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# Worldbuilding Ep. 005: Premise of Your Story World

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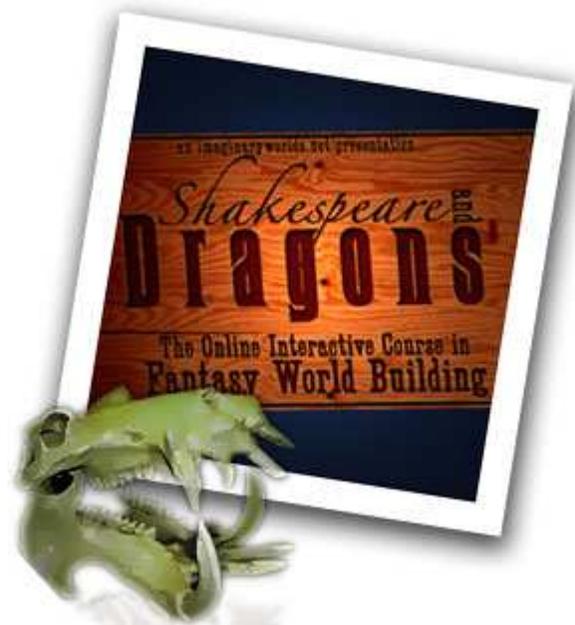


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## Worldbuilding Episode 005 Show Notes

### Worldbuilding Concept

#### Premise (from wikipedia)

The **premise** of a film or screenplay is the fundamental concept that drives the plot.

A good premise can usually be expressed very simply, and many films can be identified simply from a short sentence describing the premise. For example: A lonely boy is befriended by an alien; A small town is terrorized by a shark; A small boy sees dead people.

The uniqueness or compelling nature of a film story's premise is often a key element in selling it, especially

during the initial pitch. However, truly original, compelling premises are fiendishly difficult to come up with, and may take a writer many months of thinking and reading. Unfortunately, most premises are either derivative (Die Hard in space), contrived (two black guys must dress up as white girls) or simply dull (A man has an extremely boring job). However a compelling premise is absolutely no guarantee of a film or screenplay's quality, nor is a derivative or lacklustre premise the kiss of death.

A story which has an easily understood, compelling premise is said to be high-concept, whereas one whose premise is not easy to describe, or relatively small-scale or mundane, is said to be

low-concept. A low-concept story is highly execution-dependent because the commercial viability of the project will depend largely on the quality of the creative endeavors of those involved, whereas a high-concept story may still pull in audiences even if the script is flawed, the acting wooden and the direction directionless.

It is a common misconception that high-concept movies are necessarily expensive or effects driven. One of the most successful low-budget independent British films of recent years, *The Full Monty* (1997), had an almost perfect high-concept premise: a group of male steel workers decide to become strippers. There is no doubt that the simplicity, originality and compelling nature of the premise (which was perfectly captured in the film's publicity posters) played a major role in the film's commercial success.

## Worldbuilder's Library

Get these books to help you develop the principles of storytelling (especially thematic development, thematically logical characters, image systems and of course developing a workable premise) in your worldbuilding!

*Power Screenwriting: The 12 Stages of Story Development* by Michael Chase Walker

*Story* by Robert McKee

## Introduction to Premise

You want to build a Story World, a grand setting, a roleplaying world that others will want to explore. After overcoming the first requirement for designing your world—a passionate desire to create—you want to lay the foundation for your world design. There are three questions you want to ask right up front: What is the tone of this world? What is my central premise? And what are the key thematic subjects I want to explore. We've talked about tone in Episode Two. Today we are going to explore premise, and then tackle theme in a later episode.

## Why is premise important?

Where tone helps you establish the overall feeling of your world, the premise helps you define what your world is about—the potential characters, the central objectives, the core actions of play, the setting, the plotting and the pacing. Premise answers the questions of plot, conflict and character. Theme (which we'll tackle next time) addresses the meaning behind these things, the universal life questions that the game and world raise. All three help define and drive the overall design of the game; in fact they permeate every part of the design process (tone, premise and theme are the core of your design). Lastly, a well-drafted premise can help you market your world to the masses, and quickly communicate your concept in a pitch.

## A Traditional Story Premise (Traditional: Films, Novels, Linear Narratives)

- Your concept, delivered in 1 to a few sentences
- Describes what the story is about (the objective story: the characters, the central conflicts and the over-arching plot)
- Can be a statement or a question
- The story will be an exploration of the questions raised in the premise; the story will be an expression or exploration of an idea
- The Premise is constructed with the following information: character (who is this story about); an

inciting incident (the plot event that sparks movement in the character); the central action (the fundamental action the character must do); the overarching conflict

- Generally, the premise—for our intents and purposes—will be High Concept, meaning the premise’s pitch should immediately intrigue the audience
- Examples (from films, comics, books):
  - When a betrayed woman is offered a suitcase with a gun and 100 untraceable bullets—giving her the ability to seek revenge on the ones who wronged her with total impunity—she must make a moral choice about seeking vengeance on her enemies. *100 bullets*
  - When a young and innocent FBI recruit is offered a chance to help solve the mystery of a bizarre serial killer, she must interrogate and survive the head games of a psychotic killer who holds the key to the mystery. *Silence of the Lambs*
  - When a fearful boy tragically loses his parents to a street criminal, he must learn how to overcome and control his fear in order to fight crime itself and rid himself of his inner demons. *Batman Begins*
  - When a group of traumatized adults are called back to their hometown to face an immortal creature that uses fear as a weapon and devours children, each adult must overcome his/her personal worst fear and fight the creature that terrorized them in their youth. *It*
  - When a young farmer’s family is killed by a despotic empire, he must find his true purpose in life and become part of a rebel alliance to help destroy the empire. *Star Wars*

## The World Premise

The Premise for your world for an interactive game will have some similarities, but will demand a broader outline that includes: the potential for multiple characters; multiple points of view; and inspiration for a multitude of stories. The Premise for a Linear Story is a line of plotted causes and effects that—through character actions—explores a thematic idea to its conclusion. The Premise for a World—on the other hand—is:

1. a carefully structured setting seeded with perpetuating conflict;
2. structured around a thematic subject (usually reinforced in a Grand World Conflict);
3. inspiring possibilities for a myriad of contrasting characters with multiple views and approaches to the thematic subject;
4. and suggesting a type of core action that dictates the style of play, and structures the type of objectives the hero’s will shoot for.

Once these elements are considered, the premise can be structured into a tightly described idea and clearly delivered to an audience, in order to provide a framework for the game designers to work from, and to inspire Game Masters in their adventure design, and players in their character creation.

## Some Further Thoughts about Developing a Premise for Your World

- A World Premise will involve Multi-plot possibilities; in other words, the premise will suggest possibilities and potential for multiple characters with contrasting and dynamic points-of-view and courses of action centered around the central thematic subjects of the premise (the world should allow for opposing, complementary and varying points of view).
  - A High Concept Premise is most digestible for a world (a game usually needs a grand action—or central set of grand actions that the players will be doing—investigating, fighting, collecting, socializing, journeying, surviving...)
- Developing an Adventure Premise (you want to create a premise for a game with suggestions for the type of characters available, a central action for the gameplay that defines the objective, and the type of

overall conflict)

- Linear storytelling can be deeply intimate, psychological: the determination of a boy to let go of the guilt over the death of his brother; the difficulty of a little girl to understand racism in the world
- In interactive, collaborative storytelling, you want to define the action, the goals of the player, something that can be understood as a physical action; involve verbs (your actions) into the descriptions; most of these adventures should involve external conflict to drive the core movement of the story
- Again, a story that involves multiple points of views on a subject or conflict
- Analyze actions of famous movies or books
- Mix and match genres and premises; examples of mixed genre worlds: *Deadlands*, *Delta Green*, and *Serenity*

One could start with an adventure that would suggest a larger world, or one could start with the world and then develop adventures within that world. Each of these could become a potential seed for an adventure, and then broadened out to a larger campaign, and then potentially into a Story World. Think of films, comics or television shows that at the very least could inspire one-shot adventures. These can be translated into an effective adventure because they satisfy the requirements of a strong Premise. Some of these could be expanded into complete World Premise as well:

- *100 Bullets*
- *Monk*
- *It*
- *Gunslinger*
- *Seven Samurai*
- *Lost*
- *And Then There Were None*
- *Dirty Dozen*
- *Band of Brothers*
- *Sandman*
- *Invasion of the Body Snatchers*
- *The Thing*
- *Aliens*

Don't forget to "look under the hood" of these premises and change their setting or genre, as well as mix and blend premises. Could the premise of *Lost* be used in a *Dungeons and Dragons* setting? Could **Monk** show up as an obsessive investigator in a steam-punk setting? Could *And Then There Were None* be set in the world of *Masquerade*? Could *Dirty Dozen* be crossed with *Body Snatchers*? Could *100 Bullets* be a samurai epic with a magical sword substituting for the gun and bullets? Could **It** be stranded on a colony world with the children of that world escaping and then needing to return to fight it once again?

## Suggested Worldbuilding Activity

- Develop a carefully structured setting seeded with perpetuating conflict
  1. Where and when is this taking place?
  2. Is it a world with conflict?
  3. Look at the economy of your world and the challenges that will face the heroes in that world.
- Structure the premise around a thematic subject (typically reinforced in a Grand World Conflict, such as the Empire/Rebel War in *Star Wars* or the Invading Elder Gods in *Call of Cthulhu*).

1. Pick a core thematic subject (which we will get into next episode); you can go with a universal thematic subject such as: life and death, love, violence, chaos, hate, betrayal; or, you can explore a genre-specific thematic subject such as: the dangers of technology, the industry of war, the struggle for identity, or redemption.
- Have the premise inspire possibilities for a myriad of contrasting characters with multiple views and approaches to the thematic subject.
    1. Your thematic subject will suggest the types of characters that will be focused on in the game—if this is a game about chaos, character types will be order-seekers, truth-seekers: investigators, police, private eyes, priests, teachers and professors, and journalists;
    2. if this is a game about violence your characters will be focused on violence—vigilantes, criminals, police and other law enforcement, and soldiers;
    3. if this is a game about redemption, your characters will be focused on the need for redemption, so they will be people in positions that have wronged others: politicians, con-men, fighters, criminals and so on...
  - Suggest in your premise a type of core action that dictates the style of play, and that structures the type of objectives the heroes will shoot for.
    1. What is the central action of the stories in this world?
    2. Is the primary action fighting?
    3. Is the primary action investigating? Fact finding?
    4. Is the primary action escape or survival?
    5. Is the primary action exploration?
    6. Is the primary action questing?
    7. Is the primary action socializing (as in a game of diplomacy)?
    8. You are defining hero roles in the story—are they fighters, investigators, victims?
    9. *Dungeons and Dragons* is set up as primarily a fighting game. Its even in their loglines. *Traveller* is an exploring game. *Delta Green* is an investigating game.



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2 Comments so far

1. Kevin January 14, 2007 8:15 pm

Just wanted to say that your notes/podcasts have been very helpful in the expansive world-building process. Although I am not a RPG player, well, not of board games anyways, your translation of into more modern and vivid terms has aided me in my perpetual crafting of my first novel.

Sorry, no real topics that you could discuss as of now, just showing some support.

2. Logan January 16, 2007 3:38 pm

After this podcast, I'm really looking forward to the rest of the series. As an amateur novelist and rpg designer, your advice offers much toward the refinement of both activities. Keep up the good work.

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- Coming soon!

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