

Ys of a thousand winds and waves

by

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they/them

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Introduction: inspirations and a magic system

Ys is a cold, stormy, mostly oceanic world with four major continents and many islands and archipelagos. It is incredibly volcanically and tectonically active due to its relative geological youth and its very large, very close primary satellite, Māni. It is a world of uncertainty, conflict, and symbiosis. Underlying it all is the Syntax, the network of semiotics that carries the signals which lie beneath the surface of all living experience.¹

Nearly a thousand years before the Great Mari Empire, the races of the Followers began developing the political power and tools necessary to wipe out all but Humans (then called Īnfilī, now Ynvirī and Song) and Elves (then Māni, now Mari) on the planet. Our party's adventures take place at the very beginnings of this genocide.² Their most powerful weapons are their words, be they the ancient runic script of Norn, the spoken common tongue of Rīqu, the many variants of Yg, or the prestige dialect of Classical Ith. For on Ys, magic is just an especially visceral form of communication and embodiment.³

Powerful Wizard-Queens, half-forgotten as humans but still worshiped as demigods by many, set these events in motion long ago. They constructed a cipher to the Syntax called Ith to communicate with the goddesses, accessing the underlying semiotic fabric of the universe and its power to grant wishes.

A little-understood but closely guarded grove of sacred trees in the caldera of an extinct volcano offers clues to the magical Protic Ith language that might prevent the ensuing war; it grows in response to the language's use, and the Original Ithic script shines in the folds of its trees' bark.⁴ The few surviving Wizard-Queens, half-mad or more with immortality and so far removed from their own histories that they are hardly living at all,⁵ may offer some insight as well – if they grant the party an audience, and if the party survives the interviews.

Historians, linguists, ethnographers, and priestesses of ancient religions will all be invaluable resources as well, but the party must beware: their institutional entanglements may ensnare them into the grip of the Māni State from which many of them hail.⁶

This project is not a book: though it began as the outline of a novel, it is now a rigorous ethnography of a fictive world that I construct every week with three friends through the *Dungeons & Dragons* Fifth Edition system of role-playing. I have homebrewed the cold, stormy, oceanic world of

¹ The magic system I use was originally called the Mycorrhisyntax, as a nod to Massumi's "fields of intensities" and Tsing's Mushroom, as well as to Peirce's semiotic. Magic is an "emergent property" of these phenomena.

² The death of the most fantastical creatures (Dwarves, Goblins, Gnomes, Vampires, Giants, angel-like Eshkin, ghostly Shades, Halflings, Orcs, shapeshifting Chirals, etc) on this world is supposed to be a little Nietzschean; the world is closing a chapter of magic and entering a secular age through violence, much like Nietzsche's murdered God.

³ The specific powers of this magic include disguising oneself as someone else, becoming invisible, and other such transformations (see Deleuze & Guattari's *ATP* Essay 10.1730: "Becoming-animal")

⁴ A reference to the ecological, rhizomatic natures of signification and affect, these clonal trees are supposed to be aspen-like, in that their roots travel horizontally beneath the soil and shoot up new trunks for the colony's total health.

⁵ As in the work of Barthes, myth becomes dangerous and ahistorical. To achieve immortality is to die, in a way; to become mythic is to live outside history.

⁶ See David Graeber's *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* for a domestication of Marxism in academia; essentially, the requirement of a High Theory for radical politics rarefies and uproots radical movements, institutionalizing them in the very powers they seek to overthrow.

Ys from scratch, along with many of my own character creation mechanics, and every week I lead three players through perilous conflicts and embodied anthropological concepts. And immediately after each gameplay session, we all deconstruct character decisions, worldbuilding choices, conflicts, and the political drama in a separate “Armchair Analysis” episode of our podcast. Our recordings can be found on Apple Podcasts, Google Podcasts, or Spotify as the show *Polyvox: an Anthrogang Production*.

A shortcut to mushrooms

My interest in alternate worlds was piqued when I first read *The Hobbit*, and *Lord of the Rings*, *The Fellowship of the Ring* (to which the subtitle “A shortcut to mushrooms” refers). The maps, the histories, the biographical information and allusions to genealogies, the languages and cultures and very real, lived-in countries, the sense of geography in that the story took place as much *between* points of interest as it did *within* points of interest, simulating the time it took to travel between cities – all of these factors hooked me as much as the story had. It is from the world of Middle Earth and the history and accidents of its construction that I derived much of my inspiration for this project.

I put my initial worldbuilding efforts not into creating languages and cultures, but rather creating a planet that they could live on, that could feasibly exist in our galaxy. I didn’t include magic in its formation, I didn’t use a mythic structure at first. I didn’t even know if I wanted to populate my world until I had an entire solar system. I knew things like the luminosity, age, and mass of the star, the distance between the star and planet, the length of the year and day, the axial tilt of the habitable planet, how all of that would affect the seasons and climate, and how far away the moon was and what it would look like from sea level on my planet. I knew how deep the oceans were and I even had some speculative biology plotted out for how life would come to be on this planet. My idea was, I wanted to make a hard scifi world and then drape a cloak of high fantasy on it, almost a bit more like *Dune* by Frank Herbert than *Lord of the Rings*.

My readiness to populate my planet with peoples and histories neatly coincided with the beginning of my Purchase career. I was no geologist, geographer, meteorologist or astronomer. Though I was certainly interested in how ores were distributed in my planet’s crust, how coastlines and climates developed, and how the sky would appear from the surface from my world, the central focus had always been and would always be how these things would all affect my fictional societies and their growth. What would it be like to grow up on a world where the moon appears so much larger than the sun? A world where the solar year is just a bit over 639 Earth days? Would it be possible, given different historical circumstances, to achieve a Type 1 or 2 Kardashev civilization? How would such a civilization come about politically?

Worldbuilding as anthropological exploration

After learning of my passion for worldbuilding, a professor suggested I take a look at the 2015 presidential address to the AAA by Monica Heller, called “Dr. Esperanto, or Anthropology as Alternative Worlds.” In it, Heller outlines the history of perhaps the most famous constructed international auxiliary language, Esperanto, and maps its positionalities, along with those of its creator, L. L. Zamenhof, within the scope of highly anthropological inquiry. Zamenhof was situated at the precipice of many different positionalities; he was a Jew from Bialystok, a multilingual city which in his lifetime lived under Russian and Polish-Russian rule. His interest in creating an international auxiliary language was one of diplomacy and peacemaking in the years preceding World War I, a time where international tensions and the influences of global industrialization and capitalism were all growing ever stronger and more binding. Esperanto’s goals have since changed slightly; on a sticker

on the back of a Paris street sign in 2013, it was hailed as “La langue internationale équitable,” marking Esperanto as the “equitable” opponent to the specifically capitalist problem of income inequality. One can only conclude that not only the language itself, but also the act of its creation by Zamenhof, was a highly political project. Heller then touches upon other forms of constructed language, ones whose purposes lie in artistic expression and exploration such as David J. Peterson’s Dothraki for HBO’s *Game of Thrones* and J.R.R. Tolkien’s Sindarin for his own legendarium. The article taught me that “the act of transportation [to an alternative world] might have unexpected consequences. But the whole endeavor will be transformative, teaching us things we would never have learned otherwise” (Heller 2015: 21).

Since finishing this article, I have embarked on a journey to ground my project in social theory. My goal began as less utopic and more experimental. As of Spring 2020, and indeed in many ways as of this writing a year later, it was not yet apparent to me how my politics would manifest in the work, but I still wanted to play the game: with a number of minor changes to a habitable world from Earth, and a number of restrictions in how I depict the cultures, can I keep my civilizations alive and, more importantly, “breathing” (that is, relatably and realistically complex enough to feel lived-in), until they reach Kardashev Type 2 status? (That is, until they can technologically harness as much energy from their home star for use as they like.) What would stories look like set in this universe, perhaps stories set in the same star system but separated by hundreds or thousands of years? And how do I responsibly depict these people without falling prey to the same ideological traps that Tolkien and Herbert did?

This new phase of my project also coincided with my renewed interest in the works of Ursula K. Le Guin and the Nickelodeon show *Avatar: The Last Airbender*. A:tLA stood out as a shining example of how to write a complex, colonially-charged political history between societies without directly making any one society analogous to Western Europe or Euro-American whiteness: its worldlore is largely based on East Asian and North American cultures. I devoured Le Guin’s *The Left Hand of Darkness*, which taught me that even tiny changes to human cultural frameworks (such as, what if there were no gender as such, and what if everybody on a planet were asexual except for a predictable period of sexual arousal and attraction?) can have vast implications for that society’s history (Le Guin theorized that on such a planet, there would be no concept of war); and *The Author of the Acacia Seeds and Other Extracts from the Journal of the Association of Therolinguistics* (Le Guin’s own term for the supposed study of animal language) which taught me that the lenses of imagination can be focused just as strongly on our nearest neighbors in the dirt as they can be on the distant stars.

I therefore decided to take a hybridized Tolkien / Le Guin – ian approach to writing the stories. To avoid directly perpetuating Tolkien’s racial framework and its many ideological flaws, however, I committed to writing a world history where no one ethnic group was directly analogous to contemporary Euro-American whiteness, à la A:tLA. This would force me to build a system of racial relations from the ground up without relying too much on European history as my source material.

The magic of semiotics

Then: I had a breakthrough after reading *How Forests Think: Toward an Anthropology Beyond the Human*, Eduardo Kohn’s posthuman ethnography of a Runa group located near Ávila in Ecuador. In Kohn’s book, he applies the semiotic theories of Charles Sanders Peirce to human groups living in rainforest settings to construct and analyze a broader, more current, postcolonial cosmology for this Runa group and its implications for other groups’ cosmologies. It was my first encounter with Peircean semiotics. *How Forests Think* referred in passing to a chapter of *Tao Te Ching* that had resonated with me: Chapter 11, in which Laozi talks about constitutive absence, the anti-structures that permeate structure and make structure functional (the examples he gives include the empty hub of a wheel, the

space inside a clay pot, and the emptiness enclosed by a room's four walls). Kohn applies this anti-structure model to the semiotic, saying that Peirce's types of signs can only signify when they represent things that are not present. A child buzzing their lips to imitate an airplane will only remind you of an airplane if you *forget the differences between the child's imitation and the sound it is meant to represent*.

From *How Forests Think* and *Tao Te Ching*, I derived six major tenets that I would literally incorporate into my text's lore as an ancient religion. But more than that, it got me thinking about how language and signification was a type of magic, in many ways. So, I re-incorporated magic into my story. I based the initial rules of my magic system on the postulate that this universe was not ours, in fact, but had grown out of a knowable Universal Field that could be at least partially described with a type of grammar. This Syntax could be harnessed in languages that contained its features to "negotiate" with the universe. That is, if you speak a language that uses a lot of features of the Syntax in a short amount of time, you are "persuading" the universe to change some of its rules, at least for enough time to grant you a wish. I decided to make this language too complex to be conservative; that is, it would evolve and diverge very quickly from any one set of rules as people used it and streamlined it. There was a constructed language I knew of that might serve perfectly: the language Ithkuil, completed by John Quijada in 2011 and so complex that nobody, not even Quijada himself, is yet fluent in it as of this writing.

Ithkuil is a philosophical-engineered language whose design goals are to be as semantically condensed and specific as possible. There is a single "formant," or word, in Ithkuil that can be translated as "...being hard to believe, after allegedly trying to go back to repeatedly inspiring fear using rag-tag groups of suspicious-looking clowns, despite resistance" (the formant itself is */qhûl-hyai'svukšei'arpiptó'ks*). Quijada has offered that Ithkuil is too complex to be a natural spoken language – rather, that it is a useful tool to think about how quickly and reliably information can be condensed into linguistic frameworks. Its philosophy of meaning is (as the author himself admits) relatively Enlightenment-based – that is, there is a one-to-one correspondence of conceptual representation to some Platonic prototype of what an Ithkuil formant might mean, which is not exactly in line with the language's design goals – but Quijada here threw up his hands: "A more careful and rigorous construction for Ithkuil's lexico-semantics, given the author's stated design goals... would not assume such a theory of meaning, but would rather incorporate more recent findings of cognitive science and cognitive linguistics to reflect embodied meaning and metaphor-based conceptualization. However, pursuing such a foundation for the lexico-semantics of the language would, in the author's opinion, be extremely time-consuming (on the order of many additional years, perhaps decades, to construct)" (2011: 270-271).

I found this thoughtfully constructed masterpiece of a language perfect for my purposes and set about creating daughter languages that may have evolved from its natural use in my world. I imagined that a group of priests of the Moon Queen had created Ithkuil in-world as an attempt to access the power of the Syntax and communicate with the Goddesses. These priests *partially* succeeded, in that their new language granted them magical powers. They did not become all-powerful, however. These new Wizard-Queens attempted to conquer the world with their magic, and largely succeeded – but once they had spread out, Ithkuil almost immediately diverged into daughter languages due to its complexity, each of these languages preserving different features of the Syntax. After a few generations, the language with the most expansionist, imperial-minded speakers would conquer the world once again and spread their language into every corner of the globe. The language would diverge again, and the cycle of colonization and genocide would continue until a group of marginalized people led a revolution against their contemporary empire and broke the chain.

The politics of translation

But, at this point I was too invested in this project to continue experimenting for experimentation's sake. I needed to introduce my polemic into the work, or else it might carry messages contrary to my values (it may regardless, but at least I can try and make my intent as clear as possible). I needed my writing to reflect a strong opposition to, or at least complication of, Enlightenment ideals. I would also paint a picture of the post-revolutionary society I dreamed for my characters, which meant I needed to refine my anarchist sensibilities with a deep dive into ethics and anarchist theory.

I decided to illustrate the conflicts between more Enlightenment, classical logic-based arguments and more post-Enlightenment, posthuman arguments in a contest between two translators trying to render the same text into English. I therefore refined the six tenets of my constructed religion, translated them into Ithkuil, then rendered them back into English in two competing and slightly different ways:

1. t'al-lrëikʔatf orëtfiáss ark'arʔ
[t'al.lɾɛikθatf ɔ ,re:tfi. 'as.s ,ark''arθ]

similarity.p1s3.IFL-MLT.N-MNF-HAB-EPI thought.p2s1.FML-MLT.N-v2ss/9-GEN
source.p1s1.FML-AGG.N⁷

“It is known: some reminder is the source of any thought.” – Eloquences

“So it is that all thought's source is a likeness.” – Violet

2. okleomdh aklá'dh t'al-lrioc^haʔ atvufq orá'tf
[ɔkle.ɔmð ,ak'lãð t'al.lɾi.ɔt^haθ atvufq ,ɔ'rãtf]

river.p2s1.IFL-COH.N-PRX-ASI river.p3s1.FML-N-PRX-MED organize.p3s3.IFL-DYN-HAB-EPI.N self.p1s1.IFL-MLT.A-IND thought.p2s1.FML-MLT.N-MED

“It is known: as a current from the channel, so selfhood organizes itself out of any thought.” – Eloquences

“So it is that as the whirlpool from the stream, selfhood knits itself from strands of thought.” – Violet

3. ôcneot̄ îcneʔ̄ atvaʔoaxiarn' t'al-lrëigadhoaq'
[ɔtsneɔθ i:tsne:θ atvaθɔ.axi.aŋ t'al.lɾɛigadθ.aq']

spore.p3s3.IFL-N-ASI fungus.p2s3.IFL-N-GEN self.p1s1-IFL-N-v2x/2-v2rn̄/9
component.p1s3.IFL.MNF-HAB-EPI-N-v2q'/2

⁷ A gloss of how Ithkuil works grammatically; the first word is the consonantal root for “similarity, pattern 1 stem 3 informal;” with multiform-nomic, habitual, and epistemic affixes, in the manifestive function. The second is “thought, pattern 2 stem 1 formal;” with multiform-nomic affix, as well as version-2 “ss” affix to degree 9 in the genitive case. The third is “source, pattern 1 stem 1 formal;” aggregative-nomic affix. I wanted to illustrate in these translations how Ithkuil is constructed.

“It is known: as the fruiting body of the fungus, the crucial, tiny self is the visible component.” – Eloquences

“So it is: the smallest self is the most crucial visible component, as the spore of the fungus.” – Violet

4. t'al-lreijjaçoak ekraxiuk amvouř t'al-lrukrařiukiss
[t'al-lrɛ.ɪʒ.ʒaço.ak ekraxi.øk amvø.øθ t'al., lru:kra'θi.økɪs.s]

motion-in-situ.p1s3.IFL-v2k/2-ASO.N.PRX-DYN.EPI.HAB tool.p1s2.IFL-ASO.N-v2k/1
center.p11.IFL-N.NAV tool.p1s2.IFL-N-v2k/1-v2ss/1-MNF.HAB.EPI-framed

“It is known: a good wheel spins right about the hub, where there is no wheel.” – Eloquences

“So all wheels spin ever toward their wheel-less centers.” – Violet

5. öpatf uizát t'al-lripsásúemzeoj ékéü'ady t'al-lreisásiull
[øpatf ø., i'zaθ t'al., lɪpʃa'sø.ɛmzɛ.ɔʒ 'ékəøʔadʲ t'al., lrɛ.i'sasi.øl.ɪ]

carrier.p2s2.IFL-MLT.N mind.p1s1.FML-N-MNF happen.p1s1.FML.DYN.HAB.EPI-PRX-
framed-v3mz/9-v2j/6 path.p1s2.FML-A.PRX.PRIV-ABL-framed deviate.p1s3.IFL-
DYN.HAB.EPI-framed-v2ll/1

“It is known: a ‘thing’ is a self which acts automatically as expected, and never deviates from its predetermined path.” – Eloquences

“So inanimate is the self which obeys only habit, and never strays from destiny.” – Violet

6. t'al-lriokápps oratfiáss ákři” atf
[t'al., lɪ.ɔ'kap.ps ɔratfi. 'as.s akθi:ʔatf]

path-oriented translative motion.p3s3.FML-A.TRM-DYN.HAB.EPI thought.p2s1.FML-
N.MLT-v2ss/9 similarity.p1s3.IFL-ALL-MLT.N

“It is known: finishes, arrives, any and all thought at a type of reminder.” – Eloquences

“So the destination of a thought is a likeness.” – Violet

As I mentioned, these six tenets were adapted from the *Tao Te Ching* as interpreted through Charles Sanders Peirce’s semiotic philosophy. They have to do with the origins and ecologies of the self, the necessity and inevitability of communication, and the structure of thought. Why did I create two different translations of the same text in-world? I wanted to show how political of a project translation can be. For example, the less rigorous Violet Text translates the epistemic-habitual modal affixes of the main verbs as “so it is,” whereas Eloquences uses “it is known;” I did this because though they might not seem such different phrases, “so it is” distances the knowledge from a knower – it poses the knowledge as an immutable state of reality, rather than an interpretation derived by an observer. As I learned from readings of Roland Barthes, such mythologizations are processes of naturalizing the events of a narrative until they lose their historicity, and follow from a backformed, often misguided common sense. Mythology transmutes history into a string of isolated, politically vacuous events that could never have happened any other way.

Further examples of the differences between these hermeneutic exercises are in the translation of “similarity.p1s3” in Tenets 1 and 6. Eloquentes renders this as “reminder;” the Violet Text, as “likeness.” Why is “reminder” any more nuanced? Why might “likeness” lead the reader astray? To me, “likeness” implies literal similarity; a sort of facsimile relationship between an “original” and “copy.” I took these two tenets from Kohn and Peirce directly: Kohn says that all thought begins and ends with an “icon.” “...[A]ll semiosis ultimately relies on the transformation of more complex signs into icons” (Peirce CP 2.278 cited in Kohn 2013: 51). By an icon, Kohn and Peirce mean a type of sign that stands in representationally for another in a very literal sense, like an onomatopoeic sound-image or a drawing of a smiley face. These icons aren’t supposed to be technical, detailed imitations, but rather empty stand-ins to quickly communicate a desired connotation. Therefore, a “reminder” suffices as a translation of “similarity.p1s3,” because the relationship between the sign and the referent is not always one of literal similarity.

The limitations of magic

If magic is highly grammatical, if it follows closely to linguistic processes, then my magic system’s limitations must lie in the exclusive capabilities of non-linguistic systems, or perhaps even non-semiotic systems. We must turn to the affect theorists. Is the magical self truly nothing more than a set of interpretants, signaling to each other through eternity? What would the implications of this be for free will and the power of the individual vs. the community? This takes me to my current readings of Deleuze & Guattari’s *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism & Schizophrenia*, translated by Brian Massumi, and Massumi’s own *Movement, Affect, Sensation: Parables for the Virtual*. These books challenge the idea that the self can be reduced to its linguistic processes, and posit that the “emptiness” at the hub of Laozi’s wheel, the constitutive absence at the heart of these semiotics, can actually be filled with direction, with velocity – a sort of perpetual growth into excess meaning that’s difficult to pin down in definition or interpretation.

Massumi takes from Bergson that any space, including the political geography upon which poststructuralism maps identities in their “positionalities,” is formed retrospectively from the completion or frustration of dynamic, unmediated processes of movement and sensation in the body. For Massumi, there is an incorporeal element of The Body – its movement through spacetime – that is ontologically privileged before the formation of The Discursive Subject. “Another way of putting it is that positionality is an emergent quality of movement,” says Massumi (2002: 8).

Emergence is another effect that I address in my Tenets; Tenet 2 deals with selfhood as an emergent property of interacting thoughts, as per Kohn and Peirce. Peirce’s semiotic often grapples with the problem of continuity vs. description, creating almost a Heisenberg-like indeterminacy wherein a thought can only be described precisely as a positional snapshot, or as a “nondecomposable...dynamic unity” (Massumi 2002: 6). Peirce formulated his three types of signs as emergent properties of each other; indices are emergent properties of the relationships between icons, and symbols are emergent from analogous interactions between indices, or indices and icons. So, selfhood, language, and magic all organize themselves from the simplest signs, which is why Peirce and Kohn say all thought begins and ends with an icon. It seems there are parallels within these genealogies of thought, between the Deleuzian affect theorist Massumi and the semiotic of Peirce as it applies to posthumanism. Can the analogy be drawn further to say that if space is an emergent property of movement as selfhood is of thought, then movement and affect is its own kind of non-semiotic magic that must affect spacetime?

How does magic work on Ys?

Proposition Nine of Baruch Spinoza's *Ethica: De Deo* states: "*Quo plus realitatis aut esse unaquaeque res habet, eo plura attributa ipsi competunt.*" ("When there is more reality or being that a thing holds within itself, then it contains to itself more attributes," my rough translation). That is, an attribute, or for Spinoza, an "extension" and/or "thought" of God, directly correlates to the "amount of being of a thing." This is reminiscent of Deleuze's affect theory (which Deleuze partially derived from his highly Spinozist influences): "a multiplicity is defined not by its elements, nor by a center of unification or comprehension. It is defined by the number of dimensions it has; it is not divisible, it cannot lose or gain a dimension *without changing its nature*" (Deleuze & Guattari 1980 trans. Massumi 1987: 249, original emphasis).

If fungal and rhizomatic networks are semiotic, as we take from Kohn's *How Forests Think*, then mycorrhizal (symbiotic assemblages of fungal hyphae and plant roots) networks are multiplicitous, they are becomings-fungal and becomings-plant. They are the very model for a magic that incorporates both affect and signification. This leads me to the structure and some of the basic rules for a fictional magic system: it must likewise connect people horizontally and transversally through affect and signification at once. For this reason, I chose to allow my characters access to this type of magic through music and other types of performing arts.

Characters who focus entirely on the semiotic element of the magic system end up using a limited, externalized form of the magic to disguise themselves or trick others, often to selfish or even evil ends. Characters who focus entirely on the affective element of the magic system end up becoming entrapped in a meditative, academic sense of deep mindfulness, and seclude themselves in temples or universities or remote corners of the world. The character who can allow interactions between the performative and communicative aspects on the one hand, and the affective aspects on the other, becomes incredibly powerful and shapes history.

Methodology

Building the framework for a posthuman anthropology-themed *D&D* game

The role-playing mechanics of how to do magic in the way I have described above fit easily onto the pre-built Vancian magic system for *Dungeons & Dragons*. In 5th edition, there are three spellcasting abilities: Charisma, Intelligence, and Wisdom. I chose to call Intelligence my “semiotic” element, Wisdom my “affective” element, and Charisma my “combined” or “symbiotic” element. I then set to work making character creation mechanics partially inspired by my studies of anthropology at Purchase College. Most of these decisions went into subclasses, such as the Druid Circle of Disturbance, which I built as a humanoid Druid who deliberately infects themselves with a fungal parasite that gives them magical powers as it slowly blurs the lines between itself and its host, driving the host mad. Since none of my players decided to make a Circle of Disturbance Druid, I made a few such Druids as non-player characters (or NPCs) for the players to interact with, who ended up becoming very important in the story. These NPCs made them hallucinate with spore clouds, caused them to question their identities and roles in the world, healed and protected them and their friends, and served as gateways to other realms, geographically, socially, and spiritually.

The story I decided to tell with my players was one of tensions between individualism and community, tensions within identity, the productive tensions that generate joy and responsibility to others, tensions between transhumanist technologies and posthuman ethics, tensions between the many potential praxes of leftist thought and all their pitfalls. I wanted my players to embody these thoughts, as I wanted to embody them. That’s why I decided against writing segments of a book for this project, instead electing to play a game. Role-playing games are logical extensions of Deleuze’s questions about how art is an experiment of the self, and how affects are communicated through media in unexpected ways to this end: “how can time be painted, how can time be heard? ... Sometimes, on the contrary, the insensible force of one art instead seems to take part in the ‘givens’ of another art: for example, how to paint sound, or even the scream? (And conversely, how to make colors audible?) This is a problem of which painters are very conscious.”⁸ But in a game, one is embodying these concepts in real time, not only preserving the affects for later experience. The actors are also the audience, and everybody is participating in the field of intensity together, experimenting together.

Polyvox

I also wanted to involve my players in the ethnography segment of the project. This was extremely important to me. So, I devote a weekly post-gameplay segment of the show to “Armchair Analysis,” where we all dissect prior episodes as scholars, actors, and friends. I call the podcast “Polyvox:” I wanted to draw upon the polyvocal ethnographic tradition, deliberately decentering myself from the narrative and allowing other people to take up space in the stories I’m attempting to create collaboratively with them. Not only is the story of the Anthrogang, in fiction, on Ys, a collaborative work, but so too is this ethnography.

⁸ Deleuze, Gilles. *Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation*. University of Minnesota Press, 2003 (1981)

The podcast as ethnographic record

The podcast we record functions twofold: it's a performance of our characters and the embodiment of the concepts we try to communicate to the audience and to each other, but it's also a record of our trials as ethnographers and scholars in this world. I can draw upon this record as my ethnographic field notes.

Results: the gameplay

Episode 1: The Split Tower

In Episode 1 of Polyvox, the Anthrogang encounters an imprisoned Erelí revolutionary known as Viish the Spore Queen. Viish comes from Erel, the Land of Prophets, a small archipelago located West of the major habitable landmass of P'āl, the Southernmost continent. At the time of the Anthrogang's recent (not pictured) escape from the city of Řam, the faraway Erelí State is quickly fracturing. After a sizable segment of the military defected and became pirates, allowing for a worker's party to overthrow the monarchy, the rest of the military stepped in for a coup and quickly ousted the new Dictatorship of the Proletariat. The Pirate Army's syndicates had to flee into exile, along with the surviving members of the Worker's Party. Scattered across the seas, many of these syndicates took it upon themselves to disrupt trade between the continent of Mānt and its established colonies on the eastern shores of P'āl, thinking to protect P'āl from future Mānti influences but potentially establishing some of their own colonial projects in the process. Two of the leaders in this revolution were the Pirate Queen, as she was known by her enemies in the Erelí military, and her close lieutenant Viish.

Viish has been captured and imprisoned in a magical, doorless lighthouse in the Sea of Refuge, near Řam. She is kept there by members of a mysterious Order of Signs, a shadowy band of clerics and warlocks who worship the goddess Níc of Thresholds. They come to her bearing holy items, which she destroys and converts into prophecies in a special Erelí ritual. But she is biding her time to escape for a certain three adventurers to stumble across her path.

Viish is a Druid of the Circle of Disturbance; she has infected herself with fungal parasites that now erupt through her flesh, granting her powers with their spores that sometimes drive people mad, sometimes heal her or her allies. She uses these spores to cause a vivid hallucination in the Anthrogang when they finally come across her in the tower, then opens a portal with the last of her magical spores to escape to an undisclosed location.

She causes Elion (he/him) the Cleric to lose his connection briefly to his goddess, Chāt the Brilliant, and shows him what it would be like if he were to turn inward, away from the world.

She brings Kruhl (he/him) the Rogue to his knees as he finds himself entangled in growing, thorny metal brambles.

She shows Irxiex (they/she) the Bard that they are vast and ancient, but part of something still vaster and more primordial than they could ever imagine, by altering their sense of scale until their arm seems like a peninsula on a continent.

She alludes to the fact that Irxiex is Ofani, a secret race of angelic beings related to the Erelí whom the rest of the world thinks are all lost to history.

And when Viish disappears, she also transports the Anthrogang back to their ship, to let them wonder if it was, in fact, all a dream.

Irxix is heavily displeased with these events. Though they had hero-worshipped the Spore Queen as a figure in recent Eshkin history, they now find themselves disliking her strongly.

Episode 2: The Passenger

The ship that the Anthrogang came into Split Tower on, the cutter *Ice Knife*, takes on a passenger, who is revealed to be a member of the Order of Signs who imprisoned Viish in the tower on the island. Irxix inexplicably leaps to Viish's defense, despite their dislike of Viish, and asks the captain of the ship not to take the passenger, who is only referred to as The Signet. But The Signet casts a charm on Captain Shyri Task, and Task accepts her fare and welcomes her aboard.

Once Capt. Task learns that she has been charmed, her confidence is shaken, and she retreats into her quarters for the duration of the week's journey, leaving the Anthrogang to fend for themselves with the crew and the strange passenger. On the final evening, the passenger instigates a magical duel with the Anthrogang on the deck of the ship, which the Captain joins. The Gang and the Captain defeat The Signet, tossing her body off the side of the ship, but in the morning, the Captain falls terribly ill. She orders the Anthrogang and her first mate to take her to the city of Una, up the mountain from the port they landed in, where they will find the Order of Vines.

It's a dangerous mission, because the citizens of Una have been reportedly going insane all at once. But if the Gang can reach the Order of Vines, maybe they can cure Task's illness.

The Gang reaches the outskirts of an apparently empty, totally silent city at the top of the mountain, totally exhausted after two nights without sleep. Reaching for a pomegranate growing in a grove on a hill off the road, Irxix is interrupted by a voice that shouts "Don't eat that! Please!"

Episode 3: The Gateway Grove

The stranger introduces themselves as Foxglove, and the Gang notices some fungal growths erupting out of this newcomer's skin. Foxglove explains that if the Anthrogang eats the food around the city of Una, they will "end up like 'them,'" pointing to the silent, empty city. Foxglove then disappears into the grove of pomegranates, encouraging the Gang to make themselves scarce. The Anthrogang follows the stranger into the grove, carrying the unconscious Captain Task, until they reach a strange, beautiful forest of aspens that appear to be made of live stone covered in glowing mushrooms and vines. They recognize this forest as the Gateway Grove, a legendary forest that supposedly swallows up unwitting travelers in the Ygbel Caldera and transports them all around the island. Irxix recalls from a text they had read about this place: "Only the forest knows the door."

Foxglove rejoins the party and offers to help, leading them to a campsite on the edge of the grove. The party has not rested a full night in three days, and has taken turns carrying Task's unconscious body, and they are exhausted. Foxglove explains that they and their friends have been looking for Task for a long time, which is why they were willing to help the Gang. They take Task's body to the fire and try to treat her illness. Kruhl and Elion go to sleep, but Irsu follows Foxglove to the fire and tries to help and gather information.

During the treatment, Foxglove and their friends explain that they are members of a mutual aid organization called the Order of Vines, and that Task had also been a member at one point, or perhaps still is. But Task is suffering from an illness resulting from a form of weaponized infectious

disease created by an enemy organization, the Order of Signs. The Signet must have infected Captain Task in the previous episode, and Foxglove is unsure of how to proceed with the disease so advanced.

Then, the middle of the treatment, Captain Task suddenly wakes up and throws Foxglove and Irsu prone, escaping into a large clearing with an enormous tree in the center, which is surrounded by standing stones. Task disappears mysteriously as she reaches the tree, and Irsu can't find her anywhere, tracking her to a cliff but unable to spot her body or any tracks. When Foxglove catches up, they appear very nervous near the tree; they say, "I didn't know the forest took us here. This is a dangerous place, and we need to be smart about this." They advise Irxix to go to sleep, and promise to help look for Task in the morning.

Episode 4: On the Hunt

Upon waking, the Anthrogang is formally introduced to the Order of Vines: a grumpy Goblin ranger named Zane, a friendly Half-orc Cleric of Chât named Vytria, and a flirtatious Chiral (a home-brewed shapeshifter race) Bard named Akina. Foxglove leads the entire party to one of the standing stones, and the Order of Vines begins clearing off some of the organic debris on the stone to reveal angular glyphs carved into the rock. Irxix recognizes these glyphs as letterforms in the Classical Ith language, and read:



This translates to Tenet 1 of the Classical Ith religion: "It is known: some reminder is the source of any thought."

As Irsu reads, the glyphs begin to glimmer at them, and an intangible wind shifts the boughs of the enormous tree before them. Memories of Captain Task begin flashing through Irsu's mind. Then, in silent time-lapse, the aspens around the party seem to get sucked into the roots of the great Ygbel tree, replaced with thorny shrubs and brambles. The party has been transported to a misty, boggy region of the Gateway Grove, and Foxglove explains that the tree has interpreted Irsu's memories of Shyri Task as instructions on where to bring them within the Grove. They then all start searching for tracks, quickly locating a lock of hair that might belong to Captain Task beside a pair of boot prints.

As the hours pass and the trail narrows, Kruhl asks Foxglove about the history of the Order's struggle against the Zealots. Some weeks ago, Foxglove explains, a terrible poison infected the food around Una. Everybody who ate food grown in the city developed a strange fear of everything around them. The illness came to be known as Anton's Fire. A faction of Zealots overthrew the local government and began purging the city of the "impurities" they deemed responsible for Anton's Fire: mostly, single women living on the outskirts of town who seemed to be untouched by the illness for whatever reason. When the Order of Vines heard of this, they set up camp in the Gateway Grove and started disappearing potential targets of Zealotry into the forest, hoping the Grove would transport

them further than the Zealots would be willing to follow, perhaps even to other towns bordering the caldera.

The Gang then encounters a patch of mushrooms and vines that comes to life and attacks them and their newfound friends. In the melee, the Gang sees the image of Shyri Task suspended by the vines, and tries to free her as they kill the last of the antagonistic fungi, but she melts into a puddle of mud on the ground before their eyes. Foxglove points out, however, that she lacks a patch of shaved hair at the base of her skull, where Foxglove had showed Irxiex Task's tattoo of the Order of Vines' sigil. The Gang concludes that this was not Task, but rather a Task-shaped puppet or homunculus created by the forest to trick them.

Episode 5: A Familiar Face

Relishing in their victory briefly, the Gang quickly realizes that they have lost Task's first mate Frikki some time before their fight with the sentient patch of forest. They alert the Order of Vines, who reverse directions and return to the Ygbel Tree to track Frikki before continuing their search for Task. But as the Order of Vines presses on ahead, Elion trips and falls in a pit of icy mud, dragging the Gang with him. The Order seems to disappear into the mist ahead, and the Anthrogang is left briefly stranded on a wide rocky platform surrounded by a moat of icy mist and mud and thorny brambles. And out of those brambles, a stiff mannequin-like figure emerges: Frikki, trapped in some sort of floating paralysis, followed closely by a hulking, familiar figure.

The Signet re-introduces herself as a vampire and threatens to turn the entire Anthrogang into vampires. Irxiex attacks her by casting a spell on the holy symbol she wears around her neck, heating it up, and a fight ensues. Elion delivers the killing blow, and the Signet crumbles into ash. Elion kicks her body, and it breaks in half, dispersing in the wind, but a shadowy contour is left where it lay on the stone, and in the center lay a small bottle of milky white liquid, which the Signet had called "Nectar of Purity," and with which she had threatened to turn Frikki and the Gang into vampires. Kruhl takes the bottle, suspicious that the Signet will return once again if he doesn't.

The ground begins to rumble and quake quietly, and the Ygbel Tree shatters through the stone as it sprouts upward, sucking the bramble into its roots and replacing it with the stony aspen forest and the standing stones. The Order of Vines emerges from behind the standing stones, rejoicing in having located Frikki and the Gang and congratulating them on killing a vampire.

Episode 6: Zealotry

The Order of Vines and the Anthrogang return to the site where they lost Task so everybody can rest. The Gang has some very strange dreams:

***Elion:** you dream of a great city. It stands between a range of hills and a basin full of aspens. You walk through this city's streets, noticing fruit trees on all sides of you, gardens of moss and herbs and fruits hanging in mats and from vines growing down from the walls of the buildings. And you feel this strange manipulation of scale as you continue to walk through the city. You feel tiny as you notice outside the city walls these blades of grass the size of enormous tree trunks, blocking the sunlight briefly as they cross between you and Chaat's brilliance. And you enter a building, a great temple library. It's full to the brim with holy texts and lit by magical lanterns floating above desks with your fellow holy men reading and debating theology in hushed voices. The stairs go down into the depths of the earth, and you enter this maze of tunnels filled with books. The walls smell pleasant but musty, and the light dims further and further, and you find yourself relying on the smell. You want nothing more than to find a particular book. As you're hunting for it, you find it difficult to remember the title of the text. This bothers you immensely. Finally, in a bolt of recollection, it comes to you*

– but in that instant, a shadowy figure steps out of the darkness, puts their hand over your mouth, and slits your throat. You wake up sweating.

Kruhl: you dream of a garden of white lilies. They glow in the moonlight, even, it seems, when the moon goes behind a cloud. You feel that this should be a holy space, but that something's wrong. And as you feel this corrupting presence, you locate a shadowy figure hunched over a patch of lilies, collecting pollen. They enter a little hut, lit by a pleasant flicker from inside, and you hover at the door, wondering whether to knock as a quiet grinding sound begins from the kitchen window. Hanging on the doorknob you notice a familiar-looking necklace.

Irsu: it's difficult to tell if you're dreaming at all. For the longest time, it feels more like you're drifting between that kind of wakefulness when no time seems to pass, and that kind of half-sleep when you blink and it's suddenly further along in the night. You finally get up from your bedroll, not knowing whether you're dreaming, and you feel this strange pull toward the great Ygbel Tree down the clearing. It's irresistible. You don't know whether you're even walking toward it, or floating. You find yourself closer than you've ever been yet to this monster of a tree, close enough to touch its bark, and once again you marvel at how wide its trunk is. It's so wide that your perspective becomes a little unclear, and it almost looks like it's wrapping around you. And then, it does. It does wrap around you. You're inside the tree, it's embracing you. It hums this note of sad satisfaction, and you wake up before the rest of your party, with something in your hand: a small piece of amber with a single worker ant frozen inside, set in a silver pendant with a symbol in the bottom of the frame that you can read.

The symbol in the bottom of the pendant is the uninflected OBLIQUE primary case marker in Classical Ith / Ithkuil. It doesn't carry any information on its own; thus uninflected, with no characters following it, it simply means “the word that follows will be take the semantic role of ‘content.’ It is ‘unmarked.’”

The item is called the Pendant of the Mad Worker, and the worker ant (named Ursula) offers Irxiex:

- One *speak with plants* per long rest
- One *clairvoyance* per long rest
- One *speak with dead* per long rest
- One *insect plague* per week

If the attuned player tries to use one of Ursula's spells while another is cooling down, they may do so only if they pass a DC 17 Persuasion check; if they fail the check, Ursula will keep them up with telepathic ramblings all night the following night, causing a level of Exhaustion.

As the Gang wakes up, an unfamiliar voice begins screaming from the edge of the grove: “HELP! They're coming!” And the Order of Vines immediately gets to their feet, preparing for a fight.

A human woman, pursued by five men with spears, is running into the campsite from the direction of Una. One of these men shouts: “By the order of the Zealots of Una, hand over this witch!” and a fight ensues as the Order of Vines and the Anthrogang protect the accused witch.

The Gang defeats the Zealots and captures two alive.

Episode 7: Una

Elion takes point on both questioning Pelia, the accused witch, and the captured Zealots. Pelia tells Elion that a few days ago, a woman had come into Una promising to rescue the city from Anton's Fire, bringing food that was safe to eat. The Zealots had attacked her on sight, but she fended them

off. She had then disappeared into the tunnels beneath the city. The woman called herself Kure or Kyre, which means “immaturity” in Rīqu.

Elion then interrogates the Zealots on the identity of Kure. The Zealots are immediately defensive. Modi the Zealot says: “If you go into Una looking for a woman named Kure, you’ll get torn to pieces.” He doesn’t say anything else, but starts to pray, and a sudden blast of necrotic energy rips through his bonds. He shouts, “*Split up!*” and he and Ve take off in different directions toward the Ygbel Tree. Kruhl tackles Ve, but Modi reaches a standing stone and shouts, “Una!” and the tree takes the two Zealots, and the Anthrogang with them, to the city.

The Gang doesn’t stick around to meet the rest of the Zealots, instead opting to hide in the network of alleys. They find their way to a curiously familiar library. Elion notices that the library has the sigil of Chāt on the keystone of the arch above its doorway, and the double doors are painted with the signs of Māni, the Moon Queen. The Library of the Sun and Moon, from his dream the previous night. He leads the Gang into the library, telling them he’s looking for a book that might help them. He prays to Chāt for guidance and safety, and a beam of sunlight shines on a library catalogue directing them to the fourth underground level, where the Gang fights a mimic disguised as a bookshelf, protecting a book about fungal parasites and pests. Elion recognizes this as the book that he’s looking for, and some of the pages are dog-eared.

Once they defeat the mimic, they open the book to one of the dog-eared pages: a symbol in Thieves’ Cant is hand-drawn on the page in what could be blood, and a paper crane falls out of the back cover. Kruhl finds bloody footprints leading back out of the room, further down the tunnel.

Post-gameplay: “Armchair Analysis” segments

We had an Armchair Analysis segment following every gameplay session, but in the interest of space I will focus on four especially salient segments in this section of the thesis.

Episode 2.5

Olly starts by commenting on how Elion trusted the Signet initially, and how in general he believes in giving people the benefit of the doubt, despite having traveled the world. We talk about the joyful affects that originate in tensions in identity, citing our own experiences with gender euphoria as three nonbinary people (Conor was not present for this recording session).

Lindsey contrasts this analysis to their take on Irxiex, who “comes out swinging” at every opportunity for a fight. We talk about how trauma both informs and obstructs political effectiveness. We discuss how Irxiex is returning to a sort of hero-worship of Viish the Spore Queen from their (Irsu’s) readings of recent Eshi history, co-opting Viish’s narrative for personal gain rather than reflecting on their recent negative personal interaction with her. We contextualize this with an excerpt of Rebecca Solnit’s *The Faraway Nearby*, regarding how we write people’s histories into our own stories all the time, and an excerpt of David Graeber’s *Fragments of an Anarchist Anthropology* for his critique of domesticated Marxism in the academy that has been neutralized of its political charge in part due to the hero-worship of individual revolutionaries.

We also briefly comment on Irsu’s “speak to the manager voice” as a manifestation of how Irxiex Qadim is a racialized character in this world and may be code-switching as a performance of “politeness but also authority.”⁹

I then clarify how my Spore Queen character is not a perfect corollary to Tsing’s mushroom model, but rather a becoming-rhizome model, and I point out how that is different from Tsing’s mushroom as a model for posthuman rhizomatic power structures. Olly makes the connection that Viish being trapped in the tower isolates her from her want to spread and infect, transmitting her affects and creating assemblages. The Gang gets excited when I mention that Viish’s character is a playable subclass of Druid that I homebrewed, and Lindsey and Olly recall how their characters were changed by the encounter: “However ephemeral, however small, we’re all a little shroomy for having met her,”¹⁰ says Lindsey; “Yeah, we all got a few spores!”¹¹ rejoins Olly. I respond that “the affect...is like electricity, it transmits. That’s where her rhizome comes into play no matter what kind of being she is – humans do this kind of thing in the real world all the time.”

Lindsey begins unpacking the potentially colonial effects of a marauding pirate queen and her syndicates “protecting” a whole continent from external influences by spreading their technologies, drawing comparisons to kibbutzim in Palestine. I agree that “there’s a big...history of uncritical leftism going awry in very colonial ways,” and explain that I wanted to explore some of that, “perhaps biting off more than I could chew.”

We discuss the Signet’s lack of named identity and cite Peirce’s semiotic; she loses her essence only to be interpreted by other selves. We also discuss her wealth as a “cannibalism” – again citing Rebecca Solnit’s analysis of an Inuit folktale, also in *The Faraway Nearby*.

⁹ Weiss, Lindsey. “Ep. 2.5 – Armchair Analysis.” *Polyvox: An Anthrogang Production*. 2021.

¹⁰ Weiss, Lindsey. “Ep. 2.5 – Armchair Analysis.” *Polyvox: An Anthrogang Production*. 2021.

¹¹ Manning, Olly. “Ep. 2.5 – Armchair Analysis.” *Polyvox: An Anthrogang Production*. 2021.

Finally, we talk about something Captain Task said to Irxiex after falling ill: “I wanted to get to know the real you, the one you’re still building” (a reference to the body without organs I deliberately inserted).

The session eventually falls to joking about astrology, dating, and pickup lines – we are no longer performing scholarship for the recording, but friendship.

Ep. 4.5

Olly remarks on the developing complexity of the relationship with the party’s fungal surroundings. Conor responds: when the Task puppet groaned, “please,” it caused a resonance through Kruhl to Conor – an “are we the baddies’ moment.” We go through several possibilities of how to interpret Task’s plea. The party decides that the mushrooms were trying to trick them, *or* Lindsey theorizes that the mushrooms misinterpreted the party’s request to find Task again, and presented them with a puppet that they thought resembled the captain enough to be acceptable, because the forest considers the party to be just a much more materialistic and ontologically concerned species. They created a Task puppet without an interiority because they don’t understand what makes her Task. I mention that as soon as the party uprooted the puppet, she dissolved; she couldn’t communicate with the superstructural rhizome, which creates the consciousness of the entire forest.

“They’re mushrooms; they don’t have a sense of what harmony or conflict is.”

Conor remarks that the word “please” is a very powerful interjection, especially during a fight. I consider that changes the tone of the fight because it’s a speech act: a plea or supplication changes the relationship between the Task puppet and the party during the fight, in a powerful enough manner to resonate “up” to Conor’s own subjectivity and remind him that “oh, now my actions have consequences.”

I ask the party what they think of the Classical Ith inscription: “It is known: some reminder is the source of any thought.”

Lindsey reacts very positively to this, interpreting it as “a positive spin on the concept that there can be no original thought...a lot of people take that as a pessimistic thing, like nobody can ever be truly creative...but especially given that it was about our loved one, the way that I interpreted that was that we are simply nothing without each other. Everything we are arises from experiences that we’ve had, relationships that we’ve had especially – and that is a thing to celebrate, that is actually a very beautiful and nice thing, that I’m glad it manifested even in this moment of crisis so beautifully and nicely in terms of our love and affection for Task which is now driving our actions. It’s now actually driving us to do something, to change our ontological state. The power of love is changing our ontological state as we are going on this quest to find Task, so, that was a stressful – because she’s lost – but very heartwarming moment for me and I’m glad that that had such an affirming philosophical background as well.”¹²

Conor draws this phrase as a comparison to basic Saussurean semiotics; I complicate it slightly by involving Peirce’s theories of iconicity (but explain it poorly and need to clarify myself in Ep. 5.5). Conor asks whether the new crewmate, Akina, who changes their face, might interact differently with iconicity – drawing a comparison to the short story *The Belonging Kind* by William Gibson and John Shirley. I confirm that having a face that is literally never recognizable (unless intentionally designed to be) will indeed have a very different relationship to discursive identity construction, which takes place in the field of semiotic thought.

¹² Weiss, Lindsey. “Ep. 4.5 – Armchair Analysis.” *Polyvox: an Anthrogang Production*. 2021.

We transition to a consideration of how *De&D* allows for a lot of experimentation with time flow and impossibility, exploring how affects get compounded and exploded and expanded in the imagination “as we now delve into this six second period where fifteen people are going to fight each other to the death and we’re going to laugh about it because it’s funny.” We mention that there is tension between apparently very opposing emotions that enfold with each other in these timeframes, and name these tensions as very productive.

We then talk about the literary, historical, and philosophical grounding for the Anton’s Fire disease in-game. Historically, I had based the madness in Una on St. Anthony’s Fire, a real set of ergotism poisonings in the Middle Ages. I also coincidentally found many writings from Antonin Artaud, famous for his experiments with hallucinogens and madness, relevant to the campaign. Deleuze and Guattari write about Artaud a lot, and I explain to the party that Artaud is their prototype of how *not* to build a body without organs: “This cataclysm which was my body...into myself, into this dislocated assemblage, this piece of damaged geology.”¹³ Artaud’s assemblage was “dislocated,” it wasn’t connected to anything, it could no longer transmit.

I ask the players what happens to them when I simulate madness for them. Olly says they drew upon their experiences with the pandemic to simulate Elion’s fear of disconnection and isolation; otherwise, they could not remember any body sensations. Conor recalls being very distracted by his family at the time.

Ep. 5.5

Note: Ep. 5.5 is notated in a dialogue-heavy format because it was full of beautiful, salient insights from my co-hosts that I did not want to overly paraphrase.

We begin with a return to the body without organs: I define it as “the unbounded, nonmonadic, contemporary egg, surrounded by intensities and affects on every axis that chase themselves around and spiral continuously.” Unbounded and nonmonadic in that it is not bound by its shell and not a singularity; contemporary in that it is always hatching and never done hatching, it isn’t childlike or temporally punctual; surrounded by intensities and affects in that it is traversed by affectual information and fields of intensity. I suppose Deleuze & Guattari like the egg definition better because the egg is three dimensional, so it doesn’t need to be bounded in one’s head like the “plane of immanence” model.

Lindsey responds with another model they gleaned from *Thinking the Ecological Present* by Eva Perez de Vega at Parsons: “my understanding of a body without organs thanks to this and several other papers I read last week is that a body without organs is a body that defines itself through its relations with other objects and not through its essential qualities...it doesn’t have essential qualities that are native to itself...the intensity of its attachments with those other bodies are what constitutes its realness, its materiality...the ontology of its real being is defined through its relations with other objects and other beings.”

Olly compares this to an episode of a podcast called *The Magnus Archives*, mentioning that the episode was very creepy – this prompts Lindsey to mention that Deleuze and Guattari talk about bodies without organs as neutral states without judgment values.

“If you’re in the business of defining yourself through your relationships with others, that can either be really positive, in terms of forming a community, forming a family, forming reciprocal responsibilities that are mutually beneficial, or that can be really negative; it can be codependent...Deleuze and Guattari themselves use the example of addiction as being another form

¹³ Antonin Artaud, *Selected Writings*, ed. Susan Sontag (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1976).

of dependency on relationality to objects...so the body without organs is a neutral state that can go positively or negatively.”

I then redirect the party back to the Classical Ith inscription, “It is known: some reminder is the source of any thought,” so that we could have a more thorough conversation about it.

Lindsey quotes Gwendolyn Brooks: “‘We are each other’s harvest.’ What is it all for if not for each other? ... That is why to me, leftist thought, and especially communist thought, is so loving and so nurturing and so affirming and inspiring, because it is so excited about engaging in positive relationships...and letting that be a credit to yourself in itself...we don’t need more or less than that.”

Olly: “I don’t think humans are inherently individualistic...; people don’t just look out for themselves; that’s not how we survived as a species...as a society...”

Me: “There’s a lot of pushback against that. The ideology that we are inherently individualistic – first of all, the idea that we’re inherently anything. A universalizing human nature is actually kind of a dangerous idea in a lot of ways that a lot of anthropologists have tried to push back against in history.”

Conor: “Wittgenstein said that we as humans are like a universe trapped in a shell of what we present to others around us and we could present – he was really fascinated with clothing, and he was all about language and the transferal of, getting back to semiotics, of creating images in your head as a result of ‘This word was used in this context, so this is what I picture in my head.’ We as humans are inherently a universe of complexities and juxtapositions and differences but the way we communicate to each other on a very physical level is just, like, ‘Oh, this person is carrying themselves in this way, that must mean they are entirely this,’ instead of only seeing it as a crack through the shell, I guess.”

Me: “Right, we categorize, and one thing that we can say is universal about humans is that we do have a central nervous system that does process information in a certain way, and that certain way is largely based on pattern recognition, and that pattern recognition tends to want to categorize things. And the way that categorization happens is very different for different cultures and very different for different languages...like that is where the disconnect happens. People hear, ‘Human brains like to categorize things,’ and immediately jump to, ‘That’s why I’m allowed to be racist!’ they take it to logical extremes that don’t work at all. Where they’re jumping, there’s a lot of space in there...The English language, for example...when we have two words that mean very similar things, and someone says, ‘No, that means something very slightly different,’ and other languages are like, ‘That’s the same thing, you don’t have to distinguish between those things.’ ...There are languages that have no grammatical gender or tense like Mandarin...[attempts to explain how Mandarin verbs don’t necessarily grammaticalize time information like English verbs].”

I continue, “All of this is to say that when people say, ‘People like to categorize things,’ and they use the English language as an example of how people like to categorize things, the English language is hilariously uptight about how it categorizes things. So that’s one example I guess of how people really need to take a step back from assuming a universalized human nature based on like, the stuff in our heads all being kind of similar – because there is so much we don’t know about the stuff in our heads. There is so much we don’t know about how much of that even does our thinking.”

We talk about how one can train to think with one’s body through martial arts, for example, which completely breaks the Cartesian mind-body dualism.

Olly brings up that he dislikes how “logic and emotion are taught as mutually exclusive.”

Lindsey: “Lest we forget the root of the word ‘subjectivity’ is ‘subject’...The way that we define personhood and agency is usually construed in relation to a state and usually construed in relation to the desires of that state for maximum productivity, whether that exists in the context of capitalism or outside it is less important than the fact that assignment of human personhood is a very political decision, is one that is tied up in questions of citizenship, is very much tied up in my own life,

is tied up in questions of ability, and in terms of productivity, and in terms of in this society capacity to work. So, I will never ever take for granted that the beings that are generally assigned the designation of ‘person’ are the ones who should uncritically be viewed as embodying a subjective experience and none others should, because it will always be defined by some sort of hegemony.”

Olly: “Can we talk about how objectivity is also really subjective?”

Lindsey: “Objectivity’s wack! Objectivity’s fake! If you have no skin in the game, you don’t know shit about the issue.”

Conor: “Olly, when you mentioned ‘think with your head –’ it also got me thinking: you think with your head, you think with your heart, you think with your gut...it makes me think of a very humoristic way of portraying decision-making and intelligence, that only one region of your body is responsible for emotions versus rational thinking, versus instinct.”

Lindsey: “There’s this kind of normativizing impulse to delineate and scientifically designate which organ in your body is responsible at any given time for what emotion you’re feeling for the purposes of pathologizing or correcting it a lot of the time when in reality, almost all emotions we experience are the product of a holistic, full-body experience which can only be understood as all of these organs working as a complete assemblage and not any one working in isolation.”

Me: “And that brings us all the way back to embodiment...what does it mean to be embodying this state of...now I’m thinking with my arms, with my lungs...with my breath. I’m paying attention to my body because I’m paying attention to what it needs. I do this all the time because I’m an extremely anxious person as you all probably know by now...if I don’t then I won’t know why I’m anxious...and I won’t know how to fix it...When we’re embodying these characters to each other we’re embodying affectual information to each other as well...we’re thinking with our spirits, too, we’re thinking with our senses of humor.

“Olly, what you were saying about how it’s important to conjoin logic to emotions...that’s a pretty primary tenet of Dialectical Behavioral Therapy, which my mom teaches...this wise mind state.”

We explain DBT’s Wise Mind model as a Venn diagram between embodied sensations and emotions and the logical, reasonable consciousness; where they interact is the wise mind. Lindsey and I critique this model as still binaristic; it preserves the Cartesian dualism in a spectral form; it still oversimplifies what consciousness probably is; and it’s very much an ideological moderatism. However, it’s a useful model for acting on goals and values.

We ascribe these limitations to the fact that “psychology, as any science, has its tools and goals under the control and ends and aims of late-stage capitalism...Behavioral therapy especially...is about making sure you operate within a certain normative framework.”

Lindsey suggests essays from *Against Health*, and summarizes its thesis: “health itself as a construct unfortunately is more suited to producing normative subjects, good laborers, good citizens, within the context of capitalism and statism, than it is concerned with improving people’s lives or happiness or general well-being.”

Me: “That brings me to a topic that I’ve been sitting on for the entire campaign so far, and that is the subject of vampires, and transhumanism! Transhuman technologies as health and life-sustenance, sustaining your life, elongating your life, whether or not that’s at the expense of anything else...versus the idea of posthuman ethics, which is going to be a huge focal point of tension in this campaign.”

I pose the question of what the party thinks about how a transhuman idea like a vampire might cause friction in a posthuman space like the Gateway Grove.

Conor: “Transhumanists can’t exist in a posthuman space” – the party was only allowed outside the little “bubble” of the battle once they defeated the transhumanist vampire. We define transhumanism as “this idea of using technology to transcend the human.”

We critique the idea by calling it “Enlightenment Humanism on steroids:” as Conor says, “We are all just intelligence, so why don’t we upload our brains into the cloud and then we will be the peak

of humanity!” and I continue: “If we’re all mind juice like Daddy Descartes told us, then why can’t we be digital mind juice in a Matrioshka Brain? – prolong your life through technology because humans are essentially rational and have a unifying human nature that can be furthered and transcended through logic and reason.”

Conor: “Human beings are think-animals and the only thing in our way from attaining godhood is these stinky flesh-bodies that we’re trapped in. If we could just replace that with something that lasts longer like metal or code or whatever, then we will transcend these limitations and become the pure-thought Übermensch that we’re supposed to be.”

Me: “That’s a big thing within transhumanism and Humanism: that we’re essentially better than other animals because we’ve been gifted with this intelligence, that we’re the most evolved, that we’re at the top of this hierarchy, that there is a hierarchy to begin with, and that leads to some gross thinking, but I don’t want to totally trash transhumanism because there is some use to some of it, because it is technology you can use to save people’s lives...prosthetic limbs...”

Lindsey: “This reminds me of the importance of seeing most political thought through an amoral lens. Not trying to impose a moralistic reading onto our politics. Which is counterintuitive because if my morality is attuned to ‘Let’s try and create the most good for the most people,’ of course politics is going to be the field where that plays out...but...you can’t look at one individual wealthy man and say, ‘This man is twirling his mustache and hoarding his wealth,’ because he’s not, really...he’s just born into the system of social relations that enables him to know no other option but to exploit other people. So, it’s so much less useful, then, to be like ‘That guy’s the villain! Let’s get him!’ than to rethink holistically this entire system. And so similarly, transhumanism is a discourse and a school of thought that has such profoundly beneficial and affirming applications and profoundly destructive applications...any sort of political thought in my opinion...it serves our ends to think of it as morally neutral.”

Me: “I did come at it with a vengeance in the outset, but...Deleuze said it best: ‘Don’t come at an ideology saying how it’s wrong; ask what it does.’ And what transhumanism does is sustains hierarchies in a way that possibly is beneficial to a lot of people and possibly doesn’t further the cause of the politics that we want to end up with in the future in my opinion...I think transhumanism is...a tool. It’s using technology in a way that helps people within its purview, but that purview still needs to be expanded by...exploding the definition of what human is, and that’s where posthumanism comes in.”

We then define “posthumanism” as “thinking of humans not as individuals that are advanced beyond other animals but as a species involved in ecological relations with other animals, and reframing our role in the ecological niche that we’re in.” I clarify that this can diminish the importance of individuals, but Lindsey says it doesn’t have to: “I actually think that species is a fairly unproductive line to draw that distinction – what is species but another body? – species is an empirical taxonomic construct – in terms of what the categorization of a human species ‘does,’ it doesn’t do that much for us.”

I clarify: “When I say ‘species of humans,’ I mean, what is the role of humanoid subjectivities in this world? ...what is the role of the sentience that we understand as capable of manipulating symbolic thought?”

Lindsey translates: “What is the Anthropocene?”

Me: “I guess the big transhuman project versus the big posthuman project that you’ve encountered is another disturbance that you guys are going to have to take into account. What influence is this vampire having on the forest? What influence is the presence of these transhuman politics – is that causing friction within the posthuman realms of this space?”

Ep. 9.5

Lindsey and Olly initially comment on the imagery of the caverns beneath the library I described in game, remarking on how beautiful they imagined the caverns to be. I respond that I wanted to communicate some peace after a long stretch of “going at full throttle.” Conor and Lindsey talk about how “party banter” is such an enjoyable, fun balm to the usual grind against monsters and anthropological concepts.

I introduce the players to Félix Guattari’s transversality as an opposing idea to transference in psychoanalysis. I mention paraphrase this theory by saying that “the act of becoming tighter-knit is, in and of itself, a worthwhile goal, and...is therapeutic.” I then tell the party that this zero-combat session was supposed to be a transversal moment where “you were allowed to have more freedom to just banter and talk amongst yourselves and have a good time in a safe and peaceful environment where you weren’t encountering so much institutionalization...in *D&D* form that’s, like, rules...dice-rolling.” Lindsey has a “Eureka!” moment and says, “so we were *supposed* to know we weren’t going to have an encounter this session!”

The party discusses how, in real life (“IRL”), socializing has become more formal and less transversal since the pandemic, and how these kinds of less structured sessions are helpful to practice socializing for its own sake. Citing Bainbridge & Norris’ *Posthuman Drag*, we compare cosplay to our own roleplay: transversal moments are “a display of multiple identity eruptions that begin precisely as the costume is put on and the subject encounters another *otaku*;¹⁴” cosplaying starts with the desire to find community, and this has become the primary purpose for our roleplay as well. “I wanted to...put [transversality] on display for the recording, yeah, but I also wanted you all to enjoy it, because it’s enjoyable.”

Conor connects this to a popular quote about how “God gave us grapes but not wine and milk but not cheese and wheat but not bread because he wanted us to share in the greatest gift of all, the gift of creation.” I connect this to queerness, citing another interpretation of the same quotation: “This is why God made me trans.”

Lindsey asks, “As our ‘God,’ was there anything in the RP [roleplay] that stood out to you plot-wise that either fits or surprised you with the narrative that’s been going on?”

And I respond that Irsu’s revelation to the party of their racial identity surprised me. Lindsey implies that Irxix has surrendered all rationale to keep their secret.

I also tell Conor that Kruhl’s secret backstory of the old man who taught him origami was an interesting revelation because it wasn’t exactly “secret.” (A spirit in a pool asked the Gang for secrets about themselves to pass them through a region.) Conor says that at face-value, Kruhl’s secret was not very revelatory or profound. He also cites Frankenstein as a source of inspiration for Kruhl’s backstory.

I have a deep resonance to this: the literary comparisons are “very poignant: the reason that we tell these stories over and over again is that they mean a lot to us culturally – these touchstones get repeated and they have value.” We agree that the Frankenstein backstory turns the origami from a funny *D&D* gimmick into a full-fledged, emotionally charged backstory.

The reason the pool accepted the secret was because it wasn’t looking for “something literally hidden; it was looking for something that was going to draw the three of you closer together.”

Lindsey asks, “is that what a secret is?” They get curious about the discursive definition of a secret, so I try to define it in this context more rigorously. First, I go back to the idea of a rune, which comes from the Old Norse word *rún*, meaning “secret” as well as “glyph.” I contrast this idea of

¹⁴ Bainbridge, Jason, and Norris, Craig. 2013. “Posthuman Drag: Understanding Cosplay as Social Networking in a Material Culture.” *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific*, 32.

information storage being magical and mysterious to what the spirit in the pool wanted: something ephemeral that creates closer bonds among friends.

Conor offers, “something that isn’t spoken aloud a lot, but occupies a lot of thought. Something that isn’t talked about to random people but is very revealing of somebody.”

I challenge this with: “I guess, but also, if Kruhl went up to a random stranger on the street and said, ‘Have some origami! an old man taught me this when I was down and out in some city.’ The stranger would say, ‘that’s a depressing story, but you do you.’ It takes getting to know Kruhl for that story to become meaningful.”

The party has a collective “aha” moment, and Lindsey says, “There must need to be some investment in knowing on the part of the listener...and is it not that very investment that dissuades the secret-keeper from divulging?”

I respond: “I think that’s a common experience within our shared cultural context of feeling the need to isolate a lot of information from people we have mutual affection for because we’re afraid of being a burden, we’re afraid of being responsible for people, and information is very salient to that responsibility. But if there’s no relationship, there’s no responsibility.”

Conor offers the beginnings of a new model of literary backstory: that backstory doesn’t solely transform a character, the character also transforms the backstory.

Reflections

Ethics of building a new fantasy racial framework

As a white Euro-American who has resided in the imperial core their entire life, I felt underqualified to create a realistic fantasy racial framework in which colonial power exists, yet no society is based in Eurocentric models of history or culture. Nonetheless, I could not uncritically accept the models of race extant in fantasy literature, which are rife with Eurocentrism at best and racist caricatures at worst. This is largely to do with the genealogy of the high fantasy genre, many of whose roots can be found in the works of John Ronald Reuel Tolkien.

J. R. R. Tolkien, who publicly considered himself an outspoken anti-racist and antifascist, nonetheless based his worldbuilding almost entirely on European folklore, which did not exist in a political vacuum. He poured his linguistic training into making the Elvish languages in his world sound euphonous to English speakers in the early 20th century UK, and into making other languages in his world such as Dwarvish sound unfamiliar. For Black Speech and other such “evil” languages, finally, he reserved the least familiar sounds, to make them sound unpleasant to the same audience. Tolkien himself admitted that “[The Dwarves’] words are Semitic obviously, constructed to be Semitic.”¹⁵ In the same year, Tolkien wrote: “The language of the Dwarves...is Semitic in cast, leaning phonetically to Hebrew (as suits the Dwarvish character).”¹⁶

As his process has doubtless had the most direct influence of any single author on the modern high fantasy genre, including on *Dungeons & Dragons* itself, this has crystallized into some unfortunate effects in the intervening century.

Easiest to fix among my complaints with *Dungeons & Dragons* was the fact that every racial archetype spoke its own language, regardless of where in the Forgotten Realms or Eberron a character was born or by whom they were raised. On Ys, as I mentioned in the Introduction, the dominant language forms are those descended from the Ithkuil language, whose speakers are accumulating enough power to wipe out the speakers of any other language. At the time of the Anthrogang’s adventures, the most common languages are Řīqu and Classical Ith, both descended from Ithkuil, and Yg, which is not. Řīqu is in the process of diverging into Song dialects and Māni. I treat Řīqu as equivalent to *D&D*’s mechanical “Common,” in that almost every character will have some fluency in it.

Race has very little to do with a player’s fluency in a certain language in my game, besides perhaps informing backstory. If one is a half-elf, one may be literate in Classical Ith or in Řīqu, but likely not both, as one would likely have been raised in a community that read primarily one dialect: and so forth.

I wanted to treat *D&D* races more as ethnolinguistic groupings and cultural categories rather than immutable biological and phenotypic descriptors with mechanical features. In the rare cases where a race has a special ability, such as the prophetic abilities of the Esh or the shape-shifting magic of the Chirals, I describe it more as a cultural practice that one can learn if one is attuned to it.

This creates a strange utopic space in which we treat the game almost postracially, but not quite. Olly is biracial and has mentioned a few times in analysis that they bring their half-Asian identity to the half-elf character of Elion for inspiration. Lindsey is Arab and Jewish and has described themselves as “adept at performing whiteness;” they may have chosen their character because they liked the idea of a racialized character who must always conceal an aspect of their racial identity. Conor,

¹⁵ Gueroult, Dennis. Interview with John Ronald Reuel Tolkien. BBC, 1964

¹⁶ J.R.R. Tolkien, in letter to W.R. Matthews, 1964

on the other hand, is white; he performs the racialized character of Kruhl almost through more of a stigmatized queer lens than as any truly racial narrative.

Distance

The question of narrative distance arose frequently in the back of my mind while I was recording with my friends, as I noticed differences in how we all embodied our characters to each other. Olly, who joked the most about playing a “self-insert” – that is, a character heavily based on his own personality – seemed to distance himself from the character of Elion during play sessions by using almost exclusively third-person constructions to describe not only Elion’s actions, but also his desires and feeling states as they happened. Olly seemed to preface almost every one of Elion’s actions with “I think Elion wants to...” which was markedly different from how Conor or Lindsey approached their play: usually with a “Can I...[character action]?”

This seemed to gradually change midway through the campaign, and the shift occurred as Olly began expressing themselves more in Armchair Analysis segments as well. Olly still talked about Elion in the third person, but I noticed that they less frequently included their distinct Olly-self in the statements regarding Elion’s character actions: it was no longer “I think Elion wants to...” but rather, “Elion wants to...” or “Elion is going to...” This more active voice in both roles as Elion and Olly reflects, I think, a higher comfort level with the material, the story, and Olly’s companions.

Transversality

This brings me to the important role the game played in creating a transversal space for all four of our subjectivities to safely bloom, pause, rupture, recompose, reconfigure, and interweave. In moments such as Episode 9 (which I have not included in the story section to preserve space), in which there was less structure, no combat, and more space for the players to banter and have funny conversations (e.g. Irixiex discovers tomatoes, invents pizza; Kruhl, who hates tomatoes, is dismayed), the players expressed that they found tranquility and a sense of camaraderie and warmth. I magnified this by making it the focal point of the episode; their characters could only progress to the next region of the story by divulging a secret to each other. Olly’s character came out as gay; Lindsey’s character revealed their secret ethnoracial identity; Conor’s character told a story of the only person who had cared for him before his current friends. They do this in the presence of a spirit who takes the form of their friend, Captain Task, who has gone missing, and who they’ve been on a quest to find.

Transversality is perhaps the most important component in this story: it’s the theory that describes why we became such close friends through what began as a political and academic project. The four of us, in the creation and play of our characters and the world of Ys, found community. To parallel Bainbridge and Norris’s study of cosplay, our roleplay is also “an embodied form of social networking,”¹⁷ where our voices become the medium for likes and desires rather than our bodies. Transversality conceptually “opposes both verticality (in the sense of hierarchies and leaders) and horizontality, in the sense of groups of people organising themselves within a particular ‘section’ or compartment.”¹⁸ The way it does this is through a reciprocity, an exchange, which ideally creates positive feedback loops of affects that feel affirming and therapeutic. This was Guattari’s original model, which challenged the libidinous “transference” therapist/patient relationship that’s so

¹⁷ Bainbridge, Jason, and Norris, Craig. 2013. “Posthuman Drag: Understanding Cosplay as Social Networking in a Material Culture.” *Intersections: Gender and Sexuality in Asia and the Pacific*, 32.

¹⁸ Palmer, Helen, and Panayotov, Stanimir. 2016. “Transversality.” *New Materialism: How Matter Comes to Matter*.

dangerously unstable when it comes undone through some violation of terms. A transversal space, meanwhile, is one facilitated by nobody and everybody at once, where anybody can contribute something useful to the interaction and friendship is a natural result of the process. Becoming close-knit is a worthy goal in and of itself: as Lindsey quoted Gwendolyn Brooks during an Armchair Analysis, “We are each other’s harvest.”

The players had never met each other before Session Zero, three weeks before we started releasing episodes. Without this Senior Project, the players may never have encountered each other; Olly lives in Minnesota, and his online social circles mostly have to do with classical music, musical theater, *D&D*, and horror podcasts, whereas Conor and Lindsey live on the East Coast and are at different stages of their lives; Lindsey has a full-time job as an aquaponics farmer in New York, and Conor is finishing his anthropology degree next semester at Purchase from his hometown in Putnam County. Bringing my friends together into this space so that they can become friends with each other as well has been an incredibly worthwhile experience. Though the process of writing content for their consumption and play has been stressful at times, they always reward me with a sense of accomplishment, fun, and ease.

Sound effects and atmosphere

I decided very carefully on the sonic affects left in the podcast record. I recorded in my small bedroom with a pop shield and a condenser USB microphone, and requested that everybody else use a similar setup (offering a spare condenser USB mic to anybody who needed it). Olly is a composer and performer, and Lindsey has produced Internet videos, so they already had audio setups. Conor ended up getting a lapel microphone that worked for our purposes. Even so, our recordings ended up sounding rather messy and impromptu: Lindsey’s audio often contained artifacts of their loud neighbors in Queens, and Conor’s family was often quite noisy in his background. During one Armchair Analysis segment, Lindsey recorded from their car.

I decided to keep most of the choppy, home-produced atmosphere this created, except in moments of intensity, which I produced to juxtapose sonic affects. During these moments, such as when Viish the Spore Queen delivered her prophecy or during the dream sequence, I heavily edited the clips to reduce noise and level the volume of our voices. I also added in extra sound and studio effects such as whispering, echoing, reverberation, and music – all of which I arranged myself on MIDI synthesizers. The intent was to create noticeable differences in the sonic atmosphere of the podcast which would affect the mood with the force of its difference in texture and production.

Music

For the introductory music to Episode 1, I used a song I wrote for guitar and voice as a placeholder, but quickly decided against using it for any future episodes. It was thematically appropriate, but I thought it might be too cutesy. So, I arranged Franz Schubert’s 1815 setting of Johann Wolfgang von Goethe’s *Erlkönig* for MIDI synthesizers for the intro music for future episodes. I thought this piece more aesthetically appropriate due to its dramatic flair, and also due to its dark fairy tale text.

For the dream sequence in Episode 6, I bought the performance rights and sheet music to a friend’s setting of William Wordsworth’s *The Daffodils* for two sopranos and two altos, and rearranged it for MIDI synthesizers and chiptune beats. I did this partially to support my fellow nonbinary friend’s excellent work, trying to use this project to aid artists of marginalized identities; but also partially

because the dream sequence music needed to be calmer, more introspective, and more modally (in an unrigorous sense of the word) ambiguous than the *Erlkönig* arrangement.

Conclusions

When I think back on how this project began, I often forget that it started as a cathartic, escapist hobby. I was building Ys long before I came to Purchase College as a way of imagining environments in which I could be comfortable and free and in control of myself. Having dropped out of a fast-paced music performance program for which I felt inadequate, and subsequently having distanced myself from any sort of cohort, I isolated; I became the “dislocated assemblage,” the “piece of damaged geology.” I was a site of land and trauma to which events *happened*, with little agency or interiority of my own.

So, I began making a new world inside myself: thanks to tutorials on YouTube by Edgar Grunewald (under his handle “Artifexian”) and to others such as “Biblaridion” and “Conlang Critic,” and to helpful users on the r/worldbuilding subreddit who have spent countless hours building calculators, spreadsheets, and guidebooks for curious worldbuilders like myself, and to authors like Andy Weir and Sylvain Neuvel and Ursula K. Le Guin and Frank Herbert, whose science fiction imaginations expanded my own, I set about building a universe I could escape into to make my internal world a little more tolerable.

For nearly three years, I couldn’t hold down a job, I couldn’t pass a class, and I couldn’t socialize. I could barely leave the house. All I could do was draw the occasional map. But over time, as I progressed through therapy and constructed a new life for myself, this project that had sustained me through such dark times took on a new shape. During that time, I had learned a little about leftist politics, I had come out as transgender and queer, and I had developed a much deeper respect for cultural diversity. I wanted to use my experiences to help others, to reduce the amount of suffering people like me go through in the world. When I got accepted to the anthropology major at Purchase College, I didn’t know how my project would fit into that goal, so I put it aside for a moment.

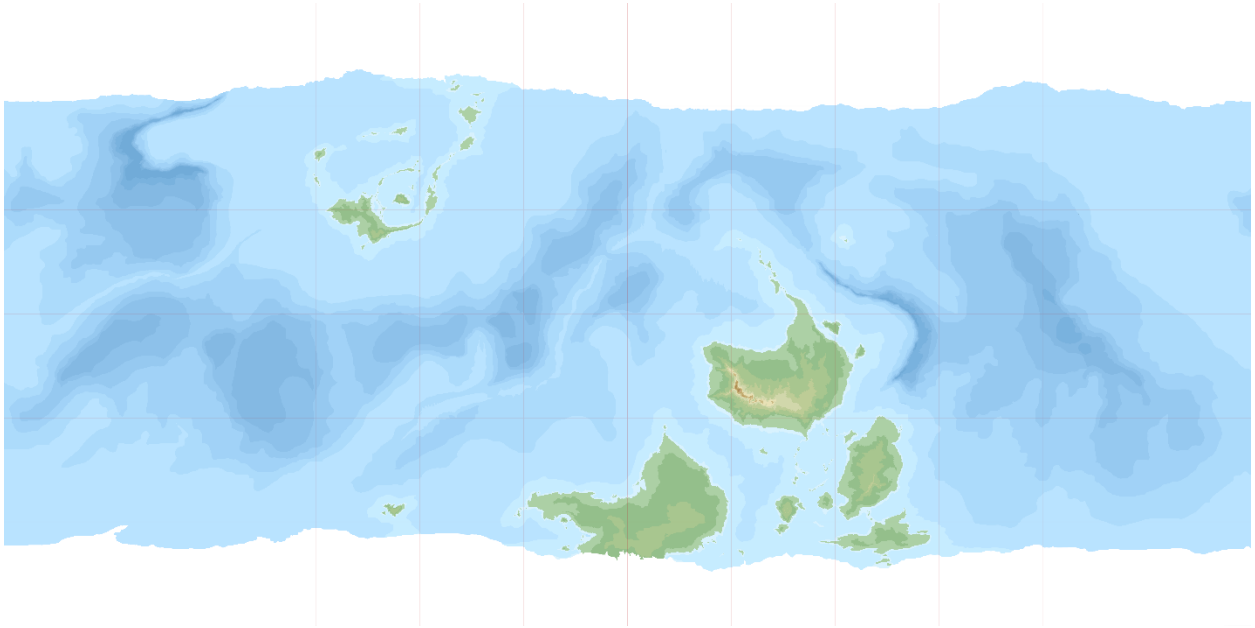
When I began it anew as a Senior Project, I had political agendas and academic goals in mind. I had forgotten the original purpose of this tool I had designed. But my friends have reminded me that no matter what else this Senior Project or the podcast accomplishes – and, truthfully, it might be very little, considering how few people listen to it! – the primary purpose of this Senior Project, and of the podcast, is to bring us four closer together through a time of hardship. The game constructs and strengthens bonds of positive mutual responsibility, interest, and fun. This is the most valuable lesson I have learned as a dungeon master, and in my senior year at Purchase College: my role as an anthropologist should be to build communities that stick around, that enjoy doing the work.

The game is still ongoing; Krubl, Irxiex and Elion are all at Level 5, and I intend to take them to Level 20. The Anthrogang will transition to a new chapter of their adventures upon finding Captain Task...

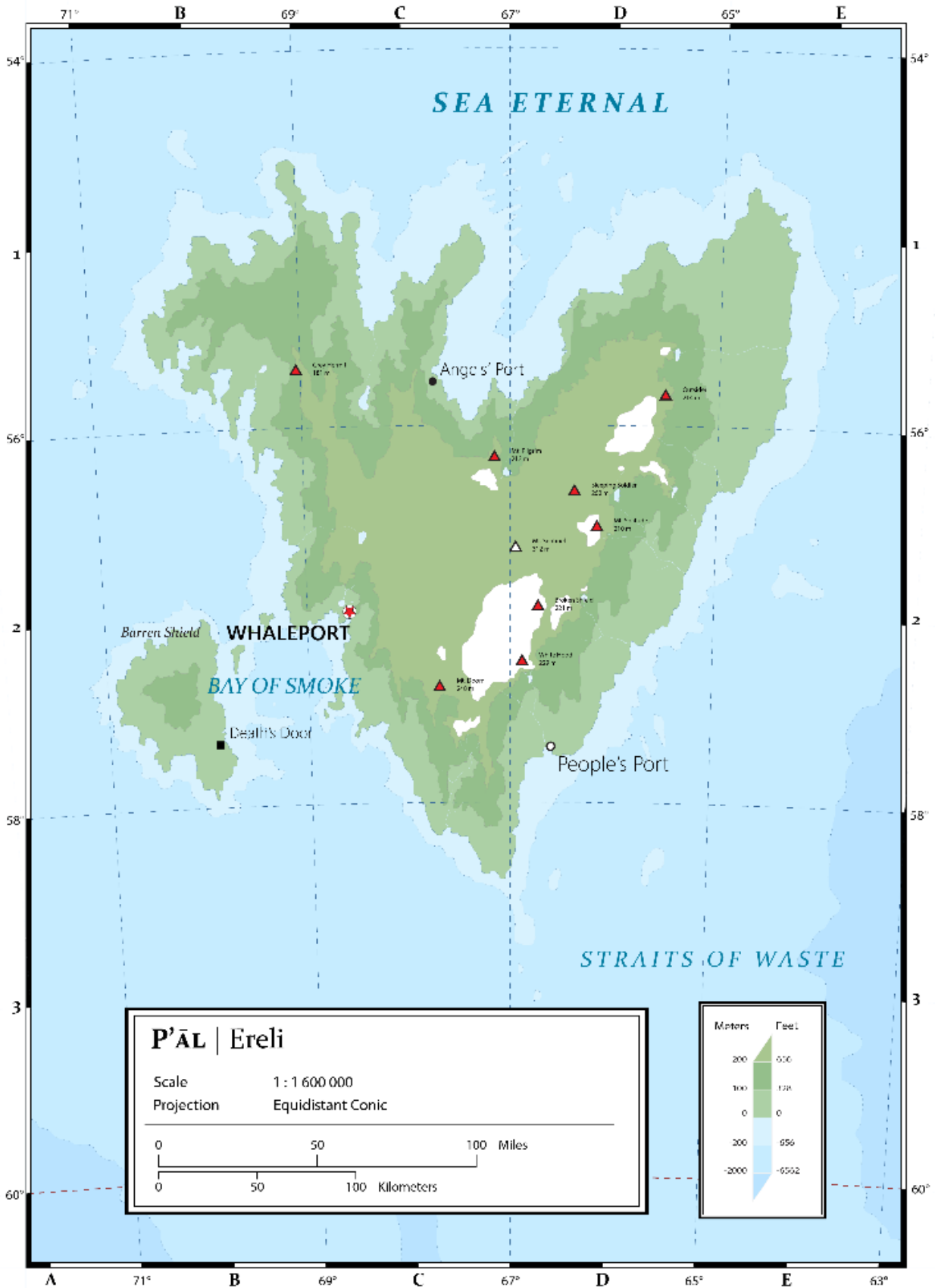
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Appendix, Artwork, and Maps



world map of Ys, in Plate-Carrée projection.



POLYVOX

AN ANTHROGANG PRODUCTION



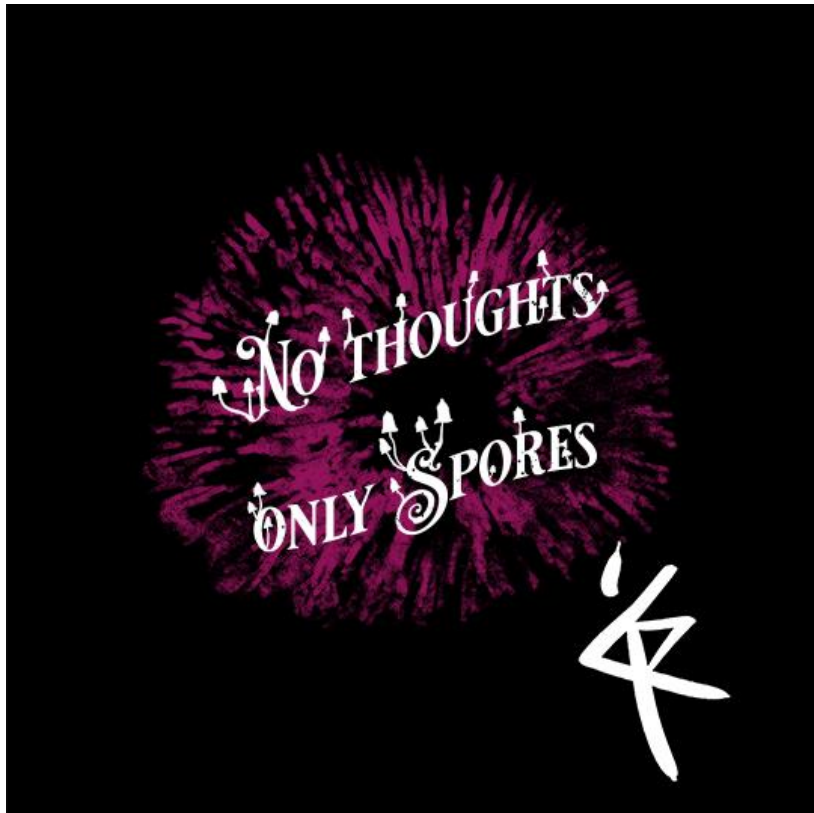
I SURVIVED THE GATEWAY GROVE



AND ALL I GOT WAS THIS CREEPY PUPPET



the Pendant of the Mad Worker, with Ursula the ant trapped inside



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