

World Building Basics

A Workshop by David Keener

Workshop Day | Ashburn, VA | November 2, 2025
Workshop: Sunday, 1:00 – 4:00 PM



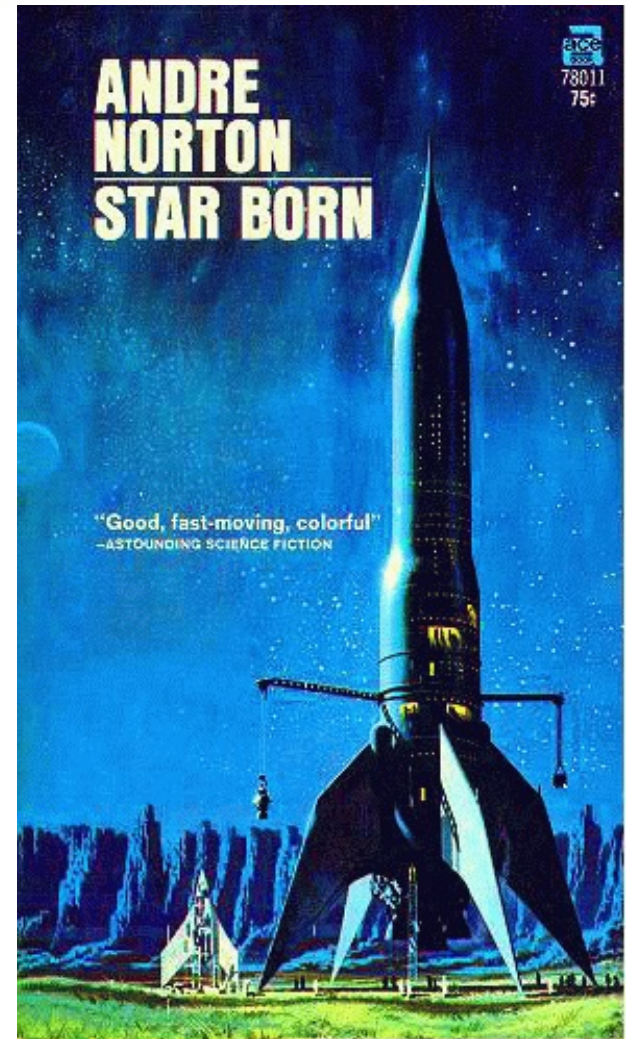


Agenda

- Introduction
- Settings: High-Level
 - Steps 1 - 3
- Settings: Low-Level
 - Steps 4 - 6
- Wrap-Up (and totally shameless plug)

About Me

- Knew I wanted to be a writer when I was 10
- This the book that made me want to be a writer...
- Published first story in 2015
- Published first book in 2017
- Published first anthology in 2018



What Makes a Good Setting?

- Sufficiently complex to seem plausible
- Well-defined prerequisites
- Logical, consistent flow from those prereqs
- Setting promotes the possibility of CONFLICT
- For a series, the Setting should provide multiple avenues for CONFLICT to occur
- It feels real



What Not To Do

- Design a Setting that serves only one purpose
 - “The Terminator” syndrome
- Add a major SF/Fantasy element without considering the impact on society
 - We have the Transporter...now what?
- Create a Setting that’s too neat and orderly
 - Reality is messy
- Ignore basic infrastructure details
 - How do that many monsters live in a cave?



The Reactive Net

The Goals are:

- To create a coherent, consistent and connected background
- That can support multiple story lines over time
- Leveraging the same Setting, Characters and a diverse cast of Supporting Characters.

The Reactive Net (2)

Provides a **6-Step Process** for crafting your Setting with...

- Enough potential Conflict to support a series
- Enough implied Complexity to feel realistic
- Enough Connectivity to “suggest” useful story interactions
- Enough Flexibility to adapt to inciting events and character actions

Step 1: Define the Playing Field

- The “Playing Field” the home territory where most action occurs
- TASK: Write a thumbnail sketch of your Setting
 - 100 words or 5 bullet points

For Batman, it's Gotham City. Harry Potter has Hogwarts. Sherlock Holmes has London.

SOUTHERN FRIED FEY 1: KOSMOPOLIS

- Small but growing city in Tennessee
- Noteworthy bio-tech corporate presence
 - Home of MOEX Technologies (bio-tech)
 - Home of Dartfell University (bio-tech, computers)
- Agricultural & rural areas around the city
- Large and liberal artistic community
- Surrounded by rolling hills, forests & parks

Step 2: Define Any Special Rules

- TASK: Define any special rules that are in play...
 - Does Magic work?
 - FTL?
 - Aliens?
 - Elvis?
 - Is there a Hell-Mouth nearby?
 - Zombies?

SOUTHERN FRIED FEY 2: SPECIAL RULES

- Werewolves and vampires – out of the closet
 - Speculation about other supernatural critters
- Magic works, but is rare
- BUT Magic seems to be increasing slowly...
 - “Seeping back into the world”
- Major ley line nexus nearby
 - Artistic community centered around nexus
 - An influential Fey community exists nearby
 - In an area called the “Brambles”

Step 3: Define Factions

To provide the potential for multiple angles of conflict, you need factions, i.e. – groups or orgs with differing goals

- TASK: Define three groups within your Setting
 - Provide a 1 - 2 line description of their goals

SOUTHERN FRIED FEY 3: FACTIONS

- **City Government** (notoriously corrupt)
- **Police** – Thin blue line protecting the public
- **FBI** – Investigating corruption, Fey threats, etc.
- **Dartfell University** – Gov. grants; bio-tech grants
- **MOEX Technologies** – Too much money/power
- **Werewolf Pack** – Buffer between Fey / Humans
- **Kalifey** – Fey community in “Brambles”
- **Church of Christ Triumphant** – Hates “subhumans”



Reality Isn't Predictable

- Everybody pulls in different directions
- Nobody ever gets everything they want
- Reality is what happens when all these things get worked out in the Stew Pot of History

You want your Setting to imply enough complexity to feel real

Step 4: Detail Each Faction

Iterate over your factions, defining each one in more detail

- TASK: Define a faction in more detail. Provide a sentence or two for each category below:
 - Attitudes
 - Goals
 - Strengths
 - Weaknesses

SOUTHERN FRIED FEY 4: CHURCH OF C.T.*

- **Attitudes:** Everything supernatural is part of a nefarious plot by Satan. All supernatural creatures and those who dabble in the black arts (Magic) should die violently. Supernatural creatures, including mages, are not really people.
- **Goals:** To expunge the supernatural from the world.
- **Strengths:** They're relentless, smart and wealthy. They're also good at public relations.
- **Weaknesses:** They are relentless. Sometimes they don't recognize when to cut their losses. They're fanatical. Compromise isn't a word in their vocabulary.

* Church of Christ Triumphant – (CCT) A radical, militant, semi-fascist organization. 16

Step 5: Define Faction Operations

How do the factions perform their day-to-day operations? Where do they get the money they need to run? How do they recruit new members? Who's doin' deals with who?

- TASK: Detail at least three operational activities...
 - Can focus on one faction...or...more

SOUTHERN FRIED FEY 5: OPERATIONS

- **Werewolf Pack** has a group house owned by the pack leader where they all meet. They live separately and tithe 10% of their income.
- **CCT** runs a syndicated “Anti-Monster” radio show and accepts donations to campaign against the supernatural realm.
- **MOEX Technologies** pioneered the blood substitute, AAA-Plus™, that vampires use so they’re not dependent on human blood.

Step 6: Define Key Roles

- TASK: Define some key roles within the Setting, i.e. – roles that are likely to appear in your stories.
 - At least four roles
 - Can be in different factions
 - Or even not associated directly with a faction
 - Ex. – the local fence for stolen goods

SOUTHERN FRIED FEY 6: KEY ROLES

- The “**fixer**” from the Werewolf Pack
- The **ambitious reporter** looking for a story
- The **drug dealer** selling a new recreational drug that affects supernatural creatures
- The **local fence** for stolen goods
- The **vet** at the local zoo
- The **FBI agent** investigating Fey threats



“Just In Time” Design

- Your Setting design is done in broad strokes
- You design your factions and roles
- You don't have to figure out every detail now
- You fill in more details as you go
 - Keeping a **Series Bible** can be useful
- Don't get hung up on world-building...



Theory Time

- You've designed your Setting
- You've added key roles
- You've added operational details

Now let's put this Setting to the test...

SOUTHERN FRIED FEY, BOOK 1

PROMPT: Someone was savagely mauled by an animal

- The **Werewolf Pack**'s fixer is worried about a rogue lycanthrope
- The **Police** want to know what's going on
- Your **Hero** wants to prevent anybody else from getting hurt
- Your **Hero** talks to the **Vet** at the local zoo, who was originally brought in by the police to look at the body
- Your **Hero** encounters the fixer from the Werewolf Pack
- The **CCT** uses the incident as part of an anti-monster campaign
- Your local **Reporter** smells a story, too
- Finally, the **Kalifey** (the local Fey community) are annoyed because the body was left near the Brambles — was it a warning or a threat aimed at them?

SOUTHERN FRIED FEY, BOOK 2

PROMPT: A half-blood Fey dies of an overdose of a new street drug that affects supernatural creatures

- The **Kalifey** want to know where the drug came from
- The Kalifey ask your **Hero** to help them
- The **Police** want to find whoever's distributing bad drugs
- The **Werewolf Pack** is involved again because the drug affects werewolves, too.
- **Dartfell University** is involved because the drug was a byproduct of one of their experiments, and it's been hijacked by an insider for illicit purposes
- The **CCT** thinks this is a great way to kill monsters



Events and Reactions

- The essence of the Reactive Net is that when an event occurs, people and organizations react, generating various types of conflict.
- Not only do they react, but they do so in logical, consistent ways.
- Reactions also occur when your Hero takes action as well.
- Leverage these reactions for your stories...

Questions

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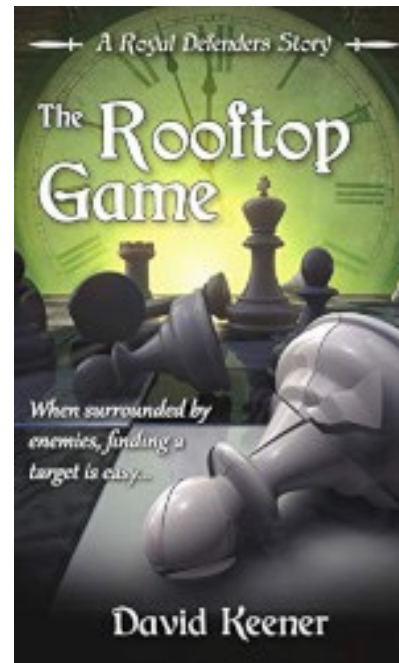


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Shameless Plug for My Books



Futuristic Heist
Behind Enemy
Lines



“Die Hard” on
the roof of a
Castle Tower



His first Mistake...
Buying a Magic
Road

Shameless Plug for My Anthologies



Stories of Fantasy
Heroes



Stories of Fantasy
Crime Solvers



A Metaverse-
Travelling Tavern
And Shared
Setting
(Coming Soon)

Credits



Kenari, homeworld of Cassian Andor in the Andor series. Impoverished children living in a tribal society in a jungle, while off-world interests spend uncouthed amounts of money stripmining. This is Andor's first glimpse of this other world. Copyright by 20th Century Fox, used under fair use.



Cover art for Andre Norton's *Star Born*, one of the key books that made me realize at an early age that I wanted to be a writer. Art by Dean Ellis. Believed to be in the public domain.



A brilliant picture of me taken by Edmond Joe in May 2015 at the District 29 Toastmasters Spring Conference. I was running A/V for the conference. This is near the end of the day, all is well, and I'm watching the show. Pretty much the same feeling I have when a successful workshop is over.