Let's Build A Campaign: Talking Turtlekin

by loottheroom - Monday, January 22, 2018

http://loottheroom.uk/lets-build-a-campaign-talking-turtlekin/

It's been a while since I really looked at this project. My break in producing content at the end of last year came right around the time that I was starting to get really enthusiastic about this campaign again, which is a shame.

It's always difficult to go back to a large project that you dropped. I think it's especially hard to go back to something that you were really passionate about and making progress on, because there's always the worry that you won't be able to get back to the same point of passion and enthusiasm that was there to begin with.

There's a cure for that, though. You break off a small chunk of the project, you put the work in, and before you know it you're back. So that's what I've been trying to do for this post.

When I left off I was talking about something akin to a procedurally-generated hex crawl system, where I would populate the map with a couple of static sites and then build a system to allow GMs to quickly populate the rest of the map themselves with other pre-built Points of Discovery (PoD) and Points of Story (PoS) as the players explore. When stated like that it seems quite a large task, but as with any large creative project we can easily break this down into smaller chunks that add together into the more complex whole. So, let's begin by seeing what kind of chunks we can break this task into.

That procedural system requires, at a minimum, the following things:

- Details of fixed sites
- Details of PoD and PoS that can be found
- A GM-facing system for populating hexes that makes game prep as straightforward as possible.
- A player-facing system to provide 'aspirational views' and help to focus/signpost navigation.

Each of those things can each be broken down into their own respective constituent parts. In the interests of getting back into the project, I want to begin by doing some work on the most simple aspect of the project - which, to me, seems like it will be the fixed sites, especially as I've already decided what most of them are going to be. In case you've forgotten, we're looking at these sites that will always be found in the same place on the island:

- The white-sand beaches that are the nesting grounds of the turtlekin
- The initial settlement that forms the player base
- The ruined city at the base of the mountains/volcano
- The mountains themselves
- The flooded mines inside the mountains
- The western swamps
- The turtlekin village

As with the broader picture, each of those sites can be broken down into certain constituent elements. In addition, some of them need other parts of the railcrawl to be in place before they can begin to be built properly. The player base needs me to build a system for expanding it over the course of the campaign, and I need to know exactly how it's going to function in the game before I can build that. The ruined city is going to be something of a ruinscrawl, and I want it to work in the same way as the overland railcrawl (so that GMs don't have to familiarise themselves with two exploration systems during the campaign), so I can't build that until I know exactly how the system itself works. And that will need to be broken down into its own Fixed Points, plus PoDs and PoSs.

Really, it seems to me that the easiest thing to start with here is the turtlekin village. It's always going to be in the same place, the players are going to encounter it relatively early on in the campaign, and working on it will help me to solidify some other parts of the island (since knowing how the turtlekin live and how they use the land etc. will help to determine what the area surrounding them might look like, and any characters I develop can later help to inform the overall story when it comes time to flesh that out in more depth).

I know from past endeavours that detailing an entire settlement is quite a big job in and of itself, and the aim here is to bite off a manageable chunk of this project that I can… well, not *finish*, but at least feel like I've made productive progress on rather than coming up with some nebulous ideas and then just letting them sit there half-formed for a bit.

So, what kind of constituent parts might we need when building a settlement? Without thinking specifically (yet) about who lives here, let's list some things we might need to consider:

- A brief history of the settlement, with an emphasis on recent events that will be most relevant to the game
- The political landscape - especially if they have relationships (either cordial or hostile) with another settlement or people
- Some brief information about overall lore
- Details of important NPCs
- Details of important buildings/points of interest. If those buildings have consistent occupants, they should also be detailed (even if they aren't "important" NPCs).
- Attitudes to magic and/or specific gods
- General overview of law and crimes
- Attitudes to death - e.g. is there a cemetery, and where is it?
- Details of the kinds of things that can be bought or found here, and possibly some unique items

When I'm writing posts like this, I often ask for help on Twitter and Facebook in order to identify things that I might otherwise overlook. Many people responded to me when I asked about this earlier. Lots of the answers were repeated, which was very useful in determining which aspects are important to lots of people rather than being something one specific person might want. While there were too many respondents to thank by name, I'd like to thank Alex Clippinger, Dan Dillon, Richard White, and Michael R Barry for pointing out a few things that I definitely wouldn't have considered. In particular, Richard White's point about the cemetery really helped me to get moving on this project again (and you'll see why in a minute).

An interesting thing that came out of asking that question was that most people seemed to like having things in groups of threes. Many people suggested detailing three NPCs and three adventure hooks. Others asked for three taverns - the most popular, the poshest, and the seediest. That's something to bear in mind for this process, although it won't be directly relevant today as I'm not planning to detail the whole settlement.

In breaking down the process into even more granular points like this, I'm looking to see which kinds of things might influence one another or help feed into other aspects. I'm also looking for an "in", an aspect that I can look at and say "I already know this. I can start here."

In this case, the most interesting part to me also happened to be the part that I already have something of an answer for; the question of this settlement's attitude to religion, magic, and death. If you cast your mind back to the beginning of this process - when I was talking about story and all the big picture stuff, rather than individual systems within the game - you may remember the actual plot of the campaign is going to be directly tied into the history and religion of the turtlekin. Here's some of that backstory again, as a reminder:

The turtle folk have called this land their home for thousands of years. They were not always confined to just this island; once, nearly a millennium ago, this place was the northernmost land in an archipelago of hundreds of islands. Though their ancestors had lived lives similar to whatever creatures they and normal turtles have evolved from – lives mostly confined to the water, coming onto land mostly to nest – their increase in intelligence led them naturally towards a more terrestrial existence. They still have a strong affinity with the water, but building a civilisation is much easier on land than it is in water. Building *is much easier on land.*

The turtle folk never built boats. Being so at home in the water, explorers of their kind tended to get around under their own power. Finding no land near the archipelago for thousands upon thousands of miles, they naturally began to explore the ocean floor below their own homes.

At some point in their history, explorers came across the ruins of an even older civilisation at the bottom of the ocean. There they unearthed something ancient and twisted, something that rose up out of the water and threatened the survival of their entire people. The turtle folk turned to their gods for help, and for a century a great war raged between the turtle deity and the elder horror from beneath the waves.

Eventually the war ended. The archipelago was ruined and sunk, the turtle gods were dead, and the elder horror was sealed beneath the last remaining island. The population of the turtle folk was ravaged, and those who survived knew that they must do everything within their power to prevent the slumbering horror beneath their home from ever waking. The initial sealing had required a huge blood sacrifice, and the magic that held the horror in stasis required yet more blood to remain functional.

As generations passed and the turtle folk slowly rebuilt their civilisation, one thing remained a constant – once per generation, as the ancient magic began to wane once more and the elder god began to stir, the most powerful magic users in the society completed the ritual of sacrifice that renewed the bonds and ensured the continued survival of their people. That work must never be stopped; to do so would result in the end of the world.

With this, we can already begin to make some determinations about how the turtlekin view the gods and magic. The gods of the turtlekin are dead, slain by an ancient elder god that they accidentally woke and now fight to keep sealed away. They know that their gods can no longer protect them or make plans for them, and that they must forge their own destiny - but they also know that they can never forget their gods, for the history of their gods is bound up in the knowledge that they need to keep the ancient evil at bay and ensure the continued survival of their people.

This also informs their view of other deities. For whatever reason, they have never discovered the other gods of the world (be that the deities of the Forgotten Realms, the pantheon of your own world, or whatever); they are a people with memory rather than faith. When they do encounter our adventurers and potentially hear about the various deities the characters worship, they are going to be skeptical. They have no reason to believe that these new gods are any more or less powerful than their own dead gods, any more or less fallible and - oddly, for a deity - mortal.

I imagine them as a fairly wise, nihilistic society. They live under the constant shadow of the ultimate end of the known world, and under the pressure of being the one thing holding that end back. There is no fate or destiny. There is only strength - physical, emotional, mental, spiritual - and the iron will to survive. People die, and life goes on for the rest. Even gods die.

And yet, despite the knowledge that the gods are dead and that they are alone in the world, the turtlekin are still a society steeped in myth and ritual. Once a generation they enact a great and terrible magic that requires some sort of blood sacrifice. This is a big, serious event, and I imagine that there is a lead-up period of many months - preparing the ritual, acquiring the sacrifice (whatever that is), observing certain rituals and traditions. The old traditions of their religion still run deep in their culture, and there is probably still an observant church of some kind. Even though they worship dead gods, they are not seen as some kind of weird or aberrant group. Indeed, these people are probably the ones directly responsible for completing the ritual. So, in a weird paradox, this godless society could potentially still be deeply religious.

This leads me to the question of magic. There's less of a distinction between the different kinds of magic in modern D&D - there's certainly no real mechanical difference between how clerics and wizards obtain their spells, beyond a bit of fluff - but in my mind arcane magic is still a different thing to divine magic. To me, what I'm seeing here is a society where the higher-ranking clerics and priests don't necessarily have access to high level magic, because in game terms there aren't any Clerics. There also probably aren't any Warlocks, since the mythology and history of the culture is very clear on one thing: there are powerful, evil things out there in the world, and they will kill you and everyone you know and love. You do not make deals with powerful entities. You wisely fear them, and you kill them if you can.

This tells me that any spellcasters the party encounter in this settlement come from other schools of thought and training. There may well be wizards; maybe once the gods died, turtlekin scholars began to research other means of replicating the magics that had once been granted to them by their deities. This could have been something of a revolution for the society; things that were once achieved by magic had to be replaced, and new technologies sprung up to fill those gaps. Simultaneously the new research into arcane magic made possible other things that hadn't been able to be done before. The arcane magic of the turtlekin is different to that of the rest of the world, arising out of a desire to replicate the things that divine magic can do.

I imagine there will also be a prevalence of druids in this society. This island is all the turtlekin know and - since their gods are dead and there is no afterlife - all they'll ever know. So they protect it and encourage it to thrive, and some people have learned to draw power from the land itself.

And what of sorcerers (and psionicists, if you're into that kind of thing (which I am))? My initial thought was that they might be seen as a sign that the gods might be alive and regaining their power, blessing some members of the society with latent magic talent. I don't like it, though. For one, there's a simple matter of mechanics. In D&D the sorcerer's spell list isn't really comparable to those of a cleric or druid in terms of utility. It's a more aggressive spell list, and less focused on things like healing that are the hallmarks of divine magic. The second thing is that I just don't think it's very interesting.

Instead, this could well be an opportunity to show a direct effect on this society of the elder god that is sealed beneath the island. What if people who develop magical abilities naturally are seen as a sign of growing danger? Their existence is proof that the elder god's slumber is less deep than it once was; they believe that it is reaching out into the world as it begins to wake, touching the minds of certain people and turning them to the task of setting it free.

Maybe anybody who begins to display magical abilities is rounded up and removed from society. They aren't killed outright; they are kept under lock and key, guarded tightly and warded to prevent their abilities manifesting themselves. Then, once a generation, they are sacrificed. That fills in a blank I identified earlier, and helps explain how a generally good-aligned society can engage in a generational blood sacrifice. They believe that their sacrifice is also a blow against the enemy, a culling of the troops that it has recruited. The loss of these people is mourned - they did no deals, they didn't ask to be corrupted, they were not at fault - but it is also celebrated, because their death is a blow against evil.

I had wanted to actually build something for this post, with it being the first one back after a long break, but the process of getting to just this point took me a lot longer than it might seem. These ideas have been percolating in my head for a long time, and narrowing down the place where I wanted to focus my attention to get back into this project was oddly quite difficult.

Still, it's nice to be working on this again, and the new schedule means I can spend a decent amount of time on the next post. My aim for next time is to have a writeup of the turtlekin settlement with at least 3 locations, 3 NPCs, a history of the settlement, and three potential adventure hooks. The hooks might not make it into the final campaign, but they will almost definitely be useful to have to hand when I begin designing the adventures that will take place here.

Until next time.

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