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# WORLDBUILDING MAGAZINE

# PHILOSOPHY

& INTELLECTUAL PURSUITS

WORLD SHOWCASE  
ANDREY NEGRÚL'S EXOLITH

THE  
PITSTOP

FORBIDDEN LORE  
WHY IS KNOWLEDGE POWER?

ANALYSIS | ART | INTERVIEWS

A COMMUNITY PROJECT

PROMPTS | STORIES | THEORY

# Letter from the Editor

**T**HANK YOU FOR reading this issue of *Worldbuilding Magazine*. First a few updates: You'll notice that our visual style has changed this issue thanks to the design work of Bruce

A Whitesides. He has been passionate in revamping it and has created an updated style guide as well. His creative problem solving skills have been helpful and I thank him for his patience with me, haha.

Enough updates! Let's talk theme: Philosophy is a broad topic that influences much of what we think and do. Whether we realize it or not, it frames the way we interpret our world and helps us make sense of our surroundings.

In this issue, you'll read about philosophy from the perspective of worldviews, knowledge, and art. In the infamous avant-garde *Fountain* by Duchamp, many people saw a urinal and thought, "This is art?" The philosophy behind

it, the intentional provocation of that question, is part of the fun. Andy Warhol, known in pop art for his appropriation of Campbell's Soup, made us question that which we took for granted: what does it mean to "create" art? Well then, what is creation? What counts as ownership of an art piece or an idea? These provocative questions are the direct intersection of philosophy and art. They can make us question our laws of ownership, such as copyright. They can create schisms in cultural attitudes towards art. They can influence your worlds.

What is the collective psychological schema embedded in language? Is there a word for throat and a word for neck, or are these two things that are separate in English the same in another language such as Korean? How does this distinction (or lack of) influence how people communicate with each other? If a creature has a different mental schema, say their brain organizes information differently from us, how would this influence the kinds of distinctions they make? This creature does not identify necks or throats, not because they do not have one, but because their brain has such a fine ability to interpret their world that they can "see" or "sense" existence on an atomic level. Everything to them is like a 3-D pointillism piece with-

out the Earthly limitations of sight a standard eyeball would have. How would one translate conversations between human schematic groupings to this wildly different way of experiencing the world?

Worldbuilding is an opportunity to question what we often otherwise accept as fundamental truths. We hope you'll let your imagination run wild with philosophical exercises in your own worldbuilding.

We are a volunteer run organization and if you like our content, please consider sharing your skills with us. You can do so via our website by submitting work or volunteering as an editor. For all other volunteer positions such as social media work, please email us at [contact@worldbuildingmagazine.com](mailto:contact@worldbuildingmagazine.com).

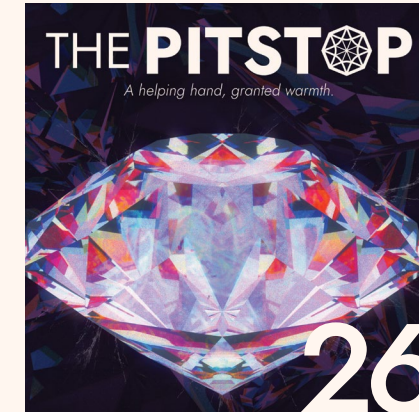
Thank you to our volunteers who make time for the work amongst their busy schedules. And thank you readers for engaging with our magazine. Most importantly, thank you for your patience! The last few years have been a difficult transition with frequent changes in staff. Your continued interest in our magazine has kept me going. Thank you.

*Zaivy (Opal) Luke-Alemán*  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

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# In The Streets Of Stillness

BY OLIVIA KRAMER

*Sometimes . . .  
even gods seek guidance.*

**T**HE CITY HAD ALREADY stained the fringe of the god's robes red only a few minutes after his arrival. Which, Lassiehr had to admit, benefited him: nobody lived in Hada-Mahada without granite grit constantly in their teeth, and he would have stood out if his robes were not marred with the rust of the streets. The god was standing near the heart of the city, where a stony street stretched before him. On his right, a cliff of the same rock rose twice as tall as a man. The rocks that made the bones of the city were webbed with hexagons stretching all over Hada-Mahada, made level only by the meticulous work of stone masons.

To his left, the road dropped off into another cliff, and he could see the ocean only half a kilometer away. The wind picked up again, colder this time. As it swept across the roads, swirling more dust into the air, Lassiehr pulled his hood tighter and continued to walk to his destination. Despite the coming winter, the streets were as busy as they would have been on a summer day. It was as if the people of Hada-Mahada willed the weak beams of sunlight, straining through the clouds, to harden into sharpened rays. Lassiehr had always admired that quality about the many groups who had once lived on this barren plateau. The people claimed the city was a holy site, the birthplace of their gods, and they built there to venerate them. To Lassiehr, the city testified to mortal willpower more than it honored him and his kin. Force of will was a muscle that only a desolate place like this could strengthen, and the Hadians had trained that muscle for over a century.

The masses of the city milled with a subconscious avoidance of the cloaked figure. Even with the dust of the locals to hide him, his hood fell around a head that was too large to be proportionate to a human body, and his thick fabric rippled in the wind with an unnatural delay. Although these things contributed to the subtle movements of the crowd, perhaps the main reason people carved an allowance around the figure was because of the outline of a sword beneath his robes. It was a sliver pressed into cloth, only the impression of a jutting nail, but any hint of a sword in their age was enough to be felt.

As Lassiehr neared the edge of the city, the cliff beside him curved away from the road he walked. People and carts grew less dense, still keeping their distance from the figure, as the buildings began to have roofs of straw instead of being built into the tiered stone cliffs. Lassiehr walked through an opening in the wall that divided the city proper from the smaller communities on its edge. The wall stood ten meters tall, ten meters of decaying wood. The last time Lassiehr had frequently visited Hada-Mahada, that wall had been freshly carved and five times as tall. But the function the wall fulfilled had long become obsolete and, in the absence of guards, rot had taken residence.

Outside of the city, the hexagonal stones became uneven monoliths growing out of the ground in clusters of two or three. Just before the red stone melted into the crop fields outside of Hada-Mahada, the pillars roared up in a semicircle with the largest pillars as tall as the city wall once was. Dirt had been moved here to make a hill that sloped in a clean arc, with the tallest of stone pillars making a backdrop to the top. It was like an ancient theater stage, except the audience stood on the slope below looking up to the place where the actors would have gone. Some of the stones had tops carved in such a way that sound would carry from the peak of the hill to the growing crowd of people standing on the hill. Again, Lassiehr marveled at human ingenuity. The god made his way to the edge of the hill, where the lowest of the red stone grew as a wall, and sat down on the ground, dead and frosted grass crunching as he rested his full weight. Instinctively, Lassiehr connected himself to the earth.

As roots tied themselves to the deity, he felt the prayers of the crowd come to him. The ones he was used to came first like the embarrassment from a smithy who let the forge die the day before, praying for his apprenticeship to end in satisfaction. But there were not many of those prayers—prayers meant for the god he used to be. Then, the flood of prayers for the god he now was washed over him. Before, the prayers were limited to his old domain, but now they branched out. Instead of tending to one limb, Lassiehr was now the tree's canopy, meant to oversee the Bounds of his seven siblings. The worries, wild dreams, and mundane hopes the people had for their own lives were channeled through the roots of the hill and into Lassiehr. Every feeling and thought asking the God above Gods for help was drawn out. Even in the realm of gods, the overwhelming mound

of collective emotions was terrifying. The plant fibers growing into Lassiehr began to violently shake until his entire arm raddled with spasms, each one as sharp as a needle. The shadows around Lassiehr grew longer, more oppressive. In his panic, Lassiehr could not even parse what the questions were, what the prayers were asking. Even if he could, he could not answer them. That is why he was here at this holy place.

A hush ran over the crowd as a man began moving towards the top of the hill. Lassiehr's shoulders slumped in relief as the prayers stopped and he pulled himself away from the roots. The man who caused the hush reached the top of the small hill, pulling himself up the final stride with a long oak staff. A sharp gray beard poked out of a hood, contrasting a hard, wiry shape with the soft billowing of a thick poncho. The bottom of his poncho was dyed with a colorful pattern of triangles, interlocking around the cloth as a trim. Similar colors were repeated on the gambeson he wore under his cloak, blues and yellows complementary to the red dust stains on his boots. At the top of the hill, the man turned around, sat cross-legged on the grass, and laid his staff across his lap. Tied into the linen wrapping of the staff on each end were shards of pottery. The shards were poised with their arch facing the shaft, ready to snap at a firm grip. The pottery, above all else, told everyone that this man was the highest of scholars and holy teachers. The dirty cloak and gruff beard were not what other generations living in Hada-Mahada would qualify as a member of the scholarly *devoteés*, Lassiehr thought. But what difference did that make? The idea of a rich, scrawny, *devoteá* sitting by candle light poring over books was as decayed as the city wall. It had no place in this world, and the people in it would laugh at the notion.

The man threw off his hood and immediately began speaking. His voice was hard like the stones that surrounded them, but it was as casual as a voice in conversation with family. It rolled onwards, without pause or awkwardness, as he began his sermon.

"I was walking on the road, tossing the bones of a squirrel behind me. Foot, femur, and fragile skull. I thought to myself, 'Why, like tossing grain seeds, don't three new squirrels spring forth from the ground?' Perhaps, if evolution had been kinder, that would have been the case. But as it is, the renewal of plants each year in spring is a type of immortality reserved for the gods themselves. For us ... life is life, and death is death." At the word "life," the man grew quiet and the rest of the sentence came out as a whisper, the words only audible

"I was walking on the road, tossing the bones of a squirrel behind me. Foot, femur, and fragile skull. I thought to myself, 'Why, like tossing grain seeds, don't three new squirrels spring forth from the ground?' ... "

because of the engineering of the hill. It took only a moment more, and a tug at his beard for him to start again, the experience of many years of teaching propelling him through his lapse. “But it is not to despair. Some say that it was this fragility that caused the Fae to become our wardens. The church calls them the Divine Humors of Human Life and not of plant life. For many, that would be enough of a speech, being told to go out and rejoice because you are to die. I am few, and many have said I am far too crass to be a part of the many, so I remain in the few. I tell you to not rejoice in your decaying body that will not regrow each spring; death comes far too fast for us to hasten it with joy. Instead, focus on the ambition of holding on to life. Like a miner on a cliff face, knuckles white, clinging to the rock is a worthy goal in itself. It is this trait that the gods admire us for, and it is the sharp moments on that cliff, being able to see the entire ocean below you and knowing that you could fall anytime, that really makes up human lives.”

The devoteá kept on preaching, another hour perhaps. The preacher spoke with experience, and with realism, not with the tones Lasseihr had expected. Each time he had come to listen before, many high and scholarly thoughts were shared, but nothing of substance was ever said. The closest that came was the notion that the Eight Fae had chosen to humbly protect human lives, and by extension organized their Divine Bounds around the human experience. That assertion seemed to just accept the premise that

human life was special without providing a reason. Even as one of the Eight, Lasseihr did not know if there was a reason, but after thousands of years, he finally needed to know what made human life so special. He admitted to himself that he didn't *need* to, Lasseihr knew the others had given him this role just to fill the gap until

the true deity was found. Still, there was an unsettled urge in him that said he must try his best to understand the responsibilities of this new domain. After all, what was religion when the God of Life knew nothing about life itself?

## After all, what was religion when the God of Life knew nothing about life itself?

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**DAN-MA WALKED DOWN FROM** the top of the hill where he had been preaching. His hood was thrown over his face again, shielding him from the wind and the faces of the people. Their faces. Cheeks flushed with life. Bitter thoughts entered his head. If he really believed in the cliff allegory he shared in his performance, then these people were hurdling straight to the rocky bottom. None of them knew how fast death could come; that's why they smiled.

Dan-Ma breathed in as he left the hill, trying to release his anger. The other people in the crowd followed Dan-Ma as he left back towards the city proper. All of them stared at the staff Dan-Ma carried, the mark of a devoteá, and none of them saw the broken man beside it.

It was strange, Dan-Ma decided, to be aware of your own brokenness while others were oblivious to it. Dan-Ma understood what triggered his bursts of anger while still feeling that senseless rage rule him. He could almost feel the fissures in his psyche growing every day.

As Dan-Ma reentered Hada-Mahada, the crowd behind him slowly merged with the city, and Dan-Ma became one of many devoteés who worked in the large city. It suited him just fine that should he later come across anybody who he had preached to that morning, they would be unlikely to recognize him as an individual. Except ....

Dan-Ma kept walking, his stride hunched far too much for a man his age. He crossed the hexagonal roads, now bustling with midday activity, and moved further into Hada-Mahada. Here, the straw roofed buildings were built tight together, allowing small red alleyways between only a handful of them. Dan-Ma ducked through the low door of one of the larger buildings. The alehouse was a squat building—all of them in Hada-Mahada were—built with mud brick and rough timber. Along the inside of the wall, at the height of Dan-Ma's shoulder, was a pattern like the one on his poncho. The room was perhaps eight meters across, with an oak bar spanning the far end. Scattered around everywhere else were tables built near the ground, with woven blankets on each side for the seats. The floor was the same as the road outside. Hexagons repeated and again. Though, in the building, lit by a hearth on one wall, the red seemed deeper than it did outside. Dan-Ma respectfully knelt down beside one of the low tables. Even in the afternoon, the building's air was sticky, mixing the smell of a drunk's breath with freshly kneaded dough. But at least it was well lit, with only a few patrons. The single server, who was likely also the barman, noticed the guest and hurried to take an order from his new patron.

“Just a lump of bread, and might as well add some dried lamb while we are at it,” Dan-Ma said before the man ran back behind the bar.

The moment the motion of the server passed Dan-Ma, he spotted the figure who had been tailing him. Tall and in dark, stiff robes, the figure knelt at a table across the alehouse. So Dan-Ma was right. From leaving the hill, the robed figure had been easy to spot, but Dan-Ma wanted to make sure he was being followed. Dan-Ma slowly pulled one of the ceramic shards he had wrapped in his staff out and tucked it into his sleeve. It wasn't the most effective of weapons, but the jagged edge would cut, and a staff in tight quarters wouldn't do any good.

Dan-Ma kept his eyes locked on the figure, who seemed awkward kneeling at the table. Eventually, ceramic ground on wood as the server slid a plate of lamb and warm bread onto the table. Dan-Ma gripped his makeshift knife at the noise, ready to swing, before realizing it was his

food. Dan-Ma absentmindedly handed over a few coins to the man while he kept his eyes on the robed figure. He reminded himself to breathe. He had food to eat and his tail wasn't likely to attack him in such a public place. Regardless, Dan-Ma kept his pottery shard up his sleeve while he ate. Although war had not been felt in this city for as long as memory went, violence such as back alley robberies were still very much a reality, and Dan-Ma couldn't think of another reason the figure would follow him. If they were someone seeking advice from him and his order, then why would they be trying to hide themselves? Robbing a devotee was a bold move indeed, but not an unthinkable one.

A settledness came over Dan-Ma as he got up from eating his meal. He bowed towards the bar and his host, before exiting. Following suit, the robed figure got up at nearly the same time. If he was going to get robbed, at least there would be an outlet for his anger.

Dan-Ma left the alehouse and walked quickly down the street, turning sharply onto another road before his shadower had barely cleared the doorway. Dan-Ma kept at this, speeding up and slowing down, quickly entering shops and leaving them. Every time, he could feel his pursuer growing more desperate as they were forced to run, before having to stop and find Dan-Ma amidst the crowd again. They started to shove more people aside as they grew more desperate in the chase. Eventually, Dan-Ma moved to the edge of the road where an alley met the main street and stood there for a moment looking for the oversized black hood. Halfway through his scan of the crowd, his eyes fell into the deep hole of that hood. The hood looked directly at Dan-Ma as one big, black eye and he felt the hair on his arms stand up. The shadow staring at him was too large to hide just a single human head, but was instead wide enough for two to sit side by side. Dan-Ma ducked himself into the alley, unsettled but knowing the figure had seen his invitation.

The ambient noise of the city died away almost instantly inside the alley. With it, the sky disappeared, squeezed closed by the overhang of the two buildings beside Dan-Ma. With one more turn, even further away from the main street, Dan-Ma pushed his back into the wall. The two buildings on either side of the alley made an L shape, with Dan-Ma hiding on the back wall of one building. Dan-Ma wasn't sure what the buildings were on the inside, but the crates of fish and other meat scattered in piles of three or four suggested some possibilities. In such a deafened place, boots on stone were easy to make out. Dan-Ma waited as the soft clomp of his pursuer came closer. When Dan-Ma could see the cloth edge of the figure's robes around the corner, he let his anger loose. He spun out from behind the turn, grabbing the collar of the figure's robes and pushing him up against the wall that made the bottom of the L. The robes molded more like clay than cloth around Dan-Ma's fingers, before he slipped his ceramic knife out of his sleeve.

"Why the hell are you following me?" Dan-Ma growled. His left hand

held his staff and he jammed it into the hips of the figure while his makeshift knife was brought up to the throat. But before the so-thought mugger could let out a surprised yelp, Dan-Ma saw what was underneath his hood. A flower, with hundreds of white petals surrounding a yellow yolk hid in the center of the hood. It was a daisy, like the ones you could find growing in the cracks of the streets, but fifty times as beautiful. Each of the hundred petals was half the width of a hand and each was run through with a vibrant streak of purple as if stabbed with a spear of lightning. In a mix of anger and surprise, Dan-Ma tore the hood off of the god with his knife hand.

"I just have questions to ask!" Lasseihr said, his voice coming vaguely from the center of the flower. Dan-Ma's grip slipped. Here, a god. One of the Fae he preached about that very morning. The devotees were not particularly religious, focusing on scholarly pursuits and philosophy rather than religion, though the two intersected intimately. Regardless, to see one of the Eight Fae walk down a mud-covered alley was a baffling experience, religious or not. Dan-Ma dropped his pottery shard.

"Lasseihr of Godfae, Bounding Embarrassment to Satisfaction." Dan-Ma himself flushed at his ramblings. One moment of shock and he reverted to spewing out facts a three-year-old would know. Regaining himself a bit, Dan-Ma said, "Or at least an imposter of him." And lunged.

The god pulled a sword out from under his robes—an iron rose thorn, flattened and sharpened. This was all the detail Dan-Ma saw before he parried out of the way with his staff. Dan-Ma recovered and closed the little space left between them. He put his hand on the petals of the god and ripped his hand upwards, as if trying to remove a mask. Lasseihr roared. The god swung his sword, trying to land a hit with the flat of his blade, and Dan-Ma took a hasty step backward. His handful of petals fluttered to the ground. As Lasseihr rushed forward for another swing, Dan-Ma realized the full height of the god and his second backstep came up short. Dan-Ma grabbed onto the off-hand sleeve of the god before the flat of Lasseihr's sword into his side sent him falling. He slammed into the ground, but Lasseihr's sleeve was still in his hand. The unexpected tug had the god put all his weight on one foot. Before he could pull his arm back, Dan-Ma aimed one swift kick to the posted leg, and Lasseihr tumbled onto the street beside Dan-Ma. The two scrambled and wrestled on the ground, rolling until their bodies were stained with red dust and dirt. Their weapons, forgotten the moment they hit the ground, were flung further down the alley



as they grappled. Lasseihr managed to get on top of Dan-Ma, and blows from spindly arms rained down on Dan-Ma, as solid as his own oak staff.

As Lasseihr punched, the sleeves of the robes flew up, showing pale green muscles woven out of plant fibers stretched taut. Each cord branched into a dozen smaller ones, which again branched and were interwoven, making a seamless flow. As the arm moved up, gaps in the weave appeared as it was compressed, showing white bone underneath. Dan-Ma, distracted, got punched hard in the nose by the god's gloved fist. The second blow aimed at his nose Dan-Ma dodged and found an opening. He braced his arms against the ground and sent his foot into Lasseihr's pelvis. The force to one side of Lasseihr's body sent him skidding back with a twist. In the small space of freedom created, Dan-Ma sprang to his feet.

"WAIT!" Dan-Ma bellowed, his palm outstretched to the god on the floor in a warding gesture. Lasseihr glared up at him, and yes, it was a glare. Though there was no facial expression to read, Dan-Ma felt the god's anger hiss in the surrounding air. Steadying himself further, Dan-Ma continued, "I believe that you are Lasseihr—" The admittance felt strange to Dan-Ma, and he paused as he repeated his first question, "Why have you been following me?" That notion was even stranger. Why would one of the gods, even one of the unimportant ones, care about Dan-Ma? This thought flared the anger that was still inside Dan-Ma. The gods had never cared about him before, not before his wife died and he was still Dan-Maelisa, not before he had lost himself in the mess they called life. Before his anger could go any further, Lasseihr responded.

"You're a holy teacher and a scholar. You teach about what life means. Why it is important, and—and I need to know that." The anger of the god that had run so hot moments before bled into ... embarrassment? "By the Lilies of Hell, I hate being honest. Your sermon this morning. It was different from the others, and I wanted to get more explanations from you." It surprised Dan-Ma to hear the god speaking in such a human way, cursing and being awkward. In the stories, the gods either spoke in cryptic poems or in philosophical jargon, and the only humans who would talk like that were scholars trying desperately to feign intelligence.

"You bound the Humors of Embarrassment and Satisfaction. Why do you need to know anything about life as a whole? Leave that up to Hadàvie." Dan-Ma responded in a tone that was probably too insensitive to address a god in.

"Hadàvie hasn't been—" Before Lasseihr could finish, a jumble of tumbling sounds came from a stack of barrels and boxes at the corner of the alley. From behind them spilled out a grinning woman with wide teeth. Her teeth were stained the same red as the stone of Hada-Mahada.

"Damnations!" Dan-Ma cursed. "Another one of you following me, and a Duster at that." For as long as religion existed, so had zealots. The woman pushed herself up off the floor, not bothering to dust off her large sleeves and instead rubbing some of the dust into her teeth before speaking.

"That is not a very nice name for us, though you devoteés have never exalted us 'Dusters.'" The women spoke sharply, like the broken edge of a pretty plate. Although she smiled, there was a gruffness that rivaled that of Dan-Ma. The woman turned to address Lasseihr, who was standing looking as surprised as a flower could. "I saw you moving through the city. I wanted the chance to meet one of the Eight Fae in person, Lasseihr of Godfae." When she got to the name of the god, she kneeled by slamming her leg into the ground with a sickening crunch.

"Oh, well. You have found me. May you be blessed as you travel through the Divine Humors in your life," Lasseihr said, surprised, but putting on an air of godliness more in line with the stories.

"Thank you, my lord. But, forgive my eavesdropping, my lord. Surely you hadn't come to Hada-Mahada to learn from a scholar? You gods are the highest among high intellectuals." Her voice sounded strained in its sweetness, and Dan-Ma grew tense.

"Perhaps ... it is a good thing that a god needs to seek help. Everybody needs help, even us sometimes." Lasseihr grew in confidence as he spoke. Too much confidence.

"Lasseihr, be careful with what you say ...." Dan-Ma said in a deep voice. "These Dusters don't like their image of the gods to be one that changes."

The woman looked at Dan-Ma and said plainly, "I don't like you devoteá . I would much rather be alone with my god. So that I, not you, may help him," she ended sweetly, before her smile widened. With a sudden leap, she was off the ground and flying towards Dan-Ma with a fire-hardened stake in hand. The sharpened wooden point missed Dan-Ma's throat by the width of a finger as he stepped to the side. Flipping the stake around with a quick toss, she smacked Dan-Ma across the cheek with a lump of knotted and gnarly wood. Dan-Ma staggered back, tasting blood, and the woman moved her attack to Lasseihr. She moved in fluid motions, expertly placing herself between Lasseihr and his discarded sword, before charging. Lasseihr ducked under her stab, popping back up and placing a leather boot right under her ribs. As she flew away from Lasseihr, Dan-Ma regained himself. The devoteá ran to pick up his staff, and then dove for the nail-like sword of the god.

"Lasseihr!" Dan-Ma shouted and tossed the sword over the woman to Lasseihr, who caught it. The woman had taken almost no time to recover from the kick, fluidly getting back to her feet. She was no ordinary Duster. Even with a sword and staff surrounding the woman, Dan-Ma took tense steps back and forth. He needed to make sure he ended this fight quickly.

**"Perhaps ... it is a good thing that a god needs to seek help. Everybody needs help, even us sometimes."**

Placing his hand at the bottom of his staff, he enclosed one piece of pottery, placed on an arch ready to break. It crumbled under his grasp as he clamped his hand tight and the weight of ancientness left the hundred-year-old artifact. The Stillness, which had its home in the ceramic, was violently displaced and looking for direction. Centering himself, Dan-Ma provided that direction and ignited the rushing Stillness, bringing it into the physical world. The end of his staff burst into bright white starlight and he swung it in near-perfect, well-practiced arcs. Trailing the staff, in the vacuum the Stillness left, rushed dark red and black smoke. The smile finally faded from the woman's face, hiding her red teeth. Sparing only that moment, she hardened her expression and engaged with him. Dan-Ma's swings were slow as he tried to remember the flow he had drilled into himself. Dan-Ma tried one swing, then jerked the staff against its own momentum, keeping the light at the tip of his staff from intersecting the smoke that trailed it. Dan-Ma cursed. The woman took advantage of the dust on Dan-Ma's training and got close to him. She slid her stake down the staff and jabbed it into the hand farthest from the light. With the pain, Dan-Ma reeled his hand back, allowing the woman to pivot the staff around Dan-Ma's other hand and hitting him in the head with his staff and the Stillness.

An overpowering sense of agelessness came over Dan-Ma. The Stillness was the force of the unchanging mountain, the force of unbreakable iron and ancientness itself, and Dan-Ma was one with it. Even with his scholarly training to defend against this feeling, there was little he could do. He was vaguely aware of Lassiehr standing frozen while the woman stabbed relentlessly at Dan-Ma's body. He felt none of it, for what could a sharpened stick do to the mountain? Time had no meaning in this state, and Dan-Ma could not say when he was finally pulled out of it.

When Dan-Ma gained awareness again, the woman, Lassiehr, and his staff were gone. A trail of wet blood led away from the alley. The stake remained jabbed into Dan-Ma's ribs. One issue with Stillness was that it was hard to tell when your prey was truly dead, Dan-Ma thought to himself. It was as close to a joke as he could manage. With a growl, Dan-Ma got up to continue the fight the woman thought had been finished.

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**LASSIEHR'S FACE WAS STILL** covered by the sack when his captor snapped her head away from him. The sack didn't blind Lassiehr as it would a human, but the heavy chains around his wrists, binding him to a large wooden pole, held him as firmly as it would any prisoner. He was inside a cavern carved out of one of the cliffs in the heart of Hada-Mahada. It was a large room, mostly empty, with a set of short stone stairs that led to a platform on which Lassiehr was bound. The woman from the alley was barking orders down at two other people.

"How did he get past the others? Nevermind, bar the door. Don't let him in!" she said. Had the devoteá come for him? Lassiehr thought to

himself. As if in response, the wooden door swung open. Bloody and tattered, Dan-Ma stepped into the large room. The wooden stake he held was covered in blood, his or others'.

"You took my god from me. I want him back," Dan-Ma said. The two other people, a woman with a bow and a man with a long thick cord tied tightly to a hammer head, stood in a tight line. The man in the front stood with shoulders slumped in a low, swaying guard and the woman kept close behind. The man suddenly stopped his swaying to drop a lock on the ground. He swung his hammer up and in a ritual motion, he cracked the hammer down on the lock. A moment later, light burst from the hammerhead and he swung it with black smoke trailing.

Dan-Ma cursed as the pair, trained to fight together using Impulse, backed away from Dan-Ma. Keeping their distance, as he tried to close it, the hammer-wielding man wove a dense net of the smoke, never letting it touch the light. When he was done, he ducked down and the woman behind him released three arrows at Dan-Ma. They whistled in the air for a second before hitting the wall of smoke. With a resounding boom, they blurred across the hall. The arrows shattered as they hit the opposite stone wall. Dan-Ma tried to get close before another net could be made, but the man swung his hammer in a large arc to ward him away. If Dan-Ma could ever get close enough to strike, he would need that strike to end the fight.

"Devoteá, come to me! Now!" Lassiehr shouted. Dan-Ma, blessedly, didn't question and began to dart towards the god as another set of arrows cracked the air. The woman from the alley tried to stop Dan-Ma. With an inelegant charge of his shoulders, he was able to knock her off the small set of stairs and rush beside Lassiehr, looking down on their three attackers. If Dan-Ma needed something old to ignite, Lassiehr would give it. Lassiehr ripped his arm forward. The chain strained, but he only pushed harder. The god's wrist snapped with a crack and a yell of pain. The bones of a god were indeed an old thing, and far older than a piece of pottery.

Dan-Ma's eyes widened in understanding and flung out his hand towards the god—whether as an act of preservation or magical instinct, Dan-Ma didn't know. The man reached into the realm of mountains and gods, the realm of all things unchanging, and felt it around his fist. He tugged in his mind, trying to pull the force into the physical. Straining, he focused himself, calming his core to become a perfect host. He pulled and the Stillness stayed. Once more, he pulled, harder than he ever had before and in the moment after, the immaterial tore into the world. The shadows living in the dim cave had no chance to run as they were disintegrated by the blinding star light that burst into the room, emanating from the raised platform.

Dan-Ma stood in a maelstrom of light and smoke, and he was the center of it. The man who had rotted with false grief, missing his wife until real loss had nearly destroyed him stood, holding the might of a god in his hand. The might of a god ... who had mangled himself to give this



power. The gods had abandoned Dan-Ma, he couldn't let go of that, and yet, Lassiehr had come to him with such a human need. A god had come to learn, to ask questions and push back the unknown. Dan-Ma slowly pushed his hand towards the wood stake trying to link the massive power to its tip. He didn't know how his life would change by becoming entangled with the affairs of a god, but he decided then that if Lassiehr was in pursuit of the human experience, he would help him find that.

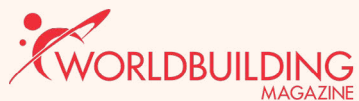
Dan-Ma's hand reached the tip of his staff and he linked the Stillness to it. His training, now fully awake, moved his body into a low stance. Dan-Ma leapt off the platform, stake raised above his head as he arced, and the world became his.

### LOOKING FOR SOME INSPIRATION?

#worldbuilding-wednesday

- 1 How have religious or political schisms dramatically changed history in your world?
- 2 Tell me about rituals in your world. What are they for? Are they literal or symbolic?
- 3 Tell me about important symbols in your world. What do they represent? Who uses them, and for what reason?

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# FORBIDDEN LORE:

Why

is

knowledge  
power?

BY KELLER O'LEARY

## ARE YOU KEEPING ANY SECRETS IN YOUR LIFE RIGHT NOW?

Throughout our lives, we often gain access to privileged and sensitive information. There is usually no inherent harm in knowing a secret, but the mere act of harboring this intimate knowledge often arms us with a delicate and unique power.

If this secret were to come out, what would happen to those who are affected by it? What would change in your life because of it?

You don't merely possess a piece of knowledge, you have the power to affect the world around you by choosing when or where to unleash this information.

While some of you scandalous readers may be coveting some par-

ticularly shocking secrets, chances are none could devastate an entire world, unlike the types of secret knowledge that we frequently find in fiction.

For the fictional worlds that live and breathe, chances are that this privileged knowledge, or **Forbidden Lore**, can elicit profound changes to their people, their ways of life, and even the cosmos. If knowledge is considered a type of power, then access to Forbidden Lore is a power in a class all by itself.

## WHAT IS FORBIDDEN LORE?

Forbidden Lore is a worldbuilding technique that is frequently utilized as a storytelling element, and because of its precarious position in between those two categories, it is often improperly classified, especially given its applications in nearly every genre. It would be reductive to consider this type of privileged (and dangerous) information as general knowledge, as that only partially encompasses the concept we seek to explore. General knowledge, for example, can be defined as:

"The fact or condition of knowing something with familiarity gained through experience or association."<sup>1</sup>

As succinct as this definition may be, it does not necessarily imply the potential for great change that underlies our concept of Forbidden Lore. So, we must look deeper to find a sufficient definition for this phenomenon.

Others have offered their own interpretations of what forbidden knowledge may be—at least in the

**"Forbidden Lore is intentionally obscured knowledge with the potential to assert lasting influence over a world through various methods."**

real world. Joanna Kempner, et al.,<sup>2</sup> have expressed their thoughts on the matter as follows:

"Knowledge may be forbidden because it can only be obtained through unacceptable means ... [or] knowledge may be considered too dangerous ... and knowledge may be prohibited by religious, moral, or secular authority."<sup>3</sup>

While this definition refers to the topic of general knowledge, it falls

short due to its narrow application of real-world information. Our concerns are solely focused on fictional or narrative-driven information and how that lore fits into the larger story world. Rather than real-world forbidden knowledge, we are instead looking to define the idea of Forbidden Lore. We can posit this concept as follows:

"Forbidden Lore is intentionally obscured knowledge with the potential to assert lasting influence over a world through various methods."

Forbidden Lore has two main differences from general knowledge: (1) it is intentionally obscured and (2) it has a perceived and inherent potential for influence. The second necessitates the first—Forbidden Lore is only considered forbidden and is obscured because of its perceived and inherent influence

over an existing paradigm. No matter the method of obscurement, those with knowledge of Forbidden Lore are driven to keep this information from falling into the hands of those for whom it is not intended.

The originators of Forbidden Lore do not have to impose a stance on the morality of its knowledge, but any coveting of this information depicts it as dangerous enough to

create some form of radical change in the world around it. Whether or not the applied use of this Forbidden Lore is morally good or bad is something that may further be explored in a narrative, but is not something inherent to its nature.

Forbidden Lore can be utilized as a force of good or evil, or it might not even serve either side of the moral dichotomy. Its morality depends on the wielder of its power and how they choose to harness the Forbidden Lore. Some benevolent information can be obtained through atrocious sources, and simple, innocuous truths can lead to sinister enlightenment. As an author, you can use your own discretion to determine the origin and impact of the Forbidden Lore and determine if you wish to explore its moral implications.

While many might compare this type of knowledge to the popular concept of “dark arts,” there is no obligation for Forbidden Lore to contain any similarly associated magical properties. As we will go on to discuss, there are numerous formats in which Forbidden Lore can manifest, and these can range from world-shattering cosmic truths down to the unintentional deconstruction of social structures.

While the information itself does not have to be inherently harmful in nature, its applications in a setting or story must lead to a shift in the existing power structures or systems that are considered firm

and resolute. In this way, Forbidden Lore can be considered a catalyst for radical change; its potential for disruption can pose an inherent risk to individuals or institutions, depending on its proximity to them or the breadth of its power.

### THE ORIGINS OF TRUTH

The strength granted by wielding Forbidden Lore cannot be discussed without considering its origins. Where does its power come from, anyway?

If knowledge is, or has been, intentionally hidden, that implies there was at some point an incentive to obscure or restrict access to it. Why would somebody want to hide the information in the first place?

Perhaps fear of its potential strength or the knowledge’s misuse at the hands of an untrusted source is the cause. If this was general knowledge, then it would have been made accessible or canonized through the traditions of passing down knowledge in a group’s respected preference: oral, written, or any other methods used to impart information. Mundane information, like cobbler techniques or daily rites, would not require obscurement, but Forbidden Lore would be guarded at a level appropriate to its known power.

The preservation of this knowledge does not inherently mean that its originators meant for it to be accessed or that there are any spe-

cific methods to access it. A secret is not meant to be shared, and yet it is often the case that in trying to bury the knowledge gained from a secret, its contents endure. It is possible for some knowledge, or forms thereof, to be indestructible, no matter how universal the desire to destroy it.

### STRENGTH IN SECRETS

If a group or an individual gains access to this information, what then?

When Forbidden Lore is accessed by a group not meant to have it, clear shifts occur in the existing balance of power. Access to intentionally obscured information should, at the very least, have some obvious impact on either the narrative being told or the existing systems of power between factions or individuals in the world.

Accessing Forbidden Lore may offer the protagonists of a world the chance for a paradigm shift, where closely guarded secrets could be the last step in a coup against a ruling class. Alternatively, an antagonist may simply be using the lore to dispose of the pesky protagonists once and for all. A character of ambivalent alignment may instead unearth a tome of destructive spells from a lost pantheon, leading to a potential apocalypse. The range of power and strength gained can vary greatly, but any society or individual has the capacity to conceal information; and despite any dormancy,

Forbidden Lore’s effectiveness can echo through generations.

The strength provided by Forbidden Lore can exist in whatever medium your world allows. Forbidden Lore can be used through a magical conduit, like in a series of magical phrases cast ritually through candles and chalk lines, or

it can be instructions for building a hyper-advanced computer from intricate lines of forgotten code. It does not have to be a medium for power, but it should be a catalyst for accessing power or exerting an influence that would be otherwise restricted.

# FORMS OF FORBIDDEN LORE

### DANGEROUS KNOWLEDGE

For low- or non-magic settings, there are countless ways that Forbidden Lore can be used as an impetus for change. Just look at our own world’s history of intentionally obscure knowledge. The destructive power of 7th-century Greek fire and the burning of agricultural and medical texts under the Qin Shi Huang dynasty are just two examples of knowledge removed due to its perceived danger.<sup>4</sup>

The morality of these innovations can certainly be disputed at length, but the fact is that progress was intentionally obscured to remove the radical impact they might hold on their region’s future. Moral judgment does not have to be given when obscuring or uncovering the Forbidden Lore, but adding a reactionary stance by figures of power can allow for further nuance to be explored in the narrative.

### THE POWER OF A TRUE NAME

While you may easily know and learn the names of your family, friends, and others in your life, chances are that you have not yet learned their True Name.

A True Name is a concept that stretches across ancient mythologies and religions, and it deals with a deeper and more complex understanding of a person or creature’s existence. One of the earliest depictions of a name giving power, and the lengths to which one will go to steal it, occurred between the gods Ra and Isis in Egyptian mythology.

In ancient Egyptian culture, there existed an innate link between somebody’s name and their sovereignty, personhood, and agency. As Nicholaus Pumphrey states, “Ancient Egypt believed the name could be used to invoke the power of the figure that held it; therefore, a human could control a god by using the god’s true name.”<sup>5</sup> The goddess Isis devised a scheme to

trick the sun god Ra into telling her his true name, something she planned on using to claim his powers for her own.

A name is intrinsic to the nature of mortals and gods alike; a name donned by a ruler that references strength makes them strong, and parents who wish fortune and bounty upon their offspring can give them names that allude to a life of prosperity and will it into fruition.

But, if another is to learn that true name—the essence of who a person is—they have potentially gained the power to impose their own will over them, to whatever ends they may seek.

A True Name can even appear or become a prominent focus in a modern story, as the age of digital identities has disconnected online personas from the users who stand masked behind them. If you're hiding your identity through a screen name, and a hacker or a troll becomes aware of your true identity, what effects could that have on your real life?

What might your antagonist do with the true name of your protagonist or vice versa? How would your characters protect their true names from being usurped or seek out another's true name?

## SOCIAL STRATEGIES

Social espionage and political scheming often utilize and deal with Forbidden Lore as power ebbs and flows between warring factions.

In the case of blackmail, politics, or general chicanery, Forbidden Lore can radically shift a delicate balance of social power. The mere possibility of unleashing concealed knowledge to the public has the potential to influence a person's status or standing in society, for better or worse. Controlling Forbidden Lore is hence a focal point for social intrigue, as its potential release could elicit profound changes to how a society may operate.

A major plot point in the first season of *Game of Thrones* (or *A Song of Ice and Fire* for the readers) was the true parentage of Cersei Lannister's and Robert Baratheon's blonde-haired children, a quality only attributed to those with strong Lannister genes. Ned Stark learns this hidden truth and knows that it was responsible for the death of his ally Jon Arryn, among other mishaps. He decides to reveal his knowledge to Cersei in the hope of saving her and her children's lives. His choice proves to be a mistake, however, and his confession of this knowledge only brings him an untimely end.

Forbidden Lore's failed potential to effect change in this previous example is not due to a failure of the information, but rather in how it was utilized. While Ned's character forced him to act honorably and justly, he did not account for his supposed allies' potential betrayal. Rather than admit this knowledge to those who would be ruined by it, a more politically nuanced character may have subtly used this information to their advantage—kingdoms may rise and fall on the power of a secret.

Likewise, in the second season of the show *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, the Avatar group (Aang, Sokka, Katara, and Toph) come across an ancient library hidden in the sands of a desert. The library holds countless books and tomes of lost information that can aid their ongoing quest to defeat the Fire Nation. By using its massive sundial to find the "darkest day in the Fire Nation's history," they uncover the intentionally obscured knowledge that there is an upcoming solar eclipse and go on to weaponize this information by planning an attack on the leader of the Fire Nation. While their plan is unsuccessful in the end—due to the Fire Nation discovering their intentions—their decision to access this restricted well of knowledge in the desert certainly produces a meaningful narrative change.

Further secrets are unearthed in both of these acclaimed series and as Forbidden Lore carries with it a power to produce meaningful changes in a world, that power becomes necessary to measure and be handled by those who truly know how to use it. Careless usage can lead to catastrophe, no matter the setting or power given by the knowledge.



## CORRUPTING KNOWLEDGE

Contrary to any notion that Forbidden Lore is *only beneficial* to the individual(s) with access to it, many examples of Forbidden Lore can be equally corruptive. The individual who learns of it will suffer drawbacks, most notably in the form of curses or physical and mental deterioration. This type of Forbidden Lore is most commonly utilized in horror or dark fantasy settings but can be applied in any relevant setting.

Throughout the cosmic horror mythos of H.P. Lovecraft and other authors, characters are frequently scarred and traumatized by simply learning about ancient and hidden truths of the universe, most often in the forms of entropic elder creatures and gods that are irreconcilable to human perception. This knowledge may require a strong mind or body to

wield it, but any strength usually withers away as the cost of knowledge bears its weight upon the decaying psyche.

While this type of forbidden knowledge exists in a more self-destructive capacity, it ultimately falls neatly within our established parameters for Forbidden Lore. Between the frailty of the jovial human mind and the mental faculties of the elder gods capable of bearing this corrupting knowledge, having existed and developed for untold eons, there are innumerable differences. Oftentimes, the focus of a human group is to conceal this information to protect society as a whole from its effects; or, it is the pursuit of a cult to inflict this poisonous knowledge onto others.

## CREATING YOUR OWN LORE

So far, we've introduced Forbidden Lore and fortified our concept with proven examples from media sources and mythological analogs. The examples of true names, social manipulation, and corrupting knowledge are not meant to be exhaustive. You can and should, however, freely compare and contrast these methods with any currently utilized in your world, and it would be beneficial to more closely analyze the power structures that could potentially be affected by the influence of Forbidden Lore.

If you would like some exercises with developing Forbidden Lore in your world, consider answering these questions.

- Is there any knowledge that is restricted to one group in your setting? Why do only they have it, and what would happen if others learned about it?
- Who is most likely to weaponize information in your world?
- Are there any groups that actively participate in blackmail? Is there a royal family whose secrets may be leveraged for power to another group?
- What kind of truth-seekers exist in your world, and why do they seek this path of knowledge?
- What secrets have been lost to time, and how can they be found today?
- What groups are devoted to protecting the world from tempting knowledge?
- Has a mortal ever wielded the power of a god through forbidden tomes?
- What's the worst secret floating around in your world, and what would happen if it got out?
- What are some texts that have been lost to time that people still look for today? What gives them significance?

### ENDNOTES

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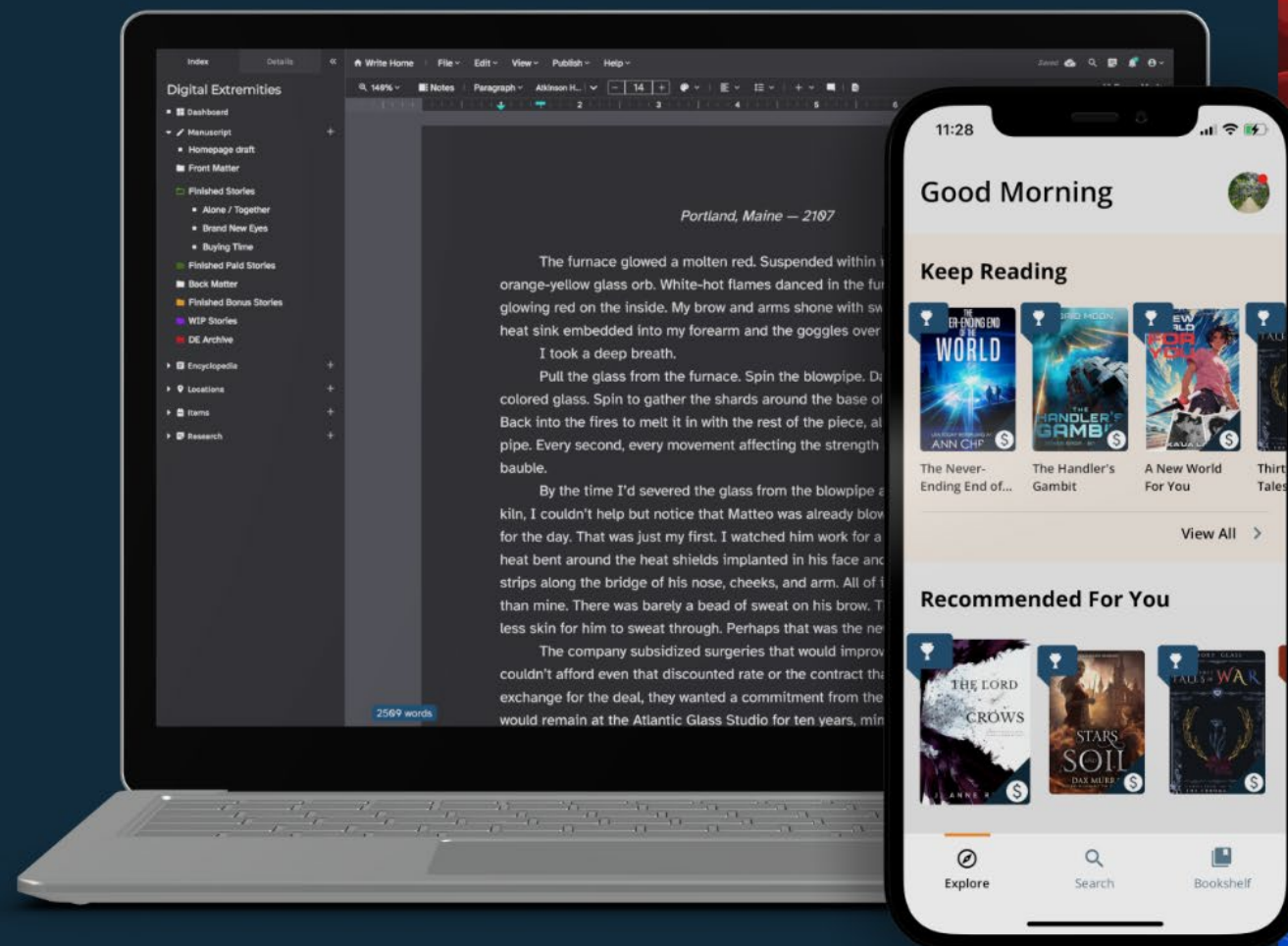
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# THE PITSTOP

*A helping hand, granted warmth.*

BY MANNY MINAYA



HE WAS A JUMI, one of those wonderful creatures living on the edge of heaven where the road snaked past the gates into paradise. A place that teemed with gems growing out of mineral deposits and the niches of nature. Jumis were born with one of these gems somewhere on their bodies, which gave them magickal abilities found nowhere else.

Like everyone else, unchecked emotions and the harsh realities of life afflicted Jumis. Like everyone else, their hearts would eventually break or their bodies would lose the will to continue. But unlike everyone else, Jumis were a proud and secluded people, their culture and traditions encouraging them to help one another instead of seeking comfort outside their communities.

She wasn't like anyone else. She had come in the eye of a snowstorm. She ambled down the road, clutching her overcoat to protect herself from the biting wind. A ghastly howl swallowed all other noise. Visibility was dangerously low to be traveling, but Rregulle remembered how the baby blue gem on her forehead cut through the white like a determined lighthouse as she approached the garage with the humble café attached.

Only her face managed to be untouched by it and if she would have gotten there just ten minutes later, she would have died.

It had been past close of business, and the crew had already settled down for the staff dinner. They whipped into gear when she arrived. The garage, having been cleaned and organized for the next day, transformed into a disarray of tools and urgent bodies.

They cleared a long tool table and laid the Jumi on it. Aaruel and Yammie—the barkeep and receptionist, respectively—asked the men to turn their backs as they removed the Jumi's clothing and threw it into an incinerator. Once the Jumi had been covered by a blanket, Rregulle and José, his assistant, were able to properly inspect the damage.

He had never met one before, but stories of the Gemmed Ones resonated across the land. Humans, or something similar, their affinities for the natural world manifested in the form of colored gems. Sociologists speculated that the gems had something to do with the elements until the Jumis made contact with the rest of the world and explained they did not know such restrictions. The Gemmed Ones simply “were one” with nature. That’s it. Whatever one wanted to do with their gem was their choice, as long as they upheld expectations as to what nature should do for them.

The gem on the Jumi’s forehead pulsed in a diminishing light. As the pulsing slowed, so did the snowstorm outside.

“Did she conjure the storm?” José asked as he traced the tender flesh around the gem with gloved fingers.

“Maybe,” Rregulle muttered, exhausted after what had been a long day. He instructed Aaruel to boil a kettle of water for tea and Yammie to research whatever she could find on Jumis. Humanoid as she was, there might be something about their anatomy he had to watch for.

“How’s the rest of her faring?” Rregulle asked Yammie.

Yammie lifted the weighted blanket covering the Jumi’s feet. “The Frost is melting but not fast enough. We need to move.”

Rregulle nodded to José, the cue to begin the work.

Both men removed their work gloves. In unison, they approached an apparatus behind the two auto lifts, recently wiped of any dust, oil, grease, and sweat. It featured two long cables, their ends splitting into three flexible wires with pads. Rregulle and José removed them from their hanging posts.

“Clear?” Rregulle asked Yammie.

Yammie was scrolling through a research paper on the garage’s computer. “One second ... Okay, it says something about how the gems are fragile and if it cracks, it could possibly kill them. Just make sure the pads aren’t near the gem. Put them right on her temples or else you’ll cause the gem to go haywire.”

The men did so. Yammie rushed to the apparatus’ terminal. It sparked awake into a fuzzy picture. She typed madly at the keyboard, referencing the computer to see what the right coding to a Jumi’s memory was.

“Damn it, what the—” Yammie seethed.

“Easy, breathe. You won’t help her by getting frustrated,” Rregulle instructed. Yammie was still fresh to the job, but she showed promise with her ability to code her way into a person’s mind in search of their fondest memories. She had even created her own presets to speed up the process; she found peoples memories all played back in a small range of wavelengths. A few button presses and she would be able to find exactly what the person needed.

Yammie slowed her typing. She stopped referencing the computer and allowed her mind to get lost in the Jumi’s world, in her coding. Images of vast places cycled on the screen in one-second spurts, a montage of a glis-

tening sea and exotic plants and Jumis dressed in ceremonial garb, their gems catching the sunlight. There was a lot of sun in the Jumi’s memories, of oases lined by palm trees, and a snaking river opening its lips to meet that shining sea, all from the Jumi’s perspective. Yammie wondered how this woman could know what a snowstorm was, what frost was, to have been nearly killed by it.

The scene passed like a split-second thought, the dark image contrasting all the sun and glitter of memories. Yammie stopped coding and rewound. An alleyway came into focus. A man stood in the foreground with his back to the Jumi. The way the man spread his arms out implied he had been protecting her from something.

Or someone. In the background, a slender hooded figure stood. The figure held a dagger in one hand and pliers in the other.

“Focus on that,” Rregulle said.

Yammie typed another line of code. The apparatus whirred, and the pads on the Jumi’s temples glowed, as did her gem.

“Please,” the Jumi groaned. Her eyes fluttered open to reveal a beautiful set of sky-blue pools. Three dots in a triangular formation surrounded her irises.

Rregulle took his eyes off the apparatus’ screen and observed the Jumi. He froze. It was as if the frost had slipped off of her and crept up his skin. He felt goosebumps. Those soft eyes, glistening from her tears, unlike anything he had ever seen before, captivated him.

José gave him a forceful push. “Snap out of it.”

Rregulle shook awake. A cluster of contradicting emotions washed over him. Feelings of love for this woman he had never met. Deep-rooted memories of his ex-wife, whose leaving him had led him to open this place in the middle of nowhere. He felt a long-lost happiness of basking in the sun—a far cry from the overcast skies that plagued this part of the world.

Yammie finished the line of code. The white noise of the one-second video cleared out to reveal the scene in full. Behind the hooded man, a crowd madly rushed in one direction. Dark splotches dotted the dirt road and chunks of sun-kissed bricks and debris had fallen all over.

“Jumi eyes are dangerous,” the hooded man on the screen said, as if he was in the room with them. “Lucky, unlucky, wise, spelling doom ....” The hooded man’s voice croaked. He brandished the knife. It gleamed in the sun. The flash of light shone on the apparatus’ screen, blinding the Jumi. A split second later, the hooded man was inches away from the Jumi’s protector.

“One-thousand gold coins for one Eye of Jumi,” the hooded man said. “And to think the streets of paradise teem with such treasures.” He stabbed the Jumi’s protector. The man slumped against the hooded man and fell face-first. With the same bloody knife, the hooded man extracted the gem from his victim’s forehead.

“Two-thousand. Let’s make it two Eyes.” A smile scratched the hooded

man's pallid face. He stepped over the dead Jumi's body towards the woman, who, on the table in the garage, fussed as if she was fighting him off.

On the apparatus' terminal, the crew saw her extend her hands forward, palms out. A gust of wind tunneled down the alleyway and kicked up dust, dirt, and an unseasonable amount of snow. The gem on the Jumi's forehead shone as she tossed and turned on the table. Rregulle and José pinned her down as snowflakes appeared on her palms and drifted down to the garage's concrete floor.

"¡Apágalo!" José shouted at Yammie.

A bang sounded off from one of the garage doors behind them. They turned to see a large dent caused by the gust of wind. A howl crescendoed, the eye of the snowstorm lingering above the garage ready to tear the roof apart to protect the Jumi.

"Not yet!" Yammie yelled back. She aimed to let the video play out, hoping to see what could have caused the frost to nearly consume this poor woman. Without that knowledge, they could not help her. They would need to travel into hell, witness pain and hurt and despair and turmoil to acknowledge it, then to name it, then to properly diagnose it. Rregulle was the one who taught them that those who run away from conflict never evolve, never learn, never become more than what their comfort zone nurtured them to be.

On the terminal, the Jumi ran with the crowd. People scrambled through the narrow streets of this unknown tropical paradise, their gems glistening like grains of sand in a rushing river. Around them—on the streets, on the roofs, behind them, in front of them—hooded figures picked them off with an assortment of weaponry.

It was then that the Jumi found herself bundled up in a snowstorm of her own doing, her thoughts attempting to come to terms with the eradication of her people, with the death of a man she spent cold nights and warm days with, an entire community washed away in an instant by the greed of those foreign figures. Within hours, those figures—learned soon after from a news broadcast to be opportunistic gem rushers from the southern country of Tréas—mined the Jumi's paradise into the bare earth. Veins of amethyst, diamonds, topaz, rubies, sapphires, emeralds, and the like were tapped dry from the bodies of the deceased. From a helicopter's camera, the desolate streets of the Jumi's paradise permeated the homes of those without much in life, who at least offered their sympathies and prayers to the unfortunate.

And the Jumi knew this would come. Laying on the table in the garage, surrounded by strangers soiled by oil and grease and the smell of fried food, she knew she was the last of her kind. This brought her an unbearable sadness which forced her eyes shut and pushed the tears out.

Rregulle wondered how one was to console this type of pain. Normally the patrons of their little pitstop dealt with more human concerns: heart breaks, financial losses, the death of a family member or loved one.

The crew never dealt with pain this deep.

The frost worsened. Rregulle and José quickly broke into a chant. They channeled their energies into a mantra to remind the Jumi of the beauties of life. But the Jumi had known beauty, had come from beauty, and so the mantra did nothing to keep the frost at bay.

The two men switched quickly from mantra to mantra, as many as they knew from years of consoling. One by one, the Jumi shot down any remembrance of life's graces. She muttered the name of a man, presumably the one who had tried to protect her. It was then that a tiny light broke through her fingers, held in a fist underneath the blanket.

Rregulle carefully pried open her hand to reveal a red-hot gem. It pulsed in rhythm with the gem on her forehead. It then occurred to Rregulle that everyone's trauma was different. The mantras and spells he had created over his years of service were designed for humans, people like him, who had worries and stresses in line with their reality. But reality sat at the core of a polygon with an infinite number of vertices, each point the perspective of infinite individuals.

A Jumi must be cured with what Jumis know best, Rregulle deduced. He ceased his chanting and plucked the gem from the dying Jumi's hand.

Aaruel nearly dropped the tray of tea when she spotted him doing so. "Stop! Don't touch that!" she yelled.

"Why not?" José asked. "Nothing else works."

She explained: a Jumi's gem was documented to have left irreparable damage to non-Jumis. The appropriation of it was dangerous, having killed many people who tried to do so. The crew would see that within the next few hours when the same news helicopter would show the disfigured bodies of the Tréas invaders.

At that moment, though, Rregulle did not heed Aaruel and suspected that finding another Jumi in that hell of a paradise would be impossible. "She will die," Rregulle said with calm certainty. "Yammie, how do I use this?"

"You're mad," Yammie called from over her shoulder as she coded frantically on the terminal in search for an alternative memory that could be used instead of Rregulle's self-righteous suicide. "There isn't a lot of research on the gems. Jumis are born with them and use them as naturally as one would breathe." She tapped the middle of her forehead. "The most spiritual in their societies are born with one on their third eye."

Surely, that wouldn't work, Rregulle thought. Humans were not in

**Normally the patrons of their little pitstop dealt with more human concerns: heart breaks, financial losses, the death of a family member or loved one. The crew never dealt with pain this deep.**



possession of such a sense, and Rregulle was not the most spiritual person. He believed in hard work. He did not observe a higher being but instead found answers in the things he could see and feel for himself. He believed in his father, whose hands toiled in the garage of Rregulle's childhood home, tinkering with automobiles and building wooden furniture from scratch. His father's hands were calloused, and Rregulle enjoyed watching the blisters form and heal ad-nauseam. The repetition of such a real thing presented him his faith early: that through one's own hands and hard work it was possible to create a comfortable reality. Whoever created the universe, he figured, might have spoken Their intentions into existence but it was Their hands which molded the earth, the heavens, and all the beautiful little things in between.

Rregulle looked down at his own hands, the ones he inherited from his father, the ones passed down through generations of cultivating the many reasons to live. His energy did not come from a gem like a Jumi's. Human energy came from any point in the body, wherever they chose to place it.

Rregulle pressed the red-hot gem onto the back of his left hand. This thoughtless action garnered a collective gasp from the crew. José would have tackled Rregulle if it wasn't for the long table between them. Yammie wasted no time in scrolling through the computer to see if there was a cure for such recklessness. Aaruel placed the tray down and rushed to Rregulle and held onto his arm. "Do you have a death wish?! Are you mad?!" she frantically yelled.

Rregulle gently removed Aaruel's clasped fingers from his arm, noticing the skin underneath his coverall had dried and cracked under her grasp. A chill rose up his arm, prompting him to remove the sleeve to reveal a thin layer of frost. Vapor rose into the air. Rregulle exhaled a cold breath. The cold from the raging snowstorm outside battered against the garage, seemingly feeling the frost building up between Rregulle and the Jumi. It wanted to be let in, to consume everyone inside in its despair. The frost traveling up Rregulle's arm quit its ascent at the shoulder as soon as the gem settled. A heat shot up his arm next, shocking him. When the heat settled, Rregulle felt an icy-hot sensation, like prickles underneath the skin.

Only then did he understand the Jumi's despair. A wave of memories crashed into the glen of his mind, drowning out the noise of the garage, the storm outside, the worried chatter of his crew. The sun-bleached streets of the Jumi's paradise entered his vision. The soothing sounds of water from the surrounding oases serenaded him. He turned. The Jumi met his—or whoever's memories he tapped—eyes.

Rregulle felt like he loved this woman. And she loved him back. And he felt all of the man's wishes and hopes and dreams and memories in the gem, perfect human worries and aspirations. He knew that although they lived in paradise, the contents of the male Jumi's mind were filled with things that would soil such an Eden, and that he had worked tirelessly to create a paradise for himself and his loved one.

He held the Jumi's hand and let the gem do the work. The memories faded away from Rregulle, and in the short-term he quickly forgot what he had just seen. The memories and warmth and reasons to live traveled along their interlaced fingers. The frost melted off the Jumi's body, starting from her soles and continuing up to the nape of her neck. The raging snowstorm outside simmered to a whimper, as did the Jumi, who no longer fussed or breathed raggedly. She slept. The apparatus' terminal shut off. Yammie flexed her fingers and tossed herself onto a rolling chair.

Rregulle carefully removed his hand from the Jumi's so as not to wake her and probed at the gem at the back of his left hand. It had not killed him. He was not a Jumi but the gem did not take his life as it had all those hooded figures. The frost on his arm remained, he found, though its cold had not, nor had the painful memories that were known to manifest when it afflicted people.

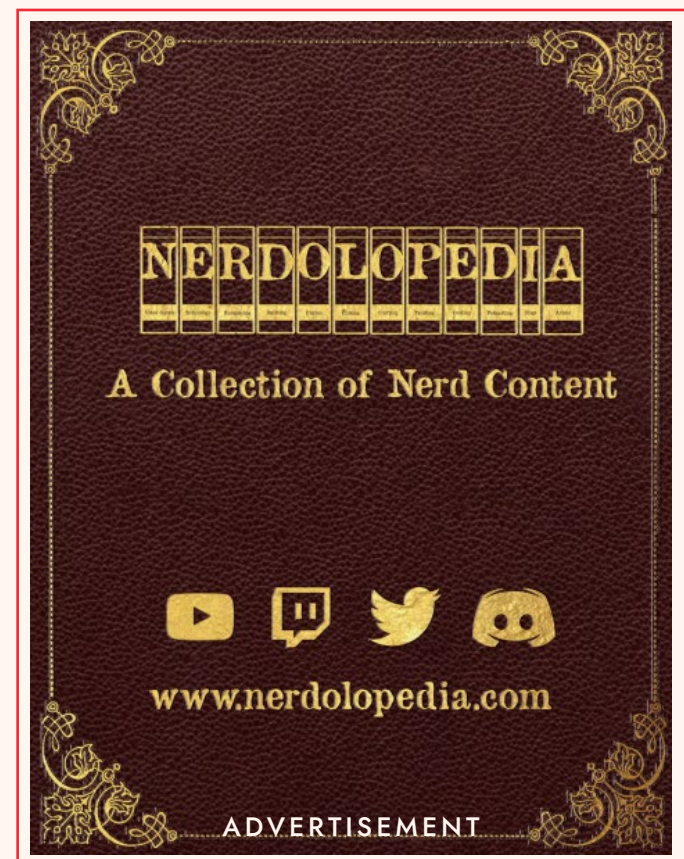
For three nights Rregulle braced himself for the worst of the frost on his arm. For four days the crew forced Rregulle to take time off to not scare the customers away. For three nights the Jumi slept in one of the rooms of the adjacent motel. Aaruel left the café in the care of José as she catered to the sleeping woman.

The Jumi awoke after closing on the fourth night, well after the crew had cleaned up, ate their staff dinner, and headed home. Rregulle ascended the stairs to his apartment above the café, carrying a warm tray of food. The Jumi stood in the middle of his living room, staring north out the window. The soft pink underbellies of the clouds on the horizon silhouetted her frail frame. She touched the windowpane. Her fingers gingerly slid off. She gripped the windowsill, ice spreading from her fingertips. The windowsill shattered under her grip, causing her to gasp and scramble to clean up her mess.

"It's ... it's fine, you don't ...." Rregulle started. This shocked the Jumi, who turned and profusely apologized and promised to pay him whatever for the damages.

Rregulle set the tray of dinner he made for himself down on the dresser by the door in conciliation. The Jumi stared at the food. Three days and three nights of sleeping made one hungry, he assumed, and she surely would need it more than him. Rregulle had figured her skin was pale because of the condition she had arrived in but as she voraciously ate and drank and her energy returned, he came to believe that it was her natural color. The Jumi was ice, in a way, the same white blue of frost.

"How are you feeling?" Rregulle asked.



“I’m better now,” the Jumi answered after she swallowed a mouthful. There was a serenity to her voice now that she wasn’t frantically sobbing or apologizing. It silenced all other noise around it. Low enough to demand people to listen, with a confidence that did not care if one chose to listen or not. “Again, I must apologize for troubling you and your staff. I thought I’d be wandering in that snowstorm until I collapsed.”

“You would have died from frost if you hadn’t come along. Please don’t apologize.” Rregulle paused. He contemplated whether he should break the news to her about the rest of her people.

She read it in his downcast eyes. She knew the Jumis’ time in paradise would come to an end, she said. The illusions cast around their city would be broken, and the world would force itself on them. But she was only one Jumi, and a pot maker at that, endlessly working on molding clay and earth. As a Jumi attuned to the earth, she heard the omen from the trembles of pebbles. She had seen the hooded figures in the waters of her finished pots. She felt the earth warm and tried to warn someone but again, who would listen to a lowly tradeswoman?

This shocked Rregulle, who questioned how she could be attuned to the earth if her gem was the color of ice. She had arrived in a snowstorm, he told her, and it raged the more pain she was in.

That’s when he noticed the cracks in her pale skin. A bronze hue spread over her. The color of tree trunks and stems and branches rode the dips and turns of her curly hair. The more she ate and drank, the more vibrant her natural colors became until the gem on her forehead turned topaz.

“How—?” Rregulle started.

The Jumi had been oblivious to her change. She gave him a tired chuckle when she noticed what had happened and gently explained, “We’re flexible people. Our gems and appearances change depending on the element we ... ‘feel’ I would say.”

“I should be the one to apologize then for your loss,” Rregulle said, thinking back to the snowstorm and how much pain she must have felt to conjure such a thing.

The Jumi hung her head and Rregulle noticed frost spreading from her fingers again. He reached out to grab her hand. The left sleeve of his jumpsuit rolled up as he did so, and the Jumi spotted the gem embedded on the back of his left hand. The frost left as quickly as it had come as she tightly clutched his hand. She kissed the gem once, rested her own gem on it, then kissed it again.

“I ... I had to use it to save you. If it was disrespectful for me to do so—”

The Jumi shook her head. “It chose you.”

“Pardon? I thought Jumis were born with gems.”

She shook her head again. “We are not. During childhood we undergo a ritual to determine our main element. Each gem is capable of flexibility, however. It changes depending on our moods or if we are in desperate situations and need another element to help us. It seems like for you, your

element is fire.”

“But I’m not a Jumi .... I should have died.”

The Jumi pushed Rregulle’s sleeve up to his elbows. She ran a finger across his blue, frosted skin. “The gems know. You’ve been through a lot of pain and so you needed it to save me. I’ve never heard of such a thing either.” It was then that Rregulle made to remove the gem from his hand to return it now that he was done with it.

“No,” the Jumi snapped. “Do *that* and you’ll die. The gem is the only thing keeping the frost back. Keep it.”

She rose from the bed and returned the tray of food to Rregulle with a bow. “Thank you for saving me and for the hospitality,” she said. She made for the door and down the stairs.

“Where are you going?” Rregulle said, chasing after her.

The Jumi turned at the bottom of the steps. “To find more of my own.”

“But they’re gone. The news reported it, the Jumis are gone. You’re the last one. Why don’t you stay with us? We can give you shelter, food, clothes, anything you need.”

The Jumi smiled at his ignorance, not expecting him or any other human to know that there were other Jumi towns, cities, societies situated in the far corners of the world. Heaven was all around them if they really searched for it, the Jumi thought, but humans were content in staying within the boundaries of what they could readily sense. She would search tirelessly, relying on the strength and flexibility of her gem to point her in the right direction.

The Jumi headed westbound towards the snow-capped mountain ranges scratching against the dark sky. It would take her a while to find the next Jumi town, but she would find it nestled in the valleys there. Then she would soon travel to the next town and the next until she reached a city by a silken sea. And Rregulle would never leave her mind. The thought of a stranger who risked his life to save her—who managed to use the gem of a Jumi without dying—kept her going. It gave her hope that perhaps not all humans were bad.

“Promise me you’ll use the gem with good intentions,” the Jumi had said before she left.

And since then, Rregulle never closed his garage doors. He figured there might come a day when someone like the Jumi, someone vastly different than himself, would come along and seek the same help. The gem had chosen him, granted him the element of fire and warmth to continue to combat the frost. He believed it to be his purpose and he would turn no one away at his doors.

# Using Artistic Movements to Inform Societies

BY TRISTEN FEKETE

**W**HEN DESIGNING THE intricacies of a society, few things tie a community together like art. The average person may not recognize it beyond a basic preference for the look of their surroundings or possessions. They might say they enjoy the style of one building in a block or one house on a road but not delve further than a cursory statement of “I like how angular it is” or, “It just stands out from the others.”

Artistic movements are often the cause of such statements. They pervade or reflect every aspect of a society; and, like the rings on a tree, they show hardship and evolution within.

## WHAT IS AN ART MOVEMENT?

“An art movement is a tendency or a style of art with a particularly specified objective and philosophy that is adopted and followed by a group of artists during a specific period ... ” and “ ... refers to when a large number of artists that are alive at the same time collectively adopt a certain, uniquely distinguishable form or style of art that can be held apart from contemporary styles and methods. This method then becomes immensely popular and goes on to define an entire generation of artists.”<sup>1</sup>

Art movements span back to the very out-

break of proper civilization, though modern art movements are defined to have begun in the mid-1800s. History’s earliest movements were established by a society’s ruler and its level of knowledge. Historians often identify ancient civilizations by the style of art created during their existence. For example, ancient Egyptian society today is broken down into eleven different eras, from Predynastic to the Roman Period, and each era can be differentiated by the types and styles of art from those times.<sup>2</sup>

This tendency to group historical eras by artistic movements follows all the way to the modern day but exploded in prevalence during the mid-19th century with the Realism movement. Since then, humanity has seen dozens of eras across the world, dubbed the “-isms” due to their nomenclature: Classicism, Impressionism, Cubism, Expressionism, Modernism, and more.

## STARTING A MOVEMENT

Art movements can be started by any number of changes in a society. Modern movements are typically rejections of their predecessors and their predecessor’s philosophies, but other origins range from cultural upheavals like the Renaissance, political changes, evolutions in science and thought, or reactions to changing social and economic landscapes.

Each movement starts slowly. One or two small artists bring a new idea or attitude to the world, make a few pieces, and display them somewhere. Other artists view the avant-garde work and find inspiration or agreement with its ideas, and the movement steamrolls from there. Art movements can last from a few weeks to a few decades depending on their popularity and the sustaining force of the sentiment which created them. New ideas are often the downfall of older ideas, so rather than harsh endings, most art movements silently dissolve into new ones, only to be resur-

rected decades later.

When creating a society and informing it with artistic movements, consider what was in place beforehand. You may be an all-powerful god of creation and destruction to your world, but allowing a society to develop organically—allowing the people of your world to react to the changes you make around them—will go miles towards how believable and sympathetically others view your work.

## CASE STUDY: FUTURISM

Futurism was a movement started in 1909 in Italy, brought to popularity by poet F.T. Marinetti. His *Declaration of Futurism* depicted aggravation over focusing on the past and an urge to embrace the energy of industry, the advent of automobiles, violence, and motion. Political influences are evident in the text, but Marinetti’s manifesto went on to inspire a small group of Italian artists, and later a breakaway group of Russian artists, to create work

You may be an all-powerful god of creation and destruction to your world, but allowing a society to develop organically—allowing the people of your world to react to the changes you make around them—will go miles towards how believable and sympathetically others view your work.

based on expressing motion and energy in all media.

Futurism's style ranges from heavily abstracted pieces bordering Cubism to collage-esque pieces depicting the same figure in multiple spaces over time. Futurist artists took clear inspiration from the Cubism, Expressionism, and Fauvism movements of neighboring France and Germany by adapting the abstractions they presented into work which glorified the changes in European society at the time. Umberto Boccioni's *Unique Forms of Continuity in Space* is a foremost example of the Futurist style, and his other work is just as captivating.

Futurism's first push lasted until the late 1920s when some of its members had died in World War I or moved on to different styles. Marinetti tried to adopt the movement into politics and was defeated, and the incoming Dada movement helped push Futurism out. It gained renewed strength with the introduction of aeropainting, and though the movement was considered extinct after Marinetti's death in the '40s, aeropainting continued through the 1980s.

Though small, the Futurist movement has been highly influential. It helped inspire the Art Deco and Dada movements, spawned a Neo-Futurism movement in the 1960s, and influenced a host of modern works.

## CREATING YOUR OWN MOVEMENT

### THE SPARK

Change necessitates change. Art movements are a direct response to change in your society, so the first step to creating one is to determine what that change is. A conflict may have started or ended, new technology was created which makes society rethink its place in the world or universe, or society is being rebuilt by an outside force. Choose a point in your timeline and loosely outline events happening before your point. Outlining the future is permissible but may make the rest of the creation process difficult.

Consider how this change affects your artists. Historically, the arts have never been the wealthiest professions, so their emotions tend to reflect the common people's. Societies where artists are in the upper echelons of influence will react differently. How does the change make your artists feel? Are they outraged at the actions of the few? Do they mourn their country's youth going to war? Are they fearful of new technology? Their emotions are what begets an art movement.

### GROWTH

Art movements are also tempered by their popularity and the means of communication available in your world. How much does the

movement resonate with the rest of society, and how far does someone have to go to see the art? Small movements only become large if their message can reach and provoke enough of the population. This doesn't necessarily mean telecommunications are required; empires and dynasties of old had cohesive art movements as well.

Now the hardest part: How is your art movement physically represented in the world? Remember to consider public reaction;

UNIQUE FORMS OF CONTINUITY IN SPACE  
BY UMBERTO BOCCIONI.



emotions are the basis of art. If people are rejecting a previous movement's ideals, keep in mind the subject matter may alter more than the art style itself. A society angered by the change will show it; they'll share propaganda against the change, demonize it, and focus on the old, more agreeable life before. A society accepting the change will push for their new lifestyles; they'll think ahead, consider the futures they'd have, and, in extreme cases, remove any reminders of the previous times.

### FOR WRITERS

Literary descriptions are easier to create, as a few adjectives are enough to evoke mental images in readers or listeners. When describing your movement, spend less time detailing how the art looks and more about how it makes viewers, or more specifically *your* viewers, feel.

"He passes an old, forgotten mural on the side of an overgrown building. A young woman's profile is surrounded by bright curves and bursts; hopeful of a time which never came. He used to know someone who looked like that. He puts the necklace with similar bursts away and the pain in his chest returns for a few minutes while he sits and eats beneath her comforting smile."

### FOR ARTISTS

Creating an art movement for visually inclined worldbuilders can be a much more daunting task when attempting to invent a new, never-before-imagined style of art. Take inspiration from previous styles, and don't shy away from stealing historical movements and changing their subject matters. If the religious power of your world drives the current movement to eradicate demons, go ahead and swipe Michaelangelo's Sistine Chapel fresco, swap the figures for demons, and add a couple of shining paladins amid the new black and red backgrounds.

If you find yourself unable to steal like an artist, you know what you got yourself into. Again, consider the emotions of the people. Angered brush strokes are quick, wide, and heavy with paint that splatters on the walls or canvases or sculptures. Fearful art is stylized and dramatic, it convinces a viewer the subject matter is in the wrong and will hurt them. High contrast, direct subject matter, and bold color choices bring the conflict to the viewer. Excited art is large and bright, motifs rise in these works and the artist's touch is light and careless.

### THE ENDING

Ending an art movement is just as important as starting one. Humans are remarkable at adapting to new situations, whether they bring pain or benefit. How long does your change last? If the effects on your society are short-lived, so too will the art movement. Enduring movements are the effect of powerful, lasting emotions and lasting change. A society's leader may enforce an art style for the duration of their reign, but that ends when they do. Art movements are not meant to last for centuries. Let them evolve into whatever comes next.

Keep in mind there may be more than one art movement in a society at a time. Each movement spawns a group that rejects it and forms its own, and movements may crop up over different changes in society at the same time.



◀ SISTINE CHAPEL - SEPARATION OF THE EARTH FROM THE WATERS BY MICHELANGELO.

▼ SISTINE CHAPEL - CREATION OF EVE BY MICHELANGELO.



## ADAPTING FUTURISM FOR A WORLD

Using the case study from earlier in this article, let's adapt some of Futurism's concepts to a society.

### THE CHANGE

Recent breakthroughs in energy creation have led to the advent of a near-infinite supply of sustainable electricity. Manufacturing plants are promising to start using it within a year or two, corporations are unraveling due to a foreseeable lack of monopolizing power, and governments are a mixed bag of excitement and fear. The common person has been using electric transportation for years now and is hopeful about the upcoming changes.

### THE REACTION

The initial reaction is overwhelmingly positive. A new art movement called Futurism erupts in anticipation. The common artist will no longer have to worry about keeping the lights on in the studio and a wave of science fiction art and design floods the society with potential possibilities. Concepts for architecture, automobiles, space travel, and globalization are rampant, all based on the ease and speed of travel in a world without energy limits.

This version of Futurism is digital; it overlays the current world with these potential designs,

shows them being constructed in fast-forward, and new vehicles and fashions whiz by people in a constant blur, just barely managing to communicate form within the motion. Excitement builds. The art is staccato, fast-paced, brightly colored, adrenaline-racing, and even overwhelming at times. Art displays are a feast for the eyes.

A rejectionist movement called Uniformism begins as the change is realized. The upper echelons of society are collapsing and the movement calls for a return to stability, a slowing down of society so the population can keep its identity. Uniformism preaches moving together as one, not racing ahead of those who can't keep up. It's fearful of these changes. It's lethargic, reminding viewers of the beauty of stopping and observing. It's a deer and its fawn in a meadow, painted in high contrast with a focus on minute detail, where the longer you look at the painting, the more you notice, à la Jeff Lee Johnson.<sup>3</sup> Sculptures of people sitting on benches are repopularized, though now, the sculptures can move and hold a conversation powered by artificial intelligence.

A third movement begins when the upper echelons of society restructure themselves. They have the wealth to be patrons and seek a reminder of the old, golden days. A Reminiscence. It's a quiet movement resurrecting the opulent themes of Art Deco,

Art Nouveau, and Rococo while merging them with the hopeful attitude of Futurism. The Reminiscence becomes recognizable by expensive materials, graphical elements juxtaposed with abstracted subjects, and a focus on subtle combinations of the tangible and the digital.

Patrons are engaged in a secret war of one-upmanship, which bleeds into haute couture and slowly influences fashion, archi-

**Sculptures of people sitting on benches are repopularized, though now, the sculptures can move and hold a conversation powered by artificial intelligence.**

tecture, product design, and the arts of those outside the sphere of influence.

### THE FUTURE

The Change is enacted. As the world becomes accustomed to limitless energy, Futurism's optimism becomes reality and its main proponents begin to look even further to the future, perhaps entering a period of stability marred by the threat of what others may do with these new resources. Its successors enjoy freedom in their virtual

worlds and begin to experiment, quickly recreating a few centuries of art movements in only years before moving on to the limits of digital expression.

Uniformism maintains and grows in popularity as Futurism wanes. It splits after a few more years, with a Neo-Unity movement calling for complete rejection of the digital. Uniformism eventually falls into obscurity as its artists move into accepting the digital and experiment with merging the authentic with the fabricated.

The Reminiscence holds for as long as its patrons do. Generational wealth keeps it sustained for far longer than Futurism or Uniformism, but it, too, evolves. The new generation now wants art they can interact with in zero gravity, creating a new Horizon Movement of inertial-centric mobiles for placement on spaceships.

## DESIGNING SOCIETY AROUND AN ART MOVEMENT

In the real world, no society will ever have a uniform appearance. To be defined by a single style, your setting would have to undergo one of two extreme situations.

First is stagnation. A society locked into its values, either by choice or by a totalitarian force,

PHOTO COURTESY: WEB GALLERY OF ART

will continue to expand under the approved style. To get a civilization completely uniform, this stagnation would have to last through multiple generations. It would have to endure changes in leadership, suppress the will of new generations to part from their forebears, and be functional enough to not necessitate change.

The second is the opposite: extreme progress. A society capable of deconstructing and rebuilding itself in a matter of years can acquire a uniform appearance for a short time. Whatever art movement is at the forefront of popularity would become the standard in such a case. Entire cities could be rebuilt under a single movement and the art within replaced

just as quickly. A society capable of this extreme reshaping would need to have an exceptionally powerful art movement fueling it to achieve uniformity, as a number of counter styles would emerge in reaction to the mainstream.

## WRAP-UP

Art movements in fiction are society's reactions to the changes you, as a worldbuilder, enact on them. You can use them to build a society around or conversely, build them around a society. They're a way to graphically tie together time periods, character struggles, and societal changes, to help your work feel more emotionally grounded and realistic.

## ENDNOTES

- 1 "Art Movement Definition: What Is an Art Movement?," EDEN Gallery, September 24, 2021, <https://www.eden-gallery.com/news/art-movement-definition>.
- 2 "Ancient Egyptian Timeline," The Australian Museum, September 20, 2023, <http://web.archive.org/web/20240521142411/https://australian.museum/learn/cultures/international-collection/ancient-egyptian/ancient-egyptian-timeline/>.
- 3 Jeff Lee Johnson, "Horror," Jeff Lee Johnson, last accessed August 24, 2024, <https://jeffleejohnson.com/horror-gallery.html>.

## LOOKING FOR SOME INSPIRATION?

#worldbuilding-wednesday

- 1 Tell me about important excerpts from influential books in your world (religious, philosophical, political, etc.).
- 2 What fundamental technology or magic shapes how people see the world and others, and how does it affect them?
- 3 Do geological or astronomical events (floods, eclipses, meteor showers, etc.) hold significant meaning in your world?

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## World Showcase: Andrey Negrúl's Exolith

INTERVIEW BY M. E. WHITE

*Andrey Negrúl is an artist and designer from Moldova, currently residing in Russia. He works in 2D and 3D mediums, as well as with the written word. His current project Exolith is a culmination of two decades of artistic experience and ideas that appeal to his worldbuilding sensibilities. Exolith will be the basis of an upcoming comic, with a preview chapter currently available to read online alongside a completed lorebook for the setting.*

ALL ART IN THIS ARTICLE WAS MADE BY ANDREY NEGRÚL

**H**! **MY NAME** is Andrey Negrúl (he/him) aka tramdrey. I am a designer and artist with more than twenty years of experience working in 2D and 3D, but most of all I love stylized art. I was born in Moldova, where I graduated from school and college (IT), then got a higher education in advertising in Russia. Despite the fact that I never aspired to be educated in the art field, I've been drawing and designing my own worlds since I was a kid. Back then, it was just a casual dream about other planets, magical worlds, and other settings, but even then, I tried to make it detailed. When I started to get serious about worldbuilding I realized how much my knowledge from other areas and of course my creative background helped me.

*Exolith* is the quintessence of all my past ideas and creative endeavors. When there were too many sketches of the setting, I decided that I needed to save all of those pieces and combine them into a single concept. Of course all my life I've been inspired by video games, especially old-school RPGs, so I even set myself a hypothetical task: I design a setting for a video game, as if I were part of some big project. In the process of creating *Exolith*, I was already surprised at how well some of the ideas could fit into the game mechanics even though I didn't set such a task.

At first *Exolith* didn't have a title and was planned to be something like a comic book with a few characters. Then I decided that a comic book required a different approach and the work I had already done was more

suited to creating a lorebook. The first version of the lorebook was more like a presentation. There wasn't much text and it was 10–15 pages long in total, but it took a lot of my effort and I was very inspired by the result. I realized that it looked like a real live world. Back then the setting was more humble than the final version, but there was already a white desert and a city around a mysterious object. After that I kept working on the next version of the lorebook, which you can still read now. Of course in the future it

would be great to make it into a video game, but I don't have any concrete plans for it yet.

**Immediately what stands out to me about your work on *Exolith* is the variety of styles and subject matter in the artwork. On one page, there's an ancient map; on another is an illustration of an explorer discovering a carving in a cave. From diagrams of masks to architectural sketches, the breadth of illustration really helps bring the world to life.**

**Worldbuilding often requires knowledge and creativity in a number of seemingly disparate subjects, like history, theology, cartography, science—the list could go on forever, really. But as an artist you also seem to work across mediums and techniques.**

First of all, I am grateful to you for highlighting this. Sometimes I've seen the opinion that it would have been better if everything had been in one style, then the project would have been more solid as a

product. I partly agree, but the result is so diverse for two reasons.

One is purely practical. Worldbuilding requires a lot of time and immersion, doing such projects in your spare time you sometimes have to choose where to spend that time. I'm always interested in developing my skills, so I simply combined practice with the *Exolith* project. Today I practice drawing diagrams, tomorrow I practice creating a mask in 3D, the day after tomorrow I read about the history of sewers to see how it

could work in my world. In some ways, this project is a cross-section of my life's skills and knowledge.

Another reason is that it creates diversity. Like how people learn history from archaeological digs, it may not only be inscribed tablets, but also household objects. It's like all this lorebook information was also sourced from different places and time periods.

**You mentioned that you have mixed feelings about the diversity of artwork in the**

**lorebooks, that some criticize it for a lack of cohesion. I, for one, couldn't disagree more with such criticism—I see it as a major strength to the work, making the world feel so much bigger than just the work of a single artist. It is my favorite part about it.**

I think these mixed feelings are more likely caused by doubts. Personally, I find this variety of styles worthwhile, each image has some little story of its own. Especially when there are those who

*Exolith* is the quintessence of all my past ideas and creative endeavors. When there were too many sketches of the setting, I decided that I needed to save all of those pieces and combine them into a single concept.

Exolith - Ur Street



Exolith - Typemark





don't think a single style would have made everything better, like you for example, for which I am really grateful! A lot of artists work in one style all their lives, almost never straying from it, but this is not my way. I would like to believe that in the long run this will pay off.

**I imagine the comic you're making about *Exolith* is a good opportunity to create a more "solid" product alongside the eclecticism of the lorebooks. Would you agree? I can see the advantages of it when you are crafting a more focused narrative.**

I think it's hard for a worldbuilding project to be a product, because it's hard to promote it as content. I've asked various professionals who do worldbuilding for games and movies, and each of them expressed the same idea: you need some kind of story to immerse the audience in your world. *Exolith* actually started with stories, and the lorebook is what surrounds those stories. Of course I've always wanted to create a video game in this setting, especially since I have that experience. But it would be a complicated and time consuming process that would take up all my free time, force me to abandon other projects, and drag on for years. I figured out my options and creating a comic book seemed logical to me. It's a fusion of screenwriting, visuals, and design, a very suitable medium for me.

**How did you decide on a single style for the *Exolith* comic? Why this specific style? Do you intend to do all *Exolith* comics in this style, or will different storylines have a different look?**

I haven't drawn full-fledged comics before, but it's a genre very close to me as I'm a big fan of the European school of comics, very fond of the works of Juan Jimenez; Sergio Toppi; and Jean Giraud, better known as Moebius. For the visual style, I studied what inspires me and tried to find a middle ground between my capabilities and a result I would be happy with. After all, this is just another project in my spare time. I'd like to enjoy the process rather than complicate things and then suffer. So for now I've settled on something like this, not too overloaded with details and color. So far only one story is planned, and it will all be in the same style.

**You mentioned some of your artistic inspirations for the comic. (Big YES to Moebius by the way; a long-time favorite of mine, as well.) What else has inspired you during the worldbuilding process?**

I've always been influenced by unusual settings in particular. Probably the very first inspiring experience for me was the video game *TES 3: Morrowind*. The world itself is very big there and essentially represents different settings, but Morrowind took

place in the province of the dark elves where every component was unlike anything I had seen before in fantasy.

In the world of Morrowind there are examples of the influence of some events on the culture and life of people, which made this place so unique. It is completed by very unusual flora and fauna, and the local people there are very mysterious and original. Some time later I discovered *Planescape: Torment* and this game blew my mind even more. Here I was inspired by the concept of a big city with a lot of weirdness in every back alley. It's interestingly overlapped with my life circumstances because I was born in a city of a hundred thousand people and at the age of eighteen I moved to study in a city of fifteen million people. Obviously all of that had a big impact on me, the *Exolith-Ur* of my setting is largely inspired by that experience.

**I see you were greatly inspired by games. I'm also interested in your experiences growing up in big cities. Do you have any other prominent real world inspirations?**

The real world remains the main source of inspiration. It is so deep and interesting that it is impossible to deplete the sources of ideas. Especially since new discoveries keep happening and all this can become new inspiration for your setting. I do a lot of research for myself because I want to create a unique world. For example, just



Videogame Mashup

working on understanding the salt wastelands is something incredible. First of all, all such places in the world are different from each other. Secondly, each such wasteland has its own history of origin, sometimes very different factors influence its appearance. Here's an example, just like in nature something happens in completely different ways, even though it looks similar at first glance. I try to represent flora and fauna on the basis of the received data, working on concepts I try to take into account the influence of the environment on the design of a particular creature.

**On the topic of flora and fauna: I've noticed that you feature insects and other invertebrates in some of your work, including *Exolith*; are you fond of bugs?**

I have always liked beetles in their own right, aren't they amazing? Look at these designs, these shapes. Like some kind of natural robots or living minerals, they look alien in their own way, so very fitting for my setting as a big part of it!

**What about writing and storytelling inspirations? Any artists or works in particular?**

From literature, I was greatly influenced by Ray Bradbury, who was able to describe fantasy worlds as if real people from those worlds were doing it. Even small stories were so convincing that you still remember some plots as something that actually happened to you. I also



*Bugman Ancient Wooden Toy* - Bugmen are mysterious creatures from the local Exolith folklore

remember the works of Soviet sci-fi writers Strugatsky brothers and their novel *The Doomed City*, where people from different times and locations of the Earth suddenly found themselves in a huge deserted metropolis. In general, I would say that classic science fiction has made a great impact on me and inspires me to this day.

Movies also inspire me a lot, but not by specific references, but rather by moods, details, and artistic methods. Sometimes the movies themselves may have nothing to do with *Exolith* in terms of setting or atmosphere, but they can give you the right feelings. In the same way, music works for me. IDM and psychedelic progressive rock are very inspiring.

**About what we see in the comic itself: the veils are a very important part of the setting. The process of obtaining a veil is very involved, and if I remember correctly it's taboo to wear a veil designed for another person, so I imagine inheriting a secondhand or "hand-me-down" veil is unlikely. Because of this I was surprised to see a child character wearing one in your comic. Would it spoil your story at all to tell us a bit about that? Is it common for children to obtain veils? And are the veils designed to accommodate them as they grow?**

Yes, this is a very strict rule and the mask can belong to only one

person, which of course does not include the people who ignore the rules. Besides, the question logically comes up, how will other people guess who exactly is underneath the mask? We are used to identifying each other by faces, although in the age of neural networks this is no longer such a reliable identifier. One of the key ideas of the *Exolith* setting is to show how some unpredictable events could influence the evolution of people's culture and everyday life. This is just a good example of that—people living in the white wasteland are used to identifying others by other traits: body language, behavior, voice. So the risk of being caught for wearing someone else's veil is higher than it may seem. And the punishment



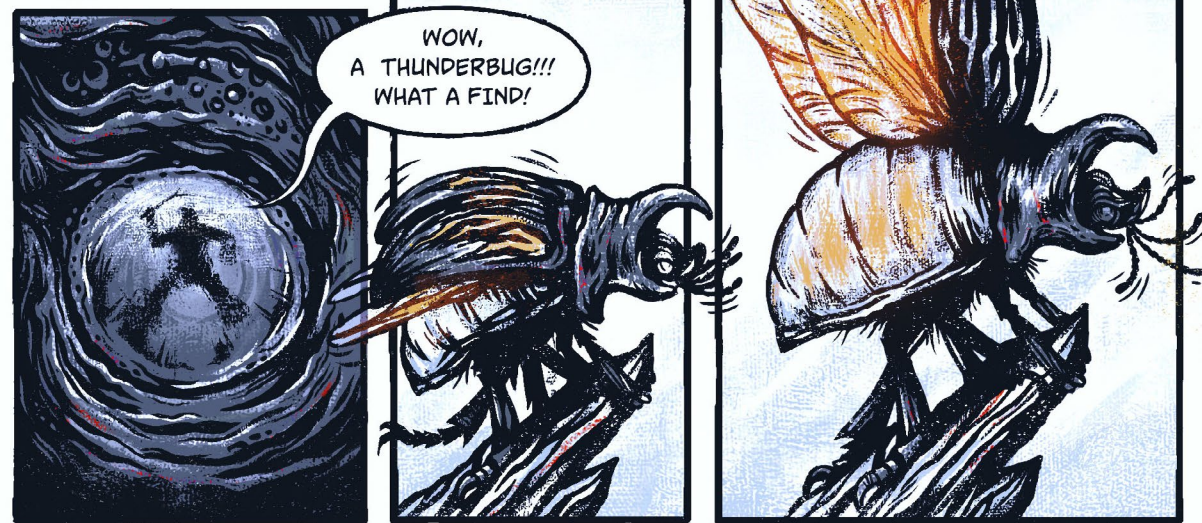
*Thunderbug* - This bug is used to charge an energy gun

for this is very serious, so only the most desperate are willing to take such a risk. The veils are not inherited, as they are kind of passports in the modern world, personal for each human.

If a person has lived in Exolith-Ur (the city beneath Exolith) since childhood, they go through two or three phases of changing veils as they grow up. The child in the comic is still at the age where he wears his first mask, and when children are very young, they mostly spend their time indoors, only being able to get outside during wet seasons when the deserts get rained out and dust lays on the ground for a while. These details, by the way, are not yet in the public version of the lorebook,

but I will try to update it over time. A veil for a child, by the way, can be requested from the Maker by any person, regardless of kinship. The person who brought the child his first mask from the Maker is connected with him by a certain relationship, something like a godparent. Masks for children generally do not have any special features designed for head growth, so for some part of childhood they will not be very comfortable. But Veil Makers rarely make something for comfort, the veil as a test of the spirit is one of the principles of their craft.

**That makes a lot of sense. Regarding the comic again, I'm also curious about the significance of Grandma remov-**



Aviculturist — bird motifs in design  
 Cartographer — reliable protection and professional devices  
 Bard — mask with built-in flute  
 Gunsmith — fine work with bug shell, red tag indicates specialisation  
 Member of the Iron Veils Guild, the main steel suppliers  
 Cook — red forks, wreath made of spicy bush branches  
 An example of a confusing fate: expensive feathers and a mask of nobility mottled by aged cracks and damage  
 The mask of an Interpreter of the Forest, a guide to distant forest lands, sometimes one is vital even in Exolith-Ur  
 The Colonist's mask, laconic at first glance, is equipped with a multitude of sophisticated optical devices  
 Only those who have seen the sunset harrier, a bird known for the harsh upbringing of its chicks, will be able to see the image of the teacher in this veil  
 Butcher's veil decorated with bones and traditional patterns  
 Pipe salesman demonstrating the versatility of his mask

◀ EXCERPT FROM THE PROLOGUE FOR THE EXOLITH GRAPHIC NOVEL

▲ EXCERPT FROM EXOLITH - LOREBOOK PG 12 VEILS

ing her veil, which shields her from the lethal “somnific ash.” If it doesn’t spoil your story, could you explain why she does this?

I think the mechanism of how the “somnific ash” works will be revealed in more detail as the story progresses (of course I don’t think anyone should read the lorebook before the comic), but this particular episode shows that although the air is dangerous, if you don’t breathe and keep your eyes closed, you can safely stay unmasked for a certain amount of time. The grandson just asks if he too can take off his veil if he follows all the rules. But Grandma doesn’t allow it, as it is the end of the wet season and the dust is slowly starting to rise. There’s no information about the seasons in the current lorebook yet either as it’s part of the ideas I’ve been working on while writing the

script for the comic. Briefly, seasons in the wasteland come in two varieties: wet and dry. Wet ones are when rain falls even in the wasteland, pushing dust to the ground. Plants bloom, even animals from the borderlands come to the wasteland, beetles are especially active, and so on. On particularly windless bright days, the streets of Exolith-Ur are full of people with their faces unmasked, still wearing their veils ready on their chests.

The dry season means sandstorms, winds, death, and danger. During the dry season, the locals prefer to hide in their dwellings, which they prepare for the harsh season throughout the wet season. So the grandmother and her grandson went out to look for bugs around the end of the wet season when the dust is already starting to rise a little. The somnific ash itself is not harmful to the skin, but is danger-

ous when it gets into the lungs or on the mucous membranes. Therefore, if there is already a danger, it is better not to risk it. In the script of the comic book the main character faces the danger of the poisoned dust for the first time. I think these effects will be revealed better there and the symbolism of the scene with the grandmother and her veil will be more clear.

I must say, your designs for masks/veils are beautiful and varied. You include many examples in your lorebook, as well as a diagram showing the different parts of the mask. My favorite is the bard’s mask with the built-in flute. Did you do research on how to make the masks functional, or is mask design more of an aesthetic exercise for you? In other words, do you prioritize form or function here? Or



Mask of Greed

something in between?

Thank you for your appreciation! I take the functional side of concepts seriously, although I realize that even in a well-designed setting it's not always that necessary. But since the functional part of these masks is very important, I tried to explain at least a basic understanding of how they work. For me, the most interesting challenge is to combine the aesthetic and functional parts.

A similar question on a

related note: I'm also wondering about your gun designs. In *Exolith*, there is a musket called a *luchefar*. Outside of the *Exolith* project, you designed a crab-inspired gun that went viral. When you design complex machines like this, do you need to do a lot of research on how they work? Does understanding the functionality of parts help you to imagine new forms for them? Or is it all about learning to emulate the appearance of

the machinery, less about understanding how it works?

Yes, I think that understanding function is very important. Sometimes function works not only for realism, but also gives the right vector for visual development. It seems to me that if you just imitate realism, it will still be flawed in some way. The functionality of the concept is what makes it persuasive.

What is your process like?

How do you decide what style or medium to render any specific illustration in? Do you ever combine 3D and 2D in unexpected ways, or do you mostly keep them separate?

The choice of medium comes from desires and possibilities. Sometimes I see an unusual map in a museum and want to make my own in the same style, but at the same time I want it to be very realistic. I realize that I have this skill and get to work.



Crabgun Concept

One of the key ideas of the Exolith setting is to show how some unpredictable events could influence the evolution of people's culture and everyday life.

I am curious as to whether you started with 3D or 2D art? How did you make the transition from one into the other?

When I didn't know how to work in 3D yet, I felt a lot of limitations. I always wanted to be able to make things that could be viewed from all angles. Even if you only do 2D art, basic things in 3D can improve your workflow a lot. 3D helps you build a base, composition, and stuff like that. Initially I worked only in 2D, all my childhood I drew on paper. Then I learned digital 2D, but until the age of thirty my attempts to master 3D did not go far. Now I spend a lot of time doing 3D. It's especially interesting to experiment with 2D skills, combining styles and techniques. Sometimes you don't know what tool you're going to use in advance and you're navigating through the process.

Earlier, you said this: "One of the key ideas of the Exolith

setting is to show how some unpredictable events could influence the evolution of people's culture and everyday life." Would you be able to elaborate on this idea? Where else would you say this idea is expressed within *Exolith*?

There are a huge number of settings for which fantasy is just a cover. For example, fantasy is often a generic medieval timeline with magic, dragons, and other fairy tale creatures. Give it a beautiful name and it can already be the basis for a good story.

Don't get me wrong, I'm not talking about it in a negative way. Familiar associations always work better for the audience. And we have many examples of such classic fantasy settings, which are simple in concept, but done very well and persuasively. And it works. But if we want to dive a little deeper into the world itself, there is a chance that we will come across card-

board walls with a painted sky like in *The Truman Show*.

Let me explain! For example, we have a world where magic has existed since ancient times, but at the same time technical progress is shown as in the real world, where magic did not exist. Mages in any setting are educated people, experimenters. Having the ability to create even the simplest fireball, it is possible to conduct a huge number of scientific experiments that are impossible in reality.

And so the science in a world like that must be different. This is a bit of an exaggerated example, but I hope you know what I mean. It was this kind of thinking that shaped my approach to creating *Exolith*. There are many settings with deserts and giant mysterious objects, but most often a desert setting is a fantasy Arabian country with Arabian music, sultans and camels, although even if you refer to the cultures of desert people from reality, this stereotype is even a bit frustrating, because in reality desert cultures are very diverse and rich. These associations are hard to beat. It's enough for the audience to see at least a fistful of sand and he draws himself a *Mad Max*-style postapoc or an Arabian fairyland.

In a way, the world of *Exolith* is a post-apocalyptic setting, only the end of the world happened in it locally, long before the industrial age and through no fault of humans. And already at this point in my opinion it draws a

non-standard world. There is also the fact that this is the time of not highly educated people who more willingly believe in miracles, so the appearance of an object of such scale was naturally perceived as something divine. And religion gives rise to traditions, rituals, influences even cuisine and fashion! But there is little to grow in the salt deserts, so the cuisine is specific.

And the veils, which originally had a purely practical meaning, became such an integral part of the locals' appearance that they began to be decorated, displaying a certain symbolism and so on. If Exolith had not fallen, all this would simply never have happened, it is an unnatural development of the culture in this location.

From the initial pages of the lorebook, it's clear that the world of *Exolith* extends much farther than the wasteland. How much thought have you given to the world outside of the wasteland and the city of Exolith-Ur? How about the history before the Exolith Era, as you call it?

Right, the White Wastelands are huge, but it's only a small region of the larger world. I have sketches of other countries and regions, there are some references in the lore book, but for now I've decided to keep my head down and work on the Exolith area, since it's a key area in the setting. One thing I can say for sure, Exolith's influence is

spread all over the world to one degree or another. Furthermore, we can't be sure that there were no similar objects or anything else with similar origins besides it. But I can say that now we are considering the world long after the fall of Exolith. What was before it is shrouded in mysteries and secrets, as history as a science is not so developed yet.

When and how did Exolith-Ur fall under the dominion of The Eternal Empire of Sy'yl? Was the city conquered, or was it a peaceful takeover? Is Exolith-Ur a tributary of the empire, or is it a proper territory within it?

Exolith-Ur is basically a city-state that has paramilitary forces, but no army in the usual sense. Historically, there have been times when the city has been invaded, but no one has been able to hold it because Exolith-Ur is only viable within the structure it has built itself. The Emperor of Sy'yl was wiser, and even with one of the largest and most powerful armies in history, he did not take Exolith-Ur by force but established diplomatic ties. And now de jure the city is under the protectorate of the Empire and representatives of the Empire have joined the council, but de facto Exolith-Ur reacts very boldly to interference from outside and the Empire has no real leverage, which makes the Emperor very angry.

Could you talk a bit more

EXCERPT FROM EXOLITH - LOREBOOK PG.5  
THE GREAT FALL - ANCIENT ROCK CARVING



about the Children of Exolith? Is there a single reason why they so ardently study and worship Exolith? You mention that they can be found all over the world. Why don't they all choose to live in Exolith-Ur? You also mention on page 15 of the lorebook that the Children of Exolith had the means to supply settlements with food and other materials needed for survival; how did this organization come by their wealth and power?

Originally, it is a group of enthusiastic explorers eager for great discoveries and adventures. Among such people there are different types of individuals. Some are desperate romantics who are ready to spend a night anywhere without a penny for the sake of some scientific discovery. Others are members of wealthy classes who set out to explore the world for glory. Both were happy to check out the rumors about treasures, valuable burials and precious deposits, which often turned out to be true and brought good earnings. When the group became a full-fledged organization, the combined efforts made it quite wealthy. Initially they mostly dwelt under Exolith, but as time went on, there were fewer opportunities to explore. Some of them went on expeditions around the world in search of other similar places, and some organized branches in other countries, studying the Exolith artifacts there, using their technology and resources for example.



EXCERPT FROM EXOLITH - LOREBOOK PG.14  
CARAVAN ON THE ROAD TO EXOLITH-UR

**Members of guilds are equipped with special veils. So if you become part of a guild, are you given a new veil? Or is guild membership determined early in a person's life so that when they come of age they are given a guild-appropriate mask? As masks are meant to convey a person's individuality, would you say that guild members in some ways relinquish some of their individuality, as symbolized by their adoption of a guild veil?**

Yes, you made a very good point

that joining a guild definitely affects the appearance of the mask. Basically the mask is either completely replaced or altered, sometimes almost beyond recognition. The Glass Masters guild, after a long and complicated initiation, completely creates a new customized mask for the new member. Golden Finger mercenaries alter the mask so that it looks like an upside-down mask, then put their mark on it. Azure Veils barely touch the structure of the mask, but completely cover it with their unique azure paint, erasing any markings or sigils that were previ-

ously on it. Thus, on a metaphorical level, joining a guild is a change of face, and thus in a way a change of personality, a rejection of the past and a transition to a new stage of life. For the same reason, leaving a guild is often impossible, it is a very complicated process.

**I love the fauna of the desert. I like that the *abutu* lizard is vulnerable to the somnific ash in the same way that humans are; however, I have to wonder: if they are blind and navigate by smell, but the filters that protect them**

**from the ash dull their smell, how do they navigate in the desert? Do they require a human to steer them?**

Thank you! Yes, these creatures are durable and strong, but they can't exist in the environment of the White Wastes without human help. During the wet season their sense of smell works very well, so mostly caravans with *abutu* walk through the wasteland at this time.

**There is quite a bit of mystery around Exolith and its origins, as well as the origins**

of the First Nomads, the Veil Makers, and the *incunabula*. It feels alien and at times even a bit eldritch. A lot of the time as worldbuilders, it can be tempting to want to know and explain everything about a world, but reading your lorebook reminded me that oftentimes what is unknown about a world can be just as important as what is known. Now, I wouldn't ask you to spill your secrets! But I'm wondering if you know the answer to the mysteries within the world of *Exolith*, if you have some vague ideas but nothing concrete, or if at this time it's just as much a mystery to you as it is to the people within the world. Do you think it's important to know these answers? Or is it OK to have parts of your world that even you don't understand?

Yes, you make a very good point. I am not trying to imitate great intrigue with an enigmatic smile because Exolith creates certain understandable associations with its appearance and history, but I do not seek to explain certain things right away. The main purpose of this is that I want to give the reader the point of view of the average inhabitant of this world. There are fundamentally few people who understand the true origins of Exolith, but everyone explains it for themselves in their own way. I would like the audience to have the same reasoning at this stage.

Do you feel it's best to have a focal point when worldbuilding? In the case of your project, yours are an event (Exolith's landing) and a location (Exolith and the surrounding wasteland). Is your worldbuilding process focused on Exolith? Or do you build more of the world "behind-the-scenes," but present a more focused look in the lorebook to work better as a standalone product?

You know, I would say like Archimedes in his time: "Give me a place to stand and I will move the Earth," where the area around Exolith and the time period described in the lorebook is the place to stand. If we imagine different stories in this setting, of course it would be great to show other places and events, but Exolith will always be the fulcrum. And in that way I absolutely agree with you, having a solid foundation, we have a much

better chance of building a strong and interesting world on top of it. That's why I initially pursued this approach and continue to do so for now. In the comic, I had planned to show a different location in the first chapter, the dense northern forests from which the protagonist would travel to Exolith. I thought this would help the reader immerse themselves in the world through something more familiar at first, but gradually find themselves in the more unusual surroundings of Exolith-Ur.

**Andrey, it's been amazing talking to you about your world! Thank you so much for participating in this interview with me and with *Worldbuilding Magazine*!**

Happy to hear that! Thank you so much for the opportunity!

*This interview was edited for Worldbuilding Magazine.*

*Thanks so much to Andrey for the great conversation! If you would like to follow him or see more of his work, he is on Artstation, Instagram, and X as @tramdrey.*

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The First Nomad

# Way Down in the Country Mud

BY RYBIN GOJDIC

⚠ Some scenes in this story may be upsetting for some readers. See end of story (page 71) for more information.

**A** WHISTLE SEEPS THROUGH THE walls of a house nestled in a *papari* grove. Father stomps around the cabin, smacking doors, bellowing “Wake up!” Four children stumble from beds jammed in the back room. Mother sparks the stove, and flames erupt around the rusting burner.

They drain their soup and grab their tools. Father sweeps a gleaming scythe over his head, mother grips a shovel, and the children carry bundled rope. The sun rises as the family marches out onto a highland valley. Stalks of wheat fill the alcove and creep up the hills.

The youngest son, Kara, is eight years old, and this is his first year collecting the harvest. Father slices a row of wheat and watches it tumble. Kara and his siblings collect armfuls of the year’s crop and tie them into bushels.

“Not like that!” Oldest Sister says. She helps Kara make a proper knot.

He runs behind the others, sagging beneath the weight he carries.

“Wait up!”

Father and Mother make his older siblings stop.

“Kara’s not very good at this!” Oldest Sister cries.

Mother touches her on the shoulder. “None of us are; we’re all new to this.”

Father nods, and after Kara’s breathing eases and his tears stop flowing, they keep working until the sun sinks below the hills. Kara limps behind the rest of his family as they trudge into the house. He glances back at the ridgeline, where the forest glows red with the sunset.

He eats his soup for dinner, but his stomach growls when he lays down to sleep. Kara’s back hurts. His hands are numb and chapped. Sleep takes him in seconds.

Eight hours later, the landowner’s whistle howls and Kara weeps.

**KARA IS A MAN.** He is fourteen years old.

Father hands him a rifle and they climb up into the hills south of the house. They speak in grunts and whispers, following *horagi* tracks over three ridges. The first ridge collapses and falls into a forested ravine. Father holds both rifles while Kara clammers down over rocks. An abandoned stone road peeks through the moss and foliage, running west. The earth is smoothed flat around the abandoned road, where cobblestones disinterred for a retaining wall lie in heaps.

“Where does this road go?”

“Ruins.”

“Will I ever see a city?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. There aren’t many left.”

“What happened to them?”

Father pauses to think for a long time.

“When I was young, I lived in a mining town not too far from a gleaming city, but when the mines dried up, the cities and towns shriveled until there were no more cities and just a few towns.”

“Where did everyone go?”

“Some of us came out here. All of the others, I do not know.”

“I want to see a town, then.”

They can see the farm from the second ridge, a beige dot bulging from a green sea. Other farms are scattered in all directions. Giant mining excavators perch amidst the stumps of the hills they had once flattened—pieces of the collapsing machines strewn around their rotten cores. The overseer’s villa sits at the end of a valley, scrunched between two lines of hills, crowning the summit of a tall, thin peak.

Father points north, past the villa.

“The Imperial Office is there, in a town.”

“Will I ever go there?” A note of pleading tinges Kara’s voice.

“I need you to help me take the crops this year. Yes.”

Kara smiles to himself as Father tousles his hair.

The *horagi* tracks freshen with each sunrise as they approach the third ridge. Father stops and squints for a few seconds, then points at a spot just above the base of the ridge. A rusted iron frame outlines a black hole of a tunnel leading deep under the ground—a labyrinth of mine shafts sealed off by a lattice of barely rusted iron. They follow a footpath that ascends the slope to the right of the mine entrance. When they cross the ridgeline they find the creature rooting for mushrooms under a tree. Using a wedge-shaped snout in tandem with its claws, the *horagi* shreds the fungi as it digs them out, then drags the bits down its throat on a long, cylindrical tongue. Waxy, sharp silica outgrowths resembling thorns cover the upper half of its thin and delicate body—camouflaging it from most of its predators. Father



taps Kara on the shoulder and points. Kara slides a bullet into the chamber and presses the hammer with his palm. The horagi pauses when it hears the muffled click, then lowers its snout again. He remembers Father's lessons, tames his shaking leg, and, after a breath, squeezes the trigger.

Birds nesting in the trees squawk and scatter into the air. The shot echoes down the ravine.

Legs flail, drool sputters.

Blood pours from its neck, soaking the mushrooms and moss.

It heaves onto its side

The dying animal rolls a few feet downhill.

Father hugs him and kisses him on the forehead.

"I knew you could do it!"

Kara's eyes beam and a smile spreads across his face.

Father crosses to the horagi as its death spasms conclude, beckoning Kara to follow. After a deep slice down the length of the body, they labor together to prepare the carcass for the journey home—Father exaggerating the motions of each step so Kara can mimic them. He scrunches his nose and mouth together at the stench of blood while pulling the creature's entrails out onto the forest floor. Noticing Kara's discomfort, Father nods and says, "It's hard, but you'll get used to it. I did, and I was twice your age when I first had to smell it," he pauses to take a breath, "but I'll confess that I vomited all over the place!" Kara laughs until he forgets that his arms are caked in horagi innards up to the elbow.

Kara fetches a tarp out of Father's bag and helps him scoot it under their prey before sliding it down the hill. Father salvages the last intact rail tie from a track leading into the decaying mine entrance and directs Kara to help him fasten the horagi to the coarse wood with some rope and a few nails.

"Father?"

"Yes, son?"

"Am I a man now?"

"You have been a man, and now no one can say you are not."

---

**KARA IS SIXTEEN YEARS** old.

Father, Kara, and Older Brother load bundles of wheat into the cart for the first of three trips. The Imperial Office lies north, in Mill Town, up a spider-thread of a road. A grizzled highland *duga* yanks the cart forward, its dirty yellow fur snapping in the brisk autumn wind. Falling leaves smack their faces.

No one speaks.

Kara's legs hang off the back, swinging with the jostling cart.

His rifle sits across his lap.

"I wonder if Mom's doing okay," Kara thinks aloud.

"Do you miss her?" Older Brother says, smirking at him.

"Shut up! You're not so tough!"

"Both of you: calm down. You both miss her. You're not unfeeling machines."

Kara fiddles with the action of his rifle. He hates the town. People sneer at them for having one duga, one cart, one set of ragged clothes each.

The sun rises and falls twice. A rancid smell—a smell of burning rot, of corrupted earth, of a million writhing maggots—washes over their cart, staining the air and singeing the insides of their noses.

"What is that?" Kara says.

Father rises from the rough-hewn wooden bench at the front of the cart and inhales. He shrinks back into his seat and takes up the reins of the duga. The animal extends its nose—a blue proboscis swaying in front of its head as it walks—then retracts it from the stench engulfing the cart. The sounds of wildlife vanish.

"Death," Father says.

They crest a ridge and Mill Town appears, its walls blending into storm clouds piled at the far end of a valley scored deep into the hills. Behind it, an abandoned excavator machine soars upwards and towers over the town's skyline, rust flowing down its sides. A pit yawns a mile outside the city, stuffed to the brim with twisted corpses. A military truck dumps quicklime on the bodies, masking their bulging eyes and bursting tongues—and their sickening odors. The patches of skin left on the bodies, infested with maggots, writhe as if they were boiling. Three gravediggers heap dirt over the dead.

Older Brother cries and Kara gnashes his teeth to hold his tears back.

"Another massacre," Father says.

"Why are their bodies so rotten?"

Father does not reply. Then he turns towards the pit:

"Gravediggers!"

They drag their heads up and hobble to the road's edge. Their clothes sag. Their skin is taut over their skulls. The gravediggers' eyes bulge out from cratered eye sockets. One has no shirt—his skin is sucked through his ribs.

"Turn back." His voice is a whisper, straining through cracked lips.

Father suppresses a shiver and asks, "What happened here?"

"Plague," another says, hissing through his teeth. He stands the closest, near where the family is keeping their provisions for the journey.

They shuffle towards the cart, their eyes darting to the family's crops.

Another spurts out, "Everyone dying," before bursting into a fit of coughing.

A pit yawns a mile outside the city, stuffed to the brim with twisted corpses.

The shirtless man slumps over his shovel and points back down the road, “Save yourselves.”

“If you can.”

“We are already dead.”

Kara’s skin crawls, and he presses the hammer of his rifle down.

“Are you scared, child?” The shirtless gravedigger points his crooked finger at Kara. “Take your crops home. There is no one to buy them.”

The gravedigger standing closest to the cart grabs hold of a bag of their food. “Or give them to us!”

Kara’s hands shake. “Leave us alone!” he says, his voice squeezing his throat and bursting from his mouth as a squeal.

Kara jerks the trigger.

The gravedigger’s neck explodes and splatters blood on the cart.

Father whips the reins and the duga heaves the cart forwards just faster than the gravediggers can hobble after it. They sit silently until Kara tugs at Father’s shirt.

“I’m sorry.”

With a sweep of his arm Father hugs Kara and holds him close as he drives the duga onwards.

One of the dead man’s blood-coated comrades paws at his corpse and chases after the three coins that fly from his pockets and bounce off the ground. The other wrests a coin from his crimped fingers. Then, they walk with him propped between their shivering bodies and topple it into the mass grave.

Father tugs the reins to stop the duga within shouting distance of the town wall, then wraps both arms around Kara. Older Brother joins the hug. Tears stream down all of their faces as Kara squirms free and flees into the back of the wagon.

“Kara, where are you going?” Older Brother shouts.

“I’m sorry! I’m sorry!”

Father leaps out, sprints around the cart to where Kara is curled up, and plucks him up into his arms until his sobbing eases a little. He sets Kara down and crouches to look directly into his son’s face.

“I killed him, I’m sorry.”

Father chokes back his tears and hugs Kara again, “No, I’m sorry, I’m sorry, I should have—” he sobs, “No, I should have—” he sobs again.

Older Brother clutches his knees to his chest—silent and staring at the walls, at the town sealed behind a locked gate.

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**FIRST IT COMES AS** a series of rashes on Father’s body; when one fades, another breaks out elsewhere—the glowing red blotches leave faint scars everywhere they bloom. Then, the fever and cough set in, accompanied by a fugue state that keeps him bedridden. A doctor sent by the Company comes to the door one day. He silently examines Father, taking his

temperature, checking his throat, and listening to his heartbeat, before inspecting his undressed body. Mother paces. The children try to listen from their bedroom.

“We don’t understand what’s happening to him, what is this sickness?”

The Doctor shrugs, “There’s not a name for it yet—not a scientific one, at least.”

Mother’s eyes tear up, “So there’s no cure?”

He hesitates, the word sinking in his throat.

Father stirs and sits up, “I saw the mass grave, there is no saving me.” He turns towards Mother with his eyes barely open, “I am so sorry. I love you, thank you for the life we had together.” Father recedes into his fever dreams once more.

Father’s hand erupts in blisters, black marks boiling in their wake. Mother cries, scrubbing his skin with crushed canna leaves, scraping his skin with crushed canna leaves. The wet, sopping lesions pump pus from his body. Black flakes of skin float in the yellow bile. The disease eats up his arm and his chest until his eyes hang loose in their sockets as it eats his face.

Mother tends to Kara’s dying siblings. She shoves Kara into the mud-brick shed at the edge of the grove. Running inside, sobbing, she cries farewell to Kara, her voice cracking, rent by coughs.

Screams rise above the sound of the hacking. Kara digs his nails into the skin on his knees as Oldest Sister’s screams blend into an unending howl of anguish.

On the second day: a gunshot. Something scuffles in the fresh fallen snow. He opens the door.

Mother crouches by the side of the house, a trail of blood and pus searing the snow behind her. She wrenches her body sideways to look at him.

Her eyes are leaking.

Kara slams the door shut.

He weeps.

On the third day: silence.

Kara creeps outside and winces as the sunlight skips off the snow. A wisp of smoke rises from the other side of the house. He weaves through the trees, dodging thick, gnarled trunks under branches uplifted in dark exultation. Where the field meets the grove, three graves mark the homes of siblings that Kara will never meet.

He lingers. Then, he steps forward, circling the house and closing on the smoke.

Ashes in the earth in front of the house. Older Brother and Younger Sister’s charred bones jut from the black mass. A breeze ruffles the grove. Smoke twirls from the last embers into the sunbeams.

Kara lingers at the cabin’s threshold after following a trail of black and red leading around the house.

Mother’s rotting corpse is sprawled on her bedroom floor. Oldest Sister lays on the hay mattress beside her, desiccated brains and shards of skull

plastered across the wall behind her head.

Kara smacks his head against the floor until a bloody circle adorns the crown of his head. He picks a splinter from his tattered hairline. The well of his tears runs dry.

Weeks pass and the spring thaw comes.

Sheets of rain pummel the ground. Kara stands outside and watches the last of the ashes seeping into the mud. He stuffs a pack with food, ammunition, and tools, slings a rifle over his shoulder, and treks north.

Kara is sixteen years old.

The whistle howls.

---

**KARA IS TWENTY-TWO YEARS** old.

Mill Town is muted without the hum of its grain elevators. There is no grain to run them. The Consumption is six years gone, but famines still hollow cheeks and snuff out lives. This year is a famine year.

Kara slides out from under his blanket. He shivers and groans. Ice coats the window sill of a once-abandoned apartment—but not anymore. It was his now.

He watches ragged people stalking the streets from his window, their eyes and stomachs bulging. Three droop their arms in front of themselves as they limp through Mill Town towards the city. A company of Imperial Soldiers guard the last grain warehouse. The soldiers distribute some food and eat the rest themselves.

Someone knocks on his door.

“Come in.”

A woman ducks into the room. She carries a bag.

“Hello Kara,” she says. “Where do you want it?”

Flat, pressed light beams filter through the window blinds, losing their bright luster as the hours pass.

“You must be hungry.”

Kara eats while the woman with the food passes out panting on the bed. Her eyes crack open.

“My husband should be the one fucking me like that.”

“He can’t.”

“You’d think a military man would at least be a good—”

Kara waves his hand in dismissal. “They get too fat eating stolen bread.”

He sits across from her on the bed. She gazes into his eyes and traces an amorphous, improvised shape on his chest three times.

“Come spoon me, handsome.”

“Never done it.”

“Your tongue is slithering like a snake.”

“I’m not lying.”

“Well, it doesn’t matter. Just come here.”

Kara lies down and the woman pulls him towards her.

“I like this.”

“Me too,” she says.

When Kara wakes, the woman with the wavy hair is gone. He stares at the creases she left in the sheets and sighs. He stands. The smell of the salted meat left on the table grabs his attention, and he eats a second meal.

---

**THE WEEKS COME AND** go as winter deepens. Kara treads in the snow behind the building. He empties his chamber pot and kicks snow over the shit and piss. Someone crunches up behind him: another squatter cocking his head.

“You’re lookin’ like a food hoarder.”

“I hunt.”

He narrows his eyes at Kara. “Why you in the city?”

“Safer.”

Kara grabs the man’s wrist and twists it the wrong way. He yelps, so Kara hits him in the face with his other hand—then pulls him closer.

“Any problems?”

“No, I’m sorry.”

Kara drops the man into the snow and wades back to the door without looking back.

Sirens wail. Kara glances out his window. A radio broadcast croaks from the town’s scattered speaker system.

“Our country has declared independence from the United Empire. All garrisons are expected to raise new banners when they receive them. We join our cousins across Cetea in their illustrious, courageous, and glorious struggle for freedom and dignity. The Imperial Board of Governors are now the National Board of Governors. They will keep order and ensure efficient food distribution. With your obedience to us and your town garrison, things will go smoothly. Return to your business.”

Kara sits at the window watching the one speaker placed in this neighborhood, bolted to the outside of a boarded-up school. During the announcement, people pass under it without a second glance—they keep shuffling towards wherever their destinations are. There’s a knock at the door.

The woman with the wavy hair slips into the room.

“Haven’t seen you in a few days,” Kara says as he stifles a smile.

She pretends not to notice. “I know, I couldn’t leave the barracks.”

“Over the table?”

“That’s a new one.”

Hours later they wake in a haze.

She wraps her leg around Kara’s torso.

“If the new government provides food, will you still fuck me?”

Kara fidgets with his shirt for a moment. “Sure.”

“Are you lying to me?”

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Kara curls into a sitting position and nuzzles his face into her chest. “No. I’m sorry. I’ve never had to talk so much before, it’s hard for me.”

She pauses. “If my husband gets transferred, I’m not leaving.”

“Good.”

Ralaga kisses him on the cheek.

Winter melts into the spring thaw. The soil in the valleys sponges up the water, which rushes down from the hills until the roads and fields turn to quagmires. No carts or trucks from the deep country appear at the town gates.

Foragers die in the barren fields among the weeds, their bodies sinking into the ravenous mud.

Government officials send trucks from the city hauling half-empty crates packed with half-spoiled food. Each truck spills into mud, the engines guzzling earthen sludge until they drown. Three trucks vanish completely.

Kara works as a porter hoisting boxes onto his head and walking them into town.

**RATIONS VANISH INTO THE** bellies of the soldiers and spring grass into the bellies of the townspeople. No one asks where the gravediggers get their meat.

Kara wanders the alleyways and streets, hopping over trickles of water that flow into ditches. He passes the barracks. A crowd points and murmurs. When he approaches, he sees Ralaga swinging from a speaker, the word “whore” carved into her chest.

The crates destined for the soldiers tumble from Kara’s arms, busting apart against the old cobblestone road like an armful of dry kindling. He stoops down and covers his face with his hands. Three women approach him. An old woman, with teeth ground flat or rotten, gawks at Kara.

“You were the lover, weren’t you?”

He stifles a sob.

“Yes.”

Kara stumbles past them.

When he gets home, he seizes a bottle of whiskey. Ralaga had given it to him as a present. He topples onto his bed and drinks half the bottle, then drifts asleep. When he wakes the sun is sinking.

He heaves the bottle through the window and smashes a chair. His shotgun rests under the bed. He loads four shells and throws the door open. He stomps through the sucking mud on the road, babbling to himself, then screams his jumbled thoughts into the sky:

“I’ll put him in the mud! The mud!” His voice rises until it breaks into a screeching howl.

“I’ll put that murdering leech in the mud!”

Three starving women with bleeding lips gape at him. Blood trickles into their mouths.

Kara looms over them.

“He’ll be the one, not me!”

Kara laughs.

He clammers over the barrack walls, slicing his arm on broken bottles baked into the concrete. He ambles through the grid of whitewashed buildings. Kara finds the captain standing on top of the wall, eyes closed, and stands behind him. Rage fills his mind and spreads through his body.

“You took her from me!”

The captain spins and Kara whacks him with the butt of the gun. He stumbles and collapses—one hand extended up towards Kara to block any more blows from the shotgun. When he realizes none are coming, he stands up.

“The gun’s still pointed at you.” Kara felt the anger heat his chest.

The sun boils and melts into the ridgeline behind the captain.

“So you’re the fucker who seduced my wife,” the captain says with a snarl.

Kara trembles with rage. “You’re the fucker who murdered his wife.”

The captain laughs.

Kara fills the captain’s chest with buckshot then smashes his head to mush. Three soldiers rush up a ladder and bound towards him. He points the shotgun at them and unloads his final three shells. One collapses off the wall. A half-dressed soldier with a club takes his place.

They beat him and tie a noose around his neck—stripping off the top layer of skin in the process.

The soldiers shove him off the wall and Kara begins kicking his feet as the rope squeezes the life from him. Blood soaks into the coarse fibers.

Kara’s vision fades, and the world begins to dissolve into an explosion of colors.

He feels Mother holding him, her face as it was when he was a baby.

He hears Father’s voice from eight winters ago, “I knew you could do it!”

Ralaga appears and wraps her arms around his shoulders.

He feels her lips press against his as he dies.

⚠ Story contains sexual content, violence and gore, and adult language.



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# Babysteps in Belief-Building

BY DAN GRILIOPOULOS

**A**S WORLDBUILDERS, WE know that worlds aren't just bricks and mortar. They're people, they're art, they're history.

Most pertinently to this article, they're ideas. One village or city is differentiated from the next as much by its physical infrastructure as by the thought processes that led to that infrastructure. Sure, Edinburgh sits upon a giant volcanic plug. But what differentiates it from Glasgow is more its people's concept of it as the capital, as the erstwhile seat of the Scottish Monarch and the concomitant cultural associations. The concept draws wealth and power. What differentiates it from London is as much igneous rock versus clay, as it is the concept of one being Scottish and the other English with their

assumed differentiations, true or not. These are differences of thought, and therefore, they are differences of philosophy.

## THE BASICS

Philosophy is a drive for understanding of universal questions, at levels stretching from the general to universal. However, *philosophies* are more complex, being sets of beliefs about how reality is structured. The study of philosophy results in philosophies—theories of being, ideas, moralities, and so on. Indeed, philosophy is the study that has produced most of the other branches of knowledge, such as the sciences, mathematics, and law.

Mass movements like religions, political parties, pressure groups, cultures, and nations tend to be motivated by associated philosophies of various types. These philosophies tend to assert things about how the world is or how it operates, along the lines of certain standard branches of philosophy. We'll go over these in more depth in a moment, but in the Western tradition these branches tend to be reduced to:

Logic, or what your philosophy deems to be coherent and valid reasoning and how it deals with incoherency.

Epistemology, the philosophy of what knowledge is and what we can know.

Metaphysics, or the philosophy of what reality is.

Ethics, or the study of what we should do, and who and what is of moral worth.

Politics, how should power be exercised, for whose benefit, and

**Already, with a few philosophical lines sketched [ ... ] we've created a unique society that would make for a solid, if dystopian, culture for worldbuilding.**

how that works off ethics—or, in many cases, doesn't.

So, for a random example: a given polity might agree that truth is only achieved through formalized public debate (logic) and that no truth can be found through introspection. They may then hold that knowledge is made up of publicly-debated hypotheses, and a hypothesis that achieves a majority of Elder votes is true (epistemology). As such, only in these

moments of debate are humans truly real, and outside them, we are but pale shadows of ourselves (metaphysics). From this, they may agree that it is acceptable to cheat and mislead other sentient beings outside of debate and for them to take revenge, but to perform either activity inside a formal debate is an ultimate sin (ethics). Finally, they may order that the political structures of the polity (for example, the state's monopoly on violence) should be focused on maintaining the purity of these debating arenas by restricting access and executing those who fail to meet their standards, whilst allowing the wider state to govern itself, and only enforcing those rules that the polity has voted to be true.

Already, with a few philosophical lines sketched in and no racial, geographical, historical, cartographical, or technological commitments, we've created a unique society that would make for a solid, if dystopian, culture for worldbuilding. An outsider from our world coming into a city following this philosophy might see it as dangerous, with property and life of little worth, and inflexible core laws. However, if they could somehow get access to the arena and convince enough of the citizens through debate, they could turn the state's power to their own ends. It is a nation easily led by demagogic orators.

These philosophies tend to assert things about how the world is or how it operates, along the lines of certain standard branches of philosophy.

## THE BRANCHES

### LOGIC & EPISTEMOLOGY

Logic is about ratiocination—that is, what constitutes correct reasoning. Though multiple logical systems have been conceived of, we are most familiar with the deductive—such as, “If A then B. A. Therefore B.” In terms of worldbuilding, though, it’s hard to use unfamiliar systems of reasoning given the difficulty in explaining them outside of our own rational structures.

What we can focus on are “premises.” Most philosophies are built on just a few core beliefs—such as the world being flat or that all humans are born equal or that god is made of flying spaghetti. How these premises work with one another, how they contradict one another, and how a philosophy’s system of logic treats contradiction are also useful tools for worldbuilding.

We can also look at how these philosophies come into being. Are they the product of scholarly inquiry by teachers, monks, wizards and the like? Or are they

the product of social wisdom, deduced without formal reasoning and rigor? To an astronomer, a planet is different from a star or comet as it moves across the heaven in predictable, repeatable ways; to a peon in a field, the same planet might be the evening star and morning star; and to a hierophant, it might be the corpse of an undead god imprisoned in the heavenly vault. The astronomer may entertain many theories; the peon may seize on whichever he conceives of first; the hierophant may receive an idea from a god or a book and be stalwart in its defense, against all evidence.

Given these differences, it’s also worth noting at this point two more elements. That a given culture’s philosophy doesn’t have to be either a) coherent or b) complete.

By “coherent,” I mean that the elements of a philosophy don’t have to make sense given our own standards of logic, or even by their own. For example, the Roman Catholic Church at one time believed both that all truth was

to be found in the New and Old Testaments and that the Bishop of Rome was infallible in his dictates. These two precepts could and did clash sometimes, and it was (and is) up to individuals in that religion and society to decide which elements of the philosophy they chose to adhere to. The richness an enshrined contradiction gives to a belief system and world cannot be understated.

By “complete,” I mean that a built culture doesn’t have to address every aspect of philosophy. It’s perfectly feasible to have cultural philosophies that say little or nothing about metaphysics, or disagree about it. For example, American pragmatism says nothing about the underlying structure of reality, nor does utilitarianism. A flat earther doesn’t have to say anything about general relativity. And so on.

Epistemology is the study of what knowledge is, what we can know, and how we acquire it. Obviously, this means it’s closely related to logic but is more focused on whether we can actually know

things at all. It’s harder to use in worldbuilding, but it does introduce the element of uncertainty—cultures that claim knowledge is impossible or that knowledge only comes from revelation would make for interesting aberrations. George Orwell’s *1984* has the ruling Party monopolizing all information, whilst making it so thoroughly censored and distorted that knowledge is abandoned in favor of adherence to their creed.

However, an element of epistemology also ties into linguistics. Wittgenstein argued that language itself constrains knowledge and logic—that language games around the words we use mean that some cultures tie themselves in logical knots trying to clarify concepts. For example, in French, “conscience” means both conscience and consciousness.<sup>1</sup> To an English scholar these are fundamentally distinct, but a French philosopher has to disentangle the concepts. Designers of conlangs can have great fun removing or mixing words to make concepts difficult to express—or going the other way, by giving a language a rich excess of them (for example, in England there are endless words for “small bread” (batch, bun, bap, barm, cob, roll, teacake, muffin, scuffer, stottie...)<sup>2</sup> or “rain” (drizzle, torrent, flurry, shower, deluge, downpour, “cats and dogs,” tipping, pissing, luther-ing, plothering, sheeting, raining stair-rods...)).<sup>3</sup>

### METAPHYSICS

Now, this is meaty stuff for worldbuilders. Metaphysics is the study of what *is* and reality itself. That is, the categories of being, objects and their traits, space and time, causation, and so on. It’s the precursor to modern science, chemistry, biology, and particularly fundamental physics.

So what are the fundamentals of reality in your world? How does your magic system work, and what distinguishes it from physics? Are there souls, daemons, and gods, and what distinguishes them from ordinary matter? Does the universe exist independently of minds, or does it require their presence to exist? How does an object or person remain themselves over time?

In our world, modern fundamental physics has narrowed the explanatory gaps where magic, souls, angels, and so forth could live—the god of the gaps has practically shrunk away. But that doesn’t mean your world has to be the same—this is the area of worldbuilding where you can come up with crazy fundamental rules that will have repercussions throughout your worlds.

### ETHICS & POLITICS

Whereas the other philosophical arenas can fundamentally affect the physical structures of your world, ethics and politics are about nothing physical—they are beliefs in people’s heads. (Or at least they are in our world—again, your metaphysics could have ideas and beliefs instantiated in the physical world.)

Ethics is the study of what we should do—that is, who and what is of moral worth, and what actions are good or evil. It’s a rich, deep field for worldbuilding, as it extends across all thinking beings, whatever their place in your cosmos. A god has an ethical stance, as does a dog. For our purposes, though, we should look at larger-scale ethics and how they are enacted—which edges into politics.

The three main ethical strands focus on: how to maximize happiness (utilitarianism); how to be the best person (virtue ethics); and how to do the right thing (deontology or duty ethics). Different ethical theories have combined these and there is some overlap, but many constructed societies follow some combination of them. Others instead eschew a true ethical position, opting for a pragmatist or relativist philosophy where whatever is useful to survival is true.

Once a culture has an ethical theory, politics can be construed as the activity of enforcing it over

## A STEP-BY-STEP GUIDE TO CREATING YOUR WORLD'S PHILOSOPHIES

### STARTING POINTS

Decide where you're going to start. Philosophies can be introduced as a tool in worldbuilding at any stage of the process. My personal preference is to conceive of them as I create any significant social group in my world, to give them an ethos. Whatever point you introduce them at, think of the storytelling feel you want this group to have, then choose premises for them to share.

### GO WIDER

Next, think what this combination of premises would say about each area of philosophy. What does it say about epistemology, metaphysics, or ethics? At this point, I'd consider whether you can invert any of the elements or deliberately introduce contradictions to create struggles inside that philosophy. For example, my metaphysics says that words cannot mislead, as each is a fragment of a perfect divine truth; yet my pragmatist ethics says that liars are liars and they must be punished. How can lies exist alongside a perfect language?

### ETHICS AND POLITICS

How would these nascent philosophies affect politics? What societal fractures would appear from different interpretations and conflicts inside and between philosophies? Would it result in class structures or do the class structures cut across philosophies?

the dissonant ethical theories in your world. Some cultures have “inalienable” rights and concomitant duties with clear boundaries. Others are totalitarian, with the rulemakers able to intrude into any part of a person's life and even claim control over their thoughts—what Orwell called “thoughtcrime” in *1984*.

And then there is hypocrisy—the public statement of a society's or person's ethics balanced against actual behavior and actions. The superb worldbuilder Ursula K. Le Guin wrote a short story, “Those Who Walk Away from Omelas.” It perfectly models a society that has a certain public ethical stance, but is built on a private repudiation of it and how individuals in that society choose to cope—or “walk away.”

## PHILOSOPHY AS WORLDBUILDING FUNDAMENTAL

Hopefully, I've demonstrated how the study of philosophy is a fruitful tool with which to approach worldbuilding. Its branches—epistemology, metaphysics, logic, and especially ethics/politics—each bring a different angle to constructed cultures and thought systems, whether they're coherent or in conflict. Philosophically rich worlds are endless engines for character motivation and conflict.

At each level of a society, at each scale of a society, there is room for the interaction and clashing of different philosophies and moralities. A world, a country, a nation, a religion, a tribe, a village, a school, a language, a family. All can have different philosophies in conflict with one another; in gossip, in politics, in debate, in war. They can be incoherent, incomplete, messy, and personal. So much richness can be built for your worlds, without saying anything about the world itself.

### ENDNOTES

- 1 Sandor Goodhart, “Conscience, Conscience, Consciousness,” essay in *Remembering for the Future* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2001), 1024–39, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-66019-3\\_68](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-1-349-66019-3_68).
- 2 Katie Mather, “Bun! A Taxonomy of the British Bread Roll,” *Pellicle*, February 4, 2024, <https://www.pelliclemag.com/home/2021/2/15/bun-a-taxonomy-of-the-british-bread-roll>.
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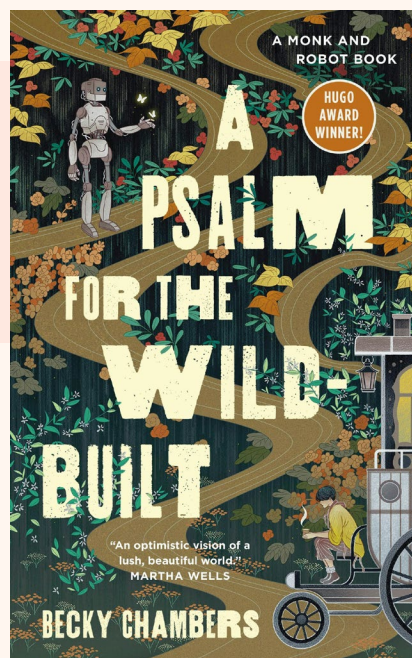
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**PICKED BY**  
Zaivy Luke-Alemán

This pleasing book was just what I needed on my days off. With a cup of tea and a warm blanket I was able to enjoy the setting of Panga. When robots gained sentience hundreds of years ago, they decided to recede from the realm of their creators to immerse themselves in a world outside of human design. In their absence, the human landscape has changed significantly, which has coincided

with the decline of crickets on the human half of Panga. Much of the world is seen through the eyes of our protagonist, a monk named Dex. The story mostly explores Dex's relationship with himself, but also weaves in major philosophical elements of the setting. Once our monk realizes they have never heard that chirp outside of recordings, they are driven to travel in search of that elusive sound.



## SCAVENGERS REIGN

**CREATOR**  
Joseph Bennett & Charles Huettner

**PUBLISHED**  
HBO Max (2023)

**FORMAT**  
TV Series

**PICKED BY**  
Zaivy Luke-Alemán

*Scavengers Reign* is the happy place for worldbuilders interested in biology and ecosystems. Within the setting, characters get a sense of nature that well reflects both the isolating horror of it as well as awe-inspiring wonder. The characters live in this breathing environment within a largely (though not

exclusively) man vs. nature tale. For those who know anything about symbiotic or parasitic relationships, are intrigued by magic fungi, or daydream about weather systems and their catastrophic effects on an environment, I highly recommend this immersive worldbuilder's dream come true.

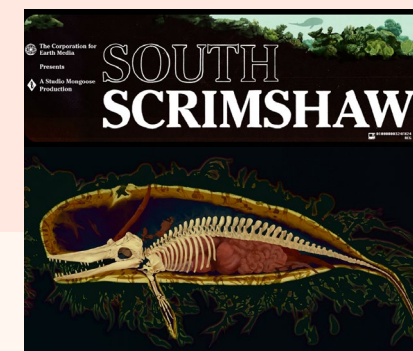
## SOUTH SCRIMSHAW, PART ONE

**CREATOR**  
Nathan O. Marsh

**PUBLISHED**  
Nathan O. Marsh (2023)

**FORMAT**  
Visual Novel/Video Game

**PICKED BY**  
M. E. White



Formatted like a nature documentary, *South Scrimshaw, Part One* takes you on a fascinating emotional journey through the life of a Brillo whale, starting from birth and ending mid-adolescence. Brilllos are a fictional species, living on a fictional planet recently colonized by humans. As such, they bear no relationship to Earth's whales, and are only called whales for similarities that are certainly the result of convergent evolution. That said, the Brilllos have a distinct adaptation which sets them apart: the ability to consciously cultivate their own symbiotic relationships with almost any species, in a way which fundamentally changes their anatomy and

survival strategies. This quality coupled with cetacean-level intelligence allows Brilllos to occupy diverse niches. This experimental visual novel tells a narrative filled with all the drama, beauty, and danger the natural world has to offer, packed into about an hour; it's also a compelling coming-of-age story. *South Scrimshaw, Part One* is available for free on Steam and itch.io, and I couldn't recommend it more to readers/players who love animals and enjoy well-thought out biology in science fiction, as well as any fans of the visual novel format. I personally cannot wait for Part Two, whose release date is yet to be announced.

## HERCULES IS DEAD

**CREATOR**  
Michael Karpati

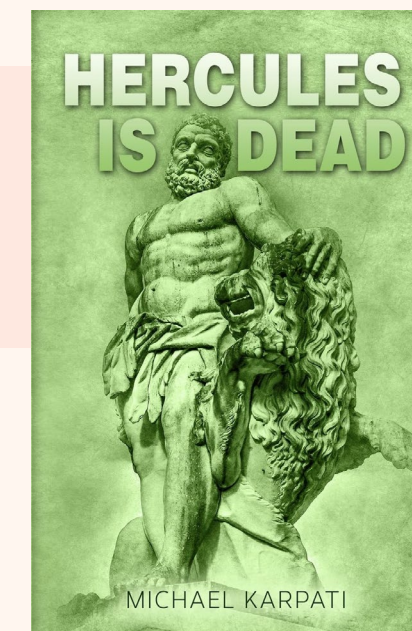
**PUBLISHED**  
August 2023

**FORMAT**  
Book (novella)

**PICKED BY**  
Obi-Wan Karpati

A fantasy-mystery hybrid, *Hercules is Dead* imagines a world in which the ancient pantheons are real, and the gods are living among us as a part of modern society. When Hercules is found murdered in Toronto, the pantheons send emissaries to discover what hap-

pened to him—lest it also happen to them. Such a story enables the ancient gods to be recontextualized, and the world to be subtly altered to suit their presence, creating a society that is both familiar and distinct from our own.







## NEW SUNS 2: ORIGINAL SPECULATIVE FICTION BY PEOPLE OF COLOR

**CREATOR**  
Nisi Shawl (editor)

**PUBLISHED**  
Solaris (2023)

**FORMAT**  
Book (anthology)

**PICKED BY**  
Zaivy Luke-Alemán

After having this sit on my shelf for too long, I finally picked it up for a long trip on the subway. When I read the first story, I was stunned by how it fit into some of my recent thoughts about philosophy and worldbuilding. One thing I was hoping to see in this issue is how philosophy explores perspectives on reality. While watching *Oppenheimer*, I found it interesting that quantum theory was made up of ideas that at the time had yet to be observed, forcing theorists to question the reality

in which people were engaged in. The opening story of *New Suns*'s second volume explores just that; philosophical ideas about reality, the observed, and quantum physics. All this within the context of machine learning, an increasingly relevant phenomenon within our own world. I was pleased to realize I would enjoy the second volume of *New Suns* as much as the first. *New Suns* is an anthology of short stories written by people of color, all within the realm of speculative fiction. Definitely recommend!

## LOOKING FOR SOME INSPIRATION?

#worldbuilding-wednesday

- 1 What is something unexpected that inspired or changed your worldbuilding?
- 2 What are some settings, ideas, or other worldbuilding elements/tropes you would like to see explored more thoroughly?
- 3 How has visiting or researching foreign cultures affected your worldbuilding?

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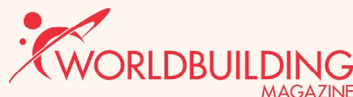


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# Ask Us Anything

BY B. H. PIERCE



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

## CRAZYCAN: Worldbuilding, Top-down or Bottom-up?

Someday I must find out the arcane and byzantine process my editors use to provide me with the vaguest questions possible. However, this time they have made a mistake, this question has a very basic answer. Bottom up. Always bottom up. Building a world from the bottom up is superior because it mimics the actual, real-life process of worldbuilding. Every world we know of has started with something small, a mote of dust that slowly gathered other motes of dust to it. Each tree of evolution began with simple one-celled organisms that slowly made themselves more and more complex as time marched on. By

worldbuilding bottom up, you ensure that your works will always have a solid foundation, because you must begin with your foundation and work your way up. Beginning small and building up will always and forever be the superior option.

However, and I am loath to admit it, while Bottom-Up Worldbuilding may be the best option forever and always, it is not always the *right* option.

Not all worlds are meant to be massive endeavors containing thousands of interlocking facets. If the world is being built not for the experience alone, but to support some work of fiction, top down can serve your

needs better in this regard. Stories have a finite word count, video games have a limited amount of storage, and tabletop gamers have a miniscule amount of attention. To work within these boundaries, building your world from the top down will be the most efficient way to go about it. If your story never visits a certain city, there's no need to detail its history. If there's no crafting mechanic in a video game, there's no need to know where to place mineral deposits and plant populations. If no one is playing a bard in your DnD game, there's no reason to work in musical traditions to the campaign. A bottom-up world will be the most like a true world, but not all projects need a true world to be successful.

**IG:**  
**How do you construct trade routes across the oceans or rivers? Whenever I look at a map the distribution of cities and routes between them seems random and changes according to criteria that I don't understand. What makes a location good for trade over any other place?**

Both of these questions have very different answers. The first about building trade routes across the ocean requires knowledge of the motion of the planets, the second means delving into the power of markets. Both are powerful, almost fundamental forces. Knowing how they work will help you be a better worldbuilder.

To build a trade route across an ocean, you must have knowledge of ocean currents and the winds that accompany them. On worlds with vast oceans, the rotation of the planet will create currents of wind and water that will drive seawater to circulate around the oceans and seas. Though not visible to the naked eye, these currents have a large effect on travel across the waves and mariners will figure out how to use them. One example of this is the use of the North Atlantic Gyre in the Triangle Trade. This gyre is a combination of currents that flow in a giant circle in the North Atlantic Ocean. Rather than attempt to sail against the currents, sailors used them to propel their ships faster, creating well-established routes from port to port.

Now, this has already answered part of your question. A good location for oceanic trade is near these currents, but that is a very large-scale geographical concern. Smaller and equally important ones will be very, very local. Aspects like the quality of the harbor, access to fresh water, how flood-prone the land is, how defensible it is—all these things (and more) will affect the viability of a trade port growing in certain locations. Being located at the mouth of a river is a great predictor for the presence of a city. Not only does it provide fresh water, but a river with few rapids or waterfalls means that merchants can easily send their goods upstream to markets further inland.

So now we know half of the formula for a good trading hub. Access to natural transport links like rivers and ocean currents, coupled with favorable local geography. However, these will mean nothing if there are no goods to move through the trade routes. To be broad, there are two types of goods that will move along a trade route, natural goods and manufactured goods. Natural goods are a product of nature, such as wheat, corn, livestock, natural cloth like cotton or jute, stone, ore, timber—anything that can be harvested from nature. A city near areas where goods like these can be produced in great volumes easily will be a hub for trade. Now, it is true that harvesting all of these requires human labor, but the bulk of their production is taken care of by nature. The next type, manufactured goods, are mostly produced by people and are just as broad as natural goods. Metal, fabric, music, books, paint, weapons, ships, medicine, and many more. A place with easy access to the material a manufactured good is made of will likely gravitate towards making those goods. The final ingredient in this formula is demand. Suppose a certain type of plant grows in abundance near a town and it makes an excellent spice. Trade will only happen if that spice becomes valuable to people further afield and they are willing to spend money and effort to get a hold of it.

In conclusion, view a trade route as if it is a river. There is a great deal of

stuff that needs to go somewhere and it will take the easiest route possible to get there. This does not mean traversing a trade route need be easy, only worth the risk. The ocean is perhaps the most dangerous environment to humans, completely hostile in almost every way. But that never stopped anyone from nailing together some planks and setting out with a cargo to sell in some distant land. Merchants and mariners will search for the most reliable way to move their goods from point A to point B. Those reliable routes will become the trade routes of your world.

**ANON:**  
**How can I use Philosophers in my worldbuilding? Not philosophy, but the guys that come up with it.**

The nature of Philosophers has changed over the thousands of years that term has been around, so let's start with a definition. For the purposes of this answer, a Philosopher is someone who spends their life contemplating relations between the metaphysical things like the human mind, society, and nature. Whether these encompass religious topics is something we will not discuss here, as I can hear my editor's blood pressure rising already. So for short, how can you use people who spend all their time pondering the mysteries of the universe in your worldbuilding.

Dead Philosophers are very useful for the lore of your world. As

people who enjoy writing letters to each other and writing things down in general, their correspondence and records have a good chance of standing the test of time. As educated people, they often find themselves in positions of power or at least adjacent to them and have a chance to influence people making decisions. A highly successful Philosopher may be so influential that their ideas become the focus of entire societies. For example, you will find Confucian ethics and ideas heavily debated, practiced, scorned, and rehabilitated for centuries in East Asia and further abroad.

However, these are Dead Philosophers, who differ very little from other influential characters that appear in the lore of your world. Living Philosophers can offer some very interesting things to your world. To start off with, thinking does not pay well, so a Philosopher will need a source of income. In many cases, this takes the form of a patron, someone who subsidizes basic needs so the Philosopher can focus on the important things. Patrons can be wealthy individuals, who either are deeply committed to new ideas or likes having someone smart around to show off at parties. An institution like a state or university can be a patron, paying the bills in hopes the Philosopher will produce something

of value. A Patron can be a protector as well, especially if their Philosopher is an advocate of dangerous new ideas. As all worlds everywhere are forever in a state of flux and change, people pondering these changes can be a source of great dynamism in a culture. Or they can be a source of stability as they fight for the preservation of old ideas. Which one is on the right side, of course, is up to you.

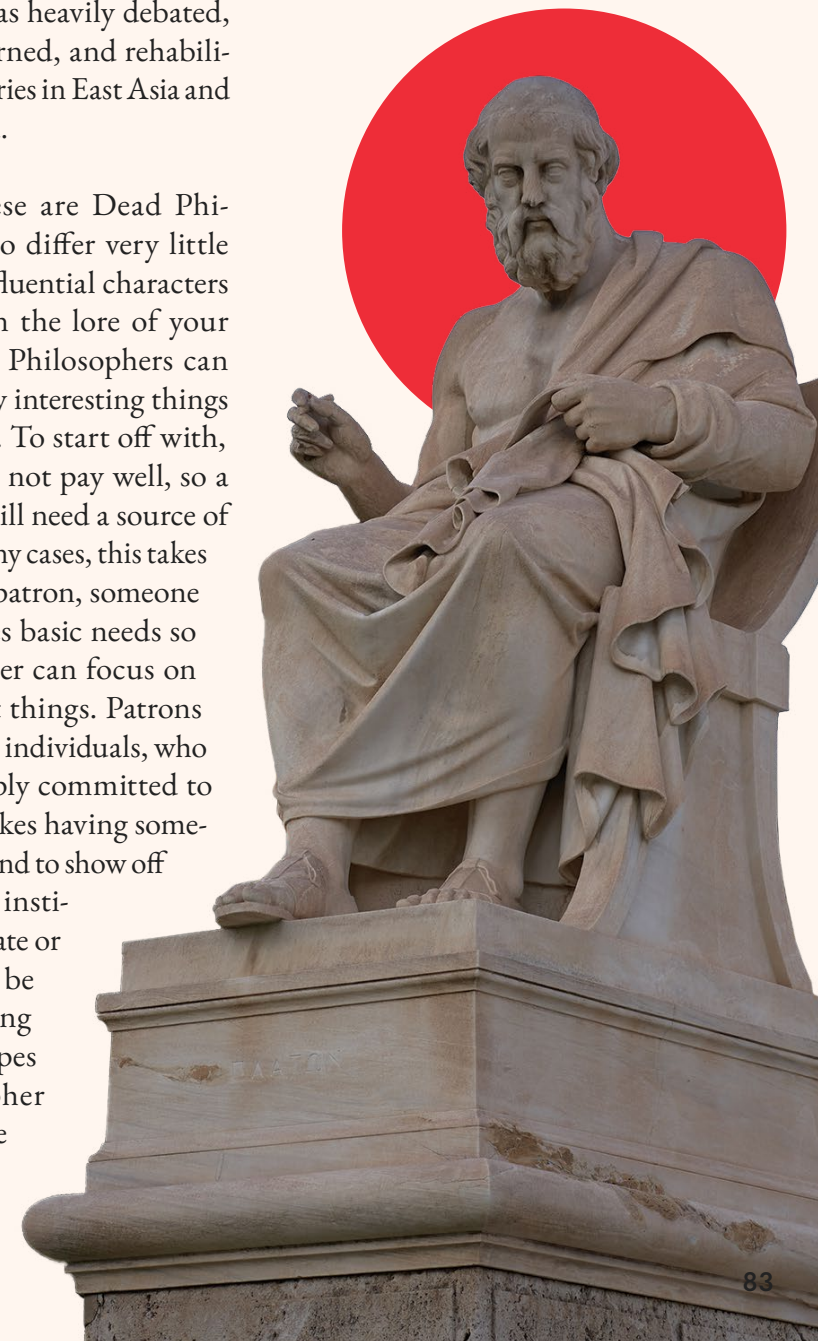


PHOTO COURTESY: GEORGE E. KORONAIOS

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