Rats in the Rain

The Golden Kingdoms Campaign Setting

A source book for lazy world builders.

Here be Dragons

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By G Christopher Dyson

Golden Kingdoms

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Written by G Christopher Dyson

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Background:

A number of years ago I had been watching "The Last King of Scotland" and thought about the potential of setting a D&D game in a similar environment. It would be a dark jungle environment where missionaries and volunteer doctors visited and would serve as a base for adventures.

I didn't have a world to set it in and I didn't think that any of the existing settings were right for it.

I didn't have the time or energy to build my own world especially since most of the play would happen in a different part of the world to where the PC's origin was.

To make my life easier, I invented the golden Kingdoms which was nothing more complicated than a parody of Europe in the age of discovery. There were a wide variety of kingdoms with ever changing borders in one area and outside of that were continents that could be explored. It was all I needed.

Little did I know I would one day need it again; a year or so later I was reading a biography of Josiah Harlan and again the idea was there, that I could build a great campaign with this setting. Again I called upon the Golden Kingdoms to provide the colonising forces, but it was Central Asia that provided the inspiration for the setting.

My third time using the setting happened when I felt inspired to put together a game to pay tribute to the sinking of the Titanic and the Costa Concordia in a game I called "Get back on the damn boat". Most of this game happened at sea, but the PCs needed to come from somewhere.

There are many source books for many games and they are full of ideas. They have detailed histories, maps, all manner of countries, but they are complicated. There is a lot to read and far too often a player has read more than the DM.

My solution was to build a new world, one that is vague, can be updated and changed when needed but is so full of locations and history that there are adventure seeds in every location.

It has worked well for me, so this guide is to set you up the same way.

It's hard work

Building a world is hard work. You need a map, you need countries, you need cities, you need histories. The list of things you need is long. Even worse, you need players who will read it all!

You can purchase a world, but that is expensive and then there is a lot of reading. Again, its hard work.

This whole concept is to take that work away. Get a map that is already drawn. Cover it with countries and cultures that already exist. Just tweak it a bit and everything is right there ready to play.

It's not just for lazy DMs, it is for any DM who wants to prioritise their time and focus on story rather than background.

What it looks like:
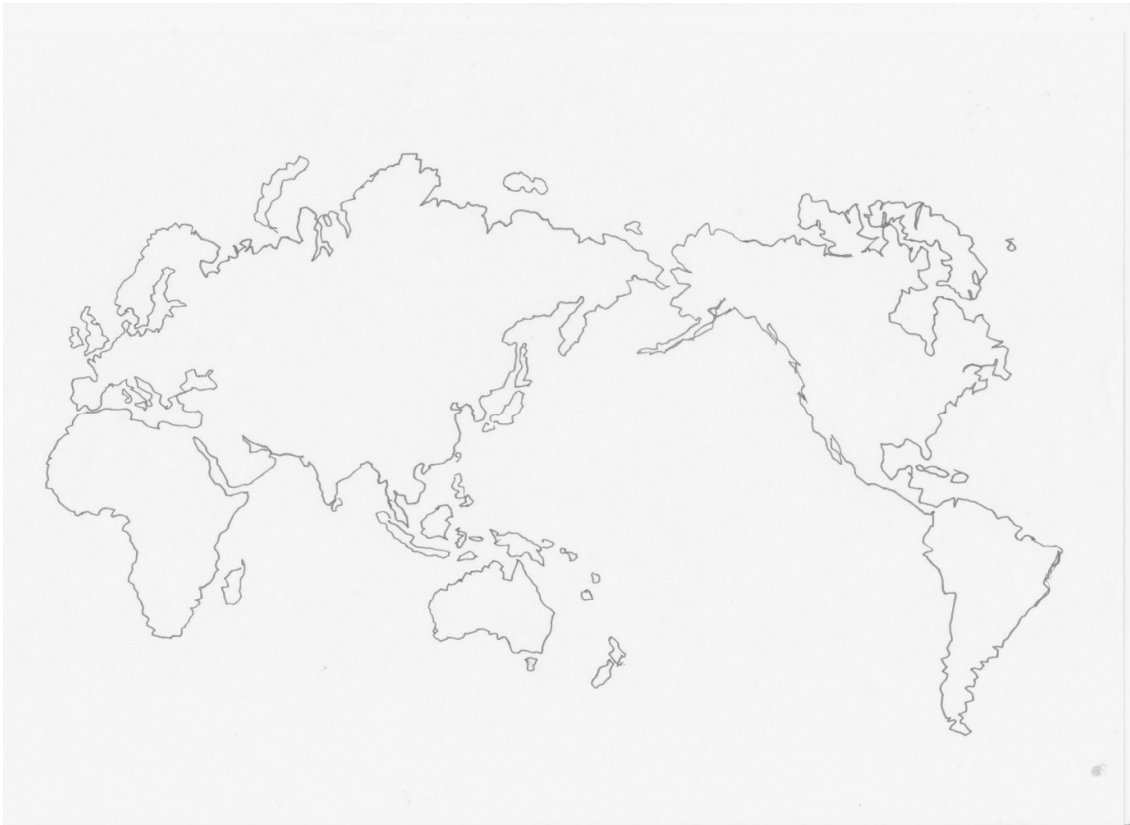
Adaptability:

The Golden Kingdoms is not specific to any one game system. While some races I suggest are given homelands based on their roles in 3.5 Ed, the setting has flexibility to move and change them to suit any game system.

Anecdotal Evidence:

This manual is written to be anecdotal rather than directional. It's a platform for ideas and uses actual adventures I have been involved in. The hope is that this will inspire other adventures. Perhaps in time more can be added to the manual, but for now this is a vehicle for inspiration.

Apologies:

My apologies in advance if I have misrepresented anyone's nation, home or people. This is intended to be fun rather than insulting, but it is possible for that line to be crossed through negligence. Personally I come from Australia "which is entirely peopled by criminals."

Nations of the Golden Kingdoms:

Beginning with little more than a hand drawn map of Europe, it is easy to begin by assigning different territories to different races:

Beginning in Great Britain, we say that the Romans had been human, the Celts were wild elves and the Scots were hill dwarves. After centuries, it becomes a great homeland for half elves with settlements for dwarves, humans and elves in various areas. This extends to different tribes of elves and various fey creatures living in Ireland. For fun, we rename the countries Angland, Scootland etc.

The Iberian Peninsula would make an ideal home for Wood elves, while high elves would live along the Portuguese coast. The southern parts of Spain would have tribes of gnolls who have crossed the straights from northern Africa.

Humans would populate France in a number of small kingdoms, renaming the region the Kingdoms of the Frinch.

Luxemborg would become homeland to Halflings and be renamed Luncheonburg. Similarly Lichtenstein would be populated by halflings and called the Principality of Luncheonstein.

A strong human presence in the Austria/German area, renamed Jormany.

The Gnomes of Zurich, could manage the finances of neutral Switzerland named Sweetsland.

Western Golden Kingdoms

Italy would be another strong human nation, though with the added presence of Aasimars in some of the more exotic city states as well as Fire or Earth Genasi living around Pompeii. The area should be portrayed as a centre for religious power as well as a land of discovery and science.

Mountain dwarves fit naturally into the Scandinavian countries, though Finland may be the perfect place for reclusive Tiefling society and merfolk would live in Denmark and the Netherlands.

The Slavonic area could well be populated by half orcs and half elves influenced by the Greek sea elves and the Persian orcs.

Russia would make another human stronghold with Siberian dwarves, Estonian gnomes, Latvian Dark elves and hobgoblin tribes deep in the heartlands.

The Wallacian Mountains of Romania almost demand an undead presence while Werewolf tribes are scattered across an otherwise human Poland.

Werebears dwell in Bulgaria and weretigers in the distant India.

Small families of goblins would travel an otherwise human Hungary in a gipsy lifestyle.

The Nile delta would be home to lizardfolk while kobolds live further down the river.

Flexibility

It doesn't take long to throw down races in countries and then let the players work with it. Anything can be changed quickly and there is no need for cumbersome source books or maps. You won't even need to keep this one. The less work the DM does, the more options are left open for players, who can see an opportunity and make use of it for their own character.

Over time, people move around, borders change, tribes migrate and refugees settle. Some nations are more accepting of racial diversity than others (you know the ones I mean)

With all this in mind, you can quickly adapt any area to your own needs.

Vagueness is your friend

The most important thing is that you should not detail everything. I certainly won't. Everything that is left vague is something that can be adapted by the needs of the campaign.

When a players says his Halfling character comes from a barbarian desert tribe that often wars with dwarves, it will be a lot easier to fit in if parts of the world are not fully developed.

"That's a great character but there isn't a desert like that in my world"

I've heard that, you've heard that, but since most of the world was never even going to get played in, what would it matter if we made one up.

Naming conventions:

There is no reason not to simply use place names as they exist in the real world.

There is nothing to stop you making up totally different ones.

What I have done is to use names that are a parody of the real ones. Its lets the players know roughly where they are, but they know it is slightly different.

Luncheonburg, Arfeka, Eendia, Jormany, Sweetsland and so on.

Map-making:

Maps of the Golden Kingdoms can be produced in many ways. Whatever country the adventure is inspired by, one can easily find a map online. You can print it, copy it, change it, do whatever and it works.

If you need a map for a particular scenario, the internet will provide. I was one running a "Die Hard" style game and needed a map of an oil platform. A quick search and download was all I needed.

The Underworld:

One great inspiration for adventuring is the Discovery Channel and particularly the program "Cities of the Underworld" where tunnels and caves beneath cities are explored and histories given. The tunnels beneath Paris or Buda Pest rival the great dungeon complexes that have been published. The histories of these places generate great adventure possibilities.

If you watch "Beneath Hill 60" you'll see a great scenario for dwarven sappers during a war.

Now imagine "Die Hard" in a dungeon rather than a building.

Scenarios:

As I indicated earlier, this setting was developed through play as one campaign after another seemed a good fit for it. There are many possible stories that can be told, but the following are ones that have actually been used and actually worked well.

The Last King

Inspired by the movie "The Last King of Scotland" in which Forest Whitaker gave a performance truly deserving of an Oscar.

As a role playing setting this has lots of possibilities. The players begin as volunteer workers coming from the Golden Kingdoms. They travel to Darkest Arfreka and the nation of Oogunda.

Some PCs may be working for the aid agency "Alchemy Sans Frontiers" others travel as religious missionaries or rich travellers looking for an adventure. The exact background doesn't matter. What is important is that they come from a traditional fantasy nation and should be hit by culture shock as they are surrounded by refugees, poverty, uncontrolled military forces and a truly dangerous jungle.

I populated my Oogunda with dwarves and added lots of gnomes into the larger cities as workers from Eendia, while most of the "volunteers" were human or elven.

On the first day, they should cross paths with the recently self-appointed dictator. I named him General Limpopo who should befriend the PCs and later on becomes a source of adventure hooks.

At low levels the party could escort shipments of medical supplies between villages, chase bandits away from a refugee camp, protect the base village from wild animals. PC can aid in controlling the spread of disease through the refugee camps or simply carry messages. Pick scenarios that match the classes of characters present because at this point they have actually been assigned to these roles.

At mid-levels, the party should get involved with General Limpopo, preferably by saving the life of his son or other member of his family. In the book/film this involved an emergency medical procedure, but in the game, his son's school may have been taken over zombies. This encounter should lead to the General taking a personal interest in the group and actually becoming their main sponsor. He or one of his advisors will invite the party on subsequent missions.

There is a transport route being built and the workers are being terrorised by a pair of lions that need hunting down.

At higher levels the general may ask the PC's aid in solving some problem that his army is not equipped to deal with: Something coming out of the General's mines.

Key locations in Oogunda are based on current cities and towns but with just enough flavour to draw the characters in.

Kampoola (large city – population dwarf 70%, gnome 20%) The capital of Oogunda is mostly populated by native dwarves often living in poor conditions. There is a large population of hard working gnomes from Eendia as well as human and dwarven businessmen from Angland and Scootland who are developing trade relations.

Most access from the Golden Kingdoms comes by crossing Lake Victorea [1]and arriving through Kampoola.

Guloo (small city – population dwarf 80%, human 10%, elf 5%) A regional capital, Guloo serves as a base camp for travellers from the Golden Kingdoms on various altruistic missions. It has temples to western gods and compounds that aid workers operate from. It is a base for missionaries, medical volunteers, teachers and explorers. Outside of town is a large refugee camp filled with people who were displaced to make room for the General's mining operations. The town also attracts foreign hunters wanting to face the local wildlife.

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[1] Named after the Queen of Angland

The Man who would be king

Rudyard Kipling's tale of two westerners using masonry to gain control of a central Asian nation is an interesting tale, but in turn was inspired by the more interesting true adventures of Josiah Harlan, whose life if well worth studying.

In this scenario, PCs could travel with or follow in the footsteps of a western explorer I named "Haloon". Starting out in northern Eendia and travelling up into the mountains, the players experience extreme weather within the "Heenda Koosh" with very few settlements and fewer friendly faces

The setup requires a number of native tribes (I used hobgoblins) so for the human/elven adventurers it is a big ask to have them negotiate between the tribes and rise to leadership positions. A way around this is to have the adventurers save the life of a chieftain's son to get befriended into the tribe, from there they just need opportunities to prove themselves. It's not a very linear scenario, so will take some research and some work setting up.

The environment needs to be deadly as the name "Hindu Kush" translated to "Hindu Killer" cliff should be steep, snow should be deep, winds should be strong, visibility poor. Characters should be well tested, by the elements and yeti creatures before stumbling upon the Tajeek, a long lost tribe of wild elves who live in a secluded and illogically tropical jungle in a hidden valley they name Shangoo-La

Peshasa (large city – Population hobgoblin 70%, human 20%) A major trading centre in the region, Peshasa has a strong military presence and extreme laws. During the last few decades foreigners have begun to have a presence in the city mostly living in fortified dwellings and running businesses. A small number of explorers and mercenaries operate out of the town. It is the first major settlement outside of the Golden Kingdoms controlled Eendia.

Kaboul (large city – population hobgoblin 98%) Sitting at the foothills of the Heenda Koosh, it is known as the last place for westerners to turn back. Already deep in hobgoblin territory, there is almost no racial diversity. Brutal tribes dominate the area, often operating beyond any law. The region is dangerous. Kaboul often hosts conflicts between the various tribes and control of the city can change quickly. Foreigners are often guests of one particular tribe, but their protection may not last for the length of the stay.

Darshambea (small town – population wild elf 60%, hobgoblin 25%, orc 10%) Nestled high in the Heenda Koosh, Darshambea is a hard to reach trading post peopled by the elven Tarjeek people who live a peaceful life and expect the same of the hobgoblin and orc tribes who live with them. This is a city of ancient traditions where powerful magic protects the residents from the outside weather. It is a useful stop for explorers and often a final place before seeking out the more mysterious city of Shangoo-La.

Shangoo-La (small town – population wild elf 100%) This ancient town is almost impossible to find, explorers will commonly face avalanches, deadly storms and massive cliffs before finding this hidden valley with peaceful, almost tropical weather and ancient religious practices.

Get back on the damn [2]boat

Inspired by the sinking of both the Titanic and the Costa Con Cordia, this scenario happens on a cruise ship in the middle of the Utlantic Ocean.

This is a low level adventure, but could be adapted to higher levels. The important thing is that PCs should not have any special movement powers such as flight or special water movement. The environment needs to be their enemy.

It begins with the party assigned as body guards to a noble or prince for a cruise or diplomatic mission. During the cruise, the ship is struck by an ice berg. The PCs should not have any way of preventing this, although the lead up should be role played so that characters can meet NPCs. The PCs should quickly be able to get off the boat with their VIP but it is while they are in the life raft that they receive their real mission. On board the ship is an item or document that is critical to national security back home. This can be revealed to them once their VIP is safe. He can then order them to get back on the damn boat and retrieve it. He also knows an agent of another nation is on board the ship and insists the PCs get to it before they do.

To play this out you may need to find a deck plan of the Titanic, which can easily be found with an online search[3]. There is no need to create your own maps when you base the game on actual history.

The PCs must return to the sinking ship and battle past passengers who are trying to flee and fighting over places in life boats. Water or ice creatures should be coming on board to provide a greater challenge while flooded passages and locked doors provide other threats. The final boss should be the enemy agent, a higher level character with a few gadgets inspired by James Bond.

It's not a long campaign, just a few hours of fun that can be played early in the character's career, perhaps while en-route to the rest of the campaign. The item that needs recovering can be used as a plot hook for future adventures (especially if the PCs fail to rescue it)

9/11 and other terrorist acts

Tread carefully with some scenarios as it is very easy to cross the line into bad taste.

There is great potential to run an adventure where PCs on board an airship must battle terrorists who have seized control of it and wish to crash it into a major trade building. There could be a great game where PCs must enter a building after a terrorist act and save lives before the tower comes down. Before running anything like this, check that no players will be offended.

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[2] I don't think "Damn" was the actual word used at the time
[3] Not included here due to copyright concerns, though the ship sank over a hundred years ago, so this may not be a problem.

Bibliography[4]:

The Last King of Scotland (the book and the movie)

Ghost and the Darkness

The Man who would be king by Rudyard Kipling

Josiah the Great: The man who would be king by Ben Macintyre

Lost Horizon by James Hilton

Cities of the Underworld

Beneath Hill 60

Nothing Lasts Forever by Roderick Thorpe

Die Hard

Titanic (I believe it is a movie)

CNN Presents: Cruise to Disaster

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[4] This is not an academic paper and I will not reference it as though it was. This is just a source of ideas, so go look them up.

Golden Kingdoms

Sooner or later every GM needs a detailed world for their game, but it's hard work to build your own.

You can use a published world, but those are expensive and players often know more about them than the DM.

This manual gives clear and simple guidelines for building a world by adapting one you already know intimately well, after all you live on it!

Demonstrating by example, this manual takes the nations, maps and histories of the Earth and quickly adapts them into a role playing world that players and GMs can easily get in to.

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