

Videogame World-Building as Ideation, Praxis and Design Model

Christian McCrea

World-Building Lab, RMIT University

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INTRODUCTION

This paper will argue that world-building (also ‘worldbuilding’) is a creative practice at the core of contemporary videogame development, culture and socialisation. Defined as the creative development of a fictional setting that is usually (but not always) focussed at the planetary scale, the practice allows the art, design and technical development to be creatively focussed, coherent and comprehensible. A broader concept than ‘narrative’ but still very much a technical description, world-building is both explored in the sense that narrative and thematic studies have trod similar ground, but it becomes a rich research area when considered as an actual craft, especially with visual art practices sitting alongside thematic and narrative questions. New research on the term and broad concept by Fast and Örnebring on media franchises, Ecenbarger on transmedia contexts, and Boni on the changing context of pre-production itself.

Yet in the post-internet vernacular, ‘world-building’ can mean almost anything and everything. It is often summoned as a qualitative measure - “this game has great world-building”, meaning the sum of non-interactive elements; art, story, music. This has become more common over time not just in the ephemeral discourses of forums and comments on the social web, but the language of developers, creators, critics and journalists - who we might have understood, once, as the location of discourse. World-building’s best definition is just that for that reason; it is amorphous, but not infinitely. A fluid meaning, but one that fills a vessel. It’s ‘everything that fleshes out the setting’, or ‘the sense of place’ in games, made up of the art and design. According to this vernacular, we are to know it when we see it and play it. I use ‘vernacular’ here as Jean Burgess defines ‘vernacular creativity’ in her 2007 thesis as content which is produced in ordinary, everyday ways, and because the field of games has an extremely strong set of vernacular languages and practices which often directly contradict official (namely, industrial and formal) languages and practices. (Burgess 2007: 29-30)

CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF THE TERM

Given the looseness of the above vernacular meaning, it’s not immediately useful to frame all videogames as having world-building - but unclear where we might draw the line. For example, the example of Tetris (Sergei Pachintov, 1981), used in games scholarly discourse for 20 years as the preeminent example of a purely mechanical game, nonetheless possesses varying elements which construct a setting, depending on the version of Tetris involved. It would be counter-intuitive to say that Tetris has

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world-building, but it also would be an effective way to describe the early versions' loosely Russophile art and sound design.

Mark J P Wolf's *Building Imaginary Worlds* (2012), one of the most significant scholarly works to focus on world settings, establishes itself thus:

The term "world", as it is being used here, is not simply geographical but experiential; that is, everything that is experienced by the characters involved, the elements enfolding someone's life (culture, nature, philosophical worldviews, places, customs, events, and so forth), just as world's etymological root word weorld from Old German refers to "all that concerns humans", as opposed to animals or gods. (Wolf 2012, p.25)

In the early stages of that work, Wolf accounts for the many pre-existing models for creative building of worlds (which is framed instead by him as 'subcreation') by beginning to distinguish elements such as nominal, cultural, natural and ontological. These are the dimensions in which worlds are created and enjoyed, according to Wolf. The experiential question is simply put: the elements are character-facing and allow us in turn to imagine them as being part of a greater whole. He goes on later to describe these worlds as "the surroundings and places experienced by a fictional character (or which could be experienced by one) that together constitute a unified sense of place which is ontologically different from the actual, material, and so-called 'real' world" (Wolf, p. 377).

CONCLUSION

This is a productive confusion. What aspiring game designers and developers now see as world-building reflects this cloudy episteme. In the context of independent game development and an ever-diffusing information environment, world-building's definition is changing so quickly that the scholarly response has to be equally rapid.

This paper will discuss how the changing understanding of the term can be a genuinely productive way to revisit the long-reviled narratology debate of 1999-2003, and capture a broad social dimension of aspiring videogame development. Three dimensions will be discussed: 1) *ideation* as an upending of assumptions about pre-production. 2) *praxis* as a means of creative intellectual development increasingly equal to the mechanic-design-element paradigm. 3) *design model* as a way to reframe the production and creative process from observation of actual practice, where world-building is the vernacular term for what the scholarly landscape would call design.

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