

CONTENTS

Front Matter	2
Contents	4
Content Notes	6
Safety Tools	6
Content Warnings	6
Racism & Colonialism	6
What Is This Book?	8
History of the West Marches	8
Two Warnings	8
Why Play?	8
CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION	9
Overview of Elements	10
The Group	10
<i>Non-Fifth Edition Systems</i>	11
The Edge of the Map	11
<i>Understand the Base Game First</i>	11
The Town	12
Missions	13
<i>Why Players Schedule Their Own Sessions</i>	13
The Map	14
<i>The Shared Subjectivity of the Map</i>	14
Emergent Narrative	14
Hacking the Game	14
CHAPTER II: SURVIVAL & TRAVEL ...	15
Travel	16
Watches	16
Travel Activities	16
<i>Altering Travel Activities</i>	17
Travel Pace	17
Travel Pace	17
Shelter & Sleeping	18
<i>The Details of Sleeping Conditions</i>	18
Tracking	18
Tracking Difficulty	18
Navigation	18
<i>Objective Navigation</i>	19
Slightly Lost	19
Significantly Lost	19
Weather	20
Precipitation	20
Precipitation	20
Wind Speed	21
Wind Speed	21
Temperature	21
<i>Hazardous Weather</i>	21
Food & Water	22
Survival	22
Foraging	22
<i>Food & Water Requirements</i>	22
Cleanliness	23
Water Cleanliness	23
Food Cleanliness	23
Surveying & Hunting	24
Surveying	24
Survey Difficulty	24
<i>The Purpose of Surveying</i>	24
Hunting	25
Harvesting Quarry	25
Harvestable Parts by Size	25
Harvest Difficulty	25

Hazards	26
Weather Hazards	26
Terrain Hazards	27
<i>Combining Hazards</i>	27
Hazard Occurrence Chance	28
Hazard Occurrence Chance by Environment	28
<i>Altering Hazard Chances</i>	28
CHAPTER III: WORLDBUILDING	29
The Town	30
Principles of the Town	30
<i>Attacks on the Town</i>	30
The Town Itself	31
Town Types	31
Town Buildings	31
Magic Item Crafting	32
<i>Gold in Magic Item Crafting</i>	33
Craftspeople & Artificers	33
<i>Why Adventurers Don't Craft</i>	34
Craftsperson Features	34
<i>Crafting is Not Required</i>	34
Material & Craftsperson Tiers	35
Material Tier by Challenge Rating	35
<i>Designing Additional Materials</i>	35
Regions	36
Principles of Regions	36
Danger Level	37
<i>Why Have Danger Level?</i>	37
Environment	38
Environments	38
<i>Generating More Environments</i>	38
Climate	38
Climates	38
Landforms & Structures	39
Landforms & Structures	39
<i>Landforms and Description</i>	39
<i>Bigger is Older is Badder</i>	39
Modifiers	40
Region Modifiers	40
Inhabitants	41
<i>Earning Inhabitants' Evil Status</i>	41
Legendary Monster	41
Encounters	42
Encounter Chance Conditions	43
Factions	44
Principles of Factions	44
Territory & Influence	45
<i>Tools, Not Rules</i>	45
Theming	46
Faction Themes	46
<i>Themes as Themes</i>	46
Bases	47
Faction Bases	47
<i>Bases, Territory, and Landmarks</i>	47
Motivation	48
Faction Goals	48
Population	49
Faction Population	49
Development	49
Faction Development	49

Dungeons 50

Principles of Dungeons.....	50
Types of Dungeons.....	51
Dungeon Types.....	51
Layers of Dungeon History.....	51
Danger Level.....	52
On Return.....	52
Dungeon Ecology.....	53
While You Were Away.....	54
Keep Telegraphing.....	54
Dungeon Bosses.....	55
Why Have Bosses Scaled to Their Dungeons?.....	55
Treasure Rooms.....	56
Expanding Treasure Rooms.....	56
Encounter Design.....	57
Loot.....	58
Attach History to Things Players Care About.....	58
Connecting It All.....	58

CHAPTER IV: NARRATIVE..... 59

Mechanics & Narrative..... 60

Principles of Mechanical Narratives.....	60
Do Not Fudge Dice.....	61
Dice Rolls in Preparing vs. Running.....	61
Verisimilitude.....	62
Planning & the Sandbox.....	62
Communicate These Principles.....	62

Lore..... 63

Principles of Lore.....	63
Layers of History.....	64
Hard Timeline Math.....	64
Items, Artifacts, & Treasure.....	65
Multiple Perspectives.....	65
Legends & Reality.....	65
NPCs.....	66

Emergent Narrative 67

Regions, Weather, & Encounters.....	67
What “Emergent” Really Means.....	67
Indexical Storytelling.....	68
Show, Don’t Tell.....	69
Why Tell Emergent Stories.....	69

Player Narrative..... 70

Ongoing Mysteries.....	70
Player Backstories.....	70
Investment Over Time.....	70

CHAPTER V: APPENDICES 71

Appendix I: Player Options..... 72

Reasons for Leaving.....	72
Feats for the West Marches.....	73
Rangers and Getting Lost.....	74
Background Features.....	74
Epic Boons.....	74
Modified Equipment.....	74
The Beaten Path.....	74
Progression Options.....	75
Character Tiers.....	75
Experience Points.....	75
Discovery Experience.....	75
On Playing in Real Time.....	76

Appendix II: Step-by-Step Examples 77

Example Region.....	77
Swamp Encounters.....	79
Example Faction.....	80
Linking Factions Together.....	81
Example Dungeon.....	82
More Than Just Loot.....	84
Tying It All Together.....	86
Unknown Names.....	86
How Many of Each?.....	86

Appendix III: The Sisters Gaunt 87

Placing the Coven.....	87
The Sisters.....	87
Coven XP.....	87
Sybil Gaunt.....	88
Morgan Gaunt.....	89
Gertrude Gaunt.....	89
Rothollow.....	90
Gaunt Coven Minions.....	92
The Coven in Combat.....	95
Services from the Sisters.....	96
Oracular Insights.....	97
Spell Scrolls for Sale.....	97
Magical Trinkets for Sale.....	97

Appendix IV: Magic Items 100

Appendix V: Crafting Materials..... 103

Appendix VI: OSR Conversion..... 106

Hitpoints & Lethality.....	106
The Old School Renaissance.....	106
Ability Modifiers & Difficulty Classes.....	107
Saving Throws.....	107
Carry Weight.....	107
Conditions & Exhaustion.....	107
Monsters.....	107

Appendix VII: Conditions & Exhaustion . 108

Appendix VIII: Tables..... 109

Travel & Navigation.....	109
Weather.....	109
Survival & Hunting.....	110
The Town.....	110
Region Building.....	111
Encounters.....	112
Factions.....	113
Dungeons.....	114
Gaunt Coven.....	115
Discovery.....	116
Player Details.....	116
Names.....	118
Generic Lore.....	120
Titles & Epithets.....	122

Appendix IX: Kickstarter Backers..... 124

Open Game License 125

Index..... 126

CONTENT NOTES

SAFETY TOOLS

Playing a tabletop roleplaying game is usually fun, but there can be moments of stress and fear and uncertainty. These can oftentimes be good: tension is good for any story, and moments of difficulty will make your game a more rewarding experience.

That said, it's important that you, both players and GMs (and audience members, if you have them), all feel safe at the table. Making certain that everyone still feels comfortable and secure—even during those moments of intensity—is more important whatever game you're playing.

We have two main safety tools to recommend; there are many more out there and we encourage you to do your own research, but these two are robust and reliable.

Lines & Veils

Lines & veils are two kinds of limits in the game.

Lines are not to be crossed: anything designated as a line will not come up in game. They are places and topics that the game will not go.

Veils are things that, while they can come up in-game, will be “panned away” from, or “fade-to-black” moments. Veiled moments are things that happen in the story of the game, but don't get a spotlight or significant screentime. They can be dealt with, but avoid graphic details.

Lines and veils both should be discussed before play begins: give all players at the table a chance to declare them before the moment might arise. It's a chance to let everyone decide how comfortable they are ahead of time.

The X-Card

The X-Card is an optional tool created by John Stavropoulos that allows anyone in your game (including you, the GM) to edit out any content anyone is uncomfortable with as you play. Since most RPGs are improvisational and we won't know what will happen until it happens, it's possible the game will go in a direction people don't want. An X-Card is a simple tool to fix problems as they arise.

To use, at the start of your game, simply say:

“I'd like your help. Your help to make this game fun for everyone. If anything makes anyone uncomfortable in any way... [draw X on an index card] ...just lift this card up, or simply tap it [place card at the center of the table]. You don't have to explain why. It doesn't matter why. When we lift or tap this card, we simply edit out anything X-Carded. And if there is ever an issue, anyone can call for a break and we can talk privately. I know it sounds funny but it will help us play amazing games together and usually I'm the one who uses the X card to protect myself from all of you! Please help make this game fun for everyone. Thank you!”

CONTENT WARNINGS

The content of the West Marches as a format does not significantly deviate from that of the base game. There will be wilderness to explore, dungeons to delve, monsters to slay, friends to acquaint, and treasure to be unearthed.

It's likely, however, that the West Marches will be perhaps more grim than an ordinary game. Friends will likely be fewer and farther between, the wilds will be more precarious, and the chances of losing allies will be higher. Violence, stress, certain horrors, and foul language are quite common.

If any of that is likely to make you or your players uncomfortable, it's worth having a frank discussion ahead of time about expectations for the game. Using the aforementioned safety tools will certainly help, and a GM can certainly bend and shift the tone of the game, but it will not be easy.

If it turns out that someone at the table doesn't want to play given the content of the game, that's fine! Far better to have them realize that a game is not for them and be able to make a graceful exit than to get in deep and have to back out.

If you realize that this game isn't for you, don't feel bad for a moment about not playing. The West Marches is a very specific game, and is certainly not for everyone

RACISM & COLONIALISM

Since its inception in the '70s, the base game itself has had profound issues surrounding racism and the colonialist mindset. Fifth Edition has done little to mitigate these issues, and if anything, the West Marches only make the longstanding rot more visible.

What does it mean to have a colonialist mindset? Consider, for a moment, the basic act of an adventure. You, the adventurer, travel far from home, break into a fortified location, kill or drive out its inhabitants, and then take everything of value they own. Afterwards, you return home, rich and wealthy, and are lauded as heroes.

You see how this might be an issue? It's only compounded by the fact that the game's reward systems inherently push you towards this sort of behavior: by default, the most prominent means to advance your characters are through combat, where you must defeat creatures, typically by killing them.

Now, granted, it's one thing to fight off dragons, beasts, and demons. They are more or less universally villainous, and the players can usually observe them being greedy, heartless, murderous monsters.

However, it's entirely another when the villains are people. Consider drow, duergar, orcs, goblins: the standing mythology that the game is built on presents them as fully sentient, and often organized into fully-fledged societies. Whether or not your specific style of managing the game as a GM explores the marginalization of these societies in thought-provoking play, the mechanics and language that comprise the fiber of the game itself presents them as villains. Reading the rules as they are laid down, the game generalizes villainy and evil to entire groups of people, and that their murder and conquest is most always justified.

This is racist.

A good GM can solve a lot of this, yes. They can remove racial stat modifiers, they can build a complex and nuanced world with myriad people, and they can emphasize empathy, compassion, and community-building.

The challenge is that the rules, as written, will be fighting that GM at practically every turn along the way. It's impossible not to acknowledge the damaging, dehumanizing elements of the game as it is currently written. The game is one that analogs existing racist attitudes in real life; though this isn't a problem in itself, by the nature of its construction it rewards those that take these exploitative and colonialist behaviors to the extreme.

All that said, the game is extremely fun. It brings a great deal of imagination, creativity, and joy to thousands—if not millions—of people. You can and should continue to enjoy the game, even with all of its flaws. But you must acknowledge those flaws.

In the West Marches, you will travel to a distant, uncharted land in search of fame, glory, and riches. Even if the Marches are solely inhabited by the most despicable of all creatures, foul devils and shambling undead and otherworldly aberrations, characters in the West Marches are not inherently heroic.

True heroism comes from reforming and advancing the existing systems of society to make significant changes that benefit everyone, including the marginalized and oppressed. Slaying dragons and looting tombs is fun, but don't make the mistake of allowing the spirit of adventure to dull your sensibilities to the deeper questions that prod endemically at the seams of the game.

Greetings and Salutations,

My name is Izirion, the Black Dread, and here in your hands you hold my Enchiridion, the sum total of all my knowledge of my domain. In your tongue, this region is known as the West Marches, and it has been the object of desire for many a hero.

All the tales you have been told are true: the Marches are harsh, brutal, unforgiving, callous, and filled with riches beyond your wildest dreams. This was once a land of gods and heroes, and now it lies in ruins.

Every adventurer, every treasure hunter, every hopeful hero that has come to the Marches has failed. Frozen, starved, drowned, decapitated, boiled, dissolved, petrified, cursed, infected, torn to shreds, or stabbed in the back by a comrade—every single adventurer meets their fate.

For the past few centuries, I enjoyed my easy dominance, my unquestioned conquest. But now, as I grow older and wiser, I seek a new challenge. Idle wanderers and foolhardy crusaders grow weary, as do petty scholars and wayward scavengers. I have slain and tortured each ten times over, and now I grow bored.

It is for this reason that you now see my Enchiridion before you. It is here to instruct you, to train you, to guide your hands and eyes in the ways of the Marches. I have a need of a new class of hero, one forged in blood and steel, a hero that can match the ferocity of the Marches.

It is my hope that, in time, you will rise to the occasion. That you will climb bitter peaks and crawl overgrown valleys. That you will delve into the ruins, uncover lost secrets, and slay mighty beasts. That you will not merely survive in the Marches, but will truly come to thrive within its wild heart.

And that one day, you will come and face me, that I will finally have a worthy foe whose skulls I will take no small pleasure in boiling.

—Izirion, the Black Dread

Hello!

You've already read the Big Guy's introduction, that's good! My name's Zadrok, and I'm the Big Guy's personal scribe: it's my job to write down everything he says for the shiny new Enchiridion.

Of course, as a right proper scribe, it's also my job to make sure that the meaning is clear, so I've left lots of helpful commentary throughout in addition to the Big Guy's notes. After all, we kobolds have a somewhat different outlook on life than dragons.

Still, I hope—both for your sake and mine—that you find the words written inside the Enchiridion both instructive and helpful. If they're not, the Big Guy will get angry, and then boil the skin off of my skull instead. And that wouldn't be very much fun at all.

Anyhow, just wanted to introduce myself and make sure you knew who I was. Bye now!

—Zadrok the Scribe

Blue Sidebars

Blue sidebars are here to explicate topics further; they're a chance for us, Dom & Sam, to say "here is exactly what this means and why we did it." They're usually around tricky or unusual concepts, or else trying to explain some particularly decision we made in the design process.

You should read them your first time through.

Green Sidebars

Green sidebars exist to give suggestions and advice on making the game your own. They offer possibilities for hacking, adjustments, and modifications to the game; green sidebars are us, Dom & Sam, saying "if we were going to change the game, here is how we would do it."

You should read them as you build your Marches.

Red Sidebars

Red sidebars are direct advice to you, the GM. They're suggestions, guidance, rules of thumb, and hard points you need to be sure to do or not do. Red sidebars are us, Dom & Sam, telling you "here is something that you absolutely should make sure to do (or not do)."

You should read them as you get ready to run at the table.

WHAT IS THIS BOOK?

Izirion's Enchiridion of the West Marches is a book that provides you and your table with all of the tools necessary to run a game in the style of the West Marches, which is a close variant of the West Marches, originally devised by Ben Robbins around the year 2000.

Within this book, there are rules to add into your game: systems for governing weather and travel and special NPCs and more. It's important to note that these systems are not content. They aren't encounters or monsters or scenarios, but rules that adjudicate parts of the game that previously lacked mechanical detail. The rules that deal with wilderness survival, for example, add complexity and depth such that players must now make critical decisions while weighing risk and reward when travelling, much as they would in combat.

These rules are GM-facing; they'll affect the players for sure, but will most often take the form of systemic challenges that players will have to react to or overcome rather than deploy directly. It's helpful for players to know, and it's encouraged for players to familiarize themselves with the broad strokes of these rules, but you should feel free to teach them as play occurs, rather than beforehand.

In addition to rules, this book contains a number of guidelines, principles, and toolsets for creating content. A lot of this content is built into the world: regions, dungeons, NPCs, encounters, that sort of thing. For creating these, this book contains numerous tables, charts, and step-by-step guides, so you can easily create excellent content for your players.

Some of the guides, however, are a little less tangible. They cover more philosophical and theoretical content, delving into narrative, design, emotion, aesthetics, and more. These have less concrete step-by-step instructions, and instead provide you with insight and advice to weigh and consider.

Finally, the book also includes a collection of suggestions, rules tweaks, and modifications from the base game to the West Marches. This tackles stuff like encumbrance and carry weight, making mess kits actually helpful, and sorting out vague background features. It also includes a little player-facing content, like new feats!

In many ways, this book is primarily for GMs, but it has a fair amount of player-facing rules as well. You can expect to use it as such.

HISTORY OF THE WEST MARCHES

Around the year 2000, a game designer by the name of Ben Robbins began running a game of 3rd Edition called the West Marches. It was, in his own words, the diametric opposite of an ordinary game. It had no set meeting time, no regular party, and no regular plot.

Instead, there was a pool of about 10-15 players, they formed their own parties and set their own times, and they explored where they chose. It was dangerous, gritty, and harkened back to the old days of the game, back to B/X (despite playing Third Edition), when things were a little less heroic and little more deadly.

Since then, the West Marches as a format has always been popular among the community. Thousands of games in the style have been attempted, and significantly fewer have actually succeeded in doing so. Not none, certainly, but fewer than the number attempted.

Our hope is to provide a baseline from which campaigns can grow.

TWO WARNINGS

Before you embark on a game set in the West Marches, there are two important pieces of information, two warnings, you should know:

First, a West Marches game is a lot of work. For the GM and players alike, more effort will be demanded than in an ordinary game. For the GM, the Marches demand a layered and complex history, in-depth maps and environment design, myriad dungeons and encounters, and a flexible schedule for missions. For players, the Marches demand critical thinking, map-making, note-taking, risk analysis, social organization, and a level of proactive engagement most tables do not ask for.

Second, a West Marches game excludes certain kinds of campaigns. Intensely political campaigns, for example, will struggle, as royal courts and cunning advisors are far and few between in the wilderness of the Marches. Likewise, any campaign set in the Marches will involve a large amount of exploring, travel, resource management, and rough-and-tumble gameplay. If this does not sound like your kind of game, you'd best look elsewhere.

If either of these turn you off, that's perfectly okay! Once again, it's far better to realize that before the campaign begins and make an informed decision—if you commit too far, leaving becomes all the messier.

Likewise, the Marches are not all that Fifth Edition or any other game has to offer! Many campaigns would have absolutely no use for the rules, guidelines, and content found here, and that's fine.

WHY PLAY?

There are three reasons to run a game in the style of the West Marches:

Increased Flexibility

In the West Marches, parties for specific sessions of play are taken from a larger player roster. That means that not everyone has to play at the same time. No cancelling sessions because a player or two can't make it, and no guilt from only being able to play on an irregular basis.

Since each individual player is not necessarily meant to go on every adventure, the responsibilities of scheduling sessions and determining who will play in them are largely shifted onto the players themselves. Provided that an open channel of communication is available between the GM and all of the players in the roster, much less coordination is required to find time to play than a traditional campaign setting demands.

Emergent Narrative

The stories you can tell in the Marches are like no other in tabletop games. As you, the players, play the game, the impact of your actions will be felt far and wide. They will affect the NPC and factions, certainly, but they also will spread to the other players as well. There is something truly magical about stumbling upon the site of a battle, corpses and burn marks scattered around, only to discover the telltale evidence that this was your allies' doing, rather than your enemies.

The narrative of the West Marches is intrinsically tied to the mechanics of the game: where you go and what you do as players is the story. The GM has no preset plot: your fate lies in your hands. Once you grasp the liberation that comes from wholly determining your own story, there is nothing else like it.

The Game At Its Fullest

The West Marches are, in many ways, a more complete fulfillment of the promise of the game. Many spells, abilities, and features that seem weak or lacking in the base game blossom in the Marches. When you must carry all of your gear on your back, for example, Strength is vitally important. Likewise, even the most basic of cantrips, say, mending, become vitally important: when your rope snaps thirty miles from town, being able to ensure that it holds secure can become tantamount to survival.

In a lot of ways, the West Marches harken back to the older days of the game, and embrace its vision more wholeheartedly. This is not to besmirch more modern attitudes found in Fifth Edition, just that there perhaps might be something lost in the more bombastic, spectacular games of today. If you yearn for ancient tombs and bloodthirsty beasts, for sweeping mountains and haunted woods, for true risk and breathtaking danger—the Marches are the place for you.

Do everything my Enchiridion says and keep your wits about you, and you shall find that there is absolutely no need for luck. The West Marches are a place of gritted teeth and bloody knuckles: do not give in to superstition.

If you do manage to survive the Marches, make sure that you thank us when you meet us. Good luck out there—you'll need it!



CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION



OVERVIEW OF ELEMENTS

THE GROUP

Unlike an ordinary game, the West Marches have no set party. Instead, there are a collection of players, referred to as the “player pool.” Each of these players plays a character, all of these characters together are called the “character roster.” Finally, each individual mission that goes out will be composed of a party; these are called “mission parties.”

Unlike an ordinary party, there can be well over six players in a West Marches game. It can easily reach ten, fifteen, even twenty players; the more players, the more demanding the game, but it is entirely doable. As a rule of thumb, you should expect to run about one session for every five players, per week. Ten to twelve players is a good starting number.

The Player Pool

The player pool is the group of players that play in your West Marches game. The player pool is where mission parties come from. If your player pool has, say, a dozen players, only a fraction of those will be going out on individual missions, but all dozen are players within the West Marches game as a whole.

The player pool is, like all tables, a social group. People gather together to play a game, yes, but at the end of the day, the game is a social function.

More so than an ordinary game, a West Marches game has intricate, complex social dynamics. At a regular table, there is a scheduled meeting time with a standard group of people, making it easy for players to find their place. It might take a few sessions, but there is a reliable social structure to fall back on, and thus most every player will find their particularly social niche.

This is not necessarily the case in a West Marches game. Players will be at different levels of experience with the game, different levels of familiarity with players, and different levels of power as characters. Because mission parties are self-decided, it's possible that some players will feel sidelined, overlooked, or left out.

The Marches are a complex beast. As GM, you should keep an eye on the proceedings; it's impossible to ensure that everyone is happy all the time, but there are things you can do to help. If one mission party is playing together all the time, break them up; if one player is domineering all missions, have them sit out; if there are serious complaints, take the time to listen and respond. Remember that the comfort and wellbeing of players always takes precedence over the game at the table.

The Character Roster

The character roster is the collection of player characters that are the main adventurers in your West Marches game. Where the player pool is the group of players, the character roster is the group of characters. Mission parties draw from the character roster, just as they draw from the player pool.

Ordinary parties of adventurers are united bands of heroes, bound together by common cause. A character roster can and often does share a similar unity, but this isn't always the case. Everyone in the roster is an adventurer, yes, and they all do traverse out into the wilds of the Marches, yes, but their reasons for doing so vary wildly.

Some adventurers in the roster are treasure-seekers and fortune-finders, out for gold and riches; some are questing individuals, looking to achieve some lofty aim or goal; and some others are refugees or outcasts, come to the Marches with nowhere else to go.

This disunity, while it can cause contentions, is usually an asset. It drives characters and missions in different directions, sparks unusual tensions, and pushes good interpersonal drama. The West Marches are a strange and varied place, and so it fits that its explorers would be equally strange and varied.

Mission Parties

As missions are decided, parties to achieve those missions will be formed. Generally, a mission party should be no less than three people, and no more than six. If you're confident in your GM'ing ability to provide fun, engaging, and functional play outside those bounds, feel free to expand them—but three to six is a good baseline.

How and why mission parties are formed is wholly up to the players. Perhaps they're choosing their friends and close confidants for a tightly-knit group; perhaps they're choosing the most effective and uniquely-suited characters for an efficient party; most likely, though, they'll choose whoever can play at the same time they can.

If you, the GM, notice that a particular subset of your player pool has spent several missions in a row together, encourage them to fragment, to find other players to go out with. Variety is the spice of life, and so encouraging your players to swap around their mission parties will keep things interesting.

Once a mission party has been formed, it progresses much like an ordinary party at an ordinary table. They have different classes and roles, and have to work together to succeed.

Non-Fifth Edition Systems

While the Enchiridion is written with Fifth Edition in mind, it is still largely compatible with most fantasy tabletop roleplaying games—particularly OSR games, which share much of their blood with Fifth Edition, and even more with its antecedents.

Whether you're a fresh beginner to Fifth Edition or a veteran OSR player, we encourage you to broaden your horizons. Read other systems, take your favorite bits and pieces from them, and then add them to your game. The Enchiridion, like most OSR and OSR-adjacent books, is meant to be hacked and modified. You can and should adjust, tweak, and alter the rules and content found here to be more fitting for your table and your own Marches.

A more thorough guide to converting Fifth Edition to common OSR systems can be found in Appendix VI, on page 106.

THE EDGE OF THE MAP

The West Marches themselves are a vast stretch of territory located to the west of the known world. They are off the edge of every known map, and are rumored to hold great riches, horrifying monsters, and ancient ruins. Almost anyone who has ever ventured into the Marches has not returned.

At the eastern edge of the Marches, at the end of the westernmost road, there is a town. This is where the adventure starts, and this is the place to which every mission will return. The town itself is small, quiet, and rather boring—there is no adventure there.

To the east lies the Empire: vast, all-encompassing, and civilized. How your players' characters lived in the Empire before they came to the Marches does matter, but don't waste your time drawing maps or writing lore. Players will fill in the details they need about the Empire, but it shouldn't be a point of interest. All that matters is that to the east lies boredom and retirement, so every adventurer should be looking west.

While nearly everyone who has gone into the Marches has not returned, there is one exception: about a hundred years ago, a group of adventurers did manage to survive, and found riches in the process. These adventurers are all dead or gone now, as is their map, but their legacy endures—the townsfolk might remember them, and their bodies and equipment might still lie somewhere in the west.

Still, the West Marches are extremely dangerous. Anyone who ventures out without planning or preparation will surely perish, and thus any adventurer that wishes to be successful must be clever, resourceful, and willing to take risks. For those who can manage this, however, the Marches are full of discovery, wealth, and secrets.

Remember, the West Marches are at their best when players are in over their heads.

Understand the Base Game First

Before you go any further, you should know the base game, regardless of which system you're using. Read the core books. Understand the mechanics. Play in a campaign. Learn how the dynamic of the table works. Make some dungeons and adventures. Be able to design monsters and magic items from scratch. Run a few sessions. Gain experience.

While we will occasionally tweak, alter, or replace existing rules in the base game, the vast majority of the content here builds on the core content of Fifth Edition or whatever other system you're using; this is in no way a wholesale replacement for those rules.

Make sure you go and read those rules, and know them well. This book will still be here when you're done.

THE TOWN

The town is one of the central constructs in a West Marches game: it is the safe haven that players both leave from and return to. Every mission begins in the town, and every mission ends at the town. It's where characters can safely rest, talk, re-equip, make plans, and decide missions.

The Town's Safety

The town is always safe. Whether this comes from thick walls, a secluded location, magical wards, or some other means, it must be true. When the characters return to town, they must know that no harm may come to them.

Don't over-worry yourself with the narrative behind this, and don't create some highly convoluted reason for it. In all likelihood, the town is so small and inconsequential that any threat big enough to pose a threat to the town has no interest in it. Sure, a band of cut-throats might try the walls every once in a while, but a dozen guards and a stout barricade will make short work of idle bandits.

If your players ask lots of questions about the town's defenses and the narrative consequences therein, take a moment to explain the mechanical reasoning behind the town's safety. It's important for the adventurers to have a place to return to, and to undermine that place's safety will throw the game's rhythm and progression out of balance. The town is where they level up, where they resupply, and where they can plan. Don't threaten that.

NPCs

In town, there will be a number of friendly NPCs around. At bare minimum, they should cover the necessities for adventurers: an innkeeper to pour drinks, a blacksmith to forge weapons and armor, a priest to heal and sanctify, and a mage to identify strange magic.

Depending on the size of the town, there might well be more beyond this; ordinary civilians, other craftspeople, local guards, travelling merchants, and more. How many NPCs in town exist beyond the basics are up to you.

It's also worth noting that the NPCs in town might change; they might move on and return to the Empire, the players might recruit NPCs from the wilds, refugees might find their way to the town, and more. While the town itself is rigid, those that come to it can vary. For more on creating NPCs for the Town, see page 33.

Nothing Wagered, Nothing Gained

It's vital that there be no adventure to be had in town. Players are naturally risk-averse; if there is an option to gain similar rewards for lower risk, they will take it. If there is adventure to be had in the safety of town, they will do that adventure—the relatively safe, close-to-home adventure of the town—over exploring every time. To push them to explore, it must be absolute that there is nothing to gain from staying in town.

If there ever were to be adventure in town, the town would be dangerous by definition. If their one 'safe' spot isn't actually safe, why should the players trust anything the GM says again?

THE WILDS

Everything outside of town is considered to be the uncharted wilds. Sprawling plains, deep forest, soaring mountains, endless tundra, craggy hills—all this and more make up the wilds. Here and there the players may encounter pockets of civilization or communities of individuals that aren't hostile, but these are considered wilderness nonetheless. The wilds are dangerous, difficult, and the source of all adventure.

Regions

The Marches themselves are not one singular area, but rather are composed of a number of distinct environments and territories. These distinct sections are collectively referred to as "regions." A region is the basic unit by which the Marches themselves are divided; each region will have its own name, terrain, features, and challenge. When players cross the border from one region to the next, it should be clear.

Regions are covered in more detail on page 36.

Dungeons

Taken literally, a dungeon is a prison located beneath a castle. In the West Marches (as in many fantasy roleplaying games), a dungeon simply refers to an isolated series of chambers or areas that contain encounters and challenges. Many dungeons are literal dungeons, meaning they are literal prison systems beneath castles, but they might also be temples, fortresses, mines, or many other sorts of things.

Dungeons are where most of the monsters, treasure, and significant challenge can be found in the West Marches. Dungeons are covered in more detail on page 50.

Danger Level

Within a given region or dungeon, it's important that most encounters and challenges are of roughly the same level of danger. For combat, this means that the enemies are of appropriate challenge rating and number; for exploration, this means that the area is traversable and survivable given the characters' resources; for interaction, this means that the challenges presented are solvable with regards to players' capabilities and tools.

This is not to say that everything must be "balanced." Dungeons often can and should be more dangerous than their surrounding regions, and having an uneven spread of difficulty across adjacent regions makes for interesting exploration. A spread of plains can be quite safe for a party of level 4 characters, but the mountains a few miles northwards might be deadly.

What is important, however, is to ensure that encounters inside a dungeon or region are of equivalent danger: if the characters can easily best the first encounter, they should be confident they can handle the rest. If the first encounter nearly destroys them, by contrast, it would feel cheap to have every subsequent encounter be effortless.

MISSIONS

At an ordinary table, players come together each week to play; what they do during that session is variable, without specific structure beyond game mechanics. In the West Marches, this is a bit different: each session comprises one mission, which is a specific objective the player characters set out to achieve.

Each mission begins with the party leaving town, and each mission ends with the party returning to town, and entails the party travelling to some location in the Marches.

Objective

Each mission has its own objective which the player characters attempt to accomplish. A successful mission is one that succeeds its objective; a failed mission is that fails it. Deciding mission objectives is wholly the players' choice; the GM can veto the players' mission choice if they feel it is not going to be sufficiently adventurous, but otherwise mission objectives are solely under player control.

The best missions are ones with a clear, tangible goal. This includes objectives like "slay the green dragon Skorenag" or "recover the cursed blade Wormwood," but it might also include less one-and-done objectives. "Scout the Isle of Redthorn" and "explore the tunnels beneath the Lakeside Fortress" are both valid mission objectives; neither has a strict endpoint, but substantial progress can be completed in a single session, with the players deciding when to return to town.

What is not a good objective is one that is dependent on the presumption of adventure without certainty. "Go to the Howling Hills and explore the first cavern we see" is a bad objective because there may or may not be caverns in the Howling Hills. Even if the players knew there were caverns in the Hills, it would still be a poor mission objective because there is no way for the GM to know which cavern the players are going to. The GM creates content on a mission-by-mission basis, and thus "explore the first dungeon we see" is asking the GM to come up with all possible dungeons. There is an implicit promise made when choosing an objective: the players will work to complete that objective, and not stray off the path unless the GM says that doing so is alright.

Instead, there is a rhythm to missions: players scout out a region or two and find 'hooks' for adventure—things like camps of bandits, ancient ruins, or monster lairs—but do not directly interact with them. Then, after returning to town, all players are informed about the various hooks, and individual missions can be scheduled to deal with each in turn. After completing most of the dungeons within a region and accruing more power, players scout the next region, and the cycle continues.

Time

Missions take time, the question is how much. Early on, when dungeons and adventure are closer to home, missions will be shorter. As the player characters explore, they will go further afield, and missions will take longer. While a group of player characters are out on a mission, they may not go on other missions, and they may not interact with characters in town.

How time is tracked at your table will influence how long missions tend to take. In some games, the GM decides when time is advanced; thus, it's in the interest of the players to synchronize their missions and return at roughly the same time. In some other games, time advances on a per-mission basis; it's assumed that all player characters remain in town while an adventuring party is out, and thus missions can be scheduled in any order. And in some games, time is tracked according to real-time, and thus players must wait days in real life to plan their missions.

In the words of Gary Gygax: "You cannot have a meaningful campaign if strict time records are not kept." Regardless of how you decide to advance time in your game, you must be certain that the players know how the rules operate, and then you must abide by those rules.

As your players grow used to the passage of time in the game, there may be special timed events: a cult must perform a ritual before the next full moon, for example, or an ancient tomb only reveals itself on the solstice. Adding these events in adds a sense of reality and urgency to the game, one that forces players to meaningful action.

See Appendix C on page 112 for information on playing the game in real time.

Scheduling

Along with deciding their own mission objectives, players are responsible for scheduling when to meet in-person to play the game. The GM should provide a rough schedule ahead of time to the players, but after that, all scheduling is the duty of the players.

Why Players Schedule Their Own Sessions

The answer is twofold: first, because players are the ones who decide their own missions. It's important they coordinate the players they need, the abilities and features the mission requires, and the plan of attack for the mission itself. If the GM was scheduling, it would deprive the players of some of the freedom to choose their own parties and missions.

Second, the GM will already have their hands full with planning the Marches, and the players should take some responsibility for the game.

*Gotta think on your feet in the Marches,
or you'll be dead before you can finish
saying "is that a giant spider?"*

THE MAP

The Marches are vast, wild, and wholly unknown. Because of this, players are responsible for drawing their own maps of the wilderness. At each session, players should have a real, paper map in front of them, which they can alter as they choose, provided they have at least one character who is mapping while travelling. This map is then carried from session to session; different players can and should work on it. From time to time, the GM should digitally copy the map, through photo or scan, and put it somewhere that all players can see.

By default, the map should be a blank piece of unmarked paper. Players are responsible for the scale, accuracy, and detail of the map, using their own wits. If a player character is proficient with cartographer's tools, the GM may provide them with graph- or hex-paper and a ruler, but that is at the GM's discretion.

As the Marches are explored, the map will likely expand; when this happens, staple or tape additional pages onto the map, as needed.

When navigating, players must use objective descriptors, such as "we travel northwards" or "we walk towards that tower we can see." They may not simply point to a location on their map and say "we travel here." Likewise, the GM should never refer to the map, nor should they directly confirm locations on the map. NPCs might, from time to time, make reference to the map or offer suggestions, but this is a rare occurrence.

Navigation is covered in more detail on page 18.

The Shared Subjectivity of the Map

Nothing on the map should ever be confirmed by the GM on the map. It should remain uncertain, based only on what the players know. Any player can edit the map, and players are free to erase or draw over what already exists on the map.

In some cases, the map can serve as a kind of shared record or log. Players might find it helpful to leave notes, diagrams, or annotations to the map; all of these are fine. Whatever the players want to add to their map, they can. Frankly, other than bringing it from session to session and uploading the map once in a while, the GM should never touch the map.

EMERGENT NARRATIVE

By default, there is no preset "story" to the West Marches. There is no plot, no inciting incident, no direct narrative arc. Rather, the story that is told over the course of the campaign is that told by the player characters actions, and their corresponding consequences.

NPCs might ask the player characters to complete tasks for them, ancient scripts might point to secret treasure, and villainous monsters might seek to end the world, but the player characters themselves are under no obligation to complete these. Because of this, the narrative of the Marches is far more systemic, far more mechanically-driven than most campaigns. In time, however, story beats will emerge: factions will war, adventurers will find causes, and drama will be found around every corner.

However, if you, the GM, attempt to create some overarching plot, some distinct series of events the players must participate in, you will ruin the narrative. The Marches are there to empower players and to make their choices real, and if you have a pre-decided story you want to tell, you will quash this power. The narrative should be drawn from the system and from the players, and naught else.

More on emergent narrative can be found on page 67.

HACKING THE GAME

You may use as many or as few of the rules found in this book as you please, and you may and should alter and adjust them as you see fit. If you are running a campaign in the traditional style—that is, a non-West Marches game—you will probably want to alter some of these rules, as they are designed specifically for a West Marches game.

However, if you are running a West Marches game and are considering altering what's found here, we encourage you to try these rules out in their entirety first. It may seem like there are some unusual rules or questionable guidelines, but these systems have been designed to fit together and with the base game deliberately. If you play for a while with these rules and still feel like you want to alter them, by all means, go ahead. Make the rules work for your game, not the other way around.

A good map is more important than any sword. Unless you have wings, of course. Then it's utterly worthless.