

Dangerous Advice: “Worldbuild only enough to support the story.”

The advice to worldbuild only enough to support the needs of a story or rpg adventure is based on three flawed premises, and often results in shallow, trite settings. I critique the writing advice that frequently lands us in that position, and advocate for world building beyond the immediate needs of what the audience will experience on the page.

That's the summary for the TL;DR crowd. Now to the essay itself.

There is a common piece of advice given to world builders that I take issue with. It is often prescribed as the answer to the question “how much world building should I do? How much is too much?” That advice is this:

“Do only enough world building to support your story.”

This statement is usually aimed at fiction writers, but the same advice (worded a little differently) is given just as often to game designers working on rpgs, adventure modules and campaign settings. (A qualifier. What I am about to say here applies equally to fiction and rpgs. I'll say “story” or “narrative” interchangeably, but if you are developing game worlds, please read this as “rpg, campaign, or adventure setting” instead. The same principles apply.)

There are two ways to interpret this advice. In one, it is taken to mean that what you present on the page should be germane to the story, and not given in infodump form. Don't talk about how frizzbots are manufactured unless frizzbots are used in the tale. Fair enough. That's good writing craft.

In the other interpretation it is taken to mean that the writer only needs to develop the world just enough to have a rationale for what shows up on the page.

It is the second meaning of this advice I take issue with. Whether it is aimed at fiction writers or game designers, I strongly disagree with this misguided rule of thumb. In most cases it is a mistake to develop a setting in this relatively minimalistic manner, for that is the best way of all

to produce shallow and derivative settings.

Why is this a problem? One of the most common concerns I hear from world builders is that their story world might not be original enough, that aspects of it might be cliched or overdone. And then there are those who “wing it” as they go; since the world building they do along the way is indeed “just enough” to support what's on the page, they figure they're good to go—until they get deeper in the story, and discover big holes they must now fill. Or they have a sinking feeling that the narrative is getting away from them, or they are painting themselves into an untenable corner through the accrual of inconsistencies in a setting that has been developed piecemeal, “just enough to support the story.”

These writers often wind up here precisely because they have followed this wrong-headed world building advice. Instead of keeping writers on track, it can very easily create exactly the kind of hackneyed settings and narratives they so earnestly wish to avoid.

Why does this happen? When we do not create a robust world—a rich tapestry that is an organic whole—then our subconscious minds offer a wealth of “creative” detail to fill in the blanks we have left in the conceptual landscape. But it turns out that these details often aren't so creative after all. They are drawn from things we already know, have read a million times, seen overdone on TV and in media, and so on. Essentially, when we shortchange the world building work, we make assumptions about our world that rely on our subconsciously stored ideas of what is fitting for that sort of a setting. Note: not the **specific** setting we are creating, but the **kind** of setting it reminds us of, based on everything stored in our memories. Every fantasy novel we've ever read, every B-grade movie, all the role-playing games that were just so-so, not great: all this and much more melt into an undistinguished pool of stuff we draw on for inspiration and ideas about how a setting should be.

“I want a fantasy land with knights,” we say—but if we don't do much concrete world building beyond that, then by default our mental shorthand for “fantasy medieval Europe” comes into play. Drawing on unconscious assumptions and associations, pretty soon we are emulating everything else that has ever been done in that kind of a setting. (Anyone who has read Tolkien, or work inspired by LOTR, or played D&D, or indeed been immersed in fantasy anytime in the last 40 years will be mightily tempted to add elves and dwarves to the mix as well.) And that is how we end up introducing regurgitated history, tired tropes, overused themes and narrative elements into the setting we had hoped would be original and exciting instead.

Generally speaking, if you want to create a robust world that is uniquely your own, with fresh material that is not simply a rehash of tired tropes, you **must** do world building that extends beyond the immediate needs of the story or rpg setting.

This is the crux of the issue: we need to break out of the “unconscious assumption/association” realm when it comes to detailing our settings, if we want to produce really good, original work, and ***doing a minimum of world building (“just enough to support what's on the page”) is usually insufficient to get us there.***

The more we focus only on what's on the page, and worldbuild with only that end in mind, the

more we are fixating on the tip of the iceberg. We become unmindful of the hidden mass—the rest of the fictional world—that is not immediately in sight and oblivious to the impact that mass can have on what we see in the story.

Do we need to write an encyclopedia detailing our world before we can get into stories set there? Of course not (although people who are allergic to detailed world building are quick to leap to that extreme to illustrate why more world building is a bad idea).[1] Should we instead focus exclusively on what is needed to support the narrative or adventure setting as it reads on the page? I say no. We should almost never build worlds with **only** the immediate needs of the narrative in mind.[2]

There is a middle path to be found. If our narrative is the visible tip of the iceberg that is our fictional world, then the quality of our work depends on our familiarity with the body of that iceberg and understanding how it informs the tip that we are so busy presenting to the world.

The Standard Advice, and What's Wrong With It

What does it mean to develop a world only enough to support your story? It means, for example, that if you describe your protagonist's wedding, you need to know what the local marriage customs are, but don't need to spend time developing customs found in another part of the country that is never touched on in your story. If your adventure takes place in a village, you don't need to design the nation it is located in first. If you're describing court intrigue or the cause of a war, maybe your focus is on personalities that carry the narrative, and you don't need to develop extensive history and social issues that fuel the conflict.[3]

As far as it goes, there is nothing wrong with those examples. The standard fiction writing advice, seen in that light, corresponds roughly with the rpg “bottom up” design approach. From that angle, the “just support the story” strategy encourages us to focus on things of immediate importance.

However, the advice itself doesn't really stop there. The broader implication is, “If you are doing more world building than the story (or game setting) needs on the page, you're doing too much of it.”

In fact, this is often said in so many words in critiques of world building. One of the most strongly worded (and inflammatory) exhortations in this regard is found in M. John Harrison's 2007 (in)famous blog post calling world building the “clomping foot of nerdism.” This post, aimed at world building in fiction, got certain segments of the blogosphere up in arms. Since the blog where this originally appeared is no longer online, I will quote the core of the post here:

Every moment of a science fiction story must represent the triumph of writing over worldbuilding.

Worldbuilding is dull. Worldbuilding literalises the urge to invent. Worldbuilding gives an unnecessary permission for acts of writing (indeed, for acts of reading). Worldbuilding numbs the reader's ability to fulfill their part of the bargain, because it believes that it has to do

everything around here if anything is going to get done.

Above all, worldbuilding is not technically necessary. It is the great clomping foot of nerdism. It is the attempt to exhaustively survey a place that isn't there. A good writer would never try to do that, even with a place that is there. It isn't possible, & if it was the results wouldn't be readable: they would constitute not a book but the biggest library ever built, a hallowed place of dedication & lifelong study. This gives us a clue to the psychological type of the worldbuilder & the worldbuilder's victim, & makes us very afraid.

Fiction writers are not the only ones admonished to avoid “too much” world building. In the realm of game design, a highly visible example of this attitude can be found in the well-known [Kobold Guide to Worldbuilding](#), where award-winning game designer Wolfgang Bauer even references Harrison's “clomping foot” analogy when he states,

The whole process of designing a campaign setting is sometimes referred to as worldbuilding, but this is a bit of a trap. 'Worldbuilding' implies an encyclopedic approach, and this is exactly wrong. It is giving in to the 'clomping foot of nerdism' [...] The designer's instinct should be to provide only that which is relevant, to provide the most immediately useful material and nothing else...[G]iving in to that [encyclopedic] instinct is poison, because it means providing huge reams of useless data along with the nuggets of gold. (page 10)

Besides the fact that the act of world building is not always and inherently encyclopedic, the error in these arguments is this: both Bauer and Harrison (and many others who go on in this vein) have conflated world development work done with what is actually presented to the audience. This confuses the work of world building with the writing of exposition in the text presented to readers. Exposition of the wrong sort can be a boat anchor in any rpg, and can completely deflate a fictional narrative—but this is a matter of writing craft, not of world building itself.

If world building burdens a story or game setting, that is not due to the fact that the design work exists (in whatever measure), but rather is the fault of **how that information is conveyed**. One certainly need not dump “huge reams of useless data” into a narrative, a campaign setting, or on the heads of unwitting readers who will drown in irrelevant material. These 'pitfalls' warned against in the above quotes are things I would characterize as potential newbie errors. I do not generally see them in well-balanced world building for fiction **or** rpgs, and they are certainly not an inevitability of the process.[4]

In any case, it seems the urge to avoid “too much” world building is why this kind of advice (“to provide the most immediately useful material and nothing else”; “a good writer would never attempt to [exhaustively survey a place that isn't there]”) is so broadly prescribed to writers.

The reason I'm dissecting this standard advice at length is because this is so often repeated it has become “given wisdom” to many writers, and I think it sets us up for the problems I noted at the start—the blithe production of derivative tripe. A lot of this has to do with the flawed premises that writing “just enough to support the story” is based on.

Flawed Premises

The first error in the standard advice argument is this: “World building that goes beyond the needs of the story or game is a waste of time and effort.”

In some circumstances this claim might at times be true, but it is not always or even generally valid. Put another way, while a “waste of time and effort” is a possibility, ***it is not a given for all or even most instances of world building.***

In my experience, most world builders who write dense background material also come to see networks of association between the various elements of their larger world and how these impact the narrative or adventure setting they are creating. Most of the material is, in some manner, relevant—if not to the immediate narrative, then to associated stories or adventures, or at the very least to the feel and sensibilities of the setting in general.

In my own case, only a fraction of my world building work appears “on the page” in story or rpg, but the body of work is frequently referenced by myself and affects the ongoing continuity and development of my worlds, often manifesting in seemingly minor details that ***do*** appear in my narratives and games. This level of development is not wasted effort for me. It serves a purpose if not in the immediate narrative, then in shaping the story world in meaningful ways, and does not require an encyclopedic creation or infodump to do so.

Is it necessary to do in-depth development to tell a single story or frame part of a campaign? Usually not. Is it necessary to do this to better envision my world? Yes. And does this quality of vision in turn affect the details and content of my stories and games? Absolutely.

Defining How Much World Building is “Enough”

The question of how much world building is actually useful, and in what context, is closely linked to **the second flawed premise**: the assumption that “too much world building” can be ***simply*** defined as “development work that does not support the immediate needs of a story, or is not immediately useful for a game.”

If we are concerned to not waste our creative juice on “pointless” world design, we must first more carefully define what is truly “pointless” and what serves a purpose. In other words, ***whether or not something serves the needs of the immediate narrative may not be the best criterion for determining what world building is actually necessary or desirable to do.***

The third premise here, perhaps not so much flawed as simply not generally true, is the notion that putting work into world building is not only a time sink but an energy drain, diverting us from the more “proper” endeavor of the actual writing of story or game. At times this rationale is overtly expressed, as it is in this piece of writing advice:

I see a lot of people going wrong in the direction of too much world-building. They do so much

work before they start writing, they never actually get into the story. - Myrealana, commenting at AbsoluteWrite.com

Yet I would point out that anything we do that is related to creative writing, which is not the story itself, **also** risks becoming a diversion that avoids the main task. Some authors get lost in character bios and plot notes, writing thousands of words of background but never a single story chapter. Some game designers dally endlessly in map creation or designing dungeon traps without ever getting down to the serious work of crafting the campaign setting.

The truth is that for a writer who chooses to procrastinate, there is no shortage of time sinks and creative energy drains to aid the process. World building may be an appealing detour for this purpose, but those woods are not so deep that writers simply **must** get lost there. If one is using world building to avoid narrative writing or game design, then one needs to reassess why avoidance is going on in the first place. It is not the fault of the world building process per se.

The Biggest Pitfall

Aside from flawed premises, the actual advice itself often leads to a problematic situation, and this is the biggest reason I call this "dangerous advice." ***What happens when you worldbuild only to meet the needs of the story on the page?***

By constraining our view only to what is of immediate relevance, we too often worldbuild with blinders on. I think the number one hazard here is that the fictional world is too easily developed in a skewed and shallow manner.

Of course, a "shallow" world does not sound like a desirable thing, but other than the negative connotations, how does this come about and why does it matter? Here's why:

When we give short shrift to social, historical, and other factors that shape a world, then absent a unique, organic background that dictates otherwise, our sense of invention tends to fall back on familiar themes and tropes and historical or fictional tidbits that we already have in our subconscious. We may alter details, but when we plug these "inventions" into our work, the end result is something that can easily feel trite or derivative and unoriginal.

So how do we break out of this trap of unintentionally regurgitating tired tropes and ho-hum concepts? Original creative material springs out of unexpected, fresh connections and unusual developments in our setting. Anyone who has felt a world come alive through the process of actually writing the story, discovering its nature as they go, knows the thrill of unexpected tidbits leaping lively off the page. But when we need to plow this fertile soil more deeply and erect more of a world building structure to support our narrative, it is then that we can falter. **The less we have laid the groundwork for good, original world building beyond the immediate needs of the narrative, the more likely we'll churn out "default inventiveness": a rehash of ideas we've absorbed elsewhere.**

This is not always a bad thing (and as they say, in fiction there is nothing new under the sun), but if we want our setting to be uniquely its own and to **feel fresh** to our audience, we need to give it room to grow organically. Very little in fiction is entirely original, so perhaps we will inevitably have elves and dwarves and Tolkienesque influences in much of our fantasy (for example), but when the whole is deftly knit together and the world building is sound, it will feel like new territory to the reader.

This cannot be achieved by “filling in the blanks” with old tropes and default bits of societies and culture—yet that is what we must fall back on if our world building is shallow.

Doing more development, rather than less, allows us to weave a richer tapestry. Not only will our story or game have more depth, but these layers of details—even if they never appear on the page (and most of them won't)—become the fertile field of invention for the fictional world. Unexpected connections and associations, new insights and ideas, grow out of this body of work. Because of the breadth of this foundation, the new things we add to our world have “legs,” and we are in little danger of generating a trite and cliched world.

Obviously I advocate for going beyond the immediate and obvious needs of the story. But if world building only for the needs of the story or game is “too little” development, then how much is actually enough? I have some thoughts on that that I'll share in a future post.

1. A common fallacy is the assumption that if you don't willfully constrain yourself to a modest amount of world building, you will somehow fall off the deep end and write encyclopedias worth of irrelevant miscellanea instead. Yes, some world building aficionados do that. But most of us have more discriminating output control than that—or at the very least, insufficient time to go there.

2. I qualify this blanket statement with an exception: if we are writing short fiction that is a one-off tale in a setting we do not (initially, at least) plan to use again. This is the most self-contained and insular of narrative units (one-off flash fiction is a great example of the breed) and it is often the case that stories like this simply do not need much if any world building beyond what appears on the page.

3. In my critique of this standard world building advice, I am mainly speaking to people creating worlds that will appear either in a lengthy work like a novel, be used for a multifaceted purpose like a campaign setting, or folks writing short fiction in a setting they are open to revisiting in the future.

4. Bauer's larger point here, though, which I agree with, is that you don't want to bury your audience in **unnecessary** detail—which, again, is a matter of writing craft.