

Glossary for Forging Fantasy Realms



A

Abeyance: When the audience temporarily suspends their questions about made-up words or worldbuilding details with the implicit understanding that they will be answered later in the story.

Absorption: The two-way street wherein the audience is immersed in the created world and is picking up the author's metaphoric building blocks to recreate the concept in their head.

Acculturation: When an adult assimilates into another culture.

Additive: When something has been added to a secondary world, usually in the form of magic or fantasy species.

Affinity: A kinship pattern wherein the familial bond is based upon marriage.

Aggregate Inconsistencies: When audiences pick up internal inconsistencies not within the same story but from multiple sources within the shared universe.

Anachronism: Details that do not conform to their time period or culture.

Analogue Culture: Real-life cultures that the creator emulates in their work and then applies their fantasy conceits to.

Ancestor Worship: The belief that deceased ancestors still exist, are still a part of the family, and can intervene within the living world on their descendants' behalf.

Animism: The belief that all objects, creatures, and places are imbued with a spiritual essence.

Apex Predator: The predator at the top of a food web that no other creature naturally feeds upon. Two apex predators cannot exist in the same niche.

Apologetics: In worldbuilding, the attempt to explain inconsistencies in terms of existing canon.

Appropriated Culture: Using a culture as a whole that the creator is not a member of. Different from an analogue culture in that the analogue is changed by the creator and used respectfully.

Artifacts: In worldbuilding, the observable ways a culture behaves due to their cultural worldview. This can include politics, economics, religion, education, arts, humanities, and linguistics, along with many other cultural norms.

Ascendant: In worldbuilding, a world that the magic is increasing in power and influence.

Assimilation: When an individual rejects their original culture and adopts the cultural norms and beliefs of the dominant culture.

Author Authority: When an author demonstrates expert-level knowledge in a field to their audience.

Author Worldview: What Mark J. P. Wolf calls “not only the ideas and ideologies of the world’s inhabitants, but also those which the author is expressing through the world’s structure of events.”

Autocracy: A government in which supreme power concentrates in the hands of one individual or polity.

Avatar: The embodiment of a deity in another form, usually humanoid.

B

Bible: In the field of television writing, a series guidebook that usually includes the pitch, character descriptions, a synopsis, as well as worldbuilding details.

Biome: The vegetation and animals that exists within a region. Terrestrial biomes include: forest (tropical, temperate, or boreal), grassland, desert, and tundra.

Black Box: In information processing, when a system is viewed in terms of its inputs and outputs without any understanding as to its internal workings.

Bottom-Up: In design, where the granular, base elements of the system are created first, then grouping them together into larger constructs over and over until a pattern forms. Also known as “pansting” in writing and worldbuilding because the creator is building by the seat of their pants.

C

Callback: From standup comedy where the punchline in a joke used earlier in the set is alluded to again, eliciting another laugh from the reframing of what was already familiar.

Canon: The core doctrine for the world when conflicting information arises. Usually what the original creator made takes canonical precedence over subsequent additions.

Capitalism: The economic system wherein individuals own the means of production.

Chekhov's Gun: Often understood to mean that something must be introduced previously if it will have significance later in a narrative, but meant by the playwright that nothing should be included in the story that is not completely necessary.

Climate: The temperature and rainfall in regions over approximately 30 years. Classified as tropical (high temperature and high precipitation), dry (high temperature and low precipitation), temperate (mid temperature and mid precipitation), continental (in the center of large continents with warm summers and cold winters), and polar (low temperatures and low precipitation).

Commercial Fiction: The style of fiction that includes all genre fiction, the aim of which is entertainment. Often fast-paced and plot-driven.

Compelling: One of the four Cs of worldbuilding, which deals with how well the core concept and subsequent details maintain audience interest.

Complete: One of the four Cs of worldbuilding, which deals with the sense that the world is lived in, has a sense of history, and continues on even when the story ends.

Complexity Creep: When material gradually grows in complexity over its lifetime, raising the bar of entry for new people experiencing the material for the first time.

Conceits: Where a story deviates from reality. Usually the focus of the fiction by being what the author intends on exploring in their works.

Conlanguage: A constructed language created specifically for a story world.

Consanguinity: A kinship pattern wherein the familial bond is based upon a shared genetic lineage.

Consistent: One of the four Cs of worldbuilding, which deals with how well the material maintains its own internal logic as established by the fantasy conceits.

Constructed World: A fictional world that does not exist but was created by someone.

Continuity: A gestalt term for perception where the mind fills in obvious blanks to make a unified whole.

Convergent Evolution: When two or more species develop analogous features to deal with their environment.

Co-Residency: A kinship pattern wherein the familial bond is based upon shared space.

Cosmology: The study of mapping the universe and our place in it.

Cost: In worldbuilding, when a character must risk or sacrifice something for magic to take effect.

Creative: One of the four Cs of worldbuilding, which deals with how and to what extent the constructed world deviates from the real world.

Credibility Threshold: Where worldbuilding details must only appear plausible to a general audience rather than demonstrating expert-level knowledge.

Cultural Identity: An individual's self-concept as distinct from others based upon nationality, ethnicity, social class, generation, and locality.

Cultural Universals: Traits, patterns, and institutions prevalent throughout humankind.

Customs: Informal rules of behavior that people take part in without thinking about it.

D

Deity: The most powerful of metaphysical entities, deities often exist in pantheons, have thematic powers based upon their roles, and few weaknesses or limitations.

Descendent: In terms of magic, the idea that the most powerful magics are from ages past and that magic is on the decline in terms of power and influence.

Despotism: An economic system wherein an individual or institution controls the laws and resources of an area.

Deus Ex Machina: A plot device in which an unexpected power, event, or deity intervenes to save a hopeless situation.

Differentiation: When one culture forms part of their identity by contrasting themselves with another nearby culture.

Divergent: When the creator alters something in the development of the world but it remains very similar to the real world in every detail but this fantasy conceit. For instance, a world that resembles our own but made up of anthropomorphic animals instead of humans.

Divine: The belief that something is of, from, or like a god.

Democracy: A government in which the people elect a governing body in some fashion.

E

Early Adoption: When an inventor or culture creates a technology long before their analogue culture did in the real world.

Easter Egg: A hidden message, image, or feature that is meant to be hunted for within the material.

Economics: The study of production, distribution, and consumption of goods and services.

Education: A form of socialization in which we teach the youth what they need to know to become functioning members of society.

Effective Worldbuilding: When 1) the immersive state is never disrupted for the audience, or when 2) the immersive state is disrupted with a positive result.

Element X: N. K. Jemisin's concept of when fantasy elements diverge from the real world. Similar to fantasy conceits.

Emic: An account of a cultural idea, concept, behavior, or belief documented as if from within the culture.

Empires: Multinational states with political hegemony over other ethnicities, cultures, or nations.

Encyclopedic Impulse: The consumer's desire to know everything about the world or the author's desire to expound upon all the worldbuilding details.

Ephemera: Transitional materials that are not meant to exist for long term, such as advertisements, diary entries, letters, posters, and the like.

Ethnicity: A group that identifies with each other based on presumed similarities such as a shared language, ancestry, history, society, or social treatment within an area. Ethnicities are not dependent upon, but are often associated with, certain taxonomic traits or physiological similarities within those groups.

Etic: When cultural ideas, concepts, behaviors, or beliefs are documented from outside the cultural milieu as a passive observer with an eye for similarities between all cultures

Exsecting: When the creator removes something that exists in the real world from the created world.

Extrapolation: In worldbuilding, the belief that any fantasy conceit should be followed to its natural conclusion.

F

Face Validity: When worldbuilding detail appears believable upon immediate examination. See Credibility Threshold.

Fan Service: Material included in a story that serves no narrative purpose other than to please fans.

Fantasy Conceit: What the creator intends to explore in the world, it is where the constructed world deviates from the real world, usually in the form of geography, biology, physics, metaphysics, technology, or culture.

Fantasy Function: When analogue cultures are filtered through fantasy conceits to populate the created world with its output details.

Fetishes: Items imbued with cultural significance and power.

First Principles: Core belief and value systems within a culture that are often unconscious until confronted.

Flavor Text: Texts within stories, video games, role-playing games, and action figures that add depth by providing a sense of history but do not alter the game mechanics or story in a substantial way.

Feudalism: An economic system wherein there is a division between the lords that protect the vassals that work the land in exchange for protection.

Four Cs of Worldbuilding: Creative, Complete, Consistent, and Compelling.

G

Gender: A social construct of how cultures differentiate the sexes.

Generalist: When every individual in a society has the same basic job, which is providing their daily caloric intake. A staple of hunter and gatherers and in contrast to specialists.

Generation: A social cohort group based around the period in which children grow up, become adults, and bear children of their own. Because of this shared timeframe and significant events in their lives, generations often share a similar worldview within the general culture.

Genre Expectation: The qualities audiences expect of their genres to be considered successful, i.e. is the thriller thrilling or the romance romantic. For fantasy and science fiction, the genre expectation is worldbuilding.

Goldilocks Zone: The habitable zone around a star where the temperature is right for water to exist in liquid form.

Group: Two or more individuals who share a collective sense of unity via interacting with each other because of shared similar characteristics.

H

Habitat: The ecosystem or ecological community creatures exist in.

Handwave: A writing term for explaining crucial events dismissively with minimal details.

Handwavium: As opposed to the handwave, when everything else in the imagined world fits logically together with the exception of the fantasy conceit, which the audience must then accept to continue on with the story.

Hard Deduction: When there is no narrator and no character bringing the worldbuilding details to the audience's attention, who must then piece together the world rules based upon the provided details alone.

Hard Impart: When information is imparted to the audience through narrative text, usually through the narrator or the internal thoughts of characters.

Hero Props: Items that are necessary for a scene to take place, making them integral to the story.

Heroic Theory of Invention: When inventors and discoverers of scientific developments are treated as solitary geniuses rather than products of good luck or a part of a team.

High-Concept: A term from the film industry meaning an idea needs lots of background details, usually compiled from the worldbuilding, to be explained for the core concept to be compelling.

Hybrid: 1) In biology, a living thing bred together from two different species, which is not able to produce its own viable offspring. 2) A method the author can employ to get details across to the audience in which it appears they are using a hard or soft impart, but the audience deduces are not correct, which then casts provided information into doubt and adds new nuance.

I

Iceberg Theory: The theory proffered by Hemmingway that so long as the author is aware of the underlying ideas, they can cut away anything from the story and it will still make sense. Usually interpreted to mean one only needs to reveal 10% of worldbuilding details or backstory.

Illusion of Completeness: The sense that the world is complete and that all questions can be answered within it rather than the creator explicitly spelling out all the details.

Immersion: The altered state in which the audience feels they are physically present in a non-physical world.

Ineffective Worldbuilding: When worldbuilding details become obvious to the consumer, thus breaking the sense of immersion and reminding them of the real world. This can be caused by internal inconsistencies or from reality incursions.

Info Dump: A sudden overwhelming quantity of backstory or background information supplied in a short timeframe.

Info Dump Equity: The idea that an author should not reveal worldbuilding information until the audience craves it, thus being able to deliver an info dump without anyone complaining.

In-Group: The other people an individual identifies with. While they may not share the exact worldview, they share the same first principles in understanding the world around them.

Innovation: The drive for change, usually technological, but also socially.

Inside-Out: How audiences process worldbuilding details, in that they pertain to the immediate understanding of the scene, which are then pieced together into an understanding of the world.

Inspired Worldbuilding: The top form of worldbuilding, which invites additional audience interaction via their imagination after the story has concluded.

Institutions: Stable organizations of individuals formed for a shared purpose, usually by performing specific, reoccurring patterns of behavior.

Integration: When an individual adopts the cultural norms and beliefs of the dominant culture while still retaining their original culture.

Interconnection: When the threads of worldbuilding are tied together cohesively. Part of Sanderson's third law of magic systems.

Interquel: Stories set in an existing world but that do not connect with the original story.

Intraquel: Stories set in an existing world that fill in gaps in the existing story.

K

Kinship: How social relationships organize into groups, roles, and families. Usually consisting of consanguinity, affinity, or co-residency.

L

Limitations: Checks put upon magical powers, usually in the form of weaknesses and costs. Sanderson maintains in his second law that limitations are more dramatically important than powers.

Linguistics: The study of languages.

Literary Fiction: The style of fiction that aims for awards, considers itself art, focuses on the prose, and is usually slowly paced.

Locality: The small-scale community in which the individuals in a group grew up, usually comprising of a town, neighborhood, or block, which differentiates them from others in the surrounding area.

M

Macroworldbuilding: The first of the stages N. K. Jemisin breaks her worldbuilding process into, which consists of planet, continents, climate, and ecology.

Magic: Change wrought through unnatural means.

Magic Point Systems: Magic systems where the casters have a set amount of energy, usually referred to as mana, to spend on their effects.

Magical Thinking: The belief people can affect change the world around them through thoughts and behaviors.

Mana: A frequent generalized term for the finite resource magic users spend on their magical effects.

Marginalization: When an individual rejects both their original culture and the dominant culture.

Mary Sue/ Marty Sue: Originally a created character for fanfic who has no flaws and is inserted into interactions with the canonical characters. Now an insult leveled at characters consumers don't like, usually claiming they are overly capable and without flaws.

Masquerade: A term taking from the World of Darkness RPG wherein the existence of magic is hidden from the general populous.

Metaphysics: In worldbuilding, dealing with deities, spirits, cosmology, and the afterlife. In essence, creatures and locations that do not abide by understandings of biology or physics.

Microworldbuilding: The second of the stages N. K. Jemisin breaks her worldbuilding process into, which consists of species, morphology, raiation, acculturation, power, and role.

Monotheism: The belief in a single deity only.

Mystery Box: The theory proffered by JJ Abrams that mystery drives audience interest, which will keep them invested in a story so long as they are promised elucidation later.

Mythopeia: Constructed mythologies, lores, and histories within created worlds.

N

Nationality: How an individual relates to their state. A component of cultural identity.

Nominal Change: A superficial change in the secondary world that contributes nothing to the worldbuilding.

Norms: What is considered acceptable group behavior and what people should and should not do in their social surroundings.

O

Oligarchy: A government in which power rests in a small group of people like the nobility, wealthy, or religious leaders.

One-Off: An intentional inconsistency meant to highlight the aberration as separate from the established worldbuilding.

Out-Group: Those that do not share the same collective worldview, which are often mistrusted or viewed with outright hostility.

Overlaid Worlds: Constructed worlds with real-world locations but with the addition of fantasy elements.

P

Pantheon: A categorization of collected deities based upon the culture that worships them

Pantsers: Creators who build or write without a clear outcome in mind. See Bottom-Up.

Pidgin Language: A grammatically simplified language used for trade that comprises vocabularies drawn from numerous languages.

Planet of Hats: The trope of treating a species or world as monolithic and with one defining trait.

Planners: Worldbuilders or writers who have a clear plan once they start creating. See Top-Down.

Politics: The decision-making process within groups and individuals involving power structures.

Polytheism: The belief of multiple gods, usually inhabiting a pantheon.

Porcelain Argument: In worldbuilding, the belief that technology stagnates at the level at which magic or a fantasy conceit is introduced.

Portal Fantasy: A subgenre in which the characters from the real world travel to a secondary world.

Prequel: Stories set in an existing world that precede the original story. They do not need to connect to the original story but often do.

Primary Sexual Characteristics: The sex organs used in reproduction.

Primary World: The real world in which we all reside and draw our experience from.

Prime Mover: A conceit that cannot be removed without the story world falling apart.

Profane: Something that is religiously blasphemous or obscene.

Prologue: An opening sequence in a narrative that establishes background details to create context, clarification, and miscellaneous information for the audience

Promise of the Premise: The term coined by Blake Snyder for the point in the story when the setup is complete and it examines its core conceits. An author breaks the promise of the premise when the story is not about the promised core concepts.

Pull Factors: Factors that draw immigrants to an area.

Purple Prose: Descriptions that becomes overly ornate and extravagant, to the point they break the sense of immersion by drawing attention to themselves.

Push Factors: Factors that drive immigrants out of an area.

R

- Race:** 1) In biology, a grouping of populations below the level of subspecies, and is rather imprecise in distinguishing the differences between them. 2) In the fantasy genre, usually understood to mean “species.”
- Racial Attributes:** The assumption that any one fantasy race shares not only certain abilities like flight or the capacity to speak with animals, but certain demeanors, temperaments, and biases.
- Reality Incursions:** When the outside world interjects itself into the created fantasy experience to remind the consumer that this is indeed a made-up world. They usually occur when the consumer has expert knowledge in a field that is not depicted correctly in the narrative.
- Reciprocity:** When people respond to actions with similar actions. This can be positive, as in the exchanging of gifts, or negative, as with punitive eye-for-an-eye punishments for crimes.
- Relativism:** The belief there is no real objective universal truth and that we base all understanding upon perception and consideration.
- Religion:** The cultural system of behaviors, morals, ethics, and worldview in which humans deal with supernatural, metaphysical, and spiritual conceptions.
- Retcon:** Short for “retroactive continuity,” the term comes from comic books when previous canon or facts are ignored or contradicted so as to assimilate new stories or understandings in current storylines.
- Reverberations and Repercussions:** The understanding that any change within a world creates many expected and unexpected changes to the whole.
- Rituals:** Formal customs often involving gestures, words, and objects performed in a traditional sequence.
- Rule of Cool:** The understanding that the audience’s willing suspension of disbelief for a given element is directly proportional to its level of “coolness.”
- Rule of Law:** The idea that laws extend to the lawmakers as well as the general populous.
- Rule of Three:** In worldbuilding, the concept coined by Randy Ellefson in which an author should alter at least three components of a trope to make it their own.

S

- Saturation:** Mark J. P. Wolf’s term for when there are simply too many details for the audience to fully absorb, which he maintains makes the world stronger since it invites the audience to reexperience the material again and again to glean something new each time.
- Scarcity:** When people put higher value on rare things and assign lesser value to things in abundance.
- Secondary Sexual Characteristics:** The distinguishing traits that distinguish the sexes, such as human males’ facial hair or females’ breasts.
- Secondary World:** A created world that does not exist.
- Selection:** In biology, the preferential survival and reproduction or elimination of individuals with certain traits. Can be either artificial, natural, positive, or negative.
- Separation:** When an individual rejects the dominant culture in favor of preserving their original culture, which often leads to minority enclaves within the dominant culture
- Sequel:** Stories set in an existing world that follow the original story. They do not need to connect to the original story but often do.
- Set Piece:** An iconic scene that exemplifies the story even though it might not actually be necessary to the story itself.
- Shamanism:** The belief that specific individuals have access to and influence over the spiritual realm, usually derived by ritual and entering altered states.

Show Don't Tell: The understanding that the audience prefers to experience the worldbuilding details and storytelling events in action rather than having them explained.

Smeerp: Unnecessarily renaming something to make it seem exotic. Derived from James Blish's sarcastic use of the term when describing rabbits.

Smeerp Hole: When one seemingly minor change contributes to a whole slew of other changes on the author's part that add little to the audience experience as a whole.

Social Class: The hierarchal social stratification of groups, usually manifesting as upper, middle, and lower classes.

Socialism: The economic system in which the workers or government own and manage the means of production.

Socialization: The process in which a group passes on the worldviews, norms, and customs to their children.

Soft Deduction: When a character with knowledge of the worldbuilding takes action based upon specific information to get the worldbuilding rules across to the audience.

Soft Impart: Information presented to the audience not through narrative text but through a trustworthy side character or source. Can often come about from an overheard conversation or explanation from another character.

Specialization: The divisions of labor and creation of occupations when the population does not individually have to account for their daily caloric intake. As opposed to generalist.

Species: A group of living creatures capable of exchanging genetic material and producing viable offspring.

Speculative Fiction: An umbrella term for fiction that inject elements into the story that do not exist in the real world. Fantasy, science fiction, horror, historical fiction, alternative history, and dystopian and utopian fiction are just a few genres that qualify as speculative fiction.

Spotlighted/ Lampshaded: A potentially troublesome concept or idea that is intentionally brought to the audience's attention before it becomes problematic to highlight that it is intended as a fantasy conceit rather than an accidental anachronism.

Stasis: The drive to maintain the current order, be it social, political, or technological.

States: Organized governments overseeing a specific territory that can interact with other states.

Streamlining: Part of Sanderson's third law of magic in which worldbuilding details should be accounted for by already existing fantasy conceits instead of creating whole new conceits.

Suspension of Disbelief: When an audience makes a choice to suspend their critical faculties to allow for a patently unreal concept to be considered logical for the sake of entertainment.

T

Taming: When an animal has been taught to tolerate human presence. As opposed to domestication.

Technobabble: When a character spouts a number of details to establish their expert credentials in the field. Technobabble is not meant to be understood by either the audience or the other characters, only to establish the character's authority on the subject.

Terra De Facto: The implicit understanding that anything that is not accounted for by a fantasy conceit must therefore abide by the rules of the primary world.

Terrain: The vertical and horizontal proportions of land masses, which includes how high it is above sea level and at what slope.

Theocracy: A government where the religious leaders and practices control the laws in addition to the religious norms and rituals.

Toehold Details: Descriptors that specifically trigger the assumption of an analogue culture and time period, and therefore help the audience to mentally populate the scene.

Top-Down: In design, when the underlying idea or system is formed on a grand scale, then with all subsequent subsystems being added and refined until everything is mapped out. Also referred to as “planner” or “engineer” when it comes to writing or worldbuilding.

Totems: Imbued emblems representing a group of people tied to a specific spirit.

Transmedial: When a story or world exists in multiple mediums.

Tropes: Reoccurring motifs, images, plots, and characterization that exist within a genre.

U

Unchanged: When the creator does not use a particular fantasy conceit and leaves their created world the same as the real world in regards to this fantasy conceit. See Terra De Facto.

Unobtainium: In engineering, the term used for materials or technologies that do not yet exist but will one day solve current problems. Frequently used in science fiction worldbuilding.

Upmarket Fiction: The style of fiction that aims for creating discussion. It often blends literary and commercial fiction, deals with universal themes, has accessible language, and is character-driven.

W

Weakness: Limiting factors that diminish the power or the person using it. Part of Sanderson’s second law of magic.

Worldbuilding Capital: Time and mental energy sunk into a world, which is why authors frequently reuse the existing world instead of forming a new one for subsequent stories.

Worldbuilding Kudzu: When too many worldbuilding choke out the pertinent information by sheer volume, thus disrupting immersion.

Worldview: How a society or individual orients their knowledge and point of view towards the world. This includes philosophy, fundamentals, existential postulates, values and ethics, ideology, and attitude. It encompasses the concept of why the world works the way it does and the “correct” way to act within it.

Worship: The act of religious devotion towards a deity or ideal.

