

The Agency: Heroic Talents System

The System

Players create characters by writing a short (~500 words) biography/description which serves as the character sheet. They then designate up to 10 qualities, skills or other descriptors from this bio as the character's talents. **Talents** may be descriptive words such as "strong" or "smart," or descriptions of skills such as "computer programming" or "martial arts." Or even descriptions of assets such as "rich" or "famous." The GM is the final arbitrator of whether a chosen talent is (1) reasonable and (2) fits the tone of the game. In a playtest, one character was allowed to use the description "excessively British" as a talent, to amusingly successful effect. Talents may be repeated (such as Smart x2), but no more than 3 times (even a genius won't be smart x4, but could have smart x3, genius x3, brainy x3, etc.).

In general, any characters can do easy things which anybody could do. For more difficult actions, characters must apply their talents to achieve the action at stake. The player of the character chooses the stakes and makes a case for which talents should apply. The GM decides if the player's action and chosen talents are reasonable. Characters may gain an extra talent temporarily by using equipment appropriate to a task; any item or combination of items acquired in play or reasonably assumed to be on hand. For each applicable talent, roll 1d6. Normally, if any dice roll 5+, the action succeeds. In harsh circumstances, another character's talents or an aspect of the environment might be rolled in opposition, with opposed dice cancelling each other out to see which side keeps its success. If neither side rolls more 5+ results, no opposed stakes succeed; however, as long as any dice succeeded, any unopposed stakes will succeed.

Any or all talents may be exhausted to automatically treat the dice they grant as successful. **Exhausted** talents all return after the next rest period (for instance, eating a meal or sleeping through the night). Think of exerting yourself to the fullest extent of your capacity to get your best results in real life, and afterwards feeling used up and temporarily unable to reach your full potential. Fuel, ammunition or other expendable resources may be exhausted to use appropriate equipment in a similar mechanic to gain an automatic success. Talents and equipment also count as exhausted if a roll using that attribute "busts" - that is, if no dice succeed, and any dice show a "1." One gets exhausted per "1" rolled on the bust. With equipment, this might represent a need for routine maintenance such as sharpening or cleaning.

When the action at stake could result in long-term or permanent consequences, the GM can rank tension as "**high**" or "**critical**." Under normal tension, actions at worst bring exhaustion (due to variables such as exertion, bruises, or just feeling stupid) but actions taken in high tension may result in damage. **Damaged** talents play as unavailable, like exerted ones, but recover more slowly, after one whole day per talent. Damaged equipment must be repaired before it can be used again. Critical tension may result in serious injury or death; talents lost in critical situations are **maimed**, and will not recover without outside intervention (such as medical or psychological care), and take at least a week per talent to recover. Equipment lost in critical situations is **destroyed**. Taking damage under high tension may cause incapacitation; the GM determines if that is at stake. In critical situations, the GM may determine that death is at stake in addition to or instead of simply being maimed. ***This must be declared before the roll.***

The GM will sometimes need to represent monsters; they will have their own talents. Monsters may have talents representing powers which humans could not duplicate, depending on the magical beast the GM is portraying, such as a vampire with a "mind control" talent. Monsters may also duplicate talents as many times as the GM wishes. thus, a Yeti might have "Strong" 5 times.

Characters may gain more talents in the course of play through **heroic moments** and **training** (limit of 3x a single talent still applies). When the GM and other players agree that a character has done something remarkable; some aspect of what was done in the "heroic moment" may be added to the character sheet as a new talent. Training takes a significant amount of downtime (length decided by the GM for type of training chosen by a character), but characters may then add new talents appropriate to the type of training undergone.

The Agency: Heroic Talents System

The Setting: The Agency

Most Agents know very little about the Agency. Its official name appears on the paperwork: The National Park Ranger Service Division of Parazology and Public Safety. Most people ignore that overlong and unenlightening title, simply calling it "The Agency" in casual speech. This equally unenlightening nickname at least presents less of a mouthful. The Agency exists because supernatural events occur from time to time. Some supernatural forces threaten the public good, so an office was appointed to deal with threats occurring within the USA's borders in 1816. The office has remained obscure over time, despite having no policy of secrecy originally. But knowledge is power, and power corrupts. This turned out to be especially true of supernatural knowledge and power, and so keeping these dangerous secrets became one of the primary duties of the Agency.

Still, the secrecy is only possible because the threats the Agency deals with are not wide-spread, and most are either benign or self-limiting. If that were not so, keeping truly dangerous ones secret would be near-impossible. Bigfoot is not a race; it would be a unique creature, if it shows up in this game. Werewolves are not a secret society spanning the globe, although one might encounter a real werewolf. Cults of dark outer gods don't secretly run the government or control the world, though eldritch cults may spring up and threaten a community from time to time. Each case is local and self-contained - and if it grows from there, then all may be lost.

The purpose of the Agency is simple: to keep track of dangerous supernatural creatures and prevent them from harming the civilian population. Regulating human use of magic is not technically part of the Agency's mandate, but the mandate has been stretched to cover certain abuses of magic on the part of human witches and warlocks, including summoning and binding dangerous creatures, mentally controlling other humans, transforming human bodies into something nonhuman, or using combat magic to attack other humans.

The Agency may keep records of spells and rituals which have been documented over the years, and may even have a few artifacts of eldritch power stored away, but these are not whipped out on a whim. In this world, all magic is a curse and inherently unhealthy for humans. It comes from other worlds and corrupts this one. The unluckiest of Agents have encountered cracks in the world from whence such power flows, and few have returned alive or sane from such encounters. The creatures which occur because of these intrusions are usually dangerous enough, and are the most common foe Agents face in the field.

Because the Agency is not well known to law enforcement organizations, it does not usually have free access to their resources. Agents must do all their own legwork, all their own research. However, balancing this lack of recognition is a presidential and congressional mandate covering their duties. So long as Agents do not compromise operational secrecy, they may gain access to any information they require. So, while operating under strictly limited physical resources and budgets, and unable to task members of other agencies to search the records on the Agency's behalf, Agents may access records and surveillance with a modicum of effort. Most Agents recruited from other military and law enforcement organizations got transferred to the Agency because their help was required in a particular mission, after which they had learned too much to be allowed back into circulation.

In general, however, Agents are recruited from among surviving victims of supernatural attack. When the Agency arrives too late, but someone has survived the incident anyway (by luck or skill), the Agency will try to recruit that person. Survival of serious incidents is rare enough that the Agency does not grow by leaps and bounds, but common enough that it (usually) keeps up with the (unfortunately high) attrition rate among Agents. Working for the Agency requires being on call 24/7 as well as training in esoteric methods of defense and the need to keep all work entirely secret. Still, the pay isn't lousy considering that Agents get free room and board along with first-rate medical care. Though more than a few Agents resent being ripped away from their chosen lives and careers at first, most come to grips with the change thanks to the more-than-decent living arrangements ... assuming they survive more than one or two missions.