

Top Down Campaign Design, David's Approach for Seasons

Phase 1: Pre-Planning – This planning phase sets up the big variables in your campaign.

1. Game Concept: The elevator pitch for your game, the single complete sentence that can wrap up what type, genre, and feel your game is going to have. Campaign length is another good element to decide at this stage of the game.

"I want to run a supernatural, isolationist, Dark Ages, Germanic thriller over the course of the next three months to correspond with the winter season."

2. System Selection: What system best supports the type of game you're trying to run? Pick it now.

"Because I want a low fantasy, realistic, and non-combat oriented game, I'm going to pick my favorite system. It has a gritty combat mechanic, good fear mechanics, and is already set in a setting that is not that different from Dark Ages Germany."

3. System Modification: Does the system need any modifications or can you run it with the vanilla rules? Any mechanics that you want to add as flavor, anything you want to represent by bending the base assumptions of the system?

"I want the system to be realistic, so I'm going to remove the ability for players to take magic life paths, and spells. Furthermore, because I want a specific mechanic to accommodate an abstract concept of 'supernatural attunement', I need to create a mechanic to handle that. Luckily, this system makes creating emotional attributes simple, and the modifications I need to do to the base system are minimal at most."

Phase 2: Pre-Player Phase – Here is where you'll set up the varying objects in the campaign world that makes it yours and allows you to interact with your players.

1. Game Scope: What is the scope of the game? Is it global, city-wide or just across the neighborhood? This step defines the physical boundaries of your game and the limitations of your planning.

"One of the themes I want running through my game is 'isolationism', therefore, I'm going to set the scope of the game only city-wide. I don't really want my players leaving the city. I have external elements in the world independent of the city, but I'm really only planning on events taking place within the city walls."

2. Evolutionary Items: What evolutionary items will I need to create, manufacture or define for my game? Evolutionary items allow you to really define the elements of your campaign that have shaped the events and need to remain consistent for the duration of play. This is where you need to clearly define the roles of science/magic in your setting so that you remain consistent.

"I don't need any specific evolutionary items."

3. Organizations: What organizations are going to be in my game? RPGs are rooted in the natural assumption that people tend toward grouping, so it stands to reason that this is one of the high level considerations that needs to occur when you plan a campaign. Remember *organizations are just like people*. They have their own preferences, goals, motivations and methods. These can *change* over the course of a campaign. Examples include government, religions, neighborhoods, etc.

"In the town we're playing in, the local government is headed by an old Duke. He presides over the two halves of the city, the Converted and the Pagan."

4. Conflicts: What campaign-wide conflicts already exist? Relating to #2 and #3, what are the 'big problems' in your campaign? War? Famine? Disease? These don't have to be a comprehensive list, but it's helpful to declare some of the big things right out, so your players know what to expect during character creation.

"In the more populous lands to the south, a war is still raging. There is a rift between the Converted and the Pagans inside the city. Winter is coming."

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Phase 3: Player Phase – This is the point in the campaign design where the players begin to make characters.

1. Character Place: At this point in campaign design, you really need to define how you see the characters fitting into the world. What do you want them to be (generally) and how do you want the world to react to them? Paint with broad strokes here, so you don't limit what your players are able to do in the world.

"I want the characters to have strong ties to the community, and be invested in the welfare of the town. They can be either Pagan or Converted."

2. Character Generation: Sit down with your players and roll characters.

Phase 4: First Session – The most important game, make sure you plan accordingly!

1. Setting Introduction: Thus far, you've given your players facts about your world. The first game affords you an opportunity to put those facts into a narrative. Show them things about your world without telling them. Descriptive language, mundane events, little anecdotes to really bring life to the 'what' of the place they live.
2. Engage Player/Character: Why does this player/character want to play this game? In the first game, you need to give them a reason to want to come back next week. Try and engage at least one part of the character's motivations or back story and tease that plot.
3. Tone Set: Setting the tone of the game doesn't necessarily have to deal with the tone of the story. If your game is going to be principally beer and pretzels dungeon crawl, then your first session shouldn't immediately start with a comprehensive, monotone and dry history lesson.
4. Cliffhanger: Let the first session close on a high-tension moment. Let the anxiousness of the players to resolve some plot, some sequence propel their motivations and invest them in the game further.