

*I have made some additions to the text. The originate from various people and are marked with: [ADD]
juuso*

World Creation

A word from the author:

Greetings!

This is the selection on "Designing a Role-Playing World" I promised. Before launching directly into it, I have a couple comments. First, I present two approaches to designing a role-playing world. I am not claiming that these are the only ways to create a world or even the best ways, but the two methods presented here have stood me in good stead for over fourteen years of DM/GM/referee'ing.

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On that same note, pay close attention to the sources quoted in this document. Remember "copying from one source is plagiarism while copying from many sources is called research!"

I gave this as a seminar, and the document is in an expanded-outline format. If you have any questions or comments on the document, I will be glad to answer them. Please direct them to my e-mail address though as I do not have much time to read the net these days. The use of the words he, him and his in this document are gender neutral references.

On a closing note, if any groups are interested in seeing the presentation, I would be glad to schedule a time and place (as long as it is within reasonable time/financial constraints for the author).

Enjoy! Rich Staats

Designing a Fantasy Role-playing World

1) Overview:

The document is divided into four major sections. We will begin with a purpose statement and move onto look at definitions which will be germane in the remainder of the document. Next we will look at the organization of the document, and then we will describe two procedures for creation of a fantasy role-playing world.

The name of the game in role-playing for the referee is creating a world where the players can suspend disbelief. The techniques described in this document will aid you in achieving this objective.

2) Purpose:

to teach two methods for the development of fantasy role-playing worlds

3) Definitions:

- Role-playing:
- Gygax in *_Role-Playing Mastery_*: "Acting out a make-believe position."
- Costikyan in *_Toon_*: "Role-playing is just 'Let's Pretend' "
- Schick in *_Heroic Worlds_*: "Quantified Interactive Storytelling"
- We will use Schick's definition for the purposes of this document.
- Character: The role a player assumes when playing a role-playing game
- Adventure: A role-playing session or series of sessions using the same characters throughout with definite beginning, middle and ending.
- Campaign: A series of connected sessions where the characters accomplish something which could not have been done in one adventure.
- Fantasy Role-playing: (FRP) Role-playing which takes place in a fantasy milieu.
- Fantasy Role-playing World: The environment in which the characters interact. It has a consistent set of physical laws and a coherent mythical order.
- Cross-Over: Travel from one role-playing milieu to another.
- Multi-verse: Set of all role-playing worlds/milieu's possible for characters to enter from a particular campaign. (Note: these worlds do not have to all be run by the same referee.)
- Party: A group of characters involved in a campaign who travel through the role-playing world together with a common set of goals and objectives.
- PC: Player Character, a character controlled by a player

- NPC: Non-Player Character, a character controlled by the referee
- Tie-In: Connecting two plot threads or regions that were not previously related.
- Maguffin: a plot device or thread specifically designed to incite player interest

4) Organization of the remainder of the document:

- A) References and Supplies helpful for World Creation
- B) Bottom-Up World Creation
- C) Top-Down World Creation
- D) Organizing the FRP World
- E) Conclusion

5) References and Supplies:

A) References (This is a list of useful resources for world creation, but the list is not designed to be exhaustive. Many of these sources were referenced in preparing this document.):

- _Role-Playing Mastery_ by Gary Gygax
- _Master of the Game_ by Gary Gygax
- _Heroic Worlds_ by Lawrence Schick
- _Campaign Law_ by ICE
- _Best of White Dwarf Articles_ (Vols. I II) by GW
- _World Builder's Handbook_ by DGP
- _Fantasy Wargaming_ by Bruce Galloway
- _Different Worlds_ (Most volumes 1 to 20)
- Beast Enterprises' publications _TS_, etc.
- _The Art of War in the Middle Ages_ by C.W.C. Oman
- _War from the Stone Age to Alexander the Great_ by Arther Ferrill
- _Powers and Perils_ by AH
- _Landscape: Physical Geography_ by Marsh and Dozier
- _Contending Theories of International Relations_ by Dougherty and Pfaltzgraff
- _The Oxford History of Medieval Europe_ by George Holmes
- _Traveller_ and _Megatraveller_ by GDW
- ``Glorantha'', ``Land of Ninja'' and ``Vikings'' by Chaosium/AH
- ``Quest World'' by Chaosium
- Many GURPS supplements by SJG
- A good Atlas
- A good Dictionary

B) Supplies:

Notebook

--- a nice, well bound notebook which you can carry around with you and jot down ideas as they occur to you.

Three-Ring Binder

--- a place to organize your sketches, maps, and articles you copy and save

Paper Punch

--- to prepare items for inclusion in your three ring binder

Camera

--- to take pictures of items that catch your eye with respect to world building/design

Colored Pencils

--- to highlight items and help you map and sketch

Felt-tipped Markers

--- as per colored pencils

Good pencil and eraser

--- for making/erasing notes and design work

Good ruler

--- useful for drawing lines or measuring things

Hex and graph paper

--- organizational tools/big aids in sketch maps or line diagrams

C) Two well known, mail order gaming suppliers (there are many, but here are two I have had good luck with over the years):

Zocchi/GameScience Distributors

1512 - 30th Avenue

Gulfport, MS 39501

Wargames West

P O Box 9496

Albuquerque, NM 87119

6) Bottom-Up or Campaign World Creation

A) Overview:

- The most common method in practice of creating an FRP world
- Natural outgrowth of campaigns
- ``Easiest" method
- Potentially inconsistent

- The "Pre-Fab" campaign (e.g. Ravenloft[tm], Dark Sun[tm], EarthDawn[tm], etc.) is a subset of this

B) Description:

- I. This method develops the world on a "need to know" basis for the characters. typically the referee does not develop the details for the world until the characters have gotten to the point in the campaign where the information is relevant.
- II. One can view this as the "concentric circle" method of world creation. The circles represent the parts of the world which must be developed to accommodate the characters demands on the world. The longer and deeper the campaign goes, the more there is a requirement for information. The characters have a certain "sphere of influence". The parts of the world touched by that sphere must be developed.

C) Advantages of the Bottom-up Method:

- I. The development of the campaign is natural. The FRP World grows and matures as the campaign grows and matures. The referee is able to directly see which areas of the world need more development based on the actions of the characters.
- II. The players are an intimate part of the world creation process. The actions of the PCs affect the part of the world "seen" by the characters; so, the players help define the world by determining what needs more detail and what does not. For example, if the players are very concerned about clothing styles in the world, the referee is likely to spend more time in that area, but the referee might be able to get by with a minimal description or examination of artistic styles.
- III. The referee does not devote "wasted" time in world development. Because the world is shaped based on the characters' sphere of influence, the referee knows that most of the details he creates will be useful to the players.

D) Disadvantages:

- I. The referee has less control in the world design than in Top-Down world creation.
- II. There is a large potential for inconsistency in the world creation. This is especially true when the referee is mixing and matching "modules" into his campaign. Since many of the details in the world are being created more or less ad hoc, some of the details may be inconsistent with each other.
- III. The referee takes a big risk of being caught "off-guard" if the players ask questions about details the referee did not anticipate or if the characters travel to some area of the world which has not been examined in advance by the referee.
- IV. The relations between portions of the world can be artificial. For example, if the referee decides to use both portions of Krynn[tm] and Arkham[tm] in his campaign, the connections between the two areas may be contrived at best.

E) How to Design a Bottom-Up World:

- I. Define the ``Key Areas" which will be affected by the Campaign
- II. Identify the geographical regions where the party will be operating in.
- III. Identify the key groups (e.g. national, social, trade, religious, racial, species, linguistic [ADD]) which will influence the Campaign.
- IV. Develop the relations between these key areas.
- V. Go one level of detail past what you believe the campaign will need.
- VI. Be as ``open ended" as possible with motivations for individuals. ``Those wacky players do the most unexpected things!"
- VII. Be as consistent with tie-ins as possible. Try to derive some motivation for connecting plot lines and regions. Answer the question, ``why are these things related?" before you spring it on the player characters.
- VIII. Define the motivations behind various groups important to the campaign (e.g. racial, theological, economic, etc.)
- IX. Place maguffins in the campaign to draw the characters into the background of the region. In this way, you can direct the campaign development to some extent.
- X. Be willing to ad lib, but **WRITE DOWN YOUR AD LIBS AS SOON AS POSSIBLE AFTER THE SESSION**. Ok, so you decided the Grey Wizards ear was green! Fine, but the next time the characters run into the Grey Wizard again, they will expect his ear to be green. If it is not, you better have a good explanation ready to go.
- XI. Keep a good campaign diary. Use the notes to redefine the key areas based on the players actions in the session, and then start over again with step (1) above.

F) Helpful Hints in Designing a Bottom-Up World:

- I. As you organize for an adventure, be willing to discard material that does not fit what already exists in your campaign world. **NEVER SAY ``I DID IT, BECAUSE IT WAS IN THE MODULE."**
- II. Likewise, be willing to add material to tie together the current adventure with adventures that came before or that you are planning to run in the future. For example, if there is a religious faction that is the lynch-pin to a module you would like to run in your campaign in the future then you will want to drop hints that such an organization exists in earlier sessions. That way, it does not seem so incongruous when you introduce the sect later and does not beg the question ``hey, if these guys are so influential how come we never heard of them before?"
- III. Write down plenty of notes and lots of maps. Make several potential plotlines up. Let these sit for a couple of days. Re-evaluate them. Ask yourself the following questions:
- IV. Are they reasonable?
- V. Will the party find them plausible? (Not the same as (i) above.)
- VI. Are they consistent with the campaign to this point?
- VII. Are they complete enough to cover the major expected courses of action the campaign is

expected to take?

- VIII. Are there sufficient "safety nets" to draw the party back to the central campaign themes if the group strays in unexpected ways? Parties always do unexpected things. If you have a particular theme you want preserved in the campaign, or if there are things which must occur from a plot continuity standpoint then you should have back up plans of how to get the party involved if they do something quite the opposite of what you expect.
- IX. Be willing to accept suggestions from the party to help you develop the world. In practice, it is useful to spend five minutes after each session asking the players about what they want to see more of and anything they have questions about from the session. I have also found it is very useful to give the players some handouts each session like maps, old documents, diagrams, etc. It helps them picture the campaign world more easily.
- X. Try to create interesting characters and plotlines. Be careful never to fall in love with a particular NPC or place in the campaign, because the PC's are sure to find some way to destroy that NPC or place through pure chance without malice or forethought!
- XI. The purpose of gaming is to have fun; if creating the world is so time consuming and difficult that it is no longer fun then you should do something else (e.g. let someone else referee for awhile, etc.)

7) Top-Down or Deliberate World Creation

A) Overview:

- It's time consuming!
- It is difficult!
- It is incredibly rewarding!
- It creates a very consistent world.
- THIS IS GENERALLY NOT FOR A FIRST TIME REFEREE!!!

B) Description:

This method develops the world beginning with the fundamental cosmology and works down to the size and description of the sandgrains the hobbit, peasant girl has between her toes.

One can view this as the Calculus textbook approach to FRP world creation. Every portion that is added is logically self consistent and at the same time flows from earlier portions developed.

C) Advantages:

- I. The referee has *total* control over the development of the world.
- II. The world is logically consistent. (At least the world is as logically consistent as the referee can imagine.)
- III. The referee runs little risk of being caught off-guard with respect to details or background in the campaign.

IV. It is one of the most direct creative processes possible. When you are finished, your world will be a direct reflection of your creative energies.

D) Disadvantages:

- I. The players have less input in the creation of the world.
- II. The process is very time consuming.
- III. If the campaign is not a long one, the referee runs the risk of spending large amounts of time on detail which the players will never directly experience.

E) How to develop a Top-Down World

- I. Select a gaming system that conforms to your fantasy world view. If you are fortunate, you can use an existing system "off the shelf", but it may involve large modifications to existing systems or even development of an entirely new system. Here are a few things to consider:
 1. Is the system consistent with your own moral and political "comfort zone"? If it is not then choose another system. There is no shame in this. You are the referee after all. It would be the height of arrogance for a gaming group to ask you to contribute hundreds of hours in time and energy to a system you feel uncomfortable with.
 2. Does the system have the right "feel" for your concept of the fantasy world?
 3. Are the mechanics workable? Some systems have great atmosphere, but the mechanics are too great a burden when you actually try to play.
- II. Determine the scope that your world must cover. Do you need to design a "world" that encompasses an entire solar system or will something the size of metropolitan Boston do? A few helpful questions to help you determine the scope of your world would be:
 1. Does your referee style support the grand quest motif? (Larger)
 2. Do you like LOTS of local detail? (Smaller)
 3. Could you do a whole campaign in a single village? (Smaller)
 4. Do you like to see lots of exploration? (Larger)
 5. Does the rules system you are using have provisions for long travel? For example, teleportation, tall ships and wagon trains all imply long journeys. (Larger)
 6. What is the technology level in the campaign? (Higher=Larger)
- III. Develop the cosmology. Answer all of the following questions. (Note: the players may never know these things, but you should.)
 1. Where did the world come from?
 2. What happened to the deities (if any)?
 3. Are they still active in the world?
 4. Are other planes or worlds accessible?
 5. Is magic possible? Psionics?

6. How accessible are these things?

IV. Develop the physical world.

1. Develop the geography. What fraction of the world is water versus dry land? How many suns, stars, planets and moons are there? Where are the mountain ranges? Are there any areas of geological instability? Why?
2. Develop the climate. Are there tides in the ocean? Are the tides related to the cosmology? Which areas are frigid? Arid? Wet?
3. Highlight any peculiar (different than Earth) features.
4. Are there any special (e.g. magical) areas?

Determine how you would like to populate the world in gross terms. What races would you like to include? What general types of societies would you like to have? Are these compatible with the results you obtained in steps 3 and 4 above? If not, can you modify the results to accommodate the cultures and races? (Possibly by including some special areas?) Otherwise, go back to step three and re-work the world until the results are consistent through step 5.

V. Develop an eco-structure.

1. Determine the food chain.
2. Where are the fertile areas? Waste areas?
3. Place the vegetation or lifeforms at the base of the food chain.
4. Are there areas with exotic or unique eco-structures? Try to tie these areas of the world in with the remainder of the world.
5. Place animals or other creatures towards the top of the food chain. Place the lowest members of the food chain first (e.g. herbivores on Earth) then work to the higher order creatures.

VI. Develop the cultures.

1. Place the culture in the world at an appropriate location. Explore the interaction between the culture and the geographical/eco-structure the population finds itself in.
2. What race will populate this culture?
3. Look at the following items:
4. Resources (physical/lifeforms/spiritual/magical)
5. Subsistence patterns
6. Religion
7. Technology level
8. Social structure
9. Symbolism (architecture/art/mysticism)
10. Languages (per race/per culture/per region) [ADD]
11. Trade, currency [ADD]

VII. Tie the cultures together.

1. Is there competition for resources?
2. What kind of trade there is between cultures? [ADD]
3. How flexible are the cultures?
4. Have past climatic or geological events influenced the culture (e.g. big floods, ice ages, comet impacting on planet, angry gods, etc.)?
5. How quickly do the races reproduce?
6. Are there religious, political, or ethnic conflicts or compatibility's?
7. Write the histories of each of these cultures.

VIII. Make the nations: [ADD]

I. Nation attributes:

1. Social system
2. Racial groups
3. Major religions
4. Major religious figures
5. Major laws
6. Customs
7. Holidays
8. Style of clothing
9. General mindset
10. Educational system
11. Economic system
12. Notable products or commodities
13. Major economic leaders
14. Major trading partners
15. Army: quality, tactics, equipment, technology(magic items?)
16. Prevalence of magic
17. Legal status of magic
18. Magical institutions
19. Magical education
20. General attitude towards magic

IX. Although you may have considered them previously, take particular care to highlight ``special" aspects of your world. (In other words, what things make your world truly unique? Why would someone want to play in your world in particular?)

1. Are there unique races or species?
2. Do the races have special symbiotic relationships?
3. Are there periodically repeated geological, cosmological or climatic events?
4. Does your world have unique aspects to the magical or psionic manipulation or use?

X. Let your world sit, and do not look at it or think about it for at least two weeks. Then go back and look at it. Is it logical and internally consistent from a cosmological, historical and ecological standpoint? Here is a brief list of some questions to ask:

1. Are there lots of caves filled with large creatures with no food source? Why? How?
2. Are there burning deserts next to glaciers? Why? How?
3. If the good gods/desses are so darn powerful, why are there still evil entities around?
4. Why doesn't the water spill off the edge of the world?
5. How far can you see? Where is the horizon? Why?
6. Is there enough fertile ground to support the population?
7. Why did the high technology races allow the low tech races to survive? Do they compete for resources? (Think about it! Maybe there are religious or cultural issues involved.)

XI. Develop the PCs to take advantage of or highlight unique aspects of your world.

XII. Introduce maguffins in the campaign to help PCs explore interesting areas and relationships in your world.

XIII. Be willing to ad lib, but as before, write it down so you remember it!

F) Helpful hints for designing a Top-Down World

- All those NPCs and ``schtuff" --- they are all imaginary, really!
- Be willing to modify part of the world later if it proves to be inconsistent. But, carefully consider the effects of doing so BEFORE you dig out the eraser! Items in a fantasy world just as in the real world tend to be connected in ways we poor mortals cannot hope to see without very deep thought. Unfortunately, you, a mortal, will not see all of the interconnections right away. But, fear not! If there is an advantageous one for the PCs, they will spot them at the worst possible time!
- Make lots of notes in the creation process. Writing down your thoughts tends to organize and crystallize them.
- The more different your world is from Earth, the more exotic and interesting it will be, but it will also be harder to visualize and referee.
- Start small! Do not go out and develop a Jupiter sized planet as your first project.
- Humans are multi-sensed creatures. Be willing to use visual and audio items to help suspend disbelief and draw the players into your world as well as using good dialog.
- Develop the cosmology and physical world to completion or near completion, but only develop outlines or skeletons for cultures which the gaming group will most likely never encounter. Spend 80 percent of your time developing things that the party is likely to spend 80 percent of its time interacting with!

8) How to organize an FRP World

A) Get a bunch of binders. The easiest way to organize is to break up the world into a bunch of smaller portions.

B) Here are several sample organizational schemes:

- By geography...
- By historical era...
- By culture...
- By race...
- Any combination of the above...

C) Index your world early on, or it will become an insurmountable task later on.

D) Always include a brief description of what a binder contains at the beginning. Ten years from now, you are unlikely to remember it contains ``samples of Overmannish wedding garb from the Huvis-Kanine era.

9) Conclusion:

Stomp and shout and applaud! Give generously! I have a family to support!

Please send questions and comments to: rstaats@mail.lmi.org

Thank you,
In service,
Rich Staats

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