Three Hexes
'Zine #1

Three Hexes Zine #1 - Nov 4th, 2019

So here I was, all ready to write a book. I have no idea what I was thinking!

A book is a crazy amount of work. It takes a lot of time to finish. It takes a lot of organization to finish. Did I mention the time it takes?

Time that I apparently am not able to devote to it without sacrificing something else - minis painting, game running (I'm currently at 3 regular and 2 on off games), podcasting, blogging… and then there's work, homelife, dealing with a five month old puppy.

Yea… about that book and a related Kickstarter.

So I was all set to give up, let the idea go… and then Paolo Greco had to go and tweet this great idea.

Paolo Greco
@lostpaolo

One last thing: zines are great for practice because they take away many choices about form and size. You only need to decide on a number of pages and fill them with text and art.

11:16 PM · Oct 23, 2019 · Twitter for Android

Well… damn. I may not be able to crank out a huge book, but what if I created a zine that had my former posts with all the good stuff fleshed out. And the extras? I could do this… and gauge response and see how folks feel about them. Is there any interest in it… and it's on a pace that I can keep up with.

So… here we are. Zine #1. It's gonna suck. My maps are crap. My formatting is probably all screwed up. But… you hold in your hands the stuff that I'm trying to do better - flesh out and give YOU tools on how to really make your campaigns start out well, without worrying about creating all the stuff that comes later.

Because you have ideas… an itch that needs to be scratched… a thing that would just be so awesome if it could just get to the tabletop! And I want nothing more than to see you get that cool idea to players so that you can explore! I know thats what motivates me to keep on GM'ing.

So let's begin…

Michael "Chgowiz" Shorten, 11/4/2019

What Are Three Hex Campaign Starters?

"It takes just three hexes to start a campaign."

The idea of that you don't have to start big to run a campaign has been something that I've been saying for almost ten years, since I started blogging about Dungeons & Dragons in 2009. I didn't do so much to really start with my ongoing Advanced Dungeons & Dragons campaign that I started about the same time in 2009. I wanted to get gaming RIGHT AWAY and I didn't want to create a lot of content beforehand.

What did I do? I started with an overall idea, a home-base, and three hexes or locations that would give the players something to do. They would get to decide what appealed to them, but I was pretty sure that one of those three things would grab their interest.

Starting off, I had a concept of what I wanted the world to be. I wrote it down, in just three sentences. Something like this:

The world suffers the effects of the apocalyptic Doom and civilization retreats from the ravening forces of Chaos. Magic is feared and hated, the priests of Light cling to the threads of faith and the survivors fear what horrors the future holds. Lost lands, conquered by the Orcs and Goblins, await heroes to rise and reclaim abandoned civilization!

Then, I created a "home-base" - let's call that hex Zero. A town is easy to create and is almost a given for starting - which is why I don't include it in the three hexes or destinations that I want to provide for players.

So, let's call our example town "Enonia." What's a good story for Enonia? I'm going to limit myself to three sentences – to get the point across quickly and easily and give myself some interesting things to start with.

Enonia sits at the crossroads to the Duchy's midlands, its market square resolutely serving nearby farms and villages. The Marshal keeps watch over the lands from his Keep close to town, worried that Orcs and Goblins from the lost city of Irecia will attack. The Priest of the Light is desperate to find his missing apprentice.
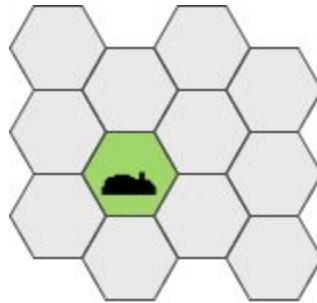

That's some good flavoring to set me off on figuring out what is going on within the town and around town, as well as something that the NPCs have happening in town.

So now I need destinations for the players to go do things: delve into dungeons, face fearsome foes, rescue NPCs in distress, you know, the stuff of adventure! I also want these to be things to do. Three concrete sentences that aren't fluff or solely background. They should have an NPC, a treasure, a destination, or a monster; something that is worth visiting this location. They can be related to each other, or independent, it all depends on what I come up with.

When I was creating this campaign, I looked around at what I might have, either as existing dungeons or things I've created, or something that appeals to me. Fortunately, I had just purchased a new D&D magazine called Fight On and in issue #1, I found a small adventure called The Ruined Monastery by James Maliszewski. I thought it would serve as a great first level for a mysterious dungeon, so I put it right next to Enonia. I then wrote three sentences to set the mood of this hex.

The Dark Woods are home to legendary monstrous spiders who spin webbed traps for the unwary. Neighboring farmers appeal to Marshal Roehm for more protection from the wily goblins raiding from their woodland camps. Travelers who come too close to the ruined monastery run in terror from grotesque, howling figures in the shadows.
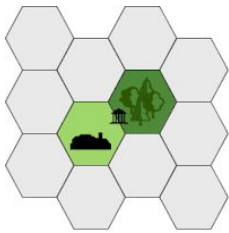
I wanted a few things going on in and around the locations that I create. Just enough to spark my imagination for later adventures, to give the players something to think about and do. Spiders and Goblins, plus a mysterious monastery would do the trick!

So, let's put something to the south of that hex. I wanted to make my own dungeon at this point, so I noodled around with some ideas, and also came up with the idea for an old abandoned dwarven mine, and a second, deadly danger close to town!

The bridge, on the road to lost Irecia, is home to a fearsome creature that no hunter will dare to approach. One-Hand Thom mumbles about an abandoned mine in the Dale Woods, whose tunnels have strange Dwarf carvings. Merchant caravans making their way north towards Enonia risk being raided by kobolds from the Dales.
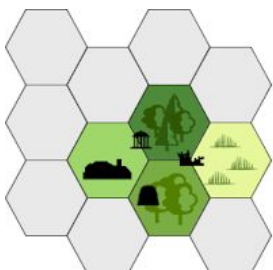
For my third hex, I had this idea of a lost city to the east. I wanted to give the players some reason to go out that way, as well as give them something to investigate along the way.

Marshal Roehm offers a reward to any brave soul who will scout out East to see what has happened to lost Irecia, Diamond City of the East. Fearsome orcs control the lands between the woods and Irecia, sacking villages and enslaving the inhabitants. Old Bob whispers about a magic sword hidden in the cellar of the abandoned Wayfarer's Inn.

That's it! That's all I needed to start my campaign world off. A homebase and three hexes or destinations to go investigate and explore.

From this little map, I ended up constructing this... but that took time. Still, with a landmass the size of Russia, it's cool to know that the players have only explored a teeny bit of this world (that's the yellow area roughly center/right). So much left to discover! (This is the first rough draft at a full map of the known continent from about 2010. That yellow spot in the middle right is the area of my original three hexes.)

So if I were to put this all together, this is what I'd do as a starting campaign, with just three hexes:

Campaign: *The world suffers the effects of the apocalyptic Doom and civilization retreats from the ravening forces of Chaos. Magic is feared and hated, the priests of Light cling to the threads of faith and the survivors fear what horrors the future holds. Lost lands, conquered by the Orcs and Goblins, await heroes to rise and reclaim abandoned civilization!*
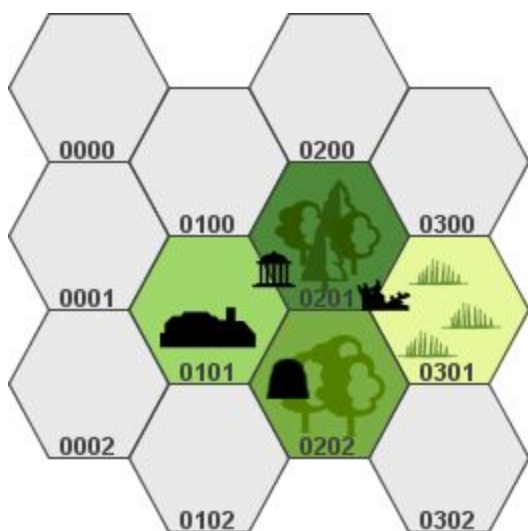
Homebase (0101) Enonia: *This old trading town sits at the crossroads to the Duchy's midlands, its market square resolutely serving nearby farms and villages. The Marshal keeps watch over the lands from his Keep close to town, worried that Orcs and Goblins from the lost city of Irecia will attack. The Priest of the Light is desperate to find his missing apprentice.*

Three Hexes:

Location 1 (0201) Dark Woods: *The Dark Woods are home to legendary monstrous spiders who spin webbed traps for the unwary. Neighboring farmers appeal to Marshal Roehm for more protection from the wily goblins raiding from their woodland camps. Travelers who come too close to the ruined monastery run in terror from grotesque, howling figures in the shadows.*

Location 2 (0202) Dale Woods: *The bridge, on the road to lost Irecia, is home to a fearsome creature that no hunter will dare to approach. One-Hand Thom mumbles about an abandoned mine in the Dale Woods, whose tunnels have strange Dwarf carvings. Merchant caravans making their way north towards Enonia risk being raided by kobolds from the Dales.*

Location 3 (0301) Plains of Irecia: *Marshal Roehm offers a reward to any brave soul who will scout out East to see what has happened to lost Irecia, Diamond City of the East. Fearsome orcs control the lands between the woods and Irecia, sacking villages and enslaving the inhabitants. Old Bob whispers about a magic sword hidden in the cellar of the abandoned Wayfarer's Inn.*

That's it! That's all I needed to get things started - grab a map or two for the monastery, the dwarven mines and the abandoned Inn and away we go.

(By the way, I know the map looks screwy. It is. This is how I did it at first, but my other maps just have the thing centered in the hex.)

Here is another example. This campaign starter is one I created on the fly while writing this, from scratch. It took me less than 30 minutes to write it down and create the map.

Campaign: *The frozen Land labors to heal from its wounds suffered during the Great Wizard Wars. The once-proud races now fight for survival against arcane-driven storms that bring ice and snow. Shamans see signs in their sacrifices to the gods of portents foretelling brave heroes who will start the ritual of healing.*
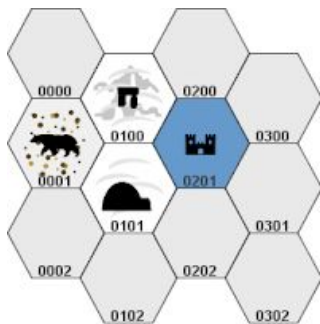
Homebase (0101) Elketra: T*he frozen city is a maze of igloos, underground chambers and forgotten spaces, built over generations. Zombies and skeletons are clawing their way through the ice and snow from a reopened burial vault. The great caravans of mammoths have arrived for their biennial visit, bearing rare goods, visitors and news of the other communities.*

Three Hexes:

Location 1 (0001) White Wastes: *Men and women journey through the cold sands and rocks to seek the Great White Bear; the trip serves as a dangerous trial of adulthood. Ice elf tents are springing up in the Dales, and the presence of their wolf scouts foretell of raids to come. White wyrms are preventing hunters from reaching plentiful herds of wild beasts, threatening the nearby tribes with starvation.*

Location 2 (0100) Ice Tombs: *Great, silent menhirs surround the barrows and tomb-tunnels of old that are dug within the glacier that spills into the sea. The largest barrow is the burial site of the Wizard Master Mekelteth, as well as the site of his treasure and a great artifact of legend. The angry spirits that roam the ice fields do not tolerate intruders into their domain.*

Location 3 (0201) Frozen Seas: *The castle of the last wizard assassin is perched atop one of the great icebergs that float in these waters. Her remains to lie within the castle, guarded by sea monsters, terrible wolves and spirits of those she killed. The Great Staff of Law may be stored within the castle; it is an artifact of great legend, said to be able to bring life back to the deceased if wielded by one with a true heart.*

Purely off the cuff, made only by imagination, some use of various things I've seen in my own readings, gaming and culture. Time it took to write all that? Thirty minutes. Yet, I have at least 3 different places for the players to go, plus some interesting tidbits of other things that I could use if I were to run this as a campaign. There's flavor for a DM to add to, but nothing too specific. Seeds and ideas, with concrete things to riff off of.

You can do this too! Three hexes are not that hard to come up with, and it doesn't take a long time to do so. You'll give your players a set of choices to start with, but nothing too overwhelming that might cause choice-paralysis.

A note about hex size and distance

Most of my hex maps are scaled to how I create my own game maps – how far can someone move in a day? For most maps, this means a hex is 24 miles across. An average person can walk 24 miles, taking rests, stopping for meals and dealing with average terrain.

I was really surprised at some of the negative feedback I received because of this approach! I had one person on reddit.com go so far as to dismiss the entire idea of 3 hexes based on that fact alone! Apparently hex size is akin to religion, and I was committing the ultimate act of heresy by making my hex maps adaptable and flexible.

The real secret to these campaign starters, and to the size of hexes, is that it's completely up to you how you want to scale and size them! I might suggest that the hex sizes are 24 miles across, but if you want them to be six miles, one mile, then go ahead and use them like that! These maps and starters are meant to be just that: starting points for you to create awesome campaigns the way you want to create them. You won't break anything by changing things, in fact, I am counting on you changing everything! That's what I would do with a book like this, and I hope you will too.

What is coming next 'zine?

I'm going to taking the Three Hexes posts from my blog and juicing them up.

You see, when I wrote them, I was just trying to get my ideas across. They were pretty much just brain dumps.

When I started writing for the book, I took things that Bryce over at Ten Foot Pole was saying - make things accessible, immediately useful and evocative. I looked at guides on writing for RPGs.

I also wanted to do things for a stretch goal - add in new NPCs, fleshed out things for each of the Three Hex entries to make them even more useful.

Well, that's what I'm going to do with this 'zine. Put them here. As you can see, the artwork is all free public domain stuff that I can find on the Intertubes. It's not going to be neatly laid out. It is what it is. And it still might suck… but this is what I'm doing now.

Let me know what you think!!!!

Art Credits:

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