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The Edge of the Imaginary World: The Influences of Imperialism and Expansionism in Secondary World Cartography

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Abstract

This paper explores the function of cartographical representations in fantasy literature and their implications in a cartographic tradition marked by Imperialism and Colonialism. Using the Tolkienian terminology of “secondary worlds”, I analyzed the features of genre-setting maps such as Middle Earth and Narnia, noting the function of frontiers within these representations of imaginary realms. Compared with the maps of early European exploration in the Americas and Africa, the Eurocentric tendencies of the two works of fantasy literature reveal themselves even in a component of world-building as fundamental as map-making. Deviations from these traditional representations of frontier-lands in Ursula Le Guin’s Earthsea series work to display in contrast how map-making influences the way other-ness in humanity operates within the work itself. I then explore the function of frontiers in the context of secondary world expansion, placed into the context of transmedia, and exemplified through the work of George R.R. Martin’s A Game of Thrones franchise. I mark the expansion of Martin’s maps over the course of the series’ existence and expansion through various outlets of media, which reveal a pattern of exploiting cartographical frontiers. I argue that while contemporary secondary worlds may have moved past traditions of the genre more closely associated with imperialism and Eurocentrism (especially concerning populations), new traditions of growth suggest an embracing of transmedia expansionism, not without its own parallels with the process of colonialization. Beyond the ethical implications of such parallels, this secondary world expansionism further emphasizes the subtle power of frontiers in fantasy map-making.

Keywords: Cartography, Imperialism, Secondary World, Expansion, Transmedia, World Building

Introduction

Cartography has been a staple of fantasy literature for decades, and imaginative authors have used maps to supplement their fantastical writings since the early 18th century. While maps have always been useful tools for fantasy writers, whether conceptual or physical, Tolkien’s inclusion of maps into his official publications established them as standard for the genre (Walker, 1981). And maps have remained as such well into the present day. Fantasy writing depends on creating and maintaining an inner-consistency of laws and geographies, a need which has sustained the map-making tradition over the last half-century. The functions of these fantasy maps in relation to the worlds they display are already complex. But, when compared to

cartographical practices of European imperialism in Africa and the Western Hemisphere, the development of fantasy map-making betrays a greater significance. I argue that fantasy secondary worlds have developed to exhibit an imaginative expansionism through the map-making tradition of frontiers, which mimics cartographical imperialism used by 19th century global empires. And despite a growing awareness and displeasure of colonial influence over decades of genre-evolution, the expansionism of transmedia entities continues to recreate a sort of colonial fantasy of limitless expansion. Such trends point to a new convention for the cartography of imaginary worlds and a repurposing of established genre traditions, entwined with the lucrative expansionism of secondary worlds across varying forms of media.

The Construction of a Secondary World

An in-depth analysis of fictional maps requires, firstly, an acknowledgement of the slippery nature of the category of “fantasy”. There exists a wide variety of contending definitions of fantasy as a genre, from the historical to the aesthetic. Some conceptualizations of fantasy welcome the likes of horror and ghost stories, while others exclude a number of popular texts commonly considered within the field (Mendlesohn & James, 2012). Yet a more effective method of clarification exists beyond this contested terminology. In J.R.R Tolkien’s essay *On Fairy Stories*, he provides a more specific and useful lexicon. In it, Tolkien (2001) proposes viewing fantasy in terms of “secondary world[s]”: worlds with their own inner-consistency of laws, which the reader enters into and experiences in “secondary belief” (p.47, 49). The makers of these worlds, being in a sense more than just writers or mappers, Tolkien (2001) deems “sub-creators” (p.37). This essay analyzes the works of four such sub-creators: Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,

Ursula Le Guin, and George R.R. Martin. While I may safely consider their work as fantasy, they are more acutely similar in their commitment to building coherent imaginary worlds.

Secondary world literature requires a particular style of writing. In traditional literature and other story-telling forms, relevance to the narrative often determines a detail's value and subsequently whether the author includes it or not. Usually, this leads to cutting. World-building, in contrast, demands a great deal of otherwise unnecessary detail in order to create a convincing secondary world. And, extra-textual material such as appendixes and maps aid the construction of the world, where they would otherwise appear "tangential" (Wolf, 2002, p.90). Sub-creators must hold their worlds in equal status to the story, while also meeting their world's demands for verisimilitude. Foreign names, histories, and lore work little for the story, but much for the world. The world of Middle Earth demands an exhibition of the variety of languages within it (Tolkien, 1973). The world of Earthsea demands an explanation of its unique laws of magic (Le Guin, 1968). And they all, to some extent, demand cartography.

Yet the terminology of secondary worlds serves an additional utility. It highlights the relationship between a sub-created world and the one in which we live, which Tolkien (2001) names the "Primary World" (p.47). World-building is contingent on an underlying dependence on the Primary World, as tools such as maps rely on Primary World cartography as the template. A Secondary World always has some "default assumptions" of world-aspects operating the same way the Primary World would. Wolf argues that the mark of the sub-creator lies in the alterations, the differences (Wolf, 2002). I argue further, that what the sub-creator neglects to alter in the process of world-building portrays just as much of a worldview. As such, the maps these sub-creators use to portray their worlds communicate a certain conceptualization of the primary world, and particularly, a conceptualization of frontiers.

Frontiers at the Edge of the World

The first mark of imperialism found within secondary world cartography is the persistent presence of frontiers, the space at the edge of the world. When approached with the original map of Middle-Earth (which operated as standard for the young genre), one can easily observe a disparity between the center and outer regions. Tolkien appears to have left the lands to the North, East, and South relatively undetailed. These outlying regions contain sparse cartographical cues, save for wide reaching names like “Rhun”, which covers practically the entire East (Tolkien, 1965a, p.16-17). And the unresolved coastline suggests a greater, concealed continent, making Middle-earth a sort of “separate whole” of the secondary world (Sundmark, 2017, p.228). These cartographical decisions create frontiers within the world’s representation, indeterminate and ambiguous frontiers; space between the known and unknown. And, as Tolkien’s standard integrated into tradition, subsequent sub-creators have generally continued this technique of mapping frontiers in secondary worlds. As Hassler-Forest (2016) notes, a secondary world, and thus a secondary world map, always needs an “outside” waiting to be explored (p.68).

In both imperial expansionism and secondary worlds, frontiers mark the boundary between the known (civilization, or *European* civilization), and the unknown. In the case of early sixteenth century England, the division between nature and society spurred on the empire’s expansion into Ireland, its “first colonial frontier” (Patel & Moore, 2017, p.51). This frontier existed at the boundary between nature and society, between the colonial regions of “the Pale” in Northern Ireland and the savage *outside* (Patel & Moore, 2017, p.52). And by conceptualizing

the land, resources, and inhabitants of frontiers as outside of society, imperial powers such as England found ideological ground in expanding into and exploiting them. Out of a wide array of technologies, cartography stands out among others for both utility in accomplishing this expansion and clarity in displaying it. But before returning to the subjects of secondary worlds, the topic requires a discussion of the cartographical practices that so subtly influenced their design.

The Cartography of Empires and the Lure of “Incognita”

The transcontinental empires of Europe developed a cartography that, both practically and ideologically, accommodated a demand for conquest and exploitation. The 1502 “Cantino Planisphere” provided Portugal an indispensable navigational tool for launching the first of many invasions into the Indian Ocean to raid the trade wealth of Hormuz, Goa, and Malacca (Patel & Moore, 2017, p.55). Gerard Mercator created the Mercator Projection, still one of the world’s most prominent cartographic tools, out of increasing demands of “rapacious and militarized commercial expansion” (Patel & Moore, 2017, p.58). Modern mapping developed concurrently with the expansion of European imperial power. As Moore (2015) articulates, “mapping space was constitutive of global conquest, not merely representative of it,” (p.212). The cartographic conventions established in Europe from the 16th to the 19th century both reflected and served the needs of the civilization’s global ambitions.

Imperial cartography also exhibited a number of ideological shifts in European civilization. The 17th century philosopher Rene Descartes pushed the ideological shift of viewing nature and society as stringent binary and in a relationship of conquest. This “revolutionary

materialism” separated mankind (civilized) from nature and promoted the domination of nature by European civilization as morally unquestionable (Patel & Moore, 2017, p.53). The divide between nature and society allowed for the separation of humanity by the binary, placing some (such as indigenous peoples) outside the realm of “thinking things” (Patel & Moore, 2017, p.52). The Cartesian conceptualization of the world as distant from the mind developed European empires that could view and represent the world through quantifiable distance (Patel & Moore, 2017). As Moore (2015) argues, an understanding of modern mapping requires a discussion of private property, as the modern concept of “land ownership” both required and created the cartographic method of surveying in Europe (p.212). These ideological transformations made imperial cartography “thinkable” in the first place (Patel & Moore, 2017, p.54).

And as ideological foundation and economic demand shaped the cartography of global empires, that cartographic method in turn perpetuated a system of exploration and conquest. The portrayal of frontiers as “incognita”, meaning *unknown* or *lands unknown*, leads back far into the 17th century. (Stone, 1988, p.58). European cartographic representations of Africa favored bank space over “contemporary wisdom” on the continent (Stone, 1988, p.58). Similarly, Captain Cook’s early charts of the American Northwest Coast exhibit this same evoking of incognita. Much of the map is comprised of a cartographic grid and an unbroken line depicting the coast. And Cook leaves the vast interior of the continent strikingly blank. This omission, no oversight or failure, served to lay the foundational cartography for Western knowledge, a foundation which later explores of the late 18th century gradually built on. And more critically, the incognita of Cook’s cartography inspired “British geopolitical imagination”, which in turn promoted colonial expansion (Clayton, 2000, p.332). Cook’s own officers saw the region as “awaiting commercial development”, an empty canvas for European expansion (Clayton, 2000, p.332).

In the United States, the concept of frontier played a particularly explicit influence on the development of the nation's expansion toward the Pacific. And United States history displays potentially the constructed dichotomy between civilization and nature, and the frontier in between. The removal of Native Americans from their homes relied on an underlying conceptualization of the land as unpeopled, as "virgin" (Cronon, 1996, p.10). And the cartographic absence of native civilizations worked to downplay the native people's humanity and further situate them ideologically into nature. The distinction makes conquest far easier to justify. In Africa, European cartographies of the continent display two distinct types of relationships (Stone, 1988). Imperial cartographies of the African interior effectively minimized the presence of native African tribes, even when cartographers worked to capture detailed geographic accuracy. Only when Europe started colonizing Africa did cartographers begin to represent signs of civilization like roads, towns, and railways (Stone, 1988).

The Secondary World cartography also benefits (intentionally or not) from evoking incognita. The fundamental aspect of inspiring the viewer/reader's imagination holds just as clearly, if not more powerfully, when applied to secondary worlds. Middle Earth's frontiers suggest a continent far vaster than what the map shows. The world, while limited in a narrative sense to the locations pertinent to the plot, at the same time operates as spatially limitless. So long as indeterminate frontiers border it, a secondary world can beckon the reader's imagination toward speculation, which in turn produces increased interest and investment into the world. But there comes a cost from evoking frontiers, which too mimics imperial ideology. The binary of nature and society can subtly influence how the people of frontiers appear and operate within the narrative of a secondary world. Sub-creators unaware of the imperialist foundation of their

cartography can fall victim to these tendencies of poorly representing frontier people, as Tolkien and Lewis's worlds each display.

Frontier People of Secondary Worlds

The imperialist cartographic approach to frontiers often created disparities between the textual and the visual reports of exploration. In his first chart of Northwestern America, Cook did not merely leave the interior incognita; he actively minimized the cartographic representation of native Nootka tribes. And this omission conflicts with the textual records from Cook, in which he clearly details his dealings with the native population (Clayton, 2000). Presenting a frontier as incognita often has the effect of underrepresenting or completely omitting the presence of native frontier people. Such omission created "imperial space" which expedited the "colonial appropriation" of land from native peoples (Clayton, 2000, p.328). Within secondary world literature, sub-creators have recreated this same frontier disparity between the text and the cartography, frequently to the harm of those people left *othered* in the process.

Tolkien (1973) integrates the southern frontier of Middle Earth, *Harad*, into the narrative more so than the North or East. While no character crosses into that frontier region, its native people, the "Haradrim", invade their way into the narrative, to the aid of the explicitly evil Sauron (p.139). Few readers today can overlook that the Haradrim have notably brown skin, contrasting with the primarily light-skinned cast of characters and races shown throughout Middle-Earth (Tolkien, 1965b). The men from the "savage land in the wide East" also join the invasion from the frontiers toward the interior (Tolkien, 1973, p.115). Textually, these peoples play an integral part in the narrative, building into overarching themes of the temptation of power

and adding variety to the roster of antagonists. However, the map of Middle Earth provides almost no evidence of occupation in these two frontiers. Along with sparse geographic details, the map details no towers or cities in Harad, save for the “Harad Road” which simply fades into the seemingly empty land (Tolkien, 1965a, p.16-17). These frontier people, beyond being associated with antagonism, receive strikingly little cartographic representation.

Lewis (1952) constructs a similar mimicry within his own secondary world of Narnia. The map holds to the conventions of incomplete continent, with Narnia serving as both the name of the secondary-world itself and the name of a particular kingdom within that world. The operation of the kingdom aspect betrays a more explicit recreation of imperialism in *The Voyage of the Dawn Treader*. Before the quest of Prince Caspian barely begins, mention of subjugating “giants” at Narnia’s borders into tributaries suggests colonialist influence (Lewis, 1952, p.19). On the first stop of the voyage east toward the end of the world, the Dawn Treader visits the “Lone Islands”, a land conquered by the Kingdom of Narnia years before (p.48). This chapter also introduces the “Calormen”, described having “dark faces and long breads... [wearing] flowing robes and orange-colored turbans”, and as proponents of slavery (Lewis, 1952, p.64). Much later in the history of that secondary world, the Calormen act as the great enemy of Narnia in *The Last Battle* (Mendlesohn & James, 2012, p.54). The land of Calormen has no representation in the original map of Narnia, and their absence from the cartography and their narrative moral role works to situate them as yet another people of the frontier.

The unfortunate state of frontier peoples complicates these foundational secondary worlds. An explanation may come from the two sub-creators’ background of study. While Tolkien was a professor of philology (often focusing heavily on language), and Lewis a professor of literature, they both “adored Greek, Roman, and Norse mythology” (Mendlesohn &

James, 2012, p.43). Their focus held to European histories and European traditions, and ultimately that focus manifested itself into the world-building and narrative. Others have well noted and analyzed the textual evidence of lingering colonial eurocentrism in Lewis and Tolkien, but the *cartography* illuminates many of the underlying assumptions that worked to cement that eurocentrism in the first place (Mendlesohn & James, 2012). Tolkien and Lewis geographically position their frontier people as not just exotic, but *other*. Cartography works as an integral aspect of colonialist structure within these secondary worlds, perhaps more subtly, but all the more critically. However, sub-creators have grown more aware of colonialist attitudes toward frontier people, and have, to some degree, attempted to resist them.

Intentional Resistance in World-Building

Ursula Le Guin's *A Wizard of Earthsea* presents a challenge toward these methods of portraying secondary worlds and their people. In opposition to the map-making convention of incomplete continents, the map of Earthsea displays an archipelago world, quite literally of *earth* and *sea*. The narratives of the Earthsea series incorporate the presence of indeterminate frontiers uniquely. There is a subtle anxiety expressed within the narrative around the nature of the world (Le Guin, 1968). In *A Wizard of Earthsea*, the protagonist Ged pursues a shadow to the easternmost island of the archipelago, an island named by its inhabitants as "Lastland", as they claim "there is nothing but water till the world's edge" from there on (Le Guin, 1968, p.194). Later, Ged asks his friend if he believes there might be "other archipelagos or vast undiscovered lands" beyond the known limits of the world, but the friend replies that any boat sailing past the reaches has never returned, and that no boat has come from any place beyond (Le Guin, 1968,

p.196). The world makes no guarantees of anything much more than what is already given. The story reaches its conclusion at this anticipated edge of the known world, farther out into the unknown ocean than any before them. They find no new lands. But for a brief moment, the boundary between sea and land begins to gray as Ged (the real name of Ursula K. Le Guin's Earthsea realm) steps out into the ocean to confront the shadow (Le Guin, 1968).

A Wizard of Earthsea's final journey also evokes a sense of alienation to the protagonist as he sails further and further from land. It becomes evident to Ged that his spells lose their influence on the world around him the farther he goes from "lands where men were meant to live" (Le Guin, 1968, p.197). This implies a mankind bound to the land and naturally confined by it. Even as Ged and his companion return homeward, the fish of the "Open Sea" "pay no heed to magic" (Le Guin, 1968, p.203-204). Earthsea is a secondary world which firmly limits any attempt of expansion into the unknown. While the world's people may, on rare occasion, press out against the confines, breaking into the frontiers, the act meets great resistance from the world itself. In contrast to Narnia and Middle Earth, where the borderlands are left open, Earthsea operates as a remarkably closed system.

On the topic of intention, Le Guin's anthropology-ingrained childhood endowed her with a greater awareness and appreciation of Native American cultures, an awareness that clearly manifests in her world-building (Cummins, 1993). The majority of the people of Earthsea are explicitly dark-skinned, the only white-skinned group being the notably conquest-based "Kargad Empire" (Le Guin, 1968, p.17). Immediately this inversion of stereotypical colonial racial hierarchies stands in contrast to Middle-Earth and Narnia's fair-skinned heroes and dark-skinned frontier-people. And while the outer reaches of Earthsea hold people seemingly foreign to those in the Inner Sea, Le Guin maintains a non-colonialist perspective of them. The East Reach-native

“Vech” plays a key role as a primary character throughout the narrative, his foreignness only complementing his uniqueness (Le Guin, 1968, p.54). And the lack of land beyond the Reaches works to enclose those would-be frontiers within the bounds of the world instead of separating them into an *other* in the outside of it.

Le Guin also opposes convention in the ways her secondary world integrates the concept of balance. Earthsea series’ thematic concept of “equilibrium” presents an ideological complication toward the influence of imperial cartography (Cummins, 1993, p.25). Limitations exist not only against expanding past the frontiers of the world, but also against the exploitation of the world. Wizards, arguably the most powerful characters in the world of Earthsea, act very much as spiritualists, serving the laws of equilibrium. When a young girl asks Ged to use magic to conjure a meat-pie, he remarks on how his illusion could never fill an empty stomach (Le Guin, 1968, p.182-183). His mystical elaborations liken all life to “syllables of the great word”, and all magic in service to maintaining the balance of all things (Le Guin, 1968, p.184-185). These narrative details intentionally construct the world of Earthsea as incompatible with imperial expansionism. However, there remains one complication in Earthsea’s map. In the Northernmost edge of the archipelago there lies a single, barren, and incomplete landmass. Earthsea still has one textually insignificant yet undeniable frontier. The “Hogen land” remains as evidence of the gripping influence of imperialist cartography, despite attempts at intentional resistance to it (Le Guin, 1968, p.8-9).

While secondary world cartographies evoke frontiers to various effects and extents, a sub-creator can also choose to actively exploit those frontiers. As in the case of Cook and the Nootka, sub-creators can expand their secondary worlds through the frontiers they create. In some cases, like Narnia, the map literally receives extensions into the south and east. And the

secondary worlds actively growing today do so at an unprecedented rate and magnitude. By expanding into transmedia entities, secondary worlds come to embody a new kind of imaginative empire, still surprisingly comparable to historical cartographic development.

Imperialism, Colonialism, and Transmedia Expansionism

“Transmedia Entity” refers to an imaginary world that expands over multiple forms of media (film, literature, video games, etc.) (Wolf, 2002, p.90). Secondary worlds tend to make extremely effective transmedia entities, and commonly hold rank among the most widespread (Wolf, 2002). For example: the Harry Potter series began as a literary work, expanded to include the lore-adding website *Pottermore*, and expanded into film through the recent *Fantastic Beasts* series. The secondary world has grown to the point of requiring a formal alteration of name to the aptly suited “Wizarding World” (Pottermore.com). I did not mark the main-series film adaptations because they, while in a new medium, add no new material to the secondary world. J.K. Rowling continues to develop to this day. Transmedia worlds are open-ended, capable of expanding beyond the original characters or even the original author, as long as the authority of canonicity is not restricted (Wolf, 2002). And so, a secondary world can continue to grow through multiple forms of media.

George R.R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* series (and the television adaptation *A Game of Thrones*) serves as an excellent and relatively recent example of transmedia world-building. Like many secondary worlds, Martin’s began in literature, with maps and appendices accompanying. But this secondary world has, over the last two decades, developed into a remarkably influential transmedia entity, encompassing video games, television, and internet

videos (Vu, 2017). More so than any other discussed here, Martin's world exemplifies cartographic expansion, from the very first monochrome map to the latest hemispheric atlas.

The original map published in *A Game of Thrones* included only Westeros, dividing the map by the North and the South of the continent. The North clearly extends beyond the margins, and an incomplete island of the coast of Dorne suggests an eastern frontier. While the map does not show it, the sprawling continent of Essos lies hidden along with the rest of the unnamed island. This omission caused confusion in some, as a primary thread of the narrative is held in the city of Pentos, completely absent from the original maps (Werthead, 2016). Only after fifteen years of the novel series running did the maps finally include land beyond the Narrow Sea. And yet even in the most recent versions of this secondary world's map, Essos continues to run eastward beyond the margins and Sothoryos just peaks out from the southernmost frontier. Like Le Guin, Martin subverts normative structures established by Tolkien and Lewis, abandoning frameworks of "good and evil" and presenting an overall pessimistic view of monarchical social structures (Vu, 2017, p.290). Yet in contrast to Le Guin, Martin has come to fully embrace the exploitation of frontiers in his cartography, with substantial results.

In an interview with Laura Miller, George R.R. Martin explained the process he went through in the creation of the map used for *A Game of Thrones*. Miller asked the question "when do you create the maps, before, during, or after you right to story". Martin replied that "the map creation is *ongoing* [emphasis added]" and that he found himself expanding and developing the map throughout his writing process (92Y Plus, 2014, 1:12:10). He also elaborates on the process of adapting the world for the publication of a map-book, which required him to add significantly more detail to the world maps in compensation for the maps being printed in larger scales (92Y Plus, 2014). This publication, *The Lands of Ice and Fire*, was the first definitive collection of

maps depicting the well grown secondary world. There became, as Martin expresses, an increasing demand for the cartographical inclusion of regions originally left obscured on the outside of the margins. People wanted more, and Martin had only extend the map to supply them.

Secondary worlds make for particularly gripping transmedia entities, as HBO's *A Game of Thrones* has made evident over the last seven years. The prior mentioned publication of *The Lands of Ice and Fire* is a perfect example of the dual function of fantasy expansion working both for adding to the secondary world and for commercial gain. Secondary worlds have the potential to grow into "something of a brand name", continuously adding (and selling) depth and width to the world (Wolf, 2002, p.93). While sub-creators like Tolkien have closed off their worlds to official expansion, the commercial success of transmedia expansion suggests a new tradition of cartography and world-building (Wolf, 2002). This tradition, while disavowing the narrative influences of frontiers, works to exploit and recreate them in a colonial fantasy of limitless expansion and discovery. So long as Martin continues to create more frontiers with every expansion, his world can continue to grow. New lands mean new stories. New stories mean new material. New material sells, funding the cycle over anew.

Conclusion

Of the many aspects of world-building that work to flesh out secondary worlds and transmedia entities, maps have remained relatively unrecognized. Yet the parallels between beloved maps like Middle Earth and the conquest-inspired cartography of imperialism and colonialism exhibit a powerfully persistent root within map-making traditions. Imperial

cartography explains the underlying anxiety that persuades many sub-creators to create frontiers at the borders of their maps. Unless a sub-creator consciously resists, these frontiers can lead to further colonial mimicry in representing frontier people, propagating perceptions of the world that have left continents of peoples under colonial oppression. While authors such as Le Guin have worked to subvert their genre through representing characters of color in both the periphery and the core of her world, the cartographic anxiety persists. And the recent development of Martin's secondary world points toward the embracing of transmedia expansionism as the new ideal. So, even as some sub-creators resist the imperial and colonial residue in their early world-building traditions, a new practice even more dependent on the exploitation of frontiers is rising to prominence. Perhaps, as Patel and Moore suggest, to change a world shaped by imperialism and colonialism requires "permanent re-imagination" (2017, p.210). It would be worth the experiment for sub-creators to attempt a re-imagination of how cartography in fantasy is done. This may include using non-cartesian/non-western models of cartography, or the creation of a complete map, without any indeterminate frontiers to exploit. But until then, sub-creators must understand the strong compulsions to beckon and expand frontiers, along with the violent past such actions parallel. And they should act with prudence, knowing the power of cartography does not lie in the center of a map, but the edges, where the map can obscure, suggest, and ultimately, expand.

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