

BUILDING WORLDS



*a toolkit for creating tabletop roleplaying
elements for any system, setting, or genre*



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BUILDING WORLDS

**a toolkit for creating dynamic settings
usable with any system or genre**

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Introduction

The term *worldbuilding* gets thrown around frequently by tabletop roleplayers in reference to the construction of a fantasy realm or even an entire fictional universe. There are maps and ecologies and complex histories involved, with all sorts of engaging little details sprinkled in. While these worlds are presumably being created to provide a grand stage for an ongoing campaign, the act of worldbuilding is often an end unto itself. It's a creative outlet even if it never gets used in a game, and one that's a whole lot of fun.

If you've got time for that, great. There's no wrong way to engage in that sort of worldbuilding. One of the greatest challenges that many gamemasters face, though, is preparation time. There's never enough of it. One of the risks of traditional worldbuilding is the tendency to gather more information than you actually need. You want to be sure you know absolutely everything about your setting, no matter how trivial, just in case it comes up. You don't want to have to stop in the middle of the action to look something up. It's normal to want all of the pieces have to fit together neatly, so that your official canon has no embarrassing continuity holes.

The other option is to just wing it. 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 method work. You can craft something from whole cloth as your setting unfolds. Not everyone is great at that sort of improvisation, though. It's stressful, and doesn't always lead to a good experience for anyone.

Top-Down Worldbuilding

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 those tiny details can be found later, possibly in character backgrounds or adventure hooks.

The strength of top-down design is that you, as the creator, are able to see a big picture. You know how and why everything fits together because you began with a larger whole and then zoomed in. 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 flaws, plot holes, and contradictions are important, because they create conflict. As we'll see, conflict creates drama, gives characters purpose and depth, and drives adventures. There may be a lot of potential in the world for many adventures, and a myriad of types of adventures to be told, but it will take tremendous amounts of work to mine them out of all the raw details required to define the top-down world.

Bottom-Up Worldbuilding

In *bottom-up* or *inside-out* design, you start small and work your way up to the larger elements. The characters may begin 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, and they in turn suggest other elements, and the setting grows organically from there.

The strength of a bottom-up approach comes from the inconsistencies that inevitably creep in. Having to reconcile contradictory details that you thought up on the fly makes good adventure fodder. The downside is that it requires strong 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. This approach can be as much work as crafting an obsessively detailed top-down design.

Mindful Worldbuilding

This book isn't about worldbuilding for its own sake. You're not going to learn how to create a massive, detailed encyclopedia for a fully-formed cosmos, although you absolutely can use it for such an undertaking. I'm not going to show you how to write the ultimate travel guide for an imaginary place. It's not a book full of checklists and random tables. This is about focusing your efforts, and assembling the key, critical elements needed in order to run compelling and richly-textured adventures. It can lean more toward top-down or bottom up design, but what matters most is your intention. Know the problem that you're solving for before you begin.

Mindful worldbuilding 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 conscious decision to include some things and leave out others because they somehow contribute to the characters, the adventure, and the overall campaign. You only have to do as much work as is

necessary to accomplish that, and maybe set up a couple of future adventures.

Using This Book

This book is system-agnostic, meaning it was not written for one specific tabletop roleplaying game. It's not exclusively for *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Fate*, *Apocalypse Engine*, *Forged in the Dark*, or any other particular game. The examples are high-level and generic, allowing you to adapt and apply them to the system of your choice. It's recommended that you read through the entire book at least once to get a sense of the contents, the flow of things, and the context for various ideas. You can then go back to individual sections as needed for reference as you're creating worlds.

For easy reference this book is broken into three sections:

Introduction

This is where you are now. A brief overview of what this book is about, the concepts that will be discussed, and ways that you can put it to use for your tabletop roleplaying game.

Worldbuilding Format

The standard "stat block" for all of the books in the *Building* series, this descriptive block will help you help track roleplaying, worldbuilding, and adventure bits regardless of rules. This chapter covers the five components of the of the stat block: *Name*, *Description*, *Purpose*, *Modifiers*, and *Story Points*.

Worldbuilding Elements

What other games call attributes, statistics, or aspects, elements are the building blocks of anything and everything

that can be created for a tabletop roleplaying game. This chapter covers eleven areas for developing worldbuilding elements: *Premise, Genre, Place and Time, Theme, Stakes, Locations, Environment, People, Technology, Events, and Vocabulary.*

Worldbuilding and Characters

All characters exist within the context provided by your setting. Their names will reflection the cultures and places within the world, and help to connect the characters to them. The appearance that you give them, from their physical elements to their manner of dress, should be influenced by the places where they grew up and have lived in. Even their purpose for being, the things that drive and inspire them, will vary based on various elements of the setting.

If your style of play leans more toward the wargaming perspective, consider what abilities are common and uncommon within the setting. How the character came to acquire those skills and talent could be an interesting bit of background information. For those more inclined toward storytelling, consider how elements in the character's background might raise questions about the setting that need to be addressed in the worldbuilding, and ways that the character's background might be able to answer them.

When engaged in worldbuilding, keep the existing character elements in mind.

Worldbuilding and Adventures

Settings and adventures ought to provide context for one another. If the gamemaster indicates the sort of campaign they will be running, they should do their best to create a setting

that fits the needs of that adventure. If game world has already been created, adapted and develop adventures to incorporate the most interesting features, so that those worldbuilding efforts are significant and meaningful.

If your style of play leans more toward the wargaming perspective, the gamemaster should consider what worldbuilding will be useful in the type of adventure or campaign being proposed. The gamemaster should design encounters that leverage the things in the setting that can serve as obstacles and hazards. For those more inclined toward storytelling, consider how elements in the setting's history might connect with non-player characters encountered, pieces of the adventure goal, and the places that the player characters travel through.

When creating worldbuilding elements, keep what's known about the adventure and the campaign and the elements that are both established and implied in mind.

Worldbuilding and Rules

All settings exist within the context provided by the rules. Abilities and maneuvers made possible by the game mechanic might offer ideas for naming conventions. The appearance that you give the world should be influenced by the artwork presented in the core rulebooks. The things that drive and inspire your worldbuilding should be rooted in the sorts of actions that are emphasized in the rules, and the implications of why they exist and how they can be used.

If your style of play leans more toward the wargaming perspective, consider why some abilities are common across character types while others are rare or absent. A character's

knowledge or ignorance of certain skills could be an interesting bit of background information. For those inclined toward storytelling, consider how elements in the rules might raise questions about the environment, the types of jobs and economies implied by the existence of specific actions, skills, and powers, and the sorts of people needed to train and teach those abilities.

When creating setting elements, keep the options presented by the rules and the things they imply about how the world works in mind.

Worldbuilding Format

Too often people look at J.R.R. Tolkien's voluminous notes on *Middle Earth*, read about the work M.A.R. Barker put into *Tékumel*, or stumble across Patricia C. Wrede's *Fantasy Worldbuilding Questions* online, and think that's how things are required to be done. Massive, detailed settings are somehow the ultimate goal. If you have fun doing that, great. For a lot of us, though, that approach takes copious amounts of time and effort that we can't spare. It's excessive and unnecessary for a weekly tabletop roleplaying game.

Settings have the potential to rapidly become burdensome as detail is added. There's more for the gamemaster to keep track of. Complexity and a great deal of trivia begin to limit opportunities. When all of the areas of the map have been charted, all the history documented, and every last idea has been officially brought into canon, there's no room for improvisation. You're left with no space to add things based on player ideas and character actions.

It's far easier, in my experience, to start with a small setting bible. It needs the information that the gamemaster and the players need to get started, plus maybe a few additional points of interest and hooks. Add to it as the campaign goes along, to bring in things that happen at the table. Build things not because you can, but because they contribute something interesting, useful, and meaningful to the adventures you're playing.

While it's impossible to create a worldbuilding checklist or stat block that could encompass all possible worldbuilding endeavors, the process can be reduced to some core

principles. There are a select few things that you need to know up front in order to run the game. Build the world based on what players will see, their character backgrounds, and the adventures you intend to run them through. Start with those essentials. Add to it as the players explore, the world reveals itself to you, and you have the time to work on the setting.

Because this book is system-agnostic, this “stat block” was designed to work alongside the rules and mechanics of your choice. The emphasis is on descriptive elements that can aid in worldbuilding, rather than specific abilities and statistics. There are five descriptors used in every stat block, regardless of the type of item or element being created:

Name: How the setting element is referred to.

Description: The setting element’s context.

Purpose: What the setting element does and how it does it.

Modifiers: Bonuses/penalties the element may provide.

Story Points: Questions and answers the element offers.

Name

You can call your world anything you please, but there are a few conventions that you need to consider. One component of a good name is resonance. If it’s a fantasy world, make it sound like a fantasy world. When you’re building a science fiction universe, pick a name that sounds sufficiently science fictional. A setting that’s based on a real-world place and time ought to evoke an association with that historical period. The players will already have a good idea of what the setting is like before they gain any more details.

Another thing you need to consider is whether your creating more of a *sandbox-style setting* or a more linear-narrative *campaign world*. What's the difference? For a sandbox-style setting, you build the world and find the stories within. You could also be tinkering because worldbuilding is fun. You don't have a specific purpose in mind, so you play around with minutiae and fiddle bits. Creating a campaign world means you have a series of adventures already in mind, and will be making the elements that are required to run that them.

In either case, worldbuilding creates the baseline information that the players and the gamemaster have to know, and exists to provide context for the adventures, and the characters that exist within it. Why is this important? The name that you give to your project should reflect that emphasis.

As an example, *Middle Earth* evokes a sandbox-style setting, because the focus is on the world itself, not the stories or characters. *The Lord of the Rings* feels like the name of a campaign world because it's centered on the stories and characters, rather the minutiae of the setting. Both require worldbuilding, but the needs of each are different.

Description

You can easily fill a book describing a setting, especially when you're creating an entire world, universe, or multiverse. I've seen people do it. I've done it myself. Knowing where to start can be difficult. We'll talk about this a bit more in the **Worldbuilding Elements** chapter under *Premise*.

Slow your roll, and know that there are only three things to focus when you're starting out: the *Elevator Pitch*, the *Main Conflict*, and the *Main Villain*.

THE ELEVATOR PITCH

This is something that I've referred to in other places as the log line or the summary. In a short paragraph or a 30-second spoken word spiel, what is this setting about? You should include the genre, things it's inspired by or similar to, and what the player characters get to do. You should keep it high level. If you've got them with the elevator pitch, they'll allow you to provide more detail.

There are two reasons to start with a good elevator pitch. The first, of course, is to convince people to play it. You are, after all, not pitching a movie, a novel, or a fictional encyclopedia. You're creating a tabletop roleplaying setting, so you have to tell people why they'd enjoy playing in this world.

The other reason is to prevent concept drift. As you go along and start getting deeper into worldbuilding, it can be easy to lose your way. Who hasn't been tempted to bring in cool elements from that movie you watch, the new TV series everyone's raving about, or the book you recently read? Having the pitch to compare things to will help you determine if those new elements actually fit, or are just details that, while cool, serve no purpose other than to complicate things.

A good elevator pitch should evoke questions. As you expand the description of the setting, you'll begin to create additional elements to answer those questions. This will allow the setting to grow organically.

THE MAIN CONFLICT

Who is fighting whom within the setting? I know that the real world is a complex and nuanced place, and there are many different types of conflicts going on. A fictional fantasy world might have a dozen major wars happening, and in a science fiction universe each planet will have its own troubles. Pick one. Make it the central cause of tension that will be the focus of your adventures. Tell one story at a time. It's less work for you, and far less confusing for the players.

Most individual adventures should tie into the main conflict somehow. The scenario has either been caused by it, or constitutes some step toward resolving it. In the elevator pitch, the things the characters get to do ought to be based on resolving, or otherwise dealing with, this core issue. Individual adventures can look at other conflicts that are happening independent of the big issue. Inevitably other issues will arise during play, often as the result of player actions and decisions. When the main conflict is eventually resolved, those can be expanded in the main issue for the sequel, allowing you to begin a whole new phase of worldbuilding.

THE PRIMARY VILLAIN

Whether it's an individual or an organization, there has to be some boss-level antagonist lurking in the background. The player characters may not face them right away, but they're on the opposite side of the conflict. You may not want to be subtle about this, although you can engage in some misdirection and allow the players to think the big bad is one person, only to eventually reveal it was someone else all along. The bottom line is that the player characters need to have an opponent to focus on over long term of the campaign.

The main villain doesn't even need to be a person. Yeah, the bad guy in *The Lord of the Rings* was Sauron, and the chief adversaries in World War II were the Nazis, but the antagonist of a post-apocalyptic world could be the abstract concept of survival. All of the challenges and big issues arise from a planet that's hostile to human life. A game set in Victorian London could posit poverty as the main villain, with circumstances causing the human opponents to be de facto agents of the causes and complications of said poverty.

Purpose

There's probably a reason that you chose to create the type of setting you did. You like the fantasy genre. China's Shang Dynasty is fascinating to you, and you think it would be neat to set adventures there. New England already has credibility as a horror setting, thanks to Lovecraft, Steven King, and others.

The purpose of every worldbuilding project is enable the gamemaster to run the types of adventures you want to run. It allows for the kinds of characters that players want to be able to play. Your worldbuilding has to create the perfect setting for the things your group wants to accomplish.

There are two things that the purpose needs to develop and support: the *Character Connection* and the *Problem to be Solved*.

THE CHARACTER CONNECTION

There has to be a solid reason for all of the player characters to be working together. "You meet in a tavern" has its limits in terms of credibility. I've played in games where characters would not be working together unless they had to, but that problem was simply hand-waved away for the sake of

expediency. Having an organization that they all belong to, a common employer, or a cause that they're all passionate about make group dynamics a lot easier to manage.

This also opens up more possibilities for drama. If characters *have* to work together, they're *allowed* to not like each other personally. They can have interpersonal conflicts, but those can serve as obstacles that make reaching the adventure goal more difficult rather than annoyances that bring the game to a grinding halt. It's so much more fun when characters get to behave like people, rather than collections of tactical advantages.

THE PROBLEM TO BE SOLVED

You know what the main conflict is and who the main villain will be. Now you need to explain what the player characters are expected to do about it. Provide some clear direction. What is the mission? What are the characters' roles in the grand scheme of the conflict? It doesn't have to be specific, like "walk to Mount Doom and throw the One Ring into a volcano." There's no need to understand up front how the problem will be solved. You can keep it high level, like "win the war" or "defeat the Nazis". *Star Trek* got a lot of mileage from "seek out new life, explore strange new worlds". It defined the purpose of the setting, and worldbuilding elements were created to facilitate the pursuit of that purpose.

Modifiers

The setting itself does not have bonuses or penalties. It does not convey modifiers to character actions directly. What it can provide is context for those things. You can't have a bonus to cast a spell if it's not a fantasy setting. There's no

modifier to shoot a death ray if the genre doesn't support death ray technology. Superheroes need universes where the laws of physicals allow for the existence of crazy powers.

There are two worldbuilding components that fall under this category: *Establish Possibilities* and *Enable Character Development*.

ESTABLISH POSSIBILITIES

You need to establish that certain elements exist. Magic, technology, superpowers, and the like fall under this component. A spy setting needs intelligence agencies. Post-apocalyptic worlds need some civilization-wrecking disaster. Those elements can establish the existence of abilities that won't be present in other types of settings, or at least will not have the same prominence.

This doesn't mean that you need to explain how and why these things function. You only need to demonstrate that they do. If you want to get into the physics, metaphysics, or supernatural forces at play, have it at it. If you want to pen a treatise on how spellcasting works, or explain the principles behind interstellar starship engines, do it. The essential piece here, however, is that the context for those things exist within the setting.

ENABLE CHARACTER DEVELOPMENT

There also need to be places for characters to train and learn. They acquired their current abilities, and those modifiers, somehow. As the campaign goes on they'll want to improve their skills and gain new ones. By accounting for that up front, it will save a lot of awkward improvisation later.

Types of Modifiers

There are two possible types of modifiers. The most familiar to tabletop roleplayers are numerical bonuses and penalties that are added to die rolls. For settings, these might be elements that provide situational modifiers that make it easier or more difficult for characters to attempt specific tasks. Not all worldbuilding elements will have these sorts of modifiers. Some, however, might align with the game system of your choice.

The second type of modifiers are purely descriptive, indicating how something compares to the baseline average or the cultural or ecological norm. It could mean better, newer, or more, for example, or of lesser quality, older, or of a smaller quantity than typically seen. These modifiers are used mainly for roleplaying and storytelling purposes.

BELOW BASELINE

The individual element is statistically below the expected measure in the context of the setting. As a conditional modifier it might have a penalty (negative modifier), no modifier, or a low bonus. A roleplaying-focused element could be described as lesser, smaller, fewer, or otherwise lacking in quality or quantity compared to the baseline.

BASELINE

The individual element's level is typical for its type within the setting. As a conditional modifier it may offer a small to moderate bonus. A roleplaying-focused element will be described as typical, average, or normal and serve as the baseline description for said element.

ABOVE BASELINE

The individual element is statistically above the typical level within the setting. As a conditional modifier it might have a moderate to high bonus. A roleplaying-focused element will be described as greater, larger, more, or otherwise superior in quality or quantity compared to the baseline.

Story Points

These are plot hooks and adventure seeds that can be harvested from a worldbuilding element. A good story point takes one of two forms, *Unanswered Questions* or *Incidental Worldbuilding*. Individual elements or components might lean more toward one or the other, but most will have a combination of both. Story points ought to offer up new questions about the worldbuilding element itself, related character possibilities, and potential adventures, while providing some new information to flesh things out.

UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Not every detail of a world's background needs to be filled out in detail. There can be people, places, and events that are mentioned in passing, which can be explored later on as part of an adventure. It doesn't have to be overtly mysterious. A story point can just be a placeholder, a dangling thread that can be fleshed out later. This also allows the possibility of connecting in-game events to those vague elements, tying the setting more closely together with the player characters and the adventures.

IMPLIED WORLDBUILDING

A world's background can be used to fill in missing details in player character backgrounds and ongoing adventures. If a

character comes from a village that hasn't been developed in any detail, it can be fleshed out. Past events introduced during the course of adventures become part of the canon, as do the places player characters visit and the people they encounter. The idea is to tie the setting and game being played more closely together, allow the players an opportunity to participate in the worldbuilding through play, making the game into a more personal and collaborative experience.

Embrace Moderation

Not every worldbuilding element will have a deep and meaningful story behind it. Sometimes a forest is just a forest, and not the supernatural forge of environmental corruption and arboreal evil. That's okay. Everything you create for the game, though, should at least have the potential to reveal something about the world, character possibilities, and the overall campaign.

Take as much space as you need to flesh out the world's history. Look over the elements in the next section and find the possible questions and answers inherent in them. Work with the other players to refine these into information that can be used in roleplaying their characters, fleshing out the breadth and depth of the setting, and generating ideas for future adventures.

Create and Resolve Conflict

One important way of using setting elements is in providing conflicts for player characters. Considering character interactions with worldbuilding elements is just a way to facilitate those conflict in an interesting way. No matter what type of setting you're creating, or what sort of campaign

you intend to run, you need to begin by asking yourself a few questions.

- What potential conflicts does this setting create for the player characters?
- How does the setting cause internal or external conflicts for the player characters?
- How does the setting provide possibilities for player characters to resolve those internal or external conflicts?

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

INTERNAL CONFLICTS

Internal conflicts take place within the character's own mind. They take action based on their own personal beliefs, goals and motivations. 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.

To have these internal conflicts, the worldbuilding has to establish the belief systems and events that aren't in sync. There will need to be clear complications if the character makes the wrong decisions, which they will have to live with. You can't enforce how a character feels, or the way that a player chooses to handle these situations, but the setting

choices ought to create the possibility for such moral dilemmas.

EXTERNAL CONFLICTS

External conflicts stem from an outside force acting on the character. An example would be the character getting drafted and forced to go to war, or having the war come to them in the form of an invading army. They have a choice as to the form of action they take, but they must take some sort of action.

To have these sorts of conflicts, elements of your worldbuilding will have to be autonomous of player character actions. Someone is going to say that this is railroading, forcing characters into specific actions. I'll counter by saying that it's more like weather. It's going to rain no matter what they choose to do, and it becomes one more thing that they need to decide how to deal with.

Story Point Essentials

For a story-driven campaign, you need to consider the elements necessary to be able to tell that story. There is a foundational level of worldbuilding that needs to exist, from which everything else can be developed. There are four sections that ought to be created: *Story Background*, *Character Backgrounds*, *License to Kill*, and *Sense of Wonder*.

STORY BACKGROUND

The story background is the bare minimum amount of information that you need in order to provide the context for your setting. Let's use a real world example for this. The American Revolution implies a government to revolt against, some reason for people to want to rise up, and the means to take action. You need to acknowledge that bit of history.

Colonial people come from somewhere, and the British monarchy came to power their somehow, so there are locations and events. The way they go to war and the battles they have will have to be fleshed out. That gives you something to start with. You can add key people, motivations, and other details as needed, and get specific more specific with your worldbuilding based on the focus of your campaign.

CHARACTER BACKGROUNDS

Everything in each player character's background exists, and is automatically canon. You much want to find commonalities between characters, so you don't end up with five redundant fishing villages and a dozen nearly-identical wizard schools. Allow the players to help flesh those elements out, because they're invested in those parts of the setting.

While you could steer them toward elements you've already created, or dictate certain pieces of their background like where they come from, let them do some of the work. You can suggest, edit, and veto things that don't fit, but if players want to take on some of the heavy lifting involved in worldbuilding, let them. Be open to collaboration, especially in regard to their characters.

LICENSE TO KILL

We all know that player characters end up getting away with things that ordinary people never could. There should be some explanation for this. It doesn't have to be a literal "license to kill" handed to them within the setting. Either they have authority, are in a lawless area, or are engaged in illegal activity. That's about it in terms of options. This means that there's either some body of authority that has ordained them, or there are people willing to support the player characters'

claim to authority. Having complications for their actions can create some fun obstacles and tense plot twists, but you don't want to stifle the players' creativity.

SENSE OF WONDER

Make your world interesting. Turn the fascinating features of the setting up to 11. The magic should be breathtaking and spectacular. Starships should be shiny and filled with possibilities. Filthy slums should be anxiety-inducing and wretched. Add whatever elements you think you need to drive home the genre and tone you want to establish with the setting.

This isn't about establishing the things; we did that above, in the Modifiers section. The focus here is about the ramifications of those things. How do they feed into the conflict. Where do they impact peoples' lives? Where are they in the history of the setting itself?

Worldbuilding Elements

An element is a building block of your setting. Unlike statistical elements they don't necessarily have modifiers, and not all settings need to have the same types of worldbuilding elements. Most tabletop roleplaying games don't have formal systems for creating settings, leaving it up to you to decide what's important and how to format that information. This allows for near-infinite customization.

This chapter covers eleven possible areas for developing worldbuilding elements: *Premise, Genre, Place and Time, Theme, Stakes, Locations, Environment, People, Technology, Events, and Vocabulary.*

Premise

Description: A concise summary of what your setting is about.

Purpose: Your premise is a statement of fact about your game world. It's what your setting supports, and what your campaign is going to be about. The premise will imply some of the things that will need to exist within the setting, and establish what is and isn't possible.

Modifiers: Components of a premise include *Characters, Goals, and Obstacles.* How these can be assessed in relation to a baseline will be discussed in each component's entry.

Story Points: Unanswered questions should be used to draw players in, hinting at mysteries that their characters will need to solve. Implied worldbuilding include player character possibilities, the culture and social structures that allow for the existence of the villain, the elements that make the goal a

desirable achievement, and the environment that creates the obstacles to that goal.

A premise is a summary of your setting in a single sentence, or at most a short paragraph; you can use the description from the **Worldbuilding Format** chapter earlier, especially the *Elevator Pitch*. It's a foundation, of course. There will be far more to your game world than can be reduced to such a simple statement. Yet if you can't get to the heart of your setting 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 setting to other people. You're going to need to attract players that want to participate in your campaign. 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 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 (unless you want to, and have the time for it).

Elements of a Premise Statement

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

CHARACTERS

The premise should never state the name of a player character, only the role they need to fill in the world. 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 "adventurers" or "paranormal investigators" or "gritty street-level superheroes" conjures up a lot of imagery and provides an idea of what the focus of the setting will be.

You can refer back to the *Elevator Pitch* for the main villain's information.

GOALS

The goal within a premise statement tells what the characters are trying to accomplish. You can refer back to the *Elevator Speech* for the *Main Conflict* that you've decided on. This goal doesn't say why the player characters are trying to achieve it. It might hint at what's at stake if they fail, or what they stand to gain if they succeed. The purpose of including the goal is to imply the nature of the action and a degree of suspense. Something happens that you, as the creator, will need to flesh out. The player should be invested and want to pursue that objective.

Keeping the goal vague gives you some wiggle room as you the campaign unfold. It should leave open a lot of possibilities as to where the adventures 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.

OBSTACLES

The obstacle is the one big thing keeping the character from achieving their goal. Within a game world there will be many obstacles, of course. You need a common type of obstacle, or a complex and overarching one, in the premise statement to make it interesting. An adventure 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 implies a lot of difficult obstacles.

A bit of fear of the unknown should be in the key obstacle as well. There has to be doubt about the outcome, and whether the player characters will be able to succeed. It can also imply the existence of other types of 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 other elements that it implies. You'll begin to see an ecology inherent in it, and know what basic elements you'll need to develop. Then you can begin to dig into some deeper worldbuilding.

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

Examples of Premise Statements

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

- A group of strangers who met at an inn must defend a caravan from bandits as they travel to the big city.
- A gangster struggles to keep his dysfunctional family together while evading rival crime families and federal agents.
- A special unit of police officers works to uncover the identity of a drug cartel's elusive kingpin.

- An orphaned girl discovers that she has the power to command dragons, and sets forth to conquer the people who killed her parents.
- A news anchor tries to make amends for his past inaction by taking on the corrupt media establishment.
- A serial killer with a heart of gold takes out criminals who have evaded justice while hiding his dark secret from his family.
- Inmates at a state penitentiary try to survive without turning into the monsters the establishment paints them to be.
- The crew of a starship patrols unexplored space seeking scientific discoveries and first contact with alien races.
- A team of doctors work together to solve medical mysteries and save the lives of unusual patients.
- Superheroes band together to face the invasion of Earth by hostile aliens.
- Young lovers from warring families seek a way to be together.

Genre

Description: A worldbuilding element built around a classification of the setting's style and subject matter.

Purpose: By defining the genre of your setting, you will further determine what sorts of elements you will need, and establish boundaries around player character possibilities and adventure types.

Modifiers: A setting that is typical for its genre could be described as at the baseline. If the genre elements are applied

with a light touch, and are not the primary focus of the setting, they might be below baseline; this could happen in mixed or blended genres. Above the baseline means that all elements of the setting have been infused with the maximum amount of genre influence possible.

Story Points: Unanswered questions will center on the explanations for and prominence of specific genre elements. Implied worldbuilding includes all of technologies and cultural contexts required to make those genre elements possible.

A genre is nothing more than a classification system, grouping things with similar elements together. It is often considered to be 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 setting. The way you describe the elements of your game world will be heavily influenced by the genre to select.

Resonance and Repetition

What genre can do for your setting is create resonance. It allows the players to form a mental picture based on their past experiences, saving you from having to fill in all of the details. When I say an adventure is set in a haunted house, you already have an idea in your head of what haunted houses look like.

You're recalling a ghost story you read or a horror movie you watched. You have expectations about where this adventure is going and the types of things that will happen. If I 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 worldbuilding 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 ways of describing elements that can positively evoke a particular genre. Are the player character possibilities known to be part of that genre? Is the goal something unique to that genre? Is the obstacle a type of problem or conflict 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 tabletop roleplaying settings and the media that inspire them, including literature, film, television, and comics.

ACTION

In the action genre there are chases, fight scenes, and suspense, usually with a thin premise to hold them together. An action setting can take many forms, including spy settings, police settings, sports settings, and martial arts settings. Those elements are just a pretense to justify the action sequences.

COMEDY

A comedy setting 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 out of proportion to the point of absurdity, or point out the logical fallacies or absurdities of real people or situations.

CRIME

A crime genre setting revolves around criminals and members of law enforcement. It explores the means by which crimes are committed, prevented, and detected, and the complications 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 dramatic setting is technically any world that is more serious than humorous in tone. Over time it has become the default category for any setting that doesn't fall under another genre. It often refers to game worlds 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 supernatural elements that are not possible in reality.

HORROR

The horror genre evokes suspense, dread, and fear. Settings usually have 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 location that once actually existed. It is often built around true events, using a combination of fictional characters and versions of people who existed.

MYSTERY

Worlds created for the mystery genre support not only unanswered questions, but the means to seeking the answers. This usually involves crime, often a murder, and determining who committed the crime. Clues and evidence are gathered over the course of an adventure, until the characters are able to draw a conclusion.

ROMANCE

A romance genre setting 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 people with supernatural or superhuman powers. Characters often wear costumes or masks. They are usually adventurers, crime fighters, or vigilantes. Most superhero tales begin with an origin adventure 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 a world 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.

Place and Time

Description: A worldbuilding element the establishes when and where your adventure takes place.

Purpose: To provide players with an immediate point of reference. If you're using an historical setting, this provides a baseline for the setting. When creating an imaginary or futuristic setting, you can compare it to the preset day, other places and times, or settings from works of fiction.

Modifiers: Individual components might be rated in relation to the baseline. At a high level, though, it's best to contrast your setting with something familiar. Baseline is identical, below baseline means it's similar or has elements over another setting. Above baseline means that it's essentially identical but with certain components exaggerated or highly emphasized.

Story Points: Unanswered questions will include whether there are elements that vary from historical fact, and how those might work within this setting. Implied worldbuilding is based on the assumption that everything in the setting is like the time and place it emulates, unless it's expressly called out that something is different.

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

Possibilities and Limitations

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

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 modeling 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 the tabletop roleplaying setting you're creating is a work of fiction. You can nail down the facts to make the setting as realistic and accurate as you please, 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 running the campaign.

ARTISTIC LICENSE

You are allowed to make things up. If you don't know what an element looks like and you can't find a reference, fake it. You can be vague, or you can create a description out of thin air based on your imagination. No one will notice, because they'll assume that it's intentional or a matter of artistic license. If you're getting the details right most of the time, those who do catch the inaccuracy will forgive you.

Common Places and Times

Here are a few broad categories of place and time-inspired settings. They cover most of the common types of worlds found in tabletop roleplaying. You can use them as templates for your own setting design, and mine them for ideas.

HISTORICAL ERAS

Your campaign is set in an actual place and time, somewhere in the past or present. It may attempt to recreate

real events, or tell a new story with actual events serving as a backdrop. You need to stick as closely to the facts as you can, filling in knowledge gaps with reasonable choices that fit in as seamlessly as possible. Even though the campaign is fictional, it should feel as if it could have actually happened.

ALTERNATE HISTORY

The campaign is set in a real place and time, but with a twist. Some new element is added, or a key event occurred differently. The heart of the setting is in discovering what happens as a result of this variation from actual history. In an alternate history, it's clear that the way the world developed did not and probably could not actually happen.

FUTURE HISTORY

A future history setting 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 minor incident, a failed terrorist attack actually occurred. The object of the setting is to explore what life might be like if things happened another way.

PARALLEL WORLD

Similar to alternate history, except the time is the present. At some point in the past an element that doesn't exist in our world was introduced, or an event happened differently. In theory everything was the same as our world until a single divergence point, which caused a domino effect that altered many other elements. The overall 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. It is not meant to

represent a real location or time period. A key point of divergence is the existence of magic and the supernatural. Many 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. The superhero genre is notorious for it. This approach 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 needs of the story.

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 needs of the setting without being beholden to facts.

FICTIONAL PLANET

Science fiction is filled with worlds that don't exist, populated by human colonies, alien races, or both. It's the equivalent of a fantasy world, sometimes patterned on and altering existing cultures, sometimes extrapolating societies and cultures based on current reality. A key point of divergence from reality is the existence of improbably, physics-defying technology.

UTOPIA

A Utopian setting can exist in any place and time, but everything there 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 sell the idea that their suffering has a purpose, and the widespread hardship is serving some greater cause. These worlds are often designed around characters 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 campaign, then the details of the location will dictate the types of events 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 specific to those environments. 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 setting. 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, below.

ENVIRONMENT

Environment 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? Environment 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 setting. The events couldn't have taken place anywhere else. The sorts of player characters, goals, and obstacles won't be found another place, or at least can't take the same form.

A Sense of Time

Each time period, when coupled with a location, provides you with more worldbuilding elements to play around with. There are historical events that might have influence on your setting, 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 adventure hooks and useful 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 no electronics. If I say "caveman times", you might think of something realistic or cartoonish, but you're thinking caves, furs and skins for clothing, fire, and wooden 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 worldbuilding work for you. Stating that it's the Early Middle Ages conjures up certain imagery, events, and cultures. If you invoke the Victorian Era or the Cold War, you call up completely different associations. 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, stating the decade is often enough. The 1940s offers a set of opportunities and limitations, 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 setting isn't following a specific timeline and actual historical events aren't being referenced.

YEAR

When your setting is meant to exist 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 of that specificity. A year works best when your setting is constructed around a particular historical event, or takes place before, after, or parallel to such a milestone.

TIME OF YEAR

Stating the season will tell the players 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 campaign takes place within a limited time frame, or the timeline of events matters, your setting 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 campaign takes place at a time after those things occurred or came to prominence.

A SENSE OF THE FUTURE

A campaign world set in the past can clarify its time period by building up to things that haven't happened yet, but the players know are coming. People are still alive, landmarks are still standing, and wars haven't occurred yet. This works best if you're going to be using those events in your adventures.

Atmosphere

When we're talking about atmosphere, alternately called mood or tone, what we really mean is emotion. What do the player characters feel? More importantly, what do the players feel? Atmosphere is all about arousing an emotional response. This is done by creating resonance with elements that the human beings around your game table are already familiar with. Adding atmosphere is letting people know what to feel. People read things labeled romance novels because they want to experience love and longing. They read horror adventures because they want to be anxious and scared. They watch comedies because they want to laugh.

Atmosphere is important is because it refines and clarifies the sense of when and where. It can help to reinforce genre. The mood created for a romantic setting built around 1970s London will contrast sharply with a horror setting in the same time and place. A world based on East Anglia during the English Civil War will have different elements, and establish a different tone, than a comedy in the same location and era.

This 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. Worlds with a lighthearted tone aren't going to feature people being gunned down in cold blood; that's far too serious and

potentially upsetting. There will always be elements of drama in a comedy, and bits of comedy with a drama, but the overall tone needs to be clearly identifiable as one or the other. An emotional breather or some shock value is good for the health and verisimilitude of the setting, when used sparingly, but if you don't deliver the type of emotional payoff that was promised, you'll lose your players.

A final point to make is that atmosphere is about what the characters within the setting are experiencing. The players are living vicariously through their characters. They aren't defeating the supervillain, their characters are; the player just gets to experience the thrill. The player isn't slaying the dragon, their character is. Light or dark, serious or humorous, the player 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.

Senses

Rather than going into a lot of detail describing the elements of your setting, try focusing on what the player characters experience. 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 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.

SIGHTS

What do the characters see? Emphasize color, shape, size, materials, textures, and unusual features. Lighting, shadow,

and darkness can be notable. Remember that what the characters can't see can be as important as what they can.

SOUNDS

What do the characters 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.

SMELLS

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

TOUCH

What do the characters 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?

TASTES

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.

Theme

Description: Worldbuilding element revealing the true meaning of the adventures set there.

Purpose: A setting's theme is the underlying meaning. Theme is what the adventure is really about. The worldbuilding you do should resonate and support the main theme of the campaign, and in that way reinforce the themes found in the characters and adventures.

Modifiers: The baseline for a theme is that it exists, and some components of it are present in most elements. Below baseline means that the things is there, but it's not front-and-center and isn't present in every element. Above baseline for a theme means that you cannot miss it, and everything has something to do with the point the gamemaster is trying to make.

Story Points: Unanswered questions might have to do with how one thematic stance arose, or why a particular element came to be associated with the theme. Implied worldbuilding is anything that supports the thematic stance, as well as the moral and ethical judgments present in assorted thematic arguments.

Theme is what your setting, and the adventures that take place there, is really about. It is often independent of the premise. All of the elements, especially the obstacles and subplots featured in the campaign, will align with the theme.

- The premise of a fantasy setting might be that a band of adventurers seeks to slay genocidal dragons that have taken over the world, but the theme might be the power of personal sacrifice. The only way for the characters to

succeed is by being willing to lay down their own lives for the cause.

- The premise of a romance setting might be that lovers are willing to do anything to be together, but the theme might be that the universe seeks balance. Every time a character loses something, they gain something, and vice-versa.
- The premise of a science fiction setting might be federal agents facing a vast 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 player characters 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 worldbuilding elements, just as theme will dictate the form those elements take.

Theme and Conflict

Conflict is something that needs to be present in good theme, and helps to define it. If the theme is that human experience is universal, the nature of the conflicts within the setting 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 in favor of 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. The player characters will have to fight against that conclusion.

Your theme can be bold, but don't use it as a blunt instrument to beat the players with. It's okay to allow the characters win even when the theme seemingly stacks the deck against them. It's often more satisfying, emotionally, when the stance 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 setting. 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 your worldbuilding.

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 non-player characters. As with symbolism, the repetition of these elements helps to reinforce the theme of the setting, and imbue it with additional meaning.

Common Themes

Below are some of the more common themes found in tabletop roleplaying settings. They're often subtle, but they're in there if you look for them. You can use any of these in your worldbuilding, or leverage them as templates to create your own themes.

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 complications, and selfish choices will 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 an 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 worse you can count on them. Taking care of family is more important than pursuing 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 looking 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 players and the lives of the characters.

HUMANITY VERSUS NATURE

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

The conflicts and obstacles in this sort of setting are 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 setting 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 reflects the 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 player characters and the truth. The problem 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 any setting element 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 player characters back. They will be centered on whatever their personal goals are, and what is necessary to achieve them. 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 player characters willing to make sacrifices will be able to persevere and succeed.

In order to get something, the player characters will have to give something up. 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 than what's lost, or vice-versa. The conflict often comes in recognizing that the player characters aren't getting ahead or falling behind, and accepting that life has both ups and downs.

COMPARISON AND CONTRAST

The themes listed above aren't the only options available, of course. You'll find many others, and can make up your own based on the type of setting you're creating. 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 include *darkness versus light*, *faith versus doubt*, *good versus evil*, *individual versus society*, *life versus death*, *man versus nature*, and *pain versus pleasure*.

Stakes

Description: A worldbuilding element defining what the player characters stand to gain or lose over the course of the campaign.

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

Modifiers: Any assessment in regards to a baseline is a risk/reward proposition. The baseline means that gaining a reward or avoiding a complication is worth the effort. Above baseline means that the benefit outweighs the amount of risk. Below baseline would reflect a situation where the amount of effort exceeds the value of the reward, or the negative effects of complications.

Story Points: Unanswered questions will involve unknown variables. Will the reward be as good as it seems, or the complications as bad? Is any of this worth the effort in the end? Implied worldbuilding is that the reward has value, both monetarily and culturally, and that the complications are universally undesirable.

The stakes are what could be gained or lost, depending on the events happening within the setting. From a worldbuilding perspective, the elements need to be present to make both the positive rewards and negative complications not only possible, but probable. The seeds of the most likely endings to your adventures 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 complications present in the setting. 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 setting 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 those things away. If you want them to be sad, follow through on taking them away. If you want them to be shocked, take away something they care about in a manner that's unexpected. 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 elements they care about are being messed with. The resolution of the conflict has to be emotionally satisfying. All of the groundwork for that conflict lies in establishing the stakes of the setting.

Rewards

The rewards of an adventure, as stated above, are the positive things that happen as a result of meeting the campaign 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 at least 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 adventure. If they get things too easily, that will feel like cheating. Balance in your worldbuilding 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 anything bestowed upon the character by someone else. It might be money, or material possessions. 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.

Complications

The bad things that might happen based in the events in the setting are its complications. Someone the character cares about dies. A valuable possession is lost or destroyed. Their house burns down, the villain succeeds in their evil scheme, and the Earth blows up.

Negative payoffs, like rewards, have to be scaled to the effort of the player characters. It's not fair to drag the characters through all sorts of hell if the worst thing to happen if they fail is that the villain steals a lawn chair off their 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 up your players to expect, it's bad storytelling and terrible worldbuilding.

INTERNAL COMPLICATIONS

An internal complication means that the character will feel bad about what happened. 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 complications make for a bigger down ending than the mere loss of, or failure to gain, stuff.

EXTERNAL COMPLICATIONS

An external complication is something bad that happens to people other than the player characters. 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. It's the player characters' fault, but it doesn't affect them directly.

Locations

Description: A worldbuilding element detailing where events within the setting take place.

Purpose: To be able to describe the homes, workplaces, hangouts, and battlefields that need to be created for the setting.

Modifiers: Locations can be assessed along a baseline for the ways that they can be used. There are *locations for conflict*, *locations for sanctuary*, and *locations for color*.

Story Points: Unanswered questions behind a place could include who built it, who owns it, and who inhabits or uses it. Implied worldbuilding comes with naming conventions, which evoke images of those sorts of places. The existence of some types of places implies the existence of others.

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 adventure 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 setting will suggest the types of locations you'll need. The genre, time, and place 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 adventure.

There are two types of locations within any adventure. 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

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

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

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 player characters need a place where they can breathe following one conflict, and prior to the next one.

PHYSIOLOGICAL SANCTUARY

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 campaign and should be a huge deal because it violates expectations.

SOCIOLOGICAL SANCTUARY

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

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 adventure. It has to not only serve the scene, but remind the player characters 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 use the real world as a setting. 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 that it can resonate with your players. 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 players can go look things up on their own if they want additional information. You only need to provide the elements that are essential to the setting.

Imaginary Locations

Using fictional locations that have been created by others can be trickier. The advantage is that your players are likely

familiar with them, so there's immediate resonance and understanding. If I'm writing a modern fantasy adventure 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 adventure, I have nearly as much research material and player 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 adventure 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 players have expectations. There is an established canon, and if you change things to suit the adventure you want to play, 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 not do it. If you're creative enough to lift elements for your adventure, why not go a step further and file the serial numbers off? Change things. Make them your own. Use other works as a template, or a source of inspiration, but put your own spin on them. Transcend from being derivative to being original.

Environment

Description: Worldbuilding elements describing the prominent features of the setting.

Purpose: To detail the variables that will affect storytelling, create character backgrounds, and generate obstacles based on common attributes of the setting and its individual locations.

Modifiers: Components that can be rated in relation to a baseline include *Environment Types, Climate, Weather, Seasons, Flora and Fauna, and Population Centers*.

Story Points: Unanswered questions might center on what sort of living things are in the environment, the types of hazards that may be present, and how it may differ from other examples of the same sort of environment. Implied worldbuilding stems from resonance with real-world components present in this type of element.

Environment is the general geography, natural features, and other components of the setting. Because our focus is on worldbuilding, we won't go into the tactical advantages or disadvantages of actions scenes taking place across various environments. 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 setting.

Environment Types

Below are some of the more common types of environments. 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 environment depends entirely open the needs of your setting.

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 through. 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 characters, 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. Characters who live in the desert either use irrigation, or are skilled at locating 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 environment, 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 land forms than hills. They are usually formed by volcanic or 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 setting.

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 a type of environment, 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 environment.

UNDERWATER

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

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 within a range. Because our focus is on worldbuilding, 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 worldbuilding.

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.

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 of 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.

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 worldbuilding, 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 SEASON

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 SEASON

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.

Flora and Fauna

What sorts of ordinary wildlife can be commonly found in this setting? 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 environment. 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, they 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 are 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 setting 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 environment'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.

People

Description: Worldbuilding elements describing the people who inhabit the setting.

Purpose: To detail the individuals, communities, and organizations needed to populate your setting. This element also helps to create possibilities for player character elements.

Modifiers: At a high level, the baseline components include Individuals, Organizations, Communities, and Civilizations. The baseline for these is going to be based on average population and element size. Above the baseline is larger, below is smaller.

Story Points: Unanswered questions will get into specifics, based on associations created by resonance. We know what Implied worldbuilding will be all of the support systems that go into each component. There are a lot of things that need to exist to have a civilization, for example. The assumption is that those requirements are there, unless they're called out as absent and explained.

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 setting. 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 setting. 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 non-player characters in your setting, or historical figures mentioned in passing in the setting's backstory.

COMMON PEOPLE

Who are the ordinary people in the setting? What are they like? How do 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 they 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 setting? Are historical figures referenced? Are they major characters, minor characters, or there simply to add some context or verisimilitude to your worldbuilding?

FICTIONAL CHARACTERS

Do characters from other works of fiction appear in your setting? 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 setting?

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 campaign. 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 do 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 complications 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 setting 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 an about.

CLIMATE AND ENVIRONMENT

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 ENVIRONMENT

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 exist, 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?

Technology

Description: A worldbuilding element detailing the types of technology available within the setting.

Purpose: Goods, services, ideas, and processes are present in the setting. This element allows you to specify everything from communications to transportation to weaponry. Elements need to be compatible with genre, time, and place.

Modifiers: Components are rated on a baseline rooted in a real-world equivalent. Something might be above the baseline for an historical time and place, while another might be below because the setting lags behind in that area.

Story Points: Unanswered questions center around how people in the setting get along in the absence of certain technology, and how higher levels of technology have impacted the setting. Implied worldbuilding is based on resonance and familiarity with the types of technology being discussed.

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 setting. 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 SOURCES

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 they 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 do nations use to make war against one another? What restrictions are there around who can own weapons, and what weapons they can use?

Events

Description: This worldbuilding element helps to document significant historical events that took place within the setting.

Purpose: This element details past events like wars and revolutions, recurring things like celebrations and festivals, and unexpected things like accidents, natural disasters, and more wars.

Modifiers: Components that might be rated in relation to a baseline include Past Events, Recurring Events, Upcoming Events, and Unexpected Events. The baseline will indicate the level of cultural significance and widespread impact in the setting. Above baseline means it affects several other elements, while below implies that it touches very few.

Story Points: Unanswered questions include the history of these events, how they came to be, and specific details of the impact they had. Implied worldbuilding reflects an

assumption that there were wide-reaching effects, and the types of effect based on real-world equivalents.

In an adventure, 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 setting, 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 campaign 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 # 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 an adventure 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 adventures, 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 wall, and the end is inevitable.

Unexpected Events

Surprises happen. Things that no one accounted for take place. In an adventure, these should be used sparingly. It's a cheat to spring things on your players 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.

Vocabulary

Description: Worldbuilding element defining the slang, colloquialisms, and special jargon used in the setting.

Purpose: Unusual terms can make the setting distinct. Common things might be called by different names. Words can be used to reinforce the genre or a sense of the historical time period. Jargon may need to be invented to represent fictional concepts with no real-world equivalents

Modifiers: Assessment of the baseline might reflect the degree to which an area of the setting might lean into the special vocabulary. Below baseline means using little or no slang or colloquialisms, while above reflects that such language is densely peppered into conversation.

Story Points: Unanswered questions include the origins and original meanings of certain terms, and the degree to which language has drifted. Implied worldbuilding is that there is an official, unadulterated, or academic version of the language.

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 players, 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 players something different about the setting than 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 setting 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 setting as well.