ISSUE 1 | 2021

WORLDBUILDING MAGAZINE

GETTING STARTED AGAIN
& other topics

WORLD SHOWCASE
Matthew Brooke's World

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with Eleanor Farron & Luis Loza

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by B.K. Bass

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LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

Starting a new worldbuilding project can be daunting, and if you're new to the process it may seem impossible. We haven't really tackled the question "how do I get started?" since 2017 when this magazine began, and we're thrilled to return to it.

In addition to the articles, we've included a list of nearly 200 prompts. Feel free to use them to help decide what to work on next!

Finally—a note of thanks from me. This will be my final issue as the editor-in-chief. I'll be stepping down and taking a new role among the magazine's staff due to new time constraints. This has been a wonderful project and I'm honored to have been a part of it for so long, but now I look forward to taking a bit of a break and seeing what the next editor-in-chief does.

Thank you all for your time, for taking part in this crazy project with us, and as always—happy worldbuilding!

Adam Bassett, Editor-in-Chief

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WORLD SHOWCASE:
MATTHEW BROOKE'S WORLD

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WRITING INTERVIEW

Matthew Brooke has been creating a post-calamity Ireland—exploring how people would react when ancient figures return and they find themselves cut off from the rest of the world. This is how he describes it.

A couple years in the future, a mist descends around Ireland and completely prevents anyone from entering or leaving. At the same time, dark aspects of the ancient and pagan past of Ireland begin to reemerge and wreak havoc. Their presence brings back old magics to the world that give power to things that have long since lost meaning: promises, secrets, and willpower. All of this splits the island into factions and groups all struggling to survive and make sense. It's a world of death, dogma, and the things we tried to bury. The story follows a man who wakes up buried in a bog. He is dug out and now has to find his place in this world of dichotomies.

A figure emerges on the human side who calls himself the Prophet. He reforms the church and creates a new dogma that has the men of the church function as governors of the towns, as well as being the stalwart against the beasts of the mist. They are quite ruthless and have slightly misunderstood the new magic that flows into the world. This often results in a tyranny comparable to the Spanish Inquisition. The churchmen wield double-barreled shotguns loaded with iron and hawthorn. They believe that when they encounter a Mist creature, the Prophet will guide their shot only if they believe enough in his dogma. If they miss twice or fail to kill the creature, it means they have failed their faith. On the other hand, the Mistlings are creatures of pure natural energy that are neither good nor evil; they simply inhabit the world. They are hunted by the church, and in turn play their own part by preying on the guilt of humans to fabricate justified 'fates' for them.

Tell me more about the mist and the Mistlings. How does it affect the world and what are these creatures like?

The Mistlings are inspired by Irish mythology, Celtic religion, and fey folklore. In this setting, their appearance varies from creature to creature, but in general they tend to resemble slightly exaggerated humans (dependent on the guilt they prey upon). Some, however, can seem far more monstrous.

The mist itself is an ever present threat. It prevents anyone from leaving or entering the island; people who walk into the mist can find themselves appearing in a completely different place, or can walk through it and experience the same place in multiple different seasons.

What do humans know of them? Are there any particularly notable interactions that have occurred?

Everyone knows they exist. The western city of Galway has been completely taken over by one called The Beast, who is holding the population captive. Bogman—the main character—is half Mistling in a way. They are like humans but don't need to breathe and are harder to kill. The church keeps information on Mistlings recorded by churchmen who have fought them—these are called echoes. For some reason, the churchman in the town that Bogman is in has decided not to kill him though he knows he is a Mistling, or at least partly one.

What more can you tell me of Bogman and his story?

He is the guy that was pulled from the bog at the beginning of the book. His real name is Fear Portaigh, but the locals just call him the Bogman.

So much of this story came with the inception of the character. I was recovering from surgery for thyroid cancer and was trying to rebuild my life. Everything felt new, I felt cold and strange and different (prone to rages, etc.); everything that I had trusted no longer worked the way it used to.

Bogman is a manifestation of that. A being of hope and confusion trying to make sense of the world around him. He doesn't work like the humans around him but believes he can understand that. This is mixed in with my passion for

religious study; I find the complex relationship between the pagan religion and the Catholic Irish fey mythology to be fascinating. I wanted to create a character that bridged those two divides. Bogman is a blank slate, someone pulled from the earth who has essentially no past. The book starts six years after his emerging from the earth, he is living in a town trying to find his place and causing constant damage as he does. There is also something dark about the churchman that allows him to be there.

What are some of those religious relationships, or general conflicts, Bogman faces as he goes through the world?

He comes across another man who has been given sainthood by the church for his fights in the wars. He has used this to amass a harem and is abusing individuals. Bogman is sought out by a Cailleach (Irish witch) who asks him to help. The resulting fight saves the women and men abused by the saint, but also damns the hope of the townsfolk who looked up to him.

Another example is Bogman's friend Micky who is hunted for being bisexual by the church. Bogman has essentially been bred by the church and originally believes a good deal of its dogma. He has to face and overcome this belief in order to figure out the humanity beneath it.

I think the focus is less on the religion but more on the dogma that is created by blind belief in the face of danger.

Makes sense. In a lot of ways, it sounds almost like a mini post-apocalypse. Speaking of—how does technology and society in Ireland react to the new isolation?

In varying degrees. Electricity is still available due to reusable energy sources but it has become something for the rich only. Cars have completely disappeared, with very little gas being hoarded for specific things. Many people use horses, ponies, and bicycles to move around but the open road is dangerous. The wild has kind of become overgrown and lots of people go missing in the new forests. The locals cut down the trees for firewood and survive on very simplistic diets.

Guns in Ireland are very rare. A commander in the north has hoarded all the British army supplies and declared himself the king of Ulster. He directly fights against the Prophet who seems to have access to some real form of magic, though no one knows how. The church has also built a gigantic cell tower called The Altar where they broadcast their comms and messages, so churchmen have working phones but with terrible signal.

Society becomes mostly based on town hierarchy, with a churchman at the top with Sage (interpreter of Prophet-sent dreams) and a Marchmaster (essentially quartermaster).

The church is the government so the people look to the Prophet for all guidance.

What kind of magic does the Prophet have—and what does magic generally look like?

The magic system is quite soft in that it runs on a number of factors, but generally works in either making yourself stronger or controlling the minds of others. The church has realised that a small amount of magic can be accessed to bind Mistlings, to make them weaker, and they believe this comes from the Prophet. They think that the more they believe, the more powerful they are, and if they feel guilty for anything they do then the Mistling will use that against them. Guilt and doubt are therefore to be avoided.

The Prophet seems in command of pure magical energy. Bullets and blades fail to harm him, and he moves impossibly fast. The church's interpretation of magic is actually wrong, though, as there are many who don't follow the church

doctrine and are able to access magic without it. The church usually kills or hushes up these people.

How does that mind control manifest?

Usually, the target has to be vulnerable to it. An individual used to committing violence can have his mind altered so he sees everything as a threat. A person who abuses their child can be made to suddenly feel small, weak, and helpless. If you use this in certain ways you can get what you want from people. The churchmen mainly use it to try to bind Mistlings, who in turn are looking for a weakness in them.

On a broader level, what are some of the bigger factional and political issues going on in Ireland?

There are three main factions at the moment. One is the Prophet's, who rules most of Leinster, Munster, and a small sliver of Donegal. Most of Connacht is owned by The Beast, who is in an unreliable peace with the Prophet. Finally, King Bernard owns Ulster and is trying to figure out a way to destroy the mist and get home.

The big issue with the church at the moment is that the Prophet was injured in a battle that took place in Donegal, close to where Bogman was dug up. He stays locked up in his room most of the time and many lower members of the church are starting to vie for power and control. Without the Prophet to dictate Dogma, they have started interpreting it, and smaller factions are beginning to emerge.

"THE CHURCH IS THE GOVERNMENT SO THE PEOPLE LOOK TO THE PROPHET FOR ALL GUIDANCE."

What are some examples of this Dogma? What's the Prophet preaching?

The Prophet's main belief is that God came to him and gave him a new book, which basically states that the Shepherd is gone and the Mistlings are wolves. The only way to survive the onslaught and bring back the Shepherd is to band together and kill the wolves themselves.

He also preaches that enjoyment and any indulgence are pathways for the Mistlings to enter into your mind. He states that he is divinely sent to fix the apocalypse. The mutterings in the church that divide it are based on the role of the churchmen as protectors or rulers, and there is some conflict there. There are also individuals seeking to go back to original Christianity or to be more lenient on the ones the Prophet claims to be 'lost sheep' (anyone not hetrosexual, white, Irish, following the Prophet's religion, etc.).

Any other interesting things going on across Ireland as this is happening?

Yeah, so the book is broken up into several short, contained stories as Bogman wanders across this new landscape. The trials he comes across each have themes and messages. In one story, he runs into an aristocratic family with a dark secret. In another, he deals with a strange figure who seems to be weaving the fates of all the people in the local town. Each of these towns have become microcosms where all sorts of stories happen. Bogman runs into a number of figures who are also wandering this world, and together they try to find some sense of belonging.

The first few chapters of the book are currently on YouTube in audio format as I am trying to keep it close to the oral storytelling style of ancient Celtic Ireland.

If you had to pick, what's your favorite part of the world?

The manic fury by which the people try to cling to morality and belief in a world where shit's going crazy and your sheep might try to eat you (I forgot to mention some Mistlings can make animals go crazy).

This interview was edited for Worldbuilding Magazine.

Thanks to Matthew for joining us! If you like what you heard about the world, you can find it on YouTube as well as his DM profile on StartPlayingGames.

If you would like to be featured in a future World Showcase, click here to apply!

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THE FOUR WORLDS THEORY

by Cathy, the Overprepared GM

THEORY & ANALYSIS RESOURCE

It surprises me sometimes just how many situations and problems can be described as a game of telephone, where a chain of people whisper a message from one to the other to see how much the message changes in the transmission. That's my go-to metaphor for describing how information and ideas mutate as they travel from one person to another, from one node or form to the next. So when I started thinking about how worldbuilding works and, more importantly, how **communicating** a setting works, I realized it's all just another scrambled game of telephone.

FOUR WORLDS THEORY

As we build and share our setting, it propagates through distinct creative modes. In a sense, these modes produce four different worlds, each distinct from the others in purpose, location, and details.

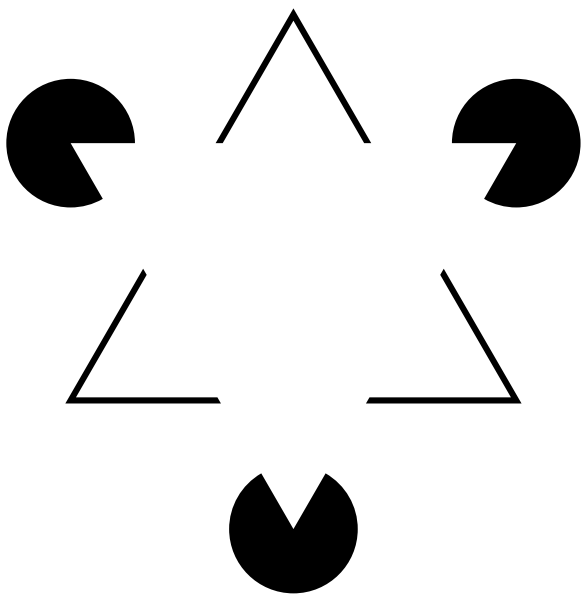
1. *The imagined world* is the world the creator builds in their mind.
2. *The recorded world* is the world the creator documents for their own use.
3. *The presented world* is the world the creator shows the audience.
4. *The received world* lives in the imaginations of the audience.

Dissecting worldbuilding this way lets us identify and fix many common problems that arise when trying to develop and communicate a setting. If we better understand how we build worlds, then we can more effectively build and talk about them. So let's examine each of the modes in more detail.

The first world, the imagined world, is fluid and alive. Every time we have a new idea, this setting in our imagination can adapt to incorporate

it. This fluidity allows the world to grow but also makes it susceptible to a lack of coherence. It's easy to not realize that a modification on one part of the world conflicts with something that has already been established in another section. It's also easy to consciously or subconsciously change the imagined world as we are exposed to new influences and experiences.

A gift of how our minds work is that they fill in details without any effort on our part. Indeed, we generally don't even notice when it happens. When we perceive or remember something, our minds are optimized to note exceptional bits and then fill in the rest with known patterns. We remember by linking the new to the old. We notice change and ignore the rest. This habit of filling in details explains a number of cognitive phenomena, such as blind spots or The Kanizsa Triangle illusion.[1]



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We can hold living worlds in our minds by choosing relatively few details as a basis for a setting, and our minds will surround these chosen details with the images and ideas we associate with them. This allows us to experience the imagined world as having a richness and depth that's not supported by our conscious choices. We can focus on a cultural reference and then perceive smells and sounds and styles that we connect to it in a sort of peripheral vision of the mind. The associations may be fuzzy because we fill them in subconsciously, but that fuzziness doesn't matter because we're not focusing on the associations, we're only focusing on the consciously chosen features. Our minds would have a much harder time picturing a part of the world if we had to choose and remember every aspect crisply and clearly.

In order to impose coherence on our worldbuilding, we need the recorded world. Going from imagining a world to recording it is a process of crystallization. We document decisions, take notes, and flesh out details. This process helps the imagined world stabilize and grow by allowing the creator to work on it piecemeal. It also exposes the difference between what we've decided and what we've subconsciously assumed, as it's easier to spot those gaps in the world's logic once the details surrounding it are written down.

The biggest weakness of the second world is that it's susceptible to versioning issues, of having newer parts of the world be out of sync with older parts of the world. The imagined world continues to adapt and grow even as we continue to nail down details in the recorded world.

[1] Blind spots caused by a small portion of each eye that have no photoreceptors and so can't perceive light. The brain subconsciously ignores or fills in the missing portion of the visual field rather than shows the missing spot. In the Kanizsa Triangle Illusion, viewers perceive two central triangles in the center of the figure. One is outlined in black, and a solid white one is laid atop it. Neither triangle is explicitly drawn, but the minds of the viewers fill in the shapes based on the boundaries of the other shapes. The mechanism for how our minds do this is incompletely understood.

As we are exposed to new influences over time, the imagined world retroactively adapts to our changing world view. We don't always notice these changes because we've changed along with the world. Once the recorded world is large enough or if enough time has gone by since we started, we need to regularly contrast later additions to earlier, "finalized" ones to ensure that they still fit into a coherent whole.

Creating the recorded world is a process that requires both the discipline to persevere on a huge and oftentimes tedious task and the pragmatism to say "good enough" and not try to record *everything*. No universe is so finite that it could be documented in its entirety. There is always more that could be decided and documented, so a relentless perfectionist may never be done recording a setting, even a very small one.

To bridge the gap between the original setting that lives in our own imagination and the final setting that lives in the audience's imagination, we create a third world—the presented world.

If the process of recording a setting is one of crystallization, then (to continue the chemistry metaphor) the process of presenting a setting is one of infusion and distillation. We start with the recorded world we create for ourselves and then infuse it with the style and essence that is core to the recorded world—the essence that we never needed to document because it was such a fundamental property of the way we imagine the world. We infuse the world with sensory details and allusions, with humor and pathos so that the audience will enjoy experiencing it. The presented world describes the setting as it is meant to be absorbed and used by others, so it should entertain and inspire. It can combine written lore, verbal explanations, in-world narratives, concept art, music, mood boards, and maps. Anything that helps you tell the story of your world, really.

The process of creating that presented world is also a process of distilling the records into the absolute smallest practical portion. Of editing out the parts of the recorded world that the audience doesn't need and of deleting notes that never quite went anywhere. Of hiding secret knowledge that would spoil surprises and of omitting spreadsheets and calculations that were useful to consider but tedious to read. Presenting the setting is about distilling the records into just its most useful, usable parts. If it's impossible to comprehensively document everything about a universe, then it's even more impossible to get an audience to read and remember everything about it.

So the trick to effectively presenting a setting is to help the audience understand the essence of the world so well that they can imagine their own details in a way that is consistent with your imagined world. To take advantage of the cognitive process that fills in blanks with known patterns. Evocation, not completion. That's the key to the presented world.

Creating the last world, the received world, is entirely in the hands of the audience. It's something we can influence through our presentation of the setting but not something we can build ourselves.

The process of receiving the world is one of filtration, absorption, and, hopefully, catalyzation. The audience filters the presented world through the metaphorical cheesecloth of interest, applicability, and usability. They choose what to skip, what to skim, and what to carefully remember from the presented world. They absorb that filtered information, and if it's sufficiently evocative for them, it sparks in their mind. The chosen ingredients of the presented world catalyze the creation of a new fluid, living setting in their minds.

Like the imagined world, the received world resides purely in the imagination, combining

the filtered details of the presented world with the audience's assumptions and knowledge of genre tropes and historical cultures to create something new. This catalyzation fails if either the audience did not absorb enough details to spark their imagination or if the details provided weren't associated with enough patterns that they could use to fill in the blank areas of the depiction.

This is one reason why familiar worlds (traditional fantasy worlds like the *Star Wars* universe or *Lord of the Rings* clones) are more marketable. We can reference the familiar tropes with relatively few details and have the audience fill in the blank spots in our description with a wealth of associated ideas. The reference doesn't even have to be explicit.

"IN THE END, WE HAVE TO BE WILLING TO ACCEPT THAT THE RECEIVED WORLD WILL ALWAYS BE DIFFERENT THAN THE IMAGINED WORLD..."

For example, if we introduce a scene of a horned hunter leading the wild hunt, the audience may associate that Fae courts and a European landscape. Even if we don't explicitly include those ideas in our presented world, the audience will include them in their received world. If we call the hunter Cernunnos, it cements the world as being distinctly Celtic-flavored without explicitly saying it, and the audience will fill in the blanks in our worldbuilding with whatever stereotypes and references they associate with Celtic fantasy.

However, let's say we want a less stereotypical take. Maybe we want to build a Celtic cyberpunk world instead of the more familiar Celtic fantasy. We can use familiar details to evoke both Celtic-ness and cyberpunk-ness, but we need to take care to clarify which tropes we're taking from which source. For example, if we introduce futuristic Fae corporations with an AI called Underhill, then we're introducing bits of both tropes. However, if we then mention the Wild Hunt, the audience can't know exactly how to interpret that. Is the Wild Hunt composed of human anarchists who convert or eliminate anyone who discovers their identity? Or are

they a group of seedy, violent wild Fae who work outside the rich, corporate enclaves? Or do they represent the unspoiled nature that the corporate Fae left behind? Combining inspirations is a great way to explore a new type of world, but the further we stray from or invert an expectation, the more carefully we need to depict that part of the world.

And if we're trying to create a received world that doesn't rely on well-known patterns, then our job becomes even harder. The audience can't fill in the blank spaces in our depiction with the right details because they won't know them. That doesn't mean they won't try, of course.

Humans are unparalleled pattern-recognizers, looking to apply the patterns we know everywhere we possibly can. All audiences come with the baggage of their preconceptions. Don't get me wrong, that baggage can be useful. The problem is that even when we don't want them to bring their own baggage, they'll try to fit pieces

in wherever they can. Into any hole in our depiction they will eagerly shove a metaphorical floppy handbag of genre tropes and a laptop case of subconscious bias. They'll fill in for themselves the details of society or ecology or cosmology that we thought too trivial or tedious to include.

The obvious remedy is to supply all those sensory details, cultural mores, names, institutions, and physical laws—*everything* that the audience might misunderstand—thereby creating such a complete depiction that nothing could be misunderstood.

However, the presented world can't be this comprehensive. It can't. The more you include, the less they'll be able to completely absorb it. When we build an unfamiliar world, it still has to rely on evocation even when we supply the audience familiar patterns to fill in the details. We have to convince the audience to learn new patterns. To fully receive the world, they need to pick up this new baggage we're trying to give them and add it to their overtowering pile of remembered associations rather than just connect to old patterns. Although it's not literally heavy, lifting that baggage does strain something. The audience has more work to do than they would with a familiar world: more to filter, more to absorb, more to catalyze.

In the end, we have to be willing to accept that the received world will always be different than the imagined world and that the more innovative the imagined world, the larger the gulf between them.

The game of telephone we play to communicate our worlds isn't perfect. We can try to speak slowly, to distill our message to the most concise and memorable version we can. But once it leaves our lips, it's no longer ours. It becomes someone else's message to consider and transmit.

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SERVING THE PLOT

by B.K. Bass

WRITING PLOT & STRUCTURE

We've all been there before. You've decided to write the next shelf-bursting epic fantasy series... Or an ongoing heroic fantasy serial... Or a new, ready-for-Hollywood young adult urban dystopia trilogy...

Then you sit down to worldbuild.

This first moment—this first decision—will likely determine if you ever even begin to write that dream project, let alone finish it. Thoughts flow through your mind of expansive worlds filled with detailed cultures, histories, ecologies, and so forth. You may think of worlds like Middle-earth, Toril, Athas, Narnia, Barsoom, and the Hyborian Age. You want your fantasy world to be just as expansive. Perhaps it's ambition, pride, dedication...or simple geekiness.

Don't fall into the trap. Remember, you might not need the entire world detailed to write your story. I have my own shelf-bursting epic fantasy series planned, and I've been worldbuilding that setting for three years. How much of the first novel is written? The prologue.

In that time, I've created a high fantasy setting and written a book for it, a sword and sorcery setting and written a book for it, a cyberpunk dystopia and written two—going on three—books for it, and a post-apocalyptic setting and...wait for it...written a book for it. But the epic fantasy series, the work that I've planned would be my magnum opus, has yet to get off the ground. *I've yet to write a book for it.*

Yet, I've written over seventy thousand words of worldbuilding that most people will never see, much of which will never make it into the books, and about five percent of which actually pertains to what is planned for the first volume.

So, how could we avoid this pitfall?

I propose a story-first approach to worldbuilding as an option, and step one to that is planning out

B.K. BASS

the story. What shape it takes will depend on your process. For planners, this will be an outline of sorts, and this will give you the best roadmap for your worldbuilding. The pantsers among us will have a harder time with this. I'm a bit of both, but mostly a pantser, so believe me when I say it's possible. You don't need the whole story planned out, but you should have a basic idea of the overall plot and where it'll happen. Most likely, you usually start with at least this much thought out in advance. In either case, remember that you can always add, subtract, or modify your worldbuilding as you develop the story.

Because you have this flexibility to change later, you don't have to flesh out an entire world before you start writing your story. As the story takes shape, either in outlining or later when your characters take the train off the rails, you'll want to change things to suit the story. Some may argue that fitting the story to an already existing world makes it more organic—and you'll even see another article in this issue that approaches things from that angle—but this method's goal is to make the world fit the story, not the other way around.

I digress: so, we have our story outlined, or at least a basic plan for it. What next? *Now*, we can get into worldbuilding. Now that you have an idea of what locations will be involved in the story, you can focus on fleshing out all the details for just those locations. Here's where you can

> Pantser: (noun, slang) An author who writes by the seat of their pants, making up the story as they go with little or no advanced planning.

get into the nitty-gritty of cultural norms, flora and fauna, architecture, food, clothing, prominent local figures, and so forth. Everything from the smell of the morning's catch being unloaded in the local wharves to the glint of the jewels on the baron's coronet can be detailed, as long as they're relevant to the story.

Then, you'll want to fill in the margins with some extraneous data—such as the overall political, ecological, and theological situations that the location is nestled within—but just enough to tie the setting of the story to the world at large. Who does that baron answer to? What's the name of the kingdom? Do those fishermen only sell their goods locally, or do trade ships fill the harbor? What other goods might be loaded and unloaded there? How does this affect the local economy? What kind of foreigners are present? When a sailor curses, what sort of nautical deity do they invoke?

"By Melitus's soggy balls."

Once you have these details set, the last thing you'll want to do is look towards the horizon and paint a hazy view of the wider world. Where do

those foreigners in the harbor come from? How far away is that mountain peak rising over the forest? Who might the kingdom be at war with, and how has the local baron responded to this? And what kinds of myths and legends are told in the taverns our characters may visit? You don't need to create detailed answers to any of these questions if your story never seeks to go into the wider world, but it does help to have enough of an idea about these places so that your main character could hold a conversation with somebody from these far-off lands.

Once you have this picture painted, get to work! Now you can start writing that epic fantasy series or whatever applies to you. Use the intricate picture you painted of the local setting to sprinkle the narrative with details which will immerse the reader in your world.

The scent of smoked crabs and mollusks filled the air, swirling with the salty brine of the sea carried by a gentle breeze.

And you can use the details you filled the margins with to make the setting feel like it's part of a larger world.

Silhouetted by the rising sun, the tall masts of a trader's galleon swayed over the bay. The wooden planks of longboats groaned as they were moored to the docks, and southerners clad in colorful silks disembarked with sacks full of exotic spices over their shoulders.

TRUEDEVIL

"YOU DON'T NEED THE WHOLE STORY PLANNED OUT..."

Finally, you can give the setting a feeling of age and the hint of depth with some nods to history, mythology, and folklore. Just be sure to make it feel relevant to the plot and characters somehow.

> *Fenrick remembered a day not long ago when the mere sight of a Capashin would boil his blood and cause him to draw steel. He shook his head and swallowed the lump in his throat as his pulse raced. The war was long over, but the scars would never fully heal.*

With this focus on details over a small area and a vague outline of the surrounding world, you can make your settings feel immersive, lived-in, and alive. Your characters shouldn't spend half a chapter reminiscing about a war fought twenty years ago, so you don't need to write an entire history of that war. Just knowing it took place is enough to give us that gut reaction to make it feel real. The same principle applies to the mythology of the world; we can add some supernatural beings into a string of expletives or visit a local temple without knowing the entire creation myth of the world.

Most of the worldbuilding we do never sees the light of day. I am a strong proponent of the *iceberg principle*—in that most of your world-building is there to tie the world together, but the reader only ever sees the tip of the iceberg above the surface of the page. So, it's possible to spend more time on the tip of the iceberg, and let what's beneath the surface be a vague image of a broader expanse masked by the sea.

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BEETLE SIEGE

by Eleanor Konik

WRITING FOOD RESOURCE

After a year of siege, Padima had lost her squeamishness about grinding insects into the morning bread. When a small, blue-winged beetle wiggled its way to the top of the barley bin, she almost ignored it—until she saw the way it skittered when Jari, her assistant, tossed it onto her millstone.

"Get me a ladle!" Padima snapped, lunging toward the stone. The grain stores were already contaminated, but she could save the rest of the food if she caught the beetle in time.

The boy looked confused, which was often the drawback of working with initiates, but all the other priests had fled—or died. "But nin-Padima, you said we can't afford to waste the protein."

Just once, she wished Jari would do as he was told without needing an explanation. Or that he'd memorized the Gardener's scriptures like every other halfway competent initiate. "We can't have half the garrison soldiers dripping incubated rove beetle venom onto the city walls either."

Blister Beetles

Horses that eat hay contaminated by blister beetles can die from gastrointestinal complications.
Read more!

RAMONA FROM ROMANIA

Rove Beetles

The toxins secreted by rove beetles are more potent than cobra venom; eating them can cause severe internal damage.
Read more!

Padima all but ripped the long-handled silver ladle from Jari's shocked grasp. She swept the millstone with the ladle spoon, but the beetle was too fast and skittered onto the floor—toward the exposed toes of Jari's sandals.

"No!" Padima shouted, but Jari flinched back and stomped reflexively.

Noxious ichor squirted out of the creature's chitinous exoskeleton, etching a hole in the ceramic tile floor of the Temple sanctum. Jari screamed as the ichor ate through the sole of his sandal and blistered the bottom of his foot. Padima ignored the mageborn toxins eating their way toward the bean stores and helped her initiate to a chair.

He whimpered.

"Don't look." Padima removed the heavy damask of her outer robes and wrapped the linen around her hands. Only then did she remove the boy's oxhide sandals and reach for one of the carefully rationed lemons hanging from a basket overhead. She channeled a speck of the Gardener's divine power, carefully reserved for disasters, into the fruit. A miraculously few seconds later, it was rehydrated enough for her to squeeze the citrus juice onto Jari's scarlet slab of separated skin.

The blisters didn't get any better–but at least they stopped getting worse. Padima handed Jari the mangled lemon slice. "Hold this against your foot." He obeyed, and she ignored the contaminated grain scattered across the floor in her rush to inspect the grain box.

"What are we going to do, nin-Padima?" Jari whispered, staring in horror as she carefully pulled three more rove beetles from the barley bin. "The city will starve if we can't use that grain."

"We're going to make lemon-barley pilaf," Padima said grimly, but there was no other choice. Lemons were the only way she knew to neutralize the toxins, and they couldn't afford to lose so much barley. "And hope the siege breaks soon."

Not Roaches

Unlike roaches, beetles fold their wings under wing cases that extend out from their exoskeletons. *Read more!*

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

So Many!

One of every four animals on Earth is a beetle. They live basically everywhere on the planet that isn't made of saltwater. *Read more!*

BEHIND THE SCENES

- The common firefly is a beetle, not a fly.

- Native Australian beetles couldn't break down cow dung, so Australians had to import Egyptian dung beetles.

- Ladybugs can fly as high as 3600 ft—about 1/10th as high as most commercial planes.

- Larval beetles are the world's most popular insect to eat as food. They're high in protein and unsaturated fats.

- Goliath beetles are popular pets in Japan, where they're sometimes sold from vending machines.

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YASSINE KHALFALLI

WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

THINKING SIDEWAYS

ABOUT WORLDBUILDING

by Robert Meegan

FANTASY

Greetings. It's nice to see so many eager faces here for this course on Worldbuilding. I know that many of you were hoping that the instructor would be Professor Tolkien or perhaps Mr. Martin or Mr. Pratchett, but there have been some budget cuts in the department and I'm afraid that I'll be teaching the course myself this time. I can assure you that no one is more disappointed than I am by these circumstances, but we all must do what we all must do, I suppose.

Anyway, as the description in the catalog states, this course is intended to provide an introduction into the construction of fictional worlds for use in storytelling. You'll note that the definition of storytelling was left intentionally vague. Whether your audience is comprised of readers, viewers, or players is not especially important at this time. The genre of the fictional world was also not specified. For our primary example, we'll use fantasy, but the same techniques can be used for science fiction or almost anything else, for that matter.

This is a laboratory course and we will be conducting experiments. You have probably noticed that there are several pieces of personal protection equipment on your desks. I strongly advise you to don them now, as some of the concepts presented here have a rather unfortunate tendency to explode when dropped. While I'm certain that you're all quite confident in your own capabilities, look around at the other members of the class. Are you certain that all of them are able to deal with potentially inflammatory material? Ah, yes. I can see by the mad scramble to get into your gear that you share my skepticism. For those of you looking for seats in the rear, don't bother. They're already filled by those who arrived early, probably because of knowledge on the nature of this course.

Those of you with some prior exposure to the topic may note that a few of the approaches that will be presented are not precisely considered "mainstream." Furthermore, the expectation that this course will be an exercise in filling in the blanks should be banished immediately. I have a well-earned reputation as an eccentric and I see no reason to tarnish that now. Instead, I hope to equip each of you with a well-stocked worldbuilding toolbox.

A KIND OF MAGIC

So, let's get started. Can anyone tell me what is the first question a worldbuilder should ask? Anyone? Right. It's going to be that kind of class. Okay then, the absolute first question you should ask is what type of story you're trying to tell. Is the scope epic or intimate? Are you trying to give your audience a comfortable and familiar feeling, or do you want them constantly questioning everything? Will it be light or dark? Yes, I know that was three questions, but they're all related.

The point is, a world needs to be tailored to its purpose. You can build one suitable for tales of vast empires clashing over centuries, or it can be small enough that the everyday lives of individuals take center stage. As an example of the latter, consider the *Thieves' World* series of stories edited by Robert Lynn Aspirin. These tales are almost entirely set in the city of Sanctuary. It's hard to imagine a more intimate setting for so many stories, including novels, but it allows for extensively interwoven plots and richly detailed characters. If these same characters were dropped on a world scaled for epic conflict, they would be lost in the commotion. Conversely, the city of Sanctuary had very little strategic value and passed back and forth between various warring parties without the residents having much influence on the larger world.

While scope is often associated with area, time is another dimension. An ancient world with a long and convoluted history can have the ironic effect of making the scope more intimate, simply because of the implication that great events have happened many times before. As a result, whatever is happening now is unlikely to be of any world-ending significance. Some worldbuilders get around this with the concept of cycles, where climatic events occur repeatedly.

To begin, I'll perform a few demonstrations. As you can see, I have Westeros from George R.R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* laid out on this table. In fact, if you listen carefully, you can hear the cheerful holiday chant of "Winter is coming!" Now, if you watch closely, I shall set the Fellowship of the Ring out on their quest from one of the houses… let's say Raventree Hall. And…

[There is a room-shaking **BOOM!** accompanied by a mushroom cloud rising a good handspan above the table.]

Ah, yes. The Fellowship lasted almost five seconds before turning on each other this time. That might be a new record. This example shows that if the story requires that characters

with a natural enmity must cooperate to accomplish the primary goal, the setting must provide room for flexibility. Creating a rigid structure, such as the complete animosity that the houses of Westeros have for each other, can serve as a backbone to a specific story arc, but it leaves little room for anything else.

Now, I'll push that table off to the side and bring this one up. As the more alert among you have already noted, this is J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle Earth. The glowing eye hovering ominously above Barad-dûr is usually a dead giveaway. As you'll note, it offers considerable space and it's undeniably less reactionary than Westeros, Mordor excepted, perhaps. Nevertheless, watch what happens when I introduce Twoflower's luggage to Isengard.

[An ear-piercing shriek fills the room, as though a thousand sapient pearwood feet were being dragged across an infinite chalkboard. The eye of Sauron blinks several times and then closes, with a single tear falling to the table.]

Right. That's enough of that. Let me put this away. [The shriek stops.] So, a world intended to be serious and self-consistent isn't compatible with elements of absolute folly. That doesn't mean that it can't contain humorous elements, but they must fit with the motif of the world or they will scream how out of place they are.

Let me complete this series of demonstrations. As you can see, this table is round and no, it's not *Camelot*. This is Terry Pratchett's *Discworld*, the home of Twoflower's luggage for those of you who didn't complete the recommended reading before the course. We'll drop the Lannisters, the Starks, a few dragons, and the Others right down here in central Ankh-Morpork and see how they fare.

[There is a brief sizzle and a thin tendril of smoke rises from the table.]

Hah! I surprised you. That was underwhelming, wasn't it? If the world is sufficiently bizarre, with wild and shifting rules, things like butchery, debauchery, and dread are going to seem commonplace; even boring. Maintaining interest in dynastic battles on something like the Discworld requires considerably more effort and a specific kind of talent. Otherwise, it's likely that some cosmological quirk will render the matter moot, probably bringing the saga to a sudden and unsatisfying conclusion.

For our experiments in this course, let's say that we want to tell stories where the fate of a country may hang in the balance, but there are no concerns about the untimely end of the world. This keeps the scope relatively modest. We're going to have a strong main story arc, so we'll need to build up the details that will drive the plot, but the rest can be left blurry until we have a use for it. The tone will be dark, with plenty of intrigue. Finally, we want to keep our audience on their toes. It's not clear what twists our world will have, but we'll be looking for opportunities to change things up.

The next major decision that we need to make involves the genre. We had already specified that this was going to be a fantasy world, but that's a little like saying that you'd like some ice cream. If you were to travel around the Earth visiting ice cream shops, I can promise you that you'll discover flavors that will cause you to rethink your faith in humanity. To avoid unpleasant surprises, it's necessary to be more specific about your tastes.

Would someone give me some examples of the types of parameters that we need to set? No, not chocolate or vanilla. I'm about fantasy here, not ice cream. What's that? You say that you fantasize about chocolate? Please, anybody else?

Ah, high or low magic. That's a good one. How common should magic be in our world? Let's look at some of the examples we've already used, as

well as a few others, to take a look at the options. In Middle Earth, magic is extremely rare. Even those who can use it, such as Gandalf, are reluctant to do so. Tolkien appears to treat magic as something that corrupts the user, or at least renders the user vulnerable to corruption. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire* takes a somewhat similar approach, although magic is more widely available, almost everyone who uses it is damaged in some way by the experience.

On the other side of the coin is the Discworld, which is positively permeated with magic. The locals treat it more or less as a natural phenomena that can be controlled, at least to some extent, by trained experts. Yes, the majority of people avoid it for pretty much the same reasons that we avoid opening containers marked WARNING! RADIOACTIVE, but that's just good common sense. J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series takes this even farther, with every properly educated wizard able to use a vast array of spells. While they can be used for evil, to the point where even relatively young students are taught the magical equivalent of martial arts in their Defense Against the Dark Arts classes, there is no implication that magic itself is inherently corrupting.

So which way should we go with our world? Before we decide, we should consider one more factor: the magic economy. What's the magic economy? Well, consider this: the more common magic is, the more likely that it will displace mundane tasks. For example, a fireball spell is very exciting, but not particularly useful unless you're frequently finding yourself in combat—for most people, it's the equivalent of keeping a grenade launcher in the broom closet. A far more useful spell would use that same energy to keep a hearth toasty warm overnight or to heat an oven for a couple of hours or even to warm up a tubful of bathwater. Each of those uses would save hours of finding and chopping firewood.

In the world of *Harry Potter*, the *Reparo* spell can mend any non-magical object and is taught in the first year of wizarding school. This single spell would destroy entire industries. Obviously, anyone knowing the spell would have no use of blacksmiths, wainwrights, or appliance repairmen once an object was created. Similarly, even if knowledge of the spell was relatively rare, those who could use it would be able to repair anything, with no material or labor costs.

In fifth edition *Dungeons & Dragons*, the relatively low-level spell "Plant Growth" allows the caster to "enrich the land" for a half-mile radius, causing all plants to "yield twice the normal amount of food when harvested." Although it's not specified, if we presume that this spell needs to be cast at some point between when the seed is planted and when the crop has reached maturity, that's still roughly between eighty and a hundred days. A particularly diligent wizard could theoretically enrich 50,266 acres of wheat. The rest of the year would provide plenty of time for recovery and spending their well-earned profits, not to mention a side job enriching orchards and vegetable gardens with more flexible schedules.

A world of magical repairmen and agricultural agents definitely has potential, but it's probably a bit less dramatic than what most of you are looking for. Let's try thinking sideways. What if magic isn't especially rare or difficult, but every spell costs the caster a bit of their life? Sparking some tinder only costs a few minutes, but that fireball or heating the house is a half day of life. Would you give a week of your life to cure a family member? What about a stranger? Now we've balanced our magic economy. If using Reparo to fix a wagon wheel has a price of eight hours of life, that more closely approximates the labor cost of doing it mundanely. This doesn't mean that there won't be wizard wainwrights, but they'll be limited to those who can't use their magic for more profitable pursuits.

PEOPLE ARE STRANGE

So, as I roll out a table containing a fresh new world, we need to decide how many primary sapient species we want to have in our world. I say primary, because in a fantasy setting we can have assorted odds and ends like the occasional dragon or piece of luggage that are more or less one-offs. Those can be fitted into place in the later stages of worldbuilding, but it's going to be important to have a good idea of the most important ones before we get too far along. While it's certainly possible to say that there is no intelligent life in your fantasy world, it does tend to significantly limit the storytelling options, so one sapient species is probably the practical minimum. Conversely, there is no maximum limit, as some roleplaying games have done their best to demonstrate, but in practical terms, when you have too many it can be difficult to distinguish between them.

The most important factor here returns to the question of what stories we want to tell. There are numerous fantasy settings that get along quite well with only one primary species (usually human or something that's human in all but the details). That should definitely be our starting point. Before we add any others, ask what they add to the story. Tolkein's elves served a specific role for his world; they represented the fall from grace. They were eternal and had once known the undying lands. To them, Middle Earth was a pale shadow. The other main species of humans, dwarves, and hobbits were all created to fill specific storytelling needs as well. The weakest, from the perspective of what he wanted to say, were the orcs. Even his notes and letters published after his death show how he never settled on their origins and what they represented.

Many fantasy worlds don't have that much thought put into the people who inhabit them. Often, they're simply humans with pointed ears or long beards and occasional personality disorders, filling roles that could be handled just as well by a human ethnic group. Arrogance, stubbornness, and brutality are character traits that can be cultural, rather than genetic. Humans are quite capable of carrying on centuries-long feuds with their neighbors, so there's no need to throw another species into the mix just because we want some hatred to stir things up.

Since I can see some of you making sad-puppy eyes at the thought of not being able to delve into creating new species, allow me to suggest that we reach into our toolbox for something that would support their creation. Right now, there is one human species on Earth. Everyone, including the people who appear in reality television shows, is a member of the species *homo sapiens*. This has not always been the case. As recently as about 40,000 years ago, we shared the planet with our cousins the neanderthals (*homo neanderthalensis*). At times within the last 150,000 years, there have been at least a half-dozen species of the genus homo existing simultaneously.

Let's say that in our example world there are two branches of the human evolutionary tree that diverged some time in the distant past. Eventually, one of the groups wandered across to another continent. Later, a climatic event of some kind broke the connection, separating the two bodies of land and their occupants. This has happened often enough on Earth to account for the settlement of the Americas via a land bridge from Asia and the initial inhabitants of Britain, who walked over the Doggerland before it sank under the North Sea. We'll say it happened roughly 100,000 years ago and that both species developed independently from that point until the recent past.

To keep this exercise simple, we'll have one of these species be humans, for all intents and purposes. The continent where they developed is large and diverse, giving us room for any cultures that we decide that we need. We'll also assume that they're like earthly humans: factious and prolific. Our other species will be called "alphas" for now. We can think of a better name later. Since we know that they're cousins to humans, the basics of their physiology are already laid out. We can figure out what physical differences we want as it becomes relevant to our stories.

Virtually the only reason to have two or more primary species is to highlight the differences between them. Since we've already said that they're physically similar (no six-legged, eye-stalk people around here), we need to make them *mentally* different. Since this is an experiment, we're going to start with one major difference: alphas are not very fertile. They reproduce more slowly and as a result, they don't face the population pressure that drives the constant need for expansion.

The relationship between longer lifespans, lower fertility rates, higher standards of living, and better education (particularly for women) in human societies is complicated. It's hard to determine which factors are causes and which are effects. In our world, we've established that each alpha female has fewer children than do most humans. The reduction of deaths in childbirth alone would increase their average life expectancy. Because of some additional factors we'll discuss in a moment, we're going to say that alphas live an average of ten years longer than humans.

That doesn't sound like much, but consider that for most of humanity on Earth, the average age of death was somewhere around thirty-five years old, and that this number remained fairly constant from the classical era up to the 1850s (and as much as a century beyond for many regions).[1] If we say that humans in our world have a similar life expectancy, that translates to roughly twenty years of adult life. Adding ten years is a fifty-percent increase. What's more, the years between thirty-five and forty-five are still before most of the debilitating effects of old age become problems. Alphas are going to have a lot more productive adult years than humans.

Now that we've put down the first characteristics of our alphas, let's throw in some geographical configurations. Humans on Earth have a rather remarkable tendency to spread out over every bit of even remotely inhabitable land. The same will be true in our world. Alphas will be rather picky about where they live. Let's drop them here, in these fertile areas with benign climates. How will this affect their development?

Well, they've got temperate weather and an abundance of food. On Earth, that generally meant

[1]Antonovsky, Aaron. "Social Class, Life Expectancy and Overall Mortality." *The Milbank Memorial Fund Quarterly* 45, no. 2 (1967): 31.

civilizations that were stable for long periods of time. (Did someone say that it sounds like the Mediterranean region? Well, I'll pretend that you did.) Because they spent less time on basic needs, many of those civilizations were able to spend more time on other things. Of course, humans *tend* to be pretty aggressive, so in addition to intellectual matters, much of this spare time was spent killing the people on the other side of the hill. We've already said that alphas don't have the same population pressures and laid out some conflict resolution options that don't involve taking nearly all of the strong, healthy, young adult males out on a decade-long invasion of far-off lands.

Less societal focus on this sort of thing would free up a great deal of people for thinking and tinkering. Also, an almost inescapable side effect of marching off to war is dying; either in battle or, more frequently, of some disease contracted along the way. Avoiding these deaths will provide a lot of that extra life expectancy that we talked about earlier. And while some of that thinking would go into philosophy and the arts, our history has shown that there are certain subjects that do well in prosperous societies—in particular, science and mysticism. And while Earthly humans have channeled that mysticism into religion, in our world there is actual magic to study.

Don't cringe at the word "science." There's a place for science in fantasy. To begin with, consider medicine. Yes, you can have healing spells, but if you want to increase the lifespan of the population, measures like not digging wells in areas near your cesspits, washing your hands before serving as a midwife, and figuring out that there's something about moldy bread that really helps a chronic cough is going to go a lot farther than the occasional healing spell.

Even without knowing why it works, our alphas are using basic genetics to improve their crops and domesticated animals. If you look closely, you'll see that all of this knowledge compounds upon itself, genetics and better steel to make tools means fewer people are needed to grow crops. Fewer people in the fields means more people available for other things. In fact, if you look over here you can see their development of geography, astronomy, and oceanography has led to navigation.

We established the nature of magic in our world earlier. As we watch the alphas, the ways in which they master its use become clear. All else being the same, the fact that the adult life of an alpha is half again longer than that of a human proportionally reduces the cost of magic. But things aren't the same. An alpha wizard has more time to study the art, as well. Not incidentally, having access to other forms of science will almost certainly drive advances in the theory of magic.

We'll pause our experiment for a bit to discuss how all of this matters to us as worldbuilders. With just a couple of small decisions, we've been able to explore an entirely new species. Now we can use what we've learned to create characteristics that make sense within the structure of our world. Perhaps we say that alpha magic is more efficient in trading life for effect, reducing the cost. Alternately, alpha magic wizards may have developed spells far beyond what any human wizard has ever dreamt of. In fact, we can say that only the alphas have developed the science of magic and that no human has ever mastered it beyond striking the random spark. Now there's a story arc waiting to be told and it feels organic, because it came from the nature of the world rather than being pasted on.

Before we move on to the final phases of our experiment, I want to note that we haven't talked about what our alphas or humans look like. Nor have we discussed their languages, religions, or styles of dress. None of that is important at this time and spending time on it now is a surefire way to wander down a rabbit hole and catch a bad case of Worldbuilder's Disease. All of these

things can be addressed when we need them for our storytelling.

COME TOGETHER

When we started, we placed our two species, humans and alphas, in different parts of the world. Now we need to bring them back together. We're looking for something that can open and close a migration route. If you're looking to stop all traffic, this requires something large. A mountain pass might be blocked by an avalanche, but if it's that small, it's unlikely to be something that thousands of people will drag their households through. Remember that humans and alphas share a common ancestor. They didn't diverge into separate species until the two groups became isolated from each other. Conservation biologists use the term "minimum viable population" to describe fewest individuals needed for a species to survive. Although the number varies depending upon the source and the nature of the species in question, for hominids it's probably in the range of 4–5,000 individuals. We need something which was large enough to let that many people through and then cut them off.

A hundred thousand years can be a long time or a short time, depending upon what you're talking about. Geologically, it's only the blink of an eye, but it's still enough time to completely alter the map, many times over. You might be thinking about continental drift. That's an idea, but alas, it's not a good one. The continental plates on Earth average about an inch of movement per year. After 100,000 years, two plates will have moved roughly three miles closer or farther apart. An Olympic 10km swimming event covers twice that distance.

There is something that can change topography quickly: glaciation. The Earth has undergone many periods of large-scale glaciation (*"ice age"* isn't an accepted term in climatological circles, but yeah, they're ice ages). The previous ~110,000 years of Earth's history saw numerous periods of glaciation covering much of Europe, northern Asia, and virtually all of Canada, extending deep into what is now the American Midwest. These cycles created the Great Lakes of North America. We can say that our world had a similar pattern of glaciation keeping humans and alphas apart and that the final retreat of the ice left a vast meltwater lake, an inland sea, forming an almost impassable barrier.

At this point, we have some options about how to bring our two peoples together. Going one way, humans and alphas meet in the present, probably suddenly. These circumstances will likely lead to a more direct clash of cultures. As the more numerous and impulsive humans meet the stiffly formal, but more advanced alphas, it's easy to imagine how each side will find the other intolerable. The stories to be told in this world are those of first contact. That's an

unusual theme for fantasy and it could be quite rewarding.

Let's restart our experiment and observe what happens in another scenario.

There! Right on the edge of the sea, random bands of human and alpha hunters are occasionally bumping into each other. Listening closely, we can hear the first recorded stories of strange people living far past the edges of the known world. I'll crank up the speed of time a bit so we don't have to sit through the boring bits. And now, a few hundred years later, there are enterprising merchants beginning to make the long and dangerous caravan trek across the wastes. At this point, only the most valuable cargos are worth the effort: gems, spices, fine fabrics, and the very best steel.

As more time passes, trade is becoming profitable enough that new trading cities are appearing on shores of the inland sea. Merchants are building fleets and knowledge is bought and sold alongside a wider variety of raw materials and finished goods. Tensions are starting to simmer just below the surface. Over here, human kingdoms are starting to contemplate whether conquest is an option. Across the waters, the alphas are recognizing the threat and discussing what it means. All of the parties are searching for information and maneuvering for position. This is a world for stories of intrigue and politics.

In any case, I see that our time for this course is just about up, so I'll summarize briefly. Worldbuilding is the foundation of storytelling, and in order to build a proper foundation, you need to know what kind of story you intend to tell. Once you get started, look for what you don't need to know right now, and then don't waste time on those things. Instead, focus on the elements that will form the backbone of your story and setting. Don't confuse superficial details for structure. It's easy to fall into the traps of worrying about hair colors or laying out fifty generations of a royal lineage, but those are incidental. The things that will make your world memorable come from a clear vision of the big ideas. In our example today, that would be the exploration of what the collision of two cultures would be like when one has turned the energies normally spent on conflict to developing science and magic.

I hope that you've added a few new items to your toolkit. Please remember to do the reading. Your final exam is to build your own world. Nothing too complicated and no functioning volcanoes, please. Lava spills are very hard on the furniture. Good luck!

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EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

WITH ELEANOR FARRON & LUIS LOZA

Interviewed by Adam Bassett

TABLETOP GAMING INTERVIEW

I got a chance to sit down with Eleanor Ferron and Luis Loza, some of the developers of *Paizo's Lost Omens* line of books, a series of brilliantly realized worldbuilding guides to the Pathfinder setting Golarian. They discuss their careers, how to develop a world while respecting their players' choices, and some of their inspirations. We hope you enjoy!

EKATERINA BURMAK

Luis Loza: I'm a developer for the *Lost Omens* book line. I've been a developer since 2018. Before that, I was a freelance writer who contributed for a lot of Paizo and third-party *Pathfinder* products, and even wrote for other games like *Dungeons & Dragons* 5th Edition.

Lost Omens is a supplemental book line for *Pathfinder* Second Edition, which is a tabletop role-playing game (TTRPG) with a strong focus on customization. *Pathfinder* is based in the *Lost Omens* campaign setting, a high fantasy campaign setting set in the world of Golarion. Specifically, the *Lost Omens* campaign setting focuses on the Inner Sea region. The region is full of unique nations and regions covering all manner of fantasy from more traditional knights in shining armor, to more gothic horror, to really out-there stuff like Numeria—the land where a giant spaceship crash landed ages ago, so now there's tribes of barbarians fighting robots. The *Lost Omens* line features books exploring the regions and people of the Inner Sea, giving you in-depth looks at the flavor and lore of the setting as well as new rules options to help cement your character within our world.

The job itself has lots of tasks. In brief, I help create a book's concept, write the outline, assign it to authors, edit and develop the authors' writing, order art, and make sure all the words and illustrations fit nicely on the page. That's something I do for every book, and I will be doing a given task for multiple books in various stages of production at once. You can think of developers [like Eleanor and I] as the directors. We make a lot of the high-end decisions and task people with helping put the ultimate vision of the book together.

Eleanor Ferron: What Luis said. He and I joined Paizo at nearly the same time, a few weeks shy of each other I believe. We've worked together on the *Lost Omens* line since it started, and the *Pathfinder Player Companion* and *Campaign Setting* book lines for *Pathfinder* First Edition before that. Before I started at Paizo, I was a freelance artist and illustrator. I did illustrations for Calico Games on their RPG supplement *Short Order Heroes*, among others.

Adam Bassett: Could you describe your path from freelancing to full time work at Paizo, and what lessons you learned along the way? What would you tell somebody interested in working on tabletop games like *Pathfinder*?

LL: My first real stint with TTRPGs was when I skipped track practice during my freshman year of high school to play *Dungeons & Dragons* [version] 3.5. I had a fun time and a few years later I learned about *Pathfinder* First Edition. It was during this time that I realized that TTRPGs could help me marry my love of gaming with love of storytelling. I started dabbling in writing my own material for my games, but I had an opportunity to enter the Pathmaster Adventure [Writing] Contest by AAW Games in 2013. I entered and got a chance to write my first ever piece of RPG writing, my own adventure! I didn't win the contest but I had some experience under my belt and used that as a stepping stone to get more work. I did a lot of third-party work on settings like Veranthea and Hypercorps 2099. Eventually, I bugged Wes Schneider, [who was] editor in chief at Paizo at the time, for a chance to work. It paid off and I got my first chance at writing for the *Pathfinder Player Companion* line. That was 2014. From then until 2017, I was able to contribute a lot to player books, setting material, and more. Eventually, there was an opening for the developer position in late 2017 and that's when I got the job.

For those of you interested in designing your own game material, remember that you don't need anyone's permission to start doing so. If you want to start making your own monsters, adventures, or rules options, just start doing it! It's the quickest way to learn the ins and outs of your favorite games. Also, if you want to start doing it professionally, save all of that stuff you

write and put it up on a free blog somewhere. Once you have that, you can point to your blog as a source for writing samples in hopes of getting your first writing gig. Without writing samples of some kind, RPG companies are probably unlikely to take a chance to give you some work. Also, take some time to try to learn the formatting and style of the game to which you want to contribute. The more you make things look like official rules, the better.

EF: Well, I don't think I'm the best role model; I almost fell into this job by accident! I got into tabletop RPGs as a kid due to reading my brother's books, but never got a chance to play any of them until college. My alma mater had a reasonably robust RPG club, where members would pool their five-dollar club dues so that the group could purchase RPG books for everyone to share. After college I fell out of the hobby somewhat, but still did writing for various online RPG websites and digital magazines. I didn't consider it a career path I could make a living out of.

Well, around five to six years back, Paizo put out a call for applicants for developer positions. I wasn't planning to do anything about that, but an employee at the time wrote a letter encouraging women to apply. I sent in my resume due

to that letter. I didn't get the job, but I did get an offer to potentially freelance for the company based on my writing. I think it was six months before I got my first assignment, and another six months between my first and second, but I managed to build up my reputation as a freelance author. The next time Paizo was hiring, I got the job.

When it comes to advice on the professional side, I echo Luis on having writing samples you can provide quickly if needed. Also, make sure you have an email address visible somewhere! There have definitely been times I've been interested in an author, but had no way to contact them beyond messaging them on Twitter, which isn't a great venue for company communications. When it comes to creating in general, do what you enjoy, because that's where your passions will shine through and gather attention. And, try not to gatekeep yourself out of opportunities based on how you perceive your own qualifications.

AB: All good advice. Now before we get into how you both help create the setting for Pathfinder and all the worldbuilding-related things, I want to take a moment to acknowledge the current situation with COVID-19 and ask how it has affected your workflow/process?

EF: I think some people flourish in adversity, but I'm more the type to get crushed. We moved entirely to work from home at some point mid-March, I believe. We're incredibly lucky to be able to do so, and Luis and I have managed to keep things moving despite it all. I've spent a lot more of my work day screaming inside, however.

LL: It could be worse, I guess? Yes, I have to realize that the world is in a scary state on a daily, maybe even hourly basis, but I get to pet my cat a lot more than when I was in the office. As Eleanor mentioned, we've been working from home for some time now. It means that some of the production steps like brainstorm meetings sometimes take longer than in person, but our tech team has made great strides in making our work easier than ever. We have more tools at our disposal that I think we'll be able to take back into the office with us to help in the future.

I *did* start writing more for myself and putting it up on Patreon, which has been fun, but for the most part, not much else has changed in my own work.

AB: I'm glad you and your teams have been able to make it work despite the situation we've found ourselves in. Now, though, we must get on to more about the world of Golarian!

How do you create adventures or generally build out the worldbuilding in a way that also allows for players and Game Masters (GMs) to express themselves and make their campaigns their own?

LL: Well, we thankfully have over ten years of existing setting material to build upon. Each of these books was written with hopes of inspiring ideas and adventures with the information they present, rather than expressing the exact way the world's events have to progress. That is, instead of telling you exactly what's going to happen, we tell you what has happened and mention several different directions things *could* go, but let GMs and players decide which of those threads they pick up and follow.

So, we get to take that existing approach and dive even deeper with the *Lost Omens* books. I like taking the approach of filling out all of the interesting little details that help the world feel alive, but never get in the way of any potential stories. We want to inspire rather than stymie. For example, the *Lost Omens Character Guide* came about in part because of my hope of fleshing out the non-humans of our setting. We have multiple ethnicities and groups of humans already detailed in *Pathfinder*, but dwarves, elves, halflings, and so on had never received that treatment. [The character guide] gave us

a chance to build upon the given information about these other ancestries and give them more nuance and interesting potential. None of that information contradicted what we said before and instead just fleshed things out more in a way that hopefully players can use to tell more interesting stories.

EF: Part of the fun of a TTRPG and [its] setting is that readers can be inspired by all kinds of things, even stuff you didn't give a second thought to when you were writing about it. So long as people have the creativity and the interest, they'll find a way to tell a story. Of course, that means we have to capture their interest! Thinking about what interests me is a good place to start, and then expanding out by extrapolating on what's popular in the real world.

AB: Definitely great to have those years of existing resources, and I agree it's all part of the fun to pull inspiration from even the most unusual of places. What are a few examples of things that have inspired your work?

EF: This is more on the *Starfinder* side, but the most popular thing I probably have written was a throwaway mention of a J-Pop band named Strawberry Machine Cake. My best friend when I was younger was super into this one visual kei band, Dir En Grey. I had no interest in them whatsoever, though I was into other music from Japan. So I dropped a minor side quest for people to stand in line for a limited edition CD album. It wound up super popular with the fans, and even spun into a whole new adventure where characters got to attend a concert.

LL: I'm sure like a lot of people out there, I'm trying to replicate a lot of what I really liked as a kid. In particular, I have a love for *Street Fighter* and other fighting games, so I'm constantly trying to find ways to include fast-paced, fantastical action, either in the form of new setting possibilities or new character options. I'm also a big fan of robots, so I'm usually sneaking in a fun construct, or robot, or some kind of automaton into our material where I think I can get away with it.

As for things that directly inspired *Lost Omens* material, I think the biggest thing was my cribbing the Rebel Alliance from *Star Wars* as a big part of the inspiration for the Firebrands in *Lost Omens Character Guide*, one of our new organizations that's dedicated to fighting oppression and helping others, and looking good while doing so.

AB: A lot of creators like to make large world guides, but that can also be very intimidating to create and read. You both have contributed to several guides like this so I'd love to hear from you on (1) how you decide you need to create a world guide and (2) how do you share that information with people—especially new people who don't know anything about the setting or the stories contained within it?

LL: The decision to make any given guide is a team effort. We meet with the other members of our team and decide what subject needs [to be] covered. Sometimes this is based on ties to upcoming material, such as *Lost Omens Mwangi Expanse's* relevance to the *Strength of Thousands* adventure path. Other times, we want to bring new players up to speed with aspects of our world like with *Lost Omens World Guide* or the *Pathfinder Society Guide*. And other times, it's just stuff that we think sounds cool and fun, like with *Lost Omens Legends*. Ultimately, we as a group decide if we feel that a given subject has enough legs to fill out a whole book and then once that's decided, get to work on deciding what goes in a book.

Deciding the information varies from product to product. In cases like the *World Guide* or *Society Guide*, we want to make sure we give everyone a basic overview of the subject first and then go into the finer details. We want to make sure we hold your hand at the beginning,

just long enough for a reader to have the general overview and feel of a subject, before pointing you to the rest of the information and letting you decide which particular subject you want to know more about. In other cases, we just take a gallery approach. We set up a theme, like important non-playable characters (NPCs) in *Legends*. From there, you're free to travel through the book exactly how you like. It makes for a more bite-sized approach to our entries and hopefully leads to more fun from discovery as you flip through and see an interesting section title or a fun illustration.

Regardless, we do our best to get everyone on the same page right out of the gate and also try to fill in missing details where we can. We might add a little bit of text to explain who a person is or what a given location is as you're reading. Otherwise, we fill in some of the details in the glossary at the back, or point you to another one of our books for further information.

EF: Having so much previous setting material makes it easier for us to see where the gaps are, in some ways. We know places that we're interested in but haven't explored, and places the fans have questions about that haven't been answered. When writing the book, we also do our best to consider connections to other places

in Golarion that readers might have seen before, so that each book can lead to a greater understanding of the full picture.

AB: It's great that you're able to guide people through these focused guides while also letting them add to and play with what you've written.

Now, on another note, I'm interested in how the mechanics of the game come into play. What kinds of things do you look for in game mechanics when creating the setting to fit them—and vice versa; how do you like to create information about the setting in a way so that it neatly adds to the gameplay experience?

LL: I feel that it's definitely a back-and-forth between the two. Sometimes the setting inspires rules and other times the rules inspire expansion to the setting. A lot of the rules options we've included were directly inspired by fun little tidbits that were part of the setting first. These are random name drops, or setting details, that we or our writers included just to add some interesting flavor that inspired us directly to create new rules options. For example, we've talked a lot about how [The Queen of Witches] Baba Yaga could grant someone the power to be a witch over the years, and *Lost Omens Legends* finally included the Baba Yaga witch patron option, so you could play a character that managed to

EKATERINA BURMAK

earn that power. Of course, the inverse is true. A desire to have a notable chaotic good organization was partly the catalyst for the creation of the Firebrands.

Since the start of Second Edition, each *Lost Omens* book has featured a member of our rules design team as an additional lead. The design lead is able to help us identify interesting flavor that we can use to expand into new rules options or identify mechanics that could have better grounding in the setting. It's this collaboration that helps form a lot of our books. Also, we as developers find inspiration in the writing that we receive from our authors. We are sometimes adding in fun little rules bits up through the eleventh hour before the book is done because of the cool writing we receive.

Ultimately, if we think something is cool or would get a player to say "I want to do that," we try to find a place for it in our rules. If we can't do it right away, we can file it away for later books or for some of our other product lines.

EF: We definitely have to keep any and all rules in mind when writing, because rules indicate what characters in the game setting can do. That informs us that we should pay attention to situations where that kind of action would come up (after all, if a player can do something, they're going to want it to be relevant), but we should also consider how the world reacts to those kinds of abilities. In a world where magic and fairies are real and are known, how do people react to magic and fairies? What do they use them for?

We haven't succeeded in creating a Golarion where the rules are truly reflected, because it isn't really possible for us. A reality where magic is a science and the gods themselves can come down and smack you if you translate something wrong would have a completely different history from ours. There'd basically be nothing in common. But we do our best to try and create a believable world where these fantasy elements exist, while still considering how they might affect the kinds of stories that would play out in that world.

AB: I want to touch quickly on the process you go through working with your teams. Paizo will bring in freelancers often to help with production. How do you manage them all working within the same setting and also keep the worldbuilding consistent?

EF: Communication is a must! When it comes to areas we already have published material on, we're all referencing the same books, so that keeps us all coordinated. When it comes to newer material, we have to keep each other informed on what we're doing and if that might be relevant to another department anytime soon. It probably looks like company gossip from the outside, or even inside, but telling each other about our plans and projects is the best way to keep abreast of things.

LL: That's the main aspect of our job! We're in charge in making sure that everything we receive from our writers meshes well with the rest of our content. Sometimes that means tweaking the voice that something is written in or other times it means lining up events properly on the timeline of the world. The development we do is getting everything to feel like it's talking about the same world and not invalidate what's come before. Logistically, the internet has made things easier than ever. Most of our projects have over a dozen authors providing content at once. To help with coordinating and communication, we set up Discord servers where the writers can communicate with us and each other to help answer setting questions and bounce ideas. They're these great creative spaces and some of my favorite content for our books has come from riffing in a project chat. This is also a thing that we have to do internally at Paizo. We are constantly checking in with our *Adventure Path* developers or rules designer to make sure that

nothing we do contradicts what they're needing to present in their products and vice versa. We're always chatting about future plans as well as what's currently on our plate. This process helps keep everything lined up and sometimes even helps get more ideas for our own work.

AB: The world of Golarian has a familiar "classic fantasy" feel, which can be fun, but we're curious to know what aspects of the setting you focused on as ways to differentiate it from other worlds people could play in. Or, is the goal simply to embrace that familiarity?

EF: Well, sort of! Different places on Golarion have a different fantasy feel to them, by design, so that groups can find an area that best suits them. A nation like Brevoy or the River Kingdoms might feel closer to *Game of Thrones*, while if you played the *War for the Crown* adventure path that's set in Taldor, you would deal with a lot more jousting, gossiping, and interpersonal relationships. And then there are more "out-there" nations like Numeria, where barbarians fight against highly advanced terror robots. That's technically classic fantasy, if you like your *Conan* books, but not what most people think of when they hear the term!

As we keep moving out from the Inner Sea Region into different continents, we also move further away from those standard fantasy settings. Luis wrote [about] a nation called Xopatl, for example, where the nation was electrically powered by a magical tree.

LL: We definitely want things to feel familiar, but we're totally taking a "yes, but" approach to things. Yes, we have elves, but they are aliens that showed up thousands of years ago. Yes, we have gnomes, but they need to be constantly discovering and continually excited, or their color drains away. Pathfinder is definitely taking the time to blaze its own trail with unique aspects to its fantasy, but we also make sure to keep enough familiar elements that people don't feel like they have no touchstones. As Eleanor mentioned, we have more traditional fantasy, but also invite you to explore the rest of the world which has other inspirations beyond the traditional fantasy. Golarion is a place where any fantasy you want is available and you're free to stay as close or go as far from that as possible. In the end, we want to make sure that everything we present all feels possible within the realm of fantasy, but we're always excited to give you new twists on old classics or take you in directions that most other fantasy hasn't taken you before.

AB: How important is the timeline to the setting when worldbuilding for Golarian? I assume it can be difficult to manage, what with so many players having their own adventures in the world.

EF: Golarion is actually assumed to share a calendar with the real world. If a year passes for us, a year has passed on Golarion. But for the most part the timeline is very nebulous unless we declare it has advanced, like at the start of *Pathfinder* Second Edition.

LL: The fun thing about the timeline is that there's always more space to add in events. It's definitely important to adhere to what's already been said in previous material, but we never feel like we can't include a new event to make a story work.

As for dealing with players' adventures, we tend to avoid speaking about any of our published adventures directly. If we have to, we try to be very vague about it. For example, rather than saying that Runelord Karzoug was defeated by a party including a human fighter, an elf wizard, a catfolk rogue, and dwarf cleric, we just say something like "heroes defeated Karzoug."

We know that eventually something we print might invalidate a group's adventures, but trust those groups to take our content and tweak it to match the needs of their stories. Maybe Karzoug wasn't defeated for a given group's game.

That's okay! That group shouldn't be afraid to disregard that.

AB: Some would say that Golarian has a bit of everything. Certainly with this mix of jousting and elves who came from space, I'm getting a similar impression! That in mind, I would love to hear what didn't make the cut. What are some examples of things that started in an early draft but didn't quite make it to the end, and why?

EF: Well, the most common reason things are cut is for space. We cram a lot into those books! So we don't actually want to answer for some of these elements, because we might get them into another book at some later date.

LL: Yeah, space is the biggest offender for us. When we started *Legends*, we discussed a lot of potential NPCs to include. I think we were pushing close to one hundred in the brainstorming phase. We immediately trimmed things down to a more reasonable number and slowly cut away at the list until we had the final one we used for *Legends*. There was a lot of consideration including gender balance, ethnicities, ancestries, and more.

This is a process that happens with pretty much every book. We have our core idea and throw together all of the possible things to include before slowly trimming it down to something that can fit in our allotted page count. Like Eleanor said, we can't go into specifics, but if you asked yourself why a given NPC or deity didn't make it into our books, it isn't because we didn't think of them when putting the book together. We did think of them, but the realities of page count got in the way! However, they're first on our list if we get a chance to do more on the subject!

AB: You've spoken before about trying to reduce the complexity for new players entering into the world of Golarian and *Pathfinder* for the first time. How do you go about that while still trying to cater to the dedicated audience who enjoys the complexity of the system and world?

LL: The Glossdex! We know that any given reader, even one that's been with Pathfinder since the beginning, might not know all the details about the setting. Our glossary/index at the end of our books gives you brief summaries about specific locations, organizations, and the like so you have enough context to understand the information we present in our books. If you happen to know what the Aspis Consortium is already, great! If not, there's a little blurb so you're not lost.

We're also not afraid to point to the past. If you want some information about *Lands of the Linnorm Kings*, the First Edition *Pathfinder* setting book information is still valid.

EF: We made a lot of alterations on how we presented the information when coming up with the new World Guide, namely grouping regions by themes. The purpose of that was to reduce the number of "places" that people had to know about when reading about the setting: they could think of areas such as the Golden Road or the Eye of Dread, and only bother getting into individual nations and cities if it really interested them. We've also been doing our best to present the information in more holistic ways. *Lost Omens: Legends* seems to have taught some people more about Golarion than anything else, and that was partially by design. You get invested in the stories, and pick up the details along the way.

AB: Where do you see the world of Golarian headed, and how do you intend to work toward that goal with some of the releases for 2021 such as the *Lost Omens Ancestry Guide* and *Lost Omens: The Mwangi Expanse*?

LL: I think that we're just going to continue breaking new ground. We talked about a lot of places in the First Edition, so we don't want to spend all of our time repeating what we said. Instead, let's head to new places and see new things! That's how we landed on the Mwangi Expanse book. We've talked about [that area] a little bit, but [now] we finally get to talk about it in great detail. I could see us doing a lot more of that. Finding places, organizations, and people that had little to no information before and shining the spotlight on them.

EF: Shining the spotlight, and also offering new opportunities to our players and game masters. As we expand beyond the basics of the setting, we can get further into more outer concepts. For instance, some of the people in the *Ancestry Guide* live in another dimension on floating islands that form a bridge to the moon!

And the fun part of TTRPGs is that the players get to choose what interests them, and we can see what they choose to do with what's presented to them. It can be a very organic worldbuilding experience.

This interview was edited for *Worldbuilding Magazine*.

Thank you to Eleanor Ferron and Luis Loza for joining us in our first issue of 2021! If you would like to follow Luis you may do so on Twitter or on his website (Eleanor did not have any links she wished to share at this time).

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DIVERSE WORLDS

BROADEN YOUR HORIZONS

by Zaivy Luke-Aleman

REVIEW

At *Worldbuilding Magazine*, we try to be inclusive to underrepresented voices in the worldbuilding community. By "underrepresented," we mean that some people are heard and seen less often when discussing worldbuilding. Whether you're someone who doesn't see yourself represented often, or someone who wants to expose yourself to different perspectives, this article is a great way to discover the rising openness of storytelling. This time we will focus on YouTube.[1] The intention of this series is to encourage readers to seek out content that both critiques stories that are typically not represented in mainstream United States media (as that's the perspective I come from), and discover stories that may not be given equal space in typical worldbuilding discussions.

Although many of the YouTube channels recommended in this article do not directly relate to worldbuilding, they discuss important topics while branching away from typically represented groups. The reason why I'm focusing on these channels instead of strictly sticking to worldbuilding is because diversity in your worldbuilding does not necessarily mean inclusion. When we diversify our projects, understanding the context of underrepresented voices in our reality can enrich our experience as consumers. It can also help creators from underrepresented groups find a deeper value in our work and discover we are not alone. Although worldbuilding is a way to explore new and different things, it is also a way to reflect underlying elements of our lives.

[1] For your discretion, *Worldbuilding Magazine* does not claim to reflect all of the views represented by the content creators referenced in this article.

However, thinking critically about how and why we diversify our worlds is only one reason. Whose worlds are celebrated? I have found that, typically, amazing worldbuilders who aren't white are left out of worldbuilding discussions. However unintentional it may be, this exclusion is a detriment to the worldbuilding community, which is also made up of people of color. My hope is that by helping all of us connect with more viewpoints, we will be able to celebrate a wider range of voices in worldbuilding. **There is no expectation for the reader to watch every single one of these videos.** Instead, it is my hope that you might be intrigued by some of these as a starting off point for your own journey of reflection on the stories you engage with. If anything, this article should be a point of reference for you to gain vocabulary on various discussions related to representation.

As a disclaimer, I have not watched every single video in each of these YouTubers' channel libraries. I also don't necessarily agree with *everything* they say. However, I think it's important to expose ourselves to differing opinions, especially in the age of technology where much of the content we receive is catered to our own actions and interests.

TJ1 AND TOKENISM

To start off, I want to recommend a video by *TJ1* about tokenism. There are a few different videos that talk about "diversity vs. tokenism," but if you don't know where to start, TJ1 helps break down some important nuances about the discussion.

For anyone who doesn't know about that conversation, diversity is a topic I grew up with in the United States. Much of my media representation as a kid was on a new wave of increasing diversity, which was great, but not without some faults. Tokenism is the concept that a character only exists to add to "diversity" without actually contributing to diversity for its intended purpose, which is to learn from one another and value each other. Tokenism typically increases *diversity*, but not *inclusion*. A good example of this is in the show Supernatural where although there are several black characters, few (if any) of whom last more than a few episodes or do anything of lasting consequence.

I won't completely explain the concept since TJ1 does a great job of doing that himself. TJ1 does not claim to represent the entire conversation about tokenism, but again, it's a good place to start thinking critically about what it means to showcase people who are typically not represented in storytelling. Sometimes inclusion comes with cultural baggage we might not have been aware of. And people can be sensitive to how their culture is portrayed because any representation may be so rare that your portrayal may be the first or only time people interact with it, leaving a long-lasting impression. It can also help us think about what is influencing our decisions when we decide to increase diversity. Is the purpose of their presence to meet a minimum quota? Is it to reflect the complex experiences of real life? He encourages us to examine our characters (and I would add worldbuilding) to see if they're being given fair treatment in the process of creation.

THE BAGGAGE OF REPRESENTATION

If you're a writer who often doesn't see yourself in storytelling, but want to see your culture more, a great inspirational video is an interview with Tomi Adeyemi and Sabaa Tahir. Penguin Teen's channel hosts a video titled "Sabaa Tahir and Tomi Adeyemi discuss cultural representation in their work" where the two authors talk about how their cultures influenced their storytelling. The relatable conversation talks about incorporating one's own culture into worldbuilding and broadening the fantasy landscape through

the use of a wider cultural scope. It also talks about how societal conceptions of marginalized cultures have influenced their worldbuilding, as well as their everyday lives. One takeaway from it is how, when representation for any group is limited, it adds pressure to creators who want to do that group justice.

Stereotypes can be helpful to quickly deliver information about a character or setting, much in the same way that tropes are. However, they become problematic due to the longer-lasting societal definition that grows from those stereotypes. This possibility of shaping society's perception of an entire group of people is part of the reason why it can be a daunting task for people to create representation, even when they themselves are members of the marginalized group. Because some representation is so *marginalized*, creators who want to represent an underrepresented group of people may not be given the space or resources to do so by a publisher or investor. This is especially true if a token quota of representation for that specific group is already met. "Oh, we've already published a book about gay people. Let's not do anything on that for a while. How about black people instead?" In doing so, the rare acts of representation have a longer lasting impact in defining what a marginalized group is from a societal perspective, especially if people who do not engage with that group have no other frame of reference.

This is in large part due to the assumption that marginalized groups do not deserve as much space as non-marginalized groups in mainstream media. The idea behind this may be that marginalized people's stories are not worth sharing to the same degree as non-marginalized groups because they are not universal enough to capture a large audience.[2] These ideas further reveal the concept that a person is largely defined by their identity, which cannot coexist with the underlying universal struggles we all subscribe to.

It also brings into question whether or not a mainstream audience has enough empathy to appreciate things that may not come naturally to their experience. A common assumption is that mainstream audiences do not have that empathy, and thus marginalized groups have been excluded.

The issue may also be that privileged groups will be made too uncomfortable by seeing how marginalized groups exist, and thus their narratives may be too unpalatable. These ideas also subscribe to the assumption that marginalized groups do not monetarily participate enough in mainstream culture to be worth marketing towards (e.g., x-people do not read or buy books, therefore we should not make books for them). When considering creating anything about underrepresented groups, these are some of the obstacles you may face, especially if you belong to said marginalized group.

TAKING RESPONSIBILITY FOR IMPLIED NARRATIVES

Renegade Cut breaks down the Hollywood lens we have historically watched movies through. Although the channel is not about worldbuilding, Leon Thomas' explanation of the cultural standards through which we interpret storytelling is incredibly helpful. Videos like "Queer Theory in 80's and 90's Action Movies | Renegade Cut," can help you think not just about those old films,

[2] Tracy Sherrod, "'A Conflicted Cultural Force': What It's Like to Be Black in Publishing," The New York Times, Interviewed by Concepción de León, Alexandra Alter, and Elizabeth A. Harris, July 1, 2020, https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/01/books/book-publishing-black.html.

but how to frame your own worlds. Through Thomas's analysis, I began to think about the context of my narratives in worldbuilding, and how my worldbuilding reflected my own life and the culture I live in. It also helped me see how stories can carry hidden and/or unintended meanings due to our cultural understanding of tropes and perspective. I personally feel like that level of introspection is a gift to anyone, but especially to creators. Through it, I can be more conscientious about the decisions I make in my storytelling. I feel more intentional about what I produce, and somewhat more responsible.

Similar to what we discussed earlier, representation is sometimes *defined* by our societal expectations, particularly when that representation is made up of small clues. Stereotypes and tropes may be used as subtext, especially in countries where a specific marginalized group experiences significant prejudice. For example, *The Untamed* is a Chinese fantasy live action drama based on a web-novel. The novel is explicitly queer;*[3] however, the live action web series self-censors much of the romance between the two male leads and hides the romance under subtext instead. Using romantic tropes through camera angles and acting techniques typically reserved for romantic storylines, the story intends to deliver homoromantic subtext rather than explicitly fleshing out that aspect of the story. The relationship between the two male leads is largely defined by subtle societal expectations of a romantic storyline in order to deliver the story while lessening the risk of prejudiced responses to it. As a warning, the web-novel also includes problematic tropes common to its genre, *danmei*, which is a genre written by women for women about romantic and sexual relationships between men. These kinds of techniques are also related to a concept called "*queerbaiting*."

The idea behind queerbaiting is that creators can use tropes and stereotypes associated with queer people in order to imply that a character or relationship may be queer, without actually offering represention. In doing so, the creators attempt to appease to two audiences, one which wishes to ignore the existence of queer people, and another audience that wishes to be seen. Of course, the end result is never so clean. This lack of care for the marginalized group, by catering to people who would hold such strong prejudice against them, is one of the reasons why queerbaiting is considered such a controversial approach to representation. However, there are other reasons for queerbaiting as well.

Back in the earlier days of the television series *Teen Wolf*, queerbaiting was somewhat fashionable amongst show creators. Queerbaiting tended to create cult-following audiences, largely because of how scarce positive queer representation was. In a fascinatingly confusing display of solidarity, *Teen Wolf* not only included queer side-characters, but also included queerbaiting amongst its main cast. Every week, we tune in to see the small hints, the "maybe" lines, hoping that one day we'll finally see a main character who is like us. And we might not even be the villain this time! Or the character who dies once the show can't hide they queer storyline anymore. Taking advantage of that vulnerability—that the LGBT+ audience is eager to see themselves represented in a meaningful way—many shows have used queerbaiting to create a dedicated audience, often times simultaneously avoiding

[3] *The word "queer" is controversial and can be offensive to some people, especially to people who have had that word used against them as an insult. Some LGBT+ people want to reclaim the word, as it once was used by queer people to describe themselves before it was turned into a slur. In the context of this article, "queer" is an umbrella term for people who are part of the LGBT+ community.

clear representation to avoid alienating a homophobic audience. Obviously, in the cast of *Teen Wolf*, there was no attempt to avoid such alienation, which makes the actual representation it created feel less meaningful. Problems like this are so frequent within queer representation, that a movement demanding better representation lead to the creation of a conference for queer representation in media titled Clexicon.

As we've touched on while discussing TJ1's video, there is an idea that diversity is becoming somewhat of a phenomenon, or that marginalized groups are "trendy." Adding marginalized representation for the purpose of joining a trend also contributes to tokenism. But, as queerness is being more accepted in my country, we're also starting to see shows like *The Owl House* that do a better job of representation. The hope is that uplifting marginalized groups won't remain a trend, but will become a beginning. Drawpinion Dump has a video titled, "Positive Representation: How to Make a Difference," which takes a look at cartoon shows that depict queer characters or topics. Drawpinion talks about how storytelling has the ability to normalize the queer experience, rather than add on to the heavy baggage many societies attaches to queer identity. Not every queer story needs to repeat the already established narratives of what it means to be queer; they don't need to depend on stereotypes or tropes in order to tell a queer story. And the more diverse queer storytelling is, the more its able to help people feel seen rather than boxed in.

Get in The Robot is a channel that features mainstream animated shows. At times, their content can be considered controversial, but they do a good job of shedding light on topics that aren't often looked at, including the censorship of queer anime in English speaking parts of the Western world. In the video, Cristal explains how Latin American dubs of anime didn't make the same censorship changes that were made in the United States. Again, this channel is recommended not because of its focus on worldbuilding, but because of their ability to help us think critically about the context for the worlds we create.

The takeaway? Just because you write something about a marginalized group, does not mean it will continue to be represented by the time it gets out to the world. Shows likes *Steven Universe*, a childrens show from the United States, are created in a country that is far more relaxed about censoring queer people than it used to be. However, since the show's creation, it has struggled with queer censorship when being exported to other countries.[4] This is a reflection of the prejudice queer people face. How strong that prejudice is can largely be reflected by the cultural context.

TWO AUDIENCES: HELPING OR HURTING?

Tim Hickson, or Hello Future Me, has a channel that features many wonderful explorations of worldbuilding, and if you're a writer, it also includes informative video essays to help you hone your skills. He occasionally touches on the topic of mental health, something he works closely with outside of his channel. In particular, he has one video that takes a deep dive on the topic in his video "The Complex Problems With Mental Illness in Fiction | a video essay."

[4] Eric Thurm, "Steven Universe censorship undermines Cartoon Network's LGBTQ progress," The Guardian, January 12th, 2016, https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2016/jan/12/steven-universe-censorship-cartoon-networks-lgbtq.

Tim Hickson has been featured in our article, "Exclusive: Tim Hickson of Hello Future Me," and in our podcast Worldcasting.

Although a heavy topic, his insight into mental health representation is incredibly valuable. He not only discusses mental health in stories, but also looks closely at their impact, especially the kind related to suicide and self harm. In doing so, he helps us understand the negative effects that can be associated with writing these kinds of stories and what to avoid when creating them. His analysis is complex and one I recommend if you're considering writing characters who struggle with mental illness. It's especially useful when thinking about cultures that revolve around mental health. Thanks to the internet, it's now easy to find online communities and cultures strongly influenced by mental health. In addition, the extreme generational rise in suicide has had a cultural affect on today's youth.[5] Using Tim's video as a way to think about how to have mental health topics—not only on a character level, but also on a cultural level—may be an interesting avenue to explore.

Horror, as a genre, is a huge contributor to mental health narratives, and often not in the best light. Some of horror's more famous mental health choices are related to hallucinations and delusions. Interestingly enough, there are video games that have taken a better approach to these kinds of topics than others, as Hickson also briefly touches on. In more recent years, some video games have been developed to help people learn coping skills to treat their mental health disorders. A fascinating example is one made by psychologists to train people suffering from schizophrenia to reduce their hallucinations.[6]

A fascinating difference between cultures occurs with dissociative identity disorder. To oversimplify, it manifests in a way so that an individual will switch between personalities as a coping mechanism, usually induced by trauma. Typically, people with dissociative identity disorder will not remember what happens between breaks in personality. While often demonized in the West (e.g. Split (2016) and Glass (2019)), in East Asia, dissociative identity disorder is often put in a quirky, comedic, and romantic light. South Korean works like, *Kill Me, Heal Me*; and *Hyde, Jekyll, and Me* are two dramas in this vein. South Korea is not the only (nor the first) East Asian country to make dramas about the disorder in such a light, though these kinds of stories certainly popularized there.

[‡] *An individual who is neurodivergent is one who either has a learning disability or mental disorder.*

Neurodivergence[‡] is often part of a larger discussion on disabilities. The Princess and the Scrivener has a video that talks about ableism. In it they discuss a topic called "*benevolent prejudice*." For those unfamiliar with the phrase, it may seem like a paradox. However, in the video "(Part 2/2) || The Shape of Ableism: How

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[5] National Insitute of Mental Health, "Suicide," Last updated January 2021, https://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/statistics/suicide.shtml.

[6] Laura Lovett, "Video game trains people with schizophrenia to block verbal hallucinations," mobi health new, February 14, 2018, https://www.mobihealthnews.com/content/video-game-trains-people-schizophrenia-block-verbal-hallucinations.

We Restrict Disabled and Disfigured Stories," this concept is broken down to its essentials. Benevolent Prejudice is a way of representing or speaking for marginalized groups with good intentions, which actually disenfranchises them. By speaking for, or speaking over disabled or disfigured individuals, we take away the ability for people to advocate for themselves.

The video is also good to watch alongside Tim Hickson's. Hickson talks about writing for two audiences, one that shares the struggles of the represented group, and the other who does not. The Princess and Scrivener's videos focus on how disabled and disfigured stories typically appeal to the latter audience. This distinction between two audiences is critical to understanding the messages that are being delivered about disabled and disfigured individuals, and what the underlying purpose of those messages are. Is this a story that helps disabled or disfigured people feel seen and connected? Or perhaps is the story a tale meant to expose the horrors of living as a disabled and/or disfigured person for the sake of inducing empathy in an unaffected audience? As a warning: the video opens up by talking about penis quite a bit.

THE IMPORTANCE OF CARE

Deathblade, or Jeremy Bai, is a translator of Chinese fantasy novels, especially web novels. His YouTube channel is a gift for anyone who is interested in his area of expertise because it breaks down cultural differences and explains nuances people who are not a part of Chinese culture might ordinarily miss. If you love fantasy and have not explored the amazing worlds in Chinese fantasy, do yourself a favor and check it out. If you *do* love Chinese fantasy and would like to learn more about the context in which these stories are created, I also recommend this channel. As a lover of xianxia settings, his video "What are Chinese fantasy novels (wuxia, xianxia, xuanhuan)?" helped me better understand the complexity of Chinese fantasy, both from the perspective of mainland China, and the West.

Xiran Jay Zhao is a historian and relatively new YouTuber. She is a fantasy writer with a book coming out in 2021 titled *Iron Widow*. Xiran does a deep dive on *Avatar: the Last Airbender* through the lens of cultural representation in her video, "Cultural Inspirations and Other Trivia and Lore in Avatar: The Last Airbender Book 1 - Water." It's also a wonderfully expansive video on the Avatar universe as it not only includes a look at the animated series, but also book, graphic novel, and behind the scenes content. Even if you have already read and watched most of the content she took her trivia from, it is still satisfying to see her pull on that information. Plus her deeper understanding of Chinese culture with her social commentary on one of the most common questions, specifically about worldbuilding inspired by a culture you don't belong to, is a good piece of thought to chew on. There is no one true answer when it comes to the ethics of worldbuilding, but her perspective is one that is useful to take into account. Or, at the very least, I found it something I wanted to take time to digest and think more on.

"How to BLACK: An Analysis of Black Cartoon Characters" is a video essay by Toonrific Tariq, or Al-Tariq Harris, that discusses Black identity in America and Black culture. Be warned! This is a video that includes curses.

With humor and wit, Harris talks about the complexity and scarcity of representation of Black people. Harris also tries to quickly cover different perspectives within the Black community. I think one of the most important takeaways for worldbuilders is when you create a culture, the individuals within that culture will have their own multiplicity. Caring about who those people are and how you present them can enhance the story by creating depth within your world and your characters. For creators with

worldbuilding closer to our Earth, this care can mean a lot to the people whose cultures inspire your world. But to be honest, in-depth characters are also a great show of skill. A character being from a marginalized group does not make an excuse for a poorly written character. Why? Because their marginalized identity is not their entire personality. His ideas of caring for the group being represented remind me of Xiran Jay Zhao's discussions, specifically in her analysis of the Mulan (1998) movie.

Zhao specifically talks about a story having "heart" being essential to its success. Combining this with the care that Harris discusses are likely some of the best methods of approaching storytelling with underrepresented groups. But, like Zhao and Harris warn, this well-intentioned care can come with limitations when done from an outside perspective. There may be cultural nuances missed, or a reliance on out-dated stereotypes and tropes due to a lack of cultural knowledge. Even when gaining inspiration from your own culture, there may be things that can be missed, especially if you belong to a diaspora. Involving creators who belong to the groups you're trying to borrow from can be incredibly helpful when allowing for open and honest communication between creators. This is especially true for large, queer-inclusive teams like the kind that made up *She-Ra and the Princesses of Power*, a show acclaimed for its representation.

Chronicles of Noria is a booktuber channel. For those of you who are not familiar, booktubers are people who review and recommend books, and/or create reading challenges. Noria has a playlist I want to point out in particular. The title is a curse word, so pardon the censorship, but it's called F*ckAThon. Essentially, the series looks at underrepresentation and problems in our society. Noria finds stories that encourage overcoming those problems. Some topics Noria explores in this series relate to ageism, ableism, queerness, and race!

Each video features twenty books for each prompt, which is not limited by genre. A few books that relate closer to worldbuilding that she has suggested include *The Warrior's Apprentice* by Lois McMaster Jubold for her f*ck ableism video, and *Kings of the Wyld* by Nicholas Eames for her f*ck ageism video. Her playlist also includes prompts like "read a book about a religion you're not a part of," which features *City of Brass* by S.A. Chakraborty inspired by Middle Eastern mythology and Islam. Through F*ckAThon, Noria helps us think about whose voices we read, and whose voices are often underrepresented. We learn about different perspectives we might have been ignorant to. Noria is personable and shares honest opinions about our world and the books covered in the series.

Although this article doesn't exclusively discuss worldbuilding ideas, these themes will come up again in future pieces, so it felt essential to

introduce these topics in the first article. The impact of representation is one that is typically excluded from the niche topic that is worldbuilding. This is reflected in the exclusion of worldbuilders that aren't your typical mainstream protagonist. There are some notable exceptions like *Avatar the Last Airbender*, but they are just that. Exceptions.

To be clear, there *are* worlds out there that already represent marginalized groups. However, the accessibility of these works is often limited because the resources for sharing them have historically been limited to certain narratives, predominantly through crafting the definition of mainstream culture. Sometimes this is done through censorship, like the infamous Comics Code Alliance or Hollywood's Hays Code. And there are many more unpublished works that have been denied a platform because they don't subscribe to that mainstream culture. Caring for underrepresented perspectives we use or are inspired by allows for compassionate storytelling and provides depth to our worlds. Understanding the context of our lives that shape our stories can help us monitor our own biases and think critically about the narratives we create. It can also allow us to manipulate techniques and develop an implied perspective. Even if your worldbuilding is not narrative based, these ideas can help you broaden your perspective on worldbuilding.

WORLD SPOTLIGHT

Every article in this series will introduce a world that is in some way related to marginalized and/or underrepresented groups.

At Library Con 2020, Hafsah Faizal spoke about her series, *Sands of Arawiya*, of young adult fantasy novels inspired by Arabian folklore. In *We Hunt the Flame*, the first book in the series, our protagonists are Zafira and Nasir: two people who hide parts of themselves for protection. The two must face each other as Zafira is on the hunt to restore magic, while Nasir has been ordered to not only steal the artifact she's using to do this, but also to kill Zafira.

When consuming content like this, it's important to understand that our interpretation of it is influenced by the context of what we're familiar with. While talking about the first book in the series *We Free the Stars*, Faizal mentioned that a reviewer had wondered if the main character's cloaked figure fighting against an oppressive patriarchy was a cry for help. This is all too common assumption is likely related to the fact that Faizal wears a niqab.[7]

The author goes on to say that the source of the character's hidden identity and fighting against oppression actually stemmed from her online experience. She was someone who had built an online platform for five years and had never shared a picture of herself there because she thought she would be safer if people didn't see her in a niqab. To put it in Faizal's own words,

> *"But years later I realized that that was the moment when I had been writing Zafira venturing into the forest dressed as someone cloaking her figure so no one would know she's a girl, because she—just like myself—we're okay with who we are, but we're afraid of how outside people judge us and how they have these preconceived notions of how we are and who we are."*

[7] Mahjabeen Syed, "What You Need to Know About Muslim Women, By a Muslim Woman," teenVogue, March 27, 2017, https://www.teenvogue.com/story/what-you-need-to-know-about-muslim-women.

Eventually, she shared her photo and was relieved that the response was fine! The reviewer made the assumption that women who wear a niqab are oppressed and in need of saving, and this cultural gap created an interpretation far different from what the author intended to convey.

Faizal wanted the book cover to show an Arabian influence because the world is inspired by Arabia. Although the publisher agreed to use a font inspired by Islamic calligraphy for the cover, they explained it was too late in production to change.[§] And so, the original cover had no image, which is quite off-brand for fantasy young adult books. It wasn't until Barnes & Nobles refused to take the book due to the cover being a poor indicator of the story that it was changed.

The publishing world has slowly been increasing the visibility of marginalized stories. It's exciting to see and it's one of the reasons why I wanted to be an editor. Please keep in mind that if you are writing a story influenced by marginalized people or cultures, that the context in which you worldbuild influences the story. It may be due to prejudice on the readers part, ignorance of an issue involving a marginalized group, or systematic erasure of marginalized people and cultures on book covers. It can be incredibly affirming to see yourself represented. The difficulties associated with sharing stories that involve underrepresented characters or worldbuilding are a reflection of the problems within our society, especially in the people who control what is mainstream.

Out of everything that was discussed in this article, I hope one thing you can take away from this is the value of caring about and respecting marginalized voices. I hope that some of these videos, or at the very least, this article, will help you feel inspired to either expand your worldbuilding explorations or discuss some worlds you think don't get enough attention.

Do you know any YouTubers you think uplift typically underrepresented voices? Join our Discord and let us know! Our magazine, after all, is about learning and sharing. It's up to us to help each other grow.

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[§] There are easy preventative measures that can be systematically applied to avoid issues like these. Much of publishing works with metadata these days. Creating a helpful template of basic metadata about the protagonist, for example, might be helpful. The system currently in place has allowed for white washing of covers, as well as the unfortunate example we have in this article. By replacing that system with something supportive towards inclusion, we can provide better representation

A CASE FOR LESS

by Adam Bassett

WRITING

I believe that there is a kind of battle that goes on within writers, especially those who are just starting out. It is a hard battle to fight—harder sometimes to even notice.

I could argue that the highest form of creative writing is the novel. These are often 250-500 page books (sometimes longer), and many of the stories you've read likely fall into this category. Even if you prefer memoirs and nonfiction, it's likely that some of your favorite books are somewhat large—because what else would a book be, but that stack of paper on your shelf?

When we knew that this issue of Worldbuilding Magazine would cover tips and tricks for starting to build a new world or write a new story, I spent some time thinking about what problems people faced—as well as problems I have faced in my own writing process. I believe this is a big one. There's a kind of social pressure when you reveal "I am an author," or "I have been writing," that leads to the *correct* social response: "What's your book about?"

People rarely ask me about my stories. They focus on the book. The end result. They assume that it fits neatly into that familiar size and package when there are truly so many other options.

A friend of mine recently decided to publish her work as an online serial. At my college, we read just as many novels as we did short story collections. Flash fiction is a popular format when done well because it lets a person jump into a story in moments. It's low-commitment, which is a rather valuable trait in the modern age of sagas and trilogies and whatever Marvel is doing with their multi-phase films. Not that there isn't value to that kind of storytelling, but I've also seen Twitter posts leave profound feelings in their wake with just a few hundred characters and a handful of punctuation marks. Some poems are even shorter. Ezra Pound wrote "In a Station of the Metro" in 1913. It reads:

> The apparition of these faces in the crowd:
> Petals on a wet, black bough.

I read this poem in college and it stuck with me better than any other due to its simplicity. It makes use of every word—even those in the title—to convey profound meaning. With poetry of such length, one has to choose their words very carefully.

The poem describes a scene in the titular metro station comparing the people in the crowd to petals stuck to a branch wet from the rain. The use of the term "apparition" suggests the people in the crowd are not of this world. Not quite present in it, at least, like ghosts just passing through. The crowd is large, but the people who make it up are impermanent. Just like the poem, they come into existence and then fade from it just as quickly. For this poem to exist as something more long form would betray the point it is trying to make—that life is fragile and short. In a section of *Ezra Pound and the Visual Arts*, Pound writes:

> *"I got out of a "Metro" train at La Concorde, and saw suddenly a beautiful face, and then another and another... and I tried all that day to find words for what this had meant to me, and I could not find any words that seemed to me worth or as lovely as that sudden emotion. And that evening, as I went home along the Rue Raynouard, I was still trying, and I found, suddenly, the expression. I do not mean that I found the words, but there came an equation...not in speech, but in little splotches of colour."*

When I was younger, writing stories because I enjoyed that feeling of discovering something at the keyboard, I felt like I was experiencing something similar to what Ezra describes here. I was stricken with inspiration by what I read in books, what I saw in the woods around me, and wondered at those delightful "what-if" questions that came so often.

Granted, many of those questions were silly or amounted to fan fiction without me realizing it at the time, but each helped me learn to write; as well as figure out what I enjoyed writing—and what I did not. I'll never regret those years, even if they were awfully frustrating.

WHEN YOU'RE NEW TO WRITING OR WORLDBUILDING, IT'S IMPORTANT TO START SMALL AND EXPAND OVER TIME.

The issue was that these ideas I had were like Ezra Pound's emotion upon seeing the crowd pass through the Metro: moments and feelings. Those are essential to a novel, but they do not make the one; however, I attempted to write novels anyway because that was all I really knew. My childhood was filled with tales from Mary Pope Osbourne's *Magic Treehouse*, of *Warriors* by Erin Hunter, and later my passion for reading was reignited by Phillip Finch's novel *Devil's Keep*. At various stages of my life, I loved these books and wanted to write like those authors did—but my ideas were moments and scenes, not something suitable for novels. At least, I didn't know how to make them work in that format well. So I kept trying, failing, and trying again.

I'm not sure that I'm cut out to write novels. I'm sure that I can, but right now I think that I prefer to explore ideas and then leave them, letting the reader mull it over and move on. It has been a hard lesson to learn, but that's where I ended up after years of never quite being able to achieve anything like what I wanted. If I'd been

exposed to short stories sooner, I think I would have made the switch sooner as well.

There's a video series hosted by Neil Gaiman on Masterclass wherein he discusses a variety of topics about developing a story, getting ideas, and writing in general. In his segment on short fiction, he says the following:

> *"A lot of writers when they think that they want to set out and sail their first craft out onto the seas of story immediately get the idea that you should go huge. You should write a series of ten books and have a huge mega-plot and you should have a cast of thousands—and all of these things—and it is a lot of skills that you need to do that and to do it successfully. Even those writers who have done that have tended to have to learn their craft as they go book by book in progression. What's lovely is taking short journeys. Is taking your boat out and just going 'round the headland and coming back in time for tea. Learning skills."*

I believe this point is particularly important, especially in the context of Worldbuilding Magazine. We like to inspire you, dear reader, with ideas to expand your worldbuilding. We love world guides and rich settings to get lost in. Many times, one of our readers will post something about their world and our staff will go read it to get lost in a new place or to be inspired by what others are working on. But not every world needs to be expansive; it doesn't even need to be an alternate world. When you're new to writing or worldbuilding, it's important to start small and expand over time. None of us started with the ability to complete a world guide or to detail the history of a fictional kingdom or to even write a story. These things happen gradually—and in many cases, expansive guides simply aren't needed for the story you're telling.

The story should always come first. When you're starting a new project, plan ahead and determine just how much you need to say. Work accordingly. A novel will be ideal for many projects, as will sequels to that novel, but there is no one-size-fits-all kind of storytelling. Each project you work on will differ. There is a case to be made for less writing, where it makes sense to do so. Sometimes the story you need to tell is complicated and happens over a long period of time and needs to be told in the way George R.R. Martin writes *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Other times you just need to convey the image of how people come into and out of your life in an instant—like petals on a wet, black bough.

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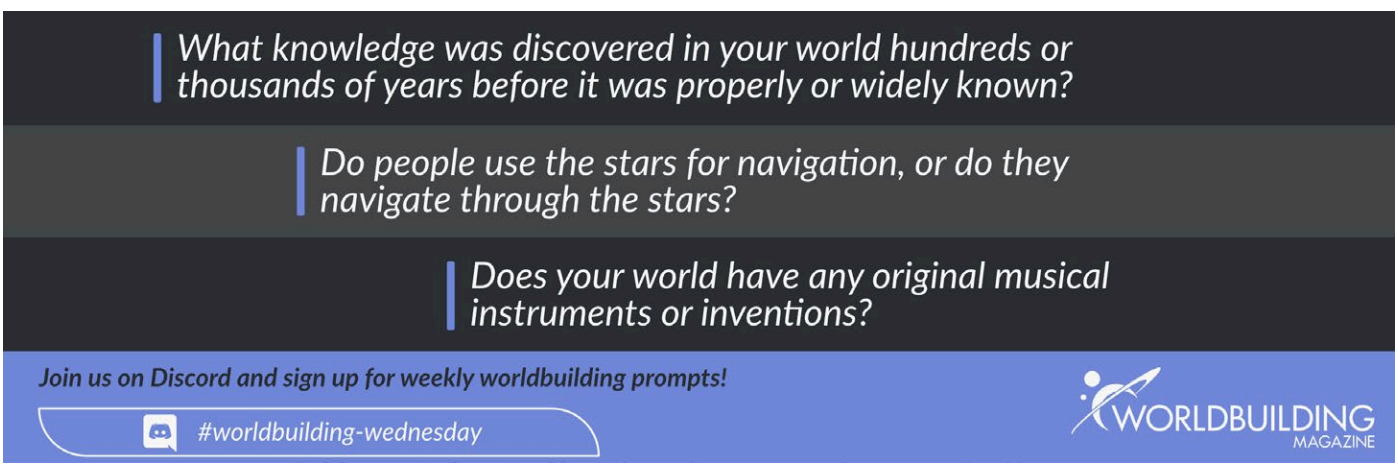

ASK US ANYTHING

by B.H. Pierce

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

How do you build a world with artificial influence?

—gregovin

AHMED ELGHARABAWY

Artificial influence. Forces beyond the ones that function in the mundane world that influence your world. This idea is both very useful in worldbuilding, and very broad, so first let us define what exactly we are talking about. There are three useful categories that make up artificial influence.

The first are the *Precursors*, a previous people who left behind great works whose function and origins have been lost to time. Precursors will not have had a hand in the creation of the world or the setting of its physical laws, but they will leave behind monuments, buildings, infrastructure, and machines, or magic that affect the current world.

Our next category is called the *Shapers*; they did not create the physical world, but they did have a hand in setting its natural laws. The Shapers are an excellent resource for speculative fiction, as they can be the source of magic or technology unique to your world.

Finally, we have the *Creators*, those who formed the physical world, all its laws, and are the font of everything. Creators tend to be distant from the affairs of mortals as their role in history takes place at the very beginning. They may be completely absent or only interact with higher powers.

These categories are not ironclad. Your world can exist in a gray area between these three or use more than one. Tolkien's mythos involves all three at different stages of history. Ilúvatar is a Creator who has existed for all of eternity and created the Ainur, who were Shapers. Ilúvatar taught the Ainur the Great Music, which the Ainur used to create the world of Middle Earth. Filling out the Precursor slot were the

Númenóreans and other ancient powers and civilizations who left behind magic weapons and artifacts.

Now that we have our categories, we can start to build. An important first step is to know the size and nature of your world. If you have one that is like the mundane world, a single planet orbiting a star in a vast cosmos, then your artificial influence will likely be contained to a single world or solar system. But given the unending possibilities of fiction, your world does not need to be like this. It could be a single fixed point that stars orbit around, a simulation encased within a massive computer, or a flat disk on the back of a giant turtle. With these smaller, more exotic worlds it is easier to have Creators and Shapers without getting bogged down in cosmological questions.

If the artificial influence is not confined to the creation of your world, but is instead persistent and ongoing, you can place your world on the Clockwork–Active spectrum. On the Clockwork end the influence runs like a computer program, doing the exact same thing over and over again. On the Active end of the spectrum an intelligence is constantly making choices and guiding the way things come out. In the middle you may have something that will enforce or enact rules most of the time, but can make exceptions based on circumstances.

For example, let's look to *Dungeons & Dragons* and two sources of magic in the game, Arcane and Divine. Arcane magic is on the Clockwork end of the spectrum. Saying a particular type of chant over a certain material will always produce one specific result, there is no variation. Divine magic operates on the Active end of the spectrum and in the middle of it. There are supernaturally powerful gods that take an active interest in the world and move to influence events on the mortal coil. Paladin magic is a good example of an influence in the middle of the spectrum. Normally the powers of a Paladin work the same way each time they are used. But if a Paladin commits an evil act, their powers will no longer function.

As with all worldbuilding tools, artificial influence can be used to add personality and flair to your world. The influence can be outrageous and fantastic or subtle and mundane. But above all else, make sure the rules of the influence are consistent.

Is it better to make my world unique or use real-world influences?

—Anon

The easy answer to this question is that your fictional worlds will always use real-world influences. It is functionally impossible to make a completely unique world that's entirely separate from the world you live in. This is because no matter what, you are a part of the real world and it will always have at least *some* influence on you, whether consciously or subconsciously. There is likely no piece of media that doesn't have at least a little real-world inspiration. Elements of *The Lord of the Rings* are based on the author's war experiences, and the first *Star Wars* film is partly rooted in mythological studies by Joseph Campbell[1]. The history of the real world is so long and varied that you won't be able to help making use of some aspects of other cultures.

The better question is, how do I make effective use of real-world influences? Many worldbuilders base their worlds on a single society; for example, Ancient Egypt. Despite a few details

[1] One of Campbell's most popular works, the book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, has defined a narrative path for fictional heroes like Luke Sywalker, Katniss Everdeen, Harry Potter, and many others.

being different here and there, the setting will just be Pharaonic Egypt with the serial numbers filed off. To avoid this, draw from *many* resources. If you want to make a setting in the mountains, look at Tibetan, Incan, Pueblo, and Alpine cultures for inspiration. A quick look shows that all make extensive use of herding animals, so now you know it might be a good idea to add your own version of a mountain goat and make shepherds important to their culture. What if you want something more specific, however, like a feudal warrior culture? The same process applies. Comparing the Sengoku Jidai to Medieval Europe reveals that both places had a strong sense of identity, but no true central authority to speak of. Now you have a basis for building your own era of warring states.

As you consider all these elements of worldbuilding, also pay attention to how you apply real-world influences. You can draw inspiration from a variety of existing peoples and use the research to create distinct cultures to populate your world. If you consider mixing them though, approach with care. Some readers have grown weary of seeing real-world cultures fused and their unique differences wiped out in favor of flattening it all into one entity. For example, mixing elements of a variety of real-world Asian cultures to create one fictional culture superficially framed as just broadly "Asian" can bother audiences. This style can come across as another type of hurtful cultural appropriation. For further reading on the topic, you can check out articles at Mythcreants and Writing With Color[2].

Even though you will be drawing inspiration from the mundane world, you can still make something that is your own. This is absolutely fine when worldbuilding as a hobby. But when you're presenting something to an audience you must be cautious. Settings heavily influenced by the mundane world are familiar and readers will enter into them with a whole nexus of connotations and assumptions. This, of course, can be good or bad. Whereas unique worlds often boast severe thresholds for entry, settings inspired by the real-world are more familiar: the names, tones, and contexts will be recognizable and will reduce the intimidating barrier. However, if the reader maintains negative assumptions or an aesthetic bias against your chosen inspirations, your setting itself might be a wall they are never going to be willing to climb over. Another drawback to creating a setting from real-world influences is creative limitation. In trying to capture the flavor of a specific culture or history, you might lose the ability to explore your world with as much freedom.

In the end, it is a question of sliding scales. A more unique world might be far more fun to build, but an audience might have trouble navigating all the new nouns and social structures that will inevitably influence your plot. On the other end of the spectrum, a medieval European pastiche might be somewhat boring to create, but will be easy for an audience to understand.

Our world is filled with amazing influences (beyond just medieval Europe) and our minds are beautifully capable of building something out of ephemeral thought alone. Take advantage of both: research the breadth of our own fantastic world, consider how you might innovate upon what you find, and implement something uniquely familiar for your readers to sink their teeth into.

What should I include in a creation story?

—Anon

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[2] Suggested reading: *Understanding Appropriative Worldbuilding* (Mythcreants), *Avoiding Homogenizing East Asian Cultures* (Writing With Color), and *How to Blend Cultures* (Writing With Color).

Creation Stories are great both for in-universe and out-of-universe reasons. Your worlds' creation story can be a tale familiar to everyone in your setting, which provides a common cultural touchstone among its people. Out-of-universe, it can also highlight the themes of your world and foreshadow conflicts to come if you're using it for narrative purposes. Just what you should include greatly depends on the nature of your world, if you want the people of your world to know its actual story of creation, and what your goals for the world are.

If your world was created through natural processes, you can look to the mundane world for inspiration. People will look around them and attempt to explain why things are the way they are. The cultural lens they view the world through will greatly impact how they explain it. A warrior society may have the origins of the world be in a cataclysmic battle, while a seafaring people will try to explain how the land rose above the waves. A culture very focused on family relations could have a mother and father pair coming together to make the world, while an orderly state could have the world made by an all-knowing scholar-official. Stories don't emerge in a vacuum; you must take into account just who is telling them.

You have more options to explore if your world was created by artificial means. If your world is only a few thousand years old and civilization existed from the start, there is a good chance that the actual story of creation is still known. The gods or other beings that created the world may take pains to ensure that no one forgets. But absent such forces, it is more than likely the story of creation will drift as time goes on, thanks to those cultural lenses we already talked about. In this case you can play around, with each myth being unique, but having a grain of truth as well as common similarities. For example, say elemental fire had a powerful influence on the creation of your world. One culture may retell this as a mighty god of the forge, hammering a new world into creation. Another could remember it as the old world burning down and a new one rising in its place. Both have a kernel of truth to them, but both creation stories are unique to the people who tell them. This can lead to friction and quarrelling between the cultures of your world.

To answer your question directly, there is nothing you *should* put in a creation story. How the peoples of your world remember and retell the origins of your world depends on too many factors to have universal rules. Take into account the actual facts of the creation of your world as well as the point of view and values of the cultures telling the story to craft something that works.

What is a theme/world/era/magic system/etc. that you think is an untapped gem?

—peppermintpeno

Mesopotamia is definitely underutilized. We know as much about it as ancient Egypt, but it's not nearly as popular. But if you want to talk really untapped, I'd have to say South America in general. Most people have heard of maybe the Incas, Brazilian Carnival, the Amazon, and maybe the Nazca lines, but they rarely come up in worldbuilding and those things are really just scratching the surface.

For example, in the pre-Columbian Muisca Confederacy, Guecha warriors would go into battle carrying the mummies of their ancestors with them to impress their armies. Many Peruvian civilizations kept records with collections of strings (with information stored by color, knot type, length, and position) rather than an alphabetic or hieroglyphic approach. The Colombian national sport is tejo, where you throw a clay disk at gunpowder targets (so, like cornhole but explosive). And that isn't even mentioning the unique flora and fauna which these places inspire us with.

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WORLDBUILDER'S CHECKLIST

by Adam Bassett & Tyler "Dino" Silva

Considering the topic of this issue, we elected to bring back last year's Worldbuilder's Checklist, originally published in February 2020 in our issue on The Arts. It has been reformatted to fit this issue, and we hope that you find it helpful as you begin a new world, or check to see what you might have forgotten to work on in an existing one you're working on! If you would like to download a copy to print and check off as you go, you can download it here. Happy worldbuilding!

FIRST STEPS

THE NATURAL WORLD

- ☐ Stars (and constellations), suns, moons, and planets
- ☐ Overall size of the world
- ☐ Mountains, woods, and/or other prominent features of the landscape
- ☐ Oceans and/or major bodies of water
- ☐ Common and rare plants
- ☐ Common and rare animals/creatures
- ☐ Poisonous and/or medicinal flora & fauna
- ☐ Invasive or synthetic species

RACES & SPECIES

- ☐ Common and uncommon races and/or species
- ☐ Dynamics between species and/or races
- ☐ Cultural similarities or disconnects between species and/or races
- ☐ Species commonly kept as pets
- ☐ Species used for industry
- ☐ Social opinions regarding various races/species

WEATHER & CLIMATE

- ☐ Typical and atypical weather
- ☐ Seasonal variations in weather
- ☐ Atmospheric phenomena
- ☐ Natural disasters (and places prone to them)
- ☐ Social opinions regarding weather

MAGIC

- ☐ Access to magic
- ☐ Access to education in magic
- ☐ Prevalence of magic users
- ☐ Restrictions on magic
- ☐ Common and rare magical skills
- ☐ Common and rare potions
- ☐ Restrictions on potions
- ☐ Requirements of using magic
- ☐ Magic's relationship to science
- ☐ Magical flora & fauna
- ☐ Magical reactions/illnesses
- ☐ Black market or forbidden magic
- ☐ Social opinions toward magic

TECHNOLOGY

- ☐ Availability of technology
- ☐ Access to education in technology
- ☐ Capabilities of technology
- ☐ Entertainment technology
- ☐ Energy production technology
- ☐ Transportation technology
- ☐ Inventions that change how society functions
- ☐ Advancements in medicine
- ☐ Black market technology
- ☐ Social opinions toward advancing and/or aging technology

DEIFICAT

ADDING TO YOUR MAP

CARTOGRAPHY

- ☐ Topographical, political. Elevation, or other types of maps
- ☐ Known or skilled cartographers
- ☐ Restrictions to cartography/ limits of the known world

LOCATIONS

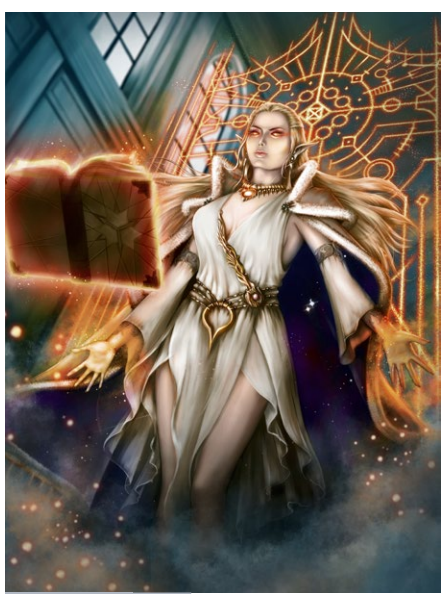
- ☐ Natural formations
- ☐ Landmarks
- ☐ Government buildings/castles
- ☐ Transportation hubs/major pathways
- ☐ Places for shopping
- ☐ Houses/apartments
- ☐ Towns and cities
- ☐ National boundaries
- ☐ Places with positive/negative opinions toward them

TRAVEL

- ☐ Restrictions on travel (societal and/or geographical)
- ☐ Dangerous locations
- ☐ Luxury/vacation locations
- ☐ Immigration/emigration trends
- ☐ Common methods of travel
- ☐ Affordability and access to travel
- ☐ Social opinions toward travel and travel methods

TRISTEN FEKETE

ANNA HANNON



DEIFICAT

DEFINING YOUR PEOPLES

PROFESSIONS

- ☐ Common and rare professions
- ☐ Specialized professions
- ☐ Social or actual restrictions on professions
- ☐ Unemployment rates
- ☐ Social opinions toward various jobs

FAMILY

- ☐ Relevance of marriage and marriage customs
- ☐ Typical age of marriage
- ☐ Typical number of children
- ☐ Availability and opinions toward birth control
- ☐ Typical family dynamic/structure
- ☐ Attitudes towards romantic love and sex
- ☐ Attitudes towards children and the elderly
- ☐ Care for children (traditional parenting, nannies, boarding school, etc.)
- ☐ Care for the elderly (in-home, nursing homes, etc.)
- ☐ Typical gender roles, or lack thereof
- ☐ Importance of birth order to family roles, inheritance, etc.
- ☐ Social opinions toward families

EDUCATION

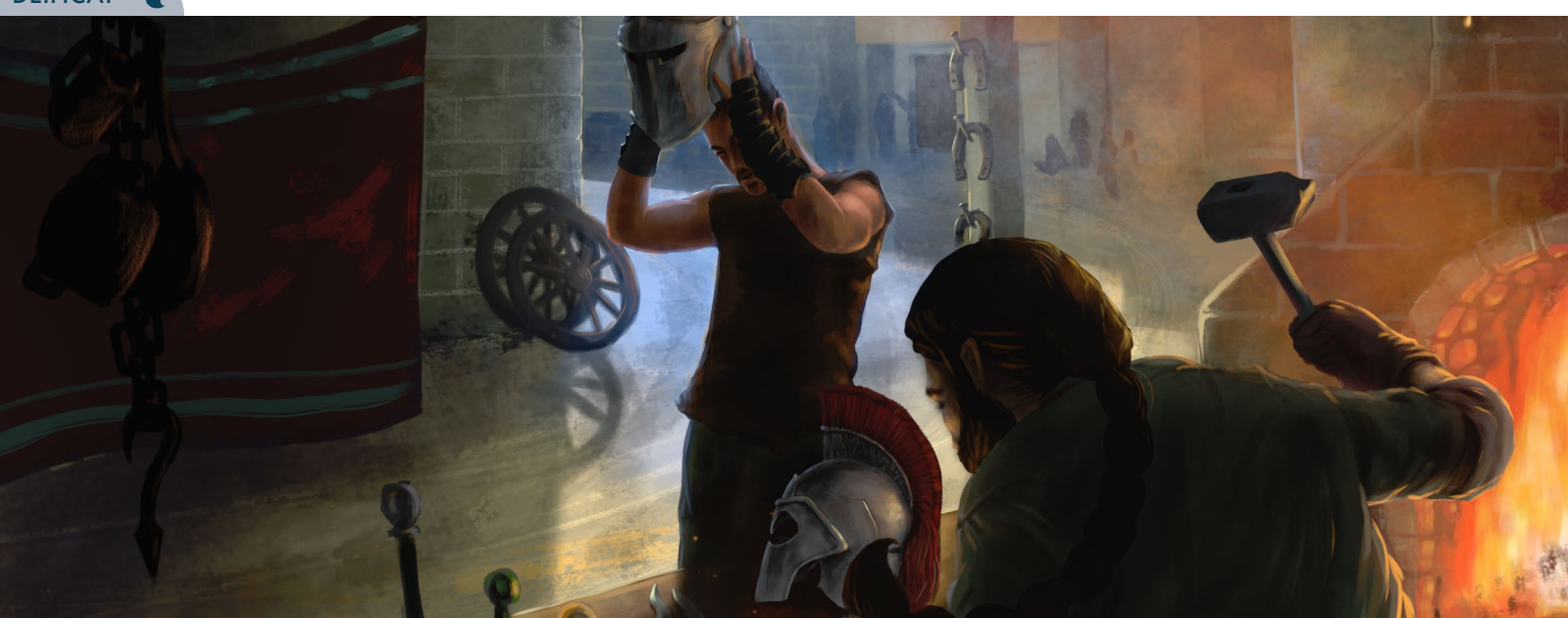
- ☐ Availability of schooling/education
- ☐ Cost and other restrictions on education
- ☐ Typical education level
- ☐ School subjects
- ☐ School environment (strict, lenient, etc.)
- ☐ Societal or other outside influences on education
- ☐ Social opinions toward education

LANGUAGE

- ☐ Primary/major languages
- ☐ Regional/minor languages
- ☐ Prevalence of multilingual/bilingual people
- ☐ Colloquial phrases, slang, and curses
- ☐ Unconventional or unusual languages
- ☐ Naming conventions/rules
- ☐ Social opinions toward different languages

SOCIETAL ORDER

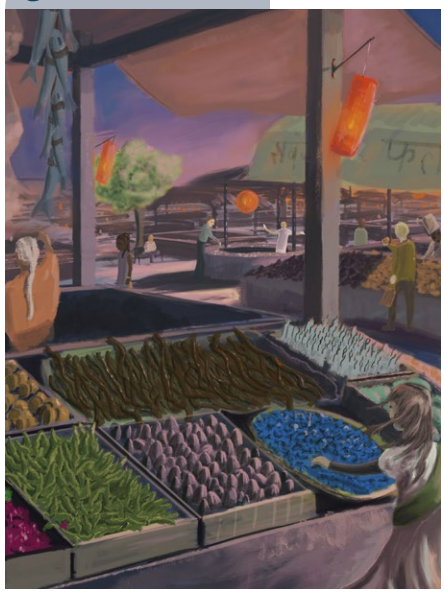
- ☐ Social structure
- ☐ Members of the highest levels of society
- ☐ Social mobility, or lack thereof
- ☐ Social norms and values
- ☐ Sense of individuality and equality
- ☐ Slavery and servitude
- ☐ Treatment of the dead
- ☐ Social opinions toward current forms of societal norms



CHAHN QUACH

INKY

TRISTEN FEKETE



CULTURE

ART

- ☐ Access to galleries
- ☐ Access to supplies or lessons
- ☐ Affordability of supplies or commissions
- ☐ Who is commissioning work
- ☐ Trends in architecture, sculpture, painting, literature, film, or other media
- ☐ Influence on society
- ☐ Famous artists and works
- ☐ Social opinions toward art

CLOTHING

- ☐ Cheap and expensive fabrics
- ☐ Differences in clothing styles between economical classes
- ☐ Uniforms and functional clothing styles
- ☐ Seasonal wear
- ☐ Differences in clothing between genders
- ☐ Differences in clothing between regions
- ☐ Differences in clothing between cultural groups or species
- ☐ Social opinions toward clothing styles

ENTERTAINMENT

- ☐ Restrictions on entertainment
- ☐ Affordability or access to films/sports/games/instruments/books, etc.
- ☐ Professional and casual sports
- ☐ Board games and/or card games
- ☐ Music and instruments
- ☐ Common themes and subjects in fiction
- ☐ Printed entertainment/digital media
- ☐ Humor and comedy preferences
- ☐ Social opinions toward entertainment

FOOD

- ☐ Staple foods
- ☐ Luxury foods
- ☐ Availability of food
- ☐ Local/regional dishes
- ☐ Foreign foods
- ☐ Unique diets of different peoples
- ☐ Social opinions toward different diets

BACKGROUND

ARCHITECTURE & INFRASTRUCTURE

- ☐ Common and rare or expensive building materials
- ☐ Appearance and layout of typical/expensive houses
- ☐ Appearance and layout of typical shops/markets
- ☐ Streets and sidewalks (brick, cobblestone, dirt, etc.)
- ☐ Availability of plumbing/sewage/snow removal/garbage collection, etc.

RELIGION

- ☐ Major religions
- ☐ Origin of religion
- ☐ Prevalence of religion
- ☐ Places of worship, or lack thereof
- ☐ Structure, or lack thereof, within each religion
- ☐ Dynamics between religious groups
- ☐ Dynamics between religious and secular groups
- ☐ Creation myths and theogony
- ☐ Religious holidays and days of worship
- ☐ Morals and beliefs
- ☐ Social opinions toward religion

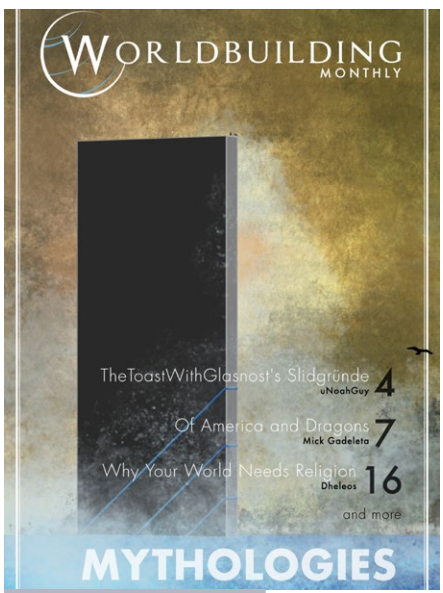
ECONOMY

- ☐ Distribution of wealth
- ☐ Lifestyle of the poor and rich
- ☐ Lifestyle of average income earners
- ☐ Money or bartering systems
- ☐ Currency conversions
- ☐ Resources in excess or at a deficit
- ☐ Opinion of wealth among various cultures
- ☐ Social opinions toward the economy

HISTORY

- ☐ The age of civilization and/or recorded history
- ☐ Major world events (wars, diseases, storms, etc)
- ☐ Social revolutions (i.e. the industrial revolution)
- ☐ Previous leaders/rulers
- ☐ Recent cultural shifts/changes
- ☐ Monuments
- ☐ Forgotten, hidden, or incorrectly recorded history
- ☐ Social opinions toward history

TRISTEN FEKETE



ADAM BASSETT

AHMED ELGHARABAWY

LAW

- ☐ Laws impacting daily life
- ☐ Common sentences for crimes (prison, labor, execution, etc.)
- ☐ Police behavior, uniform, practices, powers
- ☐ Criminal justice system
- ☐ Fundamental rights
- ☐ Major and minor crimes
- ☐ Prison conditions
- ☐ Recidivism rates
- ☐ Corruption in the judiciary system
- ☐ Social opinions toward law enforcement

POLITICS

- ☐ Form of government
- ☐ Current leader (and how they came to power)
- ☐ Political parties or factions within government
- ☐ Prominent members of court and/or government
- ☐ Secret government agencies and/or organizations
- ☐ Influence of religion on government
- ☐ Access to news and freedom of the press
- ☐ Rebel or resistance groups against the current leader(s)
- ☐ Social opinions toward government and its leaders

WARFARE

- ☐ Offensive and defensive technology or magic
- ☐ Famous battle strategies
- ☐ Famous generals, conquerors, and tacticians
- ☐ Allies and enemies of each nation
- ☐ Methods of acquiring soldiers
- ☐ Hiring mercenaries
- ☐ Social opinions toward war and soldiers

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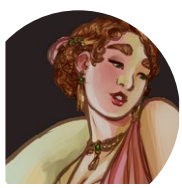

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Eleanor Konik, Writer

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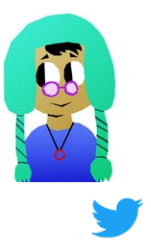

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Jacob Jackson, Community Assistant

No I'm not a robot, what makes you think that?

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JOIN WORLDBUILDING MAGAZINE

The *Worldbuilding Magazine* team is made up 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

WORLDBUILDING MAGAZINE