

[NK Jemisin's Worldbuilding PDF](#)

- Iceberg 10% visible, 90% beneath the surface
 - You've thought about it and built it but it doesn't make it onto the screen/page
 - "Fear of worldbuilding is why we see so many similar worlds done to death: Iron Age barbarians, Star Trek-ian space navies, medieval northern Europe ad infinitum."
- "Books [stories] thrive or fail on their writing: plot, characterization, narrative style, etc. Worldbuilding is just a part of that."
- Increase immersion as difference increases
- Immersion pyramid
 - High Immersion
 - Explain little. The strangeness of the world is conveyed mostly through context and rarely in the narrative. Glossaries and epigraphs can help.
 - First person
 - Second person
 - Single PoV
 - The Hunger Games
 - If on a winter's night a traveler
 - Moderate Immersion
 - Explain periodically. Sometimes interrupts the narrative for explanations of what's going on.
 - "Tight" Third person
 - Limited PoV
 - The Night Angel Trilogy
 - The Coldfire Trilogy
 - Low Immersion
 - Explain frequently, prologues are common
 - "Distant" Third Person
 - Multiple PoVs
 - Omniscient Narrator
 - Lord of the Rings
- Science vs. Plausibility
 - Writing sells "the whoppers"
 - Use enough science to make sense to the layperson, and no more
 - Engagement > entertainment, education
- Planet
 - Not every planet is Earth but it is what is most familiar to everyone
 - Continents
 - Climate
- People
 - World gives us basics: Agriculture, weather, setting

- Sociology gives us the rest
- Element X

Ezra Klein Interview with Jemisin

- 4:06 “Worldbuilding is the process you use to come up with the world that you then write the story in. Worldbuilding is not a *substitute* for writing a story.”
- Start with the macroscale and work your way down to the micro
 - Universal level, laws of physics
 - Planetary level
 - Assume world like Earth (rocky, terrestrial, people who are like us)
 - Continents
- 8:53 “We understand the world that we live in innately because we live in it, but what that means is that every single one of us is an expert in surviving on a terrestrial world with a nitrogen based atmosphere in a carbon-based organic system. You know, so we all understand this because we live it. We aren’t standing around having conversations with each other about ‘hey, nitrogen is pretty good today’ but we do understand it. So the characters who are going to inhabit this world also need to understand it.”
- You want to think about things to a level where people listening/reading/watching will stop and say “huh” as in, they had never thought about that
 - Example ~12:30 when NK describes the arid interior of a Pangaea continent
- Then you think about how a society/people might have evolved in that climate/geography/etc.

Building the World of the Expanse with Jemisin’s notes

- Universal/Planetary Level
 - The Expanse blends the two, treating each planet as a different continent but thinking of them on basic physics levels
 - Earth
 - 20 billion people
 - Untouched by climate change
 - High in natural resources
 - Mars
 - Hostile world
 - Little water
 - Arid
 - Lower gravity
 - Cold
 - Belt
 - Most hostile world
 - Very low/artificial gravity
 - “Weather” is the vacuum of space
 - Water and air are hard to come by

- Spread out amongst dozens of small islandlike places
 - How do these regions fit together?
 - The same as our Solar system, all great distances, held together by the gravity of the Sun
 - Something the Expanse seems to gloss over is the changing distances between these areas as they orbit at different speeds
- Societal Level/Three elements
 - Earth
 - Government
 - Centralized United Nations
 - Colonizer
 - Military
 - Old, established
 - Economic
 - Prosperous
 - Universal basic income
 - Architecture
 - Ornate
 - Well-developed but stagnant society at the top of the totem pole looking to maintain its position (stand in for US potentially?)
 - Defensive against biggest perceived threat: Mars.
 - Small percentage of the population actually earns or creates, the rest live off welfare because of technological advancements and very high population
 - Mars
 - Government
 - Strict militaristic government formed in order to maintain order and move forward at the most efficient pace
 - Military
 - Highly advanced
 - Small but building
 - Economic
 - Recently independent
 - Former colony
 - Architecture
 - In midst of terraforming
 - Spartan due to devotion to creating a habitable world vs. a thriving culture
 - Difficult circumstances have forced technological developments, making Mars the most advanced society in the system
 - As a recently independent entity, insecure about status and fearful of maintaining that independence from its original colonizer. Quick to project power
 - Belt

- Government
 - Factional
 - Unsupervised
 - Military
 - Wild west
 - Economic
 - Mining/resource accumulation for interior planets
 - Architecture
 - 100% functional
 - Shielding from space
 - More established settlements have centralized green spaces
 - Factional and decentralized grouping of people due to the “geography” of dozens of small rocks to live on
 - Physically smaller and more fragile due to low gravity, but resilient and resourceful due to necessity and dangers posed by hostile space
 - Pirate-esque, spacing someone not unlike walking the plank
- Element X
 - Something that creates problems: Protomolecule
- Moderate/low immersion

Middle Earth and the Perils of Worldbuilding

- “M. John Harrison once famously called worldbuilding ‘the attempt to exhaustively survey a place that isn’t there.’”
- “Harrison’s point is that the worldbuilding of much fantastic fiction, which takes Tolkien’s legendarium as its archetype, shifts the focus of literature away from the act which is most vital to its usefulness: the act of reading. It envisions a writer who photographs a secondary world, encodes it into language, and a reader who receives this immersive experience like a film, blissfully, and perhaps willingly, unaware that the world he experiences is a rhetorical construct. The only problem is that all these assumptions are based on false premises: you can’t encode the world in language; readers are never passive - they create the text as much as a writer does; and all texts are rhetorical constructs...It’s a transaction that emerges from a writer’s implications and a reader’s interpretive toolbox. Worldbuilding fiction seems to deny this transaction and replace it with a cleaner one, in which the story on offer is like a clock and the writer is like the clockmaker. The problem is that this kind of fiction creates a dependency in the reader to know more, to know everything. I feel this way all the time when I’m watching Game of Thrones. It’s what sends me online looking for backstories”
- The act of thinking about “What did Sauron look like” or “how might an elf regiment organize itself” are aspects of worldbuilding that can dilute or distract from the ideas or “bill of goods” that the text offers.
- “I’m also wary and worried about a strain of passivity in people that worldbuilding fiction seems to, at best, reflect and, at worst, encourage.

Religion

- Mormons
 - Famous for traveling west (westerns and space have a lot in common, new frontier)
 - Mormons also believe in other lifeforms
- Methodist
 - [Anna is a Methodist reverend but also married to a woman](#)
 - This is something that Methodists are currently very against
 - Shows an evolution of our world
 - “In the “Star Trek” universe, Chakotay on “Voyager” does also practice rituals connected to his Native American heritage, but the primary practitioners of faith tend to be the non-humans.”
 - “Meanwhile, the modern-day “Battlestar Galactica” featured two competing religions — the Lords of Kobol, a polytheistic system of worship, and the Cylon concept of ‘God.’”

Language

<https://www.wired.com/2017/04/the-expanse-belter-language/>

- “The sound of otherness”
- “The language is really at the center of who these people are. It changes you, it affects you,” says Rotilio. “It’s like when you put on a period costume and you play King Henry, and you become King Henry. It’s like that, but with the language.”
- “Just like their bodies changed to acclimate to low gravity, their language also evolved to communicate in the universe’s ultimate melting pot...To hear it spoken on the show is to understand how much has changed in this future, but also how similar the Belter experience is to that of immigrants at any time, including now.”
- “In the Expanse novels, Belter is mostly just a dialect. But when the show jumped to TV, the producers brought on Farmer to make it a fully realized language.”
- “Creoles are based on a mother tongue—in this case English—but incorporate the influence of many other languages. Farmer looked to Haitian Creole for inspiration.”
- “Belter is composed mainly of Chinese, Japanese, Slavic, Germanic, and romance languages because Earth’s most common tongues would be the ones to survive to form the new brogue of the cosmos.”
- “you pick up hints of familiar accents and languages—a little Italian here, some South African there, but just as soon as you think you’ve figured out which Earth-bound accent the actor is imitating, it changes. That’s by design. Belter can’t sound too much like any language on Earth.”

- “The showrunners didn’t want to use subtitles, so the crew had to find the right balance between an authentic-sounding language and one the audience could comprehend.”
- “eventually they learned Belter light sounded the best on TV. But Rotilio still learns the pure Belter version of all his lines.”

Watch-Through

- Season 1
 - World Building is important because it’s the only way to fully immerse yourself in the experiences of others. It’s model building and understanding power structures and seeing the architecture of another world helps us understand the complexity and purpose of ours.
 - Shorthand and lingo makes the world feel lived in (crows in GoT)
 - Obviously not sure whether to credit the show or the books but the show executes the plan. How is each world shot and lit? Earth feels very stable and controlled
 - Thinking through the building of a world and the necessary reasoning and logic behind it allows you to come up with new and creative solutions to problems. Any show takes place in a built world, maybe it’s similar to ours but in a different time place or whatever (element x) but the more out there the element x is, the more you have to step outside of yourself. If the world is too similar to ours, it can be hard to get perspective on it and you can get trapped in rigid thinking that’s rooted in your own experience. But storytelling is all about empathy and the experiences of others
 - Which ironically is the same kind of thinking that blinds the earthers belters and martians to the impending new element in their world
 - So this show isn’t “well written” on a micro level (ep 6 has lots of bad dialogue) but it’s the macro that’s impressive. I really like the broad strokes and the world that’s being built. It’s kind of the anti Better Call Saul.
 - Characters can survive vacuums and raw space which is instant death lol and I’m sure a lot of the physics don’t actually make sense. Even basic character motivations and deals that characters cut don’t make any sense.
 - TV is uniquely suited for this kind of “Expansive” pardon the pun, world building. We sit with characters for longer, can truly look at things from multiple angles. TV is about lived in spaces. Think of Game of Thrones, or The Wire, shows that immerse you in a world you aren’t familiar with by examining it from every conceivable direction. But that doesn’t mean that it’s an easy sell. It’s really hard to get into these shows. Often the first season is as much 10 hours of exposition as anything else. You have to be invested in that world that they’re building because the story won’t start for a whiiiiile.
 - The beginning of The Expanse looks like the Break Free video
- Season 2

- S2e7 Dawes to diago about time and birthdays
- World feels nice and full so that when new characters come on it feels natural
- Costume design creates visual factions even within factions. You can tell by looking at characters if they're belters, martians, or earthers and you can tell their attitudes of the situation (military garb or diplomatic) this is great because you don't need to remember every fact about every character
- In general, the show is most focused on the ordinary people, the masses in these new worlds, how the poor adapt, it's easy to think about the rich and how they can have everything, but it's most valuable to look at the distribution of resources and power
- The science they use is really fun in terms of orbits, gravity, thermodynamics, etc. there are def holes in the show's logic but you can appreciate the attention to detail they have in creating these worlds
- They are so good at creating ticking time bomb motifs. We have to do x before y happens. Very video game esque. Something they lean into with the first person shooter camera shots (213). Makes sense to borrow from one of the only mediums better at world building than tv
- Bad writing example from 212 when Bobby says I'll go through you like a door

Outline

- I. Introduction
 - A. Why are we talking about The Expanse?
 - B. Why is it special and why is worldbuilding important/interesting?
 - C. Thesis — The Expanse is a perfect storm of worldbuilding: combining visions of its worlds from the ground up in new and the unique opportunities to tell those stories through television, the most immersive and lived-in medium we have.
- II. NK Jemisin Walkthrough
 - A. Who is she?
 1. 3-time consecutive Hugo Award winning author (never been done before)
 2. Also runs workshops on worldbuilding
 - B. Physics level
 1. While Jemisin advises writers to choose worlds based on Earth (rocky planet, same gravity, basic atmospheric/climate features), The Expanse decides to imagine its worlds with fundamental differences from Earth, most notably gravity.
 - a) Earth, Mars, The Belt all have vastly different levels of gravity that impact the very evolution of their people
 - b) But it maintains the most important thing that Jemisin was going for: making it familiar. This is still our own expanded universe, and not difficult to imagine projecting ourselves outward
 - c) Everything else springs forward from here

- C. Planetary/Global Level
 - 1. What resources are available and how do people/societies adapt and survive on these worlds?
- D. But how does all of this communicate the themes of the story?
 - 1. Empathy, stepping outside your comfort zone, gaining perspective on other cultures. It asks the same of us as it does of its characters
- III. What makes it feel lived in?
 - A. Lingo and Jargon
 - 1. Belter, Duster
 - 2. Burn
 - 3. Scrip
 - 4. Rock hopper/hopping
 - B. Costume differences
 - 1. You know who is part of what based on their appearances
 - a) Belters neck tattoos
 - b) Martians military
 - c) Earthers ornate
 - d) These reflect the nature and attitude of their people
 - C. World feels nice and full so that when new characters come on it feels natural
 - D. Physics
 - 1. Writing sells us the whoppers
 - E. Belter Language
 - 1. The sounds that are incorporated are important because this is a world that evolved out of our own. Unlike Klingon or Dothraki or Elvish which don't need to have any similarities to our languages, Belter does, because it's built up of a melting pot of cultures we do recognize. It's supposed to feel like a future us that is possible
 - 2. Iceberg principle
 - a) He learns all his lines in pure Belter even though they use the light version in the show
 - F. Religion
 - 1. Similar to our own but expanded upon
- IV. Character
 - A. Main nucleus
 - 1. Holden
 - a) Earther castout
 - b) Reluctant hero who sees the unfairness of the system
 - 2. Naomi
 - a) Belter
 - b) Disadvantaged who wants to fight for her home
 - 3. Amos
 - a) Earther/belter
 - b) Wants a family

- 4. Alex
 - a) Former Martian navy
 - b) Wants a
 - B. Avasarala
 - C. Bobbie
- V. Perfect Fit for TV
 - A. Worldbuilding sci-fi has long thrived much more on the small screen than the big
 - 1. Star Trek, Dr. Who, Stargate
 - 2. Gives time and space to breathe and tell a more complete story from multiple angles. Game of Thrones, The Expanse, or even The Wire could never work on the big screen, even if they were film franchises.
- VI. Why is any of this important?
 - A. The elephant in the room here is Game of Thrones, the most successful worldbuilding exercise around
 - B. But it's about to end, and everyone is searching for the next hit
 - 1. Amazon has poured half a billion dollars into a Lord of The Rings show
 - 2. HBO is launching Watchmen
 - 3. Disney Plus is pulling all of their Marvel and Star Wars content from Netflix in preparation for their own streaming service that will feature shows set in those extended universes
 - C. And while I'm excited to watch all of it, I can't help but think that many of these shows lack what made Game of Thrones and The Expanse so interesting: building a world we'd never seen on screen from the ground up — icebergs of content.