

BIG CHIEFS

a game about Native Americans and the white people who love them

by Liam Burke

“You are Omaticaya now. You may make your bow from the wood of Hometree. And you may choose a woman. We have many fine women.”

-- Neytiri, *Avatar*

“Winter, 1877. What does it mean to be Samurai? To devote yourself utterly to a set of moral principles. To seek a stillness of your mind. And to master the way of the sword.”

-- Nathan Algren, *The Last Samurai*

“Turned injun, didn't yeh.”

-- Sgt. Bauer, *Dances With Wolves*

dedicated to everyone using the “coyote” ingredient this year

ingredients:

Coyote

Mimic

<http://indie-rpgs.com/archive/index.php?topic=26201.0> -- craps conflict resolution

<http://indie-rpgs.com/archive/index.php?topic=19633.0> -- GM abilities

The cavalry's coming. Not today, necessarily, nor tomorrow -- but eventually, they'll be here, because the settlers are here -- and so is your tribe.

I mean, in a sense, it's not really your tribe, because you're really just an outsider who decided to join them after some dramatic event in your life. Oh, sure, they didn't trust you at first, but after you proved yourself, they were happy enough to allow you into their homes, and you've become an invaluable asset -- a leader, even, when dealing with the hated outsiders trying to drive them away. It's up to you (and any other Caucasians who might have accidentally joined the tribe) to lead the braves to victory against their blue-coated nemeses.

Big Chiefs is a game for a Gamemaster and at least one player. You'll need paper and pencils, a few six-sided dice and some sort of tokens to play.

Tribe Creation

Your tribe has a name composed of some gerund (a verb in the -ing form) and some animal. For example: Hopping Crow, Burning Owl, Flying Antelope. You can come up with them as a group or divide up the responsibilities among you.

For each player, roll five six-sided dice and drop the lowest. Add all the remaining dice; the total is the number of Native Americans in the tribe. (Obviously, this total does not include the players.) Make a pile of tokens equal to the number of Native Americans in the tribe; this is your bank. Each token is called a **Brave**, although obviously they may represent people of any gender. You can use coins, poker chips, or the exclusive Dog Eat Dog custom tokens, available now at <http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/476430982/dog-eat-dog>

The GM gets an equal number of tokens to represent the settlers and the army. Each token is called a **Soldier**.

Put all the rest of the tokens in a pile to the side. These tokens belong to Coyote. In general, they will not return to the game.

Character Creation

Your character has the same name as you, unless your name is obviously ethnic, in which case you should find a nearby white person and use their name. (Don't worry, there's a lot of them around.)

Decide what happened to your character before they decided to join the tribe. Pick from one of the following choices:

- * **Deserter:** You used to be in the military, but you went AWOL. If you go back, you'll be shot. The GM starts with the ability **Hunted**.
- * **Survivor:** Whatever group you used to belong to, they were all massacred. You're the only one left...as far as you know. The GM starts with the ability **Nemesis**.
- * **Orphan:** You were adopted as a child; your first memories are of growing up in the tribe. The GM starts with the ability **Star-Crossed**.
- * **Lover:** You fell in love with a Native American, and followed them into the tribe. The GM starts with the ability **Star-Crossed**.
- * **Outlaw:** You're no longer welcome in the nearby towns. This is the only place you can hide from the law. The GM starts with the ability **Hunted**.
- * **Traveller:** You're from another reality, or the past or future of this reality. This might just be a game or a dream to you, or it might be you desperately trying to prevent a grim outcome. The GM starts with the ability **Nemesis**.
- * **Turncoat:** Originally you joined to spy on the tribe and report back to the army, but you've changed your allegiance. The GM starts with the ability **Untrustworthy**.
- * **Prisoner:** You were captured by the tribe and sentenced to death, but managed to escape that fate by demonstrating your ability to help them. The GM starts with the ability **Untrustworthy**.

If the GM would start with an ability twice, they may instead choose any other ability to activate.

Choose a skill associated with pioneer civilization, rather than Native Americans. Gunslinging, car driving, train conducting, mine building, allopathic medicine, whatever. This is your **Skill**. You arrived in the tribe with a creditable understanding of this Skill, and used it to impress the natives enough to allow you to join them. Necessarily, you have whatever tools, devices, or nearby resources would be necessary for you to apply this Skill.

Choose a skill associated with the tribe you've joined. This is your **Talent**. You've watched the various members of the tribe practicing this still, and even though your attempts are essentially crude mimicry, they're more effective than people who have been practicing for years.

Choose an aspect of your character which is especially strong -- charisma, willpower, experience, empathy, whatever. This is your **Attribute**. Your application of this Attribute has allowed you to rise to a high position in the tribe you have joined, displacing other tribe members, who in general demonstrate a notable lack of this aspect of character.

In addition to your real name, you also have an Indian name, which is a three or four word phrase metaphorically describing some aspect of your character. Have the player to your left (or the GM) come up with this name for you.

Map Creation

Take a piece of paper and draw an equilateral triangle on it. At one point of the triangle, draw the Native American settlement. You can just put a rough circle and label it, or draw little buildings and totem poles or whatever you feel is appropriate. Along the opposite line of the triangle, draw the pioneer settlement, calling out any specific buildings that you think a new settlement would have. Don't forget the fort!

Your Skills and Talents have already established nearby terrain features or resources -- for example, if you're a hunter, there must be a forest or something similar nearby; if you're a train conductor (not actually a good concept), there's obviously a railroad. Draw all those in somewhere between the two settlements. If you haven't established how the tribe feeds itself, come up with something and draw in the relevant terrain.

The resources that the tribe uses are also the resources the pioneers use, so for each bit of terrain you've drawn in, draw in another pioneer building that uses that terrain. A forest implies a lumber mill; a river implies a dock.

Feel free to draw in other terrain features nearby.

Setting the Scene

Big Chiefs is played in a series of scenes, each of which depicts another event in the ongoing struggle between the pioneers and the Native Americans for control of the territory. When you start a scene, choose a place on the map where it's taking place, based on the previous events in the game. If nothing leaps out at you, choose one of the terrain features that both the tribe and the pioneers are using, and set the scene there, as a conflict between the two sides and their attitude towards the resource in question. It's probably not a good idea to set a scene directly in either settlement, unless it would be dramatically appropriate, or everything else is destroyed.

You play your own character, describing their statements and actions. If there are multiple players, they should decide whether they are all in the scene, or whether some of them are not present. The GM plays all the other people in the world. In general, the Native Americans should be assumed to follow your lead and work to protect the tribe, but remember that whatever your Attribute is, they lack it. If tribe members somehow get killed during a scene before the Warpath, pay a Brave to Coyote for each member killed.

Eventually things will come to a head, and you will feel the need to engage in direct or indirect conflict with the pioneers. (If things don't come to a head, encourage them to do so. If necessary, the GM should have the pioneers start shooting at people.) When you describe an action that would immediately lead to direct or indirect conflict, proceed to the Warpath.

The Warpath

The Warpath is used to resolve actions that would lead to conflict. When you enter the Warpath, you form a **War Party** -- put forward a number of Braves representing the number of Native Americans who are working with you to accomplish this goal. If the action you're taking would result in a change to the map (like the destruction or construction of a building), you must instead form two War Parties of equal size. The GM then matches you with an equally sized War Party of their own, made up of Soldiers. Once you both have War Parties, roll two dice to see what happens.

If you roll a 7 or 11, your action is successful, and the pioneers suffer as a result. The GM must give his War Party to Coyote. If your action would result in a change to the map, make the appropriate edits.

If you roll a 2, 3, or 12, your action backfires on you, and the tribespeople working with you are killed or captured. You must give your War Party to the GM; the Braves become Soldiers. If your failure would result in a change to the map, make the appropriate edits.

If you roll any other number, write it down. This is your **Stand**; put your War Party next to it. The

pioneers anticipate your action and attempt to counter it before it is successful, and the conflict remains unresolved.

Making A Stand

When you make a Stand, return to narration; you must come up with a supporting action that would, if successful, resolve the conflict. Players who were not in the original scene may join in at this time. If you cannot come up with anything, your War Party is lost to the GM, and your Stand ends. Once you have taken a new action, roll two dice.

If you roll a 7, your action falls short, and your Stand is lost. You must give your War Party to the GM.

If you roll your Stand, your supporting action provides the momentum necessary for your Stand to succeed. The GM must give his War Party to Coyote.

If you roll anything else, your supporting action is effective but fails to turn the tide. Your Stand continues; repeat this process. You must come up with a new supporting action.

A Stand is a major conflict; whenever a Stand is lost or successful, it results in a change to the map, relating to the original action attempted.

No matter what happens in a conflict, the player's character always survives. At the end of a conflict, return any surviving War Parties to their owners.

The Blessing of Coyote

Coyote, the trickster god, will give you his support if your actions fall in line with your particular capabilities. When you enter the Warpath, if the action you take relies on your Attribute, your Skill, or your Talent, add an additional token from Coyote's pile to your War Party before the GM matches it. You get one additional token per capability utilized.

During a Stand, Coyote's support is more hard-won, but more valuable. If the supporting action you take relies on your Attribute, your Skill, or your Talent, then after you roll, you may pay a Brave from your War Party to Coyote to change the die result by one point in either direction. For each capability utilized, you may make this payment once.

The Brave Pioneers

The GM has certain special moves of their own that affect the result of the game. They always start with these two:

* **March of Progress:** When you win at least three Braves in a conflict, you may give the entire War Party to Coyote and gain a new ability from the list below, based on the events that have taken place during the game.

* **The Cavalry:** When a Stand is established, and when a roll fails to resolve the Stand, you may add a number of Soldiers to your War Party, up to a maximum of the number of players in the game. The players must increase their War Party or Parties to match.

They may also start with any of the following, depending on the origins of the players. If they do not start with them, they may be gained using the **March of Progress** ability. An ability that is lost can always be gained again this way.

* **Star-Crossed:** One of the players has a close relationship with a Native American -- they may be lovers, adopted parents, or just extremely close friends. When a roll fails to resolve a Stand, you may declare that the native in question is killed during the fighting. The player's defense collapses, and the Stand is lost. The next time that player goes on the Warpath, vengeful rage allows them to roll three dice and discard one. This ability is lost after using it.

* **Hunted:** Some organized group out there is looking for one of the players. When a player rolls a "hard way" roll -- that is, double 2s, 3s, 4s or 5s -- the hunters appear, forcing the player to choose between facing them and fleeing. If they flee, they must pay half their War Party (rounding up) to Coyote. They then return the remainder of their War Party to their bank and lose the conflict. If they stay and fight, the entire War Party is lost to Coyote, but this move is lost. The conflict is still lost. Unlike most moves, this move takes effect before the player can make a sacrifice to Coyote to change the roll result.

* **Nemesis:** One of the players has a specific foe that hates them with a passion. This may be somebody from the same origin as them, or somebody that has grown to hate them during the game. When this move is activated, choose 6 or 8, and write it down. When that number is rolled, the player's nemesis appears briefly, forcing them to pay one Brave to Coyote. If that number becomes a Stand, the nemesis is a key figure in the pioneer's resistance. If the Stand is successful, the nemesis **appears** to die, and this move is lost.

* **Untrustworthy:** The Native Americans do not fully trust one of the player characters. On a "field" roll (2, 3, 4, 9, 10, 11, or 12), some of their allies are distracted by their lack of faith, allowing the pioneers to gain an advantage. Put one of the Soldiers in the GM's War Party in a separate pile behind the original War Party. It still counts as being in the War Party, but it cannot be lost during the conflict. (This is not optional.) If the player wins a conflict in which the GM loses no Soldiers due to this effect, he wins the trust of the tribe, and this move is lost.

Ending the Game

If the Native American settlement is destroyed, or all the Braves are lost, the tribe is wiped out. The player characters mourn them, while slowly, sadly integrating into the pioneer settlement.

If the pioneer settlement is destroyed, or all of the Soldiers are lost, the settlers abandon the territory and retreat to the east. The player characters rejoice in their victory and are celebrated by the tribe, passing down into song and story as fabled heroes.

Final Thoughts

If you enjoyed this game, thanks for checking it out!

If you thought this game was absurd and racist, please check out my kickstarter for Dog Eat

Dog: <http://www.kickstarter.com/projects/476430982/dog-eat-dog>