

World Building: Fantasy Worlds

by Alan Vincent Michaels

R-SPEC Panel Members

Lynn Spitz (moderator)

Alan Vincent Michaels, Eric Scoles, Hugh Sullivan, and Ted Wenskus (panelists)

About the Presentation

This presentation is a starting point for developing your fantasy and science fantasy worlds and story settings. Your settings can be as wide ranging as a small kingdom ostensibly at peace, a realm in the throes of war, or a vast empire that spans across one or more fantasy domains exhibiting a range of struggles and wonders. Or you can set your focus on a magic-fearing family living in an arboreal village, a forgotten princess locked away in the highest turret of a decrepit stone castle, or the inner, maniacal thoughts of an aged and demented magician.

Each world has its own borders, needs its own rules, and requires a variety of structures, both literary and invented, for your story and plot to build upon. Defining those elements early on can make all the difference in whether your story succeeds or fails to deliver for your readers.

During this presentation, we ask you to put on your metaphorical overalls, grab your literary toolboxes, and tackle the foundations that support your fantasy story or novel. Our panelists will help you explore how to create believable imaginary worlds in which your characters and plot can come to life and thrive.

You are invited to share your world building ideas and discuss topics ranging from using known settings in urban or historical fantasies to creating key elements from scratch to bolster heroic or magical fantasies. Creating what is needed to tell your story helps you start writing, and thinking about how to weave settings and backgrounds around your characters and plot helps you finish writing.

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 Fantasy Settings

Realistic fantasy. That sounds like an oxymoron, right? An element that will make your fantasy story more interesting is creating a world that envelopes your characters and immerses your readers.

It's often the imaginary settings presented in fantasy stories that appeal to these readers; readers who want to escape their current lives, leaving their cares, worries, 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.

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, cohesive settings are some of the hardest writing tasks. You're creating 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, and revealed in measured doses to serve your story's plot.

That's a lot to ask of your fantasy settings. So, how do you accomplish this task? Let's begin with asking some basic questions...

Building Your Fantasy World

Let's look at one Internet resource available to help you start building your fantasy world.

Patricia Wrede has created a long list of fantasy world-building questions – a treasure trove of information that can help you decide the appropriate starting point for your imaginary landscapes. The infinite possibilities you originally faced are winnowed down to a series of logical progressions that, once mapped out, provide the foundation to your story.

Fantasy Worldbuilding Questions: The World

© 1996 Patricia C. Wrede

<https://www.sfw.org/2009/08/fantasy-worldbuilding-questions/>

- [The World](#)
 - [Basics](#)
 - [Alternate Earth](#)
 - [Not Earth at All](#)
- [Physical and Historical Features](#)
 - [General](#)
 - [Climate and Geography](#)
 - [Natural Resources](#)
 - [World History](#)
 - [Specific Country\(s\) History](#)
- [Magic and Magicians](#)
 - [Rules of Magic](#)
 - [Wizards](#)
 - [Magic and Technology](#)
 - [Miscellaneous Magic Questions](#)
- [Peoples and Customs](#)
 - [General](#)
 - [Customs](#)
 - [Eating](#)
 - [Greeting and Meeting](#)
 - [Gestures](#)
 - [Visits](#)
 - [Language](#)
 - [Ethics and Values](#)
 - [Religion and the Gods](#)
 - [Population](#)
- [Social Organization](#)
 - [General](#)
 - [Government](#)
 - [Politics](#)
 - [Crime and the Legal System](#)
 - [Foreign Relations](#)
 - [Waging War](#)
 - [Weapons](#)
- [Commerce, Trade, and Public Life](#)
 - [General](#)
 - [Business and Industry](#)
 - [Transportation and Communication](#)
 - [Science and Technology](#)
 - [Medicine](#)
 - [Arts and Entertainment](#)
 - [Architecture](#)
 - [Urban Factors](#)
 - [Rural Factors](#)
- [Daily Life](#)
 - [General](#)
 - [Fashion and Dress](#)
 - [Manners](#)
 - [Diet](#)
 - [Education](#)
 - [Calendar](#)

Building Your Fantasy World...cont.

The first section of Ms. Wrede's question list focuses on the fundamentals of your fantasy world.

Fantasy Worldbuilding Questions: The World

© 1996 Patricia C. Wrede

<https://www.sfw.org/2009/08/fantasy-worldbuilding-questions/>

A. Basics

- Are the laws of nature and physics actually different in this world, or are they the same as in real life?

How does magic fit in?

How do magical beasts fit in?
- Is this generally an earth-like world?

Is it an "alternate Earth"?
- Are there different human races, whether or not there are non-humans like elves or dwarves?

How does the cultural and ethnic diversity of this world compare to the real world?
- How long have there been people on this world?

Did they evolve, or did they migrate from somewhere/when else?
- How many people are there in this country?

How does this compare with world population?

What is considered a small town/large town/city in terms of number of people?
- Where does magic power come from: the gods, the "mana" of the world (as in Larry Niven's "Warlock" stories), the personal willpower or life force of the magician, somewhere else?

Is magic an exhaustible resource?

If a magician must feed his spells with his own willpower, life-force, or sanity, what long-term effects will this have on the health and/or stability of the magician?

Do different races/species have different sources for their magic, or does everybody use the same one?

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.sfwaworldbuilding.com/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

