

Campaign Theater™ Beta – A Primer

Overview

Welcome to the next advancement in digital tools support for tabletop role-playing games. Today, through Hero Lab Online, computers, tablets, and even phones streamline game preparation and play by handling all the bookkeeping. With the introduction of Campaign Theater, everyone at the table is now connected, allowing users to access information about the game in real-time. Some of the core goals of Campaign Theater include:

- Keep everyone informed, GM and players alike, by presenting appropriately restricted information to each member of the campaign.
- Streamline gameplay by coordinating all player and GM activities, with the GM having the final say.
- Make game preparation easy for GMs, allowing them to set up material in advance for quick access during the game session.
- Enable everyone to track custom notes about their characters and the story.
- Automatically maintain a campaign history for reference by all members.
- Efficiently manage shared resources for players, such as party loot, allowing the exchange of these resources.
- And a whole lot more!

Please Note! Campaign Theater is currently in Public Beta. We invite you to dive in, try things out, and share your feedback with us. As you may notice along the way, everything is steadily evolving, and we have an extensive roadmap ahead of us.

Bugs are sure to exist in these initial stages, and we ask that you report them as you encounter them so our team can address these issues as swiftly as possible. While we will do our best to preserve any data you create as the Beta progresses, that may not always be possible, so please be mindful of this as you explore.

Core Concepts

Everything we do with campaigns centers around the “theater” metaphor, as in movies and film. We use terms such as “scene”, “stage”, and “cast member”. This metaphor should be familiar to everyone, and we feel it translates exceptionally well to RPGs.

Every campaign has an owner, which is also its GM for now. The GM controls everything in the campaign and can invite players to join. This is accomplished through a simple “invite code”, which the GM can share with anyone they wish to include. Using the invite code, players can then directly join the campaign.

Once players join a campaign, they may bring their existing characters into it or create new ones for play. The GM can similarly bring their own characters in for use as NPCs and/or create them directly within the campaign.

Characters exist either entirely within a campaign or outside of one. You can **copy** a character so that it lives in both places, but then you have two distinct characters that are modified independently of each other.

The GM creates *cast members* to operate as NPCs within the campaign. The GM also creates *scripts* to represent planned situations where the story unfolds (aka encounters).

During a game session, everything takes place on the *stage*. This is the focal point for both the GM and players, with the GM enacting *scripts* onto the *stage* to begin a *scene* that everyone plays out.

When cast members enter the *stage*, a copy of the character is created and manipulated, with the original cast member becoming locked. This approach ensures that the scene can be abandoned, returning everything to its original state. It also allows the GM to treat many NPCs as reusable, with all changes applied during a scene being discarded (e.g., wandering monsters, bandit patrols, or any other *script* that the GM wants to use again in some fashion). When a *scene* completes, changes to cast members can be selectively retained or discarded.

Key Terminology

Campaign Theater uses a blend of familiar RPG terminology with that from movies:

- Campaign – the game world and everything that takes place within it
- Campaign Member – user accounts that are members of the campaign and assigned roles within it
- Owner – user that has ultimate control over everything associated with a campaign (initially the GM)
- GM – user that creates all the story elements and orchestrates play during game sessions
- Player – user that participates in the campaign by controlling one or more PCs
- Invite Code – unique code that identifies a campaign and is provided by the GM to the users they want to join as players
- Cast Member – character or other *actors* that exist within the campaign, typically used only to refer to those controlled by the GM (but not always); cast members can include monsters, vehicles, or any other character-like element created within Hero Lab Online
- Actor – a synonym for cast member
- Controller – user that controls a cast member
- PC – cast member that is controlled by a player
- NPC – cast member that is controlled by the GM
- Stage – where cast members are placed to actively participate in the story and interact with others
- Session – a period of gameplay bounded by a start and end time determined by the GM
- Scene – game segment that is tracked as a historical record once played out
- Notes – arbitrary text that users can attach to campaign elements
- Loot – material resources that PCs can acquire during play and transfer between PCs

Interface Layout

On a desktop or large tablet, the overall interface has three primary regions. On the left is the *navigation panel*, which allows access to the different aspects of the campaign. In the middle is the *central region*, which is where users most frequently manipulate content. On the right is the *side panel*, which provides direct access to a wide range of campaign aspects without the need to change what's shown in the central region.

Both the navigation and side panels can have their behavior controlled. They can be set to overlay the central region or be pinned. When pinned, the panel is always visible, and the central area is shrunk in width to appear alongside the pinned panel. If both panels are pinned, then all three regions are constantly visible. When set to overlay, the panel will either partially overlay the central region so you can access it or be

completely collapsed and hidden. The panel can be forced to appear via the corresponding icon above each panel. This flexibility allows users to tailor the interface layout to suit their device and needs.

Hero Lab Online utilizes a responsive design that dynamically adjusts to the size of the device being used. As the display size gets progressively larger or smaller, the layout adapts accordingly. Consequently, the two panels may not be directly viewable on devices with a small footprint, such as phones. The panels are still accessible via icons in the interface.

In various places throughout the interface, a small info icon  will be present. Clicking on this icon will display useful help information about the options available and their effects within that context.

Side-Panel

The side-panel presents a wide range of information. The two most important side-panel views are the *stage* and *actors*. When the *stage* is selected, capsules are shown for each *actor* on the *stage*. Clicking on the portrait makes it easy to manage health and clicking elsewhere on the *actor* loads its full character details into the central region. You can also use the expand/collapse button at the right of each *actor* to show more options, including weapons that give access to attack and damage rolls.

When an *actor* is shown in the side-panel, it is broken up into small portions that can be viewed individually. Below the name at the top, there is a drop list selector that allows you to choose which aspect you wish to view. With a couple clicks, you can access weapons, spells, gear, skills, and anything else you might need during play.

Player Overview

Joining a Campaign

The key to unlocking campaign access is the invite code, which is provided by the GM and uniquely identifies the campaign. Joining a campaign entails merely visiting the main Campaign page within Hero Lab Online and clicking on the “Join” link in the upper right. If a user has not yet created or joined a campaign, they’ll see a more prominent option for each to get started.

When the form appears for joining a campaign, enter the invite code, and confirm the join. That’s all there is to it!

Depending on the way the GM has configured the campaign, users may or may not be granted immediate access. If not, they’ll need to contact the GM to let them know they’ve joined the campaign, after which the GM can formally grant access.

Introducing Player Characters

Once in the campaign, users now need to introduce their character. This can be done by creating a new PC, copying/moving a personal character into the campaign as a PC, or importing a stock character from the Vault. Regardless of the path, the new character belongs exclusively to the campaign and does not exist outside of it. If an existing character is copied, the campaign now holds a copy that is entirely independent of the original from which it was cloned.

Note: While characters may belong to the campaign, **you** are still its owner and controller. Only you can directly edit the character. However, the GM dictates the rules governing the campaign, so they may require you to conform to those rules with your character.

You can always copy your character into one of your personal folders outside the campaign. And if you leave the campaign for any reason, you will automatically retain your character. A copy of the character will also remain within the campaign for potential use as an NPC at the GM's discretion.

Playing the Character

With a character now in the campaign, the most efficient and effective way to play the character is to select the character's Play tab for viewing in the central region. This provides direct access to the most frequently needed aspects of the character during play. Users are free to navigate to any aspect of a character, or also the *stage*, within the central content region. Any area can be accessed at any time. However, we recommend the Play tab as the initial starting point when first diving into Hero Lab Online.

Beyond this, the side panel on the right is typically going to be more important than the navigation panel on the left. If viewing real estate is small, consider collapsing the navigation panel and pinning the side panel. Why? The side panel grants access to some very convenient views!

One invaluable view in the side panel is the *stage*. At a glance, users can see details for all the other PCs on the *stage*. In tactical mode, such as during combat, the *stage* view includes all the monsters and NPCs involved in the scene. It also shows the initiative order, who's acted, basics for each creature and NPC (e.g., health if revealed), etc.

If a PC has a minion, such as an animal companion or drone, the side panel can also be used to quickly access minions while keeping PCs fully visible in the central region. From the side panel, users can initiate attacks, take damage, and perform assorted other actions for each minion controlled.

The best thing to do is to spend a little time exploring the product and trying out different approaches. There is a lot of versatility within Hero Lab Online, and various layouts work better for different types of characters on different sized devices.

GM Overview

More Terminology

GMs make use of many features of Campaign Theater that are never seen by players. To that end, there is additional terminology of importance to GMs only:

- Script— a prepared collection of cast members and behaviors to be enacted onto the *stage*
- On-Camera – where most cast members are placed, as this is where they interact with each other
- Off-Camera – where cast members can be placed if they are waiting to join a scene at a later point (e.g., reinforcements) or if they leave a scene with the potential of returning
- Out of Action – where cast members are placed when they are killed or otherwise incapacitated during play
- Story Mode – campaign mode where scenes play out without the need for strictly sequenced actions between cast members

- Tactical Mode – campaign mode when cast members need to go for initiative or otherwise have the sequence of their actions tightly controlled
- Retire– a designation applied when a campaign element has completed and is no longer needed within a campaign, after which it is hidden from view and not able to be manipulated
- Stand-In – a special character type that supports the participation of PCs within campaigns for players that don't use Hero Lab Online; they allow the GM to create a simple representation of the PC that can be tracked with other PCs during play
- Placeholder – special character type designed to let GMs control non-character participants within a campaign, such as traps and events
- Vault – a repository where stock material can be copied from, such as characters, monsters, etc.

Creating a Campaign

The first order of business is creating a campaign, which can be accomplished via the “Create” button in the upper right on the main Campaigns page. Simply give it a name and flesh it out with as few or as many details as desired.

Once created, the new campaign is automatically loaded. Returning to Hero Lab Online now lists the campaign on the main Campaigns page for direct selection.

The Campaign Interface

When a new campaign is first created, the central region presents a variety of helpful operations to get started. All these actions are accessible via the various areas listed in the navigation panel on the left. Clicking in the navigation panel loads the corresponding material into the central region. Here's a quick summary of each area:

- Overview – presents a summary of the campaign, along with the ability to edit the various details
- Stage – shows the *stage*, which will likely be your focal point during game sessions
- Cast Members – presents all the *global* cast members in your campaign, which are those that exist outside of a specific *script*; cast members created within a *script* are deemed *local* to that *script* and only shown within the *script*
- Scene Scripts – lists the *scripts* that have been created for planned scenes or encounters
- PC and Players – shows the user accounts that have joined your campaign, PCs that are controlled by the GM, and PCs that are controlled by players

There are numerous uses of the side panel on the right, depending on whether the GM is handling game preparation or running a game session.

PCs and Players

This area is at the bottom since GMs won't frequently need it once the campaign is underway. However, it's critical to setting up a campaign as this is where everything for inviting players and managing the PCs resides. The central region shows three different sections. At the top is the list of users that have joined the campaign as members. Here is where GMs can obtain the invite code for their campaign, which can then be given to players that want to join. GMs may also generate a new code here if they're concerned that the existing code has been compromised in some way.

This is also where players can be dropped from a campaign. Dropped players automatically retain ownership of their characters, although a copy is made that becomes a GM-controlled PC. GMs can choose to give that PC to another player, turn it into an NPC, or retire it from play.

The next two sections show the assorted PCs that exist within the campaign, with those controlled by the GM separated from those controlled by members (players). The vast majority of PCs are member-controlled, but the GM can manage them, as well. Ownership of PCs can be transferred to and from the campaign, allowing characters to be taken over when a player misses a game session. GM-controlled PCs are also very convenient when playing around with a test campaign since this allows GMs to see how everything works on the *stage* without having to invite players.

Cast Members

Cast members are the denizens of the world, encompassing NPCs, monsters, spirits, drones, or anything else that gets created via Hero Lab Online. There are two classifications for cast members: global and local. Global cast members are expected to appear in more than one scene, while a local cast member will only ever appear in a single *script*.

This area is where all the global cast members are managed. Local cast members are created and handled directly within the *script* in which they appear.

Global cast members span the entire spectrum of possibilities, from major villains to their lieutenants, to custom monsters, to important allies (e.g., Gandalf), to simple shopkeepers, to recurring grunts like city guard. Anything that can recur and requires a created character becomes a global cast member here.

Each cast member can be assigned an allegiance towards the PCs (friend, foe, or neutral), as well as its uniqueness. The uniqueness has significant implications on how the cast member can be used. If the cast member is a specific individual, it should be unique, which means only a single instance of the cast member can ever exist. For cast members that represent a common group, such as a bandit or city guard, they must be non-unique, which allows multiples to be added into a scene. By default, cast members start out neutral and unique.

Once a cast member is created, there are typically two options available:

- Add the cast member to the *stage* individually in the situations where it appears
- Link the cast member into one or more *scripts* where it appears, such as linking a major villain or lieutenant to the various *scripts* where the PCs might encounter them

If a campaign has custom grunts like city guards or bandits that appear in multiple places, it may make sense to create them as global cast members. Once that's done, they can then be linked to the different *scripts* where they show up. The advantage of this approach is that cast members in this area can be revised and automatically updated across all *scripts*. Just remember to make the cast member non-unique.

Preparing Scripts

Scripts provide a way to plan what's going to happen in the world and set things up in advance. That way, when it comes time to set things in motion during a game session, it can all be put into place with a couple of clicks by enacting the *script* onto the *stage* as part of a scene.

Traditional encounters in RPGs are modeled as *scripts* within Hero Lab Online. Currently, *scripts* consist only of the assorted cast members that appear within it, but that will be evolving to include staging notes, loot, etc.

Currently, the only two things that can be placed into *scripts* are cast members and global cast members that appear within a planned scene.

For each cast member appearing in the *script*, a few default characteristics can be applied:

- Allegiance – whether the cast member is initially friend, foe, or neutral towards the PCs; if the cast member is linked, the allegiance is dictated by the value assigned to the global cast member
- Placement – whether the cast member should initially appear on-camera or off-camera when the *script* is enacted onto the *stage* (explained in a separate section)
- Quantity – how many of the cast members appear when the *script* is enacted onto the *stage*; if the cast member is linked and unique, the quantity can only be one

The Stage

Now that we've explained the pieces that feed into it, we can dive into the *stage*, which is typically the primary focal point within Hero Lab Online, while a game session is underway.

The role of the *stage* is to gather in one convenient place all the *actors* involved in the scene playing out. All the pertinent details for each PC and cast member are visible within the *stage*, and any supplemental information needed is just a click or two away. This makes the *stage* the command and control center for orchestrating the game.

There are two “modes” that a campaign can be in, story or tactical. *Story mode* is when the PCs are casually exploring the world and interacting with cast members in a more free-form manner. *Tactical mode* is used when actions need to be carefully coordinated and resolved sequentially. For most games, this takes the form of establishing an initiative for each *actor* and then playing out the events one *actor* at a time. Every campaign starts out in story mode, with the ability to enter tactical mode whenever it's called for.

On the *stage*, there are three different placement locations that an *actor* can be assigned. The most common placement is *on-camera*. This is where any *actor* that is currently involved in the scene is typically placed. Even if an *actor* isn't directly interacting with anyone, it should usually be on camera if it's known to everyone and has the potential to interact. The *off-camera* placement is for *actors* that are not currently participating in the scene but could potentially join the scene. For example, a wizard's familiar might stay at a safe distance from possible combat, a rigger's vehicles might be waiting outside the building, or a nearby goblin patrol might be on alert as reinforcements. And the *out-of-action* placement is where any *actor* belongs that has been killed or otherwise incapacitated in the scene. This keeps the on-camera tab uncluttered to keep the game flowing smoothly.

Story Mode Layout

Each of the three placements is accessible via a tab atop the *stage* layout. Each *actor* is presented as a horizontal strip within the *stage*, with its portrait on the left. For each *actor*, an assortment of useful information appears to the right of the portrait, with information being visible based on the width of the region.

To the left of the portrait is a health bar that shows how much damage the *actor* has taken. In the bottom left corner of the portrait is an icon that indicates the current allegiance of the *actor* (friend, foe, or neutral). To the right of the portrait are the *actor's* name and a brief summary. If any status effects apply to the *actor*, they will appear beneath the summary.

At the far right, there is a vertical ellipsis button that brings up a menu with various options for the *actor*, plus an expand/collapse button that opens a region beneath the *actor* with additional details and actions. Everything between the name and right-side buttons depends on the game system and available space, but it consists of information that is useful during play.

Clicking on the portrait provides direct access to adjusting health and related resources. Clicking on weapons brings up the attack and damage rolls for the chosen weapon. Clicking in the status region allows those to be directly manipulated. And clicking anywhere else within the *actor* shows that *actor* within the side-panel on the right (if it's visible).

Game Sessions

When playing a campaign, the first thing to do is start a game session by clicking on the link in the upper left above the *stage*. Beginning a session automatically populates the *stage* with all the PCs in the campaign, getting everything ready for play. When the session is completed, simply click the "End Session" link at the top of the *stage*.

Remembering to end a game session is not necessary to have the session date recorded properly. Hero Lab Online tracks sessions based on the scenes that are resolved during the session. Whenever a session is ended, the last scene that was resolved during that session marks its logical completion.

Enacting a Script

During play, the PCs encounter the denizens of the world. When that occurs, GMs can quickly enact the *script* onto the *stage*, which populates the *stage* with all the *actors* defined by the *script*. The initial placement for each *actor* is assigned, and any quantities are honored, as well.

Enacting a *script* is accomplished via the button at the top right above the *stage*. Simply select the *script* you want from the list and confirm.

Tactical Mode

When it comes time for combat, enter tactical mode via the button in the upper right above the *stage*. Hero Lab Online automatically rolls initiative and surprise for every *actor*, which can be accepted or fully customized, as the GM prefers. Not all games have initiative and/or surprise mechanics, so those will only appear for the appropriate game systems.

Once everything is generated, the *stage* morphs a bit to show all the initiative and surprise details, which can be customized as much or as little as desired. Players can also make their own rolls and plug them in. Once everything is correct, simply click the "Confirm and Start" button in the upper right to start the combat.

Combat has now begun, and the *stage* has changed just a little from story mode:

- At the very top, it shows the combat turn on the left, with a "Next Round" button at the far right.
- Just below the "Next Round" button is an icon to toggle back into adjusting initiatives. If something occurs during combat that warrants an initiative adjustment, this is the button to use.
- The *stage* is now broken up into groupings that identify the different dispositions of each *actor*. At the start of combat, all *actors* being in the "Not Yet Acted" disposition. As they take their actions and combat progresses, various *actors* will appear in different groupings.
- In the upper left corner of each portrait is the initiative score for the *actor*.

- Above the vertical ellipsis button is now a lightning bolt button that allows you to specify what general action each *actor* takes on its turn. This controls the disposition of the *actor*.

The *actors* are listed in their initiative order. The *actor* at the top has its lightning bolt icon highlighted to indicate that this is the *actor* whose turn is next. If this *actor* chooses the “Act” option, it then drops below into the “Acted” grouping. When a character uses the “Ready Action” or “Defer Action” options, it also breaks off into a separate grouping, but those groupings appear at the top. This ensures that an *actor* who still has a pending action is kept prominently in view and not forgotten.

When the round is complete, click the “Next Round” button. All *actors* who are not still in the “Ready” or “Defer” disposition are updated to the “Waiting” disposition, and combat proceeds from there.

Ending a Scene

Once a scene has played out, it’s time to resolve it. If the GM is in tactical mode, it ends whenever a scene resolves, returning them to story mode. In addition, all the cast members added to the *stage* for the scene, such as via *scripts*, are automatically removed. The other important detail is that a historical record of the scene is created, which can be referenced by all campaign members in the future.

When a scene is resolved, all modifications applied to PCs are retained, whether that’s damage, status effects, resource consumption, or anything else. The opposite is true for cast members from *scripts*, which are always discarded. Global cast members currently have their modifications discarded, as well.

There may be times when a scene needs to be abandoned. This performs a complete reset as if the scene were never started. Any adjustments are discarded, even to PCs that typically retain them, and all cast members enacted onto the *stage* via *scripts* are removed from it.

Appendix

Key Features Due Soon

The following list identifies what we believe are some of the most important features we plan to add during the upcoming weeks. There are numerous smaller features planned beyond this list.

- More quick access capabilities directly from the *stage* for efficient use
- Stand-in PCs to incorporate players that don’t use Hero Lab Online themselves
- Direct creation of character types other than PCs and NPCs from within a campaign (you can currently create these character types outside of a campaign and import them)
- Grouped initiative control for Pathfinder 2nd Edition to handle all NPCs acting on the same initiative and minions acting at the same time as the PC
- Access to campaigns via demo accounts
- Placeholders for traps, events, and the like
- Support of the new dice roller within Pathfinder 2nd Edition and Starfinder
- Countdown trackers for consumable resources
- Detailed control of participants during scene resolution
- Sponsored access to content that’s not personally owned for characters within a campaign

Longer-Term Features Planned

We also have a long list of features that won't be introduced soon, but are on our road map and slated for this year, including the following:

- Access to scene and session history
- Shared access to content that's not personally owned across accounts
- Configurable behaviors for campaigns based on GM-controlled settings
- Party loot management
- Starship creation and manipulation for Starfinder
- Attach notes to everything
- Full-text search
- Integrated rules encyclopedia
- And a whole lot more!