Introduction: Another Word for World is Story

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Even as a young girl growing up in Manila, I had always loved imagining what it would be like to explore the world. My parents could not afford traveling with a young family, so books became a gateway for me to experience what the world could be like. Since books were cheaper than plane tickets, they became windows for me to see the world beyond the city I lived in. But more than just learning about this world, I became more interested in the worlds that only existed in the pages of the books I read: Middle-earth, Prydain, Earthsea. Beyond these books, I found myself falling into the weird worlds created by TV shows like *The X-Files* and *Buffy: the Vampire Slayer*, and (re)visited the ever-expanding worlds of the *Star Wars* franchise through the Expanded Universe novelizations. I have pored over atlases of imagined worlds, navigated imagined planets, traversed imagined histories, and even learned imagined words. To me, these fictional worlds became a way of marking my own understanding of society around me and the lives that people lived, with each story becoming a pin across the map of my own interior worlds.

Although map-making may be the easiest analogy to use to explain worldbuilding, I prefer thinking of worldbuilding as an act of curation. For instance, in a museum, each item and each detail in an exhibit is chosen by a team of museum curators and historians and restoration specialists to provide a glimpse of someone's story in another place, another time. Putting an exhibit together means teasing out the threads of a narrative, creating a path for the museum visitor to follow. There are guides – visual, aural, personal – that show the way through the exhibit, highlighting particular displays of interest that the curator has chosen to encapsulate the concepts and ideas behind the exhibit. A museum is not just a repository of items that signifies a particular way of examining specific moments within time and space. It is not static. It is a moveable journey crafted to show a particular world.

Mark J.P. Wolf, who coined the term "subcreation studies" in order to describe the nascent academic field of studying imaginary worlds, explains that worldbuilding is not just concerned with creating a setting, one of the core elements of fiction, but rather one that is more interested in creating the details and events that though it may not advance the story provides "background richness and verisimilitude to the imaginary world" (Wolf, 21), one that usually takes place outside the main storyline. The term "imaginary world" is used by subcreation

studies scholars to refer to the fictional world in which the story takes place. The world is usually bigger than that of the main storyline, and can therefore contain details that the main storyline might only refer to, but nonetheless remains consistent with the creation of the world. Unlike traditional media settings, encompassed by literature, film, and stage performances among others, imaginary worlds are not bound to one single story, or to one single author. The worlds can expand and morph and transform depending on the demands of the narrative and the audience. Time does not move in one direction, but can be looped back, rewritten, or branched out into multiple possibilities. Because of this expansive array of possibilities, imaginary worlds are often transnarrative and transmedial, and may even be transauthorial in nature — just look at how a museum can weave narratives through various platforms, with a multitude of hands supporting each individual creator. Subcreation studies provides the opportunity to examine the ways in which the human imagination can create and re-create worlds through imagined narratives.

All of the articles selected for inclusion in this special issue curate an idea, a concept, an example of worldbuilding that underscores the tremendous possibilities inherent in subcreation studies. They not only move within the spheres of literary and other cultural texts but also examine visual and spatial opportunities in creating and examining what an imaginary world might mean in such contexts. Of the forty-odd abstract submissions we received for this special issue of *SARE*, these six articles represent ways of thinking about how we read texts and imagine various ways in which building fictive worlds collides with our understanding of the world in which we live. It is also important to think about the fact that, for the most part, either the author/s or the subject matter chosen for the articles are of Asia or written outside of the Western paradigm of worldbuilding, bringing with them a unique and important perspective that re-conceptualizes our idea of "the world" and what it means to live in it, and imagine beyond it.

"Phenomenology, Aesthetics, and Worldbuilding in Murasaki's *The Tale of Genji* and Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*" by Farid Mohammadi begins with an expansive way of examining how worldbuilding is an immersive experience crafted by the creator, and how the author must channel believability in their work. He uses the framework of aesthetics and Husserlian philosophy in examining instances of worldbuilding in two significant passages from *The Tale of the Genshi* and *The Lord of the Rings*, and how each text requires an active engagement of the world in order to reach a temporal and spatial understanding of transience and nostalgia.

Similarly, Francis Paolo Quina's examination of narrative storyworlds in the graphic anthology *Mythspace* in his article "Making Space for Myth: Worldbuilding and Interconnected Narratives in *Mythspace*" expands upon how the comics medium is the perfect vehicle for transmedial storyworlds, especially since the medium lends itself successfully to the creation of multiple worlds. By analyzing *Mythspace* as an example of the

ability of comics to introduce storyworlds to the reader, Quina examines how the mental model of the world is built into the engagement with images, frames, and textual elements. The article also articulates how storyworlds may also be applied towards creative writing studies, examining not just the completed text, but the process and progress of the creative act itself.

In contrast with the expansive scope of the previous articles, "Between the *Peechil-kamra* and the *Dabusa*: Mapping Worldbuilding and Heterotopic Space on Board the *Ibis* in Amitav Ghosh's *Sea of Poppies*" by Damini Kashyap and Hemjyoti Medhi examines worldbuilding on a small scale, subverting the notion that building worlds is only for scopic narratives. The world in *Sea of Poppies* moves beyond the ship itself and overlays the imagined spaces of the characters and their connections with each other, and how the social hierarchy that is engendered by the world of the ship painfully mimics the injustices that the characters experience in their own lives.

Meanwhile, "Genetic Templates and Coded Words: David Hontiveros' *Seroks Iteration 1: Mirror Man* as World-Driven Dystopia" by Sydney Paige Guerrero examines worldbuilding as both narrative technique and political critique and effectively ties together the refractions between the real world and the imagined world. Similarly, Maria Rhodora Ancheta braids together real-world cultural influences and serial fiction in "A Convergence of Filipino Worlds: An Onomastic Reading of Edgar Calabia Samar's *Janus Silang* Novels" by examining how naming conventions in the popular Filipino young adult series become a novel way of worldbuilding by layering worlds within the narratives through the use of naming conventions and naming histories. Examining these conventions and histories through the frameworks of toponomastics and anthroponomastics, the article articulates how re-imagining folk practices and narratives provides an alternative way of introducing and reinvigorating folk cultures in contemporary fiction.

The final article, "Creating Cultural and Historical Imaginaries in Physical Space: Worldbuilding in Chinese Theme Parks" by Carissa Baker, takes its cue from the rather literal worldbuilding that is enacted by spaces such as theme parks. She examines Chinese theme parks as sites of worldbuilding, highlighting how historical recreation simulates immersion in the imagined world, how these spaces influence the experience of the theme park visitor, and how theme parks in general simulate imagined histories, and how such histories can be re-worked and reinvigorated through scaled recreations.

In addition to these scholarly articles, this issue also features an interview by Adele Ward with Singapore-based experimental filmmaker and academic Chris Mooney-Singh. Focusing on his most recent film project, *Looking for Mr Gelam* (2021), in which he created an immersive digital world called *Singapore 1825* on Kitely, Ward and Mooney-Singh discuss creating virtual world narratives through his digital speculation of a historical

section of Singapore through digital storyworld technology. In his discussion of how immersion can be achieved through digital recreation, Mooney-Singh focuses on the potential of creating immersive storyworlds of historical significance for both recreational and educational options. We are also privileged to feature a short story written by him, titled "Shadow Play," in which the vast and mythical world of the Balinese puppet play, the *wayang*, contrasts with the domestic and insular world of a blended family as they attempt (and fail) to come together.

In a way, subcreation studies mirrors the fragmented nature of our times, in which we consume narratives piecemeal, taking from different sources in order to compose a coherent understanding of a story. Given the fractious and violent state of the world we live in – a world buckling under the strain of the Covid-19 pandemic and the gross societal inequalities it has exposed, a world torn apart by never-ending border wars and modern-day slavery, a world where the rich get richer and the poor slip into obscurity, a world that we are systematically destroying as we continuously pollute our oceans and ravage our forests — the very act of worldbuilding pushes back against these stories of crisis and woe. As we contend with the ever-morphing nature of online disinformation and misinformation that changes and reshapes the narratives of our lives, worldbuilding gives us an opportunity to imagine and to curate what a better story, what a better world, might be like.

Works Cited

Wolf, Mark J.P. *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*. Routledge, 2012.