RANDOM WORLDBUILDING: HISTORICAL TIDBITS

by Justin Alexander – March 30th, 2020

In medieval Spain, free cities would erect a gallows because the jurisdiction over the death penalty was one of the essential rights they gained when freed from feudal fealty.

This led to the gallows scaffold itself becoming a sign of freedom and independence. Communities, wanting to celebrate these liberties, would place the gallows in a prominent place where it could be widely viewed. This often meant the top of a hill. Thus the *Puig de lees Forques* (Hill of the Gallows) or the *Tossal del Penjat* (Hill of the Hanged Man).

First: This is a cool bit of lore that you can inject into your fantasy worlds. You can also spin off variants, too: Like free elf communities being allowed to plant a cutting of the white-barked True Oak. Or dragonborn displaying the skull of their dead sire to show that they owe fealty to no drake. Or lean into the gallows itself by having necromantic kings send undead gallowsmen to the cities they've freed from feudal lords.

Second: These high places where the gallows once stood are now ideal for wind turbines.

These turbines, of course, are sucking up the ghosts of the hanged men and women who died there and are either spewing them out across the local countryside or injecting them into the electrical grid.

MINING THE WORLD

Kenneth Hite often asserts that, "No invented setting is as interesting as the real world." No setting is better mapped, better documented, or (as we can see above) filled with more weird little bits of lore just waiting to be injected into your game. The real world and its history also instantly resonates with your players in a way which can be very difficult (Hite might say impossible) to achieve with a fictional setting.

(For example, I've written whole articles about how to establish the lore of your world and make your players care about it so that you can use it to best effect for awesome pay-offs. Conversely, you don't have to do anything for "Hitler" or "Great Pyramid of Giza" or "Shanghai" to immediately resonate and have meaning for your players.)

So how can you find cool historical tidbits like this and use them in your worldbuilding/adventure writing?

The example of the gallows above was actually a really clean cut example of how this can work, so I thought it might be instructive to break it down.

FIRST: READ HISTORY BOOKS. Writers talk all the time about how important is for creators of superhero comic to read more than superhero comics; or for writers of fantasy to read stuff that isn't fantasy. Basically, you can't cull fresh new ideas from history unless you're actually reading history.

This isn't homework. Nor is it targeted, specific research. (That's a different thing, although all kinds of tangential tidbits are likely to crop up while you're researching something else.) Ideally this should be pleasure reading; find history books (or science books or whatever) that you enjoy delving into.

In this case, I was reading Will Durant's *Story of Civilization*.

SECOND: JOT DOWN THE INTERESTING STUFF. Durant dropped the tidbit about the free cities of Spain displaying gallows as a sign of their free rights and it struck me as a cool, macabre detail I hadn't heard before. I wrote it down in a file full of similar notes.

THIRD: PULL ON THE THREADS. I thought it would be fun to share the gallows tidbit on Twitter, but before doing so I did a quick Google search to verify it. (Durant's series is fantastic because of its almost unparalleled breadth, but he also wrote it in the '40s, so its not unusual for some of his scholarship to have been superseded by new discoveries.) The search specifically led me to an entire book specifically dedicated to the death penalty in medieval Spain with a lot more information about the gallows being displayed by free cities. That gave me both the names of the hills and the factoid about the wind farms.

FOURTH: GIVE IT A FANTASTICAL TWIST. This is more art than science, but generally you can either look at your factoid and say, "If this existed, how would magic interact with it?" (This is the sort of thought that gives you "sucking up ghosts and spewing them out.")

Alternatively, you can look at the fantastical elements that already exist in your setting and ask how they would accomplish the same thing or achieve the same goal in different ways. (For example, elves planning cuttings of the True Oak instead of putting up gallows.)

AND THAT'S IT. It really does just boil down to being self-aware of stuff that *you* find cool and interesting, documenting that stuff, and then giving just the tiniest amount of thought to how it can be used or adapted.