



World-Building in Fantasy

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ABSTRACT

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The aim of this thesis was to highlight the importance of creating credible and interesting environment designs for fantasy world-building. It can also be used as a guide for creating environments for fantasy themed world-building.

The information gathered for this thesis combines knowledge from literature, articles, blogs and interviews around the theme of fantasy media. Semiotics were used to analyse different media within fantasy genre. With the gathered information, a first chapter for a fantasy action webcomic was created as a practical part of this thesis.

The thesis is divided into three parts. The first part elaborates the basic knowledge and theory of designing environments for world-building. The second part opens the important points what to focus on during the designing process. The last part shows the working progress of creating environments for the fantasy action webcomic created by the author of this thesis.

When creating stories, often world-building focuses more on character designing and the plot. In world-building, designing credible environments is just as important and can add more details to the characters and support the storytelling. This way the audience can immerse themselves better into the world one has created. All the knowledge and information about designing environments can be adapted into different genres and artistic media.

Key words: fantasy, environment, world-building, webcomic

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ABBREVIATIONS AND TERMS

Anime	Japanese animation
Amphipteres	A fictional creature commonly known as a winged serpent
CGI	Computer-generated imagery
Isekai	Subgenre of fantasy originated from Japan. The protagonist reincarnates from a real world to a fantasy world
Secondary belief	Tolkien's term of the reader's experience of immersing to a fantasy world
The creator	A person who creates (author, artist etc.)
Manga	Japanese comic
Modern fantasy	Fantasy media and literature starting from the 20th century to present-times
Onomatopoeic words	Words which imitate the sounds they represent
Webcomic	Comics which are posted on the internet

INTRODUCTION

In entertainment media, such as video games, movies, and books, fantasy worlds are an occurring theme (Athena Productions 2024). But what makes fantasy a popular genre in contemporary media? Media within fantasy genre has been used as a form of escapism from people's daily lives. In this created safe space, people can freely explore themselves in various ways, like their identity and creativity. (Kutaval 2024.)

What differentiates fantasy from other genres of fiction, such as science fiction, is its focus on elements which have low or no probability to happen in the real world (Antoci 2024). While fantasy began to be recognized as its own genre in the late 1800's in England, fantasy was inspired by different legends, myths, epic poems and magical tales (Besson n.d.). It has come to be a norm in fantasy genre that creators develop detail-oriented imagined worlds, which include histories, cultures, languages, cosmologies and geographies (Kraatila 2021).

With modern digital tools and artists with advanced skill-levels, newer and older fantasy stories can be now created into entertaining visual media with almost endless possibilities for a larger audience. While the plot and characters are impactful in fantasy stories, the successful ones also have diverse environments to support the world-building and the storytelling. In this thesis, the goal is to give useful information on how to create believable and interesting environments to fantasy worlds.

This thesis includes basic theory on designing environments for fantasy world-building and the information was used in the practical example of creating environments for the first episode of a fantasy action webcomic. All the tips mentioned in this thesis are not limited to one media and can be adapted into different artistic professions, such as literature, video games and comics. This thesis can be used as a guide to help creating immersive environments in one's world-building.

1 WORLD-BUILDING AND ITS ENVIRONMENTS

1.1 A strong world-building creates immersive experiences

World-building requires understanding multiple aspects during the designing process. In his 2025 blog, *A Step-by-Step Guide to Immersive World Building*, author Jerry Jenkins says that world-building is answering the question “Where?” of the creator’s story and gives them a solid foundation for it. Whilst world-building can be as complex as creating entire multiverses, it can be limited to somewhere compact, where the entire story is based, for example a room (Noë 2021). Additionally, world-building is the story’s physical and cultural setting which ranges from flora and fauna to taboos and values (Wurdeman 2023).

When writing a fictional story, the surroundings should be highly vivid for the readers to make them immerse themselves into the world they are interested about (Jenkins 2025). If the creator decides to come up with something more complicated, it still needs to support the theme of the world-building (Wurdeman 2023). What successful literature pieces have in common is their storytelling, where the reader can discover the world while unfolding the story itself (Kraatila 2021).

1.1.1 Secondary and Primary worlds

In his essay, *On Fairy Stories* (1947), *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit* author J. R. R. Tolkien separated an imaginary world and the realistic universe in a story into two worlds. The world closest to our world is called a Primary world. On the other hand, a Secondary world is a world created by the creator, and where the reader believes that everything within the Secondary world is real. In a well written story, the reader is kept immersed in the Secondary world, without breaking “suspension of disbelief”. If the reader does not find the Secondary world believable or enjoyable enough, their Secondary belief becomes forced. (Tolkien 1947) The two worlds are also commonly known as “in-universe” and “out-of-universe”. Presently, other terms have been used to describe the Secondary

world's concept, such as conworld and fictional universe. (Tolkien Gateway 2024.)

Tolkien kept the Primary and the Secondary worlds strictly distinct from each other when creating his own Secondary world, Middle Earth. (Noë 2021). "Tolkien claimed that the author should respect his creation, grant it internal consistency, and let it obtain "life of its own" (Tolkien Gateway 2024). Nevertheless, Harry Potter, a series of novels by J.K. Rowling and The Chronicles of Narnia, a series of novels by C. S. Lewis are examples of how the use of both Primary and Secondary worlds in one story can be possible and successful. In both series, the two worlds are distinct yet within the same universe, allowing the characters to interact in both alternately. (Noë 2021.)

1.1.2 Top-down or bottom-up?

To begin the world-building journey, there are two methods the creator can start with, which are called top-down and bottom-up. In the top-down method, the designing process begins with an overall plan for the climate, history, geographical layouts, and inhabitants, later creating more details into them. Furthermore, some of the technologies, cultures and languages are invented. When starting with the bottom-up method, the creator begins to establish a specific area with details of the location and its population. The rest of the world-building will be created surrounding the starting point. In some cases, authors have used a mix of both methods. (Noë 2021.)

Both methods have their pros and cons, depending on the approach. The top-down method works well with creators who already have a specific goal where the story will lead and how the world looks like, so they start working from the ending towards the beginning. Details for the final world come along when the creator is figuring out how everything ended up the way they wanted them to. If that is not how the creator begins the world-building, the designing process with this method might become difficult and overwhelming. (Garrison 2015.)

As the other option, the bottom-up, is better for those who want to design a solid foundation to start their designing process. With this method, it might be easier for the creator to figure out the story and refine the world with the detailed design they have created in the beginning. As the downside, the creator might dwell in the designing process of their world and forget to create the actual story for it. (Garrison 2015.)

M. D. Presley, the author of *Fantasy Worldbuilding Workbook* (2021) and *Worldbuilding for Fantasy Fans and Authors* (2020), has created worksheets for both top-down (Appendix 1) and bottom-up (Appendix 2) methods. These worksheets include prompts, questions, and areas where the creator can write down notes and answer the questions. The worksheets help creators to find the best method that works for them.

1.2 The basics to design environments in world-building

Designing environments for fantasy world-building is not just adding magical creatures and other fantasy elements into the scenery. It is creating the mood and the atmosphere, telling a story through immersive design. Familiarity in the in the environments creates strong credibility. (Athena Productions 2024.) “Our minds need at least some familiarity to connect with before they can be broadened to accept the fictional elements” (Noë 2021).

In visual design, artistic skills are necessary to create captivating environments, but understanding the fundamentals will help to support those skills. These fundamentals are lighting, storytelling, colour theory, and composition. (Athena Productions 2024). In her 2024 article, *Medieval Resort: How to Create a Fantasy Environment*, environmental artist Reyhane Salekfard emphasizes: “In this project, I realised that being an environmental artist goes beyond design. Understanding technical aspects is as important as having artistic skills.” Whilst in literature, the world-building should be kept simple and consistent since an intricate world could make the story hard to follow for the reader (Noë 2021).

Environments can support the narrative and the storytelling. Therefore, every detail in the environments should be well thought through. Even the smallest details, such as textures in materials and architectural designs, should support the story. For example, lighting impacts the mood and atmosphere, setting various emotions for the viewer to feel within the environment. It can also help to enhance the compositions, emphasizing those wanted emotions. (Athena Productions 2024.)

In thesis writer's opinion, while details in the setting are impactful, sometimes overdoing them can have the opposite effect. In scenes, where business and liveliness are created with multiple characters interacting with each other, the background characters should have simple designs (Athena Productions 2024). This way the environments and characters stay cohesive, unless certain details are necessary to stand out for the scene (Athena Productions 2024).

In a story, the world-building should be "shown, not told". When the creator is "telling", for example, in a book, they often describe directly, what the characters look like and how the surroundings may appear. This way the creator doesn't leave any room for different interpretations and strictly narrows down how the reader should understand the world. Whilst in "showing", the creator should show the world with the use of readers' different senses. As an example, if a character feels cold, they might tighten their scarf or lift their collar. This way, the readers' attention can be grasped with the use of suggestive imagery, letting readers forget that they are reading. (Jenkins 2025.)

In an interview, comic artist Tuuli Hypén encouraged creators to be experimental by trying different ways to "show, not tell" in comics. Hypén mentioned that using different perspectives and angles in storyboards are the basics for that. As an example, they used a scene where characters are building a spaceship. The creator doesn't necessarily have to tell the viewer that the characters are building one, but the characters are shown adding parts to the spaceship. Hypén added that showing details, such as close-ups of the characters' hands with objects in them, can reveal important details of the world they are set in. Additionally, Hypén reminds, that the creators should trust the viewer and leave room for interpretation to keep them interested and guessing what everything is about. (Hypén 2025.)

1.3 Environments in contemporary fantasy media

The advantage of creating digitally is the wide range of different tools to help make the working process faster. For example, different video games, such as *City Skylines* (2015) and *Sims 4* (2014) offer players to design exteriors and interiors, which creators can use as tools in the world-building process. Therefore, all kinds of developed digital tools have been adapted into the entertainment industry to produce most pleasing and immersive experiences for the audience.

3D graphics has enabled to create hyper realistic characters and environments for gaming (Outsource 3D Modelling n.d.). Whilst in film industry, 3D graphics are used to create special effects, that cannot be created with traditional filming techniques (Brixey n.d.). Like in the movie *Avatar* (2009) (Picture 1), live actors and real sets were mainly used during the filming, but the use of CGI enabled seamlessly merge computer-generated and “live” elements to add visual effects and images (Scippo 2025).



PICTURE 1. Screenshot of the behind the scenes of *Avatar* (Collider Movies and TV 2021)

1.3.1 Studio Ghibli's traditional and digital working methods

Whilst everything seems to be digitalized in today's world, Studio Ghibli is one of the last few companies which have kept traditional techniques in their working

methods, refusing to fully transition to digital programs (Shindel 2023). Studio Ghibli is known for their worlds which are created with painted backgrounds, creating spaces for the characters. One of the animation studio's background artists, Kazuo Oga, used poster colours to paint the film's backgrounds (Picture 2), which was an industry standard back in the 2000's. He also utilized other tools commonly used for anime such as Japanese flat brush. (Animation Obsessive 2021.)



PICTURE 2. Painted background by Kazuo Oga from Spirited Away (Studio Ghibli 2001)

More so, Studio Ghibli's latest film directed by Hayao Miyazaki, The Boy and the Heron (2023) (Picture 3), still included traditional methods while creating the animation and the environments. In Daniel Schindel's interview with Studio Ghibli's

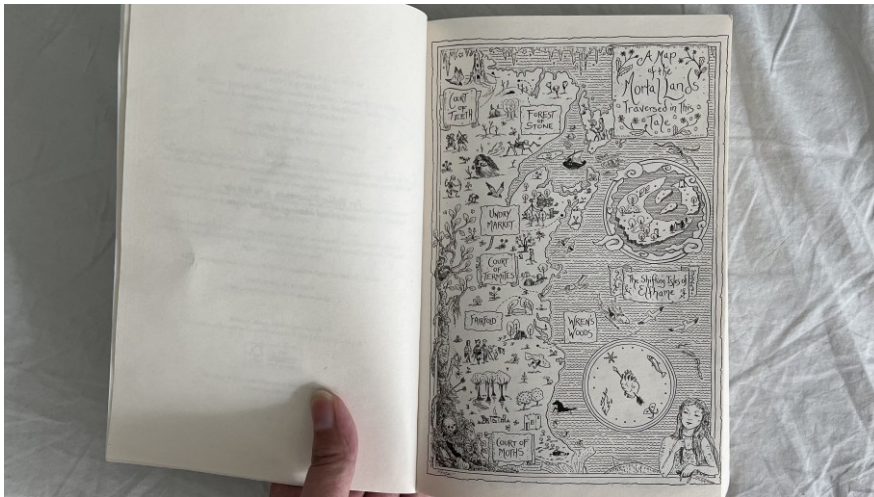
cinematographer Atsushi Okui (2023), Okui said how their animators and background artists started with drawing and painting on paper and later applying digital technology. As one of the questions in the interview, Schindel asks: "Certain fabrics and tapestries in the film appear to be hand-drawn but with computer-generated textures. It's an incredible effect. How was that accomplished?". Okui says that this kind of effect was created by combining hand-drawn work with CGI for which they've used 3D modelling. (Schindel 2023.)



PICTURE 3. A picture of The Boy and The Heron (Studio Ghibli 2024)

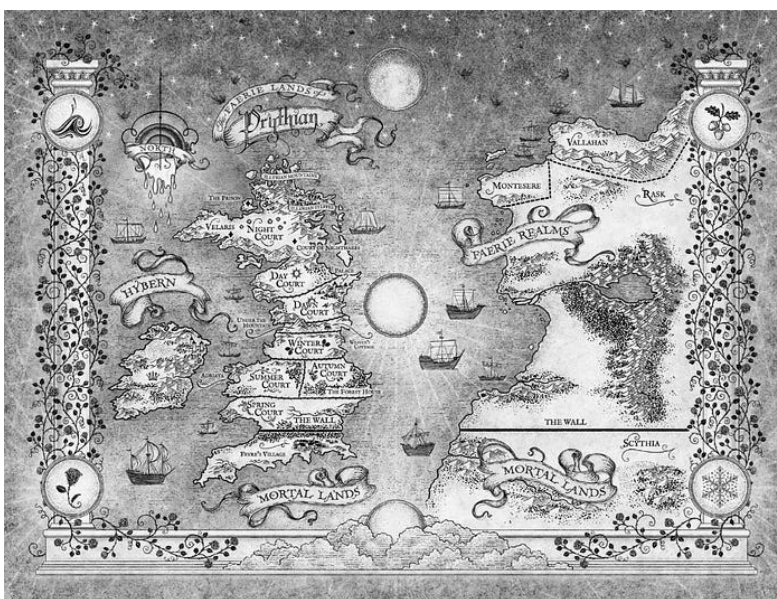
1.3.2 The use of maps in fantasy books

In her 2006 book, *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland*, Diana Wynne Jones says humorously: "We must emphasize again here that no Tour is complete without a Map". The word "Tour" is described to be the reader's journey (Wikipedia 2023), therefore maps are a necessity for reader's journey on fantasy world-building in books. Fictional and fantasy books have had a continuous trend with maps placed after the title page to support the reader's experience (Picture 4). They have been found to be useful for the authors and their growing fictional worlds. (Phillis 2012.)



PICTURE 4. The map of the Mortal Lands (The Stolen Heir: A Novel of Elfhame 2023)

For fantasy books, maps can be created in various ways, for example drawn by the creator, hiring a graphic designer or using a map-making software, depending on creator's desired results are for the maps (Pope 2023). They can include, for example, mountains, hills, coastlines, forests, deserts, cities and borders of other countries and regions (Smith 2019). The maps in fantasy books occasionally have similarities with real-life locations. Like in *A Court of Thorns and Roses* (2021) written by Sara J. Maas, the map of the Faerie Lands of Prythian reminds the shape of the British Isles (Picture 5). However, fantasy maps do not necessarily need to resemble real-life locations. (W. 2024).



PICTURE 5. The map of the Faerie Lands of Prythia (A Court of Thorns and Roses 2021)

2 PLANNING ENVIRONMENTS FOR FANTASY WORLDS

2.1 Research and references

Artist Elliott Bon mentions in an article by Athena Production, *Creating Fantasy Environment Concept Art: Tips and Tricks*, that gathering references are his first step when starting a project. For example, mood, colour palette, style and elements in the storytelling can be created when the creator uses references as their base. References can source details and ideas for the scenes and props. They can also determinate the complexity of the scene, to make it more authentic and boost its story. A strong reference board helps to make the visual language united throughout the whole project. (Athena Productions 2024.)

For example, watching documentaries, reading history books or doing research online are a few methods how to do research. If the story is based on an existing country or a city, travelling there could help to understand the regions culture, architecture and other visually or historically interesting details specific for that area. While doing any form of research, taking notes help with collecting and gathering the information for later usage. One way of doing the research is also being open to one's own thoughts and emotions surrounding the topic, since they can bring up new ideas and perspectives. Additionally, some beneficial ideas may come to mind when one is not thinking about the story or doing research actively. (Siler 2019.)

Like in the anime *Attack on Titan* (2013), manga artist Hajime Isayama told in an interview with Leah President (2023), that he took inspiration from Romans and the Germanic people and their experiences from 2000 years ago to create the Eldian and Marleyans. In *Attack on Titan*, the World War II was referenced in its narrative, therefore Isayama took heavily inspiration from Germany. Nördlingen, a small town in Bavaria, Germany, was the main inspiration of the walls and the district designs in the anime. (OT Staff 2024.) Compared to the Nördlingen's wall (Picture 6) to the wall designs in *Attack on Titan* (Picture 7), they both form circle shapes and have similar green and brown landscapes.



PICTURE 6. A picture of Nördlingen in Bavaria, Germany, from the above (OT Staff 2024.)



PICTURE 7. A picture of wall Sina and wall Rose (Attack on Titan 2013)

While comparing the buildings in the district of Shiganshina (Picture 8) to the buildings in Nördlingen (Picture 9), even the details are almost identical. The buildings in both areas have red roofs in the shape of a pyramid. More so, the walls are light-coloured with dark wooden detailing on some of them.



PICTURE 8. A picture of the town Nördlingen in Bavaria, Germany (OT Staff 2024)



PICTURE 9. The district of Shiganshina (Attack on Titan 2013)

2.2 Nature and its impact

In a fantasy world, there are multiple elements in the world's nature that can affect its living creatures and humankind. These can be, for example, climate, food sources and the existence of predators. From predators to prey on humans, they

all have to adapt to the pressure of their living conditions in order to survive. (Byrne 2019.)

Biomes are used to develop the area's culture, atmosphere and narrative, for example. Within the biomes, bigger elements, such as mountains and oceans, affect the air currents and rainfall and give the landscapes their topography. Therefore, placing these elements within the environment needs to have logic. On the other hand, biodiversity depends, where in specific biomes the flora and fauna have adapted to. The ecosystems thrive within forests and aquatic environments but in drier climates, such as deserts and tundra, the diversity is narrowed. When designing new and unique species to the fantasy world, they still need to have design choices necessary for their survival within the specific biome. (World Anvil n.d.)

In an interview, comic artist Janika Keskitalo mentioned that environments can shape the characters to grow into who they are in the story (Keskitalo 2025). As an example, people living in the Arctic have cold and harsh conditions, therefore staying together with the community is crucial for their survival, creating traits such as hospitality and diligence within their people. The question is, if the arctic people were transferred to a different biotope where those qualities are not a necessity for their survival, would they keep these traits or change them to something completely new. (Karstenberg n.d.)

2.3 Culture, history and politics

2.3.1 Cultures

In her 2020 article, *A Worldbuilding Guide to Crafting Diverse Cultures*, Amelia Wiens emphasizes: "A key part of creating interesting worlds is creating diverse cultures that vary in some way from our own norms". It might be difficult to get out of our cultural biases to reconsider what we think and see as obvious (Wiens 2020). However, if the creator wants to use real-life cultures as the main source

of inspiration, it's heavily suggested to do thorough research. These adaptations should be justified with a reason and not accidental. (Noë 2021.)

The first step before creating a fictional culture is to develop its environments. The appearance of those environments establishes a base where it's easier to start creating, for example, attributes and symbolism. Additionally, it is suggested to write down what the environments are like and how the cultures developed to the area in the first place. The creator should answer questions such as:

- What climate does your culture live in?
- Did they always live in this climate?
- What major landmarks and features can be found where they live?
- Does the environment influence their perception of an afterlife?

Whatever the answers are to all the mentioned questions, the environment's appearance may end up having a deeper meaning or the opposite, which will be the creator's decision in the end. (Krastenberg n.d.)

In an interview, comic artist Tuuli Hypén emphasized that creators should consider, what the environment can provide for the culture living in a fantasy city. As an example, what the people eat there and where they source their food. If the city is in a medieval setting, commonly it is surrounded by fields. Hypén also mentioned, that societies can't be built in the middle of nowhere, so there must be, for example, some roads and transportation. These details are great to have within the environment, even if they are not directly explained for the viewer, since they make the environment feel alive. (Hypén 2025.)

While the creator can create a whole new culture for their stories, real-life cultures have taken influence into fantasy world-building and its environments. Like in the Chinese based and anime-styled game Genshin Impact (2020), Chinese regional cultures have been naturally embodied into the game (Zhou 2024). For example, Liyue resembles China and depicts its local culture in its gameplay. When the player first steps into Liyue, the first scenery is of Dihua Marsh (Picture 10) which gives the player a general impression of Liyue. The landscape design choices in

Dihua Marsh take inspiration from the scenery of Guilin, China, which were incorporated as vast mountains, winding water and passing fishing boats, for example. (Fan 2023.)



PICTURE 10. A picture of Dihua Marsh (Genshin Impact 2020)

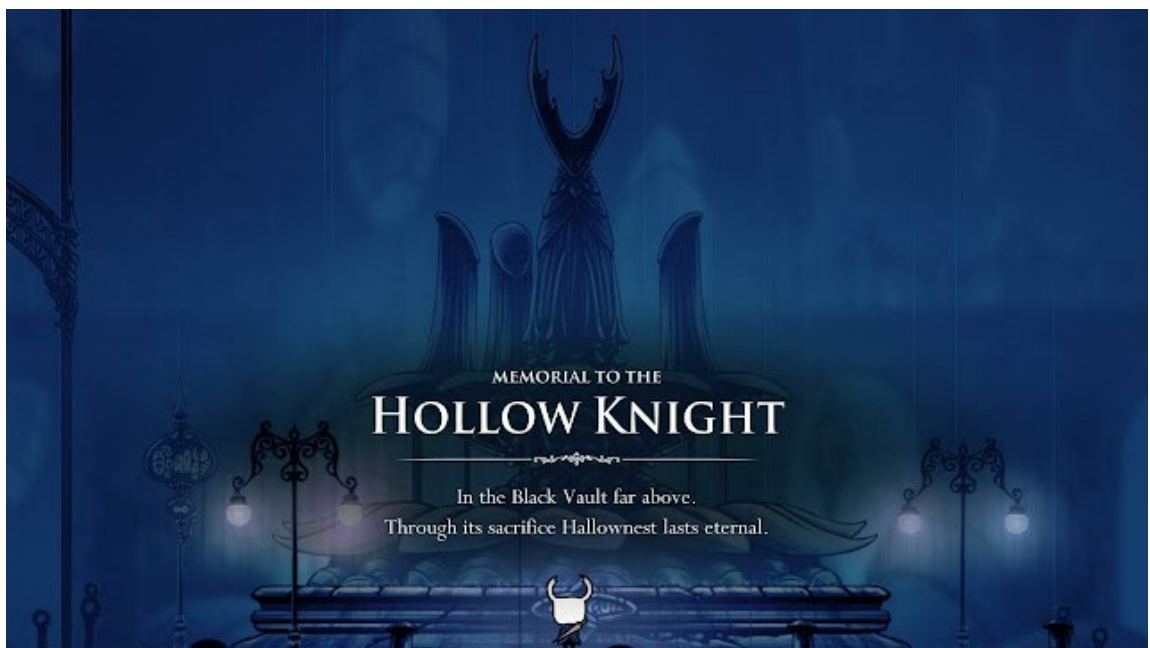
2.3.2 History

Every fictional world should include its own stories which are an important part of the characters' lives and thought process. Stories are the key motivators for wars and life decisions, for example. While it is not difficult to create worlds without stories, even the stories that are only a few decades old, they must have evolved in one way or another. Therefore, a world without those stories, which create the world's history, could seem illogical and narrow. Nevertheless, history is all about the most impactful recorded actions and occurrences. These events can be, for example, environmental disasters, wars and government changes. (Rhody 2015.)

In fantasy stories, characters who have experienced historical events gives the most reliable information of these events, therefore the recordings are written by these who had the firsthand experiences of these events (Rhody 2015). In contrast, according to Jones (2006, 90-91), the recorded history in fantasy stories is

most likely vanished, fragmented or inaccessible in one way or another. Therefore, the primary sources to find information of these events would be different myths, legends or folklores. In author's opinion, the source for the historical events can depend on how impactful these decisions are for the plot.

"Imaginary histories have been created to make political points and to explore social and gender norms, but more usually the "historical" material is there to provide an exciting problem for the characters to solve." (Clute and Grant 1997, 468-469). Video games are a good example of how history can be built within the environment and to be explored by the player. As an example, in Team Cherry's Metroidvania game Hollow Knight (2017), an ancient civilization suddenly disappeared for unknown circumstances. As proof of the civilization's existence, ancient statues, relics and totems were left behind as ruins which new splendours were built upon. (Vondrak 2024.) During the gameplay, the player explores these statues (Picture 11) and totems and collects relics revealing information of the ancient history of Hollownest and the game's overall lore.



PICTURE 11. Screenshot of the information text of a statue called Memorial to the Hollow Knight (Hollow Knight 2017)

2.3.3 Politics

The fantasy genre often reflects ancient or mythical times, with kings, lords, and powerful groups in a world where magic and stories are important. Therefore, the politics include a variety of magic, diverse cultures and sometimes ancient prophecies foreshadowing the fate of the world. To make the reader connect with the story, the political systems should not only match the epic setting but also feel human. (Yeager 2023.) Additionally, politics in fantasy worlds tend to be quite complex, involving issues that are not known for the readers, players or viewers (Jones 2006, 147).

In the Netflix series *Arcane* (2021), the city of Piltover and the undercity of Zaun have been presented differently with the use of perspectives. The two were once together one big city but are currently separated into two districts. However, the societies in Piltover and Zaun still live symbiotically. (Riot Games n.d.) In the series, Piltover is populated by the wealthier society with developed technologies and advanced academics. Therefore, Piltover is often shot from a lower angle (Picture 12), which gives the impression of power, domination and respect.



PICTURE 12. A picture of Piltover (*Arcane* 2021)

On the other hand, Zaun is home, for example, for the poor and criminals, judged and mutually hated by the people living in Piltover. Therefore, Zaun is often shot

from above (Picture 13) to visualize its oppression, being the total opposite of Piltover.



PICTURE 13. A picture of Zaun (Arcane 2021)

2.4 The laws of magic

Magic is the main element that defines the genre of fantasy (Winchell 2023). Magic and its rules differ from story to story, but it is often kept consistent throughout the story with a small amount of hidden information which is revealed later. Whilst magic in the creator's story is commonly easy to understand, there can be various systems of magic for the reader to follow. (Jones 2006, 116.) The creator should establish the laws of magic within their own world, so they know how it works and avoid situations where those rules could be broken (Winchell 2023).

2.4.1 Sanderson's Three Laws of Magic

The author of Mistborn trilogy (2006) and Stormlight Archive (2010), Brandon Sanderson has created a guideline called Sanderson's Three Laws of Magic, that helps creators to come up with rules for the magic in their fantasy worlds. It all began at a science fiction convention, where Sanderson got unfavourable responses to his statement, mentioning the necessity to have rules within magic systems. After the occasion, he started to explore the topic further and create his

laws. Sanderson has emphasized, that the laws he created are not definite but guides to help creating magic systems that make sense. (Dragonsteel 2015.)

The first law divides magic systems into two categories: soft magic and hard magic. Neither of the magic systems are better than the other, since it all depends on which system works better for the story. As an example, Tolkien uses soft magic system in his world. Soft magic typically creates curiosity in the reader, viewer or player yet it can appear unpredictable. Commonly, soft magic is rarely used to solve bigger problems, only when it is needed to finish the task, which can lead to other complications. (Dragonsteel 2015.)

On the other hand, hard magic systems are more complicated but commonly relates to the real worlds' physics and logic. It also takes some elements from science fiction with stricter rules. Hard magic is better for solving difficult problems and situations, since it is clear to the reader, viewer or player, how it works. (Dragonsteel 2015.) Like in the manga Jujutsu Kaisen (2018), the hard magic system is taught to the readers by the characters, where they elaborate their powers or how the magic system works (Picture 14).



PICTURE 14. Character Gojo Satoru explaining Domain Expansions (Jujutsu Kaisen 2018)

As the second law, limitations within the magic systems are important. These can be characters' weaknesses, narrowed abilities to use the magic and the consequences of using the magic, which are typically negative. These kinds of limitations make characters feel more real and help to make the character development more interesting. Additionally, characters have to put more effort to reach their goals with limited magic systems. (Dragonsteel 2015.)

As the last law, the creator should refine and develop their existing magic system further instead of consistently adding new powers. A complicated and vast magic system excludes depth, which is important to have. With depth, the magic system supports the storytelling better and keeps the system consistent throughout the story. Therefore, expanding what the existing magic can do and its impact to the world-building should be done before any further extensions. (Dragonsteel 2015.)

2.4.2 Magic within the environments

Just like the characters and abnormal creatures living in the fantasy lands, the environments are full of magic as well, in thesis writer's opinion. Magic within the environments, such as specific landmarks or constructed locations, can cause them to change or reshape indirectly. The creator should create the laws of how magic controls the behaviour of the world's materials and if the natural laws from real-life are still relevant. Magical weather has a similar effect. Depending on its severity, it can reconstruct or adjust the environments and its flora and fauna. (Rowenson 2021.)

Magic can have a negative effect within the environment in some scenarios, since the power of magic can be intense and destructive. Therefore, magical disasters can occur when the magic reaches its extreme. Magic can also pollute the environments which can lead to new formations in the landscapes but in the worst cases, some habitats die out and make the creatures go extinct. The pollution doesn't have to be necessarily the mankind's fault and can be caused by an over-consumption of the magical material and energy in a specific location, leading to issues in the environments. (Rowenson 2021.)

3 DESIGNING FANTASY ENVIRONMENTS FOR A WEBCOMIC

3.1 The world of Vinrya

As a part of this thesis is to create a first chapter for a fantasy action webcomic, which I have designed. In the first chapter, the webcomic focuses on its environments to optimize and support the storytelling. Thus, the reader/viewer is welcomed to Vinrya, which they will explore and get familiar with when the story progresses. Since it's the first chapter, only the initial elements about the world will be presented.

The fantasy world is my own Secondary world called Vinrya. It is set into an unknown year since Vinrya's known history is very limited. The majority of the population in Vinrya are not interested to study or research about its history since the people love to live in the present, focusing on the challenges and success of the current days. This ideology is influenced by the ruling religion, Heaven's Eyes, who are angels living above the clouds in a paradise called Atrius. It is believed that the angels are the protectors of the land and its living beings, leaving people to rely their safety on to the hands of the angels. The use of magic has also been banned, since it has been used wrongly and almost destroyed the capital city.

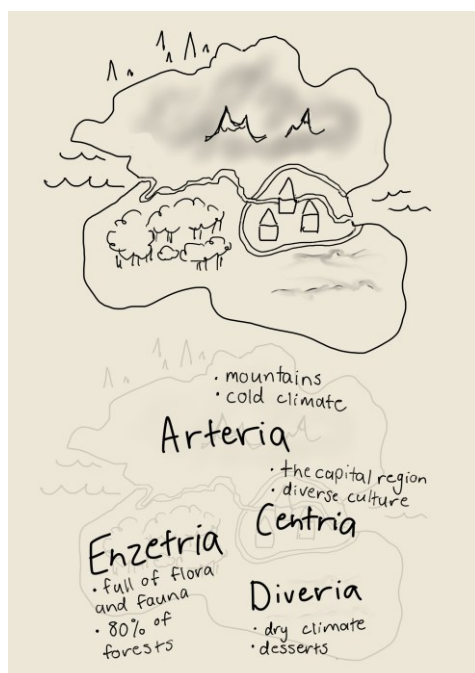
As the plan for the first chapter is to introduce the reader to the world of Vinrya and the story's main characters Devi, Layla and Fazeheirich, shortened to Faze. The chapter is based in the capital city region of Vinrya, which is called Centria and its surrounding rural areas, where in one of them Devi and Layla live. In the first chapter Devi and Layla's complex dynamic is presented in a humoristic way as the first impression of the characters. Devi and Layla get into a small fight which leads Devi to walk around while deep in their thoughts, showing different scenarios happening in the environments at the same time. Devi falls and finds herself somewhere new where Faze is introduced and the chapter ends with a cliffhanger.

3.2 Concept ideation

3.2.1 The capital region of Vinrya

To begin visualizing the world, I wanted to create the first version of the map of Vinrya. I decided to work with the top-down method, since I already had the overall picture in my head of how Vinrya would look like. The regions in the map will not have many details in the beginning, only vague and simple descriptions of the regions' differences to distinct them from one another. The details would be added to the map, when the story progresses and these details would be needed for the story. The map is to help me visually understand and remember the design choices of the regions, since I've decided that the map would not be needed in the comic before the last few chapters.

Vinrya is a large continent which is divided into four regions, which are called Arteria, Enzetría, Diveria and Centria. All the regions include a main city and their surrounding rural areas. Later in the story the main characters will explore all the regions, but the first chapter focuses on Centria. Creating the first version of the map (Picture 15) helped me visualize how the capital region can be differentiated from the other regions.



PICTURE 15. The map of Vinrya

For the design of the capital region, I wanted to go with familiar nature and architecture from the Middle Ages and western European cultures with hints of the magic system here and there. The capital resembles the Primary world setting the most out of all the four regions to have familiarity for the reader, making it easier to dive into the story without feeling overwhelmed. The capital is also majorly populated with humans and animals that are common in the real world.

The capital region is surrounded by heavy stonewall as a protective barrier from dangerous creatures. The protection abilities of the stonewall are still flawed since some of the creatures are able to enter the city by flying over it or by swimming through the river crossing the city. As the story progresses, just like in the first chapter, more and more fantasy elements are revealed, and the viewer will discover how the rules of magic, flora and fauna and other fantasy elements work in Vinrya.

3.2.2 The main characters

For the first chapter, only the three main characters were necessary to design. The designs were made to be interesting yet simplistic, so they could be easily replicated. All the characters have their unique personalities shown in the designs and some elements that hint to their origins. Additionally, the clothes have details that indicate their livelihood in the capital region. These design choices can also be seen in the designs of the side and background characters living in their designated regions.

Devi (Picture 16) is the main protagonist of the story. They do not have a specific gender, which is why their clothing style and overall design is androgynous. To show their energetic, curious and temperament personality, round shapes and sharp edges were mostly used in their shape language. Since I wanted all the characters have their own specific colours, Devi represents the colours yellow, green and black. Their cloak has the primary colour of Centria, which is navy blue.



PICTURE 16. Character sheet of Devi

Layla (Picture 17) is the most mature of the main characters. She is logical and has a strong interest towards magic and the capitals' technology, keeping her hands dirty all the time. Her figure is tall and strong from all the handy work she does on her free time. For her clothing choices, I wanted to show her feminine figure with fitted layering, since she cares for her appearance, but keeping her main clothes loose for better movement while working. Layla's main colour scheme includes different shades of purple.



PICTURE 17. Character sheet of Layla

Faze (Picture 18) is calm, curious and caring. She has a soft and round figure to represent her friendliness and welcoming personality. In the first chapter her clothes represent her origin as she has just arrived to Centria but later on Devi and Layla provide her clothes that are more common with the folk of the capital to blend in. Faze has a colour scheme of white, rose gold and navy blue.



PICTURE 18. Character sheet of Fazeheirich, as known as Faze

3.3 Initial story idea for the first chapter

For the first chapter, the plan was to visually introduce the world while creating a scenario where the relation between Devi and Layla is represented, leading up to Devi encountering Faze for the first time. Since only so much can fit in the first chapter, I decided to show only the necessary parts of the environments and the magic system which can support the storytelling. Overall, I have decided that only a small portion of the hard magic system of Vinrya is revealed to the reader in the beginning of the comic and the rest will be revealed progressively throughout the story.

While designing the panels, I also placed the speech bubbles with the sketches. This way I merged together the sketching phase and scriptwriting. This decision helped me to make my working progress more efficient.

3.3.1 The initial sketches of the comic and its environments

Right in the beginning, the first panels show a glimpse of the nature in the rural area where Layla and Devi live in Centria. In the panel where the reader gets the larger view of the area (Picture 19), there are first hints of the magical creatures called amphipteres, living in the mountains between Centria and Arteria.



PICTURE 19. The sketch of the second comic strip

The next design choices for the environments were to show where Devi and Layla live. As shown in the previous panel, their house is built far from others to indicate their need for privacy. When Layla opens the front door, it makes a screeking sound (Picture 20) which indicates the house being old and not taken care of enough.



PICTURE 20. The sketch of the third comic strip

The interior of the house does not have a lot of furniture or decorations. Devi and Layla are poor, so they do not have the extra money to make their home look aesthetic, so they only have the necessities for living. The room where this scene is located is their living room. The living room was shown repeatedly to make the reader familiar with it. However, it is not shown in every panel since some of the background designs were used to emphasize the characters emotions, such as annoyance (Picture 21).



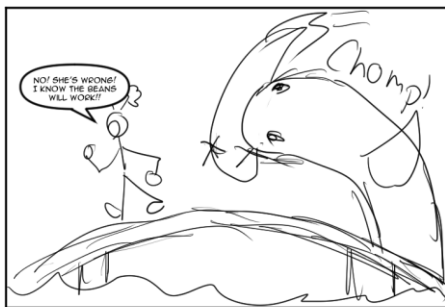
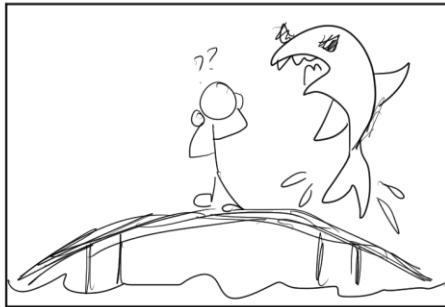
PICTURE 21. A panel from the fourth stirp of the comic

When the two get into a bigger fight, Devi decides to leave the house to release their frustration. While doing so, I wanted to show different scenarios happening in the background to show more of the environments in Centria's rural areas while Devi ignores these dangerous situations. First Devi walks across a nearby village where one of the amphipteres attacks a villager's house while the residents scream for help (Picture 22).



PICTURE 22. The sketch of the first dangerous situation in the comic

Then Devi crosses a river where one of the river monsters tries to attack Devi. Devi still does not notice the dangerous situation happening behind them. Fortunately, a bigger river creature eats the one attacking Devi. (Picture 23.)



PICTURE 23. The sketches of the second dangerous situation in the comic

In the last scenario, while in their thoughts, Devi walks towards a cliff and falls off it (Picture 24). I wanted to try and challenge my drawing skills, so I chose a bit more difficult perspective to draw Devi's fall.



PICTURE 24. The sketches of the last dangerous situation in the comic

In the final part, somewhere deep in the woods, Devi lands in a bush after falling off the cliff. When Devi gets up, they notice a beautiful woman in front of them. The woman is Faze and the reader gets the first impression of her, being lost somewhere all alone (Picture 25).



HUH?!



PICTURE 25. The sketch of the final comic strip

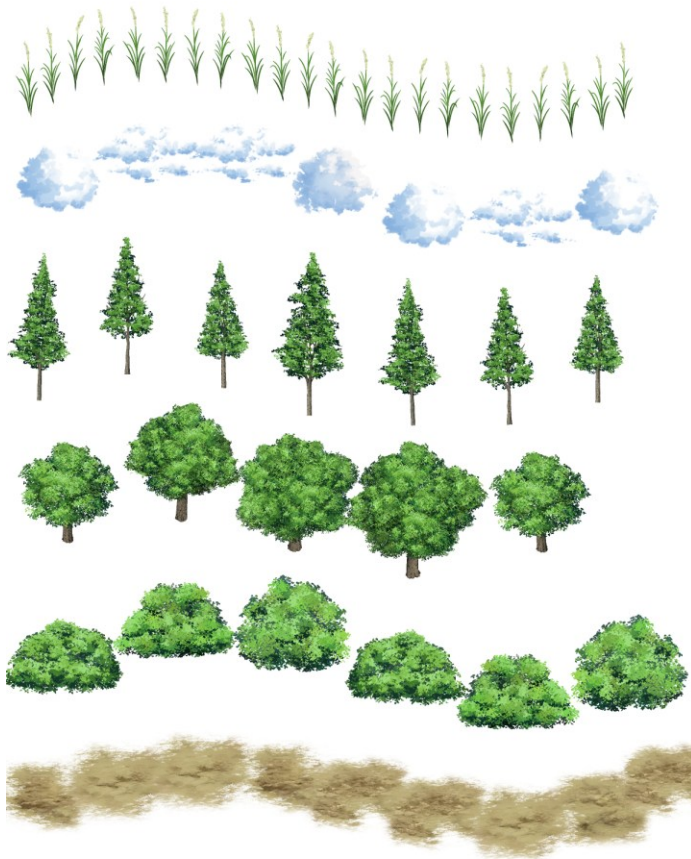
3.3.2 Refining the sketches

Once the initial story and layout designs were placed, I started to refine the rough sketches. In this phase, I realized the initial perspectives for certain panels were difficult for me to draw. For example, when Devi falls off the high cliff, the perspective was challenging for me to draw so I changed the panel to have the same perspective as the previous panels. At this point, I also changed the cliff to be a small floating rock and added couple more to the background to indicate for the reader Devi is walking on a floating rock. This decision helped me to add more of the magic system within the environment.

The main reason for these changes was the lack of practice to draw imagery with challenging perspectives. While the perspectives would have been impressive for the reader, simplifying them made the comic more cohesive with my style and easier to understand the scene in the panel for the reader. Additionally, a few of the other initial panels were altered or deleted since they felt unnecessary or made the story's pacing slow.

3.4 Finalizing the comic

I found a tool pack from a website called ACON, that was created by Jaja Studio to fasten the pace to create environments. The website also offered ready-to-use 3D backgrounds, but I didn't want my comic to have any 3D elements in the art style. The pack included different brushes of finished nature objects, such as trees, bushes and stones and texture brushes (Picture 26).



PICTURE 26. Examples of the brushes from the brush pack by Jaja Studio

When first using these brushes, there was a significant difference between the art style in the object brushes and my style. The natural objects were detailed and looked semi-realistic while my drawings had a simplified comic style. To make the environment cohesive with my art style, I used the object brushes of the trees and bushes as a base to draw over, which helped with the perspectives and proportions. Other texture and object brushes were used to shade the trees, make ground and grass textures and other details, for example clouds.

Most of the panels in the comic were intended to have detailed environments to describe thoroughly where the main characters live. From close ups to wider angled perspectives, the viewer gets a wider image of the world. Although, some backgrounds in the panels I purposely kept simple. Webcomic chapters usually have a fast pace with releasing chapters, which is commonly one chapter per week. To keep up with the tight schedule, sometimes the creator keeps the back-

grounds simple when the environments are not as necessary for the story. Reusing the same backgrounds is also recommended since it can help the viewer get familiar with the environments through repetition.

Once all the panels were finalized, final speech bubbles and onomatopoeic expressions were added as the last step. Additional smaller details were added as well to show more of the fantasy details in the background to make them more believable. However, I noticed the panels were a bit too far from one another, therefore the panels were edited closer together if possible. Thus, the first chapter for the webcomic is finished (Appendix 3).

4 CONCLUSION

In thesis writer's opinion, fantasy as a genre will increase its popularity in the future as the genre grows more diverse. Fantasy has no limitation with ideas and stories, while it does have its own stereotypes and common tropes. It was noticeable for the thesis writer during the design process of Vinrya, that designing a large fantasy world-building is no easy task and consumes a lot of time and effort. Additionally, to visualize the world requires strong knowledge of the basics of world-building and other various artistic skills. Fortunately, current technology with advanced tools create access to more people to make visually pleasing and immersive fantasy universes.

While doing research, in thesis writer's opinion, it was noticeable that the same famous creations have been used as examples, such as Tolkien's Middle Earth, Lewis' Narnia, Rowling's Harry Potter universe or the worlds in Studio Ghibli movies. Like in the famous and growing subgenre of fantasy created by the Japanese animation industry, called *isekai*, the subgenre can repeat the same patterns and be predictable for the viewers (Kemner 2023). Fantasy as a genre is vast and should be discussed and researched more from as many perspectives as possible to keep the genre inclusive of different cultures and become more accessible to various creators.

There is a wide range of sources that discuss the theme of fantasy world-building. In thesis writer's opinion, environments have been mentioned and discussed in these sources but not so much in depth as hoped for. Therefore, there could be more sources that mainly focus on fantasy world-building from the perspective of the environments; thus, this thesis was created.

As a guide to design environments, this thesis does not have to limit to fantasy genre since some elements and guidelines can be easily adapted to other genres and sub-genres, such as science fiction. Additionally, these guides are not strict rules for creators to follow but rather prompts to help creators start their design process for the environments for their fantasy world-building.

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dimensional Culture and Local Culture A Case Study of the Global Sensation Genshin Impact

APPENDICES

Appendix 1. Top-down world-building worksheets by M. D. Presley

1 (6)



A how-to article on this worksheet can be found [HERE](#).

TOP-DOWN WORLDBUILDING WORKSHEET

FROM FORGING FANTASY REALMS BY M. D. PRESLEY

WORLD NAME:

CREATOR:

ANALOGUE CULTURES

What analogue culture(s) will you be drawing from? What time period in that culture? What are some defining toehold details of that culture?

Analogue Culture: Real-life cultures that the creator emulates in their work and then applies their fantasy conceits to.

Toehold Details: Descriptors that specifically trigger the assumption of an analogue culture and time period, and therefore help the audience to mentally populate the scene.

Fantasy Conceit: What the creator intends to explore in the world, it is where the constructed world deviates from the real world, usually in the form of geography, biology, physics, metaphysics, technology, or culture.

Terra De Facto: The implicit understanding that anything that is not accounted for by a fantasy conceit must therefore abide by the rules of the primary world.

Describe your fantasy conceits for each section. If one does not apply, terra de facto is in effect and you should move on.

Make sure to include any pertinent abilities, limitations, weaknesses, and costs for your fantasy conceits.

FANTASY CONCEITS

GEOGRAPHY



TOP-DOWN WORLDBUILDING TEMPLATE

FROM FORGING FANTASY REALMS BY M. D. PRESLEY

BIOLOGY

Biology deals with the living things in this world that generally abide by the laws of nature. Each creature or plant generally reflects their environment.

PHYSICS (MAGIC!)

Physics generally means magic. Is the magic hard or soft? Is it ascendant or descendant? Is it well known within the world? Who can wield it?

METAPHYSICS

Metaphysics deals with deities, demi-deities (angels and demons), ghosts and the undead, and if the soul exists after death.



TOP-DOWN WORLDBUILDING TEMPLATE

FROM FORGING FANTASY REALMS BY M. D. PRESLEY

Technological levels are often used as toehold details to orient audiences to the analogue culture.

Many cultural changes can be due to other fantasy conceits. You should only list the changes you wish to impart to the analogue cultures as a fantasy conceit here rather than those that occur because of other conceits.

And remember, no culture is monolithic.

Prime Mover: A conceit that cannot be removed without the story world falling apart.

TECHNOLOGY

CULTURE

PRIME MOVER

Which of your conceits is the most important, such that the other conceits are often a byproduct of it?



TOP-DOWN WORLDBUILDING TEMPLATE

FROM FORGING FANTASY REALMS BY M. D. PRESLEY

ANTECEDENTS

List what each fantasy conceit will require to exist. For instance, if magic was created by the gods, then gods must therefore exist.

Geography:

Biology:

Physics (Magic!):

Metaphysics:

Technology:

Culture:

EXTRAPOLATIONS

Concisely list how the world has deviated (if at all) from our world due to these fantasy conceits.

Geography:

Biology:

Physics (Magic!):

Metaphysics:

Technology:

Culture:



TOP-DOWN WORLDBUILDING WORKSHEET

FROM FORGING FANTASY REALMS BY M. D. PRESLEY

OUTPUT DETAILS

Keeping your analogue culture(s) in mind, list several specific details as to how they have been changed due to the following conceits:

Geography:

Biology:

Physics (Magic!):

Metaphysics:

Technology:

ANCIENT HISTORY

What happened in the world's ancient history either because of or to cause your fantasy conceits? Remember your prime mover and if it is involved.



TOP-DOWN WORLDBUILDING TEMPLATE

FROM FORGING FANTASY REALMS BY M. D. PRESLEY

RECENT HISTORY

What are the important events that immediately precede the events of your story?

ADDITIONAL NOTES

Appendix 2. Bottom-up world-building worksheets by M. D. Presley

1 (8)



A how-to article on this worksheet can be found **HERE**.

BOTTOM-UP WORLDBUILDING WORKSHEET

FROM FORGING FANTASY REALMS BY M. D. PRESLEY

WORLD NAME:

CREATOR:

OUTPUT DETAILS

List all the things that cannot possibly exist in the real world that appear in your work. Try to keep examples from the first half if you have an existing story. Be brief.

Analogue Culture: Real-life cultures that the creator emulates in their work and then applies their fantasy conceits to.

Toehold Details: Descriptors that specifically trigger the assumption of an analogue culture and time period, and therefore help the audience to mentally populate the scene.

ANALOGUE CULTURES

What analogue culture(s) will you be drawing from? What time period in that culture? What are some defining toehold details of that culture?



BOTTOM-UP WORLDBUILDING WORKSHEET

FROM FORGING FANTASY REALMS BY M. D. PRESLEY

ORDERING

Place all your output details in the applicable sections. If a section does not apply, you should move on.

Geography concerns the planet itself and includes climates, biomes, and the general terrain.

GEOGRAPHY

Biology deals with the living things in this world that generally abide by the laws of nature. Each creature or plant generally reflects their environment.

BIOLOGY



BOTTOM-UP WORLDBUILDING WORKSHEET

FROM FORGING FANTASY REALMS BY M. D. PRESLEY

PHYSICS (MAGIC!)

Physics generally means magic. Is the magic hard or soft? Is it ascendant or descendant? Is it well known within the world? Who can wield it?

METAPHYSICS

Metaphysics deals with deities, demi-deities (angels and demons), ghosts and the undead, and if the soul exists after death.

TECHNOLOGY

Technological levels are often used as toehold details to orient audiences to the analogue culture.



BOTTOM-UP WORLDBUILDING WORKSHEET

FROM FORGING FANTASY REALMS BY M. D. PRESLEY

CULTURE

Culture involves human societies, their customs, and worldviews. This includes not only the main characters' culture, but the surrounding cultures as well.

Sentient non-humans most likely have cultures as well.

And remember, no human culture is monolithic.

GROUPING & INTERCONNECTION

Group your details together based upon their similarities. These similarities can be physical or thematic. It is okay if there are multiple groups in each section.

Now consider your groups. Are there some that are linked to groups in other sections? Do some cause others?

Fantasy Conceit: What the creator intends to explore in the world, it is where the constructed world deviates from the real world, usually in the form of geography, biology, physics, metaphysics, technology, or culture.

FANTASY CONCEITS

Each grouping should constitute a rough fantasy conceit of your world. Now it's time to codify them.



BOTTOM-UP WORLDBUILDING WORKSHEET

FROM FORGING FANTASY REALMS BY M. D. PRESLEY

FANATSY CONCEITS (pt. 2)

Describe each of your groupings in a sentence or two.

Geography:

Biology:

Physics (Magic!):

Metaphysics:

Technology:

Culture:

ANTECEDENTS

List what each fantasy conceit will require to exist. For instance, if magic was created by the gods, then gods must therefore exist.

Geography:

Biology:

Physics (Magic!):

Metaphysics:

Technology:

Culture:



BOTTOM-UP WORLDBUILDING WORKSHEET

FROM FORGING FANTASY REALMS BY M. D. PRESLEY

FANTASY CONCEITS (pt. 3)

Briefly list the 1) Abilities, 2) Limitations, 3) Weaknesses, and 4) Costs for each of your fantasy conceits. If one is not applicable, move on.



BOTTOM-UP WORLDBUILDING WORKSHEET

FROM FORGING FANTASY REALMS BY M. D. PRESLEY

Fantasy Function: When analogue cultures are filtered through fantasy conceits to populate the created world with its output details.

Streamlining: Part of Sanderson's third law of magic in which worldbuilding details should be accounted for by already existing fantasy conceits instead of creating whole new conceits.

Prime Mover: A conceit that cannot be removed without the story world falling apart.

FANTASY FUNCTIONS

With your analogue cultures and fantasy conceits in mind, you should be able to extrapolate your existing details into underlying rules for your world.

Going forward, internal consistency can be maintained by ensuring all deviations from the rules of the real world abide by these existing fantasy functions.

When considering adding new deviations, it is wise to remember the concept of streamlining

PRIME MOVER

Which of your conceits is the most important, such that the other conceits are often a byproduct of it?

ANCIENT HISTORY

What happened in the world's ancient history either because of or to cause your fantasy conceits?
Remember your prime mover and if it is involved.



BOTTOM-UP WORLDBUILDING WORKSHEET

FROM FORGING FANTASY REALMS BY M. D. PRESLEY

RECENT HISTORY

What are the important events that immediately precede the events of your story?

ADDITIONAL NOTES

Appendix 3. Final first chapter of the webcomic

1 (11)

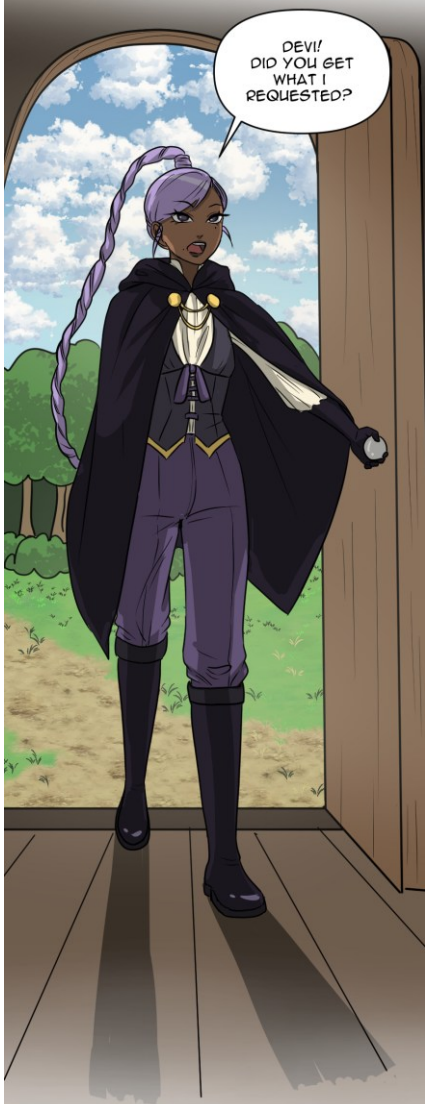
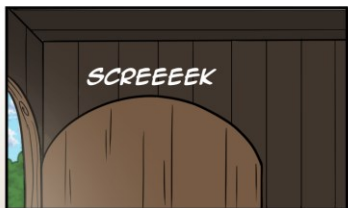
STOMP

STOMP

STOMP









MAGIC BEANS.



SO YOU'RE TELLING ME YOU USED ALL THE GOLDEN NUGGETS I GAVE YOU FOR FOOD AND NECESSITIES-



TO BUY SOME MAGICAL LEGUMES?

BUT YOU HAVE TO HEAR THIS ONE OUT LAYLA!

ON MY WAY TO THE CAPITAL
I CAME ACROSS
A SHOPKEEPER WHO WAS
LOOKING FOR SOMEONE TO
BUY HIS MAGIC BEANS.



THE SHOPKEEPER TOLD
ME HOW THESE
MAGIC BEANS WOULD
GROW AT LEAST 50
METERS LONG AND 5
METER WIDE.



AND WHEN THEY'RE
FULLY GROWN, THEY'LL
DROP BEANS AS BIG AS
HUMANS TO FEED
CITIES FOR DECADES!

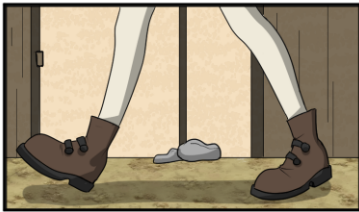


AND SELLING
THOSE
HUGE BEANS
WILL
MAKE US
A FORTUNE!



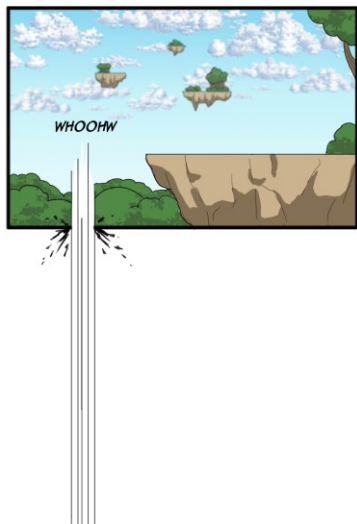


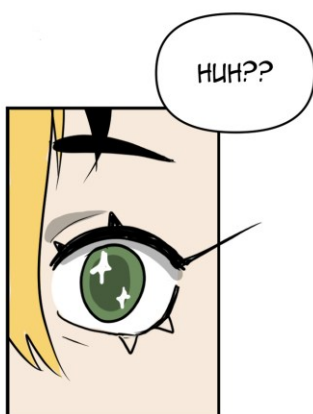
BONK



SERIOUSLY?!









HUH?!

