

Against Author(ity) as Deity:

An argument for the democratisation of worldbuilding in climate futures

by Paul Graham Raven

Worldbuilding, a term of art from science fiction and fantasy (sf/f), has gone mainstream. The visibility of this term owes much to the steady ascent of paraliterary media to something approaching a global hegemony: sf/f is everywhere nowadays, on bookshelves, in cinemas, on gaming machines. The artistic and fandom cultures around these media, and around the genre(s) more broadly, has brought with it much interest and debate (frequently fractious) upon the imaginative processes through which they are created.

The worldbuilding label has also worked its way into supposedly more serious fields of futuring. This is due to the growing influence of creative and inductive approaches to futurity in academia and beyond: put simply, the role of *imagination* in thinking about the future—as opposed to *extrapolation* on the basis of extant trends—has been rehabilitated, after decades during which ‘utopian’ was dunce-cap forced upon anyone who dared to defy what the late Mark Fisher so memorably defined as ‘capitalist realism’.

However, while extrapolation and deduction are demonstrably different approaches to futurity than are imagination and induction¹, adherents of the former paradigm—including defence-adjacent thinktanks such as the RAND Corporation, extractive multinationals such as Royal Dutch Shell, and a swarm of McKinsey-esque management consultancies, as well as climate modellers and economic forecasters—are still very much in the business of building future worlds. The difference in the approaches lies in their epistemological premises: in the assumptions made about starting conditions and the possible scope of responses to such; in who (or what) is granted agency in those imagined worlds; and in the teleologies of the work itself.

Which is to say: futurists of every stripe have *always* been worldbuilders, whether they like the label or not. Furthermore, to be a worldbuilder is to be a sort of god: it is to

1 <https://www.alluvium-journal.org/2021/06/04/from-predictive-product-to-polyphonic-practices-techniques-of-futuring-beyond-business-as-usual/>.

take an inherently monopolistic and top-down position on futurity, in which you get to define the set-up of the pieces on the board, the rules of the game, and the conditions of victory. The worldbuilder is the sole author(ity) of the world they build.

In some regards, this is both fine and necessary. Acts of monopolistic worldbuilding have brought into being stories, locations and characters which have become part of the global cultural furniture, so to speak. Such shared stories might be thought of as contributing to something like a shared mythology, a basis for conversation between otherwise disparate individuals and groups.

But therein lies the problem, too. The stories we share about futurity shape and limit the futurities we're able to imagine for ourselves and others. In the case of sf, this resulted in a megatext of narratives whose futurities largely reproduced the hegemony of straight white male

The stories we share about futurity shape and limit the futurities we're able to imagine for ourselves and others.

Anglophone people over pretty much everyone else. In the case of, say, climate futures—which, I would argue, are shared narratives of futurity in the same way as sf media properties²—the effect is less obvious, though all the more insidious for that. The authors of climate futures—myself very much included—tend to come from elite and/or privileged backgrounds, a precondition of their ascent to influential roles in academia, policy or business. As such, climate futures tend to share the biases and concerns of those rarefied demographics.

To be clear, this is not malice at work. (At least, I don't believe it to be malice in the majority of cases.) But it is nonetheless a problem—because climate futures now stand at the crossroads where sf/f found itself standing a few decades ago, peddling futures against which a diverse and growing audience is protesting, on the basis that they do not see themselves and their concerns represented therein.

I believe that the way to address unrepresentative climate futures is essentially the same as that taken in sf/f: if we want to democratise the (re)production of futures, particularly with regard to the matter of climate change—a threat for which no one person or group is to blame, but in which we are all complicit and imbricated—then

2 <https://doi.org/10.1332/204378920X16052078001915>.

worldbuilding must be turned over to as many different and diverse people as possible.

In recent years a growing number of sf/f authors engaged seriously with the critique of underrepresentation through active attempts to write from a position of empathy and understanding toward subjectivities other than their own. Leaving aside the question of individual successes or failure, it bears noting that while this strategy is inherently limited: to tell stories, whatever the medium, we draw upon our own experiences, interests and perspectives, which are perforce limited by our origins and circumstances. Hence the growing call—fully justified in my view—for greater diversity in authorship and in the publishing industry: the more perspectives we have on futurity (and on the human experience), the more likely we are to get a megatext in which everyone might recognise themselves and their experience, and thus feel that the future is something in which they have not just a stake, nor merely representation, but *agency*.

Climate futures are often produced differently to sf stories, but this is an advantage: the lone author of the latter is always at a disadvantage, in terms of diverse experience, to the collective authorship of the former. But the issue of elite perspectives persists, and must be dealt with through methodology. By drawing on fields such as co-production, action research, placemaking, design research and many more, we can enact (co-)creative processes in which ordinary people have the opportunity to speak and write and make their own imagined futures, rather than merely being invited to

By turning over the task of building a future world, in all its detail and richness, to those who will have to live in it, we tap into a diversity of situated experience, knowledge and expertise.

'consult' upon a set of options decided in advance. This is idealistic, yes, but it is also pragmatic: by turning over the task of building a future world, in all its detail and richness, to those who will have to live in it, we tap into a diversity of situated experience, knowledge and expertise which no solo or corporate author could hope to match.

Since I began making this argument, I've heard numerous objections to it. Underlying many of them, particularly in policy circles (but also academia), is the fear that futures produced by 'non-experts' will be scientifically or economically naive, or provide

answers to the question 'how should we live?' that will make us uncomfortable. I feel those fears myself—but I believe that's actually the best argument *in favour* of the democratisation of worldbuilding. If we can feel even a little afraid of the futures that the majority might choose on our behalf, then perhaps it's time we realised that the majority may well have felt just as fearful of the futures which, for many years, we have chosen on their behalf.

By meeting in the middle—with not just our fears for the future, but our hopes as well—we might find that our hopes overlap more than we expected, that our fears are more easily conquered in collaboration, and that changing the ways in which we live might be better not just for the planet, but also for us.

© Paul Graham Raven, August 2021

About the Author

[Dr. Paul Graham Raven](#) is (at time of writing) a Marie Skłodowska-Curie Postdoctoral Fellow at Lund University, Sweden, where he researches the narrative rhetorics of sociotechnical and climate imaginaries. His doctoral thesis proposed a novel model of sociotechnical change based on social practice theory, and a narrative prototyping methodology for infrastructure foresight. He's also an author and critic of science fiction, an occasional journalist and essayist, a collaborator with designers and artists, and a (gratefully) lapsed consulting critical futurist. He currently lives in Malmö with a cat, some guitars, and sufficient books to constitute an insurance-invalidating fire hazard