

## World #6

By Mark Linsenmayer

This sixth, most recent, and most extensive world he had built was by far his best, most honest, and most important work to date.

The first, which our hero had developed and virtually lived within from ages six through eight was hopelessly flat, employing a cartoon logic born less from irony (though a germ of that was in play) than from his near-total ignorance of the inner workings of things. It worked like this:

All children, when mommy or daddy has to go far away for a while, or when there's not the time or resources, to, say, build a real, working R2-D2 *right now*, ask "why?" but this kid took his lack of understanding of "why" as an answer in itself: there was simply *no good reason* why daddy couldn't just stay at home and help build the aforementioned robot, calling up NASA to borrow appropriate parts. Thus, the first world, a magical one, like Oz but not bound by an uncrossable desert, where a second grade boy could, for instance, carry on an entirely fulfilling romantic relationship with a first-grade girl without her even having to be made aware of this fact.

To say that a young boy (or girl) lives in a fantasy world is common enough, when it's a matter of *play*, and grown-ups routinely discount the serious role of pretend play in kids' lives... It's not uncommon for two playmates to come to blows over the imaginary status of some real object (e.g. "the chair is a bus!" "No, it's a gunner's seat!") But for this boy—let's call him Monkey, which was his chosen name in world #1—pretend didn't stop when play stopped. Monkey might sit and eat lunch with the rest of his class, but in his mind he was *pretending to sit with his class and eat*, he who could make them all disappear if the narrative required, and who knew himself to be master of the narrative.

One day Monkey got in trouble—big trouble—for taunting his best friend Scott Pike with an apple, which Scott hated. The class sat in the cafeteria, which was just the gym with a dozen or so tables that folded out from the walls with attached benches on either side. Monkey was pretending to eat (which involved actually eating, in this case) and pretending to talk to his friends, when Scott said "yuck" on seeing Monkey's apple, which apple immediately became a thing of high comedy to be brandished about like poo-on-a-stick. Scott bent backwards on the bench to avoid the object of his disgust, and bent backwards, and backwards, until he was on the ground, howling.

So of course Mrs. Cox the teacher intervened, and took Monkey from the room, and began, in what was the preferred disciplinary fashion in the Midwest in the 1970s, to yell at him.

And what did Monkey think of as he was being yelled at, as the force of that tone from that towering figure pressed onto his skinny 6-year-old frame? Was he somehow the master of the situation through fantasy? Did he, à la Calvin and Hobbes, envision Mrs. Cox as a screaming alien challenging Monkey, the intrepid space man? Or did he stare blankly and pretend it wasn't happening, not really, at least not to him?

The truth was that Monkey was just a kid, and not so skilled at defending himself. He felt every word as a stab, and even amplified the drama for himself, feeling ashamed, and scared, and put upon.

But World #1, through this, endured, like clothes he was wearing, and provided protection from cold and the stares of pedophiles even if he wasn't paying attention to them. Monkey felt shame, and fear, and anger, but as a character that he himself had chosen for the day, and which, though he would in all likelihood continue in more or less that role the next day and the day after that, was still of his choosing, in a world where Mrs. Cox *could* have been actually spitting fire, and Monkey *could* have been sent to work for 1000 years in a volcanic mine. But the narrative—his narrative—didn't demand this... yet.

If you can imagine what it would be like to be a 6-year-old Monkey facing everyday problems in this way, with a keen imagination and an apparently intuitive grasp of the existentialist conception of total freedom, then you might see the limitations of World #1. Total magical thinking does not lead to narratives that stand up to logical scrutiny. By the time Monkey was nearing the end of third grade, it became effectively impossible to maintain the conflicting sentiments, when faced with a troublesome situation, of helplessness and omnipotence. When Dorothy, at the end of *The Wizard of Oz*, finds out after weeks of slogging through peril that she could have used the magic slippers to go home to Kansas not ten minutes after arriving in Oz, there's no way that she wouldn't have given a certain "good" witch a good punch in the face, or at least a good, long cursing.

World #1 was, as I said, two-dimensional, in that however many pictures Monkey filled it with, these were still pictures, with no logic behind them to connect them together and a person—at least an almost 9-year-old—can't live like that.

By age 10, Monkey's pretend-play (which in the time after World #1's evaporation did continue much as for "normal" children) was given a new outlet in the form of religion. Monkey had been raised with Bible stories, to be sure, with Noah and Jonah and Abraham and Isaac and even Jesus, but these were presented (though in an offhand way, not as central tenets for living; Monkey's family was only nominally religious) as fact. What blossomed these into a world was the revelation in school, in fifth grade social studies, that there were whole religions with their own crazy sounding stories that were dead, such as the mythology of ancient Greece.

So, Jonah the whale by itself was a strange piece of history, but still just history: implacable fact.

Theseus and the Minotaur might have likewise been mundane, though strange, if presented as just a story, like *The Wizard of Oz* or *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*.

Put together, though, this meant that just as Jonah and Jesus and God had been a real though peripheral part of Monkey's life through somewhere near four years of Sunday school, so had bull-headed monsters and children springing full-grown from the heads of their parents been part of *someone's* reality.

For a skeptical—or older—person, the conclusion might have been to reject Christian mythology as just as silly and doomed as Greek mythology, and Monkey did pursue this strategy a few years later, but at that moment, it instead *all* became real to him, part of the magical olden days that still, of course, had to exist, right?

Monkey was not a gifted ten-year-old theologian. He could not explain how Yahweh and Zeus (and, as he soon afterward discovered, Odin) could rule the heavens simultaneously, and he did not try to explain this, or even ask the question. World #2 was still a realm of magical thinking, without much internal logic that had to be obeyed. The difference was that Monkey was not (so he supposed) the author, the controller. For a religious person, the world is full of power, greater power than any man, much less a ten-year-old boy with few friends, indulgent but somewhat standoffish parents, and a consistent string of duties, from school to practicing the piano to church choir to soccer. Monkey liked these things well enough, and thought that he could exchange them for other things if he complained enough, but they were fundamentally not his, and so a worldview of multi-hued, divine Others fit well with his daily attitude toward life, making it much more interesting, creating stories in which Monkey could take on a role, just like in World #1.

Was ten- (through about eleven and a half) year-old Monkey a religious freak? Did he sacrifice his dog, or set out on divine quests, or preach the Word of mighty Thor?

No, this world, like its predecessor, did not pull Monkey away from his mundane surroundings in any way obvious to grown-ups, apart from his parents, who endeavored to feed his surprising interest in mythology with a beat-up, used copy of the *Larousse Encyclopedia of Mythology* (1959), through which Monkey absorbed not only Greek, Roman, and Norse mythology, but also Egyptian, Babylonian, Indian, Chinese, Japanese, Native American, Slavic, Finno-Ugric, and more.

Success in life is measured differently depending on your religion. Failing a spelling test, for a citizen of the highly polytheistic World #2, can be a result of trickery by any number of gods, a sign that Monkey was not meant to excel in spelling, or a matter of words themselves being subject to conflicting divine interpretations. The upshot was that Monkey learned cockiness, decided that his failures (and, to be fair, there weren't a lot of them, as Monkey was a pretty bright, able boy) were not in general his fault, and that his teachers, bullies, and even his parents were pretty ignorant of the true mechanisms of the world.

These excuses, too, grew hollow for Monkey within less than two years, and the monkey wrench that wrecked World #2 was girls, whom Monkey was growing increasingly interested in, without much notion of how to act on these feelings. In fifth grade, he had begun expressing the periodic, TV-inspired crushes (e.g. Charlie Brown and the little red-haired girl, who is so unobtainable that we never learn her name or even get to actually see her) he had been afflicted with since age seven by writing anonymous "notes of admiration."

These required no response, and when he made the mistake of writing "call me" and his phone number on one of them, and the girl (a little red-haired one, in fact) called his house and spoke confusedly with Monkey's mother for a minute before they both figured out the call must be for Monkey, he flat-out denied having sent the love note, which the girl believed and hung up, thoroughly embarrassed.

While teachers and bullies are godlike enough to be dismissed as evil forces, none of Monkey's readings on Aphrodite, Hathor, Frijia, Venus, or even Loki prepared him to deal with the fear, longing, and clumsiness involved with actually talking to and "liking" girls, much less getting them to like him. Love, as experience in a warm, physical flush

as the beloved is contemplated across three desks to the front of Mr. Belluomini's sixth grade classroom, makes a mockery of the feeling in church when singing "Silent Night" in unison on Christmas Eve with lots of candles burning away, and the much less "experiential" contemplation of Horus, Ba-a lot, and Indra that helped to populate World #2 became wildly irrelevant. Monkey could not live life worshipping, or even living among, the motley assortment of deities, heroes, and beasts (however metaphorical of human life they may be) when something as awesome, defeating, and undeniably real as *She* (and the *She* in question changed regularly) was around.

World #3 was the first that was a self-consciously created, fantasy world, and was lifted largely from Tolkien, *The Sword of Shannara*, and *Dungeons and Dragons*.

The last of these, in fact, gave twelve-year-old Monkey a socially acceptable (well, OK, not to the mass of his peers, but to the four or so friends that he routinely played with) way to live in this world, to play out stories as a fighter, wizard, or thief. The thief was a favorite class, involving coping strategy that could at least in his imagination be applied to solving real problems, as he would never have the stomach to hit someone with an axe, whereas he admired how Matthew Broderick in *War Games* (and later *Ferris Buhler*, though that time hadn't yet come) could easily hack into the school's computer to change his grades.

Monkey's practice living in Worlds #1 and 2 gave him a different attitude toward World #3 than his D&D biddies. He wasn't just blowing off steam; he was returning to his true self, to his true world where there effectively weren't any girls at all and life was a series of winnable battles and explorations of strange lands, when eventually even the gods themselves from World #2 could be fought and defeated if the twelve-year-old running the game wanted to let it get to that point.

World #3 was explicitly escapist, and Monkey was very good at escaping into it, not only when role-playing with his pals, but in constant reading of fantasy novels, whose worlds could often be crammed together at least as effortlessly as the mythologies of different cultures.

Monkey began to design D&D campaigns for his friends, plotting out rooms on graph paper to represent alternate versions of, for instance, the mall, so that the adventuring party would meet a giant spider and/or a gelatinous cube in the 1 Potato 2 part of the Food Court.

By age fourteen, though, D&D and fantasy as a whole were too uncool to be associated with, even for a "loser" like Monkey who had long since quit soccer and was ostracized due to his bookishness and his sense of superiority over his dumb peers—especially those bullies who Monkey just *knew* would end up working in gas stations when they grew up.

In high school, Monkey went Goth, wearing black and worshipping music, the more droning and not-mainstream, the better. World #4 was also a self-conscious creation, but created with irony, and a good dose of spite, and it allowed Monkey to dress up, though he was never bold enough to pierce his ear, wear makeup, or get a permanent tattoo, though many clumsily drawn depictions of vampire bats, band logos, and arcane, made-up symbols were applied to his limbs, back, and once during winter break even his face in pen or markers. With proper care (i.e. not washing the area in question), these could last for weeks.

What made this a world and not just an affectation? Well, like World #2, it had gods: musicians like Peter Murphy and Siouxi Sioux. And it gave Monkey a mechanism (d disdain) for coping with school and home, and unlike the previous worlds, this one had actual girls in it... well, a few of them, like Tracy Simmons, who introduced him at age sixteen to weed (which made him nauseous, and which he totally avoided after that point) and let him touch her boobs (once).

Just as with the previous world, in the Goth world, Monkey could be “truly himself” in a way that his fellow Goths didn’t, or couldn’t take advantage of. The sense of invincibility that comes with being a teenager combined with the intellectual superiority defense mechanism that Monkey had developed around age eleven to create a boy who lived in his *own* myth, who was a secret hero of the age in incubation, scoffing at the mundanities of school (though his grades remained passably strong) and his parents (who, as before, really didn’t give him serious trouble, nor he them). Monkey knew, for instance, that other people challenged their bodies through sports training, or were doing public service work to have something to put on their college applications (and *maybe* help people), or were otherwise actually creating things in science, in art, in fledgling entrepreneurial adventures, but Monkey was content to be a dabbler, a floater, a spectator, a reader, sure that at some undefined time in the future the world would recognize his genius and make him a central cultural icon, much like Jesus.

World #4 (Goth World) was a teenage fantasy, yes, and a delusion of grandeur, and, as irony, only taken half seriously, but that’s the funny thing about irony: it lets us do and appreciate things that we might be too embarrassed to do otherwise, like enjoy disco. For Monkey, sort of pretending to be a vampire allowed him to feel sort of like a vampire: unstoppable, predatory, and very chic. In his relations with girls, he allowed himself to feel the neurotic, lonely, strange thing called adolescent love while at least being able to play at having a certain distance from it, which gave him some power over it. As with any romantic, his emotions were part of his art, part of painting the world, and the idly smirking bleakness of Goth love at once provided immersion and the self-reflection necessary to survive that immersion with his feelings of power and creation intact.

This world was swept away slowing with college, where he stopped wearing black in favor of flannel, this being the early 90s in the northern Midwest. Time and “reality” eroded his self-confidence up through graduation (with a major in linguistics, which was a fun game if nothing else). This trend continued through a couple of long, doomed relationships (one with a woman who kept re-discovering her ex, and other with a Jennifer Lauren Alt, who was later to become a marginally famous children’s author and who at one particularly low point referred to him as “soulless”), a terrible job in retail, a few years doing thankless administrative tasks at a small financial services company, a short venture into graduate school, until by age twenty-six, Monkey had become as “realistic” as they come, as unhopeful about his future, and as apathetic as the next guy about anything beyond his immediate purview. Apart from finding a better job and a sane girlfriend, he saw his day-to-day unbeatable challenges as physical: getting enough sleep, eating right, exercising. Monkey could master none of these things, though he had become quite good at minesweeper and several other computer games he could get away with playing at the office and which he then brought home with him to eat up many of the late nights alone with voyages out to catch local bands and possibly “hook

up,” which he succeeded in doing on rare occasions, which in most cases led to dysfunctional relationships lasting about four months before Monkey and his beloved grew to see each other’s true selves and one or the other of them (in most cases *She*) would flinch and decide it was time to move on.

It was at this relatively low point for our hero that Monkey began to identify himself as a world maker. Not as a writer, as Monkey fundamentally couldn’t put a narrative coherently on paper, but as an author in the larger sense, a creator of being. Linguistics had taught him that language shapes world-view, in areas of gender (must everything be masculine or feminine?), passivity (do we describe terrible things as just happening, or always talk about the actor?), and in general how finely we break things down and where we place the emphasis our attention. Why not, then, create a culture, a language, a world, just for fun, like Tolkein did in the years before he wrote *The Hobbit*, putting together a history, a mythology, new laws of physics/magic, and a consequent world-view, which would certainly be preferably to that offered by Monkey’s actual life?

World #5 was at long last born, inspired by but not imitative of Tolkein. This world was as big as Monkey could imagine, accommodating many (all new) deities, creatures, and freaks. Like *Star Wars* or *Star Trek*, an unlimited number of worlds were accommodated, but so spread out that no overreaching political narrative was possible or necessary. Such different races devised and discovered myriad technologies, and magics, some of which allowed easy passage (for some) between worlds, but at the same time, this was no World #1. There had to be plausible mechanisms behind the products of Monkey’s imagination, and the real work of world-building, or really cosmos-building in this case, was working out the mechanisms.

Monkey filled out hundreds of scrawled pages working out this or that culture, how one planet would or did handle incursion by some other civilization he had worked out in the previous year, how the various forms of travel between worlds would work, whether time travel would be possible (no), how various species totally unlike humans might behave and evolve, where earth would fit in (only very tangentially, as a planet unaware of its status as one of many).

Some of Monkey’s ideas were quite original, many not so much so, but all of them received a great deal of very meticulous thought.

And did Monkey “live” in World #5? Over his dozen-or-so years hewing it out of the dredges of his imagination, did it become real to him? To some degree. Not more real than then rest of his life, in which he did gradually improve his professional situation—with more responsible, though not *too* responsible administrative work—and his romantic life: marrying wife Melissa at age 31, with beautiful daughter Clara joining them two years later. Both of these were remarkably imaginative in their own right, though in very different ways than Monkey. Melissa was very much able to imagine herself in others’ shoes, which made her a good match for Monkey, who very much needed to be both indulged with understanding and directed by a less sympathetic presence. As for Clara... well, all children seem amazing to their parents, and Monkey was bowled over.

World #5 was a place for Monkey to visit regularly, a place to channel the ambition that didn’t fit the economic landscape of his (or any?) age, and a child in the way that all creative endeavors are even if his notes were not, and never would be, fit for

publication, and really the whole thing was too involved for even an imaginative and understanding spouse to get much of a sense of. It simply filled an hour or so most evenings, often after both of the females in his life had gone to sleep (though the third female, a wire-haired terrier named Sherpa, usually stayed up with him, and served as an model of alien psychology that his imagination could play on to extrapolate to many of his creations). This time might otherwise be occupied by TV or video games or other hobbies. For Melissa, that's all it was: a hobby. To Monkey... well... people commonly tend to take their hobbies too seriously, right? That's what being a "geek" of any stripe amounts to, and Monkey certainly didn't reject or fear that label, not as a 35-year-old with a fairly secure job, family, and course in life. No bullies would put Monkey down, no girls would scare him speechless, no teachers would punish him or give him lower grades than he thought he deserved. There were real, adult responsibilities, of course, to keep money rolling in, manage the family's debt, and the constant demands of fatherhood, but all this provided grounding, stability, and a balance to both support and limit the influence of World #5.

Why, then, would a sixth world be necessary? Or desirable? Or possible? Perhaps Monkey could have broken off a portion of World #5 to write an actual novel, and let the world (the "real" one) in on his long, secret endeavor. Or maybe he could have stumbled upon some central truth that could have spurred him to reign in his creation around a single theme (much as Star Wars revolves around "The Force"). But that's not what happened. Here's what did: Monkey died.

It was 6:45 on a Thursday in late October, when an early freezing rain (for the northern Midwest) had turned the roads icy, and while making his way home from work (late, due to an upcoming deadline that Monkey, by dying, at least got to weasel out of) the pickup truck in front of him suddenly stopped. Monkey hit the brakes hard, went into a skid, recovered, and ended up more or less perpendicular to the truck and only inches away from it. The driver of another truck (much larger) behind Monkey was not so fast, and Monkey was caught in the middle.

There's much I could dwell on here, in how Melissa found out and reacted (predictably), how the by-then four-year-old Clara coped (within two years she was happily calling someone else "Daddy," but that didn't make the intervening period any easier), or Monkey's parents, who outlived their only child. But, really, as horrible and important and real as that all was, that's not what this story is about. It is about Monkey.

Due to Monkey's infatuation way back when with religion, and some subsequent courses in college, he was quite aware of most of the theories of life after death, which are ultimately related to one's basic metaphysical picture of the cosmos. One of the *least* likely, to Monkey's ears, ideas on this subject was that the thing that happens to you when you die is whatever you *think* will happen to you: Christians can go to heaven (or hell, or purgatory for some Catholics) and ancient Greeks went to Hades and Buddhists join with the void, etc. That theory makes no metaphysical sense; it's as thin as Monkey's World #2.

Well, as it turned out, to Monkey's great surprise, something like this actually is what happens when we die. After a fit of floating above his hospital bed, haunting the rooms of his grieving family, going into the light and all that junk, Monkey was hit with the knowledge that just as he always thought, deep down, He was the author, or an

author, anyway. Does everyone who dies realize this? Monkey didn't know. He wasn't reunited with his three dead previous dogs or with his first grade teacher Mrs. Cox (who died at age 47 of a congenital heart defect) or former-best-friend Scott Pike (who died some years before, pretty amazingly, from choking on a piece of apple) or his grandparents, so who knows where they went, but Monkey felt his new power, and he flicked his "wrist"(what seemed to him like a wrist) and created, with a depth and internal logic and reality that astounded him. A life's worth of training, and thwarted ambition, and rage and sorrow at losing his family, went into his worlds, which were inspired of course by World #5, but that previous effort was clearly scribbling around with crayons, while this was manipulation of the actual stuff of life, so that if he changed one thing, that change would reverberate through the whole system, so he could see what he had done and undo the change, or change the law that made the change propagate on the way that it had. He did meet the other gods, and did fall in love again, many times, and did behave horribly, and nobly, and sometimes in ways we can't as living folks conceive of, but he did get to, to the extent that he wanted, actually live in his sixth and final world, which was frankly, magnificent, and on balance, he was happy.