

GM's Toolbox

Layers of the Past

Using historical layers to add context to your locations.

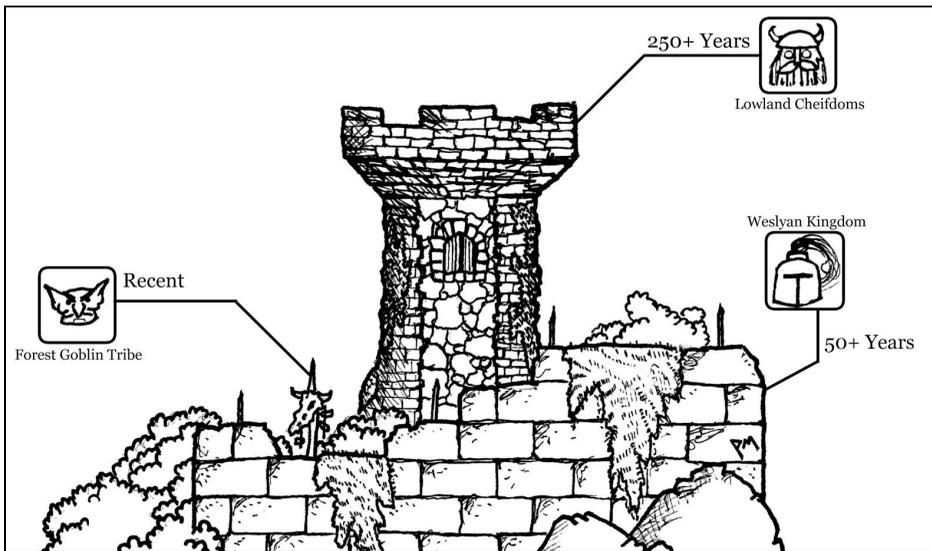
What is GM's Toolbox?

There are a variety of ways to run your RPG sessions. These articles are meant to help inspire Game Masters to add new tools to their creative toolbox. Rather than being prescriptive, the hope is that they get you thinking. Take what you need, leave what you don't.

The foggy moor, the dusty catacomb, the fragrant bazaar. The places your characters inhabit are, in a sense, characters themselves. The more realized and immersive they are, the more memorable they are for your players—and the more rewarding they are for you. Locations are an essential part of any campaign, and how you weave them into your world can be a compelling way to draw your players into your setting.

By thinking about the history of your locations, you can create a feeling that the setting exists quite apart from the PCs. A feeling that time has flowed and will continue to do so whatever the PCs might do. This can be immersive and lend a sense of weight to your settings, in the same way that a well written NPC can start to feel like a real existing person.

A simple way to use the tool of history is to think in terms of stratification, or layers. Think about the time periods and events that would have left a mark on the location, and how those marks are built on top of what came before. Every place people have lived in the real world is marked in the same way; cathedrals in the city of Rome sit on the foundations of ancient temples and catacombs, for instance.(1) Some modern homes and businesses in Boston are connected to alcohol smuggling tunnels from the 1920s, some of which are said to be connected to older colonial-era brick tunnels where American revolutionaries stored weapons and supplies.(2)



For a better example of this within the context of your game, let's consider an ancient watchtower. The watchtower originated with a

people, now gone from the world, referred to as the lowland chiefdoms. It was constructed of old cobbled and stacked stone over 250 years ago.

Later, some 50 years ago, this region fell under the control of a powerful new kingdom called Weslya. Being in an advantageous area, the watchtower was put to use by their army of knights and men-at-arms, and they built a curtain wall of carved stone.

Political boundaries change over time and in the present era the region has returned to the wild. Now a small group of forest goblins have taken up residence, decorating the ruin with wooden spikes and fetishes of painted bone.

As the PCs explore this location, simply describing the features should make the history of the location apparent. They'll see the original tower of old stone constructed in a different style than the wall, and they might even be familiar with Weslyan architecture from other adventures. Of course, seeing the crude and malevolent bone fetishes hanging from the stone of the once grand watchtower adds tension and a sense of decay.

This example shows how simple this concept is to put into practice. Three layers are present, pulled from the history and background of the region. There's no need for an elaborate and comprehensive personal history for the tower. The clues of the features themselves are enough to create the desired effect. By exploiting the history and features you've created for the region you create a sense of continuity between this location and other locations the PCs might visit. You have successfully woven it into the greater tapestry without extensive work on your part.

This concept can be expanded to cover a larger location like a city or contracted to cover a single room. An example of the latter would be a cavern chamber that was once the lair of an Owlbear and her cubs. The owlbear was killed by a ranger while she was out hunting, leaving the cubs to fend for themselves. Unfortunately for them, stirges soon found their way into the den and took up residence on the ceiling—and began to drain the cubs of their blood one by one.



By the time the PCs emerge onto the scene, which might be years later, they find the dessicated and skeletal corpses of owlbear cubs among a disused nest. In the darkness above them, they can hear the flapping of leather wings. The PCs might never discover why the owlbear cubs were left to their fate, but discovering the small corpses tells a sad tale with only their presence.

To expand this concept, imagine a dwarven fortress that spans a great chasm. It serves as both fortification and bridge for the crafty folk. For one of the many reasons kingdoms fade, the mountain dwarves in this area disappeared and left the fortification to the mountain winds. From the roots of the mountains came boiling up kobolds who soon lodged in the silent halls, delighting in their new home and the shiny things left behind. The fortress remained a kobold den for many years, until a

young dragon came to it. The kobolds immediately swore fealty to the mighty beast and the fortress became its grand lair.

The story might end there, with the PCs stumbling across the magnificent fortress bridge in their travels. Or perhaps great heroes came, slew the dragon, and founded a city in the ancient construction. People came from all over to settle here, turning old chambers into homes and building shops, bridges, and roads atop the fortress.

When your adventurers arrive they find a strange and breathtaking city stretched across this great chasm, and when they explore it they can see the layers of history. Here ancient dwarven architecture, there the tale of the defeat of the dragon, and there are rumors of small lizard-like creatures living in the sewers...

As with anything you keep your metaphorical toolbox, a light or precise touch is often more potent than a heavy hand. Not every location needs a detailed history, it's usually fine to throw in a couple of simple layers for flavor. The point of using this tool isn't to treat your players to a history lecture every time they uncover a new location. The goal should be to spice the dish with hints and clues, to show and not tell. It works best when the PCs themselves are piecing together the history of past events through the context of these hints from your descriptions.

Of course, you could still keep your copious amounts of background history and notes to hand for whenever a curious (and very kind) player wants to know more. Provided they roll a good enough History check.

Keep in mind that choosing to not use any layers can also be interesting. If your adventurers have visited many locations battered by the waves of history, to come across a location which seems to have been untouched by those waves can be compelling and mysterious. If they break into the underground complex of an ancient people and discover that none have yet to tread those dusty halls, being the first explorers can generate a lot of excitement.

(1) For more information: [Secret Pagan Basilica in Rome](#), [Rome's Ancient Catacombs](#)

(2) For more information: [Gruchy's North End Tunnels](#), [North End History: Beneath the North End](#), [Bizarre Boston: The Secret North End Tunnels](#)

“GM’s Workshop” article icon designed by [Delapouite](#) and retrieved from [Game-icons.net](#); used under the [CC BY 3.0](#) license. The designer and Game-icons.net are not employed by and do not endorse or support 9th Key Press or any article, post, or product created under the 9th Key Press name.

 Article illustration by Patrick McGill is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License.