

# Instant World Builder

by [DungeonMastering.com](https://DungeonMastering.com)

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# Foreword

I really like world building and must have spent hundreds of hours of that part of the D&D hobby in my life. I have invested a lot of my time and knowledge in this project.

The Instant World Builder Project was originally published on [DungeonMastering.com](http://DungeonMastering.com). I wrote eight articles and then unofficially added a ninth. They are all bundled together here with a few extra ideas that I gathered from the gaming community. This document is short and dense with information, tips, and ideas. I truly hope you will find my thoughts on world-building helpful and entertaining.

Suggestions and comments are always welcome.

**-Yax**

[yax@dungeonmastering.com](mailto:yax@dungeonmastering.com)

[www.DungeonMastering.com](http://www.DungeonMastering.com)

# Introduction

## What is the Instant World Builder Project?

The D&D Instant World Builder Project focuses on 2 goals:

- Create a mind-blowing D&D campaign setting.
- Not spend anytime doing it!

That's right: kicking back, blowing minds. They seem to be contradictory goals. Well they are, but compromises can be made. Just like the [Instant Campaign Builder](#), this project will suggest ways to save time while shaping a unique and stimulating environment.

## The prerequisites

*None.* This project will help all dungeon masters.

However. If you're just undertaking the dungeon master profession, You might be best served by using a published campaign setting, and maybe a

[published adventure](#) to get your feet wet, see what your players like and what your strengths and weaknesses are as a dungeon master.

## **Original Instant World Builder articles**

You can read all the articles in the original format by going to the [Instant World Builder homepage](#).

# Maps

Drawing maps for a new campaign might be my favorite DM activity. It's what I start with when I design worlds and campaigns. I am usually motivated, inspired and always surprised to see the plot hooks that arise during map-drawing.

Unfortunately I can't let myself do too much map-drawing otherwise I would never get around to doing anything else. So here are a few thoughts on creating maps.

## Write on the map

It saves time to write notes directly on the map. It allows for a better work flow if you don't have to write on 2 different sheets or documents. For those of you who are artistically inclined it might not be fun because too much writing on the map makes for an ugly final product. But you'll be the only one looking at the map so a lot of time can be saved by not caring about the looks of the map.

## **Let the players and their characters work on the map**

One of the best worlds I've created was almost completely drawn by a player. When the party would explore an unknown area I would draw a very rough copy of my map and let the cartographer of the group copy it and add details.

As the players traveled the world the map would expand and get richer - the climate, the type of creatures encountered, odd places they wanted to explore, sites of their great victories, where they got owned by a red dragon, whatever. The end result was a map 10 times richer than the one I originally drew, and it was fairly accurate.

*Note: I wrote an article on [drawing dungeon maps](#) that could also apply to drawing world maps.*

# Inspiration

Creating a rich D&D world and campaign setting is a daunting task. Is it even possible to complete such a task? Probably not. But it is possible to create worlds big enough and rich enough for one party of adventurers.

Since world building can be an intimidating activity to undertake, I thought I'd share some ways to get pumped up about world building.

## Top 12 ways to get inspired for world building

1. **Watch a movie.** You will find cool settings and environments in most movies. Not just fantasy epics. I recently watched *Pan's Labyrinth* which is a great grown-up fable. I seem to remember *Where dreams may come*'s world had a, er, dreamy feel to it.
2. **Read books.** Actually you don't even need to read old books. Just read pages or chapters of books you've already read and steal ideas.
3. **Sit down and write.** Stop procrastinating! Just sit down. World creation is fun. You'll have a blast.
4. **Get with the players and create characters.** There's nothing wrong with holding a [first game before you plan anything](#).
5. **Read the Dungeon Master Guide.** The DMG has 10 great pages (in chapter 5) of crunchy world-building details. It could get the ideas



flowing.

6. **Borrow from fluffy RPGs.** I haven't played that many different RPGs - if you count all of White Wolf's stuff as one. But other RPG setting like the World of Darkness, or Warhammer have some great ideas and concepts waiting to be borrowed.
7. **Remember your trips and travels** - especially useful if you plan on running a *tolkienesque* (new word!) travel odyssey. Sometimes there are details we can add to a game because we have seen them with our own eyes. And details definitely add to a world's overall *badassness* (another new word!).
8. **Ask your friends for ideas** - maybe from their traveling experiences in foreign and exotic places.
9. **Watch the Travel Network.** I think you get the whole traveling idea.
10. **Ask your players what kind of game they want to play.** That might help you choose some of the features of the newborn world.
11. **Ask for ideas on forums.** I'm not the only one with enough free time to talk about D&D! I discuss on [Wizards' official D&D forums](#).
12. **Draw a map** or add to your existing map. I was reading Orson Scott Card's *How to write science fiction and fantasy* and I was pleasantly surprised to read that he doodles maps and if the map intrigues him he makes a story around the map. If it's a good technique for the author of *Ender's Game*, it's good enough for you too!

## **Gathering Data**

You could spend weeks gathering information about the world you're creating - political system, level of magic, climate, fauna, how awesome red dragons are, etc. So how do you determine what is valuable information and what is just irrelevant fluff?

### **Gather data for your players**

Since all the information about the world you're creating will eventually be unloaded on your players the details of your world should matter to them and their characters - you need to make sure that you find a way for that information to be of value to your players.

### **The coolness factor**

I'm always surprised when I read my players' notes to see what they thought was important. Very often they'll remember what they thought was cool, unique, or what they think I think is important - hurray for meta-gaming! So if you want your world building work to pay off make sure you include some unique and cool ideas and concepts in it. [Phil - the Chatty DM](#) - has

bludgeoned his readers with the very, er, cool [rule of cool](#).

## **Build on assumptions**

There's no point in building a whole world from scratch. Your players will assume a lot. For example, my players will assume that there are always goblins or kobolds to be found, that dragons are rare, that the climate is temperate, and that they'll get extra XP if they pay for the pizza. By building on your players assumptions, you'll save a lot of time.

## **Starting small – the inside out technique**

This technique is a good way to keep the world building time to a minimum. In a nutshell it consists of working on a small area where the PCs will be adventuring in the first few sessions and then expand outward in all directions.

### **Establishing the standards**

You have to show your players what your world is about. I believe it makes sense for the starting area to be a normal town or village. It's a lot of work to make your players feel and understand what your new world is like. There's a risk of information overload if you tell players what the world should be like but the first few sessions are in a completely different environment. The players will still be thrilled even though they start their adventuring career in a generic hamlet.

### **Expanding outward in *almost* all directions**

Once you feel confident that the players are immersed in the new world, it's time to figure out which parts of the world to create next. Introduce rumors,

legends or myths about great people, powerful artifacts, and forgotten places. No need to plan anything. Just introduce random rumors and interesting stories and watch your players' reactions. They'll always be more enthusiastic about a few of the possibilities you've introduced in the game. Just go for whatever your players feel like doing - expand in these directions.

Doesn't it make sense for them to choose the goal of the campaign they're playing in?

## **Starting small. Thinking big.**

Designing a small area to start a campaign is a great way to save time, but the campaign still needs a grand plan. So what's the big picture?

### **What kind of campaign are you playing?**

In my current campaign, most of the action takes place in a big city. My players sometimes make fun of me by saying their characters will leave the city and never come back! They know that the rest of the world isn't designed as thoroughly as that city.

Of course the PCs leave the city quite often and they have traveled the whole world but they always come back because:

1. That's the kind of game we're playing. The best plot hooks come from the city.
2. They know that I can't possibly create a whole world and still convince my girlfriend I'm not that much of a geek.

## **The Map**

So keep in mind the kind of game you and your players want to play and don't bother with the areas that don't fit your campaign.

### **How big should the big picture be?**

I think the grand plan should be to have a good idea of what the world around the PCs will feel like. You know you have enough material when:

- You can come up with rumors and plot hooks on the fly - and they fit the campaign.
- You know what kind of mood or style of play each region of the world calls for.
- The players will feel confident they can go anywhere because you look like you know what you're talking about.
- You haven't seen another human being in weeks because you were drawing a map - a big map.

## **Disclaimer**

World building is addictive. Creating the best campaign setting ever can really eat up a lot of your free time. I really believe that starting small is the best and when you have a few gaming sessions planned you can switch to thinking up the rest of the world.



## Working with paths

Most quests require the PCs to travel. Sometimes the journey from *point A* to *point B* is an integral part of the adventure. Sometimes it's just an uneventful journey. Some journeys have to be completed many times: traveling from one city to another for example. You can save a lot of world building time by focusing around the paths the PCs are likely to take.

### Plot hooks for the journey

Instead of creating a random plot hook that the PCs might not care about, it can be interesting to create a plot hook around a road the PCs - or NPCs - use often. The obvious example that comes to mind is a road where merchants are consistently ambushed by highway robbers.

You can introduce the plot hooks just before the PCs leave on an adventure, or maybe earlier in the campaign so you can [build hype](#). Even if you don't plan anything a random rumor of thieves or monsters around the road will keep your players on their toes.

## **Random encounters**

Aren't random encounters a great way to save time? They're the apex of non-preparation. By keeping the random encounters really random - easy, appropriate, or impossible EL - you can keep the players guessing and combat is always fun.

The dice never have the last word though. You should always veto random encounters that wouldn't make sense in a scene.

*PS: I wrote an article on why I like to [roll for random treasure](#) too.*

## **The color commentator**

Two of the characters in my ongoing campaign once met an NPC - completely improvised at the time - who stuck around and became a fan of the 2 PCs. The NPC was a bard and would travel the world singing praise for the 2 intrepid adventurers. The PCs would regularly bump into the bard and they would talk about their adventures.

## **People like to talk about themselves**

Who are you to keep them from doing it! Let the players reminisce and talk about their dramatic victories and incredible fights - even encourage it! They'll feel like superstars.

That NPC who likes to talk to and about the PCs is also a great way to bring back old plot hooks that didn't work the first time around or information you planted that might have been forgotten.

## Regional characteristics and generic NPC quirks

A great way to add flavour to a region of a world you're creating is to come up with an accent for all NPCs - or any other [easy-to-roleplay quirk](#). For those of us who aren't good at accents there are expressions. It's easy to decide on a few thematic expressions that the inhabitants of a region use.

For example, you could easily name NPCs with Roman sounding names and have them use a few expressions from this [list of latin expressions](#). It's easy on the DM. It's easy on the players. And it adds a *je-ne-sais-quoi* to the campaign setting!

## Don't get too caught up in the details

That's it! You have a lot of guidelines and ideas in this document to get you going. You'll build a dense, rich campaign setting and you'll have a blast playing D&D.

The main pitfall of world building is the first one I mentioned in this document: getting caught up in the details. Instant world building is all about channeling your energy.

If you feel like you're working too much to prepare your games, then you can or [contact me](#). I'll be happy to give a few tips specific to your campaign.

I sincerely hope you'll find your D&D life more enjoyable now that you know how to create a world “*instantly*”.

**-Yax**

[yax@dungeonmastering.com](mailto:yax@dungeonmastering.com)

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