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When Worlds Collide: The Art of World Building

By admin | May 24, 2017 | Blog, Featured, Uncategorized

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By Jonathan James

Who doesn't love creating a world from scratch? So many of these places take us far away from our humdrum lives to places that inspire and transfix. Hogwarts, Westeros, Middle-Earth, Pandora, and that galaxy far far away are just a few of our favorite destinations. And with these worlds come endless story possibilities.

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However, the process of world-building is an art in and of itself. It can prove incredibly tricky, prompting legions of writers to dump page after page of exposition in an effort to describe the intricacies of the world before they've even had a chance to introduce their protagonist. That's great if you're writing a novel, but in a script, it is important to be as economic as possible.

Beyond these concerns, many writers worry that readers and executives will not understand their world if there isn't a sufficient amount of time spent establishing it in the early pages of a screenplay. If you've written a science fiction or a fantasy screenplay before, chances are you've probably seen this trend in some the feedback you've received.

New worlds prompt curiosity, which can sometimes take the form of a seemingly endless barrage of questions and nitpicks. On the business side of Hollywood in particular, producers and development executives are more likely to approach worldbuilding-heavy screenplays with a degree of trepidation. In other words, it's an important craft to master, and as an aficionado of fictional landscapes both fantastical and strange, I believe there are two distinct methods for creating vast and intriguing worlds *without* alienating your audience.

THE NEWCOMER METHOD

Harry Potter is by far the most successful example of this approach – at least in the last two decades. Here Rowling begins by giving us an appetizer of things to come with a chance meeting between three wizards – Dumbledore, Hagrid, and Professor McGonagall. This chance meeting is an incredibly important part of world building. Not only is Rowling setting up Harry's circumstances, she's giving us a brief taste of the magic that permeates this world. While we're only given a small taste, it sets our expectations accordingly, and establishes the tone of the story to follow.

The importance of including this “teaser” can't be underestimated. If Rowling had started out simply with a boy who was abandoned and lived under the stairs along with his abusive Aunt and Uncle, we might assume we were in for an intimate, low-key drama. Likewise, if the audience isn't given some taste of the world, the ultimate reveal will feel random and jarring. Think of it as a sort of dramatic irony – the audience should know that there is something *more* to the hero's world, even when the hero does not. With just a hint of what's to come, they'll be primed and ready to follow the protagonist on a journey of discovery.

From here, the writer's job becomes one of carefully-measured expansion, intricately filling in the gaps bit by bit as the hero crosses each new threshold. We aren't simply thrown into Hogwarts, for example. Instead, the process is a gradual one, beginning at Diagon Alley and later the Hogwarts Express until finally, we arrive at the main event just when we are hungry for more. It's like stepping

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into a pool – you dip your toe in at first, then slide the rest of your body into the water until you’re fully immersed.



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One defining characteristic of this approach to worldbuilding is that the audience is introduced to the world *through* Harry’s eyes. He’s a conduit – our gateway as we experience the tapestry of the

wizarding world for the first time. This also provides Rowling with bountiful opportunities for relatively painless exposition. After all, Harry’s got a lot to learn – and so do we.

Or, you can throw all that to the wind, which brings us to approach number two.

THE “HEAD-FIRST” METHOD

The head-first approach means exactly what it says: throwing your audience straight into the action without a lifejacket. Think of *Children of Men*, which opens with the bombing of a cafe in near-future London, mere moments after we learn that the youngest person on the planet has died at the age of 18. Out of the frying pan, and into the fire. This kind of less-is-more, “in media res” approach places a heavy emphasis on subtle storytelling techniques – environmental cues for example, or subtle shifts in technology or accent.

It can be an incredibly tedious balancing act, if only because it’s such an exposition-light approach to fleshing out the world of your story. Every detail must be finely tuned and placed in just the right way for the audience to pick up on it. And in order to steer clear of loopholes and logical inconsistencies, writers have to know their worlds front to back. Especially when the audience does not. Done right, and this approach can make for a thrilling introduction to a brave new world. More importantly, it can make a world feel organic and lived in. As if it’s been there for centuries, or millennia. Done wrong, and you risk alienating your audience from the outset.

When diving head first into your world, it’s important to avoid overbearing exposition. Particularly in the form of two characters discussing the nature of their world. This might seem counter-intuitive, but think about it. This is *their* world, which means it should be relatively common-place to them. When’s the last time you and your friend discussed the function of an air conditioner or some other earthly hallmark? If you’re opting for the “head-first” approach (and many of the best genre films do), you’ll have to get especially creative with how you handle exposition. Remember, the goal is to allow the world of your story to unfold like a flower – prompting curiosities, and satisfying them through the natural progression of the story.

THE PERILS OF EXPOSITION

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The mistake many writers make is over-explaining their world in hopes of painting a clearer picture for their audience. Fortunately, there's a simple rule to follow here. Instead of explaining your entire world in lavish detail, you needn't take us any further than the world of the story. In other words, only show us what we need to know in order to understand the story at hand. Yes, the world can be as vast as you want, but for brevity's sake, limit your world building to the characters, and their plight. George Lucas doesn't take us to every planet in his universe in Star Wars, for example. Rather, we only visit the planets that pertain to Luke's story. Yes, we can imagine a vast amount of other planets in accordance with the history of the Jedi, but they're not essential to this particular journey.

This point can't be stressed enough. *Never* take us beyond the reach of your story for the sake of it, and *always* resist the temptation to over-explain unless it *directly* pertains to plot and character. We don't need to know the inner-workings of a lightsaber in order to know that they're really damn cool. In the off-chance that you do receive notes regarding the believability of your world building, take a step back and reflect. Chances are, what they're really saying is that they're not invested enough in your characters.

World building takes time. As you may well know creators of these worlds sometimes have notebooks and notebooks filled with endless possibilities and endless explanations on the workings of their creation. Does that mean every single, intricate detail ends up on screen? The answer, obviously, is no – but as a writer, they're important details to keep in mind. Together, they form a vast, cohesive canvas that solidifies your characters, and enriches the story you are trying to tell.

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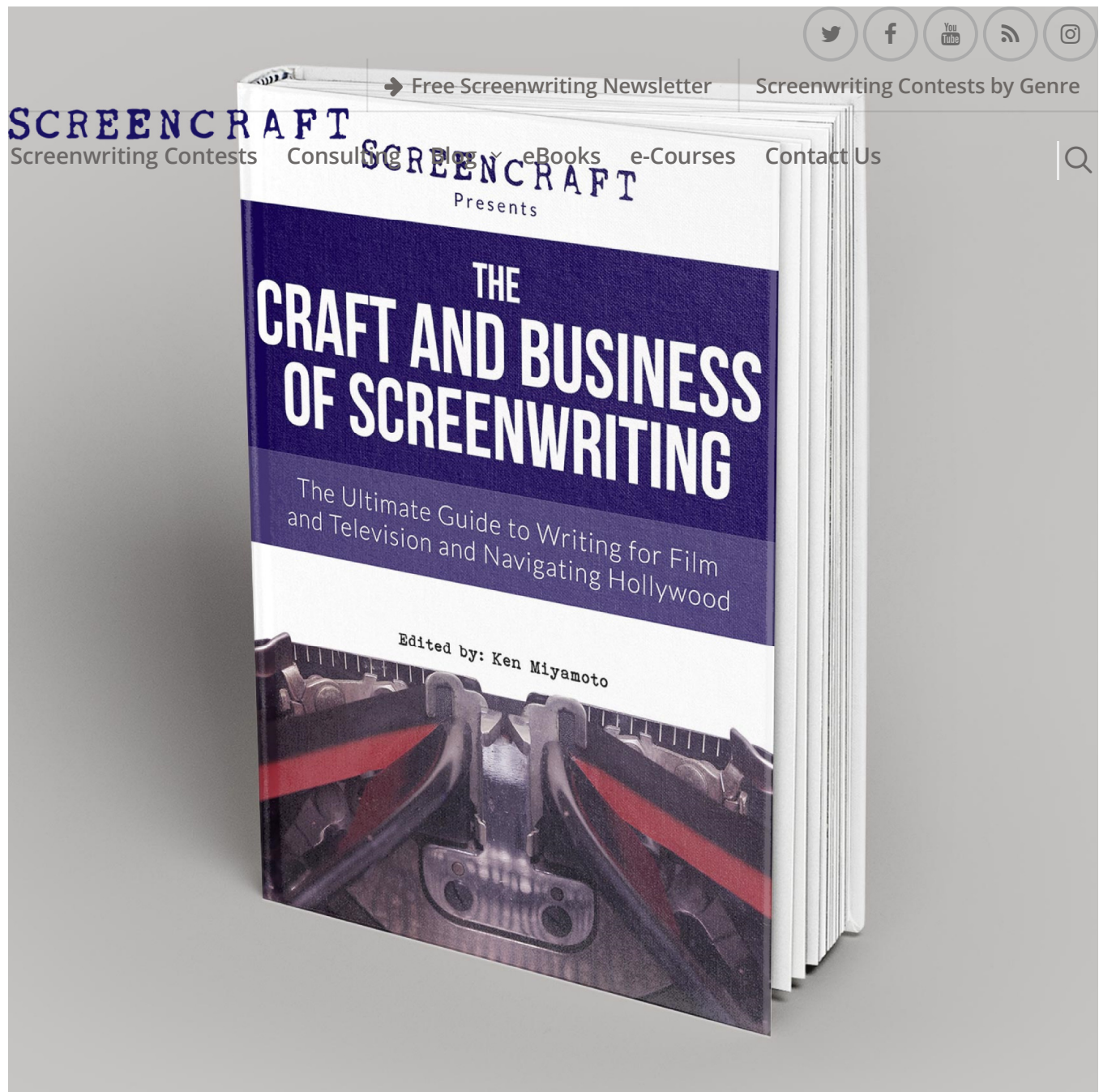
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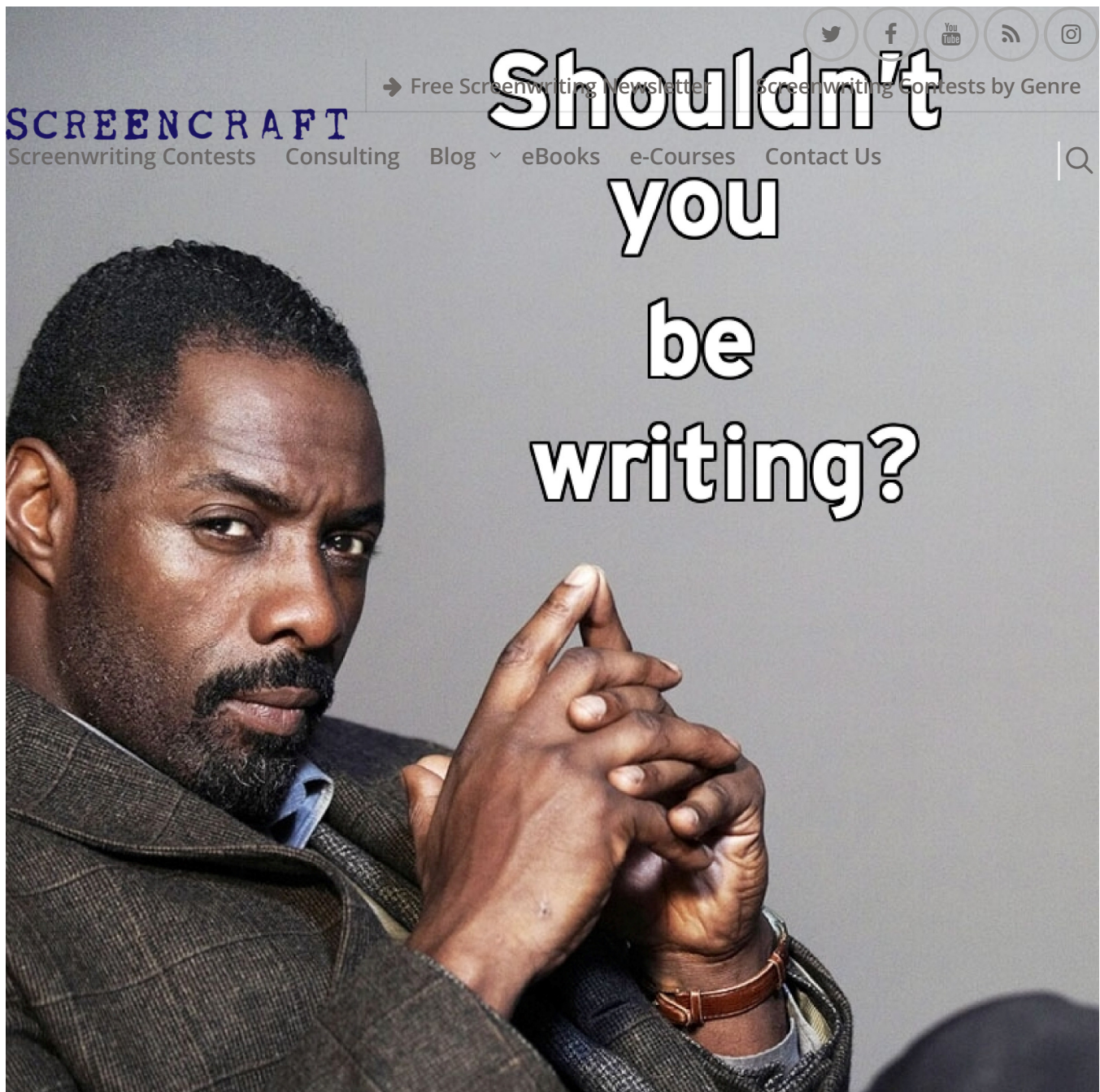
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