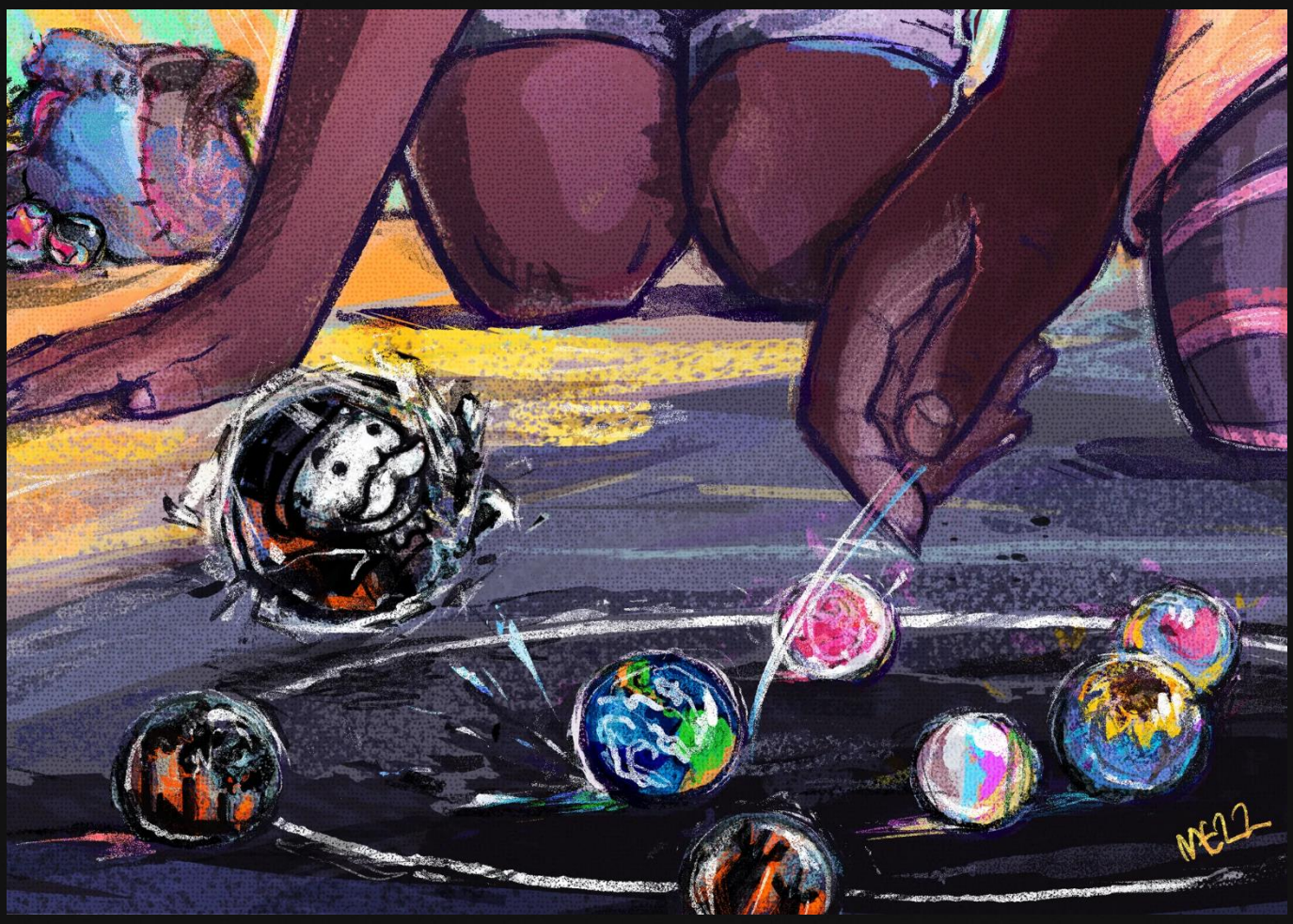

Untitled. Illustration by Mika Edström

Special Issue

This Time it's for all the Marbles.

Towards Social Justice in Digital Gaming

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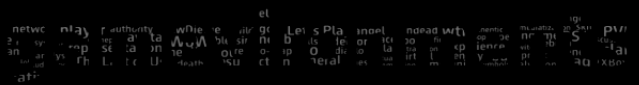
reports



review

interview

Report

Not Space-Ninjas Again! Transmedia Worldbuilding for Social Justice

Ian Sturrock

Abstract
In this report, I briefly survey some of the frequently problematic remediation of real-world cultures into fictional races, in fantasy and science fiction games. I argue that the process of designing fantasy character cultures, as part of the wider worldbuilding process, is in need of a major rethink if principles of anti-oppression are to be followed. The frequently problematic depictions of female characters, and the remediation of real-world cultures into fictional races, in fantasy games and other fantasy fiction, are explored in a close reading of the biggest name in fantasy computer gaming, *World of Warcraft* (2004). I then offer tools, techniques, and principles for practical worldbuilding of fictional cultures and religions that will both avoid the appropriative practices that are the mainstay of most worldbuilding, and create more original and compelling fictional settings. These techniques are derived from a combination of literature research into existing recommendations on anti-oppressive game design; conversations with working games artists and game designers; teaching methods derived from teaching practical worldbuilding and games narrative design on several courses at different universities; and my PhD thesis, the conclusions of which included suggestions as to a code of practice on ethical game design.

A step-by-step worked example is included: a fictional culture that is verisimilitudinous without being clearly based on a specific real-world culture. This makes for an effective starting point for anti-oppressive worldbuilding, as well as tying in with principles of user-centric design: settings created in this manner come across as fresh and original, without the often problematic clichés of yet another remediation of *Dungeons and Dragons* (hereafter D&D) (1974) remediating Tolkien. These tools and techniques allow for the creation of fictional settings that are not only grounded in principles of anti-oppressive game design but also powerfully verisimilitudinous in a way that *World of Warcraft*, for example, is clearly not. Despite the gamer community's frequently expressed fears of censorship by the social justice movement, this kind of approach to design would create better and more original art, freed from the conservative remediation-upon-remediation culture of conventional

fantasy and science fiction game designs.

Keywords: Worldbuilding, Social Justice, Game Design, Remediation, gamevironments

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Game designers run comprehensive playtest programmes to examine the player experience, and iterate their designs accordingly, but even an intensive playtest is unlikely to call attention to problematic aspects of worldbuilding. Part of the difficulty here is that playtesters are, to a large extent, likely to be complicit with any genuinely problematic aspects of videogame design; their relationship with the videogame industry is not typically the kind of counter-play stance identified by Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter (2009, 195), in opposition to the overarching dominion of the 21st century entertainment economy, but is closer to collusion, or at least, acceptance of capitalist realism. Thus, playtesting will not usually identify, for example, cultural appropriation, and even if it did, such playtest results are not what game designers and playtest supervisors are looking for in a playtest.

GamerGate and the Need for Anti-Oppressive Game Design

A fundamental building block of game studies is the concept that games are a form of culture, with culture being seen as a *system of meaning* (Mäyrä 2008). Alongside this is the notion, ultimately derived from cultural studies and psycholinguistics, that "our perceptions of reality are socially and culturally produced, rather than independent and objective facts" (Mäyrä 2008, 13). Echoing Sutton-Smith's concept

of the rhetoric of play as identity (Sutton-Smith 1997, 91-126), Bogost points out that "games and play embody ideological values and… specific forms and uses of play perpetuate and justify those values" (Bogost 2010, 52). Games do not, so far as the evidence shows us, turn people into killers. But they do, as Dyer-Witheford and de Peuter explore, reinforce the mainstream values of *Empire* (2009): market forces are paramount, profit is king, and no-one has any right to interfere with capitalism; military force and even brutal torture are acceptable so long as the enemy is presented as a credible threat to the values of *Empire*, often simply by giving them the label *terrorist*.

Gamers do form a strong community, due partly to the tendency of hardcore gamers to become involved as producers of gaming content as well as solely consumers, but its shared values may be inherently problematic:

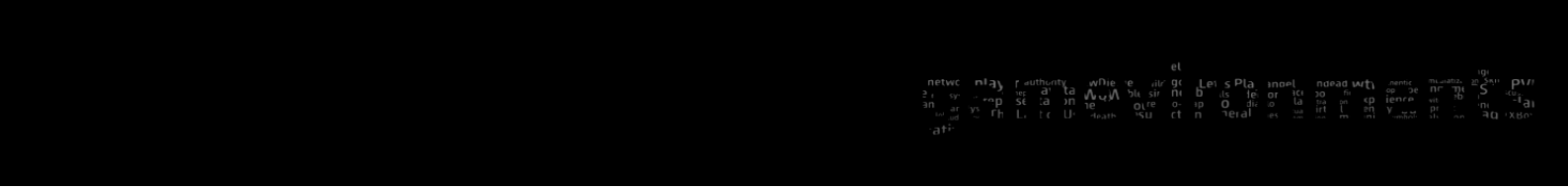
> *Doom* [(1993)] defines community as a community of killers, the high-tech version of a tribe of paleolithic hunters. Like MUDs and MOOs, *Doom* is socially shared in another sense. It allows experienced users to build new architectural 'levels' in which the game of destruction can continue. There is an entire community of such users on the Internet who construct and share the vast environment that *Doom* has become. (Bolter and Grusin 1999, 102)

This can be an improvement over more passive forms of art, but the gamer community seems unwilling, so far, to tolerate any significant opposition to Empire. Rather, gamers as a community tend to be surprisingly socially conservative. Even *D&D* players exhibited this in the 1980s: Fine observed a locker-room atmosphere and a culture of entrenched male hegemony (Fine 1983, 69-71). More recently, the GamerGate phenomenon was a primarily online mass movement of angry gamers who appeared motivated largely by a desire to shut down women's voices in gaming, and who demonstrated this by harassing women online, including doxxing them –

publishing their private information such as personal addresses and phone numbers – and sending rape, death, and bomb threats (Chess and Shaw 2015). Any attempt at introducing diversity into games design, or removing elements such as sexual objectification, even if the attempt came from a games company, was met with hostility and outrage from GamerGaters.

As a counter-reaction against the perceived toxicity of GamerGate, a number of articles appeared suggesting that the very notion of the gamer identity was a problematic one, tied up with marginalisation of women and minorities, notably Golding (2015) and Alexander (2014). The term *gamer* is perhaps inherently dubious; as Bogost pointed out "people read magazines and watch television and listen to the radio, but no right-minded person would label them *ziners* or *tubers* or *airwavers*" (Bogost 2011, 153). Its use as a label for an identity implies exactly the kind of monoculture that it appears to have become, particularly given the tendency of gamers to want to act as gatekeepers for that identity, excluding anyone who does not fit in for not playing the *right* games, or just for being a woman or a *social justice warrior*; GamerGaters targeted prominent female game designers and writers, but also less publicly known feminist game studies academics, with harassment and threats (Chess and Shaw 2015).

All of the above argues very strongly for the need for anti-oppressive game design as one way to gradually reduce at least some of the toxicity of gamer culture. Anti-oppressive design is a design that is consciously intended to end or otherwise respond to the entrenched systems of oppression that underpin contemporary society.



Anti-oppressive game design at its best, as delineated by Gunraj, Ruiz and York (2011), will inform the user about a system of oppression, and offer them tools with which to address or fight against that oppression, e.g. in-game mechanisms to email one's political representative about the issue highlighted by the game. Further, such a game will be designed and marketed with a full awareness of the creators' privileges, and a determination to avoid or subvert stereotyping in character design. Less privileged groups and individuals will be explicitly invited to participate in the design project and shape its direction. Finally, echoing Norman (2004), it will be designed in a user-centric or player-centric manner. Gunraj, Ruiz and York also touch upon the importance of treating one's employees or business associates ethically, including profit-sharing and worker autonomy. Movements for creator control over business and work practices have led to innovative and groundbreaking design in the game and other industries, so again, there is a close parallel between best practice for artistic purposes, and best practice for ethical purposes.

Close Reading World of Warcraft: Dwarves and Disappointment

The below close reading was carried out according to the principles outlined by Bizzocchi and Tanenbaum (2011), using lenses of representation, remediation, and anti-oppressive game design. I played alongside my daughter B. (with her agreement that this would form a part of an academic close reading) for Session I, and my friend S. (likewise) for Session II, since *WoW* (hereafter *WoW*) is intentionally a multiplayer game design.

Session I

We began creating characters, and almost immediately paused, to discuss our frustration and annoyance with the character options. We had both selected dwarf

characters, but were both dismayed that all the dwarf face options had large noses.

This might at first seem like a good feature of the game, if the intention was to give us a feeling of a familiar fantasy cliché. We were both very much aware, though, that the depiction of dwarves with full beards and large noses comes not from the Scandinavian mythology that is the ultimate origin of dwarves, but from Tolkien's remediations of that mythology into *The Hobbit* (Tolkien 1937) and *The Lord of the Rings* (Tolkien 1954), remediations that, as Tolkien admitted, were at least somewhat based on his perception of Jewish people. The *Poetic Edda* (s.n. 1936) refers to the dwarves as being *of the earth*, dwelling in a hall of gold, in the North, or sometimes *beneath the rocks* (Anon 1936), all of which concepts remain in Tolkien, in *Dungeons and Dragons*, and in most subsequent remediations. The idea of dwarves as small and ugly comes from later medieval sources – the sagas – rather than mythical sources (Simek 1993, 68). But it was Tolkien, aware of both the medieval sources and the *Edda* who explicitly took those concepts and added a Jewishness to his depictions of dwarves. The debate as to whether he intended a negative or positive stereotype in this portrayal is summarised in Vink (2013). Vink concludes that the question is too complex to claim that there is a definite Jewish dwarf racial stereotype in Tolkien, but still considers *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* to be "rife with racialism, or racial categorization" (Vink 2013, 129). Some of the roots of the fantasy genre are not just Eurocentric, but also suffused with colonialist concepts of warrior races and an overall obsession with race.

There should be no reason for contemporary fantasy creations such as *WoW* to continue with these stereotypes, but as Higgin points out, in relation to the MMO genre in general and *WoW* in particular, "reductive racial stereotypes and representations proliferate while productive and politically disruptive racial

differences are ejected or neutralized through fantastical proxies" (Higgin 2009, 3). Certainly, even a brief look at the other race options available in *WoW* at character creation would seem to agree with Higgin, that "the Trolls have pronounced and unquestionable Jamaican accents and the Tauren are a mystical and tribal culture with Native American architecture and dress, among many other resemblances" (Higgin 2009, 9). Detailed statistical analysis of the specific facial feature permutations of each character race, carried out by Pace (2008, 2497-2499) found that, backing up our own observations, the human race had significantly more facial feature permutations than the non-human races, around 300,000 compared to 170,000 for the dwarves. Despite this huge number of options for humans, the white male cybertype predominated in Pace's analysis (2008, 2497). The need for anti-oppressive game design (see above) is readily apparent even at character creation in the leading fantasy MMORPG.

There were no non-stereotyped dwarf character options available. 170,000 different dwarf faces, as per Pace, and all of them are racially stereotyped. Before we had even started formal play, I was already disappointed in the game. Continuing regardless, we each selected a nose and other attributes, and gave the game a try. I played a hunter, and B. a paladin.

Session II

This took place some months later, after a game update. The character creation options remained at least somewhat dubious, seen through a lens of anti-oppressive game design, though it did at least appear that the art had improved. I found the Draenei immediately appealing, with their otherworldly, faintly demonic appearance – skin in shades of pinkish-white through blues to deep violet, horns, cloven hooves, strange head-tendrils, and tails. I did wonder, even then, as I selected a female Draenei, about exoticism and Orientalism; was I just drawn to the *sexy foreign-looking*

babe cliché, reflecting my own unconscious biases? As ever with *WoW*, the non-human race options exhibit extreme sexual dimorphism, with the male versions looking like muscular but inhuman warriors, and the female versions looking like human supermodels with some body paint and horn prosthetics.

The character design screen, with its hundreds of thousands of permutations of appearance (Pace 2008), offers immediate satisfaction of autonomy needs, as predicted by Ryan and Rigby (2010, 50-51). The limits of that autonomy, though, are readily apparent: there are no options for androgynous characters, no options for more femme-presenting male characters or more masculine-presenting female characters, no options for overweight characters, no options for older-looking female characters, and no options for powerfully muscular female characters. The same failings that Mulvey identified with the film industry's use of the male gaze as the default (Mulvey 1975) are still apparent in the game industry of the 21st century. Women are ignored both as videogame consumers, and as videogame designers within the industry (Masso 2011). This is clearly problematic from an anti-oppressive game design perspective. For those who are consciously aware of issues of representation, the relative lack of autonomy will be even more salient. Again, there is little excuse for this lack of choice, given that other videogames do offer significantly more diverse options in terms of character creation; see, for example, *Saints Row IV* (2013), *Overwatch* (2016), and *Dragon Age: Inquisition* (2014).

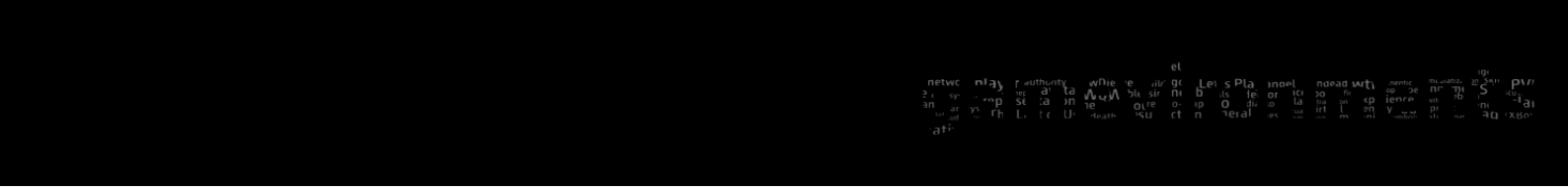
The relatively narrow character options, particularly for nonhuman characters, only serve to emphasize the racial and cultural stereotypes that the nonhuman characters frequently seem to embody. These nonhuman species are even described as *races* by the game's developers (Blizzard n.d.); Sturtevant calls this concept *the original sin of fantasy* and *a huge problem*, due to the fantasy genre's conflation of race, culture, and

ability (Sturtevant 2017). In Tolkien, hobbits make good burglars due to being innately stealthier than other *races*; in *WoW*, dwarves make good warriors, gnomes good mages, etc. Partly as a result of this critique from Sturtevant and their own efforts to be more inclusive, the tabletop RPGs that influenced MMOs are starting to move away from calling nonhuman species *races*, and instead use terms like peoples or folk (Wizards of the Coast LLC 2020). A similar reckoning is long overdue in the digital games space.

Moving beyond Dragons in Dungeons: Towards Anti-Oppressive Worldbuilding

Most fantasy and many science fiction games owe at least something to *Dungeons and Dragons* (Gygax and Arneson 1974), given the tendency of culture producers working in those genres to have, at some point in their younger days, been a Dungeon Master of a *D&D* campaign set in their own self-created game world. For several discussions touching on this, see MIT's Comparative Media Program podcasts recorded at the Futures of Entertainment conference (MIT 2006). The term game world is used in this article due to its familiarity to game designers and players alike, though game world is a form of *storyworld* as defined by Ryan and Thon (2014, 13).

The world-building appeal, central to that game, is equally central to the fantasy genre. Yet the typical fantasy or SF game-world is formed by a process of layered remediation, drawing on earlier sources with little originality or awareness of the process: *WoW*, for example, remediates earlier non-digital games such as *D&D* and *Warhammer* (1983), which in turn remediated Tolkien, who in turn remediated Teutonic mythology; see Wolf (2012, 130-3, 142-3) for a fuller account of this repeated remediation.



Artist Hayley Sherriff argues that the process of designing fantasy character cultures, as part of the wider worldbuilding process, is in need of a major rethink if principles of anti-oppression are to be followed; in most fantasy settings, "the backbone of your world is formed around the shoulders of cultural appropriation" (Sherriff 2015, 1). She recommends starting not from a real-world culture, but from an object, abstract concept, or colour. She used the example of *a culture which was based around the duality of the soul and possessing conflicting personality aspects/being two faced*, then adding in no more than one or two attributes from any given real-world culture (Sherriff 2017). This would make for an effective starting point for anti-oppressive worldbuilding, as well as tying in with principles of user-centric design: a setting created in this manner would come across as fresh and original, without the often problematic clichés of yet another remediation of *D&D* remediating Tolkien. Alongside the use of a worldbuilding tool such as *Microscope* (Robbins 2011), this could allow for the creation of fictional settings that are not only grounded in principles of anti-oppressive game design, but also powerfully verisimilitudinous in a way that *WoW*, for example, is clearly not (see close reading, above). Despite the gamer community's frequently expressed fears of censorship by the social justice movement, this kind of approach to design would create better and more original art, freed from the conservative remediation-upon-remediation culture of conventional fantasy and science fiction game designs.

Another artist and game designer Jon Hodgson, discussing the game design and visual design for his *Maskwitches of Forgotten Doggerland* (2022) tabletop RPG project, talked about making a conscious choice to exclude the *shamanic drum* images he'd produced for it, due to the end results being too close to real-world Siberian shamanism, and his recognition that he would be crossing a line, in appropriation, if he'd included them in the final game; the project, he concluded, was

both creatively stronger and less problematic if they were not in it (Hodgson 2022). Working with this level of intentionality is crucial for mastery of the game design discipline (Costikyan 2002, 30).

Game Design for Social Justice and Improved Representation

Minimum Good Practice

Drawing on social justice theory, particularly as applied to game design by Gunraj, Ruiz and York (2011), can ensure that game design is inherently inclusive and non-exploitative. Even without wrangling too much with the much-disputed area of cultural appropriation, it's clear that whether creating wholly fictional game worlds with cultures based on real-world ones, or basing a game primarily on Earth, games can be inaccurate, exploitative, insulting, stereotyping, or at least insensitive. Thus, when cultures, communities, sexualities, lifestyles, and so on, that are not those of the designers, are represented in-game, care must be taken to involve representatives of those groups in the design process. This should avoid the propagation of stereotypes. This involvement must be in the form of paid work, rather than unpaid consultation. If the game has a purely fantastic or science fictional setting, anti-oppressive practices should be embedded in every iteration of the design process so as to remove entirely the possibility of stereotypes by avoiding the lazy and potentially problematic design approach of *they're Samurai… but in space!*

Where the main themes of the game are normative of Empire, i.e. war and entrepreneurship, opportunities for subversive play and counterplay should be deliberately incorporated, rather than penalised. This can be in the form of immersive simulation elements in the gameplay, as per *Deus Ex* (2000), which offers a freedom of potential action verging on that of TTRPGs.

Best Practice

For best practice, start with minimum good practice, as above, but build on that as follows. A primary aim of the business is to use the art of game design or other means to actively improve the world. This could include an improvement in terms of social justice, anti-oppression, and better representation, enabling the voices and experiences of countercultural, minority, and outsider communities to be expressed; or it might be a broader approach to educating, empowering, and encouraging consumers regarding the climate crisis or another major area of concern (McGonigal 2011). As Flanagan (2017) pointed out, deliberately distancing the player from the real world by placing the game in a fictional setting can enhance the impact of any such theme or metaphor.

Where the main themes of the game are normative of Empire, i.e. war and entrepreneurship, subversive play and counterplay should be foregrounded, or, themes and objectives of the main storyline should interrogate or consciously subvert the militaristic and capitalistic norms of Empire. This genre of games traditionally has one winner, who proves their superiority over the other players. Even existing games that attempt to offer non-violent forms of victory, such as the *Civilization* series (1991, 1996, 2001, 2005, 2010, 2016), almost invariably design those alternate victory possibilities to be achievable primarily through capitalist-style resource management, even if the entity being invested in is framed, rather abstractly, as scientific or cultural progress. While not every play of every game should end in a cooperative, shared victory, a best practice design philosophy should at least consider incorporating collaborative or peacemaking routes to and through the endgame, perhaps as inspired by the New Games movement:

> The next game played was a battle for control over Mother Earth. Similar to a rubber pushball used in military training exercises, hundreds of people collectively inflated a canvas-covered ball measuring six-feet in diameter that was hand-painted to resemble the Earth, with its vast continents, deep oceans and atmospheric swirls. The rules were simple: "There are two kinds of people in the world: those who want to push the Earth over the row of flags at that end of the field, and those who want to push it over the fence at the other end. Go to it." …Players mobilized the re-imagined Earth from all sides and whenever a team neared a goal, it was noted that players from the winning team would defect to help the other side… The first Earthball game was played for an hour, without a score, thwarting zero-sum game mechanics into a state of Suits' utopian paradox, where the goal was not to win, but simply to play. (Pearce et al. 2007, 263)

Considering alternatives to an Empire-style capitalist economic system could be highly fruitful for game design. Given artists' capability to imagine alternatives to the status quo, particularly in the science fiction and fantasy genres (when those are not mere remediations of earlier work), and given the urgency of turning such an alternative into reality if that same status quo is not to continue propelling us into climate and ecological breakdown, such work is more vital than ever.

Perhaps the most effective published game with such an alternative is *Six Ages: Ride Like The Wind* (2019). At first glance this is a tribal management simulation game, offering building, farming, herding, gathering herbs, exploring, cattle raids, warfare, trading, and diplomacy, in a world of magic and gods, with the usual engine-building activities typical to such management games interspersed with semi-random story events. A little more play reveals a deeper, richer, ongoing story. Victory, often hard-won after dozens of playthroughs, can only be achieved in ways that are almost inimical to typical videogame play: losing battles, but carrying on nevertheless; recognizing that some enemy tribes cannot be beaten in war but must be placated with tribute; being generous when you are prosperous, both to your friends and your enemies; coming through natural disasters that can only really be interpreted as

climate crisis metaphors, in which you and your community lose almost everything but after which you still have obligations to your fellow survivors. A player determined to use brute force to conquer the valley in which the game is set, will always be disappointed and cannot win. While this game is by no means a perfect example of ethical game design – a detailed close reading would doubtless find problematic areas, perhaps including appropriation of Indigenous cultures – it can offer some clues as to how to design the next generation of games that depart from a purely capitalist, resource-gathering, economy- and engine-building paradigm. Building the values of generosity, negotiation, kindness, and altruism, into a fictional culture, even in a game less focused on resource management, can make a real difference to player mindset, both in play and potentially beyond.

Social Justice Worldbuilding Tool: Better World Builder (BWB)

Starting Points

Either a *Microscope* (Robbins 2011) session, or the approach mentioned above and exemplified below, where real-world cultural attributes are selected from enough different real-world cultures, and included with enough completely fictional aspects, that it's clear there is no attempt to appropriate or duplicate a living culture.

Expand with Cultural Values

Drawing from sociological analysis of real cultures, select or assign cultural attributes from the following categories. Note that some will seem to be the *natural* fits to the culture created in the Starting Points step, but that considering even the unnatural fits can be fruitful in creating an original but verisimilitudinous setting. Indeed, a good creative principle is to consider each option carefully and try to force together some apparently counterintuitive combinations, if they can be made to work; if they can't,

it's fine to pick the more obvious options. Note: while based on social psychology and sociology, the concepts below are adapted somewhat to be useful for game worldbuilding, and should not be considered to be inherently useful any more for other purposes such as describing real cultures!

Individualist, Family, Collectivist, or Hierarchical?

Individualist emphasizes personal freedom and independence, with few ties to families or groups. Note: this is frequently the default in video games because it's normative of Empire and of capitalist realism, but as a result, it's by far the least interesting of the possible fictional settings. *Family* emphasizes the family as the main social grouping. Extended families/clans are likely. The needs of the family outweigh those of the individual. *Collectivist* emphasizes the entire community. All work together, including the leadership if any. A *hierarchical* society has rigid social boundaries and structures, with clearly defined leadership. Everyone knows their place, and acts accordingly.

Direct, Emotional, or Polite?

A *direct* society expects its members to communicate honestly, without exaggeration or understatement, at all times, to a point that other societies might consider impolite or tactless. An *emotional* society tends to use exaggeration in communication. Public display of emotions, even extreme emotions, is the norm. A *polite* society emphasizes politeness above all other values. Honesty is less important than tact. The main aim is to avoid causing offense. This culture is likely to have a dozen ways of saying no, none of which involve actually using, or even implying, the word *no*.

Formal, Casual, or Contextual?

Members of a *formal* society always address each other using strictly correct

terminology, e.g. an engineering lecturer is always Mrs Doctor Professor Engineer, whether she is in university, at the bar, or at the gym. In a *casual* society, she might always be Jane, in all those different contexts. In a *contextual* society, she might be Mrs Doctor Professor Engineer in the university, Professor in the bar, and Jane at the gym. From a practical game design perspective, it's worth bearing in mind that individuals and contexts may sometimes subvert even the most formal society, and this can of course be used to add depth to characters and settings: a punk outsider may make a point of giving more stuffy characters informal nicknames.

Meritocratic, Nepotistic, or Corrupt?

In a *meritocratic* society, advancement happens according to merit. If you're good at your job and suited to the new job, you get promoted – potentially all the way up to president/monarch. In a *nepotistic* society, you get promoted based on personal connections, particularly through your family. In a *corrupt* society, if you pay enough, you can get whatever you want in life. Bribery is likely to underpin almost all relationships, whether with government officials or private individuals.

Indulgent vs Restrained?

An *indulgent* society permits its members to indulge in whatever pleasures they wish, so long as others are not harmed. Public drunkenness or drug use is fine. Multiple relationships are accepted. A *restrained* society expects its members to keep their vices secret, and will punish them if it finds out about those vices, whether through the law, a fall in social status, or both.

Expand with Religion

The piecemeal approach is well worthwhile here, as per *Starting Points*, above. My preferred, relatively easy yet productive, approach is to pick two or three (short!)

episodes from the BBC's *Living with the Gods* (2017) radio/podcast series, and base my fictional religion on those. Each episode takes a deep dive into one real-world religious concept, as it is implemented by several different religions. By deciding that your own fictional religion centers around a given two or three concepts, and then considering how it will implement them, you can craft something plausible, inspired by real religion, but unlikely to be perceived as a simplistic, stereotyped appropriation of real spiritual practice.

Consider Economic System

Again, starting with the recognition that the capitalist, normative approach is both creatively defunct, and socially regressive, consider ways that the fictional culture and religion you've created will interact to form an economic system that is at least somewhat different to that of the 21st century Empire you and your players inhabit. The specifics of this will depend on the rest of the setting, so any guidance firmer than that principle is impossible. Either a close reading of the aforementioned *Six Ages: Ride Like The Wind*, or research into pre-capitalist or counter-capitalist economic systems will probably prove inspirational.

Fleshing Out

The above processes should start to create a mental picture which can easily be expanded with considerations of the other aspects of the fictional culture: what do they eat? What are their art forms and pastimes and modes of communication? These are often best, and most enjoyably, worked out as in-universe documents, so that a picture of what the people are like, begins to emerge. Such in-universe artefacts can later be used as found story elements in a finished game.

Worked Example

I have produced a worked example of the BWB starting point below. This initial piece of worldbuilding took around 20 minutes, using the principles and techniques given above. Note that this is *Starting Points*, and should be expanded with stages 2-5, as usual.

This original fictional setting is an Ancient Roman-style Republic, with senators. Note that the inspiration here does not include the, later, Roman Empire. Senators, as per Rome, are appointed by the consuls, who are elected. At this early stage in the game culture design process, a deliberate departure is taken from the historical source material, with the intention of putting the new creation far enough away from the original that it is unlikely to be seen as exploitative, or indeed unoriginal, but maintaining just enough of the original for a sense of verisimilitude. So, unlike Rome, in my fictional setting the only people who can vote are the priests, not the soldiers. Specifically, this is priests who have done at least ten years' service and are therefore citizens. Consuls and senators therefore tend to be well-respected priests, too. Already this gives us a very different atmosphere to the source material, while retaining a sense of plausibility. In terms of military organisation – almost always of interest in a game context – the high-ranking soldiers serve priests directly. Drawing from two more, distinct cultures, thus keeping that sense of verisimilitude without wholesale stereotyping, I decide that military have a Samurai-style code of honour, but fight primarily as wizard cavalry. This, in my world, is similar to knights in a late Western European style, but in magical robes, protected by spells rather than armour. Each wields a staff whose touch is death. They are supported by light skirmishers armed with slings, small shields, and swords; this is another callback to the ancient Mediterranean, and the various skirmishers and light infantry that fell into and out of fashion in warfare. Logically armour is less useful against magic than more

conventional weapons, hence, light troops. This touch is another subtle way to add verisimilitude, in that most players will not consciously think through that process but the light skirmishers will still *seem to fit*.

Discussion of Worked Example

With a name and some more details about the fictional religion and culture, and perhaps economy, my newly invented nation is almost ready to slot into a fictional world. The first step in adding details would be to consider where power and privilege lies in this world; we know the priests wield huge power, but are there sectors of society who are entirely excluded from power, too? Considering *the power dynamics of the society* (Parham 2019) is typically more fruitful than attempting to create some kind of racially harmonious, unrealistically utopian society. Diaz, too, argues that fantasy and SF stories can and should cover the big issues that mainstream genres tend to ignore: colonialism, inequality, even genocide and eugenics (Diaz 2008). It's worth bearing in mind that, while genre stories can and should cover such subjects, the worldbuilding process needs to avoid duplicating or amplifying real-world bigotry and oppression. Jemisin's example of worldbuilding (using her technique, of course, rather than the one presented here), which used undersea people whose power structures were predicated on whether or not a given member of society possessed gills (Parham 2019), it should be possible to do so.

Considering the earlier close readings of *World of Warcraft*, it would be worth deliberately examining written and visual results of the worldbuilding process to ensure no unconscious biases had crept into the process. User testing and surveys at this stage could be employed to test for both verisimilitude, in the sense of internal consistency and coherence; as well as sensitivity and originality, as in, do any of the users perceive that the setting draws strongly from any given real-world culture to

the point that it may be perceived as insensitive, stereotyping, or offensive.

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