

## The Age of Chosen Worldviews

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I will be trying to convince you that *worldview* is an important concept when it comes to large-scale aesthetic artefacts such as virtual worlds. “Worldview” is a powerful conceptual tool, not only because it allows for interesting observations to be made, but because it turns our attention from the objects we are examining and to the subjects experiencing them, thereby unlocking rich theoretical resources in philosophy and anthropology.

In *The Age of the World Picture*, Heidegger holds that the modern age is characterised by a fundamental shift in how humans conceptualise the world and their place in it. All there is - nature, history and so on - has become picture in the sense of something *vorstellt*, i.e., something “for set”, “for placed”, “for put”, put forth, presented, as picture, by humanity itself and to humanity itself (Heidegger, 1977: 129f). Therefore humanity’s position in the world is now a worldview, a way of looking at that which is put forth.

This is where anthropology comes in. “[O]bservation of and teaching about the world,” writes Heidegger, “change into a doctrine of man, into anthropology” (ibid., p. 133). Heidegger’s thoughts, written down in the 1930s, actually resonate with contemporaneous anthropology. Until the late 1930s, “anthropologists tended to use ‘worldview’ as a synonym for cosmology and the ‘other’ world”, as folklorist Alan Dundes notes (Dundes, 1972: 92). Worldview is, broadly speaking, explored on religious grounds. In the following decades, the air of otherworldliness lifts and in 1957, Clifford Geertz suggests a rather straightforward way of using “worldview” on cultural rather than religious grounds.

The ambition behind use of the word “worldview” is inherently holistic; we want to sum up how people relate to the entire world. For analytical purposes, however, Geertz suggests that we split worldview into two, interrelated parts: worldview proper and ethos. Worldview is “the cognitive, existential aspects [of a given culture]”, in other words a general image of how the world is. Worldview corresponds to an ethos: “the moral (and aesthetic) aspects of a given culture, the evaluative elements”, i.e., a persons response to how the world is, in terms of a certain way of handling the world (Geertz, 1957). (Both parts are to be found in Heidegger’s “worldview” which includes “view of life” corresponding to Geertz’ “ethos” [ibid., p. 134]).

Geertz provides examples of how one can use his dual worldview/ethos concept. In the Navaho worldview, “nature [is] tremendously powerful, mechanically regular, and highly dangerous”. The complementing ethos is one of “calm deliberateness, untiring persistence, and dignified caution. In the French worldview, “reality is rationally structured [,] first principles are clear, precise, and unalterable”. Corresponding to this worldview, Geertz finds an ethos of “logical legalism”, with the French discerning, memorising, and deductively applying first principles to concrete cases” (ibid.).

Now, what is the point of using the dual worldview/ethos concept when it comes to a virtual

world such as *World of Warcraft*? Virtual worlds challenge our aesthetic vocabulary. They are simply too big to be “works” or “objects”. They are big in terms of space: they consist of many places, it takes quite a while to travel through them, it takes quite a while to establish a sense of how they are laid out. They are big in terms of the number of agents they accommodate (some of these agents might be controlled by other humans). They are big in terms of the incredible amounts of time, money, work and creativity their users invest in them. We are dealing with large-scale aesthetic artefacts which we tentatively label “worlds”. Avoiding the complications of the word “world”, I turn my attention to the subject. All aesthetic artefacts require the subject to attune itself for aesthetic experience to occur. To really get Beethoven, you must combine emotional openness with attention to structure. You can not get into a romantic comedy if you are not in the mood for romantic comedy; these are rough examples of aesthetic attunement. In acknowledgment of the large scale of “virtual worlds” I talk about attunement in terms of worldview and ethos. This move yields analytical results which I can only suggest here but hope to present to you in writing soon.

I look at the worldview and ethos of *World of Warcraft* in terms of Principles, thus following a suggestion by Dundes who criticises Geertz’ concepts for being “admirably holistic and configurational” but “somewhat fuzzy and vague” (Dundes, 1972: 92). The Principle of Unlimited Good I borrow from Dundes. That Principle states that there are endless resources in the world. That your getting rich and your neighbour’s getting rich does not work against each other, since you are both tapping into endless resources (Dundes, 1971). Playing *World of Warcraft* demands continuous consumption (potions and arrows must be bought, armour repaired etc.). Hence the typical player of *World of Warcraft* must embrace the Principle of Unlimited Good in order to get (into) *World of Warcraft*.

As a part of the corresponding ethos, the Principle of Unlimited Expansion states that a character can never be too rich, too strong, too powerful, too fast and so on. A *World of Warcraft* player strives to expand his or her capabilities. There is no end-goal to this expansion. Sometimes, players find Unlimited Expansion to be an insufficient ethos principle. They might vent their frustration in online support groups for self-proclaimed *World of Warcraft* addicts. Here is an example:

“How pointless. It is a mindless grind that makes you think you have achieved something, when in reality all you have achieved is a bigger ass from sitting in front of a computer.” [WoW Detox statement no. 25201. [www.wowdetox.com](http://www.wowdetox.com). Accessed 6 August 2009].

This kind of frustration is much more severe than the one you suffer if you can not get into a piece of music or into a film. This kind of frustration is a breakdown in virtual worldview.

The ethos Principle of Maximal Efficiency states that you must engage with a world of Unlimited Good with an attitude of careful calculation as to how you get as much as possible out of the time spent in the virtual world. This principle is stated very clearly in the behaviour of so-called gold-farmers. Some Western players are very uncomfortable with gold-farmers and I believe this is *because* gold-farmers act in accord with the implicit virtual worldview/ethos. Through their behaviour, farmers call attention to an ethos principles which seem unattractive when stated with excessive clarity.

The dual concept of worldview/ethos can also be applied to large-scale aesthetic artefacts such as architecture and designed landscapes. Time does not permit me to give detailed

examples, but engagement with a piece of modern architecture is significantly enhanced if you can take on, temporarily and freely, the modern worldview. The same goes for postmodern architecture and for deconstructivist, urban landscapes such as the Parc de la Villette in Paris. Importantly, I do not have to believe in deconstructivism, to take on a deconstructivist worldview. I do not have to think it is a great idea to expose structured values but then subversively question the dominance of one value over another, in order to embrace that ethos and thus let it help me enjoy the Parc de la Villette. Turning back to *World of Warcraft*, I do not really have to believe in Unlimited Good in order to embrace the worldview of *World of Warcraft*. Taking on these worldviews does not entail any commitment to their truth value, hence we can talk of them as “virtual worldviews”; they are not quite the real thing.

One last example, a literary one. The horror writer H. P. Lovecraft let many of his stories take place in a fixed set of fictional places such as the degenerate town of Innsmouth and the fictional city of Arkham with its just as fictional Miskatonic University, but this is not what makes Lovecraft a great world-builder. The stories might as well have taken place in real places, e.g., at various locations here in Oslo. What is unique about the stories is that they embody a clear and consistent worldview. Lovecraft stated this worldview himself as follows:

“All my stories, unconnected as they may be, are based on the fundamental lore or legend that this world was inhabited at one time by another race who, in practising black magic, lost their foothold and were expelled, yet live on outside ever ready to take possession of this earth again” (H. P. Lovecraft, quoted in Derleth, 2000: 9).

What ethos can possibly correspond to this worldview? This is the central theme of Lovecraft’s stories. His characters are known for their woodenness. They are utterly unbelievable as examples of human beings but they do serve a purpose, as lab rats in Lovecraft’s ethic laboratory. He kills off his lab rats in horrible ways. Through these morbid experiments he explicates an ethos and if we look across the stories, we can stitch that ethos together.

To make a long story short, the ethos of the *World of Lovecraft* is one of keen, thoughtful, repulsed hunger for knowledge. Simple Lovecraft characters, such as farmers, are blissfully unaware of how the world really is. Curious and intuitive Lovecraft characters, such as artists, are so open to the truth that it drives them into madness, suicide or worse. One should find a balance between being grounded like a farmer and intuitively open-minded like an artists, an ethos which is often embodied by scholars in the *World of Lovecraft*.

However briefly sketched, I hope my examples have suggested the analytical usefulness of worldview and ethos principles. Chosen, and “virtual”, worldviews are taken on temporarily, freely and without commitment to truth value in order to engage with large-scale aesthetic objects, such as *World of Warcraft*, modern and postmodern architecture, deconstructivist landscapes and certain literary worlds, such as the *World of Lovecraft*. In 21st century societies of plenty, we have the economic means allowing us to engage with these quantitatively demanding, large-scale objects, combined with the technological means allowing us to choose virtual worldviews of many kinds, i.e., virtual worldviews supported by many different media.

Peter Sloterdijk has recently suggested that life in the real, modern world is life in an “age of

chosen world images (*Weltbilder*)” (Sloterdijk, 2008: 44). That contemporary entertainment is characterised by a growth in chosen worldviews would seem to run in neat parallel to Sloterdijk’s observation. As it happens, Sloterdijk has said something most pertinent about anthropology. To Sloterdijk, human birth is the opposite of “a coming to the world” (Sloterdijk, 1989: 174, my translation). The “world” is nothing more than a promise given to the newcomer by older world-inhabitants. Such a promise about the world is bound to be broken due to the “lability of earthly circumstances” (ibid., p. 177), hence anthropology is “nothing but the science of rashness - of human frivolity, to build forms of life on promises” (ibid., p. 180).

Engagement with a virtual world is based in this most human inclination to take up and to hold (up) world-promises, or worldviews if you will. In Sloterdijk’s account, to be an active subject is to perform such a “holding” of a world-promise, subjectivity is a kind of *Haltung* (ibid. 183), it is to stand up, or strike a pose, to have an attitude, and that is exactly what we do when we engage with a virtual world, we take up and hold up a certain virtual worldview/ethos, this allows us to show *Haltung*, show attitude, strike a pose in the virtual world. With the little difference, of course, that with virtual worlds it is essentially all about not *Haltung* but *Unterhaltung* (amusement).

## Games

WORLD OF WARCRAFT. Blizzard/Vivendi, PC, 2004.

## References

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