BUILDING IMAGINARY WORLDS

The Theory and History of Subcreation

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The act of world-building, with the myriad decisions, intricacies, and complexities it can involve, not only leads to a greater appreciation of well-built worlds, but perhaps also to greater contemplation of the Primary World itself.

Creation, Subcreation, and the *Imago Dei*

> *To construct plausible and moving "other worlds" you must draw on the only real "other world" we know, that of the spirit.*
>
> —C. S. Lewis, "On Stories" in *Of Other Worlds*[24]

> *The virtual "worlds" we enter into offer us a means of escape, a mode of imagining, and a never-depleted well of possibility for imagining ourselves all-powerful, infinite, beautiful, desired, even worshipped. Virtual reality experiences such as video games and online worlds like Second Life are the most potent forms of world-building available today, even more so than cinema or novels, because the agency of the player is ramped up to such an extent that in many virtual worlds, it is up to the player–inhabitant to literally construct the world, or to single-handedly destroy his or her enemies, thereby symbolically bringing order to the world and "building" it anew. World-building, I argue, is patently a religious endeavor, one of the oldest ones on earth, practiced today in some of the newest of ways.*
>
> —Rachel Wagner, *Godwired: Religion, Ritual, and Virtual Reality*[25]

> *Will's idea, at this point, was that players were to directly experience the difficulty and frustration of making life in the universe, and appreciate the improbability that life exists at all.*
>
> —Chaim Gingold, "A Brief History of *Spore*"[26]

> *Nevertheless—and it is curious when one considers how individual is the world of each fantasy—there is a very definite and constant character to fantasy, and in nothing is it perhaps so markedly constant as in its devotion to wonder at created things, and its profound sense that that wonder is above almost everything else a spiritual good not to be lost.*
>
> —C. N. Manlove, *The Impulse of Fantasy Literature*[27]

> *Wonder, in the sense of miracle, mysticism, and faith, may well be the single most important contribution of virtual worlds to human experience.*
>
> —Edward Castronova, *Exodus to the Virtual World*[28]

Subcreation, by its very nature, is a collaborative effort in which existing concepts are combined in new ways, and a secondary world is produced which is a variation on the Primary World. Creation, the Primary World, makes possible and provides the conceptual and material support for subcreation and secondary worlds, and subcreation can be seen as a reflection of Creation. Thus, we find that many authors writing about human creativity have interpreted Genesis 1:27, in which God creates human beings in His own image, the

Imago Dei, to indicate that our desire to create is part of what it means to be created in God's image, and, according to Bruce Mazlish, "one of humanity's deepest aspirations."[29] In his "Letter of His Holiness Pope John Paul II to Artists", Pope John Paul II wrote of an idea similar to subcreation, substituting "craftsman" for "subcreator":

> The opening page of the Bible presents God as a kind of exemplar of everyone who produces a work: the human craftsman mirrors the image of God as Creator. This relationship is particularly clear in the Polish language because of the lexical link between the words stwórca (creator) and twórca (craftsman).
>
> What is the difference between "creator" and "craftsman"? The one who creates bestows being itself, he brings something out of nothing—*ex nihilo sui et subiecti*, as the Latin puts it—and this, in the strict sense, is a mode of operation which belongs to the Almighty alone. The craftsman, by contrast, uses something that already exists, to which he gives form and meaning. This is the mode of operation peculiar to man as made in the image of God. In fact, after saying that God created man and woman "in his image" (cf. Gn 1:27), the Bible adds that he entrusted to them the task of dominating the earth (cf. Gn 1:28). This was the last day of creation (cf. Gn 1:28–31). On the previous days, marking as it were the rhythm of the birth of the cosmos, Yahweh had created the universe. Finally, he created the human being, the noblest fruit of his design, to whom he subjected the visible world as a vast field in which human inventiveness might assert itself.[30]

Subcreation, though it relies on Creation, inherently asks us to imagine what possible worlds could exist beyond what is known to exist in the Primary World. It invites invention and experimentation, leading to an examination of the consequences resulting from the various structures and combinations of elements that a subcreator imagines, and perhaps even the difficulty in incarnating them into words, images, objects, sounds, and interactions. In doing so, we are able to suppose what things would be like if they were otherwise, and different from those of existing Creation. Writing to someone who suggested that a subcreator should not go beyond "those channels which he knows the creator to have used already", Tolkien responded:

> We differ entirely about the nature of the relation of subcreation to Creation. I should have said that liberation "from the channels of the creator is known to have used already" is the fundamental function of "subcreation", a tribute to the infinity of His potential variety, one of the ways in which indeed it is exhibited, as indeed I said in the Essay. I am not a metaphysician; but I should have thought it a curious metaphysic—there

> is not one but many, indeed potentially innumerable ones—that declared the channels known (in such a finite corner as we have any inkling of) to have been used, are the only possible ones, or efficacious, or possibly acceptable to and by Him![31]

The act of world-building makes one consciously consider the various decisions involved in creating a world, and realize, at least to a small degree, perhaps, the difficulties involved. Besides material considerations, a subcreator can also play with philosophical possibilities in a world, speculating as to what effects changes would have on the inhabitants of a world; as Edward Castronova has suggested, "Much of the task of world-building involves implicit messaging about what kind of world is a good world".[32]

Such contemplation of the aspects of world-building can lead to the *wonder* discussed in the quotes given earlier, along with a greater appreciation for the Primary World itself. Interviewing Rand Miller, one of the creators of *Myst*, Jon Carroll wrote:

> In my notebook I had a question from Kevin Kelly, the executive editor of *Wired*. It was not a question I had planned to ask, but many unexpected things had happened. "How has designing a whole world changed your idea of God?"
>
> Rand puffed his cheeks and blew. "Well, we could talk about that for hours. We thought about it a lot. I guess the simple way is to say that we know how much work it took to create *Myst*, and how puny and unreal it is compared to the real world, and therefore how miraculous all of creation is. Matching our experience … it just makes us realize how great God is."[33]

Subcreative activity, then, can be a humbling experience when one considers the relative simplicity and incompleteness that is inevitable in all subcreated worlds, no matter how large and detailed they may be. Comparing secondary worlds to the Primary World (which human beings, even collectively, have only seen a tiny fraction of), can only lead to a sublime experience of the latter's unimaginable vastness and intricacy.

While making one's own world is undoubtedly the best way to experience the subcreative process, the contemplation involved in the experience of making a world is also present in the genre of video games known as "god games", in which the player builds a world within the context of the game. As Mark Hayse sums it up:

> God games also inspire some theorists to reflect upon the player–game phenomenon as a divine–human metaphor. Kevin Kelly imagines that the player's work of designing and directing an emergent video game

world reflects the ongoing divine activity of creation (1995). For example, Kelly observes that god games feature an evolving future in which players directly control global events such as the weather while only indirectly influencing the response of those simulated organisms which are affected by it. Kelly speculates that god game players come to feel interest and affection for the worlds that they make. Elsewhere, Kelly argues that technology can "advance our understanding of god-ness by experiencing the limits and powers of unfolding creations of our own" (1999, 392). Similarly, Steven Garner (2005) suggests that creative engagement with technology is an expression of the *Imago Dei*—the image of God within human beings. Garner reasons that just as God might create persons, so those persons might imitate God through creative acts of their own. However, Noreen Herzfeld (2005) argues that god games do not fairly reflect the creative *Imago Dei*. She maintains that the *Imago Dei* implies a kind of mutual relationship that god games cannot reflect. Instead, Herzfeld contends that god games foster playful experiences of power and control.[34]

Subcreators in art and science have both struggled to define the limits of subcreation, for example, in the desire to create a conscious, autonomous being with self-awareness, evident in works spanning millennia from Pygmalion's statue and Hephaestus' automatons in Greek mythology to the robots and artificial intelligence of the present day. Taken to an extreme, the desire for autonomous creations results in an entire imaginary world which exists and functions on its own, a secondary world separated from the Primary World.

Differing as it does from *ex nihilo* creation, subcreation is not a usurping of the Creator's role, but rather cooperation with it, and acknowledgement of it. The subcreative desire is a part of human nature that precedes our fallen state, and the action and contemplation that accompanies it are both a gift and part of a divinely-mandated vocation calling us to carry on the work that God has begun. Like any gift, it can be neglected or even abused, but it is given to each person as an inalienable right. As Tolkien explains it:

> Fantasy is a natural human activity. It certainly does not destroy or even insult Reason; and it does not either blunt the appetite for, nor obscure the perception of, scientific verity. On the contrary. The keener and clearer is the reason, the better fantasy will it make. If men were ever in a state in which they did not want to know or could not perceive truth (facts or evidence), then Fantasy would languish until they were cured. ... For creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it. ... Fantasy can, of course, be carried to excess. It can be ill done. It can be put to evil uses. It may even delude the minds out of which it came. But of what human thing in this fallen world is that not true? Men have

> conceived not only elves, but they have imagined gods, and worshipped them, even worshipped those most deformed by their authors' own evil. But they have made false gods out of other materials: their notions, their banners, their monies; even their sciences and their social and economic theories have demanded human sacrifice. *Abusus non tollit usum.* Fantasy remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker.[35]

Subcreation and the building of imaginary worlds has been around as long as human imagination, but the opening of many new media windows during the twentieth century has made them more vivid and concrete, and vastly increased the number of worlds being produced. The addition of new tools like the computer and the Internet in the late twentieth century further refined their production and allowed audiences to reach into worlds and inhabit them vicariously, at the same time bringing them ever closer to the Primary World. Whatever their use, whether for the proposals of social, political, technological, and philosophical possibilities, or for escape, entertainment, satire, therapy, communication, speculation, or the pleasures of a good story, imaginary worlds have always been with us and interest in them has never waned; if anything, it has grown stronger over time as more possibilities become realized in the Primary World, many of which can trace their origins to secondary worlds.

Subcreation is not just a desire, but a need and a right; it renews our vision and gives us new perspective and insight into ontological questions that might otherwise escape our notice within the default assumptions we make about reality. Subcreated worlds also direct our attention beyond themselves, moving us beyond the quotidian and the material, increasing our awareness of how we conceptualize, understand, and imagine the Primary World. And the more aware we are of it, the better we can appreciate the Divine design of Creation itself and our place in it.

> *In my opinion, when we talk about God making man in His own image and likeness, we should understand that the likeness has to do with his essence, and this is creation. From this comes the possibility of evaluating a work and what it represents. In short, the meaning of art is the search for God in man.*
>
> —Andrei Tarkovsky, film director[36]