JOURNAL

NEW YEAR. NEW CAMPAIGN

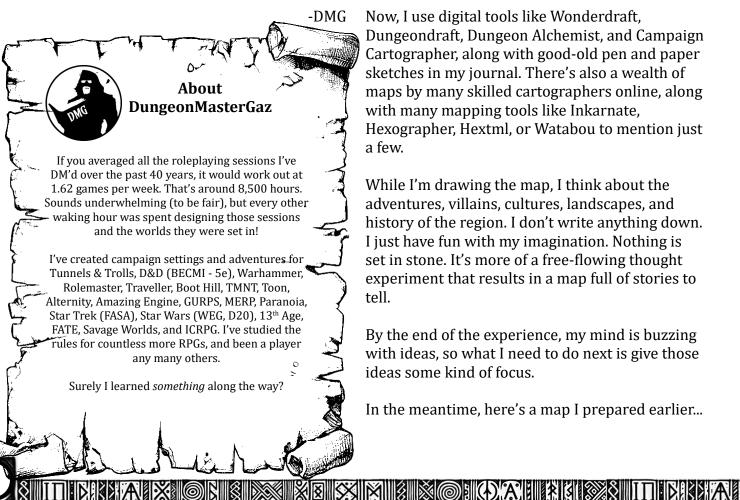# CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION

FOREWORD

WELCOME TO JOURNAL!

I love creating campaign settings. Traditionally, I start a new one in time for my birthday in January each year.

With **JOURNAL**, I'd like to share my experiences as a DM creating a new campaign setting, game-by-game. Each issue brings the ideas, challenges, advice, and fun I have along the way.

I'm building this setting for a campaign using the **Crown & Skull** RPG by **Runehammer Games**, but the topics and experiences I'll share can apply to any RPG system.

I hope this zine inspires your imagination, giving you some cool ideas and guidance that you can adapt for your home campaign.

-DMG

About DungeonMasterGaz

If you averaged all the roleplaying sessions I've DM'd over the past 40 years, it would work out at 1.62 games per week. That's around 8,500 hours. Sounds underwhelming (to be fair), but every other waking hour was spent designing those sessions and the worlds they were set in!

I've created campaign settings and adventures for Tunnels & Trolls, D&D (BECMI - 5e), Warhammer, Rolemaster, Traveller, Boot Hill, TMNT, Toon, Alternity, Amazing Engine, GURPS, MERP, Paranoia, Star Trek (FASA), Star Wars (WEG, D20), 13th Age, FATE, Savage Worlds, and ICRPG. I've studied the rules for countless more RPGs, and been a player any many others.

Surely I learned *something* along the way?

START WITH A MAP

I *always* start building a new campaign setting by drawing a map. It's the number one priority on my to-do list. It's what gets my creative juices flowing!

THE MAP
The first campaign map I ever created was drawn on the squared pages of my school maths book, ripped out and cello-taped together into a poster. Brown triangles, green circles, and lines of blue and black felt-tip pen became a landscape of wondrous adventure begging to be explored. It started with a recreation of Middle-Earth in the top left hand corner (being the only fantasy world map I was aware of back in the late 70's) which I expanded east and south with a landscape of my own design. It ended up looking similar to Pete Fenlon's Middle-Earth world map and was a blast to create!

Now, I use digital tools like Wonderdraft, Dungeondraft, Dungeon Alchemist, and Campaign Cartographer, along with good-old pen and paper sketches in my journal. There's also a wealth of maps by many skilled cartographers online, along with many mapping tools like Inkarnate, Hexographer, Hextml, or Watabou to mention just a few.
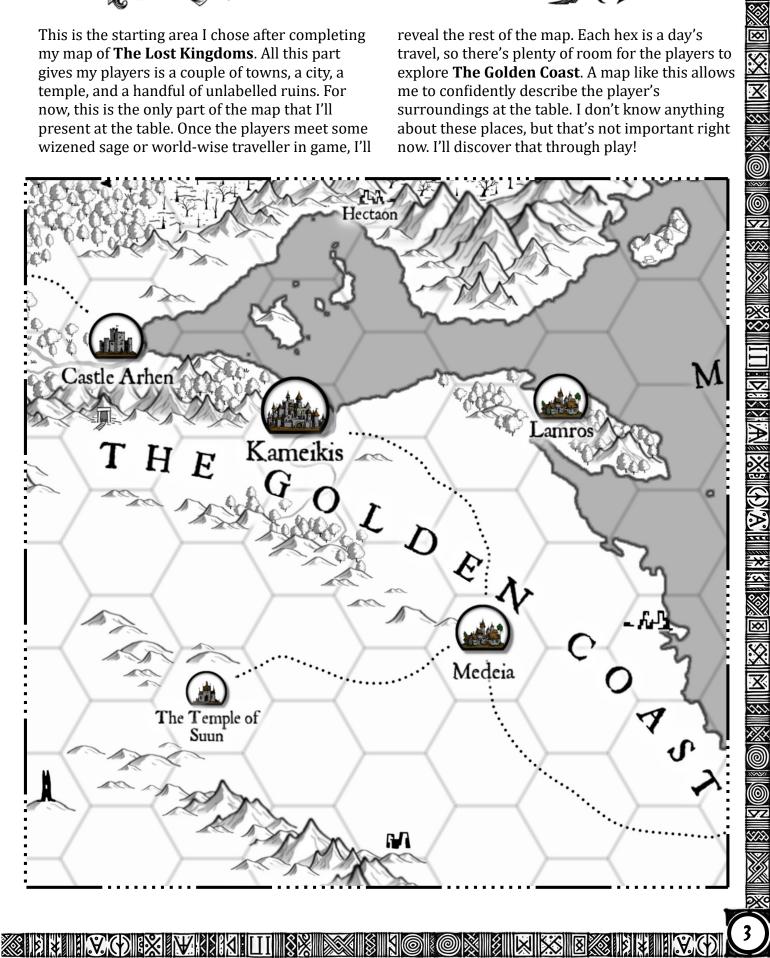
While I'm drawing the map, I think about the adventures, villains, cultures, landscapes, and history of the region. I don't write anything down. I just have fun with my imagination. Nothing is set in stone. It's more of a free-flowing thought experiment that results in a map full of stories to tell.

By the end of the experience, my mind is buzzing with ideas, so what I need to do next is give those ideas some kind of focus.

In the meantime, here's a map I prepared earlier...

EXAMPLE MAP

This is the starting area I chose after completing my map of **The Lost Kingdoms**. All this part gives my players is a couple of towns, a city, a temple, and a handful of unlabelled ruins. For now, this is the only part of the map that I'll present at the table. Once the players meet some wizened sage or world-wise traveller in game, I'll reveal the rest of the map. Each hex is a day's travel, so there's plenty of room for the players to explore **The Golden Coast**. A map like this allows me to confidently describe the player's surroundings at the table. I don't know anything about these places, but that's not important right now. I'll discover that through play!

Hectaon

Castle Arhen

Kameikis

Lamros

M

THE GOLDEN COAST

Medeia

The Temple of Suun

INFLUENCES

USE WHAT YOU LIKE

I need to be able to describe the setting I'm creating to my players at the table. Inevitably, they're going to ask questions and mine for details. Mostly what's pertinent to the situations they find themselves in, but also in a broader sense through conversations with NPCs and questions about their characters. This means that I need a way to come up with all the answers and details on-the-fly. In order to achieve that level of knowledge about my world, I need a foundation of the imagination to draw inspiration from.

That's where influences come in!

Influences are all the things that I can draw upon to help me visualise the world: books and comics I've read; films and TV shows I've watched; games and RPGs I've played.

By creating a short list of influences, I should be able to better imagine what my world looks like. This will give me a good foundation to build on and allow me to recall details at a moment's notice, drawing upon the images and elements of my influences.

To that end, I create a limited list that will shape my imagination for this setting.

Three will do. It's the magic number!

I chose:

- **Sinbad Films**
- **Ray Harryhausen**
- **Conan**

If you're of my generation, you'll likely recognise the feel I'm going for with these influences. If you're not, Google the list so you have an understanding of what I'm aiming at.

With the fundamental influences listed, I dive a bit deeper and list three specifics of each influence to flesh it out further. Then I dive into each of those secondary influences to detail a further three aspects, narrowing the focus even more.

I find that working in threes gives me a small goal to aim for that's easy to achieve and not overwhelming. The 3 x 3 x 3 method also provides a focussed result that has plenty of detail and options, producing quite a long list like in the example opposite.

I also aim to be specific with the sources of influence that I choose. After all, drawing inspiration from the film Jason and the Argonauts produces different elements to the setting than if I'd drawn from the classical Greek mythology. I'm looking for a setting that's cinematic and heroic, filled with incredible wonders and magnificent creatures, so I chose the film version as my influence.

This list should give my players and I a good idea of the setting: conjuring images of what kinds of cultures, dress, architecture, or hierarchies exist along with what creatures and dangers might be encountered. It should create a common vision for everyone, and save a ton of work writing up unnecessary descriptions that my players will never read.

One thing I've learned during my many years of being a Dungeon Master is that the players will change the setting simply through their own ideas and their character's actions. So, having a list of influences like this provides a lot of scope for change and adaptation when needed. It also lends itself to re-skinning a player's wild idea into something that fits within these inspirations, keeping the idea consistent with the setting that's emerging.

INSPIRATION

Examples of fictional, historical, or mythological worlds and elements to shape the look and feel of your campaign...

- **Sinbad Films**
  - Seventh Voyage
    - *Evil magicians*
    - *Gigantic monsters*
    - *Help from mythical allies*
  - Golden Voyage
    - *Mysterious treasure maps*
    - *Black magic*
    - *Visions and prophecies*
  - Eye of the Tiger
    - *Evil sorceress*
    - *Lost advanced civilisations*
    - *Epic quests across land and sea*

- **Ray Harryhausen**
  - Jason and the Argonauts
    - *Treasures of the gods (Talos!)*
    - *Necromancy (Children of the Hydra's Teeth)*
    - *Greek mythology*
  - Mysterious Island
    - *Survival*
    - *Genetic experiments*
    - *Insane masterminds*
  - Clash of the Titans (1981)
    - *Interfering gods*
    - *Titanic monsters*
    - *The hero's journey*

- **Conan**
  - Conan the Barbarian (1982)
    - *Brutal war and slavery*
    - *Demons and supernatural spirits*
    - *Powerful cults*
  - Conan (2011)
    - *Warlords*
    - *Evil artefacts*
    - *Decadent fallen empires*
  - The Complete Chronicles of Conan (R.E. Howard)
    - *Mysterious cultures*
    - *Otherworldly horrors*
    - *Strength and power*

THEMES

WHAT STORIES DO YOU WANT TO TELL?

I always develop themes for my campaigns. I find they impose a loose set of rules that I can follow when designing adventures and determining NPC motivations. They give me guidance and direction, allowing me to add definition to everything I create. I draw upon the themes that I choose for inspiration when none is apparent. I also try to prove the themes with every adventure I write. They lend consistency and familiarity to the setting, providing much more than the small amount of effort that it takes to create them.

Sticking with my tried and tested method of 3x3x3, I'll start with a short list of three primary themes, then drill down to create some secondary themes and finish off with some examples of how those themes might be expressed in-game.

My players determined the themes for the last two campaigns I've run, during a Session Zero for each campaign. I wanted to give them the freedom to determine what themes they wanted to explore without very much input or influence on my part. It was a challenge to conform to what the players wanted, but proved to be quite a wild ride with many unexpected twists and turns. This time I'm going to decide on themes that I enjoy playing without any input from my players. I'm also going to throw in some themes that I've never explored before, challenging myself and presenting my players with something new.

This is where I get to draw upon my **Influences** for the first time, developing themes that are drawn directly from them.

I use my rule of three again when composing themes. For example: rather than have a single-word theme of War, I make it Revenge Causes War. Similarly, a theme of friendship becomes Friendship Conquers All, etc. I think composing three-word themes gives them better definition. This will become important when I start world building, narrowing my focus and speeding up the creation process by streamlining my thoughts.
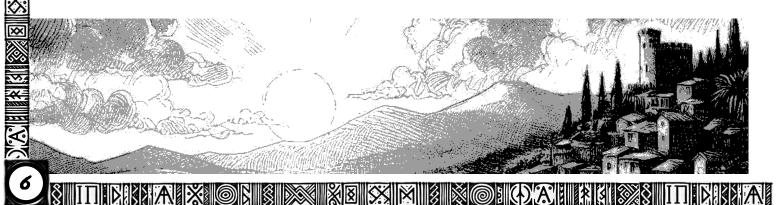
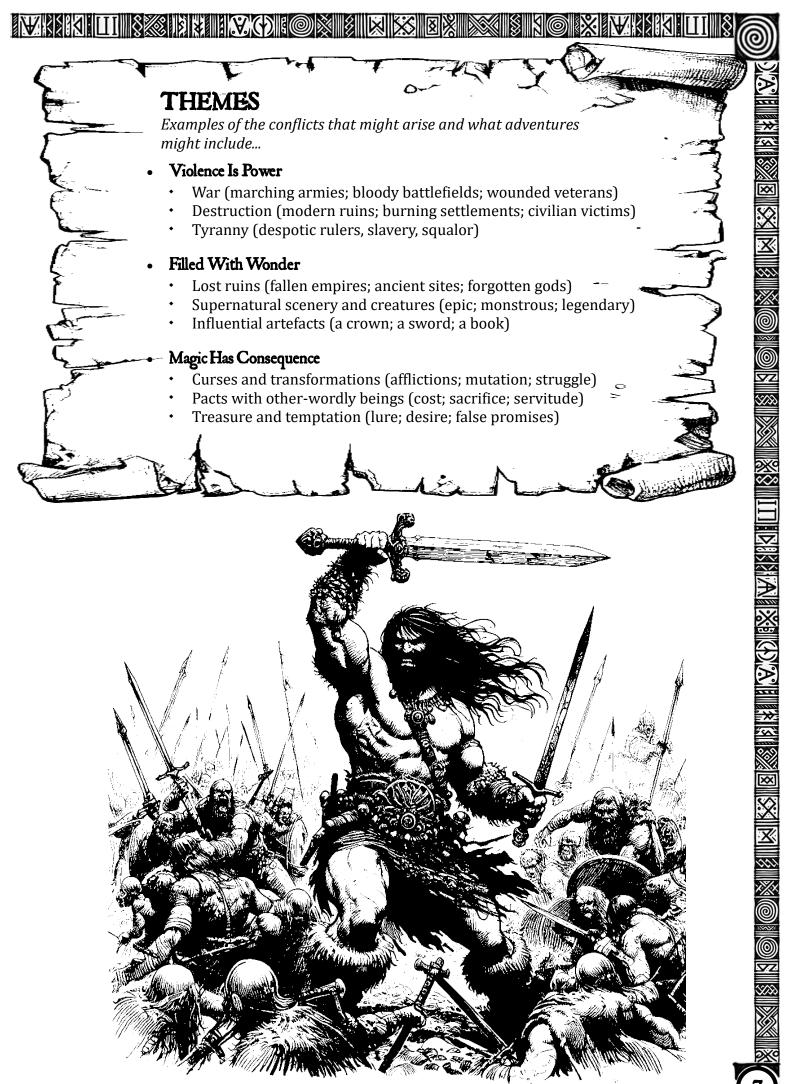So, drawing from my Influences, I quickly determine the following:

- Conan primarily conjures up images of bloodthirsty battle, war, brutality, revenge, and dark, unknowable magic and monsters.
- Sinbad depicts magic as dangerous and costly, and I like that idea.
- Ancient fallen empires are suggested by all of my influences, so I'll draw upon that kind of mystery for my world

That gives me my three core themes.

Next I drill down again and expand upon those themes with three distinct elements each that I can use to reinforce the core theme. I also decided to write three examples of how I might portray the elements within my game to further visualise the world and allow me to *show* my players what its about as opposed to *telling* them what it's about.

This short exercise resulted in the list opposite.

THEMES

Examples of the conflicts that might arise and what adventures might include...

- **Violence Is Power**
  - War (marching armies; bloody battlefields; wounded veterans)
  - Destruction (modern ruins; burning settlements; civilian victims)
  - Tyranny (despotic rulers, slavery, squalor)

- **Filled With Wonder**
  - Lost ruins (fallen empires; ancient sites; forgotten gods)
  - Supernatural scenery and creatures (epic; monstrous; legendary)
  - Influential artefacts (a crown; a sword; a book)

- **Magic Has Consequence**
  - Curses and transformations (afflictions; mutation; struggle)
  - Pacts with other-wordly beings (cost; sacrifice; servitude)
  - Treasure and temptation (lure; desire; false promises)

SUMMARY

MY SECRET WEAPONS

Armed with my Map, Influences, and Themes I have the confidence to start playing straight away, without doing any further work on the campaign. They provide me with an absolute wealth of information that I can draw upon to run any scenario that occurs, and will kick-start my imagination when I need it.

To recap:

The Map: With the map I know where everything is; can point players to dungeons, towns, and cities; answer questions about far-off places; judge distances and travel times; understand the terrain and conditions characters will traverse.

Influences: My Influences allow me to visualise the setting; describe how NPCs might dress or act; suggest what the buildings in a town look like; give me ideas about what monsters and dangers will threaten the player's characters; understand how magic and the supernatural works.

Themes: The Themes I chose tell me how NPCs behave; offer motivations for allies and enemies alike; guide the stories that are told; conjure atmosphere and tone.

These three elements will become my setting's bible. I'll refer to them when I prep for a game. They'll be my armour at the table. With them, there shouldn't be any question I can't answer, or scenario that I can't throw together on-the-fly.

At the most fundamental level, all I need is to pick a place on the map, draw on my influences to imagine and populate it, then decide on a theme to portray and I have the basis for an adventure.

But all that's for another day.

Until then – let your imagination go wild!

-DMG