BETWEEN THE STORY AND THE WORLD

Better Interactive Worldbuilding

Ben Schneider (he/him)

Narrascope 2024

world-building noun

world-build·ing ˈwərl(d)-ˈbil-diŋ

variants *or less commonly* **world building** *or* **worldbuilding**

: the creation of a fictional world (especially within the science fiction and fantasy genres) that is believable and consistent within the context of the story

Merriam-Webster.com

Worked for my 8th grade book report.
Why not my Narrascope talk?

WORLDBUILDING

Any comprehensive, coherently thought-out setting

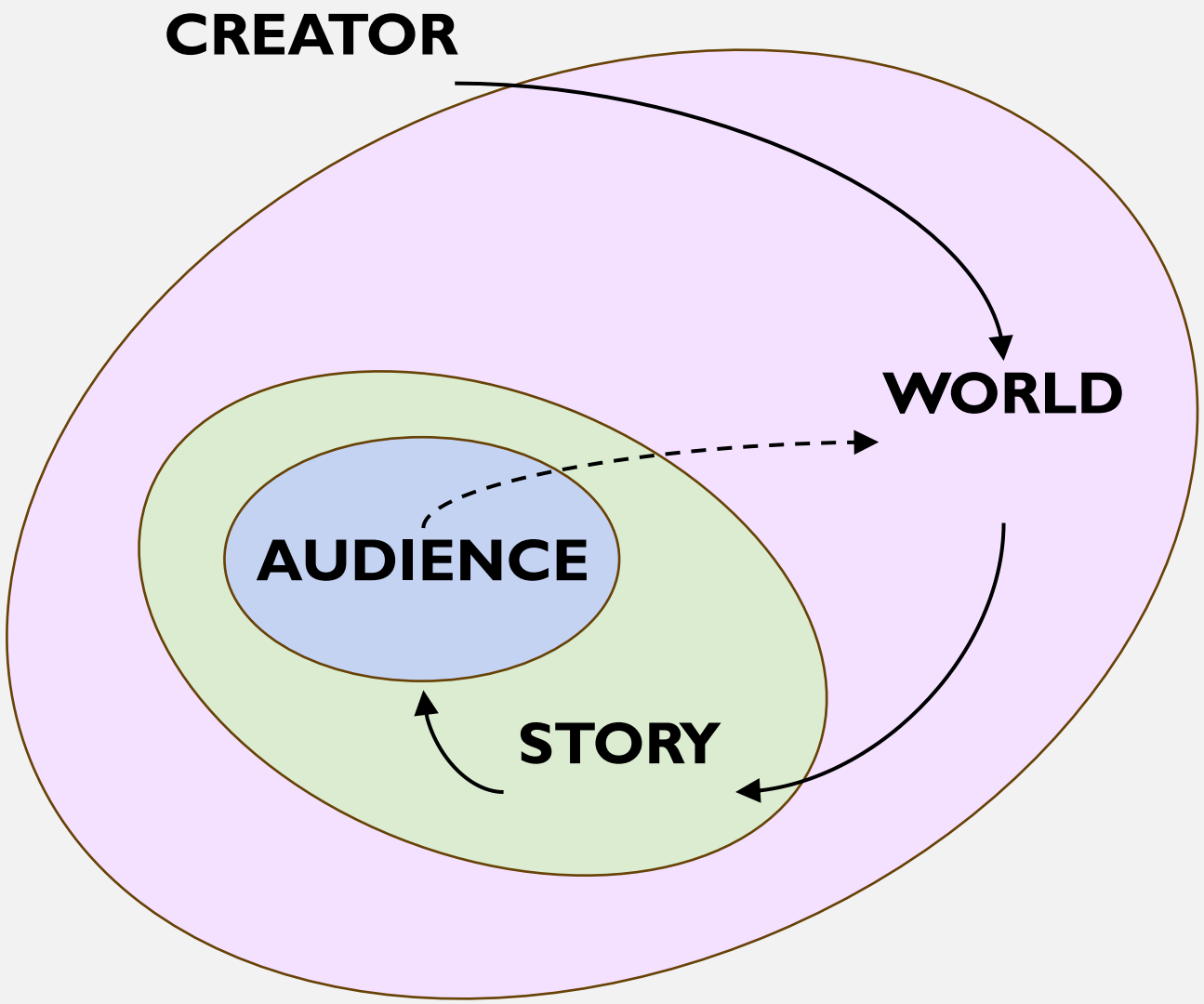
AKA IP (Intellectual Property)

… basically "Wordlbuilding Under Capitalism"

Realistic or far-flung, big or small, genre or not*

* But to be fair: e*specially* good with genre0

WORLDBUILDING



Lesson 1

WHAT IS BEST IN WORLDBUILDING?

The best worlds capture the imagination and are great places to tell stories in.

Hallmarks:

- Promise of Transport
- Rife with Adventure
- Welcoming and Accessible

Hold on, I'll explain

PROMISE OF TRANSPORT

- Transport: aka immersed
- Promise: that it will be sustained
- See also:
  - Suspension of Disbelief
  - The Magic Circle
  - "Living, breathing worlds"
  - Yeah yeah immersion
- Promise as important as Transport!

Beam us up

RIFE WITH ADVENTURE

- ~~Living, breathing, boring~~
- Adventure:
  - Here meaning narrative interest, potential
  - Via instability, injustice, aspiration
- Rife:
  - Varied and spread out
  - Non-monolithic
  - Ideally, wheels within wheels
  - (Also just a word I like)

Full of story hooks

WELCOMING AND ACCESSIBLE

- Accessible
  - Worlds need a *way in*
  - AKA entry point(s)
  - Inclusivity starts here!
- Welcoming
  - Once you're in
  - Familiar beginnings
  - Wondrous destinations

Looks safe out there

Go from the *credible* to the *incredible*

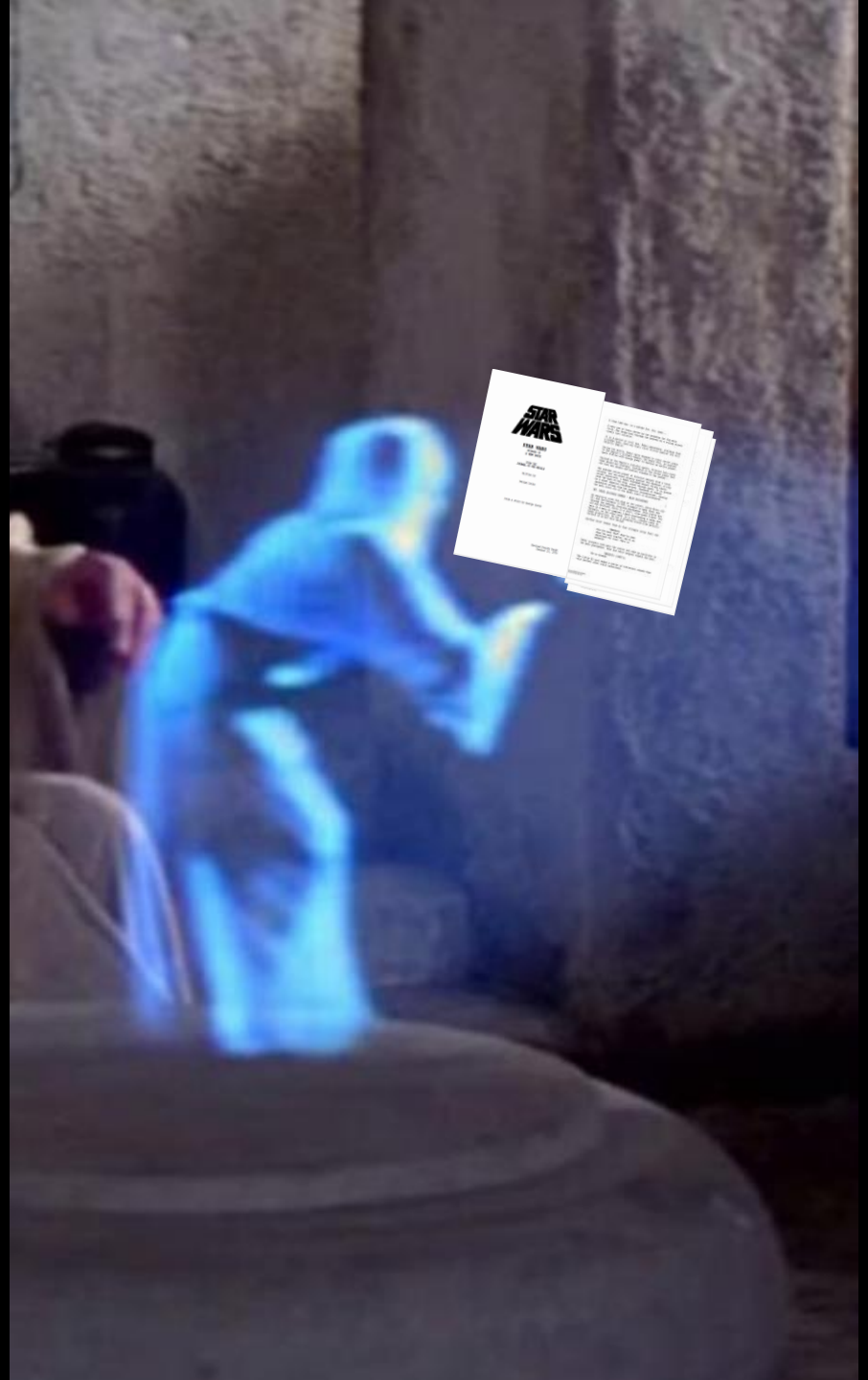
The best worlds capture the imagination and are great places to tell stories in.

Hallmarks of great worldbuilding:

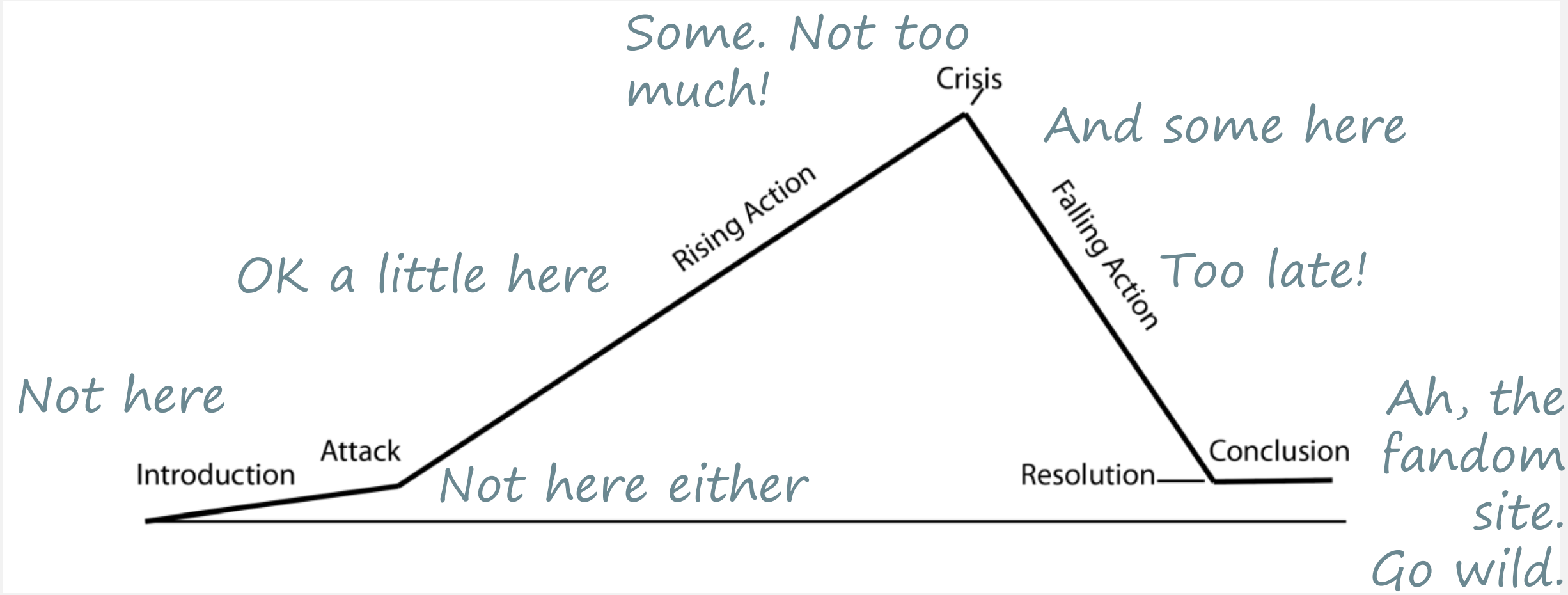
Promise of Transport	Living, breathing worlds
Rife With Adventure	Instability and varied story hooks
Welcoming and Accessible	Familiarity and inclusive entry points

Lesson 2

DELIVERING THE WORLD


STAR WARS

WHERE YOU CAN LOREDUMP: A HANDY GUIDE



The ‘Iceberg Problem’

This

Has to give you

This

THE FIRST THING YOU SEE:

SO IT'S SCI FI

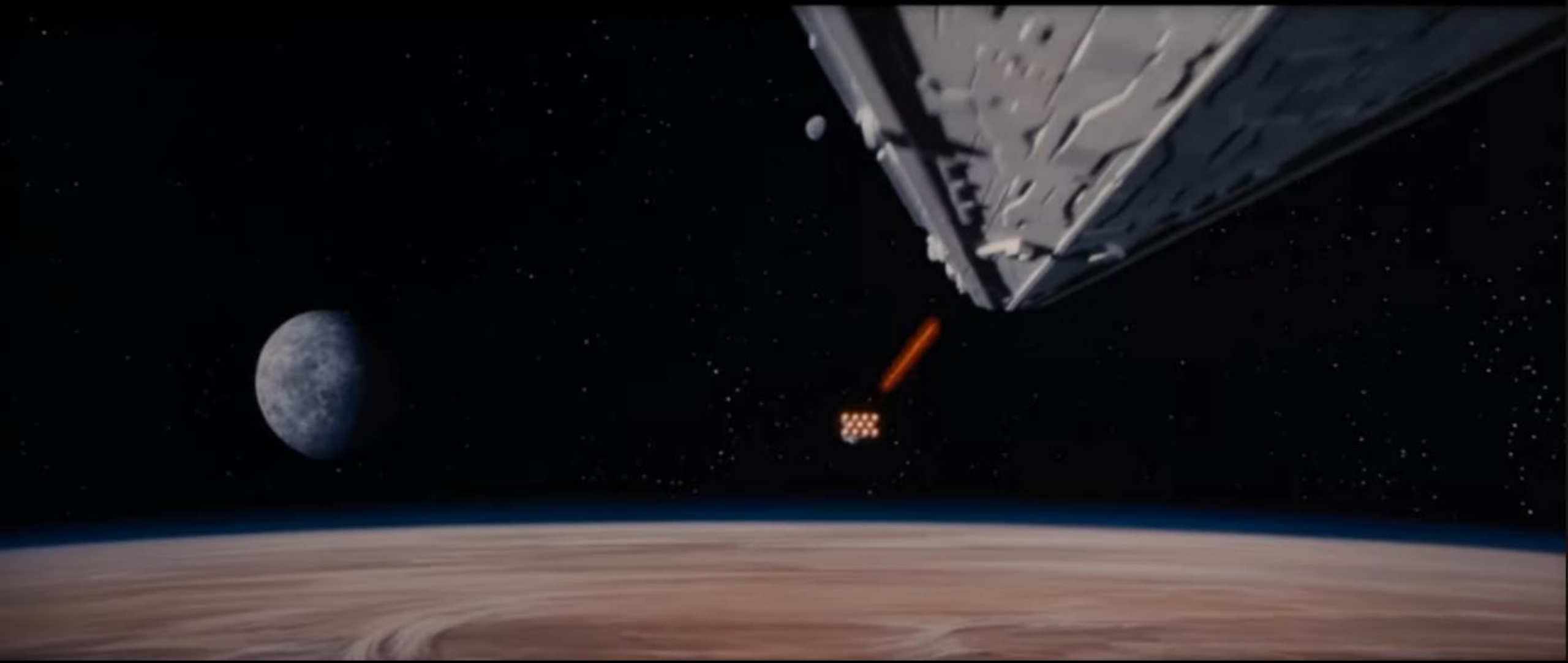
A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. . . .

Maybe there will be princesses
And wizards!

OH, BUT
IT'S LIKE A FAIRY TALE

Okay, but I hope there's some
Pewpew and robots, too.

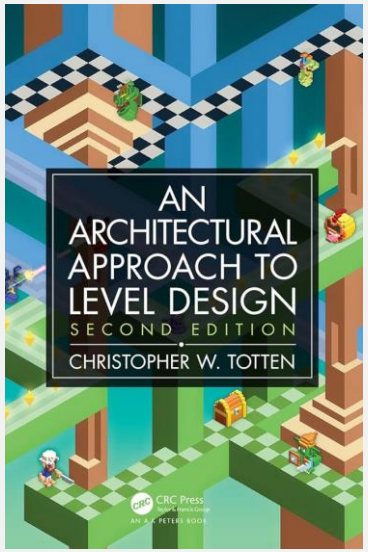
Spaceships, check
Pewpew, check
Princesses?



Imperial Senate?
Rebel spies??
Plans???
WHOA.
COOL.

THE PARADOX OF IMMEDIACY

- Immediacy leads immersion…
- Immersion leads transport…
- Transport leads worlds.



Curiously related:

Architectural Phenomology (via Chris Totten)

#1 Worldbuilder's tools: bullet lists

The micro and immediate must convey what's most essential about the macro. In the first moments and throughout.

The paradox of immediacy	^ *that*
The Iceberg Problem	What's below is clear from above
In-clueing	Exposition thy world artfully

STORY
Lesson 3
GAME
WORLD UP FRONT
STORY LATER
WORLDBUILDING

Concept art by my friend, the amazing Sean Andrew Murray

BIG HUGE GAMES
3 STUDIOS
PRESS RESET
RUIN AND RECOVERY IN THE VIDEO GAME INDUSTRY
JASON SCHREIER
AUTHOR OF BLOOD, SWEAT, AND PIXELS

Bridge clearance: 10,000 years
JOHN K THORNE

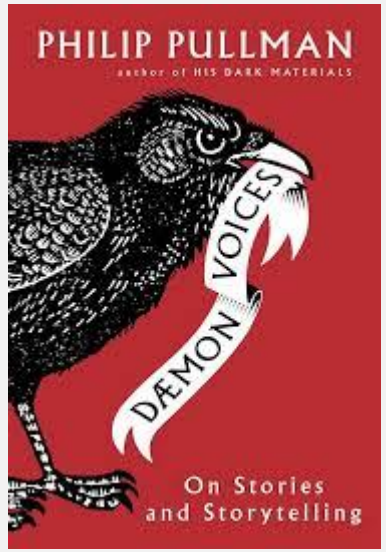
SEPARATE WORLDBUILDING FROM STORY

- Separate worldbuilding from plot construction
- Worldbuilding early!
  (plus premise and other really big moments)
- Plot outline later

- The practical: team communication, schedule
- Protects larger project from writing process

SEPARATE WORLDBUILDING FROM STORY

Philip Pullman *The Path Through the Wood (How Stories Work)*



- World = forest
- Story = path
- Totality of possible paths = story phase space

- Linear storytelling: "stick to the path!"
- Interactive storytelling: "that wolf looks like good XP"

© 2017 Saul Zaentz Co. All rights reserved. ™ Saul Zaentz Co. under license to Standing Stone Games LLC.

Every new region, a new lore doc:

- Maps
- History
- Relation to major LOTR themes and characters
- Invented characters, goings-on, issues

Worldbuilding :cheff_kiss:

© 2017 Saul Zaentz Co. All rights reserved. ™ Saul Zaentz Co. under li[illegible] Standing Stone Games LLC.

Lore doc, rated:

- ✓Worldbuilding first, story later
- ✓Promise of Transport (we thought this all through)
- ✓Rife with Adventure (story hooks great and small)
- ✓Welcoming & Accessible (why our players care, how they get there)
- ✓Iceberg problem: title, premise, theme

Check, check, check, check, and check

© 2017 Daybreak Game Company LLC. All rights reserved. Daybreak Game Company LLC under license to Standing Stone Games LLC.

LORE VS STORY

CONSIDER THE AUDIO LOG

Story

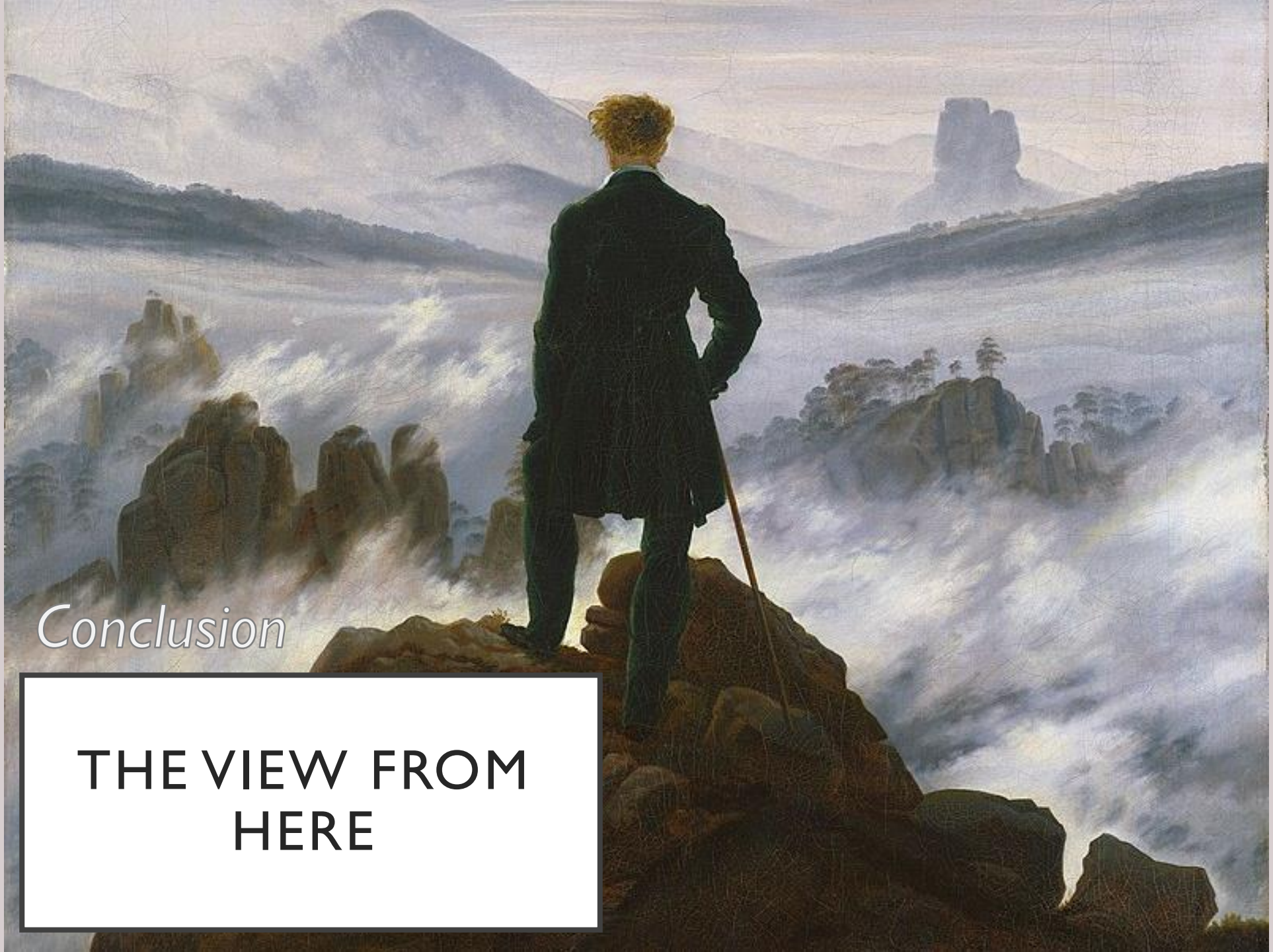
Player

Worldbuilding

PLAY EXPERIENCE ≠ PLOT OUTLINE

Narrative of a playthrough:

- Plot…
- *and* Choices
- *and* Gameplay
- *and* Emergent accident
- *and* Distractions



Conclusion

THE VIEW FROM HERE

A QUICK REVIEW

Great Worldbuilding:

Captures the imagination and affords great story

Accessible and Welcoming: inclusive and familiar entry points

Promise of Transport: Reliable magic circle

Rife with Adventure: Multifarious narrative veins

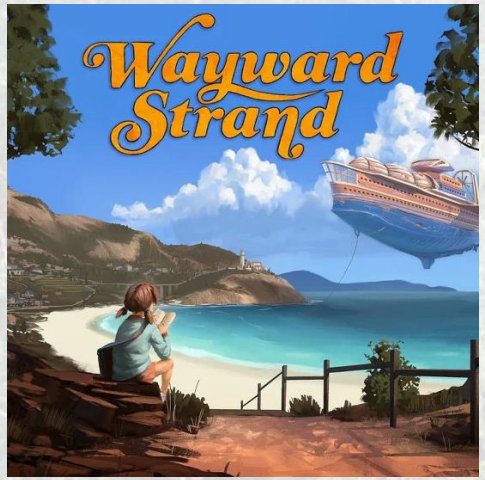
The Iceberg Problem: understand the world through a fragment

Worldbuild early, plot later

In interactive media, the player comes *between* the story and the world

Scale:
small

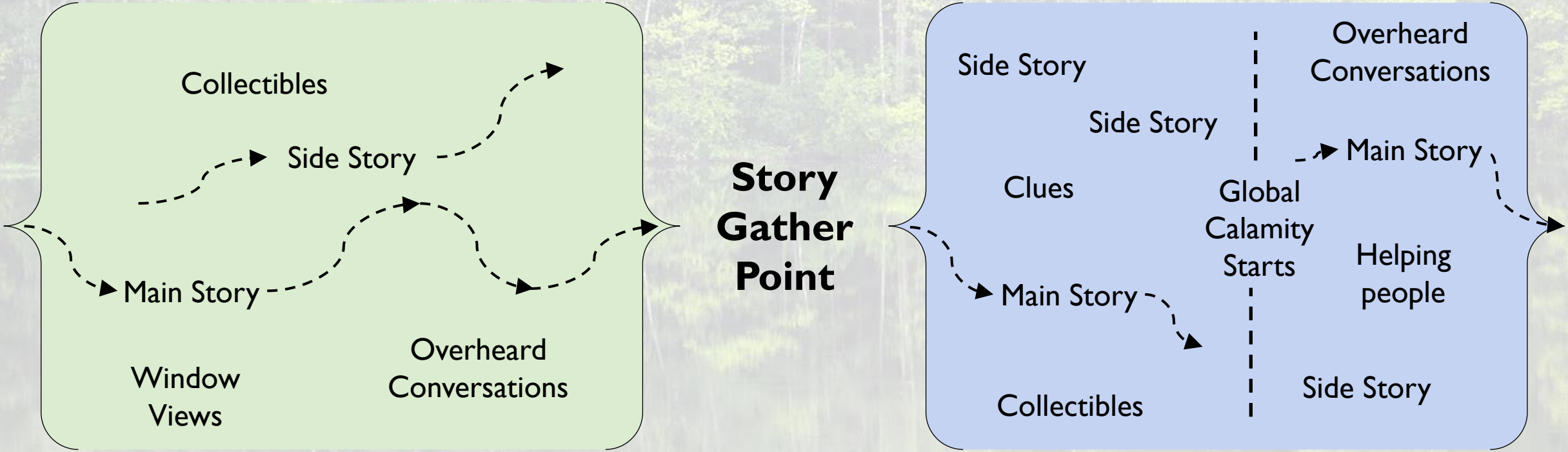
Scale: large



2023 GDC Talk: "The Secret Lives of NPCs"

Story structure like braided hair

Loose strands + gather points



NON-PLOT NARRATIVE TOOLBOX

- Diary entries
- Maps, Diagrams, Trees
- Interactive conversations
- Interactivity, NPC behavior, and other gameplay
- Scheduling and other autonomous NPC behavior
- Environmental text and audio: radio, graffiti, screens…
- Collectibles
- Choices to define self & relationships

IN SUMMARY:

Build amazing worlds

So your stories flow out of them

And those who play them are empowered, immersed, and fulfilled

THANK YOU

Image Credits:

Planet Earth, herbert haseneder, flickr 2019 (Public Domain)
Tools, Trotoart, thenounproject 2022, CC Li
Definition of 'worldbuilding', merriam-webster.com 2024
Conan the Barbarian, film via Youtube 1982
Teleporter: Star Trek
American Sweetgum Tree Balls, Jim Evans, commons.wikmedia.org 2018 (CC BY-SA 4.0)
[Hobbit Door], Rudenko, via google cc image search 2018
Star Wars, Ep. IV: A New Hope, film via YouTube 1977
Star War Ep IV original film script via scriptslug.com
Kenneth Rowe's Basic Dramatic Structure, wikipedia.org 2017 (CC BY-SA 4.0)
An Architectural Approach to Level Design 2nd ed, by Christopher W. Totten CRC Press 2019
Hegenburger 1/3 lb Cheese Burger, Elliot, flickr 2007 (CC BY 2.0)
Rope Bridge, Dylan, https://www.atlasobscura.com/places/last-handwoven-bridge
Teston Bridge River Medway, John K Thorne, flickr 2021 (Public Domain)
BHG Logo, Big Huge Games
38 Studios Logo, 38 Studios / Curt Schilling
Press Reset, Jason Schreier, Grand Central Publishing 2021
Ascendent Concept art by Sean Andrew Murray
Daemon Voices, Philip Pullman, Knopf 2017
Lord of the Rings Online promo key art, Warner Bros/Daybreak 2017
balance scale, winnifredxoxo, flickr 2011 (CC BY 2.0)
Audio Log recorder, bioshock.fandom.com
Barber of Seville, Pixabay 2017 (CC0 1.0)
Wanderer Above the Sea of Fog, Caspar David Friedrich (Public Domain)
Bottle Garden, Jethro C., pexels.com 2023 ('Free to use')
Forest lake, Laisve Lideikyte, flickr 2018 (CC BY 2.0)