

There have been a lot of space battles in TV and movies. But when I saw this one, it felt different. There aren't any lasers, no forcefields, and there's this crazy attention to the detail of physics. And then I realized that what makes this battle so interesting is exactly what makes the series so good: how it carefully thinks through details from the ground up

This is The Expanse, the SyFy - erm - Amazon series that is one of the best shows on TV at this kind of worldbuilding. Every work of fiction builds a world to hold the story it tells, whether it's with the ice zombies of Game of Thrones or a fictionalized Albuquerque with a thriving methamphetamine industry. But The Expanse is one of the best places to see this kind of thinking on display because it takes huge swings.

It projects into the future, where humanity has colonized the Solar System, living on Mars, the asteroid belt, and far off moons of Jupiter and Saturn that you haven't heard of since your solar system unit in middle school

While the show is critically acclaimed, it didn't really make major headlines until last year when it was killed by SyFy. As sci-fi fans are programmed to do from birth, they mobilized to save the show, but this time it actually worked. People flew planes with "save the expanse" banners and George RR Martin called up fantasy sugar daddy Jeff Bezos to beg him to save the show. And in a nutshell, that's what makes The Expanse so great: its ability to build a world that feels so real that people will take to the streets to defend it.

Clip of Space Battle ending in pause button

AE: Rewind
Side by side with:
Star Trek lasers/Star Wars forcefield/BSG
slowing down
Zoom back in

Expanse titles, SyFy logo, cross out and slap on the Amazon Prime

White Walkers
Walt crystal blue persuasion montage

Opening titles montage

AE:
Utilize vastness of space
Pop on critically acclaimed reviews
Cancellation news
Save the expanse
Plane
GRRM

Worldbuilding b-roll

So that's what we're going to look at today: How The Expanse builds its world and why it's so interesting. Yes, I'm aware that this is also a book series, but on this channel we talk about TV, and I haven't read them. And don't worry, no spoilers ahead. I'm Jackson, and this is Ideas At Play.

Let's start by jumping back to that space battle that got me thinking. In a sentence, what makes this so different is the show's willingness to rethink everything and think about how something like this would have to actually look.

They throw away all of the magic fixes from other media. By getting rid of lasers and shields, the crew has to depressurize the ship to prevent airleaks once bullets start ripping through the hull. Because inertia is going to be a major factor, every change of direction is tough on the crew, like that spinny thing astronauts and pilots train on.

Punctuation

Each concept the show rethinks sends these massive ripple effects on down the line.

The result is a world that feels *fresher* than a lot of other built worlds we see on television. So much of "fantasy" takes place in some kind of medieval Northern Europe or in a space Navy like Star Trek.

But The Expanse is somehow both grounded and — pardon the pun — expansive. Executive producers Mark Fergus and Hawk Ostby are masters at creating worlds that don't fit those stereotypical molds, like they did when they wrote their classic sci-fi film

Annoyed faces

Opener

Annotate this scene (look to Vox for inspiration)

Game of Thrones/Outlander/LOTR
Star Trek in all of its iterations

Miller eye-roll
Children of Men carrying the baby

Children of Men. There they tried to think through what a world might look like if nobody had been born in 18 years. And here on The Expanse they start that recalibration on an even more fundamental level: gravity.

From Interstellar to The Martian to, well Gravity, film has been thinking about gravity in their sci-fi more recently. But the difference is that they deal with gravity in the short term: what it would be like if you or I were suddenly thrown onto a different planet. The Expanse thinks about how cultures and people would evolve over generations in that environment.

Think about how different you'd be if you grew up on an asteroid space station with really low gravity. Your bones would be less dense and you'd be taller. Your environment is more hostile, so your culture would probably value self-reliance and toughness the most. That kind of culture, combined with being spread out over a bunch of asteroids is tough to govern so there probably wouldn't be much a centralized government. What I just described is one of the three main factions in The Expanse, and the one we spend the most time with, the beltters.

This is the first step that author NK Jemisin describes in her worldbuilding workshops. She's won the Hugo Award, the top prize for science fiction and fantasy literature, a record 3 times in a row, so she kind of knows what she's talking about.

In her workshops, she recommends starting on the biggest possible level and working your way down to the most minute details because it's those fundamental changes that shape everything, even if we're not aware of them at first.

Punctuation

Interstellar
Martian
Gravity
Running back to the ship Interstellar

Martian talking to the camera

Eros

AE: Person on asteroid
Lengthen them, thin them out
*Number each of these things (1. Physical changes, 2. Culture, 3. Govt)

Zoom out of asteroid to show a bunch

Try to connect them in a federation
(federation map?)
Zoom back, guy gets spaced
Gravity torture
Beltaloda

AE: Animate her powerpoint workshops

NK
Hugo award

Add 2 more

Back to her powerpoint

Every one of those details about the belters stem from the previous one and they can all find their roots back to the physical level. But The Expanse keeps pushing those physical differences. Where do you get air? Who controls the air, and how does that power structure affect the people who live there?

Of course, this would be way too much information to just dump on an audience. So The Expanse gives you a steady diet of kernels that slowly reveal the larger structure beneath. The best writers think about this as an iceberg, with 10% of their world explained and 90% beneath the surface. That 90%, while invisible is really, really important; just ask the Titanic.

The audience needs to feel that there is a 90% down there, because even if it's not present in their minds, it's shaped the characters they're watching.

Here's how NK puts it: *"You know, so we understand the world we live in innately 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."*

We don't need to have someone explain that the belters are poor, we see it in the broken screen on Detective Miller's hand terminal. We can see the Martians militantly working on creating a new Earth on Mars in their straighlaced haircuts and clothing. Earth's wealth is obvious in their wide-open spaces and sportscar racing ships.

Work backwards from 3,
3. Gov't
2. Rock hopping/spacing/resiliency
1. Physical difference

Air punctuation

Overwhelmed reaction shot

Scared reaction shot

Kernels
AE: Iceberg

Titanic punctuation

Looking over the edge in Expanse
Alex zooming out to plot his course

AE: Audio visualization/KT

Hand Terminal

Martian marines

Racing ship

There are hundreds of these examples and long Reddit threads dedicated to them, and they keep slowly detailing the iceberg beneath the surface.

One of the most fun ways that the writers of do this is through the lingo the characters use.

Clip

And even more interesting is the way the Belter language *sounds*. It's a constructed language like Elvish or Klingon, but it sounds like it evolved out of our world. According to its creator Nick Farmer, Belter Creole, as it's called, incorporates Chinese, Japanese, Slavic, Germanic, and romance languages to sound both familiar and unfamiliar at the same time.

And that makes sense for the beltters. They're immigrant workers from all over, and you hear that in their shared language, something that changes accents from person to person.

Visually, we see this on screen. The Expanse has one of the most diverse casts on television, which makes sense because humanity is colonizing the solar system, not just the white people.

It's a vision of our world, projected into the future and shaped by changing circumstances.

Which brings us back to that battle that's a microcosm for all of these things. You don't need to be in AP Physics to understand what's going on. Each of the unique details, the lack of shields, the bullets, the danger of every maneuver, is mined for more tension

Reddit thread favorite details

Botanist examining closely (cascade)

Amos laugh
Miller looking for clues

AE: Nick Farmer, break down language into parts, highlight their regions on a map?

Diverse cast of beltters

Punctuate with accent examples (season 3)

Rewind to space battle
Draw formulas on screen then wipe them off

MGFX: those details -> drama/tension

and drama. There's no countdown to when their shields run out, and any shot could be fatal. Hell, dodging too quickly could knock them out. The show isn't just building a complex world, it's using that world to up the ante and tell more exciting stories.

And the work of building that complex world starts to really pay off as it fills in our characters.

Time punctuation

By describing the world and its conflicts in such detail, that world starts to feel like a character itself, making its presence felt in the lives of each and every character.

"Earth and Mars have been stepping on the necks of the Belters out here for over 100 years and I didn't want to be the boot. So you decided to switch sides. I stopped playing."

Those systems drive their motivations, decisions, and relationships with each other, so that when two characters from different backgrounds talk, we can feel them carrying tons of baggage.

But, to me, what really sets The Expanse apart is that its story asks the same things of its characters that the show asks of us. As a show, The Expanse makes us question and think about the basic tenets of our world, but as a story, it demands just as much re-examination from its characters. In order to survive, they have to form empathy and understanding for people from different backgrounds and groups, overcoming their own bias and looking at things from a new

Star Trek shields at x% punctuation

Amos goes flying

perspective — all while a mysterious and unknowable alien threat looms.

Without giving anything away, these are not your parents' little grey aliens. It's a threat that challenges the characters of *The Expanse* to step outside what they know and what they think they know about *everything*, in much the same way that the show's worldbuilding asks of us.

And I think this kind of worldbuilding is a perfect fit for television. *Star Trek* or *Dr. Who* might not be cinematic events like *Avatar* or *Inception*, but they allow us so much more time in these worlds and with these characters.

We sit with them for longer and the nature of television allows us to look at stories from multiple points of view. 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 it's an easy sell. As much as I can fall in love with these shows, I can have a really hard time getting into them in the first place because sometimes, the first season can feel like anywhere from 5 to 10 hours of exposition, with no guarantee that the plot will actually be interesting once it gets moving.

To bring back NK: *"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."*

And in *The Expanse*, it's not. Yes, the beginning can feel plodding, and at times the dialogue is not my favorite...

Clip

I mean is that a threat? Or an insult? Doors aren't really barriers, you're supposed to go through them ...but dialogue isn't all there is to writing. The Expanse's story is based entirely on the world it's building, and how that world and those systems react to change, assert power over each other, and shape the lives of ordinary people, so it makes sense to spend the time to describe it, and to really appreciate the thought and reasoning behind every choice the show makes.

Sure, you could watch The Expanse because you like space and it looks cool, but its worldbuilding offers a completely immersive experience if you're willing to give them time. And for me, thinking about how a world is built from the ground up also helps me understand our world and how delicate of a system it is. Think about hypothetically if, oh I don't know, if the temperature of our planet rose by 2-4 degrees. Physically, rising sea levels would erase islands and coastlines. Desertification would shrink food supplies. Tropics could become unworkable in the heat of summer, where 40% of the world population lives. Refugees would tax even the most stable countries. Global GDP would plummet. Conflicts and wars would rise in the chaos. And that's to say nothing of what happens after that when we hit the next 2-4 degrees!

Ahem.

Anyway. Watch The Expanse.

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