

**Imaginary Exploration:
Worlds, Maps, and Landscapes in High Fantasy**
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Abstract: *In this article, high fantasy world building and map making are discussed.*

High Fantasy Worlds

High fantasy worlds can be extremely complex, as a lot of time is taken into mapping out the world's physical landscape. Beyond geography, time is also dedicated to establishing the in-universe canon, which includes the time period, demographics, and political and belief systems.

Writers are not the only creators of the fantasy world; characters within these worlds can serve as sub-creators within their created universe (Wolf 2014, p. 226-27). These characters rule the world, make the rules for their cities, or otherwise have the power to change how their environment is supposed to operate.

High fantasy writers take much inspiration from real-world cultures and mythos when creating these places. Elements of Anglo-Saxon and Norse mythology abound in the *Game of Thrones* universe, while the *Shadow and Bone* trilogy carries an Eastern European atmosphere. Especially in more recent years, high fantasy fiction writers have taken to non-Western cultures for inspiration. The novel *Children of Blood and Bone*, for instance, is heavily inspired by Nigerian mythology.

Secondary universes, while beautifully complicated, are often left incomplete (2014, p. 38). What lies far beyond Narnia in the same universe is uncertain to anyone besides perhaps C.S. Lewis himself. This uncertainty of parts outside the territories represented in works of fantasy, allows readers to use their imagination and become further engaged with these stories.

World Maps

Fantasy world maps themselves play a key role in establishing the universes they represent (Ekman 2013, p. 21). They position the reader in the key setting in which the events of a story unfold. Sometimes, these maps are vital to understanding how the story progresses; this is especially true for novels that involve a long journey across the land, such as the *Hobbit*, where the characters' location changes consistently- from the Shire, to Isengard, to Helm's Deep, to Mordor, and all the rivers, mountain ranges, and forests that run through it.

Maps of high fantasy worlds often evoke a sense of They often appear quite old- yellowed parchment with tattered corners and a stain or two- implying that they have been passed down within their universe for generations. Also, not only are these maps usually hand-drawn, but they are often done so in a way that implies they were created by the characters themselves. Thus, maps can also be an artistic outlet for the novelists.

Ultimately, maps serve to familiarize readers to worlds that are otherwise strange. See the two maps below? You haven't been to Narnia or Alagaësia in your life. But you can already make sense of how these worlds are supposed to be. In the real world, the maps you find in an atlas, or perhaps your phone's GPS feature, mark all the major landmarks, cities, streets, and natural features.

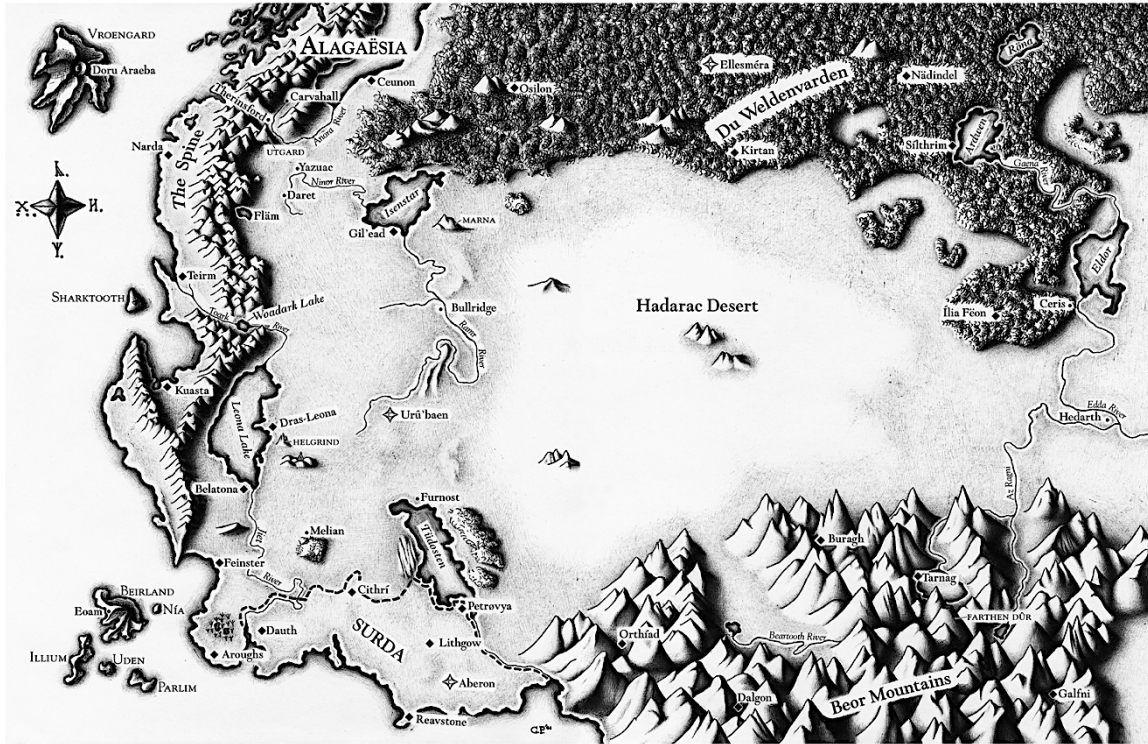
You can see that Alagaësia, for instance, is a geographically diverse region whose inhabitants mostly reside near the rocky coast; a vast desert separates the wooded north and the mountainous south. Similarly, you can tell that Narnia is peppered with thick forests and bordered by mountain ranges.

At the edge of both maps, the compass rose helps to orientate how the authors, and the characters in these stories, expect you to view landmarks in relation to each other. In the Narnia map, you see that the Witch's Castle lies to the north of the Shuddering Wood. Interestingly, north doesn't always have to face the top! For some maps, such as those made by the Dwarves in the *Lord of the Rings*, it is tradition that landmarks be viewed facing east. Suddenly, the Witch's Castle is no longer near the top of the map; from Shuddering Wood, this location is now to the viewer's left.



Map of Narnia from the *Chronicles of Narnia* series (C.S. Lewis)

(Retrieved from: <https://narniaforeverblog.wordpress.com/map-of-narnia-2/>)



Map of Alagaësia from *The Inheritance Cycle* series (Christopher Paolini)
(Retrieved from: "Map of Alagaësia", <https://www.paolini.net/2015/01/19/map-of-alagaesia/>)

Check out these interactive maps of iconic fantasy worlds!

Westeros from *Game of Thrones*:
<https://quartermaester.info/>

This map, adapted from both the novel *A Song of Ice and Fire* and the TV series *Game of Thrones*, also has spoiler control. Visitors can select which events and landmarks are shown by filtering content by chapters or episodes.

Middle Earth from the *Lord of the Rings*:
<http://lotrproject.com/map/#zoom=3&lat=-1315.5&lon=1500&layers=BTTTTT>

The LotR Project is the result of countless hours of dedication. Here, you can see the paths across Middle Earth taken by such characters as Bilbo Baggins, Frodo and Sam, and Gandalf, and examine various events and timelines within the series canon.

References

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