

# World-Building

## A guide to creating believable campaign settings



### Author's Introduction:

This text is based off of the course syllabus I created for a workshop on world-building I held at Suny College in Brockport, NY. As an RPG publisher and speculative fiction writer, world-building is an essential part of what I do. Whether it is creating an entire new campaign setting or launching a fantasy novel, a functional, believable world is necessary to insure that your audience is willing to suspend belief long enough to appreciate you efforts.

While this product specifically addresses the unique concerns of creating roleplaying material, the process itself can also be used in speculative fiction writing. This process is just that, a process. It is not an outline or step-by-step set of directions to create a universe. There already exist dozens of resources to take you through the actual mechanics of world creation. Instead, consider it a way of thinking. A methodology to employ as you begin your journey into the realm of world-building.

## Part One: Developing a Clearly Defined Logic

At some point, everyone who plays RPGs decides to create their own campaign setting. Perhaps they even dream of publishing it. The growing PDF RPG industry has made it possible for just about every gamer to become a would-be publisher. This, however, is a double-edged sword. On one hand, anyone with PDF software can write and produce a campaign setting. On the other hand, *anyone* with PDF software can write and produce a campaign setting. This creates a glutted, saturated market in which only the very best will ever see any profit. And to become one of the best, you need to be able to create functional, believable worlds.

World-Building is an incredibly difficult, but rewarding, process. But it's about more than racial stats, cool magic items, and creating new monsters. The biggest part of the process is creating what I refer to as a *clearly defined logic*. A clearly defined logic means that the underlying mechanics of the world make sense, and everything relates to everything else in a clear, easily understood manner.

Most campaign settings, on the other hand, start based on “the kewl factor.” It starts with a simple munchkin question like “Wouldn’t it be cool if there was a race of fire elves descended from fire genasi?” Or, “Wouldn’t it be cool if there was a special class that could get critical hits and backstabs on undead?”

The problem with this method is that it doesn’t take actual sociology, geography, or even common sense into consideration. Instead, the world develops in a weird min-max vacuum designed to find a work around for every law that keeps a player from doing the matrix-style moves they want with all the bizarre powers they want. Instead of developing a believable, functional setting, one ends up with a hodge-podge of mega powers with a very narrow focus that forces everyone else to stretch the boundaries of reason and common sense to make it fit.

To paraphrase Dr. Malcolm in *Jurassic Park*, sometimes creators get so caught up in seeing what they can do, they never stop to ask if they should do it.

A clearly defined logic takes into account the *who, what, where, when, why and how* of your world. Even if these things are never spelled out in your setting, you as the creator need to understand them in order to insure the world makes sense. Once you have established your logic, you will be able to find a natural progression for developing your storyline while maintaining game balance and functionality.

A clearly defined logic never starts with game mechanics, racial stats, or anything that can force you to try to fit everything else around it. Instead, it starts with a world concept. Your world concept is your overriding goal for the setting.

When I first started developing the *Neiyar: Land of Heaven and the Abyss* setting, my world concept was to create a matriarchal civilization that was functional. With the exception of the Drow, there were no serious settings like this. The typical fantasy setting is male-dominated, and females (with the exception of PCs and a few important NPCs) are on the periphery.

But it was equally important that the setting not turn into some femi-nazi woman-power love fest. The setting needed to be playable, balanced, and believable. The seed of Neiyar was built around a lesson from, of all places, a sociology class in college. There, we had learned of a small group in ancient India known as the Neiyar. This was a matriarchal, warrior society. The men were professional warriors, selling their skills to warring factions. Because the men were always off fighting and dying, the society developed a matriarchal structure to protect the survivability of the people. Without stability at home, the society would collapse.

The stability of the home should always remain in your thoughts when developing your world concept. Without homeland stability, even the most powerful armies eventually crumble to dust, unable to support themselves. All societies, good or evil, will have certain safeguards in place to insure their own survival. In fact, this need is the very answer to the question “why should an evil character care what happens to the villagers, townsfolk, farmers,

etc?” For purposes of stability, one has to care, or you lose your support system. Evil a chaotic evil warlord understands you need to leave the farmers alone at least some of the time if you want them to continue creating crops to feed your army. This homeland stability is at the core of your clearly defined logic. You must constantly ask yourself if the process, power, ability, or whatever adds to or subtracts from the ability of the society to remain stable.

So the ancient Neiyar women would marry at an early age to their *First Husband*. He had full rights and obligations to the household, and lived in the family home. However, when he was off battling, the woman could accept *Visiting Husbands*. They would have to leave their armor and weapons outside (to alert other visiting husbands someone was already there), and they had to leave the family home before morning or if the First Husband came home.

This strange arrangement insured the reproduction of the people, thus making sure there were future generations to continue the traditions. Thus, even though the family structure may seem contrary to what we normally expect, it fits a clearly defined logic, as it insured the stability of the home.

This real-world concept evolved into the original world concept of Neiyar, a tropical environment that was home to a warrior, matriarchal society. Once that concept was formed, everything else would have to revolve around that. Every race, monster, prestige class, spell, and skill from this point forward would always need to refer back to this overall concept.

**The process in practice:**

Our basic idea for Neiyar was a tropical environment that was home to a warrior, matriarchal society. In my seminar and Suny College, the class decided that they would create a campaign setting based on the following idea: An arctic environment that was home to an exiled race of elves. This became their core idea, and everything from that point forward had to work with this core logic.

**Your Notes:**

**Consider your own campaign setting. Boil it down to a one or two sentence core idea.**

## Part Two: In the Beginning

As you start to develop your world, the first thing to ask is “What type of a world is it?” But in this we don’t mean if you are creating a tropical paradise or a frozen tundra. Instead, you need to determine something much more important. Is my world open, closed, or limited access? Of course, first we need to discuss what these terms mean.

When we talk about world building, we are referring to the setting, not necessarily an entire planet. The world of *Star Wars*, for example, is really the entire galaxy. Whereas the world of the *Forgotten Realms* focuses mainly on Faerun, one continent on the planet of Toril. Your world can be as small as a city or as large as a universe. Regardless of the size of the setting, the process will remain the same.

### Open Worlds:

An open world is a generic setting. Open worlds are often small settings, such as city settings, that could exist just about anywhere. Metropolis, for example, is an Open World. We don’t really know where it is (well, Superman fans know for sure), but we don’t need to. It is a generic city designed to fit into the superhero genre.

Open Worlds will follow the generally accepted rules of behavior for the genre they are designed for. For example, if you are creating a world for a science fiction story, you are not going to introduce a bunch of arcane spell casters. If you are working in the fantasy genre, you are not going to have your characters flying on airplanes or spaceships. The setting conforms to the standard, expected rules of behavior found within the genre.

Open Worlds offer a level of familiarity to the reader. The reader can quickly get into the plot because there is already a pre-existing understanding of what to expect. Elves behave like elves. Dragons behave like dragons. Knights behave like knights. Open worlds allow for quick plot development without have to offer a great deal of background and exposition, because most of this is already understood.

On the downside, however, Open worlds limit your creation in how far you can push the accepted norms of the genre. If your elves start suddenly start raping and pillaging, your rocs all become pacifists, or your dragons are all vegetarians, you might find your reader suddenly annoyed. Once you commit to creating an Open World, you can’t haphazardly start changing the rules everyone expects you to play by.

This is vital to understand when it comes to creating RPGs, particularly if you plan on marking Open Game Content (hereafter referred to as OGC). Potential customers looking for material that they can quickly add to their existing games expect certain norms, and do not want to have to spend a lot of time tweaking your product to make it fit into their game. If you are providing Open World material, it is vital that it conforms to the norms the consumer expects. Otherwise, it is useless to them. Otherwise solid products have failed because they were marketed as generic RPG material, but then altered the rules and norms so much they were not useable by consumers looking for generic RPG material.

### Closed Worlds:

Closed Worlds have minute or no contact with other worlds, and are specifically designed to work outside the boundaries of the norms. The *Ravenloft* setting is an example of a Closed World. Magic works differently in Ravenloft. Races behave differently than their Open World counterparts. Often, such settings have specific alternate rules for the archetypes common to the genre.

The creation of a Closed World allows for a great deal of flexibility. If you want your vampires to walk around during the day, you can do that. If you want your space ships to be sentient beings, you can do that. The only limit on a Closed World is that of your own imagination.

However, with all that flexibility comes an enormous responsibility to insure that the reader clearly understands what you are doing. Closed Worlds often require a great deal of back-story and exposition in order to help the reader follow the plot. And all this exposition needs to be balanced with the need to keep the storyline moving.

In terms of gaming, this means you need to have clear reasons for not conforming to the norms of the genre. Earlier, we mentioned the “kewl” factor. Closed Worlds are the most susceptible to the “kewl” factor. Writers strive so much to be different, without considering that different does not automatically equate to better, or even acceptable.

This doesn’t mean that you can’t break the rules, but you need to have a real viable reason why you are doing so. Let’s look back at our fire-resistant elves that are descendents of fire genasi. Where would they make sense? The gut reaction would be in a desert setting. But logically, there are plenty of real-world creatures that live in deserts, and none of them possess special protection against fire. A desert setting alone would not be enough of a reason to create such a race. Instead, you would need to create a viable background to explain them.

### **Limited Access Worlds:**

Limited Access Worlds are those that try to find the balance between Open and Closed Worlds. These are unique settings that both follow the accepted norms of their genre while successfully introducing a limited number of new concepts that are integrated into the accepted norms. The world of *Forgotten Realms*, would be an example of a Limited Access World. While the world possesses many concepts and mechanics unique to the Realms (such as The Weave), it still retains the feel of a typical fantasy setting.

Limit Access Worlds provide enough generic characteristics to make them compatible with most other similar products, but also provide new ideas that can be easily folded into the mix. They offer a great range of creative options while maintaining the general Open World feel expected. Finding that balance can often be difficult, and requires careful planning to determine where the general norms will be followed and when they will be broken.

### **The process in practice:**

During our seminar, the class decided to go with a Limited Access World. They wanted to create something that could stand on its own, while at the same time being compatible with other settings. They decided to use the Limited Access Approach for their artie setting, giving them the benefit of sharing the common ground of other fantasy settings while being able to offer some flexibility in the actual creation.

**Your Notes:**

What do you want out of your world? Determine which approach you think best fits your general idea. Consider how each approach impacts your creative process in order to decide which is best for your plans.

## Part Three: Developing Your Logic

Now that you have your general idea and have determined what type of approach you want to take, now you need to develop the outline that will define your products logic. This involves two types of research.

The first type of research you need to do involves familiarizing yourself with what has already been done. Failure to familiarize oneself with what your competition is doing can lead to a redundant, unmarketable product that mimics a dozen other products already out on the market.

It is a sad commentary that too many writers do not read. Instead of taking advantage of the wealth of existing resources already available, they create in a vacuum. I cannot tell you the number of product pitches and ideas that have been submitted to me from authors so confident in the originality of their story, only to have it sound like six other stories I've already had pitched to me in a period of two weeks.

And in the world of RPGs, it is even more important to know what the competition is up to. RPGs are a niche market, and cannot sustain six campaign settings that all do the same thing. If XYZ Publishing has a desert campaign setting coming out in two months, you better be aware of it before you start working on your desert campaign.

That is not to say you can't produce a desert setting just because publisher XYZ is doing one. But you need to understand that the other product exists in order to insure that your own product can find a fresh voice. Recreating the wheel does noone any good.

The second type of research you need involves insuring the authenticity of your setting. You must engage in research in order to determine what, logically, would exist in your setting. When I started developing Neiyar, the first thing I did was research the rainforests and jungles of the real world in order to determine what sort of wildlife and plant life existed in these locales. I learned that the most prevalent life forms in these environments were insects, amphibians, and reptiles. In order to achieve authenticity in my fantasy setting, my wildlife would need to reflect fantasy versions of reality. This became important when I started to flesh out the monsters of Neiyar.

While conducting your research, you must also examine the natural challenges of your chosen environment. What challenges would someone living in this environment come across? How would these challenges impact the development of the society?

Jungles hold a slew of natural challenges: diseases, oppressive heat and humidity, quicksand, sinkholes. Just finding fresh water could be a challenge. Transportation from the outer rim to the jungle interior will be difficult. All these things would have some impact on the development of the society. All these things must be taken into account when you start developing the actual game mechanics of your races, monsters, etc.

### **The Process in Practice:**

Using the class's collective knowledge, they put together a basic idea of what would be expected in an artic setting. Mammal such as sea lions and polar bears capable of surviving in such a climate would be the primary form of wildlife. Plant life would be minimal. Carnivorous predators would be the primary threat to humanoids trying to survive in this environment, as such creatures would be both competition for the limited food supply available and a potential danger should they decide the humanoids might make for a good snack. Natural challenges of the environment would include extreme cold and long periods of darkness. Whatever civilization decided to live here would need to have ways to content with these problems.



**Your Notes:**

Start your research. What sort of wildlife is normally found in the environment? What are the natural challenges? How would this impact your civilization?

## Part Four: Building a Civilization

You have your basic idea. You know which approach you want to use. You've examined the market and done your research to understand the challenges your new world will need to address. So now what?

Again, before you start knocking our new races and classes, you need to develop your society. The type of society you develop will naturally lead you into the sort of classes, skills, races, etc that would evolve out of it. And before you develop your society, you need to consider some of the vital building blocks that make a civilization a civilization, and not just a group of people living in the same area.

One of the most important aspects of civilization is its myths. The mythology of a civilization has a profound impact on how people act and respond to situations. There are two types of mythology, literal myth and figurative myth.

Now before we go further, we are using the word mythology to discuss both religion and other forms of spirituality. At its root, a mythology is simply a way that a people connect with the divine. We aren't placing values or judgments of religious beliefs, only establishing a common vocabulary to work from.

A literal mythology is a mythology that is known to be real to the people of the civilization. It is meant to be taken literally and historically. There is no difference between history and myth in a literal mythology world. Most fantasy settings are literal mythologies. Not only are the gods real, but they also have interaction with the citizenry. The supernatural is not some strange phantom ghost, but a tangible, real manifestation of the gods.

A figurative mythology is one in which the mythology is more symbolic than factual. There is a difference between the mythology of the people and the historical facts they teach. In figurative mythologies, even though the people believe in the existence of the various gods, they do not consider the myths factual accounts. The mythology is a guideline on how to live, not hardened law.

The type of mythology you chose will have an impact on your setting. Generally, a literal mythology will be a high-magic setting, in which the gods are active in the day-to-day lives of the people. The divine agents of the various gods will be active, either behind the scenes or out in the open. In figurative mythologies, the gods still exist, but take a more hands off approach. Commonly, these are low-magic or no magic settings. The supernatural is the stuff of superstition and legend, not an everyday acceptable occurrence.

Once you have determined the type of mythology, you must define the role of the gods and the supernatural. In Open Worlds, this normally means offering generic, simple concepts. The gods are not clearly defined, rather referred to as the gods of good, the gods of evil, gods of nature, etc. This allows readers to use their own existing pantheons to fill in the blanks. In Limited Worlds, you may wish to include gods specific to your setting, giving them names and personalities. On Closed Worlds, this is a requirement. Because the world must rely on itself for all information, you will need to consider the actual make-up of the pantheon and determine how these beings interact with each other and the civilization.

Next, what level of technology are you looking for? The level of technology will determine how advanced of a civilization you are developing. People who live in high technology setting behave and think very differently than people in low technology settings. Even in our modern world, we can clearly see the difference in thought and behavior between countries with access to technology and countries in which technology is rare.

It is tempting to throw random technology items into fantasy settings, but even something as mundane as a simple rifle can dramatically change the feel of your game. Any student of the art of war can explain in detail how gunpowder changed the face of the world and how civilizations fight wars. If you are looking to throw random technological gadgets into the mix just to be different, you need to think long and hard how this item will impact your civilization.

And while considering the role of technology, you must also consider the role of magic. Rarely will the two be on equal terms. Again, it is tempting to want to run a world with both technology and magic, but as ultimately both processes are used for the same purpose, to bring about solutions to problems, extreme access to both becomes redundant. Magical fireballs mean little in a world with high-explosive bombs. And what is the point of an everburning torch in a world with flashlights?

There are generally three types of magic systems: common, rare, and exclusive. In a common magical setting, magic is everywhere. Wizards and sorcerers are an accepted part of the culture. Magic items (at least low-powered ones) can often be purchased in shops. People are just as likely to seek out a cleric to cure their diseases as they are a doctor (or, perhaps, more so). While not everyone can employ magic, magical effects have been seen by a majority of the population, to the point where such things are considered normal. Such civilizations are normally high-magic worlds, where magic is used to create all sorts of conveniences and solve all sorts of problems. Of course, magic also causes its share of problems as well.

Rare magic settings are those in which magic is more the stuff of superstition than common knowledge. Instead of wizards and sorcerers, arcane spellcasters may be referred to as witches and witchdoctors. Instead of accepting magic, the average person may be suspicious of it. The closest the average person would come to purchasing magical items would be a con artist's snake oil. These are almost always low-magic settings.

Exclusive magic settings are those in which magic is only accessible by a selected group. This may be an inherited trait, or through special training, or even the proverbial deal with a devil. Such worlds can be either high or low magic environments. For example, a high-magic world where elves possess magical ability but humans do not. Or, a low-magic world where magic is only available to a select few who are trained to understand it.

Now that you understand the mythology, technology, and magic of your world, look at your information and determine how it would impact your society. How would politics be affected? Who exactly is in charge? How do people interact with each other? For example, in an exclusive magic setting, perhaps magic is only available to the nobility, who use it to hold on to power. This, in turn, would create a caste system with the nobility at the top and the commoners at the bottom. In such a setting, the commoners would probably resent the nobility, and this resentment would impact their actions.

In Neiyar, we used a literal mythology, with the gods and goddesses taking a very active role in the society. Based on the natural materials available, there is a small amount of technology, with the people able to process the rubber tree plants to produce rubber items and road materials that can withstand the humid heat of the jungle. Magic is common, and there are a variety of types available. Due to the literal mythology of the Neiyar, the political structure is controlled by the church. As a matriarchal society, men often meet obstacles to gaining power. Therefore on a social level, this disparity in power affects interactions both between the Neiyar themselves and other races that do not follow their teachings.

**The process in practice:**

In the class, they decided to go with a literal mythology, using high magic with limited technology. They developed three separate settlements for their setting: a dwarven settlement nestled deep in the arctic mountains further inland, a settlement of elven exiles on the exterior of the mainland near the frozen waters of the ocean, and an aquatic race similar to humanoid seals or sea lions that lived in the frozen waters just offshore. The humanoid race in the ocean had a tribal, nomadic approach to their settlement, as they would keep their numbers small and follow the fish and sea life available below the ocean's surface for sustenance. The dwarves, protected from the elements deep within their mountain stronghold and with access to natural resources such as ore and stone, developed a more democratic, capitalistic society. The elves, as an exiled noble house, had a hierarchical political structure, with a group of minor nobility lording over their loyal, but increasingly frustrated servants and serfs. Without access to the resources of the dwarves, and without the natural abilities to hunt underwater for food resources, the elven settlement has begun to evolve into a trading post, serving as an intermediary between the other two races, as well as encouraging trade from other countries willing to transverse the ocean to access the resources of the arctic.

**Your Notes:**

What does your civilization believe in terms of its mythology? How does it deal with magic? What level of technology does it possess? Who's in charge? How do people interact?

## Part Five: Creating the “Crunch”

Now that we have the basic makeup of the society and a solid understanding of what we need to look for, it is time to create your “crunch”. That is, to get down to the nuts and bolts of the actual game mechanics. Now is the time to create your races, classes, monsters, etc.

When first considering your races, ask yourself “Do I really even need a new race?” Some people feel obligated to create new races for a setting, as if not doing so would be some sort of failure. There is no requirement to create new races, and more often than not you’ll find the standard fantasy races of elves, dwarves, gnomes, and others work just fine.

For Neiyar, I felt there was a need to create new races because of the nature of the setting. As an isolated jungle island with no contact with the outside world for centuries, it would have been more difficult to explain when there were dwarves and elves there that to just start from scratch. Looking at the native wildlife of a rainforest, the new races were designed to reflect what could logically be expected. There are Krakadons (a tribal, reptilian race), Amphikins (a tribal, froglike race), Mahaultae (a communal race related to tigers), and Auronnes (a swanlike race of former slaves that came to the island as the result of a shipwreck that has been adopted by the Neiyar). Each race possesses abilities and skills that would allow it to survive in a jungle climate. To represent the primitive nature of some of the races, many were given natural attack weapons (such as claws). Because they live in the muck of the jungle floor, the Amphikin are resistant to disease. Powers and abilities reflect the realities of the jungle.

How do the races interact? Do they cooperate? Are they at war? Why? The interaction of different races will affect many aspects of your world, and must be clearly defined. In Neiyar, the Krakadons once were a great empire on the southern portion of the island, but with the growth of the Neiyar culture found their territory threatened. The two races have been at war on and off for centuries, and while there is currently peace between the two, tempers could quickly escalate into battles. The Mahaultae have ties to the Neiyar pantheon and are believed to be descendants of one of the Neiyar goddesses. The peaceful Auronnes, long having been enslaved, found refuge among the Neiyar and have embraced much of their culture. The Amphikin are very much a fringe group. Technically, they are not at war with the Neiyar and freely trade with them, but quietly they are always looking for a means of circumventing Neiyar ideas of expansion.

Once you understand this basic information, you can now begin the process of mapping out your world. Based on what you know of your setting, you can begin to determine how close settlements would be to each other, where ruins would be located, etc.

Another bit of crunch you can now address are your classes, prestige classes, spells, and similar concepts. Before creating anything, always start off with the question “Why?” Does this new class, prestige class, spell, magic item, or whatever make sense with everything I have determined about my civilization? Now that you really understand your setting, you can design these things within a clear, logical framework. Classes will reflect how the people interact with each other. Spells will reflect the unique nature of the environment.

Finally, you have to address the ecology by defining the types of monsters your setting will hold. When possible, “monsterized” versions of real world creatures will create the most authentic feel.

As with everything else, ask yourself why you feel the need to create a specific creature. How would it impact the environment?

**The Process in practice:**

From everything the class determined, it was clear that at least one new race would need to be created in order to represent the humanoid seals. Like many sea mammals, the race could spend long periods underwater, but would also require air, making it possible for the race to be playable (a race that can only breath underwater would not be suitable for the typical adventure unless the entire settling was underwater). Existing races filled the needs of the setting well enough, using elves and dwarves for the basic settlements. At this point, they also added artic gnolls as a nomadic adversary. These were simply typical gnolls with some cold resistance that allowed them to survive in artic conditions. Like most gnolls, they are scavengers and raiders, and they would prove a threat to merchant caravans trying to get from the elven settlement to the dwarven city.

The group saw little need for new classes, as there was nothing inherent in the idea that would require it. They did, however, determine that the native dwarves and humanoid seals would possess new spells that reflected how they adapted to their environments. Many involved being able to manipulate ice, which would be a survival requirement. For monsters, they came up with a variant of the trap spider, a cold resistant, larger variant that would hide just below the ice and pounce out at potential prey.

**Your Notes:**

Based on what you have determined, what sort of races would live in this environment? Do you need to develop new races, or will variants of existing races suffice? How would new spells fit into the setting? What sort of specialized classes would be found in it? What sort of monsters can adventurers expect to encounter, and how to they impact the ecology?