Fantasy ‘Flavor’

Fantasy generally, and fantasy tabletop RPGs in particular are dominated by the legacy of Tolkien. Exceptions abound, but when most people hear about ‘fantasy’ fictions they envision a vaguely European feudal society with dragons, a core complement of races, and usually some clearly delineated color\design differentiated ‘armies of darkness.’

None of this is bad. In fact, it is all \*awesome\* (hence the ubiquity). The imagery speaks to so many of us deeply and we have not yet even begun to tell all the amazing stoires we can create with this storyteller’s palette of tropes. Moreover, is is an extremely useful device in roleplaying games for players to ‘know’ (or at least be able to make an educated guess) about how a dwarf or an elf is before they begin playing… many platers have no desire to read pages of explanation about a wholly alien race or culture before they start to get an idea as to how their character might act in a give situation (although, some players \*really\* enjoy this and navigating this dichotomy is one of the themes I touched upon in ‘Designing for Different Types of Fun’).

That said, I think ‘we’ as game players and game makers can and should expand the realm of fantasy. More compellingly, this is vitally important for anyone who wants to make their game setting a commercial project. If you want to make a setting \*just\* like Middle-Earth with a few cosmetic tweaks (names and the like) by all means go forth and get your geek on. But if you do this, I as a player would wonder why we aren’t just playing in middle earth and I as a buyer of games would wonder why I should shell out money when the concept has probably been done better.

Likewise, if I wanted ‘Fantasy Kitchen Sink’ I’d turn to Golarion by Paizo, if I wanted Conanesque hyperborean fantasy I’d turn to Primeval Thule by Sasquatch Games, and so on. But personally, I’m much more interested in making and playing the games that have a distinct ‘flavor’ whether that’s Sigil/Planescape, Eberron, or Dark Sun. Also, all these setting have an easy elevator pitch that explains the sorts of stories that happen there and how this is differentiated from play in ‘standard fantasy.’

Put another way, I’m most interested in playing and enjoying the games/settings only I/you could make; and this generally isn’t a retread of Tolkian.

My advice to aspiring makers of fantasy settings is the same advice I’ve tried to follow with the development of Salt in Wounds & Synoma; don’t recreate the ‘standard’ and when you do utilize tropes help your players and game masters see these conventions in a new light. Go big, go fantastic, but ground your work in a sense of people struggling with relatable goals (the needs for food, for shelter, for protection or defeat of an enemy, love of family, quest for power/regard, or rarely transcendence) no matter how alien the culture or race. And lastly, do the \*extremely\* hard work of being able to explain ina sentence or two the central conceit of your work, imply the wondrous (and unique) adventures that can take place there, and leave the listener/reader/potential customer begging to learn more by joining your game or buying your book.