



THE ART OF WORLD BUILDING

LEARN ALL ABOUT  
HOW MANY  
WORLDS TO BUILD  
AND WHY

EPISODE: 3

WITH RANDY ELLEFSON

## Intro

Hello and welcome to *The Art of World Building Podcast*, episode number three. Today's topic is how many worlds to build over the course of our career. Is it better to build one extensive world we use for 20 stories, or is it better to build 20 worlds for 20 stories? This material and more is discussed in Chapter 1 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](http://artofworldbuilding.com).

## One World Per Story – Advantages

What I want to talk about now is how many worlds we should build over the course of our career. World building can often take an enormous amount of time. Speeding up this process is one of the goals of this podcast series and *The Art of World Building* books. But does it make more sense to create one world that we're going to use for the next 20 years, or does it make sense to keep creating a new world each time we're going to create a new story? After 20 stories, we would have created 20 worlds. That seems like an awful lot and something that's going to burn us out on world building. One of my recommendations is to do a mix of these two. Talk about why in just a minute.

Let's first take a look at the idea of creating one world for one story. This does have some advantages. For starters, it takes a lot less time to do this. We also don't have to think through so many items. We're only going to create whatever we need for that story, not an entire ecosystem for example. We're also not going to be tied to that world indefinitely, so if we make a mistake there is something that just doesn't seem like it's a good idea, well that's okay because we're only using that for one story. And then we're going to move on.

If we have an idea that's a little bit more "out there," and maybe we shouldn't take that risk for the next 20 years because our audience might not like that, then just creating a world for one story, where we do something stranger, it seems like a better place to do this. Because if it doesn't work, well we've already moved on.

If we are new to world building, this might be a good approach because we have a lot to learn. We're going to make mistakes and why make a mistake that we get stuck with? I've been working on the same planet called Llurien for 30 years, and I can tell you I have repeatedly gone back over what I've created and eliminated ideas that were just kinda stupid, to be honest. I mean, I started when I was 16 or 17. At that age, you're going to have some stupid ideas. It just comes with the territory.

I've had to do a certain amount of cleaning up. And sometimes the ideas that I'm removing have good parts and bad parts and I'm trying to salvage something that was good while getting rid of the bad part. Sometimes this just creates an unnecessary amount of work. Maybe it would've been smarter to just starting over with a new planet altogether after about two or three years.

If we are also not sure how much we are into world building, then this can be a good way to kind of dip your toe in the water, just like in the summer when you get to a cold pool and you're not sure if you just want to jump right in. You can just stick your foot in and say, "Okay I don't like doing this." You have to find out whether this is something that you really want to spend a lot of time and energy on before you plan to do this for however many years.

## One World Per Story – Disadvantages

As with everything, doing one world for one story also has its disadvantages. If we don't do a lot of detail, then this can sometimes become apparent. The result might appear to be an underdeveloped world. It also might be less interesting. We might find ourselves using any of the standard species and races, for example, like elves and dwarves that you find in fantasy. Now if you're okay with that, then that's fine, but if you really wanted to do something more than that, well, you're now kind of stuck between trying not to do a lot of world building but also trying to do something new. And if anything you create doesn't have a lot of thought behind it, then I might come across as a poorly conceived idea.

Another problem with this approach is that if we keep creating a world for each story, then we might start creating worlds that are very similar to each other just because we start running out of ideas. Creative people don't typically want to repeat themselves, so if your first world had certain things in it, you probably don't want to include them the second world, even if they might've been a good idea. And then this process starts where, each time you create a world, everything that we include in that world, we don't use subsequently in another world and it's almost like putting ourselves in a noose. The possibilities for us keep getting smaller and smaller and smaller every time we create a world. And that's not ideal.

## More Resources

Let's take a quick break here and talk about where you can get more useful world building resources. [Artofworldbuilding.com](http://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](http://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.

## One World For Many Stories – Advantages

So if we're not going to create one world for each story, what's our other option? Well, the big one is to create one world with the intention of telling many, many stories on that world. This also has its advantages. One of them is that we are only creating one world and that way we are not going to be repeating ourselves. We have the freedom to just keep inventing and connecting ideas that we have just created was something that we have already created. This is one of the things that I love about creating Llurien for so many years. You know, I might've created something initially 10 years ago and now I think of something new that has nothing to do with it, but after another year or two, I suddenly see a connection, a way of bringing these together. And the result is an additional layer of realism.

Another issue is that I create the planet for its own sake. I don't create anything to tell a specific story, and the result, I feel, is that the world just feels more real. As I said a minute ago, one of the problems with creating a world for just the story that you're telling is that a lack of depth sort of makes things feel a little bit shallow and a little bit empty. And maybe just not that realistic.

If we decide to create our own species or races, we can really do a deep dive into this and create something that's very different. This can be a draw for the fiction that we create (the audience) because we've got a world that no one else has. If you use elves and dwarves, well everyone and their brother is doing that. There's nothing new about this anymore. You can put your own spin on them but in the end, it still kind of run-of-the-mill fantasy.

And I don't mean to sound negative about fantasy. I love elves and dwarves as much as the next guy, but as a creator I don't find it terribly interesting. And as a reader I kind of think, "Well, there's nothing new about this to me, regardless of what spin somebody puts on it. I already know what to expect." Now there is a comfort to knowing what to expect, but at the same time, there's a little bit of risk in not doing anything original. And the worst result of that is just doing something that is a cliché.

If your world becomes really popular, not only will that be a draw for the audience, but if you become super lucky, like a George Lucas for *Star Wars*, or George RR Martin for *Game of Thrones*, you might even be able to get away with doing merchandising. Now of course that's kind of a pipe dream. How many people get to have action figures made of the world that they're created? But you know, anything is possible. On the other hand, if you're using all the standard species and races, well that's probably not going to happen.

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and related items are my way of giving back to the fantasy, scifi, movie, and gaming industries that I love so much. You can give back too by helping to fund this effort. When the next Tolkien or George R.R. Martin shows up, you can tell yourself, "I helped him do that!"

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## One World For Many Stories – Disadvantages

The single biggest disadvantage to creating one world for many stories is the sheer amount of time that you to be spending doing. Fortunately, you are listening to a podcast that is based on a three-volume series of books that is designed to speed that process along considerably. I've been doing this for a long time and I have thought pretty much everything that – well, I have thought through everything within the series or I couldn't have written it – but I can give you a huge head start on doing this deep dive into a single setting.

Now if you're a game designer, you don't have to worry about this next issue, but storytellers are famous for wanting to tell stories but finding excuse after excuse to not do so. And world building can become one of these. We can spend so much time doing this that we never tell a story. And this is much more likely to occur if you are going to create one setting that you intend to use for many years because you going to tell yourself, "Well, you know, I'm gonna write all these stories here." Maybe you're just going to sit around world building instead.

One of the concerns about spending a lot of time on a single setting is also that, what if nobody likes what you've written? You know, you've got a world that you heavily invested a lot of time in and nobody likes it. Well, again, that's one of the reasons for this series.

Now another issue that you used to have to face but maybe don't anymore is that you can spend many years working on a setting only to never get a publishing deal. But today, self-publishing is all the rage. There is actually an entire industry that has sprung up around self-publishing and it's relatively easy to do. There are a bunch of other skills that you need to pick up, but since it is a possibility, at the very least, at the end of the day, you know that you can get your work out there.

On the surface, creating one setting per book may involve less effort at the time, but if we have to create a dozen worlds over the years, is that more or less work than one more detailed, reusable setting? You may want to consider a hybrid approach. And what that means is that you create one world that's intended to be used for many stories and you spend a lot of time on this. And even while you're doing that, you might create another world that's just to tell a specific story. And in those instances, you might just want to do something that's a little bit more "out there." Take your chances with the settings that are only going to be used for one-story, while something that's a little bit more mainstream is the world that you're going to be using for a long time.

## Deciding

If you're not sure how to decide, well then one question you should ask yourself is, "How serious are you about being a storyteller or a game designer? Is this something that you intend to do for many years?" If so, you might be doing yourself a favor to create the one world that you can spend more effort and make it more unique, and where that world becomes a bigger draw for your fans.

If you're not sure if you'll enjoy world building, or you've never done it before, then it's probably not a good idea to bite off more than you can chew. You might want to just start off with something smaller and see how it goes.

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## How to Find Time

Now I do have one anecdote to share with you. I never set out to spend 30 years and counting working on the world of Lurien. As a teenager, I was just kind of goofing around. When I was in college, I didn't really have the time to write fiction so it was just a hobby of mine, that I just kept having ideas for this world, and I kept writing them down. And sometimes I would spend a few hours writing something, and I might not have even look at that for a couple years before I ran across the file.

Later in the series, we'll talk about how to keep your files organized so you don't just keep losing everything, but at different times, life intrudes and you don't have the time to write. That's a good time to be working on a setting, whether the world is going to be used for a long time, or even something strange you're only going to use for one story.

As someone who needs to do world building as part of your hobby or career, it's a good way to reclaim lost time. And it's also a good way to kind of run with an idea once you've had it, and worry about it later, how you're going to use it or where you are going to use it. It's not a bad thing to just have an idea, write it down, have fun with it, and then tweak it later. No idea comes up fully formed at the time.

## Review

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## Wrap Up

You should also have a sense of just how creative you are. Do you think you have what it takes to create many worlds? Or do you feel like this is kind of a stretch and you don't even have ideas for one world? In that latter case, you might want to just focus on a single world. And I think that we can do to make that process more manageable. Will be talking more about that as this podcast progresses.

Right now we're still covering chapter 1, "Why Build a World?" from volume 1, *Creating Life*, and there are a few more sections of the volume that I'm not going to talk about today. One of these is a discussion of the problem that can happen if we create a setting and then publish a trilogy of novels, for example, and then try to use that setting for stories that have nothing to do with that trilogy. This is something that is discussed more in the book itself, but I'm not going to cover it in the podcast.

Another subject in the book is the issue of being too close to the world building that we're doing and finding ourselves tempted to jam a whole bunch of information into the story because we are too close to what we've been creating. The problem with doing this is that we are taking the reader away from the flow of the story and the action and just kind of hitting them over the head with a bunch of exposition. This is not a good idea. And one of the things that the book talks about our ways to go around this problem.

The final section in Chapter 1 talks about our influences and how much we are going to let them actually influence us. When we're trying to do something original, we may restrict ourselves from anything that we've seen before. But we can do too far with that kind of self-imposed restriction. The book just calls our attention to this kind of thing and make sure that we have true freedom to create something great.

## 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 [The Firebard](#), called "Still at Large." You can hear more songs at [RandyEllefson.com](http://RandyEllefson.com). Check out [artofworldbuilding.com](http://artofworldbuilding.com) for free templates to help with your world building. And please rate and review the show in iTunes. Thanks for listening!