

STORY ENGINE

—UNIVERSAL RULES—



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Games

STORY ENGINE

- UNIVERSAL RULES -



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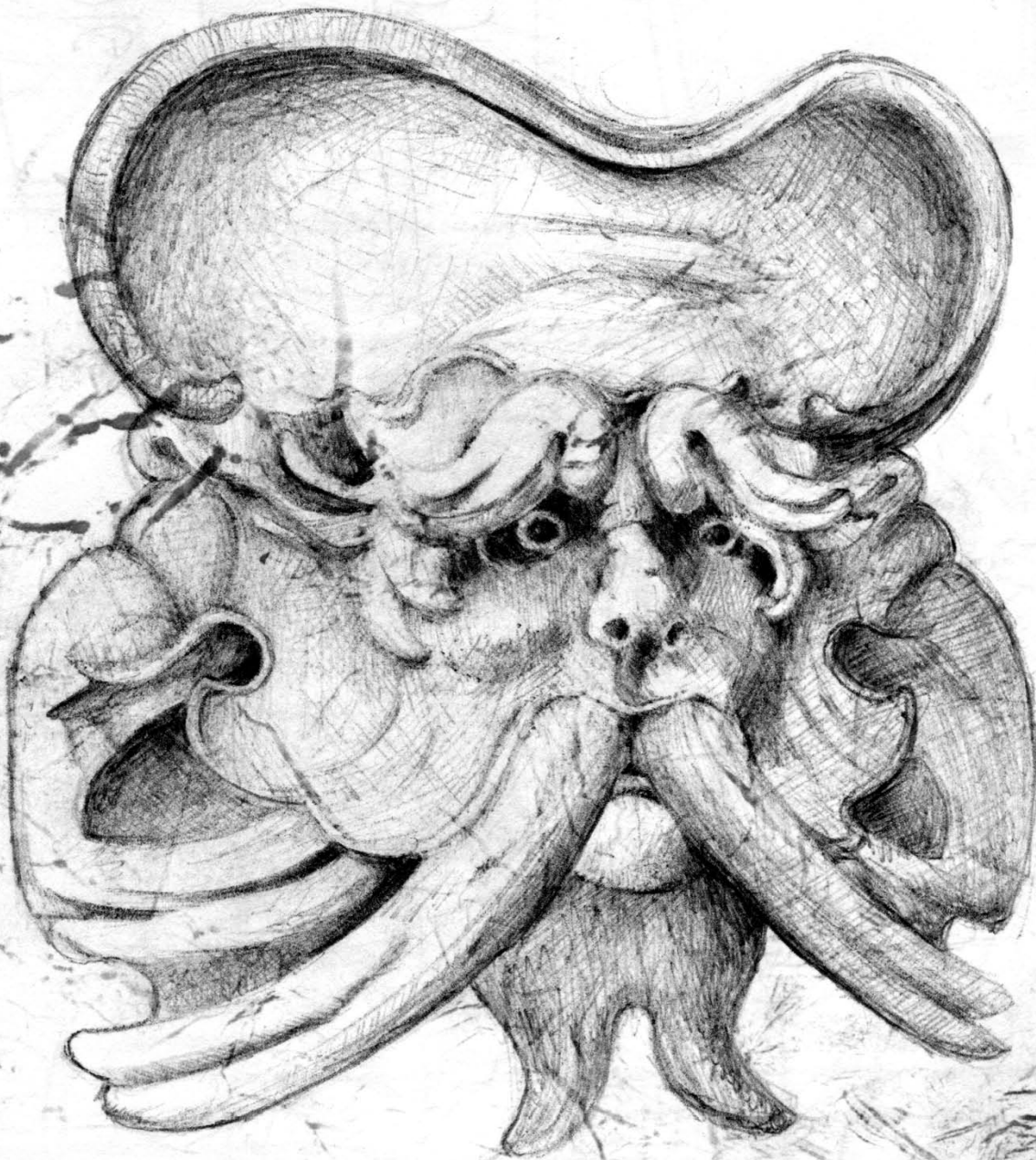
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Introduction

Welcome!

Storytelling is one of the oldest living traditions, continuing today in the form of theatre, literature, television and film. Roleplaying games evolved their own version of storytelling by piecing together a tale based on the outcome of dice rolls and player choices in the form of a game. Story Engine breathes new life into this multi-authored game format, infusing it with the fluidity of oral tradition while liberating it from the confines of round-by-round game mechanics.

Collaborative Storytelling

Collaboration is the heart of Story Engine; narrators and players work together to tell the story of their characters. Players pool their dice when they team up, and work with the narrator to describe the outcome of scenes based on a success range.

Scenes

In Story Engine action is resolved as *scenes*. Each scene advances the story, framed by the goals of the characters without pre-set lengths or segmented rounds. Players can spend resources and bid with opponents to increase their die pool, and even insert sub-scenes in the form of Quick Takes. Since scenes are resolved as a whole with one large roll of the dice, action moves quickly to ensure a fluid story and fast pace.

Characters as Roles

Characters in Story Engine are written using adjectives and phrases, creating unique roles with real personality. Called Descriptors and Traits, these adjectives are used to determine the die pool and can be invoked to gain advantages when they suit the scene. Like a novel the different elements of the character all contribute to the story — even flaws and foibles can be used this way in the form of Quirks.

A Relative Scale

What might be easy in one genre might be hard in another: in some genres people die of syphilis but in others they can survive a fall off a cliff. Story Engine provides a relative scale to rate challenges and characters so that the rules reflect the “reality” of your story.

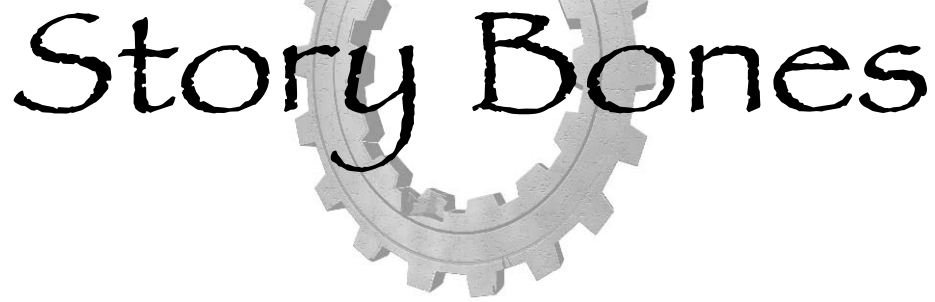
The Plug Ins

This book includes two “plug ins” — one for a cinematic Wild West setting called *Six Guns & Whiskey* and the other for the Maelstrom game world. The plug-ins help illustrate how to use these rules with *any* genre. The high fantasy adventure, *Dublin’s Tomb*, is included as well to demonstrate how dungeons can be run using Story Engine.

Evolution

Story Engine came into existence in 1996 as the rules system for *Maelstrom Storytelling*. It was redesigned for universal play in 1999. One of the first games to truly handle roleplaying as a story game, it was the first set of rules that was “scene based” — an idea that has become more and more popular as story games escape the confines of “round based” rules. Story Engine also further evolved the mechanics of “adjective based” characters, an idea that had appeared in games like *Theatrix* (Backstage Press 1993) and *Over the Edge* (Atlas Games 1992) as well as various diceless systems.





Story Bones

This is the bare bones version of the rules system, stripped to its most fundamental parts. It's fully functional and ready to run – though like any “lite” version of a game, the options have been removed and the complexity has been distilled to the main elements. For experienced roleplayers or ambitious beginners, you can skip to the full version of the Story Engine on p.13.

The core of any roleplaying game is the story. Game turns in these rules are played out as scenes within the story. Most scenes can be “role-played” without any rules, but when the outcome is not obvious or a challenge is needed, a handful of dice is rolled to determine the outcome of the scene. Think of each player as an author and the rules as a tool to allow them to help tell the story of their character.

In essence, the Story rules are about choosing when to spend resources to get additional dice. There is an heroic element to it because the players get to choose WHEN to use their resources, saving them for critical or climactic moments.

Creating a Character (check out the character sheet on p.134)

Choose your Concept

What's the central concept of your role? Are you a treasure hunter? A self-involved dilettante or a lost soul seeking enlightenment? A roguish hero or a criminal mastermind? This concept will help you play your role, and the narrator can suggest concepts that will work well in the story.

Choose your Race and Gender

If you know the races of the world your story is set in, then choose one for your role. Otherwise, best to stick with a human role to keep it easy. Pick a gender and an age, too, while you're at it. If you can draw, sketch your character. Even if you can't draw, try to get a clear idea of what your role looks like. Big eyes? Dark hair? Stocky? Long fingers?

Choose your Descriptors

Choose four adjectives or phrases to define your role. Are you tall? Are you friendly? Are you fiendishly clever? One of these four things should be a quirk or flaw — one of those wonderful failings that we all have, such as *near-sighted* or even *pouts at the drop of a hat*.

These four phrases are called Descriptors. The flaw is referred to as a Quirk.

Traits

Choose three knacks or skills that help define your role. Are you good with machines? Are you a talented pianist? Can you walk a tightrope? In a game about piracy, you may want Traits like *Great Balance*, *Swordplay* or *Improvised Sailing*, and in a story about court intrigue you may want Traits like *Diplomat*, *Dueling*, or *Gossip*.

RULES OVERVIEW

The Basic Rules:

Characters have a handful of phrases or adjectives called Descriptors. Whenever there is a situation that requires a dice roll, the players add up their Descriptors to determine the amount of dice they can roll (called the Die Pool). Characters have an extra die as well, called the Base Die. The goal is to roll enough odd numbers (called Odds) to beat the Target Number.

The outcome is decided by how close the roll was to the Target Number. This is the Success Range.

The players can add dice to the throw by spending Descriptors (see Burning Descriptors). They can also set some of their dice aside as automatic Odds (see Traits).

Bidding takes place whenever the scene involves an opponent – in these scenes the Target Number is determined by the total number of Odds rolled by the opponent. Both sides are able to spend Descriptors (by "burning" them) to raise their dice total.

Narrator

The narrator is the person who runs the story. They determine the outcome of events, prepare the plot, and play all the characters in the story that the players don't control.

Characters

Each player plays a role (called a *character*) in the story. The story in the game usually revolves around these characters, who are the central part of the game. Each player should think of themselves as the main author for their character during the game, deciding what that character does and how they behave as the story goes on.

Dice

Any kind of dice will do, because all that matters is whether they roll an odd or even number. Odd numbers count towards your total and even numbers are ignored. When taking actions, the player tries to roll a certain number of Odds, determined by the Target Number. If they roll that many Odds or more, they succeed in whatever it is they are trying to do.

Actions

Actions taken by your character may or may not require a roll of the dice. The narrator will tell you when you need to roll, though generally rolls are only required when you're attempting something difficult or risky.

You'll get these Traits at the basic level, called Weak Traits, but they can later be raised to Mild and Strong Traits.

Special Powers

Starting characters don't have Special Powers unless the narrator allows it. Players will have a chance to develop special powers through Story Points as the game progresses. Special Powers include Telekinesis, Shapechanging, Night Sight and Witchcraft (see pp.23-25), or other "super-natural" abilities or gifts. Like Traits, they are unique to each game and depend on the kind of game you'll be running.

Scenes

Open and Rolled

Scenes that require a dice roll are called *Rolled Scenes*, and scenes that do not need to be resolved with dice are called *Open Scenes*.

We generally encourage you to treat most scenes as Open unless the actions of the players are risky or the outcome is unpredictable. Every so often an Open Scene should be rolled to lend an additional element of chance to the story.

The Die Pool

The Die Pool is the number of dice the player rolls to attempt actions in a Rolled Scene.

All characters have a Base Die. In addition they add a die for each Descriptor (not counting Quirks). This total is their Die Pool. Players can increase their pool by working together (combining Die Pools) or by "burning" Descriptors and Quirks (see below).

For purposes of the Die Pool, all Descriptors count towards the total. In the basic game this means all starting characters have the same Die Pool.

Actions

Whenever anyone declares an action in a Rolled Scene, the narrator determines a Target Number or Opposing Total. If any characters are working together on the same action, they get to add their Die Pools together for the roll.

At this point, before the dice are rolled, Descriptors may be burned for additional dice, and extra dice are awarded for strategy or advantages on either side.

Once the final Die Pool is decided, the dice are rolled. If the roll is against a Target Number, then the goal is to roll a number of Odds equal to or greater than the Target Number. If the roll is against an Opposing Total, then the goal is to roll more Odds than the opponent does (re-roll in case of ties). The number of Odds rolled GREATER THAN the number needed are called Target Odds, and they determine the success range of the action.

Burning Descriptors and Quirks

Players can get additional dice for scenes by "burning" Descriptors and Quirks. To do this the player has to use the Descriptor in a sentence to show how it might help the character: "I'm so *nimble* that I can get under the portcullis before it closes" or "I'm *friendly* enough that the bartender tells me what I need to know." Unless it's a real stretch, the player gets an extra die for their pool for that action. Players can burn as many unspent Descriptors as they want per action. Quirks are used the same way, although it's usually harder to find a use for them: "I'm so *near-sighted* that I avoid the sorcerer's magic gaze" or "I'm such a *glutton* that I think my stomach can handle the poison."

Descriptors can only be burned once per session. Put a check mark next to it to indicate that it's been used. Burnt Descriptors still count towards the Die Pool.

Using Traits

When a Trait is appropriate to the action, it gives the character Auto Odds. In a fight, Traits like *swordsman*, *boxer* or *tactician* would most likely be appropriate (depending on the kind of fight). In a chase scene Traits like *horse riding*, *streetwise*, and *climbing* might all be appropriate. The narrator is the final judge, however, and Traits like *jack of all trades* and *improvisation* should be discarded in favor of more specific (and more imaginative) Traits.

Auto Odds are dice from the Die Pool that are set aside and counted as Odds without rolling.

Weak Traits allow 1 Auto Odd, Mild Traits allow 2 Auto Odds and Strong Traits allow 3 Auto Odds.

Target Numbers and Opposing Totals

These are the guidelines for Target Numbers. The Target Number reflects how difficult the task is in itself: advantages like ambushing or careful aim add dice to the character's pool instead of lowering the Target Number (see Getting Extra Dice).

Example: Ashland is trying to pick a lock. The lock is not a very good one, so the Target Number is 2 (Easy). The fact that Ashland has lock picks doesn't lower the Target Number; it gives him extra dice.

When an opponent is involved, the Opposing Total is used. The number of Odds rolled by the opponent(s) determines the Target Number.

Getting Extra Dice

When a character has an advantage while performing an action they are awarded extra dice. Advantages come from circumstances (ambushing, good cover in a firefight, advantage of ground, etc). If they have a disadvantage, dice are added to the Opposing Total instead of deducting from the character's pool (in the case of a straight Target Number, the Target Number is increased).

Generally, each good idea or tactical advantage adds a die for all characters that benefit from it. A really good idea or major tactical advantage gets 2, and an amazing idea or overwhelming tactical advantage gets 3.

EASY (2 Odds required)

This task shouldn't be taken for granted, but with a little effort can be achieved.

HARD (3 Odds required)

This task is tricky and should be taken seriously. With good effort and focus it can be completed.

REALLY HARD (4 Odds required)

An attempt is not likely to succeed, and may even be dangerous. With a lot of luck and a great effort it can be accomplished.

EXTREMELY HARD (6 Odds required)

This is a feat for a specialist. With training you might stand a good chance, otherwise it would take a lot of luck and an amazing effort to accomplish.

IMPOSSIBLE (8 Odds required)

This task seems almost impossible. No one short of a highly trained professional even has a shot at this.

These are guidelines — the Target Numbers can be whatever seems fair for the situation. (This chart is different in the full rules — see "Hard Rate" p.35)

Descriptors for Items: In addition, special items and equipment can have their own Descriptors. A sword could have “hits like thunder” and eyeglasses could “see like a hawk.” Only special items have Descriptors, either because they are incredibly well designed or because of their magical nature. These Descriptors can be burned, and they count towards the user’s Die Pool as long as they are being used (the sword only adds “hits like thunder” when wielded, and the glasses only add “see like a hawk” while worn). See Props & Equipment on p.45 for more.

Success Rate

For every action there are “degrees of success (or failure)” determined by the Success Rate:

Complete Success	(4 or more Target Odds)
Basic Success	(2-3 Target Odds)
Partial Success	(0 to 1 Target Odds)
Partial Failure	(Missed by 1)
Basic Failure	(Missed by 2-3)
Complete Failure	(Missed by 4 or more)

Complete Success: A stunning success! The action was accomplished fully and with style!

Basic Success: A solid success. The action was accomplished, but without much room to spare.

Partial Success: A minimal success. The action was accomplished, but badly!

Partial Failure: A minimal failure. The action failed, but not by much.

Basic Failure: A solid failure. The action failed and nothing was gained.

Complete Failure: A stunning failure! The action failed completely and embarrassingly!

Injury

If failure in a scene can lead to injury, the narrator should make that clear before the dice are rolled. The number of Health Levels lost due to injury is determined by the success range of the scene: for every Target Odd rolled, the losing side takes a level of injury. In group rolls the injuries can be given out randomly if it’s not obvious who was hurt.

Health and Injury

Characters are always healthy unless they’ve become injured or ill over the course of the story. Characters have Health “levels” that affect their abilities as follows:

Healthy: Other than minor scrapes, bruises or the common cold, a character at Healthy is considered to be fully functional for purposes of the game.

Injured: An injured (or very ill) character is in bad shape, having suffered a bad wound or powerful illness. Injured characters don’t get their Base Die.

Out: A character who is Out is either grievously wounded or seriously ill. These characters are unable to do anything at all.

Dead: Dead characters are dead. Though the player may bring in a new role or take over another role, this character is considered to be dead for purposes of the story.

Since the characters start at Healthy, two injuries would take them to Out, and one more would kill them.

Healing: Characters generally heal a Health level every 3 to 5 days if given proper care. Strong medicines, special herbs, healing rituals, futuristic technology and magic can all help speed up the process. The narrator should use their judgment and the healing time should reflect the kind of injury the character sustained.

Story Points

At the end of each game the narrator awards Story Points for roleplaying and plot advancement. These points can be used to give the character additional Descriptors and Traits (or even Special Powers) and may also be used during games to replenish up to four “burnt” Descriptors.

These are guidelines, and narrators can give more or less as they see fit. In general, characters should get 1-3 points a game. Each character gets 1 point for each of the following events:

- 1. Making it through the game session alive.*
- 2. Learning something important about their character or the story they are in.*
- 3. Major contributions to the success of the group by the character.*
- 4. Plot success: award this point to characters that accomplish major goals.*
- 5. Chapter's end: During long-term stories, there may be “chapters” within the story. Whenever the narrator feels as though a “chapter” has ended, award a point to all the characters.*

Adding to the Character

As the story progresses the characters develop and grow. To reflect this, Story Points can be spent to add more Descriptors and Traits, improve Traits, and buy Special Powers as follows.

Descriptors

The cost of a new Descriptor is equal to the total of your existing Descriptors (not counting Quirks). *A starting character would have to spend 3 Story Points for a fourth Descriptor, and 4 Story Points for a fifth, and so on.*

Quirks

The cost of a new Quirk is equal to the total of your existing Quirks. The maximum amount of Quirks that can be bought this way is equal to half the character's Descriptors (not counting Quirks). *A starting character would have to spend 1 Story Point for a second Quirk, and 2 Story Points for a third (providing they had at least double this amount of Descriptors).*

Traits

It costs 3 Story Points for each level of a Trait, including the first. A Weak Trait costs 3 Story Points, a Mild Trait costs an additional 3 Story Points, and a Strong Trait costs an additional 3, for a total of 9 Story Points for a Strong Trait.

Special Powers

If your narrator allows them, Special Powers cost 7 Story Points. Some Special Powers require special Traits as well, like the Magic Arts power that uses Flux Traits to determine the specific powers of the Arts. (Special Powers are covered in the full rules).



RUNNING SCENES IN STORY BONES

The time frame for actions varies based on the situation and the action itself. Speed and movement is just a matter of common sense; if it helps, the narrator can draw a diagram of the scene to help visualize what's going on.

1. Declare Actions

The players announce what actions they are taking. There is no particular order to declaring actions, as long as everyone gets a chance to declare.

2. Determine Target Numbers

The narrator decides on a Target Number for the actions being taken. If there is an opponent, the narrator says so and the Target Number will be decided by an Opposing Total instead.

3. Assign Extra Dice

The narrator assigns extra dice if either side has an advantage.

4. Determine the Die Pools

Players add up their Die Pools, adding any extra dice that were assigned in step 3. Players attempting the same action combine their pools. At this point players can burn Descriptors for extra dice.

5. Roll the Dice

The dice are rolled and the Odds are added up (Auto Odds are set aside and counted as Odds).

6. Determine the Success Range

The narrator works with the players to determine what happened based on the degree of success.

Example with Starting Characters:

Jorthid and Ashland are trying to get away from some thugs who have chased them down an alley. Ashland tries to kick open a door so they can get away while Jorthid holds off the thugs.

1. Ashland is kicking in the door. Jorthid is fending off the thugs. The two thugs (as a group) are attacking Jorthid and Ashland.

2. The Target Number for kicking in the door is 2 (Easy). The Target Number for the fight is determined by the Opposing Total.

3. The thugs have an extra die each because they're armed (clubs and knives).

4. The thugs combine their pools for a Die Pool of 10 (including their extra dice). Ashland has a Die Pool of 4. Jorthid burns a few Descriptors (because he's desperate!) for a Die Pool of 7.

5. Ashland rolls 3 Odds. The thugs roll 5 Odds. Jorthid rolls 4.

6. Ashland has a Partial Success and barely manages to get the door open. Jorthid has a Partial Failure and gets hit in the head with a club for an injury.

Translation to the Story Engine

This section is included to help you convert Story Bones to the Story Engine (and vice-versa). The main difference is the simplification of scene resolution. In the main rules scenes can have almost any scope or scale and events can be resolved in a variety of ways.

In addition to many options and added features of the complete rules, *Aspects* (see below) are used in scenes to help give context to the Descriptors and provide areas of prowess/focus for characters.

Terminology

<i>Story Bones</i>	<i>Story Engine</i>
Traits	Trait Affinities
Flux Traits	Flux Affinities
Target Numbers	Target Number/Hard Rate
Special Powers	Prime Affinities/Gift Affinities

Mechanics

Aspects: Descriptors need to be assigned to one of the four different Aspects (Mind, Matter, Spirit, Chaos) (see p.19).

Die Pool: The Die Pool is determined differently, based on the Aspect of the scene (see p.28).

Target Numbers: The Target Numbers have a different scale (see p.35).

Story Points: There are more uses for Story Points, and costs are different (see pp.43-45).



RUNNING SCENES IN STORY ENGINE

This is a summary of scene resolution described in the main rules in the following section. This only applies to Rolled Scenes (see p.28). Most scenes in a game are Open Scenes and don't need dice.

1. Frame the Scene

Players announce their goals and the actions they are taking. Based on this, the narrator frames the scene. Quick Takes are announced at this time. If this is a Straight Roll, the Hard Rate (Target Number) is announced at this point.

2. Resolve any Quick Takes

Any Quick Takes are resolved (see p.40). If the outcome affects the scene, it may add Extra Dice in step 4.

3. Assign an Aspect

The narrator chooses the Aspect (Mind, Matter, Spirit, Chaos) for the scene.

4. Assign Extra Dice

Any modifiers to the die pools are determined in this step, such as from Impacting the Scene, a Hard Rate or as a result of Quick Takes.

5. Add up the Die Pools

Everyone adds up their dice. In a Bid Scene, bidding takes place (see p.29).

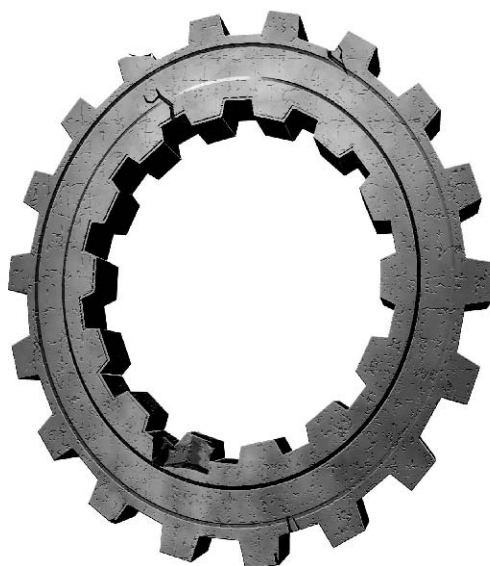
6. Roll the Dice!

Everyone rolls their dice, adding up all their Odds.

7. Determine the Success Range

The die roll is compared to the Success Rate (see p.36) and the actions are resolved (see p.41).

That's all there is to it. Take a look at pp.31-34 for some examples of how it all works during a game.



Story Engine

Story Engine was designed to foster true storytelling games without inhibiting creativity or imagination. It is a set of fluid rules that help guide the story along, moving it from one scene to the next in a cinematic style. Since the game system is relative, it can adapt to any style of game or milieu. Through Prime Affinities, characters can have special powers unique to each story and each game setting.

You may want to look at the basic rules first on page 3 to get a feel for how the system works. They're a scaled-down, fully playable version of the main rules in this chapter.

The key to the Story Engine is that action is resolved as a whole scene, focusing on the goals of the character(s) instead of segmented "combat rounds." Players spend resources to increase their chances of success and can combine their dice when they work together.

Game turns in the Story Engine are played out as scenes within the story. Most scenes can be "role-played" without any rules, but when the outcome is not obvious or a challenge is needed, a handful of dice is rolled to determine the outcome of the scene. Think of each player as an author, and the rules as a tool that allows them to tell the story of their character.

Rules Summary

Characters have a handful of phrases or adjectives called Descriptors (see Descriptors p.19). Whenever there is a situation that requires a dice roll, the players add up the appropriate Descriptors (see Aspects, p.19) and that determines the amount of dice that can be rolled (called the Die Pool, p.28). Characters have an extra die as well, called the Base Die. The goal is to roll enough odd numbers (called Odds) on the dice to beat the Target Number (see Hard Rate p.35).

The number of Odds rolled will determine the success range (see Success Rate p.36).

CONVERSION FROM THE FIRST GENERATION RULES

If you're familiar with first edition Maelstrom Storytelling, there are a few changes you will want to be aware of: 1.Secondary Affinities are called *Trait Affinities*; 2.Weak Descriptors are called *Quirks* and can be burned like a Descriptor; 3.Successes are called *Odds*; 4.The Arts & Sciences now use *Flux Affinities* and have been redesigned (see the Maelstrom Plug In for more). Narrators may also want to look over the section on Flux Levels pp.81-82.

IF YOU'RE USED TO OTHER RPGS

If you play other roleplaying games, the following analogies might help you get started: in our rules, characteristics and attributes are called Descriptors, skills are called Trait Affinities and special powers are called Prime Affinities. It may help to understand that everything in the Story Engine is relative - hence the use of words like "affinity." The key difference, though, is in scene resolution. Most games use segmented actions (often called "rounds"), which take a specific amount of time (often as short as 2 to 10 seconds, depending on the game). The rules of segmented systems quantify everything based on what is possible within these segments. The Story Engine, however, breaks events down into "abstract" scenes of varying length. The length is determined by the circumstances, and the exact amount of time is not important. This frees up the game by focusing on the goals and actions of the characters instead of the physics of each movement and gun shot. It's a cinematic approach, focused on the story instead of the numbers.

(see also Rules & Using Other Systems p.61 for more on rules and how they impact a story)

The players can add dice to the throw by spending Descriptors (see Burning Descriptors p.21). They can also set some of their dice aside as "Auto Odds" (see Trait Affinities p.21), and insert Quick Takes for special actions within the scene (see Quick Takes p.40).

Bidding takes place whenever the scene involves an opponent – in these scenes the Target Number is determined by the total number of Odds rolled by the opponent. Both sides are able to spend Descriptors (by "burning" them) to raise their dice total.

Characters (see p.15)

A character is a role (or *persona*) in the story controlled by a player. A role that is not controlled by a player is called a non-player character, or "NPC." The player who runs the game is not called a player, instead, they are referred to as the "narrator."

Characters are explained first before the other elements of the game. Characters are the central focus of the game just as they are in most stories. Players usually play characters from the Main Cast, but there are also Supporting Cast and Extras (see the sidebar on p.18).

Narrator

The narrator is the person who "runs" the game by guiding the story along. They act out all the NPCs, establish the story and plot, and adjudicate the rules. Narrators have the most work to do during a game, as well as preparation work to create the story and plot. Help and advice for running games can be found in the next section (see Running Games on p.51).

Although players don't need to know all the rules, the narrator has to have a good understanding of how they work. The narrator is the final judge of the rules and the story, and in order to run a good game and answer game questions, the narrator has to have a good grasp of the rules. We recommend a few practice games before someone takes on the job of narrator.

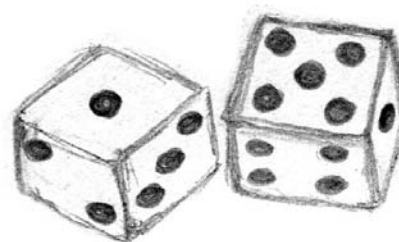
Scenes (see p.27)

The story is made up of "scenes." Instead of game turns, stories are told in scenes. When needed, the rules help determine what happens in each scene as events take place. There are a few different ways to resolve events in a scene based on the actions the characters are taking and the scale of the scene itself. Some scenes don't even require dice or rules; these are called *Open Scenes*.

Understanding how to run scenes is critical to the game. Although the players only need to know the basics, the narrator should understand the rules and the ways to use them. Since scenes can be run in different ways, the more the narrator knows the better the game will be for everyone.

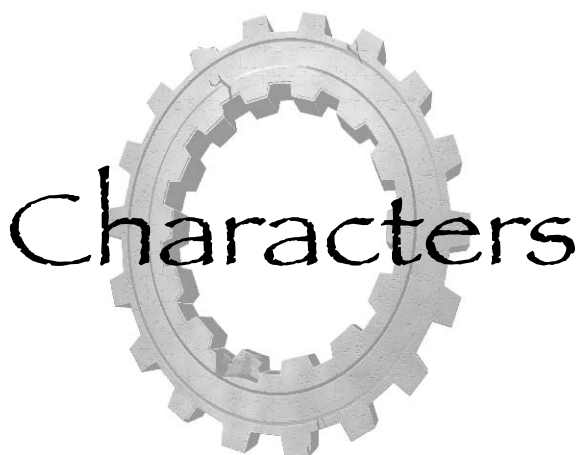
Dice (see p.28)

Dice are used throughout the game to determine the outcome of events. We recommend using six-sided dice because they roll well, are easily available and work best with the “rolling ones” rule (see p.28). In roleplaying games dice are often abbreviated with a “d” followed by the number of sides on the die, like “d6” for a six-sided die. If multiple dice are used, the number of dice is listed in front of the “d” as in “2d6” for two six-sided dice.



A six-sided die (d6) can produce a range of 1 to 3 by making $1-2 = 1$, $3-4 = 2$, and $5-6 = 3$. You can also use a six-sided die for a range of 1 to 2 by making $1-3 = 1$ and $4-6 = 2$.

In the Story Engine whole handfuls of dice are used. The object in most die rolls is to roll as many odd numbers as possible, called “odds.” The narrator will tell you how many Odds you need before you roll, and how close you are to that number after your roll (which determines the “success range” of the scene).



CHARACTERS are the central focus of the game. The whole story revolves around them. The rules use phrases and adjectives to define your character, just as you would when describing a friend or writing a novel.

If you’re new to roleplaying, it may be hard at first to come up with a role to play. The narrator can help by telling you what kind of story they’re going to tell, and they may even have suggestions for what kind of roles would work well in the story. In a story about piracy and the South Sea, for instance, it might help to create a role that can swim, knows how to sail, and can work a deck gun.

Once you’ve come up with a concept, the rest is easy. If this is all new to you, think of the character as a part you’re playing in a stage play or film. Better yet, imagine you’re writing the story of this persona in conjunction with your fellow players. It’s very easy once you get comfortable with the “free-form” atmosphere of roleplaying games – because your character can try so many things, it’s only a matter of deciding what you might choose if you were in their shoes.

WHEN TO ROLL DICE & MAKING DECISIONS

Narrators (and players, too, for that matter) have to make a lot of decisions over the course of a game. One of those is when to roll dice and when to just describe what happens. When and when not to roll dice depends more on style of play than rules. When to story-tell a scene with just words (called *Open Scenes*) or when to use the dice (called *Rolled Scenes*) can vary a lot. Anytime the players are trying something that isn't automatic or guaranteed, the rules can be used – but they shouldn't be used EVERY time the outcome isn't automatic, or else crossing the street would require a roll of the dice! When the players want an impartial ruling on an outcome, then dice are a good way to go, because the outcome is determined by chance rather than by the narrator. Each gaming group will have different styles of play (see p.51 for more on running games). Otherwise, use the dice when the element of chance adds to the story, or if the players really want to roll the outcome themselves. Dice allow players a little more control of the story, and this is an important part of *collaborative* storytelling! Also, with the Rolling Ones rule, the players ALWAYS have a chance of succeeding (no matter how slim) and should be allowed to roll if they want to.

The Character Scratchbook

A record of each character should be kept by the player. The Descriptors, Traits, Affinities, Story Points and other important information should be kept there along with notes on the character's background, possessions, what they look like, names of people they know and anything else that helps the player keep track of the story as it progresses.

We recommend using a spiral notebook. Long stories can end up using a lot of paper's worth of notes! Anything will do, however, from a sheet of paper to a laptop as long as the important stuff gets recorded. We've included a sample character sheet on p.134 to help get you started.

So find whatever works for your scratchbook and, if you're feeling artistic, you can even make a sketch of your character once you know what they look like.

Role Concepts

Each narrative is conducive to different characters, or roles. These roles can be chosen by the player or the narrator, and in adventures provided by game companies, roles are sometimes suggested by the designer.

When creating a character, choose someone you'd enjoy playing. Role-playing is a chance to play the roles of people different from yourself, and each game offers a chance to play a new role. You can play the role of almost anyone, so long as it works with the narrator's story. It is ultimately up to the narrator whether or not a character is appropriate to their story, though we encourage narrators and players alike to explore new ideas and try new twists.

Because everyone is at least somewhat familiar with the role, we're using Hamlet as our example character. We're going to create him from scratch using the rules below to illustrate how the character creation process works.

Creating a Character

There are two ways to create a character in Story Engine: **Basic Characters** and **Point Based Characters** (see below). Once this choice is made, then use the following steps to create a character:

1. Choose a Concept

Example (Hamlet): The concept for our character is “a young prince with a penchant for philosophy.”

2. Choose your Race and Gender

Example (Hamlet): Human male.

3. Choose your Descriptors (p.19)

Example (Hamlet): Introspective, Tends to Wear Black, Loved his Father.

4. Choose your Quirk(s) (p.19)

Example (Hamlet): Indecisive.

5. Assign your Descriptors and Quirks to Aspects (p.19)

Example (Hamlet): Introspective (Mind), Tends to Wear Black (Matter), Loved his Father (Spirit), Indecisive (Mind).

6. Choose your Trait Affinities (p.21)

Example (Hamlet): Swordsmanship (Weak), Philosophy (Mild).

7. Choose your Prime Affinity (p.22)

Example (Hamlet): Danish Culture.

8. Assign Story Points

If you're using the Basic process, then you automatically begin play with 1 Story Point. If you are using the Point Based process, then assign all your unspent points to Story Points for later use.

Example (Hamlet): 1 Point (if created as a Basic Character - 2 Points if created as a Point Based character because of the way the Descriptors were assigned to their Aspects with this particular character).

The Basic Character

Characters can begin with any number of Descriptors, Trait Affinities, and even Prime Affinities. The narrator can either use the suggested numbers below or decide how “strong” the characters should be to suit the story in mind. Unless the narrator wants to start everyone at the same level of power, the characters don't have to be equal: the heroic companion is rarely as tough as the hero, and the seasoned wizard might be more powerful than a young warrior.

THE DIE POOL (p.28)

The most important part of any scene is the Die Pool. So what is the Die Pool? Simply put, it's the amount of dice each player can roll in a scene. In these rules, the more dice the player has, the better the odds of succeeding. The formula for the Die Pool is always the same:

$$\text{Base Die} + \text{Aspect Total} + \text{Burned Descriptors} + \text{Extra Dice}$$

Every character has one die to start, called the Base Die. Characters also have one die for every Descriptor in the appropriate Aspect, called the Aspect Total. Characters can then “burn” Descriptors for additional dice. Strategy, tactics and circumstance can give Extra Dice and characters working together in a scene can combine their totals.

Once you know how the Die Pool works, the rest is easy.

In general, however, we recommend that basic characters begin with the following totals:

- 3 Descriptors
- 1 Quirk
- 3 Trait Affinities (or 3 levels total)
- 1 Prime Affinity
- 1 Story Point

Example (Hamlet): Hamlet has 3 Descriptors (Introspective, Tends to Wear Black, Loved his Father), 1 Quirk (Indecisive), 3 levels of Traits (1 Swordsmanship and 2 Philosophy), 1 Prime Affinity (Danish Culture), and 1 Story Point.

The Point Based Character

Characters can also be created from scratch using Story Points (see Story Points, p.43). A beginning character begins with 25 Story Points that can be spent any way the player chooses. An intermediate character can begin with 35, and an advanced character can start with as many as 50 points.

As a comparison, a character created as a Basic Character would have cost 23 points (not including the “free” Story Point given to Basic Characters) assuming the Descriptors were spread out over different Aspects. However, if all the Descriptors were in the same Aspect, that Basic Character would have cost 26 points (see costs p.44).

Example (Hamlet): Hamlet would cost 23 Story Points and have 2 points left over. Descriptors (6), Quirk (1), 3 Levels of Trait Affinities (9), and a Prime Affinity (7) for a total of 23 Story Points.

NON-PLAYER CHARACTERS

All the roles that the narrator runs are called “non-player characters” (NPCs). These roles range from fully fleshed out characters to the beggars, waiters, and average Joes the players meet in the story. Most of these characters are just sets of numbers, with no Descriptors, but the roles that are important to the story are written up just like regular characters, and can burn Descriptors and use Story Points like everyone else. We generally refer to key roles as the “Main Cast” and everyone else as the “Supporting Cast.” Supporting characters can often become integral to the story, and graduate to “Main Cast” status at the narrator’s discretion. The narrator can assign Descriptors to the supporting cast if they want, but a supporting role is usually written up as follows:

Jasmil, a cook: “Annoyingly smug” Mind 1/Matter 2/ Cooking 2/Gambling 1.
Wears a lot of green and has large gold earrings.

When the narrator is bidding against the players, it’s important to remember that the NPCs are just as real as the other characters: They don’t want to waste their Descriptors, and they may have already burned a few that day. Otherwise the players are forced to economize their resources while their opponents are able to spend recklessly. To reflect this, a good rule of thumb is to only let NPCs burn up to half their Descriptors in a crisis.

“Extras” are people in the game who have limited story value. They are peripheral to the story at hand. Extras can be treated as resources like the other useful things in the story. As such, Extras can add a die to scenes as a “tactical advantage” under Impacting the Scene (p.38). If it fits the style of the game, Extras don’t need to have injury levels – in a jungle expedition the bearers can die off left and right and, in a siege of the city, people can be crushed under the weight of falling buildings. Sometimes it’s appropriate to roll dice for these people and treat them as Supporting Cast, but other times no rolls are made and they become props in the story rather than individual people (see the “Misplaced Sidebar: Fighting Extras” on p.41).

Possessions for New Characters

Players can start with whatever possessions make sense for their background and concept. There may be special circumstances in the story that change this, like starting a game as prisoners (few or no belongings) or on a mountain expedition (climbing gear and small personal items only).

If the player feels their character should have special equipment or great wealth, the narrator should judge whether or not it would unbalance the story to start them that way (part of this is decided when the concept is chosen). Players can also spend Story Points to “buy” special items or servants and retainers, at the narrator’s discretion.

Players should record their possessions somewhere in their character notes, keeping track of items as the story progresses. Some items might have special values or hidden powers, which the narrator can record separately.

Example (Hamlet): Hamlet has books, clothes, swords, jewelry, an amulet with a portrait of his father, and other “princely things.” Wealth is not important to the events of Hamlet’s story, so there is no point cost for any of these items.

Descriptors, Quirks and Aspects

A Descriptor is an adjective or sentence that best describes one facet of the character. They may be simple, such as:

- vivacious
- powerful
- sneaky
- cunning

Or they may be elaborate, such as:

- quick as a snake on a hot day with an attitude
- charming in a disarming way that puts people at ease and makes them adore you
- determined like no tomorrow

Descriptors are a vital part of the character. They both define the personality and mettle of the character and determine the number of dice in the Die Pool for that character. Descriptors can have a broad range, and can be invoked in most situations.

One way to create your Descriptors is to write a paragraph or two describing things about your character, and then underline words or phrases that you want to use as Descriptors. This way, as you build your character you can underline other parts of the paragraph as your character earns more Descriptors.

QUIRKS

Quirks, like *lazy*, *short-tempered* or *crass*, represent parts of the character that most would perceive as faults, weaknesses or disadvantages. In these rules, weaknesses can contribute to the story almost as much as strengths. As the player authors the actions of the character, they may find opportunities to invoke a Quirk, often in ways that help the character or the group. Quirks don’t count towards the Aspect total for purposes of the die pool, but they can be “burned” for extra dice or used to invoke Quick Takes.

Assign each of your Descriptors and Quirks to one of the four Aspects. As long as it makes sense, the choice is up to the player. Above, for instance, “quick as a snake on a hot day with an attitude” could be Matter, or even Chaos. If it refers to mental speed it could be Mind. Whatever best suits the flavor of the Descriptor. Once assigned to an Aspect it shouldn’t be changed and will always be read in the context of that Aspect.

Aspects are used to determine the die pool; the more Descriptors a character has in an Aspect, the higher the value of that Aspect.

MIND

Mind oriented scenes can be about perception, social interaction, reaction speed, or anything else that is mundane but does not fall into a physical category. Common actions might be interpreting the gestures of an alien race, blending into a seedy bar in a foreign port, digging through information in a stack of tomes, or engaging in barbed banter with upper-crust dignitaries at a soirée. The goal of a Mind oriented scene is to overcome the obstacle using the wits and personality of the characters.

Sample Descriptors: *brilliantly cunning, charming as charming gets, persuasive, determined, radiant, sincere, moody, Machiavellian, quick on the take, observant, shy, confidant, saucy, sly as sly can get, sultry, engaging, curious*

MATTER

Matter oriented scenes address acts of a physical nature, from a character's strength, endurance, agility or looks. Fight scenes are often Matter based. Crawling across rain-slicked rocks, intimidating someone with physical prowess, sprinting down a hallway before the alien artifact explodes, or using delicate precision to dismantle a nuclear warhead would also be appropriate. The goal of a Matter oriented scene is to overcome the obstacle through physical action.

Sample Descriptors: *resilient, strong, quick, gorgeous, lithe, ambidextrous, long limbs, tough as an ox, vibrantly healthy, nimble, bounces back, can take a hit to the head and never know it happened, imposing, cute as a button*

SPIRIT

Spirit oriented scenes address the power of belief and the hidden inner strength of the soul. A Spirit based scene is about determination beyond the normal drive of a character, and the connection that character has with a higher purpose. Spirit is different from Mind in that it begins where the personality of the character ends. "Determined" as a Spirit Descriptor is about an inner drive, but only for certain things that are most meaningful to the character. A Spirit based scene could range from resisting the mental draining powers of an unseen opponent to convincing the king of the reverent ideals of your cause. The goal of a Spirit oriented scene is to overcome the obstacle through the inner strength and will of the characters.

Sample Descriptors: *in tune, aware of the greater truths, unwavering will, sees the light at the end of the tunnel, resilient beyond the will of the body or the mind, loyal beyond reason and without question to those she loves, transcendent*

CHAOS

Chaos based scenes are often about luck or random outcomes. At times, an understanding of Chaos can be more important than an understanding of order. Wild bar fights, dodging gunfire, avalanches, barnstorming — these are scenes that might be Chaos based. The goal of a Chaos based scene is to overcome the obstacle through a connection to forces greater than the individuals present.

Sample Descriptors: *wild at heart, sees the pattern, cognizant, sees the greater picture, finds calm in chaos, wild, unpredictable, goes with it, lives for the day, appreciates life's unexpected turns, never thrown for a loop, looks forward to danger*

Using Descriptors

Descriptors always count toward the Aspect total they are grouped under (even after they are "burned"). Descriptors can also be used for added story impact in two ways, both of which "burn" the descriptor:

Adding Dice

Descriptors can be used to add extra dice to the Die Pool during scenes. By “burning” a Descriptor (see below), the player adds a die to their Die Pool as long as the Descriptor suits the scene. The Descriptor can be from any Aspect. Players can burn as many Descriptors as they want in a scene (though each Descriptor can only be burned once per session).

Invoking Quick Takes

Descriptors can be used to invoke Quick Takes during scenes (see “Quick Takes” on p.40)

Burning A Descriptor

When used to invoke a Quick Take or add an additional die to a scene, a Descriptor is “burned.” This means it can’t be used that way again for that session. Descriptors always count toward the Aspect total for purposes of the Die Pool even if they have been burned. Remember to keep track of which Descriptors are burned – it helps to check them off as you burn them. The Descriptor needs to suit the scene, but players are encouraged to be creative: “I think I’m *powerful* enough to kick in that door,” or “my *innate sense of style* can help impress the duke.”

Burning a Quirk

Quirks can be burned just like Descriptors. As long as the Quirk is used creatively to add to the scene, it can be burned for an extra die and to invoke Quick Takes: “With my *strong allergies* I sneeze just in time to miss the assassin’s bullet,” or “I’m so *clutzy* I think I have a chance to inadvertently bump into the release and trigger the secret passage.”

ROLLING ON ASPECTS AND THE HARD RATE

Like the Die Pool, another important part of the game is knowing what you’re rolling against. The number you’re trying to beat is called the Target Number, and one of your Aspects is chosen as the base of the scene. Throughout this book you’ll see words like “roll on Spirit vs. Very Hard” – which means that Spirit is the Aspect for the scene and the Hard Rate is Very Hard (4 Odds needed). All of this is explained more fully later on.

Trait Affinities

Trait Affinities (*Traits* for short) are talents, skills and aptitudes. Like Descriptors, Trait Affinities are different for every story, and are made up by the players. Unlike Descriptors, they are about practical skills the character has as opposed to facets of their make-up.

There are three “degrees” or “levels” of Trait Affinities, labeled *weak*, *mild*, and *strong*. Each degree allows the character to convert a die in the pool to an Auto Odd (see p. 28) whenever a Trait Affinity is helpful in a scene: A character with a Mild Trait Affinity in Mechanics would be able to convert 2 of their dice to Auto Odds whenever their Trait Affinity is appropriate. Traits cost 3 Story Points for each degree.

Note that in combined rolls (group rolls) Auto Odds can apply to any dice in the die pool, regardless of whether they come from the character with the Trait or not.

Weak Trait	3 Story Points	1 Auto Odd
Mild Trait	6 Story Points	2 Auto Odds
Strong Trait	9 Story Points	3 Auto Odds

Multiple Trait Affinities can be used in a scene if they are appropriate. However, no more than 3 dice (total) may be converted to Auto Odds per character. This means a character with Mild Brawling (2 Auto Odds) and Mild Tumbling (2 Auto Odds) would only be able to convert 3 dice to Auto Odds instead of 4.

In scenes where a character has Mild or Strong Traits that are not quite appropriate to the scene but still close enough to be useful, the narrator can opt to allow 1 die to be converted to an Auto Odd.

Traits shouldn't be too general in description or else they become universally applicable. If the affinity is "survival" for instance, it might be better defined as "wilderness survival" or "desert survival," and shouldn't be used in a bar fight or a scene about clinging to a rope for dear life. In a story that is focused on outdoor adventures, there may be separate Traits for hunting and tracking as well. Traits like "jack of all trades" and "improvisation" are good examples of Traits that get abused and shouldn't be allowed.

Trait Affinities do not give a character additional dice, and they can't be burned.

If you have different colored dice, use a different color for the dice that are Auto Odds and roll them along with the rest of your die pool. This way you can keep track of the Auto Odds (no matter what they rolled) and still roll for ones (see "Rolling Ones" on p.28).

ADDING TO THE GAME

The character is the player's tool in the story, and the player contributes to the story using that tool. The trick is to make interesting choices that add flavor and interest to the game while remaining true to the role. Just doing what makes sense for the character is only half of it. Find new ways to approach dilemmas, and make choices that other players can "play off of." Information that the player has, but that their character does not have, should never be used to benefit the character – however, that information can be used to add flavor and color to the story.

Example: Pendleton has a lot of money, all safely kept in a safe deposit box. His friend Lilith winds up with the key by accident, but doesn't know where it came from. Pendleton looks frantically for the key, describing it to his friends as he searches. "A little silver key? Like this one?" Lilith asks, showing him the key. "Yes. A silver key. Very much like that one." he answers, continuing to search.

Prime Affinities

A Prime Affinity is something the character is strongly attuned to or has a special aptitude for. There are two kinds of Prime Affinities: Culture and Gifts. There are also special Gift Affinities like Magic (see p.42 for an example) or stranger powers (like the Kael Affinity in the Maelstrom world — see p.67).

Affinity: Culture

A Cultural Affinity is what ties a person to their society and their culture. All characters should begin with a Cultural Affinity for their culture, such as Basque, Cherokee, Dutch, American or whatever is appropriate to the game setting. The Cultural Affinity allows the character to know and be familiar with all the common elements of that culture, like the language, manners and history. Other things, like swimming or driving are also familiar to the character if they're a normal part of that culture.

Cultural Affinities can be very specific if it suits the game, such as "Brooklyn" or even "urban club crowd" — the scope and focus of the story will help determine this.

The Cultural Affinity provides the base die. When characters are engaged in social scenes in foreign or alien cultures, they might not be able to use their base die if the narrator feels that their cultures have very little in common (like being a "fish out of water").

Affinity: Gifts

Parameters

The power of a Gift Affinity is limited to the game world and the story. In games about superheroes, flying and x-ray vision are common powers, whereas in games about espionage, seduction and uncanny luck are as good as it gets. Narrators should work out Gift Affinities with the players, and make sure they fit the genre of the story.

Generally, powerful Gifts require the player to burn a Descriptor in order to activate, and less powerful Gifts are always available or need a Short Test to accomplish.

Sample Gifts:

Affability

People tend to like you. You have a way about you that puts people at ease and makes them comfortable and well-disposed to you. This power doesn't give the character any control over anyone, but it does encourage people to like them unless they have a reason not to. Affable characters are often given free advice, free drinks, and even a helping hand. In social scenes the character always gets an additional die, and once per session they can use their Affability Gift for an extra die for a total of 2 dice.

Ageless

You don't seem to grow any older. At some point in your life your body stopped aging.

Foresight

You often catch glimpses of events in your dreams that later come true, and sometimes your dream is so accurate you can even predict sports scores or remember license plates. The trouble, however, is that you can't always distinguish between the foresight and your regular dreams, and at times even the foresight is clouded with symbols and hard to understand. Characters with Foresight can roll on Spirit vs. Hard after a night's sleep to see if they had a premonition (narrators may want to roll privately in case the roll fails and the premonition is misleading or wrong). Also, once per game session, the player can "see it coming" and add two dice to a scene.

Healing Hands

You have the power to heal people with your hands and a few simple rituals or herbs. You can burn a Descriptor to heal a Health Level. You can even bring someone back from the dead if you get to them within d6 minutes of the death blow and if they only suffered one health level beyond "Out."

Iron Skin

Characters with Iron Skin have an additional Health Level. This level is in addition to the normal levels of health the character would have without this affinity. A character with the standard three levels, *healthy*, *injured*, and *out*, would have *iron skin*, *healthy*, *injured*, and *out* with this affinity.

Night Sight

Your eyes work like a cat's; you can see very well with poor light, and as long as it isn't pitch black you can always make out your surroundings.

Odd Six

In keeping with the heroic nature of most stories, the player can spend a Story Point to convert all rolled 6's into Odds. The player can invoke this Gift after they've rolled their dice. This can be done on any roll, but only applies to the character's dice and not that of other players. In addition, once per session the player can add a die to their pool.

Regeneration (double cost - 14 points)

You can grow back your limbs, and heal more quickly than other people. For a Story Point you can grow back anything up to an arm or leg in about a week. Once per session you can heal a Health Level overnight. Your regeneration stops when you die.

Shapechanger (double cost - 14 points)

You can change into the shape of another creature. The process takes a few minutes and you need to burn a Descriptor. Only your body changes and not your belongings. The creature is always the same, and you gain its abilities such as flight or gills but your Descriptors and Traits remain the same. You may no longer be able to use some of your Traits if the new form wouldn't allow it. You can change back with another Quick Take.

Sight

The Sight Gift allows a character to "distill" what they can see into a map of natural and supernatural items. All naturally occurring creatures, places and objects fade into a dull "grayed-out" background, whereas supernatural creatures or objects are heightened in bright colors based on the strength and nature of their "supernatural" power. The definition of "supernatural" is up to the narrator and can include creatures and things from other worlds as well as artifacts and other items with "special" powers. In a story with fate and destiny as major forces, certain important objects relevant to the story can also appear in color. Certain creatures or items might be cloaked or have some power to go undetected, in which case the player rolls on Spirit vs. the strength of the "cloaking" power, or against the creature if appropriate. Players have to invoke a Quick Take (burning a Descriptor) rolling on Chaos vs. Hard in order to use this Gift. Once per session the character can use this power for "free" (without burning a Descriptor).

Sleepless

You don't seem to need any sleep. You need to rest like other people, but you don't actually fall asleep.

Strong Will

Strong Will allows a player to re-roll one throw of their dice per game session.

Telekinesis

You can manipulate objects with your mind. By invoking a Quick Take (Chaos roll vs. Hard) you can lift small objects close to you (a few pounds), and at harder levels you can even move larger objects (up to your body weight at Extremely Hard).

Truthsense

You can tell when people are lying. Roll on Spirit vs. Easy for Short Tests; however, target characters can opt to turn it into a Bid Scene in Spirit.

The New York Times April 5, 1997: "This would all be meaningless," said Gennadi Chekaldin, the police officer who has been given the unpleasant task of trying to solve the crime, "but you can't find anyone here to tell you that witchcraft wasn't involved in the killing. In fact, you can go anywhere in Russia these days and witchcraft is a daily part of life." At times Russia seems governed as much by superstition as by democracy. One of Moscow's, and the nation's, most popular weekly television programs, The Third Eye, whose engaging host is Mikhail Andreyev, the president of the Association of White Magicians, is a straight, factual discussion of how sorcery and witchcraft can improve one's daily life."

Witchcraft (see also the sample Magic Gift on p.42)

You have the power to invoke spells and perform rituals. These powers follow precise instructions found in special books or handed down by word of mouth, and many of them involve rare ingredients or special phases of the moon or stars. The Witchcraft Gift varies by culture and setting, from pre-Christian covens of Wicce or Druidic cults to modern cybermysticism.

Health & Injury

Unless the player chooses otherwise, it's assumed that characters are always healthy unless they've become injured or ill over the course of the story. (See "Injuries" p.38 for more on injuries.) Characters have Health "levels" that affect their abilities as follows:

Healthy: Other than minor scrapes, bruises or the common cold, a character at Healthy is considered to be fully functional for purposes of the game.

Injured: An injured (or very ill) character is in bad shape, having suffered a bad wound or powerful illness. In this condition, the character adds a die to the Hard Rate in all rolled scenes.

Out: A character who is Out is either grievously wounded or seriously ill. These characters are unable to do anything at all. If they are required to make any rolls in this state (from actions in dreams or other special events) they add 3 dice to the Hard Rate.

Dead: Dead characters are, well, dead. Though the player may bring in a new role or take over another role, this character is considered to be dead for purposes of the story.

Since the characters start at Healthy, two injuries would take them to Out, and one more would kill them.

Optionally, narrators can allow characters to have additional "levels" of Health, such as Bruised (which keeps people on their feet longer) or two levels of Out (so it's harder to actually die). Certain genres work best with additional health levels, but the closer the style is to "grim reality" the more appropriate it is for characters to die from injuries.

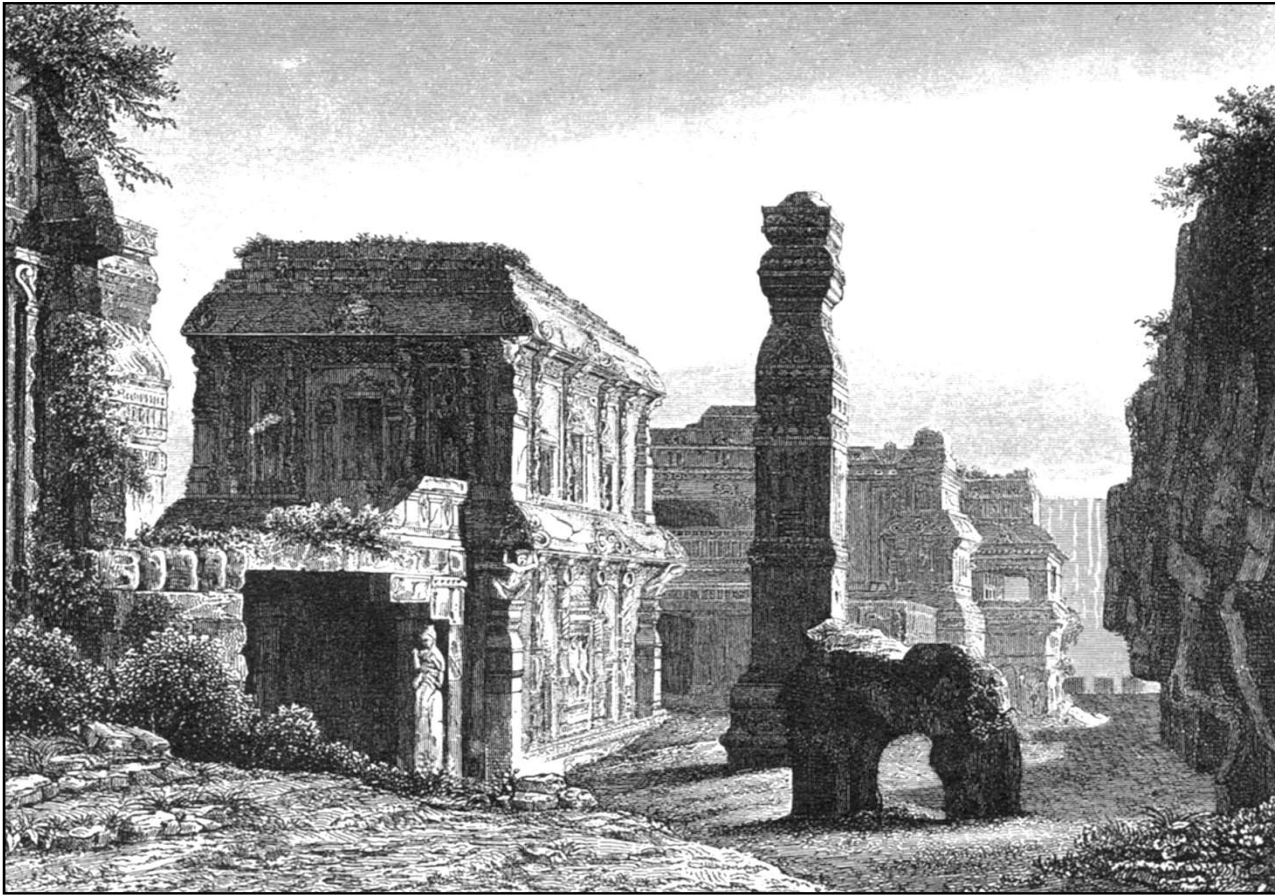
In games where body armor (historic or futuristic) is relevant to the story it can add Health Levels to the bearer (see Props p.45). We recommend lumping most armor together under an additional Health Level called "armored," assigning Descriptors to exceedingly strong armor. Like all elements of the story, bulky armor would effect the Hard Rate when swimming or hanging off a ledge, etc.

Getting injured can occur in both Open and Rolled Scenes. In an Open Scene the narrator can suggest that characters take an injury or two when it makes sense in the story – however, if the players don't agree, then the scene should be run as a Rolled Scene to give the players an opportunity to determine their own fate. In a Rolled Scene, injury happens as a result of "lost" scenes and is determined by the success range. For more on injury in Rolled Scenes, see p.38.

Healing

Characters generally heal a Health Level every 3 to 5 days in most games if given proper care. Each world setting will have its own advances (or in some cases, disadvantages like poor germ control and lack of proper medical treatments). Science, strong medicines, special herbs, healing rituals and Gift Affinities can all help speed up the process. The narrator should use their judgment, and the healing time should reflect the kind of injury the character sustained.

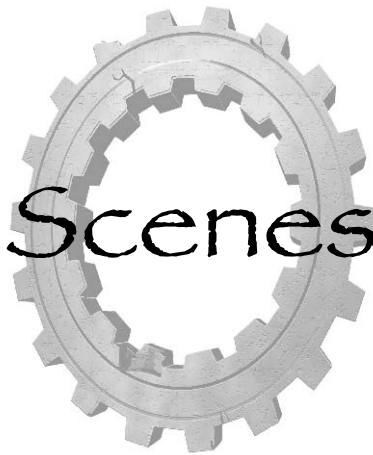
HEALTH LEVELS	
healthy	<input checked="" type="checkbox"/>
injured	<input type="checkbox"/>
out	<input type="checkbox"/>
dead	<input type="checkbox"/>



LITERAL VS. CONCEPTUAL

When describing a scene or an obstacle, it's important to convey the gist of the difficulty, even using terms from the Hard Rate such as "very hard" or "easy." A ten foot fence might seem really tall to one person, and a little tall to another. But if the fence is described as really tall instead of 10 feet, everyone gets the idea. In other words, focus on the intent behind the elements in the scene, and not on how big or how far things might be. In a movie, for instance, the camera zooms or pans to emphasize the danger and generate an emotional reaction to the scene. It's not about how far across the character has to jump, but how hard it would be to jump. In this way, the presentation of each element of the scene focuses on the difficulty of the obstacle, not on laws of physics. Everyone understands adjectives such as easy, hard, and impossible, but a wide range of arguments can arise from saying that the chasm is 15 feet across (you'd be amazed at how much people think they know about physics, laws of gravity, and what a person can or can't do). By supplying the difficulty of the task, the player fills in the distance relative to their character's capabilities.

Example: A chasm can be "very wide, the kind of wide you don't want to think about jumping" and the rogue can be "so charming that your feet fall off." Either way, the player gets the idea. Players who want to climb onto your coffee table and jump across your living room to prove that their character could jump over the chasm have probably missed the whole point of the game.



THE scene is the central element of the game. Just like film and literature, the story as a whole is comprised of individual scenes that further the storyline. It is important for the narrator to establish clear scenes. The scenes should be framed around the actions of the characters, and help advance the storyline (see Framing on page 30).

There are several ways to resolve scenes. If the outcome is obvious or merely descriptive, then there is no need to use the rules (these are called Open Scenes). If the outcome is not obvious, the rules are used to determine the possible outcomes (these are called Rolled Scenes).

Scene Basics

Scene Setup

The scope of the scene is set up based on the goals of the players and nature of the obstacle they face. See *Running Scenes in Story Engine* on p.12 for a summary of how to resolve scenes.

Straight Rolls

In Straight Rolls, the Target Number is determined by the Hard Rate.

Bid Scenes (see p.29)

In Bid Scenes, the Target Number is determined by the number of Odds rolled by the opponent. Sometimes a Hard Rate is used to modify the die pool.

Quick Takes (see. p.40)

Quick Takes are “sub-scenes” or smaller scenes within the main scene. Quick Takes are decided once the main scene has been established. The outcome of a Quick Take can effect the main scene, so Quick Takes are resolved before the main scene. Unlike Short Tests, Quick Takes usually take place within a Rolled Scene.

Target Numbers

Target Numbers are the number of Odds that need to be rolled to succeed. Depending on the nature of the scene, Target Numbers can be decided by a Hard Rate (Straight Roll) or the dice roll of an opponent (Bid Scenes).

Success Rate (see p.36)

The Success Rate determines the outcome of the scene by comparing the roll of the dice to the Target Number. Results range from “Complete Success” to “Complete Failure.”

Getting Extra Dice: Impacting the Scene (see p.38)

Anything that “Impacts the Scene” can add to the die pool and help the chances of success.

Short Tests

A Short Test is a Straight Roll (a quick roll vs. a Hard Rate) to determine a simple action, like noticing something or haggling down a price. Short Tests aren’t full scenes, just short moments that require a die. Unlike Quick Takes, Short Tests usually take place within an Open Scene.

Dice and the Die Pool

Dice are used to determine the outcome of most scenes. The “die pool” is the total number of dice a side is able to roll in a scene, and the larger the die pool the better the odds of success.

Odds

Whenever dice are rolled, the object is to roll odd numbers (called “odds”). The goal of any dice throw is to roll more Odds than the Target Number.

Auto Odds

When using Traits, some of the dice in the die pool become “auto odds.” These dice will automatically count as Odds. Because of the Rolling Ones rule, Auto Odds should be rolled anyway in case they land on a 1.

Die Pool

The die pool is the total number of dice each player can roll in a scene. Players who are working together add their die pools together.

The formula for the die pool is always the same:

$$\text{Base Die} + \text{Aspect Total} + \text{Burned Descriptors} + \text{Extra Dice}$$

Every character has one die to start, called the Base Die. Characters also have one die for every Descriptor in the appropriate Aspect, called the Aspect Total. Characters can then “burn” Descriptors for additional dice. Lastly, strategy, tactics and circumstance can give Extra Dice.

Target Odds

Every Odd rolled above the Target Number is called a Target Odd. Target Odds indicate the degree of success, and count towards the Success Rate of the Scene.

Rolling Ones

The Rolling Ones rule can be used throughout the game, by both the players and the narrator-controlled characters (NPCs) in the story. Whenever a die rolls a 1 (which is an Odd) then another die may be added to the die pool. This means that there is always a chance of success - mathematically speaking, at least. The new dice that are added also count under the Rolling Ones rule, so if they land on a 1, yet another die is added.

With Auto Odds: dice that have been set aside as Auto Odds (for Trait Affinities) may be rolled to see if they roll a one; regardless, the Auto Odd still counts as an Odd.

We recommend using this rule only when rolling six sided dice. It gives a 16.66% chance of any single roll adding a new die to the pool.

Scenes Types

Scenes that require a dice roll are called Rolled Scenes, and scenes that do not need to be resolved with dice are called Open Scenes. Short Tests (see p.29) can be used in Open Scenes to resolve

simple actions without turning the scene into a Rolled Scene. Rolled Scenes are resolved in the following manner (see p.12 for a complete scene resolution summary):

Opponents: If there are opponents in the scene the Target Number is determined through a bidding process. This is called a Bid Scene. There may also be a Hard Rate, but not always (see also “Fighting Extras” p.41).

Obstacle: If there is an obstacle, the Target Number is determined by the Hard Rate. This can be combined with a bid if there are also opponents in the scene.

Success Rate: Once the die pool is determined, the dice are rolled and the total number of Odds are counted. This number is compared to the Target Number to determine the Success Rate (see p.36).

Bid Scenes

The side that initiated the action begins the bid by announcing their die pool total. The other side announces theirs and each side can increase their pool by burning Descriptors until one side passes. Auto Odds don't have to be announced, so you'll never know exactly what you're up against until you roll the dice! Any modifiers to the die pools (from Impacting the Scene or a Hard Rate) should be announced by the narrator before the bidding begins and included when each side announces its total.

Determining the Aspect

The narrator determines what Aspect is relevant to the scene. The players can suggest a different Aspect, but unless the reasons for a different aspect are compelling, the narrator's choice should be used. Try to use all four Aspects during a game (e.g. not all physical scenes should be Matter).

The Aspect applies to all sides involved in the scene, except in the case of Quick Takes and Ties. Quick Takes, which are their own sub-scene, may involve a different aspect from the larger scene.

Presenting the Scene

Once the scene has been defined, the scene can be established and described. A good description of the scene is important because all the actions the players take are based on this information. Though the style of presentation will vary by taste and genre, the fundamentals should never be overlooked. Much confusion can be avoided by a clear and concise description, and the story can be advanced better by a tightly crafted scene (see also Weaving a Story pp.57-61).

Bid Scenes with Multiple Opponents

There are times when there are more than two sides. In this case, more than one group can win. If two groups are fighting one, then both could succeed (the single group bids against both groups at once, not separately). Run the bidding clockwise around the table until everyone passes.

Short Tests

A Short Test is a quick roll vs. a Hard Rate to determine a simple action, like noticing something or haggling down a price. Short Tests aren't full scenes, just short moments that need a die roll. Short Tests generally occur within Open Scenes, when a quick die roll can add something to the story.

Example: While walking through town in an Open Scene, one of the characters wants to make sure they're not being followed by looking over his shoulder a few times. The narrator calls for a Short Test on Mind vs. Hard. If the players want to take any elaborate actions, then a full scene would be more appropriate.

All the normal rules for scenes apply, though if the action begins to get complex the Short Test should be enlarged to become a full scene covering more than a simple action.

Framing & Scene Tools

Before the scene can be resolved, it needs to be “framed.” How large is it? How long is it? Some are obvious, others are not. A chase over the rooftops could be one great scene or a few little ones. The more scenes, the more points the characters may bid, and the more points they stand to lose. We suggest the following guidelines to set each scene, but as with all things in a good narrative, scenes should be adapted to suit the feel of the game, the players, and the genre of the narrative itself.

SCENE OBJECTIVE: frame the scene based on the character objectives. What is it they’re trying to do? If their goal is to get out of the room, then frame the scene around that objective. If they succeed, they make it out. It’s important to establish the objective of the scene, since the whole scene structure is based on what the characters are trying to accomplish.

STORYBOARD: frame each scene as it leads the story forward. The scene is as long or as short as it needs to be, ending when new options become available that will lead the story forward. Example: The scene at the bar talking to the informant is one long open scene, ending when the informant gets shot unexpectedly. The scene is framed by the gun shot, which leads to the next scene.

TIME & SPACE: frame scenes by environment - as the story moves from one location to another, new scenes are established. Example: The trip to the monastery to talk to the abbot can be broken into the journey there, the greeting at the gates, and the scene in the abbot’s chambers. And unless something exciting or colorful happens on the way back, the journey back can be skipped and the next scene can be back at the campsite.

TIME CUTS: like in a film, you can skip to the good scenes. There is no need to go through every scene. Frame scenes like cropping a photograph, leaving the good part and skipping the intro unless it’s useful or adds to the story.

CROSS CUTTING: if more than one scene is taking place at once, cut between them like a film. This maintains the excitement and keeps everyone involved. Find a good point in the scene and then cut to the other scene, so that they happen side by side. *Example: “I wouldn’t be so sure, if I were you,” says the professor as they get ready to dive off the cliff. Meanwhile, back at the college, Marris bursts through the door... etc.*

CUT SCENES: Cut Scenes can even be added: the narrator cuts to a scene in progress that does not involve the players and describes the action there. This is similar to Cross Cutting, except that the Cut Scene is a descriptive scene designed to enhance the story for the players. *Example: the players arrive in port and take in the sights of the new city, blissfully unaware of any dangers awaiting them. The narrator describes a Cut Scene: In a dark, smoke-filled room, a man enters and approaches the large figure behind the desk, who is only seen from behind. “They’re here, boss, just like you said they would be,” says the man. The larger figure exhales cigarette smoke: “Good...”*

DOWNTIME: Downtime is a way of passing time in the story between events without playing them out in detail. This is especially useful if the story has a large scope and the events in it take place over many years. Running Downtime is as simple as asking the players to sum up what they do in the time that’s being skipped. If anything needs to be resolved, you can collaborate with the player on the story or make a few Short Tests. If the actions of the player are major undertakings, then the game should switch back to normal scenes unless its suits the story to sum up the results.

EXAMPLES OF SCENES

Scenes can sometimes be run a variety of different ways. It's like a movie with the narrator making a few decisions on how to film each scene. Following are a few examples, some of these with examples of play as well.

Bar Room Brawl

The players find themselves in a brawl in a seedy bar. This is a straightforward bid against their opponents, with dice added for strategy, weapons and anything else that effects the scene. The narrator can frame it as one large scene.

NARRATOR: At this point the thugs decide to get nasty. One of them is smashing a bottle on the bar for a weapon, and the big bruiser looks like he's going to try and hit you over the head with a stool.

PLAYER 1: Well, that does it. Let's get 'em. I'm ducking low and tackling the big guy if I can.

PLAYER 2: I'm jumping onto the bar, watching out in case anyone else joins the fight.

NARRATOR: What's your goal? Are you trying to beat them up or just get out without getting hurt?

PLAYER 2: I'm not running away this time. I say we pound them.

PLAYER 1: Yeah. With any luck we want to humiliate them too.

NARRATOR: Gotcha. All right, let's roll this as one scene. I'm going to make it a Matter based scene. Success means you get the better of them, but I warn you that Partial Success might mean another round of fighting. Now, I'm giving you each an additional die for your tactics, but they get an extra die each for their makeshift weapons. They're the aggressors, so they open the bid. They have seven dice between them to start.

PLAYER 2: Seven? Well, we have eight dice between us without burning anything (1 base die each, 2 Descriptors in Matter each, and 1 bonus die each for tactics for a total of 8). I'll burn "Clever in a Jam" (Mind) for another die, and I assume I can use my Fist Fighting Trait for Auto Odds?

NARRATOR: Yes, Fist Fighting is definitely appropriate. So your total is nine now after burning your Descriptor?

PLAYER 1: Yes, but I'll burn "Powerful Limbs" (Matter) for another die, so now we have ten.

NARRATOR: Okay, they feel a little nervous with seven now, so they'll burn "Wild at Heart" (Chaos) and "Fists of Steel" (Matter) to bring it up to nine for their side vs. ten to yours.

PLAYER 2: I say we try it like this. I bet we have more Auto Odds than they do.

PLAYER 1: Sure. Let's roll!

NARRATOR: Okay, since you stopped bidding that closes the bid at your ten to their nine.

(Dice are rolled. The Players roll 8 Odds total after counting Auto Odds and rolling additional dice for any 1's rolled. The opponents roll 6 Odds in the same manner.)

NARRATOR: Looks like you guys win! It's a Basic Success since you won by 2. How do you think it went down?

PLAYER 1: Excellent! Okay, I tackled my guy before he dropped the stool and we wrestled. I got the upper hand with my "powerful limbs" and got him pinned.

PLAYER 2: I got onto the bar and kicked the bottle out of the other guy's hand before he could cut me, and jumped down on him to finish him off with my Fist Fighting.

NARRATOR: Sounds good. Since you won by two odds, you can do a level of injury to each of them if you want. I say the guy with the bottle cut his hand on the glass pretty bad when you kicked it, and the other guy got bruised up and hit his head during your tussle on the floor. They stop fighting back and beg you to stop, putting up their hands. The rest of the bar calms down and starts picking up chairs and getting back to business. We're back to Open Scenes now.

PLAYER 2: I let go of my guy and help him up. "No hard feelings," I say as we head out.

PLAYER 1: I'll leave a Prussian bill-of-note on the counter for the proprietor to pay for the damages. I act all tough as we walk out the door, but I'm keeping my eyes open in case anyone tries anything.

Speak-Easy Raid

The characters are out celebrating their recent escapades at a speak-easy, but just as the night gets interesting the place gets raided by the police.

NARRATOR: Okay, so Black Eye Billy stops playing and drops his trumpet as the whole place erupts into panic and cops come pouring in from the front doors.

PLAYER 1: Cops! Damn, and here we are loaded with evidence from our 33rd Street heist! I say we make a fast break for the back door.

PLAYER 2: Yeah, you bet we do! Hey, can we tell if the staff is using a special exit or anything?

NARRATOR: Good question! It looks like Black Eye Billy and the band are climbing through a low opening behind the stage.

PLAYER 2: Cool! Let's go that way! I pull out my 1911 just in case I need to encourage anybody to get out of our way.

PLAYER 3: I'm with you. But I want to grab that bottle of Absinth on the way out.

PLAYERS 1&2: No way! Let's scam!

NARRATOR: The place is going crazy, so you guys need to make up your minds quick. And this is going to be a Chaos scene, by the way.

PLAYER 3: Well, if you guys don't want the bottle, I'll just grab it myself. I'll invoke a Quick Take with my "loves her booze" Quirk.

NARRATOR: Okay, so the three of you are crossing to the stage and heading for the small door behind it, and Betsy [Player 3] is grabbing the bottle from the bar on the way, right?

PLAYER 1: Yeah, that's it. We're not wasting time on manners either if it comes to it.

PLAYER 2: I'm waving my gun around to help clear our way.

PLAYER 3: I'm elbowing my way to the bar, then high-tailing after them.

NARRATOR: Okay, so let's roll. It's a Straight Roll on Chaos at Hard. I'm using the sliding scale since the more of you there are the harder it is, so you need 5 Odds [Hard = 2 plus sliding scale for 3 characters adds 3]. Let's roll Betsy's Quick Take first. I'm going to say the Quick Take is in Chaos as well. It's a straight roll on Easy, so you only need 1 Odd.

PLAYER 3: Okay, so I burned "loves her booze" for 1, and with my base die that gives me 2.

(Player 3 rolls. She gets 1 Odd for a Partial Success)

PLAYER 3: Blast! Oh well, it could be worse. Okay, so how about the bottle gets knocked over before I can grab it and rolls down the bar with me chasing it. I just grab it before it hits the floor right at the feet of a cop!

NARRATOR: Okay, except the cop's busy with a feisty drunk right now (or else I think it would be closer to Partial Failure). Now let's roll the rest of the scene. You need 5 Odds. Your tactics give you each 1 extra die, except Betsy who's doing her best just to scramble after you. Your combined pool only includes Betsy's base die and the die she got for burning her Quirk because she's involved in her Quick Take.

PLAYER 3: That's alright, I didn't have any Chaos Descriptors anyway!

Drinking Contest

While in a local tavern the players become involved in a drinking contest. The narrator frames the whole event as a scene and calls for a bid against the other drinkers. The narrator could add an individual test for each character (based on their own tolerance of alcohol) and then modify the die pool for the overall scene based on the results of the individual rolls.

The Trap

At the heart of the ruined temple the players run across a trap. The narrator decides to frame the whole event and make it a group roll on Chaos vs. Very Hard (using The Sliding Scale). The outcome will determine if the characters noticed the trap and avoided it, or fell victim to it. Any injuries could be dealt out randomly. The narrator could also allow for a Mind roll to spot the trap (possibly at Very Hard) and then make another roll to avoid the trap as the group moves through.

Jumping the Pit

In a chase scene, the narrator breaks up the chase into a few key moments. One of these is getting across an obstacle (a pit). The narrator decides to make it a group Matter roll (to speed things up) vs. Hard (without The Sliding Scale) because the characters all work together to get across. The narrator could also call for individual rolls per character as they jump, with added dice for anything that Impacts the Scene such as a running start or help from another character.

Convincing the Judge

The players are brought before a judge for disorderly conduct. The narrator treats it as an Open Scene as the players try to talk their way out of it. He could also call for a Mind roll vs. Hard (using the Sliding Scale) if an element of chance seems more appropriate.

Casual Shopping

The players decide to spend the day shopping for various necessities while in town. The narrator decides to describe the results based on a Mind roll vs. Easy (using the Sliding Scale). This adds an element of chance to the day, although it could just as easily be treated as an Open Scene.

Telling Tales (using Magic from the Maelstrom Plug In)

While in a tavern, the players decide to impress the clientele with stories of their feats. The narrator decides to make this a Mind roll vs. Hard (tough crowd) to see how well the players do.

NARRATOR: Okay, why don't we make this one big group Mind based scene. It's a tough crowd, so I'm going to make it a Hard scene (Target Number = 2 Dice). In this case we'll use the Sliding Scale, so the Target Number is raised by a die for each of your characters (three characters = 3 dice added, for a final Target Number of 5).

PLAYER 1: Does my Performer Trait count for Auto Odds?

NARRATOR: Definitely.

PLAYER 2: How about my Fast Talker Trait?

NARRATOR: That was really meant for lying and talking your way out of jams when you created it, right?

PLAYER 2: Yeah, but it might help me with improvising stories about our exploits.

NARRATOR: Okay, but you only get one die for it instead of your normal total. Now, what's the group total now?

PLAYERS: It looks like nine.

PLAYER 3: Hold up. I want to invoke a Quick Take in the Arts using Redirection to add some atmosphere to the stories. I'm going to redirect the air to slam a door at a scary part of the story, and blow out some of the lanterns.

NARRATOR: Okay, let's resolve the Quick Take before we roll the overall scene. I say your difficulty is Easy (Target Number = 1 die) but everything in Dacartha is one die harder for the Arts, so it's at Hard (Target Number = 2 dice).

PLAYER 3: Sure. Okay, I'm burning "Aligned with the Storm" (Spirit) for the Quick Take. That gives me four dice to summon (base die + 2 Descriptors in Spirit + 1 Burned Descriptor) and three to control (base die + 1 Descriptor in Chaos + 1 Burned Descriptor).

(Player rolls. He gets 3 Odds to summon and 3 to control after counting Auto Odds and any 1's rolled. This gives him a total of 2 Target Odds, for a Basic Success)

NARRATOR: Great. I think that's enough to have a Direct Impact on the scene which gives you two extra dice (with a Direct Impact, each Target Odd counts as an extra die for the scene). That brings your die pool up to a total of eleven dice, and you need to roll five Odds.

(Players roll. They get 9 Odds after counting Auto Odds and any 1's rolled)

NARRATOR: Wow! That's four more than the target, which gives you all a Complete Success! You guys can describe the scene for me.

PLAYER 3: Well, I go into my trance and manage to create some wonderful sounds with the wind, gradually increasing the effects as the crowd gets drawn into the story.

PLAYER 1: And all the while I'm pushing my Performer talents to the edge, slipping in all sorts of self-aggrandizing details about how great we all are.

PLAYER 2: And any time we drop the ball, I cover with my Fast Talker skills, throwing in a few additional details about how clever my character is.

NARRATOR: That's great! The crowd, a little stand-offish at first, gets drawn into your tale until everyone in the whole room is listening, hanging onto your every word. As you finish, the candles are flickering and the breeze blows through, followed by a sigh as everyone exhales in wonder.

The Hard Rate

The Hard Rate determines the Target Number. Hard Rates are used in both Straight Rolls and Bid Scenes. The Hard Rate is applied **before** any dice are given for Impacting the Scene.

The Hard Rate uses simple terms from Easy to Impossible. These terms are relative to the characters involved and the genre of the story being told; what might be Very Hard in one genre might be Easy in another.

EASY (1 Odd required) This task shouldn't be taken for granted, but with an effort can be achieved.

HARD (2 Odds) This task is tricky, and should be taken seriously. With good effort and concentration, it can be completed.

VERY HARD (4 Odds) An attempt is not likely to succeed, and may even be dangerous. With a lot of luck, and a great effort, it can be attained.

EXTREMELY HARD (6 Odds) This is a feat for a specialist. With training you might stand a good chance. Otherwise it would take a lot of luck and an amazing effort to accomplish.

IMPOSSIBLE (9 Odds) This is one of those moments when you realize the futility of things. No one short of a highly trained pro even has a shot at this.

When a Hard Rate is used in a Bid Scene, the number of dice required for the Hard Rate are **ADDED AS DICE** to the side that benefits from the situation, or **SUBTRACTED** from the die pools of all sides if everyone is affected adversely.

***Example:** In a prolonged debate in the judge's chambers, one of the debaters is feverishly ill. The narrator decides that this IMPACTS THE SCENE and assigns a HARD modifier to that debater. The 2 dice required for a HARD roll are added to the opponent's roll. If both sides were ill, 2 dice would instead be subtracted from both sides. In other words, the added difficulty is added to the group that benefits from it, unless no one benefits and then everyone suffers the difficulty.*

The Hard Rate is not the same as Impacting the Scene. For instance, shooting someone in the back may be Easy, but there would also be dice for the circumstances (in this case probably 2 dice). The Hard Rate is applied first, (Easy for the action of shooting an unmoving target at close range) and **THEN** the dice are added for the huge advantage of gunning down an unsuspecting victim (2 for "Major Strategic Element").

Group Adjustment: Sliding the Scale

A group of characters is usually more effective than a single character, and this is reflected in the rules by the advantage players have when they combine their dice for group rolls. There are times, however, when the task they are trying to accomplish isn't fairly reflected once they combine their dice, and in these situations the Hard Rate is adjusted using the Sliding Scale.

The Sliding Scale allows the narrator to adjust the Target Number without having to change the Hard Rate. In other words, when the difficulty of the task is the same no matter how many people help out, the Sliding Scale helps maintain the "relative" quality of the Hard Rate. If the task would still be Very Hard even with a group of people helping out, such as finding a needle in a haystack, the Sliding Scale allows the Hard Rate to reflect the relative difficulty even in group rolls.

When a Hard Rate applies to a scene with opponents (a bid scene), it is almost always adjusted. If 13 soldiers are firing at an opponent with good cover, the task might be Hard. However, that only adds 2 dice to the person with good cover, and with 13 soldiers adding their die pools together, it doesn't actually make it a "hard" task. With the Sliding Scale, instead of adding 2 dice to the

opponent, you add 2+13 (one for every soldier). The soldiers still combine their die pools, but the task is now actually “hard.”

For instance, an Easy scene only requires 1 Odd; in a group roll it’s almost guaranteed that at least 1 Odd will be rolled. If the task is simple, like trying to lift a log, then it makes sense that the more people helping out the easier it will be. However, if the scene is about everyone in the group jumping over a chasm in a hurry, and the narrator decides that the target is Hard, then it would only take 2 Odds for the group to succeed. The solution is either to make each character roll separately, or apply the sliding scale to adjust the Target Number without changing the Hard Rate (the task will still be Hard, but the number of Odds needed will be higher to keep it “hard”).

The Sliding Scale uses a simple formula: For every character in the group, the Target Number is raised by 1. A group of 3 characters in a Very Hard scene would need 7 Odds (Very Hard = 4, plus 3 for each character).

***Example 1:** The characters are trying to pick a lock in a hurry. Since only one person can mess with the lock at any given time, the group’s combined efforts only help a little bit, and the Sliding Scale helps reflect this.*

***Example 2:** The group docks at a small port and go into town to shop and get supplies. The narrator rolls it as one large scene for simplicity, and decides it’s an Easy task. Since the “Easy” rate is relative to the overall group’s efforts, the Sliding Scale is used.*

Impossible Goals — “that’s inconceivable!”

There are times when players want to try something impossible. Sometimes they don’t have a choice in the matter (like jumping from a burning plane without a parachute), and other times they just want to give it a shot. Narrators are encouraged to give players a chance for success, no matter how small, and with the Rolling Ones rule anything is *mathematically* possible! If you feel like the players deserve a chance, give them a suitably high Hard Rate and let them roll – the rate of Impossible (9 Odds) can be increased to reflect the task (falling from that burning plane might require 30 Odds!). In the end, it’s more fun to roll the dice and hope for the best than to simply fail. In high fantasy or superhero stories, few things should be “impossible.” When characters do fail, however, be sure to give the player the opportunity to describe the outcome: “Uh oh — Looks like Complete Failure. What do you think happened?” This helps the player paint the scene to their satisfaction.

Success Rate

The outcome of a scene is determined by the number of Odds rolled compared to the Target Number. The results are compared to the success range below.

Complete Success (4 or more Target Odds): A stunning success! The action was accomplished fully and with style!

Basic Success (2-3 Target Odds): A solid success. The action was accomplished, but without much room to spare.

Partial Success (0-1 Target Odd): A minimal success. The action was accomplished, but badly!

Partial Failure (Missed by 1): A minimal failure. The action failed, but not by much.

Basic Failure (Missed by 2-3): A solid failure. The action failed and nothing was gained.

Complete Failure (Missed by 2-3): A miserable failure! The action failed completely and (most likely) embarrassingly.

These are the guidelines for establishing the results of the scene, based on the six options above. Players should collaborate with the narrator to work out the events based on the success range.

The ongoing example used here is from a scene where a group is attacked by orks during a storm outside the town gates. The player objective is to get back into the town alive. The ork objective is to kill the group and eat them.

Complete Success: with total success, the scene objective is attained to its fullest.

Example: the group easily outpaces the orks thanks to the daring bravery of the sub-altern who holds them off and the young apprentice who sets a curtain of fire with his spells to keep them at bay.

Basic Success: with success, the group goal is reached. All key elements are obtained, but without any extra flourish or ease.

Example: the group just makes it back to the gates after a daring race across the fields. The sub-altern is almost left behind as she fends off the orks, trying to buy the group time, and the apprentice makes a bold but futile effort to push one of the orks back across the field with a spell.

Partial Success: with partial success, the main scene objective is accomplished, but nothing else. There may even be a bad side to the outcome.

Example: The group makes it to the gates safely, but without Amriss, who remained behind to buy their escape. She is close to the gates, however, and in the following scene the group can try to help her fight her way in.

Partial Failure: with partial failure, the group will fall short of their goal, but may succeed on some level of the scene that is not contested by the opponent(s).

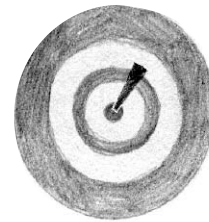
Example: the group fights their way to the gates, but the orks are all around them. The apprentice is wounded.

Basic Failure: with failure, the main goals are not achieved, and though the group may make some small progress towards an uncontested goal, they do not accomplish much.

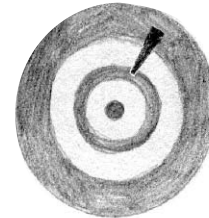
Example: the group is wounded, some more than others, and though they make it closer to the gates, they are cut off before they can reach them.

Complete Failure: total failure is, by definition, the worst possible outcome. The opposing side achieves all of their objectives and the losing group fails to accomplish any of theirs.

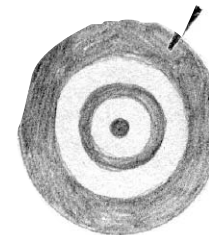
Example: taken off guard, the group is hit hard by the ork ambush, and despite their best efforts, they fail to make it any closer to the gates. Most of the group is injured, and the apprentice is out cold.



Complete
Success
(4 or more)



Basic
Success
(2 to 3)



Partial
Success
(0 to 1)



Partial
Failure
(-1)



Basic Failure
(-2 to -3)



Complete
Failure
(-4 or more)

Injury

If failure in a scene can lead to injury, the narrator should make that clear before the dice are rolled. The amount of injury is determined by the success range (see below).

Determining who was injured can be done in any of three ways: The narrator can assign injuries based on who was most likely injured, injuries can be “dished out” randomly among the possible victims, and players can volunteer for injuries when they think it makes sense for their character in the scene.

The winning side (the side with success in the scene) can inflict as many Health Levels as they wish up to the maximum listed below. The number of Health Levels lost due to injury is determined by the how badly the other side failed:

Partial & Basic Failure:

The number of Health Levels is equal to the number of missed Odds.

Complete Failure:

The number of Health Levels is equal to two (2) times the number of missed Odds.

***Example:** If Banokan is trying to climb down a dangerous cliff and missed his roll by 3, he would get 3 Health Levels of injury (Basic Failure). If he had missed by 5, he would get 10 levels of injury (Complete Failure: $5 \times 2 = 10$).*

Draws

Unlike Straight Rolls, Bid Scenes can result in a tie. When the same number of Odds are rolled in a Bid Scene a draw is reached. Ties open the door to different Aspects than were used in the bid. These become the tie-breakers, and can often be a blessing to a group that was outmatched in the original bid. Once a tie has been reached, both sides enter a second round of bidding. This round, the Tie Round, doesn't take up any more time in the story – it's a new resolution of the same event. So if time is important to the outcome, it should be treated as though there's no new round.

The players need to choose a different Aspect for the Tie Round, and unlike normal Bid Scenes, opposing sides can choose different Aspects.

Any Descriptors that were burned in the previous bidding count in the Tie Round.

Though no time is actually spent in a tie beyond the frame of the scene, they can be treated as a momentary standoff if it adds flavor to the scene.

A second tie will result in a stalemate, at which point real time resumes and a new round of normal bidding begins.

Impacting Scenes: Scene Modifiers

When a character has an advantage while performing an action they are awarded extra dice. Advantages come from circumstance (ambushing, good cover in a firefight, advantage of ground, etc). If they have a disadvantage, dice are added to the opponent's die pool. In the case of a Straight Roll, the Target Number is increased.

Generally, each good idea or tactic adds a die for all characters that benefit from it, same as each strategic element. A really good idea or major strategic element gets 2, and an amazing idea or overwhelming strategic element gets 3.

Impacting the Scene is not the same as the Hard Rate. For instance, shooting someone in the back may be Easy on the Hard Rate, but there would also be dice for the circumstances (in this case probably 2 dice). The Hard Rate is applied first, (Easy for the action of shooting an unmoving

target at close range) and THEN the dice are added for the huge advantage of gunning down an unsuspecting victim (2 for “Major Strategic Element”).

Fight Scenes

Fight scenes can be some of the most dramatic moments in a story. Fighting is resolved like any other scene that has an opponent, with strategy and weapons *impacting the scene* (see above). Like any scene in the story, fight scenes can be detailed and tightly framed (best for climactic duels) or simplified and broadly framed (best for large battles or fights with little story value). An entire fight across the rooftops can be resolved in one scene or broken into many smaller scenes; depending on how the scene is framed, the outcome could leave the characters riding off into the night or it could land them at the next fight as they try to make their way out of town on horseback.

Weapons in Fight Scenes

When one side has an advantage in arms, the Hard Rate changes in their favor (see *Impacting the Scene*). The fight itself helps determine how much the weapons will help – crossbows aren’t very useful if most of the scene is at close range, pikes are best against cavalry, two-handed swords are bad in confined spaces, etc. Strategy will also come into play: How do you plan to use the weapons? If one group isn’t very good at the weapons they have, then they won’t help much – unless the scene is about intimidating the enemy by brandishing their weapons. Think over the impact the weapons may or may not have in context of the scene, then decide whether the weapon gives the character 1 die (very useful), 2 dice (extremely useful) or 3 (absolutely perfect weapon for the fight). The outcome of the dice roll will decide how much help they really were: if the side with muskets loses the scene, then maybe they couldn’t reload in time, they misfired, or they simply missed. (See also Props & Equipment on p.45).

Target Numbers in Fight Scenes

Fight scenes are normally Bid Scenes and the Target Number is determined by the dice roll of the opponent (though it can be combined with a Hard Rate). However, in cases where both sides may be able to succeed (or fail), the Target Number can be determined by a Hard Rate instead of the opponent’s total. This can be used for duels and shoot-outs (where both sides might be injured), large scale fights (where all sides might take casualties) or any challenge that allows both sides to succeed (or fail!). (See also the “Misplaced Sidebar: Fighting Extras” on p.41).

Mass Combat

If you ever need to run large battle scenes or ship-to-ship fights, we recommend treating military units and ships as characters. Give groups or ships Descriptors based on their overall speed, firepower and strength (from 1 to 10, with the scale relative to the scope of the fighting. In a skirmish, 10 might mean an elite fighting brigade, whereas in a major offensive 10 might mean the Third Heavy Armored Division). Assign three Traits to the group or ship: Speed, Firepower and Strength. Lastly, give each group or ship Health Levels equal to their die pool. Instead of Aspects, the narrator chooses the relevant Trait (for ties switch Traits like normal scenes switch Aspects).

***Example:** The White Mary is a medium sailing ship, with light guns and good speed. We’ll give the White Mary 5 Descriptors, Mild Speed, Weak Guns and Mild Strength. The ship has 5 Health Levels (equal to the die pool).*

The die pool drops with the Health Levels (though the Descriptors are still available to “burn”). If the White Mary (above) took 2 injuries, the ship would have 3 Health Levels and a die pool of 3.

When combining Mass Combat with individual character actions, players can make Straight Rolls or invoke Quick Takes for their individual tactics or efforts, with the outcome Impacting the Scene. For effect, use Cut Scenes and Cross Cutting (p.30) to switch back and forth from the larger battle to the individual struggles of the players.

Fights of Attrition & Multi Round Fights

Since injury levels equal the number of target odds (or doubled at best for Complete Success), killing a large number of people is often hard to do in one scene. Success may drive back or disarm the enemy, but it won't necessarily kill them. If the opponents won't yield and can't escape, then another round of bidding can take place. Add dice to the winning side of the first round if appropriate for the new Hard Rate (if the losers were disarmed, thrown into disarray, backed up against a wall, etc.) and bid again. If the opponents are so overwhelmed that a new round of bidding seems unnecessary, it can be turned into an open scene where the winners can freely describe the outcome.

Quick Takes

Quick Takes are used during Rolled Scenes to accomplish a task that is separate from the goal of the main scene. Players announce that they are taking a Quick Take for their action. All Quick Takes are then resolved. Characters have to burn a Descriptor to invoke the Quick Take. Unlike Short Tests, tactics or strategy, Quick Takes are actions that would not otherwise be possible during the larger scene.

Quick Takes can't duplicate the goals of the larger scene. If the group goal is to "blast our way out of the cargo hold" then the Quick Take can't be about blasting out of the cargo hold. It can, however, help the group if the Quick Take is "hot-wiring the control panel on the main doors" or "distracting the enemy droids by throwing an electromagnetic pulse grenade into their bunker." Successful Quick Takes like those would give extra dice to the die pool for the larger scene as well as take away tactical advantages of the opposing side (see Impacting Scenes on p.38).

Quick Takes can't be invoked to accomplish something the other side is actively opposing during the main scene. In a dogfight over the Rhine where the enemy planes are protecting a zeppelin, a player could invoke a Quick Take to "take out the leader's plane" (which would result in a sub-scene duel) but not "take out the zeppelin."

Sometimes there may be events within the scene that the character wants to guarantee through a Quick Take: instead of relying on winning the overall scene to accomplish the action, the character invokes a Quick Take. The character is allowed a separate sub-scene that is based on a simple action, such as "grabbing the chalice" during the sword-fight with the museum guards, or "charming the barmaid with a wink" during a bar room brawl. The player states the use of the Descriptor in a contextual way: "I am so *tenacious* that I can make my way to the chalice during the fight" or "I am so *charming* that I can win the affection of the barmaid with a wink during the bar fight." With this stated, the character is allowed a Quick Take, which is resolved separately from the overall scene. This enables the character to grab the chalice despite losing to the guards, or charm the barmaid despite being knocked flat by the big lug.

Borrowing Odds: Once the Quick Take(s) and the larger scene are resolved, the winner(s) of the larger scene can remove Odds from their roll and add them to the roll in a Quick Take to change the Success Rate. By doing this, the winner can change the *story* outcome of a Quick Take (like "grabbing the chalice" - see above). This doesn't retroactively change the die pools for the larger scene (even if actions that Impacted the Scene are altered).

Quick Takes are resolved like normal scenes, and any opponents are able to bid and burn Descriptors. More than one character can be involved in a Quick Take, and only one of them has to burn a Descriptor to invoke it. It's also important to remember that Quick Takes take place *during* the larger scene (even though they are resolved *before*). The events taking place during the Quick Take affect the larger scene but are not necessarily accomplished before the end of the larger scene.

The Descriptor burned to invoke the Quick Take counts for the die pool in the Quick Take. Quirks may be burned to invoke Quick Takes as well, as long as the Quirk fits the action.

Characters involved in Quick Takes (players and opponents) don't fully contribute to the die pool in the larger scene: they are only allowed to add their base die and a die for every Descriptor they burn in the Quick Take. They may, however, burn Descriptors in the bidding for the larger scene. The only exception is when a Quick Take suffers a Complete Failure: in this case, the *opponents* are able to contribute fully to the larger scene.

Shaking Injuries

By spending a Story Point, a character can shake off or absorb a Health Level that would otherwise hurt them. This requires taking some form of scar, disability or mental debilitation. To do this they drop a Descriptor and add a Quirk. This new Quirk can reflect the event or nature of the injury, or it can be a reflection of a long-standing character trait that is now noted by a Quirk. A character can only “shake off” a maximum of one Health Level per scene.

***Example:** Pivoc is running screaming through the woods, chased by Seven Really Angry Wolves. He doesn't make it (failure), and is cut down (2 Health Levels) before he can dive into the river. Pivoc opts to take a Quirk instead, avoiding the injury level that would take him down. He spends a Story Point and drops his Descriptor “courageous” and adds the Quirk “limps on his left leg.” He could instead add “easily annoyed” or “flaming sweet tooth” to reflect attributes of his that he has always had, but were never quantified. Note that in this case Pivoc absorbed 1 injury level, which was enough to keep him at Injured instead of Out. He spent 1 Story Point, lost a Descriptor, and gained a Quirk.*

Resolution

Once the dice have been rolled and the Success Rate has been determined, the details of the outcome need to be worked out. The success range gives a good idea of how well (or badly!) The players did, and the winning side should get to describe how everything unfolded. Narrators can give the players a wide latitude in describing how the scene went if their side won, suggesting changes only if the description doesn't fit the success range. The player(s) who rolled the most Odds should have more say than the other players; this reflects their character's impact on the scene and also encourages more input from all the players (not just the talkative ones!).

THE MISPLACED SIDEBAR: FIGHTING EXTRAS

Players will often find themselves fighting their way through a horde of inconsequential people, from angry natives to crazed mobs. In some genres this includes redshirts, stormtroopers, flatfoots and other nameless people who serve more as obstacles than antagonists. Narrators can treat these scenes as Straight Rolls rather than bid scenes, with the players rolling against a Hard Rate. This can be done in any scene where the opponent has little story value as an individual, including packs of hyenas, alligators, desperate holiday shoppers, proselytizing fundamentalists or armed L.A. motorists.

SAMPLE MAGIC GIFT AFFINITY

This Gift is designed for a fantasy world of swords and sorcery. It's abbreviated to convey the jist of how Magic can be used. The Gift Affinity itself costs 7 Story Points and allows the mage to use special powers. Each power is a special Trait called a "Flux Trait" with the same 3 levels of competency as normal Traits.

Primus

Followers of Primus have mastered the control of the elements. They choose their specialty from among earth, air, fire and water, which they can pursue to the third circle (Strong Flux Trait). The opposing element can never be mastered beyond the first circle (Weak Flux Trait). The remaining 2 elements can never exceed the second circle (Mild Flux Trait). A magical talisman or staff is required to cast this magic, without which the Hard Rate is increased by 2 Odds.

Using Flux Traits requires a Quick Take on the appropriate Aspect. The Hard Rate is determined by the extremity of the task: First Circle Earth might chuck a clump of dirt at a wall on Easy, move a cup across the room without spilling it at Hard and move a rock at high speed 30 feet and hit someone with it at Very Hard. All of these powers require concentration and a brief moment to cast — disruptions or rushed spells increase the Hard Rate.

Mages can combine powers by adding 2 to the Hard Rate for every additional power they add.

Earth Flux Trait (Matter)

First Circle (weak)

You can move small amounts of hard matter (10 lbs)

Second Circle (mild)

You can move large amounts of hard matter (100 lbs)

Third Circle (strong)

You can convert small amounts of hard matter (10 lbs) from one form to another (precious metals and the like would be at Extremely Hard and may require special ingredients)

Air Flux Trait (Mind)

First Circle (weak)

You can cause small breezes

Second Circle (mild)

You can cause winds and change the quality of the air (purify or fill it with contagion)

Third Circle (strong)

You can carry yourself and others (each person adds a die to the Hard Rate) on the wind

Fire Flux Trait (Chaos)

First Circle (weak)

You can start fires and control temperatures in small areas

Second Circle (mild)

You can throw fire and control temperatures in large areas

Third Circle (strong)

You can create fire out of the air and you are immune to short exposures to fire

Water Flux Trait (Spirit)

First Circle (weak)

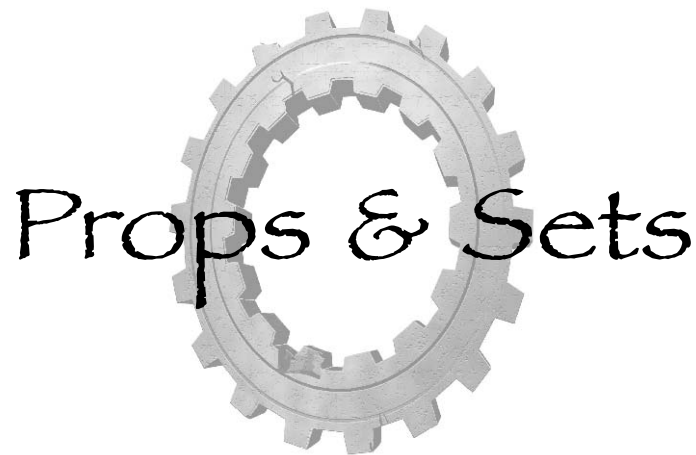
You can move and shape small amounts of liquid into semi-solid forms (5 gallons)

Second Circle (mild)

You can move and shape large amounts of liquid (50 gallons)

Third Circle (strong)

You can convert small amounts of liquid (5 gallons) from one form to another (same restrictions as 3rd Circle Matter)



Story Points

Characters gain Story Points over the course of the game, and players can use them to add Descriptors, Traits and Affinities to the character. They may also be used to affect the story outcome, replenish burnt Descriptors, and avoid injury. They act as a measure of “experience” and should reflect the character’s growth and what they are about as roles in the story.

Generally, the narrator gives Story Points at the end of each game as follows:

Everyone is given 1 Story Point automatically. In addition to this point for “attendance” the following points are awarded:

Learned Something and/or Contributed to the Game:	1
Plot Success	1
Chapter’s End	1

Learned Something and/or Contributed to the Game

This point is for characters who have stumbled onto something important about the world or themselves, as seen through “character growth” in the course of the story. It can also be given out if the player contributed significantly to the story through interesting and helpful character choices. Players shouldn’t get a point for both “character growth” and contributing.

Plot Success

Every time the group as a whole makes a solid step forward in the plot, either by discovering important clues or overcoming a major obstacle, the characters involved can get a Story Point for “plot success.” No more than 1 point for Plot Success should be given to a character per session.

Chapter’s End

Ongoing games often have “chapters,” like a book. Sometimes these are built into the story, and other times it just feels like a chapter has ended and a new one has begun. Narrators can use their discretion, but this point shouldn’t be given out more than every few games. A “chapter’s end” often coincides with Plot Success.

Story Point Award Considerations

Reward players for their role-playing, but be careful not to give more or fewer points than the game needs. Each narrative has its own feel, and characters can grow quickly if allowed. Make sure the growth rate is appropriate to the story.

Alternate Means of Advancement

Some games are best suited for roleplay-oriented development of Descriptors and Traits. After each session the narrator can discuss any new Descriptors the character demonstrated that should be added to the character sheet, as well as any Traits or Prime Affinities. This is a story based approach that helps reflect the events of the narrative and encourages creativity and role-playing from the players to advance. No more than 1 Descriptor or Trait should be given out per session, and Prime Affinities should take multiple sessions to develop. A Story Point can still be given out per session to be used for other purposes (see below). Using this system as well as the Basic Character guidelines (p.17) can help simplify the whole character building process.

Adding to the Character

As the story progresses the characters grow, and to reflect this the player can add Descriptors, Traits and Prime Affinities to their character. The new Descriptors, Traits and Affinities should evolve out of the story – things the character has done or become good at, supported by the events in the story. The suggested Story Point costs are as follows:

Descriptors	2 points + aspect total
Trait Affinities	3 points per level
Quirks	1 point plus quirk total
Prime Affinities	7 points

Descriptors

The cost is 2 Story Points plus a point for each Descriptor the character already has in that Aspect.

Traits

The cost is 3 Story Points for a new Trait at “weak,” an additional 3 to raise it to “mild” and another 3 to raise it to “strong.” It would cost 9 points to get a new Trait at “strong.”

Prime Affinities

Prime Affinities generally cost 7 Story Points (such as Cultural Affinities). However, some Gift Affinities could cost more if they are especially powerful (see below). There could even be Gift Affinities with progressive levels of power, each one costing more points. Any Prime Affinities with special costs should list the new costs in the description of the Affinity.

Contributing to the Story

A creative use of Story Points is to spend them to add an element to the story. The player can spend a Story Point and then suggest a change or addition to the story. In this way players contribute actively to the story as co-authors in the most collaborative sense. They are limited to the Story Points they have to spend, and all decisions are ultimately up to the narrator. The changes are limited to Open Scenes, and can’t be used to change Rolled Scenes this way.

Example One:

Narrator: “You finally get to a village, tired and hungry, in the pouring rain. Everything looks closed this late at night.”

Player: (spending a Story Point) “Well, fortunately, as we get closer I realize that this little town is where my uncle lives. What a pleasant surprise, especially since he runs the local inn.”

Example Two:

A character with no real military training tries to give a special hand signal to two soldiers working with him. The narrator says that hand signals might not be widely used by the soldiers of this era, and even if they were, the character might not know the right ones. The narrator decides to allow the exchange by letting the player spend a Story Point.

Replenishing Descriptors

At the beginning of each new game session all Descriptors that were burned in the previous session are restored. Additionally, players can replenish up to four Descriptors in an Aspect by spending a Story Point.

Props and Equipment

Most items in a story are just functional devices, but special items have extra story value. To reflect this, some items can have their own Descriptors (or even Affinities — see below). The Descriptors of the item are added to the total of the person or people using the item, as though it were a part of them. A wagon with the Matter Descriptor “makes a heavy load seem light” adds a die to all Matter scenes for the characters when the wagon is being used. A sword with “hurts like all get out” works the same way. These Descriptors may be burned and replenished just like ordinary Descriptors.

A FEW PROPS...

Best Pointy Boots

The latest fashions still can't turn heads like these boots. Amazingly, they seem to go with everything you own, including your best traveling gear. They have the Descriptors “Always in Style” (Mind) and “Graceful” (Matter).

Blaster Pistol

A finer blaster was never made. This pre-ban beauty is sleek with a gray matte finish, retrofitted with Centauri Tech's high capacity power mods. With this in your hands, firefights are no longer the dreary bore they used to be. Has the Descriptors “Impresses the Crowd” (Mind), “Packs a Wallop” (Matter) and the Quirk “Strange Ozone Smell” (Matter).

Ring

A simple silver band from a long-lost love. Has the Quirk “Sorrow” (Spirit).

Walking Stick

A good stout piece of wood, worn by weather and age, with the Descriptors “Gets you there” (Spirit) and “Handy with Wolves” (Matter).

Eyepiece

A small monocle encased by a thin silver frame, ideal for posh afternoons and other social galas. Has the Descriptors “Elegant” (Mind) and “Smashing” (Mind).

Favorite Beer Stein

A cracked pint-sized mug from the good old days. You wouldn't trade it for the world. Has the descriptors “Tastes Better” (Mind) and “Not Bad for Hitting With” (Matter).

Sword of the Mountain King

Made in the time of the Elosian Wars, the blade of this sword is sharper than anything you've ever wielded before. The balance is perfect and the crossguard fits your style of swordsmanship to a tee. Whenever you use this sword in combat, you do an additional level of injury. Has the Descriptors “Inspires Awe” (Mind), “Strikes like Lightning” (Matter) and “Never Fails” (Spirit).

Certain items can have Descriptors that are not directly related to their use (like a pair of boots with the Mind Descriptor “stylish”) or are only available in certain situations: A ribbon from someone’s lover might have the Spirit Descriptor “keeps you safe” but would only work for that one person. A family sword might have the Spirit Descriptor of “honorable” but would only apply to members of that family line. Items might also have Quirks – the same wagon with the Descriptor “makes a heavy load seem light” might also have the Quirk “veers to the left” or “bounces enough to give you a migraine.”

Items still retain their functional properties once their Descriptors are spent, so a thermos with a Matter Descriptor of “keeps things hot” will still act like a thermos once the Descriptor is spent. Likewise, technology works the same way: A set of infrared lenses might have “can see like a hawk in the darkest night (Matter)” and would still allow infrared sight even once the Descriptor is burned.

In some game settings technology will drastically Impact the Scene. Using a blaster pistol on a planet with stone-age natives would give a tremendous advantage. In these cases, double the dice for strategic advantage. Also, even when the weapons are equal, high tech weapons might do additional levels of injury. For instance, a grenade might do d6 additional levels of injury with Complete Success, and blasters might always do one additional injury. High tech weapons are often more lethal, and the narrator can work out the numbers with each game setting. Plug Ins for game settings give details for each game world and address issues particular to each setting.

Some items have powers other than Descriptors. Armor might give additional Health Levels, and a ring might have the Gift Affinity of “Passing Unnoticed.” These items would have their own description of how they work and what they do. Some items might have both Descriptors and other powers.

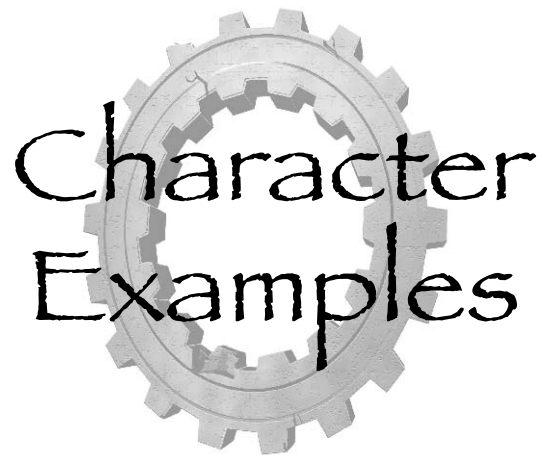
When using items it is more important to weigh how they *impact the scene* than to spell out their range, weight, or other details. The range of a rifle is less important than knowing that it can shoot further than a pistol, and the exact magnification of a telescope is less important than knowing that it can see the constellations with great clarity.

(see also Props in Games of Heroic Fantasy pp.139-141 in the bonus material)

Sets & Backdrops

Affinities can be used for places as well as people and things. A bar can have an affinity for “dark meetings” and a street can be affined to “nasty wrecks.” Of course, not everything has to be bad; a square can have an affinity for “lucky meetings” and the sick bay of your starship might have the “miraculous cure” affinity! Whenever anything happens in these places that relates to the affinity, additional dice are thrown based on the strength of the affinity. Place Affinities are rated in the same way as Trait Affinities: Weak, Mild and Strong. Unlike Trait Affinities, however, a die is added for each level of the place affinity (rather than converting dice to Auto Odds). Whenever the place affinity is appropriate to the scene (like rolling for a “miraculous cure” back aboard ship or to see if the informant you’re looking for is having a “dark meeting” at the bar) dice are added to the roll based on the level of the Place Affinity.

Certain genres lend themselves to Place Affinities, from Gothic settings and Film Noir to heroic stories of good and evil. In a game with a bent towards “real world reality” Place Affinities might be less appropriate or could be limited to Weak. Place Affinities help bring the background to life, giving it character and personality beyond the visual description.



Character Examples

The following characters help illustrate the different kinds of roles you can create in Story Engine. There's an infinite number of characters that can be created this way, limited only by the setting and story choices of your game. These roles can also be used as NPCs or even Player Characters. Allfred, Daena and Hog are fantasy characters perfect for the *Dublin's Tomb* scenario, and several others could be adapted for the *Airship Murders*.

The Story Point cost is listed next to each item, such as “Morbid Sense of Humor (Mind) 3” — this means that it cost 3 Story Points for that Descriptor. The examples also list the total point cost for that character next to the concept.

Alacia Avarin (sci-fi near future)
(Concept: Criminal Mastermind / 38 Story Points)

Alacia always thought of herself as a normal girl, with a normal home and normal life. The trouble was that she could read minds. This gift might have been better suited to someone else, however, because in her normal life surrounded by normal people in a normal suburb on a normal planet it more or less drove Alacia mad. She developed a great dislike for society and people in general after being forced to listen to every mundane and trivial thought that flitted by her. Then one day it all became clear: she was going to milk the world (and others, too) for all it was worth. Things have been much more interesting since she turned to a life of crime.

Mind 3 / Matter 1

Sharp Wit (Mind) 2
Photographic Memory (Mind) 3
Amazing Liar (Mind) 4
Gymnastic Strength (Matter) 2

Elastic Conscience (Quirk) 1

[Home] Cultural Affinity 7
Gift: ESP 7

Electronics (Weak) 3
Security Systems (Weak) 3
Banking Systems (Weak) 3
Identity Stealing (Weak) 3

Story Points: 0

Allfred Longfingers (fantasy)
(Concept: Adventurer Thief / 25 Story Points)

Allfred found at a young age that being small has its rewards. Sneaking over the roof at night let him enjoy the world outside the strict, frugal confines of the orphanage, and after awhile he was even making money by bringing things to the other kids — things he “found” while out on the town. A few scrapes with the law made Allfred decide that a few big hauls were better than a lot of little ones, especially if he wanted to be rich by the ripe old age of 23...

Mind 1 / Matter 2 / Chaos 1

Hands like Lightning (Matter) 2
“I think you missed.” (Matter) 3
Not one to miss a beat (Mind) 2
Wild child (Chaos) 2

[Home] Cultural Affinity 7

Climbing (Weak) 3
Locks (Weak) 3
Knives (Weak) 3

Story Points: 0

Daena Starfire (fantasy) (Concept: Mage / 37 Story Points)

Daena didn't know what to make of her future when the old women came and took her from the orphanage. After a long journey through the snow she found her new home in the peaks of the Alliton Mountains. It was an old monastery, long since abandoned by the Silver Monks, the dusty halls cold with drafts and shutters that wouldn't stay closed. The old women took good care of her, and as she helped with the chores they taught her magic. In time she was able to perform all the spells of the First Book, and as she came of age they sent her out into the world to find her way and pursue her powers. Daena didn't know what she was looking for, but she knew she wanted to do right by the old women and return there one day with new books and wealth to repay them for their kindness.

Mind 1 / Matter 1 / Spirit 1 / Chaos 2

Depth of Thought (Mind) 2
Young (Matter) 2
Heart of Gold (Spirit) 2
Free Spirit (Chaos) 2
Welcomes the Unknown (Chaos) 3

[Home] Cultural Affinity 7
Gift: Sorcery 7

Learned (Weak) 3
Magic Trait: Fire (Weak) 3
Magic Trait: Charm (Weak) 3
Magic Trait: Heal (Weak) 3

Story Points: 0

Kaneda Rodrigo (fantastic present) (Concept: Martial Arts Hero / 25 Story Points)

There is a war brewing, a war between good and evil. Kaneda has always known it was coming, and he has prepared for it all his life. Some people hide when darkness comes, but Kaneda plans to stand his ground and fight for the Emerald Queen when the Seven Snakes rise from the earth as foretold long ago.

Mind 1 / Matter 2 / Spirit 1

Lightning Reflexes (Matter) 2
Strength of a Tiger (Matter) 3
Disciplined Mind (Mind) 2
Sense of Purpose (Spirit) 2

[Home] Cultural Affinity 7

Martial Arts: Melee (Mild) 6
Martial Arts: Shurikan (Weak) 3

Story Points: 0

Mean Pete McGill (Wild West) (Concept: Fast-drawing Villain / 55 Story Points)

Pete wasn't always a killer, but a man can only take so much before he turns mean. His pa beat him, Indians killed his best friend, and the only girl that grabbed his heart left him for a banker from Connecticut. One day he decided to start sharing his anger with the world, communicating the details of his fury with a Colt Peacemaker. Life on the run has sent him on an odyssey across half the territories, landing him in jail on more than a few occasions. Thanks to a lawless West, good brothels and the gold rush there's no end of fun for a guy like Pete.

Mind 1 / Matter 3 / Spirit 1

Fastest Hands (Matter) 2
Light Sleeper (Matter) 3
Can Take a Blow (Matter) 4
Quick on the Take (Mind) 2
Determined to Win (Spirit) 2
Rock-headed (Quirk) 1
Stubborn as a Mule (Quirk) 2
Several Nasty Scars (Quirk) 3

Territory Man Cultural Affinity 7
Gift: Endless Ammo 7

Cheating (Weak) 3
Gambling (Weak) 3
Pugilism (Weak) 3
Quick Draw (Mild) 6
Shooting: Revolver (Mild) 6

Story Points: 1



Scurrilous Jack (World War I)

(Concept: Pilot, Adventurer / 50 Story Points)

Jack found his calling at a young age when he ran off from the orphanage and stowed away aboard a mail plane. Making his way from mail boy to mechanic was a cinch, but it took the war to make him a pilot.

Life in the Royal Air Force was no easy ticket, and Jack soon found that jobs in the private sector were more tolerant of his many vices (such as smuggling and gun running). His new career has made him famous, which is a bad thing if half your time is spent running from the law! Between dangerous runs through enemy lines and bill collectors trying to take his plane, life for Scurrilous Jack is never dull... but what kind of self-respecting scoundrel would want it any other way?

Mind 1 / Matter 2 / Chaos 1

Roguish Charm (Mind) 2
Eyes like a Hawk (Matter) 2
Quick Reflexes (Matter) 3
Never Panics (Chaos) 2
Trouble's Best Friend (Quirk) 1

British Cultural Affinity 7
Gift: Affability 7

Fighter Pilot - Strong 9
Pistols - Mild 6
Mechanic - Weak 3
Navigation - Weak 3
Carousing - Weak 3

Story Points: 2

Taver "Hog" Heller (fantasy)

(Concept: Warrior Adventurer / 35 Story Points)

Hog progressed through life on a fairly straight road, from tantrum-throwing handful to school-yard bully and then a stint with the army before becoming a full fledged mercenary in search of fame, fortune and a good pint of ale. He refined his favorite skills along the way, wasting no time with the finer things, and now can safely say that should he find the man who spanked him when he was born, he'll teach him a thing or two.

Mind 1 / Matter 3

Jaw Like Steel (Matter) 2
Built of Iron (Matter) 3
Unstoppable (Matter) 4
Determined (Mind) 2
Stubborn (Quirk) 1

[Home] Cultural Affinity 7
Gift: Iron Skin 7

Swords (Mild) 6
Brawling (Weak) 3

Story Points: 0

Url (pirate fantasy)

(Concept: Pet Sidekick / 25 Story Points)

Few people have seen the world as Url has, and if he could talk he'd have great stories to tell. As dogs go he lives the good life, accompanying his doting master across the seven seas and back, tangling with bad guys and finding lost treasure. The only thing Url misses in his life at sea are cats. Though he can't quite talk and doesn't pursue a higher truth, Url's a bright mutt and can get his point across when he needs to — especially to his master Tack who has a spe-

cial gift when it comes to understanding dogs. And people have learned to listen to Url: after saving the ship off the coast of Madagascar by spotting that smoking fuse and catching One-Armed Mike before he torched San Cristobal, it's hard to be taken for granted.

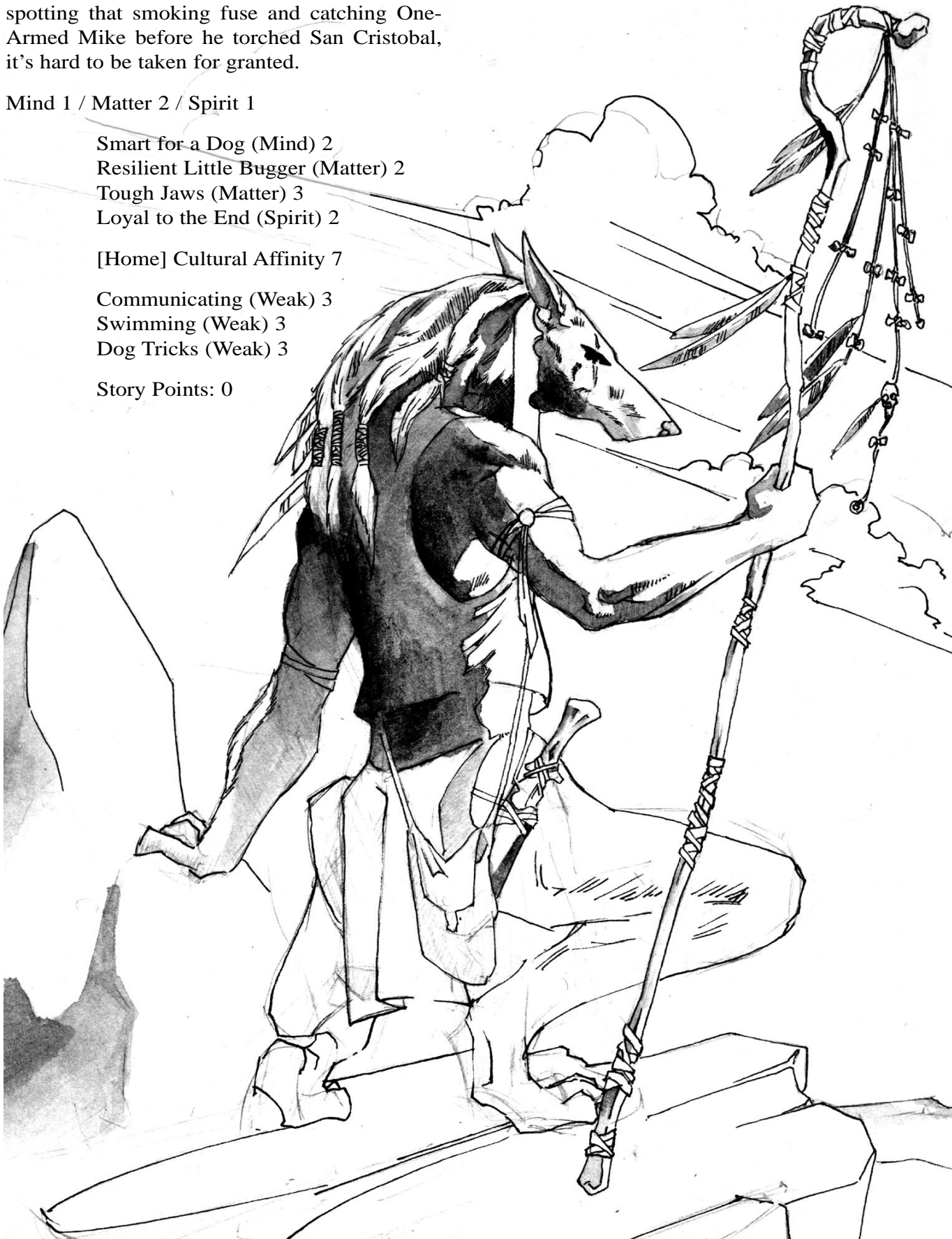
Mind 1 / Matter 2 / Spirit 1

Smart for a Dog (Mind) 2
Resilient Little Bugger (Matter) 2
Tough Jaws (Matter) 3
Loyal to the End (Spirit) 2

[Home] Cultural Affinity 7

Communicating (Weak) 3
Swimming (Weak) 3
Dog Tricks (Weak) 3

Story Points: 0





Running Games

“never let the truth stand in the way of a good story”

GAMES can be rich and wonderful adventures. With a little forethought and some good tools a game can really bring stories to life and be fun for everyone involved. Parts of this section are common sense, and probably obvious to many of you, but it never hurts to re-think the obvious or try something new. Some of it, however, should offer insight to even the most advanced players.

One of the most important things for players and narrators to understand is that the game is a collaborative event. For the story to come alive everyone has to be involved and contribute. The story is about the characters and their lives, and their actions determine the outcome of the events. Players need to do more than sit back and listen; the player’s job is to respond to the events in the story by making choices, taking action and contributing flavor and ideas to the game. The narrator’s job is more than adjudicating rules — they need to provide an engaging storyline and a cohesive game setting.

Where to Game 101: The Game Environment

Since roleplaying games are about stories, the place you choose to play is important. Do you have a comfortable place to sit? Are there too many distractions? Should you order dinner before the game starts? Does everyone have to work or go to class the next morning? Don’t lose any sleep over this, but it doesn’t hurt to think about the gaming environment and see if there are any easy changes that can help everyone have a better time.

Table or no Table

Having a table in front of you can change the feel of a game; it can help everyone focus and keeps people from getting distracted or falling asleep on the couch. Large tables are especially useful in games with a lot of notes or maps. Sometimes, however, a relaxed atmosphere is better for story games, and as long as you have some place to roll dice and take notes, playing without a table can keep the game from feeling like a classroom or conference. Think about your style of play and find what works best for you and your group.

Where to Run a Game

Living rooms are good relaxed environments for story games. A kitchen nearby helps too, especially for long games (soda, snacks and coffee are the manna of the game gods). You can run story games anywhere, of course, even coffee shops or cafés (if you know one that doesn’t mind loitering). Generally, however, a place that is somewhat private works best to avoid distractions, keep the focus on the game and help immerse everyone in the story.

Interruptions and Ambience

Interruptions can kill the flow of a good story. Try to play somewhere where you won't be interrupted all the time (turn the ringer off on the phone if you can). The atmosphere and mood of a game are subtle elements and it doesn't take much to throw them off. Also, as a narrator think about where you're sitting. Since you'll be getting most of the focus you should sit somewhere that draws the attention of the group into the room and not out the window or an adjacent room. Some groups play music for ambience, adjust the lighting or even use props – if this works for you, give it a shot. Lastly, plan your breaks well; if half the game is spent deciding what food to get and where to order it from, then your story game has just become “Dinner: The RPG.”

The Three Sides of Narrating

There are three things that make a good narrator: management, adjudication and storytelling. It takes a lot to be good at all three. **Management** just means scheduling game times and getting everyone to the gaming table with their character scratchbooks (a surprisingly difficult task). **Adjudication** requires a sound understanding of the rules as you apply them to the story and make decisions. **Storytelling** is about telling a good story and getting everyone involved. Just remember that being a great “storyteller” doesn't make you a good manager, and vice versa – great games aren't any good if no one's on time and your notes are scattered all over the house.

NARRATOR CONTROL

Some narrators (ominously referred to as “game masters” in many games) think the story is about them and whatever they've prepared for that game session. They feel a need to have complete oversight of every detail of the game, and become impatient if the players don't follow the story they've prepared. They don't allow players to roleplay their characters unless they get to supervise it and they discourage players from talking to anyone but them.

In a collaborative storytelling game, the narrator is only one part of the group. They are responsible for preparing the plot, running the NPCs, and adjudicating the rules. The story itself, however, is about the players. The narrator does not need to be involved in every conversation or every decision. Too much meddling can hurt the game. Players should be allowed free reign to determine the actions of their characters, with only occasional advice from the narrator. If the characters deviate from the planned adventure, then the new course of events has become the story. In turn players should make decisions that add to the game and help the story (but not if it goes against what their character would do in the situation). In short, narrators do not need to control every event. Their job is to guide the story along and provide responses to the decisions the players make.

Ways to Run a Game

There are several ways to run a story game and every group has its own style of playing. In standard games, one person takes on the job of narrator and the other players run characters in an ongoing story. Optionally, players can run several characters (either switching characters every so often or running them all at once) or even trade characters between players.

Other options include “troop style” games where a different player takes on the role of narrator every few sessions. You may also want to look at “Collaborative Storytelling” in *Tales from the Empire* (pp.83-84) as a way to shake up the routine every once in awhile. Lastly, you can run chapters out of chronological order, playing characters at different points in their lives, or even skip generations and play out the lives of a family throughout the centuries.

Players: Managing your Audience

Collaborate

The single most important thing you can do is collaborate. Work with the players to tell the story of their characters. Just because you're the one who throws obstacles at them doesn't mean you're the adversary. Almost all traditional RPGs foster an adversarial relationship between players and "game masters" — this doesn't have to be the case. Simple things make a difference, such as letting players describe the outcome of scenes, being generous with the use of Traits and Descriptors, and sharing in the pleasure of the group's success. It's not a battle of wits to see who's more clever — it is, however, a healthy exercise of the imagination as everyone (players and narrator alike) attempts to bring a fictional world to life.

***Example:** The narrator tells a player that the bad guy draws his gun and aims it at him. The player, surprised, explains that he thought he was upstairs at the time. This is simple miscommunication, and though it may hurt the suspense it's not a problem — the narrator says "oh, okay, I thought you were still in the main room. That's all right — how long ago did you think you went upstairs?" and they work it out from there.*

Avoid arguments. Arguing over how the rules work, why a character should have been hit or any of a thousand other things is pointless and detracts from the collaboration. It's just a story — work out a solution and go from there. Though some players can be selfish or even borderline cheaters, do your best to give them the benefit of the doubt and err on the side of generosity. Don't get too attached to your world or your NPCs — it's all right if the players trash the restaurant you painstakingly designed or shoot your favorite NPC. Players should appreciate the work you've done to make the game enjoyable, but they should also feel free to make their characters interact with the world the way they think their character would.

THREE KINDS OF PLAYERS

Many different people are drawn to roleplaying games, but despite this diversity many gamers can be categorized into three different groups. Most of us have elements of all three, but the emphasis is usually on one style of play:

Story-Oriented: these players are interested in the story being told in the game. At best they are creative, dynamic contributors; at worst they are self-involved flakes and only want to talk about their character.

Strategy-Oriented: these players are interested in the game as a mental challenge in which their characters are a tool for winning. At best they are creative problem solvers; at worst they are power-gaming rules lawyers.

Mechanics-Oriented: these players are interested in the rules and how they work. At best they are interesting contributors with a knack for min-maxing; at worst they are frustrating nitpickers with little interest in the story.

There is no right or wrong in roleplaying as long as everyone has a good time. It helps if the group you play with shares the same interests in the game, but a little diversity can go a long way. Story Engine is designed around the Story-Oriented gamer, focusing on the story and the characters rather than mechanics or strategy. A sound understanding of the rules is important, however, and without a good strategy a group of adventurers will be hard pressed to stay alive.

The more a narrator knows about the players the easier it is to keep the game interesting for everyone; tangential discussions about rules or long anecdotes about other characters are fine as long as everyone enjoys them. Puzzles and traps may appeal to Strategy-Oriented players, and interesting applications of Gifts and Place Affinities may appeal to Mechanics-Oriented players. Use your judgement and keep the players engaged.

Characters as People, Not Robots

Characters are the best part of story games. The personalities, decisions and flaws of the characters are the parts we enjoy, laugh at and remember. Many players, however, treat their character as an automaton rather than a person, turning a story game into an exercise in rules and mechanics rather than a collaborative exercise of the imagination. These are the players who argue a lot and who make their character sleep in their armor. For them it's usually about winning. If you're forced to play with these kinds of people, all you can do is try to get them to trust you (the narrator) as someone who is trying to help them tell their story. The Story Engine lets players describe the outcome of their success and with that freedom some of these

“power gamers” begin to relax and stop nitpicking. After awhile you may be surprised when one of these “must always win” players actually volunteers to be the one who got hurt in a scene! Also, remember to convey the *idea* of obstacles to players rather than specifics (try “really tall fence” rather than “18 foot fence”) — this prevents some of the arguments because the players are able to fill in their own image of the fence to their satisfaction. The player who claims to know all about climbing fences is more likely to be satisfied.

Players (of all types) are more able to trust the narrator (and the story itself) if the narrator isn't hovering like a hawk waiting for them to make a mistake. Though genres vary in their feel and how “serious” they are, narrators shouldn't make the players pay for their mistakes through the nose, especially if the mistake was the character's, not their player (in other words, the player knew better but their character did not). Players need to feel secure in letting their characters behave normally, from arguing with bartenders and drinking too much to taking badly timed bathroom breaks while on guard duty.

Take this example of a downtime scene: The player is told that during the week their character was jumped and beaten up by some local punks, who left a message from the big mob boss. The player is annoyed because his character is supposed to be this butch, heavily armed killer and a bunch of punks should never be able to take him down. Instead of arguing over it, the narrator and player address the real issue: “I don't have a problem with getting beaten up, but not by a bunch of two-bit punks.” says the player. Since the intention of the scene was to get the message to the



NON-PLAYER CHARACTERS (See also the sidebar on p.18 for more on NPCs)

Non-Player Characters (NPCs) are one of the most important elements of a story. The whole world is populated by NPCs, and the narrator is responsible for playing them and bringing them to life (in some ways, this is the fun part for the narrator). Narrators should try to focus the story around the players as much as possible, and create storylines and plots that don't require constant help or input from NPCs. At the same time, NPCs are real people with thoughts and ideas as well as feelings, needs and fears. Players interact with NPCs every time they ask for directions, order food and lodging or speak to people in the street. These are all great opportunities for the narrator to breathe life into the world by showing the attitudes and opinions of the people in it. The way NPCs react to the PCs is also a good indicator of how well the PCs fit in or stand out in the local environment. NPCs can be sources of information as well as misinformation, just like everything else in the world. If there are NPCs working closely with the players in the course of the story, make sure they don't overshadow the players and lead the story — otherwise the story starts to be about the narrator and the NPCs instead of the players, who might as well sit back and watch.

character with a display of force, the narrator agrees: “OK. I can understand that. What kind of encounter works for you?”

The Story: Where to Begin

Genre

Genre is a blend of style, setting and tone. The genre of your game determines everything from the events in the story to the whole “reality” of the game world. In some genres, people fly. In others, they die of malaria. With this in mind, work out the kinds of Traits and Gifts people can have, and whether or not they get additional Health Levels. The consistency of this fictional reality is important (see below), and some thought should be taken in order to maintain the integrity of the genre.

Suspension of Disbelief: Maintaining a Cohesive Reality

One of the most difficult jobs of the narrator is to create a fictional world that is believable. Even if you’re using a game setting you bought in a store (where someone else has done the work for you) or running a game set in today’s real world, you (as narrator) have to maintain the credibility of that world. When confronted by obstacles, antagonists or even mundane events, the players have to feel confident that it all fits the genre and reality of the story. In film the “reality” of the setting is called the *diegesis* (an obscure term - don’t worry, you’ll never hear it again). In a “larger than life” setting the villain may be expected to survive a fall off a cliff, and in heroic fantasy it’s an accepted fact that dragons can fly. Conversely, in a “real life” game no one survives falling off a cliff and dragons are only seen in faerie tales.

The first thing to do is to make sure all the different elements of the fictional world work together and make sense. If you have a race of “plague spreading flying monkeys,” make sure there’s a reason the world isn’t dying from plague. In a world of magic, would the city streets be lit at night? Would there still be disease? When players bring mounds of treasure back from a dragon hoard, do they flood the market and cause inflation? If players keep finding magical items in every dungeon, why doesn’t half the world have magical items and equipment? Just like everything balances out in our world’s ecology, the same principles apply to fictional worlds. In larger than life games (from high fantasy to superheroes and space opera) the details may be less important, but the overall “believability” is still an issue: if there’s a dragon in a dungeon, does it have a way in and out? If a planet dense with valuable minerals is populated by a peaceful, primitive people, why haven’t they been wiped out or subjugated by trans-galactic corporations, pirates and colonists? All of these events can happen, but without a good reason or explanation the players may lose their willingness to suspend their disbelief.

Once the game begins, establish the reality through your descriptions of the world. When the players interact with the story environment, make sure the world responds in ways that are appropriate

PREPARING THE ADVENTURE

A good plot will only get you so far. The more familiar you are with the characters, the better able you will be to prepare scenes the players will enjoy and anticipate the actions of their characters. Be sure to ask yourself what choices the characters are likely to make in any given scene you prepare. If it’s important for your plot that the characters travel to a certain city, then make sure they’ll have enough reason to do so. The goal has to be important enough for the characters to want to accomplish it, or else they may find themselves doing other things. However, even the best plans can go astray. Be sure to let the players do what they want (as long as it makes sense for their characters to do it). You can then weave the new storyline back into the old one or simply create a new story. Also, tangents are not necessarily deviations — if the players are enjoying a tangent of the story, let them. Remember, it’s their story, not yours.

to the setting. The way the mundane elements of the world are presented will establish how the overall world works. Describing beggars on the street says a lot about the world and what it's about, as does the way you present a corner store or nightclub. The mundane elements of a fictional world are the backbone of the world itself, even if the focus of the story is on grander things.

Relative vs. Non-Relative Obstacles

Once you know the genre, think about the kind of challenges you'll throw at the players. In some genres, every obstacle the players face is carefully matched to give them a good challenge every time. In others, the world exists independently of the characters and some obstacles are harder than others. In a genre of "grim reality" the world might be an ugly and dangerous place where the characters can get gunned down in a drive-by. In a genre of "high fantasy" the characters are usually heroes and whatever they face is carefully tailored to their abilities. Ask yourself this: if the characters hear someone scream in an alley and rush to help, will the muggers always be a good match for them, or will it depend on how tough the characters are? Making the challenges relative to the capabilities of the group is more dramatic but less realistic, and non-relative challenges are more realistic but not always as dramatic.

Scope of the Story

The first thing to do once you know your genre is to decide the story's scope. Are you trying to tell a quick story in one evening or a multi-session epic? Think about the time frame of the story

OUT OF CHARACTER INFORMATION

One of the most obvious but most abused rules of a role-playing game involves "out-of-character" information (abbreviated "ooc" and "ic" for "in-character"). This is information the player knows but their character does NOT know. For instance, the player may know their character is in danger, but if the character doesn't know that then the player shouldn't take precautions that don't make sense for their character. Essentially, using "ooc" information to help the character is cheating. There are creative ways to use "ooc" information that make the game enjoyable without cheating (see sidebar p.22) but generally the players need to keep "ooc" information separate from "ic" information.

Example 1: The character finds a small rusted nail on the table. The player is pretty sure it's important, because not only is the adventure titled "The Rusty Nail" but there's even a picture of a rusty nail on the cover of the game adventure. The character, however, is oblivious. "A rusty nail? Someone might cut themselves and get tetanus from that!" the character says, tossing the nail into the spittoon.

Example 2: One of the characters walks into a room with a medusa and is turned to stone. The other players are aware of this but their characters are not; however, the players tell the narrator they are covering their eyes before going into the room. This is using "ooc" information to cheat.

Example 3: During an otherwise normal museum tour, a character falls to the floor with sudden abdominal cramps as a monstrous parasite begins to rip itself out of the character's stomach. Another character, who happens to be a physician, tries to help. The player of the physician knows he should get away as fast as he can, but his character DOESN'T know this. Instead, the player says: "I move my face closer and try to get a better look at the poor man's stomach as I pull his shirt open." In this example, using the "ooc" info might have saved the character, but it would have been cheating, so the player ignored the "ooc" info and let their character do what their character would do in that situation (even though in this example it put them in danger). It's like watching a movie: instead of being frustrated by the consequences, the player gets to enjoy the horrible reality that they know "ooc" is about to befall them.

itself: does it cover a few hours in the lives of the characters or is it a major epic about multiple generations spanning a hundred years? A sense of completion usually makes the game better, so try to prepare a story that can “finish” when the game is done (another approach altogether is to use “responsive storylines” and let the players loose and see what they do — players with initiative don’t need much prodding as long as the environment you put them in is interesting to them).

A good storyline keeps players coming back for more. A fun and interesting story is the base of most good games. Find an idea and build in a good plot. A through-line for the whole narrative is important, or else the characters are just wandering around, drifting from one adventure to another. Objectives may shift chapter to chapter, but the overall goals should remain the same – they should be important life quests for the character, so important that they drive the character onward despite the obstacles that stand in the way.

The Plot

A good narrative needs a good plot. In a game, the players control many of the events and will steer the story in a variety of unexpected directions – directions that might be the opposite of what the narrator intended. That’s where plot comes in: the plot will guide the events of the story, and whatever the players do, the plot should be able to adjust.

So what is a plot? A plot is a cohesive through-line that guides the story. Unlike novels and films, story games are interactive and need to adjust to the new elements the players bring to it. Plots are only frameworks, and need to be flexible enough to allow a lot of meandering or even a whole new story to evolve.

In the faerie tale, the hero has to defeat the dragon to rescue the princess. He can’t rescue the princess until he defeats the dragon. Simple as that. If he plans to marry her, he probably needs to win her heart. And the princess isn’t just going to wait around to be rescued – she might defeat the dragon herself and ditch the hero in favor of her favorite scoundrel.

In a story game, all these things can happen. The plot needs to adjust to fit them. The players should be encouraged to try new things or take risks. Just because the hero has a sword doesn’t mean he should use it to kill the dragon. It might be easier to poison him. Or drop a rock on his head. Or befriend him and ditch the princess.

When designing plots for story games, be sure to include elements that will engage all of the players, taking into account the personalities, strengths and goals of their characters.

Subplots

Subplots are all the wonderful layers of story going on underneath the main story. Love interests, revenge, family honor – all these things end up creating a variety of great side-stories that happen during the main story. Encourage these as much as possible; not only do they add flavor to the game but most often they end up being as important to each player as the main story is to the group.

Weaving A Story

The Scene Tools for framing on p.30 can help the structure as well as the mood of a game. Beginning a story with a Cut Scene is a great way to get players involved. Also, be sure to Cross Cut a lot when players are involved in different scenes, and use Time Cuts to get to the good parts of the story. In addition, the following tools can help you run a good game:

Pace

Keeping a good pace can really improve a game. Each genre has its own feel, and each story its own pace. Skip over boring scenes, and frame scenes so as to capture the best parts. Pace is something that’s built – it has highs and lows. As the climax of the chapter draws near, the pace generally speeds up. Decide what each session’s story is about, and how it fits into the chapter, and

plan the scenes accordingly. But just as there are many scenes that are unnecessary or dull, some scenes are vital to the enjoyment of the game. If the players are enjoying the scene, or they need a scene for the color and mood it provides, then by all means frame it to include whatever makes it better. On the other hand, one dull or overly slow scene can ruin the pace of an entire session.

Informative scenes are generally Open Scenes, and provide flavor and mood, as well as expository material the players may need to know. The pace for these can usually be slow – but make sure they are still fluid and move ahead towards the next scene.

Action scenes are fast. To reflect the excitement of an action scene, build to it with tightly framed scenes and then unfold the action scenes at a great pace. Don't let the scene drag on. As long as the players are comfortable with the facts they need to know about the scene, then whip through the bidding and die rolls.

Resolution scenes, which generally follow action scenes, are great moments to slow the pace and recover from the speed of the action scene. These scenes are a “taking stock” time, when the players get to assess the consequences of the action scenes and determine what to do next.

Chapters

In a narrative that lasts more than a few sessions, the story can be broken down into chapters. Chapters help build the framework within the larger story, and create a pace for the plot as a whole. Chapters are segments of a larger story, and what defines them is similar to what frames a scene. As a major breakthrough in the plot or closure to a momentous event, chapters can give a sense of progress and allow the story to have a resolution scene in which the players chart their way as they assess their situation.

Suspense

Suspense works hand in hand with pace. Use Cut Scenes to add flavor and help add to the level of danger the players may sense. Suspense is also helped by foreshadowing. Tight, quick scenes work well. The underlying tension of suspense lies in not knowing what's about to happen – but fearing that something may happen at any moment.

Description

Descriptions are the most important part of any scene. They need to be as elaborate or as concise as each scene requires. More than just “flavor text,” descriptions convey the whole mood and feel of the scene, both in the set-up and in the resolution. The information provided in a description is all the players have to work with. A good description should give a feel for the scene and provide the factual information necessary for the players. Too much can be boring, too little can leave the players feeling lost. They don't have to be eloquent or verbose, but they do need to be effective.

Foreshadowing

Foreshadowing can be used poetically, or it can add to the suspense of the story. Foreshadowing is the art of hinting at what lies ahead. It may be simple, like describing the weather changing for the worst, or obvious, like bumping into a funeral procession. Often the foreshadowing can be personal, like seeing a knife and having a Cut Scene in which the character suddenly imagines a knife plunging into their heart. Dreams also can serve as devices for foreshadowing – the character may dream of horrible things, adding to the apprehension of what might lie ahead.

Reward

The reward for overcoming obstacles should reflect the effort and creativity the players put into the story. Reward is part of the *incentive* (see below) and can come in many forms, from flavorful scenes where the character is handed the “keys to the city,” to the discovery of important clues. The important thing is for the players to feel as if the effort is worth it. Likewise, the feeling of success is devalued if rewards are given out too easily.

Incentive

To make a story move, the characters have to have a reason to attain their goal. The more important the reason, the more they'll fight to get it. Incentives can range from money and fame to personal salvation. Don't assume that players will choose to follow the storyline just because it's there. If their characters have no reason to advance the plot, then they won't, no matter how good the plot is.

Symbolism

Symbolism is an abstract story element that can add a level of color that greatly enhances a story. Symbols are images that stand for something else. Recurring symbols can add a through-line of imagery that lends a creative hand to the story. Whether the group always seems to hear church bells before one of them dies (foreshadowing) or their benevolent benefactor always wears white, the symbols can be subtle, humorous or broad. The poisoned cup the character drinks from can be the same cup he used to toast his health in a prior scene. The evil nemesis can have the shadow of the church symbol fall on her in a way that makes it appear inverted. All of these things are a matter of style and taste, but a touch of symbolism is rarely wasted.

Active Authoring

Players should be encouraged to take initiative in scenes, from creatively using their Descriptors in the bidding process to describing the outcome once the dice are rolled. Since the outcome is determined by the success range, players can enjoy describing HOW the scene succeeded or failed. In Open Scenes players are free to state such things as "I sit back in the chair and help myself to the fine cigars on the desk," even if no cigars have been mentioned by the narrator. Unless there is a reason why there wouldn't be cigars on the desk, the player is able to add that detail to the scene as part of their "authorship" of the scene. Although the narrator guides the story, the players should be free to flesh out the details and bring the world to life.

FAIR VS. FUN

There are times when a scene has an undesirable result. Sometimes characters die when it doesn't seem to suit the story (at undramatic moments) or the players fail to catch the killer in the big final scene. The important part of the game is the story, but the story has its base in the excitement and challenge of the events that shape it. It may be tempting to ignore a bad roll or change some facts to make sure the players "win," but don't be afraid to accept the outcome of scenes — no matter how much they might throw a wrench in the story. The credibility of the story will fall apart if the outcome is pre-determined by what the narrator or players want, and the risk of failure has to be genuine to maintain the thrill of the game. In the long run, the reward for truly "earning" success is more enjoyable than fudging it.

On the flip side, it's important not to rob players of victory just because they had a great plan or rolled really well. If the big obstacle in a climactic scene is easily overcome, then either the challenge wasn't hard enough or the players did better than expected through luck and/or good ideas.

What does this mean in practice? If the players are having a horrible time getting out of a jam and you realize it's because it was badly designed, add another way out or adjust an element in the scene to correct the problem — but don't change anything if they're having a terrible time because of bad rolls and poor planning. Same thing goes with players who are mopping the floor with your bad guys — if they earned it, let them mop all they want, though you may want to adjust something if you realize you didn't balance the encounter the way you meant to.



Rules & Using Other Systems

You should always feel free to change the rules, make exceptions, and create your own house rules — no matter what system you're using. Just try to keep your changes within the general vein of the rules you're changing (see pp.138-139 for a few examples). Also, be sure to let your players know before you change a rule that affects them, and take their input on rules they'd like to change or ones they'd rather keep. Since rules govern the reality of the story, changing rules during a game can threaten the cohesion of your story as a fictional environment.

The rules system used in a game has an effect on the reality of the world itself. Traditional rules inadvertently define the genre by giving absolute values to how the world works, such as how much a person can lift and how fast a car can go. Most roleplaying rules are outgrowths of tactical wargames, treating characters as strategic tools used by players to overcome obstacles. Even many newer “storytelling” games are just round-based combat rules with cosmetic changes. These systems are quantitative and assign strict parameters as they attempt to simulate the laws of physics. Quantitative systems don't adjust well to genres that have a different scale of reality from their own. They also tend to rely on complicated rules for action sequences that can turn a short action scene into a slow process of rules arbitration and dice rolling.

***Example:** In quantitative systems a single action usually requires a die roll to determine initiative, followed by a comparison of offensive vs. defensive scores, modified for each element of the action and environment, which generates a second roll of the dice. The outcome is then modified in turn by a third roll of the dice to determine the range of success. Combat scenes require this procedure to be repeated for each individual in the scene for every pre-set segment (“combat round”) until the fight is resolved. Specialized powers and skills add additional rolls and segments (such as “quick draw” skills, “weapon specialization” and “super-speed (celerity)” powers). Many games have additional tables and charts for “critical hits” and “body location” and may even require players to keep track of how many blows their armor has taken and how many times their weapon suffered a “critical miss.”*

Story Engine, however, is a narrative game, in which the rules guide the storyline and adapt seamlessly to any genre, giving you fluid, fun games that focus on the story and not the rules. It uses a relative scale to rate characters and challenges: a feat rated at “extremely hard” is relative to the genre and the challenge in question. The laws of “what is possible” change by genre, so in a heroic adventure the hero can jump off a cliff and catch the wing of a plane as it flies by without even losing their hat, whereas in a tale set in the “real world” the hero's lucky to get through the day without ruining their suit.

There are trade-offs when choosing rules. Story based games (the “relative” systems) are creative and adaptable, but less realistic. They require an imaginative group of players with initiative and a willingness to collaborate. Mechanics based games (the “quantitative” systems) are more realistic but restrictive. They are more common in part because they require less input from the players and rely on the rules to advance the story.

The important thing in choosing rules is to find a system that gives you what you and your players want. By trying a few different sets of rules you can see what works best for you and even mix the best parts together for your own home-grown system.

Diceless & Live-Action (see also pp.138-139 for more)

Story Engine converts instantly to diceless! The mechanics are almost the same, except that the final step of rolling the dice is removed. Traits count as additional dice instead of Auto Odds (adding 1 to 3 dice to the die pool based on the strength of the Trait). Once any Descriptors are burned and the die pool is determined, compare it with the Target Number for the Success Rate.

In Live-Action games players get to bid against each other if they're in a conflict, burning their Descriptors to out-bid their opponent like a normal Bid Scene, with the highest bidder winning.

For a random factor, 5 index cards can be used with the numbers 2, 1, 0, -1, -2 written on the backs: A random card is drawn and added (or subtracted if negative) to the final die pool.

Since many contests and challenges take place without a narrator present, we recommend that gaming groups decide in advance what Aspects govern which types of actions, deviating only when both sides agree to change Aspects for a scene.

Conveying the Story: Ideas as Tools

One of the most overlooked keys to roleplaying is communication. The focus on rules, systems, plots and characters overshadow the primary tool of roleplaying: communication. Roleplaying is a game of stories and ideas, all of which are conveyed through communication. Communication provides the facts as well as the flavor. There are 2 key aspects of communication that are central to story games:

Concept vs. Numbers

Most slow-downs and disagreements in roleplaying come from gamers arguing about reload times, jumping distance, lines of sight, and things like that. Some gamers enjoy these tangents; they're brief discussions about things that interest them. For the rest, these tangents slow down the game and often lead to arguments in which someone (usually the narrator) "wins" and someone else "loses" — which undermines the whole idea of collaborative storytelling. Despite the fact that most gamers believe themselves to be experts on every aspect of combat, physics and tactical warfare, the game is about the story. The best way to defuse this style of quibbling over inches and minutiae is to focus on the concept of the scene and not the numbers. If presented with a "10 foot chasm" most gamers will immediately argue that their character could easily jump it, converting the story into a mathematical equation. However, when presented with a "narrow chasm" the idea of the challenge is preserved. The Story Engine uses universal terms on the Hard Rate to help maintain the idea of the threat (Easy, Hard, etc). When the player asks how wide it is, instead of answering "10 feet" the narrator can say "not too wide, but it's no piece of cake either." The narrator can tailor their answers to the character, as well: to the acrobat it can be "no sweat (Easy)" but to the elderly druid carrying a dresser it can be "one hell of a leap (Extremely Hard)."

Language as Translation

The second key is somewhat esoteric. When someone ("speaker") tells someone else ("listener") something ("the thought"), the original kernel in the speaker's head gets translated twice before becoming an idea in the listener's head. The first translation comes when the speaker converts thought into words (and gestures — there's a whole school of study on this called semiotics). The second translation comes when the listener converts it all back into thoughts. If you've ever wondered why people have a hard time communicating, this is why.

What does this mean in practice? It comes back to the first key (concept vs. numbers): the speaker's job is to ensure that the essence of their thought is conveyed to the best of their ability. This is not the same as being specific or being thorough — it depends on the nature of the thought. Narrators should focus on conveying the concept of the scene and do their best to get it across.

Players should focus on conveying the concept of their character's action (intentions, flavor, feel) not just the physical action (running, climbing, dodging).

Example: *The player says he wants to "jump over the chasm." What he might really mean (in context of the story) is that he wants to, say, "leap boldly over the chasm." Both of these actions involve crossing the chasm with a jump. But the second statement reveals the real nature of the action as conceived by the player: "boldly." Why does this matter? Because in the first statement if he fails, or the narrator tells him the Hard Rate is too high, the player can become frustrated because his character is no longer able to be "bold" (which is an important part of how they are imagining the scene). However, in the second statement he has helped establish the real kernel of his action, which enables their character to be "bold" no matter the outcome. It helps the narrator and other players see the manner in which the character attempted their action, which is an important part of the feel and tone of the scene.*

Roleplaying is both a simple game and a sophisticated art. This section is about fostering an environment that's conducive to collaborative storytelling.

WHY BEAT A DEAD HORSE

One of the difficulties when teaching gamers Story Engine is explaining that it's a *different* approach. We've watched in horror as some gamers have read our rules then tried to use them just like a round-based tables & charts game. It's like giving a gun to a caveman who had been using a spear to hunt: he grins, says thanks, then throws the gun at the mastodon. In either case the gamer/caveman will be unsatisfied with the new device and discard it in favor of the old. So we try to point out the differences and re-inforce the collaborative, cinematic environment so necessary to story games. Which is not to say that other systems aren't great, but they are different. Story Engine is an alternative to traditional RPGs for people who want to focus on story and character development in a cinematic or literary sense. Think of it as theatre. Or a novel. Narrators are like directors, setting up each scene as they advance the plot and help the story unfold.

General Advice

Keep a tight pace to the game but don't force it along unnecessarily. Players often enjoy tangents and scenes that might not advance the plot.

Be fair. If the rules are applied arbitrarily, or there's favoritism, the credibility of the game is lost (as well as the fun).

Follow the mood of the game. Each session has its own mood, which may not always be what you had expected. If the players are feeling serious, then let the game be serious. If they're feeling boisterous, tailor the session to fit their energy. Live performances in theatre gauge their audience and adjust to it, so think of each session as a new performance in the story.

Keep it collaborative. Remember to work with the players to craft a good story, but don't make it too easy or the challenge is lost.

Have fun. There is a certain amount of concentration and effort required in any creative project, but make sure it's not at the expense of the game.



Maelstrom

A Plug-In for the Maelstrom Storytelling world



The Maelstrom World

The world of the Maelstrom is a surreal world of science fantasy where chaos and order struggle under the ruins of a lost Empire. Places move, people change and the mysteries of the past are the only hope of understanding the present.

Maelstrom Storytelling contains descriptions of the world and its people, and *Dacartha Prime* provides additional source material. For more information on the Maelstrom game world, visit the Politically Incorrect Games web site at www.pigames.net

The “Plug In” allows you to use the new Story Engine rules with the Maelstrom world, replacing the first generation rules included in the main book. It also works as an example of how to create Plug Ins for other game worlds.

Plug In Notes

The Plug In adds rules for Flux Levels, the Storm, the Magical Gift Affinity and Kael. You’ll need to be familiar with the Maelstrom world to use these rules, best described in *Maelstrom Storytelling* (HG1001) and *Dacartha Prime* (HG1004). The biggest change from the first generation rules is the focus on Flux and the evolution of the Magical Arts.

Characters

Newcomers

One of the phenomenons of the Maelstrom world is the arrival of “newcomers” – people who simply open their eyes and find themselves in the Maelstrom world without a clear idea of why or a full memory of where they were before. Newcomers are people without pasts, new arrivals to the Maelstrom from some other world (like our own Earth) that they can’t quite remember. There are many theories about Newcomers, but regardless of the reasons behind their existence they all have a special power called “Kael.” Kael is a strange amorphous affinity that allows Newcomers to blend into the culture they find themselves in, which may explain how they are able to adjust to the Maelstrom.

If you want to play a Newcomer, then instead of taking a Cultural Affinity you take Kael. Choose an era on Earth that your character is from, but remember that your character won’t remember much except for vague notions of how their life was. No names or details, just feelings and a sense of what life used to be like. When Newcomers “arrive” they often have remnants of their clothing and an item or two from their old life. The narrator can determine what’s reasonable, but

be sure to choose items that add flavor and not just useful tools: a marriage ring is much more interesting than a pocket knife. Also, complex tools never arrive with Newcomers (watches, calculators, guns).

For more on Newcomers and the theories behind them, look over “Playing a Newcomer” in *Maelstrom Storytelling* pp.100-106.

Playing Characters with the Magical Arts

For a character to be a competent Naturalist or Scientist they need more points (we recommend 35) than the suggested starting characters. Unless the narrator allows the player to start with these extra points, players with beginning characters who want to create Naturalists and Scientists can begin as apprentices, students and tinkerers, gaining the Prime Affinity in the Magical Arts over time with Story Points.

A basic character can forego their Cultural Prime Affinity and choose the Magic Arts instead. This will preclude them from having a “base die” in most scenes, and means they don’t have most of the cultural knowledge and skills of their peers. In essence it creates a socially inept magician or tinkerer who has devoted their time to the Arts instead of the world around them. Point based characters could invest in both Cultural and Magical Prime Affinities, though this leaves few points for anything else. Even taking just the Magical Arts Affinity and not a Cultural Affinity, a 25 point starting character would have few Descriptors or Flux Affinities to use the Arts with much success.

Prime Affinities

Prime Affinity: Culture

The Cultural Affinity

In the Maelstrom, reality is defined by affinities. These relationships mark which elements of the world are present and help determine how different realities react to one another. The Cultural Affinity ties a character to a particular part of the world, anchoring them to that reality and grounding them when they are there. Outside that reality, characters are out of their affinal relationship, and as a consequence they lose their base die (see below).

“In Play” & the Base Die

The base die in the Maelstrom world is closely tied to the Cultural Affinity of the character. When a character is outside of their realm, they lose their base die for their die pool in most scenes. There are times when their Cultural Affinity is still “in play,” from dealing with fellow foreigners abroad to “mobile affinities” as mentioned in the sidebar below. Characters with the Magic Affinity can get a base die from the Arts whenever they are using their Magic Affinity, even if their Cultural Affinity isn’t “in play.”

MOBILE AFFINITIES

Sometimes people can bring their Cultural Affinity with them. This can happen when enough people of the same culture travel together (large groups of a few dozen) in an environment that is receptive to their affinity. If the group is bringing devices or items that define their culture, that can increase the chances of the Cultural Affinity traveling with them. These “pocket affinities” are fragile and easily dissolved when another culture is encountered. Diodeian airships, flying high over the realms below, are small contained Diodeian realities and Shrikes are well known for bringing their chaotic reality with them wherever they travel.

Changing Cultural Affinities

Whenever a character has spent long enough in a new culture, the player may opt to switch affinities. So long as it fits the story and is possible for the character to do this, then the player can switch to the new affinity and lose the old one. This action costs 2 Story Points (see Story Points p.43).

A suggestion to make the transition more gradual is for the character to develop a Trait Affinity in the new culture, and convert it to a Cultural Affinity once it reaches the “strong” level. The player can then “cash out” of the old Cultural Affinity and get 7 Story Points. This costs the same total number of points (9) and allows the character to slowly grasp the new culture over a few sessions until they become a part of it.

Multiple Cultural Affinities

Characters may have up to 2 Cultural Affinities at the same time. The second Affinity costs an additional 2 points.

Prime Affinity: Kael

Kael

Kael, the so-called “Newcomer Affinity,” is inherent to all Newcomers. On occasion other creatures are born with it. It is almost unheard of for someone to acquire it later in life.

Kael is an important part of the Maelstrom. It is tied to the shifts and the Storm, and is chaotic in nature. It allows the Newcomer, or any creature with it, to adapt to any realm and assimilate into any culture. As such, Newcomers can speak the language and the dialect of the culture they awaken to, and even generally understand and know the customs of that culture.

In game terms, Kael allows the character to mimic a Cultural Affinity they are exposed to, changing Affinities as often as once per session. Unlike a true Cultural Affinity, the adopted culture isn’t fully understood and the character only has a generalized understanding of the many facets of day-to-day life. Kael is not specific enough to mimic a subcultural affinity if they are used in the game (for more on Subcultural Affinities see *Dacartha Prime* p.70).

The additional power of Kael, which is a reflection of ties with the Maelstrom, is that the character may add 2 extra dice to their die pool over the course of each session.

There are many uses for Kael in the realms. Kael is sought by many people for use in ancient rituals and sacrifices through extraction and siphoning. Thralls and simulacrum are said to take Kael in their creation, and others store it to power the Arts or strange devices. There are also those who venerate it as holy and spiritual. For more on Kael, see p.78.

Limitations of Kael

In addition to the generalized understanding of adopted cultures mentioned above, characters with Kael pay 3 additional Story Points for other Prime Affinities such as Gifts or the Arts. Characters with Kael can’t have a Cultural Affinity while they have Kael.

Prime Affinity: Magic

Power flows and channels through the Maelstrom. It exists in every rock, fiber and air molecule. What is known as magic is the ability to tap into this power and channel it to your own devices. Magic has the power to shape reality. It can be used like a science to turn inventions into reality. It can be pulled into the chest and thrown out like a raw force. It can take people into their dreams.

This section explains how magic works in the Maelstrom world. There are two ways in which this is done, one of which is considered scientific and the other magical. Both derive their power from the Storm.

The Magical Arts are a special Prime Affinity, and cost 7 Story Points like other Prime Affinities. There are two types of Magic Affinities, called Scientific and Natural. Both the Scientific and the Natural Arts use Flux Affinities, which are special Trait Affinities for use with magic. Flux Affinities cost the same as Trait Affinities and have three levels of strength.

The Natural Arts and the Scientific Arts

The distinction between the two magical arts is best shown by the tool that channels it. The Natural Arts channel the power of the Storm through their bodies, whereas the Scientific Arts channel the Storm through devices.

The two philosophies share a similar root, but they have evolved into two nearly antithetical powers. Naturalists derive their power directly from the Storm, which is a raw chaotic force (called *visel*, pronounced ‘viss-ell’). Scientists have processed the Storm into controllable physics, which is a distilled and regulated force (called *ikel*, pronounced ‘ick-ell’). The result is that Naturalists have a harder time calling the Storm in the presence of structured civilizations, and (ironically) Scientists have a harder time using their powers the closer they are to the Storm – the chaotic source of the power itself.

The Dacarthan Arts

For simplicity, we’re using the Dacarthan nomenclature for the Arts both because of its straightforward approach and its use of Imperial terminology to distinguish the different forces of magic.

In Dacartha, the different Arts are often called Philosophies. Natural Artists are nick-named Naturalists and Scientific Artists are called Scientists. The power of the Storm is referred to as *maltel* (malt-ell) in the way of the Imperial Arts, where all forms of the Storm’s power were categorized using a special language. *Visel* is the power of the Storm as channeled by the Natural Arts, *ikel* is the power as channeled by the Scientific Arts, and *kael* (ka-ell) is the power of the Storm embodied in certain forms such as Newcomers.

THE IMPERIAL ART: “KIVEL”

By all accounts the Empire was an advanced society with a strong mastery of the Storm. The remnants of their knowledge are still being pieced together today, but much (if not most) of their powers are still not understood. The language attributed to the Imperial Arts is only seen in fragments, and was apparently never used in full but just in parts. Why they used this language is unclear. It may be related to the language found in the Temple at Sholcarta, or it may even be a vestige of some pre-imperial tongue.

Naturalists

Naturalists use their own inner selves to summon the Storm into their bodies and release the power in a focused form. The discipline involved is enormous, and the process itself can be fatal. Controlling *visel* is not easy, and requires great strength of will. Naturalists tend to approach the Arts as a raw primal force that can be tapped but never tamed.

Scientists

Scientists summon the Storm through tools and devices. Since much of the work is done by way of tools, the scientist only has to direct the flow of ikel as it begins to manifest. The creation of ikel-conductive devices is often the greatest danger the scientist faces, when the maltel is undiluted and often magnified as the device is being built. Scientists tend to approach the Arts as a logical, quantifiable study of the powers of the world.

Using Magic

A Prime Affinity in the right Art form (Natural or Scientific) allows the Artist to use the Storm, and the channeling tool is either the Artist themselves (Naturalists) or a special device (Scientists).

Using the Arts requires a Quick Take. If the Quick Take is part of a larger Rolled Scene, then the outcome of the Quick Take can add to the die pool as explained below under “Success.”

The Quick Take for Artists has two parts: Summon and Control. Both are part of the same Quick Take, and both parts get the extra die for the spent Descriptor.

The Magic Quick Take

SUMMONING THE STORM

Summoning the Storm requires not only effort but attunement to the forces of the Storm at hand. In many places, the Storm is less accessible, and in others it is more easily tapped. The Hard Rate modifier to access the Arts for the two schools is listed with the affinities for every realm.

For the Naturalist, this involves a trance-like state in which the Artist focuses inward and then slowly outward along the web-like lines of the Storm. The trance is often so deep that the Artist is unaware of events around them, and may take many minutes to complete. The Hard Rate is increased whenever the Artist attempts to speed up the process or perform other actions at the same time.

For the Scientist, most of the channeling is done by the device at hand and merely activated by the efforts of the Scientist. They refer to this merely as “concentration.”

The first step is to summon the Storm’s power. The summons is a Spirit based roll. The second step is to control the power once it manifests. Control is a Chaos based roll.

Borrowing Dice & Double Failure:

If the Summons fails, the Artist can let the power subside and abort the whole thing. The Artist may opt instead to roll the Control anyway, borrowing Odds from the Control roll to turn the Summons into a success. If the Control also fails, this is called “double failure” and the Artist has to wait before they can use the Arts again (an hour for every die under the Target Number)

Success Rate

The total amount of Target Odds the two parts of the Quick Take determine the Success Rate. In other words, if the Target Number is 2, and 3 Odds are rolled to summon and 2 to control, then the final outcome is 1 (1 Target Odd for the summons and 0 for the control). Failure works the same way.

Success

The Arts can be very powerful. The general rule of thumb is that only as many people/things may be affected by the Arts as the Artist rolled Odds (total Odds, not just Target Odds). With a Partial Success (0 or 1 Target Odd) the Artist would affect as many people or things as they rolled Odds in the Quick Take. If the Target Number is 2, then to roll 1 Target Odd would have taken 5 Odds (summons 2 + control 2 = Target Number 4, and the 5th Odd becomes a Target Odd), meaning the Artist could affect up to five people or things.

The results of the Arts may Impact the Scene if there is a larger scene taking place. The guidelines are based on the relationship the Quick Take has to the overall scene:

Unrelated Impact: The Effect, though perhaps successful, has no impact on the scene. Nothing is added to the die pool.

Weak Impact: The Effect has a minor impact on the scene. 1 die is added to the die pool.

Direct Impact: The Effect has a direct impact on the scene, but not so much as to turn the tide or change the outcome. For each Target Odd rolled in the Quick Take, a die is added to the die pool.

Strong Impact: The Effect strongly impacts the scene, enough to change the outcome. For each Target Odd rolled in the Quick Take, an Auto Odd is added to the die pool.

Failure

A failed use of the Arts can be dangerous. Depending on whether it was the Summons or the Control part that failed, the Artist could go too deep into the trance and fall unconscious or into a coma (summons) – or send harmless static charges around the room or even stop the hearts of everyone in the room (control). In addition the results of a failed use of the Arts might Impact the Scene if there is a larger scene taking place.

Partial Failure (“fizzle”): The Arts fail. The Artist is momentarily stunned or confused, and minor harmless side-effects may be seen.

Basic Failure (“mis-cast”): The Arts go awry. The desired effects are not obtained but a variant of the effects do manifest in a negative way.

Complete Failure: (“botch”): The Arts go very wrong. The Artist takes a health level of injury (summons) or someone nearby does (control). There are noticeable side effects, all of which are detrimental.

Combining Casts

Flux Affinities can be used in a variety of creative ways. By combining them, the range of possibility is increased even more. The key is to preserve the trance and summon the Storm for another cast – without breaking the original. Though multiple summons/control rolls would be made, only 1 Quick Take needs to be invoked. By going deeper into the trance and taking more time, the difficulty can be reduced as well.

Normal Combination:	Extremely Hard
A Deep Trance:	1 Step Easier
A Long Time:	1 Step Easier

In this way a Naturalist can Travel while Redirecting, or Read Down the Lines while Traveling, etc. An elaborate (and difficult) use would be to use Dream Take to launch Transference in a Dream Take, in which the Transference actually takes place but the Dream Take does not.

***Example:** to strike an opponent in another room, the character casts Dream Take to open the door, then casts Transference to push the opponent back with force. If successful, it may be possible to strike the opponent without opening the door. A suggested difficulty rating for this example (without extra time or a deeper trance) would be:*

The Dream Take itself: *Very Hard* (preserving the Dream Take during a difficult action)

The Transference: *Extremely Hard* (standard combined affinity)

This would be a difficult cast for anyone other than an expert, but very effective if successful.

Naturalists: Gathering & Controlling

The summon/control sequence of the cast is open to descriptive freedom. The best short description of Magic can be found in the main book (p.14). The trance state and the time involved are only loosely outlined. Mostly, the answer comes after the success of the scene is established: If the Quick Take failed, then maybe the trance wasn't deep enough or the caster didn't have enough time, etc.

The trance can be a powerful mystical event. The summoning can breathe a whole new life into a Naturalist. There may be incidental effects in the immediate environment like a breeze, changing colors, static charges, and strange sounds. The caster might make an awe-inspiring picture at the height of the Quick Take. Conversely, the skilled artist might be able to drive these effects with a subtlety little felt by those around them – like the Dream Take examples on p.73. The tone of the story and the individual choices of the player regarding their character will help determine the “poetic” effects of magic. In the Maelstrom many things are possible and affect people differently.

Channeling Tools: Gadgets and Devices

Gadgets and devices are the stuff of Scientists. These creations range from pendulums to steam powered ships. The hardest part of the job for a Scientist is the creation of the devices, and most Scientists spend their lives searching for parts, rare metals, lost inventions or other people's creations. With a working device in hand, however, the Scientist is able to channel power through it with less effort than a Naturalist, and in most cases more efficiently as well.

Creating new devices is Extremely Hard. Narrators can use their judgement in deciding how much time is required based on the style of the story and the flux level. The materials required in the creation process can be elaborate, even if the final product is a simple brass ring, and these materials can cost a lot or even require a long search. Rare chemicals, hard to find metals, insulated wiring, machines like the Tallert Dissonance Amplifier, etc. A good laboratory makes the roll 1 step easier, and a poor laboratory makes it a step harder. The complexity of the task, based on the realities of the realm, would also modify the task.

Example 1: The Magnetic Map

The magnetic map is a device designed to show the current patterns of magnetic lines in a realm, both for use by airships and also in the study of regional affinities. The map consists of two sets of seven spherical magnets with opposite polarity. The magnets are placed one by one on a map, and as the Scientist channels ike through them they begin to roll into positions that indicate the flow of the streams. The first magnet is placed on the map over the location of an Imperial obelisk (known for their contact with magnetic streams) and depending on the degree of success, the Scientist can determine not only the pattern of the magnetic streams in the regions but their approximate location on the map.

Creating the device, providing the Scientist had a good laboratory and access to the materials, was made at Very Hard (Extremely Hard - 1 Step for a Good Laboratory). The Sciences modifier of the realm and the reality of that realm could further modify the roll. It took the following Flux Affinities: Invention & Magnetism.

Using the device would be at Hard and require Magnetism, given the complexity of the streams, and the Sciences modifier of the realm could further modify the roll.

Example 2: Radio Transponders

The radio transponder is a primitive radio that can send and receive short signals akin to a telegraph. The machine consists of a magnetized coil, a resistor, an electrical charge supplied by a hand crank, an antenna, a paper cone vibro-emitter and a small metal striker to tap the code. Within a few miles two of these devices can communicate, and with a ground cable the range can extend as far as the wires permit.

Creating the device, providing the Scientist had a good laboratory and access to the materials, was made at Impossible (Extremely Hard - 1 Step for a Good Laboratory + 2 Steps for Complexity). The Sciences modifier of the realm and the reality of that realm could further modify the roll. It took the following Flux Affinities: Invention, Electricity, Magnetism.

Using the device would be at Hard and require Electricity, given the unreliability of the technology in the Maelstrom world. The Sciences modifier of the realm could further modify the roll.

The radio transponder could easily become a mundane device once society became used to it, and at that point the Arts would no longer be required to operate it (see “Mundanity: When Magic loses its Magic” on p.76).

The Flux Affinities

The following Flux Affinities cover the basic range of powers available to both Naturalists and Scientists. There are many more possibilities, and with creative use of the existing ones almost anything can be accomplished. Games with a strong bent towards magic should feel free to add to or change the Flux Affinities or even the Magic Affinity itself.

Italicized Affinities are “advanced arts” and require the character to master one or more other Flux Affinities before they are able to learn the advanced Flux Affinity.

Animation (Sciences)

Animation is the power to make things move of their own accord. Animists are pseudo-scientists who create elaborate machines borrowing concepts from Combustion and Electricity to make their animations work.

Combustion (Sciences)

Combustion not only covers the fine art of blowing things up, but everything from gunpowder to the workings of internal combustion engines.

Dissonance (Naturalism)

Dissonance is the power to throw the chaotic forces of the Storm into the world. Dissonance can be used to disrupt the working of complex machinery and scientific devices and gadgets. It can even be used to curdle milk or spoil meat. It can make cats howl and babies cry. Dissonance can also be used to produce grating pitches within the hearing range of most creatures. The Mallatin are rumored to be adversely affected by Dissonance, but the Shrikes are said to be impervious and even drawn to Dissonance.

Dreams (Naturalism)

The Dreams Flux Affinity relates to the Dream World and is required for more advanced Flux Affinities like Dream Step, Dream Take and Dream Touch. With Dreams the caster can often glimpse the dreams of sleeping minds near them, or soothe people into sleep by drawing them closer to the Dream World.

Dream Step (Naturalism) (requires Dreams, Dream Take)

Dream Step is the power to cross into the Dream World through the Dream Barrier. Normal dreamers are called “sleepers” and are only barely a part of the Dream World, but with Dream Step the caster physically enters the Dream World as a “breek” (for someone who “breaches” the Dream Barrier). For more on the Dream World, see *the main book* (pp.35-36) or *Dacartha Prime* (p.77).

The Dream Barrier is stronger in some places than others, but the normal roll is on Very Hard.

Dream Take (Naturalism) (requires Dreams)

A Dream Take involves the creation of a Quick Take scene that happens only in a “dream.” Blurring the lines between reality and dream, the Quick Take scene does not actually take place (unless the scene fails), and is only a brief moment in real time. The other person(s), thing(s), or device(s) in the Quick Take respond in the same manner as they would normally, and depending on the range of success they may or may not remember the events of the dream scene.

Failure might mean the dream scene actually happens in real life or the information gathered turns out to be false.

Example 1: Luthien meets the Queen, and as he kneels, he invokes a Dream Take (he has to have a high degree of success to avoid showing the trance and signs of casting). In the dream, he reaches up and kisses her hand, giving her a wink. Afterwards, the Queen might have just a fleeting sensation of having her hand kissed (success), or may feel that it actually happened (failure) and have him beheaded.

Example 2: Mider is hesitant to open the door, for fear of a potential trap. She opts instead to use a Dream Take scene to open the door in order to get a look at what might lie behind.

Dream Touch (Naturalism) (requires Dream Take and Dreams)

Dream Touch taps into the Dream World. It has the power to change perception and blur reality, lending illusory powers to the caster. The Naturalist can convey a perception of themselves to others that is different from what they would normally see. The difficulty is Very Hard and requires a prolonged trance to initiate. Afterwards, the Dream Touch has breached the veil between the real world and the Dream World (called the Dream Barrier) sufficiently to maintain the dream for about half a day with minimal concentration by the Naturalist (1 step harder whenever they cast the Arts while under a Dream Touch). Characters attempting to see through the Dream Touch should roll on spirit against a difficulty factor equal to the amount of Target Odds rolled by the caster.

The Dream Touch is powered by the Dream World, and doesn’t have to be “aimed” – anyone looking at the caster will see the illusion, even if the caster is unaware of their presence. However, because of the proximity to the Dream World, anyone Reading the Lines will easily see the use of the Arts and anyone with Gifts or other abilities involving dreams or the Dream World may also notice something unusual. In games involving the Dream World (see the main book pp.35-36 for more on the Dream World) there are creatures who can take advantage of the breach in the Dream Barrier and either cross over or even pull the caster in.

The Dream Touch could include other people (casting an illusion on several people at once, or even making two people appear as one) at a higher difficulty. The Naturalist could even fade themselves out of sight (also at higher difficulty).

When prey to an illusion of Dream Touch, the victims supply the appropriate answers themselves since it’s a trick of the mind. In the example of Karnaus

(below) they might shake hands at a normal height (Karnaus is human), but believe they have leaned down to touch a Darig's hand. The perceptions are partly determined by the caster, and partly supplied by the victim. In other words, if someone believes Darigs are more like dogs, they might "see" a different creature in front of them than anticipated by the caster.

An important question for the Dream Touch is whether or not it has a different effect on dreamers like the Sowl and the Kenratha, and whether or not it even affects the Kril (who do not dream).

THE MAGE KARNAUS

Karnaus appears as a Darig woman named Maril to disguise himself. Needless to say, this takes some skill. He uses the Flux Trait Dream Touch to complete the illusion.

Karnaus

"a malevolent, cunning trickster"

Mind 6/Matter 4/Spirit 3/Chaos 3

Karnaus has all 8 of the basic Flux Traits of the Natural Arts, and will use Transference to slam his enemies back and injure them. Karnaus also has a Strong Flux Trait in Dream Take, which he uses to mask his appearance. He can maintain the appearance until he is unconscious (or dead), though any individual may see through it on Spirit vs. Very Hard if they try.

Electricity (Sciences)

Electricity covers the full range of basic electrical understanding in the Maelstrom, from generating power to electromagnetic currents.

Gadgets (Sciences)

With Gadgets, Scientists can try to work unfamiliar devices at 2 steps harder, even if they don't have the required Flux Affinity to use the device. A diving suit that normally required Animation at Easy could be used with Gadgets at Very Hard if the Scientist did not have the power of Animation.

Humors (Naturalism)

Humors is the power to manipulate people's health. Humors can be used to heal wounds (Hard), cure normal diseases (Hard), major illnesses (Very Hard) or even incurable diseases (Extremely Hard). Basic or Complete Failure means the caster won't be able to heal that person again for that affliction. Humors can also be used to wound someone, doing a Health Level for each Target Odd. The victim has to be physically grasped by the caster for the duration of the trance.

Invention (Sciences)

Invention is required in the creation of all devices and gadgets. It covers the fundamentals of research and experimentation.

Magnetism (Sciences)

Magnetism is the understanding of electromagnetic currents, magnetic lines and polarity, among others.

Reading down the Lines (Naturalism)

By creating this effect, the Naturalist is able to read the power lines of the Storm and attempt to "see" into the currents.

Partial Success: most often nothing is read in the lines.

Basic Success: the proximity of the Storm itself is felt, as well as the presence of anyone or thing in the immediate area that is tapping the power lines.

Complete Success: as above, but the range is further (often the whole realm). Additionally, the caster often obtains a quick glance into the scenes where the power is being tapped (these can be resolved as Cut Scenes – see p.30).

Redirection (Naturalism)

A simple use of the Storm, Redirection covers an area roughly ten feet in diameter for every Odd rolled. If the target of the Redirection is large, heavy or traveling with any force (like an arrow) it will increase the difficulty of the roll proportionately.

***Example:** Redirecting rain is an Easy task, but avoiding a river of lava is an Impossible task. A shower of gravel might be Very Hard, and hail might be Hard. Using redirection against objects like arrows or any aimed weapon is usually Very Hard (bows & crossbows) to Extremely Hard (powder weapons or siege engines).*

Sidestep (Naturalism) (requires Dissonance)

Sidestep is the ability to cross into the Mirror Realms, which are the closest of the Side Realms. Sidestepping allows the Naturalist to leave the Prime World and vanish, though they can watch events in the Prime World from the Mirror Realm (though they lack the ability to affect them from the Mirror Realm). There are Gates in the Mirror Realms that allow travel to the rest of the Side Realms, but returning to the Prime Realm usually requires another Sidestep.

There are people with a Gift such as Sidesight who can see into the Mirror Realms, and some animals like Ravens and Mardoran dogs are said to as well. Additionally, some creatures native to the Side Realms hunt side travelers. For more on Side Realms see *Explorer's Handbook* or MST p.36.

Sidestepping is usually rolled at Hard and takes a few moments, though it can be done faster at harder rates.

Siphon (Naturalism) (requires Transference and Humors)

Siphon is the power to extract Kael from someone. A receptacle, such as a Kaelstone, should be on hand to store the siphoned Kael, though the caster can store the power inside themselves for a number of hours equal to the Target Odds rolled. For more on Kael and siphoning, see pp.78-81.

Soothsee (Naturalism) (requires Transvoyance)

Soothsee is similar to the Foresight Gift in the main rules. Some casters smell the premonition and feel it in their bones, others dream of it while in the trance, and yet others can see it in prophetic omens like the fall of the leaves or the flight patterns of birds. The character using Soothsee should choose the way they “sense” the future. The player chooses a moment in the future they want to “foretell” and the success range determines how clear or accurate the information is (the narrator may want to roll in private in case the information turns out to be false). The further away the moment is in time, the harder the roll. Also, with a Basic or Complete Success, the player can “see it coming” in a later scene and add two dice to their pool.

Steam (Sciences)

Steam involves all forms of generating, regulating and deriving power from steam. Steam can be used to power machines, generate heat, pressurize, and even determine altitude.

Transference (Naturalism)

This is the forceful hand of the Storm, and can be used in many ways. The caster calls the Storm into themselves and then thrusts it outward, bowling over whatever lies ahead. The success range determines the outcome. Generally, subtle force is harder to master, as is overwhelming force and range.

Delicate Push (move a tea cup without spilling):	Very Hard
Gentle Push (a solid shove to open an unlatched door):	Hard
Bowling Over (a forceful shove)	Normal
Every 20 feet of distance (after the first 20):	One Step Harder

Transmutation (Naturalism)

Transmutation is the power to change the shape of inanimate objects. The substance remains the same, and the denser (harder) the material, the more difficult the roll. For every Target Odd the caster can affect 5 pounds of matter, with the success range determining how the final transmuted item looks. “Real” transmutation, or changing the substance of items, is thought to have been possible in the lost Imperial Arts.

Transvoyance (Naturalism)

Transvoyance allows a caster to transmit their thoughts into another person’s mind within a dozen yards. The success range determines how clear and accurate the thoughts are as well as how far they were able to be sent. Thoughts include images, sound and all the visuals that take place in the brain. In the days of the Empire, devices called “voils” were used to display the images and even re-play recorded images.

Travel (Naturalism) (requires Transference and Redirection)

Using the Storm to propel oneself through space is hard to master. A new Quick Take is called for every time a change in the original trajectory is required, and more Quick Takes are needed to maintain the motion. Generally, the effect lasts for as many minutes as the character rolled Odds. The speed is up to the caster, and usually ranges from a few miles per hour to as fast as twenty (the success range determines how close the caster is to their desired speed). The Naturalist glides just over the ground or water, but will drop at a rate of 10 feet for every foot forward when traveling through air. Carrying other people or heavy items will add to the Hard Rate.

Mundanity: When Magic loses its Magic

When the work of Scientists becomes so widespread that people in that culture begin to take it for granted, the work in question begins to be absorbed by that reality and become a “mundane” scientific notion. After that point the Arts are no longer required for the work in question. Gunpowder may have been the work of the Arts, but over time in realms like Dacantha it became more alchemical than magic, and in places like Diodet it has reached a level of mundanity where it’s now purely a question of physics.

Prime Affinity: Sample Gifts

The Maelstrom has many unique characteristics, most of which revolve around the Storm and its power. Included here are sample gifts that are specific to the Maelstrom world, gathered from the other Maelstrom sourcebooks.

Chameleon

The Chameleon Gift allows the character to physically adapt to a new culture. Whenever the character enters a new realm, they can attempt to change into the indigenous culture — in a low flux game this might be a change in dialect, accent and eye color, whereas in a high flux game this may mean a wholesale

change from skin color to clothing. The power requires a Quick Take on Chaos vs. Easy and takes place gradually (or more quickly with Complete Success). No Quick Take is needed when the character reaches the new culture through a shift. Changes into other native species can also be performed at higher difficulty in higher flux games.

Variant (“Cultural Slider”): the character has no control over the changes, and no Quick Take is required. A die roll determines how strong a change occurred (the higher the roll the more the character changed). The player can invoke a Quick Take to resist the change on Chaos vs. Hard.

Dreamlife

Dreamlife is the Kenrathan gift of traveling to the Dream World when sleeping. You walk the Edge of Dreaming and glimpse into the Sea of Dreams often. The most apparent consequence is your contact with creatures there and your ability to continue dreams like stories in your mind. Time is non-linear in the Dream, so you can often discover events from the past or the future. The accuracy varies and is generally unreliable. Characters are vulnerable in the Dream World to many creatures there. Crossing over entirely (“breeching”) would be Extremely Hard, if possible at all. Characters can roll on Spirit vs. Hard to control events (Hard Rate can vary depending on the desired results), as well as spending Story Points to alter events. Spirit Descriptors can be burned to alter events in the same vein as Story Points while dreaming. No Quick Take is required to use these powers.

Kael Sponge

Much like the device of the same name, you are able to absorb Kael from people around you. For every full day near someone or something with Kael, you are able to bid against them in Chaos to “take” their Kael. The Kael power will only last for another day, but with continued exposure to the same source the roll can be made with a bonus die for every consecutive time the “Kael” has been borrowed. The victim will undergo a sense of nausea, faintness and fever, and will take a week to recover their Kael once the Sponge has failed or ceased. Most people with the Gift Affinity of Kael Sponge are not aware of their power. The challenge requires a Quick Take.

Quickchange

The Quickchange Gift allows the character to “transform” into a variety of roles within the current Cultural Affinity by changing outfits. By putting on the outfit of a doctor, the character gains “doctor” type Traits, and by changing into the outfit of a soldier the character gains “soldier” type Traits, etc. The number of Traits depends on the number of Target Odds, and the Gift requires a Quick Take on Chaos vs. Easy. With 4 Target Odds a Quickchanger with a street-performer outfit could have Juggling at Weak, Mime at Mild and Fire-breathing at Weak (4 levels total). The character loses their own Traits while in the new role.

Shadowform (14 Story Points)

You exist primarily in a Mirror Realm (Side Realms — MST p.36) and are nearly intangible. From the Prime World only your shadow can be seen unless you step into the Prime World. Once there, you appear as a figure of liquid darkness. To reflect your “intangible” form, you have extra health levels as follows: *healthy, touched, bruised, injured, out* and *dead*. Your Prime World form requires you to walk, open doors and perform other mundane actions, but in darkness you can slip through cracks and keyholes like syrup. (A Hard task on Spirit if given a few minutes, made harder by the presence of light, and much harder if forced to hurry.) Additionally, in total darkness the damage you do is doubled in Matter and Spirit based scenes. For every full day you spend in the Prime World, you wither (taking an injury level). To pass into the Prime World, invoke a Quick Take (Matter vs. Hard). To slip back, run another Quick Take

(Spirit vs Easy). The transition takes a few seconds. You cannot return to the Side Realm during a full moon, in direct sunlight or from within an Imperial structure (these restrictions should be changed to suit the story if needed). While in the Side Realm all you can do is watch events in the Prime World without interaction. (This Gift is best suited to NPCs).

Sidesight

You are able to witness events in the Side Realms (Mirror Realms) adjacent to the prime world. Roll on Spirit vs. Hard or bid against an opponent who tries to remain unseen. A Quick Take is not required.

Sidestep

By stepping into a Side Realm, you are able to remove yourself from the Prime World and exist solely within the Mirror Realm next to the Prime World (MST p.36). You are unable to affect the real world, but can witness events and travel alongside it from the Side Realm. Sidestepping requires a Quick Take and is rolled on Spirit vs. Hard, though local affinities may affect the ease and speed of the action, which normally takes a few seconds. Characters can sidestep from a Mirror Realm deeper into the Side Realms, although this becomes more difficult the further the character travels.

Stormsense

This gift allows people to sense the presence of the Storm and the shifts. The ability comes in a variety of different shapes. Some people smell the Storm and feel it in their bones, others dream of the Storm and yet others can see it in prophetic omens like the fall of the leaves or the flight patterns of birds. The character with Stormsense should choose the way they “sense” the Storm. When trying actively to sense the next Storm or shift, the character rolls on Chaos vs. Hard with the following modifiers:

Internal Shifts are one step Harder

Stormless Shifts (subtle shifts) are one step Harder

Characters with Stormsense will sometimes sense the Storm passively without trying. In this case, make the same roll at two steps Harder. The Success Rate will help determine how much they learn: Complete Success is very accurate, and Partial is vague. The number of Target Odds determine how many days away a shift can be felt. The Shift Tables on p.83 can be used to roll a false sense that might come with Basic or Complete Failure.

Stormshift

The Gift of Stormshift allows a character with the Arts (Natural or Scientific) to transport themselves to another part of the Maelstrom when a shift occurs. Naturalists can invoke a Quick Take on Hard (modified as explained below) and Scientists can create a device to channel the power (as outlined on pp.71-72). The character has to be familiar with the destination. For every additional person/creature or few hundred pounds of material an additional die is added to the Hard Rate. The character gets an extra die if they have a cultural affinity for the target location. The Success Range will help determine the outcome, with Complete Failure taking the character to some inhospitable place like the Desert of Endless Sun, Udai or Alenea (and scattering everyone over different realms if more than one person was with the caster).

Kael

Kael is an inherent power in the world, and some of this force can be tapped or “siphoned.” Many different ways to do this have been found over the years, but most of the technology was lost with

the Empire. While the consequences of the extraction can be dire or even fatal, some means leave only a temporary or even unnoticeable effect.

In many ways, Kael is like a piece of the Storm. Because it is tied to a person and therefore one location, many people find it useful as a quantifiable and consistent power source.

Kael is one of the most enigmatic and powerful forces in the Arts. There are several theories as to the actual nature of Kael, most of which relate the power of Kael to the Storm.

Extracted Kael can be used to power a variety of devices, like the magnetic engines of the Kril. Kael can be siphoned into devices that hold the power, to be used later as anyone uses the Storm. Stored this way, Kael can be used by both Naturalists and Scientists. It can breath life into artifacts. It can be used to resuscitate the dying. As a creation force, it is part of the formula for simulacrum and homunculi.

THE UNITY SCALE

The scale used by Professor Lioness of the College of the Gates is often used to rate Kael in Scientific Devices. Lioness, who had a propensity for dissecting people in order to better understand them, used the Tallert Dissonance Amplifier to gauge a variety of ephemeral substances as well as to provide psychic stimulus to “uncooperative” subjects. He designed the Unity Scale to quantify Kael. For game purposes, the Unity Scale is the same as the “dice units” used in the rules, so 5 on the Unity Scale would be 5 dice. Lioness disappeared in 301ny.

A theory is that the oblats of the Shrikes (MST p.152) are powered by Kael. There are strange devices such as the Belzaine Traveling Sideshow that thrive on Kael (MST pp.151-152). It also might be that the obelisks of the Empire somehow siphon away Kael to imbue themselves with their power.

Regardless of speculation, Kael can be used as a power source for devices and the Arts. Just as a Naturalist can tap a reserve of Kael to cast the Arts, a Scientist can power machines with it or use it to create new devices.

Kael and the Universal Power Source

In general, Kael can be harnessed and used to power certain scientific devices as well as some naturalist powers. The Kael Siphons of the Kril are famous across the realms, and Kael powers everything from Kril skyships to the voils of Dacartha.

Newcomers

Newcomers are the best known source of Kael. It may be the remnants of their manifestation or a lingering of the Storm, but invariably all Newcomers are imbued with Kael. For this reason the market for Newcomers is strong, and in many realms they are captured, kidnapped and hunted for the sole purpose of extracting their Kael. The extraction of Kael from a Newcomer can be fatal, but some means allow a “siphoning” of the energy which leaves the host intact (see below), turning Newcomers into a “replenishable” source of Kael.

Newcomers (or any person with Kael) can provide 1 die of Kael before they are tapped, regaining their die after a week. Newcomers who have had their Kael extracted (and lived through the experience) lose their Kael powers for the whole week and are usually faint, nauseous and hit with a fever (losing a Health Level). Devices that draw more Kael will usually kill the subject (Spirit vs. Very Hard to survive) but can get up to d6 dice of Kael.

KAEL DEVICES

Kael Siphon

Kael Siphons are nasty devices that are able to extract Kael from living vessels. They involve a suction pump that attaches to the head, and they rarely leave the victim alive. The Kael Siphon of the Kril (nicknamed “the machine”) uses a metal bowl that clamps to the head and sucks out Kael along with half the brain. Unlike more sedate machines that filter the Kael out much like a sponge (see below), Siphons are fast, dirty and effective. In less than an hour the Siphon sucks the Kael out and leaves the victim dead (or close to dead). Some form of Kaelstone is needed to store the energy.

Kael Sponge

Kael Sponges are devices (either Naturalism or Sciences) that are able to absorb Kael, usually by spending time in the proximity of Kael itself. Naturalist Sponges look like polished stones, and those of the Sciences are more like small mechanical boxes. Depending on the type of device and its quality, a Kael Sponge can absorb up to six dice of Kael a day, though most absorb closer to one die. The victims of a Kael sponge lose their Kael dice, as well as the other powers of Kael, after a day of exposure, and may take up to a week to regain it. The process is often accompanied by nausea, faintness and fever. If a roll is required, the player can roll on Chaos vs. the power of the Sponge (1 to 6), or the hunger of the Sponge (1 for every empty slot). Kael Sponges give the bearer an additional Chaos Descriptor, such as “Frustrating” or “Unsettling,” while worn.

Kaelstone

Kaelstones are small items that can store the Kael power. They vary from small smooth stones (naturalism) to tiny mechanisms akin to a magnetized pocket watch (sciences). They will slowly lose their charge over time from days to years (depending on the success in creating the device). Some of these devices are also Kael Sponges and can recharge themselves through proximity to Kael (see above). Kaelstones usually hold no more than 6 dice of Kael. Bearers of Kaelstones have an additional Chaos Descriptor such as “Electric.”

"Samuel was never able to rebuild the clock. Built of a thousand brass pieces in the time of the Empire, it was more than he could fathom. So he converted the top floor of the tower into a special room. With money no one knew about he bought his materials from many strange places, some far abroad. One of the things he bought he got from the Kril, and this was the living source of the power he sought to use. The Kril sold him people, people with Kael. He tied them to his workbench over a spool of wires and tubes, and with a great cranking a slow stream of sparks began to wind itself along the wires into the floor below. No one knows what became of the people, but with his stolen piece of them he made the clock work again."

from the dogbound *Purgation*

Life Force

Certain scientists and even some naturalists have been able to convert “life energy” into Kael. This practice almost invariably results in the death of the host as the life force is converted. Strange machines or arcane Flux Affinities are used in this process, and though everything from plants to people have been used it seems that sentient creatures work best. Some devices or powers only need the smallest drop of Kael to work, and in those cases blood from an artery can be enough life force without killing the host.

When successful, a sentient creature yields up to 2 dice worth of Kael, killing them in the process. Non-sentient creatures could be used as well, but the Hard Rate would increase and should also take into account the weight of the animal being used. A rat should be pretty much impossible to extract Kael from, but a cow might only be a step harder than a sentient creature. Unless it suits the story, we recommend limiting Kael drawn from non-sentient creatures to 1 die’s worth.

Kael Extraction and Storage

Kael can be extracted with a device such as a Kael Siphon or Kael Sponge. Special Gift Affinities and Flux Traits with the same powers can be created as well. The Flux Trait “Siphon” is a way for naturalists to extract Kael, and variants can be created for a story that centers around Kael.

Kael can’t be stored in fractions, so a ½ die of Kael can’t be stored. Likewise, if ½ die of Kael is needed from a storage device, a whole die of Kael has to be spent.

Using Kael

The unit for Kael is “dice,” as in “2 dice worth of Kael.” Scholars may rate Kael in different ways using scales and gauges, but for the purpose of the rules Kael is rated in “dice.”

Most devices that run on Kael are designed with a receptacle for a Kaelstone or other Kael “container.” Some devices can extract Kael directly into them, either by proximity or through some form of Siphon device. Occasionally a device can tap Kael that is extracted in its vicinity. When designing Kael-powered devices, be sure to determine how it takes Kael and how much it needs.

Example 1: An electric generator powered by Kael might take 1 die of Kael a day by way of a steel Siphon cap that extracts the Kael directly and runs it through cables to the generator.

Example 2: An Imperial Obelisk might have a small concave bowl near the base where a Kaelstone can sit, taking 3 dice of Kael to open a door in the side of the stone that acts as a Gate to a sidereal.

Example 3: An altar takes Kael in the form of life energy, requiring ½ die of Kael worth of blood to be poured over the stone surface to open the secret door behind it.

Kael can be used by Naturalists to help power their Flux Affinities. Kael dice can be directly converted to extra dice for the Cast by channeling any stored Kael in the caster’s possession. Naturalists of the “magician” circles refer to Kael in this form as “manna.”

FLUX LEVEL

The Storm is at the heart of the Maelstrom world. Across the realms it’s known as the Maelstrom, the Great Storm, the Endbringer, the Renewer, Reclamation, the Spiral God, Battruus, Leonodeen, Aj Orran (Revealer of Souls), and God. How this affects your game is up to you. The Maelstrom world can be incredibly chaotic, surreal and unpredictable. It can also be very normal and real. The key to this is the *flux level*. The narrator can determine how much of the world’s chaotic nature they want in their game. With a high flux level realms shift often, eddies are common, and reality is often not what it appears. People wake up to find themselves in different bodies, the house they were in is now a tent, or instead of farmers they realize they’re social dilettantes. With a low flux level shifts are rare, travel is safer, and the whole world unfolds as the logical mind might expect it to. Most Maelstrom games are somewhere in the middle. The flux level should reflect your tastes and the story being told. A game of diplomatic intrigue involving travel might benefit from a lower flux level, whereas a game of magic and adventure might benefit from a high flux level.

The flux level determines the impact of Cultural Affinities. When guns are brought to a place with no affinity for them, do the owners slowly forget their use and question whether or not they ever worked (low flux) or do they suddenly stop working (high flux)? Is it a palpable struggle between realities or a subtle change of impressions? Keep the flux level in mind to help guide the way the world works.

Games can change flux levels in midstream as well. A game that had begun with a low flux level can jump to a chaotic degree of flux. New players might be better eased into the Maelstrom world with a lower flux level, and then gradually increased. A change in flux levels might frustrate players unless they're prepared for it, but changing flux levels still reflects the chaotic nature of the Maelstrom world.

High Flux Games:

In high flux games, the shifts are frequent, external and rarely subtle (see below for more on the different types of shifts). The Magical Arts are easier and more commonly used. The Dream Barrier is weak, and Gates to the Siderealms are common. Reality even changes right in front of you: a Complete Success can make something look so easy that it actually becomes easier. People change overnight: "I thought the Ismolahti Ambassador was a woman!" Colors are different: "I could have sworn the shutters were red." On the road there are more eddies and places share a closer proximity to the Valley of Shards.

Low Flux Games:

In low flux games, shifts are infrequent and usually subtle and internal. There is little contact with the Side or Dream worlds, and reality is almost consistent. On the road eddies are rare and the Valley of Shards is nearly a thing of mythology.

The Shifts & Traveling through the Storm

Frequency of the Shifts: "We have Storm!"

The Maelstrom shifts as often as it needs to. What this means in a narrative is that it shifts as often as the story needs it to. Shifts generally occur within hours to a few weeks from one another, and almost invariably when the Storm passes over. Natives to the Maelstrom can tell the difference between a weather storm and the Maelstrom itself: this latter Storm is an entity, with an electrical charge to it and a pitch black mass like squid ink. Most creatures burrow, hide, or run from the Storm and when it comes no one risks being far from home.

The shifts, whether in the form of the Storm or subtle shifts, can be used to advance the story. They add flavor and create new obstacles for the players. They can also help the players by taking them from a bad place to a better one. However, using the Storm as a story device or Deus Ex Machina can take away from the game by herding the players along instead of allowing them to make their choices. The shifts are best used as an unpredictable force with uncontrollable consequences (see also: Flux Level, p.81).

Sometimes a random variable helps the game. Also, rolling dice to see if and when a shift occurs reminds the players that shifts aren't just a plot device to help the story. The following table suggests shift frequencies and type. Some places have affinities that determine the frequency of their

CHANGING REALITIES AND TRAVEL BETWEEN CULTURES IN A LOW FLUX GAME

The transition between realities in the Maelstrom is subtle and comes gradually. Airships don't stop flying when they reach Udai, and horses don't disappear when you ride them to Springtide. By moving between realities, people themselves change. Their perceptions begin to differ, their beliefs evolve, and their understanding of past events is re-evaluated. Creatures are subjective by nature and able to believe what they need to believe. It's like waking up one morning and realizing that you're old: you know it happened, but you weren't really aware that it *had* happened. Reality in the Maelstrom is defined by many forces, and one of those is belief. In turn, that reality shapes the people in it. Societies that interact often begin to blend their realities. In time the affinities between the realms may change, until the two develop Strong Affinities for one another. A city that used to be two neighboring towns has made one piece of reality out of two.

shifts, but for any place that doesn't provide guidelines for shifts, this table gives a simple way to provide the answers. For a low flux game, use a six sided die. For higher flux games, use an eight or two six sided dice (ignoring rolls over 8). Of course, feel free to change these charts or use whatever die gives you a range that suits your story.

TABLE 1

Roll	Next Shift
1	a month or more
2	3 to 4 weeks
3	2 weeks
4	a week
5	days
6	hours
7	hours
8	minutes

TABLE 2

Roll	Type
1	internal
2	internal
3	internal
4	external
5	external
6	external
7	external
8	external

TABLE 3

Roll	Subtlety
1	high
2	high
3	average
4	low
5	low
6	very low
7	none
8	none

TABLE 1: Determines when the next shift occurs. Subtract 1 from the die if the characters are on an Imperial Road.

TABLE 2: Determines whether the shift is external or internal (see below).

TABLE 3: Determines the subtlety of the shift. High subtlety indicates very small changes, usually occurring without the visible presence of the Storm, whereas low subtlety indicates an obvious shift accompanied by the Storm itself.

Shifting Across Realms: Where the *!#&@!! are We?

During external shifts, people can wind up half way around the world. Realms tend to shift within a certain region and have other affinities that affect their destination. People on the other hand are more easily flung across the realms. Often, when people are caught in an external shift, they will wind up somewhere related to the realm they were in – either somewhere else within the realm itself or in a place that shares an affinity for that realm. Other times the shift will be utterly random. Narrators may want to consider the Cultural Affinities of the characters and sometimes shift them towards a place they have an affinial relationship with.

The chart is optional, but when a random roll is helpful, it can be used to generate a destination. For a low flux game, use a six sided die. For higher flux games, use an eight or two six sided dice (ignoring rolls over 8). Of course, feel free to change these charts or use whatever die gives you a range that suits your story.

TABLE 4

Roll	Destination
1	Same Realm - close by
2	Same Realm - anywhere
3	Same Region - similar terrain
4	Same Region - anywhere
5	Same Continent - similar climate
6	Same Continent - anywhere
7	Anywhere - similar climate
8	Anywhere - anywhere

Optionally, if most of the characters caught in a shift have a cultural affinity for the realm they are in (not counting Kael) then subtract 1 from the die roll.

Strangers in a Strange Land: Reality Shifts

The abruptness and effects of shifts and changing realms varies with the flux level of the game. The following guidelines are based on a low flux game (see Flux Level p.81).

When characters travel to new realms with different affinities the world around them changes as does reality itself. The shift is subtle and, since they shift with it, the characters are only subtly aware of the change. Things that used to work in one realm might not in another, and this manifests in many different ways. The characters themselves may begin to question the former reality, in which many things will become unclear or dream-like in their minds. The things that used to work may gradually fail to work, until it seems they never worked at all. In the Maelstrom world, introducing technology or new ideas to another culture may not be enough to change the affinities. The “boom-sticks of the foreigners” might become an old story that never took hold instead of a catalyst for technological advancement. Reality in the Maelstrom has an elasticity that allows it to “snap back in place” after it’s been altered. This isn’t to say that things can’t change, it’s just that they don’t easily change.

In a high flux game, the shifts can be more dramatic. Ships can fall out of the sky, guns can fail to shoot, and the new reality can seem vastly different or even incomprehensible to foreigners.

Internal vs. External Shifts

One way to address shifts is to break them into two different types: Internal and External. External shifts affect the world around people. Internal shifts affect the people themselves, making them change with the shift.

People affected by an internal shift are usually not aware of any changes in the world, including themselves; for them, the new reality is just the way it’s always been.

External shifts affect the environment and outward appearances. People affected by external shifts remember what it was like before, and are conscious of the changes around them.

Depending on the style of your story and the flux level, shifts can be internal, external or both.

Roads

There are roads in the Maelstrom that stretch from one side of the known world to the other. Travelers can tell you that the Anterior has most of the roads, but they can be found over the Veldt, Critee and the High Mountains as well as stretching into parts of the Endless Sun. The Empire built most of them.

The roads that remain seem haphazardly strewn over the land. If they had a certain power in the past it is mostly gone now. They do, however, strengthen the relationship between their place of origin and their destination. The Imperial Roads rarely pass through hell-holes. Though the Sekoreh will cross roads and sometimes even wait in ambush, they never use the roads to travel.

Additionally, Shifts are less common while traveling on Imperial Roads; if you’re using the chart above, subtract 1 from the roll when rolling for Shifts on Table 1 and destination on Table 4.

Getting Somewhere

Travel across the Maelstrom is best done with someone who has a Trait Affinity in navigation, travel, astronomy, hunting, or any affinity in the narrative that would be appropriate. There are other tools such as the Arts and some devices that can guide or transport the traveler. But travel is still an unreliable event at best.

Travel is a Chaos-based scene. Finding one’s way is Extremely Hard. A road lowers it to Very Hard. An Empire Road takes it to Hard.

Travel Chart

Open Travel	Extremely Hard
Road	Very Hard
Empire Road	Hard

If a character is traveling to a place that they have a cultural affinity for, they can use their “base die” on the Travel Chart.

Generally there are trackers, hunters and guides who serve as scouts and messengers between places. But outside of each area of affinity there is little traffic and communication. This means limited commerce, a slow spread of information and an amplification of the cultural differences between affinities. On the other hand, with the shifts there is contact between realms that would never otherwise happen, allowing for a shared cultural reality and unity in the world despite the scope of differences.

Magnetic Streams

People who understand them navigate by the magnetic lines. These are links between places, and though they shift like all things, they are more reliable than many other tools. Some devices and creatures can sense them, and vessels like airships are drawn along them. Even the skyships of the Kril use them to some extent. Following a magnetic stream can be Very Hard to Easy, depending on the tools used to follow it and reliability of the stream itself (see the Magnetic Map example on p.71).

Cultural Affinities and Travel

People are prone to certain events, things and places. Characters with a Cultural Affinity will find it easier to find places of that Affinity. They may also find it harder to find places that are adverse to that Affinity. Affinities draw people just as they do places.

When traveling to a place where a character has a cultural affinity, they may use their base die when rolling on the Travel Chart, even if they are currently outside their affinity.

Eddies and the Valley of Shards

Though some people travel without a destination in mind, they avoid hell-holes if they have a choice in the matter. And no one has ever been known to seek out the Valley of Shards.

Failure to find one’s way can lead to a hell-hole, and Complete Failure can lead to the Valley of Shards.

Eddies

Also called whorls, or even hell-holes, these places are rare and dangerous. They are places in which reality shifts so strongly that a new reality emerges. Whether they are quasars of time and space, Storm pockets, enchanted places, waking dreams or “lost lands,” they are real enough to kill. Finding oneself in an eddy, the character is trapped. There is rarely a warning.

Eddies are different from siderealms in that they do not necessarily mirror the prime world in any way, or allow travel to other realms. They are defined as isolated pockets that draw people in from certain places in time and space. Eddies have even been found in siderealms themselves.

Once there a new reality takes over. But unlike a dream, the events are real. They may be quick and barely noticeable, or prolonged and tangible. Some people say they’ve spent years in an eddy. Others have never returned. Time inside an eddy is not always consistent with the world outside.

It is possible that some eddies are actually siderealms lying deep beyond the mirror – Siderealms with open gates that allow people to unknowingly sidestep into them.

A recommendation for narrators is to treat an Eddy as an abstract self-contained world in which the player(s) have to overcome some form of challenge. If they succeed they slip out of the eddy and it recedes behind them.

The Valley of Shards

What takes place here is up to the narrator. The myths of the Valley are varied, but they all have a common thread. A character who finds themselves entering the Valley should try to leave. In the Valley all things meet and become one – things such as time, space and ideas. All elements of the Maelstrom are present here. Living through the experience should be considered unlikely at best. No one ever survives the Valley without severe lasting effects.

A common thread in many myths is that survival in the Valley of Shards is somehow linked with the Strangers. Here the stories vary: some say that those who survive become Strangers – hollowed husks of their former selves, enslaved to the force of the Maelstrom. Others say that the Strangers represent the effects of enlightenment brought by the forge of the Valley.

Other mythologies and cultural beliefs link the Valley to the Deep Dream, a place where the tangible fabric of the prime world collides with the intangible essence of creativity and ideas. There are other ideas as well, from visions of hell and punishment to concepts of insanity made carnate, as well as poetic notions of the Valley as a holy land for lost hopes. The Darig see it as a place where time has stopped. The Kril, however, hold that it is the place where time begins. It may be the remains of Imperia, the lost capital of the Empire. Whole worlds might exist within it, from distant worlds to mystic lands like Shij Gabril. It may also be tied to the origin of Newcomers.

We suggest that the Valley be used sparingly in your stories, treated as a threat of what might go wrong as people travel the Storm. It can be used in dreams and in folktales to illustrate the power and danger of the Storm and the shifts instead of a location the characters ever visit. Conversely, should characters ever come close to the Valley the narrator might offer a glimpse into the horrors that lie ahead and encourage the players to turn back. If a story ever takes characters to the Valley in any form, it should be a momentous and life changing event. Characters who get off easy should spend Story Points on Quirks to reflect the impact and magnitude of the events. Others should expect physical deformity, insanity or simply death.

A PICARNIAN VIEW

“The One Book shall guide us. The One God shall cast out the Unbelievers and bring might to the Righteous. The One God shall turn the Thousand into One, and the Shattered Places shall melt in the Furnace with the Unbelievers.”

The Great Book

People in Picarni say that hell-holes are always in dark, cold places, where the sun doesn't reach. They are forgotten places where bad things happen and refuse to leave. These are places where the Adversary dwells. In the Picarnian view, the One God made the world out of many different parts. The One World is holy and part of their god, whereas eddies and siderealms are unholy remnants of a godless era.

In Picarni, it is not allowed to mention the Valley of Shards.

Six Guns & Whiskey

A Plug-In for Wild West Games



Introduction

You're lucky that this story begins in a saloon, 'cause you're gonna need a shot of whiskey. It ain't like what you read in one of those fancy drugstore novels. I see by that six iron hung at your hip you fancy yourself a gunslinger. You aren't the first man to come out here hoping to make a living with a pair of quick hands, and I reckon you won't be the last. There've got to be ten ornery varmints in this bar that would be willing to shoot you dead, just for your boots. An honest man's got a decent chance but a hard life ahead of him here — what with all the Indians, claim jumpers, bank robbers, horse thieves and card sharps. Is that a tin star you have there on your chest? I didn't know we were getting a new sheriff - we haven't even buried the last one yet.

The Game

Six Guns & Whiskey is a game setting "Plug In" for the Story Engine Universal Rules. Since most people have a good sense of the Wild West, even if it's just from the movies, we've only written a few paragraphs of flavor to give you a feel for the setting, as well as a few internet links and suggested films that capture the "Six Guns" feel of the cinematic Wild West. The Trait and Gift Affinities will give you an idea of the kind of characters you can play in the Six Guns Wild West, and the suggested storylines will get you started on a good story full of gunfights, drinking and a few good hangings.

We recommend creating characters with 30 Story Points and an extra Health Level. For flavor we also recommend that each character gets 3 random Traits from the list or 1 random Gift.

The American Centennial

One Hundred years ago this great nation was forged and we've been a-growin' ever since. From the 13 original colonies we've grown into 38 proud states (with the recent addition of Colorado). We're just about over the War Between the States, the scars are healing but the tensions remain. A bloody shame that was... on a lighter note they say the Union Pacific will be stretching clear across to San Francisco in just a few months time, won't that just be a sight. Out here in the territories though, life don't change much. Cowpokes still herd the cattle north an' slowly drift south again for next year. The natives (if you catch my meaning) have been more restful as of late. They were all up in arms about people hunting buffalo, killed some folks, too, so I heard... Good Old general

Sheridan and five divisions of the America's Finest hushed them up right quick. And out in Dodge City Wyatt Earp and his brothers are making quite a name for themselves. I'd like to see them try to pull the same shenanigans here. Me an' the boys would show them who runs things out here in the territories, 'cause tin stars can't stop bullets.

Calling Folks Out and Showdowns

One thing people tend to do in the Territories is shoot people. A lot of times this happens in showdown with two gunslingers facing each other in the road, waiting to draw. The best way to run these scenes is with Straight Rolls instead of Bid Scenes (see "Target Numbers in Fight Scenes" p.39). Since these are quick exchanges of gunfire, both sides might hit or both sides could miss; with a Straight Roll there is no guaranteed winner. Narrators can decide the Hard Rate based on distance and visibility, then Impact the Scene (p.38) for anything that might change the odds.

Trait Affinities

Begging - Allows the character to make the most of their physical misfortunes inciting sympathy and, hopefully, money from good-hearted folk.

Bombs - The character is skilled in the use and handling of dynamite and other black powder explosives.

Book Learning - The character has been schooled in art, history, science and mathematics. This trait requires the character to possess the trait Reading and Writing.

Burlesque - A character with this trait can sing, dance and is skilled at bawdy innuendo.

Carpentry - This trait gives the character the knowledge of tools and the skills necessary to build and repair wooden furniture and structures.

Cheating - This character has practiced both the fine art of manipulating cards (Palming, Sleight of Hand, Double dealing, etc.) and the more difficult to master skill of stacking the deck for your partner.

Cooking - Anybody can boil a pot of beans but this character knows how to make them taste good.

Engineer - This character has spent some time in the engine of a locomotive. As such they are reasonably sure that they could drive one.

Farming - This character has knowledge of seeding, planting and harvesting a wide variety of crops.

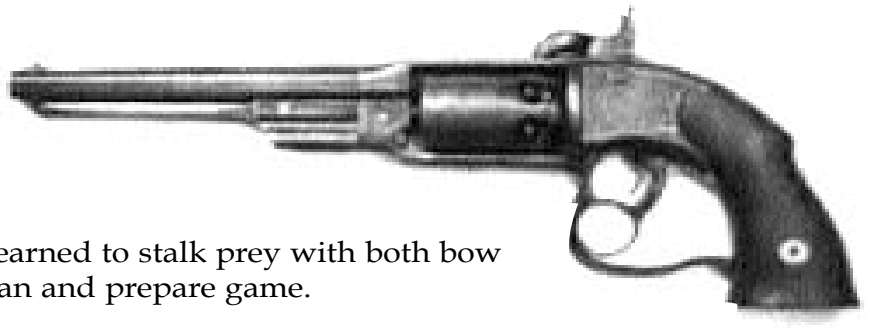
Fire Building - The character is able to make a fire without a tinderbox.

Gambling - The character is familiar with the rules and many of the intricacies of a wide variety of games of chance.

Gold Digging - The character has enough knowledge of the tools and the skills of a miner to take gold from the earth or pan it from a riverbed.

Hard Drinking - This character has abused their liver to the point where they can handle massive quantities of even the most rot-gut liquors.

Harmonica - This character knows how to play a harmonica and knows a number of sad trail songs.



Hunting - The character has learned to stalk prey with both bow and gun, can set traps and clean and prepare game.

Knife Fighting - The character is skilled in the art of cutting people with a big old knife.

Languages (Various) - Your character can reasonably speak one of the following languages: English, French, Spanish or an Indian tribal tongue.

Lawman - Your character has studied the often confusing territorial laws. This is required knowledge for any judge, lawyer or sheriff.

Lock Picking - Your character has the ability to disable locks without the proper key, as long as you have something to use as a shim.

Medicine - This character has been trained by an Indian elder in the various rites and rituals of their religion. They can mix War Paint, are familiar with the ways of a vision quest and have an extensive knowledge of remedies and cures.

Military - This character has a rank (either current or retired) from the United States Military, most likely Army Cavalry or they served during the War Between the States. This gives the character a familiarity with tactics, a certain amount of respect and a number of military contacts.

Piano - This character can stomp out a mean little ditty on any honky-tonk piano in the territory.

Plotting - This character's mind is adept at putting together grand schemes and organizing people to accomplish those objectives.

Preaching - This character heard the calling of the Lord, can quote chapter and verse from the Good Book and is confident when speaking before people. They never miss an opportunity to point out the sinful nature of humanity.

Pugilism - Your character has mastered the sweet science, the fine art of fisticuffs. You are skilled in using your fists to beat other people into bloody pulps.

Quick Draw - Damn that boy was fast.

Reading and Writing - The character was taught how to read and how to write.

Riding - The character is a competent horseman who can saddle and tend to a horse.

Rope Use - The character knows their way around a piece of rope, and can tie a variety of knots and can make and throw a lasso.

Rustling - The character has learned how to lead and herd cattle. This trait requires that the character possess the trait Riding.

Saw Bones - This character has been trained in the fine art of Medicine. They can set broken bones, clean wounds, stop infections and amputate limbs. This trait requires that the character possess the trait Book Learning.

Shooting (Revolver, Rifle, Archery) - The character is trained in the use and care of one of the following types of weapons: revolvers, rifles or bows.

Singing - Besides a sizeable repertoire of songs this character has a decent voice and can carry a tune.

Smithing - This character has been trained in how to work metal with an anvil and forge. They can shoe horses, make nails and perform various other metal work.

Sneaking - This character has honed their ability to move about all quiet like.

Swimming - This character can swim.

Tracking - This character can follow tracks and read various trail signs, allowing them to pursue their quarry (whether that be man or beast) through the wilderness.

Train Legs - The character has spent a great deal of time riding the rails, either as a workman or as a train hopper. This character can move about easily inside as well as on top of a locomotive and has reached a point where they can jump onto and off of a moving train without hurting themselves too much.

Tumbling - The character's natural agility makes it easy for them to run, jump, roll, swing and crash through windows.

Undertaker - Besides digging holes and making pine boxes, this character knows how to make a body presentable for burial. This trait allows the character to know instantly how tall or heavy a person is.

Wagoneering - This character knows how to hitch up a team of horses, repair wagon or coach wheels, and can drive a cart, coach or wagon.

Whittling - With a knife, this character can carve various shapes out of wood.

Whoring - This character is familiar with the goings on of a brothel, either as a customer or an employee.

Gift Affinities

Born to Ride - You were born in the saddle and there's never been a horse that you couldn't handle. Though a saddle can be very handy, you've never found it to be an absolute necessity. Once per session you can add 2 dice to any scene that involves your character's riding on a horse.

Dowsing - With the right stick you can find water in the driest desert. The Indian medicine man that taught you also showed you the intricacies of finding the right piece of wood. Dowsing rods are a "Y" shaped branch of dry wood that must be found and can not be cut. In any scenes that you have to hunt for water you can add 2 dice to your pool. Once per session you can spend a Story Point to find water in an otherwise dry well.

Endless Ammo - It always seems like you have a spare bandoleer lying around when you need it, or a spare box of bullets in your saddlebag. *Did I fire five or did I fire six?* The character can burn any Chaos Descriptor to find some extra ammo lying around. It is safe to assume that the character's guns are always primed and loaded unless an event in the story would prevent this.

(In)Famous Name - There ain't a sole in the territory that doesn't know your name, whether it's from all the wanted posters, the headlines, or from reading about your exploits in the Dime Novels. People may not know your face but the mere mention of your name is enough to turn heads. In any scene that involves impressing people or intimidation, the character gains an additional die. Also, once per session you can *put your name on the line* by making it known you are going to perform a task. In any one scene that involves that task you gain two bonus dice, if you fail at this task, you lose the Gift Affinity: (In) Famous Name and gain the Mind Quirk: Disgraced.

Governor's Friend - Sometimes it pays to have friends in high places. It seems that a quick letter to the right person can get you out of all kinds of scrapes. Actually, sometimes just throwing the governor's name around can smooth over an egregious faux pas. Once per session you can *drop the governor's name* to find out about the political, commercial and military goings on in the territory. If your character is ever convicted of a hanging crime you can spend the Gift Affinity: Governor's Friend to get a pardon. By using the Gift Affinity in this manner you permanently lose the Gift Affinity: Governor's Friend.

Healing Hands - You have the touch. By laying your hands upon a sick or injured soul you have the power to heal their ailments. You can heal illnesses on a Spirit Roll with the Hard Rate reflecting the severity of the Illness. If combined with the Trait Affinity: Medicine or the Trait Affinity: Preacher it reduces the Hard Roll one step. By spending one Story Point you can heal one Health Level of Injury. (Can be used in conjunction with the Shaking Injury rule)

Indian Friend - Through some action in your life you have been befriended by a specific Indian Tribe. They consider you an honorary member of their tribe. You are welcome on their land and are free to attend their ceremonies.

Intuition - You seem to have a sixth sense about things that are about to happen. Once per session you can add two dice to your pool when "initiative" (a game term for "going first") is an issue.

Lucky with Cards - When asked why you're so damn lucky with cards you like to point out that luck has nothing to do with it, knowing full well that luck has everything to do with it. Whenever you are in a scene that involves gambling you can add one die to your pool.

Lucky with Women (Men) - Sometimes all it takes is a wink, a smile or a few lines of French poetry. Whatever it is, you always seem to have a woman (or man) under each arm. Whenever you are in a scene that involves carousing you can add one die to your pool.

Prepared - Seems like you always know what to pack. You have a knack for spotting just the thing that no one else thought you would ever need. *Yeah, I got one of those.* Once per session you can burn any descriptor to miraculously find any piece of equipment your character might desire, within reason.

Presence - When you walk into a room the music stops, dealers pause, and all eyes are on the swinging saloon doors. Maybe it's how your gun lies against your hip or maybe it's the tilt of your hat. Either way, you can always count on making a scene. Now all you have to do is make a name for yourself. Anytime you need to look impressive or make heads turn you can add one die to your dice pool.

Talk to Your Horse - Seems like your horse always seems to know what you mean. It always comes when you call and even knows what window you told it to stand under. Some people think it's downright uncanny. When trying to talk to your horse, roll on Spirit with the Hard Rate determined by the complexity of the instructions.

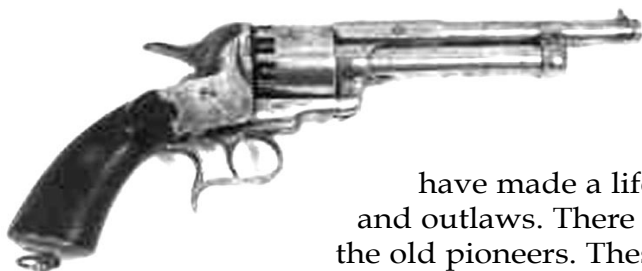
Traveled - Seems like you've been from one side of this territory to the other. Drank in every saloon with more than two chairs this side of the Mississippi, met your share of girls, too. You can burn a Mind Descriptor to get the low down on any place you may have visited in your travels; remember that it could have been a long time since you were there last.

Vengeance - They did you wrong and now they're going to pay. You have been wronged by someone or some group and in any scene that directly involves the reaping of your vengeance you get an extra die to your pool. Should you ever get your revenge you can "cash out" and get seven Story Points back for the Gift Affinity: Vengeance.

Weather Bump - It could be that corn you got or that old war scar, whatever it is you can physically feel when there is a storm brewing. When rolling to tell the weather roll on Spirit with the Hard Rate determined by the severity and distance of the storm.

Winning Smile - You can blind a man with the glint of the sun off your pearly whites. Your mama always said that if you can't say something nice, just smile... you took her advice to heart. Once per session you can add two dice to your dice pool in a social situation.

Cultural Affinities



You find all sorts of folks in the territory. Most common folk are simple **Territory Men**. From the white settlers to the recently freed slaves these people have made a life for themselves as farmers, miners, lawmen and outlaws. There are a few **Frontiersmen** left, remnants of the old pioneers. These people still make their living hunting and tracking game and as guides through the wilderness. **Easterners** moved west looking for opportunity, being lured by stories of gold just lying in riverbeds. A few educated Easterners have moved into the territories with the railroad or to become teachers and doctors in the boomtowns of the new frontier. The **Indian Tribes** have been pushed away from the new west and into shrinking reservations but still have a strong presence in the territories. A variety of tribes, each with a unique language and culture, exist but the Navajo, Sioux, Cherokee, and Arapaho were some of the better known. A number of European and Chinese **Immigrants** have made their way into the territories working everything from the railroads to the farms. **Texans** and **Mexicans** have also made their way to the territories, in the newly growing west.

Story Lines

Cleaning up the Town - A shiny new star and some big city book learning are all you've got as you settle into the dusty sheriff's office of Whiskey Flats, Arizona. Bad Billy Brad's got money, men and mayhem to spare. There still are some good people in the town but you can't find them behind the brothels, gambling and long lines of pine boxes. The townsfolk have been waiting for someone to stand up to Billy. Are you the one?

Second National Bank of Pine Box, New Mexico - The hick farmers from five counties all deposit their money in the same bank. You and your boys are itchin' to shake up this sleepy town and head off to Old Mexico with the money; where the women are cheap, the tequila is strong and the days are long. Now all you need is a plan.

Trains: Cash on the Tracks - The Trans-Union Rail Line ships its bankroll in the mail car on the first Wednesday of every month. The best place to hit it has always been between Narrow Gulch and the Colorado River but the last gang to try for it was met by Colonel Factor's First Regiment. Some people say that the colonel was there that day to hit the train himself. This time you better beat him to it.

The Land Grab - Farmer Granzie built his house with his own two hands and worked the fields for thirty-five long years, but Old Man Peters is trying to run him off it, like he did everybody else. Normally you wouldn't care what happens to these dirt farmers but farmer Granzie's paying a whole lot more than Peters and that's enough for you. Now if Peters' men don't get you, then the sheriff and the rest of the men on his payroll probably will.

Railroad Barons vs. the Orphanage - The rail barons want to run their tracks right though Sister Katherine's Our Mother of Sorrows Orphanage. The only thing standing between progress and all those poor orphans' lives is you and a belt full of bullets. Let's just hope you can dry up and remember how to shoot straight before the train pulls into town!

Stagecoach - The wildest ride this side of the Mississippi is the High Rock Coach. If you're not fighting off the Indians or shooting a rabid coyote you're fending off a bandit raid but usually not all at once! Never before have you had a trip so doomed for failure. You're carting a load of the most annoying tourists you've ever seen through all manner of foul weather. Mrs. Potts, one of the vilest, most destructive and downright meanest bandits this territory has ever seen, is about and you hear war drums in the distance. Above all that, the driver just told you that he thinks you're going to lose a wheel.

The Mother Load - Most people don't take Smiling Zachary's words at face value but his fist full of silver was quick to persuade you that all those drinks you bought him were a good investment. As Smiling Zachary lies facedown on the saloon floor you, and half the bar, are racing to reach his mine first and stake a claim at Devil's Crotch Canyon. If Zachary didn't mind the fact that he was mining a sacred Indian burial ground, why should you?

Red Rocks - Crazy palefaces have killed Seeing Dog and stormed the sacred burial grounds, defiling it as they dig for silver. With the territorial Governor days away, the only thing to do is dig up the hatchet, ride to war and cover Burning Rock with their blood. That way the white man will remember that Devil's Crotch is off limits.

Posse - Nothing makes you feel like more of a man than when a sheriff has to get a group of men together to hunt you down. You and the boys got your horses loaded and are heading for Old Mexico with nothing but a deadly desert and an army of armed men standing between you and freedom.

Deputized - Nothing makes you feel more like a man than gathering together a bunch of hands and hunting a man down. Especially since he's a dirty, no good, low down snake of a varmint who was despicable enough to rustle cattle from your ranch. You know he sold off the cattle, so now you're just out to make him pay but time's running out! If he makes it to Old Mexico before you put a bullet in his heart you'll never find him and probably never get paid.

Special Items

Lucky Bullet - When your father gave you this bullet, he told you that if you ever had to kill a man, you'd better be able to do it right. The Lucky Bullet can only be used once, and the Descriptors can only be burned and only count towards the owner's die pool the one time it's used. Has the Descriptors "Bountiful Ricochet" (Chaos), "Fires True" (Matter) and "Lucky Shot" (Spirit).

Lucky Cards - You never were much of gambler... not until you found these cards that is. Now your luck has changed. It seems you can't lose when you're playing with this deck of cards. It's gotten to the point that some people won't let you play with it. Whatever the reason, it's always been good to you. Has the Descriptor "I'll raise you" (Spirit).

Mean Pete's Gun - Pete was a wretched man. So wretched he got his neck stretched. Most of the things he did to get the name Mean Pete he did with his gun and so, one way or another, it gained a reputation all its own. Mean Pete's Gun can be whatever kind of gun the player wants, and has the Descriptor "Not a Flesh Wound" (Matter).

Medicine Pouch - Either you found it on a dead Indian or it was a gift presented to you by the tribe; either way, since you got it, traveling has been a whole lot more pleasant. Since you got it not one coyote, bear or even rattlesnake has given you the least bit o' trouble. Has the Descriptor "Friend of the animals" (Spirit).

Reference Material

Suggested Web Sites:

New Perspectives on the West
<http://www.pbs.org/weta/thewest/>

An Abridged History of the USA
<http://www.us-history.com/home.html>

Wyatt Earp's Historical Web Page
<http://www.techline.com/~nicks/earp.htm>

Suggested Movies:

The following is a list of movies and television shows that you might want to watch to get the feel of the Six Guns Wild West:

Blazing Saddles
Briscoe County Junior
El Diablo
High Noon
Magnificent Seven
Posse
The Quick and the Dead
Rio Bravo
The Searchers
Silverado
Stagecoach
The War Wagon
The Wild Bunch
Tombstone
Young Guns I&II

COYOTE TRAIL

Coyote Trail is a roleplaying game from Politically Incorrect Games, designed to be both easy to learn and play. It includes rules to create a variety of Wild West personalities; simple rules for fights and chases; ready-to-play adventures; story ideas; reference sheets; and numerous character, horse, and wagon templates. Travel the dusty trails from boomtowns to native villages. Rustle cattle, rob banks, and terrorize towns. Of course, if law and justice is your thing, take on the role of sheriffs to protect towns, and drive off bandits and Indians. Then again, you could just gamble all your money away.

Visit www.pigames.net for more information.



A Dash of Salt

SETTING: 1700'S WEST INDIES (FANTASY)

Never mistake a smile for friendliness. This was something Stink had told me long before, but it wasn't until much later that I fully understood the wisdom of his words. Standing around me, grinning like deranged schoolchildren, were six of the toughest looking savages I had ever seen. Their bodies were painted with a dark mud, and all I could really make out were their teeth and eyes. I had never seen so many teeth in a single mouth. They were bristling with teeth. Crawling with teeth. The teeth were matched only by the crazed gleam in their eyes, a gleam that broadcast plans for dinner. A big dinner in which I was going to play a big part. A part I really didn't want, which is what I was trying to explain as they dragged me off into the darkness of the jungle.

Now Alenea is not exactly a bad place. It's just a bad place if you're not Alenean. Actually, it's pretty rough for some of them too, but I'm trying to be nice here. Between eating foreigners and tossing people into volcanoes, there isn't much time for good manners and a hot bath. All this was going through my mind as they carried me off. They paid no attention to my polite efforts at conversation. Savages don't seem to go for that kind of stuff. I was beginning to wonder if they even spoke the Word until one of them turned to me and told me to be quiet. Actually, he told me to shut up. And he threw in some choice expletives too, all in perfectly fluent South Seas Word.

As it turns out I had just missed lunch, which gave me a few hours until the next pot started to boil. By the looks of it some of the less fortunate members of our shipwreck had made the noon meal, which was really no loss unless you have a thing for cutthroats and pirates. Why I had been on that ship in the first place is another story, but let's just say that waiting to be eaten was only a few steps up on the "life sucks" scale.

Now, you may not believe me given the circumstances, but all told I consider myself a fortunate man. One of the reasons for this showed up just after they threw me to the floor in some filthy hut my mother would have described as "lacking in the finer things." When some men are thrown onto floors in dark huts before being eaten, the last thing they want to see is some oversized rodent making its way over while licking its chops. I, on the other hand, was delighted.

"Stink!" I shouted, amazed to see my old comrade. He didn't seem to reciprocate.

"Alive and well, I see." he muttered, making his way to the ropes around my wrists.

"Hope you're hungry. They used a lot of rope." I said sportingly. Always try to keep up the good cheer, I say, and no better time than right before being eaten.

While Stink made quick work of the ropes, I sized up the situation. With any luck the locals were somewhat dazed and sated from their noon-time repast, which would make things easier. Easier being a relative term, of course. I figured my best bet was to sneak out of my cosmopolitan surroundings and make my way through the dense jungles and malaria swamps to the north and the whaling port of Parn Tass – assuming I was on the right island.

"Stink! Are we on Tzaulo?" I asked, freeing my hand.

"Not sure. I wasn't really paying attention, between the typhoon and ship wreck and all," he growled. "There's a big guy out front, but only a short run from there to the tree line," he added. Stink, as I should point out, is a rodent of action.

"Alright, then," I said, standing there. He looked up at me. I glanced down at him. It's not that I wasn't all for the plan, because the plan was spotless. It was the part about the large individual out front that got me. I like to work up to things, gradually say, and beginning an escape with "a big guy out front" hardly seemed to be a nice jog just to break the proverbial sweat.

"Alright, then," I said again. Stink rolled his eyes and sighed. I think that's what did it. Having a rodent think poorly of you in a moment of heroic necessity is enough to make one take action.

The warm climate and soothing tropical sea must do wonders for your health, I thought as I stared at the bulging back of the man out front. Dear gods what a bruiser, I added, standing there in the shadow of the doorway.

"Hurry up! Hit him!" Stink whispered from inside. Hesitation, it would seem, was not the appropriate course of action. I looked around for something that might actually do harm to this man, like an anvil or small boat, but the only handy item was an iron ladle. I hit him with it. A good blow to the head with both hands. It felt good, with a satisfying clang and reverberation all through the ladle. As I was fishing for a suitable comment at this moment of triumph, he let out a yell and turned around, grabbing me by the neck.

"Ack!" I gurgled, my feet off the ground as he throttled me with all his might. "Ack" was not one of the choice words I had been looking for. Stink took this opportunity to run between my legs and bite him between his. If the ladle to the head didn't do much to faze him, this did. He let out a yell fit for the stage and dropped me to the ground. With a few dozen of his larger cousins giving chase, we high tailed it to the woods.

We ran like the wind. I had always thought that expression was somewhat implausible, but I assure you no wind could have made better time than us. The jungles there are dense and treacherous, but I managed to avoid the worst of it and find myself some distance ahead of the pack.

"Stink!" I whispered, looking around as I caught my breath. Normally I'd never worry about good old Stink – but in the current environment there was no end of creatures ahead of him in the food chain. And quite a few ahead of me as well. He poked his head out of the bushes and grinned, panting. I scooped him up and we got on our way.

It was a long trip to Parn Tass, with no small amount of rivers, ravines and anacondas, but we got there at last. I'd like to think that I'm a better man for it, but I can't see how typhoid fever or eating bugs could make anything better. The worst of it, of course, was spending a week in a whaling port – I'd trade drunken sailors for crazed natives any day. As our ship sailed off at last I settled into my bunk with Stink and we watched the Alenean islands disappear into the distance.

"Think we'll make it home this time?" I asked.

"Not a chance," he said.

Adventures of the Black Rose

SETTING: SOUTH SEAS (THE MAELSTROM - SCIENCE-FANTASY)

"wicked dreams abuse the curtained sleep"

(MacBeth II.i)

"What do you make of this?" said one raven to another. They sat perched on the jungled cliffs of a small island, the smoke of black powder guns drifting through the tropical air under the pounding of cannon-fire.

"I make little of it. The red-sailed skyship swam fast towards the larger one, and it was followed by the small flying ship."

"And who began this business?"

"It's hard to say. The large seaship shouted its guns first, but the red-sailed skyship may have provoked it, like a tiger before it pounces."

"Where does the flying ship stand?"

"The flying ship is hovering like a nervous squirrel. I think it shouted mostly at the red-sailed ship and tried to drive it back, but it doesn't fly like a bird and its behavior is unclear to me." he said. The ravens cocked their heads and watched, the afternoon sun beginning its slow descent to the horizon.



Down below, in the midst of heavy smoke and the screams of war, Jini opened her eyes and looked around her. There had been no end to the cannonading, and when the two ships closed in and boarded, the shock of the collision had sent her sprawling. Above she could hear the sound of pistols and shouting. She wasn't sure if they were winning or losing, and she wasn't sure which one she was hoping for.



The door to the small storage room opened, and Jini looked up to see Ferrin standing there, a lantern in his hand.

"Jini! Are you alright?"

"Yeah. I just got thrown. What's happening?"

"I don't know. We're taking in water. I don't know if we'll stay afloat, and half the crew's dead or fighting." he said.

"Hide here with me." she said, and he looked behind him before closing the door.

"What's going to happen, Jini?" he asked.

"I don't know." she said. He blinked, looking up as a powerful blow rocked the ship. The smell of blackpowder was strong, even where they were in the lower decks.



Up above the shouting was further off, contained in pockets and sudden screams. The guns had stopped, and the creaking of the crippled ships was the only constant sound. Lao sat sprawled on the deck. His back was pressed against the mast, his hand still clutching his sword. He could

A QUICK GLOSSARY FOR THE NEWCOMER

Ravens

The ravens of the Maelstrom are highly intelligent animals. They are able to understand the spoken words of sentient races, although they aren't capable of normal speech. Many people believe they have the power to predict shifts and understand the patterns of the Storm. Though they have an intelligence not far removed from the sentient peoples, ravens do not have an evolved culture or advanced society.

Ships

There are several kinds of ships in the Maelstrom world, from traditional sailing ships to ships that fly. The three ships in this story are all different types:

Seaships

Seaships are traditional water vessels, using sails, oars or steam to power themselves. Seaships include all non-flying ships that use the sea.

Skyships

Skyships (nicknamed "skiffs" and "gallots") are large sea vessels, which like seaships have sails and are able to float and travel in the water. Skyships, however, are also able to rise over the water and sail just above the surface. When sailing in the water they are heavier and less nimble than their seaship counterparts.

When sailing normally in the water, a mill-like device generates power for the magnetic engines. When engaged, these engines relay the power to the gearing resonator, producing an energy field around the vessel that repels it from the water below. The long trailing keel and rudder maintain nominal contact with the water while gliding over it, "grounding" the vessel by dispersing the electrical static that builds up during flight.

Some skyships can actually break their contact with water altogether and tap into the magnetic streams of the Maelstrom like Airships. Ships that do this are usually called "high skiffs" or "flyers." These ships switch their energy field to one that is conducive to the air and drawn to the ambient magnetic streams. Because of the weight and relative simplicity of the mechanisms involved, high skiffs have a limited ability to actually fly, and can't attain a great altitude safely without "falling from the sky." By doing this, high skiffs can move over land – but if they lose their magnetic stream they can crash without water below them.

Airships

Airships are graceful vessels that are held aloft by ballasts and balloons not unlike a zeppelin. The ship itself is wooden and resembles a fine galley made for the sea. Moored to the air balloon above by an elaborate rigging, the ships have an open top deck and as many decks below as size permits. They dock at air stations, where they lower ropes and rig themselves to a tower, staying aloft. They are propelled by wind power, and guide their course along the magnetic lines similar to the high skiffs of the Kril. Although not as fast as skyships, they do manage to attain a great altitude and are capable of long voyages.

The Kril

A race of crab-like creatures that stand at least five to six hands above the average human head. They walk upright and have four sets of limbs; two sturdy legs, two large pincers, two sets of arms with two-fingered hands and an opposable thumb. They gather in towering half submerged cities in the South Sea. The Deep Kril live in the Inner Crescent, and are known to be prolific slavers, whereas the Black Kril live in the scattered Outer Crescent and are part of the Black Pirate Brotherhood.

Kril speak in a melange of vocal sounds, clicks from their pincers, and thoughts they are able to transmit directly.

Shifts and the Storm

Where mountains were the day before, a forest is the day after. When the Storm passes over, all things can change - but some things never do. These shifts affect the world in large and small ways, and all the places of the world are touched by it. But there is order, or something like it: places share certain ties to one another, and so while one place might shift from one place to another, it might always remain in one region - or two towns always shift together, or a valley always lies south of the same mountain. These are the patterns in the Storm, some obvious and others not. These relationships are called "affinities," linking the world into some order despite the chaos.

Shifts don't always wait for the Storm, however. Overnight the land can change, and sometimes people just realize that the world around them is different.

barely see through the fog of smoke as he lay there in his own blood. He looked down at his hand, pressed tightly against his side. The pain was intense, but it had receded into a duller throb. He was glad for the pain because it told him he was still alive.

"Malat!" he gasped, his voice weak. There was no answer. Near him he could see the body of one of the men, long since still.

"Malat!" he called again. He hadn't been afraid as they had sailed towards the Geregonian dromond, weapons drawn as they bore down on her. The sound of the cannons had made his heart pound, and a sort of euphoric high had taken over when the battle started. But now, lying on the deck, alone and bleeding, he was scared. The intoxication of the moment was gone and a sober sense of reality was gripping his broken body. He opened his mouth to call out again when he heard the hatch open nearby. He turned his head, peering into the smoke.

"Who's there?" he asked, dragging his sword across the deck as he tried to raise it.

"It's me. Jini." the voice said.

"Get out of here!" he said, his voice weak.

"Are you hurt?" she asked. He looked up as she got closer. He tried to raise the sword, but he couldn't hold it off the deck. She would kill him, that much was sure. What slave wouldn't? This was her chance at freedom.

"The Storm take you!" he cursed, the words barely escaping his mouth as the world spun around him in a gathering darkness.



When Lao awoke it was many hours later. He opened his eyes and stared at the bunk above him, the light from the lantern casting a swaying pattern of shadows as the ship rocked gently. He could hear the rattle and hum of the engines and feel the familiar listing of the Black Rose as she sailed just above the water. He turned his head and looked out over the room, his eyes meeting those of the second mate.

"Malat!" he said, his voice weak. The other man smiled, sitting back on a stool against the wall. "What happened?"

"Well, we're holed below the waterline for one. Kejet got us off the water and out of there, but I don't know how much longer this old tub can go before we'll have to set down again. Namol and him are patching her right now."

"And the captain?" Lao asked, grimacing as he tried to pull himself up.

"Dead. They're all dead. It's just us four and the two slaves."



By morning the black skies had given way to cotton-white clouds floating in a soft blue sky, the storm nowhere to be seen. The shift had taken them to waters off the northeast coast of the Rim Kingdoms, in a part of the South Seas known as Far Reach to the people who sailed it. There was an audible clatter and then a gentle shuddering as the resonator shut down, letting the Kril skiff sink gently into the water below. The rhythm of the sea replaced the mechanical cadence, and a peaceful quiet settled over the ship.



Slavery

Slavery is widespread across the Thousand Realms. It centers on the slave routes of the South Sea, and the Deep Kril of the Inner Crescent are famous for their slave trading. Certain groups oppose slavery, from abolitionist states like Dacartha to Newcomer Purists like the Dog Throng.

Slave Collars

Most slaves wear collars, either around their neck or ankles. The slave collars of the Kril are malleable circlets filled with a powerful acid that makes them extremely difficult to remove even with tools.

Dog Throng

The Throng is a fraternal order of Newcomers. Its people live a nomadic existence on the seas. The Dog Throng has ties in many places, and works as guides, pirates, merchants and mercenaries. They span the gap from the Cold Sea to the South Sea, and have an "ethnic" pride that drives them to racial Newcomer Purity.

In areas where they have a strong presence, they exact tithes in return for protection or free passage. The Dog Throng has ties with many groups, especially the Black Pirates.

Jini leaned against the prow, staring down into the clear blue waters of the sea. A warm breeze blew through her hair, the ship swaying ever so slightly in the still waters. She stared down into the endless depths, wondering where the bottom was. Deep beneath her lay Parsus, or so the story went – far below the keel of the ship at the bottom of the sea, where reality slipped into dreams.

"Does it really exist, Kejet?" she said, turning her head to the Kril who stood nearby on the prow.

"Yes. Like the whales and the moon." he said, his thoughts shaping words in her mind. Jini liked Kejet. She liked him for no reason except that she enjoyed his company. It may have been the way he was able to send his thoughts to her, gently spreading his ideas into her mind as they talked. It may have been that he, more than anyone else, treated her as an equal.

"Is it still there?" she asked, peering down into the water again.

"It may be. Your people built things to last." he said, his two stalks intertwining behind his head like a braid.

"I'd like to see it. It must be amazing. A whole city beneath the sea." she said. He looked over at her, his eyes unreadable to her. She never knew what his real thoughts were, but even so she felt closer to this Kril man than anyone else on the ship.



Ferrin stepped up from the hatch and walked along the deck towards them. The warm breeze blew through the billowy white shirt he wore, and his short dreadlocks bounced lightly like a hive of snakes.

"Malat is against going to Laun Doq. He says the Throngers will take the ship." he said to them.

"Is that true?" she said to Kejet.

"It may be. We haven't paid the tithe in two seasons." he answered. She shook her head.

"Where, then? We have to go somewhere." she said.

"Lao says we should try for Dacartha." Ferrin said. Jini looked over at him, then up towards the Kril. His antennas twitched, but he didn't send her any thoughts. She looked over at Ferrin's slave ring, clasped tightly to his ankle like hers.

"It takes us north towards the Arn Sea. We won't be far from the savages in Alenea." Ferrin said. "Also, if we aren't careful, we could slip through the shift into the Edge Sea when we pass Ismolaht." he added.

"Is it like they say? Would we really be free?" she asked.

"It's what Lao says. He says even if we take on any new crew we'll all just be running from the Throng out here. And unless we can get our collars off, the two of us'll be property for the rest of our lives."

"But we're not slaves anymore. Malat said so. And Kejet and Lao, and Namol." she said.

"Not to us. But with a new crew we might even have a new captain, and then you will find yourselves slaves again." the Kril thought to them, and she shook her head.

"I thought your people knew how to take these off?" Ferrin said. Kejet moved his great pincher limb towards Ferrin, reaching down to grasp the metal with his claw.

"When the Prophet comes, he will remove all chains and free the world. Until then, the tribes of the Swarm can remove these, but not my tribe. We do not trade in people. If we cut this metal now the juice inside will eat your leg off." he thought, and Ferrin winced at the idea as it played in his mind.



That night they gathered on the deck, the breeze cooling the warm air. The sails were full as they carried the ship northward, towards the Arn Sea in the cradle of the Two Lands. Jini stretched, elated as they left their world behind. Ferrin smiled at her as they sat back, the warm light from the lanterns casting shadows over their faces.

"Tell us about Dacartha, Lao." Jini said as Malat passed out mugs of warm liquor. Lao looked at all of them, one by one, and grinned:

"I was very young, but I still remember it well. When I was seven summers my mother took me there, and I saw the gates with my very own eyes. I couldn't read, but my mother read the words to me as we stood under them. They were as tall as a mountain, or so it seemed to me then, and the doors were wide open as people poured in and out of the city. 'Let all who pass be free' said the words, and though I was too young to know what that really meant, I could see the light in my mother's eyes when she read them.

"Inside, the buildings were tall and made of stone, and there were shops and stores, and people from all the realms. We watched street performers juggle and walk on stilts, all for a few coins thrown their way. Everywhere I looked I saw new wonders, from strange metal cars that rode on tracks to the vast bridges that span the river. People played music in the squares, with rich drums and strange trumpets, a music they called 'blue.' The sky was filled with birds, ravens I think, and the whole place was like a touch of solid truth. It's the only place I've seen that is strong enough to challenge the Storm." Lao said, and no one spoke for a while after he finished.

"If it's so strong, why do we never see their ships?" asked Namol after a while. Lao looked at him and shrugged his shoulders.

"Dacartha is never on the sea." Kejet said. They looked at him. "It has no navy. It trades by shifting to new places. Dacartha does not trade with the world, the world trades with it." he said, his thoughts drifting over them.

"It's true." Malat said, nodding. The cool breeze blew over them as he stood up.

"Tomorrow we'll pass Alenea towards the Arn Sea. They're savages and cannibals, but it's better to pass near them than risk the navies along the trade routes to the west. Barring a shift, we'll reach the Cradle in a few days, and we'll be in dangerous water so close to Diodet." he said.



Ferrin squinted, staring out at the sky. He was looking for the Dog Star, his mind wandering as he leaned against the mast. The Two Women of the Ergon Waters were full and heavy. It was a sign of fertility in Laun Doq when the moons waxed full, but Ferrin was more concerned with finding the Dog Star. As he squinted and stared east he saw something in the sky. He looked up and squinted more, and then he saw it again. Ferrin's eyes opened wide and the blood left him. It was the Respite, bearing down hard like a shadow in the night. Ferrin swallowed, frozen to the spot, his mind racing as he tried to move.

"By the tiger!" he blurted, and then he ran for the bell, freed from his moment of terror.

The Rose sat still in the cool night as the Respite flew towards her. Jini grabbed the pistol from beside her bunk as she heard the bell, racing for the deck. She could hear Lao calling for the muskets and she knew all too well how bad the situation was. The first shots rang out as she reached the main deck, the call for "all hands" coming from Malat as he rallied a crew that had dwindled to six. Jini burst above decks, looking up to see the Respite as she passed over. Ferrin fired his musket as the first bombs dropped down.

"Take cover!" she screamed, diving behind the grain sacks that littered the deck. She heard the crash as the powder bombs exploded overhead, looking up to see one slam into the deck next to her as it rolled overboard. She closed her eyes and listened, but it hit the water before it could explode.

Jini heard the engines kick in as she stood up, looking into the sky for the Respite. It was coming about for another pass. Jini fell backwards as the deck guns went off, lighting up the sky for a brief instant as the Rose fired her cannons. She scrambled for her pistol, clutching it to her as she slid back behind the grain sacks. She raised her gun, aiming at the looming airship as it came in fast. The Respite fired, the blast throwing her back. She watched it pass overhead as she lost consciousness, sprawled on the deck.



Jini lay dreaming as the fight raged on. Her mind drifted to many things, her head swimming in a feverish delirium as she lay unconscious on the deck. Smoke from the guns rolled over her, and shouts rang out as the two ships engaged in a vicious duel. The Rose made it into the air, her engines pounding as she rose over the water and turned on the small airship above them. In Jini's mind she was flying, flying over Dacartha, the sky full of birds. She looked at the birds and they called to her. 'Follow us, Jini, fly with us. We'll take you to the city. We'll lead you to Dacartha.' they said, and she looked into the growing black mass of ravens gathering around her. As Jini opened her eyes the mass of birds changed to black smoke, the sound of guns echoing in the air. She got to her feet, leaning against the rail as she held her hand to her head. She walked towards Malat and Ferrin on the aft deck, her head spinning, blood dripping over her eyes.

"Jini!" Ferrin said when he saw her. He rushed over and helped her stand. "Are you alright?" he asked.

"I think so." she said, looking up. "Where's the Respite?" she asked.

"We chased them off." he grinned. She smiled, trying to steady herself.

"We have to follow the birds." she said.

"What?"

"Ravens. They'll lead us to Dacartha. I dreamed it." she said. He looked at her as Malat walked over, looking at them both.

"What did she say?" he asked.

"She says ravens will lead us to Dacartha."



For three days they skirted the coast, nervously watching for naval ships as they looked for an inland waterway. The main river ran through Diodet itself, and their only hope was to find another way into the Anterior. At the end of the third day a raven landed on the prow. Ferrin called Jini over, and together they watched it. After a little while another landed nearby, followed by others. The whole crew gathered, watching the birds, not knowing what to say. Finally, all at once, they spread their wings and flew up into the sky.

"Follow them!" Jini said, and Malat nodded to the others as they shifted course.

The sun was nearly setting as the birds veered inland. As the Black Rose sailed on they saw the mouth of a small waterway, and Malat called out for them to steer into it. They sailed along the river, Namol and Lao nervously testing the depth, and just as the sun set to their left the river widened, taking them further inland as a solitary moon emerged overhead.



As the sun rose it lit the rolling hills around them, the rich grass fields coming to life in the morning light. The river had grown overnight into a major waterway, and on all sides there was land as they sailed their ship up the river deep into the Anterior. Jini stood on the prow with Kejet, staring ahead as the wind took them steadily upstream.

"You really think we'll find it?" he asked.

"Oh, I know we will." she said, staring out ahead.



Should I Die Before I Wake

SETTING: PRESENT DAY (HORROR)

Larry glanced in his rearview mirror again, eyeing the dark storm clouds behind him as he drove into town. He opened his mouth in a big yawn, turning on his driving lights in the dark afternoon. The radio wasn't playing anything interesting, so he turned it off as he pulled into the Milky Way Diner. The door to his old truck closed with a whining squeak followed by a clatter, making the old dog on the porch look up from his nap.

He walked into the diner and nodded at Mo behind the counter. He looked around at the locals and the truck drivers and walked over to one of the stalls. Normally he sat at the counter, but today was anything but normal. He looked out at the overcast sky again, the day getting darker every minute.

"Gonna storm something fierce, by the looks of it," came a voice. Larry looked over at Pa Grainsie in the booth next to him.

"Yep," he nodded. Pa Grainsie was one of the many older men in town who had little to do except sit at the Milky Way and talk about the weather. Larry always figured he'd be like that too when he got older.

"What can I get you today, Larry?" from Sarah as she walked over, tucking a washrag into her apron.

"Oh, just coffee for now," he said, and she smiled and nodded. Larry watched her walk towards the counter.

No. It must not be happening to her, he thought to himself as he watched her casual steps and heard her voice as she spoke to Mo. He looked at Mo, and Mo glanced back, nodding. Larry couldn't figure it out, but it was happening to some people and not others. Why? What was it all about? he thought. He shook his head, then looked up as Sam walked in, the bell on the door ringing in the dark gloom of the coming storm. Sam walked over and sat across from him.

"Hey, Sam," he said. Sam nodded.

"Well?" Larry asked.

"Yep. It happened again," he said quietly. "Except this time, Buster was there," he said.

Larry lifted his eyes and looked out over the room. No one seemed to be paying any attention.

"Buster?" Larry said. Buster was the old hound dog that lived under the porch outside.

"Yeah. He was following Mo."

"Did anybody touch the door?"

"No," Sam said. He sat back. "How long till Mo gets off?"

"Any minute," Larry said. He sat back too. Sarah walked over with his coffee.

"There you go, hon. You want anything, Sam?"

The wind had picked up by the time Mo joined them. The three sat around the table, not saying anything for awhile.

"Ok," Larry said at last, "Let's go over it again."

"Again?" asked Sam.

"Got a better idea?" Larry asked. He shrugged. "Then I'll start. Stop me if I miss anything," he said. Mo nodded and Sam leaned forward as Larry began to describe the dream one more time.

"It begins with a siren somewhere. Now, we all think it's a fire siren, but we're not sure. Then we realize we're standing somewhere, which turns out to be a hallway. We start to see each other. Last night Buster appears for the first time, but only for you two, not me. The first dream only had Sam and Me, then Mo, now Buster too," He said. They nodded.

"Now I've been wondering. How many other people are having this dream that we don't know about?" he said.

"Wouldn't they be in the dream?" Mo asked.

"They might, but what if they're having the same dream, but separate from us?" he said. Sam shrugged. "I mean, has anyone been acting unusual?" he said.

"I've been looking around, and I kind of asked my folks if they'd been sleeping alright, but no one seems to be going through this but us."

"But we haven't shared it with anyone else. Right?" asked Larry. Sam and Mo shook their heads.

"Wait a minute," Mo said. "I was talking to myself last night when I cleaned up, and Buster was sittin' there in the kitchen the whole time. You think that's why he was in the dream?"

Larry and Sam looked at him.

"That's the stupidest thing I've ever heard. He's a dog, for cryin' out loud!" Larry said. Sam grinned.

"Come on, Larry, like any of this makes any sense," he said. Larry shrugged.

"Well, whatever. I just think that's the stupidest thing I've ever heard."

"It was just an idea," Mo said, sitting back.

"Let's talk about something else. How about the door?" Sam said.

"Okay. Let's talk about the door. I think I got closer to it last night. I woke up in a sweat, and my sheets were all undone like I'd been rolling around in my sleep," Larry said.

"Yeah, it's like it's really hard to reach, like it takes every ounce of energy," Mo said.

"Well, tonight, let's try again," Larry said.



That night the storm pounded the countryside. Wind blew shingles off the roofs and slammed doors closed. Everyone in the small Pennsylvania town was indoors, and most of them fast asleep as the dream began. Slowly at first, and then more clearly, the dream began to unfold. A siren in the distance, and fog, and then the sight of each other. Buster was there, standing near Mo. Mo was in a rodeo outfit, which is how he appeared in the dream every night. Larry was dressed in camouflage BDUs with boots, a military cap and an assault rifle over his shoulder. The rifle was a new addition. Sam looked over at them, dressed this evening as a fireman. They looked at one

In his sleep Larry was sweating. His face was contorted and his eyes were darting around under his closed lids. As he began to twist around the gun he was cradling slipped towards the edge of the bed.

Old Man Cannors sat upright in his bed, his eyes wide open. That wasn't the storm, he said to himself. He got out of bed and turned on the light, shaking the sleep out of his body. Nope, that was a gunshot, he said. He opened his door and looked into the hall. Everything was dark, the wind howling outside. He made his way down the hall towards Larry's room.

[illegible]

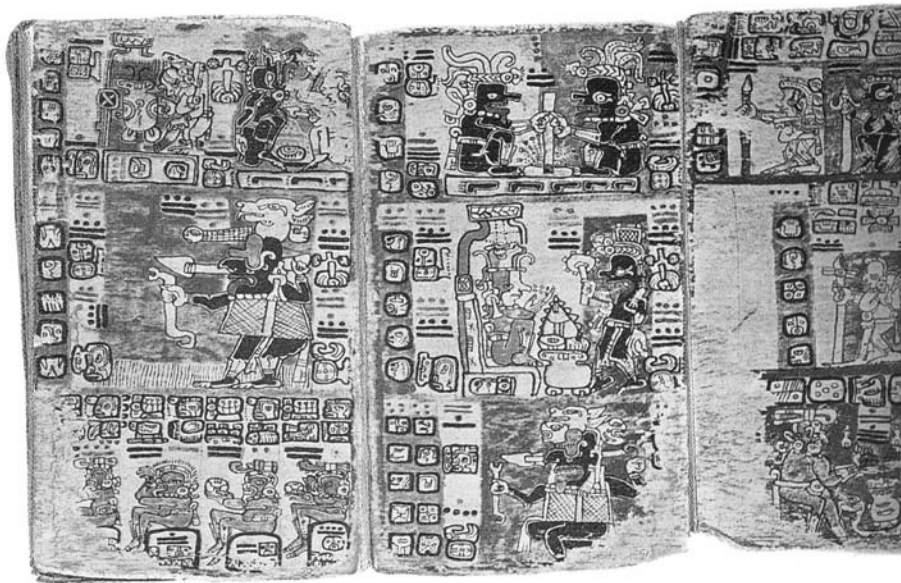
BIS

SETTING: ANCIENT EGYPT (OCCULT)

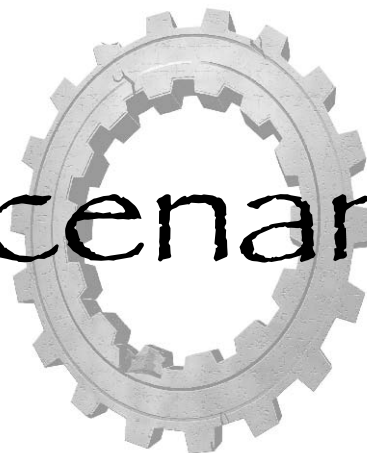
It was lonely being dead. It took Bis years to even know that she had died. She looked up one day from the river bank where she was washing her clothes and realized she'd been doing that same load of laundry for a hundred and three years. She was oddly unaffected by this revelation, and wandered back to her home — dazed but somewhat nonplused. Her house was gone, and the village was a strange new town. The people there were all different, and even their skin and hair were a shade she wasn't used to. What concerned Bis the most was that she had no purpose anymore. Her mother wasn't there to care for, her brothers were gone, and the small garden was paved over. She watched these strange people for a long time, until eventually she began to know them. She learned their stories and their lives, and listened to their songs and their prayers. She began to care for them, sharing their hopes and anxiously awaiting the outcome of their many ordeals.

It was the cats that noticed her first. They would swish their tails and their ears would go back, and after awhile she couldn't go anywhere without the cats hissing. Flames began to flicker and dough wouldn't rise when she was around. It broke her heart, but Bis began to stay away from these people she had come to love. Her presence wasn't welcome and she couldn't stand to make them unhappy.

She went to the river, her eyes red with tears. She was ready to throw herself into the water and drown when it all came back to her. That was how she had died the first time, over a hundred years before. She stood there and felt herself melt away, the knowledge of her death both sad and soothing. There was something she had missed, some part of dying she had failed to finish, and now at long last she was on her way.



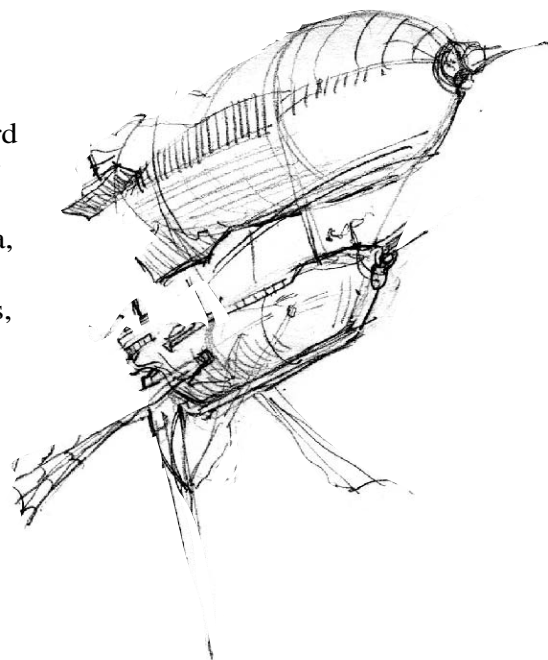
Scenario



The Airship Murders

Airship Murders is a murder mystery that takes place aboard an airship (dirigible). The cast and crew are sailing on their way to Field Station LaReine in the near-arctic wastes known as the Shelf. While flying over the cold northern sea, people aboard the airship Gaillard begin to die. At first the deaths are blamed on accidents, but as the adventure begins, there is little doubt that a killer is aboard.

Though designed for use with *Maelstrom Storytelling*, this scenario can easily be translated to a number of other games (by making the Gaillard a sea ship, or running it aboard a 1930's zeppelin, for instance). A few tips on conversion: Diodet can easily translate to 1870s France, with the Tallenits being the bourgeois class.



Story Setup

There are a thousand reasons to motivate the players to board this ship. In a 1930's setting it can be a trip among the rich and famous on a maiden flight across the Atlantic. A sub-plot can even be added so that the players are pursuing one of the other passengers, which leads them to book passage on the Gaillard. A spy-thriller might have them waiting for a rendezvous aboard the ship from an unknown fellow passenger. Ultimately, as long as the players get on the ship, the rest of the details will take care of themselves.

As a *Maelstrom* story, there are a number of reasons to travel to F.S. LaReine: The players could be assigned jobs there, either in the military or as merchants, hired hands, bodyguards, or even miners. If this adventure is set in the middle of an ongoing storyline, then some part of the story could take the players to the Shelf. Alternatively, the destination could be changed as long as the route involves cold weather and a freezing sea.

Though any sort of role can work in this story, bringing Newcomers in at the beginning would need a little more fleshing out – but as long as they make it aboard, the story will get them involved on its own. Because of the separation of crew and passengers, this scenario works best if all of the players play passengers rather than crew.

One option is to have the players create their characters privately with the narrator; this can help create the impression that the killer may be one of the players.

It's best to run this adventure using active role-playing mixed with downtime scenes to cover the events in between:

Active Scenes: The narrator frames the scene (such as the opening breakfast) and the scene is played out normally.

Downtime Scenes: In between the main scenes the narrator asks general questions such as "what does your character do during the night?" and resolves these events with short answers and/or a Short Tests. Any important scenes that crop up during Downtime can be played out fully if needed.

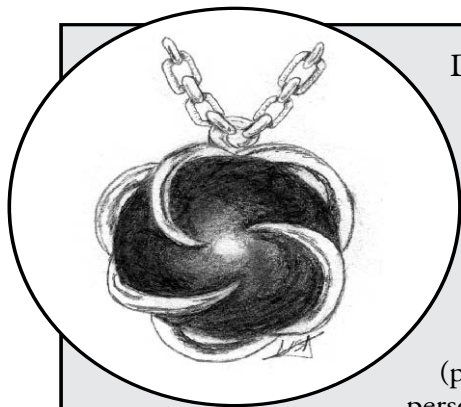
This pattern allows the story to jump from key scene to key scene like a movie, instead of drudging on during the uneventful times between the murders and the discoveries made during the investigation.

The Killer

The killer is the second mate, a Diodeian man named Jakard. Disillusioned with the rewards of his life as second mate and continually passed over for promotion to first mate, he has agreed to deliver the ship to the pirates of the Blue N'Tasque in return for a large sum of money. He is a seasoned sky sailor with sound navigational skills, as well as two terms in the Queen's Navy.

The Murders: Jakard is working with Minas Day (the cook). Jakard is doing the killing and Minas is planting evidence and confirming alibis. The original plan was to poison the entire crew a day off the Shelf, but things got a little messy (see Sequence of Events, below).

The Poison: Jakard may still try to poison everyone. Unbeknownst to Minas and him, the garlicky bread served with the meals to the passengers has Temil as one of its ingredients, which will counter-act the poison if digested at the same time. If the poison is used, it could kill everyone aboard except the passengers and the killers. In fact, one way to run this story as an action thriller instead of a mystery is to omit the discovery of the poison by Stevons and begin just after the whole crew has died.



DREAMSTONE

The stone itself is a small black pearl. The main power of this item is its ability to mask the identity of the bearer. When worn, the bearer is shielded from "scrying" powers, dreams, and even casual observers. Unless clearly seen with their own eyes, people must roll on Spirit vs. Hard or else they will not be able to recall the identity of the bearer (partial failure) or will remember the wrong person (failure / complete failure). When remembering the wrong person, their mind will transpose the identity of the person they would expect it to be onto the actual bearer. The other power of the item is to plant a dream in someone's head (Spirit based bid) — the target must be in the general vicinity. The Dreamstone adds the Spirit Descriptor "Ephemeral" to the bearer while worn.

The Dreamstone Option

(The Dreamstone is optional — narrators can use it if it suits their story). The presence of the Dreamstone can make the mystery harder to solve. The stone itself is a small black pearl that Jakard wears around his neck. The main power of this item is its ability to mask the identity of the bearer. When worn, the bearer is shielded from scrying powers, dreams and even casual observers. Unless clearly seen with their own eyes, people must roll on Spirit against Hard or else they will not be able to recall the identity of the bearer (partial failure) or will remember the wrong person (failure / complete failure). When remembering the wrong person, their mind will transpose the identity of the person they would expect it to be onto the actual bearer. This means someone just glimpsing the killer as he runs away from a murder may think it's the person they suspect the most. Keep track of what the players are thinking and give them that information if they fail against the Dreamstone. The other power of the item is to plant a dream in someone's head. As long as the victim is asleep and on the ship, Jakard can use the Dreamstone to give his own planned dreams to people (victim rolls on Spirit vs. Hard).

Sequence of Events:

The narrator should be familiar with the crew, the ship and the general day-to-day activities that take place in order to plan the actions of the killer. The adventure opens at Breakfast on the fourth day, just after the first murder has been discovered. The actions of the players will determine what happens next. The events listed here are only suggested and can be used if the players do not become immediately involved in solving the murders.

The cause of death in parentheses is the "official" cause given by the captain, which become more and more ludicrous as the game continues. The game begins on Day 4 after Murder 1 has been committed.

Murder 1 (Day 3) (Overboard)

The ship's steward, Stevons, found the bottles of poison hidden among the supplies and, in a fit of poor luck, chose to tell Jakard about it. Jakard knocked him out and threw the body out the kitchen trash hatch later that night. At first shift the next day, Stevons was noticed to be missing. It is assumed that he fell overboard.

Clues:

- There was no scream heard
- The night watch never saw him go above-decks
- Stevons rarely walked above-decks
- Stevons was not a hard drinker or a reckless man

Opening (Day 4): Breakfast in Aft Hall

The ship has been gliding peacefully through the sky for three days. The weather has been sunny and clear, and for the past day only the ocean has stretched out before you in every direction. The first of the cold climate ahead was felt last night, and in the morning there was frost on the windows of your cabins. The crew seemed somewhat agitated as you made your way to the Aft Room for breakfast, and, for the first time in your three days aboard, the captain is late.

The story opens here. The narrator can describe the other passengers and the captain, and the game can start. The first thing to point out, if the players ask, is that the person serving them is not the regular steward. If needed, Sans Genoux, Manton or Viltow can begin asking the captain why everyone seems so pre-occupied.

The purpose of this scene is get to know the cast and set the atmosphere. As soon as this is accomplished and the players have nothing else to do, cut to a downtime scene and ask them what (if anything) they do before the next scene (Scene 2).

Scene 2 (Day 4): Smoking Room

The after-dinner gathering takes place in the smoking room. If the players have not heard anything, the other passengers can throw in some gossip, as well as some of the clues from the first murder. From this point on the story can be played by ear with the discovery of each consecutive murder heightening the sense of fear among the passengers and crew. As the number of murders increase, so should the level of fear and suspicion.

Murder 2 (Day 4) (Slipped and fell)

Distraught over killing someone, Minas went to see Jakard in his cabin at night. Crew member 5 (Chase) overheard them and Jakard caught up with her and killed her in the cargo area. There was someone in the kitchen so he sneaked her body to the icy above-decks to throw her overboard. He thought the night watch had spotted him so he ditched the body behind the auxiliary steering house.

Clues:

- Chase had bruises on her body
- There were sounds of a scuffle in the cargo area
- The night watch never saw Chase go above-decks

Murders 3 & 4 (Day 5) (Overboard, Suicide)

While above-decks, crew member 4 (Mosey) noticed the cuts on Jakard's arm and asked too many questions. Jakard pushed Mosey overboard. Crew member 3 (Rand) heard the scream and ran up to investigate. Jakard shot him with the musket from the steering house, put the gun in Rand's dead hands and climbed down the side of the ship to the kitchen trash hatch where Minas let him in.

Clues:

- The wound is in the side of the head
- The frost might reveal signs of a scuffle
- Rand was a seemingly happy man and not a candidate for suicide

Murder 4 (Day 5) (Axe to the Head)

Murder 5 happens like this: Crew member 2 (Bork) tells Minas that he believes Jakard is the killer. She hits him in the head with the fire axe in the galley. Before she can hide the body, someone arrives and she flees. The body is best discovered by a player, which makes them a suspect as soon as they are found with the body.

Clues:

- Bork's voice was heard talking casually to someone just before he died
- The kitchen had a pot boiling, but the cook was not there

Murder 5 (Day 6) (Heart Attack)

At this point, Jakard and Minas will try to poison everyone. Carver can die as well unless it suits the story to keep him alive. The last crew member (Jillian) dies here.

Clues:

- Minas and Jakard don't eat their meal
- Minas and Jakard are surprised to see everyone alive
- The poison bottle is sitting on the kitchen counter

The HMBV Gaillard

Her Majesty's Ballasted Vessel Gaillard is a new ship commissioned by the Queen's Line for commercial use. It serves mainly as a long range cargo vessel, but the passenger quarters are opulently appointed and designed for the upper classes.

A frigate, it runs 84 cubits (about 140 feet) in length and is 24 cubits wide (40 feet) at its widest point. There are 3 decks below with most of the public areas on the third deck. The above-decks are a wide expanse atop the ship beneath the dirigible above.

Above-decks: Rigged to the dirigible above, the above-decks have a railing and an auxiliary steering house. For all of this story, the above-decks are covered in frost. It is windy above-decks and sounds don't travel below very well (see Murders 3 & 4).

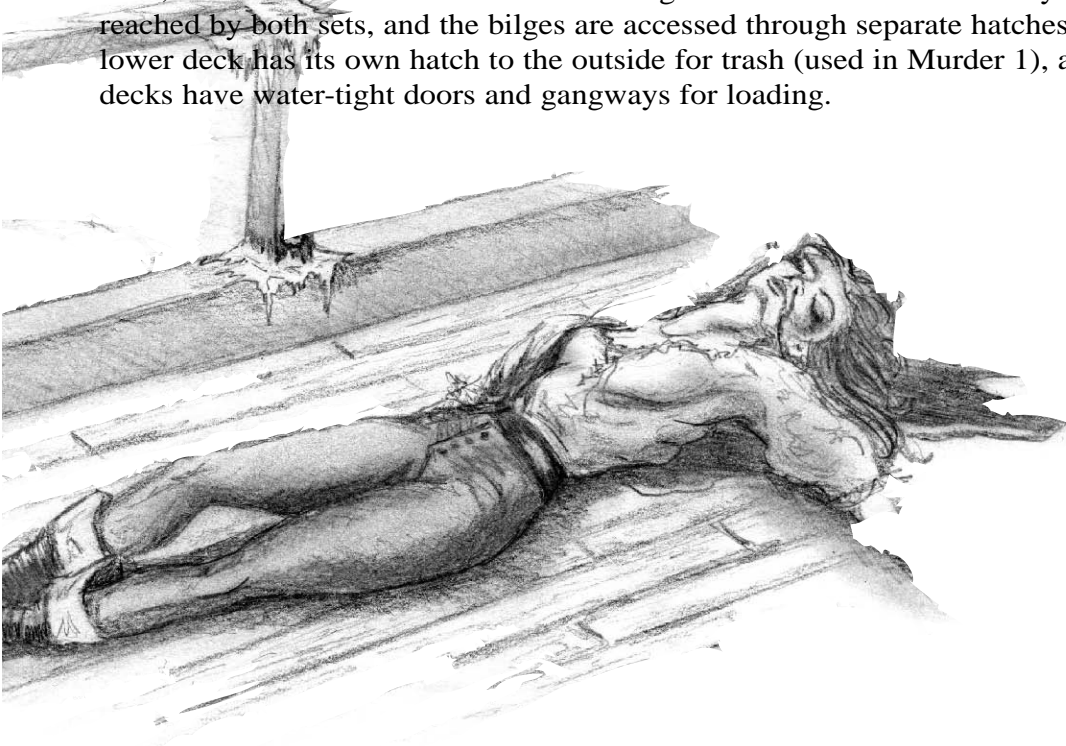
Top Deck: This is the passenger deck. The rear houses a beautiful cabin (the Aft Room) with high glass windows affording a view of the sky on three sides. The cabins are along the sides and the Smoking Room is a small social room with a bar in the prow and small windows to either side of the sloping walls.

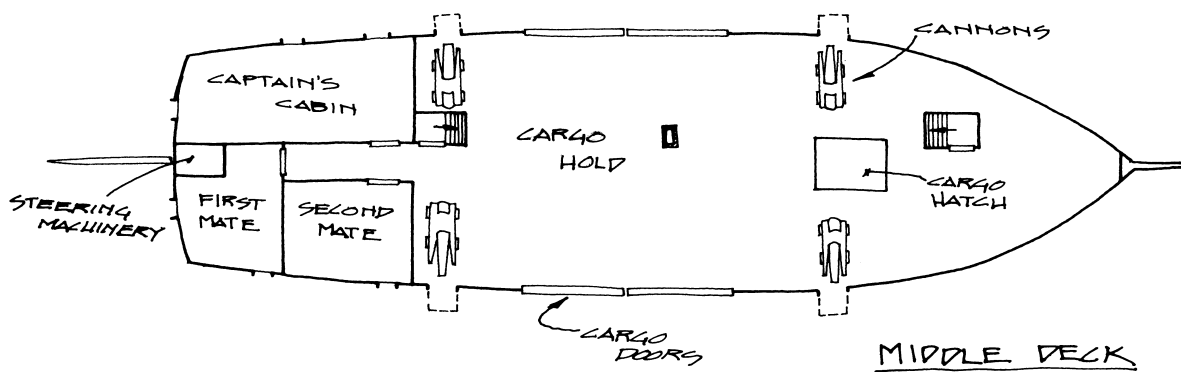
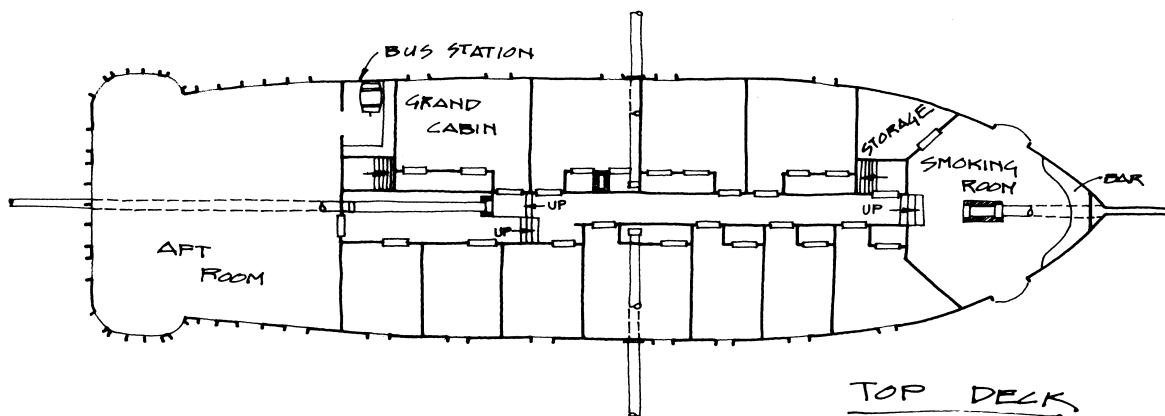
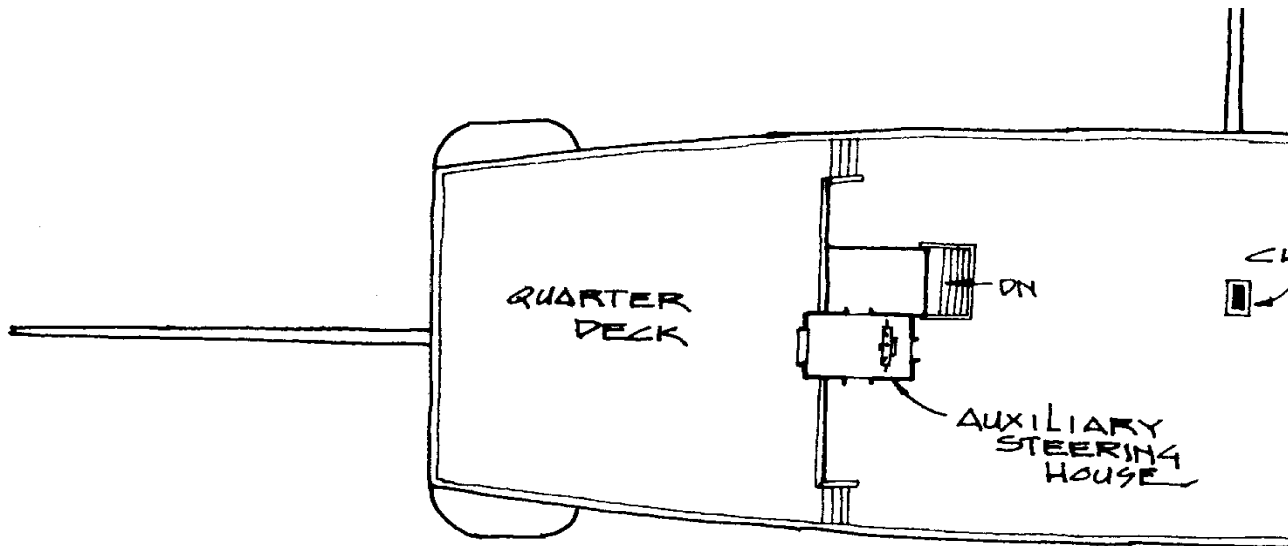
Middle Deck: This is the cargo deck. Most of the deck is open and holds supplies for the field station (grains, cloth, liquor, spools of wire, machine parts, black powder, etc). The four cannons are fitted on this deck, but are usually in a stored state that takes the crew 10 minutes to prepare for use (airships are rarely ever attacked at high altitude). The captain has quarters in the rear, along with a cabin for each mate.

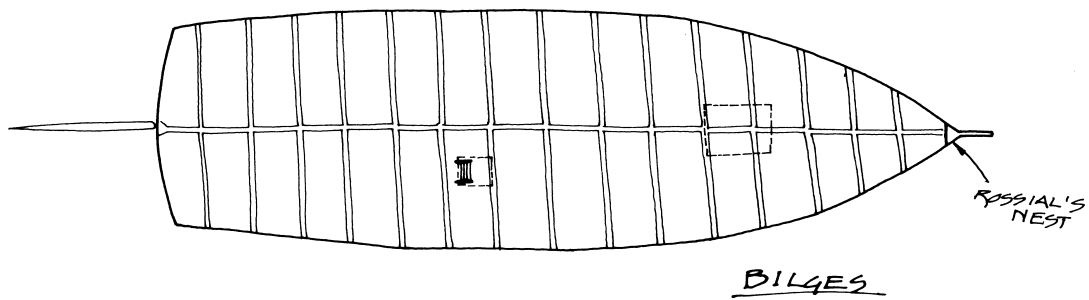
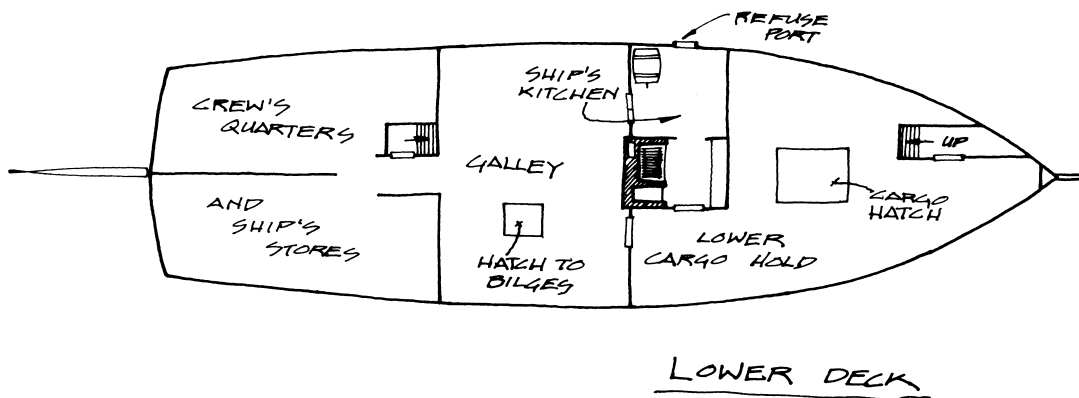
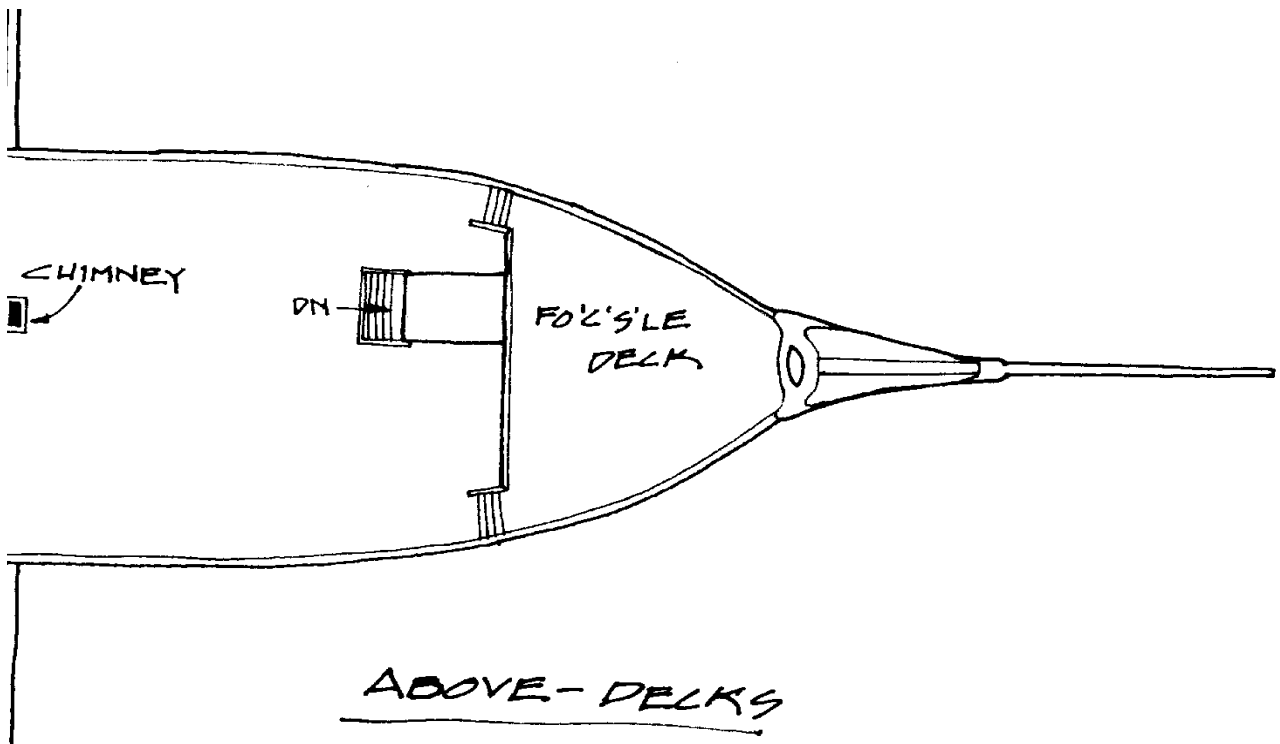
Lower Deck: The crew deck. The rear has two communal cabins for the crew. The kitchen and galley are in front of that. The forward area is additional cargo area.

Bilges: Equipped with pumps and water-tight for rare water-landings, the bilges of the Gaillard are dry and serve as a limited cargo area. The rossials (see p.118) have made their warren in the forward area behind the far wall. The ceiling is only 5 feet at the mid point, and there is little room to get around, and plenty of places to hide.

Getting around on the ship is done through two sets of stairs that lead to most decks, one in the rear (Aft Stairs) and the other in front (Fore Stairs). The rear stairs do not open onto the passenger deck, and the front stairs are reached through a door marked "Crew Only." The above-decks are reached by both sets, and the bilges are accessed through separate hatches. The kitchen on the lower deck has its own hatch to the outside for trash (used in Murder 1), and the middle and lower decks have water-tight doors and gangways for loading.







There are muskets and two pistols (for the mates) in a locked arms chest. There is always a loaded musket in the above-decks wheel room as well. Only the mates and captain have keys to the locker, and Jakard will avoid using guns (except in Murder 4) both because of the noise and the fact that everyone knows he is one of 3 people with the key.

There is always someone above-decks. At night, there is one person (the night-watch) who sits in the auxiliary steering house and makes occasional rounds.

The Cast

All characters have a list of possible motives, none of which are necessarily true, but can come out through gossip, rumors or the false dreams of the Dreamstone.

The passengers are all optional. If there are four or more players, then some (or all) of the passengers may not be necessary. They require more work from the narrator, but they serve to throw suspicion, doubt and fear around. They also prevent the scenario from degenerating into a simple case of players tracking down a predator.

Though the Cultural Affinities may vary, it is assumed that everyone speaks a common language (Diodeian Word), and over the Cold Sea everyone is allowed to use their base die. The stats below are simplified for ease of use and the narrator can elaborate as needed.

CAPTAIN MONIQUE ERINOVA - CAPTAIN

Short, as Diodeians go, with brown hair, green eyes and a perpetually crisp captain's uniform. She has a scar on her nose and left cheek from a fight with a member of the Caphir's Guard. Mind 3/Matter 3/Spirit 1 – Navigation (strong), Sailing (mild), Pistols (mild), Cannons (mild), Naval Tactics (weak), Etiquette (mild), Leadership (mild), Small Talk (strong).

Monique is an aristocratic woman who served a term with the royal navy before moving to the private sector. Her family easily obtained her a good place with the Queen's Line, and after a few years she found herself commanding the Gaillard. She eats all three meals with the passengers and will spend her time in small-talk. Until things get dangerous she will not divulge her suspicions with the passengers, and will assure them that no one is in danger.

The captain trusts Carver de Baine completely (he saved her life once) and will make good use of him. She will under no circumstances believe that Carver is guilty.

Motives: The captain is losing her mind. The crew have all noticed it. Her family has a long history of insanity and her grandfather killed his entire staff on a hunting trip. She has begun to talk to inanimate objects, plot courses that would take them off all known maps, and issue irrational orders. The crew all believe that Carver de Baine is covering it up and doing her job for her. Or she is paranoid and delusional, always expecting people to be spies for the Caphir, and in the past she killed two of the Caphir's men in duels. Or she has a pact with an evil god that needs blood sacrifices. Or she is using the ship to smuggle illicit materials for personal gain, and has to kill anyone who finds her out.

CARVER DE BAINE - MATE

A dark-skinned man who never smiles. He has a weathered face and a body like a barrel. His uniform is the only one that isn't always perfect and he usually only opens his mouth to yell at the crew. Mind 1/Matter 4/Spirit 1/Chaos 2 – Sailing (strong), Fistfights (strong), Discipline (strong), Navigation (weak), Swords (mild), Pistols & Muskets (mild), Cannons (strong).

Though universally hated for his tyrannical manner of running the ship, Carver is a fine mate and does an excellent job. His only friend is the captain, whose life he saved during a shrike attack in port. He is extremely loyal to her and the Queen's Line company.

Motives: Carver murdered his last crew on the sea-sailing ship HMS Mercure when they were adrift after a storm. He will do anything to cover this up. Or he is a foreigner, bent on the destruction of Diodel, working for Dacartha. Or he is insane, being of Udaian blood, "and everyone knows how crazy they are."

JAKARD - SECOND MATE

Like the captain, he is fairly short as Diodeians go. Not overly attractive, either, with bad hearing from when he nearly drowned. Mind 3/Matter2/Spirit 2/Chaos1 – Sailing (mild), Sneaking (strong), Eavesdropping (weak), Navigation (weak), Swords (strong), Pistols & Muskets (mild), Devious Planning (mild).

Jakard is not actually deaf, he just pretends to be to get out of work and eavesdrop more easily.

Motives (These motives are ones the crew might think of): Hates the Queen's Line for not promoting him, or has had fights with the crew and has threatened to kill a few of them, or he is a saboteur for the Geregonians, or he is in love with the captain and is insane with anguish at being rebuffed (this motive can be used for half the crew just for fun).

VILTOW KARLOVICH - TALLENT BUSINESSMAN, FORMER OFFICER FOR THE DRAGOONS

An older man, Viltow is soft-spoken and fond of cigars. He has graying hair, poor vision and is easily winded. He has the height of most Diodeians, but his skin is lighter. Mind 3/Matter 1/Spirit 3/Chaos 1 – Business (mild), Military Affairs (mild), Etiquette (strong), Great Stories About the Old Days (mild), Cigar Smoking (mild), Politics (weak)

Viltow is a respected man of affairs. He served in the Dragoons with distinction, and is still referred to as Major Viltow by some people, including the captain. He adopted the second name of Karlovich after he joined the Trade Alliance. (Viltow is so above-suspicion that — to anyone who's read a dogbound — he has to be the killer.)

Motives: Viltow has sold out to the Trade Alliance and plans to sabotage the ship to further their complex plots. Or he is a sleeping Stranger, and is about to awaken, killing everyone in the process. Or he is simply mad.

MANTON - KENRATHAN GLOBE-HOPPER, PIRATE WANNA-BE

Large tiger-striped Kenrathan who dresses in loose-fitting vests and pantaloons. Seems to carry two pocketwatches and sports a beret. Mind 1/Matter 4/Spirit 2 - Traveling (mild), Fistfighting (mild), Maps & Charts (weak), Intimidation (weak), Storyteller (mild), Languages (weak).

Manton is a large, cat-like creature known as a Kenrathan. Though originally from Arn Muhr in the Veldt, he has traveled all over the world. He has a Gift Affinity in Safe Travel which has kept him out of harm's way for the most part. In the last year he has become fascinated with piracy. Though not a killer or criminal by nature, he harbors dreams of becoming a pirate.

Motives: Manton has the "wild blood" – a strange, semi-religious phenomenon of his people that takes over their souls. In this state, they become possessed of evil dream-spirits. Or Manton is a saboteur working for the Geregonians and/or the Dacarthans.

SANS GENOUX - DARIG BUSINESSMAN, ON POLITICAL ASSIGNMENT FOR THE KHAZA

A long, light-scaled Darig, Sans Genoux is almost five and a half cubits long (9 feet) though his thin body makes him look small. He wears a silver monocle that never leaves his eye and dresses in a vest and breeches. Mind 5/Spirit 1 – Business (strong), Bribery (mild), Etiquette (mild), Small Talk (strong), Mendacity (mild), Travel (weak), Languages (weak).

Though Diodeians generally despise non-humans, the Caphir's secret police aren't above pragmatism. Sans Genoux fled Springtide when it fell to Geregonian rule, and his dislike of Geregon drove him to Diodel. An intelligent and greedy man, he found many ways to exploit the backward business laws of the city. The Khaza arrested him and gave him a pardon in return for information. He

is presently being sent to LaReine to infiltrate the Union Miners Alliance. He makes cash whenever he turns in useful information, however, so he has an interest in just about anything illegal or insurgent in nature.

Motives: Sans Genoux is a spy for the Geregonians. Or he is a smuggler, trying to kill off anyone who has found his illicit cargo. Or he works for the Shroud and is furthering their complex plots. Or he hates all humans, and is trying to rid the world of their impurity, one by one.

MINAS DAY - THE COOK

Thin Diodeian woman, more cute than pretty, long dark hair and usually wears her white cook's apron over her blue uniform. Mind 2/Matter 1/Chaos 1 – Cooking (mild), Sailing (weak), Lockpicking (weak)

Minas is a young woman with no family. She took a position with the Queen's Line to get out of the city. For no good reason, she fell in love with Jakard (love is a strange thing) and has been able to put her morals behind her and try a new life on the run with him. Most of the crew know she has a thing for Jakard, but they all assume it's just an unrequited crush.

Motives (These motives are ones the crew might think of): She is a Pulmite fundamentalist, killing people for their sins. Or she's in the pay of the Geregonians, trying to destroy the realm. Or she's not human, she's something else altogether.

THE CREW

In addition to the steward (Stevons), the cook, the mates and the captain, there are 5 other crew members aboard the Gaillard. They are all Diodeians of mixed gender. Their personalities can be developed further, but their primary use is a body count.

Crew List

Captain Erinova (see above)
First Mate De Baine (see above)
Second Mate Jakard (see above)
Cook Minas Day (see above)
Steward Stevons (dead)
Chase
Mosey
Rand
Bork
Jillian

They are Diodeians with dark hair and eyes, dressed in clean starched blue uniforms. All have Sailing (weak to mild), Cannons (weak), and Swords (weak to mild), and a few have Pistols & Muskets (weak).

If you need a random method to determine what a crew member may have witnessed, roll a six sided die during questioning. If the number rolled + the number of murders is 7 or higher, then the crew member has some information to offer (choose from the clues of the murder in question or the motives lists).

THE ROSSIALS (see MST p.92 for more on rossials)

Like most ships, the rossials see and hear everything. None of them are of the talking variety. The warren is located in the prow of the bilges and is inaccessible to anyone larger than a cat. If the players have any way to communicate with the rossials, they will inform Mott (the rossial leader) and he will send scouts to watch the player(s) in question carefully. Unless the players have a means of conveying real information to and from the rossials, this option won't get them very far. It will, however, mean that at any given time the player(s) who communicated to the rossials will be watched, and the rossials will shriek if anyone attempts to harm them (the rossials could misinterpret human behavior, taking a kiss as an attack, etc).

Catching the Killer

Give out clues as often as needed to keep the story moving, but don't give too much away: The essence of this scenario is to keep the players guessing. If the game slows down, throw in another clue! If the players catch Jakard, the story can either end there or it can take a variety of new twists:

The murder sequence should adjust to the actions of the players, and Jakard might well try to kill a PC if they're on his trail. Narrators should feel free to change any element of this scenario.

If the captain can be convinced of someone's guilt, she will order them chained up in the bilges to await trial back in Diodet. If Jakard is chained up, then he will arrange for Minas Day to plant incriminating evidence on another suspect and hope to be freed. If this fails, he will arrange for Minas to murder someone (anyone) in order to prove his innocence (if a murder happens while he's chained up, he assumes he'll be exonerated). If this fails, Minas will poison the entire crew and free Jakard.

If Minas is also caught, and the Dreamstone option is being used, it can make everyone dream new "evidence" - dreams of different or conflicting events. Additionally, a storm can come and toss the ship about enough for Jakard to get free. During the storm Jakard would attempt to kill as many people as he can while the crew is busy keeping the ship aloft: This can lead to a climactic finale, complete with gunfights and thunderstorm!

If Jakard is killed, then Minas could continue the plan. If both are killed, then the mystery can either be solved or the Dreamstone could allow Jakard's spirit to possess someone else on the ship. Conversely, if Jakard dies and the players are still uncertain how everything happened, the Dreamstone might show the real events in a shared dream.

If a twist is needed or a new challenge seems fitting, a shift can catch the ship and send it somewhere else. Airships have a knack for adhering to stable magnetic lines and are less prone to getting lost than sea vessels, but nothing in the Maelstrom is ever immune to the Storm.

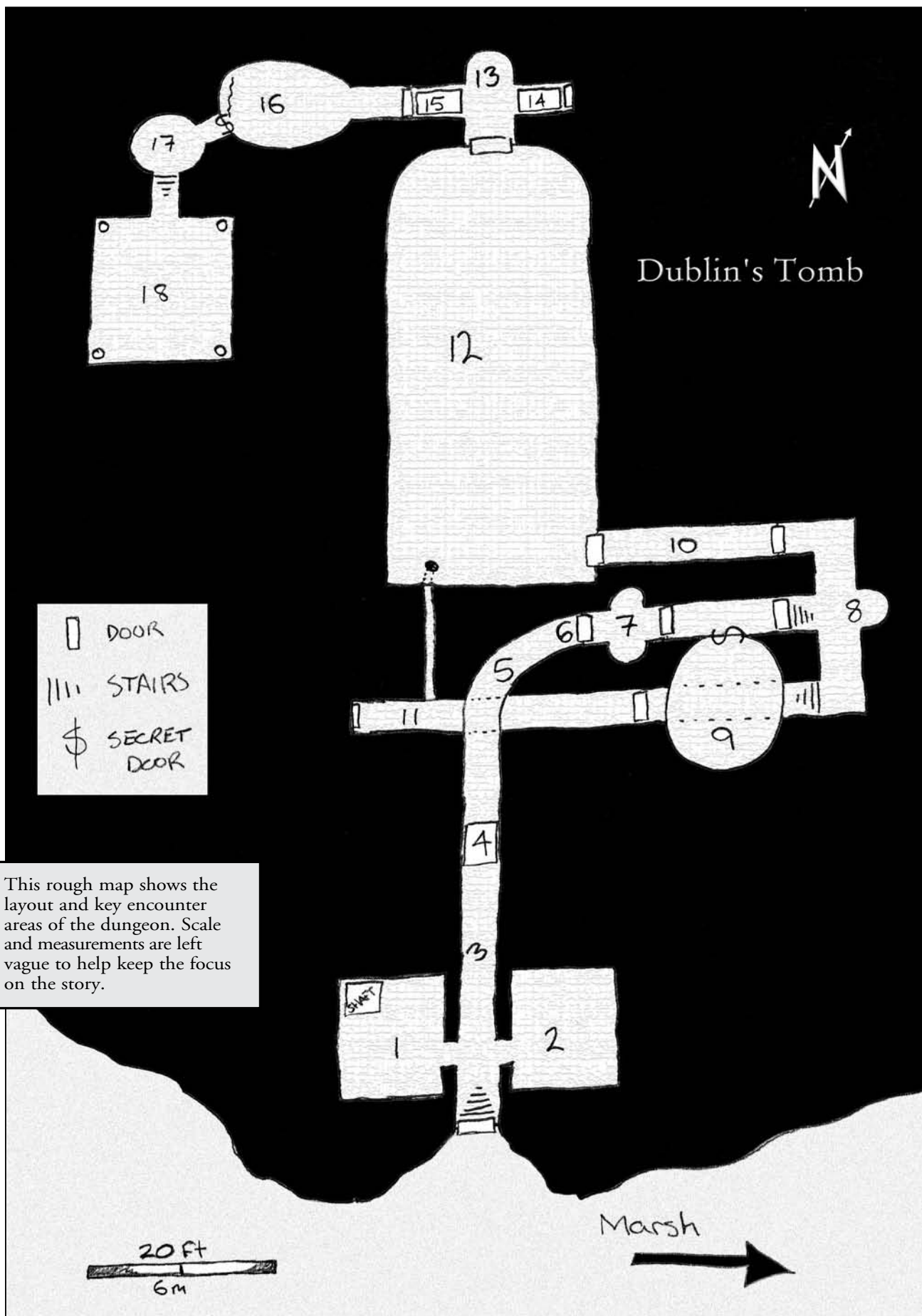
Resolution

The story can end when the murders are solved, but there are many ways to continue the story. Even if he is successfully captured, the adventure can continue on to his trial or an investigation into the Dreamstone. The Blue N'Iasque could try to capture the ship by force as well (for a climactic battle in the skies), or the players could try to catch or follow Jakard's contact in Lost Rite and infiltrate the pirates. All of these stories can be blended into other genres as well and the tone can range from mystery, action or even horror.

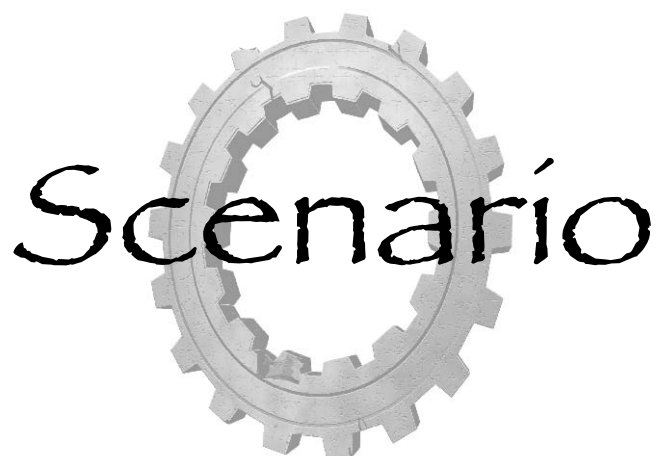
If the era is changed to one with radios or other means of communicating with the outside world, Jakard might sabotage it — the scenario works best if the setting is isolated from the rest of the world with no way to confirm information or radio for help.

If players are set to suspect one another, it helps to create their characters privately and give them secret goals and agendas. During the game narrators can pass notes to certain players to help fuel suspicion and keep everyone off balance.

Ideally the crime will be solved at the end of the session. If the players aren't anywhere near solving the crime by the end of the evening, either find a good spot to stop and pick up next session or accelerate the action — Jakard and Minas could decide to go ahead and poison everyone, which would narrow the range of suspects to the passengers, the captain and the two killers.



This rough map shows the layout and key encounter areas of the dungeon. Scale and measurements are left vague to help keep the focus on the story.



Scenario

Dublin's Tomb

Dublin's Tomb is a dungeon scenario designed for high fantasy stories. It can be adjusted to fit most styles of play, and even used in a horror setting. The scenario is designed to challenge a small group of players (3-5) with a little salt under their belts (30 to 40 points each). For fantasy games we also recommend adding 2 levels of Out to Health Levels (resulting in *Healthy*, *Injured*, *Out*, *Out* and *Dead*).

This is a straight-forward dungeon crawl designed to introduce new players as well as illustrate how to use Story Engine in a traditional dungeon setting.

If this scenario is being used as part of a larger story or ongoing game, narrators can easily adjust the regional information, history and cash values as necessary.

Story Setup

"Some ghosts are meant to haunt you. The days I worked with Dublin are like screams waking me from my sleep. I think we killed no less than thirty men through those years, and the killing didn't stop there: there were women and children too. Dublin did the worst of it, while the rest of us might well have let folks go once we got what we came for. In the end he got what he deserved, or so I've always thought. In these cold years since I've done my best to forget it all, but with age come regrets and a need to absolve myself.

"The end is as good a place to start as any. We chose the darkest night of the month to make our way up to Switch Downs, and after skirting the swamp we found ourselves at the old burial mound. I've never known whose tomb it was, some king or general from a hundred years back. People had been there before, and the stone slab that sealed it lay on its side. We all looked at ourselves then, and only Dublin showed no sign of fear. 'What better place to hide our loot?' He had said, and no one had argued. I watched them go in, one by one, and thank the Maker it was me who was chosen to guard the door. What happened inside I'll never know, but as I waited in the cold drizzle that starless night I heard screaming like I've never heard before. My boys put up a fight, that's for sure, but not one of them made it out alive. I ran for my life, and no greed has ever been strong enough to make me go back."

from the journal of Pir Gorge

The “adventure hook” for this scenario is rooted in the journal. Somehow the players get hold of a page from Pir Gorge’s journal with the two paragraphs above. Narrators can either have the players come across it in the same region as Switch Downs, making the tomb easier to find, or the page could have found its way to a far-off land forcing the players to hunt down the location based on the information above.

The local communities around Switch Downs have a certain amount of common knowledge concerning the tomb, Dublin and the rest as follows:

- Everyone in the region knows the location of Switch Downs
- Most everyone remembers the rough times 50 years back when bandits roamed the countryside
- Many people remember the name of Dublin and his band of cutthroats, at least by reputation
- Many people have heard about the tomb in the downs, and the stories involving the ghost of an ancient king buried there: “*on cold nights you can hear his moans across the marsh*”
- Some people may remember Pir Gorge (who died a few years back), though almost no one knows he was part of Dublin’s Gang
- A few people have seen the burial mound, but no one has been inside. They may have heard stories about people “*going in, but never coming out.*”

It should be hard for the players to recruit any locals to help them investigate the tomb, but with enough incentives they could hire people to help get them there and carry equipment, but no one will want to go inside.

If players spend time learning about the tomb, we generally recommend that their efforts get rewarded. If they’re creative and/or playing out their character’s personalities, narrators should feel free to improvise more information – e.g. finding the grave of Pir Gorge and digging him up may reveal more clues (like another page from his journal). Sometimes, however, players may get overly cautious and research *everything*, or simply follow worthless leads or false rumors.

THE LOCAL HERO

Jerish Dain was a constable of one of the neighboring towns a generation back. Not everyone believed him, but he claimed to have killed Dublin and his gang. His son Kett will proudly show off the mass grave on the edge of town where Dublin and his thugs were buried. The truth, however, is that when no one had heard from Dublin and his thugs for awhile, Jerish and his two fellow constables (Art Meers and Poll Anding) concocted the story of their heroic fight with the gang. There had in fact been a fight, just not with the right people: The constables had challenged some vagrants on the edge of town, and either the vagrants drew weapons or the constables murdered them, but in the end the vagrants were dead. The constables then decided to embellish and make themselves out to be heroes (Jerish was up for election as mayor). Poll Anding is still alive and if confronted with the story and prodded enough may confess, blaming it all on Jerish. The mass grave has four bodies, all human men, with no belongings.

Narrators can include this to add flavor and increase the challenge of finding the tomb, but like other false leads it can be skipped if it works best to get the players straight to the dungeon.

The Tomb

Although any sort of encounter can be added during the trip to the burial mound, this adventure begins at the opening of the tomb itself. The italicized descriptions of the tomb can be read to the players if need be, but we recommend that the narrator familiarize themselves with the adventure and use their own words.

Doors: Unless stated otherwise, the doors in the dungeon are all iron bound oak doors, rotting and rusting and easy to kick open or break through. They all have locks, which are Easy to pick and all the ones before the Boat Chamber (Spot 12) are already picked.

Secret Doors: The two secret doors should be Very Hard to find. Narrators shouldn't need to drop hints or offer clues unless the players are at a complete loss. Depending on the style of story, it may be appropriate to have the players come back without finding the real tomb in Spot 18 if they aren't able to discover the secret door.

Monsters: Except for the orks, the monsters in this dungeon are not designed to use Descriptors during encounters. The orks should be allowed to burn up to half their Descriptors. Also remember that monsters all have a base die in addition to their listed Aspect totals.

Entrance: *The burial mound is a raised earthen mound some 20 feet (6 meters) at its tallest and maybe 70 feet (21 meters) wide. It has long since grown over with bracken and bushes, with the roots of a large tree digging into the east side near the marsh. Erosion may have caused the earth around the entrance to give way, and since then looters have broken the stone slab that once sealed the tomb. The entrance can be seen beyond the slab, stretching downward into darkness.*

A small group of orks have made a temporary home of the first two rooms. One of the orks may even be outside, whittling or gathering wood for the fire. They don't usually post a look out, and stay in most of the day. The players will find boot tracks and signs of recent passage if they search around outside, and they may even smell smoke or the charming odor of the orks' makeshift latrine (inside - see Spot 3).

The orks are a bunch of belligerent, carousing murderers (as orks are wont to be) and are content to pillage or hunt at night and spend their days sleeping, drinking or playing cards. They aren't complete idiots, of course, so if faced with an armed group of people they will be open to negotiation (the orks speak a little bit of the local dialect). If the players attack or if the orks feel like they could make quick work of the player characters, the orks will fight hard and well.

Though ill-inclined to help the players, the orks might ask for some cash and then let them pass. The orks fully expect that anyone (including themselves) who goes further into the tomb will never make it back. That doesn't mean they might not hold out hopes of ambushing the group should they return :) The orks will however, if given enough incentive, tell the players a few things about the tomb:

1. Little Sal (Obor's big brother) ventured in a few weeks back and was never heard from again
2. They can hear things moving around past the bend at night
3. They think it's haunted by the spirits of the dead (they hear weeping and moans at night)
4. There's a pit trap at Spot 4
5. There's a shaft in Spot 1 that goes into some strange mist and seems to have no bottom

The Orks: Plato may do most of the talking but Obor is clearly the leader. If fighting they will use swords (Mimis will use her bow if range is a factor). They all have armor (unless surprised during the day) which adds a Health Level. They are used to fighting together and will use the best tactics

the narrator can come up with. The last resort, if losing, is to jump down the shaft in Spot 1. If defeated, the players will find a small stash of food, basic supplies and a crystal flask with a bluish syrupy liquid (if imbibed this liquid will restore a person's full health in a matter of minutes).

Combined Aspect Totals: Mind 4 / Matter 9 / Chaos 4

Obor "a large granite boulder posing as an ork" (Matter 4, Chaos 1, Mild Swords, Strong Brawling)

Mimis "a tough little gal" (Matter 2, Spirit 1, Mind 1, Weak Swords, Mild Bow)

Plato "may possibly be the brightest ork you've ever met" (Matter 1, Mind 3, Chaos 1, Mild Swords, Mild Siege & Warfare Tactics, Mild Classic Literature)

Ak and Jak "they may have once been conjoined" (each - Matter 1, Chaos 1, Weak Swords, Weak Brawling)

Spot 1 "Ork Room"

This small room has the strong smell of an animal's lair. There are beddings for half a dozen people in here scattered around the floor along with chicken bones, clothes and a few weapons. There's a square opening on the floor in the far corner with chicken feet scattered around it.

This room and the other entrance room (Spot 2) were once ceremonial preparation rooms, long since looted. They now serve as the living area for the orks.

This is where the orks have been sleeping. The chicken feet are a superstitious ritual to chase away bad spirits. The shaft goes straight down for almost 20 feet, and with enough light you can see a thick, foggy mist at about that point. This shaft was used to send the old king's bodyguards into their burial room (Spot 9): as each one died over the years the main door was opened and their bodies were slipped into the shaft. Once the last one died, the tomb was sealed and the shaft was supposed to stop working. Anything dropped into the shaft will disappear into the fog and reappear in the middle of Spot 9. If players try to lower something or someone on a rope, the fog will start to slowly change into fire (which is not to say a clever group of players couldn't travel back and forth, but it should be a difficult enterprise).

Spot 2 "Ork Other Room"

This smoky room seems to be serving as a kitchen and living room. There are playing cards on the floor, dice, a makeshift larder, chickens hanging from a rack and a circle of stones for the fire pit.

There's nothing of real interest here. There's some useless loot from nearby farms, like a few dolls, a farmer's hat, a brass doorknob, a weathervane and a scarecrow.

Spot 3 "Latrine"

The hall here is littered with trash, vomit, fresh feces and urine.

This is the ork's makeshift latrine. They thought about using the shaft in Spot 1, but Mimis was convinced it would irk the spirits living there. If the players actually search through the muck, they'll find a gold tooth that one of the ork's managed to swallow and pass through.

Spot 4 "Pit Trap"

This is a pit trap. Players searching for traps should roll on Mind vs. Very Hard to discover it, otherwise it will give way as the first person reaches its midpoint. It's 2 yards long (2 meters) and unless the player rolls on Chaos vs. Hard (or Matter vs. Very Hard) they'll take a tumble onto a spiked floor (1 Health Level for every die they miss it by). Anyone close behind that person makes the same rolls but gains an extra die for each roll. There will be a rumbling sound as the counterweight resets, slowly raising the floor and resetting the trap. Anyone who doesn't climb out quickly will be stuck until the trap is set off again. The bones of two humanoids, a child or

goblin, and a dog or wolf are scattered over the bottom. The orks have already taken anything of value (after Plato discovered the trap by falling in).

Spot 5 “Death to Thine Enemy”

As players reach Spot 5 an ancient spell will take effect. It was designed to harm the followers of the dead king’s enemy (whose symbol was an axe and wolf on a field of blue). Anyone with a wolf or axe symbol on their clothing or armor, or anyone with a blue shirt, tunic, cloak or cape as outerwear will feel suddenly nauseous and roll on Spirit vs. Hard or fall unconscious for an hour. Narrators should feel free to switch out these symbols and replace them with something that would affect some of the characters. A voice will boom: *“Die, followers of evil, whose armies were crushed at the battle of Anselms Way by the right just hand of King Arndred!”* If no one is effected, a faint sense of nausea will be felt by everyone and an unnatural breeze will blow through the hall from ahead.

Spot 6 “Slab Door”

The hall ends in a stone slab door with no handle or hinges. Words are etched into it, and the coat of arms of some noble house is carved below.

The words are in an older language which may or may not be known to the players, and reads *“Behold the Tomb of King Arndred, Hero of Anselm’s Way.”* The coat of arms is an oak tree on a field of red.

The door is a large block of granite. There are chip marks from pick axes and other efforts at opening it. A careful check (Mind vs. Hard) will show scrape marks going from right to left where the door slides. If anyone tries to slide the door to the right, it will slowly open.

Spot 7 “Skeletons”

The hall beyond ends in another door, with an alcove on either wall. Standing in each alcove is a corpse, mostly skeletal, each one missing many fingers and bones. There is a disquieting sound of rustling, like someone crumpling papers.

The rustling comes from the two dead warriors as they animate. These skeletal warriors were once fully armed and armored, and packed a punch. Now they’re a little worse for wear, beaten up and robbed by every looter who got this far. The real danger in this room is the spell: Everyone has to roll on Spirit vs. Hard or run screaming for their lives. In this state they will run right into the pit trap (unless it’s been disabled). Anyone who doesn’t run will face the skeletons.

Skeletons: (each) Matter 2, Weak Brawling, Strong Swords (they aren’t armed, but they will pick up any weapons discarded by anyone, such as victims of the fear spell). Once “killed” the skeletons will slowly make their way back to the alcoves (a few hours after they “die”) and wait for the next group. It’s a rough job, but someone has to do it.

The door out of this room is another stone slab like the first one, but this one has a keyhole in the center. Picking the lock is Hard, and once it’s unlocked it will slide to the right on its own.

Spot 8 “Guardian Queen”

The stairs lead to a small landing with a hall stretching to the left and right. An alcove in front of you holds a marble statue of a warrior woman with braided hair and a horned helmet. There are corpses littering the landing and halls, most of them very old.

The statue is in the likeness of the queen, and serves as a guardian. It will animate and look into the eyes of the closest person. That person will hear the following words in their head: *“Name the great king and pass.”* Since it’s a telepathic message it will always be in that person’s main language. If the player answers and uses the name “Arndred” (in their heads or out loud) the guardian will de-animate and let them pass. Otherwise she attacks, screaming at them the whole time in a voice so loud and powerful it nearly makes eardrums bleed.

Guardian Statue: Matter 8, Mind 1, Spirit 1, Chaos 1, Strong Swords

The bodies strewn about include Little Sal (one of the orks), and four humans (two from Dublin's gang). The bodies are picked clean, but Little Sal has a silver dagger with the Descriptor "like a wasp" (Matter).

Spot 9 "Bodyguard Burial Chamber"

This oval room is shaped like an egg, with round floors and ceiling. The mummified bodies of several men are stacked against the walls, and several more are heaped in the center of the floor. The skeletal remains of two other humans are lying nearby, one more decomposed than the other.

The heap in the middle includes pebbles, stones, a torch, and anything else that's been tossed into the shaft in Spot 1. The mummies are the bodyguards of the old king. They had gold medallions with his insignia (oak tree on field of red) but the more recent of the two looters has them all (9) in his bag. The skeletal remains are the bodies of looters who died of starvation. They will have a few coins, a few weapons, and maybe a ring or two (although anything of value will be on the more recent corpse who took everything he could find).

The secret door can be found by searching on Mind vs. Very Hard.

Spot 10 "Ghost of Queen Anne"

This hall is painted with scenes from the royal home. Kids are gathered in a courtyard kicking a ball, a feast is taking place with the family by a fire, a father is petting his dogs, a woman is bathing in a porcelain tub, the servants are preparing food, etc.

This hall is haunted by the queen. As the players enter they will feel a chill and hear faint sounds of kids laughing, glasses clinking, dogs barking, a fire, and pretty much everything shown in the murals. When anyone passes the bathing scene (about midway) the woman shown there will come to life, stepping out of the mural. The players may recognize her from the statue in Spot 8.

The queen: The queen is a ghost. She spends her time here because it feels like her home. She will talk disjointedly to the group, inviting them in, calling for servants, and otherwise acting like a royal host. It doesn't matter if she makes no sense or changes subjects, moods or acts insane (for instance, the fact that she's standing there naked doesn't seem to feel inappropriate to her at all). So long as the players don't insult her, attack her, or open the far door, she will continue like this for hours. If they try to tell her that she's dead or that her husband and family are dead (or in other ways try to impose reality onto her delusions), she will go into a rage and attack by scratching, clawing, strangling or any other means (her attacks, however, don't do normal injuries and can barely be felt since she's intangible – see below). If they try to open the far door, she will insist that they don't "*disturb her husband, he's resting.*" The only way to go through the far door without her attacking is to convince her that it's not the door she thinks it is (Roll on Mind vs. Hard "*Oh, that's the door to the wine cellar, madame, don't worry – we use it every day*").

If anyone is exceedingly nice to her, such as massive flattery, efforts to reassure her about the whereabouts of her children (which she'll bring up nervously with "have you seen the children? They're late again," etc), she will hand them a small gold key. The key is real and opens the lock to Spot 13.

The angry queen: (All fight scenes with her are rolled on Spirit - players get no advantage from weapons or weapon related Traits, although weapon Descriptors may still be used) Spirit 6, Special Attack: instead of doing levels of injury she will convert that many Descriptors into Quirks. She has normal Health Levels and if knocked out or "killed" she will dissipate and return to her tub. The queen will not leave the hall, and players can flee after one round of fighting. She will have forgotten about the whole matter and be in the bath again should they return.

Spot 11 “Flooding Trap”

This long hallway ends in another stone slab door. There are words etched on the door and the same coat-of-arms as before. The ceiling near the end has caved in or fallen, or been tunneled into.

This hall was a trap. When someone touched the false door at the end water would pour through the ceiling from the Boat Chamber and flood the hall. With the Boat Chamber now dry, all that remains is the large pipe that connects the two. It's a tight fit, but anyone interested in climbing through the pipe can do so.

Pipe: A few venomous snakes have made their nest in the pipe. A roll on Mind vs. Hard will let the player hear or see them before they attack. The snakes attack as a whole (Matter 2+1, Mild Brawling). The tight confines of the pipe will give the snakes an extra die.

The words on the door say “The Chamber of King Arndred.” A quick examination will reveal that the door is false.

Spot 12 “Boat Chamber”

The door opens onto a large, strangely-shaped room. The doorway you are standing in is half way up the wall with no steps down. The room extends nearly sixty feet (18 meters) to the right, and you can just make out the shape of a small sailing ship lying on the floor of the room, listing sharply. The ship is almost as large as the room. There are corpses on the deck of the ship and a few scattered on the floor.

This room used to be filled with enough water to keep the ship afloat. Over the years the water evaporated (and some of it left via the trap to Spot 11) leaving the ship lying on its side on the bottom. A plank used to allow passage from the entrance door to the rear deck. The prow of the ship is still moored to a rung just below the golden door on the north wall. The ship was filled with belongings the king was to take into the afterlife, from clothes and weapons to treasures and art. Much of the best loot has been stolen.

The ship is a simple sailing ship with one level below and one mast. The ship is at a 60° angle and very difficult to get inside (where most of the loot is).

The corpses are all zombies. The zombies are the animated corpses of the ship's crew (who are skeletal and missing parts and limbs). Over the years, however, anyone who has died in this room has joined the zombie horde, adding some fresher, juicier corpses to the heap. As soon as someone touches the ship the zombies will animate. They aren't fast or smart, but they do pose a challenge.

Zombies: 15 zombies, with different “Health Levels” as listed (Mind 0, Matter 0, Spirit 1, Chaos 0 with no Traits). 7 have 1 Health Level, 4 have 2 Health Levels, and 4 have 3 Health Levels. They don't use weapons. Unless their bodies are destroyed, they will come back to life at 1 less Health Level after 10 minutes (minimum of 1 Health Level).

Loot: Scattered through the ship are a dozen silver candlesticks, a gold compass, silver tipped arrows and crossbow bolts, a few sheathes adorned with semi-precious stones, a set of golden cutlery, a silver lute, and a few hundred coins of gold. There are many swords, spears and other weapons as well, most of which have been ruined by time, which makes it easier to spot the magical sword: A traditional broadsword with the Matter Descriptors “unstoppable” and “takes one to know one.” This blade belonged to one of Dublin's gang, who is now part of the zombie horde.

The door out is made of steel with a nice gold leaf. It has a keyhole under the knob which fits the key from Spot 10. The door is halfway up the wall, with a metal rung under it. Players will have to find a way to reach the door and work on the lock (standing on the metal rung can work for one person at a time). The door is made of steel and Very Hard to break down (especially since there's no running approach to batter it down). The lock can be picked at Extremely Hard.

If anyone attempts to climb down the drain, refer to Spot 11 for details. The drain is covered with a rusted iron grill, but with a small effort it can be removed (Matter on Hard).

Spot 13 “Guardian King”

The door opens onto a hall that stretches a short distance to the right and left. Ahead of you is an alcove with the broken remains of a man-sized statue.

The statue used to be identical to the one in Spot 8 except that it was in the likeness of the king. Dublin made his way in here while the last of his gang fended off the zombies in the Boat Chamber. He managed to defeat the statue, but then fell to his death in the pit trap (Spot 15). There is evidence of a wild fight here, with scrapes and chips in the walls and old, dried blood on the sword of the statue. A very careful search (Mind vs. Very Hard) will reveal boot tracks and the dragged loot bag Dublin carried heading left to Spot 15.

Spot 14 “Pit Trap”

This is a pit trap just like Spot 4. The door on the other side is false.

Spot 15 “Dublin’s Grave”

It seems Dublin got his comeuppance at the bottom of this pit trap. His body lies crumpled and desiccated on the floor of the trap. He apparently died slowly, having enough time to scrawl the words “*My name is Dublin Vies. May the Dark God curse you if you do not bury me in hallowed ground.*”

Loot: Dublin has several magical items on him. A short blade with the power to replenish all his Descriptors in 1 Aspect anytime the player spends a Story Point, a ring that allows him to see in the dark (infravision 30') and studded leather armor with the Descriptors “hard to hit” (Matter) and “unstoppable” (Spirit). He is still clutching the neck of a rotting leather sack full of gold coins (450 coins).

Spot 16 “False Tomb”

The hall opens onto an oval room with a vaulted ceiling. A faded tapestry hangs on the far wall, and thick cobwebs cover every surface. A depression in the floor holds a stone coffin covered by a large, dusty shield.

Lurking behind the tapestry is a football-sized spider named Elsa. She’s made a nest of this room, long since giving up on any tasty morsels walking through. A small hole in the ceiling leads to the surface where she hunts. Various field mice and other animals are cocooned near the tapestry for later eating. Ordinarily Elsa would stay away from a bunch of human-sized people, but since she just laid her eggs next to the coffin, she’s a tad territorial and will climb over the nearest person and drop down. Players should roll individually to see if they notice her (Mind vs. Hard) and anyone who did can join in the fray. If her chosen victim (the nearest person to the coffin) failed to notice her, she gets 2 extra dice for surprise.

Elsa: Mind 0 / Matter 3 / Spirit 0 / Chaos 1, Mild Biting Trait, Special Attack: Paralysis. Anyone who is hurt by Elsa must roll on Matter vs. Very Hard or be paralyzed for half an hour.

The tapestry shows a grand battle (*Battle of Anselm’s Way*) and players may recognize the symbols and banners as that of King Arndred (Oak tree on field of red) and his enemies (Axe and wolf on field of blue). The shield over the coffin also has the king’s symbols (though covered in dust and hard to make out), and the shield shows no signs of rust or age. The shield is a great shield and has the Chaos Descriptor “Unshakable.”

The coffin is trapped. As soon as the heavy stone lid is opened, a poisonous gas is unleashed hitting everyone in the oval part of the room for an injury level unless they roll on Matter vs. Hard. The coffin is empty.

The hole that Elsa uses to leave the tomb is too small for anything other than a rodent or small animal. It works its way some 10 yards (10 meters) until it reaches the top of the burial mound. With a lot of work players could dig their way out (the ceiling is made of stone) but they risk collapsing the whole room in the process. Players could send out familiars or other pets/servants if they are small enough.

Spot 17 “Shrine”

This small circular room is built of marble, with the symbol of the local patron god etched across the floor. The ceiling is flat with small holes evenly spaced across it. There is a stairway on the other side of the room.

If anyone steps on the etching, sharp steel spikes slam down through the holes above. The etching covers most of the floor, although it can be avoided with some care. Anyone in the room when the trap hits should roll on Mind vs. Hard or suffer an injury level for every Odd they miss it by. The trap is magical, but anyone checking for traps can roll on Mind vs. Very Hard: success means they sense a small electrical tingling as they run their hands over the etching. The trap resets a minute later, and if anyone still in the room is standing on the etchings it will go off again unless they get out fast.

If this game is being integrated into an existing story, some of the characters may be of the same religion as the shrine – if so, that character will not set off the trap (though they can be hit by it if someone else sets it off).

Spot 18 “One Angry King”

The stairs end in a large room, nearly square, with columns in each corner and a vaulted ceiling overhead. The center of the room holds a stone coffin on a dais, and each wall is painted with a scene from the life of King Arndred. The far wall depicts the epic battle of Anselm’s Way, the left wall seems to be Arndred’s wedding to Queen Anne, and the right wall is a hunting scene.

As soon as anyone takes a few steps into the room, the ghost of King Arndred will rouse itself and attack. The ghost will come in three versions, one from each painting. All scenes with the ghosts are Spirit based. Only magical weapons or spells can harm the ghosts (narrators should use their discretion as to what is “magical” – a family heirloom with no special powers might count, and any weapon with Descriptors counts). The ghost gains a die for every character attacking the ghosts with only non-magical weapons.

The Warrior King: Spirit 3, Strong Swords, 2 Additional Health Levels

The Groom King: Spirit 2 (unarmed)

The Hunting King: Spirit 2, Strong Swords

If a king is “killed” it will dissipate like a wisp of smoke and get sucked into the coffin. If anyone opens the coffin during the fight (using a Quick Take on Matter vs. Hard) any remaining ghosts will stop fighting and walk to the coffin where they will lie down and dissipate.

Loot: The body of the king is dressed in ceremonial armor, rusting with age. The crown is made of gold and has several jewels on it (the crown is worth about 500 gold coins). The king’s sword is the real find: A long blade made of silver, it has a perfect balance and the Descriptors “I will bury you” (Matter), “Crushing blow” (Matter) and “Heroic might” (Spirit). The blade also has the special ability to hum when orks are within 50 feet (15 meters). The king has an additional 100 gold coins in jewelry.

Resolution

If the characters stagger out with arms full of loot, the orks may decide to make quick work of them and take the loot. The orks expect the characters to die in the tomb; if they hear the pit trap at Spot 4 go off, however, they'll come looking. If the ork ambush doesn't suit the story then some or all of the orks could be off foraging.

Once the players make it back to the nearest village they should be in good shape. As a stand-alone adventure, the game ends here. In an ongoing game the players may need time to heal and recuperate (in some fantasy worlds dead characters can be resurrected by powerful priests) as well as find buyers for some of the loot. No one remembers King Arndred so no one will mind that his tomb's been pillaged (it is, however, a possible storyline to pursue in an ongoing game). Other consequences might await the players as well: thieves and other opportunists may try to rob them, and local officials may try to claim some of the loot (taxes, tithes and other annoyances).

If the game does end here, get them settled into an inn or other suitable spot and then let the players describe their futures:

- “Varnallis and the gang heal up for a week. After that they buy horses, gear up and head off for the port city of Talis – and that's where their real adventures begin...”
- “After a week of celebrating with the gang, Bardren makes his way back to Ovalshire. With the money from the tomb he sets up his own business and marries his childhood sweetheart, telling his grandkids exaggerated late night stories about his adventuring days.”

Running Dungeons: The Dungeon Crawl

Dungeons are one of the oldest forums for fantasy roleplaying games, even carrying over to computer fantasy games. Part of this is their simplicity: they offer a controlled environment with simple choices (such as going left or right, fighting or running) that make it easy to prepare and run. Dungeons mix puzzle solving with character roleplaying, set in a “risk environment” where nerves are on edge and every corner can lead to sudden death or great fortune.

There are three parts to a traditional dungeon crawl: Getting the players to the dungeon, exploring the dungeon, and getting back alive and safe. The first part is important: just because there's some dungeon nearby doesn't mean the characters will have any reason to explore it. Greed is a common motivating factor, such as finding some artifact or treasure rumored to be inside, but as long as the characters have a motivation to explore the dungeon it doesn't really matter what that motivation is. The more creative the better, of course, but there's no harm in starting out with a simple treasure hunt. The *getting there* part can be skipped entirely if the characters find themselves plunged into the dungeon by a twist of fate, such as seeking refuge in a cave or falling through a crevice plop into the middle of “the lost tomb of Ankior.”

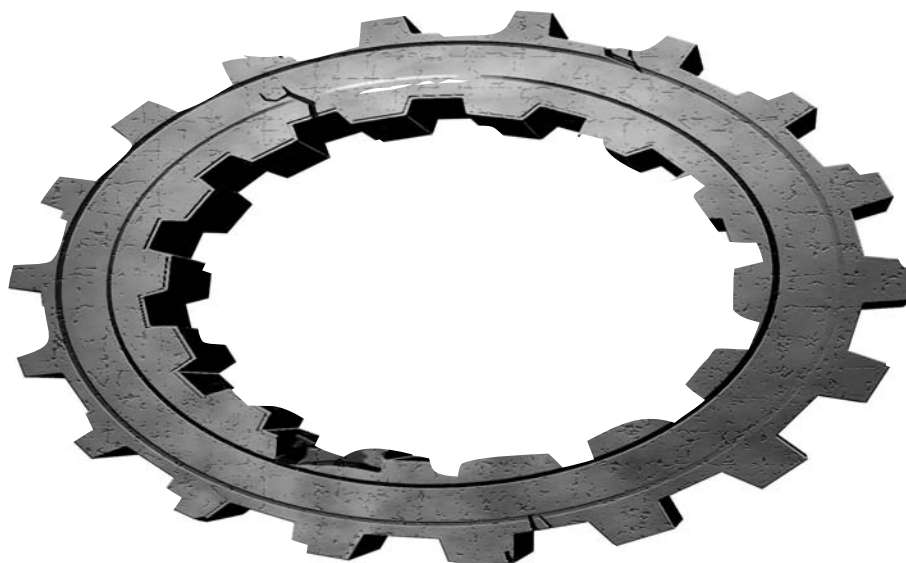
The *exploration* phase is the heart and soul of the standard dungeon, where the players make their way through the perils of the dungeon and try to make it out alive. This is where “game balance” comes into play: most dungeons are designed around the characters, offering challenges they can overcome with luck and planning. This is the Hollywood concept, where the challenges are all relative to the characters (see p.56 for more on relative vs. non- relative obstacles). The beginning of this scenario lists the appropriate match for this dungeon: “*designed to challenge a small group of players (3-5) with a little salt under their belt (30 to 40 points each).*” When designing dungeons, keep in mind the different skills and strengths of the group, and base your traps, monsters and other dangers accordingly. Also, remember that characters won't be facing everything at once – they may have ways to heal or leave and come back with better equipment or even with more people to help.

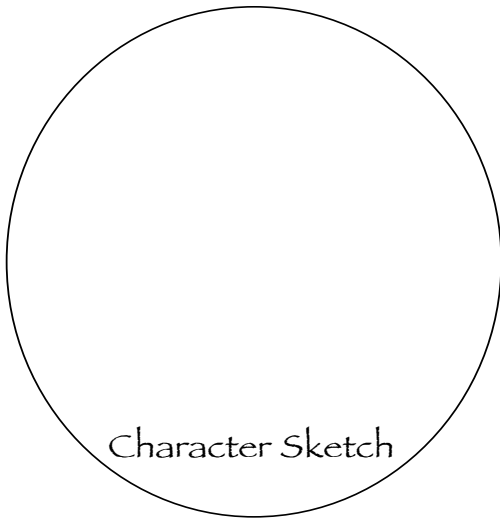
The *getting back alive* part can vary from a happy ending full of riches and fame to a grim funeral for fallen comrades or even trouble with the law for tomb robbing. Dungeons can either be isolated storylines or they can run together: information in one dungeon may lead the group to another, such as finding one piece of a magic scepter or discovering that the queen pharaoh was buried elsewhere. The Resolution section above deals with the aftermath of this particular dungeon crawl, offering ways to continue the story as well as end it.

Mapping: Traditional dungeons involve a lot of mapping. Much time is spent getting measurements and dimensions from the narrator and carefully drawing out every step the players took. Though this may be fine for some games, story games do best without it. Unless the dungeon is specifically designed to be a labyrinth, give the players a break and assume they can find their way around. Design dungeons that don't depend on detailed directions, and concentrate instead on the story. Don't make the players remember everything their characters would remember: tell them if they've been somewhere before, and don't make them describe each turn and door when they say "we're going back to that room with the gold chest."

A Few Tips

Try not to use exact measurements or compass directions in the dungeon – this helps keep the focus on the story and not the physics. Don't get caught up in arguing over why a player would or would not have fallen into a trap or been caught by surprise – work with the players to come up with results that everyone enjoys using the Success Range as a guideline. Feel free to warn the players if it's getting tough and you think they may need to rest or be careful. Keep a tight pace and try to build suspense. Slip as much history and background as you can into the game, and encourage the players to interact with things and especially each other. Most of all, have fun and work together to tell the story.





Character Name:

Name of Story:

Race & Gender:

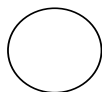
Character Concept:

Descriptors:

Quirks:

Traits:

Prime Affinity/Gifts:



Story Points

☐ Healthy
☐ ()
☐ ()
☐ ()

Background Story:

Possessions of Note:

BLACK SCREEN

FADE IN TO:

INT. BANK VAULT

ECU - EMPTY VAULT SHELVES

MALIK (V.O.)

I wouldn't say that things had been
going well up to that point.

CHILES (O.S.)

Where the hell is the money?

INSERT - ALARM SWITCH

A bloody hand reaches slowly for the switch from below

MAN

This'll teach you, you son of a
bitch...

RETURN TO SCENE

CHILES

(screaming)

Where the hell is the MONEY?

MALIK

(lighting cigarette)

Not in this bank, apparently.

INSERT - ROBBERY NOTES

Garbled NOTES with corrections, coffee stains and poorly drawn diagrams. As the NOTES come fully into frame we see the corner of a page lying on the floor with the words "3rd of every month vault is empty"

RETURN TO SCENE

CHILES

(whining)

Where the hell is the money?

Bonus Material

These extra pages are included as a way of saying thanks for buying Story Engine. Visit the Politically Incorrect Games Collaborative, where you can share your own plug-ins, stories, and character ideas with other players.

CINEMATIC STORYTELLING

The short scene to the left is written as a screenplay. As you can see, Story Engine follows a cinematic format much like a screenplay. As a game, that same scene might be run like this:

Narrator: OK, you two make it to the vault. As the dust and smoke clears you realize the thing's empty. Row after row of empty shelves.

Player (Malik): I wouldn't say things have been going well up to this point.

Player (Chiles): You can say that again. "Where the hell's the money?" I shout. I bet the alarm's been triggered by now.

Narrator: Cut to the clerk Chiles shot in the lobby as he reaches for the alarm: "This'll teach you, you son of a bitch..." he gasps with his dying breath.

Player (Chiles): I think I'm screaming at this point. "Where the hell is the MONEY?"

Player (Malik): "Not in this bank, apparently." I'm just going to light a cigarette while I mull this over. Odds are this is some special bank procedure Terrence mentioned in those notes we all ignored. I can just see it: cut to page with note saying "3rd of every month vault is empty."

Player (Chiles): Chiles is whining, staring at the shelves in disbelief. "Where the hell is the money?"

Single Die Resolution

Single die resolution is an option that uses a single die rather than the current die pool. It can be used throughout a game or as an alternative when large die rolls become cumbersome.

Whenever a roll is called for, the die pool is totaled, then halved (rounded up). A single die (d6) is rolled and the result is added to the new die pool total. This is the number of Odds that are counted towards success.

$$\frac{1}{2} \text{ Die Pool} + d6 = \text{Odds rolled}$$

Traits no longer provide Auto Odds; instead they contribute to the die pool as follows: every Auto Odd adds a die to the original die pool (before it's halved).

Bid Scenes are run in the normal way, bidding using the original die pool number (before it's halved) until bidding is complete.

The rolling ones rule applies to the roll, so any roll of 1 is counted, then rolled again. A roll of 1 followed by 4 would add 5. A roll of 1 followed by another 1 would allow yet another roll, and so on.

The Hard Rate should be adjusted by adding 3 to each category as follows:

4	Easy
5	Hard
7	Very Hard
9	Extremely Hard
12	Impossible

This system simplifies Target Numbers by making many easier rolls automatic prior to even rolling (though the roll should still be made to determine the success rate unless it would automatically result in Complete Success). Less difficult challenges on the Hard Rate are more likely to succeed, streamlining the progress of the story. This is balanced by the higher number of Descriptors players will need to burn for more difficult challenges.

Narrators may also want to look at the diceless suggestions on p.62. Instead of pre-marked cards, the diceless system can be used by rolling a die (six sided) and modifying the results as follows:

<u>Roll</u>	<u>Modifier</u>
1	add 1 then roll again
2	+2
3	+1
4	0
5	-1
6	-2

Narrative Resolution

Narrative Resolution is an option designed to reinforce the spoken story as the central element of the game, requiring the players to actively integrate their character's Descriptors into the game. The rules are the same as the diceless rules on p.62 except that in bid scenes players can bid in any order but each player can only burn 1 Descriptor at a time. Bidding ends when all sides pass. Whenever a player burns a Descriptor, they have to narrate how it helps their character (rather than just explain how they think it's appropriate). This helps the players to create the whole scene as it develops, working out the actual results once the Success Rate is known.

Example 1 (Straight Roll): The player(s) total is 5 and the Target Number is 6. A player burns a Descriptor: *Well, Cyrano is so “excruciatingly patient” that he’s able to whittle the price down by haggling so long the merchant gives up.*

Example 2 (Bid Scene): Players are in a sword fight with another group with initial Die Pools of 8 vs. the other group’s 7. Player (group 1) burns a Descriptor: *My “deft hands” give me the edge as we trade blows. That puts us at 9.* Player (group 2): *Ah, but my “quick feet” let me dance around you, backing you against the ledge. That puts our side at 8.* Player (group 2): *And my “great endurance” gives me the upper hand as we wear you guys down, putting us at 9.* Narrator: *Okay, so now it’s 9 to 9. Anyone else? Let’s pull cards and see which side wins it.*

Players need to be creative with Descriptors in the main rules too, of course, but by changing the order in bid scenes this option encourages verbal bandying and helps tell the story of the scene as it develops. Since the bid number in this option is final (it will only be modified by the card pull) the need to increase the number is more urgent.

Props in Games of Heroic Fantasy

Magic items and special equipment are the backbone of a fantasy game. They can be mythic sought-after relics or simple family heirlooms, and they add both flavor to the game as well as power to the players. The important thing to consider when adding magic to a story is to make sure you don’t upset the balance — not only should it make sense that a magic sword is hidden in a tomb, but you should make sure that it’s not so powerful that it will make the players near-invincible (unless that’s the goal). Also, little things make a difference to the credibility of a game: if the orks the players kill all had “rings of invisibility” in their pouches, why weren’t they using them?

With Story Engine you can give Descriptors and Gifts to items as well as special affinities like “always finds a new owner.” (see the section on Props in the main rules p.45). In a fantasy setting it may be important to note which items are actually magical by nature and which ones just have story value — the marriage ring a character has might have the Descriptor “true love” because of its story value, but it may not be “magical.”

Lastly, special items work best when they add flavor and color to the game. Give items special names and histories — a sword called “Blade of Antony” that was used in the Battle of Hormond Wake is more interesting than a sword with just a Descriptor (although Descriptors by their nature are more interesting than the “+1” of other rules).

A Few Good Props

No point in listing the ordinary stuff we’re all familiar with here, but a quick summary of standard adventuring gear wouldn’t hurt: heroic adventurers should always have weapons, armor and sturdy travel gear as well as torches, lanterns, food & water, iron spikes, oil flasks, the ubiquitous 10’ pole, and a good length of rope. These are all wise investments in a fantasy setting.

There are endless special or magical items (the *Encyclopedia Magica*™ by TSR is a four volume set, for instance) so this very short list is designed to whet your appetite and provide some guidelines for creating your own fantasy props in Story Engine.

Narrators can fill in a more detailed and flavorful description of these (or any) items to fit their style and story. High fantasy is well-suited to elaborate descriptions of jewel-encrusted swords with dragonscript flowing down golden blades and eldritch rings of jade with inlaid ivory forming mystical patterns...

*Items with an asterisk * next to their name may be “non-magical” items in many stories.*

Charmed Hat *

While wearing this stylish hat you tend to turn more heads, get more free drinks and are generally treated better. Has the Mind Descriptor “there must be something to a guy/gal in a hat like that.”

Cursed Coin

While a character possesses the “cursed coin” they suffer endless bad luck. The character is always 1 die worse (added to the opponent or the Hard Rate) until they get rid of the coin. The coin has a knack for finding its way back to the same character, however, so any opportunity the narrator has to give it back should be taken (whenever the character next gets change, for instance). The brigands faced by the players outside the town can even have the coin in their coin purse — as long as it is actually possible, no matter the chain of coincidences required to make it happen. The coin itself is not remarkable (although it can be detected as “magic” like other magical items) and is made of some currency common to the area.

Dumb Stone

The so-called dumb stone is a small pebble that strikes the character with the fewest Mind Descriptors in the immediate vicinity. The stone needs to be thrown in the air and as it falls it will fly towards the victim. Though it may sting a little, the victim is not injured.

Homecoming Boots *

These trusty old boots are a good luck charm on your travels. They add a die to any scene that involves finding your way home (even if home is a campsite or tavern inn). The boots have the Spirit Descriptor “of hearth and home.”

Jekka Stone

The Jekka stone is a smooth enchanted rock the size of a grapefruit. When struck it explodes, which makes Jekka stones very desirable projectiles. A stone can only be used once, and if the side using it wins the scene they do an additional d6 levels of injury. Unlike normal injury, which is optional and can be dealt out at the discretion of the winners, the injuries of a Jekka stone are always inflicted.

Jug of Fresh Water

This beaten old jug has the magical power of turning liquid into fresh, drinkable water. As long as the liquid you fill it with has some H₂O content (at least a quarter) it will come out fresh and sanitized.

Lode Stone *

This smoothed river stone made of magnetite helps guide you in your travels. Has the Chaos Descriptor “fortuitous choice.”

Lucky Cards * (see p.94)

One of the props from *Six Guns & Whiskey*, it’s also perfect for high fantasy games.

Ring of the Adept

This simple silver ring adds 1 level to a random Trait while worn. The Trait will always be the same one that was selected the first time. The ring will actually boost a Trait to a 4th level called “mastery” if the bearer’s Trait is already at “strong” when the ring is put on for the first time — otherwise the ring will never add a level beyond 3rd.

Ring of Invisibility

One of the most sought after items in a fantasy world, this ring has the power to render its bearer invisible. The character can turn invisible at will, disappearing along with

their clothing and up to their weight in items or equipment. Characters can roll on Chaos vs. Extremely Hard to spot an invisible character (with extra dice if they know the character is present). The ring also has the Chaos Descriptor “inconceivable.” The ring does not mask the other senses. It does, however, mask the bearer from other vision-based senses such as “infravision” or “darkvision.”

Ring of Safety

The Ring of Safety offsets any weapon benefits an opponent might have by 1. If an opponent had a 2 die advantage because of bows and crossbows, it would be reduced to 1. The ring also has the Spirit Descriptor “untouched.”

Sword of Wounds

This sword has the power to convert a Descriptor into a Quirk. The sword has to be wielded, but doesn’t necessarily have to make contact with the victim. The victim then rolls on Spirit vs. the sword-bearing character to resist the effect. Unless the victim succeeds in resisting, a random Descriptor is removed and replaced by a new Quirk. In addition, the wielder of the sword can do an additional level of injury with Partial Success (but not with Basic or Complete Success). The sword also has the Spirit Descriptor “flawless.”

Walking Stick * (see p.45)

Well yes this was already covered in the Props section, but a good walking stick or staff is a perfect traveling tool for the heroic adventurer.

Metric Conversion

Since not all of our players are from the U.S. or use imperial measurements, we included a quick conversion chart for anyone using the metric system:

<u>U.S.</u>	<u>Metric</u>
1 foot (ft. or 1’)	30.48 cm
1 yard (yd.)	.914 meters
1 mile (mi.)	1.609 km
1 inch (in. or 1”)	2.54 cm
1 pound (lb.)	.453 kg
1 ton	.907 metric tons
1 gallon (gal.)	3.785 liters
1 ounce (oz.)	31.103 grams

Story Engine Universal Rules
PIG Revised Edition
HG1100C
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