

7 Things to Consider Before World Building

I talked to a few authors lately who for the first time are giving some serious thought to world building. They're all coming at the process from different directions: one is new to writing, one is returning after years of not writing at all, one is changing genres and now has to invent something from scratch. But what they all have in common is that they are regarding the world building thing and kind of scratching their heads and saying, "Where do I begin?"

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Now, there are all kinds of world building processes to follow (not the least of which is outlined in our [Gazetteer Writer's Manual](#): take a look at the [Table of Contents](#) for a good road map to the process). But it occurs to me that before one can sit down and start the task of world building, there are actually a few things a writer needs to mull over first: things that will provide a frame of reference for the work to come, and maybe generate some anchor points along the way. By anchor points, I mean things that are “must haves” for when you get into the nitty-gritty development work.

So, here are my recommendations for the first high-level pass a writer takes when sidling up on the world building endeavor. This is not an exhaustive list, it is just some things that come quickly to my mind and which I think are most useful as starting points in this process. Many of these points are pretty obvious (I think), and some people will go, “Oh, yeah, of course I do that already.” Or your process may be completely different. In any case, if you are feeling a bit lost as you contemplate the the mountain that is World Building, I hope this will provide some footholds on the path.

1. What kind of story do you want to tell?

This isn't about world building per se, it is about the type of tale you have in mind.[1] What is its tone, its mood, its theme, its genre? Fast-paced futuristic action-adventure with an undercurrent of man-versus-self tragedy? A frontier love story in a re-imagined Old West? A tale of lurking evil and dynastic curses in a quirky not-quite-European fantasy setting, where the Hero's Journey rules the story arc?

Just sit with your thoughts and contemplate this before you ever start asking any world building questions. Some world design issues may suggest themselves naturally as you mull your story over (is the love story better told as a Western romance, or should it be a noir Blade Runner-ish kind of thing?) but at this point what you are striving to do is to get an emotional and mental feel for the flavor of your story, and (if possible) the “charge” around it. What is it that draws you to the story you are contemplating? What is it you want your readers to resonate with? What is it that **you** resonate with?

This process lets you engage with the intangibles of the tale and get a feeling for its vibe.

2. What setting works for that story?

Staying focused on that feeling, now ask yourself what setting(s) would work to tell it in. What's the first thing that comes to mind? Make a note of that.

This might be the perfect framing for your story—or it might be your subconscious at work, once again regurgitating your enduring love of, say, epic fantasy settings. Well and good, but that may or may not actually be the best setting for your story. Which is why we then go right on to this next step.

3. Think of two more settings that could work as well.

Try to make these additional setting ideas radically different from each other. We're not talking "James Bond in Paris, in London, or in Berlin." Rather, we're thinking, "James Bond in Paris, Giacomo Bondo of Machiavelli's Florence, or Iacomus of alternate-historical Imperial Rome.

Another approach that works is to consider the story elements and ask yourself what kind of setting will give good play to the things you want to emphasize. If you are writing a grim murder tale, you might be most interested in dark, gritty settings to reflect that theme. Or maybe a romantic love affair requires a culture with elaborate courting rituals. This will affect the kinds of settings that you come up with for alternatives. The zombie apocalypse might not be the most effective setting for a novel of manners. And so on.

4. Try these on for mental size.

Even if you just "know" that you really want to write (say) a modern espionage thriller, look first at the tale and what you want it to convey in terms of tone and theme. Now do a little mental exercise — how would your story play out, or "feel", if it transpired in a different setting? Imagine it in each of the three you've come up with. A spy story might require a modern era—but maybe not. Would it play well in a different era, or maybe a different genre entirely? For there were certainly spies all throughout history. Let your imagination cavort here and see if any new inspirations arise from this process.

I find this exercise especially useful because all too often my left brain will churn out "logical" plots and "logical" settings, but these results may feel flat and lackluster. I can't get deeply enthused about the setting, and this is a good signal that story or setting – or both – are not yet properly aligned. Taking this mental excursion, sitting, eyes closed, imagining how my story might play out in different eras and places, helps me to home in on the one fictional world that is really right for the tale.

5. And the winner is. . . ?

I did this recently with my work in progress, a novel called *Faro City*. This features a reconstructed Old West town that modern people visit on vacation. The protagonist helps solve a crime there and ends up staying as a resident.

That, at least, is the setting as I first envisioned it. When I tried the alternative setting exercise described above, though, the first thing that came up for me was a science fictional take on this story that would read more like [Westworld](#)—a place relying on high tech and robots for its illusion of realism. The other thing that called to me was the idea that someone from modern times steps through a dimensional portal (how? Not important) and ends up in the real Faro City in 1873. How would a modern person cope with that kind of transposition in time? Fascinating question.

All of these ideas had their appeal, but after trying them on for size, I decided I didn't want to juggle science fiction elements (and also did not want resonance with the well-known Westworld property). And as appealing as the time travel story might be, that would morph my story too much into a fish-out-of-water thing, and take focus away from modern people attempting to recreate the past.

Ultimately I stuck with my original idea, but I got more clear on what I liked about it and its setting—and what I must emphasize in my writing—by going through this compare and contrast exercise.

So which setting feels like the best fit for what you want to do? Pick that one and commit to it for the world building efforts which follow.

6. What Happens When an Alternative Setting Is Irresistible?

If one of your other setting possibilities really grabs your imagination, this can present a dilemma. If it is not best suited to carry the tale you had in mind, at least this provides a reality check about the setting with the most appeal to you.

This often means that a certain setting holds more creative juice for you than others you've toyed with. Consider writing in that time/place, instead of whatever else you had in mind. If your present story idea is not a really good fit, maybe you will want to rethink the concept and come up with something that complements the new setting that is calling to you so strongly.

If you need to “write the first story first” before larking off into other interesting byways, of course, that's up to you. We all have our own considerations about where to spend our creative energy. But I do find it can be a hidden advantage to write about something that really grabs me and won't let my imagination go. At the very least it makes the long slog of all the other associated work more tolerable, because I enjoy seeing that particular creation grow.

At the very least, write down setting ideas in a doc or journal you can refer to later. When you have current projects out of the way, that is one you will probably want to return to, and it is helpful to capture all those fleeting thoughts you have about it now, even if you are not yet doing any concentrated world building for that setting.

7. What's the Wow Factor?

Now that you've been all around the block with your original idea and other possibilities, take a moment to note what the “wow” factor is for the setting you've chosen to work on. What gets you excited about that fictional world? It might be something that pops so strongly it becomes a “must-have” factor that will play a role, maybe a big one, in the completed world. This is certainly something you'll take note of and develop more when you get into the world building.

In the alternative, the appeal of a setting might be much more general or fuzzy in your thoughts, along the lines of “I just love that period in history.” To which I will ask, “Why?” What about that period grabs you? Is it the battle prowess of the knights? The backstabbing intrigue of Imperial Rome? Is it the clothes and culture of manners of the Regency? Get very clear on why you are drawn to the fictional world you envision. If it is based on an historical period that might be easier to do – more challenging if it is a setting you must invent from the ground up. In either case, you need to know what grabs you, because that helps you convey that enthusiasm to your readers and lets it infuse the story as you write.

When you're done with all that, you'll have a good idea of what kind of world you want to build, and why.

Only then is it time to think about the world building itself.



1. I say “story” throughout this post, but read this as “story” if you write fiction, or “adventure” if you design games. In either case a story is being told or suggested, although the formats are different.