THE KOBOLD GUIDE TO WORLDBUILDING

WITH ESSAYS BY

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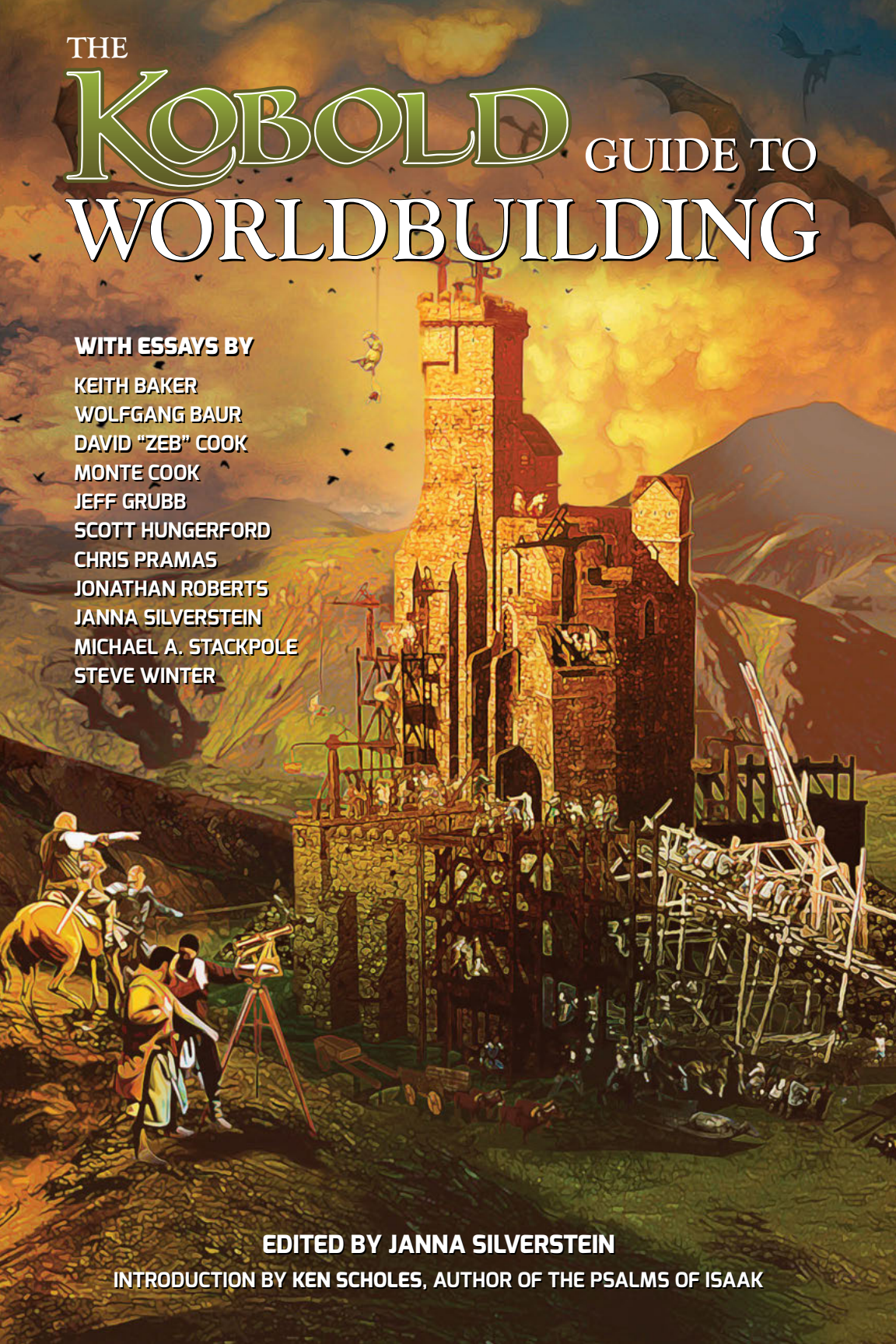CHRIS PRAMAS

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Kobold™
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TABLE OF CONTENTS

The Kobold Guide
to Worldbuilding

Introduction

Foster Worlds to Hide and Seek In

Ken Scholes

Like many of you, I've been visiting new worlds with an eye toward buying real estate for a long time now. My passport has more stamps in it than I can count.

I've been to Barsoom with John and Dejah, then tracked down Carson on Amptor. I took a nice, long walk through Middle-earth with Bilbo, Frodo, and Company before dropping by Arrakis to see how Paul's spice mining was going. I visited Almuric on my way to Hyborea to spend time with Esau and Conan (respectively). And then eventually, I found myself in hot water in Greyhawk's village of Hommlet (I lost two fingers to a giant frog there!) and spent many hours wandering the quarters of Baldur's Gate in the Forgotten Realms.

I am a traveler of many worlds.

I needed to be because this one just wasn't good enough for me. So these others became foster worlds, if you will, where I could play hide and seek with myself through books and with my friends through gaming. And I know I'm not alone. I remember Tim Powers telling my Writers of the Future Workshop that we wouldn't write what we write if we were at home in this world. It resonated with me and I suspect some others.

And somewhere along the way, it wasn't good enough for me to play hide and seek in the worlds of others—I was compelled to join the pantheon of gods who make worlds of their own. I started, like many of us, with my *Dungeons & Dragons* boxed set, a pad of graph paper, and a brain filled with all of the worlds I'd already visited by that time. It didn't hurt at all that somewhere along the way, TSR provided a list of all the other worlds out there that one could turn to for inspiration in

creating their adventures. That opened up a door for me to the work of even more world-builders—all of which fueled my fire to create.

And after a bit, it just wasn't enough anymore. I turned to writing where, eventually, I created the world of the Named Lands in my series, *The Psalms of Isaak*, my first foray into the wacky world of epic fantasy.

And I'm wishing I had the book you're now holding right now—*The Kobold Guide to Worldbuilding*—when I started that great and wild ride. Of course, the good news is, thanks to Janna's kind invitation to write this introduction, I'll have my contributor copy handy for the next world I design.

It's going to come in handy.

This volume brings together a fine set of tools, whether you're a game master or an author. In Jonathan Roberts' brilliantly succinct essay, "Here Be Dragons," you'll learn how to very simply, very practically build the map of your world and outline much of its details. Wolfgang Baur will equally amaze in "Designing a Pantheon" and "What is Setting?" with his thoughts on creating gods and religions and settings that create potential for conflict and drive players (or readers) deeper into the story without hampering the game master (or author) with so much detail that there's no room for collaboration.

I'm already taking notes for the world I'll build after I finish with the one I'm visiting now. That makes this a pretty easy book to introduce to you. Whatever worlds you're building, you'll want this one along for the trip.

The essays here, from masters of their craft, form a toolbox with all you need "to create a place that feels real enough to develop an emotional connection to it," to quote Monte Cook's essay, "Different Kinds of Worldbuilding." "After all," he continues, "who wants to save a world that no one cares about?"

So take these tools. Go build more foster worlds we can play hide and seek in. Build them well and take us there. Stamp our passports and make us want to stay forever.

WHAT IS SETTING DESIGN?

Wolfgang Baur

Long ago, I did my first bit of paid design for my friend Jim, who wanted to run a *Dungeons & Dragons* (D&D) game for everyone but didn't want to design a setting and didn't want to pay for a boxed set. He gave me $2 or so, and I did my best with it. I was 12 at the time.

I wish I still had the materials I turned over for my first paid roleplaying game (RPG) design assignment. I remember Jim especially liked the map of the barony or duchy I created using colored pencil, with its castles, forest, lakes, and so forth. He was less enthusiastic about the text; most areas were described with a single sentence, possibly two, which seemed like plenty to me, for I had written them out longhand. The whole must have been maybe 10 or 20 notebook pages. Jim was a little disappointed, but I showed him that I had created a random monster table for the region, and so all was well.

Was it a successful campaign setting? Only Jim could say for sure, but I like to think that most of the ingredients were there, even if they were fairly crude: *location*, *character*, and *conflict*.

A lot of years have passed since then, and I've given a lot more thought to more recent worldbuilding exercises, both complete and partial, from Dark*Matter to Golarion to the Midgard campaign setting.

If you ask me today, I'd say that the goal of setting design is to *create a background or setting for fantasy gaming, one that provides a rich but not unlimited range of choices to both players and game masters (GMs). In addition, the successful design must establish sources of conflict and motivation for heroes and villains who act in the setting to entertain the players.* These character and villain hooks help the GM easily construct adventures, longer-running foes, and a complete campaign arc wherein the characters change the setting in some way and in which they achieve some or all of their own goals of character change or mastery.

Sort of a mouthful, really. Let's break it down and see what really counts in creating a campaign setting.

Background and Dynamite

The whole process of designing a campaign setting is sometimes referred to as worldbuilding, but this is a bit of a trap. "Worldbuilding" implies an encyclopedic approach, and this is exactly wrong. It is giving in to the "clomping foot of nerdism," to use M. John Harrison's memorable phrase.

The gamer's instinct is that of the otaku who must know everything. The designer's instinct should be to provide only that which is relevant, to provide the most immediately useful material and nothing else. The encyclopedia approach may be good for long-term sales and release after release over 20 years. And that level of fan service may be enjoyable for the designer to provide, frankly.

But giving in to that instinct is poison, because it means providing huge reams of useless data along with the nuggets of gold. Completeness is its own reward, but it is a GM's nightmare. If everything is defined (somewhere), the GM has no latitude to invent his own material. If everything is documented, the GM needs to know and master those huge reams of material *just in case* the party goes there. There are no mysteries, and there is no room to maneuver.

The more you detail as a designer, the more lovingly described a region becomes, the more difficult it is for anyone to run it well or feel confident that they know the material. This is why long-running campaigns always reach for the reset button. Burning it all down and starting over is one way to make the setting accessible again for new players, even as it provokes understandable howls of outrage from those who have spent time, effort, and cash on mastering the old version.

No, the goal is not an encyclopedic worldbuilding approach. The goal of good campaign setting design is to stack as many boxes of dynamite as possible, and then gingerly hand the whole ensemble to GMs so that they may cackle with glee at all the tools, hooks, conflicts, dangers, and purely delightful mayhem with which you have so thoughtfully provided them.

Conflict and Instigation

A campaign setting is a work of instigation, of collusion with the game master and with the players, to create something entertaining. Climate charts and trade routes may be useful bits of worldbuilding, but they should be largely invisible to the players. They are the merest foundation on which a campaign setting should be built.

So, what makes for good instigation? All the sources of human conflict: love, war, revolution, murder, betrayal, greed, theft, rape, oppression, religion, national pride, slavery, and the raw lust for power. These are hardly the stuff of real-life amusement (quite the contrary), but for fictional entertainment they are the tools in your toolbox as you consider the main characters and societies. Peaceful hobbity Shires are exactly the sorts of places we all want to live as cheerful, peaceful, kindly neighbors. But your first instinct as a game designer should be to convince the players that it's a fine place worth saving—just before the orcs invade and burn it down.

Good and evil aren't necessarily the best or only source of conflict: consider the dozens of ways you can shape a setting to set nobles against peasants, dragons

against princes, merchants vs. pirates, or even wizards against priests. Bake those sources of conflict into the world. Make it clear that some rulers and some nations have big, deep-seated urges to conquer, to rule, or to assassinate their enemies—then make their societies paranoid and trigger-happy. Presto, your campaign setting just got more interesting, no matter whether the player characters are outsiders fighting against the paranoid super-empire, or they are lordlings and mercenaries of the empire, sent to put down the rebellious scum on the fringes.

If your players recognize the social structure as Empire vs. Rebellion, more power to them. The dramatic dynamic itself is part of the design, and it encourages game masters and players alike to choose goals and play adventures with a logical conclusion that shapes the world (the victory of one or the other side).

Build a tinderbox, and game masters and players will beat a path to your door.

So Why Write a History?

Focus on the now, on conflict. Just as set designers for a theatre or movie don't worry themselves overmuch with the history, creation, and narrative of a particular location's part (except as expressed in the present), so game designers really should not bother themselves with history except when it impinges on the current day.

This is one of the greatest traps that designers fall into over and over again. "Ten thousand years ago" sounds like the beginning of an epic history, certainly, but for most player characters, it's just irrelevant. Players don't care about 10,000 years ago until the moment it bites them in the ass. Make sure that for each reference to ages long past, there's some element of that history that is a real and present danger or conflict.

Why is it so hard to follow this rule and focus on the present? Partly this is J.R.R. Tolkien's fault for, in addition to giving us two great works of literary genius that redefined fantasy, he also gave us reams of backstory going back to the dawn of time. It's compelling stuff to read the early history of the elves, and the two trees, and Beren and Luthien, and all the other stories before the stories we know. And so gamers and game designers decided that since this was a lot of fun to read, it would also be a lot of fun to create similar history for gaming worlds.

This was a serious mistake.

Certainly readers of fiction want more and more and take delight in the continuing adventures of favorite characters, and their prequels, and their fanfic; the world is richer and more delightful, and everyone wins. But gaming is not fiction, and when we spend too much time on backstory and prequels and historical sweep and the like, the focus on the actions of the player characters fades. Design effort spent on this material makes the GM less effective in his role of director and entertainer. You'll notice, also, that Prof. Tolkien did not intend the *Silmarillion* and many of his notes for publication.

The worldbuilder's role is to prepare challenges and action for the heroes; time spent creating the details of societies, NPCs, and locales that no longer exist in the game world is time wasted. It may be rewarding for you to see the connections of past and present, and it may be a lot of fun. But as a function of successful, effective design it adds precisely nothing to the player's experience at the game table. They don't know the

history, they don't care about the web of connections, and they rarely need or want that sort of information in the course of completing a heroic adventure.

I'd say that there's a minimum amount of history required for a setting for it to make sense, some short overview of how and why empires fell or the gods shaped the world for their amusement. A second category of historical backdrop helps the worldbuilder write adventures or stories in the setting because she has a better understanding of where a secret society came from or why two races still fight. The origins of conflict are usually fairly straightforward to explain and very few require full-blown in-character fiction, diagrams of the relevant battles, or descriptions of just how a coup came about. As gamers, we fall into the trap of over-explaining secret origins as a matter of course.

But almost all of what players need is in the category of *current events*. The secret society has goals right now: those matter. The secret society was founded by Evil Wizard Mastermind 1,000 years ago, and its leaders were banished by the paladins of Undying Light? No one cares. The exceptions tend to be entirely of the sort that bring history into the present: the society's goal is to resurrect its founder. But you'll note: that's a current event. Stick to those and your setting will seem much richer, more active, and livelier to players. Why? Because you are paying attention to the part of the setting

AN APOLOGIA: HISTORY AS HOBBY

I often hear the argument that creating history helps a designer understand his or her creation better, and that it amuses the casual designer who wants to think about the grand scheme of things that the players will never know. There's nothing wrong with generating that extra volume of material if you have time and inclination to do so, and if your primary audience is yourself. I write stuff for my own amusement about various characters—and I know it's really not productive except that I enjoy it.

My primary concern is when that material, like gaming kudzu, overwhelms the work of generating interesting characters and conflicts that might actually appear in the game. Since villains in fantasy can and often are ancient powers from the dawn of time, it's worth knowing something about their origins. But if the horror from the dawn of time does not influence the present, have enough awareness as a worldbuilder to cut that material out of your manuscript and avoid inflicting it on players—unless, of course, the wizard or bard is super-keen on various bits of Lore and Knowledge skills. In that case, you've finally found a use for the genealogical charts you drafted that go back 800 years as well as that sidebar on the court customs of the fallen empires.

Work on those sorts of projects for their own sake, but realize that ancillary material is like Tolkien's appendices: they're fun, but they're not the main goal or part of the final manuscript you present to the public or to your players. It's easy to wander for weeks and years in a setting's history and never ever get around to what makes the setting compelling, what makes it unique as a living, shared experience for gamers.

Don't lose focus.

that matters, the part that the PCs touch. Sometimes they meet or care about matters from ancient times that have survived to the present, as in the evil mastermind being resurrected. Those should be moments of high drama and a conflict of past and present. Pay attention to how you build those NPCs and those encounters in the context of the present, and work on what the motivations and methods of those villains are in the present.

This same argument against emphasis on the ancient past, by the way, also explains why most players (rightly) hate the use of lengthy read-aloud text. I leave the parallels as an exercise for the interested reader.

Ignore the Mechanics

I think that almost any campaign setting worth a damn is largely independent of the game mechanics used to play it.

As proof, I offer you the Forgotten Realms (four sets of mechanics and counting have undergirded the setting) and Star Wars (I've lost track, but last I checked I think it was also four sets of mechanics, and by at least 3 different companies) and even my own Dark*Matter (two sets of mechanics). As roleplaying settings, they have outlived the mechanics beneath them repeatedly. They must be doing something right, and it's not about the numbers. It's about the potential for adventure. So save the encounter-thinking, hazards, monsters, and number-crunching for the times when you are doing adventure design. Setting design is less mechanical but just as difficult.

In campaign settings, the goal is to inspire a GM to challenge a party of players and to inspire players to explore and change the world. Neither of those depends much on mechanics, though it's pretty clear that the experience system is a large motivator for most players. So long as character advancement happens in some form and as a reward for exploration, though, there's also a need to create places worth exploring, societies worth visiting, and villains who are both easy to understand and satisfying to defeat. You need a sense of place (and I argue the same for adventure design in *Complete Kobold Guide to Game Design*).

If you can sketch out enough of a sense of place in a few sentences to inspire a month or a year of gaming, your campaign setting is a success. If your setting design inspires no urge to run a game in the red-blooded gamer, well, try again, while knowing that not every setting is to everyone's tastes.

Summation

World design seems like an opportunity to loll about in an endless vista of vast time scales, epic page counts, and limitless possibilities. That's a lot of its appeal to any homebrewer or GM. Daydreaming of other worlds is rewarding for its own sake. But to design a professional setting for an audience, you need to take a hard look at the space and elements available and maximize the impact of every character, location, and mechanic. We'll discuss this in much more detail in the essay on kitchen sink design and the most important setting choices.

Different Kinds of Worldbuilding

Monte Cook

Worldbuilding is something that novelists, game designers, and game masters all talk about, but when they do they actually mean something slightly different. Or perhaps more accurately, they mean the same thing, but they approach the topic very differently.

World Building for Novelists

Novelists, in particular fantasy and science fiction novelists, work on worldbuilding as a backdrop for their stories. But that's all it is—a backdrop. While they might create a fully-fleshed out, living, breathing world, what ends up on the page is only just enough for the reader to understand and appreciate the story. (At least, if the novelist is any good.) In a way, any worldbuilding a novelist does that doesn't focus on the story they're telling is a waste. Fun, and perhaps rewarding, as it gives them a better sense of place and scale, but still kind of a waste.

Even a worldbuilding-focused writer is better off creating a world where there is one story to tell, with only the briefest suggestion of other stories. For example, take Third Age Middle-earth as related by Tolkien in *The Lord of the Rings*. The appendices, The Silmarillion, and other sources tell us that the author's created a much larger world, but we only get a hint of this in the novels. The worldbuilding that we see is only what's going on around the main characters—only what they see.

World Building for a Game

Worldbuilding from a game designer's point of view is very, very different. A game designer needs to build a world not for one story, but for a thousand. Or more. A setting built for an RPG needs to be huge, with a lot going on. Fantasy GMs who want an evil wizard for a foe need to have not one but many to choose from. Another

GM might want pirates. And another might want a jungle for his player characters (PCs) to explore, with dinosaurs. Another will want all three. And each one of these needs to cover a wide scope—from something that poses a small but interesting threat to something really big and important. Maybe even world-threatening.

So to keep with our Middle-earth example, for an RPG, Middle-earth doesn't need Sauron; it needs five or six, all in different locales with different motives and goals. And a cult trying to resurrect Morgoth, about 20 Shelobs, and I don't even know how many Saurumans. And a few dozen petty warlords, pirate kings, orc tribes, marauding trolls, and plenty of dragons. (Of course I am exaggerating. But you see my point, I think.) This doesn't mean, of course, that any one campaign will use them all. And that's the point. GMs need a lot to choose from to offer their players, and the players need to have a lot of choices themselves. The world needs to be dynamic and broad.

The game designer's world needs a lot broader detail than the novelist's as well. The novelist can mention the ruined city of Karmesh in the Bleak Desert as a bit of flavor, but the game designer needs to describe what's there. The novelist knows his characters aren't going to Karmesh, ever. It's just a part of one character's backstory. But the PCs in an RPG might go there, and they're going to want to know what they find. The GM needs details. Facts. Maps. And he needs them now.

I'm currently working on a worldbuilding project called *The Ninth World*, which is the setting for my new game, *Numenera*. My approach to worldbuilding is twofold. I want to present a bunch of great setting details and adventure ideas, but I also want to steep GMs in the flavor and concepts underpinning the world, to help them create their own details. Sort of the "give a man a fish and he eats for a day; teach a man to fish and he eats for a lifetime" approach to setting design.

This, of course, is a different kind of worldbuilding still. I'm giving lots of detail, but then empowering GMs to create it on their own as well, by giving them an idea of what kind of things they could create. And what would and wouldn't be appropriate for the setting. Or rather, what the implications of different kinds of material will have on the setting. This allows each GM to make his own Ninth World, which is the best of all possible worlds (pun not intended—no, really).

Worldbuilding and the GM

The GM's worldbuilding sort of falls in between. Ideally, the GM who builds his own world has more than one story in the offing, so that the players have some real choice as to what their characters do in the world (one story = railroaded campaign). But the GM doesn't need to create as many opportunities as the game designer because he's only got his own group to work with. Again, ideally, the GM knows his group and knows, for example, that they aren't going to be interested in pirates but will be particularly eager to go after the undead lord and his zombie horde.

The GM also has the ability to build his world as he goes. Like the novelist, he only needs to present the players with worldbuilding information as they require it—only as it is needed for the story at hand. If the PCs are in a tiny village in Kingdom A, they don't need to know any of the details of the political machinations of the nobles in the kingdom, and they need know nothing at all of Kingdom B and

Kingdom C. The GM is free to wait to add those kinds of details. He doesn't need to pre-build the entire world.

This, of course, can lead to a tricky bit of juggling. The GM has to stay at least one step ahead of the PCs. It's helpful to have chunks of the world that he can toss in when needed. For example, the PCs are on a ship sailing toward an adventure locale. The GM isn't ready for that location, so he has the PCs spot a mysterious island in the distance. He pulls out his old *Isle of Dread* module from way back when and uses that, not so much for the adventure, but for the setting.

Or the PCs are about to cross the border into a new kingdom that they've only heard of by name. Unfortunately, that's all the GM knew about it as well, and the game is in a day and a half. He pulls out a few of his Steven Erikson books (*The Book of Mazalan the Fallen* series), changes some of the names of the Seven Cities, and inserts that region into his game world. A GM, then, has the unique opportunity to incorporate other people's worldbuilding into his own worldbuilding process.

That's not cheating. That's being a game master.

One huge advantage to on-the-fly worldbuilding is that it allows the campaign to be reactive. If the GM creates it all ahead of time and lays it all out before the players, it is set in stone. But if he later decides he wants to have a magical realm with floating mountains high in the sky and dragon-riding knights, but he hasn't created such a place, he's out of luck. But if the world is being built as the campaign goes along, he can add this land in anywhere it suits him and—more importantly—suits the campaign.

Players and Worldbuilding

But perhaps—just perhaps—there's yet another way to build a world: collaboratively.

Consider the idea that the players actually contribute to the creation of the GM's world. For example, the GM could mandate ahead of time that each PC hails from a different kingdom, land, or region. Each player, then, is responsible not only for creating his or her character, but also for the place the character comes from. The player would develop the rulers, the communities, and the geography. This could involve developing the traits for the PC's race as well. The GM, in turn, takes these player "submissions" and incorporates them into the world he's already built.

Some GMs will want to have the ability to take liberties with the players' creations to make them all work within the larger context. Others will decide to work alongside the players as they develop their homelands to ensure they have the cohesiveness needed for a usable campaign setting.

Once it's in the GM's hands, of course, it's his world to shape. He shouldn't undo what a player has created, but instead he should utilize it. This is important, because the whole point is each PC knows a lot about his or her homeland. If the GM changes it all, there's no background knowledge. But the GM can still make use of the material and create surprises.

For example, say a player with an elf character creates a wasteland that she comes from. In her creation, this was once a beautiful wooded realm, but evil priests of dark gods destroyed the vegetation and almost wiped out the elves. The character's people

destroyed the priests long ago, but the realm is still a barren desert. The player, as she creates, names a number of the various important elves in the land, and even creates a relationship with one of them, stating that the queen of the surviving elves is her aunt.

At some point after the campaign begins, the PC needs the help of her aunt, the queen of the wasteland elves. She leads her friends (the other PCs) to her ancestral land. She knows her way around—she knows the dangers of the polluted river and where it is possible to still find game. She even knows you have to pay the trolls guarding the only pass through the mountains to get to the queen's hidden palace. That's all well and good.

But the GM has decided the evil priests were not wiped out long ago. Instead, their agents are still active in the land and they now control the queen with mind-altering drugs, making her their secret thrall. When the PCs arrive, the elf character senses something is amiss—she knows this place and these people, remember—so now the player's knowledge of the realm becomes a hook for an adventure. What's going on with the queen? When the PCs discover she's being drugged, they need to figure out who's doing it and why.

The important thing to take away is that allowing the player to create the wasteland didn't remove power from the GM. On the contrary: it saved him some work, it gave him new opportunities for adventures, and it made the elf player feel more invested in the campaign as a whole. When she senses something is amiss, it's really going to worry her. When she learns that something has happened to the queen, and that the evil priests—that the player herself created—are still around, it's going to be far more meaningful to her than if the GM had created it all himself.

And perhaps that's the most important part of worldbuilding, no matter who does the work. To create a place that feels real enough to develop an emotional connection to it. After all, who wants to save a world that no one cares about?

Inside Out and Outside In

Chris Pramas

There are many ways to build fictional worlds. If you are a talented linguist like J.R.R. Tolkien, you can start by creating new languages and then create a setting to make their home. If you are an artist, you can start with look and feel and then go from there. I am a historian by training, so that's the lens I tend to look through. I want to know not just what is this place, but how did it get this way? In my 20 years of professional game design, I have approached world building in two ways. Sometimes, I start with a local setting and then expand it until the world is fleshed out. This is building from the inside out. Other times, I start with a broad framework that is large but shallow, and then focus in on certain areas to give them greater detail. This is building from the outside in. In this essay I'm going to walk through both processes and talk about their strengths and weaknesses. Remember, though, that there is no one right way to do it.

Inside Out

This approach is the more practical of the two because you are building what you need as you go. It's particularly useful when starting a RPG campaign, though the same applies if you are writing a novel or screenplay. You decide where your story is going to start and you start building up the local area and its surroundings. You can start with something as small as a village or as large as a city-state. Hopefully, you have one or more story ideas in mind, so you can sketch out what you need to support that. Who are the major players in this story? What do they want and what is creating the conflict(s)? When you have some broad ideas, you can start adding details. What is the culture of this land like? Are they religious and, if so, what form does that take? Who are some secondary characters you could introduce for color and sub-plots? What secrets are just waiting to be uncovered? As you start play or write your story, the need for further detail will become apparent and you can fill those in as you go. In this way the setting will continue to grow organically.

The process I just described is the one I used when creating the city of Freeport. It started as the setting for a single adventure (*Death in Freeport*, 2000). I knew I wanted to write a city adventure, since Wizards of the Coast was going "back to the dungeon" with the launch of third edition D&D. I also knew I wanted a place where characters from all over might meet, so that argued for a port and it was a short hop from there to pirates. I thought much of the adventure should be an investigation, which made me think of *Call of Cthulhu*. That led to the creation of a sinister cult (The Brotherhood of the Yellow Sign) and other Lovecraftian touches. In the end I wrote a four-page history of the city, plus the locations I needed for the scenario. Though not lengthy, that 32-page module created a template for Freeport. It was a setting that combined classic D&D fantasy with Lovecraftian horror and pirates.

Death in Freeport was a hit and indeed it put Green Ronin Publishing on the map. We continued to expand Freeport in future products. First, we did two more modules to make a trilogy that told one big story. Those adventures added more locations to the city, and many personalities with their own goals and agendas. Part 3, *Madness in Freeport*, did a lot to introduce the government and ruling elite of the city. We also added details about the ancient serpentman empire and its descendents. After the trilogy, we did the natural thing and released a full-fledged sourcebook called *Freeport: The City of Adventure* (2002).

From the beginning the idea of Freeport was that it was a city you could use in any fantasy campaign setting. The gods were not named, but referred to as God of Knowledge, God of War, and so on. There were references to "the Continent" but that's as far as it went. This was a feature for many game masters, and they used Freeport in many different campaign settings. Some other publishers even put Freeport into their own worlds. There were always folks who wanted to see a World of Freeport though. When it came time to do *The Pirate's Guide to Freeport* (2007), a revised sourcebook about the city, I decided to add an optional chapter that described the larger world and detailed "the Continent." And how did I do that? Outside in!

OUTSIDE IN

The first RPG campaign setting I was exposed to was the original World of Greyhawk folio (1980). I first saw it around 1981, when I was all of 12 years old. The folio contained a 32 page Gazetteer and Darlene Pekul's awesome poster maps of the setting. (Don't underestimate the importance of those maps, by the way. Great cartography helps suck people into your world. See Jonathan Roberts' essay, "Here Be Dragons," for more on the subject.) By today's standards, the World of Greyhawk was sparse on detail but it launched thousands of campaigns the world over. In talking with many Greyhawk fans over the years, I've found that most of them liked the fact that the setting was not overly detailed. It provided a broad framework that they could build on and customized as they saw fit.

The interesting thing about Greyhawk is that it did start small, in Gary Gygax's home D&D campaign. It was originally just the dungeons of Castle Greyhawk and then the nearby city. As his campaign grew, he added more details to the world but he never expected to publish it. He thought each GM would want to create their own

setting. As the early modules proved though, there was an interest there, and the decision was made to publish the *World of Greyhawk*. Gary did not want his players learning too much about its secrets, so he made some major changes (like creating a brand new map) and made up a bunch of new material. What he provided in the folio (and the later 1983 boxed set) was a big picture that was ripe with possibilities. Some of those were realized in later products and others in the many home campaigns that used the *World of Greyhawk*.

In the folio and boxed set, you can see many principles of outside in design. The scope is large. In fact, it's larger than the maps! The area covered in any detail represents only a section (The Flanaess) of a much larger super-continent called Oerik. The nations are painted in broad strokes. The boxed set includes a section on the gods and cosmology. And there is history there. Gary describes the migrations of peoples, ancient wars, and apocalyptic events to set the stage for the modern Greyhawk. There is also plenty of mystery in the setting as described, to leave room for further development or just to give GMs ideas for adventures.

Outside-in design lets you think big. I had the chance to do that, in Greyhawk no less, when I was working on the D&D *Chainmail* miniatures game for Wizards of the Coast in the early 2000s. I wanted to set the game in Greyhawk, as it was supposedly the default setting of third edition D&D, but my team was not allowed to use the nations of The Flanaess. We decided to detail the eastern part of the super-continent of Oerik instead, an area about which little had been published. This became known as The Sundered Empire setting, and at its root was a big question: what happens when the God of War dies? My idea was that mortal heroes slew the God of War Stratis in the hopes of creating a lasting peace. Instead, they started a huge conflict, as warlords sought to become the new God of War. That was the premise I started with as I built The Sundered Empire, and it helped inform the competing factions and many other aspects of my world building.

To take this back to Freeport for a minute, outside in was the approach I took to world of Freeport in the *Pirate's Guide*. In fact, knowing I had only a chapter in which to work, I drew inspiration from the Greyhawk folio. The chapter delves into the history of the ancient serpentman empire, the cosmology of the setting (which uses Yig as a sort of world serpent), and gives an overview of the "the Continent." Some things from the folio I chose to leave out, like specific numbers and troop types of the nations (which was a nod to D&D's wargaming heritage). Instead I included entries for each nation like important landmarks. These were just names with no description provided, dangling mysteries for GMs to explore. The elf kingdom of Rolland, for example, has Cairncross Hill, Shrine of the Hunter's Moon, and Windgrass Grove. I have never written those up, but I bet some enterprising GMs have.

If outside-in design has a flaw, it's that it takes some time to figure out the big issues. How large is the setting? What's its cosmology like? Are any big ideas baked into it? What are the cultures and nations like? How did the various peoples get where they are today? Who are some famous and infamous people from its past? If you are trying to get a game or story underway soon, outside-in design may not be the approach for you. If you have the time and inclination to do work up front though, you may find it easier to slot new elements into your existing framework

than expanding the world as you go. The other issue is that with all these broad strokes, you will miss a lot of fine detail. That's OK, as you can zoom in on areas to support adventure and story ideas.

Crossing the Streams

So far I have talked about these two approaches as a binary choice, but it doesn't need to be that way. You can mix and match as you go, and that's just fine. You might design a village one week and create an entire pantheon of gods the next. The important thing is to keep pushing ahead and expanding your world. You can even start with one approach and then move to the other. I was part of just such an attempt, once again (strangely enough) involving Greyhawk.

In 1999 I was working at Wizards of the Coast in Roleplaying R&D. I had been hired to work on the third attempt to do a *Magic: The Gathering* RPG (this time using modified AD&D rules) but when in-fighting between departments kyboshed that project I was put onto the *Greyhawk* team. This led to me writing (with Sean Reynolds) *Slavers*, a sequel to the 1st edition *Slavelords* modules, which were favorites of mine. It also gave me a chance to help craft a plan to bring new blood into *Greyhawk*. Roger Moore, who was working remotely in the Midwest, flew out to Seattle for a week of meetings, the team banged out some ideas, and we put together a plan for the next phase of *Greyhawk*.

Our thinking was that *Greyhawk* needed a new entry point, a way we could ease people into the setting. Books like *Greyhawk: The Adventure Begins* (1998) was great for old fans, but because it tried to summarize the whole history of the Greyhawk Wars and subsequent events, it could be daunting to newbies. Our idea was to start with a local area (say, a town and the surrounding area) in an intro product that was designed to get a new campaign off the ground. Then there'd be a succession of products that widened the scope. The next might detail a province, the next a duchy, the next a kingdom, and so on. This would ultimately lead up to a big book detailing a major slice of the setting. In our case, this was meant to be the Great Kingdom and some of the surrounding nations.

Sadly, this plan was never enacted. I feel like it was a real missed opportunity because then Greyhawk could have been approached either outside in or inside out by different game groups. I think Freeport does that, in that you can ease people into it with the original modules or jump right in to the *Pirate's Guide to Freeport*.

I hope you've found my experiences in worldbuilding helpful. In the end, the important thing is that you sit down and do it. Thinking about how you're going to get there is important, but don't let excessive analysis stop you from getting your creation going. Starting is the hardest part.

How Real is Your World?

History and Fantasy as a Spectrum of Design Options

Wolfgang Baur

One of the frequent cries around fantasy campaigns is the call for more realism or, at least, plausibility and verisimilitude. This is a long tradition in gaming circles and yet a slightly crazy one. Part of the joy of fantasy is the joy of escape from the modern world into the exploration of something new, original, creative, and different from the commute, the job, the children, the parents, the roommate, and so on. No one wants to be reminded of the real world in a fantasy game.

And yet we want things that we relate to: characters, heroes, archetypes that are grounded in myths and legends we recognize. We want "real fantasy," one of those things that makes me scratch my head, though I think we know what is meant. We want to suspend disbelief, and yet we also all have pet peeves, concerns, flashpoints that drag us out of a fantasy. How much you as a player are willing or able to suspend your disbelief with a fantasy setting is a matter of individual character and personality. How much your audience is willing to suspend disbelief and buy into your setting is a matter of supreme importance to a game designer: you need to find the sweet spot where the maximum number of people want to believe.

It's important to include magic and wonder and crazy elements in a fantasy setting. At the same time, there's clearly a limit. When things go too far off the rails, the fan screaming about "so fake" and "stupidly unrealistic" never quite stops. The internet has reinforced this tendency, but it's a strangely specific one. Swords and battle axes as big as a steamer trunk are fine to some people and anathema to others. Elves everywhere and floating cloud cities and massive mountain-sized dragons are exactly what some players and GMs want—and are annoyingly childish or foolish to others.

What does this mean for worldbuilding? It means that, as a designer, you need to consider some choices and consider your audience. And then decide which tradition to follow. Here's a summation of the field and what it means for your own worldbuilding efforts.

Real Worldbuilding

There are at least two clear traditions in fantasy worldbuilding: the real worlds and the pure fantasies. Fans of the two approaches are usually split and sometimes react violently to the wrong flavor. As with all matters of art and creative endeavor, this is a matter of subjective judgments and personal preferences. The quality of the execution carries a great deal of weight as well.

To put it simply, the competing traditions are these: some fantasy worlds are built more closely on real European legends (such as Conan's Hyborea, or an Arthurian variant, or Golarion's many Earthlike cultures), while others are built more clearly on a premise or a conceit (Barsoom or Dark Sun or Spelljammer). A few fall somewhere in between, but let's pretend for a moment that these are entirely different schools of thought with respect to worldbuilding. They're not, exactly, and I'll get to that.

The European Tradition: Historical Fantasy and Real Fantasy

The first great tradition in fantasy worldbuilding takes as its premise all the myths and legends of Europe, and weaves a world on those elements. You can certainly quibble with my categorizations, but the sorts of settings I'm talking about fall into about two large camps. There are the purely historical fantasies, and there are the ones that are clearly more distant cousins to the real world, though the echoes of the real world are visible to anyone who scratches at the surface a bit.

Hard Historical Fantasy

For the historical fantasy settings, I'm thinking of things like Jonathan Tweet's *Ars Magica*, Clark Ashton Smith's Averoigne, Chad Bowser's *Cthulhu Invictus*, Sandy Peterson's *Pendragon*, Lovecraft's Cthulhu Mythos and the related RPG, White Wolf's World of Darkness, and Scott Bennie's *Testament*. These are excellent fantasy worlds, with a specific character, a specific time period, and are built on the firmest ground of realism you can imagine for something that is still clearly a fantasy setting.

What does historical fantasy mean for your design and worldbuilding?

On the one hand, it means that your technology, backstory, and characters are already matters of historical record. The important elements of your design are the ones that introduce alternate history and magic to the setting, the differences from reality. Perhaps there are houses of wizards behind the scenes. Perhaps Arthur's knights do pursue the Grail, or eldritch, sanity-blasting monstrosities wander through Medieval France.

You'll note that this approach is a powerful shortcut to familiarity. It makes these worlds easy to explain to players, and Hollywood uses this formula often as well ("It's the Wild West—but with UFOs!"). This makes it easy to get buy-in from players or readers, and it simplifies your workload and enriches your storehouse of reference material. The real world is weird, wild, and wonderful. Humanity's legends and story

cycles are a well of endless inspiration. It's easier to attract an audience with a proven story and setting, or a hybridization of two elements into something new.

This is all great fun for anyone who loves history and alternate history, and a historical fantasy is as realistic as a setting can be, but the style also creates its own limits. Once you are committed to King Arthur and the Round Table, it's tough to work in Cthulhu (though hardly impossible—Mordred and Morgan Le Fey were clearly cultists!). Once you are discussing wizards and medieval Europe, it's hard to suddenly bring in wuxia martial arts. There are limits. A known setting can be bent pretty far, but must never violate the mysterious line where disbelief creeps in.

Because this clarity of focus makes the game easy to explain to others ("It's the Crusades with magic" or "It's the Chinese Three Kingdoms with secret Lotus monks"), it may also limit the size of your audience. Historical fantasy is a rich field but, for many, it's just too historical. *Call of Cthulhu* is beloved by RPG designers, but if you don't love Lovecraft and the 1920s, it's just never going to be your cup of tea. Know in advance that your audience may be small but intensely loyal and likely includes many experts in the period in question.

Your goal might be a somewhat accurate recreation of a historical period, overlaid with just enough fantasy and flavor to make it spicy and sexy—but not so much that you "ruin" it with too much fantasy. How much is too much? This is entirely a matter for you to determine. Some will say James Bond vs. Voodoo zombies is good fun; others will say it ruins the Bond franchise. Some will enjoy Napoleonic adventures with assassin cults; others will complain about the lack of realism in 17th-century social standards.

The approach often taken for this sort of design is to declare that the history of the world is well known—but that there is also a secret history, known only to vampires, or Templars, or wizards.

With historical design, tropes are your friend, and indeed tropes of the period are indispensable. Your job is to take what everyone knows about that time period and combine it with just enough new elements to make it exciting and original. You are both an amateur historian and a stage director, and if you are successful you will make a historical period come alive with credible characters, action, and period details. Too much detail, too much accuracy, and too much minutiae are your enemies. Consider yourself a popularizer of the period, and you'll go far.

"Real Fantasy"

Which brings us to the world that is clearly full of the echoes of history and reality, but divorced from it to a greater or lesser degree by its fantasy conceits. It's one step more fantastical, if you will; its magic is bigger and brighter and its history and sense of earnestness about itself is one step less, while still respecting the roots and traditions of fantasy. There's more Cthulhu, more fireballs, more giant robots, bigger bets on dragons and monsters and the fantastical coming into the open, rather than the Secret History approach.

To quote particular examples, I'm thinking of settings like Robert E. Howard's Hyborea, Jeff Grubb's *Al-Qadim*, Suleiman, Kenson, and Marmell's *Hamunapta*, my own Midgard campaign setting, Bruce Heard's Mystara, David "Zeb" Cook's Kara

Tur/Oriental Adventures, Tracy Hickman's *Ravenloft*, John Wick's *7th Sea*, Games Workshop's *Warhammer* RPG, and Greg Gorden's TORG. Some of these lean more heavily on the real and some more on the fantasy, but in each case, the designer clearly has a shelf full of real-world reference books. Others, like Roger Zelazny's *Chronicles of Amber*, Richard Baker's *Birthright*, and Paizo's Golarion, all lean fairly heavily on Earth and its cultures, so they seem to belong here as well.

Each of these owes a great or lesser debt to the real world's cultures and societies, and the usual points of departure include the world's great mythologies and legends, such as the Egyptian mythos, the Norse sagas, the *1001 Arabian Nights*, the tales of Stoker and the stories of Atlantis and the *Song of Roland*, Grimm's Fairy Tales, pirate tales, the tales of Baron Munchhausen, and the Holy Roman Empire. They're all built on the assumption that the real world is worth embellishing, and that fantasy is a matter of making real places or real legends more exciting. If dragons were real . . . life would be more exciting.

So, what does a real fantasy approach mean for your game design?

In each case above, it's impossible to imagine that fantasy setting without the body of lore that undergirds it. As the designer of such a setting, you must know the basics of that mythology inside and out, and the more of the obscure points you know, the better off you are. At the same time, it's very easy to get trapped in excessive research that players won't care about, and your prose and descriptive detail can become dry and academic. In a historical fantasy, that's more acceptable than in a real fantasy, where the goal is not so much "simulation plus a little fantasy" as it is "experience an improved version of the tales."

Your goal as a designer is to understand what makes that mythology tick, and why it appeals to a modern audience. Once you understand it, your work is to make it both accessible and playable by lifting the best parts of it and making them irresistible to gamers.

That's right: your goal is to do a better job on the Arabian Nights, to improve on the Brothers Grimm, and to swipe the best bits of ancient Egyptian lore from 5,000 years ago, and make it compelling reading for teenagers, college kids, adults of all ages in the 21st century.

No one said it was easy.

The Modern Special Case

The big obvious exception to all that dissection of historical roots of genre is the modern age. The closer we get to the present day, the more realism is tolerated—nay, demanded! Can you imagine Sandy Petersen's *Call of Cthulhu* being dinged for being too European? Of course not; the idea is ludicrous. The same goes for my own *Dark*Matter*, Rowling's Harry Potter books, Eckelberry and Baker's *Star*Drive*, Naomi Novik's Temeraire series, Mike Pondsmith's *Castle Falkenstein*, Lester Smith's *Dark Conspiracy*, Jordan Weisman's *Shadowrun*, and Steve Weick and Mark Rein*Hagen's *Vampire the Masquerade*.

The closer we get to the present, the more we demand some adherence to reality. Fantasy retreats when the players know all too well what the world is really like, and especially when they may have visited some of the locations involved (or at least, seen them on TV). The ability to suspend disbelief shrinks, in particular around matters of geography and culture.

What do modern traditions mean for your modern fantasy setting?

Clearly, you need to know your time period as well as any historical fantasy fan, but you also probably need to limit the fantasy elements, rather than spend time and effort expanding them. I'd argue that the main work of a setting designer for a modern setting (defined as anything after 1800, perhaps, or at least in the gunpowder-and-photographs age of history) is working out all the implications of their fantasy world's divergence from real world history—as it affects the players. The magic system is top of the list, followed by any secret history, and new cultures with prominent non-player characters (NPCs) (such as aliens, vampires, dragons, or fey).

I could go on at some length about modern campaign settings, but it's a bit of a tangent from the main focus and a specialized topic. Let's just say that they present some unique challenges of balancing what people know and what people want, but no more so than the historical fantasies of older periods. The difference is that we as readers and gamers think we understand the present day and the near past better than we understand the distant past.

The Asian Special Case

This leads me, strangely enough, to Asia. There are at least three prominent Asian settings in the history of fantasy RPGs, perhaps more depending on what you count as prominent. To my eyes, these are David "Zeb" Cook's *Oriental Adventures* and Kara Tur, Paizo's Tian Xia setting, and then AEG's Rokugan (and various modern settings, of course, such as *Dragon Fist, Shadowfist*, and *Hong Kong Action Theatre*). To a certain eye, these are purely a type of "real fantasy" as they could not exist without reference to Chinese and Japanese mythology. But I'd say that they form their own corpus of setting types, precisely because their myths are less entrenched in the psyche of the typically American and European audience of people who play them.

To put it another way, even with the rise of Asian cinema, anime, and manga, I'd argue that most Americans and Europeans don't grow up on a steady diet of Chinese and Japanese stories and setting materials. The assumptions about goblins and Shinto and Confucian values aren't ingrained in us as Western gamers. Unless you are a recent immigrant or a huge JRPG fanboy, you have to learn those tropes, from anime, from martial arts films, and from video games. It's a little like historical games, in that we get less of it from osmosis. We might know what a hopping vampire or a kappa is from our bestiaries and monster manuals. We're less likely to immediately recognize the shaman queen Himiko.

Now, I would argue that the more we know the myths and locales of a place, the more allergic we may be to them. Familiarity breeds contempt, and what is more familiar than the stories we grow up with?

Sure, you might argue that we love many real-world tropes, and that druids are real-world historical figures, and paladins are a direct rip-off of the French chanson of Roland. But for the most part, the Druids are an old, old story, but they are invisible because no gamer treats them as remotely historical anymore. They've been absorbed into gaming culture, divorced from their origins.

Some gamers react negatively to what they've seen too often. So, what makes a setting strong, compelling, tied to myths we cherish, but not too familiar? That's the fine line that every gamer and every designer draws somewhere differently.

And the proof of it might be that the Asian fantasy feels exotic and original and new to us, though the legends and tropes are completely grounded in real-world history and Asian traditions. Asia is not something we've seen often, so it comes across as shiny and new. Familiar but not too familiar. It's new to us, as gamers, so there's less of a sense of "seen it, done it." The regular, straight-up, bog-standard vanilla Asian fantasy still feels different and creative to your average Western gamer.

What does all this mean for your Asian setting design?

On the one hand, you get to play with a new box of toys, a new set of research, new sourcebooks, new characters, monsters, societies, and setting elements of all kinds. Nothing is Western, traditional, played-out. If you love novelty, Asia is full of entire cultures that—despite the continuing rise of Japanese, Korean, and Chinese culture—are still largely unknown to your audience as a designer. That's the good news.

The bad news is that as much as gamers react against overdoing the historical part of real-world European history, it's even worse with Asia. No one wants to play a real samurai or ninja. Everyone wants to play the legends as described in film and video games. And a tabletop RPG is never going to be as good at cinematic action as a film or video game about the martial arts.

The solution for a Western game would be to spend some time on the other mythic elements, about character and setting. Western gamers, however, don't want to learn the code of the samurai or mimic Confucian values. They want to kick ass (and rightly so). Your job is to balance mythic materials with modern violence in a satisfying way that neither insults the source material nor loses the interest of your audience, in a culture not necessarily your own. Again, no one said it was easy.

Getting the balance right of a relatively unfamiliar mythos coupled with Hollywood aesthetics is brutally difficult. As proof I offer you the long and stunning history of tightly-designed and lusciously-produced Asian-flavored RPGs, none of which have been a long-term commercial success. The one possible exception is the *Legend of the Five Rings* property, though in that case, we're talking about a card game that occasional puts a toe into RPGs, not an RPG property first and foremost.

Asian settings are full of sexy new toys and delightful new myths and awesome action flicks. Despite this, they have more in common with the small-but-loyal following of historical European fantasy than you might first suppose. Be wary, and know what you want your setting to achieve before committing to a major Asian campaign setting.

The Pure Fantasy Lineages: Anchored and Wild

The alternative to realism in your fantasy is the pure invention of high fantasy. Hippos fly, the sun is dying, spaceships crashed on distant worlds give rise to fantasy caste-based societies of stunning complexity, and lightning rails cover a vast pseudo-industrial continent. Hell, you could say that midichlorians provide a unifying life force for a far-flung fantasy empire of the stars. These are all Big Fantasies.

Within that realm of the high-flung fantasy setting, I think you can probably tease apart two flavors. One of them is more recognizably "realistic" or concerned with plausibility, and the other is more clearly interested in a high concept or message, with less concern for realism or authenticity.

Anchored Fantasy

Anchored fantasy is high fantasy that still takes a grain of simulation to heart. There's a sense of pattern-matching, of making sure that linguistics are reasonable, that armor might matter, or that societies function similarly to human societies already known.

If pressed to name the pure fantasies that are most anchored in some degree of reality, I'd probably list game worlds like Monte Cook's Diamond Throne, Margaret Weis and Tracy Hickman's *Dragonlance*, Jack Vance's *Dying Earth*, M.A.R. Barker's *Empire of the Petal Throne*, Ed Greenwood and Jeff Grubb's *Forgotten Realms*, Fritz Leiber's Lanhkmar, Tolkien's Middle-earth, John Wick's Rokugan, and Lucas' *Star Wars*. They all feature social structures and technology that is somewhat Earth-derived, even if the worlds themselves are clearly new.

In an anchored fantasy, the people act in ways that are semi-feudal, or similar to the Meso-American cultures, or simply in guilds, cities, and societies of knights with fancy swords and mystic codes. They're not familiar, exactly, which makes them thrilling. But we recognize that they are built on models we recognize and the places and structures they inhabit are appealing partly because we do understand them as somewhat like our own history.

What does anchored high fantasy mean for your design?

I would argue that the emphasis here is on creating an entirely new world that obeys most of the same principles and laws we know, with the major addition of magic. You can take huge liberties as a designer in these settings, setting continents adrift, lighting the world from enormous lamp-like trees, mixing alien and human societies together, and hopping from one charming vignette to the next without too much concern for the details of trade and agriculture. Your eyes are on the fantastical, and some hand-waving is fine; your audience will follow.

What seems most familiar is the heroic characters and the societies they come from. These take certain recognized forms, such as feudalism or a caste system, that are based on earth analogues. Humans are largely dominant, but not entirely, and this means that high fantasy is a place for utopian and dystopian realms as bright and dark as you can imagine. These anchored fantasies seem to drift, as a group, easily into Manichean and sometimes racist fantasy, and they are difficult to pigeonhole.

Each is a strange soap bubble, a mix of the familiar and the truly new. As a designer, you have great freedom to explore and experiment.

Wild-Eyed Wahoo Fantasy

Beyond those somewhat anchored fantasy settings are the wild-eyed and the wahoo worlds. This is by no means pejorative, as these include some of my personal favorites, but it is meant to show that there are high-concept, love-'em-or-hate-'em sorts of settings. Call them worlds of pure chaos, places where anything goes and where the usual rules do not apply. They are not meant to be realistic, and indeed that is their appeal. They are settings unmoored from reality and operating by rules of your design—but these settings do have rules.

To provide some examples, think of places like China Mieville's Bas Lag, Pratchett's Disc World, Frank Baum's Oz, David "Zeb" Cook's *Dark Sun* and *Planescape*, Keith Baker's *Eberron*, Jim Ward's *Gamma World*, NCSoft's *Guild Wars*, Andrew Leker's *Jorune*, Michael Moorcock's Melnibone, Jeff Grubb's *Spelljammer*, and Blizzard's *World of Warcraft*. These are places where truly Weird Shit happens, with different rules of physics, alien landscapes, magical wastelands, alien gods, mutants, and cosmologies. It's fun to go out on the edge, and fantasy is always exploring strange places like this. These are the high-wire acts of worldbuilding. They take creative risks, not always successfully, and they endure a higher degree of mockery than the real fantasies or anchored fantasies do because of those creative risks. They also attract a loyal following who love that particular flavor of weird. Just ask any *Planescape* fan.

But what does wild-eyed and wahoo fantasy mean for your design?

First off, it means less worry about matching real history and legend, and complete creative freedom to ask "What if?" This is tremendously liberating to a writer who may have spent a lot of time with more traditional fantasy settings. What if Law and Chaos were universal forces? What if philosophies came with secret societies and belief changed the fabric of the universe? What if wizards could stand on a spaceship's deck and travel among the worlds as starfaring explorers? What if magic creates enormous and impenetrable brambles that are slowly choking the world? What if the world was doomed to die any day now, and magic was a curse? What if Ragnarok already happened, and the World Serpent flattened Europe? What if goblins were all pyromaniacs, or mutations were good for you? What if the world really was flat? (Wait, that's Midgard.)

A wahoo design needs a single, unified premise or series of premises. These must be clearly stated and then enlarged and expanded to their logical conclusion. It needs strange societies that encapsulate that premise, and conflicts between them, and room for both humor and tragedy. Most of all, a wahoo design needs to offer new patterns for GMs to follow; the traditional myths and legends don't apply here, so you need to show people the hooks and the standard tropes of this new world. As a designer, you need to make the bizarre seem not just familiar, but inevitable, encapsulated in a few key locations (Sigil) or characters (dragon kings).

Most of all, you need to know just how far you can push this premise before it all comes apart. Too much humor or lightness, and it all becomes laughable. Too

grim, and no one wants to play. Just because you are reinventing the rules of physics, sociology, and biology does not mean you get a free pass to invent anything and everything. On the contrary, you must first describe and explain your premises, and then you must adhere to them scrupulously. Work your premise, and make it sing, and the world will dream the same strange dream you have. Fail to stick with it, or treat your premise with any disdain, and your high-wire act will flop and fail.

A Mix of Fantasy and Reality: Low Fantasy

I said earlier I'd get back to the place where plausible fantasy and pure intersect, and here we are. It's fantasy with grit and plausibility, with a dark streak of cynicism and a love of the double-cross. This is, frankly, where I run Midgard sometimes, in the space of low fantasy. It is not floating cities and unicorns, it is not wahoo very often, it has dirt under its fingernails and bloodstains on its soul. There's magic, sometimes hugely powerful magic, but it's anything but a common or everyday experience to see it.

To quote a few touchstones as I've done earlier, I'd put forward Glen Cook's Black Company, Chris Pramas's *Freeport*, Mike Mearls's *Iron Heroes*, N.R. Crossby's *Harn*, Steve Brust's Vlad Taltos series, Robert Lynn Aspirin's *Thieves World*, and George R.R. Martin's Westeros. Arguably Bioware's *Dragon Age*, Gary Gygax's *World of Greyhawk*, and Ursula Le Guin's *Earthsea* books belong to this camp, though they might be placed in the real fantasy camp instead. But this is my taxonomy, and I think the style and undergirdings of these settings have much in common.

The main thrust of the low fantasy characters and the settings is that there are limits to power, that everything has a price, that human nature is corrupt and salvation uncertain. Maybe you see where I'm going with this. . . . It's very similar to hardboiled or noir, and it requires a certain cynicism about human nature and about the roles of pure good and pure evil. It's a worldview, as much as anything.

What does gritty low fantasy mean for your design?

The interesting thing about low fantasy, or gritty fantasy, is that the heroes in it are absolutely heroes, but the setting is built in such a way as to minimize the potential for munchkinism and masturbatory fantasies of pure power. Instead, the limits of power are quite real: heroes are smaller and less important than other forces (kingdoms, gods, devils, ancient Dragaerans, what have you) but they fight and struggle mightily anyway, knowing they won't always win. This is a hardboiled ethos, a punk ethos of the little hero who comes up from nothing to achieve much. It is surprisingly unpopular in fantasy RPGs, though it is a dominant thread in fantasy fiction as sword and sorcery of the old school and the new (Joe Abercrombie doesn't even bother with magic in his take).

I think gritty settings are more appealing to designers than they are to players. Few players want limits to their character's power and a sense of futility is rarely sexy in an RPG. It's possible to design around this, to make a game compelling even when the death rate is very high and the odds of success low. It's just a lot harder than a game where players can buy magic items out of any book or where any wound is quickly healed. Design for low fantasy if you like, but realize that the majority of the fantasy RPG audience doesn't play this style of game.

An Exhortation

This overview of the major fantasy RPG subgenres presents them as I see them, with reference to particular traditions or styles in setting design. Different designers often work in several such subgenres, and I certainly would not want to imply that one or another of them is superior to the others. They all have their followers, and while the size of the audience is certainly a consideration when thinking about what sort of world to build, it's hardly the most important.

Most of all, I think, as a designer you should be aware of what has come before and how your world design relates to those ancestors. Build a world that wildly reinvents an ancient mythos. Build a whole new mythos and share it. Discuss what you love in other worlds, and think about why you love it. Don't be afraid to crib the best of history, and don't be afraid to run with a high concept if you have one that sets your designer-senses tingling.

When you've done all that, combine old and new in a way that makes it a joy for both players and game masters, but more than anything, create a world that is exactly as real and as fantastical as you want it to be. I want to play in that world.

Midgard in the Taxonomy

The Midgard campaign setting started as deliberately not a setting, and confined itself to the Free City of Zobeck, a river town that could be dropped pretty much anywhere into a homebrew campaign. That lasted for about six years, but over time, people wanted to know more and more about what was over the next hill. In 2012, with the publication of the Midgard campaign setting, a goodly portion of the world was revealed. Where does it fit in?

I've suggested here that Midgard is a real fantasy setting, but that's only partly true. It has won the ENnie Award for Best Adventure for *Streets of Zobeck*, which is a gritty low fantasy collection. It includes an entire region where Abominations Walk the Earth, and it is more wahoo in the various corners than I might have expected: especially its Shadow Lands and its Elf Lands. Fantasy has a nice way of upping the ante, and making something strangely real and entirely weird. I ran with those elements, or at least I designed them in for the players who enjoy them. They're easy to ignore for those who prefer their fantasy more realistic. The flexibility is part of what makes Midgard click.

In other words, I thought I was going to write it as sword and sorcery, and it's closer to Greyhawk and Golarion than I thought it would be. Sometimes, in the work of building a world, things may take unusual turns. That's not necessarily a bad thing, and in the case of Midgard, I'd say it's an incredible strength. The setting makes it possible to play real fantasy, anchored fantasy, low fantasy, and even some degree of wahoo fantasy in different regions of the setting. Individual GMs can emphasize or de-emphasize certain regions and elements easily to suit the preference of their group of players. I'd like to see more settings take this regional or modular approach to worldbuilding, and make it possible to scale the level of historical and fantastical elements to suit two or more of the audiences described here.

Bringing History To Life

Keith Baker

The paladin leveled his sword, the point lingering in front of the orc's neck. "You shouldn't have come here, beast."

"This was our land first, and my kind who forged that blade in your fist." The gray-skinned shaman laughed. "You don't even know what it is, do you? You think it's just like any other lump of enchanted steel. Go ahead, then. Strike me down. Draw innocent blood with the Sword of Justice, and see what it costs you."

Adventurers live in the moment. As you design your world, you may develop a rich and detailed history. You could produce lineages of kings for each kingdom you create, explore the roots of religion, even establish the global events that led to the current geographical layout of your world. But why do the players care about any of this? How does it impact their experience as they explore the world?

Not every element of history will impact the player characters. Some things are simply about creating a world that feels real. However, there are many ways that history can affect, inspire, and improve your adventures. Consider the following questions as you develop your setting.

Why Do We Fight?

What are the greatest conflicts in the modern age of your world? Is the most menacing threat an ancient evil—the dark lord lingering in the land of shadows—or conflict between human nations? Are there cultures or races in your world that you want the adventurers to see as implacable enemies—any time they encounter troglodytes, they know it's going to be a fight to the death?

Whether the enemy is troglodytes or the human tribes of the Tralog Hills, it's good to establish the reasons for these conflicts . . . and preferably, to find a way to make those personal for the players. You can tell the players the basic origin of the conflict—

how the Tralog tribes are tree-worshipping savages who have always resisted the civilizing agenda of the Griffon Empire—but after that, work with each player whose character comes from the Griffon Empire to determine their personal interactions with the Tralogs in the past. Was a character's father killed during a Tralog raid? Was the character once captured and tortured by Tralog barbarians, producing disfiguring scars that remain to this day? Was her life spared by a Tralog druid who told her that the fate of both their cultures would one day rest on her shoulders?

The same principle applies even if the threat is an ancient evil. The major villain of the campaign is the Lich-Lord of the Kingdom of Bone. It's been centuries since his undead legions have ventured from the blasted realm . . . but what connects the player characters to him? Is the wizard the last surviving member of his mortal bloodline? Does the paladin hear the voice of the saint who gave her life to defeat the Lich-Lord the last time he rose? Could the thief's terrible nightmares be related to the finger bone he found in the purse he stole from that stranger?

These conflicts may not be so simple and clear cut. It may well be that the Tralog Hillfolk have valid reasons to hate the Griffon Empire. It could be that the enemy in your campaign isn't an exterior foe, but rather rival families within a single kingdom. But the principle remains. Work with the players to determine what their characters know and why they care. Do they embrace these conflicts, or do they have reasons to go against the common flow? Could the adventurers end up forging a new peace between the Tralogs and the Empire? Bear in mind that this doesn't have to be the focus of a campaign at all. The adventurers could be solely interested in exploring dungeons and making a profit. But at least when they do encounter a Tralog, they have a sense that they are tied to one of the big conflicts going on around them—and they have a personal stake in it.

Lost Civilizations

In our world, the general rule is that technology advances and, as a result, modern weaponry and tools are invariably superior to those from the past. If you want the best gun money will buy, you buy it; you don't go poking around a dusty crypt hoping you'll stumble on a rifle better than you could find at the gun shop. However, in fantasy RPGs we often want the most potent tools and treasures to be things that cannot be bought—things that can only be obtained through adventures. Logically, how do we justify this? Why are the treasures of old equal or superior to what's produced in the present day?

Artifacts are generally one of a kind, with origins steeped in legends. When you're looking for a broader spread of treasures and challenges, this question can be answered more broadly with the introduction of fallen civilizations: cultures that advanced to a point beyond that of modern civilizations only to vanish from the world. In exploring this possibility, one immediate question is how the civilization fell. Here are a few ideas to consider.

- **The Deluge.** From the biblical flood to the story of Atlantis, there are many tales of civilizations wiped away by a devastating force of nature. An important question here is whether this was a divine punishment, a truly natural disaster, or a cataclysm the culture brought upon itself. Could it happen again? The signs

of this disaster could be traced across the world. Lingering elementals or demons may be the remnants of this destructive force. Are there still intact cities from this civilization, or just ruins and artifacts carried far and wide by the waters?

- **World War III.** As a society advances, war becomes more devastating. A fallen civilization could have been wiped out or simply reduced to a more primitive level by military conflict. Who did they fight? Was it a civil war? A war against an extraplanar opponent? Are the survivors still around today, in a more primitive state? Are modern cities built on the foundations of the old?

- **Croatoan.** The fate of the lost civilization remains a complete mystery. Its cities are still virtually intact, and still contain valuable artifacts protected by powerful wards. But the people of the nation simply vanished. This provides both a source of dungeons containing mighty magic and a mystery that could be solved as part of a campaign. Are these ancients going to return? Or could their fate strike a modern nation?

- **Vestiges of Former Glory.** A fallen culture may not have vanished completely; it could still linger in the present day as a shadow of its former self. Perhaps the elves were spread across the entire continent until a curse or war depleted their numbers; now there is only a single occupied elvish city. The elves possess amazing magic, but as their numbers have dwindled and greatest artificers died, they have lost many secrets and magical techniques. As such, they are very interested in reclaiming relics from the ruins of their former empire – but everyone in the world wants elven magic for their own.

While lost civilizations provide an easy source of dungeons and advanced magic, there are many other ways to make a fallen culture relevant in the present day. Monsters that pose a threat in the present may have been created as weapons of war by a fallen culture. A race of savage humanoids could be the degenerate remnants of a previous civilization; their current state speaks to the story of their downfall. Perhaps orcs were once the most advanced civilization in the world; the first human civilization brought down the orcish empire, and it is for this reason that orcs seek bloody vengeance on humanity.

The Stuff of Legends

In the present day, who do the bards sing of? What are the stories children demand to hear? Who are the greatest heroes of the past, and what were their treasures and tools?

Legendary heroes may be the foundations of modern nations or religions. Their unique artifacts may be the most powerful magic items player characters can hope to find. But as with war, an important question is how they intersect with the characters. As mentioned above, it's best to discuss this directly with your players. However, if you are designing your world for a mass audience, that may not be an option. But you can still think about different legends that are likely to appeal to different sorts of characters—the tale of great sacrifice and courage that may have inspired the paladin; the story of the master thief whose hoard has never been found; the tale of the first wizard, who stole the secrets of magic from the gods and was cursed for his crime. Share these tales with your players and ask them to pick the ones their

characters care about. Aside from revealing something about the kinds of adventure that appeal to them, this can also lay the groundwork for adventures to come. The paladin loves the tale of the king who gave up his life and his sword to save his nation from demons. Now the demons are returning, and the sword must be found. Can the player characters write the final chapter of this tale? And what challenges are involved? Finding the sword may be the easiest part of the challenge. But it must be reforged in the fires where it was first made, and the one who wishes to wield it must be blessed by a particular god and cursed by a fey lord. These details are all spelled out in the original legend, but the player must unravel the riddles and then find a way to follow in the footsteps of the past.

Of course, there's another side to legends: the damage adventurers can do when they interfere in someone else's tales. Perhaps a party delves into an ancient Orc tomb and retrieves a *+2 Blade of Buttkicking*. For the fighter, this is simply a step up from his current weapon. But for the orcs of the region, this weapon has significance far beyond its magical powers. This is the sword of the last true orc king, waiting in his tomb for the day a new king would prove worthy and take it. That a human desecrates the tomb and now swans around with the orcish blade on his belt could be mortal insult. It could drive any orc who sees it into a murderous rage. Or far worse, it could actually be the event that unites the warring orc clans behind a single new king—a king who will avenge this crime.

In the end, legends are a way to add depth to any culture, and to show that the creatures that players consider to be monsters have their own heroes and aspirations. This is even more interesting if the players' lack of knowledge of these tales and customs becomes a direct threat in a scene. Look to the paragraph that opens this article. The paladin had no idea that the *+2 Blade of Buttkicking* is the orcish "Sword of Justice." What *will* happen if he strikes an innocent orc with it? Does he dare to find out?

How Does History Affect You?

As you develop a new world, stop and think about events in our recent history that have had a personal effect on you. Has your life changed because of 9/11? Hurricane Katrina? The civil rights movement of the 20th century? The Holocaust and World War II? The development of the nuclear bomb, itself a consequence of the World War? While I'm never a fan of directly transplanting real world events or places into an imaginary world, if you stop to think about the roots of a real-world event and its far-ranging impact, you can likely create imaginary events that *feel* real. Pearl Harbor and 9/11 are two examples of the impact of a devastating, unexpected attack. Has anything like this happened in your world? Prohibition created a host of interesting stories. Is there anywhere in your world where a powerful nation has set up a similar situation—not necessarily for alcohol, but for *something* people want? How has this affected organized crime? Does it have the support of the common people? And as always, how does it affect the player characters?

These are just a few examples of the impact that history can have on a campaign. The key point is to look beyond the simple facts and find the ways that the events matter to people—the ways in which they shape history, and add life to the enemies and treasures players will encounter in your world.

Apocalypso: Gaming after the Fall

Jeff Grubb

Most fantasy campaign worlds, indeed, most fictional fantasy worlds in general, are apocalyptic in nature.

I know—it sounds counter-intuitive at first. Fantasy is the domain of heroes and wizards, of dragons and treasure. Its tales are set in some distant realm of the past, when life was both simpler and cheaper than it is today. Fantasy is *The Lord of the Rings*, of course, and Elric, and Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser, and Conan, but also *Dragonlance, Forgotten Realms, Magic: the Gathering,* and other series that pepper the shelves.

Apocalyptic fiction, on the other hand, takes place after the fall. Stephen King's *The Stand*, Cormac MacCarthy's *The Road*, and the Walking Dead series falls into those categories, along with *A Canticle for Liebowitz, Hiero's Journey*, and such games as *Gamma World*. In apocalyptic fiction, our mighty civilization has been brought low by war, by pollution, by forces unknown, and the survivors struggle to make their way in a fallen world.

Yet fantasy is as post-apocalyptic as any dark tale of survivors of whatever cataclysm that ended modern civilization. In fact, more so.

Think about it. Your typical *Dungeons & Dragons* campaign consists of adventurers whose lot in life is to raid ancient tombs for lost, powerful treasures. Fair enough. But for there to be ancient tombs, there must have been ancient tomb-builders. And these tomb-builders were relatively powerful, in that they built structures that could withstand the test of time. In addition, these deep places of your world still have guardians, be they undying, unliving, magical, or clockwork, who are still around after all this time to guard their treasures.

Further, these ancient builders, regardless of origin or nature, also had items of wondrous power that one could not get at the local market. Here were magical

swords belonging to long-dead heroes, dusty tomes of forgotten knowledge, holy artifacts of lost gods, and riches cast in strange metals.

As a result, these settings, challenges, and rewards all require the existence of predecessor civilizations. Further, these precursors probably met rather sudden ends, as they didn't have much chance to pass along their secrets to succeeding generations and races. Greyhawk, elder-bearded that it is, had its Rain of Colorless Fire, which wiped out the magical empires of the west and set the stage both for buried kingdoms and forgotten wizardry. The Forgotten Realms, grown out of Ed Greenwood's campaign, has had a sequence of cascading failures, as first the dragons ruled, then the giants, then the elves (leaving mythal stones carelessly around like abandoned toys) and now men. It seems that with every change of hands, the rulers of the world become both physically and magically smaller (the halflings and the gnomes of the Realms are standing in the wings, rubbing their hands eagerly, waiting for their big entrance).

Dragonlance, which evolved not out of a single extant gaming campaign but instead was created entirely as a setting for games and stories, underscores this apocalyptic nature even more strongly. In the development of the world, Tracy Hickman drew two sets of world maps for the continent of Ansalon. The first was in the golden age, when the gods spoke to men, and mighty empires such as Istar reigned. Then he (or rather, in the world, the spurned gods) dropped a mountain on Istar and shattered the map. The world of Dragonlance that the players initially encounter is a broken and fallen thing, its glory days the stuff of legend, its magic lost, and its gods no longer in communication.

The pattern continues through the game worlds of D&D and related worlds of its age. Eberron was wracked by recent world war that left an entire nation consumed by magic and lost. Tekumel, the setting for *Empire of the Petal Throne*, has a long history, most of it in the downward direction. It actually is set in the far future (after an atomic war has destroyed most of the Northern Hemisphere of Earth), and the planet of Tekumel is sucked into another dimension, crashing its advanced civilization, and turning most of its devices of the age into magical talismans. (Tekumel's inhabitants also bury and build over their cities every few decades, a cultural phenomenon that guarantees that there will be plenty of underground space to cavort in.)

So the very presence of dungeons in *Dungeons & Dragons* creates the need for earlier, more powerful civilizations, a history that the players can raid and struggle against. They are all fallen worlds, worlds that were once more powerful than they are now, and have struggled to rebuild. Many of the monstrous threats are creations of these ancients, either intentionally as servants and guards, or unintentionally as the result of their wars. In short, the fantasy world is post-apocalyptic. But its roots go back to before the first polyhedral dice were rolled.

Let's go back to the literary forefathers of these game worlds, for it is out of those inspirations that D&D and its kindred games have been woven. *The Lord of the Rings* looms large in all such discussions, of course, and its history consists of nothing but fallen empires and a wistful desire for days that have passed and will never come again. The Middle-earth of *Lord of the Rings* is at the shank-end of its Third Age, the previous ages being much more glorious but destroyed by conflict. The elves are a remnant of their once-great past. The dwarves have lost their ancestral homes, both

in the Lonely Mountain and in Moria. And even though Sauron himself is defeated, the time of the old races has gone, and the fourth age belongs to man.

So we are continually faced in *The Lord of the Rings* (and to a lesser extent, in *The Hobbit*) with both fallen predecessor kingdoms and their powerful magical legacy. Once Gondor and Arnor ruled this land, but Arnor is long gone and Gondor is beaten back to a nub of its former self. The dwarven halls of Moria are inhabited by orcs and fouler monsters, and the Lonely Mountain was captured by a dragon. The elves have been in twilight for centuries, their havens reduced to a handful of outposts, most of their people fled across the sea. One of the early chapters of the book is titled "The Shadow of the Past" and is a full-strength infodump as Gandalf unspools the history of Middle-earth, driving home the idea that things were once greater than they are now.

And the "Shadow of the Past" chapter deals with the history of the most powerful magical artifact of Middle-earth—the One Ring. Crafted by a powerful elder being, it cannot be reproduced in this lesser age, and can be only destroyed in the forge of its own making—Mount Doom.

Middle-earth as a result is pervaded with an inherent conservatism and a resignation to its condition, coupled with a longing for this lost and glorious past. The magic of the elves is such that will not be seen again, be it lembas or Galadriel's filter. And though there may be attempts to restore some legacy with the past—it is, after all, the return of the King that is a goal both sought and attained—things will never be the same again. The world has been bent, Númenor has been sunk beneath the waves, and with the passing of Sauron, the work of the wizards is done and magic itself is in decline.

Even fantasy forebears that don't deal in as large a set of issues as *The Lord of the Rings* have had to deal with these fallen empires of their own past. Conan is always finding himself among ancient ruins, or beneath cities in rotted foundations, fighting some terror, or recovering some lost artifact. Similarly, Leiber's Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser stories, though focused in tightly on the two heroes in a low fantasy, has its share of forgotten magics and elder secrets. Elric might escape this, at first blush, for these tales were set when once the world was young, but no, Elric's Melnibone has gone from ruling the world into rot, pulling back to its Dreaming City. *The Sword of Shanara* series inverts the formula slightly, but underscores it—it is our world that has fallen to a nuclear apocalypse, and the elder depths that the heroes plumb are the legacy of our time, though decked out in fantasy tropes.

So why does this fascination with the past play so heavily in our fantasy literature as well as fantasy games? Yes, for the same reason: the need for places in which heroes can fight and recover lost treasures. But our ancient mythology is generally positive. The Greek gods under Zeus rebelled against Chronos and the titans, but the end result was to make a better world, not a fallen one. The Norse pantheon has the Ragnarok, but that is the foretold end of the world for everyone, not a set of stories that explain why Thor isn't hanging around your village. The various hells created for these mythologies are going concerns occupied by the spirits of the dead, not remains of lost kingdoms. Why the fascination with fallen kingdoms and elder civilizations in fantasy?

The reason in part goes back to the European Enlightenment, from whence much

of the modern age (including the birth of the modern novel) has come. Here was a time when the civilizations of Western Europe were unifying in political power, advancing in technology and knowledge, and emerging as world powers. Yet they were still dealing with the long shadows of their predecessors—the Romans who ruled many of their lands, and before them the Greeks and the Egyptians. (Yes, there were Persians and Babylonians before as well, but they extend much further back.) It was difficult to sit on Capitoline Hill and look out at the triumphal arches of what was once Rome without feeling like one was in a diminished age, or to see the Sphinx excavated from its desert sands without wondering what else was hidden beneath. Rome, Greece, and Egypt were the real-world equivalent of the fallen empires and ancient treasures later captured in stories, and they were romanticized (yes, the Roman in the name) and held up as paragons of their age—ideals that the then-moderns could only seek to equal. So the neoclassical and Greek Revival architecture aped earlier columns and facades, while teams of explorers and adventurers plundered old tombs to find lost knowledge.

That last bit sounds so very much like a D&D adventure. It is here, in the recognition of previous powers, that the Western literary tradition gains much of its fear and wonder of the riches of the past, which passes down into the fantasy tradition and from there into gaming worlds. Even our electronic game worlds, be they *World of Warcraft, Diablo*, or *Guild Wars*, have that same descending pattern: once things were great and the age was golden, but someone screwed up, and we're now all paying the price for it. Apocalypses and Ragnaroks, large and small, litter the past of fantasy worlds, and the landscape is a scar tissue of these previous fallen times.

So where does that leave us when building brave new worlds?

The great, lost past of fantasy provides a strong foundation for storytelling, and provides many of its tropes but, as we see, it has its own baggage. This heritage creates a rich gaming universe filled with great treasure, immortal legends, and lost knowledge, and may account in part for the fact that fantasy gaming universes have succeeded over all other genres—they have universally understood tropes and archetypes. But the apocalyptic nature of fantasy also carries with it the implied statement that the current setting is diminished. That this is a lesser world, living in the shadows cast by the monuments of the past, and that the achievements of its heroes are reduced in the process.

There are a number of ways to approach this. One is to keep the focus tight and the expectations low. Lieber's Lankhmar is a good example, in both fiction and gaming. Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser live in a fallen world of lost treasures, but their goal is merely one of where the next meal (and next drink) is coming from. They may irritate lost gods, tread through forgotten galleries, and recover ancient artifacts, but it ultimately comes down to doing the job. The two heroes' masters may have more the feeling of striking against the darkness of the modern times, but Fafhrd and the Grey Mouser live for the moment. In games, an urban medieval fantasy that worries more about thieves' guilds and internal politics than about quests and ancient curses keeps the scope limited and the story grounded in the practical.

Another method is to embrace the idea of the diminished world whole-heartedly.

Jack Vance's *Dying Earth* series, transformed into a game of the same name from Pelgrane Press, engages strongly with the idea that so many great empires and ages have come and gone that it makes no sense to even worry about them, since we are truly at the end of days and the sun may well go out tomorrow. If there are tombs, they have been despoiled so many times it matters not. If there are monsters, they have been recreated and exceeded. If there are treasures, they are but trinkets that do not matter because the world is about to end. This creates an almost-comic pessimism against which the actions of Vance's protagonists (and the actions of any would-be Vancian hero) are cast against the weight of history, which is so great that it cannot be recognized and as such is merely part of the world.

A third option is to do without these trappings of the past entirely. China Mieville's Bas-Lag books, *Perdido Street Station, The Scar,* and *The Iron Council* all exist in a fantasy universe, but it seems to have moved out of the Age of Enlightenment's concern about its predecessor civilization to a more sure-footed thinking of an Industrial Age where new spells and attitudes are considered part of the world. There are monsters, indeed, but they are not the product of ancient apocalypses; rather, they are new discoveries of evolutions of current developments. Indeed, in *Perdido Street Station*, where a monster is unleashed on the city and a group of D&D-style adventurers are assembled to hunt it down, they feel more out of place than the creature that they are hunting. Mieville abandons the tropes of the fantastic past, in particular its apocalypse, for a more progressive view where the actions of the current age are what matters. It is a very different type of fantasy.

Lastly, one approach to consider is the idea of taking on the past and defeating it, of proving the superiority of one's age through besting the ghosts of the previous age. I haven't seen this one as much, but it takes a page from Mieville's work while retaining the presence of the fallen empire and processor ages. Yes, there has been an apocalypse, be it a rain of colorless fire or planetary dimension-hop. And it has spawned all manner of lost kingdoms, dangerous weapons, and lurking monsters. But the ultimate goal of this approach is to create a new world out of the ashes of the old by defeating the creatures of the past, by harnessing the energies of these lost kingdoms, and by exceeding the expectations of these predecessor races.

In this way we can take a particular trope and bend it away from its usual assumptions and the conclusions that come with it—that the world is wounded, and while we may staunch the bleeding, we can never truly heal it. We can build new fantasy worlds with an active viewpoint, that things can change as a result of the protagonists' (and players') actions. That we can shed the tradition-encrusted bonds of the traditional fantasy and move the genre, both games and fiction, forward into its own new age.

Here Be Dragons

Worldbuilding Advice from a Professional Mapper

Jonathan Roberts

Fantasy worlds and cartography have a special relationship. I can pick up a standard whodunit in the bookshop without needing a map, but if I open a fantasy novel, the first thing I look for is the map. If I can't find it, I'm lost.

The need for a map is understandable. Stories in fantasy worlds are stories of exploration. It's no accident that so many heroes are wide-eyed innocents. As they discover new wonders, the world is revealed to us through their eyes. All explorers need a map, and that's just as true for the reader exploring by proxy as it is for the sailor venturing out into the dangerous deep.

Why do you need a world map?

If you're like many GMs, you'll start your adventure in a small town with some adventure locations nearby. The adventurers won't venture beyond the confines of this area for at least a couple of sessions and that gives you more than enough time to detail the surrounding area. You *can* manage by just mapping the next area that players haven't discovered yet and build your world as they explore.

But maps do much more than stop you getting lost—they help players suspend their disbelief.

When an author introduces a new world to you as a reader they're asking you to believe the place is real. You need to believe that behind the castles and battlefields there is a functioning world. A good novel hints at events that happen off-screen. A great novel allows you to interpret those hints and predict how events will play out. The unseen workings behind the narrative give the world depth. In roleplaying games this is even more critical. Players are willingly immersing themselves in your world. They can go anywhere and do anything, and they need to believe that if they do that, they will find a rich living world waiting for them. The problem is that no GM has the

time to invent that much detail—nor should they. The key is to help players believe that you've got a world of detail at your fingertips, without ever needing to create it.

So what does this have to do with maps? A map is the perfect tool for convincing players there's a functioning world just over the horizon.

I ran campaigns in the Forgotten Realms for years. My players never ventured further than the eastern edge of the Moonsea, yet they knew about the Magocracy of Thay, the vast Anauroch desert, and jungles of Chessenta. When they met a Red Wizard they immediately knew what that meant, even though I'd only mentioned Thay in passing. The map gave them the feeling that they could jump on a ship and sail to the Nelanther Isles or travel the Road to the Dawn all the way to the Plains of Purple Dust. They never did, but they believed that they *could*.

In this way a map provides an illusion, a useful mirage of a world that you don't need to create in exhaustive detail. It also helps you tell the story. Names on a map should spark the imagination and give players a hint of undiscovered wonders, such as the Devastation of Smaug or the Wide Dothraki Sea. The style of the map can tell a tale all its own. Thror's Map tells us at least as much about the cartographer as it does about the Lonely Mountain. A map is a way of providing information to your players, just like a piece of read-aloud text or a bloody scrap of paper in an assassin's pocket. You can add whatever information, or disinformation, you want in the map you show your players.

DESIGNING YOUR WORLD

So a world map is a useful illusion—and as with any illusion the trick is to make it consistent and believable. I approach all world maps in the same order to make sure the features hang together, whether I'm designing my own world from scratch or working up a map for a client.

Grab a couple of sheets of blank paper and a pen, and we'll get started.

Nation Building

City-states war, villages burn, and the future of humanity hangs in the balance. Stories are about heroes and the fate of nations. A country's culture and history is often closely tied to its geography. If we define our countries first, the geography will follow. Note down the countries, city-states, nomadic tribes, and so on that will form the centerpiece of your stories. Here we're interested in those things that are defined by the landscape. Are they a seafaring nation? Is it secluded or does it have regular trade with other countries? Do they have enemies? If so, what stops one or other wiping each other out? Is a nation famed for its metalwork? Its beer? Its light horse cavalry?

Use these answers to get an idea of the geography. A country famed for its cavalry should have lots of plains and rolling hills. It should have fought most of its battles in this terrain, so any enemy needs to be on the other side of those plains, not coming through a steep mountain pass. A country famed for its ships should have a wide coastline it depends on for its resources. It might have little or no farmland, forcing it to rely on imports to its ports. Two ancient enemies might be separated by a range of almost impassable mountains or a strait of water. Any effort to cross this barrier takes preparation and gives the other time to prepare a defense. Think of the English

Channel—fought over for centuries by France and England—or the natural barrier of the Alps that protected northern Italy until Hannibal brought his elephants over.

These questions give you a quick cheat sheet for the type of terrain you need for each country, and also give you quick off-the-cuff content when your players ask questions. Why are the elves of An'Rathor bad horsemen? Their secluded valley is surrounded by mountains so they always fight on foot.

Sketch Your Countries

Now it's time to sketch out our first map. Start by noting down the names of your nations roughly where you want them to be. This isn't so much a geographical map as a map of connections. Mark the barriers between countries and any major geographical features.

Define Your Nations
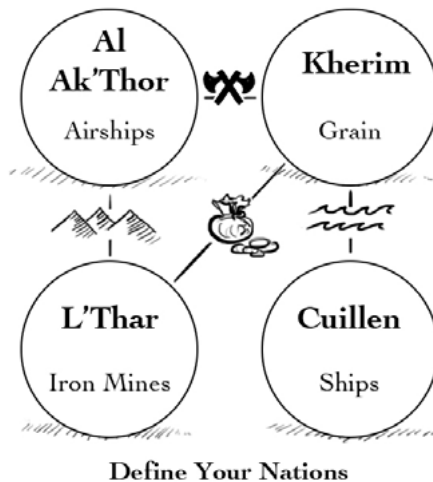
With this pinned down, my next step is usually a coastline. On a fresh piece of paper, start drawing a coastline. Use your nation sketch as a rough guide. Let your pen wander—coastlines are fractal, so any mistake can become a feature. The aim here is not to be neat. Add jagged edges and wiggles, inner seas and channels. Be careful with large land masses. The continental US is a vast unbroken landmass, and it can be tempting to go in a similar direction with your own world. I'd recommend providing much more coast, like Europe. As a Scot I'm biased towards coasts—you can travel coast to coast in my homeland in a couple of hours. But I'm not just saying this out of national pride—coasts allow for more variety in storytelling. You want to create a rich and varied world, so allow it to be rich and varied! Give countries coastlines to defend, straits to battle over, fishing grounds to feed them, and islands that harbor pirates and kraken. Talking of islands—add in groups of islands off the coast. A fun trick for islands is to use the shape of the coast to help define their shapes.

Add Mountains

Mountain ranges form along tectonic faults. They tend to form long, strung-out lines rather than filling out a region. I'm not arguing that you should figure out the tectonic history of the world to justify your mountains—you have better things to do. I'm just saying that when you lay in mountains, do so in lines. Ranges often lie close to coastlines; as one plate pushes over another it rises up and sinks the other plate beneath the ocean. The Andes are a good example of this.
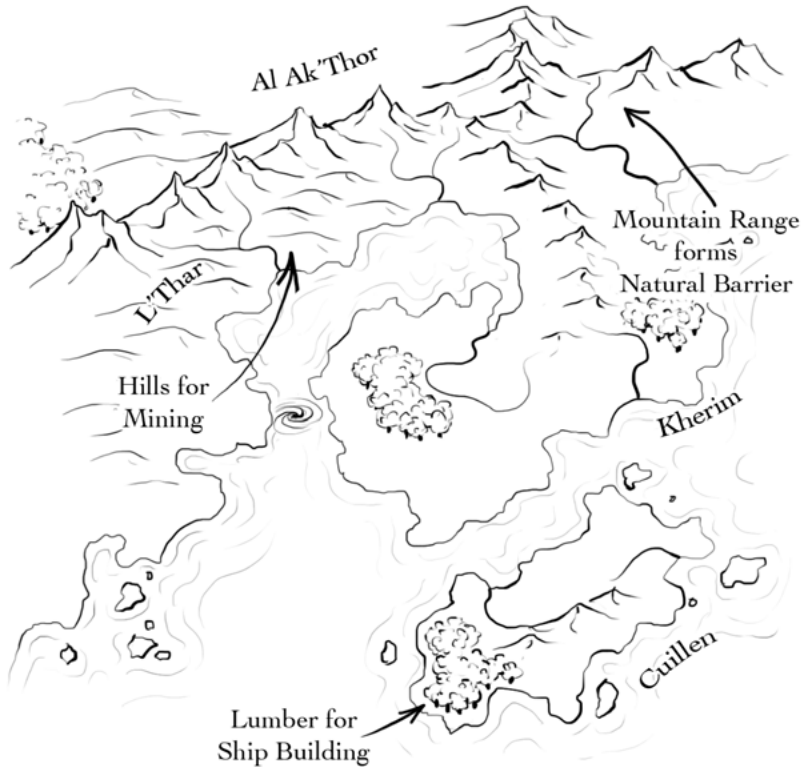
If you need inspiration for mountain ranges, it's only a click away. Jump on Google Maps, turn off the labels, and switch to the satellite view. Check out the Himalayas along the north of India—they look like a line drawn by a willful god. Remember: mountains are often the lairs of dragons, the home of giants and trolls, one of the places that harbor all those things that lie beyond the light of the campfire. They also provide one of the most formidable natural boundaries that will define the borders of your countries.

Add Rivers

The paths of rivers are determined by the height of the terrain, which is why we've left them until now. Rivers are one of the most important geographical features for

nations. They're a means of fast transport, they provide fish for eating, water for drinking, and a means of disposing of the effluent of civilization. When placing rivers, remember the following rules of thumb:

- Rivers always flow downhill. This may sound obvious, but remember this means a river can't flow from coast to coast or over a mountain range.

- Rivers join as they run to the sea, they rarely branch. Deltas are the exception rather than the rule.

- Rivers start in mountain ranges and end in oceans. Lakes without a river connecting them to the sea will be stagnant.

Rivers start inland and end at a sea

Rivers join, they rarely branch

Climate

You could spend days figuring out wind patterns and climate models for your world, just as you could create tectonic geological histories for your continents. But that's not the plan for this exercise. Once again, you can follow a few basic rules to make sure your climates don't present obvious logical problems.

- In many cases a region will have a prevailing wind. Such winds pick up wet air currents from the sea and travel inland until the rising altitude cools them to the point where it rains. This means that rain tends to fall on the side of the mountains that the prevailing wind hits first. One side of a large mountain range can be lush and fertile and the other side dry and barren.

- Rivers rarely run through deserts, and if they do they must start somewhere much wetter.

- Forests don't border deserts—make sure there's some plains or scrubland in between.

- Climates tend to fall in bands by latitude. Check out Google Maps and use

the Earth as a guide. Some latitudes tend to have desert, others rainforest, and others plains and deciduous forests. If you follow these, your players will find it familiar, even if it's only subconscious.

Final Geographical Touches

Great! We now have a world with nations, mountain ranges, deserts, and rivers. We're almost done with the geography. Add in some hills along the edges of the mountains, and anywhere you're going to want abandoned mines (you do need mines for your 1st level adventurers to clear out, don't you?), add thick virgin forest to hide bandits and green dragons, and you're done!

At this point it's best to step back and have a look over your world. Have a coffee, come back, and look at it with fresh eyes. I guarantee you'll see things you want to tweak. A mountain range will give you an idea for a glacial lake, a desert will look like it's in the wrong place. Edit, change, and tweak until you're happy with it.

But where has all the fantasy gone?

We're creating a fantasy world, remember? Now it's time to break the rules.

Brainstorm weird and wonderful locations: pockets of tundra in the center of the desert, rivers that run uphill, great floating ziggurats that hover over an ever-spinning whirlpool. All that work you've done making sure that the rest of the world hangs together means that these features will seem all the more fantastical. They'll be the wonders of your fantasy world, locations that nations will vie over for control. Sprinkle them around, especially in places that your players are unlikely to travel to. Outlandish names and reputations will spark your players' imaginations and make them want to expand their horizons. Suddenly you won't be telling them where to go, they'll be exploring of their own volition, and you'll know you succeeded in selling your world to them.

Coming full circle – putting the countries back in

Take some colored pencils and sketch in the borders of your countries. The borders should follow the natural obstacles. Make sure to leave some areas beyond the reach of any nations. These are the untamed wildernesses of the world, the regions off the edge any civilized map. Quite literally, here be dragons. When your players want to claim a royal charter by taming the frontier, these are the places they'll go.

Cities

A city thrives where there is food, water, and opportunity. Rivers or river mouths are great places for cities, and the reason for the location of many of the greatest cities of our own world (London, Paris). They are often defensible (Edinburgh) or near the source of a valuable trade material, such as a goldmine (Johannesburg). Once your capitals are placed, add in other major cities and fortresses. Keep cities near locations

that justify their existence—a spice route, a valuable fishing ground, a naturally occurring source of helium that fuels the airships of a nation. Fortresses similarly are placed along borders, at mountain passes, at the heart of a region's power, or along the coast to watch for raiders.

You don't have to name every city. It's easy to get bogged down coming up with names for every hamlet and fishing village. I tend to name capital cities and leave it at that. Create a separate list of five names for forts, five for towns, and five names for inns. When players ask about a place you haven't named, use one from your list and mark it on the map. When you have a moment after the game, update your list so you're never caught out again.

Once you've added your conventional power centers, it's time to add the fantasy ones. This is the time to place the five-thousand-foot pinnacle of ice at the center of the world, the ancient basalt gates erected by an extinct race of titans, and the floating cities of the sea elves.

Roads

The highways of the world define the arteries of trade and commerce. Start by

connecting up your capital cities. Roads tend to follow the path of least resistance, following rivers, coastlines, and winding through mountain passes. Once these are done, add a few smaller roads to connect up smaller towns—but don't worry about details. These are more to give an impression of detail than anything fixed.

Finishing Up

You're done! You now have a functioning map of your world, with nations, trade routes, perils, and treasures galore. Use this version for your own reference and sketch a less detailed version for your players. Then, when they scratch the surface and ask questions, you'll have immediate answers. This will give them (and you) a framework that they can use to interpret the world and hint at adventures over every horizon.

A map is a functional object. Its first and foremost purpose is to clearly display information. A good map can be drawn with a marker pen in the back of an exercise book or fully painted across three feet of canvas. It is relatively easy to turn a pen sketch into an old world masterpiece—but that's the subject for another article.

How to Design a City-State, Tribe, or Nation

Wolfgang Baur

It's fairly widely agreed that the atomic unit of RPG adventure design is the encounter, which governs the conflict between the adventurers and a set of foes in a single social or martial clash. What is the atomic unit of worldbuilding? Well, funny thing about that, as this is quite a bit fuzzier, but I think it might well be the *society*: a unified tribe, city-state, or nation with a shared culture, language, and traditions. You can build a world from smaller units, but in the end, it's the abstraction and concreteness of a particular social milieu that makes a particular place or a resident of that place memorable and unique.

For most human societies, the foundation stone might be the clan or the extended family—but unless your campaign world is about feuding families or highland clans or cattle rustlers, that unit of social organization is slightly too small. For science fictional societies, you might argue that the spaceship or colony is the basic unit of social organization, but for purposes of this discussion, I'm sticking with the larger fantasy setting.

Here's my argument for the tribe or city-state as a foundational unit: it provides political identity, language, a religious context, and a set of skills and traditions related to warfare, mating, magic, and social harmony, and likely a set of laws and a structure or hierarchy that governs proper and improper behavior. Those are, not surprisingly, all the tools you need to govern adventuring, titles, status, wealth, and arcane lore and divine wisdom. Skills, gear, and magic items arise only from a society. Without a society, you have a dungeon board game, a wargame, or a miniatures skirmish game, which might have elements of worldbuilding, but not a full-blown RPG setting.

The tools of the adventuring trade are always embedded in a cultural context, and thus for most worlds, the society is more important than the terrain, the weather, the monsters, or the economic and political relationships between societies.

In other words, the elements of a society are the elements that inform an adventurer's resources and background. You could define just that adventurer's immediate family or clan, and that might be appropriate for a wandering nomad from the plains, newly arrived in the Big City. But for most characters, defining just blood relations means you'd miss some of the options available elsewhere on the social ladder—where that family or clan fits into a wide context. An adventurer isn't always or even often from the upper rungs of society, and his clan or family might be tiny, obscure, largely extinct, or simply of little consequence to the world.

At the same time, the adventurer might have grown beyond that humble origin and made a name in a guild or priesthood, and that reputation defines the character. In this case, those non-familial options and elements of society will tend to be the ones that matter in play, and the character will interact with the various ranks of aristocrats, high priests, and tyrants of the world. Those characters are the ones most often handing out interesting missions, quests, and magic items in an adventure. Even if an adventure revolves around the movers and shakers of the lower classes (master of the thieves' guild springs to mind, as does a beggar prince or a humble monk), you'll need to have designed how that lower stratum of society works to know how adventurers fit into it.

In other words, to loot a world properly as a fantasy tomb robber, you need to have some understanding of where a society stashes its loot, who can tell you where the dungeons are, and how your character can transform raw gold into magical power, political power, higher knowledge, or landholdings, as your character might desire.

How to Design a Tribe

A tribe is relatively simple. The people share a race, language, and traditions, and a ruler. Most of all, the central fact of tribal life is that each tribe contains crucial blood ties among its members, and its most important sources of survival skills, political acumen, history, and knowledge all come from a collection of related people, families, uncles, aunts, and so forth. A tribal population might be a few dozen, a few hundred, even a few thousand, but the way you know these people is through blood ties: "Oh, you are the elder whose cousin was my grandfather! Good to meet you!" Blood and kin matter so much in a tribe because this is how you determine who is a member (you are born into a tribe), and also how you determine your status within it.

One way to think of it is that clan, family, and lodge relationships are an overgrown form of high school cliques and academic infighting. The stakes are small, by some standards, and there is no escaping your family or your birth. Footloose adventurers don't exist in a tight-knit tribe; there might be strangers or loners or visitors or hermits, but they aren't members of the tribe.

The relationships and marriages and feuds of a nomadic or settled tribe are carried along through history, but the wall of unity protects the tribe against all outsiders. The tribe always comes first. Strangers are not to be trusted. The tribe

obeys its elders, and those who step out of line are ostracized, exiled, or otherwise shamed. Tribal life is hard: everyone must work together, and the young typically must obey the elders.

This way of living is alien to most modern people, at least on the surface, though it is simply the biological version of us versus them. Designing a dwarf clan or a gnomish family or wood-elves who are hunter-gatherers and rely purely on their own tribe is a great exercise in worldbuilding. Tribal societies are ancient and functional, and still exist today in a few places. They might bear further study for the designer of an interstellar merchant house, or a wandering tribe of elves, or a settled hill tribe of ogres that relies on banditry.

Identify the tribe's headman, matriarch, shaman, or ruler. Identify the tribe's immediate goals or enemies. And identify their system of reward and punishment. Building that society makes it easy to see who would give out quests and rewards for accomplishment, who might be banished and why, and who the tribe fears. Those things are generally enough to place the tribe in a larger context.

How to Design a City-State

The central fact of a city is not blood and family (though those continue to be important, sometimes vitally so), but rather location and residence. The members of a city-state are those who live there. They might be relatives and members of a single tribe or clan, or they might be offspring of two, three, or a dozen distinct tribes. They might be mostly a human population, with an important minority of minotaurs or halflings, and yet still all members of the same city state. So long as they are acknowledged as citizens by some authority or by virtue of residence, the people of a city-state are more mobile and less locked-in than a tribe.

A city-state is a single settlement, and the oldest ones date back to the Harappan civilization in the Indus Valley, roughly 5,400 years ago. Even then, the outlines were clear: agriculture, a settlement, and some kind of ruling class. The cities had baths, jewelry, domesticated animals, drainage, granaries, and much more, centuries before Egypt. This is an important difference from nomadic tribes: the permanent settlement in a single locale means that locale is developed over time and its people can build defenses, temples, armories, docks, shipyards, irrigation systems, mines— whatever helps them to exploit their surroundings and make life a little easier. If a place grows attractive enough, people with no relationship to the city-state's founders will settle there and become assimilated.

And that's the point: a city-state is a place that must attract and retain its people, because urban life is the exception to the rule in middle-ages technology (see sidebar on population). Each city-state will have some advantage and lack others. As a designer, you'll want to know the city's strengths (it has a thriving merchant class and strong breeding of draft animals and warhorses) and its weak points (perhaps it is riven by competing factions or families, and political violence is common). Make those themes apparent in the city's markets, the city's NPCs, and the other day-to-day elements that visitors experience. Think like a tourist: food, shelter, shopping are likely stops, so make one destination in each of those categories stand out.

Then, throw in a twist: the things that visitors wish they didn't have to deal with in the city are as important (and more exciting!) as the things they do want to accomplish there. In a city of political strife, perhaps a fiery orator stirs up a mob. Perhaps the adventurers are mistaken for spies of one faction or another. Certainly they may provoke a fight or be challenged to prove themselves as patriots.

The city's ancient history might lead to adventure hooks, but keep it current. Your focus in designing a city-state is to make it vibrant and alive, to provide that one recurring theme that everyone remembers about the city. If the players are saying, "What is going on with that crazy mob?" when they leave town, that's good. If they are saying ,"Oh, I can't believe it: that was mostly drunken women in that mob! They are some kind of bacchae or crazed amazons!" then you've taken another step in defining the world and its people.

Every city, in other words, is defined by how its people act, whether it's well and generously and honestly, or when they are under pressure, threatened, or cruel. Make it clear what attracts people to the city-state, or why it has become less attractive, and show that citizens can vote with their feet in extremis. Make the city come alive by the stereotypes and repetition of certain patterns of behavior.

How to Design a Nation

Finally, we come to the big enchilada. At the level of a nation, with hundreds of thousands to millions of citizens, the scale of the population alone makes the approach of a tribe or even a city-state difficult to retain. What holds a nation together is largely language and culture and, to a lesser degree, ruling bloodlines, along with an aristocracy that shares common values and common goals. The noble class comes into its own in a semi-feudal, theocratic, or otherwise pre-modern social structure. This is because the king or high priest or tyrant can no longer see the

Fantasy Populations

As citizens of the 21st century, we are used to large cities of a million or even 10 million people. These largely did not exist in the Middle Ages in Europe. Rome is a notable exception (roughly 1 million inhabitants in 100 AD), but it was a huge exception and the high water mark of a global empire.

For a large kingdom, Cordova in Spain had 400,000 inhabitants around 900 AD. Paris was the most populated city in Europe around 1300 and had 200,000 inhabitants—France itself had 17 million. Constantinople had perhaps half a million people in 1400, and it was the greatest city in Christendom at the time. These were the peaks of population in the Middle Ages, and serve to provide a sense of scale for the upper boundary of population for similar societies.

The population was also distributed very differently before modern agriculture and the scientific and industrial revolutions brought people into the cities. For most of human history, a tiny minority lived in cities. Most people were farmers and lived in hamlets, villages, and small towns.

borders of the nation, and delegating administration and government tasks (military, taxation, a penal system, recordkeeping, and so forth) must be performed far from the center of authority.

This means two things for game design: it means that you need to know what the ideals, values, and principles of the nation are, and also how they are subverted or upheld far from the center. How does the king communicate with his vassals? How does the goddess-queen receive tribute and celebrate her victories? Who represents the rulers along the border? What do the nobles want, and are they getting it from the existing order? Is the kingdom peaceful, threatened, or rotting from within?

Choose at least two points of conflict, and write those down for the nation. I'd recommend one conflict within the national borders, and one conflict between the nation and some other group: a neighboring nation, nomads, a secret society, or maybe a dragon in the mountains that is the nation's nemesis. A nation with no conflicts within itself or with external nations is a wonderful place to live, peaceful and prosperous—and boring for gaming or narrative. I would not spend too much of your valuable design time on dull locations with few promising avenues for adventure.

Once you have at least two sources of conflict for your nation, figure out how those conflicts appear in everyday life that characters might see. If the king is a good ruler and taxes are spent well on worthy causes, then perhaps the heir is dissatisfied and vain and seeks power through encouraging banditry and gathering young barons to his cause. Or perhaps a curse afflicts the kingdom's rulers, such that the throne is never held for long, and each king dies a horrible death.

You need to design political dangers, political arcs, or political goals, and to some extent you need to know what the second-rank barons and earls are doing. Because— let's face it—by the time you are talking about a kingdom as big as medieval France (medieval population, roughly 17 million before the Black Death), there's no such thing as a simple city-state. There are multiple city-states, multiple competing interests, and multiple layers of complexity tying them all to a central hub of authority, such as the divine right of kings, a demi-goddess ruler, or simply the iron hand of a militant order of knights keeping down all other power centers.

Designing Societies: Adding Wonder to the World

The important element in all these societies is not necessarily the details of the ruling house (though those are often compelling), or the secrets of a society's trade routes, but rather that sense of what the society values and cherishes. Are they mad for learning? Are they terrified of ghosts? Are they all tattooed with the names of the elements and seeking to balance great forces of sea and sky? What makes them more than a historical society?

When I seek to design a successful tribe, city-state, or nation, I always attempt to add some element of magic, wonder, or mystery that takes the real world and dials it up another notch. After all, if your readers wanted pure history and careful simulation of known periods, they'd probably play a historical game or read a historical novel. So it's important to add at least one bit of fantasy or SF spice to

your creation. That bit of spice might be the first idea you have about the society, and everything else merely works out the consequences. But it's also possible that the spice is mainly visual (a city of gigantic monuments and crocodile-headed statues that walk each night) or that it is largely historical (an empire that the elves abandoned, whose roads are magical).

And that's the basics of society design. With a whole globe and all of human history to draw from, there are thousands of examples of successful and past societies that might be enlivened or explored in games and fiction. Go forth, and bend whole nations to your whims. (For more on the subject of building societies, see Mike Stackpole's chapter, "They Do *What*, Now?")

EMPIRES!

The central fact of empire is conquest. An empire grows by attacking and absorbing the tribes, city-states, and nations around it, as shown by the history of the Romans, Aztecs, Arabs, Turks, Indians, and Chinese empires, to name a few of the larger success stories in empire-building. This need to conquer has several obvious and some less-obvious consequences in worldbuilding.

The obvious one is a need for a large war machine and the ability to marshal the population for conquest, tribute, and then administration of newly-conquered people and territory. The less obvious consequences are the need for cosmopolitanism and a need for extreme bureaucratic skill. Empires need to find ways to deal with both primitive and sophisticated citizens who speak dozens of languages and who share no common culture. They need to find a way to organize entire nations to fit into the existing imperial model of rule. And they need to find ways to feed and house a growing population of their own people, for the more successful an empire is, the longer its borders and the hungrier its many mouths become. At some point, even the most successful empire can be threatened as much by a bad harvest (and bread riots) as by the small states on their periphery.

From a design point of view, an empire is a patchwork quilt of tribes, city-states, and nations, with one of these nations being dominant over all the rest. That's more a matter of applying techniques from the prior discussion than of creating an entirely new category.

THEY DO WHAT NOW?

On Societies and Culture

Michael A. Stackpole

Because discovery plays such a large part in the enjoyment of fiction and gaming, it's important for world designers to present something different. Sometimes it's a complete world, sometimes it's just a pocket universe or hidden valley. The most important aspect of both of these is the society that functions within the world. Getting it right isn't always easy, but failure to do this means the world is simply boring—which kills any entertainment value.

Getting it right is a matter of challenging yourself intellectually, and then following through with all the logical consequences of any decisions you make. The worlds that are the worst are the ones in which a designer decides a visual effect would be incredibly cool, then fails to deal with the consequences of that effect on the people of the world. Not only does this make the world shallow, but it completely misses the chance to create a place which will intrigue players.

For example, in my DragonCrown War cycle of novels, I decided that one class of society in the nation of Oriosa would wear masks. These masks would bear signs of their lives—from religious preference and exploits, down to whether or not their parents were still alive. No need for Facebook in this world; just read a facemask and you were good. I decided that, since wearing a mask was acknowledged to be an honor, it was considered ill-mannered to be seen barefaced by someone who was not a member of the family.

That's all well and good, but it forces more work. Public baths, for example, would have to provide bathing masks so that folks wouldn't ruin their good masks. It meant that when one of my heroes sees a corpse without a mask, he comments, "Because he was without a mask, I couldn't identify him." It required that nobles from other nations would be given a lacy "courtesy mask" to acknowledge their rank. It also meant that to have your mask taken from you was the greatest disgrace to which a citizen could be subjected. Literally he would be having his identity stripped from him—metaphorically they were ripping his face off.

Where to Start

The easiest place to begin to shape a society is to look at realities that result from physical form. Sexual dimorphism—the physical differences between male and female—is a prime place to start. And you could easily make that *trimorphism* if you're dealing with a non-human race which has more than one gender/life stage form. Because, for most species in our world, males are bigger and stronger or more colorful, playing with a species where our roles are altered immediately gives players a puzzle.

Imagine a hidden valley where a sisterhood of magicians has existed for eons. When a child is born they determine if it has any magick talent at all. If not, the child is sent with one of the sisters to nearby communities, where such a healthy baby is swapped for one which is not quite so robust, but is brimming with magical energy. Furthermore, they choose their mates from among the world's greatest mages, seducing them or kidnapping them and putting them out to stud for a short time, then returning them to their home. They even give their studs a young, male apprentice as a parting gift, since they've got little use for such a male child unless he turns out to be a great mage—as determined by the world.

There you have a simple society which operates on secrecy, on the sublimation of the individual to the benefit of the whole, with a self-centered morality that justifies the abuse of outsiders. It's a classic reversal of male dominated societies that practice infanticide (and you could toss that in, too). If you were to overlay upon this whole foundation the fact that these women need the best magicians since they are involved in a war to keep the world safe from an invasion of Elder Squidlings that would destroy everything, you have that whole ends-justifying-the-means conundrum to wrestle with.

Going further with this society isn't tough. If the rest of the world is male dominated, or even based on gender-equality, the details here would set them apart. Female gods would move to the fore. Male gods might become demons or serve the females. *Witch* might be a grand title here, whereas it's a term used for criminal female magickers elsewhere. The whole male-problem-solving mode of dealing with difficulties might be completely alien or considered rude. Covens might refer to groups of women who get pregnant by the same man, who bear and co-raise his children. They might not govern through a hierarchical system, but do everything through consensus. If they are holding off the invasion mentioned above, they might see themselves as the she-wolves of legend who are protecting all humanity, and have adopted both that symbolism and have woven legends in a history they accept as real.

Details Make a Difference

Non-human societies can get stranger even more quickly and are made by the attention to detail. For example, if creatures have three fingers and a thumb on each hand, would they use base 10 for counting? Whereas we might say, "Nine out of ten times," they'd likely say, "Seven out of eight times." If they see outside the visual light spectrum others do, or hear sounds above or below our hearing or are telepathic, these things will be reflected in how they act and what they value.

In the *DragonCrown War* books, I created the *urZreithi*. They occupy the same ecological niche as Dwarves, but they are shapeshifters. They don't shift their shape into animals, but change their shape to suit themselves to whatever they are doing. A miner, then, will make one hand a hammer and the other a pick. A warrior will armor himself and make his hands into blades. Because of this, I decided, they'd not value the physical form of an individual since form has no meaning outside function. So, if a warrior died in battle, they'd leave the body there. Sure, they'd have a memorial for the person, but his physical form and its recovery was unimportant.

Which means that they and their philosophy would be at odds with someone in a religious order that didn't believe in leaving anyone behind. In essence, by taking a concept which is generally considered noble and rendering it valueless, or by taking something most folks consider evil and turning it into a virtue, a design can quickly craft details for a society that becomes a puzzle for his audience.

Another good place to look for different aspects to explore involves history. Many designers work on the now and neglect how things got to be that way. For example, in between World War One and World War Two, Hungary was run by an Admiral. That might not seem strange until one remembers that Hungary is landlocked. Only by realizing that it was once part of a larger empire that had a coast and had a navy does this make any sense. This situation could only grow out of history, so it forces the designer to create some history. From that history, then, all sorts of cool stories can flow.

Playing "What if . . . ?"

Challenging yourself to create these sorts of societies and worlds isn't that difficult. It's the classic "what if" game of science fiction. And there are plenty of books and web sites that offer descriptions of real or curious phenomena which are great starting points for these kinds of things.

Begin with a hidden valley setting—a setting that likely isn't economically viable, but is intriguing enough to hold together for a short visit by your audience. Let's start with, say, a high mountain valley which has, at the heart of it, a massive ship. There's no ocean for many a mile, but this thing looks ship-shape and the folks working on it are as skilled a set of shipwrights as anyone has ever seen. How did it get here? Why is it here? What are they going to do with it?

There are dozens of answers to those questions. Maybe these are the survivors of a Noah's Ark, and they keep the ship going because they know, someday, another flood will take them back down to lands some God has promised them. Or maybe they are the remnants of a mutinous crew, which the captain caught and had exiled to this place hundreds of years ago. He casually remarked that they'd be free once they sailed from the place, and they're ready to fit the ship with balloons or skis and make their great escape. Or a prophet has come among them and convinced them to make the ship—out of true belief, or because he's bilking them of money.

This process is cyclical. You can have many explanations. The Noah's Ark idea may be new to cover the shame of the mutiny story. Maybe they are just waiting for heroes to join them for a grand voyage of adventure beyond the stars. Any designer

should be able to rationalize not only the truth of the situation, but the truths of the situation. Wheels within wheels make for very intriguing and entertaining adventures.

Once you have a hidden valley concept down, then look at expanding things to link it to the world. For example, in that mountain valley, where do they get the lumber they need? What is it they trade for such lumber? Once you can make the valley economically viable, it becomes an anchor around which you can build the rest of the world. A portion of anything the hidden valley produces will be traded down the line by the lumber-folk and so on. As you figure out what the next place trades and work out what the implications of that are for their community and the world, suddenly things take shape fast.

Granted, economics is not the only way to connect places. Because I was trained as a historian, I find fabricated history to work quite well. Geography, theology, and species/race relations also function very well in this regard. Economics is just the lowest common denominator, hence a good place to start.

As mentioned above, details make a world real. Dietary preferences determine agricultural methods—and the scenery through which folks walk. Coins, the images on them, their age and stories and slang concerning them can tell a lot about a world. National pride—bearing in mind that nationalism is a fairly late development—can also provide a breeding ground for details. Everyone has slang to demean others— other species, other religions, other nations—so figuring out the how and why of those terms will guide you in exploring the world.

Lastly, challenge the tropes of folklore concerning your world. In my novel Once a Hero I got great mileage out of wondering why Elves and Men would be pals, when Men die so quickly that an immortal race would hardly be inclined to treat them as more than pets. Having your audience explore the world and learn about it, while the world learns more through its interaction with them is terribly engaging. Your audience (as players or through the characters in a story) is invested in seeing to it that the other side understands.

Also listen to your players. Their interpretations/beliefs and even mistake about the world can provide you excellent fodder for future development. As they try to connect the dots, they may not see the image you intended them to see. Sometimes their image is better, and you can use that to your advantage. Tell them they're very insightful, and they'll never noticed you've stolen their idea and made it over as your own. Take their solutions as further challenges, and you'll produce a dynamic world which will satisfy you and them for a long time to come.

How to Make a High Magic World

Keith Baker

Swords and sorcery. Dungeons and dragons. Wizards and warriors. All of these fall under the umbrella of what we call fantasy . . . but the worlds around them can be very different. In many works of fantasy fiction, society hovers around a medieval level of sophistication. Magic is a miraculous thing that has little impact on everyday life.

"High Magic" is generally used to describe a world in which powerful magic is an integral part of society. Wizards aren't isolated hermits; they are influential people whose creations drive the wheels of civilization. Generally speaking, high magic goes beyond the widespread presence of mystical techniques and tools, and also suggests that these techniques are powerful and advanced. Spells such as teleportation and resurrection create a society capable of things we can't accomplish in the present.

In developing a high magic society, there are a number of things to consider. What basic needs of society are fulfilled with magic? Where does this power come from? What impact does it have on daily life? How do the protagonists of your story—whether the heroes of a novel or the player characters in a game—stand out in a world where powerful magic is commonplace? Beyond that, where are things going to go as your story moves forward?

What is the Nature of Magic?

In developing a high magic world, the very first thing you need to do is identify the nature of magic itself. What sort of a tool is it? What sorts of people are capable of harnessing it, and how easy is it to develop new things? Consider the following options.

Magic is a Science. Mystical energy can be manipulated in predictable, reliable ways. It may be that it's shaped using words and gestures, channeled with a pinch of sulfur instead of a copper wire, but if a formula works one day it will work the next—and more important, someone smart enough can take that formula and develop a new

one using the same basic principles. In a world in which magic is a science, a high magic society likely followed a logical path of evolution. Just as in our world, there will be inventors and innovators whose discoveries changed the world. Who created the first fireball? Who developed teleportation, and how long did it take to craft a teleporter that could transport someone between cities?

A world like this can still have people who channel magic using faith or innate ability, such as traditional clerics or sorcerers. The key is that the magical tools that are part of everyday life are the result of applied research—and that there are people out there working to improve these tools and techniques, and given time they will likely succeed. In a world like this, you should decide exactly what's holding people back, and how magic could advance further. Are there limited resources—the mystical equivalent of plutonium—whose rarity is holding back certain fields of magic? This is a way to add an unusual form of treasure, or to make a particular region especially important; if dragon bones are the key to the most powerful forms of magic, then any dragon could be worth a vast bounty, and finding a draconic graveyard could create a new gold rush in the region.

Another aspect of scientific magic is the potential that people are tampering with forces they don't truly understand. Is there any possibility of the equivalent of a nuclear meltdown? Say that your civilization uses bound elementals to accomplish basic tasks. What would it take to trigger a mass release of these elementals? What sort of havoc could they wreak before they were banished or contained?

Magic is a mystery. Magic is a vital tool of society. Teleportation is a key part of commerce. Mystical wards defend cities from monsters beyond their walls. And yet, these tools cannot be replicated in the modern age. It could be that they are relics of a previous civilization, and that the current society has simply salvaged them from ruins and incorporated them into its culture. If this is the case, finding a new dungeon associated with the ancient civilization is an incredible opportunity. Beyond finding treasures that may directly benefit adventures—magic swords, staves, armor—explorers may find new tools that can benefit their town or homeland, whether it's the equivalent of a magical microwave (applied *prestidigitation*) or better still, the ritual required to mass-produce such a thing. In this case, an important question is just what happened to the advanced civilization: if it was so powerful, just how did it fall? This subject is explored in more detail in the chapters, "Bringing History To Life" and "Apocalypso."

Another option is that magic is homegrown and may even follow scientific principles, but that the greatest works of magic can only be accomplished by a very select group of people. It could be tied to bloodline—a sound basis for the authority of a noble family—or perhaps there can only be one Supreme Sorcerer in the world at a time, and for a new one to be appointed the old one must die or abdicate. Such an approach makes the people who can produce powerful magic extremely important, while also explaining why magic doesn't advance quite so quickly as it does in an entirely scientific world.

A gift of the gods. Magic is the tool of the gods, and only comes to the mortal world when they will it. In a world where all magic is divine in origin, churches will be very powerful and cardinals may have more power than kings . . . unless nobles

also have magical powers derived from the gods. It is a bridge between the two extremes of mysterious magic and scientific magic; it is an active force within the world, but advances only occur when the gods grant them. With that said, there can be traditional wizards in such a world. Perhaps a rogue god taught the first wizard the secrets of magic so that they might one day challenge the heavens—in which case wizards may be feared, with witch-hunters tracking down these vile sorcerers. Or alternately, the gift of wizardry may be a blessing of a god of knowledge; wizards work as they normally do, but should they anger their divine patrons they will lose the ability to understand their spells.

How Does Magic Affect Everyday Life?

"High magic" suggests that magic is a vital force within a society. It doesn't simply exist; it defines a culture. For me, the most important piece of world design is considering consequences. If your world possesses a tool that doesn't exist in our world, what are the results? What does it mean to live in a world where people can reliably raise the dead? Is magic a part of all walks of life, or only used in a few ways? There are flying ships and lightning cannons, but medicine is much the same as it was in the 12th century? Start by considering the following elements of civilization, and thinking how magic applies to them.

Transportation. How do people get from one place to another? How do you transport troops, cargo, or civilians? How fast is it, and is it limited to specific locations—a railroad that follows a specific path, or a teleportation circle that can only take you to one of a handful of other circles? Are there flying ships that can transport large numbers of people, or flying carpets that only transport a few? Is personal teleportation a casual, commonplace thing? Are there any limitations on who can employ magical transportation—only wizards, only people with specific training or heritage—or can anyone steal a flying carpet?

Warfare. Critical questions arise when it comes to battle magic. First is the obvious question of just how powerful it is. Is the magic that can be deployed on the battlefield the equivalent of a grenade or a nuclear weapon? Can a mundane force challenge a mystical enemy and have any hope of winning—overwhelming them with numbers or employing superior tactics—or is battle magic the absolute king of the battlefield? One common solution to this is to have spellcasters cancel spellcasters; as long as you have a sorceress on your side she can cancel the spells of the enemy wizard, at which point the grunt soldiers remain relevant. Of course, if the enemy spellcasters are brought down, your spellcasters can dominate the field— making wizard-hunting a logical job for your elite group of heroes!

Beyond the bigger picture, there's the question of how magic changes personal combat. In this world, do people still use bows, or does everyone carry a wand? Are there things that make both valid choices—a wand can hold a powerful spell, but only a single charge of it; a "musketeer" might carry a pair of wands, but once they are discharged he'll turn to his trusty sword.

Another vital question is just what mystical tools a nation brings to the battlefield.

A nation of necromancers and a nation of pyromancers may both rely on magic to win the day, but the weapons they employ will be very different.

Medicine. How advanced is magical healing? Can you regenerate lost limbs? Cure any disease? Raise the dead? If so, are these tools in the hands of a particular group of people—for example, only divine spellcasters—or are they services available to anyone who has sufficient funds?

A world in which it's possible to reliably raise the dead is going to be dramatically different from the one that we live in. The people who control resurrection will have tremendous influence, and if anyone can buy their services, a wealthy person becomes extremely hard to kill. Think about the limits of resurrection. Are there ways to kill someone permanently, whether by inflicting a certain form of damage or using a particular tool? Does it require a particularly rare component, which would make a nation that possesses that substance extremely influential? If it's something that can only be performed by divine spellcasters, will the gods only return those who have served them faithfully in life? Take a moment to consider what sort of impact you want resurrection to have in your world—the purpose you actually want it to serve, and what limitations it needs to have to make that work.

These are three of the most vital services, but there are others. If magic is used for communication in your world, how effective is it? Can anybody send a telepathic message to a friend, as they might with a cell phone today? Or is it more like a telegraph—say, an air elemental that swiftly carries a message from one message station to another? Is magic employed to provide light and heat, and if so, what form does it take? Do you have lanterns that burn with cold flame, or are buildings themselves constructed from luminescent materials? How about crime and punishment: do the forces of the law use divination magic to interrogate criminals? What sorts of techniques are used to imprison people?

The questions are as endless as the options. The important thing is to decide how far you want to go. Personal teleportation and reliable resurrection create a society that will feel futuristic to us, while airships and fireballs aren't so different from airplanes and bombs.

What is the Role of the Protagonist?

In a world where sorcery is completely integrated into modern life, being a sorcerer may seem less exciting. Obviously it's good for the protagonists of a world to stand out in some way. How do you make them feel special in a world in which the magic around them is more powerful than what they can personally produce?

One way is to emphasize that the arcanist or priest is more attuned to the infrastructure of the world than other types of characters. In a world where arcane magic is everywhere, the wizard can fill the role of a hacker or tech-head in a cyberpunk story—the person who understands the way the world works, who can identify the dangers and potentially seize control of the reins of power. Normal people can't fly a magical galleon, but if you get to the bridge your sorcerer can take control. In a world where high magic is a gift from the gods, a cleric may simply be

the person who understands the system and has connections in the church hierarchy. In a world where magic follows purely scientific principles, the cleric may be special precisely because his faith-based magic isn't bound by the normal rules.

With that said, if you want your spellcasting protagonists to truly stand out in the world, you can focus on their roll as innovators. If magic follows scientific principles, your wizard may be the one who takes teleportation to the next level. If magic comes from the gods, your priest may be chosen to act as the personal hand of a deity or a wizard may be the first one taught to use arcane magic, the sole student of the rebellious god.

For characters who don't employ magic, part of the question is how its presence affects their lives. A warrior is an expert in combat and weaponry. If magic wands are the primary ranged weapon in your world, then you may want to adapt the skills of the fighter to allow him to be a wandslinger instead of forcing him to employ bows. If magical wards are commonplace, the rogue may have specialized tools for bypassing them, both when it comes to disarming traps or countering a wizard's defenses before making a surprise attack. These don't have to be innate abilities of the characters; the assassin may have to buy his ward-breaking powder. But given that wizards aren't assassins, think about the tools they might create to enable assassins to do their jobs. Regardless of the role of magic, there will always be a place for intelligent people who know how to create and repair the tools society relies on, tough people prepared to endure the dangers of battle and exploration, and clever folk who can trick the others. As you create your world, just make sure to think about those roles, and the tools that might exist for each class.

WORLDS AND TECHNOLOGY

Wolfgang Baur

Humans are creatures of technology, and yet many imagined worlds do their best to ignore this. Fantasy, in particular, seems to exist in a never-never world of easy farming, simple animal- or wind-powered transport, and natural and divine medicines that actually work without all the annoyance of a scientific or industrial revolution. Most fantasy RPGs are, in a sense, a deep denial of the facts of pre-modern life, and instead they substitute a rosy and glorious past of daring adventure and magic.

And that's OK. In fact, that's sort of the point: it's a fantasy. Living in a time of starvation, plague, and burdensome travel would be a boring, deadly grind. Gritty is only fun if your character doesn't die of dysentery.

Yet what technology you do highlight as a worldbuilder is important to the flavor of the world, the logic of its stories, and the drama of its best moments. Where and how technology fits into the picture is very much a personal decision for a worldbuilder, and very much a matter of taste. Here are four main elements to consider that will make a huge difference in your worldbuilding: movement, knowledge, war, and living standards.

TECHNOLOGIES OF MOTION: TRANSPORT & COMMUNICATIONS

One of the primary technologies of any world is the simple matter of getting from here to there—and in the era before phones or digital communications, this puts a hard limit on the speed of news as well. The news of a revolt or a queen's untimely demise or a wizard's hideous demonic assassins only moves as fast as a horse and rider, or as fast as a messenger pigeon. This can be quite entertaining when the PCs arrive at the site of some earth-shaking event too late because they chose to walk rather than spend their gold on fast steeds or a swift eagleback flight. Things in a fantasy world can happen quickly in distant places, faster than the heroes can get there. It seems to me that you could probably write an adventure that assumes the

PCs are travelling toward the site of some great disaster, and they closer they get, the better the information about it becomes. And of course, the information makes it sound worse and worse, racheting up the tension every time the PCs learn more of what they are getting into.

TRANSPORT

You may be familiar with the idea that most peasants never went more than 20 miles from where they were born in the medieval period. It's a stunning fact. And most people in a fantasy setting stick near their thorps and hamlets as well. Are they homebodies? No—it's simply too hard to get around when walking or riding a horse are your best options.

For most heroic adventurers, these limits don't matter. They have fistfuls of gold and magical horses to carry them and their heavy gear wherever they choose. The GM points them at an adventure hook, and off they go. Journeys are little more than a series of random encounters. The world has no freeways, but transport is simple. Just ride and fight some monsters, and—boom!—you are at the next dungeon.

This is very, very functional and good for advancing the story. But it misses several worldbuilding opportunities. In the early development of Midgard, for example, I proposed the existence of sand ships to sail across the desert. This was met

TECHNOLOGY AS A STYLE MARKER

One reason that worldbuilders get tangled up in their technology is that sometimes we want to present something that is out-of-period or inappropriate for a particular culture, locale, or stage of scientific development. The usual problem is airships for sky-borne adventuring, or cannons for pirates, or a system of long-distance rail travel in pre-industrial times. Explaining how that much steel, helium, or coal is available in a semi-feudal society with only animal-powered machines is quite a challenge.

The usual solution is to shortcut the whole problem by saying "it's magic." This may seem like a copout (and on one level it certainly is), but it's also timesaving and extremely functional. You want lightning rail connecting the five nations of a vast continent in Eberron? No problem! You want some cannons but not wholesale gunpowder? Bring on some rapid-fire Spelljammer ballistae! And so on.

The use of a particular element of Renaissance or early modern technology that is handwaved as a sort of magic is really perfectly fine if it gets you the result you want. This is fantasy and, up to a certain point, your audience will usually grant you one or two elements of super-science-disguised-as-magic. You can get very hung up on trade routes, mining, labor requirements, and so forth, but this is largely an exercise in futility because the players of the game don't care about that. They care about flying in airships, or zipping across continents, or unleashing a thunderous cannonade. If your world caters to those heroic styles, don't worry too much about who built the lightning rail.

with quite a bit of acclaim from the project's backers, more than I expected. Why? Because sandships are romantic, practical, and exotic.

Some of your modes of transit should be similar. Perhaps there are companies of giant-eagle riders that take passengers over the mountains for hefty fees, though it requires exotic saddles and hard weight limits. Or you may have vast herds of migrating manta rays that pull ships across whole oceans, but only twice a year and only for those who build the right sort of harneses and ships. Or you might have ancient shadow roads like those of Midgard, dangerous to traverse and yet tempting because of the speed they offer. Make travel itself a little more interesting.

You'll notice from the examples chosen here that "technology" in the sense of transport is typically either animal-powered or magical or waterborne. Adding machine transport to a setting can be done (airships or the mysterious underground transports of Tekumel, for instance), but most transport technology of fantasy settings involves animals, water, or magic for the very good reason that these technologies all function in the absence of decent roads.

Though a few historical empires like the Incas and Romans did build great road networks, these are key exceptions. Most nations didn't build roads because the engineering involved is expensive and difficult. Going over hills or through marshes is harder still. Bridging rivers and crossing mountains is yet more challenging. Modern humans in developed nations forget just how damn hard it is to get anywhere, so I would advise providing some sort of transport technology to a gamer audience—and making it very clear that once characters are off that transport grid, getting anywhere is much, much harder.

Technology of Knowledge: Literacy and Printing

Possibly the most disruptive technology of the medieval period was, of course, the invention of movable type by Johannes Gutenberg for the printing of indulgences. It was primarily a religious technology to begin with, but was soon adopted for secular uses as well—and it spurred the growth of radical politics, changes in faith and doctrine, and the rapid growth of a literate population. Before the printing press, most people couldn't read—perhaps for the rather practical reason that there wasn't very much interesting reading material.

I jest, but not by much. Whether or not your fantasy world has literacy and who controls that literacy is a major building block of the setting. Historically, only two classes ever developed literacy to a high degree before the printing press: the priests and the merchants. In a few cases, you might argue that the kings and tyrants used literacy but, in practice, they farmed that work out to priest-scribes and merchant-accountants.

So, what's the difference between a priestly literate class, a mercantile literate class, and an aristrocratic or general literate class with a printing class? Well, everything.

As literacy governs history, science, knowledge, accounting, debts, records, land claims, justice and the law, it's fairly crucial to civilization. The people who control the written word control a lot of power. They are in a position to dictate divine or secular law to others. Their hands are on the levers of power.

A priestly literate class may exhort donations to the church, and they control the divine word, with which to bully nobles, kings, and upstarts. A mercantile literate class controls the flow of wealth, grain, goods, and taxes. They decide who starves and who prospers.

All that being the case, the decision as to who reads and writes, and who does not, says a great deal about power and influence in your world. It may well be that multiple groups read and write, but do so differently or only within a secret society or guild (see "It's a Mystery! Designing Mystery Cults" and "How to Design a Guild"). It may be that all nobles read and use this as a mark of civilization and superior breeding against all lesser creatures. Or it may be that almost no one but wizards reads and that the act of reading itself is nearly magical. Whatever your preference, this is a technology that requires only sheepskins, papyrus, oak gall, soot, and goose feathers, but it can change your world. Don't ignore it just because there's no fire, steel, or large animals involved!

Technology of Warfare: the Keystones of Heroics

Speaking of fire, steel, and large animals: one of the primary drivers of technology has always been warfare. Armor, weapons, horses, elephants, siege weapons, and even the development of arithmetic are down to the need to crush someone else's skull in a hurry. Where do your world's societies stand in the ranks of the military power?

The easy answer is that they are stone age, bronze age, iron age, or carbon steel-using societies, but that only helps us so far. And it's not that less advanced societies are necessarily less interesting. For instance, the idea that a society is metal-poor was explored in the Dark Sun campaign setting. It made for some great gaming.

From a worldbuilding point of view, what you need to know are two primary factors about a society: what is its apex warrior using, and what is the levee conscript using? By apex warrior, I mean the most decked-out badass of that society: perhaps a mix of steel armor, pure-magic blades, and healing leeches that are born next to the skin. You'll notice that this is a combination of metal, magic, and quirky technology. I like to mix it up in fantasy societies and give each culture at least one thing that doesn't have an Earth equivalent.

Just as interesting is the typical levee. This might be a peasant in formed-chitin armor with an iron-tipped spear and a set of signal banners for communicating. Perhaps this army is better-coordinated and better-led than most. What does that mean to an adventure in this world? It might mean that signal flags are a real danger, like more-familiar gongs or bells. It might also mean that the weapons of the place are more often spears than swords.

Make some interesting choices in warfare, in armor, weapons, animals, signals, and battlefield medicine. The role of the exotic and magical should not just be in everyday technology. Quite the contrary: the most advanced technology a society has is generally found either in the hands of its rulers or its armies. Make it stand out in physical appearance, in price, and in what skills or wealth is required to bring it to bear. Make the capstone technology hard to find, and players will be more eager than ever to get their hands on that stuff, especially if the world's high-status elite rulers have it and flaunt it.

Technology of Life, Food, and Medicine: Crucially Useless Technology

Growing crops for people and livestock is crucial and difficult work when you don't have tractors. It's even harder without routine access to fertilizer, herbicides, or even irrigation.

Growing food is also incredibly un-heroic in terms of dramatic adventure. It's important that someone have mastered that technology; you can make a nod to irrigation and fertility magic in your worldbuilding if you like, but the nitty-gritty of wheat, sorgum, rye, millet, and barley? Deadly dull. Not worth your time. What you need to know from a worldbuilding perspective is who has good food technology, who starves, and who grows fat. Food is money and power in a society where people still frequently die of starvation. At the same time, agricultural technology is slow, dispersed, and takes a vast array of peasants to implement. It's necessary, but rarely heroic, to tend an orchard. If you have to arrange conflicts in your worldbuilding, stick to livestock. At least they are susceptible to theft and feuds.

Medicine, on the other hand, is a technology with immediate, practical usefulness for every adventurer. Herbalism, disease cures, the understanding of binding up injured adventurers are all chances to provide some special technology or twist—but at least in D&D and Pathfinder and similar standard fantasy settings, it is almost always replaced by magic from a very early stage. Why? Because the technology is so important that any realistic system of healing and recovery is too slow, too complex, and too fiddly to really further gameplay. Being wounded is dramatic. The recovery is often not.

Avoid the technology discussion of medicine unless there is something special there, such as a race of healers (that can be played or befriended by player characters), or a particular techno item of powerful healing (for PCs to pursue).

The Many Uses and Dangers of Unobtainium

Many science fiction stories feature a particular technology or substance that is critically valuable and impossibly rare. The fandom term for this is "unobtainium," as in, you'll never obtain any. This is a key concept in worldbuilding for gaming but a decidedly mixed concept. If you decree that something in the setting is vitae, spice, arcane dust, or power gems that enable all the cool technology—well, it's instantly what players want. But the moment they get it in the setting, the power curve of gameplay changes. This is what many players think will happen with gunpowder or lasers, for instance (in practice, those are often just longbows with expensive arrows and shinier optics).

If the PCs never obtain any of the wonder material, they'll be disappointed. If they do obtain the technological or arcane wonder-power material, they have a key to new technology and great power. It's a nightmare for the gamemaster who has made access to it too easy. It's a frustration for players who can't ever find the stuff.

So, if you do decide that your technologies depend on such a thing, I recommend

two elements in your tech design: 1) the material must be available and outrageously expensive, 2) it must be quickly consumed, and 3) the powers it grants must be designed into the rules set. [1]

Here's why:

1. If the material isn't available, ever, you're just annoying everyone with powers available only to NPCs. Shame on you for not sharing the coolest toys.

2. If the material doesn't burn up at a furious rate, you will always have cases where once it is found, the campaign never returns to its lower-power state, and you essentially bifurcate the whole setting into haves and have-nots. If that's your goal, great, but for most settings, the difference is not that stark.

3. The power has to be helpful, but it should not overshadow the heroes themselves. It should, ideally, be a technology that is additive to the heroes existing powers, enhancing what they already do, rather than replacing what they already do. Make them a little faster, hit a little harder, see a little further, talk a little smoother. But don't give this techno-powerup a whole new set of epic powers.

Word Choices: the Language of Technology

A lot of what bothers players of a fantasy RPG about technology sometimes boils down to language and word choice. If your guns are called "bolt-throwers," that's OK, even if they are ranged weapons that require slow reloads just like a rifle. If your grenades are "manufactured in a workhouse by human slaves" that's much more offensive to the ear than if they "were distilled and enchanted by kobold alchemists." Similarly, a kevlar vest is a very different tool than a suit of boiled leather or lamellar armor. In statistical terms, the differences may be minor. In worldbuilding terms, the differences are huge.

I would argue that many of your choices in technology are such matters of terminology rather than effect. Some players simply react violently and irrationally to words that trigger modern or technological associations (see "Gunpowder" sidebar). That's really their issue, but as the audience, it's their fantasy, and it's worth considering right at the very start whether you want to appeal to players with that technophobia (and appeal to their sense of magic and avoid technological trigger words), or you want to go full steampunk or arcane-techish (and garner a different audience). It's difficult or impossible to please both groups, and which way you jump is one of those creative decisions that shapes the world. Use the right trigger words in your design, and you enable a thousand daydreams of howdah pistols, spiked bronze gauntlets, or tiger-striped bolt-throwers.

In this sense, some of what you think of as design decisions (whether to include some weapon or not), may be more of a naming decision. The look and attitude of a weapon is an important part of that technology and defines the character who carries

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[1]For more on the idea of magic needing to be designed and the elements that need to be considered, see Michael A. Stackpole's essay, "Designing Magic Systems," in *The Complete KOBOLD Guide to Game Design*, Open Design, 2012.

it. The stats underneath might be the same, but the guy carrying the rapier is not the same as the guy carrying the bronze spear. Choose your names for technology carefully, because they deliver an important charge of emotional resonance and cultural memory for the GM and players.

Summation

While every technology decision has clear consequences, and there's no exact right solution for all cases, this is what makes worldbuilding fun! Some technology is vital to life but deadly to heroic adventuring. Other technology is best presented by its absence—it adds nothing to the game experience. Choose your words carefully, present technology as both exotic and critically useful to the tasks that the players set for themselves, and your worldbuilding will be much the richer for it.

Why Hate Gunpowder?

Nothing is more divisive among some fantasy RPG players than the presence or absence of gunpowder in a setting. It seems to irritate or even enrage some fans; its presence is seen as "spoiling" a world of pure magic and imagination. I admit for a long time, I was one of those players, and I see and sympathize with the problem.

For many gamers, fantasy RPGs are about the pre-modern and the magical, the age before industry and automation, the time before science and standardization. There is little that is more scientific, industrial, or standardized than firearms. Sure, gunpowder in warfare dates to the medieval period (look up bombards sometime), but gunpowder weapons don't feel medieval to us. At best, they feel like part of the Renaissance or early modern period, when arquebuses and flintlocks changed warfare from single combat to massed ranks of faceless individuals. They destroy the sense of heroism.

This argument is a load of horsepuckey. Ask any soldier, read any account of the American Civil War; it's not the weapons that make for heroism or its lack. On the other side, I think that the stories of the pure individual heroism of the Golden Age are rather suspect, because before the age of gunpowder there were plenty of faceless levees, spear carriers, and mooks in the Pharoah's armies, as well as famous heroes.

However, that's not the point for those who hate gunpowder. Gunpowder is a potent symbol and signifier of modernity, of an era after the fall from romantic rose-colored medievalisms, and of an industrial age. It's not the game effects of gunpowder that are the objection: it's the meaning of gunpowder, the flavor, that's the problem. Which side of the gunsmoke you land on in your worldbuilding depends on what flavor of world you are building, not the weapon's deadliness on the field of battle.

Why No Monotheism?

Steve Winter

Writers who create campaign settings for roleplaying games seem to love describing the gods of their worlds, and I do mean "gods." One seldom sees a fantasy setting where a monotheistic religion has taken hold the way Judaism, Catholicism, and Islam reigned in Europe, the Middle East, and northern Africa during the Middle Ages. This seems odd upon consideration, because everything else about most RPG settings borrows heavily from late Roman and medieval European cultures. One type of character, the cleric, has its roots deep in Christianity, but the class has evolved well away from that idea. I'd like to look at why that is and what the implications would be for an RPG that adopted a widespread monotheism.

Theology 101

First, let's recognize that religion can be tricky to talk about and let's clarify some terms.

Monotheism is the belief or doctrine that only one god exists, so monotheistic religions, like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam recognize a single entity as the one and only deity in existence. That deity can exhibit more than one aspect, like the Trinity of Catholicism, but the being is, by definition, the *one* and *only* god.

In contrast, polytheism posits many gods, and polytheistic religions recognize more than one deity. They might be equals, or they might be ranked in a hierarchy. Each deity typically has its own portfolio of interests: harvests, love, war, prosperity, industry, fertility, death, birth, creation, sunrise, sunset, storms, and so on. Individual cities and families sometimes have their own unique patron deities. The gods might get along with each other, ignore each other, try to undermine each other, or fight openly (in their divine realm, of course). They are frequently anthropomorphic (humanlike in appearance or characteristics), but not always. When a pantheon's gods are anthropomorphic, they tend to display behavior that reflects our ideals and foibles magnified to godly intensity.

Two Kinds of Polytheism

It's worth distinguishing between two different types of polytheism. The first is *henotheism*, in which worshipers choose one god from a pantheon and focus their worship on him or her. This is how most RPG worlds tend to work. The god of nature and the goddess of war might be brother and sister, but Rildar the Devout wears the holy symbol of just one and never the other.

Contrast that with *kathenotheism*, in which people worship all of the gods at different times as the situation demands. A farmer might pray to the lord of sun and rain when his crop is growing and to the harvest mother when the crop is ready, but he's not an exclusive disciple of either one. This brand of polytheism is less common in RPGs, even though it has been more prevalent in history.

Animism doesn't necessarily recognize any particular deity. Instead, animists believe that many parts of the natural world have spiritual lives or are inhabited by distinct spirits such as dryads and nymphs. In RPGs, druids are the most common animists, even though very little is known about the beliefs and practices of the historical druids—or maybe that's their appeal.

Dozens of variations exist: *pantheism* (the universe is a deity), *syncretic monotheism* or *syncretic polytheism* (the melding of different, sometimes contradictory religions into one), *paganism* (not modern paganism but a generic term, usually for someone else's religion).

So, Why No Monotheism?

Why don't we see more monotheistic religions in RPG worlds? I attribute it to six reasons.

1. In the Beginning . . .

Those familiar words come from the Old Testament, but I'm stretching them back to an earlier age. Polytheism is much older than the big three monotheistic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. We associate godly pantheons with ancient civilizations such as Sumeria, Persia, Egypt, Greece, and Rome. The Nordic pantheon is a popular exception, since it flourished well into the Middle Ages (and continues to this day). Monotheism is a more recent arrival.

Most fantasy settings try to evoke a sense of great antiquity, of a world predating history. Conan's Hyborean Age isn't medieval Europe and Asia, however much it might look the part. It is a time "before the oceans drank Atlantis" that bears a superficial resemblance to the Middle Ages but greatly predates Moses, Abraham, and the rise of Christianity. In such ancient realms, fierce gods still rule in pagan splendor and sometimes demand unwholesome rituals from their followers.

Contrast that with modern, monotheistic religions that preach compassion, peace, and love for your fellow man, and consider which offers more avenues for wild, heroic adventure.

2. Mythology

In games, we care about what the gods do for us, not their doctrine or how they're worshiped. We're really interested in mythology rather than religion. Mythology is where we read about gods fighting monsters, scheming against their rivals, traveling the world incognito, and handing out favors (and magical weapons) to mortals.

Put simply, player characters want their gods to reward them in this life, not the next. It's in the mythology of the great pantheons of Greece, Rome, and Scandinavia where that happens most often.

3. I Serve the God of War

Roleplayers look for ways to make their characters unique. By necessity, the deity of a monotheistic religion must be all-encompassing. That means my cleric is a lot like your cleric, and they're both in league with Bob's cleric, and no one likes Bob's cleric. If there are multiple deities to choose from, a player's choice can say a lot about the character's personality. A character who worships the god of war is likely to have different goals and take a different approach to things than a character who worships the spirit of the meadow.

4. Options, Options, Options

Gamers love options that make a difference. Characters worshipping dissimilar gods can receive unique abilities and benefits from the rules. Priests of the god of thunder and the god of luck can operate very differently on the battlefield or in a city bazaar. That sort of specialization makes a lot of people happy.

5. The Great Escape

We tend to roleplay as a means of escaping from the mundane world that surrounds us 24 hours a day. Monotheism is a familiar part of that world for most of us. Why extend it into our fantasy settings when there are so many other, more exotic choices?

6. I'm a Little Uncomfortable with This

Finally, there's social pressure. Religion is a serious issue for a lot of people—the most serious, in many cases. Anything that impugns a religion's dignity, treats it flippantly, questions its tenets, or trespasses its sacred ground can generate unwanted heat. If you prefer to avoid offending people, or treat everyone's beliefs with respect, or share those beliefs yourself, then why invite unnecessary trouble? A purely fictitious pantheon of gods evades problems before they begin.

Designing for Monotheism

Those are all sensible reasons for fantasy worlds to have a multitude of gods, but do they exclude monotheistic religions? You can argue, for example, that henotheism (a pantheon of gods where most people worship one and ignore the others) isn't much different from several competing monotheistic churches. That would be one workable model.

That model doesn't, however, represent true monotheism. It allows something

like monotheism, but then it undermines the whole concept by not allowing the monotheists to be right.

That is, after all, the foundation of monotheism—that our god is the only one. If the practitioners of any other religion can demonstrate that its deity actually exists by, say, performing miracles (spells) in his or her name, then a theology denying the existence of all other gods topples like a house of cards.

Happily, as problems in fantasy world design go, this one is not as insurmountable as it sounds. The solution is twofold.

First, even the one true faith can be split into sects. All we need to do is look around the modern world for examples of what happens when people who worship the same god disagree over the finer points of canon. You might love the sinner and lament the apostate, but there is neither forgiveness nor salvation for the heretic.

Second, a religion can be false and still have power. In other words, not all gods need to be gods. Fantasy stories are filled with beings who masquerade as gods but aren't. Demons, dragons, ancient sorcerers, monstrosities from beyond the stars, and other entities can have power dwarfing that of men while still falling far short of omnipotence. Many things can be supernatural without being divine, and such entities make excellent foes for adherents of the one true faith.

This, then, can be the shape of a thrilling campaign: a world that is the domain of a single, enigmatic, omnipotent (or near-omnipotent) deity whose followers agree on the big picture but split into factions over the details. Some churches coexist more-or-less peacefully despite their differences, while others scheme against opposing sects, persecute heretics, and wage war against nonbelievers. Around the periphery and hidden in the shadows are the secretive demon worshipers, beast cults, and pagan temples where powerful, supernatural, but mortal entities pose as gods to manipulate mortals, feed their egos, and fuel their dark agendas. Religious conflict could easily take front and center in such a campaign, rather than being a background element.

Designing a Pantheon

Wolfgang Baur

The construction of a decent pantheon of gods is one of those tasks of worldbuilding that delights me. Though I'm not religious myself, the mystic or spiritual impulse is one that fascinates me, and I'm a fan of comparative religion, mythology, and a dilettante in all the mysterious ways that humans have communed with the divine over the ages.

Which is why the standard D&D pantheon makes me so angry. It presents both a failure of imagination and a misunderstanding of pantheistic belief, all in the name of some shoddy mechanics and attempts at character building. It's hugely disappointing. I think that a thoughtful worldbuilder could do much better by trying things that reflect human nature and that offer new game mechanics.

What's Wrong with Monotheistic Pantheism

The implicit presumption of standard D&D religions is that from among an array of gods, priests choose to follow a single god and no other. This is a pure import from the monotheistic worldview, and in particular of the second commandment in Judaism and Christianity: "You shall have no other gods before me." (Exodus 20:3).

But of course the whole point of a pantheon and a pantheistic worldview is that a believer in a system like this can and does believe in many gods and offers sacrifice to them. The "Go Team Thor!" approach of the implicit or explicit RPG pantheons aligns characters with gods the way that we choose sports teams or political parties: you can be a Democrat or a Republican, but not both at once. You can follow the Chicago Bears or the Green Bay Packers, but cheering for both is pure madness.

Pantheism and Belief

Pantheistic belief isn't like this cheerleading approach, and it's annoying to have games that assume the gods of every pantheon are all as jealous as the God of the Bible.

Imagine, then, a world where a priest follows a constellation of many gods, as in Midgard, or in many still-extant cultures of Earth. Polytheism is not just a pantheon of many gods; it is the worship of multiple gods at once. While a priest might specialize in the propitiation of a particular divinity, a pantheist priest need not.

Now consider the gaming consequences of this idea. Religious life is a constellation, a menu that can be consulted more than once, a multiplicity of possible divine connections and characters ideas. It makes, frankly, for a very complicated priest class in an RPG, but it also delivers a very rich character in a novel and possibly in an advanced fantasy game. And of course that's one direction I pursued in the Midgard campaign setting, because paganism has rarely gotten an interesting set of rules and worldbuilding in *Dungeons & Dragons*.

Mysteries and Multiples

The constellation of belief is one way to design more interesting faiths. The other is to reintroduce a degree of mystery and uncertainty in religion. The old religions of Greece, Rome, and elsewhere frequently kept some of their teachings as mysteries offered only to the initiated; the rites of Bacchus or Mithras would be revealed slowly to the faithful, and presumably the more devoted members of those faiths would know more than those who did not follow those gods. This could easily become a set of feats, divine spells, or special abilities for both clerics and non-clerics who follow a particular path.

But notice: the mysteries of these ancient cults were not exclusive. Or rather, some were limited to only men, or only women, in ways that designers seem reluctant to do with fantasy religions. The gods of a pagan pantheon, though, are not meant to be all things to all people. They don't have to be, because there are so many of them. Instead, they are targeted to particular functions (expressed as domains and keywords in game terms), and they are meant to address particular needs in people in various life stages. Young boys and young women could and perhaps should follow entirely different gods than mature men or elderly women.

Why, then, can't a character who begins as a young man have an initiation in one god and then gain a second focus of worship? Or rather, it's possible, but it's not encouraged. The character sheet in a Pathfinder game or D&D game has only a small place for "Patron God", and it's always listed as a singular. In Midgard, that character sheet offers several lines, and it should be "Patron Gods," plural.

In many cases, this makes better sense in-game than the weird monotheism of PCs. A multi-classed wizard/rogue character might follow both the god of magic and the god of thieves, or the god of her home town and the goddess she discovered among the elves.

Gnosticism Rather Than Revealed Truths

The other big problem for D&D religion is that everyone knows the gods are real. There are no plausible atheists, though perhaps there's room for the agnostic or the skeptical in some form. I'll just say that skeptics in a fantasy world might just say that the gods might be powerful beings, but not truly divine.

For our purposes, that doesn't matter. The gods exist; what's important for gaming is how player characters interact with the divine. For the most part, this has been treated similarly to a phone call or a business transaction; clerics input prayer and get back spells; paladins tithe and uphold a code, and are granted power to smite evil. All this is terrific and direct. The trouble starts when designers say, "The gods exist *and they explain themselves to humans*." I take issue with that second part.

The existence of fantasy gods in gaming is usually interpreted as meaning that gods are perfectly understandable, and that they spend a lot of their time briefing the clergy and the high priests. Presumably they do this to make sure that the tenets of the faith are not only well understood but also unified and clear and the same everywhere the god is worshipped. This leads to cartoon gods, like a comic-book Thor (totally unlike the Thor humans actually worshipped) and a cartoon Raven Queen, Lolth, or Moradin (cardboard cutouts rather than sources of awe and mystery). The gods are easy to understand. Faith is really a matter of making the right offerings and getting the right gifts in return. There's never any mystery in the divine world.

I understand why designers do this. It's the geek compulsion to make everything neat and orderly and put all variables in a box. But I also think this is a huge wasted opportunity, because religion is inherently not neat and easy to put in a box. Faith is ephemeral; doubt is crucial. Religious strife is a great motivation both between faiths and within a single faith. Splinter groups, heretics, and mystery cults with different inner mysteries are loaded with gaming potential. But they don't work if everyone can call on the gods and get a straight answer.

In Midgard, I take a different perspective on this, though there are other ways to deal with the problem. My solution is to make the gods both opaque in their motivations and essentially inhuman and unknowable because of their divine status. That is, everyone knows that the gods exist but no one really understands them. They are mysterious. Their answers change over time; their appearance is inconsistent. Their motives are irrational by our standards and often seem completely insane, trivial, bizarre, or obsessive. Why do the gods want what they want? No one knows. But they do want those things.

And that's one of the keys to the Midgard approach to the gods. Most of the time we design around the player characters; what do these powers do for a PC? How soon does he access them? What elements enhance or diminish those powers? How do followers act and what symbols do they wear?

But it's just as legitimate to say that a divine being has demands. This concept first appeared in the *Zobeck Gazetteer* for the Midgard setting, and it has expanded ever since. The gods want things from worshippers; the Christian god, to name

the obvious example, wants belief, an exclusive relationship, a code of conduct, confession of sin, forgiveness, and a certain percentage of income. No D&D god makes anywhere near this level of demands, nor should they. Roleplaying a priest should not require weird cultic knowledge—but it should require some sense of respect and humility on the part of a PC and some sense that a god is not an entirely known quantity.

Let me expand on that slightly, by reference to the real world. A certain level of confusion or uncertainty or doubt is part of the religious experience for many real-world believers. Those who are entirely too certain of themselves are labeled zealots or fanatics.

Indeed, the lack of certainty is a feature that leads to religious strife and conflict. In the real world, sectarian strife is often fatal, horrible, community-destroying. Think of the Wars of Religion between Catholics and the Lutherans, or the Crusades, or even the Cathar Crusade of one Christian sect against another as historical examples. Think of the most current, ripped-from-the-headlines massacre or genocide. In a fantasy game, these are terrific motivators and sources of deep conflict, engines that power story, campaigns, entire civil wars and slaughters.

What is reprehensible in the real world can, of course, be strong, strong fuel for roleplaying games. Treat it with caution, but don't ignore it!

Here, then, is how I bring some uncertainty and strife to religious topics in Midgard.

Masks of the Gods

The first key point of a fantasy faith is that it have at least two faces, and possibly many more. If a religion is entirely revealed and all its adherents are certain of exactly who said what, when, and why, you've lost a powerful source of confusion and conflict within or between faiths. So, in Midgard I made certain that gods were not entirely clear to mortal eyes—indeed, mortals aren't sure who the gods are, because one god may wear many masks. This is similar to the Roman and Greek practice of syncretic religion, where local gods of conquered tribes might be associated with existing Roman gods. Thus the fertility goddess of the Gauls might be seen as simply another name and a different church for the same divine wellspring.

The theology of this is less interesting to me than the practical consequences for game design. One of the generally unfortunate results of any long-running campaign setting is its tendency to spawn new gods yearly, monthly, and even weekly. Every new god requires a new write-up. Every new write-up requires a community to support that god, of priests and followers. Eventually, it just becomes tiresome to say "here's the tenth Forest God"—people tune out.

The idea of gods wearing masks leads to a syncretic solution that means new names might have existing powers, and it also hints at an underlying connection between divine wellsprings. Perun is the god of war and thunder in Midgard. Mavros is a war god first, but similar to Perun in most respects. Thor is the god of thunder first and foremost, though also a god of war. They are three masks of the same god.

Competing Faiths

At first this might seem to mitigate against conflict. After all, the three churches and followers understand each other—but their small differences can also be the source of conflict and misunderstanding about the true faith. It might be as simple as which branch of the church deserves to have one of Mavros-Perun-Thor's holy hammers, or which of their paladins are the bravest and boldest, but suddenly there is room for additional tensions between characters and within the setting.

This is even more the case when the exact nature of the divine conflict is shrouded in mystery. The gods in Midgard can and do murder one another, but how this happens and how their faiths survive a deicide is not understood by any mortal mind. What's clear is that a pantheon is always in flux, and that the gods that are most alike are most likely to fight.

The design decision here was that there cannot be more than one sea-god in Midgard without the two of them being either two masks of a single source, or being eternal enemies. Masks are sources of strength, and confusion, and that's fine. Whether the two sea gods are the same figure or two eternal enemies, either way, the setting is more vibrant and more dangerous. This is the deliberate result of a pantheon designed for conflict rather than designed to have an encyclopedic summation of separate gods in endless rows.

Your own design work may adopt the model of masks and mysteries, or may take on completely different theological properties. The point, though, is that you should design your world for conflict among at least some of its major religious forces, and think through the implications of both the theology and the nature of divinity in your setting. Gods at rest, granting powers to worshipping in a predictable way, could certainly also be harnessed for maximum conflict. An example from the world of novels might be John Scalzi's *God Engines*.

Religious strife is a boon. Make sure to find the right levers for it.

Uncertain Prophets

One such lever of strife that deserves a little more attention than most is the idea of religious oracles, leaders, and prophets. Some of them are likely bringing divine revelations in a fantasy world. Some of them may well be complete frauds. In either case, they are primary movers and forces for change in a setting.

Whether your prophets are more like Christ, Mohammed, the Sibyl, Buddha, Joseph Smith, or Joan of Arc, they are not keepers of the established order. New religions are inherently destabilizing to the established order. This is why the birth of a religion is often violent or filled with zeal—it takes a lot of energy to overcome entrenched religious orders such as Jesus against the established Jewish priesthood and Roman state, or Mohammed preaching against the idol worshippers and existing sects of the Middle East, or even Joan of Arc asking merely for a divine blessing for her dauphin and king. On the line between wild legends and history, Hercules and Achilles were thought to be semi-divine, and they certainly did shift the world. Think

in those terms, and you'll have something like the Saints and Legends of Midgard: mythic characters whose actions are larger than life.

This need not involve physical action and adventure, of course. Oracles and prophets change the world with every word they utter. People move, and nations totter. Give voice and thought to these figures in your setting, whether they are forces for good and life or forces for oppression and fear. Old religions will defend themselves against new ones, and new ones will seize land, temples, and treasures through rhetoric, mob action, great battles, or miracles. A world without miracles and without gods present and active is certainly possible, but many fantasy readers and gamers enjoy the idea of real gods acting, siring children, demanding sacrifices, and blatantly favoring their own few city-states and chosen people.

The idea of divine patrons is as old as religion, and the gods are always on the side of their people. This makes them unique worldbuilding options as super-heavyweight political actors. Consider them a valuable portion of your design toolkit, and revisit, reinvent, and rediscover the variety of human belief systems to enrich your world building. Leaving religion as just a reservoir of spells and healing is not just boring, it is in direct contradiction to real, lived religious experience.

Make your world's religion risky, active, and lively. It's far more fun to play in a setting where the religious order is novel and dangerous than to play in setting where it just functions as an alternate magic system.

It's a Mystery!

How to Design a Mystery Cult

By David "Zeb" Cook

Do your players greet your religions with a yawn? Are your temples predictable? Do your powers of description fail whenever the party interrupts a temple's solemn service?

"You've managed to slip in unnoticed while the priest is leading the ritual."

"What's happening?"

"Umm . . . A priest's standing in front of a statue on an altar, and he's chanting. The rest of the worshippers are watching him."

"Okay, it's another priest in funny robes waving his hands in front of a big statue. We've seen this before. Let's stop him . . . because we all know what happens next."

You sigh and ponder: Whatever happened to the wonder of such scenes? Where did the majesty go? The thrill of the unexpected? The mystery? Fortunately, there is a cure for this. It comes straight from myth and legend, and yet it's firmly grounded in the world's ancient history. It is both known and documented, but its details remain cloaked in superstition and guesswork. In other words, it's real enough to fit into a campaign setting, while still being fantastical enough to provide the catalyst for strange and wonderful adventures.

What am I referring to? Why, the ancient tradition of mystery cults, of course.

On the surface, a mystery cult is quite simple. It is a group of believers who practice secret rituals to worship their god or goddess. The key word here is secret, thus the *mystery* of mystery cults. Now, that may sound like any given campaign's batch of evil cultists, whose clandestine cults are littered around most fantasy settings.

So what's so wonderful about that, you rightfully ask? Here's the thing: You can get more mystery out of your mystery cult by digging into the whys and wherefores of them, and that means delving into some history and sociology. Fortunately, you just need a little knowledge—no Ph.D.'s worth of studying is required!

Historical Mystery Cults

Historically, the best-known mystery cults have their roots in ancient Greece and Rome. Among the most well-recorded were the Greek Eleusinian, Dionysian, and Orphic mysteries and the Roman cults of various eastern gods—Isis, Mithras, and a few others.

These weren't secret societies in that nobody knew about them. On the contrary, writers of the time provided most of the information we have about them, and archaeologists filled in the gaps. A quick Internet search will uncover several sites about them, ranging from scholarly PDFs to New Age sappiness, and worse. (Consider yourself warned.)

So, although they are called mystery cults, it wasn't because their worshippers hid their membership. Instead, the mystery surrounded the specifics of the rituals they performed. Only those initiated into the cult learned and took part in the rites. So while a fair amount is known about the cult of Dionysus or the Eleusinian Mysteries, the nature of their ceremonial rites remains guesswork. For this reason, all the scholarly research about them becomes, at some point, pure conjecture.

In ancient times, the mystery cult was simply part of the community's everyday fabric. As a way to describe this, scholars divide religious worship of the time between public (or state) religion and personal religion.

Public religion was the official stuff—big temples with organized priest hierarchies and the like—that everyone was expected to belong to. The holy festivals, sacrifices, and prayers of these temples involved everyone in the city or community.

The other stuff, the *personal* religion, is the meat of mystery cults. People could join whatever cult they wanted, and there was no *official* role for these organizations. Being a member was more like an extracurricular activity in today's terms, and a person could join several different mystery cults—although this could prove tricky if each cult's goals opposed or competed with one another.

In gaming terms, a game setting's public religions, the *official* ones, are the standard temples with their attending clerics—say, a temple to Athena in a setting using Greek traditions. Such public religions include even the dark gods that the orcs venerate, as well as the gods that other non-humans worship. These public religions hold services for the good of the community or the health of the tribe. At the same time, the setting's mystery cults are more akin to joining a secretive club to gain certain benefits.

For example, Kleitos the Grocer joins a mystery cult because he's looking for extra good luck, fortune, and influential friends. Adventuring types may be interested in pledging membership to gain divine favor or, as outlined below, for more nefarious reasons.

How to Design a Mystery Cult

Adding a mystery cult or two to a campaign is a good way to add variety to those anonymous high priests, blank temple facades, and stereotypical holy days. On top of that, they can be a great source for adventure. After all, nothing gets the pot boiling like a little mystery.

Creating a mystery cult doesn't have to be a difficult thing; all it takes is a little planning. Who (or what) is the object of the cult? Why does the cult exist? What do they do? How do player characters join—if they can at all? Creating the answers to these four simple questions should provide more than enough ideas for multiple adventures.

1. Who–or What?

The first question is the easiest: What is the cult's object of worship? Most often this should be an existing deity in your campaign. While any god or goddess can have a mystery cult associated with them, they are most common for very old gods or very new ones. If worship has been long established, the mystery cult emerges from all the tradition, legends, customs, and quirks that time helps accumulate.

Alternatively, if the religion is new to the area, the *mystery* of the mystery cult can attract worshippers dissatisfied with their current choices. Decadent, dying, and minor religions are all other good choices. Decadent ones offer more interesting adventure possibilities, while dying religions work effectively because the mystery cult becomes a kind of last-ditch attempt to keep the god's memory alive. Minor religions suit because they don't usually have all the obligations of an official religion, and therefore they can experiment with their ceremonies and do things a little differently.

A mystery cult doesn't have to be about a god; it can instead be about a philosophy or an ideal. A cult seeking enlightenment through stoicism (or debauchery!) might embrace several related deities as part of its rites. The Orphic Mysteries of Greece (which apparently involved purification of the soul through rebirth) called on Dionysus and Persephone, deities of fertility, wine, and rebirth as part of its rites. So a mystery cult might promise a "conquest" of death, offer the rules for leading a just life, provide a path to divine power, or allow a perfect communion with all nature rather than assure worshippers the grace of a particular god.

Clearly though, the choice of god (or philosophy) initially defines the cult. The cult of the Wolf Warriors of Wotan (as god of battle) isn't likely to be contemplating the wonders of nature as its purpose in life, after all. They're going to contemplate savage war.

2. What's the Goal?

With the who or what answered, it's time to choose a goal. Basically, why is the cult mysterious, and what are they trying to accomplish? This is where the cult's real adventure hooks take shape, as the choices you make here determine the challenges the PCs may face and the rewards they may gain.

Mystery as Temporal Power

The simplest goal is power—not in the next world, not through rewards in the afterlife, but simple power in the here and now. This is the easiest motive to use when building adventure hooks. While power can take many forms, its appeal is certainly easy to understand.

Because the mystery cult has goals in the real world, its members can often seem like a secret society of schemers. However, a mystery cult is not a group of Masons with a secret handshake and a funny password. They seek divine enlightenment to

guide their actions and to give them the power to overcome their obstacles, whether those difficulties are mortal enemies or life's everyday difficulties.

The Old Ways: The nobles of the city support a mystery cult that seeks to maintain the "old ways" of a fading religion—the city's god now being eclipsed by new beliefs. The cult wants to keep the old traditions alive, as these traditions have, over the ages, ensured its followers positions of power. The new ways threaten the nobles' dominant grip in their community, and they pray for the divine power to crush their enemies and rivals.

This kind of cult is grimly conservative and is hostile to new ideas. Their secret rites reinforce the idea that worshippers are elite and special—and most of all—right in all things. Newcomers, outsiders, and upstarts are potential threats to their power. Such a group might include vigilantes and witch-hunters who seize heretics for secret trials and purification (in other words, torture) as part of their rituals.

The mystery cult might provide the "old" families with the justification and tools needed to take down nouveau riche threats to their status and influence. Not surprisingly, the cult has rigid restrictions on membership, especially for the true initiates.

Cult of Commerce: A mystery cult for the god of commerce might include aspiring merchants and tradesmen in the town who simply hope to be blessed with extra fortune, more business, and the opportunity to make useful business connections.

Of course, there is always the chance for trouble when two business rivals strive for the same good fortune. Adventurers may suddenly be useful to the cult to ensure one of the competing businessmen fails to properly observe the secret rituals needed to gain the god's favor. To succeed in this task, the player characters must learn what those rituals are to know how to effectively sabotage them.

The Slaves' Mystery: In an oppressive society, slaves turn to the mystery cult of their homeland as a means to acquire freedom from their masters. Through the cult's practices, they seek freedom in this world or the next. Their secret rites inspire acts of rebellion and sabotage, as their god's divine power possesses them to perform such feats. The masters want the cult crushed and the leaders revealed to them. Do the player characters join the rebellion, or do they hunt down the cult's ringleaders? And if they chose the latter, how do they fight the power of a god?

Mystery as Knowledge

This type of mystery cult typically seeks forbidden knowledge, the secrets man was not meant to know. Its members might do so for power (see above), enlightenment of the spirit, obtainment of a small portion of the god's power, or for internment of that god on Earth. The knowledge sought is not that simply found in books or unearthed in ancient crypts. It comes from esoteric practices requiring years of training and ritual to unlock, such as learning how to read the secrets of perfumed smokes, translating the flights of birds, or learning to write the divine alphabet, where vast knowledge is contained in the curves of a single letter.

Not surprisingly, given the obsessive and demanding nature of the work, such cults tend to be small and favored by wizards, sages, and monks, as well as the deranged.

Mystery of Magic: The mystery cult of a deity of magic will naturally favor wizards of all sorts, though more rational-minded ones find the whole idea a foolish waste of time. Nonetheless, these "dreamers" may gather to intone secret chants on nights when the planets are aligned perfectly. Members may even practice in isolation as shut-ins in their studies or as hermits in the mountains, where they can fully devote themselves to their god and rarely, if ever, meet another follower of their cult.

Cult members may do all these things in search of pure truth, the grand understanding of everything, or even transfiguration into the divine. The path to such knowledge is difficult, so there are always those looking for a shortcut to that same enlightenment. If only they knew what was done in those secret rituals, they would certainly learn the answer they seek!

Secret Knowledge: A lay cult for everyday citizens may seek to spread enlightenment through knowledge and instruction. The knowledge must be taught in secret; without proper instruction and guidance, the great insights are corrupt and useless. In other words, "If everyone knew what we know, they would simply misunderstand and abuse it."

Such mystery cults are usually harmless unless their need for secrecy causes them to take extreme measures against those who no longer follow their ways. And, of course, there are always those—like avaricious wizards or suspicious priests—willing to pay for their secret knowledge.

Mystery of Rebirth: The mystery cult of a dead god's followers pursues the literal secrets man was not meant to know in order to resurrect their deity. This deity is naturally something awful, horrible, and elder, a god so alien that its return would threaten mankind's existence. The mystery cult is led, naturally, by a mad genius who has deceived his followers into believing they are bringing about a wondrous new age for mankind. If those outside the mystery cult knew what the cultists were up to, they would take great efforts to stop him. In this case, what the cult is up to is quite literally a mystery.

Mystery as Protectors

Just as there are mystery cults trying to bring about the end of the world, there are others just as determined to save the world. These mystery cults exist to make sure key rituals are observed to:

- Keep a terrible evil safely locked away forever
- Keep a terrible evil appeased, so it leaves them alone
- Strengthen a deity in its constant celestial battle against a terrible evil
- Ensure terrible secrets man was not meant to know stay secret
- All of the above and more

The cult could keep is rituals secret for a variety of reasons, but it most likely does so

because exposure would give its enemy (the terrible evil) the information needed to eradicate it.

Cults of this nature also tend to be far more secretive about everything. Where they meet, why they meet, who goes to the meetings, and even who they revere are things they are not likely to discuss. After all, they are engaged in a covert war to protect the rest of mankind, and they can trust no one outside their inner circle.

• The mystery cult's secret rites invoke the power of a fertility goddess to keep the minions of death at bay. This means more than ensuring a good harvest, for if the cult fails to keep the favor of the goddess, the barriers to the kingdom of death will fall, and nightmarish horrors will overrun the land. It's not just that crops will fail, it's that an eternal darkness of cold and gloom will settle over the land until everything living withers and dies. Because active agents of the death god stalk them, the cult must keep its rites mysterious and secret to avoid detection.

The cult exists in a world that seems safe and secure. The gods have their proper places and are venerated by everyday folk. Everything seems as it should be.

However, the truth is the gods are weaker than known and are under threat from elder forces even greater than they. Were this common knowledge, it could lead to despair and chaos among the people. The cult exists to ensure that select true believers can aid their god in times of weakness. Only the highest initiates of the mystery cult know this secret, and it is their purpose to aid their gods in fighting these enemies.

Clearly, stout-hearted, pious adventurers seasoned at facing horror and death would be a great asset to such a cult. Just as true, corrupt individuals would be of great use to elder forces in bringing about the fall of the cult and its protectors.

• The mystery cult is a small local group charged with observing specific rituals in order to keep the wards strong on an ancient tomb. Inside rests a vampire lich, sealed away by a long-dead high priest. To guarantee the tomb remains sealed, the priest created the cult to serve his god and to keep the seals refreshed and intact. By faithfully discharging their duties, the initiates gain favor in the next life.

The cult keeps its practices secret as a precaution against tomb robbers or foolish adventurers who hope to earn fame and glory. Of course, the mystery cult is surrounded by rumors that they are hiding a fabulous treasure hoard or an artifact of fantastic power.

Mystery as Divine Power

By far, this is the most common reason a mystery cult exists: To offer a deity special veneration in return for divine favor, whether in this world or the next. The mystery of the cult is not the rites that are its path and practice (although these are secret). The true mystery is the nature of the divine itself—it cannot be explained in words or simply by watching a priest performing at the altar. Trying to reach the divine without observing the cult's rituals only leads to failure and misunderstanding, or possibly even to madness or death.

Understanding the divine can only be done by experiencing it, and the only way to experience it is to take part in the cult's secret rites. In ancient Greece, the mystery cults of Dionysus involved wild dancing, wine, and sex to reach a divine passion and communion with their god. It also led to unfortunate results of madness, riot, and murder when the rites got out of control. Even the most basic dealings with gods are not without risk!

• The mystery cult is a classic "Orphic" group. The followers meet at a sacred grove and perform wild rituals to bring about the perfect state to allow their god to possess them. However, being possessed by a god has its drawbacks. Those possessed may go permanently mad or embark on a murderous rampage—after all, who can predict the whims of a god?

However, followers who succeed (and survive) can be imbued thereafter with divine power and understanding, making the reward worth the risk. Of course, the local lord may have other ideas about the value of madmen, raving rioters, and divinely-powered peasants roaming the countryside. In fact, he might really want to suppress such a group, if only he can find someone foolish enough to try.

• The mystery cult lives in an isolated monastery far from contact with civilization. Here the worshippers come to perform the rigorous purification mysteries to become one with their god. Those successfully preserving through the arduous task may venture into the world to lead others to the true glory, or they may remain in seclusion to contemplate their god. In any case, rumors abound about a trove of great wealth and great power within the monastery, just lying in wait for anyone arrogant enough to attempt to seize them.

• The mystery cult is well-known, not hidden or isolated in any way. Common citizens are members, and through secret rituals, they find a path to inner peace and harmony, making their everyday lives better. In this, the cult is very successful, and its prosperity threatens the established order of the other temples, priests, and gods in the region. Discrediting the cult or quashing it is all possible work for adventurers. Doing so does not come without risks from enraged worshippers and displeased gods, though.

3. Joining

For any mystery cult, you have to join before you receive its benefits, and membership is not automatic. A character cannot just walk into the temple, say a prayer, and move on. If joining were that easy, there'd be less mystery! Joining has two requirements: You must be the "right type" of person and thus invited to join, and you must undergo an initiation.

Invitation to Join: The "right type" entails meeting whatever requirements the cult deems appropriate, leading to an offer to join. Some mystery cults are very forward thinking, allowing anyone to join—men, women, slaves, elves, trolls, or whatever. Other cults may be extremely restrictive, allowing only wizards, males, females, full-blooded elves with blue eyes, or only left-handed redheads into their membership.

Ultimately, the GM decides the requirements, but if the GM wants the PCs to join the cult, then the PCs must obviously meet them, or the GM must provide an option

to trick or infiltrate the cult in some way. At any rate, the GM can use membership as a PC reward or challenge. The mystery cult of a god of battle such as Wotan might only accept warriors who have killed a man in battle. The mystery cult of a god of learning might allow only literate scholars with high IQs (although this creates an interesting question of how they would determine that). The cult of a goddess of sorcery might only accept females, regardless of all else. Obtaining membership alone can catalyze potential adventure hooks.

Initiations: Meeting the cult's requirements is only half the battle in joining it, though. Undergoing an initiation is paramount to being fully accepted. Historically, the initiation proved the followers' worth, and it prepared them for the revelation of the mysteries to come.

Initiation didn't necessarily happen immediately upon joining either. Often, time and training in more basic rituals to prove oneself might be involved before a follower was initiated into the secret mysteries.

For example, a follower might have to donate money or service to earn the rite of initiation. In a campaign, this depends on how long the PCs should be involved with the mystery cult and how difficult the process is supposed to be. As the focus of a single adventure, the initiation rite should take place fairly quickly. In a long-term campaign, the process can be drawn out to build additional adventure hooks and to ground the PCs in the world setting, meeting and impressing cult leaders and other members.

The initiation itself can range from a simple, harmless ritual to something dangerous and challenging for the PCs. Just what must be done is a secret, part of the cult's mystery. Those passing their initiation don't talk about it, or they tell imposing stories to increase the majesty of the cult.

What the initiation requires depends on the cult and the GM's imagination. It should most certainly involve pomp and ritual appropriate to such an important occasion.

For example, a simple initiation may involve reciting specific charms or prayers, along with viewing sacred objects important to the cult. A more complicated one may require the PCs to undergo an examination of their faith. A truly hard initiation might demand the PCs provide a suitable sacrifice, killed by their own hands, or complete a dangerous physical challenge. The Wolf-Warrior cult of Wotan may say that killing a man in battle is not enough; instead, they require the head of an opposing chieftain as proof the novice should learn the inner secrets. Again, the initiation process is another source of possible adventure.

4. The Secret Part

And what are those secrets only initiates know? That's the point: Nobody knows! For the GM, that means making them whatever he wants. "Congratulations! Now you know the secret handshake" might not be satisfying enough, but learning the prayers to call for a divine blessing, the rites to send oneself into a battle frenzy, or even how to shape-change into a wolf on certain holy days might be useful. With secrets comes responsibility.

Once initiated, there's no going back. The character is a member of that cult. Forever. Lapsed cultists are never popular with their fellows, and cultists who

reveal a cult's secret rituals do so to great peril. They may be shunned by others, driven from town, or even hunted by assassins seeking to silence betrayers.

This last part is an important adventure hook for characters who have to infiltrate a cult. Infiltration implies betrayal, since the characters are only pretending to join. Once they complete their treachery—revealing the mystery, stealing the magic widget, or turning over the cultist to the authorities—the PCs are going to have enemies, lots of enemies. They won't necessarily know who those enemies are—some prominent members might not be open about their affiliation.

Potentially, their enemy list will include an offended god or two. And while a god might have better things to do than show up and blast the PCs for their crime, even a distracted god can make life very challenging for player characters.

And that just leads to a whole new set of possible adventures.

How to Design a Guild, College, or Secret Society

Wolfgang Baur

M ost worldbuilding is about people, places, magical changes on a global scale. But a smaller and more focused aspect of any setting is its collection of social structures: orc tribes, bards' colleges, thieves' guilds, vampire bloodlines, and even its church hierarchies and knightly orders. How does one design these elements to make a world a little more compelling and a little more playable? I'd say that the social design of these societies is crucial to drawing players further into the world and into the game.

Here are the key elements to consider when you are designing a society or guild. These points can be applied to most RPG settings and, indeed, to most worldbuilding.

Distinguishing Shared Goals and Exclusion

Unlike a tribe or nation, a society is essentially voluntary and not necessarily defined by a particular locale. Priesthoods, wizards' councils, artisanal guilds, and orders of paladins may pick and choose who is a member, and that membership generally doesn't come until after an apprenticeship or proof of qualifications. In other words, societies like this are essentially clubs, and like all clubs, they may add members frequently, rarely, or never.

The founding members are usually among the most influential members for obvious reasons (longevity, institutional knowledge, and sometimes the rewards of dispensing patronage), and sometimes it is simplest to design with the assumption that their goals are the group's goal. Picture, for instance, the archmage who wishes to enslave the queen of the djinn, the master of the goldsmith's guild who wishes to create the finest work of art ever seen, the legless and secretive alchemist who hopes to climb a mountain and build a shrine to his sainted wife. Each of these founders has a personal goal and might be persuasive, powerful, or wealthy enough to convince others to share that goal.

Most of the time, though, a group's goals are broader and more ambitious, and for a society to survive the death of its founding generation the goals certainly must be larger than any personal goal. They need to be goals that transcend individual ability, that require team effort, that change the world in some way. They need to be big goals, because people are less likely to join up and struggle to achieve lesser goals. And, well, we can presume that monsters require similar levels of motivation.

So what might those big goals be? The details depend on your world as a whole, but perhaps they involve waking a sleeping and imprisoned god, raising a library to contain all knowledge, exploring the distant corners of the world, collecting all forms of magical ore and gemstones, serving as healers to the poor and the sick, protecting elven lands from the bite of the ax and saw, destroying all trace of a blasphemous heresy. Or perhaps the goals are more specifically about power: restoring the proper bloodline to the throne, enslaving all humanity to the rule of the lich-queen, or instituting the theocratic state under the One True Demon-God.

Initiation and Acceptance Rituals

Who undertakes these goals? Those who volunteer their efforts as apprentices and journeymen, who are born into the cult or society, who pay some fee or perform some task, or who are initiated through some ordeal.

The key element for play is when a player character attempts to join one of these groups. This should be a moment of at least a little drama and a little suspense. After all, the character's application to join might be rejected by a blackball vote, a divine refusal, a terribly augury, or poor omens. A longstanding foe might contrive to frustrate the player character's attempt to join, delaying it, or making sure the application is forever rejected. Getting in should require a little work. Here are 10 possible ways to frame the entrance or initiation itself:

1) Soaked in Blood: The initiation might be one of trial by combat, requiring the initiate to fight a real or symbolic battle against an illusory foe, a horrible monster, or a journeyman of the society. Winning might be perfunctory—unless a rival has swapped in a real monster for the fake one. And in the case of combat against an armed foe, the goal might be to show toughness, steely calm, or good breeding, rather than victory itself.

2) Strength of Mind: The initiate might be tested in memory, courage, and knowledge of arcane matters, questioned for hours by examiners, asked to sing or recite, asked to answer questions in ancient tongues or to declaim long-dead histories, and to theorize

on the construction of spells and artifacts long lost to the ages. The goal might be the world's most excruciating oral defense, or the goal might be to roll skill checks until the initiate fails. Indeed, strength of intellect is a fine way to judge candidates for more cerebral societies, and ever-increasing target numbers for those skill checks can provide a sense of rising tension and difficulty in a game session.

3) Generous Ring-Giver: The initiate might be asked to show great generosity of spirit and an open purse. The initiation might involve bribes and gifts to a guildmaster, endless rounds of drink for newfound brothers and sisters in the order, even gifts of minor magic, symbolic animals, or perhaps jewels, rings, knives, or other items of significance to the society. The richer the initiate, the more generous the gifts are expected to be; the exact amount might be stipulated as so-and-so many horses, gold pieces, necklaces, or what have you. Failure to provide sufficient gifts might result in a blackballing by a soured supporter of the initiate, especially if the generosity requires a vote (as in 8, Acclaimed by Peers).

4) Bound by Magic: The initiate might be required to swear a powerful magical oath or undergo rituals of binding and compulsion, to ensure that the society's secrets will never be revealed to outsiders, or to encourage obedience to a guildmaster, or simply to ensure honesty among the members of a thieves guild. ("When you have sworn this oath, you may never lie to your brother or guildmaster.") This binding need not be entirely negative or compel certain action: the members of a wizard's guild might all gain the ability to detect or read magic on entrance to the guild, and the members of a thieves' guild might all see in the dark like cats.

5) Ceremonial Sacrifice: The initiate might be asked to sacrifice something of great value to join the society: a magical item, an heirloom, blood and hair. The initiates might all be eunuchs, or they might all be sworn to chastity or poverty. These things are surely something the initiate would know ahead of time, but knowing it and roleplaying giving it up are two different things. Make the point clear in the design so that it is clear in play.

6) Divinely Anointed: The initiate must enter some sacred place, undergo a religious ritual, or enter some ordeal with meaning to members of the faith, such as a knight's vigil or a priest's anointing. The candidate might be accepted or rejected by higher powers, or might even be expected to return with a vision, prophecy, or sign blessing his or her entrance into the society. Failure to gain such a sign or vision might be cause to dismiss the candidate permanently or until a new season returns to open the society's doors again.

7) Returned from Darkness: The candidate might need to withstand some drug-induced trauma, long fasting, deliberate poisoning, time spent in isolation or darkness, or other harrowing rituals with some real physical or psychological risk. The candidate might be tempted to spiritual or secular corruption, offered solace, water, food, or other succor that he or she must refuse.

8) Acclaimed by Peers: The candidate must charm, beguile, or work hard enough to win over the founders, leaders, or peers of the organization to vote him or her into the next rank of the society's hierarchy. Failure to convince them means the candidate does not advance, whatever his or her merits.

9) Given a Lock Without a Key: The candidate is given secret knowledge, items, a companion animal, or new magic, and must master them or learn to command them

in some fashion. Until he or she solves the riddle of this test, he or she remains an initiate and cannot enter the society fully.

10) Tested and Marked by Fate's Hand: The candidate is thrown into the sight of some powerful entity—a demon, angel, dragon, archmage, or arbiter of some kind—which peers into the initiate's soul and divines whether he or she is worthy to join the order. If the candidate fails, he or she is cast back into the world, rejected, and told to attain some quest or higher understanding before returning. "You have not pleased the Secret Master—go forth and grow in skill and wisdom before you return!" If the candidate succeeds, some mark of the test appears on his or her body: a tattoo, halo, horns, eye color, or badge of some kind that makes it clear that this person is one of that Secret Master's followers.

Open, Nested, and Secret Societies

Craft guilds and thieves' guilds, knightly and priestly orders, mage's colleges, cults, aristocratic clubs, and secret societies: they are all organizations devoted to some form of group action and purpose. But they are not structured the same way when facing the public. The craft guilds keep their methods secret and the wizards hide their arcane lore. The knights might have an open face to the world, but hide their martial techniques and their battlefield commands, banner codes, or special maneuvers and training methods. Priesthoods are known both for a public face and their inner knowledge (see Zeb Cook's essay on Mystery Cults for more on this practice of the ancient world). And cults and secrets societies are certainly secretive in what they do and do not reveal to others, especially if their goals are malevolent.

As a consequence, you'll want to think carefully about any society's public face and its private behavior and trade secrets. The most charitable, honest, and good-hearted society might still have secrets it prefers to keep to its upper echelons, the dirty laundry of its funding, its politics, its careful cultivation of wealthy donors, or its harsh rule against men and their place in the order. Likewise, a cult of animal and human sacrifice might take clear and obvious steps to prevent any public knowledge of its real activities from reaching the public.

As a game designer, you need to consider what secrets your organization has and how it keeps them secret. Peer pressure, economic self interest, shame and guilt, powerful sworn oaths, threats to family or friends, magic compulsions, invisible demonic surveillance: something helps the society keep its inner workings secret.

In general, your society might be open to all, with all its information largely known but for a handful of relatively important details of finance, theology, or magical lore. Or it might be that while admission might be open to all, it might well be closed to all but a handful of the most devout. That is, anyone can join, but not everyone joins the higher echelons, because a society might well have an inner and an outer circle. The inner circle knows the society's true goals, while the outer ring works at some other public goal, perhaps related, perhaps merely a cover. In other words, a society might have multiple levels of involvement and initiation. At each layer deeper, the character becoming initiated into more

of its secrets will have an "ah-ha" moment that explains some of the society's previously mysterious behavior. The design goal is to make it clear what information is accessible at what level.

Finally, the purest form of us-vs-them thinking in a society is that all within it keep all its information secret, and those outside it are all viewed as dangerous, unbelievers, threats to the society's greater goals. The everyday word for a society structured this way is a cult, though in some advanced economies the term "Wall Street banking firm" might also apply. If you are designing a vampiric bloodline, a Cthulhu or Mythos cult, or a similar group, consider both the secret lore and the penalties for sharing it carefully. These are likely to become plot points for gamemasters or story points in shared fiction for the setting. It might be wise to specify a particular form of punishment or retribution used against those who betray a cult's secrets: death by drowning for former devotees of Dagon, careful assassination by sunlight or vampiric bleeding for those who cross an ancient clan. If this is part of the world lore, it can be used in adventure and story design down the road.

Status and Command

Once you have determined what the types of entry to the guild or society are, you might consider the hierarchy within the society. The medieval guild master, the archmage, the vampire prince, or the baron who leads an order of knighthood are all fairly straightforward. Who are their primary supporters? How does an initiate move up the ranks from apprentice to page to squire to knight to master-sergeant to commander to marshal? How many ranks are there in this cult, anyway?

Give them some titles, make it clear that the organization acknowledges those titles, and provide the world bible with a sense of who typical members are at each of these ranks. You might not spell out every rank of a weaver's guild that is tangential to your setting, but if your worldbuilding is all about a secret organization of monster hunters, you need to sort out who signs the expense reports when someone goes overboard on ammunition costs while tracking down bigfoot.

Finally, make it clear how many minions a group has, and how widespread its influence is. This might be as simple as assigning a number of members to a thieves' guild, or it might be as complicated as drawing a full chart of sires and ghouls in a city's vampire population. Note, as well, that a small organization need not be less important or less influential than one with thousands of members. The Circle of Eight in the world of Greyhawk was central to that world's lore and mythos, and all its members were important. You might well design a similar small group of power brokers for your next world.

The Need to Design Competitors

One of the less-appreciated aspects of designing a guild or society is designing its rivals, competitors, and nemeses. After all, if it were easy to accomplish their goal, the society would already have done so. Perhaps they are opposed by another particular society, or perhaps their goals are so vile that all right-thinking people oppose them. It's also possible that a nation-state or city-state knows of their plans

and opposes them. It might be a single archmage who keeps them in check, or a loose confederation of street urchins and clever adventurers.

It's less important exactly who their opponents are than that they have some opposition who know what they are up to. When player characters join a society, they are also taking on those opponents as their own. This gives a gamemaster an easy source of conflict—as long as the opposition is clearly designed and spelled out for use, with its own goals, hierarchy, tools, spies, and special magical items. Ideally, design a simple membership test that adventurers might be able to pass or subvert to "join" the opposing society in disguise.

Repeated Signs and Recognition

Part of designing any college, guild, or society is designing how it looks to players in your game. I find that the simplest solution is to use a single symbol, article of clothing, code word, or other identifier, and just beat it to death. The Cult of the Red Star uses a red star, the Loyal Guild of Alchemists uses a pelican, the Order of Undying Light uses a sun symbol.

13 Unusual Societies for Worldbuilding

1. An alchemist's guild that really has discovered the fountain of youth

2. An order of inquisitors that can sniff out any lie

3. A brotherhood of minotaurs and rangers who specialize in dungeon delving—and banditry

4. An order of paladins devoted to robbing the rich

5. A group of holy slavers who believe their slaves are better off in servitude

6. A secret society of werewolves or weretigers, intent on gaining power over populations of unsuspecting victims

7. A wizard's guild entirely devoted to becoming liches and clock-wraiths

8. A thieves' guild that performs great works of charity for orphans

9. A dwarven merchant guild that specializes in transport by airship and griffonback

10. A society of singers devoted to maintaining the wall that surrounds the world, keeping hell's legions from overrunning civilization

11. A priestly order devoted to the advancement of knowledge and the mapping of the world

12. A society of women who between them are oracles and prophets, and who seek a world of greater peace and stability

13. An order of assassins devoted to maintaining a secret fortress where lie the roots of Yggdrasil and the Fruits of Knowledge

They are obvious, of course, because they are meant to be easy to recognize at a glance. And for wizard's colleges with their lions, snakes, ravens, and badgers, it becomes easy to use those symbols as shorthand for character and personality. There's nothing wrong with saving yourself the explanation every time: "You see a man with pale hair and a serpent tattoo" is an easier way to communicate that the person the heroes are dealing with is a member of House Slytherin than a more roundabout way of doing it. This works well for all open, public societies to help them recognize each other—and of course, it makes it easy for villains to recognize and target the heroes of the game.

Conclusion

Why go to all this trouble? Because secret societies are both the greatest villains and greatest heroes of a world you build. They outlive any attempt to kill them. The archvillain who is a member of a society can be killed: his followers may live to strike again in vengeance. The hero who falls in the service of the Order of St. Arik knows that though his life is sacrificed, another will pick up the banner and the cause.

Well-designed societies can echo and resonate throughout your worldbuilding. Make them mythic, epic, mysterious, secretive, or vile, but make them clear, organized, active, and passionate about their aims. The results will stir conflict, drama, and great games.

How to Write a World Bible

(or, How to Keep it All Straight)

Scott Hungerford

When I worked for WizKids Games on brands like *MechWarrior* and *Mage Knight*, I was one of the folks in charge of putting together world bibles—large collections of facts, histories, maps, pictures, character backgrounds, and other bits of information that summarize a game world. Such a document is part of the package that game company management teams use to set up business deals with potential partners. Industry outsiders probably won't read and understand every nuance of a 200,000-word first-draft document. But by providing an organized world bible of information that agents, licensors, and other business folks can flip through quickly, a game company gets that much closer to making the deal.

Additionally, through developing world bibles, my daily process of generating accurate game and website content became much easier. The bible helped to ensure that all the writers, editors, game designers, and artists I worked with had the right answers when it came to the amazing worlds we were building together. While you may have slightly smaller aspirations than writing up a four-hundred page document detailing everything in your game setting before you start to play, for the content editors and continuity managers who work at game companies, these world bibles are the lifeblood of a creative enterprise.

Lessons of the Big Screen: World Bibles in Action

In order to meet WizKids' business goal of bringing our game brands to Hollywood these world bible documents were an essential part of our strategy. If one of our games got picked up for a movie treatment, the bibles would define exactly what Hollywood could do with our property.

During this process one of the Hollywood producers I talked with wanted to take our capitol city in *Mage Knight* (which magically floated a thousand feet off

the ground in our fantasy world) and have it fall out of the sky and be destroyed in spectacular fashion at the climax of the film. It was comparable to Spiderman's New York City being nuked and forcing Peter Parker to move to Los Angeles in future installments of the franchise. If we didn't have things carefully written out in our bibles defining what Hollywood *could* and *could not* do with the property, they would discover loopholes that would undermine all of our work—just like your players will if you don't think through all the details of your worlds!

Whether you're making your own RPG sourcebook, writing short stories, or even working up a wealth of source material for a string of novels, world bibles are a great way to help you organize information about large groups of characters, plots, and monsters into a manageable reference guide. While some us might be lucky enough to see our work on the big screen, for the day-to-day work of generating a great world filled with detail, intrigue, and adventure, a world bible is an important tool for game designers and writers alike.

Living Documents

A good world bible is a living document, rarely staying the same for more than a few weeks at a time. At both WizKids and Wizards of the Coast, the ongoing process of designing new game sets, contracting with authors for new novels, and even the process of adding or removing cards or figures during game testing could trigger new rounds of bible revisions. Specifically at WizKids, the weekly tournaments that we sponsored worldwide drove important parts of the official ongoing storyline. For example, one faction in the game could gain more political control if its players managed to win enough matches at the gaming table. This meant that the content team had to plan for every contingency, and the content bible had to be regularly updated to reflect the outcomes of every storyline tournament.

For your own worldbuilding, a completed first draft of a world bible is a fantastic accomplishment—but you should be prepared to update it as you get new ideas, develop new plots, or especially when your test groups make interesting or erroneous assumptions about your setting. A world bible is never truly done, but you can (and should) save and print dated drafts when you reach certain milestones in your creation so you can easily look back to see how you did things before the last few rounds of edits.

> *Hint: A good old fashioned three-ring binder can be a handy and quick resource when designing worlds—and it offers the added feature of allowing you to scribble notes in the margins as things happen during a game or when you wake up in the middle of the night with a new idea.*

World Bible Sections

I break down bibles into three parts—**World**, **Cast**, and **Appendices**—though creating each section and all the materials within isn't necessarily a linear process. One of the toughest parts about creating a world bible is putting the exact right facts in—and just the facts that matter. It's an easy trap to just start to write and dump the entire kitchen sink into one monstrous document. But if you focus on presenting

just the key facts and start to train your brain to think about the specific details that matter rather than just jotting down everything that comes to mind, you'll come out with a great resource at the end.

Section One: The World

World Name: Even if you don't have a final name in mind when you start the project, choose a placeholder name up front that summarizes the theme and mood of your world. If you don't choose one, I guarantee your players will!

Introduction: Create a one-page summary, a foundational five-paragraph essay detailing what the game world is about. In my experience this will likely be the first part of the bible you write, and will be the last document you touch when everything is said and done. Be sure to summarize not only the world and characters in this page, but talk about the central point of conflict in the game world in detail as well.

> *Hint: The first time an important vocabulary word appears in your world bible, such as the name of a city or a bit of new terminology, bold it so you can see at a glance if it is the first time the word is mentioned.*

Races and Cultures: Whether mortal or monstrous, initially limit yourself to one page per race and/or culture in this section. Start with a one-line summary at the top of the page, and then flesh out the rest of the page with information on languages (both spoken and written) and how factors such as illiteracy, customs, taboos, and religion ties in with daily life. Be sure to think about political or religious factions within each racial or cultural group, and how those mainstream or splinter movements might affect the future of each kingdom, nation, or dictatorship.

> *Hint: Lifespan is one of the more telling indicators for how a culture thinks and thrives, as a race of Dwarves that lives 30 years at best is going to have a very different outlook and philosophy than Elves that live for thousands of years.*

Magic and Technology: First write up a one-page summary of how magic, science, and physics works within the world. Once that's done, devote one or two pages to each category of science or magic that you find interesting. Be as creative as you like, but don't fall into the trap of focusing only on how your world is different from the real world. In your setting, imagine daily life for those living at the lowest level of income as well as for those who are very wealthy. How does magic and science affect what they eat, how they travel, and how they earn their daily bread? Once you have the basics down for how the average person lives daily life, then you can dive into how the upper and lower classes deal with magic and technology in greater depth.

Fleshing Out Races and Cultures: Once the previous two sections are finished, go back and write up a one-pager for each group that utilizes science or magic in their culture. As a good example, did you know that the Aztecs used wheels in their children's toys—but didn't use wheels for transporting goods from place to place? (It's because they didn't have any domesticated animals that were capable of pulling carts.) It's these little facts that can really make a culture interesting, and will give your players a sense of wonder when they play in a world they've never visited before.

Currency and Economy: Give yourself a few pages to work out the details of coins, currencies, payment systems, barter, and the relative prices for food, materials, weapons, gifts, and services within the world. You don't need to finalize every last

price in the marketplace in advance—but knowing whether a gold coin is called a carpa or a therpa is just as handy as knowing that one of these coins buys a cup of coffee and the other one buys a sizable estate in the countryside. Each culture will likely have its own form of currency, and they may have a trade currency they use specifically with their neighbors. Whether it's in the form of hard metal or sea shells, or written deeds of what is owed and owned, a culture's currency defines them just as much as their style of government.

Section Two: The Cast

The Cast of Characters: Next you want to write up the character-by-character breakdowns, not just of your bartenders, bad guys, and friendly fixers, but who the key rulers and masterminds are who run things, either publicly or behind the scenes. Initially, force yourself to one page per character, though most will require more space later on as you outline their age, parentage, social standing, genealogy, family curses, business endeavors, romantic interests (both welcomed and unrequited), and other such information.

> *Hint: I'd suggest using italics to note "secret information" in your world bible so you can keep track of all those pesky conspiracies with greater ease.*

Monsters and Menaces: If your world has antagonists, whether dragons or giants, giant ant colonies or sentient plagues, be sure to include a zoological summary of each kind of entity, one page per type. Above and beyond game statistics and the obligatory picture, provide a concise summary of what (or who) they eat, where they live, and what drives them to continually act against the races and cultures of your world. With a little bit of work you can create an interesting menagerie of creatures and critters, both mundane and supernatural, which will add even more flavor to your game world.

Section 3: The Appendices

Appendix A: Timelines and Histories: Be sure to include a timeline of events in your world bible, whether dating back thousands of years or just a few months since a certain historical event or disaster happened. Initially, just include the big events, then be prepared to insert, remove, and update entries as you—and others—continue the creative work.

Later on, as your world evolves and more pieces get added to it, you may find yourself with new events that require you to detail out sub-sections of the timeline. Whether by running multiple gaming groups or, as in WizKids' case, having new comics, promotions and characters being continually added to the brand, you'll need to leave enough space in your history to allow for the expansion of your world.

Also, giving major events a name (Day of the Black Rose) or having holidays publicly or secretly celebrated (Dead King's Solstice) can be a great way to continually remind players that it's only been a few years since King Ferdinand was assassinated—and that their homeland has been subjugated by an enemy king ever since.

Appendix B: Cartography: Even if it's just an untidy sheet of ruled paper with a few scrawl marks, include a map with key borders, coastlines, mountain ranges and landmarks clearly pointed out. You don't have to be able to draw to create a simple

map, and there are a lot of real-world maps online that you can pull inspiration from. You will likely continue to update your maps as you continue your work, so don't feel ashamed to add or remove sections as you go. (See Jonathan Roberts' essay, "Here Be Dragons" for insight into creating maps.)

Appendix C: Glossary: At the very end of your document, maintain a glossary of key terms. While you should eventually have a sizable alphabetized dictionary covering every last person, monster, spell, and place in your world, at the very beginning of this section be sure to feature a one-page entry that covers the thirty or forty essential words and terms the player or reader needs to know.

Bringing it All Together

If you're adding to your world bible after every game, then making upgrades to your manuscript after every session should work out pretty well. But if you're building a world from scratch, then I have a couple of other ideas to help you assemble your masterpiece!

For the initial generation and assembly of concepts and ideas, I've put whiteboards, bulletin boards, and chalkboards to good use over the years. However, there are lots of different programs today that let you sort your ideas in non-linear fashions, almost like organizing index cards on a tabletop.

For myself I've painted twenty feet of wall in my office with a brand of magnetic paint, so I can stick magnets and index cards to it by the hundreds in whatever order I please. This way, as I make notes on index cards, scraps of paper, or diner napkins, I can stick them up on my wall until it's time to sort it all out. Including question cards is also a good idea, especially if you don't know an answer just yet but need to figure one out before you start.

Playing in Someone Else's Backyard

Worldbuilding in Licensed Worlds

Janna Silverstein

I t starts with a compelling universe. For me, it started with *Star Trek*, then *Star Wars*. Once we're fans, those of us with a creative streak want to go play in those worlds we grow to love. Some of us turn to fan fiction. Some of us become authors creating our own worlds. And some of us, once we have the skills and the knowledge, begin to work in beloved universes created by others.

But entry is neither easy nor cheap.

My first foray into working in other universes was during my time as an editor at Spectra, Bantam Books' science fiction imprint. It started with my working on the reissues of the very first *Star Trek* novels ever printed. That project was at the shallow end of licensed work. The books had already been published. They merely needed new cover images to freshen them up for a new generation of readers. Thus was I introduced to the licensing department at Paramount Pictures. During my time working with the good folks there, I began to truly understand the requirements of licensed work: the approvals, the contract details, the protective approach toward beloved properties.

But it wasn't until I started editing *Star Wars* novels and books based on DC Comics that I began to understand the breadth and depth of the difficulty and the challenges involved in creating new material for known, beloved, even flagship properties. Once I moved to the other side of the desk, working at Wizards of the Coast on *Magic: the Gathering* and WizKids on *MechWarrior* as a licensor rather than a licensee, I got the full 360-degree view: why companies choose the designers and writers they choose, the tools they may (or may not) provide to make that work possible, why and how they protect their properties, and why the bar to entry for creative types is so high.

Hey You Kids, Get Offa My Lawn!

Let's start by talking about terms: property, licensor, licensee. A property is a creative conception, for example, *Dungeons & Dragons, Greyhawk, Eragon*, Harry Potter, and so forth. A licensor is the entity which owns the property. A licensee is an entity which purchases the right to produce material based on a licensor's property. This relationship is usually governed by a strict and binding contract that sets out rules about the material to be produced, the approvals and permissions required, not to mention the money involved, and much more.

If there's no agreement between a licensor and a design studio, a game company, or a game designer producing new material based on the licensor's property, then it's against the law to do so. It's copyright infringement. The creative entity can be prosecuted if the licensor chooses to pursue that route. (That said, the rules for fan fiction have loosened up considerably since the early days. Fanfic is ubiquitous on the web now, and some licensors don't pursue prosecution because most fan writers aren't trying to sell their work, and because fanfic fans the flames of customer enthusiasm, which is ultimately good for business. If they do try to sell their work, however—and some have tried—and the licensor finds out, they're in for a world of hurt. This applies not just to fan fiction but to games and all other sorts of derivative works. Better to be a law-abiding citizen. Seriously.)

Of course, there are two other cases with regard to producing material that's not contracted for with a licensor that are worth mentioning. The first is the sanctioned approach, one that some game publishers have taken and used to great effect to find new writers. I'll talk about that a little later. The second is the idea of producing unrequested material to submit to a licensor with the idea that they'll acquire it once they see it. Let's get this out of the way right now: This idea is a pipe dream. The reasons will become clear shortly.

Why are licensors so strict about protecting their property? Because it's their lifeblood. The money made from big-name properties is often what keeps a company in business. It's the reason big companies seek to extend the life of the copyright on flagship characters and worlds. If the property isn't protected, that financial engine will run out of gas. They may also lose the legal right to call the property their own. We all want to be paid for our good work; we deserve it. Legal protection and prosecution is the way businesses—licensors—sometimes must do it.

Invitations to Play

Still, licensors want to expand and exploit their properties so they work with licensees to create books, games, toys, and so on—products that may not be the things they are most expert at producing. How do you get that gig? How do you keep that gig? What's involved?

I talked with Mike Selinker, founder of Lone Shark Games, about that. He's worked with an enviable catalog of licensors and properties: Disney, Harry Potter, Marvel Comics, *BattleTech*, and *Pokémon*, to name just a few. He gave an answer to that question that sets the bar pretty high. In the context of meeting with J.K. Rowling's company about Harry Potter, he asked to meet first with the creative team

rather than the business types. He said, "We were the best creatives in the world in our respective realms, and so we forged a bond about our mutually interactive skill sets. That's how you make someone entrust their world to you. Of course, you have to actually be the best creatives in the world at what you do first."

Remember how I said that entry is neither easy nor cheap? This is what I was talking about. Working in a licensed world usually requires experience—proven chops and powerful results. When I worked on the *Star Wars* novels at Bantam, we brought in only authors who had track records: they had already produced finished work, had a record of good sales, and had shown a strong work ethic over and over again. Whether we're talking games or novels, that's what licensors are looking for—in a word, professionals who can deliver. Their properties are world-class, and they want the related, licensed products to be in the same category. "The licensor is looking to be blown away," Selinker says. "They get mediocre all the time."

Earlier I mentioned one way that less-experienced creatives could break into working in licensed worlds. This is one corner of the licensing business where the game industry has been smart and proactive. Some property owners do accept unsolicited work for review. *Kobold Qu*arterly, for example, accepts submissions based on the *Pathfinder RPG* and the Golarion setting. But here's the rub: if they like it and want to publish it, the Golarion material still has to be reviewed and accepted by Paizo Publishing, which owns the Golarion setting. The licensor has the last word, and often the word is "no." A sale is a rare occurrence. But it does happen. Occasionally.

Playing by the Rules

So, you've got the gig: the owner of *Aqualung Airship* wants to work with you to create a game based on their world. And you, the licensee, ask the first, most obvious question: Can I see the world bible? You want to know everything that the licensor knows about the universe, and you want to be sure you're getting it right. Even if you're a die-hard fan who has followed *Aqualung Airship* from its inception, it's a stone-cold guarantee that there's information you don't have and, presumably, a bible—that tome of secrets reserved for licensed creatives—will reveal it all. Scott Hungerford talks about what a world bible is and how to put one together in his chapter, "How to Write a World Bible." It's a practical guide to keeping the facts straight on any universe—and apparently one that many licensors could use.

The truth, says Keith R. A. DeCandido, is that "there is almost never a bible, and when there is, it's more often than not useless." DeCandido knows whereof he speaks. He's an award-winning author who's worked with properties including *World of Warcraft, Dungeons & Dragons, Resident Evil, Star Trek*, and *Doctor Who*, just to name a few. "And you will almost never get a list of what you can and can't do," he continues. "You find out what you can't do when you try it and they tell you no."

Selinker told me the same thing. But he added a crucial point: "The one thing the licensor is guaranteed to be good at is knowing what's 'too far.' The goal, then, is to expand their comfort base with everything that you can imagine fitting into that box."

And that's a challenge. Without a bible, the licensee has to take what they

know and extrapolate what could work, which means pushing the boundaries and exploring new territory. "You can't be afraid to push up against that wall," Selinker says. "They want you to. They may not tell you that's what they want, but they do. Their job is to rein you in. You can't come 'pre-reined.'"

One way to expand boundaries and build out an already-established world is to use locations and concepts where the original medium can't go by virtue of inherent limitations. DeCandido says, "My Leverage novel involves wild animals, which is something a TNT show doesn't have the budget for." Similarly, in a novel he can take his characters to locations where a TV show might not be able to afford to travel. Games can take characters not just to other locations on Earth, but under the sea, off the planet, even to alternate universes, as long as it makes sense in the context of the original property—until the licensor says, "That's too far." The job of the licensed creative, then, is to find that darkened, unexplored corner of a universe and shine the light in to show what's possible. Game mechanics are a great way to do this, reflecting the way a universe works, but revealing some truth to it at the same time[2].

One thing is certain: Whether or not a licensor has a world bible, they've given great thought to what will and won't work for a property, whether because it's a TV show with a tightly-woven plot thread planned out at the beginning of each season or because it's a game with a tournament structure that directly influences sanctioned storytelling. If that's the case, then acceptance and approval of licensed material becomes a trial in how good a licensee is at shaping material to the requirements and—more importantly—the restrictions of the world. This is one of the reasons so many licensors won't look at unsolicited material from unknown writers and designers. No matter how clever or how original, if the material doesn't fit into the plan, it can't be used. Furthermore, any licensor who looks at unsolicited submissions could open themselves up to legal action if they produce stories or products that even vaguely resemble that unsolicited work. When I said earlier that selling work to a licensor without a license to produce it was a pipe dream, these were the reasons I was talking about.

I've Played Here Before . . . or Have I?

Despite a need to not pre-rein oneself, DeCandido still approaches each universe with some caution. If you're working on a property that you really know and love, there's a danger. "The hardest thing is to resist the temptation to fanwank yourself into insensibility—doing that thing you always wanted to see the characters do, and forcing them to do it whether or not your plot actually calls for it." So it's one thing to have the cultural literacy required to work on a property; it's another thing to overlay that literacy and enthusiasm with a professional's eye for what will and won't work, and why.

Finding that sweet spot is a skill that needs to be developed. At the same time,

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[2] See Colin McComb's excellent chapter, "Basic Combat Systems for Tabletop Games" in the *Complete Kobold Guide to Game Design* for great thought and detail on game mechanics that reflect story elements.

some universes come with a history that's deep and broad, like the Marvel or BattleTech universes, and are full of territory for expansion without encountering the kind of dangers we're discussing. Such enormous scope provides the creative with great freedom and tons of possibilities. The BattleTech/MechWarrior property, for example, is nearly 30 years old. Its story is galactic in scope and spans nearly 1,200 years of history, and has manifested itself in RPGs, board, computer, and card games, more than 100 novels, and a TV series. There's a lot of room to move in such a world. Pick a planet from the map that's been mentioned only once or twice in campaigns or other properties, create a likely scenario, and go from there—provided, of course, that the licensor approves.

Of working with Marvel, Selinker says, "That's a company that completely understands that its characters express themselves in hundreds of different formats, and that each format has different needs. They also have by far the richest environment ever created. . . . On marvel.com, I can read ten thousand comic books for a single subscription fee of $60. . . . You can immerse yourself in the world because they make the world available to you."

DeCandido says this is key: "Whether you're coming to it cold or know it like the back of your hand, it's always best to immerse yourself in the universe in whatever way is best, to have it all swimming around in your brain as you sit down to write." So even without a bible, most properties are their own resources. Your ability to absorb and produce material appropriate for a world depends upon your capacity for research and synthesis.

Their Rules . . . and Your Rules

If licensors have boundaries, licensees should, too. Even if you're working on a universe you love, as a creative you need to know when to hold the line and when to walk away.

On holding the line, Selinker is talking about a specific phenomenon he's seen over time. "Sometimes, your licensor wants *your* job," he says. "We game designers have all the fun. Day after day, they're looking at mediocre expressions of the thing they own, struggling to stay awake through pitch meeting after pitch meeting. The project you're working on with them is their creative outlet. The licensor that wants to design your game for you conveniently forgets that you've had years of training to get good at what you do. They have not. But since they approve everything, they have this human nature thing of liking what they come up with. The trick is to not be surprised about it, and not get mad about it. But you have to stand your ground. Your job is to give the licensing company what they want, not your licensing *contact* what they want.

"That said, a completely hands-off licensor is no good either. If they give you no feedback at all, just simply trusting you to do whatever it is you do, then your game can completely miss the mark. It's a balance. Everything's a balance."

And sometimes, no matter how much you want it, you have to step away from work. Knowing when to do that is the sign of a true professional. DeCandido says that he's only walked away from projects in specific circumstances. "The only time

I've stepped away from a project is by never saying yes in the first place. I've done that a few times, and those instances were usually cases where it wasn't going to work logistically—too tight a deadline, too little money, both—and I just wouldn't be able to complete the project."

Selinker has walked away from projects when the project itself wasn't right. "I got asked to work on an NFL card game. I love football, and can quote chapter and verse about players, seasons, rules, everything. I listened to what the design team had done. They had abstracted out the offensive line, the defensive line, yardage, and penalties. I said, 'Guys, I would love to work on an NFL game, but I can't help you. The things I need a football game to do can't fit in the space you've given it.' And I regretfully walked off the project."

Reflecting on Playtime

Worldbuilding in licensed universes, obviously, comes with a lot of baggage: oversight by licensors, understanding the rules of someone else's universe, finding the right place to set your piece of the larger picture. It also comes with a pretty high bar to entry. Most of the skills discussed in the rest of this volume certainly are applicable to the process: understanding the setting, its assets, and its limitations. Your licensor can be either your collaborator or your adversary; collaboration is always preferable, because your licensor also holds the keys to the kingdom—a playground full of equipment we all want to play on. You've just got to earn the right to play, and with the right attitude and skill set, you will.

The Limits of Design

Wolfgang Baur

Game design is about making decisions within constraints. There are only so many pages to describe a world, and that means only so many pages and so much art. Even if you distribute a setting as a PDF or video game download, the issue is still there: only so much time to write, playtest, rewrite, test again, edit, proof. Only so many dollars for art and maps. So one of the greatest challenges for game design is to provide as much useful, entertaining, inspiring, and worthy material as possible, given that it can never be a complete description of a world.

There are two ways that game designs generally attempt to solve this problem. Novels generally follow one of them.

Please Fans and Still Fail

The first method, and the one most commonly attempted in RPGs in particular, is the attempt to be all things to all people. Monte Cook talks about this in his chapter, "Kinds of Worldbuilding," the need to provide three variant jungles, many dungeons to delve, a canvas for the game master and players to choose from. This buffet includes all possible player races, typically at least three and often a dozen non-human races in a fantasy world, the sort of variety that makes Barsoom or Earth look relatively humanoid-poor by comparison.

The goal for these settings is called kitchen sink design (KSD), and it is an abdication of design responsibility. Instead of making choices for what to highlight and what to leave out, the objective of KSD is to provide every possible option, a terrain of every flavor, nations and wilderness to suit every possible adventure that a GM might run, cultures, societies, and religions by the yard and by the ton. Everything a gamer *might* want should be included. The ideal kitchen-sink world should fulfill all possible gaming desires and cover all subgenres, periods, and peccadilloes.

This solution means that none of the places, cultures, or races are given as much room as they might be if the worldbuilder made the harder choices. Instead, the worldbuilding takes a turn into what a software builder might call "feature creep". Instead of three core races, there are 12 or 15. Instead of 20 major kingdoms we have 100. More is always assumed to be better.

Surprisingly, this "garbage pizza" or "everything bagel" approach does please a significant portion of the audience. Sort of. For a while.

Why the Kitchen Sink Mess Succeeds

To my eyes, the attempt to do kitchen sink design is always futile. It is an abandonment of a designer's responsibility in favor of selling out to the marketing department. The goal is to provide something for everyone and to bring in the largest possible audience. That way lies madness, because human preferences and subjective likes and dislikes will always vary across a wide, wide spectrum. Even if you please 95% of the audience, that vocal 5% will complain about the lack of rules for aasimar, or the lack of a decent matriarchy, or the lack of a gay prince or a couatl princess.

There's a good business reason why setting sprawl is often baked in at the start, and I'm sure you know what it is. The more individual races and nations and cults that exist in an RPG world, the more game supplements a publisher can provide. For example, *Vampire: The Masquerade* started with a core set of two major clans and about a dozen bloodlines, and it has added more over the years. I'd argue that this splintering and increase in factions was good for business (more clanbooks, yeah!), but bad for the community in the long term. (I gotta learn about *another* prince and *another* secret history and set of powers? Ugh, I'm out.) The encyclopedic nature of worldbuilding is a golden business opportunity. But this is both a weakness and a strength.

The strength is that with "something for everyone" your audience is, possibly, larger and you can please everyone for a while. Gamers lobby for their favorites, and the publishers produce the most popular supplements. Over time, everyone wants official emphasis on the content that interests them. Publishers become stuck supporting the less popular elements, for the sake of completeness. To a certain degree, this reflects the RPG hobby as a collector's hobby rather than a game-playing hobby. Players want the full set of the clanbooks, class splatbooks, or kingdom books. They may really play with just one of them, but it's fun to read all that detail about the setting. The urge for completeness has given us the *Silmarillion* and *Unfinished Tales* and 12 volumes of the *History of Middle-earth*. It has given us 50 or 100 volumes of the Forgotten Realms.

And that's a real strength. People who buy and read setting books are enjoying the RPG hobby without engaging in it the same way that players do. You can see that both types of audiences exist, and there are times when a roleplayer may be looking for a new group when reading adventures and supplements is a great way to keep in touch with the hobby.

The Death of the Kitchen Sink

At the same time, this all-things-to-all-gamers approach is self-defeating. Instead of presenting a smaller number of locales in detail, it skims over dozens or scores of different worlds all mushed together. None of them necessarily make a lot of sense as neighbors, none of them are well-designed as nations or useful for gameplay—but they provide a lot of variety and novelty. That novelty alone is considered reason enough to provide more acreage, more slightly-different humanoids, and more gods in an ever-growing pantheon. This satisfies the human itch for the new and the fleetingly interesting—at the cost of making the setting less and less internally coherent.

The alternative is to do a setting with focus. With emphasis on the most prominent, most compelling, and richest sections of your world, you increase the chance that gamers will care about the setting rather than grazing it lightly with an emphasis on browsing for the outré or the unusual. They might grapple with the material when it covers a small nation in depth and a large nation lightly and swiftly. The reader will want more material on a great setting—but you don't have to provide it all at once and in depth. The goal of worldbuilding with focus is to deliver the goods in a coherent way over time.

So resist the urge for completeness and categorization and a wild open volume of material. Make the material you create matter. At a certain point, the kitchen sink approach collapses of its own weight, and there are simply too many tomes of setting material for any new player to see them as anything but an incredible obstacle to learning the world.

The publisher reaction is usually to release a new edition or hit the story reset button in some fashion. "Here's the world, but new!" is the rallying cry. It is accessible again for new gamers! But at the same time, the fans who mastered the old version of the setting may easily become alienated or annoyed. Tampering with the core expectations, characters, and joys of the setting is always exciting, and always dangerous. It may become too tempting to ignore the business proposition of setting the core book to the same audience again, but if a publisher hits the reset button often enough, fans give up on it. The world they first fell in love with has changed, and the fans find a shiny new world next door to explore.

Core Worldbuilding vs. Dead Worlds

The opposite approach to the kitchen sink is "fire-and-forget" or "limited canon" worldbuilding. This is what happens with most indie RPGs, since many of them are entirely self-contained and never produce a supplement. It's also the case with RPG settings such as Al-Qadim, Dark*Matter, or the latest version of Dark Sun, which were produced as limited-run books, without any promise to the reader about future support beyond a year or so.

I find it quite telling that indie and story gamers find nothing unusual in an RPG that delivers its setting in 32 pages or 100 pages, and that includes all the rules to play and all the setting needed to play. These story games assume that the game is four

hours long or perhaps a half-dozen sessions for a "long" game. There's no need to provide a lot of reference material to produce a playable roleplaying game. It is a habit and a tradition grown from the fantasy novels of Tolkein and from the traditions of Greyhawk and the Realms. But it is by no means a requirement of the form.

The Midgard Solution

The goal for Midgard was emphatically not a kitchen sink. There's seven major regions covering a variety of cultures and appealing to the most likely styles of play, but some things just don't really exist. Elves and halflings are minor races. The 50 kingdoms are built on themes from the core fantasy inheritance, and yet the world is not itching for 50 splatbooks to explore it all. The pantheon is expressly designed to resist the sprawling deification of every theme, domain, or human concern (see the chapter "Designing a Pantheon" for more on this subject). The world has focus because it does draw a line. The original design spec was even more constrained than the final version, but yes, I gave some ground to please the inevitable demand for encyclopedic reams of options.

I may yet regret that, but for the most part the solution was to deliver those variants (halflings, for instance) as a small and largely obscure PC race. They are playable, but they are not famous, not central to the setting, and can easily be ignored. Their role in party dynamics is largely taken over by kobolds, a race that does figure more prominently in the worldbuilding, the lore, and the dynamics of the setting (dragon-rich as it is).

The goal is explicitly to present a rich world that does not need 20 supplements to prosper.

Perhaps this is a foolish business decision. But I think it is a wise creative decision to keep the setting accessible and to avoid the encyclopedic sprawl and steep learning curve that inevitably dogs settings after a few years of development. There's richness and depth here, and plenty of time to expand on the elements that people find most appealing.

I hope that adventures and a smaller stream of support material will keep Midgard out of the kitchen sink category, while still making it accessible to gamers who want a setting they can learn quickly and play the way they want.

It's a bit of a shame that a setting designed to resist splatbook sprawl is the exception rather than the rule. This seems to be more the case in mainstream fantasy

Indie and Story Focus

The existence of indie games provides an interesting counterweight to the encyclopedic kitchen sink settings. They are featherweights in word count and in options, often providing a single locale, highly constrained player character options, and tell a single story or a primary kind of story. For instance *Fiasco* delivers an experience in which Murphy's Law rules, things fail horribly, and that's the entertainment. If you want to play it with a different setting or culture, buy another playset—usually in an entirely different world or genre.

settings, though, and there is one other place where worldbuilding is tighter and much more focused, namely indie games and story games (see sidebar).

Conclusion

Worldbuilding can be an enjoyable hobby for its own sake, and many game designers still treat it as a way to explore various social or narrative issues in dozens of environments and cultures, spinning out ever-greater quantities of material for an existing setting. My own view is that this can be enjoyable but is ultimately self-defeating, as the best worlds are memorable without requiring a 12-volume set for beginners. Kitchen sink design, then, feeds fan desires in an unhealthy way, and ultimately abdicates the primary function of game design—to make choices that focus the game experience—by emphasizing all choices equally and providing narrative and playspace for both popular and niche interests.

Contributor Bios

KEITH BAKER is best known for creating the Eberron Campaign Setting for *Dungeons & Dragons* and the storytelling card game *Gloom*. He's produced a host of games, novels, and RPG supplements, including the novel *The Queen of Stone* and the card game *Cthulhu Fluxx*. Currently he's hard at work on a brand new world. Keith can be found online at Keith-Baker.com, or on Twitter as @HellcowKeith.

WOLFGANG BAUR is the founder of Kobold Press and a long-time designer and editor in the field. His writing is firmly in the mainstream of RPG design, with credits on *Dungeons & Dragons, Alternity, Call of Cthulhu*, and the *Pathfinder RPG*. He has edited *Dragon* Magazine, *Dungeon* Magazine, and *Kobold Quarterly* magazine. The periodicals business is where he learned the value of repetition and the usefulness of dealing with difficult freelancers by keeping a straight razor in his boot.

Wolfgang is known for his world-building in the fan-favorite "Kingdom of the Ghouls" adventure as well as placing the foundation stones for Thassilon, Qadira, the River Kingdoms, and most of the Storval Plateau in Golarion, the core setting of the Pathfinder Campaign. As his worldbuilding talents have grown, he has likewise upgraded his boot armament to simple two-shot Derringers.

The Midgard setting is Wolfgang's third complete published world, following on the Origins-nominated-but-obscure *Kromosome* SF setting and the Origins-award winning *Dark*Matter* campaign (with Monte Cook). He enjoys writing travelogues of imaginary places and doesn't plan to stop anytime soon.

DAVID "ZEB" COOK Videogame and RPG designer, along with occasional writer – has been mysteriously employed making games for 30+ years. In that time he's taken a swing at most every kind of game except sports, so there's still another challenge left. Starting at TSR, he was the designer of AD&D 2nd Edition, *Oriental Adventures, Planescape*, and a slew of modules and other things. Since leaving TSR, he has been in videogames working numerous titles including *Fallout 2, Lords of the Realm III*, and *City of Villains*. He is currently working the upcoming Elder Scrolls Online MMO for Zenimax Online. He hopes someday to be an Elder of Gaming, mostly by living long enough.

MONTE COOK has worked as a professional writer for almost 25 years. As a fiction writer, he has published numerous short stories, two novels, a comic book series from Marvel, and has attended the Clarion West SF&F writer's workshop. As a nonfiction writer, he has published the *Skeptic's Guide to Conspiracies*. Most notably, as a game designer, he has written hundreds of books and articles. Best known for D&D 3rd edition, he also designed *Heroclix, Ptolus, Arcana Evolved, Monte Cook's World of Darkness*, and many more. His new project is *Numenera*, a science fantasy game set in the far future coming out from Monte Cook Games. In his spare time, he investigates the paranormal as one of the Geek Seekers. Check out his work at montecook.com.

JEFF GRUBB is a veteran game designer, author and worldbuilder. He was one of the co-founders of the *Dragonlance* setting, a co-creator of the *Forgotten Realms* setting, and has built campaigns ranging from the *Al-Qadim* to *Spelljammer* and has contributed to the recently-published *Midgard*, from Open Design. His novels include seminal works for *Magic: The Gathering, Warcraft, Guild Wars*, and *Star Wars*. He has been most recently helping build the world of *Guild Wars 2* from ArenaNet. Interestingly, his training is as a civil engineer, and he has gone from building structures to building universes. He likes to dream big.

SCOTT HUNGERFORD has worked for Wizards of the Coast and WizKids as a game designer and content editor for card, board, and miniatures games. He eventually transitioned to the electronic gaming industry as a designer for casual games, MMOs, and strategy games for the PC, Xbox, iPad, and Facebook. In his spare time, he gallivants around the countryside with his wife, or works on photography, music, or other artistic projects. He typically writes one to three full-length novels a year, often longhand. Having written epic fantasy, paranormal, urban fantasy, and a number of YA manuscripts, he's that much closer to achieving his dream: seeing one of his books on a bookstore shelf!

CHRIS PRAMAS is an award-winning game designer, writer, and publisher. He is best known as the designer of the *Dragon Age* RPG and *Warhammer Fantasy Roleplay,* 2nd Edition, and as the founder and President of Green Ronin Publishing. He has been a creative director at Wizards of the Coast and Flying Lab Software, and was the lead writer on Vigil Games' *Dark Millennium Online*, the Warhammer 40K MMO. Green Ronin continues to thrive under his leadership, publishing games like *Mutants & Masterminds, DC Adventures*, and *A Song of Ice and Fire Roleplaying*.

JONATHAN ROBERTS grew up in a medieval farmhouse between a ruined castle and a Bronze Age fort. Jon has illustrated maps of real and imaginary worlds for a wide range of clients from Wizards of the Coast and IDW comics, to George R.R. Martin's Lands of Ice and Fire and the World of Midgard for Open Design. Along with his own illustration work for books and games, Jon has curated gallery shows of maps by illustrators around the world.

KEN SCHOLES is a renegade GM turned writer. After nearly a decade of world-building through short stories, he's now wrapping up his five volume series, *The Psalms of Isaak*, critically acclaimed as "a towering storytelling tour de force" by Publishers Weekly.

Ken cut his teeth on the TSR gaming craze of the early 80s, creating diverse campaigns within the *Dungeons & Dragons, Gamma World, Top Secret* and *Boot Hill* RGPs to play with his friends. Ken's eclectic background includes time spent as a label gun repairman, a sailor who never sailed, a soldier who commanded a desk, a preacher (he got better), a nonprofit executive, a musician and a government procurement analyst. He has a degree in history from Western Washington University and is a winner of France's Prix Imaginales for best foreign novel and of the Writers of the Future contest.

Ken is a native of the Pacific Northwest and makes his home in Saint Helens, Oregon, where he lives with his wife and twin daughters. You can learn more about Ken by following him on Facebook or visiting www.kenscholes.com.

JANNA SILVERSTEIN has worked for more than two decades in the publishing industry. As an acquisitions editor for Bantam Spectra, she had the privilege of working with authors including Raymond E. Feist, Katharine Kerr, and Michael A. Stackpole among others, and working on properties including Star Trek, Star Wars, Aliens, Superman, and Batman. She also worked at Wizards of the Coast on *Magic: the Gathering* fiction and at WizKids on fiction based on *Mage Knight* and *MechWarrior*, both in print and online. For Open Design, she edited *The KOBOLD Guide to Game Design, vol 3: Tools & Techniques*, and the ENnie Award-winning *Complete KOBOLD Guide to Game Design*. Along with Open Design, she has edited projects for Night Shade Books and Pocketbooks. Her own writing has appeared in *Asimov's Science Fiction, Orson Scott Card's Intergalactic Medicine Show, 10Flash Quarterly,* and in the anthologies *Swordplay* and *The Trouble With Heroes*, among others. Though she'll always be a New Yorker, she lives in Seattle with a princessy calico cat, many books, and a respectable—if somewhat smaller—collection of games.

STEVE WINTER began working for TSR, Inc. in 1981, and has managed to make a living from D&D ever since. His many roles have included editor, designer, novel author, creative director of AD&D, web producer, editor-in-chief of *Dragon* and *Dungeon* online, and community manager. His current gig is as an independent writer and game designer in Seattle. Steve's reflections and speculations on D&D, RPGs, and game design can be read at www.howlingtower.com, or you can follow him 140 characters at a time on Twitter as @StvWinter.

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