

Let's Build A Campaign Setting: The Issue of Tedium

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<http://loottheroom.uk/lets-build-a-campaign-setting-the-issue-of-tedium/>

[Last time](#) I talked about hex crawls and point crawls. I ended by saying this:

Really, I'm not building a hex crawl at all. I'm building one long dungeon that looks like a sandbox. I'll have to decide whether I still want the players to map the island themselves or not, because asking them to do that may force them to engage with parts of the sandbox that I'm not going to build. I can already think of ways around that, if I'm being honest, but that's for a future post once I've actually put those ideas into practice and seen if they work.

I was planning to spend this week breaking down the story that I established last time into days of adventure and beginning to play out what the actual quest is going to look like. That's still on the cards as one of my next steps, but it's not what I'm going to be talking about this week - because that's not what I ended up doing this week.

One of my patrons made an interesting comment, and it set me to thinking more about how this campaign is actually going to function. We'll get to that comment, and where I went from it, in a little bit. First, though, I want to define the idea of a *crawl*, since I know a lot of my readers aren't familiar with it. In writing this series and trying to teach myself more about hex crawls and the like (because my own limited experience with them simply isn't enough) has been Justin Alexander's [The Alexandrian](#), and he has a helpful breakdown of what constitutes a *crawl* in [his discussion of urbancrawls](#):

1. It uses a map with keyed locations. (This provides a straight-forward prep structure.)
2. Characters transition between keyed locations through simple, geographic movement. (This provides a default action and makes it easy to prep robust scenarios.)
3. There's an exploration-based default goal. (This motivates player engagement with the material and also synchronizes with the geographic-based navigation through the scenario.)
4. Characters can engage, disengage, and re-engage with the scenario. (You can go into a dungeon, fight stuff for awhile, leave, and when you come back the dungeon will still be there.)

The issue I'm having, as I discussed last week, is that my default goal isn't exploration. That certainly *is* a goal - one of my design principles is the desire for the players to be able to fully explore the setting over the course of the campaign - but I also want to tell a pre-decided story, and hex crawling isn't really suited to that.

That's where the point crawl comes in - but then the issue becomes that, almost by default, I'm saying that some parts of the setting won't be detailed and, this, won't be explorable. That flies in the face of the design principles I laid out in the very first entry in this series.

So, I have one of two options. The first is the easiest - I simply revise my design principles and accept that I can't build a setting that players are going to fully explore over X number of levels, while also telling a story. And that may well be what I end up doing.

The second option is much harder. It involves finding a way to reconcile these two disparate elements of what I'm trying to build. I'll have to figure out a way to allow - and encourage - players to explore the island fully, while also enabling the story to progress at a decent pace. Too much exploration has the danger of resulting in the players potentially losing sight of the story and/or being too high a level when they do return to the story, and either breezing over things or else the DM having to do a lot of rebalancing. Neither of those are desirable. On the other hand, too little exploration means that I'll end up building lots of things that never get used - going against another design principle.

One way of reducing the amount of unused content is in providing ways for GMs to reuse content. The Alexandrian touches on this briefly in the [discussion of designing scenarios with nodes](#):

“Therefore, it can also be valuable to incentivize the funneling nodes in order to encourage the PCs to explore them. In designing these incentives you can use a mixture of carrots and sticks: For example, the clue in node A might be a map of node D (useful for planning tactical assaults). The clue in node B might be a snitch who can tell them about a secret entrance that doesn't appear on the map (another carrot). And node C might include a squad of goons who will reinforce node D if they aren't mopped up ahead of time (a stick).

(That last example also shows how you can create multi-purpose content. It now becomes a question of how you use the goon squad content you prepped rather than whether you'll use it.)”

Reading this was another one of those “why hadn't I already thought of that” situations for me. I already knew that I'm going to be placing clues in adventures that point to the next adventure - that's basic stuff. What I hadn't thought of, for some reason, was that the clues I place don't have to point “onwards”. They can point laterally, directing the players to other non-critical-path adventures that equip them with more tools and information.

Something I'm going to experiment with is placing a pointcrawl on top of a hexcrawl. I'll build the main campaign arc using points/nodes, ensuring that a party could choose to simply navigate that critical path and still have a decent chance of a) experiencing the story roughly as we intend them to and b) surviving at the end.

Underneath that will be the rest of the map, the hexes that represent uncharted territory. These will be where sidequests and exploration lie - and where the players learn more secrets about the island and what's going on here, gaining knowledge and power that is going to help them in the trials to come.

Which brings me, in a round-about way, to the title of this post: the issue of tedium.

Last time I mentioned that there would be "little of interest" to find in the hexes that don't fall on the critical path, but I was never happy with that - and I've essentially just said that that's no longer going to be the case. If I'm going to be encouraging the players to explore the rest of the island, I have to account for two things: the boredom of clearing hexes if they don't have enough interesting stuff in them, and the issue of over-levelling if those things *do* have interesting stuff (and combat encounters) in them. I have this vague idea that one of the ways to discourage too much exploration is to make exploring *suck*. I think I mentioned that last week, and touched on the idea that I need to find a way to make time work as a resource, too.

Let's look at that comment from one of my patrons that helped with some of this stuff, shall we? [Collin](#) said this:

"The question of tedium reminds me of entering a zone in WoW for the first time, and having to map it out to get to the flight points (point-crawling reminds me a lot of the flight path overlay map). So tedium to start, but the reward, in part, is being able to bypass it later. Thinking about how to achieve that effect: some of the random hex encounters might be overgrown roads that with a day's clearing can be used to speed up a path. Maybe there are a few forgotten or abandoned shrines that offer teleportation circles to connect with a similar (as yet undiscovered) spot near the home base. If they're starting in a village with local challenges, maybe in exchange for helping the village with predators, a small group of rangers will provide guides or even blaze new trails and/or discover shortcuts/hidden paths that the PCs have missed. (Once the tedium has been established, provide avenues to enlist NPCs to help them bypass it, in other words.) Finding remnants of the ancient civ could provide them with defensible waypoints as well (allowing them to skip rolls on the random encounter table overnight)."

I haven't played WoW, so I'm not entirely sure what the path overlay map is, but I think there's a lot that I can mine from this comment regardless of that. I've already been thinking about ways in which I can gate the progress of players so that they don't end up somewhere much sooner than we want them to be there, and it feels like I can tie that gating to the way I handle exploration.

I'm going to go back to video games for a minute - in particular *The Legend of Zelda: Breath of the Wild*, because a) it's relevant and b) I've been playing it a lot recently. In BotW, as with many 'open world' games, the map is split into distinct regions. Each of these regions contains a large tower that, once discovered and activated, both reveals the map of that region and allows the player to fast travel to it. I've spent a lot of time in that game trying to reach some of those towers, and failing spectacularly. There's a real feeling of achievement when you activate one of them - and, crucially, you never have to repeat the slog that you went through to get there unless you want to.

Mad Max does a similar thing, with a twist. Each region is controlled by a certain faction of enemies. The

more of them you kill, the weaker that faction gets and the safer that region gets. As regions become safer, random encounters etc. are reduced and exploring it becomes generally easier.

I'm wondering if I can make this kind of structure work in D&D. I've already divided my map up into very large hexes for the purposes of building it, and I was planning to split them into smaller hexes as I begin detailing areas. And in my rough plot outline, I had the giant gate thing that I don't know the purpose of.

I'm wondering now if each of those giant hexes contains some feature that allows players to easily jump between them, or some means of making travel through that hex easier. I'm even tempted to poach the idea of fully mapping a region by unlocking that location. Basically, players can slog through hexes stumbling across ruins in the jungle and having random encounters and generally having a bad time, until they do something that uncovers the rest of that hex for them. At that point they'll know where the points of interest are and will have a much easier time of finding them. I'm not sure whether that can actually work in a TTRPG yet, or quite how I'll execute it, but it's something I'm interested in pursuing.

The final thing to mention is the issue of experience and levelling. I've already mentioned - a few times now - that I'm borrowing from a lot of the early design work Angry GM did on his [Megadungeon project](#). One of the features of his project that I really like is his method of handling experience. I'm not going to break it down fully here; the long and short of it is that experience will be tied heavily to progressing the story and making discoveries rather than killing things. If I use a similar system, I'm suddenly able to allow the players to explore - and fight - as much as they want without worrying about what level they are. I'll have to think about exactly how I'm going to execute that system, but for now all that I need to know is that I'm going to do something like that.

I'm not sure what next week will hold. I'm still hoping to get to breaking the campaign part of this project down into smaller pieces, but I'm also feeling like I might want to take a run at developing the turtlekin and the history of the island a little more. We'll see what happens. In the meantime, your thoughts are always welcome.

Stray Thoughts

- I'm still reading through lots of published hex/pointcrawls and adventure paths. Hydra Co-operative were kind enough to send me a few complimentary copies, and I still haven't fully dived into one of them. I'm fairly sure that as I read more of these things, I'll once again discover that all of this work has already been done for me.
- I still want to find a way to include the dragon turtle in the adventure, because dragon turtles are cool and I've never used one in a game.
- I'm actually really, really excited by the idea of giving the players something akin to fast travel between certain locations.



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