

Way With Worlds Book 2: Details And Discussion

(First Edition)

By Steven Savage

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First Edition

ISBN-10: 1544152469

ISBN-13: 978-1544152462

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First Edition

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Acknowledgments

To all the readers of the original columns, who told me what they meant to them and made me realize it was time to rewrite them.

To all the users of Seventh Sanctum who inspired me to do this again.

To Serdar, Scott, Bonnie, Ewen, Jason, Paul, Carlos, Rob, Grant, and the rest of the gang for their support and feedback.

Thanks to my pre-readers:

- Julie Soskins for her in-depth analysis and support!
- Jennifer McCormick for her editing and catching my mistakes!
- Regina Williams for her detailed feedback!

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(Re)Introduction

Welcome to Book 2 of Way With Worlds!

I'd like to assume you read the first book, but it's never wise to do so. So here's how this book series came to be, in outline form:

- I always liked making settings in fiction and games.
- I came to realize that universes are the main character of a story.
- I created a column series on worldbuilding called Way With Worlds in the very late 90's.
- I rewrote and updated the series in 2013-2014.
- I then rewrote it again into two books.
- The first book was on worldbuilding essentials.

So What's Going On This Time?

In Book 1, I covered the basics and essentials of worldbuilding, from general philosophy to focusing on characters.

This time, we're going to focus on fine details and important specifics, such as heroes, villains, originality, and communication. Book 1 was about building the world; Book 2 is about getting deeper into important issues.

Now just in case you haven't read Book 1 for some reason (or if it's been awhile) let's go over my basic philosophy of worldbuilding.

Worldbuilding – An Overview

So here's my basic approach to worldbuilding.

What Is Worldbuilding?

Worldbuilding is creating a stable setting that is consistent and works by its own rules. This setting is where stories take place.

What Are The Benefits Of Worldbuilding?

Worldbuilding has the following benefits:

- Provides an understandable setting for your audience.
- Prevents errors in your creations.
- Inspires you with self-created details.
- Provides guidance in creating stories.
- Improves your writing ability as you learn to record useful facts.
- Can create other useful works, like world guides.

How Much Advice Of Yours Do I Use?

This book's contents, like its predecessor, are ideals you can aspire to. The advice you'll actually use will differ depending on your goals. A fun action-adventure game may not require quite as much worldbuilding as a five-novel series, but going the extra mile can really help your work's quality.

What Is Your Basic Worldbuilding Approach?

My approach to worldbuilding is:

- The setting is your main character – your tales are what happens to it and within it.
- Because the setting isn't your focus, you tell part of the setting's story through characters. Characters are lenses, providing a viewpoint on the setting.
- This approach means that you focus on having a good setting, which leads to good characters, whose perspectives let you tell a tale.

Now Let's Get To The Details

With all that being said, let's dive into details, specifics, and some deeper philosophy of worldbuilding!

- Steven Savage

June 16th, 2015

Heroes And Villains

I'm With The Agency

Your story or game or comic has its main characters, its heroes and villains, protagonists and antagonists. They're the ones you focus on, so they must be the main characters, right?

Not necessarily. Before we talk heroes and villains and such, let's make sure the tales you tell in your world are really **about** them. You may have a main character, but they may not technically be a hero. Oh there may **be** a hero in the world you created, but it's not your main **character**. The same goes for your villain as well – and for all characters.

(As a note, I'm lumping heroes and villains together with the idea of protagonists and antagonists. This is not technically correct, but it's close enough and easier to read. I hope you'll forgive this intentional ethical and literary simplicity.)

A Critical Definition

When you're creating the tales of your world, the main character(s) of your story are viewpoints on the world that best tell what's going on. In a few cases, if you use a first-person writing style, you do this very directly. But just because the story is from their perspective, it may not mean they're the **real** hero or villain if you have one.

The critical issue is that the heroes and villains have the ability (or assumed ability) to change the setting. If your hero is the main character, the story is told from the perspective of someone affecting the setting. A villain is the same way.

They may be *morally* different, but both are rather active, even if reluctantly or reactively (in the case of some anti-heroes).

Heroes and villains are defined by a sense of agency, of the ability to act, direct, and change things in your setting. It may not be in a good way, or an effective way, or a competent way. They may fail, but their activity upon the environment is what makes them heroes and villains, just as much as their motivation.

You could be exceedingly evil, but if you're in a coma due to your last drug binge in your lair of evil, you're not really the Villain. You're more of an After-School Special for supervillains. Or maybe you're just a jerk who doesn't change things in the world very much.

You could be exceptionally heroic, but if that results in no direction and activity, then you're not really the hero, are you? Yes, you may be a nice guy, but you're just a well-meaning victim of circumstance.

Sense Of Agency, Sense Of Story, Sense Of World

When you are deciding on what story to tell in your world, if you're telling a tale of heroism and/or villainy, these characters require agency – initiative and direction that has an effect. If they do not act, they are merely acted upon and, at best, responding. They may be main characters, but are not the “real” heroes or villains of your tale.

This is a critical definition, as a person creating a world for a story or a game can miss the importance of agency for many reasons:

- We focus so much on worldbuilding that our characters bounce around the setting like pinballs. Ever read a book that seemed to be an exercise in tourism? You get the idea.
- We conjure up characters, but the story just happens to them. The hero is there, so stuff happens and things get done, but they're not part of the world. They're a camera with legs, making your tale the equivalent of a found-footage movie. This may be what you wanted, but make sure it's intentional.

- We spend too much time inside the hero or villain's head and we forget to make them a person. You don't notice how unfurnished a room is if you keep looking out a window.

In a few cases, if your villain is a phenomenon, like a plague, then the villain can lack agency in a human sense. Their "agency" comes from pure brute force and circumstance. But if you're writing from a hero's point-of-view and they have no initiative, they're not really heroic (even if they are the main character).

You've probably read stories like above. Someone gets all the hero trappings but never does anything, never shows any initiative. It's boring – you find yourself wishing for an Author's Pet because at least they'd do stupidly overblown stuff.

(If you can write a story where the Hero is a faceless force and the Villain has a sense of agency, please do so.)

Sometimes your main character doesn't always have a sense of agency. In a few cases, this is actually OK.

Maybe your main character isn't the real hero or villain. That's fine.

The Narrative Character

If a main character is not a hero, not a person with a sense of agency, their story may not seem interesting. Who wants to play a game or read a comic about someone who just has things happen to them?

In some cases, people may. I do think this is a valuable form of storytelling – if done consciously.

Sometimes the main character isn't a hero, it's what I call a narrative character. A narrative character is someone who relates what is happening, but has little role in shaping what is going on. It can be done well, if handled properly.

After all, Doctor Watson is quite beloved in Sherlock Holmes, but he's both a narrative character and a kind of secondary protagonist.

Now, I should note that I think truly narrative characters, the victims of circumstance, are relatively rare. Usually they're on a scale between narrative character and hero. The exceptions are usually stories focused on the narrative itself, where it's kind of the goal.

A good narrative character may not be heroic, but they are a very legitimate choice for the “lens” on your world.

Some of the best examples of narrative characters are found in horror stories, where people are in the grip of powerful evil. The narrative view shows the horrors, but also communicates the sense of being trapped – as the narrator can *only* narrate. Lovecraftian tales can do this well, and it's a staple of many stalked-by-a-monster films and books.

Another good example of a genre that uses narrative characters is comedy. Many comedies are about hapless individuals who have things happen to them; the disempowerment is part of the story. Characters in these comedies are funny due to their reactions (which we may relate to), but they have little agency.

Of course, if you have these narrative characters, you have to know your setting, probably even more than if you're writing a more typical hero. The characters are relating what's happening to them in your game or book or film, so the setting has to be well-made. When this is done right, it's a powerful experience where one truly understands the setting.

However, characters evolve, which leads us to . . .

The Evolving Narrative Characters

Sometimes narrative characters evolve into actual heroes or villains – and that's the point of the story.

This is an approach to consider when thinking over your creations – your initial hero or villain may not be what people expect at the start. In time, due to being acted on, they change and then act to alter their setting. Characters who are main characters, but not heroes or villains, may become such during the course of the story.

This is a classic element of many tales – the reactive becomes proactive. A story in your setting may not focus on someone changing the world, but how they rose to *become* the person to change that world. Their evolution is a core part of the story, making them initially narrative and eventually hero or villain.

Make Your Choice And Move On

So when writing and picking perspectives in your world, remember that heroes and villains have a sense of agency. If your main character lacks such, there's either a flaw in your choices, or you're really writing a narrative character or one that evolves.

Remember, it's OK to not have the main character be the real hero or even have a hero. Maybe it's much more interesting that way, or more appropriate. You want a story of a soldier in an army, and though a great General executed the strategy that won the war, you don't want a tale of plans and calculations. You want a story of a person making it through a great conflict as best they can.

Find who works to let people experience your world the way you want.

The Deadly Hero

So we're talking heroes and villains, and sometimes their tales get active and thus violent. When it gets dangerous, I want to address a rather poorly-handled world-breaking archetype that I call The Deadly Hero.

The Deadly Hero is that character who leaves a large trail of dead bodies, but is also considered the hero (if only by the author and fans). If said bodies are soulless killer robots and such, probably no harm no foul, but usually they're former living creatures and sentients. That body count consists of a lot of dead *people*, enough you'd expect someone to get a bit concerned . . .

You know the story. It's a First Person Shooter game come to life as enormous amounts of corpses pile up and the character is still considered the good guy. They may even consider themselves heroic and still act the part of hero. After a while however something seems wrong with all of this . . .

Or maybe the Hero is a great military leader, directing armies and racking up victories against the enemy. Much detail in the world, and the stories within, are about his or her victories. The victories seem kind of vicious or excessive though, and it seems non-heroic as cities burn and bodies rot.

Something is wrong because the Deadly Hero kills worldbuilding as well as legions of faceless extras.

The Crux Of The Conflict

So what's the problem? The good guy kicks backside and wins. That's how it works. So why is there something “off” about the Deadly Hero – and why does it bother us?

Beyond gore, gratuitous action, and so on, the Deadly Hero acts without *repercussion*. After a while, their body count is like a videogame score with little to no fallout or impact. A good setting is all about cause and effect, but in the Deadly Hero's setting violence has no repercussions. Suddenly the world is no more alive than the nameless mooks littering the latest battlefield.

Since the Deadly Hero is usually about violence, let's consider the impact of violence in our real world. This lets us see why this situation seems off to the audience as well as we worldbuilders.

- 1) Violence is unpredictable. A running battle of spells in a crowded city is going to have civilian casualties – not dealing with the results of this unpredictability in favor of a body count seems unreal. If violence avoids unpredictability, how that is done needs to be explored.
- 2) Violence produces reactions. I don't care how heroic you think you are, that huge pile of cadavers might make me wonder if you're the good guy. Remember, I can't see their badges that indicate they belong to Evil Inc. until the autopsy.
- 3) People assess risks. The violent, even the heroic, may make us wonder if they're trustworthy. If you've got super battle psychic powers, that may be well and good, but the secret organization you work for is going to notice your kill count and maybe wonder if you're a risk to work with.
- 4) Violence affects people. Ask anyone who has been in a fight, gone to war, been attacked, or otherwise experienced violence. Violence changes you – it should change the characters in your world. The Deadly Hero is often not affected by violence, which makes them unbelievable.
- 5) If you're not affected by the violence you commit, something may be wrong. A character who kills without mental and emotional repercussion may be insanely dangerous – or just insane.

6) Violence takes effort. I mean, if nothing else, you have to rest, recharge, and buy bullets. That effort needs to be understood and explored in your setting.

The Deadly Hero rubs people wrong because it's death without repercussion or even lip service to its effects. A story without repercussion is a story without a working world. At that point it's just a list of things happening against a meaningless backdrop that should be a living world.

We're often used to seeing the Deadly Hero as a form of wish-fulfillment. The badass without repercussions is a form of pandering – and a sadly obvious form of pandering at that. Poorly written is bad enough, but outright pandering really means your worldbuilding is for naught, it's just setting up targets. Unless your audience wants that, you may want to rethink your goals.

I recall a time in my youth where someone talked lovingly of the vigilante comic *The Punisher*, which has often featured a high body count. I noted that, realistically, the character would inevitably kill a lot of innocent people (if only by accident), and that the public wouldn't necessarily know all the dead people were bad people.

They didn't get it. You should.

Avoiding The Trap

The Deadly Hero is a trap that's easy to fall into because this archetype is too common in our media. Even when a story doesn't feature the Deadly Hero, it may be close enough that if you follow in its footsteps, you may end up using this troublesome archetype.

If having a believable world setting is important to you, you want to avoid the trap of the Deadly Hero – and a common one it is. Here are a few pieces of advice:

- 1) Make sure violence has appropriate repercussions.
- 2) Make sure the hero's reactions to violence are appropriate.
- 3) Make sure other characters in your world react appropriately to violence.
- 4) Make sure the cost of weapons, armor, repair, lawsuits, etc. are worked into the story.
- 5) Think of what a hero *is* for you and your setting. If you are writing an admirable character, you'll need to explore their reasons and reactions to violence – which also makes you a good writer.

Avoid the trap of the Deadly Hero by making sure the world works and functions appropriately, diving in to the repercussions and richness of the setting and character. In time, this makes not just a believable story, but a better world and characters.

A Side Note: The UHB Is Still Annoying

When I first wrote this column, I noted a character I was really tired of: the Uncaring Heroic Badass or UHB. The UHB is the grim, deadly, antisocial, unlikeable character who is the Hero that the author wants us to root for even though they're an a-hole. They're an aspect of the Deadly Hero.

My opinion hasn't changed. The UHB is a power trip consisting of:

- I'm tough and can defeat anyone. Don't you want to be me?
- I don't care about anyone or anything. Aren't I cool for not caring?

The UHB isn't a hero. They're a sociopath in a costume, meant for pandering, and still freaking annoying and worldbreaking.

Fallout From The Flareup

Writing a violent and deadly hero is totally possible – as long as you understand the repercussions of violence and the character. This requires deep thought – and avoiding tropes.

If anything, I'd say tropes about violence are some of the worst challenges we face in writing (along with sex, religion, and politics). It's almost like we get invested in them, and we need to overcome them.

Like the Deadly Hero.

Dark Author's Pets

NOTE: I will be addressing overly-favored characters here – what I call Author's Pets. Author's Pets are often called Mary Sue and/or Gary Stu, but I've found “Mary” has become a gendered insult to mock female characters who dare be as competent as male characters. I've removed it from my vocabulary as best as possible, and will refer to characters that authors favor and project themselves on as Author's Pets.

A Dark Author's Pet? Most people would say that Author's Pets darken things as it is. They may make works into pandering creations that are hard to enjoy – or worse, that we have to compete with. The existence of Author's Pets worries creative types, as they don't want to come off as creating Author's Pets. Critics may dismiss works out of hand by labeling characters as some self-insertion fantasy at the mere hint of an Author's Pet.

(Not to mention their prevalence takes some of the fun out of good old wish-fulfillment.)

But there's something even worse than the usual Author's Pet. This is the Dark Author's Pet, and it's something more troubling.

Through The Looking Glass Darkly

When you're busy scrutinizing your heroic cast for Author's Pets, you might miss where else they show up. These folks are tricky little devils, and maybe you should be looking at the other side of your cast.

Sometimes Author's Pets are the *villains*, the bad guys, the antagonists. The pandering and wish-fulfillment you so wish to avoid can happen to the forces of evil – and that's when you have Dark Author's Pets.

A Dark Author's Pet is the villain or otherwise objectionable character who gets all the breaks, who gets to be the source of wish fulfillment. The villain so great and so awesome and so good-looking that there's no hope to defeat them. The murderous maniac who just happens to be really understandable if someone just opens up to her.

Dark Author's Pets can sometimes be interesting, but they're often even more annoying and worldbreaking than the usual Author's Pet. You can't believe the protagonist will defeat someone so perfect. The near-inevitable forgiveness of the too-cool villain falls flat once they've murdered a few million people. At least most Authors Pet's make some pretense to being understandable, likable, and competent.

Dark Author's Pets break the world even more than their counterparts, as they're usually up to far, far worse things than any heroic Author's Pet. Being an Author's Pet who's saving the world is one thing; being one that's destroying it while being so perfect is quite another.

So why do we end up with Dark Author's Pets? Most Author's Pets seem to be beautiful, perfect, wonderful, loved, and so on. How do we end up making Author's Pets of someone that is bad at best, and at worse, outright evil?

There's something peculiar to many of us writers and worldbuilders in that, at one time or another, we create an Author's Pet. Maybe it's a wish-fulfillment, maybe it's identification, maybe it's a power trip. Author's Pets are powerful, lucky, have it all, and are something we, sadly, get attached to.

But none of these qualities say that Author's Pets have to be *good guys*. You've probably seen a few of their ilk that were so annoying you wondered why the hell they were the heroes and heroines. Sometimes they're just outright villains who happened to have the spotlight.

In my experience, a Dark Author's Pet makes it even easier to make their stories a power trip and use of authorial fiat – all the things that lead to Author's Pets being created. Consider:

- The villain has to be a threat. It might get awfully tempting to step into their shoes and make them an Author's Pet because they they're going to have that fear-inducing role.
- The villain has power. Power is fun and enviable, and it may be a bit too easy to identify with the villain.
- Villains are great for angsty backstory and redemption tales, which we can all relate to – who doesn't want sympathy and redemption for our past mistakes?
- Villains get a lot of attention, and it's fun to have attention – thus one may make an Author's Pet of the villain.
- Villains are bad guys and lack moral restraints (in some cases). It can be fun to write a character without inhibitions or to fulfill one's fantasies and you end up with an Author's Pet.
- Marketing. It seems everyone loves a bad guy or bad woman or handsome evil android or whatever.

If this starts reminding you of some characters here or there, then you understand what I mean. Ever see a particularly foul character be strangely popular with some people? You get the idea.

Dark Author's Pets actually irritate me more than regular Author's Pets – they seem to lean more towards wish-fulfillment, provoke even more excuses, and drag the story down, especially if the hero is just someone for the villain to push around. They end up ruining the world as the story is not about what happens – it's about them.

Things To Watch Out For

To help you out, here are a few signs you have a Dark Author's Pet on your hands so you don't break your world.

- The hero/heroine is constantly outsmarted by the villain and is basically a punching bag.
- The villain is so charming, suave, debonair, and likable that they don't need an Army of Evil – they should just be able to make a good case of why they should rule everyone.
- The villain has inexhaustible resources, yet there's no reason in your world to have said resources.
- The villain is so lucky, you figure they should just try and win the world in a game of poker.
- People dislike the villain because they're too perfect. The perfection is more annoying than their actual crimes.
- The villain is giving voice to things the author thinks a wee bit too much.

See these traits in your Villain? Get out the Author's Pet detector and give them a careful examination. You may have a Dark Author's Pet on your hands, so fix it.

(And wash your hands. Who knows where that Dark Author's Pet has been?)

Closing

A Dark Author's Pet is a real kick in the worldbuilding, as well as just a poor thing to create as an author. It's also easy to miss if you're not looking for it.

I've seen these quite a few times, and they always crawl up my nose. There's something sad in seeing an author make a bad guy the Author's Pet and have it affect their work or misdirect their talent. Also, it's only so often you can hear "He/she is just misunderstood" before you want to say "no, this character is a

psychopath and I want them to die."

I also think that Dark Author's Pets can eclipse good villains or morally ambiguous heroes – areas of really good writing and worldbuilding. I'm quite fond of a few characters like that, and I'd rather not see their bad names besmirched, if you know what I mean.

Omnicompetence

When we create any main characters, be they heroic or villainous or ambiguous, we're usually dealing with highly competent people. After all, you need characters of a certain level of ability to find something worth writing, or drawing, or building a game around. Yes, there are exceptions, but more often than not, a level of competence is needed in your leads.

In some tales and games the competence is the focus of a story in a world, such as a police procedural or a game involving crafting. I've heard this described with the delightful term "competence porn" – media that is about people doing things well. So I invite you to use this term more – I do.

Anyway, there's a point where you can take competence of characters too far. The characters are not just good, but good at *everything*. They become Omnicompetent (also a word I want to promote), and at that point, the world starts breaking down because one person's talent seems unbelievable.

It is unbelievable. That's the problem.

What Is Omnicompetence?

A character is Omnicompetent when they are either so good at many things, or so good at one thing, that they might as well be good at *everything*. The former are Renaissance Men and Women turned up to 11, the latter are people who can manipulate any computer system or master all forms of magic. Both are hard to credit when we start to think about them critically, so they and their setting become unbelievable.

Attributing Omniscience to people is something we encounter not just in our fictional settings, but real life. Think of the last time someone said "Person X does Y, so they can do Z" and you went "wait, what?" because that made no sense. Politics is especially prone to this, where a person's virtues in one profession apparently mean they can solve all problems forever.

By now you're probably thinking about a few Omniscient characters you've seen and thought "you know, they're just as believable as the last harebrained political hyperbole I heard." Which is exactly the point – these characters become just as believable as a political promise, and that's a good warning sign.

Now, before we delve further into why Omniscience is a world-wrecker and distorts your setting and tales, a slight digression . . .

A Few Caveats On Omniscience

Before I launch into exploring Omniscience, I want to note a few important things.

First of all, Omniscient characters are *not* necessarily Author's Pets. In my experience, Omniscients often have reasons for being so good at everything, it's just poorly explained and designed. The Author's Pet type characters usually have no believable explanation for their abilities, if they even have any of note – the author takes care of them. Omniscient characters often have some explanation for their abilities, if a bad one.

Secondly, Omniscient characters can work in certain settings that have a comedic bent. Buckaroo Banzai, the rockstar-neurosurgeon of the cult film (and a personal fave of my youth) is an excellent example. Parodic characters can be effectively Omniscient, as that's part of the humor – as can the breakdown of their Omniscience when they meet certain challenges.

Third, I find Omnicompetent characters are often less annoying if done right, making them harder to detect. Omnicompetent characters are at least *characters*, and in the hands of talented creators, their unbelievability may be lessened. The character of Tony Stark, Iron Man, is often handled as both Omnicompetent yet fallible, which has worked well in some incarnations.

Now with that said, let's get back to Omnicompetence and why it's bad for your world and the tales within.

Omnicompetence: Just Inaccurate.

Let's get this out of the way: Omnicompetent heroes and villains are just unbelievable and distort the setting.

Yes, they're far less annoying than many Author's Pets. Yes, they can be funny, and they can often be written right. At least they may provide competence porn and be quite enjoyable, even if they're a little too competent to be believed.

But in the end, let's face it, no one is good at everything in our world, and it's hard to believe someone is in a fictional one. Omnicompetence comes off as unbelievable because it *is* unbelievable, and it's hard to justify someone like that in a credible setting. Omnicompetent characters are often deemed “good at everything” and inserted into their world without much justification for their abilities.

Trying to explain Omnicompetence doesn't hold water most of the time (though there may be exceptions). So why do we often make them?

There are several reasons:

- Making characters good at everything saves time.

- We extrapolate on talented real-life people and get it wrong by assuming they're good at everything – so we make our characters good at everything.
- It is easy to make a hero powerful enough to save the day or a villain competent enough to be a threat. That also saves time.
- It's fun to write people who know what the heck they're doing.
- It gives people something to aspire to, so we want heroes like that.

It happens. You will make Omnicompetent characters. It's OK. In fact, you may have a setting where they do fit.

Just look for the warning signs, just in case.

But what should we aim for in our character creation and worldbuilding to prevent irrational Omnicompetence? What helps us make, in short, good competence porn?

Competence With Foundations And Repercussions

A character's competence should, like anything else in your setting, have a proper foundation – and have repercussions. That's good worldbuilding.

There are reasons for a character to be good at something, and many of these overlap.

- They know something for a reason, such as seeking out knowledge or having some skill magically transferred into their mind.
- They were trained for a reason, such as having to learn a skill to survive, or to deal with a given threat.
- They directed their energies for a reason; they were motivated to learn.

- They have some trait or talent for a reason (even if it's inheritance).

In turn, the act of having or gaining abilities has repercussions:

- They take time/money/effort not spent elsewhere. The character with the three PhD's may have one heck of a student debt (there's a superhero story for you).
- Their focus on learning may change their perspectives. Your character who is a brilliant artist may not know how to turn his computer on.
- Developing abilities and competencies changes a person. The character with the implanted memories that make them super-skilled is going to suffer from some pretty interesting mental problems.
- Competence brings people to the attention of others. An amazing wizard who displays precocious skill at age eleven is going to get a lot of attention by people wondering about a child flinging fireballs.

Competence may be its own reward, but it doesn't come without tradeoffs. They just may be worth it to the character (and the people they know).

When you think about competence in origin and effect, it makes richer characters and richer worlds. Imagine the fun of a character who seems to be nearly Omnicompetent, and exploring how they got that way.

Beyond Omnicompetence: The Believably Competent Character

In creating believable competent characters – so often our heroes and villains – it's important to make sure the competence is understandable and justified. They should be believably competent characters.

Such characters are competent, but their tradeoffs and limits are obvious. The characters are then believable and understandable and relatable – and the world and the characters are more real to the audience. The competent characters are not just inserted into their world, they are part of it.

This may mean characters are talented as all get out. Human history shows us many amazing people with a wide array of skills – but that history is human history, with all people's flaws and mistakes and tradeoffs. When your competent characters have those, they're believable and their setting and lives are more real.

Keeping An Eye Out

When focusing on your competent characters, be on the lookout for Omnicompetence. In turn, by building believably competent characters you can head the problem off and make a richer world.

And a less annoying one, frankly.

Sorry, Tony.

Incompetence

In the last section I covered the risk of creating Omnicompetent characters – those good-at-everything characters who are hard to believe and thus “break” the setting. Too often we make our heroes and villains Omnicompetent, and that's a warning worth heeding. The Omnicompetent soon end up Omni-unbelievable, and the world shifts around them as opposed to being a foundation for them.

However, there's a flipside issue I want to address, that of Incompetent heroes and villains and leads. Though I find the former more common than the latter, these strangely incompetent characters are ones that I see too much of.

Ever see a “hero” and wonder how the hell this person is going to save the world? Ever see a “villain” so incompetent you wonder how this moron managed to threaten the world? Is their stupidity celebrated as a kind of victory? Does the worldbuilder seem to *want* you to celebrate it?

How are these idiots even close to succeeding in any believable setting?

Welcome to the world of the Incompetents, the dark side to Omnicompetence.

A Familiar Tale

You know the story: the hero who manages to save the day despite being stupid or ignorant. The villain with really nothing going for them, except that they are somehow a threat despite all evidence to the contrary. Some characters are even portrayed as being so good at what they do because of their stupidity, which is not a trait you want in doctors, programmers, or scientists, let alone your hero and their arch-nemesis.

Sometimes this is played for laughs, which is fine in a comedy – much as an Omnicompetent character can be amusing. In this case, these Incompetents may fit your focus.

Outside of comedy these type of characters are painful. Their successes are so outrageous and unbelievable that you really don't buy them because they are explained by (and not defeated by) their own incompetence. Just as surely as an Omnicompetent character distorts a world, so does a protagonist and/or antagonist who is too stupid. You're not sure they should be allowed to drive, let alone use the Orbital Death Ray.

These sound a bit like the classic Holy Fools, those competent-yet-not maybe-tricksters of myth and literature, but these Lucky Dumbasses are something different.

Unholy Fools And Holy Fools

You're probably familiar with Holy Fools; those characters that seem weird or dumb or foolish, but there is something greater at work. Holy Fools succeed despite – or even because – of what makes them foolish, and yet you wonder how incompetent they are. They're paradoxes – and often that's their power.

There's a beloved tradition of these characters in literature. Sometimes their foolishness is a lack of the B.S. other people adsorbed. Others think differently, giving them great insight as well as great ignorance. Yet other Holy Fools mess with people to make a point, only appearing foolish. Finally, some are ambiguous, and part of the story is making you wonder if they are smart or stupid.

Captain Tylor of the anime series is a great example of a modern Holy Fool, and his very ambiguity is part of the story. Discworld has several Holy Fools, who are not fools so much as people with helpful, but unusual, personality traits.

The Holy Fool is a damn hard character to create. If you're a worldbuilder, you have to understand them inside and out, even when others do not. If you can do it right, more power to you.

But if you're not careful, you end up with those successful incompetents I've been warning about. I've christened them Unholy Fools.

Thinking Like Children

Unholy Fools are often childish characters who succeed for reasons that seem to be dumb luck, or their dumbness is somehow a virtue. It's not that they have a virtue that appears to be dumb (often a classic element of the Holy Fool or Holy semi-Fools), or that they lack a negative complicator. It's literally they're just stupid or do stupid things – yet succeed.

This happens in comedies, as noted, but can happen in other tales as well. The heroic character who "is just doing their job" or "just knows how to punch something" may be an Unholy Fool. If they succeed *because* they're neither smart nor talented, you have an Unholy Fool on your hands.

There's no ambiguity – they're ignorant if not outright idiots. There is simply no reason for their success – and to make them succeed you have to bend your world around them. They're a danger to good worldbuilding because of that.

Why do we create these Unholy Fools? I think characters like this are popular and easy to fall into because:

- 1) They don't make the readers or gamers feel inadequate.
- 2) They thumb their nose at supposedly smart/talented people.
- 3) They can be good for a laugh.
- 4) We're used to their more believable, classic counterpart, the Holy Fool – so don't notice when we do it wrong.

The Unholy Fool grates on people because they *are* dumb, their successes aren't believable, and they don't have a reason to be the way they are. The successful idiot too easily is just another Author's Pet. In fact, I'd say the Unholy Fool is more likely to be an Author's Pet than many Omnicompetent characters.

Did You Fall Into The Trap?

So how do you detect you've fallen into this trap?

Well first, as noted, these Unholy Fools are worldbreakers. If you can't explain their success, their likability, and so on, that should set off your worldbuilding alarms. In your gut, you probably know something is wrong – you may have even been ignoring it.

The second sign is finding you didn't think them out as well as you thought. If a character seems to coast, things seem to be "too" good for them despite their flaws, you may have fallen into this trap as well. Many Holy Fools seem to “coast” along as well, so you may miss that you've created an Unholy Fool.

Third and finally, Unholy Fools are characters who, in their incarnations, appeal only to a subset of people. If you notice some folks dislike a “Holy Fool” character and you don't get why, yet others rally to defend them, that may be an indicator. There's something that gets people (and probably you) attached to them. I think it's because people relate to their foolishness in one way or another – but without that relation, others see what they are.

The best test is to simply ask yourself if you can explain why your character triumphed the way they did in a manner that works in the world. The audience may not know (that's part of the fun with Holy Fools), but you need to.

Comes and Goes

It's odd writing this, as when I first wrote Way With Worlds, I didn't see many Unholy Fools. Later, I noticed quite a few of them popping up. I think this happened as they can also be Author's Pets and appeal to anti-intellectualism. My guess is these kinds of characters and their appeal come and go with social trends.

So perhaps in another decade or two, this may get a laugh as people wonder "oh, who would write that?" But a few decades later, who knows?

Either way, avoid Unholy Fools now – and forever.

Self-Serving Self-Sacrifice

Sacrifice is a part of literature, myth, and our lives. The act of giving something up for good reasons, perhaps making the ultimate sacrifice of one's life, is part of the human experience. We value the act of giving things up because it provides clarity and view into someone's character – fictional or real.

We know sacrifice from worlds and stories very well. A few common examples:

- The heroic sacrifice of a starship captain or engineer that guides their ship into a deadly run on the enemy – and may not even be saved at the last moment.
- The person who dies for a cause, getting nothing in return.
- The hero or heroine who throws themselves on the grenade-equivalent or detonates the bomb-equivalent by hand to save his or her buddies/country/world (pick at least one).
- The villain, who at the last moment, realizes what a giant moral void they've been and dies to correct it.

I know you can easily name at least a half-dozen other examples you've seen or read in the last year, alone.

However, there are times the sacrifice seems . . . off. It sets your teeth on edge. It doesn't work for some reason. It seems false. It seems contrived.

Because it didn't work, it bugs the hell out of you as a reader or player of the game or whatever. Something is wrong in the characters – and that means something is wrong with the world, the setting.

In worldbuilding, when self-sacrifice happens, like anything else, it should have a reason. If there's no reason for it to exist, it's just going to come off wrong or out of place. Yet worldbuilders will shoehorn it in for a variety of reasons.

You may have done this yourself.

So in the interest of better worldbuilding and annoying your audience less, here are some warning signs to look out for that the sacrifice of your heroic hero or self-redeeming villain doesn't fit. We'll also look at just why it may have happened.

Warning #1: Tropeageddon

Sacrifice and self-sacrifice are tropes in media, and thus we as creators often shove these tropes into our worlds because we're used to them. We throw something into our plots and panels and game options that "fits" what we think should fit, but it just doesn't work in our world. Something not born of the setting doesn't seem normal in it.

It's too easy to put a scene of self-sacrifice into a story, just as it's too easy to put a familiar fight scene into an action movie. Sacrifice is a language people understand, but like selecting the wrong word in a conversation, it doesn't work if it's not appropriate.

Look out for putting in acts of self-sacrifice just because "the situation calls for it" or "it fits the story," because it should also fit the characters and the world.

Warning #2: Selfish Motives Of The Character

Self-sacrifice is an act of transcending the self for something greater – it's about giving things up, perhaps everything one has, for a greater reason. Now those reasons may be questionable or just plain stupid (at least to the survivors), but the act of sacrifice is literally the giving up of self.

It's *not* the same as sacrificing selfishly.

The motivations of a character committing self-sacrifice may really turn out to be selfish. Consider other motives for self-sacrificing behavior:

- In order to make someone sorry.
- In order to become famous or remembered.
- In order to escape a problem by appearing to "go out" in a heroic manner.
- To fulfill fantasies of martyrdom.
- As an act of self-hatred, essentially a suicide that doesn't look like suicide.

Now, these motives may indeed fit a character you've created who's about to detonate the McGuffin Orb or whatever. If that fits, then by all means it's consistent with your setting for them to go out. But it's not heroic, it's not noble – thinking of it as such and having characters react as such breaks continuity.

Now, consider how fascinating it could be to have not-so heroic sacrifice and work out realistic character reactions. "He saved the world, but he was also an egomaniacal jerk; how do we react?"

Warning #3: Selfish Motives Of The Creator

In no way do I want to cast aspersions on you and your world. But sometimes we do stuff in our stories for selfish reasons, and sometimes that includes how we write characters, and how they sacrifice and die.

We can be motivated to put in an act of self-sacrifice of a character for many reasons:

- To just get rid of an inconvenient character. That's copping out, and believe me, people will notice.

- Because the character is an Author's Pet and we want people to love them/feel sorry for them. Usually it's transparent enough to annoy people.
- Because we wrote ourselves into a corner or built our world in a way we didn't expect. Usually a big boom solves some of that, but there's only so often you can play Reboot The World before you ruin your credibility.

When it comes to really good worldbuilding, we have to take pride in our crafting a good world, and learn how to make it work. Inserting our own motivations too deep, violating our own continuity, damages our settings. In the case of something as important as self-sacrifice, putting it in selfishly can be very destructive to our settings.

Giving Up The Wrong Sacrifice

So, when your heroes and villains make a sacrifice, make sure it fits them, that the reasons are good, and that it fits the setting. Sure, they may be wrong, stupid, or suicidal, but at least portray them properly. It brings a truly visceral feel to the story and avoids cheapening your work's impact.

Best of all, when you deliver a tale or a game or a world where these moments of self-sacrifice truly fit, it keeps those involved in the world, the readers and gamers, engaged. It makes the world real and organic and alive – even when characters in it are dying.

That, after all, is what you're trying to do as a worldbuilder and creator.

Forget Good And Evil

We often end up discussing Good and Evil when we are talking heroes and villains, or antagonists and protagonists. This makes sense, as Good Versus Evil is a classic issue that is interesting to explore. You can't go wrong with Good and Evil – in theory.

In fact, Good and Evil can become boring and riddled with tropes: it's not explored, it has no foundation, it's just *there*. We talk Good and Evil, but don't *think* about it; instead signifiers are thrown around randomly, and titles like "heroine" or "villain" stand in for actual moral issues. It becomes meaningless in the worlds we make.

Too often we're mummifying Good and Evil, propping up their bodies, and treating them as marionettes. As a friend once noted, when cigarette smoking became regarded as objectionable in America, he saw it used more and more by “bad guys” in media. A simple trope, but a good example of signifying – not worldbuilding – and a good example of what can happen if a creator isn't careful.

So when we think Heroes and Villains, here's advice for you as a worldbuilder:

Stop thinking Good and Evil.

Start Thinking Why And How.

The Important Questions

When creating characters, and everyone from heroine to most vile villain should be a *character*; you should have a detailed, understandable cast. A well-made character is a manifestation of a well-made world, and helps people understand and experience the setting.

So when creating characters, ask . . .

WHY: do characters do what they do? What experiences, tragedies, benefits, thoughts, and ideas made them who they are?

HOW: do they see themselves? After all, few people really say "I am Lawful Good" or "I am a despicable creature of the netherdark" except on supposedly witty t-shirts.

Let's explore these questions more closely.

Asking Why

Every character has a reason for doing things. Knowing why they do what they do makes them part of the setting and thus believable to the audience. This is even more important when moral issues are the center of a work. *Why* gives you reasons.

When characters are just designated heroes and villains, "why" gets lost. It's like playing shirts versus skins, or red versus blue – it becomes arbitrary and meaningless. On the other hand, knowing what makes our heroes fight the alien hordes, or why the Dark Lady of the Night is oppressing the world, makes them real. Real, believable characters, no matter how noble or foul, click with us and we get them.

And when we get them, we're drawn into their lives and their setting.

One of the finest achievements of the *Smallville* TV series was creating a fascinatingly sympathetic Lex Luthor (helped by actor Michael Rosenbaum's considerable talent). Lex's being messed up was, at least early on in the series, quite understandable and human. You got him, and could see him becoming a monster at the same time.

As for heroes, I think *Babylon 5* did an excellent job with the “why” of heroic characters. Many of the characters thought they were doing the right thing, even when they obviously weren't. Even those who were heroic might be at odds with each other, or have different agendas. The series, in many ways, had more heroes than villains.

Why is powerful. Even the worst villain with a good “why” draws people into your world, your tales, your games. It can be so compelling that people begin asking their own questions about their “whys.”

Why is one of the many points of art, after all. “Why” means a better world, better characters, and a richer experience.

A View To How

Equally important to why characters do things is how they see themselves. If anything, this is often ignored in worldbuilding more than the “why.” We focus on why a character does something, but don't often think how they see it.

As repeatedly noted, I consider characters to be lenses on the world. They're how the audience becomes drawn into setting and the stories within. As characters are part of your setting, they're also lenses on *themselves*. They have views on who they are.

Few people seem to think "I wish to be an awful person" in real life, yet many do awful things. People try to do good, yet may be riddled with insecurity over if they're “good enough.” These viewpoints drive what they do – and may conceal their motivations from others or themselves.

How people see themselves affects what they do and how they change. So get to know your characters from the point of view of themselves – sure, they may be deluded, arrogant, or insane, but at least you know. Then you can write, play, or draw them properly.

Viewpoints are part of feedback. They help people understand themselves. Understanding the views of your characters as people will help you.

By the way, there's a chance this could get very tragic. Much as we know we can delude ourselves, trying to understand the views for five, ten, twenty characters can be a bit disillusioning. It's like discovering that people you like aren't who you thought they were – and you created them.

For Love Of Evil

I've wondered why we don't delve deeper into the Why and How of our characters. Beyond laziness and tropes, I want to suggest one more idea for your consideration.

We don't dive in because it's uncomfortable.

Every time we get to know a character, we may think about issues that are tough in our own lives.

Every time we step into a character's viewpoint, we see the world differently and in ways that may make us uncomfortable because we're not inside our own heads.

Every time we get to know a "hero," we confront issues from moral shallowness to our own failure.

Every time we get to know a "villain," we worry we may sympathize with evil or find out more about our own darkness.

A good worldbuilder gets uncomfortable. Besides, that also helps you generate that feeling in your audience, which is the point.

Ask Your Questions

So when building your characters, and most definitely your heroes and villains, ask these questions. Ask why they do what they do. Ask how they see themselves.

It's more effective, more informative, and deeper than just thinking about good and evil.

Besides, you might learn some uncomfortable truths – and then you can put those in your world and in your tales to share them!

Planet Of Morons And The Idiot Plot

Back when I was writing the original draft of these Heroes and Villains columns, author David Brin dropped an amazing essay on his blog that is a must-read. So, read it.

<http://www.davidbrin.com/idiotplot.html>

Brin noted that a huge part of our media is about the Idiot Plot: stories about a few people who save the world because everyone else, all of society, are a bunch of idiots, if not evil. It's not just suspicion of authority, he noted it's socially corrosive as we see everyone as part of a kind of Planet Of The Morons.

(Except us, we're the smart ones, right?)

Brin's article is well worth reading. I'm not going to go over it here because he did a great job and I can't do it justice.

I am going to address the issue as a matter of worldbuilding, because the Planet of Morons, the Idiot Plot, kills good worldbuilding.

I Itch, But Why?

We've all experienced a strange feeling when we've read a book or played a game, that realization that most of the cast is *stupid*. Something is off, everyone seems dumb; the resolution becomes unbelievable because it's pulled off by two people and their pet merchandisable sidekick. Saving the world is in the hands of just a few people, but how did it ever end up in so few hands in the first place?

Of course, in real life, society works due to complex series of groups, organizations, supply chains, and more. Right now I'm pretty sure you can summon an ambulance, get a pizza delivered, and ensure a fire is put out. Right now, for many people in the first world, it's amazing what *doesn't* go wrong.

But somehow when our worlds get built and our stories get told, it seems everyone's an idiot except a few main characters with great teeth.

Let's face it, when the excrement hits the air circulation device, the idea that only eight people are going to be there to save the day seems a little weird. It itches at the back of our heads because it doesn't *work*. We accept it, but there's this bit of irritation. It's *wrong*.

It seems wrong because unless your story is one of society and the world falling apart, then things are probably running decently. Not perfectly, not nicely, but functionally . . .

. . . until the story starts, then everyone's dumb. Everyone who made the world work and saved it before is suddenly stupid and it's up to the conveniently sized cast. That world you built stops when the story begins.

Where Is Everyone?

The other bothersome thing about the Idiot Plot is the simple question: how did the world saving suddenly come down to a few chuckleheads? Where the hell is everyone else when the aliens invade, dragons attack, or Morthroth the Demon Lord arises in the Eight Moon? Suddenly everyone turns into screaming extras in a Godzilla movie – and not even one of the *good* ones.

Apparently, dumb is contagious, and it moves faster than light *and* travels backward in time to create retroactive stupid.

In real life, we're used to a lot of people Getting Stuff Done. We're also used to hearing about it when they don't get done. We're not just here in a working society, when something breaks everyone raises hell because they want it to work. We don't sit around waiting for someone to fix it (unless it's the repairman).

(This is not just media but politics, where politicians sell themselves as heroes and downplay the competency of others.)

In any realistically made world, the maintaining of social and physical order is almost certainly going to be functioning pretty well – again, not perfectly or even pleasantly, but any working society by definition works. When things break, is everyone among thousands – millions perhaps – suddenly dumb except for the people who happen to be in the “story”?

This doesn't happen in our world. This shouldn't happen in fictional ones except in extreme cases.

Down To Heroes And Villains

This is when your heroes and villains get unbelievable. Because the world falls apart, they're either causing it or solving it nearly single-handedly. Anyone that pauses to think about it will feel the disconnect, and be yanked out of your creation.

The heroes are unbelievable because, really, where is everyone? Is it really down to this conveniently sized cast? Is everyone else on vacation? Yes, that may happen, but at least figure out *why*.

Meanwhile, in the Idiot Plot, the villains are unbelievable as well because somehow they threaten so much without anyone attempting to mitigate it *except* the heroes. How did the villains get to be who they are? Who else is trying to stop them? How can they do this all on their own?

This raises the question if your setting contains so many morons, how did anyone get raised smart enough to be a threat to the world or a become person to save the day? Which alone, could generate quite a story, but still, that's probably not the point.

The Familiar Glare Of The Radiant Stupid

By now some of this probably looks familiar – it's our twin dangers of Omnicompetence and Unholy Fools combined. The main cast is either amazingly talented, or unbelievably successful despite their massive flaws. Everyone else can't save the day (or threaten the world) yet someone they managed to survive this long without killing themselves with stupid.

The Idiot Plot seems to encourage Unholy Fools and Omnicompetent characters. I'd go as far to say that these phenomena are linked. If you have a Planet of Idiots, you need someone capable of saving them all – or a really fortunate idiot. Either way, it's hard to credit.

By now you're probably looking at your own works and those of others and wondering if they have the Idiot Plot. I can say it's a bit of a shocking experience, because you can see how prominent this idea is, and how wrong it is. You also realize how this diminishes a work and what it can accomplish.

It also makes me thankful for media where it doesn't happen or where it's been corrected.

Stay Vigilant

The Idiot Plot is something I'd stay vigilant against. It's too easy to decide everyone is stupid or evil and then just have powerful heroes battling powerful villains (or even the society that's just so dumb) while slack-jawed observers watch on. It is a common trope and one that betrays good worldbuilding – as well as being boring and insulting.

Of course, this then brings up questions of how you write your heroes and villains – and as always, I'd note it's picking a viewpoint. The stories that fascinate us are ones about characters, so find whose viewpoint tells the most interesting tale of the goings-on; not the people who fix everything, but the people who fix enough to be interesting.

Now in the case of a game where the goal is to affect the environment, it's probably a bit easier to just have the player change everything. In some games your character is more of an abstract controller, such as military and 4x games. You'll need to make careful calls as both a worldbuilder and game creator to find what mechanics work – and what kills the worldbuilding.

But of course once you realize this trope, think of the fun you can have identifying it and fixing it . . .

Beyond The Planet Of The Morons

Last section I noted how David Brin had gotten me discussing the idea of the Idiot Plot or the Planet Of Morons – the idea that hero(es) are the only things saving the world, which is also corrupt and stupid and probably doesn't deserve saving.

The problem with this plot is it degrades society and degrades the characters and the world. It makes the heroes stupidly unbelievable; it makes the villains shallow or uninteresting; it makes the world improbable. It encourages us to look down on our fellows and internalize deceptive ideas. In short, it's dumb and inaccurate, and psychologically toxic when it's everywhere.

I'd like to expand on this a bit more by looking at how we can get over the Idiot Plot/Planet of the Morons. We can do this and still tell interesting tales, find heroes, find villains, and have something worth experiencing. We just need a shift of perspective.

First, let's get to the heart of the matter.

The Core Truth

The core truth of combining good writing and good worldbuilding is to make sure your cast is essentially made of the best people to tell the story. As your world and characters flesh out, you make sure that you've got the right cast to tell your tale, make your game, etc.

You can develop your world and then find the best cast to tell the tale in it. You could have some initial narrative choices, and you should review these as you build the world to make sure they work. Either way, it's back to "Lenses."

Now let's look at some "Lenses" you'll be writing about, and focus on heroes and villains (since a heroic/villainous focus is often when we go off the rails into the Idiot Plot).

Focus On The Hero(es)

To refer to earlier sections, the best truly heroic "hero" in your book is probably someone who:

- 1) Has the most believable influence on the positive outcome.
- 2) Has the best perspective on the situation so they exercise #1.

There may be multiple heroes. They may see things at different times. You might have to switch perspectives. You may have to fudge the narrative a bit to get them together in the right way, or in a believable manner. But those two rules help you make sure your heroes are really heroes – and good characters to tell the story.

They also open up opportunities. The guy that makes the vaccine against the alien bioweapon and the two-fisted grunt who delivers it are both heroes, and their interaction could be fascinating. Maybe a "secondary" hero is so good at providing perspective that they tell the tale (Dr. Watson, anyone?). These two traits could lead to a plethora of realizations, plot, and character opportunities.

Let's Be Bad

Now as for the villains. The best villain is someone who:

- 1) Has the most believable influence on the negatives of the situation.
- 2) Has the most invested in the negative outcome (this is not always the case, but I find it more true than not).

Note that the villain doesn't have to be "evil" here, or think of themselves as evil. They are just invested in and causing whatever adversity is going around.

Now to make things easier, here are a few models I use that don't involve Planet Of Morons to explain the hero/villain thing.

Some Things To Try

Want more interesting heroes without having to turn your world into a planet of idiots? Look for (or create) these characters:

- **Right Person, Wrong Place** – A great hero is one who is the right person (skilled, etc.) to cope with whatever adversity comes up. A lot of real-life heroes are like this – you don't often know you were the "good guy" until after.
- **Get The Band Together** – Often it's a legion of people making things happen, so maybe your tale or game is an ensemble cast.
- **Ready And Possibly Willing** – If adversity approaches, someone may be groomed to be the hero. They also have supporting heroes in those that made them what they are.
- **Sliding Saviors** – It may not be the heroes all work together, but each has a role to play in fixing things. Maybe your narrative hands off between them, or you have an evolving group of protagonists. That combines easily with other models.
- **This Is My Story** – If there is no major hero but many, pick a good "lens" and look at one of the people making things work. Perhaps you scale back from a global story and tell it from one perspective, one "part" of the heroism.
- **We're The Legion** – Sometimes a group of people are trained/made into heroes, such as a military unit. This is a great chance to have an ensemble, a hero (the leader or a specific member of the team), or slide between the two.

Figuring out who the villain is in your tale? Here's who you should look out for:

- **Wrong Person, Right Place** – Maybe the villain is someone taking advantage of a situation. The power is there, they got to take it, and problems start.
- **I Am Trouble** – A series of events (trauma, war, medical experiments, poor upbringing) end up creating someone specifically meant to create trouble (even if it wasn't the intent).
- **Top Of The Creep Heap** – There's always people conspiring together for good or bad. One of the bad ones may come to the top and be the villain by default – they're the leader of a band of a-holes. They may not cause all the problems, but can be a pretty good central villain.
- **For Love Of Evil** – Maybe out of the band of people messing things up, one person is the most interesting to explore and study, if there's a "bad guy point of view."
- **Down The Spiral** – In a case of a real meltdown-type situation, it may be that there are plenty of people who are villains, and it's hard to say who the bad guy is. A post-apocalyptic or conspiracy story may fit this.

Note that none of these ideas require the world to be dumb, or in cahoots with evil, nor the hero to be some Omnicompetent amazing person. It's just a perspective that fits your setting designs, your world, and the right people.

Worth A Thought

I find these various viewpoints useful because they make you think about writing, about people, and about setting. In turn, you become both a better writer and worldbuilder. You may even learn to understand our world better as you contemplate fictional ones.

A good world is a giant, whirling thing with all parts fitting together in an amazing ballet. It spins stories constantly if you make it well. Then you get the painful thrill of deciding how to relate them.

But when you think about who the hero really is, and who the villain really is, you get to know the world better and often surprise yourself as well as the readers. And that's always worth it.

Oh, and your story doesn't resort to an annoying trope that can go die in a fire. Which is good.

Good Places, Bad Places

Welcome To Utopia!

Let's talk Utopias in the worlds you make.

Utopias seem to be less popular in fiction of all kinds (at least as of 2016). Sure we've got plenty of dystopias; it seems that there's always a fire sale on at the Life Sucks Dystopia Department Store. But Utopias, we don't see them very often.

Sometimes your worldbuilding is going to involve Utopias, or at least Utopia lite. I'd like to address how to design good utopias, but first a little detour into just why I don't think we see them.

A Lack Of Paradise

As noted, I don't see a lot of Utopian fiction outside of a few books, tracts, and philosophical/religious writing. I'd like to present my theories on that lack because it will help you out as a worldbuilder.

Note these are *my* theories and experiences, and I admit their limitation. Thus I'm not trying to construct a straw man, and though you might have a whiff of hay, I don't expect my ideas to go help a nice girl and her dog get back to Kansas.

So I think we don't see many Utopias in fiction or worldbuilding because:

- Utopias are seen as boring and most fiction is based on some kind of conflict or change. I argue that poorly created Utopias are boring, which is really . . .
- Because most people are terrible at visualizing a better world, at writing about it, or both. I suspect many potential writers of Utopian fiction are probably busier trying to bring Utopia about than anything else.

- Much Utopian fiction is about the Utopian vision and not the people in it – and thus the characters are unbelievable. Someone's got an idea in their head, but the inhabitants are automatons and stereotypes and aren't interesting.
- Some Utopian writing is massively agenda-driven, leading to poor writing because an agenda is not a tale. When you've got a political screed written as a story, everyone notices except the people it's designed to appeal to.
- Finally, due to the above issues, I don't think Utopian worlds are seen as having market appeal. That's when the commercial aspect comes in.

There's only so much you can say about what not to do, so let's move on from warnings. I think there are reasons to create Utopias in fiction, games, and world-settings. So now that I've talked about why it doesn't work, let's talk why we should explore Utopias as worldbuilders.

Why Make Utopia?

Why do I suggest you shrug off the naysayers and the worry that a Utopian setting may be seen in a negative light?

First, because in some cases it works and is needed. Your setting, or part of your setting, may involve a positive civilization and society. If that fits, then you should embrace it, as opposed to finding ways to make it "less so" just because Utopias are uncommon or poorly implemented. If you shy away from your inspiration, you'll just limit yourself.

Secondly, because being able to speculate on functional settings and societies makes you a good worldbuilder. Any extreme, unusual, and ultimately unexpected setting is going to really stretch you and make your world more interesting. More so because Utopian writing is rare, as noted.

Third, because I think a goal of creative people is to help us imagine differently. If you can imagine something despite the barriers – imagine a believable Utopia – that's inspiring. Maybe you'll inspire others.

Admittedly, you could also end up being a good bad example, but that is a kind of success.

So let's assume you're throwing off the fear of actually making your setting positive. How do you go about building a believable Utopia?

Building A Utopia In Your Setting

Let's get to it: why should building a more ideal place in your setting be any different than making any other setting?

Really, I think most barriers to Utopia creation are due to cultural baggage, much of it noted earlier. We spend too much time not doing things because we think they shouldn't be done. Maybe a Utopia isn't the point of your writing, but if you find yourself creating one, then so what? Go for it.

However, it's not always easy for people, so here's a few bits of advice cobbled together over the years from my own experiences and helping others:

- A functional civilization/setting is a conscious one. You have to ask how people set their goals and achieved them – and the repercussions of said goals. Utopia is an action.
- Just because a Utopia is a happy place doesn't mean it had happy origins. Sometimes the price for Utopia is paid in sorrowful ways, or with terrible deeds not admitted.
- To maintain a positive and functional setting, you need to know how it is maintained (or was maintained if things start falling apart).

- A highly functional setting is almost certainly one of high awareness in order to maintain it. Then again, if there's a lack of awareness, or shadowy forces set it up, then you may have a story where the Utopia is part of a much larger picture.
- A Utopia may not always seem so to others on the outside. There are always tradeoffs or things that may seem odd to outsiders. Utopia involves a point of view.
- A Utopia needs a strong "passing of the torch" to ensure it continues. Thus there's going to be some kind of communication, education, succession, etc. to make sure it keeps going.
- Good times don't have to last forever, but I think believable Utopias are resilient. Merely ask yourself how many disasters you've see in the news that would have been devastating if not mitigated by functional emergency response or emergency management. Now imagine that on the scale of your setting – which may be a world or a galaxy.
- If it is large enough, not everyone will know how the Utopia runs, which could be a good plot point.

So in short, I'd suggest a Utopian setting may be created (or may evolve) in a situation where people with goals and awareness consciously create a society. Now maybe they created it "around" another society, or there's something behind the scenes, but that's part of the larger setting.

Things To Avoid

Here are some warning flags to make sure your Utopia is interesting and believable as opposed to an embarrassing disaster. It's time for a few negative warnings.

- Not everyone is going to be happy. There are always differences among people, so there will almost certainly be those that are dissatisfied, if only temporarily.

- Happiness isn't weakness – a lack of maintaining the Utopia is. Utopia doesn't mean people won't protect it.
- It's unlikely any functional Utopia will have a weak leader/leadership/management structure. Utopia takes work. However, the power involved may not always be obvious . . .
- Utopias don't have to be pacifistic, and depending on setting, probably can't be.
- Single point of failure. In general (but that depends on your setting), the Big Thing That Ends the Happy is a bad plot contrivance. As a functional society requires resilience, it's probably going to be built into the society, so a single point of failure may come off as unbelievable. Think carefully.

Moving To Utopia

So, go on, unleash your inner worldbuilder and make Utopias if it really fits what you're doing. Just make sure you make it part of good worldbuilding, and keep the above advice in mind.

Oh, and I wouldn't call it a Utopia, since it's a loaded word to many.

On the other hand, Dystopia is a world people love to throw around, and we'll get to that next!

Dystopia Time!

Previously I discussed Utopias. They're not always popular, often poorly done, and are best handled by doing real worldbuilding first. Seeking to force a Utopia into your world tends to be about as successful as forcing it in real life.

If you don't get that joke, please avoid any participation in politics until you do.

So now we'll talk their opposite, Dystopias. You know how those go – they're awful, terrible, and explore the darker parts of human nature. A few even roll post-apocalyptic into the Life Sucks Stew for a complete course of misery.

While Utopias don't seem to be that popular for a variety of reasons I covered, it seems that a lot of settings I see these days (as of 2017) are Dystopias. Perhaps it'll change, but I'm not counting on that any time soon, which means if you're building a good Dystopia, you want to get it right and avoid common traps and tropes. You're going to be competing with a lot of other people building their own fictional hellscape.

Dystopia-A-Go-Go

I often ask why Dystopias are so popular in fiction, and why they were so popular when I wrote this book. It's enough to make one worry about what kind of world we're leaving behind if this many people think we'll mess it up. It's also enough to make a potential Dystopia creator wonder if the misery market is a bit tapped out.

But, if a Dystopia you must build, let's look at why people seem to like them in their fiction:

- Conflict and challenge are important to getting interest in fiction, so worldbuilding with a Dystopia means instant conflict – and instant interest.
- Dystopias appeal to people's morbid curiosity. When you see something horrible, you wonder how bad it can get. It's the social equivalent of “smell how rotten the milk really is.”
- Dystopias appeal a sense of mystery since there's always the question of "how come this is so awful?" People want to know *why*.
- People may have trouble visualizing a better world, but can easily visualize a bad one. They may thus find Dystopias more believable.
- Dystopias seem more believable to people because of real-world examples – human history has had quite a few terrible societies.
- That set of historical examples provides plenty of material to use in building Dystopias, so you have a pretty big construction set. Probably one far larger than we'd like.
- Dystopian settings may be seen or portrayed as "more realistic" because of the above examples – and the strange tendency in Western culture to believe "dark" is "realistic" or "mature."

Finally, there is one thing that distinguishes Dystopias from Utopias. Both may be written with agendas, but the above-mentioned factors may make the Dystopia easier to believe. It may even be welcome because it came in a "mature" manner (in short as part of a horrible setting that some may see as realistic).

Now this popularity and these inclinations may make it easier to create a Dystopia and make it part of your setting, your game, your book, etc.

That's the problem.

A Warning On Dystopia

Because Dystopias are so popular and common, it's actually easier to make bad ones. When something is common and popular, it's easier to just slap something together knowing you have an audience. So here's a few warnings to keep in mind if you want to make a Dystopia in your setting.

- Dystopias are easy to do because there are so many in literature. It may be tempting and easy to make one for no good reason.
- Dystopias are tempting as people see them as "realistic." That temptation can lead you to taking your setting in a dark direction, believing it's realistic when it may be anything but.
- There are so many accepted tropes on Dystopias that it's all too easy to pile a few together and call it a day. That's not worldbuilding, obviously.
- Dystopias can conceal agendas that you're accidentally working into the story. Readers/players may detect them easily while you may not see them, combining embarrassment with poor worldbuilding.
- People are so used to Dystopias they may not call out the flaws in yours, at least until you've managed to humiliate yourself by making a bad one.

So now with these warnings, let's get to good worldbuilding (of bad worlds) by asking a question, and that question is . . .

Why Build A Dystopia?

The simple answer is to do it if it's appropriate – just like Utopias. Your world may even have Dystopias and Utopias in the same setting – a great city may have an impoverished area; a beautiful world may have an uninhabitable coast ravaged by storms. Do it when needed.

I'm no fan of the overload of Dystopias in media, but sometimes your setting and worldbuilding may lead you to conclude that "yeah, this part of the setting is going to be awful." Run with it – in fact, this is the best thing to do since you reached the conclusion by working it out.

There are also a few more reasons and advantages to building Dystopias.

First, I find that building a good Dystopia is a way to expand your worldbuilding skills. Making a good one as opposed to a pile of tropes is a real challenge. Extremes are educational.

If you can build a setting that is believably *terrible*, then you've really achieved something. Bad Dystopias are just as ridiculous and just as unbelievable as bad Utopias. Good ones? That's a challenge.

Secondly, Dystopias are interesting to examine – namely, how did something end up being so awful? This is always great fun to explore as a worldbuilder because you'll study and contemplate many things to get it just right (or wrong).

Finally, extremes are just fun to explore as a worldbuilder – good or bad, high-tech or low-tech, and so on. Building a Dystopia may be interesting (even if you never use it or all of it).

So if you decide it's time to make your setting an awful spectacle of misery, then what happens now? What should you do?

Putting Together Dystopia

If you're going to build a Dystopia, what do you do specifically?

Just like Utopia, you need to sit down and do some work and make a real setting. Good, bad, neutral, whatever, worldbuilding is *worldbuilding*, a creation of thinking things over, tying things

together, and figuring out how things work.

Your biggest barrier will likely be the tropes and cultural issues mentioned above. Don't take those for granted, because they seem to be bloody everywhere. Take it from an old geek, it's like those bad post-nuclear games and tales I saw over and over in the '80s – once people latch onto some popular form of terrible, it never ends.

Despite the many ways you can make a horrible-to-live-in setting, there's some general rules for good Dystopias.

- Dystopias can be created intentionally or unintentionally by people in your setting. It's important to ask how a dystopia came about and how conscious or unconscious it was. In a few cases, you're really writing post-apocalyptic stories, which may be another kettle of dead fish.
- A real Dystopia is identifiable – it has an identity and a duration that is not a transitory state. That's another distinction from post-apocalyptic settings, which often have a strong transitory element.
- A Dystopia, as terrible as it is, has to be sustainable for it to be identifiable and have duration. You'll have to figure out how such an unpleasant setting exists and maintains itself through resources, social cohesion, etc.
- Dystopias require you to explore the psychology of people in them. People may not be happy, but they're contributing to, maintaining, or at least not opposing the situation. Without that, how does a Dystopia persist being awful?
- Dystopias present the interesting question of how they react to change. Change may be embraced or resisted, but how does your terrible/unpleasant setting deal with it?
- Did the people making this society know what they were doing or not? How do those who maintain it now react to it?

Dystopias take some work to do. Good Dystopias are just about as difficult as building Utopias, in my opinion.

Go Build The Worst

Hopefully these warnings and guides will help you in creating lousy and horrible worlds for your characters/players.

I think having seen so many bad/derivative utopias, readers, and gamers and such want something that's really good. Applying good worldbuilding to Dystopias makes you a good worldbuilder – and gives people something they'll appreciate.

Even when it's awful. On purpose.

When Good And Evil Collide (Again)

We've talked Utopias, their rarity in fiction, and how and why to create them in our worlds. We've talked Dystopias, their commonality, and why to create them despite their near-omnipresence. Now let's talk what happens when good and bad meet in your world.

It's an area near to my heart because stories and games, tales and legends, are often written on the borders, the liminal spaces, the transitions of their worlds. When things cross over, that's when stories happen – a conflict or a difference is a chance for rich worldbuilding and storytelling.

So, let's start out with what often goes wrong when Light and Dark decide to unload a can of whoopass on each other.

I want to tell you about two kingdoms.

The Two Kingdoms

Imagine two kingdoms, good and bad, near each other. You know the story, because we've seen it a thousand times.

On this side, the nice, happy people. On the other side, the mean and oppressed.

On this side, the great place to live. On the other side, the horrific hellhole.

On this side, the good king. And on the other side, the bad king.

In the middle, we readers and writers and gamers wonder how the hell two groups sitting next to each other turn out so radically different. We're having trouble buying into the world because the contrast is so obvious, so blatant, almost contrived.

True, we may not care if we're looking for, say, a simple action game. But if we want something deeper, these extremes don't sit well with us. There's not even a middle ground between the two; there are just two extremes without logic or reason, somehow spawned in the same setting.

That's the problem with good and evil colliding – namely we start writing stereotypical good, stereotypical evil, and stereotypical collisions, but we're not actually creating a world. Instead we're tossing tropes at other tropes in a kind of trope dodgeball to see which trope wins. But the world doesn't “bring” them into being.

The problem with creating good-versus-evil is that we often start worldbuilding the *contrasts*, not the *world*.

The Dangers Of Contrast

When you create contrasting or conflicting elements in your world it's too easy to turn your setting into a battle of opposites. The thing is, there's no world for them to come from you're just trying to cram these opposites together. The world flies apart because there's no structure.

When we create conflicts in our world, it's very easy to let the contrasts become the setting as opposed to coming *from* it. Because we see the differences (or start with the differences), we don't build worlds, we throw things together. Our setting isn't alive because it's a pile of dead parts.

A few examples to show you how this happens:

- If you've ever been a fan of old films or literature (at least as of this writing in 2016), you'll remember how many characters smoked. That changed over the years, and as noted earlier, a friend of mine (who smoked) once bitterly complained that smoking had become the mark of the bad guys. Contrast had reigned in a small way, but he had a point.

- The "perversion pile-on." How many times do you see a villain or antagonist written as a walking pile of mental illness, questionable sexual habits, and so on? They eventually become unbelievable as you wonder how anyone could function and not die of multiple social diseases, a drug overdose, or liver failure.
- How many times are rebels the good guys? There's often that assumption in many a tale or game, despite the fact that real-life history has its share of rebel groups who are basically evil jerks. I recall a review of the game *FTL*, where the reviewer commented how odd it was to see the rebels as bad guys – it was *that* unusual.

Once you start getting into contrasts, the contrasts can take over worldbuilding. At that point good and evil, free and oppressed, functional and dysfunctional, all become shallow shadows and your world becomes unbelievable.

Creating Good Versus Evil

In creating good versus evil, of contrasting civilizations and individuals, it's important to go back to several truths of worldbuilding:

Everything happens for a reason. Your good guys, your Kingdom of Light, are there for a reason. So are the bad guys and the Empire Of Massive Oppression. They are both spawned from one parent – the larger setting. Focus on *why*.

Sustainability. Things have to last and exist for a reason – you're not exactly going to have the Hero defeat the Empire Of Starving Peasants because realistically he won't have to (unless someone is propping up the dysfunctional Empire). Sustainability and stability are needed or your good kingdom or evil imperium won't exist long enough for anything to happen. I find being aware of sustainability in settings helps mitigate extremes very well.

Perspective. History teaches us that people don't always realize what colossal a-holes they are, and nations, empires, and groups are the same way. This is vitally important in making things realistic and in both understanding the "why" of your setting and the sustainability of its elements. Maybe the Evil Kingdom is sustainable as, after once being invaded, the people there will do anything for stability and protection.

Direct conflict is not inevitable. Many nice people, good folks, and benevolent nations have happily put up with evil and bad folks, or even secretly worked with enemies. Good and Evil don't always collide, sometimes they strike a deal and hold hands under the table for a while, because . . .

Conflict itself is inevitable. Conflict among different groups is often inevitable simply because goals don't align. Temporary alliances will fray – and many are temporary. A look at history will tell you how often this happens – and that also helps you spot when conflict happens in your story. Sure the Benevolent Solar Empire and the Tyrant of Pluto struck a deal, but neither truly trusts the other, so at some point . . .

There are more than two sides to every story. The why and how of things is always a bit more complex than they seem. Explore your settings and characters, even the evil and foul ones; make them believable, and you'll learn a lot. It makes a good world, good tales – and any conflicts that do evolve – much the richer.

The Big Truths – And One Caveat

There are two truths to take away for handling the collision of good and evil in your world.

The first big truth is, as always, that your world should be created and crafted. Making it out of tropes creates a false setting, a kind of Potemkin village of the soul.

The second big truth is that we enjoy and think in contrasts. That's part of being human and of our systemic thinking. This can cloud our judgement.

I'd like to address this thinking in contrast a bit more.

In the hands of some talented authors and in the appropriate stories, vast contrasts can work. Maybe you really are doing a four-color comic world, or something full of legendary archetypes. Sometimes tropes and contrasts are the goal of what you're doing, they're archetypical.

But you need to use contrasts with your eyes open. Then you can work this into your world design, and make sure it's properly explored.

So there is a room for contrasts – consciously used. But good world design will make sure that they're believable and understandable. If these kind of archetypical creations are not appropriate, they're best avoided.

Closing

When Good and Evil collide, make sure you know why it's a head-on accident, a fender-bender, or a near miss. Good worldbuilding and a broad perspective can do this, but it needs to be combined with good self-awareness so you don't fall into tropes and pointless contrast.

Purposeful and conscious contrast, on the other hand, can be used by the appropriately talented worldbuilder, but only when appropriate.

Otherwise, it's just a pile of stuff.

Normalcy And Probability

The Odds And Statistics

I'm not quite Han Solo. You don't have to tell me the odds, but when there's a fictional setting I'd like to have an idea of what they are. I want to know what's likely and not likely, what's a majority and a minority – there's a human instinct to understand these things.

When we play a game or read a story, we need to know the odds of things. If it's unlikely someone can survive a fight with ten well-armed Knights of The Singularity, when they win it makes us wonder *how*. If someone is ethnically and racially different than we expect in a game world, the impact of that difference is felt if we understand what it means. Probability is something that we need to understand and enjoy a fictional world.

So the odds or statistics, of your world are something you need to think over and decide. If you don't, then you may be in for some problems, as you don't know how your world works – and neither will your audience.

Let's talk about the odds, how to use them – and how not to overuse them – in worldbuilding.

Odds And Ends And Beginnings

In your world, there are percentages of people in a profession, chances for success and failures, things that change over time, and so on. Your world really is a collection of odds and potentials, of likely won't be's and will be's.

You need to know these chances in order to build your world, tell your story, make your game, or whatever. In all likelihood you're doing this already, but let me make it conscious with a little bluntness.

THE BLUNT PART: You need to know the odds and/or distributions of important things in your world so your world and storytelling methods are believable. If you don't know them, your audience can't even intuit them and your world is harder to believe.

You don't need to know the annual economic output of every kingdom (unless you're into that). But it'd help to know the chance of hyperdrive malfunction. Or what percentage of the population is Wood Elf versus Dark Elf, and what that means. In short, the basic odds of what's going on.

Why?

- 1) Major elements of your world revolve around the odds of things and distributions of elements. If someone is a cyborg in a world where cyborgs make a small percentage of a population, then their rising to prominence will be noteworthy. Your readers/players will feel that impact if they have an idea of the odds.
- 2) These are reminders to you. Knowing the basic odds and likelihoods is a reminder of how to write people, settings, characters, combat, etc. If you remember a Fusion Disruptor Halberd is a weapon that most people hurt themselves with, you'll remember to include that in the story – from remarking on an amazing victory to having someone hurt themselves in a new and imaginative manner.
- 3) Knowing the statistical chances and distributions of your world makes you think. Having to evaluate the odds helps with #1 and #2.
- 4) Odds act as firewalls to bad ideas. Knowing the odds of things in your world keeps you from being tempted by inappropriate ideas, tropes, and so on that may take you outside of the bounds of your setting.

Now you don't have to figure out every single little odd or know every statistic. You just need to know what's important.

Useful Odds And Helpful Statistics

So let's talk the odds of things you may want to know in your world. Here are some important areas of probabilities, odds, and statistics you'll want to define for your world.

Economics. This may be as simple as knowing which Kingdom is richer than the other, or how many tons of metal is shipped off-world each day. Economics is part of many tales, even if we don't see it, so knowing economic basics of your settings is helpful.

Demographics. Distribution of age, races, species, education, genders, and so on has vast effects on any setting. If your world's setting has an aging population and few births, that affects your setting. If a war killed off specific populations, that affects your settings. A *lot* of a setting is demographics.

Experiences. On a personal level, a person has a chance to be this ethnicity, have this education, and so on. Knowing how the demographics translate to personal experiences helps you write characters better. Frankly, it's hard to separate the two, but I call them out due to scale.

Abilities. What percentage of a population has certain knowledge? How many people can use magic? The abilities and information people have in your setting defines a large part of it. Ignorance can lead to the downfall of a country or company; rare knowledge may save someone when all else fails.

Physical Setting. What percentage of land is farmable? How far away is the dungeon? How many warships can fit through a wormhole? The basic odds and numbers of your setting, from the weather to the known limit on a Hyperspace gate, are all important.

Again, it all comes down to asking questions, but with some math involved.

Of course you know the math, but the people in your setting may or may not be in the same boat.

Characters And The Odds

Ever do something you thought you couldn't? Or discover you were wrong about the odds something would work? Of course you have.

The characters in your setting are in the same boat. They are viewpoints on your world, and those viewpoints may be quite wise or radically misinformed. They may or may not know the odds, or may be completely wrong about them.

So when you figure out the odds and probabilities in your world, you have to know how your characters perceive them, and that is almost certain to be imperfectly. You have to code them or write them that way – as more ignorant than you.

After all, if they knew everything, there might not be much of a tale – unless of course that is your tale.

Besides your characters don't need to know everything going on. A wizard may not care about percentage of arid farmland.

Your Audience And The Odds

Your Audience, on the other hand, should never see the odds, the statistics, and the demographics unless appropriate.

If it's a game world you're making, it may be appropriate (though I'd love to see RPGs with a bit more ambiguity around the math). If a character is a statistician or an economist, it makes sense for them to talk about odds in a tale. But if you go too far telling your audience the odds, then you affect their ability to experience the world and tales in it.

Talking odds and percentages pulls away the curtain or exposes the viscera of your setting. It may be informative, but it distracts from what's going on. Seeing the math in the wrong perspective can take you out of the world and make you realize it's a construct.

You as a worldbuilder and as a person telling a world's tale have to figure how to communicate this. That's up to you.

So Onward And Oddward

So, know the odds. Get an idea of what's going on. How much is kind of up to you, but it's important to start.

I do recommend writing these things down in a worldbuilding record. It lets you refer to them, review them, and in a few cases, decide when not to talk about them or which character has them radically wrong.

In short, show don't tell, unless it's appropriate for what you're doing.

But be sure to know, even if you don't show.

Normal

So we discussed the odds of things in your world, now let's talk about the odds that are the most important thing in your world: what's normal.

In fact, I'm going to tell you that what your stories are about, your world and everything about it, is about what's *normal*. No matter how freaky your character or strange your plot is, *normal* is what's important.

The Importance Of Normal

Normal in your world is what is reliable and predictable. Gravity works, rain falls, and Dz'orgak the demon lord is made from the blood of the Fallen God which is why every ruby gem is his eye spying on your sins. Normal are those truths that your world rests on as sure as we rely on the sun rising.

Enormous amounts of worldbuilding and tales inside those worlds rely on a grounding of *normal*. Roadways that are reliable, swords made of metal, reproductive biology that ensures species go on, and so forth. Normal is what you can count on so you can build a world; it is the foundation of your world and of the audience's experiences.

If there's no sense of normal, then the world itself becomes meaningless. Now in a few cases this might be your point. But in general, worldbuilding is about building – making something. A foundation has to be there or nothing you've created will make sense.

Even if your world is weird to us, having its own kind of normal means we can understand it, relate to it, and thus believe and enjoy it. It just may be a rather *odd* normal.

Weird Needs Normal

This normalcy is important not just to provide a believable world but to help people relate to what goes on in it, which are often anomalous events and characters.

Tales often deal with exceptions to the normal because stories are often about deviations from norms (or supposed norms). If there's no deviation, not much may actually happen in your stories. This deviation could be as big as a war among galaxies or as small as a quirky set of characters in a new coffee shop. However, the normal of your world provides the grounding to tell others what the abnormal *means* – and abnormal is almost always what you're writing about.

Some characters specialize in the abnormal – the policeman who investigates crimes, the warrior who fights invaders, the psychologist who deals with insanity. There's a reason we love stories with people like that – they're interesting because something happens to them. They try to restore normal (or find a new one) and that's what their story is about.

Normal lets you understand just what the abnormality you're often writing about means – sort of a normal abnormal. If you don't know normal, these anomalies become nonsensical or worse, "inappropriately normal."

Going Away From Normal To Get Back To Normal

Knowing the normal of your world is also important to understand events and stories that take place in it. Most people's travails, most tales, most great wars and small quests, are either seeking a return to normal or a new normal. Normal is also a "goal" of people to get to, even if normal only exists in their head for a time.

This “goal normal” may not be possible, or desirable, or realistic. The normal a character or a culture may seek could be a complete delusion. What is important is understanding the role of normal in

a character's life and in the happenings of a world – even when normal turns out to be a bad idea.

The True Normal And A Character's Normal

Knowing what's normal in your setting helps you understand character motivations and expectations. What characters want, seek, and do depends on their expectations of what's normal and what should be normal. This will define much of their activities, both conscious and unconscious.

Of course characters may have an inaccurate ideal of normal, as noted. How many times in history have we seen people long to return to "normal," when their idea of normal was a self-deceptive mix of nostalgia and ignorance? How many do we see now? How many may be in your setting?

There's normal and then there's the normal in people's heads. We need to understand what our characters expect to be normal to bring them to life. We need to understand what normal is in the world to bring it to life. These normals may not always line up.

Characters may just not understand “real” normal or want to. If your universe is one of magic and a scientific civilization refuses to admit this, then you may know normal, but the characters don't. That's quite a tale to tell, yet the story is ignoring normalcy.

You need to know what's normal. Your characters may not – which of course is part of things you'd be writing on.

Audiences And Normal

Your audience will need a set of normal expectations to understand your work – often a tricky business when you're creating a crazy world. As noted earlier, people have a natural sense of odds and likelihood, and in turn, of normalcy. They're going to look for it right off the bat in your story – or project their own ideas of normal.

Audiences can usually sense if your world has some "normal" in it. We're good at finding coherence in settings, and if your world doesn't have rules and its own normal, people will pick up on it. They may not care or they may not need much "normal" to figure things out ("magic works, wizards blow stuff up a lot" might be enough), but they need *something*. If you don't give that to them, the world will lack meaning to them.

The challenge is to communicate what's normal in your setting without over-explaining or giving people the wrong idea of what's normal (unless that's part of a deliberate reveal). That requires some crafting of your story or game to do it right.

In this case, I find empathy is the best guide. Put yourself in place of your audience and ask what they'd need to see and know to grasp the world (or for you to deceive them for a big reveal). This is also where pre-readers and testers help.

To communicate normal you'll need to know what's normal in your worlds. So one of the most important ways to let your audience into your world is to have normal all set up.

Knowing Normal

So how do you know your normal in your world?

We usually build "normal" into our worlds by instinct. You can't have a coherent setting without some rules and norms. In fact, to try and make your setting weird enough for your goals, you may have to actively make it stranger than intended.

You should focus on understanding what is the norm in your world. Much like when I discussed the odds, we should spend some time analyzing what is normal and expected in the world. Even if we never use it directly, it helps us build the world and makes this knowledge instinctive.

Here's a quick guide to the normals to look for:

- **The Reality Normal.** What is the nature of reality? Hard science? Everything has magic in it? What does this mean for your setting (if anything)? The answer may be “actual physical laws, next question” but at least you thought about it.
- **The Setting Normal.** What are the norms of your setting or settings? Droughts or snow, trees or desert, houses here and there or coffee shops on every corner? This helps you build the setting, and understand how characters and cultures interact with it. If your setting has a lot of desert, the norm is "dry" and the norm is also going to be finding water.
- **The Culture Normal.** What is the normal for the cultures that characters are in, the expectations, ideas, and language? There will be both the "norms" of the culture and the normal parts of the culture, what is expected and what is common. This normal is the one that will influence character perspectives – and character ignorance.
- **The Personal Normal.** What are a character's own experiences, understandings, and so on – and how normal are they? A character may be utterly average (dare I say normal) with one outstanding trait. A character's experiences may differ radically from others, which could make them seem disconnected or perhaps make them wiser.

These norms are all going to play into each other. If you have a culture that values honesty and assumes men are violent, a male character who is a calm master of disguise and deception will challenge people in that world. His friends may wonder if he can maintain his composure while incognito. His activities will lead others to mistrust him. “Normal” becomes the foundation of a fascinating story.

Think Normal

In worldbuilding, you need to know not just the odds, but what's normal – and be sure to put “normals” in your worldbuilding notes. That'll remind you of what should happen – or remind you in case it's time for things to get abnormal.

Conflict And Breakdown

It Comes Apart: People And Conflict

For the next few sections I'm going to be exploring dysfunctions and conflicts in the worlds we create. Not conflicts brought about by our mistakes as worldbuilders (those come later), but what happens when things break down as part of the setting. When things go wrong inside our settings, we have to figure out the implications of the crises we create.

As I'll repeat, conflict is actually part of the process of making a world accessible and interesting. People want to hear stories and play games about things that happen, and that often involves conflict. Not always, of course, but often enough that it warrants its own section here.

Everyday conflicts are one thing – arguing over a tab, not being able to find dragon dung at the alchemist's shop, and so on. I'll talk about the big conflicts, the ones that are epic, the ones we write about, and the ones in real life that make us wonder how they happened.

So let's go and find out just how things break down and go wrong. We'll start with how it stays together in the first place, and how our cast of characters and people keep it together. After all, they'll be the ones you're writing about or your players are playing.

But they could also be the ones causing the problems . . .

A Balanced Mind

A challenge in creating conflict in a setting is that it's too easy to break things into good guys and bad guys, which doesn't have to be the case (and in real life, rarely is). Good guys and bad guys may not always be obvious, or seem obvious at the beginning or the end. How do we write conflict without falling into simplistic thinking, or just sod it all and have a fight?

Fortunately, I have a model for that.

Something that deeply influenced me as a person and a writer was a book. Back in college (in the 1980's), I read a book called *Maps of the Mind* by Charles Hampden-Turner, which synthesized various ideas of the mind into diagrams. A major emphasis of the theories and the book was how the mind seeks balance and how it can spin out of control and do horrible things when it is imbalanced.

We always wonder how can someone nice or normal go and do awful things? How do murders and wars happen when seemingly healthy people are behind them? Why, when we dig for the source of evil, do we often find banality?

The answer is that people's minds spin out of control.

A healthy person's value system is self-correcting and self-adjusting, as is a healthy society's. We adapt and learn, our values align and realign, our communities adapt, our societies adapt. They may not adapt in the best or most ideal ways, but they do. Think of it almost like a wheel turning smoothly and running fine, if occasionally wobbly.

But something can unbalance us as people, or a community, or a nation. It can be a bit of insanity, an economic issue, an anger that festers in the right conditions, or an external manipulation. Suddenly *something* dominates our thoughts, and our value system becomes co-opted to become part of that obsession. If others warn us, we just decide they're against us. If we do horrible things, we desperately try to justify them.

The wheel wobbles and shudders, like a weight is stuck to the rim – the obsession.

Maybe in a few cases this obsession even makes sense – we have to throw everything we've got at a problem. But I think we can all speak from personal experience and history that it usually gets ugly when people get obsessed with one thing. Once a problem begins, once people get riled up, something easily goes wrong and then the horror begins.

The wheel goes round and round, our thoughts and our values co-opted to seek balance, as if we race hard enough, do enough, it'll all be normal, as if we go real fast that weight will magically fly off or vanish or we'll “catch up” to the right way to do things.

Naturally, a situation like this can't hold on a personal or a national level. If things don't calm down, the balance of mind or minds starts to crack. The wheel of the mind of the individual or a culture as a whole flies apart due to the velocity and imbalance.

This is where a small conflict becomes a big one, and disaster usually follows. It's when an argument over a treaty turns into a war, when an argument becomes ethnic cleansing, when a slight turns into a violent brawl. All too often things end up going to hell from something normal and banal that allows us to get out of kilter, rushing faster and faster, and ultimately watching it all collapse.

It just depends on how far the imbalance gets.

With this slightly long-winded description, you have a great idea for understanding conflict and when it can ramp up to insane levels. It's when things get out of control and imbalanced in your world, and your story is about the restoration of balance or finding a new one – or how everything falls apart.

Serious conflict is when something gets amplified to the point of insanity. This may seem sane to those inside the insanity who think they're fixing things or keeping everything running.

More Than People

This also applies to human beings of course, but you can apply it to human-like species in your setting. Does this apply to non-humans or human-like-but-different? That's probably a judgment call for you to make.

In cases of dealing with nonhumans, you'll want to think carefully how conflict affects them. This is because you might be using various "human defaults" that aren't appropriate, including this one. Different species, different minds.

Personally, I find this a great model. It's relatable because we've seen things go to hell.

Applying This Concept To Writing And Worldbuilding

As depressing as this concepts is, it's a great tool to apply to our worlds and what happens in them. I sum it up like this.

The human mind seeks balance, but it can become imbalanced when an obsession dominates the experience and co-opts ethical systems. This obsession spins out of control as balance is sought, and can lead to large conflicts, which rarely end until something stops them.

This concept can help you remember a few things:

- People don't just turn evil and do nasty stuff – there are reasons. These reasons usually involve a dysfunctional personal/social system that makes dysfunctions worth it in the short term. In the cases of the insane or of sociopaths, it may be a real core evil, but for many people it isn't. Review the imbalances that make the evil "evil" in your world.

- *Anyone* can spin out of control; it doesn't just happen to "bad" people. The heroes of your story could easily suffer from this, being on some great crusade they'll someday regret. Look for signs where characters are losing balance. This doesn't mean that you're doing it wrong, it means you've got something to flesh out in your worldbuilding.
- People unbalance *each other*. When one person or group goes into this imbalanced mode, others may follow. Some may listen to the imbalanced people. Others, by opposing them, may feed their obsession or become unstable themselves. Sometimes it's not "good versus evil" but various evils in conflict.
- Small conflicts can spawn much larger conflicts when things get unbalanced. In your worldbuilding, try and determine which "level" conflicts are on, and when they'll ramp up or scale down. Keeping this imbalance model in mind is helpful as you can figure out when things are about to go to crazytown.
- When people and societies get out of balance, the conflicts almost inevitably go too far. In your worldbuilding, remember your repercussions. This rule of balance helps you determine when things get messy – or too messy that the conflict can't continue.

I find this concept quite helpful in understanding conflicts, and I hope you do as well.

It Comes Apart: Conflicts And The World

There's a reason I covered humans (and human-likes) and the psychology of conflict first. Characters and their institutions are often the causes of conflicts, and characters are the lenses through which players/readers experience your world. Being able to think small helps you think large and tell your tales.

But what is it about these characters and institutions that lead to conflicts? What has to happen for these things to occur, and what should we look for in our worldbuilding to detect potential conflicts?

Again, it's often a matter of perspective. Which is the problem in fiction – and, come to think of it, in real life as well . . .

The Secret Ingredient Is Unhappiness

If you don't have people in your setting, there's no conflict. As soon as people are there, there's potential conflict.

A tsunami on an uninhabited world is "a thing," but on an inhabited one, it can be apocalyptic. For a worldbuilder, that's also a story to tell – the conflict of man versus nature. Adding people to a setting means there's a chance for conflict with that setting.

However, it's not just people (or whatever race you're writing) who can turn an occurrence into a conflict. People create conflicts with each other. That Tsunami can lead to not just man versus nature – but man versus man as people try to survive. Decades later people may still be fighting with each other over “who did what” after the Tsunami.

When something goes wrong for people, that's when conflict occurs. That something could be decades old, a festering slight, or a sudden incident.

Look at our "real" world, where an argument or an insult can lead to violence, where the actions of a few lead to war. It's not hard to come to the conclusion that, when people are involved, anything can expand into a conflict, from a punch-up to galactic genocide.

(Yes, assorted things can bring out the best in us, but that's not my focus right now.)

Conflict happens in the interaction of people with their setting and with each other.

It's important to remember this because unless you realize the participatory nature of conflict in your setting, then your conflicts are merely *invented*. They're not fleshed out in your world because they're not grounded in your characters and their experiences. Just deciding "hey, there's a war" isn't going to be real to your readers or players – it has to be grounded in the people in your setting, even if they're busy slaughtering each other.

How many wars against Generic Evil King and Faceless Galactic Empire do we need? Why do they exist? Was the King corrupted by magical fallout from previous experiments of an evil wizard? Is the Galactic Empire faceless because communications broke down because of solar flares, leaving it a soulless bureaucracy with a war machine?

What, in their world, led people to fight?

Place Plus People Means Pandemonium

Settings create and sustain your characters. They eat because of the sun and the rain and the plants (and perhaps Blurdgore, god of harvests). They breathe the air (or methane, or whatever). They

exist because of natural laws (or gods or magical fallout). They are not separate from their settings.

In turn, changes in the setting change things for them.

Food is less plentiful because of a drought (or Blurdgore's depression over his affair with Foroma, goddess of woodcraft). The air is polluted because of the fallout from industry. A new mineral vein appeals to patriotism to build a better technology – or greed to own it.

Much as the human (or human-like) mind is one that thrives with some balance, a balanced world means survival. Sure a few changes here and there may be good and beneficial, but the more radical a change, the more chance something is going to be radically altered. It could even be a good change, as anyone watching people fight over a windfall profit knows.

When that change hits people too hard or in the wrong way, conflict begins. That's when it's a vital part of your world – and a vital part of your story or game.

Famine means hard choices and conflicts. Pollution requires confronting issues – or avoiding them and letting the problem get worse. New resources can mean a mad dash to stake a claim and get an edge over others. A severe enough change – good or bad – can drive the population to conflict. That's the weight on the wheel I mentioned earlier.

You just have to figure out how far changes push people before things jump on the train to crisisville.

However, in theory, isn't your setting always changing? Stability is more dynamic homeostasis than anything else; the world is always altering, from seasons to arguments to weather. Doesn't this mean endless chances for conflict?

Yep. Especially when people are involved.

In many ways, your setting is probably filled with endless amounts of conflicts. They just don't seem very big or resolve themselves or don't make waves. Things are calm in total, but you could easily zoom in and see the little conflicts (in fact, a good worldbuilder can do just this).

Your epic tales and games are about ones that get kind of conflicts bigger than "what do I eat for breakfast" or "hauling in the town drunk" again. The epic tales (even if only epic for what they mean to one person), are ones where the setting and personal interests mean conflicts get exacerbated until they get interesting.

Admittedly, by interesting I mean "often ugly and bloody and action-filled," but you know what I mean. When the setting meets characters, there are times things get out of hand – or as we writers think of it, "you get a story."

But conflicts aren't forever. In fact, that desire to resolve them is part of your world and story.

The Endgame

Conflict is something people seek to resolve (even if the resolution is getting themselves away from it). A lot of conflict is people fighting about different resolutions to a problem. Those resolutions may be something like "killing every last damn orc in the province," but it is a resolution, though the orcs may have something to say about it.

Sometimes the conflict is due to people trying to solve another conflict, a kind of Mobius strip of misery.

Conflicts can't go on forever as people and resources tend to wear down – and people are often trying, however poorly, to resolve a conflict. That means, one way or another, there's an end coming – intentional or not.

Characters facing conflicts in your setting will probably have an endgame in mind, a goal to resolve this conflict. So what's their endgame? Well that's a formula brought about by what caused it – the setting and the people.

The setting defines what you have to do to end the conflict. Raise more food to eliminate famine (or get *Blurdgore* hooked up via the divine equivalent of a dating site). Clean up pollution. Kill the competition to get to the new mineral rights, etc.

People will also have their own backgrounds that affect solutions: their ethics, principles, goals, and their understandings. They will set goals based on their education, their biases, and their knowledge. These understandings may be exceptional, or they may be ignorant, and they may be very, very wrong.

Endgames may not actually be good ideas, but people will have them. A famine that could be solved by cooperation turns into a religious war. Pollution is ignored until it breeds plague. A devastating war starts over some natural resource that is destroyed in the process. Solutions may be very stupid when people look back on them, but at the time they seemed like a good idea.

Make sure characters in a conflict have an endgame in mind that is defined by the setting and themselves. The endgame *may* be completely stupid and insane, but it'll be there. Historical examples are way too easy to come by.

As for what "actually" resolves the conflict, well that could be anything from one smart character solving a problem, to a battle that leaves almost everyone dead so there are not enough people to have a conflict. That's up to you to figure out.

Developing A Nose For Conflict

When we build worlds, we build certain conflicts into them – past actions, coming plagues, etc. These are best re-analyzed as you build the world to make sure they make sense. You may find some don't pass the “smell” test, such as a past war making no sense or a family conflict not being in character.

If you're building a world, you need to develop a nose for conflict to see where things should get nasty – or shouldn't.

A weather change, the birth of a new god, or the seventh annual Hyperspace festival (when Aunt Mildred's clone visits) may seem like events that you can easily write. But will they produce conflicts – and will those get awful? What happens to people when the setting and people encounter each other? What if the conflict you thought about just seems to fade away and not make sense?

So be sure you can sniff out when conflict should start, how far it should go, and when it doesn't make sense. That's going to be an important part of your setting and important parts of the media that come from them. If you're not careful, a setting can seem unreliably calm, or be so ridden with pointless fighting that it's darkly hilarious.

Developing this ability gives you an idea of what writing or storytelling you can do because you can "sniff" out a good story or place to start your game in the timeline. You don't have to make things up; in many cases there's plenty of interesting stuff to talk about, even if what's interesting is unpleasant.

A Lot To Do

Being aware of what a conflict is, just like being aware of how people make them into conflicts or make them worse, is important to worldbuilding. Events and people are always coming together, sometimes causing conflicts, and thinking over their mechanics helps you make a realistic story and world.

In some cases, you might become aware that your world's conflicts won't stand up to scrutiny. Maybe it's so conflict-ridden that it should even exist and you have to rethink it.

Or maybe finding that means you've got a lot of great stories to tell. So let's get to various forms of conflict and breakdown to see what's up – or what's coming down.

It Comes Apart: Biases And Bigotry

Having explored the psychology of conflict and the way that conflicts can go from simple disagreements to smashing galaxies with a Dimension Cannon, let's take a look at some of the more personal elements of conflict. It's a bit of a break from the galaxy-smashing thing, but the potential is there.

Let's talk biases and bigotry in your setting, those steps that often let us climb the ladder to conflict. Or descend into the pit of conflict, whatever. Pick your metaphor.

We've all encountered biases and bigotry in real life. In our historical readings, we've seen cases where biases and bigotry have led to atrocities with depressing regularity. Some of us have lived through actual atrocities. Bias and bigotry is *everywhere*.

We've also been biased and bigoted ourselves, if we're willing to admit it.

Which means that as worldbuilders and creators, we need to think about these horrible things because they're probably part of our worlds. Worldbuilding isn't for people afraid to get their brains messy. Since you have to write the biases and bigotries in your world and the results of their existence, let's talk about them.

But first . . .

A Quick Aside On Psychology

When discussing people's biases and bigotry, I am thinking of our fellow humans, humans in our settings, and human-likes that we may create. If you are creating other species, you'll need to ask just how similar they are to humans in how their minds work, as they may have a completely different way of functioning (dare I say, an alien one). In turn that means their biases and bigotries may just

work differently than humans.

This is important to keep in mind as a worldbuilder, for when you try to make things believably alien, you may accidentally make non-humans too human. We're all inclined to humanize – it's part of being human – so don't make the truly alien too much like us.

Besides, if you can design a species that functions in an authentic alien way, that will be impressive for your readers, your players, and so on.

A Quick Aside On Psychology II: Electric Boogaloo

As we explore bias and bigotry in the characters and cultures we create, remember that these attitudes often make sense to the people who have them. To others, they may seem quaint or outright pathological, but to the people in your world they seem appropriate. How do you portray characters in ways people can connect with when, from the outside, their attitudes seem irrational or outright mad?

You do this by establishing empathy – can you (and your audience) understand the characters and cultures in question? Even if the reaction is "there but for the grace of the gods go I" when your audience realizes they could be as messed up as a given character, then you've established empathy. If people can truly understand your world and its people, even in their darkest moments, then you've done your job as a creator.

Now if people step out of your world and suddenly go "oh, ick, I sympathized with that character," count yourself fortunate since you let them suspend their reactions long enough to relate to someone truly dislikable. Well done, and you may have just given them some valuable insights into evil and it's banality – and their own evil and banality.

OK. Now onward . . . well, downward perhaps.

Big Bad Boundless Bias

You are biased.

Sorry, but you are. We all are. We have certain experiences and traumas and insights that are going to bias us towards specific actions, judgments, and people. Right now I bet a small amount of personal contemplation will reveal a range of people and things you have strong opinions on that are irrational and automatic.

This is completely normal because it's not like we spend all our time asking, "hey, do I have stupid ideas?" If we're mentally healthy and well-balanced people, we confront our biases when we find them, deal with them, and go on.

Because we have biases, we know the people and cultures we create would almost certainly have them as well. A basic rule in understanding bias well enough to analyze it and create it is this:

Bias is when opinion becomes solidified enough that it's hard to change and distinctly affects our behavior. It has a gravitational pull – it's a weight that holds us to certain actions, and it takes effort to overcome.

I'm sure this makes you think of your own biases that are rather rock-solid and distinctly affect your behavior. Good.

Why do we have opinions (and thus biases)? Because we're limited by our own experiences and see things in certain ways. None of us are truly objective, none of us analyze everything we do all the time, none of us have a gods-eye view of things. In many cases people who think they're so objective and unbiased and shout it to the heavens are very biased.

I've gone on and on (and on) about how characters are viewpoints on your world. Characters are how people experience the world because they provide a point one can relate to. That limited, narrowed, personal set of experiences is where opinions come from, and where some solidify into bias.

These biases aren't just personal; biases can be culture-wide. An entire family, city, country, or galactic empire can be biased about something, and people won't be aware of it because it's simply normal to them. We swim in biases, and, as the classic saying goes, fish have no word for water.

It can be a shocking experience in writing some of our characters to realize they are or should be biased. However, that's what good worldbuilding is all about; those connecting details. Characters are "flawed" and "personal" because they're *persons*.

It helps to stand back and think this over. So in writing bias, a quick checklist for you to keep in mind:

- Understand what opinions characters have about things. They're going to have opinions anyway, so contemplating this will just build a better character and world.
- Understand where opinions become bias. Opinions can be analyzed, but bias is a bit more ingrained and solid. Your characters' experiences or background may help or hinder the formation of biases.
- Understand that every character has opinions and thus have biases. Write them down for your worldbuilding notes (in fact, dividing up opinions and biases will help them be clearer).
- Understand the larger culture's role in biases and how characters pick them up. It's rare that any person is free of the flaws of their culture, so accept that your characters may have those biases.

- Understand how your character regards their biases – usually they think they make perfect sense. A mark of a good worldbuilder and writer is that the character's biases and flaws make enough sense in their heads that people who normally would disagree with them can still relate.

A bias is a solidified opinion. But what happens when that bias becomes something more? That's when it becomes bigotry, and that's when things get ugly.

Bigotry: Dense And Intense

If bias is what happens when opinions become solid and have some kind of gravitational pull, bigotry is what happens when bias collapses in on itself like a black hole and starts sucking in other parts of your life.

Donna Kossy's book *Strange Creations* is an excellent read for worldbuilders. The author explores various ideas of human origins and their cultural backgrounds. She found many theories of human origins were just games of “whose tribe is best” - no one actually decided “hey, wait, my people really are lousy.” The theories were bigotry, dressed up as science or religion.

That definition stuck with me for some time, and made me realize that bigotry is when bias becomes so intense it's a vital part of one's life. The bigotry is not just a held opinion or a solidified inclination, it's a part of a person's identity, one they may even work to defend.

Like a black hole, bias sucks in everything around it. In the case of raging bigots (which we've doubtlessly read about and encountered), it borders on insanity, coloring everything they see and enmeshing them in conspiracy theories. I'm sure it won't take much digging to find some rather unpleasant things on the internet in that vein.

Bigotry is the point where opinions have not only ossified, but challenging them is something that produces an existential crisis, a challenge to one's very core. To challenge the bigotry is to challenge this force in someone's life that is powerful and contains part of their identity. You challenge *who* they are, and they react, often violently.

Bigotry is also fundamentally irrational because it is so extreme and so unjustified. Bigots often have to engage in acts to reaffirm their bigotry and justify it – it takes action to keep maintaining that level of hatred, even passive or passive-aggressive hatreds. To not reassert it is to not reassert oneself, and threatens one's identity. You have to feed the black hole.

These actions may be self-destructive. If you've ever met a person with racial bias who talks about "those people and how we should do something" without realizing the irony that "those people" have good reason to hate him/her, you get the idea. By the time we get to bigotry, rational thought and empathy are out the window, and we can, at most, hope the bigotry is contained or limited.

Human cultures almost always have some bigotry in them, or the potential for bigotry in the form of strong biases. Sometimes it's something that evolved due to various reasons that may make some sense, but the irrationality is still there. Sometimes it comes and goes, and at times it goes full black hole and everything goes to hell.

Creating and writing bigotry can be a painful experience for creatives because we have to step into the minds of characters in unpleasant states, and, of course, confront our own issues. All of us have opinions, many of us are biased, and some of us may have to face unpleasant bigotries past and present.

However, like writing biases, writing and creating bigotry well is important. Again, worldbuilding is challenging, at times a very personal one.

So to help us understand and create believable bigotry, a few rules:

- Understand the opinion-bias-bigotry pathway and look at where it starts and stops in your characters and cultures.
- Bigotry is almost always part of identity. Changes in identity can increase or decrease it.
- Bigotry can be personal or cultural or both.
- Because bigotry is irrational, it leads to irrational behaviors. As a writer/creator you have to step inside the head of those with bigotry to understand why they do things, and how they react to more realistic people.
- Bigotry doesn't seem like bigotry to the bigots, and often seems harder to overcome because it's so closely tied to identity and so "dense." Bigotry may seem to border on the insane – yet the person is functional otherwise.
- Bigotry is something that may be manipulated by people in a culture or institution as a form of power – they're aware of it (even if unconsciously), and use this powerful force. People in your stories may not be bigots but may be invested in maintaining bigotry.
- Rampaging bigotry is often where the bigotry *does* become insane, and one commits atrocities and irrational acts due to it. These acts have consequences.
- Remember when I mentioned psychological balance earlier? In a way, bigots are working to maintain it, but because their belief system is fundamentally unbalanced, it requires excessive belief and activities to do keep something that flawed working. They spin the wheel . . .

Remember, It's A Continuum

The opinion-bias-bigotry continuum is a useful tool for creating worlds, cultures, and characters. It lets you ask where along the lines ideas, behaviors, beliefs, and cultural norms reside. That also lets you know when things may go off the rails into bigotry-fueled nightmares and/or bad decisions.

Within these three areas of "solidified belief" are also many nuances to explore. How do characters regard their biases and bigotries? How can they change? What role do they play? Exploring that builds better worlds and lets you be a better creator.

Oh sure, the results aren't always pleasant, but that's the point of what we're exploring.

It Comes Apart: The Persecution Rests

Last section I covered bias and bigotry in the settings you're developing. Not a pleasant subject, but one that's important because believable characters and societies have their biases and often their bigotries – just as we do.

To summarize my handy rules-to-remember on the subject:

- 1) Everyone has opinions.
- 2) When opinions "solidify" they become biases.
- 3) When biases become part of our identity they become bigotries, black holes of ideals that suck other things in. The bigotry is core to one's identity and hard to change.

When bigotries seize control of an individual, group, nation, or galactic confederation, that can lead to outright campaigns against various people. Attempts to exterminate, subjugate, control, or drive out an entire identifiable group - persecutions.

This is the unpleasant subject of *this* section.

Persecution is a common theme in many works, as it is (sadly) part of the human experience and human regrets. Therefore it's necessary to cover in worldbuilding. Persecution is also a word and an idea thrown around too easily, so we don't often think about persecutions in detail when our settings call for it. It's easy to generalize it, to stereotype it, as opposed to dealing with it as what it is – an unpleasant but near-living thing.

Let me note, again, I am discussing the behavior of humans and human-like creatures. So other races you create may behave differently – maybe the Dwarves of Lavabarrow have a semi-hive mind that makes them integrate with any society or something.

That's up to you.

Me, I'm talking about species that, like us, sometimes get busy trying to destroy others. So let's ask just what persecution *is*.

When We Talk Persecution

The following traits define persecution within a culture (again, of humans). Think of it as a handy checklist to make sure you've got the atrocities in your world right.

Persecutors Feel It's Justified

Humans don't seem inclined to engage in long-term pogroms against each other. We've got better stuff to do like eat, sleep, and have sex. But at many, many points we decided to up and exterminate part of the human race. People figured they had a damned good reason to do some damnable things and actually put *effort* into it.

This is one of the first things to deal with in persecution: it's seen as justified. Supposedly decent people throughout human history have done awful things literally because "it seemed like a good idea at the time." This terrible truth is an important lesson for worldbuilding.

You need to understand the *reason* characters do the horrible things they do in your setting. To them, they probably make perfect sense. You'll have to understand that, unpleasant as it is, to make it realistic.

This leads to some painful questions. How many potential "heroes" in your setting are behaving like the worst villains just due to one belief? How many heroes seem justified to you, but when you step back you realize your main characters are awful people?

Feel uncomfortable yet? Then that's a good sign you're doing it right.

Someone Benefits

"Follow the money" is advice we often hear in regard to politics, but I'd actually say "follow the power" is more accurate. In the case of persecutions, ask who benefits because of the next horrible campaign or solar-system destroying atrocity. Who has something to gain?

Because atrocities, pogroms, and persecutions take time or energy, someone has to be benefitting. Someone gets something out of it: it may be a dictator seeking power, or it may be a raging mob seeking an outlet. Persecution takes energy, and people aren't going to waste energy without a reason.

These gains may not be rational. Maybe the next galactic war is because a soul-crushing society led to pent up aggressions that are now unstoppably released. Maybe someone thinks they'll make a lot of money selling magical spy-eyes to control the orcs, not realizing the war against them will destroy the entire economy. We can be shortsighted and wrong-headed, and our characters and cultures in our worlds may be the same way – more so when blinded by supposedly righteous anger or bigoted rage.

But someone benefits, *or thinks they do*. Otherwise, why spend all this time engaged in the campaign to wipe out the Cybermorphs of Eridani? People have better things to do, again . . .

Persecution Has A System

Wiping out a lot of people and enslaving a race takes organization. It may be spontaneous, half-thought out, and poorly done. It may "repurpose" existing social structures in the name of horrible acts. Either way, if people don't get organized they can't commit large atrocities. It takes a real *organization* to ruin your moral authority for generations and leave decades of regrets.

A core element of persecution is that it's been made into part of the social and economic systems of people's lives. It has become part of a culture or a subculture, an identifiable part (at least from the outside) that gears part of the population towards attacking a specific group. If you don't have some kind of organization, you end up with a mob going in different directions, but no real, large-scale odious activity.

Again, that organization may not be particularly good, smart, or well-done. It may not last long. It's just enough so persecution can actually get accomplished.

Persecution may not “scale” depending on level of organization. The corruption in a small town doesn't envelop a state. Local biases are hard to take national. Simply, a group may just not get it together enough to be much of a danger in proportion to their numbers.

Not that it matters to the victims.

Persecution Has A Life Of It's Own

The flipside of persecution needing an organized system to actually be persecution is that it self-perpetuates. Any good organization keeps itself running even if that organization itself is not good. Persecution needs some institutionalization, as well as a system just to keep going.

That means persecution can take on a life of its own and keep going even if more and more people want it to stop.

This is often what we think of in historical persecutions. We think of institutions that perpetuate the atrocities, campaigns, and crusades. Persecution needs not only organization but also endurance to be serious persecution; otherwise it's a short-term thing.

In turn, it helps to think of persecutions and the cultural institutions that create them as having a life of their own, just like religions, governments, and more. Because in many ways, they do – they're often part of those organizations, part of their identities.

Persecution is what happens when bigotry gets its act together.

Again, remember, someone benefits. A campaign against a given race or organization can live on far into the future because someone gets something out of it. So, in your worlds, who is that?

It Usually Gets Out Of Control

Remember when I talked about how people can get out of balance, and their obsessions absorb their beliefs so they easily commit horrors? Persecutions, crusades, and the like are what happens when those imbalances extend to a larger society.

Think about it. You have an organized, institutionalized system of attacking group X, one that people benefit from. That's not something prone to re-analysis and thoughtful contemplation. That's something that almost inevitably spins out of control and perhaps creates its own downfall.

The echo chamber of the crusade, the persecution, the latest inquisition doesn't sync up with reality. It doesn't even sync up with the needs of its people. At some point it can spectacularly implode because the people carrying out the persecution just don't see the implications of their actions until they're unavoidable.

But the implications come. The Empire's Hyperspace gates are destroyed by rebels fighting against tyrannical rule. The farms lie burning from a bitter military campaign. No one may have foreseen the impacts, but they arrive anyway.

Persecutions tend to be like a virus, and leave a lot of misery in their wakes.

It's Not Always Visible

Persecutions are part of the culture they exist in. People may not be aware of the act of persecution, the institutions, and the culture behind it. To them, it's just normal. Perhaps they don't want to see what's going on and confront what they've done.

Now to those outside of the persecution and its social systems, it seems sure as hell something is wrong. Those who benefit are obvious to outside observers. The delusions and horrors are clear. They're just not as obvious to people *inside* the social systems.

This probably explains why persecutions and crusades over-extend themselves. Then people suddenly wonder why they're hated, disliked, scorned, or arrested – they never saw, in short, what huge a-holes they were.

While outside, or in historical retrospect, many others did.

A Few Warnings

Now as you deal with persecutions in your world, I wanted to provide a few things to avoid:

Cackling Villains. Characters are characters. Having your villain have a Crusade of Evil because you've just designated them a villain will make that evil unbelievable. Make sure they're true characters with backgrounds and motivations so their evil is real.

Not Seeing It. Remember what I said about persecutions being invisible to many carrying them out? Perhaps they exist in your world right now and you don't see them. Take a look at your world again – those heroes engaged in a seemingly just war might not be too heroic after all.

The Pity Me Hero. Writing characters as the victims of persecution is entirely understandable. Don't try to milk sympathy or martyr them inappropriately; it's artificial and contrived. Build a believable setting so people get what's going on.

Bad Historical Analogies. For the love of Gutenberg, do not map historical happenings to your stories unless you know them really well. Historical happenings easily become tropes without much of a foundation, and when you say "this action is like that event" without doing real research, you'll probably do it wrong. If you're going to use history as a guide to your horrors, take the time to research it.

Personal Relations. "It happened to me" is a totally viable way to write persecution. However, like any personal story, you have to make sure people connect with your work, which means believable characters and worlds. Personal experience has to be expressed properly.

Going Too Far. Writing about atrocities and horrible things is part of worldbuilding, but it's also easy to go too far. You don't want to make some event more horrible than it should be to get a reaction; write it as part of your continuity. Taking things too far just puts your persecutions and crusades into the realm of the ridiculous and makes them less believable.

Not Going Far Enough. The flipside of going too far in writing about persecutions is not going far *enough*. Human history is filled with vile actions that stunned and horrified people. Make sure you're going far enough in the bloody horrors you may create.

Let's Get Horrible

Persecutions are a near-inevitable result of bigotry, and we want to make sure we understand them when we worldbuild. These campaigns are part of a culture, of characters. They are dynamic and awful things. They are visible to some, invisible to others.

They're also common themes in fiction and, sadly, human history. So we need to know how to create them properly when we worldbuild.

Make sure you think them through when you design your world. You want them, as it were, appropriately awful and appropriate to your setting.

Society And Disaster Moving Faster

Conflicts and social breakdowns are often about speed. Fast or slow, the rate things happen or don't happen fuels conflict:

- That sudden change can be too sudden, and society falls apart. An invasion, a plague, or a social breakdown can be damaging because they're so damn fast that society can't adapt.
- A slow change is so slow that people adapt automatically and don't even know there's potential conflict brewing. Sure there's a plague, but it's spreading so slowly (or slowed down by modern technology) that no one ever realized they were courting an apocalypse. Conflict averted, and you never knew it – or you can't see that things are getting worse.
- That character who jumps to conclusions makes situations worse.
- That character who takes things slow doesn't address problems in time, and conflict is born.

When it comes to conflict in your world, you have to ask how fast or slow things are happening. Speed – or lack thereof – may be the only reason a conflict exists. Too often people ignore solutions or go outright Leroy Jenkins on a problem and help assist the apocalypse.

When you're writing about the conflicts in your world, you have to ask just how fast events are happening and how rapidly people react. These things determine if there even is a conflict, or at least one worth writing about. You might find that there are conflicts you never noticed your setting because they were happening too fast or too slowly.

Here's what to ask when it comes to speed and conflicts in your world:

How Fast Are Things Happening?

So your characters' society is careering towards disaster, be it social unrest or a spate of really bad movies. You have to ask how fast these crises are happening to determine what conflicts may arise, if any.

If there's a deadly plague that requires people to have a six-hour hug before they contract it, yeah, that's awful, but it's going to be pretty hard to spin as a disaster resulting in conflict. Admittedly yellow journalism may help ("hug plague to destroy slow people! Panic now and avoid the rush!"), but it's unlikely.

So let's ask how the speed of a conflict or conflict-creating event can affect a society, civilization, group, tribe, etc.

Fast Events:

- Fast events can look worse than they are. So much happens so quickly that people assume the bad will continue. A sudden military strike may be awful, but even with no follow-up, it may leave people fearful. The speed may be the factor that pushes people over the edge, not the actual problem.
- A fast-happening event is one where so much happens in a short time that people may think it's one of many or part of a continuing problem.
- Fast events give us less time to think. When people don't think, they do dumb things. When people act dumb, conflict happens or gets worse.
- Fast events can strike harder than expected. When you have something bad happen very fast, you can't prepare. That in turn can amplify the effect of a crisis because there's no time to get ready and people panic easier.
- Fast events may, ironically, get over faster and be less of a disaster. Yes, there's a super-fast deadly plague, but it kills so fast it dies out (not a conflict, but certainly an embarrassment to other, more mature plagues).

Fast events can lead to conflict because they play into all the things that *make* conflict – misinterpretation, not thinking, a lack of perspective, and being really rapid. When there's a sudden case of seven dead dragons falling from the sky over the kingdom in your story, yeah, people might get a little freaked out.

But what about slow events? How do they lead to or avoid conflict?

Slow Events:

- Slow events can lead to conflict as people don't always realize what's happening until things are too late. Sure, that cult seems harmless, until the giant civil war in the kingdom fifty years later.
- Slow events can lead to conflict between people that see a looming problem and those that do not or ignore it. Those crazy people ranting about the impending galactic collapse may get tamped down by security forces . . . until they see the problem is real all too late. Meanwhile, there are very angry people who *had* warned everyone.
- Slow events lead to conflict as they alter situations gradually. An economic stagnation's effects might not be that obvious, yet they change the economy of your setting more and more in the background, and the disaster isn't realized. Slow can mean concealment until it's too late.
- Slow events produce conflict because they sneak up on you, change the ground rules, and can divide people. It all happens so slow you don't notice until the rules don't matter.

Once you think about events in your world and how they can cause conflict depending on speed, this also brings in another question:

How fast does the culture react to pressures that could lead to a breakdown?

This Culture Goes Up To Eleven

Cultures also respond to events at different speeds. We're all painfully aware of this, from questions about the environment to wondering why some television shows just won't get cancelled. That also affects what causes – or prevents – conflicts.

Looking over the sweep of history makes us aware of just how "speed" of response makes a difference in what turns into social breakdowns. We can watch people jump to address a problem that isn't, or engage in a long-term plan to head off disasters. So you need to ask yourself how fast your cultures react to threats to determine if there's a conflict.

Let's break this into cultures that react fast to issues versus slow.

Fast-Reacting Cultures:

- Fast-reacting cultures can nip problems in the bud early. They might not even be aware of how fast they're solving problems as it's just tradition. Of course that means if the parts of the culture that react to challenges quickly are damaged, problems can ensue. Just ask how many plagues and problems are headed off by modern medicine, and what would happen if that changed.
- Fast-reacting cultures can implement a wrong plan faster – fast isn't better when you're doing something dumb. So sure, your culture thinks it's heading off a conflict by killing off all the goblins, only to discover that their myriad wandering souls wake up the Dark Lady of the Pit.
- Fast-reacting cultures may have an issue of memory. If problems are solved (or exacerbated) very fast there may not be a time to pause, reflect, and learn. When a potential civil war is headed off quickly, you might not pause to learn all the lessons of "why did we nearly have a social meltdown?"

- Fast-reacting cultures that act without thinking may create their own conflicts. When the Wizard's Guild, the Holy Church, and random adventurers converge to fight one minor Demon Lord, the Demon Lord might be the least of your issues as forces collide.

But what about cultures that react slowly?

Slow Reacting Cultures:

- Slow-reacting cultures may not fix a problem fast enough to head it off. They can get overwhelmed with issues and break down into conflict. A slow reacting culture and a fast-happening problem can mean conflict.
- Slow-reacting cultures may have time to think. Without overreacting, they avoid doing anything stupid and have time to contemplate.
- Slow-reacting cultures may just "endure" problems without looking closely at them or reacting inappropriately. An appropriately-reacting but slow culture may simply soldier on.
- Slow-reacting cultures may get "battered" by comparatively small problems and, unable to react, become overburdened and break into conflict. Little things can add up (it's also fun for you as a writer to leave little clues that suddenly give your audience a sense of what *really* happened).

A culture's reaction to potential conflicts is much like a person's reaction.

In The Eye Of The Very Panicked Beholder

Individuals also react to events at different speeds. This is another level to consider when you figure out how people deal with conflicts and potential conflicts in your world. We all move at different speeds, and we've all probably encountered people we thought were moving too fast or too slow.

When it comes to worldbuilding, you have to ask how fast every character reacts to changes.

Fast-reacting characters:

- May react faster than anyone else. Yes, this means they save the day, but people might not understand what they're doing. The guy who immediately shoots the shapeshifting spy is a hero, but when people see him shooting some innocent-looking person, that potential hero may end up full of bullet holes as well.
- Fast-reacting characters may have to "bring others along" as they try to explain their goals and plans to people less prone to action. That friction can be a source of conflict as well.
- Fast-reacting characters may, like cultures, react too quickly and do the wrong thing. Doing the wrong thing fast is a recipe for conflict in itself. If the person is trusted, they may not even have people correct their snap decisions – making the situation worse.
- Fast-reacting characters may be frustrated by slower-moving cultures and people. A well-meaning person trying to change the world to prevent a conflict may end up creating it as they try to "save everyone."
- Fast-reacting characters could get rebellious if under the command/control of people not thinking fast enough. In turn, they also may not be the best people to lead those reacting to crises in a slower way.

Slow-reacting characters:

- May be frustrating to others. It's hard to draw people along to save the world, and it becomes its own conflict.
- Slow-reacting characters may take the time to do things right and understand what's going on. This can be irritating to those who can't slow down, or make these more restrained people a font of wisdom in a crisis.

- Slow-reacting characters will come into conflict with faster-moving characters reacting to problems. Maybe they're slow enough to not do the wrong thing, or can't be rallied to do things fast enough.

As you write conflict, or potential conflict, you have to figure out how different characters react in your setting, how fast, and how they see themselves and each other. Everyone's got a different perspective; everyone moves at different speeds.

Different speeds are often the source of conflict itself.

Conflict As Friction

A lot of conflict is actually about speed. Who's moving faster and who's moving slower. Miscommunications due to people moving at different paces. Attempts to solve conflicts can end up creating conflicts because everyone's moving at different speeds.

It's about friction, of how things of varying speeds react when they come together. That "coming together" usually means "spectacular disaster" in many cases:

- A society that can adapt to a problem fast enough can head off conflicts. A slower-moving society will be steamrolled by events and fall apart – and blame the surviving society.
- A person who knows how to save the world chafes against the slower-moving parts of society. The right person with the right solution has – dare I say it – friction with others and isn't listened to. The frustrated savior then attempts to save the day – but ends up the villain as they do it without considering others.
- A group of people plan to survive the apocalypse, but the disaster happens so slowly that all their brilliant plans and experiments create more problems than the *actual* apocalypse. Overreacting produces friction worse than the actual disaster, and conflict results.

So when you think your world, its problems, your society, its potential conflicts, it's really about how fast things are moving, and how they aren't.

When speeds don't line up, much like a device, everything flies apart. And you have conflict.

Conflict's End

We've been discussing conflict in this section, from psychology to how speed (or lack of it) affects conflict. But conflicts inevitably end, if only because they become something else or because everyone involved ends up sort of dead. So, what happens afterward, when the conflict is over?

Conflicts *will* end in your world. In fact, the end of conflict may define the completion of a tale you tell in your world – or be the start of one. Such endings involve fine details you need to consider. Smoking aftermaths tend to be more work than actually causing them, worldbuilding-wise.

So we worldbuilders have to ask – what comes after a conflict?

But first, I want to address what conflict means for worldbuilding, because it has a place.

The Role Of Conflict In Worldbuilding

Here's the truth of conflict in worldbuilding: almost any time period in your world, and phase of history, is "after a conflict."

A debate is a conflict. A discussion over how to stop a killer virus is a conflict. A genocidal war is a conflict. There are constant conflicts in the worlds we build, from giant robots in battle to someone's kid not eating their peas. They're everywhere.

We rarely think of conflicts in our settings except when they're big and story-worthy. But in reality, they're everywhere. In some ways, your world is defined by the end of conflicts (and by the beginning, but we covered that).

The way I sum this up is that, in many ways, every story is a post-apocalyptic tale. The world is always ending for some people, in that the world is always changing.

This change may be – and often is – that the world evolved into something else. But the past is past and gone, and probably not without a bit of a struggle, if only a birth pang.

But of course these conflicts are a bit hard to describe narratively.

The Role Of Conflict's End in Storytelling And Worldbuilding

When we build worlds and tell their tales, we kind of need to decide when to start. Conflicts are great ways to provide "bounds" to the stories – beginnings, ends, and the like.

The beginning of a conflict lets readers/players drop into the action – or a way to end your tale on a cliffhanger.

The end of a conflict can end a story – or the end of one conflict is a good time to start a tale as another begins.

Being aware of conflicts and their ends in your world is a good way to figure out where to tell tales within it as they're interesting to people.

With that being said, now let's get back to figuring where the aftermaths fit into your world and what you need to know.

The End Of Conflicts: Questions To Ask

When a conflict ends in your world you, the worldbuilder, have plenty of questions to ask yourself. The world (or at least part of it) just went through a lot of changes and you have to understand “what does it mean?”

I'd hope that in creating your world, the conflicts you create are ones you understand and can detail. However, it's not always that easy because you've created this massive, complex series of situations. It's a little overwhelming; which is why this section exists.

It's understandable if, upon fleshing out a massive war among galaxies, that it's a little hard to know where to go next. My advice is to not let yourself become overloaded with questions and concerns. Take it piece by piece – conflicts are often smaller conflicts, smaller issues.

To help you out, here's some questions. Use them to get your mind going so you can figure out “after.”

Environmental Questions

- Did the conflict produce any scars to the environment – the planet, the continent, the space-time continuum? What will the impact of these effects be?
- If there are significant effects to the environment, are they known and understood?
- Will these impacts pass in time or are they permanent? Is that known and understood?
- If damage is permanent, can that be corrected with effort? Are people aware of this?
- Are the impacts so big that they have to be accepted, or are so large they're hard to notice? If the Seven Unknown Gods are dead does anyone notice as no one was praying to them?
- Are the impacts so small no one really is aware of them?

Social Questions

- When a conflict ends, did the society(ies) that survived endure enough to apply any lessons learned from the conflict in question? Or did they break down?

- Does the society even know a conflict happened or ended? What will the effect of that be?
- A society survived a conflict, but is what's left truly a society or is it permanently divided, and is that division known?

Social Institutions

- Does the society have mechanisms for processing the end of conflicts and learning to prevent them? Or are they going to keep making the same mistakes?
- Even if a society has mechanisms to process the results of conflict, did they survive the conflict in question? Maybe a society survives thinking it's smart enough to learn, but the damage is deeper than realized.
- How long will any information be retained by the society? Or does a conflict require the lessons be learned again and again?

People Questions

- What happened to people during the conflict? Each character is a lens, and the results of an aftermath – what is learned, what is forgotten – will depend just on who is there to learn (or ignore) lessons.
- What were the individual effects of conflict on the characters? That will determine how they react to the end of the conflict, from gaining deep wisdom to being crippled by emotional scars.
- Do people know a conflict happened or that it ended? In short, did anyone learn from this?
- Do people agree on what they learned? The end of a conflict, from a war to an argument, may turn comrades against each other while just determining "what happened?"

There's plenty more questions. These are just starters. I'm sure you can think of many more.

I'd also advise writing the answers to these questions down. There's a lot to keep track of after a conflict – it helps to record it.

Think Aftermaths

Your worlds are filled with aftermaths. Start thinking about them, start noticing them, and you'll have a richer world to build on.

Crime And Punishment

I'd like to find a more flowery way to say it, but legal systems are important to your worldbuilding.

Think about what a legal system is:

- A reasonably organized set of rules for a defined society.
- This set of rules is backed up by formal enforcement mechanisms.

This is pretty powerful stuff. These aren't rules that are informal. These aren't rules that are limited. These aren't rules where breaking them earns you more than a frown. These are rules backed up by serious force, the kind of force that has at least some legitimacy and sanction.

A legal system is a kind of "limited morality" where society does the smiting when you disobey. It can't be ignored in your worldbuilding for these reasons.

It's also very hard to worldbuild with, so I wanted to address how to, and why it's hard (though if you're acquainted with legal systems in our world, you may have a good idea).

The Challenge of Writing Legal Systems

I consider worldbuilding legal systems to be harder than making religion in many cases. Religion is something that has fuzzy, human edges. Religion is something we expect to be challenging to create. Religion is visible if only because we're too aware of the challenges it places.

But creating legal systems?

Legal systems can have both hard and soft edges, have pages of rules and general guidelines. Legal systems can be invisible because they're more diffuse than religion. More structural legal systems can lack the human face of a religion, and their mechanical nature can make it even more automatic than religion so we don't truly see it. Finally we may have our imaginations clouded by legal tropes from media (quite prominent in Western entertainment).

Legal systems are hard and soft at different times, hard to see and relate to, *and* we're used to them.

So to build a good legal system in your worlds, there are a few things to contemplate. Here's some issues to consider in the legal systems you design for your world.

Issue #1: Reasons For Laws

Laws exist for reasons. They provide boundaries for behavior or appropriate responses to transgressions in order to get results. Even when we have supposedly divine laws, it seems they get rather humanly bureaucratic as the divine has to be translated into human form.

Laws are practical in their own way. They always exist for reasons, if only because they're thought of, processed, and codified by people, even when supposedly handed down from On High. When you build a world, you need to know why the laws exist and what goals were behind their creation.

This doesn't mean the reasons are clear or honest. It doesn't mean the laws weren't created due to really bad ideas. It doesn't even mean people remember the reasons.

But the reasons are *there*.

(That's your hint to not just drop a legal system you know in a world you made. If the telepaths of Amodrax V can't stop broadcasting, you may have to have laws giving people freedom from speech.)

Example: Fearing the wrath of the Sun Goddess, the King creates a rule that people cannot go outside in the first hour of the day so as to not offend her. This is punished by strict fines.

Issue #2: Forming Laws

Laws exist for a reason. The next question is how does the "reason" lead to "the form," the clear rules that people can follow to avoid sanction?

Be it a god's commandments and human interpretation, a king's orders, or a legislature's rulings, laws have to be given form so they can be enforced. This often involves some system of people making certain decisions, even if that decision is "write down what the King says and do it despite his inbreeding."

As a worldbuilder you need to know how laws are given so they can be enforced. That may sound boring and bureaucratic (and may be), but knowing it tells you what happens when the laws enter the process of becoming "real." Does it take forever or is it quick? Is there a reliable focus on intent, or does lawmaking get bogged down in fighting among factions with a cause?

A system of randomly created laws can't last for long (though that may be part of your world), so any sustainable system needs process to give laws form. Of course if the system is unstable, that may be part of your tales – but there will be a system, even if a very temporary one.

Example: The King's ministers and high priest help formulate the law. "No one may be outside the first hour after dawn unless they are doing the work of the goddess and have the dispensation of the priesthood." Sounds simple.

Issue #3: Communicating Laws

Laws get created for a reason and given form. Laws are usually codified, turned into rules, and spelled out. From stone tablets with simple orders to giant legal documents from a massive legislature, laws get processed and sent out so people can act upon them.

After all if you don't tell people the laws, they can't follow them and they can't be enforced. That may be part of your setting, but a sustainable system needs to get the word out.

So how are laws sent to the population and the enforcers? Automatically? Regularly? Is there training? Translation? What punishment and sanctions go with them? How are records kept?

Communication and legal systems – where fine details and punishment mix with human fallibility – will always have a mildly Kafkaesque element to them due to inevitable confusion. But how much confusion is there?

A big part of your world's legal system may make no damn sense on the communication level. That's fine, but there will be a method of communicating laws least, even if it's terrible.

Example: The King's Heralds post the new laws on bills and they are entered into the great Archive Of The Law. There's a side effect of improved clock sales, though knowledge of the law is hampered by people not always reading yet *another* posted bill.

Issue #4: Enforcing Of Laws

If the devil is in the details, you should start smelling brimstone right about now.

A law has to be enforced. This is when "do what we say" meets "or else," and the "or else" part of laws get complicated. Perusal of any week of news will reveal all sorts of legal complications, from airy arguments to issues of funding. Biases, bigotries, and ignorance will affect law enforcement, often to tragic levels.

Enforcing the law takes people, resources, social and bureaucratic systems, and finally action. Someone has to hold the trials, catch the bad guys, free the innocent, and punish the guilty. Someone also has to pay for this.

Nothing says it actually is going to work very well – though it may.

When building your world you have to ask how the enforcement mechanisms work, what pays for them, and how well they function. This is an oft-invisible part of the legal process to many of us, at least until budget cuts near us make us realize "hey, this is *hard*."

Remember, you may find your world's great legal system has awful enforcement. Or your oppressive kingdom has really got one heck of a secret police. But you need to know how it *works*.

Example: The King's Police realize they have to actually go outside to enforce the law, so now all police departments must receive a blessing to do so from the local Temple. In addition, they now have to carry their badges openly to show they shouldn't be penalized.

Issue #5: Laws Have Repercussions

Laws stop crime. Well, we assume that, right? We shouldn't.

Laws have *impacts*. People know about them and adjust their behavior. Enforcement of laws has repercussions. Knowing you'll be punished for something, arresting a hundred people at once, etc. has results. It just may not be the ones that people creating the laws assumed would be had.

So in building your world you need to ask about the repercussions of laws and the legal system. Do the laws meet the intended goals? The stated goals? How are they regarded? What reactions do enforcement actions produce?

Example: The new hour-before-dawn law really screws up many businesses except people selling time pieces. The police really don't want to offend the goddess, but think this is a bit strict. The priesthood starts discovering they can sell all sorts of blessings for the people to be outside like they did the police. The Sun Goddess hasn't checked in yet, probably as she's laughing.

Issue #6: Laws Evolve

Laws change. Cultures evolve. Law is not stagnant, even if the goal is to create surety, it is a dynamic surety as living creatures and thus their cultures are dynamic things. Laws have to move with the time, or be held back from evolving deliberately.

A law may not even make any sense after awhile. It may have been a great idea at one point, but eventually it could be useless. Those laws about horse dung on the streets don't matter as much when we have our flying cars.

As the goal of laws is to have some surety, they tend to endure and evolve as people adjust them. They get appended, revised, reinterpreted. If they are useless, they may eventually be repealed. A culture with a good feedback system will adjust to needed changes.

So how does the law in your world adjust, and what is the feedback system of the culture in question? Does it adapt, or does it avoid change? Do laws come and go, or accumulate?

Example: The next King realizes this sun law thing isn't working. Instead he adds a morning blessing at all temples so people can go outside. This quickly becomes the equivalent of an alarm clock, which affects timepiece sales. The police are glad not to enforce the law, but find they kind of like the whole "blessed badge" thing. The people begin thinking themselves superior to their neighbors as they praise the Sun God every day and they don't. The temples miss the extra money, but a decade later a wit makes an alarm clock that has a little priest walking around a temple tower like clockwork and they become novelty items.

Myths To Avoid

When writing about laws and legal systems, there are a few common myths to avoid:

- **Fear produces obedience.** Fear produces a lot of things, including psychosis, terror, and punching the person who made you afraid. Do not assume people will obey laws simply out of fear – people who are afraid do not behave as you expect. Most people think others will respond to fear the same way they do – they're often wrong.
- **"In the good old days."** This is a classic way to justify portraying law and crime in a historical or historically based setting – "well in these days such-and-such worked, and such-and-such didn't." Don't assume. Do your research; there are a lot of myths out there. Also, if you go for the "in this day crime was low" routine, ask yourself just what people of the time you are writing about/basing your work on considered crime.
- **"In this country."** Many people assume they know the laws of some other country currently or in its past. Chances are you're pretty wrong about that. Do your research.

- **"Things would be perfect if . . ."** If, when writing a story dealing with crime, you ever find yourself sounding like a politician, pause. I find that can be a sign you're resorting to stereotypes or shallow thinking.

A lot of bad writing about legal systems involves utopianism, dystopianism, and agendas. Not worldbuilding.

Legal Systems: Think And Act

Take the time to plan the legal systems of your world carefully. These powerful, and at times, invisible and misunderstood social systems can go wrong easily.

Done right, you create a fascinating, dynamic, very "real" part of your setting and produce a better world to create in.

Ashes, Ashes, The World Falls Down

My friend Serdar, writer of an SF epic *Flight of the Vajra* (which I edited but also enjoyed the hell out of it), is fond of noting the plot happened when he realized his setting didn't hold together. The novel is basically about things not working, or as I like to put it, having more questions than answers is bad, but more answers than questions is worse.

What Serdar says sounds both wise and flies in the face of a lot of the attitudes heavy worldbuilders may take. We want things in our setting to make sense. We want it to hold together. We want it to work and work the way we expected.

But sometimes the world *doesn't* hold together. There's a disaster that just makes sense, a war that we can't explain away, a transition that seems inevitable. Our well-built world suddenly seems to fall apart.

That falling apart may *actually be the tale you want to tell*. In fact, it may be a sign of what a great setting you made – it's so well designed that it's disasters and degeneracies make perfect sense. You can't explain them away or avoid them as they just fit.

Of course those moments where you realize your setting is falling apart may also be a sign of some flaws in your world design. So let's go over the ways to tell if your world's shattering is due to good design, is a possible mistake, or is something that doesn't necessarily have to happen.

Just remember, sometimes the falling apart is the best story.

Question 1: Why Does It Break?

First of all you have to ask just why your setting seems destined to fall apart. A reasonably designed setting is one that you can diagnose pretty well:

- If the world seems to be falling apart as the pieces just don't come together, you've probably made some mistakes in worldbuilding. If you just don't know why a galactic economy hums along, you probably haven't added enough detail yet.
- If the falling apart occurs because of elements in the setting, it may just be an unexpected feature. If you see a race war between elves and dragons as inevitable despite a fragile peace that was hard-won, you don't have a problem, you have a *story*.

Question 2: How Did We Get Here?

You look at your setting and realize it's going to go down in flames. Is this a story to tell or is this a mistake on your part? Part of the question is asking why this is all happening.

- Do the reasons for the setting falling apart make sense in context of the world? Can you explain why the Star Empire would survive the first hundred years but not the next two? If you can explain something's fall then this crisis is probably because you've built the world well.
- If you can't explain how your setting would get to the point where it would then fall apart, you probably have an issue with your world design. It's likely you didn't figure enough of how the world works to explain both stability and instability.

Keep Asking

Those two questions can essentially tell you if you have a story – if the breakdown makes sense and the setting is reasonable up to the point of the breakdown. With both those traits you have a tale. Without those traits, you have mistakes in your setting.

However, maybe that's not what you want to great in a story or game or comic.

But I'm Not Interested In Writing It Falling Apart

What if you don't want to write a giant war or horrible disaster? What do you do if, indeed, you've got a well designed setting but it seems destined for collapse? Here's a few ideas to help you out.

- 1) Change perspectives. Maybe the giant collapse is something you can write from a different perspective than intended. Try out the viewpoints of a few different characters to see if another fits your goals better.
- 2) Back up. Back up a few years before everything goes straight to hell, and tell your story from there.
- 3) Jump forward. Jump up your timeline and see if the setting eventually evolves to the kind you want to write. Best of all whatever disaster or falling apart you didn't want to write becomes richer background story!
- 4) Re-engineer. Maybe your setting could have gone several ways, and you choose a different direction that reduces or eliminates the conflicts. This is not my first recommendation since it can tempt you to violating your own designs, but it's one to consider.
- 5) Quit. I hate to say it, but sometimes you'll find the story you wanted to write is just not there. Set it aside – and review it later.
- 6) Transform. Maybe the issue is you chose the wrong medium. Perhaps the world you're working on would be better for a game you're doing, not a comic. Maybe the setting you created would be fun for some short stories later.

I hope these give you some ideas of what you can do when a world falls apart on you. It's not easy to face that the story you had in mind may not be what you wanted.

It's Part Of What You Do

Finding your setting is going to fall apart is one of the challenges of worldbuilding. It can shock us, surprise us, and derail us.

However, it's also one of the benefits of the craft. Unexpected findings, challenges, and settings coming to life are part of the magic of worldbuilding. Though it may alter our plans, at least it's doing so in a way that truly surprises and inspires.

Even if we find these problems are due to our mistakes, in finding them, we become better worldbuilders.

Communication Of Your World

TMI

TMI is a slang term for "Too Much Information" (and one that hopefully is still relevant when you read this). TMI means you've said too much, often about an equally embarrassing subject. Writers and worldbuilders face their own risks with TMI when we communicate our worlds.

We can *overdo* telling people about them.

You know what I'm talking about: the infodump that goes on for pages, a character obsessing over details in a narrative manner, and so forth. Sometimes our game or story simply tells too much, in a way that makes it obvious that you're *telling* people something. It feels contrived and unreal, takes people out of the world, and removes the thrill of discovery.

Maybe we can't resist doing it because we have so much to share. Maybe we want to make sure people understand. Maybe we want to make sure they're not totally lost. Maybe we follow the style of an author or writer we loved and do it wrong. Either way, it's a problem.

Worse, we usually overdo it. There's rarely "just a little" TMI.

People don't need TMI. TMI distracts because there's suddenly a Wall Of Exposition. TMI confuses as the context may make sense only in your head. TMI disappoints as it can spoil stories. TMI breaks the sense of realism as infodumps feel like they came from outside the world. TMI can even change your story, as a rollicking adventure becomes a three-page discussion of dragon biology.

We as worldbuilders have to learn to communicate the right amount of information when we tell stories.

How Do We Avoid TMI?

TMI is hard to avoid because of the many reasons we may do it, as noted above. Humans are creatures of information, so oversharing is probably something we're inclined to. Because of this, it helps to have some quick guidelines to help reign us in.

So, when you're communicating details of your world, be it in dialogue or exposition, it should:

- Come naturally to the story so it doesn't break the sense of involvement. An overheard conversation, a memory of a past journey, can tell a lot about something or someone.
- Contain enough information appropriate for the characters involved in the exposition. Remember that you can learn a lot from "overhearing" a conversation.
- Contain enough information for the audience to understand what's going on. Some things might not be worth including if it does nothing for the audience.
- Be phrased appropriately. A good sign of an infodump into TMI territory is when the language shifts from appropriate-to-tale to "have some stuff."

Proper communication with your audience requires empathy – you have to relate to your characters (to know how they act) and your audience (to know how they'll react). It's an art not a science, so awareness of TMI and its risks will only get you halfway there. The other half is pure experience; keep worldbuilding, keep writing, and keep taking feedback from your editors and your readers and your own reading.

However, I can provide you guidance to know when you've gone into TMI territory. Setting the outer boundaries may help keep you out of the TMI zone, or learn when you cross that line.

Let's look at why people may go TMI in worldbuilding and tale-telling.

"Look, I Built A World!"

We may be so proud of our world we want to show it off aggressively. Suddenly there are unneeded maps, infodumps, or irrelevant references all over the place. This takes people right out of the story or game as they are not experiencing the world but are being *told* about it.

Worlds are experienced. Remember that. Help with the experience by keeping the amount of information in conversations, discussions, and descriptions appropriate. You can always put more in an appendix – after all some people enjoy that.

One more warning – trying to show off all the detail in your world can come off as bragging. That can lead your audience to getting annoyed with you. Instead, let them into the world humbly.

"Look, Detail!"

Sometimes we go into TMI mode in our creations because we want to show off the level of detail in our worlds. Soon every description and dialogue is overloaded with information, appropriate or not. Your audience will feel like you're reaching out through your characters to show off yet another bit of detail.

In real life I don't launch into extensive discussions of public transport history without prompting. Your characters shouldn't do the same. In real life you don't look at a bookstore and recall your entire past history of going there in florid detail. Neither should your characters, unless that is the story.

Avoid showing off extensive detail. Show what is appropriate for the stories, character, and setting, and your audience can fill in the gaps.

"Look, Realism!"

How many times do you need to know a character went to the bathroom? Or have your audience sit through a five-minute in-game video discussing why this elf is a psychotic killer? Those don't exactly sound fun because even though your world has "realism," experiencing it in minute and irrelevant detail isn't exactly realistic.

When your attempts to communicate to the audience are "look, see how realistic I am; man I thought this out" then you have a problem. Your audience was probably going to give you the benefit of a doubt, but showing off your realism blatantly is going to look egocentric at worst and be distracting at best.

People are not going to be impressed by the realism of your world when it's shoved in their face – and some things can be assumed (such as characters actually going to the bathroom or eating). People can give your characters and world credit for being realistic or at least having its own realism. They don't need it described to them in painful detail.

"Look, Weirdness!"

Did you ever know someone that just had to show off how different they were from everyone? Were you once that person? Either way, you're aware that someone trying desperately to be weird comes off as annoying. You can make this mistake oversharing the weirdness in your world.

People don't really need you to keep mentioning the dream-powered airships in painful detail. Your audience probably got the idea that this singer is deeply strange the first three times you mentioned it. Don't go waving weirdness around like a banner.

In reality, if it's not weird for your characters, it shouldn't seem weird to the audience. In fact, keep in mind that the impact of weirdness is amplified when it seems normal. That moment people

truly “get” this is different is a powerful storytelling moment – and you miss it by trying to show how strange everything is over and over.

But when people are enjoying a world you made and are getting used to it, and then the weirdness creeps over them, *that* is powerful.

Learn What To Say

TMI can affect many a worldbuilder and the works they craft. Creators need to work on this because serious TMI ruins the experience of a work, it takes people out of the world and into you lecturing them or showing off.

Worldbuilding is about detail. When it comes to your stories or games or whatever, instead learn to communicate what's important to people. The details that let you tell the story – the details that let your audience understand it.

You just don't need to know where all the trap doors and scenery is to enjoy the play.

Without Words

In a game or story it's easy to inform people about the world by resorting to a lot of characters using words – or a few characters using a lot of words. By speech or by writing or by The Exposition Channel, it's easy to resort to “people talking” to fill your audience in. We're used to talking to people, and sometimes we talk to our audience *through* the people we create.

Regardless of the way, shape, or form these expositions are relayed, it's still an infodump. Sure it might be an infodump wearing a funny hat, but an infodump it is.

These infodumps are often obvious as hell and instantly take people out of the immersion. When you, the author or the worldbuilder, resort to an infodump through a character, it's obviously "you" doing it. You're about as concealed as a cartoon character hiding behind a tiny tree.

Wile E. Coyote™ is not your role model.

Now you have to design your story, comic, game, etc. to communicate important things about the world to your audience. You just need to think of how to do it without dumping a pile of text or a long speech on everyone. You may need to do it without characters using words directly.

So I'd like to cover ways you can tell people about the world without resorting to the grenade-fishing equivalent of information sharing. Many of these are things that you should be doing anyway, but we often forget them. Done right, they communicate a rich amount of information without that horrible, contrived feeling of Captain Storybackground arriving to save people from being interested.

These methods are powerful because they aren't always consciously understood by the reader. They're background detail, little things that can add up. When they do (consciously or not), people are really drawn into a world because it all just makes sense.

The reader or player may get a thrill from figuring it out, but really you set the stage for them to do it.

Mark Ruffalo's twitchy, troubled performance as Bruce Banner in *The Avengers* film, said more about the character than any exposition. Even if someone wasn't acquainted with the mythology of Marvel comics, they can piece together something is wrong well before he becomes The Hulk. The right writing and the right actor said more than a page of text from a character's mouth.

But if you don't have a Ruffalo on your side, you've got a bit more work.

So let's look at how you can communicate your world without shouting things from the metaphorical rooftops.

Expressions And Actions

Blushing, looking around, twitching, pacing – wordless character actions say so much about them. In turn they can say a lot about the world.

If travelers to a particular town always seem tired, or are thought of as "always exhausted" by a character, we know the journey there is always grueling. If a character nervously waves off a subject, we know something makes them uncomfortable – and that may tell us something is up. If people are in a rush to get through a checkout, there's a reason – and soon we find out a hurricane is approaching in the story.

If you're designing non-human races, be aware of these kinds of communication as well. An alien's tentacles may twitch when he's nervous, or a fish-person's gills turn blue when he's embarrassed. Learning these involuntary actions can even be a vital part of some stories, such as when people from two different species have to communicate.

Gestures

We've heard the term "speaking with our hands" because gestures play an enormous role in communication. Peace signs, shaking hands, putting a finger to one's lips to indicate silence – all forms of communication. Just think of how internet conversations would be easier if you could see someone's expression and gestures (even if said gesture is a middle finger).

These are ways to communicate without words. Characters gesturing or pointing things out is a great way to make a point (so to speak) and not talk about it. You can go into detail how a city block has great food, or you can have a character, when asked what's the best restaurant, gesture helplessly around because it's all good.

Speaking of . . .

Cuisine

Food is the fuel for sentient beings. Without it (in whatever form) they're dead, and you don't have much of a story except, perhaps, in the afterlife. Because food is so important, it communicates a great deal about a culture, a people, or a lifestyle.

If your sword-wielding fantasy adventurer has six vegetarian meals in a town, then your audience may realize that's part of her culture. A character used to delicacies may balk at simpler fare they've never seen before (telling you a lot about them). Endless farmland surrounding a town tells you about the economy, how people eat, and perhaps even the politics.

As a personal example, I do a lot of my own cooking, and eat healthy and natural. It means my kitchen is often a bit disordered, you can always smell spices, and there's usually a few unused pickling or storage jars as I cycle through experiments. Describing my kitchen would say a lot about me without anyone having to tell you.

Economics

The exchange of good and services, economics, is a huge part of any culture. Cultures are like organisms, and the exchange of information and materials is vital to their existence. Economics is unavoidable – it may be a dismal science, but its also an opportunity to describe your world.

Rich clothes and poorly kept buildings. Piles of coins but zeroes in bank accounts. Shortages and surpluses. The signs of economic activity can say an incredible amount of things without anyone having to tell you. A comment about needing to protect a vital shipment of materials, or poor-quality food at high prices all say something.

I live in Silicon Valley as of this writing, and as I type, rent is a big issue as it keeps going up. The reasons for that tell you a lot about the area and the economy, but merely knowing it alone is an alert that something is up (besides, obviously, the prices).

The economics in your tales and games will say a lot about the world.

Clothes And Appearance

Maybe you can't judge a book by its cover, but clothes communicate a lot. A smartly-pressed business suit can tell someone you're a professional or at least trying to look like one. Casual clothes may say you don't care or that you're relaxing. A soldier's uniform communicates a great deal about him or her, especially if it's formal with a display of medals.

Clothes also say things about the wider culture. If clothing follows strict traditions, just watching everyday people will say much about the setting. Wild variance in style will tell people something else about the world the characters live in. Clothing may get very specific – think what wearing a band's t-shirt says about a person.

That's just *conscious* clothing decisions. Imagine how much is said by a hastily-tied tie, or muddy shoes? A character's appearance can be an entire story no one has to explain directly.

Artifacts And Objects

Pencils and pens, weapons and cars, all of them say something about a world without you having to explain too much.

Imagine you have a fantasy world, but the roads are covered with "autocoaches, and the infernal glow of their storage globes." You just explained you have a world of magical transport, and even hinted that they've got glowing fuel tanks in just a few words.

Or think of a world that's like ours. A personal computer isn't unusual, but a lack of one may be. If everyone seems to use a bicycle, you've just said a lot about the culture and economy. If everyone uses cash and not a credit card, you've said something else.

Things that people use everyday tell you about the world.

In the same token, be warned that the sense of what artifacts mean can change with time and reference, so you have to be aware of your current and future audience. Technology becomes obsolete, fads pass, fads arrive. You might date yourself unintentionally or use subcultural references others won't get. Choose your terminology on artifacts with that in mind.

Architecture And Infrastructure

What your world is made of and how it is made tells your audience a great deal about it.

Think of how the world around you is built. Materials have to be shipped, workers do work, and systems need to be maintained. Roads are built for reasons. Architecture is engineering, history, science, and art all in one – buildings speak to given styles and economic limits or benefits.

So much is said by what we've built, with no words needed.

Soaring towers speak of some effort of construction. Simple hovels could mean poverty or a hermit's simple dwelling. Decay can be a sign of poverty or war, shining brass of careful upkeep or pretentious design. A paved road replaced with gravel tells you of a decline in the economy or that an area no longer matters to people.

Architecture is the part of your setting heavily engineered by characters, so it says a lot about who they are/were, their situation, and their world.

A Suggested Exercise

So here's something to help practice communication in media without characters just talking. Think of the most important elements of your world that your audience has to understand. List about five of them.

For each of the above categories (Expressions, Gestures, Cuisine, Economics, Clothes, Artifacts, Architecture) ask how you could communicate those five important elements – with those categories. Suddenly you've got thirty-five different ideas to tell people about your world without telling them directly.

This kind of exercise is great practice. In fact, I bet you can think up plenty of categories I missed to try and communicate your world.

So, get to it. Surprise us silently!

Communicating Your World

After covering ways to tell people about your world without using huge infodumps, I want to focus on a few of my favorite ways to communicate information about your worlds in the media you create.

It's obviously important to communicate your world to people. You don't want to spray information around like a firehose of worldbuilding, but you can also easily leave people in the dark about how your setting functions. Sometimes this kind of uninformed poking around may be fun, or intentional, but it can also be done wrong.

Over time, various books, games, comics, and films made me realize how the struggle not to drown our readers in information can also turn into the reverse – we don't explain everything. We don't want to infodump, so we don't think about how we have to inform our readers or players. We think they'll “get” our world somehow.

But without some guidance, the audience eventually wonders, “what the hell is going on?” Now if they signed on to be confused, fine, but in most cases, you're going to have to let them in on how your world functions without letting on you're explaining things.

Let's face it, story flow aside, sometimes you have to figure out how to let people in on what's going on and how the world looks.

Fortunately, there's several ways you can do it.

Look For – Or Create Ways – To Do It

There are certain moments that give us a chance to let people in on how the world works. It's not an infodump or an instruction manual, just those moments where a reader or a player can suddenly go “aha, that’s how it works.” They might not even realize they learned something, but they'll know more either way.

The moment someone has to fix a broken device tells people how it works. The moment someone gets married tells you about traditions. A character’s perspective lets your audience understand something through their eyes in an empathetic way.

There are all these little moments that we can let people in on our world.

What I recommend doing is to look for these moments and include the audience in on them. These moments give you an opportunity to gauge how much your audience should know – and where you can tell them.

(Plus you might just find what you forgot to create.)

As you mature as a worldbuilder and creator, finding these moments becomes more and more instinctive. You develop a sense of intimacy with both your work and your reader and can “hook them up” so the people perusing your work can “get” the world.

Here's a few moments to look for.

Solution #1: Narrative Moments

I look for what I call “narrative moments.” These are the little moments that let people in on what’s going on. It can be as mysterious as an oddly colored sunset hinting at pollution or as obvious as a newscast that tells what’s going on. These are the moments where your reader or player (hopefully subtly) gets an idea of “what's up.”

These moments may not necessarily have to be in the story, but can be crafted if you have to leave a few clues. These are little extras, Easter Eggs hidden in plain site, to help the audience out when needed.

Good narrative moments are everywhere, really. I find that as you improve, you need to create them less, but notice the opportunity more.

Solution #2: Narrative Characters

For worldbuilders, it's a great blessing to discover your cast has what I call a narrative character or characters. I've addressed these as leads earlier, but let's discuss why they're so useful to helping people understand your setting on their own.

A narrative character is a character whose experiences can help the reader better understand the world. It may be someone new to a setting who learns about it (and thus readers learn with them) or someone knowledgeable who explains things to others (and in turn, instructs the reader). In their dialogue and communication the reader can learn about the world as that learning is part of the story.

It doesn't have to be an outright explanation – their feelings, emotions, reactions, and so on can tell a great deal about the setting. The thrill of having what seems to be a boring meal lets your audience grasp the level of a food crisis. Scars from a disease tell your audience just how awful that plague is. An incoherent angry rant can reveal all sorts of thing – as can a cool, internal monologue.

If a character has many of these moments, then you have a good narrative character.

Narrative characters can easily be overdone or done wrong. They can become tour guides who don't participate, Author's Pets around whom the world bends, or dull hangers-on who merely tell the

story. Narrative characters should be characters first and foremost – they're just characters that provide an opportunity to reveal more to the audience.

Needless to say, I like to find a pre-existing character and use their experience to illustrate important points.

Of course if you have a first-person narrative, then you already have a potential narrative character. Otherwise I like to keep an idea of who can be a narrative character and switch perspectives now and then.

Solution #3: Visceral Elements

One of the best ways to communicate how things work in your world is to ensure that you write elements that are very visceral in the proper levels of details and address them properly. People understand “from the gut” experiences – and those experiences can tell them about the setting.

Some visceral experiences are:

- Birth
- Death
- Eating
- Love and Marriage
- Sleep
- Travel
- Work/Leisure
- Sex

These elements are likely to pop up in your stories, and are also likely to be illustrative of how your world works and how your characters and culture work. Showing a complicated marital ritual (or even a memory of how one went) hints at how organized a culture is. Characters playing a popular game tells people the game

is popular – and gives hints as to why.

If you're careful, tiny sentences, little moments, and many things that just happen to be in your stories can communicate the world to your readers. This is probably the most invisible way of doing things – and the least likely way to make the reader feel lectured to.

Inform People – The Right Way

I hope these methods help you out – they're ones that have helped me. Just be aware of them, create them if you must, and hone your abilities so they flow naturally in your works. Done right, your audience knows enough and doesn't know they know.

Which is just where you want them, totally adsorbed in your world without knowing how you helped them.

The Drought

I've spent plenty of time here writing about how to avoid over-communicating your world and how to say enough. There's a good reason for this which any gamer, reader, or viewer knows – a giant infodump is distracting and reminds one they're experiencing fiction. You can build a great world, but when you step out from behind the curtain to over-explain it, people become disengaged and it seems less real.

If you're a person who peruses media much, then you've also experienced the reverse of the infodump: people who don't describe their world enough. As distracting as infodumps are, at least something is there to grasp, even if there's so much you can't get your hands around it. When there's not enough information on what's going on in the world, readers or players are just lost.

You can drown in too much information, or have such a drought of knowledge that your interest withers and dies.

As of this writing in 2017, I feel like I've seen less well-explained worldbuilding in media over the years, less attempts to bring me into the world. I start craving a good infodump because at least I know something is there before I get overwhelmed and my eyes glaze over.

Why? Well, let's explore the reasons people might not explain their world enough in the interest of avoiding these mistakes.

Familiar Song And Dance

Sometimes you don't provide your readers or players much world detail as your world has familiar elements you figure they'd know. People should get how magic works, how finance works, why knights hunt dragons, why aliens conquer Earth, and so on. You hold back explaining your world as the components of it seem

obvious.

You're not explaining things because they're tropes (or you think they are). This is a double danger for any worldbuilder.

First, you go out of the way *not* to explain things. Because your world is supposedly made of familiar enough things, you assume you don't have to find ways to let your audience in on how it runs. You avoid – or even remove – narrative moments, descriptions, and so on.

This approach assumes *way* too much about your audience. You assume your audience understands and thinks in the tropes you're using in an unfounded leap of faith. You also assume that your audience realizes you are working with very standard ideas, but are not communicating that fact. The audience needs something to grasp, even if it leads them to realize you're working with standard ideas.

Second, and perhaps more important, if your work consists of so many tropes you expect people to understand them easily, you should question the validity of your own work. Frankensteining a world together out of assumptions and overused ideas has its own problems, as I've discussed elsewhere. Your lack of communication may be the least of your problems.

I don't always think using tropes is a bad thing, but using them unthinkingly is.

“People Know My World”

If you are fortunate, you've written about your setting for some time and produced many works. In turn, you feel you have to explain less for your audience. Your readers or players have been with you all along, and should know what's going on – or they can catch up.

This also assumes too much of your audience. It assumes they remember all the vital details, it assumes they read or played all your previous work, and it assumes you told them enough in the first place. That's a lot to assume, and any one of those assumptions can be in error.

Finding when to communicate important worldbuilding elements in a game or tale – again – is a bit of a challenge. But that's also part of creating media. You have to ask at what points do you refresh, renew, or explain the rules and principles and places.

I've advised people over the years to make sure every distinct work is comprehensible by people who haven't read or played the previous ones. Not retelling everything or catching people up on six books of detail, but just enough to be understood. People can usually fill in the blanks given the right amount of information and no more.

How do you do that? Well, that depends on your work and you. But remember, think of the newcomers.

The Story Is The Thing!

Trying to “get to the story” and streamline a work is something I see now and then (and often goes hand-in-hand with using too many tropes). One is trying to get to the action without having enough explanation of why it happens or what's going on. The story, people often think, will let people “get it.”

Except it sometimes *won't*.

This isn't to say that a good writer or game designer can't keep players informed “on the fly.” You can do a lot with action, reaction, and happenings to help people see how the world works. It just might not be enough to help people really get what's going on – at least enough to enjoy your work.

(That amount may be pretty minimal, but you want to at least include that minimum.)

I find people fall into this trap when they move too fast and don't think about the audience. You need empathy for your audience, to understand what *they* need.

A good antidote to “rush-to-the-story” is to remember that, even in our real world, we often have to explain things to people. When your tale or game lacks people even giving each other the basic details, that's a sign you may be making this mistake. Seeing that mistake, you can then correct it.

A specific warning is in order if you find yourself taking the “do-it-fast-and-they'll-get-it” approach. If you're moving so fast in telling your tale, you may also miss the flaws in the tale and in the world. If you're not taking moments to make sure people understand things, then you're not thinking of your world, and you might not see problems.

“I'm Being Mysterious!”

Sometimes we go out of our way to obscure the world and how it works. We want to create a sense of mystery, of the unknown; we want people to think. When they experience this mystery, they're intrigued and interested.

Keeping mystery is a great thing. It's important. It avoids infodumps (useless you have to resort to the Giant Explanation At The End). I'm all for it.

But simply not telling people things isn't part of mystery. If people have nothing to hold on to, then they may get bored or confused. It's a rare creator that can maintain interest in the light of complete confusion.

In this case, once again, try and empathize with your audience. What would they experience reading your story or playing your game? Do they know enough?

Also remember you don't have to tell them true things. Part of mystery is concealment.

“I Don't Have Time For Detail!”

Then you're not being a writer or game developer, and you're not appreciating your world.

“I Don't Know These Details!”

Then you're not being a writer or a worldbuilder.

Don't Let Interest Wither For Lack Of Information.

Good writing, good world-building and world-exploring, means having the right amount of detail for your readers to understand and enjoy your story and world. Anything else diminishes what you do.

Look for these traps and make sure you don't fall into them.

Tools And Techniques

Having a Vision

Much of what I write about worldbuilding is technical. It's about breaking things into areas of analysis, questions, outlines, and more so you can make your world. This is certainly a larger part of worldbuilding, but there's another side to the art.

This other side of worldbuilding is those wild ideas, those crazy thoughts, those "what ifs," the bits of inspiration and insight that feed new ideas into your world.

We all get into moods as a worldbuilder. Sometimes we want to create. Sometimes we want to be organized. Unfortunately, our brains don't always cooperate and we find ourselves too tired to follow inspiration or too inspired to get organized.

If we're lucky, we experience moments where we're both wildly imaginative *and* we get how the world works. That experience where we have "a vision" and it **all** comes together, a bolt-of-lightning inspiration that at the same time helps us make a functional world.

Those moments are when you "get" your world, and those moments are beautiful and powerful. You probably know what I'm talking about and wish you could get into that state more.

The fact that I'm writing about this means I know a lot of people don't get "there" as much as they'd like.

Let's see how we can get you more moments in The Vision.

Worldbuilding With A Vision

The Vision is when you truly "get" your world and can make it live. You can feel the flows of history and know the fine details. You can see it happening and it makes sense, and most of all you

can see the grand themes and small patterns and how they sync up. It's an intuitive grasp of your world that isn't just warm and fuzzy but is hard as nails and sharp as a knife while being so *organic*.

In this state you can write *and* build at the same time. You can craft prose knowing you're sure of your setting, and, as you write or design game content, you can build the world on the fly. You can make huge swaths of fictional history, record them as needed, but even as you make them, they're just *right*.

You'll get flashes of your Vision as you build your setting. You'll recall things without looking at your notes or find connections pop into your mind that just make sense. At some point, you'll know your world so well you can write it spontaneously. It's having that Vision almost all the time.

That's when your worldbuilding has really paid off. The world is not just notes and random ideas, but it's something you truly understand.

Getting there is the issue though, isn't it?

I used to believe that you couldn't really "induce" the Vision, but in time I found that's not true. I think there are things you can do to keep getting into "the know" and start making it part of you. None are a single direct gateway, but they're tools to help you "build the gateway" as it were.

Getting To The Vision

So when it comes to getting a Vision, there are some things I've found can help you develop that connected sense of the world you're building. Try these techniques and find which ones work for you, but try all of them if possible, and keep retrying ones that didn't work. You want to keep your imagination fired up.

Here's what I recommend:

Print out and reread your timelines and world notes. Keep a book or wiki if you can. Doing this can inspire you, give you new ideas, let you spot flaws, and slowly work the information deep into your mind. Over time, the world becomes more a part of you, and you may experience moments of Vision.

Keep a book to jot down your random world ideas. Review these notes every two weeks to a month and put them in your worldbuilding documents. This constant review and openness may cultivate a Vision.

(I actually keep a Brainstorm Book for general inspiration and it's worked for years.)

Reread your own stories in your setting. Don't do this as an editor, do it as a *reader*. This may be painful (you are going to notice *so* many errors, trust me), but you'll also keep in touch with your ideas, stories, and characters. Inspiration may strike easier and easier.

If you ask "why," then answer. If you're looking over your world or working on a story and you ask a "why" and have no answer, *find* the answer. Find out why your barbarian warlord hates the color green, or explore the food that was used to survive on the mission to Mars. Learning to answer your own questions that appear in your head spontaneously helps you get in touch with your world and eventually *answer* the questions spontaneously.

Look for themes that appear in your world. Have you noticed a theme of redemption? Of exploring the human condition? Of giant action scenes that are just really cool? Those themes can help you get a feel for your world by finding overarching structures, elements, and underpinnings (and at times, help you break out of them or create or explore counter-themes).

Compare and contrast. Compare characters to each other, nations to each other, spells to technology, fictional history to real. We learn by comparison, and making these wild comparisons can help you get a good grip on your world and boost your imagination.

Try a different perspective. You've thought about your world through the eyes of some characters, but ask yourself how other beings in the setting see it. That extra vision about the world will flesh it out and give you new ideas. Maybe you're writing a giant city-stomping kaiju story, so asking how the man on the street feels could lead you to writing about people founding Kaiju Survivor Groups (I would read this, by the way).

Step away for a while, do something else, then return to your work. You'll approach it with a fresh view that may surprise you.

Reverse it. Play mirror universe. Ask what characters would be like if they were opposites of themselves. (Goatees are not a requirement.)

Look for the "wow." At some points you'll find this "wow" moment when you get your world and your writing and it all comes together – that's having a Vision. That moment is something to watch (but not grasp) so you know how you got there.

The key here is to keep your mind moving and keep shaking it up.

When It Doesn't Come

What happens when you just can't get that Vision? When you want it to come together but it doesn't? Then I'd actually advise writing, with a caveat.

Start writing your setting, but be willing to go back and revise or throw things out. It may be difficult, but getting moving is a better solution than waiting, because waiting rarely helps you get things done worldbuilding-wise.

Maybe you start small or try some of the exercises above, but if you're stuck you can either give up (which I doubt) or hack away and hope – and while doing so, try the techniques above.

If you persist – and are open to it – the Vision usually comes in time. Though it will probably sneak up on you.

Forward!

Getting a Vision, getting a real "sense" of your world isn't something you can follow a path to – but it is something you can move yourself towards with time, exercise, and willingness. When you do that, you're able to write and worldbuild almost as one, and get true creative depth. Also, it's quite less stressful.

It's not always easy to get there, but it's worth it. I'm sure you've experienced it before and know its value, even when frustrated – so try these techniques and keep making your way there.

Finding Inspiration

We've all had those moments where we're just not inspired to build our world – or in writing it or coding it into a game. Other times we're inspired, but it's actually not coming together, which is somehow worse. I imagine many a creator feels they exist inside a permanent form of writer's block from which they escape only momentarily until their lack of creative forces drag them back to their prison.

This feeling of being blocked is daunting because worldbuilding is an unpredictable process. A single idea or clever exercise may spawn new continents or languages. An hour of effort may yield few results. It's just as maddening as writer's block seems, only a lot less is not getting done.

So you need inspiration. Inspiration to get Worldbuilding going – and keep it going. I'd like to discuss ways you get inspired.

What is good worldbuilding inspiration? It has two traits:

- 1) It stimulates your imagination about your world.
- 2) It does so in a way that inspires the complex structures of a setting to come forth in your mind.

Over the decades I've seen many sources of inspiration that can help worldbuilders. Here are ones I've found to stand the test of time.

Documentaries

Documentaries are the Holy Grails of worldbuilding inspiration, and they're everywhere. Bargain DVDs in stores, streaming online, uploaded to websites, available cheaply or as part of collector's sets, extras on DVDs, etc.

Think of all of the documentaries you can find to get inspired: weapons and the military, strange events, food, and just about anything else. You can find almost any kind of documentary you want, and in turn you can find the exact thing to get your mind going.

What if you don't know what you want or just need general inspiration? Surf for documentaries on the internet, grab some cheap ones in stores, borrow ones, or see what's on television. Watch whatever gets your attention to see if it gets you inspired. If it doesn't work, stop watching/listening and move on.

Documentaries are helpful in both the inspiration they provide and in getting "the big picture" of how things happen. They can be lessons in coherence and concepts as well as just plain giving you ideas. You may even find yourself aware of entire chunks of history or science you can use in your world.

Watching random documentaries can surprise you as you get inspired unexpectedly or ideas hide in your brain only to pop up months later to surprise you.

Best of all as you watch these? You're learning. Beyond getting creative, you're getting *informed*.

Obviously I'm also fond of documentaries as you can pretty much play them in the background/headset/bathtub, what have you. It lets you lightly surf for inspiration.

Nonfiction Books

Just as there's a wealth of non-fiction documentaries, there's a wealth of books on any subject you could want. Be it the history of food or strange currencies, someone's probably written a book on it (and if it's really obscure, would probably appreciate the sale). It's not hard to dig up something, probably quite good, that will inspire you on specific subjects.

Self-publishing and small press publishing can also provide interesting personal and historical books, so don't just look at big names and big sellers. There are more intimate, more radical, more personal, and less watered-down books out there to make you think.

Travelogues

Books, video, and audio travelogues are fantastic inspiration for worldbuilders. I think Rick Steves' European travel show was one of my greatest inspirations in writing as he brought cities alive in his shows. All the little details he discussed gave me ideas of how to make my settings seem real.

Travelogues, in their many forms, are good inspiration because they're about someone's personal contact with part of the world. It's not just cold facts or timelines or histories; they're about someone's encounter with things from a *personal* point of view. The water is cold to someone, the prices are high to someone, the scenery is beautiful to someone. This makes the inspiration personal – and can give you ideas of how characters may see things.

It could also give you ideas for telling tales in your setting. After all, isn't *Lord Of The Rings* partially travelogue?

Used And Discounted Books And More

Used bookstores, discount racks, pre-used videos, all of these are great sources of inspiration. Just walk into a used bookstore or browse the marked-down merchandise at a video/electronics store and you can see wonder you never knew you wanted (or are surprised people parted with).

So you can buy a book on a subject you'd never thought of or grab a video you never knew existed. You can find old merchandise long discontinued or books that were printed in great quantities, but as they didn't sell, you never heard of them. There's inspiration a plenty to be had, especially in the cases of the above-mentioned

documentaries, travelogues, and books.

You don't even have to buy something. Just seeing all the different books and videos can inspire you as you look them over.

Libraries

Used bookstores and discount racks are rarely that cultivated, whereas libraries offer some order, quality control, and a quiet environment. Plus it's all free and you get to support your community.

A good library – especially a big university library – is a well-organized and peaceful source of inspiration. You've got orderly racks of books, plenty of magazines, and if it's big enough, it has enough stock to get inspired just by walking around.

Big libraries and academic libraries may even have obscure and rare books you can get access to. There's a possibility of all sorts of inspiration there – I had fun finding some pretty crazy stuff back at my alma mater.

Internet Surfing

I'm sure you've used the internet today, but have you used it to get inspired by randomly wandering around? Well, randomly wandering around with a purpose.

Go and start surfing and try these out:

- Do searches on cultural issues you want to study.
- Bookmark pages with cultural, historical, religious, technical, etc. references you can use.
- Surf randomly around really unusual websites and see what comes to mind.

You have the world at your fingertips, go explore it!

The internet can give you all sorts of randomness, resources, and of course documentaries, documentation, and travelogues like the above. There are even tools for inspiration (allow me to humbly plug mine, Seventh Sanctum at www.SeventhSanctum.com).

Speeches And Events

If you're in any kind of large city you can find speeches and presentations on all sorts of subjects at museums, colleges, and more. If you want to learn about something or just maybe are curious, someone is probably speaking on it. There's probably web pages of local events to check out.

Much like good books and documentaries, attending these is great for inspiration. Sure the person next to you wants to hear about old cars while you want to get ideas for a steampunk 50's universe, but it's all good.

Some presentations and events let you meet the presenter and ask questions. That's always a bonus to flesh out your worldbuilding ideas, and you get to make new friends.

Always attend with a notebook and write down ideas as they come to you.

Find That Inspiration

Inspiration is everywhere for your worldbuilding, just go and find it. We're surrounded by sources of inspiration. We just have to use them.

God, Darwin, History

Many, many years ago, I noticed American politics too often boiled down to blaming things on God, Darwin, or History. Later it came to me that, sometimes, worldbuilders did this as well.

These are three crutches we use to excuse decisions in our worldbuilding – the divine, evolution, and history. Three excuses that let us hand-wave good worldbuilding and thinking, leaving us to shovel in tropes. Worse, we may not realize we're using them.

So, to help you out, let's look at how these excuses get us lazy, and make poor worldbuilding. That'll help in avoiding them.

God And Related

The Devil is in the Details, but it seems God (and any supernatural element really) is really great for rewriting the details for no good reason. Supernatural and religious elements in our worlds let us make – and excuse – some pretty poor worldbuilding choices.

Why does this happen? I've found a few common causes.

"Because I Believe": Perhaps the worst form of “divine excuse abuse” is when people shoehorn in their own religious beliefs without repercussion or worldbuilding. Yes, religious fiction is oft infamous for this, but it happens outside of that sphere – and in religious fiction that's kind of the point, so it's a bit forgivable. Your beliefs may be so close to you that you don't know you're doing this unless you stop and think.

"It's Magic, What More Do You Want?": "It's magic" can be a descriptive term, or it can be an accurate description of how poorly a setting is made – you're just yelling "it's magic" as an answer to questions. The supernatural is not an excuse to not design your world – it's something you have to design. Otherwise it's just a

reason to write what you want – and you might not know you're doing it.

"Unload The Truckload Of Tropes": It's also easy to write God, demons, whatever by simply dumping in pop culture concepts and walking away. They're expected, either due to the beliefs of the audience or due to tropes being so common. Of course that means that you're not building, you've made your setting a landfill of the gods.

As a worldbuilder be aware that God, the supernatural, or whatever, is not an excuse to avoid worldbuilding. It is a reason to work *harder* since you have more to do – and more to avoid.

Deus Ex Machina – the God out of the Machine – was a description of the method of using mechanical contrivance in plays to materialize a god (and possibly wrap up inconvenient elements). The somewhat derogatory use of the term obviously came about because some playwrights overdid it – don't follow in their footsteps.

Suggestion: Review your religious and supernatural elements closely to be aware of what you're doing. Maybe you are writing religious fiction, so get it right. Maybe you need to think out a magic system more. Keep thinking.

Darwin

If we're not blaming things on God, it seems Charles Darwin is next up in the excuse parade as we justify certain worldbuilding choices by invoking evolution. Now as much as evolution is scientific and studied and real, it's still used as an excuse in the wrong hands and might as well be magic.

These are the places Darwin becomes an excuse for us to stop worldbuilding and start doing whatever.

"That's Just Evolution!": Saying of a species "Well, that's how they evolved," and throwing out one or two world elements is sadly common in worldbuilding. It's using evolution as a device that you feed one or two scientific facts into and you hope it pops out an explanation that people believe. And they may, until they realize, say "this world had tall trees so everyone evolved elastic limbs" really misses more realistic complexities.

"Cruel To Be Crueler": Also common is the idea that you can say "survival of the fittest" and then explain away anything from moral to evolutionary issues. "Survival of the fittest" (never coined by Darwin) is a simplistic summary of evolution that misses the complexity of development.

I also found that the Darwin excuse of worldbuilding, just throwing out a few things and blaming evolution, leads to stereotyping of species. "Oh, this species is violent as their planet was harsh" turns every member of that species into a trope, and your world seems less alive.

Suggestion: Study up on your science if evolution is an important part of your world. Not only does it make you a better and more accurate writer, it gives you more ideas.

History

I love history. I love learning. I am all for reading history and watching documentaries to help with worldbuilding. You can research times and people and places and events to get ideas for your world. I recommend it.

However, history can be misused and becomes an excuse to just **do** things. An event or a character is justified by some vague historical comparisons or real-world connections, and that's it. History is used as a prop, but not to bring the world to life.

Here's where using history often goes wrong in worldbuilding:

"Just Like It Really Happened": Yes, it may be tempting to totally duplicate a historical event in your setting, but that can be problematic. First, it may be obvious and people will notice. Secondly, you'll probably do it wrong unless you're an expert *and* people will still notice. Don't copy and paste history: integrate the lessons from it, otherwise you're just shoving something from our world into another, and it won't fit.

(Note: if you're writing historical fiction, go for it.)

"This Is Just Like X": When you directly lift part of history and drop it into your world, it stands out like a sore thumb. History isn't something you can transplant seamlessly, and if you're just taking an idea here or there, your world will be patchwork.

"But This Happened": One of the final "sins" of misusing history is to use a historical event as an excuse in your worldbuilding. "Because X happened in the real world, Y happened in mine." This might be true, there might be parallels, but if all you have is a parallel with no underlying reason, that's all you have. You should explain the similar occurrence in your world with more than a footnote, otherwise it's just dropped in there.

History is a great tool for worldbuilding, but I recommend using it as a learning tool and a tool for ideas. Learn about cause and effect, find examples, and find parallels. Just be careful about transplanting huge chunks of it, or using it to excuse your actions.

Suggestion: When you read a history book or watch a documentary, pick some things out of your usual comfort zones. It helps shake up your imagination, broadens you, and keeps you from settling in too comfortably. You'll also get ideas.

Learn But Watch

So go ahead, learn from theology, science, and history. Just don't drop whole chunks of poorly-understood ideas into your worlds. Don't use them as excuses not to build more of a world.

It's really not worldbuilding – and trust me, it stands out.

Handling Continuity Errors

There you are, innocently writing or programming along, and you look back on some of your published stories or game lore. Perhaps you want to review, maybe it's all in fun, or you just want to see what past atrocities you committed on your language of choice. While doing this, you then see that which we all fear, the specter that haunts so many worldbuilders . . .

A continuity error.

Maybe it's a spell working differently than it does later in your narrative, or you got a location wrong in some dialogue. Something didn't happen the way it should; it's a violation of your continuity; and it's been written, and you can't really take it out because it's out there. Perhaps even your current works rely on that error, which is exceptionally humiliating and terrifying.

If you're a continuity/setting fanatic like me, it's like having someone pour ice water over your heart. You violated your world, you messed up, you forgot, and you probably botched up future plots. You have a terrible feeling of impotence, stupidity, and dread – a real cocktail of anguish.

Sure it happens to everyone, but right at that moment everyone is *you*.

In the words of a certain computerized book, *Don't Panic*, but ask these questions.

Did You Actually Make A Mistake?

First of all, you may find your mistake wasn't actually a mistake. Review your continuity, review the story. You may have written something that you knew subconsciously and forgot consciously.

Make sure you've actually got a problem because trying to fix a non-problem can make things worse – like running off to fix the error that isn't in your next story or game and building a huge plot around it. You'll only complicate matters, and probably make real mistakes.

Is It A Matter Of Perspective?

The problem may be a problem, but only in a matter of perspective. A character may have said something wrong, but maybe that was their way of looking at it, or they misspoke (or could be assumed to misspeak), and so on. The error may be there but, it may be appropriate – or at least explainable (or ignorable until the next edition or a patch release of a game, if that).

At worse, it's no big deal and maybe you can just ignore it or make a note of it if somehow it comes up again.

Can You Explain It?

OK, you determined there's a problem and you got some element of your setting wrong. It's not a mis-interpretation on your part; it's not due to or explainable by perspective. You botched something and got part of your continuity *wrong*.

It may not be that bad. Maybe it's a character issue, like above, only a bit more pronounced than a simple "probably perspective" answer. Maybe you can decide someone read something wrong in a textbook. Maybe the robe was green due to some peculiar superstition as opposed to the purple it was supposed to be.

Now if you can explain something, you may not have to "fix things." Keep a note in your worldbuilding journals or documents. If it's not a big thing, then you may not need to worry. You're covered just in case.

Can You Fix Something By Changing Things?

If you can't explain (or hand-wave) away your problem, you may have to fix things in your setting. What you created will impact later works, and you have to do something about it. It's time to tweak your world – if the error is big enough to require making some changes.

A pretty easy way to do this is to slightly alter continuity to make up for errors. You're probably doing this a little bit every now and then anyway as you tweak and poke ideas into shape or solidify them. This is just doing it with a bit more focus.

Maybe a spell is less powerful than you wanted, so you decide "hey, that is the case," and you need to alter how someone survived an encounter ("after using magic then, I just managed to escape with a good run"). Or perhaps yeah, there was an exchange rate error ("man, remember how many credits I paid on that planet? Right before the rates went down?"). You get the idea. A little bit extra or a little adjustment can work wonders.

Maybe you can mention it in another story or game. Or keep the idea around to “fix” your mistake later. Put it in your notes.

Can You Fix It By Adding Something?

Look over the error. Maybe your continuity isn't damaged, but needs something a bit extra to explain it. Take a look at what is supposedly wrong, and ask what addition to your continuity could make the wrong thing right. It may even turn into an interesting extra story element.

Perhaps you explain some dialogue errors by deciding a character is bad at geography, and over time confronts their poor educational background. Maybe your inconsistent writing about money can be explained by having fluctuating galactic exchange rates, which could be an interesting subplot if you're writing an interplanetary war.

This isn't much different than the above solution of making a change, except you're deliberately grafting on a "patch" to your continuity with something new.

Do *not* throw something new into your world due to blind panic. It can create more problems down the road when your additions, included due to fear, create more continuity errors because they were made in a rush. Besides, you can get a kind of "mission creep" where you keep adding and adding ideas to fix problems, some caused by new additions, and it all spirals into a kind of perverse version of a creative rush.

Can You Fix It By Subtracting Something?

OK, maybe you can't fix your error by adding something. Perhaps there is a part of continuity that, when removed, fixes the problem and maintains continuity. After all, some parts are more necessary than others to your world.

Personally, I don't like doing this. It's a chance to create more problems, even more so than adding elements to your continuity. A story universe can unravel quickly if you start yanking out threads of ideas, slowly becoming an unstable skeleton of its former self.

I include it as an option, because it can work. The heroes weren't ambushed by orcs that one time because, well, their tribal lands just don't reach as far as thought. That disease wasn't cured by the universal vaccine because a shipment was defective or it just didn't work on that unique genetic structure.

It can work. Just use it with caution.

Retcontinuity

This is the Big Enchilada of correcting continuity mistakes. It's not for amateurs, and in some cases, not for professionals. This is correcting a mistake or mistakes (and big ones) by making them part of the story and the continuity. In short, the problems become

part of the world.

We're all too familiar with this happening in comics, where every few years someone decides to press the "Reboot Universe Button." DC's infamous "continuity collapse" in *Zero Hour* is perhaps one of the greatest examples, but your changes don't have to be that radical. Actually, they probably shouldn't be.

In the right hands, working errors into the setting can actually be pretty good. That little flaw can become a cornerstone to something greater. Decide that the time you got some important history wrong in your own world indicates a conspiracy that has altered historical records. A bunch of spells didn't work right due to a magical fluctuation in the universe. What is wrong really gives you inspiration for *more*.

As you can see, this could quickly get out of hand. But, it is an option.

However, this is not an option I recommend unless you're very, very sure you can do it right. We're all familiar with ambitious community building and ret-con falling flat on its face. But done right, it could be pretty amazing.

I'm not exactly a fan of this method, but with great challenges come great possibilities.

One warning, however, is that, if anyone asks, be honest about it. Don't act like you have a plan, just note you found a flaw, and in the effort of figuring it out a greater story emerged.

Besides, people *will* figure it out eventually.

Conclusion

A flaw in your continuity isn't the end of the world, so-to-speak, and, in some cases, isn't worth worrying about. But when the time comes that you must address one, use the appropriate solution for the problem.

The Power Of Timelines

I love timelines in worldbuilding, in writing, and in game design. I love history in general, so I'm biased in that I just find timelines *fun*. However, my biases far aside, there's a reason to love and use timelines when you make settings.

Timelines are both a valuable exercise *and* a valuable resource for worldbuilders. I'm going to go over just why you, the worldbuilder, will want to spend time on them.

Also, it sort of helps justify my love of them, so I don't feel so weird.

Timelines Provide History

Having a timeline is integral to worldbuilding because stories are built on *time*. Recent events have one impact, past events another. Two people interact because their timelines intersect; two empires come to blows because they are competing for the same space at the same time. Your world was made at a certain time, and the gods will return at another.

The value of timelines is making sure you know what's going on, why, and when. If you've ever read a story where the history was all too "timey-wimey," you know what I mean.

Imagine keeping track of confusing history as a writer. Make it easier on yourself and write it down.

Timelines Provide Realism

Having good timelines also means that your readers/players will find the worlds more believable. Even if they don't see them written down, they can tell that they're there. Think of what a timeline brings:

- A sense of cause and effect, and in turn a sense of stakes; that causes can have effects in the future.
- A sense of believability. Good understanding of timelines means a solid, believable world because of the cause and effect. An unrealistic setting can be very realistic when its history makes sense (at least until you realize you've been reading about an Orbital Dragon Cannon).
- A sense of empowerment. Especially important for game worldbuilding. To see the past is to believe you can influence the future or know why the characters in a game are doing what they do.
- Proper conversation among characters. Think how many of our conversations are about the past. Now think of what it means in writing/creating conversation in your settings.

Good timelines mean *believability*.

Timelines Stabilize The World You Build

I strongly recommend reviewing your world (and story, see below) timelines now and then. When you have good timelines and good continuity, a review can also help you polish your world, head off issues, and be a better creator.

We've all made continuity errors in creating and writing our worlds. But when you have a timeline, regular review can deepen, strengthen, and improve your world. A better timeline means a better world – and a better experience for your audience.

Even if you don't think you need the review, writing down your timelines mean they're there in case you need them later.

Timelines Prime Awareness

Building timelines as part of your world-setting also makes you aware of your world. The very act of contemplating interactions and history helps you become more intimate with your setting.

That intimacy, that awareness, makes you more creative as your knowledge becomes more and more instinctive, more part of you.

Making good timelines, even when they seem onerous, keeps you aware of the world you make. You may not even realize how aware you are because it's become habit.

Timelines Help You Create Tales

When you create timelines for your world, those timelines can help you create stories. Sometimes they *are* the stories – every major event is its own tale.

I use timeline-based storytelling when I write or run RPGs. I'd figure out what's happening, how things interact, and what happens next. I've even kept timelines of various characters/groups and then looked to see how they intersect. Literally, the story just unfolds as the different "timelines" combine - or as players interact with them.

This can be great for adding structure to your writing or creating a cause-effect chart for a game:

- Determine what happens at what time.
- Move the "timeline" along and determine how events intersect.
- The events that are important to the players/readers/etc. are the ones that become prominent in your story or game.
- Write/implement what's important (and track what may be unseen).

Over time I find this method just becomes habitual. Which is good if you're doing a complex tale or one of those mega-multi-ending visual novels.

Timelines Jumpstart Your Imagination

When have well-detailed timelines and it's easy for you to create and write. That's great, except for those moments where your imagination locks up and you've got a world with nothing happening. This situation happens to all of us.

This is where your timeline-keeping helps.

Read over the timelines in your world. Review unused ideas, where timelines end, and events that were important. Ask what may happen next, or after, or what could have happened. See what this inspires.

Timeline Creation Helps You Get Organized

Working with timelines teaches you good organizational skills. Good worldbuilding needs good organization, and timelines are pretty much *all* organization. When you worldbuild with timelines you become better organized as a creator.

Making the effort to keep good timelines (as needed) and use them teaches you better organization through practice. You develop the skills and habits to do this, do it better, and do it faster. The more you do it the easier it is – and the better a worldbuilder you become.

It might even help you elsewhere. I know a few cases where my worldbuilding record-keeping helped my career, teaching me about writing and organizing documentation.

Timelines Reveal Flaws

Working with timelines is a way to find out where you have, are, and will screw up your setting. You're going to do it, so having ways to catch it is always good.

First, reviewing well-made timelines reveals where you made mistakes and need to fix continuity. When two events dependent on each other don't happen at the right time, you've got a problem. Fortunately you can see it with a good timeline.

Secondly, having good timelines lets you double-check what you're doing and think about current writing or active game development in an appropriate cause-effect manner.

Third, reviewing timelines keeps you aware of your setting so you'll be less likely to mess up. When your last review reminded you that the Dwarves are facing ecological catastrophe, you'll make sure to mention it and eventually have it happen.

Timelines Let You Stay Productive

You don't want to write, code, or do art. That creative spark has temporarily left you. But you want to do something with your world – you've got time, you've got the urge to move forward, but you just don't want to do that heavy lifting.

Go flesh out some timelines. Go on, figure out what happened in the Boring Century, or work out the exact details of the Rival Band's early days. It lets you be productive when you're not up for heavy lifting, it's fun, and it provides all of the above advantages.

Timelines Can Be Fun

If you're like me, messing around with timelines is also entertaining. Sometimes we need a break and want to come up with the history of an obscure wine in our setting just because.

Maybe that's just me - but it might be you as well.

Time For Timelines

I love timelines, as you can tell. The advantages are quite profound and powerful.

No matter what methods of the above appeal (or don't appeal) to you, the very exercises of some make you better at all the others. Writing with timelines makes you a better note-keeper, fleshing out timelines during writer's block inspires you, etc. Working with timelines in any way will improve your skills.

Plus, you have something to stick on a wiki or a blog or in a later guide, where your fans will catch errors or come up with fanfic that you never expected. But that's the risk you chose . . .

A Team Effort

A lot of my discussions on worldbuilding involve solo efforts – single-person worldbuilding. I'm pretty much speaking to you as a "you" because my focus is on single readers and solo worldbuilders. But I'd be remiss if I didn't take some time to discuss group worldbuilding efforts.

Group worldbuilding is an activity a lot of us engage in. We may do it as part of a defined team, or be a Game Master who takes a lot of player input. We might be running a shared Role-Playing Game, or we may be just having an idea jam at a convention. I don't think we do it as often as solo worldbuilding, but we do it.

We might not even realize we're doing it, we just think of "well, we're cooperating" or "she's helping me out."

I'm going to take some time to discuss advantages and challenges of group worldbuilding. I've been there as well, as have many of my friends, and I figure it's worth exploring.

Besides, maybe you've not considered it, and it might be for you.

The Advantages Of Group Worldbuilding

First, why do group worldbuilding anyway? The threat of too many cooks seems to loom after all, and I'm sure we've all had creative conflicts with others. Why drag that into making a world?

There are several good reasons:

It's Fun: Working on worlds with someone else is a lot of fun. Creativity is often more enjoyable with company, and we all know the pleasure of a good creative jam. Keeping a sense of fun can also head off potential issues (which I will note next).

More Sets Of Eyes: Worlds have many moving parts. Having more people to give feedback on them helps solve problems. If you've been busy designing your world, you may not notice mistakes – or have the energy to look for them – and having someone help makes it easier.

Additional Knowledge Bases: Having more than one person work on the world lets people leverage their individual areas of knowledge. None of us can know it all, so having other people to call on helps you make a richer world.

Learning: When you have more than one person building a world, you learn from each other. Sounds like a given, but one you may miss when you're busy figuring out magic systems. In group worldbuilding, calling on multiple bodies of knowledge, everyone is going to learn something both in areas of knowledge, but also in creative techniques.

Know Your Role: Sometimes worldbuilding as a team means you can split the effort -- someone can take notes, someone can do newsletters, someone can draw maps. It's a bit easier when you can split the effort, especially if it's a short-term, intense effort.

Tag Team: If you're involved in some intense efforts (say, having to make a world for a large Role-Playing Game), it can get exhausting. You can tag-team on various efforts if you need to. In fact, a marathon worldbuilding session as a team might be fun, handing off as you go.

Pseudo-Role-Play: Sometimes the best way to figure out a scene or a character is to role-play. Now you can do that in your head, but it's a lot easier when you have people to do it with.

I'd guess most people don't need a justification to do group worldbuilding, but if you've had some bad experiences with it (and trust me, I know people who have), the refresher may be useful. Or perhaps you are just a solo act, and this will convince you to give it a shot.

Now, as noted, it's not always easy, so let's get on to the challenges.

The Challenges of Group Worldbuilding

I can speak to these challenges from personal experience, as well as that of my friends, so I'm quite serious about these. Some of this was found through painful circumstances, so I'm glad to share them so you learn with less pain.

Come to think of it, this section seems longer than the first one. Which says something, and may explain why some people are antsy about group worldbuilding.

Here's what can go *wrong* with group worldbuilding:

Clashing Egos: I suppose I don't need to explain this, but when you throw a lot of people together, there can be clashing egos. When you're making something so big as a setting, there's going to be an even bigger chance of conflict. It can get challenging to get creative people to focus on the actual creativity when egos battle over what color of eyes Forest Dwarves have.

Personal Issues: Sure clashing egos is an issue in group worldbuilding, but another issue is when people drag in, develop, or experience personal issues. The team can easily be disrupted by an illness, a love triangle, and personal problems. If you've got a good team, you can get through it – but I think a few early ground rules can help prevent problems.

Ownership Problems: People can get possessive of "their" parts of the world, "their" characters, and that possession keeps them from letting the rest of the setting influence their "chosen" areas. Simply put, people have to leave this possession at the door to make the world work – nothing is sacred, unaffected, or separate in a well-built world.

Ownership Problems II: What happens if people make something they truly want to own, such as using in their own work outside of the world? Some clear boundaries of ownership and use may need to be drawn up at the beginning (I usually prefer either "group property/open source" or straight up "you make it, you own it.")

Pseudo-RP: Remember when I said the ability to role-play was an advantage to group worldbuilding? The flip side of that is group worldbuilding can turn *into* a Role-Playing Game. Unless you intend that, it can be distracting, *and* you end up with ownership problems.

Conflicts Of Ideas: People building a world together have conflicting ideas. It always seems this surprises people who do group worldbuilding, despite the fact it's obvious.

Probably the best way to deal with conflicts in worldbuilding is make sure people have fun, get along, and act "professional," even when it's just being silly. Good worldbuilding requires you to focus on good worldbuilding first, everything else second.

If your group can't come to professional agreements on handling issues? Then they have no reason to build a world together.

My Recommendation: Try It

So there are your advantages and there are your warnings. My advice?

Give group worldbuilding a try.

I've done it a few times and I can say it's educational, fun, and interesting. You should try it at least once or twice just to give it a shot. Though there are challenges, the benefits – and the experience – are very powerful.

Besides, if you try it and hate it, you'll know *why* you hate it. You might even get a column or book chapter out of it.

Worldbuilding And Game Systems

The Game – Positives

A lot of people who worldbuild get into Role-Playing Games in my experience. It seems like many creators get ideas from, put ideas into, or think of ideas in forms of Role-Playing Games. I'm not just talking the freeform collective storytelling style of RPGs, I'm talking about the rules-and-numbers type RPGs that we're all familiar with.

We wonder what class a character would be in a given game.

We try and build a character we made in a given game.

We think of game rules as writing guidelines.

We get ideas looking over game rules.

And more . . .

You can see it in writing and worldbuilding culture – it's far beyond "what class is Sherlock Holmes in *Traveller*." It's when we talk about systems like "Magic Systems" that are straight out of RPG designs. It's when we debate esoterica of item pricing that sound like we going over RPG pricelists. Thinking in game terms is built into the modern idea of worldbuilding by and large.

We may do it deliberately, of course. Role-playing games make us think. They give us tools. They give us ideas. However it seems a lot of this use of "game-think" is unconscious – which may be an issue.

I've had discussions with people concerned about the "gamification" of worldbuilding. Why must we hear someone say "well, in terms of this game . . ." or hear characters described by RPG classes? Is thinking in "Magic Systems" limiting us? Is the

use of RPG terminology, ideas, and even rules a hindrance or a help in worldbuilding?

So for those of you who are worldbuilders and gamers, I'd like to discuss the uses of straight-up RPG games, rules, and concepts in your worldbuilding, and how they can help and hurt you. Let's be honest here, we probably think of this more than we like to admit.

Let's start with the good side.

System Thinking

RPGs are often people's first experience with comprehensive worldbuilding. That's useful because we all have to start somewhere to learn this important skill.

I find that using RPGs for inspiration, contemplation, and for fun gets you thinking in terms of what your world *needs*. An RPG must provide the purchaser with enough information to start the game, and that can give you an idea of what details you should keep track of in your worlds. Many have useful record sheets to inspire your own record-keeping.

The rules in an RPG mean (in theory) that there's enough information for the world to hang together. Or sure, it may be bad or poorly thought out, but there's enough detail to play the game. Looking at a good RPG is great training to see what you have to think about to build a world.

The Experience Of Translation

I recall in the old *City of Heroes* MMO someone had done a half-decent job of building Spiderman™. This being a game where I once saw someone play Spongebob Squarepants™ (it had a very good character design engine), it may not seem remarkable, but allow me to go on.

City of Heroes was a superhero game that used streamlined mechanics to make itself accessible, where one picked a type of hero which gave them a choice of a few superpowers to start, and you were off to heroing. Though obviously limited, I noted a few times that the game could let you build perhaps 80% of the superheroes you may want if you thought broadly and accepted some limits.

In this case, this arachnid pretender was simulated by making him a super-leaping martial artist with "darkness" attacks that confused and blinded enemies. Close enough to the famous hero, who bounded about and webbed his enemies up.

Someone had to put some *thought* into this character, and I realized that must have been stimulating to have to ask "what is this character about?" When I translated a superhero character of my own from a previous work, and then started telling fellow writers about the game, it was fun to imagine how our characters could be realized.

It makes you think and it's entertaining. It pushes you and it's enjoyable. Translating a character into an RPG really makes you ask what they're about in someone else's rules.

In fact, this fun of translating characters also leads to . . .

Rethinking Your Characters And Settings

Using RPG rules to simulate our characters, settings, and so on helps us think about them. We ask who they are, how they are defined, how would they work, and how they'd play (what is it like to be them?).

Constraints in RPGs may be there for a reason; rules are there for a reason. When you try to translate the wild idea of a character or setting in your head into stats and rules, it makes you consider them and what they mean. Or perhaps the character sheets or

equipment specs or nation guides remind you of what you didn't think of or need to.

In the case of the aforementioned *City of Heroes*, my own character, a psychologist with supersensory powers, pretty much came down to an acrobatic martial artist. Kind of dull really, but it simulated well in the combat-oriented game. It also made me think about the character, because when it came down to action, his real thing was hitting/shooting/kicking enemies while not being hit.

Get Some Rules

Translating characters and events into RPGs, and indeed playing them in general, provides understanding of rules period.

When I talk worldbuilding, I mean *building* – I love rules, but they can get overdone. You can build a rule system for your world so tight that it ends up strangling itself and never comes to life, but you can also make something that's so freeform it lacks meaning.

When you read a game manual, when you translate a character into a game, when you play a game, you have to think about rules and principles. It makes you ask how things run, how they're simulated, and what they mean.

And may tell you when you need some rules or when you don't.

Maybe you'll realize you didn't define magic, or an economic system. Maybe you didn't ask just how skilled someone needs to be to use a Neural Atomizer without melting the house pets. A game makes you think in those terms.

Or perhaps you realize that a game takes you into levels of detail that are meaningless, or miss the larger context. In a world where magic is a living force, mana points just don't cover it. The gods don't fit well into character classes. The Galactic Confederacy can't be described as one of five kinds of civilizations in an SF game.

Thinking worldbuilding and RPGs lets you understand when the rules matter and when they don't.

As A Test To A System

A flipside to the fun and insight RPG systems provide us with is that building our own worlds and characters in them is a great way to test the game system.

Imagine moving a beloved fictional character into the constraints of a system, or trying to simulate a great battle in a known war game. Imagine what you can find that works . . . or goes wrong.

If you ever tried to translate a personal or favorite character into an existing game system you've experienced this. Sometimes you find a system simulates things marvelously – sometimes you find it doesn't work.

RPGs are ways to simulate things, even imaginary things. So when you start with something you imagined without "the system" and try to make it work "in the system," you find out just how well that system works.

Plenty Of Positives

I'm not going to disparage using RPGs and ideas in your worldbuilding. I'm going to encourage them as useful sourcebooks and guides, and as a fun way to simulate characters.

Next up, let's talk negatives.

The Game – Negatives

Last section I discussed how using RPGs to explore one's setting is a boon to Worldbuilding. There were positives in stimulating thinking, in sheer entertainment, and of course using premade concepts to test the consistency of an RPG system.

Now let's talk about the *negatives* of using RPG systems to assist your worldbuilding. Yes, there are negatives. Hey, it's not all sunshine and worldbuilding here.

The core issue is that RPG systems are just that – systems – and any use of a system can constrain you. That is actually the point of having a system, to have rules to give structure and provide common ground. The problem is the system is an outside factor influencing your imagination.

Which is good. Sometimes. But we're going to look at the negatives.

Stuck On The Map

When you use RPG rules to classify your characters and settings, there's a risk you'll get stuck in thinking that way. The tool for examining your ideas and inspiring you becomes a straightjacket if you're not careful.

Witness how long fantasy games have given us Wizards with the physical endurance of over-cooked spaghetti and no weapons skills. That's back to classic D&D's Glass Cannon mages (and cannons with limited shots at that). Forget Gandalf running around swinging a sword, or real-world tales of mystics blessed with health and immortality like European and Taoist alchemists. The idea of pointy hat means a weakling persists thanks to many a fantasy game.

(Yes, I know Gandalf was more than human, but still.)

That's just *characters*. There are also the mechanics of skills or technology, worldbuilding ideas, and more that come into play that can constrain you. Your magic system looks all too much like one in a game that inspired you. You think in terms of cultural classifications from a Sci-Fi game for the planets you design.

When you think in systems, the systems can end up being a substitute for thinking. You can't get off the map. You might forget you're on one until someone in your audience notices it – and you realize you're not only constrained, you're obviously constrained.

The Easy In

Some RPG ideas, like the aforementioned Wizard of Wimp Street, have so soaked into our ideas and stories that we're vulnerable to them. How many times do you see the idea of mana thrown around in discussions of magic when it really is just a game concept for a magical fuel tank (derived from yet other concepts)? Some ideas are so prevalent we might not notice they trap us.

When we use RPG systems for ideas, there's a risk we're already so close to using them we might not notice the system is trapping us. We're already thinking in terms derived from RPGs that the right one can lead us right into a cage we can't see.

We might already be in the cage. Maybe you're already thinking in RPG terms, and are in danger of getting drawn in further.

System Reliance

If you use an RPG for inspiration or to try out ideas in your world, you may also find yourself leaning on it too much. It may provide guidance or help or just plain crazy ideas, but it can also be a crutch. Too much of this and you'll start needing a system to think or get ideas.

The worldbuilding becomes dependent *on* a system, when the worldbuilding should come first. If you've ever seen a game-master or player struggle to fit an idea into rules, you know what I mean.

Now imagine that happening to your worldbuilding, and you have an extra level of bad.

That means you have to depend on yourself, the worldbuilder, first.

Mechanic Panic

Another issue of using RPG rules and ideas to help you flesh out your world is that rules skew the stories told.

Many, many RPGs are just war games wearing funny pants. The comment that most RPGs seem to be heavily based towards killing things and inventory management (indeed, I argue early D&D was survival horror) shows how ancestral ideas skewed current ones in games alone. Now imagine that kind of legacy as part of your world.

At the same time, look at open-ended story telling RPGs, or even freeform ones. There may not be enough details there, the mechanic may be "whatever we agree on," leaving you with less guidance to solidify your world. Sometimes you want warm and fuzzy characters, but another time you need the economics of space travel in numbers.

Using RPG worlds and ideas means that the system you use may limit the ways you flesh out your world, and thus the stories you can tell. You may have an overabundance of detail that doesn't help the story, or a lack of detail where you need it because you're used to going freeform.

Language Barrier

Though RPG systems can be useful for explaining things to people, that very utility is also limiting. RPG systems have their own languages and terms – terms that may be useful for a game, but may not be good as a writer. The language of the game can infect the language of your story.

Think how classifying a story as a genre basically gives people reading instructions. It sets expectations. It affects writing. Now if you lean on RPGs for ideas and inspiration too much, the language of the game can become part of your writing and the world.

It could mean that your characters sound like they're reading from rulebooks. It could mean descriptions sound like a terminology guide. It sounds wrong because it's language “outside” the setting, breaking the sense of setting being its own thing.

If the language of an RPG doesn't fit the story you'd like to tell, then it can confuse your audience. Imagine being influenced by a combat-oriented RPG and trying to write a story that has a strong romance plot, but you keep thinking in "combat." Your audience may get confused by your wording.

Be careful about leaning on RPGs, they'll affect how you write and think.

As Always, Tools

RPGs in the end are tools for worldbuilding. Tools for thinking and creativity and reminding oneself. Like any tool, they should be used when appropriate – and don't hurt yourself or your world with them.

Skill Development For Worldbuilders

Worldbuilding As A Skillset

So you want to be a good worldbuilder. You want to improve and evolve and get better.

Maybe it's because you like to write, and you'll be crafting new worlds regularly. Maybe you want to dive deep into a world and deliver your ultimate work. Maybe you're a game developer, and it's part of the job. Maybe you build settings for your friends to game in. Whatever the motivation, some of us want to be better at worldbuilding than we are now.

I imagine if you're reading this book – and read this far – that you probably want to get better at it.

But this raises a question: is worldbuilding a skill you can improve? Is it a skillset or is it something else?

Let's take a look.

Start With The Results

When we take a look at the settings people have built, we can notice a few things that give us a clue to our question – “is worldbuilding a skill?”

We can comment on if a world is good: It's easy to talk about quality of setting when we look at a game, novel, or film. Clearly some worlds are simply better built than others despite subjective elements. We may hate a world, but can give its creator recognition for a job done well enough for us to despise it.

We can comment on change in quality of setting: It's not hard to look at an author or a writer or a game developer and comment on their skill in delivering a setting and how it changes over time. Something improves or degrades in the creator's ability.

On an instinctive level, it seems that worldbuilding is indeed a skill. At the same time, it seems hard to classify. Is it the excellent genealogies? The compelling economies? The coherent languages? We can discuss the quality of a world, but it seems that's only in pieces.

This is where the clues start coming together – worldbuilding is about good pieces made to work in harmony.

Having A Project And Getting With The Program

Allow me to digress a bit into my career. Trust me, this is relevant.

As I write this, I'm a Project/Program Manager and Scrum Master by profession. Project Managers plan, schedule, and organize specific projects to make sure things get done. Program Managers coordinate projects to come together and deliver on even larger efforts – like a marketing campaign. Both jobs are about getting things to happen and making sure everything is coordinated so work is accomplished.

If you were to ask what these professions are actually about, it requires two answers. There's a core set of skills you have that you use on the job: organization, common terminology, and so on. But there are also a lot of things that involve all the stuff you coordinate: people skills, technical knowledge, budgeting, and so on.

Project and Program Management are both a set of skills that let you put other skills and knowledge together.

Additionally all Project and Program Managers have some kind of specialty – some skillset that enhances what they do or defines them. I'm a former engineer and big on writing, reporting, and meeting people. Others are accounting wizards or statistical geniuses. It seems we're often defined by these skills that aren't distinctly part of what we do; they're the extra edge.

This taught me what worldbuilding is – it's like management. It's a skillset that lets you put the pieces together to make a world. In addition, worldbuilders all have their own special edges that make what they do their own.

Worldbuilding: A Skill about Other Things

We now have a clear definition: worldbuilding is the ability to use one's skills and knowledge to create a believable setting. Just as I and my fellow Program/Project Managers juggle a lot of pieces into a whole, so must the worldbuilder. Managers rally people to get software done, worldbuilders rally their knowledge to produce a world.

Worldbuilding is the skill of using other abilities to build a setting.

But, what are those traits of the worldbuilding skill? Well, I'm glad you asked, because I think we can detail them here.

The Worldbuilding Skills

So what can you do to improve these core worldbuilding skills? Well, we need to identify what they consist of, and here's what I've been able to identify so far. I'm sure there's more work to be done here, this is just my start.

Worldbuilding consists of:

- **Causation** – The ability to understand cause and effect on your world. You understand how actions and results work and map them.
- **Origination** – The ability to understand when something in your setting distinctly comes into being. Causation can cause origination – a war produces a new country, a love affair produces a birth, etc.

- **Termination** – You understand when things end. You know when distinct parts of your setting are over with. A character dies, a poet falls into disgrace, a mountain crumbles.
- **Relation** – You understand how the parts of your world relate together and affect each other.
- **Research** – You know how and *when* to ask questions of yourself or of experts to define your world.
- **Communication** – The ability to communicate your world to yourself and to others.
- **Recording** – You know how to store and recall information about your world. Recording information is vital to relation, communication, and research.
- **Terminology** – You know how to relate information to your world using appropriate language.

You'll notice something's missing here – all the other skills that relate. Knowledge of science and psychology, of language and history, of people and places. That's because what I just listed are the core worldbuilding skills.

But you also need other skills to use *these* skills on.

The Details Are The Devil

Much as a manager has core skills in planning and organization, but needs other skills – and other people – to make things work, you need many other skills as a worldbuilder. These are skills that your core worldbuilding abilities put into play, but are distinct and separate.

They're also something where we're going to vary widely in our abilities to use. Some of us are great at biology and bad at psychology, other people are great at understanding mechanical issues but don't get history. In short, each of us has a set of skills that lend themselves to our worldbuilding.

But we're each radically different.

This means even people with the same worldbuilding skill level may produce radically different settings or have radically different inclinations. That's simply because no matter our core worldbuilding skills, the other abilities we leverage differ greatly from person to person.

But For Now . . .

Keep this in mind: to be a good worldbuilder you need to develop core worldbuilding skills. These skills allow you to tie together information, knowledge, and ideas in a manner that builds a coherent setting. In turn, these core skills rely on other abilities to work, so you need to develop both.

Not easy? Well, if this was easy I don't think we'd find it as enjoyable.

Worldbuilding As Skillset: The Details

Previously I mentioned that worldbuilding is a skill, but a skill like some management professions. Worldbuilding is the ability to *combine* skills, knowledge, and so on to produce a setting. The worldbuilding skill lets you build a world, relying on various other things you know and do.

As noted, I think it's a skill that can be identified and thus improved, which is fairly obvious as we can compare world quality and seek to improve the quality of those we build. But there's only so much you can do with your worldbuilding ability before you have to improve what it relies on – all the other things you know and can do besides building fictional settings.

Much as a good manager needs good people, a good worldbuilder calls on a huge amount of other talents to make their setting. In fact, that leads to a challenge I want to address.

Different Foundations (Not The Asimov Kind)

Let me get this out of the way. Worldbuilding relies on rallying individual abilities and knowledge to build a world. That means that no one does it alike, no one is the same, and everyone has advantages and problems. This uniqueness means it's challenging to develop one's worldbuilding abilities because we're all different

Tolkein's worldbuilding was the result of knowledge of myth and a love of creating language, and possibly his desire to make thesauruses cry. Sir Terry Pratchett's *Discworld* is a mix of sharp wit, parody, and an understanding of the human condition. The world of the anime crime drama *Psycho-Pass* is one focused on extrapolating technology and psychology.

(This is just about solo worldbuilding, look at the crazy-quilt composite worlds of *Star Trek*, *Star Wars*, *Warhammer 40K* and so on. That's a whole other issue entirely.)

Because everyone is so different, this makes building the skills our worldbuilding relies on challenging. Let's ask where you can start.

What Do You Improve?

So, beyond your core worldbuilding skills, what others should you develop, improve, or at least get to functional mediocrity? That's an overwhelming question.

Here are just a few issues you'll face:

- 1) Where do you start? There's so much you could learn.
- 2) Role models can be challenging to look at because even if you admire them, you're not them. I may love Grant Morrison and Sir Terry Pratchett and so on, but I'm not them.
- 3) There may be so many gaps. Even if you want to fix something, where do you start?

Ages ago I just would have shrugged and said, "I dunno, learn things and have fun with it." But in time, as I studied worldbuilding more, I came to see this "where do I start" question as a serious problem. Having watched authors, friends, and myself work on worldbuilding, I have found a few rules to help you.

Rule #1: Go with what you know. You will never ever know everything you need to be perfect, so work with what you know and on improving what you know. Build on your strengths.

By improving your strengths, be they genealogy or language, you are working on improving skills in a less-stressful, more personal way, and using what you've already got in your head. In many cases, diving deep into one subject connects you to others past a certain point, just as biology and chemistry come together, or

psychology and history intertwine.

Rule #2: Fill in the gaps when needed. Admit when you have gaps and work on filling them in – don't ignore them or be ashamed of them. Just learn to realize when you don't know something it's OK to fill it in, and it may not be perfect, but good enough to do the job.

This means you learn to fix gaps in knowledge without worrying about it, and develop your research skills. In time you may add new skills to your repertoire.

Rule #3: Have fun. Part of #1 is to run with what you know, and enjoy and use that to be a better worldbuilder. The enthusiasm can take you down the rabbit hole more than once into some interesting and useful areas of knowledge.

By building and using what you enjoy, you'll be a better worldbuilder. It also relieves the pressure and keeps things from being too formalized, which can kill imagination.

Rule #4: Use everything. Learn to rally everything you know, learned, understand, or even have vague knowledge about. Building a world is a gritty, hands-on business; so when you have something that pops into your head, use it. I've used everything from my knowledge of cooking to obscure historical tidbits in my work.

Leveraging everything you have calls upon all your diverse levels of knowledge. In turn, it may lead you to new areas of skill improvement, or ideas of what you can improve.

Work with what you have, fill in the gaps, and have fun.

Accept The Gaps

You also have to accept you can't do and know everything when it comes to worldbuilding.

This is challenging. We've seen very talented worldbuilders who seem to know everything. We've seen amazing creations that humble us. We figure we'll never be as good as them.

The truth is you'll never be like them because we're all different. But as good? Not so. We're all good in different ways.

Even the authors I greatly admire are ones I can also target for criticism (I shan't for the sake of propriety). I've written on this enough and been obsessed with worldbuilding enough that the gaps jump out at me. It's only my own sense of enthusiasm that keeps me from constantly picking myself apart when I make settings or give advice.

You are going to do some things poorly, you are going to do some things mistakenly, and you're going to make some doozies of errors. You can't prevent this because you're human; you don't know everything. Building a world is playing god(dess) and you're only human, so your qualifications are somewhat limited.

So what you can do is get better as a worldbuilder, get better with all the skills and knowledge you call upon, and keep moving forward.

I'd even say that barreling ahead helps reduce errors. If you stay engaged, keep making good settings, keep working at it, then all your other advantages may help make up for, cover up, or even repair your gaps.

Constantly worrying about it isn't going to help, that just wastes time and energy.

Things You Might Want To Improve

OK, I gave you advice on what to improve skills-wise, but here's a grab bag of things I think help worldbuilders in general. Consider it inspiration if you're really looking for where to start learning.

Biology – Biology of any kind gives you knowledge of a variety of things from how people react to drugs to obscure things about diseases. It's great for designing species as well.

Botany – Clothes, food, animals we eat as food, drugs, and more, all come from plants. Plants are omnipresent in our lives. Understanding botany, even a little, opens up a huge amount of opportunities for good worldbuilding. As an added bonus, since many people aren't aware of botany, it gives you a chance to do some surprising worldbuilding.

Chemistry – Chemistry is a fascinating field because the world basically is chemistry. Good for worldbuilding when you want to deal with everything from chemical reactions to materials to chemical effects.

Culture and Traditions – Whether it's relevant to your story or not, knowledge of a given culture helps you understand people. It also gives you ideas for building fictional cultures, of course.

Economics – Economics is an ill-appreciated area of knowledge, and its practitioners don't always engender confidence. However, economics is also integral to our world, and thus having an understanding of it lets you make a more realistic world. Economics also ties into everything from science to psychology, so it's worth your time to learn about.

Food – Food history is an amazing thing because the history of people (and one would assume, other species) is partially about finding enough to eat and go on so they have history. Knowledge of food helps you flesh out cultures and produce believable writing

on issues like diet and famine, and more.

History – Knowing the history of *anything* helps you not just use that knowledge, but use the general understanding of people and situations. History gives you a sense of cause and effect, which is a huge part of worldbuilding. If that history relates directly to your setting, that's even better.

Literature – Like music, literature gives you an understanding of people and how they communicate. Literature also ties into culture, science (the printing of books and such), and economics (the exchange of information). Literature, like food, is something we take for granted but shouldn't. It's also a pretty good thing to know about if you're a writer anyway.

Medicine – Medicine tells you a lot about how people get hurt, sick, and treated. That in-depth knowledge can be useful for worldbuilding, writing on diseases, or understanding injuries and their recovery. Medicine ties into biology, chemistry, botany, culture, and many other areas of knowledge as well.

Music – Music is a large part of most human cultures, and for some a way of recording it. Understanding music and its cultural roles and production is excellent for worldbuilding.

Psychology – Knowing people is great as you'll probably be writing people. It also introduces you to a variety of colorful and interesting people (sometimes the very practitioners themselves) that can inspire you.

Zoology – Zoology is a gold mine of ideas for worldbuilding, from writing about real animals to extrapolating fictional ones. Just general reading on zoology can give you plenty of crazy ideas as planet Earth contains and has contained some pretty unusual animals.

So there are a few things I figure you may want to know as a worldbuilder. Are there more? Of course, but this is a start.

Get Learning And Get Moving

You will never learn all the skills you need to build a world perfectly. You have to focus on the right ones to compliment your general worldbuilding skill. Accepting your limits lets you charge ahead with what you do best: being yourself.

After all, I'd say the worldbuilders so often invoked were very much themselves, and it seems to have worked for them.

Besides, being yourself is the one thing you can do right.

Pandering – And Avoiding It

Panderdammerung 1: Pandering To Your Audience

Let's talk pandering and worldbuilding.

You want the game to sell, you want the book to be read, you want the film to be exciting. But you also want to build an interesting world and a consistent setting. However, if you did just a few things you might just sell more, just pander a bit.

It's time to stop and think.

If you're really serious about worldbuilding, don't immediately jump into pandering. Don't sex up your world for no reason; don't go throwing in things that don't fit. Don't go breaking your hard work for the vague promise someone will like it. Don't wreck what you've built.

I'm not saying you can't focus on a reader's needs or an audience's interests – I'll address that in a bit. Instead I want to note that pandering can be destructive to worldbuilding.

Why We Pander – And The Risks Involved

Why do people pander? Because in some cases it works.

We know that turning a story into a visual booty call gets sales sometimes. We know that a gratuitous explosion sequence gets people going "ooh." We know you can throw in some almost-familiar characters and get fans. We know it *can* work.

The problem? Emphasis on *can*.

When you pander you can also break your world in a way that screams, "I am so pandering to you!" You can include elements to blatantly get attention, but they stand out like sore thumbs, and your audience feels insulted. Or, as a friend once put it roughly, "I don't want the writers sticking their hands down my pants."

Pandering may be so obvious people are turned off.

You can also lose track of what's real and what's "for sales," and then your world spins into unknown territory – not the fun kind. You can't tell when you stuck something in and when you "meant for something" to be. I'm sure we can look at a few media properties like that.

Pandering can mean you lose your own thread.

In a world where plenty of people are willing to pander, you're probably not unusual, and there are people who may be a hell of a lot better at it than you. You're competing with *them*.

Pandering can mean that you're going to do something you may not be qualified for. Or want to be qualified for.

I'm not saying people can't succeed in worldbuilding pandering. I'm not saying it can't be successful or even fun. I'm saying it's not something you want to count on as a large part of your worldbuilding strategy. Be a good worldbuilder no matter what.

Pandering Versus Worldbuilding

Worldbuilding is about building a consistent setting and set of characters that works. The problem with inserting gratuitous elements into it is that it breaks your hard work. Much as an Author's Pet can be blatant and obvious, so can inserting pandering elements. This stands out, ironically, the more you build your world, because there's more to look "wrong" against.

In the end, I find you have to make a decision of what works for your world or what sells, and, if you're dedicated to your craft, the world wins. Otherwise, what you're doing is just dressing your ideas up in poorly fitted suits of what you think other people will like.

That's also the final problems with pandering – you don't know what people will really like in most cases. Your assumptions can be quite dishearteningly wrong, and then you're stuck with a setting that is a mess and wasn't worth it.

But, I know sometimes we need to get a game to be what people want, sell our books, or get that comic out there. Let me suggest some other approaches to give people what they want without being a bad worldbuilder. In fact, sometimes the challenge can make you an even better one . . .

Viewpoints As Vantage Point

Imagine you have built a world, but your audience want an action game. Or you have a consistent setting, but you know romance in it would sell and you really want to get this word out there. The thing is if you built a consistent world, you can find a place and time in it to give people what they want without breaking the world.

Your world may be at peace now, so your action game takes place in the years before – perhaps punctuated with some *Babylon 5*-like flash-forwards for extra spice.

The world you have isn't one where you planned to write romance, but you want to explore that to get your world out there, so pick a time and a set of characters and explore it. I recall some romance novels a friend pointed me to that had marvelous worldbuilding and you didn't need the romance – I strongly suspect the author took a perspective that would sell and focused on that.

Someone wants political drama and your setting is a light fantasy meant for comedy, so you can focus on the ridiculous political elements in some kind of *Blackadder-meets-Discworld* fusion.

I find it the hallmark of a good artist that they can change the lens on their world and experience it differently. As I've noted, you've got all these different perspectives – characters – you can pick ones that work for your ambitions.

Or perhaps you want to deliver a straight-up commercial work but want to be a good worldcrafter . . .

World As Focus

Another method I see, especially if you've got to pay the bills, is to build a setting that fits certain needs, then go deep into them and build a world among the themes that will sell. Take them to their logical extremes and then some, and do good worldbuilding with the elements that will work for your venture. You might be surprised.

A grand example of this is the *Borderlands* game series, which was reinvented many times early on, but finally became a kind of action-comedy. It's deliriously over-the-top, packed with guns, explosions, crude jokes, and everything you can imagine and obviously knows what people want. In one way it panders, but in another it's a comedic, well-realized, and interesting setting. It's a world where the ridiculously arrogant villain Handsome Jack is annoying at one moment, then reveals his humanity right before a boss fight.

(I will argue some of the plot fill-in between the first and second game was a tad lame, but still well done in the end. Also, I will never forget my first acid-shooting revolver. Can you tell I loved these games?)

I actually am a bit fond of this method of "start with the marketing and build up" as it causes you to explore ideas and may surprise you. You may make all sorts of discoveries, build a good story for a game or book or whatever, and manage to market. It's a kind of pandering alchemy.

Yes, I prefer to build worlds straight-up. But sometimes you gotta eat – might as well do your best work.

Closing

Thoughtless pandering really breaks worldbuilding, and though some people can manage to jack blatant fan-service into a consistent setting, I'm not going to count on it (and even if you do it, you may not be the winner). Instead, I'd focus on the craft of worldbuilding.

With that craft, you can find what sells in your world, or you can even take a seemingly lame set of ideas and turn them into something beautiful. But build that ability.

Of course, if you think pandering to your audience is bad, there's actually a case of pandering that's far worse.

Panderdammerung 2: Your Biggest Sellout

Previously I discussed how pandering to your audience had dangers. It could break your world, confuse your technique, and risk humiliation – as well as the fact you'll compete with people far better at selling out and far less ethical than you. I noted it'd be better to choose marketable premises or pick appropriate "views" on your world if marketing was important, and go from there.

Having covered the danger of pandering to other people, I want to focus on the one person you want to avoid pandering to.

Yourself.

It's bad enough when you try and bound and twist your imagination just to push other people's buttons. But when it's yourself you're pandering to, you enter a whole world of conceptual hurt. If you've ever read a book where the author was clearly writing with one mental hand down their psychological pants, you know what I mean. You know how their world (and their games or books or comics) look – a pile of wish fulfillment and personal delusions.

That doesn't always mean a well-built world, for obvious reasons. This means the work may be forgotten, may be laughed at, or may be a mark on your career. Sure, sometimes self-pandering sells, though you would want to assess the risk of doing that. Exposing your fantasies may not be the high point of your career (though some people can make it work).

So, let's look at just what's up with self-pandering.

Why People Do This?

I've seen many a book, movie, comic etc. that was really just mental masturbation and personal pandering. It's honestly something that's fascinated me for some time – just why do people do this, especially because it can end in humiliation?

These are the reasons I've found:

- **Ideology.** Some books and tales are meant to express or support a given ideology. They're really tracts, manifestos, or rants with characters.
- **Wish fulfillment.** The author is basically enjoying living their fantasies. Sometimes this can actually be engaging if it's done in fun, but can take weird or odd turns.
- **"Told you so."** Some worlds are built as "counter settings" to something people disagree with. They want to respond to ideas, other works, etc. by building the opposite. Usually because their ego is involved, though I'm not going to argue with the idea of just exploring the opposite of an idea.
- **Double down.** Sometime people take an idea and then double down on it to make a point. Ever read a book that seemed to be a previous book turned up to 11? You get the idea.
- **Assumptions.** Some people think that what they like, everyone likes, and pour themselves into their world. Sometimes they're right, sometimes they're just humiliated.

You've probably seen these yourself, and seen some particularly humiliating examples. However, when you think about it, Self-Pandering is not only bad, it can be even more painful than regular pandering.

Where Self-Pandering Collapses

You've seen that book or game that just seems so self-indulgent. They have a particular sense of disaster about them that's often worse than the usual results of pandering to others. Regular pandering, after all, at least thinks about the audience, but self-pandering has a particular way of blowing up.

These are the things that play into those particularly incandescent explosions of bad continuity:

- **Self-delusion.** It's easy to think that other people feel the way you do and want the same things. In turn, you may not see that you're pandering to yourself and no one else. This lets you get awfully far along before your worldbuilding collapses.
- **Invisibility.** People may not be deluding themselves about their own self-pandering, but they may not see it. They can't see how they've projected their own wants and needs onto the world because they're so used to them. Cases like this are actually a bit sad because they honestly don't mean it, and I'm sure we've all done this.
- **Obviousness.** Self-indulgent worldbuilding is often so obvious that it's outright humiliating. You may not see it due to the above two factors, and it can be crashingly painful when you do. You may be the last person to see how you're pandering to yourself.

I'm sure you can think of several painful incidents like the above. Hopefully none you've experienced, or at least experienced publicly.

Avoiding Self-Pandering

So how do we avoid doing this to ourselves? How do we avoid self-pandering and thus self-destructing in worldbuilding?

The prime rule I found is this: your worldbuilding should surprise you.

If, while creating your world your conclusions shock you, if you find unexpected results, then you're on the right track. If what you've made isn't what you expected, that's a sign that a world is truly evolving from your efforts, as opposed to being your desires codified in world format.

In fact, this is a good policy anyway – you don't want your world to meet any kind of simplistic expectations. You want to find your imagination has brought it to life. You want it to transcend expectations. You want to be shocked and surprised.

Look for those moments of surprise. If you don't see them, there's a chance you're really not diving into your world. If you do see them, then it's a sign of both good worldbuilding, and a sign you're either not pandering to yourself (or others), or have broken through the limits of pandering.

I've had this happen several times in my worldbuilding, and after awhile it's delightful. You know you're onto something when things make you go "where did that come from?" I find in time that such shocks are almost addictive as each one is a sign that your setting is alive.

Shocking is what you want, in a good way.

A Few More Tips

Beyond the rule of "be shocked" there are a few more tips I can provide to help you avoid self pandering:

- **Be aware.** Just keep an eye out on your worldbuilding to look for self-pandering. Be on the look out for regular pandering, but chances are, if you're doing that, you're aware of it.

- **Learn to let your world be itself.** As noted, a good world comes to life on its own – give it a chance; trust your creation.
- **Disagreement is progress.** When your world doesn't work the way you expected, when it doesn't always line up with itself, that's progress. It may be that you've surprised yourself or found a flaw to fix.
- **Run with your inspirations.** Go on and explore and play with ideas. That fun, that joy, can keep you from getting dragged into pandering to yourself – and others – though it can backfire at times and become self-indulgent. Most of the time though when the play's the thing, your ego takes a back seat, or at least wants to make sure everyone has a fun ride.

Can Self-Pandering Work?

Previously I made some defense of pandering by noting there were ways to have a consistent world that still had targeted appeal. I actually believe the same can be done with self-pandering.

The key thing is with self-pandering is admitting you want certain things, and then figure the best way to build a world that shares it with others. You still make a good world, you still focus on what you want, but you also make sure everyone else can join in.

I'm sure you can think of a few examples of media like this.

What's the difference? The difference is that you still make a good world *and* you think about your audience. That empathy means you don't gamble on people “just liking the same thing” and keep them in mind so you all have fun.

All my warnings apply, its just that you bring some self-awareness to the whole affair.

Closing

Self-pandering is perhaps a greater enemy of good worldbuilding than pandering to others because it plays to your ego. Fused with other forms of pandering, it can be very destructive.

But when you look for those shocking moments, those moments that surprise you, and when you practice good worldbuilding, you can avoid it – and still have a fun setting.

Originality

The Smoke And Mirrors Of Originality

Every worldbuilder, author, and artist has had that moment where originality seems to be a fleeting illusion.

Perhaps they feel that they can't seem to do anything original. Every idea they have seems done (and perhaps done better). They fear being accused of derivation. They sense everything they do seems to be alike, that they're in a rut.

So let's address that issue that many a worldbuilder faces: how do we deal with the need to be original? Fortunately there's an easy answer.

Screw originality. Who needs to worry about it?

Pointless Quest, Pointless Question

The desire for originality that troubles many a creative person, reminds me a lot of writer's block. Writer's block, in my mind, is something that only has power over us as we name it, and having named it, we've given it power and made our fear of it a trap. Originality is a case of where we have this vague idea of something and, feeling we must find it, fear its lack.

It's all fear with little substance.

Let's ask what originality is, anyway.

Perhaps originality is something never seen before? Impossible because there will have to be some similarity in your ideas or your world to something else. Otherwise, without some similarities, how will people understand it?

Does originality mean something new? New may be a matter of perspective. I'm sure with enough work anyone can find a similarity between two ideas. I once jokingly said the anime *Attack On Titan* and the surrealist cartoon *Adventure Time* are the same – a shapeshifter and a combat expert in a post-apocalyptic future helped out by a slightly off-kilter scientist. So what really is "new" or "different"?

Sometimes the unoriginality is original in another way. I'm reminded of an episode of the show *Remember WENN* called "Between a Rock and a Soft Place," where the crew of a small radio station did a show called "Sam Dane, Private Eye." However, this hardboiled thriller was really a retelling of Hamlet, with the prince as a two-fisted detective. Original or not? Original in combination of unoriginal ideas? Your guess is as good as mine.

Maybe originality means that there's nothing else like it on the market? Depends on your idea of the market, and many a market don't seem to care about originality.

Once you start examining it, you see "originality" is not a solid thing, it's a relative, situational term. "Originality" is useful as some kind of ideal or general point of discussion, but it's not a destination, not a thing.

When we treat originality as a solid thing, then we seek something that isn't graspable. When we don't find it (and worse, when we're in a funk, it can be harder), we become depressed or angry. But we're angry or upset because we can't have something that isn't all that real.

So stop worrying and get back to worldbuilding.

The real question of your setting is "Does it work?"

Integration Over Consternation

The question a good worldbuilder should be asking is about how their ideas hold together. Does the setting make sense; is the history believable; does the magic work; is the technology properly explained? Does the world function in a way that people "get it," and thus buy into it?

See, good worldbuilding means creating a setting that makes sense and functions, which people can grasp intuitively. It doesn't have to be "original." In fact, it may be rather unoriginal. You could even be exploring common ideas so that originality isn't on the agenda.

But if it works and comes to life, people can connect with it, and that's what's important.

Part of the fear of unoriginality (but only part) is that one is resorting to tropes and common ideas. Dead concepts, long ago mummified and propped up in many a story, signposts saying "here's your big 'ol standard plot." We're afraid, in short, of a world that's just "here we go again."

But when your world comes to life, when the ideas tie together, then it's not a world of tropes, it's a good, solid setting. You may see things that have been seen before, but it's alive, engaging, and interesting. It's also yours, your unique vision, spinning away like an orrery.

Tropes are uninteresting and laughable when disconnected. But when alive, that's different.

Imagine a bog-standard fantasy tale with your usual rip-off fantasy game party – the fighter, the wizard, the thief, and the cleric. Sounds boring and stupid. But imagine if brought to life with magic versus religion, a warrior's code ruling a person's life, a shadowy criminal's past haunting them. Then you have a story that could be interesting because it's alive, even if the individual parts

are tropes and stereotypes.

Such settings seem to be made of only tropes and stereotypes until you realize how lively they are.

Stop Worrying

So stop worrying and go build your damn world. Make it work, live, and breathe. Make it function. Make sure it makes sense.

You'll make a better setting, have more fun, worry less, and get more done. Let "originality" be something that's a laudable goal, but one you measure by the liveliness of your setting, and one that you don't let dominate you.

Maybe when you focus on making that world well, originality will take care of itself. When your mind gets really going instead of worrying, that's when the real surprises are created.

Actually speaking of surprises, let's talk about tropes – those anti-surprises.

Tropes And Worlds: The Living And The Dead

Last section I discussed originality being an illusion, but I feel I need to cover the use of tropes, stereotypes, and "seen-it-all-before" elements in our worldbuilding. For the sake of not having to abuse a thesaurus, I'm just going to call these "tropes." Plus, it's shorter to type.

I've talked about tropes as something that can kill a setting because they're just grafted onto a world, but aren't truly part of it. Yet other times I've discussed how you can use them and bring them alive. Let's explore this.

Trope As Recognizable Pieces

So let us consider a trope. A trope is a common or overused theme, device, idea, and so on. We're all familiar with them, from Yet Another Space Marine to the Aged Wizard Who Really Is Gandalf But We Say Is Not, and so on. There are plots that are tropes, whether it's Save Another Princess (in a castle or not), or Destroy The Big Weapon That Might As Well Be The Death Star.

The interesting thing with tropes is that they have a near-independent existence in cultures or subcultures. People are so aware of their cultural context and meaning that they recognize them and understand them automatically. In a few cases they might even expect them, creating some interesting conflicts for worldbuilding and writers who don't want to include these expected elements.

Tropes can be a kind of communication, albeit a limiting one. You can easily toss out some tropes and people immediately "get" what's going on, even if what's going on is "Oh, please not another Sexy Vampire like the last ten." A trope gets instant reaction and recognition because people know it and know what to expect from

previous experience, no matter what your world or tale or game is about.

When it comes to worldbuilding, that can be the problem. That instant recognition and easy access comes at a price.

The Temptation Of The Trope

Tropes are tempting to worldbuilders. The Dungeon Of Inappropriate Traps, The Dark Lord, The Ice Planet, and so on, lure us into using them in our settings since people automatically understand them. A trope saves time and effort and instantly gives people a recognition hit, and maybe even a pleasant buzz of seeing something they like.

The recognition hit and the buzz is exceptionally tempting to worldbuilders. It gives you a chance to pander to people's desires and expectations by throwing out something you expect people to not only recognize but really enjoy. We probably all have something that pushes our buttons that will get us reading a manga or playing a game with less consideration for quality than our usual high standards (or what we consider our high standards).

Using tropes can be a problem for worldbuilding. Though I think they have a place (and I'll discuss that), they can limit us and need to be used with caution.

The Limits Of The Tropes

Tropes are easy for us to use and give us that immediate hit and provide fan-service. Yet, as tempting as they may be, we're probably all used to calling them out. We're used to saying "oh, that again" with a sigh of resignation and a lowering of expectation.

Why? Because a trope isn't alive. Worldbuilding is making something alive.

Tropes "live," making sense and providing context, only because of our culture and assumptions and previous media. Their life comes from *outside* our works. Unless a trope is integrated into your world, it's only working due to audience effort – not yours.

A world "lives" because all its pieces work together. Just as a living person is made of many working parts, so is a good world. When cause and effect make sense, when timelines make sense, a world is a living thing. A living world draws people in, and gives meaning to the tales that take place inside it.

When you just throw tropes into your work, you rely on them to be live independently of your worldbuilding. You don't work to connect the elements of your world, have them make sense together, have them work together. You rely on tropes to bring your world to life in a Frankensteinian lightning jolt, hoping to revive various parts you combined into one thing.

But it's not alive, it's just parts brought to life by your readers' or players' expectations and past experiences. For many of them, they'll recognize that trope, sewn onto the world you tried to make, and feel turned off. There's a lack of symmetry, a lack of fit, and often a lack of life as your little jolts didn't quite wake up your creation.

Really bad use of tropes just screams "not trying," as well as making the world not seem alive. However, there are ways to use them – if you're careful.

The Saving Graces Of Tropes

Tropes are not a lost cause. There are a few cases in which I think they're legitimate or even *mandatory* to your goals.

- You can put tropes into your world in order to explore them. This can be great fun as a writer (How does a Smarmy Space Smuggler's actual economics work?), lets you bring the world to life, and get that recognition hit as well. I have a thing for exploring tropes this way; it's fun, often educational, and the audience can enjoy the ride.
- You can insert tropes in to a well-built world to subvert them by figuring how they'd *actually* work. This can be fun for you and your audience, and your audience will find the trope helps them quickly grasp the story.
- You can use tropes as a starting point. Start worldbuilding with some tropes as a familiar foundation, then build your world from there. Just be ready to revise ideas as you find flaws in the initial “trope pile.”
- Maybe you're building a world that's not meant to be deep; the setting equivalent of a thick, sloppy cheeseburger. Tropes will let you assemble something that meets your goal easier. Good worldbuilding with these tropes lets you make the “cheeseburger” it's own unique experience.

So I'm not going to completely write off tropes. I'm just going to note that knowing how you're using them keeps you from making mistakes. Tropes are compelling things as we understand them, and they can become our master if we don't think about what we're doing.

Conclusion

The danger of using tropes is that we don't bring our worlds to life, connecting the pieces, making everything function. We rely on the trope and not our own worldbuilding to make things live, and the results are more a disconnected semblance of life.

Used consciously, there are good reasons to use them, and some that are just plain entertaining.

Finally, some of us may look at those using tropes with some contempt or sense of superiority. I think this is incorrect as many, many people fall into these traps, and you probably have your own cases of doing so. Let's not get too full of ourselves.

Let's build worlds instead.

Original Me

There's one more subject to cover on that hard to find, illusionary, yet somehow real quest for "originality" that so many of us seek. Perhaps that's the point – if we're not always looking, then we're not original. Whatever that actually *means*.

In fact, the whole subject is "we." Us, me – and specifically you. Are *you* original?

As noted, I consider "originality" largely illusionary, something whose specter hovers over us only because we believe in it so much. What is more important in originality and worldbuilding is to bring your world to life. Even the most "unoriginal" world brought to life will intrigue and involve people. A seemingly boring person is far more interesting than a mannequin.

You bring the world to life. You take the ideas – “original” and “unoriginal” – and make them work. Whatever you create, who you are brings something unique to the world. You are the one thing that we might dare call *original*.

You are the secret ingredient.

So let's ask just what you bring to your world and your tale.

You Bring A Unique Perspective

No matter how common your life may seem, no matter how boring it may seem, your life is your own. How you see things, how you view them, how you interpret them is going to be something no one else can have. Your world and all the works derived from your perspective will reflect that.

Think about how you see something affects stories and worldbuilding. You may have a unique view on some given

relationships, or a different take on cooking, or can relate to a character in a way few others can. Your work is infused by how you see things, and in turn, that affects how people experience your setting.

I'm not saying your life is going to be fascinating or interesting, nor that your take on things will be as well, but it will be *yours*. Work with that because you know it better than anyone, and that lets you use it to infuse life into your creations. Real life.

Take It Further: You can take this further by understanding the unique view you bring to your world and worldbuilding, and the tales and games that follow.

You Have A Unique Sets Of Skills

Then there are your unique skillsets that inform your worldbuilding and your creativity.

Skills are important in worldbuilding because:

- 1) You can write about people that use your skills. Ever read a story where someone clearly didn't know the lifestyle and life experiences of some people? Yeah, you can avoid that embarrassment in your settings.
- 2) You understand how that skill-based part of the setting you write may work. In turn, your world becomes more believable. For myself, I've found my love of cooking added an edge to understanding setting design.
- 3) You might be able to use the skills right in your worldbuilding, writing, game development, and so on. If you're good at explaining technology, if you've got a flair for the poetic, if you know the right words for something, that works right into your worldbuilding and how you communicate it. Imagine being a programmer who writes games, in a cyberpunk setting, so you can make it even more believable as well as well-coded.

4) You have unique experiences with your skills, job, etc. that can provide inspiration. Much as you have a unique perspective on things in general, your hands-on experience may give you many ideas. One of my friends with military service used that experience to take a serious look at military SF and its many assumptions, and came up with a new, unique take that was more informed and more interesting.

Sure you may not think you have any unique or interesting skills. You may write, but so do many others. You may cook, but so do many others. You may code, but so do many others. It's your personal experience and the one-of-a-kind combination of skills you have that make you stand out and bring that "something" to your world.

Take it from a Project and Program Manager who cooks vegan food and writes about geek careers and creativity. We're all unique in what we do, in some way.

Take It Further: Ask what skills you have that relate to characters or settings in the world you build – can you better understand certain parts of your world or better create certain characters?

Unique Experiences

Any writer saying they don't use personal experiences in their world-creation and creativity is ignorant or lying. I'll give you the benefit of the doubt on "ignorant" if you say you don't do it – but you're wrong.

We *all* use our personal experiences in our art. We really have no choice because our experiences are how we assemble a consistent story of our real life, so in turn we'll use them in our worldbuilding. Our broken heart, our feeling that school is frustrating for so many, our knowledge of working in an ER, all those experiences inform what we make.

So we might as well admit it, realize it, and put it to use as worldbuilders.

Our unique experiences – and much like our perspective, they really are completely unique at least in combination – affect everything we do. We can't get away from them because they're us.

There's a combination of events, unusual happenings, and so on that is unique to you. Use that in your world creation to bring it to life and make it "original" by realizing it and using it.

Take It Further: What experiences do you have that stand out in your mind? Are any relevant to your worldbuilding? Are any "common" but you had something about them that made them unique?

So Go On And Be You

These things, perspective, skills, and experience are yours. No one has quite the background you do, and the combination of elements that makes you who you are is unique.

Even the things that seem common to you are probably unique in combination. Sure, being a computer programmer may not seem unique, being into techno music may not be unique, being into surfing may not be unique, and liking to do barbecue may not be unique. But a techno-loving programming surfer who can make a mean set of ribs is comparatively rare.

Realize these things, put them to use, and appreciate them. They'll help you grow as a worldbuilder, provide unexpected tools, and finally give you another shot at worrying less about originality. When you appreciate your uniqueness, you might see just where your work is unique and "original."

And stop worrying about it and get back to work making worlds.

Onward Again

Once again we find ourselves at the end of a book on worldbuilding. It's my sincere hope that you now have even more to think of, more to do, and maybe a few places where you found your own path and disagreed with me.

Worldbuilding is an art worth practicing, worth improving, and worth teaching. Making good worlds is vital to good fiction, and good fiction does so much for us.

Perhaps in time you'll create new works that I'll see – or even create your own guides to worldbuilding.

I'm looking forward to what you do. Everyone is – even if they don't know it yet.

- Steven Savage
February 18th, 2017

About The Author

Steven Savage is a lifetime geek. It started with a childhood interest in science, science fiction and computers. This led to an IT career that started in his twenties, and he's never stopped being an unrepentant enthusiast for video games, technology, media, and more. From geek careers to healthy cooking, he's always experimenting, exploring, and learning.

His goal is to help people in their careers and lives, especially his fellow geeks, fans, and otaku. To that end he writes books on pretty much whatever interests him that he thinks will help people. He also blogs, speaks at conventions, and more.

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