

VILLAGE MAPMAKING GUIDE

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Village Mapmaking

A VILLAGE, TOWN, OR CITY MAKES AN EXCELLENT *backdrop for an adventure. The adventurers might be called on to track down a criminal who's gone into hiding, solve a murder, take out a gang of wererats or doppelgangers, or protect a settlement under siege.*

—Dungeon Master's Guide (p.112)

Making a Map

This guide is designed with the intention of examining all of the various facets of creating a map for a village or small town to be used in a roleplaying adventure. As the excerpt above alludes to, a settlement often serves as an excellent anchor for players amongst the havoc of your campaign. It can be home to helpful peasants, wayward outcasts, eccentric establishments, and any number of adventure seeds. The process of mapping a village and the actual creation of said village are intertwined in such a way that if done so properly, a well done map will intuitively bear evidence of its inhabitants and underlying story.

Throughout this guide, I'll be hoping to provide a picture of how I design a settlement, and more importantly, how those story choices may make their way into the visuals of the map. I won't pretend to be a seasoned DM with decades of experience, but rather to demonstrate that the act of connecting a narrative with a map simply *can* be done.

This guide will also serve to illustrate the steps I take in creating the visuals for a map. As such, because my process is largely digital I will be including several screenshots and tips directly related to processes used in Photoshop. This guide assumes some basic familiarity with the program and will not necessarily be intensely in-depth, but should provide enough of a walkthrough to get you acquainted with how I go about making a map. All of the brushes used in this guide were made by Kyle Webster and can be found on his website; I draw with a stylus on a Wacom Intuos tablet.

That being said, I believe it's important to reiterate that every step outlined here can be accomplished with pen and pencil. Using a computer may make it easier or faster at times, but the raw ideation of moving from rough sketch, to penned lines, applying flat colors, and shading in texture and light can just as easily be translated to a physical media. My hope is that if you're reading this you'll be able to glean some help from my documentation, regardless of your method.

1. It Takes a Village

That excerpt from the *Dungeon Master's Guide* is found at the beginning of a section dedicated to settlements and mapping them. If you're just starting out designing your village or if unsure as to what it might look like just yet, I'd recommend consulting that section. In addition to tables on determining rulers, notable traits, reputation, and specific buildings, it provides tips on mapping a settlement and emphasizes that you "don't worry about the placement of every building, and concentrate instead on the major features."

This is great advice for someone undertaking the potentially overwhelming task of creating a convincing settlement of peoples. While I will arrive at a point at the end of this guide where my map inevitably does have a 'placement of every building', at the beginning I concern myself primarily with noting what I already know *about* the village and listing the major buildings or landmarks that I want it to feature.

For this guide I'll be looking step-by-step at my process for making a map for the town of **Poaret**. Here's some information that I already know about the town and the people living there:

- The founders and current inhabitants of the smaller town are all humans, descendants of a tribe of barbarians who long ago lost their leadership and fell away from their nomadic lifestyle.
- Being located in a fairly isolated part of a flatland countryside, the vast majority of the town are farmers and live off of the land.
- It boasts only a modest militia consisting of only headstrong youth from some of the more outgoing families.
- It is governed by an annually elected mayor, who usually belongs to one of a couple of lead families in the town.
- A group of locals in the town belong to a 'secret society' that extends back the first generation that settled here, referring to themselves as the 'Stoneweavers'. This group meets regularly somewhere around town and has an unhealthy interest in the old stories of the stone giants that roamed this part of the world.

And a list of the buildings I know need to exist:

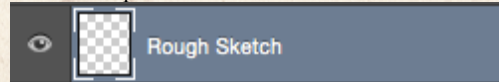
- A temple dedicated to a Goddess of life and harvest
- A tavern for locals to gather and drink
- A business existing for the sole purpose of providing repairs and maintenance for the considerable amount of farm equipment and wagons
- A number of varying families at odds with one another within the town's social scene
- Some kind of secret meeting place like an old mine or abandoned farm house

2. Start with a Sketch

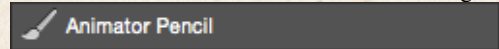
The information I can start to collect *about* the town is more abstract in how it is translated to a map; knowing Poaret to be a settlement comprised of mostly farmers, I'll need to create the map on a scale that allows me to include the entirety of the town while also noting what would be a fair amount of land between homes and the large swathes of farmland they need. Knowing their history allows me to creatively lean in to how I imagine rivalries emerging between families over time after settling here. Small paths begin to emerge, winding around other groups of homes, 'cliques' of families develop as geographical proximity leads to some comingling more than others.

Conversely, compiling a record of buildings that 'need' to be included is more like checking items off of a grocery list. Public or well frequented spaces like temples and taverns are going to be located near whatever sort of town center your settlement may have. The competing families are scattered about that town center, with those of a more predisposed nature ending up grouped around each other. My location for a potential meeting space ends up being an exhausted salt mine a little outside of town, now unused once it was drained prematurely of its resources.

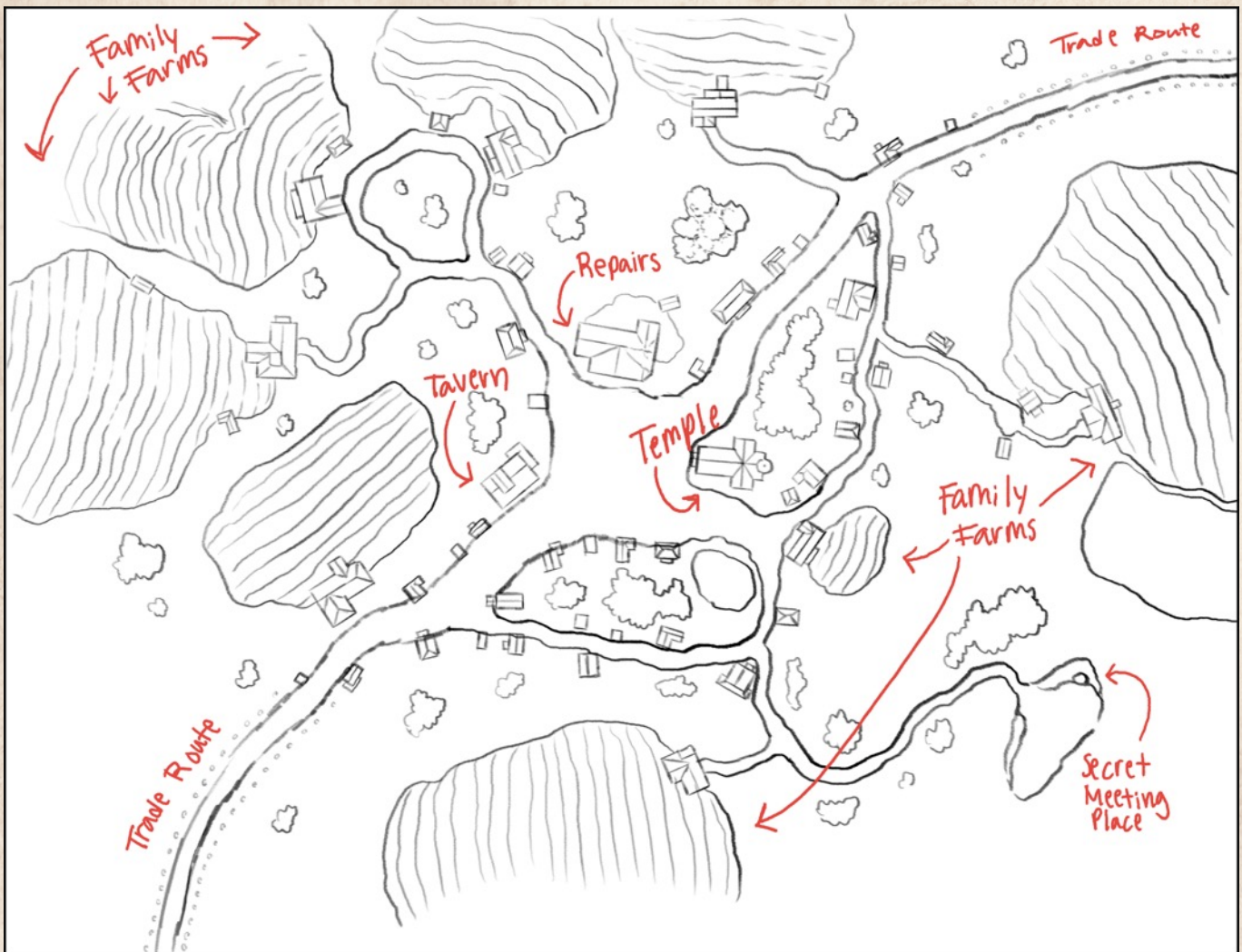
To begin, I'll create a separate layer for this sketch, to keep it organized from all of the other elements that will be coming into this map soon:



When I'm creating the sketch for any map, I'm almost always going to go with the 'animator pencil' as I feel most comfortable with how it emulates real sketching:



With pen pressure enabled, I'll begin to lightly sketch in the beginning structure of Poaret, starting with the main path that leads into the settlement from the northeastern and southwestern sides. With a town center in mind, I'll start to casually draw in smaller paths meandering around groups of smaller homes, pathways that eventually divert off and lead up to larger, more significant farm houses. With my major roads, trails, and buildings sketched in I can start to fill in the rest of the detail that will flesh out the entirety of the settlement so far: crop land, clusters of trees, a well, a pond, and the stones lining the paths into town. My first sketch builds on the knowledge that I already brought to the table in order to connect all of those elements together. It certainly needs more work from here, but the bones of everything are present enough for me to begin layering on top of it.

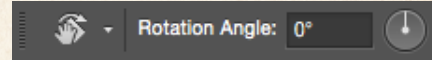


3. Inking the Map

Now that I've put together a rough layout of major paths and buildings throughout the town in my sketch, I might start to 'ink' over that initial drawing to create a cleaner version of it. Keeping the sketch on its own layer, I'll create a new layer for this line drawing and make sure it's above the sketch layer so that all of the pixels in my line drawing will likewise be above the ones in the sketch. I'll also adjust the opacity of the sketch layer, setting it to something such as 20% in order to make it much lighter and easier to draw on top of.

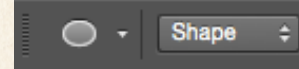
When inking, I usually tend to favor the 'tech pen' brush from Webster's Ultimate Pack, but anything from the inking set will do. I'd recommend sketching around with several of them before settling in on a few of your personal favorites. The goal here is to create a more refined and clear line drawing for your map than what you may have been able to create with just the sketch. My line width for the inked lines are usually around a 1/4 of the size of my sketched lines, giving it a much more polished appearance and easier to read for the map's users. I almost always do most of the inking entirely freehand to retain that 'hand drawn' quality, but there are a couple of shortcuts that can help reduce your work load.

My first such tip would be to acquaint yourself with the rotate tool:



When drawing on paper, I'm often hunched over, spinning the paper around to approach the image from various angles. When I'm drawing digitally, I replicate this exact tendency with the rotate tool. It will allow you to quickly 'spin' the image around as you're working, making the process feel more natural.

My second tip involve the shape tool:



If I'm ever drawing the edge of a house, tower, or other element that needs a particularly perfect looking quality to it, I may consider using the shape tool to create an actually perfect version of that for use in the map. Then, with that shape tool on a separate layer beneath the ink layer, I'll use that shape as a guideline to help determine where I should be drawing.

Lastly, use the shift key! Holding the shift key down when drawing a line keeps the line perfectly straight as you're drawing, as if using the side of a ruler.



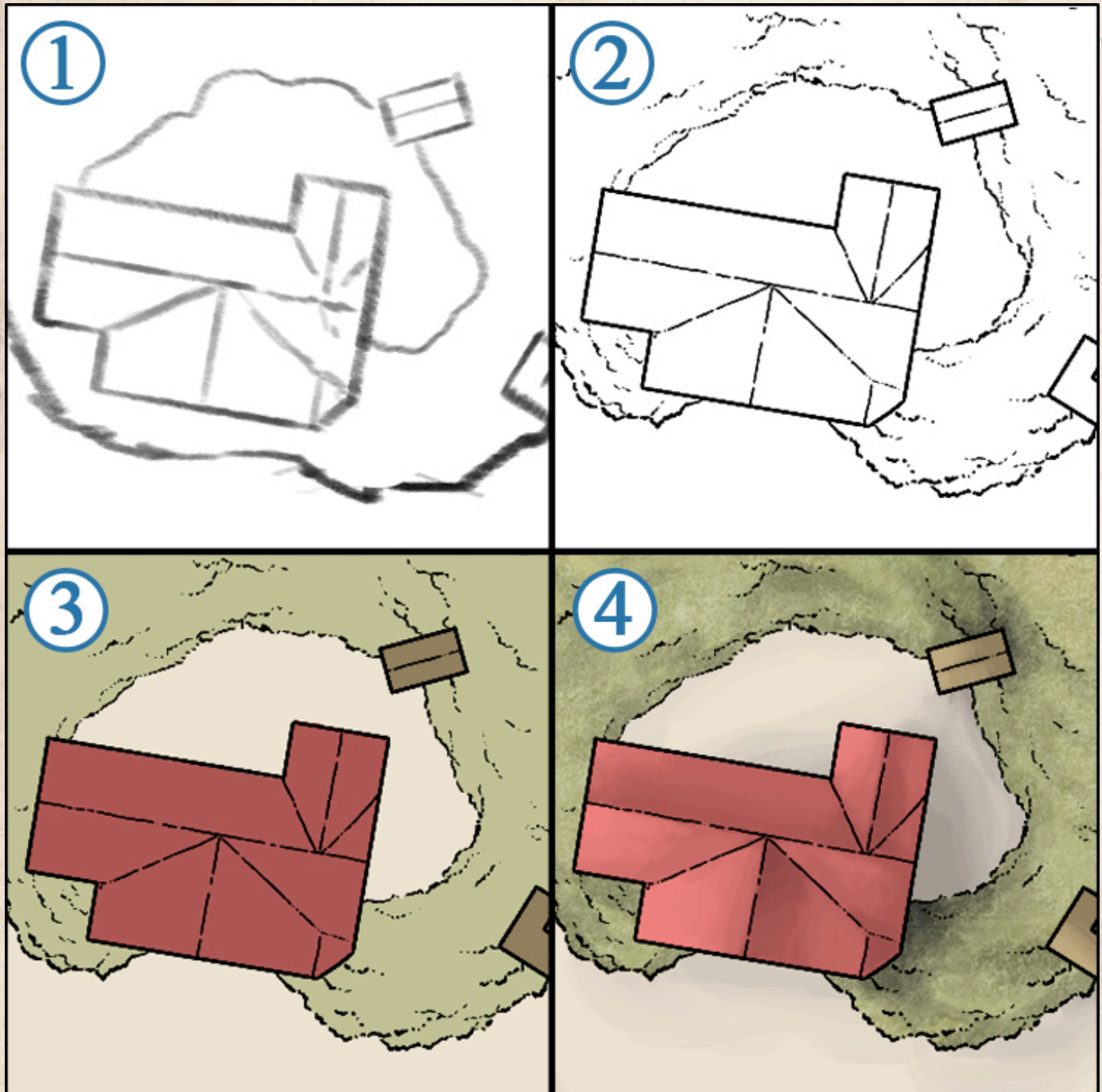
Drawing Buildings

I've created a small breakdown here to look specifically at the process of drawing buildings and other structures in your village. The difference between figures 1 & 2 should speak for itself in the significant improvements that are made from taking an initial drawing and refining a new version from it.

The color that is added will be explained in the following steps, but you can see that by the time we get to figure 4, the building clearly has discernable form and weight in the surroundings it occupies. The lines of the roof indicate the appearance of the portions of the building that we are not privy to in this bird's eye view.

Keeping Buildings Practical

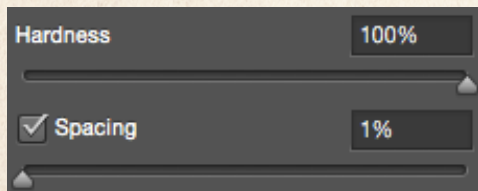
Continually try and remember the sense of reality that you are attempting to convey in the appearance of your village map. Small details don't need to weigh you down or distract you from the overall task when you're starting out, but creating a sense of verisimilitude in your images means eventually minding the specifics. For example, you'll want to try and remember the scale of your map when making buildings. The main building featured in this step-by-step is the largest building in town, and that's mostly because it services *all* of the businesses in town with repairs and storage. Keeping a realistic sense of building sizes, how much land there should be between buildings, and using elements like color to distinguish between different kinds of buildings are small examples of this idea.



4. Applying Color

When I begin to add color to an image, I'll want to start by 'blocking in' that color within the major shapes of the map. Areas like buildings, trees, farmland, roads, anything that might have its own distinct color will get a flat hue assigned to it. I'll need a layer *underneath* the finished linework layer so that even while I'm adding color, I can still see the drawing on top of it.

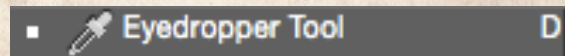
Later on once I begin shading and rendering various parts of the map I'll concern myself with which kind of painterly brush I want to use, but for now all I need to do is apply flat areas of color within the shapes that I've drawn. For that I can use any default brush and in the brush settings menu, make sure that the hardness is set to 100% and the spacing is to 1%:



With those settings, I know I'll get a perfectly smooth, even application of color out of the brush I'm using.

Additionally, whenever I'm flattening out colors like this, I will create different layers for different groups of colors that are not touching one another. By this I mean that no adjacent shapes of colors are ever on the same layer. The ground, grass, trees, and buildings all get their own separate layer—this makes it easier later on to 'lock' the layers pixels in place and paint back into them without having to worry about getting unintended colors into another area of your map.

Getting an initial layer of color into your map not only helps to add a sense of life and vibrancy to the image, but often helps visually block out parts of your settlement as well. Note how much easier it is to immediately identify where roads and important buildings are even with just the flat colors applied than when the drawing is still only black and white. When deciding on exactly *which* colors to be using for your map, I'd recommend putting some time into finding some source images on the internet. Once you've found a couple with color palettes that you resonate with, it's pretty straightforward to sample colors from them with the eyedropper tool:

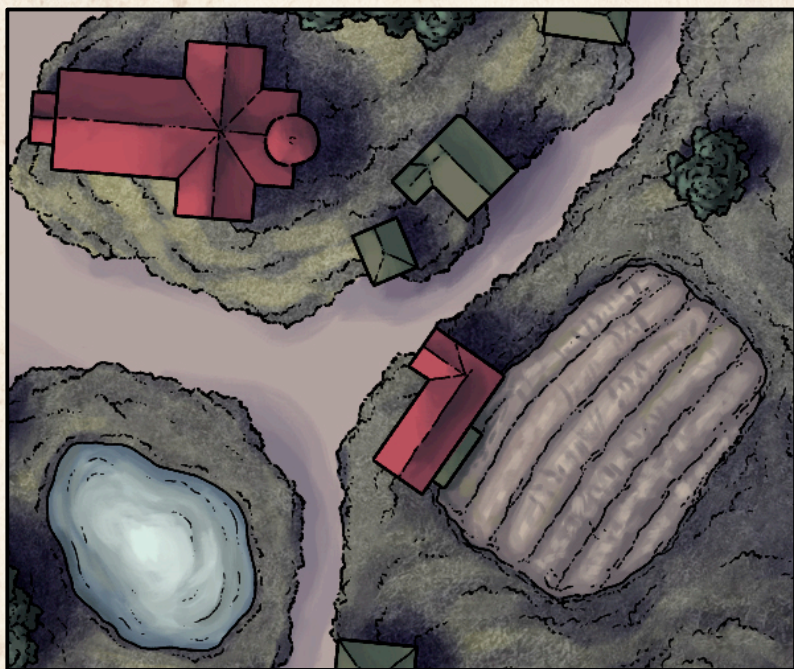
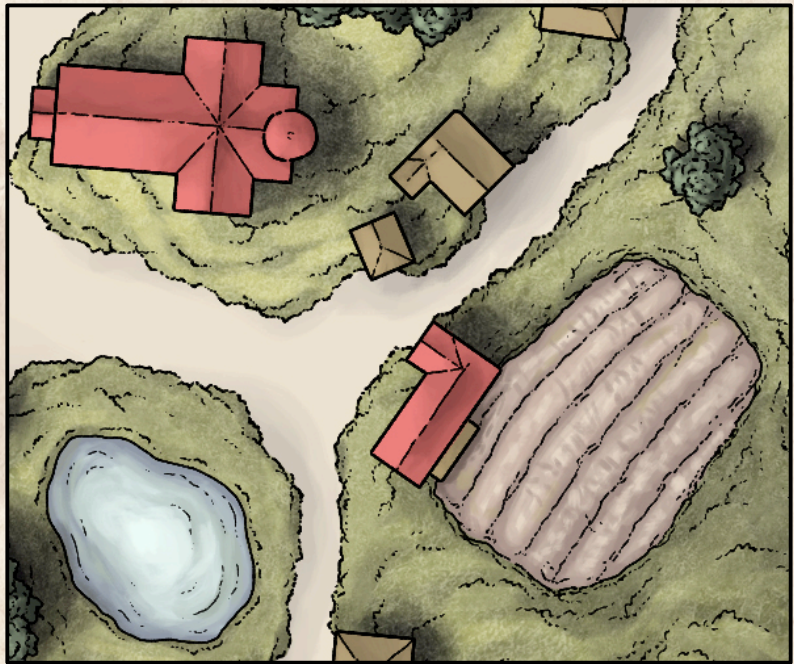


Making Color Palettes

Crafting a particular range of tones and hues to use in your map can be a more challenging task than it may seem on the surface. Simple differences in saturation or value and the relationship between your color choices themselves can leave a huge impact on the mood your village might read as to a viewer. While the parameters of this guide don't necessarily extend into a crash course on color theory, take these two examples of detail shots from Poaret, one with daytime colors and one with nighttime colors, as proof of what I'm talking about:

Getting Particular with Color

If you *really* want to fine tune your options, or if later on once you begin rendering you want colors just slightly off from what you're currently painting with, try clicking on the foreground/background section in the bottom left. These sections will allow you to see not only the current colors you're using in the image, but the vast pool of infinite choices you have, letting you toggle between various nearby options as you craft your particular color palette.



4. Shading & Contextualizing

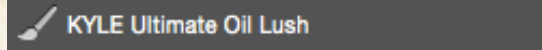
With most of the colors now blocked into flat shapes beneath the line drawing, I can finally begin actually ‘painting’ into those colors to add depth, texture, lighting, etc.

For this step we won’t actually need to create a new layer, but instead work *within* our preexisting color layers from the flatted colors. For each set of colors, I’ll need to first select its corresponding layer, then choose to ‘lock transparent pixels’ by clicking the leftmost button near the top of the layers menu:



Doing so will ‘lock’ those colors in place within the layer, allowing you to lay down additional color within the boundaries of the pixels that are already there without ‘painting outside the lines’. This allows us to work a little more quickly and without the hesitancy of trying to recreate the same perfect edge over and over again.

You’ll want to experiment with different kinds of more painterly brush types until you can settle on a couple that seem to your liking. Kyle Webster produces a huge variety of brushes designed to emulate real, physical materials and effects. For most of the maps I make I tend to work with brushes that appear like oil paint, giving me plenty of workability and smoothness, but still leaving remnants of that painterly aesthetic behind. For the Poaret map I primarily used the ‘Oil Lush’ brush from Kyle’s ‘Ultimate’ pack, but you could also try the ‘Oil Soft & Smooth’ brush:



While painting, you’ll want access to a ‘palette’ of the colors you used in the previous step. In addition, you’ll want to experiment with using darker and/or more saturated colors for shadows or details. You can see in my example that I’ve chosen an approximate direction for light to be coming from and have altered the values for where shadows and light would be falling to accommodate that illusion.

This guide is not intended to also be a color theory introduction, but I would encourage you to try a variety of approaches, especially within a program like Photoshop where things like color balance and saturation can be easily manipulated.

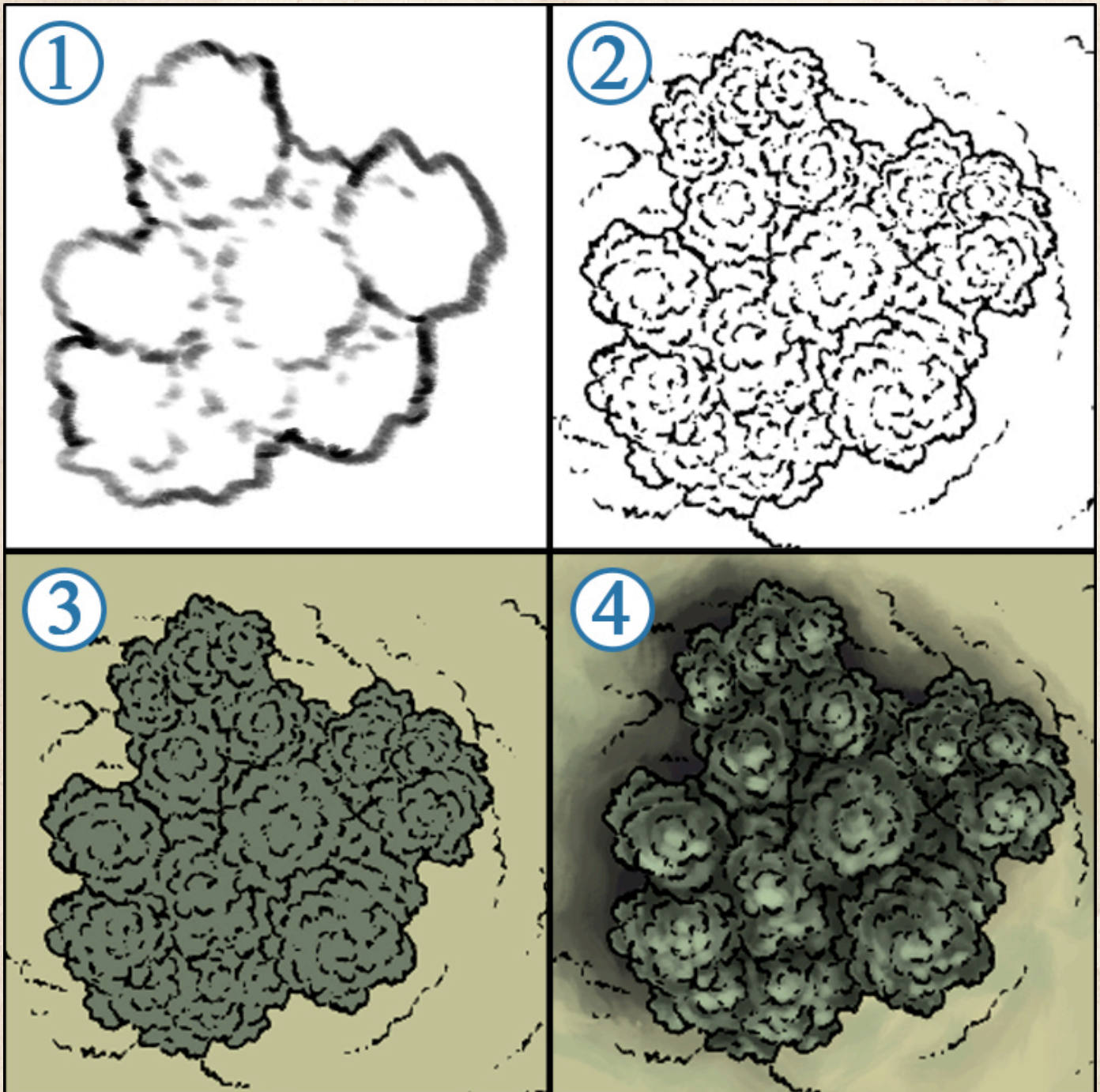


Drawing Trees

I've included another breakdown here to look instead at drawing clusters of trees. Like the step-by-step buildings before, you can clearly see a significant upgrade in clarity and detail between the sketch in figure 1 and the inked lines in figure 2. You can tell from my sketch that I have a couple of basic goals with drawing in the beginning of trees: I'll start with an outline of the whole cluster, then begin very roughly drawing in where each individual tree might be within that group. This essentially gives a rough set of 'targets' to draw within once I begin inking the trees later.

Keeping Trees Natural

Often times the most problematic element that I see in beginning mapmakers is the use of oversimplified, copy + paste trees. If you're interested in pursuing maps further, I'd highly recommend paying more attention to the 'imperfections' of your trees. They are admittedly time consuming, but end up looking far better when given the appropriate investment. You can see in my example below (and hopefully, all the trees used in my maps) that each individual tree in the cluster has been hand drawn and contains multiple layers of 'branches'. I use a solid outline for the perimeter of the trees, and a series of broken up, curved dashes and dots for conveying the layers within. Again, lengthy and time consuming, but is a nice touch to push the map above and beyond.



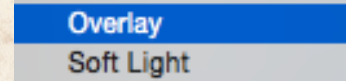
5. Adding Texture

The next, and almost final, step is completely optional. It's entirely possible that you may feel comfortable with the amount of contrast and texturing brought about in your map from hand painting alone. Often when I'm working on a larger scale map (an entire city, region, etc.) I won't bother with adding on more texture as there is already plenty of information occurring without the extra visual noise.

But in the case of Poaret here, whenever I have significant areas of unbreaking color that I think could have some additional visual noise added to them, I'll layer in some texture. In our example, I've decided to add a texture to the grass fields surrounding the village.

When adding texture anywhere, I've built up a folder where I've saved previously searched textures (e.g. "high resolution grass texture, etc."). Having several examples of each makes it easy to grab and throw into your image.

The use of texture is made significantly easier if you've followed my previous suggestions on keeping separate layers for every major element in your map. In this case, since the grass fields are on their own layer, I simply embed the texture on *its* own layer, between the grass layer and the rest of the color above it, and set the blending mode to Overlay:



The blending mode can be found as its own drop down menu at the top of the layers window. Depending on the circumstances of where you are trying to add texture to, you may need to crop, erase, or duplicate portions of the texture to make it fit.

The results range from powerful to subtle, depending on the specific interactions of the texture you're using and the color its affecting. If you want to tone down the effect a little, you could lower the opacity of the texture layer, or experiment with setting the blending mode to 'Soft Light' instead.

No Texture



Texture



6. Text & Legends

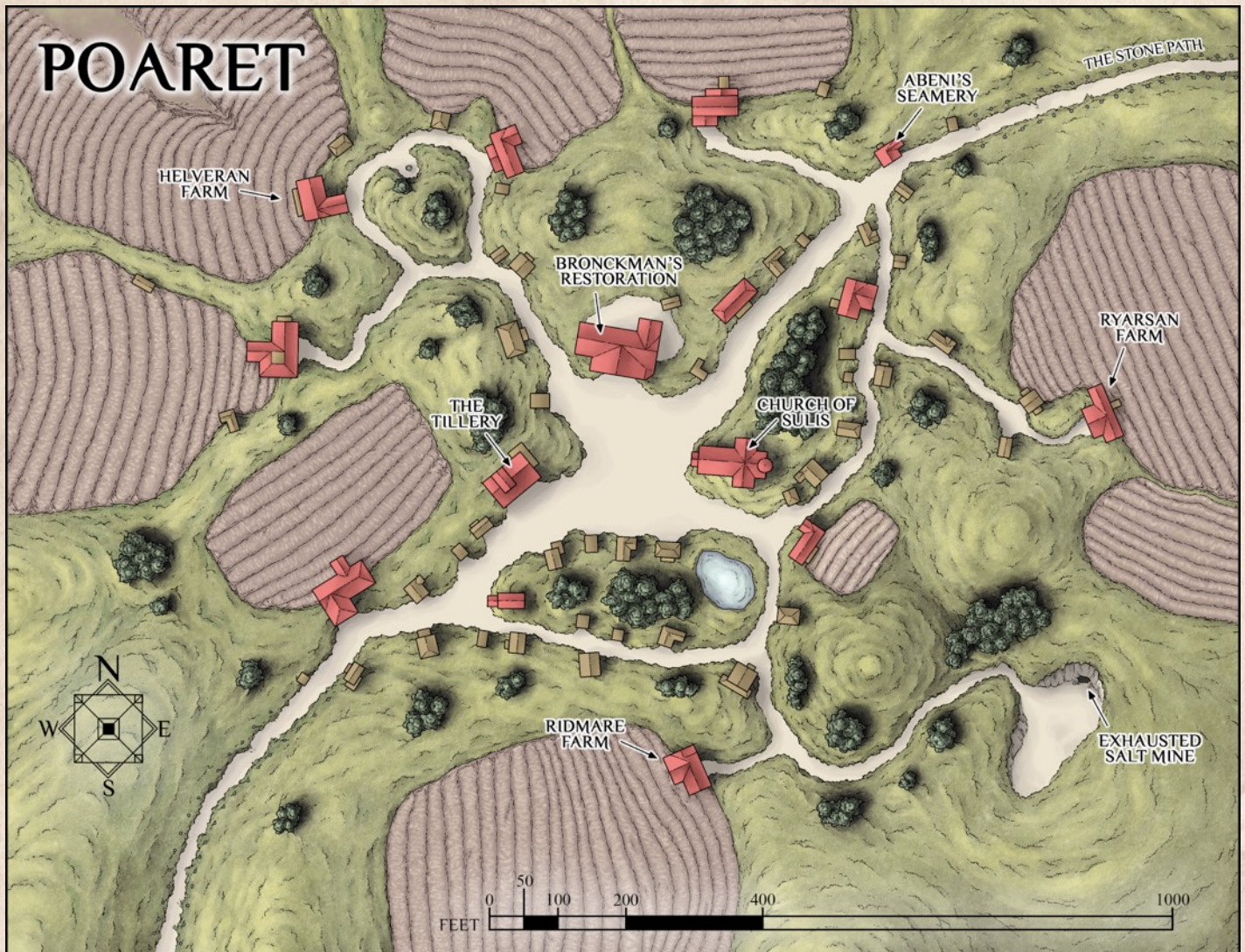
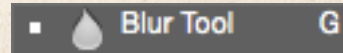
The very last step of making our map is to... make it a map. Oftentimes you may be just making a map for your own reference or to be able to put an image in front of your players, but if you want to be able to share your map and/or have it be useable by others then additions like these make this information more immediately readable.

In most cases, if you're looking to indicate major locations on your map, you'll want to decide between including the titles of them like I have for Poaret here, or alternatively you could create a small set of lettered or numbered labels for each location to then define via a legend. Other elements like a compass or scale help your reader place the location you're depicting within a larger sense of space of the region around it. Arrows are also a great tool to use to specify the exact area or structure you're referring to with a label, especially if mapping a settlement with a particular dense set of buildings.

For most of the text in my maps, I'll use the 'Yellow Magician' font, a personal favorite. However, whether it's text, arrows, a compass, or anything else that you want to have floating above your image, you're probably going to want to have it stand out above the visuals:



This can be accomplished by erasing or lightening the color beneath that information, but I like to add a subtle, blurred outline instead. To do this, you'll want to make a copy of the layer you're outlining, select the bottom copy layer, then go to Edit > Stroke and from there you can decide the color and thickness of the outline. At that point you can use combinations of opacity changes, choosing blending options, or avenues like the 'Blur' tool to further soften this outline.



Thank You!

This is the second mapmaking guide that I've made to release to the Dungeons & Dragons community and I hope that you found it helpful, enlightening and/or motivational. You can find the first guide on making battle maps, as well as all of the other RPG content I create at our Patreon (link below). My aim is to help equip other Dungeon Masters and tabletop enthusiasts with the means to fully realize the potential their own maps can take on with their own creativity and effort.

I'll be hoping to make additional mapmaking guides in the future for varying scales and types of maps, but in the meantime if you found this guide as helpful as I intended, or if you appreciated the artwork used here you can support me through my Patreon page at:

<https://www.patreon.com/venatusmaps>

Alternatively, if you just want to see more maps like the one I made for this guide, I release lower resolution versions of those maps for free on a delayed schedule on the companion blog at:

<https://venatusmaps.tumblr.com>

Lastly, if you'd like to send me suggestions, ideas for maps to do in the future, or point out any errors you might have spotted in this guide, feel free to reach me directly at:

venatusmaps@gmail.com