

Bottom Up 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: Player Phase – One of the first things that happens, after you've made some of the big decisions, is that the players make their characters. *Bottom-Up design does not start with the characters.* It's a reference to the *source* of the conflicts in the story. The base decisions are largely the same, but world-generation and conflict source are rooted in motivations set forth by your characters.

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

If you're using this method, then you should have an open character creation session. Basically, an open character creation session is where all of your players create their characters collaboratively and build their relationships out of the gate.

For Seasons, the players decided that they didn't want to be the leadership of the town. Instead, they wanted to be leaders of the *criminal* element of the town. A corrupt guard, a gang-boss innkeeper, a smuggler and an assassin.

Phase 3: Post-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. The party makeup and scope of the characters will largely define this step for you.

"The players have decided that they want their characters to be deeply ingrained in the function of the city we're playing in, so the scope of the game is pretty clearly defined as the city."

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.

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"The assassin wants to be a holy assassin for the church. Therefore, we need to define what the 'church' is. We're basing our setting off of Germanic Dark Ages, so the model of the Catholic Church during that time will do well for a base template for history, though we do want some changes.

Obviously, one the changes we'll need to make is that they sanction an assassin's guild. So, we'll modify the image slightly to present a darker edge to the model. Why does the Church need an assassin's arm? Well, tying this back into the setting, perhaps the Supernatural *isn't* a myth, and doctrine of the 'Devil's Among Us' is more literal than history implies."

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.

"The town we're playing in has a seedy underbelly. This implies that there is the rest of the animal that needs to be defined. The local government of the town is a law-abiding Duke, presiding over the city.

We already have one player bringing the Church into the game, so there's another faction. At this stage in history, the Church's biggest problem was trying to uproot the pagan elements and convert the people to their own system of beliefs. So, let's split the town to represent this: a pagan half and a converted half, separated quite physically, by a river."

4. Conflicts: What campaign-wide conflicts already exist? What player conflicts are created?

"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.

The players have decided that since they run the criminal element in the town, that the law itself is one of the biggest conflicts in their lives. Keeping themselves out of the public's eye, away from the legitimate guards and out of the crosshairs of the Church, all all big group based conflicts.

The characters themselves have individual conflicts. This is where I'd list them if I had the sheets in front of me."

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.