



Magical World Builder

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Magical World Builder's Guide

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The Magical World Builder's Guide is a tool for creating a fantasy universe. Although there are several good guidebooks to creating a science fiction world, few deal with the quintessential elements of a fantasy realm. This guide ambitiously attempts to help fantasy authors discover their realms long before they sit down to the keyboard and fill in the details.

In addition, I've written a much-beloved 30 Days of World Building tutorial designed to help you hit the ground running with your world building in just a few minutes a day.

Fantasy, like all fiction, is a function of the imagination. One common element in fantasy fiction is magic, a mysterious force which breaks normal physical and scientific laws. It has been said that any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic, and this is certainly true in fantasy. Take the example of the Dragonriders of Pern series by Anne McCaffrey. Although based on a science fiction premise, these books share a fantasy flavor by the effortless use of instantaneous travel, or teleporting. In fact, the Dragonriders series has three points of magic: teleportation, telepathy, and time travel. These three magical points are all based around the dragons of Pern. Although some non-dragonrider humans can telepathically communicate, they do not share the teleportation or time travel abilities of the dragons and fire lizards, which can go between.

In another classic fantasy example, Ursula K. LeGuin's *Wizards of Earthsea* can use many types of magical spells, but they all rely upon names. Any object or creature to be magically manipulated must have a known name, which the wizard uses to command that creature's essence. Wizardry, then, is the study of names, and the responsibilities inherent in knowing another creature's name. So, if a wizard wishes to teleport a rock from one space to another, he must know the rock's name, and possibly that of its destination. This system seems to work best for enchanting creatures and objects, transforming them into other objects, and ensnaring them. Telepathy seems unlikely in this kind of world. Calling down pure magical energies is also unlikely, although calling lightning is not (and who is to say that the one is really less destructive than the other?) The fantasy worlds of *Dungeons and Dragons* are a popular magical base for much of fantasy fiction, especially novels based in the D&D worlds. However, these worlds have a definite "D&D" flavor to them, which anyone familiar with the games can recognize. Starting with the common player character classes (fighter, ranger, paladin, mage, cleric, druid, thief, bard), these novels are rife with gaming references which non-gamers (and gamers who are tired of such unimaginative creations) find irritating. Perhaps one of the most

common problems with these novels is the fact that they rely so heavily on the exact same system of magic. I'm going to refer heavily and often to my gaming experience as I write this manual, but my object is to make it possible for other authors to create new systems of magic that are as rich and diverse as that provided in the D&D books.

Basic World-Building

For basic world-building, start with a map. Draw your map from anything, but remember that the natural world is full of irregularities. Sometimes, drawing a continent based on the stain a leaf left on the sidewalk after a storm is better than trying to make one up yourself.

Similarly, when and if your characters ever enter a village, city, or settlement, they will find that, for the most part, these are rather chaotic and "natural" formations themselves. Trust me; if you've ever been to Europe, you know that many of the towns seem to be built on a meandering cowpath. There are many reasons for this kind of street structure, not the least of which is defensive. But the primary reason is that the road was there before the buildings were, and they follow natural lines and geographical formations. Only in great empires (and attempts thereto) are straight lines used. The Roman roads were so phenomenal and so frightening because they were a straight line from departure to destination; the Romans did not let geographical barriers keep them from their objectives. Similarly, many American cities were built on clean, straight lines, to reflect an orderly lifestyle that was hoped for in this frontier. Further west, and in many of the midwestern towns, cities didn't just happen; they were planned out meticulously. Salt Lake City and Washington DC are two wonderful examples of cities that were planned out before they were ever built.

Once you have your map, decide on a technology level. Sure, you don't want your fantasy characters to have guns (or do you?), but what about cannons? Crossbows? Swords? Plate armor? Chain armor? Kevlar? What about ships: are primitive longboats the dragons of the seas, or do huge galleons rule and pillage through piracy and "privateering"? Are there paved or cobbled roads, or do people just follow the cow paths from one town to the next? How difficult or dangerous is it to travel, and what kinds of hazards exist?

If you go for a low-tech world, expect swords, spears, and polearms to be normal weapons. Remember that animal populations were a little less controlled, but natural predators culled off the weak. The "runt" of the litter of pigs wasn't a pet (see *Charlotte's Web*), it was a spring meal. Rarely would you have people bonding with their house cat, although favorite hunting and working dogs were often given special treatment.

A mid-tech world might be something like Earth at the turn of the century. Communications systems are becoming reliable due to the telegraph, and factories provide jobs for many many people. But working conditions aren't necessarily humane, and people still have (and will always have, in any age) conflicts with other people, and with themselves.

Finally, a high-tech world can be fun, especially when you add fantastical elements to it. Just beware of adding too many unreal elements to your story. A high-tech world in which traditional magic also works had better approach the subject of magic in a fairly straightforward manner, or the reader will be too confused by the introduction of both advanced technologies and magical principles.

Magic Levels

Some worlds, you'll notice, are very magic-rich. Everyone has some experience with magic, and wizards are not uncommon. In some worlds (Piers Anthony's *Xanth* and Weis and Hickman's *Darksword* trilogy), everyone on the planet has a magical talent of some sort, and some lucky individuals have more than one. Although commoners are still uncomfortable with powerful mages (who isn't, given the possibilities), they don't stone him on sight. In this kind of world, cultures which fear or hate magic have found some outlet or method for dealing with wizards. Perhaps children with strong magical talents are hustled off to become priests (the equivalent of military school for scholastics). Perhaps they are killed, although in a magic-rich world, that amounts to a lot of bodies. Sometimes, they are merely exiled, and nearby kingdoms or cultures will have a higher incidence of magical refugees from such an intolerant area. Similarly, in worlds where everyone has a magical talent, those born without such talents may have a special stigma associated with them, and become outcasts, or just embarrassments.

A magic-rich world may or may not have magical items of any significant power. If one were using the standard AD&D gaming system, it would stand to reason that a high number of mages means a lot of magic items. But that needn't be the case. It could take huge amounts of magical energy to create an item; more than any sane mage is willing to spend on frivolous things. Such items would be very rare, and very personal to the magician wielding them. Magically-enchanted weapons and armor would rarely exist, as it is an unusual mage who has time to learn how to use such things.

On the other hand, an average-magic realm could be rich in magic items. Take, for example, the world in Margaret Weis and Tracky Hickman's *Rose of the Prophet* series. Here's a world in which all magic comes from either items, or from the Immortals (genies, angels, devils, and other minions of the gods). Here's an unusual situation in which a wizard must use the magical energies charged into certain items (scrolls, potions, charms, etc) to cast even the most simple spells. But all wizards learn how to make such items as part of their training. These items are not permanent magical items, but tools for spellcasting which must be present when the wizard seeks to shape magical energy. The only other way to achieve magical effects is through intervention by the Immortals. And while some of the Immortals serve the humans directly, others are forbidden by their gods to communicate with any but the most

devoted worshippers. In kingdoms where assistance from Immortals is common and direct, pure, magical spellcasting is less prevalent. The mortals have seen less reason to research new methods for casting magic, and so many of the more powerful spells have been lost.

A magic-poor world is one in which few people show any magical talent at all, and even fewer get the training to use it properly. Magicians and wizards might have formed an elite class, ruling others by virtue of their power, or closeting themselves away with their books and tomes. They are respected, feared, but not loved. They are rarely sought for magical assistance, because most people can get by without magic, thank-you-very-much. However, this poses an interesting dilemma as the protagonist discovers his own magical powers, and the frightening depth of his abilities (Terry Goodkind's Wizard's First Rule series and Robert Jordan's Wheel of Time are great examples of this kind of wizard-elite world).

Similarly, a wizard in a magic-poor world could be an outcast, hunted. In fact, any wizard not willing to become a part of the elite group may find himself in that circumstance anyway. In AD&D's Dark Sun world, there are three types of wizard spellcasters: Dragon-lords (the rulers of each desert city), preservers, and defilers. The dragon-lords are an elite group of highly powerful magic users who have risen to power. Defilers use a magic system which literally blights the land, leaving barren desert in the defiler's wake. Finally, preservers use magical energy gained from themselves only, and do not leave behind this kind of magical damage. The result: both defilers and preservers are hunted by the elite dragon-lords, who view them as competition. Because of the taint of defiler magic, all magicians are suspect in the eyes of the mundane populace.

Remember, though, that if a world is so poor in magic, that any two wizards travelling together should have some reason for doing so. In other words, it's unlikely that a fledgeling wizard (just discovering her powers) will conveniently be travelling with or in the company of an experienced wizard, unless one deliberately sought the other one out for some reason (the novice wanted to learn, the mage was neutralizing a threat, whatever).

The same is true in any world, actually. Although a higher incidence of wizards is more likely in a magic-rich world, that does not necessarily mean they will be companions.

Magical Creatures

Your mythical bestiary need not be extensive. Having run several AD&D campaigns, and having written many, many worlds with a variety of races and character types, I firmly believe that the most nefarious creatures in the world are human, as are the most exemplary and heroic. When I use non-human races in my stories, they are either presented as "similar to human cultures, with minor difference" or as a foil to human societies. Fantasy fiction is written by and for human beings, and we are the center of our multiverse. Therefore, alien (or mythological) societies should show us different facets of the human experience, and teach

us in some ways how to deal with the alien-ness within our own world.

That said, there are some common stereotypical fantasy beings which you may or may not choose to use:

goblins and gremlins: mischievous, evil, pranksters. Goblins are rarely a serious threat; they are the class clowns of the world.elves: tall or short, they are willowy figments of beauty. Tied to wilderness areas, they are usually masters of enchantment and illusions, and they are very long-livedfairies and dryads: These are more on the primitive, mischievous, goodly sylvan dwellers. They are often portrayed as female, wearing diaphanous materials (the movie Wizards does a good job of representing fairies-as-militant-defenders.)dragons: enormous, lizard-like beings, dragons are usually quite awe-inspiring, and inherently magical. They may range from sea-monsters to winged serpents of the air. They might breathe fire, or nothing at all, and they run the full gamut of good or evil. However, good dragons seem to be incapable of evil acts, and vice versa, traits not shared by good and evil humans.dwarfs: dwarf and dour; they seem to go hand-in-hand. Dwarves are short, stocky humanoids who spend a lot of time mining, and don't get out much. They are almost universally portrayed as male-- some speculate that is because females are indistinguishable from the males.orcs, ogres: These are large, smelly humanoids who find smashing and eating good humans a fun thing to do on a Saturday night. They live for violence, and participate in violent orgies for the fun of it.unicorns: attracted to virgins (for some reason) or maidens, these equines have a single horn growing from their foreheads. They are generally portrayed as the epitome of purity, but they are also wild and elusive creatures.

These are just a few of the denizens you can have in your lands. Naturally, you could take any aspect of humanity, twist it around, and make it into a culture or species. Remember, though, that individuals may not represent the whole race, and the friendly dwarf who hated gold makes an interesting (if comical) secondary character for your fantasy story. Too many "individuals" turns your story into the "misfits anonymous" club, but that's sometimes just the right premise for a comical fantasy novel.

Magical Cataclysms

Building a fantasy world is just like building a science fiction world; keep in mind the world's gravity, age, and formation as you build it. But then remember that magical accidents can be as environmentally damaging as a meteor. Nearly every fantasy world with magical abilities has some sort of mysterious magical accident in its history. From the ever-popular

magical wars to the birth of magic in the realm, they're all there, as both a source of mystery (and geographical aberrations), and as a warning to those who would wield such powers in the present day.

In some realms, these magical accidents have created great, desert-like spaces, barren of life and (often) magical energies. Others create magically-charged areas, where the magic is so strong it mutates and transforms the inhabitants. Finally, some magical cataclysms are far enough into the past, and all magic has since "evened out," making whatever lands were warped no longer so. However, rivers, mountains, and even continents may have been created or destroyed during the cataclysm, and where once was the Lost City of Anadolia is now the Deep Ocean Blue.

If a magical cataclysm is a part of your world, then you'll need to know exactly where this event occurred in relation to your story, both chronologically and geographically. In Mercedes Lackey's Velgarth series (Valdemar et al), the Mage Wars left an enormous crater in which lies buried the weapons of the ancient wizards. Nearby, magical energies have so warped a forest that many of its inhabitants are twisted parodies of what they should be. And the "present day" stories occur some 4000 years after this cataclysm, when another such event is imminently approaching.

The cataclysmic history of your world should play a part in the story, or not exist at all. Even if your characters only encounter it as a warning from their magical training days, it should play a role in your characters' lives. After all, perhaps that warning serves to bring a power-mad protagonist into perspective as she realizes what she could do with so much magical energy. Or a great struggle ensues as the characters must cross an area which has been magically wounded in some way.

Magical Systems: Different Types of Magic

There are four basic types of magic that have been portrayed in books, television, and games. The first is the "classic" magic, or sorcery. Sorcery consists of manipulation of the world through a mystical energy which is unexplained and unexplainable. This energy might be the "Force," magic nodes (unseen rivers and streams of magical energy throughout the world), magical naming, incantations and rituals, music, or some similar casting method. In general, this kind of magic is characterized by spells, which are basically the exercise used by the wizard to manipulate that energy.

The second type of magic is of divine origin. These are priestly miracles, and they range from creating water in the desert to healing the sick and injured. The power is granted from the gods themselves; the human caster is simple a conduit for the god's power, although he or she might have other abilities as well. In AD&D, the priest class of character has very specific spells he may ask for from his deity; these are usually granted straight-out, but may be

withheld if the caster has offended his deity recently. Another example of priestly magic can be seen in Mercedes Lackey's Vows and Honor series. The Star-Eyed goddess grants her followers (especially her few priests) a very few, specific spell-like miracles. Some examples are the godfire marks on Tarma and Kethry's hands to the Spell of Oathbreaking. However, in most societies, even in fantasy worlds, divine intervention is a rare and precious thing. It usually comes in the form of visions and dreams, rather than direct spells, and the healing knowledge possessed by clerics is pure knowledge, like that of a doctor or surgeon, not a god-granted gift. Priests are therefore respected scholars, and the bearers of the words of their gods. But they are not usually spellcasters (this is not the case in AD&D, and is one of the things which makes up the unique "flavor" of an AD&D novel).

Finally, psychic abilities are the last type of magical phenomena which can be used directly by characters. These abilities are drawn from the mundane world of parapsychology. Also known as psionics, mind magic, and mental talents, they range from ESP to teleportation, and all phases in between. Because of the scientific experiments done in the "real world," psychic abilities may also appear in pure science fiction, and certain paranormal abilities do not contradict known scientific principles, although they do challenge them. Who is to say, for example, that there is no way a person could see something from a distance; we do not know that there is not a sixth sensory organ which, like the appendix, lies dormant in most people?

The fourth type of magical phenomena has already been discussed; magic items. Entire series have been written around the sagas of magical items and the people who wield them. And for the most part, they are immensely popular books. However, good fiction is about people, not things. Unless your characters are at least as interesting as their inventory, there's no story. Trust me. So, when you have the hero being gifted with the Great Sword of Destiny (it's usually a sword, by the way), make the Sword into a tool for the hero's actions, not the other way around. Or, to quote one of my favorite lines from *The Man in the Iron Mask*, "I wear the mask-- it does not wear me." For an excellent discussion of "inventory-as-plot," read "The Well-Tempered Plot Device" by Nick Lowe-- it's a terrific critique of "magic coupon collecting" science fiction and fantasy stories.

Bottom line: Your hero must be in control of his destiny. He may despise what he is destined to become, or he may fear the future, but he must ultimately be in control of himself and his item of power, or you might as well leave out the hero and focus only on the sword itself.

Wizard Types

Having discussed types of magic, I'd like to propose a few possible wizards from magic systems you might use. Some of these are stolen or adapted from other sources. They are in-

tended as a starting point for your own creativity. Take the suggestions and then embellish upon them. No one wants to read a story using the exact same magic system as another favorite author. By changing these basic systems, you make them your own.

Spellbook Mage

This is the classic AD&D system of spell casting. The wizard has a book in which he has written down his magical formulae. Anyone with the proper knowledge or training can decipher those formulae and use the spells, but it takes literally years to learn how to read magic (or it requires a spell). Someone without the proper knowledge and training who tries to use such a book will, at best, merely fail. At worst, he will cause a major magical accident, of the kind which turns your face permanently blue (in the case of a comedic fantasy novel), or ensnares your soul within some nefarious device (in slightly more serious fantasy).

Mage's background: The spellcaster is a scholar, and a specialist in arcane and unusual knowledge. This person not only knows about magic spells, but has unusual knowledge of other curious subjects. Subjects might range from the geneology of werewolves to the origins and interpretations of the Prophecies of Methaine (or whomever). These bits of unusual knowledge may or may not become useful in the course of the story.

Your homework: Write up the spells known by the mage, which are in his spellbook. They should be appropriate to his character: a pacifist is not going to have a lightning spell, for instance, just as a combat mage will probably not have enchantment spells, regardless of how useful those spells would ultimately be. Avoid using AD&D books for these spells. If you really need ideas, look at the Great.Net.Spellbook and adapt a few from there. The AD&D spells are too well known to gamers to be used without recognition. Remember that this system of magic uses formulae; those formulae may or may not have words, movements, or material items required for the spells to work. Or, working the spell from the book may be as simple as reading it from the book itself. However they work, remember that your mage has a limited repertoire to choose from.

Hedge-wizard or Herb Witch, Wise Woman

This kind of wizard uses natural magics to manipulate the world. Herbs and potions are her tools of the trade, but she can get by with something as simple as a sharp look and a well-placed threat. The hedge-wizard is especially attuned to the natural state of the world. These kinds of magicians are distinctly uncomfortable inside cities, of course.

Most pre-modern communities had a wise woman or wise man who knew the properties of plants, and their uses. The notorious Baba Yaga was a natural witch; she was distinctly tied into a natural world, filled with beneficial herbs, as well as poisons. Unfortunately, these herbalists and witches were also the first to be blamed when the crops failed, or a child mysteriously disappeared. As a result, a common conflict for these wizards comes not from within

themselves, but from the communities they have always served. Also, these kinds of magic-users often conflict with other sorcerers, especially those who use "book learnin'" as the foundation of their magery. Hedge wizards look upon these sorcerers as unnatural, because they do not understand the natural rhythms of the earth.

Character background: The character is an herbalist and a healer. He or she is an accepted member of the community, although he is also feared by the more ignorant or superstitious members. He often lives alone, or with a mundane partner or spouse. Animal familiars are a common feature of this kind of witch, who can brew a poison as easily as she can make a healing potion.

Your Homework: Decide what kinds of potions and charms are possible, and to what degree of effectiveness. Given the geographical region in which this wizard lives, are the herbs available which he would normally need for certain magical brews? What does she need to cast a spell, and what does she normally charge to do so? How much of her magic is real, and how much is just "head magic," or tricking someone into believing that it's real? If it's all false, then how does that make the witch feel about herself and her magic? Does she look down on her ignorant customers, or does she fear that they will one day uncover her secret? Finally, is she hiding a greater magical power by pretending to be a minor hedge-wizard?

Spirit Caller

This kind of wizard summons the spiritual essences of others to do his bidding. Djinni-summoners, necromancers, elementalists, shamans, and spirit-dancers. These wizards summon spirits-- be they dead, animistic, elemental, or djinn in nature-- to perform tasks for him or her. Spell effects include transporting items, summoning other items into existence (as the spiritual servant fetches the item from elsewhere), directly affecting others (the spirit is ordered to somehow prank the other person), and so forth. Rarely can the spirit caller polymorph or transform creatures or objects. Similarly, their abilities to not lie in mind-to-mind communication. Although air sprites, for example, might be used for long-distance communication, the message, like everything the mage does, will be translated through the lens of the spirit's own experience. Direct effects, however, can be quite powerful, although spirits are naturally hesitant to put themselves in direct danger through such effects. An earth elemental can summon an earthquake, while a necromancer might employ undead minions to do his dirty work.

Information gathering is one of the strong suits of the spirit caller. The spirits have information which those who dwell in the seen world do not. Water elementals would easily track a pirate ship, air elementals can see everything the sky knows, and the secrets of the dead are not safe from the probing questions of a necromancer. So, too, is it with the shaman or spirit-dancer, who summons the spirits of ancestors or of the natural world to answer her ques-

tions. Spirit calling wizards are privy to knowledge and information which normal mortals cannot access.

Your Homework: What do spirit callers in your world do to summon their spiritual assistants? Is their relationship one of master-servant, partners, friends, owner-property, parent-child, or something completely different? Who is the dominant party in the relationship? What dangers exist with this type of spellcasting system? If the spellcaster becomes the servant of the spirit, what happens? What dangers exist for the spirit, and what benefits, to make it return to the spellcaster?

Essence Manipulator

The essence manipulator is a classic mage, shaping an object's raw essence by his spells. Essence Manipulators may or may not have formulaic spells, but they rarely rely upon spellbooks during casting.

The mages from *The Wizard of Earthsea* are good examples of energy manipulators, as they use the name of their subject to manipulate their essence. Similarly, the sorcerers of the *Belgariad* series by David Eddings simply use single-word command to cause the magic to do their bidding.

The inherently powerful nature of this kind of magic makes it ripe for abuse. Consider how dangerous it is to be able to use a creature's essence not only to help the creature, but to harm it. Also, does affecting a creature this way remove its free will? The *Dark Crystal* has some potent scenes, in which the Skeksies suck out the very essence of the local inhabitants, to brew potions of longevity for themselves. There's a perversion of the essence manipulator, for these Skeksies know how to access a creature's essence by subjecting that creature to the Crystal, but they do not know how to use that essence for anything but harmful ends.

An essence manipulator can not only transform his subject, but he can also enchant or charm her easily.

Character Background: Essence manipulation is probably an in-born talent, something which may even be hereditary. Nonetheless, essence manipulators must be well learned, in both the skill needed to perform the manipulations, but also in the self-control and responsibility inherent in doing so. Good mages will be highly ethical in their use of this ability, and may have special codes for using their powers. Evil or untrained mages, such as the Skeksies, will be in the position of literally having control over others' free will, but without the ethical or moral dilemmas that such control should entail. They will be just self-controlled enough to manipulate the magic, but will happily use and abuse others to achieve their goals.

Your homework: Determine what method the essence manipulator uses to cast her spells. Does she say a word (a common method), write down her commands, or simply focus or meditate? What kinds of spells can she cast? What limitations, real or imposed, are there on

her magic? What kinds of moral and ethical rules has she set for herself, and how are those rules enforced by the spellcasting community? Finally, what are her preferred methods of using her magic? Does she prefer to twist a monster into submission, make it sleep, or shrink threats down to a more manageable size (like 3 or 4 inches)?

Energy Wizards

Energy wizards use the world's available magical energy to perform magical tasks. By far one of the more common magic systems, these wizards might draw energy from unseen sources, stones, power items, forests, music, blood and sacrifice, or some similar source. This kind of mage works best in an ambient-magic world, in which magical energies are available, though not necessarily accessible to ordinary humans. The "Force" from Star Wars is a classic form of ambient magic, and Jedis are Energy Manipulators (although they are also much more).

Energy manipulators can use the raw magical energy to strike down foes, weave it around their subject in an illusion, draw up protective barriers, and even open gates from one magical area to another (teleporting). Perhaps they can use the energy to enchant someone, although you'd have to come up with some methodology or reason (music would be a good energy source for that, since it is already so enchanting). Energy manipulators may or may not be good communicators, telepathically or long-distance, depending on the nature of magical energy in your world. If a world has a wild, untamed magical force within it, then communication may be too difficult. But if magic is like the "Force," and is tied to all living things, then the slightest push or fluctuation of that Force can be felt by any talented mage, making it a viable and instantaneous communications method. It really depends on whether or not you want communication to be as easy (or easier) for your characters as it is for modern-day email and telephone users.

Character Background: Like the essence manipulator, the energy wizard is usually born with the ability to sense and use the magic available. Similarly, a little education is a dangerous thing for these wizards; an untrained energy mage could easily flatten a castle, lacking the self-control to handle the magical energies himself.

Energy mages are likely to form groups, just as essence manipulators are, based on their ethical views on the use of magic. Uncontrolled magic use is dangerous, not only to the wizard, but to the people around him. For energy mages, it is also dangerous to the source of magical energy, which they must all share. Thus, they might form organizations to regulate the use of this energy source, and to prevent others from misusing it.

Your homework: How much magical energy is in your world? How many people can access it? Is it common, or uncommon? Are there places where the energy is strong and weak, or is it uniform? Are there cataclysmic events in the past which have changed how the magic-

al energy is distributed?

What kinds of things can an energy wizard do on your world? What misuses of the power are there? How are energy mages treated by other wizards (energy wizards or other sorcerers), and what kind of training do they undergo? Do the energy mages organize together to regulate the energy use, or do they jealously hoard magic from each other?

Culture-Building

Most of this world-builder's guide is dedicated to building the physical world, and to building magical systems that make sense. But a question was raised to me recently-- how do you come up with names that don't make your readers laugh at you?

Note the question isn't how to name things so that your reader doesn't laugh. One need only read a good Terry Pratchett book to earnestly want to create names that make your readers laugh. Nope-- the question is how to keep your reader from laughing at you, the writer. Because, let's face it, all too many names in fantasy literature are convoluted to the point of absurdity.

So I pondered this question recently and came up with the only answer I was comfortable with; don't invent a name, invent a culture. See, names are the most visible and vocal component of a society, a culture. Humans name everything-- the planet they're on, the things they eat, touch, do, love, hate, kill-- everything. They name each other, and they name the places where they live. And all of the names that humans use are born from our constant fascination with language-- we're always inventing language and have been pretty much since we became homo sapiens.

When you start populating your world with sentient people-- whether they're human or otherwise-- start addressing the question of language right away. It's an awful lot of work to create a whole new language for a culture of people who don't exist, never have, and never will. Tolkien did it-- more than once-- but he was a linguist by training, a genius, and for him, it was a ton of fun. If you love inventing whole languages, then have fun with it. If you're like me and just want to slide in a few new words because they sound "right," then do that. By all means, though, create a lexicon for your fantasy world's languages, though-- if the people of the S'nnari Desert tend to liquid sounds (lots of r's and l's), then any word with a "k" sound should be somewhat foreign to them, or have a particular impact when they say it (as in a curse word). People often say that German rarely sounds "nice," and it's somewhat true-- many hard sounds in the German language give it a much harsher "sound" to Romanized ears. The Star Trek producers were not stupid when they created the hard-sounding syllables of Klingon, either.

I can't suggest too many resources for this, except that Mary Oliver's *A Poetry Handbook* has a chapter on sound that is amazing. It's all about the sounds of words-- the differences

between vowels and different kinds of consonants, and what effects they have in poetry. Use this, or something like it-- Oliver actually took most of her information from an old primer on language she had lying around her house. Learn about how language sounds.

You can also feel perfectly justified stealing liberally from Earth worlds and languages. In fact, that's what most writers do. In fact, that's what Tolkein did; most of the Lord of the Rings is a re-told version of the Rheingold, but without all the sex.

Most of the time, you'll be writing in your native tongue, and so you'll have automatically "translated" whatever your characters are doing into the language you're writing in. You need to know what your characters' language sounds like only for those words that you want to add in, to give an exotic flair to your world. In general, these will fall into three categories: people, places, and things. Verbs, being very abstract, should not be presented in the fantasy-language unless it's absolutely necessary. Even then, try to make those verbs sound as close to your own language as possible.

One other resource that can be valuable in your search for good names: Baby name books. Both for parents and, now, more generic ones for writers. I have two naming books that I find helpful-- one lists the names by cultural association as well as first/last and male/female names. The other one is a book specifically geared towards naming fantasy characters. [watch this space for an update of the book titles and authors.]

Your Homework: Listen to how different syllables sound to you. Do they excite you? Do you associate a particular sound with an emotion or place or memory? Write down some generic preferences for your languages-- "I want the language spoken by the elves to sound like water, and the language spoken by the dwarves to sound like gravel rubbing together" and then go listen to what those things sound like. Write down the syllables you hear when you run a faucet or sit by a stream-- use those sounds when making up your Elven names for places and people and things.

Naming People

An interesting thing about fantasy novels is that there are almost always characters with unusual-sounding names doing amazing deeds in far-off unpronounceable worlds. Another interesting thing is that a bad name can ruin an otherwise-decent novel. Think about it-- do you really want to slog through 500 pages of epic storytelling about Ffrinnithelia the Ubiquitous? If you've ever read the Elric Melnibone novels, here's something you may have noticed: most people in the real world call him "El-ric." Why? Because they can pronounce it!

Give your characters names that you can pronounce. Easily. Quickly. And if that doesn't work, make them embarrassed enough about their names to shorten them to a nickname. Ffrinnithelia suddenly becomes "Frin" or "Lia." Some families, no doubt, will tend to longer, more impressive-sounding names. Perhaps there are even some non-human races that

prefer the more elegant touch of a barely-pronounceable name? But when these folk get into a tight situation, or they come to know someone well, they will drop some formality and use a shortened version of their name pretty darn quick.

In English, a long name is anything with 3 syllables-- very few names have 4 or more. That's a good cue for your own writing; 3 syllables is a long name to the English-reading public, so have a good nick-name handy.

In my own fantasy writing, I tend to prefer short names with a simple combination of vowels and consonants, and I always shorten the hero's name to one or two syllables if I can.

The caveat, of course, is that in many cases it's entirely appropriate for your character to have a longer name. The fantasy world would be nowhere without pompous officials who insist on adding useless syllables to their own names, in hopes that it makes them more impressive to those around them. Or wizards who seek a memorable name or epitaph to add to the mystique of their own powers. And, of course, in any good comic fantasy, you'll just need to have that grab-bag of rambling monikers to play with! Just remember to keep them appropriate: Harry Potter is a success in part because the supporting characters all have names that are appropriate to their two-dimensional portrayals (the Malfoys, for example? "mal" being a latinate for "bad" -- NEW! See the Resources section for a link to a page about Harry Potter names).

Don't forget, of course, that many many many names on Earth are taken from religious figures. The most popular male name in the world is Mohammed, and that's not a coincidence. If your world's culture has a particularly strong spiritual system, then the names found in those theologies should crop up frequently in your characters' world.

And what about those last names? In your comic fantasy, that last name is often the punchline, but what about in a more serious novel? Until the Renaissance, last names were usually taken from the place you were born or came from (Chretien de Troyes), your occupation (or your father's occupation, like "Smith" or "Scribner"), your father's name ("Ericson," and all the Mc and Mac Celtic clan names), or an epitaph you had adopted because of something extraordinary that you had done (William the Conqueror). Many surnames still around today are descendents of those earlier names.

Your character's surname can be something like that-- or you may decide that your character (or perhaps even most people in your world) needs no surname at all. That's fine-- but know before you start writing whether or not your hero is unique for lack of an identifying surname-- and if so, what stigma may come from that.

Your Homework: Who were your hero's parents? Who named him? Pretend you are your hero's father or mother and name him the way they would have named him. If your hero is without parents, or has chosen his own name, picture yourself in his shoes at the moment he

named himself-- was he proud and taking on a name worthy of himself? Or was he casting off a shameful past, looking for a name that would be a fresh start?

Naming Places

Despite what Ursula LeGuin may have titled her novel, in most cultures, the word for world is dirt. Whatever your people call their world, somewhere in their far-away past, that world once meant "this dirty stuff underneath our feet."

But what about other names for places? Most smaller places, villages, hamlets, boroughs, and crossroads are named for geographic features that are nearby. So, it's perfectly acceptable to call your hero's hometown "Leftcreek," which once identified it as the crook in the stream that ran left. Did you know that Oxford is actually named for a ford? Fords are important to pre-industrial societies-- they are low points in a river or stream where people and animals can cross without a bridge. The same is true for woods-- "Greywood" might be an appropriate name for a particularly dark and deep (and, dare one hope, haunted?) forest. And don't forget the potential for humor in your namings: one of the great ironies in California is a lake called "Clear Lake," the largest freshwater lake entirely inside the state's borders, and, by all accounts, a murky affair that is not very clear at all.

Aside from geographical considerations, places may also be named after the people who founded them-- or the people who inspired those who founded them. Thus we have Washington, D.C., Rome (after Romulus), and Benden Weyr (in McCaffrey's Pern books). This is very popular for towns that were deliberately settled as towns, and were not settled first as agricultural collectives that grew later. If you have a particularly influential (or simply arrogant) king in your world's past, his name might be imprinted on many places and in many different ways. One village might be called Thorinswood, after King Thorin the Conqueror, while a nearby town is Thorinton instead. When King Thorin was finally ousted, the new regime tried to change the names back, but of course language resists change in interesting ways, so Thorinswood remained, but the town is now "Thorton" instead.

A similar naming scheme is to name things after religious figures. How many cities in your own province, state, or region can you identify as having been named after a Catholic saint? The largest city I live near is San Francisco-- named after Saint Francis, and part of a rich tradition of Spanish missionaries in old California. Again, ask yourself if there are saints or demigods who would be honored most by having a city named after them? The myth of how Athens, Greece got its name is a good example of a city mythology you can create for your own world.

Your Homework: Take out the map you made and sketch in a few names. Do you have a large mountain range? What do the inhabitants of your world think of when they see that massive line of menacing earth? Is there an important city in your adventures? Who owns the

city, and what kind of history has it had? Come up with at least 5 places that you might refer to in your story, and write down their names and how big or small they are, who lives there, etc.

Naming Things

Imagine that you're writing along, spinning your story out, tremendously pleased with yourself, and then you stop. Your hero has just sat down for a meal and a fermented beverage of his choice. What's he drinking? Ale? Beer? Wine? Champagne? Yes! Champagne-- he just killed a dragon and wants to celebrate! Wait-- champagne is a distinctly French word! It has no place in the S'nnari Desert! Ack! What now?

Well, you've got to come up with either a different beverage to celebrate with-- perhaps a more humble glass of wine or (for those desert-dwelling dragonslayers) fermented camels' milk (koumiss). Or, you can invent a new word for sparkling white wine. Well, where is your sparkling wine from? Obviously it's not a desert wine-- the carbonation would never hold up well in your arid climate here. Ah, so it's foreign, even to your desert-bred hero! Okay, then. Where's it from? Err..... the north? Check your map-- who lives there, and what kind of language do they use? Well, you find that you'd put a rugged, barbarian warrior-tribe there, but that's okay-- even a barbarian can make a sparkling wine, if the conditions are right. Your barbarians speak a kind of guttural, Klingon-like language, do they? Well, what would they say after drinking a cup of your sparkling wine? Yep-- you've just invented what the barbarians call "burp-juice," but to your hero's desert ears sounds like "braak-nos:"

Dravin shook the dust off his travel-cloak and crouched in the tavern tent. "A cup of your finest, my host!" The host brought out a fragile bottle of braak-nos, the fabled sparkling wine of the Northern barbarians, and poured him a shining goblet full....

They say that the Eskimos have 500 words for "snow," and no one doubts it-- obviously, snow (and its subtle differences) is very important to Eskimo tribes. What might be important to your world's cultures? Can you imagine that a race of inherently magical creatures might have 50 different ways to describe a magical current? Do your elves know a hundred words for "song?" Do your dwarves have 80 words for "rock," but 200 for "gold?" Think about the many synonyms your cultures might have. Even if your hero never encounters the 200 different ways to say "blood" in orcish, some fifty or sixty might still exist in the place names used by the villages that were once dominated by the orc clans.

Your Homework: You've got a good idea of who your characters are, where they're going, even the kinds of magic they might encounter. As you write, think of two or three little objects that your characters would find alien enough to use their foreign names. Now decide-- what do the people who made those things call them? Go back to your map and your sounds again-- what sounds do you associate with the people, and what sounds would they associate

with the object? Finally, is it a common or valued enough thing to have more than one name? And if it is common, might it be used to name places as well as things?

Reference Material

To look at my bookshelves, you would think I were a 13 year-old girl, just getting out of the "unicorns and fairies" phase. My fantasy shelves are filled, double-deep, with wonderful paperbacks filled with wonderful worlds. I revisit these worlds on occasion to remind myself of the great stories and realms contained therein.

Aside from your standard fantasy paperbacks, my shelves also contain a shelf or two of "oversize" hardbacks. These are something between art books and reference guides. They range from a hardbound copy of *The Unicorn* to D'Aulaire's *Book of Greek Myths* (a must-read for anyone interested in Greek mythology). I have books on knights, fairy tales, Mother Goose, and Shakespeare. Some of my books, like *Fantastic People*, *The Ultimate Maze Book*, and *The Goblins of Labyrinth* are guidebooks to seeing how other people and other cultures imagine the unimaginable. I refer to these books infrequently, but I am comforted by knowing that they are at my beck and call, whenever I need a good fantastical creature or villain. They are my bestiary, if you will. And there are all too few decent books in this collection on magical systems.

Books

From *Writer's Digest Books*

The Writer's Complete Fantasy Reference (Introduction by Terry Brooks). Includes some chapters on magic and paganism, as well as commerce, trade, clothing, castles, and real-world cultures.

Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy Includes a chapter called "The World-Builder's Handbook and Pocket Companion."

World-Building, by Stephen L. Gillet. This is indispensable. It's a GREAT resource for how to make a physical world that makes sense.

Aliens and Alien Societies by Stanley Schmidt. Haven't read it yet, but it should be applicable to fantasy races as well as science fiction aliens.

Character Naming Sourcebook by Sherrilyn Kenyon. Actually, any decent baby name book will do-- make sure it lists the meaning of the name, alternate spellings, and origins. The *Character Naming Sourcebook* lists names by country/culture, so you can select names for characters that are from roughly similar cultures to make sense.

The Writer's Guide to Creating a Science Fiction Universe by George Ochoa and Jeffrey Osier. Another good one for physical world-building, defining where the mountains belong, etc.

Non-Writers Digest books

A Poetry Handbook by Mary Oliver -- Good, understandable resource for how words sound. Also useful if you're inventing languages and cultures, so you can write poetry for your gnomes.

Life in a Medieval Castle by Joseph and Frances Gies. They also have books on life in medieval cities, etc. All-around helpful resource.

All of the Brother Cadfael mystery novels by Ellison Peters are great-- Peters is a trained medievalist as well as a novelist-- her books are often required reading in college history courses.

Websites

What's in a Name? The Guide to Harry Potter Name Etymology has some great information on where the names in Harry Potter come from. Go! See how a master storyteller does it!

30 Days of WorldBuilding

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In October, 2004, I posted 30 days of world-building exercises to the NaNoWriMo discussion forums. These are short, 15-minute exercises that can help you make crucial decisions about your world, and what you want your story to say about it. These exercises have been edited for general use and re-posted here.

A lot of times, people want to write a novel and think "I want to write fantasy, but there's so much world-building I would have to do-- I haven't done any of it!" As everyone signing up for NaNoWriMo or any writing challenge quickly learns, this is really the self-editor speaking; it's another way of saying "I can't."

So, give yourself 7 and a half hours this month-- 15 minutes a day-- to build a world. It's not going to be Perfect or Set. Why would it be? You haven't actually written the story yet, you haven't tested its limits. But it'll give you something to start with, something to feel comfortable about when you start.

You'll need some way to track this stuff, by the way. A notebook is convenient, but you can track it on computer, a blog, whatever. For purposes of the exercises, I'll refer to a notebook, but understand that just means "that place where you keep your novel notes."

Day 1: Climate and Variety

How often have you read a book or story on "the ice planet" or "the desert planet"? These things simply do not exist. Humans are immensely adaptable-- if there's a section of the world they don't live on, they will do their best to figure out how to get there. There are now people living on platforms on top of the sea, as well as people living in habitats under it. The Middle East, the most hotly-contested region in the world, is in the middle of a desert.

The reason why books and stories try to limit the climate to one type or another is because the author wanted to hit upon a mood or a theme by presenting the story in a setting that is somehow related to that mood. Who doesn't have some emotional response to a frozen wilderness or a lush, verdant field?

The Exercise

Get out a map or go to an international website like National Geographic. Look everywhere. Antarctica. Saudi Arabia. The rainforests of Brazil. The rainforests of Central California. Look at how the different climates behave and appear.

The first fifteen minute exercise is to write down all the different climates you can think of-- if you need to just say a city name, do it. Sometimes "Seattle" is more evocative than "northern damp temperate climate." Write these names down in a list.

Then, go through that list and write one or two words that describe how that climate, either the word itself or the way the place itself may have made you feel, if you've been there before. Try to stick to abstract adjectives; emotional words, if you can, but nouns are also okay.

Put this list in your notebook. Tomorrow, you'll really need it, so keep it handy.

Reader-contributed Links

Conservation Maps

Day 2: The Physical Planet

One of the best courses I took in college was on Physical Geography (especially read Chapter 10), which generally taught me why the Earth is the way it is, and how things like mountains and lakes and deserts are made. The website I link here isn't from the course I took, but it's chock full of good information.

Most climates are formed by the interaction of land, water, air, and coriolis effect (the coriolis effect has a lot to do with why a particular coastline has cold water, while another part of the same sea has warm water). The coriolis effect is essentially what happens when the earth turns on its orbit, and the water and air on this rock turn at a slightly different rate than the rocks.

If the planet were covered only with water, you'd basically have interconnecting circular oceanic currents at the tropics, subtropics, and polar regions, and each current would be moving warmer water and air to cooler places, or cooler water (and air) to warmer places (certain places where these currents intersect have little interchange of movement, and are called the doldrums). But when you add land masses, those currents run into land (where most people live) and bring cold air or warm air with them, and their attendant humidity.

Seasons are caused by the earth's tilt. It's possible to create a world without a tilt, but the climate would vary less seasonally. This, by the way, is one way to create a world in which there's a chronic winter state, or it's always summer, etc. You can still have weather, but the weather isn't dictated by the season, so you're more likely to have year-round weather that tends to be stormy or cold, or calm, etc.

When you add land, you get orographic lifting, which cools air, often causing any moisture to condense into rain or snow or even fog.

The Exercise

What role do you anticipate weather playing in your story? Do you have a lot of travel that you want to complicate with bad storms? Are you going to snow in your mighty heroes? Will there be a mighty battle, determined by sudden flooding? You actually don't need to know right now. Your exercise for today is to jot down ten plot devices that relate to weather, and what you think they do to the story (for example: a snow-in can turn the mood very claustrophobic... or very intimate).

Day 3: Mood and Setting

As you've probably noticed already, a lot of my exercises aren't just about building a realistic world. They're about building a world that you can tell a story in. After all, world-building is fun, but if you're doing these exercises, you're probably not interested in spending 2000 hours worldbuilding without any practical application to your story, right?

So, pull out your list of climates from Saturday and look them over. You should have a bunch of climates, maybe even places, and a word or two describing how you feel when you're there.

Well, it's time to make your first real decision about your novel. What kind of mood do you want it to have? See, we're going to set your novel in the kind of climate that contributes to its overall mood and theme.

The mood of a novel is how it feels to read it. High fantasy is traditionally set in a climate similar to Europe or England, thanks to the father of heroic fantasy, J.R.R. Tolkien himself. However, it doesn't have to be that way, and you can capture a completely different feeling in a Middle Eastern desert setting or a Russia-like tundra.

For theme, you can adapt your setting to what's actually happening in the novel, what kind of message your novel has to tell. For example, if you want everyone in the novel to be in a constant state of uncertainty, maybe you should set them in a seismically active volcanic region (I type this just 77 miles away from Mt. St. Helen, which apparently is due to erupt any hour now). Or perhaps you want your story to feel very "escapist." Nothing says "escape" like a tropical island with balmy days, mid-afternoon storms, lush green plants, and a climate that doesn't vary seasonally but can bring up some exciting stormy weather.

If you already know "I want to write something dark and gothic" and you look at your climate list and there's "dark" or "gothic," you're there. You've got your predominant climate, and everything else after this is going to be figuring out how to build a world around that mood and climate.

If you are thinking right now "I have no idea what kind of mood I want-- this mortaine person is crazy to think I know that this far in advance," then the below exercise is YOURS; it'll take 10 minutes and you'll have made a strong first decision about your novel. And don't feel bad if you don't know what kind of novel you're going to write-- nobody really does until they write it.

The exercise:

Read over your list from Day 1 and then turn to a blank piece of paper. Close your eyes and think about what kind of feeling you like to have when you write or read. Write down four words that fit into that feeling: two adjectives, a verb, and a noun. Now return to the page with your list of climates and emotions. Do any of them match up? If they do, you have your cli-

mate. If not, try to find closest-match words.

If you spend 10 solid minutes thinking about this and still can't decide, pick two climates that express moods you like. You can make up your mind later, and you can even build your world with both climates containing equally probable sites for your story.

Day 4: Cataclysmic Events

You have your mood. You have, generally, a climate you want. If you read the linked site, you might even have some idea of how to get that climate.

Now, let's get into history.

No, not dates and names-- that's too recent. We're talking planetary history. How long has your world been around? How old was it when your sapient species reached it (either through evolution or discovery)? Did a previous species dominate, like the dinosaurs, leaving a fossil record? Or is human(oid) evolution the first major species to leave a lasting record? If a previous species was sapient, did they also leave artifacts of their society?

A fossil record can be misinterpreted in many creative ways. You might end up with legends of dragons based on dinosaur records-- unless, of course, you have *real* dragons on your world. Your current sapient beings might believe in an older race that "built" everything, when in fact that older race actually destroyed it.

Also look for the non-biological records of physical change. Most geography changes slowly. You'll find that mountain ranges take forever to grow, except when they don't. When they change suddenly and dramatically, people remember, and their attitudes about such places change as well. Worldwide legends about sudden changes may spring up-- nearly every Earth culture has a flood story. There may be a historical record there, or there may be a parable being told instead. But they all have one, and there's therefore some kind of scar on what humans perceive of as their planet's history.

For example, consider earthquakes and volcanoes. Any seismically active region will gain a reputation, perhaps as a place where geographical records may be upturned rapidly (in the case of a tectonic shift bringing a fossil to surface), may be destroyed or buried quickly (perhaps by volcanic mudslides), or may be altered rapidly (such as by a more dramatic volcanic eruption that not only buries but also relocates debris for several miles, or an earthquake that opens a rift in the center of town). In a scientifically advanced society, your seismic causes won't hold all that many surprises for your characters, unless you want to set forward a speculative question about geological cataclysm (such as a non-earthly cause or something unearthed that's unexpected). For your fantasy characters, of course, a volcanic eruption can be an enormous deal-- the wrath of the gods, a dragon awakening, or even a magically-induced catastrophe.

Other major, fast-moving cataclysms include hurricanes and flooding, fires (though recovery from fire is actually a fairly rapid process, taking a matter of years), earthquakes, volcanoes and rifts, and meteorites. Less rapid but still quick in the geological scale are glaciers, ice ages, and global warming. A good example of a very slow-moving but planet-changing event is the plate tectonic shift that essentially moved India into Asia, forming the Himalayas

and causing a massive climate shift in Africa, drying the continent out and forever altering (or perhaps just starting) the course of human evolution.

Even though we're not yet into culture-building, start thinking now about what kinds of scars your planet might have from major cataclysmic events. What major mountain ranges do you want or need to put into your story, what deep canyons, what crater-marked plains? Are all of your scars natural, or are some man-made through technological or magical forces?

The Exercise

For 15 minutes, jot down some of the Really Big Land Features you want in your story and just think "what if that were made by...." Write down a couple of causes for those features and scars, and stick it all into your notebook. Which scars are slow-force scars (like plate tectonics), and which are fast-forces (anything that takes less than 10,000 years is medium-to-fast in geological scales).

Day 5: The Map

I should warn you that today's exercise may take more than 15 minutes. I'm still working on coloring the large-scale map of a world I used 2 years ago, but the small-scale map only took about an hour.

Today is the day you get out your pencils and paper and start to draw The Map.

The non-graphically inclined, I'm sure, are about to run screaming into the streets, but please wait! You are not alone! Map-making is hard work. It takes patience, dedication, and a complete inability to draw a straight line.

What's that you say? You say you can't draw a straight line to save your life? Well, step right up, because you can draw a map of a non-existent world!

Nature has very few straight lines and even fewer right angles. Maybe that's why humans like to put them in our man-made artifacts so much! Nature is full of wiggly lines and curves and wobbles.

By now, you have a general idea of what you want in your planet or world. You have a list of climates and some big features you're going to put into the world.

You might even have a general map sketched out. I usually start with something like "I want the desert area over here, and an island chain close enough by to travel from desert to island and back again in the story." I might make a map that has basic quadrants, maybe even a loose collection of groups of people who I'm putting into the story. If you don't have this sketch, do one now. Make big ugly circles if you have to to indicate where something is.

Now, it's time to get a little more specific, a little more concrete.

I use a few methods for fleshing out my maps. The first and easiest method is what I call the "cheating from Earth" method. I took a geography class in college where a student had made a poster out of a map of a particular island nation and had put it up on the wall of the classroom. Every person who remarked on the island said "Wow, that's a good map of Cuba." If they got close enough to read the legend, they saw that it was a map of Japan, but rotated so that North was not at the top of the map.

Americans are so used to seeing north on top, you can rotate almost any land mass and change its scale and suddenly, you are the best map-creator in the world. I use Goode's World Atlas and tracing paper. Place the tracing paper over a likely-looking map and trace around the feature I want to copy. I've turned Earth lakes in South America into continents, just by copying the shape but altering the scale, orientation, and composition (reversing it from being a mass of water into a mass of land).

If you are short on time, you can really cheat by going to any topographical map website (USGS sells their data, but you can find topo maps elsewhere, too), and print out and paste together your maps.

When I run out of good subjects from existing maps, I turn to the rest of nature. I find that tracing the outline of a leaf onto my map and then sketching in the veins of the leaf gives me some truly phenomenal mountain ranges, complete with rivers and streams (the leaf veins). Arrow-head shaped leaves provide more hilly ranges, while maple leaves give you some beautiful "rocky" formations. Look at the palm of your non-drawing hand. The lines of your palm can become rivers, topographical lines, or even roads.

Roads? Yes, roads! As you draw your map, look for places where people would settle. Remember that nobody builds a settlement far away from fresh water-- water is life, so look for rivers as your earliest settlements. Water is also transportation, trade, and can serve as defense. Hills make good natural defensive structures as well-- a hill surrounded by water is one of the earliest natural fortress.

Rivers often flow through valleys, and the flooding of the river is a good source of nutrients for farmland, so watch for where your civilizations' food will be grown, and remember that those places are hugely important to the major political forces in your story. Remember: an army marches on its stomach!

I have a joke I like to tell that I got from my geography professor in college. An area starts out as a lake, turns into a wetland, then a swamp, then a bog, then a meadow, then a condominium. As sediment builds up in an area of immobilized water, the waterway gradually transforms into solid land, which humans then seize and build upon. Since the space was originally a waterway, though, what do you think happens if a meteorological event brings the water back in force?

The Exercise:

So, today's exercise is to draw out the physical contours of your map, and then identify at least three places that your people might live. You don't need names for them yet-- we'll worry about names next week, when we give our people language. Just draw a dot on the map or maybe sketch a little "house" symbol to indicate that people have settled that area.

Comment from Holly Ingraham:

My one quibble here is that you can't be arbitrary with deserts. Look at our one and only example, Earth. If we grossly simplify things, just for guidelines:

Pretty much, you find deserts on western coasts as the cold currents start to curve away from land at the equator. That includes those of SoCal/Mexico, Spain/North Africa, western Australia, Peru, and the Thar Desert of India. The opposite corner of a continent will be in the tropical storm zone: monsoons of India and SE Asia, the hurricanes of the Caribbeans.

The other time you get natural deserts is when the area is too far inland from the rain-bearing air currents, especially in the rain-shadow of mountain ranges. You see this both in the western deserts of the US, in the shadow of the Rockies from the west and the Gobi of

Asia, also in eastern Africa and the Near East that are in the rain-shadow of the Indian ranges. Central Asia is dry because it's just too far from the sea, the rain source, and lacks many rivers (for the same reason).

So your islands close to the desert should be off a west-equatorial corner, and when you build a gigantic super-continent twice the size of Eurasia and Africa together you have to remember that most of it's going to be like Uzbekistan, not Ireland, for climate.

[My background is geology, historical geology, and paleoclimatology. Climate revealed in flora and fauna can tell you something about where a land-mass was at the time. So we look for these guidelines.]

Holly Ingraham is one of the moderators of Other Worlds Writing Workshop, and an excellent author and mentor for genre writers!

Day 6: Races

Pull out your map. You probably have a good sense now of where your climates are, and you already know that there are people living in a few key places. Now ask yourself, what do the people who evolved in this place look like? Don't worry about conqueror races yet-- just those who natively evolved there. If there's a lot of sun, you might have darker-skinned inhabitants. In higher-temperature areas, a wider, flatter nose is an evolutionary advantage. In colder climates, a tendency to gain fat is an advantage as well.

Based on the climates you've set out in your map, what do the people look like who live there? Write down some typical characteristics, and then perhaps a couple of features that are considered especially attractive or unattractive.

Part of the purpose of this exercise is to move away from the very typical white Anglo-Saxon fantasy and science fiction heroes, and to get a bit closer to representing the kind of genetic and racial diversity that's actually available to the speculative fiction writer. It's not that you can't write a white person into spec fiction, but it's important that you don't *have* to.

Wherever there's a boundary, such as an ocean or mountain, you'll have more racial diversity. Wherever two groups might meet over land, you'll have more blending. In your cataclysmic events, you might have a boundary that abruptly appeared or disappeared. A sudden appearance of a boundary means that one racial group may now diverge, and when they reconnect later, they will find themselves culturally and perhaps genetically differing from the original base group. If a boundary disappeared, suddenly you will have different racial groups encountering each other, often for the first time, with varying effects on your storyline and civilization.

Technology, too, can remove a barrier. Sea-worthy vessels brought Western Europeans to the New World, forever altering the genetic makeup of those from South America; it is now very difficult to find an example of a "pure" Maya bloodline; "blending" with white settlers has changed the racial makeup of that particular group of people.

Exercise:

Spend 10 minutes figuring out what people who evolved in each major area of your world would look like. Then spend another 5 minutes asking "what if this group encountered that group?" Would they fight? Trade? Both? Inter-marry and blend their genetic types? Would they remain largely separate, with pure strains of both racial groups co-existing (not necessarily peacefully)? How would that encounter be brought about in the first place?

Day 7: Recent History

Today, we're going to talk about more recent history. It's still okay if you don't have names for your people and groups yet. Tomorrow starts the languages and naming section (yay!) so today, just call them "Group A" or "The Bad Guys" or whatever you need to to keep yourself sane.

By now, you have a geography, a map, and a general sense of groups of people living on the land. Yesterday, you approached some of the questions that might crop up in your novel, but there are also questions that pre-date your novel.

Who lives where, and what wars and conflicts have they had? Who keeps the peace? How do borders stay in place? What happens when power shifts? What major resources are considered necessary to staying in power?

As you answer these questions, you'll find that patterns emerge. A necessary resource is close to the boundary between two cultures. The peace-keeping forces don't always stay in power. Shifts in power result in conflict and war.

A note about war and its effects. In a ground war, crops are destroyed, either by being seized and eaten, or by being burned (to prevent the other side from getting them). A lack of crops means famine, which leads to disease. There is a reason that War, Death, Pestilence, and Famine are the Four Horsemen of the Apocalypse-- they go hand-in-hand whenever conflict gets violent. For those who are also telling a woman's story, war tends to be especially bad for women, as rape is often considered a valid form of warfare. Not only does this kill many women, but it may also leave them with unwanted pregnancies, disease, and of course the psychological effects of PTSD. By "women," let's also not kid ourselves about maturity, shall we-- when a soldier is engaging in rape, he's not really checking to see if she's of legal age. When you write a war into your timeline, remember that wars are never really good, even for the winners; recovering from a war takes about a generation without major conflict.

The Exercise:

Spend 15 minutes outlining the major historical events of the last 100 years before your novel begins.

Include in your timeline:

Dates when power shifted in your civilization(s) (through coup, death of a monarch, revolution, election, etc.), and whether the power shift was smooth (as it might be when a monarch dies and their offspring takes their place)

Dates when a natural event reduced or increased the amount of natural resources (food, usually, but also water, timber, and other resources).

Dates when an unnatural event (such as a magical or technological event) changed the resources as well.

Each of these factors (power shifts and resource shifts) puts pressure on the civilizations. At the high-pressure points, write "battle/conflict"-- those are points at which violence may have erupted between cultures (or, if you have non-violent people, perhaps conflict that's expressed in other dramatic ways). Events may also be interrelated-- a technological event might give the edge to one power group, which forces other groups to respond, often with confrontation.

The last dates to write on your timeline: Date your novel begins, and the date your character was born (so you know what part of history he or she directly remembers).

Tuck this timeline into your notebook; you'll need it later! In fact, if you have a politically-oriented storyline, you'll probably need more than 100 years of history and more than one timeline to represent everything that's happening, so spend as much time on this part as you like. There's no need to limit yourself to 15 minutes.

Day 8: Economics and Politics

Economic and political theories can be simplified (for purposes of storytelling) to some VERY simple statements: Economics are a rule of who has what, who needs what, and how do they get it there. If someone doesn't have something they need, they will go get it, however they can. Politics are a kind of advanced form of economics in which major players and groups work to get what they want or need.

If you are writing a novel about economic theory or a novel that is designed to promote or exemplify a particular political viewpoint, then this simplistic explanation is probably not going to be very satisfying. But that's all right-- chances are, if you're writing that kind of book, you don't need this writing exercise anyway, because the economic and political elements of your story are so important, it would be reckless to only spend 15 minutes on them.

For the rest of us, those of us who need our socio-economic/political themes to remain in the background, the above explanation forms a really solid ground for making some decisions. But don't just brush today's exercise aside; even the most hack-and-slash sword-and-sorcery story can benefit from a little behind-the-scenes intrigue.

The most important decision, of course, is what kind of resources your people need, and where those resources are. Farmland is an obvious natural resource that most cultures need (though "farmland" can also be extrapolated to "food-raising land" in cases of heavy meat-eaters and hunter-heavy, often nomadic, societies). Water is another-- you cannot have a living civilization without water. If you look at the political scene in the Western United States, you can trace nearly every major political decision involving land back to water. Who has it, who doesn't, and how can those who don't have it get it.

But food and water aren't the only important resources. Timber and stone are important for shelters. Salt is vital for life.

Certain types of minerals are more valuable than others-- like diamonds versus granite. Granite is more useful for building things, but diamonds are more precious. Some minerals are not useful until technology advances to a point where they can be made useful-- as with boron, an element that isn't tremendously helpful until it's turned into borox, which was used heavily as a cleanser and an effective (though later found to be toxic to pets) pesticide.

If you have a magic-rich world, there may be resources not listed here that are important to your world. In Mercedes Lackey's Valdemar series, special "ley lines" of magic flow through the world, and where they meet up, magic is stronger and more powerful magics are possible; the redistribution of that ley line magic resource is the major struggle in the last series, the Winds of Change books. Personally, I like to see the struggle for a missing resource as a motivation for characters (villains especially). It's much more satisfying to encounter an ambitious land-grabbing villain who wants all the land so he can rule, than just someone who's evil and

nasty because he's evil. "Because he's evil" is a fine reason in some books, but it doesn't hold up well to scrutiny.

Don't underestimate the power of the human imagination in developing your list of resources, either. Jerusalem is a city which is well-placed in terms of its nearby resources, but far more natural-resource-rich areas exist. Still, civilizations have been fighting over this one city for millenia-- why? Because it is considered sacred. There cannot be very many such sites in your world, because eventually, people will decide they're not worth losing so many lives. But a few key sites can in fact become "hot spots" of an imagined resource-- something that may or may not have much intrinsic value, but its sentimental value is extreme.

The exercise:

Just as you examined your timeline for events and pressures, now examine your map for resources and deficits. For five minutes, make a few notes on the map to mark places that have more of a type of resource, and jot down anywhere that has a definite deficit of something needed. Also check your timeline; some of your pressure-point conflicts in the last 100 years may have resulted from an unexpected increase or decrease in the resources of one area or another.

When you're done with the resources, take another ten minutes and identify which major groups in your civilizations care about which resources. These factions may appear in your story-- they may be opposing the hero(es), or even helping the villain, or they might help the hero or at least get out of the way, depending on how each faction perceives and responds to the various characters in your story. If you are aiming for a political story, you'll want to flesh this out with descriptions of how the factions perceive each other as well as the hero and villain, key people in the factions, and their tactics in dealing with others. Again, feel free to label these with generic names for now; language is coming soon!

Day 9: Language

Today's exercise is cribbed from the main Fantasy Worldbuilder page, which I wrote some time ago. I'll be pasting some of the text in, wholesale, but you can also go check it out for yourself.

Many people find this to be the most fun part of world-building. So many enjoy it, in fact, that there's an entire discipline called "conlangs." If you get started on this aspect of world-building and find it to be more fun than anything you've ever done before, you might want to look into conlangs, for creating constructed languages that didn't evolve organically, but instead were created artificially. Tolkien was a master of this, and created multiple languages for his Middle Earth setting. But then, Tolkien was a medievalist and a linguist, and creating languages was both a personal as well as professional interest.

If you're like me and just want to slide in a few new words because they sound "right," then do that. By all means, though, create a lexicon for your fantasy world's languages, though-- if the people of the S'nnari Desert tend to liquid sounds (lots of r's and l's), then any word with a "k" sound should be somewhat foreign to them, or have a particular impact when they say it (as in a curse word). People often say that German rarely sounds "nice," and it's somewhat true-- many hard sounds in the German language give it a much harsher "sound" to Romanized ears. The Star Trek producers were not stupid when they created the hard-sounding syllables of Klingon, either.

I can't suggest too many resources for the effects of sound, except that Mary Oliver's *A Poetry Handbook* has a chapter on sound that is amazing. It's all about the sounds of words-- the differences between vowels and different kinds of consonants, and what effects they have in poetry. Use this, or something like it-- Oliver actually took most of her information from an old primer on language she had lying around her house. Learn about how language sounds. I must also add: all the rules for sound are completely dependent on the native language of your listener. If you're writing in another language, your rules for what sounds "hard" or "soft" will be completely different.

You can also feel perfectly justified stealing liberally from Earth worlds and languages; many authors do this to great success.

Most of the time, you'll be writing in your native tongue, and so you'll have automatically "translated" whatever your characters are doing into the language you're writing in. You need to know what your characters' language sounds like only for those words that you want to add in, to give an exotic flair to your world. In general, these will fall into three categories: people, places, and things. Verbs, being more abstract, should not be presented in your made-up language unless absolutely necessary. Even then, try to make those verbs sound as close to

your own language as possible.

One other resource that can be valuable in your search for good names: Baby name books. Both for parents and, now, more generic ones for writers. I have two naming books that I find helpful-- one lists the names by cultural association as well as first/last and male/female names. The other one is a book specifically geared towards naming fantasy characters, and is published by Writer's Digest Books.

Exercise:

Listen to how different syllables sound to you. Do they excite you? Do you associate a particular sound with an emotion or place or memory? Write down some generic preferences for your languages-- "I want the language spoken by the elves to sound like water, and the language spoken by the dwarves to sound like gravel rubbing together" and then go listen to what those things sound like. Write down the syllables you hear when you run a faucet or sit by a stream, for instance. Those sounds will be your "root" syllables when making up your names for places and people and things.

Bonus Exercise:

If you want language to play a strong role in setting the mood of your story, visit the naming exercises from the page mentioned above, and sort out some of your names for your people, places, and things. Note that, in doing this, you will likely get a firmer grip on your character's background, as well as need to pull out your map to now fill in the names of some of your key landmarks and settlements. This will probably take an addition 15-30 minutes more.

Reader Links

Langmaker.com

Day 10: Mood and Culture

So, we're back at mood again, this time taking a look at how our bare-bones society reflects the mood of our novel.

That's right-- the mood. Remember the Day 3 Exercise, where you wrote down some key moods that you like to read or write about, and the climate that fits them best?

Well, now we're going to do a similar exercise with your history, politics, and language. Get out your timeline (Day 7), your economic/political groups (Day 8), and your list of syllables (Day 9).

Do they "fit together" with your mood? When you read about the events in your timeline, do you get the same sense of seriousness or comedy, the same high/epic feeling or low pulp thrill? Or is there some dissonance? If you're aiming for a high epic, perhaps naming your planet "Bob" isn't the way to go, hmmm?

Read down your timeline and make a small "X" next to anything that doesn't fit. You're not deleting yet-- just marking it for revision later. It might not fit your mood, or it might just need some tweaking to go in.

Also mark your political groups and economics. If you want science fiction parody, you're going to have a hard time using "wheat by-products" as an economic force. "Broken laws of physics" as an export, on the other hand, may work really well indeed.

Do the same with your syllables for language, or your place and character names, if you got that far yesterday (Day 9). In some cases, you may have a couple of intermingling cultures that create the overall mood of your novel. Perhaps you have the high/epic elves and their scary counterparts, the giants; you can use different language sounds for each group, and let that dissonance play a role in your novel as well.

Note: Having trouble really identifying the mood again? Finding that your mood and your language don't match at all?

Take a deep breath and think "When I read this story, I want to feel....." what? Amused? Thrilled? Important? Angry? Frightened? Dark? Confident? Angry?

That's your mood. Now think about that emotion and write some concrete words that make you feel that way. By "concrete" I mean nouns and adjectives-- words for things you can touch and see. Chances are, you'll end up with words that generally sound similar. For example, if I want my novel to be "gritty" I'll choose words like "grit" and "scratch" and "claw" and "mark," words which have predominant "t" and "k" and "ch" sounds in them-- to my ear, these are harder sounds than more rounded or liquid sounds. "K"s and "T"s and "Ch" sounds are all going to be in my names, then.

Similarly, if I want "gritty" I'll trim out of my timeline that War of the Ferrets I'd initially considered putting in. That one belongs to the comedy novel, not my gritty survival-of-the-fittest

story. Now is the time to trim out the things that don't quite fit your mood, add things that fit it better, and generally tweak together your novel notes into something that forms a strong basis for your story.

Exercise (recap):

As stated above. Settle on the overall mood for your story if you haven't already. Look through your timeline, political groups, and language notes and mark for revision anything that doesn't fit your mood. If you have time, revise those things. Otherwise, leave them for later.

Day 11: Focus In

Today's exercise is to expand on one area of the culture you've created for your world. We have a bare-bones timeline, the bare-bones elements of a language, the bare-bones of an economic and political scene. Today, select one of these areas to flesh out. If you're writing a novel with a more political plotline, flesh out the politics and economics. If you're writing something really "alien" in feel, or if you're writing high fantasy, flesh out the languages. If you're writing a story whose plot hinges on the past, fill in your timeline (probably not needed if this novel is a sequel, though).

History:

Write a complete timeline for your setting (last 500 years or so should do, unless your characters are long-lived or major forces earlier than that are truly world-shaking) and for your protagonist's life up until the novel opens. Make notes on how these forces will later impact the story (ex: Expansionism one hundred years ago is going to lead now to revolt in the Islands; the hero lives there and is going to get caught up in the revolution).

Economics/Politics:

Write a 1-paragraph description of each major political body (churches, governments, kingdoms, factions, economic forces, guilds, etc.) and name them now so you can refer to them as needed later. If you want, take extra time and write one sentence about how 3 of your groups (the 3 most important groups) feel about all the other groups.

Names and Language:

Write a short glossary or lexicon for some common or important words (like rock, bird, horse, king, ford, river, stream, mountain, holding, village, magic, outsider, etc.) These can be combined and declined to make place names as well as surnames and even first names. Write down five place names and five character names that you can use when you need them. If you want, take extra time and fill out your map with appropriate place names now.

Day 12: The Speculative Element

I originally had planned to make today's exercise a "What If?" about your society, but I'm thinking at this point that there's only so much you can do with it before you write, and it occurs to me that there's no better way to start building your speculative element than by asking yourself "what if?"

What do I mean by "speculative element?" In a high fantasy novel, it's the magic, or the gods, or the One Ring. In science fiction, it's the hyperdrive, or the ansible, or the near-light-speed, or the wetware implant. In horror, it's the ghosts, the nightmares-are-real, the Blair Witch. Essentially, the speculative element is the rule or assumption that is not true in present day Earth.

And "speculative" pretty much means what if, doesn't it?

The Exercise

So, settle in with your notebook. If you don't know yet if you're writing science fiction, fantasy, or horror, you should probably decide now (and yes, a blend is a-ok; just be sure to do all the speculative element exercises once for each genre). But the chances are, you have some idea already of which genre(s) you want to work in. You might even have some specific ideas to play with-- a talking octopus, for instance, or a magically-appearing cat.

Write down the snippets and images that you already know you want in your story. Some of these might be things you have already decided on as convenience items-- a faster-than-light drive, maybe, or telepathy; things you want in there to help drive the plot forward and eliminate certain inconveniences as a storyteller. Just remember that these convenience items are always available; it's implausible to have the spacetime drive fail just when the hero needs it, and these things ought to be available to the villain, too, just so your heroes are playing on a level field.

Next, ask yourself the hard questions. "What if?" What if my society could talk to each other instantaneously? What would that do to them? Would that change my plot? What if you could make yourself invisible? Would that require magic, or technology, or both-- and how would you do it with either?

Last year, I knew I wanted aliens and a network implant (like having the Internet in your head); as I played with all my "what ifs," I realized that the network implant wouldn't just change the big things, like how dangerous a hacker could be-- it also changed the little things, like very few people carrying a briefcase or cell phone, and how you always would know where you were and could never get lost.

Drill down on the big things and the details, decide what would happen if they work one way vs. another. Chances are, you'll find there are speculative elements that you need in your story to support or limit the power of the ones you've already created.

By the way: I personally find that talking about my story with someone else helps me find the holes in my spec element. For the past week, my husband and I have been playing "what if" with my dinosaurs, figuring out what needs to change in their physiology to make them able to cooperate with each other as a society, and discovering that having twelve sentient species of dinosaurs means a very complicated society indeed.

Day 13: Plot Hooks and the Speculative Element

Get your notes out from yesterday. These notes are about your speculative element-- the magic or science fiction or supernatural rule that isn't true in today's Earth. It's that thing that your readers must believe in order to buy into your story.

The Exercise:

If you have some idea of your plot by now, get out whatever plot notes you have and write down ten things (minimum) that your speculative element can do to your plot.

Example: In a magic world, travelling across a continent doesn't **have** to take weeks. In an advanced biotech world, maybe people don't have to die. What does that do to a quest fantasy in which the travel portion leads the heroes into more adventures? What does it do to the villain if he cannot die? Or the hero?

If you don't have any ideas about your plot, but you do know what kind of speculative elements you want in your novel, that's fine. Just look at your notes for that element and start asking yourself "what could I do with this element? Can I have my hero or villain use it? Refrain from using it? Is it a threat? A convenience? Both? What happens when it fails? Does it change some ubiquitous thing, like a technology that makes communication instantaneous, or a supernatural force that eats people in the dark (therefore making candles and lanterns necessary and commonplace).

What events can be framed around this speculation, and do you want those events to show up in your novel? {The litmus test for whether or not they appear in your novel is whether or not they fit into the novel's mood or theme, or otherwise grab you by the collar and yell "AHA!" at you}. Write down ten (minimum) things that happen which involve or rely on your magic, technology, or boogymen.

You don't have to end up using the plot hooks you've generated here, of course, but they help your speculative element become a more central part of your story, rather than serving as "background noise" to your novel (a la space opera). And you'll probably find that, when your plot begins to falter (usually around the middle-- plots always falter around the middle), you can grab your list of plot hooks out of your notebook and find something that helps push the story along, or at least gives your characters an interesting diversion for a few thousand words.

Day 14: Education

I probably should have put this into the "society and culture" section, but I wanted education to come after you've developed a sense of your speculative element. After all, if you have a character who is intimately connected to that speculation (a wizard, perhaps, or a scientist), then you need to know what kind of knowledge they have before you decide how they would have gained it.

This, fortunately, also ties into character development. If you don't know anything about your characters yet, at least you'll know, when you come to that, what a typical educational experience would be for them.

So, what kind of educational system does your society use? Do apprentices train in a particular trade before graduating to journeyman or master level? Does a child learn the profession of its parents? Do churches or religious institutions educate the children, and if so, do they educate all children, or just the religious or wealthy ones? Are there colleges and universities for advanced studies? Do students learn in a virtual reality world, and if so, do they have the same kinds of conflicts they might encounter anywhere else?

One of my favorite books this month is *Sabriel* by Garth Nix, because the main character grew up in a turn-of-the-century-technology boarding school where girls learn their letters, etiquette, math, science, but also fighting and, in some cases, magic. I love this book because the author didn't just stick his heroine into an apprenticeship, nor a convent, and didn't have her grow up in the modern day world with all its conveniences, only to be teleported to his story's real setting. Instead, the heroine grows up in a place where she can have a relationship with the story's setting while also being somewhat separate from it. Thus, when she goes home, she is prepared but still unfamiliar. An alien native, so to speak. Her education has made her an outsider in her own homeland. It is a crucial part of her character, and she could not be *Sabriel* without it.

Ender's Game is another excellent book for making an educational system be an integral part of the story. I'm not a fan of genius child protagonists, but I liked this novel because Ender encounters a new educational system, along with all the pressures of being in a new school and being the new kid and the small kid in his class.

Whether your novel is fantasy, science fiction, or even horror, your characters will probably have had some sort of education. It's a human universal to train our children to do something later in life. Decide now what kind of schooling is available in your world. Decide how your characters have been educated, and in what kinds of subjects. And don't focus so much on their specialty that you forget that they're people.

You may discover that you want your character to have pursued one particular field of study that isn't relevant to his or her life now, but which was an interest to them. That's great--

most people do not focus on one field of study to the exclusion of all others. If they did, you wouldn't have this world-building exercise, and a lot of great advances that rely on two or more fields intersecting would simply never have happened. You can even insert that kind of synergy into your novel (imagine the physicist who has a passing knowledge of art history--enough to know that his time machine has taken him to a certain date, based on the architecture around him!)

Day 15: Resources

Mid-way through our world-building, you might be interested in some other resources for world-building. This list was compiled by Holly Ingraham, one of the admins for the Other World Writing Workshop, which has a forum (the Starship Barbarian Lounge) over in the Writing Groups forum at NaNoWriMo.

From Holly: Read everything at <http://www.sfgwa.net> and <http://www.sff.net/people/alicia/> and <http://hollylisle.com/community/>.

Patricia C. Wrede has a whole questionnaire on world-building topics for fantasy authors

Dr. Suzette Haden Elgin, working in her double profession of scifi writer and linguist, gives us the basics of creating a new language

Suzy McKee Charnas on vampires

Joan Slonczewski on the science in science fiction

Dr. Elizabeth Viau teaches a course in world-building from the planetary dust up

S. Andrew Swann on world-building

"Construction and Influences" by Stephen Baxter takes speculation to the edge, but stays hard scifi

David Eddings' advice on getting real[/quote]

From my own World Builder's Guide:

From Writer's Digest Books:

The Writer's Complete Fantasy Reference (Introduction by Terry Brooks). Includes some chapters on magic and paganism, as well as commerce, trade, clothing, castles, and real-world cultures.

Writing Science Fiction and Fantasy Includes a chapter called "The World-Builder's Handbook and Pocket Companion."

World-Building, by Stephen L. Gillet. This is indispensable. It's a GREAT resource for how to make a physical world that makes sense.

Aliens and Alien Societies by Stanley Schmidt. Haven't read it yet, but it should be applicable to fantasy races as well as science fiction aliens.

Character Naming Sourcebook by Sherrilyn Kenyon. Actually, any decent baby name book will do-- make sure it lists the meaning of the name, alternate spellings, and origins. The Character Naming Sourcebook lists names by country/culture, so you can select names for characters that are from roughly similar cultures to make sense.

The Writer's Guide to Creating a Science Fiction Universe by George Ochoa and Jeffrey Osier. Another good one for physical world-building, defining where the mountains belong, etc.

Non-Writers Digest books:

A Poetry Handbook by Mary Oliver -- Good, understandable resource for how words sound. Also useful if you're inventing languages and cultures, so you can write poetry for your gnomes.

Life in a Medieval Castle by Joseph and Frances Gies. They also have books on life in medieval cities, etc. All-around helpful resource.

The Borderlands of Science by Charles Sheffield. Gives a really good overview of science and where scientific knowledge has reached its limit.

A similarly-titled book The Borderlands of Science: Where Sense Meets Nonsense by Michael Shermer explores the boundary between science and pseudo-science.

Don't Know Much About Geography by Kenneth C. Davis is an excellent book for some hard-core basics on physical geography on Earth.

All of the Brother Cadfael mystery novels by Ellison Peters are great-- Peters is a trained medievalist as well as a novelist-- her books are often required reading in college history courses.

The Exercise:

Check out some of the websites that relate to your novel, and pick out a book or two that you plan to read, either between now and when you start writing, or to flesh out your world after you've written your first draft.

Day 16: More Speculation

Have you had enough of your speculative element yet? Well, today is another day to nail down the rules for how your magic, technology, or supernaturalism work in your story.

You might wonder why I'm asking you to spend so much time on this. Well, if you look at the most common weaknesses in fantasy and science fiction, you'll find that people dislike unbelievable. Now, a spec fiction audience will believe a lot. They're willing to believe in dragons, elves, magic, faster-than-light travel, ansible, warp drive, transporters, holodecks, teleportation, ghosts, werewolves, vampires, and even God, for the purposes of enjoying the story.

But as soon as the rules are broken-- as soon as people stop acting like people, or the warp drive only works when the hero needs to shorten the time spent travelling to the Bad Guy's hideout, but fails once he needs to make a getaway-- as soon as something inconsistent happens in your story, you lose your reader. They'll stop reading, or at the very least they'll stop believing, and that is death to your story.

Exercise

What are the limits of your speculative element? What's the trade-off for using it? Magic usually comes at a cost-- what is that cost? If there's no cost, then what's the trade-off? What keeps it from being used all the time, for everything, or is it used that much after all? What keeps people from spending every hour in the holodeck? Why would anyone bother to learn to pilot a ship when there are transporters? Can your vampires go outside in daylight, or are they strictly limited to the dark?

Write down your rules, specifically focusing on what's impossible, and what should be established as unstable early, so when it fails conveniently in your novel, it won't be out of place or throw your reader out of the story. Establish the limits and boundaries of your spec element today.

Day 17: Moody Review

Sometimes, you'll start out with a good mood for your story-- perhaps it's a post-apocalyptic world with decaying technology everywhere and vampires rule the world.

And then, maybe on a dare or because you wanted a particular plot convenience... you decide that the elevated levels of UV in your world mean the vampires have to wear light colors to prevent themselves from being destroyed.

So now you have your dark, post-apocalyptic, future-tech nightmare world with vampires roaming everywhere.... in pastels.

Yeah. There's a great example of a carefully-planned mood being ruined by an authorial choice that just doesn't fit.

Mood mis-matches happen all the time in fiction, particularly speculative fiction. They happen in movies as well-- how many times have you walked out of a theatre wondering if the director was trying to make a comedy or serious sci fi flick? That's a problem of not fitting into a genre, but it's also a problem of not identifying the mood of the work and sticking to it.

Sometimes, mood mis-fits work really well, and a mood misfit in a secondary storyline can often accentuate the primary storyline (as comedy secondary characters can lighten even a tragic story). And good writing can save anything, even pastel-clad vampires. However, we're focusing on the major elements of your novel, and you want them to mesh as much as possible.

Exercise

Pull out the list of adjectives you wrote down that set the mood for your novel. You used this list for figuring out your setting climate, and a bit for refining your names.

Read them out loud. Then, take out your notes on your speculative element. Read your rules out loud. Try describing how your spec element works in your novel. How do you feel when you describe it? Do you want to giggle? Unless you're writing comedy, this is probably a mis-fit. Do you want to brood? If you're aiming for dark and gothic, then good job!

Also look at what you decided to name your speculative element. Whether you call it "the Force," "mana," "warp drive," "lightships," "cybernet," or "lychan," how you name your speculative element has an impact on how your reader will feel about it. Say the name out loud and decide if you feel the way you want to feel when you read your novel.

Some names and speculative concepts will be fairly neutral and may have no impact on your novel's mood. "Magic" is generic enough to require more description if your characters will encounter or use it in your novel. "Magick," on the other hand, leads you to a little sense of mystery, an enigma.

Rename and rework your speculative elements and their rules if you need to.

Examples

Here are three examples, one from each broad speculative fiction genre, of the speculative element lending itself to the mood of the piece.

Example One: Science Fiction

I watched *Alien: Resurrection* this weekend and decided it was a good science fiction movie. Not so much a horror movie, which is what *Alien* and *Aliens* were, but a good science fiction movie. There were numerous points where something was explained-- some element of the alien's biology or Ripley's biology were explained scientifically (or pseudo-scientifically if you're unwilling to buy-in to the original premise that Ripley and the alien queen could be cloned). The speculative element was that Ripley and the alien queen could be cloned, but that such cloning would result in their mixed DNA-- a little bit of Ripley would be inside the queen, and vice versa. That element of blending the human and the monster repeated itself over and over, so that this movie's mood was dark and angsty, all about internal conflict, and reconciling the self and the other, and the moments of reconciliation are almost erotic in their presentation. Frequently, scenes highlighted this conflict, especially the most memorable scene, Room 1-7, where Ripley confronts the failed clones, twisted combinations of herself and the queen that are hideous and disturbing, but also worthy of compassion.

Example Two: Fantasy

The *Harry Potter* books and movies are a great example of a spec element lending itself to the mood. The magic in these books is almost entirely known, out in the open. You learn a spell that other wizards know already. The magical beasts have special powers-- but those powers are known and knowable. There are few real mysteries about how magic works in this world, at least to the experienced practitioners of it. Dumbledore never says "I don't know how to do that, Harry." Similarly, the problems Harry faces are known and knowable-- Voldemort is a known enemy, whom Harry must confront in every book. The bullies at school are known-- Ron never turns out to have betrayed Harry. Navigating the complicated rules of Hogwart's is a secondary conflict in the books, and one which further highlights the main theme of learning how to operate within the rules (and sometimes outside of them) in order to succeed against someone who violates them. Incidentally, *Harry Potter* is also a good example of a mis-match counterpoint-- many of the magic items and spells have comedic names and functions, and the sub-plots involving them serve to lighten the overall storyline for children.

Example Three: Horror

Good horror movies should scare the audience out of their shoes. One of my favorites is *The Blair Witch Project*. Not just because it was groundbreaking filming, but because it set the mood perfectly. At no time does the audience know what is really happening-- and neither

do the characters. The force that they are in conflict against is powerful, unknowable, enigmatic-- the mood is one of unknown terrors. You never SEE the witch-- in fact, the most powerful visual impression comes at the very end of the movie, and serves as the only explanation for what is happening. A lot of people leave this movie saying "I don't get it," because the clues and cues are very small, and missing even one means you miss the (entirely non-verbal) explanation. In horror movies where the protagonist wins, the explanation has to come before the climax, but the mood actually shifts at that point and stops being truly horror. A horror story that never completely explains the horror element maintains its mood simply by virtue of never letting the reader know what's going on.

Day 18: Speculation and Society

Today's the last day we're going to really focus on your speculative element; after today, you'll be spending time fleshing out whatever aspects of your world-building you feel most interested in, pulling everything together into a cohesive plan, and getting ready to write!

Look at your exercise from Day 10, where you focused in on an area of your culture. Now ask yourself how the addition of your speculative element, with all of its powers and limitations, affects your culture and society. How are people different in your culture, now that you have this new element? If you have a magical force in your world, does that change how people react to unexpected situations? If the gods meddle often in the affairs of humans, do people still bother to pray? If science has made it possible to immediately punish criminal activity, how do crimes happen, or do they not happen at all? If werewolves openly roam the streets at night, how does a teen go on a date?

How is society the same? Fundamentally, people are people, and even cultural differences don't change certain basic behaviors. What do you think those behaviors are? What do you think people will continue to do, with or without your speculative element?

Finally, how do "ordinary" people react to those with or without the speculative element? In any culture, there will be outsiders, people who do not have what others have, or who have something that no one else has. Your speculative element is one example of something that can separate people. There are many books about the lone wizard or wizardess, born with immense power in a world where magic is gone. But how about the opposite? In a magic-rich world, what happens to those born without it? [The DarkSword trilogy by Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman is an example of this, as is the very first Xanth book by Piers Anthony.] Similarly, technology can be a divider as well as an equalizer-- Archangel Protocol by Lyda Morehouse is a cyberpunk novel in which everyone is linked into the non-secular 'net, except Deidre McMannus, the protagonist, who has been excommunicated from the net. Horror seems fraught with separating one of the characters from the others-- usually so they can either fight the big horrific monster, or so they can be picked off, one by one.

Exercise

Revise your cultural write-up (Day 10) to include your speculative element, and to answer the above question. As a bonus, you can get back to your character sketch and figure out where your protagonist and supporting cast fit into your speculative elements and society.

Day 19: What If?: Character

The three Big Elements of a novel are Character, Plot, and Setting. In a lot of novels, especially mainstream Earth novels, Setting plays less of a role. In fact, a really common problem in some of the more modern novels is "blank room syndrome," where the reader understands what happened and to whom, but has no idea what the room looked like.

For novels set in any sort of speculative fiction world, however, the setting is more important. Even if you place your story in modern-day Earth, your speculative element changes the Earth of your novel significantly from the Earth the rest of us have to live in.

When you write in a completely different world, the future, or another universe, the setting is even more crucial. World-building is all about establishing your setting.

However, setting, plot, and character are three elements to a successful story, and none of them can stand on its own. You have no story if you have only a setting. No story if you have cool characters who do nothing. No story if you have a plot but nobody to act it out. The "character-driven story" is a myth-- all stories are character-driven. All stories are plot-driven. Character and plot are integral pressures that make your story work. In speculative fiction, Setting adds the third plane in the triangle, the third pressure-point that brings it all together.

So why am I rambling about character and plot? Every Thursday, we focus a little bit on plot, exploring how your setting can aid your plot, how you can weave in one element of your world to give your characters something more to do.

But we haven't really talked much about character. There was a little here and there, but unless you've been character-building outside of these exercises, you probably don't have much (I know I don't).

Exercise

Today, we're going to apply our "What if?" wondering to the characters. You can use any character-building exercises you like, but the questions below should help you fit your characters into your novel. A person is always a product of where they came from; don't neglect your hero's background when you determine who he is and what he does. Additionally, do the same exercises for your protagonist(s), additional primary characters, antagonist(s), and any love interests in the story.

For the purpose of these exercises, I'm going to refer to the character as "Joe." Obviously, use your own character's name and gender as appropriate.

Every time you answer a question, write down at least one follow-up what if? For example, "What if Joe met his nemesis in a neutral public place?" Suppose my answer is "they would fight." my follow-ups are: "What if Joe wins? What if he loses? What if the bar-owner throws him out? What if he has to pay for the damages? What if he goes to jail for it?" Play with your what ifs? When you're writing, keep questioning the possibilities, pushing the envelope for

what could happen, and finding the most fun-to-write answer to your questions.

Describe Joe's physical appearance, age, educational background, and speech patterns: What would a stranger notice 5 minutes after meeting Joe? What would a companion notice after 5 days of travelling with, working with, or being around Joe? Who are Joe's parents? Are they still alive? What if Joe met his parents? How would he behave? Where did Joe grow up? What if Joe had grown up somewhere else? What if he didn't like his home? What if Joe wasn't born there? Who is Joe's biggest hero? What if Joe met his hero? What if Joe met his nemesis in a neutral public place? What if Joe had a family, kids, etc.? What if Joe's kids were part of Joe's problem? How does Joe fit into your speculative element? Does he not believe in it? Is he an expert in it? Is he an outsider? What if Joe encountered something he didn't believe could happen? How would he react? What would that something be? What secrets does Joe have? What if his nemesis knew his secret? What if a love interest knew? What will Joe do to protect his secrets? What does Joe not know about himself? What if Joe wasn't who he thinks he is? What if he learned about himself? How would he take the information? What if Joe left home? What if he returned? What if Joe became an outsider or outlaw?

Keep going with questions about Joe's life until you get really tired of Joe, have such a great idea of what he would do or not do in any situation, or are ready to move onto another character.

Day 20: Plot Hook Day

We're at another Plot Hook day, and since we're fleshing out the rest of the storytelling at this point, today's a good day to sit down and finish (or start) your plot outline. This should be a basic listing of chapters or scenes and what you generally want to have happen in them.

If you don't have a plot, that's fine. At the very least, though, perhaps you have a question? A conflict that keeps resurfacing in your novel preparation? No? Go back to your previous plot hook lists from last week and the week before. What do you see? Do certain conflicts keep coming up? At the most basic level, what do you see as the primary conflict, the #1 question you have to answer in your novel?

For example, in my novel this year, there are several plot hooks that keep coming up. Volcanic and seismic activity are going to play a large role in my novel, as will the family structures of cultures which are hatched, not born, and which may or may not consider fellow clutch-mates to be important members of their family. Most importantly, though, I keep coming back to the basic dynamic between predatory dinosaurs and everyone else.

The question of "who will eat whom" is so central to my other-wise complex plot, that I know that answering it is the purpose of my novel. If I cannot, at the end of the book, tell you what happens to the hunter/non-hunter relationships, then I've failed as an author, and my book has failed, too. Ultimately, that's the question I keep asking.

Exercise

So, what question are you asking in your novel? Are you setting up a conflict between a Big Bad Guy and your Hero? Perhaps your question is as simple as "who will win?" Have you established a man-against-society conflict, in which your Hero struggles against the restrictions of his oppressive futuristic dystopia (a la 1984)?

If you really have no plot, and all you have is a string of plot hooks that I asked you to write, go ahead and write down the ones you want to use, and put them in their most logical order. When it comes time to actually write the novel, you can skip from plot hook to plot hook, and your story will be less like a single narrative and more like a collection of moments from your characters' lives. This is okay, too-- many novels work best as a series of interrelated adventures (and it's within the NaNo guidelines, too!)

Day 21: Flora and Fauna

On Day 6, we talked about races in your world. For many, these races will be variants of the same species (human). However, you might also have multiple sapient species co-existing on the same planet, much like Tolkein envisioned the elves, hobbits, dwarves and humans sharing an environment.

Today, we'll focus on the other living creatures on your planet-- the non-sapient animals (fauna) and plants (flora). [Obviously, if you have sapient plants, you need to develop them the same way you developed your other races in Day 6.]

Take a look at your world again. Now, obviously cataloging every species on your planet is just going to be an exercise in tedium and frustration. So, focus on the big stuff, and add things as you go along.

Exercise

Fill in the following lists.

For flora:

What plants are especially helpful to your society? Hemp and flax, for instance, are plants that provide important sources of non-animal fibers for making clothes, rope, and other materials. Are there similar crucial plants in your own world?

What are your peoples' main crops? This will vary by region, but will likely be some type of grain or starch vegetable. Not only do humans need a certain amount of carbs to survive, but many work animals (horses, mules, oxen) thrive on grain rather than raw vegetable matter.

What are considered delicacies? Just as strawberries are a real treat to some regions, and oranges were once a traditional and very coveted Christmas gift, sweet fruits and hard-to-grow crops can be very valuable to your people.

What fruits and vegetables can be turned into liquor or other drugs and medicines? Did you know that grapes contain enough yeast on the surface of their skins to ferment naturally? It doesn't make very good wine, but it will make wine, if left alone long enough. Aspirin is derived from willow trees, and sassafras tea has a calming effect. Humans have been turning plants into booze and drugs since the Neolithic Revolution. What do your people use to kill pain, put patients to sleep, become intoxicated, or get high?

What plants are dangerous? Hand-in-hand with the drugs and medicines question comes the poisonous and predatory plant question. Poisonous plants are plants with a passive defense-- they do not necessarily kill creatures because they need to, but rather because they are protecting their own biological imperative. Also, many plants are poisonous to one species, but fine for another; onions (a blood thinner) are fine for humans but can kill a small dog. In addition to passive defenses, there are some plants that are "predatory." They lure animals (usually insects) to them and kill them, with the eventual goal of composting the dead bodies

into plant nutrients. On Earth, most predatory plants are in swamps, where soil nutrients are poor and airborne insects are plentiful. Do you have predatory plants on your world? Where are they, and do they only prey upon small insects, or do they pose a possible hazard to people as well?

For fauna

What animals are especially helpful to your world? In addition to domestication species, you may find that one species of animal is actually very helpful to your people, perhaps by preying on some other creature that is a nuisance or hazard to people. Even if domesticated, felines could be used in a pre-technological society to control a rat population that might otherwise spread disease.

On a similar vein, what animals have your people domesticated? Humans on Earth have domesticated a large variety of herd animals (horses, cows, sheep, goats, donkeys, llamas), several species of birds, and a few predatory animals (dogs and cats in particular). For the most part, we use the herd animals for work (horses and llamas) or food (cows and sheep), and the predatory animals for work or defense (dogs can be both working animals, in sled dogs and hunting dogs, or defensive animals, in herd dogs and guard dogs, while cats are largely defensive as hunters against pest animals).

Which of your fauna are used for food? Domesticated animals might be used for food, but wild animals may also be food sources in the form of game. In addition, if you have meat-eating domesticated animals, what do they eat, and do your people raise food animals for their domesticated meat-eaters?

Food animals also lead into the question of delicacies and exotics. One man's food is another man's abomination. Few Americans would ever consider eating any meat from another primate, yet in African countries it is not uncommon. The recent fiasco in New York City over cuy, a type of guinea pig meat eaten in Central America, highlighted the conflicts in different cultures' food choices.

What kinds of animals are used in medical or drug development? Although rare on Earth, some animals do have medicinal or mind-altering effects. Certain frogs excrete hallucinogenic toxins, and most antidotes are developed using the same venom or poison they counteract. Most recently, an advance in medical science uses products from shellfish to cause instantaneous clotting in humans, resulting in the development of a bandage that instantly clots a wound, halting blood loss, a major cause of death in traumatic injuries. These simple-to-use bandages are being used in the military today, cost \$100 apiece, and will likely make it into hospitals and possibly home first aid kits in the next few years. On a more common level, musk from animals is used frequently in the development of colognes and perfumes, slightly mood-altering when worn in moderation.

Finally, which animals are dangerous in your world? Which ones are actively predatory, and would consider your people as "meat" if given the opportunity or enough desperation? Dingos will not usually attack humans, but will perceive small humans as a possible food source if they are desperate (because of famine or habitation encroachment). Which animals are not active predators, but have passive defenses that pose a threat to your world's inhabitants? Snakes on Earth are not considered predators for humans-- they are too small to swallow humans whole, and therefore will not generally bother. However, they pose a threat with their defenses because, if they feel they are threatened, they will bite, sometimes injecting painful or even lethal venom into their victims. Steve Irwin has made a living handling these kinds of animals because he knows how to approach them without inciting their passive defenses.

In short, spend fifteen minutes or so sketching out some of the animals and plants your characters might encounter in your world. If you want to add a little fun, toss around some plot hook ideas while you're at it-- an unfortunate bite from a poisonous beetle can really throw a wrench in the Hero's Quest, and an unruly beast of burden might give some comic relief to your storyline.

Reader Comments:

Angrysunbird Posted on: 2004/10/22 10:43

If I may just offer some extra advice, take a look at some of the world's less well known species for domesticated animals. Instead of a cat, why not have a ringtail (a racoon like relative from the Southwest) or a genet, an African cat-like rodent hunter that was domesticated by the Romans for hunting rodents. Do your people live in tundra? Maybe they domesticated musk ox instead of caribou. Or they farm hippos in Africa (this has been proposed as they are the most efficient converters of greenery into flesh of any African animal). Why not have your riders mounted on red deer or elk? Or powerful antelope?

Feel free to raid the world of extinct animals too, there are some real beauts out there, including beavers as big as hippos, giant ground sloths, giant birds etc etc.

Day 22: Revisiting Geography

By now, you might have decided to change a lot of the way the world is shaped. Perhaps you've decided to change certain factions and need to put them closer together. Or maybe you just have to have a volcano explode in the middle of your novel... who knows?

Today, revisit your geography. If you haven't checked out some of the geography-related sites, do so. If there is one aspect you think will be important (for example, if you have a race of seafarers, and ocean currents are crucial to their survival), check up on it and make sure you're on the right track. If you decided to add in a non-real event, like a magical cataclysm, decide where that happened and how or if it changed the landscape of your world.

Exercise:

Redraw the map if you need to. It doesn't need to be exact—when they put the map at the front of your beautiful book, the publisher will hire an artist to re-do it anyway. If you have no idea how to re-draw your map, get out a black marker and go over any pencil marks from your original that you will be keeping (like contours of the coast)-- leave out any lettering, as they won't show through well anyway. Put a second piece of paper over the first and trace over the black lines in pencil. Write in place names and any additional map key icons (little trees for forests, upside-down V's for mountains, etc.). Draw in your roads and rivers (remember: blue is always water on a map), and your cities, towns, and settlements.

Day 23: Revisiting Culture

As with yesterday's exercise of revisiting the physical world, today is the day to revisit the cultures and societies of your world.

Start big: Do you know the major political and social groups in your world? Where do they live? How are they similar? In what ways do they vary? What values do they hold most dear? Are they also racial groups, and if so, how do they differ physically from each other?

Then narrow it down to a smaller region: Who are the people in your main characters' homeland(s)? What's important to them? What language do they speak? What kind of industry do they have, and what kind of food production do they have? What factions exist, and where does your protagonist fit into the factions? What is the primary unit of money called, and what can it buy?

Even smaller: What is a typical town, city, or settlement like? What was your protagonist's home town like? Does it change over the course of the novel? Who does your protagonist know from home, and what kinds of relationships does he or she have? How was the protagonist educated? Has he or she ever left home before?

Even smaller: What is a typical family structure like for your setting, and is it different in different parts of the world or for different factions? What is your protagonist's family like? Is that typical for where he or she is from, and if different, how? What other role models within the family or in close friendships does your protagonist have?

Exercise:

After 15 minutes of revisiting your notes with these kinds of questions in mind, you will have a good idea of any gaps in your background knowledge, and where you might need to change a few details (some major, hopefully most will be minor) to make everything more consistent. Remember: it's all right to have gaps, even at the end of this month. The process of writing the story will help you fill in the gaps and make a more coherent novel.

Day 24: Mood II

By now, you know what mood you want to set. You know your words. You know the color that evokes that mood. Your politics contribute to it. Your plot even assists it. And if they don't, today is the day to make sure they do.

Exercise:

Go through your notes and make a "m?" note next to anything that doesn't actively fit into the mood you want to convey. It's all right to have mismatched moods, of course; in many ways, it's crucial to have a variety. But you want to know, when you write your novel, if a particular element is going to dilute the mood or not.

Bonus Exercise:

Find a drawing or piece of artwork that captures the mood of your piece and print it out, preferably in color. Hang it on the outside of your notebook or near your desk. This might also be a good day to put together your moody playlist.

Also, check out the Bonus Exercise about burnout and what to do when you're going crazy over the details....

BONUS: All About Burnout!

Are you getting burned out on your novel already? It's not even the end of the month yet, and you're sick of the language, sick of the details, sick of your socio-political climates?

Here's how you know you're burned out:

You avoid your notes, put it off until later. You've contemplated burying the notebook in the backyard, but fear the dog might dig it up and return it to you. You skip past the exercises and think you'll get to them later, but you never do. You've started to rebel in little ways, and now your novel has pastel vampires in it after all. You can't think of doing anything but world-build between now and November 1st. You dream in your invented language.

Stop. You're going to drive yourself crazy. Seriously-- you want NaNoWriMo to be FUN. It is time to step back and get some perspective. Take a deep breath. Remember that you are creating a draft. If you spend all of October painstakingly building a world that is perfect in every detail, then you will be paralyzed on November 3rd when you've explored your plot and don't know where to go next. You must leave yourself some leeway to be creative in November! The purpose of the World Building exercises is to give you a setting, not a straightjacket.

In the Dos and Don'ts thread, the very good point is made that NaNoWriMo is about the process, not the product. If you have stopped enjoying the process of world-building, then you

are done. Your product is complete. Set it aside for this entire last week-- you won't miss anything, I promise. This last week will be focused on filling in the little gaps, filling out whatever you might have, and revising your notes if you need to. You won't miss a thing if you've already spent 2 hours for every "15-minute" exercise this month.

I'm going to repeat a couple of things I've said in other threads here, so bear with me if you've heard it already.

You will not get it "right" until you get it "write." Which is to say: there is no world-building exercise that can replace actually writing in your world.

You want a world that you can use for future writing projects? Great. Make sure you have the basics down. It's okay if you don't have a lot of depth yet, if you only know the surface ideas behind your political groups, or have no idea what the capitol city is called. When you're done with the novel, you will have added about 1/3 to your world-building without even trying. Then you can go back, fix any inconsistencies in your world and your story, add any depth that it turns out you needed after all, and consider it "right."

When you make up a new world-related detail, make a note in your World Building notes so you know later what the rule is. On November 25th, you don't want to be looking for the thing you wrote on November 4th, where you said what kind of government your people came from "back home," and which has only been relevant twice in your novel. If you forget to make a note, or you don't realize until later that it was important, you can throw in a placeholder and fix it later. Last year, I had one character leave the planet in one scene, and then re-appear with no explanation 5 pages later; I fixed it in April.

The key with world building is to stop before you get sick of your world. If you find yourself thinking "I don't need any of this-- this sucks," then put it away NOW and don't open your world-building notes until October 31st, when you read through them at 11 PM, getting ready to start writing at midnight. Go plan the rest of your story (plot and character), because your setting is as done as it needs to be.

If you're sick of it, you're ready. The details will fall into place when you write the book.

Day 25: The Sky

I had planned today to have everyone give a last check on their characters. But then Holly In-gram (Dreamway) was wonderful and sent along an article she wrote about the satellites around your world, and has given permission for this to be the Day 25 exercise.

Read this. It's marvelous and should remind us all that the moon can serve to give our story light, darkness, or mood-- but not at certain times of the month.

The title refers to rainbows, and perhaps Holly will give a brief recap on rainbows as they apply to world-building.

Exercise:

Read this article and then figure out: how many moons does your world have? How long is a month for each of them? What are they named? Do you have any scenes already plotted in which moonlight is absolutely necessary? If so, be sure to write down the phase of the moon you need on that date, and use that date as your "touchstone" for what phase the moon will be in on other days. If you need to, write out the moon's calendar and as scenes happen when you write them in November, jot them into your calendar so you know what kind of moon your folks might encounter at those times.

Day 26: Anti-What If?

This is kind of a reverse What If? day, because today we're asking what to cut.

What if it doesn't fit? After almost a month of world-building, you may be running into the problem of contradictory ideas, things that don't mesh together, or bits that you like but which ruin the mood.

I have a separate page in my notebook for the Dares that I like but which I'm not sure if I want them in the novel or not. Similarly, I have a separate page of "Misfits" for ideas that don't match what I'm planning to do, but which might later. You can put anything that doesn't match your mood into your Misfits file, but in particular (since this is the world building topic), focus on the cultural and social and world-specific ideas.

Exercise:

Look at your "mood words" list and then at your notes and outlines and ideas. Put anything that doesn't match at least one mood word (or a synonym of a mood word) onto a separate page or in a separate file. You may end up putting your misfits into this novel when you're stuck or need some inspiration or when there's an opportunity for them to fit in. You may even, when you get tired of the main storyline, decide that you want a subplot of Misfits, something to give a little comic relief, perhaps, or just an alternative tone to your main storyline.

For contradictory ideas, pick the one that you like best or, if you have no favorite, the one that best matches the mood of your piece. Put the other one into the Misfits file-- you never know when you might be able to tweak it to fit your story after all. Throw nothing away at this point, but organize your world into "things that I know contribute to what I'm trying to do" and "things that don't match but I like them anyway." In NaNoWriMo, you'll probably want to write things you "like anyway" at some point, and having those ideas already there will help.

Day 27: Plot Hooks

Today is the last day to finalize your plot hooks, those little "what if this happened" ideas that you've got going around, or scene snippets you want to have happen, just so you can see them take shape. Heck, your plot hooks probably have a few dares thrown in for good measure. Somewhere in your notebook, there is a list of plot hooks that you've been working on during these 30 days.

You may or may not have an outline of your actual whole-novel plot yet. If you do, read through your list of plot hooks and your outline, and match the hooks to wherever they might fit into the story. Next month, when you get to that part of your story, you'll decide if you need to throw the plot hook or device into the story, or if it's superfluous.

Exercise:

If you don't have an outline, look at your plot hooks and see if you can group them together ("well, these all have something to do with goats..."). If you can, cluster them together and talk about the most interesting cluster when you start the novel on Monday. You may end up changing that beginning, but if those are the plot hooks that interest you the most, then those plot hooks are your plot. Surprise!

Day 28: What Did We Leave Out?

In any group of world-building exercises, there's going to be something left out, something the person posting the exercises (me) forgot or neglected, or just doesn't think about much. I've tried to keep an eye on this forum and be alert to topics that people bring up, but I'm aware that I've probably forgotten something important.

So, what did I forget? Some of the topics I can think of off the top of my head:

Clothing: What passes for fashion in your world?

Food and Kitchens: Is food substantially different? What about food prep and kitchen areas?

Sanitation and hygiene: We don't read speculative fiction to read up on people going to the bathroom, but how clean is your world? What do large concentrations of people do with their waste (biological waste as well as regular ol' trash)? A world's history can change when its sewer needs change: polio wasn't a serious problem until closed sewers meant children weren't exposed to it early enough to ward off the disease. Not to mention hygiene and bathing.

Disease and Treatment, Medicines: Similarly, how does medicine work in your world? What do people do for pain? What do they do about disease? How do people heal? Are there hospitals, healers, infirmaries, medics?

Treatment of the Elderly: A related issue: do your elderly drift away on icebergs? Do they get put into an old folks' home? Do they shift to hyper-productive imaginative lives in a VR world? Are they revered? Reviled?

Law Enforcement and Incarceration: Long-term incarceration is a modern phenomenon, and one that doesn't seem to work very well, given the overpopulation in prisons. What happens to criminals in your world? Fines? Feuds? Eye-for-an-eye mutilation? Microchipping? Do you have prisons?

Pets: Something that many humans believe is a distinction of humanity (KoKo the gorilla being an exception) is the desire to care for a pet. And yet, the definition of "pet" wasn't always the same, and the desirability of certain animals as pets changes when one is or is not able to have them "fixed." Do the people of your world keep pets, and if so, what kinds?

Exercise:

Spend 15 minutes thinking about two or three of the above "left out topics" and post in the comments any other world-building topics that come to mind that you haven't seen addressed in these threads and would like to.

Reader Comments:

Dreamway Posted on: 2005/1/17 1:46

As I face building an idea of a middle-tech city:

Where are the tectonically active zones? In short, is this in Shaky Town? How many noticeable earthquakes a year, or month, do you have? Is it like Pompeii, where in the memory of humanity there the mountain covered with vineyards had smoked now and then but never erupted? Or is this an area where they watch the hills nervously for smoke, as in Iceland? Earthquake and volcanism can strike anywhere around a ring of fire, or other tectonic joints with subduction of sea floors. This may well affect things like architecture (Japanese disposable housing, LA earthquake safety codes after the 1932 quake) or it may be ignored and lead to disaster when it does (rigid flimsy houses that collapse on the inhabitants, etc.)

Architecture: does it reflect pure utilitarianism or are there fossil features, like a neo-Tudor split-level in Malibu that does not need steep snow-shedding roof, or an office building in neo-Gothic with non-spouting gargoyles? What is it made of, and does this vary by status? There's the old line about "found Rome a city of wood and brick and left it a city of stone" or however that goes. If it's multi-storey, how do you get between stories? Ladders or stairs or ramps? Note that trad Japanese buildings use very narrow steep accesses about halfway between stairs and ladders, going through the floor above with a relatively small hole. Does architecture channel fashion? That is, is the concept of narrow steep stairs so ingrained that something like hoop skirts could never come up? Does this vary by status? What fills the windows? Casements of bullseye glass? Sashes with oiled parchment in the frames? Shutters?

City planning: I have some lovely books on Greek, Roman, and Medieval cities, not to mention archaeological site plans of more ancient and non-European ones. The major determinant seems to be: walls or no city fortifications? In medieval cities, they tend to channel development along the streets between gates. Did it just grow outward from a ruler's house like Tara or a ceremonial site like a Mayan centre? Is it forced on a grid no matter what like a Classical colony, or is there a messy zone somewhere, older primitive form or bad terrain? History can be reflected in this.

Where's the water? Do you have to go to the well/stream outside the village/town gates to get it? That's a long haul for the women folk who in most cultures get this duty. Do men do it in yours because it's dangerous: raiders try to steal women while they're out there every few years, if you let women do it. Is there a stream through town, getting progressively filthier as the gutters and sewage dump into it? Do the high folk live at the upstream end? Why not, if they've got the money and power? Are there natural fountains spotted here and there? Piped-in fountains in every neighborhood? Running water from cisterns on the roof? You need a pressurized water system to get piped-in water above the level of the source, remember, which is why water-closets were so late in developing.

Heating the place: or cooling it. The ancients used braziers, with attendant constant light smoke inhalation. The Romans had hot-air warmed floors (the most civilized system). Chimneys were invented about 1100, but as anyone who has moved into a house with a poorly built one knows, they must have taken time to perfect. We think of early 19th houses relying on fireplaces, but in Germany they only had them sometimes in grand houses, or very poor ones. Everyone else used closed heating stoves, tended from a special corridor where the fuel was kept stacked. In hot weather, are there punkah-wallahs pulling a cord to operate the big flap from the ceiling waving back and forth, or is it all passive cooling, like Hawai'ian houses? Note that only crazy Europeans like tons of sunlight streaming in through big windows in the summer. Trad hot-zone buildings have small windows, or ones up high under the shade of the eaves. As my Granny Orbe taught me, sunlight IS heat.

FIRE! How do people handle outbreaks of fire? How frequent or dangerous are they? In Colonial Williamsburg, they point out that kitchens are detached buildings so that when they burnt down, rather frequently, they didn't take the main building along, and this was in the 1776 capital of Virginia. Is it something simply ganged up on by the neighbors? Are there private fire companies like the early ones that will only put out a fire on a building with the tag that shows fees have been paid to their company and not a rival? Without hook and ladder trucks or horse-drawn pumpers, the Japanese had fire companies in Edo that threw water when they could, dirt if they didn't have water, and mainly pulled down the burning building and any immediately in danger to break the fire.

Passage: is it legal to wander around at will? In Renaissance England, commoners needed passports to explain why they were away from their home parish. Are borders between places guarded or permeable? Do they really care if people come and go as long as they can get all the wagons and sumpter beasts carrying cargo for entry taxes? How is this policed? Great Wall? Hadrian's Wall? Guard patrols? Wait until the people have to buy food somewhere?

Cgarrett Posted on: 2005/1/17 5:13

The big one I noticed was morals in general and sexual mores in particular. A culture's attitudes towards sex can have a profound effect on how their culture develops the way that it does. After all, the Victorian view of modesty and obscenity resulted in such strange things as the use of tablecloths to cover up the "limbs" of furniture. So, what partnerships are permitted, which are slightly scandalous, and which are considered taboo? What happens to people who ignore the societal rules?

Also, what are their views on killing? Lying? What words or concepts are obscene?

And how do their views affect their language, whether slang or idiom or basic speech?

Reader Links:

WritingLife Posted on: 2005/1/21 19:30

Patricia Wrede has a long, long essay on worldbuilding on the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America site here. This page has the links to all the sections. Many, many things to consider!

Day 29: Character

Finalize your character notes today. Address any character background details you might have overlooked. Remember: where a person comes from can be a strong motivator for what they do next.

Frequently, people put a dark or traumatic event into their heroes' pasts. You see this in the comics-- even Superman, whose adopted father dies when Clark is back from college-- as well as in many books and movies. If you've ever played a role-playing game and asked people to describe their character's home life, you'll be amazed at how many orphans there are sitting at that table in the inn near Waterdeep. In part, this is because we want tragic experiences to have meaning-- we want them to shape us for the better, and so we work with heroic archetypes who are also shaped for the better by these events. But also, I think, sometimes we use a Tragic Past as a way to easily give a reason why an ordinary person would choose a dangerous and thankless path.

Pain and tragedy are strong motivators, but they're not the only shaping forces in our lives. Strong role models, lessons learned from failing at tasks that aren't life-destroying, and the simple act of being in a stable relationship or lifestyle can help strengthen a person's character. Although strong steel is forged through heat and a grinding stone, the same is not always true of human character. You might think of a character's background as a clay sculpture. Moldable, and changeable, and responsive to pressure, but truly best when guided by a strong and stable hand.

Exercise:

Look in your social and cultural world for not just the places where your character doesn't fit in, but also the places where he or she does, and note them in your character notes. Make sure that, by the end of today, you can name your character's parents and siblings, the town where they grew up, their age and any training they've had, and the most influential three people in their lives.

Oh, and for those of you who already have characters fully fleshed out: Spend your fifteen minutes writing a scene in which your character is given a gift they have to refuse. You decide on the gift, the giver, and why they have to refuse it.

Day 30: Take a break

Today's exercise is to NOT exercise. Give yourself a break from world-building to let the ideas sift themselves out in your mind before you start writing like a fiend tomorrow.