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Worldbuilding Ep. 015: The Party

By imworlds · December 17, 2007 · 📩 Email this post · 🖨 Print this post · Post a comment · del.icio.us · Digg it

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Worldbuilding Episode 015 Show Notes

News

> The show has a new voice mail number at 206-984-3443, and I encourage everyone to use that number to get their world suggestions, questions and ideas on the air for everyone to hear…

1. Season 2 is around the corner, and will require more audience participation than ever. Call in and leave a message describing the kind of world you would like to see developed for Season 2. The show has a new voice mail number at **206-984-3443**, and I encourage everyone to use that number to get their world suggestions, questions and ideas on the air for everyone to hear.What inspires you and what kind of world would you like to see developed as a shared world setting? What genre interests you (or cross of genres)? I'll play your call on the air during the Season finale episode.

You can also write in to sad@imaginaryworlds.net, and join the forums at imaginaryworlds.net/phpbb.

2. We have a special three episode monster building special available now for download, for those listeners who donate to the show. This tutorial was born from my desire to address monster building from a literary angle, a discussion about the history of monsters and their place within the story world, and how to infuse your monsters with life and drama. These three episodes form a huge tutorial which includes a PDF document weighing in at over 50 pages, plus worksheets and templates, and a commercially free atmospheric soundtrack. I've put a lot of time into the development of this resource, as a reward to those who support the show.

3. I've taken cues from the audience and completely redesigned the site to reflect your needs and requests. Visit imaginaryworlds.net, and you will see that every episode is available for download from the homepage, in one convenient location. Show notes are much easier to find. You can access them while listening to the episodes. I've also included news and recent post blocks on the front page that connect directly to the forums, in order to encourage more posts and activity there, and I will be using the forums for future blog and news posts. The front page links to an inspiration page which includes a World Builder's Library and resource link, a section that will grow over time with additions suggested by you.

As season 2 progresses, new links will be added to world notes; the created world will be open source, and ready made as a shared world for gamers, artists, and writers.

Worldbuilding Feature

What can gamers learn from reality shows?
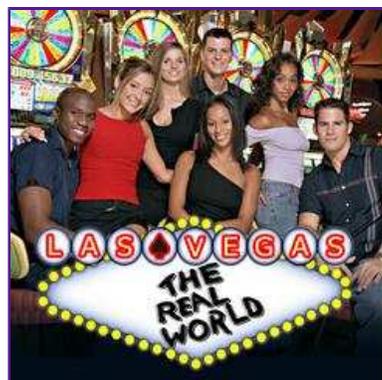
Reality shows can help gamers?

I have a group of friends who enjoy watching the show *Kid Nation*. This reality show is very similar to all the other reality shows, such as the Real World, and so on. What they failed to realize was that these shows are carefully designed with handpicked people who, put together, will create incendiary relationships.

The reality show is anything but real; it is contrived by producers, who choose character types that can be collected together to create somewhat predictable but dynamic drama.

In many ways, the reality show is like a roleplaying game. The game master is a producer who is creating a reality show in his world. Our games differ than a carefully controlled plotline because the players have (or should have) free will to act within this constructed world, effectively changing the plot. But, the players also must strive to operate according to the logic of the character's personality and design. The game master can use this to affect some dynamic predictability within the system.

Go and watch a reality show that is built from these dynamic groups, and look carefully at the character types within the system.

Character foils in literature and gaming

Elphaba and Glenda are foils, demonstrated through characterization, color and visuals

Every drama, every comedy, uses this device. The character foil is incredibly simple in theory, and as a basic definition means an opposite of a character. The character foil is the character designed to oppose the hero's design, to be a mirror to the hero, to stand next to the hero and make the hero's strengths and weaknesses stand out in relief.

If you have a multiple character story, then foils are simply opposites. Have you ever seen the *Odd Couple*? Here is the plotline:

Two friends try sharing an apartment, but their ideas of housekeeping and lifestyles are as different as night and day. Felix Ungar has just broken up with his wife. Despondent, he goes to kill himself but is saved by his friend Oscar Madison. With nowhere else to go, Felix is urged by Oscar to move in with him, at least for a while. The only problem is that Felix is neat, tidy, and neurotic, whereas Oscar is slovenly and casual.

The idea of creating foils can be used on any number of characters; the idea here is to look for opposites that when brought together will ignite and create drama. Chris Claremont understood this when he took over the *X-men* in the eighties. He created foils within the team, such as the controlling family-oriented Cyclops and the wild lone-wolf Wolverine. Beast was stoic and well-mannered, while Wolverine was rude and aggressive. Put Rogue and Storm together, and again, you will see the dynamic energy between opposites.
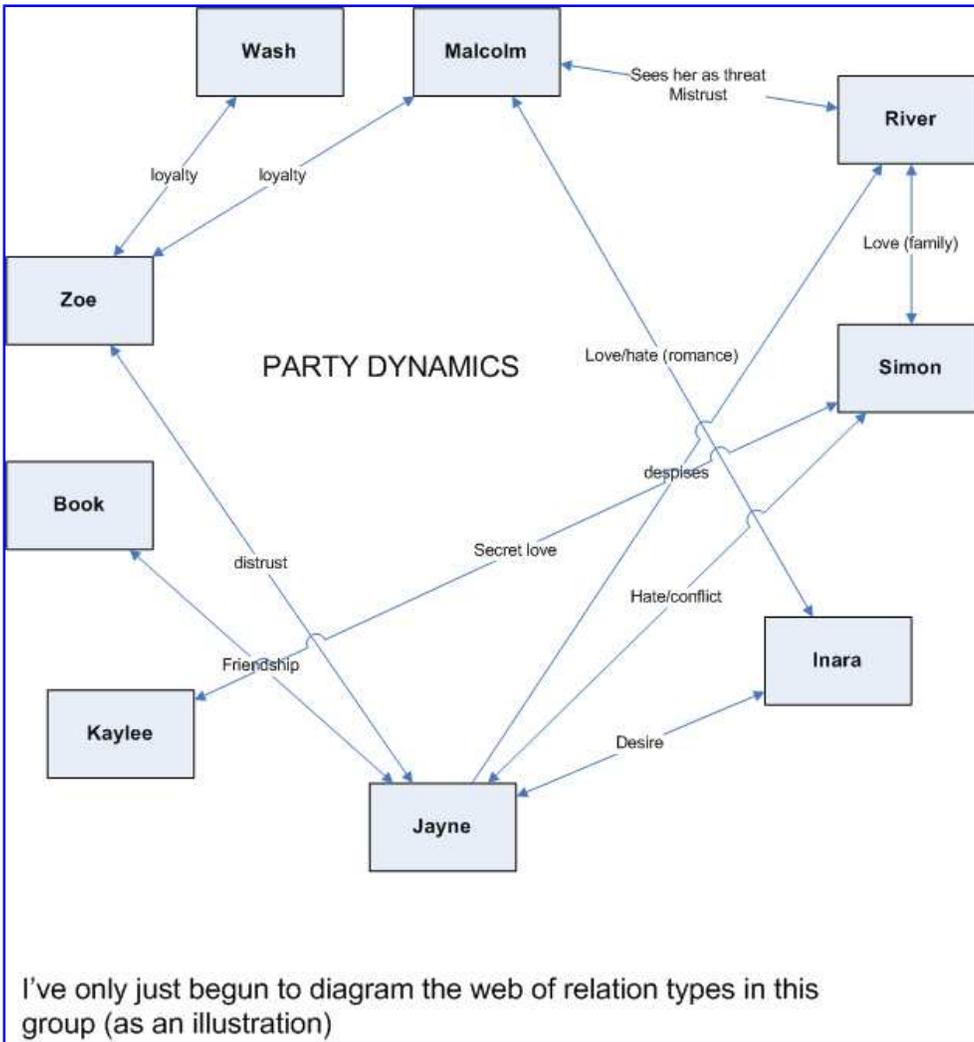
Look at *Lost*: Jack and Sawyer, Jack and Locke…
The Office: Dwight and Jim, Angela and Pam, and so on…

Scott Kurtz employs dramatic foils in his character designs (look at the design in the last panel)

Looking for patterns in dynamic party systems: the elements, astrology and the Enneagram

Firefly uses a complex network of relationships within its party matrix

Writers use systems to develop their main characters. It does not matter if you have a 2 part system, such as the *Odd Couple*, where one character is neat, the other sloppy, or a 4 part system, like the *Fantastic Four*, or a 15 part system, as in *Lost*, you want to see the Party as one dynamic unit, centered around some kind of design.

The simplest design is a binary design: two characters share opposite characteristics. *Lethal Weapon* and every other cop buddy film, Fafhrd and the Gray Mouser, Calvin and Hobbes, Lucy and Ricky Ricardo, Felix and Oscar, these are relationships designed to create conflicting energy between the opposites.

You can use established patterns for your parties, creating a template in which character types can be placed and designed.

The Fantastic Four uses the elements as inspiration for its four part systems: Earth, Air, Water and Fire representing Thing, Invisible Girl, Mr. Fantastic and Torch respectively.

Other designs include the Astrological Calendar, the Color Wheel, the Tarot, the Enneagram, the Seven Deadly Sins, archetypes, and thematic values.

Relationships within the party matrix
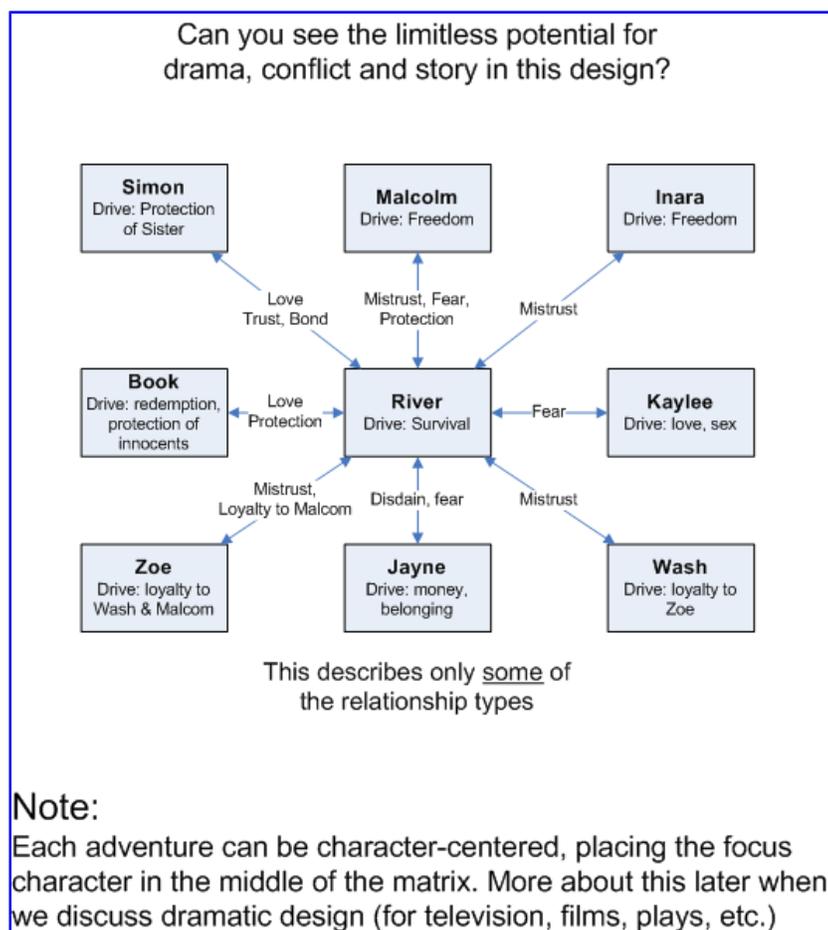
Firefly characters interact within a complex party of relationships

No character in the party should be without a context, without a defined relationship to the other characters. Using your system, draw lines between each character, briefly describing the relationship type, how the characters react to one another.

Going back to the Fantastic Four, each character acts differently with each of the different characters within the group. The Torch acts in a very antagonistic manner (almost like a bullying brother) to the Thing, while he acts more as a protective father figure to the Invisible Girl. The Thing looks Mr. Fantastic with the loyalty of a brother, yet fights incessantly with the Torch. These relationships are born from the character's types. The Torch is literally a hothead and impulsive, while the Thing is more grounded and strong willed. Mr. Fantastic is malleable but dreamy, and so on…

These character types define the relationships between characters within the group.

Relationship types generally break down to the following categories: love, hate (romantic, antagonistic), obligatory (debt or imprisonment or slavery), mentorship, dualistic or secretive, familial, honorial. Whether positive or negative, these character relationships should crank up the tension between characters in order to create conflict within the group. Again, think about reality shows like the Real World. Producers choose specific types to put together to create tension–antisocial with the overly social, comedic with the serious, criminal with the righteous. In your game world, you are creating a reality show, throwing these people together (and in stressful life-changing situations) and letting them ignite on the world stage.

The Story World's Macro Events
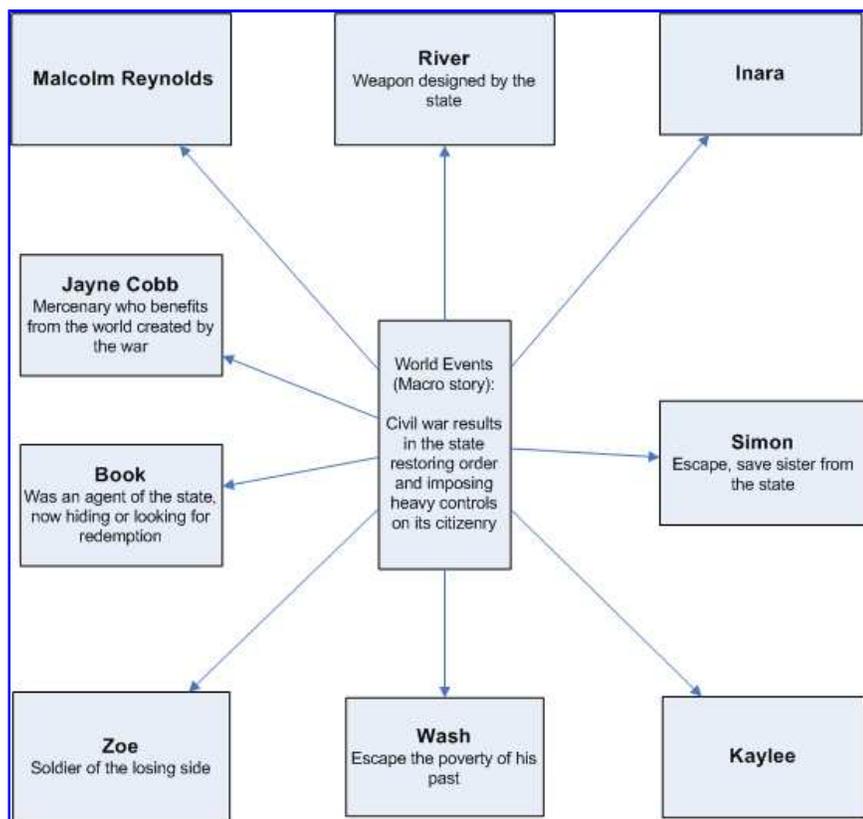
Firefly's characters are designed to react against their world's macro events

The World Back-story has Macro Events (what *Lost's* producers call its *Mythology*): pick some large events for the characters to be influenced by: Civil War, Apocalypse, Alien Invasion, Lost in a Rift, Thirty Year War, Children of Tragedy; Just as with characters, the world needs a backstory that helps shapes its cultures and history and economics–major conflicts (look at your premise, and decide what the end solution is…)

The world's back-story (its major conflicts with which the characters will react) should relate to your party dynamics. In the X-Men, government legislation against mutants is a major world back-story that influences the politics within the group, causing some character types to agree with governmental policy, others to disagree, and in varying degrees on both sides. In Firefly, party members react differently to acts of aggression or control by the state order. In Lost, each character reacts differently to the macro events on the island, some reaching for a divine answer, others for a more secular and rational one.

Character dynamics within the group should ignite every time you put a stressor down on the stage that carries with it dramatic weight. Create a back-story whose machinery runs in the background and provides an excitement and threat that intercedes in the lives of the party system. Drive them apart and bring them together through the love and hate relationships inherent in the character designs. Look at your world premise and thematic ideas, then decide: what are the world events, the macro story, the world back-story, that I will design to create conflict and drama within the group? A thirty-year war, an apocalypse, a mutant massacre, a civil war, a world war, a virus, a zombie takeover, a cold war…

Then, write reactions into your characters histories. Look at where they are in your party matrix, and help the player's write histories that explain their motives and attitudes as they relate to your world history. Each character should have a major force driving their actions. J. Michael Straszynski, creator of Babylon 5, states that strong character design involves the answer to all three questions: what does the character want, what is he willing to do to get it, and what stands in his way? If you examine any well-written story, the characters all have these questions answered by the creator.

Firefly's characters act and react according to their world's macro events

Let's look at *Firefly* as an example. One of the major world events that shape that world is the civil war that divided the people and then brought them ultimately under the control of the State. Each character is designed to be a product of that war and its consequences, although each reacts differently to the world situation, in accordance with their personality type and placement within the party.

Mal is a soldier devastated by the losing of that war. His actions reflect a man who has lost his honor, purpose and direction.

Jayne is a man without a conscious who parasitically feeds off the ruins of war, hiring himself out to the highest bidder as a mercenary, and chasing material gain over any other loyalty to cause or friendship.

River is a weapon designed by the new state, and is on the run, a product of the aftermath of war and its consequences.

And so on…

Each character is carefully designed to show a window into the world's history, and to emote feelings and experiences about the effects and weight of this world. You should ask your players to think about how their characters have been affected by the big world event that you contrive as the central dramatic force of your stories.

Use the system as a metaphor for a richer understanding of the character types

By choosing a system as a guide for your party, you can draw from this system metaphor for character design. Let's say, for example, that you want to design a four-member party around the seasons: fall, winter, summer, and spring.

You may, at first, think that designing a character around such a simple template may be limiting, but by confining yourself to the metaphors of the system, you can come up with some intriguing designs.

Let's try it as a mental exercise. I am designing four characters that embody the seasons, and I know that this world is a fantasy world (similar in nature to the typical Dungeons and Dragons setting).

I ask myself: if spring were embodied in a person, what characteristics would they have? What would a spring-themed personality look like? Spring is renewal, cheer, bright days, looking toward the freedom and warmth of summer, beautiful, escaping the cold winter, youth…interesting springboards for a character.

How about a woman who has escaped a horrible winter, a tragic event, but has chosen optimistically to look toward a brighter future. Perhaps her family has been killed by a horrible war, yet her new group of friends (the party) has renewed her hope. She will do anything to protect the party from a threat, to stop the chaos that destroyed her family. Because she is spring, she hates war and seeks only peace and love and rebirth. Secretly, she seeks a child, but will fight for a world that is worthy of bringing that child into the world.

All of these ideas came to me in two minutes, by just thinking about spring as a metaphor for a character.

Now, I want to design her foil, the *fall character*. Fall is all about turning to darkness, shoring up reserves for the hard times to come, cold, windy, the world dying and coming to a close, desolate…our second character is a foil to the spring character and therefore may have a similar history. Maybe he lost his loved ones as well, but is now seeking self-destruction rather than rebirth. He is with the party only because he sees a tiny fragment of hope that winter may be survived, but deep inside he sense only his own destruction. He was a soldier, now ruined, falling apart. Perhaps he will find renewal through the hard times to come, perhaps not.

See how this works? Try this with astrology, the tarot, and so on. Create a group using the fool archetype, the magician archetype, the devil archetype…see what you come up with by brainstorming with different party matrices.

Note: by using a system, you can see how each character, placed within the circle of other characters, acts and reacts toward the others in the group, according to their character logic and design. Characters can also be placed center-staged in more character-focused "episodes."

Secrets

> Every good character has a wealth of flaws, weaknesses, problems and a history he or she is escaping…

Lastly, use secrets. Every good character has a wealth of flaws, weaknesses, problems and a history he or she is escaping. Han Solo has Jabba the Hutt, River has her captors, Kate in Lost has her criminal past, and Wolverine has two hundred years of wars, abuse and violence. Secrets allow past history to catch up with the characters, exploding on-stage and creating a constant renewal of adventure.

In the future, we'll talk about series design, plotting story arcs over the course of a season, but for now consider Marv Wolfman's statement about how strong character design helped him make Teen Titans a powerful intellectual property for DC:

"Indeed, we wrote and drew the stories, created them from pure fiction (they don't actually exist in some alternative dimension no matter what you may have heard) but fictional characters MUST react based on who they were even as real people react based on their histories. Therefore, even if we think a character should do A, when it came down to that story, it might very well be wrong for the character do to A and so instead they do not B or even C, but perhaps M instead. If real human beings are the sum of what we were, then fictional characters need to react in the same manner. So we were often surprised at the directions the characters took even as we created the stories. I think making the characters react realistically and in character made them believable to our readers and to ourselves. And I also believe that is why The New Teen Titans became such a success."

Note: Thanks, Nils, for the Firefly character matrix diagrams!

Discussion

8 comments for "Worldbuilding Ep. 015: The Party"

1. I decided to read through the notes first, and without even having listened to the audio file I can tell this is probably one of the best episodes. Guess it was worth the wait.

   However, it's a bit hard to read those matrices, and I still haven't been able to access the forums.

   I'm off the listen to the podcast now.

   Posted by adamant | December 18, 2007, 9:09 pm

2. Adamant, you can click on the matrices; they should open up as bigger images.

   You aren't able to get into the forums? What happens when you click on "forums"?

   Posted by imworlds | December 19, 2007, 10:43 am

3. I know I can click on the images to make them bigger… but that's still a little troublesome trying to read.

   When trying to access the forums, I see:

   phpBB : Critical Error

   Could not open iCGstation template config file

   DEBUG MODE

   Line : 503
   File : functions.php

   Posted by adamant | December 19, 2007, 5:01 pm

4. I'm not sure why phpbb is giving you an error; it's not happening on my end, so it will be difficult to troubleshoot…but I will look into it.

   Posted by imworlds | December 19, 2007, 7:36 pm

5. I took the liberty to recreate Paul's drawings, I hope I made no transcription errors:

http://www.imaginaryworlds.net/phpbb/viewtopic.php?p=498#498

Posted by Nils | December 21, 2007, 6:10 am

6. Great episode, it really helped ease the sting of working retain during the holiday season.

   Because I'm a Tolkien nut, I couldn't help but mention: the actual story with the spider is that Tokien reports being bitten by a spider as his earliest memory. He was about 4ish and still living in Bloemfontein, South Africa (I think I have the town right).

   In his letters, he denies that this influenced his writing much, but its hard to make that case given that Ungoliant and Shelob figure so prominently. He does describe himself, again in his letters, as being the one in the household who would rescue spiders found inside and relocate them to the bushes in the yard.

   Anyway, I'll try to restrain myself in the future. Keep up the good work!

   -Doug
   http://robosnake.blogspot.com

   Posted by Doug | December 21, 2007, 5:45 pm

7. Great observations.

   And it's nice to have the notes for those of us stuck with slow connections.

   (PS: I'm also having trouble with the forums, anything other than the main index gives me errors such as:

   Template->make_filename(): Error - file /home/u1/qbauer/imaginaryworlds.net/html/phpbb/templates/BBTech/viewforum_body.tpl does not exist)

   Posted by Killjoy | December 23, 2007, 10:14 pm

8. I've done some poking around, and it seems to have something to do with the styles. Before I logged in (on a different computer), I received no errors. As soon as I logged in, I started receiving the same errors. Changing the style option in my profile changes the error I receive.

   Posted by Killjoy | December 27, 2007, 3:14 am

Post a comment

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