

## Creating a Sense of Place: the Many Benefits of Close Focus

In our forum, [Cadius asks](#) how people capture a sense of isolation in their settings. He is speaking of the isolation that comes from slow travel times, remote locations, no modern communications, lack of contemporary supply networks, and so on. Of course, the people living in those circumstances may not feel "isolated" per se: to them, that's just the way things are. Even relative isolation will feel normal if that's the norm. But how to create this sense in one's fictional setting? That's another issue.

His question sparked a few thoughts, and rather than hog forum space with a response that ranges a bit, I'm putting this brain dump here. This is not just about the technical aspects of isolation, but rather about how characters can be used to make isolation evident. In world building, once we know the basics of our Big Picture (like the isolation factors noted above), they often only become apparent "where the rubber meets the road": that is to say, where the world interacts with the character in our game or story.

### So, About That Isolation Thing....

I find the best way to make a sense of isolation most apparent is to shut down the scope of the setting. That is to say, focus on the close and personal, and the local life, to the exclusion of almost everything else. Cut out a lot of "news from afar" (when it arrives, via traveler, bard, or messenger bird, it should be an event that is noteworthy and might even bring everyone gathering around to get an ear full). Do keep a strict eye on supply: what's available is what can be sourced locally, and things beyond that are scarce and valuable. ("If we want something better than homespun, we can only get cloth for new dresses or tunics twice a year, when everyone goes to the County Fair and we trade leather and furs and hunting spears for fine goods made in the city.")

Sure, it's still important to note that travel is slow, distances seem far, and we are governed by a corrupt count because the king is too far away to know what he's doing. But these things all feel far removed and distant from the characters (usually), and that's because they are. It is only when things become personal--affecting the characters' daily lives in an immediate way--that they notice or even care about the things that amount to "isolation." And this is what close focus on a small locale achieves so well.

Another benefit to this approach is that what is local becomes familiar and feels like the "norm". This lets the world-creator establish a baseline for "how things are." After that, this creates a true sense of wonder and weirdness for the character when they go *elsewhere* and experience something different. This works to dramatic effect in fiction, but in gaming becomes a powerful immersive effect for the player. This is especially useful in an rpg where the GM wants the characters to feel rooted in a home base.

### It's Like a Small Town Around Here

The other benefit of enforcing close-focus scope of setting is that it creates a "small town" feel--whether it is a village, or a single ship in space on a months-long journey, or a ship at sea, or a remote monastery or military outpost--whatever works where you can keep things up-close and personal. The payoff for this is that the place actually comes to feel very homey: everyone knows everyone, and where everything is, and all the personal connections and tensions that exist in that place.

In this setting it's a piece of cake to introduce surprisingly engrossing tiny personal dramas (that may have Big story implications for later). Everyone knows everyone's business, and if one person has their nose out of joint about another, everybody has an opinion about that, or takes sides, or intervenes (or eggs them on)... This is fertile ground for drama that *seems* to be on a small scale, but can blossom into story and adventure hooks for other, bigger things (perhaps ones that take the characters out of town or off the ship. Finally).

On the third hand you can keep the entire game or story in that close setting, in which case the personal interactions, tensions and intrigues gain much more importance. Threats the characters face have to be hazards that come to where they are, instead of the reverse.

Point being: this works like a charm to create an immediate sense of place, and to adjust readers' understanding of the setting or players' expectations of their world. If the constraints of isolation need to be in place, characters will experience this first-hand on a micro-level that makes sense and engages the audience of the fictional setting. And although this post is written with isolation as the example, this technique works for any facts or elements of world design you feel have significant impact on the characters. You simply show how those things impinge on daily life, when daily life fills a small circuit.

This technique is especially powerful if you are introducing readers or player characters to a setting that is unlike anything they are familiar with: this "hot house environment" of the close-focus setting instantly immerses the audience (and characters) into your world, magnifying the many small things that are its hallmark as "someplace different." This goes far beyond mere isolation factors and gets heavily into social and cultural aspects; it is an ideal way to introduce the "foreign" and make it become "home." Hopefully I can get into that in a future post. For now, though, I'd like to hear your thoughts on the matter in the comments, or at [Cadius' thread](#) if you have more to say on isolation.