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Worldbuilding Ep. 004: Objectives of Worldbuilding and an Introduction to the Designer's Workshop

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Worldbuilding Episode 004 Show Notes

Objectives of Worldbuilding: What kind of worldbuilder are you?

1. Hobbyist
2. Writer
3. Artist
4. Gamer
5. Game Designer (table-top RPG)
6. Game Designer (video games)
7. Combination

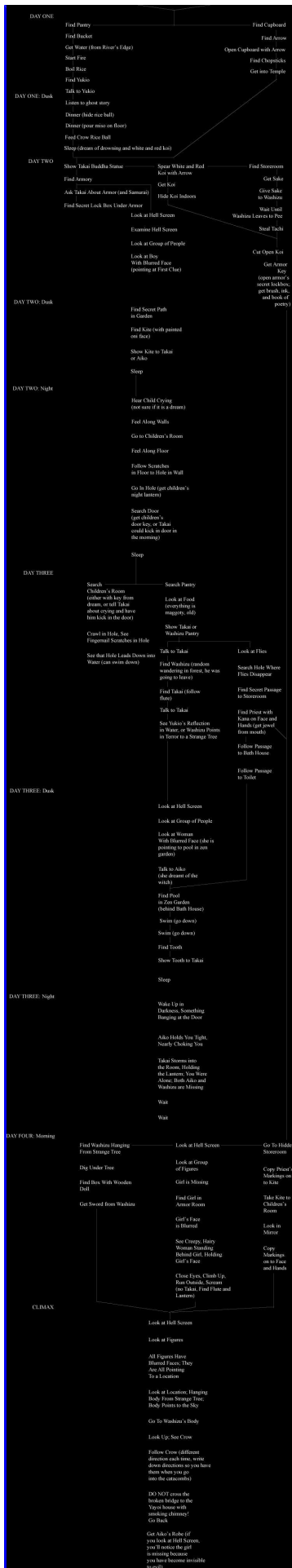
Designer's Workshop: The Inspiration and Worldbuilding Behind Three Interactive Horror Games

In our new segment that covers the worldbuilding steps of game designer creations, we take a tour through the thought processes behind three games united by one common desire: to evoke feelings of horror and dread in the player.

Game One: *Gakido*



Our first game was started as an interactive fiction, and inspired by the



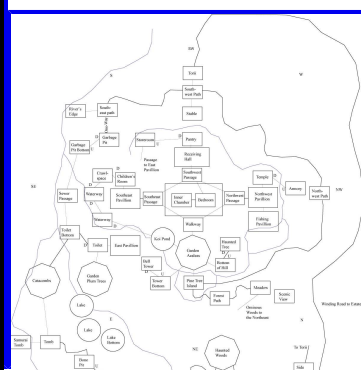
psychological horror of *The Ring* (and later *Kwaidan* and other classic Japanese stories), *The Blair Witch Project* and *The Shining*. The goal was to create an experience for the player that suggested its horrors and disturbed on an unconscious level, and slowly built up tension and dread over the course of the game.

The premise of the game involved a small girl (in Middle Ages Japan) as a protagonist who must follow her stepfather and dysfunctional family to an isolated mansion in the mountains above Heian-Kyo to deliver a handcrafted sword to the aristocratic family that lives there. Upon arriving, the group finds the house deserted, its gardens overgrown and pantry contents rotting. They soon realize that they are not alone; subtle details suggest a malevolent supernatural presence watching them from the darkness.

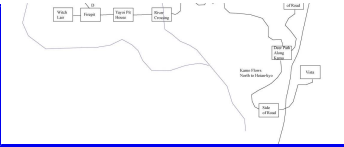
Our worldbuilding included research about the story world's setting, Heian-era Japan. We wanted to know the sights, smells and textures of this location, and understand the dynamics of the characters that were living during this time period. Research helped us to deliver setting-specific imagery in the game's descriptions:

The fragrances of the immense and empty hall are familiar, smelling like the incense mother used to cook. In summertime, she would stir (with plum meat) jinkô and clove, camphor and deer musk (in a ceramic jar) and let the mush ripen in buried earth near the house spring; the receding hall smells of ten open jars. The aroma joins with the dust of brittle autumn pine invading through the ceiling portals, and fans the marching support beams. The receiving hall flows from the far southwest wall, slipping around a corner to another room, to the inner chambers in the northeast.

The inner sanctuary is a circle of overgrown paths twisting in all directions, leading to scuttling azaleas, buzzing ponds and fat plum trees. To the southwest, about twenty paces through a waist high grassland is the cave-dark entrance to the mansion; its corridor-pavilions, like reposing arms, reach over the mirrors of fishing pools. The garden plot ebbs and flows; its grassy earth-mounds look as though they might abruptly crash down upon the pathways. The azaleas and plum trees scurry for cover in shadowy nooks. One wave crest, to the north, has captured a solitary gray and leafless tree. In death, it poses as a figurine, arching, pointing to its feet. Opposite the tree, and sweeping down into a trough some forty paces off, is a bell-tower, the bell veiled beneath the shadows of its cedar-shingled roof.



In the corner of this cramped and grease-colored alcove is a man-sized hole beaten through the southeast wall, making a crude, splintered portal near the floor leading into a crawlway behind the paneling. Most of the furniture has been removed, their extant scratches cutting arcing tracks from two walls to the door. One series of these tracks cuts an X across the others to the improvised



crawlspace. At one time, the room may have been used for a child: someone has delicately painted butterflies flitting across a yellow sky on the walls and ceiling; a toy dresser, even small for a teenage girl, squats diagonally in the center. The room's only door, unusually tall and narrow, is sealed.

Artifacts from the game design include rough drafts of the story's flowchart (specifically the geographical scope of the game world), and the puzzle flow chart (which reveals a rather linear narrative).

The game was not completed for a number reasons, primary of which was that our 3-D modeler was not partial to creating Japanese architecture.

Game Two: *Owl Creek*



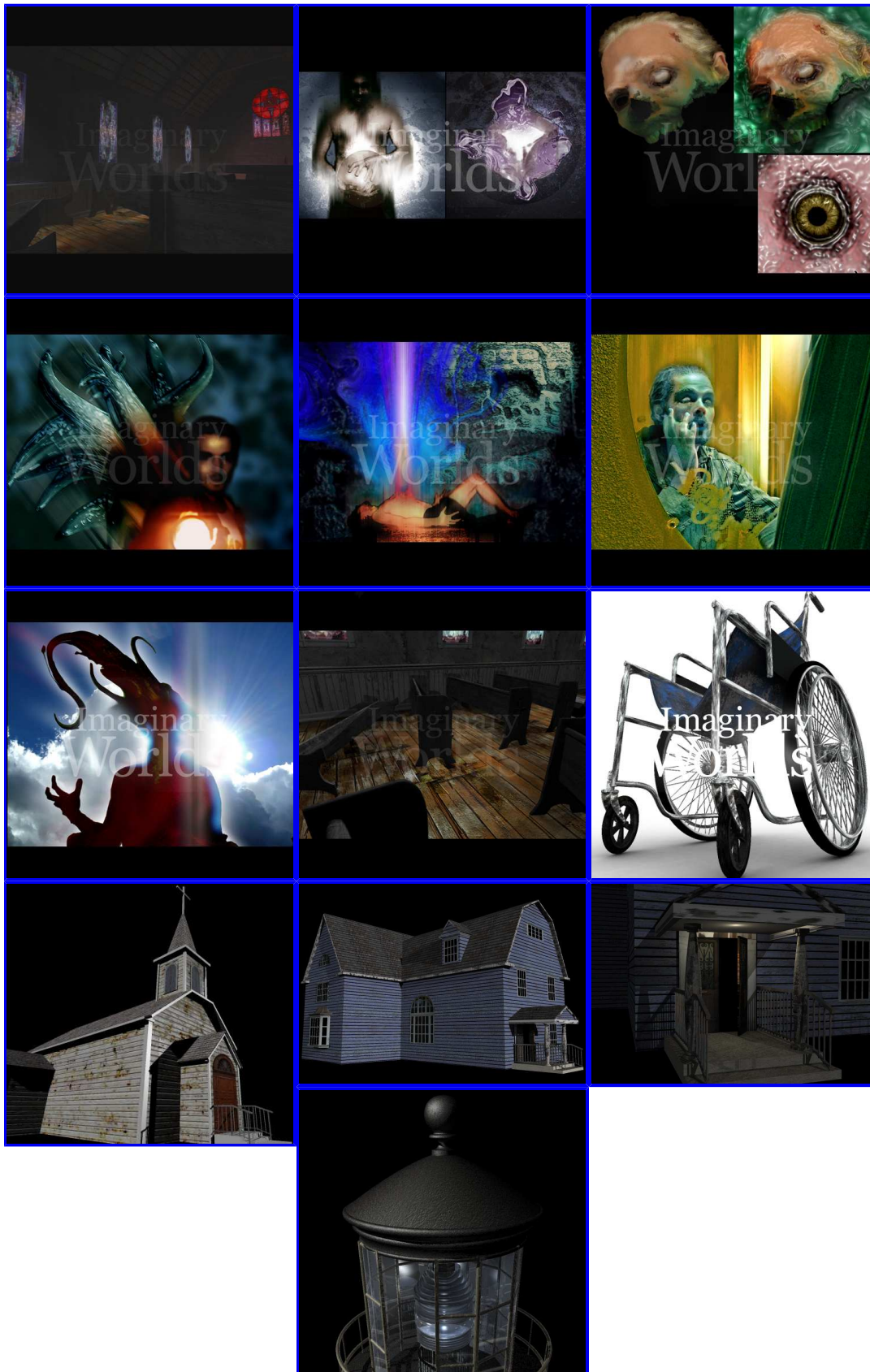
This one was a departure from the first game in regard to setting, but not feel. We transplanted our ghost story from Heian-era Japan to Reconstructionist-era America. Our heroes became a confederate soldier and his newly-wed winding up on the wrong side of the Civil War. To salvage their already broken lives, the soldier decides to follow a mysterious map to a cursed treasure in an abandoned homestead in the West Virginia foothills. When his wife disappears into the mansion, the player discovers that something lives within and hungers for new victims.

As with *Gakido*, we tried to design a game that psychologically terrified, rather than viscerally assaulted, the senses. Our worldbuilding included research about the geographic area and especially the architecture of the time period, as our major set piece was a Jeffersonian-inspired estate with underground levels and devious traps.

We set this one aside because we felt the idea was a bit done; at the time there were numerous haunted house games on the market. We have a few artifacts from

the game design that include rough renders of the mansion, that would have become the centerpiece of the story.

Game Three: *Born of Darkness*





Our last attempt was purely Lovecraftian in subject and—inspired by an incredible text game called *Anchorhead* by Michael Gentry—was set in the modern day; the game employed today’s technologies (such as a recorder and cell phone) as major plot devices. The storyline involved a female protagonist that is called back home by a sick brother who then promptly disappears. The player tries to find the brother, only to be drawn into a bizarre mystery involving dark family secrets (in very Lovecraftian fashion). The design of the game focused on suggested details meant to unsettle the player over time, and draw her steadily into a state of anxiety as the dark forces built up momentum and strength.

This game was meant to be delivered as a series of Flash episodes, and navigated in a way reminiscent of the *Myst* games. In order to entice a programmer to join the team and resolve our technical issues with the game engine, we quickly put together concept art and in-game renders, as well as rough pre-renders (which are included in this article).

The concept art phase involved hundreds of photographs of textures that would eventually be used to create believable settings: a sleepy coastal fishing town; an Aztec ruin; an arctic military base...

Unfortunately, the scope of the game was very large for a team without proper funding, and the game was shelved when the programmers’ promises fell short.

Suggested Worldbuilding Activity

If you would like us to feature one of your games, worlds or projects on the podcast and on the Imaginary Worlds Network, let us know! We’d like to see projects worthy of mention, whether they became incomplete and shelved, or whether you plan on marketing or sharing them with the world. We’d like to hear your inspiration for the world you created, and what aspects of the worldbuilding process are relevant to the project.



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Comments

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5 Comments so far

1. [Keith Curtis](#) January 19, 2007 6:21 pm

This is the best worldbuilding advice I have yet seen. You are taking a fresh and non-traditional look at the subject. I like the approach from a story- and character-driven direction.

You asked for worldbuilding projects. I am afraid that my own project is in a pretty mature form, but you might be able to get something useful from it for your purposes.

My motivation by your criteria, would be as an artist/hobbyist/gamer. I am a professional artist; I enjoy world building as an activity, and developed this world specifically as a place in which to set games.

I am only up to the beginning of episode 5 at this point, but I can give you a few particulars.

Tone: High adventure and action-rich, character-driven stories within a variety of settings.

Theme: I'd prefer to wait before answering this until I hear episode 6.

High Concept: A far-future, post-apocalyptic sword and sorcery. Thundarr the Barbarian meets John Carter.

For the particulars, these pages from the website should say it pretty succinctly.

Introduction:

www.savageearth.net

Fiction piece introducing key concepts:

<http://savageearth.net/shambles.html>

Designer notes:

<http://savageearth.net/notes.html>

2. [Keith Curtis](#) January 19, 2007 7:41 pm

Well, I left a long comment here earlier, but it seems to have been swallowed. I'll try re-composing it later.

shoot.

3. [Keith Curtis](#) January 19, 2007 9:44 pm

There it is. It just needed management approval or something. I'm so blog-ignorant. (blognorant?)

4. [Sean Morris](#) January 29, 2007 5:04 pm

I have a few world building projects ongoing, shelved and planned.

I am currently running a small D&D campaign (some images available here:

http://www.datasculptures.com/fantasy_index.html).

I have a couple of shelved web-based game projects (for example:

<http://datasculptures.com/awalkinthedark/main.php>)

Currently, I am starting to build another online RPG, mostly to freshen up and sharpen my Java skills.

My biggest problem right now is settling on a genre/setting. Listening to the S&D podcast has given me a lot of ideas, now I just need to actually make the choice.

5. Editor March 12, 2007 12:42 pm

Hey Sean,

I don't know how I missed this, but I think I completely forgot to mention your work on the show! I just noticed this as I was going through my archives. I'm really sorry. I went through your site and really liked your work. Hopefully you are still around to receive this message...

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- [Announcement: New Site Coming Soon](#)
- [Forums are back](#)
- [Forum may need a complete reinstall](#)

- [Worldbuilding Ep. 014: Setting Part Three, Using Image Systems](#)
- [Episode 14 will be up tomorrow afternoon](#)
- [Daughter of the Sun Artwork](#)
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Good Stuff

- Coming soon!

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