Wushu Open Reloaded

Preface to the Reloaded edition

I keep telling people that Wushu Open is a primer to help people write their own games. The reason it focuses on action is because that's what Dan Bayn (the creator of Wushu) finds easiest to write. But that once you scratch the surface there's a whole lot more to it. Then I go and link them to the Wall of Wushu as it's often called with some example threads.

Thing is, for a lot of people that doesn't cut it, and my exhortations are probably getting rather stale. So I decided to do something about it - write a Reloaded edition of Open with a more general, less combat-focused tone, and some additional wrinkles to address the potential shortcomings of Open from certain points of view.

I hope I manage to achieve that goal…

…what you will notice is that I haven't renamed anything. Reason being I like the evocative titles, and coming up with generic ones is bloody difficult. Plus it means everyone who knows Open is on the same page as me with what this all means. If someone wants to come along later and change the names of things, be my guest. I won't send the ninjas. Promise.

-Damian aka Kiero

The Golden Rules

There are two of them, and I call them Golden Rules because, if you forget everything else contained herein (not that there's much of it), you need to remember these. For they are the core of what Wushu is about. If you don't like the ideas and philosophies they espouse, Wushu is not the game for you.

They are the reason that Wushu is a fundamental break from the traditional way RPGs function. In the standard setup, players state their intentions, which are accepted as valid by the GM, who then couches them in mechanical terms, and a dice roll determines the result. Wushu cuts straight to the result, which brings us to the first Golden Rule: The Principle of Narrative Truth (PoNT).

Principle of Narrative Truth (PoNT)

"Everything the players describe happens exactly as they describe it, when they describe it."

The most important thing about Wushu is the way it doles out narrative and authorial power to the players. They don't ask the GM if a course of action is alright, then roll to see how successful they were. Instead, they say what happens before they roll any dice. The roll doesn't tell you how well you did, it says how effective your chosen course of action was in bringing the scene towards resolution. Because that is the key to Wushu - it doesn't do task resolution, only the broader resolution of a scene.

Task resolution is left up to the players by way of the PoNT. Namely that everything happens exactly as the players describe it, when they describe it. It bears repeating, so I'll say it again: Everything happens exactly as the players describe it, when they describe it.

It is left to the players' discretion whether they describe success or failure; it's all the same as far as Wushu goes. What might seem like a character struggling to get their point across could be turned around at the last minute with the one piece of evidence they've been saving until the last moment. It's an action movie staple for some protagonists to get beat on by the goons until they switch things up a gear and lay the smack down.

The player is within rights to describe never "failing," or to never describe "succeeding," but regardless their character can still advance a scene towards its end. If this sounds too much like make-believe to you, there's more to it, including elements of risk. More on that later.

The exceptions to the PoNT

It doesn't quite go all the players' way though. The problem with an unfettered PoNT is that old chestnut of the kid who brings a "forcefield" to a game of Cops and Robbers. Wushu requires everyone to be (mostly) on the same page about what is and is not appropriate for the game you're playing. Wushu is great at genre emulation, provided that everyone gets what the conventions of that genre are (and which are applicable to that particular game). However, it doesn't provide any mechanical means by which to enforce those conventions - except the Veto.

Veto

"If a description doesn't feel right, anyone can Veto it."

Everyone around the table, not just the GM, wields the right to Veto anyone else's description at any time. This includes a player Vetoing a GM's description. You could look at this as completely invalidating the freedom of the PoNT, and turning every game into a legislative session of trying to pass your descriptions through the House of your group, but that's not how it happens in practice. This is why it's so important that everyone is on the same page.

Rather, the Veto should serve as a flag that people aren't on the same page, and is an opportunity for everyone to get it straight. It's a chance to say "hang on a minute," and check that you're all still playing the same game. Cos shy of telepathy, we're only ever working on shared approximations of what everyone else is thinking.

The Veto doesn't have to be a negative thing. Sometimes you might have an idea on how to jazz someone else's narrative up. In that case, a Veto might be a subtle "Hey, might it be cooler if…"

When a Veto is used, the person Vetoed should describe again, amending their original narrative to fit the new consensus.

Coup de Grace rule

"You can't narrate complete victory without first resolving a scene's mechanical component."

There is one other limit to the PoNT, one that's softer than the Veto. The Coup de Grace rule says you can't describe blowing away the entire challenge of a scene in your first description. More than that, you can't describe ending it until the mechanical representation of that challenge has been resolved.

In a contest to bake the perfect pie, you can't narrate the judges loving your culinary creation and awarding you the prize of BakeMaster 20,000 in your opening narrative, if the contest is all about proving who is the superior cook. Instead you must first deal with the mechanical representation of the scene's challenge and, should you win, you get to describe your victory as a parting shot.

A Coup de Grace is a bonus narrative that the victor of a scene gets, after the roll, to describe how the thing is resolved. This is the only time a narrative comes after rolling, rather than before. It is most often used to end Nemesis battles, though it may be appropriate in any situation where the players' descriptions have left loose ends. When it is not clear who struck the final blow, the Coup de Grace may be awarded to whoever has the best idea or handled by the GM.

Everything is a Detail…

"Any and every course of action you can describe contains Details."

The second Golden Rule goes to the driving force of Wushu, the narrative. Wushu rewards expressiveness in describing what you do; each discrete element within the narrative is a Detail which earns a die. Wushu's engine works on a dice pool system, where the size of the pool depends on the elaborateness of your narrative. More on mechanics later.

In one respect, it doesn't actually matter what you describe, as long as you describe your character doing something. Everything is a Detail: dialog is a Detail, an action is a Detail, the environment and changes in it are Details, your character's wardrobe is a Detail, flashbacks and inner monologue are Details, (in more cinematic games) descriptions of camera angles and shots are Details, and so on - I think you get the idea.

This can seem daunting, to be creative for the entire game all by yourself. The thing of it is, you don't have to be on fire the entire time because you're not alone. There's nothing to stop you from building on the ideas of other players, weaving your narratives together in a step-by-step building of one idea on top of another. Setting up part of a narrative, then handing it over to another player for embellishment, before they give it back to you to continue is called a "Pass" in Wushu. Provided everyone's happy with sharing some degree authorial control over their characters, this is actively encouraged. It's not only less tiring than coming up with all of your own stuff, it incentivises teamwork and tends to produce much cooler, more entertaining descriptions than any one person could conjure up alone.

…but choose the right Details for the game.

"Everyone has to be on the same page about what kinds of Details are appropriate."

There isn't complete freedom to narrate anything you like; the more outlandish or inappropriate descriptions may trigger a Veto from someone. This is where questions of genre and appropriateness come to the fore. There are no mechanics in Wushu to tell a group what is and isn't allowed as a Detail. That's up to the players and GM to work out amongst themselves, because the internally consistent "reality" of the game only exists so far as there is consensus on what the genre of the game is, and what conventions of that genre apply.

Here's an example. Imagine two WW2 games, one is pulpy action in the vein of the *Castle Wolfenstein* games, the other ultra-realistic drawing on *Band of Brothers* for inspiration. In both games, you might have the same situation: As German machine-gun fire opens up on their advance, the characters and their squad have taken cover in a crater, using it as a makeshift foxhole.

Consider the following narrative:

"Heedless of the danger of incoming fire, BJ leaps out of the foxhole with a grenade hanging from his mouth by the pin. A Colt 1911 ACP blazing in each hand, he runs directly for the machine gun, plugging two Germans on the trot. As he gets closer, he holsters one pistol and yanks the grenade from his mouth, hurling it in the direction of the machine gun and diving to the ground as the explosion fills the air with noise"

That would be entirely appropriate for the first style of game. In the second, it would earn a Veto, since charging headlong into a well-sited machine gun position is suicide in a realistic situation.

And now the following:

"Keeping my head down, we execute the plan. Jones and Mac, lay down covering fire from the crater, forcing the Germans to keep their heads down. Greasley and Weston stay low, going left and using the drainage ditch as cover. The Jerrys don't see them, and they get their .50 in position behind the tree, ready to lay down fire on my signal. Jock Morris and I go right under cover of the hedge and complete the pincer Greasley and Weston's fire creates when I blow on my whistle."

For the first game, this is far too pedestrian and cautious; you're supposed to be Big Damned Heroes. But it's right up the alley of the second game, showing unit tactics, teamwork and command as the key to succeeding because every man is vulnerable.

Both are full of dice-earning Details, and both bring the scene towards resolution. The only gauge as to which one is "better" is what is in-genre for the particular game. Also note that it doesn't necessarily matter whether the specifics of the orders I gave in the second example would "work in real life," not unless you're playing an ultra-realistic game where valid tactics are required in your narrative.

What Wushu Does

At first, Wushu looks deceptively simple, like other rules-light games. But after a bit of playing and thinking, it becomes clear that Wushu provides a surprisingly sophisticated engine for facilitating a fast-paced, collaborative game of narration and genre-emulation. But how does it do that?

Wushu is built on the basis of a few opposing forces that drive play while at the same time providing checks and balances against possible abuse. One of those is the tension between complete creative freedom, as expressed in "Everything is a detail" and the PoNT, and the necessity for collaboration and consensus-finding, as expressed in the Coup de Grace and Veto rules. Let's look at these two opposing forces in a bit more detail:

On one hand, Wushu gives each player great incentive to become creative and narrate Details. Players are rewarded for narration not only by getting dice (and thus a higher chance of mechanical success), but also by the fact that their narration happens exactly as they describe it. This way, the system promotes a game of free narration and improvisation, as players can narrate their characters actions (and how they resolve in-game) without fearing negative consequences.

A powerful tool, but one that can be abused. Thus, Wushu offers an opposing force to keep the creative energy in check and on track, to facilitate a positive game experience not only for the person narrating but for everybody. This force comes from the Veto and, to a lesser extent, the Coup de Grace rules. The Veto rules help prevent one of the common problems with complete freedom, namely that of conflicting creative visions. It's easy for a group of friends to have different ideas of what constitutes "fun" or which tropes are appropriate to a given genre, and in a free creative environment, these difference can lead to a loss of focus or, in the worst case, to arguments and bad feelings between players. The Veto rule means that only appropriate narrations and Details, as decided by group consensus, are incorporated into the game. This way, players are given the power to Veto narrations that would ruin their fun or run counter to the expected genre.

Together, these two opposing forces hold the game in balance, as players are given the freedom to narrate, are even rewarded for narration, but are also forced to communicate with their fellow players about what is and isn't appropriate, thus building a group consensus. This increases the chances of productive, focused play without removing the aspect of fast and free narration that is the whole point of Wushu.

What Wushu Does Not Do

Wushu does not provide "hard" genre emulation through mechanics that help you enforce what works and what does not. The group is the only means by which this is possible, so if your group is unable to reach a consensus, a game will be fraught with difficulty.

In addition, the mechanics alone will not judge what is a "right" or "wrong" course of action. The GM doesn't have modifiers that can be applied to a scene to reflect the appropriateness of a player's chosen course of action. All they have are the same powers of Veto with reference to genre as everyone else.

Lastly, Wushu does not bring the cool all by itself - it relies on the players to do that. There are no mechanics which will help you build up an exciting string of actions to work into your descriptions, no lists of powers or maneuvers to spur your creativity, although you can steal those from other sources at will. If you want a mechanical underpinning to aid your creativity, Wushu is not for you. All it does is act as a catalyst for that which everyone brings to the table themselves, by not getting in the way of their creativity.

Core Mechanics

Now to the meat of how this all works. The mechanics of Wushu are all about regulating conflict. As before, it doesn't actually matter what the nature of the conflict is, whether combat, physical, social, mental, or any other kind. All that matters is that the outcome of something is important enough for us to focus on.

Wushu breaks conflicts up into a number of rounds, which could represent any length of time in the game reality, depending on the nature of the conflict. A round in a firefight may be a few seconds. A round in an election campaign may comprise months of canvassing, pressing of flesh and making speeches. A round in a trial might be weeks of research and info-gathering interspersed with hours of cross-examination and trial process. There's no hard and fast rule on this, indeed each round may not necessarily be the same length as the one before or the one after.

Each round is broken up into two phases which are completed by everyone at the same time. First, the group Describes the scene; this is the important part because their narration determines what actually happens in the game world. Then, they Resolve their dice rolls to see how this round progressed the scene towards an end.

Description

As hinted at in the section "Everything is a Detail," Wushu works with a dice pool mechanic (using ordinary six-sided dice) based on the nuances of your narrative. As long as you do something, you earn a die. For each additional Detail you layer on top of this, you earn an additional die. Whether your narrative is one long unbroken string of actions or built up action-by-action with input coming from everyone is entirely up to the group.

Here are a few examples of different types of narrative in different genres of game.

Social description in a Fantasy game:

The character looks around the hall (1), and spotting several obvious guardsmen, heads towards them with a firm step (2) and the confident, level gaze of one who has likewise seen action (3). He smiles in a friendly fashion (4), and finding a point in the bragging session to jump in, starts palling around with his own war stories (5), gently trying to tease information out of the other guards about recent events (6).

(Using the Trait: "Leader of Men.")

Physical description in a Swashbuckling game:

The character traces her fingertips over the hilt of her family blade, (1) before her fingers encircle the handle firmly and with ease born of years of use (2). With a quick metallic hiss she draws the blade, (3) the bright sun glimmering off its perfect edge (4). A faint smile creeps over the character's face as a drop of sweat rolls down the pompous baron's brow, and the baron swallows nervously (5). "You seem hesitant, Baron. Should I come back some other day? Perhaps when you've learned by which end to hold your blade?" (6)

(Using the Trait "Italian Fencer")

Mental description in a Western game:

The character takes the old map gingerly in his hands,(1) and carefully sprinkles a mixture of chemicals across the surface to bring out any hidden marks and faded writing (2). His eyes widen as he sees the faint traceries appear across the old map legend (3). Carefully noting down the latitude and longitude marks (4), he nods to himself. "Yes, of course! I should have seen it before!"(5)

(Using Trait "A Doctor of Science!")

Mystical description in a Pulp game:

The character holds out an antique pocket watch (1), and sways it gently in front of the victim (2). "Look deeply into my eyes. Deeper, deeper," she croons in a soft lullaby monotone (3). The victim's eyes glaze over (4), and he murmurs quietly, "What is thy bidding, mistress?" (5)

(Using the Trait "Oriental Mesmeric Trance")

If, at any stage, someone doesn't like a particular Detail, they can Veto it, and it has to be reworked.

Pool Limits / Die Caps

To control the pacing and tone of a scene, GMs can put a pool limit or die cap on the number of dice any player can roll at once. This is normally set up at the very beginning of a conflict. Three or four dice per round tends to result in shorter, tighter-framed descriptions, suitable for less important or warmup scenes. When things get more dramatic, such as the climax of a session, ratcheting the scene cap up to six or eight dice is appropriate.

One way to encourage a frenetic back-and-forth between players is to have a high cap on a scene, but only let players narrate a Detail or two before moving on to the next player.

You don't have to describe up to the scene cap in each and every round; sometimes tacking on a few extra Details can become exhausting. Nor do you have to stop your narrative just because you're not earning any more dice. This is a filibuster, where you go way over the cap

simply because you're enjoying yourself narrating. Some groups like it, others put limits on it.

Optional Extras: Held Dice (reprinted from Wire-Fu)

Normally, you have to roll the dice you earn during a conflict right away. However, you can also earn dice which are held over - Held Dice - to be used for a specific task later on. It is in this way that Wushu can reward preparation. Each Detail describing a preparation activity adds to either an individual or communal pool of Held Dice to be used later on. A scene with a round of planning or foreshadowing or a flashback or montage sequence are just a few means of earning Held Dice.

Resolution

Having Described what happens, the second phase of a round tells you how effective your action was in bringing the scene that bit closer to resolution. Remember, as per the PoNT you've already described whether or not your action succeeded, this frames it in the context of the wider scene.

Typically, all players roll their dice at the same time. This helps keep gameplay fast and fluid. When the action is more segmented, often because players are dealing with different threats or in different locations, GMs may want to have each player roll right after completing their Description. However, since Wushu makes it easy to run inter-cut scenes, simultaneous Resolution should work fine more often than not.

The Description phase will have told you how many dice you have in your pool. When acting against opposition, you have to split them into Yin and Yang dice before you roll.

Yin and Yang

Now to the complication in the mechanics, the splitting of your dice pool. Characters are simultaneously doing two things - exerting themselves to bring the scene to a resolution, but also protecting their narrative power to stay in the scene. It's here that the risk management element comes into Wushu.

The more you expose your narrative power, the faster you'll finish the scene and thus remove the risk, but the greater danger you are in of being removed from the scene before it's done. Keep your narrative power protected and you run the risk of doing nothing to bring the scene towards resolution, and prolong the exposure of your narrative power to gradual attrition.

Yang dice are your "offensive" dice, used to deal with the nature of the scene's challenge. Yin dice are your "defensive" dice, used to protect your narrative power from whatever threats there are in the scene. It might help to use two different coloured dice to distinguish them. In essence, every successful Yin die cancels out someone else's successful Yang die.

Successes

Wushu characters are defined by their Traits (more in a bit), which are rated from 1–5. When it's time to roll them bones, pick the Trait that's most relevant to the actions you described (if

you don't have a relevant Trait, the default rating is 2). Every die that rolls above that Trait's rating is a failure; those that come up equal to or less are successes. If there are any Yang successes directed at you that are left un-canceled by your Yin successes, your plot immunity takes a hit.

Chi

Script immunity in Wushu is called Chi. Chi can represent health, luck, prosperity, faith, resolve - it's not fixed and can mean different things to different characters in different conflicts. It is the source of your narrative power as a player. As long as a character has Chi, the player has the ability to affect the scene. Run out of Chi and your script immunity is all gone, and someone else delivers a Coupe de Grace on you to determine your fate.

Most characters have 3 points of Chi, and a point is cashed in to remove a Yang success after the dice are rolled. When you're at 0 Chi, you're teetering on the brink of losing narrative power; once you go negative, you're out. That doesn't mean your character is dead, just that you the player can no longer contribute directly to the scene. As long as you still have Chi, you can choose to withdraw from a conflict rather than narrate a description.

It's purely optional whether or not you describe losses of Chi. It can often be a rich source of Detail-fodder to work some kind of complication into the narrative following a round where you lose Chi. In an ironic way, the misstep of losing Chi helps you to do better next time.

GMs decide when characters refresh their Chi, usually between scenes. For more lethal or gritty games, or those where you want to put the players on the defensive, Chi may refresh slower than this.

Optional Extra: Setbacks

If you want conflicts to last a little longer, but with the feeling of a vicious spiral to them, you can allow players to describe Setbacks rather than going into negative Chi. Instead of losing a point of Chi, they take a Setback. A Setback is some kind of hindrance affecting the characters ability to perform in that particular scene. When talking to a fair maiden, a Setback might be breaking out in uncontrollable sweats.

The mechanical effect of a Setback is this: it reduces your personal dice cap for the scene. While everyone else may be able to narrate 4 Details, if you've taken 1 Setback, your cap is now 3. And so it continues with each loss of Chi becoming another Setback and another reduction of your cap. If your cap hits 0, you're out. This does extend the duration of conflicts, because Nemeses get to use Setbacks just the same as players, but may be more appropriate to particular genres.

Setbacks can be recovered from in two ways. You can wait for the normal refresh of Chi, which will reset your dice cap, or you can use rolled successes to raise your dice cap on a one for one basis back to the scene's maximum. If you choose to take a recovery from a setback using this method, however, you will need to decide before you roll how many dice from your pool you will allocate to the recovery.

Types of Conflict

There are three types of conflict in Wushu - Mook, Nemesis and Scab roll, though the last is really an exception to the norm.

In a conflict, players will likely be describing multiple actions and potentially use several of their Traits. Not a problem - just pick the Trait that is most relevant to the narrative. That becomes the target number for your Yin and Yang rolls.

Mook conflicts

Ambient threats in a scene, which are there to showcase the players looking good, are called Mooks. They don't have Traits, they don't have Chi, and they never roll any dice. They're just an abstraction.

In a combat scene, Mooks would be the faceless, nameless goons who are no match for the players. Players are free to describe dealing with as many of them as they like, in any manner they choose, within genre. In a research scene, a Mook might be a snippet of information that just takes time and effort to track down, not any sophisticated search techniques. Mooks don't have to be people, just relatively straightforward challenges.

A Mook conflict has a Threat Rating (TR) as the mechanical representation of it's challenge. The exact value depends on how many players you have, your dice pool limit, and how long you want the scene to last. Figure out how many Yang successes your players are likely to generate per round (roughly the dice cap minus 2) and multiply by the number of rounds you want to see.

For the more mathematically-inclined, the exact formula for setting the TR is:

(Relevant Trait/6) * (Dice Cap - Yin successes required by Mook threat) * (number of players) * (number of rounds you want the scene to go on for).

Each Yang success the players generate reduces the TR of a Mook conflict by 1. When it reaches zero, the player who knocks it out gets to describe a Coup de Grace to resolve the nature of the threat.

Since Mook conflicts are an ambient threat and don't roll any dice, they won't be throwing Yang dice at the players. To represent the totality of their threat, every player engaging them must get at least 1 Yin success every round or cash in a point of Chi. More dangerous Mook conflicts might require 2 or even 3 Yin successes a round. When framing a Mook conflict, remember to factor the number of Yin successes required into the calculation of Threat Rating.

A GM doesn't have to narrate in a Mook conflict, since they don't roll any dice (or earn them in the first place). Depending on taste, they can sit back and let the players handle the whole

scene, recap and redirect at the end of each round, or actively narrate back and forth with the players.

Nemesis conflicts

The most important scenes are handled more actively, and are called Nemesis conflicts. Nemeses have Traits and Chi (usually from 1–5) of their own, just like the player characters, though they may not necessarily be people at all.

As befits such pivotal conflicts, Nemeses must be dealt with one-on-one. If two or more players absolutely need to gang up on a Nemesis, they'll have to do one of the following: First, they can take turns dealing with the Nemesis, completing both their Description and Resolution phases before letting their allies have a go in the next round. If you've set a dice pool limit, the second option is to have the players split the max dice between them. If the Nemesis gets to roll 6 dice, two players would get 3 dice each, or three players would get 2 dice each. The Nemesis would then split their Yang successes between their opponents. The same is true if more than one Nemesis engages a single player.

What really sets Nemesis conflicts apart from Mooks is that Nemeses have narrative power just like the players. This is where you can get an interactive back and forth between player and GM in the Description (similar to players teaming up with a Pass), before you finally go to the dice to Resolve.

Remember that the Coup de Grace still applies as always, only the victor describes the end result of the scene. If player and Nemesis go negative in the same round, the one with the least-negative Chi wins. If player and Nemesis are equal, ties go to the player.

Mixing them up

While there are two kinds of conflict, you can mix the two into one scene. If there is only one Nemesis conflict in a scene, and more than one player, you need something to keep everyone else occupied. This gives them something to do while they wait their turn to have a go at the Nemesis.

The classic combat example is that not only do you have to defeat BadVillain (who is a Nemesis), but he's also accompanied by the BadMen (his henchmen). So while one character dukes it up with BadVillain, the others hold off his goons. In a social situation, while one character apprehends the store manager (Nemesis) to find out what she knows, the others could be running interference to make sure no one else barges in.

Scab rolls

Every once in a while, you might want to roll for something without making a big production out of it. That's when you use a Scab Roll. Just grab a number of dice equal to your relevant Trait and compare the lowest roll to this scale:

1 = A solid, professional success. Good work!
2 = A good success. Mission (barely) accomplished.
3 = A success, but with negative complications.

4 = A regular, garden variety failure.
5 = A really bad, probably embarrassing failure.
6 = A failure so horrible as to defy comprehension.

This is an exception to the usual way of resolving conflict in Wushu, to be used when people really don't want to narrate a conflict. In general if it's not important enough to narrate, it isn't important enough to merit any kind of roll. But for those times when you absolutely must have it randomly determined, use a Scab roll.

Optional Extras: Secondary Goals & Time Limits

Even a combined Mook and Nemesis conflict may not have enough in it to keep all the players engaged. Particularly if the nature of the threats are better suited to some players choice of Traits than others.

Secondary Goals are adjuncts to the main scene challenges which you add to make things interesting. They generally work just like Mook conflicts, though they don't necessarily require Yin successes of their own to stay safe. Being exposed to the main Mook threat, you may still have to get Yin successes to prevent Chi loss from that. It's the GM's call as to exactly how they function.

Secondary Goals are useful for framing a scene to contain conflicts of interest to each and every character. When the main scene is about investigation and stitching together the clues, you might include a social Secondary Goal for the talkative character to interview a particular witness.

Secondary Goals can also be used to spur players to make a choice between two conflicting courses of action. Yang dice thrown at a Secondary goal instead of the main Mook or Nemesis, or at one Secondary Goal over another, necessitate player choice. They must sacrifice pursuit of one goal in favor of another.

A classic Secondary Goal in a physical situation is a fire. As long as it's burning, it raises the number of required Yin successes by one, in addition to any others they require. It can even be tied to a timed condition - if it's left burning for more than 2 rounds, it then becomes a 2-Yin threat. And so on.

Optional Extras: Time Limits

A potential problem with Wushu is the lack of urgency in the standard setup - as long as a player keeps rolling lots of Yin successes, they don't lose the ability to narrate. Because the dice bear no relation to what is actually be described, they are doing just as much cool stuff as everyone else, but having little impact on actually resolving the scene.

A method of forcing players to "get on with it" is having time limits on Secondary Goals, or indeed any other element of the scene conflict. You state up front that if a Secondary Goal, or the scene, isn't resolved in X number of rounds, then Y happens. Effectively, the GM gets to describe a Coup de Grace on the players.

Let's say your character is trying to pump a diplomat's aide for information, but cannot be overheard by the diplomat. You come upon the aide at one end of a corridor while the diplomat is on the phone at the other, walking towards his aide. The GM rules that you've got

3 rounds in which to get whatever information you can before the diplomat is in earshot and the opportunity is lost.

Say you are on a speeding rail train, out of control as it careens around the snowy mountains of Bavaria, rocking on its tracks as it rockets around turns. The screams of the passengers almost drown out the screams of the wheels on the tracks. What will you do?

In this kind of scene, you don't have an enemy to fight, or mooks to deal with (though a fight on top of an out of control train is an opportunity not to miss…), but the situation itself is the threat.

The GM sets the Goal, Threat, and Time based on his own desires for the campaign, how fast he wants the scene to play out, and how much pressure he wants to put on the PC's. The train scene probably has something like : Goal 15, Threat 1, Time 3.

Example 1: The group has to accumulate 15 successes to bring the train under control. They have to use 1 Yin success every round to avoid incidental harm from flying luggage, lurching train cars, and panicked horses in the Royal Stable's car. And they have to get their 15 successes in 3 Turns or less, or the train goes shooting off into a gorge, and lots of people get very badly killed.

Goal 15, Threat 1, Time 3.

Example 2: The Duke's famous Winter Ball. The PC's attend, seeking information on their nemesis Count Rugan. Here, they fan out using their individual social Traits to plumb the crowd for information. Each Turn covers an hour of Ball going, and they need a total of 20 to learn the Count's whereabouts. The players know there is a time limit (the GM has decided on 4 turns) before something bad happens (the Count's clockwork army awakes and invades Bohemia, say), but not how many actual Turns they have… Here there is no real danger to their person, so no need to divide dice.

Goal of 20, and a Time of 4.

Character Creation

Character creation in Wushu is simple; all you do come up with a collection of distinguishing features about the character. distill your character concept into a small number of Traits.

Traits

Traits can be absolutely anything from a profession (Detective, Hunter, Neurosurgeon) to an adjective (Charismatic, Intelligent, Rich as Croesus). In a game with combat-oriented conflicts, it's usually a good idea to have a combat trait (Shaolin Master, Gun-Fu, Dirty Fighting). In games with the supernatural or other kinds of powers, one Trait should be dedicated to that special ability (Telekinesis, Conjuring Magic, Werewolf).

Each Trait starts at a default rating of 2; your GM will give you 5–8 build points to spend on raising them (1 point for a 3, 2 points for a 4 and 3 for a 5), up to a maximum rating of 5. That should be enough for 3 Traits, give or take. The usual amount is 6 points, for a character with one Trait at 5, one at 4 and one at 3.

It's important to arrive at a common standard in the group on the level of focus of Traits. Otherwise, those with more specialized Traits may find themselves using the default 2 more than others.

Optional Extra: Trait Categories

Completely free-form Traits can be a recipe for both player paralysis and a wide disparity in the focus of Traits in a group. One way to avoid this is to categorize the Traits, so that each one covers a distinct and separate kind of conflict.

Characters usually have three Traits, and the most appropriate spread is to have a Combat, Social and Professional Trait.

Combat Traits tend to cover both violent and physical conflicts. Examples of appropriate Combat Traits: Two Gun Mojo, ex-Special Forces, Big, Mean and Nasty, A Natural Athlete, Merciless Engine of Destruction, Veteran of the Legions, Tommygun Terror.

Social Traits tend to cover interpersonal and social conflicts. Examples of appropriate Social Traits: Just a Quiet Word, Silver-Tongued Rogue, Everybody Knows Me Everybody Owes Me, Who Would Suspect Such a Man?, All Your Well-Learned Politesse, Connections in Low Places, Intimidating Presence, Rabble Rouser, Skilled Orator, The Art of the Con.

Professional Traits tend to cover mental conflicts, those involving specialist skills or unnatural abilities. Examples of appropriate Professional Traits: Man of Science!, Electronics Whiz, Attorney, Herbalist, Arcane Mastery, Housebreaker, Eidetic Memory.

Optional Extra: "Trait Features"

Sometimes the handful of Traits you have don't tell you enough about when a Trait applies and when it does not. In the main that's all left up to the social contract via application of the Veto to determine when something fits and when it does not. But if you want a little more certainty in what's there, and perhaps some more room for differentiation, one way of doing that is to identify some specific things your Trait does.

These are "gimmes" if you like. They're things you can apply your Trait to that no one can Veto as stretching it too far. This tells everyone unequivocally what your Trait is definitely about. Note that it doesn't mean it won't apply to any other activities that might go under it, just that they aren't guaranteed to be accepted.

For every point over 2 (ie the default) you get a Feature which you can name (though you can use any variation, such as equal to the value of the Trait or one less than). Par exemple, you have a character in a fantasy game who's basically a Ranger-type. They have a Trait called Wilderness Warrior 4 which they use for all their fighting stuff. Using the one-less Features than value of Trait in this instance and with the Trait at 4, you get three Features. You might write it thus:

Wilderness Warrior 4 - You are adept at fighting in outdoor environments, using even the elements themselves as factors to turn the tide of battle in your favour. Features:

- Archery - feats of accurate marksmanship
- Ambushing - laying traps and avoiding them
- Knife-and-hachet combat - brutally effective two-weapon style

Optional Extra: Control Dice

This option allows you to simulate the notion that "with great power comes great risk." Werewolves who loose control of their feral natures, vampires who cannot control their lust for blood, or in general any action which gives great power at the risk of great cost.

Players do not lose control of their characters, this represents the characters losing control of themselves. Thus the failure of control is intended as an opportunity for role-playing, not as a method to give temporary control of the character to the GM.

The GM creates a pool of Control Dice for each player. The suggested starting size is 5. The player must add an additional Trait (which starts at 2, as usual) to their character sheet representing control over their innate power. At any time, a player may remove any number of Control Dice from the pool, and use them in addition to their normal pool of dice gained by description of their character's actions. They then assign the dice to Yin and Yang as usual, and roll. However, once the roll has been completed, the player must roll the dice remaining in the Control Pool against the control Trait. If they score no successes, then they will lose control in the manner defined by the trait called upon.

(Vampires acting out wanton cruelty in search of blood, Werewolves rending and tearing all within reach, and so on.)

The control pool should undergo refreshment on a much slower basis than the Chi pool, perhaps once for every two sessions, or after an activity which the GM might rule could refresh the control pool. The control pool will always refresh to full after an complete loss of control by the character.

Another option would be that once the character looses control, they reverse the control pool process, spending out of control dice until they regain control once more.

It should be noted this is a great opportunity for role-playing, and some classic angst/brooding. Most players will want to lose control at some point.

Optional Extra: "Special Something"

Players love toys, and giving them a special something helps with that. The "Special Something" is a bonus die added into the players roll when they narrate an action in which it comes into play. For a Jedi it might be "The Force". For a smuggler it might be "My Ship". For a gadgeteer type it might be "Well Equipped". Whatever it is, when they manage to put a character trait to use, narrating an action scene which uses that "Special Something", they gain a bonus die above and beyond any normal die cap or scene limit.

Examples of appropriate "Special Somethings": Alien Strangeness, Connections Up the Wazoo, Elven Steed, Ogre Blood, Pimp Ride, Psionic Talent, Gadgets/Gizmos, (In)Famous, Unbelievably Wealthy

Weaknesses

Finally, to balance out the average hyper-competent Wushu character, they need a Weakness. Weaknesses are Traits with a rating of 1. This could be a love interest who's always getting them into trouble, some kind of special vulnerability (eg: wooden stakes and sunlight), or a tragic flaw (Drunk, Egotist, Can't Refuse a Challenge). Any time your character tries to act against their Weakness, only dice that roll a 1 are successes.

It should be noted that weaknesses are not really supposed to be coming into play very often. They are things that the character will stay away from, or actions that they will try to avoid just as you would try to avoid an activity or action that you were very bad at. They influence play more by what actions your character chooses to undertake than acting as a stick to slap your character with.

Advancement

In standard Wushu, characters start out competent and stay that way. They don't improve mechanically, nor do they accumulate experience with which they can raise their Traits.

What they can do, if change is desired, is evolve.

Lets take a look at Marigold Plume.

Marigold's WUSHU stats look like this:

Traits

Friends with Vrock the Spirit Dragon 5
Curious Kid always Getting Into Trouble 4
Makes friends easy 3
Weakness: Weedy little kid 1

First Story Arc: Marigold and Vrock investigate rumors that kids are being snatched from the city and shipped to some unknown place by ship. The pair fight the dangerous Ur-Men from Lumeria who are behind the kidnappings as they seek to power their Dream Engines with the minds of children. Marigold sees the dark underside of world first hand, and it changes her. She no longer Makes Friends Easily, but has developed an Uncanny Insight into Human Nature.

Second Story Arc: A few years later, Marigold is in high school, and she's trying to balance a normal life with her occult investigations. She's grown up a bit- no longer a Weedy Little Kid, but now she's Too Pretty to be Taken Seriously. She deals with an epidemic of spirit possessions at her school and manages to become Homecoming Queen all at the same time, but she learned some things about her friends that she wishes she didn't know, and it blunts

her curiosity somewhat, increasing her Uncanny Insight into Human Nature (shifting a point from Curious to Insight).

Third Story Arc: Marigold has been kidnapped, and only Vrock can find her. Vrock reveals in addition to being a spirit dragon, he also has Many Contacts and Allies in the Spirit World and has Learned Something about Investigation from his friend Marigold. But since being separated from the spiritual anchor Marigold gave him, he has become Sensitive to Sunlight. Can Vrock find the wayward Marigold in time to get her college applications in before the deadline?

It is important to note that what Marigold can do with Uncanny Insight Into Human Nature is different than what she can do with Makes Friends Easily. Making unnerving guesses into what's bugging someone would be fine with the former, but would be completely out of theme (and most likely Veto'd) if she was using the latter.

Credits

Dan Bayn for creating Wushu in the first place, and allowing me to plagiarize his words in places. And for allowing me to include Held Dice, which come from Wire-Fu.

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