



On Cities

Preface

This is a collection of thoughts and ideas on the design of pseudo-medieval cities in fantasy CRPGs, essentially the sum of inspirational research I did when creating one of my own games, Temple of Eternity (referenced below a few times as *ToE*). The aim is not to create a realistic medieval environment – there is a lot of literature out there covering that topic – but rather something that works in games. Besides *ToE*, I will often refer to other (well-known) games for example. If you know of great examples of CRPG cities not mentioned here that you think deserve a look and possibly an inclusion here, feel free to contact me.

Also, feel free to pick and choose from this guide what you want and ignore the rest. However, I'd still be interested in your opinion. Now, I hope you find inspiration as well.

Building a city

Well then, let's start! I have learned the hard way that building a city can be one of the most daunting and exhausting, but also one of the most rewarding tasks in creating a CRPG. Why is that? Because essentially, a city is about human interaction (orcs, elves blah blah), which can be more complex than any puzzle – but also infinitely more interesting. Players will usually not grow attached to a certain puzzle, but if done right, they will enjoy returning to that special city and its inhabitants.

Role of the city

First of all, we need to determine the role the city has in our game. In general, I would separate between two kinds of cities here: The "homebase" and the "place of adventure".

The homebase

This is the most basic form of the CRPG city. Its use is nothing more than to provide a point of retreat for the player before he goes out adventuring again. Prime examples for this are the cities in the various roguelikes, most prominently *Diablo*. Those cities are kept deliberately basic because the player's mind is occupied by the dungeon out there, and he needs the city to be



understandable and reliable. If you return half-dead from the deep and only want to get healed and sell your loot, a faction war between the temple and the merchant guild is probably the last thing you'd find entertaining.

So, what would we need in a "homebase" city? The player will likely wish to

- heal wounds: Can be done at an inn (resting), a healer's place, a temple.
- cure ailments: Healer's place, temple
- buy/sell/repair weapons/armour: Blacksmith, maybe different ones for each
- buy spells/magic items: Resident spellcaster, maybe temple for divine spells
- identify items (if applicable): Either the people who also buy them or a resident sage
- train skills (if applicable): Any of the above, plus special trainers or maybe guilds
- get quests: Any of the above, plus random townsfolk or maybe a mayor

Here we go – the absolute most basic functions the city can have and the player will expect. There should be a good reason for leaving one of them out (for instance, a certain game mechanic just not being present, like item identification). Novelty alone is probably not recommendable. However, this doesn't mean you cannot be creative – the healer can be the standard friendly next door cleric, but how about a grim druid instead? Or an intelligent magical fountain? And even if you stick to the basic forms, a little personality can go a long way to make the city memorable. The sage can be an arrogant genius or absent-minded and well beyond his best days. Or a little more advanced – the mayor reacting differently to different characters (he doesn't trust elves) or the innkeeper complimenting the character on the shiny new armour (which he just bought from the blacksmith).

Depending on the scope of the game, there might also be the following (you could call the city "expanded homebase" – many of the western CRPGs in the 80s which focused mostly on game mechanics had cities like these):

- bank (for protection against random thievery encounters): bank, merchant guild
- vault (if the backpack doesn't suffice): vault, campfire chest
- transportation services (quick travel to other cities): horse carriage, port
- specialized shops (alchemy, for instance): as appropriate

Again, being creative doesn't hurt (giant dragonfly transport, anyone?). Well, it might if you overdo it – as said above, these are services the player not only requires but *expects*, and if every single one of the most basic functions has an unfamiliar shape, he will probably be unnecessarily irritated (yes, even if he always complains about the use of stereotypes).



As said above, "homebase" cities should use dynamic environments cautiously, depending on how much the player has to rely on certain services. What you can always do, of course, is adding. Maybe the player rescues a magician from the dungeon so that from then on there is a second magic shop specializing in rings and amulets. Maybe it's just a cosmetic change – the venerable sage dies and his granddaughter takes over.

Finally, there is of course the question of optics. A jungle city (and its inhabitants) will look different from an Arabian Nights city and from a barbarian northland village, but you probably didn't need me to tell you that...

That's pretty much it for the homebase. Now let's kick the door wide open.

The city as a place of adventure

I'm not certain who deviated from the "homebase" idea first, but the Ultima series is a pretty good candidate. Suddenly, citizens had their own schedules and did not only offer their services, but also could be interacted with in more subtle manners, at the very least offering information if questioned correctly. Over time, more and more additional elements were introduced to cities that came far closer to the intent of "role-playing" than the traditional dungeon grinding. The highpoint was probably Athkatla in *Baldur's Gate II*, a massive city which you could easily spend days in. So, what could we do to make our cities just as enjoyable?

In my experience, if I had to narrow it down, it comes mostly down to discovery and atmosphere.

Discovery: There is a lot to learn by exploring this city.

Atmosphere: I can imagine how exploring the city would feel.

For the discovery aspect, we first need to realize that exploration and discovery are two different things. Exploration basically means filling in the automap, while discovery means actually finding something. So, you could simply drop infinite content onto the player. But as you might guess, at some point it becomes too much. Ask yourself how much you would find fun, but don't forget to ask others as well. As the creator, you naturally have an overview and insight that players will lack at first, so it becomes important to look through other eyes as well. Bal Karesh, the capital in *ToE*, is too large because I ignored that point (I still love the city, though). Note that there are tools for making huge amounts of content easier to handle. The player might not be able to explore all parts of the city at first until he completes certain quests, or there might be an actual quest chain that leads the player through the most important areas. Much of the information about the city might also be optional, which would take pressure off the player. Just make sure he knows.



The atmosphere aspect, then, can actually enhance the discovery aspect – if the player enjoys the city's atmosphere, he'll probably have enough incentive to explore as much as possible, without being driven by a quest chain. So how do we create an atmospheric city?

I believe the important thing here is capturing the player's imagination, all the more so since we only have finite resources. Keywords like "immersiveness", "suspension of disbelief", "grabbing and holding attention"¹ basically all come down to this as well. In short, we don't need to create absolute realism, but rather help the player imagine the city as much as possible. As an example, there is no need to create a hundred civilians, each with their own home and workplace; the player in all likelihood is not even interested in talking to them, and they would just crowd the place. Instead, a number of peasant houses, even if they are all locked and empty (and, for convenience, quickly recognizable as such), are enough to suggest that there is a populace and the royal court of ten doesn't only rule over the inn and the weaponsmith. The player's mind will do the rest.

The basic groundwork can probably be summed up as such:

- Mapping is an important part. There are numerous tutorials out there that explain how to make good-looking maps, look them up.
- Detail is relevant. It's quite different whether the player is greeted with "Howdy, dude" or "Praise His Glorious Majesty!" or, in a viking city, "Haj Skadrag" (or whatever).
- A player can more readily conjure a picture of the city if it "feels right". This does not necessarily mean "real medieval city", but more meeting his expectations. You have an Arabian Nights city? Better have some camels strolling the streets, a crowded bazaar and a vizier or caliph in the palace. However, you can get away with a lot of things as long as they are internally consistent. Best example is Discworld, which is completely unreal with the world resting on elephants resting on a turtle, but this hilarious construction is shown influencing the world in so many ways that it is just taken for granted. Besides, we are doing *fantasy* RPGs here, right? So, there's this city in the desert without any water nearby – ah, it gets its water from the huge magical fountain in the temple of Aquiar. But then the cult likely has an enormous position of power, and the god should have a good reason for such a powerful (and permanent!) wonder. And maybe, just maybe, there is a dark secret behind it that the player can uncover through much exploration in an optional sidequest...

"Feeling" and "details" are quite the cues here, as they often go hand in hand. Instead of a long elaboration, I'll rather list a number of details that can immensely add to the "feeling" of a city:

¹ Beyond googling this stuff, I may recommend <http://www.gdcvault.com/play/1015464/Attention-Not-Immersion-Making-Your> if you're really interested in going deep. However, this is in no way necessary to continue.



Origin of the city – why was it built?

If the city is located in a fertile area, it's obvious. If not, there should be a good reason. Resources are a common explanation, but think that path to the end: If the city has been established because of iron mining operations, it makes sense if iron weapons and armour are cheaper here than in other cities. Or maybe they are not, because the mining company doesn't sell any cheaper to the local blacksmiths, but that's a sure reason for conflict... and so on.

It is also possible that the earlier reason the city was founded for has been replaced by another role now. Some roles cities can take.

- Trading centre (likely has a port, great market, powerful merchant associations, crime)
- Place of science and education (library, academy, maybe cultural institutions)
- Seat of government (residences of government and nobility, strong guard force)
- Military outpost (barracks, armories, blacksmiths, many farms to feed the soldiers)
- Religious centre (temples, scribes, libraries)

Of course, all of these can be turned more fantastic. How about having not a standard royal court government, but rather a dragon who protects the city? Alright, he might snack a virgin every now and then, but is that too high a price for the protection he offers? Quite the question for the hero to be...

Wealth

The city's wealth can often be directly derived from its role and environment – the principal seat of the dominant faith, located in a fertile country near a large river will be quite well off. This might show on your maps, with gold-adorned buildings of stone and marble instead of shabby wooden huts, but also in the services and goods available. Merchants that sell all kind of expensive magical items simply make more sense in a community that can actually afford those things.

Character of citizens

Role and wealth of the city should also influence the mood of its inhabitants. The citizens of an academic town are likely more open-minded, absent-minded, or both. People living in a remote mining town might never have seen someone like the lizardman in your party before, whereas the populace of a trading centre is likely quite accustomed to all kinds of weird sights from far and wide. They are likely also quite adept in separating your heroes from their money, one way or the other. If the city is wealthy enough and situated in a hospitable environment, those lizardmen might even have a small community of their own in the city, complete with their own building style, just like the "china-towns" in American port cities, for instance. (In *Might & Magic X*, there is a naga quarter in Seahaven, a great example of this.)



Rules

Laws and customs can really define a city as well. Maybe it is forbidden to bring certain goods into the city, and the guard regularly checks wanderers at the city gates. Maybe it is forbidden to show that you are devoted to a certain god, which could bring the healer in your party into trouble as she really doesn't like hiding her faith.

Dynamics

Now in a city of a certain size which will play an important role in the heroes' adventures (otherwise the effort is probably not worth it), dynamic events are a great way to add colour. There are two kinds of dynamic events – player-triggered ones and independent ones. The former are a great way to show the player that his actions really have an effect onto the world. Examples:

- People greet the player differently according to his level, status or wealth
- Merchants lower the prices if the player helped them sometimes
- People the player has freed from prison move back into their homes
- With growing reputation (after solving x quests for influential persons), the player is allowed access to restricted areas, from the nobles' quarter to the secret library
- The player was the deciding factor in a power struggle, and the candidate he supported is now the king / high priest / master wizard of the city

Independent events happen without the player triggering them, either randomly or after a certain set time. These give the player the sense that the world develops on its own, which adds much to it "feeling real". Examples:

- People enter and leave the city (for various reasons; see the above example of the granddaughter taking over the late sage's business. The first few times, she'll repeatedly say "my grandfather would have known that", but after a few times, she'll find answers to your obscure questions about strange relics just as well)
- Power struggles can also happen without the player's intervention. When a new grand priest is crowned who intends to banish all magic-users from the city, the player will regret his choice to ignore the news about the conclave meeting...
- Traveling merchants regularly put up shop in the city for a few days. If the player is attentive, maybe he'll get a great deal or find something other shop owners just don't offer².

The most advanced dynamic events are probably faction conflicts. These require quite an effort to

² I did this in ToE to great effect and have not seen it used that much anywhere else. The difference to just randomly generating the shop inventory is that regularly recurring merchants lead to a pattern the player can figure out and adapt to. For interested players, this can add a whole additional layer of discovery. Just randomly determined inventories are just – random.



implement, but the effect is almost always worth it. This is because they include many of the previously mentioned elements and form a greater whole of it. A faction conflict requires important decisions from the player (well, you should design it so it does); it gives him the feeling that he can influence the world on a larger scale, that his decisions have meaning; that the game world had a history before he entered and that this history will continue after his campaign is over, really making it feel alive; that he can approach the game world in a way he wants to instead of being led by the nose; and in an optimal case, he becomes emotionally invested in the faction and its members. The underworld conflict in *Baldur's Gate II*, the civil war in *Skyrim* and well, a lot of happenings in *The Witcher 2* are all fine examples of this. Of course, the downside is that you'll have to edit several parallel quest chains and take care of possible faction conflict results (i.e. changing who sits on the throne at different points in the game).

Specific places

Finally, here are some suggestions for locations you might place in your city:

- Ruler's citadel (with treasury to raid and unexplored caves below)
- Jail (break in to rescue someone or break out to rescue yourself)
- Casino (mini-games, good place to meet the rich, probably cover for illegal business)
- Curio collector (buys and/or identifies strange things you found on your journey)
- Shrines of strange gods (maybe your offerings have an effect, maybe not)
- Shrine of forbidden god (protect it if a good god, find and destroy if an evil god)
- Storyteller (possible source of information, unverified as it may be)
- Haunted mansion (drive out the ghosts, then maybe make it your own)
- Vault services (maybe you found some lost vault keys – finders keepers)
- Secret temple library (forbidden to the uninitiated, heavily protected)
- Arena (bet on fights or fight yourself)
- Port authority (with a library full of nautic maps and a storage full of detained goods)
- Assassins' guild (you don't find them, they find you – both as a target and a recruit)
- Public bath (colourful, unusual meeting point)
- Linguist (can decipher old texts or maybe teach the hero the dark elf language)
- Carpet maker (can he really make flying carpets? And what does he need for those?)
- Gypsy (tells the future, knows how to remove weird ancient curses)
- Chronicler (manages the city archives)
- Advocate (if you wish to introduce another level in faction conflicts...)

Happy crafting!