Building rich worlds for many stories

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WorldAnvil

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In this seminar:

- What's wrong with your worldbuilding?
- Why does that matter?
- What elements make a world rich and deep?
- How can you develop YOUR world?
- What if you're starting a world from scratch?

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The problem:
your world is only as
big as your story.
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Your worldbuilding is:

- clinging around your main characters
- inconsistent or unconnected
- feels tropey or uninteresting
- uninspiring to YOU

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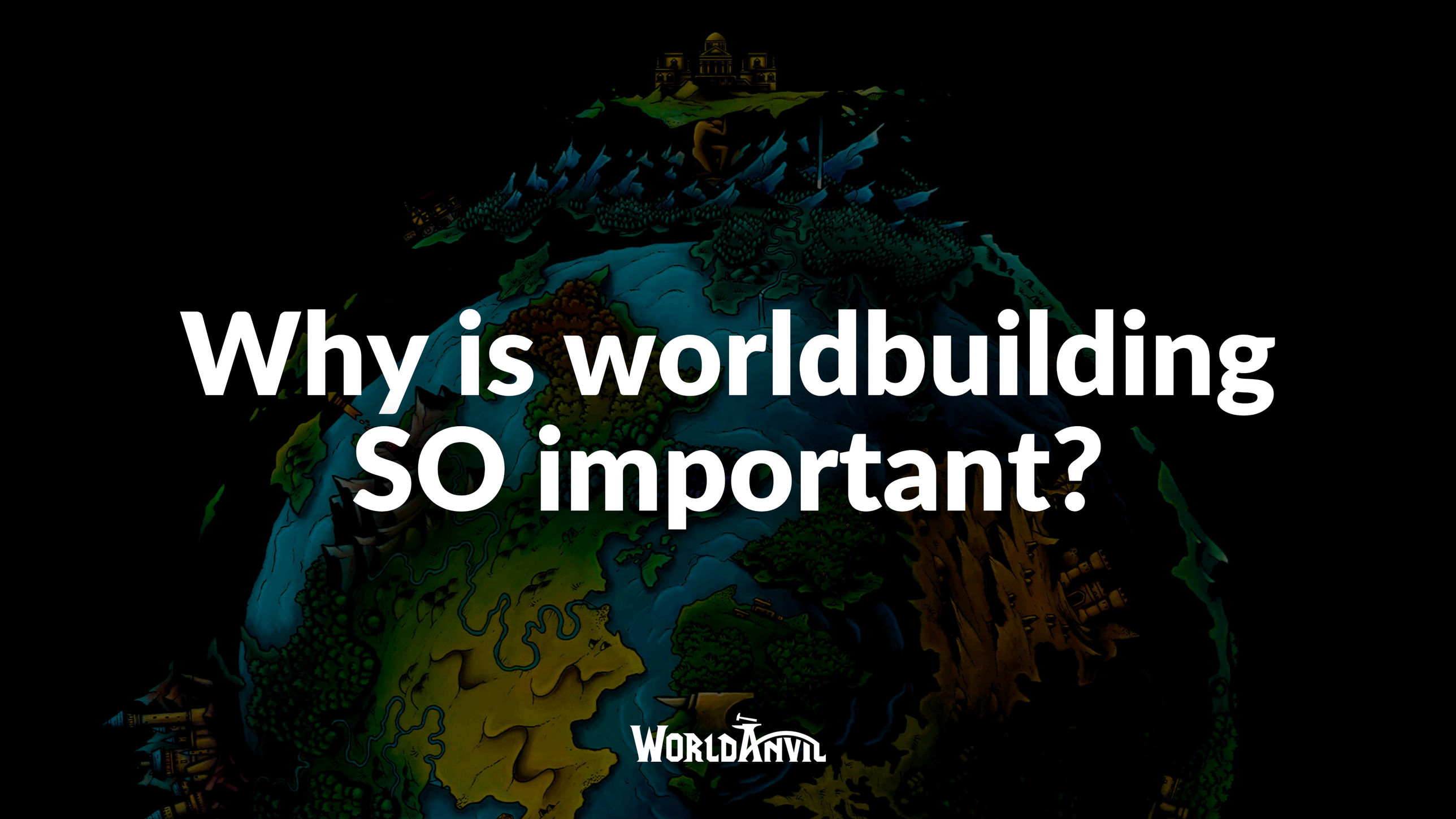
Why is worldbuilding SO important?
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Worldbuilding is:

- LITERALLY genre-defining for Fantasy (and Scifi)!
- the formative factor of your characters and their past
- the origin of your plots
- the thing your readers remember long after the characters and plot have faded (and will bring them back!)

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What are the opportunities of building rich worlds?
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Why build rich worlds?

- Save time by reusing your worldbuilding work
- Repeat readers love coming back to the same worlds
- Richer stories with more depth and impact
- A constant source of new inspiration for your stories and characters

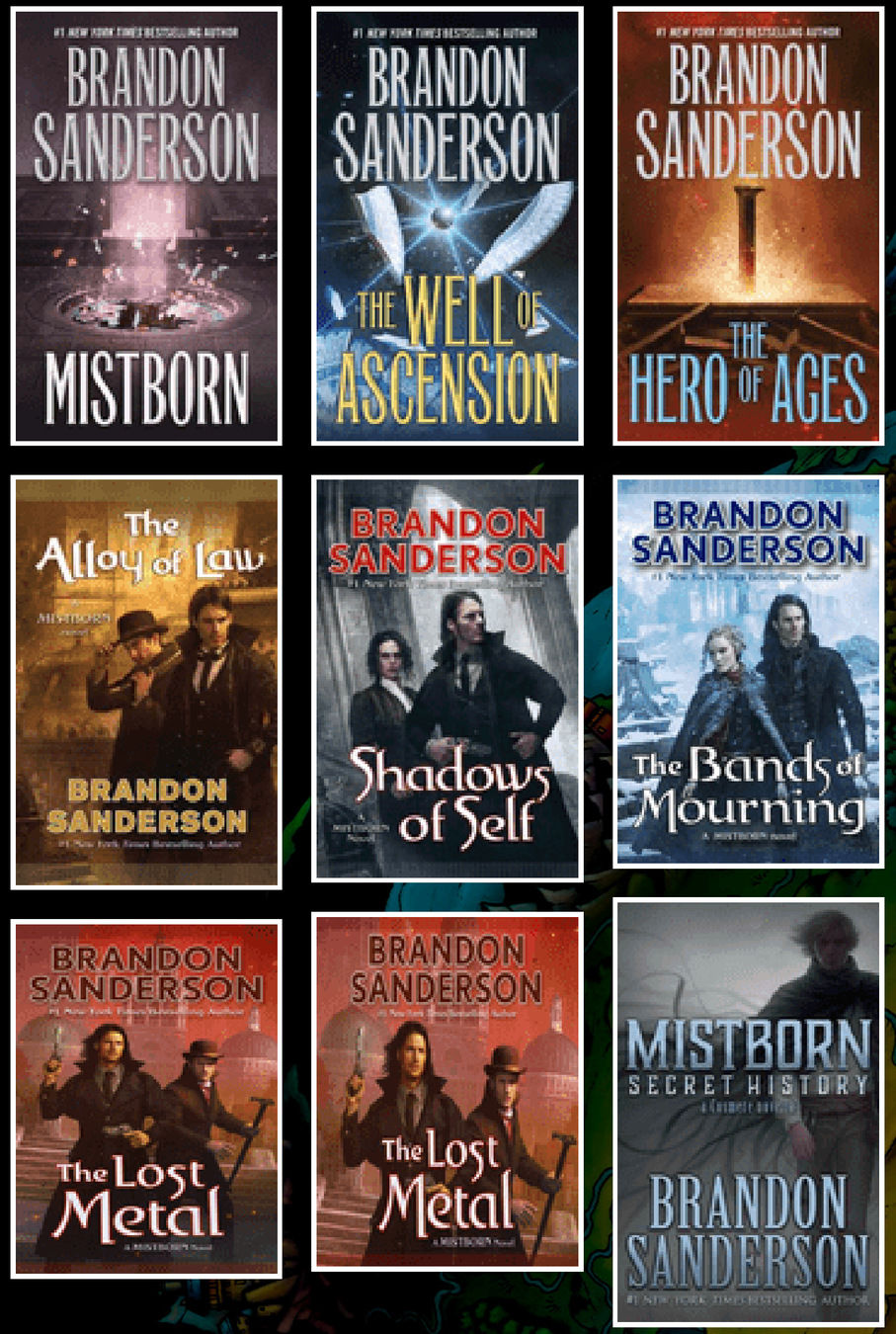
Why build rich worlds?

“In the world of IP creative content and branded franchises, the world-builder is king.
Thirty-two of the 50 top-grossing movies of all time are films that belong to identifiable fantasy universes – Pandora, Oz, Narnia, Middle-earth, Hogwarts, Neverland, Wonderland – luring moviegoers into theatres with the promise of return to a beloved fictional world, like a tourist returning to their favourite spot.”

- Tom Shone, Author & Critic
The Guardian (2022)

Why build rich worlds?

Robin Hobb has 16 books set in the same universe BUT they're arranged in 5 trilogies



Why build rich worlds?

Brandon Sanderson has 7 books set in the same universe (2 trilogies), with another trilogy coming in 2025

“OK, you’ve convinced me:

I need a rich, deep world setting!

So…”

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What makes worldbuilding feel deep and rich?
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What makes worldbuilding feel deep and rich?

The laws of the world feel consistent (even when that's inconvenient for the storyteller)

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What makes worldbuilding feel deep and rich?

The repercussions of past events are felt in the present and define the future

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What makes worldbuilding feel deep and rich?

The people and cultures feel “real” and interesting

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What makes worldbuilding feel deep and rich?

The world does not revolve around your main characters

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What makes worldbuilding feel deep and rich?

The world's interesting or unique premise has been well worked out and thought through*

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PLAN OF ACTION:

How do you convert a shallow world into a deep and rich one?

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Build deep not wide: define your active worldbuilding area.

- A city and surrounding area (e.g. Neverwhere)
- A region (e.g. Lord of the Rings)
- A continent (e.g. Game of Thrones
- A planet (e.g. The Dragonriders of Pern)
- A solar system (e.g. the Expanse)
- A quadrant of a galaxy (e.g. Star Trek)
- A whole galaxy (e.g. Star Wars)

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TO DO:
Define your active worldbuilding area
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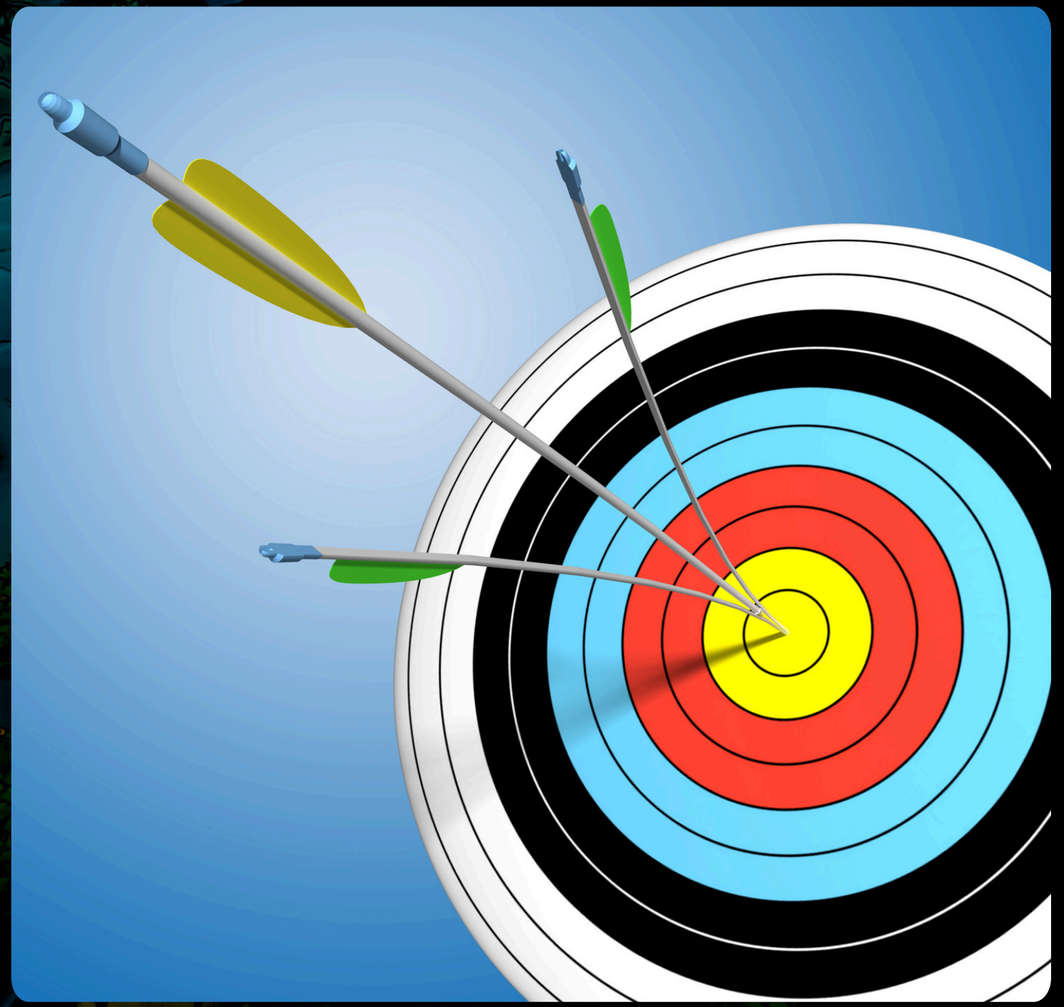
3-5 Focus topics concentrate your efforts

- Government Presence
- Rule Of Law
- Social Services
- Economic Strength
- Wealth Distribution
- Agriculture And Trade
- Race Relations
- Class Relations
- Gender Relations
- Sexual Orientation Relations
- Military Influence
- Religious Influence
- Technology Influence
- Arts And Culture Influence



3-5 Focus topics concentrate your efforts

- Class Relations
- Gender Relations
- Religious Influence
- Rule Of Law
- ~~Government Presence~~
- ~~Social Services~~
- ~~Economic Strength~~
- ~~Wealth Distribution~~
- ~~Agriculture And Trade~~
- ~~Race Relations~~
- ~~Sexual Orientation Relations~~
- ~~Military Influence~~
- ~~Technology Influence~~
- ~~Arts And Culture Influence~~

3-5 Focus topics concentrate your efforts

- Government Presence
- Rule of Law
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- ~~Class Relations~~
- ~~Gender Relations~~
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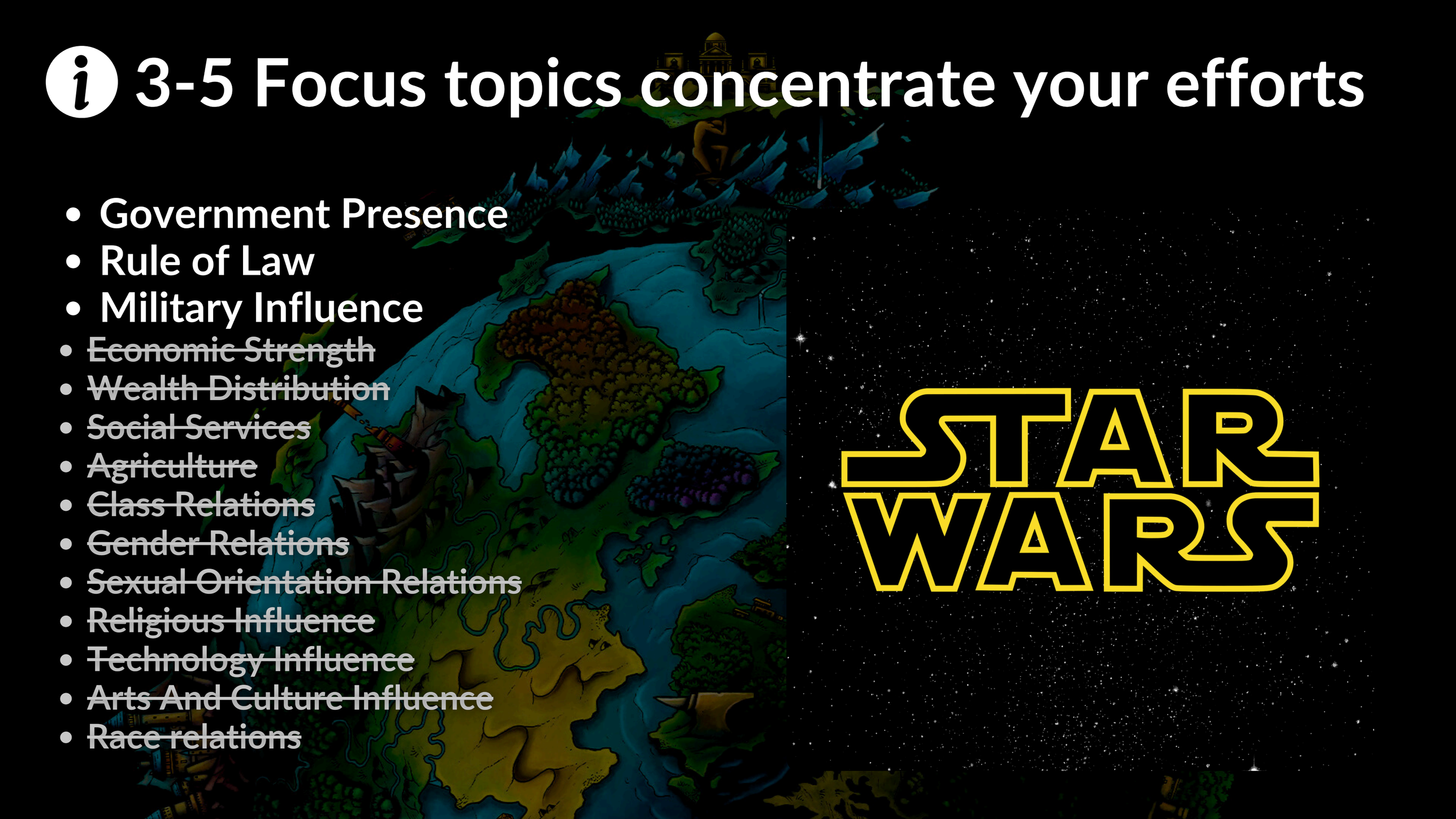
- ~~Religious Influence~~
- ~~Technology Influence~~
- ~~Arts And Culture Influence~~
- ~~Race relations~~



3-5 Focus topics concentrate your efforts

- The Natural World
- Species Relations
- Technology Influence

- ~~Government Presence~~
- ~~Social Services~~
- ~~Economic Strength~~
- ~~Wealth Distribution~~
- ~~Agriculture And Trade~~
- ~~Race Relations~~
- ~~Sexual Orientation Relations~~
- ~~Military Influence~~
- ~~Technology Influence~~
- ~~Arts And Culture Influence~~
- ~~Class relations~~
- ~~Gender relations~~

TO DO:
1. Choose your focus points
2. Add 1-2 details in major aspects of your worldbuilding that tie back to your focus points
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ℹ "If this, then what?"

- Define your core differences from Earth - natural laws and geography.
- From each, extrapolate:

"If this, then what"?

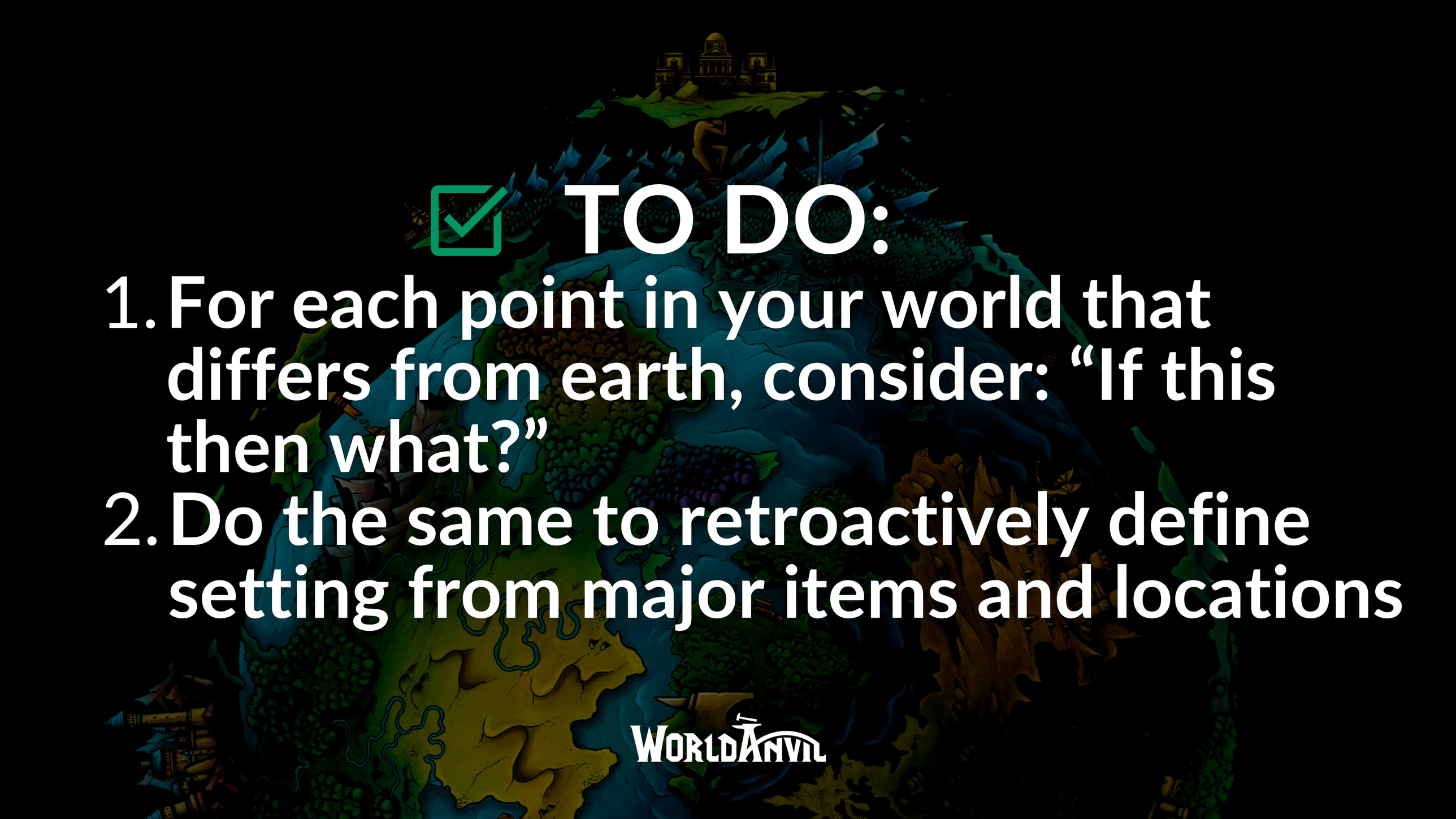
<u>For example - Forgotten Realms:</u>

- If magic is accessible to everyone, what problems arise from that?
- How is it controlled?
- How is it abused?
- How do every day folk protect themselves?
- How do the grand folk protect themselves?

ℹ “If this, then what?”

This also works to RETROACTIVELY define setting based on items in your world:

- If you have a magic item or a castle: who built it?
- Why did they need this item?
- Was it the first of its kind or one of many?
- What was their culture and how is that represented in the item?



☑ TO DO:

1. For each point in your world that differs from earth, consider: “If this then what?”
2. Do the same to retroactively define setting from major items and locations

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ℹ Rich worlds show cause and effect

Why is your world the way it is?

In our world:

- Many racial tensions in Europe and USA stem from the Colonial past
- USA: North vs. South animosity stems from the aftermath of the Civil War
- France: anti-monarch sentiment stems from French Revolution era

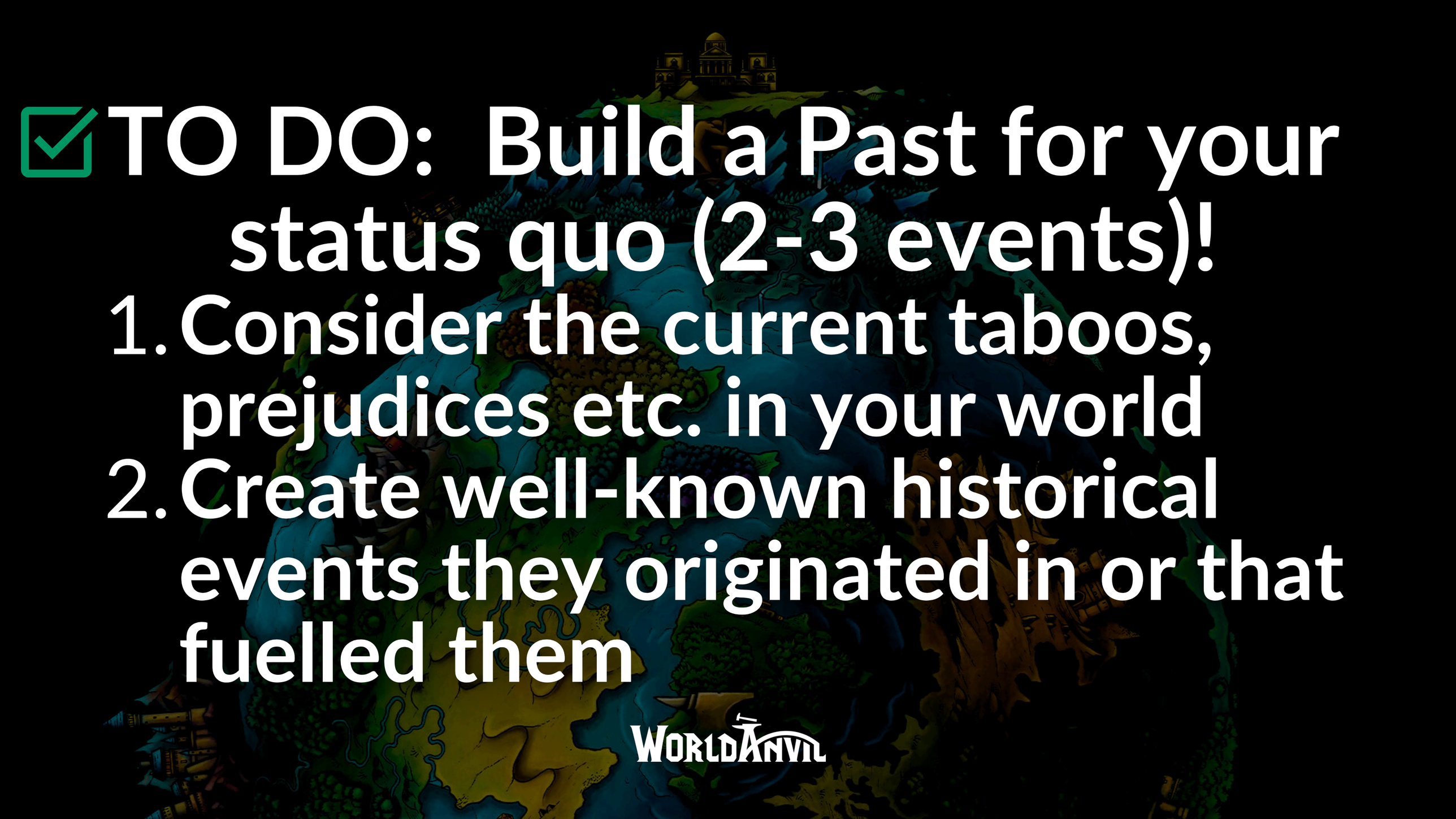
ℹ Rich worlds show cause and effect

Why is your world the way it is?

Skyrim: White-Gold Concordant
BRIGHT: the defeat of the Dark Lord
Fallout: the literal apocalypse
Witcher: the conjunction of the spheres
Dark Crystal: the alignment of the planets
Hunger Games: the dark days of the rebellion

☑ TO DO: Build a Past for your status quo (2-3 events)!

1. Consider the current taboos, prejudices etc. in your world
2. Create well-known historical events they originated in or that fuelled them



ℹ Make your peoples feel real

It's hard to show CULTURE at rest

Use traditions, like Rites of Passage & Festivals

Avoid monocultures! People have different opinions, hobbies, concerns, idioms, habits...

Monoculture

8 generations of Dwarves...

Real life

All born 1985 in New York

☑ TO DO: Living, Breathing People

1. Consider your people's beliefs & taboos. How would their births, birthdays, marriages and deaths look?

2. If you have accidentally created a monoculture, consider what the rebels look like! And what happens to them?

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ℹ Create geography - and let that impact the spaces in our stories!

Don't create cities in the void!

- every biome has its problems
- consider resources to give tactility & character to your setting (also defines wealth)

Al Fresco dining
in Venice, Italy

☑ TO DO: Physical places

1. Make sure everything happens in a biome!

2. Consider the challenges and advantages of that, as viewed through your Focus points

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ℹ Other places to hunt for stories

Start with what you know!

- Interrogate your MC's background and play What If!
  - ...things went wrong
  - they were born 50 years later?
  - they had a different skill?
- Dig into your Focus points
- Consider who is unhappy with the status quo, and why
- Consider YOUR favourite thing about your setting/genre & dial up to 11

But what if you're starting a world from scratch?
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ℹ Worldbuilding from the beginning:

1. Go to WorldAnvil.com/courses to sign up for my free“Get Started Worldbuilding Course”
2. Use a proper tools for the job (like World Anvil)!
3. If you have access: Check out my “Agile Worldbuilding for Writers” talk on PWA!

Thank you for listening!
Any Questions?

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