MAKING THE IMAGINARY:

WORLDBUILDERS, AND THE ART OF ONTOGENOUS PLAY

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Abstract:
How we imagine and the potency of alternative imaginings to socio-political concerns are vital questions for social science, and worldbuilding is a particular and understudied method of doing so. It is the creative making of fictional, imaginative worlds, offering a potential alternative method to imagine otherwise. This paper ethnographically explicates this craft through detailing how creators, known as worldbuilders, make their worlds, demonstrating how it is generative and impactful for them emotionally, intellectually, and politically. It is based of three months of online ethnographic/netnographic fieldwork across the multiple online 'sites' worldbuilders are active, particularly a forum and chatroom, as well as digital interviews with sixteen individual worldbuilders. I argue that worldbuilding is a process of toying with ontologies, which I call *ontogenous play*. I explain this through detailing what is dubbed *making the imaginary* – the worldbuilding process – going through the particulars of the process and the experiences of interlocutors, demonstrating how one achieves *situated transcendence* through it, and the generativity of that. In light of these observations, I also argue that worldbuilding is an *art*, attending to the ramifications of that designation. I draw upon anthropological understandings of making, processes, liminality, and ontologies to advance the argument, as well as the emergent scholarship on worldbuilding from 'sub-creation studies', and the erudite hypotheses of my interlocutors.

Keywords: worldbuilding, imagination, making, anthropology, ontology, ontogeny, online ethnography, sub-creation, netnography, creativity

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PREAMBLE

Introduction

Worldbuilding is the art of intricately fabulising and imaginatively extrapolating fictive worlds, of honing into the granularities and broad ideas of imagined places, layering and building to create something new. When beginning the research, a worldbuilder divulged that their project had "sort of broke some basic assumptions I had about functions of society and the range of possibilities," making them consider, investigate, and work with ideas that they otherwise may not have chanced upon. Initially, this was puzzling to me, as I was seeing and chatting with people creating other-worlds featuring, for example, space-faring crustaceans, a unified Caribbean, priestesses of non-existent faiths, subterranean foods, or settlement plans for orbital space stations – projects that seemed to get *away* from 'reality', not more deeply engage *with* it. Making sense of this testament, then, required me to look beyond what exactly was being imagined, and instead attend to *how* they were imagining; turning attention to how it is that when one shimmies away from actuality, they happen to learn more about it.

Presently, imaginings and the imagination underpin myriad social analyses and diagnoses: polities are understood to be held together through political imaginings; social groups through collective imagining; indeed, notions of the imaginary and its capacity to order our worlds appear to steal the thunder of the culture concept, with our realities refracted through the prism of the imaginary, conditioning what is actual. However, another understanding of the imagination is considering it as the ability to ponder possibilities *beyond* and *in excess* of the actual, experiential now; a cognitive tool used to escape perceived binds, capable of invigorating and inspiring efforts toward change through suggesting reality *could* be otherwise (Kind & Kung, 2016; Gosetti-Ferencei, 2018). These elements of the imagination currently have a flurry of interest around them, particularly regarding speculation and the imagination's potential for inching us out of ideational gullies and founding and inspiring efforts toward alternatives, with spates of work asking us to re-*imagine* the world (see: Gunkel, Hameed, & O'Sullivan, 2017; Rapport & Harris, 2015; Wolf-Meyer, 2019; Haraway, 2016). I, however, am concerned with a particular mode of imagining, *worldbuilding* – that is, I am interested in *worldbuilders*, the people who practice worldbuilding; imaginatively creating new, wildly different, and seemingly untethered concepts, species, technologies, peoples, religions, ecologies, or anything else, ofttimes without narrative or plot, and making them cohere with the world's other elements to make what appears as a complete world (Wolf, 2012).

This is, then, an ethnography of the imagination, as it is an ethnography of worldbuilders: a class of creatives who spend their time playing with ontologies, conjuring up and expounding on imaginative other-worlds. On its face, touting the power of the imagination can appear a little hollow, seeming to sublimate political aspirations by locating them in the imaginary sphere rather than the grounded, immediate material one, but I demonstrate that the potency and generativity of worldbuilding for worldbuilders is in unpacking and reorienting themselves to their given realities. I show how through tinkering with their settings and building them up into vibrant realms brimming with fictive life and all that follows – faiths, foods, families, ideologies, nations, languages, and more – worldbuilders found themselves impacted, intellectually, emotionally, and politically, learning more and upsetting binding imaginings. I call this *ontogenous play*, as that is precisely what worldbuilders do: they toy with their given ontologies through fabulising new ones.

It is also an anthropology of making, but of making the imaginary, focused on the process of this imaginative art (rather than its crystallised products), and how the process of making these worlds – *making the imaginary* – can alter one's subjectivity. It has been observed that many worlds that are intimately known, such as *Middle Earth*, *Oz*, *Earthsea*, *Westeros*, *Star Wars*, *The Wizarding World*, and more,[1] are capable of altering subjectivies and energising politics through allowing people to step outside their reality and wander deep into fictive realms (see: Schwab, 2012; Hassler-Forest, 2016; Jenkins, 2015), but I am concerned with how these enthralling places, interesting ideas, and strange behaviours one witnesses in fictional worlds are constructed through worldbuilding, and how this process of making impacts the maker, ethnographically investigating how worldbuilders conceptualise their craft, how they undertake it, and how they change through it.

Aims and Research Question

What motivated the research was an enduring interest in the potentialities and political lives of fiction, having had my own political outlook and intellectual interests shifted by both my fictive diet and my academic one. I, too, had tried my hand at worldbuilding messing around with ideas taken from classes, experiences, and other fictions, finding that building worlds gave me

[1] The worlds of *Middle Earth* (Tolkien, 2003 [1937]; 2004 [1968]; 2015 [1977]), *Oz* (Baum, 2010 [1900]), *Earthsea* (Le Guin, 2018), *Westeros* (Martin, 1996), *Star Wars* (Lucas, 1977), and the *Wizarding World* (Rowling, 1997), are just some of the most widely-consumed and multimediated worlds to date, but thousands more exist in immense variation, helpfully listed (inevitably partially) at the end of Mark Wolf's study of secondary worlds (2012).

greater clarity and greater enthusiasm for these interests – experiences that make the research partly an attempt to intellectualise and corroborate my experiences with others through ethnography. Centrally, though, I was shocked to discover the relative dearth of literature focused on worldbuilding, and wanted to do my small part to help rectify this: a goal in which I found camaraderie with my interlocutors, as they, like me, were having fun in the melange of fact and fiction, and were eager to make better sense of it.

What also guided the effort was the impression that worldbuilding, whether named specifically or not, is a polarised subject. You have detractors whom derisorily dismiss it as fantastical nonsense and a waste of time, decried as what I have seen called the 'great fantasy migration' (Weiler, 2017; McCain, Gentile, & Campbell, 2015), and lambasted even by those potentially understood to be involved in the sub-culture, such as M. John Harrison who dubbed it the "great clomping foot of nerdism" (2007). Whilst, on the other side, there are ones who tout its unparalleled ability to plan and remake the world (Zaidi, 2017; 2019) — both positions I ultimately find incorrect, and dangerous. These are not little spats in the cultural sphere either, as concerns about the vitality and veracity of worldbuilding have cropped up in strategic studies: it is rumoured that Vladislav Surkov, Vladimir Putin's ex-advisor, was a worldbuilder, writing novels under the pen name Nathan Dubovitsky in which he extrapolated on the so-called strategy of non-linear warfare allegedly used by Russian strategists, causing upset in NATO-aligned nations (Pomerantsev, 2014) — an example of the escalating rhetoric around worldbuilding's potency and potential.

Worldbuilding also has a long noble and ignoble history, depending much on one's attitude: political camps seem to have particular worlds ritually referenced as ideological buttressing—either as desirable, or to be avoided—such as Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* (1957), or George Orwell's *1984* (1949). Even Karl Marx could arguably be considered a worldbuilder, constructing a utopian world to unveil the concealed contradictions of our own. In anthropology and in the social sciences writ large, fiction has also apparated onto disciplinary radars with questions around the imagination and speculative fictions' political vibrancy becoming central (see: Anderson *et al.*, 2018; Wolf-Meyer, 2019; Haraway, 2016; Gunkel, Hameed, & O'Sullivan, 2017; Shaw & Reeves-Evison, 2017). Writers like Ursula K. Le Guin, Chad Oliver, Joanna Russ, Michael Bishop, and Octavia Butler—all worldbuilders, I should add—were all either heavily inspired by or directly involved in anthropological pursuits, imbricating its history with the anthropological discipline. Hence, I was curious, first about how worlds were understood and approached by scholars, and then about how their process of making could be understood and approached, so I conceived of ethnographically attending to

it as a craft, wanting to illuminate more about those practicing the increasingly popular craft at the grass-roots, and to locate some greater insights of what is behind and beyond fictive worlds.

Emerging out of these curiosities and concerns, as well as undergirded by the assertion that worldbuilding is a distinct craft, the guiding question was simple: how do worldbuilders conceive of and carry out their craft? This cursed the project with a wide remit, but it felt necessary to pry widely in order to give a sufficient representation of the craft. Subdivided, this boils down to some reasonably simple questions: What are they doing? How are they doing it? Why are they doing it? What effects does it have on them? More generally, the aims of the research are to render this particular group of creatives slightly more legible to those potentially interested in what they are up to. Hopefully, it demonstrates its manifold forms and applications sufficiently to inspire readers to try their own hand at it, or, at the very least, lend the imaginary a tad more credence. I also hope to provide a contextualised portrait *for* the worldbuilders who, too, have noticed a dearth of attention in their direction. Overall, though, this research touches on an array of subjects—namely politics, art, anthropology, imagination, making, speculation, ontology—of broad significance.

A Preliminary Note on Methods

Worldbuilders do not meet in real life (often, at least), and the community is chiefly based online. Thus, this research was an online ethnography, or, rather a netnography, as I drew heavily from Robert Kozinets' influential work and his notion of 'engagement' (2010). My methodological discussion is more substantial below (in 1.2), but, in brief, my research comprised the three methodological prongs of netnography: online participation, engaging in the chatrooms and comment sections of the community; digital interviews, with sixteen long-form semi-structured interviews conducted; and content analysis, where I diligently perused the forums and sites tied to the community, collecting, collating, and annotating excerpts and screen-shots. I also add two more to this, though: 'subcultural saturation', where I consumed large amounts of emic audio-visual and textual materials such as articles, video-essays, podcasts, and books connected with the worldbuilding subculture; and 'creative engagement', where in the lulls of activity and when the constant light of the computer screen took its toll, I worked on my own worldbuilding project, attempting to utilise the information I was collecting as a worldbuilder myself. Both provided their added insights and understandings, explored more comprehensively below.

As for where I sited myself, I was in the dual epicentres of one of the largest communities of worldbuilders online – on their chief forum, and chat server. On the forum, people post content in the forms of images, long texts, videos, or animations that others can vote up or down on the basis of its relevance to the stated goal of sharing and creating worlds, as well as comment on posts and converse about them. In the chatroom, there were far fewer users, and the site was arranged into various sub-rooms that focused on specific elements of building worlds with more free-flowing conversations conducted in real-time, rather than with long delays, allowing me to partake and observe more actively.

Of course, my methodological toolkit altered significantly in the midst of research, with me favouring certain techniques over others (particularly interviews), and I wandered slightly beyond my delimited sites, but I delve into the methodological specificities below (in 1.2).

Thesis Overview

My argument and exploration is delivered in three prongs, each attending to different but related concerns. Because of this tripartite structure, each of the three sections will be preceded by a separate, brief literature review and overview of the section. First is the expositionary part (in 1.0), introducing the subject and my particular field, positioning worldbuilding as a distinct craft and art. I detail the people and community engaged in it and from whom I learnt, providing the methodological particulars around the study's conduct. Then, I plot a brief history of the craft, suggesting a certain camaraderie between anthropology and worldbuilding, arguing that there is commonality in their origins, perceived mandate, and historical development. In this section, the extant theories of worldbuilding and fictive worlds are also delineated (Wolf, 2012), and I suggest some insufficiencies I encountered, developing my own approach to these in relation to the testaments and experiences of worldbuilders: that is, worldbuilding as *ontogenous play*, and worlds themselves as liminal spaces. For this, I draw heavily on Ingold's (2013; 2020) notion of 'correspondence' and his attention to the processual sides of creative endeavours, as well as issues of ontology and ontogeny, attempting to problematise the ontological splits in current literature and suggest a more gradual, uncertain understanding with notions of liminal and liminoid experiences (Turner, 1969; 1974).

After having situated worlds as objects and proffered a theory of their process, next (in 2.0) I attend more to the concrete creative process of making the imaginary and its different manifestations in a more ethnographically detailed way, drawing heavily on Ingold's

conceptualisation of *making* (2013). This section also interrogates the notion of imagination, drawing from an array of sources in philosophy and anthropology to suggest that worldbuilding is a mode of '*situated transcendence*', to borrow from Gosetti-Ferencei (2018). This is in service of advancing my hodgepodge theory of worldbuilding as a mode of correspondence with reality through *ontogenous play*, rather than some untethered, escapist pondering, as its detractors or the unfamiliar may allege. To get there, though, I ethnographically go through how my interlocutors proceeded in making and sophisticating their worlds, the anxieties and expectations lingering in their minds, their ways of sourcing and digesting inspiration and information, and how these relate to and impact them intellectually, emotionally, and politically.

Thirdly (in 3.0), I take a step back alongside my interlocutors and assess the craft as a whole, elucidating how the creative project is generally understood and reflected upon by them. As academic interest in worldbuilding is in its nascence, I think it is vital and informative to take stock of it alongside those passionately engaged with it, and tease out their understandings of the crafts process. For this, I consider my interlocutors feelings about the craft itself, speaking to wider questions of the imaginations validity and ideas of 'escapism'. I then pivot to discuss current estimations of worldbuilding's potency, questioning both the lofty promises of re-making the world and the denigratory slights against the craft, suggesting it to be in possession of a *destituent power*, drawing from Giorgio Agamben (2014), rather than holding the power to constitute new forms. I continue this argument and assert that worldbuilding is an *art*, drawing from Maruska Svašek (2007) to present an idea of what an art is, and the attendant potencies and impotencies that characterisations entail. This is done to more clearly present worldbuilding as fertile ground for growing and recalibrating ideas and desires, instead of a tool for societal reengineering. This is in service of the above points that worldbuilding, while salient and rife with potentiality, is not precise, and ought to be lauded for that, not denigrated for it.

Overall, each section tackles a particular segment: first, a definition of what is in focus and a discussion of methods used to apprehend it, followed by historical and theoretical explication that frames my overall effort; secondly, I go through the ethnographic data more to explore the process of worldbuilding, exploring how through making the imaginary subjectivities are changed; thirdly, I step back and attempt to assess worlds as artistic products, making wider arguments on their potentiality to change and shape ideas.

PART 1: EXPOSITION

1.0: Section Preamble: Literature Reflection and Overview

In this section, I provide the background to worldbuilding and situate it as a craft. There is a lack of exactitude in the use of 'worldbuilding' as a term, and for this reason the first part (in 1.1) provides a definition drawn from emergent scholarship, in particular Mark Wolf's recent work (2012; 2016; 2020a) and interlocutors' testaments, explicating worldbuilding through faintly delineating its process, aims, and products, and making the beginning of a case for its designation as an *art* (Svašek, 2007).

Following this, I turn to methodological considerations (in 1.2), introducing the 'site' and my interlocutors, followed by a detailed exposition of my methods and their ethics, as well as a consideration of the research context's particularities. For this, I draw heavily on Kozinet's (2010) netnographic method – that is, digital interviews, participant observation, and content analysis – with digital interviews particular focused on – as well as Boellstorff's (2008) insistence on taking online contexts on their own terms. I then introduce my two appendages to these methods, inspired by Kozinet's notion of 'engagement', intended to deepen my immersion in the context, dubbed 'subcultural saturation' and 'creative engagement.'

Having articulated both a basic definition of what is under study, and how it was approached, I then deliver a history of worldbuilding (in 1.3). I draw on previous research that relates it historically to colonialism and modernism (Wolf, 2012; Alexander, 2016), and consider its political history (Hassler-Forest, 2016). I go beyond this, too, and draw a familial link between anthropology and worldbuilding, arguing that their historical geneses are strikingly similar, and their mandate of exploration and critique is a shared one, albeit pursued differently, drawing on an array of sources from cultural history, to historic and contemporary writers, to current reflections in anthropology and the social sciences, all in effort to stitch a better bond between the two.

I end this section with theorising worlds and their making (in 1.4), introducing the dominant conceptualisation of them as ontologically distinct creations, taking from both early worldbuilders (Tolkien, 1975), and literary and media scholars (Doležel, 1998; Pavel, 1986; Wolf, 2012). However, I alter this theorisation by questioning the utility of regarding worlds as so distinct, drawing on anthropological notions of liminality (Turner, 1969; 1974) to suggest worlds are liminal products and the experience of their creation is a pseudo-liminal experience, being betwixt and between ontologies (in 1.4.2). This positioning is better able to apprehend the experiences and practices of worldbuilders themselves, revealing aspects of process and

change, rather than products and divisions, allowing for the presentation of the process as *ontogenous play*, an argument advanced with the aid of Tim Ingold's (2013; 2020) reflections on ontogeny and correspondence (in 1.4.3).

Overall, this section is focused on a delimitation of the subject and the research context, and an introduction to my approach. I position the subject in relation to other scholarship, identifying certain insufficiencies for my research purposes – namely, a focus on products over processes, which is a lopsided view that hinders investigations of worldbuilders' experiences as individuals who tamper with ontologies, finding joy and revelations in the activity.

1.1: A Definition of 'Worldbuilding'

As the name suggests, worldbuilding is the practice of constructing fictional worlds. However, this is not constructing worlds in a geographic or material sense, but in an ontological sense: these people create different realities, other-worlds populated and made not just as settings, or characters, or concepts, but all of it, together (with varying emphases). It is *not* worlding, a concept used to explicate efforts of people to make the world in new ways (Roy & Ong, 2011; Tsing, 2015), and it is *not* writing a story, nor necessarily just the exercise done in preparation before writing (although they are interrelated crafts, of course). Worldbuilders consider different questions to those of narrative, and actually putting pen to paper and plotting a tale might never be done by a worldbuilder, and they would be no less of one for it.[2] This division is complicated by interest in worldbuilding by narrative design (see: Coulton *et al.*, 2017) and its emergence as a mode of critiquing particular stories (see: Taylor & Ekman, 2016; 2018), but writing a story and making a world are two different tasks, treated separately here.

To create worlds, then, you imaginatively craft new and different societies, technologies, cultures, ecologies, species, cities, geographies, and whatever else is wanted or needed to flesh out your new realm. You, in essence, are divorcing this new, secondary reality from your primary experiential one through some degree of difference, and make all these new elements cohere and, vitally, remain consistent. It is paramount that it all melds together: developing, say, a fictive riding animal endowed with flight requires you to question what

[2] There are controversies within the community about this, and these will be explored throughout, but suffice to say here that whether or not one thinks it *ought* to be for stories, or if the efficacy is diminished by not working on stories, there *are* people who call themselves worldbuilders that make worlds completely without narrative in mind.

cultures, technologies, ideas, and ways of life may emerge from a society with these animals. This, as I was continually reminded by interlocutors, is the fun of the pursuit.

Fundamentally, you create something *new*; something fantastical, alien, or otherwise alternative, ranging from the tectonic make-up of an exo-planet, or a playful idea for a new rodent, and extrapolate, explore, and expand on it. These fictive locations can then exist merely in one's head (and, usually, on the pages or documents they have detailed the world through), or can have life breathed into them through novels, games, films, animations, albums, or other media. It can be an extremely comprehensive process, a proper "attempt to exhaustively survey a place that isn't there" as M. John Harrison (2007) has derisorily characterised it, involving the production of piles of notebooks and documents, the assembling of encyclopaedias and vast lexicons, and building of taxonomies and organisational schemes. However, the process can also be lax; one's active imagination idly building a world, proceeding like some form of some layered daydream or structured pondering. I explore the diversity of processes and approaches below, but suffice to say that the worldbuilder's chief ambition, pursued either assiduously or leisurely, is the exploration, expansion, and elaboration of a fictive reality.

One of the first scholars to contend with worldbuilding directly is Mark Wolf (2012). He asserts that a secondary/imaginary world is defined by its inventiveness, its completeness, and its consistency. By *inventiveness*, he means the extent the defaults of the 'Primary World' are changed (*ibid.*:34); by *completeness*, the extent a "world contains explanations and details covering all the various aspects […] which together suggest a feasible, practical world" (*ibid.*:38); and by *consistency*, the degree the world's components are without contradiction (*ibid.*:43). Think of J.R.R. Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* (2004 [1937]), George Lucas' *Star Wars* (1977), Ursula K. Le Guin's *Hainish Cycle* (1969; 1974; 1976) and *Earthsea* (2018), or Haruki Murakami's *1Q84* (2011 [2009-2010]): all these artefacts of worldbuilding are divorced from our primary reality through some metaphysical and ontological difference, and they form whole worlds that work with their conjured logics and orders.

Worldbuilders themselves tend to reduce these principles into a single tenet: realism. This generally contains these postulates (perhaps apart from inventiveness, as that is assumed), expressed through terms like 'believability', 'plausibility', and questions of internal logics. Hence, Wolf's three definitional features work well in cordoning off worlds as particular creations and identifying worldbuilders' general concerns, as all worlds made must have some degree of invention, must be complete to be regarded as a 'world', and must be consistent to work. If there was nothing new, it would not be a secondary nor particularly imaginative world; if incomplete, the glaring holes would undermine its worldliness; if inconsistent, it will break

down when encountered. Of course, constructed worlds are not perfect, but it is the ambition to satisfy these requisite ideals that marks out the worldbuilder (Makai, 2020:57), not necessarily their success, as with in any other creative pursuit.[3]

Unfortunately, introducing worldbuilding relies upon referencing the most mediatised manifestations of them, but not all worldbuilding is in the service of transmedia worlds (see: Boni *et al.*, 2017), nor necessarily even in service of narratives, as stated. Worlds *can* and *are* built as just that: worlds, lacking focus on narrative and plot. This, I aim to show, makes worldbuilding a distinct creative practice from storytelling. It is a modestly difficult divorce to prove, as most people have come to know fictional locales through stories set within them, and thus are accustomed to understanding worlds as valid only when brought to life through narratives, but worldbuilding exists as an independent mode of creativity. Although, as one user said, "[there is] a pretty fat grey area between them," the imperatives at the fore of storytellers' minds are distinct from the worldbuilders'. A worldbuilder may be, say, concerned about a fictive city's trade relations, its available ores, and how that impacts a smithery's functioning, whilst the storyteller may only be concerned with how their protagonist acquires a smithery's sword, and what they intend to do with it. Of course, these can come together (and certainly often do), muddying the distinction into a 'fat grey area', but the distinction is clear: when designing a city's economy, you are worldbuilding, concerned with consistency and realism, a distinct (but not totally contrasting) concern than a writer's focus on narrative tension, audience engagement, and other narratological concerns.

It may also seem trivial to split the two, because, again, most people encounter worlds through narratives, but they are practically different processes, and this fact undergirds my overall inquiry. But it is also contributory to another, wider point: that worldbuilding is an *art*. By naming it art, I contend that worldbuilding is not a dry process, or solely preparatory work for 'real' art – that is, writing, or cinema – but instead imaginative and generative in of itself. Taking from Maruska Svašek (2007) and her notion of '*aestheticisation'*, I move to '*aestheticise*' worldbuilding, demonstrating its creative verve and fertility as an *artform*, encouraging the reader to apprehend it as an art and thus assign it with the vitality that designation demands. Defining worldbuilding as an art is contended with more thoroughly below (see section 3.2), but it is sufficient to signal it here, as this point is developed throughout

[3] Nothing less than outrage has been provoked by worlds which have broken consistency in recent years—there was fury around *Star Wars*' seemingly altering how light-speed travel worked (Kadish, 2019), and anger at *Game of Thrones*' ignoring travel times in the series' final seasons, despite the fact it was done to ease "the narrative burden" (Placido, 2018).

as I interrogate my interlocutors' processes of building and fabulising their worlds into existence, and the generativity of doing so.

1.2: Methodological Exposition

Despite a certain haziness to the definition of worldbuilding, there is a well-established presence and community online — separated and distinct from other, expansive communities the craft's cousins have, such as creative writing, or illustration. Worldbuilding communities are, in fact, almost exclusively found online, with occasional in-person meetings for large organisations like the Worldbuilding Institute,[4] but for individual, small-scale worldbuilders, community is solely found online. Many interlocutors even relayed this experience of discovering that such communities existed, too: a "holy shit" moment, where they found out others were doing the same sorts of creative tinkering they were, albeit in distant and disparate locations. In some ways, this was the same for me as an ethnographer, at least regarding the richness and depth of the community: I had known of worldbuilding communities, skimming them often as part of my wider digital diet and pulling various inspirations from them, but had regarded them as appendages to other communities, not realising that for many it was, as Noah described it, "an all-consuming hobby," having worked on his world for over fifteen years. He engages online, posting his works and chatting with others, but is chiefly making it individually, and offline. In this way, I am less studying an online community per se, but a community that exist online that relates to and is a manifestation of a wider phenomenon (Kozinets, 2010:63-64).

Thus, my research was an online ethnography/virtual ethnography (Hine, 2015), or netnography (Kozinets, 2010), following the attendant methods used to study communities of people online, plus a little extra. In this section, I run through these elements, starting with the site itself, its participants, and why I chose it, as well as going through the elements of my method: that is, participant observation, online textual interviews, content analysis — these three being orthodox inclusions — but also sub-cultural saturation and creative engagement, my two personal appendages to the research that are worth exploring as their necessity uncovers more of the subject in question.

[4] For more about the Worldbuilding Institute, see their website (Worldbuilding Institute, n.d.).

1.2.1: My Ethnographic 'Site' and Interlocutors

For the research, I based myself in one of the largest communities of worldbuilders online. Here, I could open the site, scroll down and see the multiplicity of worlds being made: some at their geneses, with small sketches of cities made on planets with far thicker atmospheres than ours, drafts of recipes made of fictive ingredients and for fictive celebrations, or burgeoning ideas of a new method of magic; others fully-fledged, solid creations with vast timelines and maps of multi-planetary empires, passages detailing all the minutiae of an imaginary life, illustrations of state propaganda for a fictive campaign, or entire wardrobes for constructed cultures. With the assent of the moderators—those individuals who monitor and regulate the community's spaces—I hung around on the two main poles of the community: a forum, and a chatroom. Although at the time of writing, in-person research opportunities are restricted during the present coronavirus health crisis, an online site was chosen because it would be extremely difficult to study such a group offline anyway, so these two poles of the community were undeniably the most fruitful sites for ethnographic engagement with worldbuilders. Inspired by Tom Boellstorff (2008:61), I also attempted to take the online community on its own terms, staying exclusively in the domain of these two related poles of the community for participation, and avoided enquiring too far into people's particulars beyond what was relevant to conversations and their creations, instead letting my interlocutors inform me of what they thought I ought to know. Of course, I asked questions that elicited and were intended to elicit deeply personal answers, but I did not scour for demographic specificities, nor even names, instead getting to know them by their chosen usernames (the names featured throughout are consequently meta-pseudonyms, in a way). That said, the sixteen interlocutors I became closest to were chiefly (though certainly not exclusively) of European descent, male, University educated, and middle-class or higher—information chiefly divulged to me by them, and occasionally directly asked for.

The forum was mostly used to post about their worlds or the craft in a general way, often with images, vignettes, explanations, or questions that others can vote up or down depending on their relevance to the community's stated purpose of providing a space to share your own creations, discover others', and discuss the creative process. You can comment, too, posing questions, offering comments or critiques, or just reacting generally to the submitted content. This, however, was a huge community, with rapid content fluctuation and a huge cast of users, so I only partially situated myself here, and my involvement was limited to general and more passive observations and content analysis, occasionally commenting and inquiring more when certain posts piqued my interest, rather than having sustained encounters. Instead,

I mainly hung around the community's chatroom that had far fewer members, and even fewer regular ones (relative to the magnitude of the forum), which allowed me to partake in and observe more free-flowing and focused conversations about individuals' creations and the larger craft. This was structured in a more detailed way, with different 'channels' focused on the different elements (i.e., languages, science, humanities, geography, et cetera) and genres of worldbuilding (science fiction, fantasy, alternative histories), allowing for deeper engagements, increased participatory observation, and proper conversations and connections, and thus much time was based here.

As stated, I strategically bound my site to these two locales in order to take it fully as its own context, but it was also necessary to properly delineate the field-site to limit my scope and maintain focus and energy. This has been observed elsewhere in regard to 'real'-world ethnography (i.e., Candea, 2007: Hage, 2005), but I believe the points apply well to online spaces: it is simply too arduous to have too wide a scope – particularly in online spaces where it is even easier to go astray and wander down a rabbit hole of what appeared to be valuable data – so arbitrarily delimiting the site was necessary. This was difficult, as users linked to blogs, art pages, videos, articles, and to other content relevant in some way to the discussion that had to be followed, so I decided to follow these insofar as they were relevant to topics or directly connected to a particular interlocutor, but barred myself from going farther—from "following" too far (Gray, 2016)—and kept myself anchored to these two places for the purposes of participation and observation.

1.2.2: Methods: Five Prongs

With the site introduced, the approach to it follows. Overall, I was heavily influenced by both Kozinet's (2010) notion of 'netnographic engagement' where one ought to be active, visible and contributory, attempting to rectify the potential inadequacies of digital methods compared to classical ones, both practically and ethically. Boellstorff's (2008) methodological resolve to take his virtual context on its own terms was also a "methodological conceit" (*ibid.*:60-63) that inspired my own specific methodological decisions, namely, tying myself near-exclusively to the dominant textual mode of the community and not digging excessively for personal information perceived as superfluous to the hobby, but may have otherwise been anthropologically valued. I have thus divided my approach into five prongs: three sourced directly from the extant literature on online and virtual ethnography/netnography (Kozinets, 2010; Hine, 2015) – that is, online participant observation, digital interviews, and content

analysis – and two more acting as appendages to those – that is, sub-cultural saturation and creative engagement. I explore these below.

Participant Observation

As detailed, I was situated chiefly in two interrelated locales: the chatroom and the forum, the former allowing more active, real-time participation in conversations, and the latter more stop-and-start dialogues usually constrained to the content that was being commented on. The chatroom was more participatory and active, and was where I spent much of my time, and the forum was more relegated to the side – a tab standing open that I would flick back to in lulls or when interest in that variety of discourse and content reappeared. I existed in most spaces under a username picked specifically for the research, *exoanthropos*, used for the two necessary accounts for inhabiting these spaces.[5]

Participant observation was generally conducted through a mess of tabs and browsers, flipping between them as new messages appeared or refreshing others as new content was posted. In the chatroom, conversational rhythms were quick, with stop-and-start, nonlinear and disparate conversations and events all happening co-temporally, some demanding exclusive, sustained attention, and others more of the pop-in-and-see variety.[6] This was particularly valuable in gaining insights into the granularities of their creative processes, as the chatroom was the primary site for questions and conversations pertaining specifically to process. The forum, on the other hand, was chiefly valuable for content on worlds that were roughly finished (or, at least had presentable components) that were being shared, and although avenues for engagement were open, specifically addressing worlds as products was not my primary concern, so more time was spent elsewhere.

I elaborate more below when espousing the details of worldbuilders' processes of making, as the modes and character of their discussions have bearings on that, but one

[5] Choosing a username was a concerning process, where I tried to balance multiple factors: my role as a researcher, not a standard user; my need to fit in as a user; and my need to be visible and recognisable on either platform. In the end, I decided on a name referential to anthropology and a famous example of worldbuilding, and my 'bio' included information about my research, but otherwise I appeared as an reasonably innocuous member. Of course, I revealed and introduced myself when necessary—i.e., when attempting to interview—but it would have been arduous, limiting, and in my view no more ethically reasonable to render my account the obvious front of a researcher. The username mentioned above is not precisely what I operated under, rendered so as to maintain some distance, but is quite similar.

[6] By this, I mean conversations did not proceed in a comment and answer format. Three users could be discussing a particular concept, and a fourth could chirp in about an entirely unrelated concern, to which a fifth might reply, beginning two conversations alongside each other, overlapping but being made continuous to those furiously typing participants through the 'reply' function, which allows you to reply to a specific message out of several. Or, one's message could be ignored by the other users, instead picked up in another 'channel' or replied to a day later, or just neglected.

challenge that persisted throughout the participatory element of the research was that I was fundamentally inexperienced in these digital spaces and not socialised into these conversational rhythms. This posed challenges that more engagement helped overcome, but due to my relatively short stint, this hinderance will undoubtably reflect in my observations. It did, however, lead me to relying more heavily on interviews.

Interviews

Interviews provided an enormous amount of data, surprising me as an ethnographer taking my first steps and who believed participant observation was where all the empirical gold was to be found. However, these interviews were quite aberrant when compared to most other discussions of interviewing in ethnography (Levy & Douglas, 2011), as they were conducted in the form of often weeks-long textual interviews; more aptly described as guided conversations, with thousand-word long emails exchanged every few days that spilled over multiple topics and concerns, both asking and answering. I call them interviews because that is what they are—it was the stated purpose at the genesis of the conversations, and I maintained the authority of an interviewer (slightly looser than usual, perhaps)—but their less than semi-structured form and hazy delimitation makes them slightly divergent, somewhat akin to 'contextualised conversations', apart from their odd temporality (Stage & Mattson, 2012).

Particularities of online communication have been noted by a few, such as Boellstorff et al. (2012:92-112), but the most similar research experience found was that of Nalita James (2016), who observed that interviews conducted asynchronously through email allowed for greater reflection and depth with participants. Although email was not the sole medium I corresponded with interlocutors (the others being through the aforementioned platforms), the observation stands: through long-form, long-term exchanges with time and space constraints loosened, a greater depth was achieved, an element I believe to be compensatory to the potential shallowness of other data attained online.[7] I also chose to favour textual exchanges (instead of audio or audio-visual) due to the same rationale of taking the community on its on terms discussed above, as it was through text that worldbuilders came to know each other, and, for many, that was their prime and favoured medium. This was an immensely helpful choice to make in learning about the craft, as the looser structure allowed a freer wandering through the

[7] There are, of course, ethical issues to this: to send an long email with questions that demand lengthy responses, I impose myself on participants. I attempted to mitigate this by seeking assent to longer questionings after initial communications were made, and continually making aware and the imposition and providing a way out, but ultimately there is an unavoidable extractivist element that I can only hope is mollified by the arguments presented here.

variety of elements pertinent to each respective project that may not have emerged and been explored so comprehensively through a verbal interview or a more limited textual one.

Content Analysis

I scrolled past vast amounts of data daily, perusing instead of substantively engaging. This data was on its own not particularly ethnographic—it is the simple pluckings made during a scroll through the community, annotated and saved. But, when collected concurrent to other methods, the data collected becomes contextualised and capable of a more rigorous hermeneutic reading complimentary to the insights gained elsewhere. This, as Kozinets (2010) loosely observes, is intrinsic to much netnographical efforts because it is part of what forms the environment of a digital space: like one may record the hallway they pass through when entering an interview, the journey through a mass of content was important to record and consider. This, however, was a limited component of my engagement due to the plain fact that it is onerous and its data, although valuable, was merely complimentary and not alone sufficient to represent worldbuilders.

Sub-Cultural Saturation

Saying my field-site was online, which of course it was, is also a coy way to obscure that research was conducted from my apartment's sole table. Because of the partialities of researching online (see: Hine, 2000), and the available options to enhance my diet of worldbuilding media, I sought to leverage this and continue my engagement beyond my time on the screen by consuming and saturating myself in the content worldbuilders had to offer, such as videos, podcasts, guides, articles, documentaries, et cetera. I reasoned that while many ethnographers would eat, dine or otherwise bond with their interlocutors, I was confined to my table, so instead I could attempt to simulate more engagement while doing things around the house or generally consuming when I could not actively be in the community by listening to a podcast while cooking, watching a video while having a coffee, reading a guide in a lull, et cetera — essentially, getting myself closer to long-term immersion through media saturation.

I both took detailed notes on some content consumed, but also used this material to create an ambient media environment, giving me familiarity with terms, ongoing conversations, and trends in the community. These are analyses that stand on their own, and are brought into my ethnography below, but these materials also acted as conversational prompts with interlocutors that led into more detailed conversations and deeper engagements with particular subjects. It, too, was suiting, because many members of the community swing

between many sources of information and draw inspiration from them, so passively subjecting myself to these was another way to attain a semblance of holism and deep engagement with worldbuilding. But, as stated above, this is an appendage to the principal methods of netnographic enquiry—I was cautious of the time spent here, ensuring I was still anchored to my delimited site.

Creative Engagement

It seemed doubtfully anthropological to not try to worldbuild myself, so I did. By this I mean I tried my hand at crafting my own world alongside interviewing and discussing with interlocutors, operationalising insights garnered through fieldwork. This is an extended interpretation of Kozinet's (2010) notion of 'netnographic engagement', but also a necessary measure to engage in this community: it is about sharing and discussing worlds, and, really, you need something to discuss to get anywhere, thus I do not think this study could have been completed without the aid of the familiarity this generated. That said, this is not a large part of my method—it was just a means to advance understanding that helped relate to and discuss with worldbuilders, either directly through relaying experiences, or indirectly by helping me question productively and advance salient topics.

1.3: A (Short) History of Worldbuilding: Birth of the Demiurge

As mentioned, there was an ease in interacting with many worldbuilders because of a common curiosity, asking why, how, and importantly, what if? In a basic sense, worldbuilding is enabled by one of humanity's prime cognitive assets: imagination. Without this, that foundational and generative question of the craft — *what if?* — could not be asked. But it is not synonymous with scenarios the mind can conjure; it is a particular craft with a particular history able to be situated and unpacked. The short answer is that it lies with J.R.R. Tolkien – the "daddy of worldbuilding", to quote an interlocutor, or the progenitor of the craft, to be more anthropological about it – but I want to unpack the wider origins of worlds and provide a longer answer, tracing the craft's genealogy back to the similar origins of anthropology—in colonialism, modernism, and a fascination with difference—better establishing the two as children of the same ideational currents.

Precursory worlds can be identified in early history, such as Odysseus's adventures in *The Odyssey* (Homer, 2003), or the travels of King Mu of Zhou to Kunlun in *Tale of King Mu, Son of Heaven* in the Bamboo Annals (Legge, 1960/1865), whose large and influential stories

still exert influence and inspire creations today. Their credentials as 'worlds' are clear: they are far off, fantastical places divorced from direct reality, and are populated by strange, wonderful, and frightening things that are (loosely) made to be consistent with other features of the setting, just as worlds today are. However, these worlds (and the multiplicity of mythologies the world over) are not worldbuilding as it is today, rather, they are more like embryonic forms of it; descendants far-removed, but still genealogically linked. Through the last few centuries, and particularly the last several decades, a more complicated, focused form has emerged, where fictional worlds are produced in a far larger quantity, often by singular creatives, with increasing depth, complexity, and consistency, dealing with different themes and ideas, and proliferating far wider and in many different mediums.

Those precursors placed fantastical difference on peripheries, likely because that was where marked difference and the unknown was encountered, with contrasts becoming exaggerated into myth. At this stage, the difference encountered was limited, but when Europeans encountered the 'New World', difference became radical. These new places, peoples, customs, animals, foods, and more stimulated the imagination of European writers and consumers, spurring on imaginative creations and exaggerated stories (Wolf, 2012:72). This is where worldbuilding as we know it now takes a major leap, as alongside this colonial encounter the novel had ascended as a vital medium and the Enlightenment had invigorated the pursuit of knowledge with its postulation that all is knowable, which together fuelled a proliferation of fantastic tales featuring Europeans exploring and learning about new and strange places (Alexander, 2016:32, 18). Notions of feasibility had been shattered, and writers exploited this, but as more was learnt about the New World and increasing detail was added, fictions had to follow, providing richer accounts and convincing details of their fabulations, making the fictional evolve in lock step with the 'factual', providing intricate fantastical and alluring stories for consumption (Wolf, 2012:78). Of course, this is not a good story of enhanced and stimulated imagination, though – these stories played their part in providing fodder for the colonial imagination, sparking and sustaining disgust and shock through fabulised and exaggerated accounts of 'barbarity' in the 'New World' and elsewhere (Said, 1978:117).

This is similar to anthropology's foundation: its seed was sown in the curiosity following the colonial encounter, with that collision with bewildering difference later developing into anthropology as a discipline proper (Eriksen & Neilsen, 2013:6-11). It, too, played a part in the othering and exotification of colonial subjects, audaciously claiming to 'know' and possess the right to present the other (Said, 1978; Asad, 1973). Fundamentally,

however, antecedent worldbuilders and anthropologists found themselves similarly rapt with difference and exploring alternatives, committing strikingly similar misdeeds through providing narratives and 'evidence' that was used to justify and naturalise imperialism, but also in offering rarer sympathetic and rigorous investigations on strange and unfamiliar ideas. Similarities run deeper than this, too.

Both seek (or perhaps sought) to comprehensively describe societies, emphasising holism and defining themselves in their ability to capture whole socio-political worlds. Subjects of both, whether imaginary or actual, are also approached through outsiders' eyes (i.e., traveller, explorer), with that experience of contact between the dissimilar being enlightening and productive. Narrative demands have cemented certain tropes in both, too, such as predilections for arrival stories and expositionary encounters delivering necessary information dumps. There was even a penchant for the same locations: small-scale, generally distant communities that presented an apparently bounded and isolated subject, such as an island. For the worldbuilder it was appealing because the difference was explainable and the size was manageable (Wolf, 2012:80-81), and for the anthropologist it fit well into the idea of a bounded field site ostensibly unmolested by external influences (Rainbird, 1999, Ma, 2020:3). Desiring sufficient difference but instead encountering the growing reach of 'the West', both enterprises' attraction to islands grew: for worldbuilders, islands were distant and isolated enough to not have the imaginary overlap with the actual (now, its far-off planets, distant realms, or hidden worlds) and for anthropologists they were sites of the 'untouched', making for great ethnography. Both used their worlds for social commentary, too, utilising these seemingly strange real or totally fabulised places and people to productively ask questions and investigate their own societies (Young, 2011; Wolf, 2012:84-96).

What primarily and importantly divides the two is that one proceeds imaginatively, seeing the fictive as generative, and the other proceeds empirically, investigating alternatives in the 'actual world'. Exploration is still the shared ambition of both, and both use encounters and presentations of alterity to question with. Some interlocutors saw this, too, one even characterising his work as a 'fictional ethnography' – a characterisation that suggests that the fictional can serve a similar function as the ethnographical or anthropological, prodding and provoking productive thought.[8] However, this licence to explore through difference is not only a consequence of the enlightenment, but of modernism, too – the other major catalyst for

[8] As observed by Schwab (2012), or *Current Anthropology*'s collection on 'Speculative Anthropologies' (Anderson *et al.*, 2018).

contemporary worldbuilding, conditioning the likes of J.R.R. Tolkien's whose approach now dominates (although Tolkien himself resisted and criticised modernism [see: Tolkien, 1975]).

In brief, modernism legitimised more transgression and adulated over the new and inventive, with artists and intellectuals crowned as 'thinking giants', their creativity validated and deemed capable of altering reality rather than derided as fanciful or condemned as heretical (Alexander, 2016:40). It set the stage for worldbuilding and tinkering with the world, enabling and motivating efforts like Tolkien's *mythopoesis* – his effort to alter the world (Mortimer, 2005:115). Efforts in this time, such as L.L. Zamenhof's creation of Esperanto or the various efforts to re-shape society in more orderly forms (Scott, 1998) are related to worldbuilding, because fundamentally the craft is also dabbling with and attempting to improve aspects of society opened up to inquiry and change by modernism's rise and the boom in different forms of knowledge production and validated sites of cultural construction. And, in a way, the demiurgic worldbuilders are almost the ultimate expression of a thinking giant: they are playing God in an imaginary world, deciding the rise and fall of nations, the basic facts of ecology, and dictating the tragedies and triumphs that befall or are claimed by their fictional inhabitants (further touched upon in 3.2.1). This is a short summary of what is of course a mammoth movement, and one which is difficult to nail down due to its diffuse manifestations (Ardener, 1985), but it is where worldbuilding as an imaginative project used by a singular creative in order to change or reflect on the world took form – albeit one characterised by a fidelity to consistency and completeness, demonstrated most clearly by Tolkien, whose style is indubitably dominant.[9]

Tolkien, really, brings these varied strands together, founding the imaginative craft. His whole effort, although cautiously theorised in deference to God, was a modernist one: he was creating a world, taking experimentation of new forms to new heights, and did so in an effort to lay down new myths; *mythopoesis*. He, too, synthesised his knowledge of linguistics with his creative impulses, creating the sophisticated world of *Arda*. As one story goes, his inspiration for the one ring comes from his experience as an aide in an archaeological dig, where he was tasked with interpreting the etymology of a gold ring's inscription, finding it to read that one shall not find good health until the ring is brought back to its temple – demonstrating again a long-running enmeshment between scientific and creative concerns, historically evidencing Le Guin's (1973:73-74) observation "if there isn't some real connection

[9] I do not want to suggest all worldbuilding is undergone with the same lofty goals of Tolkien – just like other related creative crafts ascendant at the time, there were those with far-reaching goals of change, and the hobbyists enjoying it for its own sake.

between a certain kind of scientific-mindedness (the explorative, synthesising kind) and fantasy-mindedness." Of course, colonial influences appear too – both in the unsavoury racist tropes and beliefs (Hassler-Forest, 2016:32-33), but also in that comprehensive exploration of different contexts (however essentialist it may be). But, as China Miéville (2002) states, Tolkien is owed "a sincere debt. For all of us interested in the fantastic, however critical we are of him, Tolkien is the Big Oedipal Daddy," or, Terry Pratchett's observation that he is an inescapable feature of fantasy, with creators either in his lineage, or rebelling against it (2014:242).

Belief in the modernist 'thinking giant' and the power of one's own creativity to alter the actual has waxed and waned since Tolkien's heyday, but now anthropologists find themselves intensely interested in the fantastic, counting them as also in debt of Tolkien and his advancement in the arts of fabulation. There now appears to be a wider détente between the imaginative and empirical modes of exploration, with each side more readily identifying the other as concerned with similar queries, however approaching them differently – that is, either by conjuring or investigating – thus, ultimately complimentary methods. We see this with speculative anthropologies and fictions now welcomed into the academy (Wolf-Meyer, 2019; Parisi, 2013; Carby, 2008) — not a hobby outside it (explored more in 3.0). What is clear, though, is that worldbuilding has a recent history, and one closely tied to anthropology, facts that both have a great bearing on its contemporary form.

1.4: A Theory of Worlds and Worldbuilding: Corresponding Between Realms

When I first contacted worldbuilders and started to pry about their worlds, reflections on aspects of the world where they had "poured" or "invested" themselves deeply, either through theme or some wider vector (like characters, histories, events, political models, kinship systems, gender norms), were recurring. Creators had consciously imparted themselves into the world—and changed with it, too. Quickly, it became clear that there was no split between worldbuilder and world, that instead they were closely enmeshed, and changing together.

Francis' world, for example, had built up over the years, budding initially as an idea for a fantasy world with a part of the population able to control particular forms of energy (thermal, electric, and more), but those "daydreaming exercises […] gradually grew more elaborate." Now, his world is centred around cosmos-fearing humans, paranoid about the "threats and horrors [that] could lie in the big black," and Francis finds himself and his disparate interests channelled through the setting: a burgeoning career in art and animation made for in-world

scenes laced with this fear and curiosity; an interest in astronomy inherited from his father resulted in an appreciation and fascination with celestial configurations; philosophical questions of finality and aftermath fuelled in-world political quandaries. Francis, in essence, felt a great part of him was within the world, and it fed back. His extrapolations were not plain, passive additions; through expanding these ideas, sophisticating the world's dynamics, and engaging deeply with his manufactured reality, Francis deepened his comprehension, proposing questions *through* the world and pondering potential answers. It holds myriad pieces of him—preferences, questions, curiosities—and it answers back, satisfyingly engaging and advancing these ideas, and affecting him, too.

This can be extremely profound, as well. Gregory's world, a far-off and now-isolated frontier whose colonists have thrown off tyrannical rule and plot their course forward, holds a huge part of his life, its past encapsulating his past. It began as a psychological horror, with people struggling on the brink of barbarism, unable to trust others and too scared to change society due to an extreme fear of the disorder that would come: a direct parallel to Gregory's life and outlook then. But, over time, the world changed—retrospectively and co-temporally—as he changed. A series of tragic and traumatic events that accumulatively made him feel "the bottom had just fallen out of [his] life" was channelled into the world—into war and strife—and, like him, through this tumult, better futures were found. Now, the worlds people are focused on what to do next after that escape from an oppressive past, following his personal life and encapsulating his changes over time.

It, too, is a portrait of his anxieties about political realities today: in his words, what characterised the tyranny was if everything in contemporary society was made worse, with total elite capture, more intellectual obscurantism, exacerbated rural impoverishment, and forced homogeneity. But he is not stuck on this now; his focus is instead on what comes *after*, the precise opposite of that dystopia. What is key here, and what I theorise, is that there is essentially no clear trench separating creator and world, nor a clear mark of a world as a snapshot of a person at that point in time (as in perhaps a novel), with one's fantastical thoughts, aesthetic tastes, emotive state, or political ideals manifesting neatly in an imaginary world. Rather, it is a processual development of worlds, creators and creations enmeshed together and changing through the growth of the world. For Gregory, the world was born from his existential reality, changing as he did, but *he* also changed through making the world and mulling over the questions it raised—both intellectually and personally—refracting ideas and experiences back on him, altering him. He tells me, for example, that initially the fictive crisis that threw the world into chaos was inadvertently caused and the revolutionaries merely weathered it, but

now, through the introspection spurred on by questioning the dynamics of that overthrow, he changed it, making them cause it and face it head on, mirroring his changing understanding of his own past and crises he, too, triumphed over.

I do not want to stop there, however — I want to explore each part of this phenomena, theorising how imagination specifically manifests and is carried out by the worldbuilders I engaged with, making the process of this art and its impacts intelligible. This section runs through the prime dimensions, from worlds' ontological positioning as *sub*creation, to discussing their liminality, as well the process of making them as a playful correspondence between ontologies that I call *ontogenous play*.

1.4.1: The Ontological Conception of Worlds: Worldbuilding as Sub-Creation

J.R.R. Tolkien suggested his worldbuilding was an act of sub-creation, conceiving of the worldbuilder as a 'little creator' beneath *the* Creator, God, and imaginary worlds as sub-creations, existing beneath the primary world, impossible to entirely detach. However, being *under* does not reduce worlds to entirely derivative reflections of reality—they are, to Tolkien, creations in the sense they are original and transcendental as he believed that humans, made in God's image, were endowed with in innate capacity to create like God. However, just not to the same extent: God made it all from nothing, whilst humans *sub*-create. This view endures in some form, albeit for less theological reasons, carried on by Mark Wolf who has focused attention on imaginary worlds in his recent work (2012; 2016; 2020a), founding 'sub-creation studies'. Wolf's general argument is that worlds can be seen as ontologically subordinate creations, as worlds beneath a primary reality in the sense that they can never quite be entirely ontologically independent creations, as their creativity is, ultimately, limited to their reality (Wolf, 2019).

Now, despite this limitation, theorists such as Thomas Pavel (1986) and Lubomír Doležel (1998) have influentially argued that fictions are their own and unique—they are not entirely imitative of reality and can exert semi-independent influence. Their admittedly quite different arguments loosely converge on the point that fictional worlds are somewhere between firm reality—often called the 'Primary' or 'Actual' world by scholars, or 'irl' (in real life) by worldbuilders—and pure imagination, something like a design that is not yet made, capable of affecting reality yet not a rigorous blueprint for it (Pavel argues fictional worlds *cannot* be considered genuine, possible worlds). Essentially, this makes inroads against the notion that

fiction (or the imagination) is a stale part of an uninventive loop, merely memetic in content and epistemologically repetitive in effect, as structuralism suggested. Instead, it welcomes investigations into the interconnections and influences of the real and the fictive on each other. Fiction, really, then occupies a complicated border-zone between the imagination and reality, existing in a more or less post-structuralist form, possessing some ontological significance and independence (Hart, 2012:9-34) and endowed with some epistemological credentials, making the fantastical and, in this particular context, the other-worldly, sources of their own particular knowledge (Schwab, 2012; Kind & Kung, 2016). Both Francis and Gregory's experiences speak to this: that there is something gained from and informing worldbuilding more than just entertainment or mimesis.

In the ontological conception, there is no declaration of ontological independence—worlds are, as Tolkien astutely made clear, tethered to the real world. Imaginary worlds—and, indeed, all that is imagined (Gosetti-Ferencei, 2018:11)—are partially, and essentially, characterised by their inventiveness (Wolf, 2012), but can never be more than sub-created, because one can never entirely escape the 'Primary World' and all its defaults; basically, it must be conceded that humans cannot create *ex nihilo*, from nothing (Wolf, 2019:1). Of course, this may be commonsensical: fictions are made by enculturated subjects whose creativity is inescapably conditioned, but it bears stating that one cannot escape their primary reality completely. There is, then, a limitation in couching them as ontologically separate, as this makes them appear to exist in delimited camps; instead, I suggest seeing imaginary worlds as locked betwixt realms, in an ontologically liminal space *between* worlds, and the act of engaging with them as a form of liminal experience.[10]

1.4.2: Worldbuilding as Liminal Experience: Betwixt and Between Ontologies

Cooper, an interlocutor, described worldbuilding as "a sandbox for playing with how the world works." By this, he means that through worldbuilding you are playing with all these different aspects of the world, able to adjust and change things and ponder what the consequences would be. He spoke further about how the appeal for him is the deconstruction of systems he sees in the real world, and their reconstruction and alteration in the fictional world, particularly enjoying 'playing with' anthropology and politics. This is done in an imaginative, abstracted

[10] Lily Alexander (2016) has similarly brought the concept of liminality to bear on worlds, which inspired my argument, however she does so in regards to the mediatised products, and I consider the process of their making.

way, with a world populated by moth-people and lizard-people whose lives, cultures, and histories are influenced and buttressed by theories and histories of and from the 'Actual World' (explored further below, in 2.1). With this, I see Cooper, and my interlocutor's worlds in general as being in an interstitial zone *between* the ontological firmness of their primary reality and on their way to creating an ontologically whole imaginary worlds. This process, this *ontogeny* of fleshing out a new realm and its workings, occurs in a semi-liminal space, betwixt and between transcendent imaginings and hard reality (Turner, 1969:95), where one works toward displacing (or inadvertently displaces) entrenched imaginings and ideas through worldbuilding (discussed further, in 2.3). Worldbuilding, then, is a form of liminal experience.

There are myriad uses of liminality now (Thomassen, 2009), but at its heart is a process where one is disoriented and in a state of ambiguity, where you are slipping out of previous structures and classifications and subject to new, initially bewildering ones, transitioning from a prior state to another state (Turner, 1969). You learn through this process, traditionally changing in status through some form of crisis embedded in the ritual, but worldbuilding does not demand that *per se*. Liminoid experience, then, may get closer, described as a leisurely "break from normality, a playful as-if experience" (Thomassen, 2009:15)—seemingly a quite precise fit for worldbuilding. However, the experience of making or generally engaging with worlds *can* alter one's subjectivity quite radically, and characterising it as some lackadaisical recess risks deriding the whole endeavour as stale escapism. Hence, I suggest making worlds is putting yourself through a *pseudo-liminal experience* (Turner, 1974). This captures what must be captured from the above components: it does not necessitate radical change, nor is it forced, but neither is it trivial and impotent. Just like with building (to run with the crafts dominant metaphor) to build well you need to know your materials and tools well, as it is with worldbuilding: you need to know your materials well (passably well, anyway) to conjure impressive worlds. To know your materials well, then, is akin to forming your own anti-structure, as through attempting to understand the components of the 'Actual World' necessary to sophisticating a secondary one, you simplify and reveal the arbitrariness of classificatory schemes, which is key to the liminal process (*ibid*., 1969).

But there is more to this curious space where worlds exist and worldbuilding takes place; more to what worldbuilders are doing *with* and *in* this ontologically liminal space. As worlds are not fully formed creations or ontologies, they are being made and in formation, I theorise their making as *ontogenous play*.

1.4.3: Ontogenous Play: Making Worlds

Gregory's development of his world from a deeply dystopic, pessimistic world where humanity teeters on the knife's edge to a world focused on the antitheses of that order—on making and sustaining a New Order to replace the Old Order—is, I suggest, a particular correspondence. I utilise the term from Tim Ingold (2013), who explores how through making artefacts, maker and material correspond with one another in a co-constitutive and mutually enhancing way. Weavers and builders (*ibid*.:22, 48), or welders (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988:411), for example, are unable to just impose their will on materials, as materials are unruly and not perfectly pliable, so they must work *with* them, and correspond to meld them. However, worldbuilders do not, for the most part, deal with physical materials—their mode of making, like the anthropologist, is through working with ideas and knowledge about the world attained through experience, study, and reflection. Nonetheless, the same principal applies: making, whether with flax, molten iron, or social theory, resists the plain imposition of hylomorphism (or, perhaps, hylomythism here)—that fallacious idea that materials are entirely pliable to creators (Ingold, 2013; Deleuze & Guattari, 1988).

Worldbuilders like Francis, with his cosmophobic humans, cannot just paste their ideas onto an imaginary world. They have to tousle with constraints for it to feel *right*, dealing with the boundaries of astronomical possibility and logical consequences (explored more, in 2.2). Humans in Francis' world, then, fear the 'big black' because of the mysterious destruction of their home-world, and face their energy decaying further away from the sun—a compromise between the 'actual' and one's imagination. Obviously, imaginary worlds have within them radical simplifications of complex phenomena, and certainly fly in the face of actual plausibility, but these are compromises between the confides of reality and the imaginative aspirations of particular worldbuilders made during the creative process (explored more, 2.2). This was variously described by interlocutors as achieving 'realism', 'credibility', or 'plausibility', concerns which all evidence an inability to just impose ideas. Worldbuilders also communicate their craft in similar terms to a hylomorphic understanding—'planning', 'structuring', 'designing', 'constructing', 'systematising'—but the name world*building* directly implies likeness to the exact phenomena Ingold discusses (2013:48); creation as a negotiated, creative, and dialogic process.

By my reckoning, investigating this creative process is filling a hole in current research into worlds. Like Ingold observes, much research into creative domains is preoccupied with

attending to the products rather than "the productive processes that bring the artefacts themselves into being" (2013:7). Studies of worldbuilding have also been comparably lopsided, focusing on either specific worlds (Shippey, 2014), their social and political effects (Hassler-Forest, 2016; Roine, 2016; Zaidi, 2017), their trans-medial character (Boni, 2017), or their ontological place (Pavel, 1986; Doležel, 1998; Hart, 2012), rather than the actual process of making them.[11] More comprehensive efforts are beginning to be made, particularly by Wolf (2012; 2016; 2020a), providing insights of immense value but not quite elucidating what it is to worldbuild, lacking testaments from what I consider the grassroots of the craft. This is partially a consequence of understanding them through the prism of end products, as this misses processes, seeing only conclusions. Hence, while the ontological approach alone is sufficient to explain how the product is anchored to the 'primary reality' through placing it in a subordinate yet still bonded position, it is insufficient to understand the process of making a world.

To tack back, then, we can understand a world as something ontologically different—there are new technologies, political configurations, histories, and faiths—but more is needed to explain how one gets there: that push-and-pull of wanting to include something, but being unable to find a way; or trying to render an experience or affect palpable in-world, but falling short, and settling, finding, and *making* something new. Ingold, again, provides a way to apprehend this that preserves the ontological tinkering that underwrites the craft: ontogeny. To him, ontogeny as a verb moves the focus toward how something is grown and formed, rather than the bare characteristics needed to classify its existence (2020:6), shifting instead to understanding it as a correspondence: an open-ended, dialogic process (*ibid*., 2020:10). In this, too, it encapsulates the growth out of an existing ontology or 'Actual World' rather than just an ethereal plan for something new and divorced. Saying "multiple ontologies signify multiple worlds, but multiple ontogenies signify one world" (*ibid*., 2020:7) gets to the heart of a worldbuilders process and the craft: it is not summoning something totally fresh, birthing it out of unique creativity, but a negotiated dialogue between the world where one 'plays' with the world, melting it down to useful compartments, and welding new but never entirely divorced ones.[12]

Hence, worldbuilding could be seen as an ontogenous correspondence, a characterisation that brings attention to the processes of the craft, where worlds are made as

[11] Although, there are now movements in that direction (Wolf, 2020b).
[12] This observation is not in opposition to scholarship on worldbuilding and secondary worlds in literature studies, either. Links between the primary and 'secondary' are stressed by most (see: Ryan, 2013).

ontological artefacts and locked in correspondence with the 'Actual World'. However, I think it is better characterised as *ontogenous play*, as it loosens the boundaries of making. Afterall, worldbuilders are fundamentally just tinkering around, exploring ideas that take their fancy and, importantly, finding it fun to tamper with ontologies. They are not committed to a sanitised procedure, nor is it high-stakes – it is processually and playfully creating until something complete enough to be called a world emerges (Wolf, 2012:38). 'Play' also melds with Turner's notion of liminality, as "in liminality people 'play' with the elements of the familiar and defamiliarize" (1974:60), and highlights its profound generativity as an art. Worldbuilding, then, can be seen not as a decisive imaginative move, plopped out by a stroke of creativity, but generated dialogically, openly, and playfully, interlocked with reality and growing creatively from it.

When seen in this way, it also brings attention to what vitalities the process holds, showcasing worldbuilding as having a penchant for deconstruction and incision, or what Agamben calls 'destitutive power' (2014), that ability of art and social theory to dissect and dispatch ideas. I explore this further in 3.0, but for now understanding it as *ontogenous play* allows me to dive deeper into the curious consequences of this process in the next section. There, I go through my interlocutors' testaments to better explain how they are making and experiencing these ontologically liminal places, formulating the making of imaginary worlds as *situated transcendence.* Approaching worldbuilding as liminal and as *play* aids this through emphasising a position at the interstices of different states of being, drawing attention to how in that position one learns and changes — which, in the context here, is through *making the imaginary*, the art of ontogenous play.

PART 2: MAKING THE IMAGINARY

2.0: Section Preamble: Literature Reflection and Overview

Perusing worldbuilders' interactions and conversations has a surreal aspect to it, with all these people diving deeply into concerns seemingly completely untethered from reality, such as exchanges about the culinary culture of orcs, hefty explanations for how the artificially intelligent overlord of a Nordic city came to be, or arguments about the naming conventions of intelligent space-faring oceanic species. However, as shown, these are not untethered, but rather firmly anchored to one's reality, and investigating these odd questions refract back on that reality. Going off of my theorisation of worldbuilding as ontogenous play in liminal space between realms, here I concretely detail that process, showing how through teasing out the details of one's fictional world and hunting for the answers to all those self-professedly peculiar questions that arise and making their imaginary world, they and their worlds can change. In other words, through building *your* world, you can learn more about and alter the way you interact with and understand '*the* world'.

To begin, this section starts with a run-through of the basics of constructing a world. Drawing on emic materials and the testaments of my interlocutors, I suggest how one gets landed with an idea for a world and begins to work on it, challenging more rigid and linear understandings of worldbuilding (in 2.1). Then, I turn to what that process is aspirant towards, what standards and expectations are levelled on worlds—realism, believability, credibility, originality—and how those are experienced and dealt with (in 2.2). Then, I explore the impacts of the worldbuilding process on the worldbuilders I spoke to (in 2.3) — those intellectual, emotional, and political changes that are attributed to their worldbuilding. In each of these, I go through the testaments of interlocutors and the ethnographic data, and then I assess these principals of the craft in light of Gosetti-Ferencei's (2018) conceptualisation of imagination as *situated transcendence* (2.4), presenting more thoroughly the act of making the imaginary as an art of stepping away from reality and learning more through that process.

2.1: The Foundational Work of Worlds

When asked about the origins of worlds, overwhelmingly worldbuilders would respond with uncertainty, struggling to plot their debut into the craft. "It's hard to say," Louis told me when I first asked when he starting creating his secondary worlds, "because essentially worldbuilding is just a systematic way of making stuff up about the world, which I something I suppose I

have always done [...].” If pressed, as I attempted to do most times, they placed it in an encounter with particular fictions—*Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien, 2004/1968), *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (Miller, 1959), *Howl’s Moving Castle* (Miyazaki, 2004), *The Female Man* (Russ, 1975), to name a few explicitly mentioned—or in being struck with an idea through study—Qur’anic studies, design theory, economics, and, excitingly, anthropology, to give an idea of range—or just through the happenstance of life and conversations, presenting these experiences as landing them with an idea begging for extrapolation. Louis’ particular project and world, which I was fortunate to enquire about as it was just taking off, is premised on and blooms out of from a simple idea he had: if people could store their compound emotions in a material artefact. He calls this the *anchor* of the world, a conceptual tether that productively limits his later additions and developments, holding the ontology and aim firm as he uses the world to ask and dwell on salient and important questions, believing “fictional approaches to life can provide us with different perspectives on our real respective lives” (explored more below, in 2.4). Developing this particular idea is where it ostensibly ‘properly’ began, all stemming from this foundational and now-cemented idea, but prior to that there was the murky fermentation of ideas, fuelled by the intake of various, divergent materials. I want to consider this murky origins of worlds, showing how the beginning of worlds is really before the pen hits the page (or, finger to keyboard), showing how this amalgamatory and gradual process really defines the craft and the experience of what it is to make a world.

So, how do you actually go about building worlds? What is this process? Where does it begin? As stated, origins are foggy, there is still some loose sense that can be made of their worlds’ geneses, something about being visited upon by an idea and wanting to do *something* with it. I explore this here, expanding on how ideas are grown into worlds by the worldbuilders I spoke to. However, this runs against the dominant conceptualisation of the worldbuilding process—against the standard advice encountered by guides and models for worlds. In these, there are two ways to go about worldbuilding: top-down, or bottom-up. If you were to peek at any general guides, you would likely find some instantiation of this dichotomy (with *some* variation), tutoring you on how you ought to zoom in or zoom out of some foundational demiurgic act (see: Silverstein, 2012; Trevena, 2019; Holladay, 2020; Ellefson, 2020). This can be truly *foundational*, too, as many suggest somewhat masochistically to begin with the plate tectonics of a planet, creating continents from that base, then climatic zones, et cetera.[13]

[13] As the second episode of *Worldbuilding for Masochists* is focused on – a popular podcast about worldbuilding (Morris, Miller, and Marseca, 2019).

Allegedly, all worldbuilders find themselves in one camp: either birthing their fictive peoples through broad-strokes, later detailing; or through a focused approach, fixated on the granularities from the get-go, often having their world develop in a story where they slowly pan out, detailing and extrapolating on more as they go.

Within this model, you either build your world in a manner where you are spatialised above ('zooming in'), looking godlike and shaping this burgeoning reality, often starting with a map, making the general outlines of continents or planetary systems, establishing the rudimentary basics of those 'rules' that will divorce your world from the real world either aesthetically, biophysically, or, more deeply, ontologically, by means of changing terms ('reskinning'[14]), introducing new forms of life, or changing fundamental physics.[15] Or, it is bottom-up, beginning at a comparatively microscopic level—such as village, city, or character—and expanding out from there ('zooming out'), figuring out, say, how that village sustains itself, where a character's parents hail from, or what symbols mean what and why. As you work your way wider, you build more, finding and filling in gaps (where does this spice come from?, what iconography might they have?, and so on), and further detailing it until it becomes something quite expansive and its own: a world. Of course those basics of landscapes and culture are meant to still be there, but they can be a bit more muddled, gaining clarity as needed—in a way, you work "additively" with the former, adding on some base foundation, while continually constructing with the latter.

I am not suggesting these particular processes do not take place: they do, guiding many worldbuilders' processes by simplifying the overwhelming complexity of something so large as a 'world'. However, these guides actually had little purchase in the community itself—not a single interlocutor had really read one. Most said their worlds had transcended the need for one, or they just were not useful to them, but were quite familiar with their precepts. Thus, worldbuilders I spoke often separated themselves into camps on the basis of these two strategies, marking a key evolution of their project in a map drawn or a character pencilled out, a maturation in form from hazy, abstract thoughts into a form described as more "proper", "serious, or "dedicated". But, this is a development, an advancement, *not* a genesis. Louis, with his single and core tenet, outlines a different approach discernible as the actual genesis of most

[14] 'Reskinning' is nominally changing something without changing any fundamental characteristics—changing the appearance, but not the heart of the thing. It's origin is with games where you can change your character's appearance with a 'skin' but not change its abilities/'stats'.

[15] Mark Wolf suggests the four realms in which worlds separate themselves from the Primary Reality are the nominal, the cultural, the natural, and the ontological, each further separated (Wolf, 2012:34). I have bunched these together here.

worlds: an idea, an inspiration that is so tantalising to engage with that it motivates and necessitates a world to be formed. Despite the fact his testament is that of one interlocutor, his particular articulation of a world having an anchor I found transplantable to other interlocutors' worlds: one idea that they held centrally, informing all else (even if it was a loosely held one, such as an aesthetic preference or world-event, and even if it faded and morphed over time), rather than some demiurgic event of designing a planet, species, or culture.

In fact, *none* I spoke to squarely located the genesis of their worlds in plotting a coastline or naming a character. Instead, it was through engagement with other media—films, novels, games, scholarly work—that seeded their imagination and marked the incipience of the world. As another example, James explained to me how his world "took root" when he studied the Qing dynasty during his time at university, struck "by the broad, dramatic ideas" of the late Qing dynasty, where it was beset by debilitating internal fissures and the predation of outside powers, facing influxes of new ideas that clashed with entrenched traditions. James was explicit that the Qing did *not* act as a framework for his world, but as inspiration, which eventually had motley other inspirations tacked on, such as David Graeber's *Debt* (2011), the various works of Hayao Miyazaki, and games like *Rain World* (Adult Swim, 2017), helping the world's growth and sophistication. It did not start with a map, with some definitive act of birthing the world, but rather with the ideas introduced through studying Chinese history bubbling in the mind, becoming mixed with other ideas—aesthetic, political, narrative—congealing into an idea that needed a world. As relayed to me, the Qing provided the inspirational underpinning of the world, with the huge, divided state and various manoeuvring factions *so* tantalisingly interesting and dynamic as to want to "play" with it, eventually compounding with other interests into a world *entirely* different from the initial early-modern Chinese influence, melding with the "many, many more things that have inspired and informed!" It is, then, a beginning and a process not dominated necessarily by rigour and structure like the embedded metaphor in world*building* may, at first glance, suggest, but rather a budding process of an idea seeded, germinating, and then growing into something more firm and structured, thus identifiable and presentable as a world.

Although I question the accuracy of accounts that frame worldbuilding through metaphors of structuring, scaffolding, planning, and designing as the craft's distinguishing and prime features, I do think *building* is apt. My dad is a builder, and when helping him throughout the years on various sites, the process of building, say, a shed, was anything but a straightforward application of a planned form: the process was marked by unforeseen problems that required improvisatory uses of the tools available, and punctuated by many 'breathers'

while you reassess what you were actually meant to be doing and what came next, asking for someone else's thoughts and help. Of course, there is a pretty firm thrust of where you are going and what you want, but a lot changes on the way, as Ingold (2013) centrally observes. Building, then, tracks well onto worldbuilding—you have an idea, you play with it using the materials around that in this case are just ideas about the world itself, building it in the direction you have in mind, until something like a world appears. As James says about the hitches faced, "it might take research, or long conversations to figure out", which, put another way, is finding new materials or bending already possessed ones with the help of others to keep it together and expand on it, not the simple process of deciding to build a world and starting with the scaffolding.

It may be commonsensical to anyone who has dabbled in any creative field that it all begins with an idea, and that idea is then made to feel real and "proper" with some actual material, such as a map, a sketch, flash-fiction, or even just a name. But it worth stepping back and detailing their experiences of being struck or deciding on an idea, as it is integral to the making that follows. Now, I turn to that, focusing on what specifically structures this particular mode of making in worldbuilding: plausibility.

2.2: The Pursuit of Plausibility and Imagination's Constraints

Through my research, I learnt a surprising amount about rivers. Really, there were many subjects I unexpectedly had to familiarise myself with to understand some worldbuilding conversations, but hydrology was inescapable. Importantly, I now know that rivers *rarely* bifurcate, meaning that they do not split into different flows, except in certain, exceptional cases. I, like many others, had assumed rivers simple enough of a topic: a stream of water going downwards, somewhere, a zero-fuss addition to my fictive continent. However, on multiple occasions when starting my day by scrolling through the community's main page, I would see a map posted, find some rivers, jump into the comments, and there they were: the river police.

Chirping in anytime an unsuspecting novice worldbuilder strayed from hydrological orthodoxy, the river police would comment that rivers *do not* flow like that. They were a joke around the community, with them reliably cropping up to "let you know" or "keep in mind" that the river was aberrant, or, flatly impossible. If you had reasons for a river bifurcating, or otherwise flowing in some unfathomable way (uphill, two exorheic rivers from a lake, ocean-to-ocean), such as magic, some strange physical properties, or what-have-you, then you were in the clear, but, generally, you *must* have thought the river through. As I was told by a

particularly dedicated worldbuilder, Noah, even if you have those in-world explanations, "it's not an excuse for not knowing or wanting to learn more about why their maps are wrong or why things are the way they are." In essence, the expectation was that it should all make sense, and worldbuilders ought to learn and know about their present world in order to build another one. Total ignorance was, generally, impermissible.

These river dogmatists make sure rivers are understood, but the ethic runs through the community: you should attempt plausibility. Due to this, references to biology are abound, anthropological observations are staples, and physics looms high above, all acting as slight limits to more outlandish creations. Of course, you can break the mould, and all do in some respects—it is, ultimately, ontogenous play—but the aspiration is still there. You can, say, have a plausible ecology and hold to that, but recuse yourself from accountability to astronomy purely because you do not want the bother—but it is a *consciously* made call to go for the "rule of cool" over the hard, limiting rules of reality. Waving away an issue, jokingly called 'handwavium', is even given its own emoticon on the platform, often used when, to run with the example, astronomical facts stand in the way of fun solar systems or exciting space battles. But, this pressure to attain some plausibility and credibility endures, with some commenting that "[…] I need to remind myself of that. Sometimes rule of cool must take first seat," suggesting that sometimes the enjoyment of it must be re-centred, rather than solely focusing on consistency and logic.

Nonetheless, this demonstrates that worldbuilding is not some entirely untethered, imaginatively liberated craft. James, currently trying to turn his worldbuilding into a pursuit he can live off, commented that "[in worldbuilding] there *are* right and wrong answers, and it might take many tries before you have a solution that's satisfying […] It might take research, or a long conversation to figure it out." Reminiscent of David Graeber's observation that when people sit down to play Dungeons & Dragons, a supposedly great mode of improvisatory, creative play, they first must go through the hoops of quasi-bureaucratic paperwork, effectively delimiting it (2015:106), we see here that worldbuilders do the same, encumbering themselves with limits to guide their pursuits. And it is the same with children's play, where they spend half of the time bickering about rules, who is doing it wrong or being unfair, seemingly impeding 'play' with limits (*ibid.*:108). I mention this not because I have some misgivings about the imaginative capacity of these sorts of play, but instead to highlight worldbuilding's bond with these famously free and explorative modes. All imagination, really, is tethered to the real world, willingly or not (Kind and Kung, 2016), and it is at the crossroads of the attempt

to transcend reality's rules whilst still anchored to it where the fun of worldbuilding is found (as well as its other potencies).

This, too, relates to theoretical discussion in part one: worldbuilders cannot break from ontological bonds completely, worlds are consciously and unconsciously, deliberately and accidentally, haunted by the spectral logics, assumptions, and tastes of their creators (as discussed, 1.4), but the ability to do so better can be enhanced by knowing this facet of imaginative processes. Learning, discussing, and questioning are ways to enhance your ability to widen that moat between reality and imaginary world, finding different and exciting ideas, as highlighted by James attesting to the work behind making strange and sensical things.

But in this is also the stress and worry around attaining that believability, credibility, and realism, balanced with originality and creativity—a central anxiety of a worldbuilder. It was quite common to see people musing about these stresses, trying to make their ideas possible, hunting for explanations for, as an example, how there could be dozens of very similar intelligent species on the same planet, when, clearly, our history suggests only one can last. Many piled in their reckons about how it could work, from suggesting other animals where hundreds of varieties exist contemporaneously, with others shutting that down by pointing out they are confined to ecological niches, so this does not help. Another suggested alternative psychology, or a less scarce and thus competitive environment, but this was dismissed as evolutionarily improbable; so, unrealistic, unbelievable. Of course, the creator could abandon recourse to science—indeed, that is what much fantasy rests upon[16]—but that was undesirable, with the preference being a credible world. In line with Noah and James' comments above, this worldbuilder might dispense with explanation, and wave away the logical issue, or may find another way-around, but they tried reckoning with the implausibilities, doing some research and talking with others to try and find a satisfying solution.

This particular anxiety around the plausibility of different intelligent species co-existence was actually startlingly common, and the inability for some worldbuilders to come to that elusive 'satisfying' answer led them to new genres for their world, such as science fiction, a genre that offered a broader metaphysical allowance making mind-bogglingly different lifeforms' co-temporal existence conceivable. I spoke with Ren, whose main world kicked off as a *Star Wars* fanfiction, and he explained that it has since broken off and been "overhauled" as its own world (meaning, really, that is has been overhauled to obey different

[16] For instance, Tolkien's *Middle Earth* is riddled with myriad intelligent creatures, all surviving. But, importantly, he still explains this: deities created the various forms of life, not evolution (Tolkien, 2015/1977).

'rules' that define internal consistency). With this, he blended his affection with the softer science-fiction of *Star Wars* with the harder variants of Orson Scott Card and Ursula K. Le Guin, but also with his education in American Indian Studies, anthropology, and biology. His world holds tight to 'Fermi-compliance', which Ren described as a way to maintain the paradox that there *is* life out there currently, but we cannot see it (in reference to the Fermi paradox [Shostak, 2011]), by having massive projects of 'uplifting' happen in-world—a trope in science fiction of a more technologically advanced civilisation aiding a lesser one.[17] With this, the world houses myriad different species, societies, and cultures because science fiction can allow it whilst still closely following our physical rules ('hard sci-fi'), so there can be species of gargantuan slug-like peoples existing alongside (in a galaxy-wide sense) pill-shaped humming-birds with prehensile tails, and many, many others.

Those slug-like people, though, are interesting to discuss, because of the changes they went through in this push-and-pull, negotiated creative process toward plausibility. Beginning as a creature inspired by C. M. Kösemen's (2008) speculative evolution project, Snaiad, he wanted a sauropod—a long-necked, long tailed animal—on a large earth-like planet, but realised gravity would not allow that to evolve. So, compromises were made: he mixed and mashed another element of the world he was toying with, such as planets and life with different biochemistries, with this idea for a sauropod, ending up with the slug-like creatures extant now. Later, they were redesigned *again* leaning closer to the slugginess, as the "slug-like form minimizes the number of moving parts they have to keep off the ground", thus safeguarding plausibility in the environment imagined. Ren maintained multiple worlds, too; worlds whose underlying 'rules' allowed for different, similarly engaging but not compatible worlds—such as those with gods, and then different worlds with gods that played by different rules. But his main setting, this expansive science-fiction, apparently allows for the most satisfying 'play'.

What I primarily want to have demonstrated here is what I have presented above: the difficulty of putting any distance between the ontological foundations of the primary world and an imaginary one without reckoning with those foundations and either going along with them, bending, stretching, or reinterpreting them, or opting to just abandon them (and, even then, worlds are stalked by ontological suppositions). James and Ren fundamentally had imaginative ambitions both propelled and constrained by reality, something I conceive as worldbuilders' pursuit of plausibility or creating the sensical strange. For them, it was not an unpleasant

[17] If he was to obey the fermi paradox, many species would not have made simultaneously made it to the space age. Uplifting is a way to get around this, popularised through series such as the David Brin's *Uplift Universe Series* (1980).

process—indeed, they derived intense satisfaction from the melding of many interests in their world—but it was something they strove toward, having conversations with friends and other worldbuilders in attempt to make their worlds make sense. Now, I want to better explore the multifaceted impacts this process of creating a credible world has.

2.3: Impacts of Worldbuilding

Worldbuilding lies in a slightly paradoxical state, both moving beyond given reality yet still intimately locked to reality. This has been demonstrated so far with explaining how worldbuilders are landed with their ideas for worlds which come from their experiential realities, and how they develop these ideas through ontogenous play, trying to make them 'plausible'. Both of these aspects loosely speak to the fact that imagination has a paradoxical capacity to both *reproduce* inputs and *produce* new ideas, being simultaneously conservative and innovative. What I endeavour here is to further expand on this, and show how my interlocutors used worlds in multiple ways, with the process of worldbuilding impacting them intellectually, emotionally, and politically. Centrally, I want to suggest that worldbuilding is a mode of situated transcendence; that is, it is not just synonymous with imagination generally, which is essentially always a way to slightly transcend our embodied situatedness, but it is a particular way of imagining that is undertaken and structured in a way that it deliver particular impacts. It is, essentially, a craft aimed at achieving plausibility in the imagined, deliberately tethering itself to the 'rules of the world' more-so than it needs to, thus making one imagine and impacting them in a more specific way to general, unstructured imaginative pondering might.

Although, before diving into my three observed instantiations of this impact—the intellectual, emotional, and political—it is necessary to outline that none of these are actually the primary reason for any interlocutor's worldbuilding. They do it because it is fun, plain and simple. It is something primarily enjoyed, not something solely approached instrumentally. I have stated this above, characterising it as ontological 'play' and lingering on the enjoyment one gets from extrapolating on an idea, but it is worth reasserting to truthfully present my interlocutors experiences: they are indulging curiosities, having fun making the nonsensical sensical, and enjoying tinkering with reality. It is through this fun, which is punctuated by anxieties all artists feel and frustrations all creators face in the process of making, that they change, transcending slightly from their rootedness.

2.3.1: Intellectual and Pedagogic: An Informational Lodestar

When perusing the forum, users were frequently hunting for inspiration: "What sorts of things inspire your worldbuilding? Where do you turn for inspiration?", they would ask. As quite a dull question, uninspired and generally uninteresting to people who wanted to be struck with cool worlds or share their own, these questions usually get neglected, but in one now-dated post, the answer was clearly given: learn. "I try to learn […], and to make sure the thing I learnt doesn't go in vain, I try to apply it to worldbuilding. The action encourages me to learn more, and by that I get more inspiration," one said, explaining a kind of radical autodidacticism. Others did cite other inspirations, of course—other fictions, music, games, dreams, and more—but non-fiction inspirations were always there, wanted and *needed* to reach that status of plausible worlds. Here, I want to relay how worlds were used by my interlocutors as a lodestar to their more academic-oriented interests—a cognitive tool used to consume, store, and digest ideas they found interesting. In this way, worlds become extensions of the mind, seriously advantageous to logging information and exploring ideas (see: Clark and Chalmers, 1998), but it also comes back around and underwrites a curious mode of expressing interest and acquiring knowledge: not as facts in-of-themselves, but fodder for worlds.

As an example of this phenomenon, Silar worked on multiple worlds whose basis sat with some drastic divergence from history—the basis for the genre of alternative history, or 'alt-hist', which is one of three major genres within worldbuilding. When I spoke to him, he was working on an alternative history where Saddam Hussein's Iraq decisively won the Iran-Iraq war, catapulting Iraq to further international prominence. Others ideas he had touched on are little interests that pop up and are briefly explored: what about if Greater Somalia was one polity? Or, seen elsewhere, what about if the Scandinavian countries formed into a collective, Nigeria fractured, Singapore never ceded from Malaysia, or, as a sillier idea, Chile did not stop with the Saltpeter War, but continued to take *all* of the coasts? Obviously, these vary in tone and seriousness, but the point of many was that these odd entrances and imagined divergences from history gave people an 'in' through using them as fodder for worldbuilding. As Silar said, "it's all just very complex and mysterious and I love learning about it, so alt-history is sort of my exploration of it." He found himself with scattered interests, "bouncing around" between curiosities in contexts far from his own, and used building a slightly different world as a route to learn more about a specific locale, because to have a *plausible* Iraqi victory and Iraqi-dominated region, a lot about Iraq, the Middle East, Ba'athism, Arab nationalism, colonial histories, and so on, had to be known.

Ingold's (2013) observations of how you learn through making through the way materials speak back to the maker whilst they interact and attempt to manipulate them are relevant here, although worldbuilding does not have corporeal materials per se: its materials are facts and ideas about the world. Although Ingold conceives of it as something haptically encountered—the metal just *will not* do what you want it to do, or the textile just *will not* obey you—for the worldbuilder, its abstract, distant—Iraq cannot be regional hegemon *unless* it gets the oil fields—but it is still the same dialogic process: you want something to be the case, but the materials you are 'playing' with speak back, pushing at your ideas and forcing compromise. Then, you learn, and you get around it (to an extent), never entirely able to make your fun day-dreams a proper plausible world without going through that to a degree. In this, however, there can be an odd jocularity and aloofness in considerations and investigations into historical events—a distance of a sort, where they are not quite taken as they were, but as malleable materials—an exotification of sorts.

To keep running with the example of the Iran-Iraq war, this was obviously a horrendous conflict, and this thought-experiment is not a pleasant one, but it is seen as material — malleable, adjustable, combinable, and alterable (within limits), and, importantly exciting in its exoticness. This renders what is bare and sobering historical fact as creative fodder, and it is discussed as such. Though, it would be egregiously incorrect to say that worldbuilders are apathetic to these situations they learn about to sophisticate their creations, as many I encountered mentioned events such as the Mozambique Civil War, the Trail of Tears, and Ainu assimilation efforts as profoundly moving and describe how the emotional weight of these events then became palpable influences their imaginative creations. Essentially, worldbuilding frames and generates a particular intellectual curiosity and mode of engaging with materials that is indeed engagement and learning, but oftentimes in an abstracted and distanced way. However, because of the limitations of my methodology where I did not gain detailed demographic insight into my interlocutors, my license to attribute this to gendered or classed positionalities is restricted, though I have little doubt the fact that most worldbuilders (that I interacted with) are middle-class and male, living lives with little direct experience with conflict informs and allows for this particular approach, exacerbated further by the necessary abstractions worldbuilding calls for.

But this great breadth of knowledge worldbuilders attained and carried with them made my interactions with them fluid and easy, particularly because many were quite familiar with anthropology. This is again because worldbuilding is enhanced through learning, beyond just searching for historical events that piqued interest. The idea I routinely encountered was that

worldbuilding is advanced with deeper knowledge and, if you are building a world, anthropology is the discipline with the similar hubris of worldbuilders to (historically) claim holism, so it fit the bill. Many even took anthropology *solely* to aid their worldbuilding efforts. Ren, who was mentioned above, admitted anthropology was taken mostly to help his worldbuilding, as well as Native American Studies, both aiding the growth and extrapolation of his world, and the latter of which he will soon be delivered a degree in.

It would be wrong to characterise worldbuilders interests in these fields as entirely instrumental, as it is often repeated that worldbuilders do not really need to dive into every aspect of a world (as, of course, this is impossible). It is instead a mix of instrumental engagements with disciplines that are understood to help with making worlds sensical and credible, but it is also, as Ren says, "both a creative and intellectual outlet. It's a way to do something with the information rattling around in my head." There is a dialogism to it, a dialectic, where when Ren learns about, say, Mississippian mound-culture—real, solid theories—and combines it with his fantasy world, with vast cities on the riverbanks built on man-made mounds—an imaginative, looser idea—thus going through the process of worldbuilding, negotiating a compromise between fact and fiction that births the plausible built world, he learns in a different way, operationalising and synthesising knowledge in that particular way a worldbuilder does. This, again, relates to the extended mind theory (Clark & Chalmers, 1998) — worlds used as extensions of the intellect and as motivation for the procurement of more knowledge that then comprise a particular mode of knowledge production and consumption. But it also interfaces again with ontogenous play – worlds as a means of engaging two realms, finding middle grounds and altering both in the process. In this particular way, then, worlds operate as intellectual lodestars, and worldbuilding becomes and operationalisation of knowledge gained and helps cement some ideas in the mind, deepening understanding. It also allows one to go *beyond* base facts, and transcend a little bit by making ideas operable in imaginary, transcendent contexts.

2.3.2: Emotional and Therapeutic: Reflection Through Imagination

I would often ask new interlocutors if worldbuilding was a way for them to 'step away' from their lives and pressing realities, intentionally trying to lightly provoke a response by characterising the craft as 'escapist'—a sullying accusation (discussed in 3.1). Expectedly, some responded by delivering a firm *no* that was then followed by productive conversations about the term. Others, somewhat surprisingly, did not, instead staying that worldbuilding *was*

a method of retreat. And others, even more unexpectedly at that point, just lamented the partiality of the effort—that they tried to step back 'properly' through worldbuilding, but could not completely detach. Cyrus was an interlocutor who did not recoil at the suggestion, saying initially that it *did* feel like a step back, but through speaking more it came clear that this step back was more akin to retreating to the bathroom at an event for a breather and recharge: it was gaining a little distance to ponder, process, and rest from overwhelming actuality. He was, in essence, stepping away loaded with questions and concerns plaguing him on the daily, and his worlds operated as vectors for those interpersonal (and wider political) anxieties and struggles. For instance, he has severe concerns about the survivability of humanity, and channels that into making "a big planet of well-intentioned but dumb-as-bricks lizards who take their status as an apex species for granted" to dwell on that. He also has concerns about cooperation and commonality, with another project orbiting around the central conceit—both in story and setting—of "healing and working together for a cause greater than each person involved."

It gradually became clear that users often cordoned their worlds off into ones with different emotional tones—some were terrible, conflictual and violent worlds, whilst others were "reserved for good, wholesome stuff." Conversations sometimes drifted into ruminations on the emotional content of worlds—about how working on a dystopia could be emotionally taxing, or how joy or relaxation was brought about by working on more 'wholesome' worlds. Cyrus, reflecting on the multiple worlds he chips away at after I asked about what he felt he has gained through them, commented that "I don't know if these worlds help me make sense of the world around me so much as they help me cope with it." He had a least four worlds currently being developed, all characterised by different aesthetics, ontological differences, and emotional content, tackling, in a way, different anxiety inducers. Here, I want to expound on this particular utility of worldbuilding to aid personal reflection and to 'cope', continuing the case for the process's multifaceted use to makers. Chiefly, I want to suppose that 'escapism'—although a term sometimes used by worldbuilders themselves—is inadequate to explain how worlds are used, as although worldbuilders do use worlds to gain some distance from reality, it is not truly escape; instead, it is a means to gaining some limited freedom from actuality that then can help make sense of that reality.

Gregory, an interlocutor previously mentioned, is the premier example of this. His world is a distant star-system that was initially colonised by Earth but has since totally lost contact and whose inhabitants have endured the tumult of authoritarian rule and its collapse, who are now working toward the construction of a society that repudiates all the aspects of the previous, oppressive order. For him, this is both an exploration of political and sociological

themes he is concerned with, but relevant here is that this world is *not* just an imaginative extrapolation and creative re-creation of political forms, but an abstraction of his personal life and emotional tribulations with "several coats of sci-fi paint over it." It is consciously used as a way to personally reflect, with him attesting "it was a way for me to process and understand what I was going through," making clear that it was chiefly for him, not others (although, now he is attempting to write a story set in this world).

His world's history and its development traces his personal one, starting with "the basic idea was that we could keep things balanced on a knife's edge indefinitely, because the alternative was so much worse," a reflection of a seriously unhappy childhood. This balance, however, did not last, with spiralling abuse and his life as he knew it shattering, so he left and, fortunately, has since found a better life. He said that whilst this was happening, his worldbuilding was in a bit of hiatus, but after, he revisited the project, and approached it differently: those factions obsessed with avoiding collapse were instead made to cause it, because through working on the world he realised that facing a storm, as he did by leaving his family, and going actively through the myriad hardships, you can emerge better off. He changed the world and its history: they do not weather chaos, but cause it. He does concede that of course it would have been better for change to have been realised through other means, but he said that just as the characters "can defend their decision to start the storm, […] I can defend my decision to leave home and build a new life that does not include my biological family."

In this, Gregory's world becomes an abstraction of his own life, although muddled and mixed with other interests and ideas that went into its creation. It was a world reflecting clearly his negative experiences when young, but also his life as he breaks from that and starts again. To touch again on Ingold's motion of making (2013), and how one learns through the process of making, in this process of worldbuilding Gregory reckons with his own experiences more closely, interrogating their plausibility in explaining the currents of history in his world, and in doing so has several epiphanies that give him different perspectives on his personal history. It is still a world, with wide-reaching civilisational forces being the prime movers, but through developing and considering how it ought to work to be plausible, new ideas were reached that re-oriented him. Effectively, he created a new structure—a world—in which convergences could be expressed that were not evident to him otherwise, which gave him a distance from reality that is characteristic of imaginative making (Gosetti-Ferencei, 2018:221). Worldbuilding, with its tenet of plausibility, guided this, too, forcing focus on the reason of it all and making the maker hone into questions of causality. This is not to say that it could not

have been achieved otherwise, of course, or necessarily that this is by any means 'accurate' (if something like that could be said), but rather an acknowledgement of the fact that Gregory and other worldbuilders found greater emotional clarity through the process of creating their worlds.

It was wider than just personal tumult, as well. Other worldbuilders whose conversations I saw and whom I spoke to relayed how worldbuilding soothed them, or let them explore realities otherwise outside their reach. In some cases, worldbuilders built alternative realities which they found more pleasant than their real lives—a more direct case of 'escapism'. Here, in reaction to a feeling that "the world is crashing and burning around us, [they would rather] work on creating a fantasy pantry," thinking through what ingredients some imagined planet might have and what meals might be prepared. It was something to occupy the mind, to take away from the immediacy of the current moment and spent energy elsewhere. I do not think it can be said that much clarity is found in this particular instantiation of worldbuilding, but there is something to be said for the therapeutic nature of its particular creative mode that simplifies and abstracts, giving a certain agency to the creator that they might not experience 'in real life'. As one user quipped, creating a world "where you're able to live in an apartment with your significant other while having a stable job and free time […] is a power fantasy for me." All up, however, it is clear that worldbuilding has emotional utility to worldbuilders, allowing them to step back and reflect on their lives in a way that gives them greater clarity, or in an 'escapist' way where they can step back and ponder something in excess of what they find immediately possible. Either are cases of engaging the imagination in a particular way that is both transcendental and situated, rooted to one's embodied place whilst gaining some therapeutic distance from it.

2.3.3: Political and Speculative: Tarrying with Possibility

During a dip in chatroom chatter, someone offered a prompt by asking "what might be abhorrent to future generations that isn't now?" Prompts were often used to spark up conversation again, a question designed to get people considering another aspect of their worlds. Many people proffered ideas about this question: meat-eating, a lack of global peace, capitalism, racism, prisons, modern medicine, et cetera. They talked about what in the past they now see as repellent: notions of justice, slavery, feudalism, repression of women, and so on. More certain ideas came up, such as attitudes to recreational drugs and drug-use, which sustained some concentrated focus, but then urban life was thrown into the ring, and people

started to play with the underlying logics of dominant schemes now: what about if our idea of residence was different? If we did not dwell in one place, but instead homes were more transient places? If labour operated differently, what urban forms would be possible? What about if how we sourced our food and sustained ourselves changed, what then? These were lengthy discussions, interspaced with examples of fictional cities and urban forms deemed to be plausible or 'workable' into more desirable forms (such as the work of Vincent Callebaut (n.d.) or, in a less desirable form, *Mega City One* from Judge Dredd [Wagner & Ezquerra, 1977-ongoing]), as well as real cities seen as interesting or aberrant to our dominant form now, such as Cahokia or Derinkuyu. They expanded on current forms, projecting where they might go—such as with 'radical verticality'—but also challenged these prescriptions, wondering about the longevity of 'cities' as a whole. Alternative forms of life that may require different constructed environments were bandied about, too, asking what it would be like if all could fly, there were different primary senses, or different morphologies.

Speculative pondering like this was extremely common, with people searching for alternatives or different ways to approach scores of different subjects: culinary cultures, gender systems, psychologies, political ideologies, food systems, technologies, and more. It certainly did not have to be with any overt political orientation, but it often surfaced, even if only to understand why, say, Soviet cities were planned differently to American ones. Elements of worlds that diverged from ours, though, were often pride-of-place creations, with impressive alternative systems that remain plausible being testament to a worldbuilders skill (although, of course, *all* secondary worlds definitionally require *some* divergence). Gregory summed up his use of worlds in this respect as "when I ask questions, I chew on ideas, and one way I test possibilities is to worldbuild with those ideas."

Cities are one such subject he tarried with in his worldbuilding, using his world to parse out a plausible reality that is *not* urban, but rather populated by dispersed, interconnected rural communities — 'a love letter to Albertan rednecks', he has called it. In his world, they are creating new social forms in an effort to renounce the order that came before, of which a key dimension was cities and urban spaces. As he tells it, in his world "cities are associated with coldness, weak communities, and extremely unequal standards of living", and they have been made less economically viable due to changes in technology that have deliberately enhanced and allowed for decentralised modes of living, making transfers of goods, people, and energy over long distances easy, so people have shunned them. They no longer want to live in cities, and do not see the advantages of doing so, which Gregory even says "isn't quite fair, since surely one could build a city and design for community improvement instead of statist

oppression, but it is the path they've decided to take." What he has done, in effect, is built up a world where people can live in peace and plenty outside and independent of urban cores, using the process to speculate on what changes would be necessary for this alternative to be plausible. In that, it is a political project: he has taken political aspirations and ideals and churned them through the imagination, reflecting on their validity and possibilities and attempting to hash out something other than what reality has given, including toying with other ideas that lack space here, such as different ways to subdivide territories that might lead to different outcomes, or toying directly with the foggy proclamations of politicians, such as his native Canada's Conversative Party and their notion of 'ordered liberty'—a movement he is involved in. As he says, "[it] is a highly opinionated project, but I like to hope it's not shallow propaganda."

There has always been a propagandistic element to fictional worlds, though, from Tolkien's stated attempt at *mythopoesis*; that is, to create a new Anglo-Saxon mythology. Several users aspire to similar ends with their works, constructing not-so-distant fables of their own nations and communities in an effort to invigorate certain politics, such as speculating on an alternative democratic and equal Malaysia, or attempting *mythopoesis* for Italy, taking dominant symbols like grapes, or honey, and fabulising them and trying to inject different meanings. I, however, am not so much focused on the lives of these creations when (and if) they leave the worldbuilder's grasp, but rather on how working on these creations impacts those engaged in it. With these users, and with several of my interlocutors, it was clear that asserting these questions and concerns as definitional for their projects charged, altered, and deepened their political engagement and understandings, with the characteristic modality of worldbuilding inflecting that. For instance, in speculating about an alternative Malaysia, charts detailing every electoral seat and changes in those were compiled; with a fantastical Italy, beautiful illustrations are buttressed by deep and layered mythological exposition – both engaging imagination and one's politics to tinker and craft something new.

2.4. Situated Transcendence: Impacts of Ontogenous Play

When regarding the uses and effects of worldbuilding, a red thread appears clearly amongst the variation: each is transcendent in some way. Worldbuilders pick up and toy with knowledge gained in the ferment of their intellectual, personal, and political experiences and engagements, pondering over them, and going in excess of actuality through *making* something new. There are multiple elements to tease out here, such as differences between 'imagining' and 'creating'

and how to classify what is 'new', but my central postulation is that worldbuilding is an art of *situated transcendence* (Goestti-Ferencei, 2018); meaning that it is a particular art of working to exceed your given reality (I take up the ramifications of naming it 'art' in 3.2.2). This ought to shed more satisfying light on the ethnographic examples provided above around the uses and effects of worlds, as well as provide a better means by which to conceptualise worldbuilding as a distinct art and craft with particular effects.

Before explicating more, I must turn to the notions of imagination mentioned in brief (and vaguely) throughout, and sharpen what I mean. Of course, the heterogeneity of imagination (Kind, 2013) and the vast range of scholarship on the faculty of the mind thought to be "an essential and transcendental characteristic of human consciousness" (Sartre, 2004:179) is simply beyond my scope here, but it is suffice to say that imagination is fundamentally humans' capacity to sensorially take something in and give it life in the mind's domain, in ways both memetic or inventive (Goestti-Ferencei, 2018:227) — or, often, both. I have demonstrated this process taking place with worldbuilders, relaying my interlocutors' experiences of absorbing what their realities delivered them, their germination of those ideas and search for more fodder, and how by carrying forth those ideas and making their imaginative realms in correspondence with those materials, they change and learn in a multiplicity of ways; some expected, some not. This is because they are not just imagining, but *making* the imaginary, a verb which necessitates deeper engagement than cursory pondering: it is structuring, revealing inconsistencies and failures and rectifying them, and really tarrying with the actual to manufacture the plausible which then refracts back on the individual and alters their subjectivity, both lightly and, sometimes, radically. It is, in this way, an art or a craft, because it follows a particular prescribed process, what I have called the pursuit of plausibility, rather than only idle contemplation. It is, then, a particular way of imagining, not just an exemplar of imagination itself.

This is clear to interlocutors and the community itself, who debate the vitality and uses of worldbuilding amongst themselves often. Louis, an interlocutor who was deeply engaged in questions of the potentialities and efficacy of the craft, spoke succinctly about the craft's capacity to aid in reflection. To him, worldbuilding is like a more expansive thought-experiment, with "fictional approaches to life [able to] provide us with different perspectives on our real lives" by deeply diving into whatever wanders into the mind. His project, aspirant in a slightly unorthodox way to other worldbuilders, is principally focused on worldbuilding as a means of reflection, or, as he states, a "fictional ethnography or phenomenology from a layperson's perspective", using it deliberately as a means to ask why societies are the way they

are, and exploring different ways to be in them. He endeavours to do multiple 'series', dipping into his world through different perspectives in-world, each focused on different moments, events, and experiences, taking advantage of the craft's flexibility to allow creators to get past their rigid situatedness and dwell imaginatively on concerns and questions burdening them.

I bring up Louis and his explicitly explorative ambition to showcase that worldbuilders can know very well the potency of the craft—something that made these conversations extremely easy in an ethnographic sense, as we found ourselves often on quite similar pages and with similar vocabularies to express ideas. But I am also recentring this observation because it is critical to the notion of making the imaginary as an art of *situated transcendence*, borrowing Gosetti-Ferencei's conceptualisation of the imagination as the ability to create distance from the world whilst still being embedded it in. Her point is that imagination is a form of 'cognitive free play' that is able to give people some distance from reality to play with possibility, and in doing so can individuals different orientations to the world (2018:230-236). However, this process of turning fact into fiction (and perhaps back again) takes a particular form with worldbuilding, demonstrated by Louis expressly identifying rigour and systematism definitional to worldbuilding and as advantageous to his goals of personal and societal reflections. Worldbuilding, then, is not just free-play (it is playful, though), but somewhat like a method for structured pondering or assisted contemplation – as Gosetti-Ferencei calls fictional literature (2018:11). It still goes beyond the immediacy of reality and gives some ofttimes much-needed critical distance, but the imaginative churning of knowledge and experience is directed toward the making of an imaginary world, constrained by plausibility.

This notion of situated transcendence as a way to apprehend the experience of worldbuilding advances notions of fictional worlds discussed above (1.4), attending to the experience of being betwixt and between the ontological realms of the imaginative and the real. Louis, to linger on him, is exact in his articulation: conceptualising the practice as a means of attaining productive distance from the real — from the 'Primary World', or the ontologically dominant world — in this process of *ontogenous play*, or 'layperson's phenomenology.' In essence, then, the making of the imaginary can be understood as a method, or art, of going beyond and cutting through one's immediate experience by making worlds in reality's littoral, that liminal space between definite and concrete ontologies, and thus achieving *situated transcendence*.

PART 3: REFLECTIONS ON THE IMAGINARY

3.0: Section Preamble: Literature Reflection and Overview

This section's focus is more nuanced than the others, stepping back and assessing the process' impacts in a wider context. As mentioned in the introduction, worldbuilding is subject to significant dismissal and derision on one side, as well as grand promises on the other. This is admittedly a bipolar view of the discourse, but suits to demonstrate my interlocutors' stances and understandings about the life of the craft beyond their experiences of creating in contrast to wider commentary. First (in 3.1), I start with a discussion of worldbuilding as a kind of a 'secret vice' – as it was called by Tolkien himself (1997), famously coy about his beloved craft. I explore worldbuilders embarrassment and pride about the pursuit and their experiences of discussing it with other non-worldbuilders, and how they understand its treatment in wider discourse.

I then consider the wider politics of worldbuilding (in 3.2), arguing through my interlocutors that worlds are not politically firm entities that can be understood to give political programmes. Rather, borrowing from Giorgio Agamben (2014), I argue that through their *play* they have a '*destituent power'* to unmake, challenge, and to question the ontologies by which we are governed, rather than provide full-fleshed alternatives. I suggest that to argue that they do have this constitutive power is a form of dangerous high-modernism – what I called demiurgic high-modernism – whose historical record is damaging, and whose reappearance ought to be challenged (Scott, 1998). I expand this argument through drawing on Maruska Svašek (2007) to better present worldbuilding as an *art*, an idea cursorily mentioned throughout, employing her concept of '*aestheticisation'* to better understand how it has been deprived of that designation. I attempt to cast it as an art to designate the process more precisely as in possession of an imaginative vitality, and again highlight the generativity at the heart of *ontogenous play*.

In essence, this section conceptualises in another way how the makers of worlds and their visitors can be impacted, having subjectivities and orientations shifted to varying extents, but highlights again that worlds are not crystal balls, nor concrete suggestions. They are playful and incising projects, thought-provoking creations that widen our capacity to imagine, offering political verve and inspiration, but not political designs.

3.1: Worldbuilding: 'A Secret Vice'?

Tolkien, in one lecture, described his constructed languages and insights he gained from it as the "shame-faced revelation of specimens of [his] own more considered effort" (Tolkien, 1997:212), a coy segue into a further discussion of what he saw as the usefulness of worldbuilding generally. He routinely cloaked himself in a certain modesty when discussing his worldbuilding, but consistently argued against the ignominy of being a worldbuilder and the accusation of escapism, even going as far as considering the impulse heroic (*ibid*.:148). And despite (or perhaps due to) mass-market appeal of secondary worlds, this characterisation perniciously continues, with some of my interlocutors fearing that they may be perceived as "engaging in immature escapism," so conceal the amount of effort put into their worlds, or outright hide the entire enterprise. Indeed, there are examples of historical worldbuilders whose worlds only came to light posthumously, discovered and then released,[18] and some of my interlocutors' works could conceivably have the same future, being presently sequestered from friends and family. This understanding that nags at many worldbuilders is worth presenting and interrogating, as it allows a better understanding of the social life of the craft, and, by extension, its social vitality, as the estimations of an art form's value is generally proportionate to the critical attention it receives and, thus, its potential impacts.

I repeatedly discussed ideas of escapism with interlocutors, and witnessed it routinely mentioned within the forum. It clearly beleaguered many, in the sense that the idea demanded consideration. A particular video that cropped up in a few interviews, sometimes organically and in other instances was sent by me, argued that the consumption of worlds was a worryingly passive pursuit, and I used this as a provocation for discussion (Nerdwriter, 2015). There was no uniformity in replies to it: some agreed with the thesis, others thought it was overstated, some thought it was partially there, but, interestingly, some thought it to be the case for *others'* worldbuilding and worlds, but not theirs. This, I believe, is telling, because as demonstrated above a lot of the work of making the imaginary is personal: the maker is the one transcending (although through engaging in fictions others, too, enjoy other-worldly sojourns, although that is separate topic). This often insulates the craft to the person themselves, being a professedly self-indulgent process, a sort of "peculiarly shy individualism," (Tolkien, 1997:213), unless they make a suitably engaging end-product. I encountered interlocutors complaining about other worldbuilders "talking *at* the [chat]room", sharing their worlds but not aiding others. Users want reciprocal relations with others in the community, "because engaging with another person's project is inherently an investment of time and effort," one said, so you want to have

[18] Such as *The Story of the Vivian Girls* (Darger, n.d), or *Islandia* (Wright, 1942).

that cycle round to attention paid to your world. Essentially, worldbuilders appear to see others plunging themselves into worlds and ideas they might have little interest in, and may not bear witness to the reverberations of that process on individuals themselves, seeing the plunge instead as a movement *away* from material that matters, yet, I contend, is consequential.[19] To summon Tolkien again: "You must remember these things were constructed deliberately to be personal, and give private satisfaction […] Be kindly" (*ibid.*:213).

Characterisations of worldbuilding as ontologically secondary, or detached, also contribute here, as they relegate interest in an imaginary world as necessarily cordoned off from concerns of reality. Clearly, I oppose this notion, suggesting that rather than making the imaginary being an abandonment of reality, worldbuilding is actually a means by which to gain productive distance to better interrogate and consider what can be experienced as overwhelmingly present to some. But this derisory idea is nonetheless pervasive and bolsters these reservations about imaginative play. It makes it necessary for some worldbuilders to identify their worlds as *not* escapist, but reflective; *not* sublimation, but productive – both conceptualisations that recentre its focus on the actual. However, placing the process in the ontologically liminal space and thus securing it a closer relationship to real life, as I have done, does not entirely rescue the craft because some worlds are simply never done; rather, they can be forever locked in this processual zone. This is joked about within the community, with users equating worldbuilding with procrastination or bantering about a never-ending project you are locked into (because, after all, when is a *world* done?). Lisa Björkman observes that within the academy there is an epistemological paradigm that hurries us, demanding clean and closed accounts, and explicates a zone of waiting and unknowing as a productive one, encouraging us "to slow down a bit, to nurture curiosity, and to attend to seemingly insignificant details . . . and to wait and see where it all leads" (2020:144). She is concerned with a quite different case, but there is clearly a wider paradigm dictating haste and deliverability that maligns worldbuilders that may perhaps never 'finish' or share the artefacts of their process. Other works have also explored this, drawing attention to perennial states of *becoming* and the generativity of continual emergence (see: Biehl & Locke, 2017), demanding products and closure. This is perhaps why storytelling and narrative do not suffer the same fate in discourse that worldbuilding does, as, although distinct crafts, they share the ultimate concern with imaginative 'escape' and contemplation, but they produce products that are clean and finished.

[19] Consequentiality, the way I regard it, is not necessarily positive change. That depends on the project in question. Rather, it is consequential because it has an affect: it is not a symptom of stagnancy or passive withdrawal, as 'escape' suggests.

Worlds, on the other hand, may never be finished; they might never offer a product to engaged with beyond the creator's private notes, illustrations, or other artefacts.

Most of my interlocutors were working toward some end-product—Gregory is working on a book and other short stories, Francis with comics and illustrations, Louis is creating audio-visual content, and Noah wants to publish an atlas and encyclopaedia—but many also did not, with one user bluntly predicting "I don't think anyone will ever see my writing till I die." There is a medley of approaches and goals, but this idea of it as a 'secret vice' persists, forcing them to reckon with the value of the craft and the point of it all. These are, of course, important considerations in many senses, but I hope to have demonstrated above that craft does not ignite change exclusively through its products, but also through the process of making and its ontogenous play – *play* being an activity not necessarily delimited nor producing something, yet is still understood as generative. After all, productivity is not how the impact of an intellectual craft is measured: generativity is.

3.2: The Politics of Worldbuilding and the Demiurge's Potential

All this said, I want to contend with the wider life of worlds and worldbuilders, and consider the subject in a wider context, better theorising its latent power. This, too, is a concern that stems from ethnographic encounters, as worldbuilders themselves wonder about and consider the wider lives some worlds have had (i.e., *Middle Earth*, *Westeros*, *Star Trek* [see: Hassler-Forest, 2012]), and some of the ways their eventual creations could exert themselves socially, too. As I said at the onset, fiction and its apparent power is a fraught subject, touted ofttimes either as some kind of saviour, or an appendage of hegemonic ideas, and I am cautious about making interlocutors "into unwitting mouthpieces for philosophies of salvation that are not of their own making" (Ingold, 2013:6). However, the capability of worldbuilding and worlds to animate ideas and interrogate realities has a particular verve worth extrapolating. My argument is a dual one, repeating and finessing the arguments presented throughout, namely that worldbuilding is *not* constitutive per se, but deconstructive, and I draw from Giorgio Agamben's (2014) notion of *destituent power* to articulate the generativity of this; and that worldbuilding is an *art*, not an instrumental craft, and thus ought to be accorded with particular diffuse capacities assigned to arts. In sum, I attempt to make sense of worlds and worldbuilding in a slightly wider context than explored strictly through my interlocutors, trying to make better sense of its social life and influence.

3.2.1: The Destituent Power of Worldbuilding

In Agamben's articulation of destituent power, he argues that 'in-operativity' is a crucial and central political concept, meaning operations that unpick and deactivate the various works of governmentality are politically vital. By this, he means that efforts to 'destituate', that is, disable, neutralise or otherwise render inoperative some system is a central political objective. He asserts that through rendering particular systems inoperable the 'anarchy of power' becomes perceptible, and the 'pure potentiality' of human's surface – meaning, essentially, the social forms that are propped up by discourse and belief are stripped 'nude' and thus able to be changed or abandoned in favour of something new. He resolutely contends this is necessary to move beyond a system – any system – as the complete disposal of a law is necessary to inaugurate new realities (*ibid*.:71). This is a proclamation of the power of ontological anarchy, as "it frees up the living beings from every biological and social destiny" (*ibid*.:74), letting people and societies move in new ways through comprehensively disposing of inoperable systems.

As I have explicated, making the imaginary has a particular penchant for ontological limbo, a process understandable as 'ontogenous play' – or, perhaps, creativity amidst ontological anarchy. Either way, Agamben's articulation is useful to bring attention to the vitality of worldbuilding because it places a power *not* in the constitution of new forms, but in the inspection and 'destituation' of reality – precisely what I have articulated as a particular impact of worldbuilders' processes. There is a supposed constitutive capacity that is often a lauded quality of worlds and fictions: that they can shape new, usable forms and craft new realities (Zaidi, 2017; 2019), but I find this instrumental approach dangerous and unappreciative of what an *art* does. Instead, it is better to find worldbuilding's potency in its capacity to deconstruct through making individuals tarry with their extant realities, poking holes in and helping to undress power, to use Agamben's metaphor. As Louis said to me, "since everyone knows that is just fictional, I feel it is an honest way of engaging in thought experiments […] it's a medium that makes it evident that what follows is just a thought experiment." That is, Louis makes clear that it is playful: it is tinkering with ideas and using a secondary world to better grapple with the primary one, a way "to chew on ideas," as Gregory also described, which I am rephrasing as a testament toward some 'destitute power'.

It is, in fact, dangerous to suggest fictive worlds offer fully-formed alternatives because worlds are ultimately radical abstractions and simplifications of inconceivably complex phenomena, and plans based on such radical simplifications have, historically, been disastrous.

James Scott (1998) called historic efforts at nation and city planning 'authoritarian high-modernism', and to do this with worldbuilding is an example of *demiurgic* high-modernism—an even more hazardous position. Of course, efforts like this are not happening: cities are not being built on the direct basis of imaginative worlds, nor is much else, but highlighting the burgeoning narrative serves the purpose of making explicit what worlds *can* do – they can motivate and inspire projects and conversations because they animate ideas and offer a limited corporeality to strive for, making alternatives almost tangible and thus able to be engaged with (Schwab, 2012), or a means of assisted contemplation in a space slightly relieved from reality's constraints (Gosetti-Ferencei, 2018:11).

Mark Fisher (2009) has written about the contemporary imaginative malaise where thinking of the future and yearning for more is routinely put down as 'unrealistic', as a dangerous illusion, taking inspiration from Jameson's and Žižek's quip that "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than it is to imagine the end of capitalism" (*ibid*.:2). In his conversation with Judy Thorne about this issue, she argues "we need to create a discursive space in which it is not just permissible, but necessary and realistic to imagine futures we want. To outline them. To plan them" (Fisher & Thorne, 2017:161) – essentially, worldbuilding. Although I do not want to join the chorus of those dismissing various ideas as recalcitrantly 'utopian', I suggest their more precise ability is breaking dictatorial controls of ideas, desire, and hope and instead render destitute certain constraining ideas. That is, worldbuilding has a salient *destituent power* as it creates wriggling room, pokes holes in ideas, and occasionally delineates the contours of something that may come into being, but seldom if ever has the power to offer totally new forms. This effect is engendered in the processes of making demonstrated throughout, where through making the imaginary my interlocutors interrogated their realities, coming to various epiphanies in wildly different subjects. But this effect is also demonstrable when looking at famous worlds and their legacies, where impacts have been more incisive, questioning, and destituent, disabling ideas and inspiring efforts, but not offering fully-formed projects (see: Hassler-Forest, 2016). Now, however, to advance this I want to turn to better articulating worldbuilding as an art, and what that characterisation bestows.

3.2.2: Worldbuilding as Art

I have oscillated between referring to worlds and their making as both a craft and an art. I do not take these to be mutually exclusive, but instead in possession of different vitalities. Although its definition is certainly fraught, 'art' fundamentally denotes something sensorially

stimulating and considered to be valuable; to call something 'art', then, is an assertation that it possesses certain value, and that it is somehow generative. What constitutes art is not objective measurement, rather, 'art' becomes *art* through what Maruska Svašek called *aestheticization*, whereby "people interpret particular sensorial experiences as valuable and worthwhile" (2007:10-11). I have attempted to contribute to this process for worldbuilding, presenting an interpretation of it as a process with particular vitalities usually assigned to art, highlighting its latent generativity throughout; something that sits at the heart of the concepts of ontogenous play and situated transcendence. However, I want to further finesse what I intend by my assertion of worldbuilding as an art, identifying it more precisely with the aptitudes and ineptitudes an *art* has. Here, I want to consider briefly what an *art* is, and place worldbuilding within that category, identifying why it has been deprived of it and asserting again that it as a processual form that is capable of profound insights and radical personal changes, yet limited in ultimate delivery, as laid out throughout the paper.

Svašek conceptualises aestheticization as a process taking place within wider socio-political processes, showing how those render certain aesthetic experiences and objects valuable at particular times,[20] and highlights how artefacts become bestowed with the special status of art in part by virtue of the settings they are found in or what contexts they are related to. For instance, to be placed in a museum or gallery crowns a piece with the category of 'art', while to be on the street corner relegates it within a different category. For the latter there, we can perhaps discuss the inverse process, where something that might otherwise be dubbed art has been *de*-aestheticized into craft, characterised as anti-art (Gell, 1992:40), or just 'low-culture', condemned as vacuous and base entertainment. With worldbuilding, the fact that much of it exists in online spaces, shared freely on social media by pseudonymised individuals undoubtably contributes to its dismissal as a frivolity and its wider de-aestheticization – a similar fate to fan-fiction, or comics (Berkowitz 2013; Worden, 2015). Moreover, the mass-marketed life of its most famous exemplars – *Lord of the Rings* being the prime example (Tolkien, 2006/1968) – may also contribute to its lessening as a valuable piece of art, rendering it as stale commodity. Furthermore, worldbuilding being reduced to preparatory work to the indubitably artistic pursuit of writing also contributes to its lessening, as it suggests that on its own it is unvalued until life has been breathed into it by making it as media. Of course, this is partially true regarding its social impact – if it is not engaged with, it cannot exert significant impacts beyond individuals – but, as I have demonstrated, it has noteworthy impacts before

[20] For my brief history of worldbuilding, see 1.3 (or, see: Wolf, 2012:65-152).

narrative enters the scene (and it may never). Essentially, if it can be granted that the mantle of art is assigned to pursuits that prove generative and vibrant, worldbuilding – even if sometimes a hermetic pursuit made for private satisfaction, and even if perpetually unfinished and in the process of making – achieves it because of the creative process at its heart: ontogenous play.

But de-aestheticization can also be achieved through emphasising processes' instrumental use or apparent precision, as that renders it closer to a 'science' or craft. This is done when worldbuilding is reduced to a useful 'modelling system', which instrumentalises it (see: Zaidi, 2017), endowing it with overstated concreteness and certainty, and thus depriving it of the designation as an artform. When seen this way, the playful nature of worlds as shown above become couched as failure, or as a waste of time, because the generativity of ontogenous play is unseen, hence why I consciously push against this. Of course, in saying this, I am relying on a false binary between 'science' and 'art', as artists find themselves deploying both knowledge and technical skills in the creation of aesthetically potent artefacts (Gell, 1992), and vice versa, but thinking through what is loaded within these characterisations can help to better reckon with worldbuilding *can* and *does* do for the interlocutors I spoke with: that is, it stimulates, is enjoyable, and is generative, and naming it art places value within that endeavour.

Fundamentally, then, worldbuilding is an art that holds latent potential, not to redesign the world necessarily, but to recalibrate dreams and desires and offer insights and pleasure. This is precisely what my various interlocutors have continually attested to: that their process of worldbuilding has led to incisions *through* and disillusion *with* given truths and orders they encounter, and that the process of making has allowed them to better apprehend and tarry with their realities. Vitality and verve, then, is found in the practices of worldbuilders, and defining worldbuilding as some means to salvation, or conversely as a means of escape veils this potency.

CONCLUSION

Final Comments

Worldbuilding, and the worlds produced, have been shown as rife with potentiality. Each interlocutor, in making their worlds, refracted and morphed ideas through them, disabling and exceeding a not-so-concrete reality. What I have demonstrated is how making the imaginary is a form of *ontogenous play*, a process and art where one tinkers with given realities in an open-ended, creative, and enjoyable way, learning and changing through it. My interlocutors who in their other-worlds hold within them political questions, personal experiences, academic curiosities, delightful asides, and ideas and desires for the future, are testament to this.

Through worldbuilding, worldbuilders are neither here nor there, but are in the process of *making*: moving forward, grappling with ideas – old, new, and emergent – but in new ways, mixing and matching things as divergent as slug's biologies, histories of far-away places, conversations with friends, and assorted fictions, and coming to new realisations in the process. Tinkering in this way, with the creative constraint of plausibility, generates a particular process of *situated transcendence*, where one steps slightly away from reality and interrogates it. My interlocutors and their experiences make this undeniable: through their worldbuilding they mulled over thoughts, struck epiphanies, and changed in ways large and small, recalibrating themselves in slight and significant ways through their *making the imaginary* and that limited transcendence from actuality it offers.

Far from being a vice to be sequestered away as it has been regarded, worldbuilding is also shown to have latent vitality, a *destituent power* that allows it to tarry with given orders, unpicking and disabling them. Through *aestheticising* it and seeing it an *art* instead of a mere craft or preliminary, instrumental work, worlds and their builders can also be understood to have the vitality afforded to artistic pursuits.

Overall, making the imaginary has been demonstrated to be a generative artform; playful, explorative, and vital. I have taken a wide remit in approaching this, cruising past many subjects that could be explored with more focused research and in greater depth, and no doubt will, given the recent foci of the scholars discussed. Many avenues are open, such as investigating the materiality of the art and questions of embodiment, or how fictive worlds may exert influence on certain groups – for instance, how imaginary maps of alternative histories are received, or how fictive cityscapes are understood by urban planners. Wider questions tracking the affinity between social theory and worldbuilding could also be discussed, as are social theorists not also engaged in ontogenous play? Theorists and worldbuilders are alike in

their productive movement away from reality, their delight in abstractions, their quirky pleasure in unpacking and repackaging ideas, and face similar accusations of insularity. Research delving into what epistemological potential making imaginary worlds has as a possible alternative method of social inquiry could be of much valuable.

However, it is plainly clear that worldbuilding is a vibrant and impactful art for many. Through making the imaginary, worldbuilders insatiably learn and grow, contemplating and inquiring in their long processes of making worlds. Their art, this art of ontogenous play, has a latent generativity at its heart, able to apprehend and dissect realities, intervening and upsetting social imaginaries in an intensely satisfying and engaging way. Perhaps with increased attention to the imagination and making more with it, the contradictions and dispiriting facets of actuality can be uncovered, efforts toward better alternatives can be inspired.

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