

STORYTELLING AND USER EXPERIENCE DESIGN: HOW STORIES SHAPE DESIGN AND HOW
DESIGN SHAPES EVERYTHING

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*To Christina
for without whom there is nothing*

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Conclusion

"I've been thinking about how, when I was younger, I used to walk into a bookstore full of wonder. When I was a kid, I walked into a bookstore like, 'Look at all this stuff I'm gonna learn.'

As a grown-up, I walk into a bookstore like, 'Look at all this stuff I'm never gonna know.' Oh. It's hard, man. It's hard to see your ignorance alphabetized. I don't *like that*. I'm at the Staff Picks section.

I'm like, 'Of all the things I don't know, these are Brian's favorites.'"

Sheng Wang, *Sweet and Juicy*

Coheed and Cambria's *The Second Stage Turbine Blade* was released in 2002. I was a junior in high school, filling out college applications and studying for Academic Decathlon, the high school nerd olympics. I would end up getting third in state and missed first place by about one hundred points, which tracked across the ten events means I missed getting first place in state by about a question or so every other test. This was, and is, *a hard pill to swallow*. The idea that small decisions over time coalesce into outcomes, rather than large pivotal moments like the stories I found so inspirational, annoyed me then and annoys me now. A single decision can have huge effects. Thus, be careful and thoughtful when making things; your influence might be greater than you imagine. Anyway: *The Second Stage Turbine Blade*.

My friend purchased the album right when it came out, and we listened to it shortly thereafter at his house in between bouts of *Tony Hawk Pro Skater*⁵⁴ and microwavable pizzas. The disc is a convergence of a wholly unique idea set to equally interesting music. The band Dredg's initial album, *Leitmotif*, had a similar effect⁵⁵. Hearing and being wholly overwhelmed

⁵⁴ Which one? *All of them*. I celebrate the entire THPS universe/catalog, remake included.

⁵⁵ What are we doing here? Are these just some hamfisted attempts to get some weirdo pop culture stuff you like into the scholarly and academic canon? Who's to say.

by something that both feels and is new and fresh is a rare experience and even rarer as one gets older. That's why the young are so passionate, borderline strident, and the old are so weary, borderline disgusted. Young people get to have powerful, epiphanic moments every other week it seems. I get excited, genuinely excited, to have sparkling water at lunch instead of the usual flat. Experience and time dulls sharp edges, things begin to blur, and moments of overwhelming creativity fade and become increasingly harder to find. The user experience of life trends towards ennui.

Coheed's entire catalog consists of concept albums, works that have a clear theme, focus, and story that is told across the album. To add another degree of difficulty, all of Coheed's albums are in the same narrative world. Subsequent albums build and transform the narrative structure laid out in the first album. Dredg also writes concept albums, but their focus is on philosophical stories that deal with the nature of existence, reality, and what it means to make art rather than science fiction. Creating a band that does this—make concept albums that center around a sprawling, multi-planetary conflict—seemed, at the time, impossible. Only later, as I sit here reflecting and trying to give context without sounding completely unhinged, do I realize what a challenging and near-impossible proposition this must have been. Claudio Sanchez, the band's lead singer and incredible hair-haver, pitched to some record executive in early 2000, hot off the heels of pop-nu-metal acts like Korn, Limp Bizkit, and Linkin' Park, a slate of albums that go something like:

“So it's a space opera that takes place in an interconnected galaxy of planets called Heaven's Fence, all connected by a powerful beam of light that provides energy called The Keywork. Coheed and Cambria are mild-mannered parents on one of the planets, Apity-Prime, until they find out that the Supreme Tri-Mage Wilhelm Ryan implanted

them with an invisible weapon, the Monstar. To protect the galaxy, they must kill their children before the virus becomes active in them. Additionally, Coheed and Cambria learn they have special powers, much like their parents. Further, there are war-angels and evil mages, cyborgs and devil's grown in test tubes who all battle both for and against this abstract notion of God as well as the interventions and actions of the people within Heaven's Fence. Please sign my band."

And wouldn't you know it, they *did*.

This type of generative thinking requires, quite simply, belief—either in one's self, an idea, or a group. Further, this type of thinking requires a willingness to be in conflict with the attitudes and ideas of the day. New things are scary, but believing in them and then advocating for them is the type of thinking required to move forward. A great many Coheed and Cambria songs follow this mantra—rousing moments of optimism, hope, and belief couched in the crackly tough exterior of progressive rock. Famously, one of their more beloved songs from *The Second Stage Turbine Blade*, "Everything Evil," says quite simply, "Goddamnit—we'll make it, if you believe."

The album as a whole is a serious artistic accomplishment, not only in the temerity in pitching a science fiction space opera as a prog rock metal concept album, but then the gall to actually go out there for 20-plus years and keep making it happen, year after year. It's inspirational to see someone take an idea that, on the surface, doesn't fit anywhere, and then to go make that idea a reality. For the times, both in which the music began and the pall under which the music is still being made, this felt and feels deeply weird. Belief feels, and often is, in short supply. The institutions we were taught to rely on failed, work against us, and now actively

are antagonistic towards us. This is, of course, the end result of capitalism: the glutton, after consuming all available food, eats itself.

It doesn't have to be this way. We can try new things. To start, to re-energize, a new type of looking and understanding is a useful place to begin. We can reexamine stories, how they emotionally affect us and how much of them are actually true. We can look at how stuff is made, how the grid that everything is laid out upon might be more than just a collection of squares. We can review where we work, how we work, and how we think about that work. And finally, we can try to think new thoughts, whether it be by looking more deeply at simple things, like a screw, or by considering what our Things might ask of us, in return, if they were given the opportunity. Would the stories like how we use them; would they agree? Are they true? Are the things we own proud of how they are being used? Would your computer reject you if it could?

Importantly, who's at the center of all of these things? I'll tell you. We are. We always have been and we always will be. It's up to us. Never forget, not for one second, that everything we have is something we have built, fought for, and encouraged in others. We have built this thing; we can rebuild it, too. No higher institution or large-scale initiative is going to help. Those days are over, if they ever existed at all. There is only us now, and we need to look after one another—because *no one else will*.

When I have a particularly bad day or are feeling particularly loathsome not only of our society but how we choose to operate, it helps me to think about a 20-something year old group of people who had an idea and worked tirelessly to make that idea come true, no matter how niche, specific, or downright weird. This whole project is/was niche, specific, and sometimes downright weird, and I wouldn't have gotten this far without inspiration and

encouragement gleaned from all sorts of disparate sources. For me, Coheed and Cambria represent the actual, real, and tangible American Dream, the idea that anyone from anywhere, even from one of the smallest planets in the Fence, can work hard enough, practice, keep improving, and then finally make it, in whatever capacity and at whatever value that might mean to you. You can't fix everything, no one can. But you can do something.