

YURI BERNARDINI & MARIO CREA

# GRIM FRONTEIRA

EUROPE DIED OF THIRST IN 1607. SADDLE UP AND CLAIM YOUR SHARE.



ASHCAN VERSION

A ROLE PLAYING GAME OF VIOLENCE AND EXPLORATION. NO DICE HERE, YOU PLAY YOUR HAND

*“What do I know of cultured ways, the gilt, the craft and the lie? I, who was born in a naked land and bred in the open sky. The subtle tongue, the sophist guile, they fail when the broadswords sing; rush in and die, dogs—I was a man before I was a king.”*

Robert E. Howard, *The Phoenix on the Sword*,  
1932

## **GRIM FRONTEIRA - Digital Ashcan Version 1.02**

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**THIS IS AN ASHCAN VERSION. EXPECT CHANGES BEFORE THE FINAL RELEASE.  
PLEASE DON'T ROAST US ONLINE IF EMERGENCY FIXES HAVE TO HAPPEN.**

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**INCLUDED IN THE FINAL VERSION**

# PART I. EUROPE, ANNO 1607.

The Old World was knee-deep in blood and scripture. Catholics and Protestants hacked at each other from Flanders to Bohemia, each army marching under banners that swore God was theirs alone. Kingdoms shifted, and the common folk were ground into mud while priests argued over whose gospel rang truer.

Meanwhile, the New World festered in its own chaos. The Americas turned into a brawl of flags and thieves, with each invader planting their standard in soil they never tilled and calling it theirs. Spanish ships hauled silver and souls, the French traded powder for pelts, and the English carved colonies with the arrogance of landlords.

And through it all, the native peoples fought tooth and bone to keep their ground, sometimes with arrows, sometimes with fire, sometimes by playing the invaders against one another.

Yet, across the Atlantic, the crowned heads of Europe hardly noticed. They were too busy gutting each other in holy wars, convinced their feuds were the center of creation.

All seemed destined to welcome yet another age of pain, but God, or whomever was in charge, had different plans.

It all began the last week of February, in the Ottoman Empire. At first, folks believed the scorching sun was just the emissary of an early summer. But by June, there were no clouds to bring rain, and after months of clear skies and empty wells, the peasants began to panic.

The lordlings didn't care. They had the old Roman cisterns all to themselves, but that didn't last long. Angry mobs of starving civilians forgot about hierarchies and personal guards, and wasted what little water remained.

Then the rest of Europe started feeling it. The sun, once considered a divinity, was now a heartless dictator. By Christmas, the last forests of the Alps and central France were gone. No animals roamed the lands, only bleached bones and memories of what a juicy carcass looked like. Nothing to drink out of those dry carrions, just death feeding on nothing.

News traveled fast across the ocean, carried by merchants, deserters, and the occasional missionary too stubborn to drown. The Americas were still trying to figure out what they were when the ships began drifting in. Galleons with sails in tatters, frigates stripped down to skeleton crews, and even riverboats that had no business being on the open sea. They washed ashore like wreckage from a storm, each one stuffed with souls fleeing a continent that was drying into dust. Spaniards, Frenchmen, Ottomans, Africans torn from their homes, Jews chased from ghettos, heretics with no country left: an endless, hungry diaspora stumbling westward in search of any kind of mercy.

By January of 1608, the tide slowed, then stopped and then, on St. Valentine's day one last boat made the crossing, and it came crawling into the harbor like a coffin set adrift. The stench reached the docks before the ship did. There was only one body left standing: a grotesque, swollen woman with skin stretched and purple, and eyes empty as pits. Every other soul aboard - crew, passengers, even the vermin - had ended in her belly. She'd gnawed the planks clean, torn through barrels and crates, and when there was nothing else, she drank the blood of the fallen just to keep walking.

No priest dared approach, no doctor tried to examine her. Some say she jumped on the pier and vomited a mix of organs and rat fur. Others swear she never stopped laughing, while the small army that was sent for her started binding her in rusted iron.

She was prosecuted for cannibalism in a hush-hush trial and sent to the scaffold. The message was clear: the entire community wanted her gone.

When the priest began reading the last rites, and the executioner raised his axe, she giggled, then said: "un su muarti, si su ammucciati tutt'a terra!".

The Italian executioner hesitated, then gripped the axe with both hands and brought it down; the head rolled over and was welcomed by an ecstatic, cheering crowd.

He looked at the judge and whispered: "they're not dead, they're underground".



# HOW TO APPROACH THIS GAME

We wrote this game thinking about all those pizza nights in my mom's garage. "The Foe" and "The Penguin" used to go to the old bakery of Ms. Morrone and get a giant spongy pizza for just a few euros. Then we would wait for "Don Rodrigo" to bring 2 six-packs of fake German beers made somewhere near Naples, and we'd start rolling. Yes, we're from a big nickname town.

We would play RPGs at least once a week, and change the setup every now and then, but the dice stayed. Always. No skills, just rolls. So we would behead Thulsa Doom with a nice double zero on a couple of 10-faced dice, but we could also die to a drunk hobbit if we were particularly unlucky. That's when Yuri came up with the cards.

We don't really gamble, except the occasional Christmas poker night, with all-ins worth just a couple of cents, but the take on Blackjack was a smart idea to shift away from blind rolls and introduce true blinds. We also thought that adding a bit of strategy and bluffing would do a lot of good to those poor Game Masters, so nobody would blame them anymore for any hot rolls, and they would start having some extra fun along with the crew.

So that's my request to you: take this game as a fresh start. An Images and Words by Dream Theater, a Doom 2016, or even an Alex Garland's Ex-Machina, in a boring RPG landscape.

Explore, have fun, and bluff all you can; you're going to have a blast.

Time to go now, my daughter is playing Goat Simulator and I have to help her pester some campers.

Mario, November<sup>th</sup>, 2025.

## SETTING UP THE SCENE

This ain't some far-flung planet or fairy-tale kingdom. Grim Fronteira is our Earth, but it's cracked and gutted, like in a history tale written by Bukowski.

This run drags you into the first wave of Western scavengers, riding out with whiskey breath and empty pockets, hunting art and spoils in the wasteland that used to be called Europe. They think it's just bones and dust. They're wrong.

This account starts around 300 years after the drought ended, in the early 1900's. Australia? Japan? Ghost stories. Nobody's heard a thing since in decades. Maybe someone lit up electricity, maybe someone didn't. Maybe the telephone exists, maybe it's smoke signals and prayer.

Where do you want your adventure to start?

A squalid bar in Boston with sticky floors?

A coffin-tight berth on a ship crawling east?

A rat-hole underground settlement clawing to hold its ground against the invaders?

Part V throws down three raids to get your boots muddy and your hands bloody. But don't chain yourself to the script. You can plant the story in your hometown, wherever you are. Just roll back the clock four hundred years, strip out Europe and half the world, and see what's left standing.

### **Not your typical high-fantasy RPG**

We had long debates on magic, enchantments, and all that jazz. We grew up tossing fireballs to groups of Orcs, but that didn't feel right in this setup, so we decided to drop it.

There are, however, some supernatural elements here and there, just the way we like to think there is some magic in our world too. You'll find Clairvoyants and Soothsayers in Grim Fronteira, but their tricks will only work if you really believe in them.

## How should we call the Dungeon Master?

Sure, there are dungeons. But forget the glittering chests stuffed with swords glowing with runes. This ain't that game, and your table boss is no "Dungeon Master."

We toyed with "Pastor," but that only works if your crew's a choir of altar boys mumbling prayers instead of throwing rocks at old people. "Loot Master" crossed our minds too, but it reeked of cheap '90s neon and pixelart mobile phone games.

So we settled on Marshal. Yeah, it's got that Sunday matinee ring, like a shiny badge on an ironed collar shirt. But you're the one wearing it, and you can make it corrupt, cruel, drunk on power. Doesn't matter. Just don't forget the ritual. During the first session with cards on the table, steady your voice and say:

"I am the Marshal."

Grim Fronteira is about pushing into abandoned lands, but how far you ride is your choice. Your campaign can stall for weeks in a single town, or you can keep the wagons rolling east, bleeding through Constantinople, Jerusalem, and maybe, if you're still alive, all the way to China.

Most Westerners know the lay of the land well enough. Hell, their fat grandmas just carved their way into the Americas a couple centuries back. So slap down a goal, something honorable or nasty, to keep your crew from wasting forever in the first fly-blown shipyard in what used to be Portugal.

What's your gang after?

Scrawling male genitalia across the Sistine Chapel ceiling or finding their way through France to sniff out the Mona Lisa? Yeah, you got it, the Louvre never got built, so get creative.

Is loot the party's only drive? This can be yet another version of the crusades or something deeper, so check with your friends how insane you want this to be.

Whatever your choice, we've got you covered.

Character creation here runs deep enough to carve out all the grit, scars, and rotten charm your party needs. We wrote it that way on purpose.

You've got ethnicities on one side, professions on the other. Shuffle, mix, match, and don't sweat if it looks off-kilter or downright wrong. This isn't a classroom, it's a frontier, and the past has already been torched. History books? Written by winners, and winners lie, so screw the historians. If you want to march out as a West Indian noblewoman flanked by white servants on a revenge tour against the slavers' forts, do it. We can jam with that.

Your crew can be a pack of gutter-runners stitched together by greed and desperation. Maybe you roll wholesome and call yourselves a family of trailblazers, with oxen dragging wagons, kids singing hymns, crucifixes dangling from every neck, a rifle or two just in case. It'll still end with a nice funeral.

Want to run a gang of deserters in stolen uniforms, still pretending to serve a country that doesn't exist? Fine. A squad of zealots convinced God Herself spared them from the drought? That too. Hell, you could all be con men chasing different scams until one big score forces you to stick together and sail back.

The point is simple: the frontier doesn't care what banner you fly under. Ragged mercenaries, devout pilgrims, liars, thieves, saints. Build what you want. Live with it.

### **No dice here. You should've caught on by now.**

Yeah, looking at that "1" facing up can make you sweat, but dice also kill the night just as fast. We didn't want your whole game hinging on a lump of plastic.

So we cut 'em.

First came the drought, then the frontier, and finally: the cards. Dealing, calling, tapping, praying. That's where the heat lives. Cards drag you in, keep you sharp, make you be part of all of it.

Bluff when it feels right. Fold when you have to. And if the card gods smile on you, ride it hard.

# PART II: THE DECK AIN'T YOUR FRIEND

A card-draw system for gunfights, dirty deals, and the kind of bad choices that keep the frontier running.

## The Bones of the Game

This ain't a game of dice. You've rolled enough of those already, and they always fall the wrong way. Here, fate is in the shuffle.

We use a regular 52-card poker deck plus two jokers. No custom sets, no booster packs, just cards. They'll cut your hand sharper than any die.

When you try something risky, like shooting, stabbing, sweet-talking, or picking a lock, you draw cards against a target or an opponent.

Each skill gives you a number. That's how many cards you draw, plus one base card everyone gets. You're not just adding up numbers—you're playing Blackjack. Get as close to 21 as you can, without busting over.

## Basic Blackjack rules, just to be safe

- Aces are 1 or 11, your choice;
- Face cards are 10;
- Number cards are their value;
- Jokers will have a different role, and we'll talk about them later, so stay quiet;
- If adding up gets you over 21, you bust, and when you do, the Marshal laughs and decides how bad it gets.

The Marshal flips for non-playing characters (NPCs), enemies and for the environment. You flip for your character or for the whole party. The higher hand that doesn't bust wins.

That's the heart of it.

Every bullet fired, every lie whispered, every door kicked in. It's all Blackjack.

## Traits and What They Mean

Your character's got numbers tied to their name. Call 'em traits, talents, sins; you know what I mean, they don't need to be pretty. You can always improvise, but the ones you'll see bleeding out most often are those five: **Fire**, **Guts**, **Brains**, **Animal**, and **Eye**.

Every Trait cuts two ways:

- **Action** (A): The active side. This is for when you're the one pulling the trigger or kicking down the door;
- **Reaction** (R): The passive side (no kidding). This is for when the storm is coming at you and you just need to survive it.

Each aspect gets its own score, but don't get greedy: neither your **Action** nor **Reaction** can ever sit higher than the main trait's overall score.

For the common muck out there, these numbers sit between 1 and 3. If you survive long enough to master your dirty craft, you might push that number higher. That score is your lifeline: it tells you exactly how many extra cards you get to pull from the deck when the heat is on, and keep them in mind that these traits aren't just for standard gunfights and dirty deals: they're the bloody foundation of your **GRIM Maneuvers** when you're forced to pull off something desperate.

**Example:** Jess has Fire (**A**) 3. She draws 1 base card + 3 cards = 4 cards when she is attacking. On defense, Jess has Fire (**R**) 2, so she draws 1 base card + 2 cards = 3 cards when it's time to jum behind that flipped table.

She decides when to stop. If she draws 21, she's golden. If she busts, she eats dirt. Remember? Blackjack.

## Follow a Simple Order

When words fail and it's time to spill blood, both sides draw. The highest valid hand hits. Simple as that.

Follow this order to keep the chaos organized:

- **Call your shot:** the player declares their move. No backtracking once the TNT is flipping in the air;
- **Flip your fate:** both sides draw cards, following the exact skill they are using;
- **Read 'em and weep:** compare the totals. The hand closest to 21, including 21 exactly, takes the win. Bust, and you're done. Literally.
- **Ties:** if the numbers match, nobody walks away clean. The hit grazes for a scratch, provided the Marshal is in a nice enough mood to just let you bleed.
- **Point-Blank:** if you're in kissing range with a gun, it's going to be devastating. You draw two cards for damage and add them together to see how big of a hole you just blew in your target.

## Damage

Here is how you handle the pain when the cards don't fall your way:

- **Standard hit:** draw two cards from the deck and keep the higher value;
- **Devastating hit:** if you get caught in an ambush or shoot that sleeping fool, it's going to leave a mark. Draw two cards and add them together;
- **Critical Effects:** this kicks in if you pull a Joker or nail a lovely **21**. When this happens, the Marshal takes the reins, deciding exactly how bloody, broken, and terrifying the aftermath looks;
- **Checking out:** when your **Tough Skin** drops below zero, you're out of the fight. Maybe you're dead, or maybe you're just left crawling in the dirt bleeding out. Your fate is the Marshal's call. Gùllàk.

## Non-Combat: Dirty Business

Same rules, different stakes. Blackjack isn't just for blood.

### Lockpicking

*Trait: Hand or Shadow*

You draw against the chest's "lock rating". If you win, it pops. Lose, and you snap your tools, or worse, someone hears you fumbling in the dark.

### Seduction & Persuasion

*Trait: Voice or Face*

You draw against the target's Charm. Win clean, and they'll be spilling secrets or giving up whatever else you want.

Bust, and you've made a damn fool of yourself. The Marshal gets to decide just how ugly the fallout gets.

### **Exploration**

*Trait: Animal or Tough*

Use this to keep your sanity when staring at something that should've died a century ago.

Fail, and you stagger, starve, or break entirely.

### **Bluffing & Lies**

Blackjack absolutely sings when it comes to bluffing. You can stop drawing early, even if your hand is sitting low.

Look your opponent dead in the eye and dare them to push their luck. Just remember this isn't a cheap bluffing competition. Play your hand right: oversell the garbage, or downsell the winning draw.

## **The Marshal's Hand**

The Marshal runs it all, the rotting world itself is in their hand. Enemies rely on the exact same traits the players do, but don't count on it. A machete fighter bleeding in from the coast might boast Fire 3 and Animal 2, but have absolutely nothing to offer in Charm. On the flip side, a governor dripping in stolen gold might flex Face 3 and Brains 2, but she'll fold fast the second the blades come out.

The Marshal never cheats (haha!); they just flip cards like everyone else at the table, keeping the tension pulled tight.

Before you ask: yes, the Marshal cheats too.

## **Card Management**

When the deck runs dangerously low, or the moment both Jokers show their ugly faces, it is time to reshuffle. Jokers mean wild, unpredictable stuff, so think along the lines of a blind shot that catches an eye, or a rusted lock that shatters the second your pick touches it.

## **This Ain't Chess**

The cards just tell you who walks away from the exchange. Use the system to spark absolute chaos, and then build the scene around the math.

Optional Saves: If you drop below 0 Tough Skin points, you get to flip one last, desperate hand. Pull a 17 or higher without busting, and you somehow cling to life. Fail, and the Marshal will laugh hard.

Remember the tone: gritty, unforgiving, but never boring. A failed hand needs to sting, not just stall the game. Encourage crooked and broken parties. Grim Fronteira isn't built for noble knights. It's a graveyard for bounty hunters, grave-robbers, liars, zealots, and anyone else desperate enough to keep heading East.

At the table, keep the ritual spoken. When a gunfight breaks out in a saloon, look them in the eye, put your hand on your cards, and say the words out loud:

"I draw."

That's the sound of fate, and fate don't give refunds.

## Sample fight scene

Set the location first and take your time. Once a fight breaks, players and NPCs will react to the environment, so give a full description of the surroundings, because dodging and hiding behind the piano player are a thing.

Jess Ueleh, a bounty hunter with a dust-stained hat and dead-true aim, has finally cornered Opossum (not a typo), a Creole fighter infamous for his machete and a face that looks like a bad mistake.

The two face off in a narrow alley of Malopasso, the low sun dragging long shadows along the walls.

**First Exchange – the Gunshot.** Jess yanks out the flintlock and fires before Opossum can close the gap.

- Trait used: Eye A (3). That's 1 base card + 3 extra cards: 8♠, 5♦, 4♣, 3♠ → Total 20.
- Opossum tries to slip away with Animal R (2), pulling 1+2 cards: 9♥, 7♦, 4♣ → Total 20.

A tie! The bullet sings past his earlobe, grazing the skin and landing just 1 point of damage. Opossum won't be wearing matching earrings anytime soon.

**Second Exchange – the Machete Rush.** Opossum (again, not a typo) charges, rusty blade flashing.

- Trait used: Fire A (2). He draws 1+2 cards: 9♠, 8♦, 3♥ → Total 20, like a pro.
- Jess stumbles back, trying to dodge with Fire R (1): 1+1 card → 10♣, 6♦ → Total 16.

The weapon connects. For damage, 2 cards get pulled: 7♠ and 5♥. With a standard blade strike, she takes the higher card: 7 damage.

Jess started with 14 Tough Skin points, so now she's down to 7. Not dead yet, but close.

**Third Exchange – The Close Shot (Clean Hit).** Opossum is right on top of her with the machete. Jess shoves her spare flintlock into her side and fires a point-blank shot.

- To hit, she draws Fire A (3): pulling 10♦, 9♠, 2♥. Total 21. She stops there, no fourth card.
- Opossum tries to wriggle out with Fire R (2), draws 8♣, 7♦, 4♥ → Total 19.

Jess's shot lands. No decisive card rule here, nobody got busted: that only kicks in when the hand breaks past 21.

Point-blank means devastating damage. Two cards get pulled, values added together. 9♦ + 6♠ = 15 damage. Opossum, who'd already dropped to 14 Tough Skin points after the first scrape, crashes to -1. He's out cold, and he'll need to make a save roll (or choke on whatever grim fate the Marshal dictates) to keep breathing. No jokers, no blackjack in the damage draw. No fireworks, just the brutal punch of the shot.

### **Quick Epilogue**

The machete clangs against the stones, Opossum stumbles back, and then drops in the alley dust. Jess holds still a beat, thin smoke rising off the flintlock's barrel, then steps in to strip him and tie him down.

The sun over Malopasso doesn't shine for heroes. Only for whoever's still standing.

**WILL BE IMPROVED IN  
THE FINAL VERSION**

# GRIM FRONTEIRA

Europe died of thirst in 1607.

Not a war, just the sky drying up and the land giving in. What's left over there ain't much: just ghouls and lunatics picking through the bones.

Three centuries later, the civilized from the West saddle up. Whiskey in one hand, cards in the other. Heading East, not for glory, but for loot and greed.

This is Grim Fronteira, an RPG that needs no dice, just a deck of French-suited cards, a stinky game master, and the worst crew you can gather.

Get ready to ride into withered lands.



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