



DEAD LANDS

WILDCARDS MARSHAL'S NOTES

TM

During our Kickstarter *Deadlands* campaign, our good friends, the Wildcards showed off the new rules in a fantastic online *Deadlands* game. The Wildcards very own Marshal, **Jordan Caves-Callarman**, agreed to include his game notes as a bonus for our Kickstarter backers, laying out what happened in the game as well as sharing some of his insights about running games online and in person.

Howdy! My name is Jordan Caves-Callarman and I'm the GM of Wildcards, a weekly *Savage Worlds* actual play which airs live on Twitch. We love *Savage Worlds*, and *Deadlands* holds a special place in our hearts as it was the setting for our first campaign. W, so we were thrilled to be able to take part in the Kickstarter for the new edition of *Deadlands*!

Our goal was to show off the setting and a handful of the new mechanics in our two part story, *Deadlands: Lawless*. And since you folks are such fierce fans of Pinnacle and what they do, you unlocked my notes as a stretch goal.

Now I know watching streamed tabletop roleplaying games (TTRPGs) isn't for everyone—though I hope you'll stop by sometime and give us a try; we work hard to make it entertaining—so I've attempted to include elements that could be useful for anyone. If you don't give a hoot about our show or what we do, that's just fine! Hopefully my prep process, the statted NPC baddies, or something else from these notes will spark an idea for your own game. So without any further ado, let's dive in!

IMPRESSIONS

Plenty of folks have already done write-ups of the new *Deadlands: the Weird West* core rules, so I won't take too long giving you my impressions other than to say I love it.

Deadlands bursts with flavor and mood. Sure, there are updated and reworked Arcane Backgrounds, new systems for Duelin' and Dealin', a slew of infernal devices, and more. But most importantly, the book is a pulsing, sparking mass of pure inspiration. I dare you to read through it and not come up with at least three or four new ideas for a campaign or one-shot.

And while the Morgana Effect and the passage of time has changed things for the big movers and shakers of the world, my favorite part of this new edition is the focus on the smaller scale. Don't get me wrong, the larger world is incredibly rich and fun to play with, but it can be intimidating to try and keep the famous faces and moving parts of the larger Weird West in mind when you're playing your own game. It's as though this new edition is there to say, "Whoa there pardner, take a breath and relax. Hellstromme, Stone, Raven, Grimme, and the rest will all still be there if you want to use them. But why don't we focus on the story you want to tell?"

That's the attitude of the new edition, and it's what makes me excited to dive in and play.

OUTLINE

While putting together our show for the Kickstarter, that's the approach I focused on.

I wanted to create a story that felt local— - isolated terror on the lonely frontier, and a manmade evil that was fanned into horrible flame by the Reckoning's dark power.

I've been running Wildcards for over three years now, and in that time I have developed my game aesthetic and my approach to prep. My goal is to create and run games that are epically cinematic, with each session feeling like an episode of a "prestige" TV show. The prep format that works best for me is an outline of the story beats to hit as the tale unfolds.

Below are my outlines for both episodes of *Deadlands: Lawless*, cleaned up just slightly for clarity. For each session, I allow myself one page of lined notebook paper to write out my outline. Important character names and vital bits of

information I circle to remind myself to present them to the players (it even works 85% of the time!), and I have bolded those elements in the outlines below.

It's a format that works for me, and while it's probably not detailed enough to be used to run an adventure, it might be enough to serve as the skeleton for a tale of your own. There are holes because I like to improvise as a GM, so many of the story elements aren't finalized until I speak them aloud at the table.

DEADLANDS: LAWLESS - EPISODE 1:

A FLAT LITTLE TOWN ON THE EDGE OF THE WORLD

1. THE TRAIN

- What are the characters doing? Background on Flat Edge, KS and why they've been sent.
- The wounded steer; Academics reveals alligator bite?
- How do they handle it?

2. FLAT EDGE

- Flat & isolated; a town caught between tents and construction; evidence of abandoned construction; **STINKS; FLIES.**
- Telegram lines are down.
- Locals are supremely unfriendly, deny anything, point them to the Stubborn Mule saloon if forced.

A. EMPIRE OFFICE

- Locked up, dusty and disused
- Notice or Survival can detect: careful pillaging, bullet hole by desk, more recent activity; **with a raise—investigator's note.**

B. THE STUBBORN MULE

- Unhelpful patrons but for **Claude Guilford**: gambler, minor rancher—wants to play cards & cheats. Win or lose, he directs them out back to see "Slim."
- "Slim" and 7 thugs (5 if dealt with) – **COMBAT**
- Afterwards Claude directs them to **Quincy Knickelmeyer's** ranch

3. KNICKELMEYER RANCH

- Quincy Knickelmeyer – friendly but guarded.
- Construction crew and **Matthew Cooper**—gaunt and twitchy—they make each other nervous.

- Quincy reveals that Empire Rail office head **George Gauss** was a terror and took advantage.
- Under pressure, tells them they should leave (if he likes them), but that their answers are at the unfinished building in town.

4. THE SITE

- Notice reveals a section of newer floorboards—mass grave
- Matthew confrontation – calls out Elden.
 - If he kills Elden: resolve fight until Matthew dies.
 - If Elden kills him: jump to end. Blood Walker boils Elden alive.
- Blood Walker is freed, escapes to clouds as thunder cracks.
- Elden sits up screaming.

DEADLANDS: LAWLESS - EPISODE 2:

THE BLOOD WALKER

1. STREETS OF CHAOS

- Play catch up—Fear level and leering clouds.
- The moving log; screams and madness; **flee to Knickelmeyer's!**
- Quick Encounter to escape; **Ransom** sees Elden's smiling eyes.

2. TENSIONS HIGH

- Hatred of Empire and fear run hot – Knickelmeyer defuses.
- Tells them what happened & about Matthew's journal.

3. JOURNAL

- Matthew is revealed to be a huckster, a hexslinger, and a reluctant killer.
- Dream of natives: bone & flesh arrows; painting themselves with mud – shh! Shaman is killed by releasing blood walker and the braves shoot the creature.
- Gun & bullets under bed – gather recruits?

4. SHOWDOWN

- Avoid sand sneaks x6 (–1 per each recruit).

- Find Matthew's body and do their grisly work.
- Blood Walker appears on top of Empire building if fighting breaks out.
- FIGHT!

5. CONCLUSION

All right, you've seen the plan. Now let's see how it went.

THE CHARACTERS

I built characters for the group so we could show off some new mechanics and the like: a chi master, a mad scientist, a huckster, and a gunslinger. I sent them out to my players a couple days before the show with a brief write up for each, and from there it was out of my hands.

I'd like to take a moment and tip my hat to the cast of Wildcards for what they did with these characters. They are all talented performers, improvisers, and gamers, and they never cease to surprise me with what they bring to the table. I threw some real curveball characters at them because a) I wanted to see what would happen, and b) I knew they could handle it. And handle it they did! Did the characters turn out the way I envisioned them? No; they were better. I'm lucky to have the players that I do.

I chose Empire Rail (previously Union Blue) as their employer because Joshua Chamberlain is always presented as a good and honorable man, yet his rail line was equally responsible for the horrors and atrocities borne out of the Great Rail Wars. Just because a righteous man is at the helm doesn't mean that a company can't be rotting from the inside out, and that's what I wanted to play with. I think the characters dealt with that dichotomy wonderfully.

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED

Here I'd like to highlight a few moments that put me on the back foot as a GM and discuss how things worked out.

ARRIVING IN FLAT EDGE

I was surprised by the group's lack of interest in investigating the abandoned Empire Rail office as soon as they found it, but what proved to be more difficult was the fight behind the saloon. I thought the Flat Edge "welcoming committee" combat would be a fun set piece to show off the posse and their

special abilities, but instead it began to feel like we were edging dangerously close to a TPK.

The situation escalated almost immediately into combat, so the group didn't have the chance to scare off some of Slim's entourage. Coupled with rotten luck and terrible rolls from the players to start things off, I quickly started trying to figure out what would happen if they were defeated by the town thugs. I didn't want them killed right off the bat, so I figured they'd just get beat to hell and left for dead.

That still didn't feel right though; this was just supposed to be a minor combat, and I didn't want the players to immediately feel incapable and deflate the drama of the session for them. So I took advantage of Doc Wheeler's timely Called Shot to Slim's kneecap as the impetus for the gang to disperse. Combat can go sideways quickly in real life and in *Savage Worlds*, and while you can't control the dice as a GM, you *can* control the psychology of your NPCs.

THE DUEL

Elden the one-armed gunslinger was destined to die so he could return as a Harrowed, but Jordan Pridgen didn't know that. He would either win the duel or die by Matthew's hand and be avenged by his companions, releasing the blood walker either way. I wanted to show off a little hexslingin' with Matthew Cooper, but the dice were against me. I failed both of his rolls to cast *smite* and *ammo whammy* on his rune gun, and got outplayed in the duel. Ah well...so long to another interesting NPC taken out immediately by the players. But I bet they weren't expecting the duel to end like THAT!

RETURN TO KNICKELMEYER RANCH

This part got a bit sticky for me. This was the big "what's really going on here" reveal in the form of Knickelmeyer's information and Matthew's journal. I felt like I had given



them a clear idea of how to defeat the blood walker without just flat out telling them, but the group got hung up on taking the journal back to Knickelmeyer to see what else he knew. This was a classic case of me having a GMs-eye view of the game and assuming my players would make the same connections I did, so that's on me.

Trouble was, we were already taking longer here than I had anticipated. So I had the townsfolk turn on Knickelmeyer for protecting the posse and gave the characters a chance to jump on their horses and escape.

Then Wheeler didn't make it onto his horse. Then Cherry got Incapacitated by a shotgun blast while trying to help him. Then neither one of them could regain control of the runaway mount. The complications came rapidly!

Even though things got pretty dicey, this ended up being a high-tension moment that felt perfectly at home in the story, and it only happened because I didn't have any more information for Knickelmeyer to relay to them and I didn't want to waste any more time at the ranch. That's why I love TTRPGs!

THE FINAL FIGHT

It looked like a grim end was in store for the Empire troubleshooters, but they pulled it off. I did hand out one round of bad luck Bennies, but otherwise this win was all down to the players.

I originally planned to allow the posse to attempt to recruit a couple townsfolk (at a steep penalty) to distract additional sand sneaks, but clearly that was not a possibility and we were already running long, so I just threw the minimum amount at them. They didn't know how many of the beasts were about, so I could always have more enter the fray if things were too easy.

I also planned for the blood walker to have hidden Matthew's body in the mass grave, which the players would have to discover if they hoped to survive. This too I cut for time and difficulty, as things were complicated and dangerous enough as it was.

When Harrowed Elden chose to Let The Devil Out and got the best possible result from the Dominion table, recharging and boosting the rest of the posse, I knew they had a chance. From there, it was just a matter of wrapping up the tale and tying the bow.

NPCS

The critters of the Weird West were not included with the preview copy of Deadlands I received, so I created my own. If you would like to use them in your own game, feel free!

SAND SNEAKS

These nasty critters have the head and leathery skin of an alligator, bristled hair and multiple eyes like a spider, and a disgusting six foot long centipede-like body. They are solitary hunters and prefer to take prey by surprise, but they are drawn to rising Fear levels and can be driven into a swarming frenzy by sudden spikes of fear.

Attributes: Agility d8, Smarts d4(A), Spirit d6, Strength d8, Vigor d6

Skills: Athletics d8, Fighting d8, Notice d6, Stealth d8

Pace: 8; **Parry:** 6; **Toughness:** 7(2)

Edges: Quick

Special Abilities:

- **Armor +2:** Leathery hide.
- **Bite:** Str+d6; with a raise on a Fighting roll, the sand sneak thrashes violently and their target is Distracted by the sprays of sand or dirt.
- **Shallow Burrow:** As the "Burrow" Special Ability in Savage Worlds with a couple distinctions: a sand sneak may be attacked while burrowing at a -4 penalty, and foes gain a +2 bonus to Notice rolls made to oppose a sand sneak's Stealth just before they attack from burrowing.

⚔ BLOOD WALKER

Ancient curses run deep in some bloodlines, and the fell powers of the Reckoning can awaken them. Anyone from such a lineage pursuing occult power runs the risk the arcane energy they command will mingle with the curse and cause their blood to gain sentience. Trapped inside the host's body and yearning to escape and wreak havoc, periodic killings can keep the dark creature contained. But if the host is killed or resists spilling blood for too long, a blood walker is birthed from within them; often explosively, and always fatally. The creature formed of boiling blood is then free to spread death and terror.

Attributes: Agility d8, Smarts d10, Spirit d10, Strength d8, Vigor d8

Skills: Athletics d8, Common Knowledge d4, Fighting d8, Intimidation d10, Notice d8, Spellcasting d10, Stealth d6

Pace: 6; **Parry:** 6; **Toughness:** 8

Edges: Arcane Background (Black Magic), Level Headed

Special Abilities:

- **Birth:** If its host is killed, the blood walker's violent birth automatically Incapacitates the nearest living person within 10' unless proper precautions are taken (clearing the area, wearing protective equipment, etc).
- **Congeaed Claws:** Str+d6
- **Fear:** The sight of a blood walker inspires an immediate Fear check.
- **Fearless:** The blood walker is immune to Fear and Intimidation effects.

WRAPPING UP

I hope you enjoyed *Deadlands: Lawless*, and I hope you're as excited as I am to finally get your hands on the new edition of *Deadlands*. If you'd like to see more Wildcards, you can join us live on Friday nights at 8pm PT on Saving Throw, or check out our *Deadlands* and ETU campaigns on YouTube.

I look forward to seeing you all in the desolate world of the Weird West. Until then, I'll leave you with some FINGER GUNS! *pew!* *pew!*

- **Horrific:** The birth of a blood walker instantly raises the local Fear level by 1 (to a maximum of Fear Level 5).
- **Infravision:** The blood walker halves Illumination penalties.
- **Invulnerability:** A blood walker may be Shaken but not Wounded by any mundane or magical attack.
- **Powers:** blast (targets Shaken or Wounded by these blasts of boiling blood take an additional 2d4 damage at the beginning of their next turn), damage field, fear
- **Undead:** +2 Toughness; +2 to recover from being Shaken; no additional damage from Called Shots; ignores 1 point of Wound penalties; doesn't breathe; immune to disease and poison.
- **Weakness (the bones or flesh of its original host body):** Attacks made with weapons formed of or containing the flesh or bone of a blood walker's original host body deal damage normally (and add +4 to damage rolls) and negate the creature's undead immunity to Called Shots.

A NOTE ON CRITICAL FAILURES

My players and I love Critical Failures in *Savage Worlds* because of their unpredictability and the interesting story wrinkles they provide, but when Crit Fails start coming fast and frequently like they did in *Lawless*, it's easy to get overwhelmed.

Here are a couple of things to keep in mind to prevent Crit Fails from running away with your game:

1. FAIL FORWARD

Don't let Crit Fails interrupt the forward momentum of your game. A Crit Fail on an Academics roll to decipher the inscription on a mystically locked subterranean door could mean the character translates incorrectly and can't figure out how to open it; however, they're still stuck at the door. Perhaps instead the door opens and an alarm sounds, alerting the enemies, or maybe the floor crumbles beneath the character and they fall into a different area of the caverns, taking a level of Fatigue from Bumps & Bruises. Those outcomes still suck, but they move the game forward.

2. VARY THE STAKES

Not all Crit Fails are giant disasters. A Critical Failure on the last line of the incantation to close the dark portal presents a deliciously clear way to proceed, but a Crit Fail on a Notice roll to find the town saloon should rarely if ever result in the old gods destroying the world. A gust of wind blowing trail dust into the character's eyes and inflicting a -1 penalty on sight-based Notice rolls works

just fine. Now if the character is making that Notice roll while fleeing a band of bloodthirsty outlaws, a Crit Fail could mean a bad tumble and a level of Fatigue. Don't be afraid to dial the severity of a Critical Failure up or down depending upon the situation.

3. DON'T AVOID THE OBVIOUS

You don't need to come up with something creative for each and every Critical Failure in your game. A Crit Fail doesn't have to be spectacular, just a bad thing at a bad time. Did a character Crit Fail a Stealth roll? They make noise and give themselves away. A Shooting roll? The gun jams or slips from their hand. Persuasion? They fail to convince the target and are now met with suspicion. Just because the outcome of a Crit Fail is obvious doesn't mean it isn't fun. One of my favorite moments as a GM was when a player Crit Failed an Athletics roll to throw a boomerang. I'll let you guess what happened.

4. LET YOUR PLAYERS DECIDE

Sometimes your brain just refuses to work when you're running a game, and you can't for the life of you decide how to handle a Crit Fail. In that case, toss the decision to the player and ask them what happens to their character; this often leads to unexpected and enjoyable outcomes. You might have to tweak them a bit, but outsourcing rulings to the players from time to time allows you to focus your creative energies on the other things you're juggling as the GM.