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## Before You Start



*This is a slightly updated version of the post that used to adorn the top of the internal mapping forum, as part of the welcome post to new mappers on the team. I hope it will now help all the new third party mappers too. -Tim 'Termi' Grant*

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### Self Preparation

Making a Dystopia map is very different from other games, like [Counter Strike: Source](#) . It requires extreme planning and thinking outside the box. If you can't be bothered to think and draw up ideas for your map, you might as well not bother to even start.

Make sure to get a good idea to hold on to, and try to imagine the finished map in your head. *"Mapper's block"* is the single biggest killer of Dystopia maps.

I recommend getting an [I-Google](#)  widget, like [Stickynote](#) ; something that you can use to record your ideas as soon as you think of them. Google's one is particularly good, because you don't have to save or open individual files; it's just there every time you visit [I-Google](#) . Alternatively, just put a notepad file called [ideas.txt](#) or something similar on your desktop, and modify it at your leisure.

Also, discuss ideas with other people! Mappers are always on [IRC](#) , so be sure to get their opinions on things. Peer review and constructive criticism can be life-saving as far as level development goes.

*Make time*; get yourself committed to finish at least a beta, that's the first hurdle. Once you have done that, you can start a new topic for your map in the mapping forum, and even a wiki page for it. (Be sure to follow the style set by other posts).

*Keep updated*; spend at least a little time one day each week working on the core features of the map. This way you won't get bored of the same map and give up! However, try not to map out all the "fun stuff" first. Get the basic shell down in hammer, then work on details and fun stuff. Don't leave *all* the detailing until the later stages, otherwise you will get very bored! (Try to keep early detail modular, so you don't have to scrap it entirely when making an unplanned layout change).

*Be realistic*; even thinking about starting a map is a lot of hard work and effort. Make sure you have some decent knowledge of mapping before you complete the planning stage. Otherwise, you will end up with your hands tied down the road, trying to figure out how to create a major feature.

If you *are* a beginner, it's probably best to start off mapping for games that require less extensive knowlege of Hammer, like [Counter Strike:Source](#)  or [Half Life:Deathmatch](#) . Even for good mappers, the step up into Dystopia is a hard one!

### Map Preparation

- Think of your objectives in detail.
  - What events* do you want to orchestrate in your map? *What kind of battles* do you want around them? *Where* should they take place? *How long* should they last? *How biased* should they be to either side to maintain overall balance?
- Think of gameflow and layout.
  - What theme* do you want the map to be based upon? Is it a fight between two sky scrapers? A maintenance area rumble? A hot pursuit up flights of stairs?
- Think of reference areas, each with a distinguishing feature, that can be summed up in a few words.
  - You may think of the old "flag room" or "ramp room" from other multiplayer games. In Dystopia, there are obviously more descriptive ones; like "pipe room", "maintenance room", "the wall", "the gap", and "that room with the glowy thing"; because of the relatively large size of the maps. These areas help players identify where they are and make communication easier. Because they cannot be explicitly named, giving each one a prominent feature will help players make up their own terminology.
- Always make *one definite path* to the next objective first, and then possibly one or two *alternate* paths.
  - As we heard at Valve: "Don't give the players too many choices, they will get lost and bored. Don't waste time on rooms that serve no purpose whatsoever. Give the illusion of choice rather than true choice."

As always, if you have any troubles with *anything*, from [entities](#) to "Why the fuck isn't my map compiling/loading in hl2/opening in hammer?!?", ask in the [third party mapping forum](#) , [IRC](#) , or just contact one of the mappers on [the team](#).

### Mapping Efficiently

- Keep your brushwork clean.
  - Keep your grid to a decent size, the higher the better (generally speaking). Keep in mind that brushes bigger than 1024x1024x1024 will be broken up into 1024x1024x1024 chunks by the compiler. Usually, this will badly add to your poly count. The general rule of thumb is that, if you make the cuts to the brushes yourself, they will be more effective than whichever arbitrary way the compiler decides to throw them.
- Use dev textures until the block-out and game-flow stuff is done.
  - Yes it's ugly. Yes, it feels like they are raping your eyes. Yes your testers will bitch about it. But they will help you keep your proportions right, and let you get your block-out done faster without worrying about the details. They will speed up the creation of prototypes and revisions, too.
- Use prefabs.
  - There are a bunch of handy dandy prefabs (pre-built brush layouts) in the prefabs section of Hammer. There is simple stuff, like steps and ladders in there, which make it a little easier for newbies to pick stuff up. Also, for cyberspace stuff, keep in mind the "tubekit" in the [/mapsrc](#) directory of the root Dystopia folder.
- BACK UP YOUR MAP.**
  - That means not just locally, but on the net via FTP. If they are getting big, zip them up. Just be sure to keep a copy somewhere that isn't near your main computer, or on any other computers you may have. You can even email yourself a copy to a G-Mail account or something; just make sure you have a copy of the VMF somewhere safe for hard drive failures or other catastrophes.
- Make sure hammer is set up correctly.
  - Follow the [article here on the Wiki](#) to be sure. All your VMFs should be in the [%steamuserdir%/dystopia/Dystopia/mapsrc](#) directory, BSPs get copied to the [/maps](#) directory after compile. **Only compiled BSPs should be in [steamuserdir%/dystopia/Dystopia/maps](#)** (and their related [screen setup](#) file). Neat directories are easier to manage!

### Further Reading

Valve has provided a huge amount of documentation with the SDK, more than most developers ever provide with dev kits to the public. Here's a rundown of things to look for:

- SDK REFERENCE DOCS**
  - There is a link to them in the Source SDK menu. These documents are a godsend, and the base for the rest of these resources.
- Hammer Documentation
  - You can find [this documentation](#)  on the VDC. It's almost all you should need to get started, read it well and carefully.
- Entity I/O Overview
  - You can also find [input/output documentation](#)  on the VDC. They are a complete description of how the Source engine entity input/output system works, including debugging commands for in-game use.
- Performance and VIS Info
  - The VDC has an article on [performance and visibility](#)  for keeping FPS high on your map. Also, consider reading [this third party guide](#) . If you build your level from the start with these pages in mind, you shouldn't have any problems down the line.
- Three Dimensional Skyboxes
  - Don't forget about [3D skyboxes](#) . They can add so much to the immersion of the map, and if your level is a location in the middle of nowhere, it will only look average without them when it could look hot with a good one.
- Prop Type Overview
  - There are a number of [different prop types](#)  in Hammer. You should read up to have a solid idea of what [prop\\_](#) entity to use where, and the limitations of each type.
- Material Creation Walkthrough
  - Many mappers eventually want to [make their own textures](#) . All mappers should be self-reliant, at least for placeholder textures in their maps.
- Source Entity Guide
  - Combined with the [entity guide for Dystopia](#), the full VDC [entity guide](#)  will tell you everything you need to know about entity specifics.
- Displacement Documentation
  - [Displacement in Hammer](#)  are a very useful but largely unused tool. Their primary use is for organic looking terrain.

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