WORLDBUILDING
MAGAZINE

DISASTERS AND APOCALYPSES
& other topics

World Showcase
Dungeons and Randomness' *Theria*

Unnatural Disasters
A Short Story

Craters as Proof of Impact
How to Depict Loss During the Apocalypse

Featuring:
JOE MALLOZI
of *Stargate,*
Dark Matter,
and more

LETTER FROM THE EDITOR

The curious thing about catastrophes is how new things can spring from them. Forest fires consume existing plants, but activate seeds and underground sprouts which grow in the aftermath. Ice ages scrape the landscape clean, leaving deep gouges that meltwater fills to create vast lakes. And if it were not for a massive asteroid striking off the coast of the Yucatán Peninsula some sixty-six million years ago, no one would have invented chicken nuggets.

Worldbuilding Magazine has had its own near-death catastrophe over the last year. As noted in the last issue, we've been working with minimal staff for the last couple of years and as real life intruded upon all of us, the added load of publishing the magazine became unsustainable. There was every expectation that this would be the last issue of the magazine.

> "Depend upon it, sir, when a man knows he is to be hanged in a fortnight, it concentrates his mind wonderfully."
>
> — Samuel Johnson

As Doctor Johnson notes, impending demise has a way of focusing thought on the matter at hand. In our case, it led to many long meetings discussing the future of the magazine and the podcast. We decided that we want this glorious experiment to continue and we made arrangements designed to help secure its future.

A non-profit organization, The Worldbuilding Society, has been established as the parent of the magazine and podcast, and a board of directors was elected. This will allow us to look into options such as a print-on-demand version of the magazine, as well as fundraising and other activities. We'll be keeping you informed as these plans solidify.

We'll also be changing our approach to art. The magazine has always had amazing imagery and we hope to expand that by providing more artist showcases for single pieces and portfolios. If you are an artist, please keep an eye on our website and/or join our Discord for more information.

We'll still be a volunteer organization, though. If you care about worldbuilding and have an interest in writing for the magazine, serving as an editor, or contributing your talents in other ways, we'd love to hear from you.

As always, thanks for your support and your enthusiasm. We hope that you'll stick around to watch how we bloom again.

Robert Meegan

Editor-in-Chief at *Worldbuilding Magazine*

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Interviewed by Ike Riva | Edited by Amanda Jones | Cover art by Timothy Dykes

TABLETOP GAMES   INTERVIEW

Dungeons & Randomness is a podcast founded by Jason Massey and Brianna Marie that began airing in 2012. Now, after a decade of production, it boasts a total of four groups, eighteen cast members, 4.8 stars on iTunes with 974 ratings, a published setting book, several live games at DragonCon, and three successful Kickstarters under its belt. They are currently working on the sequel to their first setting book—*The Adventurer's Guide to Theria: Volume I - Ellara*—and have just begun their game's fifth arc!

I was fortunate enough to sit down and ask Jason Massey, professional game master and "man behind the curtain" of D&R, about regular people in tabletop RPG worlds, the tabletop industry, and his perspective on worldbuilding aesthetics and criticism—among other things!

Hey Jason! Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. I was looking at Theria's wiki before writing out some of my questions and I was curious: how often do you use World Anvil? Is there any organizing software or technique that you'd recommend to our readers?

I use it fairly often. We have a fantastic person that edits everything on World Anvil as our own personal wiki; Steve has been doing that almost as long as we've been around. We actually got to know Janet and Dimitri after they were first getting started with World Anvil. They've always been incredibly kind, just two genuinely nice people. It's amazing to see what they've done over the last several years.

Your first setting book is *Dungeons & Dragons 5th Edition (5E)* compatible. What's motivated you to switch systems from 5E to *Cortex Prime*?

Well, our books will still be 5E compatible. It's just that we've been playing *Dungeons & Dragons* now for about 10 years on the show. At a certain point, we started to feel that we were spending more time homebrewing and less time actually playing the game. We have a ton of fun with D&D, don't get me wrong. After several levels, though, that power creep starts to set in, and it gets harder and harder to tell a grounded story when every member of the party can focus-fire pretty much any threat sitting in front of them. We were looking for something a little bit more fast-paced and modular, so *Cortex Prime* by Fandom has been a blessing. It's fast, easy to get going, and it's focused on storytelling from the get-go.

Are you still planning on switching Theria from *Cortex* to *TaleSpire*?

For Arc 5 [of the podcast], we bit off a lot. We wanted to change everything about how we record and present the show. We changed so much that we knew some of it just wasn't going to work out. *TaleSpire* is a fantastic program—we love the way it presents everything in 3D,

A collaborative collection of short stories between Worldbuilding Magazine, Dominican Writers Association, and Cultura Cómic RD

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and it does draw a party into the world much easier than with a piece of graph paper—however, the time and attention to detail it takes to make something really special is monumental. There is a learning curve, and it takes a while to get really comfortable with those controls. When we started streaming the show, we found that if there wasn't a dedicated camera person, then the result would be exactly the same as if we were using a 2D map. So, we decided to go with *Foundry Virtual Tabletop* instead. One of our listeners, necrophage, was fantastic enough to create a *Cortex Prime* module just for us. Having all of that at the click of a button is way easier than doing it all manually.

Will your upcoming setting book be *Cortex*, *TaleSpire*, or 5E compatible?

It's still 5E compatible and we don't currently have any plans to do any other versions. I guess that would depend on time and budget for future installments. We absolutely want to develop some stuff for *Cortex*, though. We just need to know what the rules would be like from Fandom.

What kind of homebrewing did you have to do while playing *Dungeons & Dragons* that made you feel like you weren't playing the game?

It's not that we weren't playing the game, really. It was just that D&D has so many abilities and spells that sort of skip over roleplaying and consequences—making someone forget, putting them to sleep, turning invisible, shape-shifting, and just a ton of other stuff that makes it very difficult to tell a grounded story. It just really didn't fit our world and we ended up changing or removing dozens upon dozens of spells.

What kind of stories and gameplay do you think mainstream systems create? How is it different from lesser-known, or independent, systems?

I think the mainstream stories are similar, if not the same. What changes is how you get to

those beats that you want to communicate. In *Dungeons & Dragons*, it is very much like two games glued together. There is everything you do for roleplaying and interacting with other characters—oh, and then there is combat. Sections of it are just needlessly tedious. Spell slots come to mind on that front. If you are a storyteller who doesn't want to have to worry about hardcore math all the time but does want to tell a grounded story with some stakes and danger, there are hundreds of other roleplaying systems out there. I guarantee you that someone has created something that fits your style of play. We also felt that Wizards of the Coast has a big enough piece of the pie that leaving for another system wasn't going to hurt them, haha!

If *Dungeons & Dragons* feels like two games glued together, do you think one of these two "games"—roleplay or combat—is given priority over the other?

Oh, combat, 100%. The game is built around combat from top to bottom. Roleplaying is sort of an afterthought if you think about it. Anything a player is looking forward to leveling up for is about making them stronger in a fight—learning a second attack, getting better weapons and armor, learning more intricate spells, and just generally getting more powerful. The longer you play in a D&D campaign, the stronger the characters get, and you are basically doing one of two things. First, it either makes combat more tedious or trivial—tedious because players and monsters eventually have to start throwing more and more status effects on the field to keep combat interesting. It can't just be a flat damage race because it would get unbalanced pretty fast. So there are more and more spells that create walls, slow someone down, daze them, or control them, and it generally just slows down the game. Alternatively, it's either that or give players a way to avoid combat entirely by letting them fly, making someone forget something, or somehow allowing them to get out of the consequences of their actions. I guess it's just a bit too
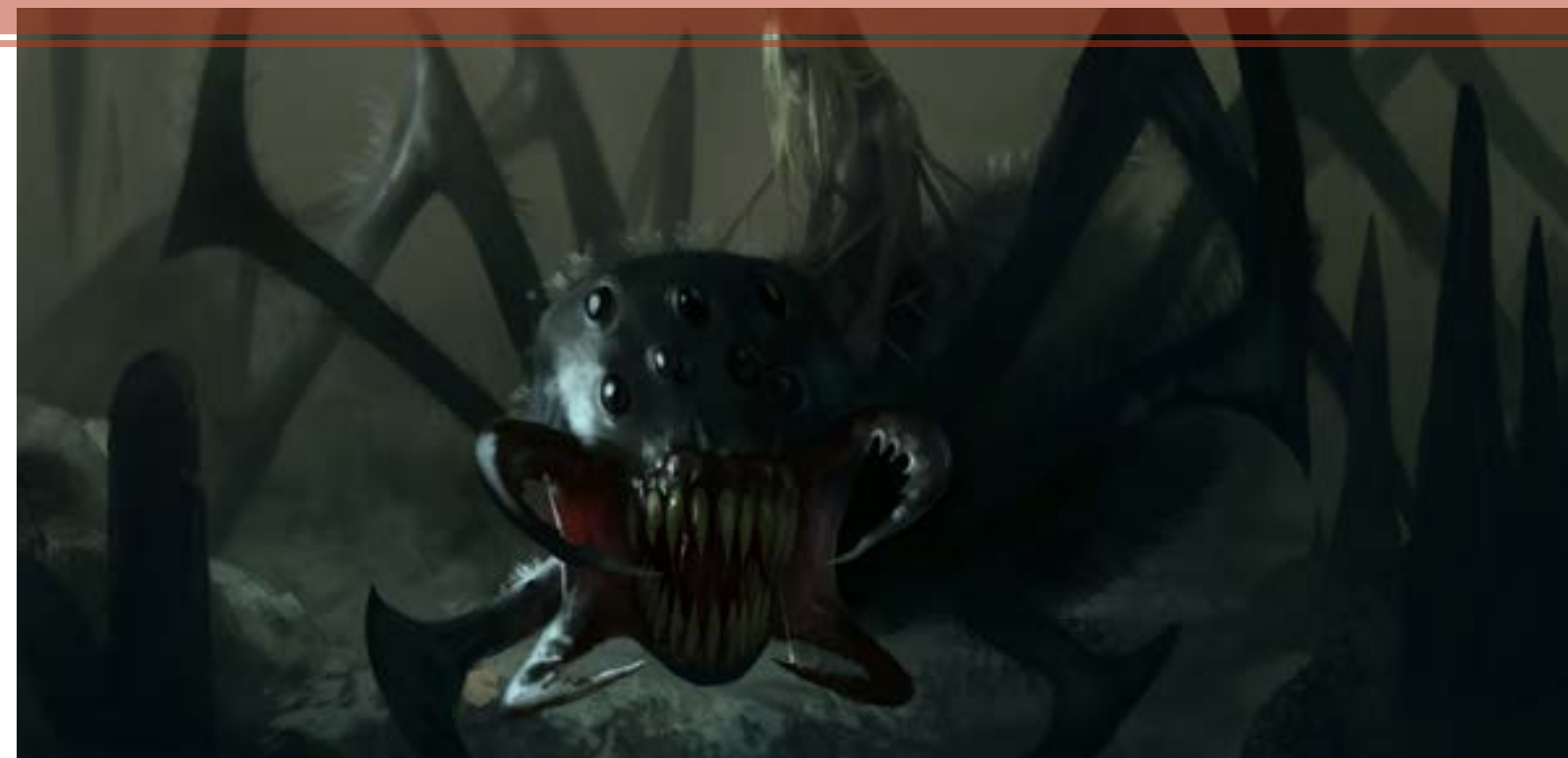
high fantasy for our world. And, again, that isn't to say that D&D is a bad game by any means. I just don't really think that it does a good job of scaling in a way that keeps the game fun at the higher levels.

Do you have any thoughts on Wizards of the Coast's market share in tabletop gaming and how this may affect games and systems?

Well, WOTC is a pretty big company. It really isn't up for debate that they own the lion's share of the tabletop roleplaying game space—they are the Hulk Hogan of RPGs. Even if you don't play any tabletop games, you probably have heard of *Dungeons & Dragons*. Any company with that kind of notoriety has stepped on some people's toes to get there. When we were getting started and the podcast took off, we had to form an LLC when this became our job. That's when we found out that Wizards of the Coast had trademarked our name so we couldn't use that as our business name. It was pretty disheartening. You also hear about their black list of sites and shows that just aren't allowed to communicate with them in any way. When they own that much of the space, it can be quite difficult to grow your fanbase and

reach new people when they are just not an outlet. I try to support as many people as I can on sites like Kickstarter if I see that they have an interesting idea for tabletop stuff and they just need someone to help them out a bit. I've gotten some really awesome things in the mail from people who just needed the chance. I've always looked at it as a good way to pay things forward. I just wish Wizards of the Coast felt the same way.

What do you think are the pros and cons of theater of the mind vs. visual presentations of tabletop sessions? How do these different constraints affect the game master's ability to draw a party into a world?

I think the main drawback of theater of the mind is that it can be pretty difficult to communicate the vision you have to everyone else. It's almost like a game of telephone where the four or five people you are talking to get a completely different image of how things are playing out. You have to be very descriptive and prepared to clarify things when someone has a question. I do prefer to use minis in virtual tabletops just so that everyone can easily see what is happening in a scene. Of course, that isn't a perfect system,

either, and can require quite a lot of setup and investment if you aren't prepared for that.

Do you view Theria as a collaborative effort between you and your players?

Oh yeah! I have always remained steadfast in the opinion that if you aren't ready for your players to make changes to your narrative and world, there is no reason for you to be playing a game at all. The point of them interacting with you is to be able to change status quos. They need agency in the world to feel like they have true character-building moments. It's one of the reasons that prequels never appealed to me. If you know that characters who appear later are in no real danger, then there just isn't a point for me. Over the years I have been lucky enough to work with my very best friends. They are family to me, and they just so happen to be incredibly creative and talented. There are certain aspects of Theria that just would not exist without them.

What are some of your favorite aspects of Theria that your friends, family, players, etc. have contributed to the world?

Every time I have presented the cast with hard choices or something high stakes they have never failed to impress me—sacrificing a character to drag a Demon Lord back through the gates of hell, fighting a dragon to the death loan just to buy a group a little more time, and marching into a city of vampires even though the odds look absolutely terrible from their end. In recent years, I can't think of a single instance of a player handling things selfishly. Everyone knows that we are putting on a show and they all do their absolute best to play things as their character would. Honestly, they are incredible. Decisions that were made early on in the show have now become part of history, with non-player characters telling stories second or third-hand, and it always gets a smile from the players and the audience.

Do you allow players to come up with world details in their backgrounds and character histories, or do they need to be acquainted with Theria's lore beforehand?

I like my players to at least have a bit of knowledge about the world before creating detailed backstories in it. Obviously, the entire cast pretty much knows the world inside and out, so I can work with them on just about anything. Where I draw the line is if a player wants to be the son or daughter of a major non-player character, or if a player were to try and change the details of famous events. That is really rare, though, and I have only had one or two interactions where someone wouldn't budge or compromise on something like that. I don't like to say "no" to players. I always try to give them an alternative if something doesn't quite fit because, usually, getting as close to their original vision is possible while still staying true to the world.

How do you make interesting status quos that have the ability to change and be dynamic, that have believable struggles within them? How can our readers prevent creating static status quos?

I was trying to get worldbuilders to not think of their story as too precious to change. The reason you set up status quos in a world is just to give everyone an anchor, to give them something to point to that is a constant. For example, if someone has been Queen for decades, that is a constant that players can point to. Obviously, that isn't always going to be the case. They might die of old age or sickness or be overthrown and executed. This should be exciting for worldbuilders. It allows you to play with brand-new parameters. I know that some people have worked on aspects of their world for years and the thought of someone coming in and changing things is off-putting; but when something like that happens, you start to collaboratively build a world. There are consequences for actions; just because the players have changed something doesn't always mean it will be in the way they

intended. Just like you—as a game master or worldbuilder—have no idea what your players will do, your players don't know how the world will react to them at any given time. I just find that type of thing incredibly exciting and it is a feeling you just can't get anywhere else.

What do you think about people using the source book to run their own games—is that collaborative worldbuilding, or something else?

It's a weird feeling for sure, haha. When we were writing the first book we were so busy figuring out the best way to do everything and struggling with production that I don't think we really thought about people actually using the book to play games. After it came out and a bunch of people told us about their adventures in our world, it floored us. When I was growing up, I read adventure books, video game guides, and all kinds of setting books. I never would have thought, in a million years, that I would help create one. Now that we know people are actually using it, we are working extra hard on the second book to give folks something they just haven't seen before. That's the goal, anyway. I also do think of it as collaborative worldbuilding. I, of course, would never take any ideas from players and put them in my world—just because I feel like that's wrong and crosses a line. But, having them take an adventure prompt or module and just run with it in a completely different fashion than what we imagined is just amazing to see.

Can you explain the "line" you think you would be crossing by taking inspiration from your players' games using Theria? It doesn't go both ways, since players can take inspiration from you—what, in your perspective, feels wrong about the reverse?

I have a standard in my head. I make a living off of doing the show and creating things for the world. That is my career and I work very hard at it to keep it running. We make just about as much as we need to in order to pay bills and

keep moving forward. If I were to take someone else's ideas and put them into the world, I see that as betraying our listenership. Benefiting from work they put into something just seems really wrong to me, you know?

What do you think about fanfiction? Have you read any you enjoyed, whether for Theria or otherwise?

I've never been a huge fanfiction guy. Brianna, my partner, is super into the idea. We actually did a couple of specials where we read fanfiction set in our world with our characters. It was super weird, but the listeners had a great time with it. We had to stop after the second special just because it got pretty intense.

What do you think about collaborative worlds that have no guiding "author" like, for example, the Cthulhu Mythos or the SCP Foundation? Where is the worldbuilding "line" there?

There are certain settings or characters that are just a bit timeless. A bad interpretation of something like Sherlock Holmes won't destroy the actual character of Sherlock Holmes. I feel like the best settings always have some kind of guideline or standard. Take SCP, for example; not everything written for that setting is canon. It has to fit the feel of the world. That being said, I love settings that were built to be collaborative in the first place. Look at all the crazy good stuff that has come from SCP alone—a thousand different voices with a million different ideas that just would not be possible from one person.

By the way, congratulations on D&R's third successful Kickstarter! When can we expect the second setting book? What can we expect to be in it?

Thank you very much! We are still working hard on everything right now and we just about have all of the artwork done. We are tackling chapters one by one. We hope to have a much more solid

guess as to when it will come out this year. We should be making an announcement about that very soon. Sadly, we have no idea how production will go just because of COVID, but I think we are all sadly used to that by now.

We obviously wanted to keep the flavor of the first book, but really tailor it to the new continent. Thankfully, we explored a decent-sized chunk of *Ta'lor* in our last arc. You'll see recipes for specific foods, crippling diseases, fantastic new monsters, and a section that I can't wait to show off. Essentially, they are Therian ghost stories—monsters that may not actually exist, but still have stat blocks and a lot of history behind them. Of course, there will be loads and loads of new tables as well.

How has COVID impacted the tabletop industry, from your perspective?

Well, it hasn't been easy from a creator's standpoint. Obviously, this has been incredibly difficult for everyone. When we were wrapping up our first book, we had actually lined up a little tour in our area. We were going to be visiting game shops and spreading the word through a grassroots effort. That was set to begin in April of 2020, so that ended up not happening, haha. There are fewer people commuting now, so there is less time to listen to podcasts. That's why we started incorporating a visual element in Arc 5. It was just long overdue, and hopefully, it helps us reach a brand new audience or reconnect with someone who had switched over to Twitch because they now work from home. I have seen a lot of hard-working people close their doors because they just couldn't outlast COVID. I feel really sorry for everyone who couldn't make it work through the pandemic.

Do you have any tips you could give our readers about creating successful Kickstarters?

You only get a few moments to make a first impression. You should do everything in your power to

make it one that counts. Obviously, letting people who already like your stuff know about the Kickstarter and have them help spread the word is key, but you need to reach new eyes in order to do things like hitting your stretch goals. We've done things such as printing postcards and leaving them around at DragonCon, guest spots on other shows, and posting on every social media platform we know, and at the end of the day, it's just about being a carnival barker constantly crowing for 30 days about your campaign until it is absolutely done. It's essentially a full-time job on top of what you are already doing.

What does good worldbuilding mean to you?

Well, I guess I would have to say that good worldbuilding, to me, is about creating a setting that feels like it has history while also making players want to create a future in that world. If you can make people want to play in your sandbox, you have something really special. If you create rules, you have to stick to them. It is the only thing that will initially make your world feel like it has consequences. Players want to know how things work, and what they can and can't do. If you have ever watched a horror movie where they establish the rules of a supernatural killer or ghost, then proceed to violate those rules moments later, you naturally don't feel as invested as you were at the start. The last thing I would say to do is leave people wanting more. You see a lot of worldbuilders start to tell you about aspects of their world, and they are so thorough that it feels like there is nothing left to do. There is no mystery anymore. Give people something to explore and answers to find on their own. Not everything needs a twelve-page backstory.

How do you give worldbuilding critique? What kind of critique do you value?

When people tell me about the worlds they are building I normally try to ask questions that I think a player might ask—very common things that might fly under the radar of someone with

a God's eye view of the world they are creating. This kind of stuff can really get you talking and thinking about things from the perspective of a villager or adventurer, the people who actually have to live in the world that you've created. What is their day-to-day life like? How do people without magic or sword skills live in your world? I have had people ask me questions over the years that I just did not have an answer for because I wasn't very educated in those fields. I value that stuff, though, because it gives me a chance to study a bit and, hopefully, flesh out the world that much more. Every time you do something like that, you are patching up holes and, eventually, you can make something very special.

Is there worldbuilding critique that you generally find unhelpful?

As you can imagine, I've gotten tons of feedback in the area over the years. Most of it has been really helpful, but every once in a while, you get someone who clearly feels that they would be better at doing your job—it is negativity without any constructive criticism. If someone tells you that they didn't like a certain aspect of an episode or your world but gives you a suggestion to change it, that can generally be helpful. Even if you disagree with them, at least you can see that they were trying to help. If someone comes up to you and tells you how terrible you are, or that they don't like your voice, there isn't really too much you can do about that.

How would you give critique for art that contains worldbuilding but is not interactive? In other words, how would you give critique for worldbuilding in which you are not a player?

I guess my biggest piece of advice would be to try and highlight what is actually important. Help people understand your world by communicating the importance of characters and decision-making. I think it's fantastic when a person comes up with bits of lore for every single thing in their world but, when you do that,

it can be very difficult for someone coming in to know what bit of lore is important and what is just something to fill out the world. Understand the story you want to tell with your world, try to communicate that as clearly as possible, and you can focus on adding to that after the fact.

How would you give worldbuilding critique differently for other mediums, such as written or visual compositions with worldbuilding elements?

So, I have a strong belief that everyone should have to work in some sort of service industry for at least a few months in their lifetime. I feel like we would have a lot more empathy in situations where someone is waiting on us. I've been a content creator for a long time now, and it has helped me understand what being critical can sound like on the other side. If I review something and I don't like it, I try to emphasize the fact that this is just my opinion and it isn't personal. I could totally be in the minority, but I think it's important that a person hearing that knows I'm just trying to help. I would want someone to do the same for me. I just think that there is a way to communicate criticism without being rude or hurtful.

Would you say that worldbuilders tend to take a "God's eye view" of the world they are creating?

I think it could be really hard not to. When you are focusing on everything in the world at once, it can be really difficult to pick any one thing to pay attention to for long periods of time. If you know that you are playing a game and the group you are hosting will be in a certain area, that can be a lot more clear. Otherwise, if you are trying to tell a story set in your world, it can be difficult to spin all of those plates and not get bogged down.

Do you think that our views of our own world may affect what flies under our radars when building other worlds? How can those biases be expressed?

If you mean the real world, I absolutely think that we all have blind spots. I can't tell you what it's like to grow up outside of America and I would have to do a lot of research before I felt comfortable telling a story from that perspective. I've gotten to know the cast very well over the years and hearing their stories about growing up and their varied perspectives on things has helped me immensely from a worldbuilding aspect. I think if you want to tell a story that appeals to people beyond you or build a world that feels truly alive, you have to study other people. The more you expose yourself to other points of view and learn, the more you can inject that into the characters of your world and tell a better story.

What is your biggest worldbuilding inspiration?

I grew up with cheesy stuff like *The Running Man*, *The Beastmaster*, and *Highlander*—excessive 80s power fantasies. I love that aspect of Sword & Sorcery, but I got really focused on how regular people would exist in those universes. Honestly, when I think about that aspect of things, it's one of the reasons we left *Dungeons & Dragons* behind. The way they treat people who aren't bosses, monsters, or adventurers is a little sad to me. A shopkeeper has absolutely no chance of doing anything to a player's character. Not that they should trounce them or anything, but what if they are defending their shop? It gives the players a sense of being able to do whatever they want. I feel like that disconnects many people from the world. It strips away empathy and it can keep them from really getting into roleplay.

Do you think that the way tabletop fantasy portrays "people who aren't bosses, monsters, or adventurers" draws people into worlds or out of them?

I can only speak for myself, but I feel like it takes me right out of all things. It makes it feel like those extra characters are only there to give quests and facilitate the game. They don't mean anything more than that and they were

never intended to. If you present a character as lesser than the players, how are they ever going to think of that character as equally important? They may not be heroes or combat experts, but they are supposed to be real people with real lives. I think that when stats are presented that way, it strips all of that out.

How is worldbuilding for tabletop different from worldbuilding for stories, or another medium?

The first thing that jumps to mind is the interactive aspect of playing a game. A dungeon master or game master will come to the table with story hooks, characters, and backstory, but you are waiting for your players to make choices and poke at things. It's a fun game of tennis where you serve them a bunch of different plot hooks and background things and they tell you what they are interested in and want to pursue. If you are just writing a story then you don't need to worry about waiting for a player to make a decision. It is all up to you. That isn't to say that the two can't mingle. Writing stories for a world you are making for players can help them understand its history and give them some lore if they want to read it.

Have you written any side stories set in Theria?

I have! It's something we only started in the last couple of years, but I think it is really helpful for flexing muscles I usually don't get to flex. Telling short stories that either talk about history or the vibe of a certain character is truly fun. I think it helps people understand aspects of the world that they usually don't get to see as much.

What's a mistake you often see beginner worldbuilders make?

I see people who spread themselves a bit too thin. It's easy to pinball all over a map and try to fill in every single gap with a special castle or army or chunk of lore. I think it makes far more sense to start in a single location and slowly

spread outward. Create a town, a kingdom, or a forest, and then figure out how that location ties in with locations near it. Not only does this help you get the ball rolling faster for a game, but this can help avoid wasted time because you are actively learning about your own world as you create it. Instead, you may be making a huge map and slowly filling things in, finding that you have to come up with better ideas that will replace the ones you made months ago.

What do you think about Tolkien's influence on fantasy fiction and worldbuilding in general? Is there any particular "Tolkienism" that you are critical of?

This is a secret shame of mine, but I have never read any of his work. I have obviously watched the films, played the games, and do know quite a bit about the world, but I have never read the original works for more than a few pages at a time. That being said, I absolutely respect what he brought to the genre and even sort of think of many of those tropes as charming.

Have you ever read any non-fiction about worldbuilding that you found helpful and would recommend? How about the reverse: Have you read any non-fiction about worldbuilding that you thought was off the mark?

I have seen several tips from fellow worldbuilders over the last few years. Honestly, a lot of it is stuff that I would tell people as well. There have only been a few times that I've seen something I have strongly disagreed with. Most of the time, it involves telling game masters to simply kick a person out of their game for changing anything in your world. Yet, most of the time, you are playing with friends. You can't just scrape one of your friends off because of something so trivial. Almost everything can be worked through and a little patience can go a long way when you are playing with a group of different people trying to tell a singular story.

Thank you for your time and answers! I think our readers will really benefit from your perspective on these topics, and we're excited to see what direction D&R takes next!

This interview was edited for Worldbuilding Magazine.

Thanks so much to Jason for the great conversation! If you would like to follow Dungeons & Randomness or listen to their work, follow them on Spreaker, Twitter, and visit their website! You can find their store here, and support them on their Patreon.

The *Adventurer's Guide to Theria: Volume I - Ellara* is available here.

THE CORNER OF MYTH AND CATASTROPHE

HOW DISASTER CREATES MYTH

Written by Cassidy Hammersmith | Edited by Dylan Richmond and Keller O'Leary

☢ **CATACLYSM**   💡 **THEORY & ANALYSIS**

There's precious little a world can do when the Gods deign to wage war. Such was the case in the world of men some dozen *grandgross* years ago, when the land was still moist and fertile. But their avarice to one another's domains gave them no leave to be satisfied with their own accomplishments. Even as their wisest creations settled into a golden age of prosperity and knowledge, the Gods plotted against one another in secret, that they alone (or with confederates; it matters little) might emerge victorious and rule the whole of creation themselves.

The precise circumstances which preceded or spurred on the War of Gods vary by regional tradition and patron. Port's disciples speak of a deep betrayal by Merzeval, the god of fire, who cursed Port's domains to forever run dry and arid, and that Port returned this gesture by tossing boulders the size of mountains across his brother's lands, which melted to form a sea of brimstone where none would ever live again.

Alta and Daschel's faithful, the disciples of Light and Life, have a very detailed history involving a quarrel with the tribes of Xedesh of Death and Xul of Time, each seeking to outwit the other through both subterfuge and gross display of creative power.

Nemuran Priestesses of Frae can produce ancient tapestries and reliefs depicting the jealousy of Ell and his sister Jhun for the beauty and fecundity of her lands, and sought to tame their wild majesty. And those that still revere Ell and Jhun are eager to sing their epic poems of the subterfuge of Veldra and Nenn in souring all of their game and crops.

It is unlikely that any of these retellings encapsulate the whole of the story. The biases of the faithful being what they are, it is likely that all Houses of Divinity share in the blame to some degree. However, in all such chronicles, one feature is constant; after many years of bickering, one of them (most commonly the Dark Maiden Xedesh) forever erased the God of the Sea so thoroughly that their name has been completely lost to history. Wiped clean, gone as if they never were.

Beneath the weight and scope of this incredible tragedy, the surviving records from this period suddenly lose all sense of embellishment and luster, reverting to bland, factual reporting of names, dates, victories, losses, advances, and retreats. Individual members of the Human race are first reported to perform acts of sorcery during this period, initially in the lands ruled by Alta, then Daschel, followed by several others. We see the Gods revealing their secrets of creation unto their children, and though some still dare to characterize this frantic period of revelation as an act of nobility, the desperation of the Gods' actions in this chapter of history belie a deeper truth: that these revelations were acts of self-preservation, setting Mankind against their sisters and brothers to continue the War of Gods on their behalf.

The Gods knew fear and death in ways that history and liturgical tradition, prior to this period, deemed utterly impossible. And their solution was to send Man to die in their stead.

Following the draining of the seas by Xedesh and her allies, when the final nail in the coffin of the old world was already sunk, only then did Alta, Daschel, Port, Ell, Frae, Jhu, and Irchet finally set aside their avarice and sacrifice of themselves to preserve what little remained of their creation. Only when faced with losing not only themselves but their entire legacies, did they take the responsibility of stewardship seriously, as we surviving Humans have always done out of necessity. The Hydromancers which sustained mankind through that eon of dying by sacrificing their bodies, their minds, and their lives to the eating sickness for no purpose other than to conjure water from the rocks themselves, know more of stewardship and nobility than any ancient god ever

dared to display while they still drew breath. Though the bodies of the Gods failed the day their Black Shroud was wrought upon the world to hold their enemies at bay, their ghosts still haunt the world in ways no mortal sorcerer can ever hope to achieve. To what result? To bring us *rain*, of all things; a blessing that would, and does, come to us on its own in time.

And yet, I find myself seated daily among learned historians, Designers of Sorcerous Acts, Stewards, and Bondsmen who still dare to worship them and beg their praises? No. Humanity is better—must be better—than that. The records make it clear: given the choice, a God will gladly send their followers to suffer and die rather than risk their own existence to save that which they profess to love above all else. Such love is covetous on the face of it. Our collective flourishing in this new age of rediscovery and progress stands in spite of the Gods' wishes rather than at their behest.

This, fellow scholars, is precisely why the work of the Academy of Man and its most cherished offspring, the Bond of Peoples, is so essential. We have no need to prove that the Gods will fail us. It is plain to see that they already have. In terms of their morality, motivations, and aims, Humanity is little more than an afterthought. But for us? There is nothing more sacred. The Academy desires no less than a perfect assurance that Mankind will never again be so threatened by the caprices of Godly appetites or the longings of divine vanity. But so long as Men desire so strongly to have and keep their faith in Gods, those Gods will have Men to work their wills in our world. A fact which should, by all rights, be of greatest concern to us all.

Master Sammahd Il Possun

Ascended Sorcerer of the Academy of Man

Year of the Bond Sevengross Twodozen and Ten

It's easy to confuse myth for history in fantastic settings. Especially in worlds like the one described above, where magic, sorcery, or wizardry is real. Fantasy fiction is replete with examples of dire and ominous myths accepted uncritically as stone cold fact. Interpretations which, in the context of their various settings, often turn out to be correct. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the retelling of catastrophic or world-shaping events. Sauron is not merely

an ancient mythic figure of evil, he is, or at least was, an incarnate reality for Middle Earth. The Breaking of the World and the Taint of saidain in the Wheel of Time is not a quaint metaphor, but an actual series of events that happened more or less as described. The Sith, the Leviathan, the Dark One and the Shoggoth are not boogeymen invented to explain the fears of the unknown, the uncontrollable, the capricious, or the malicious. They're all actual beings which caused actual catastrophes that exist within the worlds in which they are written about and spoken over in quiet whispers and fearful bed stories.

Fantasy worldbuilders in particular, then, tend not to dabble too greatly with the mythic. Their stories of Armageddons long past have the trappings of myth, of course. Heroes and villains and gods and devils abound as explanations for wars and famines by the sackful. However, these cannot be counted as truly mythic, as the events described all really took place within those settings, and those forces continue to act upon their respective worlds, more or less openly.

Since these settings already include fantastic elements, there's no additional suspension of disbelief necessary to bring the audience along for that ride. This use of legend in fantasy storytelling is so common that the audience is primed to believe those tales immediately and uncritically. One or more of the religions of the people always turn out to be factually correct, such that anyone too skeptical of their teachings can be easily branded a fool.

My question is: Why? Why should a setting where magic is real be bereft of myth? What is it that makes fantastic settings so special that humans should stop telling actual constructed or imaginary mythic histories of the tragedies which befell their forebears? If the aim of worldbuilding is to create living, dynamic settings with depth and internally consistent reality—worlds which, if looked at critically, could be mistaken for the real thing—then why does the mere

presence of the fantastical so often preclude the presence of myth which, by all appearances, exists in nearly every real human culture?

To my mind, this is a glaringly obvious missed opportunity in the construction of fantastic worlds. In the example above from my own world of "Fallow", there's obviously a very real global cataclysm buried deep within this society's prehistory. An event which greatly damaged their biosphere, shattered their landscape, dried up their oceans, and scarred their southern sky. What caused it? Gods, obviously. Warring gods. No other power could possibly have done all of that to the world, could it?

Except... this is a world where magic is clearly real. Real enough to be reliably taught at an academy devoted to the purpose. Consistent enough that the design of sorcerous acts—the engineering of new magic from base principles—is an institutionalized profession. Is our imagination so dim that we cannot conceive a better explanation?

Suppose an alternative did exist. Suppose the war that ended their world has its root causes not in the heavenly affairs of capricious divinity, but in the corporeal wants of humanity itself. It seems to me that people living through a mistake of that magnitude might, over time, distance itself from that responsibility, that those people who took part in it might tell their children it wasn't really them that broke the world, but other forces outside of their control, and that such children would know no better than to accept that story and tell it to their own children. First, by blaming other persons than themselves. Later, by blaming beings which are not persons at all. And why shouldn't they? Real humans do it all the time.

As humans, we create and sustain myths as a source of comfort or stability through traumatic and catastrophic change. Myth colors the human experience in wide and simple strokes

which are pleasing to the mind and sensibilities of the society that created them. Sometimes they include a tinge or hint of truth, and sometimes not, but any tragedy of sufficient cultural weight can and will inspire the creation of new, fictional narratives in which we satisfy some psychological or societal need. That being so, it does not follow that even substantial changes to our circumstances, such as the existence of magic or physics-breaking technologies, should prevent this from occurring. A fantastical world should, in principle, be made more believable by the presence of similarly constructed myths surrounding their own fantastical tragedies.

Blaming gods for the folly of man is easy, especially when there's magic in the air. But if what we want is to build a world that looks like it could, in some backwards way, be a real one? It might be better to keep a more worldly cause hiding in your back pocket. To play with your peoples' reactions to the myth as though it were true, while acknowledging, even if only in a small way, that this story within a story is still just a myth.

MEET NEW WORLDS

THE QUEER AND DEAR TO MY HEART

Written by Zaivy Luke-Aleman | Edited by Dylan Richmond and Matthew Redding

⚠ CONTENT SPOILERS   💡 THEORY & ANALYSIS

WORLDBUILDING KEY

Interested in the worldbuilding scale provided for this article? This scale was developed to communicate the extent of worldbuilding within their stories. An example of softer worldbuilding is MTV's *Teen Wolf*, and a harder example of worldbuilding is Tolkien's *The Silmarillion*.

SOFT ●○○○○ HARD
The worldbuilding is largely aesthetic. World elements usually look like (or are) Earth with few adjustments.

SOFT ○●○○○ HARD
Might rely more on already established tropes to inform the audience of their world/magic/science. There may be world details sprinkled in, however it is not evident that they belong to a carefully crafted system as opposed to one that is loosely defined.

SOFT ○○●○○ HARD
Stories like these may not take place on Earth, and often have a magic/science system the audience can generally follow. The worldbuilding may have small details that make it feel unique, which may be explored in shallow depth.

SOFT ○○○●○ HARD
The worldbuilding is large in either scope or scale, from which an audience could replicate similar spells/devices and remain consistent with the system it borrows from. At least one of the worldbuilding's complex systems is explored in depth.

SOFT ○○○○● HARD
Complex in both scope and scale. The systems and setting are detailed enough that the audience could replicate similar spells/devices and remain consistent with the system it borrows from. Explaining the setting can take a long time, and learning it can be difficult

If you didn't already know, this may be the last magazine format issue of *Worldbuilding Magazine* for the foreseeable future. I thought now would be a good time to retire this series. I wanted to finish with my naked heart. So, let's go over some worlds that I have really loved. I have a soft spot for queer stories, and today I want to look at some super cool worldbuilding that really was . . . well, more *queer*. And we're bringing back the rubric for it!

As a warning, this article will have spoilers for *Iron Widow* by Xiran Jay Zhao, "The Last Dawn of Targadrides" by Trip Galey from *Glitter + Ashes*, *The Unraveling* by Benjamin Rosenbaum, and *The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu.

In this particular article, queer is used in the LGBTQ+ sense, but it is also meant in another way. Queer theory, in its nature, is unwilling to be clearly defined. Among many things, queer theory is a framework to analyze life and culture that deviates from societal standards. And, importantly to this article, it is also fatally allergic to binary systems.[1]

IRON WIDOW

WORLDBUILDING:	SOFT ○○○●○ HARD
MAGIC SYSTEMS:	SOFT ○○●○○ HARD
SCIENCE:	SOFT ●○○○○ HARD

If you read our last issue, you might have noticed that I chose Iron Widow by Xiran Jay Zhao for the Staff Picks section of our last issue. Let's dive a little deeper into why.

Iron Widow starts off introducing the reader to the concept of yin and yang through a butterfly. For those unfamiliar, yin and yang are two kinds of energy. Yin is considered more feminine (among other things), and yang more masculine, but all things have at least a little bit of both yin and yang in them. Our butterfly is intersex and so it carries both male and female phenotypes. This is an important point for both the worldbuilding and the central narrative.

The setting is Huaxia, a country at war with an alien species known as the hundun. Both humans and the hundun fight for resources, but humans need the aid of mecha robots known as chrysalises (see our butterfly coming back into the story?), which are powered by qi, an internal life force that can be manipulated in various ways. Not only can qi be used against the hunduns, but it can be used inside the mecha system both for and against a copilot.

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[1] Considering this article takes a look at each of these worlds in depth, this article will not feature the World Spotlight section.

The culture of Huaxia is rigid and sexist, favoring men over women. The piloting system is also a marriage system where the male pilot has several concubine copilots with the hopes that one day, one of those concubines will eventually be able to become a main wife, or in the story, a One True Match. The way to become one? Live long enough to get there. The piloting system is lethal to most concubines due to men's qi naturally being spiritually stronger than womens', fatally overpowering their partners.

Throughout the story our main character, Wu Zetian, questions the rigid sex-based piloting

system. She is constantly fighting it, unwilling to believe she is just cannon fodder for a copilot to use, abuse, and be rid of. And through her eyes, we begin to see how the piloting system and her world are not as strictly divided as their society would have anyone believe. Wu Zetian demands to have a different world, one that will not tell her no, and she does so with a viciousness. Dominated by her own moral compass, and unwilling to bend to anyone else's rules, she also breaks away from societal conventions of relationships. Why should only men have multiple partners after all?

I loved this world. I loved this character. Both were unapologetically cruel to each other in a complementary way. Not only do the characters explore queerness, but the world does as well, by stepping away from binary systems.

THE LAST DAWN OF TARGADRIDES

WORLDBUILDING: SOFT ○●○○○ HARD
MAGIC SYSTEMS: SOFT ○○○○○ HARD
SCIENCE: SOFT ○○○○○ HARD

This story is one of many memorable stories from *Glitter + Ashes: Queer Tales of a World that Wouldn't Die*. If the anthology title is familiar, it's probably because it was in the latest article of this series.

Trip Galey creates a post-apocalyptic world ruled by drag queens in a ballroom aesthetic. For those unfamiliar, balls in gay culture are events where queer people can gather to compete and socialize. In ball culture, groups of people form what are known as *houses*, each featuring a houseparent who functions like a representative and leader. Houses are sometimes made

up of people who live together in found-family structures.[2] However, in The City of "The Last Dawn of Targadrides," the term *mother* is used in both the biological and ball-culture sense.

In Galey's world, edgerunners scavenge parts of fallen ball-culture style houses. These houses are grand, with affluent ones made up of palaces. Fallen houses are then replaced through *worldmotes* that descend on the city from a kaleidoscope sky. Not much else is known about these mysterious flying transporters.

The world itself is shallow in the sense that many new world-elements cannot be understood on a deep or complex level; however, the world plays well into themes of ball culture. It relies on the audience already understanding tropes and cultural associations within ball culture, making it an excellent example of niche soft worldbuilding. Although ball culture has gained some exposure thanks to shows like *Pose* or the documentary that the drama is inspired by, *Paris is Burning*, ball culture often feels like a hidden world. Seeing how the worldbuilding played off of ball and drag culture to inspire house rivalries, challenges, the backstage atmosphere, and more was fascinating.

This is a story about gaining independence through self-discovery. Although the queerness can be seen in the relationship between the protagonist and his boyfriend, and through the use of ball culture, I also appreciated the intentional ambiguity of the word *mother*. This blurring of its meaning, whether it was being used in the ball sense or the way it's usually used in English, was a great *queering* of the world itself. Galey created a fascinating blend of worlds that satisfied my need for queer.

THE UNRAVELING

Benjamin Rosenbaum starts off with an incredibly dense ten pages filled with details and char-

WORLDBUILDING: SOFT ○○○○● HARD
MAGIC SYSTEMS: SOFT ○○○○○ HARD
SCIENCE: SOFT ○●○○○ HARD

acters to keep track of. However, I found it was worth puzzling together.

Do you know the satisfying moment when you realize that the worldbuilding is strong enough to have an emotional impact? That's how I felt about the spoons in this story. But before we get there, we need a little context.

The Unraveling features a rigid gender binary system made up of *vail* and *staid*. Vails use ve/vir pronouns and are considered naturally more emotional, violent, colorful, impulsive, and out-spoken. Staids use ze/zir pronouns and are logic-driven, aloof, and typically dress in bland clothes of all-white. There are certain activities that only vails or staids can do. For vails, they can take any issues they have with people to the mats where they physically fight over their disputes. Meanwhile, staids get trained in the Long Conversation, a religious and intellectual experience that takes place over a lifetime and involves passing spoons in a circle of people.

This is definitely a book that deserves a second read, but even on a first go the religious worldbuilding has a powerful draw. Much of it is left up to context (though there are some explanations in the glossary section) and builds up into Fift's relationship with zirself and zir world. Fift, a staid, doesn't feel like ze fully belongs to the gender ze was assigned at birth. When ze impulsively has a sexual encounter with a friend, ze feels ashamed for having such an impulse in the first place. With the help of an admirer, Fift starts to analyze the Long Conversation and discovers zir world has never been as binary as the oppressive *Midwives* would have anyone believe. Very inconvenient for the midwives, but enlightening for Fift.

But the world is not just its gender-binary system. As an exploration of childhood and the different

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1   Shannon Ward, "A Brief History of Modern Ballroom Culture," *All Gay Long*, February 22, 2021, https://www.allgaylong.com/blog/a-brief-history-of-modern-ballroom-culture/.

phases that lead into adulthood, the world takes on an unexpectedly Dr. Seuss-like aesthetic. This is all within the context of a hypervigilant social system where the internet exists in one's head since the early days of childhood. Family systems, known as cohorts, are nothing like nuclear families. Fift, for example, has eight parents and each parent has anywhere from two to three physical bodies per consciousness. Everyone's lives are livestreamed whenever they're out in public, making them vulnerable to ridicule or popularity. If a cohort's ratings are low enough, a family can be broken up.

While this is a story about deconstructing binary systems, it's also one about growing into independence. The world does an excellent job of building on these themes.
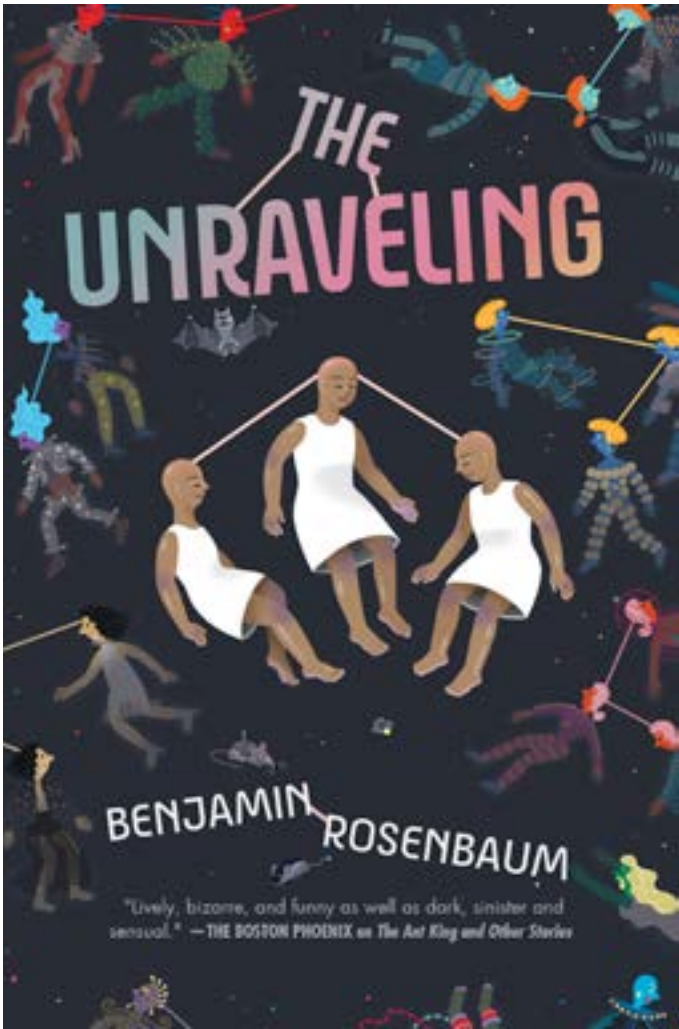
THE GRANDMASTER OF DEMONIC CULTIVATION

WORLDBUILDING: SOFT ○○●○○ HARD
MAGIC SYSTEMS: SOFT ○○●○○ HARD
SCIENCE: SOFT ○○○○○ HARD

In the first article of this series, I mentioned *The Untamed*, which is a drama adaptation of *The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* by Mo Xiang Tong Xiu. You might have heard Inky or me mention it on *Worldcasting* (our podcast) as well. The series is incredibly popular, and while much has been said about it already, it's time to do a worldbuilding dive for it.

The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation is a horror-mystery story. In terms of worldbuilding, the book is the best example out of all of the story's versions. However, the book also has some problematic elements to it that are common to the romance genre and the subgenre *danmei*, of which this story also belongs to.

Like many stories that take place in the wuxia genre, this world is made up of martial fighters whose powers stem from their internal life force, or their qi. In this way, the story is actually fairly typical. It also has one of the most common heroic tropes of all, a fight between good and evil.

What I love about this story is that it does not take the typical route of "good is good" and "evil is evil" with unquestioning loyalty. It looks at various factors in defining good and perceiving evil. By breaking away from the standard binary, this story satisfied my need for queer. I had expected this to be a thorough and simple look at good and evil to the extent that character traits like loyalty and friendship were surprises for me.

These driving narrative pieces were not only developed by the characters, but also by the magic system. There are four types of 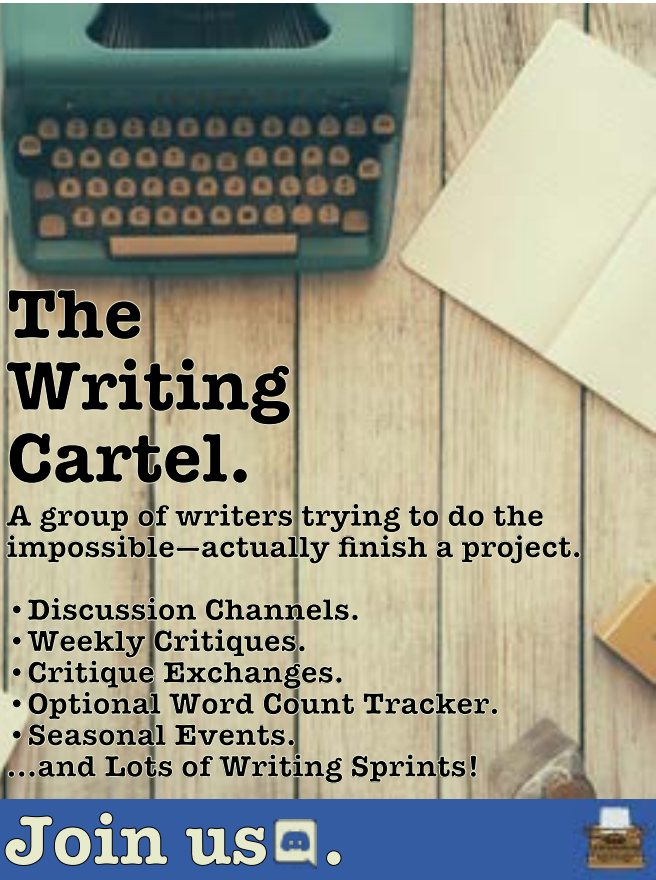energy in *The Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation*, and the kind considered most evil is called *resentful energy*. Although our main character, Wei Wuxian, dismisses the idea of ever using it, as a child, he is clever and can see the value in this style of magic. When he finally goes down this path of evil, the audience is forced to better understand the political and cultural associations with resentful energy and how it has been used for evil throughout history. With the help of the author, we are forced to question the nature of good and evil and how we define it in others. I loved this critique of unquestioned power.

CONCLUSION

Stories are a fascinating way to reinterpret our world. They're opportunities to examine familiar structures in unfamiliar environments. Each of these stories, *Iron Widow*, "The House of Targadrides," *The Unraveling*, and The *Grandmaster of Demonic Cultivation* explored different parts of our own world, queering them into new and vibrant perspectives. What are some systems we take for granted in our own daily lives? Or systems that were historically considered unquestioningly normal that might not be considered as such today? How can we challenge these systems in our own worldbuilding? Often, life is more complex than a binary system, black-and-white, good and evil.

What are some binary-breaking worlds you've enjoyed? 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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🖎 NONG V

EXCLUSIVE INTERVIEW

WITH JOE MALLOZZI

💬 INTERVIEW 🖋 WRITING

This year has been a bit of an odd one for us. With just one issue, we knew we wanted to try having an interview that was not only exciting, but covered new ground. We've spoken to authors, worldbuilders, people from the tabletop community, and educators—we've actually covered a lot of ground.

But we've never talked to a writer/producer for television.

Joe Mallozzi has an incredible resume that ranges from children's shows to epic science fiction, and now he's in early development on adapting an epic fantasy story. We talk with him about his process, his experience on shows like *Stargate* and *Dark Matter*, and perhaps most importantly we find out if Jack and Sam are canon.

I got my start in animation, writing children's shows like *The Busy World of Richard Scarry*, *Paddington Bear*, and *George and Maratha* before moving into development and assuming the story editor reins. From there I moved on to teen live action (*Student Bodies*, *Big Wolf on Campus*) before eventually taking the leap to one-hour action-adventure, eventually landing on *Stargate: SG-1* for the start of its fourth season.

I spent twelve years on the *Stargate* franchise across all three shows—*SG-1*, *Atlantis*, and *Universe*—eventually assuming co-showrunner duties on the latter two. I created my own show, *Dark Matter*, that I also showran. I have approximately 400 hours of produced television to my credit, almost 350 of it in science fiction.

Thanks for joining us, Joe! Let's begin with your approach to worldbuilding. When you start a new project, where do you start?

The first thing I start with when constructing a series is the hook. What will compile someone to buy the show and what will compile the viewers to watch, and continue watching? It could either be the show's central conceit, or a twist in the pilot that speaks to that conceit. For *Dark Matter*, it was an exploration of redemption that is introduced in the pilot's closing seconds when we realize the heroes of our show are actually villains. *Or are they?*

I always start with a macro picture and then work my way down, fleshing things out as I go. Establish what the series is about, the end-of-pilot twist, the end-of-season turn—then focus on the characters and the world. Creating a fully realized world is not only important with regard to how a series will play out, how the bigger arcs will progress and what kind of adventures will unfurl, but serve to shed light on each character's backstory.

What stories would you say have left a big enough impact on you to influence the way you tell stories on the screen be it through *Stargate*,

Dark Matter, **or perhaps even the adaptation of** *Promise of Blood* **you're working on now?**

I grew up reading science fiction, mostly the classics, but if I had to choose one writer who most influenced me, it would be Harlan Ellison whose stories were always clever, provocative, and often very surprising. Growing up, my imagination was also shaped by comic books and their unique approach to storytelling. *Dark Matter*, a show that was uniquely mine, was influenced by the aforementioned in addition to, specifically: *Blake's 7*, *Cowboy Bebop*, *The Thunderbolts*, *The Seven Samurai*, and, of course, *Stargate*.

On that note, let's chat about *Stargate*. I was wondering if you could talk to us a bit about how you got into the writers' room there?

My then writing partner and I, Paul Mullie, were represented by Executive Producer Robert C. Cooper's agent, and he informed us the show was looking for writers. They liked our writing samples enough to invite us to pitch.

We pitched three stories [for *Stargate SG-1*], and they bought one—which would go on to become

the episode "Scorched Earth". One of the other pitches that wasn't selected would be picked up later and become the episode "Window of Opportunity." We had to prove ourselves by writing a solid outline and first draft (of "Scorched Earth"). That done, we were offered staff positions on the series.

Stargate went on in one form or another for over 17 seasons, plus some films. How did you learn to write for the already-established setting when you first joined—and how did you keep records so that new writers coming in at the end of the show could get caught up?

Back when [Paul and I] first joined *Stargate* prior to *SG-1's* fourth season, there was a series bible that offered an overview of the series, its characters, and the show's first three seasons. We also received scripts to read and episodes to watch to get a sense of the show. All the same, our scripts weren't perfectly in sync with the existing show, so either Brad or Robert would always do dialogue passes before they went into production.

As the seasons progressed, and Paul and I grew very comfortable with the show and its characters, we also started doing passes on scripts written by newbie writers. After the fourth season, the production [team] stopped updating the bible and we relied on episodes and scripts to inform new writers.

That sounds difficult to manage without the bible getting updated anymore. Did it ever feel like *Stargate's* worldbuilding got out of control? Did any scripts have to get thrown out because they would have had a negative effect on the established worldbuilding?

I never felt like the worldbuilding got out of control. It certainly grew layered and complex over the franchise's multi-season run, but it was, in my mind, always straightforward.

I'm not sure what kind of negative effects a story would have on worldbuilding. If you mean were

any stories dismissed because they contradicted the established rules of the show, I would have to answer no. At that point, we were all familiar with the rules, what we could and couldn't do, and it would have been counterproductive—and a complete waste of time—to pitch something that undermined those rules.

That's fair! Speaking of the storytelling, though, how far in advance did you plan out the big arcs? For example, humans expected to eventually join the five great races, but was that an arc you planned ahead for—or something that arose after you'd already introduced them?

We would map out the big arcs prior to every season, usually on the tail end of the previous season. We never planned specific multi-season arcs, but I can't speak for co-creators Brad Wright and Robert C. Cooper who may well have had certain visions or endpoints in their heads. Having said all this, I do know that Brad had a very particular payoff to the *Stargate: Universe* series storyline he was, sadly, never able to deliver.

Are there any episodes of *Stargate* that you are particularly proud of your role on? What or which one(s) and why?

I'd say I'm proud of the entire *Stargate* franchise run. There are no episodes that I feel prouder to have been a part of than others, but there are certainly episodes I look back on more fondly than others—"Ripple Effect," "Revisions," "The Ties That Bind," "The Curse," "Broken Ties," "Family Ties," "Window of Opportunity," "Remnants," and the *Stargate Universe* finale, "[Gauntlet]." I limit myself here to episodes I wrote and produced given those are the ones in which I was 100 percent involved.

I have a friend who just wants to know one thing: "Are Jack and Sam canon?"

Good question. I guess it depends whom you ask. In my mind, they were canon with Carter's arrival at Atlantis. The framed photo of her and Jack was a hint, as were various other subtle references.

One of the most overt references was, sadly, cut for time from the episode "Trio."

Let's move on to your original show *Dark Matter*. I know you've said before that you started working on it while working on *Stargate*. What pushed you to write a new sci-fi series while you were already working on one of the biggest sci-fi shows, and what did you want to do with *Dark Matter* differently?

I assumed *Stargate* wouldn't go on forever—although, in all fairness, it almost did. I wanted to have a show ready to go by the time my run on the franchise ended, so I started developing *Dark Matter* during *Stargate Atlantis'* third or fourth season.

Dark Matter had a very SG-1/Atlantis vibe, since so much of what Brad Wright and Robert

C. Cooper had created and developed with those two shows really resonated with me. [It also] represented what the majority of sci-fi fans loved: character-driven action-adventure with a sense of humor and a family unit at its core.

You talk about the main cast of *Dark Matter* being like a family—which I definitely get. Especially as the show goes on you really get to see each member of the crew come into their own. But at the start of the show even they don't know who they are thanks to their amnesia. Why did you decide to begin the show with a group of people who really didn't know much more than the audience?

I have always been a big fan of redemption stories. Two of my favorite character arcs on *Stargate* were Rodney's McKay's and Richard Woolsey's. Two characters you hated. Then loved to hate. Then begrudgingly loved. And finally loved.

I wanted to craft a series that explored this theme of redemption, [of] nature vs. nurture. Are people born bad, or are they products of their environment? And is the answer the same for everyone? Many people say, "We are shaped by our past." But what if you have no past to weigh you down or inform you? Given a fresh start, would you be a different person?

Also, how did your experience working on *Stargate's* expansive world impact *Dark Matter's* setting? What are some things you carried over, and what did you try something new with?

Stargate's biggest influence on *Dark Matter*, beyond the series' tone, was the approach to production—proper preparation, a supportive and positive workplace atmosphere, etc.

When it came to worldbuildling, *Dark Matter* was very different, as we were dealing with a setting some [three to five] centuries into our far future. Whereas the appeal of *Stargate* was that, despite the many off-world adventures, the series was set in the here and now. The galactic power dynamics of *Dark Matter* were influenced

less by *Stargate* and more by our world, the rising power of multinational corporations and international bodies.

That makes sense. *Dark Matter* was driven hard by the corporations and police force, which acted a lot like sovereign countries. What was your process in not just creating them, but also differentiating each one on the screen?

The Galactic Authority were fairly straightforward, a galactic police force independent of the various corporations. As for the corps, I recall creating about a dozen of them, power players of varied size and structure, rivals, occasional allies, who essentially acted as multinational on the galactic stage, colonizing worlds in order to exploit their resource base.

We establish this in the series opening two-parter, also setting up the two big rival corporations—Ferrous Corp and the Mikkei Combine—whose maneuverings would often impact the crew of the Raza (the main cast).

Dark Matter's run was cut short by Syfy in 2017, despite some solid ratings. You've talked before about how that came to be—so instead I'd like to ask about how the cancellation impacted your original five-year plan for the show. What had to get cut, and if given more time what would you like to explore more of in that setting?

I had a fairly detailed narrative blueprint for the series from day one. I approached each series like an installment in a book series with its own beginning, middle, and ending. Season four would have dealt with the alien invasion while season five would have focused on the android uprising that would have inevitably drawn in our crew and set up the finale whose final moments are still clear in my head.

Last I heard, your next project was developing an adaptation of Brian McClellan's *Promise of Blood* for television. I know it's still very early to be discussing that, but could you give us a bit of info about how you're approaching the project as well as how to show off his world?

The *Powder Mage* trilogy is one of my very favorite fantasy series, so when producer J.B. Sugar approached me about collaborating on a project, the first idea I pitched him was an adaptation of the books. Once the various deals had been closed, I reached out to author Brian McClellan, and we discussed the adaptation.

I'm a huge fan of the books and want to be very respectful to not just Brian, but the fanbase as well. I don't want to just take a kernel of an idea and just run with it. I want to craft a series that echoes all of the elements that resonated with its fandom in much the same way the first five seasons of *Game of Thrones* paid tribute to its source material. Each book will form the basis of a single season, and there's enough material there for many, many seasons. I've completed
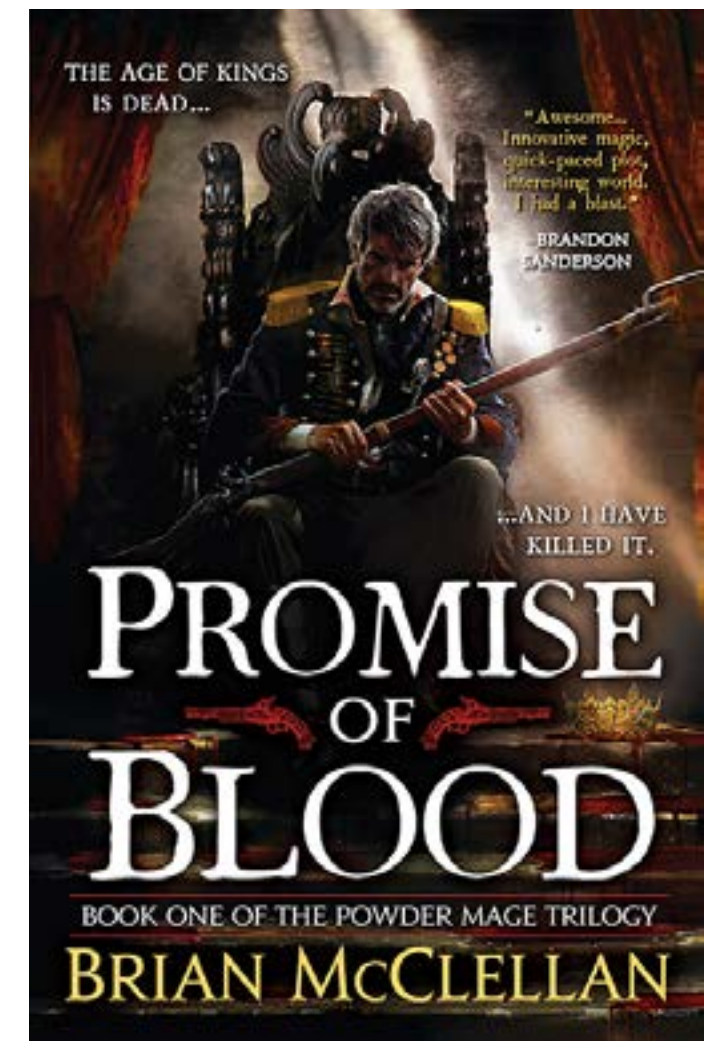
a pitch deck (series overview) and pilot script, both of which Brian has read and noted. We are presently (as of March 2022, when this interview was conducted) gearing up to take it out.

Brian has said before how a lot of *Promise of Blood* was kind of off the cuff, some of which he mentioned in the interview he gave us a few years ago! It seems to me like if given another chance, he might make a few changes to his debut novel. Is that anything you're taking into consideration for the adaptation, or are you trying to keep faithful to the original work?

Yes. Brian and I did discuss some of the changes he might have made, really more adjustments that wouldn't impact the way his story plays out, and some of these will be reflected in the proposed adaptation. When the time comes, I'm hoping Brian will have the time to actually be in the writers' room with us breaking stories.

This interview was edited for Worldbuilding Magazine.

Thanks to Joe for joining us for this interview! You can follow him on Twitter or check out his blog if you would like to stay up to date on his projects (or just see lots of photos of his dog).

🪐 **BACK TO INDEX**

LET NATURAL RESOURCES LEAD YOUR WORLDBUILDING

by Adam Bassett | Edited by Geoff Washam and Dylan Richmond

📊 **ECONOMICS**   🍂 **NATURE**

One of the first things I tend to do when I'm creating a new map is picking out where the countries are located. I think in large part that comes from the order of importance I give different parts of a setting while writing: I tend to discuss the people and where they come from before I talk about the forests and mountains—except in the case the person comes from a forest or mountain.

The result is a nice political map, but there's an issue with this approach: where does each country get its resources? Sure, *Janap* is a mighty naval power, but it's an island nation so just logistically speaking there's not much space for forests or mineral deposits. *Cadana* is a massive nation and they probably have access to most anything they need, so what *don't* they have?

Even in fantasy or science fiction people generally need wood or stone to build homes, metal to forge tools or armor. A more advanced society will rely on valuable minerals like copper, lith-ium, or *unobtanium* to navigate their every-day lives and enable their lifestyles the same way we're all dependent on our phones. A magic system generally always has some kind of source to draw upon, or there are at least some artifacts that can help a magic user focus their powers: a crystal that emits mystical power, a cloak made from invisible silk, and so on.

Access to local resources is built upon a funny mix of planning, geography, and dumb luck. Keep in mind that one of our most vital resources, oil, is a relatively recent discovery and for most of human history we didn't even know it existed. The countries that happened to sit on reserves of crude oil did so mostly by chance.

That said, there are plenty of important resources we've known about for ages. Access to water has always been vital to the health of any populace (and economy). The vast majority of our largest and oldest cities are on the banks of a river, lake, bay, or ocean. Access to lumber and farmland

are also excellent factors to consider, since these are the basic resources one builds shelter and gets food from. A lot of these are simply encountered based on the world's geography. The planning factor I mentioned before only comes into effect once the local population begins to take advantage of these resources—a forest cut too quickly won't have a chance to grow back for future generations, after all.

If a country has access to the resources they need, they'll succeed. Without them, they'll (at best) need to import whatever they can't get locally. Nations will compete over these resources, as we've seen countless times throughout our own history.

SHARED EXPERIENCES

Nations are formed out of a shared cultural experience, political treaties, or wars, to name a few examples. However, people first gathered where they could get resources: food, water, and a place safe enough to rest in. We see that as far back as in the fertile crescent in Mesopotamia, the region between the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers being the best place in the region to support agriculture and trade.

The colonial period, wherein Europe's most powerful countries colonized everything they could, was driven by a desire to control trade and trade routes. The most valuable resources of the time being spices, furs, food, and slave labor—much of which was not available in Europe, or simply was *more* available in other places. And in many ways, the independence movements that followed were about the local peoples reclaiming the rights to their natural resources.

And, of course, rejecting colonist rule. Because, obviously.

Today oil and coal are what every nation is reaching for. We're trying to rely on fossil fuels less these days, but a 2020 report (based on data from 2019) showed that fossil fuels still make up 84% of all energy consumed worldwide.[1] With everything running on them there are plenty of examples we can use to observe the impact of these fuels on conflict and politics—such as the invasion of Kuwait, The United States' tenuous relationship with Saudi Arabia, and so on. Because, after all, demand keeps rising. In a way, those who control our sources of energy controls the world.[2]

✎ JARED EVANS

Which begs the question—what resources are this important in *your world*? Does the world run on magic crystals, a special kind of very cool wood, or anything else that gives great power to those who control the supply? Where is this resource located, who controls it, and who *wants* to control it? These are all questions that will help inform your setting, as well as the politics and power dynamics between the peoples in it. In a way, answering questions like these can make your worldbuilding easier, because once you figure out who controls the most valuable resources you start to get a sense of who is wealthy and how different parts of the world live. And of course, if we're talking about trade and control, we need to understand how this resource is dispersed: could it be moved by horse-drawn cart, by truck, plane, or some other magical means like a series of inter-connected wires?

And, of course, what happens when those resources are gone?

WHEN THE GRID GOES DARK

As incredible as our power grid and systems of distributing energy are, they are not immune to failure. The obvious examples we can point to are Chernobyl (1986), the Exxon Valdez wreck (1989), and India's blackout (2012), each was a disaster that caused irreparable harm to the environment and/or loss of human life.

We can learn a lot from the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant in Japan for a fairly recent example of how one event can have massive effects. The accident (2011) was caused by a 15-meter (49.2ft) tsunami which struck the

islands on March 11th, following a massive earthquake off the coast of Tōhoku, Japan. Fukushima shut down their nuclear reactors the moment the earthquake occurred, but the tsunami that came after disabled most of the generators used to remove excess heat from the system.

The measures the plant took ahead of the tsunami undoubtedly saved lives, yet many were still endangered by the event. According to The World Nuclear Association, there haven't been any deaths or cases of radiation sickness from this accident, but of course there was a toll to the environment and the psyche of people around the world.[3] A general feeling of weariness about nuclear power spread worldwide. In the wake of the tsunami, Germany made a pledge to shut down its nuclear power plants. The last ones closed or are currently scheduled to close this year (2022).

Germany is not the only country planning to close its nuclear plants. The United States is shutting down a number of theirs, Switzerland and Spain have banned the construction of new reactors, and Italy voted to remain non-nuclear. Japan also vowed to reduce their reliance on nuclear energy.

There's a lot to break down here so here's a list of questions we can ask about our own worlds based on what we've learned from Fukushima, and use in our worldbuilding right now:

1. **Consider your natural resources:** Like we discussed above, it's important to know what people need and where they're getting those supplies.

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[2] "Fossil Fuels Still Supply 84 Percent Of World Energy - And Other Eye Openers From BP's Annual Review," Forbes, Accessed Jan. 2022, https://www.forbes.com/sites/rrapier/2020/06/20/bp-review-new-highs-in-global-energy-consumption-and-carbon-emissions-in-2019/?sh=5af1f6d466a1

[1] "Fukushima Daiichi Accident," World Nuclear Association, Accessed Jan. 2022, https://world-nuclear.org/information-library/safety-and-security/safety-of-plants/fukushima-daiichi-accident.aspx

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[1] It's worth noting that this was pre-pandemic data. After the COVID-19 broke out, energy demand dropped significantly as people began to, but it rebounded in 2021 and will likely do the same in 2022.

2. **What happens when they're destroyed, taken away, or used?** The immediate result in Fukushima was less total power in Japan, but because this specific plant was nuclear energy people also worried for their safety. If you're dealing with a volatile resource, are there escape or contingency plans in place? Will the magic crystals explode if the mine is flooded?

3. **How do people react to breaks in the system?** For this point I mean both the public and political leaders. When disaster strikes will people leave the area for good or stick around to resume their lives? Will nations reject their own crystal mines, try to make them safer, or do nothing at all?

4. **Can the resource be replaced?** One of the reasons Japan and many other nations could shut down their nuclear plants was because they could get energy in other ways with oil, coal, or (hypothetically) through green sources. But not every resource has multiple ways to access it.

Fukushima is a great example of how natural disasters and energy production can affect the entire world, but it's far from the only example of a vulnerability to our energy infrastructure. In February 2021, Winter Storm Uri struck the United States and crippled the state of Texas, which operates on what is largely its own power grid. Approximately 4.5 million homes and businesses lost power. The storms also caused problems for shipping, which created severe shortages of food, water, and other supplies. There weren't as many long-term effects from this storm, but there were people who suffered injury or death. The event revealed how vulnerable we could be if the power went out for too long.

Beside that, there's the threat of global warming, cyber-attacks, and good old-fashioned warfare. If anyone wants to cripple a nation—or to support them—one of the surest ways is through their access to the resources they need.

The natural question to follow all this up (given the context that you're reading this *here*), is how can nature affect the systems your world's people have set up for themselves? Can trade routes be interrupted by storms, or energy grids shut off by some kind of magical aura? Understanding both the capabilities and weaknesses of the systems your people rely on will help you better understand the nation and world. Especially as resources—as they tend to over time—deplete. Eventually you may need to ask yourself: "what happens when my elves are warring over some magic crystal mines?" or "what happens when my space elves are warring over some quantum crystal mines?"

THE MARKET VALUE OF QUANTUM CRYSTALS

If I've learned anything from my five years with *Worldbuilding Magazine*, it's that fiction and our reality are inextricably connected. Each informs the other. The newest discoveries and technology inspire science fiction, which in turn inspires researchers and engineers to try and make the awesome tech they've read about or seen in movies. Likewise, our past inspires fantasy, which we often use as a conduit through which to safely examine modern issues.

So when we're talking about events from reality, it's always worth considering how they might be interpreted or reinterpreted in fiction. And a lot of our history has involved fighting over the natural resources we have, or trying to guard them.

When you have that map of your world, it might be worth figuring out where the mineral deposits and forests are located. Where are some spices or foods people might want? Where's the fresh water, and is it near anything that might pollute or change its salination?

These questions don't even consider what unique resources your world might contain. You might need to also consider specific types of medicinal plant, or unique magic-bearing crystals, or a mineral that doesn't exist in our world. Every nation will want access to resources like these, and in the early days of society they'll all be fighting over them as each becomes useful. As they modernize, they'll hold debates and sign documents and negotiate trade to get access to whatever they can't.

Or, given enough pressure, they'll just go to war anyway.

UNNATURAL DISASTERS

by Rebecca Walker-Wain | Edited by Andrew Booth and Matthew Redding

🖋 FANTASY (LOW)   🖋 FICTION   🔥 MAGIC   ⚔ WAR

Do you remember in high school, when you were placed in front of that big box TV and told to watch as disaster after disaster ruined the planet? Volcanoes, tsunamis, earthquakes, all ripping people from their homes, crushing them, tearing apart families, and trying to exterminate the human race like a kid stomping on an ant colony. I remember, except now I think we should have been wiped out. I remember when I was told that in the ancient times they were warning of wars and missiles, as if they were the problem. The real natural disasters aren't the turbulent waters or the raging volcanos, they're us, humanity, and we've wrought our own destruction. The people in charge never change.

TOBY ELLIOT

They only show the really gruesome stuff once you're on your way into the adult world, a teen filled with uncontrolled emotions. Before all that and facts, weather lessons, and bits of history here and there. You knew the weather—its chaotic and previously uncontrollable nature—but up until that point, you never understood. You don't see the bodies attached to the death toll; you don't hear the screams of weeping mothers Not until you're deemed pliable.

The harsh reality of it being deemed inappropriate up until a certain age is bullshit. You know that somewhere, but never really grasp it until later life. Kids see this stuff all over the place—on the tv, in games—but suddenly it's wrong if it's real? All that media just makes them easy to mold.

The reason they put these facts in your head, give you history lessons, and tell you not to worry is so that they can abuse how desensitized you are. A Cloud Herder drags a cloud to a farming plot on a sunny day? You don't think about how it impacts the planet or how it messes with the natural course of nature. You simply smile and thank them in your head for giving you the sun again. That's what they want.

When you see the news or see some huge storm cast on enemy forces, do you think of the civilians caught in the eye of that storm? I doubt it. And before you say it, the irony in a Chaos Bringer writing this isn't lost on me.

You're probably confused why a Chaos Bringer would be so bitter about their own nation. Where I'm going you probably wouldn't survive five minutes, but that's okay. You'll be safe and sound up here, floating among the festering remains and soupy thick clouds. Perhaps, if my words strike something within you, there is still hope. The reality of my situation is that I am going to die one way or another, and with my family long since gone, I am weary and simply do not have the patience for servitude.

I suppose this entire obituary should start in my final year of high school.

Starry-eyed and completely compliant, I idolized the Sky Rangers. Filled with bright ideas of an impossible future, I fell head over heels with concepts and ideals, false promises, and the lies spun from snake-tongued teachers.

It was no surprise that when I was presented as a "Gifted," I was more than ready. I thought I had been blessed, chosen by some higher power to make some real change!

Well, I definitely changed things.

Teenagers don't understand other people's emotions, so why did they expect me to understand the complexities of my future? I'll never understand that, even now. Or perhaps it was all a trick. If I understood myself, then maybe I'd slip, maybe their control would eventually tighten into an iron fist. Or perhaps they really didn't care. Perhaps even my stupid little child self knew all along this was wrong, terrible, and would never lead to anything but destruction.

I suppose either way it doesn't matter. We thought we were solving the world's issues, but all it did was lead to a greater destruction. No one listened when people said the end is nigh. They didn't listen even before the Elementalists, so why would they when we were still something new and shiny.

"We." That's a weird concept. You love your company, your squad, and your brothers and sisters in all their glory. After all, they're the ones who understand you most. They become your family. Your parents may have your eyes, your freckled cheeks, and your attitude, but they'd never have to deal with your reputation. Usually the stares weren't bad, but it was the unpredictability of it all. Never being allowed out of uniform. Civi's knowing who we were. *What* we were. Tools, weapons, something to fix a problem. I could tell from their eyes they couldn't confound our humanity. Not us Chaos Bringers.

Anyway, I'm getting off track and this piece of paper is running out. My abilities were tested; they were volatile—too volatile for civilian eyes—so there was no way I was becoming a Weather Wrangler. I was rare, too; a nice new addition to a small subset of Chaos Bringers: a Snatcher. That's what they called us after training. We could snatch the air right out of a building if we wanted, displace it somewhere else, or weaponize it. We were taught subterfuge and persona to become someone we weren't. You get lost in it after a while.

And now the tools are being decommissioned. What a great service it was!

Many have tried to protest. Many tried to blame our government, as they rightly should, but there's not much they can do. The air station can only hold so many, and no one truly wants to give up their spot up here for a life on a toxic, rotten shell of what the Earth formerly was. The government knew what they were doing. I wish people had seen it sooner, seen that these stations had been built years in advance.

Some of us, from out-of-the-nose rich parents or government-official families, are getting to stay. Apparently, they're the good ones; the ones that didn't burn the earth's ozone just as we did. What complete bollocks. They were never like us. If they were, even for a moment, they would look at this all and use their wealth for some good for once in their lives.

I've seen it from my room when the clouds are really thin. Black and cracked, the Earth leaks who knows what. It's devoid of almost all life, at least that's what they say. I doubt they've ever been down to check. They say that this is karma. We made the world like this. We forced them out, so now they're giving us a chance to make things right. We all know they need a scapegoat, and it's just fallen on us. I'm not sure when, but I'll be ejected soon. I can tell by the way my personal guard looks at me through their little gas masks. Their droopy little eyes and trembling lips tell a hilarious story. I don't care that we were disbanded. I loathe the lack of accountability, and above all, my blindness until it was too late. I hope that those guards know they're on the wrong side of this.

I hope they feel bad. I hope they feel sick to their stomachs.

Who knows, maybe this is all just getting started. Maybe the real storm is on its way.
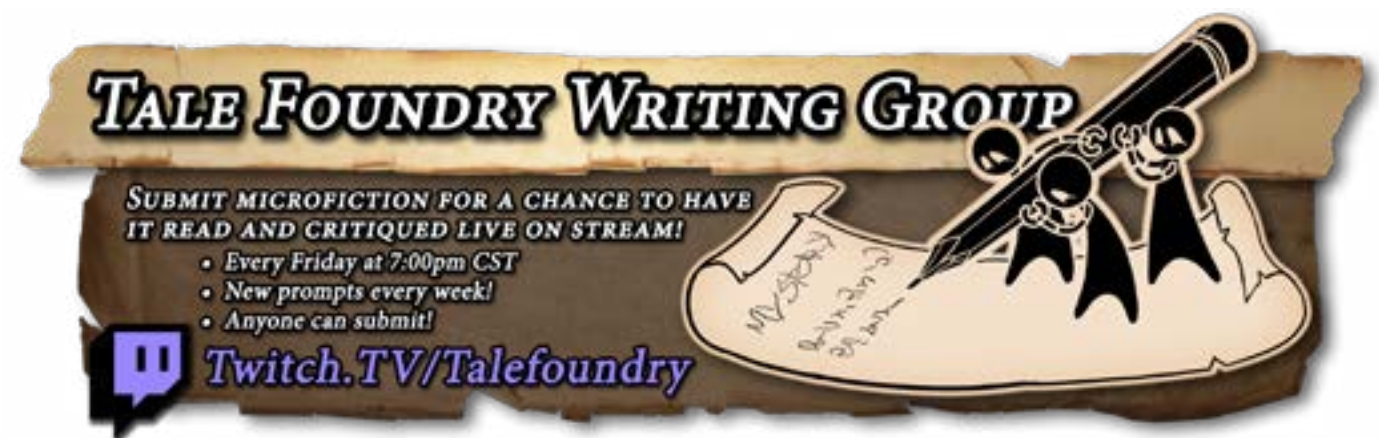
STAFF PICKS

Compiled by Ike Riva
Edited by Cat Optimist

ARCANE
A Netflix Original Series

Reviewed by
Rebecca Walker-Wain

Arcane is what happens when a game and animation studio dreams big and dedicates years planning, developing, and building a story into a series. The story behind *Arcane* is one that fans of *League of Legends* have been asking about for almost a decade, and now they are getting their answers. Powder (Or Jinx) and Vi are sisters and the two main protagonists of the show as it unveils their tragic backstory, relationship with each other, and why Jinx is the way she is. Among all of this, you also have a plethora of playable characters in the game who are slowly being revealed in their own backstories. Honestly, it's a wonder how all of this could fit into such a small first season, and not feel claustrophobic.

Animated by the French studio Fortiche and from the minds behind *League Of Legends*, *Arcane* has quickly become one of the most popular series on Netflix. With just nine episodes for its first season, the show packs so much worldbuilding into its slowly expanding world that you wouldn't be mistaken for thinking it was made by some sort of deep dank group of writers all hunched over a script. Really, the show has two plot threads: Jinx and Vi's backstory as well as the civil dispute that made Undercity gain its independence from the more prosperous Piltover.

The show parallels these two cities, but really, neither is inherently bad and all throughout the first season, *Arcane* tiptoes upon the line of black and white. The effort that is put into making both cities feel alive is astounding, from massively detailed background characters walking across the screen to voice acting to subtle mentions of other characters, and how the passage of time is handled. *Arcane* is a show that rewards the viewer's attention.

When a series such as *Arcane* is released, and it reaches the ears of so many more than those that are familiar with its characters, I think it deserves praise. With terrific story, animation, script, and voice acting, I think this would score highly with anyone's internal critic.

THE COCKROACH OF THE DADA MOVEMENT
Short Story Collection by K. Ungeheuer

Reviewed by Ike Riva

> " *My life as written here reminds me of those dot-to-dot picture games given to children. Each dot represents merely a single point of an arc or fold.*
>
> *— The Cockroach of he Dada Movement, 5*

The slim and highly entertaining collection was a surprise on many fronts, not least of which was its high worldbuilding content. Its surreal and symbolic short stories and micro-fiction pieces are efficient and quick to read, more often than not leaving one with something to think about or some intensely evocative prose to savor. It's this informatic efficiency that makes its worldbuilding pieces—such as The Death of Ma'liit the Minor God of the Delta, The End of the Drought, The Tulips on the Hill, or The Goddess in the Soil—such a joy to read. There is no plodding exposition that gets in the way of the scene and the story, everything on the page seems measured out to produce "an odd, uncomfortable, floating instant with no sense of anything that may have come to pass before or after it" (17). Those stories which do not tell of a place or time outside our own can be best described, in my opinion, as a "twilight zone"—they exist in a liminal space in which there are references to real-world places, dates, and names, but that nonetheless contain an element of the astounding, of the truly weird.

However, the worldbuilding is not limited to the confines of the page. Karl Sigler, the collection's true author, has created a mysterious and fictional writer—K. Ungeheuer—and woven his existence into our world with the skill of a master tailor. The seams are almost invisible, and were it not for the admission on Sigler's part, I would have been none the wiser. There are too many details to properly note and praise in this review, but suffice it to say that K. Sigler has created a setting that invites the reader to walk through the threshold with gusto. The Cockroach of the Dada Movement extends its worldbuilding in two directions: it creates imaginary worlds, both fully secondary and not, while also revising and adding to the reader's own world—the primary world—if they're feeling playful enough to let it. I had a lot of fun piecing together the picture of Ungeheuer which Sigler has wrapped around this collection, finding the recurring characters embedded within the collective work, and playing with the text as one would with an alternate reality game. Well done!

GNOMES
World Bible by Wil Huygen & Rien Poortvliet

Reviewed by M.E. White

As a child, I was utterly enchanted by my mother's copy of this book, which had likewise engrossed her at that age. However, you don't need to be young to marvel at this pure worldbuilding text and its brilliant illustrations; I was absolutely thrilled to receive my own copy for my 26th birthday (thanks, Mom!) for the opportunity to revisit Poortvliet and Huygen's world, which doesn't disappoint.

Written a bit more like an inquisitive scientist's field journal than a full-on textbook, Gnomes details the lives of the titular little people from birth, describing the typical gnome family, their daily routines and habits, and their roles as unseen stewards of the natural world. The worldbuilding is well thought out, particularly when it comes to gnome biology and interactions with various flora and fauna. All of it is brought to life in beautiful watercolor. One of my favorite parts shows a cross-section of the gnome burrow, which teaches you so much about how they live. If reading a pure worldbuilding text just isn't your cup of tea, Gnomes also contains stories in sections titled "Legends of the Gnomes."

I cannot recommend this book enough to worldbuilders of all ages, but I must mention readers should be prepared for things to get a little dark at times. Gnomes live in the natural world, which can be harsh and dangerous; Poortvliet's depiction of the gnome-eating trolls is mild nightmare fuel; and Huygen does not entirely shy away from discussing medical realities such as disease, digestion, and reproduction. There's also some gnudity, which is to say, gnome nudity. Overall, it's nothing gratuitous, graphic, or particularly offensive, and I certainly think it's appropriate for kids, just don't go in expecting Smurfs. When it comes to the actual thought put into the world, Gnomes takes its subject matter very seriously while somehow also managing to be playful, curious, and fun. It's a one-of-a-kind experience that I hope more people can partake in.

MRITUNJOY'S TRAGICOMEDY
Webcomic by Oratoreye
Reviewed by Zaivy Luke-Aleman

This is a visually stimulating webcomic dense in world elements. The dialogue includes conlang with translations in parentheses. At the end of each issue, there's typically a little glossary to explain cultural context, or an added fun little element to the characters or designs. As a lover of fantastical footnotes, I quite enjoy these "indexes" as they're called in the webcomic. For example, I loved how we got a peek at the currency, which is a beads-based system called Eva in the first issue. This webcomic is actually a perfect example of why I think comics are a great format for worldbuilding, but that's a topic for another day.

The story starts off with an anonymous funder hoping to rid a family of their curse, which they were previously unaware of possessing. The eclectic cast of curse-breakers known as Shiol Arusen (which translates into English as "funeral directors") are based in Ciaxpoturi, which is an odd-ly shaped collection of islands. Their clients are a fishing family who immigrated to Ciaxpoturi who never really felt welcomed in their new home. Our Shiol Arusen must stop the vengeful curse to prevent utter catastrophe. However, not everyone is so keen on preventing a little death. Written as a mystery with horror elements, it gives off a perfectly creepy and eccentric feel. This series is not completed yet, but is currently on act II of III. This gorgeous (absolutely stunning) webcomic can be found on Tapas and WEBTOON Canvas.

THE FULFILLMENT OF THE PROMISE

by Robert Meegan | Edited by Zaivy Luke-Aleman and Geoff Washam

🖋 **FICTION**   🐉 **FANTASY**

Daehyun sat on his stool at the far end of the table of elders. The seat was his by virtue of his age, but he felt the eyes upon him whenever he took his place. Who was he, a leather tanner, to sit with his betters? Those seated closest edged away, as the smell of the urine used to loosen the hair never quite seemed to disappear, for it wasn't merely on his skin or clothes, both of which were meticulously washed, but embedded in the very fiber of his existence. Daehyun knew how the others felt about him and he had never once spoken a single word in the hall, content to slip in and out without mingling with the others or disrupting the order of things.

The hall should be crowded with people tonight. There were events to be planned, for this was the month of the Great Dark, when the sun would stop rising above the horizon for eleven mornings. It was the time of greatest fear, sadness, and death, but also the time of the greatest celebration, on the fifth day, when the promise of a new year would be fulfilled.

The hall itself creaked and groaned in the wind and dustings

of snow burst in under the edge of the roof. The building was ancient beyond recall, built when Namdam had been founded as the southern outpost of the kingdom. Those had been good years, when the weather had been warmer and great herds of caribou had spotted the hills. But for all of his life and that of his father as well, the snows had been harsh and the summers uncertain, and the herds had remained to the north.

Each year, a few of the young people had hugged their parents and left to seek a better fortune further north. Some of those who were not too old had followed them and as Daehyun looked out into the hall, he could see that it was barely half-filled and those who were there were old or wretched. This truly was a time for dying.

Despite this, Hakun, the dignified representative of the royal household, had made his annual expedition to Namdam. He was the only government official who still bothered to journey this far south. Even the tax collectors had given up a decade ago when the returns no longer justified the trek. Hakun was different, though. Despite the splendor of his robes and his magnificent hat, he would stay here in Namdam until the promise had been fulfilled, living in a house that wouldn't have been fit to serve as servants' quarters back in the capital.

The hall fell silent when the doors opened and Hakun entered with two aides at his side. Everyone in the hall rose to their feet as he made his way to the table of elders and stood in the center, looking at the pathetic band before him. In a surprisingly coordinated motion, all of the residents bowed deeply to show their respect to the great man and the king he represented.

Hakun spoke the words of greeting and sat in the grand chair that had been placed for him at the center of the table. He clapped his hands once and the people rose from their bow and sat down as one.

"People of Namdam," he said, "for twenty-five years I have come to join you for the fulfillment of the promise of a new year. When first I came, this hall was filled with people and your city teemed with life, but even then there were those in the capital who mocked me for wasting time and energy visiting the far end of the world." Hakun reached up and an aide put a scroll into his hand. He cracked the seal and unrolled it. "Before this trip, I was called before the king himself who gave me a message to share with you."

Daehyun looked around the room and saw only awe on the faces of his fellows. Never before, as far as any could recall, had the king himself ever sent a personal message. If the mountains themselves had spoken, the surprise could have been little greater.

Hakun stood and began to read. "My people, you have been faithful and upheld your responsibilities. The time has come for our kingdom to reward your loyalty. In the spring, when the roads have cleared, a detachment of soldiers shall come to Namdam to escort you north to new homes. You will once more be able to live in comfort and peace. To this, I give my word."

At this, he turned the scroll around and raised it high, so that all could see the king's seal, not that any one of them could have verified it as such.

He sat back down and there was a flurry of murmurs that swept the hall. Hakun was wise enough to give them a few minutes before speaking again. "To get up and move to a new home, regardless of whether it is better or not, is a terrible thing. All of you have buried generations of ancestors in these hills and poured your life into raising crops and hunting the herds.

"Still, the time must come for the end of everything. I also give you my personal word of honor that you will be treated well and that you will find your new homes to be satisfactory."

Dandan, the chief of Namdam, rose and bowed to Hakun. "But sir, what will become of the promise? Who shall remain to ensure that it is fulfilled?"

Hakun smiled kindly. "Dandan." He looked out at the people in the hall. "All of you. Who among you is still able to make the climb? All of the young men are gone and even those of you who made the climb in the past have too many winters in your bones to make it another time."

Dandan sputtered, "But..." And then he sat down, crushed under the weight of the combined years in the hall.

Hakun spoke again. "I have grown fond of you after all of these years. I have brought food and wine with me to ensure that this last celebration is one to remember."

There was more murmuring in the hall. Confusion, excitement, fear, and a hundred other emotions mixed together at once.

Then a voice spoke out. It was small and rusty from years of scant use. "I will make the climb." To Daehyun's amazement, everyone in the hall turned to face him. "I will make certain that the promise is fulfilled one last time." To his astonishment, the voice had come from his throat. It was he who had spoken.

Pandemonium broke out. Someone cried, "Shame! To think that a tanner could make the climb!" Others made similar denouncements.

Hakun spoke, "SILENCE!" And the voices stopped so suddenly that only the creak of the rafters could be heard.

"You would do this?"

Daehyun stood and bowed. "Yes, your grace."

"Have you done it before?"

"No, your grace. I am only a tanner. No tanner has ever made the climb."

"Forgive me for saying so, but you are quite old. The climb has killed strong men a third your age. Are you certain that you want to do this?"

"It must be done. Some things can only be done by those with nothing to lose."

"Very well."

The other elders started to protest, but Hakun turned to one side and then the other, cutting them off. "There is one man among you with a great heart. Let him make the climb and the poets will

have something new to write about." He slammed his hand onto the table. "This meeting is over."

The next day, Daehyun prepared for his climb.

Throughout the day, visitors came down to his small hut and with a few small grunts handed him various items, bid him good luck, and disappeared back into the dark. In this way, he acquired warm new socks, pants, and a coat with a fur hood. Jungin, the cobbler and one of the few who would normally speak to Daehyun, brought a magnificent pair of boots. He made Daehyun sit on a bench while he carefully adjusted the fit of the boots until they were perfect. "Climb, you old son of a bitch. I'll be praying for you."

Late in the day, Dandan came by. In addition to serving as chief, his family had run the forge for generations. Like many in his family, Dandan had made the climb when he had been young. He handed Daehyun a pair of climbing poles. The bottoms had steel points and disks for use in the snow. The handles on the top ended in curved hooks that could be used to pull oneself up on the rocks.

"My father gave me these when I made my climb. His father had given them to him before that. They were to be my son's, but he never made the climb." Dandan sighed. "They know how to get you to the top."

Daehyun struggled to find words, but could only say, "Thank you."

"Listen. There is one more thing. On the shoulder, about three-quarters to the top, the trail splits. This sign is carved in the rock." He picked up a stick from the fire and used the burnt end to draw on the wall. "When the weather is good, the path to the left is an easy hike to the top. But when the weather is like this...." He shuddered. "It is certain death. Take the trail to the right. The climb is harder, but there are no hidden places where you will fall."

Daehyun nodded. "Thank you."

"Good luck." Dandan patted him on the shoulder and then left.

Only one more visitor came. It was late and Daehyun was about to crawl into bed when there was a knock on the door. When he opened it, the man who stepped in pulled back his hood. It was

Hakun. Daehyun bowed frantically. "Sir, you should not be here. The disgrace."

"My honor is my own and I'll wager that I have enough self esteem to survive being in the presence of a better man than myself. As for the surroundings…." He shrugged. "Let's say that I've seen worse.

"I've brought you a few things for your journey. Also, I wanted to know if you have any family who need to be taken care of, just in case."

Daehyun shook his head. "No sir, I am alone. My parents and sister died years ago and I never married. No one will miss me."

"Don't be too sure of that." Hakun smiled. "These should help you on the way up." He handed Daehyun a bag of sweet dried plums and a pair of gloves. "Try them on."

Daehyun pulled the gloves on. They fit well. More importantly, while they were warm and padded, they didn't restrict the movement of his fingers.

"Those are swordsman's gloves. There is a family in the capital who makes them. And this is for when the promise is fulfilled." He handed a small wineskin to Daehyun. "It's from the king's own palace. Don't tell anyone that I poured it into a wineskin, please. It's just that I didn't think that a bottle was going to be very practical."

With that, he hugged Daehyun and stepped back. "Regardless of what happens, know that the poets will be writing about you. I'll read the poem to the king myself."

Daehyun found himself without the capacity for speech, but Hakun seemed to understand. "Sleep well my friend. And may the gods watch your every step."

He pulled his hood up and let himself out into the cold. Daehyun carefully packed the plums and wineskin into his pack. His mind was racing and he did not expect to sleep, but it came quickly and easily anyway.

The next morning was cold and snowing gently when he set out. Despite the hour, everyone in Namdam was lining the road to the south. At the very end of the line, where the road ended, stood Hakun and Dandan. Both men patted his back and wished him well.

The climb from Namdam took five days. The first was relatively easy, walking across the hills and caribou pastures. It was only that night, when he had lit a fire in the small herders' cabin that marked the southernmost building in the world, that Daehyun felt the pain in his knees, ankles, and shoulders where the cold had penetrated to the bones. He made tea and ate a rice ball and some dried caribou. After making certain that the fire had enough wood to last the night, he fell asleep.

The second and third day found him working his way steadily higher. The trail was well marked and there was nothing to overgrow it, so the only challenges were places where rocks had fallen and had to be carefully scaled. His eyes had long since adjusted to the nearly perpetual twilight. Although time had little meaning, he could see that the tops of the mountains still caught the rays of the sun from over the horizon at midday. His progress toward this region of the peaks gave him hope.

The fourth day was when the trail became difficult. He was actually climbing for stretches now, needing both hands and feet to cling to the rocks. The wind fought constantly to tear him from the wall. Without his boots and gloves, his fingers and toes would have long since frozen. One brief respite, when a ledge had allowed him to sidle up the face relatively easily, quickly changed to terror when the rock crumbled below his foot. As he slid, it was only the climbing poles that saved his life as he frantically dug with the hooks, trying to find an edge to catch.

Slowly, he was able to use the hooks to drag himself back up the steep slope until he reached a wide spot where he could rest. Taking stock, he realized that he had no doubt torn the tendons in his shoulders, and after a few minutes, it was all that he could do to raise his arms level with his neck. He would not be able to lift them above his shoulders again.

When he stood up, he found himself looking directly at the mark that Dandan had drawn in his hut. To the left, there was a clear path that appeared to follow a snow ridge. To the right, the same treacherous narrow ledge led along the face of the mountain. The agony of his shoulders and the aching of his joints cried for him to go left, and he found that he was turning in that direction. Before he could take the first step, sunlight broke over the horizon and struck right where he stood, lighting up the mountain face above the ledge.

Daehyun was not a particularly devout man, but he smiled and thanked the god of the mountains for helping him in his moment

of weakness. Then he looked away from the path and began to work his way along the ledge again.

Although he climbed as quickly as possible, his progress was slow, and he knew that it would be a challenge to reach the top in time. There was no point in stopping that night, because there was no place to stop. There were only brief rests when he could brace himself long enough to take a sip of water or to eat one of the plums.

Finally, he reached a spot where the ledge ended. There was another one not far above his head, but with his arms and shoulders torn, he could not reach it. As the twilight grew brighter, he looked over his shoulder and could see that the horizon was beginning to lighten. "I've failed," he said to himself.

He stood there, unable to move, and closed his eyes. A memory long past came to his mind. He was a child, barely more than an infant, and his mother was holding him on her knee. She was speaking to him and as he listened, he realized that she was reciting a poem. It was nothing, a bit of doggerel for children, the story of a spider who climbed a tree to build a web to catch the sun. Daehyun listened to his mother repeat the poem and heard his child-self laugh with glee.

When he opened his eyes, he found his current-self laughing too. "Well, if a spider can catch the sun, perhaps so can I." Taking a deep breath, he let out a terrible scream and swung both arms over his head to grab the ledge with the climbing hooks. Without giving himself time to feel the pain, he pulled and scrambled up to the next ledge only to find that it was large and flat.

On his knees, his arms hanging by his side, he found himself staring at a large rectangular pillar. Painfully pulling himself erect, he walked up to it. The stone at the center of the pillar had been carved out. The hollow that had been created was packed with windblown snow that had repeatedly frozen and thawed into a solid mass. Gritting his teeth, Daehyun started to break out the frozen slab. Warming to the task and working with frenzied speed, he began to pull great chunks out.

Beneath the snow and ice inside the hollow was a massive crystal, as tall as he was. Peering into it, he spied his reflection, oddly distorted. Turning back around to the north, he could see the sunlight just breaking over the horizon. Quickly, he shoved the ice and snow

to one side and using it as a stepping stone, climbed to the top of the pillar where he found a small bench had been carved. Sitting on it, he could see far north to the edge of the world.

When the sun broke free of the horizon, its light struck Daehyun and the pillar on which he sat. Far below, a spot of light appeared in the valley. As he watched, it moved across the valley and briefly lit up a small town right in the center. Laughing like a fool, he knew that the promise of a new year had been fulfilled one last time.

Suddenly remembering something important, he swung off his pack and dug out the wineskin. He thought of toasting the king or the gods, but instead raised it as high as his shoulders would allow and shouted, "To Daehyun, the tanner!"

As he drank the sweet wine, the sun rolled back below the horizon. Daehyun looked at the ground beneath him and decided that he was comfortable enough sitting where he was. "The king has good taste in wine," he thought as he sipped. And when he finished it, he put the skin back in his pack. Then he closed his eyes and with a smile he dropped off to sleep.

MYSTERY FLESH
PIT
(New Jackson Survey)
Gumption, Texas
1974

ART SHOWCASE

TREVOR ROBERTS'
MYSTERY FLESH PIT NATIONAL PARK

Interviewed by Ike Riva | Edited by Amanda Jones | Art by Trevor Roberts

📋 INTERVIEW   ✏ ART   💡 THEORY & ANALYSIS

Trevor Roberts (aka u/StrangeVehicles on Reddit) is an American writer and architect from West Texas whose work, *Mystery Flesh Pit National Park,* has enthralled online audiences for three years now. A mixture of body horror, environmental horror, and cultural commentary, the Mystery Flesh Pit fills a unique worldbuilding niche thematically, and also technically, through its use of in-world artifacts in the form of print materials. The project's subreddit is currently just shy of twenty thousand members—a lively community that engages in memeing, worldbuilding deduction and theorizing, and has even produced an entire fan novel. Aside from devotees, Trevor's work has drawn confused onlookers, spurring the writing of a Snopes article to debunk an internet rumor that the Flesh Pit was real.

I was very grateful to Trevor for taking the time to answer my questions about worldbuilding, artistic mediums, and the Flesh Pit we all (un)know and love! We also talked about the coffee table/guide book which the author is currently working on—with a planned release date of Summer 2023—and he even revealed some information about his upcoming unannounced project!

My name is Trevor Roberts, and I am a world-builder. I live in the dry, dusty plains of Lubbock, Texas with my wife, Jaelen, a structural engineer and ardent supporter of my creative efforts. I was raised by my grandparents; my grandfather is a retired fireman and writer, and my grand-mother is an artist and retired Methodist minister. I am the oldest of four brothers—one is a paramedic and father, one is a musician, and the youngest is a recent high school graduate. I have a two-year-old nephew named Knox whose curiosity and creativity surprises and inspires me every time I see him. I mention these people due to how instrumental they have been and continue to be to my creative process through their patient audience to my brainstorming, as well as their continual encouragement.

Growing up in West Texas, I was surrounded by the infrastructure and ephemera of the oil and agriculture industries. Trade shows and expos featuring gigantic combine harvesters, drilling rigs, construction machinery, and tanker trucks on display for guests to walk up to and touch were some of my earliest inspirations. I don't remember when I started drawing, but I have been drawing in some regular capacity my entire life. This passion for imagining unreal futures through the freedom of a piece of paper initially led me to pursue a master's degree in Architecture from Texas Tech University.

I have been posting art and writing on the internet for almost fifteen years, though calling any of these early experiments "worldbuilding" would be an enormous stretch. I have had a continual hobbyist interest in game design (video and tabletop) which initially introduced me to thinking about worldbuilding as an integral component of a narrative. Fascinated by the decisions involved in crafting compelling, believable, and engaging fictional worlds led me down a path of studying the work of the artists Ron Cobb and Syd Mead, whose fantastic-yet-functional approach to design has profoundly influenced my aesthetic sensibilities and approach to thinking about worldbuilding elements.

People are most likely familiar with my *Mystery Flesh Pit National Park* series which I have been developing since the summer of 2019. The project began with a single poster

created over a lunch break and posted on the r/Worldbuilding subreddit completely for fun. The positive response I received compelled me to begin seriously thinking about what sort of story could emerge from the details I had already established; what sort of social, cultural, and economic ramifications would be present following such a discovery; and how humans would interact with a being like the Mystery Flesh Pit. Starting with the very first poster, I made a conscious decision to adopt a tone of speaking about this cosmic terror in the way a PR publication might talk about a forest, mountain, or cave system. I have worked hard to present the Permian Basin Superorganism (the in-universe name given to the Mystery Flesh Pit) as a feature of the natural world; a sublime discovery motivated by the resource extraction-driven culture of the West Texas plains instead of a more measured reaction—which would have resulted from an attitude of scientific exploration. There is fun in exploring the hubristic side of humanity through the project, and I try to slip in some tongue-in-cheek satire and dark humor whenever I can. My belief is that the highly manicured, confident, and commercialized voice of the print materials serve as very dim spotlights which only reveal small, contrasting
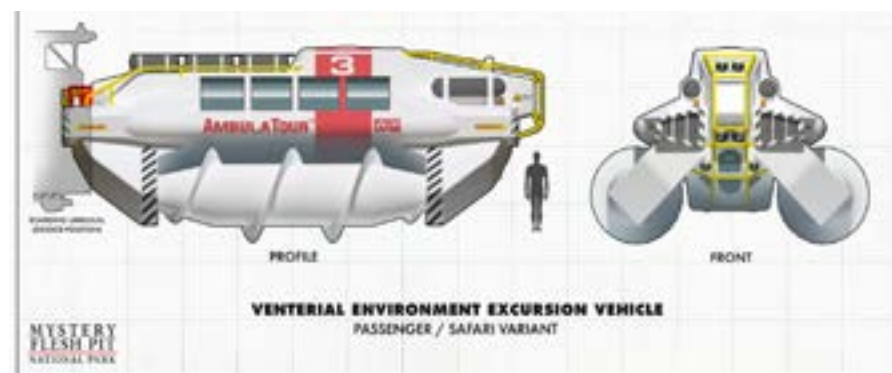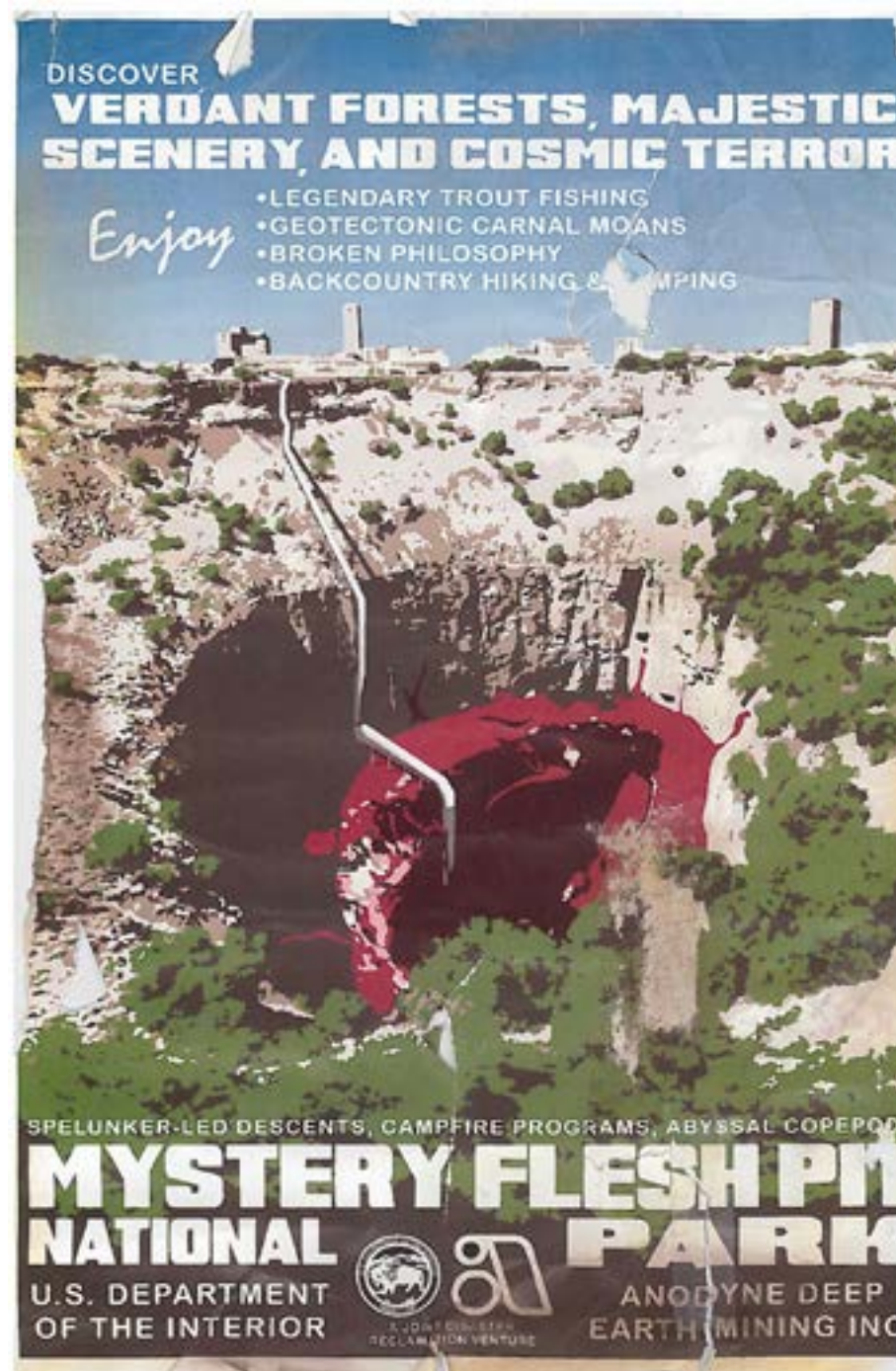
traces of the larger, and ultimately unknowable, Mystery Flesh Pit itself.

That's absolutely fascinating! I'm sure I'm not alone when I say that I'm very thankful for that first post, and even more for the direction in which you've taken your art since then. The Mystery Flesh Pit feels grounded while at the same time eldritch—the way you blend our own world with the elements that you've added in is seamless, and you leave one thinking both about the nature of the superorganism and that of humans. I think that one of the most distinct elements of your worldbuilding, aside from the unique subject matter and weighty themes at the center of it all, is that you convey it through a collection of in-world artifacts—government reports, pamphlets, etc. Most people worldbuild through direct images of their world or through writing, why did you choose to worldbuild through artifacts?

There are two reasons I have chosen to present this world as I have. The first reason was practicality; because my background is in architecture and graphic design, I am very familiar with the layout principles and production process of print materials. It is much easier to quickly block out ideas in the form of a warning sign, pamphlet, or report than to commit to a full illustration of that same concept. Certain typefaces, symbols, layouts, and color choices have an added benefit with the cultural context they bring to a piece of ephemera. A strong or stern title set in a slightly-faded Helvetica Bold evokes a specific era in time, and in doing so sets the tone for how a reader might subconsciously approach an artifact.

The second reason for the "found object" nature of my presentation of the *Mystery Flesh Pit National Park* world is linked to my own history with the broader genre of internet horror. I grew up browsing what people might term "Web 1.0", an internet largely devoid of social media aggregation and SEO. In the days before extensive lore

wikis and hour-long video essays, scary things on the internet were just that: spooky things with little, if any, background information or context. The assumption was that many of these inspirations consisted only of small cryptic pieces of a larger narrative. This unknown aspect invited the imaginations of readers to go wild with speculations and theories, with each person's personal favorite theory usually revealing some manifestation of their own fears. By telling the Mystery Flesh Pit story only through fragments, my intention was to allow readers to indulge their own morbid curiosity to fill in the gaps. My adopted philosophy is that "I have illuminated the warning signs and guideposts, but the map is incomplete, and it is at your own peril that you venture further."

It's fascinating to read how much something like a typeface can set the tone for the reader's approach to a work of art, and that considerations like these are a part of your process. The grounded, diegetic materials that you create definitely function as crystal-clear windows into a mystery-shrouded world. It seems that your work really benefits from your background in architecture and graphic design, and even your experiences with the resource extraction of West Texas. This makes me think of how, depending on the individual, people get into worldbuilding either from a craft, or they extend out from worldbuilding into doing a craft—i.e. a writer becomes interested in worldbuilding, or a worldbuilder expands into writing. Do you recommend that people worldbuild in mediums they are familiar with, or that they familiarize themselves with a medium in order to worldbuild and show others? And, do you consider yourself a worldbuilder first, primarily a digital creator, or are you a mix of the two?

I broadly suggest starting in worldbuilding using whatever tools are available; some of the best worldbuilding is done purely through writing. However, when it specifically comes to getting your work out via the internet, I believe

that the visual arts have a substantial advantage over solely written works. The internet is a primarily visual medium, and your work will be competing with thousands of other projects for the attention of an audience. Having a strong grasp of visual communication and graphic appeal entices potential readers to look at your work because it reduces the attention "buy-in" that a viewer must invest in when peeking into a fictional world. As an example: many of the most popular pieces I have created for the Mystery Flesh Pit feature multiple paragraphs of text which expand upon the world, but they centrally feature some large cutaway illustration or diagram. When reduced to the size of a small thumbnail image, the text portions lose prominence to the optical "weight" of the illustration. In my experience, people come for the weird visuals but stay for the broader narrative.

With regard to the second part of your question, I consider myself a worldbuilder first, and an artist/writer/illustrator/designer second. Whenever I am engaged in the process of creating something new—whether it is a piece of writing, an illustration, or a design for something—that "something new" cannot live in a vacuum. In order for me to fully imagine and visualize it, there needs to be some kind of context in which this art piece exists. I think this is a result of my training as a designer because, in the real world, thousands of decisions influence how something as mundane as an ATM machine or Metro Bus is designed. Even in a fantasy setting, the way in which an object is crafted or sculpted reveals details about the world; if an object is made of metal, it suggests a culture in which at least some elements of geology and metallurgy are understood. The world influences and shapes the objects, people, and "feel" of its constituent components. The art or writing is then the result of those worldbuilding decisions.

That makes complete sense! And especially considering the way that Reddit is structured to prominently feature visual mediums. I've noted how worldbuilders tend to use an "image hook"

which, like a plot hook, fulfills the function of reducing the attention "buy-in" that you've pointed out. Do you have any general advice for how to craft a compelling and attention-grabbing "image hook"? And which element do you think does the heavier lifting, so to speak, between the illustration and the text?

While I tend to think of my work as largely illustration-based, I still rely on writing to do the heaviest lifting in terms of exposition and getting big ideas about the world across. It is much easier to write something like a government report detailing a disaster than it is to try and depict that same event entirely through visual art. Crafting a successful "image hook" is tricky in that an audience's response to it is largely determined by both subjective forces, such as cultural context and the broader media landscape at that moment, and also seemingly arbitrary forces, such as social media algorithms. The one reliable tool for grabbing attention is novelty; people will notice something that stands out in some way. I cannot resist looking at intricate cutaway or cross-sectional drawings whenever I come across them. The complexity of creating such an image means that you don't see as many of those types of illustrations, so I chose that medium as a way to present one of the first Mystery Flesh Pit brochures with the knowledge that it would stand out. I don't think that this style of illustration will work for every world or setting, of course, but the wider concept of finding an underdeveloped visual niche seems to yield successful results.

That makes a lot of sense! And, speaking of niches, no other world on r/Worldbuilding comes to mind when I think of satire, especially considering your deft use of cosmic horror to heighten the setting's dark humor. Some examples include, for readers who may not be familiar with your work, how you placed a Marriott Hotel and a McDonald's near the orifice, and a collaborative tie-in with Coca-Cola using amniotic ballast fluid extracted from the superor-

ganism's glands, both of which come across as a satire of commercialism. Other times, it feels like the target of your satire is the government. I was curious to hear you describe the themes you explore in your work. How much satirical intent is there in Mystery Flesh Pit? Is there anything else Mystery Flesh Pit is commenting on?

The commercial tie-ins on the brochures initially came from a desire to make the world feel lived-in and grounded. Anyone who has been to a real theme park or tourist destination can attest to the proliferation of branding, sometimes to the point of absurd contrast with whatever the tourist draw actually is. Fantastic examples right here in Texas include the dozens of elaborate storefronts and other attractions surrounding the Alamo Plaza in San Antonio, with a Ripley's Believe It or Not! novelty museum located directly across the street from a cenotaph monument recognizing the hundreds of lives lost in the Alamo battle itself. Surrounding the NASA Johnson Space Center in Houston are themed McDonald's and TGI Friday's locations which trivialize something as vast as the U.S. space program down to a few stylized plastic spaceman-decor elements. While there is certainly a strong satirical element to almost every piece of content I make for the Mystery Flesh Pit, I would characterize it in my own description as an investigation (and sometimes celebration) of how our uniquely absurd consumer-driven society in the U.S. interfaces with environments and spaces (such as a National Park or Memorial) which defy simple commodification. I
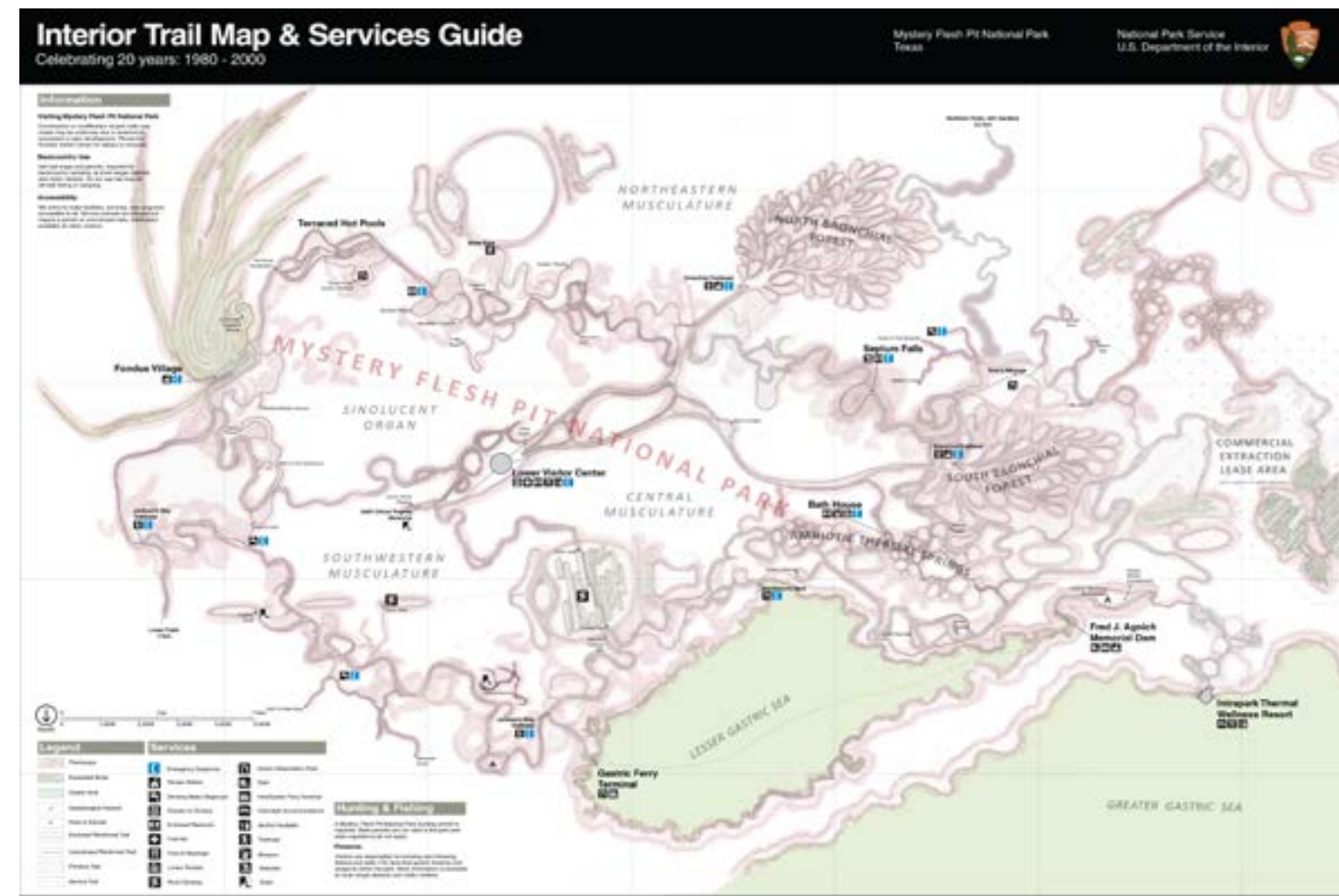
consciously view the Mystery Flesh Pit narrative as a story of the meeting of two superorganisms: The Mystery Flesh Pit itself and our own modern capitalist economy. How these two immense creatures, each eldritch and ultimately unknowable in their own way, first tenuously meet and begin to interface is what drives the drama of the overall narrative.

I see, thank you for explaining! The thought that you've put into these themes certainly shines through in your work. Your artistry and skill with photo manipulation are also evident, as they allow your vision to come alive on the screen or page. Since a lot of our readers likely have some experience with Photoshop, or other similar programs, but may not have worked with these tools for worldbuilding, do you have any "best practices" for those using photo manipulation techniques in their work? Where can people find useful material? What common mistakes should our readers avoid, and do you have any advice for those who want to produce the appearance of authenticity?

Much of my advice will be somewhat specific to the late 20th-century era in which this work takes place, but some of it may hopefully be more broadly applicable.

First, it helps to have a firm understanding of the graphic styles, tropes, or features of whichever era you are attempting to emulate. I frequently check out antique or thrift stores to riffle through antique pamphlets, sales brochures, postcards, advertisements, etc. Online sites like whatfontis.com and fontsquirrel.com make it relatively easy to identify specific typefaces. The color choices and layouts of these graphic materials are also an important consideration when trying to recreate them, so having a large collection of real materials as a visual reference library is essential.

Second, a good way to add authenticity and character to an illustration is through weathering,

which can be done in a few different ways. If you have access to a high-quality color printer, printing materials out and physically adding wear and tear to them before scanning them back in is a fantastic technique to create realism. It is the most accurate method for replicating the tiny details of ink halftones, fold marks, scratches, and dirt. An easier and more cost-effective method that I also employ is to create a small library of weathered textures by scanning distressed pieces of various blank paper stocks, blank pages of old books, half-torn pages, etc. It is also useful to collect a library of visual textures by carefully taking photos of all kinds of details that are difficult to illustrate, like cracks in concrete, rust on a metal surface, scratched paint, or faded plastic. Images from search engines also work for hard-to-find textures, but nothing beats a full-resolution photo taken by yourself. These textures can then be used in Photoshop as an overlay to add in patina and wear.

I don't believe that you must know how to draw well in order to produce convincing Photoshop pieces, but I do think it greatly helps in selling the believability of the artwork. Realistic and convincing photo manipulations—for example, adding a fictional creature to an existing photograph—require some knowledge of general illustration principles and techniques like color theory, shading, composition, and form. Photos in broad daylight are more difficult to work with than darker nighttime photos with a lot of visual noise from trees or foliage to hide imperfections. Adding in visual artifacts such as grain, motion blurring, bokeh, flash, etc. also helps to obscure finer details.

As a very general recommendation for illustration, my advice is to look at actual books for techniques. University or College libraries are excellent resources for this. Many traditional graphic techniques from the advertising and architectural industries (airbrushing, gouache, alcohol markers, and pen & ink) are easily applicable to digital workflows using tools like Photoshop,

Meet The Mesogleal Tridecapod

Though commonly considered a nuisance animal, the Mesogleal Tridecapod is a fascinating species which plays an important role within the unique ecosystem of Mystery Flesh Pit National Park by filtering out potentially harmful blood-based parasites.

Size Comparison

In addition to aiding in navigation, these ferro-metallic keratinous plates are crypted to either act as a male or fend off potential predators.

"Thirteen-Footed"
Tridecapods are so named because of their 13 legs, 12 of which are elongated and used for locomotion, with a 13th modified leg plated in durable keratinous segments used as a "head". These quasi-vertebrates pose no threat to humans, as despite their fearsome appearance, they are non-venomous and passive, tending to congregate around high-voltage areas associated with park infrastructure.

Sponge-like mucosal membranes are ideally suited for venterial environment

Sensory Ganglia

Dorsal View

Wedge shaped modified foot allows Tridecapods to easily slip and slide within the venterial environment inside of the Permian Basin Superorganism.

Reproductive Egg sac hangs below mouth

Ventral View

Conservation Consideration
Since the introduction of man-made electrical infrastructure within Mystery Flesh Pit National Park, Tridecapods often mistake electrical conduit cables for arterial vessels. Tragedy follows when these animals attempt to feed by cutting into the cables, resulting in electrocution of the Tridecapod, and costly downtime and maintenance to the Park electrical system.

WILD NATURE

Nomadic Lifestyle
Eggs are laid and hatch deep within the Mesogleatic Firmament biome of Mystery Flesh Pit National Park in early autumn and spend the next two months crawling up to the Tertiary Arterial Ring of the Permian Basin Superorganism. As they mature, Tridecapods migrate from heart to heart along this vascular chain, spending as long as a week clustered in large groups around the coronal arteries of tertiary hearts. Venteriobiologists theorize that Tridecapods prefer the coronal arteries due to the lower pressure of these vessels when compared to the larger inter-heart arteries, while choosing to migrate for reasons of security and nutrient diversity. Mesogleal Tridecapods remain in the mid to late summer in a ritual in which species gorge themselves with repeated arterial incisions before the females descend into the Mesogleatic Firmament to lay eggs and begin the cycle anew.

Electric Navigation
Like many subterranean species, Tridecapods are completely blind and must utilize other forms of sensory information to navigate. Instead of eyes or ears, these animals are equipped with two sensory ganglia clusters on either side of their modified leg which enable Tridecapods to "see" electric field gradients. These highly sensitive nodes are then augmented by keratinous plates which are impregnated with ferro-metallic flakes, allowing this sense to be focused like an electromagnetic telescope. Almost immediately after hatching, young Tridecapods use this sense of electric sensitivity to seek out the electric cardiac impulses which drive heart contractions within the Tertiary Arterial System.
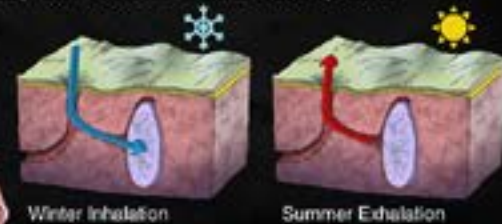
MYSTERY FLESH PIT NATIONAL PARK

Procreate, or Affinity. Many of these books are hidden gems that greatly demystify the drawing process, with much more comprehensive information than you will find on the internet. If you are already an artist but are intimidated by the complex perspective knowledge necessary for drawing "hard-edged" subjects like vehicles, architecture, or props, consider picking up some proficiency in a 3D program such as Blender or SketchUp. Being able to generate even basic form arrangements in 3D greatly simplifies the drawing process by offloading the arduous activity of constructing perspective-accurate linework to that created by a machine.

I think our readers will really appreciate and benefit from what you've said. Thank you for giving us a look into the process of Mystery Flesh Pit. I think it's obvious that you've made something with a unique appeal and message, as the thriv-

Southern Bronchial Forest

A Living, Breathing Forest

Take in the cool air as it rushes around you. Breathe in the living history of hundreds of millions of years of natural evolution and adaptation. The Southern Bronchial Forest, like all Bronchial Forests within *Mystery Flesh Pit National Park*, are enormous respiratory organs that fulfill a variety of roles in the highly complex and interdependent ecosystem of the Permian Basin Superorganism. Each year, millions of tons of gasses such as Carbon Dioxide, Oxygen, and Nitrogen are exchanged within these colossal organs in slow breaths. These long breaths fluctuate with the changing of the seasons: it takes about six months for just one of these lungs to fully inhale or exhale. During the inhalation process, cool air slowly inflates the many thousands of bronchioles within the forest. This provides the Permian Basin Superorganism with oxygen and a large volume of relatively cold, winter air. Conversely, during the warmer summer months, a slow exhalation process disperses buildups of Carbon Dioxide and waste heat. The thermal exchange of waste heat into the outer atmosphere is a vital way in which the Mystery Flesh Pit is able to maintain its metabolic processes.

Hiking in the Bronchial Forests

Unlike many of the unique environments found within Mystery Flesh Pit National Park, the Bronchial Forests exhibit a climate that is nominally habitable to humans. Fresh, oxygenated air drawn in from the surface of the park allows visitors to experience the stunning vistas and breathtaking scenery of this geobiological formation without the need for bulky respirators, helmets, or other heavy protective gear. However, unlike the majority of the park which is accessible to visitors, many of the trails found within the Bronchial Forests are undeveloped and preserved in their natural state. Chasms and bronchial passages within the Forests are generally unmarked. Before hiking into the Forest, please seek advice from a Park Ranger. Ask for an updated map, which contains in-depth information about specific trails, conditions, and smart hiking practices from either the Lower Visitor Center, or from a Ranger Station.

Many believe they are strong hikers and that a hike into a Bronchial Forest is easy. Know your limits.

NOTE: Trails are closed to the public from early May until late September each year as the Permian Basin Superorganism completes an exhalation cycle. During exhalation, excessive Carbon Dioxide concentration, excessive heat, and aggressive behavioral patterns of local wildlife create potentially dangerous conditions to guests and park personnel.

Major Trails

- Grand Chasm Route
- Middle Chasm Route
- Eastern Spur
- Pleural Divide Route
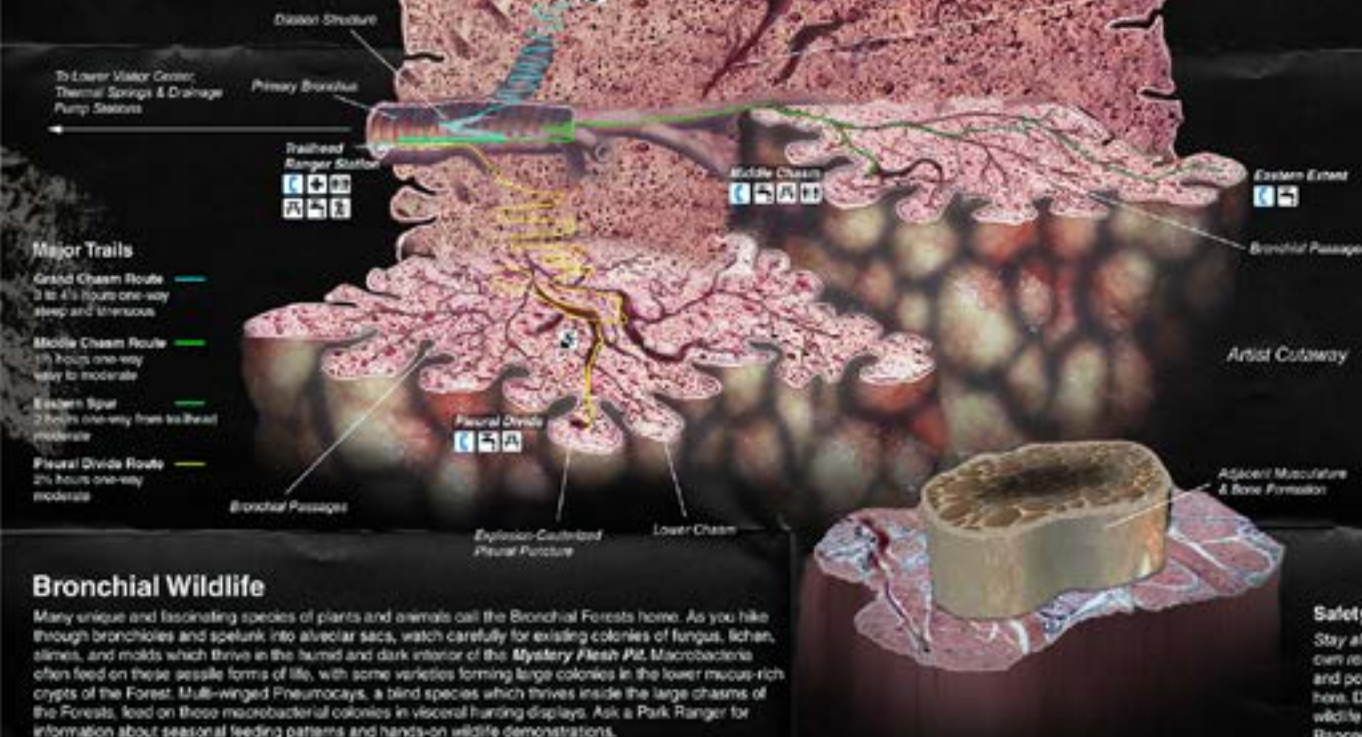
Bronchial Wildlife

Many unique and fascinating species of plants and animals call the Bronchial Forests home. As you hike through bronchioles and spelunk into alveolar sacs, watch carefully for existing colonies of fungus, lichen, slimes, and molds which thrive in the humid and dark interior of the *Mystery Flesh Pit*. Macrobacteria often feed on these sessile forms of life, with some varieties forming large colonies in the lower mucus-rich crypts of the Forest. Multi-winged Pneumocays, a blind species which thrives inside the large chasms of the Forests, feed on these macrobacterial colonies in visceral hunting displays. Ask a Park Ranger for information about seasonal feeding patterns and hands-on wildlife demonstrations.

Winter Inhalation

Summer Exhalation

Artist Cutaway

Legend

- Emergency Telephone
- Drinking Water Dispenser
- Enclosed Restroom
- Trailhead
- First Aid
- Slick Surfaces Possible
- Scenic Viewpoint
- Picnic Area

Safety and Regulations

Stay alert. Your safety is your own responsibility. Dangerous and potentially lethal animals live here. Do not feed or approach wildlife unless guided by a Park Ranger.

Emergencies call 911

National Park Foundation.
Join the park community.
www.nationalparks.org

More Information
National Park Service
PO Box 110
Gumption, TX 76951 USA
mysteryfleshpitnationalpark.com

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ing and engaged community that's congregated around your project is evidence of! Your website and subreddit contain Q&As, frequent memeing, and even the creation of an entire fan novel by user hypnoticwinter —that's impressive engagement! Fan content can be contentious among those who want to have total control of their IP, but you seem to have a more relaxed attitude. Considering all this, I wanted to ask about your opinion on fan works and canonicity?

Many creators have an intense emotional attachment to their works; the art they create is an extension of their own lived experiences. It is understandable that some would not wish to have their work misrepresented or altered in a way that did not align with their motivations for producing the art in the first place. However, I do not share this sentiment in regard to the Mystery Flesh Pit. My work is entirely intended to be enjoyed and engaged with. Part of this attitude is the result of being pragmatic and having grown up on the internet; people are going to do whatever they like with the things you make, so it is much better to embrace it and intentionally design elements with this in mind from the beginning. Worlds I am inspired by—the worlds of *Star Wars*, *Jurassic Park*, and the *Alien* franchise, to name a few—are characterized as having an open-ended feel in which many different kinds of stories and characters might exist. My job as a worldbuilder is to create a robust framework for these sorts of imaginary adventures by establishing firm rules on how the world operates, create shared key moments which define the world's history, and to use visual art to codify the specific look, feel, and tone of the world. Fan engagement is a cornerstone of this philosophy and gives the world a life far beyond what I am able to draw or write. What would I have to gain by squashing out any tiny inconsistency in a fan work or being a zealot about the canonicity of the IP? As a creator, I can think of no higher compliment than seeing other people inspired by my art, engaging with it through their own creative efforts.

Major Parasitic Fauna
of the Permian Basin Superorganism

If only more creators were of the same opinion! I'm curious, since Mystery Flesh Pit covers such a wide range of mediums and subject matters, do you ever collaborate on parts of the series? Or is it entirely a solo project?

Mystery Flesh Pit National Park has been an entirely solo project from the outset, partially because I am a control freak, but mostly because it greatly simplifies potential IP ownership issues for merchandise. With this story, I value the freedom of being able to tweak details or go in entirely different directions with certain aspects, which would be harder to do if this was a collaborative effort. In the future, however, I would be very interested in collaborating on projects with other creators.

I know that I'm not the only person excited about your upcoming coffee table-style art/guidebook! Do you have a title for it yet, or an expected release date, for your fans?

Putting the book together has been an interesting challenge as it is entirely new territory for me. It has been slower going than I would have liked, but it is progressing. My goal is to have something in readers' hands by Summer 2023, but there are many factors such as publishing and logistics which may affect this. It is important to me that the quality of the book lives up to the expectations of fans of the Mystery Flesh Pit, so I tend to take my time getting the details right. The title of the book will almost certainly be simply Mystery Flesh Pit National Park.

That's exciting to hear! I know my partner is already looking forward to the book's release while rockin' their *Mystery Flesh Pit National Park* baseball cap, and I'm sure that they're not the only ones. It's some quality merch, and I can't wait to get my hands on your book!

Given your high-quality work, I'm curious to hear about your opinion on worldbuilding critique and feedback; what do you think is good, constructive criticism for worldbuilding and, conversely, what worldbuilding critique have you found particularly unhelpful? How do you think worldbuilders can give good feedback about each other's worldbuilding even if they may be working in different mediums?

In design school, the work you produce is evaluated through a process called a "pin-up critique" in which professors, guest faculty, and sometimes invited representatives from industry give direct feedback and criticism following a presentation of your work. The result of this system is a greater reception to all types of criticism and a greater ability to sort out good critique from bad critique. As it applies to worldbuilding, I think that (generally) the more specific and actionable a piece of criticism is, the more valuable and worthwhile it is to consider. My work with the Mystery Flesh Pit project has been made better because of early comments I received from people who actually work in the fields of biology, geology, engineering, or within the National Park Service itself. This kind of expertise, which is far outside of my wheelhouse, was very helpful in editing my own work to better create the more realistic tone I was aiming for. Most of the time, these sorts of "critiques" don't even look like criticism. They will look like an excited comment or anecdote that a person types out because something about your work has resonated with them, but it pays to view it as a form of critique in which you can see a small window into how your work is perceived and viewed by others who might have very different backgrounds and experiences from yourself.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, you will receive feedback that is vague, irrelevant, or mean-spirited, but in my experience, these sorts of comments are rare. Most of the "bad" criticism I see, both with my work and the work of others, falls into the category of "it would be cool if you changed fundamental elements of the story in order to cater to my specific interest." If you have developed confidence as a story-

teller and worldbuilder, then you can easily brush these sorts of comments off because you firmly know which kind of narrative you are creating, and you also know that it will probably not be to everyone's taste. That's okay! I would much rather create something that is deeply meaningful to a handful of people than to focus-group/manifest some story with a very wide appeal that leaves no lasting impact.

Thank you for your thoughts; I'm positive that there are a lot of worldbuilders who will relate to your observation about what most "bad" world-building criticism looks like—I know I do!

On Patreon, you mention you have other ideas you sometimes entertain and post about—what is the one you're most proud about or find most interesting? We all know you so well for your Mystery Flesh Pit but what else are you cooking up in the lab?

I'm happy to announce that I have started work on my next major worldbuilding project which will explore themes surrounding American folklore such as hauntings, the occult, and ghosts. It will be hosted at SpectralHaptics.org, and by the time your readers see this, there might be some content there to peek at.

That's fantastic news! The website's 'About' page certainly has piqued my interest. Apparitional Economics? Bureau of Occult Oversight? A Halloween release date? Count me in!

Could you tell our readers a little about what to expect from *Spectral Haptics*? Will this story be told through similar kinds of diegetic materials as you've used for Mystery Flesh Pit, or will you be incorporating new mediums into your storytelling?

It will be told through similar methods as I have used for Mystery Flesh Pit National Park: illustrations, diagrams, "photos", and written accounts; though, I do plan on incorporating more audio-visual elements to compliment the narrative and make it more accessible to a wider audience. Like the Flesh Pit narrative, the story of *Spectral Haptics* will document the history of mankind interacting with elements of the (super)natural world, and the often disastrous consequences that follow. Unlike the Flesh Pit, this new series will not be tied to a singular location, instead covering a much larger scope. I don't wish to spoil too much, but this larger scope includes the U.S. Civil War, clockmakers in the Black Forests of Germany, K-Pop, mycological networks spanning continents, FDR, "Phantavore" creatures that feed on souls, and the U.S. Dept. of Housing & Urban Development. I think readers who have enjoyed the *Mystery Flesh Pit National Park* series will find plenty of things here to fascinate and entertain them.

How exciting, I can't wait to see how you weave those elements together into a narrative—if Mystery Flesh Pit is anything to judge by, it'll be grand! Thank you for giving us a sneak peek of what's to come.

And thank you as well for your time and for answering my questions. I think our readers will really benefit from your thoughts on worldbuilding and the artistic process and will be looking forward to seeing more of your work. I know I will be!

This interview was edited for Worldbuilding Magazine.

Thanks so much to Trevor for the insightful conversation! If you would like to follow him or view more of his work, join his Discord and visit his website. Trevor also has Mystery Flesh merch available at his store, as well as a Patreon.

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

🪐 **BACK TO INDEX**

CRATERS AS PROOF OF IMPACT

HOW TO DEPICT BELIEVABLE LOSS IN AN APOCALYPSE

by Keller O'Leary | Edited by Dylan Richmond and Geoff Washam

👽 **CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT**   📜 **CULTURE**   ✒️ **WRITING**

> *"When an impactor strikes the solid surface of a planet, a shockwave spreads out from the site of the impact."*
>
> *—The Lunar and Planetary Institute[1]*

The meteor has hit, the mad scientist detonates her arcane world-bomb, the missiles strike the satellites in orbit and destroy the worldwide communication systems. What do these changes bring about for the protagonist and the people of the world?

That's right: Brand-new outfits and some cool makeshift weaponry.

✏️ TASOS MANSOUR

[1] "Shaping the Planets: Impact Craters," Lunar and Planetary Institute, Accessed Feb. 2022, https://www.lpi.usra.edu/education/explore/shaping_the_planets/impact-cratering/

Does this seem off to you? What is the point of changing the fundamentals of life in the world if its inhabitants barely feel the effects that this radical change has brought forth?

Many stories offer this shift of style to explore new topics and lifestyles that a feudal wasteland setting may provide. The downside to this is that, more often than not, this structure simply mirrors the previous way of life, and their endeavors seemingly have a wasteland-tinted narrative that struggles to differentiate from life before the change. Having no consequences for the change of the setting from its pre-apocalypse to post-apocalypse merely results in a reader having no sense of change in the story, rather just viewing it as set-dressing that offers no lasting impact. It is presented as change without consequence.

A tool that may improve the influence of this global catastrophe is the usage of narrative "Craters", with points of "Impact" that are felt not only throughout a single story, but an exploration of what, or who, the people of this world have lost.

DEFINING A CRATER

What is a Crater?

For this article, we are defining a Crater as any visible absence in the world due to the apocalyptic event itself. It is entirely up to you to decide whether that is in the form of a physical void created, or an emotional shortcoming due to personal loss felt by any of the people or protagonists of the world. These can appear in the form of lost aspects of everyday life, conveniences provided by the world prior to cataclysm, or any general comforts that would make life

easier or safer to the general public. This can easily cover the loss of average aspects of life that many would take for granted, or general senses of comfort/protection/regular amenities that are made distinctly absent in an apocalyptic setting. They can be the absence of large-scale structures like government organizations and the functions they oversaw in their ruling, with their absence having a reverberating effect throughout their domain.

Martin Walter speaks of the significance that these voids can create, and even the simplest ones that are taken for granted in our daily lives. He says that "not only does the absence of familiar sights and sounds increase the feeling of unease, but the new spatiality also challenges seemingly natural everyday practices."[2] Even the most mundane loss, such as the ability to communicate over large distances, can present unique opportunities to depict the unfortunate aspects of this new life in an apocalyptic setting. The presence of a Crater is a clear acknowledgement of the void left by a much greater cause.

DEFINING IMPACT

Now that we've seen *what* a Crater is, we can now view *how* it affects your world. We refer to its lasting effect on the world as its Impact. The Impact is made in a variety of ways, some of which may be direct and present to the protagonists of an apocalyptic story, the citizens of a dying world, or may be more subtle in nature. There can be any number of points of Craters that derive from a single point of Impact, and they can offer a wider look at this world-changing event through a wider perspective.

Take a moment to consider one function of an

imaginary government which was put in place with the main priority of protecting its citizens from a slew of aggressive and dangerous beasts, who are only wounded by very specific magical rites. What happens when the government falls, fires plague the land, and there are no more state-mages to protect people? In this case, the loss of their protective force is their Crater, and Impacts made are the subsequent attacks at the hands of these bloodthirsty beasts.

This deep dive into Craters and their Impact is an effort to focus on the lasting impressions, or more accurately the lack thereof, in your worldbuilding project. They can help to deconstruct the sense of familiarity that may come from everyday life in your world, and instead be a point in which you can define a clear delineation of both before and after the cataclysmic event.

It does not have to be a focal point of the narrative, and it may be a negative action to try and create a focus around this aspect if the story at hand does not allow for it. It is up to each writer's interpretation to see how big or small this may be in the larger context of their worldbuilding efforts. The Crater is merely a tool that can help establish that there was in fact a visible aspect to life before this point, but there is a clear absence in this world from its loss after cataclysm.

KILLING YOUR DARLINGS

Not every aspect of a world will survive the apocalypse. Writers should consider what the most logical consequences will be, and what may make the most sense narratively to be impacted in a meaningful way in their story.

The Crater can be uniquely flavored to any setting, provided that the protagonists or people of the world are able to be aware of this Crater and have a need to respond to its ramifications, either directly or indirectly.

This does not mean that a beloved character must die, but the consequences of this story-changing event should have a direct connection to the group if they are directly linked to the events that build up to the event, most notably where the characters involved are protagonist forces that are directly tied to the catalyzing events towards this new world, however unintentional it may be. Those who remain of the society around them can easily be changed to live, or merely endure, through this change of scenery, and if they are knowledgeable about the events that have happened, a change in dynamic between the public and the focus characters of the world is a dynamic that could be worth exploring, depending on the extent of their knowledge.

There are many real world examples of fundamental Craters that can be made an example of, with their cause of destruction being mostly inconsequential. Their necessity will make something new fill the void, or their absence will create a new way of life entirely.

Through various natural and man-made disasters, the human spirit's inherent desire to endure has shined through time and time again; tsunamis, hurricanes, earthquakes and fires are some of just a few examples where areas can be demolished beyond repair. In the most extreme cases of these weather disasters, what happens afterwards? Does life try to return to normal, or does a new way of life develop in the wake of these Impacts?

As explained by experts, there is a lengthy and meticulous path in which a journey from destruction can return to some level of normalcy, on a predictable timeline that operates on the notion that adequate resources are able to guide the area back to normal.[3] But, in this apocalyptic disaster, there are no resources to spare. So, the variable state of human ingenuity takes its place. Life moves on past what has been, onto what they believe should be after the Crater has been formed.

[2] Walter, Martin. "Landscapes of loss: the semantics of empty spaces in contemporary post-apocalyptic fiction." *Empty Spaces: Perspectives on emptiness in modern history* (2019): 133-51.

NASA

LIFE GOES ON

The longer that time continues past the creation of the Crater, the more likely new aspects of life have begun to grow out of its absence. It is in human nature to attempt to fill the voids that have formed in the wake of terrible events. Adding such a length of time can add a level of depth to the characters that have been affected by these long-gone points of impact. Do the Craters remain in their lives in this new world, or have they been coping with it through some other means? The point is not to give them a properly-balanced journey, but rather to allow them to adapt as best as they can in this new world, where the effects of the world at large can influence the way that the normal process of grief may be allowed, or disrupted by some byproduct of this new world.

If the source of an apocalypse is personal to the journey of the protagonists that inhabit the world, giving them unique losses, more than just the loss of those they love or their home, will help to exemplify the changes made and their unintended consequences. For an example:

> " *In the lonely wasteland of New York City, Robert Neville has set up mannequins to speak and engage with in lieu of having any others to talk to. While this is far from normal behavior, it shows that he is struggling to cope with the lack of others in a world where he believes that he is the lone survivor.*
>
> *—I Am Legend (2007).[4]*

In this case, the Crater is the mere presence of others, and the Impact on the protagonist is speaking to mannequins in an effort to keep some semblance of sanity through his solitary life.

Grass may continue to grow over the Impact, and life may continue to develop in new forms afterwards, but the Crater will always remain underneath. This is a great way to articulate how life has changed with this fundamental Crater eliminating an essential part of life, and establishing what has tried to take its place.

The insights given by this area of focus offer a great amount of interpretation to the author on how they may be lasting in the world. If the point of the apocalypse in a world is a fault of those who came before, the focus can be more on the punishment of those who are complicit with this new world's state. On a brighter note, this struggle can instead be a testament to the will of the human spirit to survive regardless of their conditions. There are a variety of meteor types that an author can cast down on a world, and it is up to you and your throw to see how it affects the world at large.

EXERCISES FOR THE END OF THE WORLD

With a firm understanding of the fundamentals of Craters and their points of impact, let's connect it back to your world.

- In this world that you've crafted, what are some common aspects of life that are disrupted or removed entirely? If they are essential to the lifestyle of the people, what takes their place? How do the people endure without it?

- If your world is viewed through the lens of a single character, who or what have they lost that changes their life completely?

- How much are they willing and able to rebuild what they've lost, or what do they choose to take its place?

All these thoughts and more can help establish the true aspects of loss that the characters and inhabitants of your world have gone without, and showcase how different this new world can be in its place. The way in which they choose to build it back up, if they are able to, lies entirely at the tip of your imagination.

🪐 **BACK TO INDEX**

3 Johnson and Olshanky, "Introduction," in After Great Disasters: How Six Countries Managed Community Recovery", (Cambridge: Lincoln Institute of Land Policy, 2016), 10, https://www.lincolninst.edu/sites/default/files/pubfiles/after-great-disasters-full_0.pdf

4 I Am Legend, directed by Mark Protosevich (2007, Warner Bros. Pictures, 2007). DVD.

WORLDBUILDING AS A CHALLENGE TO THOUGHT

by Gabriel Lennon | Edited by Adam Bassett and Geoff Washam

THEORY & ANALYSIS

What are we actually *doing* when we worldbuild? What lies at the heart of that sense of satisfaction felt as the world grows under our demiurgical imagination? What's pulling us back, again and again, to fabricating these other-worlds when many, if not *most*, confess they cannot see their world becoming 'complete' in a novel, game, comic, or other media? While that may certainly be the goal for some, *many* are content to sit in a miscellany of influences and ideas and devise their worlds there, without the aim of creating something 'complete.'

What I aim to do in this article is show the *intrinsic value* to solely worldbuilding. Drawing on my own recent ethnographic research into worldbuilding, I want to show how its worth does not emerge only from the latter products it may fuel, but also from within worldbuilding's unique creative processes. Specifically, how it leads one to learn and challenge knowledge through its distinctive emphasis on 'realism' and 'plausibility'.[1] This makes the process of worldbuilding uniquely poised to challenge and expand ideas, with the tenets of the craft niggling at the mind and forcing one to think in markedly different ways compared to other creative pursuits. This forces the creation and creator *between* the space of the 'real' and unreal, where they can challenge the constraints of the known.

WORLDBUILDING FOR WHAT?

There are, in a loose sense, two types of worldbuilders: those who build for the purpose of another project, and those who build for the world alone. Many take issue with the idea of worldbuilding as anything more than preparatory work for other media, thinking it a waste of time if the setting remains a private paracosm, and is never elaborated into a narrative to be shared. I've encountered many, both creators within the community and scholars, who feel this way. They insist that you cannot get bogged down in the plotting and planning 'phase,' speaking of it like an illness that you ought to avoid, slandering worldbuilding as a 'syndrome' or 'disease' you must get past to mature as a creative.[2]

There is, basically, an underlying feeling by many that worldbuilding only legitimizes itself when it comes up with a project at the end—something graspable and complete. That worldbuilding, alone, is not valid, which even Tolkien somewhat believed when he dubbed his proclivity for it a "secret vice."[3] This isn't to say one's battle with the urge to constantly refine and perfect their world is invalid: it is an intense frustration to continually conjure new facets to a world that may be useless for your eventual product, but that doesn't mean it was all for naught.

Plainly, there are many worldbuilders engaging in the craft without the ambition of some wider project driving them, and this disparaging of them inspires guilt. I saw this first-hand when interviewing worldbuilders, who continually caveated that they *wanted* to write a story, or had thought about a comic, but to my eyes were clearly smitten with worldbuilding itself, not with storytelling—two different pursuits. Many felt worldbuilding was a dead-end, a time-suck, and childish if it didn't eventuate into something more. One interviewee relayed how they were scared to be perceived as engaging in "immature escapism," and others admitted they actively hide evidence of their worldbuilding from friends and family—a concept and mindset I want to diminish. This is not to invalidate, target, or chide those who worldbuild instrumentally, whose worldbuilding is only one step in pursuit of wider projects (many of whom I also spoke with), but these non-instrumentalist worldbuilders are here, and growing in number, because it's frankly enjoyable to be in the melange of influences and ideas that one encounters when worldbuilding, and it's fun and rewarding to imagine and craft new worlds.

Of course, storytelling and worldbuilding are interrelated and complementary pursuits. It is true that when you're plotting history, it is a narrative. I'm drawing this line for clarity because what I came to focus on in my research were the specifics of worldbuilding in and of itself: what was being done, how people experienced the craft itself, what they gained from building a world *for the world itself*, not necessarily as a setting or foundation for something else. This is because when you conceive of your pursuit as worldbuilding, rather than as creating an engaging narrative, you're forcing yourself to ask different questions and tarry with ideas that have a distinct method. This, surprise surprise, revealed itself as a uniquely fruitful, stimulating, and generative pursuit—not some quagmire sapping effort and inhibiting creativity and intellectual rigor.

A LODESTAR FOR KNOWLEDGE

Fundamentally, worldbuilding is about making something new, different, and alternative; it is *not* regurgitating a reality. It's an act of imagination, but imagination is an oddly paradoxical thing: when you imagine something, you're both reproducing your reality and producing something new.[4] It is simultaneously conservative, in that it is cognitively impossible to make something entirely new, but innovative, and yet unde-

1   Lennon, Gabriel Urlich. "Making the Imaginary: Worldbuilders, and the Art of Ontogenous Play." 2021.

2   *Ibid.*, p. 50.

3   Tolkien, John Ronald Reuel. "Beowulf: the Monsters and the Critics." Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1936.

niable that something new is produced through syntheses. Most conversations in worldbuilding hinge around this: what 'influences' should one use, and how can they be mixed and melded in interesting ways. Vitally, also, the question of *realism* dominates the view for worldbuilders, which shapes how you think and how the project grows, forcing you to decide how much you want to accommodate or depart from reality's shackles.[5]

Constructed 'secondary' worlds, then, always hold elements of that 'primary world' we're building away from. Some worlds feature great splits with biology or physics, others are distinguished by linguistic, geographic, or temporal differences, but *difference* is always needed.[6] Essentially, when you're building a world, you're making a new order, a new being; an *ontology*.

This ontological approach is an old notion of worldbuilding, endorsed (more or less) by the oldies of the craft like Tolkien who talked about it as *subcreation*, and is carried forward by more recent thinking, too.[7] And it is because of this core feature of separating yourself from a concretised reality that worldbuilding is generative: to be a good craftsperson of new ontologies, you need to know your own being and reality, changing and tinkering with aspects in interesting ways to create an excitingly different realm. The adage that you should learn the rules well so you can break them well applies here, and is something that is instinctively known by worldbuilders. This is why there is so much deference to education and formal knowledge with world-

builders, and so much importance placed and time spent on researching aspects of *our* world: because it's so vital in order to create another.

Worldbuilding is a lodestar for learning, in a way. You have the contours of an idea in your head, but to flesh it out in the world you need to research more. To create a new society, you need to first understand the contours and dynamics of a real, extant one. But it's more than simply transplanting a collation of facts, observations, and 'truths' into a new space, because you end up asking questions you mightn't have otherwise: the "what ifs" and "what abouts" that make that world something different. You're diving deeper than you might if you weren't a self-imposed demiurge, making the project of building a world into a mode of structuring the procurement of more knowledge, and then challenging it.

BETWIXT & BETWEEN WORLDS

This step beyond just research is the hook for worldbuilders, as it is for all artists. It's when you get to interrogate your material. This is where creative catharsis and enthusiasm jolt you, and worldbuilding has its unique way of getting you to this point. When you're building a world, you're a bit between realms; you've put yourself at a critical distance, and as a result have a bit more mobility in thought than you would otherwise. Artists adore abstraction and metaphor because it creates productive distance and becomes something to engagingly puzzle over. Social theorists like theorizing for

the same reason, because it distills phenomena to more simple, abstracted parts, giving them more movement for thought. Worldbuilding is analogous—it is pulling apart reality and putting it back together in wildly different ways.

There are different knowledges, though; different places one can look and interrogate. Tolkien favored linguistics, Le Guin leant toward cultural forms, Herbert focused on ecologies. Each of these are exemplary of my point: they used their worldbuilding to structure the procurement of knowledge and then, through the process of making their worlds, they asserted challenges to orthodoxies and expanded what was thinkable.

This was a continual presence in my interviews with many worldbuilders, who often discussed how their worldbuilding "broke some basic assumptions [about] society," where through the process of making another world they learnt that realities could be different and that the concepts they were combining were eminently plausible if things only took a different course. In essence, none were leaping from established knowledge they already held to these divergent worlds, but through worldbuilding and finding how specifically they departed from their primary world, they began to appreciate wider possibilities.

This is the crux of it: when you're making the new world, you're learning more about your own, because you *must* learn about your own to plan the departure well. This doesn't have to come from 'the academy' either, as the beauty of worldbuilding is that anything can be its basis: A bee colony? Two-dimensional physics? A single-sex society? Sentient plants? Yourself?[8] The difference can be found and made anywhere, ranging from one's minute day-to-day rituals,

or one's own observations and readings, to fundamental physical laws, entrenched social theory, or biological facts.

Those I interviewed had a wide range of sources that they built their world from: from personal trauma, to architectural training, to theological study.[9] Whatever it was, through creating

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[4] See: Gosetti-Ferencei, Jennifer Anna. *The Life of Imagination: Revealing and Making the World.* Columbia University Press, 2018.

[5] Even if you end up abandoning realism, you've still considered it, and moved the barometer for plausibility elsewhere to accommodate it.

[6] A model of this is Eric Wolf's degrees of invention, where he lays it out into *the nominal, the cultural, the natural, and then the ontological.* See: Wolf, Mark JP. *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation.* Routledge, 2014.

[7] See: Wolf, Mark JP. *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation.* Routledge, 2014.

[8] The Bees, Laline Paull; The Planiverse, A.K. Dewdney; When it Changed, Joanna Russ; Semiosis, Sue Burke.

[9] In the research, I divided the impacts of worldbuilding into three domains: intellectual, emotional, and political.

alternatives they were forced to learn more, and then to interrogate those distillations in order to formulate their 'other worlds,' something they found gratifying and invigorating.

This includes the out-there ideas that are undeniably abstract but remain challenges to entrenched thought. Worlds that are under-girded by a complex magic system, non-existent technologies, or entirely different biologies can still function to generate challenges to the taken for granted. This is why scholars and policy makers find inspiration in science fiction and in the manufacturing of new worlds, because it's a cauldron for new thought and ideas—both desirable and worrying. You're not, then, creating new 'potential' realities or anything of the sort—it's still 'play,' in a sense, but play is productive precisely because it's slightly liberated by the constraints of reality.

It is 'slightly' liberated because of that lingering but pervasive demand for realism. This tenet purposely inhibits total freedom from reality (as if such a thing is possible, anyway), constraining and directing our creative energy. This gives the play of creating new worlds a helpful limit and structure, where you can't really just say something *is* and it is; it needs to fit, it needs to be considered with an eye to internal consistency or plausibility. This is a definitional element of worldbuilding, and is at the heart of its genera-

tivity, acting as a stopper to ridiculousness and forcing worldbuilders to really think about what they know, and how they can bend it to make new, exciting worlds.

CONCLUSION

This may all be preaching to the converted: readers here know what they're doing and can each attest to the excitement of making new forms while they're building their worlds. That's why many are here, to see how others are doing it, to be excited by others' inventive new worlds, and to learn more. What I hope, anyway, is that readers see more clearly how worldbuilding is a method for challenging thought, and the recipe of a new reality requiring realism is an essential component to this.

In essence, the labor of worldbuilding is not wasted, as even if it remains private, these intellectual hurdles are being encountered and tarried with while you're between worlds, morphing and concocting a new ontology. You have to learn to start worldbuilding, and you have to challenge what you've learnt to keep going, and that is at the heart of what makes worldbuilding an invigorating art.

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ASK US ANYTHING
by B.H. Pierce
Edited by Geoff Washam and Zaivy luke-Aleman

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.

In a fantasy setting with magic, how would you prove the existence of a god or gods?

– Pyre

A worthy question. The art/science/skill/passion There's nothing quite like the phrase 'Fantasy Setting' to make an answer incredibly convoluted. Given the dizzying variety of magic and the many different kinds of gods possible in constructed worlds, there is no one answer to your query. To answer this we must now answer several other questions. First, what is the nature of magic and the nature of deities in this setting? Are they wholly separate or intertwined? You speak of proving, but who does this need to be proved to and for what reasons? Now, let us continue our quest to answer these questions in a coherent way.

Let us start with the gods who shall be defined as beings who receive worship, which I'm certain will upset no one. First off, are these gods active or passive? Do they exist in the background, constantly operating cosmic forces to which life itself is only one among many? Or are they more active, directly affecting the lives of mortals in a noticeable way? Once that question has been answered, you must work out if these gods have a human thought process. Are they beyond the ken of mortals or do they share their virtues and vices? Knowing these two things will help answer the question of whether or not their existence needs to be proven. If the Rain God's job is

to make the water cycle work and they do this either ignorant or uncaring of the plight of farmers, some may be skeptical about their existence. But if every time the farmers pray for rain a giant riding a nine-legged horse rides across the sky and herds storm clouds over their fields, no one will doubt they are there.

With that answered, now we must discuss the nature of magic and to do that, we will speak once again on the difference between hard and

soft magic. In this setting, is magic like gravity or thermodynamics, another impersonal force that people can learn about and manipulate for their own ends? Are its laws constant and unchanging? That would be hard magic. Soft magic is more mysterious and capricious, something understood more by meditation than study. Don't mistake this for orderly magic versus chaotic magic. The weather is the result of impersonal forces and it could never be considered orderly. Both hard and soft magic could be used to prove or disprove the existence of gods. If magic is an impersonal force, people might only be able to manipulate it thanks to the techniques taught by a god. Wild, soft magic could be used as an argument against the existence of that same god, proving that they do not control all magic. The nature of gods, the nature of magic, and their relationship with each other will add a great deal of deep lore and rich flavor to your world.

But before we wrap this up, let us briefly address the question of why this needs to be proved and who it needs to be proven to. Just how big a presence does magic and the gods have in the everyday lives of people in your setting? Is magic for the few and the elite, or does everyone have a couple spells figured out by the time they're ten? Do the gods sit aloof from the world, speaking only with the chosen few, or can you run into one at 2 AM at a dive bar? Magic could easily be held up as an example of a deity's gift, or it could be argued as proof that they either do not exist or are not worthy of worship. To be blunt, your question means nothing outside its required context. For it to be answered, you must know the nature of such things in the world you have built.

How does one dive into Sci-Fi aquatic ecology? Should one swim as closely as possible to real-life examples, or should one take a plunge and use as much artistic license as needed?

– Crazycan

The simple answer is to do whatever you want. But my editor doesn't like it when I give simple answers, even if it is the appropriate one in this case. Worldbuilding is all about creating something you find fascinating and if it involves copious amounts of research all the better. But let's expand this question from a world built for fun to a world built for an audience. Now depending on the audience, they will have certain expectations for a world based on what they expect to see. Let's break down three examples of worlds built for different sets of readers/watchers/players.

First off we have a world built for a hard sci-fi setting based around the story of colonizing an ocean planet. To borrow from your metaphor, in this instance you must swim very close to real life examples because that is what the audience will expect. They will desire pages and pages of info dumps and discussion about salinity and ph levels and how the planet's more extreme tides affect the ecosystem. If you put a kelp forest in the wrong place or misrepresent the life cycle of plankton then expect a swarm of angry letters. This option offers the benefits of requiring you to become an expert in marine biology and ecosystems and providing a dedicated (if hostile) group of fact checkers ready to ensure your work is accurate. However, I am aware my idea of paradise is radically different from others, so let us move on to our next option.

Second we have an Isekai where our protagonist (whom for some reason must be struck by a truck) is transported into an aquatic themed world. In this context real life examples will be more of a scaffold to build around than the last example. Think of this setting as the Mundane World+, with the fantastical living side by side with the normal. A Kelp forest will be augmented by a village of mermaids living within, coral reefs will be fortresses ready for a siege. The trick here is to use artistic license with things that are clearly fantastical, while sticking rigorously to the facts with inspiration drawn from the mundane world. This audience will be able to seperate the two with the magic of Suspension of Disbelief and you could

even spark a life-long interest in marine science in some of your readers.

Finally, we have a fantasy sword and sandal romp through an underwater kingdom. This realm will be ruled by what the Interdimensional Commonality Cataloging Endeavour calls the Rule of Cool. Go hog wild. If it sounds fun, do it. Does the protagonist have a pet lionfish that acts like a cat? Go for it, who cares that the lionfish is covered with spines that would poison anyone who pets it. You can turn sharks into pack hunters if you want. Have an idea for the characters dancing around an underwater bonfire? No one is going to question it, have fun! As much as it pains me to say, this type of world has its place. If it brings you and the people you intend to read it joy, then do whatever you want.

What would you say are the essentials for a technologically advanced fantasy setting? And any advice for integrating quality-of-life anachronisms into any old world setting?

– Crazycan

To be direct, the most essential thing is to identify what the difference between technology and magic is. Since magic has proven remarkably hard to pin down definition wise, we will start with technology. To use a simple, broad definition, technology is a set of practices and/or devices designed to make some difficult task easier or possible. In this definition a shovel, crop rotation, and accurate weather forecasting are all considered technology. To be quite specific, technology is replicable, while magic is not. For example, suppose in a setting there are enormous dragons that fly through the sky and occasionally drop materials like scales, fangs, or blood. If replicable techniques exist for making use of that material, that is technology. If only those rare people with the favor of the dragons (which is determined by a criteria known only

to the dragons themselves) can make use of it, it is magic. Neither of these are superior and both can be made to function in a technologically advanced setting. In the former, there could be entire fleets of aircraft tasked with following these dragons around to mark where materials break off and fall. In the latter, battles between sky dragons could simply be the cause of most flight delays. To fully answer your first question, the main goal is to figure out how a world of high-speed internet and jet travel interacts with magic. Does it harness magic, or is it forced to work around it? Either way can lead to some fascinating and thought-provoking settings.

With the first half of your question answered, we can move on to the second. Rather delightfully, I get to answer this question by directing you to some intensive research. One of the great desires that drive technology forward is the need to make difficult things easier. Transportation, communication, manufacturing, any device or technique that can make any of these things quicker and more efficient will be hastily adopted. A period of history when there was much change in these areas is the Second Industrial Revolution. In the First Industrial Revolution humanity learned to harness the power of steam and apply it to ventures in mining and manufacturing, changing much in the grand scheme of things but little in the lives of everyday people. The Second Industrial Revolution, however, was when many advances in technology pushed into everyday life. Electric lighting, train travel, labor-saving appliances and many other things wormed their way into many homes. Research this era and see what people sought most eagerly and what became widespread the fastest. For example, you may think an ice wizard would be initially used as an air-conditioner for hire. But the first use of refrigeration technology was for the large-scale transportation of fresh meat from distant farms to city centers. Research into this period of history will give you some fascinating insight and wonderful ideas on how to make such quality-of-life anachronisms.

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If you would like to join our team and help create more issues of *Worldbuilding Magazine* you can reach us on any of our **social media** accounts, **Discord**, or via **email** More information is on **our website**.

The people we need most right now to continue the magazine are layout designers (currently using Adobe InDesign, but we've considered moving to Affinity Designer if that's what most people want to use), artists, and editors (developmental or copy editors). If you don't fall into any of those skillsets, but still want to help, reach out anyway! If we can find a place for you in the magazine or podcast, we will.

Thanks for your time, and for reading this issue of the magazine.

Lyanna

Ghranze

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