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1, 2, 3 Playtime

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Monomyth / I Do Not, 2024. Unreal Engine, approx 10 min. Game views, *Malmö Gallery Weekend 2024*, IAC.
Sophia Ioannou Gjerding

On building worlds

Sophia Ioannou Gjerding

During the *1, 2, 3 Playtime* project I, like others in the group, explored the *magic circle* as a narrative element. In this regard, I have created *Monomyth / I Do Not* in Unreal Engine. *Monomyth / I Do Not* is exploring storytelling and agency in both cinematic and gaming contexts. In doing so, it employs a narrative device common in video games: the cutscene, a liminal space where player agency momentarily yields to narrative progression. The work offers a decidedly linear experience with limited player options. As the ‘player’ navigates through a series of linear scenes, they are accompanied by a soundscape of a scene taking place in a poetry salon. Here, two reluctant poets recite their versions of a heroic epic, a task they had for this specific evening. These parallel tracks point towards the exhaustion of traditional narrative structures, player agency, and the pervasive narrative trope of the hero’s journey.

As an artist, I have always been interested in creating worlds, but also in pointing out how we create worlds, even when we don’t notice it ourselves. The distinction between objective reality and worldbuilding is worth taking up, because the objective is often told from a certain position, and our world is therefore made up of stories, created from certain powerful perspectives. It is therefore not about relativising reality, but about creating a critique of power by pointing out how the world is made up of stories that create worlds. Such a story could be the hero’s journey: a story that we tell ourselves again and again in such a way that it gets deeply embedded in our culture.

The concept of worldbuilding has always been interesting to me in relation to working with game engines as a visual artist. The term has been used in so many contexts in the art world over time that its meaning has been stretched to such an extent that it has almost lost its meaning. At the same time, the term is used in many other contexts outside the art world, so that

it is often difficult to know what is meant when the term is used. In many situations it is used to point to artists who work in a combination of digital media and speculative fiction, such as sci-fi or similar.

For me, however, there is potential in this concept, which could point to a greater degree in how we tell stories. Here, I have long had the famous quote from Donna Haraway in mind: 'It matters what stories make worlds, what worlds make stories.'¹

Precisely this term indicates to me that worldbuilding is not only something that denotes the use of interactive media such as game engines, where virtual worlds can be built. It is about which worlds we create and which worlds they create.

During the *1, 2, 3 Playtime* project I came across an article in Cura Magazine². The article was a conversation with Alice Bucknell and Sarah Johanna Theurer, who compared the two concepts of 'worldbuilding' and 'worlding'. Sarah Johanna Theurer asks how these terms differ from traditional forms like science fiction thought experiments, to which Alice Bucknell replies: 'I think it might be helpful to first distinguish worlding vs. worldbuilding practices'. These terms are thrown around interchangeably to signify the same process, but for me, they are very different practices. Worldbuilding stems from a long history of creating narrative environments in which to tell a story. It's closely associated with speculative fiction and its sub-genres: sci-fi, cli-fi, horror, fantasy, solar-punk, etc. These are typically closed systems: created top-down, often by a singular author, and they don't do so well with change. As for worlding, I take a page from Donna Haraway as well as contemporary artists like Ian Cheng who see the process as much more collaborative, non-hierarchical and open-ended. It's less about creating any singular 'one' world and much more about an agile system of nested worlds that is constantly redesigning itself. Worlding often has ecological undertones, as it often deals with a multi-species cohort of co-creators, machine intelligence included.

To me, the differentiation between 'worldbuilding' and 'worlding' became a useful tool to highlight the potential of both terms. These are concepts that I have not yet finished investigating in my artistic practice. It will be a concept that will follow me when I produce works in game engines in the future, but not exclusively here. The responsibility that lies in the worlds we create, and which I particularly identify in the concept of 'worlding', the way

1 Haraway, Donna Jeanne. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Duke University Press, 2016), 12.

2 Cura Magazine. *Issue: 41: New World Agency*, 2023, 278–287.

of interweaving with the world, I find useful. It's not about creating parallel worlds, but about messing around in this world and everything it has to offer.



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