Intro

Hello and welcome to *The Art of World Building Podcast*, episode number four, part one. Today's topic is how to create gods and pantheons and why this is more useful than a single, all-knowing god. As this is a big subject, the podcast will be split into two episodes. This material and more is discussed in Chapter 2 of Creating Life, volume 1 in *The Art of World Building* book series.

Do you want practical advice on how to build better worlds faster and have more fun doing it? *The Art of World Building* book series, website, blog, and podcast will make your worlds beat the competition. This is your host, Randy Ellefson, and I have 30 years of world building advice, tips, and tricks to share. Follow along now at artofworldbuilding.com.

Why Create Gods

Whether we write fantasy or science fiction, at some point we will probably need gods. Our characters might want to pray or swear, threaten damnation, or just give thanks. That said, creating gods is optional. Maybe we don't want our characters to do these things or we just want to avoid the whole subject. But our world is arguably more interesting if we have some deities that people can refer to at various times. It creates an impression of depth that would otherwise be lacking.

In Fantasy

Our gods could be wishful thinking, but in many cases, especially in fantasy, they are often portrayed as being real beings who take an active role and participate in how life unfolds on the world. A good example would be Zeus, who has been rumored to father children with earthlings. We can obviously do something similar with our invented world.

Gods are often portrayed as the reason that the world exists. It is uncommon for the world to be portrayed as a place that already existed and the gods just stumbled upon it. Normally, we often say

that the gods specifically created the world or that the world was a byproduct of something the gods were doing. These options are something that we will delve into more deeply later in this episode or the next.

The Template

If you're looking for inspiration on how to go about creating gods, *The Art of World Building* series has a template that you can download that walks you through all of the things you might want to consider and decide upon. This template is something where you don't have to fill out every last section, but the different sections will give you ideas on things you might want to consider.

In Science Fiction

In science fiction, characters are often traveling from one world to another, and each of these planets might have a different pantheon or even just a single god like we have here on Earth in modern times. But the existence of gods is sometimes ignored altogether. The usual reason for this is an idea that science typically eliminates religion, but this really isn't true. Even today in our modern societies, many of the leading scientists still believe in God and other religions, or I should say specific religions.

Either way, the belief in God still exists even among our most educated people. So there's really no reason to act like, just because science has dominated a world or multiple worlds, that there isn't going to be any religion. Regardless of our technological and scientific discoveries, people often want to believe in a higher power of some kind, so science is not going to eliminate this. In fact, even on a world like Earth, there are still going to be countries that are more advanced scientifically, and as a result, those worlds might have more atheists, for example.

But there are still going to be areas that are less well-developed and are more likely to have a strong religious basis to the livelihood and even the traditions. Whether you agree with that or not, the point is that there are still going to be religions on pretty much every planet that ever exists. There's never going to be in a time in human history when religion is just wiped out. There are probably people who wish this would happen, partly because wars are often fought in the name of religions, but beliefs will persist regardless of scientific and technological discoveries.

In many cases, those discoveries are attributed to something that God set in motion and we only just eventually figured it out, so belief always finds its way to account for the things that we have discovered even from our scientists.

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

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Travel

In Science Fiction, one of the problems characters may face is that they have grown up in a world with certain gods and religions, and then they arrive on other planets where people have never heard of that god or religion. Some people might find that disturbing and then might want to do something like what Christian missionaries did, where they tried to convert the locals.

This is a scenario that can cause trouble, where the characters are basically interfering with how people think on that world. Their own ideas may be accepted or they might cause more trouble than it's worth. We can have our characters inadvertently get themselves into trouble by trying to talk about their own gods and religion and how life should be lived based on this. The locals might be very offended. This is a good way to give our characters an angle that causes problems in our story and adds more depth.

Are the Gods Real?

Then there's the question of whether the gods are real or not. If they are, then are they happy with the species getting so much power that they can leave the world the gods supposedly created for them? Did the gods create the universe and therefore they are okay with the species leaving the planet and exploring? Or are they bothered by this? Is there another world that is ruled by other gods who are actually real, and those guys are bothered by these travelers who have shown up and are starting to try to convert their inhabitants? This is one way that we can introduce conflict for our travelers. Some of these travelers also might be bothered by arriving on a world that has never heard of their god.

In fantasy, the gods are usually portrayed as being real. One of the ways that this typically comes up is that a priest of a religion can lay hands on a wounded person and call on that god to heal them. If this is successful, there's really no getting around the existence of that god. Obviously, they are real. We might then need to figure out the circumstances in which a god will agree to do such a thing. Do they do this for anyone? Is it only the priests? Is the cause worthy? Is that the criteria for healing someone or interfering in mortal affairs?

One of the problems with gods being real is that they are all powerful, in theory. They can swoop in at any time and do whatever they want. This is problematic from a story standpoint because that is not great to have the characters rescued from a situation by a god who can pretty much snap their fingers and make everything go away. This is something we generally want to avoid and we might want to minimize the times and circumstances under which the gods interfere with mortal affairs.

We don't need to come up with elaborate reasons for this. We can just decide that, for the most part, the gods want people to figure things out for themselves. And that their chief interference is when they are trying to heal someone through one of the priests. Saving a life seems like a good reason for a god to intervene.

On the other hand, if they are always interfering in trivial matters, then this makes the gods too much of a figure in the world. We might want to do this on a world that we are not going to use very often just because we don't want to get into a pattern of the gods helping people or interfering all the time. It removes the focus from characters and puts the focus on these deities.

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The Species

If a world has multiple species, then we must also decide if there is one pantheon of gods that all of our species worship, or if each different species, like dwarves or elves, worships a different group of gods. The problem with creating multiple groups of gods is the sheer number of gods that we have to invent. If there's a group of gods who created elves, for example, then it makes sense that the elves are worshiping those gods and only those gods. If another group of gods has created dwarves, the same thing applies.

On the other hand, if there is one group of gods who has created all of the species that inhabit that world, then it makes more sense that all of the species are worshiping the same gods. The elves might be more prone to favoring a group of gods versus the dwarves, who are favoring another group of gods, but we should make a decision about this.

It might be easier for us in the long term to create one group of gods, where different groups within those gods created different species or influence them, or are simply more appealing to them. That way, all of our species can be generally aware of all of the gods and devoted to subsets of those gods. But generally they'll just be aware of all of them and paying attention to them. It's a more cohesive group of gods. What we're trying to avoid there is creating so many different groups of gods that it just ends up being a lot of work for us.

Generally, we don't want to spend too much time on world building even though it is a time-consuming endeavor, so we need to find ways to minimize the work that we are doing while also creating great content for ourselves, our characters, and our audience.

Pantheons

Let's talk a little bit about the pantheon. A pantheon is nothing more than a mythological collection of gods. On Earth, at this point in time, we talk about a single god, but at times in our past we have had pantheons, like the Greek gods or the Roman gods. One of the great things about a pantheon is that we

have more variety. Each god can specialize in a certain set of attributes that they care about and that they influence in the hearts, minds, and souls of people on the world. This gives us the ability to have a character who worships a particular god, and this provides insight on what really matters to that character. There might be other characters who worship an opposing god and as a result, we now have some conflict.

Regarding the gods themselves, we often decide that two of them are married, or that they have children together, or that they are brother and sister. This allows us to inject typical family relationships, such as siblings who often have problems with each other or they don't get along. Children often don't respect their parents. Parents are often frustrated by their children. And we can use all of this to characterize not only the relationships among the gods, but the people who follow them.

This also greatly helps us come up with stories and myths about those gods, where one person has tried to thwart the authority of another god and this has resulted in a story, which might also result in artifacts that fall into the wrong hands, like those of the species. Generally speaking, when we have these more dynamic relationships among multiple gods, it allows us to create stories. This is kind of an improvement over a single god where that god is all-knowing, and is kind of a general deity who doesn't have anything specific about them that draws one person instead of another.

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Inventing with Attributes

When it comes to inventing a god, we may want to start out with a list of traits such as truth, love, hate, curiosity, greed, fear or others from the seven deadly sins, and just come up with gods who are based on a single trait or maybe related traits, and then figure out what this god is actually like and what their followers will be like. We can also use phenomenon like choosing a god of storms or war, or even death. We can also choose a hybrid approach, such as deciding that the god of wrath is also the god of storms.

Pantheons are often not organized in any particular way beyond family relationships. However, we can inject more into this if we choose. For example, we can decide that every god is associated with a season, or color, or an element. Once we have assigned one of these to all of our gods, then we might have a group of gods who are all in favor of spring or fire, for example. Making a decision like this, it is

often helpful to decide that a goddess of love or passion, for example, is also the goddess of heat. By extension, she would also be a goddess of summer, right?

Once we create these associations, it adds more color and depth to what we've created. Speaking of color, this can also result from a goddess of heat, summer, and fire being associated with maybe yellow and red, which are colors we often associate with fire.

Organized by Alignment

There's another way the gods are often organized and this is by good, neutral, and evil. Personally, I tend to avoid those particular words and say something is benevolent or nefarious. The reason for this is mostly that good versus evil is an interesting way of characterizing things, but it's also a little bit juvenile, at the risk of offending some of you. Many of us don't like boiling the world down to such simple ideas. Even so, this is an interesting way of dividing up your deities.

And what you don't want is to have a world that is mostly full of evil gods versus good gods unless you're doing that on purpose for a specific reason.

A subject that is included in volume 1, *Creating Life*, but will not be discussed in this podcast is the different power levels of gods, and children, demigods, and half gods. If you'd like to learn more about these, consider purchasing the book.

Review

if you're enjoying the podcast, please rate and review the show at artofworldbuilding.com/review. Reviews really are critical to encouraging more people to listen to a show haven't heard of before, and it can also help the show rank better, allowing more people to discover it. Again that URL is artofworldbuilding.com/review.

Where Do They Live?

We should also decide where the gods live. Are they on the planet and they can be accessed easily? Or are they up in the clouds? Are they on another plane of existence and they can only be reached by special means? Our decision will affect how easy it is for mortals to reach them.

There is a tradition in fantasy where mortals must prove that they are worthy in order to reach the gods. Therefore, it is not terribly easy to make it there. If I were a god and I had many worshipers, as I assume I would, I wouldn't want every last person on the planet trying to track me down all the time. I also wouldn't want them trying to get me to resolve some petty fight that they're having with someone. So the cost for someone to seek me out should be a worthy one and therefore it should probably be an arduous task to reach me.

If the gods live on the world, I recommend avoiding something as obvious as a mountaintop because most people will immediately associate that with Mount Olympus and the Greek gods, like Zeus. On the other hand, a god of the sea living underwater is obvious, but that also raises the question of whether that god is trying to avoid anyone reaching him. After all, most people cannot swim underwater to incredible depths without modern technology. Is the god trying to avoid anyone trying to contact him?

If we're doing science fiction and our species has a learn to ascend to the heavens and beyond, then if this is the place where the gods are rumored to exist, then what happens when the species is able to get up there? Do they find that the gods do indeed live up there running the world, or did they discover that the gods are not where everyone thought that they were? Does this have an impact on them? Are people disillusioned and wonder, "Hey, wait a minute, I thought that the gods were up here in the clouds and there's nothing here!"

Are they having a crisis of faith as a result of this? Do the gods even allow people to achieve technological advances so that they can discover such an idea is not true? These are some things that we might want to consider.

Not Included

The lifespan of the gods is another subject that we will not be discussing in this podcast but you can find out more by purchasing *Creating Life* and reading chapter 2 on creating gods. We also won't discuss vulnerability and whether gods can be hurt, killed, or upset in any other way.

The mythology of our gods is also very important. This includes creation myths and end of world myths. These are two of the most important stories to work out regarding our gods and how people feel about how time began, and even more importantly, how it will end. Everyone loves a good end of the world story and this is something that characters can mention at any time. It also offers a convenient way to talk about their lives and what consequences they may face when they die and are judged by a god. To learn more, check out chapter 2 of *Creating Life*.

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 album Now Weaponized! called "Keeping Pace." 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!