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Worldbuilding Ep. 014: Setting Part Three, Using Image Systems

By [imworlds](#) · November 14, 2007 · [Email this post](#) · [Print this post](#) · [Post a comment](#) · [del.icio.us](#) · [Digg it](#)

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Worldbuilding Episode 014 Show Notes

News

The CORE review will appear in episode 15. In the meantime, [check out CORE over at Dragon's Landing](#), and post your own reviews of the system. Is this a system that I should use in Season 2 in the development of our model world? Why or why not? In your opinion, what are the strengths of CORE as it applies to worldbuilding? Any weaknesses?

Be sure to go to the forum and post your thoughts, opinions, and suggestions about the kind of world you'd like to see developed in Season 2. Include your choice of genre, tone and mood, themes, characters, conflicts, inspiration (films, books, music, television) and anything else that comes to mind.

Lastly, episode 15 will air next week. Version 2 of the site will be launched around this time, as well, and will include several of the changes you asked for in the forums and in emails.

Worldbuilding Feature

Your plot is about what happens in the story. Your theme is about why it happens.

An image system is any kind of visual metaphor you use in the construction of your world, campaign, or adventure.

The key word is visual. You can, when you build, pay deliberate attention to the setting, weapons, weather, and descriptive imagery that you create, and how they relate to your thematic ideas.

Quick review



Settings reinforce the thematic ideas in *Raiders of the Lost Ark*

Your plot is about *what* happens in your story. Character A finds out about Artifact B, and then goes off on a quest to retrieve said artifact, while Antagonist C pursues our hero.

Your theme is about *why* it happens. In our previous example, our thematic idea might be about belief. Let's say our artifacts in our world are divine in nature, and our hero, in order to succeed, must learn that the artifacts are truly divine, and not just some forgotten junk. Those

who do not respect divinity will perish. The artifact is found, yet the hero must overcome his own sense of shallow disbelief in a higher power.

Belief is the key thematic idea behind the Indiana Jones movies, and these films reinforce this key idea by setting the story in locations that represent divine belief, such as tombs, religious sanctuaries, churches, temples and holy sites, and pitting the hero against foes who represent callous and mercenary or overzealous attitudes towards the divine (Nazis, evil priests, fanatic cults, sacred orders). Indiana Jones is constantly searching in the forgotten realities of a divine past, covered in dust, always having one foot in the grave. The entire trilogy is layered with visual reminders that this is a story about belief.

So, image systems are visual metaphors that reinforce and communicate and harmonize with the thematic ideas in your story. An image system will include your choice of settings and locations, costumes, weaponry, and any other forms of imagery, as well as the character types and details.

Now, if you are designing a game world, and you determine what your thematic ideas are, or this realization occurs to you midway through your process, this realization will help you in limitless ways to construct your adventures and create characters and interesting situations, all of them being cohesively tied to together by your themes.

Here are some examples to show you how writers, filmmakers and worldbuilders use image systems in their work



Blood as a recurring symbol in *Macbeth*

Shakespeare is the master of symbolism and visual metaphor. *Macbeth* is one big image system. For example, the use of blood becomes a recurring pattern throughout the play that represents the corruption in nature that Macbeth and Lady Macbeth (and the witches) bring about through the murder of the benevolent king. In *Romeo and Juliet*, Shakespeare uses plant imagery throughout the story as a metaphor for the ambivalent nature of love to potentially heal or poison.

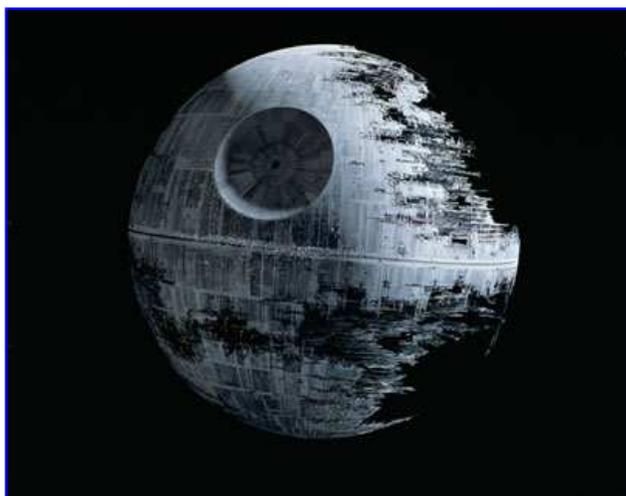
George Lucas, in *Star Wars*, explores the dehumanizing power of technology and the ability of the spirit to overcome this. His villain is a man robbed of his humanity and who is now a walking machine, both empowered by technology and entombed within it. The entire second half of the movie takes place within a massive technological weapon. The heroes use technology themselves, but the elegant and simple Light Saber is a metaphor for power without technological weaponry, and Luke's choice in the end, to deny the service of his technology and instead use the force, causes him to destroy the massive technological weapon. In the last movie, *Return of the Jedi*, the Empire is destroyed on a planet devoid of machines and bathed in overwhelming nature, and by a primitive race of creatures using simple weapons.

Lucas uses locations to mirror the journey of the hero, as well. In *Empire Strikes Back*, when Luke faces his own personal hell, the story finds itself in locations that represent this character arc, from the lifeless frigid wastes of Hoth, the murky and underground realm of Dagobah, to the Heaven-like Bespin, all settings that visually reinforce a mythological journey to Hell and back.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, Homer employs numerous visual images to reinforce the futility of senseless pride: the ocean, Poseidon himself, is Odysseus's opponent, the ultimate metaphor for limitless and divine power that constantly thwarts Odysseus's stubborn machismo in the face of the divine.

In *Silence of the Lambs*, Clarice Starling (notice the bird imagery in the name) must deal with the inherent evil in humanity's heart. In the story, she constantly must go underground, into the nether regions of the human soul and deal with the demons that exist there.

Here are some more random thoughts, in no particular order:



The entire second half of the story takes place within a massive technological weapon

King Arthur's sword represents the truth of his fate. Swords can represent truth, or justice, or order, or they can represent war, violence, or tyranny. Shields can represent defense, loyalty, or protection.

In *Firefly*, the government agents and the Reavers are the perfect antagonists to represent Joss Whedon's exploration of state order and free will.

In a western, images can be used to represent the oppressiveness of the wilderness, or the oppressiveness of Manifest Destiny, or the struggle between nature and civilization. Think about a small town set against a massive mountain to represent the futility of civilization to overcome nature. Or, think about train imagery as a device to show civilization's stubborn destruction and penetration of the wilderness. Or use: clocks, machinery, telegraphs (all metaphors communicating man's attempt to civilize the wilderness).

Cities as Visual Metaphors

Cities can be designed around thematic ideas. If your story is about corruption, or decadence, or criminal evil, you can design a city based upon Los Angeles and its history. If your world is about immigration, new lives, or romance, you can design a city based upon New York. Magic and eroticism? How about New Orleans? Espionage, war, the cost of power? How about using Washington D.C., Casablanca or Berlin as a source of inspiration? Sorcery, mysticism, gothicism, industry, history? Use London. Decadence and revolution? Versailles or Paris. The future fused with nature? Tokyo and Kyoto. Imperialism and invasion? Use the Phillipines. You can use a modern city as inspiration for your own cities in your own worlds, and mutate them into new fantasy or sci-fi settings while still maintaining their flavor and personality (or concocting an original city personality).

Image systems are a wonderful way to layer your world with metaphors that speak clearly about the significant ideas in your creation, and that tie all of its elements together.

Worldbuilding Activity

Image systems are a wonderful way to layer your world with metaphors that speak clearly about the significant ideas in your creation, and that tie all of its elements together.

Think about the key thematic subjects your are exploring in your world, then brainstorm and make a list of image-laden ideas and metaphors that can represent these thematic subjects. Divide your list by locations (cities, structures...), characters and costumes, and symbols. As a model, here is a start for *Star Wars*:

Star Wars (thematic subject: dangers of technology and the power of spirit to overcome technology)

Locations: desert world, ice world, cloud world (nature, spiritual), machine worlds (Death Star, Coruscant), spaceships (Falcon, X-wings, Tie-Fighters), the Cantina (a between place), inside the space slug, Naboo (lush nature being invaded by the forces of technology-robots)

Characters and costumes: Darth Vader (machine man), Luke (missing hand and robot hand), other cyborgs, droids, light sabers (technology or magic?), Han Solo (the blaster), the Wookies (nature), Ewoks, Jawas (big machine), Sand People (nature)

Symbols: the force, the Death Star, light sabers (symbol like sword?)

Get the idea? See you next time, where we talk about the "Party".

Discussion

No comments for “Worldbuilding Ep. 014: Setting Part Three, Using Image Systems”

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