Rochester Speculative Literature Association, Inc.

The Setting:
The Key to Speculative Fiction

by Alan Vincent Michaels

R-SPEC Panel Members

Kurt Schweitzer, **Eric Scoles**, **Lynn Spitz**, and **Ted Wenskus** (panelists)
Alan Vincent Michaels (moderator)

The Presentation

This presentation is a starting point for developing your speculative fiction – science fiction, fantasy, science fantasy, and horror/occult – settings.

Your settings can be as wide ranging as a fantasy kingdom, whole worlds and inhabited moons, or an empire that spans across one or more galaxies. Or you can adjust your focus onto an orbiting space habitat, an arboreal village, or the inner workings of an alien consciousness.

Use your notes from this presentation and review the resources listed in this handout to help you develop your imaginary settings into places your readers will want to visit again and again.

Creating Realistic Settings

What makes speculative fiction so interesting that many readers decide 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 lives, leaving their cares, worries, concerns, and sins behind, and mentally travel to and be transformed by the places they encounter.

For you, the author, the settings your characters inhabit and explore exist only in your imagination. And for the reader, she only has the words you wrote. 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, or the good rebels will conquer the evil empire.

That's a lot to ask of your speculative fiction settings. So, how do you accomplish this task?

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Some Things Not to Do

From 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

Visualizing Your Settings

Just as with using photos from magazines or newspapers of individuals you're patterning your characters upon, finding photos of scenery and landscapes, cityscapes (historical, modern, or futuristic renderings), and even magazine and book cover art can be the foundation for your settings. These images can help you visualize the large (and small) details of your settings, regardless if it's a room, a village, or an entire world you're building.

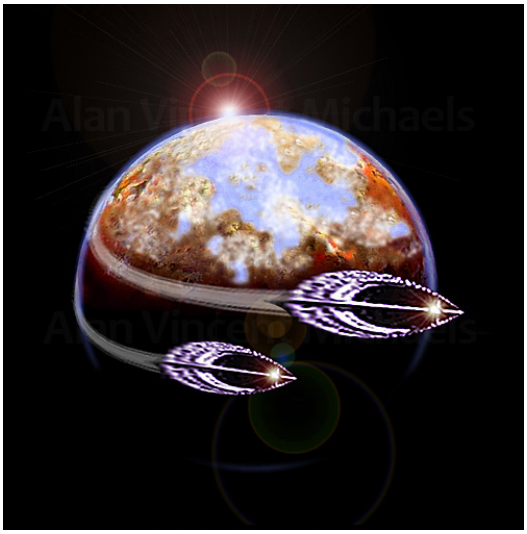
Another approach is to create your own semi-realistic images of cityscapes, or even entire planets, can help crystallize the "setting as a character" in your story. Take photographs, do "mash-ups" in Adobe® Photoshop® or a paint program, draw or paint the images you have in your mind, or sketch out ideas using words or simple line drawings. Anything that can help you visualize your imaginary places more clearly will help you find the words to convey these wondrous places to your readers.

An Imaginary World

The image at right 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 remaining flora and fauna.

Will the last, few Atians survive their exodus? Will they find a new world to call 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
- **David Gerrold**, *Worlds of Wonder: How to Write Science Fiction & Fantasy*, Writer's Digest Books, 2001
    - Setting the Stage
    - To Build a World
    - Detailing the World
    - Fantasy Worlds
- **Gerard K. O'Neill**, *The High Frontier: Human Colonies in Space*, Third Edition, Apogee Books, 2000 (also Bantam Books, 1978; William Morrow, 1977)
- **Brian Stableford**, *Writing Fantasy and Science Fiction and Getting Publi*shed, 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
- **J.N. Williamson**, editor, *How to Write tales of Horror, Fantasy & Science Fiction*, Writer's Digest Books, 1987
    - 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)

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Selected Internet Resources

Writing-World.com

- **Four Ways to Bring Settings to Life** by Moira Allen
  http://www.writing-world.com/fiction/settings.shtml
- **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
  http://www.writing-world.com/fiction/description.shtml

SFWA

- **Fantasy Worldbuilding Questions** by Patricia C. Wrede
  https://www.sfwa.org/2009/08/fantasy-worldbuilding-questions/

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

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