SETTING DESIGN

FOR WRITERS AND ROLEPLAYERS

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

The term *worldbuilding* gets thrown around a lot by both writers and roleplayers. It's most frequently used in reference to the construction of a fantasy realm or an entire fictional universe. There are maps, and histories, and complex back stories, and all sorts of engaging little details. While these worlds are allegedly being created as the grand stage for a work of fiction, which includes novels, films, television shows, and games, worldbuilding is often an end unto itself. It's an intellectual exercise, a creative outlet, and just a whole lot of fun.

This isn't a book about worldbuilding. This is a book about telling stories.

What I mean to say is, this book isn't about worldbuilding for its own sake. You're not going to learn how to create an encyclopedia for an alternate universe. I'm not going to show you have to write the ultimate travel guide for an imaginary place. It's not a book full of checklists and random tables. This is about assembling the critical details that you will need in order to tell a story.

Berin Kinsman
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WORLDBUILDING VS SETTING DESIGN

One of the greatest challenges that both writers and roleplayers face is preparation time. Before you can sit down and write a novel or run a campaign, you need to do some research. One of the risks of traditional worldbuilding is gathering more information than you actually need, or will ever use. You need to be sure that you know absolutely everything, no matter how trivial, just in case it comes up. You don't want to have to stop right when you're in the middle of the action to have to look something up.

The other option is to just wing it. Start writing, start playing, and make it all up as you go. If you're well-versed in a particular genre, or know an established setting like the back of your hand, you can make this work. That's not really worldbuilding, though; that's rote memorization and repetition. You can craft something from whole cloth as your story unfolds, but that's not worldbuilding, either. It's random chance and happenstance.

Setting design, as we'll be discussing it in this book, means doing things on purpose. It means that every element of your setting is there for a reason. You made a decision to include some things, and leave out others, because they somehow contribute to the story that's being told.

TOP-DOWN DESIGN

There are two prevailing approaches to traditional worldbuilding. The first is top-down, or outside-in, design. You start big, often with a map, and make generalizations about geography, climate, major cities, politics, ecology, and other broad topics. From there the creator can scale down incrementally, filling in increasingly finer and more specific details. Everything is created with no specific use in mind; purpose for detail can be found later.

The strength of top-down design is that you, as creator, are able to see the big picture. You know how and why everything fits together. One of the drawbacks is that it's tempting to make things fit together too well. Any inconsistencies are intentional, and might feel forced. Those inconsistencies are important, because they create conflict. As we'll see, conflict created drama and drives story. There may be a lot of potential in the world for many stories, and a myriad of types of stories, to be told, but it will take a lot of work to mine them out of all the details required to define the top-down world.

BOTTOM-UP DESIGN

In bottom-up, or inside-out, design, you start small and work your way up. The characters may start in a tavern, and that's all that you or they know of the world. They may be hired to guard a caravan traveling to a distant city, at which point the creator will need to fill in the details of the city and everything leading up to it. Every element is determined on a need-to-use basis.

The strength of the bottom-up approach is in the inconsistencies that inevitably creep in. Having to reconcile details thought up on the fly makes for good story fodder. The

downside is that it requires good improvisational skills. You're either making things up as you go along, or you're stopping and starting to do sporadic bits of research. It's sort of like building an airplane while you're flying it, and can be as much work as crafting an obsessively detailed top-down design.

STORY-DRIVEN DESIGN

There is another option, and that's to follow story-driven design. First you determine the sort of story you want to tell, then you design as much as you think you'll need in order to tell that story. Every element can justify its existence somehow. It encompasses some components of top-down design, but since you know what you need to focus on, you create less excess. There may still be elements that you won't use, but fewer of them. It also uses aspects of bottom-up design, but you'll need to improvise less. Even when you have to make things up on the spot, you'll have existing elements to serve as a foundation that you can build up.

The strength of story-driven design is that it's just as creative and intellectually stimulating as the other approaches, but it's far more efficient. You're neither woolgathering and generating reams of material you'll never use, nor fumbling to come up with some detail on the spot. You can fly by the seat of your pants when you feel the need to let loose creatively, but you also have a master plan with structure and discipline to guide you. What needs to fit together will fit together. What's inconsistent will be small enough to ignore, or novel enough that it will be fun to reconcile or explain away. Best of all, it will allow you to get down to what you've really set out to accomplish: writing a novel, composing a script, or running a tabletop roleplaying game.

USING THIS BOOK

There are many elements that go into the creation of a great setting. All of them are optional. Nothing in this book is mandatory. Use as many elements as you choose. Skip over any that don't resonate with you, or fit the project you're working on. All these elements are system-agnostic and usable with any game mechanics or genres.

STORYTELLING

When creating elements for your setting, there are three things to keep in mind:

- *What you, as the creator, need to know in order to tell the story.*
- *What others need to know in order to understand the story being told.*
- *What information the story needs in order to be told.*

If you create nothing else, you need these elements in place. It's the bare minimum requirement for setting design.

VERISIMILITUDE

Your setting doesn't have to be realistic, but it has to be believable. There has to be an internal logic and consistency to thing. Think of this as the physics of storytelling. Once you've established that a thing exists, or that something works a certain way, you need to stick to it. You can't change the rules in the middle of the story without a good reason.

The key to establishing verisimilitude is to only create as much as you have to. When I say the characters are sitting in an inn, hired to guard a caravan, traveling to a city, I don't need to explain what an inn, a caravan, or a city are. I can describe them, so you know something extra about this in, this caravan, and this city, but most of the work is already done. Rely on things the reader, or the player, already knows, and simply tweak or embellish. The more you fall back on the familiar, the more believable the story will be, and the easier it will be for others to suspend their disbelief and go along with the unusual elements.

IMMERSION

While the key is for the setting to support the needs of the story, the story will also need to reinforce the setting. Small details will need to be thrown in to constantly remind the reader or player where they are, and what this setting is all about. These are elements of genre, place and time, and theme that might not have any direct impact on the story, but allow others to become more deeply involved by giving them the sense that they're there alongside the characters.

Never let details get in the way of the action, though. Give them only as much as they need, and whet their appetite for more details. Being stingy with specific details creates an air of mystery drawing them in. Allow what's unknown to them to be a source of suspense. Sharing too much detail at the wrong time removes the fear of the unknown

and potentially spoils the story.

CREATING AND RESOLVING CONFLICT

An important function of setting is to facilitate conflict in an interesting way. No matter what type of story you're telling, or what sort of character you're creating, you need to begin with two questions:

What sorts of problems does this setting create?

What sorts of problems does this setting resolve?

Every genre has its own set of problems, as well as its ways of trying to solve those problems. Each place and time comes with its own unique types of issues and restricts the capabilities available for their resolution. The themes you choose will practically define the nature of the conflicts that will recur throughout the story. When picking elements, you need to have conflicts in mind. The more conflicts, the more material you have to work with within your story.

This is why every element that you assign to a setting has to come with additional questions:

How does the setting lead to internal conflict within the characters?

How does the setting lead to external conflict between the characters?

This is determining whether your setting is going to be character-driven or story-driven. Internal conflict takes place within the character's own mind. They take action based on their own goals and motivations. External conflict stems from some outside force acting on the character. An internal conflict would be a character choosing to go off to a war in a far-off land because their conscience or ideology drives them to do so. An external conflict would be the character getting drafted and forced to go to war, or having the war come to them; they have a choice as to the form of action they take, but they must take some sort of action.

This leads to the final two questions:

How does this help to resolve an internal problem for a character?

How does this help to resolve an external problem for a character?

Every element of the setting should do one or the other. It can do both. Every choice you make for a setting should, ideally, contribute something to a character act. If you remember that, and factor in things like genre, setting, and theme, you'll end up with a memorable setting with plenty of things for characters to do within the story.

THE SETTING DESIGN PROCESS

Begin with a character in mind. Work through the book from beginning to end. Following each step until you've created what you want. You may end up with something different than you intended. You'll discover things you hadn't imagined. That's okay. That's part of the process of creating a three-dimensional setting.

PREMISE

Your premise is a statement of fact about your setting. It's what your story is about. The premise of your story will imply some of the things that will need to exist within the setting, and establish what is and isn't possible.

GENRE

Genre is a classification of style and subject matter. By defining the genre of your story, you will further determine what sorts of elements your setting will need, and establish boundaries around possibilities and story types.

PLACE AND TIME

This is simply when and where your story takes place, but it established a lot. If you're using an historical setting, this gives you an immediate point of reference. If you're creating an imaginary or futuristic setting, you can still compare it to other works of fiction.

THEME

A story's theme is the underlying meaning. Theme is what the story is really about. The setting elements you design should resonate and support the theme, and in that way reinforce the story.

STAKES

What sorts of things do the characters within the setting stand to gain? What do they stand to lose? These are the rewards and consequences that exist within the setting, which can act as motivations or obstacles.

LOCATIONS

Where, specifically, does the story take place? The homes, workplaces, hangouts, and battlefields need to be created. The premise, genre, and sense of time and place need to be reinforced.

PEOPLE

Who lives in this setting? What sorts of character types are necessary? What kinds of people could be encountered? This section includes tips on designing the individuals,

communities, and organizations needed to populate your setting.

TECHNOLOGY

What sorts of goods, services, ideas, and processes are present in the setting? This includes everything from communications to transportation to weaponry. Are these elements compatible with genre, time, and place?

EVENTS

What happens in the setting? This includes past events like wars and revolutions, recurring things like celebrations and festivals, and unexpected things like accidents, natural disasters, and more wars.

VOCABULARY

What unusual terms are used within the setting? What common things are called by different names? What words can be used to reinforce the genre or a sense of the historical time period? What jargon needs to be invented to represent fictional concepts?

FINISHING DETAILS

Finishing details are any other elements necessary to help to reinforce the overall sense of the setting. This includes any bridging elements that help to connect all of the other elements. Think of it as polishing the setting so things hold together and make sense

ESTABLISHED SETTINGS

This section covers how to take fictional settings from other media and adapt them for your own purposes. Combine and remix other works and file the serial numbers off in order to create your own original setting.

COLLABORATION

If you're working with other to create a shared setting, these guidelines will help you with that process. Tips and tricks for including players in the setting design of games, and working with other writers on fiction set in the same world.

SETTING BIBLE

How to organize all of the setting information you create, and keep it up to date. A story bible is the ultimate reference for your setting, and a living document that will change as your story unfolds.

PREMISE

If you're designing a building, you need to know whether you're planning to build a house, a hotel, or a hospital. It makes a difference, because each one of those structures has different needs. If you're cooking a meal, you don't just start throwing ingredients into a pan and hope for the best, you follow a recipe. You focus on the things that you need, and don't waste time and resources on things that you don't. When you're designing a setting, the first thing you need to do is define the premise of the story you intend to tell.

A premise is a summary of your story in a single sentence, or at most a short paragraph. It's a foundation, of course. There will be far more to your story than can be reduced to such a simple statement. Yet if you can't get to the heart of your story with a short description, you might not have clarity around what it is you want to accomplish.

There are two big reasons why premise is crucial. The first, as stated above, is to insure that you as the creator have a clear vision around what you're doing. The second is to be able to explain your story to other people. If you're writing something, you'll need to convince people to read it. If you're putting together a roleplaying game, you're going to need to attract people to read it. Having a compelling premise allows you to pitch the basic idea and make people want to know more.

Once you've nailed the premise, you'll know what setting elements you'll definitely need, and what sorts of things you don't. Putting in your due diligence here will save you a lot of time and effort later, because you won't be fiddling about with maps and civilizations and mythologies that you'll never use.

ELEMENTS OF A PREMISE STATEMENT

There are three essential components to a premise statement: the characters in the story, their goals, and the obstacles they need to overcome. All of these are fairly high level. You want to leave yourself space to develop the specifics within the story, and you want the readers or players to discover on their own how things turn out.

CHARACTERS

The premise should never state the name of a character, only the sort of person they are. If you're writing fiction, other people reading your premise won't know who your protagonist is by their name alone. If you're running a game, you want potential players to be able to project the character they'd like to create into the lead role.

The character description in the premise is going to imply more than it tells. Just saying "a knight" or "a scientist" or "an arctic explorer" conjures up a lot of imagery and provides an idea of what the story might be about.

GOALS

The goal within a premise statement tells what the characters are trying to accomplish. It doesn't say why they're trying to do it, or whether they'll succeed. It might hint at what's at stake if they fail. The purpose of including the goal is to imply action and create suspense. Something happens in the story that you, as the creator, will need to flesh out. The reader or player should be hooked in and want to go along for the ride.

Keeping the goal vague gives you some wiggle room as you're writing. It leaves open a lot of possibilities as to where the story could go and how things might turn out. The hardest part is not being too vague, or leaving things so wide open that anything is possible. Keep it tight.

OBSTACLES

The obstacle is the one big thing keeping the character from achieving their goal. Within a story there will be many obstacles, of course. There's an implication of what's at stake, what the character might gain if they succeed and what they could lose if they fail. You need an obstacle in the premise statement to make it interesting. A story about a man going to visit his mother sounds boring. A man trying to cross a war zone to visit his dying mother is interesting, because it has obstacles.

The obstacle should generate a bit of fear of the unknown. There has to be doubt about the outcome. It should also imply the types of other obstacles that the character will have to face in pursuit of the goal.

EXTRACTING SETTING ELEMENTS

Once you've nailed your premise, you can start examining the implications it contains.

You'll begin to see an ecology inherent in it, and know what basic elements you'll need. Then you can finally begin some worldbuilding.

There will also be an ecology around the character. Where do they develop those types of skills, and who employs them? If the character is a lawyer, it implies the existence of a legal practice, a court, support staff, and clients. If the character is a pirate, it implies an ocean, a ship, a crew, other ships to plunder, probably some official agency opposing their actions. If the character is a professional football player, it implies teammates, other teams, stadiums, and fans.

There will be a lot of things necessary to support the goals. If the lawyer's goal is to prove a man's innocence, you'll need all of the details of the crime, a crime scene, a victim, law enforcement, a jail, and other suspects. If the pirate's goal is to find a lost treasure, you'll need the treasure, the place it's hidden, and all sorts of clues leading there. If the football player's goal is to reconcile with his estranged father, you'll need the father, the family home, other family members, and whatever caused them to stop talking to one another.

Finally, obstacles will present their own needs. The lawyer is going to face opposing counsel, discredit the existing evidence, find missing evidence, and convince a jury. The pirate is going to have to navigate dangerous waters, fight off the navy and rival pirates, and deal with whatever hazards and traps conceal the treasure. The football player is going to have to deal with emotional baggage, what other people think of him, and probably something keeping him from winning a big game.

PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

Here are some examples of premise statements. Each also demonstrates characters, goals, and obstacles inherent in the statement. Some possible setting details are provided.

A group of strangers who met at an inn must defend a caravan from bandits as they travel to the big city.

- **Characters**: Soldiers, mercenaries, bandits, caravan drivers, merchants.
- **Goals**: Get the caravan to the city.
- **Obstacles**: Bandits trying to rob the caravan.
- **Basic setting elements**: An inn, a road, the name of a city.
- **Expanded setting elements**: The cargo, a reason it's going to the city, a reason the bandits want it, the reasons the characters take the job guarding it.

A gangster struggles to keep his dysfunctional family together while evading rival crime families and federal agents.

- **Characters**: The gangster, his family, his gang members, the rival gang members, the police.
- **Goals**: Rebuild relationships with family, stay safe from other criminals and the law.
- **Obstacles**: Whatever damaged the relationships, whatever the rival gang wants, whatever evidence the feds are looking for.
- **Basic setting elements**: A home, a place of business, a place to meet with rivals.
- **Expanded setting elements**: The gangster's customers or victims, people the feds are questioning, deeper reasons for the family dispute, deeper reason for the gang rivalry.

A special unit of police officers works to uncover the identity of a drug cartel's elusive kingpin.

- **Characters**: The police, the kingpin, the kingpin's minions.
- **Goals**: Find out who the kingpin is, presumably to arrest him or her.
- **Obstacles**: Finding the evidence, getting people to talk.
- **Basic setting elements**: The police unit's headquarters, the kingpin's lair, a place for drug deals to go down.
- **Expanded setting elements**: The kingpin's customers and victims, witnesses and bystanders, the kingpin's organization and supply line, corrupt cops in the kingpin's employ.

An orphaned girl discovers that she has the power to command dragons, and sets forth to conquer the people who killed her parents.

- **Characters**: The girl, the dragons, the killers, the killers' allies, people who know where to find the killers.
- **Goals**: Get revenge on the people who killed her parents.
- **Obstacles**: Locating the killers, getting into a position to attack them, actually killing them.

- **Basic setting elements**: Basic dragon ecology, a defensible place for the killers to dwell.
- **Expanded setting elements**: A reason why the girl's parents were killed, and explanation of why she can control dragons, other people who can control dragons, other people who want the dragons, people willing to defend the killers.

A news anchor tries to make amends for his past inaction by taking on the corrupt media establishment.

- **Characters**: News anchor, newsroom staff, people harmed by his actions.
- **Goal**: Exposed corruption in media.
- **Obstacles**: Corrupt people hiding their secrets and protecting the status quo.
- **Basic setting elements**: Newsroom, news van, offices, apartment, bar.
- **Expanded setting elements**: Shadowy parking garages, public squares.

A serial killer with a heart of gold takes out criminals who have evaded justice while hiding his dark secret from his family.

- **Characters**: Serial killer, family, victims.
- **Goal**: Kill bad guys, not get caught.
- **Obstacles**: Nosy family members, security cameras, law enforcement.
- **Basic setting elements**: Home, killing location, burial location.
- **Expanded setting elements**: Places of employment, victim's locations, victims of the victims, police station.

Inmates at a state penitentiary try to survive without turning into the monsters the establishment paints them to be.

- **Goal**: Don't become desensitized and lose your humanity.
- **Obstacles**: Violence, abuse, lack of freedom.
- **Characters**: Inmates, guards, family and friends on the outside.
- **Basic setting elements**: prison cells, cafeteria, library, exercise yard.
- **Expanded setting elements**: lawyers, social workers, police, crime scenes, family home.

The crew of a starship patrols unexplored space seeking scientific discoveries and first contact with alien races.

- **Goal**: discover new things, meet new people.
- **Obstacles**: space hazards, cultural differences, unknown phenomena.
- **Characters**: starship crew, aliens.
- **Basic setting elements**: starship, planets, alien races, strange anomalies.
- **Expanded setting elements**: fleet command, rival explorers, enemy aliens.

A team of doctors work together to solve medical mysteries and save the lives of unusual patients.

- **Characters**: doctors, medical staff, patients, family
- **Goal**: diagnose and treat unusual illnesses.
- **Obstacles**: hard-to-diagnose illnesses, wrong diagnoses, dangerous treatments.
- **Basic setting elements**: exam room, hospital room, meeting room, surgical

theater.
- **Expanded setting elements**: patients' homes, patients' work places, doctor's homes, local bar.

Superheroes band together to face the invasion of Earth by hostile aliens.
- **Characters**: superheroes, aliens, screaming bystanders.
- **Goal**: stop the invasion.
- **Obstacles**: blasters, explosions, supervillains, people in need of rescue.
- **Basic setting elements**: city, streets, tall buildings, space ships, superhero headquarters.
- **Expanded setting elements**: superhero homes, alien headquarters, superhero family and friends.

Young lovers from warring families seek a way to be together.
- **Characters**: lovers, family members, soldiers.
- **Goal**: be together
- **Obstacles**: family members trying to kill each other, family members trying to kill them, family members keeping them apart.
- **Basic setting elements**: family homes, secret meeting places, battlefields.
- **Expanded setting elements**: each family's military headquarters

REVIEW YOUR PREMISE

Do you have a strong premise statement? Are the protagonist and the villain clearly articulated? Have the goals and obstacles been spelled out? Are there other setting elements implied by the premise statement that you can begin to flesh out?

Premise and Genre

Take a look at the genre you've selected. What elements will you be able to utilize for resonance within the premise? What genre elements work best, and which will you leave out? How can you insert a sense of genre into the premise?

Premise, Place and Time

Consider where and when your story occurs. How can atmosphere, mood, and tone be used to describe the premise? Which senses can be leveraged to connect this time and place to the premise?

Premise and Theme

Look at the theme you've chosen for your story. What conflicts are inherent in the theme that are echoed in the premise? What symbols and motifs can be inserted into the other elements implied or stated in the premise?

Premise and Stakes

What are the positive things that will happen if the promise of the premise is fulfilled? Are there personal rewards for the protagonist, and consequences for the antagonist? What will happen to the characters and the world if the story goal isn't met?

Premise and Locations

Identify the specific locations suggested in the premise. Consider what locations are required for the conflict in the premise. Develop locations to be used for the obstacles the protagonist will encounter.

Premise and People

Who are the people within the premise? What sorts of cultures are implied in the premise? Which organizations and communities are needed to fulfill the premise? How does civilization factor into the obstacles within the premise?

Premise and Technology

What technologies are contained in the premise? What does the premise suggest about the technology available? How can technology present obstacles, or allow the protagonist to overcome them? What technologies does the antagonist have?

Premise and Events

Which events set up the premise? What recurring and upcoming events are required to fulfill the premise? How will unexpected events affect the characters and their ability to overcome obstacles and fulfill their goals?

Premise and Vocabulary

Look over the words used in your premise. What terms and phrases can be used to make the premise stand out? What naming conventions could be used to make the elements of the premise more distinctive?

GENRE

A genre is nothing more than a classification system, grouping things with similar elements together. It is a problematic term, because there are no hard-and-fast rules. Within science fiction, for example, we have *Star Trek* and *Star Wars*, which are both considered part of the same genre, but arguably have more elements that are dissimilar than they have in common. They take place in space, have space ships, and feature technology that doesn't exist in the real world. *Jurassic Park* is also considered to be science fiction, but doesn't have spaceships and takes place in a reasonable facsimile of the real world.

Still, genre, like a premise statement, can be a handy bit of shorthand for describing your story. The way you describe the elements of your setting will be heavily influenced by the genre of the story.

RESONANCE AND REPETITION

What genre does for your setting is create resonance. It allows the reader or player to form a mental picture based on their past experiences, saving you from having to fill in all of the details. When I say a story is set in a haunted house, you already have an idea in your head. You're recalling a ghost story you read or a horror movie you watched. You have expectations about where this story is going and the types of things that will happen. If a say "dusty street with tumbling tumbleweeds," you're probably thinking of an Old West town complete with a saloon and a sheriff's office. The more you repeat genre elements, or give the elements in your setting genre flair, the more you allow genre to do the heavy lifting for you.

GENRE CHARACTERS, GOALS, AND OBSTACLES

Returning to premise for a moment, consider how the elements reflect the genre you're playing in. You don't want to fall into the trap of using stereotypes and clichés, but there are elements and ways of describing elements that scream a particular genre. Is the character the type of character known to be part of that genre? Is the goal something unique to that genre? Is the obstacle the type of problem that only exists in that genre? Find and repeat the resonance, and you're building the setting.

COMMON GENRES

Below are some of the most common genres found in fiction, including literature, film, television, and games.

ACTION

In the action genre, exciting things happen. There are chases, fight scenes, and suspense, usually with a thin premise to hold them together. An action story can take many forms, including spy stories, police stories, sports stories, and martial arts stories, but those elements are just a pretense to justify the action sequences.

COMEDY

A comedy story is light in tone and built around jokes, absurd situations, and ridiculous characters. It often features the juxtaposition of opposite elements, comparing and contrasting them for humorous effect. Satire and parody take elements of other genres and blow them up to the point of absurdity, or point out the logical fallacies or absurdities of real people or situations.

CRIME

A crime genre story revolves around criminals and members of law enforcement. It explores the means by which crimes are committed, prevented, and detected, and the consequences of breaking the law. It is much broader in scope than a mystery, as it involves far more than figuring out who perpetrated a crime.

DRAMA

A drama is technically any story that is more serious than humorous in tone. Over time it has become the default category for any story that doesn't fall under another drama. It often refers to stories that are meant to be realistic and portray believable, everyday situations.

FANTASY

The fantasy genre includes tales of magic, strange creatures, and otherworldly settings. Technology is often limited, and there may be races other than humans. It requires suspension of disbelief in order to accept elements that are not possible in reality.

HORROR

The horror genre tells stories that evoke suspense, dread, and fear. There is usually an element of violence, and often supernatural elements as well. Characters are placed off-balance as they learn that things exist that should not. Aspects of the world, or at least some people in it, are not what they have been led to believe.

HISTORICAL

An historical setting takes place in a real time period and usually in a real location. It is often built around true events, using a combination of fictional characters and people who actually existed.

MYSTERY

Stories set in the mystery genre involve seeking the answer to a question. This usually involves some type of crime, often a murder, and determining who committed the crime. Clues and evidence are gathered over the course of the story, until the characters are able to draw a conclusion.

ROMANCE

A romance genre story centers on people seeking love, falling in love, or trying to maintain a relationship between people already in love. It often deals with the complications that accompany relationships. The things that drive people apart and, hopefully, bring them back together are explored.

SCIENCE FICTION

Science fiction takes concepts that don't exist, usually technology, and speculates what the implications of that concept might be. It often takes place in the future, sometimes in space or on other planets. The science might be factual or fantastic; it usually doesn't matter how, for example, humans came to colonize the moon, as much as what shape society will take once we're there.

SUPERHERO

The superhero genre features characters with supernatural or superhuman powers. These characters often wear costumes or masks. They are usually adventurers, crime fighters, or vigilantes. Most superhero tales begin with an origin story detailing how the powers were acquired. A recurring villain is also a recurring element.

THRILLER

At the heart of a thriller is the truth that someone means harm to someone else. Characters are usually in a race to prevent that harm from happening, either by stopping or escaping from the perpetrator. There is often a hint of mystery. A thriller can also cross over with other genres, like science fiction or horror.

WESTERN

The western genre covers stories set the American West during the latter half of the 19th century. Tales often involve gunfighters, lawmen, outlaws, settlers, and explorers. The harshness of life in the wilderness, the challenges of colonizing the frontier, and the

dangers of living in a largely lawless area are common elements.

REVIEW YOUR GENRE

Take a look at the genre you've selected. What elements will you be able to utilize for resonance with your audience? What elements will you use, and which will you leave out? How can you insert a sense of genre into the other elements in the setting?

Genre and Premise

Does the genre reinforce your premise statement? Are the protagonist and antagonist appropriate for the genre? Do the goals and obstacles have genre components to them? Are there other genre elements implied by the premise statement that you can begin to flesh out?

Genre, Place and Time

Consider where and when your story occurs. How can atmosphere, mood, and tone be used to describe the genre? Which senses can be leveraged to connect this time and place to the genre?

Genre and Theme

Look at the theme you've chosen for your story. How do the themes conflicts express themselves in the genre? What symbols and motifs are appropriate to the genre, and how can they also reinforce the theme?

Genre and Stakes

What makes the rewards unique to this genre? How is the genre reflected in the consequences? Do the internal and external stakes represent unique positive and negative effects made possible by this particular genre?

Genre and Locations

Identify the sorts of locations specific to your story's genre. Consider climate, terrain, plants and animals, and populations centers. Think about what conflict locations, sanctuary locations, and scenery and color look like in this genre.

Genre and People

What are people like in this genre? What sorts of cultures are implied by the genre? Which organizations and communities can reinforce the genre? What does civilization have to be like to support the needs of the genre?

Genre and Technology

What are the technologies inherent to the genre? How do people get around, manage basic necessities, and entertain themselves? Which things are considered cutting edge within the genre? How can the genre help define the technology?

Genre and Events

Which past events reinforce and set up the genre of the story? What recurring and upcoming events will reflect genre elements? How can unexpected events be given a specific genre flavor?

Genre and Vocabulary

What terms and phrases can be used to reinforce the genre? Are there genre-specific terms that can be used? Which sorts of names can help to create a sense of the genre the story takes place in?

PLACE AND TIME

Philadelphia, 1776. Petrograd, 1917. Hiroshima, 1945. The Bahamas, 1492. Rome, 27 B.C. For many people, the place and time of a story is the definition of setting. None of that worldbuilding stuff, no journals full of meticulous details on flora, fauna, and history, just *where* and *when*. They are the x and Y axis in the Cartesian coordinate system of setting design.

POSSIBILITIES AND LIMITATIONS

The place and time of the story will in many ways define what is and isn't possible. The types of lives the characters live will be affected by the sorts of work available to them, the food they eat, and the technology that exists. The types of goals they'll have will be affected by politics, travel opportunities, and cultural expectations. The types of obstacles they'll encounter will be defined by the hazards present and the means of interference available to antagonists.

HISTORY AS TEMPLATE

If you're creating a fictional setting, there's no reason to do it from whole cloth. You can create resonance by modelling it after an historical time and place. This allows you to take all of the benefits of research, as well as the advantages of not being beholden to historical fact.

FACT VS FICTION

Never forget that whether you're writing a novel, a screenplay, or a tabletop adventure, what's being created is fiction. You can nail down the facts to make the setting as realistic and accurate as possible, but you're still doing so through the lens of fictional characters and events. Don't get so tied up with research that you never get around to telling the story.

ARTISTIC LICENSE

You are allowed to make things up. If you don't know what a thing looks like and you can't find a reference, fake it. You ca be vague, or you can create a description out of thin air, based on your imagination. Most of the time, no one will notice. If you're getting the details right most of the time, those who do catch the inaccuracy will forgive you.

COMMON PLACES AND TIMES

There are a few broad categories of place-and-time style settings. You can use these as templates for your own setting design, and mine them for ideas.

HISTORY

Your story happens in an actual place and time, somewhere in the past or present. It may attempt to recreate actual events, or tell a new story that occurs in between real history with actual events serving as a backdrop. You need to stick to the facts as much as possible, filling in knowledge gaps with reasonable choices that fit in reasonably seamlessly. Even though the story is fictional, it's clear that it could have actually happened.

ALTERNATE HISTORY

The story happens in a real place and time somewhere in the past, but with a twist. Some new element is added, or some even happened differently. The heart of the story is discovering what happens as a result of this variation from actual history. In an alternate history, it's clear that the story did not and could not actually happen.

FUTURE HISTORY

A future history story takes events from the present and speculates what the future will look like as a result. A different person may win an election, a country decides to go to war over some incident, a failed terrorist attack actually occurred. The object of the story is to discover what life might be like is things happened another way.

PARALLEL WORLD

Similar to alternate history, except the time is the present. At some point in the past some element that doesn't exist in our world was introduced, or something happened differently. Typically everything was exactly the same as our world until a single divergence point, after which one change causes a domino effect that alters many things. The changes can be large or small, but are usually significant.

FANTASY WORLD

A fantasy world is often patterned after an historical place and time, or several mashed together, but is not meant to represent any real location or time period. Most fantasy fiction and tabletop roleplaying games are set in fantasy worlds.

FICTIONAL CITY

The rest of the world is exactly the same, but rather than using a real city you make one up. This is often used with alternate histories or parallel worlds, and comic books are notorious for it. It saves you the effort of doing research to get the facts straight. Otherwise realistic dramas and comedies often use fictional cities and small towns so they can focus on the story and create locations as needed.

FICTIONAL COUNTRY

As with a fictional city, the rest of the world is the same as in reality, but a new nation has been added to the map. Sometimes it's an alternate history, where borders were drawn differently and regions gained independence. Sometimes it's made from whole cloth, to avoid research or to create something that fits the story without being beholden to facts.

FICTIONAL PLANET

Science fiction is filled with planets that don't exist, populated by human colonies, alien races, or both. It's just the science fiction equivalent of a fantasy world, sometimes patterned on and altering existing cultures, sometimes extrapolating societies and cultures based on current reality.

UTOPIA

A utopian setting can be in any place and time, but everything is perfect. People are happy. Hunger, disease, and poverty have been eliminated. There's no war and everyone gets along. Utopias come in two major flavors; either paradise was built on some dark secret, which if discovered will destroy everything, or things really are all good but some external force threatens to come in and ruin it.

DYSTOPIA

As with a utopia, dystopian settings can occur in any time or place. People are miserable, often by the design of some oppressive force that's keeping them down. Twisted logic tries to extol that the suffering has a purpose and hardship is serving some greater cause. Stories are often about just trying to survive and function somewhat normally under these conditions, or about overthrowing the oppressor and setting people free.

A SENSE OF PLACE

If a location is where things happen in your story, then the details of the location with dictate the types of things that can happen. In addition to geography and architecture, you have various types of cultures and economics. Different locations will have different sorts of people, engaged in tasks very specific to that locations. A lumberjack will be out of place in a desert, as will a stockbroker in a fetid swamp or an astronaut in a coal mine. There will be specific types of obstacles available for use in your story. It's unlikely anyone will die of heat stroke on an arctic plain, drown on a rocky mountain top, be shot at by street gangs on a starship, or have to fight a forest fire in lower Manhattan.

The great thing about location is that it really does a lot of the work for you. All of the details are already there. If I say the location is a city, you immediately think of a lot of buildings, crowded streets, businesses, markets, and all sorts of people, activities, and cultural elements. If I say the location is a forest, you think of trees, birds, animals, maybe streams or rivers. There's a lot there to work with, there's a lot that's already implied, and you don't need to explicitly describe it or add much detail to it.

CLIMATE

What is the average weather like? Is it cold and snowy? Are things sunny and hot? Is the place overcast and rainy? Climate will be covered in more detail in the *Location* section.

TERRAIN

Terrain is the general geography of the place. Is it along the shore of an ocean, or high in the mountains? Is it a jungle or a desert? Terrain will be covered in more detail in the *Location* section.

DEVELOPMENT

In broad strokes, consider the technology and economy of the place. Is it a poor, agrarian community with crude resources, or an industrial center with a thriving economy? These topics will be covered in more depth in the *Technology* and *Location* sections.

PLACE AS CHARACTER

Something to strive for is to create a sense that the place is another character in the story. The events couldn't have taken place anywhere else. The sorts of characters, goals, and obstacles won't be found another place, or at least wouldn't take the same form.

A SENSE OF TIME

Each time period, when coupled with location, provides you with more elements to play around with. There are historical events that might have influence on your story, or at least shape the values and motivations of the characters. In addition to fashion, cuisine, and other trappings, you have levels of technology to offer story hooks and creative limitations.

As with location, time periods do a lot of work for you by creating a mental picture. If I say it's the 17th century, you know that no matter where you go in the world there will be certain recurring social attitudes, a limitation on firearms and a greater reliance on swordplay, and not electronic. If I say "caveman times", you might think of something realistic or cartoonish, but you're thinking caves, skins for clothing, fire, and clubs.

ERA OR PERIOD

If you're dealing with an historical time and place, directly naming an era or period will do a lot of the setting design work for you. If you state that it's the Early Middle Ages, it conjures up certain imagery, events, and culture. If you invoke the Victorian Era or the Cold War, you call up completely different associations. Readers and players will know what you're referring to, or at least be able to look it up.

DECADE

When dealing with time periods closer to the present, sometimes stating the decade is enough. The 1940s offers a set of opportunities and limitation, as well as political and cultural markers, that won't be found in the 1960s. A decade works best when you're trying to suggest certain background elements, but your story isn't following a specific timeline and actual historical events aren't being referenced.

YEAR

When you set a story in a specific year, you gain the advantage of narrowing the scope of your research. You also gain an increased duty to get the facts right because you're being specific. A year works best when your story deal with a specific historical event, or takes place before, after, or parallel to such an event.

TIME OF YEAR

Stating the season will tell the reader or player a lot. You can skip naming the time of year explicitly by describing things that only occur at specific point in time. If people are skiing, it's probably winter; if they're having a cookout, it's likely summer.

TIME OF DAY

If your story takes place within a limited time frame, or the timeline of events matters, you can evoke a sense of morning, afternoon, evening, and night. If it's dark, you know

it's night. If the sun is overhead, it's around noon. The types of activities going on in the setting will change depending on the time as well.

A SENSE OF THE PAST

Another way to establish the time of the setting is to reference things that have happened previously. Noting an event, a person, or a landmark will indicate that the story takes place at a time after those things occurred or came to prominence.

A SENSE OF THE FUTURE

A story set in the past can clarify its time period by making reference to things that haven't happened yet, but the audience knows are coming. People are still alive, landmarks are still standing, and changes haven't occurred. This works best if you're using those events in your story somehow.

ATMOSPHERE

Let's be honest: when we're talking about atmosphere, alternately called mood or tone, what we're really talking about is emotion. What does the character feel? More importantly, what does the reader, or the player, or however you label the consumer of your story, feel? Atmosphere is all about arousing an emotional response. This is done by creating resonance with the place and time.

Adding atmosphere is setting things up so people know what to feel. People read things labeled romance novels because they want to feel a certain set of emotions. They read horror stories because they want to experience another set of emotions. They watch comedies because they want a completely different set of emotions.

The reason atmosphere is important is because it refines and clarifies the sense of when and where, and helps to reinforce genre. The mood created for a romance story set in 1970s London will contrast sharply with a horror story set in the same time and place. A drama set in East Anglia during the English Civil War will have different elements, to establish a different tone, than a comedy in the same location and same era.

Atmosphere isn't just about the descriptions that you use. It's about the sorts of elements that are appropriate, and the types of actions and decisions the characters are able to make. A story with a lighthearted tone isn't going to feature people being gunned down in cold blood; that's way too serious. There will always be elements of drama in a comedy, and bits of comedy with a drama, but the overall tone will be clearly identifiable as one or the other. An emotional breather or some shock value is good for the story, when used sparingly, but if you don't deliver the type of emotional payoff that was promised, you'll lose your audience.

A final point to make is that atmosphere is about what the characters in the story are experiencing. The audience is living vicariously through the character. The reader isn't defeating the supervillain, the character is; the reader just gets to experience the thrill. The player isn't slaying the dragon, the character is. Light or dark, serious or humorous, the reader should be having a good time. Happy or sad, peaceful or grim, the player should be getting a satisfying emotional payoff. The atmosphere you establish is a promise of kinds of feels the audience will be made to feel, and all of the other story elements will need to follow suit.

SENSES

Rather than going into a lot of detail describing the elements of your setting, try focusing on what your viewpoint character experiences. You don't even have to describe every sense, just the one that makes the largest impression. The description can be rounded out with one or two other sense impressions, but stick to the ones that are the most noteworthy or important.

For example, when a character walks into a room are they immediately struck by the sight of something unusual? Do they notice how cold it is? Does the smell overwhelm them? Pick one sensation, and build on it.

SIGHT

What does the character see? Emphasize color, shape, size, materials, textures, and unusual features. Lighting, shadow, and darkness can be notable. Remember that what the character can't see can be as important as what they can.

SOUND

What does the character hear? In a city, there will be vehicles, conversations, and the sounds of work being done. In a rural setting, there will be nature sounds, or even silence. Remember that weather makes noise.

SMELL

What does the character smell? Is it something pleasant, or something awful? Is it clear what it is, or hard to identify? Can the character see where it's coming from, or is the source of the smell a mystery?

TOUCH

What does the character feel with their skin? This isn't limited to what they touch with their fingers. Skin also sense temperature and pressure. Are they cold or hot? Is it dry or humid? Are the textures soft or scratchy?

TASTE

Food and drink are the obvious reasons to use taste as a descriptor. It's possible to taste things without putting anything in your mouth. The sense of taste is closely tied to smell, and illness can result in a strange taste.

INTUITION

Humans unconsciously process sensory input and relate situations to past experiences. This results in feelings that can't be explained. Someone gives you the creeps, or you instinctively trust them. You get a bad feeling about a situation.

REVIEW YOUR PLACE AND TIME

Consider where and when your story takes place. How can atmosphere, mood, and tone be used to describe various setting elements? Which senses can be used to best create a sense of this time and place?

Place, Time and Premise

Does the time and place reinforce your premise statement? Are the protagonist and antagonist appropriate for when and where the story takes place? Do the goals and obstacles have components to them that suggest time and place? Are there other historical elements implied by the premise statement that you can begin to flesh out?

Place, Time and Genre

Take a look at the genre you've selected. What elements will you be able to utilize for resonance within the place and time? What genre elements work best with the when and where of this story? How can you insert a sense of genre into this specific time and place?

Place, Time and Theme

Look at the theme you've chosen for your story. What thematic conflicts are present here and now? What symbols and motifs can be inserted into the elements of this time and place to reinforce the theme?

Place, Time and Stakes

What types of rewards are common in this place and time? Do characters here and now face unique internal and external consequences? What stakes are specific to this particular place and time, as opposed to any other?

Place, Time and Locations

Identify the sorts of locations associated with this place and time. Consider the climate, terrain, plants and animals, and population centers here and now. What conflict, sanctuary locations, and scenery locations resonate with this place and time?

Place, Time and People

Who are the people within this time and place? What sorts of cultures exist here and now? Which organizations and communities reinforce a sense of time and place? What does civilization look like?

Place, Time and Technology

What are the technologies inherent to this place and time? How do people here and now get around, manage basic necessities, and entertain themselves? Which things are considered cutting edge in this time and place?

Place, Time and Events

Which past events set up elements of the current place and time? What recurring and upcoming events define the here and now? How will unexpected events reinforce the sense of this time and place?

Place, Time and Vocabulary

What terms and phrases can be used to make the time and place more evident? What sorts of names and naming conventions are common here and now? Are there historical terms that could be peppered in to create a feel of the time and place?

THEME

Theme is what your story is really about. It is often independent of the premise. All of the elements, especially the obstacles and subplots featured in the story, will align with the theme.

The premise of a fantasy story might be that a band of adventurers seeks to slay a genocidal dragon, but the theme might be the power of sacrifice; the only way for the characters to succeed is by being willing to lay down their lives for one another. The premise of a love story might be that two people are willing to do anything to be together, but the theme might be that the universe seeks balance; every time they lose something, they gain something, and vice-versa. The premise of a science fiction story might be federal agents facing a conspiracy to cover up the existence of aliens, but the theme might be that family is the most important thing; the obstacles will come from protecting loved ones and maintaining relationships.

Most themes can be used with any premise, in any genre, time, or place. The shape the theme takes will change based on the influence of the other elements, just as theme will dictate the form those other elements take.

THEME AND CONFLICT

Conflict is present in the theme, and helps to define it. If the theme is that human experience is universal, the nature of the conflicts within the story will be things that everyone can relate to. If the theme is that love conquers all, the obstacles will be things that can be overcome by the power of love.

Theme is often an argument for one side of the conflict. It may not be the side the characters are on. The theme of man versus nature may be slanted toward the idea that nature inevitably wins, but the characters will continue to battle against that conclusion.

Theme can be bold, but don't use it as a blunt instrument. It's okay to let the characters win even if the theme stacks the deck against them. It's often more satisfying, emotionally, when the central thesis of the theme is proven to be wrong.

SYMBOLISM AND MOTIF

Symbolism is when an image representing an idea, in this case the theme, recurs throughout the story. A dove is often used as a symbol of peace, for example; seeing a dove flying away from a location might indicate that danger lurks in that direction. Using symbolism is another way to add layers of meaning to a story.

Motif is similar to symbolism, but it uses elements other than visual images. These can be words, phrases, or sounds. A motif might be concept that comes up again and again, or a certain set of personality traits shared by key supporting characters. As with symbolism, the repetition of these elements helps to reinforce the theme of the story, and imbue it with additional meaning.

COMMON THEMES

Below are some of the more common themes found in fiction. You can use any of these in your setting design, or leverage them as templates to create your own.

CIRCLE OF LIFE

All things end, but new things begin. People die, literally or metaphorically, but new people are born. Similar to *The Universe Seeks Balance*, below, but with the idea that all lives have meaning and life will go on no matter what.

The conflicts and obstacles with this theme will literally center on life and death situations. There will be images of renewal and continuation. Something or someone will come to an end, with a replacement appearing by the conclusion.

CRIME DOES NOT PAY

Honesty is the best policy. Good and honorable people will always succeed and thrive in the end. Criminals will inevitably be caught and punished. The crimes don't have to be major, and may only be metaphorical. Moral and ethical lapses will have consequences, and selfish choices with come back around to bite characters in the behind.

The conflicts and obstacles in this theme will be around what many people call karma. Justice will be served, either through the actions of the character or through acts of fate. There is often as element of irony involved.

FAMILY IS THE MOST IMPORTANT THING

No matter what happens, family will always be there. They might be crazy, they might create problems, but whether things are going well or have taken a turn for the worst, you can count on them. Taking care of family is more important than personal goals and dreams.

Conflicts and obstacles will always involve family members and relationships. It's a loved one that's placed in peril, rather than the main character. Choices have to be made between relationship and other goals. The cavalry that comes to the rescue or discovers what the main character is look for will be a family member trying to help.

FRIENDSHIP REQUIRES SACRIFICE

The way to gain and keep friends is to be a true friend. If you don't treat your friends well, they won't be there for you when you need them. If you make personal sacrifices, people will rally to help you in your time of greatest need.

The conflicts and obstacles with this theme will require characters to give things up in order to gain something. A main character will have to choose between helping a friend or attaining a personal goal, but won't be able to do both.

HUMAN EXPERIENCE IS UNIVERSAL

Rich or poor, powerful or humble, educated or simple, all people have the same hopes, dreams, desires, and needs. Dissimilar people are thrown together, and have to cooperate, learn about each other, and discover that they're not so different after all.

The obstacles and conflicts here will be things that everyone can relate to. Growing up, falling in love, finding a job, making money, and facing death are common. It's entirely about finding resonance between the lives of the readers and the lives of the characters.

HUMANITY VERSUS NATURE

Nature is a huge topic, so this them could pit humans against the wilderness in a tale of survival, humans versus extreme weather, humans versus the inevitability of aging, and any number of other iterations.

The conflicts and obstacles in this sort of story care all things outside of the main characters' ability to control. They can survive if they're clever, resourceful, and tough, but they're not going to be able to stop what's happening. The goal may not be to win, but to hold out as long as possible, or until some other story event can take place.

HUMANITY VERSUS SOCIETY

Societal pressure always tries to drive the way we behave, and often limits what we are able to do. The struggle against this might make one a pariah, a revolutionary, a criminal, or a hero. There are a million causes to rebel against, or to champion.

In this theme the conflict is between what the individual character wants, or knows is right, and what society demands. The obstacles will be people, laws, and institutions that are invested in tradition, even when those traditions are irrational, outdated, or harmful to others.

HUMANITY VERSUS THE UNIVERSE

Throughout the ages humans have tried to determine their place in the universe. This theme is a struggle to comprehend. It is the process finding meaning, of developing religion and philosophy, and understanding science.

The obstacles within this theme are anything that stands between the main characters and the truth. This obstacle is often a lack of information, and requires the discovery and testing of ways to gain knowledge. Conflict comes from the dangers of gaining the truth including physical hazards and people invested in existing belief systems and ideologies.

LOVE CONQUERS ALL

Working together, believing in each other, and providing each other with support are essential to happiness. Romantic partners can overcome adversity, survive hard times, and even achieve greatness. Unconditional love is the most powerful force of all.

Obstacles will be anything that works to keep the characters apart. This might be other romantic entanglements, rivals for the main characters' affections, distance, or conflicting personal goals.

OVERCOMING ADVERSITY

Everyone loves characters that are able to rise above a tough situation to find success. It may be the standard "rags to riches" tale, or the story of someone who starts out high, falls low, and finds their way back by learning what matters most in life.

The conflicts and obstacles here can be anything, but the common factor is that they're somehow holding the main character back. They will be centered on whatever that character's personal goal is, and what is necessary to achieve it. They should relate to the nature of the goal itself, literally or symbolically.

SACRIFICES BRING REWARD

Anything worthwhile requires hard work. No matter how many obstacles appear, or how insurmountable problems may seem, in the end the dedicated and diligent people willing to make sacrifices will be able to persevere and succeed.

In order to get something, the characters will have to give something up, and the conflict will be that these are not easy choices. Sacrifice means losing something of value. The reward cannot be significantly greater than the sacrifice, in order to make the decisions harder.

THE UNIVERSE SEEKS BALANCE

When things are going too well to be true, something bad will happen. Just when things seem to have reached their darkest point, something good will happen. Extremes seem to have a way of balancing out. Or, possibly, fate just likes screwing with people.

The obstacles here have to be related somehow to the rewards. It should always be a like-kind exchange; what's gained should never be more important or more valuable that what's lost, or vice-versa. The conflict often comes in recognizing that the character isn't getting ahead or falling behind, and accepting that life has both ups and downs.

COMPARISON AND CONTRAST

Those aren't the only themes available, of course. You'll find many others, and can make up your own based on the story you want to tell. Many common themes show forces in conflict. Highlight the differences between two things. This might take a neutral stance, not judging one thing to be better than another, only different. It might promote one idea over another, by demonstrating the relative virtue of one against the relative failings of the other.

Examples: darkness versus light, faith versus doubt, good versus evil , individual versus society, life versus death, man versus nature, pain versus pleasure.
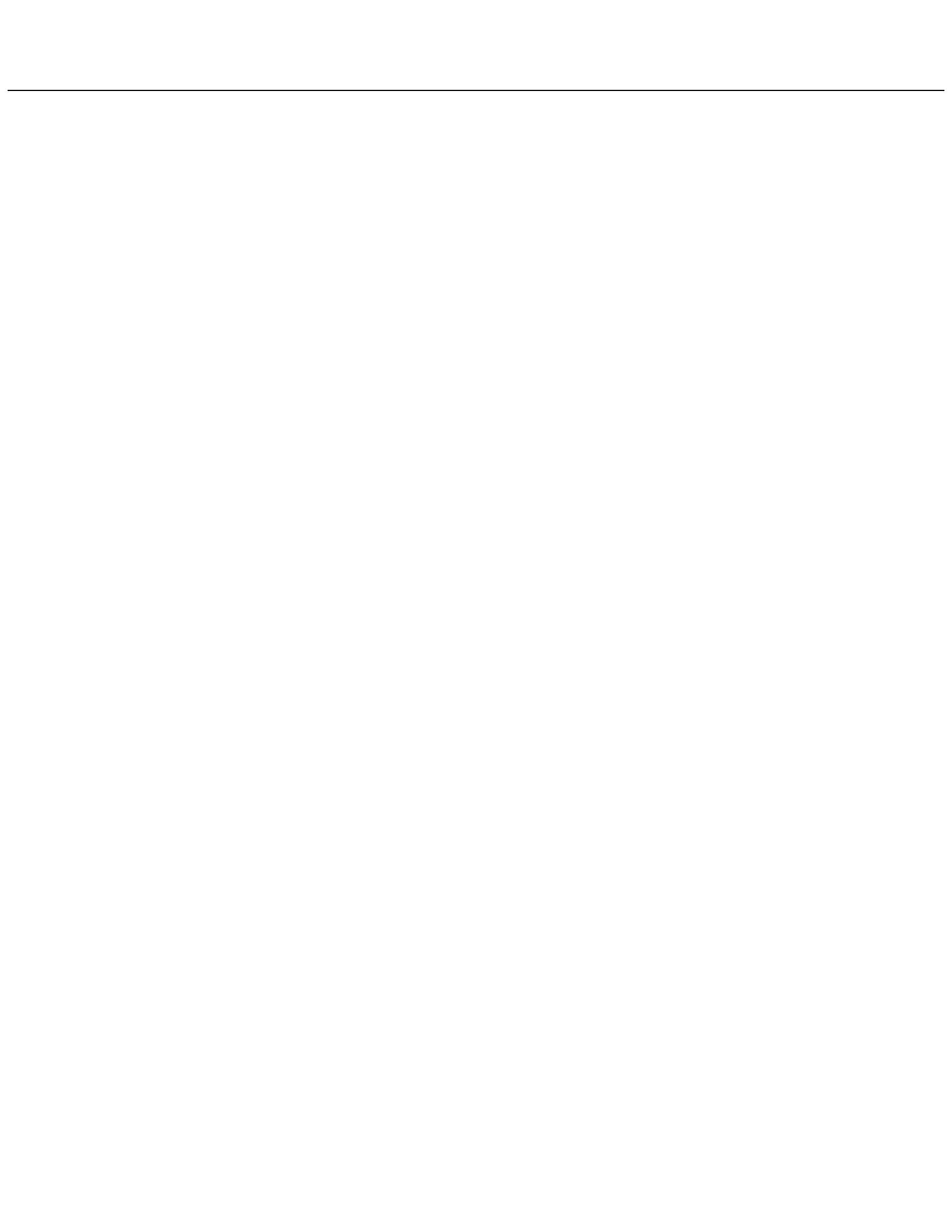
REVIEW YOUR THEME

Look at the theme you've chosen for your story. What conflicts are inherent in that theme? What symbols and motifs have you chosen to represent the theme, which can be inserted into other setting elements?

Theme and Premise

Does the theme reinforce your premise statement? Are the protagonist and antagonist appropriate for the theme? Do the goals and obstacles have components that can be leveraged to drive home the theme? Are there other thematic elements implied by the premise statement that you can begin to flesh out?

Theme and Genre

Take a look at the genre you've selected. What elements will you be able to utilize for resonance within the theme? What genre elements work best with this theme? How can you insert a sense of genre into the theme?

Theme, Place and Time

Consider where and when your story occurs. How can atmosphere, mood, and tone be used to connect the audience to the theme? Which senses can be leveraged to connect this time and place to the genre?

Theme and Stakes

How do the conflicts presented in the theme affect internal and external stakes? What types of rewards best reflect the nature of the theme? Do the consequences fit with the stance taken by the theme?

Theme and Locations

Identify locations that reflect your story's theme. How do climate, terrain, plants and animals, and population centers reflect theme? Where does the theme resonate within conflict, sanctuary, and scenery locations?

Theme and People

How do individuals experience the theme's conflicts? What sorts of cultures are implied in the theme? Which organizations and communities are needed to create symbolism and motif? How does nature of the setting's civilization help to express theme?

Theme and Technology

What technologies reinforce the theme? How could theme be connected to the way people get around, manage basic necessities, and entertain themselves? How can the theme help define the technology present in the story?

Theme and Events

Which past events establish the theme of the story? What recurring and upcoming events will reinforce the theme? How will unexpected events present the stance inherent in the theme?

Theme and Vocabulary

What terms and phrases can be used to reinforce the theme? What names have meanings they reflect the ideas in the theme? How can word choices establish symbolism and motif?

STAKES

The stakes are what could be gained or lost, depending on the outcome of the story. From a setting perspective, the elements need to be present to make both the positive rewards and negative consequences not only possible, but probable. The seeds of the most likely endings to your story need to be sewn throughout all of your setting elements. Good and bad outcomes are not mutually exclusive, necessarily, and while there may be both, things will generally skew toward one side or the other.

STAKES AND GENRE

The setting's genre will drive the sorts of rewards and consequences present in the story. The stakes in a Western might be a bag of gold, but there probably won't be a magic sword to go along with it. Failure to negotiate a trade agreement with the alien ambassador likely won't result in a zombie apocalypse. Sure, those things could happen, but either your setting has establish those things as possible outcomes, or your story is very, very silly.

STAKES AND ATMOSPHERE

If you want people to be happy, give them something they care about. If you want them to be scared, threaten to take away something they care about. If you want them to be sad, follow through on taking away something they care about. If you want them to be shocked, take away something they care about unexpectedly. If you want them to feel suspense, create uncertainty about the fate of something they care about. The bottom line is, first you need to make them care about something.

Conflict comes in the ways the things they care about are being messed with. The resolution of the conflict has to be emotionally satisfying. All of the groundwork for that lies in establishing the stakes of the story.

REWARDS

The rewards of a story, as stated above, are the positive things that happen as a result of meeting the story goals. The lovers finally get together, and live happily ever after. The dragon is slain, and the adventurers get to divvy up its treasure horde. The supervillain's master plan is foiled, and the Earth is not destroyed.

The payoff always has to be equal to the amount of effort the characters had to go through to get it. If you make them work incredibly hard for nothing, it's not going to be an emotionally satisfying story. If they get things to easily, that will feel like cheating. Balance comes in matching the risks to the rewards.

Note that the reward isn't always something that's gained, but may come with preventing something from being lost. Getting to keep your job is huge, as is healing a misunderstanding so a friendship isn't lost, and keeping the planet from being annihilated.

INTERNAL REWARDS

An internal reward is something that gives the character satisfaction or a sense of self-worth. They didn't gain a fortune, a love interest, or a magic ring, but they proved to themselves or someone else that they're capable. They overcame a fear or some personal limitation and were able to accomplish something.

EXTERNAL REWARDS

An external reward is stuff. Not always material stuff, but things bestowed upon the character. A promotion at work, positive media attention, and the adoration of fans is as much an external reward as a suitcase full of cash, a new car, and an all-expenses-paid vacation.

CONSEQUENCES

The bad things that might result based in the events and outcomes of a story are its consequences. Someone the character, or the reader, cares about dies. A valuable thing is lost or destroyed. The house burns down, the villain succeeds, and the Earth blows up.

Negative payoffs, like rewards, have to be scaled to the effort of the characters. It's not fair to drag the characters through all sorts of hell if the worst thing that will happen if they fail is that the antagonist successfully steals a lawn chair off the protagonist's porch. It's also a massive cheat to have everybody die because a character botched one simple task. It might be ironic or even funny, but unless that's what you've set your audience up to expect, it's bad storytelling and terrible setting design.

INTERNAL CONSEQUENCES

An internal consequence is that the character will feel bad. Guilt, shame, a sense of loss, and depression are common. They didn't win, the day was lost, people got hurt, and it's all on them. Internal consequences make for a bigger down ending than the mere loss of, or failure to gain, stuff.

EXTERNAL CONSEQUENCES

An external consequence is something bad that happens to other people. Someone's heart is broken. The child doesn't get the Christmas present they wanted. A friend doesn't get into the college of their choice. The whole village burns down.

REVIEW YOUR STAKES

What are the positive things that will happen if the story goal is achieved? Are there personal rewards for the characters if they succeed? What negative things will happen to the characters and the world if the story goal isn't met?

Stakes and Premise

Does the stakes reinforce your premise statement? Are their compelling rewards and consequences to motivate the protagonist and antagonist? Do the goals and obstacles align with the stakes? Are there other potential gains and losses implied by the premise statement that you can begin to flesh out?

Stakes and Genre

Take a look at the genre you've selected. What elements will you be able to utilize for resonance within the rewards and consequences? How can you insert a sense of genre into potential gains and losses posed by the story?

Stakes and Place and Time

Consider where and when your story occurs. How can atmosphere, mood, and tone be used to enhance the stakes? Which senses can be leveraged to connect this time and place to the rewards and consequences of the story?

Stakes and Theme

Look at the theme you've chosen for your story. What thematic conflicts are inherent in the potential wins and losses? What symbols and motifs can be inserted into the rewards and consequences of the story?

Stakes and Locations

Identify the locations necessary to deliver rewards and consequences. Think about how conflict locations resonate with bad things, and sanctuary locations with good things. How do locations facilitate internal and external stakes?

Stakes and People

Who are the stakes people in the setting face? What sorts of stakes are facing individuals, organizations and communities? How do cultures and civilization create both the potential rewards and consequences, both internal and external?

Stakes and Technology

What are the technologies inherent in the stakes? How can technology be used as, or used to attain, rewards? Which technologies are associated with the delivery of consequences?

Stakes and Events

Which past events set up the current stakes? What recurring and upcoming events will present opportunities for rewards and consequences? How will unexpected events increase the stakes for the characters?

Stakes and Vocabulary

What terms and phrases can be used to make the stakes stand out? What word choices can reinforce the appeal of the rewards? How can vocabulary be leveraged to increase the potential impact of the story's consequences?

LOCATIONS

To keep our terminology straight, when referencing a *place*, we're referring to the overall setting in the broadest sense. *Location* is the term we'll use for specific areas where scenes within your story occur. The *place* is Renaissance Italy; the *location* is the Sistine Chapel. New York City: *place*; the 86th floor of the Empire State Building: *location*. Your fantasy world: *place*; the tavern the adventurers are sitting in: *location*.

SPECIFIC LOCATIONS

The premise of your story will suggest the types of locations you'll need. The genre, time, and place of your story will shape the look and feel of those locations, creating both possibilities and limitations. There are three broad categories of locations that we'll focus on here: locations for conflict, locations for sanctuary, and locations for color. You'll want to create some of each, in order to have options to reach for while telling your story.

There are two types of locations within any story. The first is designed primarily, or even exclusively, for conflict and high emotional beats. The second is used for sanctuary, the quiet or down emotional beats. Dividing them up in this way heightens the impact of the scenes that take place within those locations, by creating strong associations with certain atmosphere.

LOCATIONS FOR CONFLICT

Design places for the type of conflict you have in mind. Different types of conflicts will have different needs. While the types of conflicts can and should be mixed, they will be primarily physiological, sociological, or psychological in nature.

PHYSIOLOGICAL CONFLICTS LOCATIONS

This is, very simply, a place where fight scenes will occur. It doesn't have to be a location specifically designed for combat, like a boxing ring or a battlefield, but it has to be able to facilitate a good brawl. There has to be room to move, but things to use as barriers and improvised weapons. A good physiological conflict location is the first steps toward good fight choreography.

SOCIOLOGICAL CONFLICT LOCATIONS

This type of location will be where the character will get into conflicts over their social status. It might be a place where they're subjected to racial, religious, or gender-based prejudice against them. It might be charity or government agency office where they're made to feel less than because they need help. It might be a protest rally where political rivals are mocking them for their views or status.

PSYCHOLOGICAL CONFLICT LOCATIONS

This location is where a character will wrestle with their personal demons. If they're an alcoholic, it could be a bar. If they have a bad relationship with their family, it could be a parent's house. It might be where they last saw a friend who died, or a location that evokes unpleasant memories. A psychological conflict location might serve other purposes for other characters, but for at least one character it will be a source of torment and distraction.

LOCATIONS FOR SANCTUARY

There needs to be someplace that's *base*, where characters can go to be safe. There must be a sanctuary where characters can make plans before a conflict, and regroup afterward. There has to be a location where they can heal, physically and emotionally, where there isn't going to be drama or conflict. The reader, or player, needs a place where they can breathe following one conflict, and prior to the next one.

PHYSIOLOGICAL SANCTUARY LOCATIONS

A physiological sanctuary is somewhere a character can go to be free from physical exertion. It might be a quiet apartment where they can rest, a spa where they can relax, or a hospital where they can get therapy and treatment. Fight scenes don't happen there. If they do, it will be late in the story and should be a huge deal.

SOCIOLOGICAL SANCTUARY LOCATIONS

A sociological sanctuary is a place where a character can go to avoid conflicts about their socioeconomic status. It might be where people of their own class gather, like a neighborhood bar or place of worship. I might be a place where status doesn't matter or is easily concealed, like a public park or entertainment venue. Class struggles don't come up here, and if they do, again, it will be especially awkward, out of place, and in violation of social norms.

PSYCHOLOGICAL SANCTUARY LOCATIONS

A psychological sanctuary is any location where the character feels safe. They can somehow escape their worries and emotional issues. This could be the character's home, a place in nature, a sacred space, or a hospital or mental health facility. The character's problems don't penetrate here, and if they do it will often be the moment the character faces and overcomes the problem.

LOCATIONS FOR SCENERY AND COLOR

Whether the location is being used for conflict or sanctuary, it will need additional description. Scenery and color are the perfect way to reinforce the genre, time and place, and theme of the story. It has to not only serve the scene, but remind the reader or player of when and where they are.

ARCHITECTURE

What types of materials are used for construction? Are the buildings plain, or ornate? Are they utilitarian, or meant to be cultural statements? Is the architecture of a uniform style, or eclectic? Are various periods represented?

LANDMARKS

What sorts of landmarks exist in this place and time? Are they natural wonders, architectural marvels, or heavily trafficked centers of activity? Did something famous happen there? Does something important happen there? Does someone powerful live there? Why does everyone know about this place?

LANDSCAPES

What does the world look like from this place and time? Skylines or tree lines? Rolling hills or open plains? Teeming with life or barren and deserted? Colorful or bleak? If it natural, man-made, or the result of some event?

REAL WORLD LOCATIONS

There are two major advantages to setting your story in the real world. First, research is easy. You can find surface details with a quick internet search, and deeper information by reading a few books, interviewing people who live there, and actually visiting the place.

The second advantage is resonance with your audience. If you're using a place that most people have heard of — New York City, the Great Wall of China, or Uluru (the Australian landmark formerly known as Ayers Rock) — you don't have to provide a lot of details. They already know what you're talking about, and have their own wealth of images and details to draw upon. If you're using a place that's less familiar, you can still skimp on some details, because the audience can go look things up on their own if they want additional information. You only need to provide the elements that are essential to telling the story.

IMAGINARY LOCATIONS

Using fictional locations that have been created by others can be trickier. The advantage is that your audience is familiar with them, so there's immediate resonance and understanding. If I'm writing a modern fantasy story and use the Riddle House in Little Hangleton from the *Harry Potter* novels, a lot of the heavy lifting in setting design is already complete. If I want to drop Moe's Tavern from *The Simpsons* universe into my story, I have nearly as much research material and audience familiarity as I'd have using a real world location.

DERIVATIVE WORKS

Pulling setting elements from a copyrighted work, and creating your own derivative work, is probably okay if you're writing fan fiction or running a game for a few friends. The emphasis in that sentence is on the word *probably*. Not using someone else's material for commercial gain is no guarantee that they won't come after you for violating their intellectual property rights.

PUBLIC DOMAIN

Even public domain works can be tricky. The original *Oz* novels by L. Frank Baum are in public domain in most parts of the world, so setting your story in that universe should be fair game. Unfortunately, Warner Brothers owns the rights to the classic 1939 movie, and has been known to get litigious when they think their legal claims are being threatened.

ROLEPLAYING GAME WORLDS

There are dozens, probably hundreds, of settings designed specifically for tabletop roleplaying games. There are two severe limitations with these. The first is that the audience has expectations. There is an established canon, and if you change things to suit the story you want to tell, people might get upset. This same issue happens with other derivative works, of course, but for some reason people sort of expect that things will be different in *your* version of the Marvel Universe or the Hundred Acre Wood. Yet when it comes to things like the Forgotten Realms or Shadowrun's Sprawl, people want things to conform to the sourcebooks.

The other issue is, again, that you're creating a derivative work. With few exceptions, you can't publish anything you create that's set in those worlds. You can run a game for your friends, or at a convention, because you have express permission to do that. You can write fan fiction. But you can't publish your own novel, write your own supplement, or create your own game for commercial purposes.

BE CREATIVE

The way to avoid all of the issues with using other peoples' imaginary locations is to

just not do it. If you're creative enough to lift elements for your story, why not go a step further and file the serial numbers off? Change things. Make them your own. Use other works are a template, or a source of inspiration, but put your own spin on them. Transcend from being derivative to being original.

CLIMATE

Climate is the average weather of a location, assessed over a period of time. It may be relatively stable, vary seasonally, or change slightly from year to year, but typically remains with a range. Because our focus is on story, we won't go into scientific classifications and causality. What you do need to do is consider the climate of your setting so that you can properly describe it, and take into account the various ways it can impact the events of your story.

TROPICAL

A tropical climate is wet at least part of the year. Temperatures remain fairly constant throughout the year, with seasonal changes marked mainly by changes in the amount of precipitation.

DRY

A dry climate might be classified as arid or semi-arid, depending on the portion of the year it goes without precipitation. There is little to no surface water, and as a result little plant and animal life.

MODERATE

A moderate climate is often coastal, with pleasant temperatures for a significant portion of the year. Precipitation rates vary seasonally. It may be humid, and classified as subtropical.

CONTINENTAL

Continental climates are warm during one part of the year, and cold during another part. There are distinct seasons marked by changes in temperature and precipitation rates.

POLAR

A polar climate is cold throughout the year. Seasonal changes are marked by changes in the degree of cold, and the amount of snowfall. There is little plant or animal life.

SEASONS

Seasons are divisions of the year defined by weather, ecology, and daylight. The lengths of seasons will vary depending upon the location. The seasons may be equally distributed, or one might last most of the years with others being so short they don't seem to exist. Our focus here, again, is on story, so we won't go into details of planetary rotation, axial tilt, and other scientific details.

SPRING

Spring is the temperate season, transitioning from the cold of winter to the warmth of summer. Days are getting longer, plants begin to bloom, and animals come out of hibernation and begin to mate. There are often cultural events signifying the arrival of spring, especially in locations with particularly harsh winters.

SUMMER

Summer is the warmest part of the year, with the longest days and the most sunlight. In many places it is downright hot, while in others it's simply not cold for a change. Summer is often associated with recreation, taking advantage of the nice weather or acknowledging that it's too hot to work.

AUTUMN

Autumn is a temperate season transitioning from the warmth of summer to the cold of winter. Days are getting shorter, plants are dying, and animals are going into hibernation. There are often events and celebrations around the harvest, and preparation for the coming winter.

WINTER

Winter is the coldest part of the year, with the shortest days and the least amount of sunlight. In many places it is dangerously cold, while in others it is simply less warm. There are often cultural events designed to help people get through the dark, barren times psychologically.

WET

Some locations will experience a wet season, or monsoon season, that fall over roughly the same weeks or months every year. These are marked by increased precipitation and storms. Wet seasons overlap with other seasons, and take their shape from those seasons; blizzards on the winter, hurricanes in the summer, thunderstorms in spring and fall, and so on.

DRY

A dry season is a reasonably predictable period of the year where there is little or no

precipitation. As with wet seasons, these overlap with other seasons. Dry winter seasons are periods with no snowfall, but dry summers can lead to droughts and forest fires.

WEATHER

Where climate is general, weather is specific. Climate is what things are like in the setting on average; weather is what's happening on a given day. The weather can be summed up by four descriptive factors: the temperature, the amount of wind, the type and volume of precipitation, and the visibility conditions.

TEMPERATURE

Is it hot or cold outside? This affects comfort and the ways characters should dress. Extremes of temperature on either end present a variety of hazards, from freezing and frostbite, to fire and sunburn.

WIND

Is it calm or stormy outside? Wind can affect the ability to move easily, and contributes to visibility conditions. High winds in conjunction with precipitation create storms.

PRECIPITATION

It is wet or dry outside? Is water, in some liquid or solid form, falling from the sky? Precipitation's real effects come when it accumulates on the ground, where it presents hazards from puddles to flooding, and icy walkways to deep snowfall.

VISIBILITY

Is it clear or cloudy outside? This is a side effect or wind and precipitation. Fog is just water vapor, and precipitation-adjacent. Wind can kick up clouds of dust. Even high temperatures can affect visibility, creating haze and mirages.

TERRAIN

Terrain is the general geography and environment of the location. Because our focus is on story, we won't go into the tactical advantages or disadvantages of actions scenes taking place across various terrains. What you need to focus on is how to describe your location, and take into account how each type of area can impact the events in your story.

Below are some of the more common types of terrain. Your setting might be focused on one or all of them. Note that any of these areas could be populated or unpopulated, left to the wild or developed with farms, fortresses, villages, or cities. What you put in the terrain depends entirely open the needs of your story.

COASTS

A coast is any location where land meets a substantial body of water. There are usually stone cliffs, a rocky or muddy band, or a sandy beach. The most common uses for beaches involve sailing, fishing, and recreations. The color and composition of the sand will vary. The types of flora and fauna will change with the climate, and sometimes with the season.

CAVERNS

A cavern is a naturally-created hollow space underground, large enough for people to get though. They are often the result of water carving out areas of soft rock. Caverns are common habitats for insects, spiders, and bats, and larger animals, including humans, sometimes use them for shelter.

DESERTS

A desert is a dry, mostly barren area hostile to both plant and animal life. The things that do live in a desert are specially adapted to deal with the lack of water and precipitation. Humans who live in the desert either use irrigation, or at skilled at located rare and isolated water sources.

FORESTS

A forest is a piece of land covered with trees and their vegetation. The types of trees and other life within a forest will vary with location and climate. Tropical forests, or jungles, have denser vegetation, higher humidity, and greater precipitation.

HILLS

A hill is an elevated terrain, often near bodies of water. They may also be part of plains or forest. The areas below hills are sometimes prone to flooding, making the hills ideal for settlements. The view they afford means they are also desirable locations for forts and military lookouts.

MOUNTAINS

Mountains are larger and steeper landforms than hills. They are usually formed by volcanic of tectonic activity. Mountaintops are often colder than the land below. While not good for agriculture, they are frequently climbed for recreation.

PLAINS

A plain is any flat area of land. They are sometimes located in valleys between mountain ranges. Plains are frequently used for agriculture because of their flatness. They may also be grasslands, providing grazing area for wild or domesticated animals.

SPACE

Space is the void between planets and other celestial bodies. It is a hard vacuum with no atmosphere, making it inhospitable for most life forms. For the most part, it's something that needs to be traveled through to get from one location to another in a science fiction story.

SWAMPS

A swamp is a forested wetland, where the ground is mostly shallow, slow-moving water with protrusions of dry land. They are usually located near rivers or lakes. A rich variety of plant and animal life can be found in swamps, and they are also prime areas for hunting and fishing.

WATER

Bodies of water aren't technically terrain, but exist within and alongside other types. This includes streams and rivers running through rivers and plains, and ponds, lakes, and oceans adjacent virtually any other terrain.

UNDERWATER

An underwater location exists below the surface of a lake or ocean. Life is either aquatic, or exists in an artificial habitat the mimics surface conditions. This creates the necessity for oxygen replenishment, and the ability to deal with increased atmospheric pressure.

FLORA AND FAUNA

What sorts of ordinary wildlife can be commonly found in this location? What sorts of livestock are raised as work animals or for food? What types of animals are taken as pets? Are there any dangerous or unusual creatures lurking about? What about mythical beasts or urban legends?

The types of plants and animals will vary based on climate and terrain. Most life forms are perfectly adapted for the location they're found in. When living things are introduced to a location they're not native to, the generally die, adapt, or create havoc in the local ecosystem by knocking things out of balance.

ANIMALS

What sorts of ordinary wildlife can be commonly found in this location? What sorts of livestock are raised as work animals or for food? What types of animals are taken as pets? Are there any dangerous or unusual creatures lurking about? What about mythical beasts or urban legends?

PLANTS

What sort of plant life exists? Is it lush and abundant, or sparse and tough? Do things grow wild, or are they carefully cultivated for food and beauty? What plants are found in cities and towns, versus what's in the wilderness? What do people plant around their homes? What types of houseplants do people have?

SUPERNATURAL CREATURES

What types of monsters or unnatural beasts care found in this location? How did they get there? How do they survive? What sorts of damage are they inflicting on the location, because they don't belong there?

POPULATION CENTERS

Where do the characters in your setting live? Type of population center in your story will impact other factors relating to people, including how culture has developed, the sorts of organizations that exist, and the purpose that communities serve.

RURAL AREAS

A rural area is marked by small settlements surrounded by wilderness. This includes villages, farms, and individual homes. Existence is tied to the land, either through agriculture, hunting, fishing, or other uses of the terrain's resources.

URBAN AREAS

An urban area is characterized by high population density and a heavily built-up environment. This includes towns and cities. Existence is tied to a manufacturing-based, service-based, or information-based economy. Suburbs are residential areas adjacent to the core urban area. A metropolis is a network interconnected urban and suburban areas.

REVIEW YOUR LOCATIONS

Identify the specific locations necessary to tell your story. Consider things like climate, terrain, plants and animals, and populations centers required. Think about conflict locations, sanctuary locations, and locations for scenery and climate.

Locations and Premise

Do the locations reinforce your premise statement? Are the protagonist and antagonist products of that location? Do the goals and obstacles tied to the location in some way? Are there other locations implied by the premise statement that you can begin to flesh out?

Locations and Genre

Take a look at the genre you've selected. What elements will you be able to utilize for resonance with locations? What locations are suggested by the genre? How can you insert a sense of genre into combat, sanctuary, and color locations?

Locations, Place and Time

Consider where and when your story occurs. How can atmosphere, mood, and tone be used to enhance specific locations? Which sorts of combat, sanctuary, and color locations are appropriate to this place and time?

Locations and Theme

Look at the theme you've chosen for your story. What thematic conflicts are inherent in these specific locations? What symbols and motifs can be inserted into combat, sanctuary, and color elements of the locations?

Locations and Stakes

What sorts of rewards can be gained at the location? What does the character stand to gain or lose on this spot? Are there specific risks and consequences as a result of weather, terrain, and population centers?

Locations and People

Who are the people at the location? What sorts of cultures are reflected here? Which organizations and communities are associated with the location? How does civilization make this location possible, and shape its description?

Locations and Technology

What are the technologies present in the location? How do people get around, manage basic necessities, and entertain themselves? Which things are considered cutting edge in this location? How can technology help define the location?

Locations and Events

Which past events happened in the current location? What recurring and upcoming events will impact the location? How will unexpected events affect the climate, terrain, plants, animals, and population centers?

Locations and Vocabulary

What terms and phrases can be used to make the location stand out? What naming conventions could be used to make location more distinctive? How can climate, terrain, and population centers be described to make the setting unique?

PEOPLE

Unless your characters are alone on a deserted island or an uncolonized planet, your setting will need people. There will be individuals, cultures, and organizations that both create and limit the possibilities that exist with your story. How you choose to populate your setting should support all of the previous factors, including genre, time and place, and theme.

INDIVIDUALS

An individual is a character, a single person within the story. You might encounter them directly, their name might be mentioned, or the influence of their actions might be felt.

Below are several common types of individuals found in most settings. These may be active supporting characters in your story, or historical figures mentioned in passing in the setting's back story.

COMMON PEOPLE

Who are the ordinary people in the setting? What are they like? How to they live? What do they do? When you think of the average person in the setting, what does she or he look like?

LEADERS

Who runs things? Who are the official leaders, the unofficial leaders, and the powers behind the throne? How did the come to be in charge of things? Were they born to it, elected by the people, or did they seize the reigns?

CELEBRITIES

What sorts of people achieve fame in this place and time? What does a person do to become famous? How are celebrities treated? What do people do when they meet a celebrity? Is it something to be aspired to, or avoided?

REAL PEOPLE

Are there real world people appearing as characters in your story? Are historical figures referenced? Are they major characters, minor characters, or there simply to add some context or verisimilitude to your story?

FICTIONAL CHARACTERS

Do characters from other works of fiction appear in your story? Are characters referenced to tie this setting to an existing one? Are they major characters, minor characters, or there simply to add some context or verisimilitude to your story?

CULTURES

A culture, for our purposes, is a group of people united by common history, values, and practices. Culture is important to a setting because it is often the source of drama in a story; there might be conflict within a culture, between cultures, or between an individual and a culture. Culture can make your setting more interesting and believable, and provide context for the decisions and action made by characters.

A culture is often defined by one or more of the following things. Some of these elements differ in comparison to other cultures, but there may be things on common with other cultures as well.

ARTS, CRAFTS, AND MUSIC

What forms of art do the people in this culture value? What other cultural artifacts do they deem to be worthy of preserving? What types of places house these collections? Are the open to everyone, or limited to a select group of cultural elites?

CELEBRATIONS

What do people in this culture celebrate? How do they mark these occasions? Are there special decorations, foods, songs, and events? How did these things originate? Is there any controversy around the celebration?

CUISINE

What sorts of foods do the people in this culture eat? Are these things that grow locally and are common, or special things that come from distant places? Is there any special religious or ceremonial significance to certain dishes or ingredients?

CUSTOMS AND BELIEFS

What sorts of things to people within this culture do as a matter of practice? Is there a religious significance, or an aspect of cultural identity, to the custom? How do the beliefs of this culture differ from those of similar cultures?

DRESS

What do the people in this culture wear? What materials are available in this location, and what is appropriate dress for the climate? Is there additional significance to the clothing, in terms of either practicality or belief?

EDUCATION

What is the average level of education in this culture? What is the highest form of education available? How is that education provided? What is the relationship between the educated and the average person? What types of things do people learn?

ENTERTAINMENT

How are people entertained? What do people watch, listen to, read, and play? How is the entertainment delivered? Is there a class strata to the types of entertainment, where the rich do some things, and the poor do other things?

HOBBIES

What do people do for recreation? What sports do people play? What games do they play? Where do they visit, and what do they see and do? What types of organizations and groups do people form to have fun? What types of activities do they engage in?

LANGUAGE

What is the common language in this culture? Has it always been the language, or was it brought in through trade or imposed by conquest? What are the other most common languages? How do people feel about those who don't speak it?

MANNERS

What is considered rude by this culture? What gestures or habits are expected, and which are thought to be highly offensive? How are people expected to behave? What personal and social rituals must be observed? What are the consequences of displaying poor manners?

ORGANIZATIONS

An organization is a group of people with a common goal. The people within the organization will change over time, and the means of attain the goal may adapt to changing circumstances and resources, but the purpose will remain essentially the same. Organizations can be formal or informal. They may be temporary, disbanding after their purpose has been fulfilled, or exist across generations to attain long-term goals or serve a particular ideal or cause.

Below are various types of organizations to consider including in your setting. Their existence, and the form they take, may greatly influence the direction your story takes. They may also affect the actions that your characters are able to take, and the resources that are available to them.

GOVERNMENTS

A government is an organization designed to control a political community. The size of the community can vary, from a village to an empire, and the type of government can take many forms. Government might be led by an ideal, or an individual.

RELIGIOUS BODIES

A religious organization can be as small as a few people to as large as an organized church. They are organized around a common belief, and work to either express their belief through works, convert others to their beliefs, or both.

BUSINESSES

A business is an organization that exchanges goods or services for money. It can as small as a family operation dedicated to one thing, or as large as a global corporation that does many things. The goal of a business is to make money.

CHARITIES

A charitable organization exists to serve the public interest in some way. They do not have a profit motive, but seek to fill some cultural or community need not being met through the activities of other organizations or individuals.

TRADE ASSOCIATIONS

A trade association is an organization that exists to promote and protect the needs of an industry or the people within it. This includes unions, guilds, and lobbying groups. They are often collaborations between other organizations.

FRATERNAL ORDERS

A fraternal order is a group that exists to promote some social or cultural purpose. All of the members have some defining trait in common. They can be organized around

anything not covered by other groups including race, ethnicity, and nationality.

HOBBY GROUPS

A hobby group is united by a leisure activity or other mutual interest. This includes amateur sports, collecting things, artistic pursuits, and other amusements. Hobby groups can be casual, providing members with basic fellowship, or more serious, existing to advocate for the hobby's interests.

SECRET SOCIETIES

A secret society is any organization that conceals its workings, and possibly its true purpose, from non-members. Their existence might be public, or their existence might be concealed. Their purpose can be those of any of other other types of groups.

COMMUNITIES

Communities are groups of people that are united by experiences, values, geography, or some combination of the three. Unlike an organization, membership isn't voluntary, but a matter of default; any person who resides within an area, or shares a common culture with the people around them, is considered a member of a community.

Unlike civilizations, communities are largely informal. They may organize cultural and leisure activities, share economic concerns, or speak out collectively on political issues, but they hold no direct political, financial, or military power.

Most communities have one or more of the following elements that makes them distinct. Members of the community will strongly identify with these elements, and use them to define what their community is a about.

CLIMATE AND TERRAIN

The nature of the community is closely tied to their location. This might be for survival, economic purposes, or both. Think of fishing communities, desert nomads, remote mountain villages, and similar peoples.

CULTURE

A community may exist because its members share a common culture. This often happens when the location or setting has a multicultural aspect, where there are many types of people living in the same area.

ECONOMY

The majority of a community may be employed in one dominant profession, in one industry, or even by one employer. They may be farmers, factory workers, or shipwrights. The unifying element is the shared experience of work.

HISTORY

A community may be united by some shared event that happened to their ancestors. They may be settlers, immigrants, survivors, or refugees. They have banded together based on common values and experiences.

LANGUAGE

A common language may be a defining element of a culture. As with culture, above, this element may exist because there are several communities with multiple mother tongues dwelling in the same area. Even if the members of the community have diverse background, they have language in common.

QUALITY OF LIFE

     Communities are often divided by class and socioeconomic status. The members are all part of the working class, or the poor, or the wealthy caste. These sorts of communities become about shared experiences, and often mutual protection.

CIVILIZATIONS

A civilization is a complex, large-scale society. It is marked by a centralization of political, economic, and cultural forces. A civilization might be a nation, a network of related nations, or an empire. There are formal elements to the structure of a civilization, unlike individual communities or organizations.

ARCHITECTURE

As a civilization creates urban population centers, it may develop a particular style of architecture that thematically unites its appearance. This is usually based on both the materials available in the location, and the level of technology used in construction.

CLIMATE AND TERRAIN

A civilization often rises out of a need for people to survive in a particular location. It is built on the challenges and opportunities that the weather and landscape provide.

DEMOGRAPHICS

How many people are here in this civilization? Are they all from this region, or do they come from many different places? Is it a younger population, or an aging population? Is there a mix of races, cultures, and political views?

ECONOMY

What are the major products and services that this civilization produces? What industry or business employs a significant number of people, that other business are dependent upon, and without which the people would fall into poverty?

HISTORY

Most histories have a complex history that begins with a founding moment. This is followed by the clarification of the political system, the establishment of an economic base, and the codification of cultural norms. In many ways, a civilization is defined by its history.

LANDMARKS

Locations within a civilization may be points of pride. These might be places of natural beauty, preserved as part of the common heritage. They might be buildings constructed for cultural purposes. They may be sites where significant events occurred.

CULTURES

Most civilizations will have one dominant culture. Other minority cultures will exists, either because of conquest, immigration, or trade. The interactions between these cultures and attitudes toward minorities can be a strength or weakness of the civilization.

GOVERNMENT

The shape the civilization takes is often predicated on the type of government it was founded on. The economic and diplomatic stability of a region is closely tied to the stability and continuity of the government and its leadership.

LANGUAGE

In most civilizations there is a dominant language, typically that of the prevailing culture. Other languages will be present, due to trade, immigration, and conquest.

ORGANIZATIONS

Within a civilization, organizations will arise to fill the needs of the people not fulfilled by the government. The types of groups that are necessary, as well as what are allowed and encouraged, will define the ethics of the civilization.

QUALITY OF LIFE

While there will be stratified classes and socioeconomic variation, a civilization is often characterized by the quality of life enjoyed by all of its citizens. Are people overall healthy, happy, and satisfied with the way things are, or is the opposite true?

REVIEW YOUR PEOPLE

What are the people within the setting like? What sorts of cultures have arisen? Which organizations and communities are needed to tell the story? How does civilization impact the other elements of the setting?

People and Premise

Do the people in your setting fit with your premise statement? Are the protagonist and antagonist appropriate for the cultures, communities, and civilizations you've created? Do the goals and obstacles reflect the types of people in the setting? Are there other characters implied by the premise statement that you can begin to flesh out?

People and Genre

Take a look at the genre you've selected. What elements will you be able to utilize for resonance within the characters, organizations, and civilizations? How can you insert a sense of genre into the characters?

People, Place and Time

Consider where and when your story occurs. How can atmosphere, mood, and tone be used to enhance the sense of how people live? Which senses can be leveraged to create a better feel for the organizations and civilizations in this place and time?

People and Theme

Look at the theme you've chosen for your story. What thematic conflicts are inherent in the individuals, organizations, and civilizations you've created? What symbols and motifs can be inserted into the lives of the setting's people?

People and Stakes

How do the people of the setting stand to gain is the story goal is fulfilled? What effect will negative consequences have on individuals, organizations, and civilizations? In what way does the impact on the setting's people affect the characters?

People and Locations

Identify the locations required for the individuals and organizations in the setting. Consider how climate, terrain, plants and animals, and populations centers impact people. Think about the ways locations drive the behavior of people in the story.

People and Technology

What are the technologies that people use daily? How do people get around, manage basic necessities, and entertain themselves? Which things are considered cutting edge for cultures and organizations? How does technology help define community and civilization?

People and Events

Which past events most affected the people in the setting? What recurring and upcoming events will impact cultures and organizations? How will unexpected events affect the communities and civilizations?

People and Vocabulary

What terms and phrases can be used to make the cultures and communities stand out? What naming conventions could be used to make the people more distinctive? What slang and colloquialisms do the people of the setting use frequently?

TECHNOLOGY

Technology is the knowledge that can be brought to bear to achieve results. It is the skills, processes, and techniques used to improve efficiency and productivity. It makes possible the goods, services, and quality of life that exist within the setting.

Within your setting, there will be certain types of technology that will come up often within a story. The genre, time and place, and even theme will help to define each of them. These technological elements are:

COMMUNICATIONS

How do people share ideas and information with one another? This includes verbal and written languages, and the way language travels. Communications technology is books, radio, television, phones, computers, and things not yet invented.

CURRENCY

What is the money called in this setting? What is it made of? What does it look like? What denominations is it issued in? Who issues the money? Are their banks, or other institutions to store, lend, and otherwise manage finance?

ENERGY SOURCE

The way energy is produced can limit technology, or open up possibilities. The horse pulling a plow is an energy source. Fossil fuels, windmills, and fusion reactors all provide electricity. The financial and environmental costs of energy are often major concerns.

FASHION

What sorts of clothes does the average person wear? What do the very rich wear? What clothes do the very poor wear? What sorts of color and fabrics are used? How do people wear their hair? Do thy color it, or put any sort of decorations in it? Do they wear makeup? Why do they wear it, and what it is made of?

FOODS

The types of food people eat, and the manner in which they prepare it, are functions of technology. This includes the ability to grow things not native to the area, the ability to import unusual ingredients, and the way food is cooked.

SANITATION

Human beings produce many types of waste. How those waste products are handled, where it goes, and what it might be used for, depend on the available technology. The impact on environment and quality of life is substantial.

TRANSPORTATION

How do people get from one place to another in the setting? How long does it take to travel? Is it a hardship, or something that can be done in comfort and style? Speed and cost of moving people and goods can affect many aspects of your setting.

WEAPONS

What do people use to threaten and harm one another? How do people defend themselves? What methods to nations use to make war against one another? What restrictions are there around who can own weapons, and what weapons they can use?

REVIEW YOUR TECHNOLOGY

What are the technologies of everyday life? How do people get around, manage basic necessities, and entertain themselves? Which things are advanced, and which seem to linger behind? Why are certain technologies the way they are?

Technology and Premise

Does the technology reinforce your premise statement? Are the protagonist and antagonist leveraging the available technology? Do the goals and obstacles have technological components or implications to them? Are there other technologies implied by the premise statement that you can begin to flesh out?

Technology and Genre

Take a look at the genre you've selected. What elements will you be able to utilize for resonance with the technology? How can you insert a sense of genre into the technology being used within the story?

Technology, Place and Time

Consider where and when your story occurs. How can atmosphere, mood, and tone be used to enhance the impact of technology? What technologies are appropriate in this place and time, and what's just around the corner?

Technology and Theme

Look at the theme you've chosen for your story. What thematic conflicts are inherent in the technology or the way it's used? What symbols and motifs can be inserted into the setting's technological elements?

Technology and Stakes

In what way can technology be used as rewards within the setting? Are there consequences made possible by technology? How does technology impact the internal and external stakes present in the story?

Technology and Locations

Identify the technologies present in specific locations. Consider how climate, terrain, plants and animals, and populations centers impact the development of communications, tools, and weapons. Think how technology supports conflict and sanctuary locations.

Technology and People

How do people use the available technology? What has been the impact of technology on culture? Which organizations and communities drive the development of technology? How has civilization shaped the way technology has developed?

Technology and Events

Which past events set up development of the current technology? What impact will recurring and upcoming events have on technology? How will unexpected events affect the way existing technology is utilized?

Technology and Vocabulary

What terms and phrases can be used to make the premise technology out? What naming conventions could be used to make the elements of technology more distinctive? What are the common terms for technology, as opposed to the formal names?

EVENTS

In a story, things happen. Those things were precipitated by other events that happened in the past, and will spark future events that, hopefully, but performed by the characters. To understand your story, you need to understand the events that take place in your setting.

There are four broad categories of events. Past events are things that occurred before your story takes place. Recurring events are predictable things that have happened and will happen again. Upcoming events are things that can be anticipated, and are often planned by characters in the setting. Unexpected events are things that the characters do not know are going to happen but you, the writer or gamemaster, are leading up to.

PAST EVENTS

Is there one thing in the past that people point to a pivotal to things being the way they are in this place and time? Is there a story about how it was discovered, or why it was founded? What did it start out to be, and how did it grow beyond that? What cause the boom or bust or status quo it's now experiencing?

There are distinct types of past events that may mark a turning point within the setting:

POLITICAL SHIFTS

At some point the leadership or even the system of government in the setting changed. It represents a departure from the previous status quo. This could be a good thing, or the beginning of a long, dark period in the settings history.

SOCIAL UPHEAVALS

The culture of the setting shifted at some point. This could be because of a change in the population's demographics, or an alteration of values and priorities for some reason. People no longer hold the same beliefs as before.

TECHNOLOGICAL SHIFTS

New ideas, processes, and devices come into being. With them comes a shift in efficiency and productivity. The economy and the quality of life will also change, which will be better for some people, possibly worse for others.

WARS

When nations go to war, things change in both overt and subtle ways. Whether a country wins or loses, its people are affected. Veterans have stories, landmarks are destroyed, new landmarks are created, and economies are altered to reflect the closing of old opportunities and the opening up of new ones.

RECURRING EVENTS

Recurring events are things that happen predictably. They might be weekly, monthly, or yearly occurrences. Past instances of a recurring event will influence the way the upcoming instance of the event is viewed, for good or ill.

CELEBRATIONS

What do people in this place and time celebrate? How do they mark these occasions? Are there special decorations, foods, songs, and events? How did these things originate? Is there any controversy around the celebration?

SEASONAL ACTIVITIES

Are there events that follow the seasons? Do people plant crops in the spring, and harvest them in the fall? What do people do in the summer, when the weather is nice? How do they prepare for winter?

UPCOMING EVENTS

There are things that everyone in the setting knows are going to happen. Seasons change, celebrations occur, elections are held. Children grow up, leading to weddings, births, and deaths. There are many types of predictable events that can be incorporated into your setting.

CHANGES

Change is inevitable, whether people like it or not. Old leaders are replaced with new leaders, who have new ideas and policies. Buildings crumble, and new ones are built. These changes are announced, and take time to implement, so everyone can see them coming if they're paying attention.

BEGINNINGS

New things happen all the time. A new business opens up. A family gets a new home. A new thing is invented. Beginnings are often seen as positive change, a fresh start, or a way forward. Most of these types of events are carefully planned.

ENDINGS

Entropy is the way of the universe. Things end. Finite resources are exhausted. Organizations fade and fold. Traditions no longer serve the purpose they once did. Relationships end. The writing is on the all, and the end is inevitable.

UNEXPECTED EVENTS

Surprises happen. Things that no one accounted for take place. In a story, these should be used sparingly. It's a cheat to spring things on your audience with no notice. If you've foreshadowed events and they didn't pick up on your clues, or the meaning of those elements didn't become clear until the event happened, that's different.

ACCIDENTS

Most accidents, while undesirable, are avoidable. There is always some clue, or something that could have been done differently. People make mistakes. Things wear out, but no one noticed it was happening until it was too late. The signs were there.

NATURAL DISASTERS

Nature tends to do what it wants. Rainstorms turn into floods. Volcanoes erupt. Tectonic plates shift and cause earthquakes. Natural disasters either have to fit thematically, or have to be foreshadowed, in order to be effective. Pure shock value rarely works.

ILLNESSES

No one plans on getting sick. When it becomes a pandemic, the ripples are felt throughout the setting. People aren't working, resources are stretched thin, and even if there's a cure there may be logistical issues in getting it to those who need it.

WAR

The signs are usually there that a neighboring country harbors hostile intent. Sometimes, a leader will play nice just to catch their enemy off guard. Ordinary people don't plan for war, though. They're just trying to live their ordinary lives.

REVIEW YOUR EVENTS

Which past events set up the current story? What recurring and upcoming events will impact the story? How will unexpected events affect the characters and their ability to overcome obstacles and fulfill their goals?

Events and Premise

Do the events in the setting reinforce your premise statement? Are the protagonist and antagonist affected or involved with the events? Do the goals and obstacles have connections to the events? Are there other events implied by the premise statement that you can begin to flesh out?

Events and Genre

Take a look at the genre you've selected. What elements will you be able to utilize for resonance with the events of the setting? What genre elements work best with past, future, and unexpected events? How can you insert a sense of genre into the events?

Events, Place and Time

Consider where and when your story occurs. How can atmosphere, mood, and tone be used to enhance the events? What sorts of events are commonplace in this place and time? What historical things are known to have happened?

Events and Theme

Look at the theme you've chosen for your story. What thematic conflicts are inherent in the settings big events? What symbols and motifs can be inserted into the elements of past, recurring, and unexpected events?

Events and Stakes

What is the connection between the events of the story and the potential rewards? How do past, recurring, and unexpected events set up the consequences? Can events in the setting serve as internal or external stakes?

Events and Locations

Identify the specific locations necessary for past, recurring, and unexpected events. Consider how climate, terrain, plants and animals, and population centers affect events. Think about what events can happen in conflict, sanctuary, and scenery locations.

Events and People

Who are the people behind the events? What sorts of cultural events are important to the story? Which organizations and communities are needed to manage the events? How does civilization factor into the existence and outcome of events?

Events and Technology

What are the technologies present at events? Are their causal connections between events and technological development? How can the technology be applied to past, recurring, and unexpected events?

Events and Vocabulary

What terms and phrases can be used to make events stand out? What naming conventions could be used to make the events more distinctive? How are past and recurring events described?

VOCABULARY

One way to make your setting stand out as unique is to carefully select words or phrases. Every genre has its own vocabulary, as do most times and places. Consider putting together a glossary with a few terms, not so many as to overwhelm your audience, but enough to reinforce the general feel of the setting.

ADJECTIVES AND ADVERBS

When in doubt, modify a noun. A common object like a clock can be a modern clock or an antique clock. A shiny plastic gun tells your audience something different about the setting then a weathered wooden-handled gun.

GENRE TERMS

Science fiction talks a lot about futuristic technology. Fantasy discusses magic and the elements that go into it. Romance fiction has a lot of euphemisms for sexual acts. These all qualify as genre terms. You know what type of story you're in by what things are called.

HISTORICAL LANGUAGE

In the past, people talked funny. They used words that are no longer fashionable, and they didn't use terms that hadn't been invented yet. Language evolves, and a good way to get a sense of when and where the setting exists is in picking a few historical terms and peppering them in.

SLANG AND COLLOQUIALISM

This is similar to historical language, but applicable to fictional settings of your own creation. Make up your own vocabulary for your science fiction universe or fantasy world. Create some colorful phrases that monster hunters use to refer to their prey. Let your characters be creative.

THEME REINFORCEMENT

Select terminology that reinforces your theme. If your theme is family, evoke connections, marriages, homes. If the theme is nature, describe things in terms of flora, fauna, and even weather. Make the theme resonate.

NAMES

There is a lot of power in names. Character names, place names, any names can help to reinforce the genre, time, and place of the setting. By choosing names that resonate with other works, or that means something, you can also help to promote the theme of the story as well.

REVIEW YOUR VOCABULARY

Look over the words used frequently in your setting elements. What adjectives and adverbs reinforce your sense of the setting? What terms and phrases can be used to make the setting stand out? What naming conventions could be used to make the setting distinctive?

Vocabulary and Premise

Does the vocabulary reinforce your premise statement? Are the protagonist and antagonist using unique words or terms? Do the goals and obstacles have imply any specialized? Is there other terminology implied by the premise statement that you can begin to flesh out?

Vocabulary and Genre

Take a look at the genre you've selected. What terms and phrases will you be able to utilize for resonance with the genre? How can you insert a sense of genre into the language uses in the story?

Vocabulary, Place and Time

Consider where and when your story occurs. What words are used here and to describe atmosphere, mood, and tone? What expressions are commonplace? What sorts of names are popular?

Vocabulary and Theme

Look at the theme you've chosen for your story. What thematic conflicts are inherent in terms and expressions used in the setting? What symbols and motifs can be inserted into the language and vocabulary of the story?

Vocabulary and Stakes

How can word choices make the potential rewards of the story more compelling? What terms and phrases make the consequences feel more dire? Can vocabulary highlight the differences between internal and external rewards?

Vocabulary and Locations

Identify the vocabulary required to describe your required locations. Consider terms used within the setting for climate, terrain, plants and animals, and population centers. Think about words used for conflict, sanctuary, and scenery locations.

Vocabulary and People

What slang terms and colloquialisms do people use? What sorts of cultural expressions and words are common? Which organizations and communities have their own jargon? How does civilization affect language use and naming conventions?

Vocabulary and Technology

What sorts of jargon surround the setting's technology? What are the terms for the means of getting around, managing necessities, and being entertained? How can the vocabulary help to define the technology?

Vocabulary and Events

Which past events put new words into the vocabulary? What recurring and upcoming events need specialized terminology? How will unexpected events affect the language and lead to new jargon, expressions, and names?

FINISHING DETAILS

After you've created all of the elements that you'd like to use in your setting, go back and review them. Make sure that they all support your story in some way. Check to see if they support and reinforce one another, and aren't just lists of random elements thrown together.

Review Your Premise

Go back over the original premise for your story. Do you have a strong premise statement? Are the protagonist and the villain clearly articulated? Have the goals and obstacles been spelled out? Have you leveraged the other setting elements implied by the thesis statement?

Review Your Genre

Take a look at the genre you've selected. What elements will you be able to utilize for resonance with your audience? What elements will you use, and which will you leave out? How can you insert a sense of genre into the other elements in the setting?

Review Your Place and Time

Consider where and when your story occurs. How can atmosphere, mood, and tone be used to describe various setting elements? Which senses can be used to best create a sense of this time and place?

Review Your Theme

Look at the theme you've chosen for your story. What conflicts are inherent in that theme? What symbols and motifs have you chosen to represent the theme, which can be inserted into other setting elements?

Review Your Stakes

What are the positive things that will happen if the story goal is achieved? Are there personal rewards for the characters if they succeed? What negative things will happen to the characters and the world if the story goal isn't met?

Review Your Locations

Identify the specific locations necessary to tell your story. Consider things like climate, terrain, plants and animals, and populations centers required. Think about conflict locations, sanctuary locations, and locations for scenery and climate.

Review Your People

What are the people within the setting like? What sorts of cultures have arisen? Which organizations and communities are needed to tell the story? How does civilization impact the other elements of the setting?

Review Your Technology

What are the technologies of everyday life? How do people get around, manage basic necessities, and entertain themselves? Which things are advanced, and which seem to linger behind? Why are certain technologies the way they are?

Review Your Events

Which past events set up the current story? What recurring and upcoming events will impact the story? How will unexpected events affect the characters and their ability to overcome obstacles and fulfill their goals?

Review Your Vocabulary

Look over the words used frequently in your setting elements. What adjectives and adverbs reinforce your sense of the setting? What terms and phrases can be used to make the setting stand out? What naming conventions could be used to make the setting distinctive?

ADAPTING ESTABLISHED SETTINGS

Instead of establishing your own story elements, you can use a setting already established by a novel, a movie, a comic book, a television series, or another game. Sometimes a popular setting will cross multiple media, giving you plenty of supporting characters, antagonists, locations, and situations to choose from.

One of the great things about using established settings is that you already have plenty of reference material. Do you want to be on a Starfleet starship in the 23rd century? You've got all of the episodes of all of the series from Star Trek to work from, plus movies, comics, hundreds of novels, and other games to draw on. Do you want your story to happen in the Shire following the War of the Ring? You have The Hobbit, the Lord of the Rings novels, Unfinished Tales, and several movies to mine for elements and ideas.

In your game, you get to decide what's canon. If there's something in the "official" version that you don't like, you can leave it out. If there's a discrepancy between a book and a movie, you get to decide which one is "real" in your story. You can ignore things, change them around, and make it into whatever you want it to be and no one can stop you.

HOMAGE

An homage pays tribute to someone else's work. It evokes the mood and feel of the original, without trying to copy it directly. A detective story set in Victorian London that tries to create resonance with the works of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, but never directly references Sherlock Holmes, is homage.

There are advantages to doing an homage. You get to leverage a degree of familiarity with the material that inspired it; presumably you and your audience both love the original work you're riffing on. The upside is that you get to add your own twists without violating any sort of canon. You won't get yelled at for getting details of the setting wrong, at least not as badly, because your defense is that this isn't the world of the original work.

MASHUP

It's sometimes fun to take two similar things and declare that they exist in the same universe. If you like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Supernatural*, for example, you can declare that slayers and hunters coexist. You can weave similar elements together, deciding they're the same thing, or different factions of the same organization. You can take contradictions and build a story around explaining the discrepancies. It's all in good fun, so exercise your creativity and enjoy yourself.

Such crossovers start to become their own setting if the mechanizations needed move the story further and further from the original works. It may be easier to do homage to multiple works within a time and place or genre, and leave the original works out of it. A lot of roleplaying game settings take this path, taking bits from various familiar works without every directly naming the sources of inspiration.

PASTICHE

A pastiche is a deliberate attempt to mimic someone else's style. It's meant to be respectful, demonstrating you admiration for the other work. If you're writing a Sherlock Holmes story and trying to emulate the style of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, you're creating a pastiche.

Doing pastiche can create immediate resonance with your audience. You've chosen the setting because you, and they, are familiar with it. The hardest part comes in authentically emulating the original author's voice. There's more to it than dropping names and getting the details right. It has to be the sort of story that the author could have told, but didn't.

If the work is in the public domain, it's absolutely fair game for you to exploit. More current works under copyright might be okay if you're writing fan fiction or running a campaign for friends. As stated back in the *Locations* section, the only way to avoid all of the issues that come with using other peoples' settings is to not do it at all. If you're creative enough to lift elements for your story, why not go a step further and file the serial numbers off? Change things. Make them your own. Use other works are a template, or a source of inspiration, but put your own spin on them. Transcend from being derivative to being original.

COLLABORATION

Setting design doesn't have to be a solitary activity. If you're putting together a roleplaying game campaign, other players can develop their own corners of the world, incorporating their own ideas and perspectives. As a writer, you might want to work with other writers to put together a shared world for your stories. It can be incredibly rewarding and a lot of fun, but this sort of collaboration requires some guidelines and discipline.

From the beginning of this book we've talked about setting-driven design. How does collaboration fit into that? Won't people start adding unnecessary details, leading to confusion and clutter? Not really. Collaborators should focus on the story they're telling. For players in a roleplaying game, the setting details they contribute should be the elements needed for their character's back story. For writers telling a story set in a shared world, they should concentrate on the elements required to tell that story, no more, no less.

AGREEMENT

The first step in collaboration is to make it clear that you are in fact collaborating. Make it known that other people are allowed to get into your toy box and play with your toys. Never leave it up to assumptions. Some people might think that since you're the gamemaster, editor, or lead designer, you're doing all the work and they should back off. Others will make the opposite assumption, and think that everything is a group project where all parties get to contribute creatively.

LEADERSHIP

There has to be a lead designer. People will come up with contradictory information, and that's great, actually. If the elves in your fantasy world think one thing is true, and the dwarves have a different story, there's a prime source of conflict and drama. Someone has to be there to declare what the ultimate truth is, though.

The leader will need to resolve all sorts of conflicts. Who gets to work on a particular element? Do the new elements fit with the genre, place and time, and theme already established? Does that detail belong with this topic, being developed by Player A, or with the topic Writer B is working on? Who gets what topics to flesh out in the first place? Does the work of your collaborators hang together with other elements that you've designed but possibly haven't shared yet?

DIVISION OF LABOR

The issue of who is doing what is generally easy to work out. If you're running a roleplaying game and only one player has an elf character, that player gets to flesh out the history and culture of the elves. If only one writer is interested in telling a story set in China, then they get to develop what China is like in your shared world.

Other people should be encouraged to contribute ideas, but it needs to be clear that the developer assigned to the topic will decide whether to incorporate or reject that idea, and the leader of the project should back the designer up. If everyone knows what they can be working on, and focuses on that, you can end up with an incredibly rich and detailed setting.

ACCOUNTABILITY

Can other people work on the setting design if they want, or are they required to do so. Expectations need to be clear. Are there deadlines? Is there a minimum or maximum on word count? Is there a format that needs to be followed?

If this is a project you're doing for fun, it can be hard to hold people accountable. It's different if this is a commercial project, and there's money on the line. All of this circles back to the beginning, with agreement among participants on what the design project is.

SETTING BIBLE

A setting bible is the master reference document for your setting. It is a way to organize your notes, establish your canon, and keep track of things that change as the stories within the setting contribute new elements. It is a living document.

What you're not building is a concise and detailed encyclopedia. You can do that if you want, of course, because it's your setting, but the point is to build a reference source that you can lean on as you need it. It doesn't have to be huge. It only needs to contain as much information as you find necessary.

There are broad categories of information that you'll want to organize for setting and story. There will be subcategories within these, but you'll need to sort things out at least four different ways: *background elements*, *character elements*, *story elements*, and *reference material*.

BACKGROUND ELEMENTS

Background elements are what you've worked out during the setting design process. Anything that serves as background or color for the setting, but doesn't directly impact the characters or the story, goes here. At a minimum, you should document the following:

Premise Statement, including the protagonist, antagonist, story goals, and primary obstacles;

Genre, and the specific genre elements you are intentionally using and excluding from the setting;

Place and Time, along with elements of atmosphere, tone, and mood, and descriptions for all of the senses;

Theme, with an understanding of the conflict inherent in the theme, and the symbolism and motifs that can be used;

Stakes, both internal to the character and external for the overall setting, including both rewards and consequences;

Locations, with an eye on how they can be used to facilitate conflict, serve as sanctuary from conflict, and add to the color of the setting;

People, including notable individuals, communities and organizations, cultures and civilizations;

Technology, especially communications, currency, energy sources, fashion, food, sanitation, transportation, and weapons;

Events, including things that happened in the past, anticipated events, recurring events, and the unexpected;

Vocabulary, with an emphasis on descriptive terms, specific terms and jargon, colorful phrases, and naming conventions.

CHARACTER ELEMENTS

You will need a list of all of the major and minor characters in your story, and notable details about them. The other information in this section are specific character creation possibilities and limitations you have defined on for this story, including what sorts of characters are appropriate, what sorts of statistics you're using, and abilities you may have added, deleted, or renamed.

At a minimum, you should document the following:

Protagonists, the leads or heroes who act as the viewpoint characters within the story;

Antagonists, the villains or rivals who exist to create obstacles and make the protagonist's lives difficult;

Supporting Characters, the secondary and tertiary people necessary to tell the story and populate locations;

Background Characters, the extras who make the world feel real and serve minor but necessary functions in the story;

Types and Roles, the kinds of characters necessary to the story and appropriate for the setting;

Aptitudes, the innate natural abilities available to the characters within this setting;

Experiences, the types of learned abilities, including occupations and hobbies, open to the characters in this setting;

Resources, the material possessions, equipment, personal and professional contacts, and wealth characters might have;

Wonders, the magic, superpowers, and other supernatural abilities available to characters;

Names, and possibly other descriptive details that you can reference when you need to create a new character quickly.

For more on character elements, check out the book *Building Characters* from Dancing Lights Press.

STORY ELEMENTS

This is where you'll keep information on individual stories, the arc of a series, or the master plan for a campaign. This will allow you to maintain continuity and keep track of both important and trivial details. You might also keep elements that you think of for use in future stories.

At a minimum, you should document the following:

Acts, the beginning, middle, and end of individual stories, as well as the act structure of a campaign or series of stories;

Plot, including the type of story being told, and the goals, obstacles, and rewards inherent to that type of story;

Subplots, the smaller stories interwoven with the larger plot, and those goals, obstacles, and rewards;

Scenes, both the necessary scenes required to move the plot forward, and those there for character development and color.

For more on story elements, check out the book *Story Structure* from Dancing Lights Press.

REFERENCE MATERIAL

The reference section is exactly that. It should contain anything else that you might need to help develop a story or play the game. You might have lists of names for characters and places, articles on genre, time, and place, and random notes or ideas that you haven't sorted out yet. You might have a bibliography, a morgue file, or a playlist, schedules for upcoming group meetings, or menus from places you can order take-out from on game night.

HOW TO ORGANIZE IT

There are a number of ways you can organize your setting bible. Each has advantages and disadvantages. You can use any of these methods alone or in combinations. All that matters is that it works for you.

BINDER

The binder is exactly what it says, a 3-ring notebook full of paper. It can be divided into sections with tabs, and things can be kept in sheet protectors. A binder can become a whole separate art project unto itself.

The advantage of the binder is its physicality. You can write in it and draw in it. You can add photographs, copies made from reference books, and maps. You're the only one who has it, so you're in control of both the information that goes into it and who has access to it.

The disadvantage of the binder is that it's difficult to share. This can make it hard to collaborate with people. If your group meets anywhere other than your house, you'll need to lug it around with you.

SHARED FOLDER

The setting bible can be a digital document, or several documents in a shared folder on a file hosting service. Each section can be in a sub-folder or separate document. How you organize your digital information is up to you.

The advantage of the shared folder is that everyone in the group can access it and add to it. Any sort of digital file can be included, from Word documents to ebooks, photos, music, and video.

The disadvantage is that you need to be able to access the files. If you play somewhere with unreliable wifi, you may be locked out. With everyone able to contribute, the folders can fill up with clutter and useless material. You will need to curate the information.

WIKI

There are a number of wiki solutions available, from software that can be hosted on your own website to online services that host everything for you. The best wiki is the one that works well for your needs.

The advantages of a wiki are that everyone can access it. You can restrict who is able to make changes to an entry, and who can see certain entries. All sorts of digital files can be included, and the ability to search makes it a very handy reference tool.

The disadvantage is that there is a learning curve. You need to learn the markup language that the wiki uses. If you add a lot of pages and files, there may be a cost for hosting. Some wiki services also require you to make your information public, only allowing it to be private for an additional fee. While only your group can add to and edit

your setting information, the entire world can see it.

READ WRITE ROLL

A GUIDEBOOK FOR TABLETOP ROLEPLAYERS

Reading, writing, and roleplaying are all part of continuum for me. You read the books, you write characters, settings, and adventures, and you roll dice and tell stories together with friends. Then you read some more, to fill in the knowledge gaps or find fresh inspiration. You write some new things for the game or based on it, and you head back to the table to share and conspire with your group. Read, write, roll, repeat.

Most roleplaying games aren't designed around the way stories are created and told. A lot of people will argue that that's not the job of a game rulebook, even though the game is based on acting out characters and telling stories. They like the tactical aspects, the bits that stem from the hobby's wargaming roots. Their point of view and preferred style of play is absolutely valid, and more power to them; that I want something different from my roleplaying experience doesn't make them wrong. Some will point out various indie game that do put story firmly at the center of the experience, and a lot of those games are awesome; I play and enjoy a few of them myself, every opportunity that I get. Just as there are books published for every taste and interest, and just as there are many methods of telling stories, there are wide varieties of roleplaying games. This is just one of them. It's intended to fill a specific niche. It's not the last word on any topic by any means, but will hopefully become part of the ongoing conversation.

[Download your copy of ReadWriteRoll now!](#)

At the heart of all great stories are strong characters. It doesn't matter whether you're reading a short story, writing a novel, or watching a play. The characters found in TV series, comic books, and games are more alike on a creative level than they are different. The symbiotic relationship between character and story is universal across media.

In this book, we'll explore what goes into crafting memorable and enjoyable characters. While the focus is on tabletop roleplaying games, I'll be using writing terms rather than RPG jargon. It's not going to be about crunching numbers or picking abilities. I'll talk about writing your character, rather than just playing them. Because while there are other hats that we wear around the table, including those of performer and tactician, we're all writers. Even if we never put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard, it's the writer's craft that we're dabbling in.

Follow this link to download *Building Characters* for 20% off!

The term worldbuilding gets thrown around a lot by both writers and roleplayers. It's most frequently used in reference to the construction of a fantasy realm or an entire fictional universe. There are maps, and histories, and complex back stories, and all sorts of engaging little details. While these worlds are allegedly being created as the grand stage for a work of fiction, which includes novels, films, television shows, and games, worldbuilding is often an end unto itself. It's an intellectual exercise, a creative outlet, and just a whole lot of fun.

This isn't a book about worldbuilding. This is a book about telling stories.

What I mean to say is, this book isn't about worldbuilding for its own sake. You're not going to learn how to create an encyclopedia for an alternate universe. I'm not going to show you have to write the ultimate travel guide for an imaginary place. It's not a book full of checklists and random tables. This is about assembling the critical details that you will need in order to tell a story.

Follow this link to download *Setting Design* for 20% off!

Tell better stories using your favorite tabletop roleplaying game!

We all know that stories need a beginning, a middle, and an end. Hero goes on quest, hero faces obstacles, hero completes quest. Lovers fall in love, antagonist keeps lovers apart, lovers end up together. Things beyond the protagonist's control change, the protagonist faces adversity, the protagonist learns to adapt and achieves greatness. On that basic structure writers and storytellers throughout the ages have woven variations and created masterpieces. We keep coming back to the same foundations today for one very good reason: those structures are versatile and continue to work.

This book will help you to leverage basic story structure and use it to your advantage. You'll be able to say what you want while keeping your audience engaged. The three-act structure and its variations will be discussed in detail, along ways this structure can be expanded beyond a single story and into a series or campaign. In the end, you'll have new tools in your storytelling toolbox, along with the knowledge of how and when to use them in your own creative works.

Follow this link to download *Story Structure* for 20% off!

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