

It's All Parts Of The Process: Applying Creative Methodologies, Game Design Theory and Audio Design to Storytelling, World Building and Character Development

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Abstract

This paper looks at tools and exercises adapted from professional coaching and process-oriented psychology, applied to the creative process of writing narrative fiction, specifically character development and world building. It explores how game design principles offer a lens to reflect on the overall world building process. It discusses how audio storytelling, using 3D sound design can support and enhance an immersive experience. It visits previous artworks that incorporate process-oriented techniques into creative development and production. Looking forward, it considers various technological interfaces an audience can access the story, and larger goals for creative coaching as a process-oriented tool for artists.

<1> INTRODUCTION

Fermi Paradox is a mixed genre narrative that draws its thematic influences from science-fiction, dystopia, cosmic horror, and noire. It tells a story of a distant time understood from the voices of various Earth descendents. Each character's perspective is told through nonlinear but interrelated vignettes, representing small slices of the larger world shared through audio storytelling. The project uses sound design to help create an immersive sonic environment and atmosphere. The story is accessible through a website based interface [1].

<2>THEORETICAL INFLUENCES

To create the universe where the Fermi Paradox story occurs, methodologies adapted from the field of professional coaching and process-oriented psychology are applied in order to explore aspects of the creator's inner-personal landscape. The information discovered is used as source material for character development and world building. These process-oriented practices also help to design the human relational aspects of the creative working partnership. Game design principles also offer a lens to reflect on world building as a whole integrated system of elements, and provides a useful structure.

<2> DESIGNING THE TEAM ALLIANCE (DTA)

As a partnership we discussed the human relational aspects of our creative work process. We spoke about the desired energetic vibe we want as a result of the project and working together,

what elements of world building we want to personally focus on to gain more experience and improve our skills, and how the partnership and the project can support those goals.

In Organization & Relationship Systems Coaching (ORSC), this process of designing elements of a human system is referred to as “designing the team alliance” (DTA). The DTA is a tool that helps to clearly articulate expectations between the people involved in the process. It is a dynamic and living agreement, in that it acknowledges that the needs and goals of a relationship or project may change, as time and outside forces that impact it are also dynamic and changing in nature. In creating a DTA there is an open discussion about what the people involved in the process want for the relationship or work culture; how it is they want to feel, how to be with conflict in the relationship (or if there is change), what values they want to represent together, and commitment to how they will communally hold responsibility for the larger shared vision. The conscious design of the human relational system that the DTA empowers, creates the foundation from which actionable work tasks (which the relationship is responsible for performing) are produced from.

In this process of human relational design, the larger goals we align on are: to focus on the creative narrative aspects of world building, for the overall experience to be thoughtful and embracing of our shared enjoyment for attention to detail, to be playful and have fun, to include our shared thematic interests, and for the project to require some personal flex in our respective areas of interest for digital technology, but not so much that we can't balance the extra focus we desire the narrative process and human systems design elements to receive. In the past it has felt like these areas have been given less time within the hierarchy of creative development priorities, beneath the pressures afforded with technology and production, and this was something we both wanted our project to address consciously.

Overall, the meme we found that best articulates our approach to creative work as a team is “Treat Yo Self”, from the TV show Parks and Recreation [2]. It was the compass we used to evaluate whether we were on track with the essence of our process-oriented vision. It was a safety word as much as an invitation to recover to the place we want to create from. When we connect to the value it inspires in us; we work hard because we love to grind, we play hard because we are joyous humans, and we recharge as necessary because one and two. Treat yo self.

<3> GAME DESIGN ELEMENTS FOR WORLD BUILDING

We found the elements of game design that Schell (2018) outlines in Art of Game Design: A Book of Lenses, offers a design structure that we can also serve as a checklist in our world building process. Schell says there are four basic game design elements that are interconnected and support each other [3]:

- Story: the sequence of events that unfolds in a game
- Aesthetics: how a game looks, sounds, smells, tastes, and feels

- Technology: materials and interactions that make the game possible
- Mechanics: procedures and rules of the game which describe the goal

Story as a design element of *storytelling* may seem obvious, and still considering this consciously for our world building design process it was helpful, as it had us be intentional about the different narrative approaches, genres and technical styles we want to explore as writers. It made us aware of our mutual interest in world building on a micro-scale (eg. using character points of view and sound design to support storytelling), and that we want the story to be told through separate character vignettes which cross over and occur in the same time and space, but are not linear in how they interrelate or inform the understanding of the world at large.

The aesthetics of Fermi Paradox is inspired by our shared thematic interests, such as science-fiction dystopia, retro analogue and digital technology, and previous art projects, that we have made as a creative partnership, such as Space Junkyard Blowup, which incorporates those in a similar way [4]. The style is incorporated into the visual digital art on the Fermi Paradox website, where the story can be accessed. The retro tech aesthetic is consistent across the various vignettes that comprise the larger world, and corroborates the universe mechanics and story. The same aesthetic shows up in the sound design, (eg. as computer boot-up noise audio samples) that create the sonic backdrop to the Fermi Paradox universe.

Technology as an element of world building in Fermi Paradox, can be observed in our choice to use digital audio as a storytelling approach. 3D sound design creates an immersive sonic atmosphere that supports the storytelling and offers an extra richness to the overall world feels. The website is designed to deploy the audio story through a simple visual user interface that allows the listener to engage the story, in a selectable nonlinear way, which is how we are looking to approach storytelling in this project.

The mechanics element provides a lens to consider the conceptual rules we will follow in the process of world building, including our human system design as much as our technical, aesthetic or story design. Mechanics articulate the agreed rules that the Fermi Paradox story operates within. The mechanics we agreed to for our world building process are: any universe “laws” we imply through character narratives will corroborate each other’s story, and when an idea sparks we will use a collaborative technique appropriated from improv comedy (“yes and”) to build on each other’s ideas and build on what the partner is contributing in order to keep the scene going, as opposed to blocking and ending the scene (“no, but”).

<4> THE MANSION VISUALIZATION

An ORSC exercise, “The Mansion Visualization” provides a method to raise one’s own awareness of the various aspects of their inner selves, which in process-oriented psychology are considered to be sub-personalities often based on behaviours. For our creative development

process, an adaptation of this exercise was used to discover parts of our self that we want to explore deeper and through character development within the Fermi Paradox universe. The person experiencing the creative coaching follows a verbally guided visualization that has them imagine an inner mind palace with rooms that house various aspects of themselves. As this is an awareness exercise, the person in process is encouraged to accept whatever shows up and not have to question, understand, curate, or control the presence of selves for the duration of the visualization. Some parts of self might be “who” usually faces the external world, and other parts might be less obvious, marginalized, underrepresented or unpopular, and stay locked away from the external world. The person in the creative coaching process explores multiple bedrooms of these aspects of self, exploring the qualities of each through the room as a whole, the items inside, etc. They then choose an aspect of self they are curious about exploring more in the project, and this is used for character development and world building by looking at the universe, through the character’s point of view.

<5> THE METAPHOR PROCESS

Metaphor is considered a coaching skill for the same reasons that emojis are the fastest growing language [5]; the image communicates a message that evokes a deeper understanding and depth of emotion when not fastened to text alone. In order to find more clarity in the character development and world building process of the Fermi Paradox project, an adaption of a tool called The Metaphor Process, originally created by BEAbove Leadership, which applies neuroscientific research and process-oriented techniques to coaching and self-development was used. The person experiencing the creative coaching process is asked a series of questions about a subject they are unclear about, and the emotions involved. Metaphor is used to explore the topic by asking if the emotion was another thing (theme song, movie genre, plant, article of clothing, etc.) what might it be. They then choose a metaphor that has the most resonance and explore that deeper by describing what it looks like, and by embodying it physically in their posture. The Metaphor Process was adapted to explore aspects of a character’s internal landscape discovered from the guided visualization, and to expand the understanding of them. When a resonant metaphor was chosen, another concept, signal and change theory was applied.

<6> SIGNALS, CHANNELS & CHANGE THEORY

Signals, channels and change theory are a concept sourced from process-oriented psychology and neuro-consciousness coaching. Within this framework, a signal is how we receive or send information; something that occurs on a sensory level before we are even aware of it or interpret it. Most of what we think of as information is actually an interpretation. For example, we see someone who is not smiling and it might be interpreted that the person is unhappy, however a signal is simply sensory awareness of something happening on the person’s face. By “unfolding” signals without interpretative bias we can find out what is actually happening in a sensory

informed way. Channels are the sensory-based modes in which we receive signals. There are four elementary channels that are based in the four senses (auditory, visual, kinesthetic, proprioceptive) and two composite channels within which the elementary channels occur (relationship and world). To “unfold” or explore signals, skills are used such as amplification (turn volume up or down, change speed, prohibit the signal, make a metaphor for the signal), and channel switching (as a creative coach take them to a different place: animal/mythic being - what would it be, embodiment - become something, make a dance - movement, draw a picture - visual, weather reporting - report on an emotional field, use of metaphor can also switch channels). We used signals and change theory in the Fermi Paradox creative process to explore the dimensions of our characters, and reveal the environment they find themselves within. This line of questioning and creative coaching provided new inspirations for all the layers of sound that influence the audio landscape design.

<7> STORYTELLING & AUDIO DESIGN

Sourcing from our process-oriented creative development, we each went off to work on individual character story and script writing production, which resulted in an audio file for each character. The software I use to create the final audio files is Reaper, a digital sound production application, which can also edit for VR. 3D sound can be experienced by the audience when listening through audio outputs that can play sound in multiple dimensions, and they can experience sound from 360 around and above them. The storytelling experience is not diminished by the absence of the technology to access this level of sound landscape design. In the spirit of fun (a guiding project development value), I hide audio “easter eggs” - a cosmic flirt of personal influences, shared “in-jokes”, popular cultural references, etc. that if found delight, and if missed are not missed.

Audio storytelling through sound design was something I wanted to experiment and learn more about as a result of doing this project. Using the information gathered in the creative coaching to understand the environment and world that the character I was creating a soundscape for is speaking from, I sought out sound effects that would weave together a sonic strata of atmosphere and support the aesthetic, I was trying to represent in the audio storytelling. In my production and editing techniques, I amplified the audio tracks in different ways to evoke and corroborate the universe being built, with a focus on hyper realism in respect to the environmental sound details, how they relate to the dialogue and the character as a whole entity placed in an environment.

For my own character narrative development based on the aspects of myself that I was curious about representing in the Fermi Paradox universe, sound and music provides a language I can access easily. I use musical and sound inspired metaphor (eg. character's theme song) to explore my character's inner landscape. I created playlists for my characters that they would like or that

energetically represented their essence. I use 4K Video Downloader, an mp3 extractor application, to rip audio samples from Youtube that I wanted to chop up and mix. I created electroclash style mashups of my character's playlists, and am stylistically influenced by 2 Many DJs - As Heard on Radio Soulwax Part 2 (2003) [6]. I would like to take more time to clean up my mixes and release my tracks.

<8> PREVIOUS WORK APPLYING CREATIVE COACHING TECHNIQUES

I have explored and developed creative coaching tools and exercises with artists in a previous project I was involved in, as a member of a physical theatre performance art group, The League Of Lady Wrestlers (LOLW). Using a similar exercise adapted from The Mansion Visualization, I guided the troupe through an exploration of their already established character's bedroom. Building on the information gleaned through that exercise, I did creative coaching around the embodiment work, integrating the signals, channel switching and change theory, as a way to inform the whole character development and physical performance. As the artists connected more deeply to their individual characters, they then went into their performance partnerships, and worked on how this information will inform the choreography and overall scene production. Finally, the smaller groups came together as the whole troupe, and building on the small group development process, planned the larger group scenes. I created a LOLW character, Lalahoney, based on marginalized aspects of myself that I was curious about exploring within the artistic medium LOLW offered. I wrote and co-performed in the physical theatre performance scene (as well as doing the choreography, a/v sfx (pyrotechnics) design, set and prop building, and project management). I performed with LOLW in various performances that explored different physical theatre performance styles (wrestling and cabaret) and despite the different approaches to performance, Lalahoney always operated within her own character world mechanics which was within the larger story universe of LOLW, which was reinforced through the use of aesthetics and technology.

<9> GOING FORWARD

In terms of the Fermi Project, going forward I am curious about exploring different ways of sharing the audio story, such as a physical audio player, that can be designed to work with the story universe aesthetic (eg. music box, old fashioned looking radio). These ideas lead me to think that podcasts and audio storytelling in general could be served with having its own distribution platform that highlights the sound by abstracting a visual screen. I also think the visual interface could be further developed and more interactive, while staying stylistically in the universe being built. I am inspired by the interface for the game, In Other Waters (2020) [6]. In terms of applying creative coaching to artistic development and production, I want to contribute to the body of knowledge that crosses the intersections of my creative life and work, and I will continue to work with artists on coaching creative processes and writing about it.

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