Intro

Hello and welcome to *The Art of World Building Podcast*, episode number two. Today's topic is why and when we need to build a world and how to effectively use analogues. This material and more is discussed in Chapter 1 of Creating Life, volume 1 in *The Art of World Building* book series.

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Why Build A World?

Now we're going to move on to chapter 1, "Why Build a World?" Depending on your genre, you may feel that you have no choice, that this is a kind of obligation that has been thrust upon you by circumstances or even the expectations of an audience. There are ways around that.

For example, if you are writing a sci-fi story where there are characters from Earth, well then in this case you can get away with not inventing gods or species, or plants and animals or any of that stuff. If the characters are always leaving from Earth, or if they originated from Earth and they are only encountering other humans in the context of this story, in that case, you don't have to actually build lifeforms.

Now since they are traveling through space, there are probably going to be places where they need to visit, like other planets, and in that case you will probably have to invent these other locations, but again there's the question of how much detail. So you may not have to create every last city on a planet anymore than I have done in the last 30 years of working on Llurien. But you're going to be doing at least a little bit of world building.

Now if you're doing fantasy that occurs on a fictitious planet, and there is no connection at all to Earth, then yes, you do have to do some world building. That said, you can create a world that is basically Earth by another name. So you don't have to include species other than humans. This is happening in [Game of Thrones](). Pretty much everyone there is a human. You're still going to have to create places, but at least you can keep some of the world building to a minimum, especially if this is something you don't want to spend a lot of time on.

The other solution is to use public domain species or races. For example, elves, dwarves, dragons. These are all public domain. You do not have to invent these. You can just put your own spin on any of these creations. And for the most part when you do this, you want to satisfy expectations. You don't want to be presenting something that is wildly off from what people are going to expect.

An obvious example is not to call something a dwarf and then have it be taller than humans. In that case, it's partly because the word means smaller, so that doesn't make any sense, but that's not even the point. The point is that, that's not what people are going to expect.

So when using public species and races, we can put our own stamp on them but we should at least be a little bit reasonable. If we're going to make serious changes to its appearance, its demeanor and how it acts, then we might want to consider giving it a new name, and just making it our own.

More Resources

Let's take a quick break here and talk about where you can get more useful world building resources. [Artofworldbuilding.com]() has most of what you need. This includes links to more podcasts like this one. You can also find more information on all three volumes of *The Art of World Building* series. Much of the content of those books is available on the website for free.

And the thing that you might find most useful is that by signing up for the newsletter, you can download the free templates that are included with each volume of *The Art of World Building* series, whether you have bought the books or not. All you need to do is join the newsletter. You can do this by going to [artofworldbuilding.com/newsletter](). Sign up today and you will get your free templates, and you will never miss an update about what is happening in the great world of world building.

The Rule of Three

Let's talk a little more about using analogues. I have something I call the Rule of Three. It's more of a guideline than a rule, but the basic idea is to make at least three significant changes to an analogue. The reason we want to do this is so that people don't recognize that it's an analogue.

A good example for me is the movie [Avatar](). I thought that this was really cool, but the thing that kept leaping out at me all the time is that this is basically Native Americans that are taller and blue. I don't know how much of the culture is really from Native Americans or the imagination of James Cameron, but it didn't seem like there was much difference between the two of them.

Now why is that a problem that people recognize our analogue? Personally, I find it distracting. We never want something to pull the audience out of the story. And most of us don't want to run the risk of causing some disrespect if the audience is just thinking, "Oh you just stole that from so and so." It doesn't make a good impression and they may not respect the work we've done as much anymore.

There's an inherent problem of lack of originality when using analogue. We need to balance having used something that already exists here on Earth with putting our own spin on it. And it's not really enough to just make minor tweaks to it. You really want to make significant tweaks, so this is what I mean when I talk about the Rule of Three.

This is not something as trivial as removing the pointed ears from elves. If I were to use elves somewhere I would probably not only remove the pointed ears, but instead of having them living in forests and being obsessed with all of the lifeforms therein, I would probably change their habitat to something else.

I would also probably change their life span so that they no longer live forever or over 1000 years. This is one of the basic ideas on what an elf is.

The goal of using an analogue is to create something new that is inspired by something that has already been created by someone else or which already exists. It's much easier to use an analogue as a springboard than to just start from scratch.

Names

A related issue is the name that we give our invention. For example, let's say I create a horse that has an extra pair of legs and I still call it a horse the first time I point out this extra pair of legs. The reader is obviously going to be aware of this, but as time goes on, I'm just to keep referring to this as a horse. "The guy got on a horse. He rode his horse." Sooner or later, the reader is just going to forget that this horse has an extra pair of legs because I'm not reminding them all the time. You could say that you could just keep reminding them, but is it really better to keep reminding them? Wouldn't it be better to just call the horse something other than a horse and make more significant changes to that horse?

The reason for this is that, if we use another name, and we've described this animal, now people are no longer trying to imagine that it's got this trivial change. They're just picturing something that's completely different. Okay, maybe "completely" isn't the word we want there, but the change is significant enough that they see it as a different creature. And therefore they've got this mental picture, and every time we using the word to describe it, that new mental picture is what comes to mind.

But if we keep using the word horse, well, we know what a horse is. There's a kind of mental inertia to a known term that suggests familiarity, and that will basically take over our memory of the details that are different. In other words, we'll just forget that extra pair of legs.

Now if we are working in a visual medium like film or TV, this is less of an issue because the name of it doesn't come up as much, because we're not writing sentences about this. And on top of that, we keep seeing it all the time, so obviously we're looking at a horse with two extra legs. Your eyes are not somehow going to fail to notice the extra pair of legs. Now during a high-intensity team, you might not care, but that's okay because you're focused on whatever's happening in that scene anyway.

Old Names For New Things

Another problem we can run into is using a known term to refer to something new. For example, a few years ago, I saw a movie where the characters mentioned that there were goblins that they would have to face. Now, I've heard of goblins before, I've read about them, and I immediately had a picture in my

mind of what they were going to face. It was something small, it was nasty, it was probably a little bit malformed, poorly dressed, and possibly even green.

Well, this was mentioned and then may be 20 minutes later in this film, the goblin finally appeared. And what came on screen? Well, it was a gorilla. I mean these guys made a computer animation of a gorilla. It even moved like one. It certainly looked like one. I was a little bit surprised that they didn't have it pull out a stereotypical banana and take a bite.

Now this was so distracting for me that it took me right out of the scene. And I thought, "That's not a goblin. It's a gorilla! What are you doing? This is ridiculous." Now in fairness, they did make two changes to that gorilla. They put two horns on it and they said "oh, it loves gold." So when you saw the gorilla, it looked like it had taken its front paws and dipped them into a vat of gold and had gold on its two paws.

Well this is not my idea of a significant change. These are both superficial changes to a gorilla and calling it a goblin. This is a good example of exactly what you don't want to do when using analogue.

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Analogue Example 1 – Sovereign Power

What I'm going to do now is just make up some analogues on the fly and discuss a starting point, and how we can modify that, and what sorts of things we might want to modify.

First we're going to take a look at modifying a sovereign power. And by that I mean a kingdom, empire, a federation, a dictatorship, and we'll just choose one from Earth and then discuss what we can do to modify it.

Since I live in the United States, I'm going to go ahead and start with this government because I'm familiar with it. We're obviously not going to want to use the same name, but my point is that we can call a collection of states a federation or a confederation. In fact, if you remember from the Civil War, the South was calling itself the Confederacy. I go into more details about what is the difference between a federation and a confederation in volume two, but we basically have options for what we call the resulting country. And we don't have to use those words at all. For example, in the United States we don't use either of those words to describe what we are.

This is actually quite common. For example, no dictatorship actually calls itself that. They always have another name for themselves. What I'm really getting at here is that the form of government does not necessarily have to be part of the country's name. This reality is reflected in most countries that you've heard of on Earth. Canada is a federation but they don't call themselves the Federation of Canada. Similarly, the United Kingdom of England is technically a constitutional monarchy, but they don't call themselves the Constitutional Monarchy of England. But there are places that do use the type of government in the name. This is an option you have.

Let's talk a little bit about government. Most of us find this to be a bit of a boring subject, no offense to those who find it fascinating, but this will be covered in great detail in volume 2, Creating Places. There's an entire chapter of this, so I'm not going to go into the details now. My point is that if you live in a given country with whatever government there is, you understand how the government functions. Our understanding might be a little bit limited, but that's okay because as a general rule, readers of our stories are not going to want to know how the country functions in detail.

However, most countries that are similar to the United States have multiple political parties. Here we have two major ones: the Republicans and Democrats. This is an obvious subject to change. You might still have two major parties, but you're going to call them something else. In a world with magic, one of those parties might be magical and the other one not magical. Or you might find some other points of delineation between them.

Once you know this, you can begin giving them typical hatreds of each other, for example. This particular subject is only going to be useful to you if you are planning to write something that has political intrigue to it similar to Game of Thrones.

So what else can you change about a country like the United States? You can decide to represent the United States not as its current state, but as either a future state, which gives you a lot of flexibility, or as past state. For example, you could base a country of your invention on the United States in the 1800s. You may not want to do a lot research about this, but one of the major issues still going on then, of course, was slavery. You can also decide that the country is newly formed and that there is something like our American Civil War still going on or about to brew over possibly a different issue.

Another area for change is geography. What if we were an island nation like Australia? What if we were much farther north or much farther south and the kind of vegetation here was different? This would also change the basic skin color of most of the people here. Lots of people think United States is mostly white and that white people are the majority, but this is because of colonization from Europe. The Native Americans are not white skinned. The point here is that you can reverse the typical demographics that are found in the United States and have darker skinned people be the ones who are in power.

These are some basic ways that you can change and sovereign power so that it's not as easily recognized.

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Analogue Example 2 – Species

Let's talk about using a typical species, such as dwarves, and creating an analogue. Dwarves are known for certain things, such as being grumpy, being short of course, living underground, and in many cases having beards. Let's look at each of these and decide whether they are really worth it and if we can get away with removing these and possibly having something new that is inspired by our dwarf.

Let's start with the beard. Is there any reason dwarves must have beards? Biologically I can't think of any scenario where this would always be happening. You can try to say that since they are living underground, that this is cold and they want more hair on their faces, but of course that only applies to the guys, not the girls, unless of course we decide that we want all the women to have beards as well.

But you know something? Even that explanation doesn't work because if you've ever spent any time underground, you know that the temperature is actually a steady constant. I'm not sure what it is, but it's way above freezing, and obviously if we can go outside when it's 50° outside and not feel our face freezing, dwarves don't need a beard to keep the face warm.

So I can't think of a habitat reason or a biological reason why dwarves so often have beards. So guess what? Get rid of the beard. This is the kind of thinking you want to do with thinking about using an analogue or creating something from scratch. **Question your assumptions**. This can be difficult because the hardest influence to eliminate is one that you don't even realize that you have.

What about dwarves living underground? Now in some cases, they are depicted as hill dwarves that live out in the sun, but let's focus on these mountains dwarves, as they are called. There doesn't appear to be a biological reason why they live underground. It is usually depicted as being something like a love of gold and other natural minerals that are found there. In some cases, it's a distrust of the outside world.

This latter issue is a bit problematic because, have you ever wondered where those dwarves are getting their food? Either it's going to be shipped to them by people who are willing to trade with them, or we're going to have to invent plants that grow underground. Or we can decide that they're carnivores who never eat plant life.

But even then, what about the animals? There are only so many animals that live underground. Where are they getting anything that they can eat? This idea that they can only live underground doesn't seem

plausible. It also exposes them to greater risk if they are getting any of the food from outside the mountain. All you have to do to starve them out is stop feeding them.

One of the first things we might want to do is not have our dwarves live exclusively underground. And those that do are probably going to have a more pleasant attitude about trading with others. Now there are ways around this. You can decide that they have magic doorways and can teleport from one location to another to something like a farm to take what they want. Or they can have their own farm where they can grow food. This place would be protected.

This kind of thinking can get us more ways of doing things that have not been done, or get us out of a problem like this. And of course it has one of the biggest benefits in that we have used a known race or species and have altered something significant about it, and turned it into something else, with a new name.

And then there is the grumpiness. It seems to me that if these guys are living underground and are dependent on others for so much of their food, that they would probably be more interested in positive relations with other species, not being obnoxious and hiding in their mountain, starving to death. There's no biological reason for the grumpiness unless they've all been suffering from some sort of chemical imbalance, which could be caused by lack of exposure to the sun. Now I'm not a biologist or chemist so I don't really know how that works, but I've heard about that kind of thing.

But if they are living underground I can understand being grumpy. It's not exactly the most attractive thing, looking at all these walls of stone, regardless of how well they've been carved. There's a lot of natural beauty that you're going to miss out on if you're stuck underground. The air is also not going to be as fresh. It might even be quite stale. And generally it's not the most pleasant place to be. So that could account for the grumpiness. So to some extent that does make sense.

Another thing that makes sense is their height. If you had to tunnel through the rock to create a home or a passageway, well the taller you are, the more digging you have to do in order to fit, right? Either that, or everyone will be stooped over. So it does make sense that their height is reduced.

However, this raises another point. This is an environmental reason for short height, not a biological one. This means that if they are living outside in the wilderness like hill dwarves, then theoretically these hill dwarves would not be so short. Wouldn't they be taller than the mountains dwarves? I'll leave it up to you to decide, but the point is that now we have taken our species and made more significant changes to who they are. We might have a new species or race and we're going to need a new name for them, but we have something new!

Review

Analogue Example 3 – Animal

Let's take a look at doing an analogue of an animal. The first thing is to just choose something that you like. For example, I like cats, so I'm going to go with a tiger. Now what's good about a tiger? Well there's all sorts of things about how it's ferocious, it's big, it chases down all sorts of animals and it pretty much scares the crap out of everybody, right? If you had one of these in your house, people would think twice about coming in.

Now the problem with a tiger is that it is a wild animal, so what if we decided that we have a kind of cat that looks pretty similar and it's tamable? We can train this thing like a dog. Wouldn't it be cool if you could make it do all sorts of things? What if we could decide that it's more of a pack animal like wolves, and they will cooperate with each other?

What we're getting at here is the behavior of an animal. Take an animal that you like and just start changing its behavior. It can be anything that you find interesting or which might be useful for your stories. Just have fun with it.

Another thing you might want to do is change the size and the coloring. Tigers usually have stripes so obviously you don't do that. Maybe you make it all black, for example. Maybe you need to have more of a polka dot look. Just do something different from how it normally looks. In fact, the idea of a black tiger is basically reminiscent of a panther because those are often black. You can combine features of different kinds of felines.

One thing that is tempting to many people is to create these animals that, I think these have a name, where you take something like a dog's head and put it on a cat, and then add wings from a bat to it or something. That kind of thing has been done a lot and it can be cool for something freaky, but there is a bit of a risk of being a bit of a cliché there. And there might already be one that suits your purposes. I would just recommend trying to find something that's a little bit less crazy unless you are looking to create a monster, for example.

This brings up the idea that you want to think more about behavior. How do people view this animal? Are they terrified of it or do they think it's friendly? You know, we're around horses a lot and we think nothing of them, but on the other hand if we walked into a barn that was full of giant tigers, most of us would probably get very nervous, unless these were in steel cages.

On the other hand, if these were tame, then we might not think anything of it any more than we worry about horses.

Analogue Example 4 – Plants

Finally, let's take a look at plants. You may want to choose a flower that you like the look of and change its coloring, but more importantly, you might want to just decide that it is poisonous. Once you do that, you can have fun inventing ways for that poison to be created or administered. And then also figure out treatments for this, which might inspire you to create another plant that can be used to cure this.

You could also use parts of that animal you just invented and say that the only known cure for this poison is something from that animal. This is one way to start tying together the things that you create.

You can also decide that our plant only grows in certain parts of the world and we can literally just make this up. In volume 2 of *The Art of World Building*, *Creating Places*, we have a chapter on this kind of thing and the details of each kind of plant and where it grows, but I'm not going to cover that right now. The point is that we have some leeway, and we can not only decide which latitude something grows in, but that there is a specific country that it does grow in. This can be a point of contention.

For example, a poison might grow in one country but the antidote might grow in another one that is not only friendly terms. And the next you know, you've got a problem. Someone important has been poisoned in one country and their enemy country has the cure, so what do you do? This is one way to add some additional details to your analogue so that it doesn't resemble something from Earth.

Wrap Up

So now that we've looked at some specific examples of how you can create analogs, this should give you some ideas of how you can question anything from Earth while using it as a source of inspiration, and change the details to make something new. This will prevent people from immediately recognizing your analogue.

Now I do want to caution you that some things you could change might strike you as a change when the reality is that it's already like that on Earth. For example, most of us are used to seeing orange carrots, but as it turns out, carrots come in a bunch of different colors. You could create one that's yellow, thinking you're doing something new when it's not. Now most people may not realize that, because how many people know that carrots come in different colors? But the point is that it helps to do a little bit of research.

Wikipedia can do this even though that's not exactly an authoritative source, but you can gain some high-level ideas on how your analogue really is on Earth. And frankly to find out that something comes in another color, it can embolden you to just go ahead and do that on your world.

Analogues are a great way to jumpstart your creativity, so I hope that this podcast has given you some ideas. For more inspiration, check out artofworldbuilding.com.

Closing

All of this show's music is actually courtesy of yours truly, as I'm also a musician. We're going to close out today's show with a song from my Some Things Are Better Left Unsaid album, called "The Key." You can hear more songs at RandyEllefson.com. Check out artofworldbuilding.com for free templates to help with your world building. And please rate and review the show in iTunes. Thanks for listening!