Notes: Deep & Maximalist Worldbuilding

Introduction:

- Original title: Worldbuilding For It's Own Sake - not really the intent

- This is Deep/Maximalist Worldbuilding, but it is still game-oriented

- I am not an author, so advising on worldbuilding for fiction isn't in my wheelhouse

I will not be covering:

- Magic Systems

- Levels of Technology

- Governmental Systems

- Maybe in a future workshop

Why build and play in deep/maximalist worlds?

1. Lifelong Hobby

    - Ed Greenwood started the Forgotten Realms when he was 5, and is still working on it today

2. World building is like any artistic discipline, you get better by actually doing it (10,000 hours)

    - Each world can be thought of as a separate discipline, so you will need to put the time into each

    - World 1 equals painting, World 2 equals sculpture, etc.

    - Some crossover, but each world is a separate application of skills

3. Provide a sophisticated backdrop for games

a. Campaigns, obviously, but also… Campaign of Campaigns!?

　　　　　i. Critical Role: decent example. Overlap between campaigns, but the relation is not explicit

　　　　　ii. Consider the Star Wars trilogy of trilogies

　　　　　　　1. Each trilogy is a campaign, and following trilogies are informed by the previous ones

　　　　　　　2. Each trilogy features a different set of primary characters

　　　　　　　3. Players can be different, but discovering the previous campaign's story and consequences will still be fun

　　　b. One shots

　　　　　i. This might be the only time players experience your world

　　　　　ii. But the GM lives in this world and might play dozens or hundreds of sessions here

　　　　　iii. Disconnected sessions might still have a sense of connective tissue; entertaining for GM

4. Consistent framework on which to build your stories and campaigns

- Experiences and References

- New creations feel natural and deeply connected

- Even small stories will have a depth and a texture that will make them feel more grounded

5. Empower improvisation

- It is impossible to know everything about your world

- It is impossible to anticipate what details your players are going to become interested in

- Experiences and References make your improvisation feel "truthy" (thanks, Stephen Colbert)

6. Empowers play in multiple eras that cross-reference other historical time periods, building on the sense of deep history

- Consider Elder Scrolls chronology

Our Goal Remains: The Most Fun for the Least Amount of Work

> CJRD4 said…
>
> One thing I'm struggling with when approaching my world is, how does it differ from say, Middle Earth, Azeroth, or Exandria?
>
> Aside from a different land mass, there's not really much different yet.
>
> It's mostly due to lack of time: I've drawn a map, but I haven't really dedicated time to sit down and think about it much, beyond naming things.
>
> But I'd love to hear your thoughts on how you create something that's meaningful and different from what's been done.

- Distinction between building spaces for adventure to happen and building a "functional" world.
- Question 1: If building a functional world is *not* the goal does it take more time to find and learn about a world somebody else made, or to build what you need yourself?
  - We all have limited time, so answering this question super honestly is key
  - It is okay if it turns out that using a pre-built world is just easier
- Question 2: Do you want to build a world that is distinctive? If no, that's totally fine. Your players likely won't mind. If yes, then we need to dig deeper.
- My thoughts: Your world is not simply a generic space within which your player's characters sling one-liners and fight monsters
  - Your world is art. It is not *a world*, it is *your world*.

- A reflection of your worldview and your interests

- Your takes on history and politics

- Your thoughts about what kinds of spaces are fun to explore

  - You are the only one who can make your world - Are willing to expose your heart

  - Use the freewriting methodology

    - Deconstruct influences

    - Ask yourself what is important

  - The magic will happen when you get to the *specifics* of what makes your world tick

    - understanding the *people*, not the geography

Methodology

> Unless you are Tolkien, you're probably not Tolkien

- Conlangs are not practical for any of us

- I don't recommend inventing languages as an efficient method of worldbuilding (this is a joke)

- Not bottom up or top down, I think of this as middle out

1. For high-level worldbuilding fast iteration is critical. Writing words is cheap, and creating images is expensive

2. I call this process "Recursive Sketching"

   a. This process is about working in repeating cycles of a sketch-like writing process that gets more specific with each iteration

   b. Assertion 1: There is no defined endpoint to this process other than the point at which you decide it is "good enough"

c. Assertion 2: Drawing maps first will drain you of time and energy because processing visual information requires for more cognitive cycles than raw ideas

d. Assertion 3: Mindmapping first will drain you of time and energy because because *processing visual information requires for more cognitive cycles than raw ideas*

e. Assertion 4: Freewriting is the most efficient tool you have for creating and working through ideas

    i.   Do not stop writing and don't edit anything, just get your thoughts out (let the torrent flow)

    ii. Get all the thoughts out because you will mostly likely not remember them later

    iii. Questions without answers are far, far more valuable than answers without questions because questions are inherently generative

         1. If time constrained, focus on getting out as many specific questions as possible so you can come back to your prompts

         2. When answering, write every answer that you can think of, even if they seem redundant

    iv. Don't waste energy on writing in a sophisticated manner. Nobody needs to read this except you. Use as much shorthand as you can

    v.   Write for as long as your brain churns out ideas on your topic

    vi. Edit at a later time when your mind is fresh

    vii. Repeat until satisfied

    viii. Hopefully as you repeat and edit, your ideas grow in complexity but reduce in the amount of language used to express them, if not your freewriting is not free enough

f. Assertion 5: After freewriting, if you must mindmap, do it on cheap, unprecious paper before you mindmap on software

    i.   Only mindmap things that require this type of visualization

    ii. This is about being fast and brief, not accurate

       iii. Aesthetics only matter as long as they help you understand it later

       iv. Repeat until satisfied

   g. Write for "permanent storage" into Notion, Obsidian, Google Docs, whatever you are comfortable in

       i. This is still not writing for publishing, but it must be ready for you to revisit when necessary so write for yourself as an audience not for other people

   h. Write for publishing

       i. This might only be in the form of handouts to players, but this writing is for other people so it needs to be edited as such; keep it as brief and exciting as possible

       ii. Explanations should not be exhaustive, but should generate questions

Post-recording Notes

- For disabled individuals or those wth difficulty writing with their hands, voice memos are another great way to do freewriting.

- If audio file can be embedded in your preferred notes app (Notion does this), it is easy to re-listen and refine notes toward their finalized versions

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Axiom #1: Your world does not need to be complete before you use it

- The best way to build worlds is to tell stories in that world.
  - During campaigns, retcon strategically.
  - Between campaigns, retcon liberally.

Axiom #2: Build your world to generate conflict

Without conflict there is no story

- Humanoid settlements in close proximity should compete for resources

- "Monsters" are not just dangerous threats, they are also resource and cultural competitors

- Every detail of your world should be an opportunity for conflict

Axiom #3: The map is a lie

> ℹ️ Prompted by M1rage

Mapping Does Not Equal Worldbuilding

- Often cited is Tolkien saying he "wisely started with a map" to justify mapping first, but he likely used maps of smaller regions to account for distances after writing begain

  - map crow video: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AYL-b4X7lPk

- The map does not inherently generate conflict

- Maps are the result of good worldbuilding, not the catalyst for it

- Maps require much more work than writing

  - You will not be willing to undo large amounts of work to make changes

  - Start making concessions about interesting worldbuilding for the sake of conforming to the map.

  - This is a terrible anti-pattern.

- Don't introduce an unfinished map to players before you are willing for it to be permanent

- Concession - Sometimes the "discovery approach" to generating a landmass and then filling in the interesting details created by the squiggles is fun, but it lacks the specifics that drive conflict between characters in a story

Axiom #4: Build your world out of people

> Worldbuild "People first" or "inhabitants first", not geography first

- Make some "people" and build a community

- Provide food and shelter for them, give them professions, elect their leaders, etc

- Then take something away and imagine how they respond

- Build their world and culture around how they respond to their struggles

- This iterative process should happen in a freewriting phase, but can be scaled up or down to your needs

Axiom #5: Worldbuild organizations like the John Wick movies do it

- The criminal underworld of John Wick is revealed one layer at a time through restrained use of props, dialog, and actions/consequences

- Organizations/Factions love rules, tokens, symbolic social interactions, and rituals that reinforce their values and mythology

- Show these things but do not explain them, even to players who are part of the organization.

  - Players are like the movie audience; we identify as John Wick as the protagonist, but while he knows what the tokens and rituals are, neither he or a narrator explain them.

  - The audience gets to feel the satisfaction of discovering the rules of the criminal underworld as John Wick navigates them.

- Illustrate them by having NPC use them, then allow the players to use them

- Make it accessible, avoid complexity, but make it layered so there is a feeling of constant revelation that makes the organization's history feel deep

> Example: The Black Helix - A tiered criminal organization in Charlemagne Bay that uses user-specific enchanted membership cards that grant temporary or permanent access according to the bearer's rank, but when the bearer either loses the card, or it is taken from them, memories associated with the Black Helix become scrambled. Even the founder. This allows the Black Helix to hire contractors when necessary, and protects them from people who leave the organization.

Axiom #6: Develop your themes

- One of the best way to differentiate areas or groups of nearly any size in a campaign world is to choose a theme for each area and drill down on every concept within that theme

- This concept works at nearly every level of scale from planets down to tribes

- Consider Star Wars planets or the Elder Scrolls games

- My own campaign world is a collection of continents that each function as a distinct campaign setting. Each continent relies on a very broad theme and tries to explore them as thoroughly as possible

  - One continent focuses on difficult to explore terrain that hides a lot of mysteries for which the few inhabitants have many myths, legends, superstitions, and rumors of treasure. Each sub-region represents this theme, only with different specifics and aesthetics.

  - Another continent focuses on nations that co-exist amongst plentiful resources but have strong differences in how they interpret religions and how they tolerate the use of magic

- By leaning heavily into specific themes, it is much easier to decide where certain types of campaigns will be more intuitive to run

Axiom #7: Leave space for big revelations that you don't have planned yet

- Mythos Fiction level revelations

- You can't plan for an entire world's worth of big revelations prior to telling stories

- Big revelations shouldn't contradict each other, and should support and build on each other where possible

- Your players do not need to know about all of your big revelations, they just have to feel that reality is bigger than their limited view can comprehend

Axiom #8: Know the Geometry of your world

In film criticism, a common aspect of action scenes that is discussed is the "geometry/geography of the scene", which refers to both the elements of the scene as well as the physical space in which the action takes place.

- If the geometry of the scene is well-defined beforehand, the audience can more easily track where the action is occurring and can anticipate where the action is going.

- Consider the all-time classic action masterpiece Home Alone

- In the beginning of the film, the camera moves throughout the space of the house multiple times so the audience is ready to track the action as it unfolds in the third act.

- In the case of worldbuilding:

  - The YOU that is actively running the game right now is the audience, while the YOU that is working on the world is the filmmaker

  - The geometry is the relationships between either the physical elements of your world or the social elements of your world

- Think in triangles that scale up. Triangles are very stable.

  - Physical: Every individual is connected to an organization which is tied to a settlement.

- Physical: Every organization is connected to a settlement which is connected to the local geography

- Physical: Every settlement is connected to a trade hub which is connected to regional geography

- Social: Every individual is connected to at least two other individuals that have competing priorities

- Social example from my world:

  - Social Triangle 1: The democratic government of Charlemagne Bay is being infiltrated and manipulated by a powerful trade consortium, while pro-government agents in the Black Helix thieves guild are trying to infiltrade the trade consortium.

  - Social Triangle 2: While the democratic government of Charlemagne Bay is being infiltrated and manipulated by a powerful trade consortium, the pro-democracy secret society the Alabaster Quill is spreading propaganda among the citizenry with the goal of driving boycotts

  - Two simple social triangles that establish independent social dynamics that are mutually supportive

- All these triangles can become mnemonic devices that help you remember how your world is organized

- The literal geometry of your world

Axiom #9: Revel in the unknown

- You can't know everything about your world, so don't even worry about filling in every gap

- You get to decide how many gaps there are and how big they are

- The unknown is an opportunity to improvise or experiment with campaign specific content

Topic: Settlements, Resources & Logistics (Geopolitics)

- Even the smallest podunk towns exists for a reason, and that reason should promote conflict
  - Natural resources
  - Fertile farm land
  - Strategic military placement
  - Convergence of trade routes
  - Proximity to a natural wonder or site of religious significance
- Nearby settlements should either be dependent on or covetous of other settlements
  - They want the other settlements' resources
  - They are jealout of their placement
  - They are dependent on trade
    - "Capitol Cities" often fall at the convergence of trade routes, which makes them large and wealthy, but they also become dangerously dependent on trade because they often don't produce anything that can be traded. Rival settlements will try to siphon this trade.
- Most settlements should be multiple generations old, making altering the status quo difficult, which leads to internal conflict

Sub-topic: Exotic materials

- Consider how exotic materials can be used to explain how weapon enchantment works, or to differentiate legendary weapons and armor
  - Examples: Adamantium, valyrian steel, duranium
- Settlements that produce these kinds of materials should have amplified conflict on all fronts

- Many different kinds of organizations are going to be working in secret to obtain these materials, which means story hooks

Sub-Topic: Trade & Travel

- Trade

  - Understanding trade relationships can help contextualize the tensions and partnerships between settlements and nations, which informs story opportunities

  - Trade between settlements and nations is always motivated

  - Trade happens because different regions have deficits that they can't fulfill from the interior, or surpluses that they can capitalize on

  - Despite the outward appearance of typical import/export behavior, there is usually some level of espionage and statecraft happening in the background

    - Governments and criminal organizations will have hands in trade

- Travel

  - Consider the necessary infrastructure for travel

  - How difficult do you want travel to be?

  - The harder travel is, the more differentiated cultures become at a distance

  - The harder travel is, the more exotic and expensive things from further away become

  - The harder travel is, the more prominent stories become of the strangeness of strange far off lands

Sub-Topic: Logistics

How realistic do you try to make logistics? - Torn

- Logistics are the methods and infrastructure through which resources and goods travel

  - The trucking industry in the US

- Realistic vs. Pragmatic

  - Realistic can be a loaded term that implies an impractacle level of detail

  - The goal is verisimilitude, not slavery to inflexible detail

  - A pragmatic approach is to make note of things that you know are important, but leave the specifics for the time that you actually interact with them

- These things can be invisible until the game requires them to be interacted with UNLESS there is something so significant that it becomes a major aspect of the worldbuilding

  > Example: There is a train that runs weekly between Dry Gorge and Long Bluff which carries shipments of gold, silver, and dark iron. Every gang in the valley has ambitions to rob it, but it is heavily guarded by brutes who shoot first and don't ask questions.

Topic: Culture

> How much Cultural Detail - Torn

- At minimum, follow the advice in the Creating Cultures episode of the RPG Mainframe podcast

  - Greeting

  - Trigger Custom

  - Core Values

  - Visual Que

  - Basic form of governance - Added my own

    - How does a society decide how to handle the business of running society?

- Culture is the RESULT of the things that people within a culture do, not the CAUSE

- Culture must be established through behavior before it becomes enforced through expectation
- First, add the cultural detail that will justify logical conflict
  - Vulcans adherance to logic really only exists to drive conflict with emotional species
  - Klingons are obsessed with honor to justify getting into fights with those who they believe disregard it
- Second, add cultural detail that was developed as a result of the environment that the culture lives within
  - If you live in a rainforest, knowing which plants are medicinal and which animals/insects are venomous are culturally critical
  - If you live in a desert, knowing where and how you can get potable water becomes a cultural cornerstone
- Third, take the survival details from the environmental influences, and figure out how the people will use it to create art
- These three steps will result in a culture that feels extremely fleshed out
- Do a ton of research on earth cultures and steal and remix like crazy

Topic: Naming things

- How you decide to source names is up to you.
  - Google translate, name generator, just raw creativity.
- Endonyms - names bestowed on a place by those who live there
- Exonyms - names bestowed on a place by those outside of it
- Base the source name of your places on geography, people, and history
- Iterate on the name using a few techniques:
  - Express the people simplifying by removing extra modifying words
  - Express people adding modifiers to distinguish places that have similar names

- Places located near to political borders might incorporate terms from the other nation

- Names aren't just about the place, history or people, but also who gets to choose the name or place is about who holds power there. (Think Constantinople → Istanbul after religious change)