POWER IS WHERE YOU TAKE IT

CREATING CITIES AND CHARACTERS FOR POLITICAL INTRIGUE CAMPAIGNS

by Sally Tamarkin

> "[CITIES] ARE NOT LIKE SUBURBS, ONLY DENSER. THEY DIFFER FROM TOWNS AND SUBURBS IN BASIC WAYS, AND ONE OF THESE IS THAT CITIES ARE, BY DEFINITION, FULL OF STRANGERS."
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> –JANE JACOBS, *THE DEATH AND LIFE OF GREAT AMERICAN CITIES*

This quote elegantly captures why I love cities so much—and, more importantly for this article, why I think they're the perfect setting for telling stories about political intrigue. Before I get to that, let me say this first: campaigns about political intrigue can be tricky, mainly because when it comes to getting players (and their characters) invested, such campaigns tend to lack the do-this-and-save-the-world-please quality of traditional arcs and campaigns. Those campaigns have the advantage of immediately setting the stakes sky-high, which means that players know their characters will get to be heroes or die trying—two very cool outcomes.

Stories of political intrigue tend to be smaller and are, by definition, quieter since intrigue basically means "engaging in secret schemes." In fact, the characters might want to ensure that no one ever discovers they were involved at all! The good news is that political intrigue campaigns are all about mystery and discovery, about keeping and telling secrets, and about using your wits (and, okay, maybe your blade) to get what you want—which means that with some thoughtful design, they can be thrilling and fun.

This is where cities come in. Cities are, as the quote above says, full of strangers, which makes them the perfect place to tell stories about all kinds of NPCs and factions plotting, in secret, to take what they want—money or territory, or maybe power, influence, or control. And if you build your city around these NPCs, it will feel alive and lived-in, a place where people scheme secretly, where a thieves' guild works with a city leader to shake down the local nobles; where the mayor is in cahoots with a local religious leader for some dark purpose; where the head of the city watch is conspiring with an artificer from the local tinkerer's guild to make illegal magic weapons.

On a more practical level, any city—real or fictional—has the building blocks of a political intrigue campaign. First, cities are densely populated with residents of various backgrounds and livelihoods, whose lives are intertwined through work, proximity, romance, shared interest, rivalries, and so on. Second, cities have a system of governance—an entity that holds (and generally seeks to maintain) state power, which of course means there are people or groups that seek to take away that power. Finally, cities are home to various factions competing for attention, control, and influence. Sometimes this takes the form of competition for some kind of officially recognized or "legitimate" power, as with elections, labor disputes, or matters of succession. Other times, the power that is sought is informal or perhaps even criminal—maybe two thieves' guilds fighting over territory, a religious leader seeking to influence local law using bribery, or a city leader using their station to illegally accumulate wealth.

This article includes a step-by-step guide to creating and developing a city perfect for a political intrigue campaign. It also provides backgrounds to help players create characters who are already part of a city's political life, involved in or connected to the ongoing struggles over power and influence.

CREATING YOUR CITY

Particularly if you're using the backgrounds in this article, I recommend building your city in three phases. The first phase takes place before your session zero. In fact, session zero is the time you will present the city to your players. In this phase of design you're going to come up with some basic details about your city so that it feels like a real place to you and to your players, but is not so complete and built out that your players aren't sure where their characters would fit into it. Again, political intrigue campaigns require that the players care about the city and that their characters feel invested in what goes on there. In my experience, the best way to facilitate this is to think of character creation as part of your worldbuilding and vice versa. So, let's start building the version of our city that we want to bring to our session zero.

PART 1: GETTING STARTED

We'll go through this process step by step, but these are some questions to ask as you build your city:

- How big is the city? Is it a sleepy trade town, or a major metropolis?
- What is the city's system of governance?
- What makes your city unique? What have outsiders heard about your city?
- What are the city's important geographical features? How do they affect the culture or government?

If you feel like it, you can also consider details such as the city's weather, special laws, notable exports or raw materials, and important festivals.

CITY SIZE AND DESIGN

When you're choosing how big to make your city, you just want to make sure that it's big enough to contain the factions, locations, and NPCs you need for the kind of stories you want to tell. The bigger a city is, the more flexibility you're likely to have, but keep in mind that the bigger the city, the more work it will be to build, run, and keep track of.

- Small town (population 901–2,000)
- Large town (population. 2,001–5000)
- Small city (population 5,001–12,000)
- Large city (population 12,001–25,000)

I'm going to build a small city with a population of 11,000. Although cities can be dense, sprawling, or anything in between, I want this one to be very densely populated; about a three-quarters of a mile in length and width. To support a crowded population, many buildings in the city are several stories tall, with some top floors added to older structures as the settlement grew. One of

my favorite things about cities in real life and in fiction is that when they're densely populated, people can't help but be characters in one another's lives, and that's perfect for political intrigue stories. I also really like when cities have distinct neighborhoods, so I'm going to break this one up into quadrants; the river will divide the city in two and the bridge will bisect it again. I know I'll want my city's criminal organizations to each operate out of a different district, so I'll make a note of that and return to it later. I also want there to be a district that's based around the city's key industry.

This city sits at the foot of a mountain range and is bisected by a river. I'll name my city Woodbridge, after the wooden bridge that was built by the city's founders so they didn't have to ford the river. The wide river is a huge source of employment and income for the city. Considering how important the river is, I'll call one of the four districts the Fresh Water. This will be the northwest quadrant of the city, home to fisheries, boatyards, and all the people who work with the river and its bounty. You always know you're in the Fresh Water because your boots are caked with mud and the smell of trout is in the air.

Across the bridge from the Fresh Water is a district called Bankside, an upscale residential neighborhood. If the Fresh Water is the industrial side of the bridge, Bankside is more like a luxe riverside community. Each home has a slip at the Woodbridge marina where their pleasure craft is docked, waiting to whisk its owners and their guests away on a sunset tour of the river. The only aroma on this side of the river is the sweet fragrance of the local fruit trees, which bloom every spring and draw visitors from all over town.

Continuing counterclockwise, the southeastern quadrant is Fairmarket, a lively commercial district full of shops, vendors, street performers, and stalls selling food and drink. Finally, across the bridge from Fairmarket, in the southwest quadrant, is the Spit. This area is full of dive bars, a couple of underground fight clubs, and cheap inns, as well as some disreputable shops and vendors that offer rare goods of dubious legality.

SYSTEM OF GOVERNANCE

When it comes to governance for Woodbridge, I'm going to choose a structure I feel familiar with: an elected mayor (though perhaps only land-owning nobles in this city are allowed to vote—instant plot seed!) and a four-person council of alders appointed by the mayor. I'm choosing a four-person city council because it goes along with my city being divided into quadrants; each alder can represent a specific district, which will neatly tie them to that area's residents, businesses, and desires.

Other possible government systems include:

- Council of nobles or lords
- Council of clergy or a religious leader

- Duke or lord appointed by a monarch
- Military leader
- Council of guild leaders
- Mage circle
- Council of learned engineers, scientists, artificers
- Secret council with a public figurehead

MUNICIPAL INFRASTRUCTURE

Because Woodbridge is a small city, it will have many of the trappings of an urban center but will lack some of the things you'd find in a metropolis. For example, a large city might have a university, a grand library, a public works department, a system of roads and sewers, an office of the tax collector, jail, bank, hall of records, city watch, and a newspaper. Our city isn't quite that big, but it does have a city watch, jail, and courthouse. (A smaller city or large town might have a two-person city watch, while an even smaller town might have one sheriff who also serves as jailer, judge, and tax collector, and a town crier in place of a newspaper.)

BUSINESSES

Woodbridge will have various shops and businesses, including four taverns and four inns that are important to the story, one in each district. Of course there are more taverns and inns, but I just want to populate the city enough so that each district feels lived in—I don't need a ton of stuff to track before the game even starts. There are at least two smiths in town, one who specializes in making elegant showpiece weapons and armor and a more workaday smith who cranks out the basics.

The city will have other shops, businesses, and guilds, some of which I'll come up with before the campaign starts and some of which will emerge during play. Just keep in mind that the industries in your city will determine the local guilds and the kinds of merchants and shops the city can sustain.

KEY FACTIONS

Our city is big enough to sustain two competing criminal factions—an assassins' guild (The Whispering Blade) and a thieves' guild (The Kate and Ken). At this moment in citybuilding, I'm going to say that there is one religion officially represented in the city. It's called the Temple of the Prophet, and it has a temple in town and maintains the graveyard. If, during our session zero, one of my players expresses interest in that religion or another, I'll work with them to decide the extent to which it's represented in our city.

Other factions will definitely emerge through play. Because the river plays a big role in the city's industry, there will be a guild of river workers. This will include fishers, boatwrights, workers who process the fish that's been caught, bait shop workers, and any other river-related job I can come up with.

This is all I need to have for now. After my session zero, I can flesh this out even more, name specific factions, buildings, and locations, create key NPCs, and so on.

PART 11: FACTIONS & POWER

After your session zero, continue building your city with the player characters and their backstories in mind. As you do this, think more specifically about who holds power in the city and what kind of power they have. This is when plot seeds and hooks will emerge. And of course, as you build, find places to weave the characters into the fabric of the city. Remember, a city can have multiple entities that hold power, influence, and control. Think about informal and criminal power as well as officially recognized and state power.

Here's a brief example of how to start building out the power relationships in Woodbridge based on a session zero where my players built characters using some of the backgrounds described below.

After our session zero, I knew that one of the PCs wanted to be involved in city government. They took the Politician background and we decided that they work in the office of an alder in the Fresh Water. Another player took the Public Intellectual background and wanted to be a visiting professor at the Woodbridge Institute of Liberal Arts (a college they came up with and named), lecturing on political science and local governance. The third player took the Activist Journalist background so they could be an editor at the newspaper *The Shining Light*, whose tagline is "We Tell You the Things They Don't Want You to Know." (So now we have two more factions: the university and the newspaper!)

For each faction, I'll come up with some details that will provide a basic sense of the faction's MO. I'll determine:

- Its overall mission
- Key NPC(s)
- Relationships to other factions
- Power it has
- Power it seeks (this might emerge through play; perhaps at the current moment a given faction is focused on maintaining the status quo)

Keep in mind that factions and NPCs should have well-defined goals and interests. I recommend keeping these relatively concrete and measurable. For example: more money, territory, a seat on a council, razing an area to make room for their business interest, the downfall of a political rival, or at-any-cost survival despite a looming threat.

The combination of initial citybuilding and session zero helped me get a sense of what some of this might look like