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Worldbuilding Ep. 007: Character Design Using Your Thematic Subjects

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Worldbuilding Projects

Keith Curtis is an illustrator for a collection of roleplaying companies (such as Green Ronin and Hero Games) and has created a complete world ready for exploration, which can be found at Savage Earth.

Also, check out this hilarious and inventive webcomic at Giant in the Playground's site (of Order of the Stick fame). It's called Erfworld…

I'll be posting some images from these two sites this week when I get my show notes in order…

Worldbuilding Episode 007 Show Notes

I'll have the show notes for episode 06 and 07 up this week…I promise! Until then, here are some quick diagrams to go along with the show's content. Both of these illustrate how characters can be based off of a central thematic subject. I use *Batman Begins* and *Serenity* as examples…

Batman Begins

fear

Batman: I will use fear as a weapon to fight criminals and protect the innocent.

Ras at-Ghul (a variation of Batman): I will use fear as a weapon against society because society is NOT innocent.

Falcone, Crime Lord: You fear what you cannot understand...

Scarecrow (in direct opposition to Batman): I will use fear as a weapon for personal gain and to terrorize the innocent.

Serenity

self-reliance

Mal: I will not support or be a part of any cause or statehood because they all sacrifice individual freedom.

Reavers: We believe in COMPLETE freedom (savage anarchy)...

Kaylee: I believe in friends over the individual.

Jayne (in opposition to Simon): I will put myself before anyone else.

Simon: I will put family before myself always.

Alliance: we fight to control the freedoms of the individual.

Operative (direct opposition to Mal): the individual must be controlled by the state; I will sacrifice my individual freedom to serve only the state.

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1. Keith Curtis January 30, 2007 12:11 pm

   Great episode.
   The examples really help to clarify the subject matter. This show makes me think about my game world in exciting new ways. I'm prompted to go and write up some of the themes and work up some of the charts like you have posted. Some that spring to mind are:

   1) Mystery. This one was planned from the start. The world itself is a mystery, of course. How did it get this way? Who were the demon kings? It's been very difficult to only drop hints, since revealing my answers would be antithetical to the campaign. On a smaller scale, most of the adventures involve discovery. Players have secrets, NPCs have secrets, nations have secrets, even inanimate object sometimes possess secrets. Discovering these secrets are one of the things characters do most.

   2) Conflict. The first thought is well, duh, it's an rpg. But I don't mean combat or overt physical

conflict. This is more social and political conflict. Every time I create a major social force or NPC, I try to create a roughly equal or at least prominent force or character who wants exactly the opposite thing. The real world operates this way, or at least any part of the real world that bears scrutiny.
Social and political opposition creates faction, or identification with cause. These are hooks that players can readily grasp and work with, which is one of the main reasons White Wolf was so spectacularly successful.

3) Prejudice. This one was totally unexpected. In creating social conflict, the theme of inequity came up again and again. Originally, I had placed this in the world as a tool for creating contrast: The works of civilized man are made to look grand, by showing in sharp relief the lack of power and accomplishment in those who reject that society. I had no idea how often this would resonate with my players, and how many times this would create role-playing conflict. Modern role-players are products of their society, and the current, multicultural, post-civil rights world they live in shapes their reaction to social injustice. Were I running this game for Elizabethans (whose world view I based much of the civilized society on), it would be a very different game.

Well, this "comment" went on much longer than I intended, but the last podcast just left me filled with a desire to get this down on metaphorical paper before I forgot. I intend to work this into a full essay on the Savage Earth site.

Which, by the way, thanks for mentioning.

2. Editor January 30, 2007 1:42 pm

   Hey Keith,

   Don't worry about the length. I really liked reading this. I'm blown away that you are using these concepts to look back at your own world. This feedback is helping me.

   Please let me know when you put that essay together…

3. Themes in the Savage Earth « Out Of My Mind January 30, 2007 11:38 pm

   […] to story-building. He uses many examples from popular culture and the classics. The latest episode, #7, deals primarily with how characters interact with a central theme. It has prompted me to explore […]

4. Keith Curtis January 31, 2007 12:03 am

   Well, I've decided to try and learn by doing, and have started a blog of my own. The first post (after the obligatory, "welcome to my new blog" post), is the beginning of the essay, slightly expanded from here. I'll expand it further in subsequent posts.

5. Keith Curtis January 31, 2007 8:03 am

   Oops: http://keithcurtis.wordpress.com/

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- Coming soon!

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