

Offering World Building Info Outside of a Story



SF Signal just ran an interesting article in its "Mind Meld" feature area called [The Rules of Worldbuilding](#). This article quotes "rules" from various sf authors, giving their take on do's and don'ts in this area.

One author, Robert Bennett, touched on something that I think applies especially to people who approach fiction writing from a gaming background. Some of his comment I agree with and some I don't. But let's start with the quote itself (**emphasis** is mine):

My third rule of worldbuilding – and this is probably where I break from 90% of people who do any worldbuilding at all – is that ***it should all be in the text. IE, no maps, appendices, legends, dictionaries, family trees, or any other companion material that you have to have to navigate the story.*** If a story twist means I have to go looking for an atlas to figure out what the hell it means, that means you just made me break from the text. This CAN be done well, but boy howdy, you sure can overdo it – ***I feel like with a generation of writers raised by RPGs, some just assume that you can click “World Map” in the corner of the page to figure out where the next quest point is in the story. But that’s not a story, that’s a game.***

Example: Terry Pratchett's **Discworld series**. Only one of the fifty-some-odd novels has a map, but it doesn't need it: where things are doesn't matter as much as who's doing what and why.

What's Right About This

If it is possible to provide supplementary info for a world--appendices, wikis, glossaries, etc etc--it is easy for us as writers to unconsciously rely on this material for info we're not actually fitting into the story, but which is necessary to understand the story. From that point of view, I agree with Bennett's critique. Traditionally, a good story stands by itself: you don't need aids to understanding, for the tale is sufficient unto itself.

I say "traditionally" here quite on purpose, though, for today other forms of storytelling are emerging, such as interactive multimedia ebooks, which assume as a matter of course that the story as told will naturally incorporate multiple forms of information, and be approachable from many different angles. If you are writing for that kind of market, disregard this discussion. But if your output or audience is still in the more traditional mold of "buy a story and expect the whole thing to be there between two covers," then the idea of the "self-contained story" (i.e., everything you need to understand it is there in the story itself) still holds.

So is this a good or a bad thing? Well, if you expect someone to pick up your fiction and enjoy your world just as it is written on the page, it pretty much does need to hang together all on its own. If they have to look things up to follow along, at the very least this creates a speed bump, and at the worst can completely derail the story.

The Justifiable Supplement

Now here is a caveat to add: I say this even while being guilty of the same thing myself, but my experience also makes me think that to some extent this depends on your audience and their reading habits and what they actually like to engage with. My first novel *Mainline* lacks a glossary, which I desperately wanted to include so that neologisms and jargon would be easy for readers new to my world to keep track of. (Tor Books wouldn't let me include one because of length constraints.) Sure, you can understand the book without it to refer to, because one guesses at word meanings from context. But this is not the same as reading an actual definition.

While a lot of readers don't care about whether or not there is a glossary, others have asked me for one, or to point them to one online. I think this is symptomatic of a certain kind of science fiction reader/fan being really engaged with a world (as well as the story itself) and wanting to grok more about it. Personally, I don't think that's a bad thing, and if including supplemental material makes these readers happy, then by all means, do so.

What's Wrong With This

Which brings me to the point at which I disagree with Bennett's comment.

I don't think that just by making supplementary material available to readers, that this automatically **requires** that readers break from the text to go look things up to make sense of the story. Yet in his remarks (at least as written), Bennett seems to assume that any and all supplemental information (everything he listed), if it is on offer, is stuff we "have to have to navigate the story."

I would say, rather, that whether or not we "have to have it" is completely dependent on **what** the author has decided to bundle up in the supplements, and **how** the author has presented the world as given on the page. So this is a combination of strategic info-sharing about the world, and craft in story telling. A well-written book can still be comprehensible without breaking from the text, and yet ALSO have all that supplementary information on tap for those who wish to explore it.

The important point here is that the supplemental not be *essential* to the understanding of the story. It expands the reader's experience but is not a necessary crutch for the journey to continue.

Approached from this angle, I see no problem with all kinds of additional world-building information being made available to readers. Maybe not all as an appendix to the book, but through related means: a separate, downloadable world guidebook, perhaps (like you can create with our [Gazetteer Writer's Manual](#)), or a wiki for quick look-up and cross-referencing of world minutiae, to family trees and histories and character interviews and so on at an associated book page or blog.

The only pitfall I see here, really, is when the writer skips giving sufficient context within the work for something to make sense, thinking "Oh, people can look that up in xyz reference material if they really care." Sure they can look it up--but if it really matters to the story, enough of that world building stuff **must** be incorporated into the tale so the reader who can't or won't look things up can still completely enjoy the journey.

And to that extent, at least, Robert Bennett and I are again in agreement.