RPG World Building

Agenda

Introductions

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The World Building Process

1. **Build your world around the conflict that is central to your story**
   - Conflict is central to the plot, whether it's an all-out war against evil or an argument between boyfriend and girlfriend over where to keep the toothpaste. So too must that conflict be central to the world.
     - Protagonist: Your chosen one, or chosen ones. The shining hero who will rise up and slay…
     - Antagonist: Your dark lord, your lich king, your dragon, you master of the galactic imperial stormtroopers. Your antagonist's motivation is just as important (might even be more important) than your protagonist, as in many sci-fi stories it is the motivation of the antagonist that actually drives the story and creates the circumstances that brings about the rise of the protagonist.
     - Where is your protagonist from? Was it a wholesome land until something happened? What unfortunate land does your antagonist call home? What's it like? A fetid bog? A corrupted land full of dark mists, and twisted trees?

The World Building Process

2. Put the pieces on the board

- Your protagonist and antagonist don't live in a vacuum. This is when you build your world (or galaxy) map, and populate it with strange other races, and cities full of merchants, militiamen with arrows in their knees, and children playing.
  - Try to find at least one defining characteristic for each major place the protagonists might visit. Think of Rohan from Middle Earth as an example. Land of the Horse Lords. Tolkein based the Rohirrim on the Normans. The land is named for their famous horses, and they rely heavily on cavalry charges in battle. One could say the Rohirrim are built around the horse as their defining characteristic.
  - Think about the dynamic of the peoples on your map. Not all neighbors get along. Consider the English and the French. Sometimes rivals, sometimes allies. Always in dislike with one another.
  - How do people live where they live? Where does their food come from? What do they build their houses out of? What about clothing? What can they trade with their troublesome neighbors?

The World Building Process

- **Flesh out your backstory**
  - Your world didn't spring up out of the ground overnight. And people have myths and legends to explain things like where they come from and why they are here. What are those myths?
    - What is the creation myth? Who created the world? And why?
    - How did your people come to settle in the land they now call home?
    - What has transpired since they settled there? Has their existence been peaceful? Have they been at war constantly with their annoying neighbors who tell them their fathers were hamsters and their mothers smelled of elderberries?
    - Be careful not to write too much backstory, unless you want to play Backstory: the role-playing game.

The World Building Process

2. Filling in the details

- A few more considerations
  - Wealth is never distributed equally: there are always a few rich and lots of poor
  - Power corrupts, so the people in charge are more likely to be unscrupulous
  - Majorities are silent, minorities aren't: much conflict revolves around the treatment of minorities by elites (with the majority either complicit or unaware)
  - Superstition is powerful and pervasively influential
  - Ideals are constantly being compromised
  - Good people can do bad things and (vice versa)
  - Complex solutions are hard to sell, but simple solutions rarely work
  - Even absolute rulers require some form of consent from those who control the tools by which they hold power. So they must constantly seek to influence the military, the politicians, the economy and the intellectual debate
  - Advancement is related to: drive, skill, connections, wealth and philosophy. People are always completing for advancement
  - Human needs MUST be met and will find a way. Food and shelter. Security. Procreation. Happiness. A society that fails to deliver on these to all people will become unstable until the will to restore delivery of these needs across the society (though seldom equally) is regained
  - There are tipping points to tolerance of what people groups are prepared to put up with before acting. These vary between individuals and groups within society. So an injustice can persist for a long time, then be washed away in moments

The World Building Process

- **Define your populations**
  - For each population, who are the leaders? Who oppose them? What do they disagree on? What are the flaws for each of the leaders? What are their motivations?
    - Keep in mind these are the NPCs that your protagonists will be dealing with, so make sure they are not one-dimensional
    - As events unfold, the reactions of your NPCs will help drive the story forward, and might even shape your proagonists reactions, so thinks these reactions through beforehand

The World Building Process

- **Enter the Antagonist**
  - The Antagonist threatens to knock down the whole edifice you have built by establishing your NPCs, and if things don't go the protagonist's way, he just might do it.
  - Whether his forces breach the northern wall that protect the fertile lands your protagonists call home from the ravenous hordes, or he walks into the palace unannounced, the arrival of your antagonist should not be taken lightly. It's a great big stabby, bowel-shaking deal, so make sure that your protagonists understand the gravity of it.

Things That Make Your World Memorable

- **Have your world reflect themes in your story**
  - This is a way to have your world reflect and reinforce what you are trying to convey. If a people are cold and distant, perhaps their homeland is also cold, littered with frozen fields and ponds, and snow everywhere. If they are a warm and personable people, perhaps their homeland is full of rolling green foothills and bountiful crops blooming under the warm sun.
  - Likewise, you can use similar language to convey the mood you are trying to set. If something tragic has happened and an important NPC is weeping bitterly, you can describe the sky as heavy and overcast with dark grey clouds looming.

Things That Make Your World Memorable

- **Consider ahead of time the consequences of failure**
  - A roleplaying game can sometimes go off the rails, and the dice can prove as unpredictable as the choices of protagonists. So before putting together an important encounter, make sure you plan the effects on your game world of the protagonists losing the fight.
  - Failure doesn't have to mean death. The game can continue with a radically altered setting where the kingdom has fallen, but your protagonists fight on, forming a resistance, or perhaps your protagonists are on the run as they are being relentlessly pursued by the dark lord's forces. Perhaps beloved NPCs have been slaughtered in the fall of the kingdom, or perhaps they now speak out in support for the dark lord. Perhaps former friends are even leading the dark lord's forces in their pursuit.

Things That Make Your World Memorable

- **Build your world so that the story your telling might cause it all to come crashing down.**
  - A world that is too static without real consequences is boring. If you want to create a memorable game world it needs to be in real peril so that your protagonists can save it.
    - Give your antagonist the resources to destroy it; an overwhelming horde, a doomsday weapon, a powerful enchantment that could elevate him or her to the level of a god.
    - When the final confrontation with the antagonist happens, be careful not to stack the fight too much in the antagonist's favor; or do, but give him or her a weakness that the protagonists can exploit to win. Whether you reveal that weakness beforehand, or you reveal it during the battle is up to you.

Things That Make Your World Memorable

- **Allow your players to contribute to world-building**
  - Your players will play your protagonists. They have backstories, and your world needs to have room for those backstories.
  - In addition, your players might have feedback or suggestions. Be flexible, and be open to incorporating those suggestions. RPG gaming is *cooperative* storytelling, after all.

Things That Kill Your World

- **Don't think about infrastructure**
    - How do people travel from place to place? For that matter how are your protagonists going to travel from place to place? Where do people find food, and what do they eat? What are your protagonists going to eat? Where is the nearest water source? Where are your characters going to sleep?
        - It's best to plan ahead of time and consider all of these day to day concerns, because what affects the people in an area will also affect your protagonists while they are there.

Things That Kill Your World

- **Don't explain why events are happening**
  - It's fine to have an event occur and keep your protagonists in the dark, for a short while. But before too long, if the protagonists don't figure it out for themselves it will need to be explained to them by an NPC. Think of Basil Exposition from Austin Powers; a clever name for a character who's entire purpose was to explain the plot.
    - If protagonists are kept in the dark for too long, confusion will set in and then frustration, and then you are likely to see fewer players showing up for future sessions.

Things That Kill Your World

- **Don't develop your populations beyond one-dimensional**
  - A people group isn't monolithic. While there are some things most if not all Americans agree on, to say all Americans agree of wealth distribution, social justice, or gay marriage is laughably false.
    - This implies that from time to time, your protagonists should receive aid from surprising sources. Those NPCs should be allowed to explain why they are helping the protagonists. This will give your population a more fleshed-out feel.
    - Even when it comes to the historical retelling of past events, all the parties involved may not even agree on what happened, which will further divide a population. The American Civil War told from the perspective of a black slave would be different from the perspective of a captain from a wealthy family in Massachutsetts, and would probably be wildly different than that of a plantation owner in Georgia.

Things That Kill Your World

- **Create an illogical story**
  - Consequence is the driving force behind history; action and reaction. Because your protagonists made decision X, event Y happened. An event that happens out of the blue for no reason breaks the logic of the story.
    - This is not to say that seemingly random events should never occur. Random events cease to be random when you widen your perspective, and consider the viewpoints of other parties involved.
    - Every major event should be a consequence of some past decision or action.

Things That Kill Your World

- **Don't create a sense of place**
  - You will need memorable settings to draw your protagonists into the story, even if it's just an annoying fishmonger who hawks his stinky goods from the same place everyday, there needs to be something that draws them in.
    - Generic settings, where every street corner has the same Starbucks on it will grow tired really quickly, and lead to boredom. Try to explain the colors of the autumn leaves, what the street smells like after it rains, the deep blue contrasted against the fluffy billowing white of the clouds this morning. Just don't take it too far to where you find yourself playing Description: the roleplaying game.

Common World Building Tropes

- **The Five Races**
  - This trope appears consistently across genres (fantasy, sci-fi, anime, etc.) A fantastical setting will use 5 species of people to create diversity, and they uniformly follow the same pattern.
    - **Stout** (Dwarf) – Stong, tough, masculine. Usually associated with some form of manual work.
    - **Fairy** (Wood Elf) – More feminine than other races; long hair, delicate features, preference for long-range fighting and use of wits rather than brawn in battle. Usually possesses a stronger affinity for magic or technology than other races.
    - **Mundane** (Human) - This is the race your protagonists will likely most closely identify with. Usually a jack-of-all-trades race with the weakest affinity toward magic or technology.
    - **High Man** (High Elf/Android) – The most powerful and magically or technologically imbued race in the setting. Usually a fictional representation of what mankind is intended to be but consistently falls short of becoming.
    - **Cute** (Hobbit/Gnome) – A race that appears physically weak, but possesses exceptional cleverness and inner strength to endure. Fun personified.

Common World Building Tropes

- **The great evil from ages past**
  - An enemy, cast down from grace in the days before the creation of the world, who if he/she is not evil incarnate, is as close to it as one can come. Typically the great evil has been watching, scheming, and waiting for the right moment to strike when the five races are at their weakest to steal/conquer/destroy. Typically, the great evil is fundamentally abhorrent: the eye of Sauron, Cthulhu, or ancient starfish alien world devourer.
    - The great evil isn't just *a* threat to peace and prosperity; it is *the* threat to the continued existence of your world. Being ugly and powerful isn't enough, the great evil must threaten the end of everything your protagonists fight for.

Common World Building Tropes

- **The Dark Lord**
    - If Emperor Palpatine is your Great Evil from Ages Past then the Dark Lord is Vader. If Sauron is your Great Evil, then the Dark Lord is theNazgul Ringwraiths. Or maybe instead of serving as the Great Evil's enforcer, he is working at cross-purposes. Maybe he is serving as enforcer *and* working at cross-purposes at the same time, secretly working to further his own agenda, and waiting for his moment to betray his master.
        - Your dark lord will not be as powerful as the Great Evil, but can be equally cunning. He may even be audacious enough to approach your protagonists and propose a secret alliance against the great evil.

Common World Building Tropes

- **The Ancient Artifact**
  - At the same time both your world's ultimate MacGuffin, and most powerful form of phlebotinum, the ancient artifact bestows great power on its wielder.
    - Artifacts do not ever occur in nature. They are always made, usually by gods, ancient kings, or some precursor race.
    - Artifacts are extremely rare, and are more often than not, unique. There were Nine rings gifted to the kings of men, but one ring to rule them all. So you have 10 rings, but one of them is unique, while the rest are extremely rare.
    - An artifact derives its power from some supernatural source: Either divine might, powerful ancient magic, or long-forgotten technology.
    - Obtaining an item like this is not to be taken lightly. It will elevate your protagonists beyond the level of ordinary adventurers to people of legend. It will be difficult to create enemies that will challenge them after they obtain it, so either your campaign should wrap up after they use it, or the artifact should be destroyed somehow after it is used, unless you want to transition your campaign to one of ridiculous escalation.

Common World Building Tropes

- **Artifact of Doom**
  - Your world's equivalent of a nuclear bomb, or possibly 1000 nuclear bombs at once, this doomsday weapon will probably end all life as your protagonists know it if the antagonist is allowed to use it.
    - This item can be at the same time both an artifact *and* a villain, as it was in the case of the One Ring. It consumed those who dared to use it, corrupting them with it's dark whispers of power, and exposing it's users to the Eye of Sauron.
    - Could be a series of artifacts left by an ancient civilization, like the ringworlds in Halo, which if activated would wipe out all life in the universe.
    - Could be a reality-warping, wish-granting monkeypaw purchased at the little shop that wasn't there yesterday, or even given as a gift by a creepy gnarled old man in a black cloak. The possibilities are endless.

Common World Building Tropes

- **The Villainslayer**
  - The opposite of the Artifact of Doom. While the artifact of doom is intended to be used by the antagonist to bring about the apocalyptic end of the world, the Villainslayer is intended to be used by the protagonists to exploit his weakness to kryptonite, and end his threat to your world… permanently.
    - The Master Sword Link uses to defeat Ganon, the Phantom Hourglass he uses to defeat Bellum
    - The Silver Sword of Gith in Neverwinter Nights 2, which is the only weapon capable of defeating the King of Shadows
    - The Chrono Cross, which is the only thing in the game Chrono Cross which can permanently kill the Time Devourer

Conclusion

- **Creating a memorable game world for your RPG is definitely achievable. With a little bit of planning and forethought you can increase the fun that you and your players have in collectively telling your story.**