

# GUNSLINGER

*A Role-Playing Game by Shane Ivey, © 2020*

*“Woe unto the wicked! it shall be ill with him: for the reward of his hands shall be given him.”*

—The Book of Isaiah

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# OVERVIEW

*“Soon there will come from the rising sun a different kind of man from any you have yet seen, who will bring with him a book and will teach you everything, and after that the world will fall to pieces.”* —a prophet of the Spokane

*Gunslinger* is roleplaying game about the American frontier. About the adventure and violence that defined it. About exploration and seizing the means of prosperity from the raw elements of the earth. About towns and pueblos, farms and ranches that struggle to survive by hard work and by murder. About riders who take what they need when trade fails or deathlust boils. About mountains that rise green and cold and hide treasure in their bones. About deserts of limestone and glittering gypsum where creosote and mesquite choke out the sparse grass and wolves follow travelers for their leavings and their dead. About a strange land called the Territory that has been cut off from its larger world for uncountable years. About the strange power of a great and lasting Judgment that comprises all that lethal magificence and awakens madness and magic and monstrosities. About gunslingers who forge their fates in gold and blood.

## *Gunslinger* Adventures

Most players take the role of characters we call gunslingers. They might be rangers or raiders, scouts or cowhands, farmers or ranchers, scholars or healers, priests or medicine people, diligent householders or snake-oil salesmen. Some may never raise a gun. Yet the gun is everywhere, that cruel leveler of strength and spirit. All too often, opponents who cannot back down reckon their differences in the bitter reek of smoke.

*Gunslinger* adventures are as varied as the frontier itself. Gunslingers might ride from town to town seeking gold and building their reputations. They might stand with a struggling ranch against a land baron and conjured devils. They might defend an ancient pueblo’s farmers from murderous rivals. They might pursue a stolen child or a hated foe to the ends of the Territory. They might carve a home and wealth from the rich resources of green fields and hills. They might roam as bandits and save their fellows from prison or the noose. They might struggle across the trackless desert until they are too sun-scorched and parched to move. They might sink into a haunt where unnatural horrors seep and thicken. *Gunslinger* adventures often explore the

tragedy of humanity's violent reactions to fear and to the unknown and the ways that violence precludes courage and understanding.

One player takes the role of the Judge. The Judge plays not a single role but invents and portrays all other characters and events. The Judge manifests the tragedies inherent in the struggle for the frontier between peoples made murderously desperate by circumstance or greed or ancient tradition. The Judge decides what obstacles stand in the gunslingers' path and what risks and sacrifices might overcome them. The Judge seeks to make every important decision challenge the gunslingers' beliefs and courage.

# The Judgment

The Judgment came upon the settlers and natives of the West on January 2, 1852. It erupted across the western frontier some 600 miles across: from Long's Peak in the north to Laguna Guzmán in the south, from Big Timber in the east to the Grand Canyon in the west. Where the Judgment struck nightmare lived. Many Christians said it was the Apocalypse, the unveiling of the End Times. But generations have passed and the End Times seem never to end.

## A Land Changed and Changing

Reality shifts within the realm of the Judgment. Children and artists, lunatics and priests, spirit healers and spiritualists sometimes sport indisputable powers of magic or the mind. Strangers occasionally appear whose fading memories are dreams of worlds where the Judgment never happened and history moved far along to futures that gleam with strange lights and blaze with inconceivable destruction.

Time passes strangely in the realm of the Judgment. Long years have gone. Decades? Centuries? Culture keeps in a land where people cling to traditions lest they forget themselves. Technology stagnates where inventions are lost and industry cannot take root. Stars turn strangely.

Some parts of the wide maddening country are more stable than others. Beleaguered civilization persists in villages and towns, ranches and haciendas, pueblos and roaming tribes. Folk strive to advance even while their memories of what came before fade and change.

Isolated canyons and haunts are mad with the power of the Judgment. That power spreads. Unnatural terrors come through. Entire communities have vanished. At the edges of the frontier mirages rise in the eye and mind. Some who venture into them return starved and mad. Others return not at all.

When the Judgment fell many natives called this unfathomably circumscribed land the Ghost Country. Mexicans who were newly adopted into the United States when the Judgment fell called it Coronado in an appeal to the power of the crown of God. That became the name of the primarily Mexican country of the south. American settlers called it New Jordan in determined hope and that became the name of their country in the north.

But its most common and lingering name is simply “the Territory.”

## The Territory

The Territory is the land where gunslingers explore and strive to prosper. That strange and shifting landscape encompasses a wide portion of the American west. But the Territory is cut off from the world it once occupied. When the Judgment fell New Mexico had only recently been annexed to the United States. Most of its people were Mexicans and natives. Americans were found in forts and trading posts in the New Mexico territory and the greener, cooler Kansas territory to the north. Natives farmed in pueblo villages in the mountains and roamed as hunter-gatherers and raiders across the deserts and plains. Settlers and natives shared bloody histories and hatreds born of atrocity and war.

Now all live and die in the the Territory, the vast frontier of a country to which there is no return. No one living remembers the fall of the Judgment when the world changed. Some settlements have grown. Some have sprung up anew. Others are ruins emptied by battle or disease. Sometimes gunslingers seek shelter only to find a well-known village was never there and their memories of it are changing already. Borders that separated territories and nations on old maps mean little. New states have taken shape in the absence of pressures from the east.

The map of the Territory shows the most important and persistent communities and the ranges of hunting tribes. The map is marked with hexagons each representing about 10 miles of distance. In a long-form campaign the Judge adds details as the gunslingers enter each hex, filling in the map and recording resources that the gunslingers might find and threats they might face. And sometimes the gunslingers come into a valley or town known well and find it changed like sand that drifts under the tides of the Judgment.

## Where Gunslingers Ride

In the Territory threats are always near. What Europeans called the frontier is a land of treasured natural resources. Grudges and greed seethe in the souls of whites and blacks, Chinese newcomers surrounded by exotic oppressions, Mexicans and a dozen tribes of natives often at

war. White Americans and Spaniard Mexicans cling to the tyranny and deceit of their ancient advantages. In many white communities the horrors of slavery and slaughter are long erased. It is easier say that they never happened if they never happened to you.

Peace is a hard and rocky ground. It resists the farmer's plough and the gravedigger's spade. Blood cries out to be shed. Some folk surrender hope to cruelty. They come to welcome the exhilaration and intoxicating power of slaughter. They ride as vigilantes for the torment and murder of rivals and the weak. They take to the wilds as marauders and outlaws, desperate or diabolical. Hideous and murderous mutants range out from haunts. Devilish grotesqueries creep in the wastes and shadows as if drawn from visions of the apocalypse.

And yet the awful justice of fate or furies or spirits or God can sometimes be found.

Warriors and medicine people protect native pueblos and nomadic clans. Preachers and poets and priests watch over souls like shepherds over flocks though some like shepherds harvest them for gain. American and Mexican soldiers garrison forts and outposts. Sheriffs and torchlit vigilantes patrol towns. In between ride gunslingers: adventurers who brave the madness of the Judgment for fortune and glory. Some are little better than raiders themselves. The best put themselves between awful death and ordinary folk just trying to survive. In cruel times a gunslinger may be the last unexpected hope in the haunted wild, a spark of fearsome light in a winter-dark night.

## How to Play

Most actions by the gunslingers are described back and forth by the players and the Judge. The Judge presents a scene and a challenge for the gunslingers to overcome. The players describe their gunslingers' response. The Judge describes repercussions and new discoveries. And so on.

The rules of *Gunslinger* come out when the Judge thinks an action so difficult that only true expertise or grit or hard choices can pull the gunslingers through. Can the gunslingers ride 20 miles down a mountain path to a village? Of course. The players and Judge can narrate that journey without looking at the rules. Can the gunslingers ride 20 miles to a village while a thunderstorm rages and mudslides threaten to wash path and riders away? If they must take word of an impending betrayal to the village by sundown despite the risk, the *Gunslinger* rules can determine their success or failure and the costs.

## Overcoming Challenges

Most hard and risky tasks are resolved with gunslingers' skills. A gunslinger may need to use the Riding skill to keep to the saddle and protect a horse from a treacherous path. Another might use the Hunting skill to spot a killer's hidden trail. Another might use the Survival skill to discern whether the storm is nearly done or is only about to get worse. Resolving such hard challenges is detailed in USING SKILLS & STATS on page XX.

**PERCENTILE DICE:** When a gunslinger uses a skill, the player rolls percentile dice. That usually means rolling a pair of ten-sided dice to get a result from 1 to 100. Designate one die as the "tens" digit and the other as the "ones" digit. A zero on the ones digit always means zero. A zero on the tens digit means zero except in one case: It means ten if the ones digit is a zero as well. If the dice come up 0 and 4 the roll is 04 or 4. If they come up 4 and 0 the roll is 40. If they come up 0 and 0 the roll is 100.

**SUCCESS OR FAILURE:** If the roll is equal to or lower than the gunslinger's skill rating, the gunslinger succeeds. If not, the gunslinger fails and suffers whatever repercussions may befall. Failing at a task often means a gunslinger loses Willpower Points to mental exhaustion. Or Hit Points to physical harm. Or Sanity Points to shock and terror. A challenge might threaten a gunslinger's wealth or it might threaten a loved one. It might be a chance to ameliorate risks and difficulties to come.

## Other Dice and Challenges

Challenges that threaten a gunslinger's very survival are handled in greater detail. The risks and resources of the wilds are described in TRAVEL & PURSUIT on page XX. Firefights and ambushes are described in COMBAT on page XX. The threats of accidents and poisoning and the deadly diseases of the frontier are described in OTHER PERILS on page XX.

*Gunslinger* also uses other dice that are common to roleplaying games: four-sided dice, six-sided, eight-sided, ten-sided, twelve-sided, twenty-sided. Watch for the letter "d" between two numbers. When the rules say to roll "1d4" that means roll one ("1") four-sided die ("d4"). When they say to roll 3d6 that means roll three six-sided dice. And so on.

## Resources, Not Requirements

*Gunslinger's* detailed rules can make suspenseful and often frightful adventures. Exploration. The search for natural resources. Violence. Great battles. Pursuits. Love and sorrow and

madness. The struggle to survive diseases and ill-wrought medical treatments. Possessions and wealth. The ways gunslingers occupy themselves between adventures. Those resources offer experiences as rich and deep and varied as the Judge and players want—and no more.

The Judge decides which parts of this game ought to feature in any given adventure. A short mission to overcome an unnatural menace or defend a village from raiders or recover an abductee may involve only the rules for combat, pursuit, and sanity. A long-term campaign might explore the countless threats that face gunslingers beyond the blood and terror of combat.

# Gunslingers

Players describe their gunslingers by many characteristics and ratings.

**BACKGROUND:** Players first choose their gunslingers' backgrounds, whether native or settler. See **STEP 1: BACKGROUND** on page XX.

**STATS:** Gunslingers have six statistics all in common: Strength, Dexterity, Constitution, Intelligence, Power, and Charisma. Each has a score to indicate its potency. See **STEP 2: STATS** on page XX for details.

**DERIVED ATTRIBUTES:** A gunslinger's Hit Points, Willpower Points, Sanity Points, and the Breaking Point are derived from stat scores. They indicate physical and mental resilience amid the hazards of the frontier. See **STEP 3: DERIVED ATTRIBUTES** on page XX for details.

**OCCUPATION AND SKILLS:** Gunslingers' occupations and skills describe how they spent their lives before the game began and which challenges they can most readily overcome. See **STEP 4: OCCUPATIONS AND SKILLS** on page XX for details.

**BONDS:** Gunslingers have bonds that indicate their deepest relationships and the strength that love can provide in the face of overwhelming fury or fear. See **STEP 5: BONDS** on page XX for details.

**FEATS:** Most gunslingers have one or two unusual talents or abilities. Fluency in other languages. A psychic power. A knack for long-distance riflery. Many feats are possible. See **STEP 6: FEATS** on page XX for details.

**MOTIVATIONS AND TEMPTATIONS:** Gunslingers have fundamental motivations and temptations which sometimes shape their behavior and define why they brave the dangers of the Judgment. See **STEP 7: MOTIVATIONS & TEMPTATIONS** on page XX for details.

**WEALTH:** Ready money is what the gunslingers have in hand. See **STEP 8: WEALTH** on page XX for details.

**FORTUNE POINTS:** A gunslinger begins with 1 Fortune Point. A Fortune Point can be spent to save a gunslinger from disaster. See **STEP 9: FORTUNE POINTS** on page XX for details.

**FINAL DETAILS:** Decide a few details about your gunslinger's appearance and history. See **STEP 10: FINAL DETAILS** on page XX.