Designing RPG Region Maps

Joshua Kuhl

Bamboo Hare .com

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Abstract

How to use a fractal question system to design regional RPG maps

I. Introduction

In this article, I am going to review an approach to developing region maps.

II. Geography

There are two common approaches:

 a) Major landscape decisions first

 b) Areas of influence first

The first approach is where you decide on major landscape components such as if the area was on a coast, then determining the locations of rivers and mountains.

The second approach has you draw odd shaped circles on your sketch paper. Label each circle with a power center or commonly found influence. You then decide what geography keeps these power centers physically separated.

If you go with the first approach, then you will need some thought as to how civilizations grow and travel. Water sources are followed, in part for a source of drinking water, but also because it acts a boundary. Routes along the bottom edge or the top ridgeline of a mountain is another common path.

Another factor which will influence routes are the creatures which are dwelling in this area. Some may feel more comfortable in the swamps or deep forests while others prefer mountainous terrain. Humans are the most adaptive.

The goal is to have an area with a logical structured geography. Within this geography, natural boundaries will influence the political shapes and available resources of each area. How each area interacts with their neighbors will further define the amount of wealth available to these areas.

If the areas do not get along, then most of their resources will be devoted to warfare. If they are relatively at peace with each other, then there will be more internal wealth available.

At this point, we have two types of map information: areas and the spaces between those areas. We are going to add another type called 'connection'.

This type of map component is more than a logical connection between areas. It will denote a trade route or physically accessible pathway through the boundary.

As you define this logical connection, it will also define the common route of contact between these two power centers.

We now have a logical map of the area. The spaces between the areas have some kind of physical boundary and the areas have designated controlling influences. At this point, we can begin to analyze the proximity of these power centers to each other. This will give us some natural tension. It is best not to use logic when assigning these power centers. Having an odd combination is good. We are not locked into stereotypical good/bad relations among monsters and humans. Early versions of 'D&D' had a dice roll: friendly, neutral, hostile for

each encounter.

If you have a band of orcs living in a sparse forest next to a human settlement, they could easily have cooperation between the two. Not everyone may like the idea. But it's either that or both sides go extinct. Before one marches off with the idea that all this must be bad, think of the ecology. Should the humans remove all the orcs, something else will take the orc's place. Something the humans may not survive because they would have been weakened by the war.

The next step is to bring more detail to the region. We will do this with fractals.

III. ADDING IDENTIFYING COMPONENTS

Major, minor and accents. Repeat. That is the process that we will be applying to our region.

We will divide the problem into two parts: the area zones, then the connections.

If you were to step into this area as a visitor, what is the first thing you would notice? Write that down. No details, just what is the first thing you notice.

What we are doing is building an information hierarchy. All information is associated with something else. If the first thing you notice is the snow capped mountain peak in the background, then that's the first thing you should write down. This is also the first thing you would tell your players as you describe the area. All other information will be in relation to this first item.

Next, list three large attention getting objects in the area. As we are still in the bird's eye view these objects are going to be large geographic features. Obelisks, ponds, collections of huts, mine entrances and so forth. Something that you can see from the air.

Then visit each one of these locations and repeat the process. But this time, describe the object.

For example: *A pond can be seen from the air. We will now examine the pond. Major, minor and accents. The major components could be how it's* *built: natural, magical or humanoid. Let's choose modified natural. A spring feeds this pond.*

The pond is lined with one of these:

a) cut stones

b) bones

c) timber

Then minor aspects. For which ever item one chooses in the major category, go into a little more detail describing it. Do the cut stones have gems embedded in them? What kind of bones are they? Is it rough cut timber or of elvan made?

The last step will be the accents. This is usually describing the object as a whole. Is the pond sparkling? Is it muddy? Is it filled with water or something else?

For example: *Large forest. Occupants, major, elves. Occupants, minor, wild animals. Occupants, accents, pixies. The elves live in a large stone spire emerging from the center of the forest. Crystal shards embedded throughout the structure. A crystal clear stream continuously flows from the top of this spire, bouncing from rock to rock until it reaches the bottom, forming the start of the Crystalrock River.*

This process gives our creative mind the ability to function and be effective. It channels its chaos. The end result is something of value that we can now communicate to our audience. We have a major object that defines the area, several smaller objects relative to the first one and some accents to give it life.

This process can continue for each component in the scene. How much detail is required for each area really depends on what you are building. Remember that this needs to be done for each area and connection zone. Keeping it large and bulky at this stage is fine. Allow a certain amount of push-and-pull between these areas to allow them to develop.

IV. POWER HIERARCHY

Let's review what we have at this point. A roughly defined region (note that I did not

define scale, for this works at any size) with major geographic elements roughly sketched in. A power center roughly sketched in for each area. Where the boundaries are. Describable components in each area (one to three major components per area). And possibly some detail to one or two of those areas. We then have to determine whom is in charge. We can use the same formula.

Let's say there is an area whose power center are orcs. The orcs will have a master chieftain (major component). Then decide on two minor components. I'll choose a necromancer and an ice golem.

This is a rather random collection which is what makes it good. We have now given ourselves a problem to solve. How well do these components interact with each other? Are they competitive? Destructive? Mistrustful? How did this collection become allies? What is the common goal? There would need to be a common goal to form some kind of alliance, even if its temporary.

For each of these components, repeat the process: major, minor and accents. This time, approach the problem with visual description.

This necromancer, what are the major components to the visual description? Let's try our process again: first thing we notice about him is that he is a skeleton and he is always wearing a robe. What are the two minor components that we would notice next, each being relative to that information? A missing leg and an eye. Now we need to figure out those two problems that we just gave ourselves.

If this nice skeleton fellow is missing a leg, then how is he walking? Does he have a re-placement? Is there some kind of magical means? Does he have a pirate's walk? Is he some kind of pirate whom is now undead? What about that eye of his? Could it have been a patch?

With giving ourselves a problem to solve, then following that path, we eventually find enough possibilities to create a solution. We now have a working hypothesis of a pirate captain whom is now a necromancer. His wooden leg still with him and some kind of gem in his

eye. Probably a magical gem, perhaps this is the source of his power.

Moving on to the ice golem: major, minor and accents. Major components, limited area. He only seems to slump around in a finite circle. Minor: Grumpy, frowns at necromancer. Accents: blue crystal gem, a large opal perhaps, in his chest. It is radiating out magical energy.

We can do the same for the orc chieftain, but then stop there. Although there are others within the organization, there is other work to do. This allows us to change things if we need to without losing too much work. Do this for the connections as well.

V. Adding Layers

After we have done this to each area and the connections between them, we have a rough layout of the region. Additionally, the major components can have a value: Past, Present, Future.

That civilization of lizardmen living in the swamps was eradicated 30 years ago. All that's left are the legends of magic and the gold they had. Adventurers whom dared to venture into their ruins never returned. The massive dwarven fortress embedded in the side of the mountain will not be completed for another 200 years. They are only 80 years into building it. And so forth.

This gives us a little more depth to our world. It also allows for things to age and other things to move in. We have the ability to have different occupants at different times. The mine might have been started by some dwarves, later humans moved in, and then abandoned it. Now monsters live in it. This little history gives us more details rather quickly. There were only three occupants and already we have a bit of uniqueness about the place.

This process will work for describing bridges, castles, towns and cities. Even rivers. What is the first thing you might notice about a river? Fast moving? Slow moving? Rocks and rapids? What is the second? Are there fins moving about in the water? Are there claw marks in the mud at the river's edge? And accents. How

is the sky reflecting off of the river? Perhaps not at all - or not in that one spot over there...

    This is a simple process which is repeatable.

VI.   Conclusion

There are other aspects to world building, such as inputs and outputs. You can read about those in my other article: "*A005: How to Use the Caves of Kabash*".

    I hoped this article gave you some inspiration for world building.

    Now go forth and create!