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How to create a more Realistic Fictitious World

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The Big Question

What does this do for my story?

In everything you learn in this industry, always test it before you change your entire manuscript. Even if something works for another writer, it does not mean it will work for you. Remember, creativity is subjective. - DRAKE

The fictitious world

“Reality is merely an illusion, although a very persistent one.”

- Albert Einstein 1879 - 1955

Your Most Important Character

Writers love to spend time creating every detail of their hero. They know what they look like, who their parents are, what their upbringing was like. However, there is one character that will be in your story more than your hero. Your world.

Your world is in every scene throughout your manuscript. For it to be successful, it should feel real. So real that the reader will wonder why our own “real world” doesn’t work the way you describe it in your book.

It’s all an Illusion

World building is the ultimate example of an exercise in balance. Because, while I think it’s important to create every single minute detail so I understand the “character” of my world, I don’t want to burden the reader with all those details.

Remember, we are writing a story, not an encyclopedia or a role-playing game. Think of it as you being the Wizard of Oz. You are just the person behind the curtain. And no one should ever actually see you.

The biggest limitation to world building

The Writer

There is one constant that I run into with writers - they are wonderful at limiting themselves. Which is a shame, because for world building, the sky is the limit.

Here are a few things to keep in mind that may help you when creating your fictitious world.

There are no boundaries.
There are no limitations.
You are limited only by your imagination.

You do not have to follow in the footsteps of what has been done before. The world is your playground and you are the spoiled child-god, able to play with it all.

To that end, there is a lot of work to do

Take the time to think things through – what you decide to be reality... becomes reality in your fictitious world. While the biggest limitation to all this may be your imagination, that does not take away from the fact that designing an intricate world from scratch is a lot of work.

As the creator of a universe, there is much to ponder...

Physics	Languages	Towns
Celestial Bodies	Entertainment	Literature
Nature	Animals	Rulers
Religion	Pets	Music
Government	Astral Bodies	Maps
Culture	Weapons	Education
Races	Gods	Evolution
Mannerisms	Demons	Trade
Holidays	Wars	Biology
Customs	Drugs	Science
Food	Currency	Reproduction
Architecture	Technology	Mythology

And the list goes on and on and on.

So yes, there is a lot of work to do when it comes to world building. But, to help you manage it all, here are ten thinking points that should get your creative juices flowing.

Thinking Point 1: The Lesson of Fans

One thing I hear all the time is, “what if I create something that is too far fetched?” I am not sure that’s even possible. (Abraham Lincoln, Vampire Slayer) The beautiful thing about Sci-Fi and Fantasy fans is their willingness to suspend disbelief.

If you create something with a believable back-story, an explanation for why it exists, fans of your genre will probably accept it, provided you give them enough reason to. The key is to make sure there is some type of definable logic behind it. Oh, and one word of caution: If you break your own laws, fans will call you on it.

Thinking Point 2: Stop Regurgitating Tolkien!!!

Down with Elves, Dwarves and Orcs! (Not really.)

My point here is this: Just because it is “traditional,” does not mean you have to follow it. Sure, we all love a good Elf, Dwarf and Orc story. Who doesn’t? Still, if Sci-Fi can come up with unique aliens, creatures and races, why can’t fantasy?

Also, keep in mind that today’s readers are savvier than they used to be. Giving your races the standard Tolkien one trait per race is also something many readers are looking for authors to break. So, do not be afraid to give your races some depth.

Thinking Point 3: Flesh out your Geography

Let’s face it, world building usually involved maps. And, they are important. A writer needs to know where things are in relation to each other. Plus, by drawing up where things are located, you can start to get a sense of what resources are available where. And most villages and towns are located near resources.

Still, in my opinion, maps are the least important thing when it comes to world building. They are helpful, yes. But, they are not your world. They are simply the clothing that the character called your world wears. Even a simple pencil drawing of where the major items are will suffice in most cases. The location of towns, roads, rivers, mountains, forests, etc. are all important. They are just not that interesting when it comes to the telling of the story.

Thinking Point 4: Special Terrain

While we are on the subject of terrain, keep in mind that special terrain is only special if it's special. If you create something like a river of lava, that can make a great obstacle for your characters to have to overcome while on their quest. However, if every single river in your world is made from lava, and every time your characters come up to one, it is a huge ordeal to have them cross it, this becomes redundant and boring for the reader.

Thinking Point 5: Spend some Time on Time

The past creates the present, as the saying goes. And it is the truth. The past gives us everything that is around today. Not only from our geography – mountains, rivers, oceans, etc., the past gives us our societies, religions, governments, cities (both thriving and dead) and our holidays. It gives us our prejudices and our hatreds. If you take anything that is around today, and dig far enough back into the past, you will find the cause.

Without a past, everything becomes two-dimensional. So, as you go through the next points, don't just think of how each of these are in the "now" where your story will be taking place, think of how each arrived at the state they are in "now." If you do, you will discover many opportunities to enhance your story.

Thinking Point 6: Understand your Society

Everybody you know has been shaped by the society they come from. Everything, from what religious beliefs they lean toward to what food they like to eat. From how they view and treat others to what they consider lawful and criminal.

Basically, everything that makes the characters in your story who they are.

By creating the society that created your characters, you get to understand them on a very deep and intimate level. This means that when you put them in situations during the story, you will understand why they make the choices they make.

This is where I think about things like Holidays, Traditional Foods, Colloquialisms, Accents and Languages, Customs involving family, marriage, mating, child rearing. Basically, all the little details that make up every society we find around us.

Thinking Point 7: Believe in your Religion

People want to believe. This is apparent when you take a look at the history of our own world. As far back as archeologists have gone, all of our past societies have had some type of religion.

But, what is the purpose of religion?

Religion does many things for a society. It lays out moral standards of what is right and wrong. It gives the people an explanation of how we all came to be here. It gives hope as to where we go after we die. It gives us something to believe in, when it seems that there is no hope left for us. Many people find conviction or even justification for their actions through religion.

However, as religion is one of the most powerful influences on society, it is very easy for someone to become corrupted by it.

Another key point to keep in mind when creating your religion: Religion is not normally bound by geography. It affects people as a group. This means you can have many different religions in a very small area or one religion over a wide area.

Some examples of religion types

The Void – No one believes in anything

The Inanimate – The sun, the moon, the rain

Real Religion / Fake God – Only the author knows this... and perhaps the priests

Real Religion / Real God (Inactive)

Real Religion / Real God (Active)

Thinking Point 8: Support your Government

Cavemen unite!

Government is another thing that has been around since the dawn of time. Just as with religion, government has a purpose for society. Government creates stability by establishing laws, protection (both from without and within), and currency. But also, as with religion, government has a powerful influence on society. This has led the best-hearted men down the path of corruption.

The biggest difference between government and religion is that government is normally bound by geography.

Some examples of government types

Utopia

Elected Bodies

Royalty

Tyrannical

Thinking Point 9: History is Distorted

Another beautiful thing for a writer to think about while world building is the fact that there are three sides to every story:

What people believe (written by the victorious)
How the losers feel about it (or at least their perception of things)
The real history (what only the writer knows)

This gives a writer who is savvy enough to create three versions of history a tremendous amount of freedom to lie to his readers. For me, it's all about misdirection. (Keep your eyes on my left hand, folks. There is nothing to see in my right.)

Thinking Point 10: Don't lose sight of why you are world building

Question: How much of what you create during world building should you use in your story?

Answer: Almost none of it.

Why do we need to world build? To make our world seem more real.

Why do we need it to seem real? To enhance our story.

Don't bore your readers with all your amazing history. No one wants to read that. All of this back-story is for you, the writer. By knowing your world and its history, you will have a deeper understanding of what it means to live in your world. Through this understanding, you will be better able to write your characters in a consistent and believable way.

Use World building to enhance the story you set your characters in. Don't tell a story about how your world was built or why.

End

Thank you for your time and attention. I hope you found it informative. I have started a blog dedicated to the discussion of the craft of writing. If you have specific questions, please send them to me at author@maxadrake.com and I will include them on blog.maxwellalexanderdrake.com.

I am on Facebook and Twitter as well. Please look me up.

If you want to help further my teaching career, please visit <http://www.meetup.com/Las-Vegas-Creative-Writing-Class/> and review this class. It would be a tremendous help to me.

DRAKE