Good Morning everyone, this is Trevor Van Winkle, and you're listening to – Homestead on the Corner.

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The year is 2020. The place: America. The situation: desperate. World War 3 looms on the horizon. Runaway climate change has devastated the biosphere. A new, terrifying plague seem to mark the beginning of the end for the human race. In that chaos, one man… must make a podcast about worldbuilding that isn't a boring list of technical jargon.

Okay, okay, all joking aside, what I was did there wasn't recreating a trailer for a 1970's dystopian sci-fi move, but demonstrating one of the most common types of worldbuilding. **Through selection and omission of details and choice of focus in our everyday lives, we all build our own view of reality: our world.** This is our subjective reality, which defines how we interact with and think about capital-R Reality. It determines how we do our work, how we interact with others, and how we plan for our futures and contextualize our pasts. To quote Qui-Gon Jinn: "Your focus determines your reality." Psychological phenomenon like selection and confirmation bias shows that two different people can experience the exact same series of events and come away with completely different views about what really happened.

The same can be said of your story world. A lot of writers, especially those with literary ambitions and a preference for slice-of-life stories, claim that they write about the "real world." But that's not strictly speaking true. Everyone writes with a perspective, and brings their beliefs about reality into their work – their worldview. A staunch atheist and a fervent evangelist might both believe they're writing about Reality with a capital-R, but both are engaging in the act of worldbuilding whenever they sit down to pen fiction.

Uncomfortable as that idea might make you, just think about it for a moment. In the realm of fiction writing, *anything is possible.* Literally anything can happen. In an anti-structural or absurdist story, anything usually *does* happen. Characters and events with no place in the consistent fictional world the author is building appear unexpectedly and disappear just as suddenly for comedic or philosophical effect. In sci-fi and fantasy, the laws of physics are suggestions at best, and are usually uprooted and turned on their heads for the sake of spectacle. And yes, even the most hard-edged "realist" story creates its own rules and world by selecting an angle from which to view Reality and limiting the range and scope of the story's reality.

Worldbuilding is the act of creating a fictional reality that reflects the core concepts of the story – a Story World.

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When we talk about worldbuilding, we tend to focus exclusively on Fantasy/Sci-Fi, the genre that most explicitly and expansively creates new and different worlds. Involved, internally consistent, and deeply realized Paracosmos are, in fact, the main convention of the genre. However, it is far from the only genre that makes use of worldbuilding.

A crime thriller typically (though not always) limits the boundaries of its story world very severely by choice of focus. The character web is typically focused on police, detectives, criminals, witnesses, and victims. The settings are typically limited to crime scenes, police offices, the detective's home, and the crime-ridden streets and alleys that connect them (or in the case of *Murder on the Orient Express*, almost entirely limiting the setting to one location that is simultaneously crime scene, police office, and the detective's home).

Themes, values, and messages are similarly restricted and created by the story world. In a romantic comedy, the theme can usually be expressed as some variation of "Romantic love triumphs over *blank* because of *blank*." What romantic love, as a value, defeats and why it is defeated are defined by the story world: the needs and personalities of the protagonist or protagonists that draw them inevitably together, the force/forces of antagonism that love triumphs over, and the powers available to both side from their environment, character webs, and/or social status in the story world.

That's not to say worldbuilding is a limiting, anti-creative force. Nor is it something artificial you place over your story at the beginning and slavishly follow. Rather, **it is an organic part of your central story, arising from the same source as characters and plot.** In fact, it is closer at heart to story than the other two elements of the story Triangulum. Story world is essentially the sum of the reality created by your idea, shaped by the theme arising from that idea, and the overall aesthetic and emotional impression you want to leave on your reader or audience.

The reason most of us see worldbuilding as a rigid and inflexible process is because we most associate it with fantasy/sci-fi – specifically with Tolkien's Middle Earth, one of the most beautiful, complete, and compelling constructed worlds ever put to page or screen. (And while we're on the subject, I wanted to say a quick thank you to Christopher Tolkien for all he did to preserve and further his father's incredible vision. May you find the white shores and far green country under that swift sunrise).

Now, if we're looking for a model for thorough, thoughtful worldbuilding, there is certainly no better example than Tolkien's Legendarium. However, looking at his work can be somewhat disheartening for new writers. Since we only see the end result of the decades JRR Tolkien put into building Middle-Earth, we tend to believe that we have to construct our own story worlds to the same level of granular detail; imitating his detailed conlang trees and branching dialects of elvish ourselves, or else risking the label of fraud and hack.

Now listen in. I'm going to tell you a little secret. *Tolkien was the exception.* Exceptionally brilliant and so singularly focused on language that he, in his spare time between teaching classes at Oxford, devised an imaginary language family going back hundreds of thousands of years… and then made up a story to go along with it. He didn't even know what Bilbo's ring really was when he wrote *The Hobbit*, or where *The Lord of the Rings* was really going until the council of Elrond… which is why the first half of *Fellowship* feels like a lot like a scattered volume two of *The Hobbit*.

Tolkien, first and foremost, followed his passions: language, history, and myth. Most of us don't share the same enthusiasm for those subjects. Some of us may be fascinated by crime and psychology, and thus tend towards thrillers. Some of us may be fascinated by the psychology of love, sex, and romance, and thus tend towards romcoms. I'm fascinated by astronomy, mythology, history, and psychology, and thus the story worlds I create tend to gravitate towards one or more of those points.

John Grisham builds his story worlds around laws, legal conundrums, and the courts because he's a lawyer. Clive Cussler writes books about archaeology, treasure hunting, and nautical adventures because he's an underwater explorer. Michael Crichton wrote books about the dangers of technology and biology because of his scholarly interests in science and anthropology. All three of these authors (and many more besides) wrote and found success primarily in one genre because of their personal interests, which allowed them to fill their story worlds with details of a very specific kind.

The point I'm trying to make is that your stories, and thus your story worlds, will arise from your own experiences, tastes, and interests, and you shouldn't force yourself to spend years studying and crafting fictional languages and histories just because you think *that's what real authors do*. Rather, find the details in your story world that most need research and development to enrich your narrative. If you're truly following your own passions, these should line up quite nicely with the subjects you already know and are interested in learning more about.

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Okay, you say*, I get it. Research what I'm passionate about. Got it. So do I do that before or after I start writing?*

I wish there was one right answer for that… but there isn't. It varies author to author, work to work. For most of my stories, I do start with research: reading up on mythological structures and psychology for *Return to the Echowood* and researching the sparse but fascinating historical details of Anne Bonny's life for *Siren's Gold*. Often times the research process helps reshape the construction of the narrative, or even sparks the beginning of a new story. *Disquiet* began as a horror story set in an isolated cabin in the middle of a generic wood, then evolved to a more action-oriented ghost story when I learned the history of America's only abandoned national monument.

But then for some stories, research comes during and after writing. In the finished first draft, the story world may seem flat or unrealistic, and so you begin to do research where you feel it's lacking. My most recent novel in progress takes place in a largely invented location on the Oregon coast and features many creatures and monsters out of Scottish and Orkney mythology. To begin with, I researched as much as I could about that mythology, drew on my own experience visiting the pacific coast as a child, and began to write. However, once the first draft was done, I knew I needed to do more research – a state I'm still in. I read as much as I could about Scottish history and society, all the way back to the first appearance of the Celtic peoples in Roman histories. I researched the psychology of the characters in the story, learning more about how they would think and act. And eventually, I took a week-long trip to Oregon to set my feet in the sand and take in as much sensory, geographical, and social details as I could from the location of my fictional town and the surrounding communities.

In a similar but more specific vein, when I started writing *Siren's Gold,* I used idioms and euphemisms that seemed universal. Because they came so naturally to my 21st Century mind, they seemed like they'd always been a part of the English language. However, researching these sayings (and even specific words), I began to discover that most of them didn't exist in 1721. I couldn't have the surgeon tell Barrett he'd be *Right as rain* – that expression was first recorded in 1894. The *Morgan* didn't appear off the *port* bow, but the *larboard*… because *Port* wasn't used on ships until 1844, when the royal navy realized how easy it was to mistake *larboard and starboard* for one another.

In the book *Creating Unforgettable Characters* by Linda Seger, Victoria Westermark recommends reading historical newspapers, letters, and diaries to get character voices right in period pieces. At the very least, when writing anything definitively set in a particular time and place, read and research as much as you can to find the pattern, sound, and tone of speech at the time as best you can. Not only will it give your work a deeper sense of historical/social realism, it will give all your characters a unique and memorable voice more often than not. It doesn't just have to be for period pieces either: just think of the iconic regional dialect and linguistic personality the Coen brothers captured in *Fargo.* Just don't let it become a distraction or obscure your meaning. As Stephen King says, "never use 'emolument' when you mean 'tip.'"

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Research into time, place, and language are essential for stories set in real places; not just to avoid being called out by people who know the setting better than you do (because there will always be someone who knows more than you), but to invest your narrative with a greater depth of imagery and meaning. In many cases, research can be a great way to break through writer's block, inspiring you to find new elements to enrich your characters and plot. Most writer's block, I've found, is not the result of a failure of imagination, but of not knowing where to point it next. The volcanic forge of insight

within every creator has not run dry – it simply has no path to the surface. **Research gives your imagination both a direction to go and fuel to burn brighter than before.**

But – and this is a big but – what if you are doing that traditional, high-fantasy style of worldbuilding? What if your story takes place either partially or entirely in an imaginary world? If so, great! You have more research to do than anyone else.

Writing a story world based on capital-R reality comes with the added benefit that other people have access to it – including people who are far better scholars and researchers than most writers could ever dream of being. Your imaginary world? Well, the problem's in the name: it's a world that only exists in *your* imagination. Which means you have to do all your own research, and do it all within your own imagination.

Imaginative Research, as defined by Robert McKee in his book *Story*, is to "sketch how your characters shop, make love, pray – scenes that may or may not find their way into your story, but draw you into your imagined world until it feels like Deja vu." It's the same kind of work you do when researching a historical period or real event: finding details of setting, technology, language, culture, social structure, and background that create a deeper sense of meaning and reality for your characters and plot. The only difference is that you, as the author, have to find these details within the story rather than outside of it.

Approaches to this problem vary, but usually involve some mixture of pre- and post-first draft research, the same as any other work of fiction. C.S. Lewis, for example, started with the faun, the lamppost, and a snowy wood, then slowly expanded his story world as the story necessitated. His contemporary Tolkien did most of his work upfront, as already mentioned, but only came up with the element of the rings of power and their grand significance in the world of Middle Earth after he finished *The Hobbit.* Many contemporary fantasy authors try to out-Tolkien Tolkien, extensively worldbuilding and plotting long before their first book is published to ensure they don't have to ret-con anything… but I'm sure that fine details still change between drafts as imaginative research continues to influence the telling.

The amount of imaginative research you want to do before you begin is entirely decided by the requirements of your story and your own tastes. If your work is a sprawling epic whose action is determined by a long, storied history, old rivalries, and a complex political system (see *Game of Thrones*, *The Witcher*, and *Dune*), you will need to do a great deal of worldbuilding before you can get your head around your plot and characters. If it's more simplified, small-scale, or symbolic/allegorical, (see *Narnia*, *Star Wars*, and *A Series of Unfortunate Events*), you still need to do research, but just enough to construct compelling, understandable motivations for character actions and the events within the plot.

This is the main point of worldbuilding: **to provide and maintain meaning and drive for action within the story world.** If we don't understand the value system created by the story world (or worse, it's not present), then all the complex plotting, conflicted characters, and twisting machinations will not make consuming the narrative a meaningful experience. For example, the world of *Taxi Driver* is carefully constructed around… well, a taxi driver: Travis Bickle. His world is the 1970's New York night, a world of muggers, prostitutes, and porn theaters… in other words, a paralyzing world of violence and commercialized sexuality that makes everything seem meaningless and can easily push a vulnerable person over the edge. By understanding the nihilistic world of the story, the actions of Travis – and his slow decent into madness – create meaning: the woes of modernity can push the everyman to violent extremes. Transport the same characters into a different story world – a warm and friendly world of pastoral nostalgia or the glittering, optimistic world of Superman's Metropolis – and Bickle's actions lose meaning, the plot becomes nonsensical, and the film falls flat.

By carefully, intentionally, and efficiently layering your story world with just enough detail to give character and plot actions meaning, you not only create an interesting and compelling world for readers to enjoy, but bring everything else in the narrative into sharper focus. Just make sure all elements of worldbuilding are presented as naturally as possible into the narrative. In other words, dramatize them. Make them part of the narrative, revealing them through character action or developing them organically as elements of the plot. **Show, don't tell.** In 90% of the films, books, or TV shows that open with a block of text or on-the-nose narration explaining the world, it is unnecessary – the reader will not be lost if you naturally weave the information into the plot or, in most cases, if you leave the backstory almost entirely to their imagination. In the film *Snowpiercer*, we didn't need to be told that an attempt to mitigate global warming froze the world over – we see the modern world frozen over in the first shot of the film, and the grimy interior and dystopian conditions of Snowpiercer's back carriages makes it abundantly clear that these are the survivors. The how and why the apocalypse occurred are not relevant to the meaning of the film: the narrative is entirely concerned with the microcosm of society and survival, vividly shown and brutally dramatized by writer/director Bong Joon-ho (better make that *academy award winning writer/director Bong Joon-ho*, actually).

This idea – leaving elements of the backstory to the audience's imagination – is also a powerful move to deploy when worldbuilding. The man with no name trilogy – *A Fistful of Dollars, For a Few Dollars More,* and *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* – explicitly feature a character with no explicit backstory. We never learn his real name: he's referred to by a constantly shifting array of nicknames. We have no idea where he came from – but his motivations, personality, and skills are clearly demonstrated and dramatized by his actions within all three stories. If you've seen these films, you realize just how much of their appeal comes from the enigma at the heart of the trilogy, and

how big a mistake it would be to give Eastwood's character an explicit backstory. Yet this is what the 1975 TV-release did, adding a prologue where the Man with No Name is hired to clean up the town in exchange for a pardon.

This is an example of worldbuilding that removes meaning from the story. In the original cut, "Joe" is a figure of mystery, and that unpredictability creates meaning for his character: he's a wild card, full of hidden depths that make it impossible to guess what he'll do next. Yet that mystery delights and surprises the audience, and allows them to imagine a whole host of possible interpretations. Sergio Leon might have had this backstory in mind when crafting the world of his story, but by keeping it off-screen, he created not only one of cinema's most memorable characters, but some of its most memorable stories.

Keep in mind the law of diminishing returns, however. One mysterious character creates intrigue and interest. Having all your characters as unknowns makes the story frustrating, impenetrable, and ultimately dull. The balance between what you hide and what you reveal will depend on the mechanics of your specific story. Fantasy and Sci-Fi generally demands a high level of specificity in order for character actions to have meaning not only within the story world, but to the reader as well. Domestic dramas can typically leave much detail in the background, out of focus – we can all understand or imagine what it would be like to be in such and such a family situation, going through such and such a problem, and what certain actions by certain people would signify. As always, listen to your story to find out where it should land on that spectrum. Respect the intelligence of your audience and don't hand-feed them information out of fear they won't understand, but don't blow past the details necessary for them to create meaning. **Give them the tools they need to build your world in their imagination and gently guide them as they put it together.**

I have one final piece of advice on worldbuilding that I personally consider most important: **Don't build worlds all on one level.** Take a good long look at your life – in particular, the week just past. How did you spend it? What variety of activities did you engage in? Most likely you spent the largest chunk of your hours working a paid job. What did that entail? Physical labor? Customer service? Office politics? How many levels did your day job require you to engage on: Professional? Social? Intellectual? Political? And what about the hours you weren't working? How did you fill those? With hobbies and pastimes? A side hustle? Time with friends and family? Entertainment and Media? Romantic pursuits? Did you attend a place of worship, or engage with the spiritual in some other way? Did you exercise? Go shopping? Volunteer? And what about those quiet moments when you were finally by yourself. What ran through your head? Gratitude? Dissatisfaction? Anxieties about the future? Longing for the past?

The point is that even when things seem relatively simple or "normal," our lives are complex, many-leveled things that involve several levels of professional, social, spiritual,

emotional, intellectual, personal, romantic, and/or historical contexts. In other words, **real life is a multi-level construct, and your story world should reflect that complexity.** Investigate and imagine what your characters social, spiritual, and emotional lives are like instead of building their reality completely around their job, relationships, or philosophy. By layering these inner and outer complexities into the story world, you can create a sense of emotional realism and increase believability, empathy, and interest for the reader.

So, should you create an entire fictional language for your story? If it increases the internal consistency and adds meaning, then yes. But if you're only doing it because *that's what real writers do* or to prove how clever you are, leave it out or simplify it. Never forget which details are background and which are foreground. Place character, plot, and story first, then make sure their meaning is communicated in a compelling manner. Do enough research to write confidently and consistently. Let research inspire creativity, and creativity direct your research. Once you've built a world that is real enough for your imagination to run around freely, you will fall in love with your story again and again as writing allows you return to those old familiar places.

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Thank you for listening to this episode of Homestead on the Corner! Today's worldbuilding workshop was written and produced by Trevor Van Winkle, with music from the dynamic and enigmatic Lauren Baker.

Since we do the lion's share of our research on the internet these days, why not take a quick break and check out twitter and Instagram, where you can find me at trevor_vw? Or you could even visit homesteadonthecorner.com for extra content, outtakes, and more info about the show. But if you enjoyed this lesson and want to help this show to grow, then please consider supporting Homestead on the Corner on Patreon as a monthly donor – it makes a huge difference.

Next episode, the age of heroes begins with a new story episode in the tradition of the original Superman radio serials. Be sure to subscribe so you don't miss it, and please rate and review us on Apple Podcast! It really does help get this show out to more people.

Well, that's about all for now. From the Homestead on the Corner, have a great day, and keep writing.