World Building: Exteriors
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What's an exterior? A map in a RPG? Paper? Pixels? Words in a book? The scenery? All these things depending on the medium. But exteriors are also part of the story. They can't talk, but they have a huge amount to say about themselves and the inhabitants in their vicinity.

A Village/Town/City

A population center isn't just a collection of houses and businesses. It's where someone lives, works, and often dies. All are planned in some way by the builders whether they know it or not. Some branch off from the main road leading through an area. Some are defensive in nature and use terrain to their advantage. Others follow the contours of the land as they expand for farms and pastures. Many are formed just because a group of people happened to gather there on a regular basis and some decided to stay. The smallest village can be just a handful of buildings clustered in an area while the largest cities can hold hundreds of thousands of inhabitants, but most are some size in between.

Small villages tend to be self sufficient. They're often made up of close knit people who fill what niches they can locally, and travel to larger towns for specialized services. Fields, flowers, wagons, livestock, and other such things are normal for their vicinity. There are few if any merchants since such a small economy won't support them.

Town size can range from a large village to a small city. They have distinct areas that a village doesn't, but those areas aren't so large or developed as in a city. There's normally local specialists like blacksmiths, tailors, and brewers, but a large town would support at most two of each in addition to an open air market for local farmers and merchants. Farms can be present, but are located on the outskirts because of the increased population density. Family farms are replaced with large areas of worked land to feed more people and to export food to cities. Cobblestone streets, lamps and gutters wouldn't be unusual, but only rich towns would have a wall or other large buildings. Flower beds, small garden plots, fountains, decorative trees and plants, signs, abandoned buildings, fences, and banners would be some of the common things seen 'downtown'.

Cities are complex, almost living, things. Because of competition within a large group of people, there are specialists of all sorts filling almost every niche possible. The distinct areas first visible in a town grow into their own districts and streets in a city. Oftentimes, walls divide these districts in addition to the city wall that encircles everything. Cities are

not self sufficient and rely on food being imported by farmers and merchants. What farms are present are on the fringes and out of the way places since it's normally the only land not developed. Farms are rarely within city walls. Besides many more of the same things that can be found in towns, and on a larger size, cities will have things that towns don't like patrolling guards, large building complexes, courtyards, and arenas. There will be districts of almost nothing but houses with little local economy, and others of almost nothing but businesses and merchants. Some rich, some poor, some between. Cities are most easily dealt with one district at a time, no matter the story telling medium.

Landscapes

This includes anything not built by someone. Plains, forest, mountains, but also the sun, moon, rain, and snow. More often than not, they are incorporated into the villages and cities. Even the most urban of environments have weather, grassy areas, and trees.

Weather is more important than people first think. The same conversation has a different feel depending on whether it's sunny or dark and rainy because there's been a different mood set before that point. Whether it's sunny, rainy, snowing, dark, misty or some combination of such should be decided before anything else to take maximum advantage of the mood and character interactions the weather provides. How it looks out that day is as important a part of the story as anything else in the story, and will often provide its own story telling elements for you to use once a decision has been made.

Forests, mountains and other scenery elements are just as important. The smallest blade of grass adds something to that picture and therefore to the story. Trees, rocks, ruins, water, and remains all tell their own part of the story without anything else being done.

Details in the scenery do another thing: They break up the horizon. You can't see far when you go outside unless you live on a mountain top. There's houses, buildings, signs, trees, hills, rocks, and all matter of objects blocking your view after a certain distance in any direction. The horizon being broke or not creates its own mood that can range from claustrophobic when the horizon is extremely close to disorienting when the horizon is far away. This effect can be used to varying degrees in different applications.

A good story utilizes all these exterior elements to best effect. The rules are often arbitrary and come down to what looks and feels right rather than steps A through Z. An eye for detail is a must and first hand experience looking at maps and noticing how your hometown is laid out helps a great deal. Happy creating.