



Notes Toward a Critical Approach to Worlds and World-Building

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Abstract: Imaginary worlds and how they are constructed are central to fiction. The term world-building, however, has been applied so broadly in scholarship that it has become ambiguous and difficult to use in critical discussions. Aiming to contribute to greater clarity in the critical use of the term, this article introduces the concept of critical world-building. This is distinguished from other types of world-building, such as that performed by an author or reader, mainly by the fact that a critic analyses a world through a combination of their sequential presentation, as complete world, and with critical interpretation and theoretical filters in place, applying all three perspectives simultaneously. Two possible approaches to critical world-building are presented, based on the functions of a world's building-blocks and how to interpret those functions. The first approach focuses on a world's "architecture" – its structural and aesthetic system of places – and the form, function, and meaning of those places. The second emphasises the dynamic interplay between building-blocks and their interconnections in a web of explicit, implied, and interpreted information about the world. The authors base their discussion on textual, secondary fantasy worlds but invite applications of critical world-building to other genres and media.

Keywords: imaginary worlds, world-building, secondary worlds, fantasy, topofocal analysis.

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Imaginary worlds are integral to fiction in general and fantastic fiction in particular. Yet, they have not been studied as extensively in whole as they have in part: critical focus is generally on characters or, occasionally, on setting. In scholarship on the imaginary worlds that are created in genre texts, the term "world-building" has a tendency to creep into the discussion. As common as that term is, it is also problematic, because it has been applied by a wide range of people – critics, fans, authors, and creative-writing teachers to name but a few – to a wide range of processes, describing anything from the craft of the creator (author, director, or game-designer) to the cognitive work carried out by the audience (reader, viewer, or player). Sometimes "world-building" is used with a very particular meaning, sometimes it is a vague catch-all. At the same time, the term is seductively transparent: we believe we know what someone is talking about when they talk about world-building. Often we don't.

One thing remains clear, however: the close examination of worlds, no matter their use or purpose, is an essential part of reading, writing, and, indeed, critically analysing and interpreting a text.

This essay proposes an approach to how world-building can be understood in literary criticism. Our aim is to clarify the term as a tool for critical discussion, and to begin to examine how and what might be gained by doing so. We should emphasise that we are in no way attempting to discuss or describe the worlds or world-building of a particular genre's worlds, or genre worlds in general; we only try to offer a somewhat more methodical approach to world-building for critical use.

We open by laying the groundwork for our discussion, then move on to contrast three major categories of world-building based on how the imaginary world is approached: through the author's creative effort (authorial world-building); through the reader's (re-)construction (readerly world-building); and through the critic's analysis and interpretation (critical world-building). These are not the only possible categories, nor are they mutually exclusive, but they provide a way to go into critical world-building in some detail. In the second part of the essay we outline two approaches to world-building in fantasy that can provide useful ways to discuss imaginary worlds: a *topofocal* (place-focused; Ekman *Here Be Dragons* 2) approach that examines the "world-architecture", that is, how its places can be analysed through their form and function, and interpreted in terms of their meaning; and an approach that takes into account how an imaginary world is constructed (critically) as a dynamic interplay of building-blocks and their web of implications and relations.

Groundwork

Imaginary worlds, as seen in this essay, are places for stories to happen. In fiction, the story and the world are often closely tied together, and secondary worlds in particular are generally tailor-made to fulfil the requirements of a particular story (Ekman "Platsen" 27; see also Wolf 29), at least until other stories are written into pre-existing worlds. But worlds do not have to provide the stage for a narrative; they are often built for their own sake, and media franchises such as Star Wars have worlds that can be – and are – expanded to suit the needs of additional stories (Wolf 2–3, 270).

That there is a difference between world and story is obvious from the many cases where world-details have no bearing on the story whatsoever but increase the pleasure of partaking in that story. It is, for example, possible to remove the Quenya language or its relation to Sindarin in J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* without affecting the story, but the text would be the lesser for it: Middle-earth without its linguistic details would be less engaging. In other media, the ties between world and story are even looser than in narrative fiction. Role-playing games, for instance, provide worlds that simply offer "story-hooks": situations, locations, and relations for gaming groups to adopt and adapt as basis for stories in their own campaigns, or to ignore, as they see fit.

World-building is not a new concept, nor is it one restricted to literature. It is beyond the scope of this essay to offer a complete background to the field. Instead, we refer interested readers to Mark J. P. Wolf's comprehensive work *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (2012), which contains a thorough summation of previous perspectives on worlds and world-building. Addressing what he perceives to be a lack of scholarly attention to imaginary worlds (12), in particular in Media Studies, Wolf adopts a mixed author and audience perspective on "subcreation" (he borrows the term from Tolkien's seminal "On Fairy-stories"), focusing on the worlds constructed in large – and often transmedial – franchises. His structural and taxonomical approach to imaginary worlds is no doubt useful to anyone who ventures into the field, but he largely leaves out the role of the critic in favour of authors and (fan) audiences. Although certainly a very intriguing type of audience, we have largely left fans out of our analysis. One reason for this is the emphasis that Wolf places on this group. More importantly, fans share traits with critics, readers,

even authors in their relation to worlds and world-building, and also have characteristics that are particularly fannish. This makes them a complex and challenging group to discuss in this context, and clearly deserving of a more thorough analysis than we can provide here. (Other texts have taken on world-building as part of a larger discussion in franchises; see for instance Heather Urbanski's *The Science Fiction Reboot*, which does so with an eye to science fiction franchises and fandom.)

Something that has influenced the ideas on world-building in this essay, but which is not mentioned in Wolf's work, is the narratological concept of "storyworld" introduced by David Herman. This concept provides a useful way of thinking on how a world can be built by others than the author, as Herman primarily adapts a reader's perspective. Storyworlds are "mental models of who did what to and with whom, when, where, why, and in what fashion in the world to which recipients relocate – or make a deictic shift as they work to comprehend a narrative" (5). Although interesting in their holistic approach to the imaginary world, storyworlds mix narrative and world (the who, what, where, when et cetera of the text), making them somewhat awkward to use in an analysis that separates the two.

Some terminology and choices need to be clarified. In this essay, we talk about "elements" of imaginary worlds. These are to be understood as the many varied building-blocks that constitute imaginary worlds, and comprise anything from geographical and topographical details, to flora, fauna, and ecologies, to social groupings and behaviour, political factions and ideologies, and cultural traditions and mores. World-building elements can thus be the shape of continents and the fashion of elf lords, seasonal weather patterns and childrearing among badgerkin, the properties of mithril and the anti-dwarf ideology of the Ardenhof clan. Regardless of how many elements are included in an imaginary world, they will only form part of a world. We do not suggest that the sum total of the elements that combine to build an imaginary world makes a complete world; imaginary worlds are by their very nature incomplete (Doležel 169). That said, readers may of course experience the world as somehow complete. While a taxonomy of elements (or "world infrastructure") can be devised, including categories of space, time, and characters as well as a hierarchy of natural, cultural, linguistic, mythological, and philosophical elements (Wolf 154–55), it suffices for our discussion to refer to all these types of building-blocks simply as "elements".

As we come from the field of literature, we will use the terms *text*, *author*, and *reader*. World-building, as discussed in this essay, is not necessarily limited to printed text, however, and these terms should be taken as shorthand for corresponding terms related to any medium that contains fantasy stories, such as movies and television shows as well as computer and role-playing games.

We will use the worlds of the fantasy genre as basis for our discussion simply because that is the genre that the authors of this essay specialise in and are most familiar with. Although a comprehensive discussion of world-building in literature or even just in speculative fiction is far beyond the scope of this essay, our argument concerns itself largely with any kind of world-building, and we would welcome work that extends it into other genres. It should also be pointed out that our focus in this essay is on *secondary worlds*, by which we mean fantasy worlds that are different from our own (Wolfe 115), as opposed to *primary worlds*, worlds that are in some sense fictional versions that emulate our own world at least on a macroscopic level (for this view on primary and secondary worlds, we draw on Ekman *Here Be Dragons* 9–10. Other approaches are possible, such as viewing "secondariness" as a matter of degree; see Wolf 27–28). We focus on secondary worlds here simply because these worlds provide the clearest examples for our discussion. In creating secondary worlds, authors are free to design and build worlds according to the requirements of their stories. Primary worlds already have a large number of world elements in place (including anything from natural laws and geography to cultural and historical events and people), and story must to some extent be fitted to world rather than world to story.

We should also mention that we have drawn largely on Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings* for our examples, simply because we assume most readers to be familiar with and have easy access to that work. (References will include volume, book and chapter as well as page number to facilitate locating the passages in the various editions of the book.)

Three Kinds of World-Building

A major part of the confusion around "world-building" as a term revolves around the fact that it is used to represent at least three main processes: the construction of an imaginary world carried out by an author; the re-construction of this world that a reader performs; and the way in which a world is presented through a text. All three processes can combine to varying degrees in one person, reading, or interpretation. A second cause of confusion is that "world-building" as a term is used loosely, sometimes indicating just the world itself, rather than any process actually being employed to construct it.

We say *at least* three processes, because it can easily be argued that over all the possible media and types of audiences that make use of and enjoy imaginary worlds, other world-building processes exist. Examples include computer games, in which world-building is connected to game mechanics; roleplaying games, in which elements can be added after planning by players and game-master between sessions, but also as spur-of-the-moment ideas during session; and among fans of world franchises, as they combine and extrapolate from a multitude of sources. The scope of this essay does not permit us to explore all of these various processes, but we feel confident that critical discourse on world-building would benefit from terminology also in these areas, even though they may partially overlap.

Authorial World-Building

For authors, world-building is a sequential, iterative, and segmental process: the adding, changing, or developing of elements by various strategies. Such strategies may comprise mapmaking, extrapolation, and designing a world along certain ideological lines (such as creating a matriarchal society). While it is of course possible to discuss this kind of world-building process, it is difficult to subject it to critical analysis, because, ultimately, actual authorial world-building processes cannot be analysed by anyone but the author in question; no one else has access to their mind. It is possible to analyse oral or written comments that a writer makes regarding their world-building (interviews, public comments, private communication, published letters), but such analysis will always suffer from problems with imperfect recollection and veracity. Another possibility is to analyse guidelines and manuals for world-building, which would yield information about (presumably) ideal or desirable world-building processes, but not what those processes are actually like.

Readerly World-Building

For readers, world-building is a similarly sequential process but the elements of the world are encountered in an order determined by the author, by the reader's execution of choices, or by a combination of both. In a typical novel, the author decides in which order, how, and in what context the elements of the world are revealed. In ergodic literature, in which "non-trivial effort is required to allow the reader to traverse the text" (Aarseth 1), the reader influences that order. Examples of ergodic literature include experimental novels, gamebooks such as *Choose Your Own Adventure*, certain kinds of video games, even (arguably) role-playing games. Worlds that are used in several,

stand-alone works, by one or more authors, and transmedial worlds (used in several media in a franchise), combine a measure of authorial control with audience influence.

Regardless of who controls the order in which world elements are presented to the reader, bringing the world to life is largely a combination of two interrelated processes. The readers carry out a hermeneutical construction of a world by adding pieces (elements) to a structure already in place, evaluating the pieces in light of what is known about the world so far, and, conversely, evaluating the whole world in light of new pieces. They also create the world in their minds through a cognitive process, as pointed out by Norman Holland in *Literature and the Brain*, and to some extent explored by Wolf. Herman's storyworlds suggest a bridging of these processes, as storyworlds encompass a wide range of things that influence the reader into creating the story as a full object in their minds (5–6, 13–14, 263, 301).

Critical World-Building

To critically examine a world and the world-building behind it requires a perspective that combines a number of approaches to the text, the first part of this composite being how the text presents the world. For a literary critic, there are tools and methods available to study both the author and audience side of world-building, but from our perspective, they tend to detract from the traditional object of criticism: the text itself. Our critical approach to world-building therefore focuses on what we have access to through the text: the way in which world elements are presented in a text, their context and various relations, their meaning from a theoretical viewpoint, and so on. World-building, in this sense, is the revealing of the world as the narrative moves along. Wolf points out that “how world information is doled out to the audience is an important part of world-building and design” (155) and that “doling out” of information, the order, context, and style of presentation of world elements, is a central factor in how a world is understood. It takes into account the hermeneutical building of a world that is performed by a reader, but the reader in question is generally *not an actual person* but a function in the text, an “implied” or “postulated” reader (Booth 137–38; devotees of narratology are free to substitute with any types of abstract audience functions they prefer), or simply an ideal reader who understands and reacts to information in the text as we, the critics, would have them do.

Another part of the composite perspective of critical world-building is a view of the world in its entirety. While a literary critic is certainly, from one point of view, a reader and as such part of a world's audience, criticism – the structured, theoretically informed analysis and interpretation of a world – requires a holistic approach to a world as well as a sequential one. It requires viewing the world both as a whole structure, and as one that has been put together in a particular order; as its own system of interlocking elements and as a unit in relation to a wider literary and theoretical context. In other words, the critic analyses a world in terms of the final result of the author's creative process and the reader's progression through the novel, but also through the critic's own contribution in terms of a broader perspective. Critics may generally look at worlds rather than world-building, but it is integral to our approach that both aspects be examined. Thus both the world and the world-building process are central to how a critic examines world-building as a whole within particular works.

An important part to the composite perspective is the layer of critical interpretation. The critic, as critic, also brings to the building of a world a familiarity with other worlds in terms of structures and tropes, clichés and traditions. They thus construct the world in a wider context, seeing parallels with other worlds within and outside of the genre. They may also bring to a world one or several theoretical filters that foreground certain aspects of a world and provide analytical and interpretative focus. The interpreted world is, in some qualitative way, a different world than the world in the text: it has had an extra layer of interpretation added to it. These (sometimes

multiple) layers of interpretation provide different readings of the world, and can often encourage a different focus than an author intended or a reader would see.

This composite perspective is central to how a critic works with the world and world-building. Analysing the world as a sequential, holistic, *and* interpretative construction allows the critic to understand aspects of the world that author and reader generally miss. It is the links, and the ways in which elements of the world interact or form by implication to build that world, that create fodder for the critic. The interrelations, whether by authorial intent or not, provide critical insights not only into the world and its structure, but into the stories that are told within the world.

Two Approaches to Critical World-Building

The composite perspective and world focus of critical world-building can be used as a route into a literary analysis of a text or can supplement traditional readings with a world-perspective. In order to offer ideas on how critical world-building can be used to understand secondary worlds, we present two possible ways of approaching worlds and world-building. We do not claim that there are no other ways – quite the contrary – but would like to suggest possible starting points for analytical explorations of the system of ideas underlying or encoded into imaginary worlds.

On its most fundamental level, a critical examination of a world is guided by three questions:

What does a particular element do? (What is its function?) Through the many interconnections between elements that make up the world, each element – or group of elements – can have multiple functions, depending on the particular context in which it is seen.

How does it do it? (How is this function achieved?) Each element can fulfil its functions through any number of means. The style with which an element is introduced, the context in which it is added to the world, its relation to other elements, whether it is used in allusions or as part of a trope, and the extent to which it requires a reader to be “genre literate” to fully comprehend it are all examples of how a particular function is fulfilled.

What is the effect of this element? (Going beyond analysis to interpretation.) What does it imply about the world, how does it interact with characters, in what way does it interplay with the plot, or drive or slow down the story?

With these questions as a basis, we offer two possible ways to take on imaginary worlds from a critical perspective.

World-Architecture

One way of reading an imaginary world is through the metaphor implied by the term “world-building”: that the world is a building. The critic, then, does not follow or examine the actual building process, but analyses and interprets the resulting edifice – the imaginary world – from a structural, functional, and aesthetic point of view. How the world is structured, how it functions in relation to stories set in it, and what its aesthetic properties are become critical avenues of exploration. What is being explored is not primarily the building of the world (neither as process nor as construct) but the world’s architecture.

Architecture is the art of designing buildings rather than the process of constructing them. It incorporates the building-process but also the finished result, combining a practical, constructive, functional side with an aesthetic, harmonious, symbolic side. “World-architecture”, as critical approach, allows the critic to examine the principles of design through their expression in the

finished work. Those principles, although the result of authorial world-building, are possible to identify and analyse through critical world-building alone: what the author actually did or did not intend with a particular element can be disregarded – what matters is that principle which the elements captures. Tolkien may have meant the village Scary only to be named after a rock (from “scar”, rocky cliff) but a reading of it as “causing fear” is equally if not more valid if it carries critical weight. (For a discussion of this example, see Ekman *Here Be Dragons* 52.)

Architecture, as well as world-architecture, transforms space into place. The geographical concepts of space and place, for instance as expressed by geographer Yi-Fu Tuan, are useful in discussions of imaginary worlds. To Tuan, places have history and meaning, embodying experiences and aspirations of a people (213); they have a personality which is “a composite of natural endowments [...] and the modifications wrought by successive generations of human beings” (234). An architectural place differs somewhat. It is designed for some activity (or activities) and contained, protected, or otherwise shaped to facilitate this. The architectural place then embodies its function through its form. Taken together, the notions of geographical and architectural place offer a critical route into the imaginary world. In a critical analysis of the places of an imaginary world in terms of their “personality” as expressed through their “natural endowments” and any cultural modifications (that is, as geographical places according to Tuan), the critic should remember that the world’s nature and culture are ultimately designed with an activity – story-telling – in mind. That analysis then makes it possible to bring together aspects of expression and function, and interpret the underlying meaning of these places. For example, the landscape outside the gates of Mordor can be read as more than only a dismal setting and a challenge for Tolkien’s hobbit characters to endure (see e.g. Tolkien TT, IV, ii, 617–21). Looking at it as a place, taking into account its history, relation to other areas nearby, and cultural modifications, it becomes clear what activity it is designed for, what its function is, not only as a narrative trope (“the landscape of evil”) but as a place within the diegetic world. Analysing its form in relation to its function, and arriving at its meaning through interpretation, the critic can understand more about the nature of evil in *The Lord of the Rings*. (For a discussion of this, see Ekman *Here Be Dragons* 199–204.)

An architectural approach to critical world-building goes further than the basic questions offered above: it encourages seeing the world as places designed with a certain *form* to fulfil a certain *function* and express a certain *meaning*. We have drawn the categories of Function, Form, and Meaning from David Smith Capon’s three “primary categories”, which he uses in his discussion of architectural theories, as we find them useful in thinking about how places in imaginary worlds are designed architecturally. More so, in fact, than the more commonly referenced Vitruvian Triad of *Firmitatis* (firmness), *Utilitatis* (usefulness), and *Venustatis* (beauty) introduced in *De Architecturalibridecem* (The Ten Books on Architecture), as aesthetics and craftsmanship are difficult to separate in literature whereas meaning is a very relevant category.

A place in an imaginary world is a combination of elements of various kinds, and each place is included for a reason. It has one or more *functions* in the world of which it is part, and often has a function in a story as well. Lothlorien, for example, is the final refuge of the High Elves in Middle-earth, and a place of rest, knowledge, and useful equipment in the story. Either or both functions of the Golden Wood can be analysed. A function is an expression of purpose, of the activity for which a place is designed and included in the world. This purpose is not necessarily governed by authorial intent; it is the result of a place’s relation to other places, to how and if it is used as a setting; ultimately, the function springs from the simple fact that the place is there, in the world, with all the other places in the world around it – a part of the wholeness that is the fictive world. Consequently, any place in an imaginary world can be analysed in terms of its function.

To analyse the function of a place requires analysis of the *form* through which it is expressed, portrayed, visualised, described, or narrated. Form, in world-architecture, is a question of

style and presentation, as well as of context and focus. In a text, careful readings of how elements are described can bring out their form. The way Lothlorien is described as dangerous by Boromir is telling, both of the Wood itself and of Gondor, demonstrating also how a world is one whole in which elements interact (FR, II, vi, 329). In illustrated texts or video, the form of a place can be both verbal and visual, described in words as well as images. (For an example, see the discussion of *Stardust* by Neil Gaiman and Charles Vess in Ekman *Here Be Dragons* 82–92.) The form of a place, or of separate elements, brings out the function of that place or those elements.

By looking at the form of a place along with its function it is possible to understand its *meaning*, the way in which a world communicates ideas about itself. Applied to imaginary worlds and their world-architecture, meaning captures what Tuan calls personality of places, the way in which memories and history are embodied in the imaginary places, and how these places convey experiences and ideals. Meaning is thus expressed through form and function but also governs their expression: through the three concepts it is possible to understand worlds as a combination of spatiality and “natural endowment”; identity and cultural impression; and ideas and ideology. These are all encoded in the landscape and places of an imaginary world, and can be examined through analysis and interpretation of critical world-building through an architectural approach.

At their simplest, form, function, and meaning offer a way of understanding how the space of the imaginary world is turned into a place suitable for one or more stories. They offer a means to look at the relations between the world and what meaning is encoded in its patterns of elements – whether social, spatial, temporal, or other.

World-architecture is a useful way to approach a world through material that largely concerns itself with that world as a place: most typically maps in fantasy novels, but also for example “gazetteers” or source books for role-playing games, and guides to imaginary worlds. It does not preclude analysis of worlds presented through narrative but it does focus on the world as a static, geographical construct, and as such may strike some critics as too topofocal. We therefore also offer a more dynamic approach to using critical world-building as basis for a critical analysis of imaginary worlds.

Dynamic Interplay

A more dynamic approach focuses on the interplay between elements and the world. It takes into account the entirety of the world constructed, including the interplay between all its elements and the possible interpretations available to the critic who analyses it.

Considering worlds and world-building in terms of how elements interrelate is not something new. Samuel R. Delany observes how Robert Heinlein’s oft-cited “the door dilated” (in *Beyond the Horizon* [1942]) “clearly, forcefully, and with tremendous verbal economy” portrayed a world which “contained a society in which the technology for constructing iris aperture doorways was available” (Delany 144). Although Delany’s point concerns science fiction, it is equally valid in fantasy: the smallest utterance can contribute to the world, and can be analysed for its contribution. In *The Power of Tolkien’s Prose*, Steve Walker explains how the many details that Tolkien inserts into his imaginary world tend towards expansion rather than reduction of that world. These details are, as Walker puts it, “the tip of an iceberg of implications” (10). Each detail enters the context of previous details, implying things about them and having things implied about it in turn, thus forming, by implication, the iceberg that is Middle-earth.

Such implications are key to critical world-building. The implications that both Delany and Walker point out as important in the building of a wider world arise not only from what elements are introduced and how, but from how these elements are connected to each other. In the passages cited above, Delany and Walker observe how details in the text can refer beyond that which is known about a world, thus extending it. Walker uses as example a passage in *The Return of the*

King, about King Théoden's charge at enemy soldiers, in which the king is likened to someone who has not been previously introduced in the text:

The simile detailing Théoden on horseback “like a god of old, even as [Oromë] the Great in the battle of the Valar when the world was young,” seems almost epic in its amplitude. [Théoden's] magnificence is magnified in the godlikeness of a cultural hero so renowned his name needs no gloss, glorious in a battle so significant it needs no explanation. Yet for all that obviousness, the appeal of the illusion is to unseen complexity. (10; reference to Tolkien RK, V, v, 820)

For someone reading about the world in sequence, that is, in terms of readerly world-building, the only previous reference to the Valar is towards the end of *The Two Towers*, when Frodo and Sam first encounter Faramir and his Rangers in Ithilien. The appearance of a Mûmak (war elephant) causes one of the Rangers to exclaim “May the Valar turn him aside!” (TT, IV, iv, 646). From the context, this appears to be an appeal to some kind of deities. The second occurrence, cited by Walker, confirms the impression of the first, explaining that the Valar are “god[s] of old”, and that Oromë is one of them. Walker does not discuss how the two mentions of the Valar interplay in extending the world with a religious dimension, just as he fails to include the fact that the magnificence of Théoden is not only magnified by the simile to the ValaOromë but that Oromë is also described in turn. His focus is on the particular instance, which only captures a small part of how critical world-building works.

In critical world-building, not only the sequential presentation and implications of the details are relevant, but also the world as totality. Readers may, and fans generally do, know Middle-earth as a whole but Tolkien criticism *requires* it. The mention of the Valar and Oromë refers to other instances within *The Lord of the Rings*, both previously in the narrative and in the Appendices; but it also creates connections to *The Silmarillion*, playing off the world-building there. For someone engaged in critical world-building, Théoden's charge against Sauron's troops thus reflects the battles against the greater evil of Morgoth in Middle-earth's deep past. This interplay between elements of a world used in several texts brings to the fore an interesting difference between critical and readerly world-building when analysing multi-text worlds: in readerly world-building, in which only a sequential presentation of the world is taken into account, it matters in which order a reader comes to the world. In which order have they read *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion*? To a person familiar with *The Silmarillion*, Walker's example does little to extend the world; Oromë and the battles of the Valar are already well-known. In other words, it matters whether the texts are read in the order of publication or by internal chronology. (For an illuminating discussion on how publication order and internal chronology can affect the reading of a multi-text world, see Wolf 210–11.) In worlds built in only one text, this is not an issue, of course. In those cases, the critic only needs to maintain the composite perspective of the entire world and the sequence of presentation.

Through its composite perspective, critical world-building allows for a potentially limitless analysis of a world. Elements are interrelated in a complex structure of implications that extend the world and affect the understanding of other elements and their relations. George Slusser suggests that the “very idea of world implies a complex set of laws and relationships” (3); we would claim that these laws and relationships, or connections and interactions, determine how implications extend and change the world. Critics employ a perspective that combines a holistic view of the world with the sequential introduction of elements, a wide extra-textual context, and the possibility to add interpretative layers to the world. In doing so, they participate in building the world as system in which elements interact dynamically. There is a constant interplay in which the analytical and interpretative activity of the critic provides “impetus” for an exchange of information, feelings,

and meanings within the world. Following the “laws and relationships”, the critic uses implications to analyse and interpret, and by doing so, shapes the world, thus opening it up for new implications.

When even a tiny piece is dislodged from it, an iceberg may shift and turn over, changing its apparent shape and causing enormous waves. An imaginary world works in a similar way when under the critical lens: a different understanding of just one element, or a small change in relationships between elements, can change the interpretation of the world as a whole. That change in the world’s interpretative layer may, in turn, have implications for how the interplay between some elements is then understood. Meaning in a world is created much more through such changes than through any given element or relationship used to build it.

Conclusion

Analyses of texts set in secondary worlds that fail to take into account what those worlds are like and how they are constructed invariably tend towards the incomplete. Yet, any critical venture that suffers from imprecise and confusing terminology may end up resulting in interpretations that are ambiguous and confusing – even plain wrong. To assist in future critical work on secondary worlds, we have thus argued in favour of greater clarity in the use of the term “world-building” by suggesting that the perspective that is employed is added to the term.

This essay includes three examples of world-building types – authorial, readerly, and critical – with a focus on the latter. To approach a world critically is to go further than simply cataloguing its features but to discuss the world in relation to something beyond it. This something could be (and in fantasy, often is) the relationship between story and world, but any theoretical approach could be valid, depending on the text, the world, and one’s critical preference: ecocritical, Freudian, Marxist, postmodernist, postcolonial ... Critical world-building differs from the two other types in its composite perspective on the imaginary world, looking at it holistically but with awareness of the meaning embedded in its sequential construction *and* in the layers of interpretation added to it. This composite perspective should not be taken to mean that world and world-building are one: separating world-building from the world itself is important though not always easily accomplished.

To provide some ideas about how critical world-building can be used as a tool in literary scholarship, two possible approaches are suggested: a topofocal analysis of the world-architecture and how meaning can be arrived at by analysis of the form and function of places in imaginary worlds; and an outline of how the entire web of implications that is an imaginary world can be approached as a dynamic system of interplaying elements and relationships.

We do not argue that critical world-building is the only proper way to approach world-building, nor that this essay has examined every aspect of it. The types we have described can overlap: they have some traits in common and one person can build worlds in more than one way. Nor are these the only types of world-building there are: other kinds of readers, like fans or gamers, could provide other types of world-building. Our aim is to introduce some clarity into an important, but often muddled, topic. Studies of particular texts and worlds will be necessary to develop the ideas presented in this essay, but hopefully it will inspire further explorations in the field of critical world-building in fantastic, imaginary worlds.

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