In the first of three design diaries, the Big Bug recalls how his trip down twisted trails got started.

With the *Deadlands* 20th Anniversary and *Good Intentions* Kickstarters in full swing—thanks for your generous support, amigos!—Shane and Jodi asked me to set some words to paper explaining how my trip through the Weird West got started, the thought process behind our Servitor Series of Plot Point Campaigns, and what exactly a *Deadlands* "Big Bug" does to keep the game line's trains running on time.

That's a lot to cover! So without further ado, let me get down to speechifyin'.

FROM CLASSIC TO SAVAGE

I first encountered *Deadlands* as a leather-bound tome circa 2003. I'd known of its existence in the '90s, when I lived in Colorado, but like so many other gamers of that era we were immersed in White Wolf's supernatural-themed games. And with a subsequent move to Plattsburgh, New York, my gaming fell by the wayside while I pursued a master's degree.

By late 2003, I'd moved to Maryland, taken a job as an editor, and married my lovely wife. A chance comment by a co-worker during an "icebreaker" session—something about Marvel comics, as I recall—led me to ask if he'd ever played roleplaying games. Glen had, but not in more than a decade. Undeterred, we assembled a new group from our other friends around the office and played some *Dungeons & Dragons*. When that got old (we'd all played the heck out of it growing up), we looked for something new.

It was Glen who found *Deadlands*, and schooled us on how cool it was. It had cowboys and zombies! And poker chips and playing cards! And magic and weird science! And best of all, the fictionalized "history" really gave us old grognards something to chew over. I'd minored in history at Plattsburgh, after all.

Sadly, the game lasted only a few sessions. Glen was a *great* Marshal as far as stories and descriptions went, but none of us could really wrap our heads around the rules (and I, with a newborn at home, had neither time nor inclination to try). At the same time, we were infatuated with the Weird West. We wondered if it would be possible to play in this strange and wonderful milieu using some other ruleset. Whether it was fate or simple irony, I'll never know, but the game system we settled on was *Savage Worlds*.

For old guys like us, with spouses and jobs and kids, the "little-or-no-prep" feature and streamlined mechanics of *Savage Worlds* were just what the doctor ordered. Of course, we later figured out that *Savage Worlds* was in fact the most recent iteration of the *Deadlands* rules we were replacing. If we were impressed with *Savage Worlds* before, at that point we were hooked. We used it to play *Deadlands*, *50 Fathoms*, *Necessary Evil*, and a setting I developed—set in the Colonies just after the American Revolution—called *Spirits of '86* (1786, that is).

OHIO ON THE COB

In 2007, I learned that my new gaming idol Shane Lacy Hensley would be attending that year's Con on the Cob in Ohio. Moreover, he was bringing the whole Savage gang. Determined to break into the field and design, write, and edit my own games (fueled by *Savage Worlds*, of course), I put together a *Spirits of '86* Player's Guide. I found some old-timey fonts and
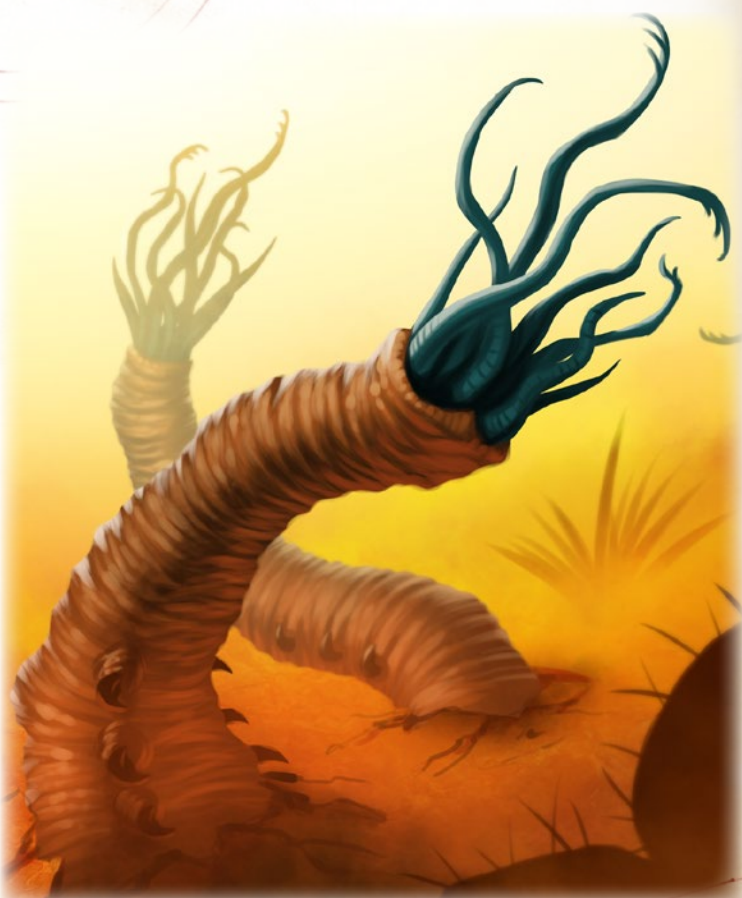
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jazzed it up in layout with Colonial-era images. I even bought an entire Colonial replica outfit—from tricorn hat to buckled leather shoes. And in October, I drove to Ohio so I could put what I'd written in Shane's hands and ask for freelance work.

That year's Con on the Cob was a memorable one. I ran a few *Spirits of '86* games in full Colonial regalia, and met a number of Savages who remain friends to this day: Clint and Jodi Black, Simon Lucas, Evil Mike, Chaos Steve, Sean Patrick Fannon, Andy Hopp, and Shane himself (Sean introduced me because I was too starstruck to approach on my own).

The next day I asked Simon whether he thought Pinnacle would be interested in expanding *Spirits of '86* into a full Plot Point book. "Um...no," he replied, and before disappointment could set in, he continued: "But by any chance would you be interested in writing for *Deadlands*?"

I'm fairly sure I managed to say "yes" after picking up my jaw from the floor.

THE PALE GUNMAN

At this point I was highly qualified to write for *Savage Worlds*: I knew the system front to back, worked as a writer and editor, had a master's degree in English Literature with a History minor, and had played RPGs since age 12. Being qualified to write for *Deadlands* was a whole different story. As much as I loved the setting, I'd never immersed myself in the various adventures and sourcebooks; I simply didn't know what had come before.

My first attempt at a full-length adventure was called "Behold a Pale Gunman." It portrayed a small Kansas town called Epiphany, whose leaders were thralls of the telepathic rattler that lived under a nearby mountain. It had everything and the kitchen sink, including the hackneyed population sign with a total that kept getting smaller. I revised it through six versions, rewriting and polishing until it was as good as I could make it.

Which, as it turned out, was *awful*.

Oh, the writing was fine and it had its moments—a few elements have shown up here and there in *Deadlands* books since—but overall it was just another "town gone wrong" adventure. It didn't bring anything new to the setting; it just mined well-worn territory.

Luckily for me, Shane and Simon saw past the window dressing to the structure and style, and liked what they found. So although "Pale Gunman" went into the dead letter office, the time spent on it was far from wasted. It was only an audition for what was next: the first Plot Point book for *Deadlands Reloaded*, tentatively titled *The Flood*. With my fingers itching to hit the keyboard, I signed an NDA and officially joined the Pinnacle team as a freelancer.

SETTING THE TEMPLATE

By 2008, *Deadlands* was suffering from growing pains. Although the team had done a bang-up job translating the rules into *Savage Worlds* with a new core rulebook a few years earlier, we needed a Plot Point book that would cover a number of crucial elements: details on all the people, places, gear, and mysteries of the Great Maze; Setting Rules that would help a Marshal bring it to life; and most important, a story that would finally pay off the hints that had been dropped in the *Hell on Earth* line for years. All that, we knew. What we didn't know was what form it would take. What did a *Deadlands* book for *Savage Worlds* look like? What was the format? Pinnacle's flagship setting was on new, uncertain ground.

Although I never got to see them, I was told *The Flood* had gone through a few pitches and drafts already, but neither Shane nor the team was satisfied. Whether it was the fact that I'd never really clicked with the Classic rules, my love for *Savage Worlds*, or some combination of the two, the answer seemed obvious to me. We already had an established format—a damn good one, I thought—in our Plot Point books for *50 Fathoms*, *Necessary Evil*, and others. Why should *Deadlands* be any different? Shane and Simon agreed, they sent me a draft in progress (the Plot Point itself and a few other adventures, written by Shane), and I was off to the races.

DELUGED!

The design mandate for *The Flood* seemed simple: Cover all the West Coast's locations, from Canada down into Mexico, and provide Savage Tales. That's about when I went a little crazy for *Deadlands*. I delved into every Classic sourcebook on the area, using the original conversion document to update it all to *Savage Worlds*. My draft included Alaska, British Columbia, the Pacific Northwest, all of California, and Mexico. It was sprawling and comprehensive.

And it was completely unpublishable! I'd created a 250,000-word monster. (I still have a print of that first version, in crude layout with tiny text; it fills a thick three-ring binder.) With a lot of help from the team, we salvaged it, of course. Simon came up with the brilliant idea of Trail Guides—smaller books that could cover the Weird West's out-of-the-way locales. Material pulled from *The Flood*'s earliest version would eventually become the *Great Northwest*, *South o' the Border*, and *Weird White North* Trail Guides. Best of all, I had the honor of collaborating on a book with Shane and seeing our work published.

Little did we know, one Plot Point and an established format weren't quite enough. To finish the tale of the Servitors, we'd have a lot more knots to unravel.

Next: A Deadlands summit in the Big Bar on Two!