

The Writer vs. The Story

By Holly Lisle

Got my 2000 words, though I ended up having to work pretty late tonight to get them. While I was writing, I was thinking about the discussion of diacritical marks and 'conlangs' that we were having a couple of days earlier.

Here was the comment that I was most thinking about: *"Just a comment on this: I don't think diacritics should be viewed as artwork at all. They are the only way (besides the IPA) to represent many non-Western sounds in the Roman alphabet. If one goes beyond the pastiche level of conlanging, and works out phonologies that are interestingly different from English, they become absolutely necessary."*

While the writer of this comment is absolutely correct about the value of diacritical marks in developing complex conlangs dissimilar to English, there's a point that needs to be brought forward.

There comes a time when the writer starts working against his own story. A point where the worldbuilding and the development get in the way of the tale.

I like conlangs. I love language development. I've been a fan of words since I realized at about the age of eight or nine that dictionaries were a lot of fun to read; that they told stories of words that had started out as other words in other languages and other times. I have built a few very nice languages, and developed a couple of them to the point that I could actually write in them and speak in them – this is one of those geek confessions that I probably shouldn't make except in the company of other language geeks, but what the hell. Mine were heavily inflected languages with some wildly non-English grammatical and pronunciation conventions, and letter combinations that would be about as cruel to the

average English-speaker as English multi-consonant combos are to many non-English speakers.

I put so much work into those languages that I wanted to use them in the stories for which I'd developed them. I wanted to use them a lot. After all, developing a language is a hell of a lot of work, and I had a lot of language there to use, and it seemed awful to waste it. I loved doing all that language work, and I loved putting it into the story.

But I discovered that the story did not benefit from my careful language-development, or from the large passages of language that I tossed in and then casually translated. I ended up having to rip out almost every bit of the conlang material because it was boring, difficult, and had the effect on the story pace of a tire iron suddenly jammed through the spokes of a bicycle racing downhill. The results weren't pretty.

I have had these hideous pile-ups over other things that were more me and less my story – attempts to shoehorn lots of details of cultures and religions that lived as the result of huge worldbuilding orgies into a story that didn't need them, wild tries at dragging my characters to ALL the places on my map because all those places had such cool things in them ...

It comes down to this. Yes, you the writer can build a great language, or a great world, or a great culture, but none of these things is the story, and if you focus on the needs of your worldbuilding over the needs of your story – insisting, for example, on using odd diacritical marks that force the reader to pronounce the word your way even if he has to stop and figure out how **ï̇½bvï̇½rti** would be different than **ï̇½bvierti̇½**, or send the reader digging for a dictionary to even take a shot at what the hell you're getting at, then you're doing your story a disservice at the expense of yourself.

The writer and the story are natural enemies sometimes, wanting mutually exclusive things. The writer's interests and hobbies and fascinations are useful in small degrees, but at some point they have to take a back seat to the needs of the story. Because if you hope to write, you are eventually going to have to throw the fight so the story can win.

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