

Taking the Crawl out of Hex Crawls

by loottheroom - Friday, July 14, 2017

<http://loottheroom.uk/taking-the-crawl-out-of-hex-crawls/>

This is the ninth installment in what has become a weekly series, in which I'm chronicling my process as I build a campaign setting and a level 1-20 campaign that goes into it, ensuring that we don't build anything that won't actually see play at the table. If you're new to the series, I suggest you [start from the beginning](#).

Last week I mentioned that I intend to draw on the conventions of hex crawling in order to design this setting, but that I ultimately won't present the finished adventure as a hex crawl. I promised to talk more about that this week. So, guess what this post is?

I'm going to be completely upfront about my experience with hex crawls; that is, I don't have much experience with hex crawls. I started playing D&D in 1994, at which point hex crawling was already starting to become a forgotten aspect of the game. I have no doubt that people were still running them and that publishers were still producing them, but I wasn't exposed to anything beyond official 2nd ed. AD&D material and some older modules until the beginning of the 2000s, so I'm ignorant of that part of the game's history.

I tried and failed to run *Isle of Dread* sometime around 1997, I played in a very poorly-run hex crawl for 3rd edition D&D in the late 2000s, and I've read *Griffin Mountain* a couple of times. That's about the extent of my experience with hex crawls.

So, take that as a caveat. I'm not an expert on this subject by any means. I've spent the past few weeks learning as much as I can about hex crawls as possible, trying to figure out how I'd run these things and speaking to people who have both run them and played in them, people with a much better idea about this stuff than I have. I've drawn some conclusions and started to get a sense of how to achieve my goals with this campaign using the conventions of this style of gaming. But it may be the case that I'm trying to reinvent the wheel when there's no need to, either because somebody has already done it or because I've made a critical misunderstanding of a key concept. That's fine; that cycle of experiment-learn-rebuild-learn underpins all of my projects, and I enjoy it. If I have to go back and scrap something because I learn something new that changes everything, I'm OK with that.

And, in fact, that sort of happened earlier today. We'll get to that. First, though, let's talk about what I did leading up to that.

Crawling in the Dark

A couple of weeks ago I mentioned that I was trying to read through as many of Paizo's Adventure Paths as possible, with a view to learning about how they put them together. I made spreadsheets with level breakdowns and everything.

I did the same thing with hex crawls. I went out and gathered together as many as I could, trying to get a spectrum of examples from the very early days of hex crawling to the present day, and covering multiple RPG systems. As I mentioned above, I already had *Isle of Dread* and *Griffin Mountain*; as well as that, I also already had Paizo's *Kingmaker* and WoTC's *Storm King's Thunder* (which isn't a hex crawl, but contains a section that reminded me of hex crawls). Since I already had them to hand, and since I was already reading *Adventure Paths*, I decided to start with *Kingmaker*.

I'm not going to talk about every single thing I read (as well as those products listed above I read quite a few other published hex crawls, as well as a ton of blog and forum posts discussing that style of gaming) and what I learned from each of them. I *could*, but we'd be here all day. Instead, I'm just going to talk about the things that seemed most important to me with regard to this project, the thoughts or decisions that I came to, and then what changed today. If you're interesting in seeing everything I read, I'll put a full list - a bibliography of sorts - in a footnote at the bottom of this post.

The first thing I need to say is that I generally hate the way hex crawls are presented. Hex crawling is a very specific style of playing RPGs that is vastly different to running a traditional dungeon, and for GMs who have never done it before it can be hard to know how to run a game. Even with modern releases - and I'm looking specifically at *Kingmaker* here - these publications just assume that as a GM, you instinctively know how to run this game.

Kingmaker - and most other hex crawls - does one of the things I would like to do with this project (and I really need to think of a name for this thing soon so I can stop referring to it as "this project" or "this thing" or whatever), in that it gives the players a partially completed map and asks the players to go fill in the rest of it. There are rules for how and when to fill out hexes and what happens when a hex is "fully explored". The problem is - and we're keeping new GMs in mind here, remember - how is the GM to know when a hex has been fully explored, so that she can communicate that fact to her players? The first book of *Kingmaker* doesn't really explain this, even though a large chunk of that book is taken up with the players beginning to explore and maybe fill out a hex or two.

Even though I've run a hex crawl (badly) and played in a (poorly run) hex crawl, I had a distinct moment of frustration and confusion while I was reading *Kingmaker*. I found myself flipping back and forth in the book trying to figure out if I was missing something that should have been obvious, something crucial that I needed to be able to run that game properly. Those few moments of frustration are the moments in which a GM is going to put your product down and go play something else, and I don't want them in anything that I release.

So that's my first takeaway. Whatever I end up doing, I need to make sure that the GM has all the tools they need up front. They need to be clear and easy to use. We talk about tutorialising in game design a lot - one thing I want to do is to tutorialise in product design, too. When I write this thing, I'll give the GM the tools they need and then walk them step by step through how to use them.

The second takeaway from reading all these hex crawls is that a large portion of the way these games tend to go goes directly against the design principles I set out when I started this series. I talked a lot about not wanting to build anything that doesn't see play; the flip side of that, something that I haven't ever really said explicitly, is that I don't want my island to be 80% filler.

Unfortunately, a large portion of hex crawls are just that. Because of the reliance on random encounter tables and things of that nature, lots of hex crawling sessions boil down to, “You enter a hex. There’s a forest in it. No random encounters happen, and there are no points of interest. You go north to the next hex. Still forest, but now there are goblins. Fight them or run?”

That’s dull. Random encounters are dull. I don’t want to build a dull adventure, and I don’t want to build a hex crawl with empty hexes. So what can I do about this?

What Changed

I was trying to figure out how to mitigate this, working out systems of mapping using smaller and smaller hexes to place points of interest and basically building the most crowded map you can imagine. It was ridiculous - way more than 20 levels worth of adventure, which goes explicitly against those design principles again.

I even started drawing inspiration from open world video games - the ubiquitous Ubisoft-style sandboxes with one large landmark that defines a region and a crowded map with smaller adventure sites surrounding it. Danger at every turn, that kind of thing. This was in the interest of reducing randomness, mainly. But again it led to far too much going on in the map - both in terms of the players being able to experience all of it, and it being way too much for me to build.

Feeling a little frustrated, I turned to Twitter earlier today (or yesterday, if you’re not a patron and you’re reading this on Friday) and asked for people’s thoughts about hex crawls. I left it very vague, in the hope that somebody would say something that led me down a useful avenue. And that’s exactly what happened.

Firstly, Mike Mearls chimed in.

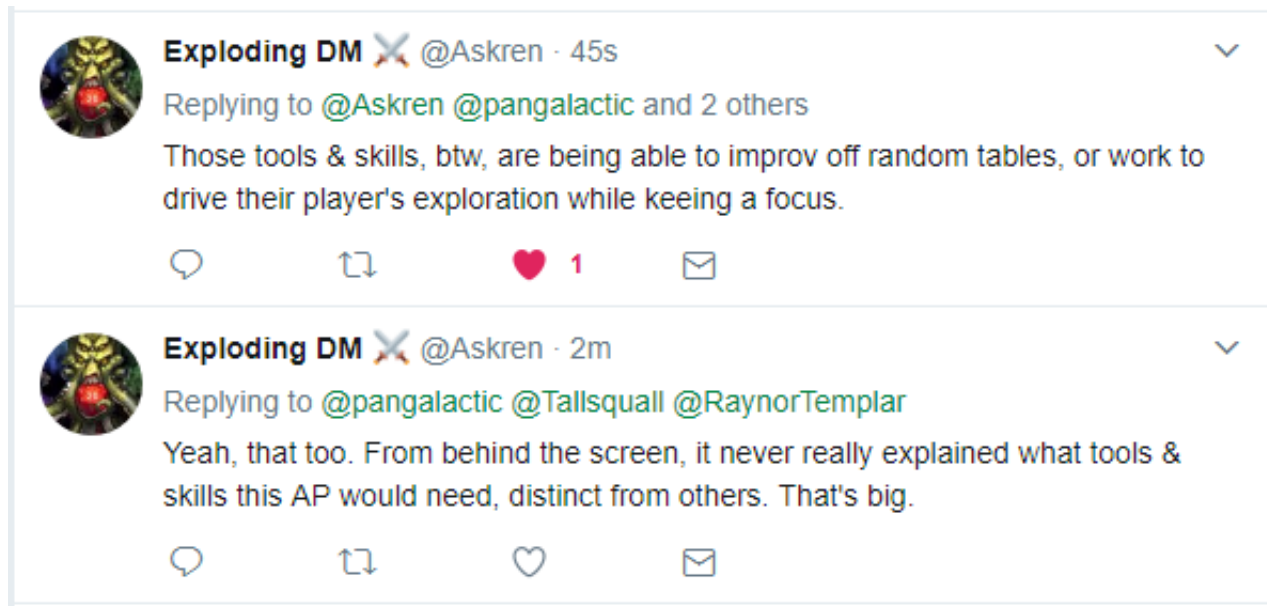


Quite a few people said this very thing, and if you’ve been following this series you’ll probably be able to see that this aligns quite closely with my design goals. Exploration is only interesting when there’s something to find, and a reason to do it beyond just exploring for exploring’s sake. I think this was one of my main problems with how *Kingmaker* starts; the players are just given a sandbox, and told to go map it. There’s a reason, but the conflict that really drives story isn’t wholly present.

I mentioned a couple of weeks ago that I really want this to be a story, with a beginning, a middle, and an end. I’ve got conflict built in and ready to go. What I need to do is make sure that there’s conflict driving the exploration, a need for the players to go out and map this island and make the discoveries I’m going to hide out there beyond the fact that they’ve been told to do it. I don’t know what that reason will be yet.

I do know that story is where I'm strongest when it comes to design. This was probably going to be something I did anyway; having it confirmed by Mr Mearls just reinforces my conviction to actually follow through with it.

Another thought I'd been having that was reinforced was the idea that *Kingmaker* didn't give modern GMs the tools they needed to run that adventure successfully.



[This is Twitter, so read those two tweets from bottom to top]

Modern D&D is much more narrative-driven than older editions; there's less emphasis on randomness, and on unfocused exploration. As already discussed, I want to try to build a wilderness exploration adventure that works with the way the game is played today. I'm not going OSR with this, even if I'm drawing on OSR tools to help me design.

The big revelation for me came out of a conversation with the folks at Hydra Cooperative. In response to my tweet asking for opinions on hex crawls, they provided me with a goldmine of information in the form of the [Hill Cantons](#) blog. I've put a link to the posts with the wilderness label on that site in the footnote to this post, and I recommend you spend some time digging into it if - like me - you're interested in the idea of hex crawling but don't have a ton of experience with it.

The game changer in those links came when I was introduced to the concept of [pointcrawling](#). That link will take you to an excellent discussion of what pointcrawling is and how it can be used alongside hex crawling. It's a good read. If you want something a little more concise, though, this paragraph from the introduction of Hydra's [Slumbering Ursine Dunes](#) (which they were kind enough to send me a copy of yesterday) sums it up nicely:

In a pointcrawl, the map emphasizes the focused choices of nodes and connections, as opposed to an all-directional hex-organized map. The lines that run between points represent paths, roads, staircases or what-have-you. They abstractly present the tedium of travel, the longer stretches of a journey that are just background. The points represent the interesting sites that break up a long trek. They might be full-on adventure sites such as a dungeon, a place for an encounter, or just an unusual landmark or piece of geography.

Honestly, this solves the problem I'm having almost entirely. In essence, I can build the island much in the same way that I'd build a dungeon, laying it out for myself like a flowchart of points of interest. Encounter sites etc. will form nodes on that chart, and each path between nodes will contain information about the landscape, travel time, etc. Since I've only been reading about pointcrawls for less than 24 hours at the moment, I don't know exactly how I'll execute this. But it's good to know that this problem has already been largely solved, and that I don't need to reinvent the wheel. ([I've had quite enough of that this month, thank you very much.](#))

The Issue of Time

The last thing I want to talk about is time. In that excerpt from *Slumbering Ursine Dunes* there's a sentence that refers to "the tedium of travel".

Wilderness exploration is a slog. Most of the hex crawls I've been reading are crisscrossed with paths and trails, roads that the party can follow. I'm building a mostly uninhabited island, though, and I want the players to feel like they're breaking new ground into the jungle. This takes time. In real life it's a slog, a grind, a *crawl* - but how can we get that across at the table without people actually feeling bored?

I talked a lot about travel time in a previous post, but how important is it in D&D really? Telling the players that it takes them 3 hours of slogging through the jungle to get somewhere isn't really important unless time is an issue. One solution to this, obviously, is to introduce time-sensitive aspects to the adventure - but if we do that all the time, it will become repetitive and dull.

It seems to me that it's best to introduce the fact that time is a resource early on by making it important at an early stage, and then use it a few times later for similar time-sensitive situations. It will always be a factor, but won't always be an important factor and can be glossed over when need be. That's a system I'm going to have to build later, once I'm further into the design process. Again, I don't have the answer yet, but asking the question is a good start.

Summing Up

This has been another one of those posts where I talk a lot about what I'm *going to do* and don't actually do it. As somebody who's read a lot of developer journals and things like that, I know how frustrating that can be. I know a lot of you are keen to see me start putting this thing together, and I understand that. I'm keen to do it. One thing I've learned from building big projects in the past is that I need to have a very clear roadmap for what I'm going to do if I ever intend to actually finish it. That's what this post is part of.

Still, that doesn't mean that I haven't been doing any creative work on this. I still don't have anything really detailed to share, but I'll leave you with a couple of stray thoughts that might indicate where I take this next.

- I like the idea that the turtlekin weren't always the only people on this island. I want relics of an ancient age, evidence of a civilisation that was once here - and might be here still, in some form.
- I've already mentioned the flooded mines at the base of the volcanic mountain. I think I want underwater exploration to be a big theme in this campaign. I have a vague notion of the flooded mines being one way of bypassing the mountains, if the party can successfully drain them. We'll see where that leads.
- After devouring the Hill Cantons blog, I also like the idea of a ruined city somewhere in the jungle. That could well form the basis for a good few levels of adventure, or could act as a site the party keep returning to, and would break up the wilderness exploration nicely.
- I thought it would be interesting to try and map the island in *Minecraft*, just for fun. Then I realised that a mile is ~1600 blocks in *Minecraft*, and that just one side of one hex would require me to place ~12k blocks, and I thought twice about it.



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