Wushu Open

The Ancient Art of Action Role-Playing!!

Written by Daniel Bayn

Introduction

I've written this version of the Wushu role-playing game for two reasons. 1) As a free preview, it's designed to get Wushu's core rules into the hands of as many gleeful gamers as possible. 2) As an Open License, it allows enterprising game designers to write and publish their own Wushu settings, adventures, and sourcebooks. Wushu Open is all about spreadin' the love!

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However, I should point out that the license does not cover material that appears *only* in my other Wushu publications (Wire-Fu, Pulp-Fu, the Wushu Guides, and the original Wushu Core Rules). The stuff that's in this file is the only stuff that counts. If you have any questions, feel free to email me (dan@bayn.org).

Core Mechanics

Action movies have always been at odds with realism. Fortunately for us, their conflict is easily resolved with a series of savage kicks to realism's face! Impossible leaps, insane acrobatics, and victory against overwhelming odds are all staples of the genre... and the essential elements of action role-playing games.

Sadly, traditional RPGs have long been in league with realism. They penalize players who want to, say, kick seven mooks with one spin kick by piling negative modifiers onto their roll, which makes them less likely to succeed. The inevitable result is that smart players stick to simple, boring actions and take a tactical approach to combat. Wushu breaks up this insidious alliance with a core mechanic that rewards players for vivid descriptions and over-the-top stunts by making them *more* likely to succeed, each and every time.

Traditional role-playing games also alienate themselves from action movies by segmenting time into rounds of only a few seconds. In the movies, you get to see characters trade a whole series of attacks, defenses, and counter-attacks before the camera cuts away. In role-playing games, players are usually limited to one action per

round, and they only get enough time for one swing, punch, or pull of the trigger before the next player's turn. This takes the back-and-forth pacing that's essential for exciting fight scenes and stabs it straight through the heart!

In Wushu, players are encouraged to make as many attacks, leaps, dives, parries, and ripostes as they like before any dice are rolled. Each "round" is divided into two parts, which everyone completes at the same time. First, the group **Describes** the scene; this is the important part because their narration determines what *actually happens* in the game world. Then, they **Resolve** their dice rolls to see *how well* it all worked.

Description

Wushu works its magic via a dice pool mechanic where the size of your pool depends on how elaborately you describe your actions. Each **Detail** you add to your description earns you a die. These could be separate stunts, witty one-liners, cinematic flourishes, pretty much anything that enhances your gaming experience. (You always get at least 1 die, just for doing *something*.)

For example, someone who says "I dodge to the side" gets 1 die. Someone who says "I dodge to the side / and grab his sword blade with my chopsticks / before punching him in the face" gets 3 dice. Someone who says "I catch his sword blade with my chopsticks / when it's chisel edge is less than an inch from my face, / then twist it around with one deft motion, / jam it into the bastard's gut, / and whisper 'Can't you see I'm trying to eat, here?'" gets 5 dice. Thus, anything that contributes to the atmosphere and energy of your game becomes a smart tactic.

Of course, not every Detail is appropriate to every game. That's why GMs and players have the right to **veto** any Detail that rubs them the wrong way. To make this work, it's important to agree on the tone and style you want for your game *before* you start playing. (I usually reference a few of the movies I'm trying to emulate and make sure all my players have seen at least one or two of them.)

To control the pacing and tone of a game, GMs can put a **pool limit** on the number of dice any player can roll at once. 3-4 dice per turn usually results in faster, more brutal combat; it's a good limit for unimportant scenes or warm-ups that happen early in a game. When things get more dramatic, you'll want 6-8 dice per turn. This is especially true when fighting major villains; you'll want a high enough limit that you can attack and counter-attack many times before stopping to roll. However, that doesn't mean you *have* to earn the max number of dice every time. Trying to tack on an extra stunt or two at the end can really take the steam out of your description!

Resolution

Wushu characters are defined by their Traits, which are rated from 1-5. When it's time to roll them bones, pick a Trait that's relevant to the actions you described. (If you don't have a relevant Trait, the default rating is 2.) Every die that rolls above that Trait's rating is a

failure; those that come up equal to or less are successes. If no one's resisting you, one success is all you need. If someone *is* resisting, they'll have a bunch of dice to roll, too. Whoever gets the most successes comes out on top. (Ties go to the players, being the heros and all.)

The key to playing Wushu is to understand that everything happens *exactly as the players describe it, when they describe it*. (This is sometimes called the **Principle of Narrative Truth**.) Rolling the dice just tells you how much further those actions have advanced the scene. In a way, the dice are only there to let you know when to stop fighting (or chasing, or talking, or whatever).

Scab Rolls

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

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

Combat

Because it's the centerpiece of any action game, and rightfully so, combat gets a few extra wrinkles. First of all, you have to worry about both offense and defense. That means splitting up your dice pool. **Yang dice** are used to injure people, run 'em off the road, kick ass, take names, and so forth. **Yin dice** are used to defend yourself from all of the above. (It might be a good idea to have two different colors of dice on the table.) Each successful Yin die negates one successful Yang die. If even one attack gets through, you're done!

Don't worry; it's not as dire as it sounds. Player-characters all get 3 points of **Chi** to protect them. Each point can be cashed in to negate one Yang success *after* the dice are rolled. (I use poker chips to keep track.) A character is removed from a fight when they take a hit and don't have any Chi left to counter it. When you're down to zero Chi, it just means you're teetering at the brink of exhaustion. GMs should give players back their Chi as dramatically appropriate, usually between scenes.

Since Wushu encourages (nay, expects!) players to carry out **multiple actions** with a single roll of the dice, you'll eventually have someone try to use two different Traits at once. During a fight, the last thing you want is to bog down play while you sort out which dice are going to be rolled against which Trait. Instead, just decide which Trait is _most_ relevant to the description as a whole and use that as the target number for everything.

Take, for instance, someone who likes to use telekinesis with their kung-fu. If they say "I nail him with a Telekinetic Blast (tm), which knocks him through a wall, then I kick him hard in the face for good measure," they'd fold that kick into the telekinesis action and roll it all against their "Psychic" Trait. On the other hand, if they say "I duck under his kick, then deliver a telekinetically boosted open-hand strike that sends him plowing through a wall" they'd fold that TK boost into their combat action and roll it all against their "Kung-Fu" Trait.

vs Mooks

Ninjas, zombies, gangers, cops... by any name, mooks are born to die in droves! In fact, Mooks are little more than set pieces whose only reason for being is to make the player-characters look good. They don't have Traits, they don't have Chi, and they never roll any dice. They're just an abstraction. Players are free to describe however many they want, wherever they want, in order to describe all the rapid-fire, ass kicking stunts they want. (Of course, GMs can reserve a few for guarding escape routes, taking hostages, and so forth.)

When the ninjas start jumping out of the woodwork, assign the whole lot of them a **Threat Rating**. (You can also assign them to non-human challenges like ticking time bombs, collapsing buildings, treacherous climbs, and so on.) The exact value depends on how many players you have, your dice pool limit, and how long you want the scene to last. Figure out how many Yang successes your players are likely to generate per round and multiply by the number of rounds you want to see. Season to taste.

As you may have guessed, each Yang success your players bring to bear reduces the Threat Rating by 1. When it reaches zero, the mooks are either all dead or running in abject terror. Conversely, you shouldn't let players describe taking out the who group before the Threat gets close to zero. If such a thing does happen, and there's some Threat remaining after the dice are rolled, you'll have to bring in some reinforcements or let previously beaten mooks get up for another round.

Now, since mooks don't get to roll dice, they won't have any Yang dice to throw at the heros. Instead, you should assume that the mob gets in at least one good hit each round. Anyone who doesn't roll at least 1 Yin success has to cash in a point of Chi or get knocked out. (For more dangerous mooks, you can raise it to 2-3 hits per round.)

vs Nemeses

If you think nothing can challenge someone who just tore through a whole legion of ninja, you're dead wrong. Mooks are just the warm-up. Nemeses have kung-fu of their own, they get to roll dice, and they even have Traits! Most harrowing of all, they get their own Chi (usually from 1-5 points, but feel free to go nuts).

As befits such worthy opponents, Nemeses must always be fought **mono-a-mono**. If two

or more players absolutely need to gang up on a Nemesis, they'll have to do one of the following. First, they can take turns trading blows with the Nemesis, completing both their Description and Resolution phases before letting their allies have a go. If you've set a dice pool limit, the second option is to have the players split the max dice between them. If the Nemesis gets to roll 6 dice, two players would get 3 dice each, or three players would get 2 dice each. The Nemesis would then split their Yang successes between their opponents.

The other thing that elevates Nemeses above mooks is that they actually get to defend themselves. (Gasp!) This is where you get that furious back-and-forth pacing we talked about. The player and the GM should take turns providing 2-3 Details at a time, just enough for a defensive move and a counter-attack. When both sides have maxed out their dice pools, let 'em roll. If the kung-fu is really flying, feel free to disregard the pool limit and roll a whole fight's worth of dice at once!

Lethal moves (decapitations, kill shots, stakes through the heart, etc.) should be saved until *after* your victim has taken that final hit, the one they don't have the Chi to pay for. If both combatants run into negative Chi on the same turn, the loser is the one who goes deepest into the hole. As usual, ties go to the players. The winner is entitled to any dramatic killing blow (or other kind of scene resolution) they wish to inflict upon their helpless victim. No dice required. This is called the **Coup de Grace**, and if anyone tries to deliver one before the proper time, smack 'em with a veto!

Notes for Veteran Role-Players

Those of you who have played other role-playing games may have been expecting a few more rules. Their absence is no oversight. If you're going to make the jump to Wushu, take the following lessons to heart...

No Weapon Damage - A character's weapon of choice should have more to do with their personality than tactical advantage. That's why Wushu has no rules for weapon damage; getting kicked hard in the chest hurts just as much as getting stabbed through a lung. This frees players to select weapons that say something about their characters, without giving better armed enemies an unfair advantage. However, your players can still benefit from their weapons by using them as inspiration for Details: blood dripping off the tip of a spear, the angry muzzle flash of a Desert Eagle, the way your rope dart whistles as you whip it around your head, you get the idea.

No Initiative - Just to be explicit, there are no rules for initiative in Wushu. Who acts before who is irrelevant most of the time (all of the time, when it comes to Mook fights) and, on the occasion when someone does want to cut in, they can just ask! As long as it's for a cool stunt, nobody will mind.

Dice Don't Rule - Wushu gives the players complete control over the action... by taking control away from the dice! You're probably used to phrasing your actions in terms of "I try to hit him" and then waiting for the dice to tell you whether or not your succeed. Well, stop

trying to hit him, and hit him! Don't get hung up on the dice; they're just there to set the pace and introduce an element of risk. The goal isn't to "win" against the GM, it's to entertain each other with a few hours of creative, improvisational violence.

Creating Characters

All a Wushu character needs to be ready to rumble is a set of Traits. They can be anything from a profession (Cop, Hacker, Chef) to a simple adjective (Smart, Charismatic, Stinkin' Rich). It should go without saying that every Wushu character should have a combat Trait (Shaolin Master, Hit Man, Brawlin', Gun-Fu, etc). If you have any kewl powerz (Telekinesis, Voodoo, Undead), they'll need a Trait all their own.

Each Trait starts at a default rating of 2; your GM will give you 5-8 points to spend on raising them, up to a maximum rating of 5. That should be enough for 3 Traits, give or take.

Finally, you're character needs a **Weakness**, which has a Trait rating of 1. This could be a love interest who's always getting them into trouble, some kind of special vulnerability (ie. wooden stakes and sunlight!), or a tragic flaw (Drunk, Egotist, Can't Refuse a Challenge). Any time your character tries to act against their Weakness, any dice that roll higher than 1 are failures. Ouch!

Things You Don't Need

Wushu characters need a lot of things: skill, courage, wits, a high tolerance for pain. Two things they *don't* need are Gear and Advancement.

Gear - Generally speaking, you should assume that player-characters have on their persons any gear they need to use their Traits. Burglars should have lock picks, swordsmen should have swords, and ninjas should probably have both. In fact, making up gadgets and weapons on the spot is a great way to earn dice!

Advancement - Wushu characters start out bad ass and stay that way. You should let your players shuffle their Trait points around between sessions, if it helps them get the most out of your game, but characters should develop via their interactions with the game world, not via the accumulation of experience points. (After all, no one just gets better and better at things all the time. Expertise requires practice and there are only enough hours in the day to be an expert at so many things!)

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