

# WU SHU



Written by Daniel Bayn

Loath Your Fellow Man  
[www.Bayn.org](http://www.Bayn.org)

# INTRODUCTION

Have you ever noticed how most "traditional" role-playing games tend to discourage cinematic actions (complex or risky stunts, multiple actions, etc.) with mountains of modifiers? In the interest of "realism," GMs are told to slap penalties onto these kinds of actions in order to make them more difficult. In other words, to make them more likely to fail. To the extent that people prefer success over failure, such games reward players for sticking to safe (i.e. boring) courses of action. If you want to play a tactical game, that's all well and good. If you don't...

Most games that try to emulate action movies dispense with modifiers, or at least tone them down significantly. However, all that does is punish players less; it doesn't promote the kind of over-the-top, tactically unsound (yet almost always successful) stunts that make action movies worth watching... and cinematic games worth playing.

Thus did I realize the need for Wushu: a role-playing game that actively encourages players to provide the most vivid, creative, and over-the-top action descriptions they can. It doesn't do it with an add-on system of special points, or a set of pre-defined maneuvers that must be chosen during character creation. Instead, Wushu ties entertaining descriptions right into the core mechanic, making them essential for success. Wushu is the only game where over-the-top stunts actually make tactical sense, because they're *more* likely to succeed, each and every time.

## ADAPTING MOVIES & TV SHOWS

After a few test sessions, Wushu revealed an unexpected strength: It makes it incredibly easy to turn movies and TV shows into role-playing games. Damn easy. Since Wushu doesn't use game stats for weapons or gear, and allows you to create special powers the same way as any other character Trait, you don't have to crunch a single number or worry a lick about game balance. The core mechanic handles everything in natural, narrative terms. As long as *you* understand how something works in the game world, the rules don't have to.

For more information and plenty of examples, see the "Adaptation" section.

# THE TRAIT SYSTEM

Wushu uses the same 1-5 Trait system to describe characters that Blur and Flip use, two of my other role-playing systems. This means that you can use characters and adventures from one game with any of the others. Both are available, for free, online:

**Blur: The Hand is Quicker than the Die**

<http://www.Bayn.org/blur>

**Flip: Disgustingly Simple Live-Action Role-Playing**

<http://www.Bayn.org/flip>

As long as I'm pimping out my other games...

**Erebus: A World of Blazing Action & Dark Intrigue**

A dark fantasy setting with 1920's flair and anime style.

**Vampires Suck: 13 New Stabs at an Old Enemy**

A systemless sourcebook for revamping vampires in any RPG.

**Star Wars (As Directed by John Woo & the Wachowski Brothers)**

A guide to reinventing the Star Wars universe for Hong Kong action.



# MECHANICS

Wushu uses pools of 6-sided dice for its obligatory dice rolling fun. However, the rolling and counting is really the smallest sliver of the game. The meat is in the declaration of actions, describing them *before* the dice are rolled. This is pretty much the polar opposite of traditional RPGs, where players are pressured to declare actions quickly, and then time is spent figuring out all the mechanics.

**Here's how it works:** Every player gets one die in their pool just for doing *something*. To get more dice, they have to add details to their description of the action. These "Embellishments" can be anything from additional actions to technical details or dramatic flourishes. As long as they're entertaining, and appropriate to the desired tone of the game, they're worth an extra die. For example...

A player who shoots someone gets only their default (1) die. A player who shoots someone (1) while jumping down a flight of stairs (+1) and landing in a summersault (+1) gets 3 dice. A player who shoots someone (1), then ducks under a punch (+1) and leg sweeps the guy (+1) so he can shoot the goon behind him (+1) and then knocks out the first guy with a boot to the face (+1) gets 5 dice.

A player who kicks someone gets only their default (1) die. A player who kicks someone (1) in the throat (+1), making their trachea collapse with an audible "sssssnap" (+1) gets 3 dice. A player who kicks someone (1) so hard that they crash through a window (+1) and fall screaming to the street seven floors below (+1), crushing the roof of a taxi (+1) and causing on-lookers to run screaming in all directions (+1) gets 5 dice.

Of course, the GM (and the group) has the right to **veto** any Embellishment for any reason. Usually, this means reigning in players who want to deviate from the desired tone of the game, making things too gritty or too cartoonish. Creativity is our friend, but even friends can wear out their welcome. Just make sure everyone agrees on what kind of game they want to play *before* you get started.

GMs can also set an **upper limit** on the size of any individual player's dice pool. I recommend 6 dice, max. Most players seem to settle in around 3-5

dice, though your mileage will most certainly vary. You can use this limit to streamline play even further by encouraging players to **Filibuster**: Instead of grabbing dice as they add Embellishments, filibustering players just launch into a narrative that includes more than enough material to justify the max dice pool. Less counting, better flow, and it's damn fun to watch!

There are two ways you can handle all of this vibrant narration. The **Taking Turns** method will be familiar to most gamers: Each player takes a turn describing their action(s), grabbing dice as they go. Once the last person is done, everyone rolls their dice at the same time.

The **Communal** method dispenses with turn-taking and allows players to bounce ideas off of each other, improvising the scene (and picking up dice) as they go. Once everyone has said what they want to say, they all roll their dice at the same time. This system can be somewhat more difficult to manage, especially if you have any players who don't share the spotlight well, but it really promotes spontaneity and improvisation.

## RESOLUTION

You've got your dice, and now it's time to let 'em roll! To determine which dice come up successes, and which come up failures, you'll need a **Target Number**. Every Wushu character has a set of Traits, rated from 1-5, that define what they're good and bad at. Select a Trait that's appropriate to the action(s) you described. Every die that comes up greater than the Trait's rating is a failure. All the others are successes. (If you don't have a Trait that's related to your action, the default rating is 2.)

If you're doing more than one thing, and no single Trait is applicable to them all, go ahead and use **two or more Traits**. Before you roll, decide which dice are going to use which Trait, since they may give you different Target Numbers. Roll the dice separately and resolve each action separately.

Every Wushu character should have a **Weakness**: One Trait that represents something they're bad at. This Trait is always rated 1. Any time a character's Weakness is related to a roll, the player *must* use a Target Number of 1, regardless of any other relevant Traits they possess.

If no one's **opposing your action**, all you need is one success. If another character *is* opposing you, the character with the most successes wins.

(There are a few more wrinkles in combat situations, but we'll get to those in the "Combat" section.) If you're being hindered by some kind of adverse condition, like being **blinded** or **restrained**, you'll have to use your first success to overcome it, before anything else counts.

The important thing to remember is that Resolution is a **purely mechanical** process. All of your narrative description, every last word of it, belongs in the description segment *before* Resolution. Everything the players described already happened, regardless of the successes rolled or lack thereof. The dice only tell you *how well* things worked, not *if* they worked at all.

## CHI

There are few things worse than watching a dramatic moment or plot arch get beaten down by a freak roll of the dice. That's why I like to put some kind of safety net into all my games. Chi is used primarily to survive being hit in combat (see the "Combat" section), but players can also **sacrifice it willingly** to recover from a bad roll. (In a way, that's exactly what happens during combat, but more on that later.)

Bring a knife to a gunfight? Spend some Chi and pull an Uzi off the nearest dead body! That mystical jewel slipped through your fingers when your pal tossed it to you? Hand over a point of Chi and it skitters to a stop at your feet. Spending your **last point of Chi** in this manner will never "kill" a character, but it *will* leave them vulnerable to attack.

## SCAB ROLLS

Every once in a while, you may run across something you want to roll for, but that you don't want to Embellish. Roll a number of dice equal to the rating of your relevant Trait, and compare the highest result to this scale:

- 1 = A horrible, embarrassing failure.
- 2 = A regular old failure.
- 3 = Still a failure, but barely.
- 4 = Barely successful.
- 5 = Solid, competent success.
- 6 = Astoundingly successful!

# COMBAT

When characters are beating the holy hell out of each other, the difference between success and failure is a bit more complicated than just "who has the most success." That's why there are a few special rules for combat. Not too many, as rules aren't healthy in large doses, but a few.

## YIN & YANG DICE

During fight scenes, players have to divide their dice pools into offensive and defensive sets. **Yang Dice** are used to inflict harm upon others. **Yin Dice** are used to avoid getting harmed, whether it's thanks to your ninja-like agility, a mystical energy shield, just because you're tough as nails. This adds a tiny tactical element to the game: Players can choose to play it safe and pick off enemies one at a time (more Yin, less Yang) or throw caution to the wind with a full-frontal assault (more Yang, less Yin).

A few clarifications: 1) You have to decide which dice are Yin and which are Yang *before* you roll! 2) The number of Yin or Yang dice does not have to match the number of offensive or defensive Embellishments given by the player, though that would be nice. 3) It might be a good idea to have two different colors/sets of dice on the table, to make it easier to keep track.

## NEMESSES

Nemeses are significant characters, usually major villains or their more memorable underlings. (In other words, they're not Mooks. See below.) When a player-character is fighting a Nemesis, each successful Yin die is used to cancel out an enemy's Yang die. If any Yang dice get through, the injured character loses a one point of **Chi** per Yang die. If a character doesn't have enough Chi, they're out of the fight. (Not dead, just out of the fight. Personally, I hate killing off player-characters.)

All player-characters (PCs) get **3 Chi points**; the GM assigns Nemeses 1-5 Chi, as they see fit. Remember, these guys might be going toe-to-toe with more than one player-character, so they gotta be able to take a beating!

PCs **regain** Chi as dramatically appropriate. Usually, that means 1-2 points between scenes. If you want to make certain weapons more dangerous (guns, poison, etc.), require more time and/or medical attention to heal the wounds they inflict. Conversely, damage from stun weapons would go away almost instantly. Handing out poker chips of different colors works great for keeping track of wounds and Chi.

## MOOKS

These are the minor, faceless, unnamed, and just generally unimportant characters whose sole purpose is to get their asses handed to them by the PCs. In game terms, they only exist as an abstract. Players should feel free to describe as many as they want, in whatever locations they want, in order to describe the actions that they want. (Of course, the GM can mandate this to a certain extent, just to make sure someone's guarding that ancient talisman, minding the hostages, or whatever.)

GMs should give every group of Mooks a **Threat Level** based on how challenging they want the fight to be (see below). Every Yang die generated by the PCs reduces the Mooks' Threat level by 1 point. When the Threat reaches zero, the mooks have been defeated. Whether that means they're dead, restrained, or running for their hollow little lives is up to you.

Mooks don't have Traits, and they don't roll dice. When fighting Mooks, any player who fails to roll at least 1 Yin success **loses 1 point of Chi**. (You can explain it afterwards if you want, but encourage players to work a few lucky Mook hits into their descriptions, just in case they get nailed.) If you *need* to roll dice for a Mook, they always get the default Trait rating of 2. What can I say? They suck!

You should **assign Threat levels** based on how long you want a fight to last. Exactly how long it takes for a group of players to mow down a bunch of Mooks depends on how many players you have, how many dice they usually earn, and their combat-relevant Trait ratings. You may need to experiment a little before you get it pinned down. Generally speaking, each player can be expected to generate about 3 successful Yang dice per "round," so multiply your number of players by 3, and then multiply that by the number of "rounds" you want.



You can explain **higher Threat levels** in a variety of ways. The most obvious is just using larger numbers of Mooks. However, a small group of Mooks with bad ass gear, like machine guns and body armor, also pose more of a Threat, as do highly trained commandos or ninja types. Creatures with special powers also deserve inflated Threat levels: zombies, vampires, cyborgs, animal swarms, and hordes of rampaging killbots are all mooks, but they're a bit tougher than your average pissed-off bar patron.

## WEAPONS & ARMOR

There are no special rules for different kinds of weapons or armor in Wushu. One hit from a fist or sword does the same amount of "damage" as one hit from a gun or grenade. Nor does it matter if you fire one shot or unloaded the whole clip. If you want to benefit from big guns and cool armor, make sure to work them into your descriptions as Embellishments. This keeps the focus on the characters, not their gear. It also speeds up play and models the cinematic feel of action movies.

## SCREW INITIATIVE!!!

There are also no particular rules for initiative. It's really rather irrelevant in Wushu. However, if the order in which things happen ever becomes important, have each player involved roll their default die against a relevant Trait *before* they start describing their actions. Play proceeds from the highest success to the lowest, then from the highest failure to the lowest. Ties happen simultaneously. Of course, they don't get to use their default die for the action itself, just whatever extra dice they earn through Embellishments.

# MAGIC

Wushu encourages creative magic the same way it encourages cinematic stunts: By awarding extra dice for entertaining Embellishments. To illustrate, I'll detail some typical forms of magic as scene in movies and TV shows...

## RITUALS

High Magic, as it's sometimes called, is characterized by complex rituals, arcane incantations, and exotic materials. Many times, no one even knows why or how the spell does what it does. All they know for sure is that, if they perform the ritual exactly right, shit happens.

Rituals have very specific effects and most are only useful under very particular circumstances. In other words, they're plot devices. Feel free to use them as such. Need to vanquish an unkillable demon? There just might be an ancient ritual for you! Need to protect your home from legions of undead? Crack open ye olde books of forgotten lore and look up a warding spell! (That's right, even expert occultists have to research their Rituals. See the "Other Examples" for more on academic & research actions.)

Players working a ritual can earn **extra dice** by inventing its high magic trappings: runic symbols, spooky chants, mythic imagery, incense, powders, fancy daggers, and on and on. Summoning a spirit often requires knowing its True Name. Inscribing a circle or pentagram with silver or holy water is quite common, as is the invoking of the four (or five) elements. For black magic, a blood sacrifice may be in order. GMs may specify some of these, like a rare herb or some long-lost talisman, for purposes of plot.

Most of the time, as long as the players get at least one success, **rituals should just work**. Demon vanquished, shield created, whatever. If the spell is something that a character can struggle against, go ahead and let them roll. If the spellcasters had more successes, the spell wins. Optionally, the GM can require a **minimum number of successes** for rituals: 2-3 is good for most spells, but you can require even more *if* you let the players build up successes over time. (This can also make them harder to resist, since the victim will also have to build up more successes.)

# VODOO

One of the oldest tenets of folk magic is the sympathetic principle: Like Produces Like. You probably know it best as "voodoo," though it might be more appropriately called Low Magic. The basic idea is that you create a symbolic model of a person, object, or a place, and anything you do to the model also happens to the thing it represents.

Low Magic is great for quick-n-dirty spells. Mold a rough model of an enemy out of clay, stick in some needles, and cause debilitating pain! Or shove the doll in a black bag to rob them of their sight! Grab a handful of dirt, sprinkle over an open flame, and bring forth fire from the ground at an enemy's feet!

Players get **extra dice** for describing the various components of their models and how they symbolize the spell's target(s) and/or desired effect. They can also earn dice by including homeopathic components like hair clippings, photographs, and objects of personal significance.

Most of the time, voodoo victims will be able to struggle against these spells, if only through an effort of will. As usual, whoever has the most successes wins. If the spell only affects inanimate objects, you just need one. As long as the model remains intact, the spell **remains in effect**.

## PSI

This category includes everything from simple Jedi mind tricks to world-shattering mojo straight out of Akira. A few limitations are suggested below, but you should generally let your players get away with anything that's appropriate to your game. Creativity *is* your friend, I'll remind you.

**Telepathy** is any kind of direct thought transference, whether passive (mind reading), active (mind control), or otherwise (illusions, communication). Telepaths can be fought off with sheer force of will (unless you're a Mook), and other telepaths can even strike back (treat as combat). They can earn extra dice by describing "mindscapes" (virtual places inside the minds of others, where they engage in actions symbolic of the effect they're trying to create) or by working hypnotic methods into their powers (looking into the target's eyes, speaking in specific vocal tones, etc).

**Telekinesis** describes any kind of mind-over-matter power, from levitation to pyrokinesis. Telekinetics can only affect things they can see, or at least know the exact location of. They may or may not be constrained by various laws of physics, as the tone of your game dictates. Players earn dice the same way they earn them for any other action, they just don't have to touch the things they're acting on.

**Clairvoyance** is the ability to gain information without using one's senses, usually through visions or intuition. It's often treated as a plot device, just like high magic; GMs can use it to dish out hints and plot hooks. Players can earn dice by describing their visions, suffering headaches or other side-effects, absorbing personality traits from people in their visions, or losing contact with the physical world and “sleepwalking” through the vision.

## KI

Ki powers are those magical martial arts tricks you've seen in Dragonball Z, Kung-Fu, and the Mortal Combat games. On the low end, they include force-at-a-distance tricks like blowing out candles from across a room, or wire-fu tricks like running sideways along walls. At the more cartoonish end, you can hurl balls of fire, blast enemies with lightning bolts, ensnare victims with vines of energy that burst from the ground, and so forth.

Players earn **extra dice** by describing their high-flying wire-fu maneuvers, flashy special FX, or negative side-effects like the rush of power turning them "evil" or nearby plants withering as they suck away their life force. Shouting a power's name (something like Flying Monkey Smash or Hail of the Thirty-Five Blazing Blades) is also worth a die.

Treat these powers like any other **combat action**. Divide dice pools into Yin and Yang, roll 'em, and Resolve hits as normal. Ki is really just an excuse for wire-fu and pretty lights.

# OTHER STUFF

Now that combat and magic are out of the way, lets go over some of the other kinds of actions common to role-playing games: Social Interaction, Technical Actions, Academics/Research, Gadgets, and Car Chases.

## SOCIAL INTERACTION

Embellishing social interactions is all about drama and dialogue...

A character trying to blend in at a bar while spying on an enemy might say, "I casually stroll over the bar and order a drink (+1), striking up a conversation with the nearest good-lookin' guy (+1), while I keep an eye on my target's reflection in the mirror behind the bar (+1)." With the default die added in, our stalker gets to roll 4 dice.

One time-honored tradition of cop dramas is the shakedown: "I shove the guy up against the wall with one hand (+1), stab my bowie knife into the wall next to his head (+1), and say 'We already know your boss stole the jade monkey. Now, you're going to tell us where it is, or I'm going to peel your face off... slowly' (+1). Our shakedown artist gets to roll 4 dice. See how easy it is?

## TECHNICAL ACTIONS

Fixing, breaking, and hacking into things are all technical actions. They're not always exciting to watch, but that doesn't mean players should get away with lackluster descriptions. Technical actions call for technical details, even if they're total bullshit...

Someone tapping into a bank's security system might say: "I log onto their system (1) using a backdoor admin password (+1) that I learned from a buddy who helped develop their system (+1). Then, I edit their event logging program to cover my tracks (+1) and start streaming their video feeds to my laptop (+1)." Note the use of a social Embellishment: the friend who helped develop the system. Our hacker gets to roll a grand total of 5 dice!

Cat burglars have an even more diverse array of tricks to use as Embellishments: "These guys are using a sad little sound system to listen for breaking glass (+1) so I attach a white noise generator to the window (+1) and slice through it with my handy diamond-tipped glass cutter (+1)." With her default die, the thief gets 4 dice, and then it's on to the next obstacle!

## ACADEMICS & RESEARCH

Research is an essential part of the lives of occultists, reporters, and private dicks from every age. More than any other type of action, a single investigation roll can determine the outcome of hours or days of activity.

Lets say your friend, the Chosen One, is having a spot of trouble with some kind of nasty critter from the Nether Realms, and you'd like to find a ritual that can banish it. You might be heard to remark: "I start by consulting the Encyclopedia Infernus (+1), which reminds me of an old academy buddy who specializes in this breed (+1). I call him up and he refers me to a Sumerian scroll, which I spend a day translating (+1)." After all that work, you'd get to roll a respectable pool of 4 dice.

Investigators who deal with mundane terrors usually stick to more scientific methods: "I dust the murder scene for prints (+1) and gather samples of skin, hair, and other DNA evidence (+1). If any of them turn up matches, I trace the suspects' credit card purchase to see if any of them were anywhere near the crime scene that night (+1)." Another 4-dice roll.

## GADGETS

In science-fiction and espionage games, gadgets can be an endless source of Embellishments. The characters are assumed to have had these handy items on them the whole time, even if their players make them up on the spot.

Someone playing a billionaire vigilante with a bat-themed costume could say: "I disarm the goons (1) by throwing a pair of bat-shaped discs (+1), then tie them together with my trusty bolo (+1) and vanish into a cloud of all-concealing smoke (+1)." Two mooks, four dice, no problem.

International spies are also known for their gadgets: "First, I jam the guards' radios with my Static Broadcaster (+1), which is disguised as an ordinary

fountain pen (+1). Then, I pop them both with the sedative darts (+1) concealed in my wrist watch (+1)." With the default die, that's 5!

## CAR CHASES

Ah, the car chase. When done right, a good car chase can be every bit as brutal and acrobatic as any fight scene. Players should remember to toss it obstacles like bridges, oncoming traffic, and the venerable road construction barricade. However, this isn't a game of realism! Cars should be capable of incredible spins, jumps, slides, flips, and anything else that revs your engine!

"I come roaring out of the parking ramp (1) fly right over the police line (+1), rotate 90 degree in midair (+1) and land sideways, ready to tear down the street (+1)." The getaway is off to an excellent, 4-dice start!

"Next, I slam on the brakes and spin a 180 (+1) down a steep embankment on the side of the road (+1). After the first cop sails over us (+1), I floor it and jump over the second cop car like it was a ramp (+1)." One 5-dice stunt, and two very smoked cops!

# CHARACTER CREATION

Creating characters for Wushu is so simple it'll make you vomit. (I apologize in advance.) The important thing is to get a solid idea in your head of who your character will be. If you have to write down a few notes, go right ahead. Figure out who they are, what they're good at, and what frightens or challenges them.

Next, write down a set of 2-4 **Traits** that describe your character. These are usually professions (Bouncer, Spy, Programmer, Celebrity) or skills (Guns, Kung-fu, Journalism, Cooking), but they can also be adjectives (Clever, Scrappy, Tough as Nails) or kewl powerz (Cloud Men's Minds, Hulk Smash!).

All Traits start at the default rating of 2. GMs should give their players a number of points with which to **boost their Traits**; 4-6 is usually enough. It takes one point to raise a Trait to 3, two points for 4, and three points for a level 5 Trait. NPCs get whatever Traits and ratings the GM wants.

Now, give your character one more Trait: a **Weakness**. This describes something the character is bad at, whether it's because of a phobia, a curse, or just a total lack of practice. It automatically gets a rating of 1, and it cannot be boosted. GMs can feel free to give NPCs Weaknesses, too, but it's not required. Good examples include Cannot Enter (must be invited into people's homes), Pacifist (will not intentionally harm others), Honest (always tells the truth), and Kryptonite (incapacitated by shiny, green rocks).

That's it! Oh, I suppose you could go about deciding what kinds of **gear** your character has, but you're better off improvising that stuff during the game. Characters should be assumed to own any gear that they need to use their Traits (like guns for a gun-bunny, or a computer for a hacker).

You'll find example characters galore in the "Adaptation" section!



# ADAPTATION

Wushu makes it profoundly easy to bring your favorite movies and TV shows from the screen to the gaming table. Because the rules are built around *your* understanding of what *your* characters can and cannot do, the *rules* don't have to know anything. Traits can easily be created for super powers, magic, high technology, or pretty much anything else you need. Plus, there's no need to worry about play balance, since "low-powered" characters can earn just as many dice, through colorful narration, as anyone else!

A few sample adaptations appear below, inspired by a number of popular sci-fi and fantasy works to which I own no copyrights whatsoever. Each explains how its core genre elements work, provides a couple of sample characters, and gives an example of play.

## THE MATRIX

I wrote a free Matrix adaptation as a promotional item for Wushu. It contains my best (pre-Reloaded) guesses on how the Matrix works, what Free Minds can do, why no one can be told what the Matrix is, and other burning questions. Plenty of GM advice and a starter adventure are also included, along with a slimmed-down treatment of the Wushu system.

You can download it, and all my other PDF RPGS, from my website:  
<http://www.Bayn.org/games>

## THE CHOSEN

Our world occupies a rare middle ground between a host of seething, hellish lower dimensions. The demonic creatures that infest such planes struggle ceaselessly to pierce the veil, overrun the Earth, and ravage its natural and mystical resources. Most harbor a deep resentment towards humanity and would relish our extermination.

Demonic power has always seeped into our realm in small quantities, but infernal influences have become increasingly common, and powerful, in recent years. Vampires (human corpses animated by demonic souls that

feed on the blood of the living) have become an almost common sight in many cities. Dark sorcerers and rabid cultists have infiltrated all levels of society, from the alleys where they perform their bloody rituals to the high rise boardrooms where corrupt middlemen benefit from their spells.

Fortunately for we hairless apes, a few of the higher planes are sympathetic to Earthly life. They imbue mortal agents with immortal power and guide them via prophetic visions, dreams, and synchronicity. The Chosen come from all nations, all creeds, and all walks of life. Some are simply stronger and faster than normal, a few are converted agents of evil, and others are half-demon hybrids whose powers link them inextricably to their enemies.

Much of the war between these forces is waged over nodes and portals where the veil between Earth and one demon realm or another has been stretched thin. Demon-worshippers try to take advantage of such places to summon their masters, or their masters' demonic servants, into the material world. Other times, the magic spawns its own evil and wreaks mindless havoc on unwitting humans. Most of these dimensional weak spots are fleeting, but a few have existed for centuries and host stable populations of demons, mystics, and guardians.

Ritual magic should be a mainstay of any Chosen game. Villainous magi are always trying to pull off some elaborate, world-destroying ritual, and the good guys can use High Magic to vanquish whatever gets summoned. In fact, a witch with a few quick spells (and maybe some Telekinesis) can provide essential back-up to Chosen combat monsters. Demons might also possess various Ki powers, and you can run the Chosen's visions as Clairvoyance.

Finally, it's worth noting that vampires (and other demons) can be either Mooks or Nemeses. Even a weak vampire is a killing machine when compared to normal humans, but the Chosen can dust your average alley vamp without breaking a sweat. Older bloodsuckers, or those with stronger personalities, are another matter entirely!

### **Hortense, the vampire hunter**

Traits: Slayer (5) Perceptive (4) Clever (3) Undercover Crap (1)

In her weaker moments, Hortense pines away for the days before she was Chosen, carefree days of school dances and hanging out at the mall. In her heart of hearts, however, she understands the grave nature of her new

destiny, and embraces it. She never hesitates to risk her own life to protect others. In short, she's a hero.

When she was only 15, otherworldly powers imbued her with supernatural strength, speed, and alacrity. After years of training, she has learned to use her power like a scalpel, cutting the festering cancer of demonic influence out of the world, without harming the innocents she protects. Though a clever tactician, she has always struggled with covert ops, much preferring a fair fight to that undercover crap.

### **Stalker, the half-blood**

Traits: Vampire (5) Sneaky (4) Occult (3) The Thirst (1)

Every few centuries, a mortal with a particularly strong spirit gets vamped... but their human soul maintains its hold on the body. The result is a "living" vampire with all of the usual powers (strength, speed, regeneration), but none of the weaknesses. They soon find themselves hunted by other bloodsuckers, and fighting alongside the Chosen.

Stalker is one such creature: trapped between two worlds, but more powerful than those who walk in either. He resents his demonic need to drink blood, but has come to terms with it by using the power it grants him to dust his bloodthirsty cousins.

### **Vulture, the darkling**

Traits: Blood Magic (4) Violent Psycho (4) Antisocial (1)

Mankind's dominance of this world is only a fleeting, cosmic accident. Demons *will* return to the Earth, it's only a matter of time. The only sound choice is to side with them, make yourself useful in *their* time of need, and reap the rewards of their favor. Those who do otherwise are fools.

The magus known as Vulture serves the same demons responsible for creating vampires, and is adept in the use of blood sacrifice to cast spells. (Treat as Ki, with the occasional Ritual tossed in.) He is also able to command servitude from any vampire Mooks he happens across. If you hunt vampires, the Vulture hunts you.

**Example of Play** - Hortense and Stalker brush the dust that was Vulture's vampire mooks off their clothes as they back him into a corner of his high rise penthouse. **Stalker** flashes him a grin full of gleaming fangs (+1) and darts towards him faster than the eye can follow (+1), slashing with his ninja sword (+1). **Vulture** takes the hit and lets the blood spray onto his hands (+1). He touches his bloody fingers to his lips (+1) and whispers something in the ancient language of vampires (+1). **Hortense** hangs back, loading another bolt into her crossbow.

*The GM rolls all 4 of Vulture's dice for his spell, which will take control of Stalker's bloodlust and make him attack Hortense. He rolls 2 successes. Stalker's player rolls 2 Yang dice and 2 Yin dice. However, since Vulture's spell takes advantage of his Weakness, the GM makes him roll his Yin dice against a target number of 1. He gets both Yang successes, but only 1 Yin success, which isn't enough to resist Vulture's 2 successes. On the up side, Vulture loses his last 2 points of Chi, leaving him vulnerable.*

**Stalker** whirls on Hortense and charges (+1), snarling like a rabid dog (+1). **Hortense**, taken by surprise, drops into a sacrifice throw (+1) and hurls Stalker through the room's floor length window (+1). Flipping back to her feet (+1), she fires her crossbow at Vulture (+1), aiming to bury the bolt deep in his diseased brain (+1). **Vulture**, already limping towards the door (+1), rolls sideways to avoid the shot (+1).

*In his altered state, Stalker's player decides he would put all 3 of his dice into his wild attack and rolls 2 Yang successes. Hortense's player really wants to put Stalker through the window, and a bolt in Vulture's brain, so she rolls all 6 of her dice as Yang dice and gets 4 successes. She loses 2 Chi to Stalker's attack, but only needs to use 1 success to launch him through the window, since he didn't defend himself. Stalker spends a point of Chi to grab onto a ledge a few floors down. The rest of Hortense's 3 Yang successes are devoted to overcoming Vulture's 2 Yin successes. Since Vulture doesn't have any more Chi, the 1 Yang die that gets through splits his head in half!*

# LIVE BY THE SWORD

During the last days of the Renaissance, when firearms were quickly making the sword obsolete, a group of renown blade-masters made a desperate attempt to push back the rising tide of history. They used powerful magic, long since lost to antiquity, to enter into a pact whereby they and their chosen students would be protected from all weapons save the sword, and all enemies save each other. They would keep the art of the duel alive forever.

Around the time of the Great War, some of the duelists lost their commitment to their art. They decided to turn their powers towards profit, and began admitting thugs and mercenaries into the pact. These immortal soldiers cared far less for the art of war than for lining their own pockets with the wealth of victims who could never kill them. These fiends have gone underground in modern times, but they still make their livings by slaughter.

The PCs are old, skilled sword masters who hunt these bastards down and end their dishonorable lives. They can be anything from European duelists to Asian samurai to machete-wielding wildmen. This setting is all about pulp-style, doin' it cuz I can't die, over-the-top action! Being a Man of Action (tm) is the only real requirement. (Or a woman of action. You know what I mean.)

Duelists are human in every respect, except for the protection offered by the pact. They can *only* be killed by another immortal and *only* with a sword of some kind. They cannot be ambushed; just before an immortal attacks, both he and his victim feel a kind of "buzz" in the backs of their minds.

However, the old ones are almost supernaturally skilled with their weapon of choice, and at fighting in general; they should have a 5 in their combat Trait. (The mercenaries are not nearly so proficient, maybe 3-4.) Some may also have a "Seen It All" or "Jack of All Trades" Trait that they can apply to anything they may have learned over the centuries, but only for a modest degree of success. Jacks of all trades are master of none, ya know.

You can run the immortality in a number of ways. The easy way is to just not have them die when they run out of Chi; they can shrug off bullets, re-attach heads, and walk away from explosions without a scratch. Another method is to let them die, but only for a dramatically appropriate period of time, and then come back to life unharmed. Finally, you can contrive all kinds of

coincidences that prevent them from getting hurt in the first place; guns get jammed, falls are softened by conveniently placed boxes, stab wounds always miss anything vital, and so forth. Tricky, but it might be fun.

Note: Immortal characters can still lose Chi when fighting Mooks, since Chi is used to cancel out *any* negative effect, not just lethal ones. Immortals can still get disarmed, blinded, knocked down, or just plain exhausted.

You should be able to slip most kinds of low-key magic in here without stretching anyone's disbelief too far. Voodoo and Psi fit the bill nicely, but Rituals and Ki powers might change the tone from pulpy to anime. (Then again, that might be exactly what you need.) Magic would make a good hook for an immortal character, an even better advantage for a non-immortal PC, and an excellent secret weapon for any kind of villain.

### **Gavin Wyrnwood, welshman**

Traits: Batshit Crazy (3) Swordmaster (5) Jack of All Trades (4) Chivalry (1)

The Welshman, as he is sometimes called, was one of the original duelists who forged the pact. (In fact, some say it was one of his relatives, gifted with the Sight, who devised it in the first place.) His creeping insanity allows him to easily overcome the primal fear that stops many new duelists from taking full advantage of their immortality. He is well known for risky stunts (like jumping out of a biplane to escape an ambush) and sacrifice moves (like impaling himself on an enemy's blade just to disarm them).

A product of the Age of Chivalry, he has a difficult time fighting women and is easily distracted by flirtation. His sense of honor also leads him to take the mercenary attitudes of new duelists as a personal affront. He takes great pleasure in dispatching them as bloodily, and slowly, as possible.

### **The Ronin, former samurai**

Traits: Art of War (5) Seen It All (3) Wheelman (4) Vengeful (1)

Since his initiation into the pact in 1853, this enigmatic Chinese warrior has watched his country, his religion, his very way of life wither and die. When a group of immortal Japanese soldiers slaughtered his entire bloodline during the Rape of Nanking, he resolved to embrace the modern world and use its tools to wreak terrible vengeance upon his enemies.

Since then, the Ronin has taken dozens of immortal lives, tracking a labyrinthine trail of loyalties back to the immortal who ordered his family's slaughter. He has learned to use guns, computers, and other technology, but his favorite tool by far is the automobile. Fast automobiles, to be exact. Whether he's outrunning police helicopters on the Autobahn or flattening thugs in the dark alleys of Tokyo, the Ronin is nearly as dangerous behind the wheel as when wielding the blade.

### **Outrider, immortal mercenary**

Traits: Gunfighter (5) Swordsman (3) Criminal (4) Sociopath (1)

Originally initiated into the Pact for his skill as a gentleman duelist, this Victorian found a much more lucrative use for his immortality in America's Wild West. Trading in his saber for a pair of six-shooters, he robbed and murdered his way along the frontier until the time of the second World War, when America just plain ran out of lawless places.

Now, the long arm of modern law enforcement keeps him on the move, migrating his way around the Third World every couple of years. His skill with the sword has slacked from disuse, but he can still handle himself in a duel... after he's run out of places to hide. He has grown so comfortable with death that he sees mortals as little more than objects, blood-filled conveyances for money or property that rightfully belongs to him.

**Example of Play** - The Welshman has Outrider cornered in the latter's seedy hotel room. The duelists draw their blades: an elegant cavalry saber and a wickedly curved shamshir, respectively. Suddenly, **Gavin** lunges forward for an overhead slash (+1), but changes direction at the last second and goes for Outrider's sword arm (+1). **Outrider** jumps back onto the bed (+1), flips over Gavin's head to the desk behind him (+1), and kicks a lamp at his face (+1). **Gavin** spins around to slash at his escaping adversary (+1) while ducking under the flying lamp (+1).

*Gavin's player rolls a total of 5 dice: 3 Yang and 2 Yin. He gets 2 Yang successes and 1 Yin success. The GM rolls 4 dice for Outrider, all but 1 of them Yin. She gets just enough successes to avoid the Welshman's attack (2), but her meager 1 Yang success isn't enough to overcome his defenses. Neither character takes a hit.*

Meanwhile, across town, the **Ronin** finds himself ambushed by a gang of street punks (Threat 9). He draws his father's katana and slices the gun hand off of the nearest one (+1). As the others charge, he dispatches three more with a series of slashing spins (+1), his trench coat fans out around him (+1). He ends the last spin with a violent kick (+1) that reduces one mook's nose to a spray of blood and bone (+1).

*The Ronin's player gets a grand total of 6 dice. She decides to play it safe and devote half of them to defense. She rolls 2 Yang successes and 1 Yin success. It's just a dent in the punks' Threat level, but had she rolled fewer Yin dice, she may well have lost some Chi.*

## DIE BY THE SWORD

Those who live good lives find death an eternal paradise, while the Damned burn in personal Hells of their own creation. Sometimes, the Damned escape their otherworldly jailers and return to the land of the living, even more twisted and powerful than before. And sometimes, just sometimes, their victims are returned to life, to bring them back.

Each of these "Returned" warriors are brought over by a spirit guide, one of the keepers of the netherworld, who takes the form of an animal familiar. Its magic makes them virtually invulnerable to mortal weapons, allows them to share their familiar's senses, and gives them whatever strength and speed they need to drag their enemies, screaming, back into Hell.

The hybrid religions practiced around the Gulf of Mexico feature many gods of death and resurrection. Most Returned from this region have birds for familiars and some kind of ornamentation on their faces. The American northwest is home to the Wendigo spirit, who sometimes brings over Returned with feral aspects like claws, fangs, or glowing eyes. The vampyre myths of Eastern Europe may be inspired by the Returned, since Balkan revenants often exhibit an intense thirst for blood.

The Damned possess supernatural powers of their own, side-effects of their time in Hell. Pretty much any kind of Psi or Ki is fair game, from vanishing into shadows to blasting enemies with infernal flame! Their most useful power, however, is the ability to kill the Returned, and their fellow Damned, where mortals cannot. Mortals can hurt the undead, to be sure, but they cannot destroy them. (The Returned have another weakness: If their familiar



is injured, their powers fade, leaving them mortal. If the familiar dies, they return to the realm of the dead, forever.)

Voodoo fits into this setting seamlessly, especially as a way to put living PCs on even footing with their Damned enemies (not to mention their Returned allies). Villains may know more powerful magic (a.k.a. Rituals) due to their time behind the Veil. The blood of a spirit guide makes a particularly potent addition to many rituals...

### **Maven, Returned vigilante**

Traits: Killin' Machine (5) Stealthy (5) Creepy (1)

A Damned street gang came into Maven's strip club one night, raped their way through the staff, and burned the place to the foundation... with everyone still inside. In death, she encountered one of the Loa, a powerful voodoo spirit, who offered her a chance for revenge.

She returned to the land of the living to collect nine Damned souls; their names are branded onto her face in the cryptic script of the Loa. Something about her tends to alienate mortals, and enrage animals, so she tries to avoid social entanglements. Instead, she relies on her invulnerability to get her through most challenges, though she's just as adept at vanishing into the shadows as she is at spilling the blood of those who oppose her.

### **Mama Mojo, servant of the Loa**

Traits: Low Magic (5) Con Artist (4) Guns (3) Old & Weak (1)

Since she was a child, the Loa have spoken to Mama Mojo. They appear to her in dreams, possess her body, and whisper to her in the rustling of leaves and the skittering of rats. They speak, and she obeys. In return, the Loa provide Mama Mojo with all the clueless tourists she needs to make a living.

On many occasions, the Loa have sent their Returned soldiers to Mama Mojo for help and guidance. Her skill with low magic and her intricate knowledge of the New Orleans underground make her an invaluable resource that any sociopathic, undead vigilante would kill for!

## **Aleister, damned soul**

Traits: High Magic (4) Telekinesis (4) Charisma (4) Egomaniac (1)

Aleister was a Victorian "sex wizard" who took advantage of countless young women under the pretense of "working powerful magick." When he went to Hell, his eyes were opened to the true nature of reality. After his escape to the land of the living, he used that understanding to unlock the secrets of High Magic and gift himself with powerful Telekinesis. He can lift cars with his mind, erect shields of force, and light bonfires with a gesture.

Over a century of torment did nothing to correct his megalomania, however, and he has used his new powers to gather a cult of fanatical followers, abducted from all walks of life, who believe him to be a god. He maintains compounds all over the world, each dedicated to the gratification of Aleister's lust, greed, and ego.

**Example of Play** - Aleister is harboring one of Maven's targets in his New Orleans mansion. Mama Mojo has talked her way into the front room, with Maven's black bird on her shoulder. Unfortunately, Aleister recognizes the familiar and calls in a small army of suicidal, cultist bodyguards (Threat 6)!

**Maven** jumps through the door (+1), does a flip over Mama Mojo (+1), and plants her heels in the face of the nearest mook (+1) for 4 dice. **Aleister** raises his gold-embroidered arms (+1) to trace an arcane pattern in the air (+1) and engulf Mama Mojo in a pillar of flame (+1) for 4 dice. **Mama Mojo** pulls out an Aleister doll (+1) and pokes two black pins into its eyes (+1) to blind him with 3 dice.

*Maven's player rolls 3 Yang successes and 1 Yin success, reducing the Mooks' Threat level to 3 and taking no damage. The GM rolls 3 Yang successes for Aleister, but since he didn't know about Mama Mojo's spell, he didn't roll any Yin dice to resist it. Mama Mojo's player rolls 2 success and blinds Aleister, but loses all 3 of her Chi points to his pyrokinetic attack, leaving her without any way to absorb more damage.*

Blinded, **Aleister** throws up a force field (+1) and tries to defeat Mama's mojo by sheer force of will (+1); he rolls 3 Yin dice, but will have to use his first success against the blindness. **Mama Mojo** pulls out her Desert Eagle (+1) and lays down cover fire (+1) while diving left to escape the flames (+1) with 4 Yin dice. **Maven** grabs the knife arm of an attacking mook (+1) and

Judo throws him into the fire behind her (+1), then spin kicks the next one in the face (+1) and throws her big ass bowie knife (+1) into the throat of another (+1) for 5 Yang dice and 1 Yin die.

*The GM rolls all 3 successes for Aleister, but his blindness soaks up the first one, and he needs 3 to beat Mama Mojo's 2 successes for casting the spell. He stays blind. Mama Mojo's player only rolls 1 Yin success, but it's enough to keep her from getting bitch slapped by the mooks. Maven's player wipes out the mooks' Threat level with 4 Yang successes, but her Yin die came up 6 (a failure), so she loses a of point of Chi. Any remaining cultists flee in terror!*

