Foreword

I poured days of writing and years of dungeon master experience in this project. I believe any DM can use the information in this document and reduce campaign preparation time drastically.

The Instant DM is a revision of the *Instant Campaign Builder* and *Instant World Builder*, originally published on Dungeon Mastering in 2007. Almost 2 years have passed since the publication of these 2 e-books, and I felt they needed an update. Both documents have been merged, updated, and trimmed to the bare essentials.

I hope The Instant DM helps you enjoy your hobby time more than ever.

Take care and keep the d20's rolling!

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Introduction

What is the Instant DM?

This book is for you if you want to:

1. Create your best campaign ever.
2. Create your best setting ever.
3. Not spend any time doing it.

That's right! Kicking back and blowing minds! They seem to be contradictory goals. Well, they are. Compromises have to be made. The more time you spend planning and plotting, the better your campaign should be. But I believe that it is possible to prepare a quality campaign without spending too much time at the drawing board.

To reach your objectives you need to answer the following *3 questions*:

1. How can I create a compelling campaign setting without spending much time on it?
2. How can I plan a memorable campaign without spending much time of it?
3. How can I have more D&D fun with less work?

I suggest that you *take some advice and leave some* -- after all, we all have different storytelling styles. So don't feel overwhelmed by the amount of information presented in here. Take the advice that you believe best suits your game and come back to The Instant DM later on to take some more.

How much time should I spend preparing for a game?

In my opinion, *anything over 1 hour of prep time for 4 hours of play is unnecessary*, but feel free to spend as much time as you want creating and writing -- I wish I could!

So let's say you're planning a campaign that will last 100 hours of play -- roughly 25 game sessions of 4 hours. You should be able to plan the whole campaign in 25 hours. You'll probably need as much as a few weeks of preparation in your spare time -- or you could hammer it out in one week-end if you're really pumped up.

Know the scope of your project

That 4 to 1 ratio of preparation time to game time is my guideline. By all means, determine your own ratio. Once you have decided on your work-play ratio, you can look at the scope of your project? Try to answer these questions:

1. How many games do you want to play in advance?
2. How much freedom do you want the player characters to have in their travels?
3. Are you using a published campaign setting or are you building your own world?
4. How long is your typical game session?

Last, but not least, compare the number of gaming hours you need to plan for to your work-play ratio. And ***be honest with yourself -- how much free time do you have to work on your campaign?*** Your new project inspires you today, but are you passionate enough about it to be inspired and motivated tomorrow?

Focus vs. Discipline

It can be hard to finish a project when it can't be tackled in a single day. You might consider making your campaign planning your top priority for a few days. Yep, you read that correctly! But I do have one quick disclaimer before I go on: ***please take care of your family and go to work as usual!*** That being said, it's possible that all your other side projects can wait. I would say that for most people, it is easier to focus on a single project and get it completed by working really hard in a short amount or time than it is to get it completed by working in spurts over a long period of time.

If you struggle to complete all the projects you undertake, I suggest you take a look at "Zen to Done" by Leo Babauta [1].

[1 - AFF] Zen to Done http://tinyurl.com/zen-to-done-dm
Note: Whenever you see "AFF" next to a link, it's an affiliate link. Dungeon Mastering takes a cut of sales made from readers using these links

Knowledge

The most important building block in a campaign is knowledge. Your **knowledge of yourself, your DMing skills, your players, and their characters**.

If the characters have yet to be created, I suggest you plan a first game around character creation before you start working on the details of your campaign. During this first game, make sure that:
• All the players have some backstory.
• You survey their expectations
• You are aware of their style of play preferences.

Your draft is your final product

Chances are you will be the only one ever using your campaign. If your goal is to publish your work, the Instant DM is not for you. Let's take for granted that your work will not be submitted to an art or literary contest. **Your campaign is yours, and yours only**. Don't spend too much time on maps or character sketches and **be brief in your notes** - as long as you are able to understand your notes when you read them.

All the shortcuts are worth something - time!

Style of play, expectations, and backstory

Determine what your style of play will be. Hack & Slash? Heavy role playing? Casual fun? Comical? Ultimately that decision should be heavily influenced by your players. The best way to assess the success of a DM (and his campaign) is by measuring the enthusiasm of his players, so make sure they are playing the kind of game they enjoy and try to make the PC backstories an integral part of the campaign.

Cashing in on familiarity

Do your players have a particular hatred for one kind of monsters? That's probably because you have introduced that creature in a past game. By planning a campaign around creatures and monsters you know well, you'll save a lot of time. A couple of

tweaks and modifications to theses creatures should bring unexpected surprises and a new challenge while still triggering memories of past encounters.

Familiar creatures also have the advantage of rarely being utterly retarded monsters [2].

[2] 30 years of stupid monsters - http://www.headinjurytheater.com/article73.htm

Props

Your players don't need to know that you only spend 1 hour or less preparing for each game. They just want to be entertained. They want something different. Props make an imaginary world more real, tangible. If you tell your players that their characters find an old ring in a chest and you actually hand them a worn ring, they'll be impressed. It definitely adds something to a game.

5 props suggestions for your D&D game

1. An old parchment. Soak a sheet of paper in watered down coffee then let it dry. You'll have a crispy, old parchment.

2. Gold pieces - real ones! Check out the Campaign Coins website [3].

3. Jewelry. You can find worthless necklaces or rings at thrift stores, garage sales, or even at home.

4. A message in a bottle. A little cliche but your players should forgive you if you actually hand them a bottle. Opening the bottle and fetching the message inside will be like opening a Christmas present.

5. NPC character sketches. I like to browse JCM's RPG art every now and then for character sketches. He takes requests and commissions too.

The props section comes early in this e-book. Why? If you design your adventure and then try to find props that fit specific scenes, you might come up empty handed. By finding a prop and then molding a scene around it you make sure you can enliven your game and you just might be inspired by all the random odd objects you find in your garage!

[3] Campaign Coins - http://www.campaigncoins.com/

Improvisation

The tools and tips described in the Instant DM can only be used successfully by a dungeon master willing to improvise... A lot! An unpredictable D&D game is an entertaining D&D game (and improvisation requires little preparation time!) Going with the flow and making stuff up on the fly is a good thing. I believe that it is beneficial to a D&D campaign. If you can keep the quality of improvised scenes high it should make your players feel like their characters can do anything and go anywhere. The gaming experience is definitely enhanced.

Do not fall in love with your campaign

It's normal to be proud of the hard work you put into your campaign. It's also normal to be excited to see your friends play out a great scene you prepared. So it can be hard sometimes to break apart a great encounter because your players are not taking an adventure hook or are bypassing an the encounter. These things happen.

Your campaign is yours, but it's not about you. It's about you AND your players, telling a story together. If you stick to the initial plan and never get off the railroad, you're telling a story by yourself, with minimal player input. DMs must be just as proud of their improvisation skills as they are of the labor of love that is their campaign.

The DM's paradox: prepare for improvisation

As paradoxical as it may seem improvisation can be prepared! I personally improvise anywhere from 0% to 100% of any given D&D game depending on what my unpredictable players decide to do. I must admit that sometimes they will notice that I improvise but only when I don't follow my own advice (nobody's perfect!).

So here are some handy tips to keep your campaign railroad free and your players impressed.

How to make improvisation seem planned in 14 easy steps

1. *Extra maps* - Print random maps and floor plans. If the PCs veer off-course you can use your spare maps as a foundation for the unexpected direction the players chose. There's a lot of free maps [4] and random map generators [5] online.

2. *Name list* - Create a short list of random names for NPCs that you have to create and introduce during the game.

3. *Geographic locations list* - Keep a list of geographic location names handy. To come up with such names, look up a world map - yes, the real world - or use any random name.

4. *Business list* - Create a short list of random fantasy business name. A good name makes every random inn or shop the PCs visit seem more important.

5. *Think in scenes* - You can divide your games in scenes. An encounter is usually a single scene. For each scene you should have a beginning that hooks the characters into the scene, a middle where information and clues are gathered, or monsters fought, a climax, and then an ending. If your players opt for unexpected destinations you can still use a hook or scene resolution idea from scenes that haven't been played out yet. You can then redesign the scenes from which you borrowed material later.

6. *Extra encounters* - Read about 1 or 2 monsters in the Monster Manual and bookmark the page(s). If an unexpected scene calls for an encounter you can easily throw a creature at the party. If the creature you had chosen doesn't quite fit the situation, just change the appearance of the creature and keep the stats. That way you don't have to research a new monster during the game.

7. *Outline* - Having a clear outline of your whole campaign will help you improvise because you can base your decisions on the big picture.

[4] Free Maps - http://www.dungeonmastering.com/tools-resources/387-free-dd-maps
[5] Random Dungeon Generator - http://www.bin.sh/gaming/tools/dungeon.cgi

8. *Side quests* - Having a side quest ready will give your players the feeling that they can follow any lead and find a well prepared DM. I often used pre-made adventures [6] for side-quests.

9. *Give players loot* - My players are suckers for loot. It will take their minds off the details of the adventure for a few minutes. I personally roll treasure at random after encounters - and that takes very little preparation!

10. *Quirky NPCs* - Quirky, well role-played, and unique NPCs hint at good preparation by the DM. Keep a list of NPC quirks handy. Anything will do: Excessive good humor, always mumbling, annoying vocal habit. The point is not to win an oscar. Johnn Four from RP Tips wrote this great article on NPC quirks that lists 40 NPC quirks. You should print that list.

11. *Take notes* so you don't forget - It's easy to forget stuff you haven't really planned. Being a note fiend is a good thing.

12. *Extra traps* - I keep a sourcebook called Book of Challenges [7] handy for improvised traps. Pitting the characters against an elaborate trap can keep them busy though.

13. *Improv as a builiding block*, reader suggestion by Jill Seal - As soon as possible after the end of the game session I go through my notes and work out whether the improvised people, places, and objects could have a deeper relevance. Can I weave them more tightly into the story? Did the players come up with ideas about them that I can decide are true? Is there anything that needs to be elaborated or decided on?

14. *Take a break* - Something utterly unpredictable happened? Take a break and organize your thoughts. It's not ideal for the gameflow but it sure beats looking unprepared.

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[6] Free Adventures - http://www.dungeonmastering.com/campaigns-adventures/83-free-dd-adventures
[7-AFF] Book of Challenges - http://tinyurl.com/book-of-challenges

Campaign Building

Campaign Outline vs. Railroad

I always want to plan badass campaigns and memorable scenes but I don't want to force the players into a linear storyline. That's where a good outline comes into play. ***An outline defines major events in a campaign. A railroad determines how characters spend their time between major events in a campaign.***

When I plan my campaign I will outline the main events like this:
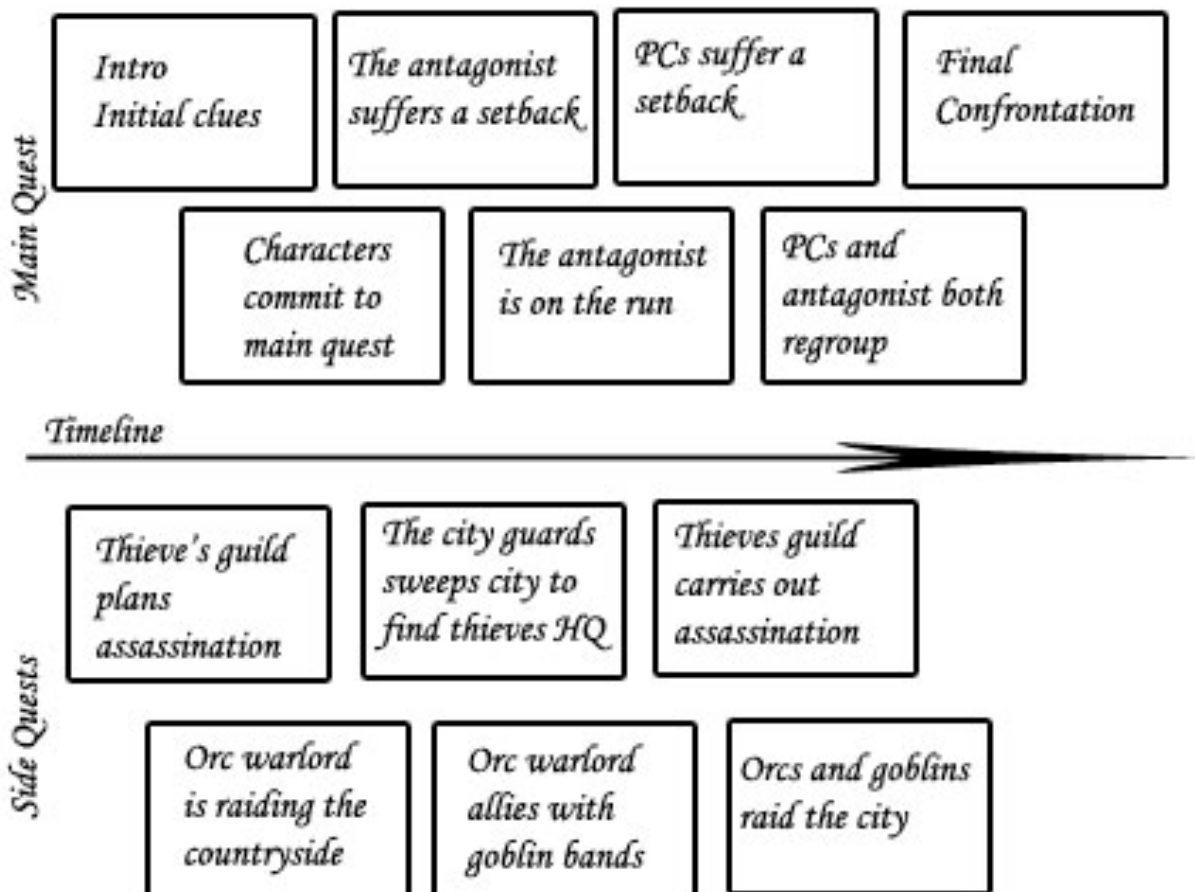
The PC party is loosely tied to the main quest. However if the players choose to be passive towards the main quest, the events still take place - the antagonist still suffers a setback but to the hands of other characters, not the PCs. The PCs can be witness to these events and jump back in the adventure if the opportunity arises.

The PCs can also be active in 2 side quests. They might not be drawn into these side adventures but they might be around when these events unravel and they could end up taking an active part in them - willingly or not.

By having a loose campaign outline the world around the PCs comes to life. The players are free to jump from one storyline to another and the multiple stories could even culminate into one action-packed chaotic finale! Do I have to prepare 3 adventures? No! I think of these storylines in scenes. In my opinion it is the key to creating unforgettable games. So let's discuss scenes right now.

Scenes - The LOCK technique

I read about the LOCK system in a fiction writing book and quickly figured that it would be useful for my D&D game planning. According to this system here are the 4 elements of a scene:

Lead - In a roleplaying game the leads are the PCs. Rich, well-fleshed out PCs can trigger great scenes. If you plan a scene around the characters in the group, chances are your players will enjoy it. The lead can also be an interesting NPC, a strange location or a special object like a precious artifact. Anything that grabs your players attention is a good lead. When planning a scene just ask yourself Why would my players or their characters care? A lead has to be interesting enough to make everyone in the party care.

Objective - Once you have a strong foundation for your scene (the lead) you can work on an objective. What will the characters want to do? If there is no clear course of action stemming from the lead, it might be a good idea to plant clues in earlier scenes that will allow your players to react to the present scene and decide on an objective.

Note that the objective should not be set by the DM, but rather by the characters.

Conflict - Having set an objective, the characters move on, but something opposes them. An NPC, a monstrous creature, their environment, themselves, anything. As long as the PCs face a challenge before they reach their goal you're all set.

Knockout (or Kick ass) - Your players were intrigued, decided on a course of action, and their characters overcame obstacles to reach their goal. What's next? The knock out! The end of the scene has to be memorable.

No matter what the scene is about, there is always a way to spice it up. Even if the PCs just vanquished an uber-villain they can stumble upon some mysterious fact or witness a strange event that leaves them wondering.

The knockout can also consist of resolution. Your PCs have just achieved one of the main goals of the campaign? Reward them accordingly and it should make the scene memorable. Let the characters bask in their own glory. But even if you choose this option you can squeeze an unexpected twist in the celebration.

Hype (and how to generate it)

Most great events are preceded by an insane amount of publicity, which sometimes generates anticipation. I believe a Saturday morning D&D session can benefit from fabricated buzz and hype. Constantly remind your players the game is coming up. If the DM is so obsessed with the campaign it has to be great, right?

Leak information. Give your players information about the campaign inadvertently. It's like meta-foreshadowing.

Create characters. Characters are the heart and soul of the campaign. You should consider preparing opening credits [8] for the campaign.

Beginning - The first scene

This is the first impression the players will get. Blow your players minds and they'll be much more involved in their characters and your campaign. That should make your game easier to prepare - which is the whole point of the Instant DM.

So after you have a campaign outline and scenes planned out, go back to the very first scene and make sure it is laden with uber-awesomeness.

Set the tone

The first scene sets the tone for the whole campaign so you want to make sure it matches your vision of the campaign. Ideally it would also match your players' expectations for the upcoming campaign.

Set the mood

What is the campaign mood? Humorous? Dark? Theatrical? Setting the mood right - dim lighting, Barry White? - in the first game might save you a lot of work. The players will assume the world's atmosphere and hasn't changed if you forget to mention mood details for a scene or two.

Make a promise

You could call this subtle foreshadowing. The promise lets the players know where the campaign is going and even what the main campaign goal is. This is done through the events of the first scene. It's not an actual spoken promise.

For example, if I started a campaign in which the characters' hometown is in a war-torn kingdom I could make this promise: "The good folks of the kingdom will live in peace again and the PCs will play a big part in ending the war."

I'd probably get the promise across by bringing an army scouting party led by a high-ranking army officer to the character's hometown, and have the PCs defeat - maybe by some stroke of luck or genius - the officer and the scout party. That will set the tone for a campaign in which you can vanquish your enemy and win the war and live in peace (defeat of the scout party) and in which the PCs play an important part (they already kicked some highranking ass).

Get a spark

If you feel your first scene isn't up to par, you can check out Roleplaying Tips' Story Sparks #1 and Story Sparks #2.

Ending - Plan it now!

I strongly suggest planning the ending, the last scene of your campaign before the first game is ever played. Here's why:

• Knowing where the campaign is headed - or where it could be headed - can help you make a lot of decisions on the fly and improvise more effectively.
• You might realize you need to plant clues, items, or information along the way.
• Once the ending is planned, foreshadowing becomes an option. A while ago I wrote about roleplaying foreshadowing.

How to end a campaign

I would definitely try to deliver on the promise you made in the first game.
Other than that I would refer to Treasure Table's "How to end a campaign" PDF [9]. It's a 5 page document that suggests 6 ways to end a campaign.

Fine-tuning

All the hard work is done. The campaign is almost ready to be unveiled. Almost! There's still a few things you can do to make it better. In no particular order here are 4 things I'll do to make sure my campaign rocks. This is something that I often prepare in 5 or 10 minutes on game day:

The superstar potential. I'll go over every scene and make sure at least one character has a chance to have a superstar moment. This is much easier to do if you have the PC character sheets at your disposal. That way it is easy to match a scene with a useful set of skills, a spell or feat. In my opinion, this is the most important point of the whole Instant DM. If your players feels like their characters rock you can get away with an otherwise sloppy campaign.

Add a unique or bizarre element to each scene. Spice up your game with unobtrusive, but interesting facts about the environment the PCs adventure in.

[9] How to end a campaign - http://tinyurl.com/end-campaign

Add completely, utterly useless clues, events, and NPCs throughout the campaign. I love watching my players meta-game an encounter. They don't say so but sometimes it is obvious they're thinking: If the DM mentionned it, it must be important!

Get your game helpers together: combat matrices, extra maps, spare dice, pen, paper, eraser, lucky hamster, whatever. Anything you might use during a game should be neatly placed together in a binder, a drawer, or a box.

World Building

Build on assumptions

There's no point in building a whole world from scratch. Your players will assume a lot. For example, my players will assume that there are always goblins or kobolds to be found, that dragons are rare, that the climate is temperate, and that they'll get extra XP if they pay for the pizza. By building on your players assumptions, you'll save a lot of time.

Start with a map

Drawing maps for a new campaign might be my favorite DM activity. It's what I start with when I design worlds and campaigns. I am usually motivated, inspired and always surprised to see the plot hooks that arise during map-drawing. Unfortunately I can't let myself do too much map-drawing otherwise I would never get around to doing anything else. So here are a few thoughts on creating maps.

Write on the map

It saves time to write notes directly on the map. It allows for a better work flow if you don't have to write on 2 different sheets or documents. For those of you who are artistically inclined it might not be fun because too much writing on the map makes for an ugly final product. But you'll be the only one looking at the map so a lot of time can be saved by not caring about the looks of the map.

Gather data for your players

You could spend weeks gathering information about the world you're creating - poltical system, level of magic, climate, fauna, how awesome red dragons are, etc. So how do you determine what is valuable information and what is just irrelevant fluff? Since all the information about the world you're creating will eventually be unloaded on your players the details of your world should matter to them and their characters - you need to make sure that you find a way for that information to be of value to your players.

The coolness factor

I'm always surprised when I read my players' notes to see what they thought was important. Very often they'll remember what they thought was cool, unique, or what they think I think is important - hurray for meta-gaming! So if you want your world building work to pay off make sure you include some unique and cool ideas and concepts in it. Phil - the Chatty DM - has bludgeoned his readers with the very, er, cool rule of cool.

Start small – the inside out technique

This technique is a good way to keep the world building time to a minimum. In a nutshell it consists of working on a small area where the PCs will be adventuring in the first few sessions and then expand outward in all directions.

Establishing the standards

You have to show your players what your world is about. I believe it makes sense for the starting area to be a normal town or village. It's a lot of work to make your players feel and understand what your new world is like. There's a risk of information overload if you tell players what the world should be like but the first few sessions are in a completely different environment. The players will still be thrilled even though they start their adventuring career in a generic hamlet.

Expanding outward in almost all directions

Once you feel confident that the players are immersed in the new world, it's time to figure out which parts of the world to create next. Introduce rumors, legends or myths about great people, powerful artifacts, and forgotten places. No need to plan anything. ***Just introduce random rumors and interesting stories and watch your players' reactions***. They'll always be more enthusiastic about a few of the possibilities you've introduced in the game. Just go for whatever your players feel like doing - expand in these directions. Doesn't it make sense for them to choose the goal of the campaign they're playing in?

Starting small. Thinking big.

Designing a small area to start a campaign is a great way to save time, but the campaign still needs a grand plan. So what's the big picture? What kind of campaign are you playing?

How big should the big picture be?

I think the grand plan should be to have a good idea of what the world around the PCs will feel like. You know you have enough material when:

• You can come up with rumors and plot hooks on the fly - and they fit the campaign.
• You know what kind of mood or style of play each region of the world calls for.
• The players will feel confident they can go anywhere because you look like you know what you're talking about.
• You haven't seen another human being in weeks because you were drawing a map - a big map.

Disclaimer

World building is addictive. Creating the best campaign setting ever can really eat up a lot of your free time. I really believe that starting small is the best and when you have a few gaming sessions planned you can switch to thinking up the rest of the world.

Working with paths

Most quests require the PCs to travel. Sometimes the journey from point A to point B is an integral part of the adventure. Sometimes it's just an uneventful journey. Some journeys have to be completed many times: traveling from one city to another for example. You can save a lot of world building time by focusing around the paths the PCs are likely to take.

Plot hooks for the journey

Instead of creating a random plot hook that the PCs might not care about, it can be interesting to create a plot hook around a road the PCs - or NPCs - use often. The obvious example that comes to mind is a road where merchants are consistently ambushed by highway robbers. You can introduce the plot hooks just before the PCs leave on an adventure, or maybe earlier in the campaign so you can build hype. Even if you don't plan anything a random rumor of thieves or monsters around the road will keep your players on their toes.

Random encounters

Aren't random encounters a great way to save time? They're the apex of nonpreparation. By keeping the random encounters really random - easy, appropriate, or impossible EL - you can keep the players guessing and combat is always fun. The dice can't always have the last word though. You should always veto random encounters that wouldn't make sense in a scene.

The color commentator

Two of the characters in my ongoing campaign once met an NPC - completely improvised at the time - who stuck around and became a fan of the 2 PCs. The NPC was a bard and would travel the world singing praise for the 2 intrepid adventurers. The PCs would regularly bump into the bard and they would talk about their adventures.

People like to talk about themselves

Who are you to keep them from doing it! Let the players reminisce and talk about their dramatic victories and incredible fights - even encourage it! They'll feel like superstars. That NPC who likes to talk to and about the PCs is also a great way to bring back old plot hooks that didn't work the first time around or information you planted that might have been forgotten.

Regional characteristics and generic NPC quirks

A great way to add flavour to a region of a world you're creating is to come up with an accent for all NPCs - or any other easy-to-roleplay quirk. For those of us who aren't good at accents there are expressions. It's easy to decide on a few thematic expressions that the inhabitants of a region use.

For example, you could easily name NPCs with Roman sounding names and have them use a few expressions from this list of latin expressions. It's easy on the DM. It's easy on the players. And it adds a je-ne-sais-quoi to the campaign setting!

Don't get too caught up in the details

That's it! You have a lot of guidelines and ideas in this document to get you going. You'll build a dense, rich campaign setting and you'll have a blast playing D&D.

The main pitfall of world building is the first one I mentionned in this document: getting caught up in the details. Instant world building is all about channeling your energy.

If you feel like you're working too much to prepare your games, then you can or contact me. I'll be happy to give a few tips specific to your campaign. I sincerely hope you'll find your D&D life more enjoyable now that you know how to create a world "instantly".

That's it!

Here are a few extra resources:

- Story Building with Obsidian Portal - http://tinyurl.com/story-building
- Encounter Building with Obsidian Portal - http://tinyurl.com/scene-building
- Storytelling and planting - http://tinyurl.com/storytelling-and-planting
- Roleplaying Tips - GMing Newsletter - http://roleplayingtips.com
- Campaign Mastery - GMing Tips - http://campaignmastery.com
- Gnome Stew, GMing Tips - http://gnomestew.com
- Treasure Tables, GMing Tips - http://treasuretables.org
- Chatty DM, GMing Tips - http://chattydm.net
- Dungeon Mastering Tools - http://tools.dungeonmastering.com
- Critical Hits - Gaming news & entertainment - http://critical-hits.com
- Geek's Dream Girl - Geek Life & Geek Love - http://geeksdreamgirl.com