

how to do things

with worlds

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introduction

This thesis is an attempt to understand what the hell I am doing. It's a collection of thoughts I have had about language, poetry and making worlds with them. Some kind of blueprint, maybe, of concepts I have discussed with people and ideas I have read over the course of two years, in order to understand my own practice better. I think I ended up with something that, at least to me, feels like the start of a framework, a toolbox with ideas I can use in the future.

In the first chapter, I discuss some ideas on how language works and how we can make it work for us. I propose that we can change what anything is by talking about it differently. And I propose that we need to change how we see reality to build better communities. We do this with language, which has the power to create worlds. When you bend the rules of language, it becomes poetry. Building worlds can be a tool to come up with new ideas.

Not all poetics are good poetics. Profit-driven, capitalist spaces use poetics as well, ubiquitously even, and their exploitation and bastardization of language is felt everywhere in how words are used. Corporations employ marketing teams to forge phrases in a workshop that is functionally identical to poetry. But the worlds it creates through language are walled off utopias, where the brand that employs them is the ultimate benevolent force. However, I'll argue that poetry is also essential to move beyond these

realities, imagine a system after capitalism and build communities based on collective solidarity rather than individual action.

In the second chapter, I'll investigate how world making actually works. You can build realities with language because with language you can make rules. I'll argue that a reality is like a game: the only way you can feel like you are part of it is by following the rules. If you break the rules, you're either no longer immersed, or it becomes a different reality (or a different game). By using poetry to bend the rules of your current reality, you can start to make your own.

Lastly, I'll look at new worlds that are being made right now. There are a lot of examples of people who have started doing this already. Some of them look at the future, some imagine a reality completely detached from what we are familiar with, some use poetics to experience what we are already familiar with, but in a different way. By using poetry to create new realities, we can move from rigid definitions and the violence of standardization to worlds that are adaptable and inclusive.

And I think that's what it comes down to in the end. I wanted to understand what it is that I'm doing in my practice and after writing this thesis, I think it's this: I want poetry as resistance to constraints. Use it to make worlds where boundaries fall away, where we have topologies over taxonomies, resemblance and difference over definition by checkbox. This is and always

will be a work in progress, but I think some of the ideas I discuss in this thesis might be a good place to start.

Oh, and before I forget. In between chapters, you'll find two exercises that are related to the topic I'm discussing. Try them out if you like, I think they can be fun games or challenges.

Anyway. Time to thank some people. There were a lot that helped me write this thing. Mijke van der Drift, Ramon Amaro, Nick Axel, Roosje Klap, Niels Schrader, Saskia van Stein, and all other tutors who read, commented on and criticized my work. I also want to mention Eva Rank, Michelle Vossen, François Charmaille, Emma Verhoeven, Ben Earl, Corinna Canali, Astrid Feringa, Jean-Baptiste Castel and everyone else at Non-Linear Narrative. Thank you and I love you. *#brunch*

1: words and realities

the beginning of a world

In the beginning, there is absolutely nothing at all. We're in a vast, infinite void. The only thing that's around is a big, burly dude with giant muscles and a beard, who is most definitely a man, thinking that it'd be good if things existed. Then, this non-corporeal being somehow — the mechanics aren't and can't really be explained properly — speaks. He says the word “light” and by doing so, wills it into existence. There's no mouth here, not a physical body involved. Hell, there's barely such a thing as space and time, just a formless and empty Earth. But the word is spoken, whatever that means in this context, and suddenly light exists.

Many religions touch on this concept of speaking as a method of creation in their stories of how the world came to be. The *Qur'an* describes in the 41st sura how God tells the earth and the heaven to “come together, willingly or unwillingly,” and by speaking these words, it happens. In the *Brihadaranyaka Upanishad*, there is nothing whatsoever in the universe, until Death itself says “let me have a mind” and by speaking this desire into existence, the incantation is executed. Then, while worshipping itself, Death thinks (or speaks) “as I am worshipping, water springs up,” and, to borrow a phrase from the Christian origin story of the universe, it is so.

There appears to be a general theme of a supreme being, channeling its willpower into words, enacting what the words mean by saying them or thinking them. (I would propose those are equivalent when a being that transcends space and time performs them.) In these stories, giving a thing a word creates the thing. It reminds me of something Hegel says in *Phenomenology of Spirit*: “it is the power of utterance qua utterance which, just in speaking, performs what has to be performed.”¹ Hegel is talking about identity here and puts something forward that I agree with, which is the argument that the existence of ‘an I’ is made through language, and can only exist by proclaiming its distance from other selves, because its actualization only happens in relation to others. Without other selves to communicate and contrast the conception of the ‘I’ to, there’s no point in even having a notion of individuality, it needs a proclamation and an audience. It’s similar to what happens when we say “congratulations”, “my condolences” or “kind regards”. All of these phrases are incantations, declarations of something that only exists through announcing the words, they are what J. L. Austin calls *performative utterances*². These kinds of sentences do not describe a state of affairs, they are not a statement of something that can be observed. Instead, they perform the action itself by being spoken in the correct context, to the appropriate audience.

The idea I want to explore in this thesis, is that it’s not just a sense of self or other abstract concepts that are created through language. I want to propose that our entire conception of the world is created through language, that

language itself creates a world. And I want to argue this means we can use, bend and break language, as well as create new languages, to produce new ways of seeing and thinking. Language will always give us merely an approximation of reality. We can't really *observe* what things are, ontologically — we can only construct ideas of what things are by giving our perceptions names and definitions. And what those definitions are supposed to be, is somewhat fragile at best. We have a vague sense of what words should mean; we learn their application through social contexts and through formalized grammar and dictionary definitions. But the dictionary makes definitions with words as well. The formal rules of a language are set using the language itself, creating some kind of cyclical logic. Aside from the situations where people use a dictionary definition as a call to authority in an argument, I think it's rather by seeing predictable reactions from other people and encountering repeated usage of phrases in certain contexts that we estimate we've reached some form of consensus. We use words and the meanings we have associated with them to create concepts through which we make sense of what we encounter. With language, we create a world for ourselves, built on a framework of grammar, vocabulary and the thoughts their rules allow us to formulate.

What I'm after, is using this idea to see how we can deliberately make our own worlds that give us frameworks to change what *things* are. If the existing frameworks are created through rules, doesn't that mean we can bend or break those rules? I want to propose we can create new realities

through languages, games, poetry, and use all of them to redefine what we experience. These are not parallel, fictional realities rooted in fantasy, but embedded in and connected to all other realities we have on hand. They don't necessarily replace, but can be supplementary to existing ways of seeing the world. Literally creating one reality on top of the other that enhances, modifies and liberates how we can think. I think this practice is a powerful vehicle with a lot of potential, but it's one that drifts on a sandy road. Making worlds can do many things. It can be maneuvered close to the territory of world building in literature and fiction, where we don't even try to describe our observations anymore and instead attempt to construct something out of thin air completely. It can also be used as a method to reclaim language to better express our experiences, make our statements not just dry, empirical observations, include their emotionality and the social context from which they are being said. But it can also get us within spitting distance of nebulous and sometimes questionable concepts built on nothing but words, such as finance, gender, marketing and, at the root of all of those, capitalism and power.

a cage made of language

Ludwig Wittgenstein famously says in the *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus* that "the limits of my language mean the limits of my world."³ But what if I don't like those limits? Some of them are pretty restrictive. A lot of

concepts in the English language, like *property* or *desire* are needlessly individualistic and there are many gendered connotations that I could really do without. It gets worse in Dutch; the language I grew up with. There's a myriad of ways to express discomfort but only a handful of phrases to say you 'like' something and none of them give you a lot of nuance. Gender neutral pronouns simply do not exist. It's not as bad as Italian, which explicitly genders almost every word the language has to offer, but we're definitely not close to how Sweden is accommodating for people with non-binary gender identities, by literally creating a new pronoun and standardizing it in their official dictionary.⁴ The entirety of the Dutch language feels very much like the culture: efficient, pragmatic, but not very well suited for emotional statements. Maybe it's the weather here. Or maybe just the people. Surely they could benefit from having their linguistic playground expanded a little. After all, there are wildly different playgrounds available in other languages. Inuktitut has at least ten words to distinguish different types of snow, like ᑭᓄᑦ (*qanik*), which is snow that's currently falling and ᐱᓄᑦ (*aputi*), snow that has fallen on the ground. Similarly, I've been told that the whole secret to wine tasting is learning how to distinguish the different flavors, which is mostly about finding names, descriptions and analogies to attach to sensations you are feeling. I think this applies to everything we experience; having a more diverse palette of ways to express yourself can reveal emotions you didn't realize you were experiencing.

However, I don't mean to say you can never feel certain sensations until you find a way to describe them. Lived experience, thoughts and the ability to communicate them are all very different things. The limits of vocabulary and grammar are not an iron fist that dictates what thoughts are possible to think. I think they're rather a guideline that nudges your thoughts in a certain direction. Although some people make it out to be more of an iron fist than others. For example, Alfred Korzybski writes in *Science and Sanity*:

We do not realize what tremendous power the structure of a habitual language has. It is not an exaggeration to say that it enslaves us through the mechanism of *s[emantic] r[eactions]* and that the structure which a language exhibits, and impresses upon us unconsciously, is automatically projected upon the world around us.⁵

It's kind of a bleak perspective on how language works if you consider this idea in isolation. The structure of the language we speak projects itself on how we see the world, and by using terms like "tremendous power" and "enslaves", Korzybski makes it seem like there is no way to escape. It's almost as if language becomes some kind of entity with its own agency. And he's not the only one to attribute that much power to language. Wittgenstein's later work already backpedals on his earlier idea of the limits of worlds being strictly set by language, but it still carries some of these

sentiments. In *Words of Selves*, Riley discusses how Wittgenstein makes grammar out to be a hidden force that dictates how we can use words. As an example, she uses a section from his work *Philosophical Investigations*:

When one says “He gave a name to his sensation” one forgets that a great deal of stage-setting in the language is presupposed if the mere act of naming is to make sense. And when we speak of someone’s have given a name to pain, what is presupposed is the existence of the grammar of the word “pain”, it shews the post where the new word is stationed.⁶

Wittgenstein seems to say here that, while it’s possible to come up with new words to describe new sensations, they will always have to slot into an existing framework, built on existing rules. The structure is still there, hiding in the background, telling us what we can and cannot do. This hierarchical view of how language works seems, Riley writes, very similar to Nietzsche’s ideas about language as some kind of seductress, laying traps through its rules for us to fall in. All of these men seem to think of grammar as some unescapable tyrant or a master manipulator that will trick us into distorting our inner worlds. Riley disputes this by shifting the agency back to ourselves: “There is no isolable Language, in that it’s not an actor and has no power to seduce anyone.”⁷ In the end, we have autonomy over our own thoughts and expressions. If we are aware of the limits of our language, we are also able to question them. We can, somewhat

frustratingly, feel like we experience things we cannot appropriately express. But when that happens, there's nothing to stop us from finding alternatives, coming up with new ways to use existing languages or even make our own. I think, in many cases, having a certain word in a language for something is really just a useful shorthand that allows thoughts to be constructed more efficiently. Some particular words embody such a pointed affect that adding them to your vocabulary feels like replacing an axe with a chainsaw. And knowing to ask a question with the right word might grant you access to certain resources or find the right communities. But in the end, when it comes to expressing ourselves, all languages can be bent and stretched to approximate what we feel as accurately as possible. This is what we do with poetry; we take the semantic constructions our language allows for and push them until cold, dry observations start radiating their subjectivity and emotional affect. By making unusual combinations, bending or breaking grammar rules deliberately and introducing new words where we feel the need for them, poetry can resist the structure of language. It can redefine what's possible in a language and make it work for us, instead of the other way around.

the urgency of feeling things

So we can overcome limitations posed by language. We can make our subjectivity and emotionality take the center stage through poetry and bend the rules to come up with new ideas. But why? I think the simple answer is

that, right now, the collective imagination of our capitalist society seems stuck. As I'm writing this, it's thirty years ago that Francis Fukuyama proclaimed history has ended. Our conception of history, Fukuyama says, vaguely drawing on some inspiration from Marx, should be understood as a linear progression to the ultimate system. And with liberal democracy, he states, we've reached that point. The idea that our current financial and political system is the final system; the best system; the only imaginable system and things will stay like this forever — it's so firmly rooted in our collective consciousness that we can't even seem to properly credit the person who came up with the infamous quote; "it's easier to imagine the end of the world, than it is to imagine the end of capitalism."

Capitalism has seeped into everything, our language, into a global sentiment, it seems so pervasive that, much like Korzybski writes about the power of language, it looks like there's no way to escape. Anything beyond neoliberal band-aids on systemic problems seems so revolutionary, we can't seem to even begin to consider it a realistic option. Individually deciding to combat climate change by going vegan, driving an electric car and showering a little shorter, that's all fine, but collectively taking action to bring down the actual causes — like the 100 corporations who have created 71% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions since 1988⁸ — is too radical, will only be bad optics and should be left to politicians. Or so I'm told. Neoliberal capital reduces us all to individual actors. Only asynchronously engaged in collectivity through parliamentary governing systems and

devotion to brands. Feeling a sense of belonging through which parties you vote for and which companies, artists, charities and forms of entertainment you support, which is also voting, but with your money. It's the perfect way to keep the current status quo perpetuated, of course. If large groups of people never really get the opportunity to act as one, all threats to the system that still pop up can just be dealt with on an individual level. So, at least to me, it seems clear we need a new way of moving forward, not based on individual action, but on collective solidarity. And in the 2012 book *The Uprising*, Franco "Bifo" Berardi writes precisely about using poetry as a tool to do that and "shift from one paradigm to another":

Once poetry foresaw the abandonment of referentiality and the automation of language; now poetry may start the process of reactivating the emotional body, and therefore of reactivating social solidarity, starting from the reactivation of the desiring force of enunciation.⁹

Berardi seems to say we need emotionality as a prerequisite for solidarity, which I agree with. I'd argue that by using poetry to create new worlds, we can transcend a system that reduces human beings to how much wealth they can create and instead create communities of vulnerability. Communities based on human relations, on connections that grow by expressing desires and working to achieve them together in solidarity. Communities that listen to troubled voices and don't dismiss them as weak and incompatible with

the system, but help them to thrive alongside everyone else. Poetry can be a tool to show the full human instead of just their economical value. These alternative readings of the world and all the potential it contains replaces the logics with which we see the world, and I think that finally allows us to build a reality that can see further than the current power structures.

In his 2015 essay *Democracy is Joy*, Mark Fisher writes about how capitalism hinges on accepting a worldview that maintains the status quo; “[...] the dreary old message, the mantra that the British bourgeoisie recites in its sleep – nothing has ever happened, nothing can ever happen, we need more time – is getting harder to push now that it’s evident that the ruling reality structure is coming apart practically everywhere we look.”¹⁰ Capital keeps up the impression that everything will always stay the same, by reframing any radical movements as either unrealistic, or, when it’s clear they’re gaining traction, calling them an inevitable progression that we always knew would have to come at some point. (Like Universal Basic Income that’s now being reframed by multiple candidates in the upcoming 2020 elections in the United States as simply a “logical choice” given the rise of automation.) We can only combat this facade, Fisher writes, by providing a new reality frame to replace the old one. “Capitalist realism cannot survive when alternatives are efflorescing ... These alternatives are not only ‘political’ in the narrow sense – they are also emotional.” A large part of accepting a new world has to do with feeling. Imagining the end of the current reality frame is not only a coping mechanism, it’s a necessity.

“The more we believe it, the more we can make it happen, the more we believe it.” World building becomes a way to look at that which we take for granted with new eyes, deconstruct the systems that are in place and move beyond them. In this way, poetry becomes a form of kaleidoscopic exploration by offering a window into how someone sees the world without any ulterior motives; an exercise in experimenting with new ideas and perspectives, just to see what happens. By treasuring the poetics of our inner worlds and opening them up to the public, we can transform the mundane, the things we’ve taken for granted into fascinating pools of fresh water that might just refresh us enough to build better realities together.

exercise 1

Name five things that did not happen yesterday. Replace each noun with a random other, unrelated noun.

Example

“I didn’t ride the bus to the forest yesterday”

becomes

“I didn’t ride the elephant to the cucumber yesterday”

Hard mode

Complete the exercise in less than 30 seconds

2: games and spells

In the last chapter, I argued why it's important to build worlds. Now I'd like to investigate how we can actually do it. In this chapter, I'll make a connection between the idea of creating realities through language and the idea that all forms of games are created through rules. By setting rules, both games and languages create reality frames. To explain this, I will use games and video games in particular as illustrations of realities where rules produce a *spell* that can be broken. I want to argue that this is what it means when you say you are *in* a game. If the rules are broken, either the spell breaks or it becomes a different game.

playing the game

What's a game? Maybe when you hear the word *game* you think of things that happen on a screen, first person shooters like the seemingly perpetually revivable franchise *Call of Duty*. Maybe you think of kicking balls, board games or table top games, like *Dungeons and Dragons*, or having a friendly competition with a friend. But how can we define a game? You could argue that all of the things I just listed are games, but what unites them? Maybe they are things you can win? That doesn't seem right. Some games don't have a clear objective or a clear winner. The drinking game *truth or dare* doesn't have goals; it just has a process. And in the end, nobody really

wins. In fact, it doesn't even have a pre-determined ending — the game ends when the participants decide to stop, which is usually around the time people are getting naked or pass out on the floor. Is a game something that has scores? Not really. That implies an objective and even then, chess doesn't have scores.

Let's look at some similarities between all of these examples by comparing what they consist of. I'm going to do it in a weird way: instead of explaining how the games are played, I'll list what physical actions you carry out in these games. In *Call of Duty*, you move sensors or mechanical parts around and press buttons — using a mouse and keyboard or a game console controller — that will make lights on a screen change. In the ball kicking game, you walk around and kick a ball. *Dungeons and Dragons* is writing things on forms, saying words and rolling dice. *Truth or dare* consists of saying words and performing miscellaneous actions. And lastly, playing chess is moving pieces on a board until some of the pieces are in a certain place and some other pieces are in another place.

I am describing all of these games in this way, because I think it highlights what is missing from the description. And what's missing is the thing that ties all of them together: rules. You don't just move a mouse around and press arbitrary buttons, you have to do it in a very specific way. The ball should not just go anywhere; it should go either to a member of your team or into the net of the opposite team. Chess pieces cannot just move in

whatever way you decide; they follow a very strict protocol. In all of these examples, you voluntarily commit to following to a certain set of predefined rules. Now you're playing the game.

That's not to say I can now happily conclude that games are defined as "something made by rules." That sounds like nonsense, because it is. I'm not even defining anything, because I'm not setting any limits that exclude other things from being called a game. Laws are made by rules and intuitively we know that a game and a law can be distinguished from each other. In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein writes: "What still counts as a game and what no longer does? Can you give a boundary? No."¹¹ He proposes that there is no way to accurately describe what games are by stating what they have in common, even though we still intuitively know what the word *game* means. This is because, he argues, our idea of a game is created through something he calls *family resemblances*.¹² An interconnected network of similarities and relationships between different types of games gives us a general idea of what we can categorize as a *game*. But it's impossible to draw a line and say "anything that crosses this line, is no longer a game." So then, what a game is, becomes something along the lines of "literally anything you want, as long it has certain rules, one of them being that you call it a game." I like this line of thought, because it implies *playing a game* is actually some kind of linguistic performance, where you follow a certain protocol and declare yourself to be playing the game. In J.L. Austin's *How to do things with words*, there's a nice example

that illustrates this: “At a party, you say, when picking sides, ‘I pick George.’ George grunts ‘I’m not playing.’ Has George been picked?”¹³ Being *in* a game becomes a story you tell yourself and other players: “I’m playing game X which has Y rules, therefore I must follow these rules.”

not playing the game

So, what if I say “screw it” to those rules and do something else? I’m still playing, am I not? After all, I just said playing a game is a performance and a matter of telling myself — and often, other players — that I’m playing it. I want to propose that accepting the rules of a game creates something that I’m going to call a *spell*. And I want to argue that this spell is what immerses you into a game, makes you believe that you are, in fact, playing the game and, when there are multiple players involved, makes others believe you are playing, too.

Maybe it helps if I paint a small situation here. Let's say you are playing chess. You're plotting your next few moves, both of you are progressing your pieces, you're getting close to a potential checkmate. Perhaps you're sitting outside in the sun, under a tree. You are patiently waiting for your opponent, who looks puzzled. Suddenly, they start moving all pieces around in an arbitrary manner. Some are not in the grid anymore, your opponent is displacing your pieces as well, it's a mess. What's your reaction? Does it

still feel like you and your opponent are playing chess? Somehow, even though you are still under the same tree, there's still a chess board in front of you and nothing significant has changed, except for the location of the pieces on the board, both of you are no longer *in* the game. The spell breaks.

There's a difference here between both of us believing we're playing chess and only me believing I'm playing chess. Instead of messing up the chess board and breaking the rules so blatantly, my opponent could also just move a few pieces when I'm not looking, just few enough to not be obvious.

Since I'm a terrible chess player, I would probably not notice and still think my opponent is following the rules. But for them, it would become a different game. Something that looks a lot like chess, is still called chess and has very similar rules, but adds one rule that normal chess doesn't have: *you can move pieces arbitrarily to your advantage when your opponent is distracted.*

When it's harder to break the rules, the spell becomes more about whether you accept the reality that the rules create for you. Refusing to follow them starts looking like the product of a defiant statement to yourself: "that's not the game I'm playing." This is particularly visible when it comes to video games. Since video games are pieces of software, their code can enforce the rules of the game for me. I am physically able to move chess pieces in a way that contradicts the rules at any given moment, but I can not break the

rules of a video game without changing or exploiting the way it is programmed. Cheating, then, explicitly makes it a different game and can break the immersion even more dramatically. Painstakingly collecting items seems pointless once you've used cheat codes for unlimited resources once. A story-driven game about uncovering a mystery will have a hard time keeping you on the edge of your seat once you've found a way to skip to the ending immediately. Following the rules that a game sets allows you and everyone involved to believe that the reality the game is dreaming up, whether it's one in which kicking balls into a net is your only goal or one where a nuclear fallout has happened, is somehow, in a way, real.

worlds as games

In *Philosophical Investigations*, Wittgenstein introduces a concept called *language-games*, where the language becomes the codification of a certain purpose, which enables those who speak it to think and communicate certain thoughts in order to act out certain actions. There's an infinite number of language-games, like "guessing riddles" or "telling a joke".¹⁴ Which activities can be carried out are then dependent on the language that is used, which allows and disallows certain phrases based on its vocabulary and grammar. In this way, languages can behave like games. They have rules and you can follow them to enact certain things. The rules of "guessing a riddle", for example, are that you follow the grammar of the

language to form a cryptic sentence and have an audience that tries to decipher what the sentence means. And just like in games, the rules create a reality, in this case one where the riddle has to make sense, but not too much. Because of the thoughts and descriptions that are allowed or disallowed to be put into words, a certain frame of reference is created. In *Ways of Worldmaking*, Nelson Goodman writes about this, when he argues the sentences ‘the sun always moves’ and ‘the sun never moves’ can both be true, depending on which frame of reference you adopt.

If I ask about the world, you can offer to tell me how it is under one or more frames of reference; but if I insist that you tell me how it is apart from all frames, what can you say? We are confined to ways of describing whatever is described.¹⁵

Goodman argues that we cannot find an overarching frame of reference that will tie them all together, because we will always end up using existing ways of describing things that are, by nature, limited. Instead we need a plurality of reality frames to make sense of different things. One that’s suited to describing laws of physics might not work as well for describing, say, how it feels to lose a loved one or the inherent eroticism of the sea. These frames aren’t just different colored glasses to look at the same, independently existing world with, they can be considered complete worlds by themselves:

For many purposes, right world-descriptions and world-depictions and world-perceptions, the ways-the-world-is, or just versions, can be treated as our worlds.¹⁶

However, Goodman does not see world making as an easy undertaking. This is where the rules come back in, not just as grammar but also as laws, game rules, social conventions. Setting rules is done through words, but the whole thing is by no means arbitrary and requires a profound sense of continuity and coherence in order to produce a usable world. A frame is useless if it's not internally consistent; "Reality in a world, like realism in a picture, is largely a matter of habit."¹⁷

This reminds me of how Austin talks about performative sentences in *How to do things with words*. He argues that performative sentences hinge on a standardized protocol to be followed. When there's no protocol, declaring something like "this penguin is now baptized" is an empty statement, since the invocation doesn't correspond to any framework.

When the saint baptized the penguins, was this void because the procedure of baptizing is inappropriate to be applied to penguins, or because there is no accepted procedure of baptizing anything except humans?¹⁸

Just like with games, a spell can only be created if there are rules to be followed. If I attempt to create a new version of chess by flipping the board upside down in the middle of a match, but do not actually state how and when this move is legal, I'm not creating a new game. I'm just breaking the rules and the spell. If there is no protocol at hand to conform to, the invocation of a reality frame misfires.

playing a world

Accepting a different reality frame is a linguistic performance, but, just like with games, it doesn't require explicit invocation through a performative utterance, saying "this is my reality now". It can also be demonstrated by showing to adhere to the new ruleset or even more simply, implied by just being in a certain context, like standing on the field during a football game, wearing the appropriate uniform. Accepting a reality frame is in that way the same thing as playing a game: it requires accepting the rules of the frame in order to become part of a new reality. I do think there's a difference here in terms of *how much* you believe in the reality frame. Playing a football game, for example, is very tentative and self-aware. You're conscious of the fact that the reality of the game is temporary and engage with it only on a superficial level. You don't actually believe that kicking balls into a certain goal is the only purpose you have, instead I'd say you suspend disbelief for the duration of the game. This is different

from, let's say, accepting a new political ideology. In a way, the process is the same, but your level of engagement is deeper and the performativity of accepting the rules can lead to an internalized experience that is not arbitrary and can not be stepped out of at any moment. This sounds similar to how some people read Judith Butler's earlier work: performativity, in Butler's case, of gender, leads to a deeply felt, incorporated experience and not the other way around. But where I disagree is the interpretation that it *has* to lead to this experience. Performing can be done on different levels of engagement and immersion, it can be done with full commitment, but also ironically or tentatively. (This is also how Butler later reflects on her earlier work.¹⁹)

Now, of course, if this is all just about following rules, that means I can break or change the rules here as well. By saying things like "that's not what that word means", "I wouldn't call that orange" or "that's not what a man looks like," I'm attempting to redeclare what the procedure, the ruleset, the consensus is. Now it becomes a power dynamic and you have to agree or disagree with my redeclaration. If my updated ruleset is acceptable, you consent, at the very least temporarily (in which case it's again a suspension of disbelief), for me to alter your reality frame. Rules can be set in many ways; by declaration, by physical limitation, by inference from other rules, by software, in which case the language becomes machine language, really by any variant of transmuting instructions into external enforcement of principles. When it comes to

accepting a frame, there are many ways as well. As I said earlier, frames can be accepted by explicit invocation, by following appropriate procedure, by implicit consent through being a certain context. But maybe it's important to note here that accepting a reality frame is not really something that can be done through force. Or, at least, I'd argue that it's very hard to do. That's because accepting a reality frame is performative, but immersion is about the lived experience. Just like (and I'm still paraphrasing Austin here) how I can say "I promise to do X" while not intending to do X at all, I can play along with a game, act as if I'm fully immersed without actually being immersed. I can outwardly appear to be playing a game but have ulterior motives, or follow all the rules but do it ironically. Doing the thing and being convinced of the thing you are doing can be the same, but they don't have to be.

Here's where I somewhat begrudgingly open my jacket to reveal all of the forbidden genders I have collected from dubious sources. When it comes to gender and in particular acceptance of transgender and non-binary identities, knowing if someone truly accepts the reality frame I propose to them becomes an issue. Someone can "play along" and call me by my preferred pronouns, use the correct words and outwardly appear as if they really accept the gender identity that's being presented to them, but — and here we get to a constant, nagging fear many trans and non-binary people have — that doesn't have to be what's happening on the inside, the performance can be, as Austin calls it, hollow.²⁰ It's terrifying, for sure;

there's no sure way to tell if you're being accepted, indulged or tacitly tolerated. As Natalie Wynn half-jokingly says in her 2018 video essay *Pronouns*: "I don't want my gender to be 'tolerated' in the way that liberal Christians tolerate other of course false and heathen religions. I'm an evangelical transsexual. I don't want toleration, damn it, I want converts."

Worrying about the performativity involved with accepting reality frames might seem similar to the paranoia that your opponent is moving the chess pieces behind your back. But I think there's an important difference. Chess stops being chess and has its spell broken if one of the maximum two players are revealed to be breaking the rules and disqualify themselves. But the worlds we create ourselves do not have to have limitations on how many people inhabit them. And inviting people to try out new worlds can build communities around them. Worlds where trans women *are* women, where gender identities are accepted as a perpetual work in progress can be turned into foundations for queer spaces, online circles, growing movements. In these cases, someone who only outwardly accepts a reality frame — or does not accept it at all — cannot make the world invalid anymore, because the rest of the community still stands in solidarity. As people gather, it becomes a collective exploration. Setting rules, creating a framework, then just playing the game. Meandering, building as you goes along, cross-connecting insights you find. Because creating worlds concerns all parts of life and not just isolated areas of interest that we have made into walled gardens through academic language and separated

university departments. Creating worlds requires a cross-disciplinary approach that sees boundaries between art, science and philosophy as unnecessary fiction.

It is in this sense that philosophy, science and art are all epistemically significant; they all contribute to our understanding; they all create worlds.²¹

exercise 2

Gather one or more friends. Name something that could never happen. Have the other participants think of ways it could. If they can't disprove you, you get a point.

Example

“Barack Obama riding a unicycle”

“Okay, it's 2023, Michelle Obama is running for president. The 2015 meme of the frog on a unicycle has become popular again as a nostalgia thing. The Obamas are desperate for some promotion, so they dress Barack up as a frog, rent a unicycle and publish a video of him riding the thing, saying: ‘here come that vote!’”

Hard mode

You can't use more than six words to name the impossible thing.

3: new worlds

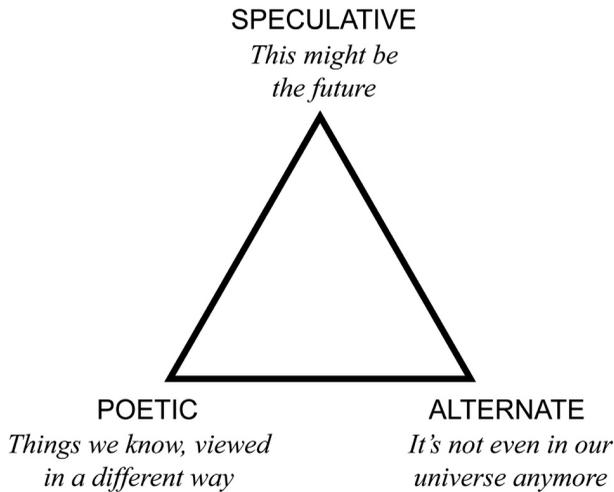
In this chapter I will try to make a distinction between different types of worlds that can be made: speculative, alternate and poetic worlds. I will use these as dimensions of a field for me to position examples in of people who are already building new worlds. To finish things off, I will return to why I think it's important to make worlds; by creating worlds that are based on poetic rules rather than rigid definitions, we can move from taxonomies to topologies, from systems of categorization to systems of relation. Instead of the often violent act of classification, we can start to grant each other a right to opacity where acceptance of difference comes without asterisks.

embedded and detached

Not all worlds are created equal. There's a tension between adopting principles from the reality the world is embedded in and changing the rules completely. Goodman writes in *Ways Of Worldbuilding* that no world is created completely from scratch, it's always derivative in one way or another: "Worldmaking as we know it always starts from worlds already on hand; the making is a remaking."²² But the extent to which a world is derivative changes what the world can do. This is what Sami Schalk writes about in *Bodyminds Reimagined* with a term she calls *defamiliarization*; a "non-realist method" that is associated mostly with speculative fiction and

is used to “make the familiar social concepts of (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality unfamiliar in order to encourage readers to question the meanings and boundaries of those categories.”²³ It’s a concept that directly relates to how embedded a world is in familiarity. For example, Schalk writes when discussing fiction that features a blind character with mystical powers: “By representing realist disabilities in nonrealist contexts, these fantasy texts push readers to understand disability from the perspective of the main character, not from our preconceived notions and stereotypes.” The combination of familiarity and unfamiliarity “play[s] with the reader expectations and twists them.”²⁴

However, playing with expectations and twisting them can be done in near-infinite ways. There are many types of worlds, but how can we get a clearer picture of how they are related? Some worlds imagine new futures; others stay pretty close to home but provide a different way of looking at our everyday reality. There are worlds that feel completely alien, retrofuturistic fiction that builds on an older version of what the future was imagined to be a few decades ago, worlds that foretell impending doom and an inevitable hellscape, worlds that make the mundane look like a fairy tale, worlds that combine all of those things and end up somewhere in the middle... I’ll set some terms to distinguish between all of these types. Maybe I should draw a diagram:



I think these are three possible dimensions of worlds that can be built: speculative, poetic and alternate worlds. There are many more that don't fit this model, but for my purposes, I'm going to use it as a topology to map examples of new worlds on. It's important to note that I'm not attempting to make hard categories here; all of these terms are meant as parameters that most worlds find some kind of balance between. I'm using this triangle because I think giving a world a point on the field helps to think about what it can accomplish. Examples of worlds that do not fit very well in here would be certain non-fictional worlds (although not all worlds on the triangle have to be fiction) such as the world of physics — a reality frame that sees reality as a collection of semi-quantifiable processes and functions

— or the world of finance, which does a similar thing as physics, but applies it to social behavior and assigns the output of all functions a monetary value. (However, if you're like Franco Berardi, you could argue that those worlds are actually poetic worlds.)

A world that's mostly speculative will try to imagine what could happen in the future, near or distant. This kind of approach extrapolates trends that are currently happening, projects them into the future and tries to build a world around those extended principles. By definition, then, speculative worlds are fiction. Obviously science fiction writers like William Gibson and Philip K. Dick come to mind, but really any kind of dystopian, utopian or even neutral fiction set in the future qualifies. These kinds of worlds are not only useful tools to anticipate issues we might face in the future, but they can also ask questions that are relevant now, like the interactive fiction *Localhost* by Aether Interactive, in which players must wipe several hard drives containing synthetic sentient beings by convincing them to delete themselves. The drives are all placed, one after the other into the same robotic body in order to talk to them. They have distinct characters and ruminate on the experience of waking up in a body they're not familiar with, or in one case even, a body of someone they once knew. Worlds like these can ask questions such as what it means to have a body, if a mind can be separated from a body and if identity is tied to physicality.

Going more along the axis of alternate worlds, we find worlds that try to sever the connection with “our universe” completely and instead imagine an independent reality that is self-contained and as alienated from what we’re familiar with as possible. An example would be Devine Lu Linvega’s *Neuismetica*, which is a collection of music, stories, languages and diagrams building a world based on geometrical puzzles that bend time and space. Here the subject matter doesn’t even touch a reality we’re familiar with, at any point it’s unclear if we’re even dealing with beings that have physical bodies, if they are human, strictly metaphorical and abstract or something else. However, as hard as they may try, alternate worlds are never completely in isolation, since, to paraphrase Goodman again, worldmaking is always a derivative activity — we can’t imagine colors we’ve never seen before.

Lastly, worlds on the poetic axis bend language, context and presentation to look at the everyday and the mundane, but from a new perspective. As Jayne Cortez puts it:

I use dreams, the subconscious, and the real objects, and I open up the body and use organs, and I sink them into words, and I ritualize them and fuse them into events. I guess the poetry is like a festival. everything can be transformed. The street becomes something else, the subway is something else, everything at a festival is disguised as something else. Everything changes: the look of the person changes, their intentions change, the attitudes

are different, experiences are fiercer. Voices become other voices.²⁵

This kind of practice is, for me at least, perhaps the most important one. It can touch anything we're familiar with and reframe it, open up the experience and reposition it. Rather than being pure fiction and speculation, poetic worldmaking can simply offer a different way of looking at lived experiences. I'm reminded of Porpentine Charity Heartscape's *Girlwaste*, which is a piece of interactive fiction that builds a world where the act of taking estrogen is reframed as a quest through a dark world, full of mystical creatures you have to pass in order to get to an elusive back-alley dealer and the estrogen itself is defamiliarized and made out to be a drug that helps achieve mental peace. This is of course very similar to Paul Preciado's *Testo Junkie*, where the reframing is taken a step further and poetics are used not just to reframe the hormone as a drug, a stimulant and a tool but to deconstruct the act of taking testosterone and seeing it in its political, social and chemical context all at once.

When I take a dose of testosterone in gel form or inject it in liquid form, what I'm actually giving myself is a chain of political signifiers that have been materialized in order to acquire the form of a molecule that can be absorbed by my body. I'm not only taking the hormone, the molecule, but also the concept of a hormone, a series of signs, texts, and discourses, the process

through which the hormone came to be synthesized, the technical sequences that produce it in the laboratory. [...] I administer myself a series of economic transactions, a collection of pharmaceutical decisions, clinical tests, focus groups, and business management techniques; [...] In this way I become one of the somatic connectives through which power, desire, release, submission, capital, rubbish, and rebellion circulate.²⁶

I'm using these particular examples because I think they illustrate what poetic worlds have the potential of enacting, which is a form of decategorization. Testosterone and estrogen, two hormones that are very heavily categorized as being *male* and *female* are, through talking about them in a different way, a poetic way that bends the traditional connotations, reframed from something needed to affirm a certain gender to a somatechnic tool that can be used to achieve certain qualities as an individual, rather than fit better into a category. Specifically that last part is important, because I think it's these kinds of practices that allow us to start moving towards systems of topology over taxonomy.

analog versus discrete worlds

The schematics of any world have inherent power dynamics. Because the framework that builds them always displaces analog phenomena into

discrete signifiers. And those signifiers need a degree of rigidity in order to be functional, or they become meaningless. If the words of a language have no meaning at all, or all meanings at once, you will never be able to make a sentence. Many worlds are built entirely on categorizations that have to combine into a coherent picture in order to be considered acceptable. But what if you fall outside of a category? Is the world adaptable and does it let you create a new one? If it's a programmed world, who has access to the code? Maybe you become, as Ramon Amaro writes in *As if*, a “machinic non-existence”²⁷ because the facial recognition algorithm coded into a closed source application, created by a monolithic corporation isn't calibrated to the color of your skin. Maybe you're in between binary gender categories but rigid rules force you to pick between two equally false descriptions of yourself. There are endless ways in which a world can codify something, but the grid it creates never lines up completely and universally.

When it comes to understanding yourself and others, many existing worlds such as the world of analytical computer vision, the world of algorithmic advertisement targeting or the world of computational crime prevention run into this problem of self-quantification. Quantification and measurement don't just depend on a standard to measure against, they change the thing that's quantified. Just like in sound synthesis, data storage and, for that matter, any application that uses discrete units of measurement, translation from analog substance to discrete signifiers will always lose something.

With any language, it will always be an approximation of what Brian Massumi calls *the virtual*.²⁸

So what happens if your world depends on these computable, rigid building blocks? What if its rules are enforced by a fixed grid of categories and discrete chunks of data that are being used to infer patterns on top of patterns on top of patterns? One single field on a form, like *male or female* can already reveal an immense background of power dynamics, a forced discretization of an analog data point that is then used as a seed to extrapolate a wealth of conclusions that, in many cases, can potentially enact violence. A standardization, then, is always a form of power. Because a standardization contains both the notion of a standard, which must be set by someone with authority, and an enforcement of the standard which is a form of violence. Pushing an endlessly morphing, formless shape into a square hole, or as Amaro puts it, when it comes to understanding ourselves and others, a “fictive and compulsive ordering of human attributes into a single coherent image of species”.²⁹ It’s similar to what Riley says:

Certainly, to be described, against my will, by others is far worse—and sometimes murderous, if I’m assigned some to grouping earmarked for hatred.³⁰

But the paradox is that no standards, no demarcation and no rules builds no worlds at all. The challenge then becomes to create worlds that are flexible,

still set boundaries but are also open to redefinition upon finding new evidence. Maybe the solution lies in embracing the arbitrariness of accepting a frame. Being aware that inhabiting any world is a choice that can be reversed. But on the other hand, if my current frame doesn't allow me to see the new evidence, that kind of flexibility won't even get a chance to be put to use. I think what we need instead, are frameworks that sidestep the entire issue. Frameworks that move from categorical signifiers to relational and topological signifiers, an approach Massumi calls "the science of self-varying deformation".³¹ Instead of making sense of what we encounter by sorting things into boxes, looking at their position, at their context and being content with that instead.

I'd argue that this is why poetry needs to be involved. Because poetry allows for descriptions that do not follow rigid rules, can have multiple interpretations and bleed emotional affect instead of abstracting emotionality away in favor of computable substance. The flexibility of a reality frame can be reflected into its rules by making the rules poetic. Poetry turns categories into topologies, definitions into relationships, quantitative into qualitative.

That's why I want to argue for building worlds that embrace poetry. I don't want to be classified, I want to be positioned in relation to others. As Glissant puts it, giving up on this "old obsession with discovering what lies at the bottom of nature's" and instead working towards a system where I can

accept others without sorting and labeling and be content with their opacity, with them just being *different* from me.³² Or as the Language poet Lyn Hejinian says in *The Composition of The Cell*: “When I say ‘equals’ I don’t mean indifference but distance.”³³

And I want to get there using a multiplicity of worlds as a method of resistance to the violence of stripping things away through organization. I want many worlds as a necessary form of play, experimentation with seeing differently in order to understand things from a point of view that embraces the entire context of any individuation.

I want worlds built on poetry that bends language and transcends language.

I want poetry as resistance to definition

as manifestation of the unquantifiable

as self-aware attempt to put the unspeakable into words,
not by empirical description, but by using the words as
starting points from which worlds are formed.

“I try to cultivate the music of language, which is not just sounds. It’s also meaning and implication. It’s also nuance. It’s also a kind of angular suggestion.”

— Nathaniel Mackey

“We settled on *trans* and *genderqueer* to stretch our arms as wide as we currently know how. One of the hopes for *Troubling the Line* is that the poetry in it imagines language that allows us to live and see more.”

— TC Tolbert

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