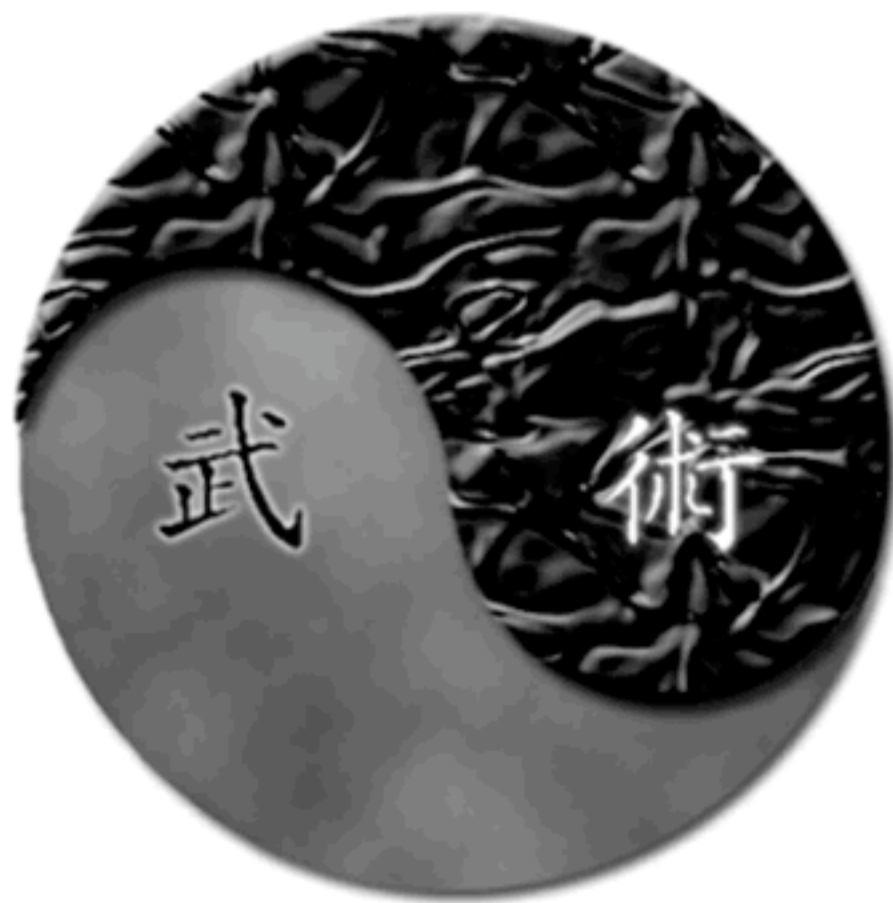


Pulp-Fu

A WUSHU GAME
of Noir Style
& Pulp Action!



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Introduction

This game was written to emulate a movie that does not exist. This movie would combine the dark, cynical style of a noir crime drama with the larger-than-life heroics of a pulp adventure and give the whole package the glossy presentation of a Hong Kong action flick. It would have running tommygun battles, bar brawls set to swing music, trenchcoats, fedoras, and even a little kung-fu fightin'! If you're looking for inspirational source material, you'll have to sample from such cinematic gems as...

- The Indiana Jones trilogy.
- The Mummy and its sequel.
- The Shadow.
- Payback.
- Road to Perdition.
- Blade Runner.
- Batman: the Animated Series.

The pulp era, generally speaking, covers a whole lot of history. After the Great War, the world was left with many unexplored corners, bitter rivalries, and a generation of heroes who had been baptized, quite literally, in fire. During the Roaring Twenties, Prohibition spawned a renaissance in organized crime and civil disobedience, at least in the United States. The Thirties and Forties brought with them the Great Depression, motorized bandits, the Nazis, and a second World War.

These historic times were chronicled in the pulps: low-cost fiction magazines printed on low-quality, "pulpy" paper. The writing was often of a similar caliber, due to the extremely low pay rates and short deadlines. Crime stories popularized the gangster and private detective as anti-heroes. Characters like the Shadow and Doc Savage presaged modern superheroes. The common denominator was hyperbole; everything had to be larger than life! Pulp-Fu games need to capture that exaggerated sense of style, without being constrained by tactics and rules.

The Pulp-Fu role-playing game is a revised version of the ground-breaking Wushu system. Pulp-Fu takes those core mechanics and expands on them with an eye towards emulating the pulps. It also incorporates revisions based on over six months of additional playtesting. You don't need original Wushu to play Pulp-Fu, but you may find a few of its supplements useful...

The Guide to Car-Fu provides additional advice on, and examples of, car chases in a variety of styles.

The Guide to Gun-Fu adds Hong Kong style to everything from wild west showdowns to speakeasy shoot-outs.

The Matrix Prohibited is a free guide to running pulp/noir games set in the virtual world of The Matrix.

Erebus: City of Shadows is a pulp fantasy setting that combines wuxia, the wild west, and film noir to create a vividly eclectic world of blazing action and dark intrigue.

You can find them all at www.Bayn.org/wushu

Wushu

The Roaring Twenties were all about hyperbole. Everything had to be Thrilling! Amazing! or Never Before Seen! Everything was larger than life. Unfortunately, such over-the-top theatrics don't mesh well with traditional role-playing systems. Rash actions are not tactically sound, by their very definition, so they often incur lots of negative modifiers. More importantly, they never have a *better* chance of success than more boring courses of action. This discourages the insane, melodramatic, and (lets be honest) bone-headed heroics every pulp game needs. Wushu reverses this trend with a core mechanic that rewards players for describing complex stunts in vivid detail.

Another way that traditional role-playing games hinder cinematic play is by segmenting the narrative into "rounds." In the movies, characters can trade a flurry of blows or entire clips of ammunition before the focus switches to another set of combatants. In most RPGs, everyone takes their turn in order and only performs a few seconds worth of action each time. This breaks up the back-and-forth interplay that is essential for dramatic fight scenes. In Wushu, players are free to describe as many actions at once as they wish, and even to attack, defend, and counter-attack multiple times before any dice are rolled.

Wushu "rounds" are divided into two parts, which everyone completes at the same time. First, the group Describes the scene; their narration determines what *actually happens*. Then, they Resolve their dice rolls to see *how well* things worked...

Description

Wushu works its magic by making complex and theatrical actions more likely to succeed. It does this by using a dice pool mechanic where the size of your pool is determined by how elaborate your description is. Each **Detail** you add to your description earns you a die. You always get at least 1 die, just for doing *something*.

For example, someone who says "I jump onto the hood of the car" gets 1 die. Someone who says "I leap from the rooftop / and drop onto the fleeing car / crumpling its hood beneath my feet" gets 3 dice. Someone who says "I leap from the rooftop / and drop onto the fleeing car / like Lucifer falling from Heaven, / point my Magnum at the driver / and say 'Joyride's over, scumbag'" gets 5 dice.

Thus, anything that contributes to the game's atmosphere and/or entertains the group becomes good tactics. Of course, not every Detail is appropriate to every game. That's why GMs and players have the right to **veto** any Detail that doesn't fit in. To make this work, it's important to discuss the tone and style you're trying to capture before you start playing. (Referencing movies is a good way to synchronize everyone's swatches.)

GMs may set a limit on the number of dice anyone can roll at once. For less dramatic actions, pools of 4 dice should be sufficient. For complex or important actions, 6-8 dice might be better. You can use these limits to streamline play by encouraging players to **Filibuster**: Instead of grabbing dice as you add Details, just launch into a Description that's more than

elaborate enough to justify the max dice pool. It's quick, it's easy, and it can be damn fun to watch!

On the other hand, players can construct a scene together if they contribute only 1-3 Details at a time and go back-and-forth until everyone's happy with their pool. This way, they can bounce ideas off of each other. You can encourage this communal approach by asking everyone to end each of the contributions with a **Pass**: an open-ended Detail that the next person can pick up and use. Mooks flying through the air, canisters of explosive gas rolling across the floor, and weapons being tossed from person to person are all good Details that another player could use to start their own stunt.

Resolution

Now that you've described your action, it's time to find out how well it worked. That's "*how well* it worked," not "*if* it worked at all." In a Wushu game, everything happens exactly as the players describe it, when they describe it. (This is sometimes called the **Principle of Narrative Truth**.) Rolling the dice just tells you how much closer those actions bring you to accomplishing your goal. In a fight, that usually means subduing your enemies. In a chase, it means escaping pursuit or preventing someone else from doing the same. In a social interaction, it might mean intimidating someone or convincing them to do you a favor. Just make sure you know what a player's goal is before they start describing their actions.

Every Wushu character has a number of Traits, and every **Trait** has a numerical rating from 1-5. When it's time to roll your dice, pick a Trait that's relevant to your action. Each die that rolls over that Trait's rating is a failure; all of the others are successes. If you don't have a relevant Trait, the default rating is 2. (Ratings of 1 are reserved for Weaknesses. See "Anti-Heros.")

Most of the time, one success is all you need. If anyone narrated actions that were intended to prevent you from reaching your goal (ie. running away from you, fighting back, resisting your romantic advances, and so forth), they'll have a bunch of dice to roll, too. Whoever gets the most successes wins.

Scab Rolls

Every once in a while, you might come across something you want to roll for, but don't quite feel like giving a big, theatrical description. That's when you use a Scab Roll. Just grab a number of dice equal to your relevant Trait and compare the highest roll to this scale:

- 1 = A failure so horrible as to defy comprehension.
- 2 = A really bad, probably embarrassing failure.
- 3 = A regular, garden variety failure.
- 4 = A success, but with some negative complication.
- 5 = A good success. Mission (barely!) accomplished.
- 6 = A solid, professional success. Good work!

Fisticuffs

When lives are on the line, winners and losers are separated by a little bit more than just who has the most successes. First of all, you have to worry about both offense *and* defense! Every time you roll dice in a combat situation, you need to divide your dice pool into **Yin** (defense) dice and **Yang** (attack) dice. (It might be good to have two different colors of dice on the table.) Yin dice are used to block incoming attacks; each one negates one of your opponents' Yang successes. If even a single Yang success gets through, you're done!

Don't worry, it's not nearly as deadly as it may sound. All player-characters get 3 points of **Chi** that they can cash in for extra Yin successes. (I use poker chips to keep track.) Each point provides one success and they're always cashed in *after* the dice are rolled. The only way you can get knocked out of a fight is if you take a hit (Yang success) and don't have any Chi left to spend. If you're down to zero Chi, it just means you're weaving, exhausted, and vulnerable. GMs should give players their Chi back as dramatically appropriate.

Since Wushu encourages players to combine multiple actions into every roll of the dice, someone will eventually combine actions that are relevant to different Traits. In combat, there's no time to separate these things out and assigning dice to different target numbers is a pain in the ass. Instead, treat the non-combat Details as part of the general combat action and just use the most relevant Trait for everything. For instance, a

character who wants to use some "Voodoo" or "Telekinesis" while engaged in fisticuffs could earn dice for those Details, but they would roll them against whichever Trait they're using the most: Voodoo for a spell with a little fighting added, or "Fisticuffs" for a right hook that used telekinesis for some extra kick!

vs Mooks

These are the nameless, faceless, clueless goons whose only real purpose in your game is to get their collective ass handed to them by the player-characters. They don't have stats, they don't have Chi, and they don't get to roll dice. In fact, they're just an abstraction. Players should feel free to describe as many mooks as they want, in whatever positions and performing whatever actions they want, in order to describe the cool combat stunts they want. (Of course, the GM can specify the locations and actions of any mooks she needs to guard that ancient artifact, block the only escape route, or whatever.)

When you start a mook fight, assign the whole group a single **Threat Rating**. The exact value of that rating depends on how many players you have, how many successes they usually get, and how long you want the fight to last. (Just multiply those factors together and use your best judgment.) Every Yang success the players roll reduces the Threat Rating by 1 point. When it reaches zero, the mooks are either dead, incapacitated, or running for their hollow little lives. By the same token, if your players describe taking out the whole group, but don't roll enough successes to wipe out their Threat, you'll have to either

find an excuse for the mooks to get back up or have more mooks jump out of the woodwork. (Like I always say: There's always more ninjas!)

Since you never roll dice for mooks, they won't have Yang dice to throw at the heros. Instead, just assume that the mob manages to get in one good hit each time the players make a roll. Anyone who doesn't roll at least 1 Yin success has to cash in a point of Chi or get knocked out of the fight. (You can raise this to 2-3 hits per roll if you want to make your mooks a little more dangerous.)

Mook fights are great opportunities to Filibuster. It's not like the mooks get a chance to fight back! You don't have to go for the max dice pool every time, though. Players should pick up how ever many dice they think their stunt warrants, then make with the thrilling description. If it looks like someone is picking up too many dice, just tell 'em to throw a few back. (Cite the veto rule, if you must!)

vs Nemeses

Nemeses, unlike mooks, are actual characters. They have Traits, backgrounds, goals, even names. They earn and roll dice just like the players do, and they have anywhere from 1-5 points of Chi. (Hell, they could have 6+, but don't go nuts.)

Whereas mooks are usually fought en masse, Nemeses must always be fought **mono-a-mono**. If two or more players really need to gang up on one Nemesis, there are two things you can do. First, they can just take turns trading blows with the

villain, going through both their description and their resolution individually. If you've set a maximum dice pool, your second option is to make the players split the max dice between them. In this case, the Nemesis rolls just as many dice as the players put together and divides their successes between their targets.

Another advantage that Nemeses have over mooks is that they actually get to defend themselves. This works best if each combatant only provides 1-3 Details at a time, then gives their opponent a chance to respond. This is where Wushu gives you that great back-and-forth interplay we talked about! If you're really getting into it, you can just disregard any dice pool limit and roll an entire fight's worth of dice at once.

Lethal actions like bullets to the head, decapitations, and stakes through the heart should be saved until after the victim has taken a hit that they don't have the Chi to pay for. If both combatants take such hits in the same round, the winner is the one who takes the fewest hits. (Ties should probably go to the player-characters, since they *are* the heros and all.) The winner then gets a chance to describe whatever horrible fate they wish to inflict upon their defenseless vicim, no dice rolling required. This is called a **Coup de Grace**, and if anyone tries to narrate it before their enemy is beaten, veto their ass!

What Wushu Doesn't Do

If you've ever played other role-playing games, there are a few things you may have been expecting to see in this section, but didn't. I assure you, it's no oversight. There are a few things that Wushu specifically avoids doing, and with good cause...

Weapon Damage - In a Wushu game, there's no mechanical difference between getting hit by a bar stool and getting hit by a chainsaw. There's also no difference between taking a single, carefully aimed shot and unloading an entire clip. This frees players to select weapons and fighting styles that fit their characters, without dooming themselves to many an ass kicking. Having said that, the best way to benefit from any weapon is by using it to add Details to your descriptions: sunlight glinting off steel, the thunderclap of gunfire, brass knuckles biting into flesh, you get the idea.

Initiative - The issue of who goes before who in a Wushu round is pretty much irrelevant. In a mook fight, it's completely irrelevant. When Nemeses are involved, I usually just ask if the player wants to start things off, or would rather react to what I come up with. If you ever want to interrupt another person's action, just ask to cut in. In a quick-draw situation, you can devote an entire round to the stare-down and allow the winner of to kick off the action on the next. It's a world of options.

Pulp Fiction

To turn Wushu into Pulp-Fu, you need a firm grasp of the kinds of Details that characterize the pulps. The best method is to get familiar with the source material. (See the Introduction for a short list of inspirational movies, if reading ain't your thing.) The four types of Details described below are my attempt to distill that material down to its bare essentials. Hopefully, they'll at least help you explain the genre to uninitiated players...

Purple Prose

Because pulp magazines were such a low-rent medium, their writers were often lacking in both experience and time. Many people look back on the resulting cheesy dialog and heavy-handed analogies with nostalgia... nostalgia that you can capture in your games! Players can earn dice by adding metaphors, one-liners, jazz-age slang, and internal monologue to their descriptions.

For example, "I was the angel of death, come to deliver some justice to the inhabitants of skid-row" could be added to the beginning of a combat action to garner an extra die. "The rain ran down my cheeks like tears / but the emptiness in my soul could feel neither sadness nor pity," would be worth 2 dice. So would, "my fist slammed into his face / like a sledgehammer pounding a side of beef." It doesn't have to be Hemmingway, it just has to add some atmosphere.

Two-Fisted Fighting

Back in the days before Hong Kong cinema graced western shores, fight sequences were all about boxing, wrestling, and brawling. Pulp-Fu players can recreate that down-and-dirty feel by paying special attention to the effects of violence (especially pain, spilled blood, broken bones, lost teeth, etc.) and by devoting more Details to each opponent (none of those kung-fu style one-hit take-downs, I'm afraid). In mook fights, this is as easy as letting the mooks get back up a few times. Nemeses can take care of themselves.

However, kung-fu is not entirely out of place in a pulp game, especially a Pulp-Fu game. Many pulp heros have bizarre powers imported from the Far East, and a few even have kung-fu fighting sidekicks. The key to making it all sound pulpy is to keep the tone gritty and brutal, regardless of the fighting style you use. (It can be particularly fun to incorporate some martial arts into gun fights by using firearms as melee weapons: fight up close, swing shotguns like short staves, grapple each other's shooting arms, etc. The Wushu Guide to Gun-Fu has a lot more to say on the topic than I can fit in here!)

One-Upsmanship

This one can be a bit tricky. Because pulp characters are built on hyperbole, many of them are far more clever and/or intelligent than any normal person, and that includes your players. One way to mimic this is to allow players to make plans

and preparations retroactively. For example, a player who finds herself caught in an ambush might say, "I knew you'd know we were coming, so I left your snipers a little present," / then pull a remote control out of her pocket, / and trigger an explosive charge that sends the snipers flying (for 3 dice)!

The same trick can be used for humor and character development, too. Need to explain how your character knows some obscure fact or has a connection in the Treasury Department? Just Filibuster yourself an old war story or some other impromptu anecdote. It's a staple of the genre. Say you're in a speakeasy and some mook takes your seat. You politely inform him of his error and he replies with "I don't see your name on it." At that point, you can grab him by his hair / slam his face into the bar / and force him down under the bar stool / so he can see that your name is engraved on the bottom (for 5 dice).

Fun with Failure

Our final class of pulp Details flies in the face of tactical RPGs by rewarding screw-ups with an increased chance of success. I call it "The Indiana Jones Principle." In practice, it means using blunders, whiffs, and accidents as Details inside a larger, ultimately successful action. You could take a swing at a mook, only to have him duck under it so you club one of his pals (or even one of your fellow PCs), then catch the squirrely bastard on the back swing. Another classic is the bullet that misses its mark, but ricochets into a chandelier or a ceiling fan that then falls, knocking the original target unconscious.

Anti-Heros

I have this theory about pulp and noir characters. They're often referred to as "anti-heros" because they're far too tormented, pragmatic, or misanthropic to qualify for white knight status. I think they come in two distinct breeds...

Bad Guys Who Do Good

Everyone knows this type; it was made popular by such characters as Batman and The Shadow. Very little separates them from the actual Bad Guys they wage war upon. Usually, that "very little" is a refusal to kill, at least not in cold blood. They are most often motivated by either a thirst for revenge or the desire for redemption. They need Weaknesses that make it difficult for them to do the "right" thing: Vengeful, Sadistic, Berserker, etc. The goal is to make the character's player avoid certain situations because the temptation to return to their wicked ways would be too great.

Good Guys Who Do Bad

These folks used to be Good Guys, once upon a time. They may have been idealists whose souls were crushed by a cold and uncaring world, or posers who desperately want a badass reputation they may not be willing to back up. The Green Hornet and Darkwing Duck typify the second type; Mal Reynolds

and pretty much any hard-boiled detective are examples of the first. They need Weaknesses that make it difficult for them to do the "smart" thing: Hero Complex, Naive, Honorable, etc. No matter how much they want to turn their backs on humanity or visit harsh justice on their enemies, they just don't have it in 'em.

No Mere Mortals

Whatever their breed, pulp heros are a cut above mortal men. Many have special abilities that would be called "super-powers" nowadays. Those who don't are still more than a match for your average soldier, cop, or street criminal. I've categorized the typical excuses for this larger-than-life status as follows...

Ancient Mysticism - Ninja powers, shaolin kung-fu, shamanic magic, arcane sorcery, hypnosis, vampirism, lycanthropy, the list goes on and on. These powers don't have any special effect on the rules (though you do need to devote a Trait to them), they just change the types of things a player is allowed to narrate. They can earn dice by describing ritual actions (chanting, dancing), implements (blood, antique daggers), flashy special effects (light shows, gusts of wind), or anything else you might see on The X-Files.

Super-Science - Spy gadgets, rocket packs, ray guns, sleeping gas, x-ray specs, armored suits, strength serum, time machines, all those retro sci-fi toys. Players should feel free to make these up on the spot; there's no need for inventory tracking! Details should involve techno-babble double-speak about Tesla coils and Z-rays, flashy special effects, and

humorous malfunctions that get fixed in the nick of time.

Traps and doomsday devices allow Nemeses to have at the player-characters from a safe distance. GMs earn dice for these devices by narrating their functions and features using the kinds of Details described above, then roll against its inventor's relevant Trait. Devices like this may or may not have any Chi to spend in their own defense; it's up to the GM.

Obsession - When you're willing to sacrifice everything, you can achieve just about anything. Maybe you trained for years to be the best martial artist in the world, or maybe you've studied insects for so long you've developed an affinity with them. Either way, the results are nearly supernatural. Just ask Batman.

Obsessed martial artists can punch through walls and pull off flying kicks that seem to defy gravity. Characters with "Affinities" can control the subject of their obsession through force of will (and maybe a super-science device. In the case of animals, they may even be able to communicate with them! (Yes, this may overlap with Super-Science or Ancient Mysticism from time to time. So sue me.)

True Grit - Some pulp heros are just too damn tough to die. Gangsters, old soldiers, and your hard-boiled types usually fall into this category. It's pretty much the baseline default for Pulp-Fu characters. Remember, this is the generation that invented (and survived) trench warfare!

Traits

Now that you know who your character is and why they kick so very much ass, it's time to turn those ideas into Traits. Just about anything can be a Trait, from skills and professions to personality traits and miscellaneous adjectives. If you have any supernatural or super-science powers, they need to have their own Traits. Each Trait starts at the default rating of 2. GMs should give their players 5-8 points to spend on raising them; each point increases the rating by 1, up to a maximum of 5.

Next, you'll need to pick a Weakness. In part, this should be determined by what kind of anti-hero your character is. Does your Weakness make it hard for you to do the right thing or the smart thing? Weaknesses can also be things your character just isn't good at, like shooting guns or dealing with the supernatural. If all else fails, just pick a phobia and be done with it! Any time the character tries to engage in an activity that's goes against their Weakness, they must roll all of their dice against a Target Number of 1. For example, a Master Spy with the Weakness "Sadist" would have to roll against a 1 to interrogate someone without torturing them, even if they also had another relevant Trait (like "Master Spy," for instance).

The key to role-playing your Weakness is to understand that it's something your characters doesn't like about themselves. They may resent their feelings of obligation to protect innocents, or they may feel bad about indulging their righteous thirst for revenge, but it's got to be something about themselves that they desperately wish they could change. In the

example above, the Master Spy *could* use his normal Espionage Trait to torture someone, but he doesn't *want* to be a torturer any more! There's no rule to enforce this; it's all done through good, old-fashioned role-playing.

Things Pulp-Fu Characters Don't Need

Once again, you may think you're missing a few steps, but don't worry. There are a few things you just don't need...

Character Advancement - Pulp-Fu characters don't start out weak or unskilled; they're created in their prime and they stay that way! However, players should be allowed to rearrange their Trait points between sessions in any way that makes the game more fun for them. To be honest, this is a more accurate model of how human skills really work; high levels of skill require constant practice and there are only enough hours in the day to practice so many things!

Starting Equipment - Generally speaking, you should assume that Pulp-Fu characters have in their possession any and all gear that they'd need to use their Traits. In fact, pulling gadgets and weapons out of thin air should be a common way to earn dice! (As long as it's dramatically appropriate. Anything that stretches credibility should get a big, fat veto.)

The following character templates are provided to help you start thinking about genre-appropriate characters. Just add a few Trait ratings and they're good to go!

The Intrepid Explorer

You're a man of the present with a passion for the past, more at home in the deserts of Arabia or the jungles of Africa than among your "own kind." You may be an idealist who fights to preserve ancient relics before they're crushed beneath the grindstone of progress. Maybe you're an "entrepreneur" who sells your discoveries to the highest bidder. Or maybe you're just a rich dilettante looking for adventure in far off lands.

Whatever your motivation, any Explorer must be extremely self-reliant; you spend most of your time far from the comforts of the industrialized world. You must be educated in the scientific study of the past and the lore of lost civilizations. You may have some access to arcane powers or magical talismans, but most Explorers are solidly in the True Grit camp. You're just too damn tough, smart, and/or pretty to die!

Typical Traits:

- **Jack of All Trades** - Knows a little about almost everything, from shootin' to sewin'.
- **Forgotten Lore** - Reads dozens of dead languages & knows every mythical god or beast.
- **Been Around** - Can blend in with crowds all over the world, from Boston to Bombay.
- **Lucky** - Manages to squeak through most situations by the seat of his pants!

The Hard-Boiled Detective

Somebody has to take the cases that the cops and the papers won't touch. Somebody has to crawl through the gutters with the cheating husbands, petty criminals, and three time losers. You just don't understand why that somebody always has to be you! Once upon a time, you were a decorated cop or a respected journalist. Now, you're a private dick. Maybe you screwed up and now you're looking to pay for your sins by helping the meek of the Earth, or maybe you're still that good cop or journalist, somewhere deep down, beneath the pragmatic bastard the world has made you become.

In any case, investigation is your stock in trade. You know your way around a crime scene and have been on more stake-outs than you care to count. You still have contacts on the force, on the street, and/or at the local rags. You can handle yourself in a fight, but stealth and deception are more your style.

Typical Traits:

- **Eagle Eye** - Photographic memory; notices every detail.
- **Seen It All** - Way too cynical to get taken by surprise.
- **Contacts** - Old friends who still owe you favors.
- **Take a Beating** - Gets punched in the face a lot.

The Grifter

Workin' is for chumps! You know much easier ways to make a living. Why, you can part a sucker from his money with little more than a wink and a handshake (or a quick flick of the wrist). You might be a gambler who's spent their life waiting for that one big break, a slick con artist with false identities in every state, or a modern Robin Hood who swindles the rich and gives to the poor (minus your living expenses, of course).

The key to all these lifestyles is the confidence game, or "con" for short. Why take by force what you can trick people into giving away? You have a line for every occasion, a way out of every sticky situation, and at least a dozen schemes in motion at any given time. You never reveal your true goals to anyone, because it's all about playing the angles!

Typical Traits:

- **Cheat** - Rules are made to be broken, whether the game is poker, kickboxing, or high finance!
- **Sticky Fingers** - Knows how to pick pockets, pick locks, and palm an ace of spades.
- **Con Man** - Manipulates people like puppets, by pulling on their deepest emotions & darkest desires.
- **Fights Dirty** - Hey, no one's givin' out medals for chivalry!

The Penitent Hitman

Killing people is the only thing you've ever been good at. You used to make quite a living at it, too. Maybe you killed for the mob, or the government, or just for yourself, but one day that life came crashing down around you. Either your employers sold you out or you decided there was enough innocent blood on your hands for one lifetime (and then your employers sold you out). The problem is, now you have to kill just to stay alive.

An assassin needs a diverse set of skills. You are probably well-versed in some form of combat, whether it be guns, blades, or fists. Expertise with poisons and explosives is also quite useful. Subterfuge is a big part of the whole hit man thing, so you're probably familiar with stage make-up, acting, and con games. You might also be a skilled burglar, with all the stealth and security training that entails.

Typical Traits:

- **Artist with a Gun** - Turns gunfights into ballets of bullets!
- **Angel of Death** - Knows a thousand ways to kill a man, and even invented a few of them.
- **Everywhere & Nowhere** - Can get in & out of any place, without ever leaving a trace.
- **Crazy Like a Fox** - Can think circles around police, bodyguards, and security experts.

The Rumrunner

You live for the thrill of the chase. Unlike most people, you don't mean that in the "I love to chase others" sense. No, what you love is being chased, particularly by the cops... and making them look like flat-footed fools! You probably work for the mob, picking up booze from smugglers and moonshiners, then running it into town under cover of darkness. You know you're supposed to do it quiet like, but what's the fun in that?

You spend as much time working on your customized hotrod as driving it. It's got enough speed and agility to outrun anything the cops have, and there are hidden compartments all over the place. Most are reserved for the booze, but you've got a couple of tommyguns stashed in there, too. You do some motorized banditry on the side, mostly small town banks and speakeasies that try to stiff you. You may do it all for the thrill, but that doesn't mean you don't deserve to get paid!

Typical Traits:

- **Bat Shit Crazy** - Stunt driving & other insane heroics.
- **Grease Monkey** - Knows automobiles inside and out.
- **Criminal** - When you hang out with mobsters, you pick up a few things.
- **Gunbunny** - Eventually, everybody runs out of gas...

The Flying Ace

If God never meant for Man to fly, why'd He make you so damn good at it? Maybe you're a veteran of the Great War who helped invent the art of the dogfight. Maybe you're a young maverick who doesn't know his own limits. Maybe you're a talented crop duster from the boonies who just loves soaring with the birds. The one thing they all have in common is that they can't imagine what life was like before the aeroplane.

Obviously, your core skill is flying, but that may also make you a decent driver or motorcyclist. You may or may not know a thing about how airplanes actually work. You definitely have a general disregard for your own safety, whether that's because you have some secret death wish or because you think you're just too damn good to die. You might have some military training; at the very least, you've been in enough pilot bars to know how to handle yourself in a fight!

Typical Traits:

- **Flyboy** - Can fly anything from a zeppelin to a Fokker D7.
- **Daredevil** - You live more in a single hour than most men do their entire lives!
- **Mystique** - The ladies love a man in uniform (even if it's just some goggles and a scarf).
- **Veteran** - After staring down a machinegun nest, street thugs just aren't that scary.

The Master Spy

During the Great War, you tackled dangerous covert operations from intelligence gathering to sabotage. You excelled in this role and, after the war ended, your superiors found new targets for your talents. Maybe you still fight for your native land, or maybe you've gone into business for yourself. (Not that they're not mutually exclusive; you could always be a double agent or take out private contracts on the side.)

Secrets are your life. First among them is the secret of your true loyalties. Other people's secrets, however, are your bread and butter. You must know how to discover them, how to communicate them, and when the occasion calls for it, how to kill to protect them. You must be clever, resourceful, and ruthless enough to defeat your enemies on their own ground.

Typical Traits:

- **Espionage** - Surveillance, stealth, code-breaking, and investigation are your stock in trade.
- **Access** - Vast stores of money, influence, and super-spy gadgets are always at your fingertips.
- **Deadly** - Firearms, hand-to-hand combat, and maybe even a little demolitions training.
- **Smooth** - Social skills from etiquette to seduction.

The Man of Science

Technological progress doesn't happen by itself. Men and women in white lab coats make it happen. Maybe you're an amoral engineer who only cared about solving problems, until you found out that your inventions were being used to kill people in the Great War. Or maybe you're a social progressive who dreams of making the world a better place through the application of science. Your many patents may have made you independently wealthy, or maybe you give your innovations to mankind free of charge!

For you, invention is a way of life. You're always surrounded by super-science gadgets; they're built into your clothes (bullet-proof cloth, powered armor), your car (concealed guns, super-charger), your weapons (gas guns, web shooters), even your glasses (radar scanner, heads-up display). It's not all about the tools, though. You can also jerry-rig new devices on the fly and strip down anything human hands put together.

Typical Traits:

- **Gadgeteer** - Building, using, and modifying, well, just about anything! (Can be used as a combat Trait.)
- **Fringe Science** - Reads all the best research journals... and more than a few crackpot newsletters.
- **Scrappy** - You might not look like much, but you can hold your own in a fight (mostly with tricks and traps).
- **Smart** - You're always the man with the plan!

The Mystic

There are wonders and horrors in this world that are beyond most men's imagining. You go toe-to-toe with them each and every day. You might be the last in an ancient bloodline of sorcerers who wield the vast power of magic in defense of the innocent. Or you might be a psychic who sees things others cannot. The important thing is that you're mankind's last line of defense against the Forces of Darkness.

Magic is far too varied an art form for any one mystic to master. Your specialty could be anything from low-down sympathetic voodoo to an inherited psychic power to arcane rituals for binding spirits and demons. It may not even be a "good" power; you may harness the same dark forces as the villains you fight against! Magic is neither good nor evil. That's what free will is for.

Typical Traits:

- **Mojo** - This is your special brand of ancient mysticism.
- **The Sight** - Can "read" objects & places, sees spirits, and has visions of the future.
- **Warrior** - Guns are worthless against the undead, but swords work great!
- **Magician** - A little sleight of hand is usually enough to impress the locals.

The Savage

In the Pulp Era, most of the world still belongs to "savages." Contrary to the common wisdom of the western world, they are every bit as evolved as their European cousins. In fact, most are far more adapted to their chosen environments than foreigners will ever be, and they remain in touch with primal forces beyond the ken of western science.

Maybe you're a jungle warrior, skilled in tracking and killing, come to the city to hunt the most dangerous game. Maybe you're a tribal shaman charged with protecting some ancient ruin or relic from those who would misuse its power. Maybe you're a westerner who lost his way and went native, or a "wild child" who was raised by animals. In any case, you're probably not too good with guns, cars, and the other mechanical contrivances of the industrial age, but there are many places in the urban jungle where your talents are still quite effective!

Typical Traits:

- **Law of the Jungle** - Brutal unarmed & melee fighting.
- **Hunter** - Tracking, stealth, camouflage, setting traps, etc.
- **Shaman** - Herbal, sympathetic, and/or ritual magic.
- **Strong** - Life in the city makes men soft and weak! You, on the other hand, can crush a man's skull!

The Liberated Woman

Women's Lib made great strides during the Roaring Twenties. Flappers rebelled against the restrictions of a sexist society, not to mention the restrictions of Victorian fashion! Many traditionally male occupations, like journalism and academia, saw invasion by talented young women. Of course, there were also those who used men's expectations against them, making their way in the world through seduction and manipulation.

What binds all of these women together is their rejection of the roles to which society has assigned them. They hate being treated as inferior simply due to their biological sex. These women set out to prove that they can compete with men in any field of endeavor, though their methods of competition may vary from direct confrontation to cunning exploitation.

Typical Traits:

- **Feminine Wiles** - Uses her good looks and the old "damsel in distress" act to sucker men.
- **Women's Work** - You'd be surprised how often cooking, sewing, and nursing skills come in handy!
- **Tough as Nails** - Can take a punch and knows how to return the favor in spades!
- **Judo** - Who says upper body strength is the only way to win a fight? The bigger they are, the harder they fall!

Narrative Structures

Now that you know your characters, you have to find a way to bring them together and give them something daring to do. (Actually, this might be a good thing to talk about *before* the players settle on their characters.) The examples below are just a few of the narrative structures to be found in the pulps...

Private Eyes - The characters run an investigation agency. They probably specialize in a certain type of case, like supernatural phenomena or tracking secret societies. If they're lucky, they have a financial backer who keeps them in the green. (Such investors make excellent NPCs, by the way.) Otherwise, they're probably broke most of the time. They'll need at least one detective, maybe a former cop, reporter, or a forensic scientist. They might need a manager or accountant to handle the books. Muscle, of course, is always welcome.

Mobsters - The Roaring Twenties were a boom time for organized crime. Your characters could be cashing in as Mafia legbreakers, hitmen for Murder Inc, or even an upstart street gang of their own. They could operate speakeasies, traffic in moonshine, run numbers (aka. illegal gambling), or kick the crap out of other gangs and take their stuff. In this game, everyone's the muscle. Well, a con man might be nice, too. And maybe a mystic or a savage, if they're into that sort of thing. Once again, you can give them NPC bosses to drop hints, hand down missions, and otherwise jerk the player-characters around.

Crusaders - Some kind of power is about to be unlocked, and the heroes are in a race against time to prevent their arch-rivals from controlling it! Perhaps some archeologists have uncovered an ancient temple or magical relic that should have stayed buried. Maybe some cosmic convergence is approaching and certain rituals must be performed in a variety of remote locations in order to harness its power. Whatever the particulars, this premise holds a ton of potential for globe-spanning adventure as your players chase a trail of clues, or follow in the footsteps of their enemies, on a collision course with destiny!

Out for Revenge - This is probably the easiest way to tie a diverse group of characters together: They're all after the same villain. It's quick, it's easy, and it keeps everyone interested until the final scene. If possible, you'll want to make sure each character has some unique skill or ability to contribute to the group, so they all have something to gain by working together.

Old Loyalties - If your players can be counted on to role-play such things, building personal relationships into their characters' backgrounds can add another dimension to any of the narrative structures described above. They could be blood relatives, childhood friends, old war buddies, or even frat brothers! (You can use the same trick to drag your players into a plot by endangering the life of an NPC bonds of friendship of family. See "Femme Fatales" below.)

Villains

As much as they might try to deny it, villains are what motivate pulp heros and make their lives interesting. They have schemes that need foiling, minions that need stomping, and power that only our intrepid heros can keep in check. In a game where the players are kept busy reacting to events, the villain is the real central character. Even when they're not so central, they still serve as the GM's presence in the game world. They shape a game as much, if not more, than the players do.

In other words, the selection of a villain is one of the most important steps in creating your game. You'll need someone who can challenge your heros and antagonize your players. They should have at least as much depth as the player-characters; cookie cutter villains are boring and predictable. If you can incorporate the villain into the player-characters' backgrounds, especially in ways that play off of their Weaknesses, all the better!

Nazis

The Nazis seem to infest the pulp world like termites, burrowing their way into every corner of the planet. They weren't around during the Roaring Twenties, but their ideological ancestor was. The Thule Society was a secret "cult" dedicated to the rebirth of the mythical aryan race. They believed that the German people had descended from an advanced society

whose island nation sank below the northern atlantic ages ago. Their involvement in the occult was directed towards recovering the secrets of that lost civilization.

When the Thule Society gave birth to the Nazi Party, the latter inherited much of the former's bizarre brand of mysticism. This is what will bring them into conflict with your pulp heros, more likely than not. Either they're searching for something your players want, or something your players want to remain unfound, or they've already found it and now must be stopped from putting it to some nefarious use. However, the real boon to using Nazis as villains (especially as mooks) is that no one feels bad about kicking the holy hell outta 'em!

Aryan Superman

Commando (5) Intimidation (4) Resources (4)

Most likely a member of the SS, this blonde haired and blue eyed bad ass carries out the orders of his superiors with ruthless efficiency (and a large side of sadistic glee). He honestly believes that his "pure aryan blood" makes him physically superior to other men, but that doesn't stop him from letting legions of goose-stepping mooks soften up his enemies for him! Use him as an antagonist in the most literal sense.

Thule Inquisitor

Occultism (5) Interrogation (4) Resources (4)

These creepy bastards are the Victorian-style occultists that the Thule Society sends to places like Tibet, India, and the Middle East to recover ancient lore and mystical relics. They

don't even have to be related to the aryan myth; the Nazis want to grab any and all sources of power they can get their hands on! His "Occultism" Trait may or may not come with real magic, but it certainly makes him an expert on it.

Nazi Soldiers - Your standard military types. They carry pistols, rifles, and knives. They might know a little hand-to-hand, but it's mostly boxing. Theirs is but to do and die. Mostly the "die" part.

Zombie Nazi Soldiers - As above, but already dead and animated by forbidden magic! Can be conveniently stored at the bottom of a lake or river. A shot to the head might kill them, but it's best to dismember and incinerate, just to be safe.

Criminal Masterminds

Far less transparent than the Nazis, these villains specialize in convoluted plots and elaborate death traps. They may or may not care about keeping their own hands clean, but they always have legions of goons and lieutenants to do their dirty work for them. In fact, your mastermind may work entirely from the shadows, puppet-mastering the "lesser" villains that your players interact with. Gradually, your heros will gather clues as to the mastermind's identity, location, or evil schemes and, in the final showdown, confront them face-to-face!

Obviously, criminal masterminds make great villains for an "Out for Revenge" game, but the fact that they make their money by victimizing others means that they can run afoul of just

about any group of heros. Their greatest assets are intelligence and ruthlessness. Coming in a close second are the vast resources of their sprawling, criminal empires. They may also have access to super-science and/or mysticism by way of their underlings, pawns, and hired guns.

The Infamous Dr. Fang

Cunning (5) Elusive (5) Unusually Strong Chi (5)

He may not be a "real" doctor, but his intuitive grasp of Chinese medicine makes him an expert healer and a deadly martial artist. His keen intellect has allowed him to take over most of the Asian underworld by sheer force of will. Those who are not loyal never get a chance to betray him. Because of this, it's nearly impossible to get close to Dr. Fang; he has no living relatives and no pictures of him exist. He is the consummate puppet-master! (Just call him Kaiser Sozay.)

Rich Uncle Moneybags

Squeaky Clean (5) Deep Pockets (5) Influential (5)

The worst thing about going up against this mastermind is that no one believes he's a criminal. Somehow, the heros know the truth, but good luck collecting enough evidence to convince anyone else! He hides his criminal empire within a maze of front businesses, launders his money in ways the IRS has never dreamed of, and all his criminal lackeys have legitimate-looking day jobs. Plus, kids love him!

Henchmen

Clever (4) Violent (4) Resistant to Interrogation (3)

Their official title is probably "executive assistant," if they have an official title at all. Some are virtual non-entities; their bosses have erased their pasts in exchange for their undying loyalty. Their primary job is to shield the mastermind from incrimination by handling all communication with actual criminals. Most are also part-time hitmen who silence anyone who might pose a threat to the organization.

Hired Goons - These are the mookiest of the mooks, recruited from the ranks of petty criminals and street thugs. Most of the time, they probably don't even know who they work for, but they might be able to point the finger at a henchman or two...

Mad Scientists

They're scientists... and they're maaadd!!! Just like their archetype, Doctor Frankenstein, mad scientists are the personification of the dark side of technology. They go too far, too fast; they are progress out of control. The mad scientists themselves may be fully in control of their technology, but if they're willing to put it to insane uses, the outcome is pretty much the same. (Unless *someone* can stop them!)

It goes without saying that they have a truly awe-inspiring array of super-science gadgets at their disposal. They may also be filthy rich from selling their inventions, extorting money from world governments, forging their own money, turning lead into

gold, or a thousand other possibilities. They may be loners, working feverishly in their fortress-like laboratories, or they may have a vast criminal empire (or robot army, or legions of atomic supermen) at their disposal. They may even be the unwitting pawns of some Criminal Mastermind!

Hiram Maxim Jr.

Inventor (5) Driven (4) Wealthy (4)

When Hiram Maxim Sr. invented the machine gun (he called it "The Devil's Paintbrush"), it was in the hope that such a fearsome weapon would make war too costly for mankind to wage. Instead, it claimed the lives of untold millions. Hiram Jr. inherited his father's dream, along with his engineering brilliance and a boat load of money. He is currently hard at work building a doomsday device (I leave the specifics to you). When complete, he'll either use it to hold the world hostage (and force them to make peace) or give it to every nation in the world so that they can hold each other hostage...

The Future

Mechanist (5) Lunatic (5) Resources (5)

No one can fight... The Future!!! This madman thinks of himself as a force of nature, the personification of progress. He exists to usher mankind into a golden age of technological advancement, whether it wants to go there or not. His success, he believes, is inevitable. He tried to persuade and lead by example, but was forced to conclude that superstitious humans can only be lead by force. On the day that his robot armies

march across the globe, many will struggle against inevitability, but the glorious ends will justify the means!

Robot Soldiers - They're a lot like regular soldiers, but made of metal. They may have weapons built into their arms (or maybe laser eyes). They may be remote-controlled or artificially intelligent. Bullets are pretty much useless against them, but blunt trauma and electricity will often do the trick.

Atomic Supermen - The atomic angle might be a little ahead of its time, but there are plenty of other reasons that a mad scientist might have legions of mutants lying around. You can allow your players to gain extra dice by describing their many bizarre features & special powers. Tons of variety, tiny GM effort.

Femme Fatales

The women's movement was a big part of what put the roar in the Roaring Twenties. The Femme Fatale is the distillation of every male fear concerning female empowerment. They are manipulative, scheming, and completely irresistible. No matter how many times she sells you out, plays you for the fool, you just can't say "No." It need not even be a woman, strictly speaking; you can get the same dynamic with old friends, religious figures, and representatives of the government (if the character has a patriotic streak).

Of course, some players may not want to play along with this self-destructive cliché. You should make sure that your

Femme Fatales know how to exploit your heroes' Weaknesses. In fact, "Femme Fatale" would make a great Weakness all on its own! If the player wants to engage in any type of (how should I put this...) smart behavior concerning their Femme Fatale, make 'em roll against that wicked target number of 1!

Perfection

Dream Girl (5) Hurt People (4) Jack of All Trades (4)

She claims it's her real name, but what are the odds that the perfect woman would actually be named Perfection? For all anyone knows, she might be a spy, a thief, an undercover cop, a con artist, or any combination of the above. When the heroes first meet her, at least one of them falls madly in love. Perfection homes in on the sucker, leads them on a little, then proceeds to play them like a fiddle!

The Old Flame

Manipulative (5) Dangerous (4) Misc. Profession (4)

This version works best for the redemption-seeking Bad Guy Doing Good. She knew the hero back when he was just a Bad Guy, but decided not to join him on the straight & narrow. Now, she shows up to manipulate the character's affections and tempt him into returning to his wicked ways.

There's no mook version for this one, unless you wanted to have a rampaging army of ex-girlfriends... Naw, better not.

Old Gods

Earth's primordial past was dominated by alien creatures of unfathomable power. Shortly before the rise of homo sapiens, something changed in the cosmos and these beings were forced to leave our plane of existence. However, the Old Gods know that the time of Man is finite and they struggle ceaselessly to return to our world, crush humanity into dust, and restore their savage reign.

There are soulless men and women who believe that they can gain worldly power by serving the Old Gods and aiding their efforts to pierce the cosmic veil. Some are rewarded with arcane powers, while others are twisted by their exposure to alien realities. Most gather cults of fanatical followers to themselves, using them as a first line of defense against the champions of mankind. (See below for more on Eldritch Horror.)

Demon Made Flesh

Dark Magic (5) Telepathy (4) Tear Humans Into Tiny Pieces (5)

The Old Gods may not be able to manifest in this world, but there exist rituals that allow them to use human beings as their meat puppets. Such possessed mortals usually retain their normal appearance, allowing the god to walk unnoticed among mankind, but they can also imbue their hosts with supernatural power that warps their flesh in unmistakable ways. The Old Gods also have an instinctive grasp of ritual magic, which grants them access to powers both great and numerous.

High Priest of Evil

Zealot (5) Ritual Magic (4) Brutal (3)

Those who are willing to sell their souls to alien devils gain dark powers here on Earth. They have access to ritual magic and control over their deity's other minions (cultists and monsters). They exist only to work the will of their patron... and to enjoy the benefits of worldly power. The Old Gods may be unmitigated evil, but a mortal who's willing to betray his entire species truly deserves an ass whuppin'!

The Hounds of Hell

Savage (4) Fast (4) Acute Senses (4)

Every Old God has its own monstrous minions; hell hounds are just a convenient example. They are dogs or wolves that have been infused with alien power through dark rituals. High Priests can control them by force of will, but just barely. They are chaos and bloodlust incarnate!

Evil Cultists - Most of these poor bastards honestly believe that they will be rewarded when the Old Gods return to Earth. They are willing to sacrifice their lives to see that dream come true. Don't worry about crushing that dream when you kick 'em in the face. The Old Gods would do far, far worse!

Eldritch Horror

People sometimes forget that H. P. Lovecraft and his collaborators were also pulp authors. Their creations, alien beings of unfathomable age and immense power, often showed up as pulp villains and even crept their way into a few noir stories. You can get a good survey of their work from Chaosium's excellent "Encyclopedia Cthulhiana" and there are a few websites that offer free transcriptions of Lovecraft's many short stories. Some of my favorites are...

- "At the Mountains of Madness"
- "The Whisperer In Darkness"
- "The Shadow Over Innsmouth"
- "The Shadow Out of Time"
- And of course, "The Call of Cthulhu"

Insanity

A nearly universal component of Lovecraft's mythology is the idea that contact with things beyond the sphere of Man inevitably leads to madness. These alien beings, and their equally alien realities, are incomprehensible to the human mind. Catching a glimpse of their power is scary enough; experiencing them in their full glory will drive you insane.

Thus, no treatment of the pulp genre would be complete without a mechanic for madness. If you plan to use any Eldritch horror in your game, give each of your player-characters a free

Insanity Trait. What's more, you can let your players pick what rating they want, 1-5. A low score represents someone who's a skeptic; they're not good with magic and they tend to freeze up when faced with the impossible, but they're emotionally stable and resistant to the Old Gods' corrupting influence. Characters with higher Insanity scores are, well, crazy; they tend to flip out a lot, but they're also more effective when doing battle with the forces of darkness. Choose your poison.

You'll rarely roll against your Insanity like you would a normal Trait. Instead, it sets a limit on the number of dice you can roll when dealing with the supernatural. If a pair of Hell Hounds jump you in an alley and your Insanity is only 2, you can only add 2 Details to your frantic running away action. (At least, you can only earn 2 dice.) This really evens the odds for twisted monsters and spell-slinging cultists with less than stellar Trait ratings. Need to complete an arcane ritual to vanquish a Demon Made Flesh? You'd better hope your Insanity's higher than 1!

So, what's the down side to having a high Insanity? First of all, there's the **Insanity Check**. Any time you fight a supernatural foe, even mooks, roll a single die. If the result is higher than your Insanity, you manage to keep a level head. Otherwise, you have two choices: Fight or Flight. If you chose to fight, all of your dice must be Yang (attack) dice. If you chose flight, they all have to be Yin (running away) dice. Of course, your Insanity rating still sets an upper limit on the total number of dice you can roll.

The other catch to a high Insanity score is that the forces of darkness have an easier time getting inside your squishy,

human brain. Most Old Gods are inherently telepathic; they can read your deepest thoughts, put new thoughts in your head, edit or erase your memories, and give you hypnotic commands. However, their victim's Insanity score sets the limit on how many dice they can roll for such purposes. The sane are harder to read and manipulate than the loopy.

Going Insane

For many games, the mechanics above are all you'll need. However, the long spiral into madness is such a big part of Lovecraftian horror that I suspect many GMs will want rules for changing a character's Insanity during play. There are a few ways to go about it. Pick the method that works best for you...

The Slowball - Every time a player makes an Insanity check and rolls under or equal to their Insanity (ie. they flip out), the Trait goes up by 1 point. This lets low-Insanity characters stay stable for a long while, but their slide into madness accelerates as their Insanity increases.

The Fastball - Every time a player makes an Insanity check and rolls over their Insanity (ie. they keep it together) the Trait goes up by 1 point. This causes low-Insanity characters to increase a lot at first, and then level off as they get crazier.

The Curveball - In this scheme, players get to break the Insanity rules by choosing to increase their Insanity by 1 point. For the remainder of the scene, they can either ignore the dice pool limit imposed by their Insanity or they can chose to split their dice between Yin and Yang (if they flipped out), but they

cannot ignore both rules at once.

Whatever method you use, a character's Insanity can never go above 5. Instead of adding a point to such a character's Trait, you should invent a new Weakness based on the event that caused the Insanity Check. (Only do this on a roll of 6; the slowball would result in a lot of new Weaknesses!) It might just be a post-traumatic stress thing that sends them into flashbacks any time similar circumstances arise, or a phobic fear of the dark, blood, dogs, or something else that was present at the time. The new Weakness doesn't kick in until later on, however. GMs gets to decide exactly when the player finds out about it!

You can also allow characters' Insanity Traits to go down between sessions, presumably due to some off-camera psychotherapy, heavy medication, or their favorite brand of spiritual affirmation. I'd only do this 1 point at a time, but go with whatever works best for your game.

Horrific Details

Lovecraftian stories are rife with unique genre elements, and these offer plenty of additional inspiration for Details. Players should feel free to describe things that are usually left to the GM (barring veto, of course): features of the setting, aspects of supernatural creatures, and so forth. As usual, the best way to get a grip on these genre elements is to read up on the source material. However, I've tried to distill the essentials for you...

Non-Euclidean Geometry - Buildings and artifacts constructed by the Old Gods are often described in ways that

defy the laws of geometry: squares made entirely of obtuse angles, cubes with more than six sides, surfaces that are both curved and angular... pretty much anything you'll find in an Escher painting.

Indescribable Sensations - The human mind is not equipped to perceive alien realities. Those unfortunate enough to experience them often tell of colors they have never seen before, deafening silences, blinding darkness, and other confabulations of the familiar.

Impossible Scales - The Old Gods operate on scales far grander than anything in the human world. They travel through the depths of space, to and from places far beyond the limits of the known universe. The same goes for time: they were here in the primordial past and wait patiently for their time to rise in futures far too distant to comprehend.

Eldritch Anatomy - Manifestations of the Old Gods, whether they be creatures or magical effects, are supposed to be repellent to normal people. Use nature imagery that taps into everyone's basest aversions: slimy textures, the stench of rotting meat, swarms of insects, serpentine slithering, predatory teeth, and (of course) masses of writhing tentacles!

Creeping Insanity - Finally, players can also earn dice by describing their characters' internal reactions to all of the above. This falls largely into the Purple Prose category, but should involve a lot of introspection concerning the mind's inability to cope, the cold sweat of fear creeping over you, every cell in your body screaming to flee in any direction... you get the idea.

Illustrative Examples

The regular text below is devoted to the Description phase. It's written in prose because that's how a Pulp-Fu game should sound: like a single, coherent narrative. Slash marks like this / are used to separate individual Details. The total number of Details given, and dice earned, appears in parentheses like this. (# dice) In a Nemesis fight, each character may take turns describing a few Details at a time, in which case you may see multiple dice totals in a single paragraph. They'll be conveniently totaled up in the Resolution section...

... Which appears between dashed lines and in italics. It shows you how to take the dice earned during Description, roll those bad boys, and interpret the results.

The goal here is to teach by example. Wushu requires a major shift in how most veteran role-players think about their hobby, and there's a lot more to the pulps than can be conveyed in a few pages of game mechanics. These examples should give you a better feel for Pulp-Fu's unique blend of noir style and pulp action. With any luck, they'll also show you how to use the Wushu system in play and give you a few ideas for plots, stunts, and fight locations. Enjoy...

Speakeasy Showdown!!!

A Hard-Boiled Detective and his partner, the Penitent Hitman, have hired a local Grifter to help them track down the Insidious Dr. Fang. A snitch has lead them to The Rising Sun, a Chinatown speakeasy. The proprietor, they suspect, is one of Dr. Fang's seemingly countless alter egos... and he's in town to inspect his operation this very night! The Grifter gets them through the door easy enough, but the bouncer still demands that they leave their weapons with him. Inside, they find a nightclub filled with smoke, eastern decor, asian music, and throngs of inebriated patrons.

The Grifter says "Just follow my lead, boys" / and heads straight for the table with the most geisha girls and bodyguards around it. / As said bodyguards move towards him like the clouds of a gathering storm, / he shouts "We know who you are, sir, and our silence will be far from inexpensive!" / in perfect Mandarin. (5 dice) An oriental man with a long, zig-zaggy beard / regards the Grifter with a gaze like a surgeon's scalpel, / that cuts him open and lays bare his very soul. / Then, he raises one hand and gestures to his bodyguards... (4 dice)

The GM decides to leave the meaning of this gesture vague, so she can adapt it to the outcome of the roll. The Grifter's goal is to find out if the oriental man really is the Insidious Dr. Fang. He is, but if the Grifter fails, he'll call the PC's bluff and pretend not to know what they're talking about.

The Grifter rolls his 5 dice against his "Con Man (5)" Trait

and gets 1, 2, 2, 4, 6 for a total of 4 successes. (The 6 is over his Trait rating, so it's a failure). The good Doctor rolls his 4 dice against his "Cunning (5)" Trait and gets 1, 5, 5, 6 for a total of 3 successes. Fang falls for it hook, line, and sinker... but he reacts in a way the Grifter may not have expected!

As his bodyguards move in, the oriental man says, "Then you must know I cannot allow you to leave this place with such secrets on your lips." The Hitman runs forward and vaults onto Dr. Fang's table, / where he kicks the villain square in the face! (2 dice) Fang leaps to his feet and flips the table over / scattering shot glasses and liquor everywhere. (2 dice) The Hitman jumps up, letting the table somersault beneath him / and lands on the now empty floor in a Striking Scorpion stance. (2 dice) Fang enters a Coiled Viper stance in slow, smooth motions / and says, "Tell me, where did a foreign devil learn such an esoteric fighting style?" (2 dice) The Hitman replies, "From Master Wu Shan. You killed him." (1 die)

The Penitent Hitman has chosen to take on Dr. Fang, so the Grifter and the Detective handle the mook fight. Once again, Fang gets 4 dice; he choses to split them evenly between Yin and Yang. The Hitman gets 5 dice to roll against his "Angel of Death (5)" Trait and choses to roll 3 Yang and 2 Yin dice. All 3 attack dice come up successes, but only 1 of his defense dice. Rolling against his "Unusually Strong Chi (5)" Trait, Dr. Fang gets 1 Yang success and 2 Yin successes. The Hitman has just enough Yin to block Fang's attack, but the Doctor isn't so lucky.

He takes 1 hit, so the GM cashes in 1 of his 5 Chi tokens.

Meanwhile, the Grifter looks back at the Detective and says with a grin, "See, I told ya it was him!" / as he kicks one of the mooks in the crotch / and sprints towards the bar (3 dice). The Detective snatches a bottle of Midori from a nearby table as a half dozen martial artists surround him. "Okay, boys. I'm gonna give you one chance to walk away from this, but it's just 'cuz I don't wanna mess up those fancy shirts you got on," he says as a foot comes out of nowhere and kicks him in the chin. "Ow," he groans. "I wasn't ready, that time. Next time..." and another kick rushes towards him. This time, the Detective steps to the side, catches the mook's leg under his left arm, and smashes the bottle over his bald head. (6 dice)

The GM wants this mook fight to last about 3 rounds, against 2 players who'll roll 3-4 Yang successes per round, so she gives them a hefty Threat Rating of 20. The Grifter picks up a meager 3 dice the first round (he's workin' on something big for next round!) and reserves 1 for defense. Rolling against his "Fights Dirty (5)" Trait, he gets 1 Yin success and 2 Yang successes. The Detective filibusters his way into the max pool of 6 dice, rolls 1 for defense and rolls 4 Yang successes. Neither lose any Chi this round, but the mooks lose 6 points of Threat.

The Insidious Dr. Fang springs forward out of his Coiled Viper stance / and launches a volley of lightning quick punches at his enemy. (2 dice) The Hitman blocks each in turn, / then

catches the last one an inch from his face / and twists Fang around into an arm lock. (3 dice) The pain wracks the villain's body, but it cannot touch his disciplined mind. / He kicks off the back wall, vaulting over and behind his nemesis, / puts our hero in a headlock, / pulls a pistol from his sleeve / and presses the barrel against the Hitman's temple. (5 dice) The click of the hammer sounds like a death knell in our hero's ear. / The Hitman snaps his head back viciously, / delivering a brutal headbutt to Dr. Fang / as the bullet rockets past his face in slow motion. (4 dice)

That was some serious kung-fu, so the GM decides to ignore the dice pool limit and let 'em roll! Both combatants go on the offensive, rolling 4 Yang dice and 3 Yin. All the Hitman's attack dice come up successes, but 2 of his Yin dice come up 6, leaving him with just 1 defensive success. The Doctor rolls 2 Yin successes, so he has to cash in 2 more points of Chi to make up the difference, leaving him with 2 to spare. Luckily for the Hitman, two of his Yang dice come up 6, for a net of 2 offensive successes. The Hitman cashes in 1 of his 3 Chi tokens.

Back behind the bar, the Grifter tears open the package he paid a bartender to hide there the day before. / Triumphantly, he emerges with a tommygun cradled in his arms. / "Kung-Fu this, ya palookas!" he yells / as the machinegun sprays hot lead like a fire hose! (5 dice) The Detective dives for the floorboards / and curses the day he met that two bit con man. / One of the bodyguards hits the deck right next to him, / so the Detective

stabs him in the face with the business end of his broken bottle.
/ The mook screams and jerks away just in time to catch a bullet
in the brain. (5 dice)

The Grifter earned that first die with One-Upmanship: He had not mentioned paying a bartender to hide that tommygun before the scene; he made it up on the spot. The GM could have vetoed it, if she really wanted a no-guns bar brawl, but she went with it because it was funny. Whatever works for the scene.

Both players choose to roll 1 Yin die and 4 Yang dice. The Grifter rolls a 6 on his Yin die, so he cashes in 1 of his 3 points of Chi. They both luck out on their attack dice and get 8 Yang successes between them, knocking the Threat down to 6.

His face still hot from the muzzle flash / the Penitent Hitman brings an arm up to block Fang's gun hand. (2 dice) Dr. Fang pulls back, plants a foot in the small of the Hitman's back / and kicks him into the back wall with enough force to crack the plaster, / then unloads the pistol into his enemy's back. (3 dice) All the Hitman can do is duck and cover / while the bullets send plaster spraying all around him. / Fortunately, that headbutt had broken Fang's nose and some of the blood splashed into his eyes. / As the dust settles, he turns around slowly and pats himself down in disbelief. None of the bullets connected. (4 dice) The Doctor blinks the blood away, / stares at the Hitman with eyes the size of dinner plates, / then snarls like a wild beast and charges in! (3 dice)

Notice that the player and the GM decided which attacks would succeed and fail during their Descriptions. This is as it should be; it gives them the greatest possible control over the action. Remember, no one can "win" until the Coup de Grace!

The Hitman decides to split his dice evenly this time, rolling 3 Yin and 3 Yang dice. Dr. Fang, on the other hand, grows tired of this crap and decides to go on the offensive. He rolls 4 Yang dice and 2 Yin, but it backfires when he only gets 1 Yin success versus the Hitman's 3 Yang successes! There go his last 2 points of Chi! 3 of his Yang dice are successes, but so are all 3 of the Hitman's Yin dice, so our hero loses no Chi at all!

When the tommygun finally exhausts its ammo, the mooks move in for the kill. / The Grifter turns his chopper around / and hits the mook to his left with an expert golf swing / that sends him crashing through a dinner table. (4 dice) Two more mooks run up to the bar, but the Detective appears behind them. / He picks up a bar stool and smashes it to tinder over the first one's back. / Then, he grabs the other mook by his silk collar / and pounds his head into the bar, / grinding the shards of broken shot glasses into his face. (5 dice) As he sits down, exhausted, the Grifter silently pours him a drink. (1 die)

The mooks don't have much of a chance of surviving this round, so both the Grifter and the Detective decide to roll all of their dice to attack. Since they know they won't have any Yin successes, they each turn in 1 point of Chi right up front. They

each roll 5 Yang dice and get a total of 9 successes, which is more than enough to obliterate the mooks' remaining Threat.

Fang grasps his gun by the barrel and swings it down like a sledgehammer. (1 die) The Hitman steps to the side and takes it on the shoulder. / He feels a fracture crack open at the point of impact and course down his scapula. / Fighting through the pain, he sees his opening and / delivers a knife-hand strike to his nemesis' throat, / crushing his trachea. (5 dice) The Doctor knows he only has a few seconds to live, so he unleashes a whirlwind of crazed attacks: / a flying kick that snaps the Hitman's head back, / a spinning leg sweep that knocks him to the floor, / and a series of frenetic open-hand strikes / that crack his sternum like a jackhammer pounding pavement! (5 dice)

The GM is happy to let Fang die this round, but she wants him to go out with a bang! She rolls all 6 dice for attack and gets 5 successes! The Hitman goes conservative, rolling 2 Yang dice and 3 Yin dice to get 2 attack and 2 defense successes. With his last 2 points of Chi, that puts him at -1 and the good doctor at -2. They're both down, but the Hitman gets the Coup de Grace...

The Hitman lies on the floor, coughing up blood, as the fiend's diseased brain finally runs out of air. He waves his allies away when they approach, "Get the hell outta here, before the cops show up," he tells them. Later, when he feels Fang's body grow cold, he closes his eyes... and rests.

The World of Tomorrow!!!

The Master Spy races through the city in his super-charged Studebaker while his partner searches for The Future's doomsday device. The Man of Science knows that the device uses a radioactive isotope to ignite a thermal chain reaction in normal atmosphere / so he has modified the Master Spy's portable radio receiver to pick up trace radioactivity. / He carefully records the clicks and whistles it makes as they zigzag through the city, / using the strength of the signal to triangulate the device's most probable path. (4 dice)

This is a simple investigation action, and the GM could have just asked for a Scab Roll, but the player had some good techno-babble on hand and wanted to go the whole nine yards. He rolls 4 dice against his "Gadgeteer (5)" Trait and gets 2, 2, 4, 5... all successes. One would have been enough.

The trail leads them directly onto the old grounds of the World's Fair, down the Midway, and into the House of Tomorrow exhibit. The doomsday device isn't hard to spot: a silver sphere hangs from the living room ceiling; / a clock in its center ticks away the last two minutes the world may ever see. / Unfortunately for our heros, a crowd of Atomic Supermen, each more mutated than the last, stands between it and them. (3 dice)

A pair of pistols slide out of the Master Spy's impeccably tailored sleeves as he tells his partner, "I'll take care of them. Just disable that monstrosity!" He fires at the front most pair,

blasting fist-sized holes through their scaly and puss-covered faces, respectively. They fall to the ground, quivering as their buddies rush forward to avenge them! (6 dice)

The GM wants to make sure there's some "super" in her atomic supermen, so she decides they'll dish out 2 hits per round instead of the usual 1. She figures the Master Spy will get about 3 successes per round, and wants the fight to last at least 3 rounds, so she gives them a Threat rating of 10.

The Spy filibusters himself 6 dice and decides to split them into 2 Yin dice and 4 Yang dice. Using his "Deadly (4)" Trait, he gets 2 Yin and 2 Yang successes. He loses no Chi this round and reduce the mooks' Threat rating to 8.

The Man of Science fires his rocket boots, / sails up into plexiglass rafters, / and lands squarely atop the device. / He conjures a plasma torch from his lab coat / and begins slicing his way through the device's silver casing. (5 dice)

When our heros first entered the House of Tomorrow, the GM earned 3 Yin dice for the doomsday device. Rolling against The Future's "Mechanist (5)" Trait, she gets 3 successes.

The Man of Science is using his rocket boots to defeat its first line of defense (being suspended in the air) and his plasma torch is taking care of the second (its silver shell). He declares all his dice Yang and rolls against his "Gadgeteer" Trait again, getting 4 successes. The GM gives the device 2 Chi and cashes in 1 of them to make up the difference.

Down below, the Master Spy walks backwards into the Kitchen of Tomorrow as calmly as if he were carrying in the groceries. His twin pistols produce a thundering hail of bullets that shatters a china set and most of the cupboard doors, pierces an insectoid mutant's gigantic compound eyes, pummels a half-lion half-man into a mass of blood and fur, and bounces harmlessly off the armored flesh of a Man of Steel. Then, click, click, click... he's out of ammo! (6 dice)

That filibuster combines a lot of Pulp-Fu tricks, including descriptions of the mutant NPCs and some fun with failure. The Master Spy splits his 6 dice into 4 Yang and 2 Yin, once again. Unfortunately, he rolls two 6's, one of each, leaving him 3 Yang and 1 Yin success. He tosses the GM 1 Chi token and knocks the mooks' Threat down to 5.

Meanwhile, the Man of Science pries away a square of metal and lets it drop to the floor far below. He hears a soft "click" as a high-capacity circuit closes inside the device. / A powerful electrical field courses over the its silver surface / arcing bolts of blue lightning into the air! (3 dice) The Man of Science expected something like this, so he made sure to wear his rubberized gloves. / He jumps up and grabs onto one of the cables supporting the device, / swings around it as the booby trap does its deadly work, / and then carefully lowers himself back down. (4 dice)

The doomsday device is definitely on the offensive! The GM choses to roll all 3 of her dice to attack, while the Man of Science splits his for 3 defense and 1 attack. The GM rolls 2, 4, 4 for 3 successes. The player rolls a 6 in his Yin pool, leaving 2 successes. He owes the GM a point of Chi. His Yang die came up a success, so the GM cashes in the device's last Chi, too.

The Man of Steel lands a kick that sends the Master Spy flying through a window and out onto the Deck of Tomorrow. / The whole place springs to life: deck furniture, a wet bar, and work-out equipment pop conveniently out of the floor. / The Spy grabs a pair of dumbbells off a rapidly retracting rack, / ducks under a sledgehammer swing, / and delivers a punishing right hook to the mutant's midsection, / then follows it with a left hook that puts a deep dent in his armored skull. (6 dice)

Once again, the Master Spy earns a die by describing his own ass-kicking. He knows he has enough Chi to survive this round, so he decides to go for the kill. He rolls all 6 of his dice to attack, getting 2, 2, 3, 5, 5, 6... just enough to put the Man of Steel down! He turns in the last of his Chi and calls it a night.

High above, the Man of Science wrestles with his nemesis' devilish design. The device is packed with dummy wires that outnumber actual, working parts two to one! / Plus, all of the wires are exactly the same color / and stretched so tight there's no way to pull them apart! (3 dice) The Man of Science attaches a voltage meter to one of the wires / but it just snaps in

half and the timer starts to count down in triple time! / Panicking, our hero searches frantically through his pockets, / pulls out a pistol, / and blasts away like a madman! (5 dice)

The GM describes the device's last line of defense, then the player adds another: the triple-time count-down! (Note that the Man of Science is pretty sure this will be the final round.) The GM declares all her dice Yin, so the player goes for all Yang. She gets 3 successes, but the player gets 4. Since the device is out of Chi, that's curtains for the The Future's engine of evil! That entitles the Man of Science to a Coup de Grace...

The timer flashes "00:00:01" and then goes dark. The Man of Science slumps forward and lies face down on the device, weak with relief, as his partner emerges from the Kitchen of Tomorrow, still brushing shards of glass from his tuxedo. "Hey, there! No time for a nap! Did you disarm the infernal thing or not?" The Man of Science just offers a feeble thumbs up, then returns to his nap.

Nazis on Wheels!!!

The Rumrunner races through the crowded streets of Bombay, four pairs of Nazis hot on his heels! In the back seat, the Liberated Woman keeps a tight grip on the Staff of Shiva, an ancient relic they just rescued from a Nazi convoy. The Flying Ace is in the passenger seat, desperately wishing he was behind the wheel.

A pair of Nazi motorcycles flank the Rumrunner's recently "acquired" Chrysler Imperial. The engine roars like a jaguar / as he hits the gas and jerks the wheel to the right / bumping one into a head-on collision with a farmer's cart. (3 dice) On the other side, the Nazi in the sidecar jumps across the gap and starts climbing his way into the back seat. The Liberated Woman shatters his left goggle with the Staff of Shiva, / then kicks him hard in the face, / sending him careening into a fisherman's catch o' the day. (3 dice) The Flying Ace steps over the Rumrunner with a quick "Beg yer pardon" / and leaps into the now vacant sidecar, / pushes the driver unceremoniously off his seat, and takes control of the bike / with a nod and a wave to his friends in the car. (4 dice)

These mooks are just a warm-up for something else the GM has planned, so she gives them a Threat Rating of 12 and sets the dice pool limit at 4 dice. Each player reserves one die for defense. The Rumrunner rolls against his driving Trait, "Bat Shit Crazy (5)," getting 1, 1, 4 to attack (all successes) and a 6 to defend (big failure). He tosses the GM one of his Chi tokens and says, "Damn, I must have dented the fender!"

None of the Liberated Woman's dice roll over her "Tough as Nail (5)" Trait, so she loses no Chi and takes 2 points off that Threat Rating. The Flying Ace uses his "Daredevil (4)" Trait and rolls 1 Yin success and 2 Yang successes. All together, that reduces the Threat to 5.

The two remaining Nazi bikers open fire on our heroes!

The Flyboy zigzags across the road like a madman, / alternately drawing their fire and blocking bullets with his sidecar. (2 dice) The Liberated Woman opens the passenger side door and swings herself out over the road / to nab a bag of flour from a passing truck. / She tears it open with her teeth as she swings back into the car / and empties its contents into the air to create a white smoke screen behind them. (4 dice) The Rumrunner cranks on the emergency brake / and sends the car into a box slide that spins them sideways / and rockets into a narrow side street / as the Nazis sail blindly into a dead end! (4 dice) The Flying Ace zigs the other way and zags off down an alley of his own (1 die).

The Liberated Woman racked up 4 dice with a nice Pass, which both of her fellow players picked up for dice of their own. She rolls 1 Yin and 3 Yang, getting 1 Yin success and 2 Yang successes. The Rumrunner's pretty sure the mooks are done for, so he narrates what should be their defeat (sailing blindly into a dead end) for 1 Yin die and 3 Yang dice. He splits his dice evenly, not wanting to lose any more Chi, and gets 2 successes of each kind. The Flying Ace gets a total of 3 dice, rolls 1 Yin and 2 Yang, and rolls a 6 on that Yin die! He cashes in 1 point of Chi and contributes to a Yang total of 6 for the round, more than enough to end the Nazi pursuit... or so they think!

As the Imperial blasts down a wide boulevard, a new threat emerges: a Nazi fighter plane bears down on them / like a falcon diving for a fresh kill / and strafes the street with its twin

machineguns! (3 dice) The Rumrunner, swearing profusely, / dodges to the left and then back to the right, / fishtailing straight through a stack of wicker baskets. (3 dice)

The Nazi pilot is a Nemesis, so the players will have to deal with him mono-a-mono. The GM gives him a “Do Nazi Stuff” Trait of 4 and 3 points of Chi. He’s on the offensive this round, so the GM declares all of her dice Yang, and the player declares all of his dice Yin. The Nazi rolls well, getting 2, 2, 4 for 3 Yang successes. However, the Rumrunner rolls 1, 3, 5 for an equal number of Yin successes and suffers no damage.

Two streams of bullets tear their way down the street; / one catches the back of the car at the end of its fishtail / and pops a hole in the gas tank! (3 dice) The Liberated Woman sees their fuel spraying out onto the road. / She quickly tears a strip of cloth from her skirt / and crams the makeshift plug into the leak. (3 dice)

Once again, the GM decides to roll all of her dice to attack. The Liberated Woman’s actions seem purely defensive, but she decides that someone needs to take this Nazi down a peg, so she declares one her dice Yang. None of them roll over 5, giving her 2 Yin successes and 1 Yang success. The Nazi also rolls all successes, for a total of 3. Both the player and the GM must cash in a point of Chi to make up the difference.

Suddenly, the Flying Ace rockets in from an alley behind them! / Using a flight of stairs as a ramp, / he launches his Nazi-cycle into the air. / A metal chain unspools like a parade streamer behind him. (4 dice) Oblivious, the Nazi pilot swoops around for another attack / and his left wing swings towards the daredevil / like an executioner’s axe! (3 dice) The Flyboy jumps off his bike without skipping a beat, / drops his chain into the plane’s propeller, / and lands back on his bike as it returns to Earth! (3 dice) The Nazi tries to pull away, / but the chain is already wrapping around his nose, / so he guns the engine for one last burst of speed! (3 dice)

Inspired by Flyboy’s daredevil stunt, the GM decides to ignore the dice pool limit for this round. The Flying Ace splits his pool into 3 Yin dice and 4 Yang; the GM decides to split hers 2 Yin and 4 Yang. They both roll some 6’s, leaving the Flying Ace with 3 Yang successes vs. the Nazi’s 1 Yin. The GM tosses in her last 2 points of Chi, but her pilot is still in the fight! The Nazi’s 2 Yang successes just fall short of getting past the Flying Ace’s 2 Yin successes, so the player gets to keep his Chi (for now).

The chain pulls taught and whips the plane into a nose dive, / but the extra speed is just enough to tear the chain free of its moorings (a blacksmith’s shop) / and the entire plane crashes into... plummets towards the road just ahead of our heros! (3 dice) The Rumrunner pushes the accelerator through the floor / and scrapes under the plane just before it hits terra firma! (2 dice) The Flying Ace tries to jump over the wreck (1 die),

but the propeller comes flying upwards like a striking snake / and knocks his bike out from under him, / sending him flying head-first into the air! (3 dice) The Liberated Woman sees this and swings herself out to the side of the car again. / She uses the Staff of Shiva to knock loose a cafe's street umbrella to break Flyboy's fall. (2 dice) He falls right through it, crashing (safely) into a woman's tea and crumpets! (1 die)

The GM begins to describe a crash, but the Rumrunner asks to cut in, so the GM changes "crashes into the road" to "plummets towards the road." Since the Nazi is not long for this world, the GM decides to let the players all contribute to a shared dice pool, so they give two Details each. (Actually, the Flying Ace gave 3, but can only use 2.) The Nazi gets an equal pool, 6 Yang dice, and decides to roll 4 of them against Flyboy and 1 each against the Rumrunner and the Liberated Woman.

Both the Rumrunner and the Flying Ace decide to split their dice between 1 Yin and 1 Yang; the Liberated Woman rolls both of her dice Yin, but lends them to the Flying Ace. The GM lucks out and only rolls 1 failure: the attack on the Rumrunner (who had a Yin success, anyway). The Liberated Woman does roll 2 Yin successes, but they're not protecting her, so she has to cash in a point of Chi against the Nazi's successful attack. Her 2 Yin successes add to the Flying Ace's 1 Yin success for a total of 3, just below the GM's 4. The Flying Ace cashes in one more point of Chi, but makes it through the crash safe & sound!

Terrors from Beyond!!!

The Intrepid Explorer has recently returned from Darkest Africa with an incredible find: a stone dais older even than the Pyramids! Unfortunately, a local Mystic came to him with a story about "great evil" arising from it, so the pair has broken into the museum to recover the blasted thing. There, they cross paths with a Savage who followed the relic to the states from Africa. What they find in a back hallway confirms their worst fears...

The GM calls for Scab Rolls before doling out the clues, but the players will have to Describe how they investigate those clues next round. The Intrepid Explorer grabs 4 dice, courtesy of his "Forgotten Lore (4)" Trait; the Mystic gets 4 for her "The Sight (4)" and the Savage gets 3 for "Shaman (3)." Their highest rolls are 6, 3, and 5, respectively. The Explorer gets the best clue...

A security guard lies on the floor, a gaping wound where his heart should be. The Explorer recognizes an ancient Egyptian symbol drawn in blood on the man's chest. He closes his eyes and mentally compares the symbols to others he's seen. / Yes, he remembers seeing something like this in a temple that was buried by an earthquake during the first dynasty. / He was being chased by a tribe of crocodile-men at the time, / but he's sure it was carved into a statue of... (4 dice) Hauhet, an ancient creator-goddess often connected to the idea of infinite space. This symbol marks the corpse as an offering to her.

The Intrepid Explorer used a nice bit of One Upsmanship to convince the GM that he would recognize that symbol. He rolls his 4 dice against his "Forgotten Lore (4)" Trait and gets 2 successes, which is more than enough. The GM rewards him with two bits of information: the significance of the symbol and the name of its deity.

The Mystic kneels beside the body and touches its forehead with her fingertips. / She opens her third eye and peers through the mists of time, / reliving the dead man's final moments. (3 dice) She sees a tall man in black robes, who seems to glide across the floor, sneak up behind the guard and slide a wickedly curved dagger into his back! Then, everything goes dark.

Since her Scab Roll didn't earn her any particular clues, the Mystic has to start from scratch. Her "The Sight (4)" Trait lets her see visions relating to things she touches, so she rattles off some genre-appropriate Details and sees what she can see. She rolls 4, 6, 6, which means only 1 success. The GM gives her a description of the High Priest, but that's about it.

Meanwhile, the Savage smells something foul on the air, / the scent of rot and things long dead. / He walks around the corpse and tracks the smell towards... (3 dice) The Special Collections wing. The scent is fresh; the killer passed here no more than a quarter hour before!

The GM still needs to make sure her players proceed to the fight scene, so she uses the Savage's successful Scab Roll as an excuse to lead him by his nose. The Savage rolls against his "Hunter (4)" Trait and gets 3 successes, which is just fine by the GM! She tells him exactly where they need to go...

Our heroes draw their weapons (a revolver, a short sword, and a hand axe, respectively) and rush down the hall! Spurred on by the sound of arcane chanting, the trio kicks open the door to the Special Collections wing and sees the black-robed man standing on an elaborately-carved dais. Silently, the figure raises his arms to either side, / points gauntlet-covered fingers at a pair of mummified warriors, / and whispers a command older than any human tongue. / The mummies lurch to life and raise their spears towards the intruders! (4 dice)

There's no need for the High Priest to roll for his spell; the GM wants it to happen, so it happens. However, she can roll those dice to defend the Priest, since that's what the undead bodyguards are for. She sets those 4 dice aside for later.

Right now, the players need to make Insanity Checks. It's not every day you see the dead rise from their graves! The Mystic has an Insanity of 4 and rolls a 6, so she keeps her wits about her. The Explorer has an Insanity of 3 and rolls a 4, so he also keeps his cool. The Savage has an Insanity rating of 4; he fails with a roll of 3 and decides to Fight...

The Savage sprints between them and leaps onto the robed figure's back, / snarling like a feral beast / and slashing madly with his axe. (3 dice)

Since he chose to Fight, the Savage must devote all 3 of his dice to attack. Using his "Law of the Jungle (5)" Trait, he rolls successes on all 3. The GM grabs those 4 Yin dice from before and rolls them against the Priest's "Brutal (3)" Trait, getting only 2 successes. The GM cashes in his only point of Chi.

That leaves the Explorer and the Mystic to deal with the mummies on their own. The latter loosens her sword arm and says to the former, "Don't waste your time with bullets, my friend." (1 die) The Explorer shoots her an incredulous look and unloads his revolver into the one on the right. The bullets pass right through the creature's dried flesh, but one also punctures a metal canister near the back wall, sparking off a jet of flame that sets the mummy ablaze! (6 dice) "Beginner's luck," notes the Mystic / as she parries a spear thrust / shatters the mummy's knee with a kick, / and lops off its bandaged head. (4 dice)

With their Insanity ratings limiting their dice pools, the GM expects her players to get about 4 Yang successes each round. She wants her mummies to last a few rounds, so she gives them a Threat Rating of 10.

The Explorer pulls off a great Filibuster, but his Insanity limits him to only 3 dice. Since these are mooks, he decides to roll 1 Yin and 2 Yang. Rolling against his "Lucky (5)" Trait, he

gets successes on them all.

The Mystic also has to toss one away; she earned 5 dice but her Insanity is 4. She rolls 1 Yin and 3 Yang against her "Warrior (5)" Trait, getting 3 Yang success and a big failure on that Yin die, so she tosses the GM a point of Chi. Adding in the Explorer's 2 successes, that reduces the mummies' Threat to 5.

Despite being incinerated and decapitated, respectively, the Threat Rating says the mummies are still in the fight. The GM thinks it'll be funny to have the headless one keep on attacking, so she decides to just go ahead with the next round of mook combat and catch up with the Savage in a minute...

Unfortunately, the rest of the mummy seems unimpaired by its sudden lack of head. It thrusts its spear towards the Explorer, / who manages to wrestle the weapon away / and jabs it through the thing's torso. (3 dice) It also grabs the Mystic by the throat and lifts her into the air. / Her third eye snaps open, revealing the threads of magic / that pull the creature's limbs like marionette strings. / She invokes the magic hidden within her blessed blade / and cuts its strings one by one! (6 dice)

The Explorer has more fun with failure and splits his dice 1 Yin and 2 Yang. Once again, they all come up successes! Meanwhile the Mystic makes up a lot of Details about mummy animation and her sword being "blessed," racking up 6 dice. This time, she decides she wants to roll them all, so she chooses to increase her Insanity to 5 and ignore the dice pool limit for the rest of the scene. She rolls 5 Yang and 1 Yin, getting 4 attack

successes and 1 defense. That's a grand total of 6 hits, which takes the mummies out for good!

Atop the dais, the Savage continues to sink his teeth and steel into the dark magician (1 die), who reaches up to grab the Savage's head / and flings him to the ground. / Then, the magi opens his palms, / utters a short incantation, / and releases two streams of brilliant energy that course through the Savage's body! (5 dice) He flies backwards and the bolts pin him against the wall, / but the Savage's insane fury cannot be contained so easily! / He lifts his hand axe and whips it across the room, / burying its blade in the bastard's head! (4 dice)

The Savage begins the narration, but then the GM cuts in mid-sentence (with permission, of course). Notice that it's the Savage who describes one of the effects of the spell: pinning him against the wall. He also gets in some Purple Prose before actually striking back, building a pool of 5 dice, but his Insanity limits him to 4. He can't split them because he's still flipped out, so he ends up with 2 Yang successes and no Yin.

The GM splits her 5 dice into 1 Yang and 4 Yin, getting 2 defensive success and zippo for attack. No one loses any Chi this round. That doesn't mean the High Priest can't die on purpose, though...

"You're too late, warrior!" the magician screams. "From the depths of infinite space, I ARISE!!!" More lightning erupts from his body, pouring out of his eyes and mouth. The river of

light pushes the axe out of his skull and flings it into the wall a few inches from the Savage's head!

That was just for fun... and to trigger some more Insanity checks. This time, the Explorer is the only one who flips out. Based on his Weakness ("Self-Aggrandizing Pretty Boy"), the player chooses Flight.

The Explorer lets something to the effect of "Fuck this" pass his lips, / then spins on his heel / and dashes for the exit! (3 dice) Unfortunately, a bolt of light flashes through his body, / jerking him around like a rag doll, / and slams the doors closed with telekinetic force! (3 dice)

The Explorer rolls all 3 dice against his "Lucky (5)" Trait and gets 3 Yin successes. The Demon Made Flesh rolls 3 Yang dice against its "Dark Magic (5)" Trait and also gets 3 successes. He may be trapped, but at least the Explorer lost no Chi.

With her third eye still open, the Mystic sees the goddess in her full glory. / The unfathomable void between the galaxies stretches out all around her / before her mind can force her inner eye shut. / Her body rushes into battle of its own accord / and she hears herself scream "You are nothing, and to nothing shall you return!" (5 dice) The goddess made flesh just laughs a deep, echoing laugh / and the space around her begins to warp and stretch. / No matter how close the Mystic gets, there always seems to be more distance between them! (3 dice)

The GM gives the Demon Made Flesh 3 Chi tokens and decides to roll 2 of her dice in defense, since it sounded like a pretty defensive spell. She rolls 1 Yang and 2 Yin successes. The Mystic figures she has a couple more points of Chi, so she decides to split her pool into 2 Yin and 4 Yang dice. She rolls two 6's, one of each, leaving 1 Yin and 3 Yang successes. That is just enough to block the Demon's attack and get 1 Yang past its defenses. Since the Mystic was never described as actually hitting the Demon, they explain the lost Chi as fatigue from channeling such dark energies. (Yeah, that sounds good.)

The Savage whispers a prayer to his ancestors / yanks his axe from the wall, / and crashes through Hauhet's protective ward! (3 dice) The vile creature spins around / and clocks the Savage with a vicious backfist, (2 dice) but the warrior holds tight to her arm / and plunges his axe into her heart! (2 dice) Hauhet screams a scream that pierces the humans' ears / as energy spills from the wound. / Her other fist delivers a thunderous punch to the Savage's chest / and sends him soaring back towards the exit. (4 dice)

The Savage's shamanic counter-spell is just one part of an otherwise physical attack, so he rolls all of his dice against his "Law of the Jungle (5)" Trait. Unfortunately, he has to drop one of those dice because his Insanity is only 4. He puts them all into attack and rolls 3 successes. The Demon splits her dice evenly, rolling 2 Yin successes and 3 Yang. She loses another

point of Chi, but wipes the Savage out completely! He's not done yet, but he's pretty damn close. Luckily for him...

The goddess' wailing fades away as a blinding light fills the room. When our heros recover their vision, the room is empty. The Mystic didn't need second sight to know they'd be seeing her again...

The GM always intended this scene to be her players' first encounter with a recurring Nemesis. Since Hauhet is still alive and kickin', she decides to end the scene with a flashy escape. No roll necessary.

Remember: The GM's only goal should be to run a game that entertains the group. If there's no need to fear the GM, then there's no need to fear their unrestrained dramatic license!
