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**20 Worldbuilding in Role-Playing Games**

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Whether you are creating a fantasy role-playing game (RPG), science fiction live-action RPG (larp), seafaring tabletop RPG (TRPG), or a vampire multiplayer online RPG (MORPG), one of the first practices in the process is the creation of the fictional universe, or world, from which the stories, perspectives, and roles emerge. This practice is called worldbuilding.

Worldbuilding is just that—creating a fictional world. It constitutes of both the “act of designing and constructing believable fictional universes” (Dowd et al., 2013, p. 21) and the “process of creating a universe “that links together individual stories scattered across multiple media” (von Stackelberg, 2011, p. 79). As such, worldbuilding enables what Samuel Taylor Coleridge in 1817 famously called “willing suspension of disbelief” as a precondition of poetry: a reader’s willingness to accept the author’s vision of otherwise unbelievable times, places, worlds, or characters. (Dowd et al., 2013, p. 21). In other words, the audience must willingly step into that new world, even if it makes no sense within their own world. Worldbuilding is an essential component of RPGs. In fact, a desire to be immersed in a new world is a primary motivation for many players.

***Worldbuilding: The act of designing and constructing believable fictional universes***

Callout 20.1: Worldbuilding

In his seminal study *As If* , Michael Saler (2012) explains worldbuilding as an attempt to “re-enchant” our own everyday reality or “primary world” with intensively detailed fictional, “secondary worlds.” The pivotal epoch in which worldbuilding transformed into what we recognize it as today took place between 1883, with Robert Louis Stevenson’s *Treasure Island* and the inauguration of the so-called New Romance literary movement (Saler, 2012, p. 67), and 1917, when sociologist Max Weber gave his famous lecture on modernity’s “disenchantment of the world” (Saler, p. 8). *Treasure Island* famously featured a map Stevenson created with “engineer’s exactitude,” which facilitated the reader to imagine herself into the fictional world. The New Romance movement, encompassing figures such as Stevenson, Lord Dunsany and Jules Verne, used riffs on new scientific and engineering knowledge to bring the reader into closer contact with their fictional propositions. Saler cautions us, and explains that we should not conceive of the reader as being tricked by this aesthetic illusion. Rather, an active reader uses a *willing activation of pretense* (instead of the more passive *willing suspension of disbelief*) to pretend their way into the fictional time-space in exchange for a deeper, child-like enjoyment of its splendor. The willing act of pretense relies on Weber’s assertion that we would otherwise be imprisoned in a kind of “iron cage” of modernity—one that had measured, bureaucratized, and eradicated any meaning in the world. An *ironic imagination* permits a reader a loophole through which one can escape the boring calculability of the primary world into the exciting intentionality (and emergent properties) of the secondary world. Saler’s prime examples of expert secondary world creators include Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (with Sherlock Holmes), H.P. Lovecraft (with his Cthulhu mythos), and J.R.R. Tolkien (with Middle Earth). Together, the genres of science fiction, speculative fiction, and fantasy across media play a central role in worldbuilding as a cultural practice (Bainbridge, 2010). Rosenblatt explains that the act of reading involves a type of co-creative worldbuilding performance, and leads to “the creation of a dynamic, alternative reality- one that requires the active participation, or even performance, of the reader in creating ‘the poem’ that results” (Rogers, 1999, p.140).

In a sense, worldbuilders like Doyle, Lovecraft, or Tolkien play “God” in that they are creating a brand new world, its stories, and its physical, mythological, social, and fantasy aspects. The worlds that are created can range from a tiny ant farm in a parallel ant universe, to a jungle of giants in a made-up monkey kingdom. As Noah Wardrip-Fruin (2014) writes, “Sometimes these fictional worlds closely resemble our own. Others are speculative and represent realities far-removed from the world we know. Either way, most fictional worlds present us with lenses with which to view familiar aspects of our own that have been accentuated, transformed, and lain bare”.

In RPGs, the world provides the raw material and constraints that shape the possible roles, and provides a playground in which to experience and enact these roles. While specific stories can emerge from the world, the world itself acts as a substrate and home base where one’s role can play and interact. Often, worldbuilding *is* the gameplay in RPGs, or a central part of it: in TRPGs such as *Microscope* (2011) or *The Quiet Year* (2012) described below, or in larps such as *Revived* (2014) or *New World Magischola* (2016), in which players are given broad license to determine major aspects of the world.

Worldbuilding involves not just imagining a new world, but also creating materials that instantiate it, such as writing timelines, drawing up maps, filling dictionaries with new languages, populating a religion with detailed mythology, realizing the technologies and artistic pieces of this new world as 2D or 3D assets, or even creating new races, ethnicities, cultures and subcultures in fictional travel guides and bestiaries. These practices and genres have become so commonplace in RPGs that many audiences *expect* them in new games, particularly ones set in fantasy, science fiction and speculative fiction genres. RPGs imply the invention and simulation of other realities. The term “role-playing game” that eventually emerged in the 1970s had been competing with the term FRP, or “fantasy role play.” RPGs have spawned entire subgenres not just of world-describing materials (so-called supplements, manuals, or expansions), but also of guides for creating them. Some RPGs even have rule systems and tools for generating new worlds, such as tables for randomly creating maps and encounters, digital map editors, or procedural content generation software (Smith, 2015).

In this chapter, we describe the major models of worldbuilding, the components and process of worldbuilding, and the central tensions, as well as the best practices of worldbuilding, with special attention to the connection between RPGs and worldbuilding.

# Major Concepts in Worldbuilding

Before moving forward, we need to define a few key terms central to the discussion of worldbuilding. First, people speak of many different types of worlds, such as “fictional world,” “secondary world,” “storyworld,” “backworld,” “possible world,” “virtual world,” and “transmedia world.” They also refer to key components and qualities of fictional worlds, such as “mythos,” “ethos,” and “topos,” “colour,” and “worldness.”

***Fictional world: An internally consistent world, either an alternate version of our own or otherwise, that has been imagined for the purposes of fictional storytelling.***

***transmedia world – A fictional world that invites its participants and consumers to experience it across multiple platforms.***

Callout 20.2: Fictional World

A *fictional world* is an internally consistent world, either an alternate version of our own or otherwise, that has been imagined for the purposes of fictional storytelling. It is a “system of non-real but possible states….created by the text, of objects, individuals, space, time, events, regularities, etc” (Eder, Jannidis & Schneider, 2011, p. 7). J. R. R. Tolkien coined the terms “secondary world” or “subcreation” to describe consistent fictional worlds in contrast to the real or “primary” world (see also Benton, 1983; 1992; Tolkein, 1947). Tolkien considered his world Arda, where the continent of Middle-Earth is located, to be such a secondary world. Like characters in a novel, secondary worlds should have their own internal logic, consistency, and richness of life, granting them some autonomy vis-à-vis their creators. Their “scenery” of geography, characters, languages, timelines etc. should make the characters and stories they host believable. Tolkein explains that, “The story-maker. . . makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true.’ . . . You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside.” (Tolkein, 1947/1965, p. 37, quoted in Rogers, 1999, p. 139). Tolkien also popularized the term “*mythopoeia” or mythopoesis*, literally “myth-making,” to describe the genre of fiction that creates a fictional mythology (see Nagy, 2004).

Likewise, Mark J.P. Wolf has called worldbuilding a type of “subcreation,” which “refers to both *process* and *product* … [involving] new combinations of existing concepts, which, in the building of a secondary world, become the inventions that replace or reset Primary World defaults (for example, new flora and fauna, new languages, new geography, and so forth)” (Wolf 2012, p. 24). Though transmedia subcreation pre-dates the computer—Wolf calls *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) the first true transmedia property—the rise of modern computing informs much of the language we use to describe it. For example, Wolf uses the technical term “secondary world infrastructures” to refer to imagined maps, timelines, genealogies, natural beings, culture, language, mythology, and philosophy created in concert with one another. Marie-Laure Ryan uses similar computational language when she talks of “metaleptic machines” that produce secondary worlds (Ryan 2006, 204-230). For instance, she explains that we now have algorithms that can rapidly produce fictions with their own physics and lifeblood, which encourages “interpenetration” between primary and secondary worlds.

***Storyworld: The constructed, sensual world in which the events of a story takes place. Can be fictional or non-fictional. Also known as the diegesis.***

Callout 20.3: Storyworld

In contrast to fictional or secondary worlds, a *storyworld* can be fictional or nonfictional, or have components of each. The storyworld is the constructed, sensation-filled world in which the events of a story take place, and it is also known as the “diegesis” of a text (Genette, 1980). Wholly unfamiliar storyworlds may require a reader or player to adapt to a new environment and its rules. Familiar storyworlds, such as those of popular franchises like *Star Wars*, save the recipient a great deal of cognitive load by having the same world serve as a backdrop for many different stories (Ryan and Thon, 2014). Storyworlds afford specific genre tropes; a high school on Mars would imply themes of adolescence and the isolation of an inhospitable planet. A vampire-dominated urban area implies a predator-prey dynamic and shadowy conspiracies. A bunker in the post-nuclear computer role-playing game (CRPG) *Fallout* (1997) suggests themes of safety and survival amid a dangerous post-nuclear environment and the remains of the past. Storyworlds typically embrace some type of mythology, or lore and an internal logic that explain why some things in the world happen while others do not. For example, in the CRPG series *Dragon Age* (2009),you can play as mage elves or Templar humans (among other things), and the explanation how magic, religion, and races relate is part of the game’s mythology.

Similar to the concept of “backstory,” literary scholars speak of the “*backworld*” of a storyworld that encompasses the information or history of events that lead up to the “present” state of a world, or the “unseen story that informs all of your characters’ decisions and actions” (Weiland, 2009, para. 7). This could include anything from the construction of Hogwarts in the *Harry Potter* universe (1997–)to the first unleashing of the Reapers in the *Mass Effect* CRPG series (2007–). It is the world that existed prior to how the world functions in some fictive “now” state, usually fixed by a particular canonical story. A backworld may be revealed directly or indirectly, and it may or may not be explicit within stories. The CRPG *Demon’s Souls* (2009) is an example of a non-explicit backworld. Oftentimes, it is established to maintain consistency, continuity, and provide a rationale for the “current” state of the world, as well as motivators for its characters. If a backworld is not established right away, it may need to be created or activated later, a process called “retcon” or retroactive continuity (Wolf, 2012).

***Possible world: Emerging from the realms of logic and philosophy, a possible world is a version of our world that may or may not exist in a broader multiverse. Many possible worlds include the use of alternate histories, geographies, and scientific laws. The use of logical conjecture and the imagination of cause-effect relations are pivotal in possible world creation, as the natural consequences that we’d surmise about a given alternative state of affairs also govern the main points of difference in the world from our own. Possible worlds may adopt the veneer of scientific, logical accuracy, although are no more free of prevailing social ideologies than any other human creation.***

Callout 20.4: Possible World

The concept of “possible worlds” emerges from logic and philosophy; it involves proposed versions of our world that may or may not exist in a broader multiverse, or multiple universes that exist side-by-side (Menzel, 2016). Possible worlds are mostly like ours, but have something slightly different about them. These things could be infinitesimal, such as a coffee cup shifted slightly to the left, or cosmic, such as having 28 planets in our solar system. In philosophy, the use of logical conjecture and imagination around cause-effect relations allow one to picture the rippling butterfly effects of this proposed difference. Though such worlds could be posited as more “logical” or scientific, they are no freer of prevailing social ideologies than other human creations.

***Virtual world – A virtual world is a simulated environment that can be experienced by one or more users. Virtual worlds are typically associated with computer graphical representation of topography, motion, and figures, with which a user has at least limited interaction. Also associated with the connectivity of the Internet and multiple, simultaneous inhabitation by multiple users who can communicate with one another***

Callout 20.5: Virtual World

A virtual world is a simulated environment that can be experienced by one or more users (Bartle, 2003). Virtual worlds are typically associated with computer-generated, mostly audiovisual representations of spaces with objects and actors with which a user has at least limited interaction. However, as the typically text-based Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs) demonstrate, virtual worlds can also be simulated in other forms. Today, many virtual worlds use computing and networking capabilities to be persistent and multi-user: the world continues to exist and evolve even if we exit it, and it can be simultaneously inhabited by multiple users.

***Transmedia Storytelling: The act of consciously telling a story across multiple platforms. A transmedia storyteller will often assume that the participant/consumer of the fiction will have gleaned some details about the storyworld and its characters from some other platform.***

Callout 20.6: Transmedia Storytelling

Transmedia stories are stories told across multiple media, such as television shows, books, video games, websites, and on-the-ground events. Transmedia stories, which are “told across these platforms, interlock and interlace—if you remove one platform, you do not just remove one story element or one character, but you remove a portion of the overall experience.” (Schrier, 2016, p. 1). For example, *The Matrix* (1999-2003) is told across three movies, an animated series, comics, and video games. Although each component tells a standalone story; the stories together create a transmedia experience that is greater than the sum of its parts, and provide new perspectives to each standalone story. Along these lines, the term “transmedia world” refers to fictional worlds that invite audiences to experience them across multiple platforms or media formats (Jenkins, 2006). Together, transmedia storytelling and worldbuilding involve consciously telling a story and building a world across multiple platforms. A major challenge for transmedia storytellers is that each audience member will come into a particular story with different amounts of knowledge about the general storyworld and its characters, and may continue to learn more about the storyworld from other media in the future. Effective transmedia stories create, stem from, or contribute to a holistic transmedia storyworld, but remain self-contained and satisfying on their own (Rutledge, 2011; Jenkins, 2006).

***Transmedia World: Describes a storyworld that exists across multiple platforms, such as games, comics, and television. Examples of popular transmedia universes include Star Wars and the Marvel universe, but can also include any number of role-playing products such as Dungeons & Dragons. Although the stories within the transmedia world differ, the general timeframe and space of the world remains constant and requires extensive, fictional multimedia elaboration and documentation.***

Callout 20.7: Transmedia World

Klastrup and Tosca (2004, 2016) have teased out three important elements standard to all fictional worlds: mythos, topos, and ethos. Mythos is the “backstory of all backstories—the central knowledge one needs to have in order *to interact with or interpret events in the world successfully*” (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004, p. 412). A world has a strong mythos when the central conflicts, figures, rumors, creatures, and objects of note reinforce each other. In the world of *Cyberpunk 2020* (1990), for example, a timeline walks the readers year-by-year through technological advancements and waypoints of social decay and corporate dominance. 2020, the current year of the storyworld, then becomes the year that high technology meets social decay and corporate dominance.

Topos describes the “setting of the world in a specific historical period and detailed geography. … From the player’s perspective, we can say that knowing the topos is knowing *what is to be expected from the physics of and navigation in the world*” (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004, p. 412). TRPG *The 13th Age* (2013), for example, contains a glossy full-colored map of the Dragon Empire, clustered around The Midland Sea and bordered by The Iron Sea. As Klastrup and Tosca note, “the actual space and time of an actualization of the transmedial world can be changed, but the general space and time of the universe is normally unchangeable” (Klastrup & Tosca, 2004, p. 412). While Steampunk worlds may evolve, inhabitants of these worlds cannot jump ahead in time 150 years to see future advances from steampunk technology, for doing so would destroy the internal consistency of the world.

Ethos delineates the “good and bad” elements of the world, a “form of knowledge required in order to know *how to behave* in the world” (Klastrup and Tosca, 2004, p. 412). In our world, for example, euthanasia is often frowned upon. In the dystopia of *Logan’s Run* (1976), however, euthanasia is called “Carousel” and is ritualized when citizens turn 30. Ethos defines the grounds for internal character struggle over moral issues within any narratives that would take place within the world. For instance, in the *Star Wars* universe, Luke Skywalker must not succumb to the Dark Side of the Force.

“Color” describes the richness and quality of detail that helps the audience to more fully believe that a created world is an actual world they can embody and embrace (Edwards, 2003). The more color, the more others are able to imagine and co-envision it, and to also empathize with its characters and situations. Color is present in both explicit ways such as specific character tags in *Spirit of the Century* (2006) and other FATE games, and in implicit, less direct and unstructured ways, such as entailed in the description of objects or characters. Apart from fleshing a world out and making it believable, color is also crucial in evoking mood, emotions, and caring (Gargiulo, 2012).

# Worldbuilding and RPGs

Worldbuilding is often an integral component of RPGs, whether conducted by designers, players, or both in tandem. Game designers and game masters are worldbuilders by definition, fleshing out a fictional world in code, words, or physical props. In some RPGs, players are inextricably involved in the worldbuilding, such that the game only exists once the world is created by its players.

Why is worldbuilding so important to RPGs? Player immersion in a secondary world—rather than cognitive estrangement from either it or our own—is a common motivator and aesthetic ideal of RPGs (Murray, 1997; Calleja, 2011; Torner and White, 2012; Wolf 2013). Referring back to Saler’s (2012) notion of worldbuilding as re-enchantment, both analog and digital role-players try to actively and willingly “trick [themselves] into creating interesting things” (Ravachol, 2013), thanks to well-engineered design techniques that supports such immersion. For instance, adventures are often written in the second-person, a time-honored method of situating the players themselves (beyond their characters) in the secondary world (Cover, 2010, p. 107).

Klastrup and Tosca (2004) argue that storyworlds rely on semiotic and narrative cues to immerse the player. To feel authentic, they require a certain degree of fidelity to both our own world (in terms of physics, the look of flora and fauna, etc.) and “core elements of the ur-world,” the original setting of the story universe, to make immersion work (Klastrup and Tosca, 2004, p. 415). As Jessie Verino (2010) frames it, worldbuilding is also about creating a hospitable space: “Worldbuilding is so much more than creating a planet in a galaxy far, far away. Writers must take the foreign, the alien, the unfamiliar, and make it resonate with readers. Readers should feel welcome in the world created, not like an outsider or spectator. They need to identify with the characters, be they humanoid, demon, angel, vampire, were, or an alien form of life. Simply stated, the writer must make the unbelievable believable”.

How do we design these new worlds in an immersive, believable manner? The process of creating a world and its stories, characters, and “worldness,” or the trait of feeling like a world, is complex and involves many layers of production, interactions among people, and iteration. The goal of worldbuilding is to establish and define the context for a story, set of stories, regardless of how they will be told (e.g., through a book, game, larp). Other goals of worldbuilding are establishing consistency and reliability of the stories, particularly to establish its trustworthiness, and it is also to provide a sense of immersion and engagement for the audience.

Different forms of RPGs incorporate and approach worldbuilding differently, particularly in terms of who does the worldbuilding—designer/writer, player, or both. We will now summarize the different major role-playing game forms and how each form typically delegates or establishes worldbuilding.

## The RPG Player as Worldbuilder

RPGs always concern the agency of the player **(see chapter 27)**. Some games intend the player to have full agency over world creation as well. In a “bottom-up” approach, designers provide the initial components of the world or give prompts and rules for creation, but the players ultimately discuss and co-create the world collectively, either in the course of gameplay or as the core of gameplay itself. A world is built each time a new version of the game is played, or a world is shaped over time and over many plays of the game, such that the ultimate world that is generated has evolved well past the initial sketches.

As examples of RPGs with worldbuilding as the central activity, consider *Microscope* and *The Quiet Year*. *Microscope* (2011)calls itself a “fractal role-playing game of epic histories.” This TRPG situates worldbuilding as a collective activity across temporal dimensions: players create a chain of events, and then “zoom in” and “zoom out” of specific scenes as they define and experience a sweeping epic history out of chronological order. The flexible temporality of the game humanizes the events on the timeline, allowing the players to remain in suspense about the outcomes and ripple effects of events small and large in their secondary world. *Microscope* thus actively engages with possible worlds (Doležel, 2000) and their interplay with contingency and necessity (Singles, 2013).

Similarly, *The Quiet Year* (2013) takes the often lonely activity of mapmaking and gives it a twist. Players play out a year of a community trying to survive after the fall of civilization, watching and reacting as the events of the year take their toll. Play is initiated through the drawing of a map of the community, and elements are added as opportunities and crises turn up. Horizons of possibility can radically shift with one illustration or another, with players capable of introducing a drought or rabid war weasels under the same category of “threat.” But at any time, players can take a Contempt token that signals discomfort with any other player’s (or character’s) decision. Contempt tokens can later be spent on selfish actions. This has the effect of producing fallout for worldbuilding decisions that do not align with the spirit of the group. Peter Molyneux’s *Dungeon Keeper* (1997) is an example of a worldbuilding CRPG in which players carve out a dungeon and populate it with monsters to protect its treasure from invading heroes.

## RPGs as Richly Created Worlds

In other RPGs, worldbuilding is a top-down process. A designer or group of designers creates the world from high concept to detailed settings and non-player characters. Storylines, plots, and possible sequences of events may be more or less rigidly pre-scripted. A good example is Richard Bartle’s virtual worlds model, which is based on Multi-User Dungeons (MUD) and was later applied to MORPGs. In Bartle’s model, virtual worlds are constituted by “codebases” (Bartle, 2004, 32) that enable players to engage with a pre-created world based on their different motivations. While player contingency and different motivations should be accounted for in design decisions, responsibility for the world’s consistency ultimately rests on the shoulders of its creators. Examples of this type of richly created world that a player then inhabits include games such as those in the *Final Fantasy* (1987–), *Fallout (1997-)*, *World of Warcraft* (2004–), and *Fable* (2004) series. While many games can be modded (modified by the player) to some extent, and player actions and behaviors may change the world, the game’s diegesis, mythology, and main characters have been pre-established by the designers. MORPGs and CRPGs tend toward top-down authorial worldbuilding, with a tight rein on player input. *World of Warcraft* may have its modding culture around “Addons” and the ability to establish sub-cultures through guilds. However, in *World of Warcraft*, monsters are reset, the environment remains static, and little player input within the game itself can contribute to or expand upon the world already created. Espen Aarseth has described it as “essentially hollow, a multicolored shell with a hard, static surface and no inner substance to speak of” (Aarseth, 2008, p.111-112). Likewise, *Mass Effect* features a richly detailed universe with its own in-game history encyclopedia, complex set of character backstories, and founding myths related to the player-character by the game’s NPCs. Part of the game’s narrative suspense involves uncovering further secrets about past fictional civilizations. Players choose their character’s *interpretations* of those secrets.

TRPGs, online freeform, and larps, on the other hand, grant more direct worldbuilding agency to the gamemaster and players. Without requiring massive coordination between programmers, graphic artists, and storytellers, these analog and freeform-digital games can more easily incorporate player input and spin it into the fiber of the world being collectively built (Cover, 2010). Larps such as *The Intrepid Seven* (2016) have characters terraforming a new planet during the larp, showing how worldbuilding itself can be incorporated into live-action play. TRPGs such as *Empire of the Petal Throne* (1975) or *Children of the Sun* (2002) place heavy emphasis on player-characters engaging deeply with the world, but that does not prevent them from changing it during play, given consent at the table.

## RPGs with Player/Designer Co-Creation

While every game is to some extent a co-creation between player and designer, some games are specifically designed to balance their worldbuilding aspects between players and designers. For example, in the MORPG *Landmark* (2016), players can create buildings, levels, and challenges for other players to encounter. It takes advantage of the key features of specific genre worlds – futuristic taverns for space operas, epic castles for wuxia—and allows players to develop and expand on them.

Cragoe (2016) compares mythmaking in folk narratives and RPG games played place face-to-face (generally TRPG and larp). He argues that unlike in folk narratives, where the story is dictated, in RPGs the gamemaster or storyteller is a facilitator who helps co-create the world with the players, who play an active role performing the story. Cragoe argues that this difference may be indicative of the value in the Western world, where these RPGs are popular, to provide more agency and individuality to the participants, and greater flexibility and collective participation in the mythmaking (Cragoe, 2016).

# Components of Worldbuilding in RPGs

Regardless of where you start while creating a new world—a map, guidebook, the mythology, the characters, or the gameplay, worlds themselves should be expansive, rich with detail, and ripe for telling stories. These stories do not need to be tied to a specific platform, but should be draw from the world’s core canon (Dowd, 2013). The following are some possible components of building a new world, with a short description of each as applied to RPGs.

## Core Canon

The core canon includes the official elements that make up your world, which are agreed upon by the makers and the audience/fans. Canon is *always* a negotiation. According to Dowd (2013), “We talk about canon (official elements of the universe)—this is a case where this particular fact was originally part of the official story, but was cut, and because of its inclusion in the novelization—the official adaptation of the motion picture—is viewed by many fans as ‘canon’” (sec. IV). RPG worldbuilding influences this process. *Star Wars: The Role-Playing Game* (1987) by West End Games, for example, took the liberty of embellishing upon and inventing new universe details in that franchise. It later became a story bible for Timothy Zahn in writing the beloved *Heir to the Empire* trilogy (1991), which in turn canonized figures such as Grand Admiral Thrawn and Mara Jade among fans. RPGs that take place in certain fictional worlds such as Middle-Earth (1917) rely on the core canon of specific non-RPG books to dictate what is and is not possible in them. But other games such as *College of Wizardry* (2014) or *Glorantha* (1966) create worlds specifically to be used by their corresponding games, establishing core canons by way of hundreds of pages of description and illustration in the main rulebooks. On the one hand, publishers of RPG titles perform a gatekeeping role with respect to what counts as core canon: fans of Palladium Books titles such as *RIFTS* (1990) could not publish their own content, and Bioware CRPGs do not let fans dictate components of *Dragon Age* (2009). On the other hand, player interpretation plays such a large role in the reception of RPGs that one might say the impact of core canon is lessened from other fandoms. Bailey writes: “RPGs are by their nature varying and modular. Trying to lock them down to a consistent set of facts is disrespectful to players and painful for everybody…” (Bailey, 2010, para. 3). Yet Bailey suggests that having a consistent setting and agreed-upon facts and principles helps everyone stay focused and connected, particularly when there are so many people with so many different roles and perspectives (Bailey, 2010). Jason Mittell (2015) argues that the very act of interpreting and establishing the canon from these different perspectives may even be part of what engages people in this world.

Canon, and establishing it, is essential even for worlds that are not derivative of any previous worlds or creations. For instance, in any games from the *Glorantha* fantasy setting, the play experience is greatly enhanced by knowledge of the world’s mythology and politics, so one can know the significance of, say, the invasion of Sartar’s lands by the Lunar Empire. *College of Wizardry* establishes Czocha Castle in Poland as a major hub of magical activity, delineating both the parts of the world that most certainly resemble the *Harry Potter* universe and the others that necessarily diverge.

## Fringe

In addition to the canon, there are also works, stories, and sources that are *semi-canon* –– as in: some people/audience members accept it as canon and others do not –– and also *fringe*, which are typically told through unofficial channels (‘zines, fan blogs, forums). Examples include the backstories of certain guilds in *World of Warcraft* or the widespread impact of a regional Mind’s Eye Society *Vampire: The Masquerade* (1991) event. Some information may overlap with the canon, some may be conspiracy theories and so-called insider information that has not yet been vetted by the community, and some may be fan fiction that is oblique or purposefully counter to the canon such as a fan community developing materials where two characters are in a relationship that would be impossible in the canon. However, established canon more generally becomes worldbuilding fodder for others. TRPG-inspired literary worlds such as *Dragonlance* (1984) transform into Wikis explaining the canonical physics of the Silver Arm of Ergoth or the deep culture of the kender.

## Metatexts

Beyond the texts that stem from the world itself, such as books, web content, or game narrative, there are extra-diegetic texts that can be used to describe or visualize the world in question. These are called meta-texts, and can be created by the designers/world-builders, fans/audience, or both. This could include, for example, a wiki or collaborative online encyclopedia (Wikipedia) for the world itself (such as Fringeopedia, *Dragon Age* wiki). It could include a map to the world, such as the large map included in the *Fallout* guide, or a collaboratively-drawn map of *Skyrim*. It could also be a timeline that is created by one fan or many, or even the designers, as they try to organize all of the major plot points that happen in a world.

The world “metatext” comes from literature and literary theory and can be locational, such that it points to itself or parts of the text (e.g., “in the next section, we will discuss”), or it could be rhetorical, which refers to the act of research or writing done by the author (e.g., “in this paper, we will argue that”) (Thonney, 2016). The metatext breaks away and is the commentary on top of a text. In this way, the world and its texts are multilayered. Metatext typically has five characteristics (McGee):

* It is self-referential, in that it refers to itself as being a text and as being a text about a text.
* It breaks the fourth wall, or speaks directly to the community, is from the community, or does not come directly from the fictive world but is from our own world.
* It blurs the boundaries between the fictive world and our own real world by focusing on those ways that they interact with each other. For example, it might point out the boundaries of the fictive world (through a map) or explain how characters in the world might look like people in the real world.
* The narrator in these texts is constantly interrupting and being involved in the process of creating itself, rather than letting the story unfold. The narrator, and his/her intent, matters because it is the insight you get into how they are interpreting the fictive world.
* Finally, it is constantly explaining its own medium, whether it is a map, guide, timeline, or other artifact.

## World Book or Story “Bible”

In the creation of transmedia, a so-called “story Bible” is imperative in documenting –– and thus establishing –– the world. With RPGs, however, the world can manifest differently across different media. Images, embedded fiction, and near-encyclopedic pages of taxonomy and description portray the worlds of most TRPGs. Such material can usually be found in the “core” book of a game, but inevitably supplement books and campaign modules flesh out the imaginary world even more. CRPGs and MORPGs, by contrast, mostly permit players to know about the world by exploring it virtually with their avatar. Occasional games such as *Mass Effect* contain codexes with detailed meta-level world information, but many games such as *Dragon Quest* (1986) have very little explaining the backstory, objects, and location of the world. Thus CRPG and MORPG worldbuilding tends to be sensual with respect to player-characters. The opposite is true of most larps: worldbuilding happens in books and sprawling PDFs containing outlines of the advantages or disadvantages of playing specific character types, lists of different available weapons, and how specific cultures might behave. Although high-budget larps such as *College of Wizardry* may be able to create close to a 360-degree illusion of a wizard school by holding it in a Polish castle, most larps rely on players knowing of and referring to items present on so-called “blue sheets,” or extra-diegetic documents explaining aspects of a world key to player experience.

## The Creative-Interpretive Community

Because the world itself is fictitious, it is strange to think that some parts of it could even be a fiction to that fiction. But there are governing rules of worlds that should not be broken. The creative-interpretive community sifts through the canon, semi-canon and fringe to create meaning. The interpretive community that interacts and responds to a fictional role-playing world is similar to that of literature. In literature, the interpretive community reads and responds to literature and imbues it with meaning—we cannot escape the cultural frames and values of our time and perspective. Each text or world is created with “authorial intent” but the community of readers also construct those meanings as well (Fish, 1980). In role-playing games, the interpretive community provides culturally constructed meaning, as well as homegrown micro-narratives, side stories, perspectives, and characters, which can affect how the world is perceived, and also potentially change the world itself. For instance, in larps, the fictional world is co-shaped by the players, and the fictional world does not even emerge without players playing the game, and shaping how the world gets realized (Linderoth, 2012). In the horror RPG, *Call of Cthulhu* (Chaosium, 1981), the premise stems from the worlds created through H.P. Lovecraft’s writing on imaginary beasts such as Cthulhu, and uses basic role-playing rules. But individual players can, for example, fill in information about their character’s backstory, traits, injuries, phobias, and treasured possessions. How players describe and interpret their roles and then enact them in the game contributes significantly to the Cthulhu world that gets co-created through each instance of play. Likewise, in *Dungeons & Dragons*, local game master or “house rules” for playing the game can influence how the game is played and how the world of *Dungeons & Dragons* is realized at a particular table. There are also different aspects of RPGs that can be interpreted, such as the drama of the game (narrative meaning and story), the game challenges, obstacles, balancing, and win conditions, and simulation, or the consistency of the events, rules and activities of the game are as they emerge (Kim, 2008).

# Closing Thoughts

Worldbuilding brings up many questions essential to understanding humanity. For instance: How does creating a fiction world, and playing as a member of this novel world, enable us to see our own real world in a new way? In the process of creating other worlds, the act of worldbuilding also reveals something about us. As the editors of the Journal of Digital Humanities write, “What can we learn from the creation and exploration of a virtual world? The impulse to create imagined spaces occupies a longstanding tradition in the humanities. Whether it be Plato’s Cave or Mount Olympus or Yoknapatawpha, virtual landscapes hold out the promise to expand our human capacities to create, to imagine, and to analyze beyond our physical constraints” (Editors 2014, para. 1). What we choose to build, and how we choose to explore it through a role, suggests something about who we are and how we dream.

# Summary

In this chapter, we have explored the complexity of worldbuilding in RPGs. We have discussed its origins in literary practices and discussed how it forms an integral part of RPGs, both in their creation as well as their play. One of the fundamental ideas is that a certain amount of worldbuilding is necessary in order for players to collaboratively make sense of and understand the gameworld they are participating in a collectively co-creating. There are different models for worldbuilding: some provide all of the creative agency to the players, others are primarily in the hands of game designers and gamemasters, while a third group attempt to balance both.

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# List of keywords defined in callouts at the end of the document

Fictional World, Possible World, Storyworld, Transmedia Storytelling, Transmedia World, Virtual world, Worldbuilding