

Why You Should Theme Your World

By Chris Winkle on April 3, 2016



A sleek government fleet from Serenity, headed toward the monstrosities they helped create.

Some mainstream storytellers think speculative fiction is easy; instead of doing research, we just make things up. But anyone who practices the genre knows that we can't "just make things up" if we want our audience to have a positive experience. We must create a new framework for reality that doesn't [feel jarring or unbelievable](#).

For a world to foster immersion, it must feel cohesive, more cohesive than the real world. Anything out of place in the real world can be proved with evidence; fictional worlds don't have that luxury. To make everything feel like it fits, [worldbuilders use themes](#) to hold their worlds together.

The Difference a Theme Makes

I'll present two example worlds. One of them has a strong theme; the other doesn't. You'll know which is which.

Example One

The world of Mystoterica features four gods. Each god represents its own element and dreams its own realm of reality into existence, a realm that embodies that element. The denizens of each realm remain ignorant of the other realms or any of the deities. But slowly they stumble onto the language of the gods. By speaking this language and embracing their element, they might crudely gain a god's attention and alter their reality. Little do they know that by casting their magic, they could cause the realms to shift: a cataclysm that might destroy all they hold dear.

Example Two

The galaxy of Orion is ruled by the Janthian Empire. They ruthlessly maintain order through a supercomputer that predicts enemy actions. However, this empire has been thrown into chaos as the dryads have grown more powerful. The gods Growth and Decay protect dryads wherever they go, but their divine aura also causes non-dryad ships to fail. As the struggle between the empire and the dryads consumes the galaxy, Rainbow Sparkle, the unicorn of prophecy, appears. Rainbow Sparkle has the ability to make everyone understand how their enemies feel. This leads to the Great Reconciling immediately before the Age of Human Sacrifice.

The Benefits of a Theme

The themed world [feels more believable](#), whereas the world that isn't themed [feels contrived](#). A themed world will also make a more lasting impression.* That's because all the elements of a themed world can be boiled down to an iconic aspect. Whether it's the magical wonder of Middle Earth or the uncanniness of [Lovecraftian horror](#), this unifying impression is what keeps fans coming back for more.

The Components of a World Theme

Whether the world is designed as a gritty dystopia or a wondrous land of the gods, [the core concept must be followed](#) faithfully to create a strong theme. This means maintaining consistency in multiple areas:

- **Mood and Atmosphere:** The world could be a bright future or grim past. Its elements could be romanticized, subversive, or carrying disturbing implications.
- **Aesthetic Environment:** You could include cities of gears and steam, old stone that is being slowly overtaken by plant life, or a galaxy full of ships and space stations.
- **Context and Explanation:** Supernatural elements could rigorously follow the rules of known science, originate from technology that has yet to be invented, or occur according to the will of the Old Gods.
- **Moral Framework:** Your world may include a struggle between ultimate good and ultimate evil, numerous factions that are selfish but balance each other out, or just people with good intentions that misunderstand each other.

This isn't an exhaustive list of all of the things a world theme might include, but jarring differences in any of these areas can fragment a setting. Luckily, that doesn't mean worlds can't contain diversity.

How Themes Bring Diverse Elements Together

When asked, most people say that the difference between science fiction and fantasy is that scifi uses advanced but possible technology, whereas fantasy is driven by impossible forms of magic. But from a fiction standpoint, these are nearly identical. They both [advance civilizations](#) and [empower characters](#). They both must be [carefully introduced](#) to an audience before they become important to a story. They both must [have rules so they feel cohesive](#) themselves. What divides them and their associated genres is theme.

Elements from any speculative fiction genre can be re-themed to fit a different setting. Take a standard time machine and turn it into a hour-glass necklace, and behold, you have the time turner from Harry Potter. You can also combine two genres into a cohesive whole or blur the line between them. The movie Underworld uses urban fantasy creatures but explains them with pseudo-science instead of magic. The world of Firefly is a science fiction western; the rich take their advanced tech for granted while the poor make due with horses and wagons.

You can make diverse elements work together as one theme. But you'll need to explain how that situation arises, and then that contrast will become a defining feature of your world.

Let's say you want spacefaring gnomes. Maybe this is the result of a fantasy civilization that became more and more advanced over time, finally reaching space. If that's the case, their spaceships might be powered by magic. Instead of an engine room, they could have a ritual chamber. Alternatively, your gnomes might come from a human colony that became isolated for thousands of years. This created a new subspecies of homo sapiens that's smaller than average, and so the other races started calling them gnomes. That suggests a world with more rigorous science and a lot of cultural tension between different colonies. Whatever your choice, it should reverberate through the rest of your world. That will keep your theme strong.

Paring Down to a World That Works

Sometimes creating a strong theme means scaling back our ambitions. Re-theming out-of-place world elements is adequate for many situations but not all of them. The ageless temple built in homage to the Old Gods may not be as inspiring if it's created in homage to a supercomputer instead. If you want to [subvert genre expectations](#), transforming a story element could remove your punchline. A knight's dramatic choice to spare a dragon won't mean as much if the knight is a space marine and the dragon is an alien species. Plus, while two contrasting genres can be made to fit each other, three will test even the best worldbuilding skills.

If you try to make your world everything to everybody, you're both diluting the setting and not doing the parts you love justice. The temple of the Old Gods deserves a world where the

inhabitants live by the whims of ageless deities, not one where humanity has power over the stars and then comes by to sacrifice an animal on the weekends.

So choose what's important and theme your world around that. If your world contains something that you love but just won't fit, [clip it out](#) and save it as the seed of a new setting.

When in doubt, think about the settings and stories you love the most. Were they magical, humorous, rebellious? Make it your goal to depict one of those themes, not the specific races, characters, or nations that brought it to you.

Comments

1. Terra

April 3, 2016 at 10:01 am

I for one would read a story that names the era after the "Great Reconciling" the "Age of Human Sacrifice". ;) More to the point, though – World Themes are valuable, but if too tight, they tend to be limiting. Our own world is not tightly "themed" and structured. Very interesting things can happen when "worlds collide", and this can breathe some life into otherwise cliché settings.

2. Sara Baptista

April 3, 2016 at 12:23 pm

Quite true what Terra said. But the main point, I think, is when the start of the story shows that it is a cyberpunk universe and in the middle the author joins some wizard that flies in a broom ?

1. In reply to Sara Baptista



ScottFW

December 20, 2016 at 8:33 am

Ahh, but what if it was a nanotechnology broom?

3.



Chris Winkle

April 3, 2016 at 1:26 pm

The best fiction doesn't portray places, people, and events that are just like the real world. Fiction is a representation of reality that's designed to feel natural yet more entertaining and engaging than life. If your dialogue was exactly like real conversation, it would be messy and not as engaging. If your plot reflected how real things happen, it would be messy and not as engaging. And if your world was as unstructured as the real world, it would be messy and not as engaging.

That's doesn't mean you can't bring in contrasting things together in your world, it means that throwing in whatever you feel like at the moment will eventually give you a world that offers little more than being humorously bad. Some franchises have made "humorously bad" work for them, but that's not what most of us aim for.

4. Kevin

April 26, 2016 at 8:17 pm

OK, I'm ashamed to admit this, but I can't actually tell which world has the theme. Which was it?

1. In reply to Kevin



Chris Winkle

April 27, 2016 at 12:25 am

Example Two should come off as silly because it does not stay in theme. How often do you see works with both an intergalactic empire and a hero named something like Rainbow Sparkle? It changes explanation for speculative fiction elements (gods vs advanced technology) and mood (enemies coming to understand each other vs human sacrifice). It would make for a very random, eclectic setting.

I hope that helps.

1. In reply to Chris Winkle



ScottFW

May 25, 2017 at 8:50 am

While I don't know of any intergalactic empires or any heroes named Rainbow Sparkle I have heard of a little backwater rock and water planet with a resident author named Moon Unit.

2. In reply to Chris Winkle



Leon

December 3, 2018 at 1:49 am

I can very clearly picture a gruff, surly, queer space fighter pilot with the call sign rainbow sparkle :D

1. In reply to Leon

Bubbles

December 3, 2018 at 9:25 am

I agree! It seems that a lot of people have already stated in this very comments section that you don't need a theme to have a good story. While I know that the authors of this blog aren't mandated to reply or anything (as the comments policy says), it would still be nice if they replied to the many objections. BTW, I've noticed something unusual; when I post a standalone comment, it's rare for me to get a reply, but when I respond to someone else's comment, more people tend to reply. Is that because people are getting email alerts? (I don't get any). I'll just say that I have a comment at the bottom of this page, as well as standalone comments on "How to Create a Rational Magic System,"

“Designing Aliens From an Alternate Earth” and “Getting Started With Worldbuilding” that no one has replied to – even though my replies to other comments have been responded to.



5.

Smartass

November 20, 2016 at 1:19 pm

So, which of the examples is supposed to hold a theme? I found both of them contrived.

6. Inner Prop

May 9, 2017 at 8:27 am

Example 2 sounds a bit like “Star vs the Forces of Evil” which is silly and has names like Rainbow Sparkle but deals with some interesting topics in what might be considered an enlightened way.

Another example would be “Adventure Time.” It’s post-apocalyptic but it has magic, talking candy etc. and a Space Princess. For crying out loud Princess Bubblegum (a sentient, person-shaped wad of gum) is a self-proclaimed scientist.

On the other hand, KNOWING your theme as a writer could help you write the story.

I can also see how setting up a theme is sort of a contract with the reader. This is probably why people groaned at the aliens in “Crystal Skull.” They aren’t less believable than magic nazi-melting boxes, but they are a different “genre.”

Maybe if you are going to combine themes you need to do it up front. If you are going to change or mixing up themes, like a lot of things in fiction it must, in the end, be unanticipated but inevitable.



7.

Tumblingxelian/Vazak

May 25, 2017 at 6:12 am

An intriguing and well written piece.

8. Alan Mills

October 5, 2017 at 7:47 pm

The temple to a super computer has been done: Landru on Star Trek, the original series.

1. In reply to Alan Mills

Greg

May 18, 2018 at 2:27 pm

Sentient and semi-sentient computers dominating and subverting human cultures is a recurring, um, theme, in the original Star Trek series.

I am Landru. You are not of The Body. You will be absorbed.

9. Greg

May 18, 2018 at 2:34 pm

I think it's easy to get hung up on specific examples that contradict the idea of theme; and by doing so miss the over-arching point.

Imagine you're watching a Star Wars movie and suddenly a hobbit shows up with a magic ring (in the movie, not real life). It's not gonna work, because it destroys the consistency of the theme. You can say "Ooooh that sounds like it'd be cool!" And maybe it would be in a movie with absurdity as part of it's established theme (like, say, Spaceballs).

Another example: Imagine Star Wars tried to explain the ability with the Force isn't really mystical, but it's due to some weird microorganism in the blood. Oh wait... !

10. Bubbles

November 28, 2018 at 10:31 am

I know my comments tend to be critical. However, there are many articles that I do like on this website; it's just that I don't feel driven in the same way to comment if all I have to

say is "I like this." Maybe I should start doing that...

Anyway, I have several criticisms of this article. One is about how the advice in this article is presented as an absolute, but it probably doesn't always apply, even in fiction. Even in this comments section, which while admittedly not a representative sample, a significant number of commenters have already criticized the idea of a strict theme. Also, Greg's comment, while it does support the post's idea, mentions Star War's midichlorian explanation of the Force as something that broke the theme – except that because Star Wars is science fiction, the midichlorian explanation technically preserved the theme, and the mystical explanation was what didn't fit!

While it's true that some people will be put off by a lack of a theme, as you say, it seems possible that a significant number of people will not and may even not like a theme. Also, I know of at least one example of a successful work without an absolute theme: the SCP Foundation. It's a wiki-based story about a fictional organization (the Foundation) that hides and contains objects and people (the SCPs) that don't obey the laws of physics as commonly understood. Yes, you could say it has themes of science (as despite this, the Foundation tries to understand the SCPs as much as possible) and horror (many of the things are extremely dangerous, and the Foundation itself will go to nearly any length to achieve its goals). However, many tales and things from the perspectives of other groups in that multiverse don't really follow the scientific theme, and not all of the SCPs are scary (check out SCP-348 for instance). Even the horror SCPs don't really have one theme, as they range anywhere from "standard" terrifying monsters to objects with powerful benefits and dangerous drawbacks to people with unusual abilities to things that cause harm to those who merely know about them.

Some of the examples you give of unthemed ideas could arguably fit in a theme. Your example of "the temple of the Old Gods...while humanity has power over the stars" could show a world where no matter how powerful humanity becomes, there will always be something unknowable and more powerful, which is arguably one theme of cosmic horror. And of course, there's the fact that science fantasy is a genre of its own.

Somewhat related to this is the fact that what counts as a "theme" is likely culture-dependent, or even dependent on the individual. What seems to "fit" to a person from one region may seem out of place to a person from another, who grew up with different kinds of stories. I think I made a similar point in my comment on the article about rational magic systems (which no one has replied to). I'll use the SCP Foundation example again: the SCPs don't share many similarities with each other; they break the laws of physics in their own ways. There are a few attempts to create a unified theory of them, but none have been "proven" in canon. Perhaps, if you're stretching, that could be a theme in itself; there are things beyond our common experience, things we may not be able to understand.

1. In reply to Bubbles

Jasin Moridin

December 4, 2018 at 5:24 am

The cosmic horror/science fantasy stuff certainly puts me in mind of Warhammer 40k. Humanity has a huge galaxy-spanning empire and advanced tech, but it's got to deal with everything from super-advanced basically-undead alien AIs who can warp the laws of physics through EXTREME science, to big green football hooligans who love fighting and don't understand why other species don't, to realpolitik-practicing mostly-idealistic aliens who wouldn't be out of place in Mass Effect, to actual literal evil deities manifested from the worst parts of the psyches of every single sentient being that's ever lived and who are the reason FTL travel is dangerous and unreliable.

That human empire is nominally ruled by a horribly-mangled almost-corpse on life support who can't directly interact with anyone, whose existence is sustained by massive-scale human sacrifice, and who might actually resurrect himself if he dies (but no one wants to find out because he's fighting the aforementioned evil deities on their own turf and serving as the focusing lens for the beacon human ships use to navigate hyperspace). The current regent is one of his genetically-engineered super-soldier sons/science-experiments who was in stasis for almost nine thousand years due to being poisoned, and is currently alive only due to an advanced suit of armour that took millennia of tinkering to get right, and literal necromancy from an alien priestess of a not-fully-born death god.

1. In reply to Jasin Moridin

Bubbles

December 4, 2018 at 9:45 am

I've heard a bit about Warhammer 40k as well, although I don't know that much about it. I'm not exactly a fan either, but I would generally agree with your point that the universe in that work includes many disparate elements, seemingly from separate genres, yet makes them all fit together pretty well. However, I'll be a devil's advocate for a moment. Many of the "magical" elements in Warhammer 40k are actually mind/psionic based powers essentially. Psychic powers are fairly common in science fiction for some reason, even though they probably don't exist in real life, so someone might argue that they do fit the "theme" of science fiction. I suppose, in fact, that might be one of the reasons why I decided the "magic" in one of my older worlds, the one I keep mentioning in my comments here, is somewhat based on common depictions of psychic

powers (telepathy, telekinesis, and teleportation specifically). Nevertheless, considering that Science Fantasy is a thing, I still would say themes aren't necessary for a good story, and some audiences, at least, may not care about or even be put off by a theme.

11. Anthony

November 2, 2019 at 9:03 pm

In defence of this article, I think a more pedantic way of putting it is that a story's setting should have a theme.

If I were to write a story about a wanderer, the world of the story could practically be any number of things, but the setting is what is relevant to the story and thus it needs to fit the theme. The goings on of a sweatshop worked in by cybernetically enhanced wizards barely paid minimum wage and plotting revolt against their extraterrestrial overlords, is not necessarily going to be relevant in a story about a hobo whose story happens because of the collective ignorance about basic humanity. These two concepts are very disparate, but they can still happen within the same world and perhaps elements of the one could sink their way into the other. That said, the hypothetical stories are still practically worlds apart, and I think the point being expressed here is that the more alien concepts are to each other, the greater the difficulty may be to relate or unite the ideas.

However, in criticism of the article, it seems to be saying that elements of a story should center around a genre. A fantasy epic about philosophical dilemmas of a new and terrible powers is a more concise idea than two empires waging war in space and stopping due to the efforts of a unicorn with a funny name who teaches them empathy right before everything goes straight to Hell, but that's because the very natures of these concepts are different; the first could be more the setting, the second more of a hasty outline.

Example One could very well be the catalyst of Example Two, as well. If I'm to infer a theme from such a mess, it would be the dangers of fully, eagerly integrating some unknown, barely understood power into the inner workings of the world and what difficulty there is in making peace during such hostilities. Applicable to modern readers in the sense that A.I. is being integrated wherever it can, without regard to the sheer destructive ignorance of such artifices and how their algorithms place everyone into wrathful enchochambers.

My point being that you absolutely can make weird, disparate elements fit together if you're clever about it and without having them be in the same genre.

12. Nicholas Fletcher

May 7, 2020 at 5:00 pm

Honestly, example two sounds like the more interesting story. The first example has a tighter theme, but the second sounds more fun and dynamic.