

Fantasy World Building Tips for RPGs



While world building for a fantasy RPG such as D&D or Pathfinder, think of yourself as a master weaver of a wall-sized tapestry. Most of the time, your players just see the back of it, and can't see the big picture of how things fit together.

Occasionally they figure something out. And it's as if they see a small section of the front-side of the tapestry. It is those moments where your players will have those "aha" moments, filled with wonder.

To elicit this awe from your players, it helps to have certain aspects of your world fleshed out. And to follow certain practices while building your world. You don't need to do all this work up-front before Session Zero. But you should build your world gradually as the PC's explore your world and go on adventures.

1: Build just one world and stick with it

The more detailed your world, the more immersive it becomes for your players. Since world building takes a lot of [your time](#), it helps if you have just one world to build. It also helps to focus your efforts near where the PC's happen to be to support the adventure.

RPG campaign worlds need a certain amount of detail to be fun. So many GMs prepare the entire plot line up front, including supporting maps, NPC's, etc.

The problem with this approach is if the players think of a completely different way of achieving the objective than what the GM did. This threatens to obsolete all or most of the prepared material.

Worse yet, the GM may protect his investment by forcing the PC's to follow the planned plotline. This is called railroading; and players hate that. But there is another approach, one I call "Just-in-Time Worldbuilding", which is based on Just-in-Time manufacturing.

In Just-in-time (JIT) manufacturing, there is very little inventory of parts, and just the right amount of parts appear at the right spot in the manufacturing process at just the right time. Since JIT uses a "pull" system, where upstream processes dictate through signals how much to produce, instead of "push", where everything is planned up front, it easily adjusts to changes in consumer demand. A similar process can be employed when building campaigns.

When I GM, I don't lay out in advance a grand plan on exactly how the PC's are supposed to accomplish their goals. If I did, I'd be tempted to railroad the players if they try to deviate from my plan for them.

If the PC's do something I don't expect, I save unused material I made up for a future adventure.

If I design the material right, I could even drop that area into a completely different part of the world. Since the players never went there, they won't know the difference.



Instead, I detail history, items, groups, NPC's and places near where they're currently at and how they tie into the goals. Then I use those details to "wing it" during play based on what the players decide to do.

I build these details around the PC's between sessions, rather than all in advance, so I can adjust to the PC's actions. This also minimizes the wasted material I created in case they do something I didn't anticipate.

To figure out where the PC's will go next and what they plan to do during the next session, simply listen to them talk to each other. If they mention two or three possibilities, detail them all.

The level of detail should be enough to allow you to wing it during play. Not everything need be mapped out ahead of time, but if you create a map of a store or something during play, be sure to jot it down in your notes in case they come back later.

By anticipating where the PC's will go next and detailing just that, I give my players the false impression that my entire world is incredibly detailed and interconnected and the correct impression that they're in control of their actions.

Just like in JIT manufacturing, this approach to worldbuilding fills in just enough detail (the places they are likely to go) at just the right time (before the next session) using upstream signals (what I hear the players discuss in the previous session and where their PC's

are currently located and what they just did).

If you use these techniques, don't let your players know. As my brother once told me about being a GM, "[Never let them see the man behind the curtain.](#)"

If you tire of your world, you may be tempted to start a brand new world. Doing this will make it harder to have the detail needed to create that sense of wonder from your players.

Instead, use that creativity to make up a different part of the same world, or a pocket dimension.

Keeping it part of the same world allows you to intertwine the two parts later.



2: Remember that the PC's are the most important part of your world

Unless you want to jump straight to the action with Session Zero, PC's should always have a backstory. But you should have the player make one up before the next session. And the PC backstory should always fit in with your world.

Suppose the player decides that their character once attended a Wizard's College. If you already have one made up, then tell the player that's where their PC learned the craft of magic.

Now suppose the PC comes from a port city, but you don't have one already. Then worldbuild with that player to make up the port city.

If you use Scabard, you can make the player a Power Player, and he or she will be able to make their own NPC's and towns that fit in with their character's backstory, without giving them access to secrets.

Find out more about Scabard RPG Campaign Manager

3: Use a World building tool

If you're like most world builders, you keep your notes in a haphazard collection of computer files and paper notes. Your computer files are in random folders scattered across multiple devices. You probably have multiple copies of many of these files... each slightly different.

A better way is to use a world building tool like Scabard where you can connect everything together seamlessly and even share your intricate world with your players online.

Find out more about Scabard RPG Campaign Manager

4: Start with a starting village or town for your PC's



Worlds for RPG's tend to get built organically over time. So an ideal place to start is a starting village or town where the PC's first meet up. Not necessarily where they're from, but where they meet for their first adventure. So there should be a dungeon nearby that they can explore.

Every adventuring group has to start somewhere,

be it a small keep on the borderlands with caves nearby, a village near a ruined moathouse, a port town with a supposedly haunted house on a nearby hill, or any of a dozen other settings. The small town or village with an inn for resting between adventures and a tavern for collecting rumors is essential to the adventurer's base needs. And creating such a starting settlement is important for the GM who is building a campaign for the players to explore.

5: Make a map of your fantasy world

Whether you draw your maps by hand, or use fantasy map making software, you should draw a map of your world.

If you have ever read a fantasy novel, you probably look at the map of the world first. And then, while you are reading the book, you refer back to the map whenever the heroes are arriving at a new place. Fantasy is the only genre where this is normally done. In a novel set in the real world, there is no need to provide a map to show where New York or London is. In science fiction, maps are almost never used because the characters travel so fast that movement overland is not really an issue.

But in fantasy, with its long journeys overland, featuring visits to forests, swamps, cities, villages, and fantastical places, the reader needs a map to make sense of it all.



So if you want to make sense of your campaign world, and you are in the fantasy genre, then you should have a

map. If you want your players to make sense of your campaign world, then you should have a map. You don't need a map right away - perhaps you can start out the campaign with a single village and a nearby ruin. But once your players have finished that first adventure, they will want to travel elsewhere, and you will need a map. But in fantasy, with its long journeys overland, featuring visits to forests, swamps, cities, villages, and fantastical places, the reader needs a map to make sense of it all.

You don't have to have a map of the entire world, in fact, that is not really feasible. What you should start with is a map of a single kingdom, or a large province within a kingdom, or maybe just a county.

You can draw a map on paper, or with a computer. If you draw it on paper, you can use butcher paper if you want a really large map covering a large territory, or you can draw it on an ordinary sheet of copy paper.

I would suggest drawing your map on hex paper, which can be purchased at a game store or online. Large hexes are best, one inch across. Smaller hexes will obscure too many details, making things hard to see.

There are computer programs which can be used to build a campaign world map, the best I've found is Campaign Cartographer 3 (CC3).

Fantasy map making software, like Campaign Cartographer 3, tends to take longer than hand drawn maps, but tend to look better. Or you can use a fantasy map generator and create one instantly.

I use CC3 program exclusively now for overland maps, though I still use graph paper for dungeons, towns and buildings.

To be sure, CC3 is a complicated program with many features, and it has a steep learning curve. It is possible with CC3 to have elaborate maps of publishable quality, but that requires the use of many features that I never bother to use. I want a functional map, not a piece of art. Made by Blackrook with Campaign Cartographer 3 CC3 also has supplements which allow you to draw dungeons and cities, but I don't recommend purchasing them. The options of images are too limited, in my opinion, to make it worth the extra money. I can always make a better dungeon, and make it faster, using graph paper and pencil.

[Campaign Cartographer 3 Fantasy Map Generator](#)

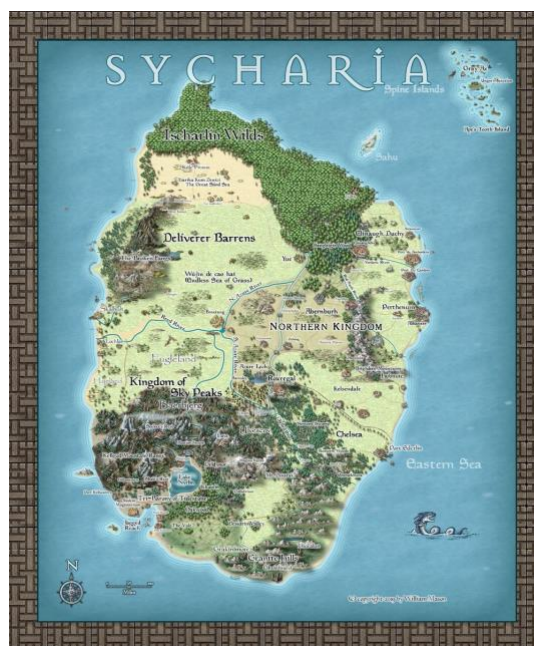
Drawing a good map of a major section of your world is time consuming, and there are no shortcuts. You will need to draw coastlines, place mountains, draw rivers, and then settlements like cities, towns, and villages. Also, you will need forests, swamps, scrublands, plains, blighted areas, and farmland. Finally, put in ruins for

the players to explore. It helps to know the history of the world you are building, but sometimes you have to draw the map before you create the history.

Uploading maps to Scabard

With a Hero subscription, you can upload any number of Campaign or Place maps to your campaign on Scabard, and then link to other pages in your campaign with pins.

Find out more about Scabard RPG Campaign Manager



6: Give your world a history that goes back to the creation of the world

For your players to feel like their characters are living in a real world, it should have a history. That history should extend back to long before the PC's were even born.

Having a such a history will give you plenty of material to draw on when dressing your dungeons.

Creation Myth

Cultures in the real world have creation stories, from Genesis in the Bible to the Mandé; the Greeks to the Norse. Fictional settings should have them too.

- [Creation stories](#) tend to have common elements:
- How the world was formed from chaos
- The first gods and goddesses
- How the earliest races came to be, such as elves
- How more modern gods overthrew the early gods
- How mortals came to learn about fire, magic, planting crops and forging weapons.

You should [build your own creation story](#) for your world

Recent History

There should be more and more detail to your history as you get closer to the current campaign date of your world. So recent history (the last 100 years or so), should be the most detailed of all.

Fantastical Legends

Make up stories of powerful heroes of old. These ancient heroes often have legendary powers, and god ancestors. Add magic items to these legends, and your PC's will want to find them.

Magic Item History

Powerful magic items should have a history too. Who made them and how and who wielded them to what end. [For an example, see the history section of an item from my campaign.](#)



Major Allies are quest givers, mentors, or powerful NPCs whose interests are permanently or temporarily aligned with the PCs, such as kings, archmages, high priests, guild masters, etc. Major allies can provide structure to the campaign, by giving the PCs quests to complete, rewarding them with magic items, or providing them with valuable information to complete a quest.

PCs can develop a certain amount of attachment or loyalty to major allies, seeing it as a critical part of their lives to protect and serve such a person. A major ally will have a defined personality and possibly a detailed backstory, but may not have stats, since it is not his/her role to be in a combat with the PCs.

7: Create believable NPCs

NPCs are the second-most important part of the world. So it is important to make your NPCs memorable. Weave the NPCs in with the world building you've done already:

The history you've made up

- *Who they are the descendant of*
- *What ancient magic items from legendary heroes they own.*

[Creating a family tree for your NPCs](#) can help with that. It is a great way to tie your NPCs together and to come up with a never-ending stream of stories for your PC's.

NPC Roles in your Campaign

There are different types of NPCs:

Allies, Neutrals, and Villains.

NPCs can also be ranked in importance:

Major, Minor, and Extra.

Minor allies are henchmen, or NPCs that might temporarily join a party to serve a purpose, like extra muscle for the group, or as a "MacGuffin" character that needs to be protected or escorted from one place to another. A minor ally might be that gruff dwarf you met in the tavern, or a princess that needs to be taken to another land to be married off. A minor ally should be defined by stats and may have defining characteristics like a certain voice or accent, but will not necessarily have a fully fleshed personality or background story.

Major Neutrals are characters who the PCs are unsure of where their loyalties are. They may give quests to a character, but the PCs do not fully trust their motives. The guildmaster of a Thieves' Guild, or a Spymaster, might be this kind of NPC. A character like this will often be very mysterious, and the NPCs might not know much about him/her. Also, you probably won't need stats, unless it seems that the PCs will attack him/her.

Minor Neutrals are characters who provide goods, services, and information, but at a price. For example, the tavern keeper who knows where the best swords are made, or the town guard who knows who has a bounty on their head, or the healing woman who has a lead on a good local quest. Minor neutrals are only barely above extras, and don't usually need a detailed background or stats, though you might want to take notes on personality traits like "grouchy" or "has a high squeaky voice." Keep track of your minor neutrals, and if the PCs keep meeting them, it makes your world seem more "real."

Major Villains are the characters who are the main antagonists of the plot, it is their actions that oppose the PCs and defeating them may be the main goal of your campaign. Put some work in making your major villains, with detailed backstory, personality, and probably at some point you will need stats when the PCs confront them. A memorable major villain will make your campaign something the PCs will want to return to.

Minor Villains are the "mooks" of your campaign, and they may be a set of stats and nothing else, perhaps a henchman to the major villain, or an assassin he sends to attack the PCs, or a tribe of orcs they meet along the way to something more important going on. A minor villain with a distinctive personality or background story is on his way to becoming a major villain.

Extras are the characters the PCs will probably never think about: the bar wench who takes their order at the tavern, the courier they hire to take a message to the king, the coach driver they hire to take them to the next town. They don't talk, they don't usually have names, and if they have stats, they are not very good at anything except what they do for a living. Extras can be elevated to minor status if they get a name or if they start talking to the PCs and becoming more important to the campaign.

8: Consider co-GM'ing on the same world

If others in your RPG group also GM, consider taking one continent each on the same world. This helps share the load of world building with a friend. Yet also allows you to keep secrets when your co-GM is a player in your part of the world.

For example, my brother made Krythar, and I made

Eraven, which are continents on a common world, Erona.

A great way to intertwine the histories is to decide when mass-migrations took place. Or when important NPCs from the past travelled from one continent to the other.

In Krythar, there was a major war called The Shattering that lasted 100 years. I decided that during this period, many migrated from Krythar to Eraven, fleeing the war. Co-GM'ing the same world also gives you a believable way to explain PC's who want to switch campaigns. They embark on a ship and sail there.

9: Prefer many small dungeons over one gigantic one

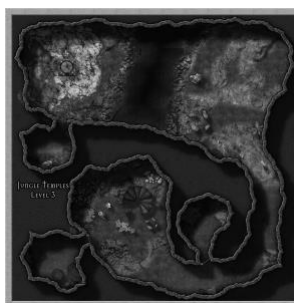
You should consider dungeons as part of your world, and not disconnected from it. So they should fit in with the history of your world. I.e., there should be some explanation (even if secret from your players) of why they are there.

Smaller dungeons are easier to explain in a story-based world than large ones. PC's quests should have them traveling to 3 or 4 locations instead of a single one. Tie these locations in with the NPCs and history you've made up. And use this history to add dungeon dressing when populating the rooms.

There is even a technique to creating small dungeons. Johnn Four, from Roleplaying Tips, recommends [Five Room Dungeons](#), where each room plays a specific role.

Another technique is to make each dungeon the setting of some larger adventure.

One tool you can try is the [Adventure Builder](#) from Scabard. A powerful brainstorming tool that helps you plan your entire adventure and instantly connect it to your campaign.



Resist the temptation to wave your hand and have them appear at the next location. Getting there should be half the fun. You can use my [Events while Traveling](#) to spice things up along the way.

10: Have areas of your world with harsh environments and horrible weather

It's not always sunshine and happiness. And tough monsters should never be the only challenge. Some parts of your world should have harsh environments and fearsome weather. Throw occasional storms and earthquakes even at the civilized parts of your world.

Many game systems have complex weather rules. Here are [my weather rules](#), which should streamline things a bit. Even more simplified, just roll once or twice for weather on their way from Point A to Point B for a freak weather event. If they're in temperate climes during Summer, no one cares if it's warm and sunny. Because that's expected. Having said that, if PC's don't have the proper gear for the climes they're travelling through, then that's obviously a problem. If your PC's are somehow able to ignore the weather, then you're doing it wrong. Remember, at the very least, it should hamper movement. At the worst it should be life threatening.

