



World Maker

A single-player world-building exercise

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INTRODUCTION

Building a fictional world from scratch is a lot of work. Whether writing a story or running a tabletop role-playing game for a group of friends, it takes practice to build an intricate setting complete with warring factions, a timeline, and non-player characters who compliment the story. Often all this effort creates details that are never relevant to your players or principle characters. World Maker is an exercise meant to focus your energy into details, relationships, and traits that are relevant to your main characters or the players at the table.

Many tabletop RPGs have a role called a game master, dungeon master, or storyteller. It is often their responsibility to play the roles of the non-player characters, build the world the player characters live in, and describe all the sensory experiences and plots of the world to the other players. This often means that this one player has to do hours of work creating a campaign setting before the other players make their characters, and also must do hours of prep work before each session of play to have the story “ready” for the players to experience.

World Maker is an exercise about creating a fictional world by concentrating on the characters. Creating the setting as a response to the player’s choices at character creation ensures that everyone at the table is invested in the stories being told. You will create characters with random attributes and build a setting around them that fulfills and compliments who they are and the stories they can create. This exercise will help you run RPGs by making adventures and scenarios that are relevant to your players beliefs, relationships, and skills, with less time spent detailing parts of the world your players will never see or care about.

To play World Maker you will need:

4-6 sheets of paper and something to write with, or any blank digital document you can write and draw on.

A deck of playing cards, with the jokers removed

1

GENRE

If you don't have a genre of story or type of world in mind you may generate one by dealing a random card from the deck face-up in front of you. You may also select one of the genres below, or skip this step entirely and let the characters determine the genre as you play.

When choosing a genre think of novels, movies, and games that can act as touchstones or examples of the sort of stories you want to tell.

Consider the sorts of details that set your world apart from other examples of the genre. Is your fantasy world a low-tech planet on the fringes of a galactic empire? How does the history of your modern setting differ from our own? Note these ideas now or wait for the cards to inspire you.

Once you've recorded your genre return the card to the deck and shuffle.

- ♥ - Medieval/Fantasy
- ♣ - Science Fiction
- ♠ - Modern/cyberpunk
- ♦ - Apocalypse/Post apocalypse

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CHARACTERS

Next select a number of characters for your game. Use 2-3 characters for an easier, shorter exercise. 4-5 characters would be a greater challenge and force you to create a much larger, richer world.

Deal one card face up to represent each character. Make sure each character card has room beneath it for 2-10 more cards laid out in a column and an additional card between each column.

The value of each character card determines how detailed their backstory is. Face cards have a value of 10, Aces have a value of 1.

High value cards will have several details, while low value cards will have fewer. This disparity mimics the sort of disparity you'll see when you have different players during a tabletop RPG. Some player will be able to build characters with elaborate backstories, others will have only a few ideas of how their characters act and operate in the world.

These card values may also represent the age and experience of each character. Low values could be younger characters or single-minded characters, high valued cards could be older characters or people who are adventurous or have had complicated lives.

These aren't the only characters in this story, just your principal or main characters. Other side characters will reveal themselves as needed in your world. They could be relationships with your main characters, faction leaders, or common friends and enemies.

3

DETAILS

Deal a number of cards face up under each character equal to their card's value. These cards each represent the history of each character, who they've met, what they've done, and what skills they have acquired. Each detail needs to be accounted for in the world you build.

The card suits represent different aspects of each character.

♣ - Skills

♦ - Heritage

♥ - Relationships

♠ - Traits

Refer to the **Card Codex** at the end of this book to see what each card represents.

Be on the lookout for common suits between the characters. What do these similarities say about the world, if anything?

Lots of skills might point to a group of mercenaries, freelancers, or other experienced professionals.

Several heritages or relationships may mean that the world is densely populated with several geographical features and cultures.

Characters who all have several traits might indicate a special group brought together for a singular purpose.

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WORLD BUILDING

You should now have a few characters with different skills, appearances, relationships, and heritages. Where did they come from? What happened to them? What does this world look like? You now have all the tools you need to answer these questions.

Review each character's details. Then start asking yourself questions about who these characters are and how they got here. Start with one character. Elaborate on answers that interest you and write notes as you go. You might think of something that will be relevant later as you build your world.

If you find yourself struggling at this stage, each card in the **Card Codex** has some sample questions and prompts to inspire you.

Keep track of any major factions, places, and events that you created to give these characters their details. Other characters may share these details, and they will help build the geography and laws of your world.

Not every character detail needs to exist by itself. If a character has both the soldier and the doctor skills these two details could be combined into one: combat medic. This way a complex character becomes easier to detail.

When you find yourself describing a place, make a note of it and start drawing a simple map. When you make a faction, name it and write a brief description. When you describe a fundamental principle of your world, like how magic or technology works, make a note of it. Create a timeline of events like births and deaths of notable people, wars, etc.

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CONNECT

Next you will connect these characters together with relationships. This can show why all the characters are in the same location, part of the same faction, or facing the same challenge in your story or game. Without connections or relationships your characters might not have any reason to work together.

Deal a card between each column of character detail cards. These are relationships or connections between the characters. If there are more than 2 characters deal an extra card to the right of the rightmost character; this introduces a connection between the rightmost character and the leftmost character.

The suit of the card between the characters determines the nature of this connection.

- ♣ - The characters share a skill
- ♦ - The characters share a heritage
- ♥ - The character share a relationship
- ♠ - The characters share a trait

Select a suitable detail between the characters that they can share. If the characters don't share any suit cards that's okay. Just use one detail card on one of the characters of the appropriate suit to create the relationship. If neither character have a detail card of the appropriate suit, select the one you like from the **Card Codex** or deal cards from the deck until you deal a card of the appropriate suit.

6

QUESTIONS

Once you finish step 5, you're done! You'll need some names for your characters, factions, etc. but the world building you've done has already created a setting that is centred on the characters. Here are some tips to help you incorporate every detail of each character:

Be on the lookout for common suits. What do these similarities say about the world?

Lots of skills might point to a group of experienced professionals.

Several heritages or relationships may mean that the world is densely populated.

Characters with several traits might indicate a group brought together for a singular purpose.

Does one of your characters have two heritage cards? Maybe that is a single location.

A character with multiple skills could represent a single specialized profession.

Characters with multiple relationships could belong to a single specific faction.

Maybe two heritages are actually a location that has changed over time.

Characters who share a skill might have worked in the same profession.

Character who share a relationship may be part of the same faction. Maybe one left on bad terms?



SKILLS

Ace - Sharpshooter

What is their arsenal? Who, if anyone, do they work for? Who trained them?

2 - Duellist

How do they fight? What do they use? Are there strict rules of conduct?

3 - Artist

What is their medium? Can they make a living or is this a side gig? Is their work well known?

4 - Labourer

What do they do? Are they a professional? Are labourers respected, commonplace, or rare?

5 - Criminal

Are they on the run or did they serve their time? Do people trust them? Why do they do this?

6 - Doctor

What do they practice? Have they ever saved someone's life? Where did they train?

7 - Soldier

Have they ever killed anyone? Where was their last battle? Did they volunteer?

8 - Bounty hunter

Are they valued or reviled? Who do they work for? Is there a type of job they refuse to do?

9 - Assassin

What is their preferred method/target? Who else knows they do this? Who do they work for?

10 - Pilot

What do they drive? What sort of reputation do they have? Who keeps their vehicle in order?

Jack - Arcane/Technical Knowledge

Witches, sorcerers, hackers, druids, tinkerers, and thing-speakers. Is this common, or rare?

Queen - Leader

Are they religious, political, rebellious, loyal? Who do they lead? Why?

King - Academic

Philosophers, professors, sages, hermits and intellectuals of all kinds. What do they know?



HERITAGE

Ace - Decaying Ruin

What used to be here? What happened? Who else knows about it? Where is it?

2 - The Breadbasket

What do they produce? Who relies on it? What makes this place good at producing food?

3 - Islands

What separates these places? Are they all the same? Are they all inhabited? Where are they?

4 - Beyond the Maps

Uncharted space. What does it look like? Why is it unrecorded? Who else knows about it?

5 - Underworld

Below the surface or below the status quo? What makes this place different?

6 - The Verdant Place

Lush and full of life. Why is this place so fruitful? Is it guarded or dangerous? Where is it?

7 - Suffocating Wastes

Desolate, polluted, bloody. Did something happen or was it always like this?

8 - The Caravan

Does it have a route? Does something guide its path? Where is it now? Where is it going?

9 - Arctic

Is it remote or populous? Is the weather harsh? Are resources scarce? Where is it?

10 - Desert

Hot and arid, or cold and icy? What survives here, if anything? Where is it?

Jack - Shipyards

What is built here? Who owns it and who runs it? Where is it?

Queen - The Streets

A social strata or a lowly place? What do people here lack? How did they survive?

King - The Capital

Is it huge and imperious? Is it purely symbolic? Why is it important? Who rules there?



RELATIONSHIPS

Ace - Rebellion

What are they fighting? How long has this fight lasted? Who is involved? Who leads them?

2 - Criminal Syndicate

What do they do? Are they in the open or the shadows? Is this ongoing or a one-time thing?

3 - Incorporate Company

What does the company do? Where are their headquarters? Who is their competition?

4 - Arcane/Technical Coven

What knowledge do they covet? What does membership entail? Are they valued or feared?

5 - Science Foundation

What have they discovered or achieved? Who is allowed entry? Who funds their work?

6 - Religious Sect

What do they worship? What are their beliefs? Is this sect a prominent religion or a cult?

7 - Underground Gang

What laws do they break? Who do they compete with? How do you become a member?

8 - Workers Guild

What work do they do? Who represents them? Who uses the workers for their labour?

9 - The Dead

Memories, bodies, or something different? Are they revered, feared, ignored?

10 - Nature

Are they a keeper, poacher, or something different? Do they exploit nature or not?

Jack - Sole Survivor

What calamity did they survive? Who died? Is anyone missing? Who was to blame?

Queen - Alternate Reality

Where did they come from? How did they get here? What is different in that world?

King - Wealthy Family

Does the character have access to this wealth? Who owns it? How is it maintained?



TRAITS

Ace - Tattoos

Who applied them? What do they represent? How do other people react to them?

2 - Scars

Where did they come from? How noticeable are they? How do other people react to them?

3 - Multiple Languages

Are they fluent? How did they acquire these languages? Is this sort of thing common?

4 - Died

What happened? How did they beat death? Does anyone else know about this?

5 - Doesn't Sleep

Is this psychological or physiological? Is this sort of thing common or rare?

6 - Cursed

How did they get it? Is it literal or just unlucky? Can anyone fix it/make it worse?

7 - Blessed

How did they get it? Is it literal or just lucky? Can anyone break it or take it away?

8 - Synthetic

What are they made of? Is it one thing or a mix of materials? Is this sort of thing common?

9 - Augmented

Is this cybernetics, transplants, or something else? Is this sort of thing common or rare?

10 - Prophet

What do they predict? Do these predictions tend to come true? What does it look like?

Jack - Alien

Where are they from? Does anyone else know about this? How did they get here?

Queen - Immortal

How else are they different from mortals? Are there others like them? Is this common?

King - Time Traveller

Where and when did they come from? How did they get here? Can they get back?