

FORGING FANTASY REALMS



WORLDBUILDING FOR FANTASY FANS AND AUTHORS

M. D. PRESLEY

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Forging Fantasy Realms: Book I

by

M. D. Presley

To Mihir, who long ago started me down this
path.

I may forgive you for it someday.

Maybe.

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Part I: Introduction

“It’s a dangerous business, Frodo, going out your door...You step into the Road, and if you don’t keep your feet, there is no knowing where you might be swept off to.” —J. R. R. Tolkien

“Before you judge a man, walk a mile in his shoes. After that, who cares? He's a mile away and you've got his shoes!” —Billy Connolly

Inauspicious Beginnings

Journeys are dangerous, wonderful, dangerously wonderful things. And none is more wonderful nor more dangerous than deciding to become an author. A romantic mystique still surrounds this occupation for some inexplicable reason, with most folks envisioning the author hunkered over an old-fashioned typewriter click-clacking away in a vain attempt to get the barrage of words out of their head and onto the page. When this tortured genius steps away from the typewriter, it is only to dazzle rapt audiences with their clever bon mots, usually over a cup of coffee or, more likely, whiskey.

This depiction did not match my personal journey in the least, although whiskey certainly made a few cameos. I always had an interest in writing, but I never pursued it outside of a single creative writing course led by a professor who considered any whiff of the

supernatural to be “gothic dreck.” Yet without any background or inkling of the skills it required, I decided to pursue screenwriting a week after graduating college. And because the odds weren’t already long enough, I decided to do so while residing outside of Los Angeles, the beating heart of the entertainment industry.

But the real kiss of death to any potential career was that I wanted to write fantasy.

To put this terrible curse in perspective, at the time I made this decision, *The Lord of the Rings* and the first Harry Potter movies were both still being filmed, and George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* consisted of only three books that were considered unfilmable. Fantasy as a genre had not yet broken through to the mainstream as it would over the ensuing decade. It instead remained the domain of nerds, geeks, and the chronically uncool. Much of this stigma would be scrubbed away over the next few years, but this was the current I chose to swim against when I dedicated myself to screenwriting. Or perhaps it wasn’t a choice at all. Perhaps it was finally succumbing to my creative compulsion and trying to channel it in the right direction.

Not entirely a fool, I shelved all my big high-fantasy ideas in favor of urban fantasy stories akin to the Vertigo comics I grew up reading. This was because I knew filmmaking to be an expensive undertaking, one requiring millions of dollars spent on production before even considering the post-production special effects, whole sets that would need to be constructed, and talented designers for creating new creatures and cultures. With no name or popular preexisting intellectual property to adapt, I sought to keep any potential budgets on the smaller side by adding magic to the world around us rather than creating new worlds from scratch. Then, like most aspiring screenwriters, I took a series of day jobs to support my creative endeavors. Fortunately for me, my career and creative interests intersected as I managed a team of a dozen coverage readers assessing screenplays for seven years, totaling several thousand scripts in that period. It's a cliché in Hollywood for people to brag how they've read thousands of scripts in their tenure, but in the case of my team, we had the hard data to back up our boasts.

Yet while I peddled my urban fantasy stories, one story set in another world would not let me go, and for over a decade, I kept adding bits and pieces to the idea. Invariably it would rear its head at the most inopportune times, usually when deadlines loomed for other

projects. And so it festered until I finally decided to exorcise myself of the demon by writing it out. So while awaiting a new set of notes from my producers, I began outlining the characters, plot, and world for my own edification. My producers, being European, did not tell me they decided to take the entire month of August off, and by the time they resurfaced with the next set of notes, I had already filled out over a hundred pages. With that groundwork laid, the rough draft of what would become my first series appeared in six weeks. I wrote as if possessed and even relearned how to type after breaking two fingers. But the pain and splints would not dissuade me, and soon enough I could count myself as one of those few people who had completed a novel.

After a few editing passes, I now had a finished fantasy reimagining of the American Civil War. Having had all my big ideas shot down by producers wise enough to run screaming from anything that smacked of high fantasy and unwilling to begin the querying process anew with a slew of traditional publishers, I turned to self-publishing. A few more weeks of online research, a disastrous first cover, and calling in every favor I accrued over the years, I released my book to a whole thirty sales that first week.

And thus began my inauspicious introduction into being an author.

But my journey into worldbuilding didn't begin until I entered my first book in Mark Lawrence's Self-Published Fantasy Blog Off. An outgrowth of Lawrence wondering how many quality self-published fantasy novels languish without ever being discovered, he teamed with ten brave bloggers to judge 300 applicants. Each blogger would whittle down their thirty novels to one champion, with the ten finalists then pitted against each other. Established in 2015, the Self-Published Fantasy Blog Off (or SPFBO, to those in the know) has succeeded in bringing some much-needed attention to self-published fantasy authors, burnished away many negative connotations, created a vibrant online community, launched several careers, and (ironically) led to several authors becoming traditionally published.

With the no-entry fee being exactly what my meager marketing budget would allow, I entered the third year of the competition and found myself in *Fantasy Book Critic's* group, headed by Mihir Wanchoo. Since *Fantasy Book Critic* had been around for nearly a decade and helped discover Michael J. Sullivan, who would go on to reach numerous best-seller lists, this was a lot of pressure. Mihir soon reached out, and although I was not ultimately chosen as their

champion, I did receive a wonderful review and advocates in their team. Other sites took notice, and more reviews came streaming in, all complimentary of my worldbuilding. One reviewer in particular postulated that I knew my world so well that I could probably tell her the best regions to grow wine. She said this in jest, but when I answered her with very specific regions, it amused her to no end. And even those reviews that did not care for my female anti-hero or non-linear storyline still mentioned the strength of the worldbuilding.

So, like any opportunist author seeing a chance to stand out from the pack, I pivoted my marketing strategy to drill down into my unintentional “brand” with the hope of weaponizing it. I intended, in a matter of weeks, to become “the worldbuilding guy,” the fellow others turn to as an expert on the subject. With any luck, I would soon be invited to panels on worldbuilding, where I would dazzle audiences with my clever observations, which would lead to me being invited to all the right writerly parties, which would eventually culminate in me buying a tweed sports coat and smoking a pipe to really hammer home my affected author archetype.

But I hit an immediate roadblock in that I could not put a finger on what constituted “good” worldbuilding. And what exactly was “bad” worldbuilding? Why did some reviewers praise mine while tearing

apart others that I considered equally as good? How could I become *the* expert on the subject when I couldn't even come up with a serviceable definition of my topic?

Journeys are indeed dangerous, wonderful things, and after having stayed the path Mihir started me down for three years, I can confidently say that, despite its ubiquity in the science fiction and fantasy genres, there is no shared definition for what worldbuilding entails. Plenty of people bandy the word about, with most reviews at least making some mention of the stuff. Yet what exactly this mysterious concoction consists of still remains a mystery to most.

Worldbuilding Approaches

This is not to say there is not already a wealth of information out there. An entire library could be dedicated to books on writing fantasy and science fiction, and numerous thriving online communities exist for discussing worldbuilding. The Reddit [/r/worldbuilding](#) community alone boasts more than a half-million members at the time of writing, while constructing worlds is a critical component in game design. Yet there is no definitive underlying approach applied to worldbuilding for fantasy stories, which I find odd considering that worldbuilding originated within the medium of storytelling before spreading to the other disciplines. During my research, I discovered that there

appeared to be as many theories on what constituted good and bad worldbuilding as there were fantasy fans and authors. So with that in mind, I availed myself to anything I could find on the subject, which quickly became overwhelming. But I soon divided the existing material into two distinct groups.

The first is academic, with such luminaries as Douglas Parker, who taught comparative worldbuilding in his parageography course at the University of Texas from 1987 to 2007. Parker left behind a wealth of information on comparative worldbuilding in classical works as well as his outline for teaching parageography, which required his students to create their own world as a final project, all of which can be found at douglassparker.org. Mark J. P. Wolf's *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* is another treasure trove of information, with Wolf chairing the communication department at Concordia University Wisconsin and being one of the leading scholars on video game theory and worldbuilding. Each of these sources proved invaluable to me as a fantasy fan, with both being intensely interesting on the intellectual level, but neither terribly applicable to me as an author.

The other end of the spectrum consisted of other authors who put together how-to books, checklists, and workbooks on the subject.

After just a few online searches, I quickly found dozens of worldbuilding tools, slides, and infographics. These included the well-known names of Hugo and Nebula-winning authors N. K. Jemisin and Orson Scott Card as well as anthropologist-turned-fantasy-author Steven Erikson. These tools also illuminated the way as the authors delved deep into their processes to recount their worldbuilding from inception to completion. But these resources, and the other dozens of books on the subject, all approached worldbuilding from each author's own personal perspective alone. In effect, each book provided a distinct path to the promised land of good worldbuilding, yet each route was different, and none mirrored my own particular path. This personalized approach was compounded by including the role-playing community, who have been building intricate worlds for over forty years after the invention of *Dungeons & Dragons* by Gary Gygax and Dave Arneson. Hundreds of different game systems now exist, with thousands of game masters fashioning their own unique worlds for others to explore. Before the invention of role-playing games, worldbuilding was mostly the domain of authors, but it has been effectively crowdsourced since then. No longer was it only authors attempting to get their individual worlds across but thousands upon thousands of worlds designed to interact and provide

entertainment for millions of gamers across the globe. The internet provided a platform for these folks to share their worlds, along with best practices in designing them as well as several more books on the subject. But as with authors, each of these routes was based on personal experience. And they were scattered throughout the internet like so many clues along a scavenger hunt.

There is clearly a lot of middle ground between these two extremes, one being the comparative academic analysis and the other the intensely personal experience. And it's within this middle ground where most authors and fans reside, even though we still can't quite agree on shared definitions of worldbuilding. Yet we're all exceedingly sure we know what makes for good worldbuilding. Similar to how United States Supreme Court Justice Potter Stewart tried to define pornography in his well-known quote, we believe we can identify good worldbuilding when we see it. But that's like making a literary criticism without a literary theory underlying it. In effect, this is the realm of opinion, which everyone is entitled to. But it is not criticism, which has a consistent philosophical component to its process. Like a good story, good worldbuilding deserves to be poked and prodded, to be examined by the curious to see if it will stand up to the stress tests of intellectual rigor. Dozens of literary theories

exist, some outright contradicting the others, and while literary critics might favor one theory over another, they are expected to be knowledgeable about them all so they can apply the right theory to the applicable text.

With that in mind, my goal for this book is to distil many of the existing worldbuilding theories and philosophies to create a shared vocabulary, to sift through the inordinate material, find the patterns, and compile them here. For fellow fantasy fans, the intent is to have a shared vocabulary for expressing what worldbuilding details did and did not work in fantasy stories. For fantasy authors, the goal is to be more mindful of our decisions before sharing our deeply personal creations with audiences.

In college, I was lucky enough to study anthropology at Durham University for a year, where I took a course on the anthropology of art. I entered that class knowing little about either art or anthropology, yet I felt confident I could define art if someone put a gun to my head. Several months later I exited the class with significantly more knowledge on both art and anthropology. However, with so much understanding now crowding my brain, even defining what “art” was became difficult in that I could spew numerous theories and analytical

arguments at the drop of a hat. Ironically, by spending an academic year on the subject, I now proved incapable of explaining it succinctly.

By knowing more, I somehow understood less.

Such a situation is the opposite of my intention here, so I will open this book with a clear definition of worldbuilding. Firstly, as a verb, worldbuilding is the process of constructing an imaginary world, which can consist of something as small as a room or large enough to encompass an entire universe with multiple alternative timelines. Worldbuilding as a verb is used when constructing a world for any purpose, be it for a narrative story, an interactive game, or even just a mental exercise of wondering “what if?” That said, although we will draw from video and role-playing game sources, the rest of this book will examine worldbuilding exclusively for the purpose of narrative storytelling.

As a noun, worldbuilding refers to an authentic sense of space and time, such that the setting feels like it exists independently of the story being told. These are the vibrant worlds that critics claim “spring off the page.” This is a bit of a catch-22, however, in that effective worldbuilding elicits a sense that the created world does not serve the story when in fact the world was created explicitly to tell the story.

If that inherent paradox hasn't frightened you off yet, we will spend the next several hundred pages picking apart this definition of worldbuilding as a noun so as to make the verb an easier process. However, please only continue if those two definitions ring true for you. They are, in effect, my fantasy conceit, my core concept that I will ask you to buy into and accept by investing your willing suspension of disbelief, a process we'll (hopefully) discuss later in chapter eight.

But these are not the only conceits that I will expect you to swallow, all of which I'd like to get out of the way here in the introductory chapter. As we'll discuss in chapter twelve, audiences hate a bait-and-switch, which happens when the story strays from the promise of the premise—i.e., when audiences start a story believing it will be about one thing, only to discover midway through it has veered off course.

Worldbuilding Exemplars

As I stated, I come from a screenwriting background, where there's a premium on page length. In my time in the industry, the standard page count for a speculative script has dropped from 110 pages to closer to one hundred, and it's now not uncommon to see some under ninety pages. And the screenwriter is expected to get a full

story across in those ninety through 110 pages, complete with character arcs, twisting plots, and intricate worldbuilding with room left over for a potential franchise. Fortunately for aspiring screenwriters, a wealth of information exists on how to accomplish this. Robert McKee's *Story* and Blake Snyder's *Save the Cat!* are both best-sellers on the subject, but the most helpful resource for my own career was Terry Rossio's blog post *Death to Readers*. For those unfamiliar with the industry, *readers* are also known as coverage writers, whose job it is to review screenplays so the executives don't have to bother reading them. Readers are the first ones sifting the wheat from the chaff, and I had the distinct privilege of working with some of the most talented individuals in the business. Which should be expected since pretty much every writer in Hollywood has gotten their start as a coverage reader, including Terry Rossio and his writing partner, Ted Elliott, whom you might know for penning *Pirates of the Caribbean*. On his website, he provides a sixty-point checklist outlining what he learned while working as a reader, and #36 has always stuck with me:

“Every single line must either advance the plot, get a laugh, reveal a character trait, or do a combination of two -- or in the best case, all three -- at once.” (Rossio, 1997)

This single sentence best encompasses the relentless efficiency required of screenplays, which is something I've taken to heart as both an author and worldbuilder. As such, I'm adapting his adage to creating fantasy worlds in that all worldbuilding details must either serve:

- the plot
- the characters
- the world

And the best, most efficient worldbuilding will accomplish a combination of all three simultaneously. As such, the author should keep all three in mind when fashioning a fictional world. Yet it will ultimately be the audience who decides if these worldbuilding details succeed in the author's intent. But the greatest irony of all is that most audience members will not notice when the authors succeed in their tasks, only when they fail.

I wanted to state this tenant of mine at the onset because I expect many will object to the idea that something as creative and deeply personal as worldbuilding must serve a purpose, particularly one judged by others. Having perused the online worldbuilding forums for a long while now, I fully understand that there are those who create worlds for the sheer joy of it, fashioning them alone like Emily Dickinson and her poetry. To these worldbuilders, creating an

imaginary world serves no other purpose than personal pleasure. This is certainly a laudable mental exercise—one I've availed myself of numerous times. But once an imagined world makes its first contact with someone, it shifts from being a mental exercise into being a work of art. And one thing I do distinctly remember from my anthropology of art class is that all art is a sense of self-expression aimed at eliciting an emotional response from an audience. This audience can take many forms, from a single friend offering a few notes, to the expansive franchises inundating all of our forms of entertainment these days. So while anyone can worldbuild alone, thus acting out the verb, once they show it to anyone else, it is no longer entirely theirs and thus transforms into a noun.

It is no longer an act, but a piece of art that audiences will now interpret.

Artists traditionally search for an audience in one of two manners: they find the largest audience possible or seek out a very precise niche. The first method wants anyone drawing breath to see and marvel at their work, which is what we in the film industry call a "four-quadrant movie"—it appeals to everyone. A precise audience, on the other hand, encompasses niche groups, who presumably have more of a deep, personal connection with the material. It could be

argued that this is a quantity over quality dichotomy, but there is no reason to believe the popular worlds are qualitatively lesser because they are so popular. In fact, the inverse is most likely true.

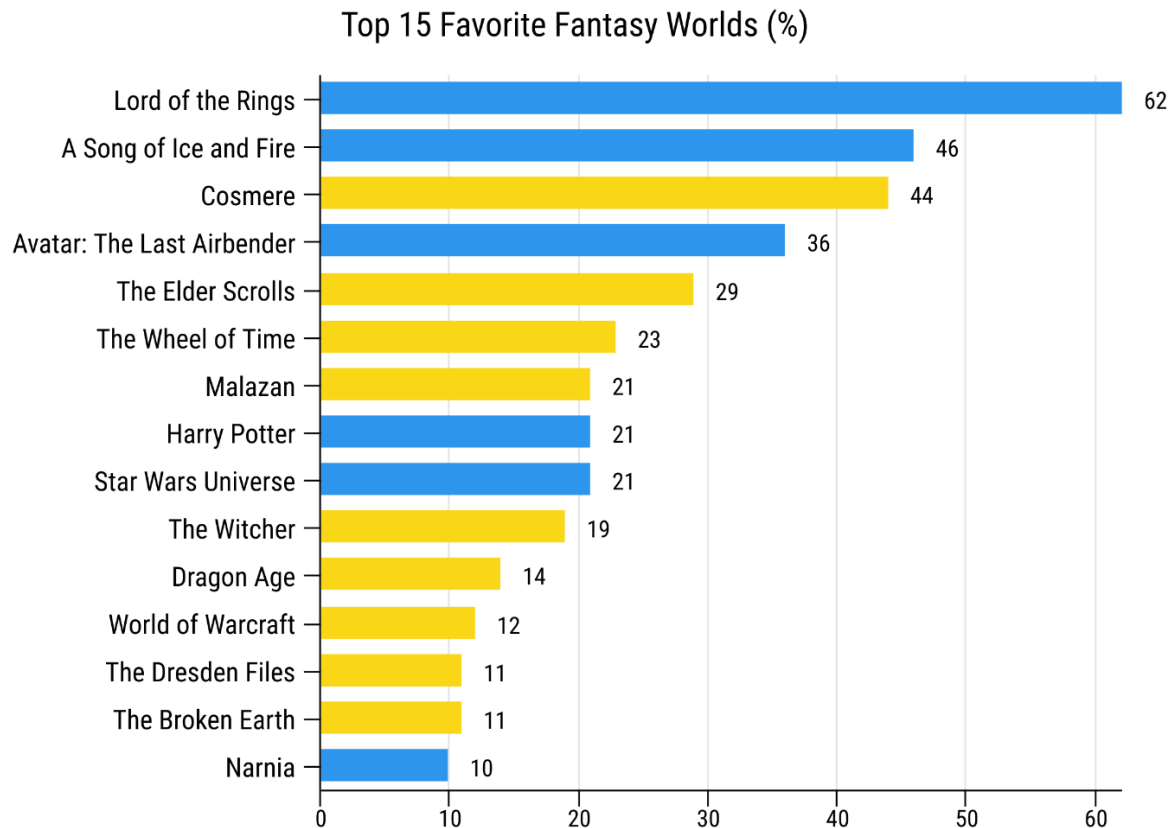
Which leads us to the biggest pill I'm going to ask you to swallow if you continue past this introduction: The vast majority of my worldbuilding examples will be drawn from J. R. R. Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, George Lucas' Star Wars, George R. R. Martin's *A Song of Ice and Fire*, and J. K. Rowling's Harry Potter series, and I will hold them up as exemplars of effective worldbuilding. All four have, in the span of a single generation, changed the fantasy genre by being paragons of worldbuilding. f

To these four, I will add Michael Dante DiMartino & Bryan Konietzko's *Avatar: The Last Airbender* for comparative purposes. I do not include *Airbender* because I personally consider it the best of these examples (although I certainly do), but because it fulfills all my other subsequent criteria but does not yet stand shoulder to shoulder with these titans in terms of audience awareness. However, I will note that in the case of Tolkien's Middle Earth and Martin's Westeros, their fame did not come immediately. Drawing from their examples, it can take over a decade for a project to reach terminal velocity and escape the confines of genre fandom, which is why I have included *Airbender*

for now, to see if audiences will eventually elevate it into this pantheon.

Which means my argument basically boils down to audiences.

All five of my exemplar worlds, especially my core four, have transcended the fantasy genre to captivate mainstream attention. My totally anecdotal proof of this is my mother, who has never cracked open a fantasy book outside of my own novels. Yet she still knows what Jedi and hobbits are, that Hogwarts is a school, and that Lannisters always pay their debts. These four works have slipped their genre bonds to suffuse popular culture and are therefore the easiest examples to cite due to their ubiquity, as was borne out by a survey I conducted (Fantasy Worldbuilding Survey Results, 2020).



Now while this may seem like I'm advocating fantasy worldbuilding for non-fantasy consumers, this is not the case. After numerous interviews with fantasy authors, these four core worlds came up again and again, with dozens of authors citing them as the inspiration for their own writing. They offer something universal, something that can appeal to the non-fantasy fan as well as the die-hards, to the point that they are used to market other products. I can distinctly remember scratching my head after seeing a commercial of ring wraiths chased down a Kia Sorento to promote free DVDs given away with a test drive. Walking through a hardware store not long

ago, I found Star Wars licensed refrigerators, while my front door sports a welcome mat featuring Han, Leia, and a baby Vader given to us as a housewarming gift. Each of these intellectual properties has something specifically iconic about them, be they lightsabers, the One Ring to rule them all, house signs and sayings, or pretty much anything Harry Potter related. This sets up the classic chicken-or-the-egg dilemma: Are they popular because they're iconic or iconic because they're popular?

Because, make no mistake, they are incredibly popular, with the Harry Potter book series having sold more than 500 million copies, Star Wars 160 million, *The Lord of the Rings* 150 million and *The Hobbit* another one hundred million, and *A Song of Ice and Fire* ninety million, for a billion copies between them. They are no slouch when it comes to the box office, either: as of the writing of this book, the Star Wars franchise has grossed \$10.3 billion, Harry Potter \$9.1 billion, *The Lord of the Rings* \$5.8 billion, and *Game of Thrones* \$3.1 in HBO subscriptions alone, for a combined total of 28.3 billion USD.

To put that in perspective, a million dollars is considered a lot of money—at least to me. But a million seconds is only 11.5 days. A billion seconds, on the other hand, is approximately 31.5 years. And these four franchises have amassed that amount multiple times over

without even including income from video games, toys, or any other merchandising.

I mention these movie adaptations and merchandising outlets for a reason, which is another of my criteria in choosing these core four: they are **transmedial** in that they are not constrained to a single medium. In addition to the obvious books, movies, TV shows, and video games, their outlets include comic books, trading cards, role-playing games, action figures, and sourcebooks outlining material not even included in the core canonical works. This demand for additional material and outlets demonstrates these properties' expanding reach, with each of them created by only one or two individuals but eventually employing hundreds if not thousands of others to produce enough material to meet the demand of millions of fans around the world. Both Harry Potter and Star Wars have theme parks, where fans can walk down the same streets as their favorite characters. Meanwhile, the shooting locations for *The Lord of the Rings* and *Game of Thrones* are also popular tourist destinations, bringing in crowds from all over the globe.

I should state that this focus on worldbuilding is not to take anything away from the strong plots and characters of these series, but the magnetic draw of their worldbuilding cannot be ignored. It

should also be noted that the criteria of being transmedial and influencing popular culture does mean my examples are rather high and epic fantasy focused, with only Harry Potter being an outlier. This reflects the fantasy genre to a certain degree, with a recent survey of *Our Gateway Into Fantasy* at *The Fantasy Inn* website showing that 47.5% of fans classify the book that drew them into the genre as epic fantasy (2020). These results were borne out in the *Fantastic Insights 2020 Survey* at *The Fantasy Hive*, where 60% of readers list epic fantasy as their preferred subgenre regardless of age or gender (2020). This attention paid to epic series is also due to the subgenre's focus on worldbuilding due to the nature of quests in these narratives: the characters invariably traverse new and strange lands, thus acting as tour guides for the audience. This, in turn, is a great example of when the worldbuilding details serve the plot, characters, and world simultaneously. This is most likely why the fantasy genre has cleaved so closely to the high and epic fantasy tropes over the decades, but that is not to say an author cannot create a new world equally vibrant and in-depth as *The Lord of the Rings* spanning no more than a single location. Harry Potter has demonstrated that fans will return to the same school year after year if the location is compelling enough.

The third criteria in selecting these series as worldbuilding exemplars is that the worlds support multiple timelines by their initial creators. Although Star Wars infamously began with *Episode Four: A New Hope* and completed that initial trilogy with *The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*, two new trilogies have appeared in the intervening years, examining approximately twenty years before and thirty years after the initial trilogy. *The Hobbit* preceded *The Lord of the Rings* by seventeen years; *A Song of Ice and Fire* has the *Tales of Dunk and Egg* prequels as well as other prequels currently in development at HBO; Harry Potter has the *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them* prequels as well as the stage play *Harry Potter and the Cursed Child*; and *Airbender* has its sequel series *The Legend of Korra*. And while all five of these examples overlap with the original series in terms of characters and events, they are also independent plotlines complete with characters acting out their own unique stories. This demonstrates again the power of great worldbuilding in that these universes were initially created as vehicles to deliver the original stories, only for the world to outgrow the initial tales when fans demanded more and more adventures.

This is one of worldbuilding's greatest strengths in that, while it's possible to enjoy a book, show, or movie multiple times due to the

characters or plot, the law of diminishing returns makes for a short entertainment half-life. This is because, although we may still appreciate the artistry of the execution, we cannot be surprised by the plot or characters a second time. No matter how great a moment, learning that Vader is Luke's father cannot pack nearly the same emotional punch a second time around, no more than Eddard Stark's fate, nor the relief when Gandalf the White appears. These moments can certainly be revisited and enjoyed for the craftsmanship it took to pull them off, but the initial shock and sense of wonder can never be recaptured.

Compare this to experiencing a fantastical world, which can inspire the same sense of wonder again and again with each revisit. And with each induction, new details about the world emerge, increasing the appreciation with each exposure, such that it becomes a haven from the real world. So while a strong story may invite multiple viewings, strong worldbuilding ensures fans return again and again to uncover new details in their sanctuary.

Although I will lean on these five series while ignoring others than fit these same criteria, the contribution of other fantasy authors cannot be ignored. Orson Scott Card, Robin Hobb, Patrick Rothfuss, Anne McCaffrey, Robert Jordan, Naomi Novik, C. S. Lewis, Tamora

Pierce, Philip Pullman, Mercedes Lackey, Tad Williams, Margaret Weis, Tracy Hickman, Octavia Butler, and Joe Abercrombie are just a few who influenced my personal understanding of worldbuilding. However, Brandon Sanderson, N. K. Jemisin, Neil Gaiman, Ursula K. Le Guin, and Steven Erikson all bear some special attention for deconstructing worldbuilding as a subject, and I cite them quite a bit alongside Tolkien and Wolf. I have also interviewed dozens of fantasy authors about their worldbuilding process and heard these same five series appear again and again when describing their favorite fantasy realms.

I realize if this book were instead about recording a rock album, it would seem that all my examples would be drawn from The Beatles, The Rolling Stones, Jimi Hendrix, Led Zeppelin, and U2. And while I am a huge rock fan, I personally own only one album between all these artists. My own tastes run much more experimental, and so I avoid these bands like the plague. But I still know many of their songs by heart because they are mainstream. They have reached the widest possible audience, whereas I would instead seek a very niche audience made up of individuals whose own tastes are as eclectic as my own.

The same holds true of the philosophies and insights contained in this book. While the aim appears to be reaching the widest audience possible, I am by no means advocating aping these authors' worlds as the pinnacle of fantasy worldbuilding. They are by far the most popular, but that does not make them any more valuable than any lesser-known authors aiming for a smaller and more personally aligned audience. As an author or fantasy fan, if you do not agree with my selected exemplars, please choose your own canon and rigorously examine how they accomplish the worldbuilding you so enjoy. Study their strategies by comparing and contrasting them to those I put forth here so you can forge your own worldbuilding path.

Because that is the ultimate philosophy of this book: tools, not rules.

Like battleplans, no adage or literary rule holds up in the thick of reading or writing. What works for one author falls apart in the hands of another, which is why the goal of this book is to give you all the tools in the box, let you know how best to employ them, then set you loose to do as you choose.

So, with all that out of the way, let's get to work.

Part II: What Is Worldbuilding?

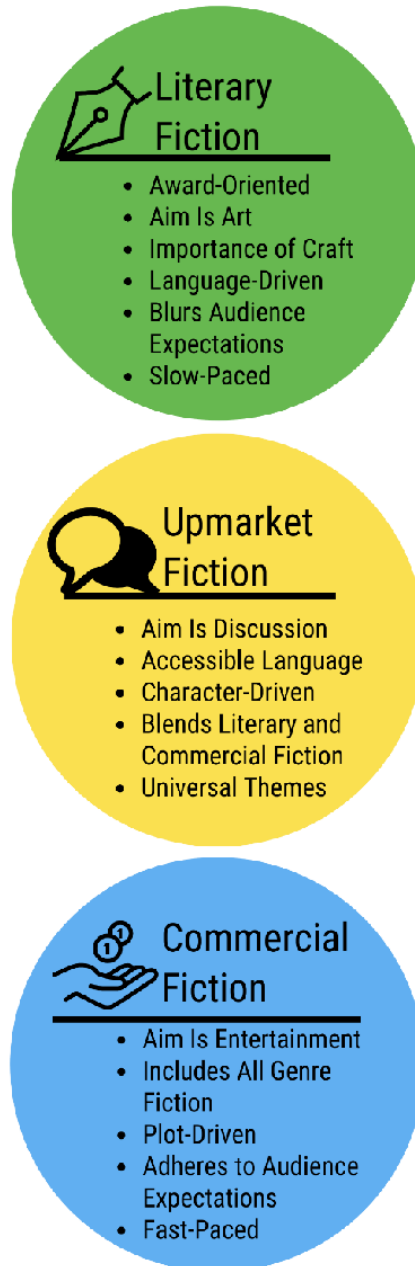
“All the works of man have their origin in creative fantasy. What right have we then to depreciate imagination?” —Carl Jung

OVERVIEW: In this section, we will examine what worldbuilding is and how it is indelibly tied to fantasy and science fiction, although not limited to these genres. This is due to their roots in speculative fiction, as well as genre expectations, which originate in the distinction between literary, upmarket, and commercial fiction. We will then delineate science fiction and fantasy by which fields they use to establish their worldbuilding credibility. We then will dig into how fantasy worlds most often manifest themselves as either extensions of our own reality or their own distinct reality in overlaid and secondary worlds. Last, we will examine two author worldbuilding strategies—top-down and bottom-up—to see how they align with the audience members’ subjective experience of worlds from the inside-out.

1. Literary, Upmarket, and Commercial Fiction

Early in my novel writing endeavor I considered going the traditional publishing route and researched literary agents. And as I scoured

their online wish lists, I kept coming across the same terms over and over: literary, upmarket, and commercial. These terms confounded me until I came across a helpful infographic by the P.S. Literary Agency.



Adapted from infographic by Carley Watters

Literary fiction, they explained, were those books intent on earning awards and therefore focused their energies on the strength of their prose. Famous examples of literary fiction include pretty much anything you were forced to read in school (especially James Joyce). **Upmarket fiction**, on the other hand, seeks to highlight universal experiences to spark discussion and are character-driven. Examples include *Water for Elephants* and *The Lovely Bones*. **Commercial fiction** intends on entertaining its audience by focusing on plot-driven stories. All genre fiction, including fantasy, science fiction, romance, thrillers, horror, historical fiction, and dozens of others, fall under this umbrella. These are the books that, unlike their literary and upmarket peers, care more about sales than awards or spirited discussions.

As the name connotes, commercial fiction is in it for the money.

Although this infographic proved exceedingly useful, it is also rather reductionist in that the best genre fiction incorporates great characters enacting an engaging plot comprised of prose that resonates. Prose, plot, and character together make up individual legs of this literary table, and when any one leg is longer or shorter than the others, it wobbles.

However, genre fiction has a fourth leg, one that is contingent upon its specific genre. This is the **genre expectation**, wherein the audience decides if the story fulfilled all their presumptions of the genre. Many of the genre expectations are eponymous—e.g., is the thriller in fact thrilling, the romance romantic, or the horror story horrific? Just like their upmarket and literary fiction kin, commercial fiction has its audience in mind and intends to give them what they want. But for the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and (to a lesser extent) historical fiction, the genre expectations take on more nuance. For historical fiction, we expect an authentic representation of the time period. Contrast this to science fiction and fantasy, which are often both uncoupled from reality in terms of time and place. Yet the genre expectations for all three are intrinsically linked to their worldbuilding because all three rely upon their setting to fulfill their audiences' expectations.¹

As Wolf points out, “Worlds can exist without stories, but stories cannot exist without a world” (Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation, p. 27). A story certainly needs a setting, a canvas to paint the characters and plot upon, but the setting alone is not worldbuilding. Worldbuilding extends beyond just the location and geography to encompass everything the characters encounter on

their narrative journey. Worldbuilding as a verb is therefore constructing an authentic and credible canvas to splash the story upon.

That said, while worldbuilding is crucial for fantasy and science fiction, it is by no means limited to those genres. Police procedurals live or die by their sense of credibility in capturing the feel of the precinct and criminal underworld, from *Dragnet* on through *Hill Street Blues* and into the many iterations of *CSI* and *Law & Order*. The same is true for courtroom dramas, where they create an authentic sense of space through knowledge of the criminal justice system in whatever county or time period the story takes place in. A lawyer that does not know when to properly object or a judge who does not challenge them on their knowledge of the law deeply damages the sense of credibility because of a weakened sense of worldbuilding.

Worldbuilding also exists in Stephen King's fictional town of Derry, Maine, a spot that does not exist on any real map, but a place that audiences have visited for over thirty years. The same is true for Springfield from *The Simpsons*, a town defined by whatever the episode requires at the time and thus includes nearby mountains, oceans, forests and deserts. Despite its mercurial nature, familiar landmarks such as the Kwik-E-Mart, Krusty Burger, and Moe's Tavern

next to King Toot's Music Store are so familiar that they have received their own theme park. Even the staid and stolid literary fiction contingent contains examples of worldbuilding, such as Faulkner's Yoknapatawpha County and Joyce's Dublin, while classic examples include Milton's Dis and Dante's Inferno. Worldbuilding is not confined to narrative stories, either, with Tom Waits painting an authentic picture of Puntum County, whereas Bruce Springsteen credibly conjures images of New Jersey. Over one hundred million users have visited *World of Warcraft's* Azeroth, and fans have been electronically exploring iterations of Hyrule for decades to adventure along with Link and Zelda.

Yet while many mediums and genres employ worldbuilding, the genres of fantasy and science fiction cannot exist without it. For the other genres, strong worldbuilding adds to the story, but does not diminish the genre expectations when not included. In fact, literary fiction authors are advised to not list specific locations or brands in their stories and to keep the setting generic. The logic behind this is to make the story feel more universal in that the audience can imagine the events taking place anywhere in any time period.

Compare this to fantasy and science fiction, which both *must* produce an unfamiliar world for their audiences to explore. Stripped of

all subtlety and artifice, *Star Trek: The Original Series* encapsulates the genre expectations best in the show's introductory mission statement: "To seek out new life and new civilizations." It is this sense of exploration, of discovering new living cultures and biological creatures that is the beating heart of both genres. Without a fantastical world to discover or a new fantastical way to reexamine our own world, both genres lose a leg and topple under the weight of the story.

Yet while science fiction and fantasy share this same core genre expectation to the extent that they often get lumped together on the same bookstore shelf, fantasy and science fiction are in fact very different beasts. They share similar histories and external traits, such that even luminaries like Orson Scott Card distinguish between them only by if they occur in the future or the past. Arthur C. Clarke states the difference is that "science fiction is something that *could* happen—but you usually wouldn't want it to. Fantasy is something that *couldn't* happen—though you often only wish that it could." Rod Serling echoed this distinction a bit more succinctly: "Fantasy is the impossible made probable. Science fiction is the improbable made possible." Both genres break the laws of nature as we know them, but these similar traits result from convergent evolution, meaning they

carry out and succeed in their genre expectations in entirely different manners.

2. Speculative Fiction

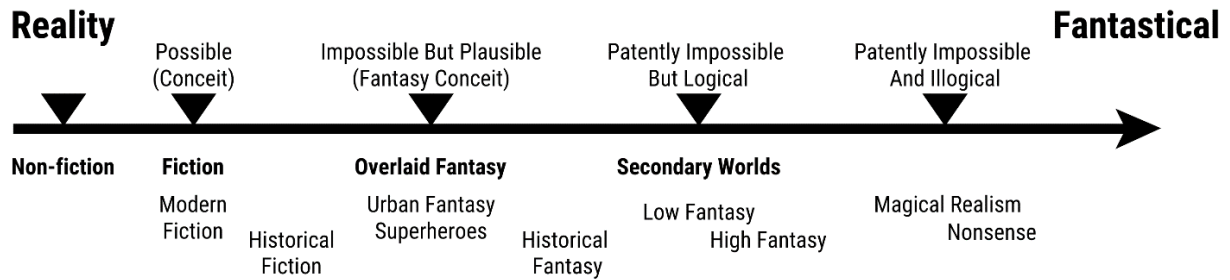
Fantasy and science fiction share more than just a search for new life and civilizations and being classified as commercial fiction. They, along with horror, alternate history, and fairytales, fall under the umbrella of **speculative fiction** in that they inject into the story elements that do not exist in the real world. This separates them in regard to the other commercial fiction genres, including historical fiction, which also leans heavily upon worldbuilding.

All fiction is by definition made up, hence being fiction rather than fact. Fiction may draw heavily from real-world events and characters, particularly historical and alternate fiction, but must also make sure to include a narrative. Although narratives do exist within the real world, with cause and effect ensuring the events make sense to observers, history exclusively concerns real events that have occurred. Fiction does not concern itself entirely with the facts, and instead makes up the events to produce a more streamlined and enjoyable narrative. Even when the events occur to real individuals, if the events in question are the invention of the author, they then qualify as fiction by the virtue of deviating from reality. These

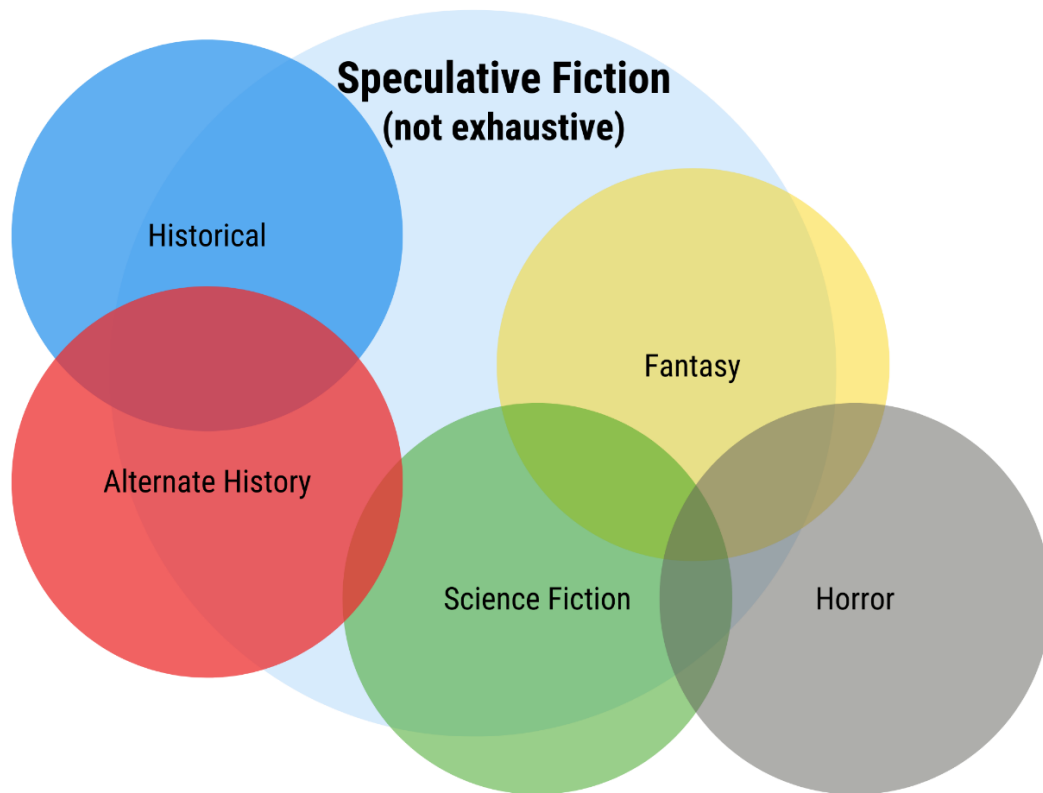
deviations from reality are called **conceits** and are generally the focus of the fiction by being what the author intends on exploring in their works.

Yet speculative fiction differentiates itself from the other fictions by focusing on things that are patently impossible. Fiction may bend the facts in terms of characters and events, but speculative fiction intentionally breaks the laws of nature. This is done through the inclusion of events that definitely could not exist in our shared reality. These impossible elements are called **speculative conceits**, which take the form of **fantasy conceits** or **science-fiction conceits** for their respective genres. Sometimes speculative conceits are easy enough to spot, such as the science-fiction spaceships in *Star Trek* or fantasy dragons in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Other times they might not deviate in the slightest from the laws of nature, such as with alternate history or dystopian fiction. However, in the case of alternate history, the patently impossible rears its head in that these imagined events did not occur or else we would be studying them in history class rather than imagining what could have been. Dystopian fiction, conversely, speculates on a future that has not yet occurred and thus again deviates from shared reality by traveling into the future.

Fantasy Fiction Continuum



None of this is to say that dystopian and alternate history cannot contain fantastical elements that break the laws of nature as we know them. These genres and conceits are not mutually exclusive, and it's quite possible to have an alternate history tale where magic makes the difference during the moon landing, or a dystopian future where neural implants ensure no individual spends more than a single day in the body they were born into. But, like literary fiction and upmarket in regards to worldbuilding, these speculative fiction genres do not fall apart when they don't break the laws of nature.



This leaves fantasy, horror, and science fiction furthest out on the continuum of speculative fiction due to their patently impossible conceits. Horror differentiates itself due to the intent of its genre expectation, which is to inspire a sense of unease and horror for the consumer. Science fiction, and fantasy to a greater degree, intend to inspire a sense of wonder through their worldbuilding. But how they go about injecting their fantastical elements and how they are judged as successful or not differs greatly.

3. Unobtainium vs. Handwavium

When watching James Cameron's *Avatar*, I remember my disgust upon discovering the reason they were mining the planet of Pandora was for "unobtainium."² The chosen name was so on-the-nose, so blatantly obvious that it broke my sense of immersion and made me question his screenwriting chops. It was not until much later that I learned that **unobtainium** is a real term used in engineering for materials or technologies that do not yet exist but will one day solve current problems. And although this may sound like a cop-out by simply saying someday technology will save the day, it serves a very specific purpose in the field, with titanium being a real-life example of unobtainium. Engineering unobtainium is not a shortcut or catchall to get out of doing additional work. Instead, all other variables are taken into account, with the one missing component identified. It is basically an entire equation that has been solved, with the one exception being a single variable, which is then identified by the term unobtainium.

Unobtainium is meant as only a stand-in for future improvements, of things that could be possible given enough time and technological advancement. As such, the lightsabers and hyperdrives in Star Wars fall under the umbrella of unobtainium because it may at some point be possible to find a material like Kyber crystals with which to construct glowing laser swords, just as it might

be one day possible to bend space to travel faster than light with the right technology.³

Because of the dependence on what could be in its speculation, science-fiction worldbuilding is beholden to the laws of science, and therefore uses unobtainium as its first choice in forging its sense of authenticity. Other disciplines certainly factor in when assessing the created universe, especially the understanding of culture, but they are all subordinate in relationship to science.

Unobtainium as a stand-in for the patently impossible differs from the **handwave**, which is a writing term for explaining crucial events with minimal details. As the name connotes, the handwave is meant to be dismissive because the why of the fantastical elements is not nearly as important as the what they bring about story-wise, and thus the audience should not stop to fixate on these elements. Often this is a sign of lazy writing on the author's part in that they do not want to take the time to properly explain backstory, motivation, or a fantastical conceit. *Star Trek: The Next Generation* is replete with examples of the handwave, usually whenever Geordi and Data get together to create an impossible new invention in the nick of time, often after throwing around some technobabble to explain how they suddenly are able to overcome a problem that has confounded

scientists throughout the galaxies for centuries. Oftentimes this will include a nod to unobtainium when they exploit the item de jure introduced at the beginning of the episode in a hitherto unknown way. However, most often they are handwaves in that the audience is not meant to focus on the science behind their sudden discovery and is only meant to understand that these two key players save the day at the last second.

Contrast this to the science-fiction tool of unobtainium, wherein the laws of science are adhered to and the currently unobtainable element or technology is inserted into the world to make this conceit feel plausible. It is a well-thought-out means of worldbuilding, opposed to the handwave, which the audience is simply meant to accept without question.

Yet for the fantasy genre, the handwave is a necessary component of worldbuilding because the fantasy conceit almost always involves magic, which we will delve into deeper in its own chapter. Since it involves breaking the laws of nature, it cannot fall under the domain of unobtainium. When the strange and otherworldly occurs in fantasy, it is specifically not meant to reside within the domain of science, so its implausibility is quickly explained away with a handwave. The audience is not meant to dwell upon the

explanation further other than it being “magic,” and they should instead kindly shuffle along so the story might continue.

Handwavium, however, exists within the fantasy genre in the same space as unobtainium in science fiction. In engineering, everything else in the invention is well thought out and meticulously investigated, with but one component missing. Handwavium, opposed to the handwave, means everything else in the imagined world fits logically together with the exception of the fantasy conceit, which the audience must accept to continue on with the story. Everything else in the story world is meant to be plausible, meaning the story adheres to a consistent sense of logic throughout.

The proper application of handwavium coincides with the willing suspension of disbelief, which we’ll discuss in chapter eight. But what’s most important is the distinction between handwaving and handwavium in terms of worldbuilding, with the former meant to simply usher the story along, whereas the latter composes one of the foundations of creating a sense of plausibility.

Plausibility in the fantasy genre may seem like an oxymoron in that fantasy, by its very definition, consists of impossible things. However, as Tolkien points out in his own dive into worldbuilding in

his lectures and subsequent essay *On Fairy-Stories*, “For creative Fantasy is founded upon the hard recognition that things are so in the world as it appears under the sun; on a recognition of fact, but not a slavery to it” (p. 51). Jemisin echoes this observation when she says, “The thing you have to do to world build well is to understand how our world works” (N. K. Jemisin's Master Class In World Building, 2018). This makes sense in that we can imagine just about anything, but can only conceive and express our ideas in terms of our own experience. As such, we instinctively judge the unknown in terms of the known.

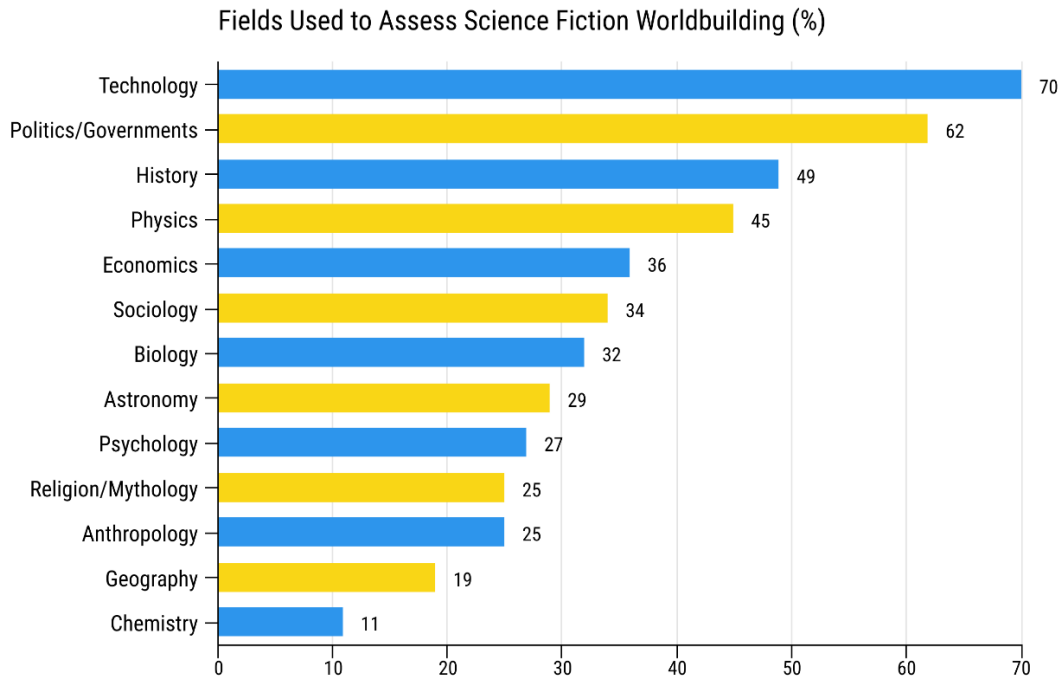
To illustrate, I remember a college course on the history of Isaac Newton, his invention of lenses, and their impact on Western civilization. During the lecture, my professor stated that due to the makeup of a hawk’s eye, the positioning of its optic nerves and lenses, and the liquid in the orbs, it would be able to see colors invisible to our own eyes. I immediately demanded to know what these colors would look like, whereupon my very knowledgeable professor sputtered a long while before saying it would be like the color red tinged with green. But as any kid with a color wheel knows, when these two complementary colors combine, they make brown. However, the hawk sees them mingle together into a color we can’t

really comprehend. Yet even though these colors are invisible to us, we're still stuck discussing them with concepts we do comprehend.

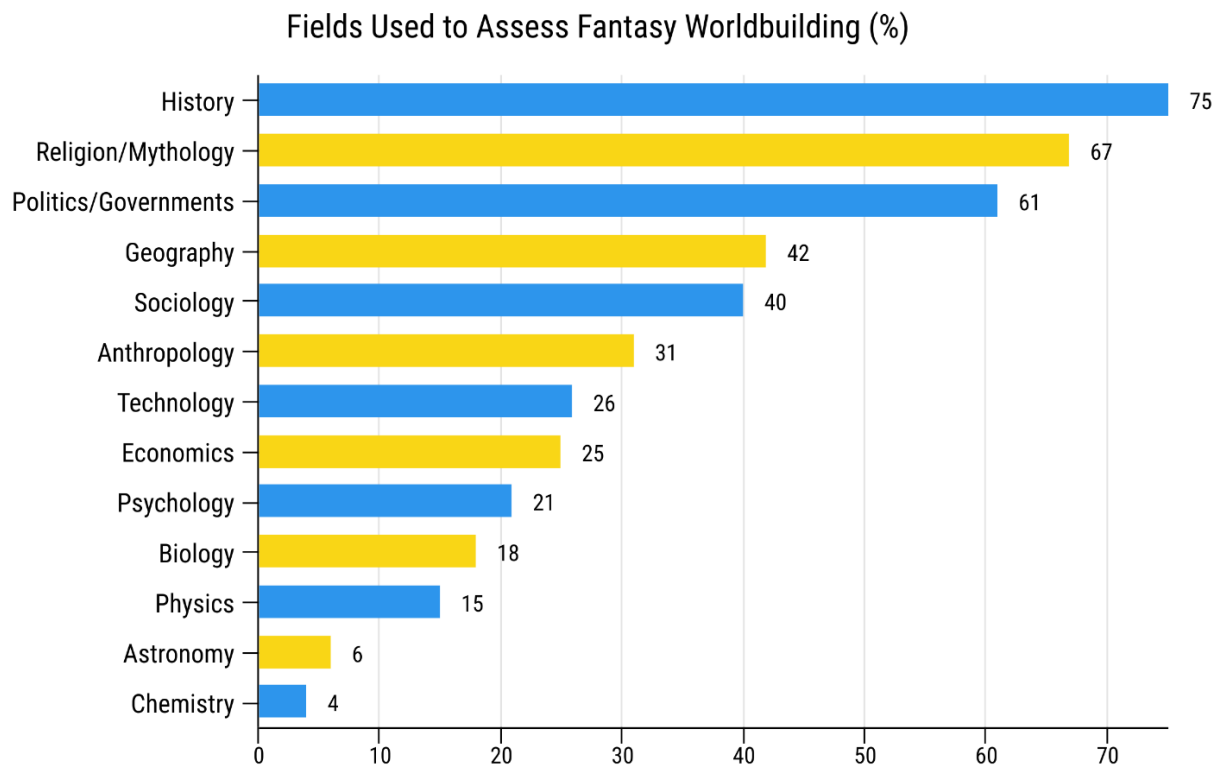
And, to a certain degree, this sums up the fantasy genre in a nutshell: attempting to describe invisible colors to others using only the shared hues we all can see.

As such, the author creates their imaginative fantasy worlds with concepts that are recognizable to audiences, who then assess those worlds in terms of their own understanding, which are in turn based upon their personal experiences. In historical fiction, the effectiveness of worldbuilding is fairly easy to assess by how historically accurate the setting and characters are. A story set in ancient Greece should not include a character speaking modern English and sporting inventions stemming from the Industrial Revolution, after all. However, as we'll discuss in the chapter on immersion, audiences' assessments are based on both their personal knowledge of a subject as well as a general sense of face validity. Someone who is unfamiliar with either Ancient Greek history or the English Industrial Revolution would be hard-pressed to find any historical inaccuracies in the above example.

Science fiction, on the other hand, is primarily assessed by how credible an understanding of science and technology the author can communicate. Audiences judge the world as to how well it facilitates its science-fiction conceit in terms of science but then add to it their understanding of human nature. Although we may be dealing with alien creatures, we still implicitly expect them to be understandable in human terms. This means we anthropomorphize them to a certain degree and measure their motivations and behaviors in terms of our own. Since this understanding of human nature does not fall under the umbrella of the science-fiction conceit, it is secondary to the understanding of science in assessing the credibility of the worldbuilding. In science fiction, the measure of human nature manifests itself in audiences' understanding of culture through the social sciences: Do these futuristic or alien cultures conform to examples we can produce in the real world? Do their social structures make sense in terms of our own Earthly ones?



Effective worldbuilding in a massively multidisciplinary field, and as such, many other factors come into play when assessing science fiction other than science and culture. However, these are the primary means within the genre, which then leans on the audience's knowledge of both those fields. Authors fulfill their speculative fiction expectations by taking both their knowledge of present culture and speculating how additions or changes to the world around them will affect future generations. Science-fiction fans mimic this stance when assessing the worldbuilding. In effect, both groups measure the effectiveness of science-fiction worldbuilding by standing in the present and looking towards the future.



Fantasy fans, in contrast, stand in the present and look to the past to assess the plausibility of the worldbuilding. Like their historical fiction counterparts, this means they rely upon their experiences and understanding of social sciences and humanities (particularly history) and then finally their knowledge of science to decide if the world feels credible. So, despite their similarities in terms of aim and importance of worldbuilding within both genres, science fiction and fantasy are entirely different breeds that must be handled differently when assessing the success of their speculative elements. As such, we will focus on fantasy alone for the rest of this book since, although I'm a casual fan of science fiction, I don't feel qualified for a deep delve into

the genre. The patently impossible has always been my personal preference, which is why we will now turn our gaze towards the past and fantasy's place in it.

4. Primary vs. Secondary vs. Overlaid Worlds

With references to Heaven, Hell, Tian, Valhalla, the Summerland, Hades, and Svarga loka, it would be tempting to state that fantasy worldbuilding has been with us since recorded history. These locations clearly do not exist within the confines of Earth and are therefore otherworldly and patently impossible. However, since these examples all come from the realm of religion, they are excluded from our definition of fantasy worldbuilding since people either currently or at one time have believed that these locations are real. Fantasy as a genre implies the impossible and thus that audiences are fully aware these locations and worlds do not exist. This disqualifies religious and mythological settings from our definition of fantasy worldbuilding, although fantasy persistently draws from mythology and religion. Real-world locations are also often fair game when it comes to fantasy worldbuilding.

In Homer's *Odyssey*, Odysseus travels from many real-life locations, such as Troy and Ithaca, only to then encounter monstrous creatures, such as the Cyclops and Scylla, that plainly do not exist in

the real world. Hercules is born on the real-life location of Thebes but then descends into the underworld of Tartarus, as does Orpheus and Theseus. Dante Alighieri and John Milton also drew upon this descent into the underworld theme for their canonical works. Dante's *The Divine Comedy* in particular may have been the first documented case of fantasy mapmaking, and after Sandro Botticelli's commissioned painting of Hell accompanying the manuscript, it became quite popular among Early Renaissance artists to depict Dante's trip through first Hell, then Purgatory, then finally Heaven.

These brief mentions of worldbuilding in antiquity barely scratch the surface of this subject, and for an incredibly comprehensive comparative exploration of historical worldbuilding, please check out Douglas Parker's notes and handouts for his course on worldbuilding at douglassparker.org.

In his own exhaustive exploration of the history of worldbuilding in *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*, Wolf traces the tradition from antiquity through the lost-world phase, where imaginary worlds exist on Earth but cannot be found easily, to the modern examples of fantasy and science-fiction worldbuilding. He treats this fascinating subject with exacting attention, such that the array of information can often be overwhelming. However, there are

no two greater resources as to the history of worldbuilding, which should be taken advantage of if you have any interest on the subject. I will not include any more of it here because, although it's quite fascinating, it adds little to the conversation other than some additional context.

Tolkien was a major shift in terms of fantasy worldbuilding, as he not only inadvertently created the epic and high-fantasy subgenres but examined fantasy worldbuilding extensively during his lectures and essay *On Fairy-Stories*. Although considered the father of modern fantasy, the genre certainly existed before him, with examples such as Lord Dunsany, L. Frank Baum, and J. M. Barrie. However, through *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien reshaped the landscape of fantasy such that many modern works still bear his fingerprints.

And he did this through his intuitive understanding of worldbuilding.

Ask any Tolkien aficionado and they'll surely mention how he was a philologist who invented the elvish language before he even set pen to paper on *The Hobbit* in 1937. This was seventeen years before *The Lord of the Rings*, which many consider the very first adult

fantasy story since previously most books in the genre were adventure stories aimed at children. *The Hobbit* still bears these hallmarks in that not only does it have a far more childlike tone than *The Lord of the Rings*, but its story is episodic in that each chapter has its own independent story arc. This is because each chapter is meant to be begun and concluded by the parent reading it aloud to their kids at night. This was because Tolkien's original audience was his own children, which also explains why *The Lord of the Rings* is aimed at adults: Tolkien's children had grown up and were now themselves off to war.

During these seventeen years between the release of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien was not idle and worked on *The Silmarillion* as well as reacting to anthropologist, folklorist, and literary critic Andrew Lang and his collections of fairy stories. In his lectures and subsequent essay *On Fairy-Stories*, Tolkien defended fairytales (and also the burgeoning fantasy genre he would later come to dominate) as being important vessels through which to interact with the real world.

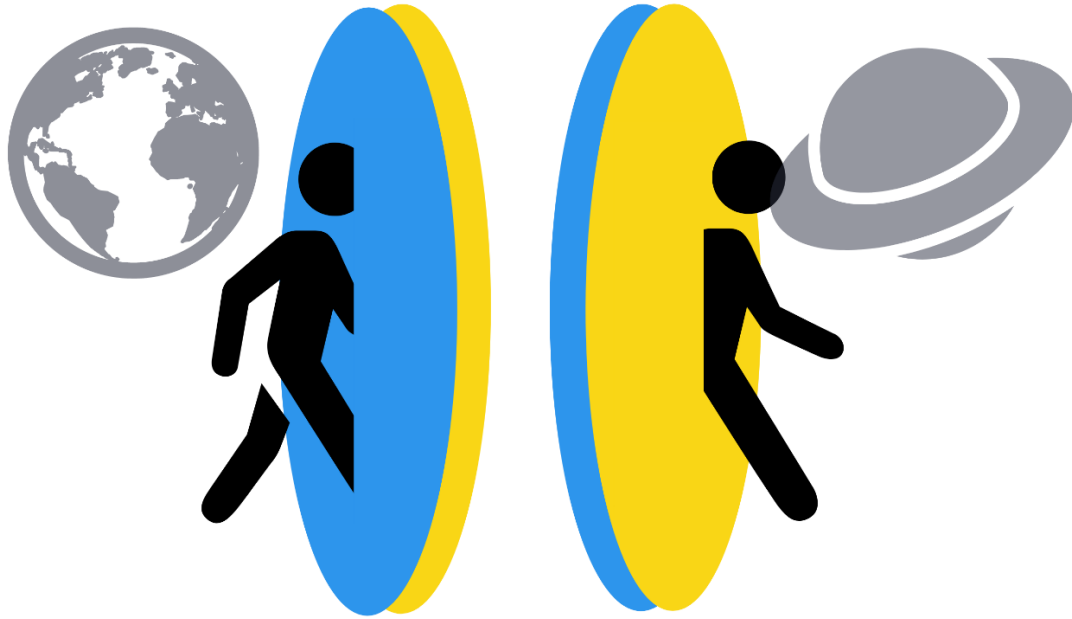
Not all of Tolkien's arguments in *On Fairy-Stories* still pertain to the fantasy genre, but it's here that he coined the terms **primary world** and **secondary worlds**, concepts which still hold sway. Tolkien

considers the primary world the real world in which we all reside and draw our experience from, whereas the secondary world is the one created by the author for purposes of the story. Instead of considering worldbuilding to be a frivolous activity, the devout Tolkien believes constructing secondary worlds to be a religious act: “Fantasy remains a human right: we make in our measure and in our derivative mode, because we are made: and not only made, but made in the image and likeness of a Maker” (Tree And Leaf, p. 52). Of perhaps even greater importance in terms of insight, Tolkien recognizes that we can only judge secondary worlds in terms of the primary world and that the created worlds must adhere to the same standards as reality to be considered credible.

The terms primary world and secondary worlds are still used extensively in worldbuilding communities to this day, as is the term “constructed worlds” and their abbreviation “conworlds.” The *con*-prefix is also often attached to worldbuilding output details, such as “conlanguages,” “concultures,” and “connations,” which all denote that these details have been created specifically for their unique fantasy settings. “Imaginary worlds” and “narrative worlds” are also terms that often appear, with some worldbuilders using all these

interchangeably, although there is some distinction between a secondary world and constructed world worth noting.

Secondary worlds, from Tolkien's coinage on, are generally understood to take place somewhere else away from Earth. So although he drew extensively on our planet to create Middle Earth, his constructed world is clearly not meant to reside within our shared reality. This separateness of secondary worlds led to the early concept of **portal fantasy**, an exemplar being Narnia, wherein the characters literally step through a portal to enter the secondary world. The portal in question acts as a bridge between reality and the imaginary world. The most famous and iconic portal fantasy would be *The Wizard of Oz*, especially the film version that visually separates the black-and-white "real" world from the vibrantly fantastical realm of Oz. It should also demonstrate that the portal in question does not need to be literal, although some means of conveyance such as the tornado is usually utilized to transport the characters.



A constructed world can encompass both secondary worlds and the primary world with a few adjustments. The Harry Potter series is clearly a fantasy creation, but deals with many real-world locations, such as the reptile house in the London Zoo and King's Cross Station. Harry and his friends walk real-life locations before being whisked away to Hogwarts, which is said to reside somewhere in Scotland. These constructed worlds with their locations clearly from the real world but with the addition of fantasy elements are considered **overlaid worlds**. Most superhero stories where a heightened reality exists on top of our own mundane one fall into this category of overlaid worlds, especially the ones from Marvel, where the characters exist in real-life cities, such as New York, rather than concities, such as Metropolis or Gotham in the DC universe. It is also

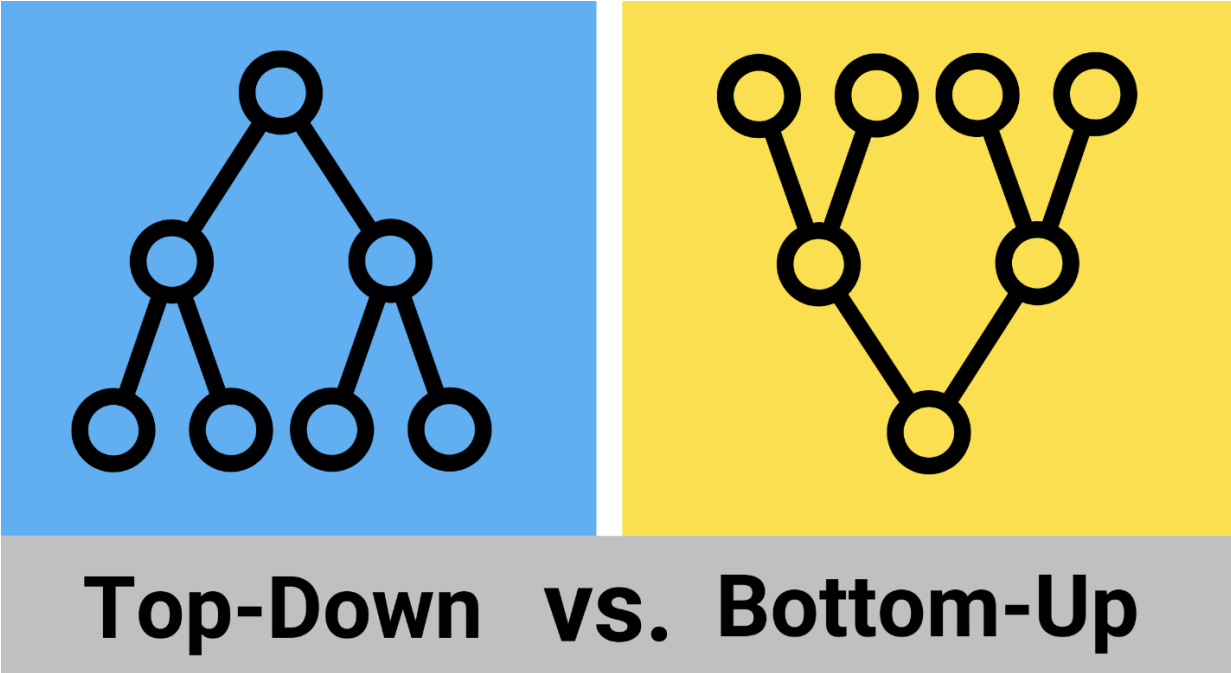
quite possible to have an overlaid world and a secondary world within the same story, with fantastical elements moving readily between the two.

For the sake of this book, I will simply refer to the primary world as “reality” or “real world,” whereas “world” will be shorthand for constructed worlds, which will encompass both secondary worlds and overlaid worlds. I will leave it up to context and you the reader to decipher which one I mean at the time.

Let us hope this trust is not misplaced.

5. Top-Down, Bottom-Up, and Inside-Out

Spend even just a minute among worldbuilders and you’ll likely hear the terms **top-down** and **bottom-up**. These two information processing approaches constitute the ends of extremes when it comes to worldbuilding strategy.



Top-down approaches the world in terms of overview, where the underlying idea or system is formed on a grand scale then with all subsequent subsystems being added and refined until everything is mapped out. It is, in effect, the “big picture” view wherein minor details are initially ignored in favor of big patterns, which are in turn broken down into smaller portions until everything is accounted for. Architecture employs top-down design, with the blueprints first mapping out the foundation and general size and shape of the building before delving into the nitty-gritty aspects, such as the electrical system and bathroom fixtures.

In terms of worldbuilding, top-down takes an idea and then builds out from it. By way of example, a top-down world creation

would start with a concept and then speculate as to the changes wrought to it by said concept. For instance, we could decide our world would be one where the ground becomes poisonous at night. With that concept in mind, we could then extrapolate the ramifications of this change, such as all creatures there needing to leave the ground at night. This could lead to a preponderance of arboreal animals or perhaps a higher percentage of winged creatures, including humanoids. From there, we would continue this line of thinking to design the cultures of this world based upon their arboreal nature until we had all the smaller details laid out, including their diet and clothing. It should also be noted that the top-down system can incorporate multiple ideas from which to build the world out from.

Bottom-up, on the other hand, deals in the granular, base elements of the system first, figuring them out as needs arise then grouping them together into larger constructs over and over until a pattern forms. Toy building blocks are a great example of bottom-up design in that the components can be assembled brick by brick until a building eventually emerges. First, one might construct a wall and then another with a bit of embellishment, figuring out how to hook them together along the way. It is a far more organic process, with the

final shape of said building not being known until the final brick is placed.

In terms of worldbuilding, bottom-up is often deduced after the fact of construction. For instance, if the author wrote a scene in which elves flying on dragon-back attacked a tribe of orcs at night, only for the orcs to drive them away by summoning ghosts capable of tearing a soul from a body, we could surmise the worldbuilding through the provided details. Impossible races like elves, orcs, and dragons exist, as does magic, ghosts, and the soul. With those worldbuilding details in mind, we could then construct a unifying framework to explain these details, perhaps with two warring deities who use these hapless creatures as minions in their eternal war.

In many ways, bottom-up worldbuilding mirrors how fans deduce overarching worldbuilding systems from the details they discover in a story.

Most individuals exist somewhere in between these two extremes, and both strategies have their strengths and weaknesses. How people interact with Legos is a great indicator as to their top-down, bottom-up inclinations, with top-downers starting with the included plans and assembling the design via the instructions,

whereas bottom-uppers scatter the blocks on the floor and simply start building. In terms of authors, top-downers meticulously plan out every character, plot point, and location, whereas bottom-uppers like to just write and see what comes out of it. George R. R. Martin distinguishes between the two as “architects” and “gardeners” when he said:

The architects plan everything ahead of time, like an architect building a house. They know how many rooms are going to be in the house, what kind of roof they're going to have, where the wires are going to run, what kind of plumbing there's going to be. They have the whole thing designed and blueprinted out before they even nail the first board up. The gardeners dig a hole, drop in a seed and water it. They kind of know what seed it is, they know if planted a fantasy seed or mystery seed or whatever. But as the plant comes up and they water it, they don't know how many branches it's going to have, they find out as it grows. And I'm much more a gardener than an architect. (2011)

In other writing circles, these two extremes are often referred to as “planners” and “pantsers,” the former outlining everything while the

latter group performs discovery writing and supposedly get through the story by the seat of their pants.

These two extremes apply to authors and worldbuilders alike. However, worldbuilding is not the domain of authors alone, and many role-playing gamemasters mirror this dichotomy in constructing their own worlds. Although it's unlikely that you would be reading a book on fantasy worldbuilding and not be familiar with tabletop role-playing games, let's take a moment to examine them. Role-playing games are an interactive storytelling medium where a gamemaster (or dungeon master in the *Dungeons & Dragons* series) controls the setting and situations where the other characters, all playing various roles, find themselves. Both sides adhere to a set of rules created by the game system, which acts as a framework for their exchanges in the unfolding story. The players make decisions for their characters to interact with this situation while the gamemaster controls all other variables.⁴ Due to the interactive nature of role-playing games, even the most meticulous and type-A gamemaster cannot plan for all contingencies the characters will attempt. Player characters will unfailingly find a way to confound the situation, thus forcing the gamemaster to flow with the story or else lose control of the session.

Gamemasters, however, ultimately hold full control over the world outside of the agreed-upon rules that come with the game. In Richard Baker's *World Builder's Guidebook* for the second edition of *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, he outlines seven basic approaches for designing a world, the major two being the macroscopic and the microscopic. These two correspond with Chris Pramas' two major approaches as outlined in *The Kobold Guide to Worldbuilding*: Outside-in, wherein the gamemaster creates the world in a top-down manner from world to continent to kingdom until the campaign setting finally emerges, to **inside-out** (p. 17), which takes the opposite approach in that only what's needed for the immediate gaming session is constructed and the gamemaster simply adds more to the ever-expanding world as is needed for the next session. Inside-out, in effect, is staying just one step ahead of the gamers when it comes to worldbuilding. The parallels between top-down and outside-in and bottom-up and inside-out should be obvious, but the implications of the latter cannot be overstated. This is because it focuses on the gamer rather than the gamemaster, the audience rather than the author.

The argument between top-down and bottom-up worldbuilding always concerns the method the author uses when constructing the

world. However, as the inside-out approach points out, those interacting with the world do so one session at a time. The author or gamemaster may have an expansive understanding of the world from its creation in the cosmic forge until that very moment many millennia later, but none of that matters to the player unless it impacts them in the moment. The player is mostly interested in pertinent details for that single session, which expands to encompass larger and larger areas as the game goes on.

Fantasy fans mirror this inside-out gaming approach in that they encounter the created world one word at a time. Yes, the big top-down ideas such as a hidden magic school for kids can certainly attract the reader via the book's back material, but the actual world itself is experienced in the moment through immediate details, with the audience learning what's pertinent for the current story. This is then built upon to finally encompass an overview of the whole created world as the story progresses.

This is possibly the greatest insight role-playing games offer to fantasy authors: That while the author may employ top-down, bottom-up, or a combination of the two strategies in creating their specific world, the audience still experiences said world from the inside-out. And, as Tolkien notes, audiences will assess the effectiveness of said

worldbuilding based upon their own experiences and understanding of the real world.

Which leads us to the ultimate conundrum for worldbuilders: audience members' assessments are entirely subjective since they are based upon their personal experiences.

This shouldn't be a terribly unexpected development, being as that every other aspect of the storytelling experience is also subjective. No matter how hard the author believes they've hammered home a character motivation or set up a plot twist, there are those who will say these choices were unwarranted and inexplicable. Meanwhile, there will be others who will say these moments of setup were far too telegraphed and heavy-handed. No matter what, there will be opposing camps as to the effectiveness of the work, such that those same details, those same exact words, elicit entirely different responses. Tolkien's songs in *The Lord of the Rings* prove the perfect example, with many describing them as breathtakingly beautiful, whereas others will immediately skip them for being boring.

And not only does this subjective experience and assessment mean there's massive variance within the audience as a whole, it

means the subjective experience can change for the same audience member over time. What seemed like a brilliant detail to us as kids may become grating when we re-experience the same thing many years later. Tolkien himself was not immune to this mutability and stated how much he hated reading poetry in his youth and would skip poems whenever they came up in a story.

What's more, the subjective audience experience is also always based on the current cultural milieu. This means not only will current social and cultural beliefs flavor audience members' subjective assessments, but the understanding of technology, science, history, and culture will shift as well. Change can come at a much different rate than authors anticipated in their speculation, especially in the realm of science fiction, where Star Trek's tricorders and communication devices now seem quaint. On the opposite end of the spectrum, 2019 has come and gone and yet we don't have flying cars, androids, or off-planet travel as promised in *Blade Runner*. Ray Bradbury's tales of people living on Mars now seem overly ambitious since we've actually landed a rover on the planet to realize how inhospitable it really is.

These moments where details do not conform to their time period are known as **anachronisms**. Anachronisms are an anathema

to effective worldbuilding because these incongruous details derail the immersive experience, as we'll discuss in chapter ten. Some anachronisms are objective and easy to detect, such as the lack of *Blade Runner's* flying cars and androids in 2019 or Bradbury's suburban communities on Mars. However, both these examples come from the realm of science fiction, which depends primarily on the understandings of science and technology that audiences have. Fantasy anachronisms are instead primarily judged by audiences' understanding of history, which makes it a bit trickier to navigate.

I am reminded of one time on a fantasy forum where a member complained about how their immersive experience was ruined when reading a book because a character exclaimed "wow." This expression was too modern they said, even though the story takes place on an entirely different world with no connection to Earth. So I looked into the etymological history of "wow" to discover the expression dates back to 1510 Scotland. The age of this word would mean it very well could exist within the constructed world, yet when I pointed this out, the forum-goer rejected my argument and simply reiterated it was too modern of a word for a fantasy setting.

Any fantasy setting.

The fickleness of the subjective audience experience in assessing fantasy worldbuilding is no small impediment. “You can’t please all of the people all of the time,” as the adage famously states; however, you can please many people most of the time, which is why we focus on our worldbuilding exemplars for this book. They have pleased millions of people for decades, and from them, we can deduce some worldbuilding best practices to implement for authors as well as reasonable genre expectations for fantasy fans.

“Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, and it may be necessary from time to time to give a stupid or misinformed beholder a black eye.”

—Jim Henson

Part III: Building Blocks

OVERVIEW: Since all audience members' assessments are subjective, creating a credible world is exceedingly difficult, as someone will always object to the author's decisions. This requires authors to focus on not trying to please everyone, but to please the largest number of people, which can be accomplished through several strategies.

We will first examine the entertainment dilemma, which explains why people simultaneously want both familiarity and newness. With these paradoxical desires in mind, we will explore the hard and soft spectrum to know which best applies to the given situation. The concepts of narrative gestalt and terra de facto will lay the groundwork for how audiences approach the concept of immersion or getting lost within the story or world. How audiences interact with their immersive experience gives us new definitions of how to assess worldbuilding cumulatively. We will then discuss the specific ways immersion can be disrupted for audiences, which negatively affects their worldbuilding experience. Finally, we will look at the four Cs of worldbuilding, which help maintain an internal validity for worlds and aid in preserving an immersive experience for audiences.

6. The Entertainment Dilemma

In Michael Pollan's *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*, he notes that humans, as omnivores, are at an advantage since we can consume both plants and animals and have thus doubled our chances of finding sustenance. If we can eat anything, then everything is fair game for calorie consumption. The eponymous dilemma comes from the fact that in being able to eat anything, we also double our chances of consuming something poisonous. What improves our chances of survivability as a species also increases our chances of death individually.

Audiences experience this same conundrum to an extent when it comes to our sources of diversion. The world of entertainment is currently in a golden age, if not in terms of quality, then at least in terms of quantity. Multiple mediums are immediately available at the click of a button, with access to anything the consumer desires. Instead of scarcity of something to watch, we lack the time to watch it all. Fortunately for us, we know what we like and want more of it. But due to the law of diminishing returns, we cannot consume the same thing over and over and derive the same pleasure from it. Each time we consume the same thing it delivers less and less of a thrill. So we seek new similar experiences, although we know that they might

disappoint us. In effect, we want something novel that is equally familiar. We want to encounter something new we can relate to.

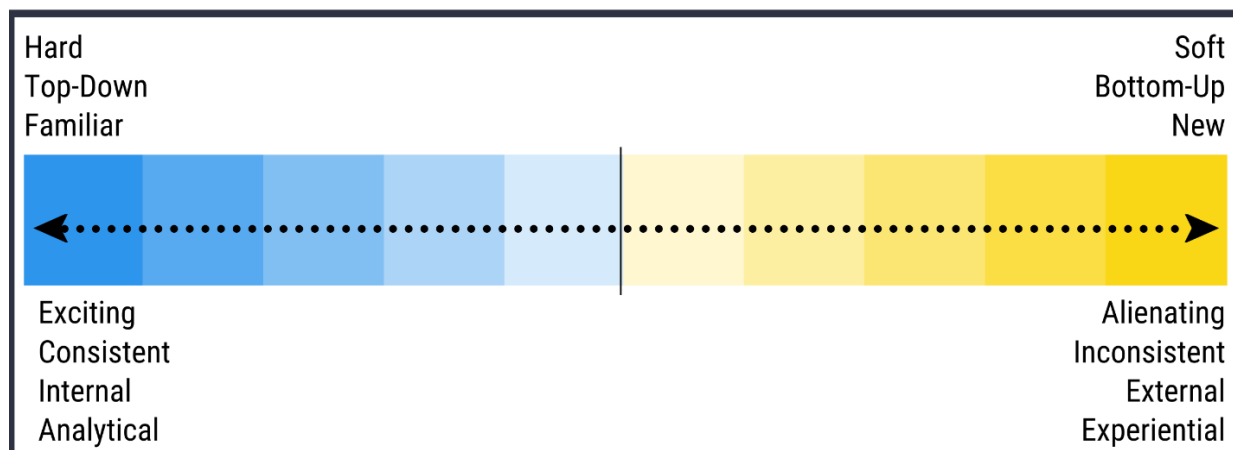
This is the prime reason familiar archetypes and tropes dominate genre fiction. Genre expectations ensure audiences want a particular type of story that checks all the anticipated boxes for the genre. And nowhere is this more prevalent than in Hollywood. Producing a movie is no small expense and costs significant sums of money for something audiences may ultimately reject. This is why Hollywood is notoriously risk-averse, and even with the largest-grossing movie of all times in *Titanic* under his belt, it took James Cameron years to get *Avatar* made. And not until the box-office receipts came rolling in to again claim the highest grossing film of all-time title did the studios finally breathe a sigh of relief. Due to the huge capital investment required in film, producers want a proven commodity to lessen their risk in making a film. This is one reason Hollywood scoops up books, comics, and video games that already have a strong track record and built-in audience.

It also explains why we have so many derivations of *Die Hard*. And I don't just mean the half-dozen sequels to this hit. I mean the knockoffs such as *Under Siege*, which is the same basic story and characters but set on a boat; *Olympus Has Fallen* and *White House*

Down, which both take the premise to the White House; and *Lockout*, which mimics the others but set in space. The rationale behind greenlighting these films is easy to understand in terms of the entertainment dilemma: audiences want something like *Die Hard* but need something different enough to earn a new dopamine pop. Although the characters and basic setup remain the same, the switch up in setting elicits both the feeling of new and the familiar. In his seminal book on screenwriting structure, *Save the Cat!*, Blake Snyder calls this “Same But Different” (p. 23), which is a guiding principle in Hollywood. It also holds true for fantasy fans, who crave their fantasy genre expectations in a new form each time.⁵

7. Hard and Soft Spectrums

Humans are a unique combination of contrasting impulses. As such, many of the following concepts we will explore in this book will exist somewhere along a spectrum, with most individuals falling somewhere between the extremes.



One of the spectrums we'll deal with the most is the hard/soft dynamic made popular in the genre of science fiction. An element of hardness has always existed in the genre due to its speculative nature of imagining futuristic scenarios through the fields of science and technology. They are what put the science in science fiction. But hard science fiction pays more attention to the scientific rigor behind the core concepts of the stories. They seek to portray all story facets as realistically as possible, which means they focus on unobtainium rather than using the handwave. Several famous names populate the hard-science-fiction subgenres, including Robert Heinlein, Isaac Asimov, Aldous Huxley, George Orwell, and Arthur C. Clarke, to name but a few. In contrast, soft science fiction cares far less about the rigors of the science in question and focuses more on the human experience of the science-fiction conceit.

In the fantasy genre, the hard/soft dynamic has been adopted and made popular by Brandon Sanderson's three laws of magic. We'll delve deeper into them in the section on magic, but all three of his laws (which are secretly four) can also be expanded to worldbuilding as a whole. And one concept he deals with quite a bit is the idea of hard and soft magic. His definition of hard magic basically boils down to if the magic is fully understood, whereas the soft magic system is still mysterious. It should be pointed out that we mean understood by the audience. An author may know every detail of the magic system or world's history, but both would still be considered soft if unexplained to the audience.

The hard/soft dynamic has particular importance in worldbuilding because the harder the system, the more it's understood and therefore familiar to the audience. The soft system, on the other hand, is more mysterious and elicits a greater sense of newness and exploration. Both styles have their place and purpose in worldbuilding, and neither is mutually exclusive: Tolkien includes both hard and soft magic in *The Lord of the Rings* in that the rules to Frodo's ring are easily understood, whereas the extent of Gandalf's powers are still a mystery almost a hundred years after being published. What's more, the audience's understanding of a

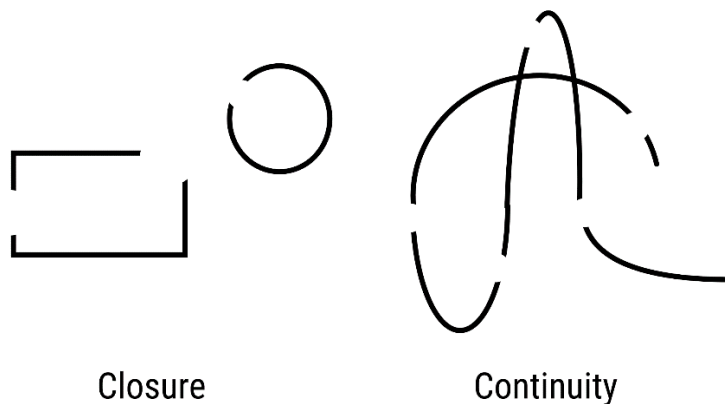
worldbuilding detail can shift from soft to hard over the course of the story. Ghosts and monsters in horror stories are prime examples of this dynamic in that they are introduced as mysterious forces that confound and horrify the characters and audience alike (as opposed to creating a sense of wonder, which would fulfill the fantasy genre expectation). Then, after numerous deaths over the course of the narrative, the characters delve into the particular history of the monster, learn its origins, limits to its power, and eventually its weaknesses, which they then exploit to defeat it in the finale. Their ultimate victory is because the characters now possess a hard understanding of the monster as opposed to their soft initial introduction.

8. Narrative Gestalt, Terra De Facto, and Immersion

In his famous work on hierarchy of needs, Maslow identified self-actualization as the pinnacle of human potentialities, which we can achieve after all our lower needs are accounted for. Those few self-actualized individuals, he found, dealt well with ambiguity. Most of the rest of us, however, do not care for uncertainty in our lives. And we outright hate ambiguity in fiction. Viktor Frankl's logotherapy maintains we seek meaning in our lives, even in events that are

entirely arbitrary. Bad things randomly happen to good people all the time in reality, and this causes us no end of anxiety.

Fortunately for audiences, fiction is not random since it is controlled by the author. As such, we demand meaning in everything we consume. This comes with an implicit understanding that everything included in a story is there for a reason, and that an underlying purpose and logic guides the story from the opening passage until the final punctuation. At times, authors will play with this expectation, such as Sartre's assertion that there is no meaning in the universe. This, paradoxically enough, is a meaning the author successfully imparted to the audience. And with the understanding that the audience intends to decipher this meaning, the question becomes how the author imparts said information.



Gestalt psychology can be summed up as the idea that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts and deals extensively with

how humans perceive and process information. Narrative theory, in turn, uses many gestalt concepts in regards to storytelling. Two of the most used are **closure** and **continuity**, in which the mind fills in obvious blanks to make a unified whole. This is used quite often in storytelling in that the author often leaves out the boring bits. For instance, early into the movie of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, we see Frodo and Gandalf set off fireworks for the children, and in the next scene, they arrive at Bag End. We did not witness their full journey to this location, but due to the gestalt concept of continuity, we mentally fill in the gaps and assume their ride was uneventful. The audience's interest is a valuable and finite commodity, so the author knows not to squander it by including pointless parts to the story. It's been an unwritten rule in Hollywood that you never see heroes reload their guns in films, and this is because it takes up valuable runtime. Directors know viewers will assume the hero reloads off camera, which accounts for the trope of an infinite amount of ammunition for protagonists.

Until, of course, when the tension reaches its very peak and the heroes are caught without an extra bullet. The story leaves out all the boring, repetitive bits to focus on the moments salient to the story, which is illustrated in characters going to the bathroom. Seldom is

this seen in stories unless it plays a particular part in the narrative where it either proves pertinent to the plot, the character, or the tone of the story.

The narrative application of gestalt's continuity is also instrumental in creating twists. Because the audience is filling in the blanks, the author can use this to their advantage. Take, for instance, Gandalf's fall from the bridge when fighting the Balrog. Although the immediate aftermath is eventually shown in *The Two Towers*, Gandalf's fate is originally left up in the air. The audience, like the characters in the story, fill in the gaps via continuity, which leads them to suspect he splats somewhere far below. Playing with the audience members' assumptions due to continuity therefore allows Tolkien to create a sense of surprise when Gandalf appears again in his white robes.

This narrative gestalt continuity can be applied to worldbuilding as well when the audience fill in the gaps. Being as they are only provided the worldbuilding details through the narrative, they form a mental representation of the world as they ascertain the underlying logic behind the details. We expect and crave order to the world the story takes place in, to the point we'll create it from the most minimal narrative details. For example, I played the original *Metroid* with my

neighbor as a kid for more hours than I would care to recount. The narrative behind the story is rather basic, as one would expect from a platforming game where the goal is leaping from one pylon to the next. But there was one section of the map which was an “ice level.” I’ve added the quotes because what separated this section from the others only consisted of a shade of blue and white. Yet to our elementary school minds, this had to have a purpose, and we stayed up late for weeks on end discussing what could have happened to have plunged that region into an eternal ice age. We actively sought continuity and invented our own rationale to fill in the gaps left by the game’s lack of explanation.

This quest for continuity can lead to some outlandish theories, which are known as **apologetics**. This term is borrowed from religion and is used to explain doctrines to others based on systematic arguments. Probably the best-known example in Western religion is the Trinity, wherein the Christian God is simultaneously the Father, Son, and Holy Ghost. Being both father and son seems contradictory, which is why reams and reams of paper have been sacrificed by religious scholars to make it make sense.

Apologetics most famously appears in fantasy worldbuilding in Star Wars, wherein Han Solo boasts he made the Kessel Run in

twelve parsecs, which as Carl Sagan pointed out at the time, is a unit of distance, not time.⁶ Many fan theories existed for years, from Han skimming a black hole to the nav computer being advanced enough to plot an exceedingly speedy route, until the movie *Solo: A Star Wars Story* officially explains that he took the most daring route on the run. Another famous example comes from *The Lord of the Rings*, where people argue the eagles that appear in *The Hobbit* as friends of Gandalf and again at the end of the film to rescue Frodo and Sam could have significantly truncated their journey by simply flying them to Mordor in the first place. The apologetics comes with fans insisting the eagles would have drawn Sauron's attention and the ring wraiths on their dragon-like Fellbeasts to make short work of the eagles. Neither this eagle theory nor Han's Kessel Run explanation are a part of the original stories, but that did not stop fans from filling in those gaps. A good rule of thumb for spotting apologetics is the need for several additional steps or leaps in logic from the fans in order to accept the explanation rather than relying on a parsimonious face validity.

Although some will insist that the need for apologetics is a weakness of the worldbuilding, apologetics actually demonstrate how much the audience has emotionally invested in the world. You don't

twist yourself into logical pretzels for something you don't care for, after all.

As Tolkien points out when he distinguishes primary from secondary worlds, audiences assess the created world in terms of the real world. This, in turn, creates the implicit understanding that anything that does not obviously deviate from the primary world (e.g., the appearance of dragons or magic) must adhere to our understanding of the real world. There are numerous terms for this impulse, but here it will be called **terra de facto**.

Terra de facto may seem a simple concept, but it has huge implications for worldbuilding. As we discussed in the last section, audiences assess worldbuilding by their personal understanding of the real world. This includes many different fields, among them biology, physics, technology, culture, and society. The audience employs their own assumptions of the world around them to the author's world, often with disastrous results. However, with some thought ahead of time, the author can ensure the audience's detail-by-detail acquisition of the world is seamless and unconscious. Because when it comes to worldbuilding, most stumbles occur when the audience suddenly becomes conscious of the uptake process.

In worldbuilding, the term **immersion** is thrown around with abandon. It is borrowed from the field of Virtual Reality and revolves around the sensation of being physically present in a non-physical world. This is an altered state to a certain extent in that the mind imagines itself elsewhere due to the artificial stimuli. The immersive experience is therefore critical to video game design, although it certainly did not originate there.

Any avid reader can easily recount losing time when immersed in a story. Entertainment by its definition is a diversion from our everyday lives, and therefore the real world, thus we enjoy the stories that make us forget about ourselves for a brief while the most. This is an altered state of consciousness wherein audience members disappear into the story and lose a sense of self by imagining themselves in the author's imagined world. Wolf breaks immersion down further, first into three different types of immersion then contrasting it to absorption and saturation. To him **absorption** is the two-way street wherein the audience is immersed in the created world and is picking up the author's metaphoric building blocks to mentally recreate the concept in their head. **Saturation** is when there are simply too many details for the audience to fully absorb, which he maintains makes the world stronger since it invites fans to re-

experience the events again and again to glean something new each time. This aspect truly is worldbuilding's greatest asset, and why fans will consume the material over and over again in numerous mediums: so they can absorb the details they missed before.

No matter how you personally parse the immersive experience, it works best when it is an unconscious state. And as anyone who has been forced to memorize random facts by rote can tell you, it's a chore because there is little continuity between these details. When making sense of our surroundings, humans expect meaning, which they naturally form into a narrative. This is why competitive memorizers often employ a story strategy where they form a basic narrative around the details they must recite. We are as a species hardwired to absorb and retain stories, it seems.

But the absorption and immersive state of the story depend implicitly on the willing **suspension of disbelief**. Despite being most famous for his poem *The Rime of the Ancient Mariner*, Samuel Taylor Coleridge also conceived of the willing suspension of disbelief to incorporate more supernatural concepts into his tales. Although these notions would be patently impossible in the real world, Coleridge expects "willingness to suspend one's critical faculties and believe something surreal; sacrifice of realism and logic for the sake of

enjoyment." There is a transactional nature to the suspension of disbelief in that we allow the author some leeway when it comes to logic in our eternal search for entertainment.

Suspension of disbelief is not *carte blanche* for the author, however, hence the "willing" modifier. Suspension of disbelief deals more in the core concept of the story itself rather than the actual act of absorbing the details. It's the big picture, the big ask expected of the audience before starting the story in the first place. For instance, if the reader does not care for magic schools or elves, then it is unlikely they will read either *Harry Potter* or *The Lord of the Rings* after perusing the synopsis on the back of the books. If a viewer refuses to accept that a terrorist strapped a bomb to the bottom of a bus that must maintain fifty miles per hour or explode, they will most likely never watch *Speed* after seeing the trailer. In television writing circles, the willing suspension of disbelief is called "the buy," meaning the audience is expected to buy into the concept before devoting hours of their lives to the series. In this sense, suspension of disbelief is indelibly linked to genre fiction in that people often prefer certain genres, such as fantasy, and thus specifically seek them out. On the flip side, people often avoid other speculative genres due to their preferences, saying something to the effect that they don't care for

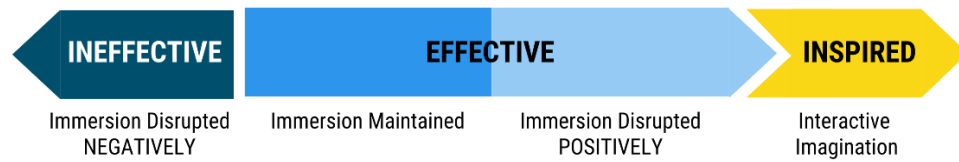
horror. Science fiction and fantasy both suffer from this from mainstream audiences, who believe that because the world is speculative and therefore made up, that there are no real stakes. In their mind, the author is not bound to the laws of reality, and therefore can shift the rules of the world to serve the plot and characters, thus lessening the inherent conflict and tension. Their personal preferences mean the buy is simply too high for them to willingly suspend their disbelief.

Yet if the suspension is willing, the mind becomes permeable for a brief while to allow the audience to absorb the narrative details, particularly the worldbuilding. Because they have willingly entered this new world, they give the author a short span of time to entice them to continue the journey. In screenwriting, this short state of permeability is generally understood to last for the first act, wherein the author must establish the story's setup, the main characters, their central conflicts, then officially kick the story into gear with the onset of the second act. This is where consumers, consciously or not, decide to continue on or find something new to watch. Willing suspension of disbelief, therefore, is the chance to get one's storytelling foot in the door, whereas the state of immersion is what you build with that initial goodwill.

9. Effective vs. Ineffective vs. Inspired Worldbuilding

Reviewers love referring to the fantasy worldbuilding as either “good” or “bad,” but we will avoid those terms going forward. Not only are these both loaded statements that imply a value to either distinction, but due to the subjectivity of the assessment process of audience members, these aren’t precise enough terms for our purposes. “Good” can mean a lot of things to a lot of people. In high school, scoring an 80% on a test would have been quite good for me, whereas my wife would peg “good” at 98%. The same is true for “bad,” which high school me would have considered under 70% versus 97% and below for my high-achieving wife. In both these cases, it’s a matter of thresholds in that “good” for me is making it over the bare minimum, whereas my wife places the bar much higher. But, since I’m the one writing this book, we’ll be applying my bare-minimum bar definition from here on out.

So instead of declaring the worldbuilding either good or bad, we’ll use “effective” and “ineffective” since we’ll examine if they achieved their aim in terms of the immersive experience. But because everything we’re discussing here resides somewhere on a spectrum, so will our definition of effective, to which we’ll also add “inspired” in a moment.



Effective worldbuilding is thankfully an easy threshold to clear in that it is when the worldbuilding details do not disrupt the audience's sense of immersion. This makes for a seamless storytelling experience, be it written or viewed, in which the immersive episode remains unbroken from beginning to end. All details in turn either serve the story, the character, or the sense of setting such that the audience can absorb these details and experience the world undisturbed for its duration.

However, this is a bare-minimum threshold in that the worldbuilding itself never quite stands out. This is in no way a problem since the worldbuilding served its purpose perfectly by never interfering with the story or characters. But by remaining unconscious throughout, it also means it never inspired the audience to think about it either, be it favorably or unfavorably.

Things become much more complicated when the consumer becomes conscious in the middle of a narrative. In many ways, the immersive experience is like a dream state in which the audience is

aware of events taking place around them, but not conscious of the altered state as distinct from reality. Yet consciousness can return within the dream state, usually in the form of a nightmare or, more pleasantly, lucid dreaming, wherein the dreamer becomes aware of and then controls the dream state. This parallels both ineffective and the next state of effective worldbuilding well.

Like a nightmare, **ineffective worldbuilding** is when the worldbuilding details become obvious to audience members in a negative light. We'll dig into the specifics of this in just a bit, but it occurs when the sense of immersion is shattered and the audience is ejected from their subconscious state. However, like a nightmare, this does not have to ruin the entire night's sleep. With any luck, the consumer can shrug, roll back over, and return to the previous calming sense of unconsciousness upon re-entering the story. But these breaks in immersion quickly add up, and negative experiences are much more memorable than pleasant ones due to negativity bias. This accumulation of small negative breaks that eventually lead to an unpleasant experience which initially seemed enjoyable are what I personally call "parking lot movies": I enjoyed them while in the theater, but after reflecting on them on the short walk to the car, I realized how weak they were. Examples include both *Contact* and

Signs since I personally enjoyed watching them, but once removed from the spectacle of the big screen and given time to think about the worldbuilding and plot, I found the films lacking.

Past the effective threshold wherein there is no return to consciousness for the consumer is the mirror image of ineffective worldbuilding, where the consumer becomes conscious of a detail, considers it against their mental model of the world, and finds the detail to align with their worldview. These moments are often slight blips in the immersive experience akin to skipping a line in a paragraph, wondering why the story suddenly doesn't make sense, tracking backward to see the mistake belongs to the reader and not the author, then returning to the story at hand.

Further along on the spectrum of effective worldbuilding are moments when consciousness returns to audience members, they consider the details or worldbuilding as a whole, then find the experience to be pleasing. This is akin to encountering a twist in the story wherein the consumer stops, considers all the plot points leading up to this reveal, then feels a visceral shiver at how well they were executed. The effective immersive break follows this track in that consciousness often returns when encountering a moment of

wonder where the worldbuilding details are so enjoyable the consumer stops to savor them.

Inspired worldbuilding ascends into a rarified air that invites audience interaction via their imagination after the story has concluded. These are the worlds that live on in our heads after finishing the story. The audience is no longer a passive observer, but now takes an active part in the world. And, in a moment that is probably telling about myself as a person, the best example of inspired worldbuilding I can think of is when a friend and I spent a week trying to figure out how to murder a Jedi.

To set the scene, it was the early '90s, the prequels did not yet exist, we were bored, wired on Mountain Dew, and feeling rather tempted by the dark side. We quickly got to wondering, without being armed with the Force, how we could possibly kill these psychic space knights wielding laser swords. So, with hundreds of viewings of the original trilogy under our belts, a few Star Wars paperbacks, and multiple sessions of the Star Wars role-playing game between us, we set out to kill us some hypothetical Jedi. We knew right away we'd be unable to sneak up on them due to their abilities to sense a disturbance in the Force. We also knew firing blasters would never work since they could simply reflect the shots back at us. This meant

their reflexes were enhanced, so short-range weapons against a sword that could cut through anything would also prove futile. This led us down our first successful path when we decided to use slug throwers, which were ancient projectile weapons that resemble bullet-firing guns in our world. The rationale behind this was that at least they wouldn't be unable to turn our own weapons against us as they could with blasters. From there, we realized they could only stop something the width of their lightsaber, meaning a shotgun blast worth of tiny pellets could get around their blade. We followed this line of thought a little further to realize that their lightsaber would be entirely ineffective against area-affect weapons like a thermal detonator or rocket. Eventually we concluded the best method for murdering a Jedi would be to launch an area-affect weapon with a large blast radius from a long distance while they were unaware.⁷

And while this seems like a silly aside, it demonstrates inspired worldbuilding in that the universe Lucas created stayed with the two of us well past our unconscious absorption of it. Not once during our countless viewings did we consciously try to memorize the worldbuilding details, but when faced with this mental exercise, we discovered we had all the tools we needed to solve it. No longer were we passive observers, but active archeologists hunting for clues

buried within our collective memories we could then reassemble within this universe. And in so doing, we demonstrated how invested we were in it. The buy asked at the beginning had been gladly paid, and we kept turning our attention to this universe even long after we knew what the results would be. How Luke and Vader would defeat the Emperor over and over again with each rewatching was never in question. The story was still an immutable whole that was entirely complete,⁸ yet the world kept calling us back to mentally play in it.

George Lucas was certainly not the first to make this connection between loving a world and a sense of playing in it, but he was the first to monetize it through merchandising action figures, which are the early epitome of inspired worldbuilding. Instead of taking a pay raise off his last film, *American Graffiti*, Lucas instead opted for all merchandising rights for Star Wars and all of its subsequent sequels. This decision ended up being worth more than twelve billion dollars in total. Recognizing that fans would want more stories within his constructed world than he could ever create, Lucas effectively crowd-sourced the solution by giving children plastic facsimiles of his characters, vehicles, and settings and then set them loose to continue the story however they saw fit. Not only were the core characters immortalized in plastic form but so were the supporting

characters, background actors, and any other cool image from the film, until the toy line outgrew the movies themselves and they started making Star Wars figures outside of the films.

Fan art and cosplaying are also obvious outgrowths for this sort of devotion to inspired worldbuilding, but video games, especially the massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMOPGs), which allow the consumer to design their own character within the universe, offer the most telling manifestation of this adoration. Unlike the cheap store-bought costumes of Luke and Leia we wore in the '80s, these instances mean the consumer is mentally projecting themselves into the universe. And often they are not dressing as a particular character, but instead make an extension of self within the shared universe, be it Jedi, Sith, smuggler, or Wookie. The same holds true of Harry Potter fans, who not only dress up in the robes of their favorite houses but also use the houses in their dating profiles to express their personalities and values for other fans.

Because people are so willing to project themselves into these shared worlds, this means they have a sense of ownership in them. With such a mental investment, they've decided how the world "should" be, and can be overprotective of the worlds when others try and add to them, be it other commissioned authors or even the

original creator. In effect, we've been playing with the licensed action figures so long that we think they are an outgrowth of our own imagination instead of a product sold to us by another. However, this is a discussion for later in chapter twenty-four.

It is quite possible for a world to include ineffective, effective, and inspired worldbuilding simultaneously. Star Wars has some rather infamously ineffective worldbuilding in that most worlds are described with exactly one climate, such as the ice-world Hoth, swamp-world Degoba, and forest-moon of Endor. Many a scientist has rolled their eyes at these descriptions of mono-climates, yet millions of others have watched the series from beginning to end without a single blip of negative consciousness. To them, this was sheer entertainment with no underlying message or inspiration, making it a poster child for effective worldbuilding. Yet others, like myself and my Jedi-murdering friend, become inspired for all the wrong reasons. Because of audiences' subjective examination of the same world, assessing if it is effective or not becomes a cumulative endeavor. Like Rotten Tomatoes not focusing on any one particular film critic by aggregating them all, worldbuilding must be judged overall on how many people find it ineffective or effective. It is similarly impossible to ascertain what exactly will inspire others about a world, meaning one cannot

bank on creating an inspired world no matter how much time or effort that goes into it.

But it is quite possible to minimize the chances of ineffective worldbuilding by ensuring the immersive state remains unbroken for as long as possible.

10. Breaking Immersion—External and Internal Validity

Sleep is a fragile thing that can be disturbed by an outside source, such as a crying child, or an internal source, such as a dream about falling off a cliff. Both shake you awake and out of unconsciousness. The same holds true for the immersive state, which can be assailed from both external and internal sources.

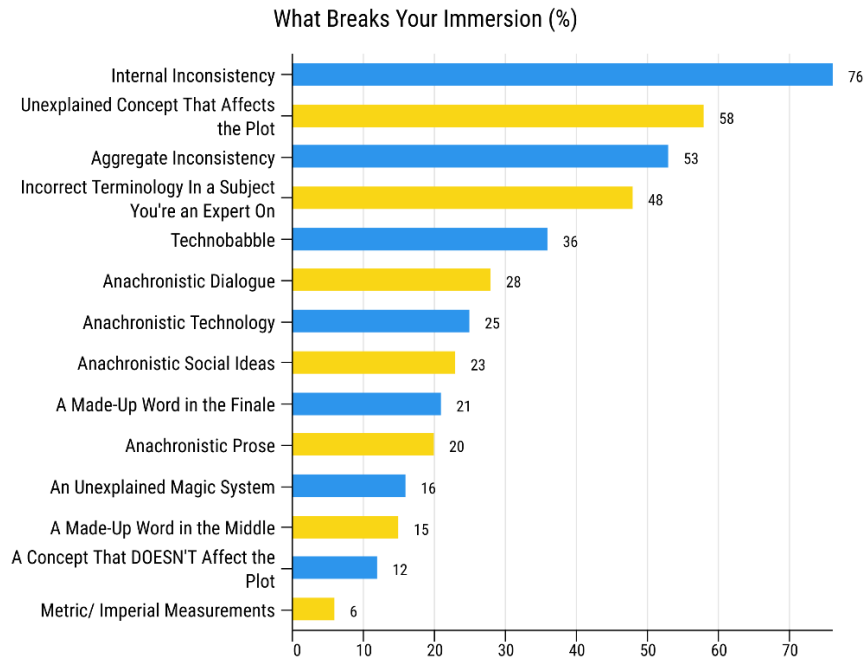
As we discussed, *terra de facto* means anything that does not pertain to a fantastical conceit falls under the rules of the real world. And, as Jemisin points out, “You have to understand the audience is bringing to the table the knowledge of one world—this one” (N. K. Jemisin's Master Class In World Building, 2018), and everyone considers themselves an expert on how the world works. But our level of understanding of the real world varies quite a bit based upon experience, education, and culture. This also means there's a bevy of knowledge out there to assail the constructed world and pick it apart

with. Fortunately, other than professional critics and people who simply love to overly criticize, most consumers are not out to tear a work apart. If they're consuming it in the first place, this means they've willfully suspended their disbelief and entered the permeable unconscious state. But the author's details must still pass muster, and if they fall under the auspices of terra de facto, they must adhere to the general understanding of the way the real world works. If not, immersion is irrevocably broken.

To pass the **credibility threshold**, these details must clear a low bar in that they must only appear plausible to a general audience. This means they must feel credible or valid upon first cursory inspection. In the field of assessment, this is known as **face validity**: upon immediate examination, the detail appears believable. For instance, if I said that a horse ran at a breakneck pace, nearing thirty kilometers an hour, that would most likely pass the credibility threshold because there would be little reason to doubt this statement since this seems a plausible speed for a horse.

However, the more familiar the audience is with the details in question, the higher that minimum credibility threshold becomes. These details are held to a higher standard because they test the consumer's personal knowledge bank. My own personal knowledge

bank includes jewelry making since it is a hobby of mine, meaning I know more about shaping, silversmithing and smelting than your average individual. Because of this esoteric knowledge, I nearly sprained my eyes rolling them during the scene in *Game of Thrones* where Khal Drogo bestows Viserys his golden crown by tossing some jewelry into a pot heated on the fire then pouring it over his head. I knew that gold melts at 1,064 degrees Celsius, whereas a common wood-cooking fire, as shown in that scene, reaches about 320 degrees, hence goldsmiths using kilns for smelting.⁹ So, although this was a great and symbolic scene that most people did not think twice about, it did not ring true for me and thus shattered my immersive state. And I'm not alone, with "Incorrect Terminology in a Subject You're an Expert On" rating fourth when fantasy fans were surveyed on the subject. That the first three on the list all pertained to breaking internal consistency, which we'll deal with soon, should demonstrate the pitfalls of an audience's expert knowledge.



Expert knowledge is so important that it affects memory as well, with psychologists demonstrating that chess masters can remember the layout of boards far better than novices—if the boards were laid out in plausible patterns that occur in a real game, that is. If the placement of the pieces was random, the chess masters' memories rated no better than the novices'. This is why non-experts may not notice when real-world details interfere with the story when an expert would. Moments like these are **reality incursions** in that the outside world interjects itself into the created fantasy experience to remind the consumer that this is indeed a made-up world.

And nothing is worse then disrupting the immersive flow.

Like that typo in the previous sentence (*then* instead of *than*), these reality incursions derail the flow and make the work and world seem amateurish. However, it cannot be stressed enough how dependent these expert-level knowledge disruptions are on not only the knowledge of the consumer but on their perceptions as well. There's a chance you missed the typo, meaning your immersive reading experience remained undisturbed until I pointed it out. And probably only my long-suffering copy editor noticed in the previous paragraph about jewelry making when I did not use an Oxford comma for the first and only time in this book. If I know him, his experience was lessened because of that intentional mistake on my part. But unless you also happen to have a career in editing, it's likely that it slipped by without a hitch in your reading experience.

It should also be noted that these external-reality incursions can have little correlation with regards to the story, no matter how fantastical the genre conceit. One such example came from my coworker who had been in the military and enjoyed the show *The Walking Dead*. Then one day, he came in complaining how the characters misused their assault rifles and insisted they would be out of ammo within seconds if they handled them the way they did on the show. He was up in arms about this mistake, which ruined the whole

episode for him. Yet he was still completely fine with the idea of ambulatory undead roaming the world without any explanation within the story world. These walking dead are the core concept, the fantasy conceit where it deviates from the real world. Since he knew this going in, he willingly suspended his disbelief in this drastic deviation from reality. But once a detail outside of this fantasy conceit came into his wheelhouse, he rebelled, even though the fantasy conceit is far more outlandish and demands a much bigger mental buy-in than how many bullets a gun could fire.

Once an author realizes every detail can and will eventually be judged by an expert in that field, creating a world becomes quite daunting. This produces the desire to be an expert in all fields touched upon in the book no matter how trivial. Unfortunately, this is unsustainable for the author and leads to the paralysis by analysis in which the creator keeps researching and adding to the worldbuilding details to perfect the sense of authenticity. Conversely, authors can end up spending all their time becoming an expert in a certain field such that they gain a false sense of security. This harkens back to *The Psychology of Computer Programming*, the seminal 1971 book with ten commandments of egoless coding, number three of which is that “no matter how much ‘karate’ you know, someone else will

always know more.” This means no matter how great an expert you believe yourself to be in a specific field, there is someone more knowledgeable out there who could easily defeat you. Realizing this leads to egoless programming by not relying on your own knowledge and being ready to accept input from someone else. In worldbuilding, accepting that no matter how well you research and reveal real-world details in a chosen field that someone will find your knowledge lacking can be a liberating experience since the creator should no longer attempt to please experts but instead focus on clearing the minimum credibility threshold for the average consumer.

Horses are a great example in that they are ubiquitous in fantasy literature. Every knight must have their steed, after all, and it's hard to go on a quest without this basic form of transportation. Yet despite their pervasiveness, it's unlikely that the average fantasy fan has spent more than forty hours on horseback in their lifetime since less than 3% of Americans ride horses each year. Yet we've absorbed enough details about them from media consumption to have a basic understanding of how they work and what's actually plausible. A horse being ridden for five hours a day for five days with rest would likely not raise the ire of your average reader, which is why horses are basically treated as living cars by most modern authors.

But despite the truism to the adage that “half the world is below average,” the author should not treat their audience as unintelligent. This means the minimum credibility threshold is higher than the proverbial 50% mark, and most details should at least be considered, if not researched a bit. The author/screenwriter cannot rely on the argument that it’s a book/show about dragons and ice zombies, so therefore complaining about cavalry tactics is off-base—as the writers to the final season of *Game of Thrones* learned the hard way. There are always accepted moments where logic is bent to serve the scene, as with Viserys’ golden crown, but outright breaking the logic of the worldbuilding to serve the scene is just as bad as having characters act against their established personalities and backstory. In both cases, it cheapens the scene because it disrupts the internal validity, as we’ll discuss in the next chapter.

Conversely, what consumers believe to be the minimum credibility threshold or face validity may have no bearing in reality. This often occurs when men insist women could not wield weapons in the same way males do, thus invalidating the whole tale when a female barbarian appears. Cases like these can be hard to parse since, on one hand, the critics are assuming a level of expert knowledge in a field they most likely have little knowledge in since

very few people these days have actually swung a sword in combat. On the other hand, the author cannot simply rely on the explanation that this is a fantasy world and thus is shielded from this criticism unless it is a direct component of the fantasy conceit or character concept. Martin made it a point to incorporate this argument in his depiction of Brienne of Tarth, whose training as a knight makes sense both within the world and as a part of her characterization. And audiences will generally give a lot of leeway if there is some addressing of the minimum credibility threshold.

Unless it drastically affects the plot, that is.

As Wolf points out when it comes to inconsistencies, the more they affect the main plotline for the story the more disruptive to the immersive experience they become. A throwaway line about mono-climate forest moon of Endor or the Kessel Run being accomplished in a matter of distance rather than time can be easily dismissed as no more than a typo since these details do not affect the main throughline of the Star Wars story. However, in a modification of Sanderson's first law of magic (see chapter thirty-five), the more the details affect the core concept of the story, the more the audience will expect an expert level of detail from the author. So, to wit, horses can be used as hairy cars in a story unless horses are a significant

component of said story. If it revolves around a nomadic people on horseback whose entire lifestyle is dependent upon their mounts, the more the audience will expect an expert level of detail. Likewise, if the tale centers on building an impenetrable castle, the author best demonstrate an expert level of knowledge on the construction, defense, and attack strategies of castles. This is known as **author authority** and must be established early on so the audience will accept the author as an expert in their chosen fields. This is frequently done by using specific, esoteric, and credible details to demonstrate the author's level of understanding, which is quite similar to technobabble, which we'll discuss shortly.

As Erikson so succinctly states (*italics his*): "It's not enough to simply describe your setting. *Make use of it. Use your assembling of details to convey authority – the sense not only that you're there, but you as author, know what you're talking about...* So, while you don't need to know a lot about this, you need to know enough to fake it. And the best way to fake it is to use practical, mundane, accurate observations..." (*What, Another Tavern? The Use of Setting in Fantasy*, 2018). Gaiman echoes this in his course on writing, as does Card when he points out that information "is to your audience as water is to a plant—it's the life of the story, and yet you

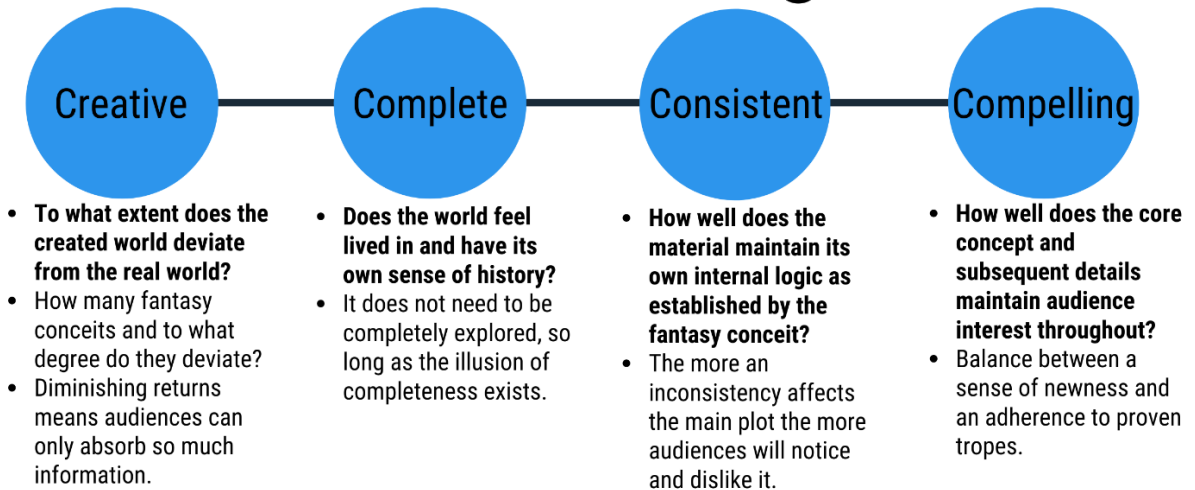
have to keep it in balance” (How To Write Science Fiction and Fantasy, p. 88).

Because of the genre expectations in the fantasy genre, the audience expects the unbelievable, leaving the author in the unenviable position of creating an authentic experience in a world that cannot exist by definition. So how does one make dragon riding feel realistic when no one in fact has ever ridden a dragon?

11. Internal Validity—The Four Cs of Worldbuilding

One of Wolf’s greatest contributions to the field of worldbuilding was recognizing three components to maintain a sense of credibility. These he identified as **consistent**, **complete**, and imaginative. We are deeply indebted to him for this insight, but because of my adoration of alliteration, we’re going to rename imaginative to **creative**. To these three, we will also add **compelling**, thus creating the **four Cs of worldbuilding**. These four aspects help define our imaginary worlds by setting up their parameters and ensuring adherence to them throughout so as to provide the essential internal credibility necessary to maintain the sense of immersion.

The Four Cs of Fantasy Worldbuilding

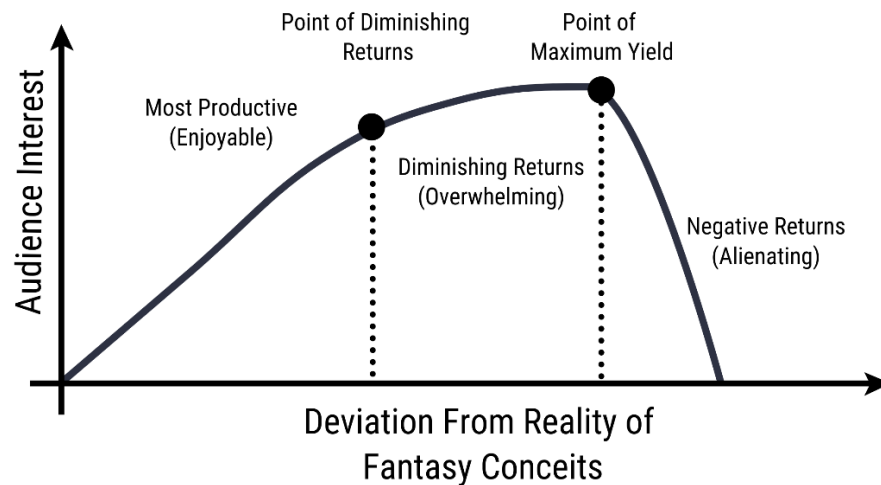


But before we delve into these four Cs, it should be noted that all four need to be examined both in terms of concept and execution. This mirrors the top-down or bottom-up approach in that the conceptual level steps back and examines everything from the big picture perspective while the executional level means considering the details themselves that the audience encounters. When it comes to *The Lord of the Rings*, the concept is about a high-fantasy realm where multiple races exist in a magical war between good and evil centered around the return of a once-dead demonic overlord bent on conquering the planet again. In terms of execution, it's the specific and authentic particulars like the hobbits' hairy feet, female dwarfs being mistaken for men due to their beards, veins of mithril shining in the mines of Moria, and goblins riding wargs instead of horses.

In effect, it is quite easy to have a great world that is creative, compelling, consistent, and complete in concept, but if the details the audience encounters do not pay off individually, it creates a disconnect. Ditto for the inverse, where each detail itself is splendid when taken individually, but the audience cannot fit these building blocks into a coherent whole that reflects the author's aim. For each of these four aspects, the author must ask themselves, "What am I trying to say and how am I trying to say it?" The details must reflect the top-down concept, whereas the core concept must be able to be gleaned from the bottom-up details. With this dual-nature in mind, let us examine our four Cs:

Creative: *To what extent does the created world deviate from the real world?* On the conceptual level, this deals with the fantasy conceits that we'll spend chapter twelve discussing and addresses how often and to what degree changes have been made to reality. In terms of the entertainment dilemma, this pertains to the X factor, the new life and new civilizations the audience expects to check off their genre expectations. At the same time, something that is too many deviations from the norm can become alienating, which is why the majority of fantasy tales deal with, if not outright human, then at least humanoids that mirror our own Earthy societies. There are certainly

stories that do center around non-bipedal creatures, like dragons, but these are outliers that spring to mind because they are so odd.



Sprawling epic high-fantasy tales with dragons, dwarves, elves, and demons might seem passé by today's standards, but they were entirely new to the general populous when Tolkien released *The Hobbit* in 1937. Little details like wizards carrying staves and the hobbits residing in hills with round doors were charming and enchanting at the time, so much so that they have become fantasy staples decades down the road. The same holds true for laser-sword-wielding psychic samurais in a space opera, but both *The Lord of the Rings* and *Star Wars* only do so because they set the standards for their genres for generations to come. And both these ideas would be called **high-concept** by today's Hollywood definition. High-concept, at least in the film industry, means the idea needs a large degree of

explanation to get across to your average individual, hence having to include worldbuilding details like what hobbits or Jedi are. One cannot adequately explain *The Lord of the Rings* by stating that some short guys cross a continent consumed by a world war to drop some jewelry in a volcano any more than Star Wars can be condensed into saying that a rebellion attempts to defeat an authoritarian regime by assassinating its emperor and his right-hand man. Although they can both be easily reduced to their main plot points, neither becomes compelling until context is delivered in terms of worldbuilding. Compare this to a relatively low-concept pitch about an acrimonious divorce or a murder mystery. Because both of those examples revolve around common and familiar human interactions, they do not require much in the way of background worldbuilding to reach the core concept of the story. They are instead compelling because we can relate to those situations rather than being compelling due to the patent impossibility of their high-concepts.

In terms of bottom-up creative details, these are the original little moments that make the story seem magical by either showing us something entirely new and wonderful or making us see the mundane in a new light. Harry Potter is replete with such examples, such as the candies of every flavor (including boogers) and the chessboards that

execute each other and offer advice to the players. These little flourishes add quite a bit of whimsy to the moment and make the world feel like the core concept is being used to its full advantage. These details can sometimes be embellishments in that they do not directly serve the story, yet they still serve the world in that they make it feel real and lived in. In the case of Harry Potter, it takes the concept of a magical world that mirrors our own and extends the idea to its natural conclusion. In this universe, they even instill their sweets with magic and have their own form of sports, which gives the audience a great number of building blocks with which to construct a mental map of the world.

Complete: *Does the world feel lived in and have its own sense of history?* Completeness tackles the catch-22 of fantasy worldbuilding in that its intent is to make the world feel like it does not only serve the story even when the world is delivered to the audience via a story, so without intruding upon the narrative, a sense of completeness is reached when the created world equals or surpasses the real world in terms of scope, depth, and breadth. Not only does a sense of completeness demand that the world appear to expand beyond the physical confines of the story itself, that sense of scope should also extend forwards and backwards in time to give the

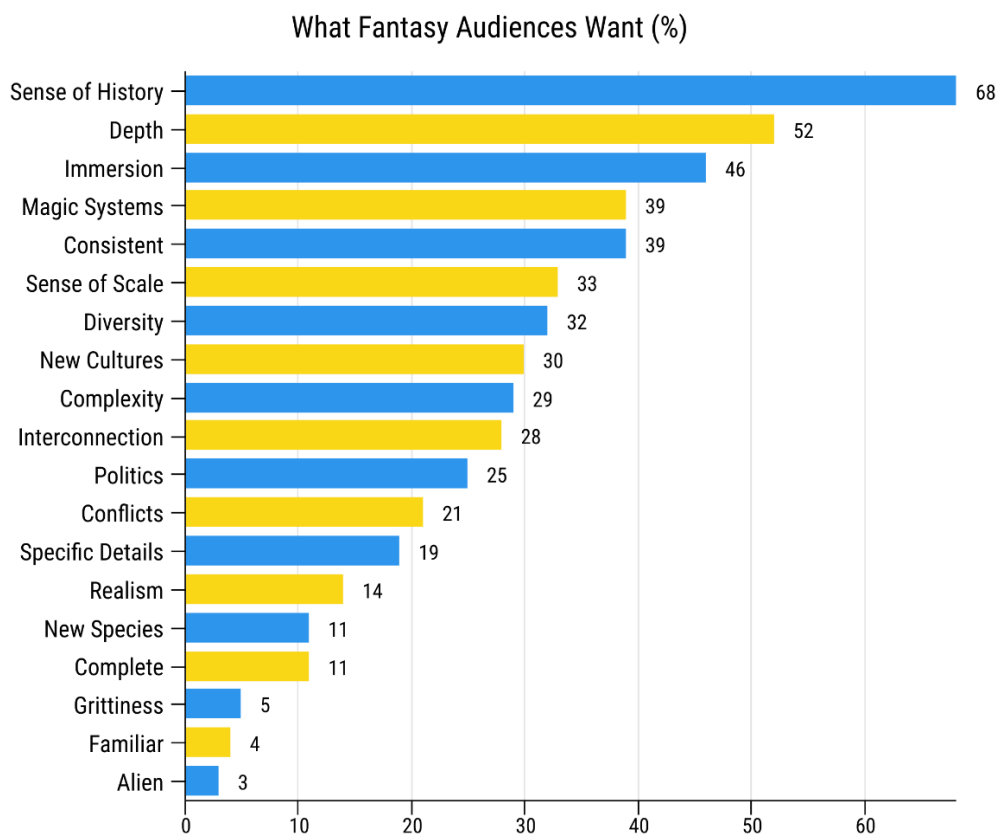
impression that this is just a snapshot in its very long and rich timeline. This is how the sense of completeness manifests itself on the conceptual level, by giving the sense of being vast even if it incorporates only a small space, as with Hogwarts. However, this sense of scope and depth is created via the subsequent details, which often serve the world rather than the plot or characters.

Worldbuilding is a lot like character backstory in that it incorporates the history, motivations, and mannerisms of all the settings, organisms, and cultures in the constructed universe. The world itself becomes a living, breathing character that leaps off the page based upon these details. And much like with character backstory, it quickly becomes tempting to include every single moment of it, even if not immediately relevant to the plot. Wolf quotes Henry Jenkins' blog post on the **encyclopedic impulse**, which is the desire for the world to expand beyond the consumer's current grasp. Wolf repurposes the term to mean "exploratory interludes; points at which the narrative halts so that information about the world and its inhabitants can be given" (Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation, p. 29). For our purposes, the encyclopedic impulse is the consumer's desire to know everything about the world or the author's desire to expound upon all the

worldbuilding details. These asides can add depth to the world but can also manifest as the dreaded “info dump,” which we’ll cover in chapter fifteen.

A sense of completeness is hard to attain even in a real-world setting and even more difficult in fantasy worldbuilding. No one has experienced every event in the real world that has rolled on for billions of years, so how can they create this same sense of scope and breadth in a fictional world? To do so, Wolf offers the concept of **illusion of completeness**, which hints at the overarching history of the world instead of exploring every single aspect. Much like with character backstory, this can be better achieved by parceling out the information through mystery. Sanderson calls this “info-dump equity,” which we’ll examine in chapter twenty-one. This also dovetails into writer and director JJ Abrams’ idea of the **mystery box**. Abrams realized that mystery drives interest in stories as the audience builds anticipation as to when the mystery will be revealed. In effect, the audience can be strung along in the story if they are given the promise of elucidation later. This leaves them engaged and still immersed in the story so as to continue to absorb the worldbuilding details.

The illusion of completeness can be harnessed through throwaway lines such as Obi-Wan's allusion to the Clone Wars Luke's father fought in. And although a trilogy of movies and TV series now exist around this single line, when it was first uttered in 1977, it had no real-world context. Even in its own current constructed universe, it had no direct significance and was not alluded to again in the original trilogy, yet it served its purpose perfectly by instilling a sense of history to the world. This isn't surprising at all since a "sense of history" rated number one in what fantasy audiences wanted in terms of worldbuilding.



The mention of the Clone Wars can be considered a form of **technobabble**, which is a writing tool in which a character quickly spouts a number of details to establish their expert credentials in the field. Much like the author establishing their bona fides in regard to real-life worldbuilding elements that will feature prominently in the story, technobabble is meant to demonstrate that the character has expert knowledge beyond the others. Technobabble is used in many genres and is quite effective in getting across throwaway worldbuilding details that offer a sense of completeness that might never need to be returned to again, so long as they leave a sense that they could be returned to again, that is.

When creating the illusion of completeness, the author walks the razor's edge in that too few specific details give the world a generic ambiance, whereas too many might overwhelm and alienate the consumer. This was the case with the card game *Magic: The Gathering*, where the research & development team realized that over the years the game had evolved to become more complex by slowly adding new elements with each new release. Yet new players entered with the same knowledge each time (i.e., nothing), making the game more difficult to understand and learn and thus driving new players away. They coined the term **complexity creep** to describe

this gradual growth in complexity over a project's lifespan that raises the barrier for entry for people encountering it for the first time.¹⁰

Each new detail also risks the chance for inconsistency by disrupting the immersive state by raising a question in the consumers. However, as Wolf points out, "So long as the audience does not find their question unanswerable, the world will appear to be sufficiently complete" (Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation, p. 39). Much like the wine example I mentioned in the introduction, the reviewer did not actually want to know where the best regions to grow wine in my world were. She just wanted a sense that this information might exist, thus making the world feel more real. As we'll discuss in chapter eighteen, the hint of completeness can be compared to an iceberg, where only a small portion is visible to give the impression of greater, hidden depths below.

Star Wars, *Airbender*, and the filmed versions of *The Lord of the Rings*, *Game of Thrones*, *The Hobbit*, and Harry Potter have a distinct advantage over their written word iterations in that it's less obnoxious for visual details to reach a saturation point where the audience is no longer able to absorb them all. A picture is worth a thousand words, as the adage says, so in depicting the Battle of

Helm's Deep on screen, for example, with thousands of characters all decked out in different attire and sporting different weapons battling it out, it need take only seconds to convey all the rich details. Compare this to the written word, which would have to list each and every detail to convey the same information. The visual medium can wash over the audience without taking away from the moment, whereas the sense of completeness created by listing off each and every one of these details in textual form would quickly become tedious, as is often the complaint when Martin goes into painstaking detail as to how his knights are dressed or what food is consumed. Seeing this moment visually takes but a second compared to the time it takes to read and process all the information.

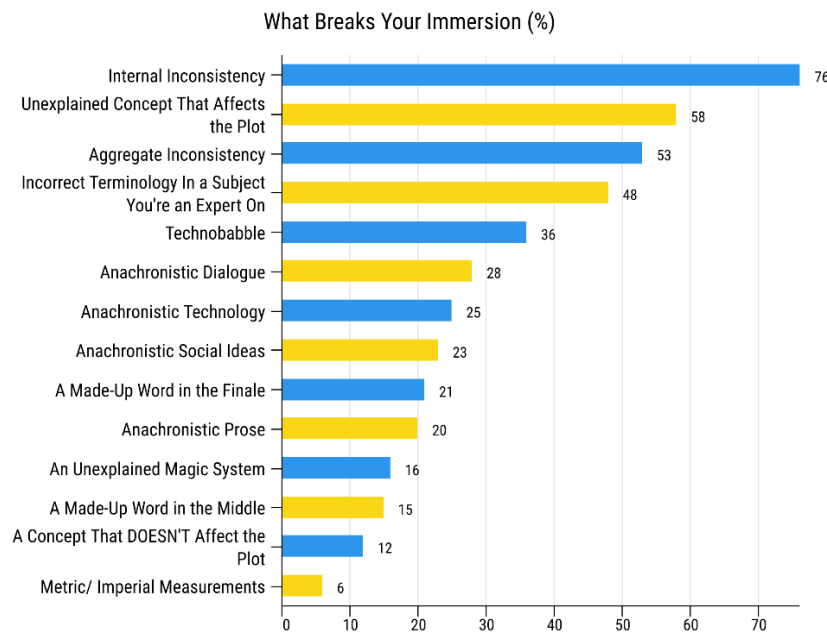
The visual mediums maintain this advantage of being able to create this overflow of information because they are not the product of a single individual like the written word is. Not only does the director offer their interpretation of the screenwriter(s) adaptation of the original text, the producers and executive producers have their input, which is filtered through the concept artists, creative designers, costumer designers and costumers, set designers, visual effects, and computer animators (to name just a few). Each person adds additional elements in the form of visual grace notes that expand

upon the creator's initial idea. So while this visual presentation takes away quite a bit of the audience's interaction by solidifying and codifying what the consumer's imagination might have visualized differently, it allows for professional creative crews to fashion more details than the consumer could have conceived of on their own. This ties into Wolf's idea of saturation in that all these visual elements cannot possibly be consumed and processed in a single sitting, which is why these inspired worldbuilding properties invite multiple viewings to uncover facets that were overlooked the last time. By providing an overabundance of details, the illusion of completeness is maintained.

Unlike the creative aspect of internal consistency, which can be evaluated in terms of conception and execution, completeness is mostly defined by its ground-level details. Each one provides a new brick, a new building block for the audience to discover and put together. Each new detail pushes back the white space that is this new world, illuminating the unknown and filling in the mental map. And those white spaces outside the edge of the story with "here be dragons" scrawled on the margins just invite more exploration and imagination.

Consistent: *How well does the material maintain its own internal logic as established by the fantasy conceit?* Ralph Waldo

Emerson once famously stated that “a foolish consistency is the hobgoblin of little minds,” but he also stated one should not “recite other people’s opinions,” so perhaps his previous point should to be taken with a grain of salt. Famous transcendentalists aside, audiences demand consistency within their stories and worlds. As such, the author cannot state all dwarves are short and then immediately produce a tall dwarf without breaking the consumer’s immersive state due to the inconsistency. In effect, the author must remain within the logical framework established by their own work. They must adhere to their own rules or suffer the audience’s wrath, as demonstrated by the top three answers pertaining to inconsistencies as the worst ways to disrupt the immersive experience.



Consistency can be assessed in both how well the executed details reflect the fantasy conceit and if they run contrary to each other. The fantasy conceit in Harry Potter is that magic exists and is taught to children in a clandestine primary school, which is stated clearly on the back material of the book and features prominently in the movie trailers, meaning it is well-understood that this is its high-concept selling point. In *Save the Cat!* Blake Snyder calls this the **promise of the premise** (p. 81), which is the first half of the second act where the core concept is explored to its fullest. If the events of Harry Potter did not involve the eponymous boy who lived and instead revolved around an orc detective bent on solving the murder of his troll partner, there would be an obvious disconnect between the core concept and story events, thus destroying the promise of the premise.

Internal consistency can also break down if the offered details are incongruous with previous details. Often this comes about by the author not keeping track of minutiae, such as Harry's textbook being called *One Thousand Magical Herbs and Fungi* then later as *One Hundred Magical Herbs and Fungi* (and corrected for continuity in later editions). Other times the inconsistency can only be discovered through careful consideration, such as when it is stated in *The Order*

of the *Phoenix* that Snape and Bellatrix ran in the same crowd at Hogwarts despite their years not overlapping due to their age differences. Still, other inconsistencies come from books far later in the series or from ancillary sources in what Wolf calls **aggregate inconsistencies**, such as in *Chamber of Secrets* when everyone has to put a pinch of Floo Powder into the fire to travel opposed to Mr. Weasley using a single pinch for the whole group in *The Goblet of Fire*. As with the typo example earlier, the chance of audience members noticing these inconsistencies and breaking immersion is a subjective matter, although the closer they occur to each other increases the chances significantly. And an author can use this desire for consistency to draw attention to an aspect of worldbuilding. In the above example where it's understood that all dwarves are short but then a tall one appears moments later, this could be an intentional inconsistency meant to highlight this aberration from the established rules in what is known as a **one-off**. But this is a gambit that might backfire when the consumer is intentionally jostled out of the immersive experience, and it is a matter of execution as to if the audience finds this break to be pleasant or not.

Wolf points out how difficult it is to maintain internal consistency, especially as the world expands in scope. This puts the consistency

aspect in direct opposition with the complete component in that the more material that is provided the harder it is to keep it all straight due to the aggregate inconsistencies. It is difficult for a single author to maintain internal consistency, which takes on a whole new set of headaches when other contributors add their own artistic flourishes. Both Tolkien and Lucas battled with what they considered inconsistencies in their work, which we'll discuss in the section on retconning, which was only compounded in Lucas' case by the steady stream of other authors writing within his world. They released a comic series in the same universe detailing the characters' backstories from 1977-'86. To this they added a series of books in 1991, which became known as the Expanded Universe (EU) and employed dozens of authors all spinning their own tales in Lucas' world. After the prequel trilogies, the TV series *The Clone Wars* filled in even more details. With so many metaphoric cooks in the kitchen, Leland Chee became the caretaker of this wealth of information in what was known as the Holocron Continuity Database. This was eventually wiped away with the sale of Star Wars to Disney, which in turn began to establish its own official **canon**. Canon comes from the term for the church's decisions on which religious texts to include in the Bible, and in terms of worldbuilding, it is considered the accepted

material in a fictional universe. And, like religious texts, canon is considered the core doctrine for the world when conflicting information arises. A general rule of thumb when considering canon is that any work made by the original creator takes precedence, whereas the further from the core creator it goes, the less canonical it becomes. The size of an audience can come into play, too, such that those iterations with the largest fanbase win out. For example, even though Timothy Zahn's Admiral Thrawn should have been thrown out with the great Disney canon purge, he proved so popular that he appears in the subsequent show *Star Wars: Rebels*.

Finally, consistency also falls under the terra de facto umbrella in that anything outside of the fantasy conceit must remain consistent to audiences' subjective understandings of reality. This adds external pressure for the details to remain consistent. Fortunately, so long as the details pass the credibility threshold, immersion should be maintained. And audiences are often more forgiving about inconsistencies so long as the material is compelling.

Compelling: *How well does the core concept and subsequent details maintain audience interest?* Of the four Cs of worldbuilding, compelling is the most subjective and difficult to gauge. Some might put this under the creative component, but it differs dramatically since

the creative concept deals with how much the worldbuilding conceit and details diverge from reality. This sense of new certainly adds to how compelling the world is, but the aspect of creative deals exclusively with the divergence from reality. Compelling takes this sense of newness into account but also how familiar the details and concepts are and deals with the sweet spot where they combine to form something enjoyable.

While the ideas of elves, dwarves, and magic certainly existed long before Tolkien, he made them popular, to such an extent they are considered “tropey” and mainstream today. But this certainly wasn’t the case when *The Hobbit* came out, which reiterates how subjective in a temporal sense the audience experience can be. Personally, I encountered the world of Shannara, a direct imitator of Tolkien’s high-concept, high-fantasy epics, long before my first foray to Middle Earth. As such, even though Tolkien’s works long predated Brooks’, they seemed derivative to me and therefore less compelling. In my case, the undue familiarity proved to be a detriment.

Escapism from the boredom of the mundane world is such a great drive that it’s common for children to imagine themselves as adopted and that their “real” parents are far more interesting and will propel them into amazing adventures upon their return. Anyone

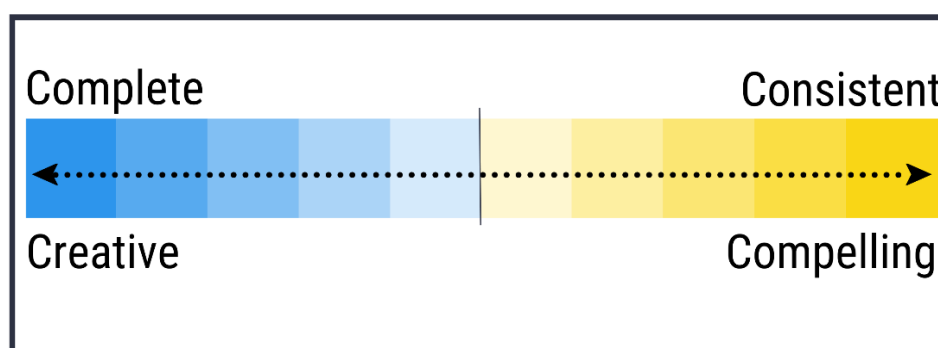
familiar with fairytales will recognize this orphan motif, which is also borne out in the Arthurian legend and numerous Disney films. As a creative child who often bristled under the constraints of formal education, I frequently imagined a secret classroom within my elementary school where children like me would be taken. There, they would reveal our special powers and teach us to harness them for the greater good. It would be years before I encountered my first X-Men comic book, but my fantasies followed the same basic format wherein children ridiculed for being different are spirited away to hone their differences into something that makes them special. Likewise, when I encountered Harry Potter many decades later, I did not find the core concept to be very creative at all. To me, this was a very familiar refrain.

But I always recognized how compelling this core concept was. It directly taps into the sense of wish fulfillment all children have, which goes to demonstrate how compelling familiarity can be. Wish fulfillment also taps into Sanderson's zeroth law of "err on the side of awesome," in which he embraces the idea of entertainment for escapism. This parallels the **rule of cool**, which states that the audience's willing suspension of disbelief for a given element is directly proportional to its level of "coolness." So long as people enjoy

something, the less they will mentally pick at the feasibility of the thing. And in this regard, the importance of a sense of universality cannot be overstated. While the audience is actively seeking out new experiences, they still need something to identify and empathize with—the more universal the better. The concept of compelling is where the unique and familiar overlap, where we find something new that we can relate to. **Tropes** are reoccurring motifs, images, plots, and characterization that exist within a genre, particularly fantasy, which has a preponderance of themes of good versus evil, quests, magic, and medievalism. Yet these tropes exist because they are incredibly effective, and consumers cleave to them because they fulfill the function of compelling.

Compelling also coincides with the sense of wonder, a word that popped up in every author interview I conducted. This pertains not only on the conceptual level, such as a school for magical children or an army of psychic laser-sword samurai, but within the details as well. There's lyrical sense of majesty when it comes to Tolkien's description of the Pillars of Kings, Martin's stark beauty of the Wall, and Aang's awe at entering the spirit world. This visceral connection to the material through the characters' experiences is what separates the effective worldbuilding from the inspired.

However, these details can overwhelm over time. Diminishing returns exist not only in the entertainment dilemma but within the work itself. Tolkien's poems and Martin's exacting details about armor or cuisine can take their toll, for instance. And just as the aspects of completeness and consistency act against each other, the same holds true of the creative and compelling concepts: what was once enjoyably new can quickly become tediously familiar.



As with all ideas in this book, it is never recommended to exist on any one end of the spectrum. Most consumers and authors love the dynamic interplay between these extremes, meaning the worldbuilding must employ all four aspects if the world is to be deemed effective and, hopefully, inspired. Each detail that passes the four Cs for internal consistency forges a link that anchors the world's core fantastical concept to the real world, which in turn grounds it and makes it stronger. The only problem is keeping all this in mind when

creating said world. Fortunately, there are several strategies, which we'll dig into in the next section.

Part IV: Fantasy Functions

“It is very edifying and profitable to create a world out of one's own brain and people it with inhabitants.” —Charlotte Brontë

OVERVIEW: Now that we understand the components that go into an effective world and the many hurdles that can trip up the immersive experience, we will examine the factors that construct an internally consistent world. To do so, we will first explore fantasy conceits, which are the creative deviations the author makes to the real world. Fantasy conceits generally progress in an order from geography to biology, physics, metaphysics, technology, and finally culture, which is why the second half of this book is dedicated to each category individually. Analogue cultures will then come into play, which are real-life cultures the author emulates in their work and then applies their fantasy conceits to. This combination of analogue cultures and fantasy conceits creates fantasy functions and is the cornerstone of fantasy worldbuilding. As we inspect fantasy functions, we will discover not only how prevalent they are, but how they are the backbone for classifying many fantasy subgenres.

12. Fantasy Conceits

A fantasy conceit is what the author wishes to examine in the fantasy work itself. Often known as “the hook,” it is the soul of the story and therefore the accompanying world. And while this statement might reek of pretension, the fantasy conceit does not need to be pretentious in the least. As we discussed in chapter one, commercial fiction’s purpose is to entertain, and while this does not preclude it from having a message, one is certainly not necessary. Stories and worlds revolving around elves, dragons, and wizards can and do exist simply because those ideas are objectively awesome. These deviations from reality are why we read the genre, after all. In her workshops on worldbuilding, Jemisin calls these fundamental changes to the world **element X** (N. K. Jemisin Speaks at WIRED25, 2019), which is where the fantasy elements diverge from reality to make these worlds unique. Wolf refers to fantasy conceits as **secondary world defaults**, which “are what define a secondary world and delineate its difference from the Primary World” (Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation, p. 57). These are an outgrowth of the creative component of internal validity we discussed last chapter in that it is where and to what degree the created world deviates from the real world. These are the big ideas that alter the laws of nature, such that it is immediately clear that this

is not the mundane reality we all share. Each fantasy conceit causes major reverberations and repercussions for the world and are, in effect, where the handwavium rubber meets the road.

As both Wolf and Jemisin point out, one of the most important aspects of the fantasy conceit is that it is clearly recognized by the audience. This component is crucial since the audience discovers the world and its rules from inside-out processing. It might not align exactly with what the author intended in conception, but it's always strongest when the intention aligns with the execution. In *Airbender* the eponymous fantasy conceit is easy to distinguish as bending, which is the harnessing of the four elements by performing martial arts maneuvers, with only the Avatar being able to master all four at once. This aspect of the worldbuilding is so crucial a concept that it is overtly stated in the opening credits during a visual demonstration of all four bending styles. From those very first few seconds of the show, it is clear that this world is not our own and operates by very a distinct, separate set of rules.

Fantasy conceits can manifest in a myriad of ways since any change made to the basic fabric of the world can be considered a conceit. But for simplicity's sake, I have grouped conceits into six

different categories that unfold in a natural progression from geography to biology to physics to metaphysics to technology and finally culture.

Although a world can exist with only a single fantasy conceit, several conceits often coexist. *Airbender* has two more to add to the elemental control: (a) a spirit world exists wherein past lives of humans and other entities can communicate with the Avatar, who acts as a bridge between those two worlds, and (b) most animals are made up of two Earth species merged together or are exaggerated versions of their Earthly counterparts. The existence of the spirit world is first introduced in episode six, whereas the mixed-species appears in the very first episode with the flying bison Appa and then later otter penguins.

Even though it is the most unfamiliar of my worldbuilding exemplars, I chose *Airbender* first because it has the fewest number of fantasy conceits. This is, in my opinion, why *Airbender* is the most efficient of the five, since it is able to create such a varied and vibrant new world with just three major changes to the DNA of reality.

With that in mind, it should be noted that fantasy conceits constitute significant changes to reality rather than surface-level

alterations. In *On Fairy-Stories*, Tolkien points out the difference between major changes to reality and **nominal changes** (Tree And Leaf, p. 46). In his example, it is easy for an author to say the sun is green instead of yellow, but if this new green sun does not affect or alter the secondary world in any significant way, then he considers the change just a token attempt to make the world appear new or unique. The nominal change to the world is the handwave in which the audience is not meant to think about it much, whereas a fantasy conceit is handwavium in that all other aspects of this world have been considered and withstand both external and internal stress tests to the world logic.

We've already tackled part of Harry Potter's fantasy conceits in the last chapter, but here they are in their entirety: (a) magic exists and is therefore secretly taught to children who demonstrate the capacity to wield it in a secret school; (b) fantastical creatures exist, including goblins, giants, dragons, hippogriffs, etc.; (c) the soul exists, and while an afterlife is only implied, ghosts of witches and wizards can linger behind if they have unfinished business; (d) wizarding culture is very similar to but distinct from modern-day society.

It can be surreal to see over 4,000 pages of novels and nearly twenty-five hours of movies distilled down to four bullet points, but this demonstrates the power of compelling fantasy conceits. Like atomic bombs, by harnessing just three or four major speculative changes to reality, a whole new realm can explode into existence. Both Harry Potter and *Airbender* reveal how little needs to actually be altered to the rules of the real world to yield such fantastic results. However, the distillation process is often easier for an outsider to observe than for the creators. Authors are notoriously terrible at writing their own novel's back material, and the same holds true for listing their fantasy conceits. In my experience, when asked the core components of their worlds, most authors will sputter for a few seconds before listing one and then rambling about another tangential detail, then backtracking several times to new details they forgot to mention. Even those with prevalent top-down tendencies rely on some discovery writing when creating their world. Inversely, even the biggest bottom-up authors have a general idea as to their fantasy conceits since these constitute their core concepts. The genre expectations of fantasy involve the creation of worldbuilding, after all, and as such, bottom-up authors need some inkling of their story, characters, and world before setting pen to paper.

This is because the fantasy conceits are closely tied to the audience's willing suspension of disbelief. As stated before, the fantasy conceit is usually conveyed to the potential consumer via the book's back material or movie's trailer since few people spend their money on something they randomly encounter. Once they understand the core fantasy conceit, and if it aligns with their interests, they willingly suspend their disbelief and allow themselves to be immersed in the world and story. This places them in a mentally permeable state in which to absorb the fantasy conceits from the inside-out, no matter how outlandish or patently impossible. Card points out that audiences practice a form of suspension of disbelief in what he called **abeyance**. This occurs when they encounter the made-up terms that are the calling cards of science fiction and fantasy and temporarily put their questions on hold with the implicit understanding that these phrases will be explained later. This holds true for all worldbuilding details in the setup phase of a story in that audiences will ignore their initial confusion so long as they find the story compelling. This mirrors Konrad Lorenz and his famous study, wherein he found ducks believed the first things they encountered upon hatching were their mothers. As he demonstrated, this could include inanimate objects like shoes, but it did not matter

to the ducks, which simply accepted anything presented to them during that permeable bonding state.

For human consumers, this permeable state usually lasts about the first act of the story, wherein the characters, conflicts, and context via the world's rules are established. During my years assessing thousands of screenplays, I observed that the first act also requires the outright establishment of the genre: If the script was meant to be a thriller, it needed to be thrilling in those first twenty-five pages, just as a horror script would need to establish a sense of dread within that first act. In fact, we counted off significantly not only if the genre was not established until after the first act but also if the tone veered into an entirely different genre after the first act. This abrupt and late shifting of genres, although often attention-grabbing, worked to the script's detriment because it felt like a bait-and-switch. This again returns to the promise of the premise in which the story must adhere to the core concepts established at the onset. This holds true for worldbuilding as well.

However, a shift in genres is certainly possible, especially if a slow boil over a long series. Harry Potter is a perfect example in that it began as a children's series, but grew to encompass young adult

as the protagonists aged. The series became much darker, as did *Airbender's* subsequent series, *The Legend of Kora*, wherein the main characters are burgeoning adults rather than adolescents. As we'll discuss in just a little bit, this shifting of genres goes hand in hand with the shift in analogue culture, which can affect the overall tone and genre.

Speaking of a darker tone, *A Song of Ice and Fire* is trickier to pin down the fantasy conceits on since they include tone and **author worldview**, which Wolf describes as “not only the ideas and ideologies of the world's inhabitants, but also those which the author is expressing through the world's structure of events” (Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation, p. 155). *A Song of Ice and Fire* falls into this category since it is generally considered an anti-Tolkien story. Martin reacted to many of the tropes Tolkien established and which dominated the genre for decades, including the hero, right triumphing over might, and a high degree of magic and monsters. As such, Martin ran the opposite direction with his fantasy conceits in that: (a) the planet is off-kilter, and therefore, seasons can last an unknown amount of time; (b) impossible or extinct animals, such as dragons, exist but are very rare; (c) the undead exist but are forgotten; (d) magic exists but is

very rare; (e) gods exist but seldom intervene in human affairs; (f) being morally upright does not guarantee survival.

Although it can stand on its own in terms of worldbuilding and story, such that fans rated its worldbuilding second only to Tolkien's (Presley, 2020), the context of Martin's reaction to Tolkien adds additional nuance to his work. But no matter how much additional enjoyment that can be rung from this knowledge, it should be pointed out that *A Song of Ice and Fire's* worldbuilding passes the four Cs of worldbuilding with flying colors. Yet the grim tone and nearly nihilist worldview of Martin's construction cannot be removed from the work without irrevocably altering both the world and understanding of the story, making this the prime suspect in our search for a prime-mover fantasy conceit, which we'll discuss in a moment.

Star Wars not only employs multiple fantasy conceits but also straddles both the fantasy and science fiction genres: (a) a mystical force surrounds all living things and can be harnessed by a select few for either good or evil, (b) an afterlife exists wherein the consciousness can return to the realm of the living, (c) multiple species and exotic creatures exist on (d) multiple planets, (e) faster-

than-light travel exists as one of the major technological advancements.

I've grouped the first three into the fantasy genre, whereas the last two conceits exist within the realm of science fiction (although it could be argued that c, d, & e are all science-fiction conceits). This demonstrates that no story or world has to be constrained to a single set of genre expectations or conceits, and worlds that employ fantasy conceits can also use thriller, horror, romance, or any other genre conceits as well. Star Wars borrows liberally from science fiction but also from the Western genre, military history in its depiction of World War II era dogfights, and even pulp adventure serial stories.

But although these genre conceits are not mutually exclusive, a **prime-mover** conceit usually exists that cannot be removed without the story world falling apart. The idea of a prime mover traces itself back to Aristotle, who maintained an intelligence existed that was "ultimately responsible for all wholeness and orderliness in the sensible world." This concept was the cornerstone of Western philosophy for centuries, and while out of favor now, it fits quite well

with the audience's demand for meaning in both narratives and created worlds.

In terms of worldbuilding, it can be adapted to mean the fantasy conceit that undergirds the others such that they are more outgrowths of it rather than independent of it. The prime-mover fantasy conceit therefore acts as a linchpin to the world in that, if removed, the world and subsequent story that is built upon this foundation, falls apart. Star Wars, for all its science-fiction and Western trappings, can exist both as a story and constructed world without those elements. Take away the space ships and the story could still carry on relatively unchanged since the ships are simply means of conveyance and combat rather than a core concept of the narrative. In effect, the world and story could still exist on nautical ships or airplanes without affecting the core story much at all. The battle between good and evil, the light and dark sides of the Force as played out by the Empire and Rebellion, would still remain unchanged.

Compare this to the Force and Jedi. If the Force was removed from the story, not only would the Jedi not exist, but neither would the Sith, which in turn leave the Empire without their mystical

megalomaniac leader. There would be no need for the Rebellion, which robs the story of its inherent conflict. The world could still exist to a certain extent, what with the space ships and vaguely Western vibe, but the worldbuilding would subsequently be bereft of its most compelling element. As such, the Force is Star Wars' prime mover. And the Force is clearly a fantasy conceit since it does not abide by real-world logic or fall under the unobtainium umbrella of science fiction, thus marking Star Wars as primarily a work of fantasy with overtones from other genres. In fact, as we'll discuss in chapter twenty-three, the shifting of a fantasy conceit explanation of the Force to a science-fiction conceit may account for why midi-chlorians were so universally reviled when they appeared in the prequels.

A distinct prime mover that defines the true genre also explains why many fantasy fans object to the blending of the romance and fantasy genres. Taken individually, the two conceits are not mutually exclusive: fantasy seeks to explore new worlds, whereas romance explores a relationship between two (or more) individuals as it evolves to mutual affection. A romantic subplot exists in all our fantasy exemplars to a certain extent—Aragorn and Arwen, Han and Leia, Hermione and Ron, Aang and Katara, and Jamie and Cersei all immediately spring to mind. However, as with the Force being Star

Wars' prime mover and thus firmly planting it in the fantasy genre, all these romantic elements are subordinate to the prime-mover fantasy conceits in their respective series. They can effectively be removed without affecting the core story much. This clearly delineates them as fantasy with other genre overtones. If, however, the fantasy conceit could be removed from the story in the same way space ships could in Star Wars without it affecting the romantic plot significantly, then it follows that the story belongs in the romance genre with the fantasy elements acting as nominal window-dressing. This one foot in either genre accounts for a lot of pushback from fantasy fans when they, consciously or not, realize the story in question is abiding by one set of genre expectations when they had expectations for another genre entirely. This can appear as another bait-and-switch, which always leaves the consumer unhappy. But, as with all the worldbuilding elements outlined in this book, the goal is to be more mindful as consumers in order to articulate why the worldbuilding did or did not seem effective. In instances like these, it's a case of comparing apples to oranges and should be noted as such.

Finding a prime-mover conceit is much more difficult in *The Lord of the Rings*, despite it being a cornerstone of the fantasy

genre. Its conceits include: (a) although on the wane, magic exists and can be harnessed by a select few, such as Gandalf, Sauron, and Saruman; (b) the afterlife exists in the form of Valinor but can be staved off through magic, which can create ghosts; (c) multiple humanoids exist, including elves, dwarves, orcs, and hobbits; (d) multiple creatures exist that defy biological conventions, such as dragons, ents, and balrogs; (e) elements and materials that defy the laws of nature exist, such as mithril and galvorn; (f) deities exist and perpetuate a war between light and dark.

When comparing these fantasy conceits, which encompass a whole gamut of worldbuilding details, with the worldbuilding simplicity of *Airbender* or Harry Potter, it feels a bit muddy. In fact, *The Lord of the Rings* falls squarely into the Hollywood concept of high-concept in that many aspects of the worldbuilding must be explained to provide context for the story. This is most likely due to the fact that *The Lord of the Rings* is the eldest of our worldbuilding exemplars, whereas *Airbender* and Harry Potter are the youngest and have therefore been able to stand upon the shoulders of giants. All of *The Lord of the Rings*' fantasy conceits work with each other and are intertwined enough that they somewhat buttress each other, to the extent it's hard to find a prime mover. Any of the multiple races could

be removed from the story, including (arguably) the hobbits, without affecting the story much. Magic is a necessity so as to have created Sauron's ring, but it plays a rather small role in the story after that point. The afterlife and Sauron's return from the dead could also be removed, with Sauron simply being a new overlord in Mordor bent on conquest without affecting the overarching story too greatly. Neither the unnatural materials such as mithril or the impossible creatures such as dragons or ents really play a crucial role in the story that couldn't be replaced with a human analogue. The existence of gods doesn't even really play a part in *The Lord of the Rings* story and only exists as supplemental material in *The Silmarillion*. Yet despite an obvious prime mover, *The Lord of the Rings* is clearly a fantasy creation, one that set the standard for decades to come. And because of *The Lord of the Rings*' ubiquity, it has spawned its own subgenre in fantasy known as "high fantasy." All these disparate elements have been lumped together for so long in *The Lord of the Rings* that they have launched multiple genre tropes that now appear par for the course and do not require any additional suspension of disbelief to swallow. High fantasy has become a bit of a catchall for these multiple fantasy conceits that exist within a vaguely medieval European setting.

But why do we use this medieval European setting in the first place?

13. Analogue Cultures

Because of the entertainment dilemma, we consumers crave new experiences yet want them to be familiar enough that they're not alienating. A fantasy story and subsequent genre expectation for a totally new world can subsequently be daunting, which is why we lean so heavily upon history and employ analogues. **Analogue cultures** are real-world cultures that authors use and then modify such that the real-world inspiration is easily apparent to audiences, but is not usually a verbatim copy. Science fiction demonstrates that it is quite possible to create new species and cultures from the ground on up, but fantasy remains bound by its reliance on history. This does not necessarily need to be the case, and Jemisin's workshops on worldbuilding employs many science-fiction strategies without an overt reliance on an analogue culture, but this does not appear to be the norm for most fantasy authors and thus acts as the exception that proves the rule. As such, fantasy authors continue to plunder the past for not just inspiration but anything not bolted down to use in their worldbuilding.

If we travel back far enough to two of the most famous ancestors of fantasy in Homer and Milton, we find them using real-life locations and adding fantasy conceits such as gods, monsters, and magic. Yet each one wrote about a previous period of time and used their current understanding of the time period to create their world, which included a few anachronisms like iron in Homer's Bronze Age tale. Rather than creating whole new cultures, they borrowed liberally from the real world around them. Flash forward many centuries, and the rest of the burgeoning fantasy genre followed this trend, including Malory's tales of King Arthur and the Grimm's collection of fairytales, all the way until Tolkien. Although not the first to borrow from the real world to populate his secondary world, Tolkien was quite conscious of his plundering of the past when he developed his concept of the primary and secondary worlds. With a background in academia, Tolkien drew from his English and Anglo-Saxon heritage to fill out the details to Middle Earth, which he drew from the Norse tradition of Midgard. Each one of these cultures was inspired by one on Earth, meaning he was following the age-old adage of writing what he knew.

It is possible that the use of analogue cultures in fantasy is simply a vestigial outgrowth of this process carried down over the

ages. Star Wars definitely draws from Earth cultures in its depiction of the Jedi, but it feels like more of an amalgamation of different eras and ideas than an outright lift of time period and place. However, again, this is more the exception that proves the rule, and you would be hard-pressed to find many secondary worlds that did not spring from an obvious Earth analogue. Or it may be that analogue cultures come from literary evolution in that this method has been selected for due to its effectiveness in the same way that tropes have. Using analogue cultures acts as a heuristic shortcut that not only saves the author a great deal of time and mental capital but also ensures the audience has something familiar to latch on to when exploring the new worlds. Every individual on Earth has a sense of history, either from formal education or experiencing other stories within the genre and absorbing the tell-tale tropes and conventions. So, as a thought experiment, please now imagine an armored man swinging a sword while riding a horse into battle.

Is that image fully formed in your head?

Good.

Now what's in the background?

If there was nothing, that's no problem at all and means you were following instructions to simply imagine an armored man + sword + horse. But even those details can trigger an assumption for a medieval age in a European analogue, which in turn spawns a lot of other information to go with it. The brain is now primed for other tell-tale familiar details such as castles, archers, horses, and perhaps dragons. The mental image of the scene in question, and therefore the world, automatically populates with details gleaned from history and the genre conventions sparked from just a few words.

Compare this to the image of a woman waving a wand. Without any additional information, this image could occur in any era, ranging from prehistory to the present. So, unlike the knight waving a sword, our wand-waving woman needs more details to clearly establish an analogue culture. Whether she's decked in furs, colorful silks, a corset, or blue jeans, it changes the mental image and automatically populating mental background details significantly. These descriptors that specifically trigger the assumption of an analogue culture and therefore help to mentally populate the scene are known as **toehold details**.

Analogue cultures are effective both because they anchor the audience with a sense of familiarity and allow the author a shortcut in terms of description, time, and explanation because of a shared understanding between the author and audience. Also, due to terra de facto, using analogue cultures helps spotlight the fantasy conceits when they do deviate from historical expectations. In terms of mathematics, the world the consumer is encountering can seem like a huge and complex equation they need to solve for. By including analogue cultures through toehold details, the author is able to solve a significant portion of the equation by holding these details constant so the audience can then focus on the remaining variables that are the fantasy conceits. Knowing that a new world is basically medieval Europe with the addition of fairies is much easier to get a mental foothold on than simply listing out all the conceits and historical details until the audience finally deciphers this based upon their own inside-out construction of the world.

Which Is Easier To Solve?

$$W = \sqrt{\frac{Z(A + B) + X - Y}{B - Y(A - Z)}}$$

or

$$W = \sqrt{\frac{7(A + B) + 3 - 2}{B - 2(A - 7)}}$$

Although we call these analogue cultures, we should note that cultures are not just a group of people bound together in terms of space but also time. Cultures evolve and change over time, and as we'll discuss in the chapters on culture and technology, cultural change is not linear. So the era should also be a factor when describing an analogue culture, as there is a huge difference between an analogue of Europe during the Middle Ages versus the Dark Ages versus the Renaissance. All three can comprise of the same space and people living there, but there's a world of difference in how they will think, act, and present themselves. And while Europe is often the default when choosing an analogue culture for

fantasy,¹¹ it should be noted that Europe only accounts for ten percent of the current world population. With an almost limitless abundance of cultures and time periods to choose from, it's telling how we keep returning to the same time and place to fulfill our genre expectations in creating new worlds.

Analogue cultures, like fantasy conceits, are not mutually exclusive, and multiple cultures can be drawn from in the same story. *Airbender* draws from several Asian cultures, particularly the classical Chinese period, but makes sure to add nomadic societies in the air and water tribes, and even throws in some swamp hillbillies for good measure. They also play with the time period analogues by making the fire nation equivalent to the Industrial Age with their use of steam engines, which only expands into a Roaring Twenties analogue with electricity and radio in *Legend of Kora*. *A Song of Ice and Fire* draws its inspiration from the War of the Roses in medieval Europe but also adds nomads in the Dothraki, Mediterranean analogues in the Dornish, and Middle Eastern analogues in Qarth and Slaver's Bay.

Compare the expansiveness of those two series to Harry Potter, which spends the majority of the original series within a single

location. A whole Wizarding world exists outside of Hogwarts, which is explored in greater detail in the *Fantastic Beasts* series, but the vast majority of the analogue still draws from English culture. Star Wars, in turn, scoffs at a single planet and includes different star systems with hundreds of different alien creatures and cultures in terms of scope. Meanwhile, several comic book publishers, DC and Marvel in particular, have populated whole universes that equal Star Wars in terms of scope but have added multiple realities where different outcomes and timelines exist for the same core characters. This should drive home how analogue cultures can range from a single small time in space to multiple universes when it comes to worldbuilding.

But like fantasy conceits, analogues can also be distilled in terms of character age and the story's tone. Harry Potter originally centered on children aged eleven, making the first few books in the series children's books. Over time, as the characters grew up and faced age-appropriate challenges, it shifted in tone from a children's series to a young-adult series that parents all around the world now worry over as to when their kids are old enough to complete the series. This shift in tone is partially due to the characters aging, but as with the metaphoric frog in a boiling pot, the change was gradual

enough over a long enough period that it felt seamless. This is in stark contrast to the follow-up series *Fantastic Beasts*, which was suddenly populated by adults instead of children. Although the original children consumers of Harry Potter have grown up, this shift in terms of analogue culture—not just by centering on adults but also by incorporating the United States in a different time period—altered the tone and worldbuilding enough that they were not nearly as well received as the originals. We'll discuss this again along with the bait-and-switch nature of midi-chlorians in Star Wars a bit further in chapter twenty-three.

Analogue cultures are drawn from anywhere and anytime on Earth, to which the fantasy conceit is then applied. However, the difference between an analogue culture and an **appropriated culture** should be noted. The term “appropriation” has taken on a very negative connotation of late, especially when applied to culture, which is akin to stealing something that does not belong to you. But to make the issue thornier, it's difficult to define ownership of something as nebulous as culture. What might be meant by the author as respectful inspiration can easily be interpreted by audiences as disrespectful or outright cultural theft. As Tolkien and Jemisin have both pointed out, audiences judge the fantasy worlds in

terms of their understanding of the real world, which means unless you're appropriating from an entirely dead culture, there are those who are experts in said culture by the sheer fact of existing within it. This inherently places these individuals at an expert level of understanding when the author may just be aiming to pass the general credibility threshold. This means these consumers will be thrown out of the immersive experience over and over due to external-reality incursions unless the author has put significant time and effort into getting all these cultural details correct. And if the author hasn't, this gives those audience members with an expert-level understanding of the culture the impression that the author is treating it with the disdain of a handwave.

With that in mind, there are times when cultural appropriation is the intentional goal. Parody and satire both depend on the audience immediately recognizing the appropriated culture so as to lampoon it. *Animal Farm* intentionally appropriated the Communist USSR collectives to make its point, as did Swift with his *Modest Proposal* and *Gulliver's Travels*. Voltaire's *Candide* follows this route as well with its satirization of religion, politics, and the aristocracy. And, as with all parody and satire, one person's joke about a way of life is deadly serious to another, as Salman Rushdie discovered by his

depiction of Islam in *The Satanic Verses*. Authors should therefore keep their audience in mind when drawing inspiration from other cultures, and consumers should consider if the slights they see are intentional on the author's part or accidental.

14. Tropes: Would an Elf by Any Other Name Still Have Pointy Ears?

In *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy*, Card warns against calling a rabbit a **smeerp**, which was a term coined by James Blish to describe “long-eared, short-tailed, burrowing mammals.” This description clearly meant a rabbit, and Card and Blish rightfully derided pointlessly calling a clear analogue something else. If a rabbit appears in the story, why not just call it a rabbit instead of creating a whole new name for the creature?

Because a lot of analogues carry baggage with them, as demonstrated by fantasy tropes.

Analogue cultures do not necessarily need to draw from existing cultures on Earth. And as Randy Ellefson points out in his worldbuilding series *The Art of World Building*, another difference between science fiction and fantasy is that many famous science-fiction species, such as Wookies and Vulcans, are trademarked and

impossible to use without permission of the owner. Compare this to the fantasy mainstays such as elves, dwarves, dragons, orcs, goblins, giants, unicorns, fairies, vampires, and werewolves, which are all fair use and only scratch the surface of common fantasy tropes. Oddly enough, only hobbits number among the major mainstream races that remains copywritten by the Tolkiens, which *Dungeons & Dragons* was forced to file the serial numbers off because of a lawsuit, thus renaming them “halflings” and “kender,” the ents “treants,” and balrog “balor.” But as freeing as this is in that all these races and creatures are available for authors to use with impunity, the trope baggage they carry with them can cause unintentional drag.

Familiarity is a double-edged sword because while functioning as an audience shorthand for understanding, it also means the audience brings with them their own preconceptions of this trope. As always, they will subjectively be judging the worldbuilding output, but instead of drawing from their knowledge of science, culture, history, or other social sciences, they will compare the tropes to their understanding of other secondary worlds created by other authors. But they have not all consumed the same materials, and since there is no actual real-life elf or dragon to definitely represent their kind,

there's an even greater variance to the understanding of these tropes. This is because, unlike the science-fiction species, which are usually created by a single individual, fantasy creatures are generally inspired by antiquity. Since they have no single origin, they are instead an amalgamation of traits that don't always easily congeal and in some cases outright contradict each other. Unlike the Wookie, which can be easily explained with an almost dictionary-exact definition, it's nigh impossible for everyone to agree on the traits fantasy creatures share.

And yet, to harken back to Stewart again on his definition of pornography, we know tropes when we see them. We can all recognize a dragon or elf even if we don't quite agree as to their defining traits. There seems to be core defining traits to these tropes, with a lot of ancillary attributes that are debatable. The only question, then, is figuring out which is which.

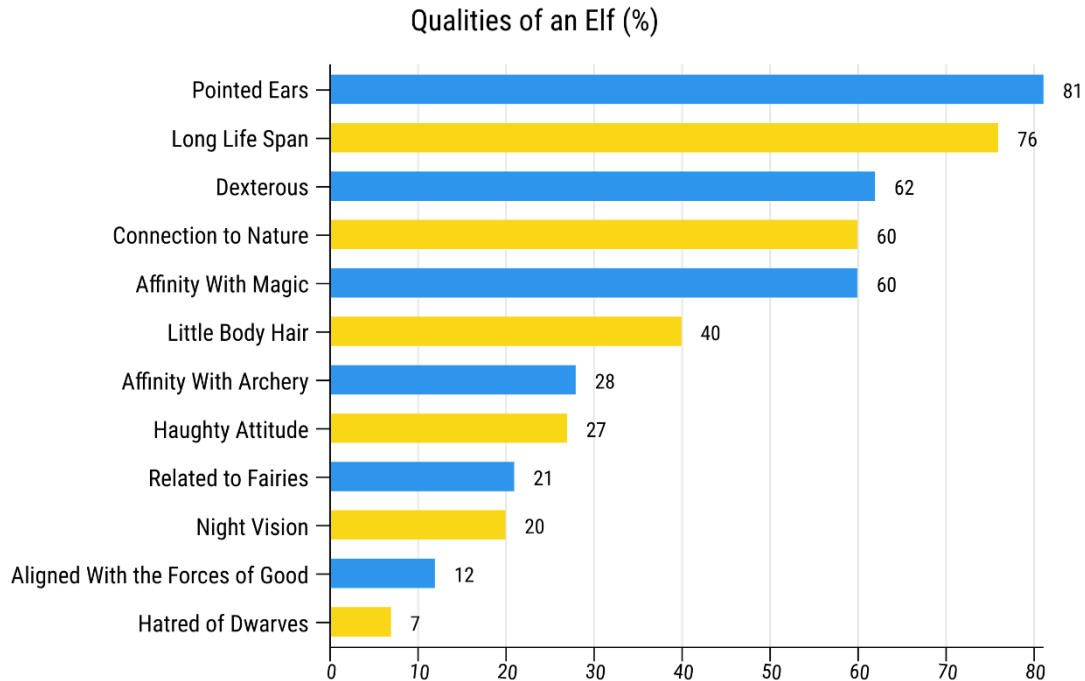
By way of a thought experiment, please imagine a bird. Chances are what you see in your head is significantly different than the one I did, which happened to be a Harpy Eagle. And someone else could have easily imagined a penguin or ostrich or hummingbird.¹² But since all these real-life creatures fall under the

class of Aves (bird), we know they are categorized as having feathers, possessing wings (even if they cannot fly), possessing beaks, and laying eggs (along with the lesser-known qualifications of four-chambered hearts and lightweight skeletons). Mammals are similar in that they are warm-blooded vertebrates, give birth to live young (with the exception of two species), and have mammary glands with which to feed their young (and the lesser-known neocortex and three middle ear bones requirements).

Such a definitive taxonomy does not exist for fantasy tropes, meaning what exactly an elf or dragon is can vary greatly from one individual to another. Unlike mammals, which have a prime-mover linchpin that they must have mammary glands, no such defining feature exists for fantasy-trope creatures.

“But wait,” you say. “Aren’t elves’ pointy ears a defining trait?” According to my survey of fantasy fans, it’s true that pointed ears are a more important trait than a long life span, affinity with magic, or dexterity (Presley, 2020). Yet all these top-rated traits are rather modern additions. Not to delve too deeply into the subject, but elves come from the Nordic tradition wherein they were beautiful supernatural creatures more akin to fairies by today’s standards.

This continued during the Romantic period, probably sprouting from Shakespeare's depiction of fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*. They continued their spritely representation until Tolkien came around, who reintroduced them into the fantasy vernacular as human-like, long-lived beings that have become a high-fantasy mainstay since then. But even then, it should be noted that in their introduction in *The Hobbit* they were much flightier and spritelier than their later iterations in *The Lord of the Rings*. And it's also interesting that Tolkien never outrightly said they had pointed ears in either *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, or *The Silmarillion*, only that their ears were "more pointed and leaf-shaped" than humans (Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation, p. 60) in a subsequent piece on the etymology of his writings.



Elves evolved into the tropes they are recognized as today most likely due to *Dungeons & Dragons*, which built upon Tolkien's portrayal. But due to the nature of being a game that needed roles for people to play rather than a narrative with distinct characters, they required hard statistics for their races. This led to a codification of what it meant to be an elf, which included the pointy ears, long lifespan, night vision, +1 to dexterity, -1 constitution, and a load of other traits designed for the game itself. Erikson agrees when he states: "The "role of AD&D [*Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*] is seminal to modern fantasy fiction. If anything, its influence is so vast it can be hard to get a handle on it" (2010). Although considered the social ghetto for nerds and geeks for many decades, *Dungeons &*

Dragons influenced modern fantasy tropes simply by compiling all the different traits, codifying them, and becoming an (albeit rather arbitrary) authority on the matter. In doing so, they took the soft definition of what these creatures were and hardened it. This evolution can also be observed in *Dungeons & Dragons*' treatment of magic, which we'll discuss in its own section. Yet it should be noted that *Dungeons & Dragons* is not the outright authority on everything, and fantasy tropes certainly evolved outside of its influence.

I clearly remember a meeting I had with a producer early in my career that illustrates this in terms of vampires. My script pitch was a vampiric version of *Reservoir Dogs* taking place in a mall over Christmas, and he seemed quite excited about the idea. Until I mentioned "the rules" about the vampires, which were basically just cribbed off the White Wolf Publishing's role-playing game *Vampire: The Masquerade*. I could pinpoint that exact moment when the light went out in his eyes and he stated, "That's not how vampires are." Then, just like that, the meeting might as well have been over. What's interesting about this experience is that I, as a gamer with an extensive knowledge of vampire lore and the White Wolf library, was undoubtedly far more of an expert on the subject than the producer. And yet, to this day I still do not know what specific traits this

mythological creature needed to possess to fit his definition of a “real” vampire.

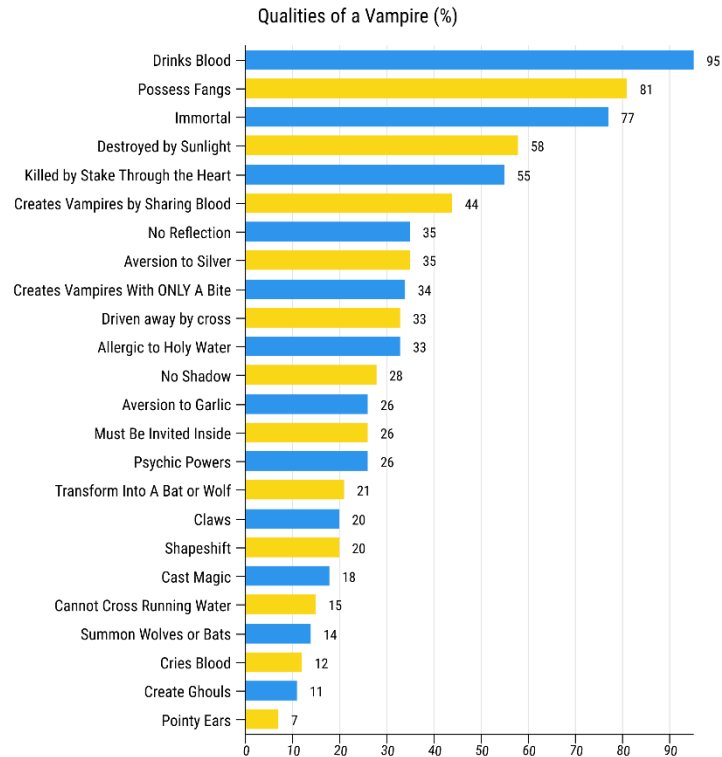
But I’m willing to try by applying some abstraction to some tropes.

Below I’ve outlined some of the more common traits associated with vampires in no particular order off the top of my head. They include: drinks blood, immortal, fangs, destroyed by sunlight, killed by stake through the heart or decapitation, cannot cross running water, allergic to garlic, can transform into a bat or wolf, allergic to holy water, can create more vampires by infecting someone with their blood, can create ghouls, must be invited in to enter someone’s home, cast no reflection, can summon wolves, psychic powers including telepathy and mind control, have pointy ears, can sprout claws, and can be driven away by a cross.

This is by no means an exhaustive list, but it should hopefully suffice for our abstraction process. In philosophy, this is an inductive process where we synthesize our facts into a general theory of the thing. To do so we will remove any and everything we can from this list until only the core components of the vampire remain—e.g., if we remove one more, it ceases to be recognized as a vampire. And now

with the process laid out, what can we remove? Surely the allergy to garlic can be stricken from the list without affecting the conception of a vampire and ditto for cannot cross running water and having pointy ears. Their ability to create ghouls and sprout claws as well.

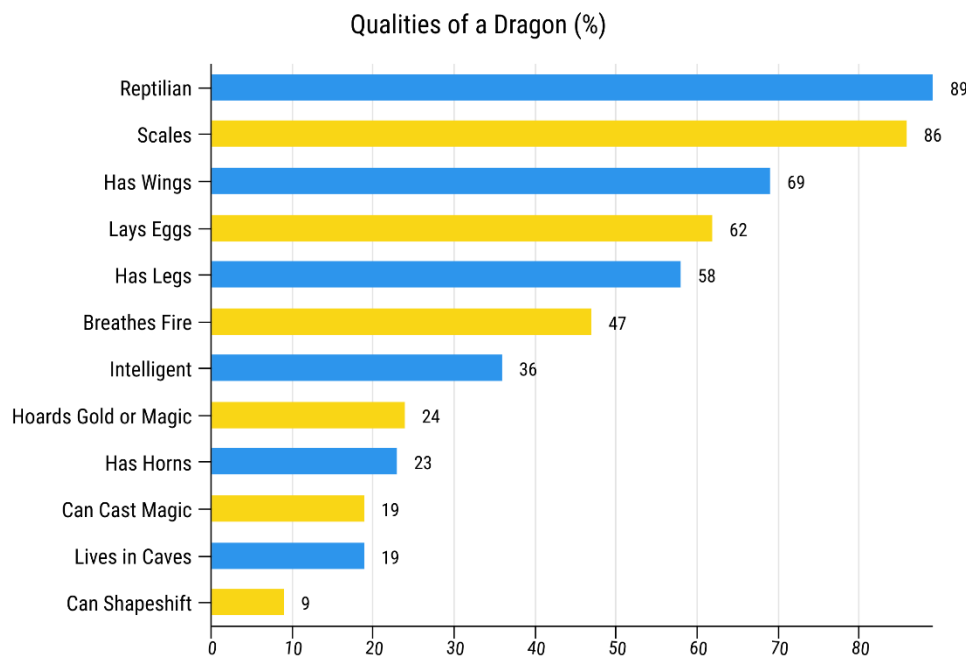
In fact, it's fairly easy to whittle this list down to: drinks blood, immortal, destroyed by sunlight, fangs, and killed by a stake through the heart or decapitation. These specific traits get closer to the bare minimum necessary to classify something as a vampire and be recognized by the general populous. In my survey of fantasy fans, three traits stood out for vampires above all others: (1) drinks blood (95%), (2) possess fangs (81%), and (3) immortal (77%)¹³. The next closest competitor was being destroyed by sunlight at 58%. Other mainstays could easily be done away with, such as the aversion to garlic, which only 26% of responders required of their vampires.



Although Dracula was not the first vampire, Bram Stoker's creation is the one who introduced the trope to the general public. And Dracula, as Stoker introduced him, could certainly walk around in the sunlight. It's also interesting to note that although he mentions Dracula having sharp teeth and that Mina's teeth grew longer after her infection, they were not specifically listed as fangs. In fact, Bella Lugosi's portrayal of the vampire (which also cemented the famous Hungarian accent) did not have fangs either. These were added to the popular lexicon of traits mostly due to Christopher Lee's version in the '60s and '70s. What's more, the godfather of all vampires in

Western culture was repulsed by garlic, meaning we perhaps shouldn't have stricken it from our list.

Dragons, on the other hand, are often synonymous with breathing flames. Yet when survey participants began eliminating traits to abstract the trope, breathing fire came in sixth, with only 47% believing it necessary for a dragon. Fantasy fans instead imagine a very reptilian (89%) creature that has scales (86%), wings (69%), and lays eggs (62%). Possessing legs (58%) also rates higher than breathing fire, whereas traits like having horns, intelligence, magic, and hoarding gold underground didn't even rate higher than 24%.



These two examples unfortunately illustrate what a difficult knot tropes are to untangle. Adhering too closely to the general consensus of a trope means there will be little newness injected into the world. Altering or ignoring key components to the trope has its own pitfalls when the consumer maintains that the missing piece was core to the sense of authenticity and loses immersion because of its lack. In his series on worldbuilding, Ellefson maintains a **rule of three**: if a trope is being used, then the author should alter at least three components to make the trope their own (Creating Life, 2017). By intentionally deviating from the traits at the onset, this marks this iteration as the author's creation, meaning they should be given a certain degree of leeway by the audience to play with this idea due to the willing suspension of disbelief. This also provides a safety net by injecting a sense of new into the familiarity of a trope. The unfamiliar elements aid in maintaining the sense of mystery and wonder required of the fantasy genre, which is why fantasy conceits should not be spelled out directly to the audience. Once the fantasy conceit is completely understood, there is little chance for surprise, which is why the output details we'll discuss in a moment need some added noise to them. Fantasy conceits and functions work much like a scatterplot in statistics in that they create a line of best fit that

demonstrates their correlation despite all the details not directly adhering to it on a 1:1 ratio. Because a 1:1 ratio makes a straight line, and while straight lines are great in mathematics, they are quite boring when it comes to a narrative. Which is why we employ so many twists in our stories.

15. Fantasy Functions

Fantasy conceits and analogue cultures, including tropes and author worldview, combine together into **fantasy functions**. These occur when the author filters the analogue cultures through the fantasy conceits and uses the subsequent details to populate the world and make it feel authentic. This can be a conscious decision, as outlined here, or an unconscious bottom-up process in which the author discovers the rules to their world in the same fashion as the audience. But no matter how much the author embraces discovery writing, there is usually some core conceit in mind when they set out to explore the world. Even just knowing the main cast will include a barbarian, an archer, and a mage means the author has most likely settled on a medieval analogue that will include magic as a fantasy conceit.

Combining these two components resembles a mathematical function wherein the fantasy conceits act as the set, whereas the analogue culture is the domain.

$$\text{WORLD} = [\text{analogue culture}] * (A * (\text{Geography}) + B * (\text{Biology}) + C * (\text{Physics}) + D * (\text{Metaphysics}) + E * (\text{Technology}) + F * (\text{Culture}))$$

In this model, there are multiple fantasy conceits, represented by the variables A, B, C, D, E, & F. If there is no change to this component to the worldbuilding and terra de facto is in effect, the value would be 0, meaning there would be nothing added in that section to affect the function.

To illustrate, Harry Potter would read a bit like this:

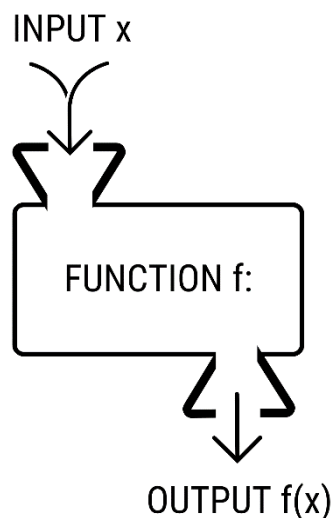
$$\text{WIZARDING WORLD} = [\text{Modern English Children}] * (0(\text{Geography}) + \text{Other creatures exist} + \text{Magic exists} + \text{The soul and ghosts exist} + 0(\text{Technology}) + \text{Distinctions between muggle and magic societies}).$$

The Lord of the Rings, on the other hand, is a much more complex function:

$$\text{MIDDLE EARTH} = [\text{Medieval Europe, Anglo Saxon, \& Norse}] * (\text{Unnatural minerals exist} + \text{Other races and creatures exist} + \text{Magic}$$

exists + The soul, afterlife, demons, and ghosts exist + 0
(Technology) + Distinction between hobbit, elf, dwarf, human, orc,
goblin, etc. societies).

If your eyes just glazed over or high school math scarred you to the point you're considering tossing this book away, let's reframe fantasy functions. Instead, let's think of this as a cryptology code where we wish to translate the details of a culture into something new. We're effectively taking the details of said culture and considering them the letters in our message. These are then fed into the substitution cipher for translation, which are then altered due to the fantasy conceits employed, at which point they are spit out as entirely new letters. And since our world represented by this codex is consistent due to the four Cs of worldbuilding, all of these output variables will follow the same sort of pattern.



So if our codex is simple such that every letter has a numeric value (A=1, B=2, C=3, etc.) and we're simply adding three to each letter, A would now equal D, and the word *apple* would translate to *dssoh*. "The man ate the apple" would then become "Wkh pdq dwh wkh dssoh," which makes little sense on its own until one considers the simple substitution cipher.

Fantasy worldbuilding is often simply an extension of this system where we alter details of the real world within the consistent confines of our fantasy conceits. We use our imagination to change the details of our own experience into something new, an output variable that we then add to the world via story details. And while this may be an automatic, nearly unconscious creative process, each of these details needs to be able to withstand the four Cs of worldbuilding in that they should be creative, complete, consistent, and compelling. These output details then act as links in a chain that anchors the story to the analogue culture so that it never becomes too alienating to the audience. And these links in the chain can withstand a bit of mental strain, but the audience's immersive experience is lost when they break.

However, these output details serve another purpose in that the audience is also using them to build their conception of the world from the inside-out. The audience is attempting to break the code, to figure out the function of the fantasy conceits by comparing the input variables to the output variables. They are reverse engineering the entire formula by working backwards and comparing what went in (the analogue culture) to what emerged (the output details). Due to the back matter, they probably already have the prime-mover conceit, but much of the rest of the worldbuilding experience is attempting to figure out the rest of the conceits.

In information processing, this is called a **black box**, which is a system that is viewed in terms of its inputs and outputs without any understanding as to the internal workings. This is why the box is “black”: it is opaque and unknown. However, the inputs and outputs can be accounted for, and if you know you put two apples in and get four out, six when you put in three, then an eight output for a four input, you can assume your black box doubles your input. How or why it does this does not matter so much, only that the inputs transform into the outputs in a consistent manner. Fantasy conceits act as a black box, with details culled from analogue cultures being the inputs that in turn transform into output details. These details are

then mentally unpacked by the audience to comprehend the black box. Although the whole history of the world, the whys and whyfors, may remain opaque to everyone but the author, the inputs and outputs can still be measured and understood by the consumers, either consciously or unconsciously.

An **info dump** is the sudden overwhelming quantity of backstory or background information supplied in a short timeframe. We'll dig into the why of this in the next section, but one of the reasons info dumps are treated with such ambivalence is because they effectively hand the audience an answer as to the parameters of a fantasy conceit, and thus take away the joy of the audience figuring out the worldbuilding formula themselves. On the other hand, experiencing a new world for the first time is daunting, especially when considering it as an intricate and complex equation. In these cases, the info dump can be welcome in that it's filling in a piece of the equation, which makes it much easier to solve as a whole. So although info dumps have fallen out of favor recently, it's important to note that the first thing Tolkien did when introducing us to hobbits in both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* was to explicitly tell us what hobbits are. He immediately broke what many writers consider a sacrosanct rule of "show don't tell" yet is still held

up as a luminary of worldbuilding. I mention this to illustrate that, like everything else we examine in this book, there is no inherent right or wrong as to info dumps; they are tools to be used. And every tool has a purpose.

16. Subgenres

Although fantasy conceits and analogue cultures might be a newer way to examine fantasy worldbuilding, they have been with the genre from the beginning. Previous to Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*, fantasy was considered the domain of children, which changed when he introduced us to high fantasy aimed at adults. Le Guin brought us young-adult fantasy with *A Wizard of Earthsea*, while Robert E. Howard toiled away with his sword and sorcery along with Fritz Leiber. Since then, the subgenres have evolved and branched like heredity trees to the point they have become incredibly specific. This is by no means an exhaustive list, but common subgenres include (in no particular order): portal fantasy, high fantasy, low fantasy, urban fantasy, paranormal fantasy, fairy tales, sword and sorcery, Arthurian fantasy, historical fantasy, science fantasy, Arabian fantasy, grimdark fantasy, dark fantasy, steampunk, flintlock fantasy, Christian fantasy, epic fantasy, fantasy of manners, gaslamp fantasy, military fantasy, mythic fantasy, new weird, wuxia, litRPG, progression fantasy, etc.

We as humans have an inherent need to categorize things, and like tropes, what constitutes a subgenre is ill-defined and based mostly on consensus after the fact. When something doesn't fit well into a current understanding of a subgenre and there are enough distinguishing features, we invent a new term for it. Yet in most of these cases, it's the fantasy conceits or analogue cultures that define these subgenres.

Analogue culture subgenres are pretty easy to spot, including Arthurian, Arabian, wuxia, urban, historical, gaslamp, mythic, and flintlock (to a certain degree). Each of these connotes a specific culture or time period from which the author is drawing from.

Fantasy conceits are also easier to spot when you know what you're looking for. As we've discussed, high fantasy is simply a catch-all of many conceits made popular by Tolkien, which is often interchangeable with the epic subgenre. Low fantasy is a reaction to high fantasy in that it contains a much smaller amount of magic and is much grittier, which can also be considered an outgrowth of sword and sorcery. Steampunk, flintlock,¹⁴ litRPG, science, and military fantasy all depend on a technological conceit, whereas paranormal, grimdark, dark, and Christian fantasy all deal with a matter of tone

and author worldview. This leaves fairy tales, in which a biological fantasy conceit exists in the eponymous fairies; fantasy of manners, which delves into the culture conceits; and new weird, which subverts tropes and hops genres. Portal fantasy, on the other hand, is simply taking a character from our world and transporting them to a new world, which means it shows an analogue culture in the real-world culture they're being plucked from, and then the subsequent subgenre of the world they will be transported to.

So even though we might not have been conscious of the fantasy conceit and analogue cultures, we still have been guided by them for decades. However, the great irony of the fantasy genre as a whole is that even though we can create anything from the loam of Earthly inspiration fed through the fantasy conceits of our boundless imaginations, we keep returning to the same medieval European analogue cultures filtered through high-fantasy conceits. There are always brave explorers who step off the familiar path the same way Tolkien did when he created high fantasy, Le Guin with YA, or Martin with *A Song of Ice and Fire* and grimdark. Once someone shows success outside a familiar subgenre, others will flock to the new and expand upon it until it develops its own set of tropes and sense of familiarity. But until recently, publishing was a very expensive

endeavor, just like movie making. This necessitated investors in the form of publishers or producers, who are notoriously risk-averse and want proven concepts in a same-but-different mold. Yet each of the creators of the exemplar worlds took significant literary risks at the time: Tolkien with his first high-fantasy novel for adults, Lucas with his space opera no one even knew how to classify, Martin with a nearly nihilist take on the common fantasy fair, Rowling with her manuscript that was rejected twelve times, and DiMartino and Konietzko with their Asian-inspired world aimed at Western audiences.

This is by no means a call to arms to reject all high-fantasy medieval European worlds. Like all tropes, they exist for the simple reason that audiences crave them.¹⁵ People want what they want and we'd be fools not to give it to them. But there are other options available these days, and with fantasy conceits and analogue cultures in mind, we can better examine how to make new worlds more effective and for audiences to appreciate them more.

Screenwriters often ask if their ideas “properly translate to the page,” which is a fitting way to look at worldbuilding through the fantasy conceit and analogue cultures. The author's initial idea goes

through the black box of their brain and comes out in a new form of worldbuilding details that the audience then attempts to break the code of. And, as with all elements of story, there's countless opportunities for something to get lost in the process. Many times nuances the author thought were clear get muddled when converting the thought to the page, whereas the consumers can take that information and misconstrue its meaning or take those metaphoric building blocks and create something that does not reflect the author's intent in the least. I'm sure everyone is familiar with the game of telephone, where one person whispers something into another's ear, who then whispers what they heard to another individual. And thus the message travels down the line, mutating with each iteration until it scarcely resembles the initial sentence. Alas, any time you involve others' subjective experience of your world, you invite the opportunity for misunderstanding. Fortunately, there are some useful tools for ensuring the least amount of message degradation as the author's ideas pass through the black box of world creation.

Fantasy conceits and analogue cultures are simple tools in concept, but just because you understand the mechanics of a car or

how a gun fires bullets doesn't mean you can drive well or shoot accurately. Applying the function takes some work as well.

Part V: Unpacking the Black Box

“Look, that’s why there’s rules, understand? So that you think before you break ‘em.” —Terry Pratchett

OVERVIEW: Now that we understand fantasy functions, we will explore how they are used to fashion fantasy worlds. This is done by identifying the difference between fantasy conceits and output details, which can appear similar at first glance. We will also explore how fantasy conceits generally manifest by removing something from the world, changing something in the real world, or adding something to it. We will then dig deeper into how fantasy conceits flow from larger categories, such as geography and physics, down to smaller ones, such as technology and culture. How fantasy conceits interact through interconnection and streamlining will then build a foundation for purposeful worldbuilding. We will then delve into several narrative techniques, including Chekhov’s gun and Hemmingway’s iceberg theory, to ensure all the worldbuilding details are employed effectively by either serving the characters, plot, or world itself. Then we will examine how the point of view the author uses affects the words, concepts, and manner in which the worldbuilding details can be delivered to the audience, making them crave additional information

rather than the dreaded info dump. Finally, we will investigate what happens when the audience comes to a conclusion the author did not intend, how the author can clean up some dangling worldbuilding details, and the pitfalls of reusing worlds more than once.

17. Fantasy Conceits vs. Output Details

In *On Fairy-Stories*, Tolkien compares using tropes to making a stew: When ladling out a bowl, you can identify the metaphoric carrots, onions, and chicken that went into it. You can also most likely identify the herbs involved, but the taste of the soup takes on all those aspects and becomes its own distinct flavor. The chef has somehow created something completely unique out of common foodstuffs. This dovetails into the gestalt in that when drawing from real-world cultures and applying the fantasy conceits properly, something greater than the sum of its parts emerges. But before the ideas are sliced, diced, and tossed into the creative pot, it's important to note how the input details of the analogue culture differ from the author's stew that emerges for audience consumption.

It should again be noted that while both the fantasy conceit and the output detail can deviate from the real world, fantasy conceits are changes to the world itself, whereas the output details are the result of those changes. The fantasy conceit is the pure speculation of

speculative fiction that asks “what if?” and then traces that question to its natural conclusion. Since we were children, we’ve all wondered what if something was different in our world, be it small—a later bedtime, for example—or grander—if we had evolved from aquatic lizards instead of apes. This is the essence of creativity: we wonder. But this questioning and subsequent sense of wonder is only part of the process, and there is a discipline to following the fantasy conceit to its natural conclusion. This is a mental exercise that is entirely dependent upon the author’s personal process, but a few patterns emerge if you speak to enough fantasy authors and worldbuilding communities.

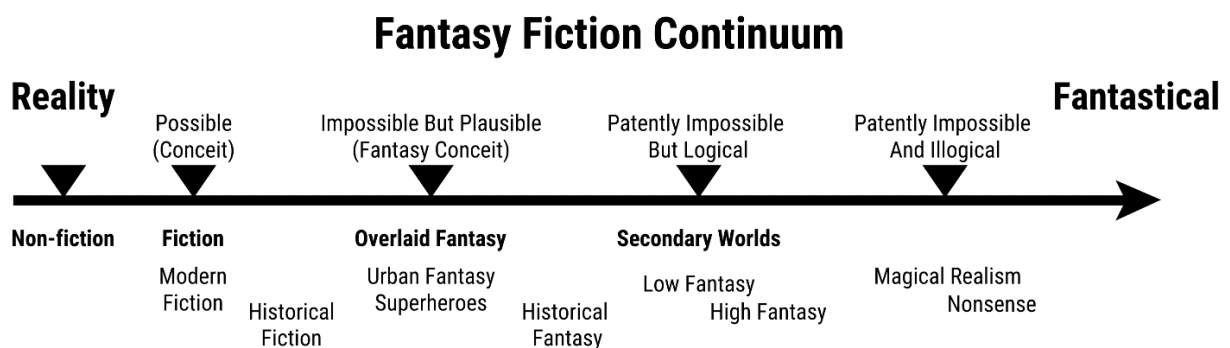
Firstly, fantasy conceits either follow the rules of the real world or they don’t. And while this may sound like a very obvious observation, it’s still worth picking apart. This generally applies to the laws of nature in the form of geography, biology, and physics. If the fantasy conceits adhere to the laws of the real world, then it’s expected that this is reflected in the world’s output details. As such, the geography of the planet should be such that water flows downhill from mountains, which are formed from tectonic plates smashing together over millions of years. Animals must have clear sources of food, according to biology, with calories diminishing significantly each

step in the food chain. In the case of physics, matter cannot be created or destroyed. But since this is fantasy, it's quite easy to instead have patently impossible things like waterfalls that flow upwards into the clouds, winged horses that drink only single malt whisky, and to truly disintegrate matter through magic. However, due to terra de facto, audiences will still expect anything not falling under the explored fantasy conceits to still adhere to the real-world laws of nature.

Secondly, fantasy conceits generally follow four specific patterns: exsecting, unchanged, divergent, or additive. **Exsecting** means removing something from the real world, which the *Dungeons & Dragons* setting of Dark Sun embodies in their removal of iron from their environment. **Unchanged** is as the name denotes and defaults to the real-world standard of terra de facto. **Divergent** means something specific was altered, such as a world where the dominant species evolved from cats and may either remain analogous to Earth or be drastically different. Many children's books with anthropomorphic animals living out very human lives with identical technology and society to our own fall into this category. **Additive** means something has been added to the world, usually in the form of magic or fantasy species. Like the fantasy conceits themselves, there

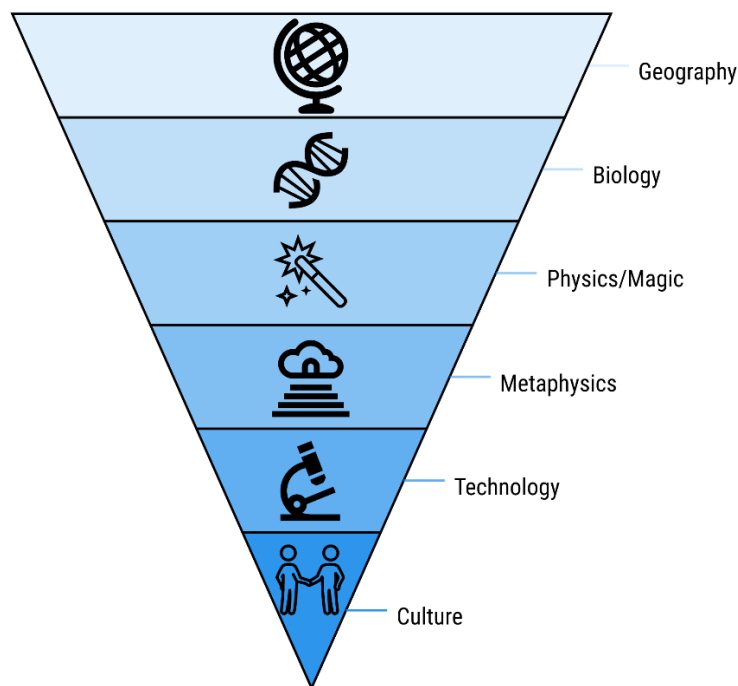
can be multiple ways in how these fantasy conceits manifest, with Dark Sun being both exsecting in the loss of iron but additive by including magic and monsters.

Finally, audiences expect meaning and purpose within the worldbuilding. If there are changes to the world as they know it in terms of output details, they expect this to be the direct result of a fantasy conceit. And those fantasy conceits better serve a purpose in the form of character, plot, or worldbuilding, while simultaneously being creative, complete, consistent, and compelling. Changes to the world without consistency or purpose are no more than a child's story that, while entertaining, remain the realm of pure nonsense. Or magical realism.¹⁶



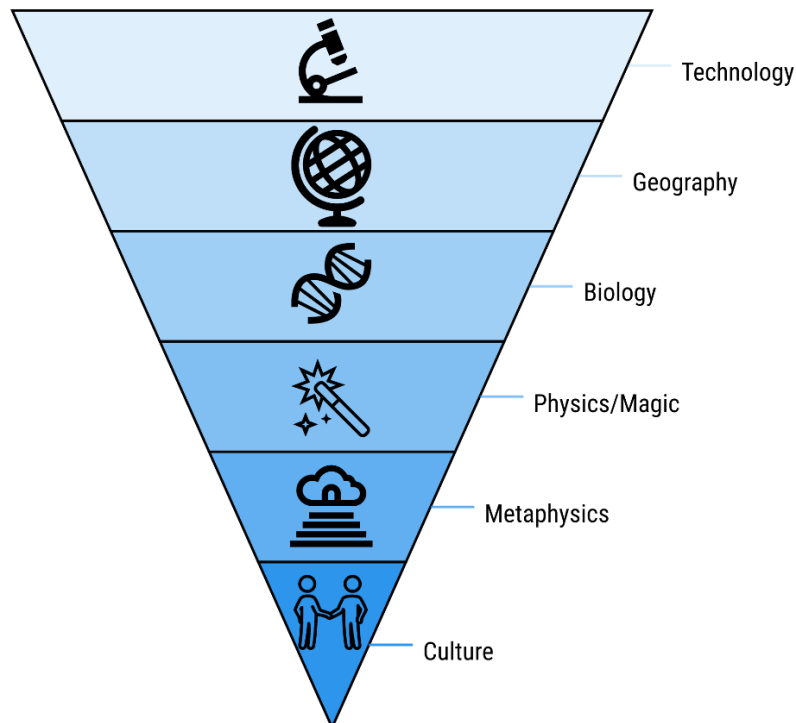
Audiences instinctively expect the changes to flow from the big to the small, even if they are encountering the smaller details first, which is why there is a progression built into the fantasy conceit

function. It is predicated on the idea that the environment affects the individuals inhabiting the world, which is why it starts with the geography and moves on down the line through biology, physics, metaphysics, technology, and finally culture. Each section builds and compounds upon the changes exhibited in the prior category unless there is no change in terms of a fantasy conceit there. For instance, evolution has taught us the environment shapes the creatures within it. And since technology and culture are outgrowths of intelligent creatures, we expect them to be shaped by the creatures that have been shaped by their environment in turn.



This progression is by no means sacrosanct and may need to be reordered based upon the particular fantasy conceits being used.

This is illustrated by the famous evolutionary anecdote about white pepper moths in London being selected for until the Industrial Revolution started spewing soot into the environment, which then began selecting for the rare mutation of black moths. This is a great starting point for a fantasy conceit about a major change to the environment due to technological advancement changing the basic biology of the area. So even though technology sits next to last in the usual progression, if this speculative idea of a disastrous Industrial Revolution that blotted out the sun for decades is followed out to its natural conclusion, it would set technology up first, with its changes affecting the geography, biology, physics, and on down the line to culture.



It's also entirely possible to start with output details and then reverse engineer the worldbuilding conditions necessary for this result, which is the basic *modus operandi* for bottom-up worldbuilders. For instance, if you desire everyone to fight with flaming swords fueled by the trapped souls of loved ones, this would again be a technology component since it deals with the output detail of a physical object. Working backwards for proper antecedents, this would necessitate the existence of the soul, which would be a metaphysics component, whereas the iron or other magical mineral necessary for the swords would be a matter of geography and physics. The trapped souls of loved ones would then still incorporate a cultural component in that the societal structures that we're familiar with would most likely be adjusted when you realized your loved ones could gain great power upon your demise. This might uncouple the concepts of love and trust, which necessitates more exploration by the worldbuilder to make sure these output details are creative, complete, consistent, and compelling.

A society where the firstborn child is dedicated to the gods to act as their magical familiars in battling against dragons that emerged from a crack in the world would be a culture output detail. It in turn would necessitate fantasy conceits in metaphysics because of the

gods, physics due to the magic, biology due to the dragons, and geography due to the cracked earth that released them.

In both of these examples, it should be noted that not all categories contained fantasy conceits, nor are they necessary in every world. A world with the physics fantasy conceit where the aurora borealis grants wishes would easily be strong enough to carry a series by itself, as would one where dragons return to reclaim Earth from humans. Mark Twain's familiar adage states, "It's not the size of the dog in the fight, it's the size of the fight in the dog." In terms of fantasy worldbuilding, this can be adapted to: it's not a matter of fantasy conceits in the story, but the story of the fantasy conceit that matters.

However, multiple fantasy conceits are pretty par for the course, so it's most likely you'll either create several as the author or encounter numerous ones as a consumer. In some cases, as with *The Lord of the Rings*, there is no obvious prime mover, which makes the worldbuilding feel a bit messier than a more focused world such as *Airbender*. This is because *Airbender*, intentionally or not, follows a variation of Sanderson's third rule for magic: "Expand on what you have already before you add something new." The conceits of *Airbender* also fall under Sanderson's concepts of interconnection

and streamlining. **Interconnection** means the threads of worldbuilding should be tied together, at least thematically. In *Airbender's* case, the four types of elemental bending tie directly into the Avatar being the only human able to control the four elements, which acts as the prime-mover fantasy conceit. The second of *Airbender's* fantasy conceits is that the spirit world exists and that the Avatar is the bridge between the two worlds, which falls under the prime-mover conceit since it involves the Avatar, but it does not drive the story world to nearly the same degree as the harnessing of elemental forces. The third conceit, that of the amalgamation or exaggeration of Earth animals, does not directly fall under the Avatar/elemental magic fantasy conceit umbrella, leaving it dangling a bit.¹⁷

Streamlining, as the name suggests, is keeping everything simple. In *Airbender* they note in both the series bible and very first minutes of the pilot episode that bending is not magic. Which is untrue for the audience but makes sense for the characters in that they understand it as a natural phenomenon rather than a deviation from the laws of nature. And they still have the concept of deviation from the laws of nature or else they wouldn't have a concept of magic to compare the "normal" nature of bending to. But the audience never

experiences magic outside of bending, meaning it is streamlined to the point of nonexistence. Each nation can control their own single form of bending, and they use them quite creatively in designing every aspect of the world. Even slight deviations such as blood bending are well within the logical framework rather than introducing a whole new magic system for the audience to contend with. This leaves *Airbender* feeling very streamlined and without a hint of excess to it, which is in obvious contrast to the exceedingly expansive scope of *The Lord of the Rings*, which includes unnecessary worldbuilding details such as Tom Bombadil.

18. Purposeful Worldbuilding

Tom Bombadil is a great example of purposeless worldbuilding—or at least worldbuilding that can be interpreted as purposeless. While the character does save the hobbits in *The Lord of the Rings* and provides some background, there's a good reason he is omitted from the film: he complicates the story rather than simplifies it. The character and all his extensive background therefore can be cut without affecting the main throughline of Frodo and his quest in the slightest. Due to the cost of making films and the fact that few people want to sit through a three-hour film, there's a premium on keeping scripts short, to the point, and parsimonious to a fault. Each page of a

script roughly translates into a minute of screen time, and so screenwriters whittle their words down until there's not an ounce of excess anywhere. Those extra words and scenes that don't serve a direct purpose quickly inflate the page count, which is why screenwriters are all about streamlining the story.

This is not the only reason screenwriters cling to the idea that every word needs a purpose to remain in the story. We're also inheritors of **Chekhov's gun**. To those unfamiliar with the phrase, the Russian playwright and short-story writer is best known for the statement: "If in the first act you have hung a pistol on the wall, then in the following one it should be fired. Otherwise don't put it there." Oddly enough, the corollary to Chekhov's statement is generally understood in that if a gun is going to be shot in the third act, it needs to be introduced in the first. However, Chekhov actually adhered to the concept of purposeful writing in that every word needed to be absolutely necessary to be included.

This parsimony is reflected in Ernest Hemingway's **iceberg theory**, in which he stated: "If a writer of prose knows enough of what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of

movement of an ice-berg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing.” Both Jemisin and Gaiman have referenced using only 10% of backstory and worldbuilding details in the story, which goes to show how prevalent this idea is, although it should be noted that the actual percentage is pretty arbitrary. Hemmingway took this impulse to chop away at words to a new extreme when he realized he could leave out major moments, such as the suicide of his protagonist, yet due to narrative gestalt, the audience would make the proper inferences for his stories to make sense. In *The Art of the Short Story*, he states: “A few things I have found to be true. If you leave out important things or events that you know about, the story is strengthened. If you leave or skip something because you do not know it, the story will be worthless. The test of any story is how very good the stuff that you, not your editors, omit.”

Another reason screenwriters can be so stingy in terms of details is because they never have the final word in a story or how it appears on screen. The director, art director, producers, executive producers, and even actors are just a few with creative input as to how the scenes unfold, which makes a screenplay similar to sheet music that will only be seen by the performers, played once, then

disappear except as reference. This collaborative process is by no means perfect, but it can generate significantly more visual detail than an individual alone. Take this iconic scene from the script of *The Fellowship of the Ring* when they first encounter the Balrog:

INT. DWARROWDELF CHAMBER, MORIA - DAY

GANDALF leads the FELLOWSHIP into the huge DWARROWDELF CHAMBER.

GANDALF

This way!

They hurry towards a distant door ... as GOBLINS start scuttling down the PILLARS behind them, like cockroaches!

ANGLE ON: FRODO looks with horror at the overwhelming GOBLIN army that's rushing towards them!

SUDDENLY! A deafening roar fills the air! A fiery light dances down the hallway ... the pillars castings eerie shadows.

ANGLES ON: The GOBLINS freeze. They back fearfully away from the approaching beast ... melting into the darkness.

BOROMIR

What is this new devilry?

A HUGE SHADOW, surrounded by FLAME, falls across the hall ...
the ground shakes ... an unearthly sound rumbles.

GANDALF

(quietly)

A Balrog ... a demon of the ancient world! This foe is beyond any of
you!

(urgent yell)

Run! Quickly!

CUT TO:

INT. STAIRWAY OF KHAZAD-DÛM, MORIA - DAY

The BALROG, a massive creature rises from a chasm, a great 40-
FOOT MAN-BEAST, with a MANE OF FLAMES! In one hand is a
BLADE ... like a stabbing TONGUE OF FIRE; in the other, a WHIP of
MANY THONGS.

ANGLE ON: ARAGORN leads the FELLOWSHIP to the top of a
dizzying stairway ... GANDALF follows, leaning heavily on his staff.

CLOSE ON: ARAGORN looks at GANDALF, concerned.

GANDALF

Lead them on, Aragorn! The bridge is near.

ARAGORN hesitates ... GANDALF looks at him.

GANDALF (CONT'D)

Do as I say; Swords are no more use here.

The FELLOWSHIP race down the stairway.

ARAGORN picks up FRODO ... leaping across a gaping chasm ...

GANDALF yells to the others.

ANGLE ON: ARAGORN makes to throw GIMLI across the chasm.

GIMLI

Nobody tosses a dwarf!

The BALROG smashes through the wall and spreads its VAST WINGS. It swoops down past the FELLOWSHIP, disappearing into a FLAMING PIT!

CUT TO:

This scene in the film runs for approximately five-and-a-half minutes and incorporates many intricate details a consumer might miss upon the first viewing, from the armor and weapon designs of the goblins, the ethereal glow of the crystal in Gandalf's staff, the amazing dwarven architecture, to the scope of the bridge. And that's not even taking into account the design of the Balrog, with its

downward-curved horns or how the flames radiate from within the smoke of its body.

Compare that to Tolkien's own passage, which runs for approximately 500 words, which according to the average reading speed in English, should only take about two minutes to consume. The description is also exceedingly sparse and only includes salient details such as, "In its [the Balrog's] right hand was a blade like a stabbing tongue of fire; in its left it held a whip of many thongs." When compared to the visual mastery in the film scene, the written word inspiration can feel a bit lackluster.

This process of transferring the written word to the screen through the screenplay is worth examining since it demonstrates how the worldbuilding must adapt to become transmedial. Because of the parsimonious forces acting upon a script, the screenwriter only includes **hero props**, which are items that are necessary for the scene to take place. These fall under Chekhov's gun and are described in just enough detail to get their necessity across. In the above example, the Balrog's sword and whip are the hero props because they will be used in the next scene when it battles with Gandalf. All else is left out of the screenplay in terms of specific detail for the folks in their respective creative departments to deal with. Like

trying to whittle down a trope to the bare minimum, hero props are elements necessary for a story that is cut down to the bone. These are the details the audience will pick up on to decipher the black box of the author's worldbuilding, and as such, need to be handled mindfully.

To a certain extent, all worldbuilding inclusions outside of the visual mediums (film, video games, and comic books) fall under the umbrella of hero props in that the author includes them because they are necessary to the story—or at least this is one reason to include them. If they do not serve a purpose, they should be excluded according to Chekov, Hemmingway, and the film industry. The issue then becomes when worldbuilding details add value and in what degree to do so. As stated in the introduction, those adapted purposes are if they serve the (a) characters, (b) plot, (c) world.

Before we examine these individually, it should be noted that, just like when assessing the four Cs of worldbuilding, examining the purpose of worldbuilding should be considered in terms of both conception and execution. As such, we will look at them in terms of both fantasy conceit and output details.

Character: Everyone loves an underdog, and worldbuilding allows the author to adjust the building blocks of the world itself to ensure their protagonist fits the role perfectly. Frodo acts as the archetype in that he and his species are the smallest and least powerful in the world around them. Yet Tolkien went to great lengths to show how these diminutive individuals were indispensable to the events of *The Lord of the Rings*. Or the opposite can occur wherein the protagonist is the “chosen one” meant to save the world, like Aang, or destroy it, as in the case of Anakin Skywalker. Or, as in the case of Harry Potter, the eponymous protagonist can fulfill both. In all these cases, the protagonists are defined by their roles, which are in turn defined by and a product of the authors’ worldbuilding details. This makes sense in that each time I asked an author if they designed their character, plot, or world first, they would consider before stating it was a flowing process between them wherein they would adjust character details to fit the plot or worldbuilding, while simultaneously shifting the plot or character to account for worldbuilding details already established.

Antagonists and support characters fall into this process as well, although to a lesser extent than the protagonist due to their lesser importance to the story. Conflict is the core of all good drama, so

setting the characters at diametric extremes in terms of roles, power, and cultures can work wonders for their dynamic, as seen by the moments shared between Tyrion and Bron, Jamie and Brienne, or Daenerys and Khal Drogo. In each of these cases, the characters draw upon their conflicting backstories informed by the worldbuilding to infuse every moment with tension on multiple levels.

Plot: Critics have been attempting to classify the number of basic plot outlines for centuries now, with numbers spanning from two to twenty, but even accepting the top end of that range, that's not many stories for a species composed of over seven billion. Considering we've been telling stories for a quarter of a million years and have not yet exhausted those basic plots is both a testament to how much we crave the familiar as well as how much variance can be created by just changing a few details. Worldbuilding is an easy means to disguise the basic plot arc, not just in terms of set dressing but also in the plot points themselves. On the conceptual level, you have *A Song of Ice and Fire*, which takes its inspiration from the War of the Roses and deals with intricate betrayals and literal plots against other characters. The War of the Five Kings would not exist without the Seven Kingdoms of Westeros being created and

differentiated from each other. This manifests itself in terms of government, culture, and actual locations of the kingdoms.

On the ground level of details, the worldbuilding can be used to solve or create problems for the characters. Details like water benders growing stronger in the full moon or fire benders losing their powers during an eclipse both feature prominently in *Airbender*, whereas the fact the fire benders gain great power during a comet creates a great ticking-clock to drive tension through the whole series. The TriWizard Tournament not only sets the stage for *The Goblet of Fire*, but also gives brief glimpses into the greater Wizarding world of Harry Potter when the other two major schools, Durmstrang Institute and Beauxbatons Academy of Magic, arrive at Hogwarts to compete.

Serving the plot can go too far, though, as Nick Lowe points out in his scathing essay on the science fiction and fantasy genres, *The Well-Tempered Plot Device*. In it, he compares many familiar magical items like the One Ring as “Plot Coupons” the characters must save up throughout the story to redeem in the finale. When it comes to worldbuilding details that overtly drive the plot, he attributes his rule of thumb to Phil Palmer, wherein you replace the object in question with the words “the Plot.” The example he uses is the Force, with several

choice cuts such as: ““The time has come, young man, for you to learn about the Plot.’ ‘Darth Vader is a servant of the dark side of the Plot.”” He further states, “When a whole planet of good guys gets blown up, Ben senses ‘a great disturbance in the Plot.”” Cases like these demonstrate, as we’ll discuss further, how fantasy elements used to simplify the plot are less satisfying than those that complicate the situation and increase the conflict overall.

World: While worldbuilding details that positively affect the characters and plot are easy to surmise because both push the story forward, those that are used to enhance the world itself can be the trickiest to justify, or they can be the easiest, which ultimately makes them the most subjective. Because what one person loves another loathes, threading the needle between embellishment and the bare minimum can appear impossible. To this day, a friend of mine who adores *The Wheel of Time* can’t ever go a single discussion without mentioning the long description of a chair that no one ever sits in whenever the series comes up.

So why, then, was this detail included if it served no obvious purpose?

A lot of this comes down to the illusion of completeness, the encyclopedic impulse, and author authority. As we discussed in the four Cs of worldbuilding, the author does not need to reveal everything within the world, only give the impression that the author likely knows all the details. Like how technobabble is used to establish expert-level knowledge for characters, the author must demonstrate their credibility as an expert on their chosen subject early in the material. In terms of nonfiction books, this is usually done with an introductory chapter in which they cite their credentials in a narrative form by explaining how they became interested in the field and eventually an expert on the subject. If done correctly, this not only demonstrates how much the author knows but also makes them seem more human and empathetic so that the audience will trust them from then on out.

In fiction the sense of credibility is established in the vivid details used to paint the scenes. By including specific images and technical terms from the genre, setting, and subject of the story, the author emphasizes that they have firsthand knowledge of the subject—or at least have researched it enough to appear like an expert. Like technobabble, the audience may not be meant to understand the individual technical words, but rather be impressed that the author

does and subsequently assume that the author can use them accurately and appropriately. Abeyance, or the willingness of the audience to not question made-up words and concepts early on in a speculative story, tangentially falls under the author authority umbrella in that the audience believes the author to be an expert on these fantasy conceits and will hold off immediate elucidation for the promise of a later explanation. They implicitly trust the author because this is the author's creation, and as Tolkien observes, the worldbuilder acts as god to their own realm by creating or destroying whole continents or civilizations with a few flicks of the pen.

This is an awesome power, but doubt comes creeping in with it in that it is impossible to know if the author's ideas have properly translated to the page until they receive audience feedback. As such, the encyclopedic impulse kicks in, spurring the author to add detail upon detail so as to appear more of an authority on their own world. This quickly leads to a downward spiral where more explicit details are added to ensure the original ones made sense, which in turn creates the sense that even more details are still needed. Rather than giving the bare minimum details necessary for the audience to understand the story, the encyclopedic impulse demands the inclusion of *all* the details without consideration as to their importance

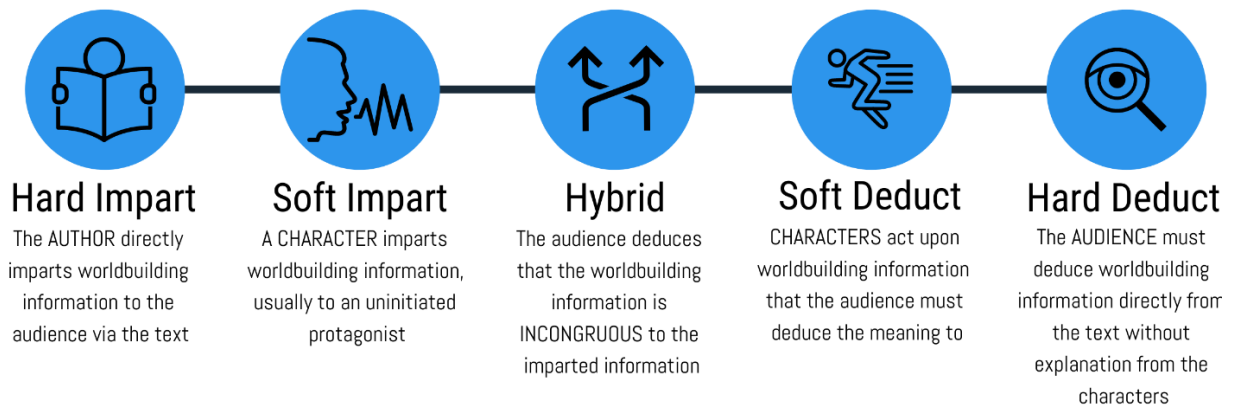
so as not to be forced to make that distinction. In terms of target practice, this is what a friend of mine calls “accuracy by volume.” Another name for this is **worldbuilding kudzu**: the details soon choke out all the pertinent information by sheer volume, making the immersive process a slog.

On the other hand, starving the audience of details leaves the world feeling anorexic and without enough musculature to support the skeleton of a story. In my interviews with fantasy authors, two words came up more than any others when discussing what they loved about and inspired their own worldbuilding: “wonder” and “depth.” As we mentioned earlier, wonder is an experiential sensation the audience feels when encountering something new. It is the heart of exploration of the unknown and the sense of awe one feels when encountering events and ideas that cannot exist in our own world. Depth, on the other hand, is that sense of completeness and complexity in knowing you will always unearth more if you keep digging—that the world is never exhausted by a single encounter. Neither of these terms implies a sense of parsimony, yet each is considered the highest praise from fantasy authors about exemplar worldbuilders.

Alas, there is no easy answer to if worldbuilding details pertaining to the world itself serve in making it feel more real and credible or are worldbuilding kudzu. That is for the author to decide when including those details and the audience to be mindful of when assessing if the details serve their purpose. However, with these three purposes in mind, there's several distinct methods in which to deliver this information.

19. Ladling the Stew—Imparting, Deducing, & Hybrid

Audiences mentally create their conception of the world from the inside-out, but how the author delivers these bottom-up details influences this process. In this case, the continuum of delivery is from **impart** to **deduct** with a hard and soft component to each and a **hybrid** middle that composes elements of both. These methods also work in terms of getting across character and plot elements, but we will focus on worldbuilding alone for now. To ensure we're all on the same page, in all five cases we will unpack below, we'll use the worldbuilding detail that all elves are left-handed.



When imparting information, the author overtly tells the audience worldbuilding elements and how they fit together. A hard impart lays out the facts from a trustworthy source and can be accomplished by an omniscient narrator overtly telling the audience that all elves are left-handed. Tolkien uses this method in both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* by spending the first chapters discussing the hobbits, their habits, and backstories. And while this approach of an omniscient narrator has fallen out of style over the years, it certainly has its merits. As Ursula Le Guin points out: “The voice of the narrator who knows the whole story... cannot be dismissed as old-fashioned or uncool. It’s not only the oldest and the most widely used storytelling voice, it’s also the most versatile, flexible, and complex of the points of view” (Steering the Craft and Discussion on Story Writing for the Lone Navigator or the Mutinous Crew, 1998, p. 87).

The omniscient narrator is the most obvious, but a hard impart can also be accomplished by a trustworthy first-person point of view, wherein the audience exists within the protagonist's headspace and hears their thoughts. Any worldbuilding details imparted this way can be taken at face value and added to the mental map of the world the audience constantly constructs.

A soft impart parallels the hard impart in that it is a statement of worldbuilding fact taken at face value. However, the soft impart comes not from the narrator or protagonist, but from a trustworthy side character or source. In the case of our left-handed elves, it would be when a support character turns to the protagonist and says something along the lines of, "Well, everyone knows that all elves are left-handed." Hermione immediately springs to mind as a vehicle for soft impart details to the ignorant Harry, but she shares this role with a lot of famous fantasy names. Never forget that Obi-Wan, Varys, Gandalf and Aragorn, and Katara and Sokka all impart valuable worldbuilding knowledge to their respective protagonists, who in turn act as proxy vessels through which the audience receives the information.

People often complain about the "farm-boy-with-a-sword" trope, which as the name implies, involves a naive protagonist plucked from

obscurity, usually due to a prophesy, who is suddenly empowered with a magical item to defeat the evil threatening the land. If he or she is secretly royalty or the child of the evil overlord threatening the realm, all the better. This is certainly an overused trope, but it should again be noted that tropes exist because they are effective. The protagonists in all five exemplar series are, intentionally or not on the authors' parts, ignorant of the strange new worlds in which they find themselves, allowing them to function as the conduit for all the worldbuilding knowledge to flow to the audience. Luke Skywalker is literally a farm boy from an area he describes as the farthest point from the center of the universe, who then inherits a sword and is mentored by the world-weary Obi-Wan. Harry Potter was raised by muggles, who is then forced to navigate the Wizarding world with the help of his social guide, Ron, and academic mentor, Hermione. Aang was on ice and out of commission for one hundred years and requires the guidance of Katara and Sokka to acclimate himself. Both Bilbo and Frodo start in the backwater Shire, far away from all the big events of Middle Earth, only to be led by Gandalf, who imparts many facts and worldbuilding details along their quests. And, in Frodo's case, when Gandalf disappears, Gollum appears to act as guide into Mordor, which is a dark reflection of Virgil in Dante's descent into Hell.

Because of its multiple points of view, *A Song of Ice and Fire* employs nearly a dozen soft impart vehicles for its proxy protagonists. Although quite knowledgeable about the north, the Starks are immediately cast out of their elements when taken to King's Landing, where Eddard is instructed on the lay of the land by both Littlefinger and Varys. Meanwhile, Jon Snow goes north to the Wall, where he is taught the way of the world first by Lord Mormont and then by Ygritte, who reiterates his ignorance before educating him with her infamous, "You know nothing, Jon Snow." Across the globe, Daenerys explores a whole new content, learning about several new cultures and being told "it is known" after being imparted with exposition. Tyrion, Jamie, Sansa, and Arya also all receive explicit instruction in the way of the world due to each of them being ignorant outsiders in the cultural milieus they find themselves in, thus providing the perfect proxy to impart this worldbuilding information as audience surrogates.

Another option for the soft impart would be for a character overhearing the information being imparted to another. This is frequently done when the character in question is spying, meaning the audience is paying more attention to the drama of the scene, namely the fear of the character being caught, than the imparting of information. The best example of this would be Arya's overhearing

Varys and Illyrio discussing their masterplan for reestablishing a Targaryen ruler in Westeros after chasing a cat into the crypts. The concern for her fate far eclipses the realization that the audience is being spoon-fed information directly by the author. The hard impart is well-recognized as the dreaded info dump in that it is an explicit telling directly to the audience. The soft impart is still an info dump, but it is usually considered more palatable since it is one degree removed from the author instructing the audience as to the world.

Since hybrid necessitates the understanding of deduction first, we'll skip ahead on the spectrum. As the name implies, deduction means the audience figures out the worldbuilding rules on their own from the details provided by the author. At no point are they explicitly told how the worldbuilding works, which is an outgrowth of the **show don't tell** school of writing, in which it is assumed the audience prefers to experience the worldbuilding details in action firsthand. There is certainly strength to this adage, although it should be noted it is an outgrowth of the field of screenwriting. Unlike the written word, movies, television, and plays are visual mediums. And while they too can and often do employ a narrator, it has fallen out of favor over the centuries. Because they are visual mediums, it is rightly assumed the audience would prefer to see the details taking place rather than

stopping the action so either some characters or the narrator can explain it.

The soft deduction, as a mirror image of the soft impart, means a character with knowledge of the worldbuilding takes action based upon specific information to get the worldbuilding rules across to the audience. In the case of our left-handed elves, it might mean the protagonist tosses something at another character, who instinctively catches it with their left hand, revealing themselves as an elf. Or it might mean that when the villain draws her sword, the protagonist notes how she holds it with her left hand and then declares her an elf. In these cases, the characters are all already aware of the worldbuilding rules and clearly base their decisions on this knowledge, which then hopefully provides enough context for the audience to piece together the underlying fantasy conceits.

A hard deduction is where there is no narrator and no character bringing the worldbuilding details to the audience's attention, who must then piece together the world rules based upon the details alone. For our sinister¹⁸ elves, this might mean that it is mentioned throughout how elves always wear their scabbards on their right-hand side or that their castle spires rotate counterclockwise, thus denoting how they defend them with left-handed weapons when retreating

upwards. This asks a lot of the consumer, first in that they notice these details within the work itself and then that they draw the proper conclusions from these details. In the case of left-handed elves and their spiraling defense, this would require the consumer to know that it is traditional for castle tower staircases to spiral upwards in a clockwise manner so the right-handed defenders would have more space to swing their weapons, whereas the attackers would have less room to work if right-handed and ascending.

That is a big ask of the author for the consumer to notice both details and deduce their meaning correctly. Due to narrative gestalt, audiences may fill in that missing information in any manner of ways that deviate from the author's intent. However, there are few feelings more satisfying than figuring out a twist or reversal before it happens, thus demonstrating the consumer's acumen in understanding and predicting the author's intent ahead of time. The hard deduct allows for this, whereas imparting the information does not.

The hybrid method appears on the surface to be an impart, either through the side character explaining to another or the narrator or protagonist stating facts directly to the audience. What makes it hybrid is when the audience realizes this information is unreliable. Since this realization on the audience's part can only come via

deduction by comparing the stated “facts” against their own observations, this means they combine the two strategies. Overtly it appears to be a hard or soft impart, yet over the course of the story, the audience begins to realize that their mental map of the created world does not align with the provided face-value statements. Based upon the author’s clues scattered throughout the tale, the audience then begins to doubt the narrator or imparting character and realizes their biases or manipulation of the information. When a character other than the protagonist imparts flawed information, the audience’s realization can come at the same time as the protagonist’s, as with Luke when he discovers the truth of his parentage. However, in the case of the unreliable narrator or protagonist, the audience must pick up the pieces and discern the narrator’s bias by realizing the output details do not align with the imparted information.

In terms of our left-handed elves, it could be that our protagonist already hates all elves because they are inferior to humans, but this antipathy also extends his hatred to left-handed humans for displaying this elfish trait. But if over the course of the story he discovers numerous elves that are in fact right-handed, the audience can deduce that this worldbuilding detail is in fact false. If this intentional incongruity in the worldbuilding is done effectively, the

character and audience together might end up rethinking a core convention of the world itself. It might be the left-handedness is an arbitrary distinction plied against the elves just for being other, or perhaps it is a power dynamic enforced by society to keep the elves in an inferior social role. These or a dozen other different reasons could add additional nuance to the story that pure impart or deduction alone could not.

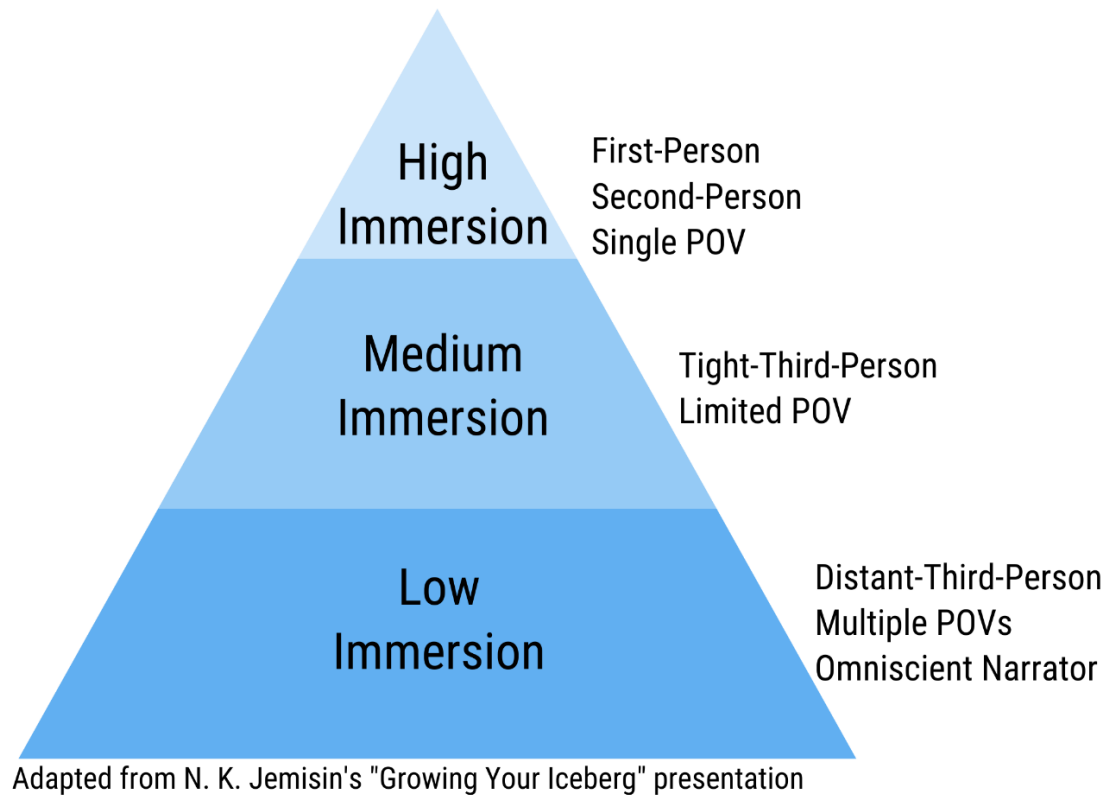
When done effectively, this means all previous information provided is suspect and must be reevaluated for additional meaning. The benefit is twofold: not only is the world now considered with new implications, but the audience reconsiders the character as well to open up new facets based on their revealed biases and agendas. In this case, the hybrid method serves both the world and characters, and perhaps the plot itself if used effectively. This is a very difficult needle to thread, however, and when ineffectively applied, it just seems like inconsistent details, which can disrupt the sense of immersion negatively.

20. Points of View and Author Worldview

The manner the author addresses the audience also affects the worldbuilding in how much the audience trusts the author or a character's point of view. Although listed lowest on Jemisin's

Immersion Pyramid, the distant-third-person point of view and omniscient narrator are traditionally considered trustworthy sources, meaning any imparted information is taken at face value. Acceptance is implicit because they are simply conduits for the information—at least so the argument goes. In terms of descriptions within the text, these are always trusted since it makes no sense to impart information as to surrounding objects and their appearances only for the consumer to later discover this was incorrect. Without a solid foundation of trust between the author and audience, there can be no forward movement on the story, which is why trust is freely given with the willing suspension of disbelief. What the author is able to withhold from the audience also tracks along the immersion pyramid, with the distant and omniscient third-person point of view able to dispense any information. This means the audience can receive any information at any time, and any withheld information is a conscious choice on the author's part. Multiple points of view, tight-third, and first-person points of view are each generally bound by what the characters are aware of, which means the author can withhold more information from the audience. This can increase mystery in a more palatable manner since the audience is building their conception of the world based upon the characters' understanding and implicitly understands

that the characters are not privy to everything. This is another reason many authors employ characters that are ignorant to the magic around them as proxies for the audience to experience only parts of their world at a time.



This implicit reliance on point of view leads to the interesting side effect Card points out in *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy*: the audience literally believes every word in a fantasy and science-fiction story. Because what is patently impossible in the real world is a cornerstone of the genres, fantasy and science-fiction authors must choose their words carefully. For instance, the sentence

“Resplendent in her red dress, she *floated* across the ballroom” would be acceptable in anything from upmarket to literary fiction. However, in the realm of speculative fiction and the domain of the patently impossible, the audience could rightly expect the woman to literally *float* over the ground on her journey across the room. Stating a character *breathed fire* is an acceptable description for an angry individual in non-speculative genres, but it has entirely different implications within our unreal realms. So, to a certain extent, fantasy authors are hamstrung in that they are reduced to simile only instead of metaphors in their comparisons.

Symbols and allusions are dependent upon audiences’ knowledge, which can vary based upon education as well as culture. Adding Christ-like motifs to a character can resonate with those already familiar with the additional material, as Aslan in *The Chronicles of Narnia* demonstrates, but can be missed entirely by those not raised in that cultural milieu. Meanwhile, allusions to the Monkey King might be lost on a Western audience. Idioms are also problematic, not only in that they may not translate to different cultures but in that they reflect the author’s worldview even when used as a third-person narrator. These figures of speech also risk being taken literally, although they can be reflective of the author’s voice

and should be considered accordingly. Like little details that serve the world by making it feel more authentic, idioms can also establish a greater sense of authority for the author by making the writing feel more idiosyncratic and less generic. Idiosyncratic writing is also what establishes an author's personal style, which is a vital part of the story and worldbuilding experience.

In terms of worldbuilding, oftentimes authors can fall into the trap of **purple prose**, which are descriptions that become overly ornate and extravagant to the point that they break the sense of immersion by drawing attention to themselves. An overabundance of adjectives, adverbs, and alliteration is considered the hallmark of purple prose, but as with all aspects of writing, its success or failure resides in the eye of the beholder.

Overreliance on prose can be a crutch, but Le Guin makes a salient point as to how the language reflects the audience's expectation in her essay *From Elfland to Poughkeepsie*. Being that most inspiration from the fantasy genre is drawn from historical sources, the audience often expects formal, antiquated manners of speech, not only from the characters themselves but the author as well. Much of this can be considered an outgrowth of *The Lord of the Rings* and Tolkien's very classical writing style, which prevailed

among his contemporaries in his literary group the Inklings. Having been inspired by antiquity, it makes sense he would replicate it in his voice. However, Tolkien claimed to be a translator in the opening of *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings* and used terms that could be considered anachronistic in his created world, such as the Gregorian calendar names of the months as well as comparing Gandalf's appearance to that of a train. So although he mostly wrote with a classic sensibility, Tolkien included modern terms because he was writing for a modern audience.

With this in mind, the author must also consider their own worldview and how it aligns with the analogue culture. Some consumers find any modern worldviews, be they from the characters or the narrator, that do not conform to the expected worldviews of that analogue culture to be an anachronism. Objections most often arise when characters state beliefs that run counter to what is thought to be the general consensus of the time period and as such seem progressive and reflective of a modern sensibility. This point of view often ignores that no culture in any time period is monolithic and that many ideas that we consider modern, such as equality between ethnicities and genders, have their origins hundreds of years ago. It also ignores the fact that by virtue of the genre, fantasy works are

meant to not strictly adhere to the rules of the real world. But as with the example of the word *wow* being considered anachronistic, the power in this relationship resides with the audience, not the author. No matter how historically accurate the author actually is, it's the perception of the audience that holds ultimate sway. Even though these fantasy realms can be secondary worlds never connected to Earth in any way, they will still be assessed based upon the cultures most analogous in the audience members' minds and their personal understandings and expectations of said cultures.

Be that as it may, the author can make their intentions as to adhering to authenticity of the analogue culture known right at the onset during the mentally permeable period in which the audience has given willing suspension of disbelief before the break to the second act. Acclimating the audience to modern worldviews and turns of phrases at the onset while they are still learning the rules to the created world can inoculate the work against the claim of anachronisms since those perceived anachronisms are baked into the DNA of the world itself. This is usually accomplished through a hard deduction in that the author's worldview and decisions are laid out in the language and details of the world rather than stating these facts outright via a hard impart.

21. Info-dump Equity

Although the info dump, along with prologues, have fallen out of favor lately, both still benefit from **info-dump equity**. In the *Writing Excuses* podcast, Sanderson states it is not that people dislike info dumps, rather they object to too early a placement of this information (14.11: Magic Without Rules, 2019). If given too soon, then info dumps detract from the consumer's enjoyment in figuring the world out on their own. He maintains that info dumps should therefore only be applied after the audience already craves this information. Equity is established by raising questions or demonstrating something incongruous that sparks interest and makes the audience desire an answer that they expect will be forthcoming. So when that information finally arrives as exposition, it provides both a need in terms of the required worldbuilding information but also alleviating a burning desire in the audience. This parallels JJ Abrams' mystery box in that the audience craves an answer to an early teased mystery and will stick around to be introduced to the characters and story so long as they believe the mystery will eventually be answered. Yet the audience's interest has to equal or be greater than the degree to which the info dump disrupts the flow of the story for info-dump equity to be achieved. Timothy Hickson echoes this in *On Writing and*

Worldbuilding: Volume I when he states, “At its heart, every mystery is simply a character on a quest for exposition” (p. 29). Steven Erikson agrees, and in his presentation on Anthropology in World-Building at the 2019 Hong Kong Book Fair, states how an author should subtly build the world such that the audience doesn’t notice because info dumps are “clunky.” He goes on to argue for building a history for the world for audiences to uncover during the story: “That idea of layering the world that you’re creating in a hidden and buried past, and then in the process of writing, you’re basically excavating and revealing that past and how the bones of that past have shaped the surface of the world.” In camouflaging the worldbuilding details, the author forces the audience to act as archeologists hunting for clues as to the rules of the world.

Much like horror-movie monsters, creating info-dump equity can be an exercise in moving from a soft to hard worldbuilding understanding. Equity is established by showing an impossible ability or a situation that cannot possibly exist in the real world and makes it feel strange and exciting due to the rule of cool. This creates a compelling question and promises answers so long as the audience sticks with the story. This can be done with a **prologue**, which is an opening that establishes background details to create context,

clarification, and miscellaneous information for the audience. The prologue often involves an earlier time period that will affect the main plot, although it may not physically intersect with it in any form. Consciously or not, the prologue attempts to establish this info-dump equity by showing something incredible or impossible that will only be explained much later in the story. Although it calls itself “Chapter One” instead of a prologue, the opening to *The Sorcerer’s Stone* is a great example in that the book opens many years before the actual Harry Potter throughline with the very mundane Privet Drive being disrupted before Harry’s first appearance. This includes Dumbledore’s discussion with McGonagall in cat form, which alludes to Harry’s ancestry and the death of Voldemort rather than overtly laying out this worldbuilding bedrock at the onset. This is a soft impart or perhaps even a soft deduction in that the characters are going about their usual lives without bothering to explain the significance of the worldbuilding details to the audience. However, they are certainly sowing the seeds of info-dump equity by making these details intriguing with the hint of answers to come.

A Song of Ice and Fire is a masterclass in using a prologue to establish the impossible in that the White Walkers make their first appearance and kill two men from the Night’s Watch with their

unexplainable frigid powers, the threat of which will drive the next several thousand pages. This contrasts significantly with Tolkien's opening to both *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, wherein he unabashedly delves into the history of hobbits and how they fit into Middle Earth, including quick genealogies and a synopsis of their culture. In *The Lord of the Rings*, the chapter is designated as a prologue, but compare it to Jackson's film opening of *The Lord of the Rings*, wherein the history of Sauron and his ring are established through both a narrator and physical depiction of events. Although this is a hard impart, the visual details are arresting enough to be compelling and raise the question as to how an insignificant creature like a hobbit can possibly overcome a being that it took the whole world banding together to defeat. This info dump also effectively acts as a prologue in that, although it directly affects the main characters, they are not aware of its significance until much later into the work.

Airbender and *Star Wars* also both open with a hard impart outlining the basics of the world in what can be considered a prologue. In *Airbender*, it appears as the title sequence in which bending and the Avatar are explicitly explained, whereas *Star Wars* opens with its famous text crawl. Both these and the film opening to *The Lord of the Rings* demonstrate a rule of thumb in film that if one

must tell and not show to establish context, then it should happen before the story begins in earnest. Video games also reflect this with tutorial levels kicking in before the story acclimates the audience to the strange new world they find themselves in. With that in mind, the author should consider their intent when employing the prologue and info dumps, whereas audiences should watch to see how the author executes their decisions and how effectively they land.

22. Deduction of Omission

No matter how much an author has considered their concept and how best to deliver it to the audience, one can never depend upon the audience's deductive interpretation aligning with the author's intent. This incongruity often manifests in how consumers interpret what the author left out of the material as a specific component of the worldbuilding. This creates meaning when there is none intended on the author's part. In my example of attempting to explain away the ice level in *Metroid* as a child, there is no real harm to these flights of fancy. But in cases like Star Wars, real audience backlash can come from author omissions like the lack of female Jedi until Rey in *The Force Awakens*. Yes, there was Mara Jade from the Expanded Universe, Ahsoka Tano from *The Clone Wars* TV show, and even a female member of the Jedi Council in *The Phantom Menace*. Yet

each of these examples were not a part of the original trilogy most fans cut their teeth on, with most casual fans never having stepped into the Expanded Universe via books or TV shows. In the outlier case of the female on the Jedi Council, her name was not spoken in the movie, which also came out nineteen years after *Return of the Jedi*. The first time a female Jedi spoke or was seen in action was nearly an hour and fifty minutes into *Attack of the Clones* in 2002, which left nearly two decades for many fans to use their powers of deduction to decide that Jedi were exclusively male.

Now this was likely never Lucas' intent when he first imagined the Jedi Order, but it was an outgrowth of the omission of females as driving factors in the original trilogy. Even though Yoda spoke of "another," meaning Leia, for twenty-two years many fans concluded, consciously or not, that Jedi were exclusively male. This deduction alone cannot account for all the backlash against Rey in her introduction in *The Force Awakens*, but it does lay the groundwork for why many screamed this was needless overcorrection for the sake of inclusion. Because very few females or people of color appeared, many fans concluded this was canon and that any changes to it were anathemas. Which just goes to show that deductions of omission

usually say more about the audience than it does about the author's intent.

Star Wars is by no means alone in this field, with Star Trek and *The Lord of the Rings* both showing little diversity in terms of gender or ethnicity, and both receiving backlashes when they later introduced darker-skinned Vulcans and elves. So although this most likely was not the intent of the authors, it should demonstrate how a beloved creation can grow in unintended directions once it produces fans and their personal interpretations. Authors should take these implications into consideration at the creation phase, while fans should consider if aspects they believe to be sacrosanct canon are actually the author's plan or the product of their own deductive interpretations.

Watching these outgrowths can also drive authors to continually tinker with their creations. The term **retcon** is short for "retroactive continuity" and comes from comic books in which previous canon or facts are ignored or contradicted so as to assimilate new stories or understandings in current storylines. Retcons are generally reviled but are employed in multiple long-running mediums. Lucas is often derided for his decision to remaster the original trilogy numerous times, not just updating the special effects to overcome technological limitations at the time of filming but also changing out components of

the story itself. The most infamous example is Greedo shooting first despite his blaster being aimed nowhere near Han Solo, which caused quite an uproar at the time. This furor was particularly fierce because this was Solo's first appearance in the film, which according to Blake Snyder and Terry Rossio, means the character needs to perform some action that immediately symbolizes who they are as a character. In the original version, Solo shot first under the table after disarming Greedo with his charm. This established that the character was charismatic yet a scoundrel willing to kill in cold blood. This was not at all heroic in any sense of the word, so it makes sense Lucas would want to alter this for his series aimed at children. But in doing so he changed a core tenant in what we spent twenty years believing was Solo's personality. This was not some small tweak to special effects, but a bedrock alteration to deduced canon, which in turn shook the whole sense of the character. Wolf points out that inconsistencies in the story can be tolerated the further they are from the main plot, which holds true for retcons as well in that the more affecting to the concept itself, the less likely the change will be accepted by the audience. The same holds true for characters.

Although the biggest recipient for retconning ire, Lucas is by no means alone. Tolkien spent many years making additions and

changes to *The Lord of the Rings* and *The Hobbit*. Many of these were cleaning up typos and ensuring that travel times matched both series, but his greatest change came to the character of Gollum. When first introduced in *The Hobbit*, Gollum was a simple creature who willingly handed up the ring that allowed Bilbo to escape and was genuinely disappointed he could not present Bilbo with it because it was missing. But after working on Gollum in *The Lord of the Rings*, Tolkien realized that Gollum as he was portrayed in *The Hobbit* did not gel with the later iteration. For one thing, he would not have given up his precious as easily as he did originally. So Tolkien changed up the chapters concerning Bilbo and Gollum's riddle-fest, making the creature creepier and far more sinister in the second edition of *The Hobbit*. Yet Tolkien does not garner even a fraction of the abuse Lucas does for making such a major change to such a major character. Part of this is because Tolkien included an explanation in his new addition of *The Hobbit*. In the preface, he states that the first version was a literal translation from Bilbo's own memoirs entitled *There and Back Again*, with the hobbit intentionally bolstering his claim to the ring by undercutting Gollum's due to the dark influence of the ring itself. The second iteration was a revised version of the memoirs that Bilbo continued to include some of the events of *The*

Lord of the Rings, which Frodo and the others annotated with additional information in what would be later known as the *Red Book of Westmarch*. Due to this additional research within the world, the second iteration is therefore considered the more authentic interpretation.

More importantly, though, these two case studies in retconning backlash diverge in terms of exposure. Star Wars was an instant hit that maintained its canon to millions for nearly twenty years before the infamous special editions. *The Hobbit*, although successful enough to garner a sequel in *The Lord of the Rings*, was not so popular that the first iteration of Gollum was well-known. He was a minor character quickly forgotten about except for his love of riddles and vehicle for delivering the ring to Bilbo. So his major rewrite in the second edition was noticed by far fewer people, making those few copies out there with his original rendering worth quite a bit of money. Unlike Solo's popularity, Gollum was not introduced to the general populous until he appeared in his final form.

23. Consistency Strategies

No matter how hard a top-down creator is, inconsistencies are impossible to completely sidestep, and even worldbuilding luminaries like Tolkien are subject to errors. And when inconsistencies arise,

audiences have a decision to make: to either return to the immersive state or decide the inconsistency is too egregious to continue. Inconsistencies can also pile up, eventually weighing the suspension of disbelief down until it breaks. Fortunately, though, authors have more options to combat this than ever before. Firstly, there are **bibles**, which are series guidebooks that usually include the pitch, character descriptions, a synopsis, as well as worldbuilding details. Bibles come from filmmaking as a means to prove to producers that the creator knows all about the show, the characters, and has enough ideas to support a series for many years. One of the first bibles was written by Gene Roddenberry for Star Trek, which lays out many of the calling cards for the series, including an optimistic view of technology, a diverse cast, beginning each episode in the middle of an already existing crisis, and each episode mirroring a topical real-world issue dressed up as science fiction. Show bibles are not reserved for TV any longer, and many authors maintain worldbuilding bibles to keep their characters, worldbuilding details, and plot points straight. There are also numerous services that have popped up, including wikis, that allow authors to post worldbuilding details, not just to keep their own notes straight but for audiences to enjoy as well. Leland Chee managed the Holocron database and kept track of

canonical details for the Star Wars universe, whereas Elio García and Linda Antonsson maintain *Westeros.org*, an extensive collection of facts and details that led to them being fact checkers and co-authors with Martin on the companion book about the history of Westeros. Bibles and wikis also aid in searching for inconsistencies in the editing phase, which should be significantly shorter if the fantasy conceits and how they would manifest in the work are fully explored and extrapolated beforehand. Creative writing, however, cannot ever be fully mapped out in advance, and some degree of discovery writing will occur in which a cool new idea either clashes with the already established rules or breaks them outright.

It is generally understood that once a worldbuilding detail has been published in a story, it can be considered canon. In universes like Star Wars and *The Lord of the Rings*, it's also understood that there are levels of canonicity, with works by the original creator superseding those of additional writers working in the universe, with those subsequent works being influenced by the more canonical works, but not influencing them in turn. In ages past, a full retcon or reprinting ala Lucas or Tolkien would be in order to smooth over any inconsistencies, but with the rise of digital publishing and print on demand, this is much easier for artists to accomplish. Another option

is for the author to ignore the inconsistencies and hope no one will catch them. Apologetics is another contingency, wherein either the audience organically explains the inconsistency away, or the author attempts to explain it away by adding new facets after the fact. This is often accomplished by a minor form of retconning where the characters discover they did not quite understand the world properly, thus acting as proxies for the author to better impart their new, updated version of the rules. Apologetics can still garner the same backlash as a full-on retcon depending on how crucial the change is to the core story, as can be best seen with midi-chlorians.

While some fans complained about Greedo shooting first, midi-chlorians and Jar-Jar Binks are infamous for fan furor, to the point both were quietly removed from the subsequent sequels without a word of complaint. Yet midi-chlorians offer us an interesting case study in what happens when one alters a world's fantasy conceits. As stated previously, the Force is the prime mover of the Star Wars universe in that it cannot be removed from the world without the story itself collapsing. In the original trilogy, Obi-Wan describes the Force as "an energy field created by all living things. It surrounds us and penetrates us. It binds the galaxy together," which is a fantasy enough explanation that Han later refers to it as a religion rather than

a science. However, in *The Phantom Menace*, released decades after this fantasy conceit took root, the Force is apologetically referred to as the number of microscopic symbiotic organisms residing in a person's blood. Unlike the supernatural implications of Obi-Wan's explanation, the midi-chlorians are clearly a science-fiction conceit rooted in biology. *The Phantom Menace* then doubles down in this explanation by even giving quantitative numbers to both Anakin and Yoda's midi-chlorian count.

Much of the backlash to this can be explained by the fact that this is a clear shift in conceits, leaving the fantasy genre and setting up camp in the science-fiction domain. And although Star Wars has many science-fiction trappings, the original trilogy, at its heart, was a fantasy. This new science-fiction explanation therefore felt like a bait-and-switch, in which a core component was traded out for something else entirely. Much like someone taking a bite of a chocolate chip cookie and discovering those dark bits are really raisins, no one appreciates a bait-and-switch.

A bait-and-switch backlash can also occur when an author switches out an analogue culture. As stated before, the original Harry Potter book and movie series are set with modern analogues for English culture as well as kids aged eleven to seventeen. Harry

literally becomes an adult in the last novel, at which point his story ends except for a brief coda many years later. This demonstrates how important the original analogue culture is and also explains the critical and box-office panning of the subsequent *Fantastic Beasts* franchise. Unlike the original series, *Fantastic Beasts* sets its analogues in the 1920s, which makes them a bit of a prequel to the original series. But it is not the prequel nature of *Fantastic Beasts* people objected to, rather the change in analogues from children to adults. Adults in the original series are tertiary characters with the exception of Dumbledore, Snape, and Voldemort, and even still, these three mainly operate as antagonists or allies to the kids rather than main characters. But in *Fantastic Beasts and Where to Find Them*, all the major roles are taken by adults, and by shifting the analogue from children to adults, the childlike sense of wonder and whimsy that pervades the Harry Potter worldbuilding suddenly clashes with the adult-oriented stories. This disconnect only flows one way, though, with the children in Harry Potter learning how to grow up and be adults in their tale. In the *Fantastic Beasts* series, however, the characters are now incongruous to the world around them. Gone are the wish-fulfillment fantasies that makes Harry Potter so compelling, only to be replaced by adults acting very childish so as to fit the very

childlike setting surrounding them. Unlike Harry Potter, which is aimed at kids and those young at heart, *Fantastic Beasts* is aimed at adult fans of the original series, and in so doing, loses what made its worldbuilding compelling in the first place.

Star Wars and Harry Potter should in no way be looked down upon for attempting something new and shaking up their worldbuilding foundations. A sense of newness and discovery is what drives consumers, after all. And with their meteoric popularity and audiences constantly clamoring for more, Lucas and Rowling would be fools not to continue to create in their already established world, just as Tolkien would have been if he declined to write *The Lord of the Rings* after *The Hobbit*. One of the features of an inspired world is that it is expansive enough that it can support multiple separate storylines rather than just one single story. Yet how this is gone about deserves some additional attention.

24. Old Worlds, New Stories

Worldbuilding capital derives from the economics concept, which are durable goods used in the production of other goods or services. For instance, if I were to create a business making T-shirts, the machines used to print the shirts would be considered capital since, although they are not the product I am selling, they are what I must

invest in to produce my actual product. In economics, these are sunk costs to start a business, which parallels worldbuilding quite well. Although the world is influenced by the story and characters, inspired worldbuilding that is creative, complete, consistent, and compelling can exist without the story itself. While the world was indeed created as a vehicle to share the story, when the worldbuilding is effective enough, it outgrows the story. And since the author has spent so much time on it, it is a sunk cost in that all the investment of mental effort will be lost if it is not used again. This is why authors often return to their world for further adventures rather than creating another one. The already existing world is also a known commodity with a built-in audience who wants to continue exploring the place they love. But unlike the original story that evolved with the world, additional tales are an existing world in search of a story.

Wolf notes that additional stories after the original tale take numerous forms: (a) the **sequel**, which follows the original story; (b) the **prequel**, which precedes the original story; (c) the **interquel**, which are set in the world but do not connect with the original story; and (d) the **intraquel**, which fills in gaps within the existing story. Star Wars gives us examples for each, with the third trilogy acting as a sequel to the originals, whereas the prequel trilogy fills in the events

before the original trilogy. *The Mandalorian* series is an interquel in that it takes place independent of the main Skywalker throughline and is only tangentially linked to the main series. *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* acts as an intraquel where the events leading to the Rebels acquiring the plans to the Death Star are explored, complete with the moment of handover to Leia. Wolf goes on to examine how sequels are constrained by the worldbuilding of the original series due to the fact the world was originally built to facilitate the story but now forces the sequel to reside within those worldbuilding constraints. To overcome this, the sequel usually expands upon the world by exploring new lands, worlds, characters, and storylines to continue the sense of exploration. Another method is to set the sequel many years later so the audience can wonder as to how much the world has changed in the intervening years.

Things get more complicated when prequels come into the mix since they are constrained not only by the established worldbuilding but also by events yet to occur. As Wolf points out, “A prequel, then, is not so much about the destination, but the journey to the destination” (Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation, p. 207). Like sequels and subsequent stories, prequels allow the author to add new information to the original story. The

prequel need not affect the original story in any shape or form, but the temptation always remains to add new nuance and backstory to the popular characters, items, and events from the previous story. And by intertwining them, the prequel can lose its sense of stakes. For instance, we know Han, Chewbacca, and Lando all survive to reach the original trilogy, so it is impossible to convince the audience they risk any real harm in *Solo: A Star Wars Story*. Ditto for Obi-Wan in the prequel trilogy. And while we did not know the exact path Anakin would take to become the twisted psychic cyborg Darth Vader, his conclusion is still forgone the moment his character appears as a child. As such, all conflict and sense of stakes are reserved for the newly introduced characters, which the audience does care for to the same extent as the carryover characters of the original trilogy. Any newly introduced characters are recognized as cannon fodder who will either not survive to make it to the original story or were not important enough to warrant a role in the first place.

What's more, the general stakes of the prequel are reduced overall since they must tread in the shadow of the original series, which has not even occurred in their timeline yet. Authors often truck in the biggest stakes possible for their original stories: the end of the world as we know it. In subsequent stories taking place after the

original story, end-of-the-world stakes can be raised again with little issue. But since the world clearly survives to connect to the original story, prequel stakes are diminished, even when the end of the world is invoked.

The encyclopedic impulse can also rear its head wherein the author attempts to explain all the setup that went into the original story. This can take several forms, the first being the **Easter egg**, which is a hidden message, image, or feature that is meant to be hunted for (similar to an Easter egg hunt) by consumers. These are generally a nod to the audience and give a quick thrill when discovered. The quick glimpse of E.T.s in the Galactic Senate in *The Phantom Menace* is a great example because Star Wars and Spielberg's *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* were box-office contemporaries, and the directors worked together, so their appearance is a great aside to fans already in the know. Martin's inclusion of fellow fantasy author Robert Jordan as "Lord Trebor Jordayne of the Tor" in *A Storm of Swords* is another Easter egg that only hawk-eyed fans will notice. A **callback** is very similar and is taken from the field of stand-up comedy in which the punchline in a joke used earlier in the set is alluded to again much later, eliciting another laugh from the reframing of what was already familiar. The famous cabbage merchant in

Airbender is a great example of a callback throughout the whole series. In both cases, the author attempts to create a shared joke that only those who are already fans can appreciate. An example of this can be seen when Jango Fett bumps his head on the door of his ship in *Attack of the Clones*, which was an allusion to a storm trooper smacking his head in the original *A New Hope* and had become a bit of an inside joke to fans. Both Easter eggs and callbacks take advantage of this shared sense of context, although it should be noted that metatextual moments such as these break the immersive state because the audience has to disengage from the present story to realize the references. In many cases, this can be effective worldbuilding if the audience finds the experience to be positive, but one always risks creating a negative experience when breaking immersion, intentionally or not.

The encyclopedic impulse can also appear as apologetics. One example is the plans used by the Rebels to destroy the Death Star. Many critics have complained how ultimately easy it was to destroy the Death Star over the years, which is why a whole film is based around how the design could have such an obvious flaw. What's more, the plans to the Death Star appear in *Attack of the Clones* in a quick aside explaining how the Geonosians are ultimately its creators.

Geonosis then becomes central for plotlines in both the animated series *The Clone Wars* and *Star Wars Rebels*, tracing the ultimate destruction of their species over several decades due to creating the Death Star. These examples are interesting because they add some small degree of context and nuance to the original *A New Hope*, but are ultimately unnecessary when it comes to enjoying the original, which had to stand on its own. It's arguable that either of these examples could sustain interest without the built-in interest that comes from the original trilogy. Which is something the author should keep in mind when writing a prequel: Can the story stand on its own without knowledge of events that take place later in the world? Is it a necessary story with its own stakes, plot, characters, and purpose, or does it simply patch a hole in another story by providing an explanation?

The desire to tie everything together can also create unnecessary issues in logic, even in the already heightened reality of a fantasy world. That R2-D2 knows Anakin and then later draws his son, Luke, into the conflict already strains credulity, but that Anakin actually builds and programs C-3P0, who in turn never reveals this connection to Luke, is beyond the pale. The character shoehorning continues in *Revenge of the Sith* when Chewbacca appears as one of

Yoda's guards on his home world of Kashyyyk, again tying together two characters that serve no point in terms of worldbuilding, plot, or character growth. In fact, it damages the series since Han actively doubts the existence of the Force, even though his best friend served with the Jedi and witnessed their powers firsthand. Both are pointless when it comes to narrative value and could be considered **fan service**, which is material that is included that serves no narrative purpose other than to please fans. And just like high-sugared junk food, fan service provides quite a rush of empty calories and little nutritional value to the story itself.

In terms of characters, it's also often tempting to make every event that occurs in the prequel have ramifications for the original series. But with so few details sprinkled over the course of the original series, they must cram them all into the prequel without consideration of if they serve the present story or not. From the original series, we learned that Han Solo: (a) won the Millennium Falcon from Lando in a game of chance, (b) he and Chewbacca are inseparable, (c) he made the Kessel Run in twelve parsecs, (d) he knows Imperial protocols, (e) he's enough of a scoundrel that (due to previous retconning) it's questionable if he would shoot someone first. These are great character details that would have required a long and interesting life

to acquire. Yet other than the three-year time jump in which Han is inducted into the Imperial military, all of *Solo: A Star Wars Story* takes place over the space of a few days, wherein Han accomplishes every single one of these existing character details. All of this, a lifetime's worth of events, condensed into what is essentially a long weekend. While it is an axiom that every tale should involve the most important moments in a character's life, it still strains the bonds of credulity to cram so much into a single sitting. One or two of these could have sustained the story while leaving room for Han's new adventures. Instead, they intentionally tread old ground.

Finally, there is the impulse to reverse engineer a character arc after the fact by employing an unnecessary character callback. Lando comes to mind in this case in that the audience knows full well he ends up running a mining colony in Cloud City and that Han taunts him for being respectable for it in *The Empire Strikes Back*. Lando also already has an arc in the original series, going from betraying Han to rescuing him and joining the Rebellion. Nothing more is really necessary for the character, who is rather tertiary to the original story, yet they thought it clever to toss in a line in the Solo prequel where a young Lando states how much he hates mines, the irony being that he will one day run one. However, taken out of context and with only

knowledge from *Solo: A Star Wars Story*, this line makes no sense. The same is true for C-3P0 in *The Phantom Menace* stating starships are dangerous and he never wants to be on one, which only has meaning when the audience already knows he will soon spend much of his existence on space ships. In these cases, they are details serving a separate story rather than the story at hand, which makes them unnecessary and even a bit confusing to the uninitiated.

Ultimately, these issues with prequels will never stop people from demanding them, so authors will continue to be quite happy to accommodate them. And prequels are definitely indications the worldbuilding is successful enough to inspire them in the first place. With that in mind, authors can fashion prequels so the world and story work hand in hand rather than the story serving the existing world. Audiences too can temper their expectations once they have understanding of what goes into additional stories set in the same world, prequels in particular.

And with all that in mind, we now leave the theoretical, overview realm of worldbuilding to examine the hard and social sciences that go into the building of successful worlds.

Part VI: Geography

“If you’re going to have a complicated story, you must work to a map; otherwise, you’ll never make a map of it afterwards.” —J. R. R. Tolkien

OVERVIEW: Before we delve into the next few sections breaking down the fields used in fantasy worldbuilding, I should note that these chapters are in no way meant to be the ultimate authority in creating or assessing worldbuilding. For fantasy fans, they are meant as broad overviews for a shared understanding of how they affect the realms of fantasy. With these chapters, fantasy fans should be able to dissect worlds and state what they found effective and why. For authors, however, these chapters are only the first steps on a lengthy journey of research, consideration, and extrapolation.

As Jemisin points out, “To world build well is to understand how our world works” (N. K. Jemisin's Master Class In World Building, 2018). And the real world we model our creations on is a complex place with many overlapping systems that affect each other while eschewing easy classification and prediction. For instance, sugar cane was introduced on the first plantations in Australia in 1862, yet the native grey-backed cane beetle threatened the single source of

sugar in Australia. So they imported the cane toad native to the Americas instead of using pesticides because of its success in Puerto Rico, Hawaii, and the Philippines. But no one considered that the beetles live atop the sugarcane or that the toads were terrible climbers, nor did they take into account how, without natural predators and with an abundance of other food sources, their population would explode from several hundred to hundreds of millions in under a hundred years. The environmental impact wrought by these toxic toads cannot be ignored as it displaces native species, and while some predators died out, others have altered their behavior to overcome this ungainly invasive species. The black kite, for instance, has adapted to attack the toad's underbelly to avoid the poison glands, whereas humans have been known to go into "toad rage" as they swerve their vehicles to squish as many as they can on the roads. Through no conscious choice of its own, this toad has radically altered the behavior of much more intelligent species. And all of this change and adaptation was because a few colonists wanted a local source of sugar several hundred years ago.

Due to this interconnection of systems, any change wrought creates many expected and unexpected changes to the whole, which we refer to as **reverberations and repercussions**. Fortunately, the

worlds we create are closed systems beholden to the whims of their creators, yet making changes that seem insignificant at the time can have major repercussions down the road. So while these chapters aim to summarize each category, they are not a replacement for research. To create a sense of credibility, the author must know the real-world details they draw inspiration from so that the output details still feel authentic once the fantasy conceit is applied. This is done by gaining expert knowledge of the conceits in question while maintaining a general level of credibility in the other fields so as not to disrupt the audience's immersive experience. So while these chapters cannot replace research, they will hopefully point authors in the right direction to mindfully apply their research. For the top-down planners, this means considering all the fantasy conceits at the onset. For the pantsers applying a bottom-up strategy, the goal is to uncover themes and patterns between their existing output details, match them to their proper conceit, and consider what other reverberations and repercussions might come to bear from those changes.

25. Terra De Facto's Long, Invisible Reach

When we talk about fantasy, we invoke the impossible, often comprised of secondary worlds bristling with dragons, fairies, magic, and gods. The lay of the land seems insignificant when compared

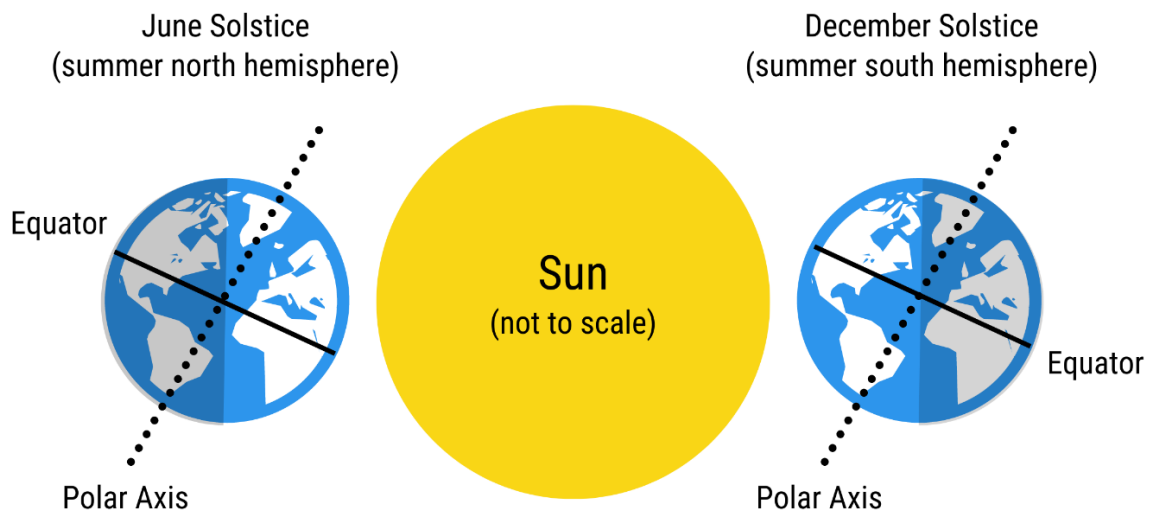
against these expansive ideas. So why then is geography first in the process when we consider the fantasy conceits? The reason we deal with geography first is because if the other fantasy conceits are the vibrant paints to splash across this new world, then the geography is the canvas. All the amazing hues need a space to be placed upon, and so it's best to know the canvas in question's size, orientation, and composition before applying brush to pigment.

But this idea of a blank canvas as only a medium on which to deliver the other fantasy conceits undercuts its importance. It also shows how ingrained *terra de facto* is, which consists of the belief that any detail that is not an output of a fantasy conceit must then abide by the laws and constraints of the real world. So while most fantasy authors will, in theory at least, create whole new worlds full of unfamiliar continents, they're really just rearranging the landscape of Earth.

Which is why most fantasy worlds have seasons that mirror our own.

Of our exemplars, we excuse Harry Potter from this niggle since it takes place on our own world, whereas Star Wars does not stay on a planet long enough to show if seasons exist, but judging by its

mono-climate planets, it appears not too much thought went into considering geography in the worldbuilding. *The Lord of the Rings* and *Airbender*, along with countless other fantasy worlds, have the familiar spring, summer, autumn, and winter progression. Only *A Song of Ice and Fire* uses the seasons as a fantasy conceit, which can last for years at a time, but even then, it still follows the same seasonal progression as Earth.



Yet seasons exist on Earth because of the 23.5-degree tilt on the planet's vertical axis from a massive asteroid collision billions of years ago. Because of this tilt, which remains steady due to the gravitational pull of the moon, for half the revolution cycle one hemisphere receives less direct sunlight and radiation, thus making winter, whereas the other hemisphere is closer and accounts for

summer's warmer temperatures. The equator stays relatively equidistant throughout, meaning nothing really changes temperature-wise during the seasons. And the farther we travel from the equator, be it north or south, the colder the climate gets, especially in winter. But were our axis not tilted, we would remain equidistant from the sun all year round, meaning there would be no variation to the temperatures of each of the zones. Earth would not resemble what we know now if this were the case, with plants and animals evolving quite differently to deal with the continual temperatures. Many plants, for instance, have adapted to sprout in the spring and disperse their seeds in the fall, whereas numerous animals change their coats or hibernate to deal with winter. It is argued that humans would only be able to survive along the warm equator without seasons, which would have dramatically diminished our access to raw materials as well as potential farmland from which our civilization is a bit of a byproduct.¹⁹

So, due to terra de facto, it is an underlying assumption that all fantasy worlds with seasons are on planets with a similar 23.5-degree tilt. What's more, they usually assume the same 24-hour day and 365.25-day year, which would mean these secondary worlds orbit their stars at approximately 150 million kilometers distance and spin at 1,600 kilometers an hour (which is, in and of itself, a unit of

measure that is dependent upon the specific conditions of Earth). In astronomy, this is known as the **Goldilocks zone** in that liquid water can be present because it is neither too hot nor too cold and therefore can support life as we know it. And, as any astronomer will tell you, planets falling within the Goldilocks Zone are infinitesimally rare, even in an endless universe. The mass of the planet would also need to correspond to Earth's own to account for the same gravity we're accustomed to. And that's not even accounting for that exact 23.5-degree tilt and single moon needed for similar seasons.

All these changes to the planet and how it would affect life are usually the domain of science fiction rather than fantasy, but I bring them up here to illustrate how ingrained terra de facto is since we unconsciously have all these expectations of our secondary worlds from the onset. And because this is the fantasy genre, we just handwave these questions away and assume all planetary and geographical similarities between Earth and the secondary world are 1:1. Yet something as seemingly minor as adding an additional moon would have drastic implications, from the seasons (or lack thereof) to the tides.

A Magical Society: Guide to Mapping by Joseph Browning is an incredible resource for building a world top-down and deals with

everything from assigning tectonic plates as to account for mountain ranges to figuring out climate zones and how they would affect prevailing wind patterns and therefore rainfall. Jemisin uses a very similar system and can rattle off weather patterns and oceanic conditions for a random smattering of continents in seconds during her worldbuilding courses. Fortunately for fantasy authors, most fantasy fans do not demand this level of macroworldbuilding and are more than happy to maintain a state of terra de facto. Because audiences approach worldbuilding from the inside-out, they need only the details pertaining to the current situation. Yet the illusion of completeness demands there be a sense of more outside of the immediate milieu, which is why the author must know what lies beyond their story's borders—or at least seem to. *The Worldbuilder's Handbook* by Richard Baker is another great resource when it comes to worldbuilding despite being centered around *Advanced Dungeons & Dragons*, and he identifies several strategies of world creation based upon the dungeon master's intentions. If the story is meant to only take place within a single village, then that is all that is created. In *The Kobold Guide to Worldbuilding*, Wolfgang Baur keeps creation simple and in the social realms of city-states, tribes, or nations, which we will discuss further in the section on cultures. And generally

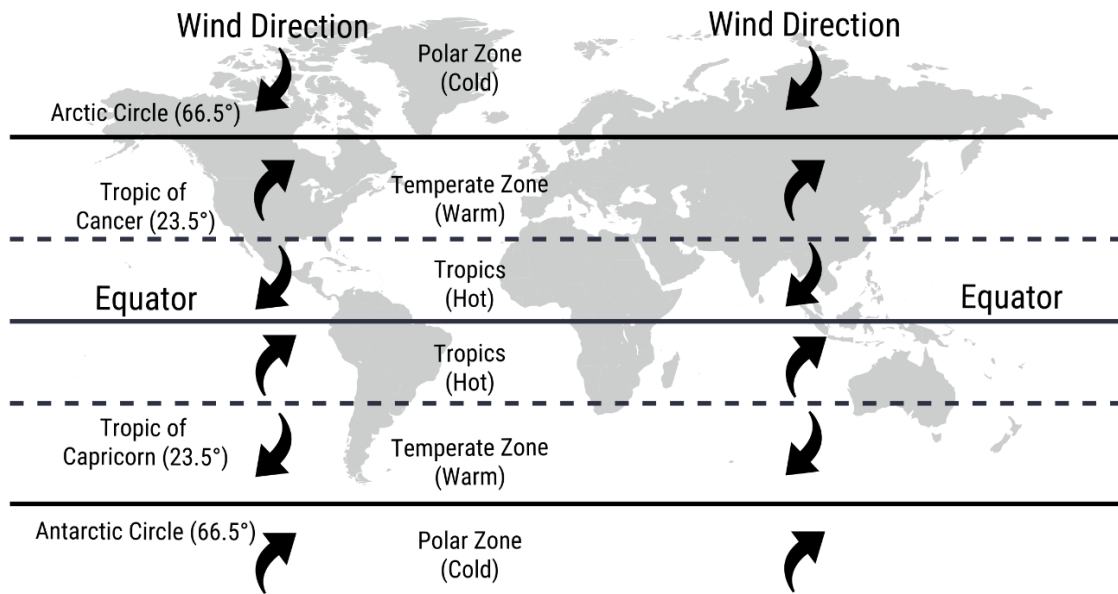
speaking, a single continent seems to be perfectly sufficient for most fantasy stories.

26. Climates, Biomes, and Terrain

Guns, Germs, and Steel is a seminal book every serious worldbuilder should read, as should any student of humanity, which might be why it won the Pulitzer Prize in 1998. In it, Jared Diamond draws from dozens of different disciplines to examine how inherent geographical advantages influenced us as a species. Technology in particular is often an outgrowth of the lay of the land, with whole cultures thriving based upon where their civilizations resided and which resources were available to them. And as we'll discuss in the next section on biology, we expect animals' adaptations to be a clear evolutionary outgrowth of their environment. The same holds true for the societies those creatures form, which is why basic geography provides a foundation for both.

Earth is divided into sections based upon their distance from the equator, which is mostly just an acknowledgement of the drop in temperature as one travels either north or south. These changes in temperature affect the weather patterns, which in turn affect what plants and animals that can survive there. **Climate** refers to the temperature and rainfall in these regions over approximately thirty

years and are classified as tropical (high temperature and high precipitation), dry (high temperature and low precipitation), temperate (mid-temperature and mid-precipitation), continental (in the center of large continents with warm summers and cold winters), and polar (low temperatures and low precipitation). **Biomes**, on the other hand, refer to the vegetation and animals that exist in the region. Although the marine biome is the largest, we will instead focus on the terrestrial biomes, which include forest (tropical, temperate, or boreal), grassland, desert, and tundra. Climate has a great effect on the plants, and therefore animals, that exist in it, although the biome has little reciprocal effect on the climate. Many of these are easy to align, such as deserts occurring in dry climates. However, the interior of Antarctica is considered a cold desert, whereas forests can occur in tropical, temperate, or continental climates in very different forms.



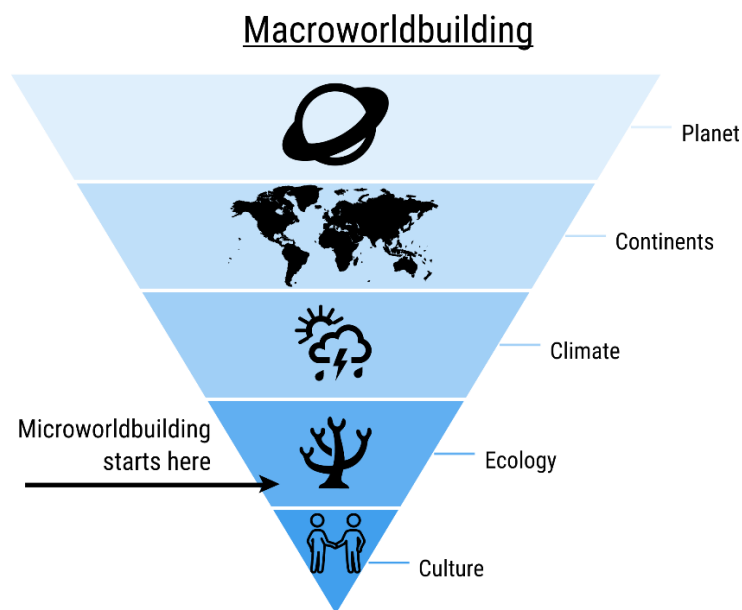
Finally, **terrain** is the vertical and horizontal proportions of land masses and includes how high it is above sea level and at what slope. It is the measure of mountains, hills, and plains, which in turn can affect the climate and weather patterns.²⁰ For instance, Death Valley is the driest location in North America because it not only is in the rain shadow of two mountain ranges, which prevent winds from bringing moisture to it, but is also below sea level, which contributes to dry conditions. Weather patterns are also dependent on seasonality, with wet seasons arriving consistently from year to year in some regions.

Terrain also has a major effect on water resources because streams often start in the mountains then join together in valleys to make rivers. Thus terrain, along with climate and biomes, have a

major effect on which animals, including humans, can survive in a given area. Dense jungles and rocky crags do not support horses, for instance, whereas desert environments mean little agriculture without irrigation. Meanwhile, as Diamond points out, plants can spread along the east-west latitudes due to the climate and temperatures being relatively constant. This means continents that are oriented east-west, such as Eurasia, have a greater likelihood of horticulture than north-south-oriented continents, such as North America, South America, and Africa. These continent orientation and subsequent biological reverberations have massive repercussions on the cultures that reside within them, to the extent that Malcom Gladwell posits in *Outliers* that East Asian societies do better on standardized math tests because they cultivated rice for centuries, which required daily tending rather than seasonal planting seen in Western cultures (Rice Paddies and Math Tests, 2008). These differences in horticulture based on plant biomes eventually filtered through to the different worldviews and educational systems of each culture with some surprising outcomes down the line.

Changes in planet dimensions, climate, and biomes are more the domain of science fiction, whereas fantasy maintains terra de facto and plays mostly with the terrain. There are many possible

reasons for this, but this does lead to a bit of divergence between the two genres. Those that come from the science-fiction background, like Jemisin and Card, see less of a distinction between the two, but I would argue that science-fiction authors put most of their worldbuilding energy into geography, biology, technology, and culture, leaving the other categories for fantasy authors to explore.²¹ To that effect, Jemisin divides her worldbuilding into **macroworldbuilding** and **microworldbuilding** (N. K. Jemisin Speaks at WIRED25)..



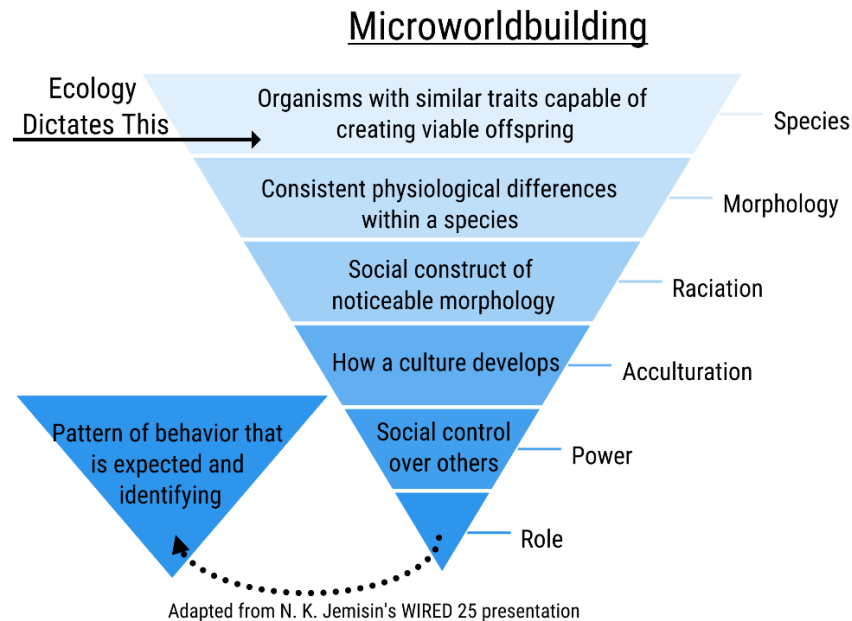
Adapted from N. K. Jemisin's WIRED 25 presentation

The top three levels of macroworldbuilding, it should be noted, deals exclusively with geography, whereas the second to last with

biology, and the final component being microworldbuilding, which corresponds to our category of culture. This is by no means a knock against science-fiction strategies, only an observation that these differences exist between the two genres. Science fiction, broadly speaking, enjoys making big changes to the world itself, whereas fantasy prefers to keep most aspects of the world and species constant so as to highlight other changes.

There's a decades-long argument in the field of science fiction if a seabound race would be capable of harnessing technology since they would obviously never be able to master fire, and while that argument can get a bit esoteric at times, it still acknowledges the tremendous effect geography has on biology, technology, and culture. This is because, consciously or not, we understand that people and cultures are shaped by the terrain. The Riders of Rohan make sense on the grasslands on which they could feed and ride their horses, whereas dwarves' fixation of mineral wealth reflects their living in the mountains. The horseback way of life for the Rohirrim would make no more sense in the mountains than the dwarves domesticating horses to work their underground mines. *A Song of Ice and Fire* also uses climate and terrain to explain the cultures of their continents. The Ironborn of the Iron Islands, for instance, live on rocky islands with

fish as the only natural resource. Without the ability to grow crops of their own, they turned to reeving their more prosperous neighbors, to the point that their house words are: “We do not sow.”



Not all created creatures and cultures need to be an obvious outgrowth of their terrains, biomes, and climates—this is the fantasy genre, after all. Impossible terrains and climates that defy the laws of nature can easily exist within a created world, as can portals that connect distant continents, nether realms, and elemental dimensions. Yet these additions and their reverberations should be taken into account since they would affect the biology, physics, metaphysics, technology, and cultures of this new world in drastic ways. Even Tolkien’s example of a nominal change in the form of a green sun would have massive implications for the world that cannot easily be

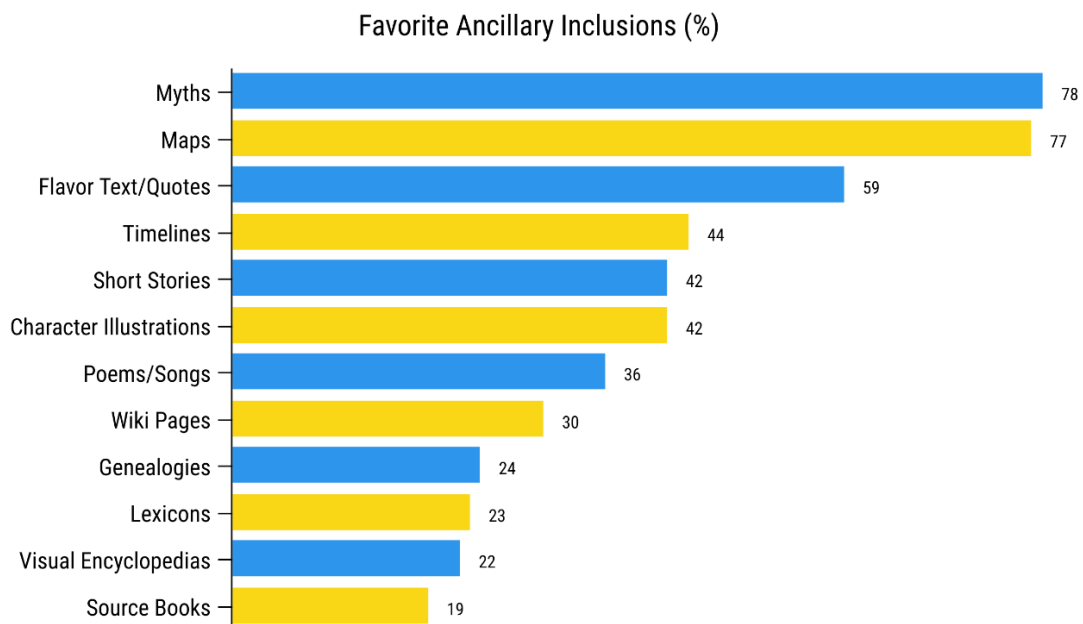
handwaved away, which is why we consider geography first when examining fantasy conceits. Nine times out of ten there will be no major shift to the geography, and terra de facto will reign supreme, with the author really just making superficial changes. And there is certainly no harm in ignoring geography as a fantasy conceit since it allows the created world to remain familiar to audiences and frees the author up to apply their creativity to their other conceits.

27. Maps

Although authors are split on the inclusion of maps in their worlds, audiences are wholeheartedly for them. Wolf states that maps “provide a concrete image of a world, and fill in many of the gaps not covered in the story; gaps between locations, at the world’s edges, and places not otherwise mentioned or visited by the characters. As such, they are one of the most basic devices used to provide structure to an imaginary world” (Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation, p. 155). Maps are the quintessential info dump in that they impart the lay of the land and positioning of major locations rather than having the audience deductively gather the information themselves. But since it’s a visual info dump, maps get a pass by audiences since they occur at the beginning of books. In so doing, the author sets the stage for the

upcoming story and allows the audience's eyes to wander the setting before beginning the story.

So why then would authors not include maps when audiences enjoy them so much?



A lot of author ambivalence comes from the constraints maps put upon the creator. When depending upon the written word alone, locations are left rather ambiguous, which allows for more spatial leeway and fuzzy travel times. Without a visual reckoning that the distance between King's Landing to Winterfell is twice that of King's Landing to Lannisport, the audience would not care in the least when it takes the same amount of time to travel to both of them. But once those visual representations are set upon the page, the author is now

beholden to those consistent locations, distances, and terrain. Many complained in the final season of *Game of Thrones* how quickly Daenerys was able to arrive north of the Wall for her rescue, and the internet devolved into heated debates over dragon wingspans, the running speed of blacksmiths, and wind patterns. This would all have been moot if the maps did not feature so prominently in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, to the point they are the highlight of the highly imaginative introductory credits to the show. Yet audiences now expect maps with fantasy series, which may be a carryover from Tolkien's detailed map of Middle Earth.

The constraints of including a map need not be considered a negative, however. Sanderson's second law states that "limitations > power," meaning that audiences prefer abilities with clear limits that the characters must creatively think around rather than straight up displays of power. He was speaking as to magic systems, but his rule holds true for worldbuilding as well. In terms of maps, their constraints due to set locations forces the author to think creatively so as to consistently abide by the laws of their own creation. Much like the argument that the fantasy genre contains no stakes because anything is possible, a world without a map is unbound and limitless in its possibility. This in turn removes one set of stakes from the

characters as a result. This is why fantasy worldbuilders spend so much time establishing their world and its rules at the onset: without clear rules, the stakes dissipate. The same holds true to a lesser extent to those worlds without maps in terms of travel times and distances. Saying something is far away can only conjure so much mental attention, whereas the picture of the distance clearly shown on a map is worth a thousand words.

How much detail a map should contain is another thorny issue. I still remember the first fantasy map I came across in *The Sword of Shannara* at the age of eight and how enthralled I was of this new world. But even at eight, I was disappointed in seeing only the locations encountered on the characters' journeys. This left huge gaps of white space, which made the map feel empty and sterile. This decision makes perfect parsimonious sense in that, much like worldbuilding, each mark on the map needs to serve a purpose. Too many extraneous details muddle the map and make it difficult to read. Too many details can also oversaturate the audience such that none of the details stick. Threading the needle between just the bare minimum and too much detail is difficult, as are learning the rules of geography and cartography such that the landmasses abide by the laws of nature. Tolkien himself bemoaned making his map to serve

the drama rather than reality in terms of geography, although he made the right decision if the effectiveness of his world is taken into account. Fortunately, there is an abundance of information out there for fantasy mapmakers, but here are a few rules of thumb:

- 70% of Earth is ocean, which contains 97% of the world's water supply
- Only 1% of Earth's water is fresh, with another 2–3% contained in glaciers
- Water flows downhill from mountains to lakes or oceans
- Lakes usually only have one river draining into them
- No river on Earth flows from coast to coast
- Rivers do not split; they join. The exception is deltas, where rivers split as they join large bodies of water.
- Rivers never loop
- Rivers rarely flow through deserts, and if they do, they began far away
- Multiple small lakes can string together like beads on a river
- Approximately 25% of Earth's surface is mountains
- Mountains very rarely occur alone
- Mountains exist in ranges due to plate tectonics and volcanoes
- Rain typically falls on one side of a mountain range depending upon the wind patterns, leaving the other side barren
- Continents clump together
- Supercontinents have very arid interiors
- Plains account for 50% of Earth's surface
- Forests account for 31% of Earth's surface at present, but this was much greater in the past
- Islands are usually close to a continent rather than scattered out in the sea
- Settlements usually form near access to water or within 80 km of the shore
- Port cities are usually slightly inland from the coast

- Settlements clump near natural resources (especially water)
- Settlements require a source of food, typically 1.5 acres per person
- Settlements often require defenses, be they natural formations or manmade
- Roads link larger settlements and usually follow the path of least resistance
- National boundaries often form near natural boundaries

28. Measurements

We on Earth generally abide by a 365.25-days-a-year calendar that is broken into twelve months consisting of, on average, approximately thirty days. This is a solar cycle in that each day is one rotation on our 23.5-degree axis of the planet, and one year is the number of days it takes to make a full journey around the sun. Yet we also mark the passage of time in terms of the seasons and lunar cycles, which consists of a full wax and wane of the moon. The lunar cycle does not align with our solar cycle, which happens to have won out despite the arbitrariness of days in a month. Like the twelve numbers on a clock, the twelve months is said to make sense since it can be divided by four to account for the four seasons, whereas a clock or calendar with a base-ten system could only be divided in half or into fifths.

Yet there were not always twelve months in the Roman calendar, which later evolved into the Gregorian calendar we know

today. At one point, it was only ten months long, which means October, November, and December make sense when you look at their Latin roots. These months were either thirty or thirty-one days long, making 304 days of the year, with the remaining fifty or so days considered “winter.” But due to the inexact months, the seasons soon no longer aligned, and they began adding months to put the calendar back on seasonal track. Weeks also were not a standard set of days and varied from seven to nine days in length. The Aztecs, on the other hand, broke their weeks into thirteen days, but their year into eighteen months consisting of twenty days, leading to a grand total of 360 “named” days in the year, with an additional five “nameless” days added at the end that were considered unlucky.

We’re examining Earth calendars to demonstrate how ultimately arbitrary they are. Even here in the real world, we as a species cannot agree on how to divvy up our year, and it makes little sense individuals on created worlds would either. That said, we would expect them to still divide up the day into night and day, which due to terra de facto, we expect to be approximately twenty-four hours long. Yet how this singular unit of measurement is multiplied to divide up the year itself could be considered arbitrary in the constructed world as well. Much like altering the tilt and rotation of the world to alter the

pattern of the seasons, the added worldbuilding value should be considered before creating a new calendar. The vast majority of the planet Earth now uses the Gregorian calendar, so if nothing else, the year in the new world would be expected to be twelve months long to account for the four seasons; however, the question to rename these months or use their Gregorian names remains. In a sense, this could be considered a **smeerp** in that if a month occurs at the beginning of summer, why not call it June or July? Why create a whole new confusing word?

For one thing, it adds a sense of authenticity to the world by making it new and yet familiar. And it really makes no sense that a secondary world would use the same terms as our world, especially when you consider the Latin root words of many of them. Yet something as seemingly simple as renaming the months of the year can lead an author down a **smeerp hole**, which is when one seemingly minor change contributes to a whole slew of other changes that add little to the audience experience as a whole. In terms of renaming the months of the calendar, this might lead the author to realize their inhabitants would also most likely have different names for their ages in the same way we divide history into BC and AD. In turn, this might make the worldbuilder create their own system of

measuring time, which would incorporate multiple epochs and how they were decided for the world, leading to a very confusing dating system in their series.²² Deciding to remove hidden place names from the text can also take one down a smearp hole, as Terry Pratchett pointed out when he said, “The builder of fresh worlds may start out carefully avoiding Alsatian dogs and Toledo steel, but if he or she has any sense will one day look up from the keyboard and utter the words ‘What the hell?’” As with all worldbuilding, the changes to the analogue cultures need to serve a purpose in the story, and so the author must balance wanting to make the world feel more credibly alien to the audience with keeping it familiar enough to ensure that consuming it does not become a slog.

Renaming common items also raises the question of translation and point of view in that the author is usually considered a translator for the story. We don’t expect two elves conversing in their own native tongue to be speaking English, yet we do not object in the slightest when their discussion is recounted to us, the audience, in English. The same holds true for any other characters and the narrator since all information is meant for a modern audience. So while new names for the months might give a sense of credibility, it is not entirely necessary. Tolkien himself used the terms May and June in *The*

Hobbit and *The Lord of the Rings*, and he is still considered one of the greatest worldbuilders to this day.

Until the metric system, arbitrariness held sway in our real-life measures of distance as well as time. Without a standard unit, people coped with generally agreed-upon measures, such as using their hands to measure the height of horses or the length of an arm for a yard. Many of the ancient civilizations we draw our inspiration from had conflicting and arbitrary systems for measuring distance, some of which still hold sway in the United States.

Again, the author can consider themselves a translator of the material and therefore use modern measurements in their works to describe distances. That said, some fans have mentioned they find the metric system anachronistic in particular since it is so modern. This makes the British Imperial System ironically less anachronistic in fantasy settings since it is so anachronistic in the real world. But the British Imperial System is not the only system authors can choose from. Some authors opt to keep distances ambiguous and undefined. Like a lack of a map, by not giving a specific means by which to define the world, the author has allowed themselves more leeway by depending on the audience's imagination. This is the entertainer's dilemma in action yet again, forcing balance between the new against

the familiar, the precise against the vague, and the complete against the complex. In balancing all these considerations, the author must decide to what degree their created world mirrors our own, and what effects that will have upon the world, and ultimately the story itself.

29. Set Pieces

Over the years, **set pieces** have come to mean any scene or set of scenes in a film that are so essential that they cannot be skipped or edited out without ruining the experience. As with most definitions, set pieces came originally from theater as the actual physical setting in which the scenes took place. These were integral for the plays, which evolved somewhat when they made the transition to film. In this new medium, it meant scenes that were elaborately planned and executed such that they would draw an audience for the spectacle itself. These were the centerpiece moments to the film such as a shootout on a moving train or the spaceship crashing to Earth and cracking in two. These are the iconic moments such as Luke and Vader battling it out on the catwalks in Cloud City, Gandalf arriving to rescue Helm's Deep at the dawn of the third day, or the Weasleys spiriting Harry to Hogwarts in their parents' flying car.

The term has since migrated away from film and into most storytelling mediums to mean an iconic scene that exemplifies the

story even though it might not actually be necessary to the story itself. These are the moments that get audiences talking and create word-of-mouth buzz. And because these scenes are so important to the piece, the rule of thumb has become “important scenes need to happen at interesting spots.”

Star Wars, *The Lord of the Rings*, Harry Potter, and *Airbender* are replete with examples of iconic set pieces, such that I could likely spend the rest of this chapter listing them. In each of them, the detail and grandeur of the location reflects the importance of the scene such that it is impossible to mentally disassociate the two. The team falling into the garbage shoot in Star Wars, Gandalf battling the Balrog in Moria, the battle for Hogwarts, or Aang facing Fire Lord Ozai at Wulong Forest are all standouts where the locations are easily as enthralling as the action itself, and authors should take advantage of this by ensuring their worldbuilding scenery matches the significance of their scenes. What's more, the set pieces can enhance the important scenes by increasing the difficulty and dilemma for the characters as well as adding a thematic or symbolic context. This is why many set pieces occur at either high-up points or at chasms. This not only increases the physical danger of the scenes but symbolically shows how the characters have climbed to new

heights or teeter at the edge of an emotional abyss. Set pieces can occur in any genre, but fantasy and science fiction have the advantage of being able to cultivate their set pieces to perfectly reflect or juxtapose the important scenes.

It is worth noting the distinction between settings and set pieces, the former being any location within the story, whereas set pieces are locations that are integrally tied to the scenes. A setting can certainly add to the worldbuilding by inspiring a sense of wonder or demonstrating depth and breadth to the world as a whole without it being utilized as a set piece. *A Song of Ice and Fire* does this to a great extent with its settings. The Wall, Winterfell, the Eyrie, Harrenhal, and Dragonstone are wonderfully designed and iconic in their own right, but they act more as settings than set pieces. This is because the locations are seldom used to enhance the scenes as they play out. An argument can be made for the Eyrie working as a set piece as Bronn fights Ser Vardis in Tyrion's trial by combat since the existence of the yawning Moon Door is used to add tension to the scene, although it acts more as an introduction of Bronn and his clever character by having him forego armor and resorting to underhanded tactics to win. It should also be noted that while the Moon Door does add tension to the scene, in the books it is a statue

Bronn uses to defeat his enemy. Compare this to the more visual medium of the show where Bronn utilizes the Moon Door, which should demonstrate how the show writers tried to incorporate the setting more than Martin did in the books. Some might argue that the battle for the Wall against the Wildlings could count as a set piece, but this is tenuous since so little of the setting is used to add to the drama of the scenes. In the books, the Wildlings attack from the south and are eventually defeated, whereas the main force from the north is repelled after a brief moment when the giant Mag breaks through the gate but is ultimately overcome. In this, the Wall acts exactly as it is meant to: a huge fortification that the attackers cannot scale, which lessens the suspense rather than enhances it. It is much more of a set piece in the televised version of this battle with the addition of “the scythe” device used to cut down the climbing Wildlings, but again, little of the setting is used to enhance the tension since this addition only increases the defenders’ chances. Iconic scenes from the show such as the Battle of the Bastards, with its focus on gore and grit, occur at nameless locations that do not incorporate any of the well-established settings from the series.

This focus on setting rather than set pieces can best be summed up in the Fall of Winterfell. Although Winterfell is an iconic

setting with an established layout including the courtyard, the godswood, and catacombs, these locations are not utilized until the aftermath of the attack in the books. This was most likely a conscious decision on Martin's part as he reacted to the usual heroic tropes and subverted the set piece by destroying one of the most important locations through trickery and without a heroic battle. Compare this to the show's second battle for Winterfell against the Night King. Most of the complaints about strategy, such as sending the Dothraki out on a pointless charge, are also implicit complaints about not utilizing the setting to enhance the conflict in the scenes. Winterfell as it was depicted could have been any generic castle introduced just that episode rather than the symbolic representation of the North and last bastion for humanity.

CONCLUSION: Geography as it is related to the fantasy genre is an opportunity to create settings to enhance important scenes. Altering the geography allows for massive changes to the world itself, to such an extent most authors opt to ignore these options in favor of terra de facto. Geography still holds a lot of sway in fantasy worldbuilding, though, with creatures and cultures reflecting the locations they inhabit. How the author treats the space of their world also shines

through in the use of maps and measurement systems, which both offer their own unique strengths and weaknesses.

Part VII: Biology

“Children know perfectly well that unicorns aren't real, but they also know that books about unicorns, if they are good books, are true books.” —Ursula K. Le Guin

OVERVIEW: In high school, we learned that there is a general hierarchy to the hard sciences, with physics quantifying the components and processes of the universe, chemistry then demonstrating how those building blocks fit together, then biology as the culmination of those physical components acting within those laws of nature. This meant biology was considered subordinate to the other two since it depended upon the laws of physics and chemistry, neither of which depended upon biology. But in the fantasy realm, biology takes primacy over physics, into which chemistry is rolled into as almost an afterthought. This is because fantasy stories revolve around living things rather than forces of nature. As such, this section will focus on the basics of biology, firstly exploring if fantasy worldbuilding is really beholden to these rules, particularly evolution. We will then see how plants and animals can be used within the fantasy world and how convergent evolution gives worldbuilders a lot of flexibility when designing their creatures. Then we will return to the smerp to see how renaming creatures can serve the story and how domestication has served humankind. Finally, we study the difference between species and races and see how treating species as races has led to accusations of racism within the genre.

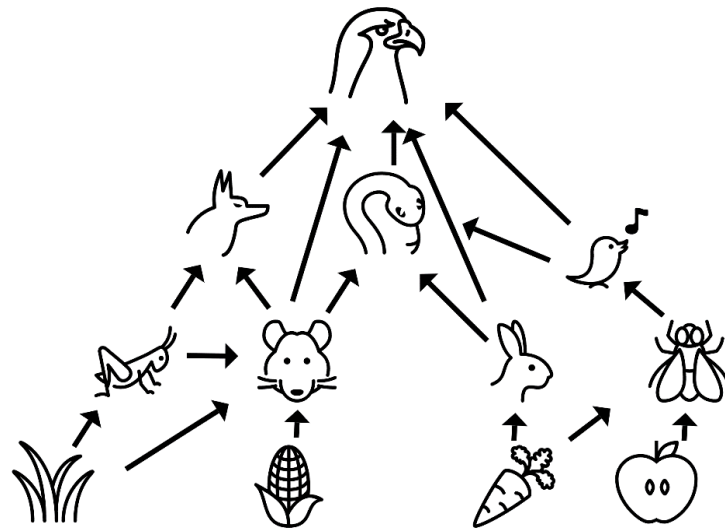
30. Biology Basics

The first question worldbuilders must ask themselves is if they expect their biological creations to adhere to the laws of nature, and if so, how closely will they cleave. Because we dwell within the realm of the impossible, it is possible to throw the laws of nature out the window without raising an eyebrow. Many mythological creatures that act as inspiration for fantasy bestiaries fall into this category in that they are simply two existing creatures merged together. Pegasus' combination of horse and eagle, the centaurs' melding of horse and human, and Chimera's combination of lion, goat, and snake are easy examples. These creatures immediately defy the laws of nature and raise all sorts of issues about their viability. For instance, an average horse weighs 450 kilos, which means aspect ratio would require Pegasus' wings to be between nine and thirteen meters long to provide adequate lift. To put that in perspective, an average horse is only 2.4 meters long, meaning its wingspan would be over three to four times its body length. But in nature, birds with longer wings, like the condor or albatross, use thermals rather than flapping their wings to take off. They do this usually from either great heights or after a long running start, both of which would be difficult for an animal with wings so out of proportion. This is not even taking into account the possibility of hollow bones like birds have for Pegasus, which then might be far too fragile to support a human rider. The digestive tract of centaurs also poses feasibility issues in that horses are non-ruminant herbivores, allowing them to consume grass despite having a simple stomach like humans. They need to consume six to nine kilograms of food per day,

which would be a physical impossibility for something with a human-sized head and jaws (Tarr, 2017).²³

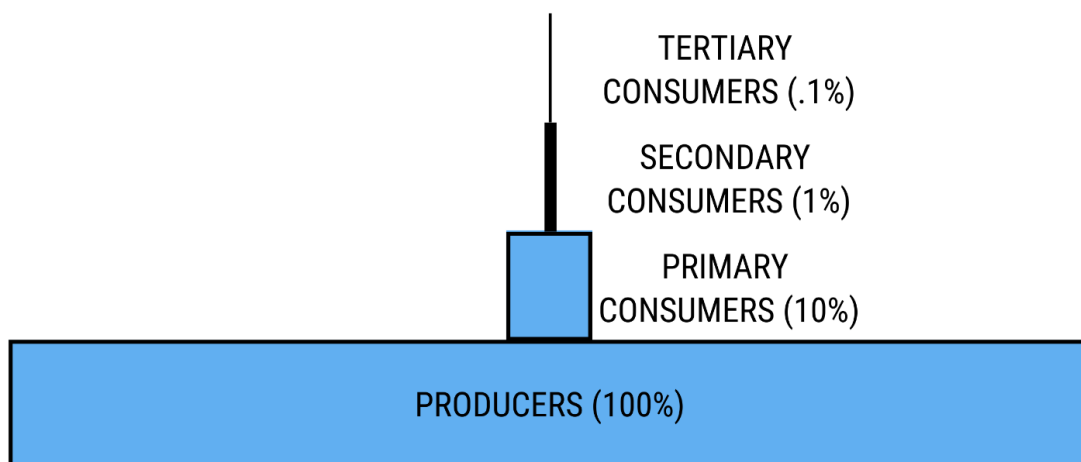
Yet Pegasus and centaurs are mainstays of the fantasy genre and no one bats an eye at their biological impossibility. If fantastical beasts are one of the fantasy conceits, then this allows a lot of leeway for the author to create and audiences to consume. However, the idea of evolution has permeated us to the point that we expect our fantastical creatures to make sense in the same way we expect meaning from all fantasy conceits. We demand that our fantasy creatures exist for a reason within the created world.

In the real world, creatures evolve to fit a niche within their **habitat**, which is the ecosystem or ecological community it exists in. This holds true for fantasy creatures as well, even if it's unconscious on the audience's part: A woolly mammoth would not be out of place in the tundra, whereas it would seem all sorts of odd in a desert. As such, fantasy fans expect there to be some correlation between fantasy beasts and their real-world analogues when it comes to being shaped by their climates and reflecting their adaptations.



Basic Food Web

Real-world analogues also exist within food webs, wherein they act as either predator or prey. The predators are carnivores or omnivores, whereas the prey can be carnivores, omnivore, or (most likely) herbivores, which kick off the cascade of calorie consumption by feeding off plants, which derive their sustenance from the sun.



PYRAMID OF ENERGY

Yet it should be noted that this flow of calories from plants to predators loses nearly 90% with each consumption, which is why predators seldom feed on other predators. It also explains why the **apex predator**—e.g., the creature at the top of the chain that no other animals feed upon—is alone. A niche cannot support two species vying for the same position, which is why one always displaces the other.

We recognize this to a certain extent in fantasy worlds, with the largest creatures at the top of the fantasy food chain, often dragons, being the rarest. The environment simply could not support a large number of apex predators ravaging the land for long. Dragons also demonstrate how much latitude mythological creatures get when it comes to breaking the laws of nature. Approximately two-thirds of fantasy fans expect dragons to have wings, which would presume also the ability to fly. But, as we discussed with Pegasus, this would require either a wingspan several times its length, or perhaps hollow bones, even though hollow bones are hallmarks of birds rather than reptiles, which 89% of fantasy fans classify the dragon as. The ability to breathe fire also contradicts the cold-blooded nature of reptiles.

Fortunately for fantasy fans and authors, dragons are so ingrained in the genre that they can easily be handwaved away. They are magical beings unbowed by biology, and everyone easily accepts that. This grandfathered handwave acceptance holds true for many other mythological creatures such as fairies, changelings, and unicorns. Demons, angels, and ghosts also fall under this umbrella of biological *carte blanche*, and will be discussed further

in the chapter of metaphysics since they make no attempt to adhere to the laws of nature.

Other unconscious assumptions gleaned from biology due to terra de facto include two sexes and sexual dimorphism. Although asexual and hermaphroditic creatures exist on Earth, we're mostly familiar with animals that are divided into male and female. Each sex then produces one-half of the chromosomes necessary to create new life via sexual reproduction. Although it is not always clearly delineated, many species exhibit a distinction between the male and females due to primary and secondary sexual characteristics. **Primary sexual characteristics** consist of the sex organs used in reproduction, whereas the **secondary sexual characteristics** are distinguishing traits like human males' facial hair or females' breasts. In animals, secondary characteristics can occur in terms of size, and while males are usually larger in the human species, this is not the case with many spiders, birds, and amphibians. In many bird species, the male is far more colorful while the female is significantly less so.

With sexual dimorphism in mind, it should be noted that there is massive variance within species due to sexual reproduction, allowing for the mixing of genes. These genes pass on certain features that are selected for by the environment and by the sheer fact the creature survived long enough to mate and pass on their genes. It should be noted too that while we share the same genetic makeup as other species, creatures can only successfully breed within their own species. While magic can make this a bit murkier, generally

speaking, the offspring of two different species that do manage to interbreed are considered a **hybrid** and are sterile. The mule is the best example of this in that it takes the best aspects of the horse and donkey. However, no mule is created by breeding two mules together; they must always spring from one horse parent and one donkey parent and never pass their own unique genes along due to having an odd number of chromosomes.

One of the key components of evolution is **selection**, which can either be artificial, wherein humans control the passing of traits through intentional breeding practices, or natural, where the environment selects which traits are passed along. This is a cornerstone of biology, but it should be noted that selection can be both positive and negative. In positive selection, an advantageous trait is selected for, whereas the trait is removed from the population due to being disadvantageous in negative selection. However, these two factors can be applied internally and externally for the species. External is the standard environmental or artificial factors acting upon the species. Internal is known as sexual selection and involves the traits the species desires when picking mates, such as female peacocks picking mates with more eye spots on their tailfeathers. Unlike external selection, which usually directly affects the survival of the species, internal selection does not, as demonstrated by the peacocks with more eyes on their tail feathers, which has no bearing on their survival in the least. Sometimes the internal and external factors can be at odds, such as when internal factors select for males with long wingspans, which eventually extend to the point the males can no

longer fly. Then the negative external factors rear their head and remove these now flightless birds from the gene pool. When creating fantasy creatures that adhere to the natural world, authors should take into consideration what selection factors are acting upon them, and if they are internal, external, and where they might converge to account for the abilities and physical characteristics of the creature. Where these creatures exist within the food web should also play a part, along with what other animals it preys upon or prey upon it.

This brief overview of biology is not meant to intimidate or be even remotely exhaustive. It is simply here to bring attention to some assumptions we have about biology and see how they will play out when altered due to fantasy conceits. Although causing less reverberations than massive geographic changes to the world, biological changes can still have major repercussions on the world from even minor changes. For example, it's understood that we humans utilize a base-ten mathematical system because of our ten fingers. A bipedal creature with only eight fingers, as elves are often depicted, would therefore most likely use a base-eight system. So, with that in mind, we will continue our skim into the world of biology and how it pertains to fantasy worldbuilding.

31. Flora and Fauna

The vast majority of life on Earth begins with plants, which compose the first step in nearly all food webs. Even the fearsome lion that only uses plants as cover when stalking its prey ultimately depends on plants to feed itself. And

the vast majority of terrestrial plants depend on sunlight, water, and soil. Yet handwavium means that any one of these three major components can be altered, with some plants perhaps floating in the air instead of the ground or others that convert moonlight to sustenance. There is massive variance within real-world plants, with Venus flytraps, bromeliads, and corpse flowers being but a few interesting examples, which means the possibilities are endless when creating fantasy flora. Yet many of the plants populating fantasy worlds reflect our own world without any modification. Oaks, willows, and pines pop up endlessly in fantasy stories and demonstrate yet again that the Earth default is sufficient due to terra de facto.

Unlike on Earth, where plants are used mainly for nourishment and their fibers, in fantasy worlds they're often used for their effects, which frequently break down into either poisons or enhancements. Poisons should require little exploration, with hemlock and nightshade being prime examples in the real world. Enhancements also take their inspiration from nature in that many plants produce benefits to those who consume them, with willow bark as a form of aspirin and rosy periwinkle used in fighting cancer and Hodgkin's disease. Fantasy worlds often diverge in either the degree or effect on the patient, to the point that wounds that should realistically take weeks to heal are patched up instantly. Other enhancements include magic potions rendered from rare and fantastical flora specimens that fall into the realm of magic since their effects have no scientific plausibility, such as flight or telepathy.

Fauna is the fancy term for the animal life present in a particular place and time. Like all other living things, animals respond to stimuli, but unlike plants, we expect some sort of intelligence from the animals that occur within fantasy stories. 90% of animal life on Earth is invertebrate and bears no practical form of intelligence, yet these creatures seldom factor in the conception of animal life to anyone except biologists. To respond to stimuli, most animals have some sort of sense organs, many of which outstrip our human abilities, as with bees being able to see in the ultraviolet spectrum, bats and dolphins able to echolocate, and basset hounds with a sense of smell forty times stronger than our own. But as with plants, we regard animal life in how it affects the plot, characters, and world itself. This means most animals are relegated to food sources, transportation, predators, pets, and weapons of war. This necessitates species large enough to interact with the characters and story. If terra de facto is invoked, the species present will follow the same niches as on Earth and in the same basic numbers. As on Earth, we expect them to reflect their habitats, although they can be altered significantly through fantasy conceits.

32. Smeerps, Convergent Evolution, and Domestication

We again invoke Blish's definition of smearps as unnecessarily renamed creatures in speculative settings. It is telling that Blish uses an animal as his example, mainly because of how prevalent and important they are in fantasy stories. Since most inspirational analogue cultures are drawn from our preindustrial past, this means animals are still the prime source of

transportation in fantasy settings. The horse is particularly ubiquitous, which makes sense in that it has guided humans' development for the last 6,000 years since domestication. Not only did it rule the battlefield for four thousand years, but it allowed for greater diffusion of the human species as well as horticulture in its role as beast of burden. And few authors would be unwise enough to call a horse by any other name. But is it okay to place another fantastical animal in the niche the horse currently occupies? What about the dog or ox?

While there are surely consumers who will object, this substitution is by no means a smerp because the newly created creature takes the place of the familiar rather than painting over it with a new name. As we stated back in chapter seventeen, fantasy conceits usually take the forms of exsecting, unchanged, divergent, or additive, with this being a case of divergent in that another creature takes the place of the horse, dog, or ox. In these cases, they are simply fantasy conceits applied to analogue creatures.

That these divergent beasts might occupy the same niche without much change to the fantastical world is surprisingly scientifically sound. **Convergent evolution** is when two or more species develop analogous features to deal with their environment. Flight is an example in that birds, insects, and bats all developed wings despite being vastly different species. That fish, dolphins, and the dinosaur ichthyosaurus all strongly resemble each other is another example, with all three developing a similar streamlined shape to deal with their similar niches. The Eurasian mouflon (ancestor of

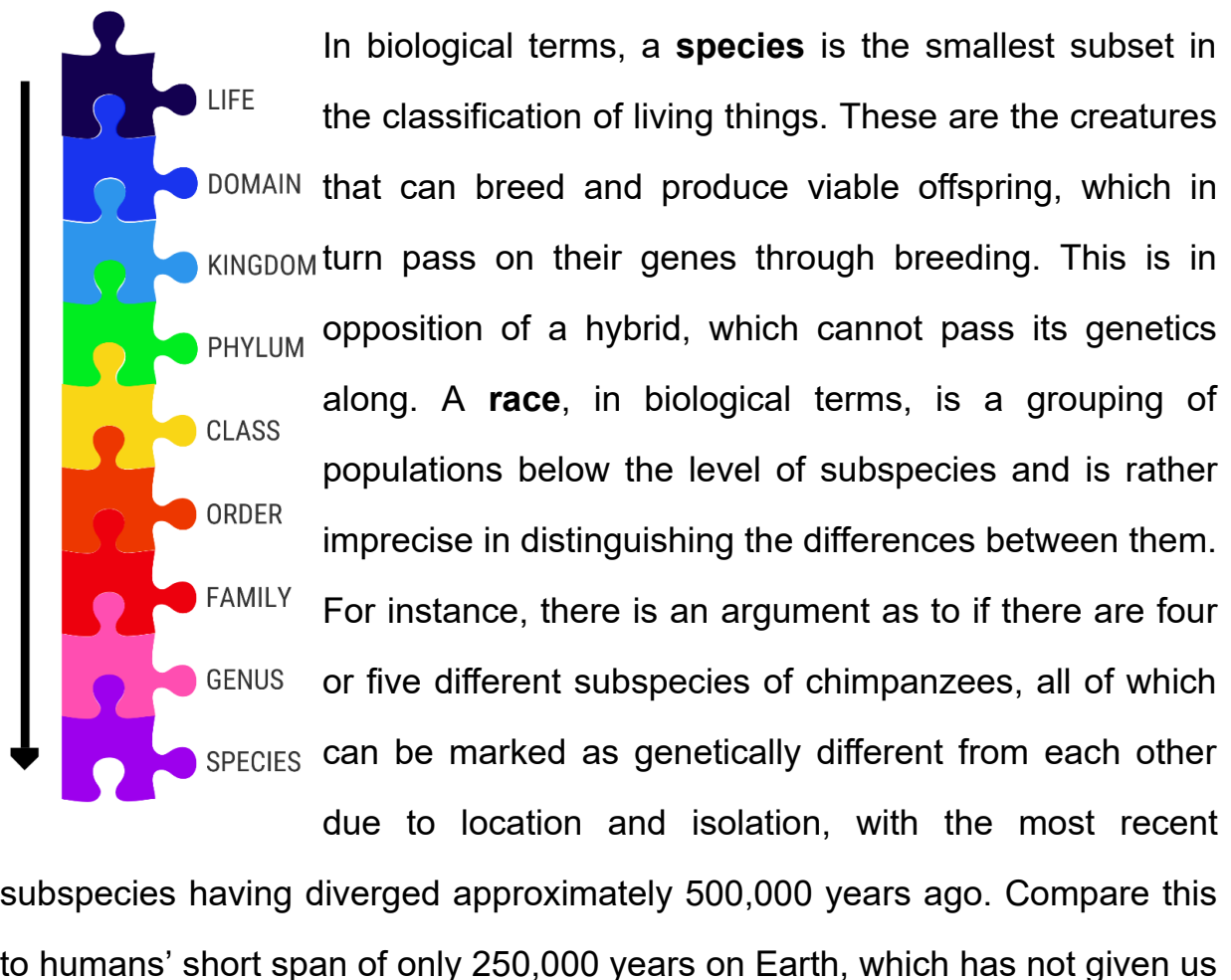
domesticated sheep) and the bighorn sheep of North America both look nominally similar and occupy the same niche in their respective continents, yet they are genetically different enough that one could be domesticated by humans and the other still roams free.

While on the subject of domestication, it should be pointed out how invaluable it is to human development. Without domesticated plants and animals, it is unlikely we would have ever developed past subsistence farming, which in turn would have never allowed for the population boom and specialization in roles that allowed for human civilizations as we know them today. *Guns, Germs, and Steel* goes into great detail on this subject, demonstrating how the availability of thirteen out of the fourteen candidate large species for domestication existed in Eurasia, which allowed for a significant advantage over cultures from the other continents. Domesticated animals on Earth share the same six characteristics: (a) a plant-based diet, (b) a rapid growth rate, (c) ability to breed in captivity, (d) manageable disposition, (e) resistance to panic, and (f) herds with a social structure, and it would be safe to assume that fantasy animals filling the same niche would exhibit many of the same traits.

Yet just because an animal is not domesticated does not mean humans will not use it. Elephants are notoriously difficult to breed in captivity, which is why they are taken from the wild at a young age to be trained. **Taming**, in contrast to domestication, means a relative tolerance to human presence and can apply to any sort of fantasy creature dreamed up. The Wargs in *The Lord*

of the *Rings* are great examples in that they barely tolerate their orc riders, opposed to the domesticated Rohan horses. The pharaohs of Egypt kept cheetahs as hunting companions but never could domesticate them due to the large space necessary for their mating rituals. So although a fantasy creature may not be 100% domesticated and fit exactly into the niche of the animal analogue, it can still feel credible so long as the author does the research to provide the specific details necessary to make the fantasy conceits appear authentic.

33. Species vs. Races



enough time to even evolve into different subspecies. So, biologically speaking, humans all belong to the same species, meaning we can all interbreed, meaning we are all the same race.

The word *race*, used in the social sense, is an unofficial taxonomy based upon shared physical characteristics for an identity or social group. Humans, being the visual creatures we are, base these distinctions around things such as skin tone, eye morphology, and hair type. Jemisin refers to this as “raciation” in her microworldbuilding process in that they are social constructs built upon superficial biologically insignificant yet noticeable morphologies. **Ethnicity** generally refers to the region and cultural heritage an individual either currently hails or descended from. This means ethnicity and race, both social constructs, can both be at odds and fluid. Not long ago, people of Irish descent were not considered “white” when racially categorized upon immigration to the United States. The same holds true for Italians, Greeks, Poles, and Slavs as well. “White,” which would ostensibly appear to be tied to skin color, was instead a mark of social standing. To reiterate again, biologically speaking, all humans are the same species, which is the dominant species on the planet.

But this is often not the case in fantasy realms, with other famous examples from *The Lord of the Rings* alone including: elves, dwarves, orcs, goblins, trolls, giants, ents, and hobbits. We refer to these fantasy creatures as races, which would mean they should be able to interbreed if using the biological definition. *Species* would be a more precise word if interbreeding is

not meant to be possible, as would most likely be the case between an ent and hobbit pairing. These two species most likely evolved from very different ancestors and therefore do not share the same genetic makeup necessary for creating fully viable offspring. But the word *race* is synonymous with the fantasy genre, due in part to Tolkien's use of the term and its prevalence in the gaming industry to mean any bipedal creature, although the core races are usually composed of humans, elves, dwarves, orcs, and goblins. Tolkien also said that Aragorn had elf blood in him, and hobbits are "relatives of ours: far nearer to us than Elves, or even than Dwarves" (p. 2). In Harry Potter Hagrid is half-giant, and Osha mentions that she believes Hodor has some giant blood in him in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. With this crossing of genetics between what we term different races in fantasy so common, authors and audiences must decide if this is meant to adhere to biological plausibility or if it can be handwaved away.

Because, as any fantasy fan can attest, as soon as a new race appears, there will be someone out there who wants to have sex with it. So the question is if these two races are in fact different species, if they can produce offspring in the form of hybrids, or if they can produce viable offspring. This question becomes more difficult when clearly non-human creatures such as dragons, demons, and fairies come into the mix, for while elves, dwarves, and hobbits are humanoid and at least loosely bound to the laws of nature, these clearly supernatural creatures are not. However the author or consumer lands on this question will determine how credible they find the biological

underpinnings of the world but are usually not deal-breakers for audiences. We have come to expect all sorts of strange offspring in fantasy, at which point the next question emerges: Should these offspring inherit any special abilities due to their unique heritage? This is not such an outlandish idea since humans do pass along many genetic traits to our offspring. Physical anthropologists study human adaptation and have observed that humans have overcome climate extremes in a number of ways. People who live in hot conditions tend to be thin and have little body fat so as to aid in dispersing heat. But differences exist between those who reside in humid climates, which are usually taller and have darker skin, than those who exist in arid conditions, which are not nearly as tall. Those who live in colder climates tend to be rounder with shorter limbs, fat pads over their sinuses, and a more pronounced layer of body fat. Most people who travel above 2,500 meters without pressurization frequently suffer from altitude sickness, but not the 2% of the human population whose respiration and circulatory systems have adapted to overcome it. The seafaring Bajua people of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines often spend upwards of five hours underwater per day and have developed enlarged spleens to aid in oxygen retention for deep dives. Compared to the general populous, these adaptations seem like advantages that can cross the line into attributes.

34. Racial Attributes and Original Sin

Racial attributes are the assumption that any one fantasy race shares not only certain abilities such as flight or the capacity to speak with animals but

also certain demeanors, temperaments, and biases. They are given a set of defining traits that all within the species are meant to share. In the prologue of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, Tolkien immediately states that hobbits' height is "between two and four feet," and although they "are inclined to be fat and do not hurry unnecessarily, they are nonetheless nimble and deft in their movements" (p. 1). He also states they "love peace and quiet and good tilled earth," and "do not and did not understand or like machines more complicated than a forge-bellows, a water-mill, or a hand-loom" (p. 1). These descriptions incorporate not only their physical distinctions but their mannerisms, behaviors, biases, and inclinations as well. In the film version of *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, goblins are described by Hagrid as "clever as they come, goblins, but not the most friendly of beasts." And although described by the narrator as "to the waist, a man, with red hair and beard, but below that was a horse's gleaming chestnut body with a long, reddish tail" (*Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, p. 261), Hagrid characterizes centaurs thusly: "Never... try an' get a straight answer out of a centaur. Ruddy stargazers. Not interested in anythin' closer'n the moon" (p. 263). In both cases, the information involved in these fantasy creatures is imparted, either directly by the narrator in Tolkien's case or softly via a character with Rowling. And in both cases, the information is taken as truth since it comes from such trustworthy sources.

Many modern fantasy fans object to these depictions of racial attributes, mostly because it mires the fantasy races in tropes from which it is difficult to

escape. Over the years, we have come to expect that elves are thin, beardless, and haughty. Dwarves, on the other end of the spectrum, are stocky, hirsute, and cantankerous. These collection of tropes leave little leeway for reinterpretation of the fantasy races, which stagnates the genre when fans see the same thing again and again. Yet in nature, as we discussed earlier, there is massive variation within any living species, meaning not every fantasy creature needs to strictly adhere to these narrowly defined attributes.

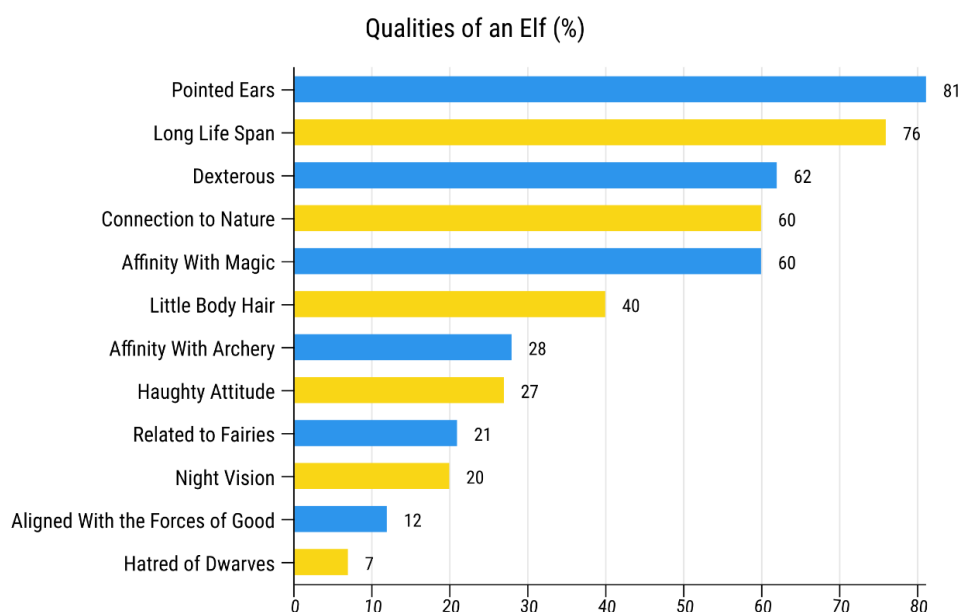
Another reason for objection is the generalization of races within fantasy bears a striking similarity to racism in the real world. Humans have often demonized and dehumanized those they disagree with, with both scientists and preachers in the antebellum United States claiming that Black slaves could not feel pain the same way that whites could because they were an inferior subspecies. Since race is a social construction, it's important to note who creates and justifies the social distinctions. It certainly does not help that most "evil" and "monstrous" races in the fantasy genre have dark skin. The drow elves in *Dungeons & Dragons* are particularly interesting in that they are considered the evil inverse of regular elves, who align themselves with the forces of good. These dark-skinned drow live underground in the Underdark, where they never see the light of day. Yet every species on Earth that lives without the sun develops albinism, which makes the drow's dark pigmentation particularly troubling. Using white to symbolize good while black symbolizes evil is not unique to fantasy, yet it takes on a totally different interpretation

when it is applied to the color of a species' skin as a visual shorthand for how the entire fantasy race behaves and should be regarded.

Not all attributes are considered negative, and many role-players will stick to a particular fantasy race for the abilities it imparts. I personally played as elves exclusively for years for their dexterity bonus. And role-playing games are a prime suspect for where the idea of racial attributes entered the fantasy mainstream. Although their origins do date back before Tolkien and his treatises on the race of hobbits, role-playing games went a long way in codifying these attributes. Before the birth of *Dungeons & Dragons* in 1974, there was no definitive guide to supernatural creatures. As we discussed, elves were considered more akin to fairies rather than the thin haughty humanoids they are depicted as today. At this point, fantasy creatures could be considered a type of soft worldbuilding in that no one source explained their origins, abilities, or even descriptions.

As enjoyable as soft worldbuilding can be, as seen in the fact myths of these fantastical creatures have existed for centuries, it does not serve a game at all. Because role-playing games require a shared framework of rules, everything from the combat system to the statistics of seducing a non-player character need to be spelled out in advance. This certainly includes the characters themselves, which are the building blocks of the entire adventure. As such, Gary Gygax, Dave Arneson, and the other developers needed a hard system for the fantasy races. They initially cribbed quite a bit from Tolkien (to the extent they were sued and had to change the names of several

creatures) but also drew inspiration from mythology and their own imaginations. And to these creatures and fantasy races they gave specific numbers for attributes and abilities. Although *Dungeons & Dragons* is by no means the authority on either fantastical creatures or magic, it still started the process of calcifying the fantasy races and applying a hard system to them in the worldbuilding.



Although the origin of racial attributes may come as a surprise, it may be more surprising that we still cling to them to the degree we do over forty years later. In the same way terra de facto shapes fantasy geography, tropes decide how fantasy races appear in storytelling. However, although many authors are content to recycle the same tropey understanding of orc, dwarves, and elves again and again, audiences show some openness to reinterpretation in my surveys. Although the vast majority agreed that elves needed pointy ears (81%), long life spans (76%), being dexterous (62%), as well as an affinity

with nature (60%) and magic (60%), other major trope traits such as an affinity with archery (28%), haughty attitude (27%), alignment with the forces of good (12%), and hatred of dwarves (7%) barely registered. It seems, then, that audiences are ready for tropes to be played with, giving authors more autonomy to make these tropes their own or break away entirely.

CONCLUSION: When it comes to fantasy conceits applied to biology, audiences must decide how closely they expect their fantasy creatures to adhere to the laws of nature. For authors, this question must be addressed consistently throughout, with all potential reverberations being considered for any changes wrought. Because even omissions and easy decisions will be interpreted by consumers as the laws of nature by which the whole created world will be judged. As such, a little extra time spent developing fantasy flora and fauna and examining how their analogues in the real world are interpreted can pay big dividends down the line.

Part VIII: Physics (Magic!)

“Truth is ever to be found in simplicity, and not in the multiplicity and confusion of things.” —Sir Isaac Newton

OVERVIEW: In this section, we will peel back the veil and ponder the mysteries of magic. In so doing, we will first come up with a shared definition of what constitutes magic. Then we will draw heavily from Brandon Sanderson and his three laws of magic, first looking at the hard versus soft dichotomy, how limitations are more useful to a magic system than powers, and how magic should be built upon existing systems rather than creating whole new ones. To this we will add how the inhabitants in the worlds view the magic and if it is on the rise or decline.

And while it may seem somewhat counterintuitive to finally address magic two-thirds of the way through a book about fantasy worldbuilding, it probably seems even stranger to label the chapter “Physics.” But this is magic at its core: the breaking of the laws of physics. Science fiction too breaks these laws, but does so in a more measured way. Few books, with the exceptions of A. K. Dewdney’s *The Planiverse* and Alan Lightman’s *Einstein’s Dreams*, deal with the effects of actually altering the laws of physics as we know them, *The*

Planiverse by imagining a world composed entirely of two dimensions, whereas *Einstein's Dreams* features a collection of worlds where the laws of physics behave differently than our own. Science fiction usually breaks laws like the speed of light through either handwaving or unobtainium in that either the audience is not meant to think about it at all, or it is explained away through technology. Fantasy employs the same strategy to fracture multiple laws of nature but calls it "magic," leading Arthur C. Clarke to wryly note that "Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic." There is a great deal of merit to this observation, but since magic is the bread and butter of fantasy, it behooves us to dig a bit deeper.

Consciously or not, Clarke broaches the idea that all magic is addressed through the mindset of science in that we expect the results to be consistent, predictable, and repeatable in the same way the scientific method is. Yet this is not always the case in how magic is presented, meaning that he's right in that advanced technology can seem like magic, but magic does not always resemble technology. However, we are still caught in that paradigm of understanding because we wish to comprehend and categorize the impossible in a consistent and rational way. But to do so we should

have a shared definition, which proves nearly as difficult as coming up with a shared definition of art. Magic as an idea has existed throughout human history and is considered one of the cultural universals we'll discuss in the chapter on cultural worldviews. Magic appears in anthropology as **magical thinking**, which is the belief we can affect change in the world around us through our thoughts and behaviors. This is considered an irrational belief in psychology and psychiatry, but it manifests itself in a myriad of different ways in every culture. With so many nuanced views out there, I've decided to employ the abstraction process we used on vampires, dragons, and elves to reduce it to its core components and nothing more. With any luck, this will provide a skeleton strong enough to support any additions other authors will later add. As such, **magic** is change wrought by unnatural means.

This definition may seem a little too minimalistic, but there's a lot packed in there. First, there's the aspect of change. Change can be overt, which is the traditional conception of a magic spell such as a fireball issuing from the practitioner and exploding upon hitting an unlucky enemy. In this case, the magic user created a clear change in the environment by fashioning a ball of flames seemingly out of

nowhere. Overt change is therefore anything that creates a physical effect on the environment.

Change can also be subtle, usually employed to enhance senses or personal knowledge. Psionics or precognition are great examples in this regard in that they open the individual to new information they are otherwise incapable of perceiving. Like overt magic, subtle magic effects create change, but while overt effects change the world around the magic user, subtle effects change the user or other individuals in unseen ways.

It should be noted that overt and subtle changes are not parallel to hard and soft magics, which are more of a discussion on how the audience understands the magic system in question. The hard and soft paradigm is attributed to Brandon Sanderson as a reinterpretation of hard and soft science fiction, but its roots go deeper into traditional understandings of magic in culture. To outsiders, magicians performed soft magic in that the observer did not understand the esoteric mechanisms through which the magic user affects their supposed change upon the world. Yet to those initiated into the magical order, the rules and understanding are hard in that they are explicitly cause-and-effect practices in which to affect

their change, because at its core, magic is about change. When wielded by individuals, it's either change upon their surroundings, others, or themselves. When in a wilder state, such that no one directly commands it, it is a feature of the environment, such as the land of fairy, which is always swathed in dusk. This environment is a physical deviation from the usual order of the universe as we know it.

Which leads us back to the second qualification of magic: this change is wrought by unnatural means. It should be noted that "unnatural" in this sense refers to the audience, who understands that it breaks the laws of nature of the real world. Those within the created world might think these magical effects are quite ordinary since they are a part of the natural order of said world. The Force in Star Wars is an easy example in that even races technologically advanced enough to be star-faring don't balk at a living energy that binds them all together. *Airbender* is another example in that the altering of the environment through bending is so socially ingrained that they divide into nations grouped around their specific powers. In the first few minutes of the opening episode, Katara softly imparts how bending is different than magic in that it is natural. Although magic is never glimpsed in the subsequent series, Katara clearly has a concept of magic and can recognize that it is unnatural in her

world, whereas bending is clearly normal. Harry Potter sort flips this understanding on its head in that in the Wizarding world magic is quite natural to them despite it being spectacular to muggles. Yet the mundane muggle world in turn is quite unnatural to the wizards, to the point they cannot easily blend in, and Ron is enamored by a simple fifty pence piece.

There are dozens of other systems for understanding magic, all highlighting different aspects to divide them into categories. Many of these focus on the cost or source of power versus the method of gaining the power, examples being the *Dungeons & Dragons* system, where wizards forget their spells upon casting them. This is in comparison to the **magic point** or **mana** systems favored by a lot of other games where the casters have a set amount of energy to spend on their effects. Like health points in role-playing and video games, the ability to use magic is considered a finite resource that depletes depending on the specific cost of the magical act. Other systems invoke spirits, demons, or deities to affect the unnatural change on their behalf. Here it should be noted that these different methods are considered magical systems in that they explain the ins and outs of how the magic works rather than a method of generally defining magic across the genre as I did at the beginning of this

chapter. All magics seek to create change, and the systems in which they do their work are invented by the author; therefore, the first question is: How much does the author make the audience aware of their systems?

Brandon Sanderson is best known for his Cosmere universe as well as finishing off *The Wheel of Time* after Robert Jordan's death in 2007. In addition to being a prolific writer in multiple speculative genres, Sanderson is also very forthcoming about his writing process. His lectures at Brigham Young University, where he teaches creative writing, are available online, along with a popular fantasy and science-fiction writing podcast with Dan Wells, Mary Robinette Kowal, and Howard Taylor called *Writing Excuses*. The podcast alone has more than a dozen seasons, with the 14th devoted entirely to worldbuilding, and I highly recommend everyone avail themselves to these free resources. But Sanderson came to the forefront of magic system worldbuilding almost accidentally with three blog posts on the nature of magic systems. These blogs were spaced years apart and are rather free flowing in that he was still figuring out his laws as he wrote them. And by "laws," Sanderson is adamant that they are more rules of thumb and patterns he's observed over the years. They are also meant to be specifically for writers in that their

goal is to add conflict and stakes to the story. As such, these laws for magic systems are meant to enhance the inherent drama rather than be an exacting and sterile method for dissecting magic systems. What makes his laws so beloved is their utility in that they are application-based rather than being entirely hypothetical. They are widely used because they work. So, without further ado, let us examine Sanderson's three laws (with a hidden fourth thrown in at the end).

35. Hard and Soft Magic

“An author's ability to solve conflict with magic is DIRECTLY PROPORTIONAL to how well the reader understands said magic” (Sanderson's First Law, 2007).

This first law is the fulcrum on which soft versus hard-magic systems pivots, and in it, Sanderson states that the softer the system the less satisfying it will be when that soft system solves the conflict in the story. This is the Gandalf conundrum in that if Gandalf simply uses his magic to save the hobbits each time, it would smack of **deus ex machina**. Deus ex machina translates to “god from the machine” and was a popular dramatic device back in ancient Greek theater wherein actors depicting the gods would descend on a

mechanical device to resolve the story in the finale.²⁴ Even at the time, there were detractors, Aristotle being but one to recognize how it robs the characters of any agency and causes the audience to wonder why the gods just don't intervene in the beginning and save everyone all this hassle.

Soft-magic systems have many advantages, which Timothy Hickson digs into in *On Writing and Worldbuilding: Volume 1*. He identifies six strengths of soft-magic systems, including (a) the ability to increase tension due to the unknown elements; (b) increasing the sense of mystery by having the magic system occur outside the main character points of view; (c) ensuring characters do not understand their own magical gifts, thus forcing them to rely upon cleverness and other abilities; (d) making the magical effects unpredictable such that they raise new issues when solving plot points; (e) including multiple magic systems for variety; and (f) increasing the sense of aesthetic style that comes with the esoteric mystery of the soft system. Like Sanderson, who Hickson draws from in this chapter, each of these arguments are aimed at increasing tension within the story world for maximum effect.

However, the modern reactionary trend is toward hard magic, where the ins and outs of the system are much better understood by audiences. This can best be seen in the progression fantasy subgenre, which depends on the characters exploiting their understanding of the magic system. Every little detail of how the magic works and how it can be utilized is shared with both the characters and the audience. As such, summoning a magical bridge to cross a chasm while being pursued by demons is much more dramatically satisfying when the audience understands how difficult this spell is to accomplish, why it is so difficult, and what the character risks to achieve it due to a hard system. Compare this to if Gandalf simply summoned a bridge to allow the fellowship to escape the Balrog. This would have undercut the drama because the audience would not have been aware of this ability until it was used to escape the current crisis at hand.

This tilt towards hard-magic systems can again be attributed to *Dungeons & Dragons* in that they were the first to popularize a hard-magic system. Based upon the Jack Vance system from *Dying Earth*, the original *Dungeons & Dragons* magic system required mages to memorize their spells once a day, which they would then lose upon casting or the expiration of twenty-four hours. Spell

components, plus verbal and somatic motions, filled out the system, which was the basis for subsequent role-playing games as well as the nascent video-game industry. Just like with the codification of the races due to *Dungeons & Dragons*, this hard system was a necessity for gameplay since the gamers required a shared framework through which the game could flow. This obliged spells with specific parameters as to abilities and capabilities, which slowly trickled through to the mainstream understanding of magic. This made magic more of a science than soft magic in that the spells were reliable and duplicatable, both requirements in scientific experiments.

It should be noted, though, that while the general trend has been towards harder magics over the years, most of our fantasy worldbuilder exemplars employ soft-magic systems. Sanderson points out how successful both *The Lord of the Rings* and *A Song of Ice and Fire* are despite no one really understanding how the magics work or why. This reveals the real strength of soft magics, and that is in the sense of wonder they inspire at seeing the impossible. Because the soft magics are never understood, they carry with them a greater sense of mystery and anticipation in that anything is possible. “Wonder” was one of the most frequently used terms brought up when authors and audiences discuss their favorite

aspects of worldbuilding and is one of the reasons they seek out the genre. The Force in Star Wars is equally nebulous and wonder-inducing, with the film audiences having to extrapolate their abilities rather than knowing exactly what a Jedi can and can't do. Certain abilities, like their sudden bursts of speed or capacity to jump inhuman distances, aren't seen until the prequels and then are never seen again in the films. This, coupled with the genre shift in midichlorians as the explanation for the Force, diminishes the strength of the worldbuilding and demonstrates the truth to Sanderson's first law: if audiences don't know the limits of the abilities, it appears the author relies upon them as a crutch to move the story along. With injudicious use, soft magic becomes an example of handwaving the conflicts away instead of dealing with them directly.

Airbender is the only real exemplar where the magic approaches a hard system. The hows, limitations, and methods are laid out to Aang throughout the series, who acts as a proxy for the audience to learn the rules via a soft impart. Harry Potter, on the other hand, sits in a sort of middle ground: Spells such as *accio* or curses and magical effects such as Polyjuice potion and Patronus are spelled out in a hard sense. Yet a full understanding of where their magic comes from, how it can be harnessed, and its full limits

are never really addressed. This leaves some magical objects, such as Hermione's Time Turner, as the most powerful item in an early story, which is then forgotten about later in the series as a problem-solving tool. Some spells, such as Patronus, evolve from a very specific means to defeat dementors to a message relaying device which seems to serve the story rather than remain consistent throughout.

Magic systems run the gamut between the hard and soft extremes, with authors picking and choosing which to use for which situation. For instance, while Gandalf's magic is soft and therefore unable to satisfactorily solve dramatic questions in the story, the One Ring's abilities are quite hard in that both the character and audience know the abilities and limitations of it. This makes it satisfying to see Frodo use it to escape Boromir at Amon Hen or Sam to rescue Frodo from the spider-demon Shelob since we know what they risk and gain by putting the ring on.

36. Limitations > Power

"Limitations > Power. The limitations of a magic system are more interesting than its capabilities. What the magic can't do is more interesting than what it can" (Sanderson's Second Law, 2012).

Since much of what makes fantasy compelling stems from the wish fulfillment of acquiring power, this law seems somewhat counterintuitive. Yet while we all desire magical powers to a certain extent, unlimited power not only corrupts but ultimately becomes quite boring. Although he was the first and most powerful superhero, Superman headlines significantly fewer comic titles than the non-superpowered Batman. This is partially because Superman is so powerful. Part of his character's hook is that he's basically a god living among humans, and while that is inherently interesting, it's not entirely compelling because there are few entities that can stand up to Superman in a straight fight. He cannot reasonably be defeated without trickery or some convenient kryptonite. Compare this to Batman, who although outfitted with all sorts of outlandish gadgets, is still just a man and must obey the laws of physics. A single well-placed punch can flatten him, which is where much of the thrill in reading a Batman comic comes from: seeing how Batman uses his human intellect and inventions to overcome enemies far more powerful than himself.

Limitations can come in many forms, from specific parameters to the scope of power, to rather arbitrary rules like that the powers can only be used during daylight or in a specific emotional state.

Sanderson breaks these limitations into two main categories: weaknesses and costs. **Weaknesses**, as the name implies, can diminish the power or the person using it. Vampires and their avoidance to the sun falls into this category, as does Superman and his kryptonite, or the kids in Peter Pan needing to think happy thoughts to fly. This is the most basic form in that the character literally loses their abilities under specific situations. Weaknesses can also manifest in those the powers do not work on, as in *The Phantom Menace* when Watto offhandedly mentions that Jedi mind tricks do not work on Toydarians. In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Melisandre's magic is dependent on her Red God, whom she must appeal to for her magic to work. In *Airbender*, the fire benders lose their powers during an eclipse, just as the water benders do if there is no moon.

Cost means the character must risk or sacrifice something for the magic to take effect. Frodo's ring is a great example of a built-in cost in that, while he might become invisible to most, Sauron and his minions instantly know where he is. This means Frodo must weigh the immediate need for donning the ring with the long-term risk of alerting his enemies of his location. The temptation and spiritual degradation of the ring is no small cost, either. Often the cost will

manifest in the form of mental and physical exhaustion, as with Aang passing out after exiting the Avatar state, as well as the knowledge if he dies in the state then there will be no reincarnation and all the Avatars will die with him. Melisandre also shows the cost of her magic in that she must sacrifice something living for her magic to take effect.

Some authors, such as Card, argue that all magic must require a cost, even if the cost is simply an investment of time and dedication to learn the magic in the first place. Harry Potter walks this line in that it seems that so long as a magically adept student sacrifices their time to learn a spell, all things are possible. Study and the willpower to do the deed seem to be the only costs in the Wizarding world. The same holds true for *Airbender* in that other than the exhaustion from physically pushing oneself through the acrobatic maneuvers, the magical individual does not pay a cost to perform their abilities. Jedi too seem bound only by their training and affinity with the Force when it comes to using their abilities, although *The Last Jedi* and *The Rise of Skywalker* blurs this with Luke and Leia succumbing to exhaustion after projecting themselves. Yet all three of these examples demonstrate that you can have a very

successful magic system without an immediate cost to the magic user.

However, all three also demonstrate a level of moral cost in their systems. The dark side of the Force is the easiest example in that it promises great power in exchange for dedicating oneself to evil. Harry's discussion with Slughorn about creating horcruxes also demonstrates a moral cost in the repugnant acts necessary to split one's soul in two. In *Airbender*, the act of blood bending, or using water bending to control the fluids in another living thing, is considered abhorrent to the point it threatens the practitioner's mental health. So even if the cost is not immediate or immediately obvious, there's a good chance it's there.

37. Expand Instead of Add

"Expand on what you have already, before you add something new... A brilliant magic system for a book is less often one with a thousand different powers and abilities – and is more often a magic system with relatively few powers that the author has considered in depth" (Sanderson's Third Law of Magic, 2013).

In this case, Sanderson argues for seeing how abilities can be accommodated within an already existing fantasy conceit rather than

creating a whole new one. This is an argument for parsimony in that the magics should be interconnected and structured rather than free-flowing and additive. Again, Superman springs to mind: his powers do not fall under an easy organization. His initial powers were super strength, speed, incredible leaping, invulnerability, and enhanced senses. But then the Silver Age of Comics came around and Superman's powers quickly became bizarre, with authors gifting him with flight, heat vision, freezing breath, a perfect memory, super intelligence, ventriloquism, and hypnosis. This evolution of Superman's powers is a great example of breaking all three of Sanderson's laws in that Superman's powers were often created simply to get him in and out of tight situations, thus diminishing the satisfaction of using those powers (rule one), adding to his already long list of abilities rather than limiting them (rule two), and providing no clear way to categorize them (rule three). They effectively kept spackling on one new ability after another until they obscured what made the character compelling in the first place. Simply put, there was no rhyme or reason to these powers.

Compare this to Spider-Man, who has a wide array of powers as well: super strength, agility, ability to adhere to objects, a sixth sense, and (in some iterations) the ability to exude webs. Taken

individually, these powers would seem disparate and almost as random as Superman's powers. But they all fall under the umbrella of being based on a spider's abilities. They thematically group together, which makes them more palatable and easier to mentally digest. All new powers, such as the ability to organically shoot webs, which was added in the Sam Rami film version of the character at the suggestion of James Cameron, are not out of place since they fall under the canopy of the spider concept. Once set up against Superman's haphazard development of powers, it's easy to see which character obeys Sanderson's third law.²⁵

Sanderson uses three concepts within this law: extrapolation, interconnectedness, and streamlining. **Extrapolation** means that any fantasy conceit should be followed to its natural conclusion. This dovetails back to the concept of completeness in that all aspects of the fantasy conceit should be explored—or at least give the illusion that the author has done so. The conceits are the hooks to catch audience members, after all, and once they're enthralled, they'll deduce all sorts of theories for these fantasy conceits, their range of powers, and their limitations. As such, the author needs to stay at least one step ahead of audiences by examining all the reverberations and repercussions that each fantasy conceit could

cause. The example Sanderson uses is a magic system capable of creating free food. With this resource suddenly available, it most likely would affect the economy in that there would be no need for farmers. This in turn might affect the environment as these tracts of land are used for something else. What else would these people do if suddenly freed from the burden of producing food? Would they live lives of leisure, turn to the arts, or perhaps be conscripted to fight in the wars waged between the mages as a means of population control?

A Song of Ice and Fire does a great job of extrapolating the effects of its fantasy conceits. That dragons once existed and dominated the battlefields completely changed the medieval power dynamic. The harshness of a world with unpredictable seasons also comes into play in their society and worldviews. The White Walkers being able to transform their victims into zombie slaves is also used to its utmost in their attempt to usher in another ice age. *Airbender* explores their conceits to an even greater degree, especially in the Earth Kingdom of Omashu, with its intricate earthen delivery shoots, and the Northern Water Tribe capital city being constructed entirely out of ice. Bending affects everyday life for all the characters in

creative and credible ways, with each tribe differing from the other based upon their particular abilities.

The world of Harry Potter, on the other hand, is not nearly as robust in its extrapolation. Many of the mundane tasks we take for granted, like postal delivery, are handled by magical means in their world, but they do not appear to be followed through to their logical conclusion upon close examination. Hermione's Time-Turner used for extra class time in *The Prisoner of Azkaban*, for instance, is an incredibly powerful device that, if used judiciously and immediately, could solve many of the characters' problems. Coupled with the ability to teleport anywhere, this could do anything, including saving Harry's parents to preventing any number of escapes from Azkaban moments after the fact. Rowling seems to have noticed the overwhelming power of the devices, which were under strict control of the Ministry of Magic, and then wrote them out of the series by putting them on an endless time loop during the Battle of the Department of Mysteries in *Order of the Phoenix*. That Harry uses three wands to increase his power in Deathly Hallows yet that no other wizard ever thinks to do the same or that Voldemort does not compel all of his followers to swear Unbreakable Vows also raises a few extrapolation questions. In 2019, the official Wizarding world

tweet explaining that Hogwarts did not always have bathrooms, with the witches and wizards simply relieving themselves wherever they were and “vanished the evidence,” caused quite a stir as muggles everywhere tried to figure out the bathroom customs of the characters. Each of these worldbuilding details does not fully stand up to close scrutiny. At least not to adults, which is why it should be remembered that these books were intended for children. In these cases, the worldbuilding clearly served the story towards its targeted demographic.

Interconnection deals with how well the magic system ties together. This harkens back into the Superman/Spider-Man dichotomy in which one set of powers are thematically unified, whereas another's are not. When addressing not just magic systems but the worldbuilding as a whole, this mirrors the prime-mover conceit: there is one major conceit that many, if not all, the other conceits can draw their origins from. This is consolidation in that the magics work together rather than at cross purposes. *Airbender* again is a great example because the four elemental powers all fall under the prime mover of the Avatar, who is the only person who can wield all four at once. The spirit world too falls under the auspices of the *Avatar* in that they are the bridge between the two worlds. Only the

third conceit of the exaggerated animals does not obviously fall under this prime mover.²⁶ *The Lord of the Rings*, in contrast, has far less interconnection due to its high-concept and existence of numerous disparate fantasy conceits.

Streamlining is another argument for parsimoniousness, which can be summed up in my father's old adage of, "Play with the toys you have instead of buying more." The idea is to fully utilize the conceits already active in the world before adding new ones. Sanderson's examples spring from how different cultures might approach the same ability of heat generation, with some using it for warlike purposes, whereas others for healing. Instead of adding a whole new magic system for the new hypothetical culture, he considers how they would use already existing abilities in unique ways. The Jedi and the Sith are examples of this in that both come from the same force-sensitive stock, as seen by Dooku and Anakin both being Jedi before turning to the dark side. Both sides harness their similar abilities in very different ways, as demonstrated by the dark side's force lightning. Sauron, in the guise of Annatar, works with elven smiths of Eregion to forge the rings of power, showing that his and the elves' powers are similar enough to work together and only differ in the application of their powers.

In arguing for these three components of his third rule, Sanderson says worldbuilders should “create deep worldbuilding instead of just wide worldbuilding,” meaning they should explore all ramifications and reverberations of their fantasy conceits fully before adding new conceits, which would make the scope of the story wider instead of focused. And any new conceits should then be woven in with the current conceits rather than starting down a whole new path.

Finally, Sanderson has a fourth hidden rule as a bit of an Easter egg reference to Isaac Asimov, who also has three famous rules for robotics with a secret fourth one. Sanderson’s fourth rule is “err on the side of awesome,” which ties back to the rule of cool in that magic should be enjoyable for the audience. Despite being the progenitor of much of our understanding of hard-magic systems, Sanderson never loses sight of the escapist enjoyment that comes with fantasy. This parallels the component of compelling in that audiences want something new and unique they cannot find in the real world, and it is the author’s job to deliver this sense of wonder and excitement through their world.

38. Masquerades, Ascendent and Descendent Magic

A few more aspects should be considered when it comes to assessing worldbuilding magic, the first being if those in the world are even aware of magic. The term **masquerade** is employed by White Wolf's World of Darkness role-playing game universe spearheaded by *Vampire: The Masquerade*. Theirs is an urban fantasy world where vampires, werewolves, mages, and ghosts all live in the real human world that parallels our own. Yet humans are unaware of these mythical beasts because of the eponymous masquerade, which is an agreement that anyone who reveals themselves to a mortal should be killed to protect the secret of their existence. Like superheroes having to hide their secret identities, the masquerade means the world of magic can exist right under our mundane noses.

Masquerades are common in other urban fantasy stories where a magic world is overlaid on top of our own. The implications and reverberations of a modern world where magic is common would be enormous, and the need to extrapolate all the changes could easily sidetrack the whole story. It's therefore much simpler to invoke a masquerade to keep the modern world as a known quantity so as to explore how a gifted few utilize their amazing powers. This is the basis of most superhero stories as well. In *On Writing and*

Worldbuilding: Volume 1, Hickson spends a chapter dissecting masquerades and hidden worlds and identifies six questions:

- How does the magical world stay hidden?
- How do they deal with discovery?
- How does society function within the hidden world?
- Why does the society stay hidden?
- How does geography and population affect the hidden society?
- How does the hidden world affect the narrative?

In these instances, the masquerades act almost like portal fantasies in that even though they generally take place in our own world, they transport the character who discovers them into a new world just under the surface. Like portal fantasy, this allows the protagonist to act as a proxy for the audience as they discover the rules to this new reality.

But masquerades need not remain the domain of overlaid worlds. Secondary worlds also need to consider how well-known and accepted the fantasy conceits are. As we'll discuss in the section on technology, how information disperses can be even more influential than the information itself. And just because a fantasy conceit exists

doesn't mean everyone in the world is either aware of or believes it. Han Solo is quite skeptical about the Force until he witnesses it with his own eyes. And even with the Night's Watch having been established to battle the White Walkers and sending a wight's hand as evidence of their need for assistance, the southern lords refuse to accept them as either a threat or even real in the first place. Ironically, even though the audience might be aware of magic in a secondary world, the characters within it may well not be.

This is likely due to the exclusivity of magical abilities in most worlds. While it may not be required that magic has a cost, as seen with Harry Potter and *Airbender*, there is still an undercurrent of inaccessibility when it comes to who can and cannot control magic. In *Airbender* the bender population depends on the spirituality of the people, with the tribe of Airbenders having nearly 100% benders among them, while the less spiritual Earth Kingdom has a significantly lower percentage. Hogwarts serves the entire United Kingdom yet only contains 600–1,000 students, meaning the population of magic users for the whole area would be under 5,000. Considering it is one of eleven magical schools worldwide, it can be extrapolated that the Wizarding world contains less than 1% of 1% of Earth's population. Exclusivity of magic acts as a limiting factor and

makes the magic seem more awe inspiring as a result. It can also take many other forms than the apparent hereditary component used in Harry Potter, *Airbender*, and Star Wars. In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Melisandre's powers come from the Red God and are dependent upon his whims, while study seems to be the means in which wizards in *The Lord of the Rings* gain their powers. It is certainly quite possible to design a world in which everyone has some form of magic, but doing so risks making the sense of wonder that goes with magic more mundane. Or, as stated by the villain in *The Incredibles*, "When everyone's super, no one will be."

When most fans discuss the existence of magic within a world, it is in terms of being "high" or "low," the former with a significant amount in the world whereas the latter has little. *Airbender* would qualify as high due to the profusion of magic, whereas *A Song of Ice and Fire* is on the low end of the spectrum. Many subgenres take the high-to-low nature of magic into account when making distinctions, with high and epic fantasy usually containing high magic, whereas sword and sorcery and low fantasy contain significantly less magic in the characters' day-to-day lives. And while these terms are the norm in the field of fantasy and worldbuilding, they are subjective and nebulous. *The Lord of the Rings* is the progenitor of the epic and

high fantasy world, yet has significantly less magic than *Airbender* or even Harry Potter. In her book *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, Farah Mendlesohn classifies fantasy by how they interact with magic, breaking them into: (1) portal-quest, (2) immersive, (3) intrusive, and (4) liminal. Her definition of portal mirrors that subgenre in that it distinctly divides the magical from the real world, whereupon the real world intrudes upon a fantastical realm as a point of discovery. Immersive aligns with the concept of the secondary world in that the audience and characters are assumed to be a part of the already existing fantasy conceits. Intrusive maps somewhat to overlaid worlds in that it is the fantastical elements that intrude upon the real world as a bringer of chaos, although it can also exist in a secondary world. Liminal is the most difficult to describe in that fantasy elements are considered mundane to the people within the world but disquiet the audience.

Another consideration to take into account is if the world's magic is **ascendent** or **descendent**. In *The Kobold Guide to Worldbuilding*, Jeff Grubb points out that most *Dungeons & Dragons* adventures that involve a group looting a dungeon are post-apocalypse stories in that those powerful items belonged to a society where life was better and these magical items and treasures have

been lost for ages. That would put those past ages at a greater magical level than the current age, which has diminished since then. This descendent view of the world is nothing new, with philosophers like Ovid and Hesiod believing in a long-ago age of perfection and a slow degradation of the human condition. Hesiod went on to create the concept of the five ages of man. Each age is generally lesser than the one prior, and the terms Golden Age, Silver Age, Bronze Age, and Iron Age all have their origins here, which Ovid then used in his *Metamorphoses*. This degradation of the ages shows up in the Christian Bible as well when Daniel interpreted the dream of Nebuchadnezzar and his infamous statue that started with a golden head but ended with feet of clay. In Buddhism, there are three ages, the latter of which is known as the Degenerate Age. Conversely, the idea that life and technology have been improving over time is a rather recent development in the real world and is seldom seen in the fantasy genre.

In fact, most of our exemplar worldbuilders' magic is descending: Tolkien went to great lengths to describe the end of the age of magic and beginning of the age of "Men." In Star Wars, the Jedi go from being thousands strong to only Obi-Wan and Yoda in exile, which leads to only Luke and eventually Rey. *A Song of Ice*

and Fire's history is replete with tales of dragons and great feats of magic, but both have been all but forgotten at the start of the story.

Harry Potter does not easily fall into the descendent or ascendant dichotomy and seems more static in that magic does not seem to change overall. The kids learn the same sorts of spells their parents did, and even Snape's great insights in herbology in his childhood journal did not disseminate within the Wizarding world at large. The level of magic remains rather inert throughout the series.

Airbender is the only outright ascendant of the bunch, especially when *The Legend of Korra* is taken into account. In it, we see the metal bending that Toph develops in the original series being exploited by the police force of Republic City. Bending itself undergoes a significant change in the past seventy years, having grown from a very stylized, kung-fu-influenced artform to a much faster and more modern mixed martial arts style used in their game of pro-bending. How technology also acts as a counterpoint to the magic of bending is also quite interesting, but the subject of a subsequent section.

CONCLUSION: As a cornerstone of the fantasy genre, particular care has to be taken with magic for it to feel both authentic and imaginative. When dealing with something as powerful as magic that can disregard or entirely rewrite the laws of physics, it's best to use it sparingly and strategically. Because without limits, wish fulfillment goes awry in that suddenly anything is possible. Stories live or die based upon their stakes, and by suddenly removing them from the worldbuilding, the world loses a bit of its luster.

Part IX: Metaphysics

“To construct plausible and moving ‘other worlds’ you must draw on the only real ‘other world’ we know, that of the spirit.” —C. S. Lewis

OVERVIEW: Now that we have an understanding of biology, it is time to examine those beings that do not abide by the laws of nature at all —e.g., deities, demigods, spirits, and ghosts. In this sense, these creatures adhere more to the understanding of magic. We will also see how they ignore the real-world laws of geography in the same manner when we explore fantasy cosmology. Then we will delve into deities and how they are differentiated from each other. This understanding will then extend to lesser spiritual being such as demigods, angels, demons, and avatars. Then we will study the least powerful of the spiritual beings, consisting of ghosts, spirits, and the undead. Finally, we will see how metaphysics affect mortal beings with an exploration of souls and the afterlife.

For our worldbuilding purposes, we will use the term “metaphysics” not in the philosophical definition of searching for the first principle of things, including abstract concepts such as being, knowing, substance, cause, identity, time, and space, but more in the colloquial sense as it pertains to cosmology and entities like gods,

demons, and spirits. We can consider these creatures abstract in the sense that there is no genuine attempt to explain them using biological concepts such as cells and mitosis, nor is there any notion of these creatures abiding by the laws of physics. While they may interact with the natural world, they are not a part of it and therefore do not fall under any other category. So we will fashion for them their own.

But we should also uncouple metaphysical entities from religion. For our worldbuilding purposes, religions are the acts humans take part in based upon their belief in and understanding of metaphysics. Religion is composed of social behaviors and institutions, which makes it one of the subjects in our section on culture. This section will instead deal with the creatures that inspire all this human attention. We will draw from the myths in which gods scheme, cavort, and hold sway over the world and attempt to classify them and their actions rather than the religious rites of the humans who worship these deities.

39. Cosmology

In the real world, **cosmology** is the realm of astronomy and astrophysics mapping out the universe around us. Being that metaphysical entities inherently defy natural laws, science need not

apply when deciding where the deities exist and how this links back to the physical world in fantasy worldbuilding. The Greek gods resided on Mount Olympus, although the underworld of Tartarus and the Elysium Fields also existed within their cosmology. As with the Norse, the world was created by these beings and will eventually end. This holds true for Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as well, but contrasts to the Indian and Buddhist beliefs in a cyclical existence without a creator deity or perhaps multiple ones that account for multiverses. No matter the source of the world in question, cosmology deals with the deities and how their realms connect to the mortal realm. They might reside on the planet directly or be linked to it with rainbow bridges, as with the Norse, or underworld entrances, as with the Greeks.

Humans put a lot of importance as to where we reside in the universe, with Galileo famously being forced to recant his heresy for daring to suggest that the Earth revolved around the sun. The ancient Greeks believed in celestial spheres, with the stars embedded in each concentric one to account for their movements around Earth as the center of the universe.²⁷ In one Hindu tradition that Terry Pratchett fans know well, elephants support the world, which in some renditions stand upon a world-turtle's back. All three may seem quaint

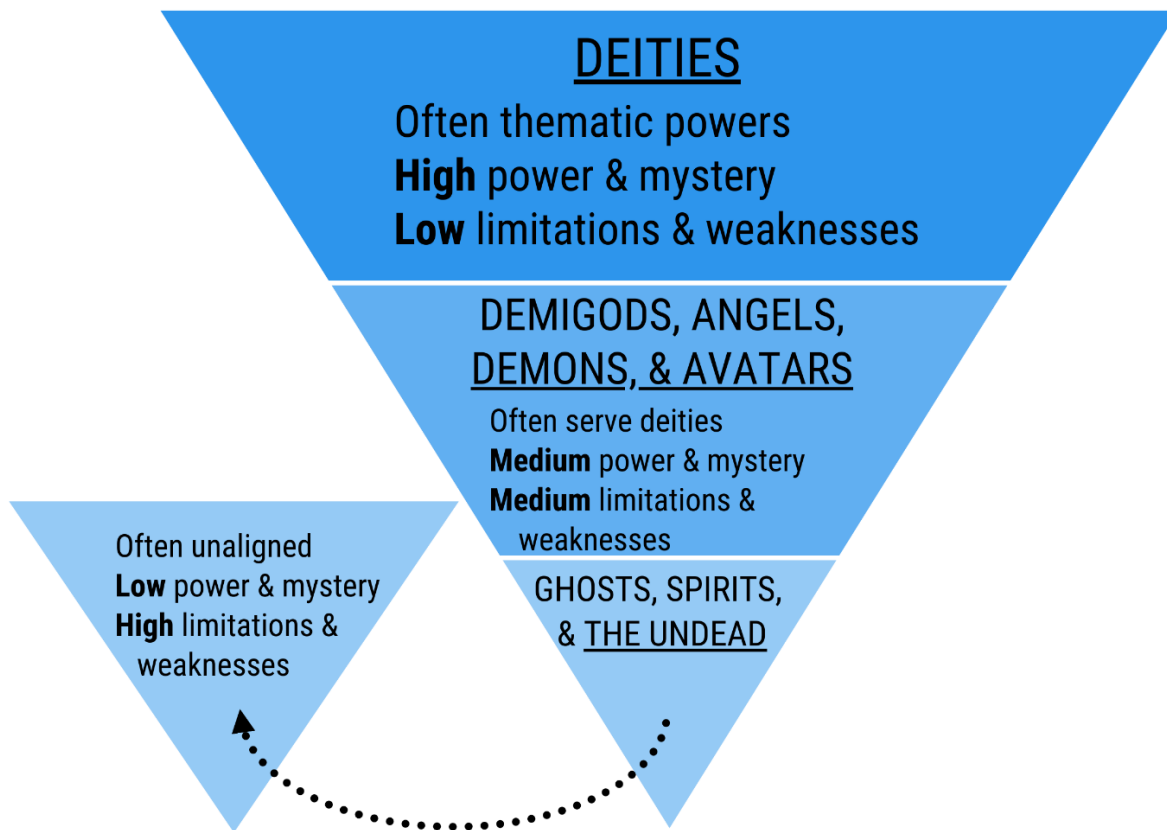
to modern folks, although there are many people walking the globe today who believe in a flat Earth. And while these cosmologies are pure speculation in the real world, every one of them are completely valid for fantasy worldbuilding. That means anything is fair game when it comes to fantasy cosmology so long as the conceits still abide by the four Cs of worldbuilding. Audiences expect deities and greater supernatural beings to exist within their own realm, which allows for a secondary world within the original secondary world. The realms of the gods does not actively need to be visited in the fantasy story, mind you, although it can be a large part of the mythopoeia, or the myths that exist within a secondary world, which we will discuss again in the chapter on cultural artifacts.

40. Deities

Most people like to assign their gods either a “good” or “evil” modifier in the same sense the Force is designated as light or dark. This is to signify a moral component, with the good gods acting towards humans’ best interest, whereas the evil entities are blithely indifferent (at best) or outright hostile towards us. Similar to our definition of effective versus ineffective worldbuilding, we will avoid these loaded terms since they assign a value to the deities in question. Those that align with our own interests we frequently call gods, while those

indifferent to us might be christened “the old ones,” like in the Cthulhu mythos, and those bent on our destruction called demons or asura. Yet in many ways, they are the same entities examined either from a human-centric point of view or non-human-centric point of view. For example, Sauron is the enemy of humanity, but he would seem like a benevolent alternative to the orc and goblin societies fearing extermination from humans and elves alike. Although to a lesser extent, Voldemort might epitomize evil to most mortals, but he offers the giants a return from their wizard-imposed exile in Northern Europe.

We will therefore divorce deities from their intention and only assess them based upon their levels of power and influence. This is a somewhat arbitrary distinction between the types of entities, with quite a bit of gray area between them. Some of this is also semantic, with the worldbuilder able to name their entities anything they choose based upon their own criteria. But here we will distinguish between the divine based upon their abilities.



Deities reign at the top and are the creatures that can affect substantial changes upon the world around them. These are the creator entities that brought their respective worlds into being or those that alter the biology, physics, technology, and mortal cultures around them with but a whim. They rival the power of the author in that we often use them as explanations as to why the world is the way that it is. This includes both sides of the arbitrary moral distinction, with the Greek gods sharing this niche with the Titans, their enemies, the Indian devas cohabitating with the asuras, and Satan acting as opposite of the Christian God.

As you likely noted, I slipped into using several pantheons in the last paragraph. **Pantheons** are a categorization of collected deities based upon the culture that worships them. Pantheons go hand in hand with **polytheism**, which is the belief in multiple deities to populate the pantheon. This is in contrast to **monotheism**, which is the belief in a single deity and is the major Western understanding in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. However, as Steve Winter in *The Kobold Guide to Worldbuilding* points out, monotheism is not nearly as conducive to fantasy settings since a single entity provides significantly less drama. Compare that to the *A Song of Ice and Fire* levels of skullduggery on display in the Greek and Norse mythologies: Loki tricks one blind brother into murdering his own immortal kin, whereas the Greek deities actively take sides in the Trojan War, disrupting and ending the lives of thousands of mortals as their own form of entertainment.

Deity Involvement



Oblivious

Ignorance or indifference to mortals or the planet.



Aloof

Deities aware of world but take very little direct action, preferring to deal with their own affairs. May be curtailed by their own code of conduct.



Moderate

An even mix of their own affairs and the events transpiring on the planet with some intervention.



Meddlesome

Explicit contact with servants and directs them to take an active role in events on the planet. Some direct intervention on their own part.



Direct

Near constant presence on the planet and takes direct action to influence events.

Adapted from the World Builder's Guidebook by Richard Baker

Just because a deity can create the world or influence the outcomes of war doesn't mean the deity will. *The Worldbuilder's Handbook* provides a helpful scale for how involved the deities are within the world, with the continuum including (a) oblivious, (b) aloof,

(c) moderate, (d) meddlesome, and (e) direct. **Oblivious** entails ignorance or indifference of humans (e.g., Lovecraft's Old Ones), with each progression taking a greater degree of interaction with the world in question. The **direct** distinction entails spending significant time on the world and making the deity's will empirically known to mortals without any need for interpretation. **Aloof** to **meddlesome** means the deity's will is known to only a select few or is unclear and open to interpretation. R'hllor, the Red God, in *A Song of Ice and Fire* would most likely fall into the aloof to moderate range in that he sends his agents out into the world to do his will, but his directives are vague and open to interpretation. This makes sense within the narrative because, as with Sanderson's first law of magic, the divine intervention of gods is a literal deus ex machina that diffuses the drama entirely. As such, it is narratively wise that R'hllor's messages to Melisandre through the flames are difficult to interpret and his intervention via divine acts comes with a cost. This treats the intervention like its own form of soft magic, which makes it more satisfying when it appears rather than the god descending down to the world to take direct action himself.

It is tempting to assign each deity a role within the pantheon. Most real-world pantheons do this, including the Greek, Celts, Norse,

Hindu, Aztec, Buddhist, Egyptian, and many others. Fantasy realms follow suit, with *A Song of Ice and Fire* taking it to the extreme wherein the worshiped deities do not even have names but are known by their titles as the Father, the Mother, the Maiden, the Crone, the Warrior, the Smith, and the Stranger (even though they are said to be seven different aspects of the same god). In pantheons with role distinctions, the gods' specific powers reflect their roles, such that the trickster Loki can change shape, the oceanic Poseidon can cause hurricanes, and Agni as the embodiment of fire.

The final major consideration of deities is their motivation for interacting with mortals. Humans have the tendency to worship entities since the dawn of time, but the question becomes what the deities get out of it. Some have imagined that this worship fuels the gods, as in Neil Gaiman's *American Gods*, but this does not necessitate human affection for all entities. In the cases of the Greek gods, their demands of mortals were more narcissistically motivated by seeking adoration. Knowing to what degree the deities interact with mortals and their expectations in terms of reciprocity makes their motives understandable to the audience, even though it is a common real-world maxim that the will of gods is unknowable.

41. Demigods, Angels, Demons, and Avatars

One step down from deities, these demi-deities still outstrip mortals in terms of power but are dwarfed by their progenitors. That said, the lines can certainly blur between these two, with Hercules being a child of Zeus, thus making him a demigod with abilities far beyond humans. But upon his death, he receives divine status and is raised into the pantheon proper. **Avatars**, on the other hand, are the embodiment of the deity in another form. These often possess supernatural abilities and act out the deity's goals. However, most creatures within this stratification are usually servants of the deities and do their bidding. Many, such as Hercules and Achilles, have adventures of their own and often interact with mortals. This makes them far more corporeal and approachable than deities, which are often far removed from the realms of mortals.

The demi-deities also show a lot more interaction with humans in that many of them come from breeding between human and deities. As discussed in the chapter on biology, interbreeding between species seldom creates a viable offspring, but when metaphysics are concerned, the laws of nature need not apply. These couplings almost invariably yield offspring that carry abilities corresponding to their divine lineage with them. Angels and demons are no exception, with both these demi-deities spawning protagonists

in countless stories. In these cases, the degree to which the entities' interests align with their designated deities quickly comes into play. At its core, *Paradise Lost* is a tale of an angel rebelling against its designated deity, and many other tales deal with demons opposing or wishing to supplant their overlords.

Drawing on this interpretation, *Airbender* gets closest to metaphysics with the concept of the Avatar and the Avatar State. Like the demi-deities, the Avatar comes from mortal origins yet is the vessel of the collective knowledge of all previous Avatar lives by virtue of being the bridge between the physical and spirit worlds. The significance of the soul, spirit world, and reincarnation will be addressed shortly, but we should note that *Airbender* plays with all these metaphysical concepts without adding an obvious religion to accompany it in the social sphere. Spirits certainly exist within the *Airbender* universe, but there are no real deities, leaving the Avatar as the most powerful being.

42. Ghosts, Spirits, and the Undead

Still further down the list, ghosts and spirits have minor effect on the corporal world, if any at all. Like the demi-deities, they may have originated from living creatures, as with ghosts, but it is always clear they are not of the natural order, as are the ghosts of dead Jedi in

Star Wars or deceased wizards in Harry Potter. The spirits Hei Bei, Tui, and La that Aang encountered on his journey all act as anthropomorphic entities embodying animals, but also often incorporate a role or abstract concept like love or deception in the same manner the deities do. Although embodying these concepts, these spirits do not ascend to the rank of deity, or even demi-deity because of the lack of their ability to affect change. In most cases, the spirits or ghosts' range are limited to a specific location, be it in this realm or another.

There is usually a much harder understanding of ghosts and spirits than there are of deities and even demi-deities. This may be because gods are meant to be so far beyond mortals that their motivations are incomprehensible to us, or perhaps it is baked into the notion that entities capable of changing the very fabric of reality to fit their whims are so powerful that we can never know the full quantifiable scope of their abilities. As such, it is hard to constrain the deities with hard, specific statistics as to their abilities, limitations, and weaknesses. Spirits and ghosts, on the other hand, generally abide by a sense of rules, abilities, weaknesses, and limitations. Poltergeists, for instance, are usually understood to be able to affect the physical world, whereas most other ghosts are insubstantial.

The White Walkers fall into the category of undead in that they eventually have hard parameters to their abilities, origins, and weaknesses. Which just goes to show that just because something sits low on the pyramid of power doesn't mean it cannot shake the world to its very foundation so long as its fundamentals are there. Although corporal in origin and with limited intelligence and powers in terms of intense cold and the zombie-like ability to reanimate their victims, the White Walkers are legitimately some of the most fearsome creatures in the fantasy canon.

43. The Soul, Afterlife, and Other Realms

Reanimated corpses and reincarnation bring in another salient question for fantasy worldbuilders regarding the soul. Although there are numerous competing definitions with great nuance to them, the soul basically breaks down to an indelible component that exists after a mortal's corporal demise. This concept of soul is tied to that of consciousness in that it's understood that an entity's distinct personality components and memory remain after death. Most real-life societies have some concept of a soul and what happens to it after an individual's demise.

The ironically named afterlife accounts for the soul after death and can be another realm entirely like the Greek's Elysium, the Norse

Valhalla, or Christian Heaven, or the soul can continue to cycle through life again and again through reincarnation, as in the Hindu and Buddhist faiths. In some traditions, the soul is immutable and cannot be destroyed, while others ignore the idea of the soul entirely and consider oblivion the individual's ultimate end. No matter the decision on the worldbuilder's part as to the existence of the soul and afterlife, there should be a distinction between what exists in the story world and what the people of the world believe to be true. This keeps the social component in effect in the same way we can separate the entities from the human understanding of them in the form of religion.

CONCLUSION: As with magic, metaphysical elements should be considered in terms of how they affect the human aspect of the story. Like magic, deities, demigods, and spirits can add quite a bit, but also run the risk of acting as a *deus ex machina* and thus dilute the drama. When creatures as powerful as gods come into play, the stakes instantly rise, although it does become more problematic when the gods themselves drive the action. This is not to say a fantasy story should not incorporate deities or that they cannot be the center of enthralling tales. Multiple mythologies from across the globe revolve around gods and have made for thrilling tales for generations. But in

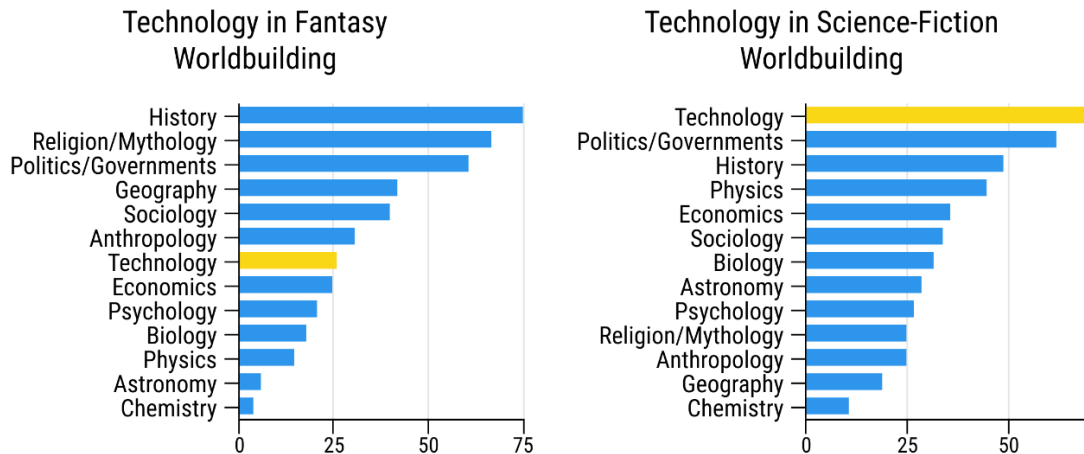
the fantasy genre, their powers should always be taken into account. As Sanderson points out about magic, limitations are greater than power. This means the greater the power of the metaphysical entity, the less drama exists due to the scope of their power. This is why deities and their agents often act behind the scenes through setting up the situation or outright manipulating their agents to take action on their behalf. As with what Hickman points out with soft magic, the immensely powerful deities also work well as villains because their undefined raw power instantly puts the protagonists in the position of underdogs. So, as with all elements of worldbuilding, the author needs to take into account what they want out of their story and how metaphysical beings can help actualize that goal. For audience members, they must disassociate from their own personal metaphysical beliefs to consider how the author has utilized this fantasy conceit as a component of the world.

Part X: Technology

“Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic.” —Arthur C. Clarke

OVERVIEW: Although technology is considered the domain of science fiction, it plays a significant role within the fantasy genre as well. In this section, we will explore how technology is frequently used to identify time periods within our own world and anchor analogue cultures in fantasy narratives. To do so we will first examine how technological-fantasy conceits function and how they can deviate from the traditional exsecting, unchanged, divergent, and additive paradigm. Then we will discover the effect technology has when dispersing throughout a culture. Finally, we will dig into toehold details and how technology holds a unique position in orienting audiences to the analogue cultures.

44. Technology 101



It's ingrained in us that fantasy incorporates magic, such that it's a defining component of the genre expectations for fantasy. The same holds true for technology in science fiction, to the point that Clarke interchanges the two in his well-known comparison of magic and technology. In a way, he's right that technology plays the same role as magic in creating impossible things. But technology is also much more egalitarian than magic, which is usually exclusive to a specific type of individual. Technology, on the other hand, can be utilized by anyone. This is probably why technology is the least utilized when it comes to fantasy conceits, hence placing it second to last. Yet technology plays an outsized role in fantasy worldbuilding because its output details act as anchors through which audiences acclimate themselves.

But before we delve into technology, we should first note that technology is not a sign of intelligence. Technology is rather egalitarian in that anyone should be able to use it, opposed to magic, which is usually treated as exclusive in that only certain gifted individuals can harness it. And because of the egalitarian nature of technology, it becomes tempting to believe that any group that does not possess a certain technology or understanding is less intelligent than a culture that does. This is an outgrowth of the **heroic theory of invention**, in which we treat inventors and discoverers of scientific developments as solitary geniuses rather than products of good luck. In his book *How to Invent Everything: A Survival Guide for the Stranded Time Traveler*, Ryan North designates only five inventions he believes necessary to create a modern society: (a) a spoken language, (b) a written language, (c) a robust number system, (d) the scientific method, and (e) calorie surplus (p. 11). He also points out that we humans are genetically the same as our ancestors from over 200,000 years ago. Yet the oldest of these inventions (spoken language) is only 50,000 years old, whereas the most recent (the scientific method) is less than 400 years of age. That means we've spent 75% of our time as a species without even the spoken word and less than 1% with the scientific method. Even concepts that

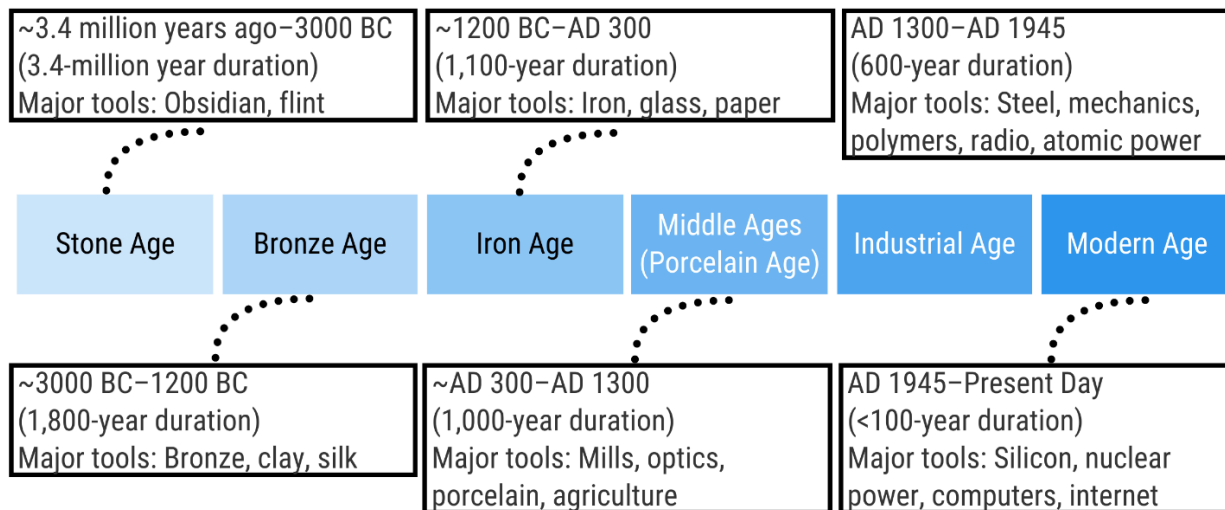
seem incredibly simple, like the number zero, did not develop until almost 40,000 years after the invention of counting. Negative numbers appeared even later, whereas the saddle followed the domestication of the horse by 4,000 years. The company Xerox famously allowed Steve Jobs into their research center, where he first saw the computer mouse that he would make famous with the Macintosh. The mouse is now integral to our computing experience, making us wonder why its inventors never capitalized upon it. It also makes us question who is more intelligent, the initial inventors or the person who recognized its true potential?

The point being that just because an invention seems obvious in retrospect doesn't mean it actually is. In fact, it's often quite the opposite.

Guns, Germs, and Steel examines the disparity in technology among societies, looking at why some farmers reverted to hunter-gatherer lifestyles off the coast of New Zealand and why some nations readily accepted technological advances whereas others shunned them. This should reiterate that the adoption of technology is not representative of a society's intelligence, rather on the society's needs and access to materials. For instance, the Native Americans of the Great Plains are romanticized for their horsemanship abilities,

although horses were not a part of their lifestyle until after being introduced by European settlers. These tribes readily adopted the horse to fit their lifestyles, whereas other tribes did not, meaning there are many underlying factors going into societal acceptance of technology.

That said, we can never completely uncouple our understanding of technology as a signifier of advancement in societies. That is why we break down human history from the prehistoric years until the present into ages, including the familiar Stone, Bronze, and Iron Ages, which are based upon their tools at the time. In terms of technology, ages continue on and correspond to the major technological advancement of that time period. The demarcations of these advancements are somewhat arbitrary, but I have included some of them here to show how ingrained they have become. The most popularly accepted ages break down as:



Unfortunately, these ages are rather imprecise and are rather Euro-centric. Not every area or culture within an area adopted the same technologies at the same time, meaning there is no definitive time span. However, much like the term *race* being used in the fantasy genre, these terms are now ingrained in us when discussing time periods. In the fantasy genre, most analogue cultures are cribbed from either the Middle Ages for epic fantasy or the Modern Age for most urban fantasy. Yet other subgenres take root in different ages, with mythic fantasy dallying in the Bronze Age and Iron Age, and steampunk and gaslight in the Industrial Age. As we'll examine shortly, these ages are important in establishing toehold details to orient consumers.

This understanding of technology operates on the conception that technology is continually progressing, which is not always true in

the real world, and certainly not within the domain of the fantasy genre. Many of these real-world ages also come with long gaps between them where no major milestone occurred then are capped off with a period of many technological advancements. This is because, contrary to the popular belief that “necessity is the mother of invention,” many inventions come about as an idea that then goes searching for a market. Thomas Edison never considered that his phonograph could be used for the frivolous pursuit of listening to music, and Nikolaus Otto’s gas engine was not mounted to an automobile until thirty years after its invention.

Both North and Diamond mention how critical agriculture is when it comes to inventions. This is because hunter-gatherer societies, which composed 90% of our existence as a species, are **generalists**. This means that every individual in the society has the same basic job: providing their daily caloric intake. They may break this task down by gender roles, with the women providing the lion’s share of the calories through gathering and small-game hunting, compared to the men’s hunting of large prestige animals, but all hunter-gatherer societies dedicate their days to sustaining themselves and providing for their daily needs. While this search for food isn’t as all-consuming as many people believe, with hunter-

gatherers having very varied diets and more time to socialize with their peers than we do, it is still a subsistence existence.

Domestication of plants and animals means not only that people had to remain in the same place to harvest their crops but also that a single individual could grow and store more calories than their household could consume. With farmers and ranchers now able to produce food to sustain others, **specialization** in occupations came about since caloric surplus freed others from spending their days on the quest for subsistence. This led to social classes, where rulers exchanged protection of the farm lands for a portion of the product in the form of taxes. Soldiers and bureaucrats, including the first scholars, all came from this specialization because of domestication. In a sense, the technological advancement of domestication led to the specialization that allowed for a leisure class of inventors with the spare time to create the next technological advancement.

45. Technology Fantasy Conceits

As with fantasy conceits in general, technological conceits manifest themselves in the four basic patterns of exsecting, unchanged, divergent, and additive, with a new addition of early adoption exclusively for technology.

Exsecting in terms of technology simply means that something necessary for a technological advancement is absent. A good example would be the Dark Sun world in *Dungeons & Dragons* in which iron is not available, meaning they fashion most of their weapons from stone and bone rather than steel. We could also consider a world without animals capable of being domesticated as exsecting in that they would not have the beasts of burden capable of erecting buildings, tilling the land, or as mounts for travel and war. We should, however, note that exsecting technological factors do not have to be absolute and can lead to other technological advancements. For instance, the iron deposits in Japan are considered low in quality, leaving them with substandard steel. So the metalsmiths in Japan made many advances to overcome this lack, including the process of folding the steel for their samurai swords.

If these holes in the familiar landscape are not plugged with a fantasy equivalent, then it is exsecting since the repercussions of the fantasy conceit affect the analogue culture. But if another fantasy conceit enters the picture to make up for this technological lack, this qualifies as divergent. The banthas used by the Tuskin Raiders in *Star Wars* are an example of a fantasy creature filling in the beast of

burden niche. The ostrich horse of *Airbender* is another example of a divergent substitution, one that wears its inspiration in its name.

Or the inverse can be the case in which a fantasy conceit takes the place of a technological advancement. For instance, if flying carpets are readily available, it makes little sense for people to invest the time and mental capital into inventing airplanes. This is often the argument for why most fantasy worlds seem stuck in the medieval European analogue in that it's believed that magic would freeze technology development since there would be no need for any additional technology. This is a variation on what's known as the **porcelain argument** (Forbes, 2015), which theorizes that the Chinese never developed glass because they already had porcelain. Porcelain was quite a technological achievement at the time, one perfected during the Han dynasty (AD 25–220) and taken to new heights during the Song dynasty (AD 960–1279), where they could fire between 25,000–100,000 pieces at a time in their dragon kilns. This porcelain was in high demand in Europe, but could not be reverse engineered until the 1700s. However, the theory is that because the Chinese depended on porcelain to such a degree, they never developed glass, which was a prerequisite for chemistry and optics, which in turn allowed Western scientists to extend their

productive years by creating spectacles. The porcelain argument maintains that because they never went down these avenues, Western scientists eventually technologically outpaced them despite the Chinese head start with the inventions of paper, printing, gunpowder, and the compass. Right or wrong, there is a strong thread of the porcelain argument in any fantasy world where technology becomes stagnant because of a fantasy conceit. However, the inverse could also be true, as seen in *The Legend of Kora* when technology makes great strides to overcome their dependence on bending. Because power was relegated to a select few benders, others developed egalitarian technology that anyone could use to be on equal footing and overcome the benders, which just goes to show the fluid nature of causation in justifying fantasy conceits.

Unchanged, as the name connotes, means that technology remains equal to the real-world analogue despite the other fantasy conceits. This is the case in *The Lord of the Rings* and *A Song of Ice and Fire*, which both remain bound to their medieval European analogues despite magic and fantasy creatures. Harry Potter and almost every other urban fantasy are good examples of unchanged technology levels despite the presence of magic, although it should

be noted that the wizards in Harry Potter are notoriously bad with muggle technology.

Additive usually accounts for impossible technologies that do not abide by the laws of nature as we currently understand them but could still be scientifically plausible. The Jedi's lightsabers possess many abilities, like cutting through almost any substance and being able to reflect enemies' blasts back at them. These are fantastical abilities that can be explained away through technology. This case teeters between being a handwave and handwavium in that when lightsabers were introduced, they were simply cool laser swords, but since then have been expanded upon to account for their powers with the unobtainium element of Kyber crystals. If this is an act of fleshing out the worldbuilding of Star Wars or a case of apologetics is up to audience members to decide. Aang's glider that is collapsible enough to function as a staff and yet still sturdy enough to work as a weapon is another example of an additive technology that does not draw its abilities from a fantastical source.

It's arguable if early adoption is a subset of divergent or unchanged, and since there's no clear place for it, I've given it its own category. In **early adoption**, an inventor or culture creates a technology long before their analogue culture did in the real world.

Many portal fantasies like *A Connecticut Yankee in King Arthur's Court* use this method when the protagonist impresses those in a secondary world with common modern concepts and practices. Early adaptation can also occur when a society or individual uses technology incongruent with their analogue culture. For instance, although the analogue culture is classical China in *Airbender*, the Fire Nation possesses steam engines and mechanical tanks that far surpass that analogue time period. In the show version of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Qyburn creates the mechanical ballista Euron Greyjoy uses to bring down a dragon. Although ballistae have existed since the ancient Greeks, the aiming and firing mechanism depicted in the show far outstrip the technology of the medieval European analogue. And because they had not introduced a technological fantasy conceit into the series until that point, which was nearly 90% complete, many consumers objected to it because it broke their immersion due to the late introduction.

Samwell's suggestion of a democracy that was laughed down in the finale is another example of early adoption and shows not all of them need to be a physical invention. Any expression of a concept or philosophy that does not match the analogue culture could also fall under this umbrella. Yet it is often difficult to parse and might be

interpreted as an incongruous detail that breaks immersion for the audience. So early adoption should be used carefully and perhaps be **spotlighted**, aka **lampshaded**, to highlight that it is intended as a fantasy conceit rather than an accidental anachronism. The term spotlighting comes from theater via screenwriting and means to intentionally draw the audience's attention to an object, concept, or idea. In so doing, the author makes it known they have taken this into consideration and it is therefore not a mistake. In effect, the author points out a possible problem in the worldbuilding or plot before it breaks the immersive experience for the audience, therefore inoculating them from it later down the line when it becomes important. Often this occurs through meta humor, which diffuses the glaring issue in the same way a lampshade does with light, although it should be reiterated that metatextual asides break the immersive experience by design.

As with other fantasy conceits, technological conceits are not mutually exclusive, and multiple methods can be employed within the same series. A world without iron or horses might instead domesticate dragons, using their scaly hides for their armor. Then might develop their own air force without ever having bothered with a cavalry phase in their ground wars, thus demonstrating exsecting,

divergent, and early adoption within just the single technology fantasy conceit alone.

46. Innovation and Distribution

Much like with physical resources, just because knowledge is present during a time period doesn't mean it's well distributed throughout the population. Consider literacy, which grew out of the need for bureaucracy and therefore originally only revolved around counting and commerce. This was restricted only to advisers to the royal class and bureaucrats and only trickled down to the merchant class in Europe during the Middle Ages (with some estimating that 40% of the merchants were literate by the 1500s, which still only accounted for 5% of the entire population) and into the general populous after Gutenberg perfected the printing press in AD 1439. This caused an explosion in the number of books available, which in turn led to new readers by making it a sign of status to be literate. Only much later did literacy become a part of basic education. Even still, it is restricted in many places to this day, with those in power often intentionally keeping women away from this technological advancement that's been around for centuries.

Motorized vehicles are another example, with the initial invention dating back to 1885, but only being available to the wealthy.

It was not until Henry Ford perfected the assembly line (inspired by the “disassembly line” used in slaughterhouses) in 1913 and reduced the time required to assemble a car to less than it took for the paint to dry that the prices dropped enough that the middle class could afford them. This influx of accessibility to a rather new technology caused another wave of secondary repercussions and reverberations in the sudden need for stoplights and paved roadways to accommodate these cars, thus leading to new taxes, interstates, and the insurance industry. Laws also needed to change to accommodate the fact that automobiles had shifted from the wealthy to the middle class and now supplanted horses and carriages to dominate the roads.

Social factors also play a large role in the distribution of technology. In *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Diamond goes into significant detail about how Europe was far outstripped technologically by China until a shift in political power caused them to undo their predecessors’ accomplishments in the 1400s. This meant dismantling the royal navy and ceding the oceans to the Europeans, who used their maritime advantage to increase their national power through trade. The samurai of Japan were also early adopters of firearms, but due to a lengthy period of peace and a policy of isolationism during the Edo period (AD 1600–1868), they maintained the smoothbore matchlock

instead of moving on to rifles, like Western nations did. In both these cases, the decision to turn away from a technological advancement came from those in authority in very homogeneous societies, but other societal factors can also limit the spread of technology. These societal factors act as bottom-up inhibitors in direct opposition to the prevailing top-down practices, as is the case with many people avoiding vaccines despite both the overwhelming scientific proof and laws set by the government.

Be it top-down or bottom-up, there are two distinct drives within cultures: stasis and innovation. **Stasis** maintains the current order, be it social, political, or technological, whereas **innovation** is the desire for change. Although not always the case, those in power seek to maintain the status quo, even when it opposes the spirit of innovation. Authors therefore need to be conscious as to the repercussions of technological fantasy conceits because great changes in society often follow great changes in technology, as was the case with the Industrial Revolution and the fundamental shift from rural lifestyles to urban existence.

47. Technological Toehold Details

Of the fantasy conceits, technology and culture play particularly outsized roles when it comes to identifying analogue cultures due to

toehold details. This might be why both are the least utilized when it comes to fashioning fantasy conceits. Instead, they often function as output details from previous fantasy conceits, which is why they are so useful in identifying analogue cultures.

Due to either personal knowledge or inundation of tropes within the genre, most audiences cue in on the specific details used in the opening chapters to decipher the analogue culture. These details usually manifest in the form of technological descriptions, which lay the groundwork as toehold details. This is easiest within the visual mediums of films and comic books in that the clothing and weapons of the characters immediately reveal the time period. *Star Wars* is known for its opening shot that establishes its science-fiction trappings, whereas *Airbender* dives into the classical Chinese aesthetic in the introductory credits before the orienting with Katara and Sokka in their canoe as a counterpoint to establish their hunter-gatherer existence. In books, the author often uses specific hero props, which are items of particular importance to the story. Martin goes into great detail in the *Game of Thrones* prologue, mentioning clothing, breeds of horses, and weapons to establish his medieval setting, as does Tolkien when first introducing us to the Shire. Harry Potter also establishes its modern English setting in the first chapter

in its description of Privet Drive and the odd folks who show up to deliver Harry to his muggle home.

By judiciously using technological toehold details, the author can establish their authority by demonstrating their knowledge of the specifics of that analogue culture. This demonstration in turn not only elicits the sense of credibility but also orients the audience as to the analogue, thus going a long way in automatically populating the details of the world, as we discussed in the chapter on analogue cultures. As always when it comes to output details, this is a difficult needle to thread due to the encyclopedic impulse to include every detail as potentially pertinent. As such, the author must consider which ones to use and how they might affect the audience. The audience, in turn, should note the details the author finds pertinent and ponder if these details are there to aid in the worldbuilding or instead to augment the plot or characters.

CONCLUSION: Although considered the top genre expectation for the science fiction genre, technology plays an under-acknowledged role in the fantasy genre. Frequently this role is ignored due to our own misunderstanding of technology in our own lives. Through judicious use of technological conceits, as well as the resulting output

details, fantasy authors can put unique spins on audience members' expectations.

Part XI: Culture

“What people say, what people do, and what they say they do are entirely different things.” —Margaret Mead

OVERVIEW: Culture is a hard nut to crack. Although the social sciences all focus on unique aspects of the field, it's hard to get a clear consensus when combining them. That's because we humans are rather complex creatures that do not adhere to natural laws in the same way atoms and molecules do in the hard sciences, but that does not stop us from studying ourselves as unique organisms. Which makes sense, because although we are like the other animals in that we are products of our environments and geographies, we are the only species that can reshape our environment. We are also the only species not solely focused on our own survival (and, sometimes, the only species that seeks our self-destruction). Although we are not the only species to produce tools, we are the only one to make products that serve no other purpose than our own enjoyment.

In other words, art.

The social sciences study our species directly, but the fields of the arts and humanities also delve into this unique desire to create things that do not serve our survival. They plumb the depths of

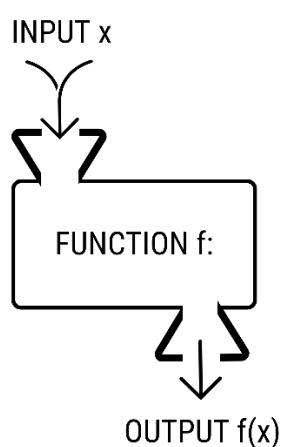
human nature in our act of and reaction to art, of which worldbuilding is just another aspect. Although worldbuilding is a multidimensional discipline composed of five other fields, the cultural aspect might be the most difficult to achieve expert-level understanding in. Each other fantasy conceit breaks down to a single field of study that people dedicate their entire lives to, yet the major fields of the social sciences alone comprise of anthropology, sociology, psychology, communications, economics, political sciences, linguistics, and religion, just to name a few. Each of those requires just as much knowledge and dedication as the hard sciences, which is why many fantasy authors elect to use analogue cultures instead of building new cultures from the ground up, as is common in science fiction. History provides an easy framework for the author and the audience, which allows them to wave away many pressing details like the economics of the fantasy world so as to instead focus on the story, characters, and world itself. Yet the author still must pass the general credibility threshold, which means many cultural fundamentals will rear their head. As such, the author must consider how to approach these cultural concepts and what changes they should render.

In terms of fantasy conceits, we can consider culture its own black box. While it's difficult to define and delineate the boundaries to

it, we still know we are products of our culture, which shapes us as individuals, who then shape the society in turn. We know we go into the black box as children and come out a product of what we experienced. We also know it is an ongoing and unending process. Yet we seldom stop to consider these invisible forces that shape us. The difficulty of culture as a fantasy conceit is further compounded by the fact it's hard to tell if the fantasy cultures are fantasy conceits themselves or the output details from other fantasy conceits. Introducing dragons would reshape any culture on Earth, which makes this distinction in fantasy even more difficult with each additional conceit added. Fantasy authors also have the potential to create non-human cultures. But, as with all fantasy worldbuilding, we must design impossible cultures based upon our understanding of our own cultures. This sense of authenticity often comes from researching the analogue cultures and delivering those details credibly.

For this section, I will provide a very, very brief breakdown of many concepts from the social sciences, arts, and the humanities. Several of the concepts are controversial or have their detractors, and just because other ideas did not grace these pages, does not make them any less valid. As with all purpose-based worldbuilding,

the ideas presented here are because they provide some value in constructing or deconstructing a world. This is meant as only the most basic of roadmaps and cannot be a substitute for personal research. As with all fantasy conceits listed within this book, these social-science concepts are a jumping-off point rather than the end of the worldbuilding journey.



Being that culture acts as its own black box, we will address it as a separate fantasy function that spits out an observable product. For our purposes, the input domain for culture is its worldview, whereas the output products are artifacts. **Worldview** encompasses what the culture collectively thinks, whereas the **artifacts** are what they do because of what they think. And while it is possible for the author to explicitly impart what the culture believes via their prose or a character expounding their worldview, it is often through the

artifacts that the audience forms the culture's worldview from the inside-out.

But before we dig further into these two components, we should note that no culture is monolithic. This is to say there is no culture where everyone believes and behaves in perfect sync—at least not on Earth. There is just as much if not more variation within every culture than there is biologically within every species. Treating a species or world as monolithic with one defining trait leads to the trope of **planet of hats**. This is a reference to *Star Trek: The Original Series*, which had a tendency to portray cultures with one defining feature. In the patient-zero episode of *A Piece of the Action*, the Enterprise crew lands on a planet that favors fedoras and emulating 1920s gangster culture, with every person they encounter exhibiting this single trait. For all its desire for diversity, Star Trek also has a longstanding habit of putting hats on species and cultures, including the logical Vulcans, the warlike Klingons, and the profit-motivated Ferengi. This was an outgrowth of the episodic show format demanding that the writers introduce a new planet or culture each week. With little time to establish the culture or concept before the story kicked into gear, they would give them an easy and recognizable visual representation and then move on. And while this

works as shorthand for entertainment, it is not an authentic representation. Cultures may appear uniform to outsiders, but there is always variation within the group. Groups are comprised of individuals, after all, and no two humans are exactly alike. That said, because this is the fantasy genre, it is possible to create cultures that are utterly uniform, although this would be a major fantasy conceit that affects the entire world and story.

48. Cultural Worldview

Cultural worldview is how the society orients its knowledge and point of view towards the world and harkens back to author worldview that we discussed in chapter twelve. This encompasses its basic philosophy, fundamentals, existential postulates, values and ethics, ideology, and attitude. Worldview is the culture's concept of why the world works and the "correct" way to act within it. These are all intangible beliefs the culture uses to make sense of the world around them. These are also huge core concepts that strike at the heart of a society and include such ontological questions as:

- a) Where did the world come from?
- b) What will the future hold?
- c) What does it mean to be "good"?
- d) How do we be good?

e) What is true and what is false?

f) Why is the world the way it is?

And like many core beliefs, they are often unconscious until directly confronted or threatened. These foundational belief systems are **first principles** in that they are positions that are argued *from* rather than *for*. These are cultural value systems, which signify what they hold dear and to what degree. Value systems and their underlying worldviews are, as Steven Erikson points out, the seed for character motivations (Hong Kong Book Fair 2019: Anthropology in World Building). What they value and why they value it are steeped in cultural context that the story should explain and exploit throughout. These incongruous motivations based upon foreign worldviews increase the depth to the world by not only adding conflict to the situation and characters but also by forcing the audience to reconsider their own first principles upon encountering new takes on old ideas.

Cultural universals are traits, patterns, and institutions prevalent throughout humankind. Arguments still rage as to if these arise because of evolutionary adaptations or if they are an outgrowth of the human condition, whereas others deny their existence entirely. However, they are a suitable starting point for anyone creating a new

cultural worldview. The full list is quite extensive and can get very granular, so some of the more prevalent cultural universals include:

Abstraction of speech and thought	Conflict	Gender roles	Logic	Personal names	Rites of passage
Age status	Cooperative labor	Incest taboo	Magical Thinking	Play	Shame
Art	Death rituals	Kin groups	Marriage	Music and dance	Status and social roles
Body adornment	Etiquette	Language and symbols	Morals	Poetry	Property
Classifications	Family/ household names	Laws	Oaths/promises	Prestige inequalities	Territory
Color terms	Feasting	Leaders	Peer groups not based on kinship	Proverbs	Trade

This is just a small smattering, and just because a society has a conception of a cultural universal, that does not mean it will manifest the same way. Property, for instance, is deeply ingrained in the modern Western worldview and is the cornerstone of economics. But to a nomad, physical property becomes a hinderance, meaning that those considered rich are not those with the most objects, but those with the ability to coerce others to shoulder their burden for them. It should also be noted that no culture is ever static and forces within and without seek to change it. Much like with technological

advancement, there is a constant struggle within cultural worldviews between forces for change and the status quo.

Cultural worldviews and their significant differences lead to what is called **relativism** in anthropology, which is the belief that there is no real objective universal truth and that we base all understanding upon perception and consideration. The argument is that we cannot fully comprehend another culture because we approach it only in terms of our own culture, which we believe is “correct.” It is impossible to suspend one’s own cultural beliefs, yet much of the thrill in fantasy worldbuilding is encountering foreign worldviews and discovering how they make sense in their cultural context. Take, for instance, Daenerys’ time with the Dothraki as she learns their ways. Their worldviews contrast not only from her own but from the audience’s modern sensibilities by being based upon force alone, rewarding rape, slavery, and plundering anyone they consider weaker than themselves. The Wildlings also offer another alien worldview for Jon to navigate, which include raiding for not just resources but to acquire future wives as well as not naming their children until the age of two for fear they will not survive. Personally speaking, these are some of the most interesting storylines in *A Song of Ice and Fire* because the characters, and therefore the audience, are ensconced

in an alien society that seems both familiar and enticingly new. And in both storylines, Daenerys and Jon are forced to adapt to their new surroundings by learning the ways of their adopted people. **Socialization** is the process in which a group passes on the worldviews, norms, and customs to their children. But in these cases, a proxy protagonist ignorant to the new culture has to learn the alternative ways of the world around them, most often through a mentor to impart to them the worldview and social structures. When an adult assimilates into another culture, this is **acculturation**.

These mentors also impart a **cultural identity**, which is the self-concept based upon nationality, ethnicity, social class, generation, and locality as distinct from others. **Nationality** involves how the individual relates to their state, which we'll discuss in the section on governments. In *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the Seven Kingdoms qualify as their nationality. **Ethnicity**, as we discussed in the chapter on biology, is a group that identifies with each other based on presumed similarities such as a shared language, ancestry, history, society, or social treatment within an area. Ethnicities are not dependent upon but are often associated with certain taxonomic traits or physiological similarities within those groups. In the case of the people of Westeros, the First Men of the north, the Andals of the interior, the

Ironborn, and Dornishmen make up the distinct ethnicities based upon their ancestry and history. **Social class** deals with the hierarchical social stratification of groups, usually manifesting as upper, middle, and lower classes. Tywin Lannister explaining the difference between “my lord” and “milord” to Arya is an exceptional example of this. A **generation** is a social cohort group based around the period in which children grow up, become adults, and bear children of their own. Because of this shared timeframe and significant events in their lives, generations often share a similar worldview within the general culture. This is best illustrated when Old Nan calls Bran a “summer child” or when Catelyn calls Renly and his army “knights of summer” since they had not experienced a true winter as the elder generation had. **Locality** is the small-scale community in which the individuals in a group grew up (usually comprising of a town, neighborhood, or block) which differentiates them from others in the surrounding area. Davos Seaworth mentioning how he grew up in the Flea Bottom neighborhood of King’s Landing counts as locality.

Kinship is how social relationships organize into groups, roles, and families. What distinct components that make up a family is rather fluid throughout cultures, with some considering families just

the parents and children, whereas others extend this to include distant relatives and clan members. However, how people conceive of kin has three distinct patterns: **consanguinity**, or relationships borne of shared genetic lines; **affinity**, which comprises relationships recognized as marriage; and **co-residency**, which are families formed out of shared space.

Sex refers to the biological distinction of an individual, which in our world at least, is traditionally male or female. Based upon biological fantasy conceits, there may be no end to the number of sexes a species can have. **Gender**, on the other hand, is a social construct of how we differentiate those sexes. These are the range of characteristics that are considered male, female, or other. Most real-world cultures are gender binary and only recognize masculine and feminine traits, but this is not always the case and certainly need not be in a fantasy setting. However, many languages have built-in gender asymmetry, meaning the words shift based upon the gender of the person speaking, person being spoken to, or subject, which just goes to show how deeply ingrained gender is for us as a species.

A cultural worldview weaves these social concepts together into a unified and consistent whole such that societies can identify each other by their shared understanding of the world around them. These

understandings have a strong moral component in that the society believes its ways of thinking are “right” and “good,” whereas those that don’t adhere to the worldview are regarded as “wrong,” “evil,” or “other.” A **group** is two or more individuals who share a collective sense of unity via interacting with each other because of shared similar characteristics. An **in-group** is the other people an individual identifies with, and while they may not share the exact worldview, they at least share the same first principles in understanding the world around them. We consider those who do not share our same worldview the **out-group**, which is often mistrusted or viewed with outright hostility. Yet in-group and out-groups are fluid things based upon goals and proximity as much as worldview. Taking the Wildlings into consideration, the Hornfoots and the Ice-river clans hate each other and consider the other heathens, thus in the out-group. Yet they set aside their differences based on a shared fear of the White Walkers and hatred of the Southerners below the Wall. The worldviews of both the White Walkers and residents of Westeros are even more alien than the worldviews of the different Wildling clans, which is why they can temporarily consider themselves in the same in-group. It should also be noted that people consider their own in-

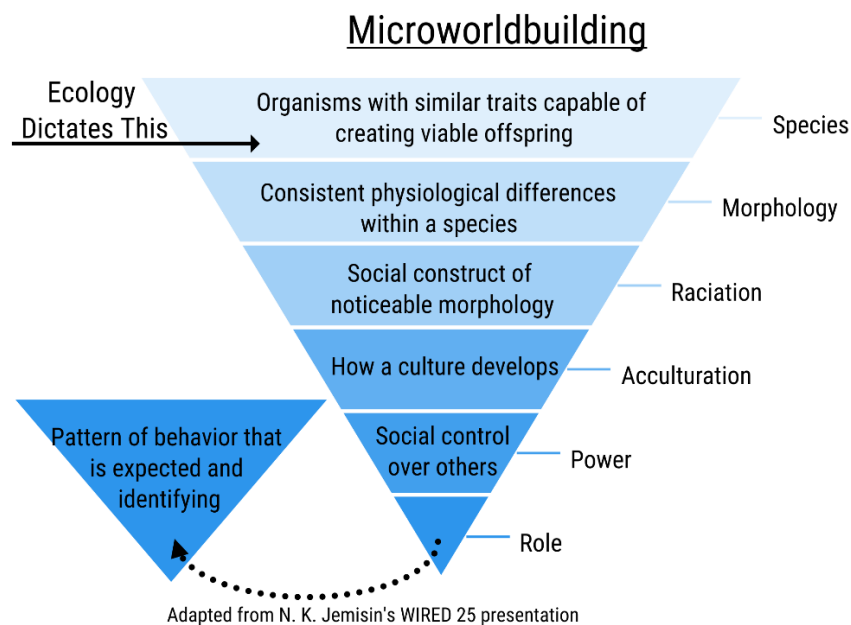
group to be quite diverse. Out-groups, on the other hand, are considered homogeneous, which eases in demonizing the other.

In anthropology, there are two approaches for studying viewpoints that authors can use. The first is **emic**, which is an account of an idea, concept, behavior, and belief from within the culture. **Etic** is the second and describes the ideas, concepts, behaviors, and beliefs from outside the cultural milieu as a passive observer with an eye for similarities between all cultures. First-person or a tight-third-person point of view can parallel an emic approach in exploring the story from the viewpoint of someone enmeshed within the culture. A more neutral third-person point of view or character within the story observing another culture would be a more etic approach, and both have their advantages and disadvantages that correspond to imparting and deducting worldbuilding details.

A culture's worldview is often very difficult to pin down in that it is often unconscious until challenged. Where the world came from is often the domain of religion, whereas humanity's place in the universe is the realm of philosophy. Both often disagree on what is moral and right in the world, with individuals accepting or rejecting those worldviews on a case-by-case basis. But there is a general shared overlap to these worldviews, and even if an individual is

rejecting a core component of the culture, they are still aware of the majority position by personally rejecting it. Because of their fluid and nebulous nature, worldviews often act as the black box the audience attempts to decipher. To reverse engineer the culture's beliefs without having them explicitly laid out, they need output details from which to construct their theories. These output details appear in the form of the more observable cultural artifacts. These artifacts may not be entirely tangible, but they are at least observable and are the means in which worldviews manifest themselves.

49. Cultural Artifacts



We should again note that when discussing cultural artifacts in fantasy worldbuilding we are not dealing with them in the anthropological sense of physical items from which to extrapolate a

culture. We instead widen our scope to refer to the observable behaviors, institutions, and products of a culture. These are how the intangible worldview makes itself manifest in the world around it, be it through art, laws, or religious ceremonies. These acts, although structurally the same in that they all exist in human cultures, still vary significantly based upon the worldview of the cultures in question. Many styles and motifs become synonymous with certain cultures and time periods, demonstrating their close ties with society. If culture can be thought of as a secondary black box, then the artifacts are the output details that make the culture and world feel lived in and with a unique history all its own. These artifacts can manifest in the following ways, but are in no way limited by them:

Norms are what we consider acceptable group behavior and are what people should and should not do in their social surroundings. **Reciprocity** is probably the most famous norm, and is when people respond to actions with similar actions. This can be positive, as in the exchanging of gifts, or negative, as with eye-for-an-eye punishments for crimes. Wearing clothing is an easy example of a norm most cultures share, although what is considered being “appropriately dressed” can vary not only between cultures but within the culture as well. A cultural worldview that believes that sex is for

procreation alone would arguably cover themselves more than cultures with a worldview that sex is for the giving and receiving of pleasure. The worldview of the Iron Islands in *A Song of Ice and Fire* is quite harsh, ensuring their behavior is much more brutal than the pleasure-seeking people of the Summer Isles, even though both were seafaring people. The worldview, and therefore norms, of the kids in Harry Potter very much reflects the norms of the real world, down to their very British formality in school. In effect, norms are how an individual knows how to be a “good” member of the society. Non-conformity to the norms is labeled deviant behavior.

Norms often appear in the form of **customs** and **rituals**, which act as the output details of norms. Customs and rituals are often informal rules of behavior that people take part in without thinking about it. Shaking hands or bowing when greeting someone as Aang does in *Airbender* are examples of customs that are culturally specific. In the much more dire world of *A Song of Ice and Fire*, the custom is that a guest received sanctuary if offered salt and bread by a host, something Walder Frey deviates from during the Red Wedding. Rituals are more formal customs and often involve gestures, words, and objects performed in a traditional sequence. Rituals often have religious implications, but not always.

Institutions are stable organizations of individuals together for a shared purpose, usually by performing specific, reoccurring patterns of behavior. Many formal institutions include political parties, religious affiliations, and civil societies, such as charities. Guilds are another formal institution that should be familiar to fantasy fans where the members all act towards a specific goal through shared resources and aims to benefit their members collectively. Formal rules and rituals may dominate the institutions or may manifest themselves in informal sets of implicitly understood behaviors. Institutions often take on a life of their own and are notoriously resistant to change, either from within or without. Familial relationships are a form of informal institutions based upon kinship wherein the individuals serve the greater good of the family, be it the immediate family or extended. As with formal institutions, a clan or tribe acts collectively and expects the individual to submit themselves to the group in exchange for identity and collective benefit. They often build this identity around kinship in that the clan or tribe considers themselves descendants from an ancestor of some sort. And like formal institutions, informal institutions can include a hierarchy.

In fact, anthropologist Elman Service proffers a system of classification of societies based upon their hierarchies. These

include:

1. Hunter-gatherer bands, which are generally egalitarian and consist of kinship bonds. These societies are usually subsistence-based, with little specialization in roles.
2. Tribal societies, which are kinship-based but with more hierarchy and social rank due to a higher population. These can be subsistence-based or with domesticated plants and animals for a more sedentary and specialized lifestyle.
3. Chiefdoms, which are also based upon kinship but with a formal leader and aristocracy acting as permanent institutions, which can include monarchies. These are almost always agrarian societies with a food surplus and large population to allow for specialized roles, ranks, and jobs.
4. Civilizations, which are complex societies no longer based upon kinship and instead have many social hierarchies, formal institutions, and usually a state government.

Politics and Economics

Politics in its most basic form is the act of getting what you want, often by impressing your will upon others. This can take the form of convincing, manipulation, or even coercion, and politics always involves hierarchy and power dynamics in social situations. However, when politics appears in fantasy, it's usually regarding governments and political institutions, which make up the field of political science. And when discussing politics in this manner, we are usually referring to **states**, which are organized governments overseeing a specific territory that can interact with other states. As Max Weber points out, states ultimately control the legitimate use of violence with police and military forces, through which they punish those who take part in unsanctioned violence. Unlike chiefdoms, which can devolve into civil war over who will take the mantle of chief next, states remain relatively unchanged after losing a leader and pass on the position without dissolving. Ironically, even though one of the defining characteristics of a state society is that it continues to exist after the loss of a leader, state societies are notoriously unstable and often topple within a matter of generations. The Roman Empire casts a long shadow across Europe, but barely survived 500 years. This is in contrast to the acephalous, leaderless societies of hunter-gatherers, which is how humanity spent 90% of its existence and

have remained relatively unchanged over the millennia. That said, most hunter-gatherer societies have either adopted the ways of state societies or been displaced by them.

There are dozens of ways to categorize governments, but we'll only deal with state societies since most fantasy stories take place within those realms. The major breakdowns are **autocracy**, in which supreme power concentrates in the hands of one individual or polity; **democracy**, in which the people elect a governing body in some fashion; and **oligarchy**, in which power rests in a small group of people like nobility, the wealthy, or religious leaders. Other distinctions between government types fall more along economic lines, which we'll discuss momentarily, and the realm of fantasy deals with many government types that no longer exist, such as city-states and fascism. *Airbender's* four nations are autocracies in that the Earth Kingdom and Fire Nation, along with the Northern Water Tribe, are ruled by kings or chiefs, whereas the Southern Water Tribe seems more acephalous. The war in *The Lord of the Rings* is a battle between multiple kingdoms, to which even little hamlets, such as the Shire, owe their allegiance to. The Seven Kingdoms of Westeros are an autocracy wherein the king rules, although it could be argued that each warden acts as their own king working either with or against the

others during the war, which would make it more of an oligarchy. Star Wars and Harry Potter are both battles between democracies and autocracies, with the Republic and Ministry of Magic representing the former, whereas the Empire and Voldemort's rebellion represent the latter.

As these examples show, multiple governing types can exist within the same world. And when multiple governing types butt up against each other, the likelihood of war looms. In fact, some anthropologists have noted how warfare is tied to population density, with professional soldiers being an outgrowth of specialization that agriculture accounts for. So although warfare exists in acephalous societies, the overall lethality increases exponentially when involving states. This is interesting because these professional soldiers rarely have a personal, individual animosity against their adversaries. Yet because these enemies are suddenly a part of the out-group and the fellow soldiers are a part of the in-group, the individuals can soon view these impersonal adversaries as personal enemies.

It's impossible to think about warfare without thinking about **empires**, which are multinational states with political hegemony over other ethnicities, cultures, or nations. Empires exert control over the other nations, usually through conquest, although the degree of

control can range from total domination to minor taxation. Diversity is important in defining an empire, though, since it is not homogeneous due to the annexation of other regions or states. These conquered regions are unequal to the citizens in the empire itself, although the rights of citizenship can be bequeathed, as with the Roman Empire. Due to conquest, most empires are contiguous and expand from a central hub that was the original territory, although some seafaring empires existed with colonies in other continents, as with the British Empire.

State societies are known for their laws, which exist (or at least should) separate from and after a change in ruler. **Rule of law** refers to the idea that laws extend to the lawmakers as well as the general populous, which contrasts with autocracy and monarchy. Because of the arcane inspiration of ancient analogue cultures, many fantasy laws might seem bizarre by today's standards. Laws are a great example of worldview in artifact form via a codified system of right and wrong along with legal consequences for deviance. Being that worldview influences them, laws often trace their origins to religious understandings of morality.

One way state societies maintain order is through a police force ensuring individuals obey the laws. The second means is through the

military, which defends the state sovereignty from outside forces and sometimes from within. Militaries differ significantly based upon what type of society they take place in, with hunter-gatherers having to convince their neighbors to go to war alongside them, whereas clans and tribes often martial their kin to fight with them. Chiefdoms may have professional soldiers to defend the aristocracy but may also conscript soldiers when necessary. States frequently have standing armies of professional soldiers, which are an institution with its own customs, rituals, symbols, and sense of identity.

Economics is the study of production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services. It also seldom graces the fantasy genre as a conceit in and of itself, although it appears anytime commerce takes the stage. **Scarcity**, in which people put higher value on rare things and assign lesser value to things in abundance, undergirds the field of economics. Value is also inherently fickle, as demonstrated by diamonds serving no purpose in a survival sense. They also serve very few practical purposes, yet their cost has ballooned over the last hundred years due to the value we ascribe to them, which is then compounded with an artificially created scarcity.

Fantasy economies are interesting in that many fantasy conceits alter the sense of scarcity in the world through magic or impossible

materials and abilities. A society of creatures capable of flight would most likely place less value on horses because they would not need to travel by land. Magic also could significantly affect scarcity by being able to produce impossible items that render other goods or services obsolete, or even very common items could flood the market. Harry Potter deals with scarcity in an interesting manner in that even though magic renders time-consuming tasks like sweeping up or repairing a room effortless, and food could be conjured out of thin air, scarcity still exists in the Wizarding world. Sometimes certain objects are considered better than others, such as Harry's Nimbus 2000 opposed to the Comet. Other items are rarer, such as invisibility cloaks, or difficult to make, such as the Felix Felicis. So although it appears no wizard ever needs to work to survive, a system of scarcity still exists that requires an economic system in the story.

But for most fantasy worlds, economics rears its head in the form of trade and coinage. Humans have been exchanging goods since at least the Bronze Age. Barter and negotiation are still used to this day, although many state societies use currency, which is anything accepted in exchange for goods and services. While we often think of money as either coins or paper, other commodities have been used in the past, including cattle, tea, and salt. States often

interject themselves in creating currency and add legitimacy to it by designating a specific value to it, either by exchanging it for a set amount of items like gold and silver or decreeing it to be legal tender through fiat. One of the great drives in human nature is accumulating wealth, which often comes in the form of money. Wars have been fought to ensure profit as well as enslavement and eradication of different peoples so the flow of wealth continues.

The accumulation of wealth as a drive for people in power is so great that one way to categorize governments is by their economic system. Most medieval European analogues deal with **feudalism**, which was the division between the lords that protected the fiefs and the vassals that worked the land in exchange for protection. Steampunk, gaslamp, and other more modern fantasy subgenres deal with **socialism**, which is where the workers or government own and manage the means of production, and **capitalism**, where individuals own the means of production. **Despotism**, which means an individual or institution controls the laws and resources of an area, often appears as an outgrowth of an antagonist, as does totalitarianism and tribalism.

Another way economic scarcity reveals itself in fantasy is through populations and specialization. With a sedentary chiefdom or

civilization, there is room for specialization among the populous for goods and services. However, these goods and services need a large enough population to support them. A village of fifty people might well have plenty of farmers and a market through which they trade, but might not be large enough to support a full-time metalsmith or shoemaker. But as the population in the area rises, so does the opportunity for such occupations, which is why one would find more variable careers near cities. The same holds true for specialized materials, which not only need to be near the readily available resource but also depends on specialists who can handle, transport, and be willing to part with said materials. And just because an object or service is available, that does not mean it will be affordable.

Religion and Education

As mentioned in the chapter on metaphysics, **religion** is the cultural system of behaviors, morals, ethics, and worldviews in which humans deal with supernatural, metaphysical, and spiritual conceptions. Most often this takes the form of beliefs, practices, and social organization around these supernatural beings and how we relate to them. One of the first questions of cultural worldview is how the world began, which is often attributed to a deity, meaning religion and cultural worldviews are so entwined it is often impossible to

untangle them. Clergy or priests are mainstays in organized religion and act as authorities on interpreting the wills of deities, often having abilities granted to them from the deities in question in the fantasy genre. **Theocracy** is a government where the religious leaders and practices control the laws in addition to the religious norms and rituals.

There are countless religions in the real world, and every culture throughout recorded history has a form of religion. Although there are often more comparative differences between religions than similarities, most usually deal with the **divine** and the **profane**. The former are qualities that are considered aspirational and like the deities, whereas we abhor the latter for being an anathema to the deities. Social interactions and instructions pass these conventions along, and social components make up a large part of **worship**, which is an act of religious devotion towards deities or an ideal.

We discussed monotheistic versus polytheistic religions in the section on metaphysics, but as Steve Winter points out in *The Kobold Guide to Worldbuilding*, role-playing games favor polytheistic religions. These religions, often led by deities at war with others in their pantheon, lead to more potential conflict within the story, which allows for more drama. However, unlike the real world, the fantasy

genre allows deities and entities to appear to their followers and make their positions known with no intermediary or ambiguity. This could cause many reverberations regarding faith, atheism, and agnosticism. Instead of ever doubting if a god exists, it might be more of a matter of finding a god the individual personally agrees with or that interacts with them on a personal level.

Other forms of religion not tied to deities include **animism**, wherein all objects, creatures, and places are imbued with a spiritual essence. All things have agency and are essentially alive to animists. Items imbued with significance and power are often referred to as **fetishes**, the most famous being the voodoo doll, and **totems**, which are imbued emblems representing a group of people tied to a specific spirit. **Ancestor worship** involves the belief that deceased ancestors still exist, are still a part of the family, and can intervene with the living world on their descendants' behalf. In these cases, the forms of worship might be for the sake of devotion, to ward off negative events, or for the spirits to intercede with deities on their behalf. **Shamanism** is the belief that specific individuals have access to and influence over the spiritual realm, usually derived by ritual and entering altered states. And this smattering of non-institutional religions just scratches the countless ways in which religion manifests

itself in the real world, the possibilities of which become all the greater when including fantasy conceits.

Education in its most basic form is socialization in which we teach the youth what they need to know to become functioning members of society. This can come from the informal instruction of guardians as to how to act in public, to institutions with no other mandate than to instruct the next generation. Formal institutions as repositories for information are fairly new in the history of humanity, with public libraries dating back to clay tablets in Sumer in 2600 BC, and universities beginning around the eighth century. However, most information passed along to others takes place through informal means. In *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Diamond mentions how the Fore people of Papua New Guinea were experts on the land and were able to identify hundreds of unique types of plants, animals, and fungi and know which ones were edible. He maintains this rivaled any formal education in terms of scope and depth. This parallels the informal instruction that the Wildlings require to survive in such an inhospitable climate, a fact made even more evident when the formally educated Sam attempts to endure there.

Like technology, the distribution of education throughout the populous matters a great deal. In certain societies, we restrict formal

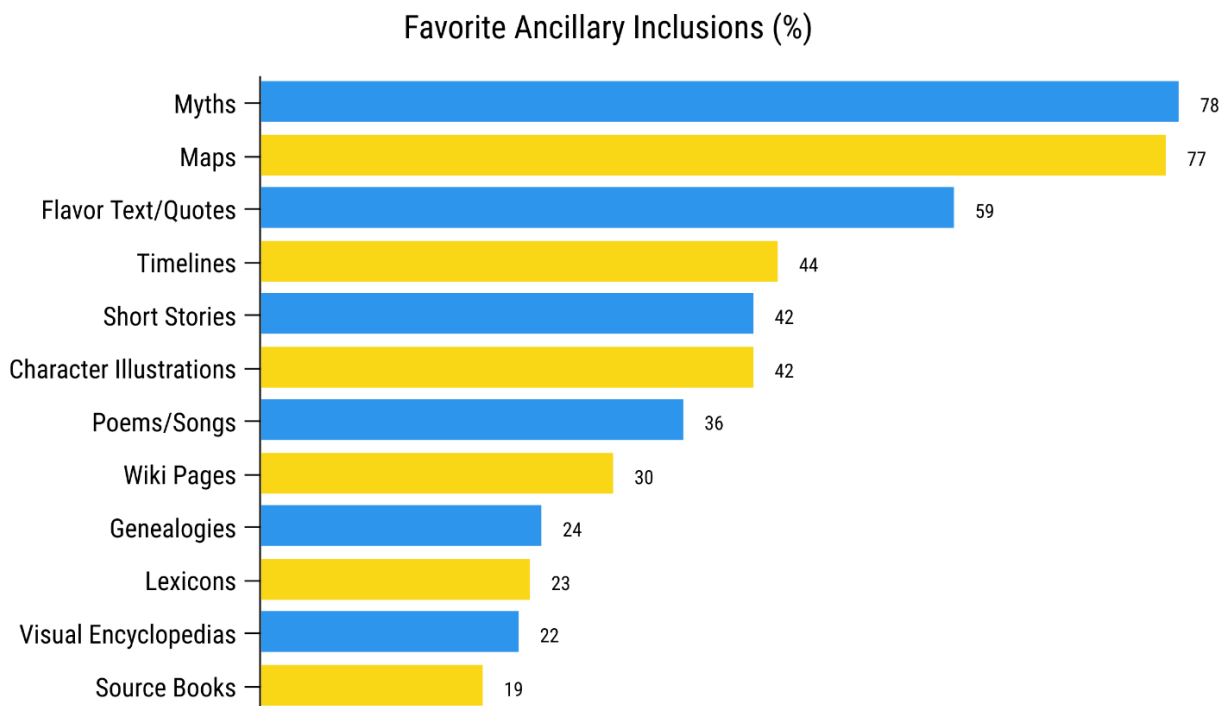
education to certain classes, ethnicities, or genders. The amount of education we afford individuals also depends on social factors, as is what level of education is necessary for the individual to be considered a viable member of society. Although commonly known for their human-sacrifices, the Aztecs educated all children, be they peasants or royalty. But what they taught depended on the students' social classes and genders, with male nobles learning leadership, religion, astronomy, and art at the calmecac, and the lower classes learning agriculture, trade skills, and fighting techniques at the telpochcalli. Girls attended a separate school to learn household skills, crafts, and religious rituals. Formal education is also used for indoctrination, as Aang discovers when attending a Fire Nation classroom, where he witnesses how they positively portray the Fire Lord that wiped out his own clan. Regardless of social status, all humans soak up information, and as worldbuilders it is important to know the scope of their knowledge and the means in which the characters learned it. The content of the characters' knowledge also needs to correspond to the means and methods available to them in the created culture to maintain audience immersion.

Arts, Humanities, and Linguistics

Art and the humanities are uniquely human endeavors. Although there are cases of animals making paintings, we should note that these are always individual animals instead of the species as a whole, and they do so only after being taught by humans. Physical artistic depictions date back eight thousand years, and there's a good likelihood these are just the few that have survived long enough to make it into the archeological record. Other insubstantial forms of art, such as storytelling, music, and dance, likely coincided with these images carved into stone, meaning art is a substantial part of what makes humans human.

Art and the humanities tie into worldview more than any of the other artifacts because art, by its very nature, is expression intending to elicit an emotional reaction from an audience. Many motifs, styles, and patterns act as signifiers for a culture's art, which can be a shorthand in the process of worldbuilding, as in how haikus are synonymous with Japanese culture. How the art expresses the worldview and its difference from those in the real world can provide a great opportunity for authors and audiences, especially when taking fantasy conceits into account. The style of art from a species without sight would differ significantly from our own, as would that of creatures with additional senses. Many of our stories are based

around Joseph Campbell's heroic myth, but there is no reason to expect this to be the standard story progression for other intelligent species. Stories and myths reflect the culture's values, and so it follows that tales and myths from different worldviews could lead to some fascinatingly divergent morals and archetypes.



Tolkien refers to these constructed mythologies, lores, and histories within constructed worlds as **mythoepeia**, which rate higher than even maps as audiences' favorite inclusions in fantasy worlds. These often appear in the form of quotes, epigraphs, and recitations of texts and songs preceding chapters or mentioned by the characters. The most famous example would be the many elf, dwarf,

and hobbit songs within *The Lord of the Rings*, but *A Song of Ice and Fire* also has the infamous “The Rains of Castamere,” with lyrics written by Martin for *A Storm of Swords*, and the music later composed for the series and performed on the show. These texts within stories add depth by providing a sense of history, but they can quickly overstay their welcome. In video games, role-playing games, and with action figures, this is called **flavor text**: it adds spice by giving backstory, history, and context without affecting the game mechanics or story in any substantial way. These bits of text within the story are **ephemera**, which are transitional printed materials that are not meant to exist for the long-term, such as advertisements, diary entries, letters, posters, and the like, that exist only within the world itself.

The humanities are disciplines that study society and culture in a more critical or speculative fashion than social sciences and includes the classics, law, linguistics, philosophy, religion, and history, just to name a few. With religion and philosophy, they deal directly with worldview and attempting to uncover those first principles that undergird a culture’s system of thought. In the cases of architecture, anthropology, and history, the goal is still to crack the worldview code, but the study goes about gathering the artifacts and deciphering their

meaning. Cultural context is key in these fields, particularly history, in that the dry recitation of facts does no one any good. It's the understanding of the events, their meanings and importance in context, that makes history so interesting. History is also the inspiration for analogue cultures, which the author must use to ensure their specific details correctly establish authenticity. How history shapes analogue cultures should also inspire authors how to create their own sense of history such that the story does not begin and end with a single throughline. A sense of history is one of the core components in creating a credible, complete world with depth. All our fantasy exemplars excel in this regard, with full histories ranging back thousands of years to create a firm foundation for the current storylines. Martin includes the ethnic migrations of the First Men and Andals to Westeros, whereas Tolkien traces Middle Earth evolution in terms of ages spanning thousands of years before Bilbo and Frodo depart the Shire. The offhand mention of the Clone Wars and the diminishing of the Jedi help accomplish this in Star Wars, whereas *Airbender's* main throughline begins one hundred years after the start of a war Aang sought to avoid.

In effect, the present storyline in inspired worldbuilding is always the culmination of numerous antecedent events.

Linguistics is the study of languages, which play an interesting role within the fantasy genre. Most urban and overlaid fantasies have the full scope of real-world languages to draw from when constructing their stories, which are not insignificant in number. There are presently over ninety languages of more than ten million speakers, with eight having more than one hundred million speakers worldwide (Mandarin, Spanish, English, Hindi, Bengali, Portuguese, Russian, and Japanese), which account for more than a third of the world's population. Yet these eight biggest languages are a tiny fraction of the estimated 5,000–7,000 total languages presently being spoken on Earth—and that doesn't include dead languages.

The densest collection of languages belongs to Papua New Guinea, where around 850 exist in an area roughly the size of Texas. This is why many in New Guinea use a **pidgin** language, which is a grammatically simplified language used for trade that comprises vocabularies drawn from numerous languages. Fantasy worldbuilding usually takes a much more streamlined approach to language, with pidgin languages for each species, even though this does not square with the real world, which does not currently have a universal language for “human.” And the use of languages raises some secondary issues when it comes to translation. Because of the long

shadow Tolkien and the other early English fantasy authors cast, we generally assume that inhabitants of secondary worlds speak a formalized, antiquated version of English. Never mind that during the Middle Ages—the analogue culture most often chosen for epic fantasy—Old English, Old High German, and Old French were the dominant languages, all of which are nearly incomprehensible to modern audiences, as can be seen in the first line of the Lord’s Prayer:

Modern English: “Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name...”

Middle English (~AD 1400): “Oure fadir that art in heuennes halowid be thi name...”

Old English (~AD 1000): “Fæder ūre, ðū ðē eart on heofonum, sī ðīn nama gehālgod...”

Were linguistic realism in either prose or dialogue required for fantasy, lines like these would be far more common.

But it is not the job of the fantasy author to so strictly adhere to accurate language representation. This is fantasy, after all, with the author usually writing their tale in their native tongue, which is generally English. Yet the odds of a secondary-world character

speaking English are even lower than the chances of finding another hospitable planet with the same tilt, rotation, and circumference as Earth. And those odds were already infinitesimal. It is therefore assumed, consciously or not, that the author is acting as translator for the story in question and simply describing events and dialogue in English. Tolkien established this tradition by explicitly calling himself a translator in the opening to *The Hobbit*, which accounts for his apparent anachronisms in using the Georgian calendar and references to trains. In fact, the names we know the principle protagonists by—Frodo, Samwise, Merry, and Pippin—are English translations of their hobbit names—Froda, Banazir, Kalimac, and Razanur (Tolkien, Appendix F, Part II, On Translation). In picking their anglicized names for the hobbits, Tolkien makes them seem more familiar for his audience. But oftentimes an alien name is the intent, and this is often accomplished with the addition of apostrophes, duplicate letters, or unexpected punctuation. The apostrophe has been a mainstay of science fiction and fantasy names since Edgar Rice Burroughs and H.P. Lovecraft, although it is often attributed to Anne McCaffery for bringing it to prominence in her *Dragonriders of Pern* series. Tolkien popularized the diaeresis (better known as the umlaut) as a stand-in for accent marks. And, as Le Guin pointed out,

many young authors emulate what they love, leading to odd spellings becoming a trope in and of themselves. This, in turn, has sparked a backlash over the years against names that are difficult to pronounce.

The translator argument should counteract many anachronisms, both in prose and characters' speech patterns, but not all audiences accept it. The author acting as translator is more difficult in tighter points of view, such as first-person and third-person omniscient, where the author's choice of words must reflect the characters' understandings, worldviews, biases, and educations. The more a word choice deviates from the audience's understanding of an analogue culture, the more it breaks the sense of immersion. And numerous breaks, intellectually justified or not, quickly add up to a negative experience.

The translator argument also brings up an interesting situation in using clearly foreign words within the story world. The author should know the meaning of any foreign words, and as translator, there is no reason not to provide explanation to the audience. When a character switches languages within the story, we do not expect the author to change the language they write in, after all. So the choice to use a foreign word within a story is a conscious choice on the author's part to impart a sense of strangeness or otherness, as was

the case with the Dothraki arakh. The curved swords the Dothraki favor on horseback could have easily been called either a sickle or the more analogue-appropriate “khopesh,” yet Martin chose an entirely invented word to give it more significance and show how it was culturally specific. This is often done in real-world stories when authors use foreign words that have more cultural implications than simply translating the word into English as well.

A **conlanguage** is a portmanteau for “constructed language”—i.e., a language created specifically for a story world. Tolkien again set the standard for this with his creation of the Elfish language long before even writing *The Hobbit*, and conlanguages are a staple of the fantasy genre. As with foreign words inserted in real-world materials, this is generally done to make the audience reexamine their mundane reality by giving a sense of otherness, to use a word that has a particular cultural context, find a word with the perfect implications, or any combination of the three. This is no accident for authors, and audiences should consider which reasons the creators chose when assessing the effectiveness of this worldbuilding detail. However, renaming common items that serve no purpose to the plot, characters, or worldbuilding can be considered a smerp when done just for the sake of easy output details.

There are innumerable resources to creating a conlanguage, so I will not include them here, although a more comprehensive list is available at my website. Yet most Earth languages are based upon vocalization, with a written language appearing many years later. Some fantasy species, or even humans, might not be reliant upon speech, opening up many conlanguage possibilities and making the act of translation even more interesting.

Translation, word acquisition, and language drift are other things to take into account when considering culture in worldbuilding. Humans are not static creatures and have migrated across the planet numerous times, taking their languages with them while adopting aspects of others. But even those displaced by these invasions and migrations leave calling cards in the form of vestigial words. Place names are an outstanding example of previous cultures, with the state of Florida bearing a Spanish name, even though its capital of *Tallahassee* is a Muskogee word given by the Creek people. In fact, twenty-six names of the fifty United States bear Native American origins. Many of these words, like worldviews, are so ingrained in the populous that they never question where they came from. For instance, the suffix of *-chester* in town names is drawn from the Roman word for *fort* or *-shire* being an Old English word for *county*,

which shares the same root with the word *sheriff*. *Avon* is the Celtic word for *river*, which makes the four *Avon Rivers* in Britain rather redundant. Other buried word meanings include surnames, which in the European tradition frequently denote whom they descended from (*Johnson* and *Madison*), their ancestors' professions (*Fletcher* and *Cooper*), locations or features (*Brooks* and *Stone*), or from specific ancestral traits (*Short*, *White*, *Drinkwine*, etc.).

Technology is another means for watching the drift and adoption of foreign words. In *Guns, Germs, and Steel*, Diamond points out how the etymology of certain words like *gun* and *banana* can be traced across the Polynesian islands, and based upon linguistic evidence compared to settlement dates, were used to determine when these groups diverged. If many languages have similar root words for the same object, such as *banana*, that means the languages diverged after the discovery or invention of the object. However, as with the case of *gun*, if there are many different root words for the same object, this means the languages had already diverged by the time the technology appeared and thus made up their own individual words for it. A modern counterexample to this phenomenon would be that the word *zombie* is the same in most languages despite its Haitian origins then made popular by the American George Romero

in the 1960–'70s. This is because the concept of zombies did not become prevalent in popular culture until after the invention of the television, at which point it spread around the world in a matter of years. As such, most people adopted the exotic term into their language instead of attempting to find an existing term to affix to it or creating a whole new word.

50. Creating Cultures

Fantasy and science fiction share the same rarified air in that they are the only two genres where it is not only possible to create impossible creatures, but it's also expected. Yet we are again caught in the catch-22 of elucidating impossible concepts using human cultural analogues, which leaves us attempting to describe a new color using only existing colors. This creates a new dichotomy: that of adoration or abhorrence.

Having spent more than a decade working with screenwriters, both professional and aspiring, I've experienced firsthand how authors fall in love with their characters, which is a good thing to a certain degree: the authors can't possibly excite audiences about a character, plot, or conflict unless they are excited as well. Without that personal investment, the writing becomes nothing but drudgery, which comes across to the consumer. But the inverse can also occur,

where the author falls in love with their protagonist to the point that they lose perspective on the character. And, as anyone who has fallen head over heels can attest, when you're in love with someone, you think they're perfect. This leads to the character being portrayed without any faults and being capable of overcoming any obstacle, which leads to the audience labeling the overly capable character a **Mary Sue/Marty Stu**. This insult originated in the *Star Trek: The Original Series* fanfic community in the 1970s, where a created character acts as an author avatar who befriends the canon characters, who then quickly fall in love with the insert character after seeing firsthand how beautiful and capable she is. But the term has morphed over the years to encompass any character the audience doesn't care for, especially those as seen without flaws. It's important to note that most people are only aware of the female iteration of this trope but not always the male equivalent. As we discussed in chapter twenty-four, a lot of online blowback against Rey occurred in the third Star Wars trilogy, with many people claiming she was a Mary Sue because she is a natural pilot, a Force-adept able to accomplish Jedi tricks Luke spends years developing, an expert in starship engineering, can shoot well without ever having held a blaster before, and defeats Kylo Ren in a lightsaber duel despite never wielding one

before. And that is just in *The Force Awakens*. As the third trilogy continued, the argument became that she is capable of doing whatever the plot needs her to accomplish at that very moment, which is not only lazy worldbuilding but lazy characterization and plotting. However, people seldom consider Anakin a Marty Stu, even though he is also an excellent pilot, a Force-adept with more midi-chlorians than even Yoda, and an expert mechanic able to create C-3P0 out of scrap at the age of nine. Both wield nearly the same abilities within their first introductions, but the complaints of being a perfect character without flaws is more often lobbed at female characters rather than males. Over time, one of the strategies that evolved for Mary Sues to exit from fanfics was for them to sacrifice themselves to save the canon crew, wherein they would be lauded as being too good for this flawed world.

Alas, the same author impulse for falling in love with a character holds true for worldbuilding as well. Tolkien was correct when he compared worldbuilding to playing God, and it is indeed intoxicating to wield such a power over a population when creating them from scratch. If you've ever seen new parents cooing over their infant, you know there's another set of people who can see no faults in their creation. And it makes sense authors would fall in love with their

worlds since so much is tied up in the cultural worldview, which is often an outpouring of the author's own worldview in how the world "should" be. Since this is an aspirational approach, it makes sense the author would be unable or unwilling to see the flaws in the created culture because it is meant to be perfect. This unfortunately leaves the author with the cultural equivalent of a Mary Sue. And since a perfect society is one without any conflict, stakes, or dilemma, this is the death-knell for a narrative. This is why many authors who have fallen in love with their cultural creations seek the Mary Sue strategy of gracefully extricating them by having their numbers in decline or by being nearly extinct.

They were in fact too good for this world.

Again, the origin of this can be traced back to Tolkien and his love affair with elves, the first and fairest of the children of Eru [Ilúvatar](#). Wise and immortal, their songs are the fairest, they live in blissful peace with nature, do not need sleep, and are nimble enough to walk across snow without leaving a footprint. They are, in effect, perfect. Which was why Tolkien was wise not to center his story around elves and their conflict-crushing perfection. Only Legolas and Elrond play much of a role in *The Lord of the Rings*, and their roles are rather slight when compared to the flawed hobbits and humans.

What's more, Tolkien embraced the idea that the elves are too perfect for Middle Earth, which is why they are in decline and depart for the Utter West to usher in the end of the Third Age and begin the rise of man.

Lucas went a different route with the Jedi in Star Wars, at first portraying them as peacekeepers whose influence diminishes due to the betrayal of Darth Vader. Obi-Wan refers to the lightsaber as “an elegant weapon for a more civilized age” before demonstrating it is more than a match for anyone with a blaster. In the first Star Wars trilogy, the Jedi are seen as saviors and something worth aspiring to. They are wise and compassionate, and in the case of Yoda, demonstrate a quirky sense of humor. They are presented as a perfect culture, which is why it was wise for Lucas to focus on the last remaining Jedi as he comes into his powers rather than centering the story on the Jedi society at the height of its influence. This makes Lucas' choice in the prequels to portray the Jedi Council as mired in bureaucracy while their powers diminish rather interesting and perhaps an apologetic attempt at explaining how it was that this previously perfect culture fell.

Even *Airbender* is not immune to creating the perfect culture that is too pure for the world. Although not explored much in the

series, the Air Nomads are the most spiritual of the four tribes, which is why every member of their tribe can bend, as opposed to the least-spiritual Earth Kingdom, where a much smaller proportion of the population displays their abilities. In their few appearances via flashbacks, the Air Nomads are fun, quirky, yet deeply spiritual. They too are too perfect for their world, which is why they are exterminated before the series even kicked off. And having the villains of the series, the Fire Nation, being the ones to eradicate the Air Nomads demonstrates the inverse impulse in creating cultures: demonizing the enemy.

Deciding our enemies embody all that is evil is also nothing new. They are the other, the out-group, after all, which means they can be dismissed as a single entity. One of the other aspects of out-groups is that they are considered homogeneous, which means once you know one, you know them all. “The only good X is a dead X” is a common incarnation of this. The Fire Nation is not portrayed as much more than a collection of faceless enemies, with one of the main throughlines being Zuko realizing his culture needs to atone for its transgressions against the world. He goes from being indoctrinated to rejecting the worldview he had not questioned until confronted by it.

It should be noted that although *Airbender* did portray most of the Fire Nation as one-note antagonists, Zuko's uncle Iroh eschews this portrayal, along with a few other minor characters. Still, the villains' whole culture is portrayed as a planet of hats, with their fire bending, tendency for technology, and warlike nature defining the majority of the Fire Nation. The same holds true for the Empire in *Star Wars*; most of the Death Eaters in *Harry Potter*; and the Freys, Ironborn, Dothraki, Lannisters, and Targaryens in *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Any variation from the baseline of evil comes from the depiction of major characters, which are portrayed as outliers from their cultures.

This brings up another truism of the fantasy and science fiction genres: the fewer the number of people portrayed from that culture, the more a character will be considered the embodiment of that society. This is an inverse from the planet of hats in that traits from the singular character are assumed to be true for the entire culture or species. This springs mostly from the inductive reasoning in cognitive processing, where one draws conclusions for a whole based on a sampling. This makes sense from an evolutionary standpoint in that if the first dog we encounter tried to bite us, we cautiously approach them from then on under the assumption all dogs will do the same.

But inductive reasoning is not nearly as accurate as deductive reasoning, which is the basis for the scientific method, and can lead to startlingly incorrect results when presented with a single sample. In cases when there is only one character from that culture, the audience assumes all members of that culture act in the same manner, much in the same way early audiences assumed all Vulcans behaved like Spock since he was the first and only Vulcan they encountered for many years.²⁸ We instinctively assume all those in an out-group are homogeneous, after all, and only revise our inductive conclusions when presented with several counter examples.

It's tempting to go down this path, with the villains clearly evil because of their cultural socialization, whereas the heroes and created cultures are virtuous and without flaws. But this ignores the human condition in that we are composite creatures encompassing good and evil in equal measure. Terry Pratchett probably put it best when he said, "Humans need fantasy to be human. To be the place where the falling angel meets the rising ape." So, with that in mind, it is never realistic to portray a culture without faults any more than it is to portray a monolithic society bent upon nothing but evil for the sake of evil. Beauty needs blemishes to be believable, just as the monstrous need to be credibly redeemed. This not only holds true for

human cultures but also those outside our species as well. Elves, dwarves, orcs, and goblins are fantasy mainstays²⁹, and how they and other invented species are portrayed in the genre matters more than we acknowledge.

Unlike human cultures portrayed in fantasy, which draw from analogue cultures that are then deviated from based upon the fantasy conceits, non-human characters are seldom drawn from a single culture. There are some exceptions, with dwarves frequently speaking with a Scottish brogue, whereas the elves are decidedly English, but for the most part, they adhere to a general medieval European *mélange* rather than a specific culture. They carry with them many vestigial traits from this general time period such as royalty, courtly intrigue, and fashion, but it is far more difficult to draw a one-to-one comparison in cultural traits as it is with human cultures. This picking of piecemeal traits for non-human cultures is wise for the author, especially for species or cultures that are portrayed negatively in the story, which can lead to audiences believing the author views the real-world culture this way. This leads to non-human cultures being more of an amalgamation of traits from several cultures based upon their analogue environments, making their creation fairly similar to how science-fiction authors design species.

This piecemeal approach for non-human cultures should be a freeing experience, but it is still dragged down by audience expectation and adherence to tropes. The more non-human a species appears, the more monstrous they are usually portrayed. They are more alien, after all, which automatically puts them in the out-group. We treat our own species this way, so it stands to reason we'd do the same with those creatures even more alien to us. Perhaps that is why monstrous races are almost always portrayed as evil, because we base them upon ourselves on some unconscious level. Yet for all of our human faults, we are also inherently empathetic creatures, as evidenced by caring for the aged and infirmed even in our prehistoric periods. Evolutionary psychologists believe this empathy is one reason our species, despite being outmatched by many other animals when it comes to physiological weapons, has grown to be the apex predator of the entire planet.

So why then would non-human species lack empathy when it is genetically selected for in our own kind?

These are questions authors must address when creating non-human species and cultures. Most likely they evolved on a similar planet as humans, and convergent evolution dictates they would therefore demonstrate many of the same traits that we humans do in

order to survive in the same niches. As such, it makes sense they possess very similar cultures and social structures to our own, especially the more they physically resemble us. Dolphins have brains nearly equal in size to humans and a close brain-to-body weight ratio, meaning they should have a similar predilection towards empathy despite their peculiar appearance. They also have very complex social structures, which do not resemble our own, despite their capacity for thought and feeling. Parrots, on the other hand, have a smaller brain-to-body weight ratio but have a greater capacity for language even though they are not mammals. But despite similar capabilities with these animals, some cultures hunt dolphins for food and others keep parrots as pets. Even our closest animal relatives in the apes have been driven nearly extinct by our actions. So, with that in mind, how we treat creatures that do not resemble us in the least should be considered thoughtfully, both by audiences and authors. As fantasy fans, we seek out new life and civilizations, so every created species is a chance to add something new to the body of work for others to uncover. It is therefore vital to be mindful what human analogues are being used for non-human species for the author to properly get their intentions across. It is also imperative to reiterate that no culture is monolithic, meaning there is variation throughout

them. Although this does not necessarily need to hold true for non-human species, fantasy fans do seek something unique they can relate to, so it is wise to leave something for fans to cling to even in the most alien of beings.

The interaction of numerous species, particularly ones with the same basic genetic advantages and technological level, offers many opportunities for authors. In effect, the more human-like they become, the more they would compete for the same niche as an apex predator at the top of their food chain. How these species and our own would interact, or them with other species, can best be extrapolated by observing our own interactions. And we humans do not have a great track record, with one of the few times we existed with other similar species being the Neanderthals, which are now extinct. Some believe we simply overcame them in the hunt for food and resources, whereas others maintain we exterminated our genetic cousins.

More and more evidence of Neanderthal DNA in Europeans and Denisovan DNA in Asian and oceanic-island populations shows there was some interbreeding between our species, so perhaps not all of our interactions ended in bloodshed. Within our own species, humans from different backgrounds, nations, and cultures often clash. War is often the outcome, but other options also exist. The fourfold model

looks at acculturation strategies wherein one culture overcomes another. **Assimilation** is when someone adopts the cultural norms and beliefs of the dominant culture and rejects their original culture. **Separation** involves the individual rejecting the dominant culture in favor of preserving their original culture, which often leads to minority enclaves within the dominant culture. **Integration** involves the individual adopting the cultural norms and beliefs of the dominant culture while still retaining their original culture. **Marginalization** occurs when the individual rejects both their original culture and the dominant culture. It could be argued that Aragorn moves from assimilation through marginalization and finally to integration because he is a human raised by elves who originally has nothing to do his human heritage. He then chooses to live alone in the woods as a ranger before finally accepting his role as king of Gondor, where he rules with his elven wife.

The Fourfold Model of Acculturation

Do they maintain original cultural
identity and characteristics?

Maintain relationships with larger society?		No	Yes
	Yes	Assimilation	Integration
	No	Marginalization	Separation

We can extrapolate that those cultural coping mechanisms would hold true when other humanoid species interact with each other. It is common in fantasy for each species to set up a territory of their own, which leads to the question how trade and other interactions would carry out. Humans have a habit of migration, usually by either **pull factors**, which draw the immigrant to an area, or **push factors**, which drive the people away from an area in search of a better one. This leads to the question as to whether there would be separate enclaves in other species' territories or more integration. Enclaves and ghettos both exist within the real world, with these areas often embracing their status as a form of identity that can be a two-edged sword when dealing with the dominant culture. Yet most states are divorced from the concept of kinship in that they are drawn together by location rather than personal relationship, so the extent to which a mixed-species society is heterogeneous or homogeneous should be considered as well as how well the factions get along.

In her workshop on worldbuilding, Jemisin refers to **differentiation**, which is where one culture forms part of their identity by contrasting themselves with another nearby culture. Athens and Sparta are great examples in that both despised the other despite sharing the same Greek heritage and only 150-kilometer distance

between them. That the United States still clings to the antiquated British Imperial System when the rest of the world has moved on to the metric system is another example of differentiation that we have dubbed American exceptionalism.³⁰ It would follow that numerous species clamoring for the same niche as the apex predator would use differentiation in worldview when explaining their own culture superiority to other species.

Because, in the final analysis, it all comes down to worldview. In terms of culture, this drives each group as they make sense of the created world and their place within it. Their place needs to reflect the story and character requirements of the author but also needs to be consistent and complete. Creative and compelling wouldn't hurt either when it comes to worldview and the cultural artifacts that manifest because of it. Because when an author creates a fantasy culture with its own unique worldview, they are in effect reflecting the author's own. The author should then be mindful if these cultures serve only the needs of the story or if they make sense in their place in the created world. Because, like it or not, worldbuilding is an art, which is a sense of self-expression intending to elicit an emotional response from the audience. Therefore, the author needs to ensure their worlds are portrayed as precisely as possible. Audiences, in turn, need to be

mindful when assessing worldbuilding effectiveness as to whether or not the author is getting their specific vision across rather than if the worldview explicitly adheres to audience members' own. Because we, as fantasy fans, should not be dismayed when new ideas, creatures, and cultures appear.

They are the reason we love the genre, after all.

Part XII: Conclusion

“The most authentic endings are the ones which are already revolving towards another beginning.” —Sam Shepard

Many years ago, I attended the last Grilled Cheese Invitational, where 200 entrants put it all on the line to conjure up the world’s greatest grilled-cheese sandwiches. The competition broke down into four categories: (a) white bread, butter, and American or cheddar cheese; (b) any type of bread, butter, and cheese; (c) any type of bread, butter, cheese, and additional ingredients to make a savory sandwich, (d) ditto as the last list item, but for a sweet dessert sandwich.

As I did my damndest to consume my bodyweight in cheese and carbs, I sampled some truly amazing concoctions. I also got to talking to the competitors and discovered that the most coveted prizes were for category three or category one. Wanting to win the third category made sense to me since it was the most adventurous, to the extent that I sampled some vegan entries despite the main ingredient being explicitly non-vegan. These sandwiches tested boundaries, and I applauded them for it. But I couldn’t comprehend wanting to win such a boring prize for just slapping some cheese

between two slices of white bread with a slathering of butter, especially when everyone else would be using the exact same ingredients.

Then one of the competitors explained it to me: This prize was the most coveted because it displayed the greatest degree of skill. Since everyone had the exact same ingredients, any superiority would be attributed entirely to the chef's cooking prowess.

They were more skillful only because they were so constrained.

I think this best sums up the dichotomy of worldbuilding: the battle between unfettered creativity and the discipline of imposed constraints. We seek the ethereal in terms of imagination while still being chained to the earthen idea of authenticity. And in many ways, we resent the real world for constraining our imaginations. I know I saw this in the film industry with young screenwriters. As one myself, I know I bristled at the idea of structure and learning the "proper" way to compose a story. These traditional rules only got in the way of my "genius," which I insisted should be free to explore ideas most people would barely comprehend.

Or at least that's what I thought at the time.

Screenplay structure, like worldbuilding tropes, exist for a reason, and that is that they are effective. Audiences crave the same (albeit different) and are always looking for something new they can relate to, so these patterns exist because they are tried and true rather than being arbitrarily assigned by some shadowy authority figure. Eschewing the structure and tropes is not an act of freedom, rather the flailing of the uninitiated. And after reading *Save the Cat!*, I realized the real gift of screenplay structure: knowing the rules so I could decide when to follow them or not.

I also became an advocate for screenplay structure in the same way I am for understanding worldbuilding patterns and theories. Every choice an author makes is a willful decision, and as in life, it is best to mindfully make those choices based on all the available information. To those fellow authors I worked with who bristled under the idea of structure, I reframed the issue in the same way the grilled-cheese competitor did: by adhering to constraints you demonstrate your skills. I took heart in that one of my favorite writers, Neil Gaiman, agrees, stating, "It's a wonderful thing, as a writer, to be given parameters and walls and barriers." Like poets writing in the very rigid format of sonnets or haikus, you prove your skills by adhering to the rules while still producing something of beauty.

Creativity without constraints is simply flights of fancy, but creativity that is mindfully focused on a purpose fashions real art and is what marries the artist's imagination with the audience's expectation.

Tolkien compares worldbuilding to stews in which the same simple ingredients are transformed into something wonderful through the chef's skilled hand. What were once scattered and inedible ingredients suddenly become something nourishing and delicious when the worldbuilder has all the implements at hand to create the meal they envision. And for fans, the aim is to not act as snobby food critics, but aficionados appreciating the meal for not only its intent but also the skill in which it is presented.

Because worldbuilding, like any art, be it culinary, visual, or auditory, is a conversation we are better for having had.

FROM THE AUTHOR

Thank you for reading *Worldbuilding for Fantasy Fans and Authors* and for making it all the way to this page. It's every author's fear that no one will ever see the words they tortured themselves over, so knowing that you're reading this hidden message fills me with joy.

But what's next?

Well, if you're one of those fantasy fans, it would be really great if you could leave a review. Reviews and word-of-mouth recommendations weigh nothing, but they're more valuable than gold to us authors. So if you have a second, please [do so over at Amazon](#).

Now, if you're one of those eccentrics who's out to build your own world, I hate to tell you that you probably have a chronic case that will never quite go into remission. But not to worry; there are treatments out there. I personally recommend any of the books listed here in my works-cited section.

And you could check out my other books that are a more hands-on approach to worldbuilding. [101 Worldbuilding Prompts](#) is only just \$.99 over at Amazon.

For a more in-depth dive, pre-order the *Fantasy Worldbuilding Workbook*, which has more than 750 worldbuilding prompts and practices due out later this year.

Finally, you can visit my website, mdpresley.com, for news as well as dozens of free worldbuilding resources.

Acknowledgments

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No less important, special thanks to the authors who took the time to speak to me about their worldbuilding processes. And to those who filled out my endless surveys online, particularly the folks over at /r/worldbuilding and /r/fantasy. Many thanks too to those fellow Sigil Independent and Terrible Ten authors who make the lonely writing endeavor a bit less lonely.

And finally, thanks to my ARC readers, who allowed for this release to be a success due to their hard work.

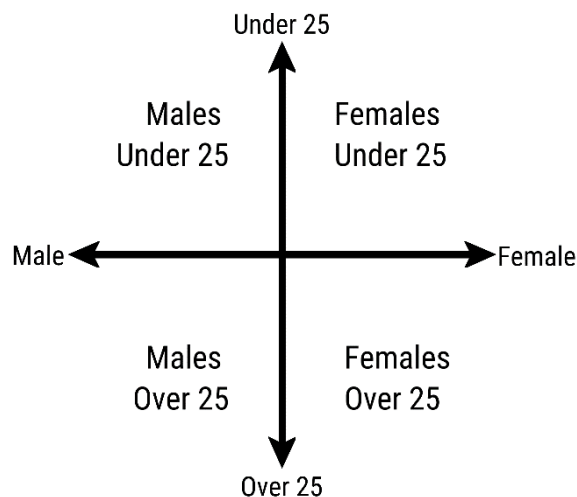
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Appendix 1: Fantasy Taxonomy

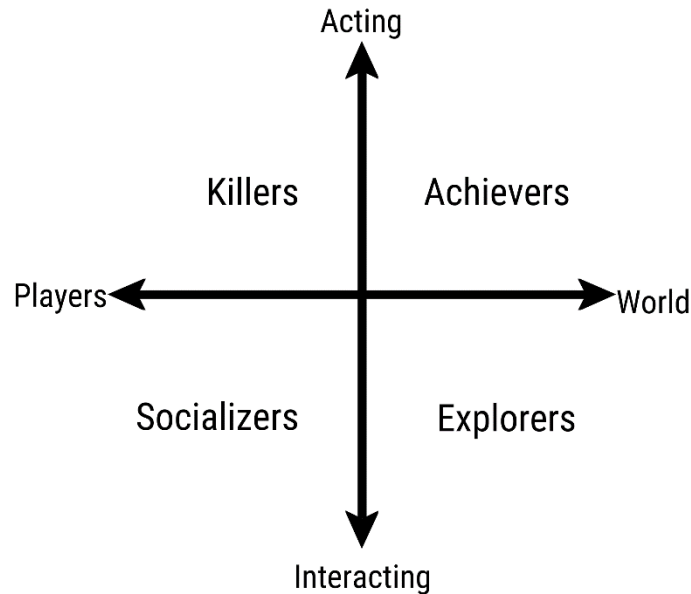
Humans love to categorize things, and in that respect, I am probably the most human of all. In college, I was fascinated by the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator personality test and ceaselessly annoyed my friends by figuring out their types. And while few people personally enjoy being categorized, it is something we instinctually do as a species. So much so that whole industries exist to drill down into the human experience and place people in their respective categories for ease of advertising.



In Hollywood, the old mainstay is the four-quadrants idea, which divides the public along two axes: male/female and above/below twenty-five years of age. The understanding is that males and females want different things in movies, as do those above and below the twenty-five-year dividing line. Most films attempt to cater to at least two of those quadrants, with blockbusters being the mythical **four-quadrant movie**, which will appeal to both men and women above and below the age of twenty-five. These are supposedly the movies with something for everyone to enjoy.

The film industry is not alone in dividing its consumers into four quadrants, with Richard Bartle, who helped create the first multiplayer virtual game back in 1978, constructing his own taxonomy for massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs). Instead of the male/female and age axes, he opted for if the players interacted with other players or the world itself, and if they preferred interacting with or acting upon their environment. This broke down into four types (Hearts, Clubs, Diamonds, Spades: Players Who Suit MUDs., 1996): the Killers, who enjoy competing with and overcoming other players; Achievers, who enjoy gaining points, levels, or resources in the game; Explorers, who prefer uncovering the immersive world around them; and Socializers, who

play the game more for interacting with other players than the game itself.



The Bartle taxonomy has been around for over twenty years, has been taken as a test over a million times, and is a core component of game developers in designing games intended for specific audiences. This taxonomy's simplicity and application appealed to me, and so I wondered if it could be adapted for the fantasy and science fiction genres. For the most part, both genres are categorized by their subgenres and their expectations, which quickly branch out and add complexity to deciding the taxonomy, especially when new subgenres spring up each year. Many others have tried to divide the genre by the level of magic (high/low), interaction with magic (portal/immersive/intrusive/liminal), themes

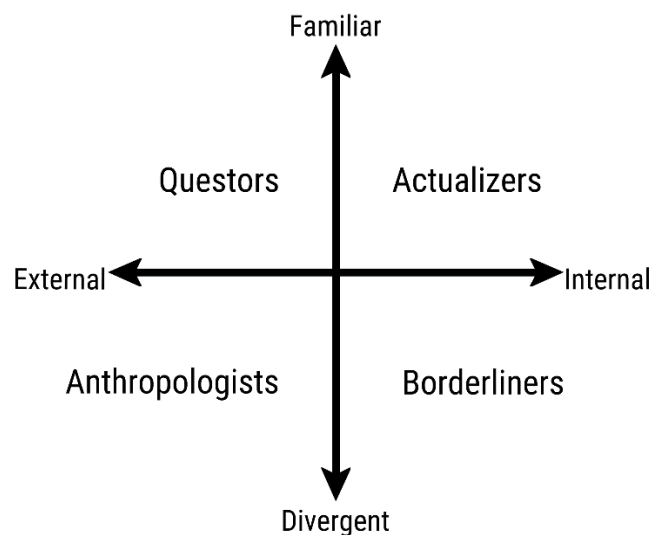
(grimdark, Christian), technology (flintlock, steampunk), or analogue cultures (Celtic, wuxia), just to name a few.

It wasn't until I came across the distinctions between literary fiction, upmarket fiction, and commercial fiction, as well as codifying the genre expectations that I realized I had my four qualities consisting of prose, character, plot, and worldbuilding.³¹ But these four qualities did not organically fit into an easy four-quadrant taxonomy—at least not at first.

After immersing myself in the surveys for this book and seeing audience expectations versus author strategies, a few patterns emerged. The fantasy genre expectation is for worldbuilding, which is usually utilized in a literal journey, although how the journey takes place can vary quite a bit. Seeing how people parsed tropes and their expectations made me realize how much the entertainer's dilemma of “the same but different” also came into play.³² As such, I divided my taxonomy into two axes: the journey on the x-axis, and their expectation on the y-axis. The journey can be either internal or external, which roughly align with the upmarket versus commercial-fiction focus on characters or plot. The y-axis is for the expectation along the journey, be it by audiences or authors, and how they align

to common tropes. Those that desire archetypes and tropes cling closer to the familiar tangent, whereas those who deviate from expectations lean more towards the divergent extreme. The focus on familiar tropes allows for a certain degree of ease in consuming the material, whereas the deviation from norms in the divergent extreme requires an amount of mental effort on the consumer's part. Unfortunately, many authors equate "required work" on the audience's part with intentionally making the prose or characters obtuse. I would also proffer that most people who are employed within the fantasy publishing industry fall closer towards the divergent end of the spectrum, which makes sense when you consider that they do this for a living. Unlike most fantasy consumers, who use stories as a means to escape their everyday world, consuming fantasy is the industry insider's daily existence. It is their job, which means they are inundated by familiar stories over and over. This in turn means they are looking for something that stands out from the same old tropes they encounter each day, which understandably means that they would wind up seeking books that deviate from the established archetypes and traditions. Meanwhile, in the self-published spheres, books that invoke the classic fantasy tropes sell exceedingly well, but are dismissed in the industry

because they cling so closely to the familiar, easy-to-enjoy tropes. I witnessed the same thing while working in the film industry, where readers, producers, and agents sought out scripts that deviated from the norm instead of films that adhered to audience expectations simply because they were personally sick of seeing the same thing over and over again.



When combined, these two axes divide the fantasy genre into four quadrants: (1) Questors, (2) Actualizers, (3) Borderliners, and (4) Anthropologists.

Questors seek out an external journey, usually in the form of plot or worldbuilding, and prefer their details to adhere to familiar

fantasy tropes. Subgenres like high, epic, low, and sword and sorcery generally fall into this quadrant.

Actualizers want their journey to be an internal one that also adheres to the familiar fantasy tropes. They are more interested in character growth than the carrying out of quests. This is not to say quests or worldbuilding will not appear, instead that actualizers care more about how the protagonists grow as characters because of these components. Series which use the protagonist's name eponymously are good examples of actualizers and often include the urban, romantic, and coming-of-age subgenres. Harry Potter is a prime example of an Actualizer series.

Borderliners are mirror images of Actualizers in that they want an internal journey, but care little for character growth. Instead, they focus on the flawed characters' authentic experience of events, which can often be unpleasant or misanthropic due to their desire for deviance from the usual tropes. This is not to say the characters cannot grow, only that their momentary experiences are more the focus than the growth itself. A harsh, gritty, or nihilistic tone can also be incorporated to distance the material from familiar tropes, which is why it encompasses grimdark, new adult, dark, and new weird. Lev

Grossman's *The Magicians* is a prime example of a Borderliner in that it takes the basic setup of Harry Potter, but instead makes all the characters flawed and focuses on their experiences of being flawed rather than having them grow as characters.

Anthropologists also seek an external journey, but deviate from the familiar experiences of a traditional plot or characters. They are more interested in worldbuilding, philosophy, and themes, and frequently use the characters and plot as vehicles to explore their abstract ideas. This can be considered an outgrowth of pure speculative fiction in that they imagine what the world would be like if they made a few changes, which is why it encompasses the subgenres of utopian, dystopian, alternate history, and fantasy of manners. Although not exactly from the fantasy or science fiction genre, Ayn Rand's *Atlas Shrugged* is a great Anthropologists example since the story and plot are there simply to explore her ideas. *1984* and *A Brave New World* also fall into this category.

It should be noted that these four categories are not mutually exclusive and that consumers can crave components from different categories on different days or even at the same time. Nor are stories confined to one quadrant any more than a book must choose

between having good prose, characters, plot, or worldbuilding. In fact, all our fantasy worldbuilding exemplars check off qualities of all four quadrants. Harry Potter certainly goes on a physical quest to defeat Voldemort that spotlights the worldbuilding during his internal growth, whereas Frodo and his friends go through a great deal of personal growth during their physical quest. The same is true for Aang and Luke, who see some real raw and unpleasant character experiences along their journeys. *A Song of Ice and Fire* certainly takes the cake when it comes to the Borderliners qualities, and all five also check off the Anthropologist quadrant in how they deviated from the norms of worldbuilding that were popular at the time, such that they inspired imitators, as we discuss in chapter sixteen.

Since this book is built upon the concept of purposeful worldbuilding, I almost did not include this taxonomy because it had little to do with worldbuilding itself. I also questioned the purpose and utility of breaking fantasy expectations down into these four quadrants but decided to include it because of how much they mirror subgenres. Just like subgenres, this taxonomy is an abstract and fairly arbitrary way to understand audience expectations. It is very much like the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator I used to annoy my friends with in that putting things into a box can make them easier to

understand. But they can also limit our understanding if we rigidly remain within the box. That is why I consider this taxonomy like subgenres or personality tests in that they are great starting points. They are frameworks we can build the rest of our understanding upon, and I'd like both authors and fantasy fans to be aware of where they stand, what they want from a story, and if those two aligned during the experience. Authors can also be mindful at the onset as to which quadrants their stories reside within, which can also help in terms of understanding the expectations of their quadrant and what they can do to expand to others if they choose to do so. Audiences, on the other hand, can use this to decide what they are in the mood for, what subgenres might fit their requirements, and specifically why or why not the story in particular met their expectations.

Appendix 2: Terrain Types

List compiled by the US Geographic Names Information System
(GNIS)

Arch: Natural arch-like opening in a rock mass (bridge, natural bridge, sea arch).

Arroyo: Watercourse or channel through which water may occasionally flow (coulee, draw, gully, wash).

Bar: Natural accumulation of sand, gravel, or alluvium forming an underwater or exposed embankment (ledge, reef, sandbar, shoal, spit).

Basin: Natural depression or relatively low area enclosed by higher land (amphitheater, cirque, pit, sink).

Bay: Indentation of a coastline or shoreline enclosing a part of a body of water; a body of water partly surrounded by land (arm, bight, cove, estuary, gulf, inlet, sound).

Beach: The sloping shore along a body of water that is washed by waves or tides and is usually covered by sand or gravel (coast, shore, strand).

Bench: Area of relatively level land on the flank of an elevation such as a hill, ridge, or mountain where the slope of the land rises on one side and descends on the opposite side (level).

Bend: Curve in the course of a stream and (or) the land within the curve; a curve in a linear body of water (bottom, loop, meander).

Cape: Projection of land extending into a body of water (lea, neck, peninsula, point).

Cave: Natural underground passageway or chamber, or a hollowed out cavity in the side of a cliff (cavern, grotto).

Channel: Linear deep part of a body of water through which the main volume of water flows and is frequently used as a route for watercraft (passage, reach, strait, thoroughfare, thoroughfare).

Cliff: Very steep or vertical slope (bluff, crag, head, headland, nose, palisades, precipice, promontory, rim, rimrock).

Crater: Circular-shaped depression at the summit of a volcanic cone or one on the surface of the land caused by the impact of a meteorite; a manmade depression caused by an explosion (caldera, lua).

Falls: Perpendicular or very steep fall of water in the course of a stream (cascade, cataract, waterfall).

Flat: Relative level area within a region of greater relief (clearing, glade, playa).

Forest: Bounded area of woods, forest, or grassland under the administration of a political agency (see "woods") (national forest, national grasslands, State forest).

Gap: Low point or opening between hills or mountains or in a ridge or mountain range (col, notch, pass, saddle, water gap, wind gap).

Glacier: Body or stream of ice moving outward and downslope from an area of accumulation; an area of relatively permanent snow or ice on the top or side of a mountain or mountainous area (icefield, ice patch, snow patch).

Gut: Relatively small coastal waterway connecting larger bodies of water or other waterways (creek, inlet, slough).

Harbor: Sheltered area of water where ships or other watercraft can anchor or dock (hono, port, roads, roadstead).

Island: Area of dry or relatively dry land surrounded by water or low wetland (archipelago, atoll, cay, hammock, hummock, isla, isle, key, moku, rock).

Isthmus: Narrow section of land in a body of water connecting two larger land areas.

Lake: Natural body of inland water (backwater, lac, lagoon, laguna, pond, pool, resaca, waterhole).

Lava: Formations resulting from the consolidation of molten rock on the surface of the Earth (kepula, lava flow).

Pillar: Vertical, standing, often spire-shaped, natural rock formation (chimney, monument, pinnacle, pohaku, rock tower).

Plain: A region of general uniform slope, comparatively level and of considerable extent (grassland, highland, kula, plateau, upland).

Range: Chain of hills or mountains; a somewhat linear, complex mountainous or hilly area (cordillera, sierra).

Rapids: Fast-flowing section of a stream, often shallow and with exposed rock or boulders (riffle, ripple).

Ridge: Elevation with a narrow, elongated crest which can be part of a hill or mountain (crest, cuesta, escarpment, hogback, lae, rim, spur).

Sea: Large body of salt water (gulf, ocean).

Slope: A gently inclined part of the Earth's surface (grade, pitch).

Spring: Place where underground water flows naturally to the surface of the Earth (seep).

Stream: Linear body of water flowing on the Earth's surface (anabranch, awawa, bayou, branch, brook, creek, distributary, fork, kill, pup, rio, river, run, slough).

Summit: Prominent elevation rising above the surrounding level of the Earth's surface; does not include pillars, ridges, or ranges (ahu, berg, bald, butte, cerro, colina, cone, cumbre, dome, head, hill, horn, knob, knoll, mauna, mesa, mesita, mound, mount, mountain, peak, puu, rock, sugarloaf, table, volcano).

Swamp: Poorly drained wetland, fresh or saltwater, wooded or grassy, possibly covered with open water (bog, cienega, marais, marsh, pocosin).

Valley: Linear depression in the Earth's surface that generally slopes from one end to the other (barranca, canyon, chasm, cove, draw, glen, gorge, gulch, gulf, hollow, ravine).

Woods: Small area covered with a dense growth of trees; does not include an area of trees under the administration of a political agency (see "forest").

Appendix 3: Sci-fi vs. Fantasy Budgeting

Due to my background in film, it's fitting I would approach this difference between science fiction and fantasy in terms of movie budgets. Specifically, the special-effects budgets, which are where most of the execution of the visual worldbuilding takes place. As stated before, filmmaking is an exceptionally expensive endeavor, which is why budgeting holds such sway in getting a movie made. This is because budgeting acknowledges there are finite resources, with audience attention being just one component. We call the willing suspension of disbelief in a series "the buy" because we know consumers are choosing where to spend their time and attention. But the consumers aren't the only ones spending a resource, and the producers must decide where to allocate each and every cent. So for this appendix, sit back and imagine yourself a producer of a fantasy world for a moment.

The concept of a special-effects budget works well with worldbuilding because you only have so much creative cache to spend when creating your world. And some worlds are much bigger than others in the same way some films have larger budgets to work with. This does not mean the bigger-budget movies are inherently better than the low-budget, indie darlings, only that they have more resources to spend on the spectacle. A high-concept world like *The Lord of the Rings*, with numerous fantasy conceits, asks a lot more of audience attention to keep track of it all than say, *The Indian in the Cupboard*, which centered on the single conceit of a magical cupboard that can bring toys to life. The latter could be considered almost low-concept and certainly would require less budget for getting the special effects across (by means of comparison, the 1995 film *The Indian in the Cupboard* cost forty-five million USD, whereas *The Fellowship of the Ring* in 2001 was ninety-three million dollars). High-concept worldbuilding similarly has more of a budget to spend than lower concepts with few fantasy conceits and a greater focus on character than on sweeping plots.

For the sake of argument, let's split the difference between them with seventy million dollars for our hypothetical special-effects budget. With that number in mind, the producer has to decide where

to spend these finite resources in terms of creating their conceits. And, I maintain, science-fiction worldbuilders place the majority of their budget into geography, biology, technology, and culture. Seeking out new life and new civilizations necessitates a new world, the new life to populate it with the civilizations, and the technology necessary to discover this new world. Splitting the budget equally between these conceits suddenly means each one has only \$17.5 million to work with, and it's not easy to treat them equally since each one has worldbuilding ramifications for the subsequent conceits. Making major alterations to the planet such that it does not adhere to terra de facto means massive changes to the lifeforms that would evolve there, which would have major repercussions for the cultures that would arise in turn. These few changes alone would eat up most of the budget without even addressing the technological ramifications of the conceits or even the culture that's making first contact with this new world.

This is why a lot of science-fiction worldbuilders end their construction with just these four conceits. Some, such as near-future worlds, don't even need to bother with geography or biology, with science-fiction stalwarts such as *Blade Runner* investing all their resources into just the technology and culture categories, which

would leave them thirty-five million dollars apiece for each conceit. This choice, in turn, allows them to spend much more in these categories to add more details and depth.

It's easy to disregard this producer angle when dealing with the written word since the story takes place in the audience's mind rather than splashed across a big screen. In these cases, the real cost is just what it takes to get the words to the reader's eyes, which means the creator can build with abandon and with no regard to a set "budget." Although this notion disregards the concepts of streamlining and interconnectedness as well as forgetting that each detail strains the consistency of the world by increasing the sheer number of variables, the idea itself is not wrong. But it dismisses purposeful worldbuilding, which is the aim of this book. Each detail should yield maximum effect upon the audience, which means they need to be used judiciously. And too many details can quickly overwhelm the audience, whose attention is a finite resource. This is why most worldbuilders apply a prime-mover conceit, which is used as the hook to interest the audience. Once the foundation is set with this prime mover, then the additional conceits get layered on for a greater degree of complexity. Which is, again, why the budget analogy holds true for science-fiction and fantasy conceits.

Fantasy worldbuilding, as we discussed in the section on geography, employs *terra de facto*, which means there's no need to sink any of the theoretical budget of seventy million dollars there. Biology, physics (magic), metaphysics, and culture then chew up the budget with the fantasy races, magic systems, deities, and new cultures that arise from them, again leaving the worldbuilder with \$17.5 million if it's split evenly. Which is another reason why many fantasy worldbuilders simply apply the analogue culture of medieval Europe. In doing so, they perform the cultural equivalent of *terra de facto* by using a constant that most consumers won't question in the least. This means the seventy million dollars just needs to be divided by three, giving twenty-three million dollars to now play around with the core three conceits of creatures, magic, and gods. This mental budgeting for conceits, consciously or unconsciously, is another reason why the same tropes appear again and again within the genre.

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Notes

[←1]

Dystopian/utopian fiction and alternate history also distinctly depend on setting as a core conceit, but both are frequently considered subgenres of science fiction or occasionally literary fiction, which is why they only get a mention here in the footnote.

[←2]

Cameron's "unobtanium" in *Avatar* was spelled differently than "unobtainium."

[←3]

Yes, I know faster-than-light travel is considered an impossibility for many in the hard-science-fiction spheres, but that is the subject for another day.

[←4]

Except for the dice, which will invariably betray you.

[←5]

If you'd like to know more about how Hollywood divvies up audiences as well as my own system for the fantasy genre, see [Appendix 1: Fantasy Taxonomy](#).

[←6]

Lucas was aware of this, with the fourth draft of the script in 1976 stating that Solo is simply trying to impress Obi-Wan and Luke with an obvious lie.

[←7]

The Death Star's ability to destroy a planet from orbit ended up being the trump card, although we realized acquiring such a weapon would probably be less than feasible for most.

[←8]

No, the remastered editions were not out at this point, meaning it would later not be nearly as immutable as we would have liked.

[←9]

And to those who insist that the flame of a candle is technically hot enough to melt gold, I invite you to try for yourself.

[←10]

This is something I can personally attest to as someone who played Magic for many years when it first came out but now cannot understand the modern cards in the least, meaning I fail the barrier for entry now even though I hurdled it in the past.

[←11]

And let's be honest, by "European" we usually mean "English." This may be another example of Tolkien's lingering fingerprints, but may also be strongly tied to the fact that most fantasy books are written in English.

[←12]

Or a woman if they were being intentionally difficult and British. Which are often synonymous.

[←13]

Since saying “Only 5% of respondents did NOT require vampires to drink blood” was a bit confusing, I inversed it by subtracting that number from one hundred to show the percentages that DID require these abstracted traits. I used this same process for my results for elves and dragons in their charts as well.

[←14]

In *The Kobold Guild to Worldbuilding*, Baur maintains nothing divides fantasy fans more than the addition of gunpowder to a fantasy setting. For many, it destroys the sense of antiquity even though the effects of gunpowder can be far smaller than many magical abilities. But it injects modernity into the fantasy setting, which disrupts the immersive experience for many fans. During the Hong Kong Book Fair 2019, Erikson stated that most fantasy fans expect heroic one-on-one combat, which the introduction of guns disrupts. Anecdotally, I can state they're both right.

[←15]

See [Appendix 1: Fantasy Taxonomy](#).

[←16]

Although I adore some magical realism, I fall into the camp that qualifies it as literary fiction instead of fantasy due to the fact it frequently uses inconsistent worldbuilding, which is the genre conceit of fantasy. Both employ magic, but fantasy does so within a logical framework that creates constraints for the story, whereas it is used chaotically and in such a way to remove impediments from the story in magical realism. Fortunately for magical realism, the genre conceit for literary fiction is attention to the strength of the prose rather than worldbuilding.

[←17]

Although it should be noted that some animals, like badger moles, dragons, and air bison, can bend and were the ones who taught the humans, so it could tie in. Also, the animals in the spirit world consists of a single Earth species, like the panda Hei Bai outside of the Senlin Village or owl Wan Shi Tong with his library in the Si Wong Desert, so it could be argued that this falls under the category of the spirit world.

[←18]

The word “sinister” is Latin in origin and means “on the left side.” I’ve highlighted this detail to illustrate the assumptions authors make of their audiences and what they intend for them to notice in the output details.

[←19]

See Part X: Technology and Chapter 47: Cultural Artifacts, Politics and Economics.

[←20]

For a list of common terrain types and a brief definition as compiled by the US Geographic Names Information System (GNIS), check out [Appendix 2: Terrain Types](#).

[←21]

For a discussion as to how science fiction and the fantasy genres allocate their worldbuilding differently, see Appendix 3: [Sci-fi vs. Fantasy Budgeting](#)

[←22]

Yes, I am speaking from personal experience here.

[←23]

I honestly think [this post from Tor.com](#) about the horrific physiology required of a centaur is one of the funniest things I've ever read, which I guess says a lot about me as a person.

[←24]

This means deus ex machina was basically the special-effects-driven blockbusters of the time, where spectacle took precedence over plot.

[←25]

It could be argued, though, that all of Superman's powers thematically fall under the auspices of him being the literal superman in the Nietzschean, Übermensch sense, but I personally believe this is an apologetic stretch.

[←26]

See footnote #5 in Chapter 17: Fantasy Conceits vs. Output Details for the argument that this is accounted for.

[←27]

This view still holds enough cultural cache that it accounts for the etymology of the phrase “spheres of influence.”

[←28]

Never mind the fact Spock is half-human and therefore probably atypical of the culture in terms of personal experience.

[←29]

Although significantly less prevalent than humans. In the spring 2020 census of the 500,000+ members of /r/worldbuilding, 87% responded that humans were present in their worlds. Elves only appeared 25% of the time, along with dwarves (21%), orcs (17%), and goblins (14%).

[←30]

This phrase was actually coined by Joseph Stalin to explain why the United States did not adhere to Marx's theories on communism.

[←31]

See chapter one: Literary, Upmarket, and Commercial Fiction.

[←32]

See chapter six: The Entertainment Dilemma.