DM Tips - Worldbuilding Through Song and Story

by loottheroom - Wednesday, December 14, 2016

http://loottheroom.uk/dm-tips-worldbuilding-through-song-and-story/

Just over a week ago I posted this random table of bard songs, to inject some life into the inevitable hanging-out-in-the-tavern scenes in your game. In it I mentioned that travelling bards and performers can be incredible world-building tools, and that I'd write more about it in the future.

Well, the future is now. This is that post. The calls were coming from inside the house.

This will be a long one, folks. I make no apologies for that. And while the title is to do with worldbuilding specifically, I'm going to be talking about a lot more than just that. But it's late, and I suck at coming up with titles, so I'm leaving that as it is. Now, onwards!

What is a bard?

That seems like a stupid question with an obvious answer, right? Except it isn't, really.

In D&D terms, most of us think of bards as a support class, the almost-rogue who hangs at the back buffing the group and helping to control the battlefield with spells. We've probably heard the phrase *jack-of-all-trades* bandied around when talking about bards. And they're probably your go-to character for any social encounters that require deception or the ability to be persuasive.

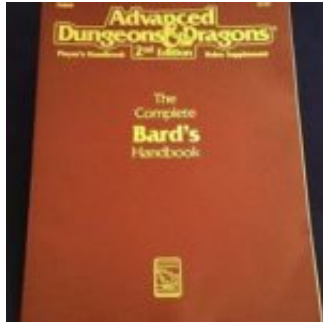Oh, also, music. Bards have music. And inspiration. And healing.

When we think about character classes - particularly in D&D - we tend to think of them in terms of what they can do in combat. Outside of that, the non-combat skills that probably get the most use are things like sneaking and picking locks. Yet this is a roleplaying game with a tactical combat element, not a tabletop skirmish game. This isn't *Warhammer* or *Mordheim* with some talking tacked on the pad out the time at the table. Yet too often social encounters are reduced down to success or failure, roll high or roll low. (And let's not even get started on using the word 'encounter' to describe the roleplaying part of this roleplaying game, shall we?)

Essentially, in D&D terms, bards are the guys who can do a bit of everything, but not as well as everyone else can do it. They casts spells, sure, but they're never as good as a dedicated caster; they can fight, but a proper martial class does it better; they can heal, but not as well as a cleric; they share some rogue abilities, but... you get the idea.

It's very rare that you find a bard in a standard 4 player group. And that's a shame. Sure, your group may be less powerful in combat than a standard Mage-Fighter-Cleric-Thief combo, but *so what?* If your DM isn't willing to account for that when planning combat encounters, they're a bad DM. You aren't playing the game *against* anybody, so power levels shouldn't matter. And yet, how many bards do you see at the table?

Exactly. And that's criminal, because the bard is one of the most interesting classes, one of the few classes that comes pre-packaged with a huge host of roleplaying opportunities.

Let's go back in time for a second. Specifically, to 1992, and the AD&D 2nd Edition *Complete Bard's Handbook.*

I used to love these little leather-looking books. Yes, 2nd edition's kits were an unholy mess, and these books were largely responsible for that, but what these books did right was really selling you on why you'd want to play a particular class or race, giving you history and lore and tons of thematic ideas to draw character concepts from. The kits themselves were often generic and uninspired, but those first chapters that blended real world history with invented lore were great (even if the *Complete Elf's Handbook* did have some weird elf racism going on in it).

Let's take a quick look at the introduction from this book:

> In every area and every region throughout the world, traveling musicians wandered throughout the land. They moved from town to town, making a living by plying their trade as artists of sound and motion. In the AD&D® game, adventurers who do this are called bards.
>
> Historically, bards were the poet-musicians of the Celtic peoples living in the British Isles (the Irish, Welsh, and Scots). Bards composed music, sang songs, and entertained their masters. Usually they worked for noblemen and spent their time honoring these noblemen and their families in song and music. Bards often accompanied their songs on the crwth, a type of lyre. Since their music wasn't written down, most of it has vanished.
>
> During the early Middle Ages, bards had considerable political power and influence in the royal houses. However, in 1284 A.D., Edward I conquered Wales; the resulting turmoil reduced the importance of bards. Noblemen had more pressing concerns, and bards were left to fend for themselves. A few lingered on, into the 17th and 18th centuries in Ireland and Scotland as folk singers and musicians, but they eventually vanished along
> with their music.
>
> During the 19th century, a determined effort was made to revive the bardic tradition. Folk music gatherings took place in and near Wales. These neo-bardic activities caught on among the public, and today the annual Eisteddfod folk festival is a popular and growing event in this region of the world.

Thus, bards have shown a cunning knack to survive through the ages. In one form or another, bards have been around for nearly 1,000 years. Besides the Eisteddfod festival, the bard has been immortalized in the genre of fantasy. Now you have a chance to continue the bardic tradition.

Did you see that? That last line? *Now you have the chance to continue the bardic tradition.*

Have a think about that. Think about the games you've played where somebody has played a bard (if that's happened - it's not the most popular class choice). Think about Scanlan on *Critical Role*. What do those characters tend to be? Magic-wielding almost-rogues who sing songs and heal people, usually. They're probably your go-to person for situations requiring social abilities - persuasion, bluffing, etc. Like we've already discussed, they're a *jack of all trades and a master of none*. They're the fifth wheel.

Now go back to all that talk about the bardic tradition. Show me where any of that is in the bards you've seen at the table.

The Good, The Bad, and The Bombadil

I want to step away from D&D for just a few minutes. We'll come back. Don't worry.

I want to talk about two things. I want to talk about *Lord of The Rings*, and I want to talk about *The Kingkiller Chronicle*.

One of the biggest complaints I see from people who have read *The Lord of The Rings* is about all the songs, poems, and general exposition that it was packed with. Say the name 'Tom Bombadil' and a large number of fans of those books will recoil in horror. Indeed, one of the things I hear people praise about Peter Jackson's films (besides, you know, *everything else*) is that he chose to remove those parts of the books. And one of the biggest criticisms of Jackson's *The Hobbit* is that he did the opposite, bloating it up by inserting things from *The Silmarillion* that didn't need to be there.

Now, I understand that. All that exposition slows the pace of the novels down, it ruined *The Hobbit* (well, it *helped* to ruin it), and Tom Bombadil as written is insufferable. I'm not going to argue for even a minute that you should insert bards into your world who do nothing more than spout off seemingly irrelevant songs and stories that your players are forced to sit through before they can get back to killing things.

In fact, I'm going to be very clear on that point: **Don't do that.** That would suck.

Take a minute to think about Tom Bombadil, though. Really think about him. We're not going to get into an argument about who or what he actually *is*. But he looks and sounds like a bard, and even though there's a lot more to him than that - a *lot* more - we're going to talk about him in those terms.

Get past the talking in rhyme, and the dancing, and the talking in rhyme, and think about the things Tom Bombadil knew. He knew *at least as much* about the One Ring as Frodo and the hobbits do, and there are hints that he knows a lot more. Tom Bombadil is one of the most interesting characters in LoTR, and it's a real shame that Tolkien chose to use him in the way he did. All that history is fascinating; unfortunately, it was presented in such a way that people choose to skip it.

In contrast to that, take a look at Patrick Rothfuss' *Kingkiller Chronicle*. Kvothe is originally one of the Edema Ruh - who are unquestionably bards - and his entire character, and the story that he tells us (because let's not forget, the story of Kvothe is being told to us by Kvothe) is inseparable from that Ruh culture. His origin story includes him literally being saved by music. Kvothe and the greater story are inseparable from the idea of story, history, lore, and the bardic tradition. Nearly everything we know about the Chandrian - the spectre looming over the whole story - comes from scraps of lore and history that we are told by musicians, scholars, and the tales Kvothe has gathered throughout his life. Hell, the whole damn *series* is presented as a bard telling his own story.

Pretty much everything we know about the world of Temerant is information learned through the lens of song and story, of shared history. Very little of it feels expository - the world-building is delivered in conversations that make sense given the characters who are having them, through events that advance the plot, through the protagonist uncovering things that increase his knowledge of the challenge that he faces.

Where Tolkien delivers his world to you in big, divergent chunks of text, Rothfuss reveals it through the main character's exploration and experience of that world, and allows you to explore and experience in the same way.

What do you want your game to be? Do you want Middle Earth, with *tons* of history and worldbuilding and lore that's hamfisted in and ignored by a huge number of people? Or do you want Temerant, where there's less of the lore and the history but it's *baked in* to the world and the story that you're telling?

If you want Temerant, stick with me. I'm going to show you how to do it.

Bards as NPCs

Think about the last time your group found some powerful magic item sitting dormant and forgotten in an abandoned ruin somewhere. Unless it was the focus of their quest - in which case the group probably got told about its history and powers by the person sending them to recover it - they probably did little more than cast *Identify* and spend some time attuning it. They probably learned what specific abilities or bonuses it bestowed, and that's it.

When was the last time your group took something to be appraised? When was the last time they found out the history of an object before they found out what it does? When was the last time they found out the history of an object *before they found the object itself*?

Similarly, when was the last time your bard knew anything about this week's dungeon before they got inside it? Dungeons are quite often massive ruins infested with monsters and stocked with treasure and magic, hundreds if not thousands of years old. Sure, they find out the history of the place when they're given the hook to go there, but why have they never heard about it beforehand?

Think about urban legends. You probably heard some growing up, or know some about the area where you now live. I'm going to tell you one from where I grew up.

I grew up in a medium-sized village in the north of England, out in the country but not too far away from a decent-sized town. Probably not dissimilar from the kind of place your group might start their first

adventures from - except, you know, in the late 20th century, not sort-of-Medieval-times. And what we had in that village was a local dungeon. Sort of.

The story goes that, during the English Civil War, Oliver Cromwell ordered that the monks of England should be driven out of their monasteries and killed, and that the monasteries themselves should be razed to the ground. One particularly prescient monk fled from his monastery and took refuge in a cottage at the edge of the village. Eventually, Cromwell's Roundheads found him hiding in a cubby-hole halfway up the cottage's chimney, and tried to drive him out. They lit a blaze in the fireplace, and when he emerged they killed him. Then, for whatever reason, they left his skull on the mantlepiece, where it has remained to this day.

So far, so ordinary. Things like this certainly happened during the civil war. But the story goes on to say that subsequent residents of the house have each tried to dispose of the skull, and each have found that they can't - and have met with disaster shortly after trying. One threw it into the river, only to find it had returned - before he himself drowned in the same river. Another took the skull as far from the house as he could and left it there. After the skull returned, he fell down the stairs and died. And so on, and so on.

The current occupants of the house, of course, know better than to try and get rid of the skull. Or at least, that's how the story went 20+ years ago when I was a child and, having just asked a friend who still lives there, that's how it goes today, even though ownership of the house has changed hands.

The fact of the matter is, the story confuses Oliver Cromwell with Thomas Cromwell, who dissolved the monasteries under Henry VIII - not during the civil war. By the time this story supposedly took place, there hadn't been any monasteries in England for about 100 years.

Now, most people who grew up where I did could tell you that story - but when I was a kid, if you really wanted to hear it and hear it told well, you'd gone to one of the pubs by the side of the canal, and you'd speak to Gerald. I guess he was probably in his '60s when I was a child, and he was renowned as being something of a local historian. He'd been a mechanic at one point, I think, but that wasn't what he was known for.

Gerald was known as a man who could spin a tale. And he had plenty of them.

In my mind, Gerald is a bard. He was the go-to guy for local history, and though most people over the age of about 8 or 9 knew the story of the skull house, Gerald was the one who told it best. We'd occasionally get people visiting the village - students, historians, people wanting to carbon-date the skull (which, as far as I'm aware, actually does exist - though I don't know that for sure). And they'd all get pointed towards Gerald, even though people lived in the house and they could probably just go and knock on the door and speak to them.

Now you're probably thinking, what the hell has this got to do with my D&D game? Well, I'll tell you.

That little story about my childhood and Gerald shows us two things we can do to make the history of the world come to life in our games.

Firstly, think about the fact that my quiet little village had something of an intermittent tourist trade due

to an apocryphal story linked to a local landmark - even though the story was demonstrably false. And there were no monsters or powerful, ancient artifacts lurking there - just a skull that may or may not exist.

Dungeons, unless they're out in the middle of nowhere, should work like this. If your party are in a town sitting less than a day's travel from the Pit of Horribleness, or whatever, they're almost certainly not going to be the first people to take an interest in the place. Even if nobody has actually explored it for a long time - maybe the entrance is impassable, or some other contrivance to keep it unlooted - the locals should know about it. They should have stories about it. Kids might be banned from playing near it - though that of course means that it's the one place you're guaranteed to find children playing - and most people in their teens and upwards should be able to talk about it in some way. And those stories spread, as people pass through the town and carry them onwards.

If this Tomb of Elemental Eagles, or whatever, has been sitting there for hundreds of years, there's no way only the people in the tiny Village of Hobblet are the only people who know about it. They're simply the people who know *the most* about it.

Wouldn't it be fun if you peppered your world with tales of abandoned sites? Just little snippets, things overheard in taverns and gambling dens, stories told by other adventurers. (Or maybe, even, by bards. Because every village has a Gerald, and what is Gerald? He's a bard. But we'll get back to Gerald.) Snatches of information that seem made up, or irrelevant, stories about far-off places that your group haven't ever been to.

Then, one day, they go there. And they see the dungeon. And they remember that story they overheard a snippet of five sessions ago. And they know something about the world, without you spoon-feeding it to them. They may find that what they'd been told didn't match up to the facts - no monasteries for 100 years, remember? - but that doesn't matter. What matters is that they had somewhere to start their investigation when they decided to learn more about this place, without you having to dangle a plot-hook-bearing ~~exposition monster~~ bartender in front of them.

Think how satisfying that is. Your players are going to feel great, because they knew something about your world *because their character knew it*, and they didn't have to roll a single d20 to find it out. They didn't have to sit through you reading A Brief History of Castle Ravenskull at the beginning of the session. They engaged with your world, and it paid off.

Think how good that will feel for you, when your players decide to go and investigate the mouldy ruin because they're aware of the stories surrounding it, and not because you presented it as this week's dungeon. At that point, you don't even need to come up with someone to offer them a quest to go there and maybe get killed. They're going to go anyway, because they're invested and they're curious.

The question is, how do you fill your world with these kinds of things *without* reading Murder Dungeon: A History to them every other session?

The answer, of course, is Gerald.

See, at some point in your game - the game you're playing now, before you've decided to try and implement all these ideas I'm talking about - your players are going to go to a tavern. That's a given. And

they're also going to want to find out something about The Keep on The Bordersands, or whatever. And that's where you get to feed them information about 'irrelevant' things that will one day be relevant.

Let's say the party have rolled up in to town, where they were greeted by the mayor, who's heard of their exploits (how? Have bards been telling tales about the group in taverns? Why haven't the group heard these for themselves?) and wants them to help clear out the Caves of Inevitably Mild Peril, in exchange for a reward of some kind. The party have agreed - eventually, having tried and failed to seduce their way to a bigger reward - and now they're off to find out some information before they stock up on potions and head out.

If you've been paying attention, you should know exactly what I'm going to say now, because it's obvious. *Everybody the party asks should know something about the dungeon*. They probably all know the same story about it - though they will all probably misremember it in some way. And, secondly, *everybody should tell the group that Gerald is the best person to ask*.

Now, where can Gerald be found? In the tavern, obviously - a) because that's where the group were ultimately headed, having just arrived in a new town, and b) because now you can work some magic.

What does the bard say?

Gerald is a story-teller. He's the old guy sitting in the corner of the bar who knows everyone and who will talk the ear off anybody who sits still long enough. Travelers buy him drinks - or pay his tab - in exchange for the information he has. So far, so boring - we've all used this character.

Now, remember what prompted this post. In case you've forgotten, it was my post of [songs a bard could be singing in a tavern](#). This is where you get to use that - or something like it, something that you build yourself to match your world.

When the players find the tavern, Gerald is already mid song. Or else, if he's not a singer, he's loudly telling somebody a story about that Murder Hole five towns over. Not the Assortment of Fighting Rooms in *this* town, the one the group are interested in; he's talking about other things. The group will interrupt him, they'll ask him to tell them about the place they're interested in looting, but they still heard him. Maybe one or two of them will make notes; maybe they won't. They probably won't, the first time.

But then, in four sessions' time, they'll get to Town Five's Murder Hole, and they'll remember that Gerald said something about it. And next time they meet someone like Gerald, they'll likely listen to what he's saying.

The key to this is to be subtle. It's tempting to foreshadow everything you plan with a Gerald character, but that's overkill - and it ruins the game if the players always know what you're planning for them to do next. They want to feel like they have agency, like they're driving the narrative - and really, you should be letting them drive it. This isn't a way to tell the group what you want them to do. Instead, what we're doing is making the world feel big and lived-in, and rewarding the players for engaging with that by occasionally having the information they've learned pay off.

If you've got a big, eventful history of your world written up, you can show parts of it off by having the

group interrupt Gerald while he's talking about one cool aspect of it. It might never come up in the game again - but, similarly, you might find that it suddenly becomes relevant, and at that point your group already know the information.

Quite often, in fact, I've had a local bard tell a story I made up on the spot, fully intending never to pay it off. Then, suddenly, it's the day before game night and I haven't got anything planned - but what I have got are those briefly-overheard tales of urban legend. Once you've started sowing your game with them, it suddenly becomes easy to summon a story from an old session and drop it into the world as a thing the players can interact with for a new session.

I'm not going to labour the point. Bards are awesome, and if you drop them into your world you can do a lot with them.

Bards as Players

So, what about bards at the table? When people discuss things like classes and character options in D&D, it's *usually* with regard to combat. And yet, if we look at the way bards are presented in the rules- and the way I'm suggesting you should use them as NPCs - that doesn't seem fitting. Bards are essentially entertainers who have tagged along with a bunch of murder hobos for whatever reason. Sure, they'll need to know how to take care of themselves, but that shouldn't be their focus. They're gathering stories and tales, acquiring knowledge, sating their unquenchable curiosity. Or maybe they're sick of telling stories about other people, and now they want to make some stories for themselves. Loial from *The Wheel of Time* is a good example of an adventuring bard, though I'm not about to start dissecting the way he's used in that enormous series.

Ask yourself something. Whether you're a DM or a player - when was the last time the bard in your group stood on a table in a tavern and led the crowd in a baudy song? When was the last time your group sang for their supper, or spun stories of their adventures to a group around a fire in exchange for a meal and somewhere to rest? When was the last time they got in a pissing contest with another group of adventurers about the places they've been to and the things they've done?

I bet it hasn't happened. Or, if it did, it was a memorable moment that has always stuck with you because of how freaking cool it was.

Now go and pick up a standard fantasy novel, the kind of book D&D draws its tropes from. I bet you'll find a scene where something similar happens. I can think of a ton of them. It happens throughout the *Wheel of Time*, it happens in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, *The First Law Trilogy*. All. The. Time.

I'm not sure why people don't use their bards in this way more often, and I want to start encouraging it more in my game. It makes for great moments where it feels like the world is alive and real, that the characters have history, that the hosts inhabiting the park (yes, I mean NPCs. I just finished *Westworld*. Shut up) are responding to the things that the players do. And if Gerald is telling a story about something your group did when they walk in, wouldn't that feel amazing? But I'm going backwards - I'm meant to be talking about players, not NPCs.

Encouraging this kind of behaviour - these kinds of roleplaying opportunities - is as simply as placing NPCs into the world who behave in this way. Have your NPCs start reacting to the fact that the party are adventurers - for instance, when they stagger back to town from a dungeon and immediately stumble in to Potions R Us without stopping to get clean first. And have those NPCs have *no idea* who the party are initially - until they're told about the things the party have done. Give the group an opportunity to brag, to say *don't you know who I am?*, and have your world react to it.

The more you start doing that, the more your players - and particularly your bard players - are going to want to spin tales about the group's exploits. And if you start asking them to make Performance checks when they do it, and basing the results around that roll, you're going to find that the bard starts stepping up to the plate. And, eventually, you won't have to encourage this kind of thing. It will just happen.

The other thing we've talked about is the idea that dungeons and adventure sites don't exist in a vacuum limited to the one nearby settlement. With that knowledge, you can even start building this feel of a big, real world before the group ever even meet Gerald. Maybe the town they've just arrived in has a small Murder Hobo Pilgrimage Hotspot, but it's not as notorious as the Temple of Ultimate Failure forty miles up the road. so, when the party arrive in town, you simply tell the bard that she knows they aren't far from the Temple of Ultimate Failure. It's clearly not where they're heading this week - it's forty miles away, after all - but it exists, and your character knows about it.

Because she's a bard. And bards know about these kinds of things.

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