My story takes place on the world of Hathrae in the Mallen Valley. But what is Hathrae and what makes the Mallen Valley special. These are the questions that lead an author to create a world and populate it with characters both wonderful and fearful. It is not a task to be taken lightly, because the story depends on it.

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Douglas G. Clarke

World Building

The task of building the world in which a fantasy or science fiction story will take place is one of the most important, and often one of the hardest, of the entire writing process. It is this backdrop on which the characters will perform and the story will unfold. The world can either amplify the story by allowing the reader to become immersed in the story or be a distraction that keeps pulling the reader out of the story.

The world of the story can be as small as a single dungeon room which the characters are trying to escape from, and as large as many star-systems that the characters are somehow traveling between. The author is the one who must decide how large the world is, and here lies the first challenge. If the world the author creates is too small, the reader will notice the edges and be distracted. If the world is too large the author will spend time developing features that the reader will never even know about.

In the case of a story that takes place inside of a spaceship, does the world end at the hatch on the side of the ship, a hundred meters beyond the hatch, or does it include the planets and stars the ship is travel-

ing past. The answer is, it depends on the story. If the story could be told on a spaceship, submarine, or even a car, and if no character ever wants to go through the hatch, then what is on the other side of the hatch doesn't really matter. On the other hand if characters want to go through the hatch, but can't or don't, then the reader needs to know what is preventing them from doing so. In this case simply knowing that the vacuum of space is waiting for them, and so death since their space suit is damaged, is enough to satisfy the readers curiosity. If the story is about explorers traveling through space, then the characters focus will be on what they are traveling past, and then the readers will want know what is beyond the ship, too.

In *Unremembered Loss,* the story takes place in and around the town of Maple Grove, so the world needs to include Maple Grove, the farmland and woods that surround it, and the foot hills above it from whence the monsters come. However my world needs to be a little bigger than the valley that the story takes place in. The reader needs to know how far away the next town is and if it could supply the help the characters need.

This leads into the second question that the author needs to think

about, in how much detail does the world need to be defined? Again the answer is that it depends on the story. If the story is about the personal interactions of the characters, the details of the world can be minimal. If the story is about the characters dealing with a strange and varied new world, obviously the detail of the world has to be much more developed.

To complicate matters, the level of detail within the world the author is creating isn't a constant. Usually the level of detail goes down as the world spreads out away from the center of the action. It may be important that it is a hundred rugged miles to the next town, but if the story doesn't lead to that town then how many hills must be climbed and how many rivers must be forded doesn't really mater. However if the edge of the stories world is something that is keeping the characters inside the world, it may be the thing that has the most detail.

For *Unremembered Loss* there are some locations that have lots of detail. Such as places within town that Annay visits more than once and the turpis' camp. There is only the general information about the surrounding farms, which are left in the background and are areas just pass through.

Beside the level of detail, the author needs to understand that there are two kinds of detail. There is the detail that the readers see. This is the descriptions of the of the places, people, customs, and history of the world. These details are easy to recognize since as the story starts to unfold the author starts to write about them.

The other kind of detail concerns the things that drive the characters, that the reader never sees directly. These could be the personal history of the characters, the way the weather works, or the layout of the streets in the town. These details help to keep consistency within the story, which in turn keeps the reader from asking the question, why?

Now that we've looked at the size of the world, the level of detail needed, and the difference between the detail that the reader sees and the author needs, it's time to look at the hard part - consistency and believability.

Consistency is just making sure that every thing fits together and follows the same rules. In my world a young boy buys a cup of tea and pays an extra piece of copper for some honey. I've now set the value of a penny in my world. Later when someone buys ten candies and ten muffins it better be for more than twenty pennies.

Believability is a bit tricker. Mark Twain said, "The difference between fiction and life is that fiction has to be credible." The biggest challenge of a science fiction or fantasy writer is bring the reader into a fantastic world and making it believable. From my long years of playing Dungeons and Dragons I ran into this problem every time I tried to create an adventure.

The characters find a long lost dungeon entrance and journey into its dark depths. Along the way they enter rooms and chambers filled with monsters they have to fight. But why are the monsters there? What do they eat? Why don't they attack each other? And how can they get through the locked doors if the adventures can't?

If the point of the game is to kill lots of monsters, then the players don't care about these questions, but if there is an underling story which the player care about, then the answers to these questions can become critical.

Why are the monsters in my story attacking? Why don't the towns guards just kill them all? Does this happen often? What are the monsters doing when they are not attacking?

All of these questions need to be answered directly or indirectly in order to make the story believable.

An even bigger problem with believability comes up when you try to compare the hero and her enemies with everyone else in the world.

In order to have the hero struggle, there must be an enemy that is more powerful than she. The question becomes, is the hero more powerful than everyone else around them? If the answer is "No," then what makes her a hero. If the answer is yes, then what has kept the enemy from overwhelming everyone else in the past.

One answer is to have some evil just come into being and then hero must save everyone from it. This works fine in explaining why the evil hasn't already won, but begs the question, where did it come from?

Another answer is have the hero adventure into a dark and untamed part of the world. This implies that the civilized world is able to keep the evil at bay, but can't defeat it. This works fine as long as there are not other people in this new area of the world, otherwise it brings up the same questions of why hasn't the evil already killed them or they killed the evil.

Of course there is evil that is not just physically stronger than the hero. Maybe the evil uses temptation or trickery.

In my story the balance between the two forces is broken when a magical item is found by an overly ambitious chief. It is this combination of things that tips the scales and requires a hero to step forward. By keeping the conflict just above the norm it is easier to keep it believable, but at the expense of some drama and excitement.

There is nothing like the sight of ten thousand orcs marching on the hero's castle to drive up the tension, but then where did those ten thousand orcs come from?

So here I am, building the world of Hathrae, wondering how much of the world to define. Do I write down the various languages of the people of Hathrae like Tolkien did, or do I focus on the look and feel of the Ranger's Arrow Inn where so many meals are eaten?

I have to keep remembering that the world only needs to be big enough to hold my story, and only needs to have the details that are important to the story. It has to be big enough and have enough details so that its pieces make sense together and hold together when the story weaves itself through them.

World building is the heart of the science fiction and fantasy story-telling process and is a skill that has to be honed over time. It is this labor of love that both inspires me to keep writing new stories and threatens to keep me from every writing again.