

### *Clip of Space Battle ending in pause button*

If you've seen a lot of space battles on screen, you'll probably notice that this one looks and feels a lot different. There's a lot going on here that makes it feel different — the lack of lasers, the lack of force fields, and a focus on real-life physics — but all of these changes are products of masterclass worldbuilding.

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. And *The Expanse* is one of the best places to see this kind of thinking on display because it takes huge swings.

It takes place in a future where humanity has colonized the Solar System and looks a lot like an Ariana Grande video. ([Expanse](#)/[Break Free](#) videos side by side).

All kidding aside, *The Expanse* made major headlines last year when it was killed and then brought back to life in the same month thanks to its impassioned fanbase. 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.

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

Let's jump back to that space battle. It's a fight between our main characters' ship the *Rocinante* and a much scarier stealth ship, something they set up throughout the episode. *The Expanse* critically rethinks everything we expect and asks the question, "what would this really need to entail?"

They're shooting bullets at each other and there's no shielding technology, so the only option is to depressurize the ship, empty out its air, and put on spacesuits so that when bullets start flying through the hull they don't cause massive airleaks, and then just pray that nothing too critical gets hit. Every quick change of direction, acceleration or deceleration is tough on the crew and subjects them to the same effects as that spinny thing astronauts use to train. Patching damage in zero gravity is dangerous which is why they have magnetic boots.

*The Expanse* is really good at using this kind of if-then thinking to build 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 some far off space confederacy where technology solves most logistical issues.

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 the classic sci-fi film *Children of Men*. There they took a simple concept — that nobody had been born in 27 years — and built on top of it, trying to envision how much that would change everything. And here on *The Expanse* they take a similar strategy of critically rethinking something that we all take for granted with something even more simple: gravity.

Now this is something that film has been a lot better with in recent years. From *Interstellar* to *The Martian* to, well *Gravity*, there's been an attention to this detail. 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. That lower gravity is a result of smaller mass, so these societies are going to be smaller and spread out amongst the rest of the asteroid belt. Therefore there wouldn't be much of a government, and your culture would probably value resiliency above all else because it's so hard to survive in that hostile environment. What I just described is one of the three main factions in *The Expanse*, and the one we spend the most time with, the *belters*, people who live in the asteroid belt.

This is the first step that author NK Jemisin describes in her worldbuilding workshops. She's a Hugo Award winning writer, the top prize for science fiction and fantasy literature, something that she's won a record 3 times in a row.

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.

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. As the show starts to consider resources in space, again, it's important to rethink everything and tie it back to a physical level. Where do you get water and food, yes, but also where do you get air? Who controls the air, and how does that power structure affect the people who live there? And this is just one of three major factions on *The Expanse*.

Of course, this is way too much information to just dump on an audience. Hell, even just talking about someone else doing it can be a lot to dump, if you haven't already clicked off this video that is. Our girl NK argues that 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 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."*

And because The Expanse has thought through its foundation in such a way, it really thrives when it builds smaller details that make the world feel lived in. There's the broken screen on Detective Miller's hand terminal because the Belters can't afford to replace them. There's the straightlaced clothing and haircuts of the Martians who are militantly focused on building a new Earth on Mars. There's the extravagant and mostly useless technology of the Earthers like sportscar racing ships.

There are hundreds of these examples and long Reddit threads dedicated to them, but they all make sense under a microscope, which allows a viewer to dive in as deeply as they want to. You can sit back and absorb everything or go through screenshots with a fine tooth comb.

One of the most fun ways that the writers of The Expanse tease their deeper understanding of the world is through the lingo the characters use.

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A duster is a person from the dusty planet of Mars. A rockhopper is someone who travels from asteroid to asteroid in the belt. Burn is how hard your ship is accelerating or decelerating.

Even more interesting is the way the Belter language *sounds*. Joining Klingon, Dothraki, and Elvish, The Expanse has made its own constructed language, "conlang" for short. But unlike those languages, Belter 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 it's these kinds of touches that color the Belter people. They're the most dispossessed people and the poorest. They're immigrants from all over, and you hear that in their shared language, something that changes accents from person to person.

And this reality is reflected visually in the representation of actors 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 demographic.

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

The same goes for the religions of The Expanse. While not a huge focus, we're introduced to Mormons in space, which makes sense because The Latter Day Saints are one of the few sects of Christianity with a stated opinion on extraterrestrial life. A character introduced in the third season is a Methodist preacher, but she is also in a same-sex marriage, something that is forbidden in Methodist churches today, but something that could realistically change by the time we start to explore the stars. We might not all be experts on physics or science, but we are experts of our own experience and we can envision how those experiences might change as long as those changes are thought out and articulated.

Let's go back to that space battle from the beginning. You don't need to be in AP Physics to understand what's going on here. Each of those details, the lack of shields, the bullets, the danger of every maneuver, is mined for more tension and drama. There's no countdown to when their shields run out, and any shot could be fatal. Hell, dodging too quick could knock them out. And while the physics aren't totally correct, like how there are sound effects in space, The Expanse does enough to get you focused on the right parts. The show isn't just building a complex world, but also using that depth to create bigger narrative stakes.

That being said, there are lots of cool little details that hold up under closer examination. As bullets fly through the hull, their trails of vaporized metal float in zero gravity until the ship changes direction. While approaching the battle in the first place, the Rocinante flips around and fires its main thruster to slow its descent instead of slowing down thanks to non-existent friction.

And the work of building that complex world starts to really pay off as we get to know our characters. By describing the world and its conflicts in such detail, it starts to feel like a character itself.

*"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."*

It adds a whole new dimension to our characters. They have their identity, their interpersonal relationships, and their relationships to the world and its factions. Our main character Holden is an Earther who left home when he saw the inequity of the system. Naomi is an ingenious Belter engineer trying to find a way to fight for her home. Avasarala is a UN diplomat trying to find the right balance between doing what's best for Earth and what's best for humanity at large. And Amos and Alex are castouts from Mars and Earth, just trying to find a family and place where they belong.

But, to me, what really sets The Expanse apart is that it makes its audience question the most basic tenets of our world — from air and gravity to each character's background — and tells a story directly related to that practice. In order to survive, they have to form empathy and

understanding from different factions from different backgrounds 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 their expectations and reconsider *everything*, in much the same way that the show's worldbuilding asks us to do.

And I think this kind of worldbuilding is a perfect fit for television. Sci-fi has thrived for decades on the small screen from *Star Trek* to *Dr. Who* because it allows us so much time in these worlds. They might not be cinematic events like *Avatar* or *Inception*, but because of this TV shows get to focus in on their 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...

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...but that's not all there is to writing, and I think that difference is crucial. *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 can watch these shows just because they look cool or because you like space, but you can also get as deep into them as you want. They offer a completely immersive experience if you're willing to give them your 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 the Earth rose by 2-4 degrees celsius. Not only would the physical makeup of the planet change, with rising sea levels wiping out islands and coastal cities. There would be massive displacement and a refugee crisis the world has never seen. Global GDP would plummet. The tropics would become unworkable in the heat

of summer. There would be mass extinctions throwing a delicate ecosystem out of balance. Conflicts over the dwindling resources would escalate. Hypothetically of course.

Anyway. Watch The Expanse.