

# Let's Build A Campaign Setting: The Rough Map

by loottheroom - Friday, July 07, 2017

<http://loottheroom.uk/lets-build-a-campaign-setting-the-rough-map/>

[A few weeks ago](#) we talked about story, and developed a very broad overview of the backstory of this island, along with putting some of the pivotal story moments for the campaign in place. This week I decided I'd done enough thinking about things for the time being; I wanted to draw some maps.

This won't be a long post, because I didn't get very far with mapping. Most of my week was taken up with working on *Bulette Storm*. There is a map, but it won't be what you're expecting. I'm not ready to map every inch of the island yet - we're working in broad strokes still. What I have done is laid out the shape of the island, some distinctive geographical features, and started thinking about how to control the progress of the players as they explore the island.

We'll get to all that in a minute. First, though, I want to talk about hexagons.

## Hexes as a Design Tool

A few weeks ago we talked about [distance and size](#). I settled on a rough area for the island of 3,249 square miles, calculated by figuring out how much ground a party can cover in 20 levels of adventure if they do nothing but travel all day every day. (That number is actually smaller than the area that came out of that calculation. If you're figuring the numbers out yourself and you're wondering why it's different, read the post I just linked to).

Since I want this to be an exploration-heavy campaign, I'd already decided to myself that I was going to draw on classic D&D hex crawls as I design it. I won't be running it as a hex crawl - I'll go into the reasons for that, and talk a little more about what I *do* intend to do in next week's post, so that this one doesn't go on for 10k words - but I'll be using the conventions of hex crawls in order to build it. That means splitting the island into hexes (traditionally of 5 miles, but I prefer a [6 mile hex](#) personally) and then determining what kind of terrain type that hex contains and detailing any points of interest to be found there.

My intent is to use hexes to build the island piece by piece, starting at a macro scale and drilling down into smaller and smaller hexes until I hit the level of detail I'm happy with. (As you'll see if you read that post on The Hydra's Grotto - and the comments - it's possible with a 6 mile hex to drill down to 1/24 mile hexes, which take up 44 squares on a battlemap. You can easily fit a dungeon into that space, so I can place them very precisely on the overall map if I want to.)

The first thing to do if I intend to build with hexes is to figure out how many hexes I actually need. That involves some maths (and if you follow me on Twitter, you'll have seen me struggling with this part this week. Maths is not my strong suit).

The area of a 6 mile hexagon is roughly 31 square miles. The upper limit on the area of the island is 3,249

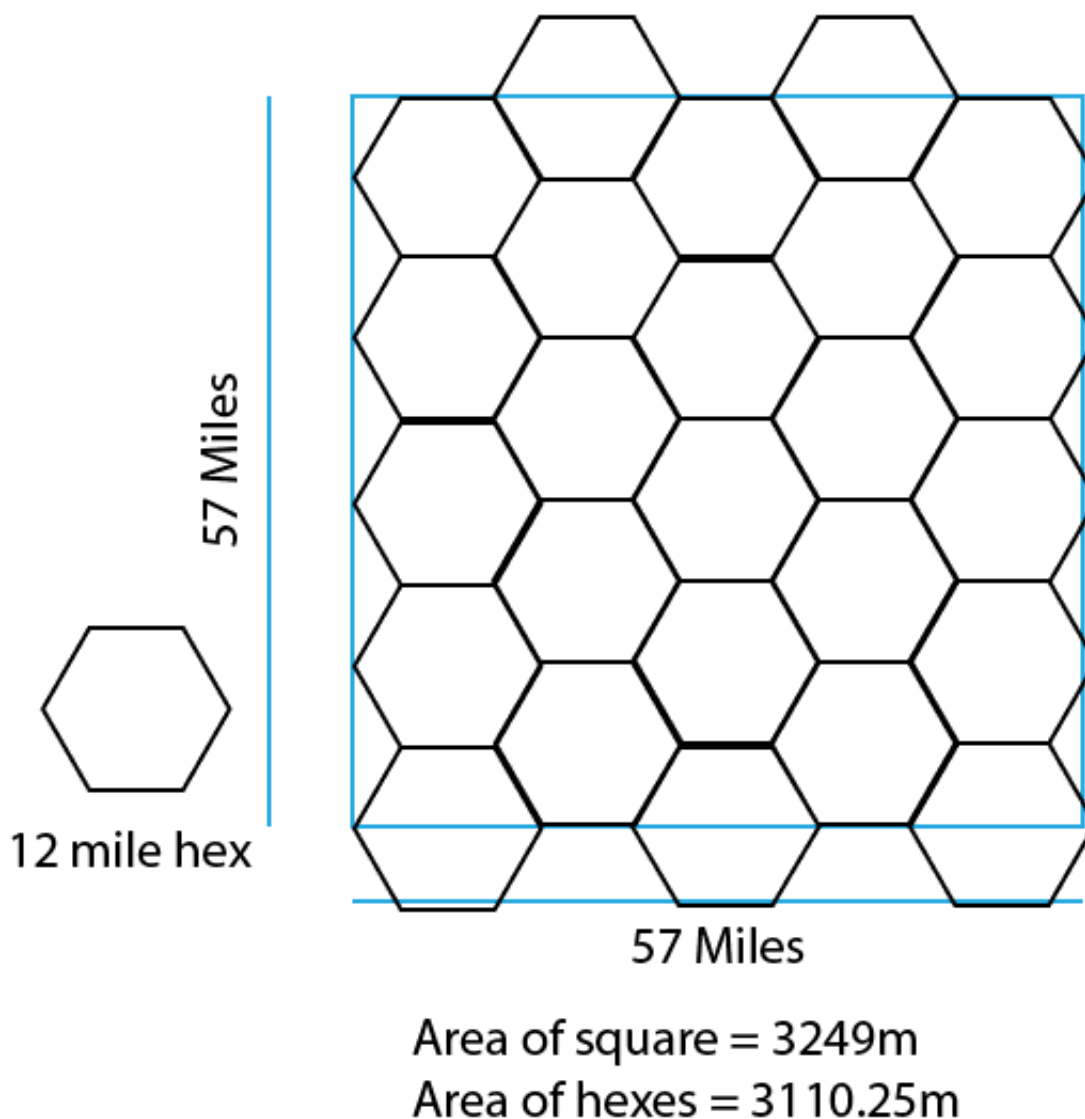
square miles. That means that I need around 105 6 mile hexes to represent the island.

At this stage I'm not ready for that level of detail - 105 hexes is too much to work with this early on, even if most of them just say "jungle" or something of the like. I had an idea about how to use these hexes while mapping - which I'll get to shortly - that also meant that this number of hexes simply won't work.

So I went bigger - up to an atlas-sized 72 mile hexagon. The area of that is 4,496 square miles, which is bigger than our intended island. At that scale hex, it's just a border that I can draw in. It's pointless.

So, we go smaller again. How about a 12 mile hex? At 12 miles per hex - each one with an area of ~124 square miles - I need 26.11 hexes to fit the map. That's a nice, manageable number.

So, I went to Illustrator and the very fancy boxes I drew when we talked about scale and distance, and overlaid a grid of hexes onto the 57x57 mile square that represents the outer bounds of my design space.



I actually only used 25 hexes to cover that space, which gives us a total area of 3,110 square miles. The island is shrinking again, but that's fine. I want players to revisit some areas anyway, and they're very obviously not going to spend all their time exploring. Once again, that 3,249 square mile area was always just an upper bound.

The next thing I intended to do was revisit some of the island outlines I drew and overlay these hexes onto them, then start placing some terrain. But actually, I've already come to a decision about how the island actually looks, so I just went straight to it.

## **Astonish Me With Geography**

I already know a couple of things about the island from [developing the story](#). I know that the northern shore is made up of sandy beaches and dunes that the turtlekin use as their nesting grounds. The rest of the island is lush and verdant - jungles, and the like. And there's something ancient and evil sealed beneath the island too.

I'm going to go down a well-trodden road and have this be a volcanic island, with a large dormant volcano in the middle of it. I know that's a very common trope, but it's going to serve a purpose when it comes to gating off sections of the island to low level PCs. It's also not at all unbelievable that a tropical island would have a volcano on it, so I'm not worried about it.

Part of the dilemma I was having this week was in figuring out how to stop the PCs from landing on the island and simply heading south immediately and discovering the turtlekin before we want them to. There's also the fact that they're on an island and have access to boats; what's to stop them from circumnavigating the island and discovering the turtlekin on the southern coast?

The answer is geography. In looking at - and reading about - islands of a similar size to the one I'm building, I started researching things like coral reefs and atolls and all that kind of stuff. I won't bore you with the details of all that. I'll just go ahead and state that the island is going to be ringed by rocky waters and treacherous sandbars for miles that make it very difficult to circumnavigate it at a reasonable distance for making observations. This terrain will be mostly plain and barren - I may drop a couple of interesting locations out there if it takes my fancy, later on - and will simply serve as a physical barrier to entering the island. The initial starting location - the colony settlement - will be located near the only easily navigable passage through those waters.

The answer to how to stop players heading south straight away also lies in geography. The easiest way to make terrain impassable to low level characters is to simply throw a mountain range in the way. They *can* get past it, with some effort, but it will be very dangerous.

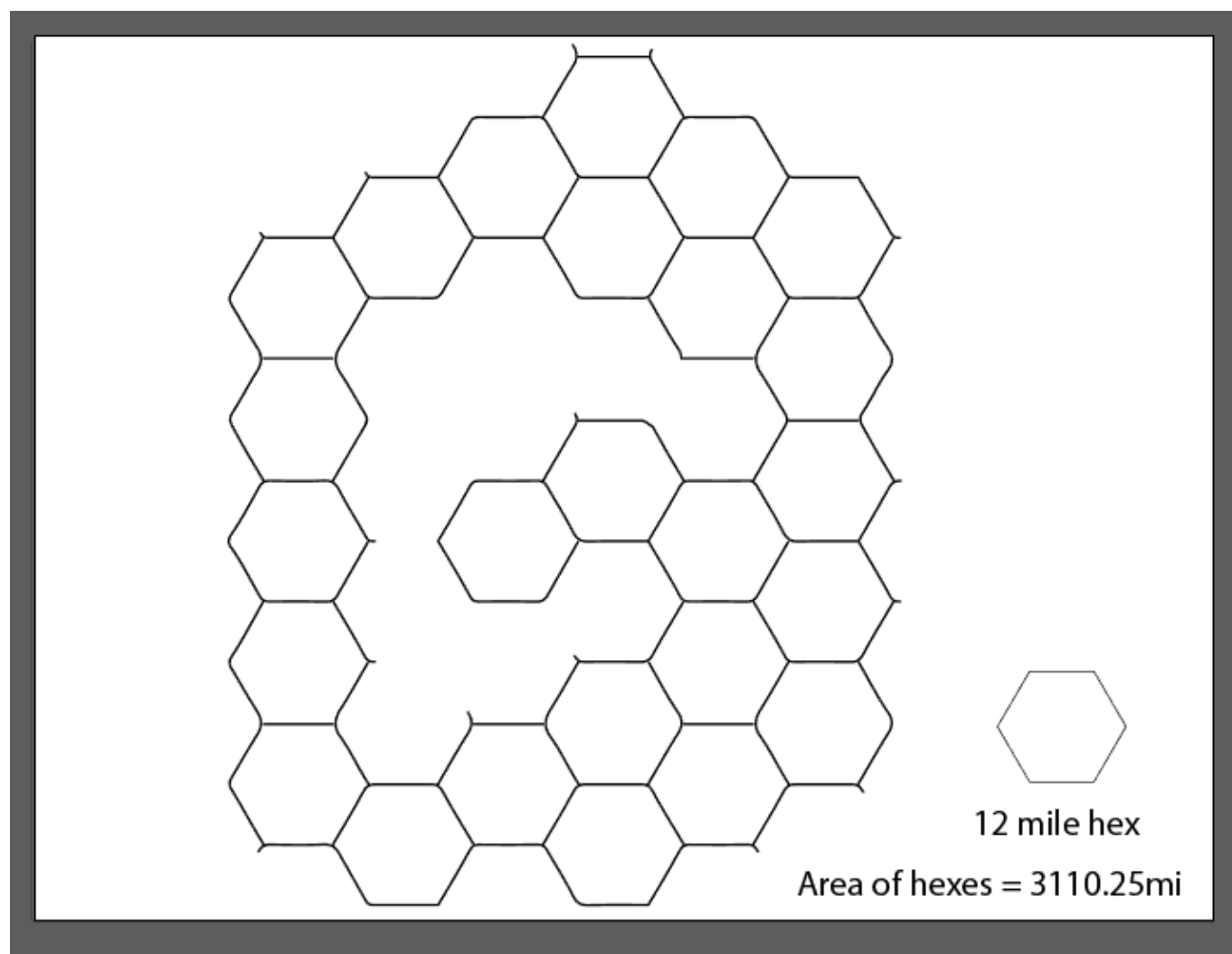
Now, the island isn't completely bisected by mountains. That's silly. So I started thinking about how I could use terrain to guide the passage of the players. I also started thinking about the way this island was formed, and the kinds of terrain I like writing adventures in.

The island was formed by a massive explosion of magical force that obliterated the archipelago that was here originally. That means that while I'm still going to try to design a believable geographical location,

I'm able to take a couple of liberties.

I've decided that this island wasn't completely unaffected by the event all those years ago. The side nearest the rest of the archipelago - the western shore - is very slowly sinking. And I mean very slowly. Basically, the western coast of the island is made up of jungle wetlands and swamps. They're not as impassable as mountains, but they still present a barrier to lower level groups. And the added bonus is that I really, really enjoy writing swamp-based adventures.

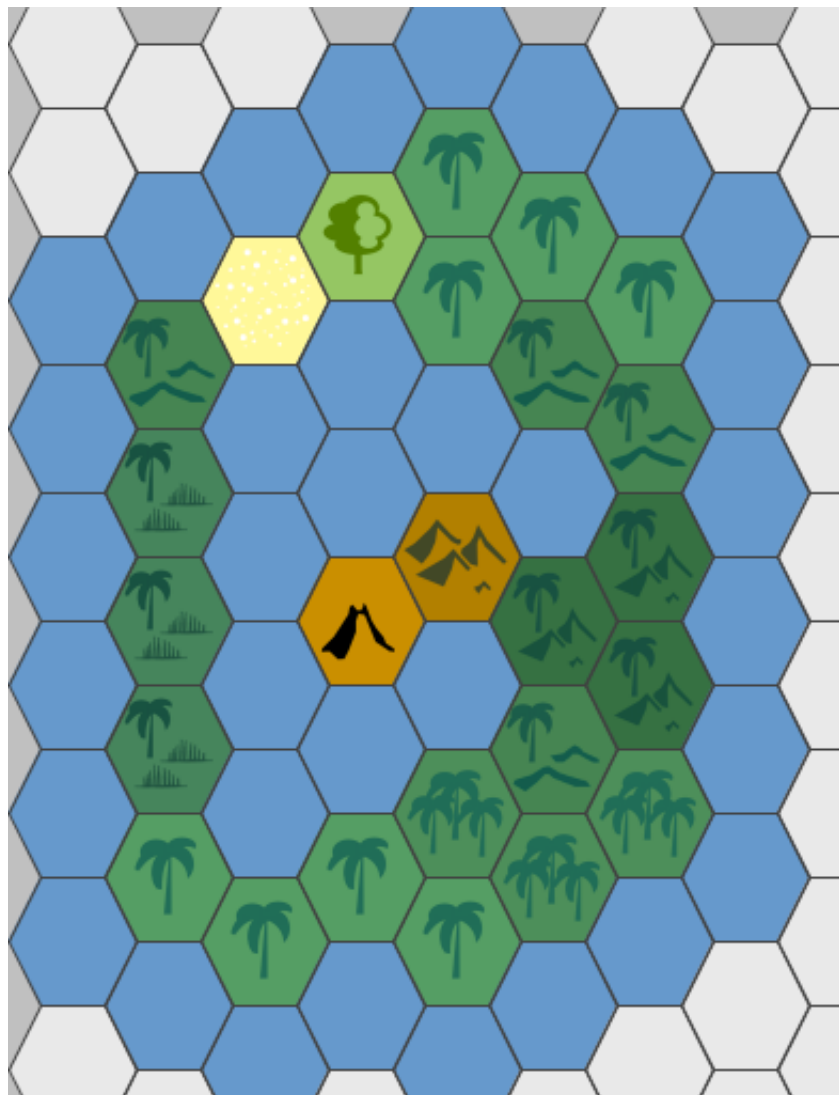
So I went back to my hexes and started placing them in the rough shape that I envision for the island. It looks like this:



The space in the middle with no visible hexes represents more water. In essence this island has sunk a little bit, enough that the lowland areas that existed before have vanished beneath the waves. Now I get to throw in some underwater adventures, too. If there was ever any kind of mining operation on this island (and if there was, who did it? Probably not the turtlekin), maybe there are entrances to mines on the side of the volcano - but they're all underwater, and the tunnels are completely flooded. That sounds like a cool dungeon.

I was going to start drawing at this point, but time got away from me. All I've had a chance to do this

week is to jump into Hexographer and roughly - *very* roughly - block in some terrain types. Take a look:



That big patch of sandy orange represents the hex where the initial colony will be - that's the sandy beaches and the starting town. That sandy terrain obviously doesn't take up the whole hex, but it's nice to know where that will be placed. I may actually move it more northeast from that position once I start drawing for real. You also can't see the ring of coral/sandbars/whatever that prevent access to the island on this map. Just imagine that it's there.

So that's where we're up to. Next week I'll be talking about hex crawls and why I won't actually be building one. I'll also take a look at some interesting things Paizo did in their *Kingmaker* Adventure Path, and see if there's anything there that I can learn from as I start to build this in more detail. And, if I get a chance, I might just draw something, rather than continuing to use the hexographer map.

Thanks for reading!

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