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Worldbuilding Ep. 006: Thematic Subjects of Your Story World

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Worldbuilding Episode 006 Show Notes

Is the gaming industry dying? I respond to [an article by Ryan Dancey](#) (cocreator of *Legend of the Five Rings*, and key figure at *Wizards of the Coast*), about his predictions for 2007 and what it means for the top six roleplaying companies. [Fear the Boot](#) also addresses this article in their current show and show notes.

Worldbuilding Concepts

Thematic subject: an abstract (idea, concept, something you can't touch or see) word or a phrase that is the underlying meaning of a work; in other words, it's what your world is about on a philosophical level. The subject is what the world or work develops or explores through its conflicts and characters.

Usually, oppositional stances on a subject are developed to comment on differing aspects of the thematic subject. Examples of thematic subjects include: the nature of love, the reality of death, dangers of technology, the darkness of the human soul, the triumph of the human spirit, the power of faith, justice, revenge, violence (notice these are all one word or phrases).

Theme: a theme is a complete statement about the thematic subject, and in some ways is similar to a thesis in that it is an opinionated stance on an issue, or a perspective on life or human nature. Sometimes a theme becomes morally didactic and attempts to teach a lesson to us. In nonfiction, the author attempts to prove the thesis through argument, rhetoric, example and evidence. In contrast, a story—or fiction—reveals its meaning through character and conflict. It is only after the story is fully explored that the thematic meaning becomes

clearer, and even then, themes can be elusive to crystallize. Examples of themes: obsessive love often leads to self-destruction; violence is an irrational act that only leads to more violence; the power of a strong idea far outweighs the power of any weapon (these are all opinionated claims about life, reality or human nature, that can be explored, possibly proven or possibly countered by opposite viewpoints)

Some Thoughts About Thematic Subjects in Worldbuilding

- There is no one right way to examine a story or world; there will be multiple interpretations of any one piece of fiction. The strength of one's analysis of a piece of fiction relies on the consistency of evidence within the text to support the theory about the work's theme. A thematic subject reveals itself as a consistent pattern in the conflicts, story logic, character motives, and plot complications.
- Dissecting a story for its thematic elements is a bit of surgery; and in a way, this kind of analysis robs a story or world of its magic. Stories are more than the sum of their parts, and I don't want to suggest that a left-brain dismantling of any story or world will give us a complete understanding of a story's vitality. But understanding the thematic subject of other stories, and consciously thinking about the thematic subjects of our own story worlds can help us solidify and strengthen all of the disparate parts of our world as we create and free-associate with the right brain.
- I'm not suggesting we always start with a thematic subject when we create our story worlds. But I am saying that we can pay attention to the thematic subjects that naturally reveal themselves in the creative process. Once the thematic subjects surface, and you have that "Aha" moment of clarity where you understand finally what your world or story is about, then you can go back and revise and refine and make sure all of the other pieces fit logically within the world's meaning.
- Lastly, you will inevitably see thematic subjects that I missed and vice versa. Many worlds and stories have multiple thematic subjects that can be stated in a multitude of ways.

Some Examples From Films

Naturally, the following are my opinion, but can be substantiated with evidence from the stories:

Spider-man 2

Thematic subject: power of love

Theme that develops through the actions of Peter-Parker: Love for another is a primal force that cannot be denied and when accepted can be a source of great power.

My rationale: Peter Parker loses his powers when he denies the love of Mary Jane. He believes that his obligation requires him to protect her by shutting her out. A mysterious loss of his power coincides with this decision. It is only when he is forced to act to save her from Doctor Octopus, and give in to his undeniable love for her, that his powers mysteriously return. In contrast, Doctor Octopus loses his mind when his love is destroyed by a tragic accident. The story examines how love is a powerful controller of our lives and can motivate a person to heroism or cause us to self-destruct. When Peter marries Mary Jane in the end, the theme is proven as he valiantly swings back into action.

There is also a hint in the conclusion that his decision will carry consequences in the future, a further development of the thematic subject that will most likely be explored in the next film (maybe: the consequences of giving into love's power?)

Star Wars: A New Hope

Thematic subjects: power of the spirit; dangers of technology

Themes that are explored in the film: the power of the spirit is far greater than any technology or violent show of strength or aggression

My rationale: the finale is a battle between faith (Luke's control of the Force to help him direct his attack to the critical sweet spot in the Death Star) versus the epitome of technology (Death Star—the ultimate product of technology). Luke proves his theme when he turns off his computer and destroys the Death Star. The thematic subjects are reinforced throughout the film: the Jedi's weapon is a lightsaber, a simpler more primitive form of technology that becomes a symbol for the focus on the spirit as having real power; Darth Vader as becoming so dependent on technology that he needs a machine-suit to survive; the Emperor's overriding confidence in his technological power and dominance over the rest of the galaxy; Obi-Wan's belief in the power of the Force over any material object, and his triumphant return in the finale as a ghostly voice that guides Luke to victory; Han Solo's oppositional stance against the power of the Force and his cocky reliance on machines like his blaster and the Millennium Falcon...

I found my thematic subjects; now what?

Along with tone and premise, the thematic subject becomes the foundation for your worldbuilding process. Your characters will be philosophical mouth-pieces for your subjects (check Episode 007 for an explanation); they will embody oppositional values based on your subject. Look at *Star Wars* (technology and spirit):

Luke: I will devote my life to faith in the Force, and abide by the philosophies of the Jedi.

Han: Faith is no match for a blaster (technology).

Vader: I need technology in order to survive; I am now more machine than man.

Threepio: I am a machine that can understand every conceivable language except the language of the human mind and spirit.

Kenobi: Faith is the ultimate power in the universe; I am so confident of that fact that I will face death to prove it.

The thematic subject will also inspire and guide all the other elements of the worldbuilding process, such as plot complications for your characters, motifs and image systems for your stories and world setting, and art direction for your world design. These topics, and the application of thematic subjects to these processes, will be addressed in future episodes.

Suggested Worldbuilding Activity

- Take a favorite television show, comic, film, or even game, and try to distill it down to its thematic subjects. You can do this by carefully paying attention to the pattern of conflicts in the story, and the various philosophies and choices that the characters take in response to these conflicts. Thematic subjects can also be suggested through setting, genre, and design choices, but these elements will be explored later (since each deserves more attention than I can possibly give here).
- When you have a thematic subject that makes sense, that can be supported with evidence from the story, try developing opposing philosophies that relate to your subject. See if you can create a system of characters that all react in different and oppositional ways to the thematic subject.
- You can also look at a world that you have already constructed, and decide on its thematic subjects. Examine an already detailed world and unlock its underlying meaning.
- In the next episode's show notes, I'll talk about more steps you can take with the thematic subject. Specifically, we'll look at out how to design character teams and antagonists from your world's thematic subjects.



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