Vitruvius, Critics, and the Architecture of Worlds: Extra-Narratival Material and Critical World-Building

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All works of fiction build imaginary worlds in which they set their stories. What makes genres such as science fiction and fantasy different is that their worlds are often created not as twins to our actual world but as cousins or even distant relatives to it. Some of these worlds are built to stage a particular narrative, others to house certain casts of characters, and yet others to offer exciting possibilities for exploration. They can be shaped by, for example, text, film, graphic novels, computer games, or combinations of these media. I find such worlds fascinating objects of study, not only as backdrops to particular stories but as aesthetic and cultural objects in themselves, and I am intrigued by how worlds can be built by elements that are not part of the narrative. Such *non-narratival* elements are often ignored in world-building analyses, while potentially being of great importance to the world to which they contribute. In this essay, I look exclusively at non-narratival world-building. My first example shows how a collection of "lore" in a computer game or (in my case) a graphic-novel app can offer material for a scholar who analyses the world of the story. Then I turn to a world without any explicit narrative, using the illustrations from a Dungeons & Dragons rulebook to demonstrate what they can say about the implied game world. Before that, however, I introduce the concept of critical world-building and outline my view of world-building as architecture. *World-architecture* provides the basis for my analysis of the examples.

Critical World-building[1]

Fictional worlds are artistic creations, expressed through one or more media, but they are, in a sense, treated as having an existence beyond the medium or media through which they are created. The text is, in Marie-Laure Ryan's words, "apprehended as a

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[1] This section is based on Ekman, "Map" (67–70).

window" through which the reader observes something that exists outside of language and extends temporally and spatially beyond the "window frame". A textual world implies a distinction between "a realm of language, made of names, definite descriptions, sentences, and propositions, and an extralinguistic realm of characters, objects, facts, and states of affairs serving as referents to the linguistic expressions" (91). Ryan's observation can be extended to worlds expressed through media other than text (also noted by Wolf 19–20), and her basic point would still remain valid: fictional worlds are *treated* as if they are described or referred to by a medium (or media), rather than created by the use of this medium. Even worlds that are very different from the actual world of their creators and audiences "serve as referents" to the expressions – words, images, sounds – that bring them into being. Moreover, it should be stressed that "world" in this sense refers not only to a (fictional) physical space. In keeping with other scholars (e.g. Ryan 91; Wolf 25; Taylor 7–8), I consider a fictional world to consist of its physical space along with all that this space contains, such as flora and fauna, climate and time, and beings and their cultural and social expressions.

World-building can be approached from several directions or discussed as different, if overlapping, types of processes. It is possible to look at the creative endeavours of an author, the cognitive processes of a reader, or the compilation of information performed by a fan. My main interest is the critical methods that a scholar uses in constructing a world out of a work of fiction in order to analyse and interpret it. Such "critical world-building" is distinguished by focusing on the medium from which the world is built, rather than the strategies and methods of which the author avails themselves, or the processes through which a reader re-imagines it (Ekman and Taylor; Taylor and Ekman). Critical world-building constructs the fictional world as a composite, combining the mainly sequential presentation of the world in text and images with a more holistic view of it, and places the world in its larger critical context of genre conventions and theoretical discourses (Ekman and Taylor 11–12). The various building blocks – "elements" – of such a composite, critical world relate to each other dynamically rather than statically. Combining one detail with another in the analysis, (re-)interpreting something in light of a new genre trope, or adopting a different theoretical perspective could cause a chain of new realisations of how the world functions in relation to its narrative(s). (In my discussion below, "world-building" should be understood as "critical world-building".)

If a building is considered as a metaphor for a fictional world, as the term "world-building" implies, that fictional world can also be considered, metaphorically, in terms of its "architecture". *The Oxford English Dictionary* offers several definitions of architecture. These cover the skill and knowledge required to build, the process of constructing, the actual result, and particular (aesthetic) styles. The fact that the word can be used in a general or figurative sense is also acknowledged ("Architecture"). Because of its breadth of meaning, *architecture* is a useful concept for analysing and interpreting how a fictional world is planned and put together, but also how it works and is described. As a concept, architecture spans all structural and aesthetic aspects of a building, from its conception and planning to its execution and final result. It also looks to more than the work itself, taking into account how a building relates to its surroundings as well as how it fits its various purposes. Audrey Isabel Taylor and I therefore argue that *architecture*, as metaphor, is a useful conceptual tool for dealing with the building of a fictional world, and with the fictional world as a building (Ekman and Taylor 12).

A world-architectural approach to world-building makes it possible to draw on architectural theory for the analysis. The Vitruvian triad, a traditional way of looking at architecture, can be easily applied. In his *The Ten Books on Architecture* (*De architectura libri decem*), Vitruvius explains how a building must have the qualities of solidity (*firmitas*), utility (*utilitas*), and beauty (*venustas*): it must be able to remain structurally sound even after extended use and exposure to the elements, meet the requirements of its intended use and inhabitants, and be aesthetically pleasing (in its cultural context). Thinking of world-building in these terms means using them as metaphors, and depending on how a scholar views a world, their meanings may shift slightly. *Solidity*, in a fantasy context, could be taken to refer to the consistency with which the world is constructed (a common criterion for a well-constructed fantasy world [Taylor 20]) but, depending on one's critical perspective, could also refer to the stability of its societies or the very world-order's susceptibility to change. Prompted by David Smith Capon's extensive discussion of Vitruvius' triad, Taylor and I propose that in analysing world-architecture, the related triad of *form*, *function*, and *meaning* is more useful (Ekman and Taylor 13–14; cf. Capon). Close to Vitruvian *solidity*, *form* would encompass the structure and design of the world, both in direct descriptions and in how the structure itself stresses or de-emphasises elements in text, image, or other kinds of portrayal. Discussing only formal qualities of world elements is a descriptive exercise, even if it may require close-reading, an eye for how an image is constructed, and detailed examination of how structures work. Understanding the *functions* of elements means adopting a more analytical approach. All elements in the fictional world have one or more functions, depending on their form as well as on how they interrelate with each other and the narrative(s) set in the world. Through interpretation of forms and functions, the elements' *meanings* can be uncovered. The critical progression may seem one-directional, but in actuality, the forms, functions, and meanings uncovered affect each other, requiring the holistic perspective of critical world-building. Any of the abundance of elements that make up a world can be analysed through this triad, whether they belong to the natural or cultural part of that world.

World-Building Beyond the Narrative

Imaginary worlds do not have to be built by narration alone. For organising the information about imaginary worlds, "*narrative* is the most common form of structure, and the one that usually determines which elements in a world are most defined and developed, or at least mentioned" (Wolf 154). And while a narrative is possibly the most common structure used to communicate a fictional world, as Mark J. P. Wolf claims, world-building is by no means limited to narration. Extra-narratival forms of communication can also contribute to building the world. These forms can be visual (for example, cover images, fictional maps, *mise-en-scène*, illustrations), audible (for example, voices and sound effects), or textual (for example, glossaries, timelines, footnotes, game rules). In *The Lord of the Rings*, J.R.R. Tolkien included a range of extra-narratival material in the form of maps, illustrations, a prologue ("Concerning Hobbits and Other Matters"), and appendices. The published parts of roleplaying-game worlds are built largely from extra-narratival material; the narrative is then constructed verbally by the players and the game master while drawing on such material.

I have previously discussed the nature of fantasy maps, how they contribute to world-building, and how they interact with the narrative (Ekman, "Entering"; Ekman, *Here*; Ekman, "Map"). Here, I turn to two other forms of extra-narratival material for my examples in this essay: a contextualised collection of world-information and illustrations that are not related to a story. Through these examples, I demonstrate how world-architecture can be used to draw attention to the dynamic interplay between narratival and extra-narratival elements of a world.

Example 1: Contextualised Codex in the *Anomaly* App

Anomaly was created and written by Skip Brittenham and Brian Haberlin as an app for Apple's iOS.[2] Apart from the traditional graphic novel features (such as panels, splash pages, speech balloons, captions, and onomatopoeia), the digital form allows for the use of some limited parallax animation, background music, and voice acting. These features can be turned on and off by the reader. *Anomaly* also contains two collections of world information, the "Macodax" and "Tonni's Journal", which are accessible in their entirety from a menu, or entry by entry via "touchpoints" inserted on the pages (the touchpoints can also be turned on and off). Such world information includes, for instance, character backstory, historical information, details on various technical devices, and descriptions of particular places or races.

In computer games it is common to collect world information that the player discovers in a journal or encyclopaedia. In games, such a collection is often referred to as a "codex".[3] "Macodax" and "Tonni's Journal" are both similar to game codices in that the reader comes across information at various places in the story and can choose to read the entry at that point, or access it later, and I have therefore adopted the game term for them. The codices in *Anomaly* differ from many game codices, however, in that they are available in their entirety from the beginning.

To some extent, *Anomaly's* additional features serve to shift attention from story to world. The animation determines the speed at which a reader can take in a panel and directs the reader's gaze; the voices and occasional sound effects also determine reading speed and define what someone or something sounds like (rather than leaving it to the reader's imagination). The touchpoints and associated codex entries constitute the clearest shift of attention from story to world. Text and pictures that give details on various entities and are hyperlinked to various places in the story interrupt the narrative with world information. Because it is possible to understand the plot without the codex information, that information expands the story but also draws the reader's attention away from the story. Thus, the extra-narratival material in the codices helps build the world, not the story.

Accessing codex entries via touchpoints contextualises the world information. This context needs to be taken into account when analysing any particular entry, just as a single entry needs to be analysed from the perspective of the entire fictive world. The entry on the soft drink Binky Cola can be used to illustrate how codex entries can be read in terms of world-architecture.

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[2] *Anomaly* is also available as a print version, which can be read with an "augmented reality" app for other features.

[3] Some examples of games with codices include *Oxygen Not Included* (Klei Entertainment, 2018), *Masquerada: Songs and Shadows* (Witching Hour Studios, 2016), and BioWare's *Dragon Age* (2009–2015), *Mass Effect* (2007–2017), and *The Witcher* (2009–2015) series.
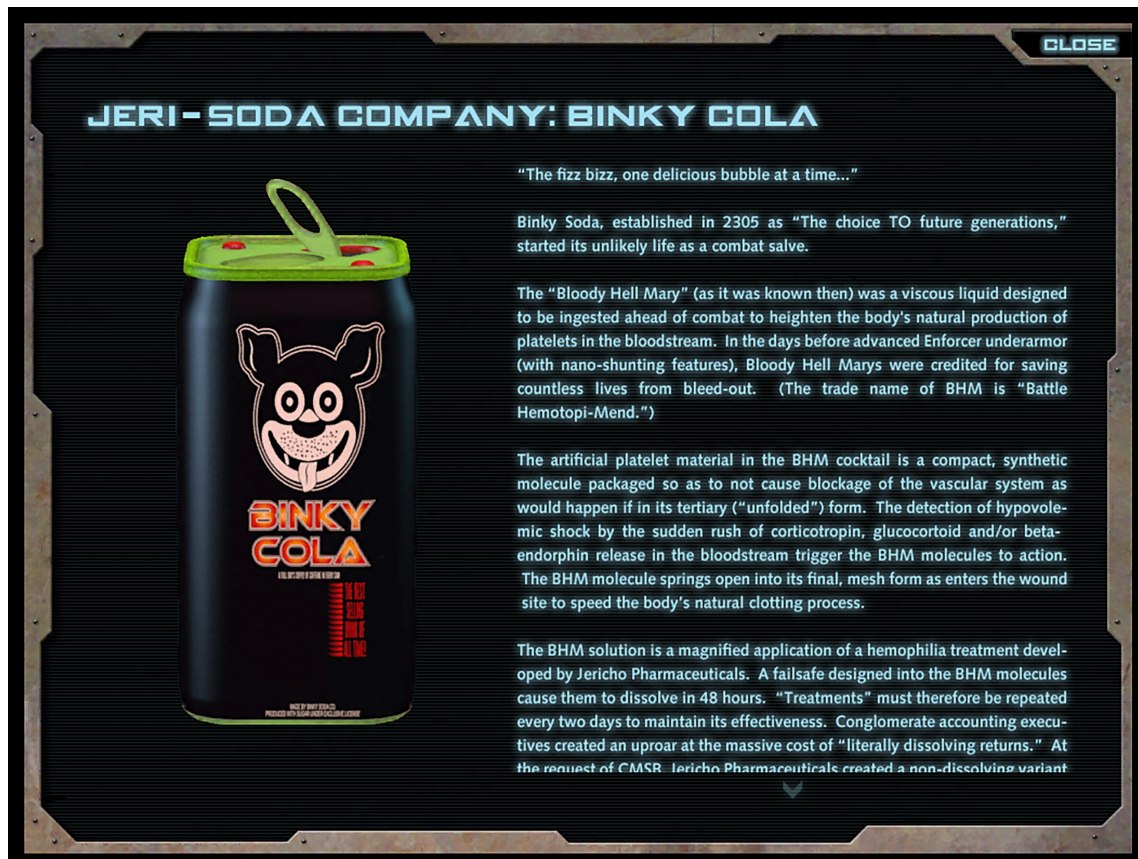
The beginning of the Binky Cola entry from the Macodax codice in *Anomaly*. © 2012 Anomaly Productions. Used with permission.
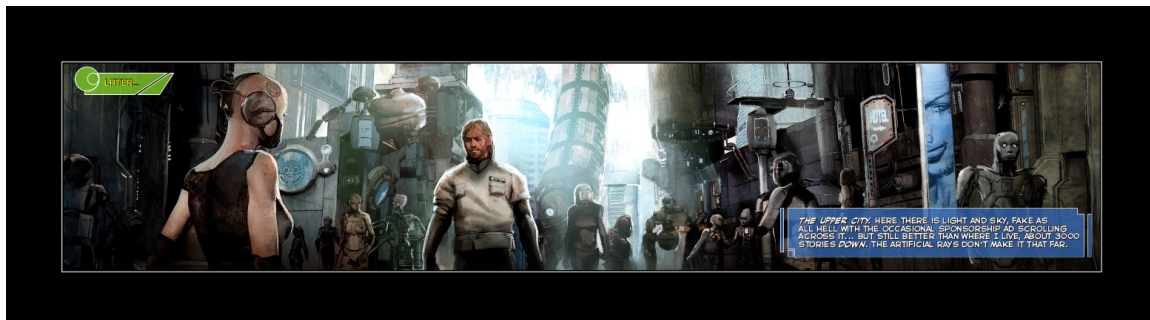
The panel on page 7 in which a touchpoint can take the reader to the Binky Cola entry. (The Binky Cola ad can be seen to the left in the panel, in the middle distance.) © 2012 Anomaly Productions. Used with permission.

Binky Cola plays no part in the story in and of itself. Its entry (approximately 600 words long) is linked to a touchpoint next to an image advertising the beverage in a street view (7), and it provides a background to Jeri-Soda, the company that manufactures the drink, along with an explanation of Binky Cola's popularity and a note on the manufacturer's commercial power. It also shows an image of a can of Binky Cola. The codex entry contributes to the architecture of the world by extending the various military campaigns (referred to by, and driving, the narrative) backwards in history; by adding to the narrative's portrayal of a world under plutocratic rulership; and by introducing themes of artificial food and the (mis-)use of biotechnology. The

touchpoint/codex entry also emphasises how important parts of a world can be seemingly irrelevant. By the time the touchpoint sends us to the codex entry, the Binky Cola mascot has already shown up (uncommented) on page 6 and illustrates the codex entry to "Ad ORB (external)" linked to from a touchpoint on page 5. There, it is easily overlooked or ignored. Not until the touchpoint draws attention to the ad in the panel on page 7 and the codex entry explains it does the relevance of the previous instances come across and reinforce the sense of Binky Cola's (and Jeri-Soda's) importance to the *Anomaly* world.

The codex entry's contribution to the world can be discussed in terms of *form*, *function*, and *meaning*. The entry provides descriptions of numerous elements, such as how an earlier product of the company works in biochemical terms, the efficacy of that product in combat, the fatal experimenting on "lab clones", Jeri-Soda's use of sugar in drinks, and its control of "all sugar-producing plant material in the Agrogenetic Catalogue". The structures to which these elements contribute – biochemical high-tech, aggressive imperialist expansion, plutocratic rulership, disregard for lives – are parts of the world's form. They show a world in which future advances within the field of biochemistry do not help humanity to stay on Earth but help the rich to stay in power as they lead the human expansion into the universe, a world in which the marginalised poor and Other are valued only insofar as they contribute to accumulation of wealth. The entry shows how the structures combine and make sense together rather than contradict each other. These structures could be read in terms of various themes: the totalitarian plutocracy, the history of military conquest, the disregard for human life vis-à-vis economic gain, the testing of bioengineered substances on people, and the imperialist structure of the space age, for example. Some of these themes have already surfaced in the narrative, others appear later, but they all have functions.

A function always relates to a purpose, and in *Anomaly*, the purpose of the world is to provide a setting for a story. Worlds are often created as settings for particular stories, although they can also be meant to house several stories or even just provide a good potential for stories (roleplaying-game worlds are examples of the latter). Analysing the themes suggested by the codex entry through questions such as "how do they contribute to the story?" reveal that they add to the plausibility of the events of the plot and the motivation of various characters. For example, the main character's background as an "Enforcer", who accidentally started a war with an alien culture and thus caused their total eradication (Brittenham and Haberlin 3), ties in with several of these themes; they also foreshadow his being subjected to an experimental treatment. The time span of the entry (Binky Cola was established in 2305 and Jeri-Soda secured certain cell-sample rights in 2619, but events both prior to and after those dates are included; the present of the story is 2717) adds to a sense of historical continuity, connecting the events of the story to the present of the reader (and the fictive world to the actual world). Ultimately, the world elements in the codex entry, in the form they are given, function in a way as to give an impression that this is the only world in which the story could be set. Events are engendered by the way the world is built.

How the world is built and what themes its elements create have deeper meanings than how they function together with the story. To find meaning in a world means to interpret the way its elements are thematised, structured, and presented. It also means picking a particular perspective or theoretical stance for such an interpretation. The *Anomaly* world could be interpreted from a feminist, or

postcolonial, or ecocritical perspective – or from any other theoretical point of view that a critic finds useful. Applying an ecocritical perspective to the entry, for example, would draw the critical focus to issues such as the artificiality of food ingredients, the commercialisation and patenting of genetic material of plants, and the creation of "agro-planets". Through the panel in which the touchpoint is located, it is also possible to put such elements in a context of other environmental themes, such as the need to live in artificial environments (the text in the panel describes how even the sunlight and the sky are "fake as all hell" [7]). The need for artificial environments has already been introduced: in an earlier Macodax entry ("Earth [2717 A.D.]") the reader finds out that Earth's environment in *Anomaly* is very different from the actual world – warmer, with incredible storms and no polar ice caps, and the narrator blames humans for this (5). The narrator portrays such environmental issues as negative; the voice of the codex entry comes across as neutral or even positive about Jeri-Soda's success. The world is meant as neither warning nor encouragement, it seems; but the story paints the ruling plutocracy as power-hungry at best and totalitarian at worst, showing the Macodax up for the voice of the elite and thus undercutting its neutrality. The meaning of the world, from an ecocritical perspective, is to serve as a dystopian warning, made easy to relate to by connecting it to something as innocuous as a soft drink.

Taylor and I point out that critical world-building requires "a holistic approach to a world as well as a sequential one" (Ekman and Taylor 11); the critic needs to shift back and forth between the details of a singe codex entry to the entire world to re-interpret the world elements in the entry in a new light. Particular passages, including the contextualised codex entry, must be read in the light of the totality of the world. By shifting to the entire *Anomaly* world and back to the codex entry, it is possible to access more meaning in its various elements. There is another perspective to take into account, however: how the world elements in the entry relate to the (implied) reading experience. By using something as commonplace as a soft drink, the entry establishes a point of identification for the reader: Binky Cola, despite its unusual background, becomes something ordinary in an extraordinary world of space stations, androids, and a totalitarian plutocracy. Through it, the fictive world can be related to the actual world, its issues possible to translate to actual concerns. It encourages a discussion of what the actual implications of these social and political issues are, transforming the dystopia presented in *Anomaly* into a dystopia *relevant to its reader.*

Example 2: Illustrations in the Dungeons & Dragons Rules
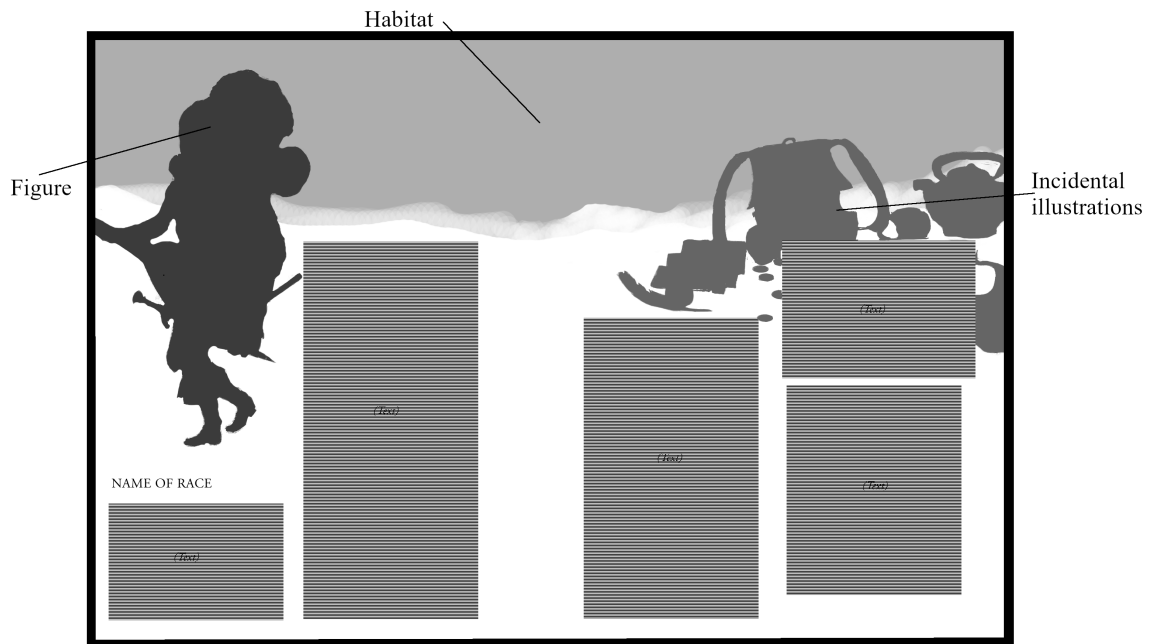
Schematic representation of the Halfling spread (pages 26–27) in *Player's Handbook*, Dungeons & Dragons, 5th ed.

My second example of extra-narratival world-building material is the illustrations in a rulebook for the table-top roleplaying-game Dungeons & Dragons (5th edition). I have limited my analysis to the illustrations in chapter 2 of *Player's Handbook*, which presents the various races available to player characters. Each race is typically presented on two or three pages, with at least one full-size figure of a person of each race dominating the first page by its size and clear colours. Behind it is a racial "habitat" in muted colours covering the top third of two pages, and there is a scattering of smaller pictures of various objects or settings throughout the text. These illustrations serve to create a world with structures that mean to include all kinds of players in a traditional fantasy adventure. (I read the rule book as building a single world, even though this is not explicitly stated, and thus I analyse and interpret findings from one element in the light of other elements.)

In terms of world-architectural form, the illustrations bring out three prominent structures in the world that are addressed here. These structures concern pseudomedievalism; familiarity and homeliness; and adventure and travel.

The pseudomedieval nature of the world, the first and possibly most prominent structure, is communicated forcefully through the characters that represent each race, and more precisely through their garments and gear. The representatives for the various races are dressed in clothes that broadly suggest the Middle Ages. The gnome, for example, wears what appears to be a hood and a cloak over a tunic, with unspecified legwear that could be brais or hose, and boots with buckle straps. Cloaks, tunics and boots (and unspecified legwear) are common among the other races as well, with occasional garments of more fluid cut, such as the long surcoat worn by the half-elf and the tabard the dragonborn wears over their chain mail. Many of the figures wear armour, ranging from the metal armour that covers most of the dwarf to the halfling's wrist and shoulder guards of leather. The dark elf is even portrayed with what looks

like a codpiece. Clothes, armour, and equipment are attached by straps, belts, and clasps. The weapons are similarly pre-modern, comprising swords, bows, staves, and daggers. Staves occur at least in four illustrations, each adorned in a way as to suggest mystic or magical properties. Books and scrolls of parchment are worn or carried by the human, dragonborn, and high-elven figures. Other kinds of equipment are of simple design but with a great deal of decoration. The overall effect is one of a pre-modern setting that alludes to the (Western) Middle Ages.

Kim Selling describes neomedieval worlds as "environments where the characters wear medieval dress, fight with swords, and live in hierarchical, vaguely feudal, semi-pastoral societies with low levels of technology" (212). She draws on Umberto Eco, who refers to both "fantastic neomedievalism" and "pseudo-medieval" phenomena in *Faith in Fakes: Travels in Hyperrealities.* In a categorisation of secondary fantasy worlds, Zahorski and Boyer include "pseudomedieval settings" (61), and according to Brian Attebery, fantasists often "fill in empty fictional space" with references to what is "essentially a simplified version of the Middle Ages" (132). It is not surprising to discover that the illustrations in a Dungeons & Dragons rulebook build a world that has the kind of pseudomedieval environment that can be found in much (but not all) fantasy literature. If the text of *Player's Handbook* had been taken into account as well, this would have been clear from the beginning. The introduction informs the player that the game "is about storytelling in worlds of swords and sorcery" and that these worlds "begin with a foundation of medieval fantasy" (5).

This foundation is modified in various ways, resulting not just in a "simplified version of the Middle Ages" (Attebery 132) but in a world that expresses a fantasy aesthetic. Rather than simplifying the Middle Ages, the illustrations mix different time periods. While largely medieval, the garments of the figures also include more recent dress elements, such as the halfling's fluffy collar and laced sleeves, which recall the Renaissance. The turned-down tops of the boots most figures wear suggest the 17th century. Even more modern is the way in which the illustrations appear to portray both male and female characters as ready to take up arms or use magic. This mirrors the fantasy world's modern views: female warriors were rare during the Middle Ages (but not non-existent, as Stefan Högberg demonstrates in his exhaustive book on the topic); and medieval people accused of using magic risked terrible fates. So while not unheard of, the apparent acceptance of female warriors and open use of magic indicate something other than medieval characteristics.

To the mix of time periods is added the fantastic, both through specific elements and through a particular fantasy aesthetic. The non-human races are clear indications of fantasy, but different forms of magic are also implied in a range of ways, from items that convey a sense of magical or ritual use to environments that suggest the presence of magic. The use of magic is signified by mysterious light around the hands of the high elf, half-elf, and tiefling. Along with these fantasy elements, a particular aesthetic pervades the illustrations. The armour of several figures is constructed based on aesthetic choices rather than martial requirements, for example, offering sub-optimal protection or combining parts in an unusual ways. The outlandish costumes of the high elf and the tiefling are also designed largely according to a fantasy aesthetic rather than being modelled on historical apparel. Their fluid lines and (seemingly) light fabric vaguely suggest modern evening gowns but, according to textiles historian Viktoria Holmqvist, these clothes are more typically generic fantasy costumes. She observes how the elf's dress has a sleeveless top and halter-neck with layers of heavier fabric over lighter skirts, combining traits of a modern evening gown with traditional

Japanese garments that use layers of loose-hanging fabric. The wide sleeves for the lower arms, attached to embossed leather bracelets above the elbow, make little practical sense and are, Holmqvist argues, the product of the artist's fancy. The belts around her waist, which hold a large scroll case and a girdle book, respectively, appear ready to slip down at the slightest movement, and the book itself looks very little like its medieval model (Holmqvist). Yet, the figure conveys common perceptions of the lightness, mystery, and timelessness of elven magic.

The pseudomedieval world is, ultimately, one in which aesthetics, or art, is more important than verisimilitude or historical facts. It is a world of make-believe, a world that requires its players to not only suspend their disbelief but to maintain what J.R.R. Tolkien refers to as "Secondary Belief", the ability to make what is in the Secondary World "true" (132). The world in *Player's Handbook* is, in other words, a fantasy world. Based on the Middle Ages but rendered both more modern and more fantastic, the pseudomedieval world is encoded in the illustrations of the representatives of the different races.

The habitats behind the figures, as well as the incidental illustrations, draw attention to a second structure in the world: that of familiarity and homeliness. The nine habitats vary from abstract and vague to concrete and detailed, and portray a range of different environments: underground caverns, forests, camps or villages, and towns or cities. They differ in brightness, level of detail, and style – the detailed city seen from afar, with blue mountains and a blue-grey sky in the background (half-elf), contrasts starkly with the dark façades and indistinct ship shapes of harbour quarters (human). However, they all present the habitats of the race in question, mainly through various types of dwellings.

The elven habitat, for instance, shows buildings in a forest: two visible, a third partially obscured by the elven figure, but several more suggested in the gloom by lit windows and dark contours against a lighter background. Stairs and lights can be seen winding up tree trunks, hinting at unseen structures above. The buildings are tall, with steep roofs and high, vaulted windows, decorated with spires, columns, and towers as well as balconies and galleries, and use contrasting light and dark material. The architecture strives upward, mixing a Gothic style with elements more suggestive of Art Noveau in their rounded shapes, but also evoking national romanticism through their rustic features, the suggested half-timbering, and the way the buildings meld organically with the surrounding forest. Tiny figures give a sense of the massive scale of the architecture as well as of the surrounding trees. The visible buildings reach for the treetops, and in the darkness, the settlement melts into the vegetation. The forest is deep and shady, a mix of conifers and deciduous trees, some of enormous height and girth. Light from above illuminates some roofs and trees but most lie hidden in shadows, only lights from windows revealing the extent of the settlement. The combination of architectural styles and the size of the houses suggest that they have been built over centuries, as ancient as the elves who live there; the blending between buildings and trees suggests a life in harmony with the surrounding forest. For an elven character, it is implied, this could be *home*. The other habitats offer other possible homes for other races, such as the half-orc's camp, the halfling houses, and the underground dwarven stronghold. As part of understanding what it means to play a character of a certain race, the player is offered a glimpse of a racial home.

This sense of homeliness is stressed in many of the incidental illustrations. They add to the sense of the familiar and commonplace rather than the exotic and adventurous. With the exception of the dragon theme of the dragonborn jewellery,

there are no fantastic beasts: the animals portrayed can be found in the actual world, which suggests that the fictive world is a familiar place in which a player would feel at home. The various everyday items also indicate things about the culture to which they belong. The dwarven objects – a pick axe, a lock, a goblet, a coarse comb – capture a dwarven society of mining, valuables, feasting, and, apparently, hair grooming; and, apart from the feasting, all are traits mentioned in the text. Each item is decorated with the stylised face of a bearded dwarf, however. As the female dwarf figure is beardless, the decoration could be interpreted as a male dwarf and thus an indication of a patriarchal society (only male faces are used for decoration). An alternative interpretation is that it is the face of the god Moradin, who is "revered by dwarves of the Forgotten Realms, Greyhawk, and many other worlds" (*Player's Handbook* 293). The male deity would still suggest a dwarven patriarchy and the god's ever-present face adorning everyday items would indicate a society in which religion plays a very central role.

The items that illustrate the halfling section, although equally practical, suggest a very different society. A backpack and map with quill and ink pot, along with a handful of small coins, sit next to a matching cup and tea pot made from what seems to be glazed earthenware, with a simple, bright pattern and a stylised frog's head. There is also something that looks very much like a bib, with a stylised fox's head (the same fox adorns the backpack). Overleaf, there are a pumpkin, two (dessert) pastries decorated with berries, and a wooden flute. The items are uncomplicated, with simple design, reflecting a similarly uncomplicated society: halflings are not artisans or great craftspeople, nor are they warriors. Theirs is a society concerned, on the one hand, with staying at home, eating, drinking, and making merry, and, on the other, with wandering off and exploring the world.

That is the third structure made visible in the illustrations: travelling, adventures, and an exotic world beyond what is portrayed. Both the halfling and human figures are dressed for travelling, indicating that what is a familiar home for someone of one race is a foreign place for people of other races. The habitats are both familiar and strange, known and unknown, a place of origin and a place to visit during adventures. The world is homely but also obscure, unseen, to the point where there are only abstract colours flowing into each other, evoking a mysterious atmosphere but little else (such is the case in the tiefling picture: no concrete habitat is portrayed). Both home and away, the illustrations evoke a sense of departure into an unknown world. The human habitat does this most clearly: a port, ships suggested, incidental illustrations of a sextant and a map, and a human figure dressed in travel gear. The unknown lies ahead, adventure calls in the form of the strange habitats of other races, and it is time to leave the familiar behind.

The world's form has been in focus for this example, but I should add a few words on how the Dungeons & Dragons world can be seen in terms of function and meaning as well. The function of these structures is not to build a world for a story but rather a world with a great *potential* for story, inviting everyone to play. This is a world in which all players can be heroes. The structure of familiarity and homeliness works with the structure of adventure and travel to create a foundation for a hero's tale: there is a home, with familiar objects and animals, from which the heroes can venture out into an unfamiliar world. Whether this departure into the unknown that the world-architecture reveals is interpreted in terms of Vladímir Propp's folktale morphology, Joseph Campbell's monomyth, or Farah Mendlesohn's Portal-Quest fantasy, the adventures on offer by the world – as it is constructed by the illustrations in the chapter

on races – follow a trajectory of leaving the familiar and venturing out into the unknown. This is not the only fantasy trajectory there is, but it is certainly very common (Attebery 87–88). It has the advantage of putting the player and the character on something of an equal footing in confrontations with the strange and fantastic.

Conclusion

To approach worlds critically is quite as scholarly an exercise as to approach the stories set within them. By applying even a simple architectural model to world-building, it is possible to reveal not only how the world is constructed, but what function the structures have, and what they mean. In this essay, I have shown that even extra-narratival material can be fruitfully engaged in this manner, offering not only additional information about a world described in a narrative, but even offering a way to approach worlds that are built entirely without narrative. Having demonstrated how much it is possible to learn about a world from a single codex entry or the illustrations of a single rule-book chapter, I propose that the world-architectural way of reading a world would work just as well with worlds built in any medium, textual or non-textual, narrated or non-narrated. The worlds are there, waiting for us to reveal their secrets, and I hope that you are encouraged to take them on, critically and architecturally.

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