

Almost Instant Towns

By scott virtues

Nothing can kill a game session like not being prepared. It is an ongoing challenge to produce background material quickly and extensively. There's that old Catch-22 of Gaming: the more the gamemaster maps, the more likely the players are to walk off into uncharted territory.

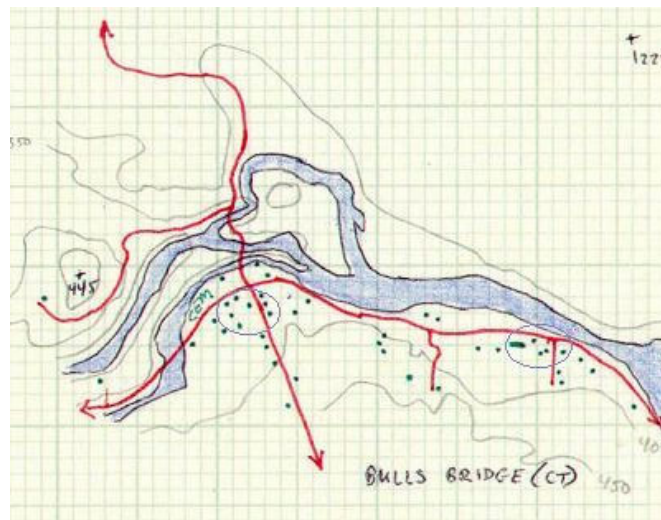
Quick Maps

I have always collected non-gaming books to use as game references. Books of mazes are handy. Few things are more fun than trapping a player in one of those 3-d eye-popping op-art maze books! I've also used books of floor plans for homes, books of floor plans of famous Cathedrals, the 1901 Sears catalog, etc. But my favorite tool is a good topographical map.

The U.S. Geological Survey has printed detailed topo maps (quadrangle maps) of the whole country. And there's so much detail that they even put dots for individual buildings. Sure, there's no way they can keep up with the people building houses, but we're going to be using the maps for fantasy purposes anyway.

It's not easy to design a realistic village. If you stare at an empty page, with or without lines, we usually think of boring, square patterns. While most urban areas are based on bland grids of roads, medieval towns were more open and compare well to small rural towns today.

When I needed a new town, I would either photocopy portions of a topo map of a small town and write all over it, or do a quick tracing on graph paper, like this:



Here, red lines are roads, blue is a river, and the buildings are dark green. The next step was to circle the business areas, and let the rest of the dots be houses. Yes, this is a sketch of Bulls Bridge, CT, where I used to go hiking. Sometimes, just this skeleton sketch of a town is enough. I can tell if roads are going uphill, which roads leave town, and I can guess where the inns are located. I see two hermits living off to the left, one of them on an island in the river. One might be a monastery instead, or a winery, or a thieves den. Interesting. I can put abandoned mines on the hillsides. You name it.

This simple town outline could be used in almost any scenario. I could match it up with a town dot on my large-scale world map, or just assign neighboring towns and distances to the arrows where the roads leave the town. Now, to spice it up:

Describe the overall architecture: Describe the roads & their condition. Underline the town center and one or two other key buildings

This little sketch of a town could be used in almost any scenario:

The dots could be tree houses for some panther race

or pits in the Elemental Plane of Earth

or adobe huts baking in the Arizona sun

or a neighborhood near you

or lifedomes on Mars (in which case the river would be a deep canyon)

To complete the town, you need to have a table you can check for type of businesses and another for residences. As the players pass the dots, you could say honestly that there is a theatre on the left and oxygen processors on the right. I wrote a program that can roll on long series of interconnected tables for me. With this tool, I can write the tables as text files and let the computer generate building descriptions on the fly. If I don't like the result, I can roll again, and it causes much less interruption than rolling real dice (and possibly having to pick them up off the floor).

Keeping the Players Local

You're probably wondering why anyone would go through all this bother, when the players are guaranteed to spend the night here and never come back. Well, I had a whole pile of these maps, so whenever players entered any town, I would have something ready for them.

But seriously, if you make a town interesting and make it a place where adventurers can get supplies at a good price, and have some key NPCs there to help them or antagonize them, then they will probably come back.

This little town might be one of the players' hometown. His family is green dot #1 (pick a dot, call it #1, call it home, done). Most game sessions lack any sense of family or character background. Nailing down some spots, which have personal meaning to the players, is a good way to start.

This town might have a player's mentor. I think the most effective adventures are ones where character must learn primary skills from masters. Then, you put their teacher of swordplay in this town, and they'll come back regularly. In a high-tech game, one building could be a community college where Player B took classes ... in any good bureaucracy, it's easier to go back and take more classes than to try and transfer those credits elsewhere.

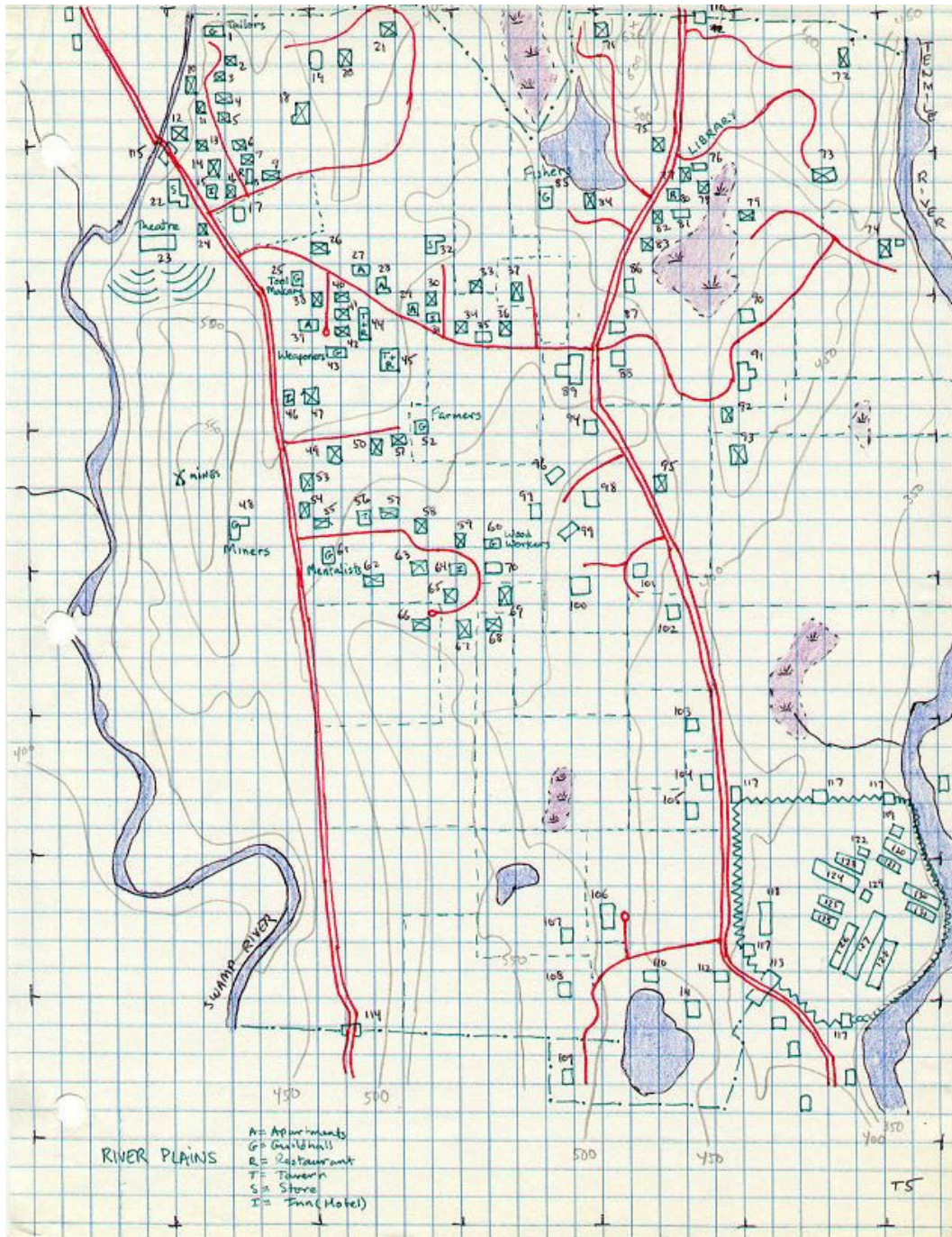
Key services, family ties, and colorful NPCs are just a few tricks to making any town attractive.

Sample Town: River Plains

Here is a sample town, rolled up this way. I drew this one about 15 years ago. It didn't take long to make it an interesting center for our group of adventurers. The building descriptions are brief, saying who lives in a house, or the brief use of a building. I could "wing it" and deal with any interior details based on these brief cues. I was using this in a Rolemaster campaign, so it's a medieval/fantasy town. I later called it Dunwich, ignored the fortress, generated new building descriptions, and used it in a Call of Cthulhu campaign!

I admit it; I spent a little more time on this town than usual. But it's still mostly wiggly lines and rectangles. I numbered all the buildings. These days, I would number businesses B1 through whatever, and homes as H1 through whatever, and keep them in two separate lists -- because that's how my table roller software generates the descriptions.

What I like about this kind of town is that it's not square. Players shouldn't be mapping towns anyway. I could highlight one part of town and decide that it's the original settlement -- there's plenty of color to add.



I drew an irregular wall around the town. The wall was damaged about 8 years ago, so there are piles of rubble in places. (Adding color is so easy...) There's a sizable fortress in the lower right corner, but in all the time we played in this town, I never described it in detail, and the characters never actually went there. I added some thin dotted green lines for fences. Purple areas are swampy, straight from the original topo map.

Now, just to give an idea of the basic cues for each building, here are a few sketches:

Bldg 1 = 20x40x2 Floor 1 = clothing store, Floor 2 = Guild of Tailors
2 = 20x20x2 Home: Thief-15, wife, one kid
3 = 20x20x2 Home: Animist-2
4 = 20x30x2 Home: Tanner, wife, 3 kids
5 = 20x20x1 Home: woodworker (out of work)
6 = 20x30x1 Home: laborer, wife, 3 kids (1 trapper, 2 too young)
7 = 20x25x1 Home: fisherman, wife, parents
8 = 15x30x1 restaurant, class B
9 = 20x30x1 tailor, wife, baby
10 = 20x35x2 Teamster guild, both floors

The nice thing with these sketches is, whatever happens to your players in this town, NPCs can suggest who they should go to for help. If your town has 70 buildings, you can even roll percentile dice to see whom they run into along the way ... rolls over 70 would mean no encounter. On the table here, a roll of 9 means they run into the tailor from house #9, who may be out with his wife and baby. Another roll of 2, and the Thief-15 from house #2 is also out, on the prowl. That sounds like trouble.

Economy?

With a little tweaking, even a long list of these building outlines can be turned into a lively economy. Example: for each town, pick three items that are in demand and three items that are supplied by the town. If there's water near your town, and you have lots of fishermen living there, fresh fish might be a supplied item. For supplied items, all prices in town should be 1/2 the listed price. For items in demand, you are free to double or triple the prices in town, or simply declare that the item is not available at all.

There are lots of other ways to build an interesting town economy, especially if your players contribute to the economy somehow. But that's the subject of another article.

Summary

Don't overlook real-world reference material for your games. After all, there is a whole world out there already.

Even a basic sketch of a town, with just a few key buildings described, will get you out of a jam and keep players interested. These days you can get sketchy maps from a variety of online databases, but they just don't look that good, and they usually have road names all over them. I recommend USGS quadrangle maps, but you might check the roadmaps in your car -- surely there's some tiny section in the spaghetti of roads that gives you an idea.

Now, if we could just come up with rules to keep players from knocking on everyone's door and pestering them ...