6 Creating a World

"Sing the songs with us, oh bastard prince!" The keketar's voice was high, euphoric. Several of the words formed shapes in the air, one turning to a centipede that writhed as it drifted away.

"Join us in the dance and we will remake you/make you so beautiful. We will sing the stars from the sky/sea."

"I'll pass," Seltyiel grunted. Beneath them, the islet was already crumbling. It wouldn't last another minute under the keketar's influence.

The hell with it. He'd only get one shot anyway. Summoning the last of his magic, Seltyiel leapt backward, out into empty space...

PATHFINDER
ROLEPLAYING GAME

WORLD BUILDING

While running games within a published campaign setting or a favorite fictional universe is a lot of fun, many GMs enjoy creating an entire setting from scratch—a world in which every idea, NPC, and location, is an expression of your creativity. It's a powerful feeling, one that can give you countless hours of enjoyment even outside of the game session.

Yet creating a setting from scratch can also be intimidating. This chapter provides you with tools to help take the guesswork out of world building, breaking down monumental considerations into small, manageable chunks. While this section (and indeed this book) presumes you're creating a fantasy setting for use with the Pathfinder Roleplaying Game, most of this advice can be applied to any game genre or system. Keep in mind that not all of these questions need to be answered ahead of time, and creating as you play allows you to keep things fresh and fun for both you and your players.

DEFINING A SETTING

When beginning work on a setting, it's useful to start with a concise description of your idea—a mission statement of sorts. Try to keep to the essentials. If the setting is derivative of something else, don't be afraid to note that. Every artist pulls inspiration from existing work, and this is just a starting point—by the time you're done, your setting will likely have evolved into something completely different. Moreover, if you try too hard to make a setting unlike anything your players have ever seen before, it might leave them confused and disconnected—having to confront a 60-page synopsis just to be able to create a character gives players a major incentive to go play something else. Drawing from the real world or fictional universes familiar to your players gives them an easy entry point, and when a player can visualize the world you're presenting, it's easier for him to get caught up in it. This initial premise is also a good place to note any fundamental rules you intend to follow, such as a lack of intelligent non-humanoids or a quirk in the way magic works. Your entire concept might be something as simple as "an alternate history Europe, but with a Viking empire bigger than Rome's."

When working on this setting definition, remember that a setting is not a world. Focus your attention on where you expect to spend most of your time in the campaign. Later on, you can always expand outward—this is often known as the "bullseye" method—and leaving blank space around the edges of the map creates a sense of mystery key to exploration.

More than establishing any concrete facts, your fundamental concept for your setting needs to capture what makes it special and different from other settings. Try to answer questions like the following: What is the single most defining aspect of this setting? What is the one-sentence hook that would make players want to play in it, and what aspect are you most excited to work on? It also helps to write down what type of game you're hoping to run. Is it a swashbuckling sword and sorcery adventure? Complex political intrigue? Wild magic in the wilderness? A good setting should encompass and facilitate multiple types of play, but defining the game you want to run can steer you toward setting choices that compliment it.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE

Every GM has his own preferred method of world creation. For some, this process starts and ends with pen and paper, in which case it's often useful to have graph paper to help judge scale and create miniatures-ready maps, or a small notebook to carry around and record ideas as inspiration strikes. Yet not even those are necessary—part of the beauty of pen-and-paper RPGs lies in the freedom from material components.

For some GMs, technology can be a huge asset in world design. Programs such as dungeon-building and mapping software, name generators, and the like can be found for sale or for free on the Internet, and spreadsheets and wikis can be invaluable when keeping track of important names, dates, and other world details. More importantly, the Internet offers convenient access to a wealth of information and inspiration, such as online encyclopedias, atlases, and more. It's the rare fantastical concept that hasn't already been dreamed up or carried out by some real-world historical culture, and cribbing off real-world maps can be a godsend when you're new to mapping or strapped for time. If you don't have computer access, a local library can fulfill most of the same functions.

The following pages cover a number of questions you should consider when designing a setting, but sometimes the easiest place to start is with a single setting element, such as the city your players find themselves in at the start of the campaign.

BUILDING A CITY

Even if you decide to take a broad-strokes approach to campaign design, eventually you'll need to get down and gritty and start creating an environment on the level at which your PCs will interact with it. Likely the best place to start is the major city or town closest to your campaign's focus—as with every aspect of building a setting, how much work you spend on a location should be commensurate with how likely players are

to spend time there, and it's nice for both the GM and PCs to have a base of operations. Along with the natural lures of healing, buying gear, and selling loot, you can use memorable characters like mentors or patrons and favored restaurants and taverns to help make the city feel like home. (These details also raise the stakes significantly if you later threaten the city's existence— it always helps if the PCs have some sentimental attachments to give them a personal stake in a region's defense.) Bear in mind that players are fickle and may become attached to unexpected people or entirely ignore characters you expected to become linchpins. Don't be afraid to roll with the punches if they prefer the halfling pickpocket to your paladin laden with adventure hooks. In fact, it's often best to wait until you see where player characters focus before fully exploring any particular NPC.

Creating a city can follow a pattern similar to that used when creating nations. Start with the natural geography and the locations of the borders and the most important elements, which are likely inherently tied together (see pages 146–147 for further information on how geography informs a city or nation's layout). From there, work out the government, cultural institutions, economy, and so on. Try working on your city both from the top and bottom, letting the middle shape itself out as you go. For example, while you should know who the highest potentates in the city are, unless your players will be interacting with them immediately, it's probably best to put this aside and spend more time on the level of the common people, the streets where most people live and work.

If you're just starting a campaign, this city may be the best place for you to introduce the underlying themes of your setting. Figure out how to immerse your players in it—how can these themes play out in the first session? How can their early interactions foreshadow and set them up for their coming adventures?

Once you've got the big picture for your city, it's time to start filling in details. Don't panic! A city has a lot of space to fill, but you don't need to know what every dot on your map is. Create a number of colorful locations, characters, and connected plot threads—but don't pin them down. Remember, you only have to detail as much of the city as your characters can interact with. If your characters head east from the town square looking for an inn, give them a few choices. If they instead head west—give them the same choices, but turn that waterfront bar into the best inn on the hilltop. If you want them to run into a certain character, they can do so whether they head to the market or the boatyard. While such tactics might feel like "cheating" to some GMs, roleplaying has an element of solipsism to it, and if your players never experience a given location, it effectively doesn't exist. Change names and ad-lib where you need to—in this manner, you can populate an entire city with just a handful of businesses and characters, and ensure that your favorite creations (whether NPCs or adventure hooks) get the airtime they deserve.

For more information on building cities, as well as important questions to consider, see pages 156–157 and page 209.

DETAILING YOUR WORLD

Game designers work for months on setting sourcebooks, novelists agonize for years over how their world might work, and screenplay writers have production designers and art directors helping them present a movie's backdrop to the audience. You, on the other hand, may not have much time to create the world your players will adventure in, and you definitely won't have a huge production staff to help you.

Luckily, you won't need it. With just an hour or two of considering the following questions, you should have all the answers you need to kick things off with a bang. What follow are 30 of the most important questions in setting design to help you formulate a quick world-building cheat sheet.

THE HEROIC DETAILS

First things first: What do the heroes do in this new world of yours? The first thing players do when you start a new campaign is create characters, so it's a good idea to think first about what the heroes of your world need to know.

Look over the character generation rules of the *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game Core Rulebook* and see what jumps out at you. What do fighters fight? What principles do paladins champion? Who do clerics pray to? Where do rogues do their sneaking around? It may seem strange to think of these things first, but consider this—your players are probably going to start thinking about what characters they want to play long before they ask you about the coins in the Empire of Fulbar, or even if there *is* an Empire of Fulbar.

The questions don't stop at character generation, either. What sorts of adventures are the new heroes going to go on? What are they going to run into? What can they do with all that loot? Even in an established campaign setting, looking ahead to the middle and higher levels of play can help iron out potential wrinkles before they start.

The following list covers 10 questions every hero is likely to wonder.

What's my base of operations?

A pastoral shepherd village with farms and nearby wilderness is going to inform entirely different character concepts than a cosmopolitan city. While the characters might be outsiders or new arrivals, they're still going to want to know where their base of operations is, if only in terms of size, profile, or geography. Is it high in the mountains? Is it on a trade route? Is it a mile beneath the waves? Pick a likely spot and be ready to give the players a sentence or two describing it. The details can be fleshed out later.

Do I look different from everybody else?

Adventurers are often just homegrown heroes, raised in unremarkable communities with ordinary backgrounds.

Yet they're just as often members of strange and mysterious races or outcasts from far-off places. You should consider what races and backgrounds your players might choose when the game begins, and how these will affect their interactions with the NPCs in the starting location. Allowing offbeat or colorful races that aren't standard also means you need to understand those races and how they work in your society.

How do I make a living?

This question isn't just asking for the list of allowed character classes, which you should decide in advance. Rather, it asks how the heroes keep themselves in room and board (or ale and companionship). Are heroes in your world paid to do what they do? Are they mercenary dungeon delvers, or is this a part-time gig for a group of city guards and scholars? The answer might differ from character to character, but once you settle on what the heroes are actually doing to put bread on the table, you have formed a clearer picture of the role of heroes in your new world.

Have I been doing this long?

A great many campaigns assume the heroes start off as 1st-level adventurers, but that's not the only option. Consider whether you're building a world for low-level heroes or higher-level veterans, because this choice affects the presence of wise mentors, young sidekicks, wealthy patrons, and ruthless villains.

Are we at war or at peace?

This is the basic level of political information the heroes need. Is some awful nation sitting at the border ready to invade, or does the world enjoy relative peace? You don't need to tell them who the duke is, or if his dastardly brother is the wicked leader of that awful nation. Your answer could be as simple as, "There was a war hundreds of years ago, but everything's been fine lately," or "The country is constantly being raided by barbarians." Players can then make the classic choice of playing dangerous foreigners, or if there's peace at the start of the campaign, they can play up their characters' backgrounds as innocents heedless of the threats that lurk on the horizon.

What am I doing with these other guys?

Do the player characters already know each other from their days in the Citizen's Guard? Are they old friends from the College of Delvers? Perhaps they're all related: brothers, sisters, or cousins. Or, as is often the case, maybe they're complete strangers who meet in the bar in the first session and get thrown together by common circumstances. As a world-building detail, these connections suggest organizations, guilds, mysterious patrons, or significant families, and can also determine a player's choice of character. As hard as it might be to explain a dwarf PC in a family of elves, even that choice spawns plenty of setting conceits.

How are lives affected by magic?

Most fantasy game worlds have magic of the arcane kind as a staple. Players who are looking to play wizards or sorcerers need to know what it means to be a wizard or sorcerer, even if they don't initially have to know the source or origin of magic itself. This is also true of the other heroes, who should have a fairly good understanding of what society thinks of people casting *fireballs* and summoning demons. You're also going to have to tell the players whether they should expect to have access to healing magic, or if the world is more gritty and dangerous.

How are lives affected by religion?

You don't need to go into much detail about the gods for the benefit of the players, but you should decide the basics and what this means for clerics, paladins, and other characters bestowed with divine power. Essentially, decide what divine patrons they can choose for their characters, even if the answer is just "There's the goddess of cities, and the gods of the four seasons, and the god of thieves."

Who or what is going to try to kill me?

It's always good to know what the major threats are, but you don't have to go into much detail for the players on this score. Primarily, you need to be able to tell the ranger player that choosing evil outsiders as his favored enemy is a good idea, or if he should instead go for something like goblinoids. In answering this question, you're also making some decisions about mood and theme: if most of the bad guys are human or half-human, this suggests a different kind of world than one in which the villains are all Lovecraftian horrors and their unfortunate minions.

Where can I sell this loot?

Assuming your world is one in which piles of gems await the heroes in subterranean mazes, what do the heroes do with them when they get back to town? Is there a Crazy Yorick's Magick Shoppe in every large city, or do the heroes have to craft their own magical wands, potions, and gear? Can they invest their winnings in stock or property? Is there some kind of fence or underground black market to move goods?

THE MUNDANE DETAILS

Once you have the key heroic details figured out, you have a rough sketch of an adventuring world. Now you're going to have to think about the run-of-the-mill folk who populate it. Some NPCs may be just a funny accent and a handful of stats, but they still exist independently of the heroes. Think about the sorts of things the player characters might ask the innkeeper or the town guard.

These details are often the things people think of first when they start building new worlds. It's not a bad idea to have them in the back of your mind, but it's also a lot easier to fill these in once you have the broad strokes already settled. None of this information is hidden or secret; as characters within the world, the PCs might know it, too.

Who's in charge?

Who holds the reins of power? Consider what difference it makes to have a single monarch as opposed to a council of mages or a monolithic church. What do the citizens think about their government? How do neighboring nations or societies get along with this authority? Has it always been this way, or is the ruling power only newly ascended?

Who has the biggest army?

As a follow-up to the last question, who controls the military? Is there a standing army, or does the government send out calls to militias (or bands of brave adventurers)? Is there a legendary troupe of knights that leads the army into battle, or is the army made up entirely of clockwork soldiers? Deciding what the military looks like and who controls it not only gives your players somebody to fear, hate, or respect, but also seeds your campaign with hooks for higher-level play—as the heroes get sufficiently experienced, they might acquire armies of their own.

Who has the most money and power?

This is often connected to the first two questions, but it doesn't have to be; indeed, it often makes things more interesting when nobility and wealth are not synonymous. Does your world have a merchant class? Are high-level adventurers the wealthiest members of society, or are they paid to do what they do out of the deep pockets of aristocrats? While you're thinking about money, you should also decide whether to go with the gold piece standard or experiment with different economic systems.

Who maintains law and order?

What laws and regulations are in place in your world, and who enforces them? Some settings, such as wild and untamed lands of mystery and danger, might leave this task in the hands of rangers; others, especially those that feature high magic, should provide some explanation of how laws are applied to wizards and sorcerers.

How hard do poor people have it?

Nothing produces a cunning and ruthless population of scum and villainy—or heroic rogues and swashbucklers—like an impoverished background. How do the lower classes live? Is there any oppressed or subjugated minority or group that the average townsfolk look down on? The presence of multiple races, for instance, or a division of magical haves and have-nots, often suggests tiers of wealth or poverty. What if the elves were poor and orcs were their cruel masters? What about the other way around?

As in our own world, wealth is the chief producer of societal friction, and the way it moves through your society can inform everything from social norms and values to crime and military engagements, as well as provide unlimited seeds for adventure.

How do people travel, and how easy is it?

In some worlds, the open space between civilized areas is wild and untamed, making travel highly dangerous. Others feature enormous urban sprawls or patchwork villages and farms. The availability of magic also affects the manner of travel. Think about how travel works in your world as a result of these choices. Are horses and wagons common? Do people walk to their destinations, or fly on griffon-back?

What are the best-known landmarks?

You can bring a world alive through the use of extraordinary and fantastic locations, but they don't have to be limited to the places the heroes explore. What's noteworthy back in town? What can the average citizen of the world see out of his or her back window? Could your starting location be named after such a landmark? Consider what major institutions, legends, or heroes may have some connection to a geographical feature or ancient ruin nearby.

Why is everybody celebrating?

Holy days, feast days, and anniversaries are all essential world-building elements that you should consider sketching out when you're working on your new setting. For more information on designing holidays, see page 162.

What do people do for a good time?

Give some thought to how the average person cools her heels at night when the day's work is done. What form does entertainment take? Are there traveling minstrels, or bards appointed by the Emperor to mock his family? Do taverns and bars stay open all night, or do people spend their time reading books?

How weird does it get around here?

Memorable worlds aren't made up solely of ordinary people living ordinary lives in ordinary towns. Does another plane intersect with the area somewhere close by? Do ghosts walk around carrying on their daily business? At times, your players should be equally surprised by the strange things locals have grown used to and no longer think about, or by the apparent lack of weirdness.

THE SCHOLARLY DETAILS

Now we come to the information that perhaps only a sage would need to know, but which forms the underpinning of your world's physics—and metaphysics. Such details include how the world was formed, how magic works, and where dead heroes go when they fall in battle; many are fleshed out further starting on page 160.

Like the other considerations, these aren't necessarily outside the comprehension of the player characters. Most people have a basic understanding of them, albeit colored by their backgrounds. It's been said that sometimes the most exciting and rich worlds are those that don't answer all the questions, but you're the final arbiter on that score.

How did the world come to be?

The answer to this question is your world's creation myth. You can have more than one answer to this, especially if you have multiple races and they don't all share the same worldview. You can choose one of them as the "real" story, or you might suggest that they are all aspects of the truth. This question leads in turn to questions such as how old the world is, what role the gods played in creation, and possibly even when the world is going to end. There's a lot of room for mythology.

What is the nature of the gods?

This is the question that your clerics are going to want to know more about eventually. Are the gods omnipotent and omniscient beings far above the world? Are they capricious superhuman beings, like the gods of Greek myth? Is there a pantheon, or a single creator figure? There are many options here, but you should at the very least know for yourself what level of detail you want to maintain for divinity.

What is the source of magic?

The easiest answer to this question is to simply have magic be a part of your world's physics, a natural force that wizards and sorcerers somehow draw upon to work their spells. But you might also consider having arcane magic stem from the gods or be left over from a deific war. Are there multiple sources of magic? How does this affect the magic of creatures like dragons, fey, and outsiders?

What happens when you die?

Think about whether your world has an afterlife, a place of eternal reward or suffering. Do souls travel the planes, becoming servants of the gods, or do they reincarnate, with the legacy of heroes extending back to the earliest days? Do people even have souls at all? Among the many reasons to consider this question is the existence of spells like *resurrection* and *speak with dead*, as well as the nature of undead. If you depart this world for your next life after death, what's that ghost's story? Why is it still around?

What cycles or events define the calendar?

One characteristic of a world is the cycle of seasons, the weather, and the passage of time. For more information on this subject, see Time on pages 162–163.

What do you see when you look at the sky?

What are the stars? What about the moon and planets? You can leave most such questions unanswered for a long time, but when the player characters achieve the kind of power or freedom to venture to other worlds, you'll want to know what they find. For more on this topic, see pages 164–165.

What constitutes cutting-edge technology?

Setting a world's tech level can be an excellent defining characteristic. Where does alchemy fit in? Does the printing press exist? What about rudimentary steam power? For more on this subject, see pages 160–161.

Where do monsters come from?

While it's easy to assume the presence of monsters, questions like this one open doors to adventure hooks and new monsters. Was there some event in the history of the world that spawned monsters like chimeras, hydras, and dragons? Are monsters an accident of nature or an integral part of the ecosystem? Thinking about these things can also suggest the origins of PC races like elves, dwarves, and gnomes.

Which is strongest: magic, gods, or nature?

Fantasy worlds often hang in the balance between opposing forces. Is your world all a grand design, woven by cosmic beings? Is arcane magic in opposition to the power of the gods and their clerics? Does nature battle magic's transforming nature, or do the forces of order and chaos battle for domination? It's possible that a nonstandard answer to this question can form the heart of a world or campaign.

If I drop this off the balcony, what happens?

This question is actually about verisimilitude, and the answer is usually, "It falls and hits the person standing beneath it on the head." So the real question is, other than "accepted" weirdness like magic and demons, is there anything you want to change or alter about the physical world? If so, how can you do it without losing the players' suspension of disbelief? Your world needs to make its own kind of sense to bind the strange and fantastic in a way that feels natural—at least to the world's residents— thus creating a stage for the PCs' wondrous adventures.

GEOGRAPHY

One of the greatest joys of creating your own campaign setting is the thrill and challenge of crafting an entire world, shaping it out of the primordial clay and setting it spinning in the void. Yet as much fun as this can be, it can also be a complicated and frustrating endeavor if you aren't already an expert in the things that make our own planet what it is. When you run up against something outside of your knowledge base, it's often tempting to simply say, "This is a magical world—rivers and mountains and deserts can go wherever they want."

Tempting—but lazy. Your players deserve better. Take the steps to make your world realistic, and when you do want to break fundamental laws of reality and put a desert in a swamp, make sure you come up with a reason. After all, if you take pains to ensure that the rest of your world is realistic, those magical regions that break the rules will feel all the more fantastic and unique.

If you're familiar with the real world's geology, you've already got a leg up in designing a realistic world. It's no fun to spend weeks or months creating the perfect setting map, only to have a geologist or cartographer friend point out something you did wrong. Yet if your game group includes specialists like this, you're lucky! Don't be afraid to ask your geology enthusiast friend to help you decide where to put mountain ranges, or to ask your meteorologist pal to help you define your world's trade winds. At the very least, using your gaming group in this way keeps them from ambushing you with errors later on.

But let's face it—most GMs don't have access to these resources. In this case, a little research can go a long way. Read up on geology, meteorology, astronomy, and other earth sciences. Watch documentaries and educational shows on these subjects. Most of all, study maps of the real world, not just game products—as any student of geology can tell you, it's shocking just how many scientific errors appear in maps from the most beloved fantasy games and novels.

CREATING A WORLD MAP

The first thing to accept when you sit down to draw a map of your campaign world is that it doesn't need to

be beautiful. As long as you can understand your own scribblings, you'll be able to maintain consistency and verisimilitude when running your game. If you don't think of yourself as particularly artistic, buy some tracing paper and crib shapes and designs from maps you like. Try reproducing a favorite map by hand, or extending an existing map beyond its edge in the same artistic style.

When creating your world, you can use color as a handy way to keep track of forests, deserts, or oceans, or develop your own system of simple cartography symbols. These symbols can be extremely simple: inverted "V" shapes for mountains, crosshatching for forests, scattered dots for deserts, etc.—whatever makes the most sense to you. Some GMs prefer to draw their world maps on blank paper, sharing them with players as "in-world" handouts. Others prefer to use graph or hex paper, the better to precisely track distances and travel times. Still others use professional cartography software. The "right" method is the one that feels most natural to you, and the following advice applies no matter what media you use.

STARTING SIZE

The kind of campaign you want to run should inform the scope of the map you need to create. If your game focuses entirely on a small valley in a mountain range, you might not even need to create a world map. On the other hand, if you're intending to include long overland journeys, you might need to create a sprawling map of an entire continent, or even a whole planet! The important thing to keep in mind is that you don't need to finish everything before the first game. Focusing only on the parts of the map that are directly connected to the next session not only eases your workload, but makes it easier to keep track of things. You're learning about your new world as you create it, and if you do so in small patches over the course of months or years, your knowledge will grow organically.

TERRAIN HIERARCHY

When it comes to drawing your map, keep in mind that the world's shape follows a specific hierarchy. As you draw your map, it's best to follow the steps below and make your decisions in this order—after all, it's tough drawing rivers without knowing where the mountains and coastlines are.

Step 1: Coastlines

The first step is to divide land from water—draw in the region's coastlines, remembering to add bays and harbors here and there (these make great locations for major cities). Scatter islands, inland seas, and lakes here and there, bearing in mind that a chain of islands extending off a coast might indicate an extension of a mountainous region into an ocean or sea. Unless you're an expert on geology or cartography, don't worry about things like plate tectonics or trying to map the curve of the planet, especially if the region you're mapping is only a single continent or smaller. (Of course, it can't hurt to freshen up on these topics.) One way to make this easier is to vaguely base the shapes of your continents on the shapes of Earth's continents, a tactic used by many game designers and fantasy novelists.

Step 2: Elevations

Once your coastlines are set, draw in the outlines of where you want your region's major mountain ranges to run. A mountain range outline should generally be long and narrow, perhaps with multiple "fingers" extending from its length, since mountains often form as continental plates push together to "wrinkle" the surface of a world. Mountain ranges that roughly follow a region's coastline are common, as seen along the west coasts of North and South America. Volcanic activity can also cause mountains to rise—now's a good time to place some volcanoes (preferably in a line along a mountainous coastline or a range of mountains). Once you have your mountainous regions placed, you can draw an increasing number of outlines around those mountains to show gradual changes in elevation as you work your way down to the coastline. Don't be afraid to make these lower regions wide and large—you'll need somewhere to put your deserts and large forests. Also remember that mountain ranges extending into oceans are an excellent source of realistic island chains.

Step 3: Rivers

Once you have the elevations of your region marked, you'll be able to place rivers. Start near the centerline of a mountain range and wind downward on whatever curving course you want as you approach a coastline. Make sure that your rivers don't double back across an elevation line once they cross it, since water has a hard time flowing uphill. One important thing to keep in mind is that, as a general rule, water wants to flow together rather than apart—as a result, you should avoid having your rivers "split" as they flow downward from the mountains, save to create a delta like those at the mouths of the Mississippi or the Nile. Likewise, make sure that you don't have multiple rivers emptying out of a lake!

GEOLOGIC TOUCHSTONES

Below are several handy bits of trivia about the real world that can help with fantasy map design.
- Deserts and forests each cover approximately a third of the Earth's land surface.
- Oceans cover approximately 70% of the Earth's total surface.
- The peak of Mount Everest, at 29,028 feet, is the highest point above sea level on Earth. (The tallest mountain on Earth, on the other hand, is Mauna Loa, which from seabed to peak rises 33,500 feet.)
- The lowest point in the ocean is the Mariana Trench, at a depth of 35,797 feet.

Step 4: Vegetation

Sketch in major woodlands or jungles, placing them along coastlines and in lowlands, perhaps up to the edges of your highest elevations in places. Vegetation near a large water source like a delta often forms a marshland or swamp. Don't go too overboard with these regions, though! Remember that areas you don't turn into woodlands or swamps can be hilly regions, plains, steppes, badlands, or other relatively clear terrains. Deserts are a special case—place them in areas where there are few rivers (it's okay to have one or two) and where there's a mountain range to block the path of precipitation—this area is known as a "rain shadow."

Step 5: Tags

Now you're ready to start naming your regions and placing spots of interest like cities, dungeons, and other notable features. Keep in mind some simple rules here—cities are almost always found on rivers or shorelines, and you'd expect to see cave entrances in hilly or mountainous areas. If you're drawing in national borders, remember that such divisions commonly fall along convenient geographical features, such as rivers or mountain ranges. Make sure to place plenty of intriguing adventure sites, too—it's a good rule to place three adventure sites within a few day's travel of each of your cities.

Breaking the Rules

While these guidelines stress the importance of realism, don't forget that you're designing a fantasy world! Anything goes—feel free to have rivers flowing uphill, mountains that float on the ocean, deserts or forests that move, or swaths of ocean where the water drops away to expose portions of the sea bed. As long as you realize that these locations are unrealistic, you can design for them and explain them however you wish.

CULTURAL CONSIDERATIONS

While such things are undeniably important, creating a world is more than merely drawing realistic geography and political lines and then slapping down analogues of real-world societies. World building is, at its core, about creating cultures and showing how those cultures have shaped the world, from simple farmers laboring for a lordly knight to fantastic sky aeries of winged elves or plane-shifting cities of ethereal horrors. But what is culture? Culture is not merely the social environment of a village or the quaint customs of the locals.

Culture is, in essence, the evolution of thought, and can span regions or even nations. It's about the way that people have described their history and experiences and their continued growth as a people. It's about creating a cultural "personality," a quick sketch for understanding—but keep in mind that not everyone from a culture will have exactly the same personality.

One can approach culture building in multiple ways:

- By looking at and adapting real-world cultures.
- By choosing a desired culture as an end point and retroactively deducing the historical factors that led to it.
- By starting from the emergence of the people, and following their growth logically and persistently along a timeline.
- By any combination of these approaches.

All of these methods are valid, though each has its pitfalls and its benefits. A creative GM can certainly use real-world cultures as a starting point or base when creating new cultures for the game world; after all, these are proven points of history, and provide easy access points for players. The other options require significantly greater creative involvement. The following tips can help a GM get started.

CORE ELEMENTS OF THE PEOPLE

The GM can place each of the following elements on a spectrum; religion, for instance, can produce both fanatics and agnostics, and trade can consist of simple barter or complex financial instruments used to move vast sums of hypothetical money. Where a culture falls on each question is up to the world builder, but keep in mind that none of these elements exists alone, and the position of one may influence that of another.

Survival: The first things a GM should consider are the world's people and their basic assumptions about life and survival. At the most fundamental level, their physiology defines their core needs: shelter, food and drink, mates, and a relatively tenable environment. Combine their physiology with their environment (both past and present), and one can begin to draw a picture of how the people have adapted to the world around them. How do they acquire food? What threatens them? What

advantages do they secure by living here? What food do they eat? What do they drink? All of these also help to inform what character traits a society values—one culture might call itself clever, quick-witted, and fast to seize an advantage; its enemies might call members of that culture duplicitous backstabbers who would sell their children for a momentary gain.

Language: Once one can define a culture's character, one can define the culture's language. What sparks the language? It isn't necessary to spell out the language, but rather to imagine its core. Language and culture are inextricable; concepts core to a people's identity may be expressible only in their language, with translations grasping the idea only loosely. Is the language pure, with few words borrowed from outsiders, or is it a trader's language, a complex tongue with origins in a variety of cultures? Is the language primarily oral or written, and if it is written, what is it written on and how? Does it share an alphabet with another language? Keep in mind that high literacy rates tend to combine with rapid invention, as knowledge becomes easy to transmit. How do the people tell each other stories about their past? Do they have methods for communicating with far-off friends? Are they telepaths, or do they use sound beyond the threshold of ordinary human hearing? Do they travel, and if so, by what method? Each answer has its own implications, and can help tease out a sense of a particular people.

Religion: What sort of relationship do people have with their god or gods, and why do they have it? Are the people devoted to their gods as worshipers, familiar with them as acquaintances and comrades, or contemptuous of them? Do the people require priestly intermediaries to hear the words of the gods, or do they have a direct relationship with their gods? How much influence do the religious exert in this society? How well do they tolerate the beliefs of others?

Foreign Relations: Is this a homogenous group, having lived and intermarried within a relatively small group of people, or the product of a series of invasions and raids? How much contact and commerce do people have with outside cultures, and is travel beyond the hereditary home feasible and encouraged? How are outsiders viewed, and who are the enemies and allies of this culture?

Government and Law

When cultures break down into nations, whether from tribal loyalties or other shifts in thinking, or grow too large for simple meetings or councils to oversee, they require more formal governance. Broadly speaking, there are three types of government: anarchic, or rule by consent of the governed; authoritarian, or rule by the few; and democratic, rule by voice of the people. In general, most fantasy nations fall into the first two categories, either too small or disorganized to have a central authority, or possessing a ruling class that keeps the rest of the nation firmly in line.

Authoritarian governments come in many forms, and each of these can combine with the other forms to create a different kind of government. Each culture has its own twists, and the world builder should consider the culture and decide which of the following is the most logical outgrowth of the people's history. This style of government accords most strongly with the lawful alignments.

- **Aristocracy**: The rule of the "best," in which the most accomplished members of society make decisions to help guide the rest. This often begins as a meritocracy, but frequently devolves into a plutocracy.
- **Kleptocracy**: A corruption-based government, generally based on a fallen version of other models of rule.
- **Magocracy**: Rule by mages, wizards, or shamans.
- **Monarchy**: Rule by a single person, with varying degrees of absolutism and heredity involved.
- **Plutocracy**: Rule by the wealthy.
- **Theocracy**: Rule by priests or by the church.

Anarchic governments are, by their very nature, limited in size. When people need to work together, they must do so by choice, rather than being forced through the threat of a greater government's might. Some of these societies involve smaller tribal units, answering to a chief or matron, who sits on a (mostly) allied council of similar representatives. Members cannot (or do not) force each other into anything, except perhaps by threats of force or economic embargo. This form of government tends to give way to charismatic and ambitious leaders who establish an authoritarian government of one sort or another, and thus it usually exists for a relatively short time. But it can also arise in cultures with strong notions of individual liberty—both in expecting freedom and demanding it from others—which may make it more stable.

Democratic governments are a matter of definition. How free is the society, and who is free to vote? In ancient Greece, the birthplace of democracy, the councils were open only to male citizens; no slaves or women had a voice in the assembly. It is up to the world builder to determine who receives a vote in these democratic societies. Does the democracy extend across more than a single grouping of people, as in a small nation, or is it confined to a people in one area? Do the people gather in citywide assemblies? How often do these assemblies meet? Do the people send representatives (as in a representative democracy), or do they vote by mass acclamation?

The laws of a culture grow out of its values, and the government grows from its laws. For the most part, law springs from one of the bedrock concepts of the culture: honor, religion, kinship, loyalty, money, power, tradition, and others. Using the cultural character developed earlier, the world builder should examine what this culture values and what behaviors it uses to reinforce these values. Who sets the laws? Who interprets them?

Another consideration: Do the laws permit precedent, meaning they build on previous judicial interpretations, or is every case decided afresh based on the statutes in ancient tomes? If it's the latter, then the outcomes of similar cases may bear no resemblance to each other. If the former, then every case heard in court adds another wrinkle to the law that must be considered, and a new breed arises to deal with these interpretations: lawyers, advocates, or solicitors. Keep in mind also that a broad, national law with established precedent makes trade easier, since merchants no longer have to learn the vagaries of law in far-flung towns and counties—and this in turn strengthens the nation.

Economics

Every civilization that rises does so via the use of resources: goods that have both utility and scarcity. As noted above, people require shelter, food, clothing, and other goods simply to survive. Basic innovations help store food and create clothing faster, and these innovations free members of society to help produce still more inventions. At some point, communal wealth tends to move toward private ownership, which then requires trade. The earliest form of trade is barter, or the exchange of one good or service for another (or for social status). But what happens when one party needs something and the other doesn't require his resources?

This leads to the introduction of commodity money, or trading for an agreed-upon middle resource such as obsidian, cocoa beans, bushels of wheat, or other useful goods. In time, intermediate forms of broadly accepted currency develop, based on stored value—in our world, a shekel indicated 1 bushel of barley, and basic coins were used as storage chits. With the invention of mining, metals could be extracted and used, and in time, the metal coins created came to represent stored value themselves. Thus the English pound came to represent 1 pound of silver. The appropriate coin could then be used to claim the value indicated from governments or banks.

An economy is a dynamic system, and what goes into it must affect another part. Using metal coins as money functions only as long as the supply remains relatively constant. If a major new silver mine introduces too much silver into the economy, the value of a silver coin decreases correspondingly. If a dragon hoards thousands of coins, they have essentially disappeared from the economy, causing the value of the remaining coins to increase; their reintroduction upon the dragon's death causes the devaluation of the rest of the coins in circulation. That is to say: Too great a supply of anything decreases demand and therefore decreases value; too little increases the demand and thus increases value. It is the world builder's job to determine what goods and services are valuable in the culture—be they hard coins, precious gems, or ephemera such as honor.

The following pages outline several types of societies.

The Primitive Society

All historical cultures—and nearly all fantastical ones—spring from primal forebears. Though creation myths sometimes tell of people springing full-formed from the earth (or the sky, the clouds, the seas, the blood of a god, and so on), culture in general proceeds from a primitive state to a more advanced one. In this case, "advanced" means a fixed agrarian base, a shift away from the hunter-gatherer model, the development of technological innovations, and a step toward an integrated economy, where the method of trade moves beyond simple barter or communal requirements. It's certainly possible to see an advanced culture devolve into primitivism, though it's much less common. In these cases the memories of lost glories likely end the primitive era more quickly.

What makes a culture primitive? Is it because the environment in which the people eke out a living is so harsh that they must focus all their energies on survival? Or are the people so isolated, by choice or otherwise, that the exchange of ideas is small, and progress slows to a snail's pace?

The term "primitive culture" is one determined by outsiders, existing only in contrast to more "advanced" societies, and as such comes laden with the potential for bias and prejudice. It can encompass a huge range of potential behaviors, from cave-dwelling, pre-language savages in familial tribes to peaceful nomads with rich and vibrant oral traditions who have chosen to reject the trappings of the modern world. Remember that simply because the culture is primitive does not mean its people are stupid. They may be cowed initially by displays of might and power, but they have not survived in their land by being oblivious, and many a "civilized" visitor has been taken aback (or apart) by the quick thinking and natural cunning of his supposed inferiors.

Since many primitive cultures are nomadic or migratory, without permanent homes, they tend to be masters of adaptation, a trait that comes in handy if one of these so-called "savages" is thrust into the midst of civilization. Whether this means becoming a fearsome warrior, an incomparable tracker, or a natural magician or shaman—or simply fleeing deeper into the wilderness—is a matter for the GM to decide.

Some examples of "primitive" culture include:

- The archetypal cave dwellers, possibly just now discovering basic tools.
- Hunters and gatherers, chasing down game on arid savannahs.
- Nomadic horsemen of the steppes, the terror of their neighbors.
- Migratory tribes, living among the trees or great plains of their continent, following the great beasts, and moving with the seasons.

- Polar nomads, hunting seals, whales, and polar bears.
- Jungle dwellers defending themselves against constant warfare by rival tribes.
- Barbarian tribes dwelling in rough huts, slowly becoming a more settled civilization.

DEFINING PRIMITIVE CULTURE

A primitive culture is one that relies mainly on its connection with the land for subsistence. Its people don't engage in large-scale and complex organization, nor are they complex toolmakers. They may travel frequently, following herds of animals or escaping marauding predators. Their clothing is of cured animal skin or crudely woven plant fibers. Their tools and weapons range from simple stone and wood bound together with leather strips to crudely worked iron at best. Their craftsmanship, on the other hand, can range from rude to exquisite, depending on how much time they can devote to this outside of the more basic necessities of survival.

Such cultures' living units tend to be tribal and communitarian, focusing on the pragmatic rather than the ideal. Depending on their disposition toward outsiders, members may have established certain rituals for trading with others of their kind. When trade occurs, it's most frequently skins, weapons, or knowledge, though certain cultures may trade stones, beads, or other items of ceremonial value that indicate status and wealth. However, rather than an economy comprised of money, this economy is primarily gift-based or enhanced barter, as it has no basis for currency.

Primitive wise men and wise women know the local herbs and plants, and they make use of natural medicines and, in some cases, potent hallucinogenic drugs. Visions from the latter sometimes guide them, as do divine beings or ancestor spirits called forth in elaborate rituals.

The peoples of primitive cultures must frequently be superb warriors and survivalists, at least within their specific environments, and such cultures often have astronomically high childhood mortality rates.

Leadership and Control

A primitive culture rewards strength and intelligence in its leaders. Smart leaders show the people how to prosper. Strong leaders bring plunder and security. Different cultures place different values on their leaders, but they inevitably follow those who give them the greatest chance for survival. If raids and brutality are the means by which a culture survives, bloodthirst becomes a virtue. If guile and cunning prove more efficacious, then the culture develops them as its primary traits. Leaders, then, must demonstrate their abilities to earn and defend their positions, whether by leading war bands, luring enemies into snares and ambushes, or devising better methods for hunting and raising food. Those with aptitudes for magic or the divine can often lead as well, whether directly or through an advisory role.

Religion, Taboos, Rituals, and Superstitions

The religions of early people tend to be simplistic and animistic, ascribing spirits and thought to objects and phenomena. Their lives are full of portents and omens, and when they read the wind and follow the stars, they see the hands of the unknown in the world around them and so invent rituals, beliefs, and sacrifices to placate such spirits.

Because of this, shamans frequently hold powerful positions in these cultures. They are the men and women able to speak to spirits and ancestors and commune with strange creatures. The shamans advise the chiefs, and sometimes even become chieftains themselves. They lead the tribe to water in times of drought, read the signs of migrations, and teach the children the lore and history of the tribe. In more difficult times, if the shaman cannot produce results, the tribe may turn on him, exiling him or sacrificing him to the now-silent mysteries of the earth.

The burial mounds of ancestors may become pilgrimage sites, and legends of older times fill the oral histories. People tell stories of creation, of the gods and their tricks and triumphs, stories that are invariably mirrors of the qualities the tribe wishes to adopt.

The stories the tribe tells may also be instructional for younger members, warning the children of dangers in the area and behaviors to avoid. Tying these lessons to stories can give rise to superstitions that become ingrained over the years: telling a child not to eat the red berries of a certain bush may lead to a belief that red is an unlucky color, thus spawning the notion that spilling blood unnecessarily brings ill fortune.

Primitive magic is frequently sympathetic; that is, by drawing pictures of their enemies, people hope to gain control over them. By eating the flesh of strong beasts, they hope to absorb that strength—and some even eat the flesh of worthy opponents to commemorate their bravery.

QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR PRIMITIVE SOCIETY

When designing a primitive culture, keep in mind some basic questions about the people.

- Where do they fall on the technological spectrum?
- What is their environment? How does it affect their worldview?
- What sorts of monsters do they see routinely?
- What are the major dangers in their area?
- How does the tribe protect itself? What are their special skills regarding magic or combat?
- What traits does the culture hold as virtues?
- How do they feel about magic?
- Are they nomadic or sedentary?
- What is their social structure?
- Do they live in comparative ease or hardship?
- What are the major obstacles to their advancement?
- If they are nomadic, how far do they typically travel in a week, and by what means? Do they leave traces behind or do they try to vanish when they travel, and why?
- What is their attitude toward outsiders? What about trade or intermarriage?
- What goods does the tribe use for trade or commerce?
- Does the shaman hold power outright in the tribe?
- What rites do they observe?
- Does the culture hold any interesting beliefs?
- What are the superstitions and taboos of the society?
- What happens if someone violates them?
- What are the tutelary deities of the tribe?
- Who rules, and how is the ruler determined?
- How powerful is the average tribe member? What about the weakest and the strongest?
- What do they eat? How does the group store food?

PATHFINDER
ROLEPLAYING GAME
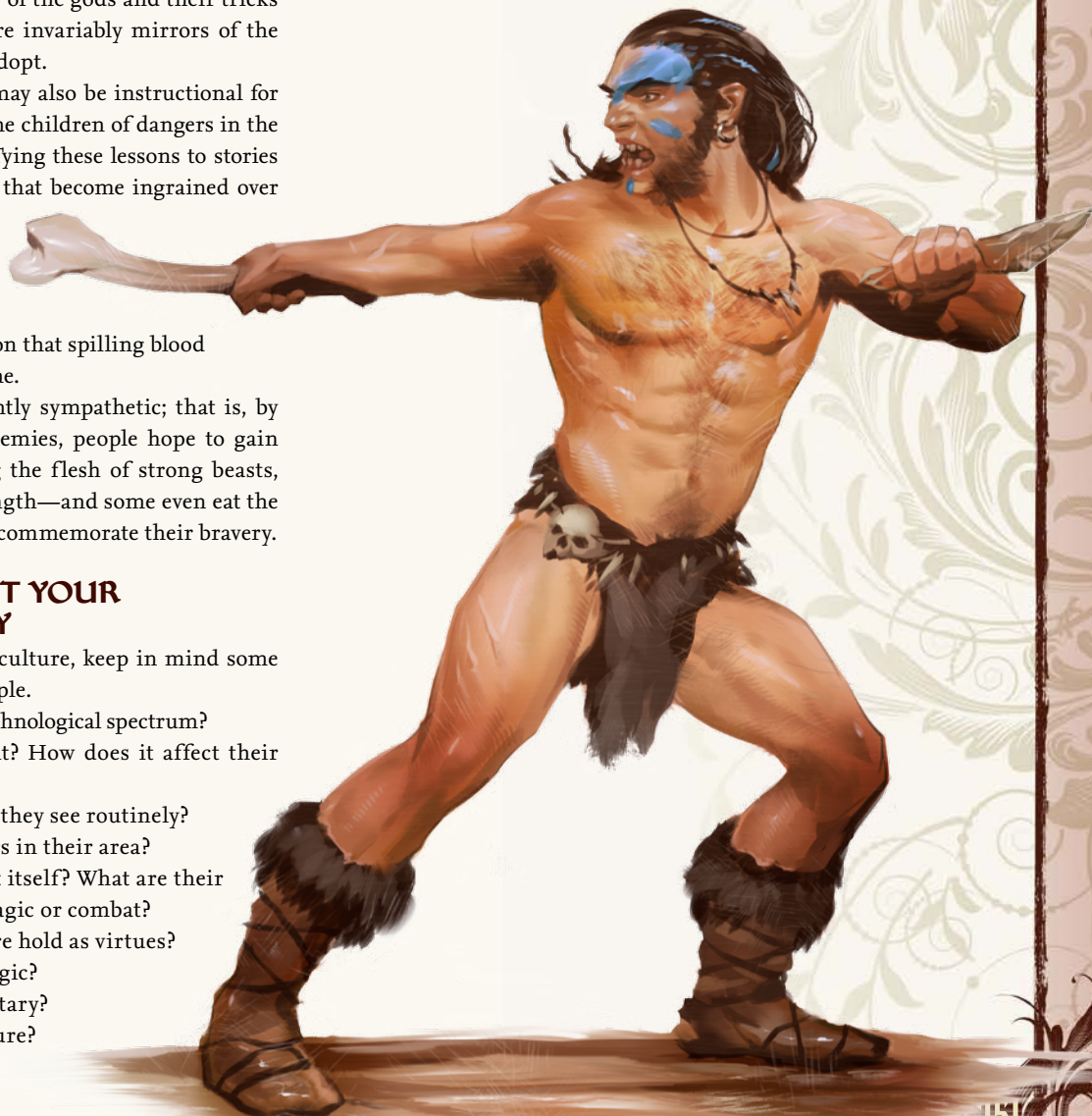
The Feudal Society

As cultures emerge from ignorance into knowledge, as the people band together for mutual protection, certain leaders—whether strong, smart, or charismatic—rise to guide, lead, and protect. In a fantastic feudal society, such protection is paramount. With hordes of orcs nearby or a dragon's lair within flying distance, those without skill in arms or magic must depend on those who do have it—and those who have it must expend their energy on maintaining their abilities, rather than scratching the earth or chopping wood. Thus, leaders arise.

These leaders gather strength by bringing together other powerful people. Advisors and warriors earn power and prestige, and as the society expands, so too does the land (or the ambition) required to support it. The trusted advisors become vassals, sworn to commit their warriors in defense of the commonweal, and in turn, the leader becomes the liege, who likewise swears a solemn oath to uphold the sanctity of the realm. This structure is feudalism.

The feudal system is thus a pyramid of bodies, controlled by the warrior aristocracy. At the bottom of the pyramid labor the serfs, who compose the vast majority of the feudal population. In the earliest stage of a feudal society, the fruit of their work supports nearly the entirety of the rest of the society; they act as woodsmen, farmers, hunters, trappers, miners, smiths, millers, carpenters, and more. Serfs are the property of the lord who controls the land on which they work, and most of them never see the world 20 miles past their birthplace. They are expected to serve their lord faithfully and without question; his word is their law, and in return, he protects them, administers justice, feeds them in times of famine, and serves as the mouth of the king.

Above the serfs are the freemen, who pay rent on land overseen by the local lord. Their service to the lord begins and ends with the moneys due him, but many choose a more active role as free mercenaries, smiths, innkeepers, and more. Because the lord of the land to whom they pay rent has no obligation to them in lean times, freemen must create their own fortunes, save their money, and rely on themselves.

Both freemen and serfs might be called to serve in the levies and militias of their kingdom.

To manage their land, the landowners deputize vassals of their own: lesser judges, sheriffs, guardsmen, and more. These men might be serfs as well, or they might be freemen who have sold their services to the lord, but they wield power in the name of the lord, and their word is law unless someone higher up the social ladder says otherwise.

Above these vassals are the nobility, both greater and lesser. In many feudal societies, the nobility are knights, their status dependent on their skill with the blade or the spell. For the most part, they are also landowners, sworn to their liege lord's defense and sworn to the defense of the citizens who depend upon them. These knights are warriors or magicians, and in certain cases, the religious hierarchy of the kingdom. Those with castles or keeps have more of a duty to their kingdom than simply waiting at the king's call. They must also adjudicate matters in their fiefs, raise and support a troop of knights to contribute to their lord's defense, and keep current with the politics of the court and their neighbors. Additionally, they must also tax their peasants, maintain the fief's infrastructure (since technically this land belongs to their liege), and stamp out uprisings, rebellions, and monstrous incursions. They can pass their titles to their children, if their liege allows it; many titles begin as granted titles but later turn into hereditary titles, with the holder being responsible for the fief's tithe. At the top of this pyramid sits the all-powerful monarch.

RULING A FEUDAL SOCIETY

The primary responsibility of a feudal lord is protection for his or

her vassals. This protection is both physical and legal, including aid if a vassal comes under attack as well as swift justice under the law. Though more advanced kingdoms tend to rely on precedent and established common law, kings and queens can override these at will. Their word literally is the law, often bolstered by a supposed divine mandate (and their allies within the church).

Protection comes in many forms. The very purpose of the kingdom is to stand united against enemy invasion, and this is the reason the vassals have sworn to provide warriors and service to the king. Yet the king must also protect the kingdom against internal threats, such as rebellions, bandits, thieves and murderers, mercantile fraud, and dissident or ambitious nobles. Much of the time, this means passing responsibility to the local lords and trusting them to do their work; and in most cases the vassals have extraordinary latitude to interpret the king's wishes, and direct appeal to the ruler is rare and discouraged by his underlings. Feudal justice at the uppermost levels tends to be pragmatic, rather than idealistic, meaning that any disputes are settled according to which party is of most use to the king himself. Occasionally, as in the case of the Holy Roman Emperor, a monarch may be selected by a group of peers rather than inherited through his bloodline, in which case he's both absolute ruler and beholden to his underlings, a fact reflected in his rulings. In a feudal society, justice is far from blind.

THE FEUDAL HIERARCHY

A sample feudal hierarchy, from top to bottom, is as follows. Note that the nobility holds the land in trust for the crown and does not own it outright. Certain exceptions, called allodial holdings, can be granted to anyone by the crown, but they usually quickly revert to the crown via trickery or conquest. As a feudal society doesn't leave a lot of leeway for travel, adventurers might be freemen out to improve their station through great deeds, or the youngest progeny of the nobility, eager to win their own titles through force of arms.

Title	Lands	Hereditary?
King/Queen	Kingdom	Y
Prince/Princess	Principality	Y
Duke/Duchess	Duchy	Y
Margrave/Margravine	Marquisate	Y
Count (or Earl)/Countess	County	Y
Viscount/Viscountess	Viscounty or Shire	Y
Baron/Baroness	Barony	Y
Knight/Dame/Lord	Manor	N
Merchant	—	—
Freeman	—	Y
Serf	—	Y

RELIGION'S ROLE

Faith plays a huge role in many feudal societies, especially in monotheistic belief systems whose churches are structured in a similar fashion. In a fantasy setting, with multiple pantheons and the favor of the gods manifesting in physical phenomena, all bets are off. Will a monarch want to ally with a church? Early members of the royal family may find these alliances convenient, but when a priest can cast *detect evil* or *know alignment*, rulers no longer have the option of hiding their true beliefs. Giving such power to a church might spell disaster for a royal house. When priests speak of a ruler having the divine right, the people can rest assured that this is so. One question, then, is what happens when a hereditary monarch doesn't have that favor. Does he corrupt the priesthood, or do the priests help to replace him? In a feudal society, these are not small tasks.

Depending on the society you design, the churches may be more or less woven into the framework of society, with churches of a lawful bent naturally appealing to a monarch from whom all laws stem. In such situations, the monarchy generally works with its spiritual advisors in much the same way as it does with its vassals—though in theory the church answers to itself, in practice power begets power, and those churches deeply enmeshed in feudal politics tend to spend much of their effort enforcing the social order, maintaining orthodoxy, and rooting out heresies.

QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR FEUDAL SOCIETY

When designing a feudal society, consider the following:
- Who rules the society? How does the ruler maintain power and control?
- What factions plot against the ruler? Why?
- How is the ruler selected?
- How does the ruler keep order?
- How involved is the ruler in the affairs of the realm?
- What are the external threats to this society?
- What are the internal threats to this society?
- How corrupt is the nobility?
- How rigid is the social system?
- What do the social classes think of each other?
- How well does the nobility provide for its serfs?
- How does the society feel about traveling adventurers?
- What is the role of religion in this society? What deities are prominent?
- Do priests wield power? How much?
- Is there a hierarchy within the church that mirrors that of the society at large?
- What is the role of wizards in this society? Do they work with, against, or alongside the monarch?
- How do people of the society feel about magic?
- Which are the most prominent cities, and do they have major works like cathedrals, bridges, and fortresses?

The Rural/Agrarian Society

In general, civilization hinges on a people's ability to move beyond the hunter-gatherer model, to settle into a place, learn to understand, and it harness its resources. In most cases, this is the result of a primitive people first domesticating wild animals—either as hunting companions or as food, clothing, or milk sources—and learning to plant crops for survival. Many cultures eventually move on from that base, focusing instead on technological innovation, conquest, or higher magic.

Some, though, choose to live in harmony with the earth, to keep their heads down and their roots deep. These are the agrarian societies, and they can be found almost anywhere civilization spreads its cloak. Without the ability to grow large amounts of food, and without the aid of beasts of burden to speed agriculture and provide a richer, meat-based diet, most advanced societies could not exist: the citizens would be dependent on their own skills to raise food, and they would not have the energy or inclination to pursue other avenues of thought. After the invention of agriculture, however, more people can devote their lives to improving society as a whole: creating pots to store the food, refining processes to cure hides and create clothing, building more durable houses, and creating standardized currency to expedite trade.

In a realistic world, pastoralists might raise cattle, horses, sheep, or goats and farm wheat, lentils, barley, or maize—staples that provide labor, fiber, and food for a large number of people. In a high-fantasy world, they might raise more fantastic creatures, such as griffons, hippogriffs, or dire wolves. In either case, farmers and ranchers typically choose locations near rivers or lakes, which they can use to irrigate fields or water animals. If necessary, they often clear trees and brush from the area to create open fields or pastures.

Some broad agrarian settings include:

- The fertile farmlands outside a city, whose inhabitants are mocked by the same snobbish city folk who rely on them for survival.
- Serfs toiling around the keep of a once-proud noble, who offers them protection.
- Rural farmlands, feeding a distant empire embroiled in an ancient war.
- A pastoral paradise far from urban society, where the citizens want for nothing.
- A walled farm town, perched high on a peninsular bluff, defending its goods and lifestyle against pirates and raiders alike.

LIFE IN AN AGRARIAN SOCIETY

In most settled lands, there is a limited growing season. Whether this is because of harsh winters or blazing summers, lack of or too much water, or monster activity, farmers must plan well ahead to gain the most from their land. Near the equator, growing seasons tend to be longer, while near the poles, they're shorter. As continuous farming leaves the land poor in nutrients, farmers must figure out ways to improve the yield year after year. Whether by controlled burning, crop rotation, irrigation, or synergistic fertilization with domesticated animals, the members of an agrarian society must constantly and consistently ensure that their lands are fertile during the growing season, and that they produce as much as possible during that time.

Farmers must also always be prepared for floods, plagues, insect swarms, wildfires, storms, and other such natural disasters. Their entire livelihood—and their very survival—depends on storing food and preserving it against future disaster. As such, they often develop a stoic, fatalistic mindset, with a healthy appreciation of simple pleasures and hard work.

The demands of planting, harvesting, and caring for their animals means that farmers have precious little time or energy to work on magic or martial skills from spring to fall; such pursuits are almost exclusively saved for winter.

Agrarian communities are usually closely knit out of necessity, though
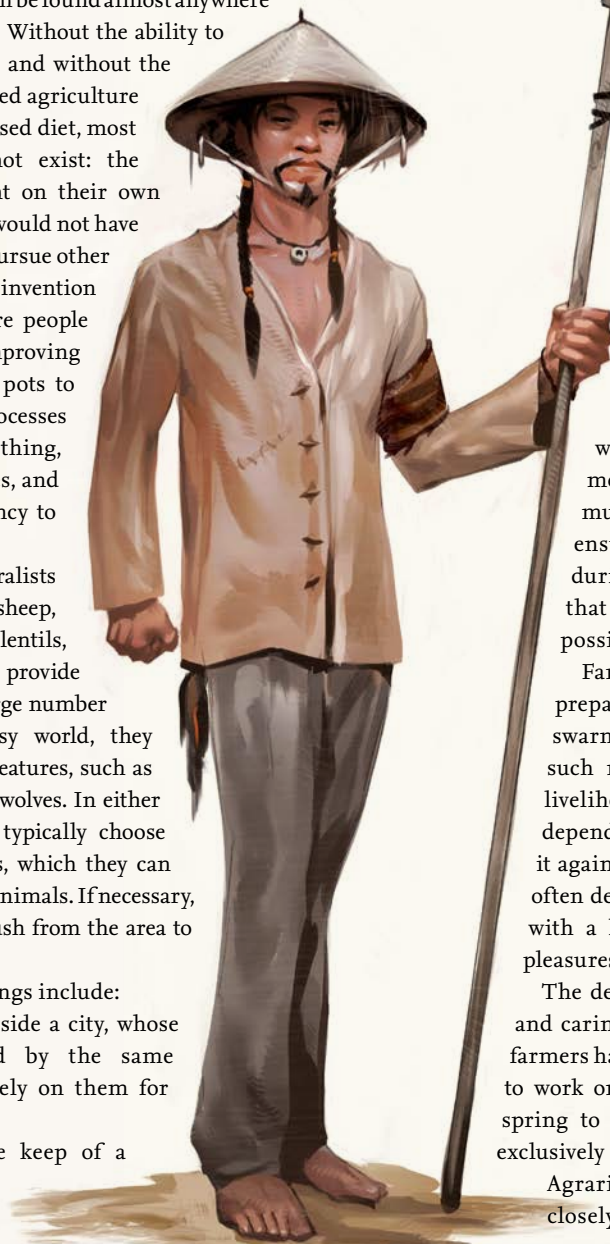
there may be tension and antagonism among the members. Such societies require mutual cooperation to survive, and as a result, their interactions often revolve around group activities, such as a shared religious services or barn raisings.

The Religion of Farmers

Being so closely tied to the land naturally directs these cultures toward nature-based deities or the worship of nature itself. Druids and the gods of fertility receive sacrifices of thanks and prayer; the gods of death, disease, and famine receive supplications to keep their distance. The reproductive cycles of various domesticated animals are incredibly important, and other holy days might be built around harvests, solstices, equinoxes, plantings, and other annual tasks. Such events are often marked with fertility rites, bonfires, celebrations, and sacrifices to assure greater yields, more children, and the blessings of the gods.

Superstitions and taboos may also play a strong role in the society. As with the primitive society (see page 150), many real-world taboos arise as ways of passing on practical lessons, such as dietary restrictions on animals that eat unclean foods and could therefore pass along disease. Other superstitions might hold that placing hex signs and horseshoes on barns prevents bad luck, or farmers might keep goats with their cows to prevent sickness, then sacrifice the goats to drive away plague.

Social Structure and Economy

Since farms are an integral part of any civilization, the question for a world-builder is just how much of the society focuses on agriculture. In an early feudal society, most of the peasants and serfs work on farms. As farming methods and means of distribution improve, some peasants become freemen and can move toward other professions, creating a burgeoning middle class. In the beginning, though, these post-farming professionals tend to be oriented toward pastoral crafts, such as weavers, potters, and smiths.

No one specific type of government best fits an agrarian society. Some societies might have inherited monarchs who rule by fiat, while others might elect reluctant leaders or councils of elders, and still others might come together only in mutual self-defense. Within the home, the father is usually the landowner and head of the household, working the fields from sunrise to sunset. While the wife often works beside him during harvest time and handles the food preservation, an important goal for most women is to bear and raise as many strong children is possible, for more children mean more hands to help with the fields.

Challenges

Far from the protecting arm of a liege lord (if they have one at all), most rural societies must rely on themselves. Along with the normal race against time and nature to produce enough food to survive, raiders and monsters are a constant threat, especially during the winter, when farmer's stores are full and foraging is difficult. As a result, farmers are as likely to be suspicious or hostile as they are to welcome the protection of adventurers. War is another great destroyer of rural communities—though rarely involved as fighters themselves, farmers see their fields trampled and animals infected by unburied corpses. Warlords of all alignments are notorious for commandeering and slaughtering farm animals for their sustenance, and billeting their troops in homes even if they are unwelcome.

QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR RURAL/ AGRARIAN SOCIETY

When designing a rural or agrarian society, keep in mind some of the following basic questions about the people.

- How advanced are they technologically?
- Where did these people originally come from, and why did they come?
- What did they do when they arrived in this land? Were they friendly or antagonistic toward the creatures and people already here?
- Did they bring seeds and animals from their homeland with them?
- What terrain do they inhabit?
- Who are their enemies and allies?
- How fertile is the land? What happens to any excess crops that are harvested—are they traded or stockpiled against future shortages?
- How do the farmers fertilize their land, and with what materials? (Examples: manure, compost, blood, corpses of enemies, magic, prayers.)
- What is their primary food crop or animal?
- What is their primary beast of burden?
- How do they store their food?
- Do they have currency, and if so, what is it? Who issues it, and by what authority?
- What is the weather like, and what kinds of clothing do they wear?
- How clean are they, and how do they maintain that level of hygiene?
- How do they feel about magic and wizards?
- What is their relationship with their gods?
- What is their relationship with travelers, merchants, and other foreigners?
- How do they protect their land?
- What monsters and fey live near this society, and how do these people deal with them?

The Cosmopolitan Society

While countrysides, farmlands, mountaintops, forests, and tundras all have their place in a well-developed world, the city is where the heart of civilized culture beats. As trade hubs, military fortifications, artistic centers, intellectual havens, and seats of government, cities are repositories of history and cultural knowledge. But what makes a city? How does it form, and how does it attract its people?

As a rule, cities form around water sources, whether that's a single oasis or a lake, river, or sea that provides the additional boon of fisheries and convenient transportation of people and goods. Once water is accounted for, cities frequently form near tracts of fertile land or rich veins of ore—or junctions of the roads along which such things are transported. They may form at key strategic locations, like mountain passes that control movement between fertile valleys (thus allowing easy taxation), or just before a difficult stretch of a major thoroughfare, giving weary travelers a place to rest (or give up their burdens and put down roots, enlarging the city). Whatever the reason, a city grows and thrives by becoming a hub, attracting trade, visitors, and new residents. As it grows, it changes, and residents can often see the shape of the old city underneath the gleaming streets, with the old buildings coexisting with or being slowly supplanted by the new. A city's architecture is typically reflective of the people who created it, and immigrants frequently bring the aesthetics (and cultural practices) of their homelands, making a city's buildings and structure a physical record of its history.

CITY REQUIREMENTS

While smaller settlements like towns and forts can sometimes exist in barely tenable situations, often for strategic military reasons, most realistic cities have a few basic requirements that must be met.

- Access to sufficient food and fresh water (for both drinking and sanitation).
- Centralized authority, whether king or council, to provide protection, and taxes levied by those authorities to help pay for walls, guardsmen, weaponry, and other defenses against invasion.
- Infrastructure to provide food and basic necessities.
- Craftsmen and specialists, and importation of raw materials for those artisans.
- A reason to exist: Why is the city here, and not 20 miles down the road? Does it have strategic importance or natural resources, or is it a crossroads for trade?

URBAN PLANNING

The first question the GM must ask about a city is what drew the original settlers to this specific spot, and why they stayed. Was it the protection offered by a mountainous bluff? Proximity to a river? Or merely the closest they could reasonably get to an easily exploited natural resource?

Early on, building infrastructure is a communal effort, requiring little management. But as a city grows, someone eventually needs to take charge. Who rules your city, and how are they appointed? Are the leaders mayors, elected by the people, or are they viceroys, ruling in place of a king? How do they make laws, and with what strength do they back those laws? How far are they willing to go to enforce them? Is this a free city, where citizens can speak their mind without fear, or is it a heavily guarded fort where any hint of insubordination is immediately crushed under the governor's iron heel? If it's the latter, why do traders run that risk in order to trade there?

Every city requires trade in order to grow. Some grow from fur-trapping settlements, while others rise near especially productive mines. Some are merely waypoints along caravan routes, set alongside natural springs in the desert. What they all have in common is that they are centralized locations for people of varying backgrounds to come together and distribute their goods to others who might need them. Trade is a city's lifeblood; its tolls and taxes provide support for the infrastructure, its coins enter and help to stabilize the local economy, and its cultural mores quickly come to dominate local customs. But trade requires markets, and markets require marketplaces. What sort of trade defines your city? Is it all based around the same basic good, with businessmen attempting to undercut each other in an effort to sell to outsiders, or is it varied and catering primarily to its own populace? What are the marketplaces like? The larger the city, the more markets it needs, centrally located for business and residential districts, and these markets need distribution channels—which is to say: roads.

Unless a city is planned in advance—a relatively rare occurrence, usually the result of government decree or religious mandate—city streets tend to grow up around existing structures and the paths of the original settlement; as a result, most cities have winding, narrow streets, suitable for foot traffic or small carts, with buildings pressing in above. As the city expands, the streets of the city often change and expand as well depending on their traffic and their usage patterns. If the streets see frequent use by heavy carts, the city leaders might pave them to prevent them from turning into trenches every time it rains. Smaller streets may remain unpaved, and the residents may even toss their chamber pots directly into the gutters, waiting for the rains to wash away the filth.

Cities frequently house a mix of social classes. Some people inevitably become wealthy and develop different living patterns, requiring people of lower station to help manage and maintain their estates. How much of your city do the wealthy command? Is there a middle class? How do the various races mix, and what do residents in general think of those who are different from them? What sorts of political groups or religions does the city have, and how do they interact?

Most of these groups will be interested in power, and many will imagine they can do a better job protecting the city than the current ruling clique. But from what does the city need protection? The *Pathfinder Roleplaying Game Bestiary* contains helpful lists of monsters grouped by their environment and habitat; these are invaluable tools for outlining the possible monsters that lair near the city. Of course, the presence of monsters also attracts adventurers seeking glory or wealth. The more monsters or other physical threats near a city, the more likely the city will have extensive stocks of adventuring supplies, weapon shops, armories, and the like.

QUESTIONS ABOUT YOUR CITY

Designing a city can seem like an overwhelming task, but in a roleplaying game, the key to designing a compelling city is to consider those aspects that are most likely to affect your adventure or the PCs. Before you start writing your city, develop a familiarity with the more practical elements of your locale by answering the following questions (many of which are useful in designing smaller settlements, as well).

- Who rules the city?
- How does the ruler maintain power?
- What factions or personalities plot against the ruler? Why do they do so?
- What four enemy types are common to campaigns set in this city?
- Which local NPCs are the PCs likely to befriend? Why?
- What three things about your city make it unique?
- What monsters lurk in the city?
- How powerful are the city's trade guilds?
- Is there a wizards' guild?
- Is there a thieves' guild?
- What deities have temples in the city?
- What is the most popular religion? What about your city's character makes this religion popular?
- From whom are the PCs likely to seek healing?
- Where can the PCs buy weapons, armor, and equipment?
- What's the best inn or tavern in town?
- Which tavern is most likely to be the site of a bar fight?
- Where would the PCs buy, sell, and trade magic items?
- How does social class affect the lives of citizens in your city?
- What do the social classes think of each other?
- How corrupt is the city watch? The courts?
- How dangerous is the city at night?
- What are the three most beautiful things in the city?
- How does the city protect itself?
- What does the city smell like?
- What do the citizens do to have a good time?
- What do the citizens fear more than anything else?
- What would a bard like about the city?
- What would a barbarian, druid, or ranger like about the city?
- What would your significant other or spouse like about the city?
- Why do adventurers come to your city?

Other Societies

The cultures presented in the preceding sections are broad categories, and certainly not the only ones available to a fantasy world. Others have flowered from similar beginnings and taken dramatically different paths. The societies listed below are merely a few other possibilities; taken with the advice from previous chapters, these sketches can be used by world builders to begin creating cultures from whole cloth. Whether your new society is inspired by real-world civilizations or completely alien, consider the following questions about it:

- How do adventurers rise from this society, and what are they like?
- What is the most common attitude toward adventurers within this society?
- What attitudes do these cultures have toward outsiders?
- Are there customs that outsiders might easily break? These might range from simple etiquette to required ritual cleansings. If so, what is the usual reprimand for breaking them?
- How does the society communicate? How do members pass along their knowledge?
- Where does the culture fit on the chaotic/lawful spectrum—that is, from anarchist to authoritarian?
- What do members of this society trade, and on what do they subsist?
- How are the rulers determined, and on what basis do they pass on their authority?

Bureaucracy: Emerging from a feudal or authoritarian society, bureaucracy generally requires both literacy and a codified set of laws. The culture can be ancient or advanced, but it must be large enough or complex enough that the rulers of the country have elevated those who understand and interpret its laws to a greater position of responsibility. When applied judiciously, bureaucracy is a rational and controlled way to compartmentalize and reign over a sprawling empire. When taken too far, one discovers why it is the preferred government of Hell. It grinds both slowly and exceedingly fine.

The head of state in a bureaucracy might be a king, a councilman, a priest, or a mere figurehead, but beyond the leader, the power of the nation lies with the bureaucrats, who interpret the laws and apportion resources across the land. More than simple government functionaries, they are the hands that steer the ship of state. They control the regulations, the ministries, and the fates of the citizens under their purview. Nobility may exist, but its power largely lies in influence over the ministers who oversee the bureaucracy. Those nobles who fall out of favor may find their land assigned to others, their taxes raised, their titles mysteriously downgraded, and more. And woe to the commoner who angers a bureaucrat, for a small amount of power sometimes does strange and wicked things to a bureaucrat's thinking.

Try combining bureaucratic governance with another societal trope for strange results. A pastoral bureaucracy, for instance, might see farmers told what to grow, whose fields are to lie fallow and when, and which farmers are expected to fight in the militias. Bureaucratic feudalism might result in something that resembles medieval China.

Caste System: This is similar to the feudal system. The most famous real-world example is that of historical India, in which society became stratified into broad classes: Brahmins, the teachers and priests; the Kshatriyas, warriors and kings; the Vaishyas, traders and farmers; and the Sudras, craftsmen and servants. Beneath these lay the Dalits, or untouchables, who performed menial and "impure" jobs, such as waste collection, street sweeping, or butchery.

Each caste carries its own duties and responsibilities to itself and to other castes. Members cannot marry outside their caste, nor can they easily change the caste into which they are born, but they are equal within their caste, advancing in their professions by merit and ability. The castes work interdependently with each other, and without one, the others fail. The system of obligation and counter-obligation keeps the society functioning, and few who receive its benefits rail against it—but others often see it as a means to subjugate others without hope of change. The whole culture may resonate with this tension.

Decadent: Societies rise, and societies fall. Lesser societies simply fade away and vanish under the relentless tread of history or conquering armies. Greater societies, though, are more likely to slip, notch by notch, into the darkness. Is this effect due to the corrupting influence of money? The over-extension of the military into ill-advised ventures? The widening gap between the upper and lower social classes, or perhaps the exaggerated effects of various fads, drugs, or religions? Whatever the cause, the once-great society loses its power and watches its territories fall away. Its enemies seize their chances and strip away outlying lands. Strong provinces declare independence. Former allies take the opportunity to snatch weaker provinces or rich trade routes.

In the cities and towns, malaise sets in. The citizens oscillate from one extreme to another, seeking ways to restore their power and former glory. They may divide into factions, seeking to gather as much power as possible for themselves so that they can enjoy the fruits of empire before they die, or to help shape what they see as the possible rebirth of their land. Either way, the ruling class and the classes beneath are fractured, suspicious, and frequently ready for violence. Though the infrastructure that holds the empire together still exists, it falls into greater disrepair, and the poor become more feral even as

the wealthy become more indolent. The decadent culture, once reliant on law, is spiraling into chaos and anarchy—a fertile ground for adventurers.

Magocracy: Similar to an aristocracy, a magocracy is a society in which wizards, sorcerers, and other magically imbued beings control the government. Those who have magic at their fingertips are at an immediate advantage in this country, though they may have to prove themselves against others, depending on the local codes. Those who do not have magic tend to be the underclass, serving the whims of their masters. These cultures often orient themselves more toward research into powerful and esoteric magics than day-to-day politics, and thus they may slide more quickly into decadence. The leaders may enact brilliant policies and create a utopia for all, or the elite may dabble constantly in the lives of their citizens, experimenting and choosing wildly disparate means to test their theories. Some of these societies will be blasted wastelands; some will be paradises. The trade from these countries is likely rich in magic and power, but their trading partners may be concerned about fraud and justice. These lands tend to be open to adventurers, just as the rulers tend to be open to new experiments and new ideas, but there are always exceptions, and some will have their borders sealed by magical energies. Adventurers from a magocracy might be low-magic outcasts who have fled to find themselves a greater place in history, wizardly apprentices or journeymen who travel as ambassadors and spies, or scholars in search of undiscovered knowledge.

Matriarchy: A matriarchy is a system in which women rule and men may be subjugated to a greater or lesser extent. The populace could be warlike, as with the Amazon civilization, in which women used men as slaves and fathers but not as husbands, and could not be mothers until they had killed a man in battle. Alternatively, the society could be gentle and nurturing, with women permitting men to help with defense, but otherwise dominating the political scene, industry, and the arts through a combination of communal rule, and utilitarian care for the good of all. Consider the society's origins—is the matriarchy a violent, revolutionary response to a history of male oppression, or a natural evolution over the course of generations, about which no one now thinks twice?

When creating a matriarchy, the world builder should address the roles of both women and men in the society, and whether the rulers welcome men as visitors and near-equals or enslave them on sight.

Monstrous: Many monstrous societies are low on the technological spectrum, living in caves and subsisting primarily as raiders, rather than as creators or farmers, but some of them make the leap to more advanced civilizations, usually far from human lands. Sometimes these societies are splintered from the rest of their kindred and have been exiled from the lands they once thought to rule. They may prey upon more civilized societies, raiding for slaves to work their crude farms and to replace those who fall, or they may wish only to live and let live, pursuing the advancement of their species in peace but unafraid to defend their realms with fang and claw. Both because of their natures and due to the persecution they often find at the hands of "normal" races, monstrous cultures often take a dim view of outsiders. They may tolerate visitors but rarely welcome them.

Theocracy: In a world where the gods not only exist but manifest their existence through direct action, their spokespeople will naturally assume a greater degree of control in some societies. Some folk are more deeply religious than others, and in these societies, priests can easily take control of the levers of government, existing not just alongside but in place of the temporal authorities. They dictate the laws based on their holy teachings and expect the populace to fall in line. The priests of chaotic gods rarely take control of governments like this; they believe in individuality, not the rule of law.

If a priesthood assumes power by entering an existing power structure, its members may simply place themselves at the top and control the ministries or courts of the nobles by edict and fiat. If they instead choose to replace the previous power structure, they might establish a government as a mirror (or branch) of church hierarchy. Priests assume the power of bureaucrats, scribes, courtiers, and judges, interpreting the words of their deities as law. Until their god-given powers disappear, it likely seems reasonable to both them and their constituents to assume that their actions have the blessing of their god—a divine mandate in the most literal sense.

By their nature, priests in a fantasy world must be faithful to reap the benefits of the power of prayer. Those who rise to power within the church hierarchy are therefore the most faithful of the faithful—their detractors might even call them extremists and zealots. Moderates might exist peacefully within a theocratic government, but they also might be hounded out and driven away from the ship of state. Outsiders may be welcome, or they may be required to convert or tithe to the church while within the borders. Priests from these lands might be more devout, seeing their rule as a privilege, or they might be sycophantic politicians cloaking themselves in the barest shreds of faith. Adventuring priests from such lands might act as missionaries and envoys, and how expansionist the government is likely depends on the teachings and interpretations of their holy texts. Such a society may choose to remain within its borders and attract followers by virtue of its shining goodness, or it might choose to launch crusades to bring nonbelievers to the truth.

Technology

One of the most important factors in building a world is its level of technological advancement. Technology affects every aspect of the game, from what gear PCs carry to what kinds of adventures a GM can run. Though many fantasy games presume a level of technology based on medieval Europe, this is far from the only option—even leaving aside those subgenres that might qualify as science fiction, fantasy can still run the gamut from steampunk and magic-infused technocracy to the hardscrabble world of primitive barbarian tribes. So how do you decide what's right for your world?

CONTENTIOUS TECHNOLOGY

Many fantasy RPGs assume a medieval or Renaissance baseline, a level of technology in which castles, swords, and armor are at their peak. Yet if your world follows the same trends as Earth's history, several technological revolutions are just around the corner, and you should give some thought to how they interact with your setting, if at all.

Airships: Various historical accounts claim that the first winged gliders appeared in the medieval period or even earlier—albeit with minor success and massive injuries—and the technology behind hot air balloons potentially predated them by several centuries. In a world where creatures as large as dragons soar through the skies, it only makes sense that mankind might seek to do the same. Yet airships, while exotic and useful for transporting PCs, carry their own set of complications. Are a castle's walls still useful when the enemy can drop bombs from a thousand feet up? How rare are airships, and who has access to them?

Firearms: Of all the technology that can be introduced to a campaign setting, none has so polarizing an effect as gunpowder. Some GMs view the thought of a fighter with a pistol as heresy, while others happily dive into the world of primitive flintlocks and blunderbusses, and still others would love nothing more than a barbarian with a sword in one hand and an assault rifle in the other. Beyond simply the flavor aspect, guns can present a tricky game balance issue, as it's important that the addition of firearms doesn't make existing player characters obsolete. If you choose to include guns in your world, be sure to consider the natural evolution of the technology and draw your lines accordingly—large-scale cannons and simple bombs are easier to design than handheld firearms, and even once gunsmithing has been refined to incorporate muzzle-loading pistols and muskets, there's still a long way to go before the invention of cartridges and other advancements that allow guns to be reloaded quickly. Until those late-stage inventions come to bear,

the musketeer that misses with his first shot may find himself peppered with arrows while he searches for powder and wadding.

Medicine: Throughout history, medical advances have come at different times in different locations. Middle Eastern cultures were the first to develop hospitals (an idea taken back to Europe during the crusades), South Asian dentists were drilling teeth over 9,000 years ago, ancient Egyptians recorded the first medical texts, and Greek surgeons experimented with daring manipulations that we're only now perfecting. While magical healing and the Heal skill may cover all your bases in-game, it's good to know what level of medical technology exists in your world. If a PC gets sick, do the local villagers soothe his fevered brow or beat him with sticks to drive the demons out, while simultaneously draining his blood? Your PCs may know everything about slaying dragons, but do they understand germs and why they shouldn't drink downstream from the battlefield? How common are plagues in your world? Do its people understand drugs and antiseptics?

Printing Press: Printing presses spread literacy and help people organize and disseminate information, yet they can cause distinct problems for GMs (not to mention those feudal lords who depend on keeping their serfs ignorant and isolated). If you introduce the printing press to your world, who has access to it and what sorts of things does it print? Does it get used for religious texts or revolutionary pamphlets? Can it print magical texts like spellbooks and scrolls, and if so, how do you keep suddenly cheap magic from destroying the economy?

Sanitation: The real medieval world was a disgusting place, rife with filth and disease. While those GMs seeking authenticity might have everyone in the city emptying their chamber pots into the streets, privies, aqueducts, and other such sanitation aren't actually anachronistic, depending on the culture. (And what wizard capable of traveling the planes wants to constantly worry about stepping in human waste?)

Steam Power: Entire genres—especially steampunk—have been built around steam power and the idea of "industrial revolution fantasy." Steamboats, steam trains, mechanized factories—the advancement a simple steam engine can bring to a world is immense, and in such a setting, it's easy for steam power to become the focus. Steam-powered vehicles streamline transportation of troops, civilians, and goods, making it easier to build vast empires. Steam-powered factories turn out perfect machined goods at a rate far above traditional cottage industry. Steam-powered war machines might even make appearances on the battlefield. Next to firearms, steam power has the most potential to change the flavor of your campaign setting, for good or ill. Use it carefully.

MULTIPLE LEVELS OF TECHNOLOGY

One of the best things about creating an entire setting is giving yourself several different regions with wildly different societies, and that includes regions with differing levels of technology. While some GMs argue that such variances break a game, a glance at Earth shows that it's possible to have neighboring nations operating under extremely different conditions, and the farther apart the societies lie, the less likely there is to be crossover. Hence, it's entirely possible to have both guns and swords in your world, or a futuristic race with inventions too advanced for the primitive barbarians next door to replicate on their own. While less fortunate cultures likely lust after such innovations, it's not hard to stem the flow of technology, especially if the only people capable of constructing the wonders keep the secrets to themselves and sell their wares at incredibly inflated rates.

This brings up another important issue: futuristic technology. Though it can be argued that, to a caveman, a sword constitutes future technology, most people think of futuristic science in terms of ray guns and laser swords, the treasures of invading aliens, or the post-apocalyptic remnants of lost civilizations. Such items are often persona non grata in a fantasy setting, but the question remains: in a world where a wizard can make his wishes reality, is there any functional difference between a ray gun that shoots fire and a *wand of scorching ray*?

MAGIC AND TECHNOLOGY

The question of how magic and science interact in your world is worth asking. Not just in terms of the laws and logic that each follows—though that helps—but how each is viewed and utilized by society. In a world with magic, is there any need for conventional science? If so, what factors determine which scholars pursue which? Which one is cheaper for the average peasant with a problem, and which is more reliable? How do the various churches view science? Do scientists and arcanists get along, or do they see each other as rivals? If they coexist, do the same individuals study both, and how do the different fields inform each other? Why bother with expensive, dangerous scientific experiments when you can cast a divination spell and have a deity personally verify or disprove your hypothesis?

In the end, neither magic nor science can truly replace the other, for every archer needs a basic understanding of physics, and the doctor who cures disease with moldy bread is every bit a magician to the uninitiated onlooker. By figuring out how the two interact and balance out, you can flesh out your cultures and be prepared when a player decides he wants to foster a scientific revolution in-game.

ANACHRONISMS

Anachronisms, meaning things that seem out of place in a given time period, are always an issue in fantasy. Any time you try to draw from the past, your base assumptions as a resident of the present make it easy to accidentally introduce modern conventions. Every GM should be prepared to deal with players calling him on anachronisms she hadn't noticed (or worse, on things like eyeglasses and clocks which feel anachronistic but in fact far predate the medieval period). So how should you deal with anachronisms?

Simple: don't bother.

The first thing to remember in designing a campaign setting is that it's your world, not Earth. Random chance plays a major role in science, and the fact that a given Earth culture didn't make a specific discovery until a certain date doesn't mean your culture has to follow the same timeline, so long as the progression is internally consistent. On Earth, different cultures advanced in different fields at different rates—the Chinese had cannons, flamethrowers, and land mines before Europe discovered gunpowder. Don't let history tie the hands of your imagination.

Time

Even the most superficial treatment of a campaign setting needs to deal with history and the passage of time. Every ancient ruin, powerful artifact, and court intrigue is rooted in the past, and history brings context to adventures. Your decisions on such things as the age of the world, the nature of the calendar, and even the length of the seasons have significant impacts on the stories that unfold.

THE ROLE OF TIME

Time creates continuity and strings together what would otherwise be a collection of random events, dungeon crawls, and journeys. A world is much more than a vague stage for the adventurers to act upon. To bring depth to the setting, you need to look into the past and establish at least a loose framework for history. How many generations ago did people first arrive in the area? How far back does the current ruling family trace its lineage? How long ago was the port city founded? And what do all of these have in common, if anything?

Time also acts as a pacing mechanic, both during the adventures you run and when connecting them together. The use of downtime for healing, recovery, and crafting items (to say nothing of adventurers who have family or business obligations) is made more real when you know what being away from the story for that length of time means. Does a villain have time to recover his forces after the last battle, or is he still weakened? Does the war in the neighboring kingdom get worse, or do diplomats forge a peace accord? To this end, it might be useful to establish a campaign calendar that allows you to track time in-game, and that can also be filled out ahead of time with major holy days, festivals, and other time-sensitive events to give your campaign added verisimilitude and easy adventure hooks.

TIME IN YOUR GAME

In most fantasy settings, time is a linear construct, a series of dates on a line. This is the standard construct, but it can also be tweaked. Do the people of your world think of time as a series of never-ending cycles or in terms of ages defined by a common theme, such as the Dark Ages or the Age of Reason? Does history repeat itself? If so, is this repetition what leads to prophecy, and how does it affect the role of sages, historians, and storytellers? Alternatively, you might decide that time happens all at once, a singular, shared hallucination—this obviously becomes complicated and makes great demands on your world's cosmology, but it can be a fun conceit nonetheless.

Assuming time is linear and cause leads to effect, how long are your world's years, seasons, months, or weeks? In most cultures, these are labels for meteorological or cosmic events that can be reliably tracked. The sun goes down every day, the moon goes through its phases every month, the seasons come in cycles of four, and so forth. Any and all of these could be altered or eliminated, so long as you think of some reasonably sensible explanation for it.

Changing such things as the length of the day is more significant than the length of a season or even a month, because it can directly impact an adventure. If a day in your world is 32 hours long, how much of that is night? How does this change the length of a typical "business day" for markets, farmers, craftsmen, or guards? What about magic users whose abilities refresh each day?

A common world-building twist is adding moons or perhaps some other great cosmological object. If you do this, you provide your world with another reliable marker for time's passing, so be sure to consider its effects. Is the smaller moon faster or slower? When a comet manifests in the heavens, does it signal the changing of kings or the beginning of a ritual war?

Finally, you should think about how tightly you want to bind such things as government, religion, or magic to the marking of time. Do people think of time in terms of the emperor's reign? Is each day of the week connected to a religious practice or observation?

CELEBRATING TIME

Holidays, festivals, and other calendar-based events provide easy world flavor and adventure hooks.

Holy days are connected to religious events, often signifying anniversaries of important events. This might be the birth of a religious leader, the foundation of the religion itself, a period of abstinence, or a day of miracles and portents. If your world has many gods, then almost every day might have some religious significance. Don't go overboard, however, or you'll lose that sense of drama that comes with the observation and its associations. Holy days also make great deadlines, such as the heroes needing to return a missing magic artifact to its temple before the holy day arrives.

Festivals usually take place over several days. Anything can be used as an explanation for a festival, from the celebration of the new harvest to an annual coming-of-age rite for the town's youth. Because they can extend over more than a single day, they're an excellent backdrop for an intrigue or a lengthy episodic adventure.

Don't forget the extraordinary events that the heroes themselves have a role to play in, either. If the player characters liberate a town from years of domination, then that's cause for a new celebration!

CRAFTING TIME

When answering the questions in this section, don't be afraid to start simple and add more as you run adventures.

Write up a few important events in your setting's history, shuffle those around, and when you're happy with the story, you can set their dates and lay them out into a timeline. Even if you only have five important dates, that's enough to provide context for dozens of potential adventures. And as the game progresses, you simply flesh things out more.

Some people really get into this aspect of world building, and that's great. It's important to remember, though, that unless an event has some value to the stories and games you plan on running, it isn't worth burdening yourself or your players with it. If you are especially detail-oriented, you can go so far as to set up multiple timelines, keyed to specific topics: religion, politics, and technology, for instance. You could also transition this to a digital document, making it even easier to link events together. Be careful with this, though, as the complexity of such systems can snowball rapidly.

This last point cannot be stressed enough: one of the most common player complaints about a setting is an overzealous backstory. Don't fall so in love with your world's history that you marginalize your players. Historical facts should be presented in a manner that's fun, exciting, and useful—or else ignored altogether.

THE AGE OF THE WORLD

Time isn't just about holidays, calendars, and politics. On a more cosmic level, the tone of the campaign may depend on how old or young the world is, and what this means to the people, places, and plots that play out upon it. While the standard fantasy world assumes such things as ancient empires and lost races as an explanation for the many dungeons, artifacts, and legends that feature in adventures, this is merely a default. Consider these other options.

Youthful Worlds

A young world is one that has only recently given rise to a civilized society, one in which many races are in their infancy or have yet to achieve cultural maturity. There are no ruined remnants of a lost age (or they may be buried so deep as to be yet undiscovered by the current residents). In such a world, magic may feel raw and untamed. The gods may yet walk the earth, or they have only recently inspired the creation of cults and churches. Military orders have yet to be founded. Races have not been divided by civil war or strife. The player characters are the heroes that future generations will tell stories about. Depending on how young the world is, you might decide some rules elements may be entirely absent—no iron weapons, no spells greater than 3rd level in power, and so on.

Ancient Worlds

In contrast to a young world, an ancient world has already hit the peak of its civilizations and is fast approaching

TRAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES

While creating calendars and timelines is a lot of fun, it also carries with it a few design risks that can end up coming back to haunt you if you don't take care.

Dates: Fantasy naturally lends itself to epic adventures, and the temptation with dates is to make the numbers large and sweeping—cities 10,000 years old, legends stretching back a hundred generations. Avoid this impulse! History is a lot shorter than you might think, and it doesn't take long for people and legends to rise and disappear again. The United States itself is barely over 200 years old. Christianity has only seen 2 millennia. Ten thousand years ago, *Homo sapiens* were just starting to think about planting crops. And if it only took the march of technological process 150 years to go from the first internal combustion engine to a man on the moon, how come nobody's invented a better plow in the 7 millennia the serfs have been tilling your kingdom's fields?

While of course a fantasy world doesn't need to correspond to the real world, there is still physics to consider. How old can your ruins really be, when stone and metal degrade without magical protection? For reference, scholars believe it would only take a thousand years without human upkeep for plant life and the elements to erase almost all trace of modern New York City.

Names: When writing up their worlds' calendars, many GMs realize that our own calendar (with both months and days named after historical and mythological figures) seems out of place in-game. While making up your own names for the months or days of the week seems like the obvious solution, it can also be aggravating to players trying to keep track of time when the adventure begins on the third Blargday of Skurbgin. If you want to create new names, it might help to have the definitions readily available, to name them after your own gods or historical figures, or cheat a little and have the first letters stay the same (such as a work-week running from Mournday through Fireday).

its end. In the twilight of this setting, some races have been lost to history or have moved on to other shores in the multiverse. Technology may have come and gone, giving the setting either a dystopian, post-apocalyptic theme or a pastoral, back-to-nature aesthetic. Or it may have advanced to a truly astounding level, marrying the traditional fantasy elements to steampunk or cyberpunk tropes. If the world is ancient, tradition might be even more dominant over the lives of individuals. Sorcerers may no longer exist, having had their magical traits codified into the power of wizards. Barbarians and druids might no longer have a place, or perhaps their role is changed to that of degenerate savages.

THE COSMOS

Space. In many fantasy games, it's not even the final frontier, but rather completely beyond the bounds of the campaign setting. Yet mankind has always looked to the sky for escape and adventure, and why should your PCs be any different? By answering a few questions regarding the nature of your world's cosmos, you can expand your setting and greatly increase its verisimilitude.

CREATING YOUR PLANET

The first question every GM should ask about a world is whether or not it's a planet. This is by no means a foregone conclusion—planets are a relatively recent concept, and in the millennia before Earth's shape was proved, various cultures had widely varying theories. Many believed that the Earth was flat, a disc floating in an endless ocean or supported on the back of an elephant (in turn riding on a huge turtle). Others believed the world was square, the slopes of an enormous mountain, or bound by the roots of a colossal tree that held up the sky. Who's to say that any of these isn't true for your world? Perhaps your setting is a giant mobius strip, or a facet on the many-sided gem of the universe. You're the GM, and what you say goes.

That said, however, creating a world so wildly different from our own can capture players' imaginations and raise questions that you'd rather gloss over. If your world is flat, how far away is the edge? Can you fall off, and what keeps the ocean in place? Who lives on the flip side, and is it possible to dig a tunnel through to them? As with everything in this section, the farther you stray from the Earth standard, the harder you have to work to maintain your players' confidence.

Yet even using Earth as a model, there are still several factors you should take into consideration.

Size: For many GMs, the temptation when designing a planet is to make it larger than Earth, the better to increase the mystery and provide unlimited canvas. Yet this carries problems both logistical and physical: If your planet is larger than Earth, does its gravitational pull get stronger? Your horizon will also be much farther away than ours—how does it affect your siege adventure if the defenders can watch the raiders approaching for a week? Even on Earth, it took a long time for the various regional cultures to expand and make contact—if distances double or triple on your world, what does that do to social demographics or political relations? Do the various populations and ecosystems of your world even interact?

Composition: What your planet's made of is important. For instance, if your planet is hollow and full of dinosaurs, what does that do to its gravity? How do volcanoes work if the planet's core isn't molten? What keeps the seas from draining into large-scale networks of caverns and tunnels? A planet's composition is also important to its magnetic fields and thus to navigation—if compasses don't point north, what do they point to? A city of wizards? A guiding star? God?

Movement: Does your planet rotate, and if so, how long are your days? How long is 1 year (meaning a single orbit around the sun)—or does your planet revolve around the sun at all? Perhaps the crystalline spheres of the ancient geocentric model are literal truth in your world.

Moons: Earth's moon is responsible for its tides—if your world has no moon, does it still have tidal action to stir its oceans? What about lycanthropy or other magic inherently tied to the moon? Conversely, if your world has an enormous moon or multiple satellites, do you have enormous and erratic shifts in your tides? Are the moons close enough to reach, and what effects do they exert on each other? Are they lifeless rocks or thriving worlds?

OTHER WORLDS

While solitary planets are common in our universe, why restrict yourself to one world? Try roughing in some other planets in your solar system—such worlds spawn strange beasts and give you entirely new campaign settings to explore. In creating these planets, remember that rocky worlds like Earth form close to the sun, and gas giants farther out. But that doesn't mean you can't have playable worlds all the way out to the system's edge—captured bodies like asteroids and planet-sized moons around gas giants make wonderful solid worlds. A full solar system lets you play with planetary characteristics that are likely too extreme for your base world, such as the following.

Tidal Lock: A tidal lock is when a celestial body keeps the same side facing another body, such as Earth's moon with its visible face and mysterious "dark side." If a planet always kept its same face to the sun, one side might boil while the other froze. Would cultures live solely on the line between night and day? Would creatures and cultures evolve separately on the light and dark halves, and what would happen if they came into conflict?

Tidal Heating: For tidally heated worlds, the pull of another gravitational field (such as that of another planet) warps the planet's shape, causing stress and friction to create massive outpourings of heat in the form of steam and lava.

Eccentric Orbit: Some planets have eccentric, elliptical orbits that make their seasons drastically uneven. If your planet slingshots quickly around the sun and then passes back out into the darkness for a thousand-year winter, what sort of creatures and societies would evolve?

Orbital Interactions: A planet that passes through a cloud of dust, comet tail, or asteroid belt at the same time every year might have anything from regular meteor

showers to a rain of fire or even an extinction-level impact. Likewise, two planets passing close together in their respective orbits might offer a chance for interplanetary travel (both benign and destructive), communication, and so on.

Atmospheric Conditions: On Venus, the atmosphere is so thick that the wind is like a brick wall slowly scraping across the landscape. How would characters survive on a world whose very air crushes them, or whose air is thinner than on the highest mountaintop?

Transient Object: Perhaps a world is just passing through, an object pulled off-course by the sun but still bound for distant stars. What strange discoveries might it offer, and how would its residents treat the worlds it passes near, knowing they'll never be back this way again?

Dying Sun: All things have their end—even the stars. Perhaps your sun is on its way out, and while your primary planet hasn't been affected, its neighbors are suffering. This might mean a society falling into anarchy as reduced light cripples its agriculture, or a race for escape as the red-giant sun reaches out to consume nearby worlds.

SPACE TRAVEL

If your solar system has multiple worlds, the next question is how beings can travel between them.

Portals: Perhaps the easiest method to manage from a GM perspective, magical or scientific portals between worlds allow players to transport themselves to locations chosen by the GM, giving her natural adventure hooks and allowing her to keep a tight rein on interplanetary travel.

Vessels: Whether powered by magic or science, spaceships add a whole new flavor to a game. Do your starships operate via massive thrusters or diaphanous sails that catch the sun's light? Do they fold space and time, or are they giant space-faring creatures that passengers stow away inside like Jonah and the whale? And does it take days, years, or generations for the vessel to reach another world?

Spells: Teleportation spells are important to consider when establishing extraplanetary locations. Can a wizard simply cast *greater teleport* or *wish*, or is more required to reach the stars? Be warned that easy access to the galaxy brings a host of concerns—such as why, if interplanetary travel is easy, aliens aren't thronging your base world.

EXTRATERRESTRIALS

When creating alien races, first decide how alien you want them to be. Strangely colored humanoids serve their purpose, but given the biodiversity on even one world, why not try something bizarre? Are they blobs of floating protoplasm, built for grazing on gas giants? Sentient

viruses? Bug-like cyborgs? Once you've come up with a basic idea, consider how the aliens' evolution informs their society and thought processes. Do they have a sense of right and wrong, or life and death? Do they have a sense of property? Are they part of a hive mind, and if so, are they capable of understanding free will and individual culpability? Most importantly, what are their intentions toward your PCs' world—are they benevolent "angels," or planet-killing Old Ones? By making your aliens different from the races of your base world, you create a chance for your players—and yourself—to boldly go where you've never gone before.

THE PLANES

Perhaps the most prominent question in any society is that of what happens to us when we die. In a roleplaying game featuring larger-than-life heroes, this is a practical as well as philosophical consideration, for many spells are capable of returning the dead to life, and more than one group of daring PCs has followed the path of Orpheus and ventured into the underworld to reclaim a fallen comrade. Fantasy RPGs have long been attached to the idea of the multiverse, the concept that the world in which the players reside is merely one (and often the most mundane) of a number of different planes of existence. Many real-world religions follow the same principle to a lesser extent, often viewing death as the natural transition from one plane to the next. When designing your world, it's important to give thought to the worlds that lie beyond, and how souls and the various cycles of existence play into them.

THE PURPOSE OF PLANES

If you're pouring all your efforts into developing a vibrant, self-contained world for your campaign setting, why should you bother introducing planes at all? The simplest answer is that many rules systems expect you to. Monsters like devils and angels—and in fact, all creatures of the "outsider" type in the Pathfinder Roleplaying Game—are presumed to stem from different planes than the PCs, often ones tied to specific alignments. In addition, it can be difficult to challenge high-level PCs within the boundaries of the same world that housed their low-level adventures. By having your players travel to other planes, you gain the opportunity to reinvent the natural laws of the setting and introduce both creatures and characters powerful enough to keep the PCs on their toes. Most importantly, however, planes fill out your world and help to answer the biggest of spiritual questions.

PLANAR MODELS

The Pathfinder Roleplaying Game presumes a multiverse in which each alignment has its own plane. After death, individual souls travel via disparate means to the plane that most closely matches their alignment, or else the domain of the primary god they worshiped in life. Within this model there's room for great variety—every plane is yours to design as you will, and the organizational structure might be anything from concentric shells like nesting dolls to a great wheel or islands floating in an astral sea. Yet the alignment system is far from the only means of dealing with the afterlife. Below are a few other models drawn from real-world beliefs. (Note that each of these deals in some way with the progression of souls—for information on alternate dimensions and

other secular diversions from reality, see Parallel Worlds on pages 168–169.)

Heaven and Hell: Many religions opt for a two-party moralistic system, with saved or good-aligned souls going to Heaven and all others condemned to Hell, which in an RPG comes with the added bonus of explaining both good and evil outsiders. Yet several questions arise in such a situation: does your world have a Purgatory, in which those in-between or not-yet-judged souls wait out eternity? Where do neutral outsiders live? Do multiple deities exist in such a situation, or is there simply a single god (and perhaps that god's adversary)? Traditional visions of Heaven and Hell vary by culture, with Heaven anything from stately cities and Valhalla-style feast halls to battlefields and untouched wilderness, and Hell ranging from a burning pit of torments to the lonely absence of creation.

Underworld: Perhaps you don't want to bother with sorting the good from the bad, and all souls travel to the same underworld to while away eternity. For many cultures, this kingdom of the dead exists deep underground, often ruled over by stern but honorable gods charged with keeping the living and the dead apart. Sometimes the corralling of dead souls is the underworld's sole purpose, while in other legends, such as those of the Egyptian Duat, this goal is secondary to another, like providing the tunnels through which the sun rolls during its journey from west to east each night. As such a realm likely serves as the destination of both the wicked and the just, the conditions often prove neutral or little different from those in the world of the living, though such might vary wildly.

Distant Worlds: In some belief systems, a soul freed from the body by death is transported to a realm on another planet rather than a different plane, sometimes in its original form, in others reincarnated.

Elemental: The four elements of earth, fire, air, and water play a significant role in many cosmologies. Rather than merely harnessing energy, do spellcasters calling upon the elements in your world actually bind beings and spirits from elemental planes of existence? And if so, do their own souls break down into those same fundamental elements when they die?

Structure: Some planar systems are held together by a single object or structure, such as a world-tree whose branches and roots connect and support a number of different planes, or a vast mountain with each plane of existence representing a terrace along its sides. Variations on this theme are endless, and when constructing such a system, be sure to note whether the connections are visible to outsiders—does a traveler between planes literally climb the mountain's slopes or walk the tree's branches?

Order and Chaos: Just as Heaven and Hell divide the planes along one axis, order and chaos divide them along

another. Perhaps your universe rejects moralism in favor of organization versus entropy. In this case, consider whether your PCs' native plane is the epitome of order and everything beyond it is the howling dark, or if your world instead follows in the footsteps of Scandinavian myth and exists at the balancing point between the two extremes, the line at which the generative forces of light and order meet chaos and crystallize into a world.

Deific Realms: Rather than instituting any overarching organizational principle, it's entirely reasonable to say that every god in your world possesses its own realm, to which it draws the souls of petitioners after their deaths. This realm may be merely a manifestation of the god's will, a tiny island of creation the deity has claimed as its own, a purely metaphorical place representing a merging with the god's essence, or whatever else strikes your fancy.

None: Who says you need an afterlife, or alternate realities? While it requires more footwork to explain how some creatures and magic work in the absence of the presumed planar model (and perhaps the absence of gods as a whole), there's no reason you can't build your setting to focus exclusively on a single world. Players may gain an entirely new and more harrowing experience if they learn that death is final and that not even magic can return the dead to life.

LOCATION AND TRAVEL

Once you've decided what sorts of planes your setting needs—whether a thousand tiny fiefdoms, two massive planes where souls roam before birth and after death, or something else entirely—it's time to address some basic logistical factors likely to come in handy if your PCs ever decide to visit. Start with the spatial: Is each plane infinite, and if so, how does even a god handle organization, communication, and travel when there's literally always someone else just over the horizon? If not, what's beyond the plane's horizon (and beyond that, and beyond that…)?

Equally important is the question of how the planes are arranged and connected. Does Heaven share a border with Hell, a constantly shifting battlefield of impaled devils and dying angels? Are they coterminus, with any point as close as any other for those with sufficient magical power, or separated by unimaginable gulfs of nothingness? Do some planes connect with others to form vast patterns, and if so, can you walk from one to the other, fly up into heaven, or dig a tunnel to the underworld? Travel is by far the most crucial consideration in constructing a cosmology, as it's the only way your players will ever interact with your creations. Assuming mundane means are insufficient to access the planes—that it's not merely a challenge of building a new Tower of Babel or finding the right cave

SAMPLE COSMOLOGICAL SHAPES

The overarching structure by which individual planes are connected to each other can take any form. Below are merely a few suggestions.

- Nested spheres or shells, with each plane a new onion-like layer.
- A great wheel with planes linked to form the rim or emerging from the central hub of the Material Plane like spokes.
- A mobius strip connecting all the planes, similar to the great wheel, save that the mobius strip may be twisted to bring distant planes closer together.
- A world-tree whose roots and branches provide conduits between worlds.
- Islands in an ocean of chaos, or mountaintops poking above the clouds, beneath which lies the underworld.
- A living creature, with the planes forming its limbs or carried on its back.

entrance—the most common methods are through plane-shifting spells, magical portals, and strange and deadly interstitial realms and passages. You should feel free to make certain planes off-limits or reachable only through other planes, forcing your players into a mind-bending cosmological walkabout—for if ever there were a place for a GM to blatantly play god, this is it.

OTHER CONSIDERATIONS

One of the biggest questions that comes up in creating planes of super-powerful (and in some cases deific) entities is why those beings don't already control the players' comparatively weak homeworld. Is it that plane-shifting is forbidden, or too difficult for the creatures to attempt it on their own, or simply that it's not worth the effort? Certainly some of the gods have managed to exert themselves on the Material Plane, and perhaps it's these same gods that keep the borders from becoming too porous. Regardless, it also brings up the issue of the gods—do they reside on particular planes, and can you visit their shining cities in person? Or do they exist here and there, as ideas or manifestations, omnipotent but unconcerned with creating a physical home? Do they all reside in the company of their peers, looking down like the Greek pantheon at plots they've set in motion, or do they seek solitude in the farthest reaches of their chosen plane, bored with the constant streams of petitioners seeking their favor? For that matter, did the gods create the planes, or did some mysterious force beyond even them set the current celestial order in motion? Dealing with the infinite and omnipotent always begets such questions, yet it's within these very tangles of cause and effect that a GM can unleash the most creativity.

PARALLEL WORLDS

In physics, a theory called the "many-worlds interpretation" asserts that for any given choice or event, a separate reality is created for each possible outcome. Under this model, history is not a straight line but rather an endlessly branching tree, in which the viewer is only conscious of the limb he's standing on (though alternate versions of him exist on other branches).

Alternate realities give GMs an unlimited sandbox in which to create new adventures for their players. Bored with your current setting, or its natural laws? Throw your party into a new dimension, one so strange that it's an adventure just surviving, or so similar that the players only slowly come to understand what's happened. Whether it's a dream world, an alternate history, a parallel dimension, or some entirely new creation, alternate realities offer possibilities unavailable anywhere else.

CREATING A PARALLEL WORLD

To create an alternate reality, simply take the existing world and change any one event or factor, past or present. From that point, it's a matter of extrapolation, tracing down the many routes that history could take given your change and picking the resulting world that seems like the most fun to play in.

For example, let's say you want to create a parallel world in which the evil wizard-king, a recurring antagonist in your campaign, was never born (or better yet, was killed early on in his career by alternate versions of the PCs). Upon entering the world and discovering its difference, the PCs may initially rejoice. Yet perhaps they haven't ever stopped to consider that, without the strong king to hold things together, his many dukes and barons would launch a war of succession that would kill thousands. Perhaps wizardry has been outlawed by zealots determined to never suffer such oppression again, and even good-aligned wizards are burned at the stake. And can the farmers and townsfolk defend themselves from monsters without the harsh but effective royal guard? Any time you make a change to your world, ask yourself what could go right, and what could go wrong—many times, the best challenges come from changes that, on the surface, seem positive. In this example, not only have you created a new world for your PCs, but you've also forced them to revise some of their basic beliefs.

While for most games it's not necessary to explain the theory behind a parallel universe, such considerations can be fun for you as a GM. Did some cataclysm tear reality in two, creating parallel worlds evolving separately? Is it a naturally occurring phenomenon, or intentionally caused by some great wizard? Perhaps spells like *wish* create alternate realities to accommodate the caster's flagrant breach of probability. All of these are academic questions, except for one: how to travel between the worlds. If you want to create a magical or scientific portal for your PCs to jump through, and follow it with another allowing them to return home, that's perfectly valid. Yet you may want to make jumping between realities more complicated, the better to lead your party on quests and adventures, and to this end it helps to know the underlying structure of your realities.

As mentioned above, one model is to think of reality as a tree, with the PCs marking the end of a given branch. Every choice, event, natural law, or other discernible characteristic for its timeline has caused a branching, and the seemingly linear path back to the tree's root is their history. Yet while that route is all they can perceive, every road their world didn't take exists alongside them in the tree's canopy, just waiting for them to jump between branches. As with an actual tree, those realities that branch closest to the PCs' end point are easiest to reach—a world in which the events of yesterday turned out differently is comparatively easy to jump to compared to a world in which the PCs' home nation was never founded, and the latter might require more powerful magic or a series of jumps through interstitial realities. This model also reinforces one piece of GM advice: while it may be tempting to alter a number of factors in your world at once, the ramifications of a single change are usually more than enough to keep you busy, and changing too many runs the risk of overwhelming your players. Keeping the worlds' point of divergence identifiable is half the fun of alternate realities.

SAMPLE PARALLEL WORLDS

The following are several alternate reality archetypes. Of course, these are just a smattering of different possibilities to get you thinking—literally any world you could want to play in is possible using the parallel world model.

Time Travel: Moving up and down the timestream offers PCs a glimpse of the future or a chance to observe (and possibly change) important moments in history. By far the most fun and frustration involved with time travel, however, comes from paradoxes and the unintended consequences of PC actions. If they've gone to the future, does their foreknowledge make it possible for them to prevent that future—and if so, have they retroactively made it impossible for themselves to have visited it? What if they bring something back, introducing it to the world before it's even been invented? Traveling into the past is even more dangerous, as the PCs have no idea which actions will have major repercussions farther along the timestream. From accidentally preventing her

parents' wedding to stepping on the prehistoric bug that eventually evolves into an intelligent species, there's no end to the trouble a PC dabbling in chronomancy can cause, and the return home from a visit to the past is a perfect time to introduce an alternate history setting.

Alternate History: This term usually refers to a world in which a single historical event of some importance doesn't occur, or plays out differently than in the PCs' own timeline.

Mirror Universe: Popularized in modern science fiction, a mirror universe can range the spectrum from a literal realm of reflected doppelgangers (including opposite-alignment versions of PCs) to a surreal Alice-style Wonderland. For a different take on this idea, try creating a world in which the gods have different alignments—forcing PC worshipers into conflict or converting them as well—or changing the alignments of a few key NPCs.

Superpowered: A world in which the PCs acquire godlike powers can be a lot of fun, though they might be surprised by the jealousy they suddenly inspire. These superpowers might be genuine new powers, acquired mysteriously in their transition between worlds, or it might simply be that some of the PCs' normal abilities are unique to their new world, as no one there has ever encountered a monk's slow fall ability or a bard's magical songs.

Different Dominant Species: Whether it's cities of peaceful, surface-dwelling drow or hyperintelligent dinosaurs that never suffered mass extinction, a new dominant race in a world otherwise identical to the PCs' own can present PCs with a host of challenges.

Different Campaign Setting: An alternate reality is the perfect chance to move existing characters between campaign settings. Always wanted to see how the barbarian would fare in Victorian-era England, or run the party through a far-future space opera? This is your opportunity to make your characters track down a Great Old One in 1800s New England, or to trade in your classic fantasy for post-apocalyptic mercenary work.

Different Natural Laws: The most fundamental change you can make to your world is altering the natural laws on which it runs. Though revising gravity might be too extreme, what about a world in which magic simply doesn't work, or spells work in unexpected ways? Similarly, what about a world in which all the gods are dead—or weirder yet, never existed in the first place? Making such changes can be dangerous to the balance of the game—after all, few spellcasters enjoy losing their abilities entirely—but when done correctly, a world that's identical save for the loss of magic, deities, or some other crucial constant can be more terrifying than any dungeon.

Going Home

While it's possible that your players may fall so deeply in love with your parallel universe that they don't want to go home (in which case, you now have a new campaign setting!), for most dimension-hopping adventurers, the whole point is to finally return to the world of their birth. Yet this homecoming doesn't have to mean the end of the madness. For instance, how do the characters know they're actually home? After letting the party breathe a sigh of relief, try placing some doubt in their minds, little inconsistencies that might indicate that they've only returned to a similar world, not their true home. If the front stairs to the characters' favorite tavern no longer creak, is it because someone fixed them while the party was away—or because they never creaked at all?

Of course, extradimensional paranoia is only one way to have fun with the characters' homecoming. Others are more blatant—for instance, if time doesn't pass at the same rate between dimensions, the PCs might return home to a world 30 years after than they left it, during which time they've been vilified for abandoning their responsibilities. Once you've opened the door to parallel worlds, you've given yourself carte blanche to play fast and loose with your world and your players' expectations, and nothing will ever again be quite what it seems.