How to Create Realistic Fantasy and Science Fiction Settings

by Alan Vincent Michaels

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Creating Realistic Fantasy and Science Fiction Settings

What makes speculative fiction – fantasy, science fiction, science fantasy, and horror/occult – so interesting to many readers they decide consciously not to read contemporary, mainstream fiction?

It’s often the imaginary settings presented in speculative fiction stories that appeal to these readers; readers who want to escape their current world, leaving their cares, worries, concerns, and sins behind, and mentally travel to and be transformed by the new worlds they encounter.

For you, the author, the speculative fiction settings your characters inhabit and explore exist only in your imagination. And for the reader, she only has the words you wrote, and if the details aren’t clear or they’re missing, she’s more than likely to start filling in the gaps with her own ideas.

Creating realistic and cohesive settings can be among the hardest of writing tasks. You’re presenting imaginary and potentially transformative environments that may not share any familiarity with the real world. When starting your story, you’ll need to determine your story’s settings and build everything from the ground up. Your settings need to come to life in the same manner as your characters. More importantly, your settings will often move your story along when the plot is already clear: the quest will be completed, the princess will be saved, the good rebels will conquer the evil empire.

There’s a lot riding on your speculative fiction settings. So, how do you accomplish this task?

Let’s get started by taking a look at Charlie Jane Anders’ “7 Deadly Sins of Worldbuilding”:

1. Not thinking about basic infrastructure
2. Not explaining why events are happening now
3. Creating fictional versions of real-life human ethnic groups that never go beyond one dimension
4. Creating monolithic social, political, cultural, and religious groups
5. Inventing a history that is totally logical
6. Not really giving a strong sense of place, like what it smells like after it’s been raining
7. Introducing some superpower, like magic or insane tech, without fully accounting for how it would change society

During the discussion, please feel tree take notes and ask questions. Later, review the resources listed in this handout and use them as a starting point to help you develop your new, imaginary worlds – worlds your readers will want to visit over and over again.
Setting Visualizations

Just like finding images in magazines or newspapers of individuals you’re patterning your characters upon, sometimes creating semi-realistic images of landscapes, cityscapes, or even entire planets can help crystallize the setting-as-a-character in your story.

Take photographs, do “mash-ups” in Adobe Photoshop or a paint program, physically draw or paint the images in your mind, sketch out ideas using words or simple line drawings. Anything that can help you visualize your imaginary worlds more clearly will help you find the words to convey these wondrous places to your readers.

Image Notes: The image above was created in Photoshop to help me visualize my short story, “Exodus,” which is a tale of the last ark ships leaving Atia, a depleted and nearly lifeless world. The Atians moved out into their solar system and exhausted the other planets and asteroids. Now, radiation from their sun threatens all remaining life.

After years of horrific, devastating planet-wide wars, droughts, disease, and natural calamities, the Atians decide that journeying to the stars is the only chance for their survival and for the survival of Atia’s flora and fauna.

Will the last, few Atians survive? Will they find a new world to call their home?

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Selected Writing Resources

- **Ben Bova (with Anthony R. Lewis)**, *Space Travel: A writer’s guide to the science of interplanetary and interstellar travel*, Writer’s Digest Books, 1997
  - Living and Working in Space
  - Space Habitats
  - Starships

- **Orson Scott Card**, *How to Write Science Fiction and Fantasy*, Writer’s Digest Books, 1990
  - World Creation (How to build, populate, and dramatize a credible, inviting world that readers will want to share with you; Developing the rules of your world...and then abiding by them and making them matter; working out the history, language, geography, and customs of your invented world)

  - Setting the Stage
  - To Build a World
  - Detailing the World
  - Fantasy Worlds


- **Brian Stableford**, *Writing Fantasy and Science Fiction and Getting Published*, Teach Yourself / NTC Publishing Group, 2004 edition
  - Falling Sparrows: Worlds within texts
    - Real and imaginary worlds
    - Plausibility and probability
    - The moral order of worlds within texts

  - World Building in Horror, Occult, and Fantasy Writing (Marion Zimmer Bradley)
  - Sword and Sorcery, Dragon and Princess (Darrell Schweitzer)
  - Science Fiction: Hard Science and Hard Conflicts (Michael A. Banks)
  - Researching Science Fantasy (Sharon Baker)
Selected Internet Resources

Writing-World.com

- **Four Ways to Bring Settings to Life** by Moira Allen
- **Setting: The Key to Science Fiction** by Bruce Boston
  http://www.writing-world.com/sf/setting.shtml
- **Creating a Realistic Fantasy World** by Penny Ehrenkranz
  http://www.writing-world.com/sf/world.shtml
- **Map Your Settings** by Victoria Grossack
  http://www.writing-world.com/victoria/crafting54.shtml
- **Location, Location, Location** by Jim C. Hines
  http://www.writing-world.com/fiction/location.shtml
- **The Art of Description: Eight Tips to Help You Bring Your Settings to Life** by Anne Marble

SFWA

- **Fantasy Worldbuilding Questions** by Patricia C. Wrede

Other Resources

- **7 Deadly Sins of Worldbuilding** by Charlie Jane Anders
  http://io9.com/7-deadly-sins-of-worldbuilding-998817537
- **Fantasy World Building: How to Develop a Realistic Setting for Your Novel** by Boyce’s Writing Corner
  http://writing.smboyce.com/fantasy-world-building-how-to-develop-a-realistic-setting-for-your-novel/
- **Clare Dunkle’s Ideas on Creating Fantasy Worlds** by Clare B. Dunkle
  http://www.claredunkle.com/Design/writefantasy.htm
- **Creating Fantasy and Science Fiction Worlds**, a tutorial by A.R. George, Michael James Liljenberg, et al.
  http://www.elfwood.com/tutorial/c9416faa-ad87-5049-db0b-228d6f80c922/creating-fantasy-and-science-fiction-worlds
  - Chapter 1: Day 0 - In the Beginning God - Theology/Spirituality
  - Chapter 2: Day 1 - Physics
  - Chapter 3: Day 2 - Weather
  - Chapter 4: Day 3 - Geography
  - Chapter 5: Day 4 - Astronomy & Planetology (includes Solar System Worksheet)
  - Chapter 6: Day 5 - Animals / Zoology (includes Ecosphere Worksheet)
  - Chapter 7: Day 6 - Anthropology (part 1) (part 2)
  - Conclusion: The Rest of the Story