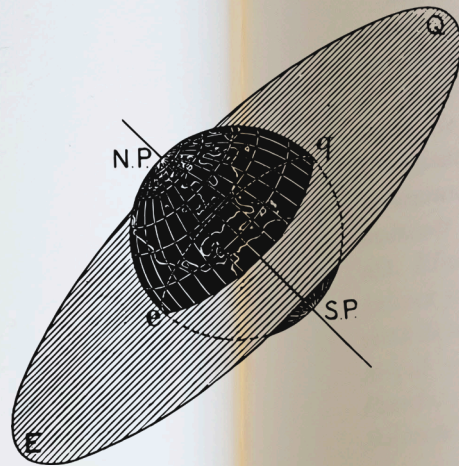


Building the World You Need, Not an One You Want

a writer's perspective



J. Pekka Mäkelä: a very short CV

- Science Fiction novels: *391* (2004), *Alshain* (2006), *Nedut* (2007), *Karsta* (2009), *Alas* (2013)
- "Sub-urban fantasy" or "Finnish Weird" novels: *Muurahaispuu* (2012), *Pahasilmä* (2021)
- Historical novel *Hunan* (2018) shortlisted for the Finlandia Literary Award 2018
- More than 60 literary translations (fiction and non-fiction) from English to Finnish:
Philip K. Dick, Sean Stewart, China Miéville, Ernest Cline, Neil DeGrasse Tyson, ...
- Screenplay for The Finnish Science Centre Heureka's multimedia show
Satunnainen matkailija aurinkokunnassa (1994)

Why build a world?

- Because it's fun!
- Most of us have read, listened and watched fairy tales as a child. Fictional worlds are natural for us.
- Sometimes a more fictional environment may tell more about our hopes and fears than strict realism.
- Sometimes a more fictional environment may be more honest about our everyday world than what is supposed to be realistic.

Some roots for speculative worldbuilding

- Fairy tales: "Once upon a time in a far-away land..."
- Legends and myths: Olympos, Eden, Valhalla, Dreamtime, *Kalevala*...
- Utopias, lost kingdoms: Atlantis (Plato's *Timaeus* and *Critias*, 4th century BC), Utopia (Thomas More, 1516) Eldorado, Seven Cities of Cibola (16th century), Shangri-La,...
- Satire: Jonathan Swift, Stanislaw Lem,...
- Early space travel fantasies: *Alēthē diēgēmata* (Lucian of Samosata, 2nd century AD), *L'Autre Monde: ou les États et Empires de la Lune* (Cyrano de Bergerac 1657),...
- Uncharted and unexplored areas on the map, rainforests, undiscovered islands, hard to get mountain valleys: *Tarzan* novels (E. R. Burroughs), *King Kong*,...
- Fictitious predictions/inventions/warnings for the future: Jules Verne, H. G. Wells,...

The Sinisalo–Mäkelä Speculative Fiction Mandala



...but where are

- new weird
- urban fantasy
- finnish weird

...?

Any work of fiction creates a new world of its own

Mimetic worlds

- one or two variables, *novum* or *nova* – a characteristic of a person(s) or the world – making a difference from a mimetic world
- epoch
- paleofiction worlds: Björn Kurtén, Jean M. Untinen-Auel, Jack London (*Before Adam*, 1908),...
- alternative history lines, parallel universes, superheroes, steampunk
- apocalyptic worlds: *Mad Max*, *Bird Box*,...
- Fictional countries/cities:
 - Orsinia (Ursula Le Guin: *Malafrena*)
 - Beszel/Ul Qoma (China Miéville: *The City and the City*),...

Any work of fiction creates a new world of its own (cont'd)

Complete original worlds

- hermetic worlds:

Lord of the Rings, Song of Fire and Ice (Game of Thrones), Earthsea,...

- original world interacting/connected with the mimetic world:

Narnia (C. S. Lewis),...

Future worlds, other planets

Fantasy worlds disguised as science fiction worlds

- *Star Wars, Dune*

Horror worlds

Humor, hybrids

How to use a world?

○ **Scenery: Where the story happens to happen**

- world built *for* a story
- world as a instrument for the subtext(s)
- analogy
- alienation or estrangement (eg. Liu: *Remembrance of Earth's Past* trilogy, Lem: *Kongres futurologiczny*)
- allegory, satire (e.g. *Gulliver's Travels*)
- utopia or dystopia

○ **Premise: The world as *the story***

- thought experiments
- world as a concretization of an argument or astronomical hypothesis
– Hal Clement: *Mission of Gravity*

○ **Shared worlds as locations for various peoples' fictitious stories**

- Petri Hiltunen: *Jaconia* (*Praedor* stories)
- open game worlds

Different worlds for different folks

- Tove Jansson: The Moomin Valley
- J. R. R. Tolkien: Middle Earth
- George R. R. Martin: Westeros
(*The Song of Fire and Ice* books, *Game of Thrones* TV show)
- C. S. Lewis: Narnia, The Space Trilogy
- Ursula Le Guin: Earthsea, The Hainian World
- Isaac Asimov: The Galactic Empire (*The Foundation* series)
- Iain M. Banks: The Culture series
- David Brin: The Uplift series
- Frank Herbert: *Dune*
- J. Michael Straczynski: *Babylon 5*
- The *Star Trek* universe
- Margaret Atwood: *The Handmaid's Tale* / *The Testaments*
- Terry Pratchett: Discworld
- Douglas Adams: *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy*
- J. K. Rowling: Harry Potter
- *X Files*, *Stranger Things*
- Gabriel García Márquez: Macondo
- Philip K. Dick: *A Scanner Darkly*,
The Man in the High Castle,
Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?,
The Galactic Pot-Healer,...

What your world needs?

- Coherence, logical rules, continuity (also with the characters)
– probably more than our real world!
- Even a mimetic world needs a logical and factual foundation
- Science fiction: scientific credibility, even with novel inventions like faster than light travel
- Credibility breeds immersion (“Suspension of disbelief”)
- Anomalies kill immersion.

What your world needs? (cont'd)

○ Applicability of the world:

- for the story (as an one-off or a possible series)
- for the characters in the story
- for the subtext(s) of the story

○ Liveability of the world:

- How people are born, raised, educated, what they eat and drink, what they believe in,...

○ How the characters see their world

The story as a tip of the iceberg

- Somebody living/visiting in a fictitious world or a recipient of the story does not need to know everything about the world – but you do!
- Wholeness of the world is essential for immersion
- Research well done helps to breed immersion and feeds the story and the characters
- Laziness in research and fact checking gets noticed and highlighted
- "Suspension of disbelief" is a contract with the reader/audience.
Do not break the contract!
- God lurks in details

Connect all the dots

- Religions, politics, science and technology, economics are not insular from each other
- The environment, conditions and circumstances shape
 - evolution
 - habits, manners and traditions
 - language
 - society
 - power structures
 - government (or the lack of one)
- Innovations shape culture, culture shapes innovations

What your world needs

- Planetary and geological history, geography and climate
- Biology with evolutionary history
- History for the inhabitants
- Social and political structure, governmental system
- Natural resources, means of livelihood, professions, economical system(s) with consequences
- Science, technology, innovations (or lack of)
- Languages and naming conventions
- Belief systems, values, laws, morals (or lack of)

Problems with exposition

- In a mimetic world there's no need to explain what a "car" is. In a hermetic world the word meanings may differ and need explanation: a "car" could mean e.g. "railway carriage" or "chariot".

- Avoid infodumps and exposition*

*or, like Douglas Adams and Terry Pratchett, make them a thing.

- Show, don't tell. Let the ways of the people do the telling

- Show consequences, not necessarily their reasons

- You might want to slyly show things before the story actually needs them

- Sometimes, an uneducated, uninformed and curious outsider might be useful

- Fake documents may help

How not to fail checklist

- Has your fantastic element (eg. magic) any limits and logic in its workings?
- Do your definitely non-human lifeforms still behave like humans?
- Are your fantastic being's physiology fit for its "natural" environment?
 - Could your lifeform actually survive and thrive where it's supposed to live and thrive?
 - Does your overall ecology work?
 - Does the planet you have created have climate zones, different ecosystems, environmental variability?
 - Do people dress/prepare accordingly?

How not to fail checklist (cont'd)

- Is your planet a single state? Is a race or a species a nation?
Is a nation just their elite and government?
- Who does production? Who does regeneration?
- Do your lifeforms have gender-related or cultural hierarchies even if their biology doesn't need any?
- Do your story obey the natural laws you have created?
- Does your world have the historical, archaeological etc. strata it must have if it didn't just pop into existence yesterday?
- Do you take into account the ramifications of any scientific and technological improvements that have happened in your world?

Where to go for inspiration?

- Myths, fairy tales, beliefs, folklore
- Literature, media, other forms of fiction
- The cultures and lifeworlds of our own world
- Science, especially scientific hypotheses and speculations – even discredited ones
- Pseudoscience, paranormal beliefs
- News
- Personal experiences, dreams
- "What if...?"

Science fiction worlds of mine

- *Alshain* (2006), *Alas* (2013), *Alue* (c. 2023)

- (first three books of the future pentalogy)
- Themes: individualism vs. eusociality, immigration, emigration
- Setting: A human-colonized planet several centuries into the future, with local biosphere

- *Karsta* (2009)

- Themes: heroism and its worth, aftermath of war, propaganda
- Setting: A spaceship cleaning wrecks in space, several centuries into the future

- *Nedut* (2007)

- Themes: immigration, aboriginality, shamanism, Neanderthals
- Setting: Korso (and greater Helsinki area) in present time, but with Neanderthals having returned to Earth and taking back most of the Central Europe

Other worlds of mine

- *Pahasilmä* (2021)
 - Themes: rush judgement, moral superiority, witchery, early internet
 - Setting: Helsinki and Vantaa in 1996, fictional small town of Kaurissalmi in 2018
- *Muurahaispuu* (2012)
 - Themes: family history/relationships, unspoken episodes of Finnish history, humans as eusocial animals
 - Setting: an apartment building in Kontula, where dreams may let you see things with somebody else's eyes
- *Hunan* (2018)
 - Themes: patriotism, religion, missionary work, colonialism
 - Setting: Central China (Hunan province) in late 1930's and early 1940's

Roll your own world

You have been given a "what if" -premise.

- Discuss what kind of practical consequences would that premise create in that fictional world.
 - How would that world differ from our own?
 - What would be e.g. the ecological/environmental, economical, cultural, sociological, political, scientific, technological, theological influences of the premise?
 - How would those consequences affect the everyday life of the inhabitants?
 - What areas of knowledge you would like to research for your world?
- Remember that in this exercise there are no given right answers!
- Give the ideas in bullet point style and be ready to discuss your points.

World building Exercise #1

What if in this fictional world...

- that resembles Earth in all other aspects, the Americas (North and South continent and the Caribbean isles) don't exist and have never existed.



World building Exercise #2

What if in this fictional world...

- that resembles Earth in all other aspects, humans are not and have never been able to live within the low lands, ie. at heights under 1 kilometer over the sea level.



World building Exercise #3

What if in this fictional world...

- humans colonize a planet that in all other aspects resembles Earth but with 2G gravity (twice that as on Earth).



World building Exercise #4

What if in this fictional world...

- that resembles Earth in all other aspects, people have recently invented means that eliminates totally the need to sleep. The invention is available to everyone who wants to use it.



World building Exercise #5

What if in this fictional world...

- that resembles Earth in all other aspects, gun powder (and consequently, other explosives) was never invented.



World building Exercise #6

What if in this fictional world...

- that resembles Earth in all other aspects, large animals that have been used in our own world as beasts of burden, to ride on, to draw carriages and plows etc. – horses, donkeys, oxen, camels,...– do exist, but have always been impossible to tame for any human use.



World building Exercise #7

What if in this fictional world...

- that resembles Earth in all other aspects, there is no concept of money.

