WORLD BUILDING CHEATSHEET – PART I

by Dimitris Romeo Havlidis | Nov 15, 2016 | Worldbuilding | 1 comment

Author's note

I have been thinking for quite some time about writing an article like this. I know that there are some similar articles out there, but I wanted to give you my own thoughts on the matter. For those who don't know me, I am a web developer and sociologist by education and I have been creating worlds for the past 20 years. Through these years I have used a variety of methods – from utter chaos to religiously following books on writing or world building. I will be suggesting some excellent books (at the end of the second part of this article) which I think are worth the time of anyone who wants to create their own world.

My intention is to expand on each of the steps of the cheatsheet with following article(s) on the subject, but let's see how this goes. Please do let me know what you think would be useful – I would really appreciate your feedback.

World building from scratch

Building an imaginary world from nothing can be a daunting prospect, as much as it is an exciting one. This article aims to provide you with a way to put some order into what can otherwise be a chaotic jumble of thoughts and ideas. Giving structure can help you focus on what you really want to do, whether this is writing simple stories and campaigns, or creating complicated and intriguing plots of political machinations.

Who should use this cheatsheet?

This sheet is intended to be used by people who want to create a historical, fantasy or science fiction world for role playing or writing. It's not an absolute guide. It is meant to be used as a checklist, to make sure that you have the most important areas covered and to give some structure to the process.

How to use this cheatsheet?

It is not necessary to follow the cheatsheet from top to bottom, although it might be a good idea to try it once if you are a world-building novice. You can start from any point you like. Even if you are constructing your world as you go, at some point you will need to address some, if not all, of the steps described below, even if you only have a general idea of some of them. I would suggest that having a clear, defined concept – your elevator pitch – really helps too…

The concept and your motivation

- **Why are you doing this?**
- **What are you getting out of it?**

It might sound facile, but the reason why you are doing this world building "exercise" should be something you write down, and can refer back to when you are feeling lost or bogged down. Ideal times to check your motivation include the wailing cries "*This is so hard*" or "*It will take forever*". I tend to write my motivation on a post-note, and stick it close to where I work.

The Unique selling point, the cliché or elevator pitch

- **What is your USP? (Unique Selling Point)**
- **Can you describe your world to someone in the time it takes to go up 5 stories on an elevator? What is that description?**

Forget what you know for a second, and think about what makes your new world unique. If it was a product, how would you sell it? Imaginary or historical worlds share some common themes and ideas, but a world that people remember is one that has something unique about it. Perhaps this is something that others never used before, or an unusual combination of themes or concepts.

Clichés also have a place. Clichés are commonly-used patterns associated with a list of rules or ideas that people are familiar with. Examples of cliché settings include "high magic fantasy", "space opera", "steam punk" or "lovecraftian horror" – all of these are associated with certain parameters. For example, multiple races and the use of magic are associated with high magic fantasy – think "Harry Potter" or "The Lord of the Rings" (or Forgotten Realms, etc). The parameters automatically associated with a clichéd setting (at least, for those familair with the genre) can take away a lot of the burden from building your own world, but can also make it a challenge to produce a unique, memorable world. Use these clichés with care.

Before you begin creating your world, sit down and think about the questions above. Jot the answers down on the first page of your notebook, wiki, stack of papers, or similar. Refer back to these answers when you need to refocus, and make sure that you sanity-check your daily inspirations against them.

The world building Cheatsheet

All set? Great! The cheat sheet was intentionally written to make you feel like the omnipotent creator of your new world, taking a journey through its creation. If you're starting off with your new world, I would strongly suggest that you work down the steps, from top to bottom.

World Building the Cosmology of Planescape (Forgotten Realms)

1. Genesis

- **How was your world created?**

Finding out how a world was created can become a source of inspiration and establish a clear theme. Did its creation follow what scientists currently believe is involved in planetary genesis? Was it created by a corporation whose sole purpose is to build worlds which travel on top of four elephants, on the back of a giant turtle? Was the planet sneezed into existence by a deity? Writing down your ideas of how the world was created, even if you are unsure how this will fuel your imagination, will help give you a fuller understanding of the different forces at play. Do note that the inhabitants of the world might have all sorts of odd ideas about how their home planet came into existence, and for the time being we can safely ignore them. It's good to be the god-creator, isn't it?

2. Rules of Physics, Magic & Cosmology

- **Is there a higher being, or a pantheon of them?**
- **Are there any other dimensions or worlds?**
- **Are there stars in the night sky and, if so, what are they?**
- **What is the grander stage (universe) that your world exists inside of?**
- **Are there laws of physics which are different to our reality?**
- **Is there magic or something resembling it? If so, how does it work?**

Intentionally, I have put magic and physics in the same bucket, in order to make you think of magic as a force that exists and changes your world fundamentally. In magical worlds, there is a tendency to see magic as a bolt on – "oh yeah, and then there's also magic!". The very existence of such a potent force, no matter how you define it or how the inhabitants of your world are aware of it, will change the way that the world works on a fundamental level.

World building is an exercise in informed and imaginative creation, and the laws of physics (or other) that you define will have a "blanket" impact on all your decisions. A good example of that is this:

> "In my world, Gravity is less strong – around 0.7G, compared to 1G on Earth."

This change in gravity won't just make people able to jump higher. It will change the evolution of organic life and also the geography of the world. You might have flying trees, creatures with very light and fragile bones, and flight as a more common ability. Would oceans even form as we know them? The same goes for magic – it could affect all parameters of a world, from the evolution of plants, animals and sentient species to the very geography and formation of the planet.

3. Geology and Geography

- **Do you have a map of the current geography of the world?**
- **Were there any Cataclysmic or Extinction level events in the Geological history of your world?**
- **Have you created a plate tectonics map of your world?**
- **Did continental drift affect the geology of your world?**
- **Are there any significant natural wonders on your world?**

Building the geography of your world is, for many, one of the most enjoyable parts of world building. Having skills in map making helps but, in reality, maps look so much better when they make sense. The geological history of your world establishes the landscape which upon which your legendary stories will be played. It's the stagecraft of world building.

Geology and geography are quite separate things. Having continents, oceans, mountains and forests is one thing, but understanding the minerals and their locations under the earth can add a whole new layer later when considering the strategic importance of locations. Minerals and their properties can be a unique resource which changes the face of the world, such as a mineral associated with magical energy, or which can be used as a powerful energy source (e.g. Star Trek's Dilithium, a mineral which powers starships).

On top of that, natural wonders are something very often missed as a trick. Natural structures that dominate the landscape around them, or places that inspire wanderlust to your inhabitants, add flavour and uniqueness to your world.

4. Climate and Biomes

- **How are the climates of your world separated?**
- **Are there any weather phenomena that dominate certain areas?**

Altitude and distance from the poles (if any) are only part of how the climate of a world works. Creating weather systems like oceanic currents, terrestrial or non-terrestrial sources of heat, the effect of orbiting bodies, the seasons and the geological phase of your world, adds flavour and also a sense of passing time. A seemingly peaceful valley might be susceptible to deadly flash floods every few months, due to the way that twin moons affect the bodies of water of your world.

Biomes is another interesting subject. They will help you create diversification in your flora and fauna. Biomes (and the changes within them) are catalysts for evolution – different plants and creatures will adapt to meet as perfectly as possible the needs of their local biome. Even within the same species, there will be physical differences across different biomes. For example, cows are not always the standard black and white Friesians from childrens' books; check out the Scottish Highland Cows – they're woolly, adorable and so, so Emo.

5. Biodiversity and Evolutionary Drives

- **Have you created plants unique to your world?**

- **Have you created animals unique to your world?**

- **Are there any evolutionary drives that bestow commonalities to your species?**

After your wondrous world is created at some point, hopefully, life has arisen! Congratulations! Now it's time to get cracking and create all those species of plants and animals. You might go as far as creating wholly or partly the predecessors (the proto-species) of the life that currently inhabits your world. Just so we're clear, that will also include what we generally define as "races" (although, technically, they're species) – the intelligent or artificially constructed inhabitants of your world.

But we'll talk more about that next week…

A special thank you to everyone at the /r/worldbuilding reddit and Discord channel for all their support, and great banter, and to my beloved wife, Janet for editing my articles into something readable by sane humans. I couldn't have done it without you guys.

How did you find the cheat sheet so far? Are there any points you'd add to the ones above?

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Master world builder Terry Pratchett, at work. | We miss you, Master Pratchett!

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My name is Dimitris Romeo. I am a dyslexic one-eyed, web architect, developer and designer with a passion for photography, User Experience and telling stories.I spend my free time taking photos, watching tv series, cooking and watering my plants.I love lemon tarts, audiobooks, top hats, fantasy and science fiction in all its forms.