

My Advice - Setting Information... World Building

First off I would like to start with a couple of definitions:

Setting – The area that affects and is affected by the Player Characters
World – The planet upon which the setting is located

As the DMG points out there are two different methods for creating your own game world...internal and external. Internal means to start with a small area such as a village and immediately surrounding areas. External means starting with the big picture and then adding in the details throughout. Now I would like to say that I start small and then work out since this could save a lot of time upfront...but I've never been known to do things the easy way, I use External mode of world creation. The external mode needs a lot of time upfront, I have one that I've been working on for over 2 years and its still not finished in my eyes, but once you finish you have all the information on your world before the players even start creating their characters.

A colleague once stated that there are three basic world types: The Generic World, the Specific World, and "The Kitchen Sink". In my opinion there are nearly limitless world types possible the selections are only limited by our imaginations, and I don't begin to think that I know them all but I will make a humble effort to provide a few examples to help get your brain juices flowing freely. (Although my terminology may differ from some the ideology is still the same for the first three.)

The First four in this list I treat as a skeleton for my world, they give me the basic structure of my world and how it is setup...geographically, technologically, socially, religiously. I always start with one of these Types before I decide on anything else.

Standard (General):

A world that closely resembles many other worlds found throughout Fantasy settings. These will include some if not all standard races and character classes from the PHB.

Minimal (Specific)

Narrowly defined setting within a world that has only a small portion in which the PCs will be able to act, although part of a larger world the players are for the most part secluded from the greater world, but major acts of heroism or villainy do leak out slowly to other areas of the world.

Potpourri

Think of this as a world made up of various Minimal Settings, each area being secluded from the next. This way each region could evolve differently with different religions, different rituals, and different styles of magic, and different combat techniques. Think of it as each setting being an island in a huge sea of islands each separated from the others.

Amalgamated (The Kitchen Sink)

This world type seems at first glance to be the same as the Potpourri type, but the difference being that instead of having several smaller settings unaffected by the PC involvement, but in actuality this is a much broader connected world. This world could have everything that the writer could think of is there but has a specific place where it belongs and it fits in.

The next six in the list I view as being the flesh on the skeleton, these are what give the world its personality, its distinctive feel and aura. These give your world life and help them to seem as if they are living, breathing, and organic worlds. Instead of just a bunch of notes scribbled on a Legal Pad.

Terrain (Earth)

Basically this is your stock world where everything reacts as it would on Earth. Your Physics are normal, your weather is normal, your seasons are normal...everything is easy to relate to for your players because it is for all intensive purposes just a Fantasy Earth.

{I added this world type in order to add some clarification to fact that you don't have to make an 'off the wall' type of world. But that even our world is vast enough to offer ALOT of inspiration.}

Legendary

In this world news travels faster than lightning, or so it would seem. Even though the PC might take out a minor War Lord their tale spreads and grows rapidly, so much so that by time they reach the wilderness fortress several months later they are welcomed as Legendary heroes that stood up to the largest villainous army ever assembled and triumphed with only sticks as their

weapons.

Grim & Gritty

This world is the total opposite of the legendary world type. Instead of the PCs becoming widely known heroes to point that citizens of cities sing songs of their adventures, they are in fact rarely even noticed by the world around them, they are loathed by those of the aristocracy for being lowly in station and therefore considered to be equal to rats and pigs, and yet they still trod on to do what they can although every time they win a battle or defeat a mad man it seems that someone else is given the praise and credit for it as 'the PCs obviously couldn't have done it themselves' so they continue on always unknown by those they may protect.

Psychedelic

This type of world can be a somewhat difficult one to create, in this world nothing is what it seems, every action that PCs take despite how they think (or logically should) affect the world around them it doesn't always turn out so simply. This type of world is full of so many different plot twist and varying degrees of morality that it seems to come alive so easily once it's fully developed. The major driving force behind game play in this type of world is true Role-Playing...NOT COMBAT...in fact combat in this type of world seems to only complicate things further, because no matter how much good you do for one group, your doing bad for another.

Improvised

This type of world can be extremely fun and entertaining and provides for a lot of laughs down the road. This world is exactly as it seems its completely developed on the fly while running a game. This can cause a lot of work for the DM during the session taking notes constantly and after the session organizing these notes so as to not to contradict themselves at a later time.

Predestined

In this world type, players might have a tendency to claim that they are being railroaded because no matter what they do the final result of the world is the same. The reasoning behind this is based on the "3 fates" of mythology where everything that a person has done or will do has already been recorded and even though the PCs decide to change their ways it was already known that they would do that. Therefore if your players become aware of the fact that everything is predetermined in the world they could become upset.

I may try to further elaborate on each of these design ideas when I have the spare time. But for now this might help those out there that may be looking at starting their own campaign setting but having trouble figuring out where to start. And certainly there is much more to designing a setting than simply deciding upon the type of world you want there is town designs and architecture, bestiaries of the differing regions, religions, cultures, technological advances, Notable NPC design, etc. This is just a small starting point to very long and arduous process that pays off in the end.

Okay...

So you've decided what type of world you want to create, you've chosen a skeleton and its flesh...GREAT!!!

Now what do you do?

Well it's simple to tell you that you fill it up, but then the question arises, "With what?"

This is where it starts to get fun and complicated (at least if your like me and are not a fabulously creative person). Read some books, watch some TV, read a comic book...this is where you start do what ever it is that gets your creative juices seeping...personally I go for a jog around the lake by my house with my MP3 Player blasting some classic '80s Rock...but that might not be your thing. Everyone is different and just because something gets all of your friends thinking creatively doesn't mean it will do so for you. All of my friends would rather shoot themselves in the foot before going for a 3 mile jog...it the way they are...my best friend is possibly the most creative guy I know and he sits on his couch and plays Video Games to get his inspiration, another friend of mine is one of those naturally creative guys...you know the type...they see something and it sparks their imaginations no matter how mundane it is...We played in a campaign for 2 years where his inspiration for it was a toilet, I hate him sometimes. The simple truth is that you can't create your own world until you get your creative side working, so find what works for you and do it.

The rest of this entry is going to sounds like a High School Writing class because it system works...

Sit down someplace free of interruptions with a pen (I say Pen because you should never erase anything no matter how asinine you may think it seems once you've written it down) and a stack of paper, and just write...you could write words, phrases, sentences, paragraphs, heck you can even write a novel it doesn't matter, this is what is known as freeform brainstorming, as opposed to structured brainstorming that comes next...it this part you want to just get out as many thoughts as you can about everything you are thinking about, this helps to clear and focus the mind on the next task. Do this for about 5 minutes.

Now that you've gotten all your erroneous thoughts out of your head sit those sheets of paper off to the side somewhere that they won't distract you. Take a couple of deep breaths and just start to picture your world in your head, close your eyes if you like, just think about your world. Once you have a clear picture in your mind of your world start writing, same as before but this time focusing on your world as you write, jot down names of people, places, wild life, topographical & geographical features, draw pictures if you like...at this point you are trying to get as much information about your world down on paper as you can.

Once you've written till you can't think of anything else or you feel like your hand is going to fall off...STOP! Just stop, put the pen down and walk away. Don't touch it; don't think about it for at least a day although I suggest 2 to 3 days. This extended time from the creative process will allow your brain to basically reset and start thinking fresh. When you go back to the papers don't read them, just put them in a separate stack of their own. Now we start the brainstorming process over again from the start, but don't try to remember what you wrote the last time instead start completely fresh, if you repeat an idea great, if not great (we'll get into this seeming contradiction later). Do this entire process 3 more times for a grand total of 5 brainstorming sessions each time compiling your Freeform Brainstorming sheets (I never said to throw them out) into a pile and your focused brainstorming sheets into another pile.

Now we start going through the stacks of papers, this will take awhile so you might want to save it for a day that you can dedicate strictly to doing this all day I suggest Highlighters, Sharpie markers, Radio, some snacks, and a Bottle of Aspirin for the headache you'll inevitably get. First go through the stack of Free form papers and highlight anything that catches your eyes as being even remotely usable for your world...it might be your grocery list and that's fine just highlight it. Next go through your Focused sheets and highlight just the things which reoccur over the different sessions, if something is written down in all 5 sessions then make sure you mark it good, because I'm willing to bet you that this is a major theme you want in your world. If something only occurs once then leave it be for now. Once all repeated ideas are highlighted reread them, if they don't spark something in your imagination as you read it then mark through it with the sharpie. Why would you want to write on something that you don't have any passion? Eventually you'll have a bunch of paper with highlights and black marks throughout. Now do the same for the non-repeated ideas if anything doesn't spark your imagination mark through it. Now you may feel like your marking a lot of ideas out once you get done but it will make things a lot easier in the long run.

The next step is something I actually enjoy doing but I think most people despise and that's Outlines...when I was in Junior High I despised them myself till I start writing short stories and amateur fantasy novels and eventually a series of comic books then I fell in love with outlines and I've never looked back, Don't think of it as a map that you write by...I think this is where a lot of English instructors loose people to the thought of an outline...instead use it to group similar ideas and themes together...I suggest even doing this on index cards if you like that way you don't feel tied into a format.

Once you have your Outline done and all your ideas listed and sorted look for any holes or gaps in your world, which is rapidly forming now. Just jot these down somewhere and don't worry about them for now. Pick a section of your outline and start to flesh it out write as much as you can about that 1 index card of ideas and repeat for each section you have. Try to get at least 1 page per 3x5 card, some you'll be able to write more and some not quite so much, but get as much out of them as you can.

Now take these sheets of fleshed out ideas and place them somewhere safe while you work on the holes in your world.

Take a break for a couple of days and then pull out your list of things your world is missing, for each thing on the list make out an index card for the topic and keep these in your pocket that way no matter where your at if inspiration hits, you'll be ready to jot down quick notes. Once you get a few thoughts per idea flesh them out as mentioned above and add those sheets to the rest, pretty soon you'll have your world fully written. But your not done yet...

Relax for a few days again, take your mind off your world...no one said it was a fast process after all and if you obsess over it your liable to either give up on it half way through because you get writers block or you'll decide your done when you've gone through it so fast that its full of ideas that even you don't understand when you go to pull it out for its first run in game. Take a break. If you forget about it and happen across it in a week or two and then remember, "Oh yeah I was going to finish that sometime!" then your definitely ready for the next step.

Read through your papers (if you find yourself trying to figure out what you were thinking then its time for some editing) clean up the phrasing and simplify descriptions make it easy to understand and use vivid descriptions.

Then the final step is to organize the sections, make a table of contents and place it all in a 3 ring binder, make some maps.

Congratulations you have a Game world. And it's just that a world...not a campaign...but it does give you somewhere to start. And just remember that every great writer will tell you that they are better editors than writers. Nearly every thing written professionally is redrafted and rewritten at least 7 times before the actual editors ever see it; this is why you brainstorm several times separately. And also why you keep your work in a 3 Ring Binder...easier to change entire sections of text if desired

Mapping out your World

So now that you have your world written and described in as much detail as you want...hopefully its very detailed...it time to create some visual references for it and by that I mean of course maps.

I'm not going to tell you to draw them by hand on loose paper, and I'm not going to tell you to go out and buy Campaign Cartographer or some other mapping program, that's a decision for you to make yourself as to how you like to do things...me I use a cartography program and hand drawn maps.

Well first step is to draw an atlas of your world...One map with all the Continents and oceans and seas and forests and mountain ranges and isles and great gorges and large lakes shown. Don't worry if your not the best drawer in the world after all you don't want any straight lines at this point you want your coastlines to be rough and uneven with various peninsulas and inlets throughout. This seems like a daunting task but its really easy once you have your world written down...for example if you have a large city that is located on bay on the southern tip of the western continent already written down then you know that is where you need to drawn in a bay.

Once you have your Atlas drawn...label it. Name the Continents, the mountain ranges, and the bodies of water, the deserts and forests. If you felt it was important enough to draw it in then its important enough to label.

From here on is where a Cartography program comes in handy to keep shapes consistent.

Now draw separate maps of each continent and chain of isles, and label them with landmarks and cities. Mark the cave of your great dragon, or your swamp swarming with trolls. I even suggest going as far as marking territory borders for the individual kingdoms.

By this point your probably getting the idea of where I'm going with this...

Then repeat the process for each major city, or isle, or village of note, or pirate cove...anywhere that your Players might wish to go early on...and mark dungeons connected to these areas.

Map out some dungeons...a stack of dungeons is a great thing to always have and by simply moving doors to different walls and switching a few traps a dungeon can be reused many times with out the players ever realizing it. After all it wouldn't be Dungeons and Dragons without dungeons.

For your cities remember that the walls of buildings might be straight lines themselves but streets can still bend and turn so keep the city interesting and if their are any large or particularly interesting structures then map them out too...heck I map out every Tavern and Inn because so much happens in them, along with street markets and especially boats for the same reason. Just remember that this is your world and you can create as much or as little as you like.

The last step and possibly the most important one is simple and will cost you a

little bit of money...Sorry everything can't be free...this is to laminate your maps. If you are thinking to yourself, "Well DUH!" then you know why I say this, but on the other hand if you have no clue why I say to laminate your maps then I'll explain. When your players are trotting along through one of your dungeons or traveling across the country and decide that they want to go back to something they past earlier and you were smart enough to mark on your maps where they had been and what they have gone through then you will know if they need to disarm a trap again or if they must avoid detection by the patrolling Goblins to get there. And it also helps you to remember where in your world they are.

As a side note I don't use battle mats of any form in game I like to keep things simple and mobile, if it can't fit into my backpack then I don't need it.

A few mapper programs that I use from time to time are [Fractal Mapper](#), [Campaign Cartographer](#), and my personal favorite [Auto Realm](#). I also use [RolePlayingMaster](#) for mapping and all my other GM needs from organizing and prep work to actually running a session, its great for automatically crunching all the numbers for me. And that is my little plug.