

The Mountainlands Campaign – Player Briefing

Rob Alexander, May 2015

The modest town of Woodthorpe is on the far side of High Pass across the Boundary Peaks. The Mountainlands beyond are wild and uncivilised, abandoned by civilised people centuries ago, before the modern kingdoms, before the war. Woodthorpe is a garrison town, supporting the meagre army that holds the pass against all threats. Most people there stay in the safety of the town, or in the marginally patrolled areas nearby (Cradle Meadows and the Upper Woods).

There are a few, however, who come to the town with no intention of staying safe. They go out into the wild lands in search of excitement, treasure, fame, and maybe greater rewards from the ancient past. Most call them fools. Some call them “adventurers”.

The Deal

Although we’re using D&D 5e, this is a *very* particular game.

- There will be a pool of active players (10-14, ideally), there will be game sessions as and when (GM availability is probably the main constraint), and there is a wild land waiting to be explored.
- Each session (pretty much) starts in town (or the Upper Woods) and ends up back there. In longer game sessions, there are penalties for not getting back by the end.
- *There is no plot.* The story is about some adventurers who went into the Mountainlands and fought some monsters and were chased away by other monsters and who found some treasures and fell in some holes.
- By all means roleplay your character as you see them. Unlike my normal style, though, I’m not going to target your character’s stories by – you’ll have to make your own using the world as you find it.
- I won’t fudge die rolls, and I won’t scale encounters to the party. You’ll need to learn about the map and the dangers, and make sound judgements.
 - In the first fifteen sessions we’ve had seven deaths (including one TPK) and there’s no-one in town who’s Raise Dead –capable.
- I *will*, however, strive to make it possible to read the terrain, to learn the nature (and risk level) of different areas, and to know when you’re getting into real trouble.
- I have a map, but I won’t share it with you. Maybe make your own?
- The campaign will run for as long as it does. There won’t likely be an explicit “end”.

Basic Logistics

- One character per player at any one time, except as permitted in House Rules below
- Town is safe. There are no adventures in town, although some interaction with town NPCs is possible.
 - To have adventures, you must go out into the wilds
- If your character is in town on a given game date, they can join any expedition (any session) that starts on that game date or later
 - If your character is in town, but is ahead of others on the calendar, they cannot adventure with them until they catch up
- If your character ends a session out in the wilds, they are stuck out there until you (a) play in a session that starts with them out there and gets them back to town *or* (b) have them take the “return to town” penalty (see the House Rules, below)
- I don’t arrange sessions – if you want to play, email the mailing list with an expedition idea
- *But* all games must be publically announced to all active players – no private sessions.
 - And I need advance warning of your general plans, so I can prepare

House Rules

Configuration Settings

- All new characters start at level 1, zero xp
- Attributes are allocated from the standard array – 15,14,13,12,10,8 – not by rolling or point buy
- At present, all new characters must be from this subset of the races and classes:

Dwarf	Cleric
Elf	Druid
Half Elf	Fighter
Halfling	Paladin
Human	Ranger
	Rogue
	Warlock
	Wizard

However, when a PC dies (not merely retired, actually killed in action), the player may choose any of the standard classes from the PHB. They may also choose a different race – either Gnome or Half Orc. Once they do that, that race and/or class is available for any new character.

Rationale – keeps the game simple at first (for the GM too), and softens the blow of character death.

Optional Rules in Play

- Multiclassing (PHB ch 6) is **not** available
- Feats (PHB ch 6) are **not** available

Rationale – simplicity

- I'm not consistently or regularly awarding Inspiration, but it *is* in play. In particular, any PC abilities that grant Inspiration work as normal.

Rationale – Inspiration is mostly meant to reward roleplaying awkward behaviours that we're not encouraging here, but some mechanics already use it and it's a nice thing for the GM to be able to award for in-world reasons.

Changes to Rules

Short and Long Rests – longer cycles

Short and Long Rests happen differently in the Mountainlands.

In standard 5e, a Short Rest is one hour, and a Long Rest is eight hours. You may take only one Long Rest per 24 hours.

In Mountainlands, a Short Rest is eight hours, and you may only take one per 24 hours. On every third Short Rest, you get Long Rest benefits as well. (If order matters there, treat it as whatever favours you).

In town with a Modest lifestyle, or in some safe, comfortable place in the wilds (not wild camping – a permanent camp at least), you get a Long Rest every other Short Rest. In town with a Good lifestyle, you get a Long Rest every time.

Rationale – 5e is built for heroic characters who can manage 6-8 combat encounters *per game day* (given a couple of short rests). In the Mountainlands, that's just not viable – if you had that many encounters, you'd travel glacially slowly in real-world time. 2-3 encounters per day is more realistic, but that eliminates a lot of resource-management challenges and disproportionately increases the power of recharge-dependent classes (e.g. Wizard) versus all-always-on-power classes (e.g. Rogue).

If we just make the individual encounters more dangerous, the death-and-ruination rate will go right up. Slowing down the rest cycle is better.

(This is a variant of a standard variant in the DMG (“Gritty Realism”, p267). I think my variant is better because it preserves the SR-LR ratio, which helps maintain class balance.)

Spells with 24 hours duration or slightly more

Where the PHB says a spell (or similar limited-use ability) has a duration in hours, then its duration changes:

Normally	In Mountainlands
1 hour	8 hours
8 hours	24 hours
Between 24 hours and (wild-camping Long Rest period – currently 72 hours)	(wild-camping Long Rest period).

Rationale – So that spellcasters aren't disadvantaged WRT the interaction of these spells with the longer Long Rest period. (spells of durations like “8 hours” are a bit awkward)

Gaining xp and Levels

- Characters gain xp they're due on every long rest, and if they have sufficient xp they gain a level right away.

Rationale – parties are often of mixed level, and it's good for low-level chars to get a chance to catch up during a session. This is more likely than high-levels pulling further away, as all characters will be getting equal share of xp, and low-levels need less to advance.

- HP at levels beyond first are always average-rounded-up (you can't choose to roll).

Rationale – avoids a roll that's quite swifty and quite significant

- Maximum PC level is 9th.

Rationale – needs to be some limit because there isn't room to have map areas that suit the whole 20-level span

- PCs who are in play for only part of a session gain xp proportionately

- PCs who die during a session still get their share for the time they were alive

Rationale – basically, that this feels right – PCs get xp for the specific challenges they survive and conquer

XP Awards

- Defeat/rout/capture/ensorcel a monster etc – **monster's xp value**
- Escape or bypass a monster that was aware of you and actively hostile – **half monster's xp value**
- Survive/overcome a trap – **GM assess threat to party in terms of risk categories from DMG, then works out XP value based on that**
- Find treasure – **none**
- Do a good deed, help the weak, achieve a personal goal – **none**

Rationale – The DMG is actually very vague about this, in particular for non-combat threats, so I've had to make this more specific. General theme here is that xp is a reward for overcoming risk.

Ranger Class Feature “Natural Explorer”

Most of this is clear in an ML context, but one point is vaguely worded and potentially extremely powerful, so I propose to replace it with something more precise and rather weaker. “When you are in your favoured terrain...”

- “Your group can't become lost...” becomes...
 - Normal played-out travel – you get Advantage on all navigation rolls (on top of your double-prof-bonus on Survival)
 - Retracing Your Steps – if your journey is at least half in your favoured terrain, you get your double-prof (but not Advantage)
 - Returning to Town –

Rationale – Mountainlands is very much about exploring and navigation, and this ability as written could let the Ranger take a lot of the uncertainty out of that. I think that the high frequency with which this ability will be used (compared to a more typical 5e game) give-or-take makes up for the reduction in its power.

Outlander Background Feature “Wanderer”

Standard interpretations in terms of the rules are as follows (though feel free to make a case for other benefits in specific circumstances where they really fit well):

“*You have an excellent memory for maps and geography...*” – when Retracing Your Steps (new rule, below) you have advantage up 7 days after travelling that route, and don't hit disadvantage for a month.

“*you can find food and water for yourself and up to five other people*” – as it sounds, but can't do it in very unhealthy environments (Haunted Woods, I'm looking at you). And between sessions you still have to pay half upkeep cost at your chosen standard of living in order to maintain equipment and the like.

New Rules

These don't so much replace standard 5e rules as add completely new aspects to them.

Faster Travel - Retracing Your Path

Function of this rule: Allow repeats of the same in-game journey to take less real-world time *during a session*.

Other goals for this rule: Maintain some of the risk and uncertainty of the fully-played-out journeys, and retain the difference in feel and risk between a short wander in Cradle Meadows and a haul to the far side of the big river via the haunted wood. And maintain the cost to the characters of travel - they should arrive at their destination about as bent out of shape as they would have in the full-play version.

If a character has previously made a journey in the game, they may use this rule to repeat it.

Restrictions

- Basically this is a once-per-session thing. You can't use it to move around like you're on a subway network. The GM may allow a second use to return to town at the end of the session.
- The navigator must have made the exact same journey within the last game month and be at least 3rd level.

Procedure

1. Say that they want to use this rule, then declare their destination to the GM
2. Choose a speed (the normal set - slow, medium, fast) - this determines travel time, stealth (or lack of) and passive perception as normal
3. Make a single Survival roll to determine how the journey goes
4. Expend rations etc according to the time taken

DC for the Survival roll

- Normally 10

Modifiers to the roll

- 3 days or less since you last made the journey - Advantage
- 7 days or more since you last made the journey - Disadvantage
- Only done journey *once* before - (no penalty at the moment, might change later)
- At least one other party member has made the journey at least as recently as you (give or take) and has a net Survival skill of +1 or better - Advantage

Interpreting the results

Critical success (natural 20)	You reach your destination in normal time and do not risk random encounters at all
Success	You reach your destination in normal time and suffer only half the normal rate of random encounters
Fail by 1-4	You get there in normal time after all the normal encounters and fun thereof
Fail by 5	The journey goes badly. You take half again longer, suffer random encounters accordingly, and the GM may rule that you stumble upon unpleasant static locations that are near your path.
Critical fail or fail by 10	You get badly lost. GM determines how long it takes you get to wherever the fuck you end up, you suffer random encounters accordingly.

Other Notes

You'll notice that the above ignores distance and the nature of the terrain traversed. That's because the effect of those applies anyway via the number and nature of the random encounters that may occur.

Returning To Town

Function of this rule: Allow characters to return to town *between sessions*.

Procedure

1. Say you want to return to town, and nominate a navigator
2. Roll a d20
3. Look at the results table below
4. Expend rations, take calendar time etc as normal

When you do this, you have to come up with a story of why your guy (a) got back to town and (b) got so fucked up doing it. Starting points include:

- Chased for miles by a shadowy figure
- Enchanted by faeries and wandered as if in a dream
- Captured by bandits and force-marched back to their camp, then escaped

If a character is literally trapped (e.g. locked in somewhere they can't escape, or surrounded by enemies that they can't easily sneak past), then they make not use this action. Their escape will have to be played out. (You may, of course, "retire" them and create another character. The GM will probably assume the worst for their fate.)

Modifiers to the roll

- + half Survival skill of navigator (if their skill is -1, then -1)
- + total party levels divided by 4
- - average CR of areas traversed (GM will provide)
- Each hex travelled beyond the first (Upper Woods doesn't count) - -1
- Previous play session was under 3 hours - +4
- Previous play session was under 4 hours - +2

Interpreting the results

(Natural 1s and 20s aren't "crit success/fail" as such, but they are only modified towards their extreme. E.g. if you're +3 on the roll and roll a 20 you get 23; if you're -1 on the roll and roll a 20 you get 20.)

- 19+ Pleasant things occur! Each PC rolls on the "Good things" table
- 9-18 Ok - the journey is basically uneventful.
- 4-8 Each PC rolls on the Bad Things table
- 1-3 Each PC rolls on the Very Bad Things table
- < 1 Disaster. Each PC rolls on the Terrible Things table. They rue the day.

Good Things

1. "What's this..." - you find a random item from Magic Item table A (if average CR is 5+, table B instead)
2. Pecuniary gain - you receive random individual treasure commensurate with the average CR of your journey
3. Glory - you defeat a monster and receive xp equal to a Medium encounter of CR equal to the average for your journey

Bad Things

1. You arrive in town with a bad attitude and piss off everyone you meet. All costs and prices (inc living costs) are 25% until you return from your next expedition.
2. Exhaustion! You suffer 1d3 exhaustion levels (can't leave you with more than 4)
3. Disease! You take 1d6 damage to one attribute (heal at 1 pt per long rest)

Very Bad Things

1. Robbed! In return for your life, you give over half of the money and valuables (e.g. jewellery and other treasures) you are carrying (work out with the GM what asshole did this)
2. Loss! You lose one randomly chosen item of non-trivial value (e.g. torches don't count, weapons do, toolkits do)
3. Cursed! Someone or something curses you with a badness that will increase the dangers you face outside town. Nature to be determined by the GM based on where the journey was and who the character is - the PC may not know this.

Terrible Things

1. You are set upon by terrible things in a dark place, and do not return. Only the GM knows the location of your body and possessions.
2. You are haunted by a spirit and your mind is harrowed. Loses 2d6+1% of your total xp. (Can cross level boundaries, but you don't actually drop levels)
3. You are driven mad in the wilderness and do not return to town for 2d6 days. You are naked and have no idea what happened to your possessions.
4. Terrible wounds. You suffer 1d2 points permanent damage to a random attribute. It will take a Greater Restoration spell (Cleric 5) to repair that.

Extant Issue – What about single PCs or small groups returning (e.g. Caspian once walked back alone from the Haunted Castle)? The above are pretty nasty for them unless they're badassess sauntering through low-CR parkland.

Rationale – the game assumes that nearly every adventure starts from town or nearby, so its easy to justify player swap-ins. Just letting people “teleport” to town, however, would damage the feel that the Mountainlands are a real and dangerous place. What I'm trying to do here is maintain *most* of the risk and uncertainty of the fully-played out return journey, without being actually punitive (i.e. without this being worse than having played out the return).

Pool Characters

If you want to play in a session, but your character is not in town when it leaves, you can take a pool character – one of the greenhorn adventurers hanging around the town. They are 1st level. You may need to make them a character sheet, or there may be one already.

At the end of the session, the character takes an equal share of xp and a fair share of the treasure (as decided by the GM – the party can't cheat them in any way). You then decide whether to replace your main character with them (in which case the character keeps the xp and treasure) or to abandon them (in which case the character goes back in the pool, and the xp and treasure just vanish. Perhaps they drink the treasure and lose their memory of the whole affair.)

Rationale – it's good for any *player* to be able to play in any session

Extra Characters

When your first PC reaches 5th level, you may create a second one (using the normal “replacement character” rules. You may only play one in any given session, but you may choose for each session which to play. Similarly, if the second character reaches 5th level, you may create a third, and so on until the end of time.

If a 2nd (or later) PC dies they can be replaced as normal, as long as the “supporting” higher-level characters still live.

Rationale – it's good for any *player* to be able to play in any session, and it's good to have characters in a party of a broadly similar level.

Splitting Treasure

Players decide at end of each session what they want to do in terms of splitting treasure. The GM should check this happens.

If for some reason this doesn't happen, and some but not all of the PCs from that session embark on a further session, the GM will decide on a split – typically an equal split except for items etc that are of particular one value to one class.

Rationale – we need to be able to start any session knowing what treasure each PC has.