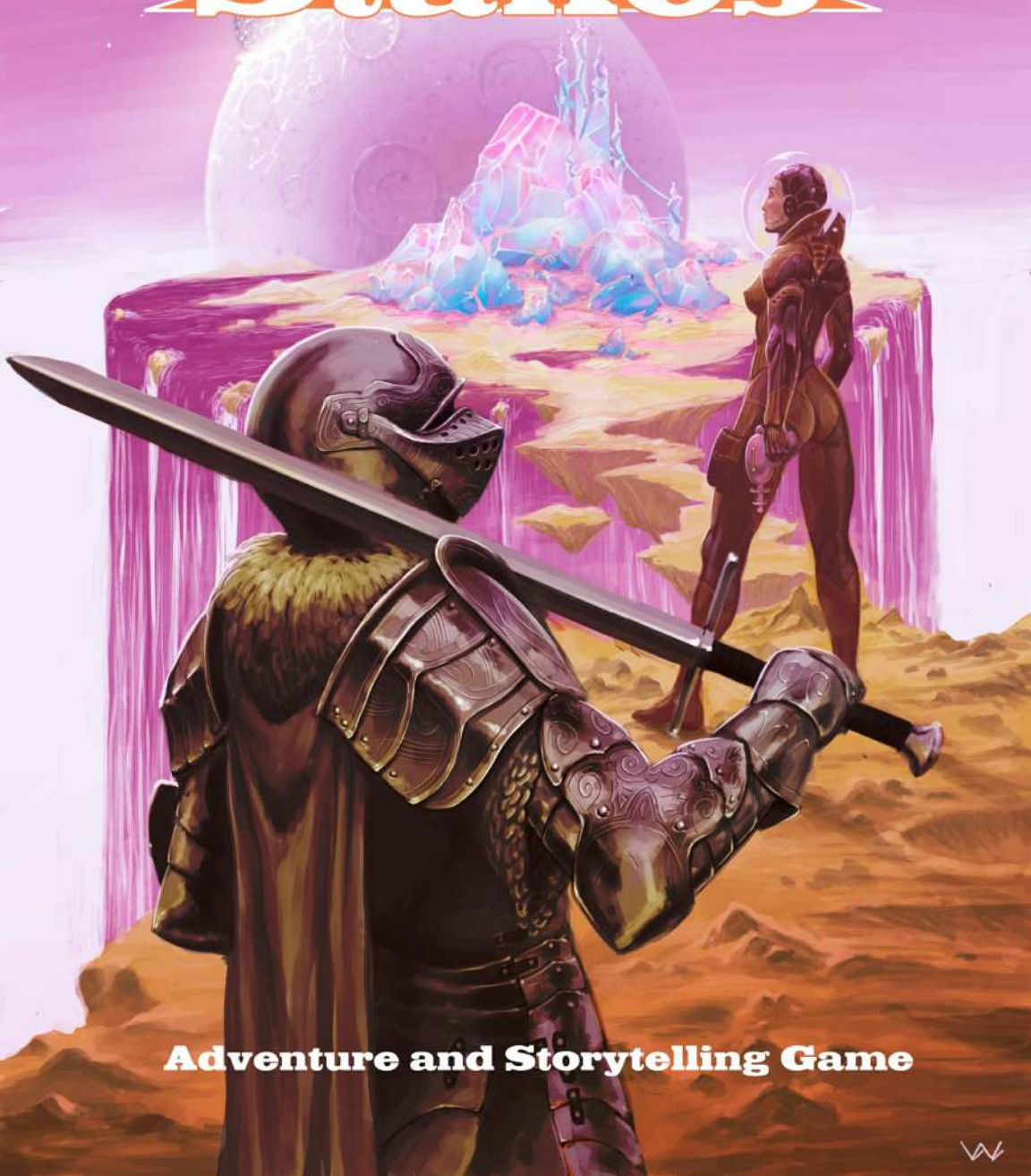


**Free  
Beta**

# High Stakes



**Adventure and Storytelling Game**



# High Stakes

***A Storytelling Adventure Game for 2 or more players***

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Lite Version

Rules version 3.5, Unedited

This is the free, light version (without any art or background material) of *High Stakes*. It contains the full system, allowing you try the rules in a setting of your own devising.

These rules are constantly updated. Make sure you download the latest version. If you like it, you may purchase one of the Hackbooks produced for *High Stakes*. The Hackbooks reprint the core rules (so you have to carry around only one book or file) and add plenty of ready-made settings, story hooks, interesting characters, genre tropes, and ideas to create your stories.

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## **What is This Game?**

High Stakes is a simple, fast set of rules to create awesome stories with your friends. To play, you need this book, a copy of the character sheet, paper, pencil, about 10 six-sided dice, and at least one friend.

## **What is a Hackbook?**

A Hackbook is a published variant of these rules, providing a setting, characters, and plenty of story ideas to get you playing immediately.

## **A Summary for Old Hands**

If you are an experienced player, here's a short description of the system:

This is a GMed storytelling system. It's universal and designed to be used with as few participants as a single player and a GM. The rules encourage a narrative, improvisational play style. The GM sets the scenes (telling players what they see or hear) and the difficulty of obstacles. Players roll dice to solve problems or conflicts. Rolls may bring complications or may let the player add narrative elements to the story. Characters are defined by three attributes (Body, Mind, Aura but the names may differ in some Hackbooks), 5 traits (talents,

skills, etc) and 3 relationships (people in their life). Players choose one attribute for the scene and roll as many d6 as the attribute, plus extra dice from descriptors and relationships that they want to use. Players may also get extra dice by raising the stakes -accepting harsher conditions for failure. The GM has veto power over narrative elements that contradict the genre or setting. Hackbooks, or supplements, describe setting tropes, difficulties, and story hooks. There are no "pre-written" adventures in High Stakes, just lists of likely encounters, conflicts, problems and hostile NPCs to enliven your stories. The game's storytelling will emerge from the game. That's it!

## **How Do You Play?**

Participants sit around a table. Each participant plays a character, describing his or her actions. We use the word "player-characters" or PCs, to indicate characters run by players. They are the protagonists of the story. PCs are defined by a name, a concept (alcoholic detective, space adventurer looking for a way out of poverty, ninja expelled from his clan, vengeful pirate on a quest to redeem her soul) three attributes (the physical,

mental, and social abilities of the character), traits (what the character can do), relationships (people who are important for the character: parents, siblings, lovers, enemies, and so on). Characters may also have personal secrets and maybe a McGuffin.

One of the participants does not play a single character of his or her own. Instead, this special player runs all the other characters and describes the game-world to the PCs. We call this player the Game Master, or GM.

## **What Does The GM Do?**

The GM sets the WHAT, WHERE, WHO, HOW and the WHY of a scene, describing what the PCs see, hear, or experience with their senses. The GM may also pass to the players any information that their characters are supposed to know. The GM does NOT tell the players how their characters feel or what they think – that is for the players to decide.

- The GM should answer any question asked by the PCs on what they see or hear.
- The GM should ASK a lot of questions to make sure he understand the intent of the characters' actions.

- In some cases, the GM will answer certain questions only if the PCs roll dice.

## **Examples of Questions Asked by the PCs:**

- How tall is the ceiling?
- Is the air cold or warm?
- Do we hear any sounds coming from the cave?
- How many people are in the bar?
- What color is the Archmage's robe?
- What does the public know about the Green Avenger?
- Do goblins live under those hills?
- Can my character squeeze into that tunnel?
- Is it too dark to see well without a lantern?
- Can I recharge my blaster using the guard's batteries?
- Can I eat that?
- Are the relationships between these two villages strained?
- From where do the natives get their water?
- What do green dragons eat?

In some cases, the GM will be prepared and refer to his notes or to his “mental image” of the scene. In most cases, however, he will just make up the information.

*The idea is painting a vivid image of what the characters see. Important details should be jotted down so they can be remembered later. What you say in the fiction becomes real and may be expanded upon by other players. For example, if the GM says that the library is filled with old, dusty tomes, a player may later blow on the books to lift a cloud of dust.*

**In some cases, the GM may decide that a question requires a die roll.**

For example, if Green Dragons are rare or not well known, he may require a Mind roll with a Difficulty of 1 for trivia (knowing what Green Dragons eat), 2 or 3 for important information, and 4 or more for secret information (how to locate a weak scale on their skin so that a green Dragon may be easily defeated).

Likewise, **if something is hidden or not clearly visible, the GM may require a Mind roll to spot it** (lurking ambushers, a trap covered with branches in the woods, a secret door on a moss-covered wall, or even a small change in a character’s

attire that would go unnoticed unless one pays a lot of attention).

**If the whole group of PCs wants an answer to the same question, roll just once using the character with the best odds of success**, and add +1 die for each character helping. However, if something bad happens to the character who rolled, the same consequences should apply to all those who helped.

*Three PCs suspect that there is a thief hiding in the shadows. They all use their senses to spot him. The PC with the best Mind score rolls 3 dice (he has a Mind of 3), but adds +2 dice because two characters are helping him. If the roll fails, the GM has established that no character will get a second chance to spot the thief, and when the thief will try to steal the party’s valuables, all the characters will be robbed.*

The GM should not give out secrets “for free” unless this furthers the story. When to require this roll is largely a judgement call and depends on the genre. For example, in a pulp game where all characters are adventuring archaeologists and treasure hunters, recognizing a dead language may be common knowledge (“you find a plaque written in Attic Greek”) but

deciphering it may still require an easy roll.

## Example

## Examples of Questions Asked by the GM

- What do you do now? (This is the most important question. The GM should be asking this at all times).
- Do you scale the wall using a rope or with your bare hands?
- Where are you hiding?
- What do you think of this character?
- How do you feel about that?
- Where do you keep your valuables?
- What is your plan?
- How do you do that?

Players do not roll dice to decide what they do. They just describe their actions, speaking in first person if possible (saying “I open the door” and not “My character opens the door” is preferable). **As soon as their description includes an action that may fail and have consequences, the GM will require a die roll before the narration can continue.**

*GM: A loud THUD! comes from the other side of the door. The ground shakes, as if something heavy was dropped onto the ground. What do you do?*

*Player: I step back from the door and use my pole to see if I can push the door open without touching it with my hands. What does the door look like? Does it have a handle or something?*

*GM: It's a plain wooden door with an horizontal bar on your side, so you can lift it with your pole and then push the door open. Are you trying to do it stealthily, so whoever is on the other side does not hear you, or you just do it quickly?*

*Player: I lift the bar carefully so it doesn't make a sound.*

*GM: That requires a Body roll, since success depends largely on your coordination. Difficulty is 1, Consequence of failure is: you are heard by whomever or whatever is on the other side.*

*The player rolls three dice (his character has Body 2 and he decides to use an extra die*



*from his Thief trait). Unfortunately, the player rolls two 1s and a 2. Three failures with a complication!*

*GM: The bar collapses to the ground with a loud thump. Immediately, the door opens and a gigantic ogre charges you!*

Let's see this scene again, but this time the player makes the dice roll.

*The player rolls three dice (his character has Body 2 and he decides to use an extra die from his Thief trait). The player rolls two 5s and a 6. Three successes, and the player may add a narrative element to the scene!*

*Player: "I lift the bar and slowly push the door open without making a sound. The door swings open, revealing a massive figure on the ground. It is a huge minotaur, and he was stabbed in the back. The thumping sound we heard before was his body falling to the ground. What else do we see in the room? Is the minotaur dead, or can we hear him muttering his last words?"*

## Starting a Game

Typically, the GM will begin the narration by considering the characters' goals and placing a social, mental, or physical obstacle in the characters' path. The PCs want to do something, or are tasked with a mission, and must solve some problem to do so.

*Aran, Derk and Boba are three young, down-on-their-luck adventurers in a fantasy world. Their goal is to get rich or die trying. So far, they have amassed barely enough silver to pay for their horses and food, and have been close to death quite a few times. The GM may begin a play session by informing the players of various job opportunities at the local adventurers' guild, and letting them choose a path of action. So in this scene, the characters must choose among several options. Will they go bounty hunting for the infamous One-Eyed Krill? Will they hunt the werewolf that terrorizes the moorland? Or will they take Count Wysaf's call for men to clean up his stables? Or maybe come up with an idea of their own?*

## Triggered Scenes

The GM knows secrets about the story being told, and reveals them when the characters reach a certain point of the narration or perform certain actions triggering an event.

*For example, in a game where a ghost is hiding in a castle's basement, the GM will narrate a scene in which the ghost appears as soon as a character enters the castle's basement, triggering that story element.*

In a "whodunit" mystery, the GM will decide the identity of the culprit, and the adventurers may decide to try and solve the mystery. Investigation-based stories may have more Secrets to solve, while action-oriented stories may have more physical scenes like combat, chases, or dangers to avoid.

In a typical session, there will be 1 to 3 triggered scenes.

*For your first adventures, when the players are still not familiar with the improvisational storytelling style of High Stakes, the GM may rely more on Triggered scenes as a means to keep the action flowing. Once all players get used to improvisation, Triggered*

*Scenes may be used more sparingly.*

## Escalating

A scene may begin as a simple dialogue scene, and then escalate into physical action, or into a mental or social conflict requiring a die roll. This can happen because the GM decides that a non-player character escalates the conflict, or because a player wants to do so. It may also happen that something said by the PCs triggers an action scene ("As soon as you state your intention to sign the treaty, the prince turns into a werewolf! What do you do?")

## Difficulty and Consequences

**Dice are rolled whenever a character tries to do something where failure has consequences.** Even a dialogue scene may have harsh fallout: imagine what happens if you insult a king who could order your head to be cut off! **The GM determines WHAT IS AT STAKE, and HOW DIFFICULT it is for the PCs to overcome the obstacle.**

*Example: a player narrates a scene where his character challenges an enemy to a duel. The character could win or lose, the duel could come to a draw (or to a situation where*

*it is not clear who won and who lost), or an unexpected event could interrupt the duel, so dice are rolled to determine the outcome.*

**The GM sets the difficulty of the duel and announces the consequences of failure.** For example, in the above situation, the GM could say:

*"This is a duel to the first blood with a competent opponent, difficulty is 2. Consequence: If you lose, you will either be wounded (-1 die from Body), or suffer a loss of face (-1 die from Aura) or confidence (-1 die from Mind)."*

**Difficulty is the minimum number of successes needed for the action to be successful.** A success is a die that rolls a 3 or better. In the above example, the player "passes" the roll by rolling at least 2 successes.

**The PC will roll dice for the appropriate attribute:** Body for problems that can be solved by strength, agility, endurance, or other physical capabilities, Mind for problems that can be overcome with cunning, intelligence, or knowledge, Aura for problems that can be solved using social contacts, charisma, or persuasion skills. The player propose which attribute is used, but the GM may change that

to another attribute (this is rarely necessary: the physical, mental, or social nature of the conflict is often evident).

**The player may RAISE THE STAKES, accepting worse consequences for failure in exchange of bonus dice.** The more risk the character takes, the more extra dice the character gets DURING THIS SCENE ONLY.

*Player: I raise the stakes. I insult my opponent, and this becomes a duel to the death! (death as a Consequence gives +4 dice to the player. The character dies if the roll fails).*

**A character may also add +1 die by activating one of the traits and/or relationships on his profile.**

*For example, the player may use his "experienced swordsman" trait to add +1 die in the duel, and add another die because he is defending the name of the lady he loves (activating his "Love relationship with Lady Imarra of the Rose").*

A friend (a character played by another player) may also help by burning an appropriate trait from his profile.

*For example: a character who has a "witnessed many duels" trait may use it to help his friend, giving him an additional die.*

**Each trait may be burned only once per session.** If someone narrates a Rest scene in which the characters recover their energies, heal, or spend a period of recovery, all the descriptors and relationships are reset and may be used again. Normally, **only one Rest scene per session may played.**

Bonus dice can also come from the GM, in terms of **Tactical Advantage dice**. These are awarded because the PC did something right in the fiction.

*Example: the PCs have to go through an encounter with a werewolf, a monster with a weakness to silver weapons. This is a Secret, and is written on the GM's notes and it is NOT revealed to the players until they narrate a scene where they could logically discover it. Let's say the players know there is a werewolf. In a scene, they speak with the daughter of the man whom they suspect of being the werewolf. They ask the girl if she noticed anything unusual, and she will tell them that her father has been*

*acting strangely, and refuses to wear his silver crucifix. The players prepare to face the werewolf by going to the local silversmith and have their blades covered with silver. Later, when they meet the werewolf and fight the creature, the GM will tell them to add +2 Tactical Advantage dice to their roll.*

There is no limit to the amount of bonus dice that a player can get on one roll.

To recap, you ALWAYS get dice from:

- The attribute (Body, Mind, Aura) used in the scene

And you MAY get additional dice from:

- +1 die from a Trait if it applies
- +1 die from a friend's Trait if the friend is helping and not doing anything else
- +1 die from a Relationship if it applies
- +1 to +3 dice from the GM as tactical advantage dice
- +1 to +4 dice from your choice of Raising the Stakes

There is no maximum limit to the number of dice you roll. There may occasionally be negative modifiers

(such as an Attribute losing a die because of a wound, tiredness, or some other story reason).

## Rolling Dice

All the dice pertaining to the scene are rolled simultaneously, after the GM has announced the Difficulty of the scene and the Consequences of failure.

- Dice that roll 1 are failures and bring COMPLICATIONS.
- Dice that roll 2 are FAILURES.
- Dice that roll 3, 4, or 5 are SUCCESSES.
- Dice that roll 6 may be counted as SUCCESSES or EXPLODED, as the player prefers. Exploding a 6 means discarding that 6 and throwing two more dice instead, and abiding by their result. You may continue to explode dice as long as you roll at least a 6. If you roll at least a 6, you may ADD A NEW NARRATIVE ELEMENT to the scene.

**If enough successes are rolled, the player narrates the scene with the desired outcome.** The number of successes must be equal to or higher than the Difficulty of the scene.

*"I win the duel, disarming the villain and wounding his arm.*

*Clutching his bleeding biceps, he runs away."*

**If Complications are rolled, but the number of successes is still enough, the player narrates the scene but accepts a setback from the GM.**

*Player: "I win the duel, but there is a complication." GM: "Yes, you strain a shoulder. If you duel again, you will have to subtract 1 die until you are healed in the next Rest scene."*

Hackbooks have lists of complications appropriate setting or genre.

*For example, a Hackbook for swashbuckling adventures might have Complications for duels, while a Hackbook for hard-boiled detective stories may focus on Complications for addictions, the use of firearms, and dealing with the criminal underworld.*

**You may burn a 6 to negate a Complication.** If in the same roll you have a 1 and a 6, you may use the 6 to cancel the 1.

A Complication can take many forms. Here are a few examples:

- The temporary loss of 1 die from an attribute (this should

## High Stakes

- last until a Rest scene is narrated);
- The arrival of an enemy/danger on the scene;
- A social setback (loss of face, money, or political influence);
- Loss of a special or expensive piece of equipment;
- A McGuffin is stolen or misplaced;
- A dependent NPC (child, sick relative, old parent, friend, etc.) disappears or is endangered;
- An innocent bystander is endangered or wounded;
- A weapon jams and must be cleaned or repaired before it can be used again;
- A car breaks down;
- A clue or evidence is destroyed by mistake;
- Cell phone battery dies;
- This place is on fire!
- Something that was tied down/secured becomes loose;
- A pet's leash breaks and the pet runs away;
- The book you just found is missing a few key pages;
- The archeological find/ancient scroll/Clay tablet is so old that it dissolves into dust;
- The enemy you were supposed to find sleeping just woke up;
- The monster you just killed has a mother/brother/friend;
- You must decide between saving valuables or a friend;
- The bridge is collapsing. Run!
- Rain soaks your musket's black powder;
- You ran out of ammo and there is a big battle coming;
- No more spells until the sun rises!
- Your god is angry with you, and will deprive you of your clerical powers until you perform some holy deed;
- Time is wasted; night falls/dawn breaks;
- Something blows up;
- Something sinks;
- Someone changes his mind about you/begins to hate on you;
- You just killed/caught/blamed the wrong person;

- Bad news: the bad guy is much stronger than you think!
- The PC is subject to some effect that will kill, impair, or embarrass him/her later unless the PC does something to prevent it ("The wound is a mere scratch, but the blade was poisoned with Rainbow Lotus juice. You will die within five hours unless you find an antidote!). There **MUST** be a way for the character to get out of the predicament, or the Complication is no fun.

**A Complication is a narrative element determined by the GM. The other players may suggest Complications. A Complication makes the PC's life harder but will not kill the PC straight away, Complications should be events of "bad luck".** Think Murphy's Law in action: what could possibly go wrong in this situation?

If the number of successes does not equal the Difficulty of the scene, the GM narrates the scene applying its consequences. If a player put his character's life at stake, the GM should narrate the death of the character.

## **Death of A Character**

A character death should always be a meaningful moment of the story.

In most genres, the death of a PC at the hands of a villain should give +2 dice to his or her friends in a future revenge scene against that villain. This is a temporary relationship, and the bonus lasts until the character is avenged.

When a character dies, it is not the end of the game for the player: the player creates a new character and brings it into the story as soon as the GM or another player narrate a scene where the character may be logically met. This new character **MUST** be different from the previous character. Try to give him a different personality! Creating characters in *High Stakes* is very quick, so you can continue playing. Losing a character is not the end of the world. In addition, in some settings death may not be the character's final fate – heroes could be resurrected by magic, revived as cyborgs, brainplanted into cloned bodies, reincarnated into new human beings retaining memories of their previous lives, and so on.

## **What You Narrate Becomes Real**

When you narrate a scene and roll at least a 6, you may add creative details and embellishment that work within the boundaries of the story and the genre. Your embellishment may introduce

elements that weren't mentioned up to that point of the story.

*"I slay the orc and as I inspect the body, I notice something dangling from a chain around his neck. It's a mysterious golden key with a butterfly emblem on it. Hmm, how very un-orcish. I guess he stole it from someone. I wonder where it comes from and what could it unlock?"*

**The GM may veto your narration if it contradicts the setting.** This may seem harsh, but nothing breaks the illusion more than a character with a name that doesn't fit the spirit of the story or finding a modern object in a medieval story -- unless you are playing a comedic, parody game, or all the players agree that "anything goes" and any sort of narrative element may be added.

**All players should agree beforehand about the narrative conventions they are adopting.** This is part of the unwritten contract of any game, and includes the idea that troublesome players whose idea of fun is spoiling other players' enjoyment should be asked to leave. Hackbooks have suggestions to keep stories within the accepted boundaries of the genre.

**Keeping within the convention of a genre doesn't mean that what**

**you narrate must be dull or predictable.** You can always come up with a nice idea that feels fresh and surprising but still works within the "canon". Just ask yourself: would this scene appear in a movie or book of the type we have agreed to play?

**What you narrate becomes real in the game world.** It may have consequences later, and will be used by the other players in their narratives.

*For example, you describe an action scene in a fantasy game in which your characters force a band of goblins to flee into a tunnel. The tunnel wasn't there before you added it to the story, but now it is -- and of course, your characters can now go down the tunnel and search for treasure. Maybe the goblins have reorganized themselves and are ready to ambush the party? Where does it lead?*

## The GM's Veto Power

This rule is rarely used but some players find it necessary. The GM may veto a narrative element created by a player if it contradicts:

- 1) a Secret of the story, or
- 2) the background of the game, or



2) something narrated in a previous scene, or

3) the laws of physics implied by the setting (this includes the way “weird” stuff like psionics, magic, and superpowers work).

*Example: In the "goblins down the tunnel" scene above, the GM may know from his story notes that tunnels indeed do exist beside the goblins' caves. But these tunnels are a passage to another world left here by Mallorzanath, the dark elf prince that ruled over the area. So the GM may just add that the goblins run into a dead end corridor and are easily slain by the party, or have them disappear forever into the tunnel.*

*Example: a previous narrative has established that the trolls hiding in the sewers are immune to flames thanks to magical algae growing on their skin. When a troll chases the heroes in a burning building later, you can't narrate that the troll burns to death because you can't contradict the previous narration.*

*Example: Even in a fantasy, high-magical setting, a player can't say "I'm setting the lake*

*on fire", because water doesn't burn, unless this has been established with an agreement between players. However, keeping with the fantasy genre, the character could obtain a chemical ("Greek Fire") that burns on the surface of the water.*

## Sample List of Generic Narrative Elements

Here are a few sample narrative elements. Use them as examples, not as rules. Some of these may apply to your setting, some others may not. If in doubt, ask the GM.

- A mysterious object is found.
- A clue is found.
- The weather changes.
- A sound is heard from another room/area.
- A secret passage/trapdoor is found.
- Tracks/Footprints are found.
- You find something to replace something you lost or a piece of equipment that was destroyed.
- A new, previously unknown character enters the scene.

- The action performed is more successful than initially thought.
- You gain some information, but you don't know whether it will be crucial to the plot or not.
- A disturbance in the mana or mystic energies lets an appropriate character (mage, psionic, etc.) receive an omen or a glimpse from the future.
- You understand a facet of someone's personality that is normally hidden or not well known.
- You impress a NPC who now likes you/adores you/follows you.
- You destroy or grab a piece of equipment that was in the hands of an opponent.
- You find valuables worth one month of your character's salary.
- You realize the opponents you just defeated were not who or what you thought they were.
- You add one important character to your network of contacts.
- A vanquished enemy spills the beans and reveals part of the plans of an over-arching villain.
- An animal likes you. You gain a new pet.
- Someone involved in the story is a relative, friend, or lover, of yours.

## **Keep Everyone Involved in The Fun and In The Storytelling**

We play games to have fun and spend time with friends and interesting people, so when it is your turn to narrate a scene, try to suggest events that keep the other players involved. Don't hog the microphone: this is not a competition for who plays "best", it's a shared narrative. There are no winners or losers: **everybody wins if a good story is told.**

Discuss shortly beforehand if there is any subject that you want to avoid. We play to have fun, so it may be better to avoid controversial subjects like race, religion, politics, and gender issues. Some players may also be uncomfortable with graphic depiction of violence, especially crimes such as rape, or addictions. We are not asking you to censor your creativity, but to make sure that everyone is comfortable with the subject matter.

## **Player Versus Player**

Sometimes, a PC will try to stop the actions of another PC, or two PCs will compete on an action. Think of two heroes trying to woo the same lady, a sibling rivalry to get the attention of a parent, or just two fantasy warriors arm-wrestling, or competing for who slays the highest number of orcs. In these cases, instead of rolling attribute dice versus a fixed difficulty, the two players should simply roll the Attribute dice against each other at the same time, and count the successes scored. On a tie, roll a die to determine who wins. Alternatively, the players may agree that they are evenly matched and call it a draw, depending on what makes sense in the story.

## **Players Running More Than One Character**

It is possible for a player to run more than one character. This is advisable in certain genres only. For example, if you run a horror survival game, you could have many characters as likely victims of a slasher or zombie infestation and play the story to determine who gets to be the “final girl” (or guy). In most other genres, it is better if each player runs only one character.

## **Who Should be the GM**

Anyone who knows the genre being narrated can be the GM! A GM should be a creative person who likes to keep track of information and to build worlds in his or her imagination. A different player can be the GM in each session, or if you prefer, the GM can always be the same person. If you like long stories that stretch over several play sessions, like the episodes of a TV serial, the same person should be the GM until the current narrative arch is completed. This allows the GM to keep long running secrets and have over-arching villains that continue to harass the adventurers for a long time.

If you are an adult playing with children, or an experienced player playing with newbies, you should be the GM at first. Others can become Masters after a few games.

## **GM Around the Table**

You could even play a shared GM game, in which the role of the GM switches with every scene. Just go clockwise around the table, or in a random order. Each player gets to add one Secret to the story. This mode is recommended for well-oiled groups where everybody wants to be a GM and also play a character. When you are the GM of

a scene, your character should declare his actions last.

## **How Long Does A Story Last?**

**Short answer:** for as long you are having fun.

**Long answer:** Decide whether you are playing a short, one session story, or an ongoing story. On a one-on-one game (one GM, one player) you could tell a meaningful story in 5 to 10 scenes, for a total playing time of one or two hours. There should be at least one Secret to be discovered and a Tactical Advantage to be gained at some point, such as learning the weakness of an opponent. It is the nature of the game to create "loose ends", so use a notebook to keep track of what happens in the story. You may refer to these notes later, and they can be a springboard for new stories ("What if the beggar that the PCs met in front of the Town Hall was really the Burgomaster in disguise?").

If you play a long story over several play sessions, you may end each session with a "cliffhanger" situation: will our heroes manage to escape from the deathtrap before water fills the sealed room? Anything where the life of a character or the fate of something

hangs in the balance can be a cliffhanger.

Also, players should spend five minutes after the session to annotate experience on their character sheets and discuss what they liked about the story.

## **Campaigns**

A multi-part story, played over several sessions, is called a Campaign. In a Campaign, some characters may be retired or die, and new characters may join the party as the need arises and logic allows. We urge players to publish their exploits and story reports on a blog for the world to see.

## **Hackbooks**

If you like this system, expand it with one of the Hackbooks. A full list of available Hackbooks is at the end of this booklet. As a new Hackbook is published, the list is updated. A Hackbook guides players and GMs into the hows and whys of a setting and explains the tropes and secrets of a genre. It details a background, interesting characters, secrets, and story hooks to begin your adventures. If the genre includes special abilities like psionic powers, spells, yogic powers, cybernetic equipment or the like, the Hackbook will define what those can do. Note

that the core rules are repeated in every Hackbook, so you have only one book to carry around.

## Creating The Characters - The Three Attributes

A character is made up of three numeric attributes. The name of attributes may be different in Hackbooks, using words appropriate to the setting.

**Body** - how strong, agile and healthy the character is. This is used in action-oriented scenes like combat, chases, sport competitions, fighting against the elements, climbing, swimming, resisting disease or fatigue, long trips through inclement weather, and any other scene where the characters' chances of survival and success are based on the strength of their bodies. If Body is reduced to 0, the character is permanently impaired (becoming a paraplegic, losing the use of both arms, blindness), contracts a fatal disease, or is killed in action.

**Mind** - how smart the character is, and how good he or she is at figuring out things. This is used in investigation, scientific analysis, and to cast spells (in worlds where magic exists), use psionic powers (in a world where they exist), but also to play games based on reasoning and memory like Go or chess. Mind is

also used to notice things with senses (sight, touch, smell, hearing, taste, and a sixth sense where this is permitted). If Mind is reduced to 0, the character becomes a madman, is mind-controlled by a demonic entity, or becomes mentally disabled and cannot survive without the help of others.

**Aura** - how good the character is at influencing others, how likable he or she is. This attribute is used in social interaction scenes. If Aura is reduced to 0, your character may die a social death: becoming a pariah or a recluse, being imprisoned, being beheaded for a rebellious attitude, have civil rights stripped, and so on.

**To create a character, distribute 8 dice among the three attributes. Assign at least 1 die per attribute. You may NOT assign more than 4 dice to the same attribute.**

After your first game, you may reallocate 1 die as the character matures and you start to know him/her better, but you are still limited to a maximum 4 dice in an attribute.

*Certain genres may have different limits and dice totals to assign. For example, pulp action deals with larger-than-life heroes and you could give 10 dice, and raise the limit to 5 dice per attribute.*

## What Is The Best Attribute?

Good stories have a balanced mix of action, investigation, and social interaction scenes, so the three attributes are equally important. However, unbalanced characters (such as a physically weak intellectual, a super-strong loaf, a scientific genius who is socially inept) may be fun to play. If a setting is mostly action (sword and sorcery), investigation (crime, horror), or social interaction (politics, dynastic fantasy), the players may agree that it is better to assign more dice to the most "useful" attribute. This is part of the social contract among players: what type of stories do they want to tell?

**The attribute number is the number of dice you roll.** So if you have a Body of 4, you will roll 4 dice when narrating a scene based on your Body capabilities.

## Traits: Five Things You Can Do Well

Each character has a few Traits that describe his or her skills, inborn talents, and overall life experience. Write them on your play sheet.

You may "activate" a trait when narrating a scene, to add +1 die to your roll. You may use each Trait

only once per session. However, a story may have a Rest scene where used Traits "refresh" and become usable again.

In some Hackbooks/genres, you can create powerful or complex characters with more than 5 Traits.

**A trait should not be so vague and generic that it applies all the time.** You can't just be "versatile" or "good at everything" or even "good at combat" or "a scientific genius", but you can be "good with a sword" or "a crack shot with a bow" or "one of the finest minds of modern mathematics". Languages you speak fluently enough to read, write and communicate with a stranger on the street should be Traits, unless you are playing in a fantasy setting where people can learn languages easily via magic or in a science fiction setting where instant translation tech exists.

Likewise, **a Trait should not be so specific that it never applies.** Follow the examples below. Many more will be in the Hackbooks. Any ability can be made into a Trait. Just discuss it with the GM and the other players to make sure your Traits are unique and fit with the kind of stories you want to tell.

## Examples of Traits

- Good with knives

- Skilled climber
- Party animal
- Fast-talks her way out of trouble
- Seductive
- Dead shot with his raygun
- Has an eye for detail
- Skilled dragon hunter
- Speaks a foreign language
- Skilled blacksmith
- Hacker
- Necromancer
- Has an affinity with cats
- Can draw well
- Knows medieval heraldry
- Weekend athlete
- Chemical engineer
- Knows how to deal with children
- Rides motorcycles like a devil
- Avid comic-book collector

## **Relationships: Three Important Persons in the Life of The Character**

You should list three Relationships. Each entry stating the kind of

Relationship you have with a character, NPC or PC. Love and hate can be powerful motivators, so you may activate a hate relationship in a conflict with that person, or a love relationship when risking your life to help a loved one. Relationships work like Traits, letting you add +1 die in an appropriate scene. In most settings, revenge (fighting for righting a wrong committed against a loved one) may be applied also after the loved one's death. Your character may have relationship with NPCs (non-player characters run by the GM) or with other PCs, as you desire.

Typical relationships include love, hate, rivalry, jealousy, friendship. You can be more specific if you wish: "wants to earn respect from his father" or "tries to protect her younger sister from strangers" are perfectly acceptable. Make sure that your relationships can logically be part of the story. For example, in a planetary romance where all characters are writers on a writers' retreat who get transported to an alien planet, it would be difficult to involve a character's old, bedridden father, unless you explore the relationship through flashbacks and dream sequences ... make sure the other players are comfortable with that.

Relationships state how your character feels about another person, but you may include that person's feeling for your character as well. "Loves Thyssa and is loved back" is perfectly fine. However, unrequited love or contrasted relationships often make for more interesting storytelling. You can make the Relationship as nuanced and complicated as you like. Simpler, clear-cut relationships will work better in action-oriented genres, while more complex relationships are better suited for stories focusing on social interaction.

### **Personal Secret: Something You Don't Want Others to Know About You**

You may, if you want, add a secret about your character. It can be something that could put your character in trouble, or attract unwanted attention of the media, your social circles, your church, and so on. Having a Personal Secret means giving a story hook to the GM. You gain +2 dice in any scene in which your Personal Secret is revealed. You may decide to reveal the secret yourself, or let others do that. This is a once-in-a-campaign bonus. Personal Secrets are optional: they are fun but do not feel forced to have one.

### **The Unique Thing: An Object That Defines You, Gives You Some Extra Ability, or Forces You To Do Something**

In some settings, players may agree that one or some PCs possess a something— an object, secret code, spell, magic weapon, suitcase full of mysterious papers, strange tattoo, item of jewelry, pet, rare mineral, formula, heirloom, and so on. This unique thing plays an important role in the campaign. This can be known from the beginning (as with the One Ring in *The Lord of the Rings*, an item of power that the PCs must destroy and their opponents want) or discovered later in the campaign. Use of the Unique Thing should be limited to once per session – use your common sense – but it should confer some advantage (depending on its nature, but we recommend a +2 dice bonus on a scene, or the use of some supernatural power) and also create trouble (for example, because it is wanted by enemies). Not all genres will use Unique Things. The PCs may also decide that they share one common Unique Thing. Sample Unique Things will be described in Hackbooks.



## Experience: How Characters Grow

Characters go through amazing life experiences and learn new things. At the end of a story, experience lets you add ONE TRAIT or one RELATIONSHIP based on the adventure you just played. You may choose something that your character did or tried to do, even if you failed: people learn from their mistakes as well as from their successes. Examples:

- Fell in love with the king's daughter (add a love relationship);
- Passed a final test at the alchemists' guild;
- Defeated a dragon;
- Won a chess game against a champion;
- Rallied the populace against the tyrant;
- Rode a plesiosaur;
- Exorcised a demon;
- Survived the night in a zombie-infested graveyard;
- Swam through quicksand;
- Danced with a celebrity;
- Resisted a mermaid's seduction.

The more stories you play, the more your character will grow. After a few adventures, you will have plenty of descriptors and relationship to call upon when narrating a scene.

## Being VERY Good at Something

Experience may also be used to BOOST one of your existing Traits. For example: let's say you are "good with knives" and fight your way through a series of combat scenes. At the end of the session, you may choose to be "VERY good with knives". When you use this trait, you will gain +2 dice on that scene. You may also split the 2 dice and use one each on a separate scene. If you use two dice, both will refresh (become usable again) when a Rest scene is narrated. In pulp or superhero settings, players may extend this rule to up to 3 dice on a trait.

## Shouldn't Characters Be More Detailed?

In the end, the level of detail is up to you: but seeing the characters grow organically during play is more fun than writing up a three page bio when you haven't still played the character and you do not know if you like him/her!

## Team Efforts

In scenes where the characters act together, collaborating as a team to solve problems, they should each narrate their character's actions and roll their dice, adding to the total of successes, complications, or failures for that scene. Roll in clockwise or random order around the table. Each player's narration must take the narration of other players into account.

A team effort may be against odds that would be insurmountable for a single character.

## Overkill: When the PCs are Much Stronger Than The Problem They Are Facing

If a team effort against a simple problem is an overkill, the GM will let you narrate the scene without rolling dice. If there are no consequences for failure, or the problem you are facing is negligible for a group of heroes working together, do not roll the dice.

*Example: five trained warriors will make short work of a lone goblin, and none will risk being wounded by the puny creature. In this case, the players simply tell something like: "We surround the goblin and quickly overbear him. A*

*hit from a sword pommel knocks the guy out."*

**As a rule of thumb, you get an overkill situation when you have 6 more dice than the Difficulty.**

## Shared Scenes

A shared scene is a scene where all or most of the PCs are taking part of the action, and they split their dice against different enemies or problems in the scene. If a scene presents several obstacles, the characters may split up their actions. Each character may choose to focus on one problem, and his/her dice will be rolled independently of others. If there are several sources of trouble in the scene, make sure that EVERY source of trouble is assigned to one of the characters. Each player may RAISE THE STAKES for his own action independently of others: for example, in a combat, some characters may risk their life more than others, letting their guard down in order to strike better at their foes, while others hide in the rearguard. In a social situation, one character may attract the attention and make a fool of himself while others keep a lower profile.

Let's see a detailed example of a shared scene.

## **An Example From a Fantasy Game**

Three adventurers are hunting down a giant spider that has captured the child of one of them, Rann the ranger. Entering the dread Silk Forest, where long cobwebs hang from dead trees, they are surrounded by the S'karra -- goblins who worship giant spiders. As the goblins circle the party and prepare to attack, one of the adventures hears the cry of a child coming from a large tree, and sees the long spindly legs of a giant spider scurrying up the branches.

As there are plenty of goblins, two adventurers will try to split the goblins by fighting in two different locations of the clearing. The elf archer hides behind a bush and starts to rain arrows on a few goblins, while the dwarven skullsplitter charges into melee swinging his battle-axe. Meanwhile, Raan the ranger (the mother of the missing child) tries to avoid the goblins and climb the tree to rescue her child.

The GM has established that the total Difficulty of the scene is 8, and the Consequence of failure is escape (the goblins do not necessarily want the characters dead: they will be satisfied if they just leave the forest). But the dwarf hates goblins, so he

decides to fight to the death and receives +4 bonus dice for Raising the Stakes. The elf does not Raise the Stakes: she is more cool-minded and plans to come back with reinforcements later if the fight goes badly. Rann wants to save her child so she risks being caught, adding +1 die for Raising the Stakes (loss of freedom).

The players split the Difficulty as follows:

The elf has to overcome difficulty 2. She gets a +1 d because she decides to activate her "good with a bow" Trait. If she fails, she will run away from the forest.

The dwarf has to overcome a Difficulty of 3 (since he is getting into melee with the S'karra, the players have agreed that his task is more difficult). He decided to fight to the death (raising the stakes, putting his life at stake) so he gets +4 dice. If he fails, he will be killed.

Rann the ranger has to overcome Difficulty 3 (avoiding the goblins and climbing up a tree covered in sticky cobwebs). She gets +1 because she activates her love Relationship with her child, and +1 for Raising the Stakes (loss of freedom). If she fails, she won't manage to free her child and will remain stuck in the webs.

Dice are rolled. Since this is an action scene, Body is used for all characters (if a character were a spell-caster and used a spell, she would roll Mind instead).

The Elf and Rann have Body 2, the dwarf has Body 3. The Elf rolls 3 dice (2 + 1 for being good with a bow), the Dwarf rolls 7 dice (3 +4 for putting his life at stake), and Rann rolls 4 dice (2, +1 for using a relationship, +1 for raising the stakes, risking capture).

The elf rolls three 4s. Three successes. No special results. "My arrow fly fast and true, and the four S'karra that charged me all die before they can even reach the bushes where I'm hiding".

The dwarf rolls two 1s (two Complications), three 5s and a 4 (three successes) and a 6. He has a total of 4 successes, barely enough to succeed, and he can add a narrative element to the scene because he rolled a 6. He chooses not to explode the 6. "My battle-axe dances a whirlwind of red death among the gray-skinned savages, splitting skulls and shields alike. The head of a goblin is separated from his torso with such violence that a spray of blood reaches the cobwebs on the tree that Rann is climbing, thus revealing the hidden shape of the giant spider!" The GM does not veto the narrative element, since the

scene does not contradict the setting (fantasy is full of decapitated goblins, after all) or what is known about the giant spider. The GM thinks about a Complication for the Dwarf, but does not announce it immediately. She decides that the Dwarf has been poisoned by a goblin's envenomed blade, but it's just a scratch so the player won't know until the poison takes effect one scene later.

Rann rolls. Unfortunately, she rolls a 1 (complication) and three 2s (three failures). The GM narrates: "As Rann climbs the tree, she gets stuck in the webs. The giant spider scuttles down and bites her (complication is being poisoned, Rann loses 1 die from Body). Rann tries to fight back, but the spider's poison is slowing her down. Her figure disappears among the webbed, blood-soaked branches."

Now the characters have to rescue their friend before the spider consumes her or her child! But this will happen in next scene. As the next scene is a continuation of this action scene, the characters have no chance to narrate a Rest scene to recover their bonus dice.

## **Types of Scenes**

There are many types of scenes possible in a story, but these are the most common. Most stories will

need variety. Varied stories are fun for all players, as people tend to like different things. For each scene, it is important to understand:

- 1) What are the characters trying to obtain?
- 2) How are they trying to obtain their goal?
- 3) What sort of conflict or obstacle (physical, social, mental) is in their way?
- 4) How difficult will it be for them to overcome the obstacle?
- 5) What are the consequences of failure?

**Interaction:** A scene where the players interact with others. Dialogue scenes may be totally narrative and require no dice rolling, unless the characters are trying to manipulate, coerce, con, seduce, threaten or bribe someone into releasing information or doing something for them. In that case, an Interaction scene requires rolling the Aura dice. A Dialogue scene can escalate into a different type of scene. For example, a dialogue in which a character says something insulting could turn into a combat scene. Both the GM and the players may recognize that a dialogue scene is escalating into something different and thus require a dice roll.

**Action:** A scene where the characters fight, try to escape or chase, or enter a sport competition, and may lose face, freedom, or even their life. In most genres, combat is the most common form of action scene, but you can also have "Man vs Nature" situations in which the PCs must survive freezing weather or natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, forest fires, tornadoes, sandstorms, and so on). Moving past terrain obstacles, such as braving river rapids or climbing a cliff, and surviving car crashes, are also action scenes. Action scenes normally require the characters to roll Body dice.

**Rest:** A scene where all the extra dice spent for descriptors and relationship are reset, and any losses from the attributes are healed back, so that the attribute goes back to its initial value. Normally, a play session should have only one Rest scene. Normally, Rest scenes do not require dice rolls. Something pleasant happens (the PCs find a water well in the desert, an inn appears as they move out of the woods, they are saved by the bell at school, they get a good night's rest in a safe location) and the PCs recover their spent Trait dice.

**Investigation:** A scene where characters search for clues, notice hidden things, and try to gather

information from various sources, including magic (divination, crystal-ball gazing, tarot-reading, dream interpretation) in settings where it exists. The consequences of investigation scenes range from legal trouble (the characters may be fined or jailed for trespassing property, or sticking their noses where they shouldn't), to the triggering of an action scene (a physical encounter with angry guard dogs, bodyguards, bouncers), gaining new enemies, alerting the enemy, and so on. Investigation scenes require the characters to roll their Mind dice.

**Connection:** The purpose of a connection scene is simply to take characters from point A to point B through time or space. Normally, this does not require dice rolls. Examples: long uneventful trips, passage of time spent waiting for an enemy to appear, or long leaps in time, the so-called "two years later" scenes. The players should agree if they want a lot of time to be glazed over. It could be an interesting way, for example, to play a dynastic story in which political alliances are formed, weddings are celebrated, kingdoms are conquered, children are born, and people (including the PCs) die of old age or disease.

**Flashback:** It may be fun to play a flashback scene now and then. It

may be an anecdote from the character's youth that shaped her personality, the reason why she happens to have a star-shaped scar on her left cheek or why she hates tacos. Normally, flashback scenes do not have huge consequences on the current status of the character. The character may not raise the stakes during a flashback (as obviously the scene shows something that already happened!)

**Déjà Vu:** In certain genres (supernatural thrillers), the GM may rule that visiting a place or performing an action triggers an experience from a past life or a long lost childhood memory. This could be played out like a scene.

**Dream Scenes:** Dreams may have precognitive content, as the characters see glimpses of things to come, and may be a convenient narration technique (if the genre conventions allow) to drop hints of things to come. A dream scene may be triggered by the GM during a rest scene. The player may roll Mind dice to gather reliable information. The consequences of failure in a dream scene may be that the character fails to rest, and the information gained is confusing.

## Consequences

Here is a sample list of what can happen when you fail a scene. The GM will decide what's at stake in a scene, but if you can logically raise the Stakes, you may choose a worse consequence from the list and use the bonus dice it provides. Heroes can summon extra power from themselves when the going gets tough.

**Retreat:** The character is forced to escape, flee, or avoid a confrontation. This causes a setback in the mission. In a "race against time" situation, the consequences of fleeing may be harsher than one thinks. Retreat from a danger or opponent may mean that the conflict may be faced again later. This is the weakest form of consequence, and the most common. Retreating does not give extra dice.

**Temporary loss of face, +1 die:** The character will be humiliated and his/her authority will be discussed until he/she manages to redeem himself/herself. The character loses 1 die from his or her Aura.

**Loss of equipment or money, +1 die:** A blade snaps, a car breaks down, an expensive potion is dropped from the character's backpack, a thief steals the character's purse. If this happens,

the GM may impose a Complication later based on the lacking equipment. For example, the difficulty of a scene may increase by 1 because the character lacks the proper tools to solve a problem.

**Wounded, +1 die:** The character loses 1 die from Body until a Rest scene is narrated and the loss is recovered.

**Loss of a relationship, +1 die:** A relationship listed on the character's sheet ends: a romantic breakup, the end of a friendship, being expelled by a guild, losing one's job, being excommunicated from one's church, and so on.

**Loss of Concentration or Confidence:** The character loses 1 die from his or her Mind until a Rest scene is narrated.

**Loss of freedom, +2 dice:** The character is captured, imprisoned, falls into a trap, or needs to be rescued by the other characters.

**Social Death, +3 dice:** The character is excommunicated from his religion, exiled from his town, demoted from his military rank, disinherited, has his career ruined forever, or otherwise socially impaired for the rest of his life. Whatever you choose, make sure that is something that lasts for the rest of the campaign.

**Death's Door, +3 dice:** The character is grievously wounded, to the point that he or she can survive only with the help of others, and any other physical damage suffered while in this condition would prove fatal to the hero. A character in this condition dies if he is required to make any Body test for any cause that could logically worsen his wounds.

**Game Over, +4 dice:** The character dies, or is otherwise permanently impaired and cannot any longer participate the story. Death or permanent incapacitation may not be permanent in some fantasy or science fiction settings. Death is not the only form of Game Over: be creative. Permanent insanity, lying in a coma, being trapped in a shadow dimension or becoming a wailing ghost are all more interesting options. It all depends on the genre.

## The Heroic Effort

Sometimes, the minimum punishment for failure is game over. If a scene has a loss of life Consequence set by the GM, a player may opt to BURN a Trait. Burning means that a trait gives +2 dice in that scene but the trait won't be useable again until the character uses Experience to get that trait again.

## How Difficult is That?

Hackbooks have lists of dangers and explain how difficult it is to accomplish something in that setting. By comparison with the listed Difficulties, GMs will be able to rate any action, danger, or enemy. In general:

**Difficulty 0, Automatic stuff** does not require rolls. If something can't hurt you, do not bother to roll. Examples: walking through stinging nettles, climbing a moderate slope, defeating a single goblin in fair combat, asking for directions, engaging in elevator small talk with strangers, writing a letter, jumping out of a window on the first storey, and so on. Actions at this level can still be painful, and be part of the narrative, but they cannot prevent the hero from accomplishing the desired action.

**Difficulty 1, Easy stuff** that could be dangerous only if things go extremely bad: Climbing a tree with lots of branches, defeating a couple of goblins or a single orc, opening an ordinary locked door with the proper tools and no time pressure.

**Difficulty 2: Moderate dangers**, such as defeating an inferior foe, or a few (2 to 5) cannon-fodder foes; climbing a wall or a very steep incline using proper equipment, moving out of a room on fire,



swimming through freezing waters for a few minutes, opening a difficult locked door in a short time.

**Difficulty 3: Tricky stuff**, such as defeating an opponent on the same power level as the PCs, or 2-3 competent foes; climbing a wall without equipment; fighting bare-handed against an armed foe; defusing a bomb; running on a rooftop without slipping; surviving a fall from the third storey; opening a high-tech or magically-protected locked door.

**Difficulty 4: Heroic stuff**, like defeating a monster, resisting the spell of a powerful wizard, resisting torture, defeating 10 inferior foes, bending or breaking a steel cage or chain, defeating a national champion at a chess game, driving a car against a train and diving out at the last second.

**Difficulty 5-15:** Defeating an apparently indestructible monster, entering a place from where no-one has ever gotten out alive.

## Different Difficulties for Different Approaches

Sometimes, an encounter may have split difficulties. For example, defeating a large dragon in combat may be Difficulty 15, but tricking that dragon into playing a game of chess

may be Difficulty 5. Convincing him to part with this gold and donate its treasure to the dwarven orphanage may be Difficulty 25!

## Multiple Difficulties Rolled Together

If more than one danger or opponent are grouped in the same scene, add their respective Difficulty levels together.

*For example, in a fantasy setting, defeating a minotaur (d 3) and a bunch of goblins (d 2) has a total Difficulty of 5. Unlocking a door (d 2) while avoiding to trigger its alarm (d 2) is Difficulty 4. Defeating a single orc is D1, but defeating 10 might be D10 (or less in a dungeon corridor where there won't be enough space for multiple foes to outnumber the heroes).*

## How Much Can Happen in One Scene?

Imagine watching a movie with the characters acting out their desired course of action. We define a scene as **everything that happens without changing the place, time of the day, or the characters on stage.**

So you can't narrate: "We defeat the orcs in the Dread Forest and move into the Royal Hall to pick up our rewards from the King", because that would be a change of location and it would mean adding the King and the Royal Court into the stage. You can say: We defeat the orcs and start walking out of the Dread Forest, planning to request audience with the King." The GM will then set up the next scene.

What about the scene where the heroes defeat the dragon and open the door behind the monster, revealing the evil wizard that was controlling the dragon? That's simply one scene (dragon encounter) triggering the next (wizard encounter).

## **Who Does What ? In Which Order?**

In a scene, characters do different things at the same time. Players take turn around the table, generally in clockwise order, but if you prefer you can roll a die to determine who gets to narrate first.

If the characters are cooperating, or could reasonably affect each other's actions, the players should discuss a plan of action before starting their narration, to make sure that a character's actions do not prevent other PCs from performing theirs.

They could agree that a character's actions are narrated before another character's.

*For example, three adventurers (one warrior and two rogues) approach a group of sentinels. The warrior wants to rush in and kill the sentinels, while the rogues prefer a more stealthy approach and want to skulk past the guards unnoticed. The player may decide to narrate the stealthy characters' scene first, and then narrate the combat.*

Some characters may also hold their action until something happens.

*For example: Three SWAT cops burst into the den of a gang of drug dealers holding someone hostage. The sniper stays outside the room, trying to find a line of sight on the gang's boss. A cop confronts the crook holding the hostage, while another points his gun to a couple of men stuffing narcotics into a bag. In this situation, the two cops entering the room try to force the thugs into a surrender, using their Aura rolls with bonuses from their character sheets. If their dice rolls fail, the situation will escalate into a firefight. As soon as this*

*happens, the sniper has a chance to play his scene, shooting at the gang's boss before the other characters roll dice. This is a "held" action. The situation will suggest whether a held action can be part of a scene. There is no single "correct" way to play out this scene, but it just makes sense that the Sniper has a chance to affect the scene before the others.*

*encounter with flying teapots and knives.*

However, the players actions inform the GM's choice. If Dean and Jake did not narrate their intention to investigate the kitchen and decided to wait outside, the GM would have kept the camera on Melissa.

## **Moving From One Scene To Another**

The GM is responsible for pacing and switching from one scene to another. If the characters split up, when a scene ends the GM decides whether to keep the camera on the current character/s or move to other characters in a different location.

*Example: occult investigators Dean, Jake and Melissa are exploring a haunted house. As Melissa wanders into the attic, chasing a mysterious black-clad figure that moves through walls, Dean and Jake face a poltergeist attack in the kitchen. The camera is on Melissa: when she finally sees the ghost, the GM may decide to keep the player hanging and move to Dean and Jake's*

## **Splitting the Party or Keeping it Together?**

Certain genres (for example, horror and thrillers) thrive on separating the characters.

In some stories, the characters' begin in different locales, and then meet. Characters may meet for many reasons. Examples:

- They all have a common goal
- They visit the same place for different reasons
- They all work for the same organization
- They are brought together by a mission.

In other genres, it is a convention to begin the story with the characters already working together. In fantasy dungeoneering adventures, for example, the characters will meet obstacles and foes that no single character could face on his/her own: dragons, archmages, demons, or

even small armies of minions. In this genre, the player characters are supposed to work as a team and travel together. Every decision to split the party should be weighed carefully. A reduced party won't have enough dice to kill that Difficulty 15 dragon...

## **What About Equipment?**

Equipment can be really boring to keep track of, so we do not focus on it unless the genre being played is somehow dependent on that. Just assume that the characters are fully equipped as it befits their professions and descriptions, and may lose equipment for the effect of Complications. In that case, the Difficulty of problems they have to solve may raise by 1 or 2. Certain actions will be impossible without the proper tools, and in certain genres/campaigns it will be necessary to keep track of what the characters are carrying. Hackbooks will have lists of typical equipment carried by characters. However, if you are not sure a character might be carrying some piece of equipment, let the PCs roll for the scene and have the appropriate/desired tools if they roll any 6 (adding a narrative element).

## **What About Treasure?**

Monetary gains are a staple of certain genres, so you can keep track of any riches found by the PCs during a story. Generally what matters is whether the characters' lifestyle may change thanks to the treasure they found, or because they were awarded a big prize or won the lottery. Do not waste time counting every silver piece or dollar bill in their possession. If it is logical that they can afford something, let them have it. If having something would compromise the story, just say it is against the setting and veto that. If you think that having a small influx of money would be a nice change to the story, let them have a windfall with a narrative element (when they roll a 6). If the story or setting has established that they are destitute, let them change their financial status as a logical consequence of the game's fiction. Also remind them that money can go away as quickly as it came...

# **Nightblades**

In this fantasy setting, the characters are young students at an assassins' guild in a large city state, Dorantia. They are all kids between 9 and 12. These kids are immune to magic until they hit puberty, making the early training of street kids as assassins and spies highly desirable. Typical missions include getting into a wizard's abode and stealing or copying documents, defusing magical traps, or killing the magic-users themselves. The kids are typically armed with short, black-tinted poisoned blades hidden under their plain clothes, hence their Nightblades moniker. The blades are tinted in black so they do not reflect light in the night. When Nightblades become young adults, they are allowed to choose one of three paths: become a full-time assassin for hire, become a mentor for new kids, or leave the guild (and the city) with a sizable amount of money to start a new life somewhere else, after undergoing a magic therapy that erases from their mind any memory of their past as guild members. As Nightblades are poor street urchins and young kids easily manipulated by smart masters, the prospect of enough silver to buy a small farm somewhere is attractive. Defection

is rare. Betrayal is punished with a swift death.

Nightblades are conditioned to forget their given names and take new names coming from physical or psychological characteristics. The sample characters are Rust (she has dark red hair), Ash (he once hid into a fireplace when he attempted to escape, and was covered in ashes when he was caught), and Wind (he runs very fast). Kids with wood elf blood often take names of plants or birds (Oak, Willow, Heather, Jay, Buzzard, Hawk). Kids with orcish blood take names of powerful animals (Boar, Bear, Moose, Forest Lion, Wolf).

All characters can read, write and speak Dorantian. Characters may know other languages by listing them as Traits.

Contrary to popular opinions, these young assassins are not cruel -- they are taught to take lives only when necessary. Killing a rogue alchemist who is about to release an army of acid elementals on the city is the lesser evil. However, in corrupt, power-hungry Dorantia killing is frequently necessary.

## **Magic**

Magic exists and is powerful: mages can summon demons, create elemental servitors, curse people

and throw fireballs from their fingertips. Most mages of this power level are old and frail, because magic takes many years of study. Dorantia has very powerful alchemist guild, controlled by lodges called Squares or Circles, involved in continuous, behind-the-back struggles for power. Chemicals discarded by alchemists end up in the town's sewers and create monstrous mutations like intelligent rats and giant cockroaches. The most dangerous non-human creatures that may be met are the Philter Wraiths -- people addicted to alchemical waste and low-quality potions, especially love philters and healing potions, who turn into shaggy, powerful creatures that can be killed only by silver weapons or restricted by golden chains.

Magic can't affect children. Of course, a child could still be killed by a summoned creature, or by a building burning down because of a magically cast flame, but a mage cannot directly affect the child with a spell.

Kids are affected by potions like anyone else.

## **Technology**

Technology is equivalent to late Roman/early medieval. Transportation is by horse for noblemen and rich people.

Commoners walk or travel in a cart pulled by ponies. Streets are cobbled. There is a sewer system. The importance of hygiene is not well understood. Rich people rely on expensive potions to cure their ailments. Poor people just pray and hope for the better.

## **Law**

Law is harsh but fair. Capital punishment is rare but applied to heinous crimes. Law is enforced by the Red Sleeves -- city guardsmen, some very young, wearing a distinctive tunic with a red right sleeve, and a coat of scale mail. Red Sleeves are typically armed with a short spear, a shield, and a straight short sword.

## **Government**

Dorantia is the capital of the Dorantian Empire. It has two Emperors aided by a council of elders and guildmasters. The Guild of Alchemy and the Guild of Entertainers are the real powers, and often the Emperors themselves must bow down to their will. It is said that the lives of both Emperors depend on magic and alchemy, and their popularity with the masses derives from arena games.

## **Character Restrictions**

The characters may NOT learn any magic, and are immune to it. They are immune to spells cast upon them, but NOT to the effects caused by magic in the natural world. So a kid may not be enchanted or even healed by magic, but he can be killed by a monster summoned by magic, or suffocate in a burning building set on fire by a fireball spell.

Remember that the PCs are kids: their life experience is limited, and they won't be taken seriously by most adults (until the "kid" drives 10 inches of Dorantian steel into their backs, poison their drinks, or sets their house on fire, that is).

Nightblades are not allowed to leave the city, except on short, controlled trips just outside the city walls, in the forests North of town, to train in wilderness survival, orienteering, and to pick plant and mushroom materials for poison-making. Those who try to leave the city without permission are killed.

All characters are humans but can have orc, elf or halfling blood as these races mix with humans. There is racial animosity between people of different blood. Half-elves are stereotyped as aloof and arrogant, Half-orcs as stupid and aggressive.

## **Equipment**

Nightblades typically carry thin ropes that can hold their weight, a bag of caltrops to dissuade pursuers, a poisoned blade, and a pouch with a few copper coins. The blade is in a leather scabbard tied to the character's left forearm, hidden by long sleeves.

## **The Story**

This is a story for a single Nightblade, Ash, a boy of 12. A player will run Ash and the other will be the GM. If you are going to be Ash, stop reading now. An experienced GM can adapt the story for more characters. The story should be concluded in around one hour of play time, but this is variable.

## **Story Hook**

Agramelus the mage has received a dangerous book from Lisius, a foreign merchant. The guild of assassins is tasked with recovering this book before Agramelus can learn the spells it contains. Willow, the old blind teacher that mentors Ash, Rust, and Wind, must choose one of the three kids to enter the mage's sancta sanctorum and steal the book. If necessary, Agramelus may be killed, but this is not a priority.

Rust has a bad feeling about this mission. She had a dream in which she died, smothered by a heap of falling books. She doesn't want to go.

Wind doesn't care. He may go but does not volunteer to do so. If Ash volunteers, Rust and Wind will have no objection.

## Problems

Agramelus lives in a villa, on a hill. The building is surrounded by high walls.

### High Walls

Difficulty 2 to scale, 3 if without equipment like a rope.  
**Consequence:** Ash gives up scaling the wall.

**Complication:** someone sees him attempting to scale the walls and calls the city militia).

### Guards

The villa is guarded by a couple of watchmen armed with short swords (Fistur and Gallius, difficulty 2 to defeat in combat, difficulty 3 to persuade).

**Consequence:** Ash is forced to abort the mission and try again another night.

**Complication:** Ash must escape the two or be caught and taken before Agramelus after a night of beating that will reduce his Body by 1 die).

### Watchdogs

The inside of the villa is guarded by two large watchdogs (Furius and Demon, difficulty 2). Ash will have to deal with the dogs, killing them, putting them to sleep with poisoned food, or distracting them.

**Consequence:** Ash is bitten in a leg and loses 1d from Body until he is back home and narrates a rest scene.

**Complication:** A wound received by a dog bite develops an infection. The pain and fever give Ash a -1 die on Mind.

## Secrets and Twists

All the windows in the building are protected by iron gratings. One, however, was damaged by a burglary attempt and can be removed (difficulty 3, consequence: ash slips down and is wounded, losing 1 die from Body, complication: Ash falls down and is attacked by the watchdogs).

The front door is protected by an alarm spell. Ash may try to lock pick the door (Difficulty 3, consequence: Ash is not able to open this lock.



**Complication:** a silent alarm attracts the golem (described below) who will be waiting for him behind the door.

### **Too Many books**

Agramelus has at least 10 books that fit the description of the book Ash is supposed to steal. These are huge tomes, too heavy for Ash to carry of all them, and too complex to be understood with a casual skimming through their ancient, dusty parchment pages. Ash should add some narrative element to pick the right book.

### **Monsters in the House**

Agramelus has three monsters in the house, that could be met as Complications. One is a **giant slug** with two long tentacles that project from its head. It lives in a small underground chamber that can be reached via a trapdoor. The slug attacks by entangling its victim with its tentacles and then biting and dissolving its victim with its highly corrosive saliva. Fighting with the giant slug is Difficulty 3. Consequence: wound or capture. It is vulnerable to salt, which could be taken from the kitchen (add +2 tactical dice in an action scene if the player thinks of using salt).

The second monster is a **golem** -- a giant artificial man made of clay. The

golem has a secret weakness, a spot under its right arm that, if pressed, will deactivate it and turn into a lifeless mound of clay. The golem is a Difficulty 4 encounter but Ash may find the weakness mentioned in a book. If Ash knows the weakness, he will have +2 tactical dice to defeat the golem. The golem is immune to poison. Consequence: wound AND capture.

The third monster is a **winged, horned demon**, that has been summoned by a spell in the book. If the book is opened in front of the demon, the demon may be ordered to get back in the book (this would be an Aura roll with +2 dice). The winged demon speaks Dorantian among its many languages and is a Difficulty 6 creature (the GM should make sure the player understands that demons are powerful creatures). Consequence: Ash panics and runs away from the villa.

## **Things That Happened When We Played**

Stories in *High Stakes* are very open-ended. The players add a lot of narrative elements. Masters must be on their toes, vetoing things that disrupt the enjoyment of the story, but at the same time try not to limit the creativity of players. The following events happened when we played this story:

Ash skulked in when only one guard was present. He distracted him with his stage magician tricks and fast-talked his way to the front door.

Attacked by two guard dogs, he defeated them with his poisoned blade. The player then added a story element: since the guard dogs went and came from the house, IF there was an alarm on the door, the dogs' collars had a magic rune that prevented the alarm from going off every time. So Ash wore a collar and loch-picked the door, ignoring the alarm.

Ash then explored the house. He didn't meet any of the monsters. He found a door ajar. He added that the room was a library, and Agramelus had fallen asleep while reading. Searching the books, Ash discovered (another story element added by the player) that Agramelus stuck notes in Elvish on the books. Ash can read Elvish so it was easy for him to determine which was the book he was looking for. Ash did not kill the sleeping mage and managed to steal away with the heavy tome in his knapsack.

Back at the guild, Willow congratulated Ash on a job well done, and Rust thanked him. She revealed she is deathly afraid of dogs and would have hated to face them.

The GM decided that someone had spotted Ash on his way back to the city, and played a follow up story in which Ash, while going out for errands, was shadowed by two thugs. Trying to shake them off, Ash went into a dark alley but was confronted by a philter wraith. Having to pick the lesser evil, Ash let the two thugs capture him. Ash tried to talk the two into releasing him, but was beaten and taken before Agramelus, who tried to learn where his book was kept and who ordered the kid to steal it. Ash did not bend to his threats and was thrown in the trapdoor with the slug monster. So a new adventure began... and another story was told.

## **High Stakes Character Sheet**

Name:

Character Concept:

Body (Physical abilities)

Mind (Smarts)

Aura (Social)

Traits (Things I am Good At)

1

2

3

4

5

Three Persons and my Relationship with them (love, hate, rivalry, etc)

1

2

3

(Optional) Personal Secret (Something About Me That I don't Want the World to Know)

(Optional) A special object, fact or knowledge that defines who I am, guides my actions, or makes me a target)

## **List of Available Hackbooks**

None at the moment but we will inform you. Several authors and publishers are working on High Stakes right now.

## **About the Cover Artist**

Artist: The Galapalo.

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# NIGHTBLADES

Character Concept

**NAME:**

**BODY:**

**MIND:**

**AURA:**

Dice you roll in physical scenes: fight, climb, run, endure pain, resist disease, swim, avoid danger, skulk, ambush, perform sports, jump, bash down, lift, brawl, throw.

Dice you roll in mental scenes: research, study, perform magic, resist persuasion or interrogation, defuse traps, remember, understand, notice, find, discover, plan, disbelieve illusions.

Dice you roll in social scenes: persuade, convince, trick, embezzle, fast-talk, seduce, interrogate, impersonate, lie, act, intimidate, lead, rally, encourage, perform, bully, motivate.



Complication



Failure



Success



Success



Success



Success, add narrative element; you may Explode the die (roll 2 dice).

## TRAITS

List five things your character is good at: skills, talents, languages, knacks, experiences. Each Trait gives you +1 die ONCE per session if you use it in an appropriate scene. Used Traits refresh during a rest scene. Use extra spaces for Experience.

## RELATIONSHIPS

List three persons who are important for you and what kind of relationship you have with them (love, hate, friendship, rivalry, support, etc). Once per session, each Relationship gives you +1 die in a scene about that character.

### PERSONAL SECRET [OPTIONAL]

Something about you that you don't want others to know.

### UNIQUE THING [OPTIONAL]

An object, fact or knowledge that defines you, guides you, or puts you in trouble.