

# **Dynamic Worlds**

## **A Generative Approach to Worldbuilding**

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### **Session I**

#### **Introduction to Dynamic Worlds**

Dynamic Worlds is an approach to Worldbuilding. The name describes its two main aspects: This technique will help you design worlds that are dynamic, in that they are constantly changing and evolving. And it works by helping you design worlds whose parts have a dynamic between them: different elements combine in different ways, and define a world by their effects on each other.

A Dynamic World is defined both by what it contains, and by what it leaves unexplored. It is the realm of the unexplored that allows for constant change and growth.

Worldbuilding, as a process, can be done at different scales. It is said that one can start at the largest scale (the world) and work one's way down to the smaller details, or start at the level of details within a setting and work one's way up. This 4-part workshop -- Dynamic Worlds -- will explore each of these scales, and talk about what it means to start with any one of them, or to start in the middle and work with both large and small scales.

First, though, we'll describe the main technique in the Dynamic Worlds process.

Imagine you have a deck of cards, and on each card is a word. These could be nouns, verbs, adjectives, or perhaps even symbols. Each of these we call an Element. We draw a card: the card says:

#### **Sky**

This is a tiny world, consisting of the explicit element of the sky, and any implicit elements that may suggest to you. Birds, clouds, blue, rain, and more. Thus, it's not as small or limited a world as it first seems, but fleshing out that world would take some time. Now, we draw another card:

#### **Tree**

Our dynamic has just grown larger, but in an incremental way. We may picture a thriving tree, its branches spread out against a bright blue sky. But then perhaps we draw:

#### **Lightning**

... and our small world changes significantly. At this point, we may have the seeds of a story, or at least a setting. We have a dynamic made up of different elements, and we also know from experience that this world as defined by its elements can be changed dramatically by adding new elements: This world is dynamic, changing, mutable.

Not all the elements we draw will be so easily related to our evolving theme. We might draw:

#### **Eggplant**

... and would be faced with the decision of weaving it in to the dynamic world, or rejecting the element. An easy rule of thumb is to see whether or not your mind easily or instantly recognizes new implicit elements, even if they are surprising. If not, discard and draw another.

One exercise that can be used to try this out is to deliberately draw, say, seven cards, with the goal of discarding the two least related of them no matter what.

Before we go further, and talk about how this technique can actually be used for worldbuilding, we should talk about these cards: If we really mean to have a stack of cards and draw from them (and we do), then where do we get the cards?

My own introduction to this technique came from purchasing a deck of 10,000 Spanish vocabulary flash cards. Their main purpose was learning Spanish; but the end result was that I had a set of 10,000 elements from which to draw English words as well. But there is another, more organic and free way to build your deck which works much better for ending up with internally consistent dynamics, or worlds that focus on certain themes. It is to author what we will call a **wordgarden**.

### **Exercise - Solo Wordgarden**

Take the sheet of paper you have, and start by writing one word in its center:

#### **Canyon**

Now, write the next one that occurs to you, and then another after that. If you want, you can write short phrases as well, but the words should be clustered enough for you to clip apart into tiny rectangles. Do this for 2 minutes.

You now have the start of a tiny deck of elements. We can read off a few elements from different peoples' sheets -- and see that they have both differences and similarities. We could take the time to combine our efforts and transcribe all the words here, and end up with a pretty large set, all centered around the element of Canyon. We could have each person read their 10 favorite elements, giving everyone a chance to add any of them to their own sheets. Either way, once we're ready, we clip the elements apart, put them in a small index card box, and we've got our start.

Before we go on, we should clarify that wordgardens need not be limited to singular words. Phrases can be used as well; but since the eventual goal is to clip these out and have them to use for active writing, any phrases should be written down as compact squares, almost like tiny poems:

#### **The sun shining on the surface of Great Lake Vaandis**

### **Exercise - Two-person Wordgarden**

Let's try this again, but break into pairs with the person next to us. Put a sheet between you. Now, start with the element:

#### **Citadel**

... and take turns, starting with the first person to have a clear element in mind, and write the element down from your perspective, allowing the other person to write theirs down from the opposite side of the sheet. In other words, you'll have to read their elements upside down to ponder your next element. This speeds up the creation process, but also makes for an interesting artifact when you're done. Take 2 minutes.

Again we'll read off our 10 favorites and add any to our own sheets that we like. We have to decide who gets the elements we've created this way, and clip them apart. Draw randomly, or take turns choosing one at a time.

Before we go on, we'll experiment with the elements we have: From your inventory, draw seven elements and discard the two least related. We will go around and talk about them, and then move on.

## **Worldbuilding with Dynamic Elements - Three Scales of Worldbuilding**

For the other three parts of this workshop, we will explore three scales of worldbuilding in depth, and use the Dynamic Worlds process to flesh them out. From here on, you should keep in your mind a world of your own creation, on which you are working.

### **World > Culture < Character**

Top-down worldbuilding is working from the large-scale level of the entire world in question (continents, countries, weather, moons and stars) downwards. Bottom-up worldbuilding is working from the small-scale details of a character's immediate environment or person (father's sword, grandma's recipe box, mole over the left eye) upwards. And Middle-out is working from the level of culture (language, rituals, cities) outwards in both directions.

We have color-coded paper, so that you can pick out different scales from a mixed inventory. I have used green for World, blue for Culture, and yellow for Character.

### **Next Steps: Preparing for World, Culture, Character Scales**

As a prelude to the work we'll do in the next three sessions, we will try a wordgarden at the large scale of a whole world. Follow from here for one minute:

#### **Continent**

(If there is extra time: Try Culture and Character. These can be used as starting points and resources for those sessions.)

Now, one minute at the scale of Culture, trying to stay around a medium scale:

#### **Religion**

Finally, one minute at the scale of Character, trying to stay around that smaller scale:

#### **Locket**

In the remaining sessions, we will explore each of these levels in more detail, and I will provide some starting sets of elements with broader categories to spark your imagination. In between, try this out again, with your own world in mind, at each of the different scales -- and try to write at least one or two paragraphs, set in your world, using 5 drawn elements from the ones you have created.