

*In the second of three design diaries, the Big Bug recounts the design process behind our Plot Points.*

The *Deadlands* 20th Anniversary and *Good Intentions* Kickstarters are roaring toward their conclusion. Thanks so much for your support, compadres! Now we're gonna set for a spell and talk about the Servitor Plot Points—how they came about, the thorny quandaries they presented, and how we solved them.

### A DEADLANDS SUMMIT

Scene: Origins 2008, at a leather-upholstered booth in the Big Bar on Two. Shane, Clint and Jodi Black, Yours Truly, and a few other attendees (whose identities have slipped my mind; bourbon was on the menu) gathered to map out a brand strategy for *Deadlands*. Looking at the sheet of notes I took, over the following eight years we managed to hit just about every target we laid out for the game line. A few fell by the wayside because the time to write them never materialized (like the *Back East Trail Guides*), while others were perhaps a little too outré even for us (to wit: a fantasy version of *Deadlands* called *Hexsljnger*).

We talked about how the players of our Plot Points could have agency, really feel like they were making a difference, in a setting where so much of the future history had already been established in *Hell on Earth* and *Lost Colony*. Plus, the Plot Points had to pay off a dizzying number of stories and subplots from earlier Weird West adventures and sourcebooks. But most important were the ideas and insights I gained from the team regarding what makes *Deadlands* tick.

We had a fairly solid idea in mind for *The Last Sons*, with the assumption that the heroes wouldn't face Raven directly—he ends up chained to a mountain, after all, and the chronology demanded that binding happen in the 1980s. Short of releasing a new *Deadlands* setting with a New Wave soundtrack, we couldn't make that happen. Luckily, Raven's servants all looked and acted just like him, giving the heroes a way to fight "Raven" without invalidating other stories.

Clint threw out some brilliant ideas for Stone, most of which ended up in *Stone*

and a *Hard Place*. The conversation then turned to the last Servitor Plot Point, which we knew would focus on Darius Hellstromme. I was scribbling furiously in an attempt to keep up, when Shane smiled wistfully and said something that forever changed my perspective on the metaplot:

"At its heart," he said, "*Deadlands* is a love story."

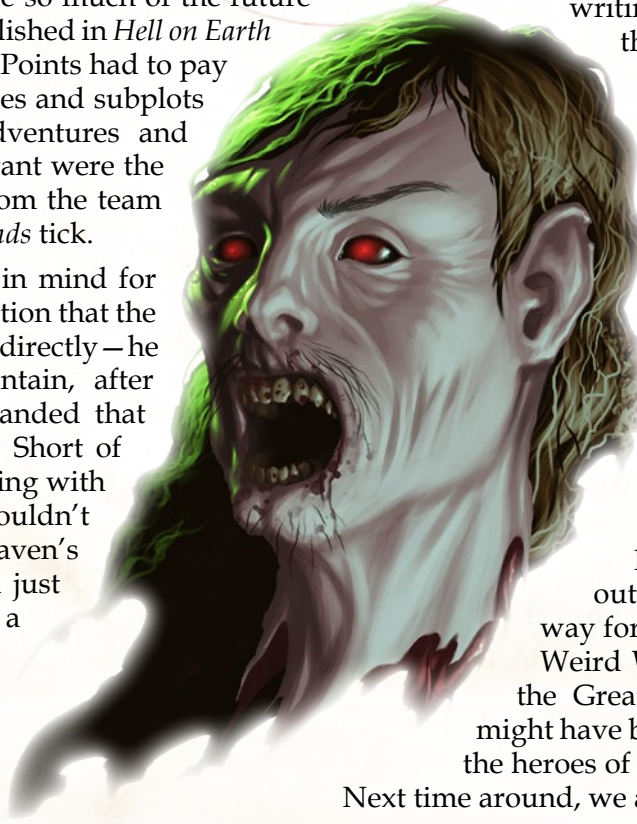
I must have dropped my pen and taken a slug of bourbon before I asked him to elaborate. I won't spoil it for you here—longtime fans can likely guess what he was getting at; for those who can't, it's spelled out in *Good Intentions*—but it was a statement that informed everything I wrote from then on. The idea that a tale of Harrowed gunslingers, science gone mad, and Hell brought screaming to the Earth could be about a love affair for the ages...well, that fired the creative furnace and kept it burnin', amigo.

### BACK TO BIGNESS

Hindsight's 20/20, to hackney a phrase. If I had *The Last Sons* to do over again, it would be a smaller book. At the time, I deluded myself into thinking I was writing a future-classic RPG tome in the style of Chaosium's *Beyond the Mountains of Madness*. Sure, it would be huge—with a price tag to match—but it would cover the Disputed Territories and the Sioux Nations, as well as recounting how the Great Summoning came about (well-known to Marshals and players of *Hell on Earth*). And to be honest, Shane's attention was elsewhere at the time so there was no one to stop me at the brink. We took the plunge.

I'm happy with how it turned out—we found a fairly satisfying way for players to participate in one of Weird West's greatest alterations after the Great Deluge of *The Flood*—but it might have benefited from a tighter focus on the heroes of the story: the player characters.

Next time around, we aimed to fix that.



## TEMPORAL ODDITIES

At the end of *The Flood*, the Great Deluge just about wiped Lost Angels off the map and Reverend Grimme vanished forever in the chaos. *The Last Sons* tells of a similarly massive (if much less well-known to the general populace) event, the Great Summoning. Technology would never again function inside the Sioux Nations' boundaries, as told in the *Hell on Earth* sourcebook *Spirit Warriors*. The heroes of these tales shook the pillars of Heaven and clobbered the bad guys in a big way.

For the next Plot Point, *Stone and a Hard Place*, we wanted to do two things: make the story smaller and more personal, and get back to that spaghetti-Western feel that informed some of the greatest Classic sourcebooks. But we also had a few tangled knots to unravel: how to tell a satisfying story about an unstoppable killer, and how to resolve the story of Stone and his mysterious benefactor, building on events from the *Classic Road to Hell* adventure trilogy. Whether we achieved those ends without leaving any gaping paradoxes in our wake, I'll leave it to you to decide. Likewise, I'll spare you our endless discussions about whether *Deadlands* time travel works like it did in *Back to the Future* (short version: it doesn't).

What I'd like to talk about is what ended up being my biggest misstep as Big Bug. Backers of the *Stone and a Hard Place* Kickstarter — those who got a good look at the initial PDF release — know it was a little different from the final version we published. This was the third Plot Point, so in narrative terms I felt it had to take heroes to a low point. The main enemy was a stone-cold killer, and I didn't want to dial back that ruthless nastiness. It had to go to *The Empire Strikes Back* levels of brutality. I wanted a story as rough and hard as Jasper Stone himself.

So, to underline just how badass Stone was — and also to "clear the decks" for whatever phase of *Deadlands* might come next — we included a sidebar describing how the Deathly Drifter murdered just about every one of the Weird West's enduring (and endearing) Classic heroes. One by one they went down, shot through the head and the badge: Hank "One-Eye" Ketchum, Ronan Lynch, Nevada Smith, Six-Hundred-Pound Sally, cut down in a hail of mystical bullets and gunsmoke.

And boy did I screw the pooch there, amigos.

It wasn't so much that they died. After all, *Hell on Earth* describes how Ronan Lynch's skull ends up in future Lost Angels, so we know he had to go at some point. No, the problem was that they died off-camera, in a sidebar. Their deaths had no meaning or resonance. And in the end, my lack of history with Classic came back to bite me in the ass; I'd sorely underestimated the sheer amount of love for these characters.

Lucky for me, Kickstarter is a forgiving medium. We were able to dial that sidebar *way* back, portraying the killings as events reported in the *Tombstone Epitaph*... but not necessarily true at every game table. We also punched up the final scene so the players had more cool things to do in their final confrontation with Stone.

In the end, we were happy with how it turned out. The element I enjoy most about *Stone and a Hard Place* is its use of Tombstone's history (or at least legend) of the Earps and Cowboys as a jumping-off point into our imagined events. Best of all, the fans taught me a very valuable lesson I could put to use on the next and final Servitor Plot Point.

## GRAND INTENTIONS!

If *Stone and a Hard Place* was intended to show just how brutal the Servitors could be, *Good Intentions* was conceived as a love letter to you, our fans. To balance out our two world-shaking Plot Points, we'd do another story that was more personal, whose outcome might never become common knowledge in the Weird West. Moreover, everything would come full circle. The Servitors' tales began with Darius Hellstromme winning the Great Rail Wars at the Battle of Lost Angels; they would end with the Bad Doctor once more taking the stage, as the greatest and most important of his plots came to a fiery conclusion.

We also completed a process we'd been working on since *The Flood*: reintroducing a lot of the concepts and flavor that had been lost in the translation from Classic to Reloaded. Over the course of three Plot Points, players got the ships of the Great Maze, more options for chi masters, expanded powers and abilities for native shamans, gear and gadgets for U.S. Agents and Texas Rangers, the option to begin the game with a Harrowed character and a passel of Harrowed Edges, and one of my personal favorite Arcane Backgrounds, the hexslinger (but not the hexslöynger).

*Good Intentions* brings back the metal mage, updates the blessed, and brings Divine Interventions to the table, allowing the forces of good to call down the thunder even though they're now bound to Power Points and a more limited selection of powers.

Most of all, *Good Intentions* plays on Shane's defining statement from all those years ago: that *Deadlands* is, in the end, a love story.

Does love conquer all? Well, amigo, that's something you'll have to figure out for yourself at your own game table, surrounded by friends. We can't wait to hear the answer.

*Next: What a Big Bug does...and what's next for Deadlands!*