



BERIN KINSMAN

WORLD BUILDING THEORY

THE SECOND PILLAR OF
FANTASY ADVENTURE

A FORAGERS GUILD GUIDE

WORLDBUILDING THEORY

The Second Pillar of Fantasy Adventure™

Berin Kinsman
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Bryce Carlson
Shining Arrow

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THE SECOND PILLAR OF FANTASY STORYTELLING

Worldbuilding is essential to a good fantasy adventure. It creates the context for the characters and the stories that they're involved in. The information necessary to understand the motivations of the villains, the goals of the story, and what's at stake if the protagonists fail, are all tied up on the setting elements that have been established and explained. Without the worldbuilding, your setting might as well be any other setting. In a roleplaying game, it means you end up with very generic kill monster-get treasure dynamics. A valid style of play, if you're into that, but it's also a ton of wasted creative potential.

Too often, though, we lose sight of why we're creating an imaginary world. We look at Tolkien, who started off by creating complete languages. Only a fraction of that made it into his books and stories. M.A.R. Barker started working on the world of ***Tékumel*** during childhood, before anyone had even conceived or roleplaying games. He didn't publish any of his ***Empire of the Petal Throne*** material until he was in his 40s, and didn't write his novels in the setting until he was in his 50s. Roleplaying games publish gazetteers filled with complex histories of their fantasy worlds, with amazing levels of detail. It's almost standard operating procedure for fantasy novels to have a map of the world contained within the book, whether the map is relevant to the story or not. It's a daunting amount of work. It's also not necessary.

There are already a ton of books on fantasy worldbuilding available. I wrote Worldbuilding Theory in order to take a different approach. Rather than dig into all of the fiddle bits, this volume takes a practical approach. We'll delve into what I consider the Three Essential Elements of Worldbuilding — genre, time and place, and tone. The interdependence of setting with characters and stories, the other two pillars of fantasy adventure, will be discussed at length. By the end, you should have a clearer understanding not only of what you're creating, but why you're creating it. Then you can target your efforts and save yourself prep time by concentrating on the elements you'll need.

ABOUT THE FORAGERS GUILD SERIES

Most tabletop roleplaying manuals will tell you everything that you need to know about running a game. At the same time, they offer precious little information on how to tell a story. There will be a wealth of advice on how to build a world and develop a setting, but not much on what you should do with those details once you have them. You'll find volumes on how to maximize your character's abilities and put them to the best tactical use, but not much on how to use that character to help bring that world to life and tell the story. The Foragers Guild series is for everyone harboring a desire to create better fantasy adventures, no matter what system or setting you're using.

THE THREE PILLARS OF FANTASY

ADVENTURE

The Foragers Guild series asserts that fantasy storytelling requires three essential, non-negotiable elements. You need compelling characters, a captivating setting, and electrifying adventure. These elements apply to any fantasy world and work with any rules system. The interplay of these three pillars is what will make your fantasy adventures stand out.

CHARACTERS

The best fantasy stories have memorable, even iconic, characters. We all have our favorite fictional heroes and villains. They're always shaped and supported by the setting. Adventures are about their attempts to achieve their goals and fulfill their ambitions. Characters are the first pillar of fantasy adventure.

WORLDBUILDING

Something about the fantasy genre makes people go crazy for worldbuilding. It's important to understand why the setting is important, and how the other two pillars balance it out. Your creative efforts must serve the needs of characters and adventures, and not be an end unto itself. Worldbuilding is the second pillar of fantasy adventure.

STORY

Your adventure needs a plot, whether it's simply and linear or complex and convoluted. There has to be a beginning, a middle, and an end. There have to be clear goals and objectives for them to

accomplish. Otherwise, they will wander aimlessly without any sense of purpose or satisfaction. Story is the third pillar of fantasy adventure.

USING THIS BOOK

To get the most from this book you should read it through once in its entirety. At least skim the thing and read the headers. That way, you can pick up on the key points and familiarize yourself with what's in here. Then you can go back later and reference sections as you need them.

The main sections of the book are as follows:

ZEEBO'S JOURNAL

Our intrepid member of the Foragers Guild, Zeebo Kantelleki, expresses his opinion on how maps, laundry lists of characters, and an excess of background information don't always help him get through his adventures easier.

WORLDBUILDING AND GENRE

One of the three essential elements of worldbuilding, the setting's genre will create possibilities and limitations. It's fantasy, but there are subgenres to explore and mash-ups with other genres can happen.

WORLDBUILDING AND TIME AND PLACE

The second essential element of worldbuilding is the when and where of the setting. In a fantasy world this is arbitrary, but if you're emulating real-world events it will affect a lot of things.

WORLDBUILDING AND TONE

The third and final essential element of worldbuilding is mood and atmosphere. Your game can be serious, scary, silly, or any combination of things. Holding to the tone can determine the setting's success or failure.

WORLDBUILDING AND CHARACTERS

A look at how worldbuilding affects the first pillar of fantasy adventure. Setting elements have to be useful for protagonists and antagonists, and set up the existence of the supporting cast.

WORLDBUILDING AND STORY

Your fantasy setting has to create possibilities and limitations for the third pillar of fantasy adventure, the story. How those boundaries can save you time, spark your creativity, and make for better gaming.

WORLDBUILDING AND GOALS

All adventures have a story goal that the protagonists have to accomplish. Your fantasy setting has to contain all of the elements needed for the player characters to be able to accomplish those goals.

WORLDBUILDING AND OBSTACLES

Without obstacles the player characters would just walk around picking up treasure. Your fantasy setting will determine the types of complications characters will face in pursuing the story goal.

WORLDBUILDING AND REWARDS

When the adventure is over the characters get experience and treasure. Those things might look different within your fantasy setting. There may be other reward that are specific to your world.

WORLDBUILDING AND CONTINUITY

Sometimes you create setting elements on the fly. Other times players add things as part of their back story. How to keep your continuity straight, and fix it when you've made a mistake.

WORLDBUILDING AND RULES

Every fantasy setting has to operate within the context of the game mechanics. There are also setting rules that have to be established, which will affect the characters and the stories that you tell.

DESIGNER'S NOTES

A few words on what motivated me to write Worldbuilding Theory and how the Foragers Guild series came to be.

ZEEBO'S JOURNAL

So there I was, sitting in the tavern listening to this racist dotard going on about how his people were the best, when one of Lord Madblade's pages shows up. He was human, of course — not the page, the idiot — which should go without saying. Not all humans are problematic, but most of them think they're the center of the universe. If they weren't, why was the term humanoid used to describe other races that shared certain characteristics, but were not human? We all get compared to them, not the other way around.

The answer, by the way, is because it was humans who came up with the term humanoid. The same people who dubbed an entire species halflings because they look like humans, but are half the size. I can't even imagine dwarves referring to other species are dwarvenoid or elves calling different civilizations elvenoid. All species are racist in their own way, but only humans try to codify it with their naming conventions.

Anyway, as I was contemplating what sorts of tricks I could play on this *frinking arvool*, up to and including luring him into a fight because a six foot-tall-human couldn't live down getting his nazz kicked by the three-foot-tall gnome, the page walked in. Now, if you're not familiar with the Foragers Guild, you hear the word page and think of some boy in short pants and long socks, probably carrying a scroll. That's not how a weirdo like Madblade operates.

Guild pages are these hairy, seven-foot-tall guys from a species who call themselves *bogge*. Humans call them bugbears, which

some bogge consider a slur but most of them let it go. Better than being called halfling, right? They wear immaculate uniforms made from top quality leather and silk, which is a complete juxtaposition with the bogge's appearance. No slight intended, but they're all teeth and ears. The pages confuse people, which is what Madblade intended, I'm sure.

Back to the point, the page comes in, and the racist *arvool* shuts up, because it's one thing to talk booloo in front of a harmless looking gnome, and another to spew in front of a bogge. When the bogge tells me that I'm wanted back at the Guild Hall, the idiot suddenly realizes that he's been flapping his beer hole in front of one of them. I point at the *arvool* and give him a wink and a smile, and I think he started to choke.

When I walk into Madblade's workshop, he's drawing a map. I call it a workshop out of respect for the weirdo. Indoor midden isn't quite right, because it wasn't completely a pile of garbage. His space is just a mass of clutter. Tables full of alchemical equipment, books stacked in piles taller than me on the floor, monster bones scattered around, just a mess. He's one of those freaks that know where everything is, and considers this space to be organized. It hurts my soul to look at it.

He's drawing a map, based on a couple of other maps that he's got out on the table, along with a book that's open on a smaller table next to him. The weirdo is wearing his little glasses, but looking over the top of them.

"Do you know what this is?" he asks me, smiling.

I roll my eyes far enough back into my head to see what I was thinking about yesterday. “A map, weirdo. Of what, I don’t know. And I don’t care. What did you need me for?”

“What does this tell map tell you?” has asked. The little smile got broader. I put up with the weirdo because he’s the only other gnome that I know of in this part of Desteon, but he pushes my buttons. I really hate people who play the I-know-something-you-don’t-know game. Because most of the time they don’t actually know boolo, they’re just into power games. I am not into power games, and the fact that Madblade was able to push my buttons at all was sprinkling me off.

“A map tells me absolutely nothing useful,” I said.

He feigned hurt feelings. “It tells you many things! Look at that coastline. That bay. There’s a city there. A major port. Over here, in this deep forest, a community of elves. To the north, among that mountain range, is a significant dwarven kingdom.”

“Yeah, no, that still tells me nothing. Cities on oceans, elves in forests, dwarves in mountains, no kidding. That’s pretty much every world I’ve ever been on, ever, and that’s a lot of worlds. Next you’ll tell me that there are caves, and in those caves are goblins.”

“But maps help us to get around! How do you get from one place to another?”

“For me, usually, I complete some quest or mission or assignment, go back to wherever I happen to be staying, go to sleep, and wake up someplace else. Put there, I might add, by whatever god or gods happen to be holding my bar tab at the moment, and decide there’s some problem that they need me to straighten out.” I

was starting to feel bad, because I could tell that I was hurting his feelings. History was his thing. He was the Curator Militant of the Guild Museum. He collected knowledge. Maps, to him, were knowledge.

“Look,” I continued, “for the things that I do, maps aren’t useful. I get that they can give you a sense of the geography of a place, and the broad strokes of political boundaries and where various species are likely to live. But it doesn’t tell me about the place. I can take a wild guess that I’ll run into elves in the forest, but it doesn’t give me a sense of who they are as a people. What the culture of that community is. What their problems are. Why I might have ended up there. How to find the resources I need.”

Madblade got serious, and nodded. “The map is not the adventure.”

“Exactly. So I know where on this planet I’m standing. It doesn’t tell me who I need to fight, what I need to steal, how many guards I need to bribe, and what peoples need to be lifted out of oppression. Maybe if, I don’t know, I were a general commanding an army, it would be useful to know where my troops were, and where the enemy forces had gathered, and what sort of terrain we’d be fighting on. That’s not what I do. That’s not what we do, in the Foragers Guild. But you know that. What’s your game, weirdo?”

“You know the King of Azilan?”

“The human? I know of him, but I’ve never met him. He’s supposed to be a real piece of...”

“He’s demanded to know the details of Guild operations in and around his kingdom. So I’m drawing him a very pretty map, and I’d like you to deliver it to him.”

At that, we both laughed.

WORLDBUILDING AND GENRE

A genre is a category of fiction that's defined by specific characteristics. As a genre, fantasy includes anything set in a fictional universe that contains magic and supernatural elements. That's it. That's all you need in order to qualify as fantasy. You don't need to have medievalist elements. There doesn't have to be a reliance on mythology and folklore. If it's not the real world, and has things that can't be explained using the scientific laws of nature, it's fantasy.

Genre is the first essential element of fantasy worldbuilding. It might seem obvious or even redundant that your fantasy has to contain characteristics of fantasy. Consider, though, that there are several subgenres of fantasy that can add further qualifiers which, in turn, create other possibilities and limitations for characters and stories. In a moment we'll look at some of those including high fantasy, where the magic is turned up to 11, and low fantasy where the supernatural elements are dialed back to 3 or less.

Other genres can also have a strong influence on your particular fantasy world. Horror commonly crosses over into fantasy, as do elements science fiction. You can also play with influences drawn from crime fiction (thieves' guilds, anyone?), westerns (unexplored frontiers), mystery, and any number of other genres. Your core setting still remains fantasy, in spite of the presents of those borrowed and adapted elements.

Some examples of how genre can drive worldbuilding are as follows. This isn't an exhaustive list, but it represents elements

most commonly found in roleplaying settings. These genre examples will be used throughout the book.

HIGH FANTASY

This is the default subgenre for most fantasy roleplaying games. In high fantasy, magic is a powerful and pervasive force present in the world. The protagonists are larger-than-life heroes, who represented the qualities of all that is good and pure in the world. The antagonists, by contrast, are profoundly evil and corrupt. Good and evil are clearly defined moral and ethical concepts, with little or no gray areas between them. The struggle between these opposed forces is often the central focus of high fantasy.

LOW FANTASY

In low fantasy, the supernatural elements are present but minimized. They may be so rare as to have no significant impact on day-to-day life. Spellcasting will be rare or non-existent. Races could be limited to humans, with monsters more likely to resemble beasts than fantastic creatures. Protagonists may be good, but they might also be morally ambiguous. Their status as heroes is often a default position, simply because they're less corrupt and ethically challenged than the antagonists.

DARK FANTASY

This subgenre is fantasy with strong elements of horror. The monsters are meant to be terrifying. Threats are often beyond understanding, rather than creatures that can be faced directly and slain. There are elements of investigation and mystery, as the protagonists have to figure out what's going on before it's too late.

Those protagonists might also be more morally ambiguous, playing with forces beyond their understanding. Fear, rather than hope or heroism, is the prevailing emotion.

SCIENCE FANTASY

This subgenre is the intersection of fantasy and science fiction. Magic and plausible technology may coexist in some combination. The technology may be so fantastic as to not be credibly scientific, but disbelief is suspended and the characters behave as if everything makes logical sense. The world might resemble either a traditional fantasy realm, or a standard science fiction universe, with elements of the other genre folded in to create new possibilities and challenges.

ROMANTIC FANTASY

This is fantasy that places a heavy emphasis on character relationships. Social, political, and romantic issues are the focus. Characters will follow standard love story beats, meeting, falling in love with one another, and encountering obstacles along the way. There are often class distinctions that make relationships difficult, or cultural taboos that need to be faced and overcome. Setting elements often reflect real-world political issues that affect notions of love, marriage, and the definition of family.

GENRE AND SETTING

How you choose to expand the definition of the fantasy genre will affect other elements of your setting. Distinctions made in a subgenre like high fantasy may be absent in a dark fantasy world. The way that supernatural elements are presented in a low fantasy

setting will be distinct from similar elements in a romantic fantasy world.

GENRE CAN ESTABLISH THE SETTING CANON

Remember that the only two hard-and-fast criteria for the fantasy genre are that it is a fictional world, and it must contain some form of magic and the supernatural. By declaring your setting to be within the fantasy genre, you are establishing those two points. That gives you a starting point to work from. The use of fantasy subgenres and blending in other genres will provide other baselines and open up other possibilities. Genre choices will also close off other options

GENRE CAN EXPRESS THE SETTING CANON

This is where you can make your fantasy world distinct from other fictional realms. While magic is distinct from other forces that follow natural laws, are their rules involved in spellcasting? Do supernatural elements have common characteristics? Genre expression can also show how things are similar to other familiar fantasy settings, but having certain creatures, magic items, or other elements in common with them.

GENRE CAN RESTRICT THE SETTING CANON

The inclusion of something that goes against established canon may require additional worldbuilding to make it fit. Say you've been focused primarily on science fantasy, for example, by providing pseudo-scientific explanations for things. Suddenly you add in dark fantasy elements that are meant to be weird and defy explanation. It

could lead to confusion and wreck the baseline expectations you've established for your fantasy world.

GENRE AND CHARACTERS

Fantasy implies certain types of characters. Larger than life heroes, disturbingly evil villains, and the availability of supernatural abilities are the standard for fantasy roleplaying games. Your setting has to provide the support systems for those characters. Organizations, training, equipment, causes to support, causes to oppose, and all sorts of other elements have to exist in order for the characters to be plausible.

GENRE CAN ESTABLISH CHARACTER POSSIBILITIES

We know that the setting is not the real world, but the elements present in the world will define the kinds of people that inhabit it. Everything from the terrain to resources available will create possibilities for professions, cultures, and civilizations. These in turn will define job. You will also need to establish the relationship that characters within the setting have with the supernatural. Are they separate from it, or a part of it? Do they use it, fear it, or fight against it? Characters' relationships with magic will change depending upon subgenres and genre blends used in your fantasy setting.

GENRE CAN EXPRESS CHARACTER POSSIBILITIES

There is magic in your fantasy world, but how does it work? Even within the mechanics of the game system you're using, there can be unique descriptive details, words and gestures and special effects, that set spellcasting in your setting apart. How do characters learn

magic? How did the various fantasy races develop? What impact has the presence of the supernatural had on the development of cultures and civilizations? What sort of religious and political ideologies will characters have to deal with because of the fantastic elements in your world?

GENRE CAN RESTRICT CHARACTER POSSIBILITIES

Depending on how you choose to define fantasy, and the subgenre or cross-genre elements you incorporate, some character possibilities may not fit. They may be rare, or required to operate in secrecy, because of cultural attitudes, religious beliefs, and laws around the use of magic. Character classes and archetypes might need adjustment to accommodate elements of other genres, or that may be negated because they conflict with elements brought in from those other genres. Anything that contradicts the way you've established and expressed genre needs to be explained somehow, or else excluded.

GENRE AND STORY

A fantasy story can follow the same beats and structures as any other kind of story. There are certain kinds of stories that are more common to fantasy than other genres, however. We're all familiar with the Hero's Journey, right? There are quests to find artifacts and slay monsters. You can even find crime capers in fantasy fiction fairly regularly. Yet when the genre is fantasy, elements will be different than in other genres. Things need to be bigger, grander, more over-the-top. The sense of magic needs to be pervasive throughout even the smallest details of the story.

GENRE AND THE BEGINNING OF A STORY

In the beginning of the story, the fact that this is not the real world needs to be established. Something fantastic needs to happen to show that this is not some historical time and place. The existence of magic and how it works has to be introduced. Characters in the beginning of the story will be going about their normal business, showing what life in the setting is like. Their story goal, what the player characters need to accomplish, will be introduced and it will have to have supernatural overtones. The worldbuilding as presented in the beginning of the story will establish elements that won't pay off until later in the story, but their credibility and the willing suspension of disbelief will begin here.

GENRE AND THE MIDDLE OF A STORY

In the middle of the story, the fantasy element has to be put to good use. Things need to be described in larger-than-life terms. The elements that set things apart from the real world need to be on display, and hopefully part of the plot. Magic and the supernatural have to be pervasive through everything in the setting. Characters in the middle of the story need to encounter magical obstacles, and will have a chance to show off their own fantastic abilities. The worldbuilding as presented in the middle of the story has to expand upon the foundation laid in the first act, providing more information about things seen or mentioned in passing in the beginning, so that their significance to the story becomes clear. All of the setting details mentioned need to pay off somehow, even if it's just to reinforce the notion that this is a fantasy world.

GENRE AND THE END OF A STORY

In the end of the story, no new fantastic elements should be introduced. Work with what you've already established, and make it pay off. The final act is after all, about wrapping things up, applying context, and having everything ultimately make sense. Characters in the end of the story should get to show off their most fantastic abilities. The worldbuilding as presented in the end of the story has to deliver on the promise of the premise, that is, to really demonstrate not only that this is fantasy, but what your specific fantasy world is all about.

WORLDBUILDING AND TIME AND PLACE

In the previous section we mentioned that the fantasy genre carries the requirement that the setting not be the real world. That doesn't mean, however, that it can't be based upon actual places or historical periods. It can even be a version of the real world, firmly established to be an alternate reality. This section will get into how you should utilize when and where your fantasy world is set, and how to incorporate that into your worldbuilding.

Time and place, then, are the second essential element of fantasy worldbuilding. They allow you to build resonance with your audience — *the other players* — by evoking elements that are already familiar. You can, in short, steal and tweak rather than create from whole cloth. The customs and values from one place can be mashed up with the fashion and architecture from another. Events that happened in one period can be dropped in with characters based on people from another era. The worldbuilding comes in creating coherent connections that make all of those disparate elements hold together as a unique whole.

Some examples of how time and place can drive worldbuilding are as follows. This isn't an exhaustive list, but it represents elements most commonly found in roleplaying settings. These time and place examples will be used throughout the book.

MEDIEVALIST FANTASY

This is the default for most fantasy roleplaying games. Culture, technology, weapons, and armor are closely modeled after those of the High Middle Ages in Europe. Monarchy, feudalism, and an agricultural economy are the baseline for medievalist fantasy worlds. Knights and castles, a secular clergy that moves about in the world, merchant trade and exploration are standard elements.

CONTEMPORARY FANTASY

Contemporary or modern fantasy, also known as urban fantasy and a few other things, is set in a version of the present-day real world where magic exists. The supernatural elements may be obvious, known and accepted by everyone, or hidden and only accessible to an elite few. Contemporary fantasy may include settings where characters from the real world cross over into standard fantasy worlds and vice-versa.

GASLIGHT FANTASY

A very specific form of historical fantasy (below), this is fantasy set in an alternate version of the Victorian era. The events and people of the period are often blended with fictional characters and incidents, particularly supernatural fiction from the era. Faerie, vampires, werewolves, faux-Egyptian cults, and witchcraft are common elements of gaslight fantasy.

HISTORICAL FANTASY

This is any fantasy set in an alternate version of an historical period. Like contemporary fantasy, this takes a real time and place. Actual historical events and persons are blended with supernatural

elements. Often there is a “secret history” element, where the existence of magic and fantastic creatures are not known to the public, and a handful of heroes guard those secrets and protect the world from evil.

WUXIA

Fantasy centered on Chinese martial arts, Wuxia often takes place in an historical time period. It may be a fantasy world, rather than an alternate China or other part of Asia, but it draws heavily from those cultures and traditions. The abilities of swordsmen and unarmed fighters are supernatural in nature, and heroes often take on evil magical creatures and corrupt authority figures abusing their power and exploiting the common people.

TIME AND PLACE AND SETTING

How many fantasy worlds are simply the real world, with the maps redrawn and the countries and geographical landmarks renamed? From Robert E. Howard’s *Hyperborea* to Ed Greenwood’s *Forgotten Realms*, real cultures, nations, and events have been dropped into fiction whole and then tweaked. It’s an okay starting point because there’s plenty of source material to mine, and it will make your setting immediately feel familiar to players. Don’t stop there, though. When done poorly, reskinning the real world is just lazy. Come up with new combinations and new twists, and work at hiding your sources to make them less obvious.

TIME AND PLACE CAN ESTABLISH THE SETTING CANON

When you make it clear when and where your fantasy world is set, or what period and location it’s attempting to emulate, you

establish a lot of other details. Saying that there are medieval weapons, or Victorian fashions, or Qing Dynasty political systems, means that you don't have to create those details. You can simply look them up, and in swift broad strokes determine what is canonical and what is excluded.

TIME AND PLACE CAN EXPRESS THE SETTING CANON

This is where you call out the differentiators that make your fantasy world different from the real-world time and place. Maybe magic makes more colors available to your medieval fashions, so even common people dress in brighter hues. Perhaps spellcasters in your contemporary fantasy are prohibited from using firearms, so you can identify them because they carry daggers and swords. All of the same things exist in your world as in the historical time and place, but but the names and small details have been tweaked.

TIME AND PLACE CAN RESTRICT THE SETTING CANON

One of the drawbacks of basing your fantasy world on an historical time and place is that anachronisms can creep in. These are often hard to explain. It might be cool to throw Industrial Revolution-era firearms into your otherwise Middle Ages-based setting, but there are a lot of peripheral details that you'll need to account for. One jump in technology implies other changes. A seemingly simple shift in politics can affect a lot of elements within your setting. Be cautious that elements of time and place don't wreck your canon.

TIME AND PLACE AND CHARACTERS

You can use time and place to create boundaries around characters. What would be appropriate for a protagonist in a medieval fantasy might not fit in a gaslight fantasy, and vice-versa. The possibilities and limitations for backgrounds, personalities, and classes will be driven by what exists within the fantasy world's historical analogs. When and where your adventures take place create context for character-driven worldbuilding elements.

TIME AND PLACE CAN ESTABLISH CHARACTER POSSIBILITIES

A **Medievalist Fantasy** will force characters into the social hierarchy of feudalism. In a **Contemporary Fantasy**, character will have access to current technology as well as magic. **Gaslight Fantasy** will force a lot of social strictures on characters. Characters in a **Wuxia**-based setting will have specific cultural values. The political, cultural, and religious mores of the time and place, and the problems those ideologies and traditions create, will be fodder for character backgrounds. Technology and economics will force characters into specific career paths. The character has to be a product of when and where they were born, grew up, and began their adventuring.

TIME AND PLACE CAN EXPRESS CHARACTER POSSIBILITIES

A character class might function the same mechanically from setting to setting, assuming they use the same rules set, but the attitudes, histories, and social constructs around those professions

will vary based on the time and place. A soldier in a the Middle Ages is significantly different from a modern-day soldier. They both fight, and wear armor, but they weapons are different, as well as the way they are trained and the reasons they fight. A wizard in Victorian England should look and act differently, based on different backgrounds, than a wizard from another historical time and place. Even if the spells they cast are the same, the components may vary, and will other trappings of being a spellcaster. A monk in a **Wuxia** setting should hew more closely to the Chinese source material than an unarmed fighter from another time and place.

TIME AND PLACE CAN RESTRICT CHARACTER POSSIBILITIES

The boundaries created by the time and place are often cultural. What works in one context won't work if dropped into another, because elements that create a specific set of possibilities are absent. Adding in elements to make one character option work might break other options, in terms of their plausibility within the setting. A character from a Middle Ages-inspired fantasy world isn't going to have anachronistic values unless you write a reason for them into the setting. A modern-day character won't automatically have the context on how characters from another period did things unless the character's background explains how and why they've studied that. There's an implied cosmology to Wuxia-inspired fantasy worlds that, if changed too much, destroy the explanation for why martial arts-based powers work.

TIME, PLACE AND STORY

The time and place used as the basis for your fantasy world will also create story possibilities. Whether you are using a variation of historical events, or playing out an idea based on the culture, politics, or religious activities of a particular era, the choice of when and where your setting is rooted will open up story opportunities and even imply certain types of tales.

TIME AND PLACE AND THE BEGINNING OF THE STORY

In the beginning of the story, you get to establish the important elements of the time and place. Characters at the start of the story will show what daily life in the fantasy world is like. Before the story goal is introduced, we should get a feel for what the setting is like when things are normal. The worldbuilding as presented in the first act of the story has to create a solid first impression of the time and place you're using, or have been inspired by, in creating this setting.

TIME AND PLACE AND THE MIDDLE OF THE STORY

In the middle of the story, some details and explanations for elements of the world's time and place can be provided. Characters can expand upon their back story and motivation, based on things that are seen in the world. The gamemaster can explain as they go along, adding details and additional history to the areas the characters travel through. All of the background information needed to complete the story goal should be fleshed out and provided during the second act.

TIME AND PLACE AND THE END OF THE STORY

The end of the story is where the worldbuilding has to pay off. Tie the completion of the story goal to the time and place, so that the setting matters. This adventure couldn't have happened anywhere other than when and where it did, because it was these unique elements of your fantasy world that made the story possible. This keeps your tales from becoming generic, or even generic fantasy.

WORLDBUILDING AND TONE

You can change a world entirely simply by changing the tone. Take a setting that carries the lofty ideals of heroism, where action-oriented characters battled despicable evil villains, and make it funny. It's now a completely different setting. Take a world that's relatively normal, but start layering on bizarre, unsettling elements so that ordinary things now create a feeling of paranoia and dread. That simple shift in mood, atmosphere, and the emotional baseline have implications on the types of characters that fit into the fantasy world, and the sorts of stories that can be told.

Some examples of how tone can drive worldbuilding are as follows. This isn't an exhaustive list, but it represents elements most commonly found in roleplaying settings. These tone examples will be used throughout the book.

HEROIC FANTASY

This is the default, and the baseline used throughout the **Foragers Guild Guides**. Stories deal with heroes having grand adventures, overcoming great hardship, and defeating diabolical villains. It has an action-oriented tone that's often over-the-top, and relies upon a firm in-setting belief in the forces of good and evil.

COMEDIC FANTASY

The overall tone of comedic fantasy is humorous (duh), with events played for laughs. Puns and joke names abound. Nothing is more important than the players cracking each other up, even if that means sacrificing some continuity, fudging the rules, and

introducing anachronisms. It may pretend to have another tone in order to satirize or parody that style of play.

GRIMDARK FANTASY

Fantasy that is violent, featuring bleak or dystopian themes, can be considered “grimdark”. The notion of a “killer DM” who sets out to challenge the players by destroying the player characters is standard, as is the idea of the “total party kill” where all of the protagonists die horribly. The story goal may be nothing more than to see how far the players can get in the adventure, rather than having an expectation that they’ll be able to complete it.

JUVENILE FANTASY

This type of fantasy is suitable for children, and often features morality tales and teachable moments. It’s a lot like heroic fantasy in tone, but tends to feature milder violence and no sex. Heroes are often children, teens, or young adults, with antagonists and obstacles representing themes from the players’ lives that they can deal with allegorically.

WEIRD FANTASY

There are elements of horror in weird fantasy, but the tone has more to do with the mood and atmosphere within the setting than the harder elements of genre. Things are alien and unsettling, generating a sense of discomfort rather than fear. It relies on description and the sense, not events, to make even ordinary things seem strange.

TONE AND SETTING

The types of elements that you choose to include within the setting will go along way to establishing the tone. The form that various elements take can also convey tone through the senses they provoke, the associations they call up, and the context they provide. Adding or excluding things from the setting can shift the emotional content from darker to lighter, fearful to joyous.

TONE CAN ESTABLISH THE SETTING CANON

Brighter lighting and more vivid colors imply an upbeat atmosphere. Darkness and earth tones create a more somber tone. You can establish the atmosphere of your fantasy world by how things appear, their smell and texture, and their age and quality. When supporting characters sing songs about heroes, and there are statues of great legendary figures in the village square, it demonstrates the tone. When the shop names and supporting characters all have joke names, you're establishing a comedic setting. When things are dark and jagged and lead to violence, it shows that the fantasy world has a dark edge. A lot of talking animals can be presented as cute and friendly, showing that the setting is aimed at kids, or unsettling and creepy to establish a weird fantasy tone.

TONE CAN EXPRESS THE SETTING CANON

You always have the option to make the things in an established setting, or contained in a rulebook, your own. Altering the tone is one good way to do that. The weapons in a **Heroic Fantasy** might be bright and shiny, while those within a **Grimdark** world are

weathered and tarnished no matter how well cared for they are. Spells can be renamed to reflect a fun and friendly mood, or be given special effects that are strange and imply unsavory things. The context provided by renaming things, and describing the smell, feel, and appearance, can express that this world is your own by stamping the tone on everything.

TONE CAN RESTRICT THE SETTING CANON

It's possible to try to use a tone that doesn't work with other elements you want your fantasy world to have. You may need to eliminate some things in order to keep the tone light, if the context of those things is depressing and bleak. It's possible that you might need to add elements that aren't normally in a setting, based on the genre, time, and place, in order to make the tone work. These will require some explanations and additional worldbuilding, and may still cause the fantasy world to feel disjointed.

TONE AND CHARACTERS

The personalities and back stories of the characters need to align with the tone. A protagonist out to avenge the death of his family at the hands of an evil cult might work in a **Grimdark** setting, or even in straight-up **Heroic Fantasy**, but it's going to be jarring in a **Comedic Fantasy** or something intended to be for kids. A character that cracks jokes might provide a much-needed break in the tension when you've established a **Weird Fantasy** tone, but if you're trying to maintain a darker mood and atmosphere they're likely to be the first person killed.

TONE CAN ESTABLISH CHARACTER POSSIBILITIES

Certain types of characters will not fit with the tone. A lot of people won't allow assassins in a **Heroic Fantasy** setting, arguing that their profession is innately evil. A paladin might not work in a darker setting, where the inability to make some moral and ethical compromises is going to kill the mood. Classes, races, and backgrounds all have elements of tone that might not be compatible with the setting, so either those elements will be canonically altered, or left out of the setting.

TONE CAN EXPRESS CHARACTER POSSIBILITIES

A shift in tone is going to show how various elements are different within your setting. A character's motivation for becoming a certain class will be different depending upon how light or dark, serious or humorous the tone of your fantasy world is supposed to be. The cultural history of a race, the politics of a kingdom, and the religions available are going to offer different possibilities to the characters, while cutting off some things that don't suit the tone.

TONE CAN RESTRICT CHARACTER POSSIBILITIES

Lighthearted, non-combative characters aren't going to last long in a **Grimdark Fantasy**. Extremely violent and bloodthirsty characters are going to get arrested in a **Comedic Fantasy**, or censored (hopefully) in a juvenile fantasy. Characters that have an innate weirdness to their background might not make good protagonists in a setting with a **Weird Fantasy** tone, because it's not going to be unusual or unsettling for them. The character has to be able to react in an appropriate manner, both tactically,

intellectually, and emotionally, to the established tone. Otherwise, they're not going to be a good fit.

TONE AND STORY

While tone may not necessarily limit the types of stories you're able to tell, it will influence a number of elements in that story. The way the story unfolds, nature of the story goal, and the sort of antagonists and obstacles will be strongly shaped by the tone you're aiming for.

TONE AND THE BEGINNING OF A STORY

In the beginning of the story, the gamemaster will set an expectation for the players by establishing the tone. Some key scene or event has to take place within the first act that will be the iconic moment that demonstrates the mood of the setting and the story. If the tone of the story is going to be different from the usual adventures within this setting, it needs to be indicated here, right up front. The worldbuilding elements that you emphasize here are the ones that provide context and create resonance with the story.

TONE AND THE MIDDLE OF A STORY

In the middle of the story, the tone needs to be reinforced. Things will need to shift a little bit, adding a sad or scary moment in an otherwise upbeat story, or cracking some jokes against the ceaseless terror of the characters' existence, but the overall mood needs to be consistent. What needs to happen in the second act, emotionally, is to set up the ending. A hopeful tone will show that the finale will work out. A bleak tone means the characters are likely marching to their doom. You need to work with their

motivations, which will be affected by the mood in the middle of the story.

TONE AND THE END OF A STORY

You can play with tone in the middle of the story, changing things up to get some different emotional beats and keep things interesting. When you get to the end, you need to nail the mood you establishing in the beginning. This doesn't mean that the characters in a lighthearted adventure will automatically win, or that in a depressing hellscape of a fantasy world they will inevitably lose. It does mean that victory and defeat both need to be in line with the tone. **Heroic Fantasy** means that characters come out with their dignity intact just for trying. **Grimdark Fantasy** will leave no good deed unpunished, and unintended consequences will about. **Juvenile Fantasy** means the characters will always learn a valuable lesson. The tone is going to affect the nature of the outcome of the story either way.

WORLDBUILDING AND CHARACTERS

Standard operating procedure is to create characters that suit the fantasy world. The setting, or at least the game system, comes first after all, and defines things like character classes, races, and abilities. Why can't the characters, in turn, help to further define the world?

Rarely do we put a lot of thought into how much the player characters contribute to worldbuilding. Their back stories become part of or fantasy world's canon. Their supporting characters, including family, friends, and significant others, create ripples through the setting by their mere presence. Events that happened might not change established canon, especially in a published setting or one adapted by another media, but its influence will help to shape the way the gamemaster presents other elements.

CHARACTERS AND GENRE

The specific elements of genre that your characters embody will define what the genre looks like within the setting. If magic exists, but none of the player characters are spellcasters, the way that element of the fantasy genre will be expressed will shift. Rather than seeing things from the perspective of an insider, for whom magic is second nature, it will have to be something more mysterious. If there are no player character clerics in the party, then the role of the gods will be changed.

The experiences that characters have with the supernatural will also affect the way genre is expressed. If they grew up seeing dragons flying overhead it might still be awe-inspiring, but not in the same way it would if they'd grown up only hearing stories about dragons. How you handle genre elements will have a lot to do with the characters in your game.

Characters in **High Fantasy** tend to be capable, having all of the skills, powers, and equipment necessary to take on any challenge. Worldbuilding elements have to explain and support why characters are high-powered, expertly trained, and have the means to acquire expensive and impressive gear. What these characters can contribute to the worldbuilding are specifics on honor codes, and the things they've been taught by culture and religion about the nature of good and evil.

Low Fantasy characters have more ordinary background and mundane abilities. They often start off poor and tend to stay there, struggling to acquire basic equipment. Power, wealth, and influence are for some vague elite class, which the player characters are not a part of. The worldbuilding has to support a class system that keeps people down. A character from this subgenre can speak for what motivates people within this world, and express what it means to struggle.

In a **Dark Fantasy** setting, characters tend to either know nothing about the supernatural, or belong to a secret organization that combats it. The worldbuilding has to support ways to keep mysteries a secret over time, so that most people have no idea what's really going on. There also has to be a way to induct the

player characters into these mysteries, so they can fight the forces of evil. The characters contribute a perspective on what outsiders think about the fantasy elements, and what they fear about them.

Science Fantasy will feature characters similar to those of **High Fantasy**, except the equipment they have access to will be technological in nature. Worldbuilding will have to explain why these scientific devices exist concurrently with magic, or abilities that greatly resemble magic. Conflict may arise over who gets to control these scientific marvels. Characters can contribute to the folklore or even common misconceptions about the elements in this subgenre.

Within a **Romantic Fantasy** setting, the characters will tend to be attractive. They are often from a noble house, making them socially and financially privileged. This is very limiting to them, closing off career possibilities as well as acceptable romantic partners. These social restrictions lead them to rebel a bit, as they try to forge their own path in life separate from their station. Characters can contribute to the worldbuilding by developing the social customs, taboos, and histories between noble houses.

CHARACTERS AND TIME AND PLACE

It's a rare player that digs deep into the elements of time and place within a setting. They are more likely to latch onto some high concept items, some hooks that they can use and roleplay against. Those specific elements will be drawn out as the importing things to know about the fantasy world, and the gamemaster should build upon them. If the players care about weapons, dig deep on the weapons research and drop in more details there. Allow them to do

their own research. If they don't care about fashion, or what people eat, or the specifics of the political system, skip that research. Gloss over it and provide the bare minimum needed to understand that piece of the world and pursue the current story goal.

In a **Medievalist Fantasy** setting, the characters will reflect the professions and archetypes of the Middle Ages in Europe. This doesn't have to be an historical accurate portrayal, but more of a vague understanding of what that time and place was generally like. Characters contribute to the worldbuilding by fleshing out the minutiae of their class and profession, as it pertains to the setting.

The characters in a **Contemporary Fantasy** world have to be true to the real world in most respects. They will dress, speak, and behave as ordinary people. Their brushes with magic and the supernatural are the exception, rather than the rule, and they will need to react to those things as "normal" people would. Characters will shift the worldbuilding emphasis organically based on what they care about and talk about, and the normal, everyday activities they engage in.

Gaslight Fantasy will feature characters drawn from Victorian history and literature. There will be an Anglophilic bent to things, possibly with some revisionism to deal with problematic topics like racism and misogyny. Where the character will contribute to the worldbuilding will be in how they view the class system, and things like race relations, women's rights, and general imperialism. Their perspective will shape the setting elements that need to be flesh out and incorporated into stories.

Within Historical Fantasy settings, the characters will have to reflect the popular archetypes of that time and place. This is as much for the benefit of the players, who will need some basis from which to play their characters, as it is for the gamemaster who will need to keep important historical details straight.

A **Wuxia** setting will offer characters that are drawn from movies and mythology more than actual history. As long as things don't take a racist or culturally offensive turn, players will add to the worldbuilding through what their characters contribute. Naming martial arts style, citing proverbs, inventing histories, or pulling from actual history and other works in the Wuxia genre will help to flesh out the setting further.

CHARACTERS AND TONE

No matter what the gamemaster intended the tone of the fantasy world to be, the actual tone will be dictated by the player characters. The only way to enforce tone is for everyone to agree on it and do their best to play things that way. If it's supposed to be **Heroic Fantasy** but the protagonists are all amoral murderers, the actual tone will be less epic and more dreary. When you're shooting for a **Grimdark** tone but the characters have joke names and the player keep making each other laugh, you at best have a dark comedy setting.

A **Heroic Fantasy** tone will require characters that are generally good, selfless, and likable. They can be happy or moody or express any range of emotions. They contribute to the tone by acting heroic, reacting to evil deeds with shock and disgust, and holding

themselves to honor codes and high standards of ethics and morality.

The tone of a **Comedic Fantasy** should encourage characters that aren't too serious. They might be parodies of characters from other media, or satires of fantasy genre tropes. Characters contribute to the tone by at least attempting to be funny, going for the laugh rather than the tactical advantage, and not taking things personally unless their reactions are comically broad.

Grimdark Fantasy will create an atmosphere where characters take themselves too serious. Everything is a matter of life or death. Characters contribute to the tone by being a bit paranoid, recounting tales of things gone horribly wrong, and being overly-prepared for any contingency.

It's important that the tone of a **Juvenile Fantasy** be kid-friendly all around. Things have to remain light and fun, even if the story pretends to be otherwise. Characters contribute to the tone by being curious, asking questions, and being willing to learn new things. They maintain a positive attitude even when things get frustrating, and always hold onto hope.

With **Weird Fantasy**, the gamemaster has to establish and maintain a tone that's confusing and a bit disorienting. The characters will continually run into things that are unexpected. They can contribute to the tone but reacting to the weirdness appropriately. Or, if they behave inappropriately, it should be in a way they adds to the strangeness. Being nonchalant and acting as if none of this supernatural stuff is any big deal wrecks the tone.

WORLDBUILDING AND PROTAGONISTS

One of the first and most obvious questions that you should ask when you sit down to begin worldbuilding is what characters get to do in this setting. If you want something for everybody, then you need to find a purpose for every character class or archetype. There needs to be a spot for each race. You need hooks for all of the broad character elements that the system you're working with has to offer.

The alternative, if you're less inclined to have a kitchen sink setting, is to limit the character options. Build your fantasy world the way you want it, and then only have the classes and races available that fit the world. This will certainly cut down and preparation. It will also allow you to focus on adding more depth to a smaller number of options.

SETTING CAN ESTABLISH PROTAGONIST POSSIBILITIES

Having world-specific background information on character options will validate the material in the rulebook. If you talk about elves, it establishes that your setting has elves. If you only talk about humans, it at least implies that there are only humans in your setting.

Your setting material should also reflect the cultural, religious, and political beliefs in the world, in terms of how heroes are defined. People elevate what they value. If wizards are distrusted, you may restrict that class to antagonists and supporting characters. A setting where all of the culture heroes are fighter will establish that the player characters should be fighters, or at least player character classes that have decent fighting skills.

SETTING CAN EXPRESS PROTAGONIST POSSIBILITIES

Including player character options will validate what's written in the source material, but you can still customize things to make them fit your setting. Perhaps only certain religions allow, or even encourage, their clerics to go adventuring? There might be something going on in the world that has driven the druids out of the wilderness, accounting for more opportunities for them in urban settings. A race might be refugees, forcibly relocated, giving a player character an instant back story.

The background information that you create for character options will demonstrate how things in your world differ from other fantasy settings. Humans may be a minority, rather than the *de facto* majority seen in most (not all) fictional worlds. Trained fighters might be rare, with battles fought mainly by another class. There may be political or religious restrictions on who gets to train to be certain classes. All of these influence the personalities and motivations of the protagonists, even though mechanically they are straight from the rulebook.

SETTING CAN RESTRICT PROTAGONIST POSSIBILITIES

A setting might make certain character options impossible, or at least highly unlikely. If there are no deities in your setting, then characters that cast divine magic are out. A culture that abhors violence isn't necessarily going to venerate combat monsters. If barbarians are considered to be violent invaders, that class won't make for a good hero. As above, anything that doesn't fit into the setting can be excluded by the gamemaster, meaning that those options won't be open to players when they create their characters.

WORLDBUILDING AND ANTAGONISTS

Villains exist in relation to cultural values. They reflect what a people find to be evil, corrupt, and undesirable. A way to make both your setting and your antagonists stand out is to have social anxieties, past events, and strong traditions to play off of. For every race, religion, nation, and organization, you should think about what they'd consider to be the worst thing that could happen. What do people within your fantasy world fear? Your antagonists will do exactly that, or cause that to occur, or otherwise exploit those fears.

SETTING CAN ESTABLISH ANTAGONIST POSSIBILITIES

When you establish that dragons exist, or vampires, or whatever race are going to end up being your “orcs” (the go-to arrow fodder foes), you've opened up the possibility for using them as villains. Going deeper and working on setting-specific elements, making an evil cult that worships demonic entities part of your canon sets them up as potential antagonists. Factions within governments, a secret society of wizards, a thieves' guild, all become sources of villains when you add them into your fantasy world's history. The motives and goals of those villains will be based on the objectives you build into the setting.

SETTING CAN EXPRESS ANTAGONIST POSSIBILITIES

So we have dragons. They sit on mounds of treasures inside of mountain. In your fantasy world, why do they do that? Maybe they live in a different type of lair instead, for setting-specific reasons. Mechanically your antagonists will be identical to what's in the rulebook, but you can give them a history that examines and explains their villainous behavior. The same can be said of any

monster, and any antagonist character of any race or class. Past injustices, old cultural grudges, racial issues, religious differences, political machinations, or any other sort of setting elements can be leverage to craft the origin story for a great villain.

SETTING CAN RESTRICT ANTAGONIST POSSIBILITIES

Villains do not always behave logically (see also: *chaotic*) but they need to fit with the overall genre, time and place, and tone of the setting. The elements that you establish within your fantasy world will eliminate some possibilities. What you create should help to shape what evil looks like in the world. They should provide contrast to the player characters, but not go completely against the grain of what your setting is supposed to be.

WORLDBUILDING AND SUPPORTING CHARACTERS

Your fantasy world needs people. The same setting elements that will imply certain types of heroes will also create the need for non-player characters. The history, economy, and even geography of your world will make certain types of supporting characters not only possible, but necessary in order to make things work.

SETTING CAN ESTABLISH SUPPORTING CHARACTER POSSIBILITIES

If your setting has pirates, that means you have sailors, and shipbuilders, and merchants. It establishes that there are dockworkers somewhere who load and unload ships, even if they're never seen. The goods that are being shipped, and looted by pirates, have to be made or grown, then packed, then sold. Someone has to

count the money, and pay the taxes to pay for the king's fine carriages and upkeep on the castle. There are characters that perform that maintenance, and drive those carriages. Even if most of these supporting characters are never seen, their existence is established by the existence of other setting elements.

SETTING CAN EXPRESS SUPPORTING CHARACTER POSSIBILITIES

If you start with the basics, we know that the people in your fantasy world wear clothes, eat food, and live in houses. To keep it to a player character perspective, they carry weapons, wear armor, and wield magic items. Someone has to make those things. Protagonists won't know how to do everything. They will need supporting characters who have abilities they lack. Non-player characters will offer information, goods, and services that player characters need. The types of supporting characters, how they do the things they do, and the ways that player characters can find and interact with them, can express elements of your fantasy world that differ from other worlds.

SETTING CAN RESTRICT SUPPORTING CHARACTER POSSIBILITIES

This comes back around, again, to genre, time and place, and tone. There are types of supporting characters that won't be needed, or won't make sense, in the context of other elements of your fantasy world. If you've got a strict moralistic theocracy, you might not find taverns and alehouses because alcohol is prohibited in that religion. A low-magic setting isn't going to have a shop selling magic items and spell components on every corner. Focus on what the

setting needs, rather than falling back on stock characters that might not fit with your specific fantasy world.

WORLDBUILDING AND STORY

Your fantasy setting has to create both possibilities and limitations for the third pillar of fantasy adventure, the story. In this section we'll discuss how those boundaries can save you time by focusing your worldbuilding efforts on what's relevant. Hopefully, having boundaries will also spark your creativity, and make for better gaming by allowing everyone to add more depth to a smaller number of setting elements rather than merely increasing the breadth of your fantasy world.

STORY AND GENRE

The two essential elements of a fantasy genre story, as we discussed previously, are that it take place in a fictional world and deal with the supernatural. Roleplaying game setting as clearly not the real world. Magic and monsters cover the supernatural element. How you emphasize those elements in your worldbuilding, and the importance they have within your own setting, will be drivers for the stories that you tell.

In a **High Fantasy** setting, the stories tend to be larger and more over-the-top. The antagonists will be powerful, the obstacles will reflect the fantastic nature of the world, and the rewards will be large. The worldbuilding that you need to do has to “go big” to accommodate these story elements.

Low Fantasy, by contrast, often offers up smaller stories. The villains will have more mundane power, based on money and politics rather than magic. Obstacles will tend toward physical threats rather than supernatural forces. Rewards will be less grand,

leaving the player characters only slightly better off than they were before. Your worldbuilding has to scale down to smaller, more enclosed and stifling settings that support closer action and more intimate interactions.

Dark Fantasy stories are about the terror of not knowing, and the horror that comes from finding out. The antagonists are always supernatural and powerful. The obstacles are often centered on acquiring necessary knowledge, or trying to operate without it. The rewards may be nothing more than surviving to fight again another day, or learning some new truth. When worldbuilding with these stories in mind, focus on muted colors, unpleasant smells, and strange, unidentifiable sounds.

Science Fantasy genre stories tend to be grand in scope. The antagonists have audacious goals that threaten entire planets. Obstacles often involve facing, overcoming, or learning for to operate technology in order to gain information or tactical advantage. Rewards are frequently social, rather than financial, with medals, promotions, and public accolades. To incorporate this into worldbuilding, make things shiny, make landscapes large, and throw in a lot of jargon that's meant to sound scientific (but isn't).

The stories found in **Romantic Fantasy** are focus on relationship, often with a goal of two lovers finding a way to be together. The antagonist is keeping them apart, either intentionally or because their other plans unintentionally create some barrier. The obstacles are all of the social mores, political alliances, and family traditions that prevent the lovers from connecting. The reward is getting to live happily ever after, at least until the next

story tears them apart again. Worldbuilding with a romantic tone in mind means focusing elements that can bring people together, as well as ones that will keep them apart.

STORY AND TIME AND PLACE

When and where the stories in your fantasy world are set, and the time periods and locations your fictional setting are meant to emulate, will create some boundaries around the types of stories you are able to tell. Culture, customs, technology, and other factors determined by time and place will suggest certain sorts of adventures. If nothing else, the way that more generic story structures will play out will be influenced by these elements.

Within **Medievalist Fantasy**, the most common stories can be described as chivalric fantasy. Characters with heroic qualities go on quests, encounter fantastic things, and engage in folkloric adventures. Worldbuilding for this sort of time and place will mean constructing castles and kingdoms, royal dynasties, and keeping magic as something mysterious, powerful, and possibly blasphemous.

For **Contemporary Fantasy**, stories can be drawn from the headlines. You can deal, allegorically or directly, with actual events, people, and social issues. A lot of your worldbuilding has been done for you, because you can just look around, consult information and actual places, and use real maps.

A **Gaslight Fantasy** story can be crafted around a reimagining of a novel or short story from the era. Pull plots from Charles Dickens, Bram Stoker, and Sir Arthur Conan Doyle and remix them with your unique setting elements. There are ample, well-documented

historical events that the player characters can become involved in, as well as secret histories that can be woven around real places. Your worldbuilding needs to focus on the supernatural elements that turn a real time and place into a fantasy setting.

When creating stories for a Historical Fantasy setting, it's often best to anchor things around one key event that the players are familiar with. Your story can then spring forth from, or lead up to, that defining moment in history. The worldbuilding efforts should concentrate on what's needed for that story, plus whatever magic and monsters you need to logically work into the time and place.

Wuxia stories originate in Chinese literature, but have spread to television, film, and other media. The plots revolve around fighting injustice, writing wrongs, and characters atoning for misdeeds committed in the past. Your worldbuilding will rely on some research into customs and values that drive Wuxia stories, and the types of locations used within the times and places of those tales.

STORY AND TONE

The tone of your fantasy world will influence how you describe things within your story. A monster or supporting character will be mechanically identical regardless of the mood and atmosphere you're setting, but the way you portray them has to carry emotional weight. The way that an orc walks into a room, and the way it's described, can make the players laugh or it can make them think that they're all about to die. Your worldbuilding, from history to rumors, has to establish whether things are going to be a joke, or to be taken serious, or whatever feelings you need to evoke.

When working with a **Heroic Fantasy** tone, everything needs to be exceptional. Nothing is merely pretty, it has to be the most exquisite example of the thing the characters have have seen. No monster is just scary, it has to be utterly nightmarish. Worldbuilding for this tone means finding new adjectives and cranking the hyperbole up to 11. Make every element feel important and amazing.

Comedic Fantasy relies on jokes, so your worldbuilding will mean establishing a lot of setups. You can't force things, though. Think of it as improv, and make sure that there are plenty of situations and props for the characters to work with.

In **Grimdark Fantasy**, the tone of the setting will drive stories that are more violent and lethal. Your worldbuilding has to establish that death is a real presence, that people are hostile, and that monsters are aggressive and predatory. Everything needs to feel oppressive and hopeless.

The tone **Juvenile Fantasy** stories project has to be hopeful and optimistic. Things can be dangerous, but not too frightening. Options to overcome obstacles with violence have to exist. The worldbuilding has to reflect a world as seen by children, created to accommodate child characters.

Weird Fantasy has to continually feel like a dream. The worldbuilding is normal on the surface, but you need to be prepared to make things slightly off-kilter. Make this cool, but mildly confusing. The stories don't have to entirely make sense, because they're more about emotions and mood.

WORLDBUILDING AND GOALS

All adventures will have a story goal, the one major thing that the protagonists need to accomplish. Your fantasy setting has to contain all of the elements to make it possible for the player characters to accomplish those goals. The world should also have some hooks built in that can serve not only as adventure goals, but personal goals for the protagonists and possibly as group goals for the party.

GOALS AND GENRE

For a fantasy world, story goals should contain elements of genre. This means that they should be things that aren't possible in the real world, or require actions that could not be undertaken outside of the context of fantasy. Supernatural elements have to be part of the goal as well. This could mean acquiring a powerful artifact, defeating a mythological monster, or using magic to complete the story goal.

The goals in a **High Fantasy** setting, especially in roleplaying games, are reward-based. The player characters need to stop the villain, rescue the prince, or halt the invasion, but it's ultimately about what they'll get out of it in the end. Treasure, magic items, and leveling up are the true goal, even if the characters have no idea what they'll do with the money, swag, and power. Your worldbuilding has to provide a context for why those rewards are valuable to the characters.

In a **Low Fantasy** setting, the player characters will have goals that are centered on survival. They need to stop the villain because

their lives, and the lives of their friends, family, and community are threatened. The goal may also simply be to keep their home and put food on the table. Worldbuilding has to make things bleak, but with enough hope that the characters are willing to take risks to improve their lot.

Dark Fantasy is all about understanding a supernatural threat in order to stop it. They want to save a person, a community, or the world from some powerful evil. Your worldbuilding efforts have to give the players a reason to care, something that shows that the world and its people are worth saving.

With **Science Fantasy**, the story goal is often villain-based. The antagonist wants to do something massively evil that will consolidate their power. The evil plan usually involves doing great harm to many people. The player characters have no other directive than to prevent the villain's plan from coming to fruition. When conducting your worldbuilding, you need to provide motivations for the villain, and a means for them to rise to power.

Characters in **Romantic Fantasy** just want to be together. They might care about what's happening with their family, or the political situation of the kingdom, or other social issues that affect their relationship. Their actions might have an impact on those other things. But ultimately, it's about being able to be together. When you engage in worldbuilding, you need to establish why relationships are important, emotionally, to the well-being of the characters and worth the risks they will have to take.

GOALS AND TIME AND PLACE

Story goals need to be appropriate to the time and place of your fantasy world. Leverage the culture, the economics, and the technology of the setting to determine what would need to be accomplished. The objective should have some significance to the social, political, or religious beliefs inherent to when and where your story takes place.

Medievalist Fantasy stories have the unwritten goal of having the characters prove their heroism and, but extension, their goodness. The overt goals are often quests to find something, rescue someone, or return some object to its rightful owner or place in the world. Your worldbuilding has to provide the cultural, religious, and political contexts for wanting to validate their status as heroes.

In a **Contemporary Fantasy** story, the goal is usually to keep the chocolate out of the peanut butter, metaphorically speaking. The supernatural and mundane worlds must be kept apart of one or both. What your worldbuilding needs to do is establish why those things need to be kept separate, and imply what could happen if they're not.

Stories in **Gaslight Fantasy** can have goals that range from the frivolous (winning a bet by accomplishing some fantastic deed) to the profound (securing social justice for an oppressed underclass) to the patriotic (protect Mother England from hostile threats). Worldbuilding efforts have to provide a context for why the characters would choose to take on these challenges, rather than counting their money, fighting for social change, or simply trying to get by day-to-day.

Historical Fantasy can have any number of goals, but they are always tied to the time and place. The player characters have to deal with the fallout of some historical event, or perhaps that event turns out to be the result of their actions within the story. The goals, then, are shaped to create some result that dovetails into documented history. All worldbuilding efforts have to be directed at making the central event feel important, and tying other elements back to that event.

Within a **Wuxia** story, the goal is almost always tied up with honor: gaining it, retaining it, or restoring it. This is expressed through having to defeat some great evil or correct some grave injustice that has been inflicted upon characters or communities. The worldbuilding you do has to continually reinforce that sense of honor and justice.

GOALS AND TONE

Regardless of the mood and atmosphere of your setting, the story goal is something that is necessary. If it isn't accomplished, there will be consequences. Something bad will happen or, at the very least, something good won't. The tone of your fantasy world will shape the types of story goals, and define the nature of those goals and how they will need to be achieved. Worldbuilding has to align the goals with the tone.

In **Heroic Fantasy**, the goal has to be to achieve some noble purpose. Lives have to be saved, people need to be rescued, and evil needs to be defeated. It has to remain hopeful, and even aspirational. The worldbuilding that you do needs to reinforce the

values and social structures that make heroism an important pursuit.

Comedic Fantasy can have any sort of goals, but even stupid ones have to feel necessary. Characters have to have some logical reason for pursuing a goal, even if it seems silly and the path acquiring it will be fraught with jokes and bad puns. Your worldbuilding efforts will need to make the story goal feel plausible even in the context of lighthearted fun and objective silliness.

The actual goal in a **Grimdark Fantasy** atmosphere is to survive as long as possible, but the story goal has to be something else. What the player characters seek to accomplish promises to stop the spread of evil, save lives, or somehow protect the protagonists themselves from harm. It has to feel important enough for the character to willingly risk their lives for it.

For **Juvenile Fantasy**, the goals can't be too dire. They might be necessary and important, but they can also come down to doing something nice for someone. Kindness is a motivating factor. When worldbuilding, make sure that the story goal is reasonably pure, and that the culture of your fantasy world tresses the importance of good values and strong character.

When setting story goals for **Weird Fantasy**, anything will do. There may be conflicting goals, or they character may think they're trying to accomplish one thing when they're actually achieving something else. The worldbuilding has to be such that a story goal almost becomes an anchor point, something solid in an otherwise strange and confusing world.

GOALS AND CHARACTERS

A character's race, class, and other background elements will help to establish their values. In turn, their values will help to connect them to story goals, party goals, and personal goals. What they need, and what they want, will be the things that they are willing to take risks for. The goals, then, need to be aligned to the characters so that they'll be willing participants in the story. Your worldbuilding effort will need to establish what is possible for the characters, and what isn't, so that there is clarity around their objectives and motivations.

GOALS CAN ESTABLISH CHARACTER POSSIBILITIES

Characters won't want things that they cannot get. Well, they will, but those things don't translate into goals. The abilities they acquire, their cultural, political, and religious values, will all be aimed at acquiring the things that they need and desire. The elements of your fantasy world will be aligned to provide characters with the means to accomplish those goals, because those sorts of goals already exist within the setting.

GOALS CAN EXPRESS CHARACTER POSSIBILITIES

The existence of goals can provide context for why certain character classes and abilities exist. Fighters exist because war, or at least the need for defense, is a constant. Clerics exist because people have a need for religion, and religions have a need to proselytize. Thieves exist because greed, poverty, and evil also exist. Characters have goals because there are things in the world that drive them to do things, or make their work necessary.

GOALS CAN RESTRICT CHARACTER POSSIBILITIES

A goal has to make sense in the context of your fantasy world. If the risk is greater than the potential benefit, no one would reasonably do it. If the outcome from achieving the goal is something that no one needs and no one wants, there's no reason to bother. Characters should have abilities that will never get used, because the reason for having those sorts of powers and skills doesn't exist within the setting.

GOALS AND STORY

The goal is the engine of the story. It clearly defines what the player characters need to do. When the goal is achieved, everyone knows that the story has come to an end. That's why goals have to be meaningful within the context of the setting. Your worldbuilding efforts have to make the goals align with the needs and desires of the people that inhabit your fantasy world.

GOALS AND THE BEGINNING OF A STORY

In the beginning of the story, the goal has to be introduced. The characters have to be shown why achieving the goal matters to them, and how it will have an impact on the world. They need to understand what will happen both if they accomplish it, and if they don't. The worldbuilding presented in the beginning of the story has to support the reason for the goal, and establish all of the things that make achieving it possible.

GOALS AND THE MIDDLE OF A STORY

In the middle of the story, the reason the story goal is important has to be reinforced. Examples of the complications that will arise if

the player characters don't succeed have to be presented, along with hints of the good that will come from completing the goal. It's a carrot to keep the protagonists motivated, but it also makes the pursuit of the goal meaningful. Worldbuilding presented in the middle of the story will include elements that allow the player characters to achieve the goal, but will also continue to illustrate the needs and desires that make the goal worthwhile.

GOALS AND THE END OF A STORY

In the end of the story, the characters will accomplish the goal or die trying. At this point it has to be clear that the goal is worth dying for. It has to make sense that the characters would get to this point and keep going, no matter what, and not just give up. Characters in the end of the story need to be shown, for a final time, what will happen if they fail. The villain wins, people die, and they don't get the fantastic treasure. There won't be any new worldbuilding in the final act, but all of the salient points established in the first two acts will come up again to remind the protagonists of the stakes.

WORLDBUILDING AND OBSTACLES

Without obstacles the player characters would just walk around picking up treasure. There's only a limited amount of satisfaction to be gained from that. We're wired to value what we've worked for an earned. Obstacles give characters a chance to show off their abilities, as well as chances to develop and roleplay based on their reactions to those challenges. Your fantasy setting will determine the types of complications characters will face in pursuing the story goal.

OBSTACLES AND GENRE

For the fantasy genre, the obstacles have to be things that we would not have to face in the real world. Or, they can be the sorts of things that we might face, but blown up and write large. Supernatural elements have to be present, so the obstacles either have to be based on magic and monsters, or require something magical to overcome them.

The majority of obstacles in a **High Fantasy** setting will be magical in nature. This means having to overcome magical traps, doing battle with supernatural creatures, and dealing with complex, overblown problems. Worldbuilding has to account for how these things get created, installed, and entrenched in the various nooks and crannies of the setting.

Low Fantasy often bases obstacles around people and resources. Other people and their agendas conflict with the player characters'

goals. Potential allies want something in return for their help. The protagonists don't have money, transportation, or the right sort of magic and have to improvise. The political, economic, and cultural influences that make these things possible have to be developed in your worldbuilding.

A **Dark Fantasy** setting will leverage the player characters' lack of knowledge as an obstacle. They will have to operate based on false information, half-truths, and guesswork. The major obstacles will be not only the supernatural creatures, but the problems created by people who are panicked and behaving irrationally because of the monsters. Your worldbuilding will have to account for why more information isn't available, who holds this information in check, and how this fear of the unknown is created by other cultural and religious contexts.

Characters in a **Science Fantasy** setting will find themselves up against action-oriented obstacles. All of the technology in the world might be at their disposal, but they'll still need to run, jump, climb, and fight to advance toward the story goal. The worldbuilding that needs to be done has to create limitations for the technology, as well as account for it being there in the first place.

Romantic Fantasy has more social obstacles than combat-oriented ones. Not that there won't be the opportunity for duels, or fights with the love interest's angry, bigoted family. There are more issues around finding approval for the relationship. A lot of the worldbuilding will be around creating those cultural, political, and religious traditions and the means through which they are enforced.

OBSTACLES AND TIME AND PLACE

Historical context will suggest certain types of obstacles. Actual events from the period, the level of technology, and even the geography of a location will offer up potential barriers that need to be overcome. Worldbuilding for obstacles is often a matter of leveraging what's already there in the source material, and adapting it to the other contexts present in your fantasy world.

Medievalist Fantasy will have a lot of combat. There are walls and fortifications that keep characters out, and hidden places that need to be discovered. The worldbuilding has to center on the reasons for these obstacles to exist. There needs to be context for why monsters, evil wizards, and enemy knights exist. Castles get built for reasons, and artifacts get hidden away from specific people and forces.

Some of the main obstacles in **Contemporary Fantasy** are the need for secrecy. The non-supernatural people in the world can't find out what's going on. Magical creatures can't learn how to gain greater access to the mundane world. The characters can't do their thing openly. Worldbuilding has to establish the rules of interaction, as well as potential complications that will arise if the secrets are revealed.

In **Gaslight Fantasy**, the obstacles often arise from social mores. Things cannot be done in a certain way because it's simply not proper! There will be scandal! Maybe the characters don't care, but other people who do will, in turn, create new obstacles. Your worldbuilding has to establish what the cultural, political, and religious rules are, how they're enforced, and who will enforce them.

Historical Fantasy will base its obstacles, directly and thematically, around the central historical event that your fantasy world is based on. At least some of those obstacles will be based on acquiring information, figuring out what's happening, and devising a plan to deal with it. Worldbuilding will be centered on establishing who has the information, who is unwilling to share it, and why the player characters have difficulty getting it.

Within a **Wuxia**-based fantasy world, the obstacles are often evil martial artists. There will be fights with oppressive authoritarian forces, people who misused knowledge and magic, and a need to maintain and uphold an honor code. A lot of worldbuilding will go into establishing the motivations of the villains, and the reasons why martial arts were developed.

OBSTACLES AND TONE

Every obstacle is there to control the pace of the story. It also have to allow the characters a chance to show who they are. Either through showing off their abilities and rolling dice, or roleplaying in reaction to the situation, an obstacle allows characters to shine. The tone of the setting will influence what that reaction is, in both form and degree.

Heroic Fantasy will present obstacles that will appear strange when contrasted with the player characters' normative existence. Things are not the way they are back home, in other words. Bizarre supernatural creatures, villains with strange customs and beliefs, and things you just don't see every day are meant to accentuate the protagonists' journey into the unknown in order to fulfill their

quest. Worldbuilding will need to establish what is normative, so that the obstacles can lay outside that.

The obstacles in a **Comedic Fantasy** will be largely non-lethal. They might be more embarrassing than dangerous. Again, puns and joke names will abound, and the complications that arise will be designed for laughs. Your worldbuilding will have to account for opportunities to embarrass the characters, set them up to make wisecracks, while still holding them back from attaining the story goal.

Within a **Grimdark Fantasy**, all obstacles are deadly. Not potentially deadly, just deadly. Everything can kill the characters. Foreshadowing and clues are for the weak. The characters have to approach the most innocuous things as if they're some sort of trick or trap, because they probably are. All worldbuilding has to be aligned with preventing them from reaching the story goal, however, rather than just being arbitrary death traps and murderous ambushes.

Juvenile Fantasy obstacles are generally straight-forward and non-lethal. There will be more things for the players to work out, and challenges designed in such a way that teamwork is required to overcome them. If you can cram in some object lesson to make each obstacles a teachable moment, you're golden. Worldbuilding has to reinforce the values of the setting, so that these sorts of obstacles reinforce that context.

Obstacles in **Weird Fantasy** stem from not knowing enough to figure anything out. There will be a lot of investigation, research, and trial-and-error. It's also likely that obstacles will involve

outrunning things, fighting things, and hiding. A lot of worldbuilding needs to go into establishing what is mundane and normative, so that the bizarre and unsettling things can be subtle yet still highly effective.

OBSTACLES AND CHARACTERS

The obvious idea here is that characters exist to clear away obstacles. Their class specializations and the abilities that they possess are all designed to overcome something. The nature of a roleplaying game forces characters into that paradigm. What you need to consider are the characters' backgrounds. Are they emotionally and intellectually prepared for the things that they will face? Do their backgrounds provide them with the context for why they'd be trained to tackle these sorts of obstacles? Your worldbuilding will need to address that.

OBSTACLES CAN ESTABLISH CHARACTER POSSIBILITIES

The existence of character abilities drawn directly from the rulebook will validate what's written in the source material. That's all mechanical. Having skills and spells designed for particular types of obstacles implies the existence of those obstacles. Worldbuilding should make it clear what sorts of obstacles characters are likely to encounter, so they can place the emphasis of both abilities and background elements to align with those expectations.

OBSTACLES CAN EXPRESS CHARACTER POSSIBILITIES

In a game, there should always be more than one way to solve a problem. A story should never rely on one character having one

specific ability. That limits the players' creativity can stall your game. The gamemaster should allow player characters to use their abilities in unorthodox way, and to leverage the knowledge they'd have from the background, to address obstacles.

OBSTACLES CAN RESTRICT CHARACTER POSSIBILITIES

If the gamemaster never plans to include certain types of obstacles, the players need to be informed. When there's no reason characters will ever have to worry about finding potable water or ample amounts of food, for example, they won't need to develop skills or spells around those types of problems. When the stories won't focus on diabolical traps, characters can shift their focus to other abilities.

OBSTACLES AND STORY

There are very few point in a story where player characters will have it easy. The degree of challenges that the characters face will increase or decrease, depending on what point in the adventure they're at, to keep things interesting. Worldbuilding for a range of obstacles in relation to attaining the story goal will help keep the story moving at a reasonable pace.

OBSTACLES AND THE BEGINNING OF A STORY

In the beginning of the story, the obstacles that the player characters face will be relatively minor. At the start, things will be relatively normative and familiar, so they won't be required to stretch much. Challenges will be easy, and in line with their strongest abilities. This allows you to establish who the characters

are, lets them gain some confidence, and starts things off in a fun way.

OBSTACLES AND THE MIDDLE OF A STORY

In the middle of the story, obstacles will start off easy as they were during the first act. As things go along, they will become increasingly more difficult. Obstacles should require them to call upon abilities that they aren't as good at, and to do things that aren't part of their normative life. By the end of the second act, they should be facing the most difficult challenge of the adventure.

OBSTACLES AND THE END OF A STORY

In the end of the story, the characters should face the second-most difficult challenge of the entire story. I know that this seems counter-intuitive. The boss monsters always comes at the end, right? Hear me out. By this point in the game, the player characters are beaten up and injured. The spellcasters are almost out of spells, and may have already used their best stuff. The players are tired. Emotionally and intellectually, it already feels like this is going to be the hardest battle. Ease up a bit, and make it a little easier for them to win. It's not cheating. It's designing for the story and, frankly, the genre. Allow the heroes a fair chance at winning.

WORLDBUILDING AND REWARDS

When the adventure is over, the characters gain experience and are showered with treasure. Those are standard roleplaying rewards, but things might look different within your fantasy world. There may be other reward that are specific to your setting. Your worldbuilding will establish what is useful and valuable to the characters, so that rewards can be both exciting and appropriate.

REWARDS AND GENRE

After accounting for cost of living (i.e. paying the innkeeper and stocking up on rations) and professional expenses (buying arrow, spell components, and better armor), player characters tend to spend their money on magic items. The best rewards are acquiring magic items directly, finding them in a treasure hoard or taking them off of a defeated antagonist. This is completely appropriate to the fantasy genre.

The rewards for achieving the story goal in a **High Fantasy** setting are generous, and often include a lot of gold and powerful magic items. Worldbuilding comes into play to explain where all of the money came from, and how it doesn't crash the economy by dumping it back into the market. How the magic items were made, and why they ended up in a pile of loot, are also good bits that can help develop other setting elements.

In **Low Fantasy**, the reward is survival. The player characters are less in the hole than they were before, or ahead of the game for a while. The people that they care about are safe, sheltered, and fed. Your worldbuilding efforts have to explain why these rewards are

meaningful but establishing the problems, as well as why they might only be temporary solutions to larger issues.

Characters in a **Dark Fantasy** setting are rewarded with knowledge. They have learned something about the supernatural creature they were fighting, the nature of the universe, and probably something about themselves as well. When you delve into your worldbuilding, you need to establish why the characters will be motivated to keep that knowledge safe (and therefore rare and valuable) and not share it with the world.

The genre of **Science Fantasy** rewards characters with fame and social rewards. They gain praise from the organization that work for, new medals, and a degree of renown within the setting. The worldbuilding has to establish that these accolades carry social and political value that can be leveraged later, or even on an ongoing basis, by the characters.

Romantic Fantasy rewards the player characters by allowing them to finally be with the person they love. They will have a safe space where they can be together, a few allies that will assist them, and some degree of tolerance for their relationship if not complete acceptance. Worldbuilding has to establish that there are people in the world who, like the player characters, disagree with the status quo.

REWARDS AND TIME AND PLACE

All rewards have to reflect what is considered to be valuable and useful in the context of when and where the story is set. What one culture considers to be a great honor, another will take for granted. A sum of gold that would be a fortune in one period might be a

pittance in another. Your worldbuilding has to create some economic and social baselines.

The reward in a **Medievalist Fantasy** setting will be dependent upon the nature of the quest. It should thematically reflect what the characters were seeking. The worldbuilding here will be to establish the quest itself as valuable, for the knowledge and experience the player characters gain, and to have the reward be a symbol of that growth.

For a **Contemporary Fantasy** setting, the reward will often be a lack of consequence. The great secrets have been kept, the world has not ended, and the player characters have not been outed as practitioners of magic. Your worldbuilding efforts have to show that this is still a huge boon, because the characters get to keep on living their lives without interruption or having additional hardships piled on them.

Within **Gaslight Fantasy**, characters will be rewarded with financial stability and social status, which may amount to the same thing. Rich characters get richer. Poor characters are less poor. People with titles may get better titles. Those without titles will get a polite pat on the back. The worldbuilding involved is simply mining the fiction and history of the Victorian era to see how things actually work out for heroes.

In a Historical Fantasy setting there will be two types of rewards. The first is whatever is materially useful or valuable in that time and place, to help the player characters. The second is of the nudge-nudge wink-wink variety, as the players get to see how the

story pays off in regard to the characters' impact on actual documented history.

Wuxia rewards typically involve honor being restored. The people will be saved, the hero will have proven himself worthy, and evil will be driven from the land. All worldbuilding will go into establishing what the status quo of the fantasy world is, so that a return to that status quo can be seen as adequate compensation for the efforts the heroes made.

REWARDS AND TONE

The tone of your fantasy world will affect how the reward is bestowed, how the character receives it, and the impact it has on their lives. Is it the greatest thing ever? Does it have strings attached? Will it end up causing them unforeseen hardship? Your worldbuilding efforts will have to create context for the rewards, whether they are compliments or stealth insults, and the effects that they will have on the characters after the story is over.

The rewards in **Heroic Fantasy** need to be aspirational. They have to somehow reflect the player characters' heroic status. In addition to an increase in prosperity and power, the reward will somehow solidify the protagonist's social status. Worldbuilding has to establish that the rewards are symbols of that new status, reserved for heroes.

In **Comedic Fantasy**, rewards are often humorously disappointing. There will be a buildup to something, only to find out that there was a misunderstanding. What the player characters assumed the reward would be will turn out to be something else entirely. That doesn't mean that it won't be valuable or useful, but it

won't be what was expected. All of the worldbuilding efforts have to create an environment where the characters can't be upset about being slighted.

A lot of the rewards within **Grimdark Fantasy** will be incremental and disposable. Because the objective is survival, and the odds of all the player characters making it out of the adventure alive is slim, rewards will be things that can be used to sustain them. Food, water, healing potions, ammunition, and magic items with limited charges are typical. Of course, these things are probably trapped or cursed.

Juvenile Fantasy will offer up simple rewards that are easy to get excited about. They might have tactical advantages, like magic weapons or armor, but what they do will be straightforward. If it's something kids would get excited about receiving, it's a good reward. The worldbuilding here needs to reinforce that the good deeds themselves are the real reward, and any material or mechanical gains are a bonus.

Weird Fantasy rewards characters with safety and security. The player characters will be okay, as will the people that they care about. In practical form, this means that they gain knowledge that allows them to protect and defend their homes and communities. They get to live lives that are less weird than the events in their adventures.

REWARDS AND CHARACTERS

Rewards have to be valuable and useful. There is a cultural context there, which has to be established in the worldbuilding, but

they also have to be worthwhile to the characters that earn them. Gamemasters need to take the logical conclusion of the story into account, as well as the social, political, and religious values of the setting, but a reward also needs to fulfill some need or desire of the protagonists.

REWARDS CAN ESTABLISH CHARACTER POSSIBILITIES

A character wouldn't need something, or feel that need it, unless something in their background had taught them that. I don't want to get into Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs here, but a reward fulfilling something that's established by the character's personality. If they have some burning desire, that was also planted in their head by something that happened to them in the past, or by some personal goal that they've developed.

REWARDS CAN EXPRESS CHARACTER POSSIBILITIES

This is where the meaningfulness of a reward comes into play. You can give the two different character the same reward, and it will have a different impact on each character. A magic item might give one a tactical advantage, while to the other it's redundant to what they can already do. There might be a context from their back story that makes it meaningful, or they might see a well-intentioned award as an insult.

REWARDS CAN RESTRICT CHARACTER POSSIBILITIES

Rewards can push characters to develop in a certain way. Social status and wealth, for example, often come with obligations. Fame can attract unwanted attention. Freewheeling characters might start to feel tied down. Characters that want structure and order

may discover that new advantages result in a flurry of activity and chaos that they didn't expect- Your worldbuilding has to account for the reactions of other people to the outcome of the characters' actions and the rewards they gain.

REWARDS AND STORY

The reward has to be tied into the other elements of the story. It's one of the strongest ways to tie the story to the fantasy world by making it story-specific. It also connects the story to the characters by the value and utility it offers, and the fulfillment of needs and desires that it promises.

REWARDS AND THE BEGINNING OF A STORY

In the beginning of the story, the reward might be explicitly named or merely implied. It's the difference between telling the player characters that they will be paid 100 gold to do a job, and saying that they have to fight a dragon but get to keep what they find. Characters will vary in motives, with some taking up the story goal because they see that it's the right thing to do, or because they understand the consequences, while others will need the promise of a reward. The worldbuilding as presented in the beginning of the story has to present the reward, whether it's treasure or a favorable outcome, as being worth the effort the player characters will have to make.

REWARDS AND THE MIDDLE OF A STORY

In the middle of the story, most roleplaying games will provide incremental rewards. These should be thematically tied to the big payoff in the finale. If the reward is a lot of gold, then the foes

encountered will all be carrying some of that coin. If it's a major artifact, then lesser magic items that somehow resonate with that artifact will be found, probably in the hands of bad guys. The worldbuilding as presented in the middle of the story should reinforce the promise of reward, even as it reminds the characters of the stakes involved for not completing the story goal.

REWARDS AND THE END OF A STORY

In the end of the story, the characters will get their reward. In addition to being useful and valuable, it should close some other story, character, or worldbuilding loops. The reward explains some unanswered question that's lingered throughout the adventure. It will allow a character to complete a personal goal. There will be new possibilities opened up in the world, sequel stories and spin-off adventures made possible by the implications of the reward. The reward will offer something satisfying beyond its intrinsic tactical or monetary value.

WORLDBUILDING AND CONTINUITY

Sometimes players and gamemaster will create setting elements on the fly, to fill in gaps in the story as it unfolds. Other times, players will add elements as they flesh out their back story and make it connect with the events unfolding at the table. No matter how you add to your worldbuilding, you will need to keep your continuity straight, and fix it when you've made a mistake.

CONTINUITY AND GENRE

Fantasy is not an excuse to be sloppy. Just because it's not the real world, and magic exists, doesn't mean that anything goes. The most satisfying fantasy worlds have a consistent internal logic that sets clear expectations. Your worldbuilding has to have some structure to it. Otherwise, nothing means anything and no one has any reason to care.

High Fantasy works in broad strokes, so continuity isn't as difficult to keep track of. The background elements will be more mythic in scope, recalling what elves collectively did during a vague past era, rather than recounting the specific details on a particular individual on an exact date.

The continuity with a **Low Fantasy** setting will matter. A player character missing an important detail could become a matter of life and death. It's important to keep track of who did what, and when, and why.

Managing a **Dark Fantasy** setting's continuity is a mixed bag. What mortal people do needs to be tracked, but the more vague you are about supernatural elements, the creepier things become. Having intentional inconsistencies to keep characters (and players) confused is a feature, not a bug.

Within **Science Fantasy** settings, continuity can be loose in terms of where things are located and when specific events took place. Consistency is required when explaining how technology, and even magic, works. Things that are pseudo-scientific have to follow rules, even if the rules are outlandish and implausible in the real world.

In **Romantic Fantasy** the only continuity that needs to be maintained relate to social rules. If something is taboo, it has to be dealt with consistently because it affects the plot. Relationships between family members tend to remain static, even as other entanglements change and grow.

CONTINUITY AND TIME AND PLACE

You're thinking that because your fantasy world is a fictional location, you don't have to worry about continuity regarding time and place. You would be wrong. Details need to be internally consistent. A city can't be by inland along a river one adventure, and then alongside the ocean the next, unless it's established that the city moves. You can't base the customs on a specific period in real-world history, and then ignore those customs later.

Medievalist Fantasy doesn't have to conform to all of the beats of Middle Ages Europe, but you need to pick the ones that make it feel medieval and stick with them. If you're sticking with 13th

century weaponry, you can't suddenly introduce 19th century firearms.

In **Contemporary Fantasy**, the continuity will come down to the elements that you add. If you create a fictional fast-food chain, use it. Don't suddenly default to real-world brand names. If you're using actual places, don't start making up fictional ones.

The continuity in **Gaslight Fantasy** will often come down to having historical and fictional supporting characters staying in character. Sherlock Holmes isn't going to miss details to make your plot contrivances easier. You also can't fudge when events too place or discoveries were made too much, or else you start to mess with other events and setting elements.

Historical Fantasy should have some fixed events that will take place no matter what the player characters do. To alter things too much means that it's no longer that time and place, not really. Continuity means mostly sticking to the key historical events so that your setting remains recognizable as Historical Fantasy.

In a **Wuxia** setting, you should nail down a time period at least, if not a time and specific place within Asia. The customs and cultures are more important than the events, because the stories are morality plays rather than reenactments. You need to be consistent with the presentation of honor, and the traditions that are expressed to be meaningful and important to the setting's people.

CONTINUITY AND TONE

While you can and should vary the tone of your stories from time to time, they should always return to the baseline. The degree to

which you can stray from the core tone, and for how long, is entirely up to you. If you go too far, or stay away for an excessive period, you risk permanently shifting the tone. It's not a **Comedic Fantasy**, after all, if 90% of your stories are serious in nature.

Within **Heroic Fantasy** you should never lose sight of the fact that the player characters are the good guys. Don't offer them temptations they can't resist, or get away from should they momentarily succumb. Don't allow them to become mere mortals, stuck with normal flaws and ordinary problems. They need to be operating on a grand scale, both physically and emotionally.

Comedic Fantasy has to stay funny. You can get serious for a moment, but there should still be some mild jokes. Most of the time a shift in tone is simply a break to allow you to set up a bigger payoff. Think of it as the details you need to present before dropping the punchline.

When you're dealing with **Grimdark Fantasy**, you can't let up on the bleak and nihilistic tone. Everyone is awful and everything is terrible. Changes in tone are necessary to keep players from getting ground down entirely, but don't linger longer than necessary. A respite from gloom and doom usually means that something even more horrible is about to happen to the player characters.

Juvenile Fantasy has to stay fun. You can change the tone from happy to sad to serious to scary, but there has to be a sense that everything is going to be okay. The changes in tone ought to be setups for more action and excitement to follow.

Dealing with the tone on **Weird Fantasy** almost means ignoring continuity. That doesn't mean that things should cease being weird,

at least not for long. The volume control on the weirdness has to go up and down continually, though. When things start to feel comfortable and almost normal, drop something incredibly strange on the player characters. When things have been at a high level of bizarreness, drop it down to normal for a bit to make the player paranoid about the lack of weirdness.

CONTINUITY AND CHARACTERS

The things that your characters do within the setting will flesh out and change certain elements of your fantasy world. More importantly, it will create history for the character. In future adventures, what's happening now will be back story. A character's personal goals and motivations will change, requiring and update to canonical continuity.

CONTINUITY CAN ESTABLISH CHARACTER POSSIBILITIES

It should be self-evident that once something has been introduced into the canon of your fantasy world, it will be available for characters to leverage. This includes not only abilities, but background elements that could be worked into a character's history. When you begin on worldbuilding, keep in mind how elements might be used, abused, and unexpectedly exploited in the future.

CONTINUITY CAN EXPRESS CHARACTER POSSIBILITIES

Some things in your fantasy world's canon might not be particularly detailed at first. If, through the story or the development of a player character, some setting-specific details are added, that can affect future characters. For example, you know

that canonically that there are elves, rangers, and elf rangers. If it's later established that in order to be trained as a ranger elves need to undergo so ordeal or pass some test, then afterward all elf rangers within your setting will be subject to that same canonical process.

CONTINUITY CAN RESTRICT CHARACTER POSSIBILITIES

If a setting element contradicts some aspect of what's been established as character canon, or if something in your fantasy world's canon changes, it can have a negative impact. Adding details to some generic event or element to the setting might create conflicts with the way a character has be leveraging that element. This, in turn, creates more continuity problems that will need to be addressed.

CONTINUITY AND STORY

When we think of continuity, we often thing of it as something directly connected to story. Things that have happened in the past affect things that are happening in the present, and can create boundaries around the possibilities for the future. One event, encounter, or set of actions leads into the next. It's important to keep track of continuity in order for the story to make sense.

CONTINUITY AND THE BEGINNING OF A STORY

In the beginning of the story, events will need to be consistent with established canon, but there's no continuity for the story itself yet. This means that any elements that are going to be essential need to be planned out and introduced, so that they can become

part of the canon. The worldbuilding as presented in the beginning of the story, then, lays the foundation for what's to come.

CONTINUITY AND THE MIDDLE OF A STORY

In the middle of the story a few canonical details might be introduced, but for the most part existing elements will get fleshed out. In building upon things, previous continuity needs to be followed, and the new information will need to be tracked for future continuity.

CONTINUITY AND THE END OF A STORY

In the end of the story, no new elements of continuity will be introduced other than what happens in the finale. The outcome of the story is perhaps the most important bit that needs to be tracked. Whether the character succeeds or fails, what happens to the antagonists, and the impact of rewards will have a ripple effect on future adventures within your campaign.

WORLDBUILDING AND RULES

There are three different types of rules involved when putting together a fantasy roleplaying game. The first are the game mechanics themselves. Even if they're not setting- or genre-specific, they will imply things about your world based on the possibilities they create.

The second set of rules are the house rules. These are either put forth by the gamemaster, or agreed upon by the group. Most of the time these are preferences, mechanics and options that are tweaked or excluded, or alterations to the system intended to streamline play. As with the core game mechanics, they shape worldbuilding possibilities rather than drive them.

The third are the rules of the setting. These are the way things work within the world itself. Setting rules include laws, social contracts, cultural taboos, religious doctrine, and other things that typically have little or nothing to do with the game mechanics. This is the sweet spot for worldbuilding.

Because it's impossible to speak to the full range of game mechanics, and popular systems have already had volumes written about the implications of their rules on setting choices, we'll stick to the latter definition from this point forward.

RULES AND GENRE

There are two ways they you can leverage genre for worldbuilding when creating your setting rules. The first is to call out ways that demonstrate that your fantasy world is not the real world. This

means creating things as mundane as cultural customs, political systems, and religious beliefs that vary from things found in real life.

The second is to infuse everything with magic, making it a pervasive force that shapes civilizations. There should be at least vague rules about why magic works, who gets to wield it, and how it affects other elements of the world.

Within **High Fantasy** settings, cultural, political, and religious rules tend to be flexible. The only absolutes are the definitions of right and wrong. Magic is commonplace, used by average people for ordinary things.

A **Low Fantasy** world will have a lot of laws regarding crime and punishment. You need them not only to know when characters are engaging in criminal behavior, but also to establish how corrupt authority figures and villains are when they twist, distort, and abuse those laws. The gamemaster will be the arbiter of how consistently the rules are applied, but they will still be there.

The rules within a **Dark Fantasy** setting are more akin to climate than weather. They tend to be flexible within a range, rather than being absolute and specific. Some element of mystery exists as to what motivates the forces of evil, and how monsters come to exist, in order to sustain that necessary terror of the unknown.

For a **Science Fantasy** universe, there have to be consistent rules around how things work. How organizations are run needs to be detailed. What defines right and wrong needs to be made clear. The technology, as well as the magic, will make it clear that this is not the real world.

Romantic Fantasy requires a lot of social, religious, and political rules about courtship, marriage, and family ties. These traditions will both create resonance with the real world, so players can relate, and set it apart from the real world. Magic is almost ambient, something in the background everywhere that's taken for granted.

RULES AND TIME AND PLACE

Every time and place will have its own set of rules. This extends from the cultures and customs of the world's peoples to the fashion, architecture, and technology. Think in terms of what is expected, what is taboo, and what people in that time and place would consider to be normative.

In **Medievalist Fantasy**, you need to conform to political rules more than social or religious ones. There is a class structure that will be enforced, legally and socially. The needs of the players will eliminate a lot of the racism and sexism, which can be explained by the influence of fantasy races and their cultures. Magic will create some exceptions to Middle Ages technology.

Within **Contemporary Fantasy**, the rules of the real world will be supplemented by your own rules for how the supernatural works. We understand the social order, what the law requires, and the belief systems of political parties and religions. Now how will the introduction of magic influence those things?

Gaslight Fantasy will often carry with it Victorian class structure and rules of proper conduct. Even if the player characters are rebelling against such structures, they are by force reacting to those rules. Noble titles, social etiquette, and the needs of empires drive what's considered normative.

For Historical Fantasy, the rules have to reflect the values of that time and place. If there are specific things that make the core event that you're building the setting around possible, those need to be preserved as well.

The rules for **Wuxia** will vary depending upon the period of Chinese history you're basing your setting on. There are generally strict rules of conduct, and a rigidly enforces class system. Who gets to study what sorts of fighting skills or magic will also be based on social status.

RULES AND TONE

The nature of the setting's rules will greatly affect the tone. The culture, politics, and religious traditions can determine whether a setting is serious or comedic, lighthearted or horrific. Your fantasy world's rules will drives behaviors, determine how people feel about things, and define how safe it is for people to perform even the most ordinary tasks.

There need to be codes of conduct that characters in a **Heroic Fantasy** are held to. How they accomplish things is as important, if not more so, than what they accomplish. They need to do things in a manner that demonstrates that they are good, noble, and decent people.

Comedic Fantasy might seem pretty fast-and-loose in terms of setting rules, but they're actually pretty important. In improv you can throw in anything and say "yes, and..." but for a game setting, you need some baseline structure the play with. An improv sketch only goes on for minutes, after all, while a successful campaign can last a lot longer than that.

To make **Grimdark Fantasy** palatable, it helps to provide a reason for why absolutely everyone and everything is deadly. There should be a back story, or at least a theme, that explains the bleak tone of the setting. That becomes a filter, if not a rule, for how the things trying to kill the player characters operate.

The setting rules for **Juvenile Fantasy** are very transactional. If the player characters do this, then they will succeed and be rewarded. If the characters do bad things, then they will fail and bad things will happen to them and possibly to other people. It's a simple morality play dynamic.

Weird Fantasy only has one rule. If something can be twisted, contorted, or corrupted to make it uncomfortable and off-putting, do it. The closer in proximity a person, place, or thing is to the supernatural, the weirder it will be.

RULES AND CHARACTERS

Bards listed as a character class in the rulebook is a mechanical rule. Not allowing evil player characters is a house rule. Stating that there are no dwarf monks in the setting is a world-specific rule. The things that you establish as canonical for the setting, as well as the reasons behind them, will define what options are available for characters.

RULES CAN ESTABLISH CHARACTER POSSIBILITIES

Every possible character element can be subject to some setting-based rule. What do some races value, or fear, or feel the need to regulate? Are there political stances regarding specific abilities, like magic or class capabilities? Do religions have moral or ethical

opinions on the way certain character classes conduct themselves? Are their organizations and institutions that characters of a particular race or class or background are forced to interact with?

RULES CAN EXPRESS CHARACTER POSSIBILITIES

Exploring race and class combinations, or even the way different cultures handle class abilities, can allow for some varied expression. Just as a cleric of one god will have different background details, motivations, and traditions than a cleric of a different god, a fighter from one part of your fantasy world will be expressed differently than a fighter from another part of the world. An elf wizard will have had a different education than a gnome wizard.

RULES CAN RESTRICT CHARACTER POSSIBILITIES

As stated above, the needs of the setting might prohibit race, class, race/class combinations, or specific abilities. Aside from those things just not existing, there may be in-setting reasons why they are prohibited. They might be illegal, or the knowledge may be lost. Characters don't have the chance to learn things because of restrictions based on their culture, their religious beliefs, or the political climate around them.

RULES AND STORY

Many times, the rules you establish for the setting are what drive your stories. The existence of some element creates problems, which the player characters will need to solve. Sometimes the lack of some setting element will cause an issue that needs to be addressed. Remember that the things built into the setting need to serve some

purposed, and that's often nothing more than to be a great story hook.

RULES AND THE BEGINNING OF A STORY

In the beginning of the story, any setting rules that the player characters aren't aware of need to be made clear. While it's possible to leave them out of the loop and have them operating in the dark, it's not entirely fair. Characters will make decisions and take actions based on what they know, or think they know, about your fantasy world.

RULES AND THE MIDDLE OF A STORY

In the middle of the story, there can be more exposition as the player characters experience new things. They will learn more about the world through those experiences. Here in the second act they should absolutely learn about any setting information, and how things work in the world, that will impact their ability to complete the story goal.

RULES AND THE END OF A STORY

The way that the characters defeat the antagonist and achieve the story goal, as well as their personal or party goals, is often a result of what they've learned along the way. The way that culture, politics, and religion drive how the world works can come into play and give the player characters the information they need to succeed. When you can do this, it ties the characters, the setting, and the story together nicely and creates a satisfying experience for everyone.

DESIGNER'S NOTES

The original Foragers Guild was an organization that I created for my high school roleplaying group. I didn't think of it as a worldbuilding exercise, but that's what it was. There were things in our fantasy game that didn't make sense to me. There were needs that weren't being filled for the player characters. The *handwavium* of having characters just meet in a tavern and suddenly be a team didn't work for me. Neither did just being able to buy and sell things without some merchant to interact with.

The Foragers Guild of my games is something akin to the real-world Royal Geographical Society. They funded expeditions and equipped player characters in return for a cut of any treasure recovered. The Guild would help injured characters with healing, and help them mend armor and repair weapons. They would buy any magic items the player characters didn't want, and sell them magic items that other expeditions had found.

Over time I had a stable of older and more experienced (i.e. higher level) supporting characters who could mentor the player characters. When someone needed to learn a new skill or spell, or developed a new class ability, it was because of the Guild. Eventually, I started sticking my own retired player characters in as the mentors, because I knew how to roleplay them, and it was a way to be able to play them again even if they weren't going on adventures.

If there's one thing that I want you to take away from this book, it's that you should engage in world building for your own reasons.

Don't do it because you think it's required. Never feel like there's some checklist that you need to follow. Create things that support the needs of the characters in your game, and the story that you're telling. Do as much as you need, and then expand to do as much as you want. Have fun with it, but have a purpose for doing it. You'll enjoy it a lot more when you can actually put the things you've create to use.

ABOUT DANCING LIGHTS PRESS

Dancing Lights Press is an independent small press publisher dedicated to helping people explore creativity. Our mission is to help people become better story tellers. We believe that the stories we tell can enrich the lives of individuals and even change the world.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Berin Kinsman is a writer, indie publisher, and entrepreneur. He tries to live according to his personal motto, “simplify, create, thrive”. Berin travels the world with his wife, the artist and educator Katie Kinsman.

NEXT UP: ADVENTURE THEORY

The next Foragers Guild Guide will get into the third and final pillar of fantasy adventure, adventure! We'll look at how you can cut down on preparation by only creating the bits that you need. The guide will examine the relationship between the setting you've created, adapted, or chosen to use, and the characters within it. I'll offer up some advice on how to leverage your setting for story ideas, and in turn use the events of the story to expand the details of your world. Stay tuned!

THE FORAGERS GUILD GUIDES

Because you asked for it, a new line of character, worldbuilding, and adventure creation aids from Dancing Lights Press! In the spirit of our best-selling titles for both creative writers and tabletop roleplayers, the Foragers Guild is a series of supplements useful with all popular fantasy games including *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Pathfinder*, *Dungeon World*, *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay*, *Tunnels & Trolls*, and more.

Each volume examines a different aspect of fantasy roleplaying from the perspective of the 3 Pillars of Fantasy Adventure: Characters, Worldbuilding, and Stories. You'll learn how to flesh out the back stories of player characters, adversaries, and non-player characters. We'll show you how to establish and expand various elements within your fantasy world. The ways that the tropes of fantasy can be leveraged into stories that challenge and excite players will be explained.

All volumes in the Foragers Guild Guide series will be available at DriveThruRPG, Amazon, and through our [Patreon](#) as they are released.

RWR1001 Character Theory

RWR1002 Worldbuilding Theory

RWR1003 Adventure Theory

RWR1004 Party Theory