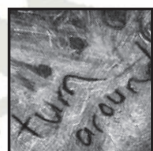


the NO PRESS RPG Anthology

8

Original, Complete, Short-Form Roleplaying Games



Snowball

by Alexander Cherry



pretender

by Kirt Dankmyer



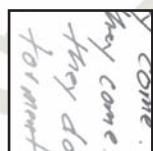
THE AGENCY

by Matt Machell



CELL GAMMA

by Mike Holmes



DISCERNMENT

by Michael S. Miller



WTF?

by Daniel Solis



Pagoda

by Jeffrey Schecter



Over the Bar

by Ben Lehman

with an introduction by Ron Edwards, author of *Sorcerer*, *Elfs* and *Trollbabe*

Edited by Luke Crane, creator of the *Burning Wheel Fantasy Roleplaying System*

Credit Due

SNOWBALL written and conceived by

Alexander Cherry: www.twistedconfessions.com

DISCERNMENT written and conceived by

Michael S. Miller: incarnadine.indie-rpgs.com

PRETENDER written and conceived by

Kirt Dankmyer: www.ivanhoeunbound.com

WTF? written and conceived by

Daniel Solis: www.danielsolis.com

THE AGENCY written and conceived by

Matt Machell: www.realms.org.uk

PAGODA written and conceived by

Jeffrey Schecter

CELL GAMMA written and conceived by

Mike Holmes

OVER THE BAR written and conceived by

Ben Lehman

Anthology Editor

Luke Crane

Copy Editors

Rich Forest, Thor Olavsrud and Jonathon Nichols

Foreword

Ron Edwards

Illustrations

Snowball

Emily Veinglory

Discernment

Ian Armstrong (title illustration), Michael S. Miller (side bar illustration)

Pretender

Steve Dismukes

WTF?

Daniel Schenström

The Agency

Cliff Kurowski (title illustration), Kev Sather (side bar illustration)

Pagoda

Jonathon Walton (title illustration), Emily Veinglory (side bar illustration)

Cell Gamma

Ed Heil

Over the Bar

Lindsey Anderson

Layout, Design and Print Production

Luke Crane

Press Logo Design

Mike Sculco: www.digimaxstudios.com

Cover Design

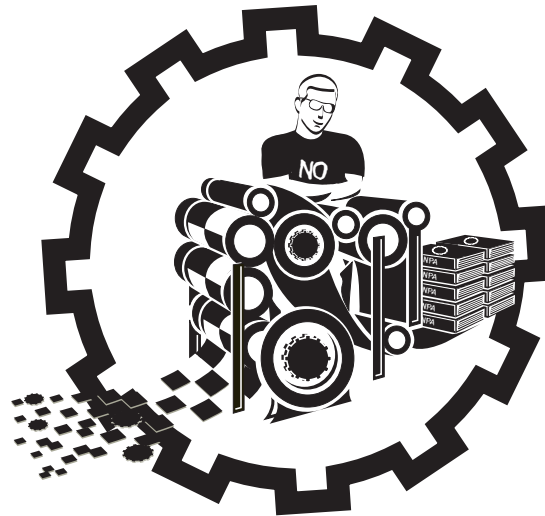
John Harper and Luke Crane

Contents

Foreword	6
Editor's Intro	8
Snowball	9
What is Snowball?	9
Zero: Before You Begin	10
One: Character Creation	10
Two: Defining Traits	11
Three: Events	12
Four: Victory and Defeat	13
Five: Scenes and Story	13
Six: Example of Play	16
Appendix: Event Flowchart	19
Thanks	19
The Author	19
Discernment	
What is this Game?	20
Where is this Game Played?	21
Who Plays this Game?	21
How is this Game Played?	22
Designer's Notes and Acknowledgments	27
Pretender	29
Introduction	29
Consensus	31
Start	31
System	42
Non-Systems	49
Actual Play	50
Designer's notes	58
Credit	59
About the Author	59
WTF?	60
WTF is WTF?	60
What you need to play	61
Game Concepts	61
How to play WTF?	62
Climaxes	64
Jam Sessions	64
Writers	65
About the Author	65
The Agency	66
Introduction	67
About the Agency	67
Playing the Game	68

Character Creation	69
Choose skills	69
Choose bonuses and flaws	70
Examples of Character Creation	70
Game Rules	72
Karma	72
Action rolls	72
Combat	73
Car chases	76
Heroic Bonuses and Flaws	76
Bonuses	76
Flaws	79
Directing	80
The Stylised Sixties	80
What's Happening in the World?	80
Scenarios	82
Scenarios Seeds	86
Series	87
Villains	87
Supernatural Antagonists	90
Notable Members of The Agency	93
The Agency's Most Wanted	93
Other Settings	95
Looking for Inspiration?	95
Acknowledgements	95
Pagoda	
About Pagoda	96
Elements	96
Aspects	97
Paths	98
The Flaw	99
Sign of the Zodiac	99
Rules of the Game	100
Chi	101
Combat	102
Injury	103
Shamans and Sorcerers	104
Spirit Magic	104
Elemental Magic	105
Inner Strength	105
The Last Straw	106
Non-Player Characters	107
Relics of Power	110
A Final Word	110
Cell Gamma	111
GM's Introduction	112
Prisoners and Resolution Mechanics	114
Welcome to Cell Gamma	117
Relationships	120
Areas	121

Events.....	123
“Progress”.....	126
Breakdown.....	129
Improvise.....	130
Climax.....	131
Conversions and Other Ideas.....	132
Over the Bar.....	136
Character Generation.....	136
Task Resolution.....	137
Conflict and Opposed Challenges.....	137
Drinking at Other Times.....	137
Advancement.....	137
Ending the game.....	137
Appendix 1: Rules for Teetotalers.....	137
Appendix 2: Advanced Play Rules.....	138
Critical Acclaim.....	138
Shameless Advertising.....	138
Index.....	139



The No Press RPG Anthology is copyright © 2004 Luke Crane. All works herein, games and illustrations, are property of their respective authors. They are used in this anthology via kind donation and permission. This anthology was printed in Washington State, USA, Fall 2004.

All rights reserved.

ISBN: 0-9758889-3-5

Sparks from the Digital Furnace

So one day early in 2003, Clinton R. Nixon emails me and he says, “Check out this Burning Wheel game by Luke Crane. I already contacted him and told him about the Forge.” I do it. And Luke is this wiry New Yorker with a chip on his shoulder, and at first he’s reeeeeeally skeptical about anyone telling him about designing and publishing a roleplaying game. Because he did it already, and anyone who tells him anything can just — oh wait. You guys do it too? he says. And just provide some Web site support, contacts for artists and other resources, and all kinds of discussions? And the whole point is creator ownership, with a fair nod toward capitalist piggy snort-snort success as well? Well then.

Because you see, the Forge is only about creator ownership. Have a game already? Cool. Published it already? Cool. Totally the opposite? Cool too. The site’s there for you.

A year (and a whole lotta Burning Wheel) later, Luke follows up on a bunch of get-it-done style activities at the Forge, such as the 24-hour RPG project and the Iron Game Chef competitions, but his idea is to gather up the little “sparks” that people have been giving off. Sometimes, an idea doesn’t make it onto one’s front burner, or maybe it’s a little too goofy for further development. Sometimes it’s a fantastically great idea, but without much meat, and other times, it’s meaty but not, you know, what the author wanted to work on right then. Luke put out a call for them and he got a bunch. Some in their original forms preceded the Forge itself, like *Cell Gamma*. Some were built literally by musing there, like *Snowball*. Others were sort of in-between, or arose during the aforementioned activities. All Luke wanted was for it to get developed enough to be playable and for it to have a “spark” quality — you read it, and think that someone, somewhere, is gonna like this one.

Let’s talk about that spark thing.

Spark stuff #1— The games in this book were written for fun play, and nothing else. Not according to publishing-specifications at all, from anyone—not even any internalized specs the author happened to be carrying around already. That stuff just got whisked out the window, and each person worked only with raw RPG building blocks. Even worse, only with the ones he wanted to use! (Would I bore you with some theoretical discussion of something called the Lumpley Principle? Not here, but if you wanna, I’m willing. I’m always willing, honey.) Never mind what a roleplaying game “ought” to have. These have what they need, according to each author.

Spark stuff #2— The sparks didn’t come from nowhere, and the authors know it. I think that’s one of the finest strengths of the new community of independent roleplaying authors: they like acknowledging one another and giving credit to their inspirations. The impact of *The Pool* (James V. West, Random Order Creations), *InSpectres* (Jared A. Sorensen, Memento-Mori), and

Otherkind (Vincent Baker, Lumpley Press) is enormous on all of these designs and the discussions that surrounded them. You'll see them and a bunch of others get mentioned. Why? Because these authors are part of a community built of ideas, experiences, feedback, and experimentation. They know that if Game Y was heavily inspired by Game X, or if, conversely, it was built to refute the idea that prompted Game X, it only strengthens the community for everyone to appreciate the flow of concepts.

Spark stuff #3— You can read a lotta talk about game “engines” in all sorts of published games. Well, these aren't engines. They're sparks, and you're the engine, and maybe you have an engine in you that you didn't even know about and won't until the right spark hits it.

I'd be surprised if anyone liked every single one of this anthology's games well enough to play right away, but I won't be surprised at all when one or a few get you excited ... and when a different one or a few gets your best buddy excited.

It's a diverse bunch, too. Along with the near-freeform stuff like *WTF?* and *Over the Bar*, there are solid genre faithfuls like *The Agency*, *Pagoda*, and *Pretender*. And in between, you have *Snowball*, *Discernment*, and *Cell Gamma*, in which in-game time and improvisation do funny things to one another. You'll see no GM, a central powerful GM, and everything in between. You'll see dice and no-dice. The only thing you won't see is any credence given to a single “right way to play.”

Spark stuff #4— So these are little weird games, right? Aren't they just wacky for its own sake? Different just to be different? Well yeah, to some extent that's true. They're sparks! But that doesn't mean they're one little brief flash and that's it. In all the diversity, there is one thing you can count on: ease of play, if the spark ignites for you. See, that's a big thing at the Forge. If even one of the sparks makes your engine roar, then you are holding an actual RPG in your hand that has been played, beaten with a stick, and played again.

And one other thing. We all give off sparks, my friend. You do too. Maybe it's buried in the “optional rules” section of that 600-page “gonna fix D&D” game you've been working on since you were fifteen. Or maybe it's back in the margins of your little scrawled notebook from last year, left behind because you figured no one would ever really want to play that way. Or saved in the hidden folder on your work computer. You know what I'm talking about.

Pull it out from all that encrustation and brush it off. I'll betcha your spark will light someone else up, and maybe a lot of someones. Whatever else you play, whatever else you write, and whatever else you might think about roleplaying, I urge you — bring out that spark and blow on it a little, out where everyone can see it. James V. West had no idea how many people would enthusiastically seize *The Pool* and play it to pieces, but they did.

See what happens? Yeah: ignition. A whole bunch of people who had a great time playing these games and helping their presentations in this book to be as good as they are. That, and nothing else, is what makes roleplaying alive, beautiful, and burning bright.

—Ron Edwards

Editor's Intro

What you have in your hands is, ultimately, a burst of inspiration. Reading through myriad PDF games on the Web—seeing how brilliant many of them were—I was struck by the overwhelming urge to get these games out there. The Web is a great place to search out obscure arcana, but it can't match the exposure given by getting a game into hard copy.

Many months of hard work later, we have a collection of works culled from the darkest and farthest reaches of the Internet, re-edited and reformatted, ready to be played.

Eight games in one book. (I don't even play eight different games in a year!) To me, the wealth of material in this book is staggering. Even if you only play half the games, there are so many glisteningly cool ideas under one roof it boggles the mind.

Michael S. Miller's and Mike Holmes' games—*Discernment* and *Cell Gamma*, respectively—are twisted thought experiments, pushing the very boundaries of what a roleplaying game is. *Pagoda* does in ten pages what many RPGs fail to do in ten books—it clearly evokes its setting through interesting and engaging mechanics. *Snowball* offers a different take on time, sequence and decision using a simple die pool mechanic. *Pretender* and *The Agency* look lovingly into the past and remember a time when Death was cool and spies wore polyester—most importantly, they focus this into their mechanics. *WTF?* is strange. It's closest sister here is *Discernment*, but it is faster, weirder and less rigid. It most definitely produces the air of anime mayhem it sets out to recreate. Lastly, *Over the Bar*, is, well, over the top. You'll see.

I hope you enjoy playing these games half as much as I enjoyed reading them, collecting them and presenting them to you. They are eight fires of inspiration combined for you into one little inferno.

Why No Press?

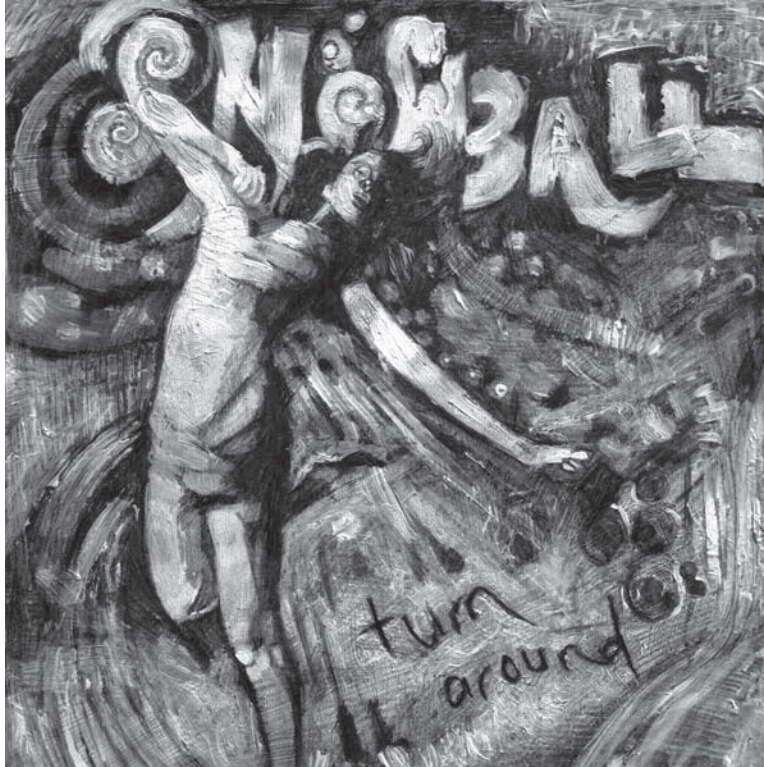
Born of forum discussions and late night, caffeinated binge-writing sessions, the original forms of these games were pixels and electronic type. I don't think any of the authors expected to see print. I don't think they cared. There was no press in their future.

But they are in print now; didn't they come out of a press? This layout was created and a high-resolution PDF generated and sent to a print-on-demand house in Washington. Not the traditional method of book printing. No press involved.

And, of course, we don't expect to get any good press about our endeavor.

So our title is ironic, these games are punk rock, low budget and certainly not traditional. They were created that way, and arrive in your hands by similar means—not via that stinky old traditional press. No press indeed. In fact, what you have in your hands is a printed and bound copy of the future.

Enjoy,
—Luke



Snowball

by Alexander Cherry

Snowball is a variant rules system based on *The Pool*, a game copyrighted by James V. West of Random Order Creations (www.randomordercreations.com).

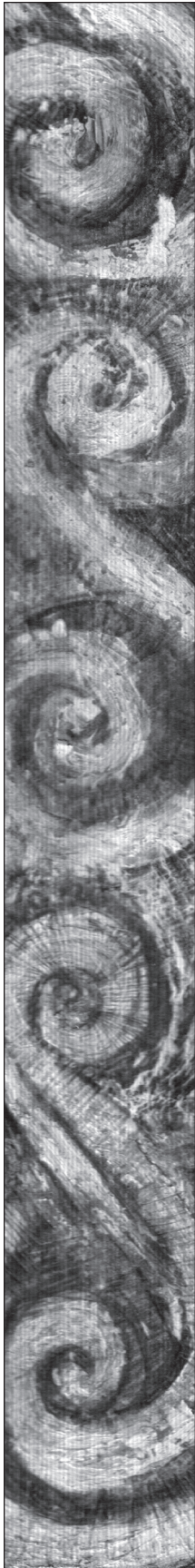
The unlikely name “Snowball” is a reference to the snowball effect, one of the most well-known examples of positive feedback. Just as the shift of a snowball at the top of a mountain can eventually cause an avalanche, this game encourages both character and story to grow larger and reinforce one another as the story rolls on.

What is Snowball?

Snowball was originally created as an attempt to emulate backward-storytelling, starting with the last scene and moving backward toward the beginning of the story in discrete intervals (like the movie *Memento*). However, it has expanded beyond those narrow roots and can easily be used for more “normal” play. Section five gives tips and tricks on how to play Snowball in either mode.

Like its ancestors, Snowball is a roleplaying game geared toward a narrative collaboration between a GM and one or more players. Characters in Snowball are not defined by assigning values to a list of pre-approved attributes in an attempt to balance them against an objective standard. Instead, they are defined through a series of Traits, which are rated by how important such Traits are to the story.





In Snowball, the influence players have on events is not limited solely to dictating the actions of their characters. By invoking Traits, suggesting Ideas, and gambling dice, the players can actively direct the story, essentially assuming the role of the GM for brief periods of time.

Creating a story can sometimes be seen as a hike to the top of a high mountain, trying to reach the peak. In Snowball, everyone starts at the top, and the story naturally rolls down to the bottom, gathering more details in the trip.

Zero: Before You Begin

One person in your group needs to be the Game Master, or GM — this is the person responsible for setting up the scenes, creating situations, playing other characters, and directing the game when no other player has the reins. The GM should ensure not only that the game runs smoothly, but that it remains enjoyable to all participants.

You will need a bunch of six sided dice, probably about 10 per player, including a handful of GM dice that look different from the rest.

Snowball is designed to be used in any setting — but before play begins you should decide on just one. Before the first game, there should be a general idea as to the genre in which you will be playing, as well as the setting and opening of the first scene. See Section **Five** for more details.

One: Character Creation

Character creation in Snowball is very easy, although it can be frustrating for those who want to know every detail about their character at the start of the game.

Characters begin with a name, five dice in their Pool, and a Trait that must be showcased during the first scene. Traits will be discussed in Section Two, and handling Events in Section Three. Creating a back-story for a character is discouraged, but can be done—however, keep in mind that everything is mutable, and your imagined back-story could be changed by a single roll of the dice.

The Pool

Every character has a Pool filled with dice, the exact number changes over time. These dice are the basic currency of Snowball, and can be spent to add new Traits to a character, increase existing Traits, or gambled to increase the chances of a roll's success. The more dice a character has, the more potential he has to affect the story. See Section Two and Three for more information on what to do with the Pool.

Two: Defining Traits

A Trait is a short, definitive statement about your character, something important, something that makes your character who and what he is. Traits can be anything: an aspect of personality, a skill, a handicap, an ability, allies or enemies, possessions, beliefs, destinies — anything that helps bring the character to life.

Make sure your Traits are specific enough to avoid conflicts over vagueness— instead of “Magic” or “Scholar,” say “Wizard of Fire” or “University Professor.” Be sure that your fellow players and the GM are clear as to the purpose and nature of your chosen Traits.

A starting character has a single Trait, which begins at level 3. This should be one of the most noticeable things about the character, as it will come up immediately in the first scene. Further revelations about your character come later, unfolding just as they would while reading a book.

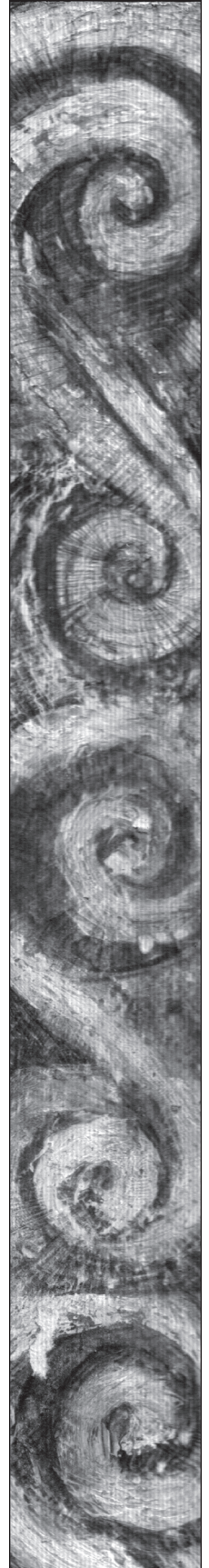
Adding and improving Traits may only be done one level at a time, and only in certain situations — between scenes and during appropriate moments in play. Every time a Scene ends, any character who was in that Scene may add or raise *one* Trait by a *single* level, which costs an amount of dice from one’s Pool equal to the level. For example, buying a new Trait would cost 1 die (which would start at level 1), while raising a level 2 Trait to level 3 would cost 3 dice. Any Trait added or improved between scenes must be invoked at least once in the next scene in which the character appears.

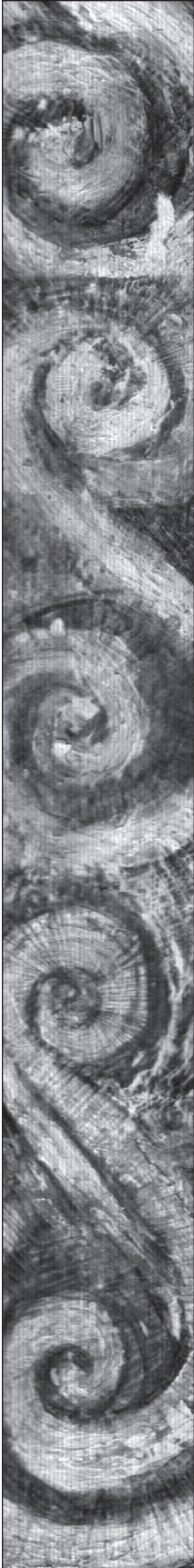
In addition, while inside a scene, a player may choose to add a new Trait or increase an existing one. To do this, the player states an Idea or declares how the Trait will be used in a Conflict, and then spends his dice. Additional dice can be gambled on this roll. See the next section for more details.

If a Monologue of Victory is rolled, the change or addition goes through as planned. If a Monologue of Defeat is rolled, the dice are still spent and the Trait is improved, but the Trait does not have a positive effect. In some cases, this sort of corruption might even change the description of the Trait.

Conversely, in a Guided Event, the player does not spend his dice (they are returned to his Pool), nor does he get the Trait. The player may not try again to increase or add that Trait until the next scene begins. See *Section Four* for more details on Monologues, Guided Events, and their role in the game.

Finally, one may reduce a Trait if so desired, at any time after it has been used at least once. This adds dice into the Pool equal to the levels lost. However, a character may not *completely* remove a Trait without the GM’s permission, and must always have at least one Trait total. Generally, if a Trait is removed, it should be addressed somehow in the current or upcoming scene.





Three: Events

In Snowball, dice are cast to resolve all Events, which in turn push the game forward by determining narration privileges. There are two types of Events in Snowball—Conflicts and Ideas.

A Conflict occurs when at least two forces are at odds with one another. In classic RPGs, this could be anything from a character trying to jump a ravine to a giant snake trying to strike someone. In Snowball, you don't always have to roll dice if you want to try something — just say you do it. But if you or the GM decide the act is (or could be) of some importance to the story, or if you simply have an interest in it, you roll dice to determine who gets to describe it, and whether the action succeeded or failed.

An Idea is different from a Conflict because it comes into play right out of someone's head, rather than out of an obstacle already set in the game. Ideas can be as simple or complex as you want. They can come into play at any time. If you have an Idea, announce it and the GM will let you roll for the chance to describe it. Ideas are pursued and resolved on a first-come, first-serve basis, so make sure you speak up!

Events are, by definition, something important enough to the story that dice are rolled to decide their outcome. A player can call for a roll, the results of which will determine how the narration proceeds. Even if a player's character is not present in a scene, he may still call for a roll to introduce a new Idea.

Before rolling for an Event, one must first declare both *Intent* and *Calamity*. The Intent is what you want to have happen — keep this short; the full narration comes later. Conversely, the Calamity is what you don't want to have happen — whatever sort of hindrance, complication or problem you can think of that will make the story even more interesting than it already is. If the GM calls for a roll from a player, the player is still responsible for stating both of these.

Next, decide what Trait, if any, you will invoke for this roll. You may invoke your own, or, in an Idea involving another character, you may invoke one of their traits. You may never invoke more than one Trait in any Event. If you or your GM believe this situation calls for a new Trait, or an increase in a Trait, you add the dice spent on raising or adding the Trait *instead of* invoking an existing one.

The GM may award 0-3 Bonus Dice per roll, as he sees fit. This is not based on difficulty, but rather on both how much he likes your idea, and whether or not he wants it to succeed. You may also gamble dice from your Pool, adding them to the roll — the more dice gambled, the more likely success. However, if you do succeed, those dice are lost.

Add up all your dice from various sources, and roll them. There are three possible results:

- If you roll even a single 1, it's a good result — don't even worry about the rest of your dice. You get a Monologue of Victory, which must follow from your stated Intent. You also lose any gambled dice from your Pool.

- If you roll no 1s, then check for 6s. If you have even one 6, you get a Monologue of Defeat, which must follow along your previously-stated Calamity. You also gain a single die in your Pool.
- Roll no 1s or 6s, and your roll is neutral. The result is a Guided Event, which the GM may narrate as he sees fit, regardless of your Intent or Calamity.

A conflict between two player characters is always treated as a Guided Event; never roll for such conflicts. In addition, keep in mind that no player character may ever die without that player's consent — and if that player does decide his character is to die, the player gets a free Monologue of Defeat to describe that death.

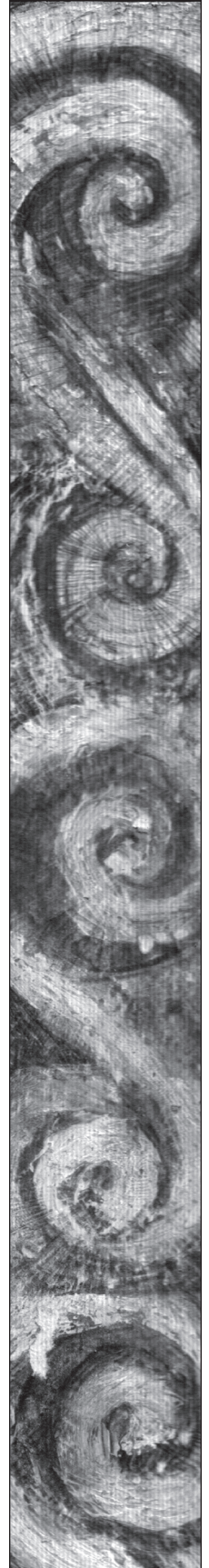
Four: Victory and Defeat

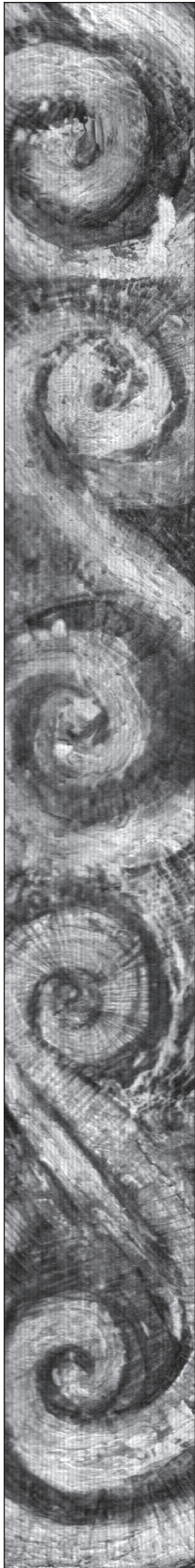
During a Monologue, the player in question is entirely in control of the game for a short time. He can describe actions, dialogue, new characters, new events, etc. — whatever might make a good addition to the story. But there are a few ground rules to keep in mind.

- **Focus** — Make your narration appropriate to the type of Monologue you're giving. A Victory should be in line with what you stated in your Intent, and shouldn't stray too far out of bounds. A Defeat should always add complication or conflict. And if you used a Trait in rolling for an Event, your Monologue must highlight that Trait, either positively or negatively.
- **Respect** — Don't alter another player's character. You can certainly use their characters and their actions, but try to keep them within the parameters of behavior that have already been established. If in doubt, ask the player if your Monologue is appropriate to his character.
- **Consistency** — Keep your narration consistent with the story as a whole, and the facts that have already been put forth within the story. If it's already been established that General Mongo died twenty years ago in the Battle of Bliss, don't describe him as a happily retired advisor to the military.
- **Conciseness** — You should end your Monologue in a timely manner. Going on for too long robs the other players of their chance in the spotlight. The GM may interrupt your Monologue if it goes on too long — try to keep it no more than a minute or two.

Five: Scenes and Story

Like a movie, play, or television show, a game is a series of scenes. The GM is the one who decides how to set the first Scene. He can do this by deciding exactly who is in the Scene and what is happening, or by using a scene suggested by one of the players.





The GM has as many options for setting a Scene as his imagination allows. Scenes can open quietly or in the heat of conflict, abruptly or subtly. A Scene can even take place without any player character present. If a character is in a scene, and the character has added or improved a Trait since the last scene, the GM should craft the scene to highlight that Trait.

Once the Scene has reached it's natural end, the GM will announce a Scene change. Players who want to add more to a Scene may announce an Idea before it closes.

After each Scene has closed, all the participants may add a die to their Pools. *This is important.* They may also increase or add a single Trait, as described above.

More than one Scene can be happening at once, either emulating the same time frame, or in different times altogether. The player's characters probably won't be together all the time. They may not even know one another. If more than one Scene is happening at once, the GM will cut between them at natural pauses or cliffhanger moments, keeping each player as involved as possible.

One Step Forward, Two Steps Back

Snowball was originally designed for reverse-Scene game play, inspired by the movie *Memento* (2000). The opening Scene should always be the very end of the story, the final pages of the book. Keep in mind that, if this were a forward-moving story, the credits are pretty much going to be rolling after this scene — start it with a bang, and let it end on its own course.

Generally, the opening scene should be set in less than a hundred words. Always leave more questions than answers, and keep in mind the Traits each player has chosen for their characters, as well as anything else agreed upon such as genre, setting, and so forth.

As an example, here is the opening Scene from the very first game of Snowball, where I began with quite a literal bang:

"Everyone's ears were ringing. The pistol lay smoking on the ground where it had been thrown. Blood was everywhere, the hired men scattering in fear. And, lying amidst the sand on the slabs of the ruined temple, The Green Man's blood oozed from his ruined face, a hole in the base of his neck."

The setting was a renaissance high fantasy, and the suggestion from a player was "the death of the Green Man." When the Scene opened, nobody knew who the Green Man was, or who had shot him. The other details (hired men, the ruined temple) were also improvised without explanation.

After that scene concludes, the GM should set each next Scene before the previous Scene began — the required time frame is variable, and can usually be left open to interpretation. As with the first scene, keep the opening of each successive scene under 100 words if at all possible. It helps if each opening keeps the players on their toes — try to start Scenes in the middle of some action, or introducing some new twist, with only occasional Scenes devoted to downtime.

When running any particular Scene, the GM should keep in mind any new or improved Traits the involved players may have added to their characters, as these Scenes should be constructed to highlight these Traits. GMs should not be shy about incorporating their own ideas to complement the player's ideas, and calling for rolls when necessary.

The play goal of each Scene in reverse-Style is obvious — to get the characters from the opening situation to the situation which opened the “previous” Scene. Each scene has its own endpoint, which is already defined, and it is the job of the group to maneuver there. The GM shouldn't necessarily make it easy for them, and scene openings are a good spot to introduce a new plot complication.

Scripting out an adventure for Snowball isn't all that difficult — come up with the story in chronological order, split it out into scenes, then reverse them when introducing them in play. Make sure to keep things vague enough that any Traits a character may gather, or start with, can be incorporated. And be prepared for rolls that succeed when they “should” have failed, or vice versa.

In a more open-ended environment, be sure to keep track of the hints and pieces that have been laid out in play. If a character mentions something like, “this isn't the first time you've lied about something like this,” make note so that you can incorporate that into a later scene.

Starting at the End (or in the Middle)

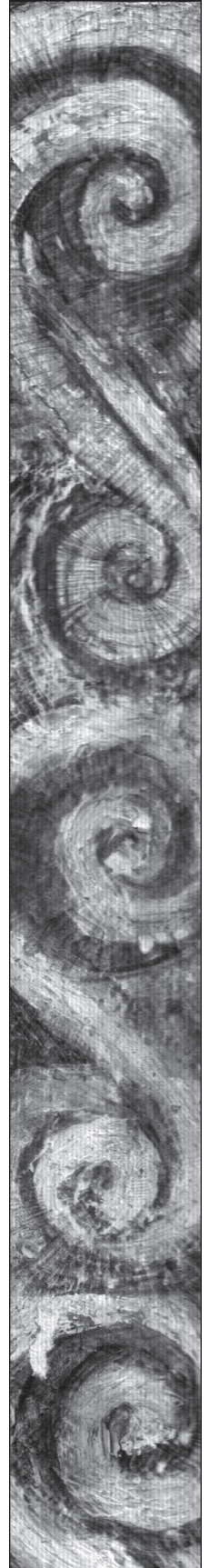
Even if you don't plan on using Snowball for reverse-Scene play, there's something to be said for setting your first Scene at the end of the story, or at some other important turning point. This is a method often employed by storytellers — start off with the fight/flight/stand-off, then go back to “it all started when...”

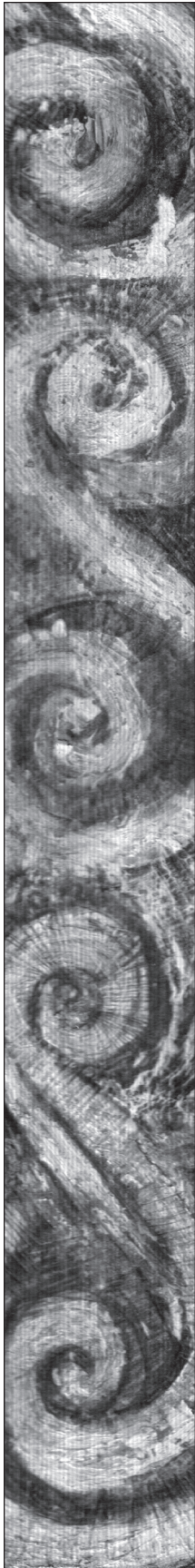
Using this method helps give the players and GM a goal to move toward, a frame around which the narrative may develop. The actions the characters take in the Scene, and the statements they make, can be used to establish developments and relationships that are only fully realized later. It also is often a good excuse to put all the characters together, though this is not necessary.

If the first scene is meant to be the final scene of the narrative, try to provide some closure before the Scene ends in the manner suggested in the previous section. If it is simply meant to be a pivotal scene that the story will move past when it comes around again, don't worry about closure.

Out of Order

Snowball can also be used to tell stories where the narrative has no direct sequence whatsoever. This is easiest when the scenes are in some sort of pattern, whether regimented (i.e. alternating scenes set in the 1920s and the 1990s, or scenes set just a week apart) or more intuitive and free form (moving back and forth as seems fit). It also works well for a time-loop scenario, where each iteration of the same scene (or collection of scenes) reveals new information, both about the participants and their environment.





Much of the advice in the previous paragraphs can apply to Out of Order play as well — the main difference is that, much of the time, there is no well-defined defined end-point for the subsequent scenes.

The biggest suggestion is simply to keep track of the various bits of foreshadowing hints that are dropped in the game. Encourage the players to add foreshadowing in their monologues, and be sure to add foreshadowing yourself. New scenes can then be pieced together using these bits.

In addition, allow players to call for scenes of their own, within reason. If a player wants his character's next scene to involve a particular set-up, he probably has a good reason. Let it happen!

Six: Example of Play

Danny, Ken, and Veronica have gathered together to play a game of Snowball, using the example opening scene from earlier, and using the Memento style of play. Ken is the GM; Veronica is playing Ioana, whose single trait is Dryad (3); and Danny is playing Specere, a Pangolin (3). We join the game already in progress. Both players have four dice.

"Everyone's ears were ringing," Ken says. "The pistol lay smoking on the ground where it had been thrown. Blood was everywhere, the hired men scattering in fear. And, lying amidst the sand on the slabs of the ruined temple, The Green Man's blood oozed from his ruined face, a hole in the base of his neck."

"Okay," Veronica says, "there's the beginning. What's the next step?"

"Improvise," Danny says. "We're standing over a dead body."

"Yeah," Ken adds, "your characters know what happened, but as a player you don't. You can improvise facts in play."

"Ioana climbs down the tree, staring at the corpse. She takes up a branch and pokes at it."

"There's a tree?" Danny's kind of slow.

"There is now," Ken says. "In the distance, the sun is setting. The sandstorm seems to be picking up again."

"Well, I suppose that's one way to resolve it."

"Is that your character speaking?"

"Yeah, sure. Specere says that...from a few steps below the scene. He's leaning on his staff, looking solemn."

"Ioana says, 'Is it real? Oh Lord, it's bloody real' and she buries her head in her hands and begins to sob."

"So..." Danny asks, "did WE kill the Green Man?"

"All you know is that he's dead. Based on your actions, and maybe the dice, YOU get to decide who actually shot him. And why."

"Oh, okay. In that case, Lethandyr lets out a rasp, as if he hadn't breathed since the shot rang out."

"Now you're getting it, Danny" Veronica says. "Do you want this guy to have any special relationship to you?"

"I think I'm going to call for a roll on this one," Ken says before Danny can speak. "On a success, Lethandyr is friendly to you; otherwise, he's hostile."

"Um, okay," Danny says "Those are the Intent and Calamity, right?"

"Right. You can change the details if you want, but that might affect how many dice I'll give you."

"No, no, that's okay."

"You're gonna have to spend a die," Vanessa says to him, "to cement this relationship."

"What do I roll?"

"Well, you're spending one die," Ken says, "and I'm giving you two, for a total of three. You can gamble more dice if you want, but if you win, you lose 'em."

"No, no, that's enough," Danny says, and tosses three dice. They come up 1, 5, and 4.

"Okay, that's a Monologue of Victory. You now only have 3 dice in your Pool, and write down "Friendly Relationship with Lethandyr" on your sheet. Make your Monologue."

"Um, Specere stares sternly back at Lethandyr. Lethandyr wheezes, 'I had to do it, Spec, I had to.' He begins to sob."

"Lightning cracks in the distance," Ken says, "as the sandstorm whips up the spirits that dwell in the deepest part of the desert. The sun begins to darken behind the clouds."

"I wasn't done yet," Danny says. "Specere looks at Lethandyr and says, 'I hope it was worth it, my friend.' NOW I'm done."

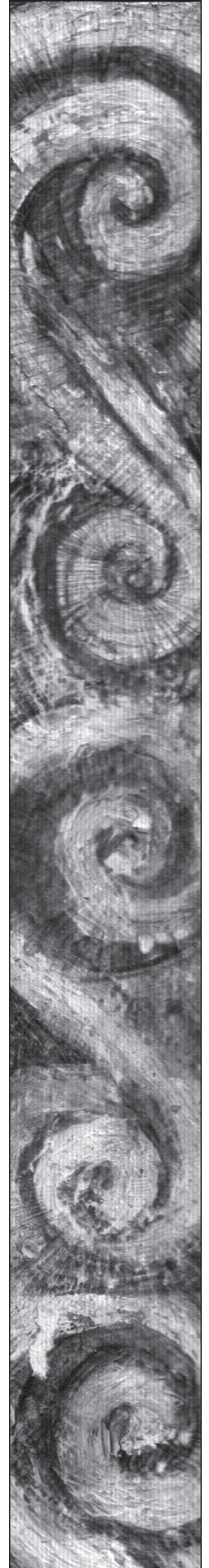
"Okay, the lightning still happens. Sorry bout that. Lethandyr now says, 'It had'ta be done. Doesn't matter 'twere worth it or not.' He wrings his hands. 'Is it finally over? D'ya think the lightning will take me now?'"

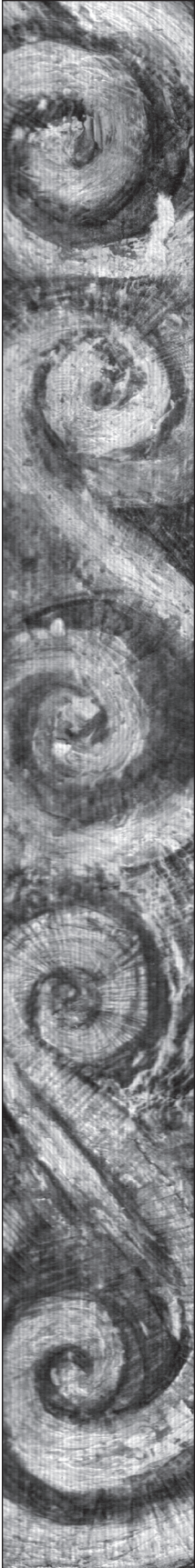
"Ioana says 'No, you don't deserve it.'"

"Wow, that's kind of harsh. Okay, Vanessa, let's invoke your dryad trait. As the clouds obscure the sun, your tree is going to start to wither. That's the Calamity, anyway. Intent is open."

"Um, okay, Intent would be to allow the tree to grow and create a shelter from the oncoming storm."

"Very nice. I'll give you only one die for that, though, since I'm not sure I want y'all to have shelter."





"Sure, that's 4 total, and I'll gamble two..." Vanessa rolls six dice, and gets 3,4,6,6,5,2. A Monologue of Defeat. "Wow," she says, "Ioana suddenly collapses to the ground, let's say, as the tree begins to wither. How did a dryad get into the middle of the desert, anyway?"

"That's for the story to find out. Anything else in your monologue?"

"Ioana looks up at the tree as she writhes in agony, and cries out 'Nooooo!!' Okay, I'm done. At least I didn't lose any dice." She adds one die to her pool, in fact.

"Fade to black?" Danny asks.

"No, we still need to use your Pangolin trait. What is that again?"

"It's a scaly anteater. I figure Specere is sort of like a teenage mutant ninja turtle, only an anteater instead."

"Oh. Well, um, the scene won't end until you showcase the Pangolin trait. How do you want to do that?"

"Well, Pangolins curl up into balls to protect themselves. How's about this — Intent shields him from the storm, but Calamity causes a lightning bolt to kill him. After all, this is the LAST scene."

"That's the spirit! I'll give you three dice to go with your three. You gambling?"

Danny just rolls his six dice and gets 4,2,4,5,3,4. A Guided Event. "What now?"

"Well, your Pangolin's fate will remain in question. As he curls up into a ball, the final light of the sun is now gone, the sandstorm raging, coming towards the ancient redoubt, lightning flashing angrily. Lethandyr stands tall and proud, hoping, begging that the storm will take him, and a weakened Ioana tries vainly to get to cover. But this time, the storm will not fade until it tastes the blood it desires most."

"Fade to black now?" Danny asks.

"Yeah. And you each get another die in your pool."

"Sort of a tragic ending for these four characters, no?" Vanessa asks. "The green man dead, Ioana crippled, Lethandyr suicidal... Specere is the only one with any great chance of survival. How did things get this way?"

Ken grins. "That's what you're going to find out. Now, before we start the next scene, anyone want to buy any new traits?"

Appendix: Event Flowchart

It has been pointed out to me that an easy-access flowchart of how to resolve events might be well-received and useful in game, for ease of reference. One follows:

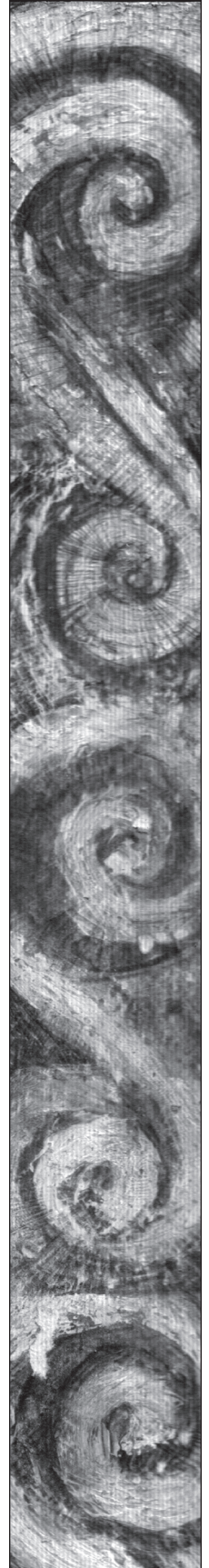
1. Identify Conflict and/or State Idea
2. Determine appropriate Trait (if any); spend dice to raise a Trait, if appropriate
3. State Intent and Calamity as appropriate
4. Receive dice from narrator
5. Add any gambled or spent dice from the Pool
6. Roll dice
 - If you have at least one 1, don't even worry about the rest of your dice — you have achieved a Monologue of Victory. Narrate following your stated Intent, and lose any gambled dice.
 - If you have no 1s, and at least one 6, you have a Monologue of Defeat. Narrate following your stated Calamity, and add a die to your Pool. Gambled dice return to the Pool; spent dice are lost.
 - If you have no 1s or 6s, it is a Guided Event. The GM narrates as he sees fit, regardless of Intent or Calamity. Return all gambled and spent dice to the Pool.
7. Increase Trait if appropriate.

Thanks

Thanks go out to Nathan Banks for introducing me to The Pool and having several interesting conversations about the game. Thanks also to Shreyas Sampat, Jeremy Rice, Chris Edwards and Joshua Kashinsky for their playtesting, Guy Jobbins for being the first Snowball GM besides myself, and Nikki Noble for all her proofreading and encouragement.

The Author

These rules were imagined and adapted by Alexander Cherry of Twisted Confessions (www.twistedconfession.com), an independent game publishing venture. All comments, criticisms, errata and questions are welcome on the website, either in the forum or through email. Snowball was last updated on January 13, 2004.





DISCERNMENT

A roleplaying game of grasping after the truth

by Michael S. Miller

What is this Game?

Discernment is a roleplaying game in which a subject faces numerous challenges in diverse settings, while a panel of scholars attempt to discern the subject's true nature.

It must be kept in mind that there are three layers of reality and fiction operating in this game. The three levels are noted throughout the game by the following icons:



The First Level is the reality: a group of people who have come together to play a game of *Discernment*.



The Second Level encompasses the fictional roles of scholars who seek to discern a subject's Soul Quality, and a subject who is held in such a manner that his perceptions and memories are completely at the whim of the scholars.



◎ The Third Level is the fictional roles and Scenarios that the scholars impose upon the subject in order to test his reactions.

Where is this Game Played?

◎ It is preferred that the players arrange themselves so the scholars are somewhat physically apart from the subject. The ideal positioning would place the scholars along one side of a long table, all facing the subject. The subject would be seated on a single chair, isolated from the rest of the room.

Who Plays this Game?

◎ The first act of the game is for the group to select which one among them will be the subject. This is done by secret ballot. The secret ballot is tallied by the last Scholar Emeritus, if the group has played *Discernment* previously, or by the player who first read *Discernment* if it has not. After the subject has been chosen, all other participants become scholars.

◎ The scholars are human beings, but not of this Earth. They have been sent here as part of an expedition to colonize and eventually civilize these backward people, adding their physical riches and the fruits of their labor to the coffers of their far-off motherland. As scholars, their superior intellects have allowed them to master the languages, history, science, arts, literature and cultural traditions of Earth in a matter of weeks. Detailed reports on these have already been filed, and but one task remains for the scholars on Earth. A certain subject has been assigned to the scholars so they may discern the subject's Soul Quality. Despite the phenomenal technology at their disposal, classifying the Soul of another human being remains the arduous, time-intensive task that it has always been. The scholars have not been informed what fate awaits the subject after his Soul Quality has been discerned. They are free to speculate upon that fate as they see fit.

A Single Subject

◎ One and only one player must be the subject of the game. The subject will portray numerous roles in the course of the game. He begins by choosing, in secret, one Soul Quality from the Quality Wheel. This Quality will be the single constant throughout the various situations through which the scholars will place the subject. The subject must commit his Soul Quality to memory, and may *not* write it down. He should also take note of the two Qualities that are adjacent to it. These Qualities are called Approximations. The subject begins play with three pennies for each scholar, as well as one dime and one nickel. The subject is responsible for distributing the coins and Hypothesis sheets, and managing the bank of pennies.

◎ The subject has been torn from his own life so completely that even the memory of that life has been excised from his mind. He knows that he is completely at the mercy of the scholars, and senses that they are testing him for his Soul Quality. The scholars have given no indication that they will ever stop until they have learned what they seek. A subject may well be tempted to stymie their efforts by concealing his Soul Quality however possible, but

*I defy them — and still they come. I give them
what they ask for — and still they come. I ask them
why they're doing this — but they don't understand
me at all. When will this torment finally cease?*

The Subject seems to react most strongly to stimuli of an intensely personal nature. Furthermore, the Subject's range of behaviors is quite limited and its motivations are shallow and easily mapped. I might, were I in a good humor, call them "quaint," although "pitiful" is also quite serviceable.

the subject should also consider that his fate rests completely in their hands. Alienating the scholars may not be in his best interest. Is it not far better to develop a rapport with one's captors that they might show mercy? They are, after all, fellow human beings.

Multiple Scholars

☉ All other participants will portray a scholar. Each scholar's goal is to discern the Soul Quality the subject has chosen. To this end, each member of the panel of scholars will take a turn as Lead Scholar. The Lead Scholar will formulate a Scenario, describe the central role that the subject will play in the Scenario, and cast fellow scholars to portray supporting roles in the Scenario. Once each Scenario is complete, each of the scholars will Hypothesize what the subject's Soul Quality may be. During the course of the game, scholars are permitted to freely converse with one another outside their prescribed duties within the game. The only exception is that scholars may *never* reveal their Hypotheses to one another during the course of the game. Also, no scholar may speak with the subject, except in following the dictates of playing the game (i.e., describing his role in the Scenario, or playing a supporting role that is interacting with the subject's role). Each scholar begins play with ten pennies.

How is this Game Played?

The Order of Actions

☉ After the subject has chosen his Soul Quality, committed it to memory, and mentally affirmed that he will not alter his choice in order to mislead the scholars or for any other reason, he announces that play is about to begin by saying "What is happening?" At this point, the first Lead Scholar begins play.

To determine which scholar is the first Lead Scholar, use the following method: Whichever scholar has, in real life, published the most roleplaying games is the first Lead Scholar. If none of the scholars have published any roleplaying games, then the first Lead Scholar is the player who has published the most roleplaying-related articles or the like. If none of the scholars have published articles, then the first Lead Scholar is the player who has played roleplaying games the longest. When the Lead Scholar has completed his Scenario, the scholar on his left becomes Lead Scholar. The first Lead Scholar is designated as *alpha* scholar. The scholar to their left is the *beta* scholar, then *gamma*, *delta*, *epsilon* and *zeta*, around the table.

Running a Scenario

☉ It is the duty of the Lead Scholar to create and preside over the running of a Scenario. A Scenario consists of several components: roles, a setting and a number of Scenes. Each Scene must have a central Conflict. Upon their turn, the Lead Scholar must begin by saying "And so it begins." He then defines the Setting, describes the central Role, and describes the supporting Roles.

☉ In defining the Setting, the Lead Scholar may be as general or specific as he chooses. "We begin in a fairy tale kingdom" is as legitimate a definition of Setting as "We begin in a Parisian back alley during the German Occupation,"

or “We begin in the midst of the play *MacBeth*. MacBeth has just returned home to find that his wife, Lady MacBeth, has read his letter telling of the prophecies he has heard.”

☉ In crafting the various roles, their circumstances, and the setting, the Lead Scholar should keep in mind the two Soul Qualities that he wishes to test for. A well-crafted Scenario will present the subject (through his role) with an important choice. It is this choice which will become the Crux of the Conflict described below. If the Lead Scholar has the Crux Qualities firmly in mind when defining the Scenario, he may craft every detail of the roles and circumstances toward highlighting these two Qualities and making the choice as important and compelling as possible. For example, the Lead Scholar may, if he chooses, define one of the supporting roles as sympathetic to one of the Crux Qualities, and another supporting role sympathetic to the other Crux Quality, and then craft the circumstances in such a way that the subject must choose one over the other.

Defining the Roles

☉ In defining the Central Role the subject will portray, the Lead Scholar may define any past actions that the role has taken, as well as any externally-imposed conditions attached to the role. So, “Convicted murderer,” “Rich,” “Broke,” “Married,” “Has served twenty years on the police force,” “Embezzler,” “Tells her husband that she loves him every day,” “Maintains a secret identity,” “Has often said he wants to be a rock star,” “Is looking for another job,” and “Paraplegic” are all legitimate parts of a defined role. However, the Lead Scholar may *not* define any psychological, emotional, or otherwise internal nature of the role. So, “Loves her husband,” “Hates his job,” and “Wants to be a rock star” cannot be part of a central role’s definition. Generally, a role won’t require more than three to five traits such as these. The subject is encouraged to color his performance in this role according to his Soul Quality, but *by no means* should his Soul Quality dominate his roleplaying.

☉ For supporting roles, the Lead Scholar will cast fellow scholars in these roles, at the Lead Scholar’s discretion. The Lead Scholar can never play a role in his own Scenario—the risk of corrupting the data is too great. Supporting roles are defined just as the Central Role is. However, the prohibition against internal definitions is not in effect. In fact, some definition of a supporting role’s goals and desires is mandatory. It is called motivation, and should be specific enough to serve as a guide for the scholar’s portrayal of the role for the scene at hand.

Laying, Playing, and Resolving Scenes

☉ To define a scene, the Lead Scholar states which roles are in the scene, any specific context or circumstances that the scene may require (what has gone on before), and says “Curtain.” The subject, and scholars portraying supporting roles, begin to speak to one another in character, describing any non-verbal actions their roles take.

*I defy them — and still they come. I give them
what they ask for — and still they come. I ask them
why they're doing this — but they don't understand
me at all. When will this torment finally cease?*

The Subject seems to react most strongly to stimuli of an intensely personal nature. Furthermore, the Subject's range of behaviors is quite limited and its motivations are shallow and easily mapped. I might, were I in a good humor, call them "quaint," although "pitiful" is also quite serviceable.

Playing of the scene continues until the Lead Scholar determines that the conflict has reached a point where it must be resolved one way or another. The Lead Scholar says, "A conflict is upon us. The crux of the conflict is ..." and states the two Soul Qualities that he has featured in this conflict. These are called the Crux Qualities.

The Lead Scholar then says, "Subject, state your outcome." The subject then describes, in brief, how he would like the conflict to be resolved. Then the Lead Scholar states how he would like the conflict to be resolved—generally a state of affairs quite contrary to what the subject stated. The two described outcomes need not correspond with the two Crux Qualities, although they may.

After the two possible outcomes are described, all participants will bid. All the scholars' bids will be counted together toward making the Lead Scholar's described outcome happen. The subject's bid will count toward making his desired outcome happen.

While the scholars simply must decide how many pennies to bid, the subject also has one nickel and one dime. These count as five pennies and ten pennies, respectively. However, a subject may only bid his dime if his Soul Quality is one of the two Crux Qualities. A subject may bid his nickel if his Soul Quality is one of the two Crux Qualities *or* if it is one of the Approximations of the two Crux Qualities. Bids are made in secret, and the coins are placed in the closed fists of the players, who hold them out before them. When everyone has held their coins out before them, the subject says, "Let my fate be revealed." Everyone reveals their bid and whichever side has the higher value may describe in detail the way in which the conflict is resolved. All pennies bid return to the bank. Any nickels or dimes bid return to the subject.

Awareness

If the scholars win the bid, the Lead Scholar describes in detail how the conflict is resolved, and play continues to the Hypothesis phase. If the subject wins the bid, he may describe in detail how the conflict is resolved. He has the further option of paying one penny to the bank to enter a state of Awareness. If the subject chooses to become Aware, each scholar must return one of their pennies to the bank. Furthermore, the subject has seen through the façade that the scholars have constructed for him to discern the truth behind it. He sees from the Third Level to the Second Level.

On the first instance of a subject becoming Aware, he gains some perception of the scholars and his captivity. Beginning with the Lead Scholar, each scholar in turn must describe one detail of the Second Level, such as what the subject's immediate surroundings look like, how the subject is held, and the like. Once all scholars have furnished one detail, the subject's Awareness ends and play continues with the Hypothesis phase.

On the second instance of the subject becoming Aware, the subject regains some memory of his capture. First, the Lead Scholar describes one detail of how the subject was selected. Then, the subject describes one detail of his actions or state of being mere moments before he was captured. Then, the scholar to the

left of the Lead Scholar describes one detail of the capture. Then, the subject describes one detail of his capture. Description continues in this fashion, from scholar to subject until each scholar has furnished one detail. Then, the subject's Awareness ends and play continues with the Hypothesis phase.

On the third instance of the subject becoming Aware, he regains some memory of his true self and his life before being captured. The subject narrates one detail of his previous existence for each scholar. After the third instance of Awareness, the subject says, "No more," and the game ends. The prohibition against scholars discussing their Hypotheses with one another is lifted, and the scholars must straighten up the area of play, and put away the game equipment. Once the playing area is returned to its pre-game condition, the game is over and the proscription against speaking with the subject is lifted, although it is requested that the subject never reveal his Soul Quality.

Hypotheses

After the scene's resolution, each of the scholars writes what they think the subject's Soul Quality is on their Hypothesis sheet. They need not propose a Hypothesis if they choose not to do so. Whether they have proposed a Hypothesis or not, they hand their Hypothesis sheets to the subject.

The subject reviews the sheets and awards himself a number of coins from the bank equal to the number of Hypotheses proposed, and announces this number. He then takes from the bank three pennies for each correct Hypothesis and one penny for each Approximation. He gives these pennies, as a lump sum, to the Lead Scholar.

The Lead Scholar distributes the pennies by giving one to himself, then one to the scholar on his left, and so on, until all the pennies have been distributed. At this point, the Lead Scholar may start a new scene, using the same setting and Central Role, or may end his tenure as Lead Scholar. To end his tenure, he simply says, "And so it ends." The scholar on his left becomes Lead Scholar.

To start a new scene, the Lead Scholar must pay the bank a number of pennies equal to the number of scenes that have already transpired during his tenure as Lead Scholar. Also, at least one of the Crux Qualities of the new scene must be the same as one of the Crux Qualities in the previous scene.

I defy them — and still they come. I give them what they ask for — and still they come. I ask them why they're doing this — but they don't understand me at all. When will this torment finally cease?

The Subject seems to react most strongly to stimuli of an intensely personal nature. Furthermore, the Subject's range of behaviors is quite limited and its motivations are shallow and easily mapped. I might, were I in a good humor, call them "quaint," although "pitiful" is also quite serviceable.

Scoring


● The game ends either at the third instance of Awareness, as described above, or when *all* the scholars' Hypotheses for the current scene are correct or are Approximations, *and* at least half of them are correct. When the subject sees that this is the case, he says, "We shall now see who has discerned the Truth most clearly."

The subject awards points for each Hypothesis made during the entire game. Each scholar receives one point for each Approximation and three points for each correct Hypothesis. The subject may *or may not*, at his discretion, award additional points to the various scholars for the following:

- +2 to the scholar whose Scenario first used his Soul Quality as a Crux Quality
- +1 to the scholar whose portrayal of a Supporting Role most impressed the subject
- +1 to the scholar whose Scenario most impressed the subject
- 2 to every scholar whose Crux Qualities did not include his Soul Quality or one of its Approximations
- 1 to the scholar whose portrayal of a Supporting Role least impressed the subject
- 1 to the scholar whose Scenario least impressed the subject
- ±3 for any specific criteria and amount the subject desires. Examples include: -1 for each incorrect Hypothesis proposed after having proposed a correct, or Approximate, Hypothesis; +3 for treating the subject with respect during the course of the game, etc.

● When finished calculating scores, the subject does *not* announce the point totals. He merely points to the scholar who has amassed the most points and says, "This scholar has discerned the Truth most clearly." This scholar is named Scholar Emeritus by his fellow scholars, who must heartily congratulate the Scholar Emeritus. The Scholar Emeritus must describe one detail of the fate that awaits the subject after the scholars have finished with him. Then, the scholar on the left of the Scholar Emeritus must add a detail, which cannot contradict the letter of the Scholar Emeritus's detail. Scholars continue detailing the subject's fate until each scholar has added one detail. At this point, the subject straightens up the area of play, puts away the game equipment, and disposes of the Hypotheses sheets—preferably in a manner that keeps them from ever being read. Once the playing area is returned to its pre-game condition, the game is over and the proscription against speaking with the subject is lifted, although it is requested that the subject never reveal his Soul Quality or discuss his scoring calculations.

Designer's Notes and Acknowledgments

 *Discernment* began as one of those “shower games” that occasionally hits me early in the morning. The inspiration came from a seriously cool, but highly underrated film called *Dark City*. At some point during its long, slow simmer on the back burner, it merged with marginally-remembered snatches of Michel Foucault's *Power/Knowledge* from my grad school days. Who has the Power in this game, the scholars or the subject? Who has the Knowledge and who makes the Knowledge? What can the scholars do if the subject defies them? What can the subject do if the scholars never relent?

My thinking about games has changed dramatically in the time that I've been marinating in The Forge (www.indie-rpgs.com). I was particularly influenced by Paul Czege's work in nontraditional roleplaying. Ironically, I did not read his excellent game, *The Valedictorian's Death*, which has a very similar scoring system, until after this game was written (www.halfmeme.com). Also influential were the New Style games *Power/Kill* by John Tynes, for addressing psychology through roleplaying; and *Pantheon* by Robin D. Laws, for its post-game scoring. The structure of the bidding system was inspired by the game *Zendo*, by Looney Labs (www.looneylabs.com). I got the idea for the ritual words that are spoken at certain points in the game from a post about scripted roleplay by Jonathan Walton (<http://www.indie-rpgs.com/viewtopic.php?t=4868>). Ron Edwards' use of the swimming pool analogy in *Sex and Sorcery* to explicitly discuss the ways in which we immerse ourselves into the fictional element of roleplaying influenced my thinking on the three levels of reality and fiction in this game (www.sorcerer-rpg.com).

I posted the first version of *Discernment* at the Forge for discussion, and the most amazing, unexpected thing happened. Three fine fellows from the Philippines playtested it and sent me feedback! I was overjoyed. I thank Tobie Abad, Isami Kamada, and Awie Roasa for playtesting above and beyond the call of duty. Tobie keeps an archive of his roleplaying activities at http://www.geocities.com/toma_tob. Their input, as well as that of others on the Forge, was invaluable in revising the game. Please feel free to e-mail me at TheBard@incarnadine.indie-rpgs.com or post comments in the RPG Theory forum on the Forge, and please send me a Private Message to let me know you've posted something. Special thanks to Luke Crane for all his hard work in making a place where these games can be more than a collection of ones and zeroes.

—Michael S. Miller

version 2.0

Copyright © 2003 by Michael S. Miller

<http://www.incarnadine.indie-rpgs.com>

Permission granted to photocopy the following page for personal use.



I defy them — and still they come. I give them what they ask for — and still they come. I ask them why they're doing this — but they don't understand me at all. When will this torment finally cease?

The Subject seems to react most strongly to stimuli of an intensely personal nature. Furthermore, the Subject's range of behaviors is quite limited and its motivations are shallow and easily mapped. I might, were I in a good humor, call them "quaint," although "pitiful" is also quite serviceable.



DISCERNMENT

HYPOTHESIS SHEET

SCHOLAR:

A alpha	B beta	Γ gamma	Δ delta	Ε epsilon	Ζ zeta
------------	-----------	------------	------------	--------------	-----------

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____
6. _____
7. _____
8. _____



pretender

A Roleplaying Game of Supernatural Cool

by Kirt "Loki" Dankmyer

introduction

Pretender is a roleplaying game of extreme personalities. You will play a Pretender, a supernatural being "passing" as human in 1980s America. Your otherworldly nature magnifies and focuses your character's human faults and virtues.

You will not change the world, which is one of the reasons the game is set in the past: to underline this fact. You will, however, find out new things about the world and yourself. And look damn cool while doing it.

The other reason for the past setting is for that feeling of edginess and cool and familiarity, yet with the touch of the exotic.

You will chew the scenery. You will find out who you are, and you will change. Together with the other players, you will create this world.

If you've read Nancy A. Collins, you know where we're going here. If that excites you, good.





Your World

The year is 1985. Punk is alive, but it's mutated, and there's been enough time for goths to reinvent themselves at least once. Crack cocaine and Nintendo have been invented during Ronald Reagan's second term of office.

And at any minute, nuclear fire could rain down on everything.

In the cracks of this world, there are monsters. Vampires and werewolves and angels. Faeries and ogres, elementals and more. Dear me....

They live on the streets, and most people don't know they're there. They hide, not because some authority tells them to, but because in the Atomic Age it's easier that way. Less dangerous — the humans have teeth they never had before. Plus, it's easier to prey on people who don't believe in you. Loud, stupid creatures are either culled, or they work for and are hidden by others. Most humans don't see their predators — not because of supernatural powers, but because no one looks twice at a homeless person or a man in a bland suit.

You are one of these creatures, a Pretender. You pose as human. Maybe you were a human, once... and maybe you weren't. Maybe you're something unique, like a vampire that never died, half living and half undead. Perhaps you're something more "common," like a demon trying to ensnare human souls.

Most Pretenders can sense other Pretenders. How this works and what you know varies widely. Maybe you can smell them. Maybe you can see their auras. Maybe you pick up their surface thoughts. But you'll know, even if you might not know much other than that you're not dealing with a human. Knowing where the others are doesn't make you feel any safer.

Perhaps you are ancient, having existed for a thousand years. Maybe you were born into the world of the Pretenders yesterday. Age doesn't matter — sink or swim, baby.

Around one in every ten people is actually a Pretender of some sort, or connected to one. The actual concentration becomes higher the more urban an area is, and the more lower-class the area is. Among the homeless, it's more like one out of every three — as if being a homeless person didn't suck enough, one has to deal with the supernatural as well. No wonder so many bag ladies are insane. Lucky for the Pretenders, no one cares about the homeless. They're perfect victims.

New York City, of course, is the worst. It's the place to be for humans and Pretenders alike, but you'll very much end up swimming with the sharks.

Given all this, a Pretender, particularly in an urban area, is not going to get left alone. Pretenders, in the majority, are as cynical (if not more so) as the humans around them, and are certainly more predatory. The most powerful Pretenders draw all other Pretenders (willing or not) into their schemes. Sometimes this works, and sometimes this backfires, ending an immortal's life. This is just the way things are, and there's no hope of changing it, even with your supernatural powers. There is even less peace on the streets once you see the Real World behind the veneer of the "normal."

Pretenders have needs. Blood, companionship, defiled corpses, human flesh, prestige.... These and more drive them, make them trade with each other, and push them to face each other directly and through proxies.

Aside from these facts, nothing else is predetermined. The Game Moderator (GM) may have some idea, as may you and the other players. But how vampirism works, what angels really are, where elementals really come from... everyone will be working together to explore this. And while you're at it, you will be trying to survive, and looking damn cool while doing it.

CONSENSUS

A lot of these rules require the group to reach a consensus, especially at the start of the game. Ideally, all the participants, including the GM, should just talk it out until everyone is happy — or at least mollified. But if an argument breaks out, and all sides refuse to budge, put it to a vote, with the GM breaking ties. (In a perfect world, this would not happen, but if it does, don't sweat it.)

A Note for Pedants

For convenience, I will refer to all players with the male pronoun and GMs with the female pronoun, except in the examples.

start

All the players start a campaign by creating characters. This **MUST** be done as a group, if at all possible, with the GM present and active in the discussion. The steps are:

1. Decide what kind of game this is going to be. What are the themes? Is this a street level game or an epic? 2. Define *what* everyone is playing. 3. Link all the characters together, create a situation for the characters to deal with, flesh out the world a bit, and create GMCs as you go. 4. Define the characters further. Who are your enemies? Your friends? What's your story? 5. Put down statistics.

It's easier than it sounds.

As a running example, we'll talk about a group consisting of Alicia, Barry, Catherine, Dwayne, and Eva. Eva is the GM, and the rest are players. Examples are always in italics, like this. Some of the examples are long, so you might want to skip them during your first read-through.

1. What kind of game is this going to be?

Before starting, set some ground rules. What is the game going to be about? *Pretender* can cover a lot of themes... Which ones is the game going to focus on? Horror? Theology? Cool factor? There is a big difference between a game where several broods of vampires are vying for the control of the city and one where God is personally punishing the characters, but both are possible games. Also, power level should be discussed — is this a street-level game, focusing on individuals, or something more “epic,” focusing on large supernatural events?





It's okay for vastly different power levels to exist between the characters, but if that is the case, be sure to come to an understanding about what the game will focus on, and why the less powerful characters will be able to make a difference.

This is a good point to start brainstorming about the later phases. People might want to mention their tentative ideas and bounce them off each other. It's okay to jump around a little, but the GM should keep everyone on-track. Later on, feel free to back up to this step if you need to.

Someone should volunteer or be chosen to take notes. Ideally, *everyone* will take notes.

Alicia, Barry, Catherine, Dwayne, and Eva agree this is a street-level game, about low-power supernaturals looking for a personal identity while struggling to survive. There is some discussion, mostly from Barry, about a secondary theme involving what it means to be forever separated from God, but the rest of the group (including Eva) decide they're not interested in something that deep for their first campaign.

2. What is Everyone Playing?

We're talking in the broadest outline here. You're playing a supernatural creature. What? A vampire? An angel? Something unique? Something obscure?

Players are encouraged to let their imaginations run free. Yes, vampires exist, but so do mannequins that come to life during the night, races of immortals that look (and act) like psychopathic children, and spiders that have circumvented the normal cycle of reincarnation to become "human" — if you want them.

Decide what you want to play. Then figure out how it works.

Unless you're playing a unique creature type of some sort, like a werewolf-turned-vampire or something, just think in broad outlines. If you're a werewolf, how does that work? Is lycanthropy some sort of disease that you can catch, or were you born a werewolf? If another player wants to play the same type of thing, the two of you should talk.

In fact, everyone should talk. The idea here is to decide — as a group — how things "work" for the supernatural beings in question. Everyone should agree about the details. You can leave some details for later, but try to pin down as much as possible. Figure out which, if any, of the "traditional" powers and/or weaknesses (if such exist) your character is susceptible to.

Again, let your imagination run free. Brainstorm. Talk it out, pin it down, and make compromises as needed.

Remember: Pretenders should be cool. Icky is okay, but only if you have an angle. It's not your primary concern right now, but it's something to keep in the back of your head.

Also, if the GM knows that some of the players aren't going to be into nailing down all this detail in a discussion, she might want to prepare some descriptions of different supernatural beings to suggest to such players. Feel free to borrow from other games, movies, books, and TV. We won't tell on you, as long as you're having fun.

Regardless, try to be logical and interesting. Although you're nailing down facts, try to make sure those facts have interesting potential for conflict and extreme personality traits.

Keep two things in mind: You have to be able to pass for human, at least some of the time, and you need some way of sensing other Pretenders. Also, keep in mind that there is probably something the character needs from humanity — some sort of drive or need, perhaps connected to the creature's supernatural powers. Other than that, let your imagination run free.

So, in this phase, Alicia and Barry decide they both want to play werewolves. Catherine wants to play a vampire. Dwayne wants to play something of his own invention, a unique creature — an intelligent colony of insects in a hollowed-out human corpse.

Alicia thinks werewolves should be the result of a disease — if you're bitten by one, you might become one yourself. Barry thinks of them as being a separate race, the interface between the spirit of the planet and humanity. Eva, who is listening, suggests a compromise: Lycanthropy is spread like a disease — a magical virus — but what it does is put one in touch with one's primal self. This allows shape-shifting, usually into a wolf, but not always. Alicia riffs off of this, saying that once infected, it becomes painful to harm any plants or animals, making humans the natural prey of such creatures. Barry agrees, but stipulates that the irony is only humans can catch the disease — other Pretenders and/or animals can't catch it, and the virus re-writes human DNA so that other Pretenders can't affect them very easily, as well as giving them preternatural healing abilities and the ability to "smell" other Pretenders. Alicia agrees with this, and adds that werewolves — at least as this group is conceiving of them — can't be turned into vampires. Barry nods and asks the others if this is okay. Catherine, Eva, and Dwayne agree, though Dwayne mentions that these werewolves need some weaknesses and suggests that while silver doesn't make that much sense as a vulnerability, their "connection to nature" could mean that wolfsbane stops their healing powers. The others like this idea, and agree readily. Catherine suggests that the natural cycle of the moon affects werewolves as well, making them respectively angrier or more placid as it waxes and wanes. Everyone agrees, and Dwayne, who has volunteered to keep track of all this, writes it down.

Catherine says vampires are really demons in the bodies of humans. When a vampire kills someone, there is a small chance that a demon will take up residence in the corpse. The demon has full access to the mortal memories of the corpse, but probably has a radically different personality. The demon is driven out of the corpse by sunlight, causing the body to turn to dust. A stake in the heart will do the same. She goes on to explain that vampires are supernaturally strong, supernaturally fast, immortal, and their powers wane if they do not feed on the blood of humans, but they do not die. They can see the auras of those around them, which is how they detect other Pretenders — each Pretender has a slightly different colored aura. Everyone agrees to this, and Dwayne suggests that the demons that become vampires are





the least important in Hell, without even a name they can call their own, created to cause mayhem on Earth. Eva suggests that since the human soul flees when a vampire-demon takes residence, it is possible for the human soul to become a ghost. Catherine doesn't like this idea, but Eva seems to think the possibility of conflict is interesting. Catherine still doesn't like the idea, so Eva shrugs and gives up. No one has a problem with Dwayne's earlier idea, so he writes it down along with what Catherine said.

Dwayne says that he wants to play a colony of roaches which have somehow — as a colony — achieved sentience. He deliberately wants to leave a lot vague, specifying mainly that this is the only such colony in existence. Mainly, all the roaches can do is hollow out a human body, and wear the “skin” for a time, until the carcass rots. Aside from working together to “walk” and move around in the skin, the colony is unsure of what it can do. However, it is extremely difficult to kill (one roach can re-build the colony, and they can pour out of the skin and scatter if need be), and they can sense other Pretenders through their antennae. Dwayne states he wants the roaches to find out what else they can do through play. Everyone agrees to this, though Catherine notes she finds the whole concept disgusting, and notes that the colony should be able to “talk” in a buzzing sort of way, just to make things easier. Regardless, she doesn't object. Dwayne writes down the details, agreeing that the colony should be able to “talk” after a fashion. Dwayne also mentions, in passing, that he's going for a sort of “Terminator” look for the character, a sort of stiff, “sunglasses cool.”

3. Link Everyone, Create Situation, Flesh Out Your World, and Create GMCs

It is *not* the GM's job to decide how to tie the group together. The group should figure this out now, with the GM's input. Do some of you have a GMC (Game Master Character) that you protect? Do you have common enemies? Perhaps a cause you all believe in? Or are you all in the same rock band? Make sure everyone is comfortable with what's discussed.

Note that there is nothing wrong with having several separate player characters (PCs) who don't know each other and using jump-cut techniques to jump from scene to scene among them, but the group should be aware that some GMs find this difficult. You should discuss with your GM what she prefers to do. Also, it doesn't mean there shouldn't be conflict between the different PCs, it's just the conflict should be an excuse for interesting dialog, not a reason to come to blows — look for something to serve as common ground at the end of the day.

Regardless, at this point, your characters need to gel. Now is when you talk more about the specifics of your individual character some more. Also, if there are any important GMCs associated with your character, mention who they are and what the GM and the other players need to know about them. Many Pretenders have one or more humans who work for them, whether you call them “servants,” or “retainers,” or “Renfields.” A lot of the time, these relationships are fairly obsessive and dysfunctional — now's the time to establish these aspects of those relationships. Keep in mind that dysfunctional relationships can lead to conflicts, which can be quite interesting, so don't shy away from them. (Not to mention it's a classic element of the genre.)

Everyone gets input into these GMCs, particularly the GM — after all, she has to play them most of the time. You may want to draw a chart of the connections between the different characters, for ease of reference — a map of the relationships.

The GM may want to expand this map later, so that she has some idea as to who would care if something happened to a particular GMC.

And remember: Try to be cool. Obviously, different people have different concepts of cool, but we're thinking "street level" here. Start thinking in images.

And one more thing...this is important: *You should also decide on a problem or circumstance faced by the characters.* The idea is to establish a situation for the PCs to deal with. You need something that will take quite some time to unravel. This is often a very powerful common Enemy (see below), but it doesn't have to be.

Perhaps a disease that only affects Pretenders is sweeping through the major cities, and your characters want to find out what's going on with it. Perhaps several Pretenders are trying to form some sort of clandestine political organization. Perhaps there is a secret war going on. Perhaps the characters are being chased by a shadowy government agency. Perhaps all of these things are true, or none of them. But the group needs to decide what gets the story going at the start, without boxing the characters into a single course of action. (This is very similar to the concept of a Kicker, from Ron Edward's RPG, *Sorcerer*. People interested in honing this technique should check it out.)

Perhaps the best way to understand this is to consider the scarcity of resources. Most Pretenders need human beings: for food, for companionship, or even for something more metaphysical, such as human souls or human dreams. Pretenders also need a place to hide, a lair. Ghosts often haunt the places they were killed, and predatory Pretenders are going to mark territory, and fight over it. Money is easy to get if you're immortal, and power often follows. But that makes things more complicated, not less, because your rivals have the same advantages.

Now is also a good time to decide where the game is set. Are we talking about a particular city, or an unnamed urban landscape? The default assumption is New York City, but it bears thinking about.

Again, try to be logical and interesting. A character with no connection to anyone else is boring. A character with no problems is dull. Try to provide a problem for the group to deal with from the get-go.

Also, this might be a good time to talk about how certain "common" supernaturals work, and what the PCs know about other Pretenders and their society. This includes everything from "All Pretenders know silver has no effect on werewolves," to "The last vampire died in my arms," to "No one realizes that the faeries were once angels."



Alicia and Catherine say they'll go into why the Goblin Queen hates them when detailing their characters further, and Catherine says she'd rather talk about other GMCs now. After some discussion, the group outlines a manager for the band, who knows something is strange about the band members but not what, and a couple of groupies that the band members like enough that they have tried to shield them against harm — another linking element.

Eva wants to talk about ghosts. She has an idea that, considering the violence that surrounds Pretenders, it's natural that they would have to deal with human spirits. To her surprise, Alicia and Barry say they'd rather not have ghosts exist at all. After some discussion, she finds them adamant, and so she gives way.

Catherine asks what Pretender society is like. Eva says she assumes there is a clandestine war between the vampires and the were-creatures, as vampires are highly unnatural, but there are certain "rules of engagement" for the purpose of keeping things from the humans, since both groups feed on humans. Other Pretenders find a niche on either side of the war, wheeling and dealing — it's all very polite and clandestine. Territory is a big issue, and fights break out over lines of "turf." Everyone likes this idea, and Catherine adds that both sides know each other's weaknesses, which everyone agrees to. Barry adds that the reason Alice and Billy don't mind Cindy is that while their characters feel that primal connection to nature, they have bigger fish to fry, such as the Goblin Queen and human science. Alicia and Catherine readily agree to this. Dwayne adds that the advantage of the vampires (immortality) is somewhat neutralized by the fact that they often fight each other as well, while the weres tend to band together in "packs." Dwayne's idea meets with general approval; Dwayne writes all this down. Eva asks if she thinks they have a proper problem or circumstance for the group to face. Catherine says she thinks that with the Goblin Queen and the war between the vampires and the weres, they should have plenty to do, and everyone agrees.

4. Define Characters Further

This is where the players outline their own characters' backstories, in whatever level of detail they want. However, at the very least, players will need a concept of the character's personality, a general idea of what the character is capable of, and Enemies. (Enemy is capitalized because it's a game term in this context.)

Every character has at least one Enemy, and perhaps several. The Enemy is a conflict that the GM can return to at any point to move the action along. *While an Enemy can be a single individual, at least one of the Enemies needs to be broad and/or abstract, like "all vampires" or "anyone who opposes my Brood."* If the character is driven by ideals, the Enemy should be the antithesis of those ideals. Pretenders are driven, dangerous beings, and hate lasts a lot longer than love. It wouldn't do to just destroy your Enemy in a day and have done — that would be boring.

It's important to note that an Enemy is a person or group the character *knows and hates* — not a secret enemy the character doesn't know about. While secret enemies make great plot hooks, no one wakes up in the morning (or evening) to thwart enemies that one is ignorant of.

Enemies can change at any time. All the player has to do is change what he's written down, though he has to inform everyone of the change, and why the player made that change.

Similarly, *every character needs at least one Connection* — someone the character cares deeply about. In many ways, this is the opposite of an enemy. This is someone that character cares about enough that they react passionately to how the other character (GMC or Player Character) acts. Only the most intense attachments





are worth calling a Connection in a game-mechanical sense — the character can be “connected” to all the other PCs without having a Connection, in a game sense, to them. It all depends on the intensity of the relationship.

Again, make an effort to keep things interesting and logical. Don’t pick something “just because” — think about what would fit with your character, what would make sense. Everyone has to agree your Enemies and Connections are okay.

At this stage, character creation is much more individual, but keep people informed as to what you’re doing and take input into account. If people express reservations about your character, talk it out. Don’t play a total bastard if no one wants to deal with that sort of character. Even the worst monster should have some redeeming qualities.

This is also where you nail down what the character looks like. *Try to keep your character’s physical description down to about three or four simple sentences.* Let people’s imagination (and actual play) do the rest. We don’t need to know exactly how tall your character is, but we do need to know if he’s unusually short, if that’s part of the character concept.

For the rest of this example, we’ll concentrate mainly on Catherine and Cindy. Catherine decides that while Cindy is currently a jazz singer, she was originally (under a different name) a French noblewoman in the 14th century. Over time, she has honed her supernatural powers to a terrifying degree. Most vampires her age have a bunch of other vampires they have created, but Catherine decides that Cindy actually hates other vampires. Cindy hates what she has become. On the other hand, Cindy has a pathological fear of final death and return to Hell, so she does what she can to maintain her existence. She takes her anger and her frustration out on other vampires. Given that, she’s an expert in both ancient and modern weaponry, and a trained escape artist — Cindy feels running away is often as good as fighting back.

Given these facts, Catherine decides that while Cindy is slick and manipulative (so she can always have easy prey and a Renfield or two), underneath it all is a smoldering anger that comes out in her singing. With this in mind, she chooses three Enemies: All other vampires, the particular vampire who created her (who she does not give much detail on at this time), and the Goblin Queen, who hates Cindy because she stole one of the Goblin Queen’s lovers. (In fact, she stole “the boy” from the Goblin Queen.)

For a Connection, Catherine chooses Cindy’s “servant,” Fred Ruffin. Catherine says Cindy treads Fred so badly because she doesn’t want to admit to herself how much she cares for him — not an uncommon condition in Pretenders.

Catherine describes Cindy as: “Boyish, with bottle-black hair. Always in a simple, black dress. Always posing, yet vulnerable.”

Catherine writes all this down, and runs it by the group. Everyone agrees, and Dwayne adds Cindy’s “sire” and the connection between “the boy” and the Goblin Queen to the relationship map.

5. Determine Statistics

Okay, here's where we talk numbers. Your character is represented, numerically, by five statistics. Earth, Air, Fire, Water, and Spirit. These statistics are described below.

Earth— This is anything passive and physical. It covers endurance, resistance to disease, stamina, and the ability to deal with damage and pain (in extreme cases).

Air— This is anything active and mental. We're talking intellectual stuff here: Logical thinking, remembering facts, doing math problems.

Fire— This is anything active and physical. Running, jumping, punching, wrestling and shooting are all covered by Fire.

Water— This is anything passive and mental. That is, anything emotional. Empathy and social skill are covered by this statistic, as is anything artistic.

Spirit— Spirit is a special case — it's how well you do anything supernatural. If your Pretender can read minds, how well you can do that is determined by the Spirit statistic. If your Pretender can change shape, how well you do it is determined by the Spirit statistic. Even physical powers — like incredible speed — can be represented by Spirit, though they don't have to be. When using such a power, you can opt to roll Spirit instead of the appropriate attribute (Fire in the case of feats of speed), or perhaps you've already represented the power with a Specialty (see below). Also, Spirit represents sheer luck — in situations where it's really up to fate, you roll your Spirit. Regardless, what you can do with your Spirit depends on what kind of Pretender you are, which should already have been established in the earlier stages of character creation.

Decide on a numerical rating for each statistic. That's all: *Decide*. Unlike other RPGs, there are no points to allocate, and no dice to roll (at least during character creation). You simply decide what your statistics are, based on your description of your character. There is no concern with "game balance" — the important thing is everyone agrees that those statistics properly represent your character as he's conceived.

To emphasize: This is not a competition — this is about playing an interesting character. Such a character should be really good at certain things, so they look cool. They should be bad at other things, because otherwise it would be boring, and a character without weaknesses doesn't make much sense.

As a general guideline, a statistic of 3 is the mythical "human average." A rating of 1 or 2 is below average, and a rating of 0 (the minimum) is worse than even the most helpless human. A rating of 4 is human maximum, and "average" for most Pretenders. A rating of 5 is quite rare, and anything beyond that even more rare. The exception is Spirit — most humans have a Spirit of 0, indicating no feel for the supernatural at all. Humans with a higher Spirit are usually psychic, or sorcerers of some sort.



If you are used to other RPGs, it is important to note that character change can be slower in this game (see Advancement, below), so you want to make sure you have the character you want from the get-go. Don't be afraid to grasp at some power, so long as you have some weakness to keep it interesting and within the guidelines the group established at the start. Keep in mind that personality-based Specialties can give you a lot of Rerolls. Most of all, *make sure you like your character and you're willing to play the character for a long time*. For example, part of the reason we keep reading about Sonja Blue in Nancy Collins' books is she's an interesting – and flawed – character.

Often it's helpful to think of different Specialties as you pick out your statistics, as Specialties are often relevant to one statistic or another.

So, Catherine needs to pick statistics for her character.

She decides on an "average" Earth score of 3. As this doesn't fully capture the character's essence with regard to Earth, she makes a note to add the Specialty "dead" to represent the fact that certain things don't really affect vampires because they're walking corpses.

She chooses an Air score of 3 as well — she doesn't see Cindy as being smarter than average, just better-trained. With that in mind, she makes a note to take the Specialties of "cunning," "lived for six centuries," and "music theory" — the last represents her musical training.

She chooses a Fire score of 4 — she has honed her body into a fighting machine, and she makes a note to add the Specialty "personal combat training" to represent all her obsessive work in that direction. She doesn't opt to take Specialties to represent her preternatural strength and speed — she decides to use her Spirit to represent that.

She chooses a Water score of 4, and makes note of several Specialties to represent her social and artistic tendencies: "manipulative," "seductive," "singer." She also decides on a signature quote: "You know you want me."

Finally, Catherine sets Cindy's Spirit at 5, representing her obsessive work on her supernatural powers. She makes note to choose the Specialty, "focused on the supernatural," to represent this.

In addition to the Specialties already chosen, Catherine needs to pick at least one emotional Specialty, and she decides on several. She picks "afraid of final death" and a Specialty of "humble about her smarts" — when it comes to her intellectual abilities, she doesn't give herself a lot of credit. Catherine explains this combines with Cindy's social manipulation ability to cause people to underestimate her. She takes the Specialty "angry" to represent Cindy's smoldering anger. She also chooses the Specialty "insecure" to represent the fact that Cindy's manipulative tendencies mask a lot of insecurity and fear.

Catherine writes all this down and shows it to everyone, asking if they have any comments, suggestions, or concerns. Barry suggests instead of "focused on the supernatural," which he thinks sounds difficult to apply, that she instead takes "fiendish," to represent the devil within, and the fact that when she uses her powers, she is stronger if she is brutal — that in the end, Cindy is a demon. Catherine agrees, making the change, and Catherine writes the following down on her character sheet, along with the notes she made in the previous step:





Cindy

Boyish, with bottle-black hair. Always in a simple, black dress. Always posing, yet vulnerable.

Earth 3, Air 3, Fire 4, Water 4, Spirit 5

Specialties: dead, afraid of final death, cunning, lived for six centuries, music theory, humble about her smarts, angry, personal combat training, manipulative, seductive, singer, fiendish, insecure, “You know you want me.”

Enemies: All other vampires, the vampire that created her, the Goblin Queen

Connections: Fred Ruffin

Catherine also writes down Cindy’s vampiric powers and weaknesses for easy reference, and double-checks that her Enemy list is correct.

New Players

When adding a new player to an ongoing story, just go through an abbreviated version of the steps above. As many things will already have been established, the steps may be more a matter informing the new player of previous decisions than actually reaching full consensus again — don’t contradict previously-established history to accommodate a new player.

system

Before we get into how to roll, let’s talk about the *Rule of Jared*. The Rule of Jared is named for Jared Sorensen, who wasn’t the first to propose this rule, but is one of its most vocal proponents. The rule is: Roll only when it’s important. If, in order for the game to get going again, the vampire needs to break out of her tomb... she breaks out of her tomb. No roll needed. Roll only when success OR failure has an effect on the game. That is, roll only when it’s interesting.

The GM decides when to apply the Rule of Jared. However, assuming the action isn’t completely trivial (“completely trivial” covers such things as walking across the room for an ambulatory character), the player can always choose to roll instead of accepting the GM’s use of the Rule of Jared, in order to risk failure or in an attempt to garner a more spectacular success.

Note that the Rule of Jared always covers the actions of GMCs. The GM never rolls dice. If a GMC acts against a player’s character, the player can roll to resist what the GMC is doing, perhaps with some Adversity (see below). If a GMC acts against a GMC, the GM (or whoever is narrating, see below) decides what happens.

One more thing before we get started: *You can change your character sheet at any time.* You need to make sure everyone is okay with your changes (see “Consensus,” above), but that’s all. If you forgot something, add it. If a recent event would wreak a major change to your character, go for it. But make sure everyone else is okay with the change.

Once the group has decided on a fact or decided to do things a certain way, do not revisit it later unless you plan to add a detail or fix a recurring problem, *not* in order to change a decision or take an element away from a previous decision, unless there is *unanimous* agreement. Keep the game flowing, and don't get into "but we let Barry do that" kinds of arguments. The GM has the right to table re-hashing of old discussion until the end of the session.

Dice

You will need several ordinary six-sided dice, probably no more than ten or so for most games.

Scene Resolution

So, okay, you have dice and the GM is not invoking the Rule of Jared. While you can (and sometimes will) use the dice to resolve a single task (a short, single action), generally a single roll of the dice will decide the results of an entire scene (think a scene in a movie), such as an entire fight rather than a single blow in a given combat. The GM generally sets the scope of a particular die-roll.

You should have a vague idea of what you're doing — but don't get too specific yet. You should specify your goal, but not exactly (except in the vaguest terms) how you're getting there. This is important: the player does not have to announce the character's specific, actual, choreographed action prior to the roll. The player states the general intent, but does not state the actual, physical, detailed action. That waits until after the resolution, when the narration happens. This way, if the roll is a failure, the character does not seem helpless, but a dramatic set of circumstances can be narrated that indicate why the character fails.

Barry: "Billy's going to try to hurt this guy real bad, using his martial arts.... uh... I fail, and you're the narrator, Eva."

Eva: "Your form is perfect, but it seems your opponent is familiar with your Crane Style. He grabs ahold of your leg when you try to kick him."

Usually, not always, a single roll determines the result of an entire conflict. A conflict can be an entire fight, the entire process of trying to take over a corporation or invade Hell, or an evening spent trying to seduce someone — whatever you can think of as a single logical unit. The roll resolves the conflict up to a point, depending on the amount of progress made.

The GM decides which statistic is appropriate for what you're doing. *You then roll a number of dice equal to your statistic's numerical rating — plus one more die if you are facing an Enemy listed on your sheet, plus an additional die if a Connection is involved.*

Note that if multiple Enemies and/or multiple Connections are involved with the action, you get a maximum of one die for an Enemy and one die for a Connection.

The Roll

Take all your dice and roll them. Higher is better, most of the time.

Now, each of the dice represents one part of what happens, and you get to decide which. Assign one die to each of these categories:



Ripple— Everything is interconnected — sometimes what you do has an effect elsewhere, or on others. Actions can have side effects. Side effects are always unrelated to the goal of the action, and perhaps even appear in a different

scene, narrated as an aside. If you assign a 5 or 6 die to Ripple, whether you succeed or fail, a sort a positive side effect comes of what happens. On a 3 or 4, the side effect is either slightly bad or slightly good. On a 1 or 2, some sort of bad side effect comes of the action. If no die is assigned to Ripple, there is no side effect at all unless the GM is narrating; the GM is always allowed to add side effects in her narration. Assigning a Ripple die can lock down whether that effect is good or bad.

Discovery— During the course of the action, the character discovers something about the world, or a person, possibly the character engaging in the action. Perhaps the character discovers a new fact about vampires or discovers a supernatural power that he never manifested before, which is added to the character's sheet. Or perhaps the character discovers a limitation or weakness regarding himself, another, his own powers, or another Pretender's powers. Whoever narrates decides what this discovery is. If you assign a 5 or 6 die to Discovery, whether you succeed or fail, you find out something useful or manifest a new power; the latter is particularly common for young and/or unique characters who do not know their capabilities. On a 3 or 4, you find a mildly disconcerting or mildly useful fact, power, or limitation. On a 1 or 2, whatever you find out implies bad things for your character. If no die is assigned to Discovery, there is no discovery at all unless the GM is narrating; the GM is always allowed to add revelations in her narration. Assigning a Discovery die can lock down whether a Discovery is good or bad. *If the goal of the roll is to find something out, the discovery is always unrelated to the goal* — if you want to succeed in investigating something, assign a high die to Motion.

Pull— The action attracts others; it gets people involved. By assigning a die to Pull, you're pulling a GMC into the action. This can be either a new GMC created during the narration, or an existing GMC that had been previously established. For example, an excellent computer hack may attract the aid and attention of a famous hacker who is also a Pretender. Supernatural events may attract other Pretenders nearby, or even just the mundane authorities. If you assign a 4, 5, or 6 die to Pull, then the GMC that shows up is favorably inclined toward the character. If you assign a 1, 2, or 3, then the GMC that shows up is annoyed — or even angry — at the characters. If this die is unassigned, the action could still attract GMCs — it's just that they aren't inclined to be pleased or displeased, yet. Of course, a good (or bad) first impression can be changed by future actions. While Ripple can be used to alert GMCs of an event as a side effect, Pull guarantees that the character shows up during the action, if only at the tail end of it. Note that an angry GMC can still help the character, but may expect some compensation afterward.

Some people may wonder why you'd assign a low die to any of the optional categories. The main reason to do this is to make things more interesting and more realistic. "Wouldn't it be cool if my Enemy stumbled on us killing his men, and it pissed him off?" Then Pull him in. If you think the story would be more interesting or realistic if you found out your character can never become human again, then make that Discovery. Want your recent actions to stir up that Enemy organization that wants to kill you? That's a negative Ripple.





Also, note that “negative” and “positive” are relative to the *character*. The player may have other goals.

In addition, keep in mind that Adversity (see below) can be applied to any die — usually to Safety or Motion, but it could be applied to, say, Discovery if the GM wanted to throw in a black revelation where the player thought there would be a bright one.

Rerolls

After the dice have been assigned to categories, the player can use Rerolls.

The most common way to get a Reroll is to activate a Specialty. You can activate each Specialty once, and only once, per roll. The Specialty must be relevant to the action in question (for example, activating a “former doctor” Specialty when giving first aid to a normal human). Alternately, if the Specialty involves an emotion, personality trait, or quote, activating that trait for a Reroll means that emotion, personality trait, or subject of the quotation must figure into the narration. You cannot activate a Specialty if you have already activated a Specialty that is arguably its opposite. This is the GM’s call; it is always the GM’s call as to whether it’s okay or not to activate a particular Specialty.

Billy is in the middle of a fight. He’s trying to escape without getting hurt. Barry rolls his Fire, gains narration rights, and activates an “angry” Specialty for a Reroll. He then tries to activate a “timid” Specialty, but Eva rules in this situation that the two Specialties are arguably opposites. Regardless, Eva reminds Barry to include Billy’s anger as a factor in his narration.

Sometimes the GM will give you one or two Rerolls “for free.” These are for allies you might have, magical influences in your favor, or even qualities of your enemies. When she does, she’ll tell you what they mean and how (and if) to include them in narration. You never have to use a Reroll if you don’t want to.

Billy is drunk and trying to hit on a woman in a bar. Eva tells Barry to roll his Water score, and gives Barry one Reroll, telling him that if he uses the Reroll, the narration should simply include him being drunk. Barry rolls well, so decides not to use the free Reroll. Billy’s drunkenness doesn’t turn out to matter.

A Reroll allows the player to roll any die again. This is done *after* dice are assigned to categories, and the rerolled die remains in the category it is in.

A die in a required or optional category that is “empty” can also be “rerolled” using a Reroll — just roll a new die and put it in that category.

You can keep rolling a die over and over as long as you still have Rerolls, i.e. so long as you have relevant Specialties to activate.

Narration does not commence until all Rerolls that the player desires are used and any Adversity (see below) is applied.

Wrinkles

Regardless, whoever narrates must not contradict anything that has been established before. Of course, it is important to remember that a character saying something is true does not establish something as true. The narrator must also keep his or her narration within the guidelines established above. Keep in mind if certain Rerolls are used, it may indicate certain elements that have to be used in the narration.

Narration lasts as long as the person narrating wants — it can cover a single action or a whole scene, and it is generally used to narrate entire scenes at a time. Only if another player insists on getting involved should a scene be cut short, and this can be overridden by the GM. The narrator controls all GMCs while this is going on, though the person narrating is encouraged to take input from other players about what GMCs do. At some point, the person narrating decides when to stop, and the GM picks up from there, filling in additional details if needed. The GM should stop the narration only if it wanders too far beyond the stated goal of the roll, especially if other PCs are not being given a chance to act.

Adversity and Injury

Generally, the GM does not roll for GMCs. The person narrating the action narrates the actions of the GMCs and the results of those actions, in relation to the result of the Motion die. When the Rule of Jared is being used, the GM narrates, based on common sense and what has previously been established about the world.

Serious opposition to the PCs is represented by Adversity. This is any non-negative number, but rarely higher than 3. Usually it indicates some form of supernatural opposition, from an ogre bodyguard to a powerful psychic shield. Usually, when dealing with normal humans, there is no Adversity at all, so Adversity is 0.

If there is any Adversity, the GM will tell you what its value is before you roll. You can discard dice (don't even bother rolling then, just roll less dice) to reduce Adversity, limited by the number of dice you have. (Adversity cannot go below zero.) You have to decide to do this before you roll.

After you've assigned your dice and done all Rerolls, the GM subtracts points equal to your enemies' Adversity from one (and only one) of your dice, usually either your Motion die or your Safety die. A result die cannot go below 1 this way.

If two PCs come into conflict, then the GM decides who is “active” and who is “passive” — that is, who is being affected, and who is resisting. The “active” player rolls as normal, but there is an Adversity equal to half one of the “passive” character’s statistics (like Earth, to resist an attack, or Fire to actively parry an attack) of the GM’s choice, rounded up. The “passive” player decides which die to apply the Adversity to.

Injury usually affects Adversity. Whenever a roll resolves to Safety 3 or 4, whoever narrates the roll describes the injury and describes its game-mechanical effect, usually a temporary increase in Adversity for certain kinds of rolls.





Whenever a roll resolves to Safety 1 or 2, whoever narrates the roll describes the terrible injury or injuries the character receives — even a shattering blow to one’s confidence can be an “injury.” The person narrating decides what happens, and *can and should permanently change the injured character’s sheet to reflect the damage*. No group consensus is needed to change the character sheet, unlike the usual case. Specialties can be added or subtracted, permanent levels of Adversity can be noted on the sheet (such as “+1 Adversity on all Fire rolls”), and new weaknesses or fears can be added to the character.

It takes some more creativity to come up with “injuries,” permanent or temporary, that result from non-physical actions, like telepathy or computer hacking. Conditional Adversity increases are good here, such as “Virus has infected your computer, +1 Adversity to all computing tasks.” For mental and social tasks, consider some sort of temporary or lasting neurosis or fear, perhaps the result of damaged confidence. Unsafe telepathic attempts can result in all sorts of insanity. These are all just suggestions — feel free to brainstorm ideas with the other participants in the game.

When multiple PCs are working together (see below), and the Safety die is low, at least one PC has to be “hurt,” but the person doing the narration decides who is and isn’t hurt.

Group Action

If you and another PC are facing the same Adversity to reach the same goal, you can roll together. Whichever of you has the higher appropriate statistic makes the roll; in case of a tie, choose one player. Roll the dice equal to that high statistic, plus one die if anyone’s Enemy is part of the opposition, plus one die if anyone’s Connection is involved, *plus one more die because you’re working together*.

Any number of PCs can work together, but you only get one bonus die for working together. Everyone must quickly agree how to assign the dice; if you can’t, the GM should step in and assign them for you. (If you can agree which dice to discard, the GM should respect that agreement.)

If facing Adversity higher than zero, whoever is making the roll decides whether to discard dice to reduce the Adversity, before the roll is made (as usual).

Note that PCs never *have* to work together — everyone should roll separately if their goals are different.

After the group roll is made, all participants may activate relevant Specialties for Rerolls. The player who activates a Specialty decides which die to reroll, even if that conflicts with the wishes of the others.

Putting It All Together

Billy and Cindy are surrounded by vampires that are allied with the Goblin Queen. They decide to fight their way out, back-to-back, working together.

Eva says this is a Fire task. Cindy has the higher Fire score, which means Catherine rolls, using six dice. Cindy’s Fire statistic is four, and she is facing an Enemy (+1 die) as well as working with Billy (+1 die).

Eva says these are young vampires, but there are a lot of them, so the Adversity is 2. Catherine opts to lose a die to reduce the Adversity to 1. So now Catherine is rolling five dice.

Catherine rolls the following: 5, 5, 4, 3, 1. Catherine and Barry assign 5 to Motion, 3 to Safety, 4 to Narration, 5 to Style, and 1 to the optional category of Discovery (rather than discard the last die). Catherine activates Cindy's "angry" Specialty to re-roll the Discovery die, and rolls a 6! But this also means Catherine will have to mention Cindy's anger in her narration. Billy has a relevant "martial arts" Specialty, which Barry activates to Reroll the non-assigned Pull die "to make things more exciting," rolling and getting a 2. Catherine frowns but decides to use Cindy's "personal combat training" Specialty to re-roll the Safety die, getting a 4. They both stop activating Specialities, and tell Eva so. In the end, they have a 5 in Motion, 4 in Safety, 4 in Narration, 5 in Style, 6 in Discovery, and 2 in Pull.

Eva subtracts 1 from the Safety die, making the result a 3. Catherine decides she will narrate (remember, they assigned a 4 to Narration).

Catherine narrates: "Cindy screams in anguish and frustration as she lays into the vampires, stake in hand, dust flying — her motions are fluid and beautiful, like a ballet. Billy, in perfect synchronization, kicks them, knocking them over long enough for Cindy to stake them. However, when there is only one enemy left, Billy focuses his chi like his master taught him, and accidentally taps into his primal connection to the Earth as he touches the vampire's chest with his foot, and the vampire turns to dust. Billy has discovered that even when in human form, he can turn a vampire to dust by focusing his personal energies. However, such an unexpected release of energies causes his foot to split open, making him lame for a short amount of time — he has +1 Adversity on movement or combat for a while. He hears someone chuckle behind him, and whirls around to see a tall, handsome young man in an Armani suit. Cindy gasps as she recognizes her sire."

Eva nods and tells Barry that the penalty lasts for one game hour, until Billy's preternatural healing energies take care of the rip. Eva makes sure Catherine is done; Catherine tells her she will leave it to Eva what Cindy's sire does next.

non-systems

Advancement and Combat

RPGs traditionally have an "advancement system." RPGs traditionally have a different system for combat. *Pretender* has neither.

You don't need an additional combat system. The base system covers combat just fine.

You don't need an advancement system. If it makes logical sense for your character to change in some way, then change the character. So long as everyone agrees, it's fine. Forgot to add a Specialty your character would logically have? Quickly run it by everyone and add it. Recent narration caused your character physical brain damage? Talk to everyone and adjust your Air score down. The game isn't about becoming more powerful — if you wanted to be powerful, you could have started out that way.



actual play

A Different Example

I've run this game several times and had a blast every time. Below is an example of a group of characters and a world background worked out in actual play, as an example of what you can do with the game. I've taken some liberties because the system changed slightly due to playtest, but otherwise this is raw, actual play. This was the first playtest group; the players were Russ, James, Emily, and Jamie. I was GM.

We ended up going with an oddly Judeo-Christian theme — in fact, as GM, I had to curb some discussions regarding the nature of God and whether God can break His own rules, as not terribly relevant to what we were attempting. Note that if playing around with such themes bothers you, you might not want to peruse this example — we got into some very strange stuff.

In the original brainstorming session, Emily decided she wanted to play “a Death.” Originally James was going to play a spirit that avenged abused children, but as the very Christian themed character ideas started flying, he decided to play an angel that had been exiled to earth. These were the only two characters that were of a generic “type,” in the sense that there was more of that type in the world. That is, we decided there was more than one Death and more than one exiled and/or Fallen angel on Earth.

We decided a Death is created when Uriel, the Archangel of Death, links a human being to the process of reaping souls. Reaping human souls is addictive, like heroin, complete with a rush and a high. Once a human becomes a Death, he can reap a soul (i.e. get a fix) by being present at someone's death, but cannot kill anyone himself. So long as a Death gets his fix relatively regularly, he is immortal. A Death can also tell the hour of someone's death, barring supernatural influence. This is how a Death detects other Pretenders, as even mortal Pretenders have no natural hour of death. A Death can also see someone's life story and cause someone to re-live parts of it, as in “my life flashed before me.” If a Death goes without a fix long enough, he can sicken and die, in addition to suffering from heroin-like withdrawal symptoms.

We decided later that unless Uriel or a Death is present when someone dies, that person is highly likely to come back as a ghost. A Death can reap a ghost, destroying it, but it's a very poor fix — kinda like methadone for a heroin addict, in that it satisfies the craving but there isn't a high. For this reason, we decided that Deaths were fairly common, created by Uriel to help him in reaping human souls — 1 in every 10 Pretenders is a Death.

As the brainstorming continued, we decided that Uriel cannot currently create new Deaths, as he has been exiled to Earth for a time for being *too* zealous in his duties. Yes, Uriel was a player character — this is one of the sort of things *Pretender* allows you to do, to center entire elements of the game world around a player character.

Emily was playing a recently-created Death named Lola, a “death junky” always looking for a new fix.



As I mentioned before, James wasn't playing just *any* exiled angel — he was playing Uriel, who is bitter about God's decision to exile him on earth to "experience some of the suffering you so casually created."

In our discussion, we decided that Angels are usually spiritual beings that can do nearly anything, subject to the Will of God and their own "job." However, fallen or exiled-to-Earth angels, have a physical form that looks male but has no genitalia. They can fly, manifesting wings from nowhere, plus they are unaging and they can regenerate damage quickly. If that weren't enough, they require no human sustenance and they can perform minor miracles of awe — talk with the voice of God, manifest a shining aura, and so on. In addition, they can sense other Pretenders by sensing degrees of holiness and unholiness, and any exiled angel or Fallen angel will have some unique powers relating to its "job," that is, the purpose God originally gave it. Demons are Fallen angels in this sense.

Everyone else in the game was something unique, species-wise. Jamie was very hot to play Lilith. We're talking the complete Jewish legend here: Lilith was the first wife of Adam, before Eve, but was exiled from Eden because he refused to be subservient to her. In terms of powers, she could shapeshift into three forms: a serpent, a half-serpent and half-woman, and a redheaded woman that Jamie described as a "sexy librarian." She could read — and manipulate — men's minds, as part of her eternal search for a new (and better) Adam. Her weakness was cold; Jamie was going for a reptilian vibe. Lilith's other weakness, in a psychological sense, was men.

Here is where brainstorming came in again. Given Lilith's status as the "mother of all monsters," and her sexual overtones, after some discussion we decided that she could drain men's vitality through their semen to gain power, and that any child she bore was monstrous. (As an interesting detail Jamie came up with, Lilith could do either live birth or lay eggs — again, the reptilian thing.)

As an aside, I really liked this character, as it showcases one of the things I was aiming at in *Pretender* — the ability to play big, mythical immortals with some serious archetypal resonance.

Shawn wanted to play a sentient computer virus, but we pointed out that a Pretender had to be able to pass as human, at least some of the time. The discussion ranged all over the map, but with input from the other players, Shawn decided his character was a computer virus that accidentally ate part of a witch's spellbook. This caused the virus to fuse with a demon, creating a new half-demon and half-computer virus thing. This new being was literally two months old at the start of the game. It could possess anything with a microchip and could also possess human beings. (We decided the True Name of the demon was a series of computer characters, like @\$^...) Since it was 1985, still in the early days of computing in some sense, we nicknamed it the "Cookie Monster," after a famous "virus" of that same name.

Russ's character benefitted the most from brainstorming. Russ had a physical form, and some powers in mind, based on an old character from Palladium's *Nightbane* game. The character could either be human or this thing that looked like a cross between a wolf, a lizard, and a bat, which could breathe fire and give out a disturbing howl.





It was a strong (and cool) image, but there was no concept to hang it on. Ideas were bandied back and forth — a sentient biological virus, a mutation, the results of a Thing From Beyond pushing into our world, a being of primal Chaos from before God made the world... Taking some ideas from our biblical theme and the latter idea, we came up with the idea that Russ's character was an animal that Adam forgot to name when he named everything else. Because of this, he came to represent the fear of the unknown, and the rage and anger of the natural world. Therefore he could take any shape, though the beast-shape I mentioned is his preferred form. He-That-Is-Unnamed feeds on fear, made strong by people (even Pretenders) being scared of him, and weak by those who are not afraid. Because he was not named, he even escaped death, becoming immortal.

(Ironically, this made him the only character older than Lilith, as we decided he was created during the “six days,” before man and woman were created.)

In human form, he went by Terry, and in the modern day he makes snuff films. That was 100% Russ's idea, and I thought it was a nice touch, after all the other stuff the rest of us had come up with — an almost sophisticated side to a primal creature of fear.

The character generation session went something like this:

1. What Kind of Game is This?

We started out with a free-wheeling discussion — all over the map, discussing character concepts and ideas, with no particular organization. I let this go, and it was useful until it got out of control, when I reeled things in. Many ideas were bounced around at this point. At this time, James was still thinking about playing a spirit created by the rage of raped women that punishes rapists, in contrast to Emily, who had the Death thing 90% fleshed out already. Shawn wanted to play a being that existed ONLY on the Internet, when I reminded him the Internet wasn't that big in 1985, and that Pretenders usually should be humanoid at least SOME of the time. Jamie wanted to play Lilith, and Russ had some vague concepts based on that old *Nightbane* character of his.

2. What is Everyone Playing?

We started with Lilith. Since she is a unique “creature,” we were sort of defining the character to a certain extent, though I tried to keep the discussion, for this step, centered on what she could DO.

Regardless, Jamie wanted her version of Lilith to be able to shapeshift into a serpent, a serpent-person hybrid, or a woman. Lilith could read men's minds (to be extra explicit, though with a bit of a tongue in cheek, we defined “male” as anything with a Y chromosome), and she could manipulate men's minds in a wide variety of ways — I just wrote “various mind-fucks” while taking notes. Jamie wanted to have weaknesses, so Lilith grew torpid in the cold (the lizard thing again) and human (i.e. non-Pretender) women had a subconscious hatred of her.

We also decided that as the “Mother of All Monsters” Lilith got a simple tingly feeling (think “Spider Sense,” though in this case probably more like “Lizard Sense”) around other Pretenders. Also, Lilith was immortal, because God wouldn’t let her die, as her punishment for being cast out of Eden before anyone/anything else.

As previously mentioned, Emily had nearly the whole Death concept fleshed out from the start. We decided that the “dealer” who created Deaths was the Angel of Death, and it was at this point that James decided to play Uriel, the Angel of Death, after some further discussion. Later discussion about ghosts made us decide that one out of every ten Pretenders was a Death.

We then nailed down how earth-bound angels worked, as above. Angels still in God’s graces, we decided, were 100% spiritual but manifested according to God’s will and schedule, with unlimited power except to interfere with free will. Later on we got into some serious discussions about this, in a long theological sidetrack — Russ seemed to want to *define* God to a near-mechanical level of detail, while the majority of the players (including myself) wanted to leave that up to a theme to be developed in play.

We discussed the other PCs a little bit, as mentioned above, and moved on.

3. Link Everyone, Flesh Out Your World, and Create GMCs

The way this worked is we started out linking everyone together, got into a discussion about the problems the group would face (something which we would return to later), and created GMCs as we went. We used a whiteboard to draw a relationship map, and later I re-wrote the map on butcher paper.

There was some discussion as to where to set the game. Jamie was dead set against New York, and someone else suggested Seattle, but Jamie decided that was too cold for Lilith. Then someone (I forget who) suggested New Orleans, and everyone liked that idea. I asked if there was such a thing as a Pretender-only club and if they frequented one, and they came up with a Pretender-only nightclub that catered to Pretenders that didn’t like God, which was sort of our theme. I suggested the name “Purgatory” for this club and everyone seemed to like that.

The group decided that Legion (who was originally invented as simply someone to point Uriel to the nightclub), was trying to take over Hell, and was manipulating all the non-demonic, but anti-God supernaturals to this end (i.e. including the PCs). Later on, since a dislike of God seemed to unify the group, they also decided they needed a holy group to oppose them, and they came up with the Knights Templar.

In essence, the Knights Templar, as we decided for the game, were a secret society of holy warriors, formed by the Archangel Michael, whose job it is to keep Pretenders in check. Knights Templar count as Pretenders because in gaining supernatural powers, they get proof of God’s power — and this removes their ability to truly have faith and doubt, making them in some sense less than human.



Speaking of Uriel, aside from the connections mentioned so far, Uriel has an odd curiosity about the Cookie Monster, since he registers as unholy, and yet isn't really a demon. Uriel was introduced to the club by Legion soon after arriving on Earth. Legion spends most of his time possessing a local rabbi. The Archangel Michael has it in for Uriel. (Michael runs the Knights Templar, remember.)

Legion, of course, is the secret villain of the piece. Aside from the connections mentioned so far, we decided the Cookie Monster was created from a piece of him, and Legion is trying to gather all his fragments together to prepare for his coup in Hell.

Speaking of the Cookie Monster, aside from the connections already mentioned, he has a personal enemy — the witch whose spellbook he ate when he was “only” a computer virus. He’s never seen her face-to-face, but she goes by the handle of “WICCAGRRL.” Also, the body he is in happens to be the brother of Father Jeremy.

Ah, Father Jeremy. The group didn’t want a “kill ‘em all” zealot, so instead they decided he’d targeted the PCs for conversion — he wanted them to repent and accept the mercy of God. He’s particularly anxious to get his brother to do this, as he senses his brother’s unholiness. As a Knight Templar, he is supernatural and holy, protecting him against the usual wiles of the PCs.

(You’ll notice I left Terry out. I didn’t do this out of spite, but because I’ve already mentioned all his connections.)

4. Define Characters Further.

Okay, we fleshed out a lot of small details here — a lot had been established during the previous steps. Reading from my notes:

- Lilith is a majority shareholder in the men’s sin industry — porn, sports, men’s magazines, etc.
- Lilith keeps dating men — though she hates them — because she is looking for perfect love. Love that, perhaps, only God, who she hates, can give.
- Uriel has only been on Earth for 6 months, but thanks to Lilith he has money, due to a job as a “consultant” for a men’s magazine.
- Uriel, like all exiled angels, has some powers that are unique to him. His touch creates plague and death (more or less at will), and he is immune to plague and pain. He used to be able to heal, but God took that away from him (as well as his ability to create Deaths) as a punishment for being too zealous in his duties, and out-of-character because Emily wanted James to drop the healing power so Lola would have less of a problem with Uriel. James also wanted to be “fast as death,” i.e. supernaturally fast, but we talked him out of that as not making a lot of sense — death is often slow.
- Lola is a young Death — she’s only been a Pretender for five years now, and acts like your basic heroin addict, as modified for the nature of her addiction.
- Terry influenced the creation of gargoyles in medieval Europe, as well as Gothic architecture. He feeds on fear, but he’s become “refined” about it — he’s a strong believer in “terror through art.”

Regardless, we came up with the following Enemies and Connections for everyone:





Lilith's Enemies: Adams (i.e., each man as she individually dates them, or as they act like Adam), God. Lilith's Connections: Cookie Monster

Terry's Enemies: scientists and philosophers (by exploring the unknown, they push back the boundaries of fear). Terry's Connections: Lola

"Cookie Monster" Enemies: "elite" hackers, WICCAGRRL. "Cookie Monster" Connections: Lilith

Uriel's Enemies: Michael, all immaculate (i.e., non-Fallen, non-exiled) angels. Uriel's Connections: Lilith, Lola

Lola's Enemies: the Knights Templar (because they can heal people). Lola's Connections: Uriel, Lilith

5. Put Down Statistics

This went relatively smoothly, though we had to talk Jamie out of a Water of 100 (she didn't realize at the time stats corresponded to number of dice rolled), and Russ out of some unusually high statistics.

Final character sheets, stat-wise, with Specialties listed next to connected traits (this was a minor organizational thing for the players, with no game-mechanical effect) were as follows:

Uriel

Earth 4 — resilient, dedicated

Air 3 — overwhelmed, hyper-sensitive

Fire 4 — flight, anger

Water 3 — cold confidence

Spirit 5 — spread plague/pain, enigmatic, regeneration

Lilith

Earth 4 — can't die, desperation

Air 6 — carries grudges, gross manipulation, pragmatic

Fire 4 — sex, relentless, dance

Water 8 — seduction, manipulation, reptile empathy, stupid faith

Spirit 2 — seeks pure love, all powers (i.e. Reroll when actively using her powers)

"Cookie Monster" virus

Earth 4 — determined

Air 6 — logical, recalling information, problem-solving, storing data, calculating match functions

Fire 4 — humorous

Water 2 — curious

Spirit 3 — fiendish

The Un-Named Animal (Terry)

Earth 5 — resilient, determined, predatory

Air 5 — calculating, predatory, cunning

Fire 5 — furious

Water 6 — artistic

Spirit 6 — terrifying, shape shifting, nihilistic

Lola

Earth 3 — numbed, empty

Air 2 — tunnel vision, finding dying

Fire 1 — lethargic, finding dying

Water 5 — empathy, searching, intuiting triggers

Spirit 5 — hour of death, obsessed

Let's Play

I won't bore you with all the details of the campaign, but here are some highlights, in terms of notable scenes:

- Emily's character, Lola, acting like a true junky, going around to the Pretenders in the club: "You gonna kill anyone tonight? Are you? Are you?"
- One good early example of player-created plot seeds: Jamie put a 6 in Narration on a roll to "pick up a new Adam," and passed the narration to James, who, due to the Ripple die, ruled that the guy had a guardian angel watching him. This came into play later.
- Another good example of player-run narration was when Jamie had Lilith read the "new Adam's" mind, and took narration for herself, narrating that below his superficial yuppie exterior, this guy had been recently dumped and was just the sort of sensitive man Lilith is looking for. This became especially relevant when Legion killed the guy.
- The Cookie Monster Virus used his ability to possess electronic devices to travel over phone to the Legion's party in order to beat everyone there, and since he gave me the narration with a negative Discovery die, I narrated how he was (in part) stuck in the body of Denzel — his soul had left, so the Cookie Monster Virus always had to be using part of himself to possess it. (This also shows, BTW, that players are more than willing to put low dice in the optional categories, just to make things more interesting. Shawn has always been good at the "willing to hose his own character" thing.)
- In one of the more interesting cases of player narration, James narrated how Michael was actually the angel watching Lilith's date, and that Michael was really there to keep an eye on Uriel. The result was a knock-down, drag-out fight with Michael on the beach where Uriel Discovered (on a 6) that he could manifest a scythe of plague energy. James went on to narrate how Jesus Himself subsequently broke up the fight, who then condemned Uriel to never be allowed back into Heaven — or into the fold of Hell, in an extreme example of Pull.





· Nearly all the PCs worked together to destroy Legion’s house, as Terry and others discovered Legion was trying to steal the Cookie Monster Virus’s power, and because Legion killed Lilith’s date (another result of player narration). Most notable in this scene was Terry turning into a whirlwind, which I didn’t expect.

· In an interesting follow-up to the situation with Uriel, Lilith tried (and failed, due to Adversity) to seduce Jesus, getting a hug instead. This led to one of the more interesting images of the game: Lilith flicking off Terry while giving Jesus a hug.

· After the Jesus thing, Lilith got into a long theological discussion with Father Jeremy about the value of selfless devotion to God — or Jesus, who Lilith was crushing on. I can’t do the conversation justice — I think Jamie and I enjoyed it more than the other players did. Suffice it to say it was a lot of fun, the slightly-not-human (as he was a Knight Templar, therefore a “Pretender of the Light,” as it were) fanatic discussing selflessness and free will.

· A piece of Legion tricked Uriel into storming Hell, resulting in the climactic scene of one session. At the end of the narration, despite a large amount of Adversity, Uriel was successful, and James narrated that Uriel was now trapped in Hell, and that he was now its ruler.

And while Uriel was storming Hell, Terry was playing golf with Lucifer....

This is only one example of the sort of game that is possible — compare and contrast with the example used throughout the rules.

designers notes

As a break from my other game, *Unsung*, I started work on totally different game. With *Pretender*, I was aiming at the same “turf” as the *World of Darkness*: Mythic creatures in the modern day. Not as a competitor, but as a complement, a different shade.

I wanted to hew closer to the *Sonja Blue* series. I wanted to add what the *World of Darkness*, especially in its currently (over) expanded form, lacks: a sense of wonder and exploration.

In essence, I wanted a game where it was easy to play vampires in the (kinda) modern day, but also were-gators, mannequins that come to life during the night, races of immortals that look (and act) like psychopathic children, and sentient colonies of roaches. Flexibility was key here — I was not interested in having “splats” (clans/tribes/kith et cetera). I’d wanted to run a campaign like this for a very long time — playtesting was a blast.

In terms of Forge “GNS theory” (see the essays of Ron Edwards at www.indie-rpgs.com if you’re curious), I wanted a very Simulationist game that focused on extreme personalities, grittiness, and creating the world as you went, with perhaps a touch of irony and humor. (The result is perhaps more Narrativist than I intended, but that’s okay as well.)

However, I wanted there to be a framework for people to hang stuff onto. I also wanted to have shifting narration, and a very “develop in play” style — the GM and the players would really “create a story together.”

I tried to think what system would suit what I wanted best, and settled on a heavily-modified version of *OtherKind* (on the web: <http://www.septemberquestion.org/lumpley/other.html>).

Playtesting has shown it to be a robust game, and I’m very pleased with the results.

credit

The most credit goes to Vincent Baker’s excellent RPG, *OtherKind*, from which I swiped much of the mechanics. While I modified the system very heavily to make it more Simulationist than Narrativist and to better fit my theme, it certainly still shows its roots.

Credit goes out to Jared A. Sorensen, whose design for *OctaNe* influenced me a lot, and to the Forge (<http://www.indie-rpgs.com>) for giving me ideas on Simulationism. The essays of Ron Edwards were particularly influential, not to mention “relationship maps” from Ron’s *Sorcerer* supplement, *The Sorcerer’s Soul*. A lot of the pre-game discussion text was influenced by *Sorcerer* and by the *Universalis* RPG by Ralph Mazza and Mike Holmes.

I should also probably mention Jonathan Tweet’s under-appreciated RPG *Everway*, which inspired the statistics for Pretender.

And I’d be remiss if I didn’t mention that the design improved through the suggestions of Mike Holmes, Ralph Mazza, Vincent Baker and others at the Forge. And don’t forget the playtesters: Russ “Nightbane” Rosin, Shawn “Cookie Monster” Rhodes, James “Uriel” Spahn, Emily “Death Junkie” Shoop, and Jamie Lynn Smulian, aka “Lilith.” Their suggestions were very helpful; much of the current design was in direct reaction to their comments during and after play.

Ewige blumenkraft!

about the author

Kirt A. Dankmyer was born in 1972, and has been roleplaying, in some form or another, since the early 1980s. His RPG credits include *Faster, Better, Cheaper* and *Unsung*, a game about cops and other unsung heroes, which is slated for future release as a print and PDF product. He has a wife and a cat that will DESTROY YOUR WORLD. You can check out his games, and more, at his web site: ivanhoeunbound.com

Pretender © Kirt A. Dankmyer 2003.





WTF?

THE GAME OF COMPETITIVE SCHIZO- STORYTELLING

By Daniel Solis

WTF IS WTF?

It's a mini game, a metagame, a universal supplement, and a game design experiment gone horribly wrong. It's anything you want it to be as long as you want it crazy.

WTF is highly influenced by FLCL, a must-watch anime series that initially centers around Naota, a normal schoolboy living in an unremarkable town save for the colossal iron-shaped medical factory dominating the landscape. His life is turned inside out when a mysterious pink-haired girl runs him over with her moped and bashes his head with an electric guitar. For the rest of the



six-episode series, he tries to maintain a predictable school life while dealing with cat ears, Gibson guitars, and giant hand-shaped robots bursting from his brain. Just when you think it gets too weird, it gets weirder.

WTF attempts to capture the frenetic pace and absolutely unpredictable narrative of FLCL in a roleplaying game by flipping over the traditional roles of players and GMs. In WTF, there is only one player, the *star*, and a bunch of GMs, the *directors*, all vying for control of the story and the favor of the star. As each director tries to one-up the others, the resulting stories become schizophrenic narrative freak-outs.

WTF can be played “on top” of other RPGs or on its own as a loose structure for collaborative storytelling. The rest of this write-up assumes you’re doing the latter rather than the former. When choosing an RPG, I suggest a system with very quick resolution mechanics. Turns of real time (5 minutes, 10 minutes, 15 minutes, etc.) are the foundation of WTF, so you don’t want to waste your turn calculating damage or looking up data on charts and tables.

WHAT YOU NEED TO PLAY

“Tokens” are used as a reward in WTF, so you’ll want some little objects to represent those. Coins, candy and marble counters work well. A stopwatch is very handy for keeping track of how much time is left in a director’s turn. Also, if you decide to use your favorite game, you’ll obviously need whatever props the system requires.

GAME CONCEPTS

Schizo-Storytelling

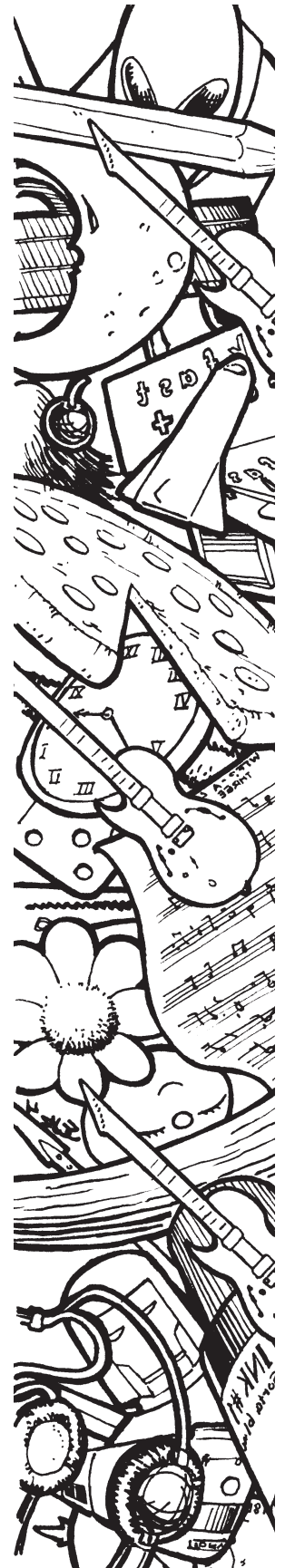
A schizo-story can shift between different dramatic elements suddenly and without warning. This isn’t just your normal end-of-the-movie plot twist either. No, the story keeps freaking out from beginning to end. The goal is to make the audience ask themselves, “What the @#\$\$ is going on?”

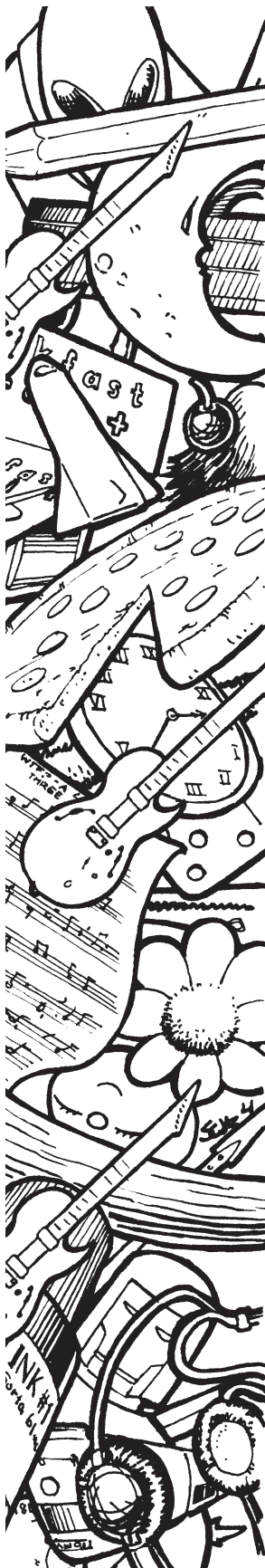
The Show Must Go On

No matter how screwed up the plot twist, incongruous the character, or jarring the mood swing, the show must go on in all its bizarre glory. The game is designed to provide enough structure to allow the story to last at least a few episodes.

Star

A player who role-plays the main protagonist of a story.





Directors

The other players, who compete with one another to direct the protagonist toward their stories, sometimes by force, hoping the star will take interest and pursue those story lines later on. Directors have limitless control over their characters and story elements but cannot control the star, his actions or reactions.

Scene

This is the same thing as a scene in a play or movie. It's stuff that happens at one time in one place.

Turn

A single director's turn at directing the story, encompassing as many scenes as he and the star are able to play during that time.

Episode

A roleplay session of WTF.

Series

All of the episodes centering on one protagonist. If the star plays a new protagonist, a new series begins. If a new star plays the same protagonist (for whatever reason) it's up to you whether to consider it a new series.

HOW TO PLAY WTF?

The star creates a character using whatever system the group has decided to play with for that series. When you're creating a protagonist, it's helpful to come up with just enough background to spark some inspiration for the directors. Be forewarned, however, that this character will have weird, crazy things happen to him and around him. Don't get too attached. Finally, make sure the character is kept secret from the directors until the first episode.

The following are some example WTF protagonists. Ideally, these should be short and sweet, the kind of examples you'd hear a narrator describe in a cheesy movie trailer.

A simple schoolboy struggling to cope with his coming-of-age.

A wandering mariachi with a guitar case full of guns and a head full of regrets.

A star-faring rebel fighting an evil galactic empire.

A renegade cop. A robot renegade cop.

First Episode

The first episode is the introductory session where all the directors get a turn to direct the story and make their first impressions on the star. It's like an audition for the directors.

Each director explains, briefly, the plot elements they'll be using during their turns. These elements can be characters, themes, or genres. For the spice of unpredictability, it is best that the directors have chosen these elements separately from each other. For example:

Dora, star, will be playing a coming-of-age schoolboy named Billy.

Jake, director, explains that his turns in the director's chair will focus on "pilot-training in the Inter-Stellar Alliance."

Elise, director, decides she'll be running "a pirate story involving lots of rock n' roll imagery."

Ted, director, will focus on "conflict between young hipsters and the stern, grown-up establishment."

Bub, director, will be "doing stuff with giant robots and monsters."

After those introductions, the Star decides which director she'll allow to run the story first. Then the next director has a turn, then the next, and then the next, until each director has had a turn. Each turn is only 10 minutes, at which point the next director takes over the story, either continuing the elements introduced by the previous director or suddenly shifting the story to his own elements as quickly as possible.

This "scene shift" is a particularly important point to have agreed upon ahead of time by the group, since it can be a point of friction between directors. The two extremes are 1) that the directors can only build upon previously established dramatic elements or 2) allowing directors to completely switch stories between directors, with the very confused protagonist as the only consistent element.

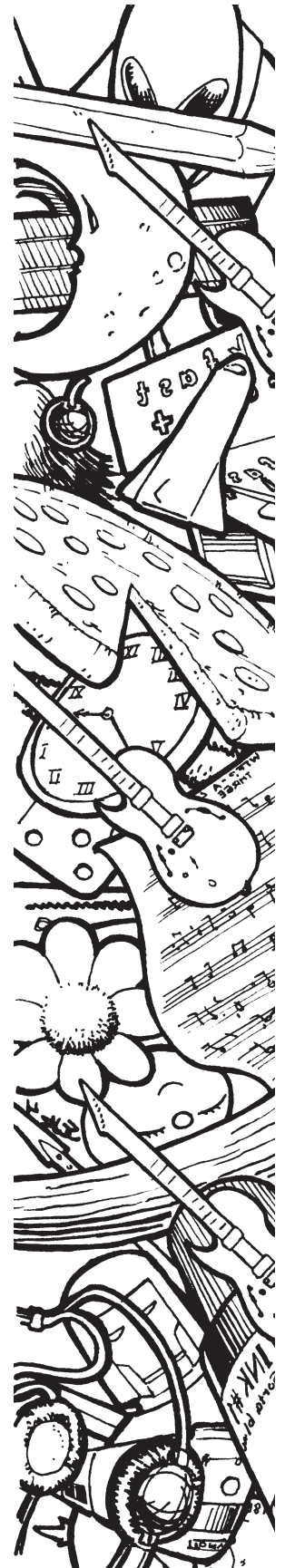
The first option creates a more cohesive continuity but gives a lot of narrative power to the first director of an episode. The second option creates an unpredictable schizo-story, which can be a lot of fun to watch unfold, but can build up a bit of resentment between sensitive directors who have had the spotlight rudely pulled out of their hands. Then again, FLCL had a fairly even balance between these extremes, never completely deciding to go with one method or the other. It's a rare treat if your group is comfortable enough with each other to not adhere to a single method. Most folks will probably want to stick on one side of the line or another.

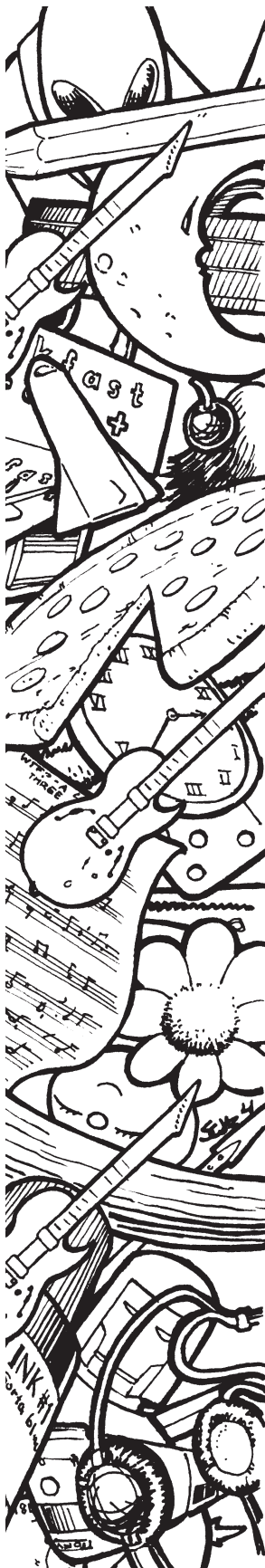
First episodes are complete when every director has had an equal number of turns at directing the story.

The last director to have a turn ends his segment with the phrase, "roll credits."

End Credits

As the credits roll, the directors refresh the star on the cool stuff that happened during their turn. The star then rewards the cool stuff by distributing director tokens to the directors. The more tokens a director has been awarded, the more the star liked that director's portion of the story. The amount of tokens awarded is proportional to the top director's award and the number of directors who have participated in the episode.





For example, if the star's favorite director of the episode got five tokens, the next favorite director would get four tokens, the next best would get three and so on. Every director should get at least two tokens. The star can decide to award every director an equal number of tokens, except for the top director who would get one more.

Further Episodes

Further episodes are episodes beyond the first. Every further episode in the series begins with the top director of the previous episode getting ten minutes to kick things off, but the director can continue beyond those ten minutes as long as another director doesn't interrupt. In further episodes, each director is entitled to at least fifteen minutes before interruptions are allowed.

A director can only interrupt by spending a director token. If two or more directors decide to interrupt at the same time, the Star decides their turn order. In that situation, a director who has to go on the waiting list is allowed to abort their interruption, keep their token and just interrupt at a later time. Otherwise, further interruptions reserve spaces on that waiting list.

Directors cannot "interrupt themselves" by spending a token to extend their turn nor can they reserve two consecutive turns on a waiting list.

CLIMAXES

While the directors essentially have unlimited control over their characters, there are certain things only the star can do by virtue of her role as the protagonist of the story. The series is about him or her, after all. All the other elements of the story are only relevant in how they affect and interact with the protagonist.

A director can spend a token to declare a scene Important with a capital "I." This scene is called a climax and should only happen once per episode. Usually, a climax has the most dramatic impact towards the end of an episode, but it can happen at any time. By making a scene Important, the director has chosen to give the Star control of the scene for five minutes. During that time, the star becomes his own director.

The star cannot use a climax to retroactively change past events (unless time travel was part of the story, then it's fine) or control another director's character's actions. If the star requests it, other directors may still speak in-character. A climax is basically an opportunity for the star to describe, on his own terms, how the protagonist acts as the ultimate hero of the story.

JAM SESSIONS

Some groups may find the hard and fast turn structure too restricting for their play style. To alleviate this problem, directors may spend a token to interrupt and declare a scene a "Jam Session."

For ten minutes, all the directors' level of control is more in line with the traditional player-GM structure. That is, each director controls only characters that they introduce into the scene and how their characters react to the other

directors' characters' actions. It's basically roleplaying with casts instead of single characters. Directors who spend their last token to declare a jam session earn back two tokens automatically. Directors may each only declare one jam session per episode.

WRITERS

Perhaps only one player wants to be the full-blown director, but others still want to give input in a more subdued fashion. As an optional play method, there is one star and one director, while the rest of the players are "writers." The writers can spend a director token to introduce a plot twist, a turn of events, new characters, and so on. It is then the director's job to somehow make the crazy writers' ideas work with the already-established story line. Writers are awarded director tokens in the same manner as they would be if they were playing directors.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Daniel Solis is a graphic designer by day, game designer by night. You can reach him at danielsolis81@yahoo.com.





THE AGENCY

by Matt Machell

YESTERDAY'S DEAD DIE TOMORROW

A quick kick to the groin dealt with the first guard. The second, whose teeth had locked around Simon's arm, was trickier to cope with. The third guard was fumbling around on the floor trying to find the eyes that Simon had knocked from their sockets.

Simon Drake hated zombies.

In an effort to dislodge the second, he used it to bludgeon the third, only to end up with a bodiless head attempting to gnaw his arm off. He prized it off with an umbrella, and made a run for the mansion's steps. Another three rotting corpses entered the hallway, shambling after him. Simon yanked the rug out from under their feet and bolted for the door.

As he rushed down the manor's steps a red sports car skidded to a halt in front of him.

"Need a ride?" Jenna Styles asked, casually brushing the remains of a zombie gardener from the paintwork. A pair of very sharp looking shears were embedded in the car's bonnet. Simon pulled them out, flung them at his pursuers, and vaulted into the passenger seat.



The engine spluttered and died.

"That'll teach me not to tip the mechanic," Jenna noted. A glance in the rear-view mirror showed a shambling horde making its way across the gravel.

"You still keep a shotgun under the back seat?" Simon asked.

"No," Jenna said, flicking a switch on the dashboard, "I found something better."

There was a whir and a click, followed by a gout of flame spewing from the back of the car.

The zombies burned. The credits rolled.

INTRODUCTION

The Agency is a roleplaying game where players take on the roles of 60s secret agents fighting the machinations of the supernatural menace. It's *Austin Powers* meets *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, or *The Avengers* with Hammer Horror. It's designed to be a simple and light-hearted system, with lots of opportunity for heroics.

This is not an extensive set of rules. However, they are designed to *really* convey the feel of the setting. The game is strongly focused on players cooperating to create fun stories of a particular style, and the rules reflect this. It is abstract in comparison to some games, but the purpose of the game is to allow fun to flow from the freedom granted by that abstraction.

The game works best with 4 or so players, and you'll need some dice and paper. A few character sheets (which can be downloaded at <http://www.realms.org.uk/theagency>) are also useful.

MEMO

TO: All Agency Personnel

FROM: Col. Masters

SECURITY CLEARANCE: Alpha 5

All agents are to be on the lookout for Norman Fitch (see case file 2345). He is known to be in possession of an artefact called the Eye of Leng. This device is believed to have mind altering effects and to be of dubious occult origin. Our man in Spain observed one of Fitch's associates making contact with a member of F.E.S.T.A. Agents are to recover this artefact at all costs and take Fitch alive for questioning. Caution is advised.

ABOUT THE AGENCY

It's the 1960s. London hums to the music of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones. New fashions and lifestyles sweep the nation. With the beginning of the Age of Aquarius, a sinister conspiracy threatens the nation: Abominations of the supernatural are bent on the destruction or enslavement of the human race! The only thing that stands in their way are the plucky agents of the top secret organization: The Agency.





The Agency began as an obscure sub-department of military intelligence, working as a special operations unit and handed the rather dubious task of investigating weird phenomena. For some fifty years, this small team was all that protected the country from the horrors of the night. The last 10 years have seen an alarming upturn in activity by supernatural creatures of all kinds. This has led to the home office expanding the original team and officially establishing The Agency.

The remit of this organization is quite simple: uncover any supernatural threat to the nation and eliminate it. To avoid public outcry, the Agency is tasked with doing its work as quietly as possible; witnesses are to be recruited. This policy has resulted in a strange assortment of characters becoming members of the agency. Millionaire playboys, military men and rock stars all secretly work for the Agency. These Agents are organized into small teams, called together should need arise, and backed up by a staff of scientists and support personnel.

The Agency has its headquarters in rural Sussex, hidden behind the façade of a rather nice Jacobean mansion. The area directly around Agency H.Q. is used for training, and new recruits can often be seen practising martial arts and running assault courses on the grounds. Several hundred metres below the ground, the Agency operates an experimental containment facility, where “neutralized” supernatural creatures can be safely stored and monitored.

PLAYING THE GAME

To play the Agency, you’ll need some normal dice and some players (3-5 is about right) and somebody to act as Director. If you have not played in a roleplaying game before, this role may need some explanation. The Director is a player who is responsible for organizing play, setting the scene, conceiving plot and describing the actions of non-player characters. Where the players will create characters who are the heroes of the piece, the Director will set the scene for that story and play the bit parts, allies and villains. There is more discussion of this role later on.

Typically, play will begin with the Director describing a scene and then continue with players describing how their characters react to events. Their decisions, and suggestions, will lead to a changes in the scene and the development of the plot. The events may be dramatic chase scenes, brawls with supernatural creatures, or acts of death-defying heroism. The object of the game is to have fun by creating an enjoyable story. Rules help frame the action in a manageable way and encourage the conventions of the action genre. The dice add an element of the unforeseen to the experience.

MEMO

TO: Westminster Office

FROM: Col. Masters

SECURITY CLEARANCE: Delta 4

All Agents are reminded that following the recent attempt to replace local food vendors with zombies, the Canteen is off limits for the next two weeks for decontamination.

CHARACTER CREATION

Players in the game create characters whose actions they will guide during the game. Character Creation is easy; the first step is to come up with a suitable concept. Keep in mind the influences of the game. Remember all those TV spy series from the 60s and 70s? Which cool characters from those shows would you want to be?

Characters will have a normal life and an Agency life, and so typical concepts might include: International playboy, rock star, photographer, military specialist, spy, cat burglar, scientist, mystic guru, martial artist, or fashion model. Also pick a name for your character at this point, it should be something evocative of the setting. Note down a few details about the character's look and mannerisms.

If you have trouble creating a character concept, consider the following questions: What do you see your character doing, and what is cool about it? What is your character's purpose? How will the character go about achieving this? What does your character think about the Agency? What are your character's distinctive personality traits? What does he or she look like? What amazing fashions does he or she wear?

CHOOSE SKILLS

Skills are abilities in which your character has some talent. Skills are used in the game to determine chance of success at particular actions during moments of dramatic tension. Skills have five different levels: Poor means you aren't very good at something, Normal means your character has a layman's understanding of a skill, Fair is slightly better than a normal person, Good is trained and Excellent is a truly heroic level of expertise. All skills default to Normal if you don't have an appropriately named one.

Examples of skills include: Science, Kung Fu, Brawling, Melee, Acrobatics, Seduction, Guns, Languages, Intimidation, Persuasion, Investigation, Medicine, Driving, Security, Survival, Stealth, Observation, Music, Riding, Athletics, Dodging and Intimidation. This is by no means an exhaustive list, and you have total control over what your skill is called, as long as you can get your Director to agree. Pick whatever you think suits your character concept.

All players in the game start by picking 2 skills in which their character is good, and 1 skill in which they are excellent. Also choose one area in which your character has a poor skill, nobody has a perfect knowledge base after all.

You can also choose to take an extra skill at poor, to gain an extra skill at fair.

MEMO

TO: All Agency Personnel

FROM: Col. Masters

SECURITY CLEARANCE: New Recruits

New recruits are reminded that Tuesday is their training course 'The Vampire: Menace or Misfortune.' Recruits should bring their own piece of wood.





CHOOSE BONUSES AND FLAWS

Bonuses and flaws are the things that make your character stand out — natural strengths and weaknesses, social contacts both good and bad — the things that bring a character to life. In a game of *The Agency*, no two characters should have an identical set of bonuses and flaws.

A heroic flaw is something about your character that is not perfect, which may occasionally make him act in an inappropriate, but all too human, way. Examples include, but are not limited to: Proud, Lustful, Gambler, Drinker, Reckless, Vengeful, Cowardly, Soft Hearted, Obsessive, Addicted, Violent, Forgetful, Clumsy, Gullible, Frail.

Each character also has a heroic bonus, something that sets the character apart in a positive way. Heroic bonuses are aspects of a character that are not covered by skills but nevertheless have a huge impact on events. These include, but are not limited to: Wealth, Contacts, Influence, Rank, Artefact, Gadget, Toughness, Luck, Mysticism, Quick, Bruiser, Magnetism.

If you want, you can take an extra flaw, you can take an extra bonus too.

Custom Bonuses and Flaws

The default collection of bonuses and flaws is detailed later, but feel free to invent your own if nothing defined fits your concept. All you have to do is decided the name of the trait and the arena that it covers, and get the Director to agree that your idea works.

Bonuses and flaws can be as abstract as you wish, but a good rule of thumb is that they should be quickly summarized, and their effects should not be duplicated by anything else that exists within the system.

EXAMPLES OF CHARACTER CREATION

Simon Drake

Simon Drake produced records for a living, until he wound up in the path of an angry vampire who was being chased by the Agency. His timely use of a pool cue as a makeshift weapon brought him into the Agency's ranks. He cuts a dashing figure in the latest fashions and is known to many people in and around the London music scene.

Simon has the skills Music and Brawl at good. He is excellent at Persuasion. He is poor at Science. He has many Contacts from his days as a promoter of bands, but he suffers from a Reckless Streak.

MEMO

TO: Simon Drake

FROM: Finance Department

In response to your query, hair gel is not a legitimate expense.

Bobby Harris

Bobby Harris was a boxer. He could have been world champion, had he not been kidnapped by the Order of Sutekh and hypnotized into stealing items from the British Museum. Fortunately the Agency foiled the plot, but Bobby was never the same again. He works as a janitor and groundsman for the Agency but occasionally gets called in when they need a bit of muscle.

Bobby Harris has the skills Athletics and Socialise at good. He is excellent at Brawling. He is poor at Stealth. He has the bonuses Tough and Bruiser. He has the flaws: Forgetful and Easily Led.

Sifu Fung

Sifu Fung studied for years in Tibet as a mystic and practitioner of martial arts. In his later years, he received a mysterious vision, which drew him to Europe to work against the machinations of the Demon Lord Askashta. He has aided the Agency many times but never officially joined. He is a diminutive oriental gentleman, in a pristine suit, carrying a walking stick.

Sifu Fung has the skills Acrobatics and Investigation at good. He is excellent at Martial Arts. He is poor at Languages. He has the bonuses: Mystic and Signature Weapon. He has the flaws: Frail and Soft Hearted.

Reginald Forbes II

Reginald Forbes was named after his uncle, who had a brief career fighting supernatural creatures in the 1920s. Educated at Eton and Cambridge, Forbes is the epitome of the rich young aristocrat about town. While investigating his uncle's past, he crossed paths with a team of Agency investigators and aided them when they were forced to confront disturbing eldritch horrors. He has a penchant for velvet jackets and Union Jack waistcoats.

Reginald Forbes has the skills Firearms and Driving at good. He is excellent at Socialise. He is poor at Survival. He has the bonuses Wealth and Contacts and the flaws Drinker and Gambler.

MEMO

TO: Reginald Forbes
FROM: Central Office

Thank you for the kind donation of 14 Harrington Way as an Agency local office. It would be of great help should any supernatural activity threaten the Butlins Holliday village.

Jenna Styles

Jenna Styles worked as a fashion photographer while enjoying the life of a London socialite. She joined the Agency after surviving an unfortunate run in with a zombie cab driver. Nobody had tried decapitating a zombie with a high-heeled boot before.

Jenna has the skills Martial Arts and Photography at good and is an excellent Driver. She has the bonuses Vehicle and Magnetism. She has the flaws Reckless and Soft Hearted.



GAME RULES

KARMA

Karma plays an important part in The Agency. The law of Karma is very simple: for every good thing that happens, something bad will happen too. In the game, Karma is used to arbitrate a number of aspects of the story. Sometimes a player can choose to take a point of bad Karma. If a player's character has bad Karma, then the Director can cash it in to cause bad things to happen. Similarly the character may gain good Karma, and choose to spend it to power his Bonuses. The character sheet has a bar to indicate the current state of your character's Karma. Since it moves up and down, I'd recommend using a glass bead or token that you can move up and down the scale.

We'll cover more precise uses of Karma later. For now, the most important thing to remember is: In matters of Karma, the Director is always the final arbitrator. That is to say, the Director says yes and no to your requests as a player to give your character Karma.

ACTION ROLLS

Whenever a character tries to achieve an action that will change the course of the plot, the controlling player makes an action roll. You don't roll for everything, just for those actions that are important to the progression of the story. Usually the Director will tell you when you need to roll. You wouldn't need to roll for driving a car across London, but you would need to roll to avoid crashing into innocent bystanders as you drive through Camden Market after a werewolf. The key thing to remember is: When an action roll is made, the outcome of events will always be in the balance.

Action rolls follow this simple procedure: Roll a number of dice based on how good your character is at a relevant skill (see below table). Each roll of 5 or 6 is a success, and if you get at least one success, you succeed! Some situations will reduce the number of dice you can roll, but a character can never have less than one die.

Skill Level	Dice
Poor	1
Normal	2
Fair	3
Good	4
Excellent	5

Simon Drake is trying to bluff his way into an exclusive fashionable club, which the Director says requires an action. His player rolls 5 dice for excelling at persuasion. He rolls 1, 2, 2, 5, 6, a total of 2 successes.

Success and Failure

Whether you succeed or fail, the result of an action roll should always make the plot interesting. If you fail a roll, there will be a plot complication. If you succeed, your character will be closer to his goal. Normally it is the Director who describes the results of an action.

However, if a player takes a point of Bad Karma, he can take control of the narrative and describe a particularly cool success. The description is limited to the effects of that action, but the player can use this to turn the plot in his character's favour. A special success like this will always give more of an advantage than the normal one.

If a player fails a roll, he can choose to "take a fall" and opt to describe a really interesting failure for his character. If the Director thinks it's an interesting enough failure, he'll let you remove a point of Bad Karma. This gives you a chance to decide how the character failed (as long as he does fail), and also to add interesting new twists to the story.

Example of success

Jenna Styles is driving her sports car through Covent Garden after a rampaging werewolf. The director calls for a driving roll to keep on target and avoid pedestrians. Jenna's player succeeds and chooses to take a point of Bad Karma. She narrates her success as skillfully weaving between the pedestrians, narrowly avoiding a performance mime, crashing into the beast, and sending it flying back into a wall, stunning it.

Example of failure

Simon Drake is trying to defuse a bomb at an embassy ball. Unfortunately his science skill is poor. His player rolls and fails, but he decides to 'take the fall'. He describes Simon stressing as he tries to decipher the bomb, then giving up and throwing the device out of the window, hoping that it will detonate in the open and do less damage. Unfortunately, it's landed in an ambassadorial car that is driving away, and the clock is still ticking. The Director thinks this is suitably amusing, so lets Simon's player have a point of Karma back.

Opposed Actions, Big Creatures and Ganging Up

If an action is opposed by another character, then rolls are made for both and the totals are compared. The character with the greater number of successes wins. If the action is opposed by more than one person, the larger group gets an extra die for each person they have above the other side. A particularly large monster will also get an extra die for actions relating to its size, but one less die in areas where its size is a disadvantage.

COMBAT

Combat is a common form of action, this is a game about sixties spies fighting a supernatural menace after all! Combat has a few extra rules, to make things interesting and to allow events to flow smoothly.





Awareness

At the start of the combat, players roll a die. This is their awareness value, there's a space on the character sheet for keeping track of it. The Director rolls for any villains present. Characters and villains act in awareness order, highest first. Players can add 6 to their awareness if they take a point of bad Karma and can choose to do this after rolling their dice.

Awareness will fluctuate up and down during combat as the character fails or succeeds. Characters whose awareness dips below 0 are said to be *dazed*. Dazed characters get one less die on all action rolls until it rises above 0 again.

Rounds and Actions

In a combat situation, events are divided up into rounds, so that it's easier to work out who is doing what. Each character can do only one action each round. Actions are taken in order of awareness, highest first. A round is not a set length of time, it's just a game mechanic for splitting things up. The time span could be said to be "as long as it takes to do one cool thing".

If a character's action is to attack a villain, then resisted rolls are made. If the character succeeds, he does damage to the opponent equal to the total number of successes. There is more information on damage later.

As with normal actions, players can opt to take bad Karma to describe an exceptional success or decide to 'take the fall' to gain good Karma. An exceptional success in combat might be disarming an opponent, knocking him over, or hitting a particular part of the body. Taking the fall might mean your character's gun jammed, he lost his weapon, or he slipped on the floor.

Taunts

Taunts are the witty banter that throws your opponent off his guard. To use a taunt, a player sacrifices 1 point of his awareness and comes up with a suitable humorous taunt of his character's opponent. That opponent gets -2 to his awareness. Taunts don't require a roll to succeed, and don't count as actions, but characters are limited to one taunt per round. Yes, this does mean you can taunt your opponent until he is dazed.

Transition

At the end of the round, any character who succeeded in an action adds one to his awareness. Any character who failed takes two off his awareness. When each character has performed their action for a round, a new round starts, unless the combat has reached a natural conclusion. Note: You get a bonus for any successful action, not just the obviously combat related ones.

Damage: Scratches and Wounds

When a blow is landed in combat, a character receives damage. There are two kinds of damage: scratches and wounds. Scratches are minor annoyances, bruises and so on. These are totalled up in the scratches box on the character sheet. When a character's scratches reach a total of 5, the character takes a wound.

A character has 3 wound boxes. Two are unlabeled and one is labelled “Down.” These represent serious wounds that the character has taken in fights. When a wound is taken, tick the box and add a suitable description to the label. If a character is wounded he suffers a penalty to actions, -1 die for each wound.

Normally a Down character cannot act, but players can take a point of bad Karma for their character to act as if only wounded. A character who reaches Down is on the floor and maybe dying. Only medical care can help him recover.

Villains get varying numbers of damage boxes, depending on whether they are a human or supernatural creature. As in the TV series’ that inspire the game, villains who reach Down are usually unconscious and will likely get dragged away by their compatriots, the police or an Agency clean-up squad. Supernatural creatures who reach Down will often spontaneously combust in an interesting way.

Characters heal all scratches at the end of the scene. “It’s just a scratch” after all. Wounds heal at one per day during rest and recuperation. A character can only be brought back from down by a visit to hospital. Any character with a medical skill can patch up a wound box by making a skill roll.

An Example of Combat

Simon Drake is attacked by one of the evil Dr. Heimlich’s goons as he tries to sneak into a warehouse. Player and Director roll awareness. Simon gets 4, the goon gets 6.

The goon’s first action is to try to hit Simon. The Director rolls 2 successes, and Simon’s player rolls 4. The goon fails, which the director describes as him lurching wildly past Simon.

It’s now Simon’s chance for an action. Simon’s player decides to attack the goon. He gets 4 successes. The Director gets 1 for the Goon (who has no skill in Brawl). Simon does 3 scratches to the Goon.

Now that both combatants have acted, the round ends. Simon gets +1 awareness, The Goon -2.

A Note on Damage

Players of other RPGs will notice that there are no rules for how different weapons do different amounts of damage. There’s a reason for this. In the genre of TV the Agency is based upon how much damage a weapon does is almost totally irrelevant. How many times does James Bond remarkably survive a hail of machine gun fire? What matters is how important the enemy in question is to the story, and his skills. To model this, characters who are important to the story have access to bonuses that allow them to take and withstand more damage, along with higher levels of skills.





Danger: Other Forms of Damage

Not all damage comes from getting hit. Sometimes a character will fall off things, get burned, have things fall on him, get struck by a lightning bolt or have to avoid a large explosion. Normally, such forms of damage can be avoided by using a dodging skill against a danger level in dice as if it were an opposing character.

Danger	Suggested Level
Falling from a moving car	3
Falling from a small building	5
Near a car when it explodes	4
Getting hit by chunks of falling masonry	5
Inside a building in early stages of fire	3
Inside a building in later stages of fire	6

CAR CHASES

Car chases are the staple of every action series. Car chases (or chases in any other vehicle) are handled using the combat rules shown above. However in chases each car is allotted a chase value, which defines how far ahead each vehicle involved in the chase is. At the start of the chase each moving car has D6+1 rolled for its base chase rating. Stationary cars start at 1, no matter what.

One person in each car is designated driver, and must make a successful driving roll every round. If the driver fails this roll, then the chase value drops by 1. If he succeeds it increases by 1. If a chase value drops to below zero, then that car has been forced out of the chase.

If, at the start of a round, two cars have the same chase rating, then they may ram each other, or passengers can attempt to jump between them, punch people, grab each other, and so on. Actions like these require action rolls as normal. All successful attempts to damage cars with a weapon reduce the target's chase value by 1. Successful ramming attempts reduce the target's chase value by 2.

If vehicles are not at the same chase rating, then only ranged weapons can be used.

HEROIC BONUSES AND FLAWS

Every time a player states he is using his character's heroic bonus, he receives a point of bad Karma. This is noted down, and at some point in the future that Karma may be called in. Bonuses have been kept fairly open to allow players to impact the story flow quite considerably, but at a price.

BONUSES

Wealth — Your character is particularly wealthy, and so can afford the types of things that most agents only dream of. Invoke this bonus to spend ridiculous amounts of cash, stay at the most lavish hotels, etc.

Example: Reginald Forbes is a particularly wealthy aristocrat. He needs to get to Paris quickly, to avert a disaster as the sorcerer P'Kang attempts to use the Eiffel Tower as a psychic conduit. Reginald invokes his wealth bonus to charter a private jet to France.

Contacts — Your character knows people, who know information. Invoke this bonus to find out information from one of your many associates. You decide who the person is and what kind of information they know. But the Director will play the NPC.

Simon Drake is trying to find out where a secret stash of guns is being brought into the country. He invokes his contacts bonus to find an old friend who's in the know and who points him in the direction of a gang in south London.

Influence — You know people who can arrange things. This bonus covers political favours, getting things done through non-standard channels and covering things up.

The Agency needs to hush up strange goings on in the village of Hex Norton. Alfred Pettiforth uses his influence bonus to convince the local paper not to publish the story.

Rank — You have rank in the Agency, and can use it to get things done. Invoke this bonus to order around subordinates, civilian authorities and other agents.

Colonel Sidney Pennington is chasing a dangerous sorcerer across Bodmin Moor, he can't cover the area without help. His player invokes the rank bonus to call in army helicopters to help chase the fugitive.

Artifact — You have in your possession an ancient mystical artefact with strange powers. Describe the artefact to the director during character creation. Invoke this bonus to use the artifact's powers. You have complete control of what this artefact is. If you take this bonus, you have the option of taking a flaw of 'Artifact problems'.

Benni Jones possesses an ancient Welsh artefact, the cup of Gwrythodd. It possesses the ability to heal people when water is drunk from it. Benni chooses to take the Artifact problems flaw, choosing the problem that the water occasionally turns to very potent alcohol.

Gadget — You have access to some of the Agency's more experimental gadgets. Invoke this bonus to acquire usage of one of these items. The player gets to decide what the gadget does. It should be noted that the Agency does not have a very good track record with its devices, and field agents carrying them will often be viewed with suspicion by their peers. Particularly large devices are usually brought in under the control of the Agency's science division. Directors are encouraged to give each device a quirk that, while not making the device useless, makes it's use entertaining...

Merriweather is investigating a haunting at the British Museum and is at a loss for clues. He radios to base and requests the "Experimental Ectoplasmic Surveillance Grid" (a device the player had just made up). A few minutes later a group of Agency scientists arrive with some powerful static electricity generators wired together and





linked to some receiver devices. The scientists explain that ghosts will show up as disruptions in the static. Unfortunately, the large amounts of electrical charge in the air keep earthing themselves through people.

Toughness — Your character is just naturally tougher than other people. Invoke this bonus to halve the damage from a single blow.

Harris, a former boxer, knows how to take a punch. A vampire lord throws a wardrobe at him during a particularly vicious fight, doing 6 points of damage. This would normally put the plucky agent out for the count, but his player invokes his toughness bonus to reduce it to 3 points instead.

Luck — Your character is just plain lucky! Invoke this bonus to give your character surprisingly good fortune. Luck covers random happenstance. It will never give results as good as a specified bonus, but provides flexibility other bonuses don't. Any advantage gained from luck should be at least one step removed from the actual aim. It won't let you know who the kidnappers are, but it might mean you happen across a useful clue.

Finding an important clue in the rubbish bins of your enemy. Finding an unguarded entrance to the F.E.S.T.A. lair. Your character's girlfriend knowing one of the people you're looking for.

Mysticism — You know something of strange and occult matters. Invoke this bonus to gain insight into an esoteric subject, perceive supernatural energies or access volumes of occult lore. Optionally it can be invoked to gain strange premonitions.

Sifu Fung, a master of meditation from Tibet, and his comrades are entering a mysterious temple beneath Chinatown. Ahead on the wall, he sees strange mystic symbols etched. He focuses his mind and perceives that a spell is embedded within the symbols.

Quick Witted — You are particularly quick-witted and can invoke this bonus to go first in a combat round. When you invoke this bonus, you always go first in a combat round, 6 higher than any other awareness roll. You may invoke this bonus even after other characters have spent Karma to boost their awareness.

Jenny Simms is a quick witted journalist. While investigating a mysterious set of murders in the London sewers, she steps through a door, only to be confronted by a pair of zombie alligators. The Director calls for awareness rolls. Jenny's player invokes the quick witted bonus to boost her awareness, choosing her action as stepping quickly back through the door and bolting it before either alligator can react.

Bruiser — You are one of nature's thugs, a pillar of muscle power. Invoke this bonus to do 6 extra damage to an opponent when brawling, or to perform an act of superhuman strength.

While battling their way from the hidden lair of F.E.S.T.A., Jenny Simms gets trapped beneath a collapsed pillar. Bobby Harris' player invokes his Bruiser bonus to use his last resources of strength to lift the pillar from his friend.

Signature Weapon — You are particularly suited to using a particular weapon. Invoke this bonus to double the damage done by a particular attack with this weapon.

Sifu Fung carries a walking cane. He has trained for years in using this gnarled old stick to defend himself. It is his signature weapon.

Vehicle — Your character has access to a car, bike or other form of transport. Not only this, but the vehicle in question has any number of enhancements. You can invoke this bonus to activate one of these enhancements. You don't have to define what they are until they're needed. They could be weapons, ejector seats, a speed boost, whatever is needed. Such devices will often have an effect on a chase rating, and can alter your character's car's chase rating up by 4 or your opponents down by - 4.

Jenna Styles is speeding down the motorway, trying to avoid a group of vampire bikers. She invokes her vehicle bonus to activate the oil slick generator. This reduces the bikers' chase rating to 0, which Jenna's player chooses as causing the bikers to crash off the road.

Magnetism — Your character is naturally alluring to the opposite sex. They just can't get enough of you. Invoke this bonus to double your successes in any seduction attempt.

Jenna Styles needs to find out the location of a Siberian Yeti from the Russian Attaché and decides to seduce him to get the information. Readying her special kinky boots, miniskirt and Chanel XXX, she invokes her bonus for automatic success.

Advanced Planning — Your character is better prepared than you are. Invoke this bonus to have your character have planned for an unforeseen eventuality.

Colonel Masters finds himself alone in Germany with no money and a team of F.E.S.T.A. agents on his tail. He invokes his bonus and picks up the stash of money he stored at the Frankfurt left luggage office for just such an eventuality.

FLAWS

Flaws are somewhat easier to explain. Players can have their character act according to their flaw and build up some good Karma. However, they only gain good Karma if they act according to a flaw in a situation where it is inappropriate or causes disadvantage. An alcoholic drinking when he is in a bar would not gain any Karma, but getting paralytic while on an important diplomatic mission certainly would. It's the Director's responsibility to make sure that the impact of a flaw on the plot is sufficient for it to be worth the Karma.

Simon Drake is creeping up to scope out the smugglers. He sees there are 20 of them. Simon's player decides that he'll announce his Reckless flaw coming into play, and will not call for backup. The Director agrees and gives him a point of Karma to use later on.



DIRECTING

The job of Director is to evoke the world of The Agency, to describe the events in which the player characters become involved, to play the bit parts and the antagonists. It is the Director's responsibility to describe the scene, control the actions of non-player characters, and keep the group focused on the game at hand. It's a tough job, but somebody has to do it, and you get to create, and play, loads of interesting characters. In this section I'll cover briefly the role of Director and give some advice on running a successful game of the Agency.

THE STYLISED SIXTIES

The Agency is set in a stylized version of 1960s Britain. It's a world of red telephone boxes, London buses, Bentleys, Union Jack print waistcoats, paisley, velvet jackets, bowler hats, flares, the Beatles, Bobbies, red telephone boxes, manor houses, Hippies, the Cold War, and miniskirts. All filmed at strange angles and in far too many primary colors.

In other words, it should never be considered an accurate portrayal.

This is a world where spies can be famous, where an umbrella is a deadly weapon, and where people may just get taken away to a mysterious island if they talk too much. As Director, it is your job to help evoke this atmosphere when describing the scene to other players. It will probably help you to watch some cult 60s and 70s TV to get a feel for the type of things that contribute to this flavour. Jot down a few common themes, motifs and visual elements. The list at the beginning of this section is a good start.

WHAT'S HAPPENING IN THE WORLD?

No sixties spy series would be complete without a bit of globe trotting. After all, the villains have secret volcano bases in the Caribbean, and mysterious processing plants in the south of France. These villains, they really know how to pick the sun spots, eh?

Of course, it's not all sun and exotic beaches. Agents may end up in Outer Mongolia chasing Genghis Khan's restless spirit, or investigating mysterious disappearances in the fog off the Scottish isles.

Europe

Europe is the battleground of the cold war, and as such is neatly divided into east and west. The supernatural forces of the world have done their best to capitalise on the political climate, and their nefarious schemes cross borders. Interpol's supernatural branch works with the Agency and allows a lot of leeway. On occasion, the eastern block's Spezial Directorate can be persuaded to help too, though ideological differences cause problems.



Europe is infested with weirdness. High class clubs in Britain are covers for ancient cults worshipping dubious entities. Evil masterminds moor their yachts off the south of France and dive for lost cities and trinkets of ancient power. The Principality of Monaco is infested with inbred ghouls who feast on casino-goers. Werewolves stalk the forests of Germany.

North America

North America also has its share of supernatural oddness. Unit X, a special division of the FBI, deals with most occurrences. They have a healthy competitive streak that sometimes makes combined operations problematic, as egos inevitably clash.

Most supernatural activity in the US is found in the more remote areas, from the mysterious Native American spirits who haunt the back woods, to the devil fish that lurk in the swamps of Louisiana. Vampire smuggling from Europe is a big problem, and border control is the area where Agency personnel will often be called in to aid Unit X.

MEMO
TO: Unit X
FROM: Col. Masters

Whilst we accept that it is not always possible to accommodate our agents at short notice, we would appreciate it if, in the future, the broom cupboard were not suggested as the most appropriate place for a temporary office.

Central and South America

Mexico is full of vampires, most of whom immigrated from Spain during the inquisition. Further south, rumors persist of demonic snake people haunting the jungles and guarding drug cartels. The pyramids of the Aztecs hold restless spirits and mummies to rival those of Egypt.

Africa

The sands of North Africa hold many secrets, and many were best left unearthed. Artefacts from archaeological digs are still the biggest supernatural problem for this area. The undead menace of the mummies still haunt the more obscure parts of Egypt.

Further south, the jungles of Africa hold lost cities, malevolent shamanic spirits and weird totem statuettes. Smuggling of occult items from Africa causes all sorts of problems for the Agency, and teams are occasionally sent in to try and crack down on the trade. Secret missions of this type can be problematic, as the Agency doesn't always ask the local law enforcement for permission.





MEMO

TO: Ambassador Mukambi

FROM: Col. Masters

With our sincerest apologies, please find enclosed your King's ceremonial tribal mask and feathered gown. Unfortunately, we were unable to return it intact due to difficulties involving the thief. I am assured the stains can easily be removed. Please forward the bill for repairs to my office.

The Middle East

From lost cities from the dawn of civilization to the bazaars of Istanbul, the Middle East holds many mysteries. With so much history piled on top of itself, the area is a hotbed of freakish supernatural occurrences. Lying as it does between east and west, this area runs riot with cold war activities, and this can cause Agency members to tread on other spies' toes.

Asia

The Agency maintains an office in Hong Kong, and with good reason. The city is a hotspot for supernatural activity. In the side alleys, ghosts of dead ancestors can be summoned and bound, ancient orders of monks battle with the minions of the Demon kings, and rival schools of mystic martial arts test each other's mettle. Posting to Hong Kong has become somewhat of a punishment in recent Agency history. The stress induced by being in charge of keeping a lid on this mystic melting pot is enough to tax anybody. The current head of Hong Kong office is Donald Bane, a man noted for his nervous tick and high psychiatrist's bills. His assistant, Mr Phelps, has a reputation for attempting to foist off local matters on visiting agents...

SCENARIOS

Part of the Director's job is to come up with a plot outline, the scenario into which the player characters will be put. Plot outlines are a basic framework upon which you and your players can build when playing the game. Because the game is fairly freeform, and often allows a great deal of player control, the plot should be allowed to develop through play, rather than being created entirely beforehand. All that is really needed is a solid concept of what is going on, which you can build upon during play. As a Director, you may have to do some quick thinking to meld player ideas into events in the scenario, but you'll often find that running with player-introduced ideas can produce more entertaining results than what you originally envisioned.

The easiest place to begin is to just come up with some bizarre supernatural threat to the nation. Maybe a secret society of vampires is kidnapping politicians, Russian spies are raising zombies to overthrow the state, or a band of cultists have managed to steal some nuclear weapons and hold the country for ransom. What works well in The Agency is a juxtaposition of ideas, things that wouldn't initially seem to fit, but that when joined together are quite amusing. Scenarios should be a mix of the surreal, macabre, comedic, and action packed.

In its most basic form, simply come up with 1) what the Agency knows and 2) what's actually going on, then set the players loose to investigate. If you suffer from a dearth of ideas, simply watch your favorite sixties or seventies style adventure show (some are detailed in the inspirations section) and change the villains to evil supernatural creatures.

Getting Things Started

The fact that characters are all members of The Agency gives you an easy hook to start things off. A starting point to any story can be a mission briefing, the characters being told what they are investigating. It's an easy starting point, but shouldn't be overused. Your stories will be more interesting if you can vary the way in which plots begin. Chance meetings during daily life, calls from long lost friends, relatives going missing, sudden inheritance of a mysterious Scottish castle: all these things make a nice change to a mission briefing and help to tie characters more firmly to the plot. Characters care less if Dr. Mandrake has kidnapped a random person, but if it's their own girlfriend who has gone missing, then the character is damn well going to get her back. These plot devices are cliché, but playing with these clichés is part of the fun of the game!

Alternatively, throw the characters in at the middle of the story, rather than the start. Leave out the investigation bit, and focus purely on dealing with the problem. This can be a good way to keep the pace up even at the start, rather than suffering from a slow build up. Another option is throwing the characters into such a scene as if it were the pre-credits section of a film or TV show, the end of the last adventure before the start of the next.

Keeping Things Going

Many scenarios have a tendency to droop in the middle. It is important that you remember this and don't leave your players floundering around. It's your job to keep things exciting, interesting or amusing. One way to deal with this is to come up with a number of predefined events to kick-start the story. Tie one of these events to each character. If things start to drag, add one of these events to the mix. Remember that any of these events should help to keep things moving or drive the story off into new territory.

Knowing when to cut from a scene will also help keep the pace up. The secret here is not to get caught up in the details. If enough has happened or the action starts to flag, end the scene and start a new one, quickly summing up the boring bits in between.

Rounding It All Off

Resolution is the most important part of the scenario. If the pay-off isn't worth it, then the whole thing will have a feeling of anticlimax. Try to make the resolution of the scenario as exciting and interesting as possible. Location makes an awful lot of difference to the climax. Tops of buildings, volcanoes, secret bases: big geography of all kinds. The other important thing is that the resolution matters. Consider what you would think if you were a viewer. Would you care about the character's actions, or are you bored with them saving the world again?





Success will help a climax, but keep in mind that success with a price will often make resolution more poignant. Make the characters choose between two difficult solutions. Remember that the characters will often have to balance their normal life and secret duty to the Agency, so making them have to choose between life and duty can give a satisfying feel to the story.

Elements of a Good Scenario

When designing your scenario, it really helps to consider the following:

What do Your Players Enjoy Doing?

It may seem obvious, but your players are here to have fun. So think about what they'll enjoy as much as what you will enjoy. Some players like the challenge of investigation, others just want to have their characters do cool things, others want to be thrown into difficult social situations. Knowing what your players want is the first step to running a game they'll enjoy.

What are the Characters Like?

Craft your scenario so that it works for the characters players have created. If the players have created a set of kick-ass ninja masters, then they likely expect to do lots of butt-kicking. Occasional fish out of water scenarios can work, but players will often get annoyed if their characters are always being thrown into inappropriate arenas.

Where is the Conflict?

All stories come from conflict. Who is trying to do what, and why, and who is trying to stop them and why? Every major conflict is likely to have a dozen others nested within it. Conflicts are much harder to resolve if you give each side some hold over the characters. Think about the connections that the antagonists can use and abuse.

Is it a Plot Suitable for the Setting?

The Agency is a place for brash heroes and wildly extravagant set pieces. It is not a game where introverted characters or plots will work well. Bear this in mind when writing the scenario and advising players on their characters.

How will the Characters Influence Events?

This is a big thing. If the characters can't influence things, then frankly, there's no point in the players participating. Be prepared to let players take things off in a completely different direction. Learn to improvise. The system is simple enough that you can create new encounters with a minimum of fuss.

Is the Scenario Flexible Enough to Allow Players to Alter Events through Uses of Bonuses and Karma?

Bonuses and Karma can have quite a dramatic effect on any pre-made plots you might have come up with. Flexibility is the key here, as is knowing what powers your players' characters are likely to bring to bear. Think about how your players may react.

Are There Opportunities for Character Flaws to Come into Play?

Flaws are there to help characters build up Karma, so that their bonuses can come into play later. They also help you, as Director, engineer movie-like events. If a character is lustful, then he is a prime target for being seduced by the vampire queen's daughter. In other games there might be a tactical disadvantage to players allowing such events to happen; in The Agency, you get rewarded for them.

Will Every Character Be Able to Contribute Something to the Story?

Players have fun when they are involved. Make sure that every player's character can get the spotlight at some point. Everybody has a skill at excellent, so make sure that they have an opportunity to use it. For some skills this will be more difficult but can result in some comedy moments. "You mean we have to whistle Mozart in order to open the mystic box? Good job I'm an excellent musician."

Do the Main Antagonists Engage You?

Everybody likes a well drawn villain. Pay close attention to who your villain is and what makes him interesting. Having good reasons for their behavior is an excellent start, as are distinctive mannerisms. Try to come up with a good signature for your villain. Does he eat only the finest truffles? Is he a Yorkshire vampire with a taste for black pudding? Is he a cultured zombie whose limbs fall off as he talks?

Is It Fun?

If you don't find a scenario fun, then chances are your players won't either.

If you can answer all of these questions in a positive way, your group is on the way to a fun roleplaying experience.

Brainstorming

Brainstorming ideas can help you envision how different elements of a scenario relate to each other. Start by writing down anything that you think might be cool in an Agency scenario: names, supernatural creatures, locations, characters, set pieces, etc. Start linking these together with lines, attached to which are key phrases that define connections between these elements. Good phrases to link characters are 'fears', 'hates', 'owes', 'loves' and so on. Link characters to places or events with 'knows about', 'is responsible for' or other connections. Consider what the important conflict is in the scenario, and how it relates to each of these elements and the connections among them. If it doesn't really relate, scrap the element and add something else in its place. Repeat until satisfied.





SCENARIOS SEEDS

The Hex Norton Horror

Hook: The players are on a well earned break at the Health Spa in Hex Norton, but strange things are afoot in the village. The locals all seem terribly odd...

What's going on: The evil F.E.S.T.A has set up a secret base in the village and is attempting to raise an Eldritch Horror.

Likely Events: Encounters with obscure local folk who seem suspicious but are really just plain odd. F.E.S.T.A. agents causing problems in the local pub, leading to a bar fight. F.E.S.T.A agents breaking into a local curiosity shop and stealing some mysterious old knickknack. A strange and unearthly eldritch horror chasing Yorkshire farmers through the fields. The characters and villagers holed up in the inn as tentacles slowly start to pour through the doors and windows.

You Only Live Forever

Hook: An alarming number of MI5 agents have been going missing, snatched from their missions by a mysterious source.

What's going on: Jacob Swain, a rogue agent turned vampire, has begun setting up his own secret organization. He offers his former comrades the choice of joining him as vampires, or dying.

Likely Events: Players setting up a trap by spying on as yet unaffected agents (cue hilarity as the MI5 agents mistake them for Russians). One of the players is approached by Swain as a possible convert. Swain sends his vampire goons to make things difficult for the characters.

In Too Deep

Hook: A member of parliament is discovered dead on the beach, but he was seen over a hundred miles away shortly before his death.

What's going on: Fish Demons are infiltrating the House of Commons and replacing the MPs with cunningly disguised doubles.

Likely events: Meeting the witness. Meeting slimy politicians. The witness and the characters being attacked by sea monster goons from the sewers. Tracking the goons to a secret base in the sewers. Attacking the sea monsters' underground lair.

SERIES

A series is a group of interlinked scenarios featuring the same group of characters. It's a chance for characters' personalities and relationships to develop over a series of scenarios, for echoes of future events to be hidden in earlier times, and for in-jokes to become rife.

The Agency contains no detailed system for character advancement. It's not that kind of game, and it's not really true to the inspiration. If you are running games where characters go from scenario to scenario, Karma should get reset at the end of each session. You can also get each player to justify getting a bonus point of Karma for next time, by reminding the group of something particularly cool their character did that session.

You may find that players who acquire mystic artefacts, lavish riches or books of spells wish to keep them. Let them! You can hang interesting plots off them in the future. All such acquisitions come with an associated price, and that price will be a flaw that balances the bonus they grant, as chosen by the player. This may not seem fair, but it does make things interesting (and that's what we want!), and justifying the flaw can make for interesting character developments.

Agent Jones finds a book of spells, used by a F.E.S.T.A. sorcerer. He experiments with the book and comes to a rudimentary understanding of some of the spells. Unfortunately this new found power doesn't sit well with him, and he becomes increasingly insufferable around people. He has gained the egotistical flaw.

VILLAINS

Part of the Director's job is to create and control the characters' enemies. Since the player characters are going to interact with them, some traits like those used to define characters are useful. In order to make the job easier, villains can be roughly divided into three categories: Goons, Minions and Bosses.

Goons

Goons have only 6 scratches and down as damage levels. You won't have to detail too much of these villains' capabilities, as they're not really too important to the plot. They are the faceless extras who show up to hinder the characters' efforts, the guys in boiler suits in that secret mountain fortress, the street thugs sent round to rough up the characters when they get too close.

DESCRIPTION: Man in Red Boiler Suit

PERSONALITY: Weak-willed

SKILLS: Poor Brawl (1), Good Run for life (4), Good Blabber for life (4)

QUOTE: "I'll tell you anything, just let me go!"





Minions

Minions are the flunkies of the bosses. They are second-in-commands or minor villains. Include basic skills (2 good 1, poor) and character wound levels when creating them. Try to give them a few personality quirks, and maybe bonuses and flaws too. Minions tend to lead groups of goons and escape when the going gets too difficult for them.

SAMPLE MINION: Oscar Hemmington, upper class cultist

DESCRIPTION: Well-dressed

PERSONALITY: Suave, sophisticated, unhinged, inbred

SKILLS: Good Socialise (4), Good Fencing (4), Poor Intimidation (1)

BONUS: Wealthy

FLAW: Gloating

QUOTE: "You've interfered with the wrong people. Father will be so upset, those stains take ages to wash out."

Bosses

Bosses should be as fleshed out as possible, as they are the bad guys behind evil plots. They should have skills, wounds, bonuses and flaws similar to a players character. Consider their motivations, as such antagonists are always more interesting if their motivations are understandable. Bosses will often have multiple bonuses and flaws.

SAMPLE BOSS: Kingpin Fletcher

DESCRIPTION: A slightly overweight, bald man in an ill-fitting white suit, smokes roll-up cigarettes. Fletcher is the London underworld's occult kingpin. If it's of dubious origin, it's likely passed through his hands at some point. So far his excellent lawyers, and his hands-off approach, have made it difficult for the Agency to pin anything on him.

PERSONALITY: Sleazy, determined, considerate, vengeful

SKILLS: Good Firearms (5), Good Occult Knowledge (5), Excellent Deal Making (6), Poor Athletics (2)

BONUSES: Wealthy, Contacts

FLAWS: Incompetent Minions, Easily Distracted

Villains and Karma

Villains are affected by Karma too. They can use their own good Karma to invoke their bonus.

Also, If a player character has Bad Karma, then the Director can give the villain a point of Good Karma. It's not for free though, this gain in Karma comes at the cost of the villain being able to use his bonus.

Villains also have flaws and *players* can invoke them at any time. Doing so causes the villain to gain a point of Good Karma to use at a later date, but also gains the players some kind of advantage based on that flaw. It's often worth leaving a villain's exact flaws undecided and letting players suggest one that would be appropriate when they try to invoke it.

You should give all villains one or two free points of Karma, so that they have a chance to make use of their bonuses before being overwhelmed by the onslaught of the players' characters.

Villainous Bonuses

Villains have access to the majority of the bonuses available to heroes, as well as the following:

Aura of Importance — Invoke this bonus to allow a villain to keep people talking to him rather than attacking him.

Well-Respected Gentleman — For some reason people believe the villain to be innocent. Invoke this bonus for normal people to ignore the blatant evils of the villain in question.

Planned Escape Route — The villain in question has planned his life in such minute detail that he can escape from almost any situation from inside his base.

Villainous Flaws

Merciful — The villain will choose to be merciful 'just this once', and spare the characters lives when he could kill them.

Gloating — The villain will gloat about his plans to the characters, even if it's not in his best interest.

Incompetent Minions — This flaw can be invoked to cause the villain's followers to be grossly incompetent. The minions might fail to tie up the characters, leave the secret base door open, and so on.

Easily Distracted — The villain will be distracted by some minor problem, instead of focusing on the threat of the characters.

Duellist — The villain will nominate to fight one individual character in a duel rather than mob the group with goons.





SUPERNATURAL ANTAGONISTS

Agents will often come across weird supernatural creatures and occurrences. Here are a few examples of how these antagonists can be dealt with in game terms.

Vampires

Vampires should have normal human damage boxes but take half damage from attacks not made with fire, garlic, sunlight, or crosses. A stake through the heart will revert a vampire to a corpse (of the appropriate age), but requires an expenditure of Karma to succeed in combat. This stays in effect until the stake is removed. Vampires are armed with weird mind-affecting powers and are the evil plotters behind schemes: Blofeld with fangs.

Mind-affecting powers should be rolled as a skill at either good or excellent (depending on the age of the vampire). Typically, they can be used to force others to obey the vampire's will. Other vampires may have the ability to turn into animals or mist, maybe even fly. Vampires can grapple people in combat, so they can feed (a point of Karma is spent to drink). For every point of damage done in this way, they can heal a scratch. Vampires also have the supernatural strength bonus, which allows them to do +8 damage by taking a point of bad Karma.

INEXPERIENCED VAMPIRE

DESCRIPTION: Tall, thin, and dressed in the latest fashions, conveying a feel of aloof mystery.

PERSONALITY: A domineering and cultured megalomaniac

SKILLS: Control Mind (good), Brawl (good), Persuasion (good)

BONUSES: Blood Sustenance, Supernatural Strength, Well Respected Gentleman

FLAWS: Duellist, Sun Allergy, Staking Problem

EXPERIENCED VAMPIRE

DESCRIPTION: Tall, thin, and dressed in outdated fashions, conveying an feel of aloof mystery and eccentricity.

PERSONALITY: A domineering and cultured megalomaniac

SKILLS: Control Mind (excellent), Brawl (good), Persuasion (excellent), Technology (poor), Current Affairs (poor)

BONUSES: Blood Sustenance, Supernatural Strength, Well Respected Gentleman, Wealth

FLAWS: Duellist, Sun Allergy, Staking Problem, Incompetent Minions

Zombies

Zombies have double normal human scratches (10) and should take no wound penalties, though bits of them will drop off with each wound taken. They suffer from an automatic -2 to awareness for being slow and shambling (yes, they can be automatically dazed). They should have one or two skills (physical only, really). It is left up to individual Directors what happens when a zombie bites a character.

TYPICAL ZOMBIE

DESCRIPTION: Decaying.

PERSONALITY: Brains!

SKILLS: Brawl (good), Find Spicy Brains (good)

BONUSES: None

FLAWS: Shambling

Werewolves

Werewolves have normal human health levels. They can spend Karma to enter a wolf-man state, where they take half damage from anything but silver or mystic items. In human form, they have normal skills. When in man-wolf form they gain +2 to any physical skills they might have, and -1 to all mental or social skills. All werewolves suffer from the additional flaw of easily enraged.

TYPICAL WEREWOLF

DESCRIPTION: Furry mass of teeth and claws / confused human.

PERSONALITY: Angry

SKILLS: Brawl (excellent), Tracking (good), Appropriate Human Skill (good)

BONUSES: Wolfman Form

FLAWS: Easily Enraged

Mummies

Mummies take half damage from everything except fire or mystic items, both of which do double damage. They are armed with mysterious Egyptian spells, which summon strange weather, control minds or create hordes of man-eating scarabs. Typically these spells will use weird ingredients (like mummified crocodile tongues), which are used up when the spell is cast. Spells require a point of Karma to work.





IMNATEN

DESCRIPTION: Looming figure wrapped in burial shroud, carrying an ankh and a sceptre.

PERSONALITY: Angry. Sleepy. Missing his lost wife.

SKILLS: Melee (excellent), Mind Control (good)

BONUSES: Egyptian Magic

FLAWS: Fear of Fire

Sorcerers

Sorcerers should have many strange and magical devices, as well as spells. Typically spells require a great amount of preparation time and weird occult ingredients. Use of magical devices or spells for instant/unprepared effects requires them to take a point of bad Karma. Sorcerers will often have a variety of bound supernatural creatures as allies, and small, hunchbacked servants. Use the sample villain information for sorcerers' skills.

Ghosts

Ghosts have no physical bodies and have to possess humans in order to do anything. This requires a difficult roll using their possessing skill. Characters with the Mysticism bonus can sense spirits and invoke their Mysticism bonus to see them or attempt to exorcise them. Ghosts can manifest, but it is a tremendously difficult task and requires the expenditure of a Karma point. They have skills equivalent to when they were alive, with a level similar to a goon or minion..

Eldritch Horrors

Eldritch horrors are Lovecraftian things from beyond the bounds of the universe. They tend to make a mess. They have tentacles and bloated bodies, with a few too many dimensions for their own good. They should be treated as having bonus dice in combat due to size, and should take larger numbers of scratches per wound (15 or so). Eldritch horrors have their own agendas, beyond the ken of mortal man, though they often seem to be motivated by hunger.

THING FROM BEYOND SPACE

DESCRIPTION: Mass of odd angles and tentacles

PERSONALITY: Unknown, but slobbering

SKILLS: Attack with Tentacle (excellent) , Break Things (good), Make People Afraid (good)

BONUS: Drive character temporarily insane

FLAW: Unable to pass into confined spaces

NOTABLE MEMBERS OF THE AGENCY

Colonel Sebastian Masters — Nicknamed “Uncle M,” Sebastian is the current head of the agency. Having been moved from MI5 when the agency was formally set up. He is a rotund gentleman with a big moustache whose fitness has gone downhill since getting a desk job. His daughter works as a reporter in London and, much to his annoyance, is constantly winding up in trouble.

Professor Nina Spencer — Current head of the Agency’s research division, she deals with uncovering scientific explanations for supernatural creatures and providing agents with experimental weapons and equipment. A driven individual, she will do almost anything to acquire new knowledge. She occasionally takes ridiculous risks to further her understanding. She is a thin woman and typically wears a battered lab coat.

Doctor Stibbons — An academic who specializes in ancient languages and esoteric studies. Stibbons runs the Agency’s research into the history of the supernatural. Stibbons is noted for his attempts to “be cool” despite his age, something that amuses younger agents. He has a fondness for kipper ties.

THE AGENCY’S MOST WANTED

Victor Levenstein — A former diplomatic attaché from Romania. The Agency originally caught him attempting to smuggle vampires into the country. He admitted to being an accomplice and sent the agency after his superiors. It was only later they discovered that Victor was actually an accomplished sorcerer, who was using hypnosis to control other members of the diplomatic staff. He escaped and went to ground in the village of Little Dorking, where he took control of a local Lord’s manor and attempted to raise the spirit of a powerful British warlord. He was defeated, but again escaped and is currently at large. Levenstein is often accompanied by a group of uncouth imps and spirits who act as his servants.

DESCRIPTION: Thin, pasty man with a pointy beard

PERSONALITY: Charming, in a weaselly kind of way

SKILLS: Persuasion (excellent), Occult (good), Dodge (good), Athletics (poor)

BONUSES: Hypnosis (Mystical Ability), Aura of Importance

FLAWS: Gloating, Incompetent Minions

Baron Von Blutstrom — The youngest scion of an ancient Germanic line of vampires, the Baron goes by a number of aliases. Most recently he was known as rock & roll star Jim Bluud. Remarkably well adjusted to the modern world, he preys on groupies and those enamoured with his celebrity. He has a perverse sense of humor, and has indulged in a number of extravagant practical jokes. His





last joke resulted in the Prime Minister and Queen being covered in pig's blood and entrails at the state opening of Parliament. He is considered a dangerous and unpredictable opponent. His sense of fashion is dubious.

DESCRIPTION: Tall, thin, and dressed in a mishmash of antiquity and modern culture. Last seen wearing a paisley cravat with a biker jacket.

PERSONALITY: Insane. Homicidal sense of humour.

SKILLS: Control Mind (excellent), Brawl (good), Persuasion (excellent), Technology (poor)

BONUSES: Blood sustenance, Supernatural Strength, Magnetism

FLAWS: Sun Allergy, Staking Problem, Gloating

The Brethren of Mé — A secretive cult of magicians and their allies, the brethren are considered one of the gravest threats to the Agency. A secret society of the old school, very little is known of their agenda. They are known to employ sorcerous powers and undead servants. The agency first came into contact with them when several of their members were discovered in Scotland Yard covering up decidedly strange murders. Further investigations turned up a huge number of zombies hidden away in a secretive part of the London sewers. An Agency task force raided the location and managed to eliminate the threat, but the majority of the Brethren either escaped or committed suicide using mysterious magics.

F.E.S.T.A. — Is the Fiendishly Evil Supernatural Terrorist Agency (or at least that's what the Agency claims). It is a close-knit group of cultists, supernatural creatures, criminals and sorcerers. Unsurprisingly, their aim is to rule the world, and for reasons best known to themselves, they have decided to start with Britain. The Agency has foiled a number of plots involving F.E.S.T.A., often attempts to blackmail politicians or gain access to obscure occult knowledge.

Memo

To: All Agents

From: Col. Masters

All agents should be aware that in the last month F.E.S.T.A. Activity has increased 250%. They have been co-ordinating supernatural activity on three continents. All information points to an occult convergence of vast import. Agents should be on the lookout. In addition, any Agent that can explain F.E.S.T.A.'s sudden interest in garden gnomes and cuckoo clocks will receive a promotion.

OTHER SETTINGS

The Agency was designed to be played using the default setting of supernatural weirdness, but it could equally be used for a fairly generic 60s spy series. Simply tone down the supernatural elements.

There's no reason you can't move the setting forward into the 70s too, although the source material changes, generally getting either more serious or more tongue in cheek.

Equally, there's no reason why it should be set in the UK. As mentioned in the background section, America has Unit X, a similar agency, and the Eastern Block has the Spezial Directorate (and being chased across Siberia by Zombies is an interesting image).

Other periods in history can also be used, as long as the same style of action fits. Want to play swashbuckling members of the Elizabethan Secret Service, fighting a mysterious Spanish sorcerer with his Armada ghost ship? These rules can handle that. If improbable action and snappy one-liners are the core of the genre, then the tweaks should be minimum.

LOOKING FOR INSPIRATION?

The Agency draws inspiration from sixties' and seventies' secret agent films and TV shows. Things like *The Avengers*, *The Saint*, *The Prisoner*, *James Bond*, *The Persuaders*, *Randall and Hopkirk (Deceased)*, *The Champions* and *The Man from U.N.C.L.E.*. A quick web search should put you on to information about all of these, and most have DVD/Video sets available. For a loving parody, the original Austin Powers is worth a look, too. For the horror elements, I suggest a look at anything in the Hammer back-catalogue.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Agency is the product of several years of comment and testing by various people from across the globe. Thanks to everybody who downloaded the playtest edition and provided comments. Special thanks to all the folks at the Forge (www.indie-rpgs.com), RPG.NET, and to all the people who emailed me with comments about the previous version. Thanks also to Frances, for putting up with my gaming habits.

There are more games like this at www.realms.org.uk.





By JEFFREY S. SCHECTER

About Pagoda

Pagoda is a game of *wuxia*, or melodramatic Chinese martial arts. While *wuxia* features wild, high-strung, fast paced, crazy kung fu action and flashy sorcerous fires and lightnings, that is not what the genre is truly about. *Wuxia* is not about just fighting, but why the characters are fighting: their motives, drives, goals, and destinies. This is the premise upon which Pagoda focuses the most attention and energy.

Characters in Pagoda are made up of three Degrees — Elements, Aspects, and Paths — as well as a Sign of the Zodiac, a Flaw, and a pool of Chi points. There are five each of Elements and Aspects, a great number of Paths to choose from (although any given character will possess only five paths), twelve different Signs, and as many Flaws as you can think of. For each of the three Degrees, your character will have two scores at 1, two at 2, and one at 3. A higher score is always better. You may pick any zodiacal Sign for your character, and should work with the GM to create an appropriate flaw. Every character starts off with 3 points of Chi.

Elements

Elements are the first Degree of a character. Elements are the base components of the world; they are the things that bind the universe and all living things together. Characters can Sense (1) two elements, are in Harmony (2) with two other elements, and have Mastery (3) of the fifth. The five Elements are Water, Wood, Fire, Earth, and Metal.



The **Water** element is a still pond, a reservoir of great, untapped energy. Water is the element of winter and Full Yin. Those who are stressful and passionate find that Water drains from them, while the calm, cool, and even-minded store Water. A character who has Mastery of Water must be in Harmony with Wood, and can only Sense Earth.

The **Wood** element is a coiled spring, waiting to release its explosive energy. Wood is the element of spring and is the New Yang. Wood represents youth, vigor, growth, and sexuality. Those in which Wood flows strongly are free spirits, expressive and constantly changing. Blocking Wood results in frustration, jealousy, and anger. A character who has Mastery of Wood must be in Harmony with Fire, and can only Sense Metal.

The **Fire** element is a blossoming flower, showering the world with energy in a great burst. Fire is the element of Summer, a time of heat and flourishing life, and represents the Full Yang. Fire is associated with compassionate love, joy, openness, and generosity. If a man blocks Fire, he will experience fits of hysteria and nervousness, and be plagued by heart problems and hypertension. A character who has Master of Fire must be in Harmony with Earth, and can only Sense Water.

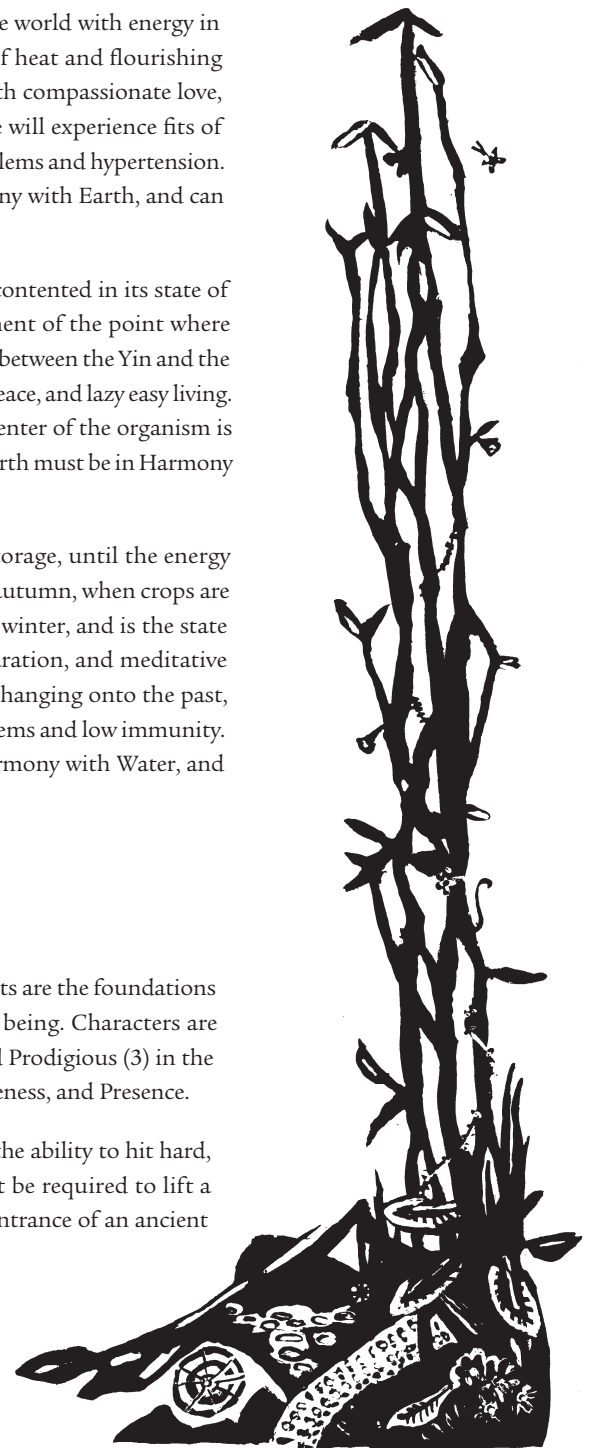
The **Earth** element is a brown field of waving wheat, contented in its state of harmony with the world around it. Earth is the element of the point where Summer fades into Autumn, and is the perfect balance between the Yin and the Yang. Earth is associated with mellowness, contented peace, and lazy easy living. Blocking Earth results in impaired digestion, as the center of the organism is thrown off balance. Characters who have Mastery of Earth must be in Harmony with Metal, and can only Sense Wood.

The **Metal** element is an egg, drawn into itself for storage, until the energy inside is needed by the world. Metal is the element of autumn, when crops are being brought in for reserve and all are settling in for winter, and is the state of New Yin. Metal is associated with cleansing, preparation, and meditative insight on what is to come. Blocking Metal results in hanging onto the past, melancholy, and grief, which results in breathing problems and low immunity. Characters who have Mastery of Metal must be in Harmony with Water, and can only Sense Fire.

Aspects

Aspects are the second Degree of a character. As Elements are the foundations of the world, Aspects are the foundations of a human being. Characters are Adept (1) in two Aspects, Strong (2) in two Aspects, and Prodigious (3) in the fifth. The five Aspects are Power, Grace, Cunning, Awareness, and Presence.

Power is a character's muscle and endurance. Power is the ability to hit hard, be hit hard, and remain standing. A high Power might be required to lift a fallen tree, or to budge the great boulder blocking the entrance of an ancient shrine to the deities.



Grace is a character's finesse and agility. Grace is the ability to strike precisely, and to not be where blows land. A high Grace might be required to leap a great distance, or to slip quietly past the alert guard waiting at the entrance to the Emperor's chamber.

Cunning is a character's wit and imagination. Cunning is the ability to trick an enemy, and to realize when one is being fooled. A high Cunning might be required to survive in a barren desert, or to convince the province that the Celestial Mandate has abandoned their ruler.

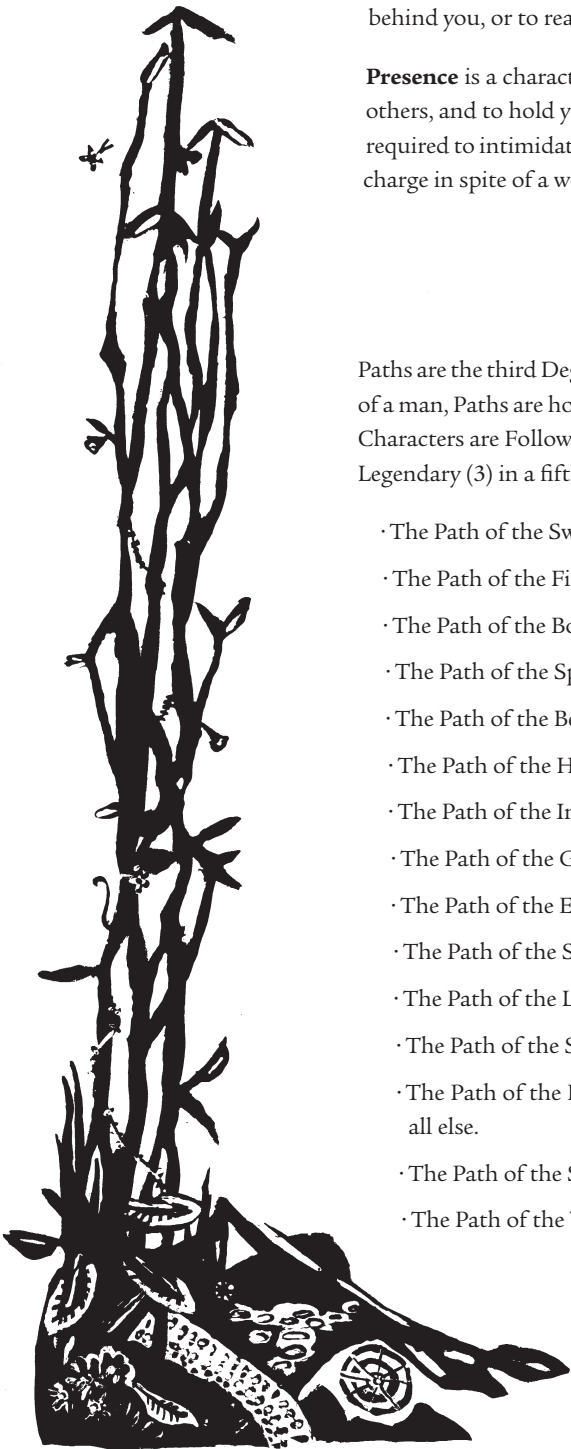
Awareness is a character's perception and the acuteness of their senses. Awareness is the ability to find a hidden clue, and to realize when something is missing. A high Awareness might be required to notice someone sneaking up behind you, or to react in time to the man with the poison-tipped darts.

Presence is a character's bearing and willpower. Presence is the ability to cow others, and to hold your head high when disgraced. A high Presence might be required to intimidate the provincial duke into submission, or to continue the charge in spite of a wound.

Paths

Paths are the third Degree of a character. Where Aspects are the basic structures of a man, Paths are how the player chooses to elaborate upon those structures. Characters are Followers (1) of two paths, Accomplished (2) at two paths, and Legendary (3) in a fifth. Some sample Paths are described below.

- The Path of the Sword teaches melee weaponry and fighting.
- The Path of the Fist teaches unarmed martial arts.
- The Path of the Bow teaches ranged weaponry and archery.
- The Path of the Spirits teaches mysticism and magic.
- The Path of the Beast teaches the handling and riding of animals.
- The Path of the Honorable teaches honor and glory.
- The Path of the Invisible teaches stealth and ambush.
- The Path of the General teaches leadership and tactics.
- The Path of the Emperor teaches intrigue and statesmanship.
- The Path of the Survivor teaches self-preservation.
- The Path of the Lover teaches passion and emotion.
- The Path of the Sage teaches knowledge and understanding.
- The Path of the Balanced teaches harmony between all elements and with all else.
- The Path of the Scourge teaches intimidation and brutality.
- The Path of the Vengeful teaches justice and revenge.



- The Path of the Meditative teaches introspection and careful consideration.
- The Path of the Runner teaches fitness and athleticism.
- The Path of the Laymen teaches crafts and professions.
- The Path of the Merchant teaches acquiring wealth and determining value.

These are only some of the possible paths. Keep in mind that as a general rule, a Path should be a particular characteristic of an Aspect or Element. For instance, the Path of the Runner has to do with sprinting, which is a function of Grace, and the Path of the Vengeful, which relates to anger and jealousy, is strongly tied to the effects of blocking Wood. A Path may also represent some supernatural ability possessed by a character. For instance, if you wanted to play a character who could ride on clouds, you would simply make up a cool name—Path of the Soaring Vapors, for example—and note that the Path would let you ride clouds.

The Flaw

Not even the greatest warrior embodies perfection, and neither do characters in Pagoda. Although not a Degree, Flaws are a vital part of any character. Heroes are defined by what they can't do, as much as by what they can. Players will create one predominant Flaw for their character.

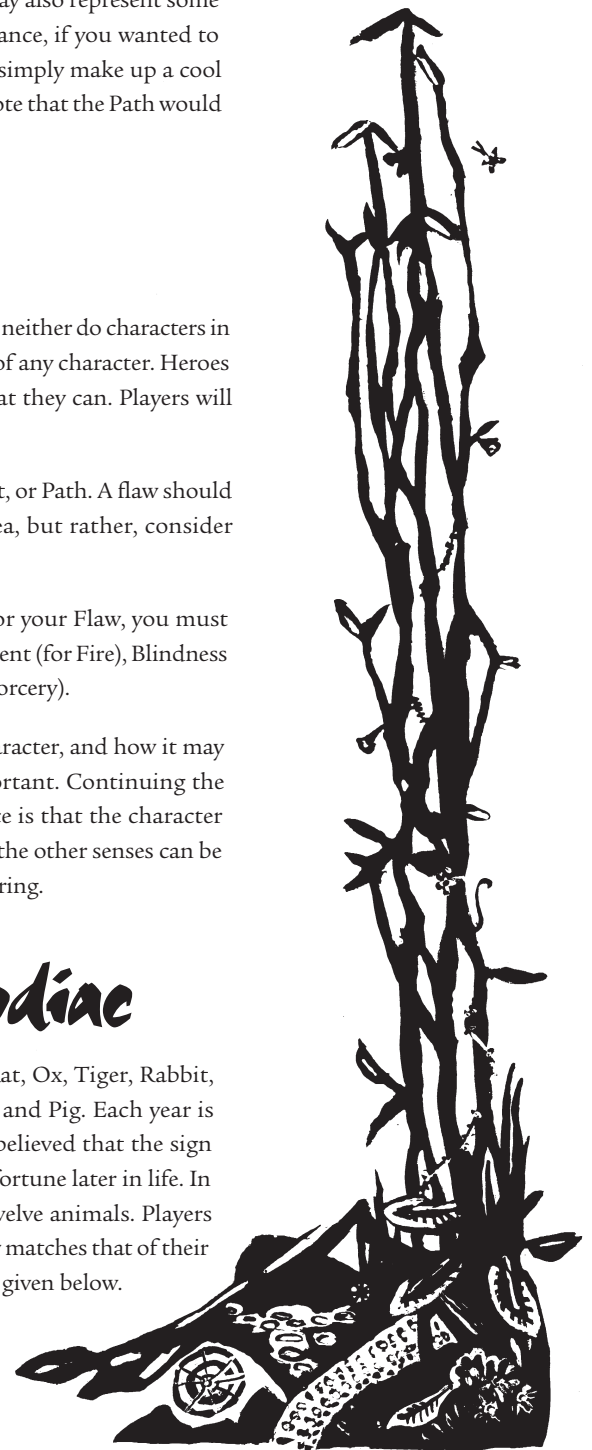
A Flaw will be attached to a particular Element, Aspect, or Path. A flaw should not necessarily go into your character's weakest area, but rather, consider putting it into his strongest, for added depth.

Once you have chosen an Element, Aspect, or Path for your Flaw, you must briefly describe it. Example descriptions are Overconfident (for Fire), Blindness (for Awareness), and Uncontrollable (for the Path of Sorcery).

Now you must explain why this Flaw hinders your character, and how it may help. Note that both parts of a Flaw are equally important. Continuing the Blindness example from above, the obvious hindrance is that the character cannot see. However, he may have come to realize that the other senses can be as acute as sight, and has thus honed his smell and hearing.

Sign of the Zodiac

The Chinese zodiac consists of twelve animal signs: Rat, Ox, Tiger, Rabbit, Dragon, Snake, Horse, Sheep, Monkey, Rooster, Dog, and Pig. Each year is matched up with an animal in an ongoing cycle. It is believed that the sign one is born under can tell much about personality and fortune later in life. In Pagoda, each character must have a Sign, one of the twelve animals. Players should choose the animal whose personality most closely matches that of their character. The twelve animals and their personalities are given below.



Rat— Aggressive, ambitious, suspicious, power-hungry, honest, generous, hot tempered, overly critical, and free with their money.

Ox— Powerful, unyielding, stubborn, natural leaders prone to success if given a chance, Oxen lean toward easygoing conservativeness.

Tiger— Prone to fighting, sensitive, aggressive, unpredictable, charming, emotional, and courageous, Tigers often risk themselves for others.

Rabbit— Affectionate, obliging, pleasant, sentimental, and tranquil, Rabbits tend to get a bit too superficial and avoid emotional conflict.

Dragon— Intelligent, bossy, loud, garish and unfaithful, Dragons are vital and enthusiastic and are often charismatic and popular.

Snake— Clever, intense, determined, romantic, wise, and charming, but vain. Snakes are often beautiful, and are strongly guided by intuition.

Horse— Hardworking, smart, friendly and cheerful, Horses tend toward being impatient, arrogant and selfish when under stress.

Sheep— Creative, passionate, elegant, warmhearted and honest, but often pessimistic, timid, and disorganized, Sheep tend to fail under pressure.

Monkey— Intelligent, clever and inventive, Monkeys are often entertaining but dangerous and easily discouraged, and have many close friends.

Rooster— Courageous, hardworking, shrewd, and arrogant, Roosters tend to be eccentric and reckless but decisive and desiring of knowledge.

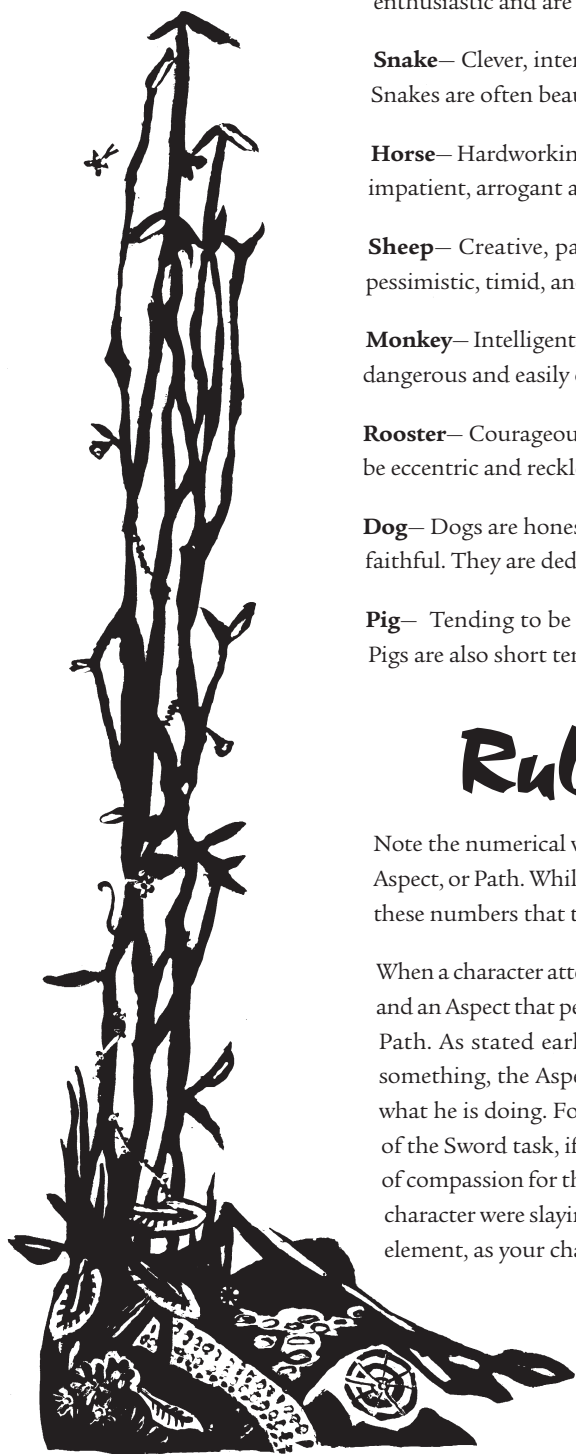
Dog— Dogs are honest, quiet, intelligent, and stubborn, but fiercely loyal and faithful. They are dedicated and cynical and prone to anxiety.

Pig— Tending to be honest, reliable, sincere, tolerant, shy, and affectionate, Pigs are also short tempered, naïve and impulsive.

Rules of the Game

Note the numerical value that goes along with each descriptor of an Element, Aspect, or Path. While the descriptors are more aesthetically pleasing, it is upon these numbers that the mechanics of the game are based.

When a character attempts a difficult action, the player must choose an Element and an Aspect that pertain to that action. If he can, he may also choose a relevant Path. As stated earlier, the Element represents why the character is doing something, the Aspect represents how he is doing it, and the Path represents what he is doing. For instance, slaying a bandit might be a Fire / Grace / Path of the Sword task, if your character is ridding the countryside of this man out of compassion for the peasants, with style and poise, and using a weapon. If the character were slaying the bandit for stealing his love, you would use the Wood element, as your character would be acting out of jealousy.



The player will then roll a number of normal six-sided dice equal to the sum of the numerical values of the chosen Element, Aspect, and, if applicable, Path. The player may roll one extra die if the action relates to the personality of his character's Sign, and the Game Master may also grant an extra die for any description deemed especially vivid or exciting. If the player rolls at least a doubles (two or more dice show the same number), he has succeeded at the action. Easier and harder actions might require different rolls, as shown on the table below.

If a character is taking an action that is being actively resisted by another character, both characters make a roll. The roll in which more dice show the same number is superior (triples beats doubles, and so on). If both rolls are tied in this respect, look to secondary duplicates. Thus, if a character rolls 2, 2, 3, 3, 3, 6 (a triples and a doubles), he succeeds against a character who rolls only 1, 2, 4, 4, 4, 5, 6 (and scores only a triples but nothing else).

Difficulty Roll		Example
Easy	None	Jump over a mountain stream
Challenging	Doubles	Leap over a boulder
Heroic	Triples	Land unscathed from a fall from a high roof
Legendary	Quadruples	Destroy well made armor with one kick
Impossible	Quintuples	Punch through a foot-thick brick wall

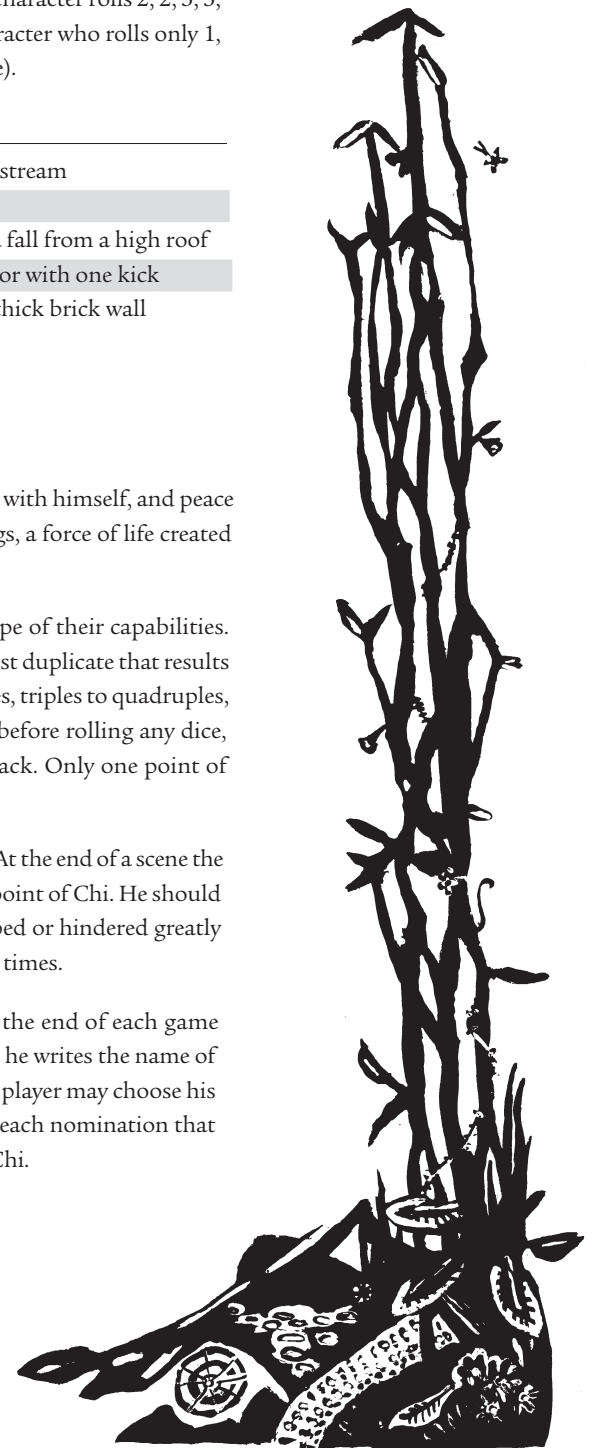
Chi

Chi is a measure of a character's spirituality, harmony with himself, and peace with the rest of the world. Chi flows through all things, a force of life created by the Yin and the Yang, the balanced elements.

In Pagoda, characters can use Chi to push the envelope of their capabilities. When a player spends a point of Chi on a roll, the highest duplicate that results from that roll is increased by one step (doubles to triples, triples to quadruples, and so on). The player must decide to spend the Chi before rolling any dice, and after the dice have been rolled, may not take it back. Only one point of Chi may be spent per roll.

Each character starts the game with three points of Chi. At the end of a scene the Game Master may choose to reward a character with a point of Chi. He should do so whenever the character is played very well, is helped or hindered greatly by a Flaw, or gains a bonus die for description multiple times.

In addition, a few extra points of Chi are given out at the end of each game session: each player is given a slip of paper. On that slip, he writes the name of a character who deserves an extra Chi point, and why. A player may choose his own character or no character at all if he so desires. For each nomination that a character receives in this fashion, he gains 1 point of Chi.



The Game Master should keep this in mind: just as Chi can be used as a reward, it can, if absolutely necessary, be used as a leash. If a player completely goofs off during a scene, ruining the feel of the game, the Game Master should take away one point of Chi at the end of the scene.

Note that although characters may occasionally increase Degrees via The Last Straw (see below), Chi is used as the main method of character improvement. Players should keep this in mind when choosing Elements, Aspects, and Paths for their character, as there will be little chance for those Degrees to alter during play.

Combat

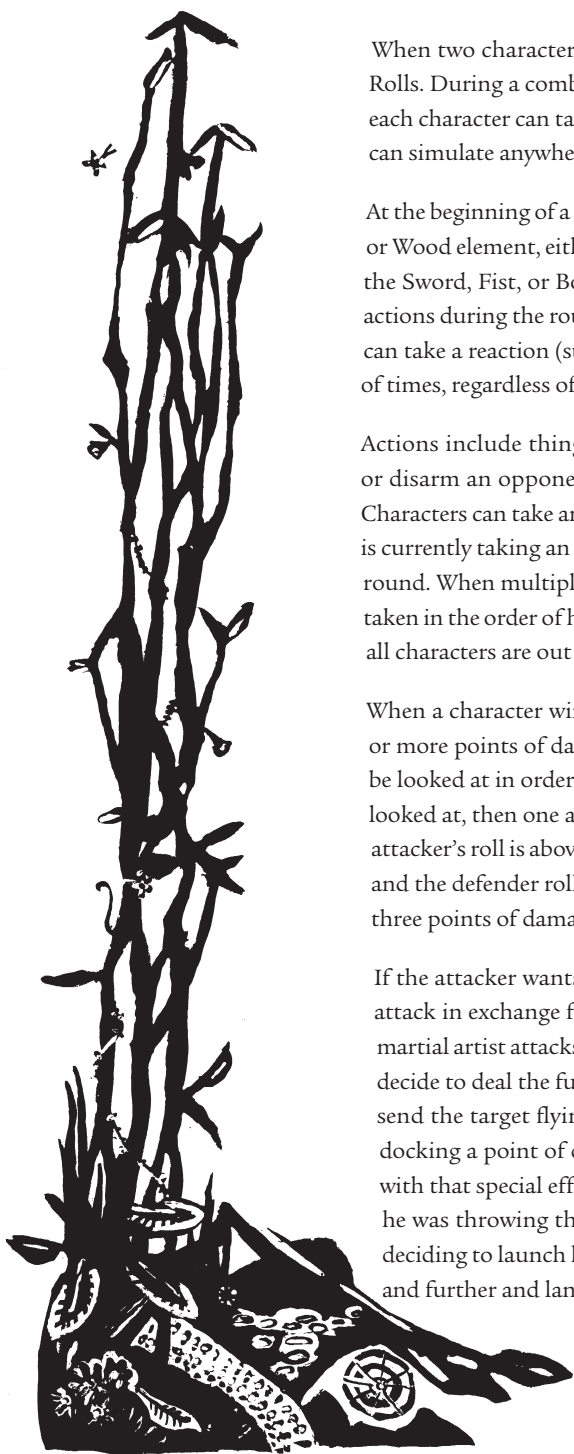
When two characters engage in combat, they will make a series of Opposed Rolls. During a combat, time is divided into rounds: periods of time in which each character can take one or more actions. In terms of real-time, each round can simulate anywhere between one or two and ten seconds of action.

At the beginning of a round, each player will make a roll, using either the Water or Wood element, either the Awareness or Grace Aspect, and the Path of either the Sword, Fist, or Bow. A doubles indicates that the character can take two actions during the round, a triples means three actions, and so on. A character can take a reaction (such as parrying a sword or resisting a spell) any number of times, regardless of the result of their roll.

Actions include things like attacking with any weapon, attempting to trip or disarm an opponent, disengaging from a melee, or re-rolling a reaction. Characters can take an action whenever they like, as long as no other character is currently taking an action, and they haven't used their full allotment for the round. When multiple characters attempt to act at the same time, actions are taken in the order of highest Grace to lowest, with Alertness settling ties. When all characters are out of actions, a new round begins.

When a character wins their opposed roll for an attack, the target takes one or more points of damage. One point is taken if secondary duplicates had to be looked at in order to resolve the attack. If only the first duplicate had to be looked at, then one additional point of damage is taken for each step that the attacker's roll is above the defender's. For instance, if the attacker rolled triples and the defender rolled no duplicate (singles), then the defender would suffer three points of damage.

If the attacker wants, he may decide to withhold a point of damage from an attack in exchange for some neat stunt of his own creation. For example, if a martial artist attacks an imperial soldier and scores a two damage hit, he could decide to deal the full two points of damage, or deal one point of damage and send the target flying back a couple yards. Special effects that are added by docking a point of damage should never be as spectacular as an action taken with that special effect as the sole intent. So, if the martial artist declared that he was throwing the soldier instead of attacking him and then retroactively deciding to launch him into the air, the poor imperial servant would fly longer and further and land with louder crunching noises at the end.



There are many situations in which a player may wish for his character to perform an attack that targets multiple opponents with a single action: spinning circle kicks, rains of shuriken, tossing one enemy into another, and other such stunts. If this is the case, the character will simply roll the attack once, subtracting a number of dice from the roll equal to the total number of targets. Each target rolls his defense individually. So, if a character wants to carpet an area containing three opponents with a hail of arrows and is using the degrees Water 3, Awareness 3, Path of the Bow 2 for the attack, he would roll (3 Element + 3 Aspect + 2 Path - 3 Multiple Targets) 5 dice.

Injury

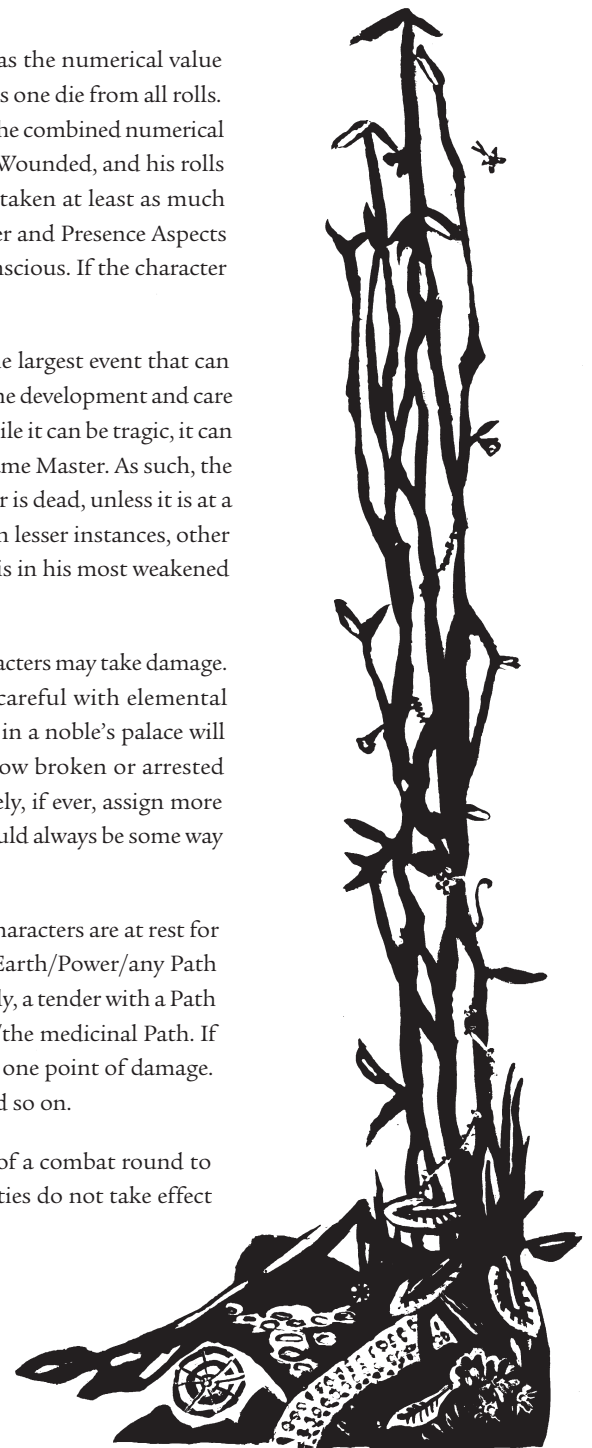
When a character has taken at least as much damage as the numerical value of his Power Aspect he is considered Scratched and loses one die from all rolls. When a character has taken at least as much damage as the combined numerical values of their Power Aspect and Metal Element, he is Wounded, and his rolls are now penalized by two dice. When a character has taken at least as much damage as the combined numerical values of his Power and Presence Aspects and his Metal Element, the pain has driven him unconscious. If the character takes any more damage there is a chance he will die.

Consider that the death of a character is just about the largest event that can impact the game, as it means an immediate end to all the development and care that has been poured into the terminated persona. While it can be tragic, it can also be used to great effect in the hands of a skilled Game Master. As such, the Game Master should very rarely decide that a character is dead, unless it is at a dramatically and thematically appropriate moment; in lesser instances, other options, such as capture by enemies while a character is in his most weakened state, should be considered.

Note that combat is not the only scenario in which characters may take damage. For instance, a sorcerer will take damage when not careful with elemental energies. A character that falls from the highest tower in a noble's palace will take a few points of damage unless the fall is somehow broken or arrested before impact. Note that the Game Master should rarely, if ever, assign more than three points of Damage to a hazard, and there should always be some way that the Damage could possibly be avoided.

Damage does not stay with a character forever. When characters are at rest for a substantial period of time, they may make a roll of Earth/Power/any Path that the Game Master thinks is appropriate. Alternatively, a tender with a Path related to medicine may make a roll of Earth/Cunning/the medicinal Path. If the roll scores doubles, the wounded character recovers one point of damage. Triples indicates that they are relieved of two points, and so on.

When a character takes enough damage in the middle of a combat round to put him into the next category of penalties, these penalties do not take effect until a new round of action has begun.



Shamans and Sorcerers

Magic plays a large role in the *wuxia* genre. Kung-Fu priests throw fireballs and evil Eunuch Sorcerers summon spirits from the world of the dead to do their evil bidding. Magic is a resource both powerful, and costly.

Characters cannot cast spells unless they walk upon the Path of the Spirits. Even though there are two types of magic in Pagoda (Spirit Magic and Elemental Magic), a character only needs the one path to use both forms. The distinction between the two types of magic is somewhat artificial and exists purely for rules purposes; after all, how does a priest call lightning, but by beseeching the spirits of the sky? However, the method of casting the different types of spells, and what happens when something goes wrong, makes separate mechanics necessary.

Just because a character can command spirits doesn't mean that they can't fight, too. In fact, characters are encouraged to possess both the Path of the Spirits and the Path of the Sword, Bow, or Fist.

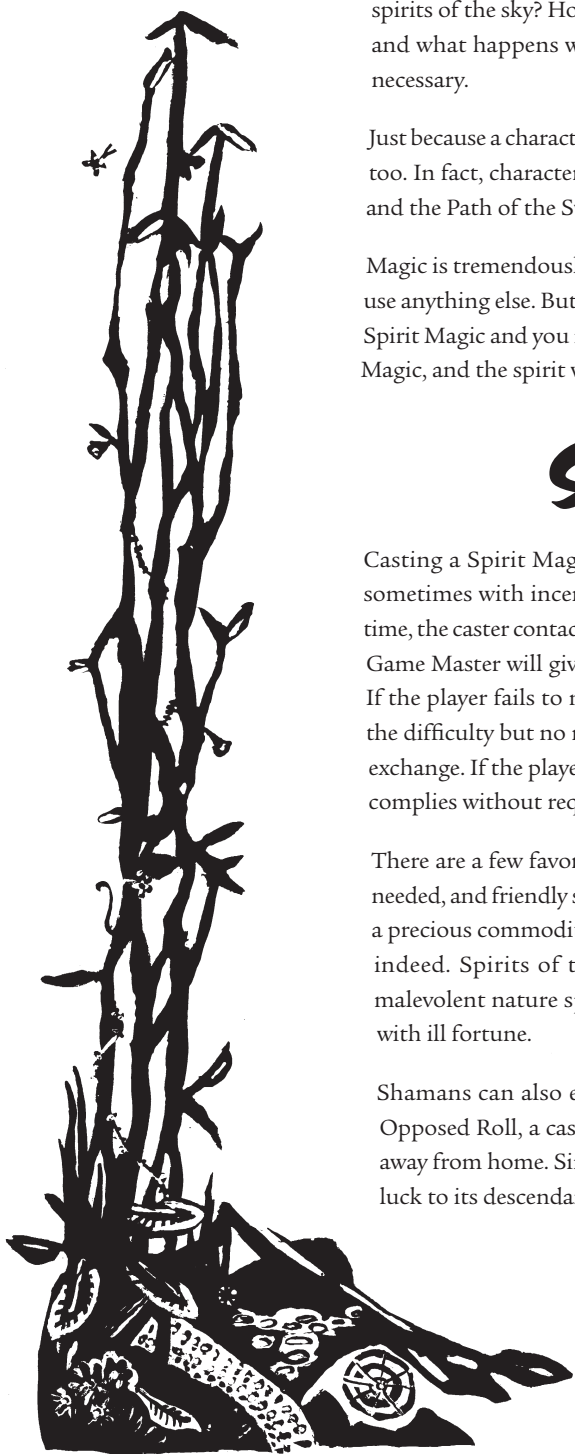
Magic is tremendously versatile and it may seem as if there's no reason to ever use anything else. But keep in mind that this might also comes at a cost: abuse Spirit Magic and you may owe your life to the Spirit World; overuse Elemental Magic, and the spirit world may take your life without warning.

Spirit Magic

Casting a Spirit Magic spell usually requires a few minutes of meditation, sometimes with incense, and in a family shrine or serene glade. During this time, the caster contacts a family or natural spirit, and asks them for a favor. The Game Master will give the favor a difficulty, usually either doubles or triples. If the player fails to meet the difficulty, the spirit refuses. If the player meets the difficulty but no more, the spirit complies but asks a favor of the caster in exchange. If the player rolls at least a step higher than the Difficulty, the spirit complies without requesting compensation.

There are a few favors that are more common than others. Healing is always needed, and friendly spirits can provide magical restoration. Information is also a precious commodity, and those of the Spirit World are quite knowledgeable indeed. Spirits of the land can be asked to increase a field's bounty, or malevolent nature spirits can be persuaded to haunt a spot or plague a man with ill fortune.

Shamans can also exercise their will over weaker spirits. With a successful Opposed Roll, a caster can anchor a spirit to the physical world, stranding it away from home. Similarly, a magician can put a curse on a spirit, causing bad luck to its descendants or the land they inhabit.



When a Spirit Magic spell fails (the caster loses an Opposed Roll with a spirit or doesn't meet the difficulty of a request), the caster loses one point of Chi. If the sorcerer has no points to lose, he is obligated to the targeted spirit, and must help if ever the spirit is in need or loses its magical powers.

Elemental Magic

Using Elemental Magic usually takes only one standard combat round. A caster can manipulate any aspect of any element that he is in Harmony with or better. For instance, making a tree grow to tremendous height would be the direct application of Wood, while cursing a mother with sterility would be a completely different application of the same Element. Causing a man to burst into flames would be a direct application of Fire, while making a man see you as an old friend would be an emotional application.

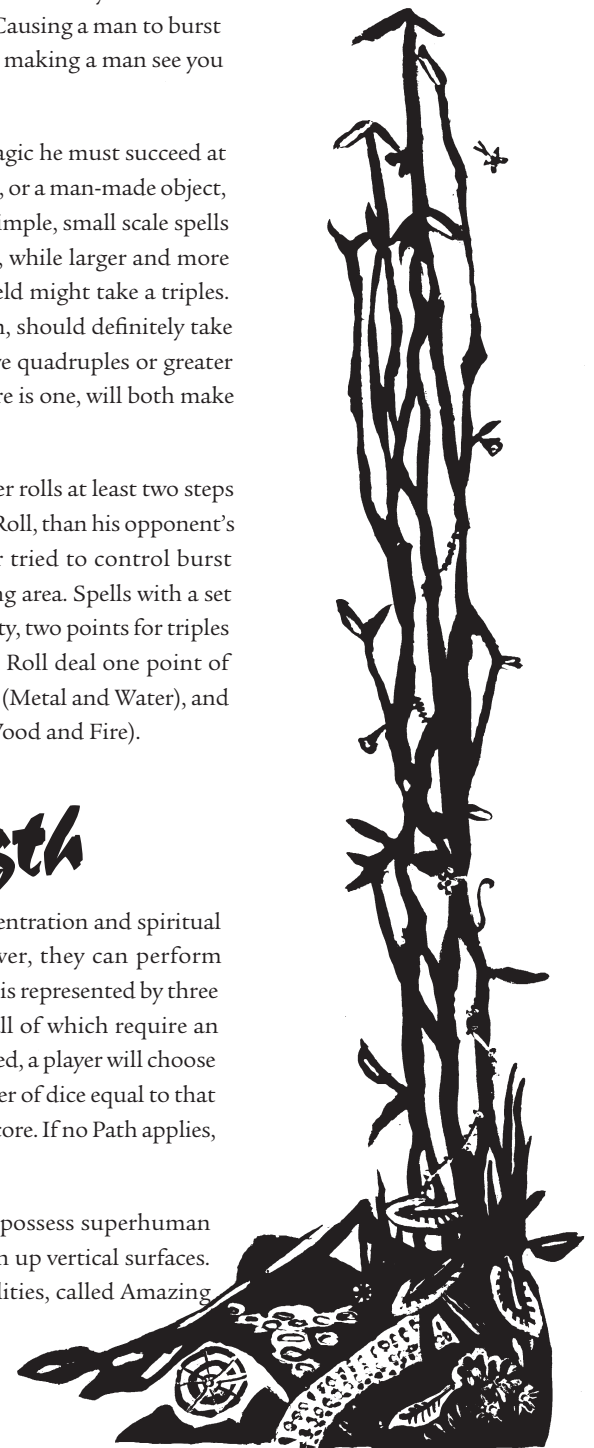
When a sorcerer wishes to affect a creature with his magic he must succeed at an Opposed Roll. When he wishes to affect only nature, or a man-made object, the Game Master will assign a difficulty to the spell. Simple, small scale spells such as lighting a fire, should have doubles difficulty, while larger and more powerful spells, such as withering all the crops in a field might take a triples. Truly tremendous tasks, such as toppling a mountain, should definitely take longer than casting a standard, smaller spell, and have quadruples or greater difficulty. The caster of the spell and the target, if there is one, will both make the roll using the element that the spell manipulates.

When an Elemental Magic spell fails terribly (the caster rolls at least two steps lower than the difficulty, or, in the case of an Opposed Roll, than his opponent's score), the raging elemental energies that the caster tried to control burst free, dealing some damage to him and the surrounding area. Spells with a set difficulty deal one point of damage for doubles difficulty, two points for triples difficulty, and so on. Spells that require an Opposed Roll deal one point of damage in the case of Earth or one of the Yin elements (Metal and Water), and two points of damage in the case of a Yang element (Wood and Fire).

Inner Strength

The characters of Pagoda possess great powers of concentration and spiritual aptitude, represented by Chi. By calling on this power, they can perform impossible shows of martial and mystical prowess. This is represented by three things: Amazing Feats, Kata, and Virtue from Fault; all of which require an Inner Strength roll. When an Inner Strength roll is needed, a player will choose a single applicable Path (if any applies), and roll a number of dice equal to that Path's numerical value, plus his character's current Chi score. If no Path applies, then simply the character's Chi in dice will be rolled.

The main characters in a good number of *wuxia* films possess superhuman powers of flight, the ability to tread on water or even run up vertical surfaces. Characters in Pagoda can also perform such impossibilities, called Amazing



Feats. Doing so requires an Inner Strength roll. Just like any other difficult task, the GM will set a Difficulty for this roll. As usual, doubles is the standard difficulty, and applies to almost any Amazing Feat, from running across a pond to sprinting upon a wall. However, if the character fails to roll triples or better he has succeeded only sloppily: his feet occasionally break the water's surface of the water, or he must recover his balance after the stunt. If a character rolls no duplicate at all, he may choose to succeed at the feat that he has just attempted, but not be able to make another Inner Strength roll for the duration of the scene. If the player chooses against losing his Inner Strength, then the character fails at whatever he was attempting to do, but may still perform Amazing Feats, Kata, and Virtue from Faults in this session.

Kata are graceful displays of martial arts mastery, sometimes referred to as "forms". In Pagoda, Kata are used to gain an upper hand in combat and take one action to perform. This action must be the first a character takes in a combat round. The player will describe the Kata, and make an Inner Strength roll. Then, once during the same round, the player may decide to grant any other roll the Kata's benefit. This enhanced roll is made using two extra dice if the character rolled doubles on his Inner Strength roll, three extra dice if he rolled triples, and so on.

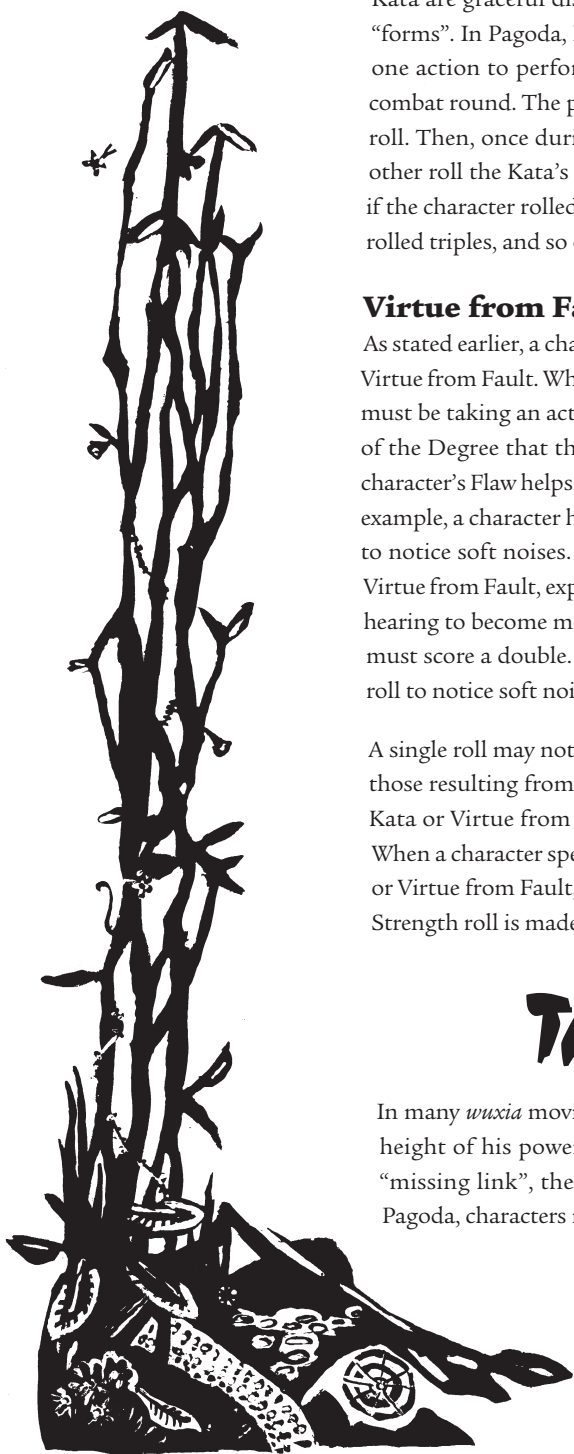
Virtue from Fault

As stated earlier, a character's Flaw can be used to help him. Such is the way of Virtue from Fault. When a player wishes to use Virtue from Fault, his character must be taking an action that relates both to his Flaw and to the specific part of the Degree that the Flaw is tied to, and the player must explain how his character's Flaw helps him in this situation. For instance, to continue an earlier example, a character has the flaw of Blindness. The Game Master asks for rolls to notice soft noises. The blind character's player says that he wishes to use Virtue from Fault, explaining that blindness has caused his character's sense of hearing to become more finely attuned. He makes an Inner Strength roll, and must score a double. If successful, he gains two additional dice on the actual roll to notice soft noises.

A single roll may not be enhanced by both the extra dice granted by Kata and those resulting from Virtue from Fault. A roll that gains the benefit of either Kata or Virtue from Fault may also gain the benefit of a spent point of Chi. When a character spends a point of Chi on a roll that gains the benefit of Kata or Virtue from Fault, the point of Chi is considered to be spent after the Inner Strength roll is made.

The Last Straw

In many *wuxia* movies, the film does not start with the main character at the height of his power. Rather, in a single, intense moment, he discovers the "missing link", the uncovered part of himself that holds his true glory. In Pagoda, characters may reach new heights in a like manner.



When a character is only one point of damage away from unconsciousness and his nemesis stands over him, when his beloved father is brutally murdered before his eyes, when the village in which he was raised is destroyed in smoke and flame—these are the times when a character may discover new power in a fit of emotion.

When a character is in such a situation, the Game Master will let the player increase one of his character's relevant Elements, Aspects, or Paths by one step. Alternatively, the player may grant his character a new path at Follower (1). The steps that come beyond Mastery, Prodigious, and Legendary are all known as Transcended (4). The Game Master may also choose to immediately give the character a point or two of Chi, if the player roleplays the situation well.

Game Masters will have to decide when it is appropriate to allow a character to advance. If the stress to the character is only mild, or the player does not react strongly to the situation, the character should not gain any benefits. However, if the trauma to the character is great, and the player realizes and portrays this, he should be allowed to go up in power. The GM will also need to judge which Elements, Aspects, and Paths are appropriate to increase. For example, if the character needed to capture a Shadow Spirit, increased Power would not be appropriate.

Note that this is not the only way for a character to increase in power, but merely the only way to increase the rating of a Degree. All other increases in skill and general ability, such as that gained by training for years with a respected dojo, are represented by a 2 or 3 point increase in a character's Chi.

Non-Player Characters

If you are the Game Master, you will need to come up with non-player characters (NPCs). These are the characters that you create for the players to interact with, and range from an evil Eunuch Warlock to the great grandfather of one of the player characters to the master smith who created the finest sword in China. There are two main types of Non-Player Characters: Major and Minor.

Major NPCs are the personalities of the setting that really make a difference. It doesn't matter if it's a four thousand year old ghost or a six year old kid, the thing that makes a Major NPC major is his importance to the plot. Just like the characters controlled by the players, Major NPCs should have a comprehensible personality, and at least a bit of background.

Major NPCs follow the same rules as the player characters. They have the same five Elements, the same five Aspects, and any five Paths. The main difference is that, aside from being controlled by the Game Master, NPCs have a bit more leeway. If the Game Master wishes, they may, for instance, have two Mastery elements, or start with five Chi points. Conversely, the Game Master may choose that an NPC will have only three Paths, or is not Prodigious in any Aspect. However, if the Game Master wants a Major NPC to be about as powerful as the player characters, then he should adhere to the rules for creating characters presented near the start of the game.



Minor NPCs are there for the self esteem of the players. They are extras, inconsequential, target practice. The most common use for Minor NPCs is to throw a couple of them at the player characters when the game is getting slow, or to slow the players down a bit and maybe deal a point of damage (not likely they'll ever deal more . . .) before they get to their real target. Minor NPCs are simply described by a single number. This is the number of dice they roll for any purpose, be it attacking, defending, or resisting a spell. Typical Minor NPCs are rated at four. When Minor NPCs have taken one point of damage, halve this number for all intents and purposes. When they have taken two points of damage, Minor NPCs are out of the fight. If the GM wishes, he may create tougher Minor NPCs that may sustain more than one point of damage before falling, but these, as a general rule, should be rare. Note that Minor NPCs do not have Chi and thus have no use for Inner Strength.

Example Major NPCs

A few major NPCs are presented here as a reference point for Game Masters and Players when creating their own characters. The Enlightened Monk, Heroic General, and Evil Sorcerer are all built with the same numbers as the player's characters. The Pompous Magistrate and Plotting Noble are slightly below that level.

Pompous Magistrate

Elements: Mastery (3) of Earth, Harmony (2) with Metal, Sense (1) Water, Fire, and Wood.

Aspects: Strong (2) Presence and Cunning, Adept (1) Power, Grace, and Awareness.

Paths: Accomplished (2) Emperor and General, Follower (1) Sage, either Scourge or Honorable, either Fist or Sword.

Sign: Any

Chi: 2

Flaw: Good examples include Greed, Lust, Ambition, and Lack of Initiative.

Enlightened Monk

Elements: Mastery (3) of Earth, Harmony (2) with Wood and Fire, Sense (1) Water and Metal.

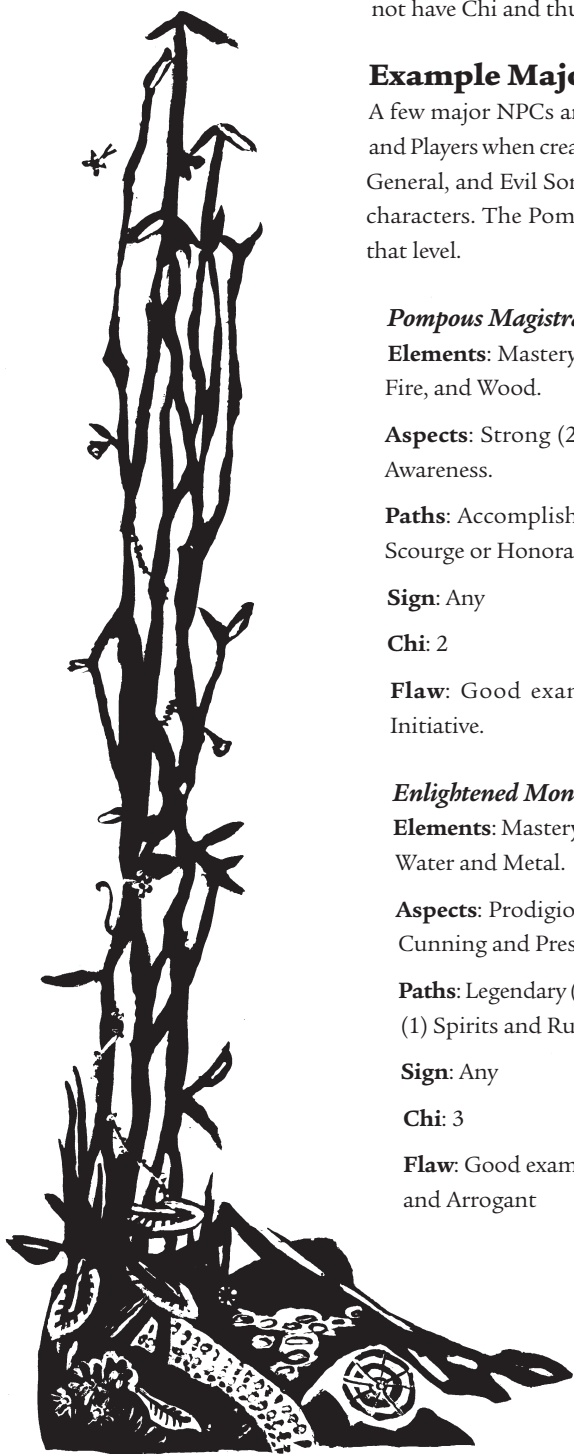
Aspects: Prodigious (3) Grace, Strong (2) Awareness and Power, Adept (1) Cunning and Presence.

Paths: Legendary (3) Fist, Accomplished (2) Meditative and Laymen, Follower (1) Spirits and Runner.

Sign: Any

Chi: 3

Flaw: Good examples include Overly Complacent, Poor, Unused to Society, and Arrogant



Renowned General

Elements: Mastery (3) of Fire, Harmony (2) with Wood and Metal, Sense (1) Water, and Earth.

Aspects: Prodigious (3) Cunning, Strong (2) Power and Presence, Adept (1) Grace and Awareness.

Paths: Legendary (3) General, Accomplished (2) Sword and Bow, Follower (1) Emperor and either Honorable or Scourge.

Sign: Any

Chi: 3

Flaw: Good examples include Violent, Power Hungry, Fanatic to a specified cause, and Traitorous.

Plotting Noble

Elements: Mastery (3) of Water, Harmony (2) with Wood, Sense (1) Water, Fire, and Earth.

Aspects: Strong (2) Presence and Cunning, Adept (1) Power, Grace, and Awareness.

Paths: Accomplished (2) Emperor and Invisible, Follower (1) Sage, Lover, and Sword.

Sign: Any

Chi: 2

Flaw: Good examples include Untrustworthy, Lustful, Malcontent, and Restless.

Evil Sorcerer

Elements: Mastery (3) of Wood, Harmony (2) with Fire and Earth, Sense (1) Water and Metal.

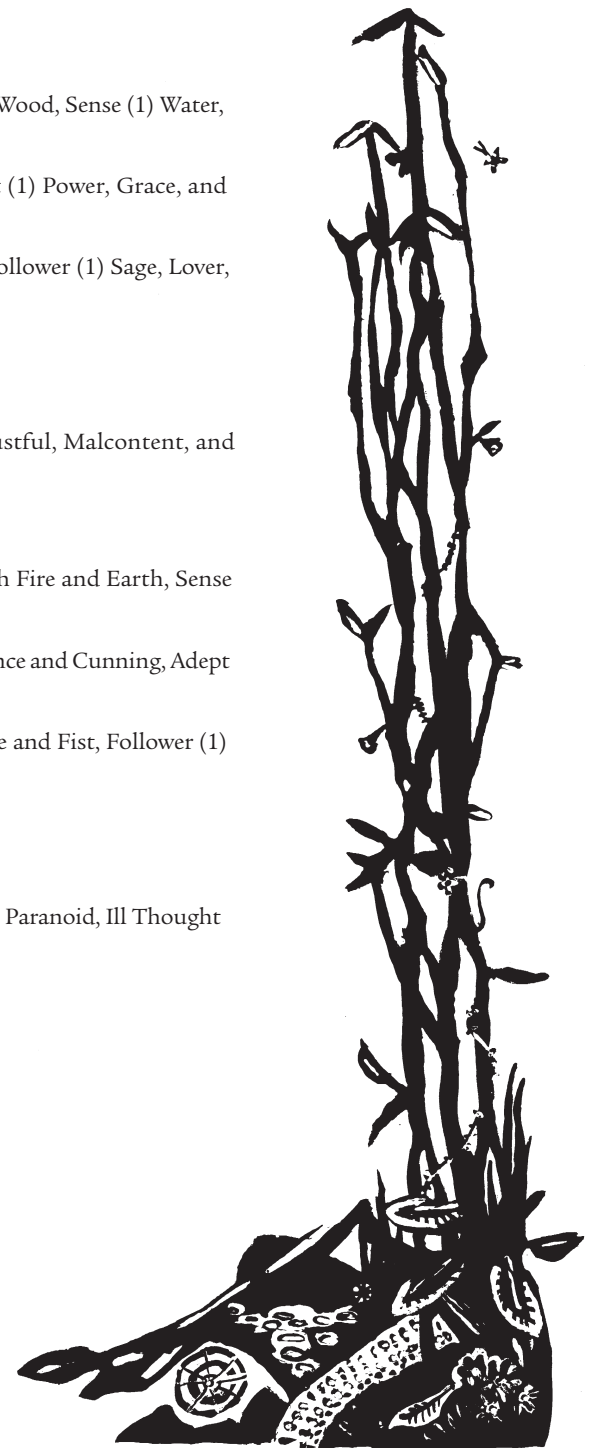
Aspects: Prodigious (3) Awareness, Strong (2) Presence and Cunning, Adept (1) Power and Grace.

Paths: Legendary (3) Spirits, Accomplished (2) Sage and Fist, Follower (1) Beast and Lover.

Sign: Any

Chi: 3

Flaw: Good examples include Greed, Power Hungry, Paranoid, Ill Thought Of, and Distrustful of Authority.



Relics of Power

The Shadow Dragon can only be harmed by weapons of jade. The Nine Ring Sword can open gates to the spirit realm. The Phoenix's Egg will one day hatch to bear a powerful fire spirit that will serve the one who possesses the egg at the time.

Magic items of mystery and power are a staple of many *wuxia* films. If you as a Game Master plan to include such objects in your game, they should be rare at best, and often not of obvious import. However, some games may deal with minor enchanted items regularly, with perhaps prayer strips to ward off the spirits of the dead and bring good luck being the most common. Regardless of strength, there are two main types of magic items: Assisting items, and Capability items.

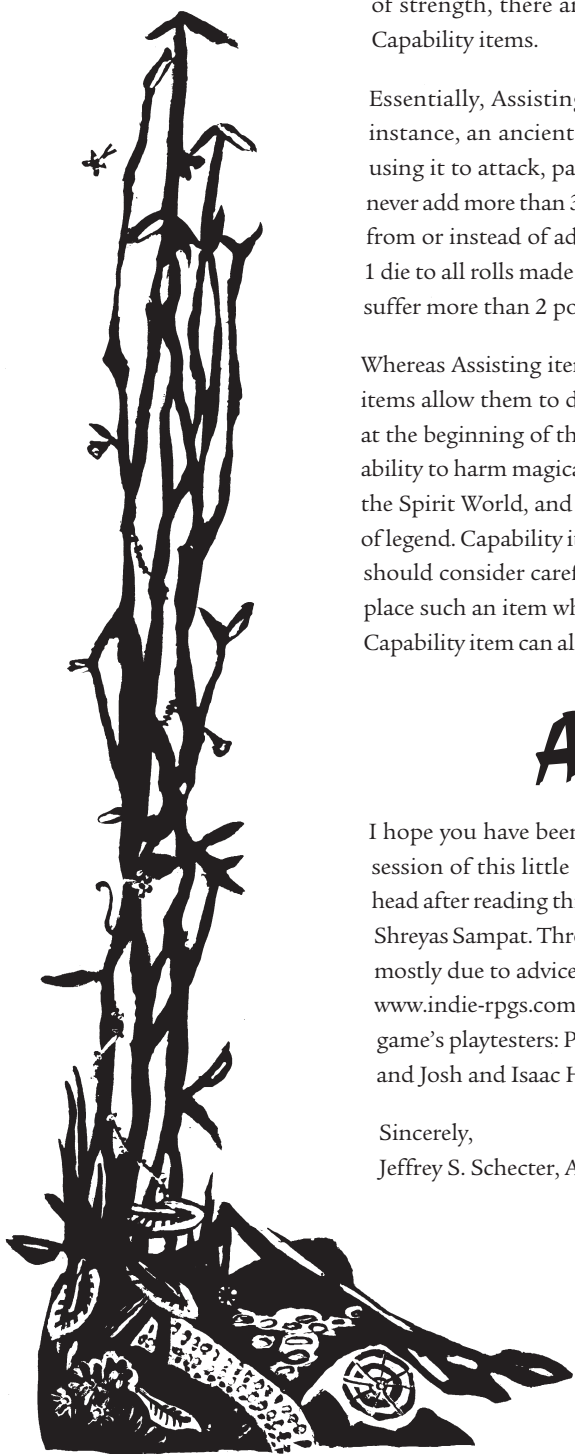
Essentially, Assisting items just add a number of dice to certain rolls. For instance, an ancient crystal sword might add 2 dice to all rolls made when using it to attack, parry, or do anything else with it. In general, items should never add more than 3 dice. Some Assisting items might have other effects aside from or instead of adding dice. For instance, an enchanted armor might add 1 die to all rolls made to avoid harm, and make it impossible for a character to suffer more than 2 points of damage from a single effect.

Whereas Assisting items allow a character to do something better, Capability items allow them to do something completely new. The three examples given at the beginning of this section are Capability items: the jade weapon has the ability to harm magical creatures, the Nine Ring Sword to pass the bearer into the Spirit World, and the phoenix's egg to eventually transform into the bird of legend. Capability items vary greatly in utility and power, and Game Masters should consider carefully possible paths for the rest of the game before they place such an item where players may gain permanent access to it. However, a Capability item can also be great fun and add exciting new options to the game.

A Final Word

I hope you have been inspired by reading Pagoda and play many a fulfilling session of this little old game. The first thoughts of Pagoda appeared in my head after reading through the game *Refreshing Rain*, another *wuxia* RPG by one Shreyas Sampat. Throughout the next nine months it underwent huge changes, mostly due to advice given on The Forge (a wonderful game design website at www.indie-rpgs.com) or received through e-mail. A big thanks goes out to the game's playtesters: Peter Chisnell, Curran Hoffman, Eli and Sam Lichtenstein, and Josh and Isaac Haselkorn.

Sincerely,
Jeffrey S. Schecter, Author





CELL GAMMA

An in media res premise

PLAYER INTRODUCTION

What's Going On?

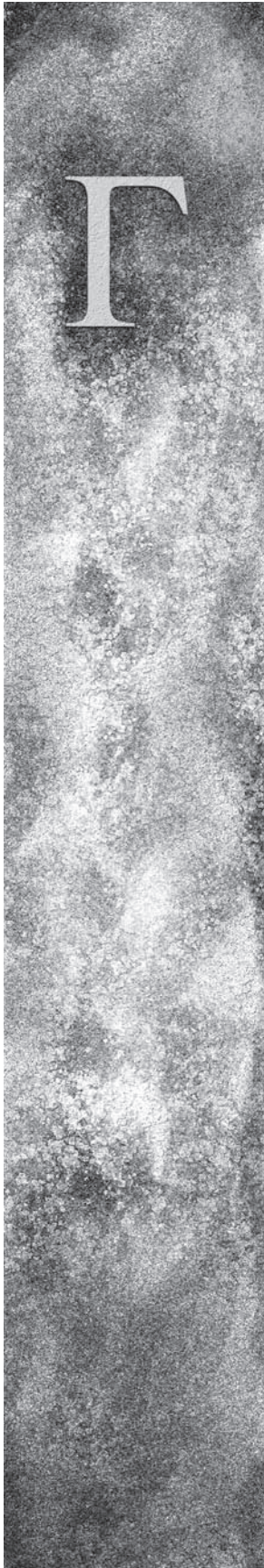
When starting a game of Cell Gamma, the following should be read to the players or provided in a handout:

You wake up alone with a pounding headache, the kind that makes it hard to concentrate. You are in a room that is about eight feet long by six feet wide, and about eight feet high. A single circular light with a plastic cover set flush in the ceiling above hurts your eyes, and lights this space with an uninspiring yellowish tone. The walls are composed of flat gray poured concrete — the sort that has different colors in it but is very smooth and looks very clean. The simple metal cot upon which you awoke protrudes from one of the long walls. On it are a white pillow and a blue blanket made of something synthetic.

There is a steel door in one of the shorter walls, with no handle or lock, and a small, barred window. It seems to be of the sliding type. Through the window, you can see a symbol (T) painted on the wall opposite the door. By straining to look left and right you see a corridor about 5 feet wide and as high as the cell. The hall is lit by a series of lights like the one in the cell. There are more of the same symbols at regular intervals to your left and right on the opposite wall. This is all you can see; a feeling of claustrophobia sets in.

And you can't remember anything... anything at all.





GM'S INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *Cell Gamma*. Besides the introduction above, the prisoners know nothing. This is essential, as the game is all about the mystery of who they are and why they are in Cell Gamma. As the game progresses, they will gain insight as to what is going on. Through interacting with the environment, events that happen within Cell Gamma, and the odd assortment of NPCs, the prisoners may deduce the nature of their imprisonment.

Acknowledgements

I got quite a bit of inspiration from the TV series *The Prisoner*. The exact start of the scenario was mentioned in a thread on some RPG forum as a start for a campaign. There was also an *Over the Edge* adventure in *Sylvan Pines* that used amnesia. I credit much of the discussions on www.gamingoutpost.com and www.rpg.net as the motivation for coming up with this game premise. Also, the HBO show *Oz* and several other game systems were influential. The game has definite similarities to *Zero*.

And, of course, *Paranoia*.

What is Going On

The prisoners have all been given a unique treatment that causes amnesia (and, coincidentally, powerful headaches) and placed into holding rooms in a high tech complex. The particular area that they are being held in is referred to as "Cell Gamma," hence the title of the game.

Beyond this, the players themselves determine the "reality" of Cell Gamma — though they'll not be aware of this. The game involves allowing the nature of the imprisonment to be determined by what happens during play. As events occur, the prisoners will make assumptions about the purpose of their imprisonment and will eventually propose theories to one another. The GM latches onto one or more of these theories as play progresses, altering it as he sees fit, allowing the reason to ultimately be brought out by player deduction. However, the players should not realize that this is occurring; instead they should just feel they are digging down to a predetermined truth. This does require some deception on the part of the GM, and those uncomfortable with this concept may wish to try the Predetermined Game instead (see *Conversions and Other Ideas*, at the end of this game).

There is No Cell Gamma

What is Cell Gamma? Why are the characters there? Are they imprisoned for crimes against humanity? Experimental subjects in weird alien science? Superheroes or super-spies trapped in the villain's lair? Government experiments gone horribly wrong? Or something else entirely? While you're reading *Cell Gamma*, keep in mind that it can be all of these things, but it is only what you, or you and your players, make it that counts. What is Cell Gamma? Cell Gamma is what the players unintentionally decide it is.

What is presented here is a framework from which to run the game that allows you as GM to adjust the backdrop so that it becomes whatever you need it to be to facilitate this process. The reader will note that in the following sections there

are as often ambiguities as there are concrete suggestions. This is intentional. Consider the concrete-seeming material to be nothing more than suggestions, or a framework that is, itself, ambiguous. That is, if any element doesn't fit into the current presentation, then alter it so that it helps the game along.

The concrete "feel" of the interior of the game space has to be maintained while, in fact, the space is actually potentially being altered just before the players get there. For instance, there are places where it lists that there are doors to areas that are off limits to the players. Are these areas dead ends, or escape routes? The answer is that they are whatever you need them to be when they are encountered.

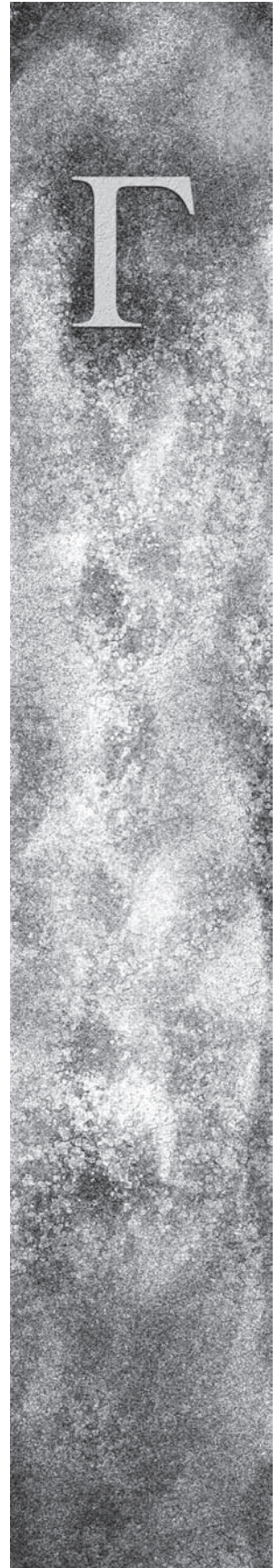
This explains why there is no map of Cell Gamma provided. If the players ask a concrete question, give a concrete answer, and don't change it after that. But don't nail down anything that's not necessary until it becomes so. In fact, this applies to everything about Cell Gamma. Not only is there no map, but the nature of the jailers and their intentions remain in limbo until they are revealed.

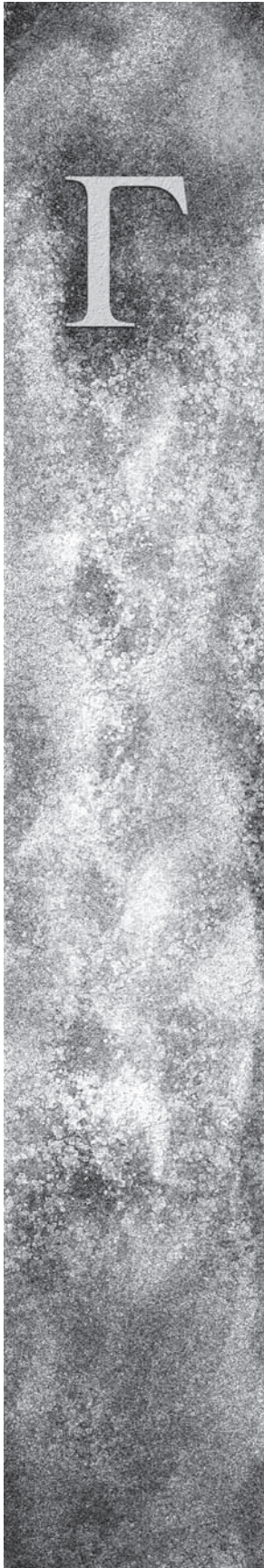
Tone

Cell Gamma is intended to be an exercise in fear, paranoia, and existential introspection. Therefore, describe all areas and features in a manner that tells little about them other than their basic function. Things in Cell Gamma tend to be flat and without protrusions, and neutral in color. The idea is to give the players the feeling that they are in a relatively sterile, lab-like environment. They should feel as though they are under a microscope at all times. For example, at certain times, the prisoners will be instructed what to do by an anonymous Voice, which comes from cleverly concealed speakers all over the complex. The source of the Voice can apparently see and hear what they are up to most of the time (through equally as cleverly concealed cameras and microphones). A robot, called "Melvin" by the other inmates, will come and brutally enforce the will of the Voice when necessary.

The motives of the jailers are never too clear, but they seem to be putting their "guests" through a series of tests and exercises designed to produce some unknown result. What this desired result could be is not easy to discern. It may appear to the prisoners that at least some of the exercises are just silly or nonsensical, possibly thrown in to keep the inmates from guessing which tests are the really pertinent ones. And this is possibly true.

One useful tool to support the tone of *Cell Gamma* that is recommended for face-to-face play is a clipboard. Use this to store notes on prisoners, one to a page, and anything else you might need to keep track of, including established facts about the nature of the imprisonment and the facility. In fact, it is a good idea to be constantly making notations. This will lead to paranoia as the players wonder what the heck it is that you are constantly scribbling. The overall effect of the clipboard is to give you the air of someone technical and in authority. Make sure you jealously guard the secrets on the clipboard; the players should never see what you have written. For even worse effect you might try a lab coat...





Unlike *Paranoia*, the tone is very somber and serious most of the time. Any humor that does occur (and some probably will to release tension) should be juxtaposed at the end by some event that punctuates the fact that the prisoners are in a severe prison. This should not dampen the fun but serve to put things back on track. In general, Cell Gamma is intended by the jailers to be bleak. For example, if the prisoners are having a food fight, have Melvin appear and get pelted with food as he subdues some prisoners violently. Something that would have the players thinking, "That's really funny, but, oh boy, are we in trouble now!"

However, there is hope. The GM should make sure to be constantly dropping "clues" so the players feel as though they are making headway (whether they are or not) and rewarding any sort of well thought out plans to determine the true nature of things. Make this an "ebb and flow" thing, with the prisoners getting an idea of what the truth is, only to find some of their assumptions false. Always two steps forward, one step back. Their jailers aren't infallible, of course, and despite their best efforts, the prisoners should occasionally be able to see chinks in their armor. Effort must be taken to not overly frustrate the players. The prisoners, however, should seem frustrated constantly.

This is an important note. The players should always be having fun watching the plight of their characters and promoting their causes. As GM, you're there not to antagonize the players, but to make life hard for the characters. Basically, if you see that a player is getting down, then have something good happen to reward their ingenuity as a player. If things are seeming too easy, then crank up the challenge.

Eventually they should experience a victory of some sort. But only after some serious effort.

PRISONERS AND RESOLUTION MECHANICS

In a game with no rules, what rules do you play by?

Character Creation

Character (or prisoner) "creation" involves nothing more than the GM coming up with each prisoner's appearance. And even that you can create spontaneously if you like. Jot notes about the character's appearance and abilities on your clipboard (or notes) as they become apparent. Every aspect of a character will only become set once it's been determined in game. Hence, the player won't know what their character's face looks like until they can find a mirror or something in which to see their reflection. The character's strength will be affected by their appearance, but won't really be known until they try to lift something or otherwise do something to test their strength.

Essentially, the character is generated as a result of play. But, once again, it should not *seem* so. To the player, your descriptions should seem to be the relation of previously established facts about the character.

How strong is a character when he finally does lift something? When a character performs some activity, roll a d6, as though rolling to see how successful the character is. The number that comes up tells you something about how well the character did. If you roll high, then he does well; if you roll low, then he does poorly. Pretend to compare this roll to some characteristic on the sheet, and then announce an appropriate result. This should be done while taking into account the context of what's already known about the character, so as not to create inconsistent results.

For example: Rex, who's already been described as large and well built, tries to push another prisoner into the pool. The GM rolls a die, getting a six, and announces, "Those muscles aren't just for show, and you easily push him in."

If the GM had rolled a one: "Despite your huge muscles, you slip a bit on the wet tile, and your push is ineffectual."

If there's nothing to tell you whether or not the character is good at something, then use the following rule.

Rule of Two Out of Three

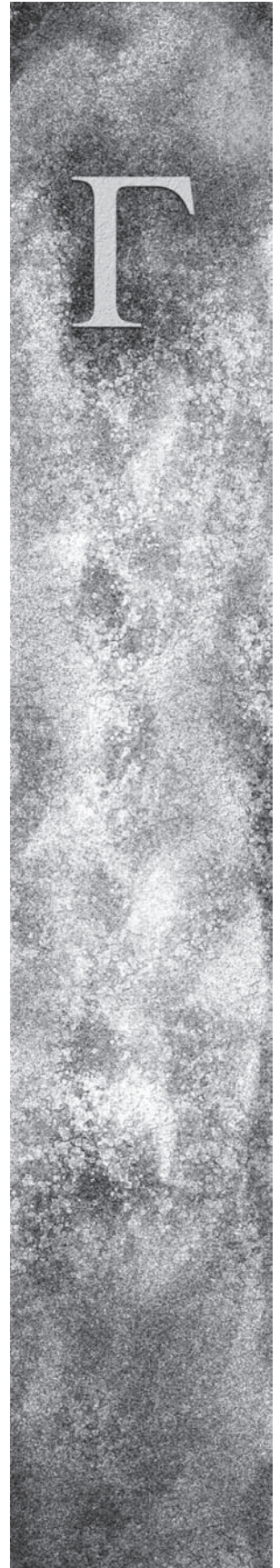
Roughly every third attempt at trying to do something new, the prisoner should fail badly. On a roll of a one or a two on the die, occasionally describe this result as the prisoner seeming to have little or no ability in that area. Always make these rulings seem consistent. Do not introduce contradictory information without an explanation for the contradiction.

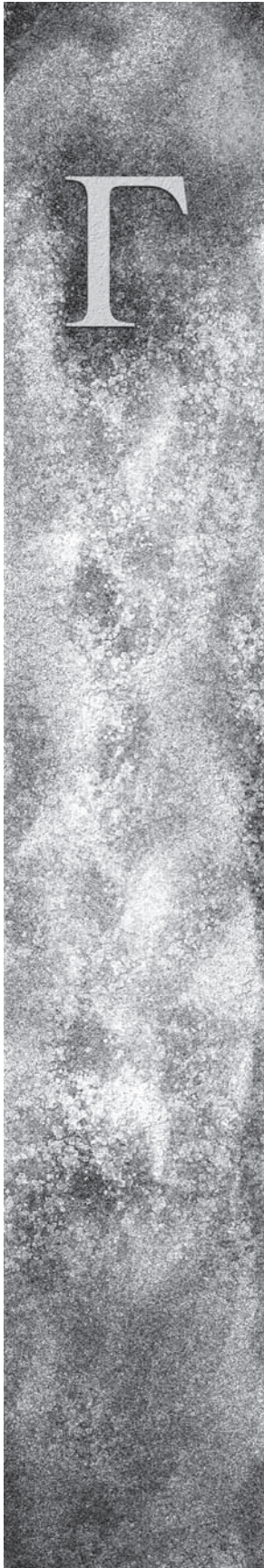
For example, a character has already been determined to be physically fit, strong, and highly agile. He tries to run quickly down a hall to test his speed. The GM determines that this is the one out of three that isn't good for this character. He decides to inform the player that the character seems to have a bad leg from what might have been an earlier injury. The character just hadn't realized it until he tried to run.

The purpose for this rule is so players don't catch on to the idea that they are determining the reality of their characters' abilities through the choices that they make. This should never become apparent; they should always be under the impression that any tests that they perform on their own abilities are exposing their predetermined attributes.

This concept should be used generally for many things in playing *Cell Gamma*. Many aspects of the setting, situation, and characters in the game start ambiguously and are defined when the GM takes cues from the players' choices and establishes the reality from these cues. Because of this, the GM should determine reality in some other way a significant proportion of the time, so that the players do not catch on to what's happening.

For example, when the characters open a door that the players have presumed to lead to laundry facilities, the GM decides that this is precisely what they find. After all, the players will only speculate on the plausible, so it gives nothing away to say that it is indeed the laundry room. If they open up another door that they assume leads outside, however, the GM decides to make it a mop closet in order to keep the game going, and because if the GM just goes with player cues for everything, players will soon catch on to what's going on.





Resolution Results

The descriptions of the results of actions are clues to a character's background. They should be handled carefully so as not to give away too much at once. In many cases, it may require several different kinds of attempts at something before a player should get a really accurate description of a particular character ability. Others may be more obvious.

"After jumping as high as you can several times, you can't seem to clear more than about a foot vertically."

It is better to be general than specific when describing character abilities. The terms "about" and "around" are your friends here: use them liberally. In general, the idea is to give the player as close to the same impression as the character would have about his abilities. So only let a player know exactly how high his character jumped if that character has a yardstick or something with which to measure his jump. For the most part, these sorts of tools are unavailable, so the characters will only have a relative idea of how well they did something, anyway.

The characters will only become aware of their abilities through attempted uses, and the players will be provided no other form of information about them. No character sheets, nothing. In fact, the GM may wish to prohibit players from taking notes (denying them any play aids may help them better feel the deprivations that their prisoners do). Definitely do not let them have dice under any circumstances.

When to Stop

After a while, if a player has determined that their prisoner has quite a number of abilities, start to make more than one out of three attempts at new actions fail. Eventually only a very few tests should succeed in showing any success in producing more abilities. Time this to when the player seems to be able to make some guesses as to the nature of the character, and when the character has some respectable abilities. Don't stop at a point that would make the character weak or useless; remember, the characters are the protagonists and will need some abilities to help them win out in the end. Just don't let them have every skill in the book. Start trailing off when the abilities start to indicate a complete character. This should all be timed with memory recovery as well (see memories).

WELCOME TO CELL GAMMA

Denizens (NPCs)

The Jailers

This is how the Betas (inmates of Cell Block Beta) refer to their captors. Not that they've ever seen one, but they just use the term to refer to whomever it is that is keeping them inside. The following NPCs represent the presence of the Jailers.

The Anonymous Voice

This Voice is one of the most important NPCs in the game. Speak in monotonous and metered fashion when representing the voice. Never show emotion, and always remain factual. The person or persons who are behind this Voice can usually see what a character is doing through well-concealed cameras. The Voice will come on and address the prisoners when it feels it has a need to. This can be used to great effect to induce paranoia. When the prisoners are conspiring, the Voice will sometimes come on and tell them to disperse. It might tell someone trying to commit suicide to stop what he is doing.

Other things that the Voice might typically say:

Do not damage the dining equipment.

Causing disarray in the cafeteria will lead to a reduction in rations.

Clean the cafeteria (followed by Zombies proffering cleaning equipment).

When finished cleaning the cafeteria, proceed to the showers.

Do not attempt to injure other prisoners.

Do not attempt to damage the robot (see Melvin, below).

All Cell Block Gamma prisoners proceed to the gym for dodgeball.

Prisoner, proceed to the laboratory.

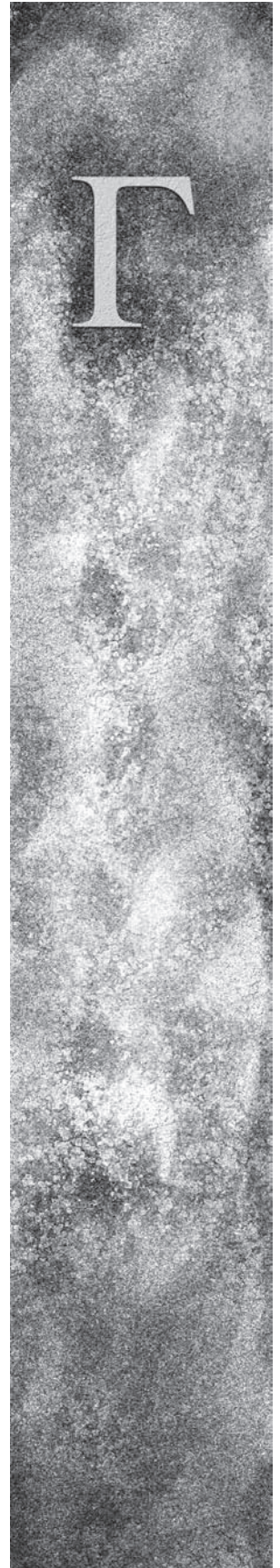
All prisoners in the pool area, enter the pool now.

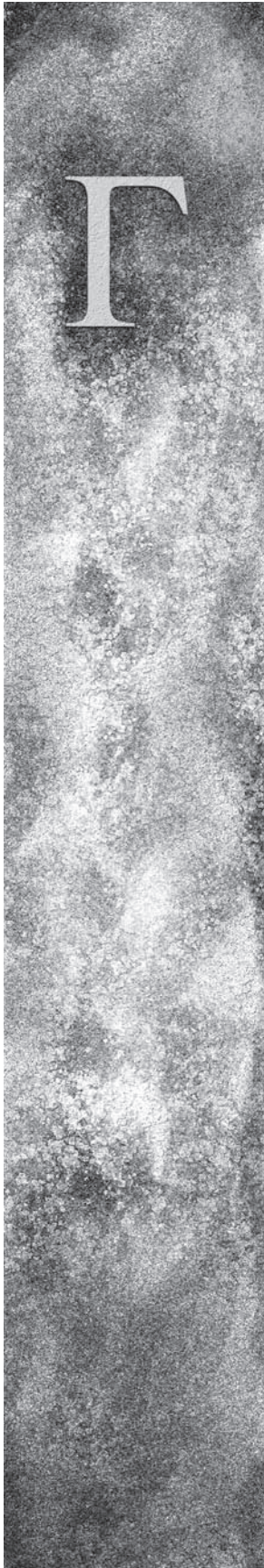
The following time period is assigned for sleep.

Melvin

Melvin is a three by three by three-foot, four-ton box of metal with eight articulated telescoping arms and a few sensors on it. It is painted with diagonal black and yellow stripes over the entirety of its variegated metal surface, the kind that indicate that it's something that's not supposed to be stepped on. This robot is dispatched to motivate recalcitrant prisoners. Those who do not want to attend an exercise will probably find themselves visited by Melvin, for example. It is nigh indestructible, and not really designed to handle people carefully.

An encounter with Melvin is likely to leave a prisoner with many bruises from where it grabbed the person in question. It is capable of lifting and moving two individuals easily, and can theoretically detain eight (one with each arm).





It can even move eight people, but would have to drag them. This would be painful if resisted. A Beta-Blocker called Fonzy (see below) named this entity “Melvin,” and it has stuck for some reason.

Melvin travels in smallish tunnels that run throughout the system, and can respond in short order to any problem that the Jailers think needs solving. There may be more than one Melvin, but no prisoner has ever seen more than one at a time. If there is more than one, they would have to be identical.

Dr. Willie

This man of indeterminate Eurasian descent is seen in his lab. He is the only (presumably) rational human that the prisoners will see other than prisoners. He, however, never says anything or shows any emotion (leading some Betas to suspect that he is the Voice) as he conducts bizarre behavior and physiognomy tests on the residents. This is what led a Beta called Slim to name him so: he gives people the willies.

The Zombies

These poor creatures seem to share the same fate as the other prisoners with the exception that whatever process was used to give amnesia to the prisoners has been taken further with the zombies. They suffer from much the same effect as if they had been given a full frontal lobotomy. They are employed by the jailers to perform menial tasks, and they follow just about any given verbal order. Abuse of the zombies by the prisoners will likely result in a visit from Melvin and suspension of “privileges”: privileges being things like food, showers, sleep, and time for the prisoner to do what they like.

These unfortunates are most commonly seen cleaning corridors to a level approaching sterility, and doling out meals in the cafeteria. Einstein, the informal leader of the Betas, has theorized that these may be other prisoners whose treatments failed, or, more direly, that they may represent what is to happen to the amnesiac prisoners after the experiments upon them are complete. You don’t think that the jailers can just release those they’ve treated this way....

Individual zombies can be identified by their appearances and by the numbers by which the Voice refers to them. Also, Slim, in his nervous manner, talks to the zombies quite a bit, and has a name that he refers to each by. Some of the other Betas, like Fonzy, have picked up on this habit; others, like Joan, find it repugnant. Following is a description of each zombie, the nickname that Slim has for each, and what jobs they are each best at (and will therefore perform most often).

No. 1— Asian male, average height and weight, 40s, “Chang,” Shower Patrol

No. 2— Polynesian male, tall, average weight, 30s, “Billy,” Paper Plates

No. 3— Caucasian female, average height, heavy, 30s, “Lena,” Glop Slopper

No. 4— Arabic female, tall, average weight, 40s, “Sandy,” Hallways

No. 5— Caucasian male, short, heavy, 20s, “Pudge,” Glop Slopper

No. 6— Caucasian male, average height and weight, 20s to 30s, “Ken,” Hallways

No. 7— Asian female, average height, slim, 30s, “Lala,” Glop Slopper

No. 8— Caucasian female, tall, average weight, 30s, “Farrah,” Laundry Runner

No. 9— Aborigine male, short, slim, 20s, “Tiny,” Hallways

No. 10— Hispanic male, average height and weight, 40s, “Pedro,” Pool Attendant

No. 11— African female, average height and weight, late teens to 20s, “Ann,” Glop Slopper

No. 12— Caucasian/Asian female, average height, heavy, 20s, “Wilma,” Gym Attendant

No. 13— African male, short, average height, 50s or older, Not named, Laundry Room

It would be easy enough to identify these individuals as zombies by the blank looks on their faces, but in addition they all wear brown jumpsuits. These are often soiled due to a zombie’s poor performance at cleaning something, or missing getting glop on a plate, etc.

Beta-Blockers

These are another group of prisoners who reside in another cell block, and who have all been here longer than the Cell Gamma prisoners. All the Betas wear green jumpsuits.

Einstein

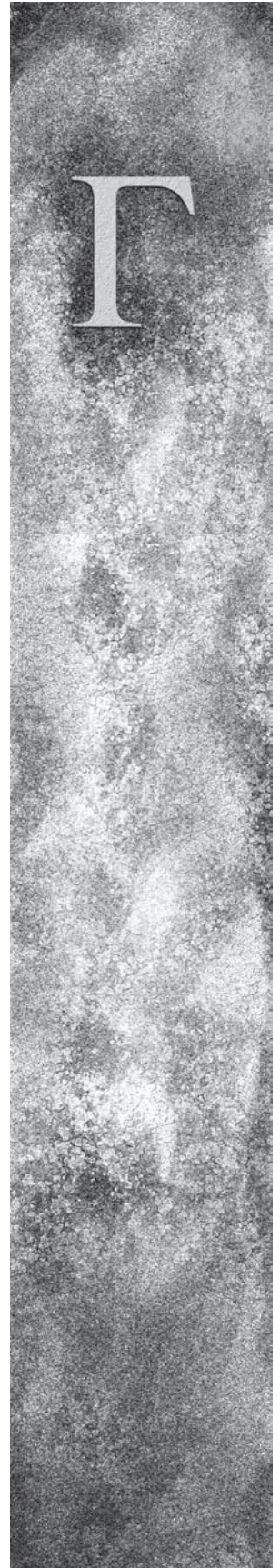
The leader of the Betas. She seems to be an extremely intelligent woman and has several theories as to the nature of the complex and the jailers. She is aging, wears glasses, and is somewhat short, apparently being of Asian descent. She is nearly constantly “fixing” her glasses — pushing them back up the bridge of her nose until they’re flat against her face where they usually promptly fall right back down again.

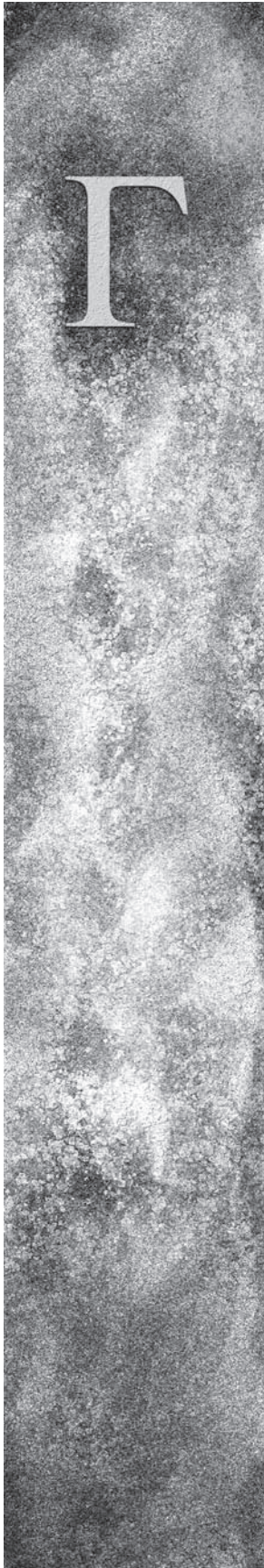
Fonzy

A short but extremely self-confident twenty-something Caucasian male. His demeanor seems odd given his circumstances, and the others don’t trust him much. This doesn’t seem to faze Fonzy in the least. Fonzy seems to smile a lot given the circumstances and often points to things.

Joan

Short for “Joan of Arc,” a name given to her by Einstein. She is constantly crusading for things, be they better food or more heat in the cell block. She is a moderately tall Caucasian and physically well-conditioned individual. When not otherwise occupied, she’ll often start exercising or stretching.





Bubba

This African male is well over six feet tall, and easily over 300 lbs. He is both fat and muscular. He was fairly gregarious until recently, when he remembered something during a game of dodgeball, a fact that Jane Doe noticed. Since then he has said very little and the jailers are concentrating quite a bit of extra effort on him. Bubba has a nervous twitch in one eye and wrings his hands quite a bit.

Jane Doe

A rather nondescript Caucasian female, hence the name (which she doesn't like). She is very empathic and can often sense how the others are feeling, even when they are hiding things. Jane paces when under stress and tends to gesticulate a lot.

Slim

A Native American about the same height as Bubba, but weighing less than half as much. Slim is very nervous and speaks very rapidly. He often goes on about nothing in particular when placed under stress (which can actually be somewhat significant itself — this free association might sometimes represent an inadvertent relaying of a memory), and he tends to slump his posture as if trying not to be seen.

Jay

This Caucasian boy in his early teens is very shy and retiring. He believes his real name starts with the letter "J," so the others refer to him by this. Jay hides behind other prisoners when he can, and glances about furtively.

Johnny Boy

This athletic and charismatic Caucasian male in his late twenties or early thirties used to be a wise-cracker and stirred up as much trouble as he could. He also shared leadership of the Betas with Einstein. Then one day he suddenly seemed to remember something (See Johnny Boy's Story) and began to tell the others. He was soon apprehended by Melvin, and hasn't been seen since. The only way the Cell Block Gamma prisoners will become aware of the above is if a Beta relates the information.

RELATIONSHIPS

For ease, you may want to rule that physical relationships between prisoners will not be allowed. Or, if you have a mature group and are willing to try it, say that they are allowed, possibly even encouraged. Be sure to have a good idea of what the group is ready for before allowing any such roleplaying, though, and, if even one objects, rule that this sort of thing is forbidden by the jailers. If this is the case, reduce any attempts at such a relationship to a harsh visit by Melvin, even worse for rape attempts.

In any case, prisoners attacking other prisoners will usually not be allowed, though the GM may allow it if it seems likely to produce some sort of progress in terms of the players discovering something. In any case, the possibility of permanent injury should be low and death very unlikely. Inconsistency is

probably as good as consistency here, as it will keep them guessing. Whatever rules you decide on, Melvin will be there to enforce them as quickly as you think necessary.

AREAS

Cell Gamma

This is actually a cell block of 10 cells each labeled with the gamma symbol on the door. This is the prisoners' home when they are allowed to sleep or rest.

Cell Beta

There is another cell block called Beta that, except for the labeling and occupants, is identical to Cell Gamma. The occupants of this block have been here longer but seem to know as little as the gamma prisoners. They have taken to referring to themselves as the "Beta-blockers."

Cell Alpha

Is there a Cell Alpha? Who resides there? Some of the Beta-blockers believe that when they learn or remember more, they will be transferred to Cell Alpha, which is what they suspect happened to Johnny Boy.

Cell Delta

This cell block remains empty. Did it formerly house inmates? Will it again?

All of the cell block areas have to be passed to get to and from other major areas (with the exception of the missing Cell Alpha), so despite the fact that the gamma prisoners will not likely enter cell block Delta, they will be aware that it is present.

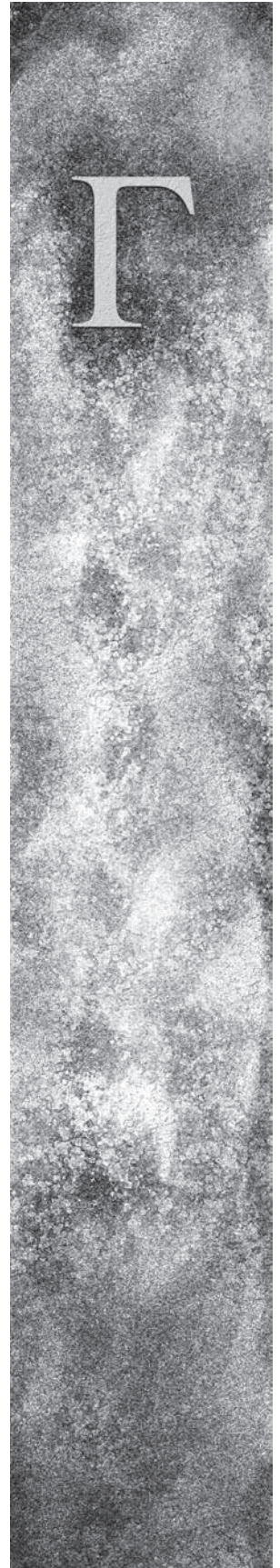
The Cafeteria

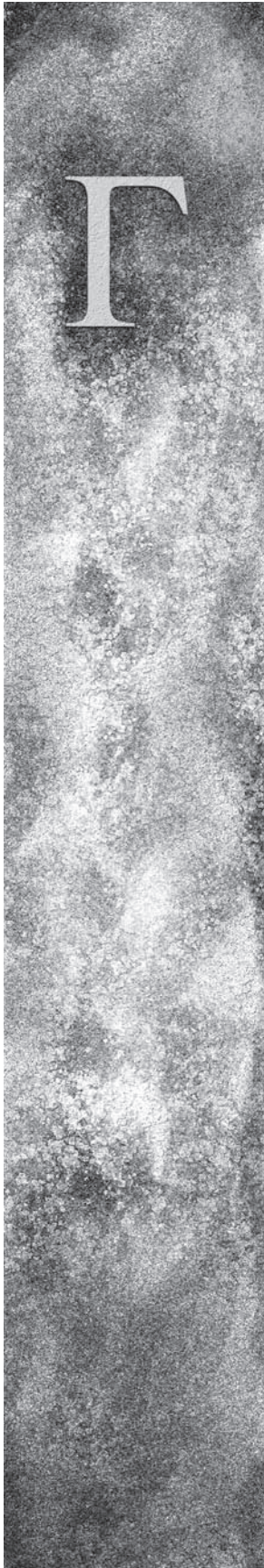
This area is near the cell blocks, and is where the prisoners get their regular meals. There are tables and stools bolted to the floor (these could be loosened with continuous attention, but this would be discouraged by Melvin). Meals are served from plastic buckets, carried by a line of four or five zombies. Each doles out a scoop of different colored glop onto a paper plate distributed at the start of the line by yet another zombie, along with a plastic spork. There are lavatories off of this area. Prisoners are encouraged to eat quickly and quietly and to make use of the lavatories while they are in this area.

There are slots in the wall for garbage, and prisoners will be encouraged by the Voice to clean up after themselves. They will not be punished for non-compliance for this, however, as the zombies will ensure that the area is clean after the prisoners leave.

The Kitchen

Just off of the Cafeteria, this is where the zombies get the food to serve to the prisoners. Prisoners are not allowed in, but they get a glimpse in occasionally as a zombie goes in or out. There are other doors in the kitchen, and other clues for those intrepid enough to venture inside (not to mention extra food). There are several apparatuses that intake raw food and dispense glop into buckets





placed beneath them. There are also utensils that the prisoners might be able to make use of. Any prisoner will, of course, be dragged back to the cafeteria by Melvin if/when they are noted as being in the kitchen (they either go there in an obvious manner, or they fail to sneak into the area).

Dr. Willie's Lab

The lab has all manner of experimental equipment. The area where prisoners are experimented on is separated from a viewing booth by a practically unbreakable wall of Plexiglas (creative prisoners may discover a way to break it, and may have a lot of motive to do so). As far as is possible, Dr. Willie will perform experiments using a complex and durable set of waldos (mechanical arms) that he controls from his partition. If more equipment is needed or something must be done that requires more range than the waldos provide, the Voice will summon zombies to aid Dr. Willie or bring in more equipment (nothing is more disturbing than having a zombie perform unwanted "elective" surgery on you while under local anesthetic, following the direction of a speechless Doctor and an anonymous Voice).

Lab Equipment Room

This is where equipment for Dr. Willie's experiments stays when it is not in use. This is just off of Dr. Willie's lab. Zombies only. There are other exits from this room, and the door is only opened when Dr. Willie thinks that his subjects are restrained. There's a treasure trove of items here that might be very useful to prisoners if they could find a way in. Think of the sorts of things that you might find in a garage or an operating room.

The Gym

This is where the prisoners spend a lot of time senselessly working up a sweat. It has all sorts of equipment. Loose equipment like dodgeballs are policed by a zombie attendant and placed into a smaller room with no exits just off of the gym.

The Pool

This is adjacent to the gym and showers. It has all the accoutrements that you'd find in a high school pool: lifesavers, hooks, kick-boards, etc. The room is somewhat dimly lit, and everything takes on a bluish undulating glow from the lights underwater.

Sensory Deprivation Tanks

These black tanks are in a quiet room down a long corridor. They are filled with a salt-water solution that allows the prisoner to float in complete darkness and silence. Even the sense of touch vanishes. A laundry runner zombie will provide towels to emerging prisoners. Usually.

The Infirmary

This is a relatively bare area with spartan beds that include restraining devices. It is usually unmanned, but a zombie will be recruited to act as an orderly or to distribute medicines when necessary.

The Pharmacy

This is where zombies get medicine, bandages, etc., for wounded prisoners. Like Dr. Willie's Equipment room, it has other exits, and so is not opened up when loose prisoners are in the infirmary. There are also many useful items here.

The Laundry

In this room is equipment (washers, dryers, etc.) for attending to the laundry needs of the prisoners. Spare pillows and jumpsuits of different colors are found in abundance. A particularly aware prisoner might catch the fact that there are six colors of jumpsuits: blue, green, brown, red, and black. The prisoners have never seen anyone in red or black before. There are other exits and items of potential use to the prisoners, so this is another zombies-only room. The door will not open unless the corridor outside is devoid of prisoners.

The Box

This is where prisoners are placed in solitary confinement. There are actually several of these boxes in an area far from the cells. The prisoner may have all of his clothing removed first. These cells are simply six foot cubic boxes with no other features than the door. These are used very sparingly, as part of the program seems to be to keep the prisoners together.

The Zombie Pen

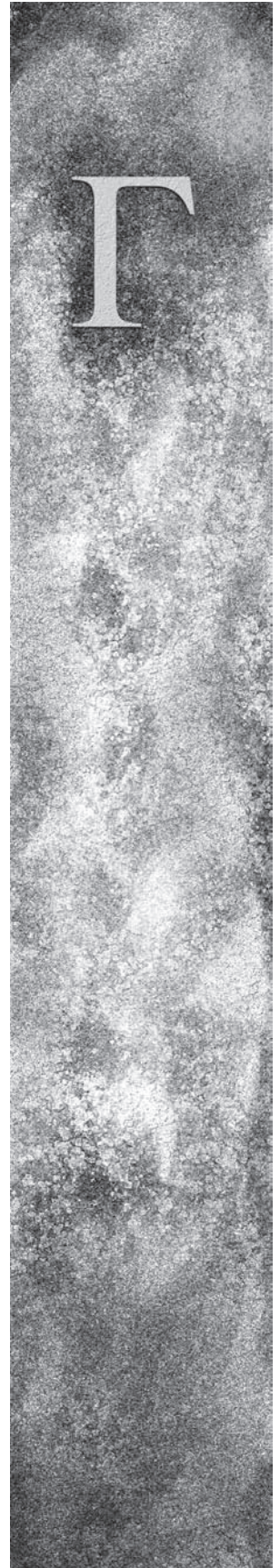
This area is near the Cafeteria. Zombies who do not have an assigned task are sent back to this room. Prisoners are not allowed inside but may rarely be passing by when a zombie enters or exits, thus allowing for a glimpse inside. There are actually beds for the zombies here, and other exits.

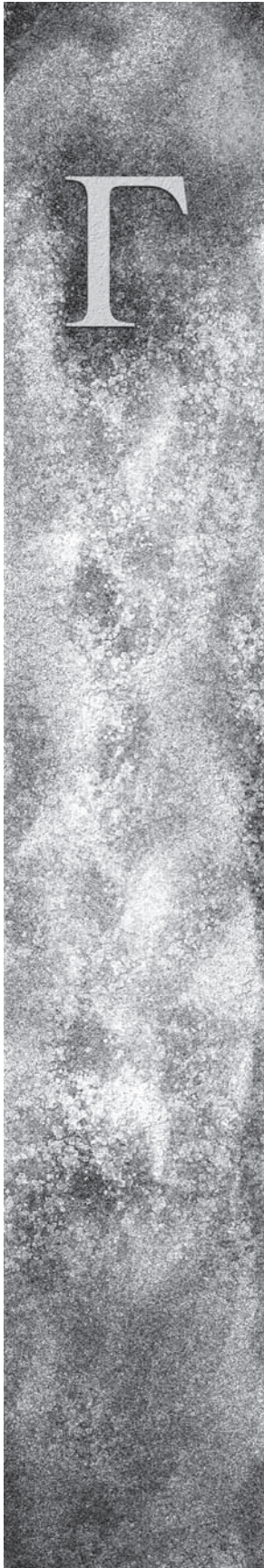
Showers

Soap is available from well-attached dispensers. There are wall-mounted blow dryers. The water is almost always just a bit too cold. Occasionally it will be extremely hot. The showers are located adjacent to the pool and the Gym.

EVENTS

These are the types of events that will occur to and around the prisoners. One of the GM's jobs is to describe these things as they happen, and use them to keep the prisoners moving from place to place. The jailers seem to feel that peer pressure is an important motivating factor in their program, and so tend to keep the prisoners together (this is also an excuse to keep the prisoners all together during play — let the players make of it what they will). If one prisoner does something unruly, the entire group might be sent to Dr. Willie's for a round of electroshock therapy, for example. At times, the Betas will be present in these activities as well, especially during meals, which seem to be served to everyone at once.





Regularly Occurring

"Night"

The prisoners are allowed to sleep, but usually not enough. Sleep deprivation seems to be an important part of the program. To that end the lights are not always turned off. Since there are no windows anywhere in the complex, none of the prisoners ever really know what time it is. This is the time when the prisoners will have the longest unobstructed opportunities to discuss things, and they may be tempted to use some of this time in this manner.

Wake Up

A klaxon blares at seemingly random intervals to wake the prisoners, after which the Voice rings in and exhorts the prisoners to head to their next destination. Those who try to sleep in will get a visit from Melvin, who will either motivate them to get to where they should be or drag them there painfully.

Meals

Often very disappointing, the meals that are served are intentionally short on calories. They also consist mainly of weird colored pastes dispensed by a line of zombies. Prisoners who eat quickly may have some small amount of time to talk. If enough people are chatting, they may assume that they will not be overheard by the microphones (sometimes this assumption will be correct).

Exercise

Trips to the gym and pool for exercise are mandatory. They seem to be designed mostly to thoroughly wear out the prisoners and just keep them busy (and some might surmise to keep them in a semblance of shape). Running, jumping rope, rope climbing, pegboard, swimming — inflict on them all stuff you hated in High School. If they protest, a visit from Melvin may give them the necessary attitude adjustment.

Showers

Usually, exercise is followed by a trip to the showers. Occasionally the prisoners will receive new jumpsuits, delivered by a zombie who will remove the old ones. Usually there is a zombie in attendance to perform clean up after the prisoners finish. Horseplay that gets out of control will bring a visit from Melvin.

Occasionally, no replacement uniforms will be provided. On other occasions there will be no showers at all. This may go on for a while.

Sensory Deprivation

This can almost seem like a delight at times, but after several hours in the tanks, the hallucinations begin. Play this out by giving each player a note that describes some random hallucination. Be creative and surreal. Try not to include anything character specific (if you want something specific, impose a serene memory flashback; see memories). This is not to say that the player will not interpret these visions and sounds; they probably will. Use this to develop the character, but use the two-out-of-three rule to ensure that the players don't realize that they are creating reality. Those not playing along

and resting quietly will require Melvin to remove them to somewhere less pleasant, like Dr. Willie's Lab or to the pool for some special activities (see below). By the way, with psychic prisoners, this treatment may cause them to manifest the ability to see into others' hallucinations.

Special Exercises

Dodgeball

This seems to be a favorite of the jailers, as they assign it regularly. It is played in the gym, and rubber balls are provided. As an incentive to win, the last person on the court gets an extra ration. Sometimes, the winner is the only prisoner who gets to eat.

Swim for Your Life

Prisoners will be told to get into the pool and tread water with Melvin in attendance. Any attempt to hold on to the ledge will prompt Melvin to push that prisoner back out to the center of the pool. This will continue until somebody drowns. The other prisoners will be required to drag this person out, and Melvin will hustle them off to the infirmary for resuscitation, which is almost always successful.

Titanic

A variation of the above in zero degree Celsius water. Usually takes much less time, and the survival rate is actually much higher.

Experiments

Experiments should mostly be designed and described so that the player might guess at the purpose of it, but not be certain. Most of these will be performed in Dr. Willie's lab. Fortunately, experiments are a relatively rare occurrence.

Electroshock Therapy

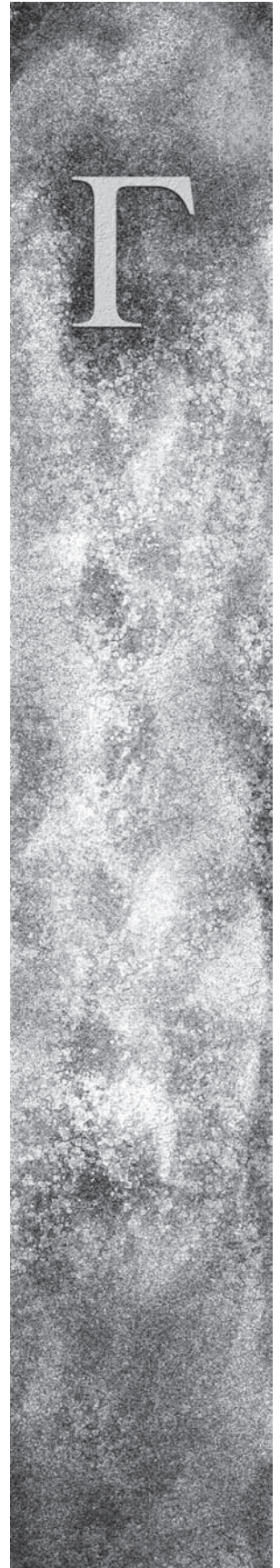
A favorite of Dr. Willie's. This can go on for extended periods of time. Occasionally, these extended bouts require a trip to the infirmary afterward.

Elective Surgery

And Dr. Willie has the only vote. Another of his favorites, sometimes it just seems like Dr. Willie wants to see what's inside somebody. Almost always sends the subject to the infirmary afterwards. Fortunately, Dr. Willie almost always uses anesthetic.

Sensory Bombardment

A Clockwork Orange anybody? Follows sensory deprivation really well, or vice versa. The images shown might be random, or they might pertain to certain facets of the character's background. The images themselves can be clues.



“PROGRESS”

GM's Role

This is an especially important couple of paragraphs that follow: read them carefully.

The job of the GM in *Cell Gamma* is twofold. First, and more obviously, the GM is there to deliver a description of the environment in which the prisoners find themselves. The GM should at regular intervals move the scene on to new territory to deliver the idea of day-to-day life in the complex. When the players seem to be out of inspiration, it is the GM's job to drum some up by having something out of the ordinary occur. See below for ideas.

The second, subtler, and more important role of the GM is to facilitate the characters' victory. This deserves restating: The GM's role is to allow the prisoners to win out in their efforts. The prisoners of Cell Gamma are the protagonists in this game and should experience minor small victories that eventually result in their achieving a goal. This is not to say that such victories should come easily, or every time, but every time a player comes up with an interesting idea, the GM should look at it from the point of view of “How might it succeed?” and go from there.

Note that this does *not* mean that the GM should come up with an escape plan or even shove opportunities under the prisoners' noses. The players are the ones who should be coming up with the theories and plans. This planning is crucial to allowing the game to come to an end; if the players don't speculate, the GM can't use their speculations to find the resolution for the game.

Memories

Memories are the most effective way to advance the plot, and should be inserted in a well-metered fashion. Keep in mind that sharing of (often highly personal) memories or hallucinations might be dangerous for the prisoners, as they may be of value to the jailers as well. At certain points, prisoners may be asked to divulge any memories that they may have had return. And they might not be asked politely.

Memories are most likely to return under stressful circumstances, especially pain. Sensory deprivation and bombardment are also good candidates. Those brought out by pain and sensory deprivation will tend to be random, whilst those brought out under sensory bombardment will probably relate to the theme of the images.

If Dr. Willie is trying to get the prisoner to remember something, he will tailor the images and sounds in a sensory bombardment episode to cause this. It will probably take more than one session of this to cause any memories to resurface, and the prisoner may well contemplate the nature of the images and why they are being shown them.

Make up random, non-specifically meaningful memories. Let the players try to determine what the memories mean. The two out of three rule applies here, as well; make every third assumption wrong, so the players don't catch on that they are creating reality. As always, appearances must be maintained to give the impression that the memories are from a predetermined past.

The memories in question need not always be the PCs'. The Betas can be just as good or better a source of memories. Any one of them could, at any time, have a memory. On the other hand, getting it from them may not be easy — they remember what happened to Johnny Boy when he started talking. Largely, getting information from the Betas is about establishing trust. Give the prisoners some opportunities to do this, and reward them for taking these opportunities by giving them the trust of other inmates.

For really advanced mucking with people's minds, you may rule that Dr. Willie and friends have the ability to implant false memories. This will make it harder for the prisoners to ever know what is real. In this case, tell them that Melvin leads them away alone. When they awake in their cell, they now have a memory that is similar to the one they'd had before, but they remember it differently now. Which was the real memory? The original one, or the corrected version? Was the memory implanted, or did it just correct itself while the character was unconscious?

It's very important that the players discuss these memories out loud, so that you as GM get an idea of their impressions and can play off of them. To that extent, if they aren't discussing these things among themselves (in character or out), give them some opportunity to do so in-character without being snooped on by the Jailers. Or, if that doesn't work, try to coax their impressions out with one of the Betas, who might even offer to trade memories. This is crucial to advancing the characters' stories.

Johnny Boy's Story

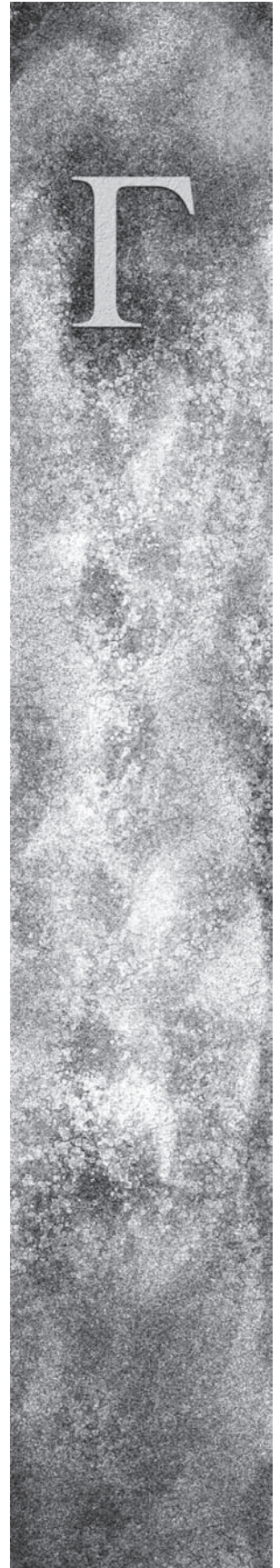
Just before being taken away, Johnny Boy spilled some important memories to the other Beta-blockers. This is an opportunity to put all sorts of information out there if it seems that the players really need it. The Betas don't know if the Jailers know that they know this information — though they suspect as much, and they will be reluctant to give the information up without something in return (the Gammas could be plants, after all). In fact, they may parcel out the story in parts to keep the trade of information a two-way street. On the other hand, they may not all be on the same side in terms of negotiations, and since they all know the information, they have an advantage in these negotiations.

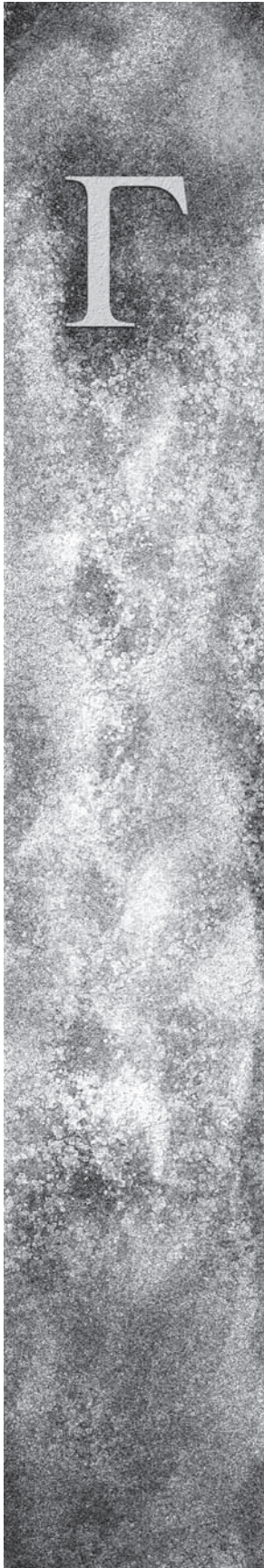
Create a memory for Johnny Boy much as you would any memory for any other prisoner. But make it more extensive as a reward for discovering the information.

Other Hints and Clues

Cameras, Microphones, and Speakers

These devices are concealed well, but not perfectly. In spaces that have high ceilings like the Cafeteria, they will be up above the reach of the prisoners. Elsewhere they are hidden behind Plexiglas shields punctured with holes in





order for sound to pass through. In the individual cells these items are in the light fixtures. It is a simple matter for a prisoner to cover the light in his cell by holding his pillow over it. This will probably provoke a muffled warning from the voice, followed by a visit from Melvin if the character persists. This is usually true of all attempts to fiddle with these devices, but exceptions could occur.

Also, there *are* dead spots where prisoners can hide from the cameras, although they are fairly rare. If a character makes a habit of not being in sight, and checks from Melvin indicates that the character just seems to be resting out of sight during these periods, the jailers might be lulled into believing that out of sight prisoners are just not in camera range (when in fact they may be elsewhere). Encourage plans like this with success.

Cultural Cues

The prisoners should easily pick up on the fact that the name Fonzy is a distinctly American reference. Actually, the TV character is probably known by a lot of people in other countries, but the players may assume that because they have this knowledge about the name (which they do have), and because it is American in origin, that they are Americans. Also, the paper plates, sporks, and ice cream scoopers used by the zombies to slop glop might indicate America. Or not. Go with whatever interpretation the players come up with for this sort of observation. Of course one of the biggest cues should be the language that the prisoners speak.

That said, using the two-out-of-three rule, occasionally a character will not know something that a player knows. Inform the player of this fact. To keep things plausible in-game, the player should play as though the character is unaware of the information. Interestingly, however, the player will not be able to ignore the information, and it will tend to inform his speculations anyhow. That is, there's nothing wrong with out of character speculation, and that information is just as important to you as in-character speculation in terms of knowing where to go with the plot.

Further, knowing that you don't know something is knowledge of a sort, and can be used in deduction. That is, if a character doesn't know some American cultural knowledge, but other characters do, he might assume that he's a foreign spy, for instance.

The Plant

One of the Betas is a plant. Allow some suspicion on the part of one of the players to pin the plant tag on one of them. Fonzy is the obvious choice, but he is better used as a red herring; any assumption that Fonzy is a plant will be wrong. This is a good way to throw off any ideas that the players might be getting that they are creating reality. A good alternative is Bubba. His recent memories may just be a ruse to get someone to trade memories, which he then passes on to the jailers. Or somebody else may work as well or better. The plant may actually become an aid to the prisoners if he decides to defect for some reason, or somehow leaks some information. The prisoners might be able to get a lot out of him if he is effectively grilled.

A Zombie Snaps Out of It

Suddenly a zombie starts asking a character questions. Note, this will essentially render the zombie in the same boat as the prisoners. And soon after the occurrence, the zombie will be taken off either to return as a zombie again, or never to return. This can be used to impart clues of various sorts before the zombie is “fixed.”

Open Doors

The automated system for the doors is not perfect, and occasionally doors will become stuck or obstructed. Under normal circumstances, Melvin or a zombie will be dispatched to fix the problem. On occasion, though, a door might fail and not be noticed. This might include the doors to Melvin’s tunnel network.

Mic Left On

If the players need a real morale boost due to the seemingly hopeless nature of their situation, have this occur. A different Voice starts speaking over the complex speakers just after an announcement made by The Voice. It should go something like this:

The Voice: “All Cell Gamma inmates return to your cells now. <Click><Click>”

New Voice: “So, like I was telling you, I had drawn to a straight flush and Marge comes in and interrupts the game, harping on me for not taking the garbage out....”

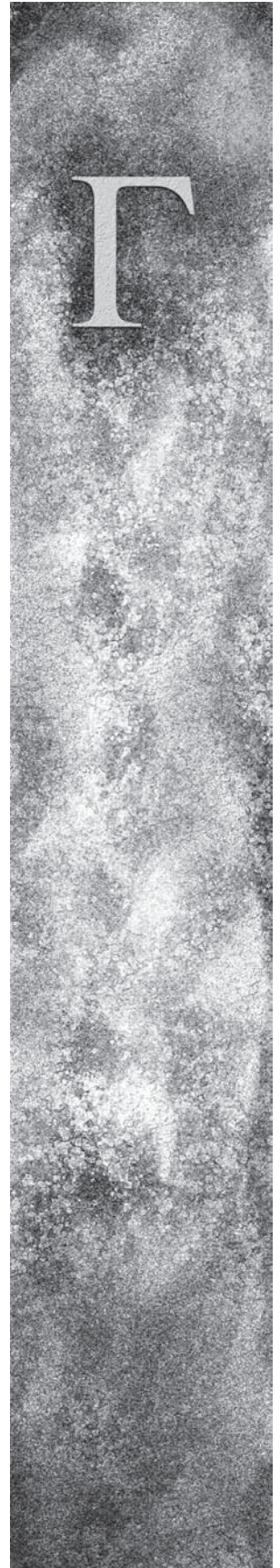
The Voice, disturbed, interrupts, “The mic’s still on! Shut it off...”

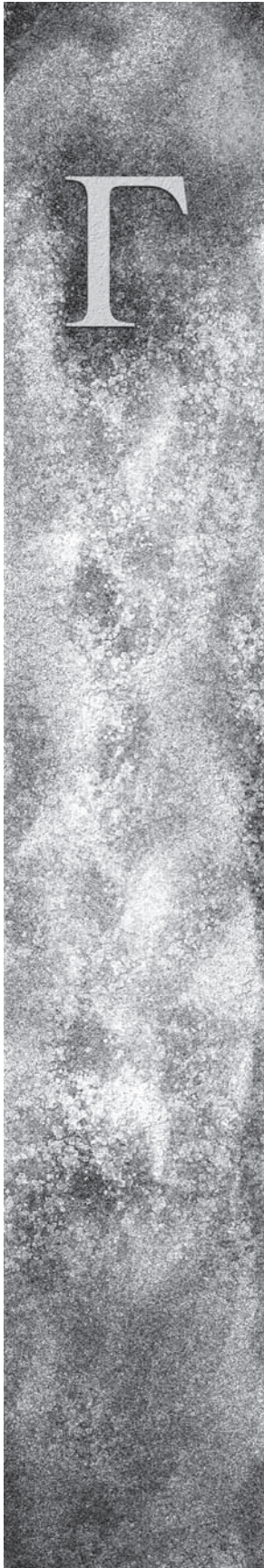
New Voice: “Oh, shi<click>”

BREAKDOWN

The players will, of course, not have to endure the unpleasantness of the treatment that their prisoners receive. This may lead to them constantly trying to buck the system. While this sort of resistance is good, it must have a price. If this sort of thing becomes consequence-less, then the players might have their prisoners going off and trying weird things constantly.

The jailers will come up with punishments for many behaviors that they disapprove of. When this happens, be sure to note the nature of the punishment on the clipboard and give it a breakdown rating of from one to ten. The rating should depend on the nature of the punishment, which will tend to have a correlation to the severity of the infraction. Over time, and with victories, a character can lower his accumulated breakdown. Be sure to note this as well. If a character ever gets ten or more points, he loses it. The interpretation is up to the GM, but whatever happens, the player temporarily loses control of the character until he can recover some breakdown points.





Sample infractions, punishments, and associated breakdown points:

Failing to work hard during exercise: loss of a meal, 1 pt.

Refusing to go somewhere: a dragging by Melvin, 2 pts.

Molesting a zombie: thrashed by Melvin and no dinner, 4 pts.

Breaking a camera, mic, or speaker: solitary confinement, 5 pts.

Shorting Melvin out by getting him in the pool somehow: electroshock therapy, 7 pts.

Killing another prisoner: creative deformative surgery by Dr. Willie, 10 pts.

Play fast and loose with this. It's not intended to be a hard rule, but just a way of ensuring that the player feels a consequence of driving the character too hard. Be sure to allow the character a chance to recover quickly, so he gets back in the game.

There can be an up side to breakdown. As a sort of reward for having tried so hard, the GM may decide that during the breakdown, the character remembers something, probably something that has some sort of similarity to whatever caused the breakdown. This should not be used with every breakdown, but every so often.

IMPROVISE

You will undoubtedly wish to add your own touches to *Cell Gamma*, and many parts of it have been left intentionally ambiguous so as to encourage this. If you were only to use the ideas already provided, you might not get very far. Create new events. Maybe there is a door the prisoners have not yet seen that leads into a new area. You can introduce new prisoners: you might even want to suddenly populate Cell Delta with a whole new group of prisoners. Melvin could go haywire, kill all the zombies, and require normal humans to come in and retrieve him.

The important thing here is to make sure that you do not give the game away. Under no circumstances should you create opportunities for escape that the players did not come up with. They have to make their own victory.

That said, your improvisations should be designed to push the game along. Add things that inspire the players to speculate on their character's natures and get them thinking about escape or other solutions to their prisoner's incarceration.

It Dawns On Someone

No GM is perfect, and some players are deviously intelligent. It may occur that a player will realize that they are creating the reality of the game. Be on the lookout for the "Oh, I get it now" face or for players who start to be more obvious about their ability testing. If you do detect this, try to get the player alone and ask what they think is up (often players will contact you surreptitiously when this happens because they don't want to spoil it for the other players). If a player

has guessed right, you may want to let them in on the secret, in which case the game becomes an Open Game for them (see the Open Game Option, below). Ask them to keep the secret between the two of you to preserve the enjoyment of the other players. Alternately, if you think you can get away with denial, go ahead, but you may have to alter your tactics somewhat.

It may occur that a player determines what is going on, but does not let on to anybody that they know what is up. If so, more power to them. If you can't detect it, the other players probably can't either.

If the game is blown wide open, you have two options: let everyone start playing the Open Game, or switch to a Predetermined Game. To do this, just take all that has been learned so far and determine a concept to go with. From then on, the game is played as if it had started as a Predetermined Game.

CLIMAX

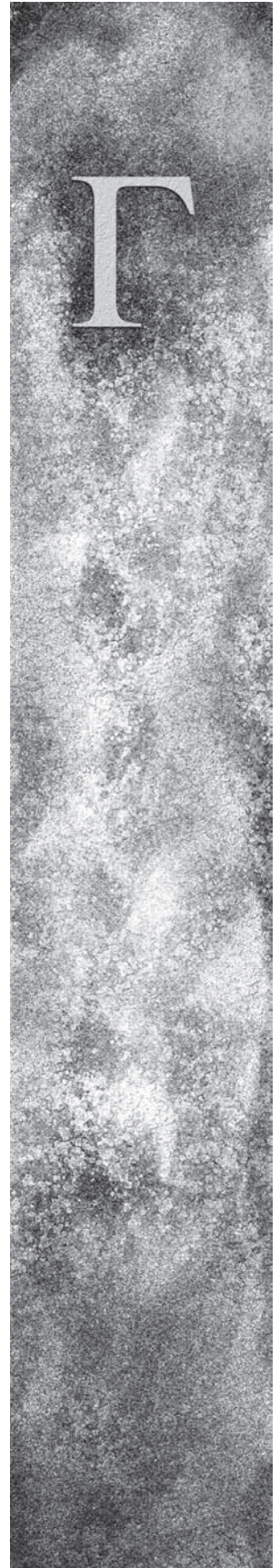
A game of Cell Gamma should run its course in only a few sessions, possibly as few as one. Remember it is your job as GM to accelerate things if they get slowed down. One good method is to have an introductory session where everyone gets used to the setting, one for development, and one for the climax. If you feel you can sustain it longer, by all means throw in failed escape attempts and all sorts of other scenarios. But eventually, you'll want to get to a climax.

Escape

This can be an extremely satisfying conclusion. You may want to work in the destruction of the jailers as well for a complete victory. It is up to you to decide what is beyond the walls of the "known" complex in this case.

Brazil Ending

Named for the movie, this ending involves the character victory being solely an internal one. In the external world, the prisoners may still be incarcerated, or even dead. But inside they have discovered truth and remained true to themselves. This may only be applicable for certain groups of players. If it seems as though the prisoners are resigned to their fate, but have made a declarative statement that they intend merely to remain defiant in their incarceration in perpetuity (in manner much like Sisyphus), then you could declare a successful end to the game right there.



CONVERSIONS AND OTHER IDEAS

Settings

Cell Gamma need not be set in the modern day. It transports very easily to futuristic settings and, with a little modification, other genres.

In a fantasy setting, for example, the complex is in a necromancer's dungeon. Melvin is renamed Malvar and is an eight armed iron automaton. Dr. Willie becomes a mute Igor in a torture chamber. And the zombies, well... are zombies. The prisoners may be heroes who attempted to penetrate the lair of the necromancer and got caught.

The Predetermined Game Option

For those who want less of a challenge than the normal game represents, or who just don't like the deception that it entails, the Predetermined Game option exists as an alternate way to play. This version entails coming up with the reason for the prisoner's incarceration prior to play. Prisoner abilities should all be written up using your preferred system. Since you'll be doing all the rolling, good suggestions include "light" systems like *Over the Edge*, or *FUDGE*. Then, when resolving actions, you use this system normally but keep the characteristics and rolls secret so that the players are still getting the idea of their prisoners' natures from observation, rather than off a sheet.

Following are some example concepts behind the prisoner's incarcerations. In most of these concepts, the Betas are all assumed to be incarcerated for the same purpose as the prisoners. Having them all be plants, or in for another of the concepts entirely, is not a good idea, as it would leave the Gamma prisoners with no allies at all.

Experiment

In this concept, the prisoners are all just normal people who have been snatched by the government or a large corporation in order to conduct experiments on them. In this scenario, at about the same rate as the players regain memories, the nature of the experiment will come out. Some Potential experiments:

- Testing the effects of stress on individuals. Scientists will use the data for the purpose of determining whether or not the public can handle the release of some "Big Secret."
- Testing how stress can be used to create better soldiers. The government wants to design programs to create super soldiers.
- Testing the amnesiac effect itself. It is intended to be used as a weapon, and they want to know how long the effects last and what stimuli will negate the effect. They'd prefer not to have to use it on "lobotomy" setting for everyone.

- Drug testing. The amnesiac effect was caused by some drug (the zombies were from earlier tests) that has some other intended effect. Possibly the prisoners have been infected with biological weapons, and the jailers are testing the antidote (which explains really well why there are no untreated humans about to get infected). Or maybe the drug has some very valuable pharmaceutical effect and they are trying to get rid of the amnesiac effect. Or possibly the amnesiac effect isn't related, but just added so the truth of the complex never gets let out.
- The prisoners are all part of an experiment designed to produce psionics or superpowers. These will, of course, be very handy in escaping when they manifest. Possibly the prisoners already have these powers, but just don't remember them and can't manifest them. Either way, the amnesiac effect is a by-product of the process that must be overcome. Possibly that's why superheroes wear costumes in this world, to prevent revelation of the fact that they are former abductees who still have amnesia. Alternatively, one of the stress tests above could produce these effects by accident. Be creative in finding ways to explain game events.

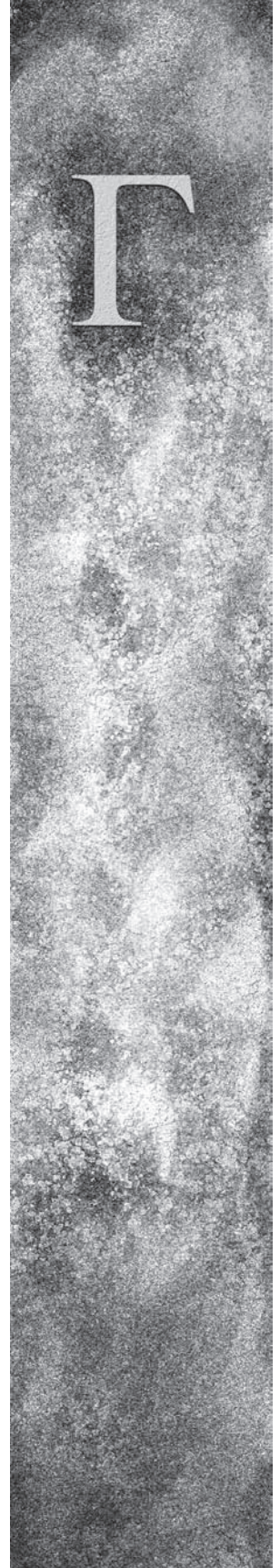
Punishment

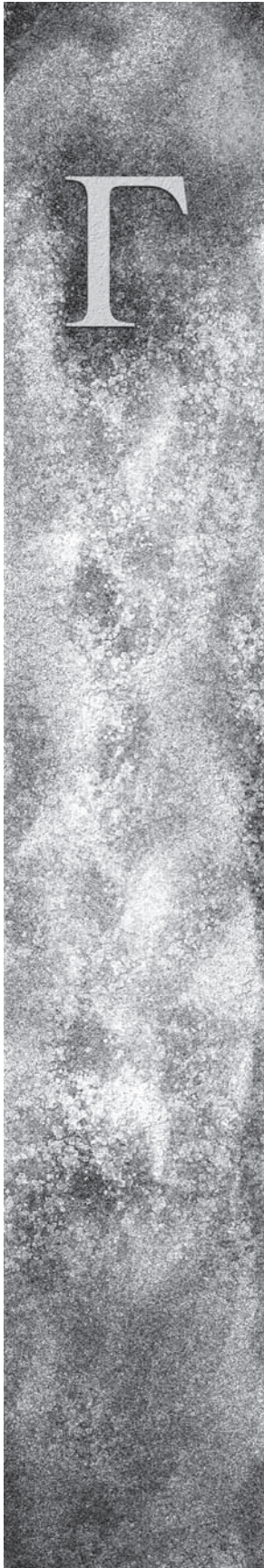
This could all be some sort of elaborate punishment for some sort of exotic crime. Make the nature of the crime pretty heinous, to merit such attention — probably at least murder, and likely worse. Also, this will make a big impact as it is revealed. The process of remembering will eventually reveal the crime. The intent of the jailers is to make the prisoners feel especially strong remorse by remembering their crimes first and motives later. This may just be a specially mandated form of punishment by a technologically advanced society, or it may be a method to cause rehabilitation. This catharsis through reverse revelation may cause shocks that will snap the character into a healthier mind frame, the intent being to allow the character back into society.

This would all hinge, of course, on how a player decides to have the prisoner react to the revelation. If the decision after the treatment is that the character is remorseful, then the prisoner may be released. But a more interesting reaction will be if any of the prisoners decide that this is cruel and unusual punishment, and that they refuse to change their personalities. The player may choose to have the prisoner remain true to himself, even though that self may not be a nice person.

Spies

The prisoners are spies who have secret information that they would never, due to incredible willpower and sense of duty to nation, divulge. The idea of the amnesia treatment is to make them forget their allegiances and remember only the information. So the exercises are designed to produce memories of just the information in question. This can then be extracted much more easily. During the course of remembering things (see Memories above), if they come across one that would reinstate their sense of duty, that memory will be tampered with. If things have gone too far, that individual may have to be removed to Cell Alpha.





Super Spies

The prisoners are all spies, in fact part of the best spy organization in the world. They all have abilities on par with James Bond, Matt Helm, Flint, Napoleon Solo, Simon Templar (the Saint), etc. They have been incarcerated by an evil organization bent on world conquest. The amnesia treatment is intended to make the prisoners all blank slates so they can be indoctrinated in the ways of the evil organization.

This has to be handled especially carefully, but would be interesting. The organization would have to be portrayed all along as fighting to unite the world against oppressive national governments and establish a benign world government. The jailers would seem to be trying to break them of an assumed allegiance to the aforementioned organization. The final session would involve the organization then “breaking in” and “rescuing” the prisoners (the prisoners could seem to be helping from inside, causing a distraction, perhaps, or opening an important portal). The prisoners would then have the added difficulty of determining this other truth (memories may lead them this way) and then thwarting the evil organization’s plans.

Superheroes

The prisoners are superheroes who have been captured by a super-villain whose plans they have thwarted time and again. See superheroes under the Experiment concept, above.

This then plays out like Super Spies, above.

Or, the experiments could be designed to determine the source of the character’s powers so that the villain can steal them, or donate them to his evil henchmen. The climax to this sort of concept optimally occurs after the prisoners have lost their powers, and must use their wits to get them back, faced by now vastly superior foes.

Aliens

The prisoners are from another planet, solar system, dimension, whatever. They are being held for similar reasons to the Super Spies concept, trying to get information from them. Or the jailers just might be trying to study them, and the amnesia effect is designed to prevent them from using special abilities that they would otherwise have.

The prisoners would believe that they were human (and indeed they would seem so to a cursory examination) but after a while the nature of the experiments and telltale signs might tip them off. They might at first think that their lack of fingernails is an effect caused by the amnesia effect, but they might start to question that when they start to shed all their skin.

Or maybe the amnesiac effect is caused by alien DNA being injected into them in order to create hybrid human-aliens. Slowly they will start to mutate and eventually may develop cravings for linoleum. Why hybrids? See *The X-files*. That is, it’s all part of a government deal with the aliens to ward off invasion.

The Open Game Option

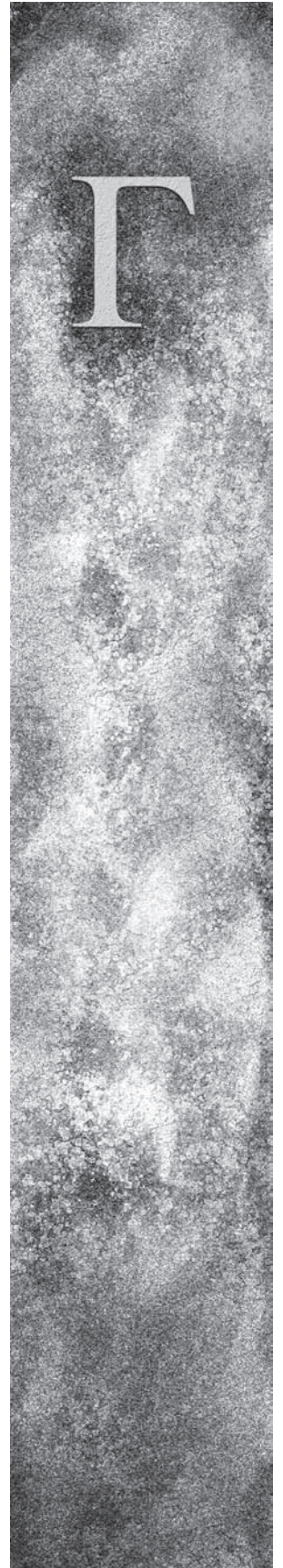
After playing through once, or if you think that your group would be better predisposed to it, you can play an Open Game. In this case, the players are informed that their ideas about their interpretations of memories, hallucinations, and experiments, etc., all create their reality.

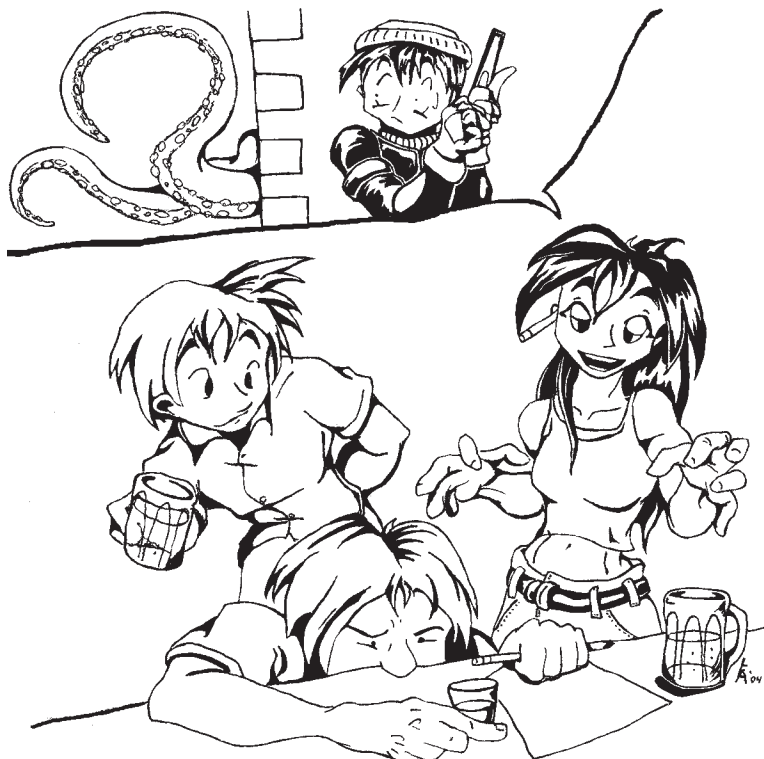
This needs to be handled carefully by the players and GM. Things should develop slowly, with the first theories proposed being considered very far from the truth, and possibly with the use of the two-out-of-three rule, randomly generated with dice. The GM should continue to give random input, and the players should consider carefully their characters' interpretations. Over time the truth will hopefully become a new synthesis of the ideas presented. Make it a goal to come up with a reason for incarceration that is different from any you've read about here or played.

The Author humbly suggests trying the closed setting first, since once you've revealed the secret of the players creating their prisoners' reality, you can never go back.

Campaign Start

As is implied in many of the Predetermined Game concepts, escape from the complex may just be the beginning of a campaign. As a way to begin a campaign, *Cell Gamma* provides an opportunity for players to get intimately acquainted with their characters before heading out into the wide world.





Over the Bar*

**How much are you willing to drink
to get what you want?†**

A small Over-the-Edge inspired Universal Bar RPG, which may be played in any location where alcoholic drinks are easily available.

Character Generation

- Pick a **Major Ability** for your character: This is generally something broad, like a profession, or something that grants a particularly strange or versatile ability.

Examples: Ninja, Can Fly, Fratboy.

- Pick a **Minor Ability** for your character: This is something more focused, that offsets your major ability.

Examples: Look of Doom!, Drives Well, High Capacity.

- Pick a **Hobby** for your character: This is quite closely defined, but can be anything you like.

Examples: Dancing, Martial Arts, Card Games.

- Pick a **Deficiency**: This is something that your character is bad at.

Examples: Low Drug Tolerance, Socially Inept, One Eye.



*Apologies to Mr. Tweet

†Apologies to Mr. Edwards.

Task Resolution

If your character has an ability relevant to a task, she can perform that task without difficulty. If she has no relevant ability, you must take a drink to accomplish it. If she has a deficiency, then you must take two drinks, whether she has a relevant ability or not.

Conflict And Opposed Challenges

If two players are competing for something and are both at the same skill level (skilled, unskilled or deficient...) they both drink. Whoever finishes the drink faster wins.

Drinking At Other Times

If your character is not actively attempting something, you can still drink. You just don't gain any in-game benefit from it.

Advancement

Advancement is mainly handled by the increased alcohol tolerance of the players.

Ending the game

When two or more participants have become too drunk to continue, the game ends. Someone calls a cab, everyone goes home.

Appendix 1: Rules for Teetotalers

Any participant who does not care to drink can be assigned a "capacity" by the other players. This can be determined medically by body weight, body mass index, body type and height, or it can be randomly assigned by whoever cares to do so. Every time the teetotaler cares to "take a drink," they merely deduct one from their present "capacity." When they are out, they are considered "too drunk to play" for the purposes of the game.

Capacity can be tracked with coins, bottle caps, or other such devices, or it can be tracked on a napkin, or it can be tracked in the head of said teetotaler, provided that they are considered trustworthy. (It is not recommended that other participants attempt to track these values in their heads, for obvious reasons.) Some groups find tracking capacity with M&Ms, peanuts, or some such tasty thing adds an appropriate element of temptation.

To keep in the spirit of the game, the Teetotaler can drink some non-alcoholic drink at the appropriate times.

In competitive challenges, it is recommended that the Teetotaler drink something reasonably difficult to down quickly, like carbonated soda.

In the endgame, the Teetotaler drives people home, which is cheaper than calling a cab. The only exception to this rule is if the Teetotaler cannot drive or no car is available.



Appendix 2: Advanced Play Rules

- For physical actions drink beer, whiskey, or vodka.
- For mental actions / perception, drink some other hard liquor.
- For social actions, drink some fruity mixed drink.
- This can be extrapolated to other types of conflict.

Critical Acclaim

"Brilliant!"

—Dana Johnson, charter member of the Estrogen Brigade

"Fantastic. A game that can only get better as the night goes on."

—Emily Dresner, author of many fine RPG products

"Oy! For invoking my name in association with this terrifying thing you have created, I insist you attend traffic school just on general principles."

—Ron Edwards, creator of the critically acclaimed *Sorcerer* RPG

Shameless Advertising

Look for *A Shot in the Dark*, the first *Over the Bar* supplement, due out whenever I awake from my drunken stupor.

Over the Bar 2nd Edition ©2003 Ben Lehman

1st Edition Publisher and Production Coordinator: Tim Alexander

2nd Edition Publisher: Luke Crane

2nd Edition Editor: Jon Nichols



INDEX

1. What Kind of Game is This?	52
1. What kind of game is this going to be?	31
2. What is Everyone Playing?.....	32, 52
3. Link Everyone, Create Situation	34, 53
4. Define Characters Further.....	37, 55
5. Determine Statistics	39, 56

A

About Pagoda	96
About the Agency.....	67
About the Author.....	59
About the Author.....	65
Acknowledgements, The Agency	95
Acknowledgements, Cell Gamma	112
Action Rolls	72
Actual Play, Pretender	50
Advancement, Over the Bar	137
Advancement and Combat, Pretender	49
Adversity and Injury, Pretender	47
Africa	81
Agency, The	66
Agency's Most Wanted	93
Anonymous Voice	117
Aliens	134
Advanced Play Rules	138
Areas, Cell Gamma	121
Are There Opportunities for Character Flaws to Come into Play?	85
Asia	82
Aspects	97
Author, Snowball	19
Awareness, Discernment	24
Awareness, The Agency.....	74

B

Before You Begin, Snowball.....	10
Beta-Blockers	119
Bobby Harris	71
Bonuses.....	77
Bosses	88
Box, The	123
Brainstorming.....	86
Brazil Ending.....	131
Breakdown	129
Bubba	120



C

Cafeteria, The	121
Cameras, Microphones, and Speakers	127
Campaign Start	135
Car chases.....	76
Cell Alpha.....	121
Cell Beta	121
Cell Delta	121
Cell Gamma.....	111, 121
Central and South America.....	82
Character Creation, The Agency	69
Character Creation, Cell Gamma.....	114
Character Creation, Snowball.....	10
Character Generation, Over the Bar	136
Chi	101
Choose bonuses and flaws	70
Choose skills	69
Cindy.....	42
Climax, Cell Gamma.....	131
Climaxes, The Agency.....	64
Combat, The Agency.....	74
Combat, Pagoda.....	102
Conflict and Opposed Challenges	137
Consensus	31
Conversions and Other Ideas	132
Cookie Monster virus	56
Credit, Pretender	59
Critical Acclaim, Over the Bar.....	138
Cultural Cues	128
Custom Bonuses and Flaws.....	70

D

Damage: Scratches and Wounds	75
Danger: Other Forms of Damage	76
Defining the Roles	23
Defining Traits, Snowball	11
Denizens (NPCs)	117
Designer's notes, Pretender	58
Designer's Notes and Acknowledgments, Discernment	27
Dice, Pretender	43
Difficulty Roll Example	101
Directing, Agency.....	80
Directors, WTF?	62
Dodge Ball	125
Do the Main Antagonists Engage You?	85
Dr. Willie	118
Dr. Willie's Lab	122
Drinking at Other Times	137

E

Einstein	119
Eldritch Horrors	92
Elective Surgery	125
Electroshock Therapy	125
Elemental Magic	105
Elements	96
Elements of a Good Scenario	84
Ending the game, Cell Gamma	137
End Credits, WTF?	63
Enlightened Monk	108
Episode	62
Escape	131
Europe	80
Event Flowchart, Snowball	19
Events, Cell Gamma	123
Events, Snowball	12
Evil Sorcerer	109
Examples of Character Creation, Agency	70
Example Major NPCs, Pagoda	108
Example of Combat, The Agency	75
Example of failure, Agency	73
Example of success, Agency	73
Exercise	124
Experiment	125, 132

F

First Episode, WTF?	62
Final Word	110
Flaw , Pagoda	99
Flaws, Agency	79
Fonzy	119
Further Episodes, WTF?	64

G

Game Concepts, WTF?	61
Game Rules, Agency	72
Getting Things Started, Agency	83
Ghosts	92
GM's Introduction, Cell Gamma	112
GM's Role, Cell Gamma	126
Goons	87
Group Action	48
Gym, The	122

H

Heroic Bonuses and Flaws	77
Hex Norton Horror	86
How is this Game Played?, Discernment	22
How to play WTF?	62
How will the Characters Influence Events?, Agency	84
Hypotheses	25

I

Improvise	130
Infirmity, The	122
Infractions, punishments, and associated breakdown points:.....	130
Injury, Pagoda.....	103
Inner Strength	105
Introduction, Pretender	29
Introduction, Agency	67
In Too Deep	86
Is it a Plot Suitable for the Setting?	85
Is It Fun?	85
Is the Scenario Flexible Enough to Allow Players to Alter Events?	84
It Dawns On Someone	130

J

Jailers	117
Jam Sessions	64
Jane Doe	120
Jay	120
Jenna Styles	71
Joan	119
Johnny Boy	120
Johnny Boy's Story	127

K

Karma	72
Keeping Things Going	83
Kitchen, The	121

L

Lab Equipment Room	122
Last Straw	106
Laundry, The.....	123
Laying, Playing, and Resolving Scenes	23
Layout, Design and Print Production	2
Let's Play	57
Lilith	56
Lola	57
Looking for Inspiration?	95

M

Meals	124
Melvin	117
Memories	126
Mic Left On	129
Middle East	82
Minions	88
Multiple Scholars.....	22
Mummies	91

N

New Players	42
Night	124

Non-Player Characters	107
Non-Systems	49
North America	81
Notable Members of The Agency	93
Note for Pedants, Pretender	31
Note on Damage, Agency	76

O

One Step Forward, Two Steps Back	14
Open Doors	129
Open Game Option	135
Opposed Actions, Big Creatures and Ganging Up	73
Optional Categories, Pretender	44
Order of Actions, Discernment	22
Other Hints and Clues, Cell Gamma	127
Other Settings, Agency	95
Out of Order	15
Over the Bar	136

P-Q

Paths	98
Pharmacy, The	123
Plant, The	128
Playing the Game, Agency	68
Plotting Noble	109
Pompous Magistrate	108
Pool, Snowball	10
Pool, The	122
Predetermined Game Option	132
Pretender	29
Prisoners and Resolution Mechanics	114
Progress	126
Punishment	133
Putting It All Together	48

R

Reginald Forbes II	71
Regularly Occurring (Events), Cell Gamma	124
Relationships, Cell Gamma	120
Relics of Power	110
Renowned General	109
Rerolls, Pretender	46
Resolution Results	116
Roll, Pretender	43
Rounding It All Off	83
Rounds and Actions	74
Rule of Two Out of Three	115
Rules for Teetotalers	137
Rules of the Game, Pagoda	100
Running a Scenario	22

S

Scenarios, Agency	82
Scenarios Seeds, Agency	86
Scene, WTF?	62
Scene Resolution, Pretender	43
Scenes and Story, Snowball	13
Schizo-Storytelling	61
Scoring, Discernment	26
Sensory Bombardment	125
Sensory Deprivation	124
Sensory Deprivation Tanks	122
Series, WTF?	62
Series, Agency	87
Settings, Cell Gamma	132
Shamans and Sorcerers	104
Shameless Advertising, Over the Bar	138
Showers	123, 124
Sifu Fung	71
Sign of the Zodiac	99
Simon Drake	70
Single Subject, Discernment	21
Example of Play, Snowball	16
Slim	120
Snowball	9
Sorcerers	92
Special Exercises	125
Spies	133
Spirit Magic	104
Star, WTF?	61
Start, Pretender	31
Starting at the End (or in the Middle), Snowball	15
Stylized Sixties	80
Success and Failure, Agency	73
Superheroes	134
Supernatural Antagonists, Agency	90
Super Spies	134
Swim for Your Life	125
System, Pretender	42

T

Task Resolution , Cell Gamma	137
Taunts	74
Thanks, Snowball	19
There is No Cell Gamma	112
The Show Must Go On	61
Titanic	125
Tone	113
Transition	75
Turn	62

U

Uriel	56
Unnamed Animal (Terry)	57

V

Vampires	90
Victory and Defeat	13
Villainous Bonuses	89
Villainous Flaws	89
Villains, Agency	87
Villains and Karma	89
Virtue from Fault	106

W-X

Wake Up	124
Welcome to Cell Gamma	117
Werewolves	91
What's Going On?, Cell Gamma	111
What's Happening in the World?	80
What are the Characters Like?	84
What do Your Players Enjoy Doing?	84
What is Going On, Cell Gamma	112
What is Snowball?	9
What is this Game?, Discernment	20
What you need to play, WTF?	61
When to Stop, Cell Gamma	116
Where is the Conflict?, Agency	84
Where is this Game Played?, Discernment	21
Who Plays this Game?, Discernment	21
Why No Press?	8
Will Every Character Be Able to Contribute Something to the Story?	85
Wrinkles, Pretender	47
Writers, WTF?	65
WTF is WTF?	60

Y

Your World, Pretender	30
You Only Live Forever	86

Z

Zombie Snaps Out of It	129
Zombie Pen	123
Zombies	91, 118

