BLOB BY BLOB: DESIGNING A WORLD

BY KATJA FLÜKIGER

Q & A with Slartibartloose, Earth expert, and Earth II design supervisor

The meeting takes place at the visitor center of planet Magrathea, the white walls are sparsely covered with pristine posters showing the popular interplanetary tourist attractions.

Q: **Regi Külfajtak**, Editor in chief of the Universal Times

A: **Slartibartloose**, Earth expert and Earth II design supervisor

Slartibartloose and Regi are sitting on opposite ends of an absurdly large table. They are communicating through device resembling a string telephone.

Welcome Slartibartloose, and thank you for joining us tonight. We are so excited to hear about your insider perspective on what it is really like building Earth II on Magrathea and what challenges you have encountered with the design of it, but more to that later.

Q: For our readers who are not familiar with Magrathea, could you just quickly explain who you are and what you do?

A: Of course, I can Regi. I currently am employed by the—recently re-awakened—planet-building-planet, Magrathea. As you know the planet-building business caused the intergalactic stock market to crash and consequently Magrathea went into hibernation to prevent any further losses. At least that was until recently when we got the order to build Earth II. My responsibility is to find a way to build accessible worlds through designing a system of meaningful points of entry.

Q: Why Earth?

A: Well, ever since my exchange century as a graphic designer on Earth, I have been interested in the less developed worlds like that one. It's so CUTE how humans overestimate their importance. Remember that golden record they sent out in the twentieth century? They drew diagrams and everything, as if we didn't already know. But humans are also very creative. They have an ability to conceive imaginary worlds and bring them into reality. I figured that, as a professional world builder and designer, I could learn a lot from these humans and I discovered that the principles of worldbuilding can easily be applied to graphic design to create sustainable systems that have space to evolve. Graphic design is essentially a form of worldbuilding.

Q: You mentioned earlier that you build accessible worlds. How many worlds are there?

A: Humans may say that surely there can only be one—Earth. Wrong! Even if they do not have all the necessary technological advancements, and even if they are blissfully unaware of what is really going on in the Universe, they have no excuse to not believe in the multiplicity of worlds.[1] There is the science world, the art world, the graphic design world, the Old World, the New World, the world of pain, Disney World, the world of video games, movies, stories etc... I once tried to look up a definition for "world," and guess what, I got 25 definitions! Clearly, humans like worlds, and they like belonging to them.

Q: What exactly do you think they like belonging to?

A: Kids frequently enter imaginary worlds in play. They work in blanket construction, become Lego architects and dungeon designers. Some researchers, including John Tooby and Leda Cosmides, state that building imaginary worlds is innate and may even be essential to evolution. They strongly believe that imagination and association are of great value for humans in survival and reproduction.[2]

Q: How is that?

A: Have you ever tried to have sex without employing your imagination?

I have, it's boring!

As mentioned earlier, I have spent many years on Earth doing research on world-building, and I have found that it really is not so different from the design process we employ here at Magrathea.

Q: But those are not real worlds, they are fabricated.

A: Fabrication implies fallacy, but in an imaginary world more than one fact can be true. If someone asked me what I see when I look out of my window, I could answer with "a spaceship," "a cluster of molecules," or even "a triangle." All these answers are true depending on

THERE IS ONE SIMPLE LAW IN MY WORLD: GRAPHIC DESIGN IS WORLDBUILDING.

OFTENTIMES WE FORGET THAT TO CREATE A DESIGN IT IS NOT JUST A MUTUALLY DEPENDENT RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN ADOBE SUITE AND THE DESIGNER, OR EVEN THE PENCIL AND THE DESIGNER. WE WORK WITH WRITERS, PHOTOGRAPHERS, EDITORS, FILMMAKERS, ETC. WE TAKE INSPIRATION FROM ALL AROUND US AND FOCUS ON CREATING DESIGNS THAT BELONG TO A COHESIVE WORLD.

THERE ARE OF COURSE MANY WORLDS. THERE IS THE SCIENCE WORLD, THE ART WORLD, THE GRAPHIC DESIGN WORLD, THE OLD WORLD, THE NEW WORLD, DISNEY WORLD, THE WORLD OF PAIN, THE WORLD OF VIDEO GAMES, MOVIES AND SONGS. THE WORLD I CHOSE FOR MY THESIS IS THE WORLD OF *THE HITCHHIKERS GUIDE TO THE GALAXY* BY DOUGLAS ADAMS.

[1] Goodman, Nelson. "I. Words, Works, Worlds, 1. Questions". *Ways of Worldmaking*. 2013

[2] Holland, Norman. "Part Nine: Cognition, Emotion, Evolution, Science". *Literature and the Brain*. 2009

IT IS A WORLD THAT HAS BEEN ADAPTED AND REINVENTED ACCROSS MEDIA. ADAMS HIMSELF WAS INVOLVED IN MANY OF THESE ADAPTIONS AND CHANGED THE STORY AS HE SAW FIT. M.J. SIMPSON ONCE SAID ABOUT ADAMS: "HE WAS PRETTY GOOD AT MIDDLES. HE COULDN'T DO ENDINGS... MAINLY BECAUSE BY THE TIME HE GOT TO THE MIDDLE, HE'D THOUGHT OF ANOTHER REALLY GOOD BEGINNING AND HE WANTED TO GO WRITE THAT INSTEAD OF DOING THE ENDING..."

ADAMS WASN'T NECESSARILY A GOOD STORY TELLER BUT HE WAS A REALLY GOOD WORLD BUILDER. WORLDS ARE ALWAYS BEING CONSTRUCTED, ALWAYS GROWING AND ALWAYS EXPANDING AND DEFENITELY NEVER ENDING. THINK OF A WORLD AS A SYSTEM. EVERYTHING IS CONNECTED.

SLIME MOLD (PHYSARUM POLYCEPHALUM) IS A SINGLE CELL ORGANISM THAT CANNOT BE PROPERLY CLASSIFIED. IF YOU FEED SLIME MOLD OATS IT WILL MAKE DIRECT CONNECTIONS BETWEEN THEM. IT CAN LEARN THROUGH HABITUAL LEARNING AND IS AN ALTERNATE FORM OF INTELLIGENCE.

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what world we are in—or, in other words, what context we are asked the question in. Truth is not solely defined by the answer but also by the specificity of the question. Different worlds ask different questions.[3] In fact, the only reason we are building Earth II is obviously because our ancestors failed to ask the right question. I mean seriously, what did they expect the answer to "life, the Universe and everything" would be?

A big chunky "42" raises and starts flashing on the absurdly large table.

Maybe a better word to use instead of "true" would be "relevant." Facts are more or less relevant depending on the world.[4] For example,

S. puts out his hand and grabs a heavy looking book called *How to Lose Friends and Alienate People* out of thin air and drops it immediately. Then he picks it up and opens it.

See, here in this heavy book, the designer made the stupid decision to create a separate page for each page number. After the first few pages the reader will know and accept the fact that they only have to read every second page. Even if it makes no sense whatsoever, it is now a rule. Truth becomes nothing more than an "imaginative commitment."[5]

Q: So are you saying imaginary worlds are as valid as real worlds?

A: Of course they are, Regi! Worlds are not always physical or actual. They can be conceptual, virtual, or imaginary.[6] That doesn't mean we can just disregard them. Sometimes, the line between imagination and reality blurs and virtual worlds can become actual. Have you not seen the Quidditch matches that took place on college campuses all over Earth? Yes, of course, Quidditch is fun with mini jet-packs, but running around with sticks? Why the sticks? What is their purpose? Where was I?
Ah yes. Each world is built upon a frame of reference, or several frames of reference. A balance between imagination and reality. It is a fine line but it is also a line that to some extent is predetermined. Human imagination is limited in the sense that it is influenced and defined by past experiences and memories.[7] For example, I could have never, ever imagined this thing called a fidget spinner, before I encountered it in my research on 20th century Earth. You should see this thing. Whoever invented it should get an award for complete waste of time and resources. I mean, you push it once and it spins forever; what fun is that?

Q: Limitation of imagination? But I thought imagination was endless?

A: To you maybe, you are also the omni-cognisant editor in chief of the Universal Times. But for the rest of us, imagination is limited. Basically, our understanding of life is based on the physics of our intrinsic system—in the case of humans that system is Earth. But of course, as we know, humans are clueless. The only one who got it right was Mark Haddon in his book, *The Curious Incident of a Dog in the Nighttime*:

"People think that alien spaceships would be solid and made of metal and have lights all over them and move slowly through the sky because that is how we would build a spaceship if we were able to build one that big. But aliens, if they exist, would probably be very different from us. They might look like big slugs, or be flat like reflections. Or they might be bigger than planets. Or they might not have bodies at all. They might just be information, like in a computer. And their spaceships might look like clouds, or be made up of unconnected objects like dust or leaves."[8]

It is not necessarily about breaking down these barriers imposed on us by reality, but to make unexpected connections between different systems to trigger an imaginative response in the viewer.
We are basing our imagination of the future on decisions we have made in the past. We are not imagining the future per se, but rather a different version of the present. An alternate universe, a different world.[9]

[3] Goodman, Nelson. "I. Words, Worlds, Works, 5. Trouble with Truth". *Ways of Worldmaking.* 2013

[4] Goodman, Nelson. "I. Words, Worlds, Works, 4. Ways of World-making, (b) Weighting". *Ways of Worldmaking*. 2013

[5] Yacavone, Daniel. "Part I. Films and Worlds, 1. Worlds Within Worlds". *Film Worlds*. 2015

[6] Bogue, Ronald. "4. Hyalosigns: Crystals of Time *Deleuze on Cinema*. 2003

[7] Goodman, Nelson." I. Words, Worlds, Works, 2. Versions and Visions". *Ways of Worldmaking.* 2013

[8] Haddon, Mark. *The Curious Incident of a Dog in the Nighttime.* 2003

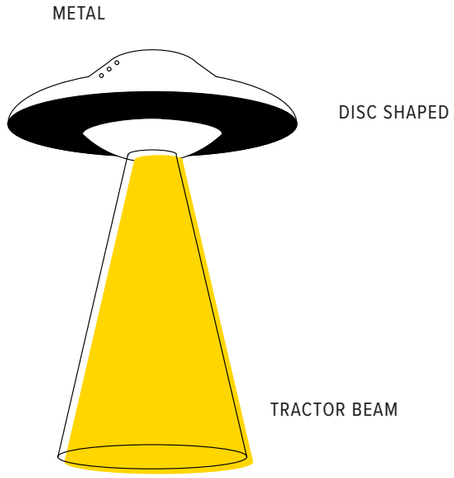
[9] Dunne, Anothony & Raby, Fiona. "Physical Fictions: Invitations to Make-Believe". *Speculative Everything, Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming*. 2013

Q: So how DO you build a world?

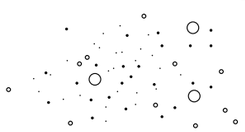
A: Worlds are made up by shared human ideas—the cultural world, and common frameworks of meaning.[10] You start with defining the basic properties and truths of your world. What does the world look like, what does it feel, smell and sound like? What are its rules, laws and truths? Where is it? When is it? Why does it exist?

My good friend Nelson Goodman once said: "Worldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking."[11]

Just picture a mind-map. We start with a mind-map made from expectations or frames of reference.

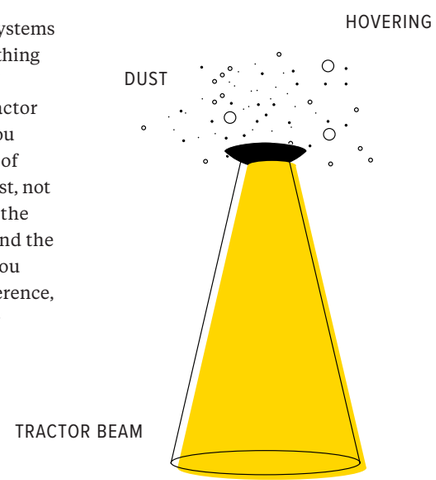


Now, if we sent one of our dust ships to Earth, no one would know we were aliens,



but if we installed one of these ancient tractor beams, they could make the association and draw a conclusion.

The internal connections among systems are important. You start with something that you connect to your frame of reference—"Spaceships have a tractor beam." Then you add to that, or you make changes to the initial frame of reference—"The ship is made of dust, not metal." The more things you add, the more things can be experienced and the more connections can be made. You are creating your own frame of reference, based on facts you have defined.[12]



DESIGNING A WORLD IS LIKE GROWING SLIME MOLD. YOU START WITH A FRAME OF REFERENCE, OATS IN THE PETRI DISH, POINTS THE VIEWER WILL RECOGNIZE AND CONNECT TO THEIR MEMORIES AND EXPERIENCES. NOW YOU START CHANGING THESE REFERENCES, MAYBE SUBSTITUTE IT WITH OAT PASTE, OR COFFEE AND YOU SEE WHAT HAPPENS. DOES IT STILL CONNECT? IS IT STILL RECOGNIZABLE? DO THE CONNECTIONS CHANGE?

THE TRICK IS TO KEEP FEEDING THE MOLD REFERENCE POINTS. THE NUMBER OF CONNECTIONS WILL GROW EXPONENTIALLY AND EVENTUALLY CONSTRUCT THE WORLD, OR ITS WORLD, THE PETRI DISH, I SHOULD SAY.

PRO TIP: IF YOU STOP PUTTING DOWN OATS, THE MOLD WILL TRY TO ESCAPE ITS WORLD AND FIND A BETTER ONE.

[10] Yacavone, Daniel. "Part II. Worlds of Symbols, 2. The Framework of Worlds". *Film Worlds*. 2015
[11] Goodman, Nelson." I. Words, Worlds, Works, 3. How Firm a Foundation". *Ways of Worldmaking*. 2013
[12] Wolf, Mark J.P. "1. Worlds Within Worlds. *Building Imaginary Worlds*. 2012

MUCH OF MY DESIGN PROCESS WAS EXPERIMENTATION. I FOCUSSED ON EXPERIMENTING WITH THE SLIME MOLD TO DISCOVER AN UNEXPECTED VISUAL LANGUAGE, BUT ALSO ON EXPERIMENTING WITH THE BALANCE OF FORM AND CONTENT. WHICH NARRATIVE PROPERTIES OF AN OBJECT CAN BE REPLACED WITH VISUAL ONES, AND HOW MUCH CAN I DISTORT THEM BEFORE THE OBJECT BECOMES UNRECOGNIZABLE?

GRAPHIC DESIGN, MUCH LIKE BUILDING A WORLD, IS ABOUT CREATING (VISUAL) POINTS OF REFERENCE AND MAKING PARTIAL CONNECTIONS TO CREATE A SYSTEM WITH THE POTENTIAL TO EVOLVE.

THE BETTER WE CONSTRUCT THE WORLD, THE EASIER IT IS FOR THE VIEWER TO ENTER IT.

Q: You mentioned earlier that world building reminds you of your own design practice. How is that?

A: Just look at it like Lev Manovich. He thought of a world, a system, as a database. A database without hierarchy, all the facts, all the information of the world is in that database. In a way, we are the interface designers of that database. We create different buttons that access different content in the database and reveal different things about the world.[11]

We create "parts, representing wholes, designed to prompt speculation in the viewer about the world these objects belong."[12] We are expanding narrative systems by creating a visual system and by bringing virtual worlds into the actual world of the viewer.

We design strong, fast, and important worlds as well as subtle and quiet ones. Happy, bubbly, dark and scary, whatever the client wants. The components of the world—values, philosophy, history, purpose—are anchored by a common characteristic—a logo, a publication, a hologram. The visual properties have to support the narrative ones.

Q: What does this mean for the designers in the so-called "real world"?

A: Designers are already familiar with building systems and subconsciously already use many of the approaches it takes to create a world.

We start with elaborate research to establish our frame of reference and then create a cohesive system that connects these points of reference. We constantly move between conception and construction until we have defined a system we think is appropriate for what we want to communicate.

Of course, the system can be flexible, but most of the time it is designed with clear limits: a style guide, not to be deviated from—and don't forget the copyright laws, the gatekeepers of creative freedom. These limits prevent the system from developing and fully growing into a world.

In my opinion, building a world is just taking it a step further and factoring in the evolution of the system. How can our work grow after we send of version Final_Finalfinal2.ho?

I'm not saying, abolish style guides all together, but to leave enough freedom for the system to grow. Establish the necessary rules but make space for new ones to come.

Take language for example. The basic grammar, rules and vocabulary are established to the point where we can all seamlessly understand each other, given we own a Babel Fish of course. However, language changes and adapts, not by itself but through interaction, conversation and sometimes pure necessity to express oneself. Design is the same. It is a conversation between the creator and the viewer, the virtual and the actual. It is a sustainable and inclusive way of designing and doesn't take more than an open mind.

It is important however to design a world with a solid foundation. The visual language has to be cohesive, and content should be connected and self-referential. Each asset is an entry point into your world, a part representing the whole, or how Adams puts it:

"Since every piece of matter in the Universe is in some way affected by every other piece of matter in the Universe, itis in theory possible to extrapolate the whole of creation—every sun, every planet, their orbits, their composition and their economic and social history from, say, one small piece of fairy cake."[13]

Q: Sadly we are nearing the end of our interview. Do you have any last thoughts you want to tell our readers?

A: Take risks! I know it sounds cliché but I find it so difficult to step out of my comfort zone and experiment, yet I believe it is one of the only ways to expand our imagination and be creative. Being uncomfortable and stepping into the unfamiliar forces us to slow down, pay closer attention and eventually make new connections.

Last year, for example I spent my vacation doing this Space trek through the Outer Asteroid Belt. Unfortunately, I had to turn around halfway because I ran out of storage on my camera. The good news are however, that Earth II will now have this amazing asteroid field protecting it. Each rock will be custom made by one of the designers on my team, modeled after the photography I took on that vacation.

Oh and also, to any of you time travelers out there, if you could make a quick stop to 2017 Earth and prevent America from making that *yuge* mistake that set back civilization by centuries, that would be great.

loud explosion

Oh I believe that explosion signifies the end of our interview. Thank you so much Slartibartloose for your insight. Next time I add my hover-clip-art to our company news flyer, I'll be sure to think of you.

Choose wisely.

[11] Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media.* 2001, pages 225–227.

[12] Dunne, Anothony & Raby Fiona. "Physical Fictions: Invitations to Make-Believe". *Speculative Everything, Design, Fiction, and Social Dreaming.* 2013

[13] Adams, Douglas. *The Restaurant at the End of the Universe.* 1980

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[10] Manovich, Lev. *The Language of New Media.* Cambridge: MIT Press, 2001