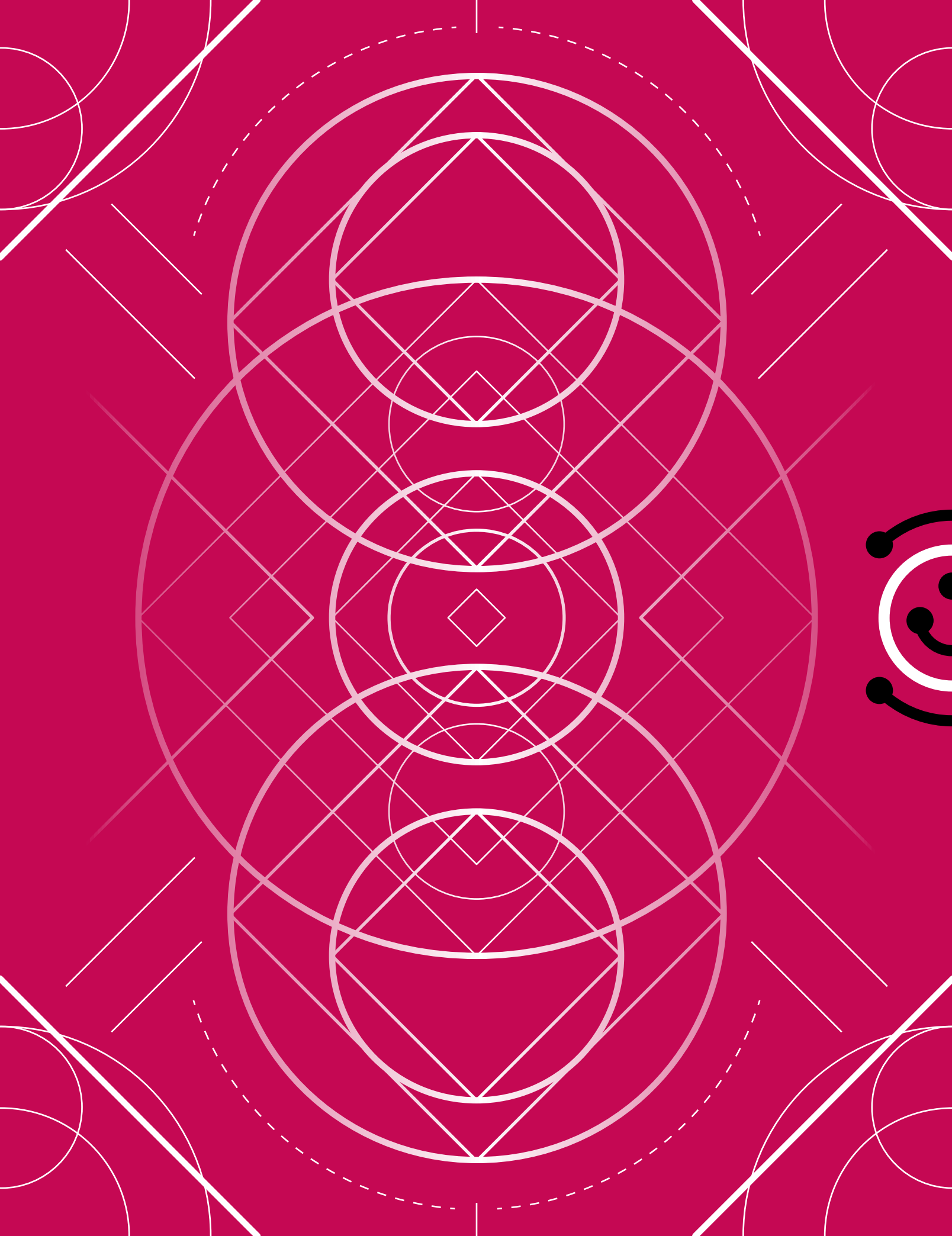
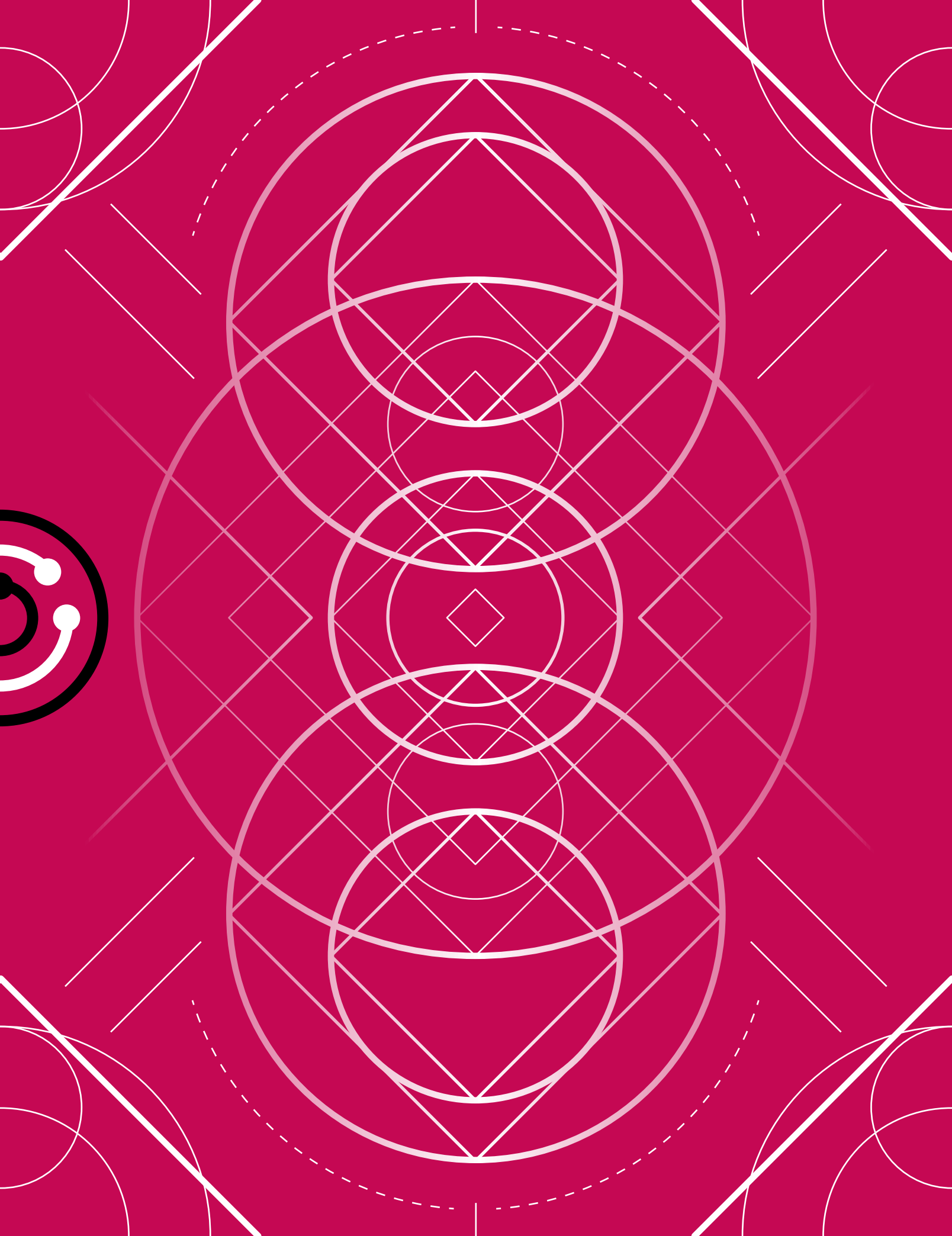
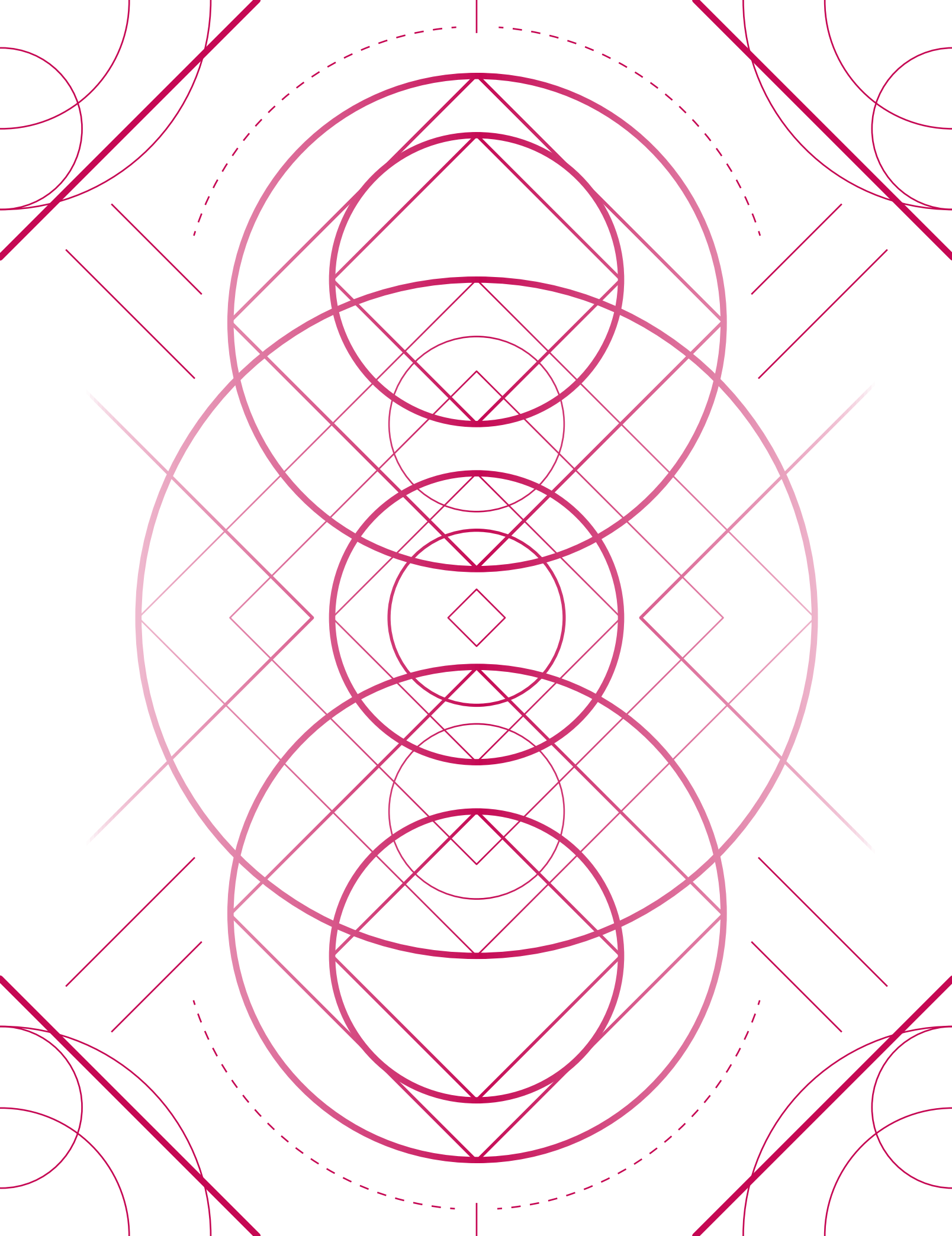

cortex™
PRIME
GAME HANDBOOK
CAM BANKS







# cortex™ PRIME

## GAME HANDBOOK

BY CAM BANKS

FANDOM TABLETOP UNITED GAMING

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*Sovereign Stone Game System* (*1999*)
Don Perrin, Lester Smith with Larry Elmore, Tracy Hickman, and Margaret Weis

*Cortex System Role Playing Game* (*2008*)
Jamie Chambers with Cam Banks, Jennifer Brozek, James Davenport, Digger Hayes, Nathan Rockwood, Floyd C. Wesel

*Leverage: The Roleplaying Game* (*2010*)
Cam Banks, Rob Donoghue, Fred Hicks, Ryan Macklin, Clark Valentine with Matt Forbeck and Laura Anne Gilman

*Smallville Roleplaying Game* (*2010*)
Cam Banks, Joseph Blomquist, Roberta Olson, Josh Roby with Mary Blomquist and Amanda Valentine

*Dragon Brigade Roleplaying Game* (*2011*)
Cam Banks, Dave Chalker, Tracy Hurley, Dain Lybarger, Philippe-Antoine Ménard, Adam Minnie, Andrew Peregrine, and Chris Pierson

*Marvel Heroic Roleplaying* (*2012*)
Cam Banks with Dave Chalker, Rob Donoghue, Matt Forbeck, John Harper, Will Hindmarch, Jeremy Keller, Philippe-Antoine Menard, Jack Norris, Jesse Scoble, and Aaron Sullivan

*Cortex Plus Hacker's Guide* (*2013*)
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*Firefly Role-Playing Game* (*2014*)
Cam Banks, Dave Chalker, Brendan Conway, Mark Diaz Truman, Deanna Gilbert, Eloy LaSanta, Philippe-Antoine Ménard, Jack Norris, Andrew Peregrine, Beau Sheldon, P.K. Sullivan, Monica Valentinelli, Rob Wieland, Margaret Weis

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# CONTENTS




## INTRODUCTION — 4

What is Cortex Prime? 4
The Cortex Primer 6
The Core of Cortex 6
Got it, What Else? 8
What You Need to Play 10
How to Use this Book 13





## 1 PRIME CORE — 14

Dice 16
Hitches and Botches 17
Tests and Contests 18
Difficulty and Opposition 18
Outcomes 19
Heroic Success 20
Effect Dice 20
Being Taken Out 22
Interfering in a Contest 23
Test and Contest Mods 24
Traits 26
Plot Points 27
Plot Point Mods 29
Hero Dice 30
Doom Pool 32
Assets and Complications 34
Assets 34
Complications 36
Asset and Complication Mods 39
Stress 39
Life Points 43





## 2 PRIME CHARACTERS — 44

Defining Characters 46
Prime Sets 47
Affiliations 48
Attributes 49
Distinctions 50
Powers 51
Relationships 55
Resources 56
Skills 57
Values 60
SFX 61
Signature Assets 64
Trait Statements 65
Talents 66
Creating Characters 67
Archetypes 68
Scratch-Built 70
Pathways 73
Growing Characters 82
Session Records 82
Growth 83
Milestones 84





## 3 PRIME SCENES — 86

What are Scenes? 88
Types of Scenes 89
Running Scenes 90
Framing the Scene 90
When to End the Scene 92
What is Conflict? 97
Three Kinds of Conflict 97
Dramatic Order 98
Action Order 98
Taking Initiative 99
Advantage of Scale 99
Timed Tests 101
An Example Throwdown 104





## 4 PRIME SESSIONS — 108

Preparing a Session 110
Game Moderator Characters 114
Major GMCs 114
Minor GMCs 115
Locations as GMCs 116
Extras 116
Mobs 117
Bosses 118
Factions and Orgs 119
Running a Session 120
Session Tricks 123





## 5 PRIME SETTINGS — 124

Intro to Genres 126
Pick Three and Add Cortex 128
Eidolon Alpha 132
Hammerheads 150
TRACE 2.0 164





## 6 PRIME LISTS — 180

The Power List 182
Power SFX 191
Power Limits 193
The Ability List 194
Abilities as Gear 213
Fantasy Milestones 214
The Motor Pool 216
Characters from the Cortex Multiverse 219

GLOSSARY & INDEX — 228
CHARACTER FILES — 244

# WHAT IS CORTEX PRIME?

Cortex Prime is a **multi-genre**, **modular**, **session-centered roleplaying game**. It's based on the same underlying rules system previously used in several award-winning RPGs based on comic books and television shows. These games were different from one another in ways both major and minor, yet the heart of Cortex was evident through all of them. With the Cortex Prime Game Handbook, you have the tools and resources to create your own custom-built game using a myriad of switches and dials.



ODERA IGBOKWE





# MULTI-GENRE

Cortex Prime handles a multitude of genres from books, television, movies, and video games. Almost any genre you can imagine can be represented with this system. You can cross genres, mixing them up and using elements from more than one in your game, as you like.

Cortex has been used for science fiction, steampunk, fantasy, space opera, prime time drama, superheroes, crime capers, and supernatural action. It works best for genres that emphasize a cast of interesting and interconnected characters in settings that let them show off their talents, personalities, and relationships.



# MODULAR

Cortex Prime isn't a fixed set of rules. It's more of a toolkit, or a big box of building bricks. From a central system of dice and descriptive traits, you can assemble your own game from modular parts (or mods) to best suit the way you and your friends like to play. You include only those mods that suit your genre preferences and leave out those that you aren't as excited by. You might switch out some mods for others after you've played a few sessions, just as you might switch out the characters that you play.



# SESSION-CENTERED

Cortex Prime is designed to suit groups of players who meet together in person around a table or online around a virtual tabletop, ready to collaborate on a shared story. Each session of play is its own experience. String a few sessions together and you get a story arc or something more episodic. By focusing more on individual sessions, Cortex Prime gives groups the flexibility to tell stories together that are short and sweet or long and involved.

Cortex Prime makes significant use of terminology from the scripted entertainment that inspires it. The stories unfold in scenes, including opening and tag scenes, bridge scenes, and flashback scenes. And we talk about beats, reveals, and conflicts when setting up those scenes and the overall session. Classic RPG stories such as dungeon crawls or space battles can be included in this kind of structure, making those stories come alive in Cortex Prime.



# ROLEPLAYING GAME

Following the tradition of similar tabletop games from the Seventies onwards, Cortex Prime is a game in which players create characters and make decisions for them, playing their roles as if they were a combination of actor and screenwriter. Cortex Prime has rules, like any other game, and uses dice to provide an element of randomness and unpredictability. Because it embraces player imagination, decision-making, and agency, it has rules for affecting the outcome of the dice and the fate of the characters.

Cortex Prime players are encouraged to embrace their characters' motivation, personality, and backgrounds. In many cases those elements are hardwired into their character file as traits. As the stories develop, everyone is invited to really sell these characters' victories and failures, their highs and their lows, true to who their characters are. As sessions go by, these characters grow in meaningful ways, and reveal more of themselves and the settings they inhabit.

# READ THIS FIRST: THE CORTEX PRIMER

If you've come from other roleplaying games, even if you've played previous Cortex-based games, it might seem daunting to jump straight into a modular, customizable rules-set like this one. This primer serves as a bare bones look at Cortex Prime before plunging into the rest of the rulebook.

## THE CORE OF CORTEX

Here is the core of Cortex, stripped down to the basics:

1. Everyone writes down their character's name and one central thing they're good at doing. This is their trait ("Seasoned Journalist").
2. Each player makes decisions for their character ("What would Jane do?").
3. If a player wants their character to do something that the character's trait would help them do, they roll 6 6 6 ("My experience as a journalist will help me gather information on this subject").
4. If their trait doesn't have anything to do with the thing they want to do, they roll 6 6 ("My experience as a journalist will not help me win this fistfight").
5. Every character starts with one plot point (represented by this symbol: PP).

In this handbook, dice are represented by the symbols below, using solid shapes for dice type and numbers outlined by their respective dice shapes for example rolls.

**DICE SYMBOL REFERENCE CHART**

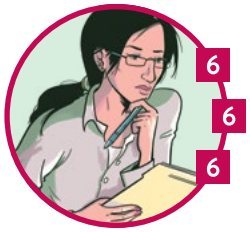
| TYPE | SYMBOL | SAMPLE RESULTS |
|---|---|---|
| d4 | 4 | 2 4 3 |
| d6 | 6 | 2 4 5 3 |
| d8 | 8 | 2 7 3 6 |
| d10 | 10 | 8 2 5 9 |
| d12 | 12 | 8 10 4 11 |

Here's a super basic Cortex Prime character:

### JANE DeFALT

**BASE TRAIT:**
Seasoned Journalist

PP




When you want to do something and there's something that might get in your way (such as the environment, another character, or time), you make a test. Someone else picks up dice to establish the difficulty number you must beat to succeed.

- For easy opposition, roll 6.
- For challenging opposition, it's 6 6.
- For hard opposition, it's 6 6 6 or more.

Then you either roll the default 6 6 or roll 6 6 6 if your trait is applicable.

If you roll 1 on a die, that die is called a hitch and doesn't count. When you roll a hitch the GM can give you a PP. You can spend a PP later to add a 6 to your roll if you can describe something cool that helps you out.

Total up your dice, excluding any hitches. If you had more than two dice, only add the best two dice together. Your opposition does the same.

- If you beat your opposition's total, you succeed!
- If you get equal to or less, you fail. Talk about what happened instead.

# THREE EXAMPLE SITUATIONS

## THE DEADLINE

1



Jane needs to get a big pitch done by tomorrow morning.

The game moderator (GM) decides staying up late should be an easy task, so they roll 6.

| GM's Roll | Player's Roll |
|---|---|
| 6 | |

2



Jane's player reasons that she has plenty of experience with all-nighters from journalism school.

The trait, Seasoned Journalist, is applicable to this contest so the GM allows them to roll 6 6 6.

| GM's Roll | Player's Roll |
|---|---|
| 6 | 2 3 6 |

Jane's player chooses the two highest results for a total of 9, **which beats the GM!**

3



Jane manages to stay up all night to finish her pitch. Next morning, she walks into her boss's office and slams it down on the desk.

## THE INFORMANT

1



Jane needs to talk to a source inside a members-only biker bar.

The GM decides that it should be more challenging to get past the bouncer and rolls 6 6.

| GM's Roll | Player's Roll |
|---|---|
| 3 4 | |

2



Jane's player tries to convince the GM that her journalistic background would make her a smooth talker.

The GM disagrees that her trait would apply here so they restrict the player to rolling only 6 6.

| GM's Roll | Player's Roll |
|---|---|
| 3 4 | 1 5 |

Jane's total of 5 doesn't beat the GM, but she picks up a PP for rolling a one (a **hitch**).

3



The bouncer shoves Jane into the mud. The source comes out and hands her his card. She'll get her info later—but will she hit her deadline?

## THE SCOOP

1



Jane, working undercover to investigate possible corruption, must sneak into the corporate lab to get some files.

The GM decides this task should be hard to pull off and rolls 6 6 6.

| GM's Roll | Player's Roll |
|---|---|
| 3 5 5 | |

2



Jane's player points out that her informant provided the lab schedule, so she uses Seasoned Journalist and a PP for good measure.

The GM agrees to that and lets the player roll 6 6 6 6.

| GM's Roll | Player's Roll |
|---|---|
| 3 5 5 | 4 5 5 6 |

Jane's player chooses the two highest results for a total of 11, **which beats the GM!**

3



Jane discovers some damning evidence and sneaks out with the incriminating paperwork before anyone notices she's not at her desk.

JEREMY NGUYEN

# GOT IT. WHAT ELSE?



Cortex Prime provides mechanical support for the various genre styles that you may want to emulate, or for the way you want to play. From drama-heavy games with lots of character interaction to action-heavy games with perilous challenges and exciting opposition, Cortex Prime can be modified, assembled, and run in hundreds of ways.

There's a common language shared by each Cortex Prime game, and it's this language that makes the system so readily customizable. Let's go into a little more detail about what that design language looks like.

## TRAITS

Every Cortex Prime game—even our stripped-down basic rules-lite version—incorporates traits. A **trait**, when you get right down to it, is a descriptive label with a **die rating** attached. Nearly everything on your character file is a trait. For the most part, the rating is a die type (d4 through d12) but it could be a multiple of dice (like d8 d8) or two die types together (like d4 + d12). Cortex Prime traits are almost universally this: Trait Name <dice icon>.

A game typically breaks traits down into **sets**, such as attributes, roles, values, and so on. If you're building your own Cortex Prime game, you pick trait sets that most suit your setting or world. Maybe you want to use affiliations and not attributes, or relationships and not skills. Maybe everyone has super powers or maybe only aliens do. Sets are like buckets the various traits are dropped into, dividing a character file into areas that are easily defined and assigned when making new characters.

Trait sets are also the individual components of a dice pool. Most of the time when a player rolls to determine an outcome, they grab a die from each of the appropriate sets on their character file. The act of choosing a die from a set helps pull you back into the story and give some narrative structure to what may otherwise seem like just an elaborate dice game.

## PLOT POINTS

Cortex Prime games run on a narrative currency called **plot points** (PP) that influence the plot. They're the fuel for the system's engine. The cycle of earning, spending, and then earning more plot points is something that you must maintain when deciding what mods to use.

So long as there are various ways to earn PP, spend PP, and explain what it means to do this within the context of the story, you're set.

If you rely too heavily on PP being generated by utterly random occurrences (such as rolling hitches), players may feel that their character's progress is arbitrary and out of their control. Always include some way the player can make a risky or challenging choice and gain PP in the process. Don't leave this to the GM to manage—it should be in the hands of the players.

## ROLL AND KEEP

In Cortex Prime, you may roll a lot of dice, but you don't add them all together. By default, players keep two dice to add together for their total.

The statistical qualities of rolling a bunch of dice of varying sizes is a little beyond this primer, but if you're worried about the odds, take some comfort in the fact that it operates on a curve. It seems obvious when choosing dice that a d12 is better than a d4, that five dice should logically result in a better average total than two (especially if you keep the two highest rolling dice in any given roll).

But there's a lot of variation there. The more dice you roll and the bigger they are, the better chance you have of getting a higher total. There's an element of risk, however, because the more dice you roll, the better chance of rolling hitches.

## STEPPING UP AND STEPPING DOWN

Cortex Prime games feature a lot of "dice tricks." One of the most common methods of altering the outcome is by changing the type of die being rolled. Things like distinctions, SFX, and talents often allow you to **step up** a die (changing it from a die of one size to one of a larger size) or **step down** a die (the reverse). We do this in lieu of flat modifiers, to preserve the swingy nature of the dice pool, and to give you the feeling of improving your odds without actually breaking the balancing nature of the roll-and-keep method.

## ASSETS AND COMPLICATIONS

Another central part of Cortex Prime is the use of assets and complications. This includes such things as stress or resources or stunts—basically, temporary traits that either help you out or make life more difficult for you.

An **asset** is a trait you create during play that instantly labels a part of the fiction as significant. Sure, there are guns everywhere in an action movie setting, but when it's a Gun 8 people take notice. Whether you create them by spending PP or as a result of a die roll, an asset allows you to improve your chance at influencing the story by adding more dice in a flavorful and thematic way.

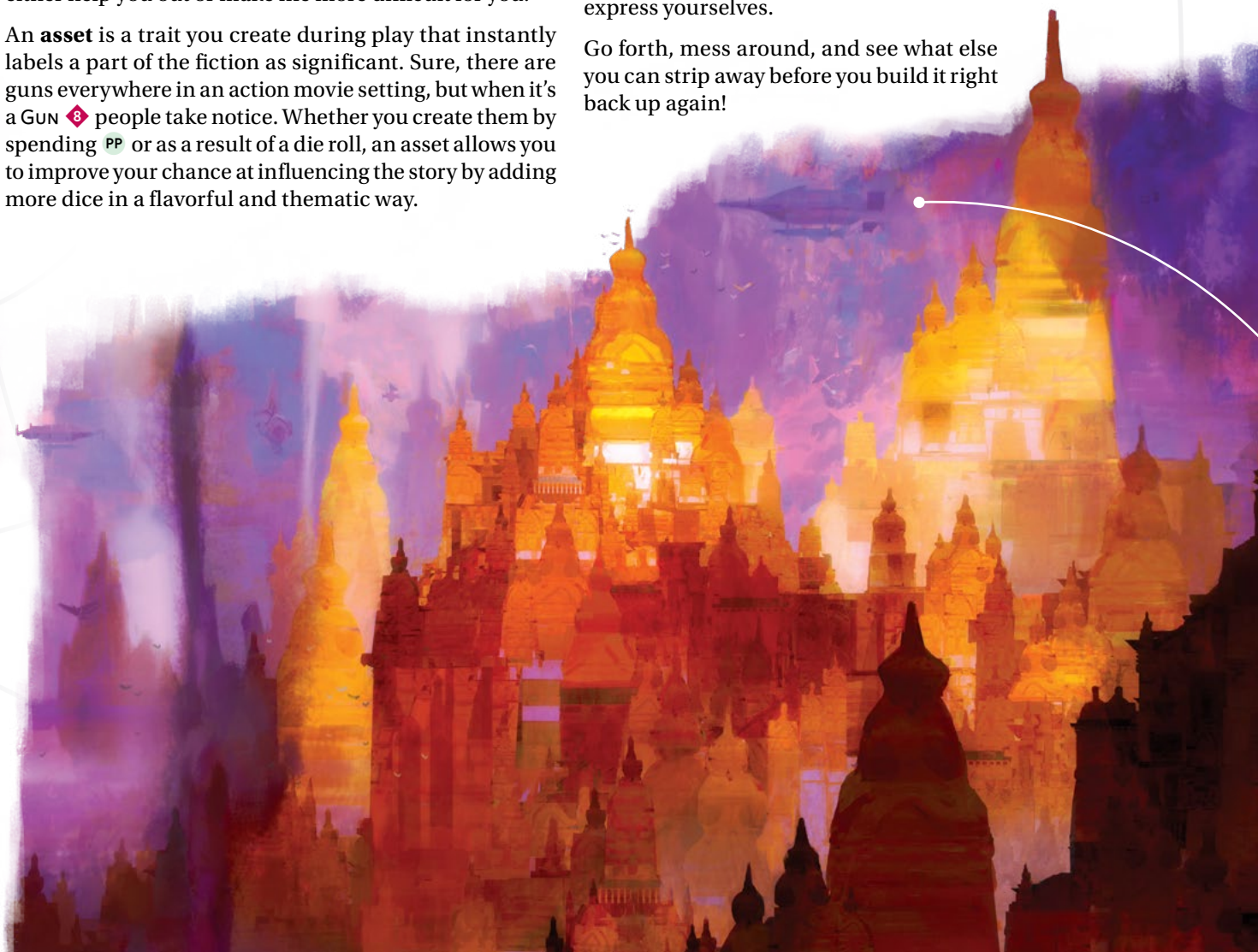
By contrast, **complications** are traits that make things harder for you. As Cortex Prime is almost always a game of opposed dice rolls, increasing the risk of something makes the opposition better by increasing their dice pool. Complications (or stress, or whatever they end up being called in your game) are bonus dice included in your opposition's dice pool when your negative circumstances would hinder you.

A healthy game of Cortex Prime often ends up with the playing area or character files or chat windows covered in sticky notes or index cards, each labeled with some asset or complication or equivalent. They come and go, they change hands, they get bigger or reduced in size, and they're a sign that the story is evolving and changing, directly affected by the players and their choices.

# WHAT'S NEXT?

This is just the beginning of a book packed with ideas, suggestions, variables, and mods that you can use to create the game you want. With a shared design language and a shared goal of emulating genre, the rules and mods in this book are primed and ready to inspire, motivate, save time, and above all allow you and your players to express yourselves.

Go forth, mess around, and see what else you can strip away before you build it right back up again!



THOMAS SCHOLES

# WHAT YOU NEED TO PLAY

To play Cortex Prime, you'll need a few other people, someone to manage the rules and prep the session, some dice, and a handful of other supplies. Most of all, you need this *Game Handbook* and a few hours to play the game.



ANNA "SARIANNE" NEUMANNOVÁ

## PLAYERS

Cortex Prime works best with two to six **players**, each creating and playing their own **player character** or **PC**. The PCs together make up the **group**. Each PC gets their own **character file** for players to record important game statistics and details.

### PLAYERS ARE RESPONSIBLE FOR:

- Deciding what their PCs do.
- Confronting any problems that the GM throws in front of them.
- Pointing their PCs in directions that make for good stories.
- Supporting other PCs and giving them a shot at what they're good at.
- Deciding how their PCs change and grow over time.
- In general, telling the story of their PCs.

## GAME MODERATOR

One person at the table doesn't take a PC, instead playing the role of the **game moderator (GM)**. The GM manages the **session** and presents exciting **scenes**, **locations**, and **game moderator characters** (or **GMCs**). Often, but not always, the GM is the person who bought the game and has read the book a few times.

### THE GM IS RESPONSIBLE FOR:

- Preparing and presenting the session to the players.
- Deciding how the GMCs react to the group's actions.
- Asking leading questions of the players to lead them into further adventure.
- Revealing the important details of the setting to the players.
- Facilitating the game rules at the table and maintaining the pace of the session.
- In general, bringing the world to life around the other players.

# GAME DICE

Cortex Prime uses game dice of various sizes. You can pick them up from hobby stores or online. Dice often come in sets but can also be purchased individually. For each session, you need a bunch of four-sided, six-sided, eight-sided, ten-sided, and twelve-sided dice. You won't need the twenty-sided die, or dice marked with special symbols, or those with percentage numbers. You will, however, need a fair amount of dice. We recommend a communal pool of dice for the table, with at least three or four of each type. The more dice you have the better.

If you're playing online, you might have dice simulators for making virtual dice rolls. Make sure everyone playing approves of the method you use, and that everyone can see the results of each die in your die rolls.



**TETRAHEDRON**
Four equilateral triangles with three numbers on each face. Indicated by whatever number is on top or bottom.



**HEXAHEDRON**
Six square faces, most common type of dice used.



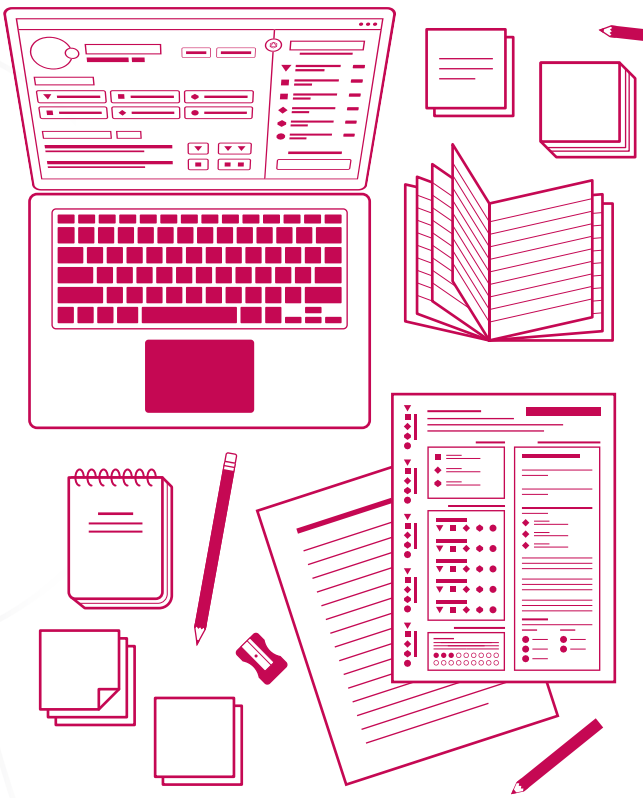
**OCTAHEDRON**
Eight equilateral triangles (made up of two pyramids).



**PENTAGONAL TRAPEZOHEDRON**
Ten congruent kites, zero represents 10.



**DODECAHEDRON**
Twelve pentagonal faces connected to each other.





# A WAY TO KEEP TRACK

There's a good reason tabletop RPGs are often called pen-and-paper RPGs. Every player as well as the GM should at least have access to scratch paper and writing implements. A whiteboard or dry-erase gaming mat large enough to draw maps and other diagrams on is helpful.

Cortex Prime is also purpose-built to be played online or with our digital tools. Whether your group uses tablets or laptops to keep track of character files and notes around the table, or your "table" is entirely virtual and you're gathered together online, you can eschew the traditional pen and paper for a digital solution.

Visit *www.cortexRPG.com* to learn more.

# PLOT POINT TOKENS

You need a set of about a dozen or so game tokens to represent plot points. These can be poker chips, coins, glass beads, or plastic counters. Put a pile of them in the middle of the table where the GM and players can reach them.

When using our digital tools to play Cortex Prime, keeping track of plot points can be handled virtually.



**POKER CHIPS**



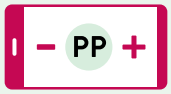
**COINS**



**GLASS BEADS**



**PLASTIC**




**DIGITAL**



**CANDY**

# SETTING

Every Cortex Prime game needs a **setting**, although in some cases the setting is created by the players and GM during the first session. Even if collaborative setting creation is your goal, you should have an idea of what kind of game you want to play, and what sort of world, background, and shared space your group expects to create characters and stories inside.

Pre-made Spotlight settings are included in this book, as well as in other Cortex Prime supplements and products. These settings vary in genre, tone, and detail. You can expect pre-made settings to specify what mods and traits are expected, what major conflicts, themes, and ideas are present in the world, as well as who the characters are, broadly speaking.

**Note:** This Handbook has three Spotlight settings: *Eidolon Alpha* (page 132), *Hammerheads* (page 150), and *TRACE 2.0* (page 164).

Cortex Prime is built on previously published Cortex games based on popular media properties such as comic books and television shows, and each of those games has its own setting. You can treat those older games as pre-made settings or use them to inspire your own. You can also use a setting you and your group already know and enjoy, either from another roleplaying game or from media properties that don't have their own RPG adaptations.

### OUR EXAMPLE CORTEX GROUP

Throughout this book we include examples of play, and those examples feature the same players, GM, and characters for consistency. They are:

- **Mary Rose:** Game Moderator
- **Amanda:** The Engineer
- **Adam:** The Hero
- **Tina:** The Sage

If you look closely, you'll see the Engineer, the Hero, the Sage, and several other archetypal characters in the artwork gracing these pages. Like Cortex Prime itself, they may vary widely in representation but they share common traits. See if you can spot them!



H. WON

# HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

The *Cortex Prime Game Handbook* is divided into seven chapters, each covering an important part of the game:

**Prime Intro:** You're reading this chapter already.

**Prime Core:** The basic rules of any Cortex Prime game and how they work, including dice, traits, and plot points.

**Prime Characters:** Defining, describing, and creating characters for Cortex Prime.

**Prime Scenes:** Framing, moderating, and resolving scenes.

**Prime Sessions:** How to plan for and manage Cortex Prime sessions, including GM advice.

**Prime Settings:** How to build and use your own settings. Features three Spotlight settings for use as-is or as inspiration.

**Prime Lists:** An appendix of lists, followed by a glossary and index.


KEVIN HONG

If you skipped "Read This First: A Cortex Primer" earlier in this chapter, start there. If you'll be the game moderator, you should read through the entire book at least once, and pay special attention to the Prime Core, Prime Characters, Prime Scenes, and Prime Sessions chapters as they contain the bulk of the game's rules. Read the Prime Settings section for ideas on what sort of world you and your players want to set your game in. Use the Prime Lists chapter for reference as needed.



Players should eventually be familiar with Prime Core and Prime Characters, but as the GM it's one of your responsibilities to introduce the rules and concepts to the players. There isn't anything in this book that's especially secret or that needs to be hidden from the players, unless you plan to use one of the Spotlight settings for your game—in that case you may want to encourage the players to let you brief them on those, to avoid spoiling secrets.

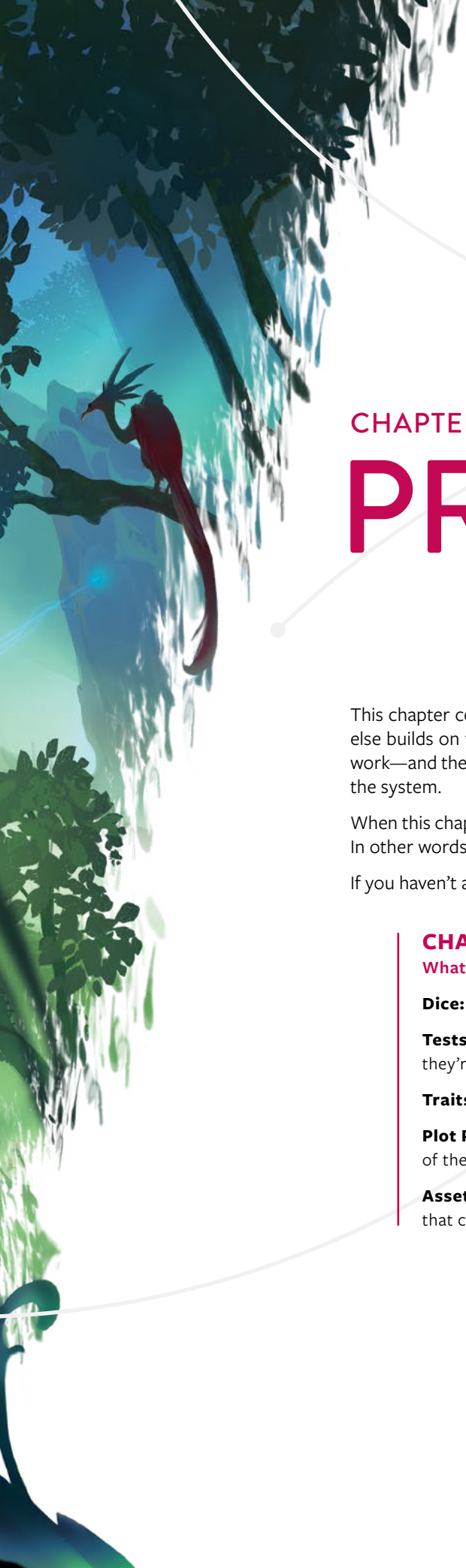
## USING MODS

This book includes a lot of **mods** that expand the basic rules, as explained in other chapters such as Prime Characters and Prime Sessions. Due to the modular approach of Cortex Prime, everything about this game can be hacked, drifted, modified, and changed as you see fit. Where possible, the book tells you what to expect when you use specific mods, and in some cases, what happens when you use two or more mods together, so you can assemble the right version of Cortex Prime for your game table.

Mods are called out using this symbol . You might see this symbol a lot. Where there's a stated rule or game mechanic and there's no mod symbol next to it, assume that you're reading a Prime Core rule.



NOÉ LEYVA



CHAPTER 1

# PRIME CORE

This chapter covers the rules and mechanics at the core of Cortex Prime. Everything else builds on these systems and procedures. Once you understand how these rules work—and the mods that change how they work—you can do whatever you want with the system.

When this chapter refers to "you," it's usually a generic player, not necessarily the GM. In other words, this chapter is for everyone.

If you haven't already read the "Cortex Primer" on page 6, go back and do that now.

## CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

**What's in this chapter:**

**Dice:** How the dice work and how to roll them.

**Tests and Contests:** How characters deal with the situations they're confronted by.

**Traits:** The elements of every character.

**Plot Points:** The way players can influence the outcome of their actions.

**Assets and Complications:** The positive and negative influences that can tip the outcome and shape the story.



ARTUR TREFFNER

# DICE

Cortex Prime uses five kinds of dice: d4, d6, d8, d10, d12. The number tells you how many sides the die has: the more sides, the bigger the numbers. A handful of dice is called a **dice pool**.

When you roll a die, the number on the uppermost face is the **result**. Usually you add results together to get a **total**. Adding results together is about the only math you need to do in Cortex Prime.

The dice introduce a random element to play, helping us resolve tests and contests. Bigger dice (more sides) means potentially better outcomes, and more dice means more reliable outcomes.

## DIE RATINGS AND STEPS

Every trait in the game has a **die rating**. Whenever you use the trait, you pick up a die of that size for your dice pool. Occasionally, you're asked to swap out one or more dice for bigger or smaller dice. This is called **stepping up** or **stepping down** a die rating. Stepping down a d4 makes it go away. A d12 can only be stepped up in certain situations, such as taking out a character.




### BEATS, SCENES, AND SESSIONS

Every time you sit down to play Cortex Prime, it's called a **session**. The flow of the session can be broken down into **scenes**. Scenes can be further broken down into chunks called **beats**, and a **test** is a character's attempt to do something (usually involving rolling some dice), typically over the course of a single beat. A **contest** is an exchange between two or more characters with conflicting goals. These concepts are the basic building blocks for creating a narrative.

For more on managing and running scenes, see Prime Scenes (page 86). For more on handling sessions of Cortex Prime, including preparing the session and GMCs, see Prime Sessions (page 108).

To step up a die by one, swap it for a die that's one step larger than the original. To step down a die by one, swap it out for a die that's one step smaller.

Die ratings usually correspond to how much effect that trait has on the outcome of any given test or contest. They're a useful shorthand for how strong, smart, skilled, or important a character is.

More sides doesn't always mean *better,* so much as it means *more important or significant in the story.* Having a d12 in a trait like STRONG vs a d12 in a trait like JUSTICE doesn't mean that strength or valuing justice measure the same things. It just means that being inhumanly strong can affect the outcome just as much as being obsessed with justice does.

# THE DICE POOL

Any time you're called to roll dice for a test or contest, you assemble a dice pool out of relevant trait sets on your character file, plus any bonus dice from other sources. The dice pool represents all of the various things that might contribute to your success. There's no maximum number of dice in a dice pool, but generally the pool includes anywhere from three to eight dice.

The GM assembles a dice pool (the **opposition pool**) based on what your character is up against. For a **test**, this usually starts with two **difficulty dice** chosen by the GM.

**The Child** wants to find out where the portal leads.

Based on the difficulty of the task, the GM assembles a pool of 8 8 which is considered challenging.




YANGTIAN LI

For a **contest**, whoever acts first—usually a player—puts together a dice pool. Instead of difficulty dice, the opposition puts together their own dice pool once they see how the initiating character does on their roll.

The **doom pool** is a mod that does away with difficulty dice and replaces them with a pool of dice that grows and shrinks during play. Any reference to difficulty dice usually applies to games using a doom pool also.

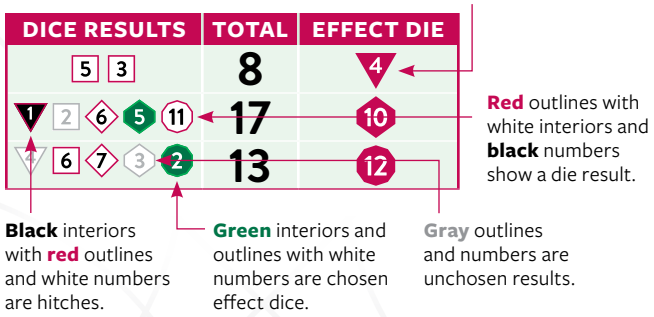
# ROLLING DICE

Usually when you roll two or more dice, you choose two results to add together for your **total**, and a third die to use as the **effect die**. If you're rolling one die, your total is equal to the result of that die. If you don't have a third die, your effect die starts at 4. See "Effect Dice" on page 20 for more on how effect dice work.

All rolls, including the GM's, are done in the open. After rolling dice, leave them on the table in view of everyone. Only pick up the dice once a test or contest has been resolved.

We differentiate the dice results by the color of the outline, interior, and numbers.

**Red** interiors with white numbers is die type.




**Red** outlines with white interiors and **black** numbers show a die result.

**Black** interiors with **red** outlines and white numbers are hitches.

**Green** interiors and outlines with white numbers are chosen effect dice.

**Gray** outlines and numbers are unchosen results.

You are free to choose *any two dice* for your total. You don't need to choose the two highest rolling dice. You may want to save a die with more sides for your effect die, even if it was the highest result. Likewise, the GM may decide to let the dice fall where they may and always keep the two highest rolling dice, or use the choice of two dice as a way to moderate the opposition without simply fudging dice.

You and the other players make decisions for the group in response to the challenging situations the GM presents. *Not every decision needs to involve dice.* Don't bother picking up the dice unless the outcome of a roll—success or failure—would be interesting or move the story along, or unless there's something keeping the player from doing what they want to do. If a particular outcome is guaranteed to happen, the GM might either describe what happens and move on, or have the player narrate the outcome of what their character does.

# HITCHES AND BOTCHES

If you roll a 1 (a **hitch**) on a die, it doesn't count toward your total at all and can't be used as your effect die. It's called a hitch because it's a little obstacle that could lead to an inconvenience—a complication—without ensuring failure. Set hitches aside for now. The GM has the option to activate those hitches to do things on their side of the table. The GM might also roll hitches—called **opportunities**—which the players can activate.

If *all* your dice come up as 1, that's a **botch** and it's a sure sign of trouble, especially since your total is effectively zero. With a typical failed test or contest, not everything is bad. The story still moves forward, just not how the character might like. With a botch, there's no ambiguity about it—things are bad for that character, and sometimes their story hits a brick wall for a moment.

Game mechanics that allow you to reroll dice can be used to reroll hitches or even a whole botch, so long as they haven't been used to trigger any other game effect (such as a complication). The GM should ask the player if they have such a mechanic in play before spending the hitches for complications or other effects.

# SFX

Many characters have exception-based features called **SFX** (special effects) that can alter or influence the dice pool, dice results, or even the story directly. SFX frequently come in the form of an activating condition, some kind of cost or drawback, and then some kind of benefit or bonus. You can read more about SFX in Prime Characters (page 61).



KEKAI KOTAKI

# TESTS AND CONTESTS

A **test** is the central mechanic of rolling dice to resolve a situation by determining if there's a successful outcome or a challenging failure. Almost always, tests are initiated by the GM asking the player, "What do you do?"

When a PC gets into a conflict over something they want, this is called a **contest**, which determines if any other character can intervene, thwart, or oppose the character. Contests are almost always initiated by a player, who picks up dice and essentially says, "I'm doing this. Who's stopping me?"

If the outcome is guaranteed or nothing opposes or acts against the character, tests and contests can be resolved without rolling dice. A player can always choose not to respond to a test and find another way forward. A GM or other player can always respond to a contest by declaring that they don't oppose the initiating player, in which case the contest's outcome is determined as if the player succeeded. In both cases, there's usually no need for an effect die; if one is needed, use the largest die in the dice pool (the opposition pool for a test, or the player's dice pool for a contest).

## DIFFICULTY AND OPPOSITION

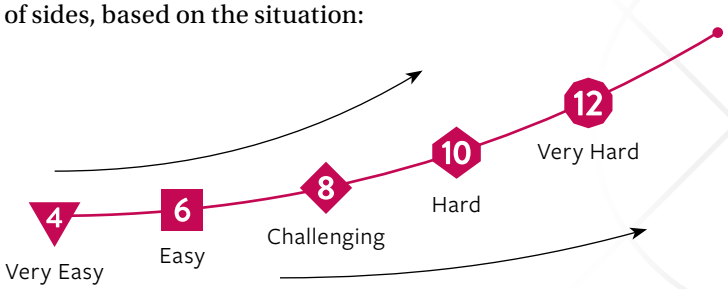
Whenever you roll dice, you want to get a higher total than your opposition. This is the core principle of Cortex Prime's dice mechanics. The key difference between tests and contests is who rolls the dice first.

### TESTS: SUCCESS OR FAILURE

If it's a test, the GM assembles an opposition pool and rolls it, setting the **difficulty** by adding together two dice from the roll and announcing the total.

That difficulty is the number you need to beat with your own total when you roll your dice for the test. If you beat it, the test is a **success**. If you didn't beat it, the test is a **failure**. Beating a difficulty means rolling *higher* than the difficulty total. If your total is the same as the difficulty's total, you didn't beat it, so this still counts as a failure.

The difficulty dice are always two dice of the same number of sides, based on the situation:




In addition to difficulty dice, the GM picks up one or more dice based on appropriate traits from the location, opposing GMCs, or the scene itself. When in doubt, the GM can simply add one or more six-siders to represent increasing risk, threats, or challenges.

> Mary Rose calls for Adam to make a test when his Hero sneaks past a lazy watchman. To set the difficulty, she puts together an opposition pool using 6 6 (because it's an easy test) and a 8 for the watchman. That's a pool of three dice: 8+6+6.

Tests are usually uncomplicated. A success means the character does what they wanted to do, and a failure means they don't. Occasionally, the player sets the difficulty for a GMC's test. In this case, the player rolls first and the GM rolls to beat the difficulty set by the player. Usually, though, the GM sets up scenes where the players roll tests to change the status quo being maintained by the GMCs.

## CONTESTS: THE STRUGGLE

When you engage in a contest, you're the one initiating it, so you pick up the dice and roll first, adding together two results for a total. If your opposition decides against opposing you after seeing what you rolled, you automatically get what you want. If your opposition decides to stop you, they assemble a dice pool and try to beat the difficulty you just set.

If your opposition doesn't beat your difficulty, you've won the contest and you get what you want. If they beat your difficulty, the ball's back in your court. You can choose to **give in**, in which case you define the failure on your own terms, you cannot immediately initiate another contest with your opponent, and you get a PP. Otherwise, your opposition's total becomes the new difficulty, and you must roll again to try to beat it. Failing to beat your opposition means your opponent gets to define how they stopped you.

Contests go back and forth until one side gives in or fails to beat the difficulty. The losing side picks up a complication or, if it's a high stakes scene, is **taken out** of the scene—they're beaten, knocked down, or possibly even on their last breath. Players can spend PP to avoid being taken out, but they still take a complication.

Sometimes the GM may initiate a contest when a GMC chooses to do a thing; the GM is essentially asking the players, "What are you going to do about it?" However, because Cortex Prime games are about the PCs more than the GMCs, this shouldn't happen very often in any given session.



# OUTCOMES

When you win a test or contest, you get what you want, and you can narrate the **outcome**. What this means usually depends on what you said you were trying to do. Was your character trying to hack the mainframe? It's done. Knock out the bad guy? They did that, too. The player describes it and then the story moves on. If the player can't think of what might happen if they succeed, the GM can do the honors, and remind the player to think about what the consequences of success are before they roll the dice next time.

When you fail, however, try to be entertaining in how you describe your failure. The only lasting effect is the story heading in a different direction than you wanted, unless you picked up a complication or you rolled all hitches and came up with a total botch.

> Early in a scene, Adam's Hero triumphed over a rockslide, leaping to safety with a priceless artifact. However, as Adam rolls to signal a friendly plane overhead with a flare gun, all of his dice come up hitches! Had he simply failed the test, maybe the flare gun jammed and he'd need to change his situation a little—get to higher ground, build a signal fire, or something like that—before trying again. Instead, with this botch, Adam suggests that it wasn't a friendly plane after all, and maybe he's called down a lot of trouble for his Hero instead.

## OUTCOMES CHANGE THE STATUS QUO

When your character fails, it doesn't necessarily mean the scene ends and their goals are thwarted permanently. A scene can have many tests and contests in it, involving many characters, sometimes even several tests or contests going on at the same time. Failure should always mean that the situation has changed in one way or another. Consequences should always come from failure, even if they're as simple as "You dropped it; now what do you do?"

In some cases, losing a test or contest can result in your character being taken out of the scene. But in most other cases, your character only needs to revisit their new circumstances and take a different course of action, perhaps with a complication now making their lives a little trickier.

# HEROIC SUCCESS

In a test, if you beat the difficulty by 5 or more on a roll, you've got a **heroic success**. You not only get what you want, your roll produces unexpected beneficial results. In a contest, if your opponent loses by 5 or more, you've got a heroic success and are the clear victor. As with any success, the GM should ask you to describe your amazing efforts, but that's just icing on the cake. There's an added benefit, as well.

The **effect die** (see following section) is stepped up by one for every 5 points you beat the difficulty by.

> Adam's Hero makes a test and beats the difficulty by 10—a heroic success. His effect die is a 6. The complication or stress created from the test is a 10: the 6 stepped up twice, once for every 5 points he beat the difficulty by.

| Adam's Roll | Opposition Roll |
|---|---|
| 3 3 8 9 | 4 2 3 2 |

Some SFX might specify a heroic success as the activating element. Often, these sorts of SFX create additional assets or complications beyond the one that may have been created from the test or contest, or they change the story in some interesting way by introducing a specific flavor to the outcome.




# EFFECT DICE

The **effect die** is chosen from the dice pool after the dice used for the total are taken out and added together. The effect die is used for things like determining the size of an asset or complication, or (if you're using the mod) stress. Only the size of the effect die (number of sides) matters; the result rolled on the effect die has no further use in the roll. You won't always need an effect die, especially when you're only concerned with pass/fail outcomes.

> Tina's Sage is trying to set up a new security monitoring system in an enemy base. Mary Rose has set a difficulty of 12. Tina rolls a pool of five dice: a 12, 8, 8, 6, and 4. The 8 8 each come up 8, which add together for a total of 16, beating the difficulty. The 12 comes up 2 so Tina chooses the 12 as the effect die. This means the Sage's security system—an asset—is rated at 12. Had Tina rolled an 8 on the 12 and a 2 on one of the 8 instead, and she'd chosen a 8 effect die, the security system would not have been as strong. In either case, the fact that the die rolled a 2 doesn't matter. Only the number of sides matters.

## INELIGIBLE DICE

You can't choose a die that produced a hitch for an effect die. If you spend PP to add more dice to a total beyond the first two, those dice can't also be used as effect dice. If there are no dice left in the pool once the total is determined (or the remaining dice are hitches or otherwise spoken for), the effect die is always a 4.

| GM'S DIFFICULTY |
|---|
| 12 |

| TINA'S DICE RESULTS | TOTAL | EFFECT DIE | ASSET CREATED |
|---|---|---|---|
| 3 5 8 8 2 | 16 | 12 | Security System 12 |
| 3 5 2 8 8 | 16 | 8 | Security System 8 |

## SFX AND EFFECT DICE

SFX may refer to effect dice. Here's an example:

- *Lunar Strength:* When the moon is full and your dice pool includes your PHYSICAL attribute, spend a PP to step up the effect die by one.

If any rule or SFX steps up the effect die beyond 12, either the effect is an automatic take out or victory, or another die from the pool is turned into a second effect die.

Some SFX let you choose more than one effect die. You can also spend a PP to add an extra effect die. In both cases, you have to choose from the dice left over from your roll. If there are none, use the 4 default. If an SFX tells you to step up or step down an effect die and you have multiple effect dice, only modify one of them for each SFX that you're using.

## EFFECT DICE IN OPPOSITION

When rolling dice for tests, the effect die serves as a useful indicator for the scope of the action's outcome. A 12 effect die means the test had a mind-blowing outcome, while a 4 means it was marginal at best. There's usually no need to compare your effect die with the opposition's effect die.

The effect die is more important in a contest. If you win a contest, you compare your effect die against the opposition's effect die (from the roll they just made to try to beat you).

In a scene that the GM has determined is high stakes, if your effect die is larger than your opponent's, they're taken out of the scene. If their effect die is equal to or larger than yours, or they spend a PP to avoid it, your opposition isn't taken out. Instead, they take a complication equal to your effect die.

> Adam wins a contest in a high stakes scene between his Hero and a GMC. His effect die is a 8, and theirs is a 6. Adam's Hero takes out his opponent, unless Mary Rose spends a PP to prevent it. If that happens, the GMC picks up a 8 complication because of Adam's 8 effect die. If Mary Rose's effect die was a 8 or higher, Adam's effect die wouldn't be larger than hers, so the GMC would take a 8 complication without having to spend a PP.

| ADAM'S EFFECT DIE | GMC'S EFFECT DIE | DOES GM SPEND PP? | OUTCOME |
|---|---|---|---|
| 8 | 6 | NO | GMC taken out |
| 8 | 6 | YES | GMC takes 8 complication |
| 8 | 8 | NO | GMC takes 8 complication |

If the contest isn't a high stakes scene and there's no perilous outcome to worry about, the losing side just takes a complication equal to the effect die of the winning side—unless the opponent's effect die is equal to or larger than yours, in which case your effect die is stepped down by one before being applied as a complication.

> Adam wins a contest between his Hero and a GMC opponent in a standard action scene. This means Adam's Hero imposes a complication on his opponent. His effect die is a 10, and theirs is a 12. His 10 effect die is smaller than their 12 effect die, so it's stepped down by one before it's used against them—in this case as a 8 complication.

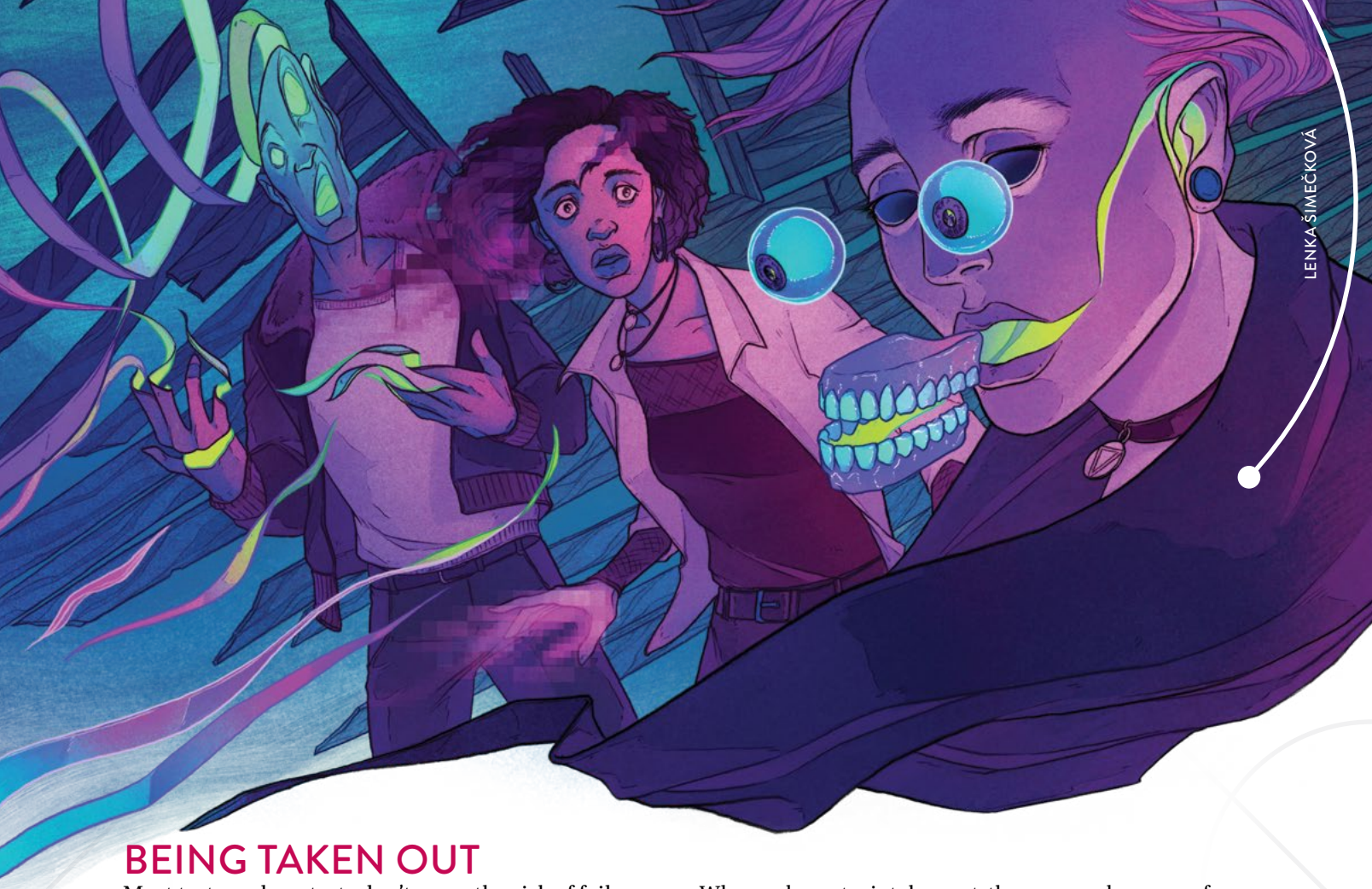
## EFFECT DICE IN AUTOMATIC OUTCOMES

When a test or contest isn't opposed and you need an effect die, use the largest die in the opposition pool (for a test) or the initiating dice pool (for a contest). Most of the time, however, you won't need an effect die if no test or contest is actually rolled.

> Adam declares that his Hero reaches for a priceless artifact and asks, "Who's going to stop me?" Mary Rose and the other players elect not to oppose him, so his Hero takes the artifact. If for some reason Adam needed to know how well his character took hold of the artifact, he would look at the dice pool he just assembled for the contest and choose the largest die in the pool for the effect die.



RAFAEL SARMENTO




# BEING TAKEN OUT

Most tests and contests don't carry the risk of failure so dire that it takes a PC out of the scene. It's up to the GM to make it clear from the beginning when it's a **high stakes scene** where failure may mean being taken out. Some examples include:

- A PC tests to stay awake after being exposed to knock-out gas.
- A PC initiates a contest with another PC who they want to knock unconscious.
- A deadly trap needs to be overcome before it brings doom to all of the occupants in a room.

Often, as GM you present the players with a number of options that include some with this potential outcome, usually with a commensurate greater reward. Players can then decide if the risk is worth it.

> Tina's Sage is presented with two options in a scene where she's dealing with rogue pharmacists trying to trigger a worldwide epidemic from their computerized lab. She can stay out of sight and try to hack the pharmacists' server, which might delay them. Or she can charge in and take the pharmacists head-on, which might eliminate their threat entirely, but carries a risk that she'll be taken out by their armed response.

When a character is taken out, they may no longer perform any test or contest and no longer participates in the scene. As the GM you may rule that certain tests are still possible, or that a character's SFX may still be activated. Generally, however, a character that's taken out of a scene has no further impact on the scene's outcome.

## BEING TAKEN OUT BY COMPLICATIONS

If a complication attached to a character is somehow stepped up *beyond* 12, that character is automatically taken out of the scene. Complications that are stepped up beyond 12 are such a significant hindrance that they effectively keep the character from being able to act or play any part in the scene.

See "Complications as Consequence" (page 37) for more on using complications to take out characters.

## RECOVERING IN A SCENE

It's possible that being taken out of a scene can be reversed by other characters in that scene, if they have healing abilities, magic, or the ability to change the circumstances that took the character out in the first place. If a character returns from being taken out, they usually come back with at least a 6 complication that reflects their traumatic experience. See "Trauma" on page 41.

## INTERFERING IN A CONTEST

If you want to get involved in a contest between two other characters, your character can attempt to **interfere**—but it costs a PP and comes with a bit of risk. Usually this means your character wants something neither of the other two characters wants, or maybe you want the same thing as one of them but on your own terms. After each side has rolled at least once, you can spend a PP and describe how you're trying to get between the characters. Roll your dice and compare your total to the current total in the contest.

If you don't beat the total, they ignore you and the winner gives you a complication (or stress) for getting in the way. If you beat the total, you've stopped the contest in its tracks. No one gives in and no one takes any complications—yet.

If both sides are committed to continuing the contest, their players (or the GM, if a GMC is one of the contestants) each hand you a PP and describe how they work around, over, or through you to continue their conflict. Neither of them can give in until both have rolled again.

You may elect to interfere again by spending another PP, but if either contestant rolls higher than you, they can inflict a complication (or stress) on you—that means you may get two complications if you don't roll high enough.

> Amanda's Engineer is arguing with a major GMC, a rival mechanic, over the rights to upgrade a starship. Adam's Hero decides to interfere, asserting his claim that they should do what's right for the upcoming mission. Amanda rolls her dice first, getting a total of 12, and Mary Rose rolls next, getting a 14. Adam spends his PP and rolls as well, beating both of them with a 15. Adam says his Hero stands between the two of them and settles the argument with his inspirational speech.
>
> Amanda doesn't want the argument to end, and she asks the GM, Mary Rose, if that's true for her rival, as well. Mary Rose says yes, this conversation isn't over, so Amanda and Mary Rose each hand a PP to Adam to continue the argument with a new contest. Now, Amanda's Engineer is yelling past Adam's Hero to the mechanic, and the mechanic is yelling back. Adam decides he'll sit back and let the technicians duke it out, rather than interfering again. Amanda and Mary Rose roll again, and Amanda wins with a 19. The GMC takes a complication.
>
> If Adam had interfered in the contest between Amanda's Engineer and Mary Rose's GMC, but failed to beat either of their totals in the contest, his Hero would just have stood there trying to come between the arguing technicians, utterly ignored by their heated debate, and taking a complication.

## CONTESTS WITH MORE THAN TWO CHARACTERS

You can use contests as a way to represent all-out scrambles for some kind of object, goal, or prize. One player initiates the contest, then any other character that wants to be involved in the contest can join in, one at a time as determined by the GM. The highest roller is the successful character. After the first roll to enter the contest, any character that chooses to stay in the contest takes a complication if they fail to beat the total. They may otherwise give in as normal.

**CONTEST 1**

Adam spends a PP to interfere in a contest between Amanda's Engineer and Mary Rose's rival mechanic GMC.

| AMANDA'S TOTAL | GMC'S TOTAL | ADAM'S TOTAL |
|---|---|---|
| 12 | 14 | 15 |

Adam's Hero beats both of them!
Adam wants to end the argument with his winning roll.

**CONTEST 2**

Amanda and Mary Rose both decide they don't want this to be the end of it, so they each spend a PP to continue the argument.

| AMANDA'S TOTAL | GMC'S TOTAL |
|---|---|
| 19 | 16 |

Amanda wins! Mary Rose's GMC takes a complication for losing the second contest.


NATALIA BACETTI

# TEST AND CONTEST MODS

By applying mods to test and contest mechanics, you can change how they're used and implemented. Some of these mods make the rules simpler; others add complication.

## ACTION-BASED RESOLUTION

This mod takes the rules for tests and contests and sort of smashes them together. Using this mod, anything a player character or GMC does is called an **action**. If you want to carry out an action, you declare it, gather up your pool, and roll the dice, just as if you were starting a contest. Instead of moving to a back and forth escalation like a contest, the action is opposed by a **reaction**, which is either the target of the action rolling their own dice, or a difficulty set by the GM rolling difficulty dice. If the reaction beats the action's total, the action fails.

An action-based resolution approach places heavier weight on who goes when and the order in which actions take place. The scenes are more structured, each player tends to take their own turn, and an **action order** (page 98) is established to manage this.

Because the action's dice are always rolled first, before difficulty dice or opposing reactions are rolled, action-based resolution can make actions seem chancy. Players may not know whether they should include more dice into their totals with PP. To offset this somewhat, the GM's difficulty total or the reaction total must exceed the action's total for the action to fail.

Amanda's Engineer and Tina's Sage are trapped in an elevator shaft by killer robots. On Amanda's turn, she uses her action to roll an impromptu bot-hack to disable one of the robots, which means she rolls her MENTAL 8 + THE WORLD IS MY WORKSHOP 8 distinction + OPERATE 8 skill. She gets a total of 11 plus a 8 effect die. Mary Rose, the GM, rolls for the killer robot's reaction using the KILLER ROBOT 8 trait + MURDEROUS MACHINE 8 distinction + SERVO MOTORS 6 trait and gets a 9 with a 6 effect die. Amanda's action total is higher than Mary Rose's reaction total, and her 8 effect die is higher than the robot's 6 effect die, so the killer robot is taken out. (Mary Rose could hand over a PP to have the killer robot take a 8 complication instead, but she chooses not to.) Amanda picks Tina to go next in the action order, probably for the Sage to deal with her own killer robot problem.

| PLAYER | TRAITS USED | DICE ROLL | TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|
| Amanda | MENTAL 8<br>THE WORLD IS MY WORKSHOP 8<br>OPERATE 8 | 2 4 7 | 11 |
| Mary Rose | KILLER ROBOT 8<br>MURDEROUS MACHINE 8<br>SERVO MOTORS 6 | 3 4 5 | 9 |
| Amanda wins! Since Mary Rose declines to use a PP to take a 8 complication, the robot is taken out. | | | |

## ADD ALL THE DICE

With this mod, all the dice rolled in the dice pool are added together for the total, then compared to the opposition total (which likewise is every die added together). With this mod, use either the No Effect Dice or Reroll for Effect mods, as adding together all of the dice leaves no die for the effect die.

This mod still keeps the rule about hitches. Any die that comes up as a 1 isn't included in the total, and counts as a hitch to be activated by the players or the GM, depending on who's rolling.

This mod places a much higher value on adding dice to the dice pool, so assets and complications become much more potent. Games using this mod likely have character files with no more than three trait sets to ensure that totals don't become astronomical.

## NO EFFECT DICE

In this mod, effect dice are dropped entirely, and all tests and contests have simple success and failure outcomes. The degree of success or the measure of the outcome remains story-driven and descriptive, rather than being represented by a die rating. Any time a test or contest should generate a complication or asset, assign a 6 and step it up with heroic successes.

No effect dice means you can't compare effect dice to modulate the outcomes of contests. High stakes scenes result in opponents being taken out unless they spend a PP, and low stakes scenes result in opponents taking 6 complications or having existing complications stepped up by one.

## REROLL FOR EFFECT

This mod doesn't use the original die roll to generate the effect die; instead the player or GM rerolls their dice pool and takes the highest rolling die as the effect die. SFX that call for choosing more than one effect die or stepping up or down an effect die apply to this new roll. If SFX or other mechanics altered or stepped up dice in the pool after they were rolled, those effects don't apply when rerolling; pick up the original dice pool and roll it.

## STATIC DIFFICULTY

With this mod, players only roll against opposition dice pools in a contest, not in a test. When a player rolls in a test, the difficulty is a static target number instead of a difficulty die.

Static difficulty is based on this difficulty dice chart:

| 3 | 7 | 11 | 15 | 19 |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Very Easy | Easy | Challenging | Hard | Very Hard |

If the PC has a complication that would add to the opposition, the complication die is rolled and added to the static difficulty.

> Adam's Hero is trying to clear away a fallen stone slab from the tunnel he's exploring. Mary Rose, the GM, has determined that this is Hard. Adam's Hero is also suffering from a **Broken Leg** 10 complication. Mary Rose rolls the 10 and adds it to the Hard difficulty of 15.

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| | 15 | Hard difficulty set by Mary Rose for Adam's Hero |
| + | 5 | Mary Rose's roll from the **Broken Leg** complication suffered by Adam's Hero from an earlier contest |
| = | 20 | Static difficulty set by Mary Rose for Adam's Hero |

The Hero Dice mod (page 30) complements this mod, allowing the players to spend hero dice to help overcome the impact of complications. With a static difficulty, there's no option for the GM to roll any hitches, unless you decide that rolling a 1 on a complication die would count. GMs are encouraged to let players spend hero dice to achieve the same outcome; i.e., instead of spending a PP to activate a 1 on a GM's dice, you spend a hero die and either eliminate a complication (if the hero die spent is equal to or greater than the complication) or step a complication down by one (if the hero die spent is less than the complication).

GMs still roll dice for their GMCs as normal and can even roll against a static difficulty if they aren't opposed by another GMC or a player.

**CLASSIC CONVERSION NOTE**

This is essentially the same difficulty system presented in Classic Cortex. You may want to experiment with SFX and drawbacks that make static difficulty easier and harder by using them as fixed numbers rather than dice. A quick and easy conversion is to divide the maximum result of the die in half and apply it as a fixed number instead of rolling the die. Thus, a 4 is a +2, a 6 is a +3, and so on.

# TRAITS

Each PC's character file is mostly a list of **traits** and related game stats. Traits define a character and how they interact with the world they live in. Traits paint a picture of who a character is and what they can do, not just in terms of their skills and abilities but also their personality, background, or aspirations.

Each trait has a die rating, usually between 4 and 12. When that trait comes into play, the player rolls that die as part of their dice pool.

Many different types of traits are used in Cortex Prime games. These include (but are not limited to) **attributes**, **distinctions**, **skills**, **affiliations**, **relationships**, **powers**, **roles**, and **values**. Read more about which traits you might use in your own Cortex Prime game in the Prime Characters chapter (page 44). Choosing which traits to use defines how a Cortex Prime game is played more than almost anything else.

## TRAIT SETS

Any collection of traits that belong to the same basic type is assumed to be part of a **trait set**. *Attributes* is a trait set, as is *skills*. The rule of thumb in Cortex Prime is that you may only add one trait from any given trait set to a dice pool without added cost. If you want to include more, it costs a PP. Some Cortex Prime games might limit this use of PP to specific trait sets, such as skills or attributes.

Every Cortex Prime game needs at least two **prime sets** in addition to distinctions. These are the source of almost every dice pool used in tests and contests. Attributes and skills are common prime sets, which means any test or contest must include one attribute and one skill. Resources and specialties, on the other hand, are not generally considered prime sets.

A character may be defined by as few as three and as many as six or seven trait sets, depending on the game.

### TEMPORARY TRAITS

In play, characters may gain **temporary traits**, which last for a short time—a scene, or maybe a session. Temporary traits can also be assigned directly to a scene or to a location, and either go away when circumstances make them irrelevant (like a Flaming Torch 6 once it's doused in a lake) or when some other time limit is reached.

Assets and complications are the most common examples of temporary traits.

### DISTINCTIONS: THE UNIVERSAL TRAIT SET

Every Cortex Prime game includes **distinctions**. They're sort of like your character's "elevator pitch:" reading all of them should tell anyone a lot about who the character is, whether they describe personality quirks, backgrounds, or the character's role in the world. Distinctions are considered a universal prime set, so regardless of what sets are used in your game, every character should have three distinctions broad and varied enough that you can narratively justify including one in almost any dice pool. Some Cortex Prime games expand further on their role in the game (or how many of them a character has). Avoid removing them from your game unless you have an equivalent universal descriptive trait set to take their place and serve their function.

**A NOTE ABOUT EXAMPLES**

Cortex Prime is designed to be modular and customizable, and no prime set, aside from distinctions, is a default for the purposes of playing the game. That said, when providing examples of how the rules work, I often default to an action-adventure approach that's common to most roleplaying games and is the easiest to grasp for players coming from those games.

The prime sets for examples are attributes, skills, and distinctions. Just because I use these in examples doesn't mean all Cortex Prime games should or must have those trait sets. In fact, the three Spotlight settings in Prime Settings don't use all of these trait sets. The only trait set that should belong in every Cortex Prime game is distinctions; even then, it's your game at the end of the day, so if you've got a good equivalent, more power to you.



ANTHONY "ROBOTPENCIL" JONES


JESSICA FONG

# PLOT POINTS

**Plot points** (PP) are a way for players to affect the plot beyond the roll of the dice. Plot points can be spent to give players more dice, make the dice they have more powerful, or activate certain traits or special effects (SFX) on a character file. You need a way to keep track of PP. You can write them as tally marks on your character file, or you can use poker chips or some other kind of token (pennies, paperclips, glass beads… you get the idea).

**Every player starts a game session with at least one PP.** Unspent PP are carried over from session to session, but it's best to spend PP when the opportunity arises—it's not hard to get more during play.

In some of the earliest Cortex-powered RPGs, PP were mostly used just to add dice to the dice pool or increase the total after the dice were rolled. Cortex Prime uses PP more broadly, and mods (page 13) give you the opportunity to tweak PP to make them more or less influential in your game.

## PLOT POINTS AND META-REALITY

For some players, PP and other meta-fictional mechanics are a way to step outside of the characters and the setting and impose some authorial control over the unfolding story. Other players struggle with mechanics that don't seem to have any direct connection to the fictional reality of the game setting. If it helps to think of PP as "luck" or "faith" or something else that has a kind of quasi-real existence in the setting, then call them that! PP are an extension of the dice mechanics, serving the same kind of role in the game as dice pools and so forth.

## THE GAME MODERATOR AND PLOT POINTS

Unless mods are applied, the GM has two pools of PP: the **bank** and the **pile**.

### THE BANK

At the start of each session, the GM gets a PP per player in the game to spend on GMCs. These PP are solely for keeping GMCs from being taken out in a fight, for using SFX, or other GMC-related things. The same bank of PP is shared by all of the GMCs in play; they don't each keep track of their own plot points.

When the GM spends these PP, they go to the *pile* instead of to the player who was affected by the roll, just as if a PC had spent the PP on the roll. The GM can add more PP to the bank by activating GMC SFX, including using distinctions as a ▼4 instead of a ◆8.

### THE PILE

In addition to the limited pool of points set aside in the bank, the GM has an unlimited number of PP to give to the players when appropriate. The GM uses this pool to purchase complications when the players roll hitches or to hand over PP to the players when an SFX calls for it. It's called the pile because if you're using physical tokens to keep track of them, it's best to just make a big pile of those tokens in the middle of the table. Most of the time, when players or the GM spend PP, they return to this pile.

# EARNING PLOT POINTS AS A PLAYER

There are several ways for players to earn PP during play. Unless otherwise stated, these PP come out of the pile, not the GM's bank. If you earn a PP because of a die roll, such as a hitch, you can't use it until your die roll is resolved (so you can't roll a 1, get a PP, and then spend it to keep more dice in your total).

**Complications:** The GM may hand over a PP from the pile to activate a complication when players roll hitches. Complications start at 6, but additional hitches in the same roll step up the complication without the GM needing to spend additional PP. The GM may choose to create multiple complications if there is more than one hitch, but each new complication requires handing over a PP. If all your dice are hitches, that's a botch. Your GM can create a complication without handing over a PP, stepped up for each hitch past the first.

> Tina rolls four hitches. Mary Rose could hand over a single PP to Tina and create a 12 complication (6 from the activated hitch, stepped up three times to 12 for the three other hitches).
> Or, she might hand Tina two PP and create two 8 complications (6 from each activated hitch, each one stepped up by one for an additional hitch).
> If Tina had rolled a hitch on all five dice, Mary Rose could have taken her out of the scene entirely with that botch: a free 6 complication, stepped up four more times, beyond 12.

**TINA'S BAD ROLL**

| 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 2 |
|---|---|---|---|---|

| SPEND A PP | SPEND PP PP | SPEND PP PP PP |
|---|---|---|
| Create a 12 complication | Create 2 8 complications **or** Create a 6 and a 10 complication | Create 2 6 complications and a 8 complication |

**Giving in:** If you give in during a contest and let your opponent succeed rather than rolling to beat their total, you earn a PP. You only get this PP if you've already rolled at least once in the contest; you don't get a PP if someone starts a contest and you choose not to oppose it.

**No Bank Mod:** If the optional No Bank mod is used, players may earn PP when the GM spends a PP on a GMC.

**SFX:** Some SFX (including the default *Hinder* SFX for all distinctions) give you a PP.

**Roleplaying:** The GM is always free to hand out PP for remarkable moments in play, including making everyone laugh, doing something truly heroic and in character, and so forth. This is something that each table agrees to and isn't mandated by the rules.

**Using 4 in your roll:** If you include a 4 complication (or stress, if you're using those rules) in your dice pool, you get a PP, just like you would if you used the *Hinder* SFX from a distinction. This does not apply when you're forced to use 4 rated skills, attributes, or other traits in your dice pool. On the plus side, you're more likely to roll a hitch on a 4, which could lead to a PP.

# SPENDING PLOT POINTS AS A PLAYER

You can spend PP for a variety of benefits, such as including more dice in your total, activating some SFX, creating new assets, and using hero dice. Remember, you can only spend PP you've earned from a die roll after your die roll is resolved and the total announced.

**Activate SFX:** Some SFX must be activated by spending a PP. These effects only last for the duration of the roll you're using it on; once you do something else, the effect must be activated again.

**Add more dice:** Before you roll, you can spend a PP to include more dice from a trait set in your dice pool, so long as you can give a reasonable explanation as to why. This includes adding more than one skill, more than one attribute, or perhaps another power.

**Activate an Opportunity:** If the GM rolls a 1 on their dice, that's a type of hitch called an opportunity. Players can spend a PP to activate opportunities to either step down an existing complication or step up an existing asset. Some SFX may allow other uses for opportunities.

**Create a relationship:** When using relationship traits, you can spend a PP to create a 6 relationship with a character that you don't already have a relationship with. This relationship goes away at the end of the session unless you use growth or XP to keep it around.

**Create a temporary asset:** You can create a 6 temporary asset by spending a PP. This asset lasts for the rest of the scene. If you spend two PP, you can keep it for the rest of the session—assuming nothing happens to remove or eliminate it. This allows you to give some dramatic weight to an item (Length of Pipe 6) or part of the scenery (Unlocked Door 6), or create a new GMC (Handyman 6). The temporary asset only helps you, unless you give it to somebody else when you create it, or spend another PP to make it free for anyone to use.

**Include more results:** After any roll, you may spend a PP to include more results out of the dice pool you just rolled. This way, your total may be three, four, or five dice added together. The only limit to how many results you may add to your total is how many dice you rolled to begin with and how many PP you have available.

**Interfere in a contest:** If you want to interfere in a contest that's already underway, you can spend a PP to join in. If the other contestants lose to you, they can give you PP to renew the contest for another round.

**Keep an extra effect die:** You can spend a PP to keep an extra effect die, using it to create an additional asset, complication, or stress. You can't use this if you have no dice left over from your roll.

**Roll a hero die:** With the Hero Dice mod (page 30), you can spend a PP to roll a banked hero die and add it to your total, even if your opponent has already rolled their dice.

**Share an asset:** If you've created a temporary asset by spending a PP or by making a test (page 35), you can spend a PP to make it "open" for other characters in the scene to use in their dice pools.

**Stay in the fight:** When you would be taken out, you may spend a PP to take a complication instead. The size of the complication is equal to the effect die of the opposing dice pool. If you're using the Life Points mod (page 43), you can spend a PP to stay conscious or active in the scene when your life points exceed your threshold.

## SPENDING PLOT POINTS AS THE GAME MODERATOR

PP can be spent by the GM to include more dice in a GMC's character's total, to activate a GMC's SFX, and to help a GMC avoid being taken out in a conflict.

**Include more results:** After any roll involving a GMC, the GM may spend a PP from the bank to include more results out of the dice pool just rolled. This way, the GM's total may be three, four, or five dice added together. The only limit to how many results the GM may add to the total is how many dice the GM rolled to begin with and how many PP are left in the bank.

**Activate SFX:** Some of the GMC's SFX may have effects that must be activated by spending a PP from the bank. Any effect that's activated like this only lasts for the duration of the roll; once the GMC does something else, the effect must be activated again.

**Avoid being taken out:** The GM may spend a PP from the bank to prevent a GMC from being taken out and instead take a complication. The size of the complication is equal to the effect die from the opposing dice pool.

# PLOT POINT MODS

These rules alter the way the plot point flow works in the game, including how they're spent and tracked by players and GMs.

## STARTING PLOT POINTS

The rule of a single PP per character is a reasonable default in all cases, but you can mix it up. You might have players start with more than one PP as a default, or you might say that every session, all players get a PP on top of any remaining from the last session.

Alternately, you may decide that at the beginning of each session, all players roll dice to determine how many PP they start with. For instance, every player could roll 4 and get as many PP as the result of that die.

For a more predictable spread of PP around your table, have each player pick up all of the dice in one of their prime sets, such as attributes, relationships, or roles. They roll this dice pool, add two dice together for a total, and compare totals with the other players. The player with the highest total gets three PP, the one with the lowest gets a single PP, and the rest get two.

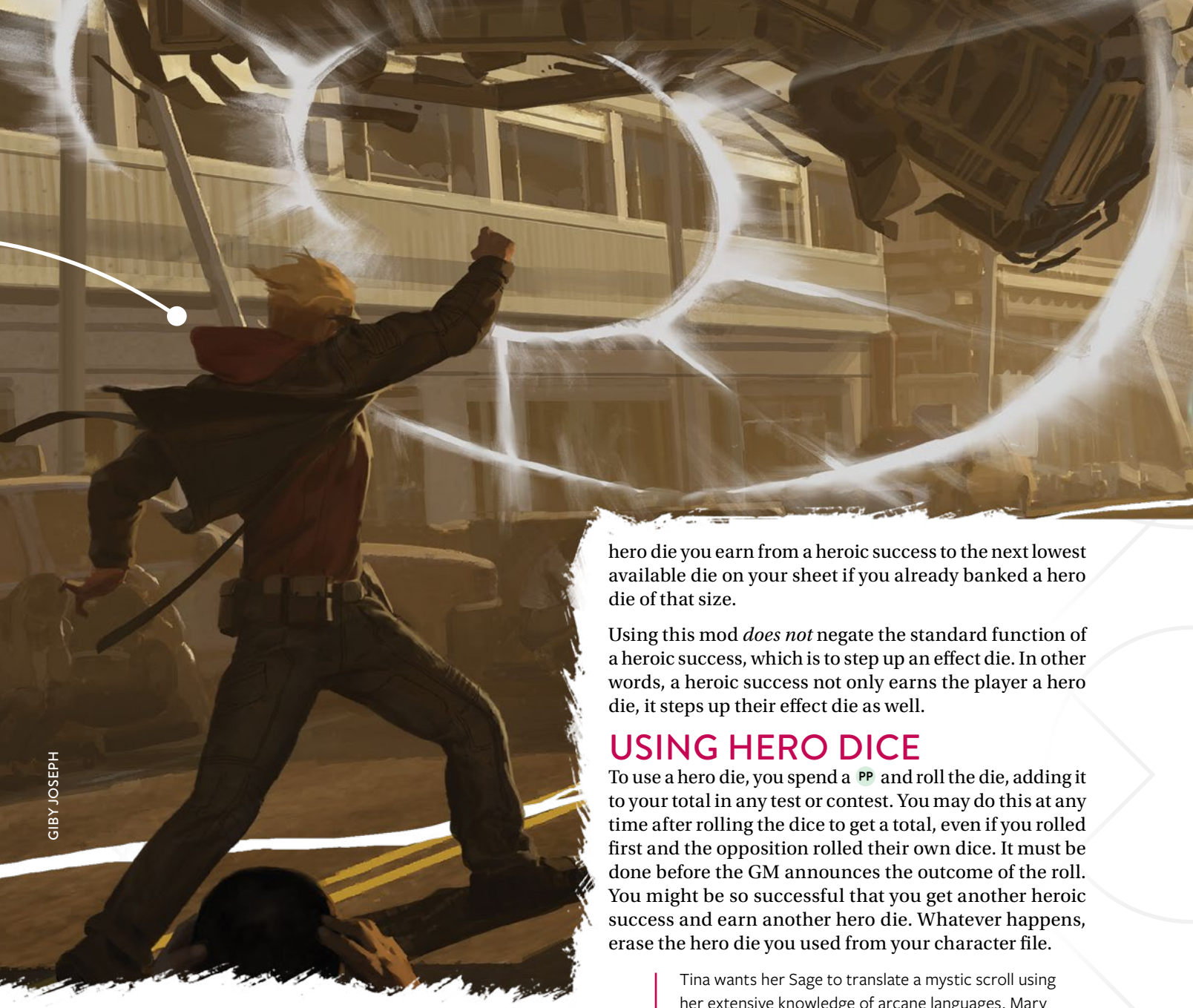
> **Note:** The more PP a player starts out with, the more likely they are to spend them at the beginning of a session, rather than at the end or at a climactic point. This isn't a good or bad thing, but it's useful to keep in mind.

## NO BANK

With this mod, the GM doesn't have a private supply of PP. When the players spend PP, they go into the big pile in the middle of the table, in front of the GM. When the GM spends PP in a roll against a player, they slide a PP from the pile to that player.

Players can't use PP they just earned when the GMCs spent the PP to improve their current rolls or activate SFX, so they should keep those PP separate until the end of the current roll.

Using this mod, a major GMC can't earn a PP when a distinction is used as a 4, so the GM can bank a 6 for that character and drop it into a future action as needed. There's no limit to how many of these dice a major character can save up, but regardless of how many are used on a roll, the GM may still only use two dice for a total.



GIBY JOSEPH

# HERO DICE

Using this mod, the primary benefit of a heroic success is the creation of **hero dice**. On a heroic success, you may bank a die equal to the highest rolling die in the opposing dice pool. These banked dice are called hero dice, and players may save as many of them as they like. In games that use this mod, there's a space on the character file to indicate how many hero dice you've earned and what size they are.

In some Cortex games, the GM might rule that players can only bank one hero die of any given size. In such a game, the character file has spaces to mark off each of the five die sizes (4 through 12). You may opt to step down a hero die you earn from a heroic success to the next lowest available die on your sheet if you already banked a hero die of that size.

Using this mod *does not* negate the standard function of a heroic success, which is to step up an effect die. In other words, a heroic success not only earns the player a hero die, it steps up their effect die as well.

## USING HERO DICE

To use a hero die, you spend a PP and roll the die, adding it to your total in any test or contest. You may do this at any time after rolling the dice to get a total, even if you rolled first and the opposition rolled their own dice. It must be done before the GM announces the outcome of the roll. You might be so successful that you get another heroic success and earn another hero die. Whatever happens, erase the hero die you used from your character file.

> Tina wants her Sage to translate a mystic scroll using her extensive knowledge of arcane languages. Mary Rose sets the difficulty on this test with a roll of 12. Tina only rolls a 10. That would usually be a failure, but Tina chooses to spend a PP to roll a 8 hero die she banked earlier. The die comes up a 4, which kicks Tina's total up to 14. Good enough for a success!

Hero dice can backfire. If the die comes up 1—a hitch—the GM may introduce a complication as if you had rolled a 1 on any other die. However, instead of accepting a PP from the GM, you may choose to take back your hero die and not add it to your total. You still lose the PP you spent to activate it.

Hero dice require PP to activate them because adding dice after you roll your test or contest is a powerful advantage.



This is one of the few cases in Cortex Prime where you have the ability to roll more dice to add to your total after you've rolled your dice pool.

Hero dice don't stick around after they're used for a roll. During a contest, if your opponent beats your total even after you added a hero die to it, you can't use the same hero die on your next roll.

## THE GM AND HERO DICE

The GM doesn't pick up or use hero dice. If the GM rolls 5 or more than the player on their rolls, they instead remove a hero die from the PC in question equal to or less than the highest rolling die on the GM's roll. If the PC had no hero dice banked yet or no hero dice of equal or lesser size, nothing happens. Either way, the GM narrates something to justify the bad guy upstaging the PC in that moment!

> Adam's Hero has a d8 and a d10 hero dice banked from previous scenes. During a duel with his nemesis, the Beast, Adam rolls a 6 on his dice so he spends his last remaining PP to add the d10 hero die to his total, raising it by 6 points to a 12. Mary Rose, playing the Beast as a GMC, beats this with a 17. That's a heroic success, ending the duel immediately with the Beast as a victor! However, Mary Rose doesn't get a hero die from this. Instead, she looks at her dice, notes that her highest rolling die was a d10, and removes Adam's banked d8 hero die instead.

## HERO DICE AS PLOT POINTS

With this mod, there's no additional cost to use hero dice if the player chooses to include them in their dice pool before they roll; they simply erase the die from their character file and add it into their dice pool like any other trait die. If you go this route, it's simply another die in your pool that might end up contributing to your total. The hero die may also be spent in place of a PP in any situation where a PP is applicable, and you don't have any. This also means spending it, so it's erased from your character file.

Some SFX may specify the use of hero dice instead of PP, usually when the SFX is particularly strong. The size of the hero die doesn't matter unless specified. You might have an SFX that states: *when you are in a tense or dangerous situation, spend a hero die to remove a complication of the same size die or smaller.* This is a fairly potent effect, but it's limited by the use of a hero die (and a contextual requirement) rather than a PP.

## HERO DICE AS EFFECT DICE

With this mod, hero dice may be spent to substitute for low effect dice from dice rolls. Used this way, you spend a PP and use the hero die as the effect die instead of one of the dice from the roll. A heroic success does not step up this new effect die. That only applies to effect dice sourced from the die roll itself.

> After Adam wins a later duel with the Beast, he only has a d4 left in his dice pool to use as his effect die. If he had a hero die banked, such as a d8, he could spend a PP to switch out the d4 with the d8.

If you've got some kind of effect active that lets you keep more effect dice from your roll, such as an SFX, you can spend PP to switch out any or all of those effect dice with hero dice; it just costs a PP for each switch, and you must have enough hero dice banked to do it.



# DOOM POOL

The **doom pool** is a mod that serves as a combination of ambient threat level, GM resource, and pacing mechanic. The doom pool is sometimes called the trouble pool, the danger pool, or some other thematic title.

When the GM has a doom pool:

- They do not have a bank of PP.
- Players earn and spend their PP directly into and out of a central pile.
- The GM spends dice out of the doom pool instead of using their own PP.

At the beginning of each session, the GM starts with a doom pool of at least 6 6. If the session is of global or cosmic scale, the pool may start with 3 or 4 dice. If the session is a major breakpoint in a campaign, the size of these starting dice might be 8 or even 10.

**The doom pool replaces difficulty dice for all tests.** To set the difficulty, the GM picks up some or all the dice in the doom pool and rolls them, taking two of the dice results and adding them together, as normal. The GM can spend a die not used in the total and add its result to the total; this spent die is removed from the doom pool. The remaining dice, including the two that were added together for the total, remain in the doom pool.

The GM may spend a die from the doom pool to add it to a GMC's dice pool during a contest, before the dice pool is rolled. This die is removed from the doom pool and doesn't go back in once the GMC's roll is resolved.

Doom dice may also be spent like PP, where a 6 from the doom pool is equivalent to a single PP. This usually happens when activating a GMC SFX or avoiding being taken out of a fight. If the doom pool only has larger dice in it, the next highest die must be spent in place of the 6.

The doom pool increases when the GM activates hitches rolled by players. Instead of adding a complication to the table, the GM adds a die of the same size as the one that rolled the hitch to their doom pool. Alternately, the GM can use a smaller die to step up an equal or larger existing die in the doom pool by one step.

> Amanda rolls a 1 on a 10 in her dice pool. Mary Rose adds a 10 to the doom pool and Amanda gets a PP. Mary Rose could alternately choose to step up a 10 that's already in the doom pool by one step to 12.

| DOOM POOL | OPTION 1 | OPTION 2 |
|---|---|---|
| 10 10 | 10 10 10 | 10 12 |

The doom pool can be used for additional scene effects, depending on the game. Some of the most common uses are:

**Create a complication, asset, or scene distinction:** Spend a die from the doom pool and create a complication or asset attached to the scene equal in size to the die spent. Or, spend at least a 8 and add a distinction to the scene that may be used by players and GMCs alike.

**Interrupt the action order:** Spend a die from the doom pool equal to or greater in size than the largest combat or senses-related trait of the PC whose turn is up next. One of the GM's own GMCs gets to go instead, and the GM then picks who goes afterward (not necessarily the player who was interrupted).

**Add a new extra:** Spend a die from the doom pool and create an extra with a single trait rated at the size of the die spent.

**Introduce a minor or major GMC:** If a GMC who isn't present in the scene could conceivably show up, spend a die from the doom pool equal to that GMC's highest rated trait and drop them into the scene, ready to act when the action order gets to them (which could be right away, if the GM is the one deciding who goes next).

**Split the group:** Spend a 10 or a 12 from the doom pool and some environmental or narrative event takes place that divides the group into two (minimum one PC in each new group). The PCs have to spend time reuniting their group, which may lead to more problems.

**End the scene immediately:** Spend 12 12 from the doom pool and cut the scene off right there before it's resolved, with the GM deciding how it ends. Usually, the scenes should play out until there's a reasonable ending point, but this way the GM can just smash cut to a new scene with plot threads dangling. Or stage an auto-win by the villains.

## LIMITED DOOM POOL

In this mod, the difficulty is determined as usual based on the situation's overall difficulty and by any GMC traits that factor into it. Doom dice are then spent out of the doom pool to add dice to the difficulty or to include more dice into the total after the dice are rolled, as per the standard doom pool rules. In this mod, doom dice continue to replace PP for the GM.


REZA AFSHAR



## CRISIS POOLS

With this mod, the doom pool mechanic represents multiple localized problems. Each of these smaller problems is its own pool of dice and spends dice just like a doom pool would, but only for things that the problem might be able to influence. These are often called **crisis pools** to distinguish them from the larger, session-wide doom pool.

Crisis pools can be directly affected by the actions of PCs. In this way, they are a lot like mobs (page 117). To eliminate a die in a crisis pool, a player makes a test opposed by the crisis pool. If they beat the crisis pool's difficulty, they can apply an effect die of at least one step larger to the crisis die they want to get rid of. This takes it out of the crisis pool entirely. If they don't have a die that's larger, they can use one of the same size or smaller to step down a crisis die instead. Crisis pools reduced to zero dice are no longer problems.

> Mary Rose creates a crisis pool that represents a forest fire, and a crisis pool that represents a runaway train loaded with hazardous materials. She assigns 6 6 6 to the forest fire and 8 8 to the train. Any time the players make tests involving the forest fire, the forest fire crisis pool is used to oppose them. Similarly, if they're trying to stop the train, they deal with the train's crisis pool by testing against it and removing those 8 with effect dice. If the players roll hitches, Mary Rose can hand over a PP to activate the hitch and add a die of the same size to a crisis pool.

| STARTING RATING | 6 6 6 6 | 8 8 |
|---|---|---|
| **DICE ROLL** | **FOREST** | **TRAIN** |
| If PC succeeds and effect die is 8 | 6 6 | 6 8 |
| If PC succeeds and effect die is 10 | 6 6 | 8 |
| If PC rolls a hitch on a 6 | 6 6 6 6 | 6 8 8 |

You can use both crisis pools and the doom pool, spending dice directly from the doom pool to create a new crisis pool. Dice spent in this manner go from the doom pool to the crisis pool, thus reducing the overall doom of the session but creating specific, localized situations the players can directly affect.

> **Note:** You can have both crisis pools and mobs, because they perform different functions; mobs can have SFX, or additional traits, whereas crisis pools are just pools of dice. Or, you can have crisis pools replace mobs, and create a crisis pool like ANGRY VILLAGERS 8 8 8. For more on mobs, see page 117 in Prime Sessions. For more on crisis pools, see *Hammerheads* on page 158.



# ASSETS AND COMPLICATIONS

Not all traits are listed on a PC or GMC's character file. Some traits are temporary, reflecting conditions, circumstances, or objects that help (**assets**) or that make things difficult (**complications**). These, too, are given die ratings and are included in dice pools where appropriate.

Both assets and complications are created by the GM and the players on-the-fly, representing the situational advantages and disadvantages that the group will encounter during a session. Assets are short-lived, lasting only for a scene unless players are willing to spend additional resources to keep them around; complications are sticky and last until the PC has either overcome them or the complication is irrelevant.

## ASSETS

Assets are included in a player's dice pool when they're applicable and helpful. Some examples:

- Press Pass, which helps a PC slip into a restricted location without being stopped.
- Thermal Jacket, which makes surviving in the icy cold much easier.

They can be environmental, too:

- Footholds Everywhere is an asset that would help a PC climb a cliff face.
- Handy Info Kiosk is an asset that any PC might use to look something up.

### CREATING ASSETS

During the game, you can spend a PP and create a 6 asset with a name you come up with.

Some SFX allow for assets that start with a 8 die rating. These are called **stunts**.

Assets larger than the standard 6 asset or 8 stunt can be created by making a test against a difficulty set by the GM, even if the PC has run out of PP. See "Test-Created Assets" on the next page.

Assets last until the end of the scene, unless something in the story makes them no longer relevant, or they're stepped down or eliminated.

During play, you can add as many of your fictionally appropriate assets to a dice pool as you'd like. Since you spent a PP for the asset itself when you created it, you don't need to spend a second time to use it.

Once created, assets are largely static. You can step them up with GM opportunities, or with SFX that permit you to do so. You can also spend a PP to make the asset last for the rest of the session. If you don't spend the additional PP, the asset goes away at the end of the scene.

An asset is assumed to belong to the character of the player that created it, and by default can't be included in anyone else's pool. If you create an asset to help another character (another PC or a GMC), you can declare the ownership of the asset to be that character instead. In this case, the other player (or the GM) may use it in their character's dice pool and you may not. You may spend an additional PP to declare an asset to be open and usable by any character in the scene (including GMCs); this is in addition to any PP used to make it last longer than one scene.

### FREEFORM ASSETS AND COMPLICATIONS

While narrative twists and turns move the story forward after rolls, sometimes successes and failures lead to new assets or complications. When the situation calls for it, the GM may allow a successful test to create a 6 asset for free. A player may then spend a PP to make that asset last for the session rather than just the scene.

Similarly, the GM may rule that a failed test leads to a 6 complication. Like other complications, the character can attempt to remove these complications through a recovery test or wait for the complication to wear off.

## TEST-CREATED ASSETS

Players can create assets greater than 6 and without spending PP by making a test. The player declares what their character does to create the asset and assembles an appropriate dice pool. The GM rolls to set the difficulty, usually with something average like 6 6. The effect die of the test becomes the die rating of the asset.

The GM may set a cap on the size of the assets generated in this fashion by setting the difficulty dice to that die rating. The asset created may not be larger than this die cap.

> Mary Rose sets a cap of 10 on the die rating for an asset created by Tina's Sage character, who is trying to discover dirt on a crime boss. This suggests that there simply isn't enough evidence to justify a 12 asset under any circumstances. The difficulty dice are set to 10 10, Mary Rose adds a 8 for the crime boss' trait of Plays Cards Close to His Chest 8, and the dice are rolled to set the difficulty. If Tina beats the difficulty, even if her effect die is a 12, the size of the asset remains capped at 10.

| GM'S ROLL | DIFFICULTY |
|---|---|
| 3 7 8 | 15 |

| TINA'S RESULTS | TOTAL | ASSET CREATED |
|---|---|---|
| 3 9 10 | 19 | Evidence Asset 8 |
| 8 9 7 | 17 | Evidence Asset 10 |
| 6 7 3 | 13 | None |

## CLUES AS ASSETS

Anytime a PC wants to get a read on somebody, case a scene, spot something out of the ordinary, or generally just use their senses, they're creating an asset.

The GM usually calls for the roll, though it's just as valid for you to ask for it. The difficulty for an asset test is set by rolling a straight 6 6—unless the GM decides otherwise. Your dice pool for the test is assembled from appropriate traits related to senses or perception.

With a successful test (you beat the difficulty), your PC gains some crucial information or gathers some useful intel. If you spend a PP after you succeed at your test, you can bank the asset until you need it, give it to another character, or keep it for longer.

With a failed test, you don't gain any useful advantage. If you don't beat the difficulty set by the GM, it's business as normal, essentially. If there are complications, they generally represent the consequences of poking around places trying to find stuff out, such as Enhanced Security, I'm Being Followed, Skittish Bystanders, Tripped Alarms.

## THE LOGIC OF ASSETS

If a PC picks up a crowbar to beat up some gangsters but doesn't spend a PP, should they still get an asset? After all, they've still got a weapon, right?

Well, no. Here's the thing—the PC is one of the stars of the story. If they get into a fight, they use whatever's on hand to their best advantage—that's just a given. Picking up the crowbar, going after the weakest guy, or looking scary, this is all assumed to be part of kicking ass and taking names—and having a high rating in Fight or Shoot.

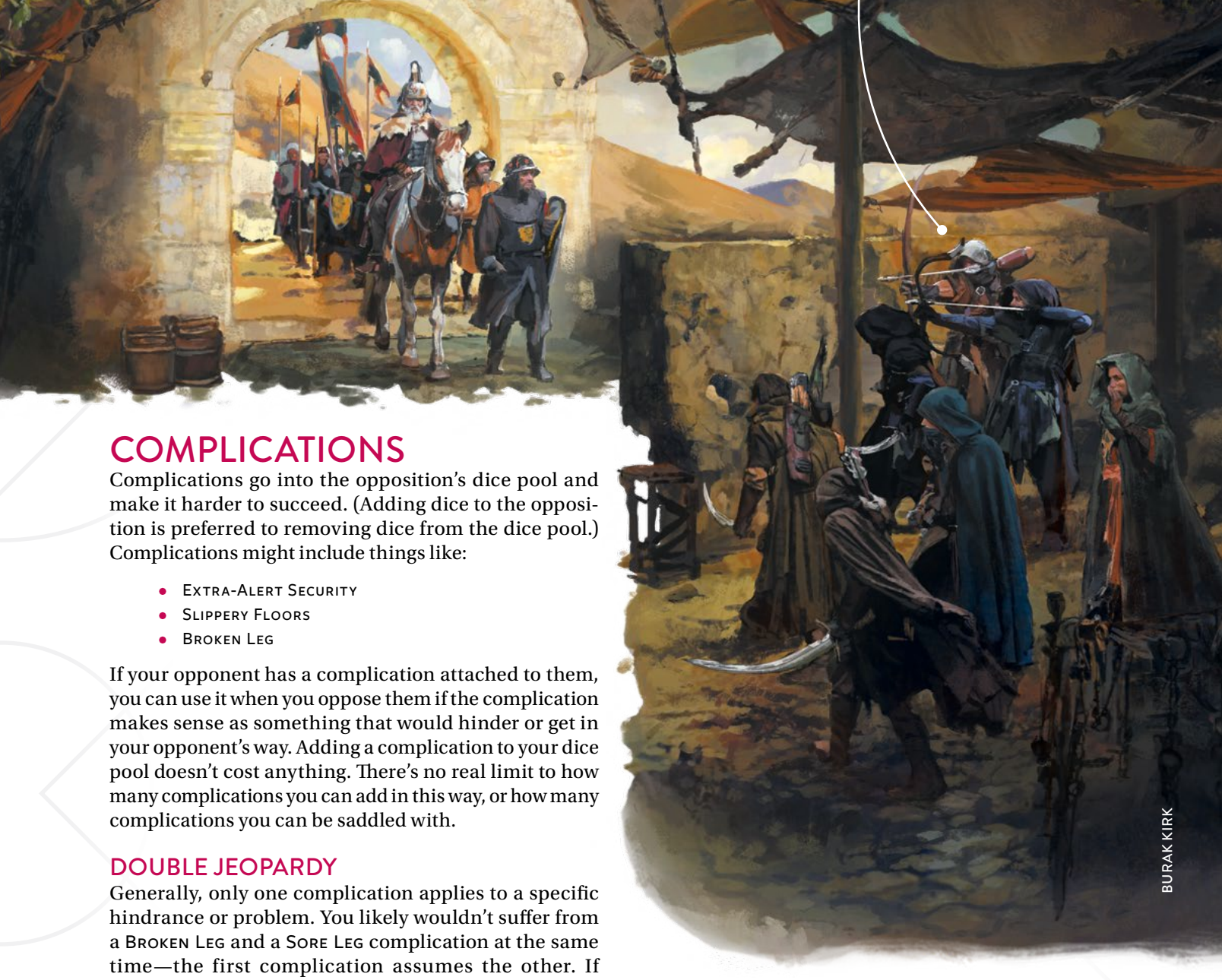
Spending the PP doesn't magically make the crowbar they picked up into something that's more dangerous than some other weapon. Instead, spending that PP makes the statement that "this crowbar matters." When they tell the story of the fight, it's "that time I beat up a gangster with a crowbar" rather than just another fight where they picked up whatever was on hand.

This is equally true for almost any kind of weapon or tool. If it exists in the story, if it's something the GM or players are using as part of their description, then it should be a part of narrating the outcome of a test or contest, but it doesn't confer any more dice unless it's turned into an asset by spending a PP or some other way.

In short: most objects in the game are color, setting, or flavor, until they get a die rating and become an asset.



KINIXUKI



BURAK KIRK

# COMPLICATIONS

Complications go into the opposition's dice pool and make it harder to succeed. (Adding dice to the opposition is preferred to removing dice from the dice pool.) Complications might include things like:

- Extra-Alert Security
- Slippery Floors
- Broken Leg

If your opponent has a complication attached to them, you can use it when you oppose them if the complication makes sense as something that would hinder or get in your opponent's way. Adding a complication to your dice pool doesn't cost anything. There's no real limit to how many complications you can add in this way, or how many complications you can be saddled with.

## DOUBLE JEOPARDY

Generally, only one complication applies to a specific hindrance or problem. You likely wouldn't suffer from a Broken Leg and a Sore Leg complication at the same time—the first complication assumes the other. If you want to make a complication worse, it should be stepped up.

## CREATING COMPLICATIONS

If you roll a 1—a hitch—on any of your dice, the GM always has the option of introducing a complication. Whether the PC succeeds or fails at the test or contest, a complication means something else has gone wrong, making life difficult.

When the GM introduces a complication, the player gets a PP from the GM's pile; aside from distinctions, this is the main way for players to gain PP. The GM notes down the complication, giving it a descriptive name—sticky notes or index cards work well for this—with a 6 die rating. For the rest of the session, if that complication comes into play, the GM gets to roll an extra 6.

If more than one hitch comes up on your dice, the GM may choose to step up the complication by one step for each additional hitch.

> Adam rolls three hitches on his dice. The complication he gets when Mary Rose activates the hitches starts out as 10. However, Mary Rose still only pays a single PP, even though it was stepped up twice for the additional hitches.

| ADAM'S ROLL | GM'S COST | RESULT |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | PP | 6 complication |
| 1 1 | PP | 8 complication |
| 1 1 1 | PP | 10 complication |

The GM may also choose to step up an existing complication instead of introducing a new complication, putting pressure on players who are locked in a fight or trying to escape the authorities.

> Amanda incurs a WANTED BY STATE POLICE 6 complication when she rolls a single hitch, but Mary Rose steps that complication up to a 10 when her next roll includes two more hitches.

| ROUND | AMANDA'S ROLL | RESULT |
|---|---|---|
| 1 | 5 6 **1** | WANTED BY STATE POLICE 6 |
| 2 | 4 **1** **1** | WANTED BY STATE POLICE 10 |

If a complication is ever stepped up beyond a 12, it has overwhelmed the PC and keeps them from acting further in the scene until the complication is removed or no longer hinders them. You can overcome this for a single test or contest by spending a PP, but you may only keep one die for your total rather than two. This is a severe handicap, but sometimes it's necessary.

## OPPORTUNITIES

If the GM rolls a 1 on their dice, this hitch is also known as an **opportunity** (i.e., an opportunity for the player to do something), and any player can spend a PP to step an existing complication down to a smaller size die. A 6 becomes a 4, and a 4 goes away. If the GM's dice include multiple 1s, you may step down existing complications by more than one step. You still only pay a single PP per complication affected.

| GM'S ROLL | ADAM'S COST | RESULT |
|---|---|---|
| **1** | PP | 8 complication steps down to 6 |
| **1** **1** | PP | 8 complication steps down to 4 |
| **1** **1** **1** | PP | 8 complication is eliminated |

Players can also spend a PP to activate an opportunity to step up an asset—with a maximum of 12—for the rest of the scene. Multiple opportunities allow you to step up existing assets by more than one step. Even signature assets can be stepped up, but only for the scene.

## COMPLICATIONS AS CONSEQUENCE

Complications may also represent those times when characters are hurt or suffer a debilitating setback—physical, mental, or social. Instead of being taken out, you can choose to spend a PP and take a complication. This works just as if you'd rolled a hitch on your dice, but you spend a PP instead of gaining a PP.

These complications should represent the PC's injury or setback, such as BROKEN ARM or IDENTITY THEFT.

The die rating of this complication is equal to the effect die of the opposition. So, if the GMC's attack roll had a 10 effect die, then the complication starts out as a 10. If the complication comes from something other than a die roll, it begins at a default 6.

The GM can decide that you must step up an existing complication by one when you take this option or when you roll a hitch on a subsequent roll of the dice, if the existing complication is equal to or larger than the die rating of the new complication. Characters may be taken out once the complication is stepped up beyond 12.

**PREVIOUS CONDITION**

Amanda's Engineer incurred a BATTERED AND BRUISED 10 complication from a previous contest.

| AMANDA'S ROLL | SPIDER'S ROLL |
|---|---|
| 3 2 3 2 | 2 4 6 **3** |

The Engineer's BATTERED AND BRUISED 10 complication steps up from the effect die to become BATTERED AND BRUISED 12.

> Amanda's Engineer fails to stop an assault from a giant mechanical spider, and already has a BATTERED AND BRUISED 10 complication. Not wanting to be taken out, she spends a PP to take a complication instead. Mary Rose's effect die is a 8, so taking this steps up Amanda's existing complication to 12.

Like the players, the GM may decide to accept complications on a GMC instead of allowing that GMC to be taken out. If the GMC loses a contest to a PC that would result in them being taken out (such as being shot or struck in the head) the GM may hand over a PP to the player who won the contest and add a complication to the GMC equal to the effect die in the player's roll. This should be used sparingly and only to drive the story forward, rather than to frustrate the players.

## RECOVERING FROM COMPLICATIONS

Many complications are simply temporary problems and will go away before the next scene begins. Complications that represent major consequences, however, stick around. To get rid of them, the group must test their traits to recover.

Getting rid of or reducing a complication is a test vs a dice pool consisting of the complication and a base difficulty of 8 8.

Other traits may also affect the roll, as it's easier to heal a gunshot wound in a Hospital and harder to shake off a concussion in a Noisy Room. In addition, the PC or their circumstances must be capable of improving the situation to make a roll.

When the test is complete, one of the following happens:

| PREVIOUS CONDITION |
|---|
| PC has an existing complication of Broken Arm 10. |

SCENARIO 1

**If you beat the difficulty and your effect die is greater than the complication,** the complication is eliminated.

| PLAYER'S ROLL | TOTAL | DIFFICULTY |
|---|---|---|
| 2 2 7 10 5 | 17 | 15 |
| The Broken Arm 10 complication is eliminated. | | |

SCENARIO 2

**If you beat the difficulty and the effect die is equal to or smaller than the complication,** the complication is stepped down by one. You can't try to recover that complication again until time passes.

| PLAYER'S ROLL | TOTAL | DIFFICULTY |
|---|---|---|
| 3 5 5 8 8 | 16 | 15 |
| The Broken Arm 10 complication is stepped down to 8. | | |

SCENARIO 3

**If you fail to beat the difficulty,** the complication remains as it is.

| PLAYER'S ROLL | TOTAL | DIFFICULTY |
|---|---|---|
| 2 2 3 2 6 | 9 | 15 |
| The Broken Arm 10 complication remains as is. | | |

SCENARIO 4

**If you beat the difficulty but roll a hitch,** the GM may hand over a PP and introduce a new complication related to the one that was just recovered, turning a Broken Arm 10 into a Splinted Arm 6.

| PLAYER'S ROLL | TOTAL | DIFFICULTY |
|---|---|---|
| 1 6 8 10 3 | 18 | 15 |
| The Broken Arm 10 complication is eliminated, but due to the hitch, the GM spends a PP to create a new complication, Splinted Arm 6. | | |

SCENARIO 5

**If you fail to beat the difficulty and roll a hitch,** the complication is stepped up by one step for every hitch rolled, which turns a Broken Arm 10 into a Broken Arm 12.

| PLAYER'S ROLL | TOTAL | DIFFICULTY |
|---|---|---|
| 3 3 5 1 6 | 11 | 15 |
| The Broken Arm 10 complication is stepped up to 12. | | |

| PLAYER'S ROLL | TOTAL | DIFFICULTY |
|---|---|---|
| 1 4 6 1 7 | 13 | 15 |
| *Option A:* The Broken Arm 10 complication is stepped up beyond 12 thus taking out the character out of the scene.<br>*Option B:* The Broken Arm 10 complication is stepped up to 12 and the GM can spend a PP to create a new complication, Infected Arm 6. | | |

## 4 COMPLICATIONS

If a complication is stepped down to a 4, the very next time the complication might affect your character, you add it to your own dice pool and earn a PP (much like a distinction being used with the *Hinder* SFX). Immediately after it's used this way, it's stepped down to zero and eliminated—unless the dice come up with one or more hitches, in which case the GM may choose to activate them and step up the complication to 6 or more.

| PREVIOUS CONDITION |
|---|
| Existing complication of Broken Arm 4 stepped down from previous successful rolls; adding the 4 gains a PP for the player. |

| PC'S ROLL | RESULT |
|---|---|
| No Hitches | Broken Arm 4 complication eliminated |
| 1 | Broken Arm 4 stepped up to 6 |
| 1 1 | Broken Arm 4 stepped up twice to 8 |

This rule keeps the lowest rating of complications from creating more problems for the opposition. The increased chance of rolling a hitch on a 4 means there's an added chance of a new complication being created or the current complication getting worse as a result of continued activity by the player.




# ASSET AND COMPLICATION MODS

These mods change the way that assets and complications work in your Cortex Prime game.

## STRESS

With this mod, instead of using complications to track injury, damage, or other negative personal effects on characters, you implement a distinct trait called **stress**. Complications can still be in play, but they represent external hindrances, obstacles, or other problems that aren't direct injury or negative personal conditions like exhaustion or pain.

Stress replaces the rule about players choosing to spend PP to take a complication instead of being taken out. Stress doesn't require players to spend PP; any time a failure at a test or contest might take you out or cause harm, you take stress instead.

Any attack or effect that can take you out:

- Inflicts stress equal to the effect die in the attack (if the PC currently has no stress or a lower die rating of stress than the new stress die).
- Steps up stress (if the PC already has a stress die rating equal to or greater than the new stress die).

> Amanda's Engineer has 8 stress and takes 8 additional stress. This steps up the existing stress to 10. If she has 8 stress and instead takes 12 additional stress, this replaces the current 8 stress die with 12 stress.

Stress rated at 4 functions just like a complication rated at 4; it goes into a player's dice pool instead of being added to the opposition dice pool and earns the player a PP. Right after that test or contest, it either goes away or—if the player rolls a hitch on one of their dice—gets stepped up as the injury gets worse.

Only one type of stress can be used against a character at any given time, unless the GM pays the player a PP to add an additional stress die to the opposition dice pool. Characters can be affected by both stress and complications at the same time, however.



## TYPES OF STRESS

Typically, a character can be afflicted by one or more types of stress, depending on the game. Some games simply have a single stress track; others might distinguish between types, such as:

- Physical, Mental, Social
- Afraid, Angry, Exhausted, Injured, Insecure

Stress is a useful mod to use when you want your SFX or other game mechanics to cause or affect specific types of harm. It reduces the need to track quite so many complications at any given time; instead, you just track one or more stress dice. Stress also leads to other mechanical tricks, such as using stress to help the character at the risk of making things worse.

Characters can still choose to inflict complications on their opponents; these are created in the same manner as stress, but represent such things as deliberately hindering an opponent, creating distractions, and so on.

## RECOVERING STRESS

All stress die ratings are always stepped down by one during any scene specifically framed to act as a rest period, downtime, or transition between action-heavy scenes. If a character takes stress in one scene from a battle, and the next scene is another battle soon after the first without any time spent resting up, then no stress is recovered. To recover any remaining stress, use the guidelines for recovering complications on page 37.

## STRESSED OUT

If any stress die rating is ever stepped up past 12, the character is taken out (or **stressed out**) and no longer takes part in the scene. By default, you can't spend a PP to delay this effect, though certain SFX or other rules may be implemented to do that. When you're stressed out, you are assumed to have 12 stress for the purposes of taking any additional stress, even though you can no longer act in the scene.

## PUSHING STRESS

With this mod, players may choose to have their character shoulder through their pain and suffering and use it as a motivator rather than a setback. To do this, you spend a PP and instead of adding the stress to the opposing dice pool, you add it to your own dice pool for that test or contest.

Using stress in this fashion has an additional cost. After the test or contest is resolved, the stress die included in your dice pool is stepped up by one. This may result in the PC being stressed out if the die is stepped up past 12.

In some games, this rule may be built into an SFX on a distinction or a power set. In this case, the SFX usually doesn't require a PP to activate; the drawback on the SFX is the worsening of the stress die.

| PREVIOUS CONDITION |
|---|
| PC has an existing stress of Exhausted 10. |

| PC'S ACTION | PC'S DICE POOL | GM'S DICE POOL |
|---|---|---|
| Nothing | 6 6 6 | 6 6 10 |
| The PC's stress of Exhausted 10 remains the same. | | |

| PC'S ACTION | PC'S DICE POOL | GM'S DICE POOL |
|---|---|---|
| Spends a PP | 6 6 10 | 6 6 |
| The PC's stress of Exhausted 10 steps up to 12 after the contest is resolved (or by more if hitches are rolled). | | |

## TRAUMA

Trauma is like long-term stress. Any time a PC's stress is stepped up past 12, they're stressed out of the scene, and they gain 6 trauma of the same type of stress that just increased. Trauma functions just like stress but is much harder to recover.

During any scene in which a character is stressed out and has taken trauma, additional stress to the character goes directly to trauma. Once trauma is stepped up beyond 12, the character is permanently out of options—they're dead, hopelessly incoherent, lost to their own psyche, or whatever seems most appropriate.

| PREVIOUS CONDITION |
|---|
| PC has incurred the trauma of EXHAUSTED (see below table for values) from a previous contest. They become stressed out again before recovering their trauma. |

| IF TRAUMA IS... | THEN... |
|---|---|
| 6 | EXHAUSTED 6 trauma stepped up to 8 |
| 12 | Character is taken out of the game permanently |

If the next scene is a recovery, transition, or otherwise restful scene in which the PC can be taken care of or allowed to recuperate, the PC's stress automatically steps down by one, but the trauma remains at the level it was at the end of the previous scene. Recovering trauma requires a test using any appropriate traits vs a base difficulty of 8 8 plus the trauma die.

| PREVIOUS CONDITION |
|---|
| PC has incurred a trauma of EXHAUSTED 6. |

SCENARIO 1

**If you beat the difficulty,** the trauma die rating is stepped down by one.

| PC'S ROLL | PC'S TOTAL | DIFFICULTY |
|---|---|---|
| 5 6 6 | 12 | 10 |
| The EXHAUSTED 6 trauma steps down to 4. | | |

SCENARIO 2

**If you fail to beat the difficulty,** the trauma does not get any better or worse. You can't try to recover that trauma again until time passes.

| PC'S ROLL | PC'S TOTAL | DIFFICULTY |
|---|---|---|
| 2 5 5 | 10 | 10 |
| The EXHAUSTED 6 trauma is unchanged. | | |

SCENARIO 3

**If you beat the difficulty but roll a hitch,** the GM may hand over a PP and introduce either a complication that will hinder the PC in the next scene or inflict stress of a different type than the trauma that was being recovered, starting at 6 (or stepping up by one if the PC already had stress of that type).

| PC'S ROLL | PC'S TOTAL | DIFFICULTY |
|---|---|---|
| 1 7 8 | 15 | 10 |
| The EXHAUSTED 6 trauma steps down to 4 and if the GM spends a PP, the PC can incur a new stress starting at 6 or step up an existing stress rating different from EXHAUSTED. | | |

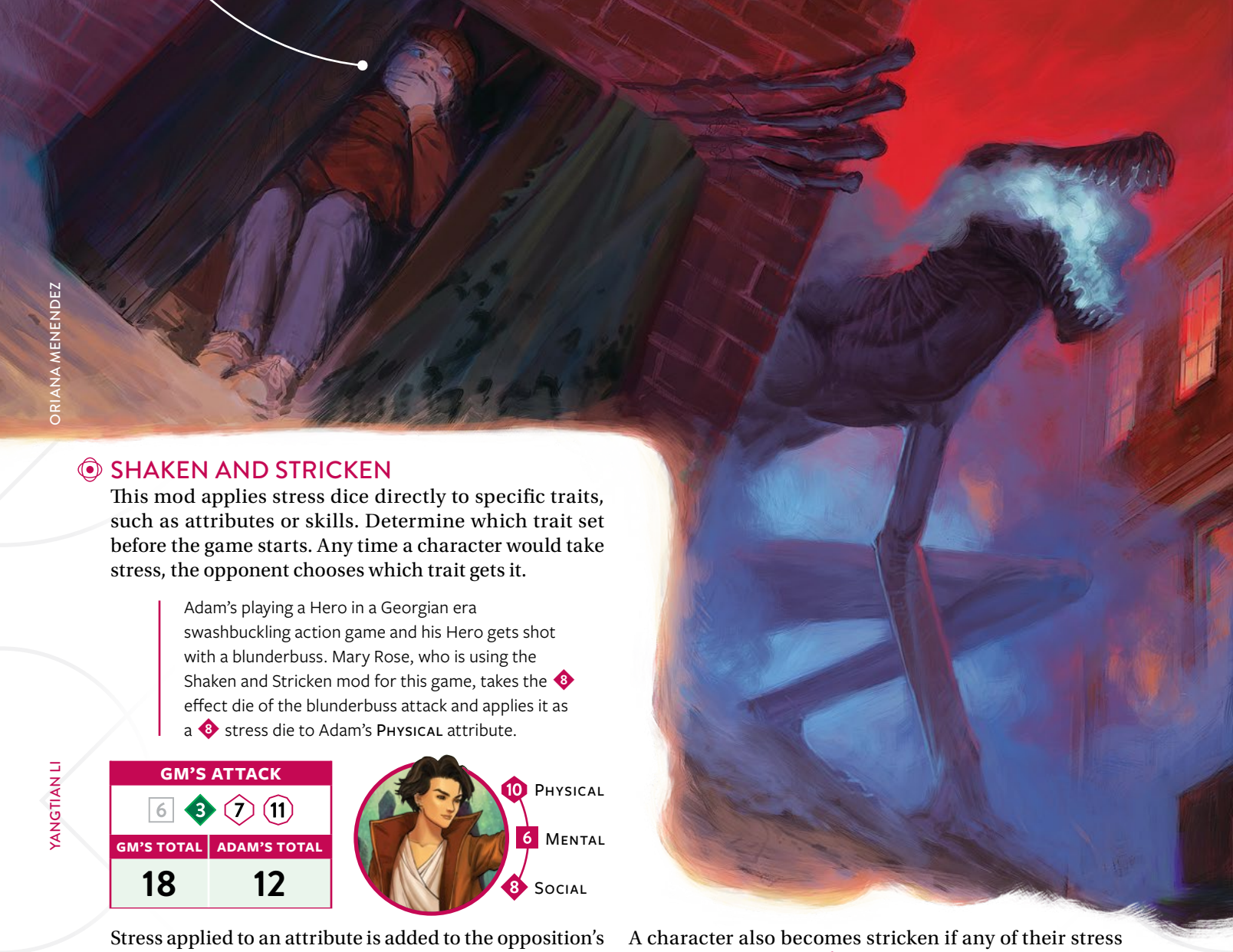
SCENARIO 4

**If you fail to beat the difficulty and roll one or more hitches,** the trauma gets worse, stepping up by one for each hitch rolled. If this steps the trauma up past 12, that's all, folks.

| PC'S ROLL | PC'S TOTAL | DIFFICULTY |
|---|---|---|
| 1 1 1 | 0 | 10 |
| The EXHAUSTED 6 trauma steps up to 12. | | |



STEPH C.



ORIANA MENENDEZ

## SHAKEN AND STRICKEN

This mod applies stress dice directly to specific traits, such as attributes or skills. Determine which trait set before the game starts. Any time a character would take stress, the opponent chooses which trait gets it.

> Adam's playing a Hero in a Georgian era swashbuckling action game and his Hero gets shot with a blunderbuss. Mary Rose, who is using the Shaken and Stricken mod for this game, takes the 8 effect die of the blunderbuss attack and applies it as a 8 stress die to Adam's PHYSICAL attribute.

| GM'S ATTACK | |
|---|---|
| 6 3 7 11 | |
| GM'S TOTAL | ADAM'S TOTAL |
| 18 | 12 |




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Stress applied to an attribute is added to the opposition's dice pool whenever the player uses that attribute in a test or contest. The exception is when the stress is a 4, in which case the player includes the 4 in their own dice pool as per the basic 4 complications rule on page 38.

**STRESS EFFECT**

Whenever Adam uses PHYSICAL 10 in a dice pool, the opposition gets to add a 8 to their own pool for the stress applied to that trait.




If the stress applied to a trait is greater than the trait it's assigned to, the PC is considered **shaken**. They can only keep one die for their total. If they're already shaken and take stress to another trait that would make them shaken, they're considered **stricken** and are taken out of the scene until they can recover.

**SHAKEN!**

PC can only keep one die for any future contests.

**STRICKEN!**

Having another trait shaken takes the PC out of the scene.

A character also becomes stricken if any of their stress is stepped up beyond 12. Stress is recovered in the same way as other stress-based mods.






# LIFE POINTS

Instead of using complications or stress to reflect harm to characters, some Cortex Prime games might choose to use a system of **life points** instead. Life points are a classic option that eliminates the hindering aspect of taking damage and instead uses damage as a pacing mechanism for conflict.

All characters have a number of life points based on two of their traits. The die rating of those traits is added together to get the baseline life point score. Which traits are added together depends on the game and which traits are being used. Using the example trait sets, life points are equal to Physical + the highest of Fight, Focus, and Survive.

> Amanda's Engineer has Physical d8, Fight d4, Focus d6, and Survive d6. She has 14 life points (8 from Physical d8, and 6 from either Focus d6 or Survive d6).

If you're using different prime sets, base life points on two traits that emphasize hardiness, willpower, or stamina.

Life points can be handled in one of two ways. The first is an ablative method; the second is a threshold method. In either method, rather than adding the effect die as a complication (or stepping up an existing complication), the GM or player takes the difference between what the player needed to roll to beat the difficulty and what the player actually rolled and applies that as damage. Some games may have the damaging character roll an additional die from a signature asset, or gear, or some kind of power, and add that to the damage.

## ABLATIVE LIFE POINTS

With this method, the damage taken from attacks is subtracted from the player's life point score. If the PC's life points drop to 0 or a negative amount, they are taken out of the scene and are clinging to life. Without some first aid or intervention, the player must spend a PP to keep them alive, and any additional damage taken by the PC forces the same PP spend until the total negative amount of damage is equal to the original life point score. If this happens, the PC is dead.

## THRESHOLD LIFE POINTS

With this method, damage is split evenly into **wounds** and **stun**, before any additional damage from weapons or signature assets or powers is rolled; that additional damage is applied either to stun only, wounds only, or evenly split between both. Wounds and stun are marked off on two separate tracks that start at zero and go as high as the life point score.

**If the accumulated wounds and stun, added together, exceed the life point score**, the PC is unconscious. This includes having no wounds and stun that exceeds the life point score all by itself.

**If the total wounds (not counting stun) exceed the life point score,** the PC is dead.

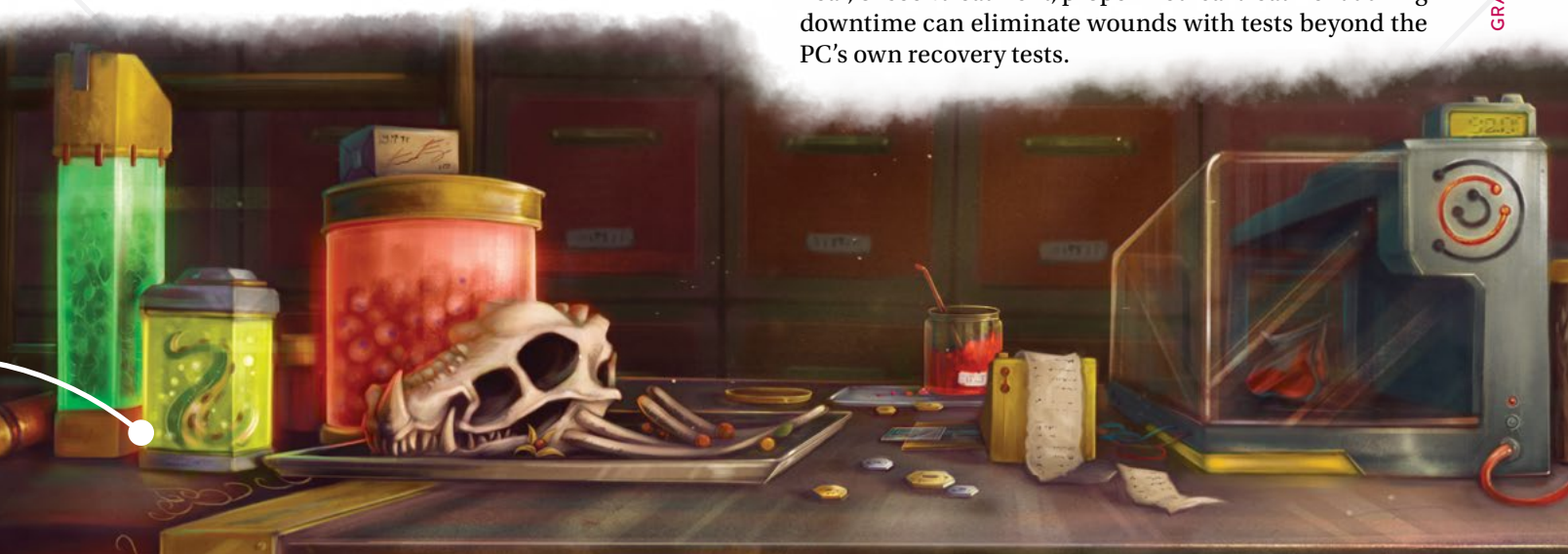
| PC'S LIFE POINTS | STUN | WOUNDS | PC'S STATUS |
|---|---|---|---|
| 14 | 8 | 7 | Unconscious |
| 14 | 15 | 0 | Unconscious |
| 14 | 10 | 15 | Dead |

**CLASSIC CONVERSION NOTE**

Threshold life points is the method used in Classic Cortex games. When creating Cortex Prime games that approximate the classic approach, pay particular attention to mods that increase the total of dice rolls as these also increase wounds and stun.

## RECOVERING LIFE POINTS

Characters who have taken damage and need to either recover lost life points (ablative method) or get rid of accumulated damage (threshold method) must make recovery tests. The difficulty is typically the standard difficulty dice of d6 d6 plus any relevant complications or other traits that might make it difficult. The amount that the player beats the difficulty by is the number of life points recovered (ablative) or is divided equally into recovered wounds and recovered stun. PCs using the threshold method can recover all stun damage at the end of any scene, assuming they have an opportunity to rest, heal, or seek treatment; proper medical treatment during downtime can eliminate wounds with tests beyond the PC's own recovery tests.



GRACE P. FONG



JASON ENGLE



CHAPTER 2

# PRIME CHARACTERS

Characters are the beating heart of Cortex Prime, waiting to be brought to life by the players and to inhabit your shared world. Like with everything else in this toolkit, the traits that define a character in your game are part of a veritable buffet of options. Your choice of prime sets, like attributes or skills, and how and where they interact with modular elements like SFX, assets, and die ratings is one of the most important decisions you need to make before you even get a game off the ground.

Once you've settled on how characters in your game are defined, your next decision is how each player creates their own character for the game. Which method (or methods) you use can inform the way the game plays out over time and what the first session of play looks like. Are characters made together at the table? Are they based mostly on pre-built archetypes?

Finally, you should also determine how characters grow and change over multiple sessions, if at all. Some groups want to see a noticeable change in game traits, others just want to record what happened in the session to use later on for flashbacks. There are several methods included in this chapter and you can pick and choose parts of them as you and your group like.

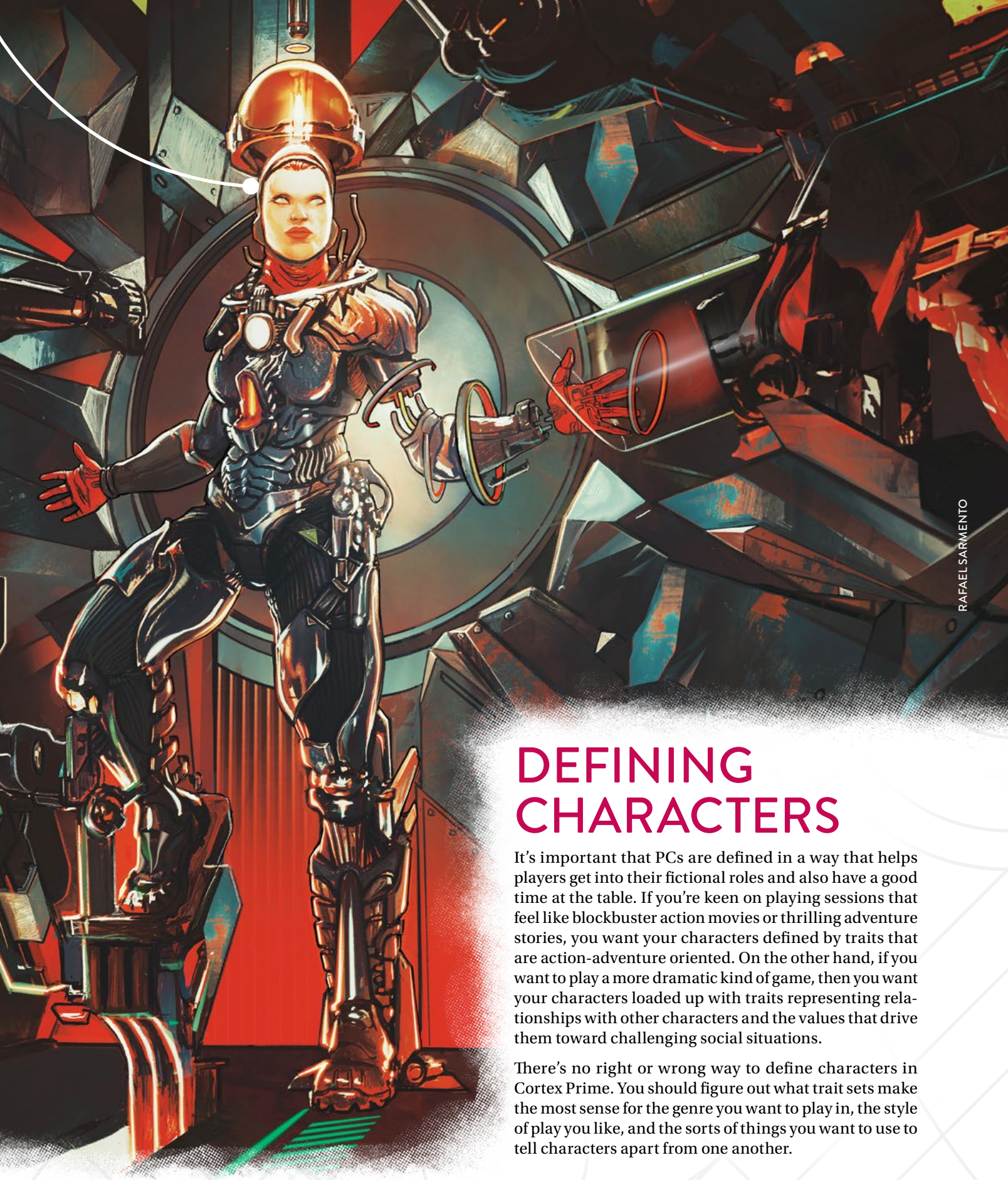
## CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

**This chapter explains how characters work, what a character file includes, and how to create characters for your game. Here's how it breaks down.**

**Defining Characters:** Choosing which traits to use and which of those will be your prime sets.

**Creating Characters:** Creating a character from concept to character file.

**Growing Characters:** Representing character growth, advancement, and experience.




# DEFINING CHARACTERS

It's important that PCs are defined in a way that helps players get into their fictional roles and also have a good time at the table. If you're keen on playing sessions that feel like blockbuster action movies or thrilling adventure stories, you want your characters defined by traits that are action-adventure oriented. On the other hand, if you want to play a more dramatic kind of game, then you want your characters loaded up with traits representing relationships with other characters and the values that drive them toward challenging social situations.

There's no right or wrong way to define characters in Cortex Prime. You should figure out what trait sets make the most sense for the genre you want to play in, the style of play you like, and the sorts of things you want to use to tell characters apart from one another.

# CHARACTER FILES

A **character file** is the central record of essential game details for your character. All players maintain their own character file and the GM maintains (often abbreviated) files for important GMCs. Character files serve double duty. On the one hand, it's where you account for all of the die ratings, points, and important information about your character. On the other hand, it's kind of a wish list to the GM. The choices players make when creating characters, which ratings and dice they assign to their characters, tell the GM what sort of character they want to play, and in turn what sort of stories they're hoping to be part of.

A character file needs to include space for all of the information players need to record and maintain. There's no fixed character file for Cortex Prime because there's no fixed array of trait sets—every Cortex game is potentially different in that way. Each of the settings in Prime Settings includes a blank character file by way of example, and every Cortex Prime setting published outside of this book also includes a blank character file.

# PRIME SETS

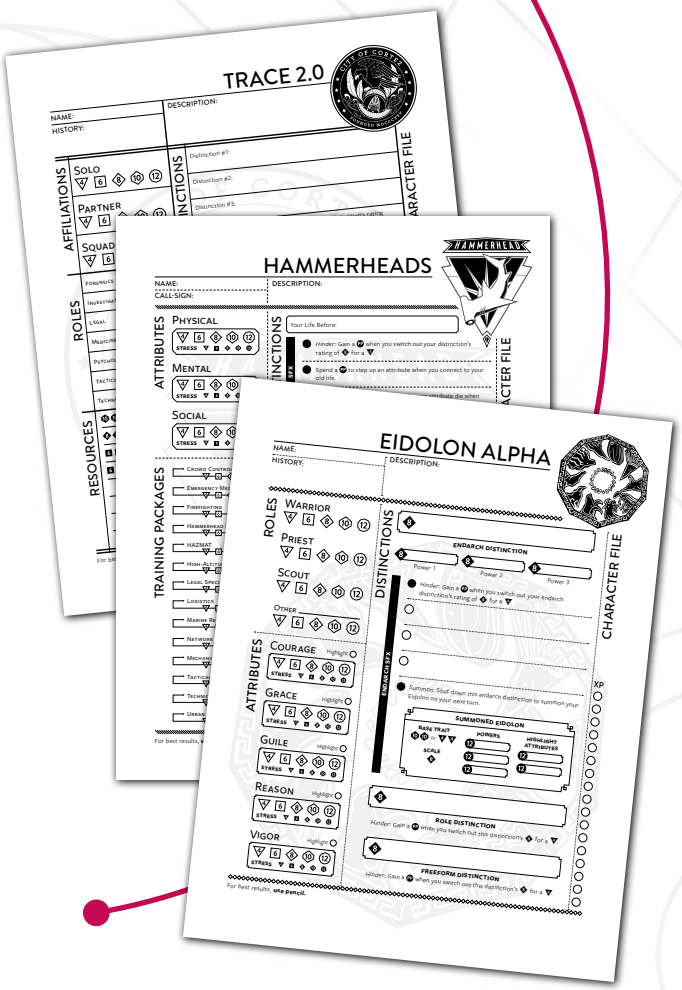
A **prime set** is one of at least two trait sets, in addition to distinctions, that serve as the core of any Cortex Prime character. There are no pre-defined prime sets, because the trait sets you use in your game are up to you and the decisions you make with your group. The examples in this book use attributes and skills as prime sets, but you might have attributes and roles, affiliations and values, relationships and skills, and so forth.

Prime sets provide the baseline dice for your dice pool on any test or contest; they're the dice you reach for when you want to do something. Each trait in these sets should have a die rating. If no die rating is noted, it typically defaults to a d4.

## READYMADE PRIME SETS

Here are some prime set choices based on popular genres or tropes. Note that distinctions are always a prime set for Cortex Prime games, even if they're not fully loaded with SFX or other features.

| GENRE | DISTINCTIONS PLUS... |
|---|---|
| **Grim Fantasy** | Attributes + Skills |
| **Heist Action** | Attributes + Roles |
| **Paranormal Mystery** | Roles + Powers |
| **Prime Time Drama** | Values + Relationships |
| **Romantic Fantasy** | Relationships + Skills |
| **Superheroes** | Affiliations + Powers |

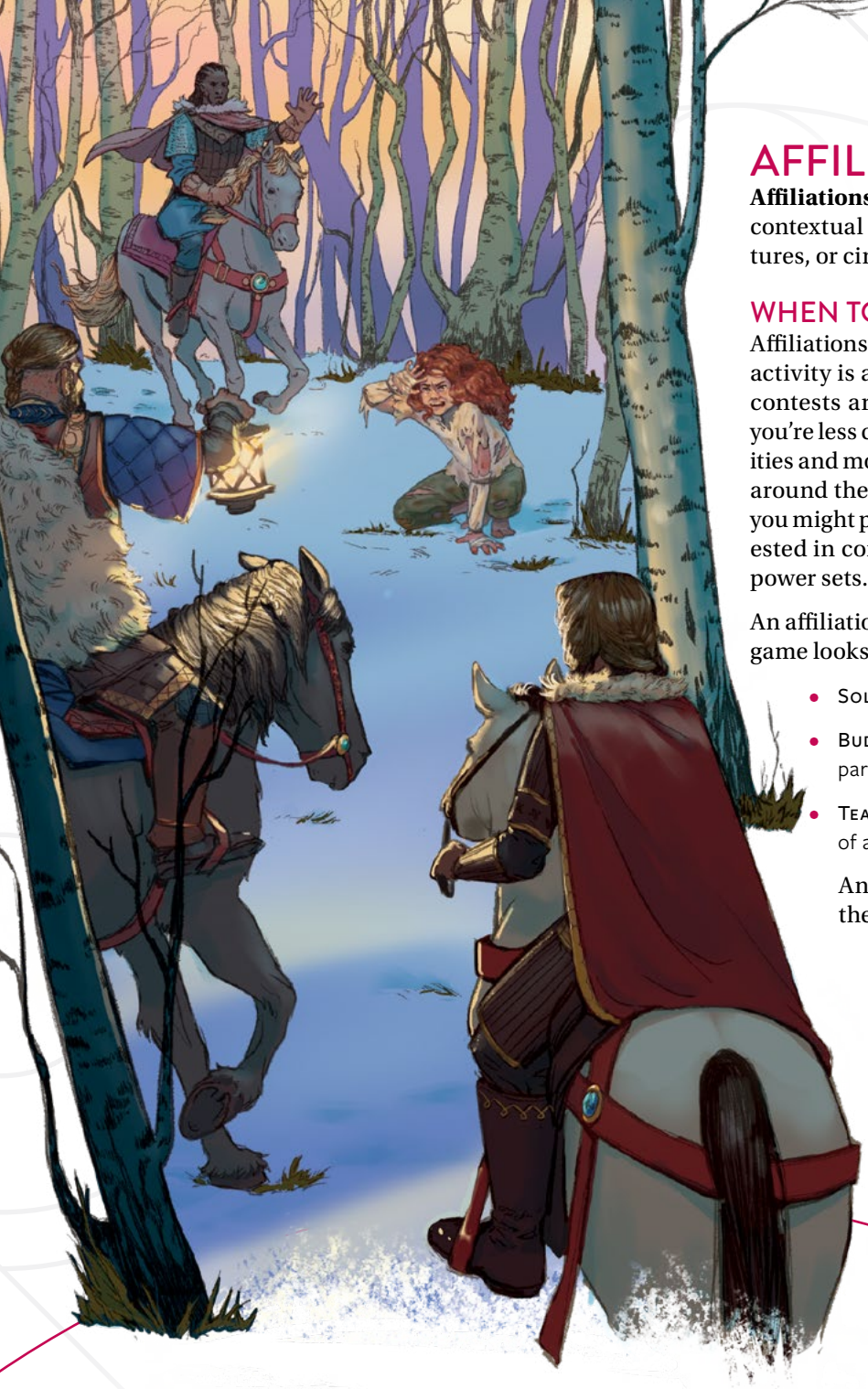



## EXPANDING PRIME SETS

Prime sets can be expanded by adding SFX or trait statements to them. This is especially common with powers, but it also makes attributes, roles, and relationships more interesting. Do this if you want a specific prime set to carry more story weight in the game through description or deeper definition.

> Mary Rose decides that for her upcoming game of super-science treasure hunters, she'll use the standard attribute triad of Physical, Mental, and Social. However, she's asking her players to choose a statement for each of the three traits that further clarifies what the die rating in each attribute means. Physical d10 is one thing, but Physical *Raw, Unchecked Strength* d10 is another.

Keep in mind that if you add SFX or statements to a prime set, you shouldn't include them with more than one other trait set in the game. For example, having your relationships and values use trait statements is fine, but don't also include trait statements for powers and skills. Similarly, if your powers and distinctions each have SFX, your relationships and values shouldn't. Two sets with trait statements and two sets with SFX? Fine.



# AFFILIATIONS

**Affiliations** reflect how well the PC performs in specific contextual situations, like environments, societal structures, or circumstances.

## WHEN TO USE AFFILIATIONS

Affiliations are useful for games where teamwork or solo activity is a key factor in how successful a PC's tests or contests are. They're a good alternate for attributes if you're less concerned with a character's internal capabilities and more interested in how they fit in with the world around them. If your game is based on squad missions, you might pair affiliations with roles. If you're more interested in comic book superheroes, pair affiliations with power sets.

An affiliation set for a mission-based or superhero-based game looks like this:

- **Solo:** The character's ability to act when alone.
- **Buddy:** The character's ability to act when partnered with another character.
- **Team:** The character's ability to act when part of a group of three or more characters.

An affiliation set for a medieval setting based on the three estates might look like this:

- **Clergy:** The character's ability to act in the context of religion and religious institutions.
- **Nobility:** The character's ability to act in the presence of aristocracy and ruling powers.
- **Commons:** The character's ability to act among peasants and the bourgeoisie.

## RATING AFFILIATIONS

Because most affiliation sets only have three traits and it's assumed everyone is rated in each of them, the default die rating is a d8. If one of them is a d10, another of them has to be a d6.

d6: **Disadvantaged**. Your character tends to get in more trouble or functions at the lower end of their ability.

d8: **Stable**. Your character is comfortable in these situations and performs neither at their best nor their worst.

d10: **Advantaged**. Your character performs at their best in these situations.

# ATTRIBUTES

**Attributes** represent raw ability, prowess, and effort. They rarely offer an insight into a character's experience, training, or external circumstances; they make a good baseline for a prime set. If you're not sure where to start with prime sets in a Cortex Prime game, start with attributes.

## WHEN TO USE ATTRIBUTES

Any conceivable test or contest can fall into one of three areas: Mental, Physical, and Social. You can use these three as your attributes, or you can expand beyond this and shape the tone and flavor of your Cortex Prime game with a different list.

A classic attribute set is as follows:

- **Agility:** Speed, reaction time, and hand-eye coordination.
- **Alertness:** Mental acuity, perception, and awareness of your surroundings.
- **Intelligence:** Reason, logic, and ability to use what you've learned.
- **Strength:** Physical power, muscle, and athleticism.
- **Vitality:** Physical endurance, stamina, and ability to survive in hostile surroundings.
- **Willpower:** Mental resolve, concentration, focus, and force of will.

A swashbuckling attribute set might be:

- **Courage:** Determination and steel in the face of danger.
- **Faith:** Belief and conviction in higher powers or in others.
- **Guile:** Capacity for wit, cunning, and subterfuge.
- **Reason:** Raw logic, knowledge, and mental comprehension.
- **Vigor:** Physical fitness, strength, and endurance.



LISA HEIDHOFF

## RATING ATTRIBUTES

Attributes usually have a rating from 6 to 10, although there are exceptions. Everyone has a rating in each of them, and they usually default to a 8. Higher rated attributes must be balanced out with lower rated ones.

These ratings may scale differently depending on your game, but in general they follow this basic scheme:

- 4: **Poor**. Notably deficient in this area.
- 6: **Typical**. An average degree of ability.
- 8: **Excellent**. Above-average performance.
- 10: **Remarkable**. Greatly above average.
- 12: **Incredible**. Peak levels of ability.

# DISTINCTIONS

To inspire roleplaying, PCs have three **distinctions** that paint a clearer picture of their background, personality, and role in the story. Just by looking at your character's three distinctions you should have a clear impression of who they are and how their past has shaped them.

## WHEN TO USE DISTINCTIONS

For a given Cortex Prime game, distinctions might be player-created (come up with three backgrounds, personality quirks, catch phrases, or job descriptions) or the GM might prepare a big list of them to choose from.

Distinctions are one of the main ways to earn PP. Every Cortex Prime game should include distinctions as one of the prime sets, which means your distinctions should be varied and broad enough that one of them will apply almost every time you put together a dice pool.

Distinctions are frequently paired up with SFX—in fact, all of them have the *Hinder* SFX: "Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's d8 for a d4." You can assign more SFX to a distinction but leave them locked until the player earns experience or growth (see "Growing Characters" on page 82) or some other mechanic (see "Rating Distinctions," below).

The most basic distinction looks something like this:

### APOCALYPTIC CULT SURVIVOR




*What you experienced in the cult had a profound effect on your life and what you do now, a decade later.*

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's d8 for a d4.

The text in italics should be no more than one or two sentences and give context for what this distinction means or implies. The choice of when to use a distinction is the player's, but it must make narrative sense to do so.

## RATING DISTINCTIONS

Distinctions are always rated as d8 and as such don't necessarily need to have the die rating included in text when referring to them. That said, you might decide to apply a mod to this rule and have distinctions rated from d4 to d12 like other traits; if so, the average of the dice should still be d8.

While three distinctions is the default number for Cortex Prime games, you're under no obligation to limit your characters to that many. Some Cortex Prime games allow for the option of several distinctions, rated anywhere from d4 to d12. In games like this, consider connecting the unlocking of SFX to the die rating, rather than XP spending: unlock one SFX at d4, another at d8, and the last one at d12.

## HIGHLIGHTING OTHER TRAITS

Distinctions can speed up character creation if they're pre-built to represent common character qualities, backgrounds, or vocations. Having the choice of distinction also generate other traits on the character file is a great option. With this mod, you can have each distinction include two **highlight traits**, which are traits from a specific trait set (like skills or powers) that the distinction is most usefully linked to. If you use highlight traits, choosing the distinction means those traits get stepped up by one during character creation.

> Adam's creating a Hero in Mary Rose's treasure-hunting super-science game, which uses highlight traits—skills, in this case. He chooses a distinction called Soldier of Fortune, which has the highlight skills of Shoot and Survive. This indicates that being a soldier of fortune implies a tendency toward being able to use firearms or bows, as well as live off the land and track prey. When assigning dice to his skills, Adam first steps up Shoot and Survive for free before he applies any other steps.



GIBY JOSEPH

# POWERS

A **power** is a special kind of trait that represents superhuman ability or some extraordinary quality that most normal humans or baseline characters don't have. The origin or source of powers varies from setting to setting—radiation, genetic mutation, sorcery, high-tech gadgets, etc. Powers can also be used to represent gear or special equipment, making it possible to mix heroes of varying power origins together with the same system.

## WHEN TO USE POWERS

Powers are central to superhero games but are also appropriate for fantasy games or science fiction games with aliens. They are incredibly flexible and—paired with SFX and limits—they can represent almost any super-powered character. On page 182 of Prime Lists there's a big list of powers that you can start with; renaming and tweaking this list is one of the key parts of defining a game that uses powers. For quick reference, here's that power list without the full description of what they do:

- Attack: blasts, weapons
- Durability: toughness, force fields
- Elemental Control: air, earth, fire, gravity, ice, kinetic, light, weather, water, etc.
- Intangibility: phasing through objects, going ethereal
- Intelligence: inventiveness, knowledge, calculation speed
- Invisibility: vs sight or vs other senses
- Mimic: creating copies of other powers as assets
- Movement: speed, flight, swing, swim, etc.
- Psychic: mind control, telepathy, etc.
- Reflexes: reaction time, coordination
- Resistance: vs sonic, poison, psychic, fire, etc.
- Senses: vision, hearing, touch, weird senses
- Shapeshift: changing shape, copying other's appearance
- Size-Changing: grow, shrink
- Sorcery: creating magical assets
- Stamina: endurance, staying power
- Strength: might and heavy lifting
- Stretch: elongated limbs
- Teleport: gateways, wormholes, shadow-steps, etc.
- Transmutation: changing one thing into another



## RATING POWERS

Powers are rated on a short scale from minor to godlike. If all of the super-strong heroes in your comic book universe tend to have Superhuman Strength 10 or Godlike Strength 12, you won't see any fine-grained differences in their ratings. That's intentional! Power ratings are rungs of broad ability and scope, as well as significance. The fine grains are seen in choice of SFX and in all of the other traits the superhero possesses, from their distinctions to their skills, relationships, or values.

A power has a die rating range between 6 and 12; the rating usually defines how far-reaching, extensive, or significant the power is. If you don't have a power, you don't have a default die rating in it.

> 6: **Minor** (or **Influence**). A power with this rating allows the character to do something most people can't do, but it doesn't have much effect on ordinary tests and contests nor is it likely to be a character's signature power. Powers that permit levitation, additional senses, or low-level enhancements are often rated 6.
>
> 8: **Enhanced** (or **Control**). A power with this rating represents a level of performance beyond ordinary human beings, and one that the character likely uses most of the time. Flight at subsonic speeds, strength or stamina at the absolute peak of human capability, control over an element or energy type in a local area, or attacks that are the equivalent of automatic weapons are rated 8.
>
> 10: **Superhuman** (or **Mastery**). A power with this rating is rare and reflects someone with extensive training or use in their power, an individual who stands out among others with this power, or performance at a truly superhuman level.
>
> 12: **Godlike** (or **Supremacy**). Very few have a power at this rating, as it represents a level of control beyond superhuman or at the very peak of potential with a specific ability. It's reserved for truly godlike characters and aliens, or superhuman individuals whose signature power puts them among the top tier of those who have it.

Powers simply do what they say they do and can be used as benchmarks for performance on an automatic success (the GM can simply say that, because you have a power at 8 or 10, you can just do that thing if the outcome isn't really in question). Powers aren't usually a prime set; instead they're added to a dice pool when their use can be justified as key to the test or contest's success or failure.

## POWER SETS

A **power set** is a mod that adds thematic strength to a collection of power traits. Power sets usually come with a limit that governs them, one or more helpful SFX, and a single origin or source that explains why your character has these powers. A power set might be something like Russian Science Experiment or Alpha Centauri Heritage or Dwarfish Traits. Each power set counts as a trait set of its own.

Using power sets helps in a number of ways: It allows you to pre-build standardized "power sources" for your superhero characters, ready for players to choose at character creation. It links powers thematically with a limit that can provide PP or other benefits. And it makes it possible to group SFX together in flavorful ways that accentuate the powers you're using, rather than seeming disconnected.

A power set must have at least one SFX, which helps flavor the use of the powers. SFX are usually a way to double specific power dice, step up dice, or roll an additional 6 when using the power trait. Power set SFX are always linked to the power set's theme. In some cases, using a specific power trait in a specific way is sufficient activation for the SFX (such as, "step up Superhuman Strength 10 when you are submerged in water") while others require PP spends.

A power set must have at least one **limit**, specifying what happens to the power set under certain conditions. Limits always exist in the form of a PP gain in return for **shutting down** the power set or, in some cases, specific power traits included with the power set. A shut down power set no longer works and its power traits can't be included in dice pools until a specific recovery condition is met.

The intent behind limits is that players have the freedom to choose when and where their powers stop working, act uncontrollably, or trigger negative effects. It's up to you to decide if the GM has the power to actually trigger limits, too—if that's the case, the GM should always ask the player if they want to activate the limit on their own in order to get the benefit of activating it on their own terms.

There's no set number of powers in a power set (though it's usually at least two) and no cap on the die ratings of the power traits (though most don't have more than one trait at 10 or 12). Individual power traits within a power set might be stepped up as a result of growth, or entire power sets might be acquired or swapped out during play, depending on the game.

Characters may have more than one power set. Each of them counts as a different trait set; if you have two power sets, you may include one power from each of the sets in your dice pool at no cost.



JULIA METZGER

## ABILITIES

Some games use a mod of power sets called **abilities**. An ability is a rated trait, something that may be included in a dice pool, that also has a number of SFX attached to it. It works a lot like a power with its own SFX, rather than a group of powers with linked SFX. In games that use abilities, the intention is to simplify a power set while keeping it separate from distinctions—as abilities don't automatically come with the "Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4" *Hinder* SFX—and to make super powers or alien qualities a more dramatic, narrative-shaping element rather than a simple dice pool builder. Almost all ability SFX expand what PP can do in the game. There is a list of abilities and SFX in Prime Lists starting on page 194.

When creating a character with an ability, choose one of the SFX listed underneath the ability for free. Unlock the other SFX just as you'd unlock SFX on distinctions.

Abilities often include effect tags and descriptor tags. The ability's **effect tag** suggests ways that you might roll the ability in a test or contest. There are six effect tags:

**Attack** effects are pretty cut and dry. Dice from this effect hurt people; you use them in rolls to give others stress.

**Sensory** effects allow the character to better perceive and understand their surroundings; you roll them in perception-based tests and contests.

**Movement** effects help characters get from place to place in unusual ways, so roll the dice in tests or contests that depend on speed or travel.

**Control** effects allow characters to manipulate aspects of their surroundings. Use the ability die to influence the outcome of a test or contest by altering the environment.

**Defense** effects protect the character from some type of harm. Roll the die when it would help you against attacks or rolls to inflict stress.

**Enhancement** effects let the character change, shift, boost, or alter their body or talents in some amazing way. Roll this ability when your enhancements give you an advantage.

An ability's **descriptor tag** establishes the details of how and why an ability works or specifies something about how the ability contributes to the story. They may end up being used in place of the ability's generic name in a character file.

> Adam and Tina each create wizards that have BLAST as an ability; but while Adam's Hero wizard has BLAST with descriptor tag *Lightning Bolt,* Tina's Sage wizard has BLAST with descriptor tag *Flame Strike.* Both abilities cause some serious hurt, of course, but someone susceptible to electricity would be much more affected by Adam's *Lightning Bolt* than Tina's *Flame Strike.* On the other hand, someone that might be easily dehydrated or burned would hurt more from Tina's *Flame Strike* due to the heat-based descriptor.

An example ability might be something like this:

### SUPER STRENGTH 10

*You have amazing strength beyond the abilities of most mortals and can accomplish great feats of raw power and muscle.*

**Effect:** Enhancement

- Spend a PP to perform a fantastic feat of strength.
- Spend a PP to throw or knock another character out of a scene.
- Spend a PP to pound on the ground, creating a shockwave sweep effect, knocking everyone in the scene off their feet.
- Spend a PP to break through a wall—even a brick or stone wall—to grab a target or object on the other side.
- Spend a PP to wield a large inanimate object, like an automobile, as a weapon (and as a 8 asset.)



VANESSA MORALES



J YANG

# RELATIONSHIPS

**Relationships** are traits that represent the intensity and importance of a character's connection to another character or group of characters. This connection may be positive or negative in nature, so long as it motivates and empowers the character who has it. PCs start with relationships with other PCs and some GMCs but can add more during play. This makes relationships flexible and not as limited as some other trait sets.

## WHEN TO USE RELATIONSHIPS

A relationship contributes its die rating to a dice pool when the test or contest involves the character the relationship is linked to, or when that character has influence over or inspires the PC. This makes them great to use in Cortex Prime games that center around emotional drama, large ensemble casts of characters, the dynamics of a prime time drama, or interconnected groups. Use relationships if the connections between characters are as significant to the outcome of a story as any other character trait.

## RATING RELATIONSHIPS

A relationship's die rating indicates the intensity of the character's feelings or attachment to the subject of the relationship. A high die rating doesn't mean you necessarily like the subject more than a low one; in fact, your 10 relationship might be a really intense hatred, or a particularly strong jealousy.

> 4: I don't feel anything for this person.
>
> 6: This person matters, but so do a lot of people.
>
> 8: I'm invested in this person.
>
> 10: This person matters more than most.
>
> 12: There's nobody who matters more than they do.

Relationships between PCs are assigned during character creation. If characters are created using a simple trait assignment process (such as picking distinctions, assigning dice to attributes and skills, etc.), then one relationship is assigned a 10, another a 8 and the rest 6. Characters created using another system such as pathways begin as a 6 until stepped up as a result of pathways choices.

During play, 6 relationships can be created using a PP, much like a temporary asset. The relationship lasts for the duration of the session; when experience or growth is resolved, it can either be dropped or made permanent. If made permanent, the relationship remains as a 6 until stepped up in later sessions.

If a PC has no relationship to a character for any given test or contest, they can either create one with a PP or assume a 4 relationship default, just like any skill.

## REPUTATIONS

A **reputation** is a relationship trait mod that may be used alongside relationships or in place of them. Reputations work like relationships do, except they represent a character's standing with a group, organization, company, or culture. PCs might start with a cap on their reputation die ratings because of inexperience or lack of fame or popularity, and steadily increase their reputations as play continues.

Reputations change as often as relationships do. They can also be affected by the actions of the character during play, especially when paired with trait statements (see page 65 for more on trait statements). A player might challenge their reputation statement to get a short-term benefit, only to see their standing drop in the long term. Increasing reputation might be a good use of milestone-based XP, as players take concrete actions in support of a group or organization in order to raise their status.



# RESOURCES

There are four types of **resource:** extras, locations, organizations, and props. Resources are usually represented by two or more dice of the same size, which may be used to aid a test or contest where that resource is helpful or significant. Players choose how many resource dice to roll—after they're rolled, those dice are considered **spent** and can be recovered later during downtime. Thus, if a character has 6 6 6 in a resource and uses 6 6 to aid in a test, those two dice are spent, and one remains.

## WHEN TO USE RESOURCES

Include resources when you want an asset that is exhaustible and renewable. You might use all four kinds of resource or just one or two types.

- **Extra:** An extra is a type of GMC, but when it's attached to a PC it represents a contact or ally the player may draw on for help.
- **Location:** A location is a place in the game setting that may be used to set scenes or provide valuable resources.
- **Organization (or org):** An organization is a group of people who function under a specific ideology, structure, or goal. An org resource may open channels that the PC doesn't have alone.
- **Prop:** A prop is a tool, object, or item that helps a PC broaden the scope of what they can achieve in specific situations.

A resource die is *committed* before the test or contest dice pool is rolled but *rolled* separately. If more than one resource die is spent to aid a test or contest, only the highest rolling die is applied. This result is **added to the total**.

Resources are recovered at the beginning of every session, or during any period of downtime (such as a week of relaxation). You might also decide that resources can be refreshed by spending PP on a one for one basis (one PP for one resource die recovered).

## RATING RESOURCES

Every resource has a name, a die rating (nearly always in multiples of 6, but sometimes larger dice), and (optionally) a **tag** or label to indicate what kind of field or quality that resource belongs to, such as *Politics*, *Crime*, *Academics*, or *Military*. If you use tags, each listed resource should have two of them, and they should inform you of the kind of test or contest that the resource might apply to. A GM can invoke GMC resources by spending PP to add to an opposition dice pool total.

> Adam's playing his Hero in a *TRACE 2.0* game run by Mary Rose. His Hero has an org resource called Cortez City Police Department, with the tags *Investigation* and *Law*. When Adam's Hero is investigating a criminal case or researching a legal matter, he could roll one or more resource dice from this org alongside his dice pool for the test or contest. On the other hand, if he's trying to break into a bank and there are cops out looking for the Hero, Mary Rose might spend a PP to activate a police chief GMC's Cortez City Police Department resource for the opposition's dice pool total.



## RESOURCES VS SIGNATURE ASSETS VS HERO DICE

A resource is similar in many ways to a signature asset in that it's a trait that represents an external person, object, place, or thing that contributes to a character's dice pool total in a test or contest. It's also similar to a hero die in that it's rolled separately and added to the total.

Resource dice are more helpful than signature assets because they always increase the potential total in a test or contest, but the downside is that they're spent, whereas a signature asset can be used as many times as is justifiable.

Resource dice are more helpful than hero dice because they don't require PP to activate them, but the downside is that they can only be used in specific circumstances, represented by the resource's tag. Hero dice can be used on any test or contest, regardless of the nature of that test or contest.

# SKILLS

**Skills** represent natural talent, training, or experience. If you can describe it as a verb, it's a good candidate for a skill. The default skill list for Cortex Prime consists of verbs.

## WHEN TO USE SKILLS

Because it's so easy to describe characters in roleplaying games by what they can do and how they're trained, skills are a natural trait set to include in a Cortex Prime game. If you aren't using skills, you're probably either focused more on dramatic flavor or you've got a similar kind of trait such as roles or specialties, which work a lot like skills.

Although you can and should create a skill list for your game based on the genre and sorts of activities you expect to be common in the game's world, the default list is provided as a baseline.

Note how they're all framed as verbs, to make it easier to imagine when you'd use them.

- **Craft:** Crafting things, includes building, assembling, or creating stuff.
- **Drive:** Land and surface vehicles, including cars, boats, and trucks.
- **Fight:** All kinds of close combat, including weapons or fists.
- **Fix:** Repairing things.
- **Fly:** Piloting air vehicles or spacecraft.
- **Focus:** Concentrating on something, to study or steel your will or whatever.
- **Influence:** Making others do, think, act, or feel the way you want them to.
- **Know:** General knowledge and recall. Use specialties to cover specific areas: *Business, Navigation, Religion, Animals, Fine Arts,* etc. **Know** always includes a free specialty of the player's choice.
- **Labor:** Carrying out tasks of manual labor, lifting, pushing, digging, pulling, hauling.
- **Move:** Running, jumping, climbing trees.
- **Notice:** Spotting, sensing, or hearing things.
- **Operate:** Using things like computers, gadgets, and devices.
- **Perform:** Acting, putting on a show.
- **Shoot:** Guns, big rocket launchers, things that you point and shoot.
- **Sneak:** Sneaking around. Sneakily.
- **Survive:** Surviving in the outdoors or wherever.
- **Throw:** Throwing things.
- **Treat:** Taking care of people. Heal, treatment of injury, but also counseling.
- **Trick:** Deceiving or conning somebody, sleight of hand, using spin.



JOEL DUQUE

## RATING SKILLS

Every PC has at least a d4 in each skill, which represents being untrained. Proficiency and expertise are represented by ratings between d6 and d12. Most characters start with 12 points (roughly equal to ⅔ the number of skills in the skill list) to put into skills' die ratings, with one point stepping up a die by one step; some or all of these points may be predetermined by character creation options such as archetypes or pathways.

> d4: **Untrained**. You have no idea what you're doing, and you're likely to create trouble when you try it, but who knows.
>
> d6: **Competent**. Sufficient training to get by. You're comfortable doing this.
>
> d8: **Expert**. Able to do this for a living. This is second nature to you.
>
> d10: **Master**. One of the best in the field. Likely known to others who possess the skill.
>
> d12: **Grandmaster**. One of the best in the world. Known even to those outside the field.



H. WON

## ROLES

**Roles** are skill-like trait mods that replace skills in some expressions of Cortex Prime. A role acts like a skill group or skill set, rather than a specific skill, and reflects a PC's experience, training, or proficiency in a broad thematic area. Games that use roles should have no fewer than three and no more than six roles.

Roles are rated from d4 to d12, like other traits. Each PC usually has at least one d10, one d8, and one d4, with the rest at d6.

- **Three roles:** d10, d8, and d4.
- **Four roles:** d10, d8, d6, and d4.
- **Five roles:** d10, d8, d6, d6, and d4.
- **Six roles:** d10, d8, d6, d6, d6, and d4.

A set of roles for a tactical action game might be:

- COMMANDER: Making strategic decisions; inspiring the troops; talking with authority.
- ENGINEER: Repairing and maintaining equipment; jury-rigging gear; understanding science.
- MEDIC: Applying first aid and medical treatment to others; recognizing and diagnosing disease; using medical equipment.
- SNIPER: Using ranged weapons; patiently waiting in a hidden location; being familiar with terrain.
- SOLDIER: Close-combat fighting; use of military weapons; making use of formation and defenses.

A set of roles for a fantasy action game might be:

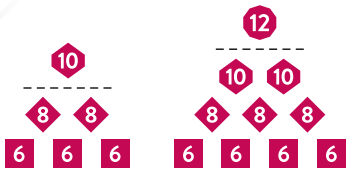
- WARRIOR: Use of all weapons, armor, and combat training; small unit tactics; maintaining gear.
- PRIEST: Use of healing spells; channeling divine energy; knowledge of religion.
- WIZARD: Use of elemental spells; using arcane items; knowledge of magic and occult.
- ROGUE: Use of thief tools; sneaking, spying, and scouting; opening barriers; knowledge of crime.
- BARD: Use of social skills; performance-based magic; knowledge of culture and legends.

Roles are a good choice for a Cortex Prime game that requires specialization without removing the ability to use certain skills. This includes action-heavy or team-oriented games of all genres. When using roles, specialties allow for narrow focus in a role's area of proficiency.

For a variation on roles, check out training packages in *Hammerheads* on page 152.

## THE SKILL PYRAMID

One way to ensure that players aren't quickly maxing out their skills or other traits is to require them to adhere to a **skill pyramid**. Using this mod, if you want a 10 rating in a skill, you need at least two 8 rated skills and three 6 rated skills. If you want a 12, you need at least two at 10, three at 8, and four at 6. In order to maintain the skill pyramid, it may be necessary to step up a 4 skill before subsequently stepping up other, larger dice until the pyramid is restored. As skills have a baseline of 4, there's no required number of 4 rated skills in the pyramid.




Top rating only obtainable once skills below line are achieved.

Skills reach this quantity and at these die ratings in order to move a second level skill to the top rating.

If this mod is used with highlight traits associated with distinctions, or any other bonus skill steps, players must "fill in" the pyramid with skills to account for any imbalances once the bonus steps from the highlight skills are resolved.

## SPECIALTIES

A **specialty** is a narrow area of concentration or focus within a skill. Using this mod, specialties confer a bonus 6 to any test or contest that falls into that narrow area and involves the skill they're attached to. There's no fixed list of specialties, which may include things like: *Grappling*, *Seduction*, *Rifles*, *Pickpocket*.

| SPECIALTY: GUNS | | |
|---|---|---|
| **Skill** | **Subject** | **Bonus 6?** |
| Shoot 12 | PC shoots a hunting rifle | **YES** |
| Shoot 12 | PC shoots a bow & arrow | **NO** |
| Fix 8 | PC fixes a cannon | **YES** |
| Fix 8 | PC fixes a generator | **NO** |
| Know 10 | PC tries to infer the caliber of a bullet | **YES** |
| Know 10 | PC wants to figure out the artist of a painting | **NO** |

If you're using specialties without using skills, specialties replace skills but can't be used by default. They start out at a 6 and can increase to as much as 12, but if you don't have a specialty you don't have a rating in it. See No Skills, Just Specialties for more information.

## MULTI-LEVEL SPECIALTIES

With this mod, specialties start at 6 but can be increased to multiple dice or larger dice either during character creation or through experience. They're usually grouped as follows:

> **Trained:** 6
>
> **Expert:** 8 or 6 6
>
> **Master:** 10 or 8 8 or 6 6 6
>
> **Grandmaster:** 12 or 10 10 or 8 8 8 or 6 6 6 6

## NO SKILLS, JUST SPECIALTIES

A Cortex Prime game that doesn't use skills as a trait set may choose to use specialties as a trait on their own. With this mod, specialties are rated from 8 to 12 rather than set at 6. Unlike skills, there's no default specialty level for all characters—if you don't have a specialty, it's assumed the kinds of activity included in the specialty aren't relevant or significant to your character.

> Without a Pickpocket specialty, Tina's Sage can still clandestinely pilfer a key; she just doesn't gain an additional die for doing so beyond what she might have from other traits.

Without skills, it's useful to create a master list of specialties to choose from so that the thematic aspects of the setting are maintained. For example, listing Computers, Spacecraft, and Laser Weapons tells players that those things are a part of the setting.

## SKILL AND SPECIALTY SPLIT

With this mod, characters have general skills at a rating of 4 (Untrained) or 6 (Competent), but to have higher ratings they must specialize. Ratings of 8 (Expert), 10 (Master), and 12 (Grandmaster) are only available for specialties of that skill, and a character may have multiple specialties at different die ratings.

> Mary Rose is running a game where the general skill of Drive only goes as high as 6 and requires her players to focus to a specialty such as *Motorcycles* to have a 8 or higher. Adam's Hero might end up with Drive 6 (*Speed Boat* 8, *Motorcycles* 10, *Drift Cars* 10).

Using this mod, you don't add both the skill and the specialty to the dice pool. Your character's specialty replaces the skill die rating, which you continue to use for all tests and contests where your specialties don't apply.

This mod emulates the way skills work in Classic Cortex games and is a good option if you want to encourage many high-rated but narrow skills.

# VALUES

**Values** represent how much specific things matter to the PCs and, in turn, how much they influence the outcome of tests and contests. They can embody such things as societal mores, cultural principles, or elements of a code of honor or behavior. As with relationships, a high rating in a value doesn't mean your character likes or stands out as a paragon of that value, but rather that they are more invested and concerned about that value than if they had it at a lower die rating. A d10 in Truth could still mean the character is a liar, but the concept of truth and falsehood is one of the things that drives them the most to succeed.

## WHEN TO USE VALUES

Values are useful in games where differences in physical or mental attributes matter less to a character than what they're motivated by and what they believe. Prime time drama, YA stories, political drama, and other personality-driven and emotion-driven genres are all excellent candidates for the values trait set.

A dramatic set of values for a game about superheroes and their friends might be:

- **Duty:** Motivated by what one feels they must do for others.
- **Glory:** Motivated by praise, acclaim, and renown.
- **Justice:** Motivated by adherence to the law and what's right.
- **Love:** Motivated by affection and compassion for others.
- **Power:** Motivated by control, wealth, and influence.
- **Truth:** Motivated by facts, fidelity, and rejection of deceit.

A dramatic set of values for a game about dark supernatural romance might be:

- **Envy:** Driven by coveting the status, traits, or possessions of others.
- **Gluttony:** Driven by appetite, excess, and consumption.
- **Greed:** Driven by avarice and a desire to possess more than what one has.
- **Lust:** Driven by sexual or carnal desire.
- **Pride:** Driven by hubris and placing one's own needs and successes before others.
- **Sloth:** Driven by apathy and laziness.
- **Wrath:** Driven by anger and vengeance.



LENKA ŠIMEČKOVÁ

## RATING VALUES

Five to seven values is usually enough. Values have the same range of dice as attributes: usually one at d10, one or two at d8, one at d4, and the rest at d6. When a value changes—either stepping up or stepping down by a die size—one other value must change at the same time in the opposite direction. Thus, the total number of die steps in the dice assigned to values in any given Cortex Prime game should always stay the same. Values can never be lower than d4 or higher than d12.

> Tina's playing her Sage in one of Mary Rose's high society drama games, where the values are the seven deadly sins. During play, Tina steps up her Gluttony d8 to d10 to show that her Sage has taken a turn toward the intemperate. Because she stepped one value up, she has to step another one down, so she steps down her Wrath d6 to d4. No time to worry about being angry, she thinks.

The die rating of a value measures how much the value matters to the character, as follows:

> d4: "I'm really not into this."
>
> d6: "Sure, this matters. But so do a lot of things."
>
> d8: "This is definitely on my radar."
>
> d10: "I'm all over this thing."
>
> d12: "This is my heart and soul."

# SFX AND OTHER TRICKS

**SFX** is short for "special effect." It's usually some kind of benefit or bonus that only occurs under certain conditions. In Cortex Prime, SFX are used as a way to introduce exception-based rules for trait sets that possess them. They're a way to break the rules of the game, modify the outcome of tests and contests, and add more texture to the story.

All distinctions get the "Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4" *Hinder* SFX for free, and other trait sets may have one or more SFX to give context to the traits in the set.

## WHEN TO USE SFX

SFX are especially useful when you want to add depth and variety to trait sets or assets. In general, you should decide which trait set in your game features SFX, and use that trait set as the key area of differences between otherwise similar characters. In games with power sets or pre-set distinctions, SFX provide ways to further define and shape what those traits actually represent.

Mary Rose is planning a heroic fantasy game using power sets. Two different power sets with the same powers, such as Superhuman Strength 10 and Superhuman Durability 10, might be distinguished from one another with names like Ogre Blood and Forged of Living Iron, but mechanically-speaking they're identical. Using SFX to give Ogre Blood something like "Spend a PP to double an Ogre Blood die when engaged in battle with fey" and Forged of Living Iron something like "Earn a PP and create a Sinking 8 complication when you enter any large body of water or liquid" lets Mary Rose sharpen these two power sets not just in the narrative, but in the game as well.







## CREATING SFX

One way to look at SFX is as a combination of a **cost** and a **benefit**. The standard SFX for all distinctions has the cost of "use the distinction as a 4" with the benefit of "earn a PP."

Here's a list of sample costs to choose from:

- **Spend a PP** (very common)
- **Step down a beneficial die** (usually an attribute, skill, or asset)
- **Step up a non-beneficial die** (usually a complication)
- **Choose to do or introduce something risky/ill-advised/complicated** ("When you walk right into a volatile situation and start causing trouble...")
- **Create a 8 complication**
- **Shut down a trait set** (the trait set can't be used until restored)

Here are some useful benefits:

- **Earn a PP**
- **Add a 6 to the dice pool**
- **Step up a beneficial die** (usually a specialty or asset, like "step up Pistols")
- **Double a beneficial die** (usually a specialty or asset, like "double Pistols")
- **Step down a non-beneficial die** (usually a complication)
- **Introduce a non-mechanical story detail** ("Hey, I think I know that guy's brother...")
- **Rename a complication** ("I'm not Sickened, I'm Angry")
- **Reroll a single die**
- **Create a 8 asset for the rest of the scene**

Some SFX may switch out the cost for a different sort of triggering condition. This can include rolling a heroic success, or some roleplaying-based triggering effect.

> Mary Rose introduces some SFX in her *TRACE 2.0* police procedural game. One lets a player double their character's Move skill die when they're in water. Another lets them introduce an Obscure Legal Case 8 asset in any scene in which they're alone with a law enforcement officer.

SFX often combine both a cost and a triggering condition, especially if the benefit is broader or more potent than usual. In some cases, an SFX may include a narrative condition that explains when and how it's used to give context to the SFX.

> Tina's Sage in a fantasy game has an SFX that lets her spend a PP to bank two hero dice of a given value instead of one, so long as she is engaged in battle with her hated foes—goblins. A powerful feature (doubling a hero die) has a triggering condition (fighting goblins) and a cost (spending the PP). It might be too narrow for some groups, but for the setting Tina's playing in (an epic war against goblins) it could be a powerful advantage.

## STEPPING UP, STEPPING DOWN, REROLLING, AND DOUBLING

SFX use these dice tricks a lot, so here's a summary of what these actually mean.

- **Stepping up** means increasing the size of a die by one step, i.e. a 6 to a 8, or a 10 to a 12.
- **Stepping down** means decreasing the size of a die by one step, i.e. a 8 to a 6, or a 12 to a 10.
- **Rerolling** means rolling a die or dice again, ignoring the previous result and using the new result.
- **Doubling** a die means adding another die of the same size to the dice pool before the dice are rolled.

Aside from rerolling, most SFX tricks affect the unrolled dice in the pool, although SFX that call for stepping up or stepping down an effect die obviously take place after an effect die is chosen.

Good SFX make it unambiguous when an effect takes place, usually after a specific trigger and before the total is declared or effect dice are put into play.

## THE LOGIC OF SFX

Because SFX are used to break the rules or provide additional ways to earn and spend PP, create assets, or alter die rolls, they're a mechanical way to represent special abilities, tricks, or maneuvers your character has knowledge of. SFX are best when they allow you to differentiate your character from other characters with otherwise similar traits, and to flesh out trait sets that form the core of a character.

When you use SFX with distinctions, they let you further define what a character with that distinction can do beyond just getting the 8 in a dice pool. When you use them with power sets or skills, they allow you to attach fun and interesting tricks to those traits without having to create narrow or specific traits. And they provide an ideal means of tracking character growth, especially when they're used in pre-built character archetypes; distinctions can come with three or more SFX that the player can unlock over time and experience.

## SIX STANDARD SFX

SFX are the fiddliest part of Cortex Prime and take some effort to get right for some players and GMs, so it might help to look at the examples of Power SFX in the Prime Lists chapter (page 191). In a pinch, however, use one of the following SFX that game designer Leonard Balsera uses when creating new distinctions.

**The Exchange:** Step up or double one useful die for the scene but step down one other die in exchange until you do a recovery action.

**The Price:** Step up or double one useful die for the scene or take a 8 asset for the scene (choose one benefit here, not both), but also take a 8 complication.

**The Swap:** Spend a PP to use a different die than would normally be appropriate for a given action, based on your distinction.

**The Edit:** Spend a PP to declare a beneficial thing to be true in the fiction, based on your distinction.

**The Folly:** Earn a PP when you choose to do something detrimental related to the distinction.

**The Shutdown:** Earn a PP when you declare that, due to appropriate circumstances based on your distinction, you have lost access to one or more of your attributes/skills/roles/etc. for the scene and cannot use it for any actions.



ZOE BADINI

## LIMITS

A limit is an SFX mod that introduces vulnerabilities that provide PP. A hero is nothing without his flaws and weaknesses; most superheroes have an Achilles' heel, even if it's just that their powers wear them out!

Most limits use the shutdown cost with the earn a PP benefit. With a shutdown cost, there's always a specific situation in which the character can restore the shutdown trait, even if it's just "restore the trait at the beginning of the next scene" or something along those lines.

The GM can also activate limits in some circumstances by spending a PP (or doom pool die, if that mod is used). If the GM chooses to do this, they should first offer the player the option to activate it themselves, in order to gain the PP benefit. If the player decides not to, the option then goes to the GM, and the PP the GM spends goes to the pile, not to the player.



## SIGNATURE ASSETS

Some characters have iconic weapons, gear, or pet robots that contribute to their dice pools in tests and contests. These are **signature assets** that the character doesn't have to create during play as they "belong" to the character and act much like any other trait.

Signature assets work like regular temporary assets—they give players an extra die to include in their dice pools when they're able to justify their use. Unlike skills or attributes, they're about things a PC has or people they know, not about qualities innate to them. Not every PC has a signature asset, but they're a great way to further reveal a PC's personality as a means of representing heirlooms or unique weapons or special relationships.

Signature assets begin with a 6 die rating but can be stepped up during play. They aren't tied to a distinction, attribute, or skill, but may complement any one of those traits. Some examples of signature assets include:

- **Organizational Ties:** San Narciso County Sheriff's Department, Dio Sanchez Gang, CTRL-ALT-DEL Hacker Collective, Aurora Hunting Club, Free State Bikers
- **Vehicles:** My Favorite Bike, M1 Abrams Tank, Trans-Dimensional Scooter, Souped-Up Station Wagon
- **Weapons:** Magnum Research Desert Eagle, My Grandmother's Sword, Trusty Pew Pew Laser Blaster, Louisville Slugger, A Knife (!!!)
- **Gear:** All-Season Thermal Jacket, Talon TSA-Ready Multitool, Handheld Tablet, Bundle of Baling Wire

Signature assets can be left as they are—simply a die rating on a character file—or the player can unlock an SFX for the asset much like the SFX on distinctions or power sets. There's no default SFX for a signature asset, and no two signature assets are the same, so typically there needs to be a conversation with the GM about appropriate options before one can be added. Typical SFX for signature assets allow the player to spend a PP to step up a skill when the signature asset is used with the skill, especially when the signature asset is itself a tool of some kind. A good rule of thumb is to attach a single SFX to a signature asset; if you feel like adding more, there should be a limit of three.

Signature assets can be temporarily knocked out, eliminated, rendered unusable, or damaged during play by actions taken by the group or a GMC; but as they're a featured element of the PC's file, the player can recover



KEKAI KOTAKI

the signature asset between sessions or by spending a PP at the beginning of the next scene (with some narrative justification for getting it back/fixed).

Signature assets cannot be shared between PCs; if someone "borrows" a signature asset from a character (picking up the other character's heirloom sword or driving their custom sports car), the borrower must spend a PP to create an asset as normal to get any benefit from the asset borrowed, and the asset is rated at 6 like any other plot point created asset.

# TRAIT STATEMENTS

A **statement** is a sentence or phrase that clarifies or refines the trait that it's attached to. One or more trait sets may be assigned trait statements. They're especially useful when assigned to values, relationships, or attributes. They signify which trait sets you want at the center of your game's dramatic tension.

A statement might be something like *I'm not afraid of danger* or *Everyone deserves respect* (for values), *He's my brother from another mother* or *Why doesn't she understand me?* (for relationships), and *Tough as nails* or *Genius runs in the family* (for attributes).

## CHALLENGING STATEMENTS

Trait statements are narratively similar to distinctions, but a statement is a truth about your character that you may **challenge** and then grow from. When you challenge a trait with a statement attached to it, you act contrary to the statement and your trait die is tripled for that roll.

Once a trait statement is challenged, the trait it's attached to steps down by one. At the end of the session or whenever character growth is resolved, that statement must either be rewritten to reflect a new belief or truth and the die returns to its original rating, or the statement remains the same and the die remains stepped down. If the die rating is stepped down, it's likely that another trait must be stepped up to balance it out, especially if the trait set has a fixed number of assigned steps.

> When she does something for someone else at the cost of her own safety, Tina's Sage challenges the statement *Nobody matters but me!* to her Social 8 attribute. Tina triples her Sage's Social to 8 8 8 for the roll, which steps it down to 6 for the rest of the session. At session's end, Tina has to decide whether to restore her Social 6 up to 8, in which case she needs to rewrite her statement; or to keep Social at 6 with the statement as it is and step her Physical or Mental up by one.

## STATEMENTS AS DISTINCTION ALTERNATES

As a mod, you could have a Cortex Prime game where trait statements replace distinctions entirely. It's important that there still be at least three prime sets so that dice pools remain centered around a set of three dice; ensure there's another prime set or sufficient other ways to add dice (such as through talents or specialties) so that it remains consistent.

# TALENTS

A **talent** is a special trait that doesn't have a die rating and consists of some descriptive or narrative text with an SFX, separate from a distinction. Talents are often associated with another trait group, such as skills or the roles mod. They can also be grouped together based on things such as professions, cultures, past experiences, membership in a group, faction, or organization, or just thrown into a single generic list. In each case, making it easy and quick to skim the lists of talents and identify which ones might be appropriate during character creation is a good idea.

Talents are helpful in a game where characters from similar origins need to be distinct from one another, or where the other traits are less numerous or are broad in scope. Because talents don't have a die rating, they're frequently used to boost or accent another trait or series of traits that do have die ratings. A talent like Elite Sniper might step up both a Shoot skill and a Notice skill under specific circumstances.

Most characters in games using talents start with two and can add more as part of character growth or advancement.

The following is the standard format for talents.

### TALENT NAME

*Descriptive text (optional)*

**Activation:** (cost or triggering event)
**Effect:** (benefit)

Here are three sample talents to show off the breadth of options available.

EXAMPLE 1

### UNRELENTING FORCE

*When you steel yourself for trouble, you are a force of nature.*

**Activation:** The GM gets a heroic success for a GMC your PC is engaged in a contest with.
**Effect:** You ignore the GM's heroic success if the roll beats yours by 5-9, such as the GMC's effect die being stepped up, or being taken out automatically. A roll of 10 or higher is a normal heroic success.

EXAMPLE 2

### YOUR SHOELACE IS UNTIED

*Your deceptive wit and fast-talk helps you pull the wool over your opponent's eyes.*

**Activation:** You're engaging in a contest with a major GMC or another PC, such as a fight or a battle of wits. You spend a PP.
**Effect:** For each die the GM keeps in the total after the first—including those they keep as a result of spending PP—you get a ◆8 asset. You can use this asset in your next roll for this contest. The GM may choose not to keep a second die when determining their total.

EXAMPLE 3

### HOPELESS ROMANTIC

*Everywhere you go, you run into old flames and people you've romanced before. This can be helpful, but it can also be hurtful.*

**Activation:** Introduce or identify a past fling, no more than one per scene.
**Effect:** You get a ◆8 asset linked to that character, but the GM gets a ◆8 complication to use on you or one of your allies.



GRACE P. FONG

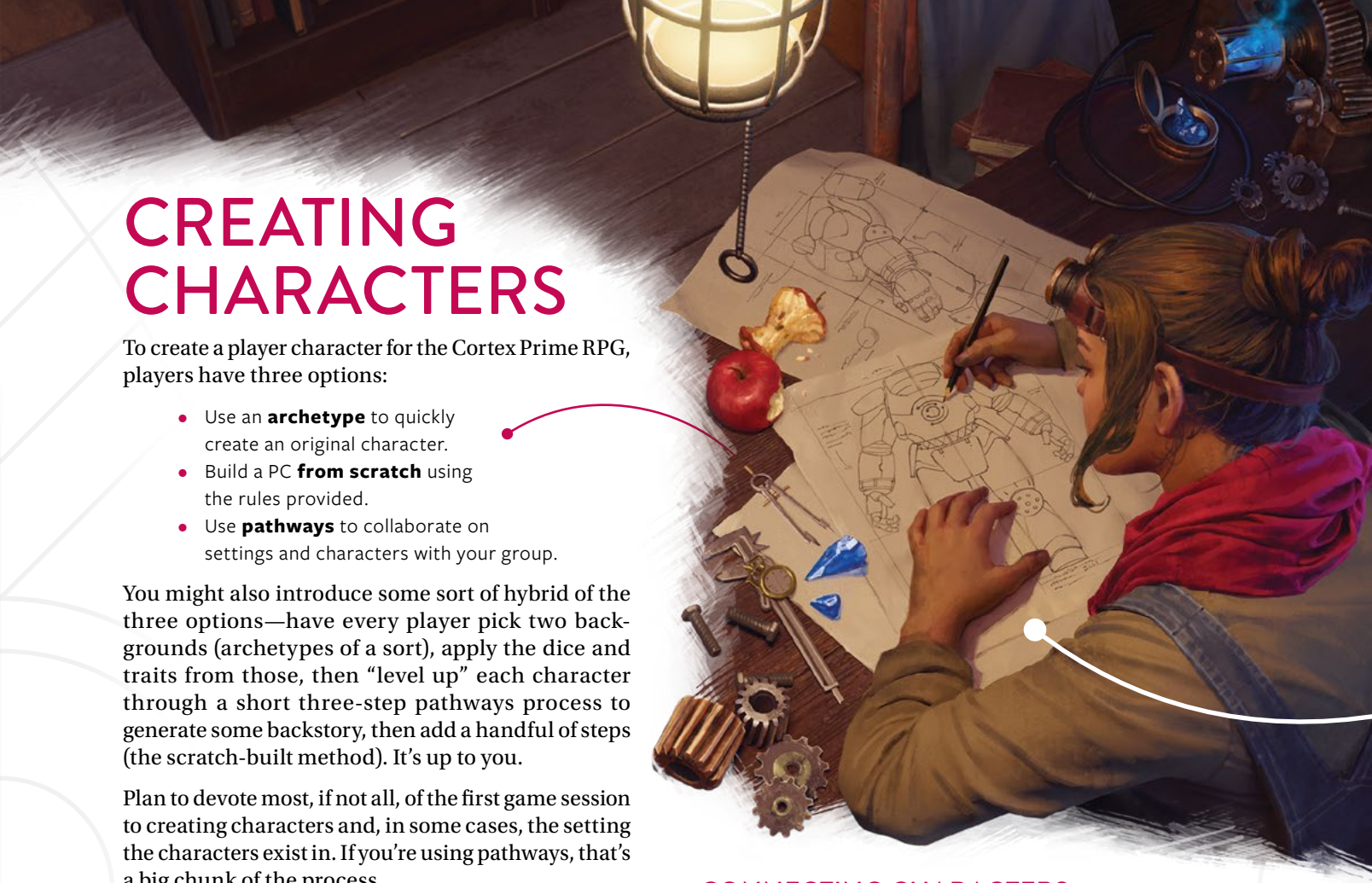
# CREATING CHARACTERS

To create a player character for the Cortex Prime RPG, players have three options:

- Use an **archetype** to quickly create an original character.
- Build a PC **from scratch** using the rules provided.
- Use **pathways** to collaborate on settings and characters with your group.

You might also introduce some sort of hybrid of the three options—have every player pick two backgrounds (archetypes of a sort), apply the dice and traits from those, then "level up" each character through a short three-step pathways process to generate some backstory, then add a handful of steps (the scratch-built method). It's up to you.

Plan to devote most, if not all, of the first game session to creating characters and, in some cases, the setting the characters exist in. If you're using pathways, that's a big chunk of the process.



VIKO MENEZES

## FORMING CONNECTIONS

Even if the game you're creating focuses mostly on action adventure, connections between the PCs and the world you've created are crucial.

### CONNECTING CHARACTERS TOGETHER

When deciding your method of creating characters, remember how important it is for the PCs to share some sort of bond, relationship, or background. A Cortex Prime game that starts out in the first session with four to six completely random characters who happen to be in the same place at the same time does stretch credibility. But even in that case, there's no reason you can't ask each player what their PC thinks of the other PCs, based on their snap first impression.

Connecting the PCs might only be flavor, but it's important. Even if the PCs are supposed to be rivals or enemies, they share something that motivates them to get in each other's business. When in doubt, make them all part of the same organization, family, or local culture at a specific starting event. That often provides players with plenty of ideas to link these different backstories together before play starts.

### CONNECTING CHARACTERS TO THE SETTING

Once you've established that the characters share something in common with other characters, even if it's not the same backstory for all of them, you can move on to the next most important part: the setting.

Characters live in and inhabit their worlds. They belong in them and they've usually grown up in them, so it's a fair guess to say that each PC has a connection to the setting's GMCs, locations, and timeline. You can achieve this through the character creation process with discussion around the table, or more formally through a pathways method. Cortex Prime games are much stronger when players have input into not only their characters, but the setting's specifics as well. If you're the player who named the local bar the Skunk Pangolin, then every time the bar is introduced into a session as a location for a scene, you feel a sense of ownership.

**CREATING THE ENGINEER**

We use Amanda's Engineer, one of Cortex Prime's iconic characters, in our examples for creating characters. Follow along in the examples to see how Amanda uses the different methods to produce the same character file. The character file for the Engineer appears on page 81.

# ARCHETYPES

An **archetype** is a partially created character you can use to generate your own character quickly. Archetypes have background information and suggestions for how to play the character, as well as three pre-assigned distinctions, pre-assigned attributes or other traits, and a choice of two signature assets. Each distinction has the base 4/8 *Hinder* SFX already unlocked, and more SFX that may be unlocked initially or later in play. The distinctions also list highlight skills that are appropriate to that distinction and, by implication, that archetype.

## HIGHLIGHT SKILLS

If your Cortex Prime game doesn't use skills, your archetypes will look a bit different. You might highlight another trait, such as roles, or use other methods to step up traits.

Each distinction in an archetype lists two highlight skills that are appropriate for that distinction. If you're making distinctions from scratch, these skills should be chosen by the player. If the distinctions are pre-built by the GM or included in a specific Spotlight or world setting, they should already have their highlight skills provided.

Highlight skills start out at 6 rather than 4. If a highlight skill appears on two distinctions, it starts out as 8; if it's on all three distinctions, it starts out as 10.

To build a character using an archetype, players:

1. Select one of the archetypes provided.
2. Choose two distinction SFX to unlock from the three distinctions provided.
3. Select one of the two listed signature assets for each character.

The archetype uses the skill list common to all characters in the game and may include bonus specialties.

> **Note:** Cortex Prime games with trait mods may use slightly different archetypes.

Any skill listed as a highlight skill on the archetype's distinctions starts as a 6, not a 4. Once these are adjusted, each player has nine additional points to spend on stepping up skills. Each point may be spent to step a skill die up one step; the GM may set a cap on starting skill dice (10 is common). In addition to stepping up skills, players can assign three specialties to a skill rated 6 or higher, as well as an additional specialty if KNOW is rated at least 6.

## EXAMPLE ARCHETYPE: THE ENGINEER

Amanda's Engineer character is an archetype all by herself, so here's how this might look if she were represented in a Cortex Prime game that uses attributes, skills, distinctions, and signature assets.

### THE ENGINEER

*Ever since you were young, you knew your path was creative. You build, you repair, you invent, you innovate.*

*It's what gives purpose and meaning to your life.*



YANGTIAN LI

8 PHYSICAL
8 MENTAL
8 SOCIAL

**Distinctions:** (unlock two more SFX)

DISTINCTION 1

#### THE WORLD IS MY WORKSHOP 8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.
- *Kitbash:* Spend a PP to gain a 8 asset for the rest of the scene.
- *Out of Stock:* Gain a PP when you declare that you don't have the tools you need to make a repair or build something that others are asking you to repair or build.

**Highlight skills:** FIX, OPERATE

DISTINCTION 2

#### BOUNDLESS CURIOSITY 8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.
- *Intriguing:* Spend a PP to step up or double your MENTAL die when you're making inquiries or investigating something new.
- *Killed the Cat:* Gain a PP when you poke your nose into something secret and are discovered.

**Highlight skills:** KNOW, NOTICE

DISTINCTION 3

#### CAN'T STAY LONG, TOO MUCH TO DO 8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.
- *Full Speed Ahead:* Spend a PP to reroll your dice when time is of the essence.
- *High Demand:* Gain a PP when you leave an important scene to help someone rather than help the people you're with.

**Highlight skills:** DRIVE, MOVE

**Skills:** Step up each highlight skill listed in your distinctions. Then distribute nine more points to the remaining skill list. Maximum skill die rating is 10. Add the following Know specialties: *Mechanical Engineering* 6, *Electrical Engineering* 6. Add the following Fix specialty: *Mechanical* 6. Choose an additional Know specialty if the skill is rated at 6 or higher.

| SKILL | HIGHLIGHT? | POINTS | FINAL RATING |
|---|---|---|---|
| Craft | --- | ●● | 8 |
| Drive | **YES** | --- | 6 |
| Fight | --- | --- | 4 |
| Fix | **YES** | ● | 8 |
| Fly | --- | --- | 4 |
| Focus | --- | ● | 6 |
| Influence | --- | --- | 4 |
| Know | **YES** | --- | 8 |
| Labor | --- | --- | 4 |
| Move | **YES** | ● | 6 |
| Notice | **YES** | --- | 6 |
| Operate | **YES** | ● | 8 |
| Perform | --- | --- | 4 |
| Shoot | --- | ● | 6 |
| Sneak | --- | ● | 6 |
| Survive | --- | ● | 6 |
| Throw | --- | --- | 4 |
| Treat | --- | --- | 4 |
| Trick | --- | --- | 4 |

**YOUR SKILLS AT A GLANCE**

Craft 8
Drive 6
Fight 4
Fix 8
(*Mechanical* 6)
Fly 4
Focus 6
Influence 4
Know 8
(*Electrical Engineering* 6, *Mechanical Engineering* 6, *Physics* 6)
Labor 4
Move 6
Notice 6
Operate 8
Perform 4
Shoot 6
Sneak 6
Survive 6
Throw 4
Treat 4
Trick 4

**Signature Assets:** Choose either Engineer's Goggles 8 or Crew of Builders 8.



## THE ENGINEER

*Ever since you were young, you knew your path was creative. You build, you repair, you invent, you innovate.*

*It's what gives purpose and meaning to your life.*

### 1 SELECT DISTINCTIONS

- Select the SFX *Kitbash* from The World is My Workshop.
- Select the SFX *High Demand* from Can't Stay Long, Too Much To Do.

### 2 ADD SPECIALTIES TO YOUR SKILLS

- Add the specialties *Mechanical Engineering* 6 and *Electrical Engineering* 6 to your Know 8 skill (you can use a bonus 6 if you use Know on anything that requires mechanical or electrical engineering know-how).
- Add the specialty *Mechanical* 6 to the skill Fix 8 (you can use a bonus 6 if you use Fix on anything mechanical).
- Choose additional specialty *Physics* 6 for your Know 8 skill.

### 3 SELECT SIGNATURE ASSET

- Choose signature asset, Engineer's Goggles 8.



# SCRATCH-BUILT

Some players prefer to build their own characters rather than play an archetype. To scratch-build characters, players should do the following.

> **Note:** If you're not using attributes and skills, keep reading to see how various character mods affect this checklist.

## STAGE 1: ADJUST ATTRIBUTES

All characters start with a 8 in each attribute: Mental, Physical, and Social. You may step down an attribute (from 8 to 6) to step up a different attribute from 8 to 10. No starting characters have an attribute lower than a 6 or higher than a 10 at character creation.

| OPTIONS | Physical | Mental | Social |
|---|---|---|---|
| Base | 8 | 8 | 8 |
| Example 1 | 6 | 10 | 8 |
| Example 2 | 8 | 6 | 10 |

## STAGE 2: CHOOSE DISTINCTIONS

Choose three distinctions to add to your character file, noting the highlight skills associated with each distinction. Distinctions can represent roles, relationships, quirks, personality types, character histories, or any other descriptor that helps to flesh out who the PC is in the game.

## STAGE 3: CHOOSE DISTINCTION SFX

Once you've selected distinctions, select your distinction SFX. The first three SFX are preselected for players—they're all *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4. Players should choose two additional SFX. If players design custom distinctions, the GM may need to develop new SFX or use SFX from other distinctions for the custom distinction. When in doubt, pick two of the six standard SFX (page 63).

## STAGE 4: STEP UP SKILLS

As with the archetypes, custom characters are given nine skill points to step up skills. Before spending those, however, step up your skill dice with highlight skills listed in your distinctions. If a skill is listed more than once across your distinctions, you should step it up one for each time it appears (up to a 10 skill). Once you've stepped up those highlight skills, step up skills using skill points. Each point steps a skill up by one step.

## STAGE 5: CHOOSE SPECIALTIES AND SIGNATURE ASSETS

Players have five points to assign to specialties and signature assets at character creation. Each point may be used to:

- Add a specialty to a skill rated at a 6 or higher.
- Create a signature asset at a 6.
- Step up a 6 signature asset to a 8.

With your five points you might:

- Assign 5 specialties and create no signature assets.
- Assign 4 specialties and create one 6 signature asset.
- Assign 3 specialties and create one 8 signature asset.
- Assign 2 specialties and create three 6 signature assets.
- Assign 1 specialty and create one 8 and two 6 signature assets.

## STAGE 6: BIOGRAPHICAL INFORMATION

Last, but certainly not least, add a few details:

> **Your Name:** Pick a favorite name or use an online name generator.
>
> **Background:** Where were you born? Where did you grow up? What is your family like?
>
> **What you look like:** Got a telltale birthmark? Blonde hair? Tall and stout? Short and thin?

To further flesh out your character background, look at the distinctions you've chosen and think about:

> **Where you've been** the last few years.
>
> **Where you're going** in the near future.
>
> **What you're doing** to keep your head above water.
>
> **How you feel** about the politics of the world.

## EXAMPLE SCRATCH-BUILT CHARACTER: THE ENGINEER

Here's how Amanda puts together her iconic Engineer character using the scratch-built method.

**Stage One:** Amanda assigns a 8 to all three attributes. She briefly considers stepping up Mental to 10 and stepping down Social to 6, but she's not really interested in the awkward yet brilliant stereotype of an engineer. Her character will be well-rounded.

**Stage Two:** Amanda then chooses three distinctions (The World Is My Workshop 8, Boundless Curiosity 8, and Can't Stay Long, Too Much To Do 8) and she notes that the highlight skills listed with these are Drive, Fix, Know, Move, Notice, and Operate.

**Stage Three:** Amanda unlocks two SFX out of the remaining six options after all three *Hinder* SFX are unlocked for free. She decides on *Kitbash* (from The World is My Workshop) and *High Demand* (from Can't Stay Long, Too Much To Do).

**Stage Four:** First Amanda steps up her highlight skills one step from the base of 4, which gives her Drive 6, Fix 6, Know 6, Move 6, Notice 6, and Operate 6. She's got 9 skill steps left to assign to skills. She decides to step up Fix, Know, and Operate by one more step each, which costs her 3 steps. Then she puts Craft up to 8, which costs another 2. With the remaining 4 steps she sets Focus, Shoot, Sneak, and Survive to 6.

**Stage Five:** The Engineer has a Know skill of at least 6 so she gets a free 6 specialty. She adds *Physics* 6. She's got five points to assign between additional specialties and signature assets. She gives the Engineer a pair of Engineer's Goggles 8, which costs her 2 points (1 for the 6 rating, and 1 to step it up from 6 to 8). Then she uses the remaining points to add a Fix specialty of *Mechanical* 6, and two more Know specialties of *Electrical Engineering* 6 and *Mechanical Engineering* 6.

**Stage Six:** Here's the story Amanda assigns to this character, with more details probably to come later as she starts playing: *She's been everywhere, she's fixed everything, but she still has so much more she wants to do. The Engineer retains her wide-eyed wonder at the universe even as she draws on her experiences to keep her grounded.*

## CHARACTER BUILDING WITH OTHER TRAITS

Many Cortex Prime worlds use variations on the baseline traits, and building characters differs slightly when powers and power sets are added to the game, or attributes are replaced by affiliations. In each case, the number of options within each trait set is a good indicator of which dice to assign and whether there's a default rating. What follows are guidelines for implementing trait mods into character building.

### AFFILIATIONS

Start out with a 8 in all three, with (if there are more than three) a 6 for any additional affiliation.

### ATTRIBUTES

The baseline is three at 8. If you have a longer list, each additional attribute beyond the first three starts out at 6.


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## MULTI-LEVEL SPECIALTIES

With this mod, in stage 5 you can step up specialties from 6 instead of adding additional 6 specialties. Starting characters rarely start out with 12 specialties.

## POWERS

If your game uses powers and power sets, assigning powers to characters depends in large part on the scope of super-powered characters in the world the game is set in. If superhuman characters are common, in stage 3 every character gets two power sets, each with two SFX and one limit. If they're rare, drop this to one power set, or offer the choice of a power set or 5 additional points in skills, talents, etc. A player might choose to drop a power set entirely in order to add an SFX to another and increase their starting number of powers by one.

The number of actual powers within those power sets also varies based on the game. A good rule of thumb is that each character should start with a number of 8 powers equal to the number of power sets plus one. Stepping up powers uses the same points used for specialties in stage 5, and powers may be stepped down to step others up. No power should start above 10 unless the game features godlike heroes. No power may be stepped down below 6; if it is, the power trait goes away.

More SFX may be added in the same way that distinction SFX are added or switched out. If using powers, the game shouldn't use SFX with distinctions at all to avoid cluttering up the character file and making it too busy.

Tweak all of these guidelines as needed.

## RELATIONSHIPS

When assigning relationships, most PCs should have a relationship with each other PC at 6 for free. Step these up using the points in stage 5 that otherwise are used to step up signature assets or add specialties. Alternately, set one relationship at 10, one at 8, and the rest at 6. Assign a relationship to any GMCs the players might want to have a relationship with to start the game.

## REPUTATIONS

See relationships, above. It's often a good idea to cap the die ratings of reputations during character creation to something that matches the level of notoriety or fame you expect the PCs to start with.

> Mary Rose decides to set the cap for reputations in her game to 8, giving her players a reputation at 8, two at 6, and all others at 4. During play, any of her players might step up their reputations to 10 or even 12.

## RESOURCES

If you're not using a relationship map like pathways to establish shared resources in your game, you can still implement resources by allowing them to be purchased in a scratch-built character. Resources cost one specialty or signature asset point in stage 5. This gives you a 6 6 resource with two tags. Spending additional points can either give you another resource, step up a resource's dice by one step (6 6 to 8 8) or increase the number of dice (6 6 to 6 6 6).

Resources of greater than 8 8 or 6 6 6 are not recommended. It's better to add more resources to a character than invest more than 2 points in a single resource.

## ROLES

Characters using roles instead of skills ignore stage 4 and assign the following based on how many roles are used in the game:

- **Three roles:** 10, 8, and 4.
- **Four roles:** 10, 8, 6, and 4.
- **Five roles:** 10, 8, 6, 6, and 4.
- **Six roles:** 10, 8, 6, 6, 6, and 4.

## SKILL AND SPECIALTY SPLIT

Using this mod, assign points as noted in stage 4 to skills, but no skill may be advanced above 6 except as a specialty. Points later assigned in stage 5 may also be used to step up those specialties but may not be used to step a 4 skill up to a 6 skill. Therefore, the 9 points from stage 4 and any bonus steps from highlight skills from distinctions are the only way to raise a skill from 4 to 6.

## TALENTS

Choose talents from a list provided by the GM or the world, or create them from scratch using the SFX rules, during stage 3. Players usually start with 2 talents, linked thematically to either the highest rated role or skill, or some other important trait.

## TRAIT STATEMENTS

If using trait statements, write these during the last stage once you have a good grasp of the other PCs and the overall direction of your character.

## VALUES

When using values, dice are assigned to them during stage 1. Assign 8 for the first three, and 6 for the rest, with the option to step values up by stepping others down. Usually this looks like one at 10, one at 4, two at 8, and the rest at 6.

# PATHWAYS

**Pathways** is an interactive and collaborative setting and character creation process. It creates a kind of map that shows the connections between characters, places, events, and objects and helps provide the basis of a Cortex Prime series. It's best to set aside an entire session for it, and it's intended for use in a long-term series. Pathways is excellent for creating the setting within which the players create their characters using either of the two previous methods.

Each stage in the pathways process can be used to assign some of the points or steps that create a character beyond their starting values. If you know you need to assign a total of 9 points to skills, and you're using 9 stages, have each player assign one point to a skill each stage. Use major stages to decide things like distinctions; use meta stages to pick abilities or power sets. On every stage, including a standard stage, choose to step up skills and attributes, add specialties, and so forth. The default pathways table has guidelines for choosing traits.

## GETTING STARTED

Pathways requires the group to have some idea what the game will be about, and each player should have at least a basic character concept. A shared understanding of what you want the game to be is important to ensure that the elements the players pick work with the intended setting and tone. In creating the pathways map, players have a lot of freedom to create or introduce characters, organizations, and situations, so it's important to be on the same page about what's suitable for the game.

If you meet in person you'll need a large piece of paper (or some other surface you can write on), and if you meet online you'll need a shared drawing tool.

### PLAYER CHARACTERS (RECTANGLES)

First draw a rectangle for each player, and draw lines between each of the rectangles. This is the foundation of your pathways map.

## ROUND ROBIN SETTING CREATION

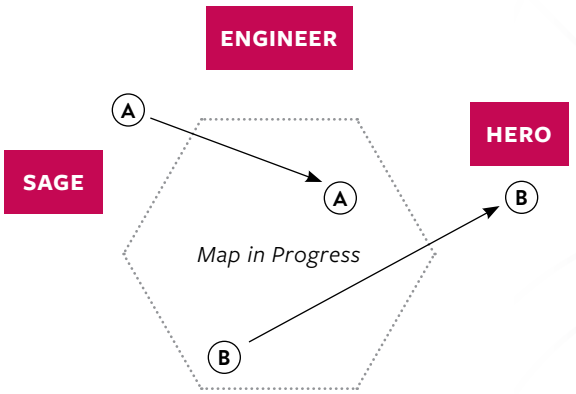
The idea is simple: go around the table taking turns adding ideas to the game's setting and adding traits to your character until you have the "play area" of your campaign and a set of characters connected to it. If the group finds any created element problematic, you can ask the person who suggested it to change it or come up with something else.

## MAPPING TIPS

The story map you create in pathways can very quickly get complicated and confusing. Here are a couple of tips:

If you have a small number of player characters, placing the rectangles representing them towards the outside of the map can make things a little easier.

If need be, you can put "warp zones" on the map. Put an A in a circle in two places to indicate a jump, and then move on to B and so on as needed.




## ELEMENTS

The pathways map consists of several different kinds of **elements**. These can be relationships, characters, assets, situations, etc. By themselves, elements don't concern characters' actual abilities, though they can imply a whole lot, and in story terms can help reinforce a character's traits. Some archetypes imply a school that might serve as a location or a mentor who can be a secondary character; membership in an elite organization helps show that the character is in fact an elite.

### CONNECTIONS (LINES)

**Connections** are the links between things, and thus they're represented by lines between different elements. Each connection should end up with a description written along the length of the line. These descriptions don't need to be detailed, but they do need to explain what joins the two elements together. A connection might imply the existence of a relationship trait, if your game uses those.

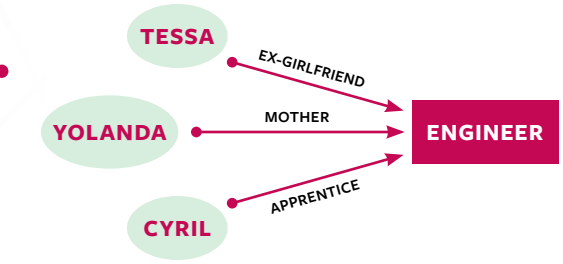
> **Examples:** Business rivalry, has a crush on, uses for transportation, has terrible nightmares about



## SECONDARY CHARACTERS (CIRCLES)

Secondary characters are the people and other actors that take part in the story. These will become important GMCs and can range from valued friends to desperate enemies.

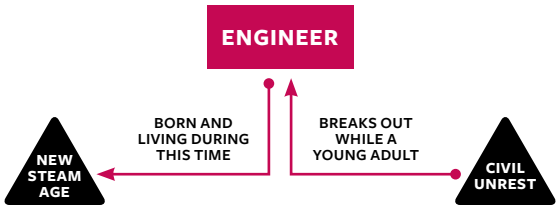
> **Examples:** Classmate, Colleague, Lover, Parent, Sibling, Teammate




## SITUATIONS (TRIANGLES)

A situation is an event or potential event that's important to the character(s) in some way, whether it's a past event that shapes them, something currently ongoing, or a possible future problem.

> **Examples:** Occupation, Pending Invasion, Pogrom, Power Manifestation, Questionable Experiments




## RESOURCE (DIAMONDS)

A **resource** is something in the world connected to the character. Resources connected to your character aren't necessarily ones they can use—resources cover plenty of things that could be adversarial to or simply desirable to a character—so make it clear in the connection how the resource relates to your character. There are four different kinds of resource: **extras**, **organizations**, **props**, and **locations**. They can be used purely as setting creation tools or may be represented as traits on a player's character file (see "Resources" on page 56).

**Extras** are minor characters that make themselves useful to a character in some way. Unlike secondary characters, relationships with extras are pragmatic. They can be contacts that provide information or services, or just flunkies at a character's beck and call. Extras can include a group of people, such as a squad of soldiers, who mostly act as one character in the story.

> **Examples:** Alchemist, Doctor, Gadget Guy, Scholar, Scientist, Security Team, Servant, Soldiers

**Organizations** are established groups of various kinds. Depending on the scope of your campaign, this could range anywhere from a powerful government to a school club. Think about how your character relates to a given organization.

> **Examples:** Army, Corporation, Government Agency, Religion, Research Facility, Secret Society, Thieves Guild

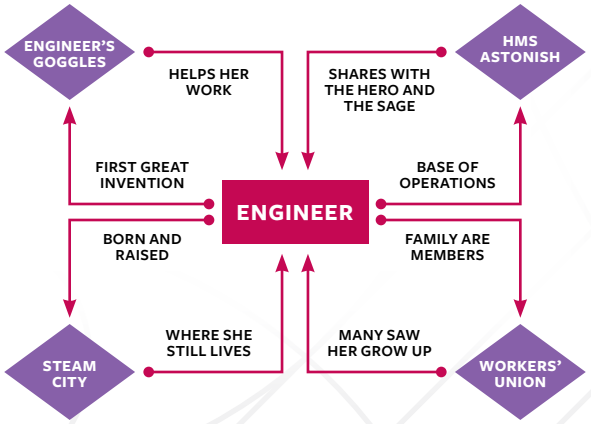
A **prop** is an object of major importance to the story. It's most likely a MacGuffin in the classic sense—a thing that the characters desire enough that it helps drive conflicts. Props are usually, but not always, signature assets.

A prop element doesn't necessarily mean a character gets to possess some particularly powerful thing. A sword that people would fight wars over might not have the slightest hint of magic if it's got the right history behind it.

> **Examples:** Autographed Baseball, Crown Jewels, Legendary Sword, Magical Key, Special Formula, Suitcase Everyone Wants, Vial of the Z Virus, Vitally Important Data Crystal

**Locations** are places of significance to the characters. A location can be a place they specifically own or control, or just a place that's somehow significant to their affairs. A team's secret base, the bar a character owns, and a pizza place where they hang out can all be locations.

> **Examples:** Bar, Bowling Alley, Café, Mansion, Military Base, Newspaper Office, Restaurant, School, Store





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## STAGES

During pathways, players go through a series of **stages** that represent different periods in the characters' lives. Different characters' stages don't necessarily correlate in time, so a 200-year-old elf and a 2-week-old robot could still go through the same number of stages if it comes to that. Instead, the stages represent more the thrust of their formative experiences and connections. On the other hand, if your game is based around several pivotal events, you could deliberately make each stage correspond to a particular time period.

The number of stages the group goes through determines the complexity of the resulting pathways map and how long it takes to create. Five stages make for a good average. The pathways table in this section has a suggested default pattern of stages, but of course you can customize it to your tastes. We get into the types of stages in a moment, but the first and last stages should be major stages.

Your map should already have rectangles for all the PCs, with their names inside them, and lines connecting each PC to all the others.

## USING THE PATHWAYS TABLE

On our default pathways table, each stage has five choices. Beginning with Origin and going all the way down to Life-Changing Event, your choice for the next stage must be directly below the choice you made in the current stage, or the choice to the left or right of that one. So, from the Gifted Origin (stage 1), you could pick Average, Geek, or Outsider for your Youth (stage 2).

## TAKING TURNS

It isn't absolutely necessary to have the players take turns adding elements to the map, but it does makes things less confusing. For each element allowed in a stage (major and meta stages have two each), go around the table once letting each player add their element.

## TYPES OF STAGES

There are three types of stages—standard, major, and meta—that work a little differently in terms of what kinds of elements players get to add.

| STAGE | TYPE | TITLE | A | B | C | D | E |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Major | Origin | *Rich* | *Ordinary* | *Gifted* | *Strange* | *Alien* |
| 2 | Standard | Youth | *Jock* | *Average* | *Geek* | *Outsider* | *Paragon* |
| 3 | Meta | Focus | *Money* | *Life* | *Status* | *Technology* | *Paranormal* |
| 4 | Standard | Road | *Risky* | *Straight & Narrow* | *Lofty* | *Underground* | *Ethical* |
| 5 | Major | Life-Changing Event | *Advancement* | *Tragedy* | *Manifestation* | *First Contact* | *Destiny* |
| 6 | Standard | Priority | *Friends & Family* | *Work* | *Moving Forward* | *Looking Back* | *Performance* |
| 7 | Meta | Modus Operandi | *Loyalty* | *Shady Business* | *Against the Grain* | *Outside Normal Channels* | *Special Gifts* |
| 8 | Standard | Motivation | *Others* | *Self* | *The Cause* | *The Job* | *The World* |
| 9 | Major | Identity | *The Sidekick* | *The Foil* | *The Rebel* | *The Specialist* | *The Hero* |

## STANDARD STAGE

During a **standard stage**, each player gets to connect their character to an element. You can draw a connection from your character to an existing element, or you can add a new character, resource, or situation to the map and draw a connection from it to your character.

The following stages count as standard: **Youth**, **Road**, **Priority**, **Motivation**.

Use a standard stage to gain a resource, signature asset, skill, or specialty based on the element you've just connected. You can add a new one at 6 or step up an existing one by one step.




## MAJOR STAGE

A major stage represents a major turning point in the characters' lives. During a major stage each player adds two new elements instead of one, drawing connections to them, but otherwise it works like standard stage. Roughly one out of every 3 stages should be a major stage.

The following are major stages: **Origin**, **Life-Changing Event**, **Identity**.

Use a major stage to gain a resource, signature asset, skill, or specialty just as with a standard stage, but also define and add a distinction.




## META STAGE

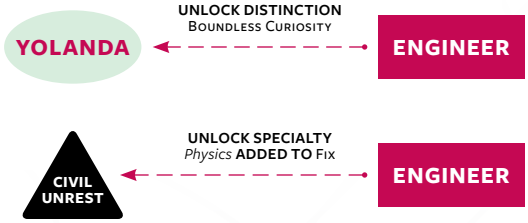
In a meta stage, the players also get to play with other aspects of the pathways map. In addition to adding one new element like in a standard stage, each player gets to do one of the following things:

- **Draw a connection** between any two non-PC elements and define a relationship between them.
- **Destroy a connection** between their PC and a given element and add a new element and connection. This implies that something happened to sever one connection and foster another.
- **Introduce** an element for another PC. The other player defines the nature of their characters' connection with that element however.

One out of every 4 or 5 stages should be a meta stage.

The following are meta stages: **Focus**, **Modus Operandi**.

Use a meta stage to gain a resource, signature asset, skill, or specialty as well as a new distinction, just as with a major stage. Also add a power set or ability if you're using those traits. If you add a power set, you can now add powers on future standard or major stages.



## DEFAULT PATHWAYS TABLE

The default table has nine pre-built stages that form a narrative background. Start with the first five stages, then decide if you want to progress to the remaining four for a more experienced group. Here are brief descriptions of the stages to inspire your own pathways tables.

- **Origin:** Where did you come from? Was your family rich, or ordinary? Was your family blessed with gifts, or just strange? Were you an alien (another planet, another country)?
- **Youth:** What sort of childhood did you have? Were you a jock, a geek, or just average? Were you an outsider among your peers, or a paragon in your community?
- **Focus:** What sort of goals and values were instilled in you as you grew up? Was it money, a good life, or elevated status? Was it a dedication to technology or involvement in the paranormal?
- **Road:** What path did you walk as you emerged from your youth? Was it risky, or on the straight and narrow? Did you tread a lofty road above others, or stay underground and out of sight? Was it a road governed by ethics or a code of honor?
- **Life-Changing Event:** Something changed your life forever. Was it the thrill of advancement, the sting of tragedy, or the manifestation of a hidden power? Did you contact something beyond your ken, or come face to face with your destiny?
- **Priority:** What goals do you set above all others? Friends and family or hard work? Moving forward in your life, looking back at your achievements, or concentrating on your own performance?
- **Modus Operandi:** How do you achieve your goals? Do you stay loyal, engage in shady business, or go against the grain? Do you rely on outside channels, or your own special gifts?
- **Motivation:** What keeps you going? Is it other people, yourself, or a cause that's bigger than you? Is it your job, whatever that is, or the world around you?
- **Identity:** Where do you see yourself in the unfolding drama of your life? Are you the sidekick, or the foil to others? Are you the rebel of the group, the specialist who does one thing really well, or are you the hero of the piece?

## DOES THE GM GET A TURN?

Chances are the map is more than sufficiently large and convoluted at the end of pathways with just the players adding to it, but if as the GM you want to have some creative input into the whole thing, you can fill in your ideas on each stage as per a player, adding new elements that relate to the PCs and GMCs.

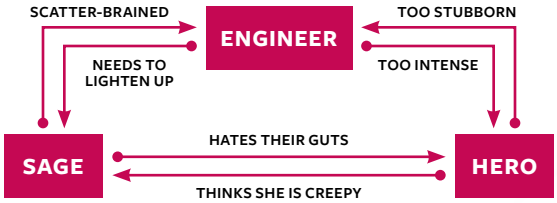
As the GM you don't have your own character, so you can add elements connected to whatever you like.

## USING THE FINISHED MAP

The pathways map will provide you with plenty of ideas, but it still takes a little thought to fully flesh out the story.

### TRIANGULAR RELATIONSHIPS

One key thing to look for on the pathways map is places where multiple characters have conflicting connections with a given element. The classic love triangle is an obvious example, but anything where connections are at odds is a potential place to make things more interesting.




### WEDGES

The GM, whose job is to drive the conflicts in the game, can look at the pathways map and look for places to drive wedges, to threaten and mess with existing relationships. If there's a triangular connection, look for something to exacerbate it. Even if a connection is non-triangular, you can find interesting ways to mess it up.

### IMPLIED ELEMENTS

The pathways map covers most of the major elements that go into the game, but it can't be truly comprehensive. An organization has leaders and members, characters have other characters around them, locations have any number of people associated with them, and so on. While the map is a very useful tool, it shouldn't limit what you bring into the game.

## LATE ADDITIONS

The simplest way for a player with a new character to be introduced to the game is to just run through the same stages as for the original PCs. That gives them plenty of opportunities to give their character connections to existing elements, as well as to add some new ones.

It's up to you whether you want the new PC to start off with connections to all the other PCs. Sometimes this makes perfect sense, and other times it's tricky to pull off, so you may want to have a new character start without connections to other PCs until the player draws them in (though in that case you may want to give them a couple extra element choices).

## EXAMPLE PATHWAYS CHARACTER: THE ENGINEER

Amanda and her friends are creating a collaborative steampunk setting with Mary Rose as the GM, and they've decided to use pathways to do it. They're using the first five stages of the default table to draw the pathways map. Mary Rose has compressed all the character creation steps into those five stages, so she lets the players know what traits they'll be choosing at each stage.

- **Origin** (Major): All players choose their first distinction, step up the highlight skills plus two additional skill steps anywhere they like, and add a specialty or a signature asset. All three attributes start at 6.
- **Youth** (Standard): All players get two skill steps and a specialty or signature asset and may step one attribute up by one.
- **Focus** (Meta): All players choose their second distinction, step up the highlight skills plus two additional skill steps anywhere they like, and add a specialty or signature asset. One SFX is unlocked.
- **Road** (Standard): All players get two more skill steps and a specialty or signature asset and may step up an attribute by one.
- **Life-Changing Event** (Major): All players choose their third distinction, step up the highlight skills plus one additional skill by one, add a specialty or signature asset, and unlock a second SFX. They get their third and final attribute step.

Let's see what Amanda chooses as everyone around the table takes their turns. Amanda's Engineer, Adam's Hero, and Tina's Sage are all rectangles on the map, with lines linking them together.

**First Stage: Origin** is a major stage and it represents the genesis of Amanda's Engineer. She gets to add two elements to the map and connect to them with lines, so she adds a triangle for the situation New Steam Age, a circle for Yolanda, her mother, and draws lines to both of them from her rectangle. Her pick for origin is Gifted: Amanda says her Engineer was born with a wrench in one hand and eyes wide to the world of science around her. The distinction she chooses is Boundless Curiosity, which steps up Know and Notice to 6. She steps up Know again to 8, and Craft up to 6. Know comes with a free specialty at 6, so she adds *Physics,* and uses her specialty or signature asset step to add *Electrical Engineering* 6. All of her Engineer's attributes are set to a starting 6.




### THE ENGINEER

*Born to Yolanda during the New Steam Age, her natural sense of curiosity and giftedness made her seek to understand the world around her.*



6 Physical
6 Mental
6 Social

STAGE 1

**+Boundless Curiosity**

Know 4 steps up to 6 (unlocks a free specialty)
Notice 4 steps up to 6

**+2 ADDITIONAL SKILL STEPS**

Know 6 steps up to 8, Craft 4 steps up to 6

**+1 SPECIALTY OR SIGNATURE ASSET**

*Physics* 6 added to Know 8 (free from distinction)
*Electrical Engineering* 6 added to Know 8

**Second Stage: Youth** is a standard stage. Here Amanda adds a location to her pathways map, Steam City, and connects it to her character rectangle. Amanda looks at the pathways chart and sees that her choices for her Engineer are Average, Geek, and Outsider. While Geek seems the most obvious, Amanda wants to have a more well-rounded character, so she chooses Outsider. Born with obvious talents, her Engineer's youth in Steam City was sheltered because of her non-technologically inclined family. She mostly stayed out of other people's way while pursuing her gifts. She gets two skill steps, and puts them into Focus and Sneak, raising them to 6. She also adds *Mechanical Engineering* 6 as a specialty for Know and steps up her Physical attribute to 8.




### THE ENGINEER

*Raised in a family that didn't understand her interests and talents, the Engineer felt isolated and longed to be part of the innovation of Steam City.*



8 Physical
6 Mental
6 Social

STAGE 2

**+2 ADDITIONAL SKILL STEPS**

Focus 4 steps up to 6, Sneak 4 steps up to 6

**+1 SPECIALTY OR SIGNATURE ASSET**

*Mechanical Engineering* 6 added to Know 8

**+1 TO AN ATTRIBUTE**

Physical 6 stepped up to 8

**Third Stage: Focus** is a meta stage and where Amanda's Engineer begins to come into her own as a mechanical prodigy. She adds a prop, her Engineer's Goggles, to her pathways map, connected with a line; she also connects her character rectangle to a situation triangle Adam created earlier, Civil Unrest. Her focus is clearly Technology, and Amanda adds The World is My Workshop distinction together with the two highlighted skills, Fix and Operate, each of which step up to 6. She adds the Engineer's Goggles as a signature asset at 6, and can step up two more skills, choosing to step up Fix and Operate again to 8. At this stage she can unlock her first SFX, and goes for *Kitbash* (under The World is My Workshop).




## THE ENGINEER

*Her first invention of her distinctive goggles marks a breakthrough in what will be an incredible journey of discovery and invention.*




STAGE 3

**+The World is My Workshop**

Fix 4 steps up to 6, Operate 4 steps up to 6

**+2 ADDITIONAL SKILL STEPS**

Fix 6 steps up to 8, Operate 6 steps up to 8

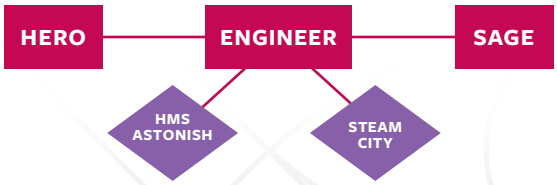
**+1 SPECIALTY OR SIGNATURE ASSET**

Engineer's Goggles 6 added as a signature asset

**+1 UNLOCKED SFX**

*Kitbash* unlocked under The World is My Workshop

**Fourth Stage: Road** is a standard stage and Amanda draws a connection to an element Tina had added to the pathways map earlier, the airship *HMS Astonish*; it's another location (albeit one that travels around the globe). Her road is Underground, meaning the shadowy or secret lifestyle outside of the mainstream of Steam City: The Engineer travels with the Sage and the Hero in their airship, righting wrongs caused by the Clockwork Empire. She spends her two skill steps on Craft and Survive, adds *Mechanical* as a specialty to Fix, and steps up her Mental attribute by one to 8.




## THE ENGINEER

*Operating just under the radar of society, she travels around the world with her companions to fight against the Clockwork Empire.*




STAGE 4

**+2 ADDITIONAL SKILL STEPS**

Craft 6 steps up to 8, Survive 4 steps up to 6

**+1 SPECIALTY OR SIGNATURE ASSET**

*Mechanical* 6 added to Fix 8

**+1 TO AN ATTRIBUTE**

Mental 6 stepped up to 8

**Fifth Stage: Life-Changing Event** is a major stage. Amanda picks First Contact—an encounter with the mysterious Luminescent Beings cements her future as the world's premier Engineer. She draws them on the pathways map, connected to her with a line; she's realized that the world is more than she imagined, with other worlds and other intelligent forms of life. She picks her final distinction, Can't Stay Long, Too Much To Do, and unlocks the *High Demand* SFX. The distinction gives her steps in Drive and Move, both now 6. One more skill step goes to Shoot, making it a 6. Her final attribute step raises her Social to 8 like the other two. With the last signature asset or specialty step, she steps up Engineer's Goggles to 8, and the Engineer is complete except for the finishing touches.




## THE ENGINEER

*A pivotal point in her journey is her encounter with the mysterious Luminescent Beings, who prove that the world is bigger than it seems.*




STAGE 5

**+Can't Stay Long, Too Much To Do**

Drive 4 steps up to 6, Move 4 steps up to 6

**+1 ADDITIONAL SKILL STEP**

Shoot 4 steps up to 6

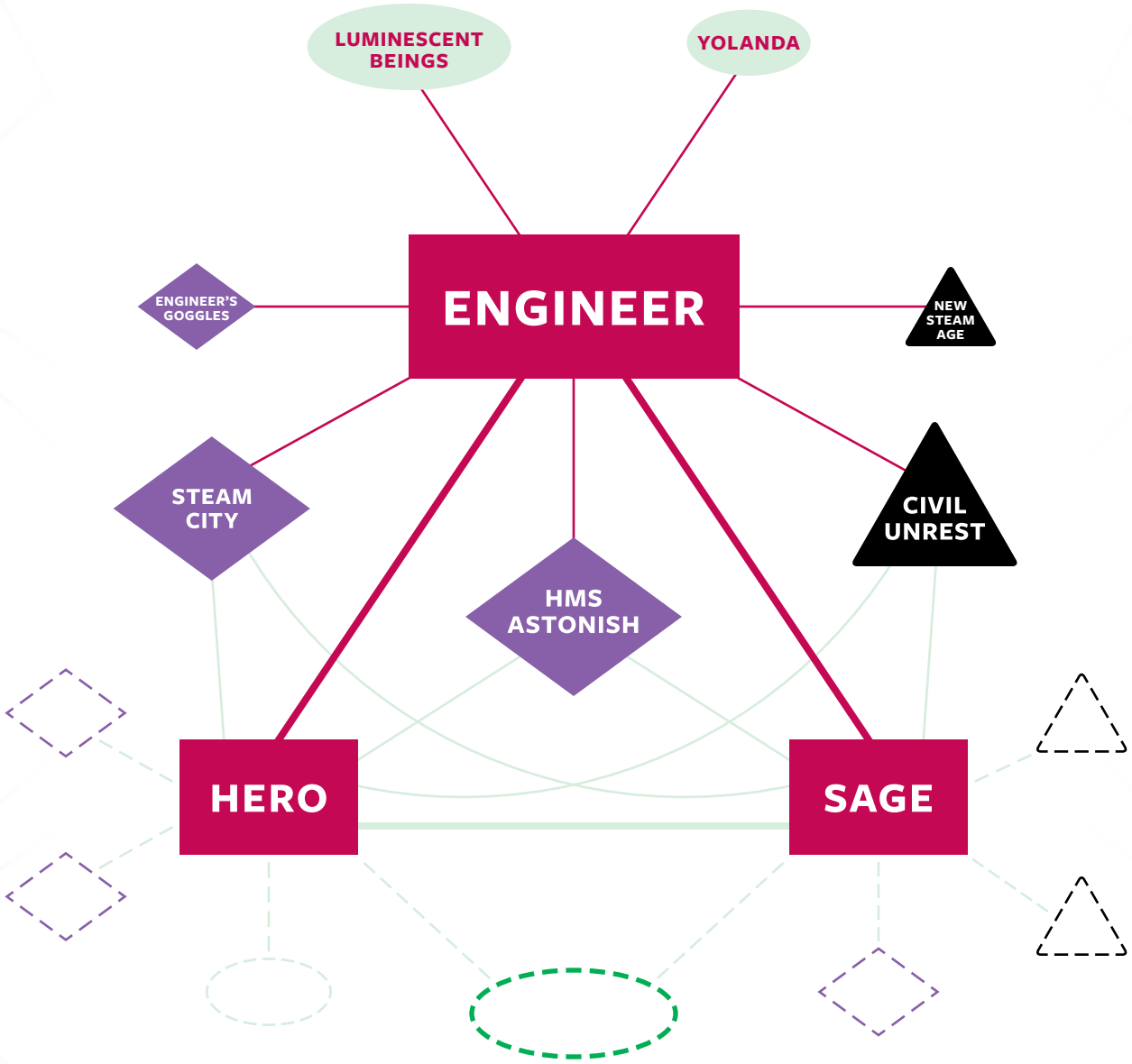
**+1 SPECIALTY, SIGNATURE ASSET**

Engineer's Goggles 6 stepped up to 8

**+1 UNLOCKED SFX**

*High Demand* unlocked under Can't Stay Long, Too Much to Do

# COMPLETED EXAMPLE PATHWAYS MAP




**RECTANGLE:** Player Character

**CIRCLE:** Secondary Character

**TRIANGLE:** Situation

**DIAMOND:** Resource

**RED LINE:** Engineer's Connection

**GREEN LINE:** Other PC's Connection

**DASHED LINE:** Other PC's Connections and Resources (not filled out for the purpose of this example map).

# THE ENGINEER

*She's been everywhere, she's fixed everything, but she still has so much more she wants to do. The Engineer retains her wide-eyed wonder at the universe even as she draws on her experiences to keep her grounded.*

DISTINCTIONS

### The World Is My Workshop 8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.
- *Kitbash:* Spend a PP to gain a 8 asset for the rest of the scene.

### Boundless Curiosity 8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.

### Can't Stay Long, Too Much To Do 8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.
- *High Demand:* Gain a PP when you leave an important scene to help someone rather than help the people you're with.

ATTRIBUTES

Mental 8
Physical 8
Social 8



YANGTIAN LI

## SKILLS

- 8 Craft
- 6 Drive
- 4 Fight
- 8 Fix
  - *Mechanical* 6
- 4 Fly
- 6 Focus
- 8 Know
  - *Electrical Engineering* 6
  - *Mechanical Engineering* 6
  - *Physics* 6
- 4 Influence
- 4 Labor
- 6 Move
- 6 Notice
- 8 Operate
- 4 Perform
- 6 Shoot
- 6 Sneak
- 6 Survive
- 4 Throw
- 4 Treat
- 4 Trick

## SIGNATURE ASSETS

Engineer's Goggles 8



# GROWING CHARACTERS

While PCs start out as competent, experienced professionals, they change and grow during play, with each job they take giving them more to grow on. The more adventures the group undertakes, the more benefits they can enjoy and the richer their backstory becomes.

All of these methods of growing characters are mods. You can play many games of Cortex Prime without growth of any sort outside of the kind that happens in the story or fiction. Many Cortex Prime characters are just fine as they are for several sessions, and if you're doing a one-shot or limited session story, you won't worry much about growth either. However, many players love to change things about their characters, so you should—as a group—decide how you want growth to work in your Cortex Prime game.

## SESSION RECORDS

With this mod, at the end of each session, the players make a note of the session's name on their character file. This is the PC's personal **session record**, and over time it provides an account of the group's accomplishments and checkered past.

### CALLBACKS

Each player may use their own session record to make **callbacks**, references to events from other sessions that may be useful towards the current storyline. To make a callback, have your PC make an in-character reference to a session in their session record while performing a task. While the name of the session might be referenced explicitly, it's more evocative to say something like "This is just like that time in Montana…." When you use a callback, you may gain a benefit immediately for anything that a PP could be used for—activating an SFX, keeping an extra die result in your total, or creating an asset to reflect your PC's previous experiences with the task.

You can only make a callback to a specific session once per session. A checkbox next to each session is useful for this purpose. Erase the checked boxes when a new session begins and add the last session's name to the record.

### TRAINING UP

By spending sessions from your record, you can make permanent improvements to your PC. A spent session remains on the record but can no longer be used for callbacks or to train a second time.

- **Turn an asset from a session into a signature asset (or relationship):** 1 session
- **Switch out a distinction (or trait statement) for a new one:** 1 session
- **Step up a signature asset (or relationship):** 2 sessions
- **Add a new specialty:** 2 sessions
- **Unlock a new SFX:** 2 sessions
- **Step up a skill (or resource, role, value, or power):** 3 sessions
- **Step up one attribute (or affiliation) and step down another:** 4 sessions

Training can happen anytime during downtime between sessions. Maximum die ratings of 12 apply in all cases to skills, attributes, and assets. If you switch out a distinction, your new distinction has as many SFX unlocked as the original, although they may be entirely different SFX.

# GROWTH

The best dramatic heroes grow with the story and are changed by the challenges they face. Indeed, to some, that's the very definition of a hero—or, at the very least, a protagonist. Even antagonists, if they're interesting, change over the arc of their story.

With this mod, PCs gain new traits and advance current traits through a mechanism called the **growth pool**, which is a pool of dice you build up over the course of the game. This method uses the Trait Statements mod (page 65) extensively but can be adapted in other ways depending on your game.

You can get dice for the growth pool in two ways:

- Challenging a trait statement.
- Successfully recovering stress or complications with someone else's help.

You can then use that growth pool to add new traits or improve existing ones at the end of the session, in a special kind of scene called a tag scene.

## TAG SCENES

At the end of every session you have the opportunity to do a special kind of scene called a **tag scene**, where you can try to improve your character's traits.

Tag scenes shouldn't be very long—just enough narration for everyone to get an idea of how you want your PC to change. After that, you get to do two things: rewrite statements and step up traits.

See Prime Scenes for more information on types of scenes, including tag scenes.

## REWRITING STATEMENTS

For every trait statement you've challenged in the session, you get to make a choice: did your PC change perspectives? If so, you can rewrite your statement to reflect your new belief about the trait and put it back to its original die rating. Jason *would never let me down* 8 might become Jason *isn't the friend I thought he was* 8 or Jason *will answer to me* 8.

If your PC didn't change perspectives, you can keep the statement the same, but the trait it's attached to must stay at the reduced die rating. For values or other traits that share a fixed number of steps, pick another value or values to increase by that same amount, so your total number of die steps remains the same. So, if you stepped down Love from 10 to 6 (two steps) during a session and decide to stay there, you'd pick one value to step up by two, or two values to step up by one.

For relationships or other traits that aren't governed by a fixed number of steps, if you stay at the lowered die rating, add another die to your growth pool equal to the new die rating. So, if you stepped down Jason from 8 to 4, you'd add a 4 to growth in addition to the 8 you added when you originally challenged it.

## STEPPING UP TRAITS

You may select one trait to step up or pick a new one to add. New traits begin at 4. You can't step a trait up higher than 12.

To raise the trait, you must succeed at a test. You roll your growth pool plus the highest stress or complication you had during the session, even if it was recovered. The GM sets the difficulty at one die equal to the trait level you want to step up to and a second die based on what kind of trait it is:

- **Attribute or Affiliation** 12
- **Distinction, Role, or Power** 10
- **Skill, SFX, or Value** 8
- **Relationship, Resource, or Signature Asset** 6

Unlike other tests, you can't use PP to affect the outcome of this one. Ignore all hitches. If you win, you get to step up your trait or add a new one and the dice in the growth pool are used up. If you lose or tie, you can do it anyway, but you have to step something else down to compensate; the dice in the growth pool stick around for next session.



JANNA SOPHIA



NOÉ LEYVA

## MILESTONES

**Milestones** are an alternate way to track progress and earn experience points (XP) that players then use to unlock character upgrades, as well as story **unlockables** and other narrative benefits. With this mod, players hit milestones through the choices they make for their characters in play.

Characters have two milestones. Often, one is shared by the entire group, while the other is chosen personally. The personal milestone might be built into your archetype, suggested with a distinction, or be developed for your specific character.

Milestones contain three different levels:

- A **1 XP** level that can be hit as many times as it applies (or once per test or contest).
- A **3 XP** level that can only be hit once per scene.
- A **10 XP** level that can only be hit once per session. If it's a shared milestone among the party, once this milestone is hit, it's unusable until the next session. If it's a personal milestone, it closes that milestone completely, and the player should choose a new one at the end of the session.

Milestones are usually hit by the players' tests or contests, with the GM verifying if there's any question whether one has been hit or not.

The following is an example of a group milestone for a game based heavily on classic heroic fantasy:

### HEROIC ADVENTURERS MILESTONE

*You're out there for the thrills and the fame, but mostly for the thrills. If there are monsters to vanquish and people in need of adventurers, your troupe is there!*

- **1 XP** when your party defeats an adversary.
- **3 XP** when you emerge successfully from a battle or conflict.
- **10 XP** when you complete or abandon a major quest.

However, if you're running a game where fighting is downplayed, you might change the focus of the milestone to match your game's theme. Here's an example:

### DUNGEON DELVER MILESTONE

*You heed the call of all the riches found in lost ruins, forgotten tombs, and strange abandoned temples. Finding the dungeon is half the fun; clearing it is where it's at!*

- **1 XP** when you find new treasure.
- **3 XP** when you explore a new area.
- **10 XP** when you finish exploring a complete dungeon or abandon a dungeon because it's too dangerous.

## SESSION MILESTONES

GMs can offer milestones at the start of a session or reveal them after major turning points in the session's ongoing narrative. Session milestones tie the PCs directly into the story, giving them personal motivations (and XP!) for becoming involved.

As you have two milestones, you can replace your current personal milestone with the session milestone, or if the GM allows, replace the group milestone until the session milestone is completed.

An example session milestone might be:

### RESCUE THE PRINCE OF FLOWERS

*My son the prince has been abducted by the Bandit Queen! I won't stand for this affront to our family! Save him before it's too late.*

- **1 XP** when you ask somebody you just met about the Prince of Flowers.
- **3 XP** when you get a clue towards the Prince's location.
- **10 XP** when you rescue the Prince or decide to leave him with the Bandit Queen.

## UNLOCKABLES

XP may be spent between scenes to increase a PC's traits or unlock other benefits. You may spend as much XP as you've earned to unlock multiple upgrades at once.

The GM may create unlockables that provide greater access to story elements such as important GMCs, previously unavailable locations, or property. Sometimes an unlockable represents a one-shot benefit that's significant enough to warrant earning XP towards it; other times it becomes a permanent option in your repertoire.

Tailor the following menu of options to the specific traits and mods you're using for your game. This list can also be customized and adapted for games that eschew milestones but feature the GM handing out XP directly each session for such things as entertaining roleplaying or achieving story goals.



CAROL AZEVEDO

**5 XP:**
- Train a new specialty at Expert 8.
- Unlock an SFX.
- Add a 6 signature asset.
- Upgrade an existing trait from 6 to 8.

**10 XP:**
- Add a 8 signature asset.
- Add a new locked SFX to a distinction or signature asset.
- Upgrade an existing trait from 8 to 10.

**15 XP:**
- Upgrade an existing Expert 8 specialty to Master 10.
- Add a 10 signature asset.
- Upgrade an existing trait from 10 to 12.

**20 XP:**
- Upgrade an existing Master 10 specialty to Grandmaster 12.
- Add a 12 signature asset.



KEVIN HONG



CHAPTER 3

# PRIME SCENES

Every session of play is broken down into scenes that involve characters trying to resolve the challenges and obstacles in their path toward success, victory, or character growth. This chapter looks at scenes and explains the different sorts of scenes characters might be involved in, and what goes into each scene from a rules point of view.

## CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

**This chapter covers a number of topics relating to the management of scenes.**

**What Are Scenes?** This section explains what scenes and beats are, as well as the six standard types of scenes.

**Running Scenes:** This section includes how to frame a scene and how to end it, as well as how to run different types of scenes and which game mechanics are used to do so.

**What Is Conflict?** The remainder of the chapter breaks down the use of conflict in scenes, specifically how to manage the action order and use tricks like timed tests and scale differences to spice up a scene.



REZA AFSHAR

# WHAT ARE SCENES?

A **scene** in Cortex Prime is much like a scene in a movie, a novel, or a play: a unit of story in which characters interact with each other and the setting. Scenes are always framed by the GM, which means the GM describes where the scene takes place, which of the PCs is there, and what is going on. We encourage the GM to ask the players leading questions to give them an opportunity to explain why their PC is present, what they're doing, and so forth. A scene doesn't need to involve the dice until the back and forth—the GM presenting the situation and the players saying what they're doing—comes to a point of conflict or decision.

Breaking a session into scenes allows the GM to skip past otherwise uninteresting periods of time or storyline and get right to a charged situation, a set of circumstances that might reveal interesting developments. Traveling by train from Chicago to Minneapolis isn't a scene, but the group chatting over bad dining car food right as the bridge ahead gets blown up by explosives is a scene.

A scene ends when the primary objective or situation of the scene is resolved. There's no need to wrap up the scene beyond its logical ending point or let conversations between the characters continue to ramble. The GM can just call "Scene!" or something like that, and go immediately to "Okay, three hours later…"

Scenes can be further broken down into beats, which is how we track all of the things that happen in a scene.

## WHAT ARE BEATS?

A **beat** is the smallest dramatic unit of the story. If two PCs try to crack a bank vault's door, that's a beat. If a PC guides a boat through a harbor filled with mines, that's a beat. If a PC hides in a closet while a creature stalks through the house, that's a beat. If a PC spends hours online researching a corrupt mining conglomerate, that's a beat. The trick is that it doesn't matter how long or short the activity is, but how simple it is.

A PC may spend all night pulling out the guts of a pickup truck's engine, but it's one beat because it can be boiled down to "My PC fixes the pickup truck's engine." In contrast, within the span of thirty seconds, another PC somersaults through an open window, takes a wild shot at a security guard, shoots out the tires on the security guard's nearby car, and jumps onto the back of a delivery truck that's taking off—four separate beats.

There's no fixed number of beats in a scene; they're just a convenient use of time within which you can frame something that a player character tries to do—a test. Thinking in terms of beats should give you a gut sense of the tests a player needs to make to do what they want to do.

A PC makes a test to somersault through the open window (success), then takes one to shoot at the guard (failure), one to shoot the tires (success), and one to jump onto the truck (success).

# TYPES OF SCENES

Cortex Prime divides scenes into different types that serve specific functions. This may be useful in pacing out sessions and giving certain characters more opportunities for using their skills and abilities with some regularity.


NATALIA BACETTI

## OPENING SCENES

**Opening scenes**, also known as establishment scenes, are designed purely to set up the core problem or situation of any given session. They set up what the characters are doing when the session starts, establishes where they are, who they're with, and what they've been doing since the previous session. You can manage bookkeeping in opening scenes, introduce or foreshadow characters and ideas you plan to confront the players with later, and so forth.

## ACTION SCENES

**Action scenes** involve high stakes, cinematic action, and opposing forces in combat or challenge. They typically feature tests and contests, or might use the action order (page 98) to manage beats. Action scenes often make up the bulk of the scenes in a session.

## BRIDGE SCENES

**Bridge scenes**, also called transition scenes, represent downtime between action scenes. In some games, they might be the only scenes in which PCs can create, recover, or upgrade assets and eliminate or recover complications without high difficulty. Use bridge scenes when the PCs are regrouping, checking in on contacts or extras, or making plans.



## EXPLORATION SCENES

**Exploration scenes**—a variation on bridge scenes—are often reduced to montages or red travel lines drawn across maps. They may feature tests against the environment or even traps and puzzles, but the focus is less on action and more on getting from one place to another, finding the way to the next action scene. They're similar to bridge scenes in that they link action scenes, but they can serve the specific purpose of passing time without simply hand waving the experience.

## FLASHBACK SCENES

A **flashback scene** is often used in tandem with a callback (page 82), but not necessarily. Flashback scenes serve the primary purpose of establishing an asset or relationship and filling in some backstory that the GM or players want to bring up in the current scene. A flashback scene can interrupt another type of scene, but it shouldn't be drawn out, since flashback scenes often involve only one or two PCs and the GM.

## TAG SCENES

A **tag scene** is the last scene in any session and represents the "here's what we learned" scenes between characters. This type of scene is important in a game that uses growth and trait statements to represent advancement; players can roleplay that growth in tag scenes.

A tag scene is short, summarizes or ties up loose ends, and each character may be in several tag scenes at the end of a session depending on how many important characters (PCs or GMCs) they might be tangled up with.



# RUNNING SCENES

The primary goal for the GM in any scene is to set it up (frame it) and then see what happens. Often, the GM has no idea what the end of the scene will look like, so there's as much of a sense of discovery in framing scenes as there is in playing them.

## FRAMING THE SCENE

As the GM, one of your primary responsibilities is setting up each scene or **framing** the scene, to use cinema lingo. Of all of your tools, this one places the most authority on you. It's a powerful thing, because it means you get to decide the most basic things about the scene: where it is, who's there, what's going on, why it's happening, and when all of this takes place. You're painting a mental picture for the players, getting them ready to jump right into the story again. You can add distinctions to the scene that any PC or GMC can use, complete with SFX. You can also add predefined assets or complications. See "Locations as GMCs" on page 116 for more.

Once you've framed the scene, this authority shifts back toward the players and the game's rules; players tell you what they want to do, the rules help you figure out what dice are required if any, and everyone gets to see what happens. Sometimes, the scene is only a couple of beats and it's done—other times, it can take up a good part of the session!

### WHERE AND WHEN IS IT?

First decide where the scene takes place. Is it a location familiar to the players? That's easy, you won't need to go into too much detail. Is this somewhere new? Take a moment to set the stage: give the players a quick rundown of the location and what's there. Then let the players know how long after the last scene this is—is it later in the day? The next day? A week? If a scene happens immediately after another one, make sure you communicate this right up front.

Don't spend a lot of time providing them with an inventory of the location's contents, but do try to engage at least two senses, like sight and touch, smell and sound. If you can hit the main elements of a scene, like "It's a smoky bar in a shady part of town, not too far from the river; the ceiling's covered in years of soot and the furniture's seen better days," then you've given the players plenty to go on.

Similarly, you don't have to tell the players everything that's happened in the time between this new scene and the last. If it's been a week since a big fight that the players were involved in and you're not worrying about a bridge scene, then you can just say "It's been a week of fruitless searching for the mercenary who escaped you, but you think you've got a lead." Tell them what time of day it is, since that can make a big difference.

Sometimes it's okay to let the players take the lead when it comes to the where and when. If the players tell you, "We're going to go downtown to the club later that night and see if the gang boss is there," then that's a good reason to set the scene at the club and at night. On the other hand, you don't have to abide by that if you don't want to. You can even redirect that with something like: "The club doesn't seem to be crowded, and the gang boss is nowhere to be seen. On the way back from the club, however..."

### WHO'S THERE?

The GM gets to say who's in a scene and who isn't, and that includes which PCs start out in the scene and which ones don't. Sometimes a scene is just between two of the PCs and a GMC contact of theirs, and other times the whole group is present. You can take a hint from the players if they seem really interested in splitting up and going in two different directions—frame a scene with one of the two groups, and then move to another scene with the rest of them after you're done with the first one.

You absolutely do not need to put all of the PCs together in every scene. Sometimes the scene only needs a couple of them, for instance if three characters meet up at a restaurant to share information. Other times, the scene might only have one PC in it to start with.

### WHAT'S HAPPENING?

The final element of scene framing is setting up what's actually going on in the scene when it starts. You want to convey a sense of action so the scene is alive from the beginning; you can do this by setting things in motion—trees have the wind in their branches, crowds of people are moving along the street, rain is bouncing off the tin roof, and so on. You're establishing the mood of the scene with a couple of details, and that helps the players complete that mental picture.

You also want to figure out what's happening with the players as the scene starts. It's one thing to tell them they emerge from the tunnel into a treasure vault filled with coins and gems. It's quite another thing to describe them tumbling in from the chute above, arguing with each other about who pulled the lever that dumped them here.

Remember, the players will take their cues from you. If you describe things as static it can take a lot for them to get things moving. If you start things in motion, even just a little, you're setting up a scene that encourages activity.

Even a bridge scene intended to be a period of recovery and reflection can be framed as part of a living, breathing world, rather than a snapshot. Don't be afraid to use GMCs and other incidental characters or creatures to make it alive, regardless of whether or not the PCs are going to do something.

## SCENE FRAMING TRICKS

It's easy to fall into a comfortable but repetitive pattern with scene framing. These techniques, drawn from literary and cinematic screenwriting, help you start scenes off with some variety and shake things up a little.

### "WHY ARE YOU HERE?"

Sometimes you've got an idea to put a character somewhere and you're not actually sure why they're there. You might just need a character to be somewhere because it's about time for them to confront the big bad of the session, or you want to introduce a couple of new GMCs but you haven't nailed down why the group is at this particular meeting place. Some GMs have the impulse to ask the players if their characters would be there or not. But if you give them a yes or no question, the answer might be "no" and you're left with an empty scene.

Instead of *if*, ask the player *why* their character is there. Put it on them to suggest a reason, a motivation, or a goal based on their character's traits. Players know their characters better than you do; by presenting a question of "why?" rather than "would you?" you invite them to fill in the gaps with something that makes sense for their character.

Sometimes I might ask a player not only why they're there, but why another character is with them. This encourages players to set up fun rivalries or partnerships that they might not pursue otherwise. "Why is your knight here arguing with Amelie's knight?" for example. Or, "Why did your police detective tell Amelie's medical examiner to meet you at the docks?"



ALEXANDRA MIMS COOK



### FRAMING AFTER ARRIVAL

Frequently a scene starts with the PCs showing up somewhere, especially when you're following the natural progression of the last scene's activity. If the players all decide that their characters are heading off to the herbalist to find a rare herb that's needed for a ritual, you don't need to start the next scene with the PCs showing up at that herbalist's shop. Instead, you can skip ahead, explain that they were there and found the herb without much trouble, and frame the scene with them leaving the shop. Then, you surprise the players with an ambush of assassins sent from an enemy who wants to keep them from performing the ritual, since that's the scene you want to play out.

It's fine to move things along in this way even if you'd otherwise be calling for a test for the thing that you're skipping over. Sometimes that sort of test won't really give you anything interesting anyway, and it's more interesting to assume the PCs are successful and get to the juicy stuff.

### IN MEDIAS RES

One of my favorite tricks is to start a scene in medias res, which means "in the middle of things." With this trick, the scene opens with the action already in progress. Describe the PCs standing back to back, dozens of ninjas with their swords drawn around them. Or describe the carnage of a dozen fallen ninjas, the PCs flicking blood from their own blades as the ninja's wicked master emerges from his sanctum.

Beginning a scene in medias res carries a few risks. Some players really don't want to skip over that action because it assumes choices they wouldn't have made. Others might want to have done something before the scene went this far, such as set up an ambush or scout around. As terrific a narrative device as this is, you should go into it with a clear understanding of your players' preferences.

## WHEN TO END THE SCENE

Just as the GM frames the scene, it's the GM's job to end it. Cortex Prime works best when scenes are short, punchy, get things done, and cut away to move onto another scene before they become long, dragged-out affairs with characters sitting around waiting for more things to happen. Here's a few guidelines about how to determine if your scene has hit the ending point.

### ALWAYS LEAVE THEM WANTING MORE

It might seem like you should resolve everything before the end of a scene, but the best writers know that keeping some questions unanswered keeps people interested in what will happen next. If a problem surfaces during a scene, it might not be resolved until another scene comes around. It's important that the status quo changes during a scene—otherwise the game feels static—but you can extend major developments over a number of scenes (and with a number of different characters and locations) before you finally tie the knot in it.

### CUT BEFORE THE SECOND LULL

It's natural for some scenes to start out all storm and thunder but slow down somewhere in the middle as the players figure out what's happened, make some decisions, and contemplate their next moves before the action picks right back up again. The trick is to end the scene before this happens twice. Let players charge back in after a mid-scene pivot, and then cut away before you lose any of that momentum.

### IMPASSE

Sometimes there's a clear point at which two opponents are trading blows, barbs, or bluster back and forth in a contest for several rolls but nothing meaningful seems to be happening. You've reached an impasse, and this drops the mood as other players, eager to jump back into the game, have to deal with the repetition of it all.

When this happens, end the scene and return to this very same conflict later in a new scene. You can pick the action right up again and start a new contest with new rolls, even though it's technically continuing the last one. Unfolding developments in later scenes might give the conflict in the stalled scene more context and meaning, which could invigorate it from whatever state it had fallen to.

### THE BUTTON

Sometimes it's obvious when a scene is done. Somebody says something hilarious, somebody delivers a finishing blow, somebody pulls open a door and there's a monster behind it. That's your cue to push the big red button and end the scene, while everyone's nodding in agreement and smiling. Or, for that matter, when everyone's screaming and groaning at this new story wrinkle.

## HOW TO END THE SCENE

Once you know you have to cut away, you actually need to do it. The next scene awaits, after all—even if it's a bridge scene or a flashback, you have to bring the current one to a close in a manner that's appropriate to the preceding events. So here are some additional tricks.

### FLEE!

Yes, that classic "the bad guy's getting away!" trick. How to end a pitched battle where the villain is on the ropes but it's just not time for them to drop the final curtain? Have them give the PCs the slip. Somebody important to the PCs is placed in immediate danger, something explodes in a fiery blossom of orange nearby, a wall collapses... These are all fine ways to give another character a means of escaping the scene and ending it. This goes double for players, too. If a player's in dire straits, it's not a bad idea to let them narrate their getaway and then smash cut from that scene to the next.

### STARE-OFF

Remember the impasse? A scene with multiple contests between two characters that's ended in a stalemate or a major slowdown can be ended with the two characters pacing back and forth, glaring at each other, ready for that next exchange—that you cut away from, leaving it as a cliffhanger.



The roleplaying between contests is a good place to end a scene if everyone's ready for a change of pace. Similarly, that heartbeat after the smack-down of an opponent in a scene that involves multiple opponents is the perfect place to end a scene, as the remaining antagonists look from their fallen ally to the PCs with murder (or fear) in their eyes.

### ON A FAILED TEST

Has a player just failed a test and you don't know what to do with that outcome right away? Unsure how the character's going to get out of this scrape? Leave the scene hanging and cut away to another. The players can stew on it a bit while you sort out the potential consequences. Even if you already know what will happen (because a good test has you thinking about the potential outcomes before you roll the difficulty dice) the space between a failure and the description of that failure is an ideal place to plant a cliffhanger and maintain the players' interest.

### INTERRUPTION

A good place to cut away from a scene can just involve somebody walking in and interrupting the flow of action. Heated exchange between the PCs and the judge who's overseeing the case? A clerk walks in waving a folder with new evidence. Players despairing after unsuccessfully taking on a gigantic sea monster? A huge armored turtle rises out of the ocean to square off with the beast. Basically, throwing in something that interrupts the flow of action serves as a good way to bring a scene to an end without needing to immediately resolve the situation, and introduces something new to deal with the next time you frame a scene with those characters.



ALEXANDRA MIMS COOK



## RUNNING OPENING SCENES

Your opening scenes set the stage and introduce the characters to the sort of storylines you're hoping to establish in the session. That's why these are often called establishment scenes. You don't want to soft-pedal these—it's fine sometimes to start off the game by saying something like "So you're all in an inn," but it's much better to drop them in medias res, setting up something that's already underway, skipping over the uninteresting stuff.

What's uninteresting stuff? That depends on your group. For me, I don't usually explore the characters waking up in the morning, getting their kit together, setting out for work, catching a ride on the Metro, and so on. Instead, I frame an opening scene at the character's workplace with a big problem having just landed on their desk, and asking them, "So how do you deal with this?" Opening scenes invite the players to start roleplaying their characters' strengths and flaws right away, confronting anything that's introduced by you as GM and setting up what they might be doing later in the session.

### OPENING SCENE MECHANICS

An opening scene doesn't need to involve tests and contests. They can just be roleplaying and questions asked and answered. Make the opening scenes for all of the players short and sweet, but give them enough to work with so that everyone around the table knows where things stand.

## RUNNING ACTION SCENES

All of the information presented earlier in this section applies for action scenes, which should be framed to be as hard and as punchy as possible. An action scene is often the highlight of the session for many players, one where they can show off a lot of their SFX and skills, and generate PP or hero dice for later. The big finale of a session is usually an action scene, a showdown between the players and the antagonist they've been psyching themselves to confront all session.

### ACTION SCENE MECHANICS

Action scenes are characterized by conflict, but it's not always between characters. In settings like *Hammerheads* (page 150), action scenes are where the PCs engage with the catastrophic disasters and crises that make that setting notable. Thinking of action scenes as "combat encounters" isn't accurate, but it's a decent comparison for folks who are used to combat oriented RPGs—you square off against some obstacle or another, roll a bunch of dice, and hope to come out of the scene with a win.

See "What is Conflict?" on page 97 for more on how to build on conflict in action scenes.



# RUNNING EXPLORATION SCENES

Exploration scenes often set up an action scene or a flashback scene, and they're a perfect opportunity to give your players details and info. An exploration scene can spread over multiple locations, requiring one or more tests from the players, or you might isolate the scene to a single location with hidden clues, knowledge, or things to discover. I like to use exploration scenes to feature interesting locations that the players might not otherwise discover.

## EXPLORATION SCENE MECHANICS

Exploration scenes in a mystery-themed session will likely focus on investigation—play out the acquisition of clue-based assets, pick up one or two complications that persist until later, and introduce GMCs to help you as GM explain one or more situations that are key to the session's story.

You can use an exploration scene to map out a setting, as well. In fantasy games, these are the scenes where PCs delve into underground chambers, lost tombs, and ruined temples. In a modern setting, these scenes reveal locations around a city, rooms in a hidden base, or sites around an archaeological dig. In a science fiction setting, these scenes are those where the PCs analyze planetary features, scout out abandoned space stations, and puzzle out computer matrices.

# RUNNING BRIDGE SCENES

Based on their name, bridge scenes might sound less important than action scenes, but in Cortex Prime a lot of the good stuff happens in the scenes where the characters are recovering from their wounds, regrouping after a difficult encounter with an antagonist, or doing some important research on something that's causing the group trouble that session.

If the PCs aren't all in the same place, you can link bridge scenes together. Bridge scenes serve some of the same role as opening scenes—they're establishing the new status quo, setting up the next part of the session. Some players need time to unwind during play, but they don't want to just sit the game out. Let them roleplay with other characters, share information, and really get into their character's heads. It's worth it.



LINDA LITHÉN

## BRIDGE SCENE MECHANICS

These scenes use the rules for recovering from complications (page 37) and creating assets with tests (page 35). Bridge scenes are also excellent opportunities for PCs with social or personality-focused distinctions to make tests that might not make sense in an action scene, but which allow them to create assets or pick up PP necessary for later on.

In games that use milestones for character growth, bridge scenes are essential. Frame a bridge scene with an eye toward allowing PCs to hit those milestone goals. Players love to get XP for roleplaying something that makes sense for their character and gets them into trouble.

# RUNNING FLASHBACK SCENES

Flashbacks are the heart of some Cortex Prime games the way that action scenes are the heart of others. In a game that depends on heists or capers, or on mysteries and relationships, flashback scenes help players prepare and reinforce their characters without needing to frontload the session with such things as shopping or bookkeeping.

A flashback scene can be inspired by one player asking another player, "Hey, remember that time you did that one thing?" That's a use of a callback if you're using that sort of character growth, and it's an opportunity for you to cut away from a scene that's ongoing and frame a scene in the past involving the situation the players are talking about. I love to use flashback scenes to unpack something the players are otherwise just riffing on, and it gives them a great way to play out what really happened in the past.

## FLASHBACK SCENE MECHANICS

An important use of a flashback scene is to cut from an action scene, play out a short scene that lets the player create an appropriate asset, and then cut back to the original scene.

You can play out conflict in a flashback scene, but a simple test works better than a contest unless it's important that the players figure out how a showdown in the past actually played out. Remember, flashbacks are history; they affect what happens in the "now" of the session, so they can't usually change something that's already happened unless it's to reveal a twist or hidden knowledge that casts what's already happened in a new light.

# RUNNING TAG SCENES

Nothing makes the end of a session more satisfying than playing out those last scenes that deal with where the PCs end up as the session wraps. It gives you the opportunity to tie up loose ends that won't carry over to the next session and to explore what each character thinks about what happened in the session.

## TAG SCENE MECHANICS

A tag scene is essential for character growth that depends on recovering trait statements. You can use them liberally in other games, too, of course. Go around the table and ask each player what their character is doing and where they are—not something I recommend for framing scenes, but a fun thing to do when wrapping up a session. How are they dealing with what happened? What's their character's new perspective in advance of the next session? Did any of their traits or other details change this session from milestones, growth, or earning XP?

Tag scenes are no place for contests, really. In fact, you might not call for any dice at all, as these scenes are mostly for summarizing the session, setting up the next session, and resolving outstanding questions. In the rare case that you do call for a test, make it quick and short. It's not really a tag scene if it's a pitched argument with another character or a fistfight. Imagine the stuff that happens right before the credits roll, not the stuff that happens right before an ad break.



ANNA "SARIANNE" NEUMANNOVÁ

# WHAT IS CONFLICT?

The degree to which conflict dominates your Cortex Prime game is up to you as GM and your players. You can manage any kind of struggle between characters and the environment or each other using the rules for tests and contests.

## THREE KINDS OF CONFLICT

Some genres are more traditionally prone to extended battles or fights than others. A game that revolves around interpersonal drama is just as conflict heavy as one that revolves around medieval warfare or resistance to an alien invasion.

### HEROES VS VILLAINS

If your game is about heroic characters striving against wicked villains, the typical conflict might be a series of scenes in which players test their traits against monsters, minions, and mooks in the form of minor GMCs and extras. A major GMC—such as a warlord or mastermind—serves as the climactic contest, one that might shift from location to location, with a chase in between.

It's crucial to use an action order (page 98) for larger set-piece scenes with multiple antagonists and every PC doing something different, sharing a spotlight. Use contests occasionally for one-on-one duels.

### INTERPERSONAL DRAMA

If your game is about a cast of PCs who may work toward conflicting or opposing goals, even if they're not aggressive or violent in nature, most scenes are contests. In between these scenes, players might test their traits against GMCs or difficult circumstances, often to establish their own storylines. The group doesn't have to get along. In fact, when emulating television dramas, the PCs don't even like each other all the time, let alone want to spend time with one another or work toward a single goal.

Don't use action order unless necessary. Instead, establish who is the dramatic lead and play out contests using a dramatic order (page 98). Use the rules for interfering liberally (page 23). Contests form the bulk of player vs player drama.

### ENVIRONMENTAL CONFLICT

If your game is an exploration or investigation game, including those with a "sandbox" setting (where the players decide where to go within an open setting filled with story hooks) or one that plays out through a mystery, most of the conflict is the players testing their traits against the environment or an abstract difficulty.



STEPH C.

From time to time, threats such as monsters or henchmen or supernatural phenomena show up as tests. Contests are much less likely but may be used to represent extended chases. Timed tests are common.

Action order (page 98) comes into play when there are fights with threatening elements, but the pacing of each scene is freeform and organic.

# DRAMATIC ORDER

If the primary focus of your session is intense conflict between characters, or it plays out over longer periods of time between scenes, **dramatic order** is your default. In dramatic order the decision about who goes first is determined by a character, usually a player, stating that they want something and another character, sometimes a player but often the GM, saying they want to stop them. The initiating character is called the **dramatic lead**.

Play carries on as normal with the dramatic lead starting the contest by rolling dice and their opposition trying to roll higher, just as with the standard rules for contests. Once these contests are resolved they can either transition to another contest shortly afterward, with or without a change in location or circumstances, determined by the first contest's outcome.

> Adam declares that his Hero, a special agent chasing down a terrorist, is going to confront an arms dealer in a border town and shake them down for information. The dealer, Ronnie, in this case a GMC played by Mary Rose as the GM, doesn't want to get on the terrorist's bad side, and thus a contest arises with the Hero as the dramatic lead. Adam wins the contest, and a 10 complication is imposed on Ronnie to bring pressure against him to spill the beans.

When there are multiple players active in the same scene and one player starts a contest, the other players can try to aid the dramatic lead, interfere with the contest (because they want something else from the scene), or wait to see what happens.

If everyone wants to go first and it's not clear who would, you can call for all the players who want to start the dramatic order to roll their dice for the contests they want to start. The highest rolling player starts and uses that roll for the contest; the other players pick up their dice and can interfere, assist, or sit out the contest as it plays out. Move on to other contests as appropriate, varying the dramatic lead when possible.

> Mary Rose shifts attention to Tina. Her Sage, another agent, is now the dramatic lead. She uses the previous complication as leverage to force Ronnie to give them access to the terrorist cell's website. Mary Rose rolls an opportunity, so Tina spends a PP to step up the existing complication to 12, and when she wins the contest with Adam's help, Ronnie is taken out. He hands over the passwords to Tina's Sage.

# ACTION ORDER

If the order in which things happen in a scene matters, it's often a good idea to shift conversational back and forth between players and GM with the occasional test or contest to an **action order**. This is especially true of fight scenes or moments when there's chaos and confusion and it becomes important to know who goes first and when. Other names for action order include handoff initiative and elective order.

## ACTIONS AND REACTIONS

When using an action order to track conflict, tests and contests are replaced with actions and reactions. An **action** is like the initiating roll of a contest; a **reaction** is a defensive or reactive roll to avoid it and only defensive traits apply. The character whose turn it is chooses which character they target with their action. If there is no opposing character, use difficulty dice as the reaction. For more detail, see Action-Based Resolution on page 24.

## WHO GOES FIRST

The GM decides who goes first in the action order based on a snapshot of the scene at that moment. Often it's a PC who starts a fight, shouts something insulting, or bursts in on a room full of unpleasant people. If a GMC has the drop on the group, then they go first in the action order. The character who goes first is the **action lead**.

All characters—player and GM—get a turn. Play progresses around the table, starting with the first to act, and then that player chooses the next character—either a PC or a GMC—to act. Once everyone has had a chance to do something, the last one to go chooses the action lead for the next round (this could include nominating themselves).

## HOW IT ENDS

As the GM, you can drop the game out of action order at any time. If it's a fight and one side scores a decisive win, then the action order is obviously over and play carries on as it did before, with a shared spoken narrative. Or it's possible that nothing interesting can happen any longer and so the scene ends, and with it the action order.

## TRACKING ACTION ORDER

Using **turn markers** to clearly show when a player or GMC has taken their turn in the action order is highly recommended. A turn marker can be something as simple as a two-sided card, with one side showing green and the other red, or a painted miniature of a character where it's standing up if the character hasn't acted yet and lying down if they have.

# TAKING INITIATIVE

This mod calls back to roleplaying games where the order in which characters act is determined by a die roll or some other mechanic at the beginning of the fight. The order proceeds from the highest rolling total to the lowest, and then either starts over again at the top of the next sequence and repeats, or there's another die roll to establish the order again.

There are several ways to determine who takes initiative using this mod. They include:

- **Each side in a conflict chooses a leader**, who assembles a dice pool appropriate to the situation (usually one that includes traits reflecting tactical or strategic know-how) and rolls. The side with the highest total chooses one of its group to go first, then the next highest rolling side chooses one of theirs, and so on.
- **Everyone in the conflict rolls dice for themselves**, and characters make tests or contests in order from highest rolling total to lowest.
- **Each character has a fixed initiative rating** based on the highest possible total of two traits (such as PHYSICAL + MENTAL) and everyone acts in order of that rating.
- **Each character has a fixed initiative rating but rolls a die** such as a 6, or perhaps a 8 if they can justify a distinction that's appropriate, or a 4 if they can justify a distinction that's a hindrance. Add the die to an initiative rating derived from two traits and then act in that order. Any hitches rolled do not add to the initiative rating, as usual, and can be activated by the GM once initiative order is settled.

**CLASSIC CONVERSION NOTE**

Classic Cortex games used this initiative system. They included SFX that altered initiative rolls to represent those who were especially combat-ready or combat-inept. You can duplicate that using talents or distinction SFX that allow players to add a die to their initiative score or somehow penalize their score by only allowing them to use a single trait instead of two. You can make these persistent SFX or require a PP to activate them or, in the case of the combat-inept characters, allow them to earn a PP if they choose to act last.




# ADVANTAGE OF SCALE

In some cases, a conflict might take place between two groups of radically different sizes, scale, or degrees of power. An example might be a lone PC taking on somebody in an armored car, or a fighter jet taking on an enemy aircraft carrier. As GM, you may adjudicate a simple scale advantage as being outright impossible (human being tries to punch spaceship) or with a **scale die**, which is a bonus 8 added to whichever side has the advantage. Along with a scale die, that side also adds an extra die result into their total for free (the equivalent of spending a PP on their total). This additional die represents a pretty profound advantage.

You could decide to go with a 8 8 scale and keep two additional dice for the total, but this is an overwhelming advantage. Usually it's best to make a ruling and move on ("The armored car's machine gun sprays a hail of bullets, you're a mess and need an ambulance.").

As a rule of thumb, when the mismatch is so unfair that it would never work for a normal person, but a PC might be able to pull it off, that's the cue to go to the extra dice. Players can earn a scale die if they vastly outnumber or outgun their opponents, but usually such odds cause GMC opposition to simply surrender.

## MULTI-LEVEL SCALE

Using this mod, the scale die may be any size from d4 to d12, each step representing an increasingly larger target. You can choose to split the scale die up into smaller dice: a d12 can become d10 d10 or d8 d8 d8 or d6 d6 d6 d6. The larger scale side still only keeps one additional die into their total, rather than an additional die for each additional scale die.

> Mary Rose is using multi-level scale for a giant mecha game she's running, as well as action order and actions instead of tests and contests. Heavy mechs have a d10 scale, while medium mechs have a d8 and light mechs have a d6. Adam's Hero pilots a medium mech with a d8 scale, so when he assembles his dice pool for an attack action against a light GMC mech target, he can add either a d8 or a d6 d6 to his pool and may keep an additional die when adding up his total. If the GMC mech was also a medium scale mech, he wouldn't include an extra die. If the GMC mech was a heavy mech, Mary Rose would keep an additional die in her reaction total.

| ADAM'S OPPONENT | RESULT |
|---|---|
| **Light Mech** d6 | Adam can add d8 d8 or d6 d6 to his dice pool and keep 3 results for his action. |
| **Medium Mech** d8 | Adam gets no advantage. |
| **Heavy Mech** d10 | Mary Rose can add d10 or d8 d8 to her dice pool and keep 3 dice results for her reaction. |

## GANGING UP

GMCs, especially antagonistic ones, often **gang up** in large numbers because they think that's going to help. Sadly, they've never heard of the inverse ninja rule, which states that the more bad guys there are, the weaker they are individually. If they keep doing it, here's how you handle it.

Each additional opponent adds a single die to the opposition's dice pool equal to the highest trait they could use in the fight. This doesn't change the number of dice added together to set or beat the difficulty (it's still two), just the number of dice rolled. The most common example of this is a gang of six Thugs d6 which amounts to a roll of 6x d6 (first thug is d6, each additional thug adds another d6, so it's 6x d6). This is formalized in some games as a **mob GMC** (see page 117 for more information).

Every time a player beats the difficulty against a side that has multiple assisting characters, they compare their effect die to the supporting dice and knock away a single supporting die that's smaller than their effect die. This represents whittling away the opposition, one ugly mug at a time.

If the player beats the difficulty by 5 or more with a heroic success, they can either step up their effect die to take out a single supporting die or they can keep two effect dice and try to knock out two supporting GMC dice of smaller size. Once the PC gets down to a single opponent, though, no more dice get knocked off.

> Amanda's Engineer is taking on a rival workshop in Steam City's annual kitbash contest, all by herself. The rivals consist of a Workshop Boss d10 and three Roustabouts d6 who are helping their boss. Mary Rose plays this out with a simple test, using the Workshop Boss d10 plus d6 d6 d6 from the Roustabouts as an opposition pool. The rivals set a difficulty of 10, which Amanda beats easily with a 15 on her own dice. As that's a heroic success, Amanda looks at her remaining dice, which are d8 d8 and d6. Her best option is to use her heroic success to pick d8 d8 as effect dice, using them to knock away two of the Roustabout d6 dice from the rival's team. This leaves them with a d10 and a d6 for the next round. If she'd had a d10 available to her, she could have picked that and used the heroic success to step it up to d12, taking out the Workshop Boss d10.

| CHARACTER | DICE RESULTS | TOTALS |
|---|---|---|
| Workshop Boss d10<br>**3x** Roustabout d6 | 4 3 ~~6~~ 4 | 10 |
| Engineer | 2 **3** **4** ~~7~~ ~~8~~ | 15 |

Effect Die 1 **3** → ~~6~~ Roustabout
Effect Die 2 **4** → ~~6~~ Roustabout
6 Roustabout

## GETTING HELP FROM OTHERS

A group of PCs can gang up like a horde of mooks can, handing over a single die of the appropriate type to the player whose character is leading the charge. The risk is that if the opponent beats the difficulty, they could use the effect die to take out a helping player's die (much like with Ganging Up, above), and the helping PC is taken out as if they had lost the fight. You can always choose to drop out before the dice are rolled again. You can also spend a PP to take a complication instead of being taken out, but regardless you can't keep helping the primary PC.

Another way to aid a PC is to use your turn to make a test and create an asset to hand over to the PC (page 35). This eliminates the chance that your character gets taken out, but it can take some organizing and has a chance of failure.

# TIMED TESTS

Quite often the real challenge comes not from whether a PC can succeed at a task, but whether they can succeed at it fast enough. Timed tests work well for characters like the technician, pilot, or medic when the other members of the group are off doing something like shooting bad guys.

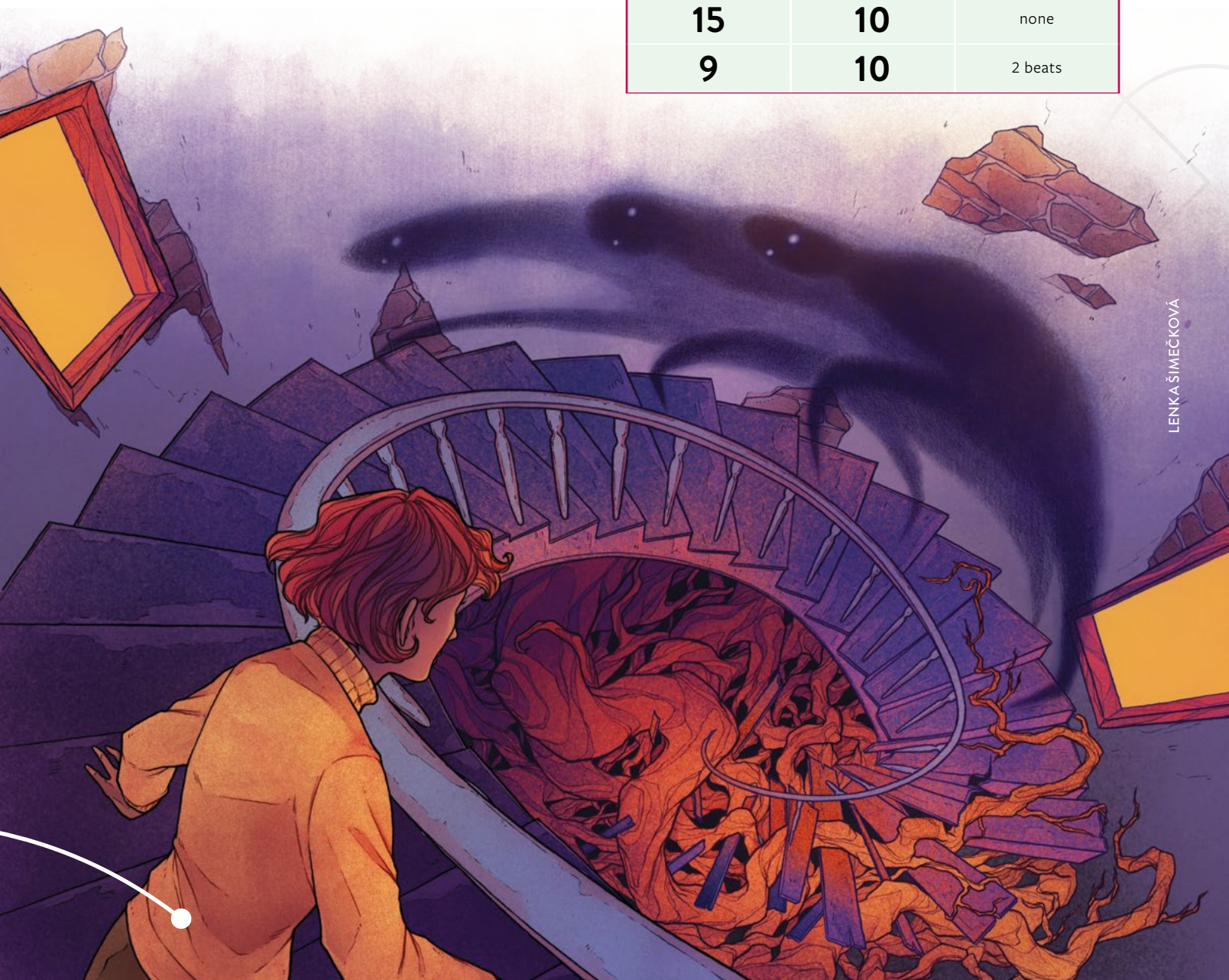
A **timed test** is a special kind of test that handles situations where there's a clock counting down or a limited window in which to carry out a task. Timed tests use a series of standard tests, either several of the same kind (Mental + Fix, for instance) or a series of different tests for something that has multiple steps (such as Physical + Sneak, then Mental + Focus, then Social + Influence).

The time's measured in beats—the more beats, the longer you have. Each time a player rolls the dice, it uses one beat. Use checkboxes or tokens to keep track of beats. It's a countdown, because there's a finite amount of time; once that's gone, they're done.

As the GM, you set the difficulty for the tests and decide how much time they have. By default, the number of beats is the number of tests—three or four is a good baseline. For an easier timed test, give them one or two additional beats to accomplish it. For a harder test, give them one or even two fewer beats.

- If you beat the difficulty, it only costs you the time you spent, i.e., one beat. A heroic success means you found a shortcut and don't lose any time at all. You don't lose a beat for that roll.
- If you fail to beat the difficulty, you succeeded but that part of the test took too long, and an additional beat is lost. Move on to the next stage of the timed test.

| PLAYER'S TOTAL | DIFFICULTY | COST |
|---|---|---|
| 12 | 10 | one beat |
| 15 | 10 | none |
| 9 | 10 | 2 beats |



LENKA ŠIMEČKOVÁ

Tina is playing her Sage in one of Mary Rose's near-future superhero games. Mary Rose has just framed a scene in which the Sage, who is a highly skilled mind-scanning telepath and secret agent, arrives at a crowded social function that's lousy with wealthy city officials, politicians, and celebrities. She tells Tina that her Sage's contacts revealed that her nemesis, the Crow, has planted hired killers in the crowd, and the Sage only has minutes to locate them telepathically and stop them from staging a deadly attack.

This is a timed test, using the Sage's Mental 10 + Focus 8 + Telepathic Agent distinction and Telepathy 8 power die. Mary Rose sets the difficulty at 8 8 and puts three poker chips on the table to act as the beat countdown. She says that each roll costs a beat, and requires three successes, one for each killer. If she pulls off all three and uses up all three beats, she's stopped the attack just in the nick of time. Every killer she doesn't manage to track down leads to progressively more carnage!

Mary Rose sets the difficulty on the first roll: it's 10 (8 + 2 on the 8 8). Tina rolls her dice pool and gets 7, 6, 2, and 2. The 7 and 6 give her a total of 13, which is enough to identify one killer. This costs her one beat, and Mary Rose removes one poker chip.

Two more to go!

On the next roll, the difficulty is 8 (6 + 2 on the 8 8). Tina spends a PP to create a 6 asset for her roll; the second killer saw the first one get seized by Tina's task force, and his mind is loud with alarm. Tina rolls: 10, 5, 4, 2, and 2. That's 15, a heroic success that doesn't use up any beats.

Two killers are down.

Finally, Mary Rose rolls a 7 (5 + 2). Tina's Sage scans the room for the last killer, with a die roll of 5, 4, 1, and 1. Two hitches, one on the 10 and the other on a 8! Luckily, the 5 and 4 give her a 9 total, so she locates the final killer, but in the process Mary Rose says that her telepathic probe goes too far into the killer's violent mind.

Handing over a PP to activate the hitches, Mary Rose gives Tina's Sage a Overloaded Psyche 8 complication (6 from one hitch, stepped up by one for the second). The Sage saved the day with one beat to spare, but might not be in the best mental state to deal with the fallout when the Crow arrives at the gala...

## THE SAGE

*Knowledge is the only weapon I need.*

- 8 Focus
- 8 Telepathy

Telepathic agent 8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.



6 Physical
10 Mental
8 Social

YANGTIAN LI

| DIFFICULTY | TINA'S DICE POOL |
|---|---|
| 8 8 | Mental 10, Focus 8, Telepathy 8, Telepathic Agent 8 |

**FIRST KILLER**

| PLAYER | DICE RESULTS | TOTALS |
|---|---|---|
| Mary Rose | 2 8 | 10 |
| Tina | 2 6 7 2 | 13 |

Tina's total beats Mary Rose's and the Sage locates the first killer.

Killers Left

Beats Left

**SECOND KILLER**

| PLAYER | DICE RESULTS | TOTALS |
|---|---|---|
| Mary Rose | 2 6 | 8 |
| Tina | 5 2 2 4 10 | 15 |

Tina spends a PP to add a 6 asset to her pool. Tina's roll beats Mary Rose's by more than 5 for a heroic success.

Killers Left

Beats Left

**THIRD KILLER**

| PLAYER | DICE RESULTS | TOTALS |
|---|---|---|
| Mary Rose | 2 5 | 7 |
| Tina | 1 4 5 1 | 9 |

Mary Rose spends a PP to add the complication of Overloaded Psyche 8 (6 hitch stepped up by the additional hitch).

Killers Left

Beats Left



## FAILING DOESN'T MEAN GAME OVER

Cortex Prime games frequently feature characters that are some of the best in the world at what they do, so failing a roll doesn't always mean the character actually screwed up. The timed test is a pacing mechanic. It's a given that the group's hacker will break through that firewall. But can she do it before the enemy's intsec agent notices? How many complications does she create by rolling hitches? Does she grab any opportunities from the GM? Those are the places where major twists and turns happen, not in failing to roll higher than the opposition's dice.

> Tina's Sage definitely had the chops to deal with the crowded ballroom infiltrated by assassins, but the hitches she rolled at the end added flavor and thrills to an otherwise routine series of rolls. Alternatively, the Crow could have shown up and caused chaos early in the form of a **Murder of Crows** complication, making the scene a tempest of screams and fear. Or Mary Rose could have created two separate complications to make things really interesting.



## RUNNING OUT OF TIME

If the player runs out of beats—zero or less—they're out of time, and whatever bad thing was going to happen happens. They might have a chance to escape, depending on the situation, but they can't finish their objective. You should have something in mind for when this happens, but the player can also suggest something to the group and see what happens next.

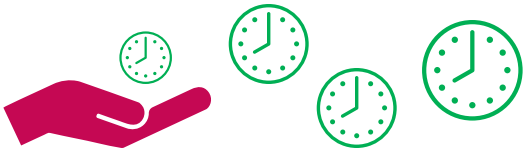
> What if Tina hadn't been able to succeed at finding all three killers before she ran out of beats? Mary Rose had an actual fight with the killer lined up, if that happened, with the downside that somebody important would have been murdered before Tina's Sage could get to him. This would have introduced a lot of drama as Tina's agency loses some respect for her telepathic powers and assigns her an assistant or puts her on less high profile cases.



## COMPLETING THE TIMED TEST

When you finish with the obstacles planned for that test and the player succeeds with time left on the clock, they've achieved their objectives (including a clean getaway, if that's what they're looking to do). If they succeed but have zero beats left, they must choose between achieving their objective and a clean getaway (or between achieving their objective and saving some money or between achieving their objective and being proud of their work, etc.). In other words, if you complete the test with no more beats remaining, your success is conditional.

> Tina's Sage finished the job with a beat still left on the table. Mary Rose says this means the Sage has time to plan for the Crow's arrival, as well as taking out all three killers. What if she'd used up all three beats? In that case, she'd have to make a choice: take out the final killer, and have no time to prepare for the Crow, or lose track of the killer but learn enough from the minds of the others that she's ready for the Crow's entrance minutes later.



## BUYING TIME

If a PC is running dangerously low on time, the rest of the group might be able to help them out. They can make a test of their own—causing a diversion, trying to delay the bad guys with conversation, eliminating some security guards—and with a success, they give the player back one of the beats they've lost. If they get a heroic success, it's two beats. Failure means that PC can't help any more for the rest of the timed test. No matter what, only one attempt at buying time can happen in between each beat of the timed test.

> Amanda's Engineer, sitting out in the tricked-out surveillance van, could probably have helped Tina's Sage by accessing the closed-circuit TV system that's monitoring the venue. If Tina had flubbed the first roll, she'd definitely have called in for that kind of assist. Luckily for Amanda, her Engineer didn't need to get involved and risk being dragged into any crisis. Now that the Crow is about to show up, of course, it's all hands on deck.

# AN EXAMPLE THROWDOWN

Let's look in detail at a series of high stakes contests that make up the climactic battle between two characters: **Count Jubatus II**, a rocket-pack-wearing feline nobleman from a far-future space opera setting, and his tireless foe, **Morza Sorx**, a squid-headed duelist and bounty hunter.

BETHANY BERG




## COUNT JUBATUS II

### Noble of the Ådlakatter ◆8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's ◆8 for a ◆4.
- *Noble Reputation:* When you loudly announce your breeding in order to sway a foe, spend a PP to double your Influence for that contest.
- *Oh, Jeeves:* When you engage with your fellow aristocrats, spend a PP to create a Loyal Retainer ◆8 asset.

### Species: Rymdenpanter ◆8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's ◆8 for a ◆4.
- *Feral Fury:* When you unleash your feline nature, spend a PP and double your Fight or Shoot die for that contest.

### Veteran of the Pride Wars ◆8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's ◆8 for a ◆4.

| SIGNATURE ASSETS | | |
|---|---|---|
| Rocket Pack ◆8 | Mother's Blaster Pistol ◆8 | My Butler Magnus ◆8 |

## MORZA SORX

### Devil with a Knife ◆8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's ◆8 for a ◆4.
- *Cruel Cut:* When you first draw blood in a duel, spend a PP to gain a Bloodmarked ◆8 asset.

### Species: Hashtapamard ◆8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's ◆8 for a ◆4.
- *Aquatic Recovery:* When you are submerged in water, spend a PP to recover a complication with your Mental attribute die.

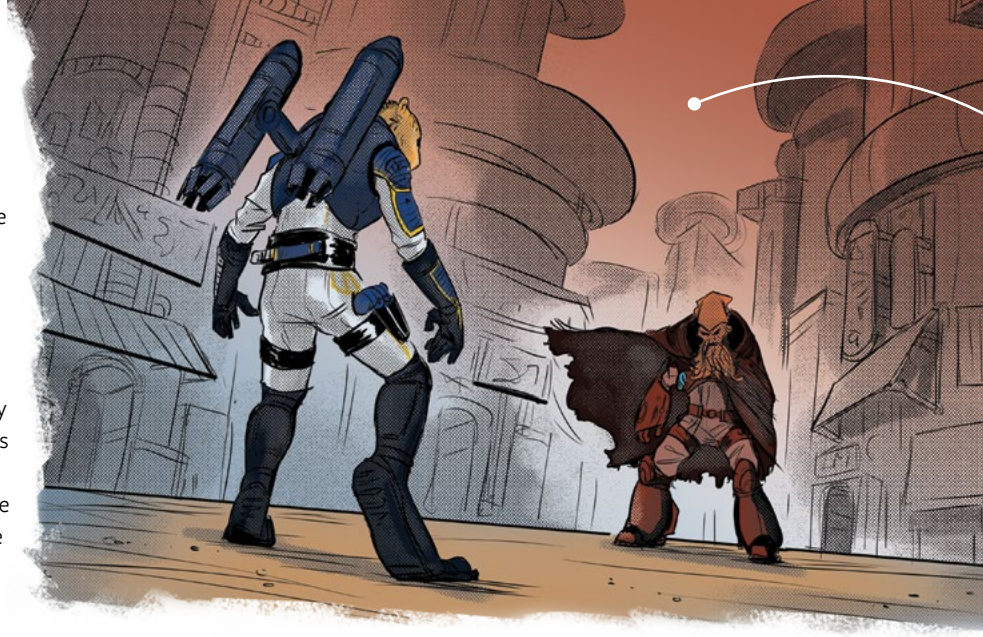
### Hunter of the Pride ◆8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's ◆8 for a ◆4.
- *Fear in their Eyes:* When you engage in conflict with one of the Pride, spend a PP to double your Social attribute die for that contest.

| SIGNATURE ASSETS | | |
|---|---|---|
| Personal Cruiser ◆8 | Cruel Blade ◆8 | Squid Squad ◆8 |

## MEANWHILE...

Count Jubatus II (played by Lenny), with a price on his head, thinks he has outrun his pursuer, Morza Sorx (played by Josh). However, the tentacle-faced bounty hunter surprises his quarry in the Night Bazaar on Ceti Lambda. Mary Rose, the GM, frames the scene: vendors scatter, clutching their wares and yelling as they trip over each other to clear a space for Jubatus and Morza. Ceti Lambda's twin moons cast a harsh light on the market square. The stakes are high; only one of them can come out of this the winner, for surely this is the last act?



1



Lenny picks up his dice. "I won't let him keep this up," he says. "Time to settle the score!" Jubatus bares his fangs and bellows a challenge at Morza, hoping to throw the bounty hunter off with a roar. He picks up his Social d8, Influence d8, a d6 for his *Intimidate* specialty, and a d8 for his Noble of the Ådlakatter distinction, and rolls. Lenny gets 13, with a d8 effect die.

| JUBATUS (LENNY) | |
|---|---|
| Dice Results | Total |
| 6 3 4 7 | 13 |

2

Josh describes Morza spreading his arms, revealing his Cruel Blade underneath his greatcoat. "I've faced stronger cats than you in the Pride Wars," the Hashtapamard says. Josh picks up their Social d8, Focus d6, and Hunter of the Pride d8 distinction. They also spend their PP to activate their *Fear in their Eyes* SFX, doubling their Social die. Josh rolls and gets a 15, with a d8 effect die.

| ACTIONS |
|---|
| A PP is spent to double Social d8 |

| MORZA (JOSH) | |
|---|---|
| Dice Results | Total |
| 2 5 7 8 | 15 |



3

Lenny could give in, but decides to keep pushing. He rolls again, this time getting a 12, but Lenny spends his PP to add in a third die—a 6 on his d6—to make the total 18. Once again, he keeps a d8 effect die. Josh knows they can't beat that, with no remaining PP, so they flip their distinction to a d4 for the last roll, picking up a PP. They roll and get 14, which isn't enough. Josh sets aside a d8 effect die, which means that Lenny's roll can't simply take Morza out of the scene (Lenny's d8 effect die isn't larger than Josh's d8 effect die).

| ACTIONS |
|---|
| A PP is spent to add a d6 to the total |

| JUBATUS | |
|---|---|
| Dice Results | Total |
| 4 6 2 4 8 | 18 |

| ACTIONS |
|---|
| A PP gained by changing a d8 into a d4 |

| MORZA | |
|---|---|
| Dice Results | Total |
| 2 6 3 8 | 14 |

4



Lenny defines the resulting complication as **Rattled** 8. Josh accepts it, and describes Morza as taking a step back, squid eyes widening with astonishment. Lenny says, "How about Morza books it and runs?" But Josh points out that Morza wasn't taken out of the scene, so Lenny doesn't get to describe how Jubatus defeats Morza…yet.

Mary Rose puts it to Josh: "What does Morza do now?" Josh figures that, even as spooked as the bounty hunter is, Morza Sorx is one of the greatest duelists in the galaxy! So Morza draws his cutlass, the **Cruel Blade**, and runs at Jubatus, initiating a new contest.

5

Josh puts together the dice for their pool: **Physical** 8 + **Fight** 10 (*Cutlass* 6 specialty) + **Devil with a Knife** 8 distinction plus the **Cruel Blade** 8. They roll and score only a disappointing 9 with a 8 effect die. Not a great initial lunge for Morza, but the duel is on.

| MORZA | |
|---|---|
| Dice Results | Total |
| 2 2 3 4 5 | 9 |



6



Lenny knows Jubatus isn't much of a fencer, but he's much stronger and faster than Morza. Lenny picks up **Physical** 10 + **Fight** 8 + **Veteran of the Pride Wars** 8 distinction, as well as the **Rattled** 8 complication that's attached to Morza from the last contest. He rolls and gets 15 with a 10 effect die. Jubatus ducks, weaves, and high-kicks at Morza with a growl!

| ACTIONS |
|---|
| 8 added due to Morza's **Rattled** complication |

| JUBATUS | |
|---|---|
| Dice Results | Total |
| 4 7 8 5 | 15 |

7

Josh retaliates, rolling the same dice pool. This time it's a much better total: 16, with a 10 effect die. "I have you now," Morza says to the Count. Josh mulls over making this definitive by spending their PP to keep another die but figures 16 is good enough.

| MORZA | |
|---|---|
| Dice Results | Total |
| 2 3 8 8 3 | 16 |

| ACTIONS |
|---|
| 10 stepped up to 12 due to the heroic success |

| ACTIONS |
|---|
| A PP gained by changing a 8 into a 4 |

| JUBATUS | |
|---|---|
| Dice Results | Total |
| 4 2 3 7 | 11 |

Lenny's all out of PP, so he decides to do the same thing Josh did: flip his distinction to 4, picking up a PP, and just try to roll as well as he can. The dice hit the table… and the best Lenny can get is an 11, with a 8 effect die. Josh's 16 is 5 points more than Lenny's 11, so that's a heroic success, and steps up Josh's effect die to a 12! Lenny spends his PP to keep Jubatus from being taken out, but he takes a **Wounded** 12 complication. The tables have turned!





8 With no PP and a huge 12 complication, Lenny wonders if it's time for Jubatus to get the hell out of the Night Bazaar. Mary Rose looks at him, and Lenny says, "The Count clutches his wound, and growls, 'Another time, Morza!'" He picks up his PHYSICAL 10 + FLY 6 + NOBLE OF THE ÅDLAKATTER 8 distinction + ROCKET PACK 8 and the RATTLED 8 complication from Morza. His total? A reasonable 12 with a 8 effect die…but one of his 8 came up a 1. He looks at Mary Rose, who shrugs. "I could make that 12 complication get worse, but I'll go easy on you." She hands over a PP for the hitch, and creates a new complication, RUNNING SCARED 6. Lenny groans. "Thanks."

| JUBATUS | |
|---|---|
| Dice Results | Total |
| 2 1 4 6 6 | 12 |

9



Josh thinks about how Morza will stop the Count from getting away. They invoke Morza's personal gang of goons, the SQUID SQUAD, describing the band of thugs running from out of the maze of vendors to grab at Jubatus. Josh picks up SOCIAL 8 + INFLUENCE 6 (plus 6 for *Leadership*) + HUNTER OF THE PRIDE 8 distinction + RUNNING SCARED 6 + WOUNDED 12 + SQUID SQUAD 8. "Seize him, my squad!" The dice fall, and the total is a 15. Josh spends the PP they had remaining, adding a 5 from a 8, for a final total of 20, and a 8 effect die.

| ACTIONS |
|---|
| 6 and 12 added for Lenny's complications, PP used to keep an extra die |

| MORZA | |
|---|---|
| Dice Results | Total |
| 2 2 4 4 5 6 9 | 20 |

10 "Dang squids!" curses Lenny. All he needs is to win this contest in order to get away. He rerolls and this time gets a total of 16. It's not enough, but Lenny has a PP on hand. He spends it to add in a 5 from a 6, pushing the total up to 21. His effect die is a 10. Mary Rose looks at Josh, noting that Morza could possibly beat 21 if they switched a distinction for a 4, but it's a long shot.

| ACTIONS |
|---|
| A PP is spent to add a 6 to the total |

| JUBATUS | |
|---|---|
| Dice Results | Total |
| 5 2 4 7 9 | 21 |

"This isn't our final battle, Count!" says Josh. They announce that they give in and collect a PP from Mary Rose. Lenny leaves Morza and his SQUID SQUAD in the dust as the Count's rocket pack carries him off into the night sky of Ceti Lambda.

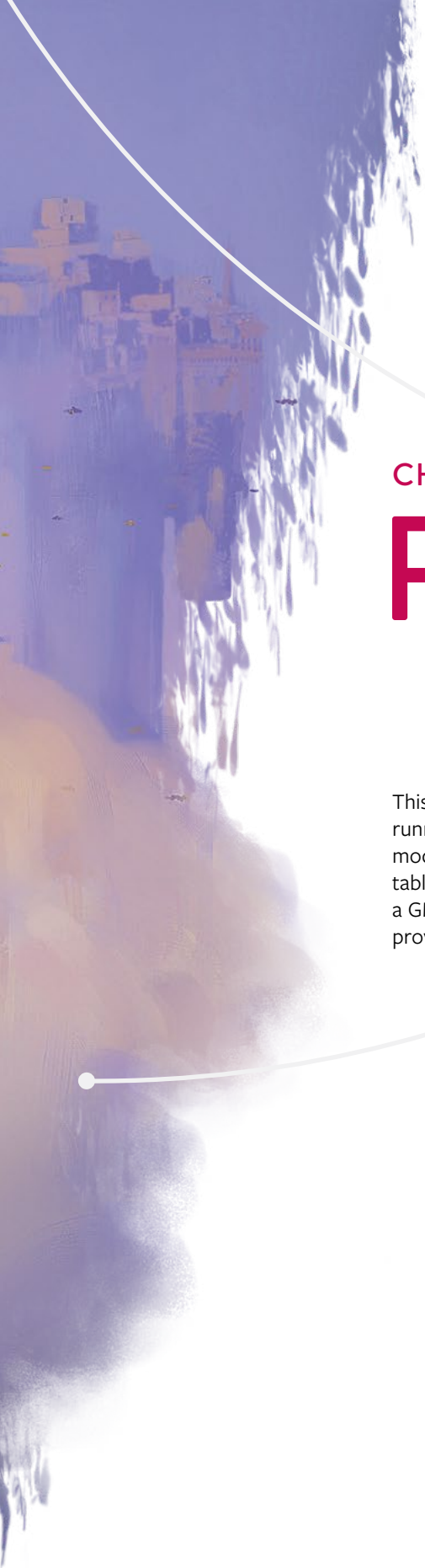
Mary Rose calls the end of the scene. Count Jubatus needs to shore up his defenses and maybe recruit some goons of his own… Perhaps a LOYAL RETAINER?

BETHANY BERG





SABINA LEWIS



CHAPTER 4

# PRIME SESSIONS

This chapter is intended mostly for the game moderator (GM). It covers preparing for, running, and wrapping up a session of play, as well as putting together and using game moderator characters (GMCs). Cortex Prime is all about the sessions you play at the table, focusing on what most groups are able to deal with in real time—a gathering of a GM and players. Whether you're playing a one-shot or a whole series, this chapter provides guidance to help you manage every session.

## CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

**Here's what to expect from this chapter.**

**Preparing a Session:** The length of sessions, and how much prep you need to do for them.

**Game Moderator Characters:** How to build a GMC and an overview of the various types of GMCs.

**Running a Session:** Managing all of the elements of a session, from setup to GMCs to the climax.

**Session Tricks:** Options for making a session different from the ones before it.



# PREPARING A SESSION

Before you run your first session of a Cortex Prime game, plan on a few hours of preparation. It's a good idea to try to familiarize yourself with the contents of Prime Core, Prime Characters, and Prime Scenes. If you're using a pre-made setting or adapting one of your favorite TV shows or movies to Cortex Prime, you might want to make some notes about what sort of game you're interested in being the GM for. The players have a lot to say about their own characters and what sort of setting they'd like to explore, but it makes things a lot easier if you show up with an idea about what you're prepared to run for them.

## WHICH SETTING?

Some GMs pick a setting they like, spend time writing up detailed histories and backgrounds, create distinctions and powers, and maybe some archetypes. Then they put that in the hands of their players and use the first session to make characters. This is a fairly traditional method that works for a lot of groups.

Other GMs don't have a preference or only have a couple of broad ideas about what they'd like to run, and they use the first session as a collaborative process with the players. They might suggest a steampunk setting or an urban fantasy drama loosely inspired by a few movies everyone's seen, and then the details get fleshed out with a pathways map in the character creation session.

For more on settings, see the next chapter (helpfully named Prime Settings). You can pick one of the three settings included there or go with one of the more broadly defined genres and see where that takes you. More settings and worlds are available in other Cortex Prime books.

## HOW LONG IS A SESSION?

Sessions can be short or they can be long, and you could play multiple "sessions" in a single day around breaks for lunch or dinner. But generally, a **session** is about three to four hours of play with a beginning and an end, allowing for bookkeeping, advancing a story along, and giving everyone enough time in the spotlight.

The central hook or story idea for any given session is called the **situation** (page 112). This isn't the same as the plot, because roleplaying games aren't pre-written stories, but it's the "what" when you look back at a session and think, "What was that about?"

### SERIES

Many groups plan to meet for several sessions, telling part of the same ongoing story each time. I like to think of sequential sessions as episodes in a television show or issues of a comic book. You can consider a game that takes place over several sessions as a **series** if you continue with the TV or comic book metaphor—there's a story arc, but quite often you don't know what the arc is until it's been played out, and the "season" is over.

With a series, take a moment to recap the last session at the beginning of the next one, like a "previously on..." segment before the opening credits of a TV show.

### ONE-SHOT SESSIONS

A one-shot is an excellent way to test the waters of a new setting or a genre that the group hasn't played with for a while (or ever) or introduce new players to Cortex Prime. If not everyone in your regular group can show up to an ongoing game, the other players might want to play a one-shot rather than play without that character.



JULIA METZGER

This is often a good way for the regular GM to step back and play a character of their own while one of the other players takes on the GM duties for the evening.

With one-shots, starting in medias res—in the middle of the action—is highly recommended as you have less time to build up to the situation than you might with an ongoing sequential game. You need to prep the session in advance—write up some GMCs, maybe provide pre-made characters, and think up a situation. As the GM, let everyone get acquainted with their characters, make quick introductions, then jump straight into an action scene with the story already underway.

## HOW MUCH PREP?

For some GMs, getting ready for a session takes as long, if not longer than, the session itself. For others, preparing for a session is nothing more than scribbling down some notes and reviewing the character files before the game starts.

The degree to which you need to prepare for a Cortex Prime game comes down to personal tastes and preferences. Making up minor GMCs and difficulties off the cuff is simple, but if you want a major GMC to show up in the session with a full character file of their own, it pays to sit down and figure out at least the key traits and description in advance.

Here are some useful guidelines for any Cortex Prime GM, experienced or not.

### RUNNING OFF-THE-CUFF

With a little bit of information and access to the players' character files, you may have enough to run the session without a lot of detailed notes or background. Take a look at the prime sets of each character. See where the players have invested larger dice and more involved SFX or descriptions. Each character file is a player's wish list to the GM, an invitation for challenge and a guide to the sort of action and drama the player expects to see come up.

- Do your players invest a lot into combat, military, or conflict-creating traits? Make sure that there's a fight in the session, or at least something that lets them pull out those big guns and SFX.
- Are your players focusing a lot on social and interactive traits, or those that depend on internal feelings, goals, or values? Make sure those traits have a role to play in the session by framing scenes that directly call upon them.

Knowing in advance what sorts of characters your players have created gives you a head-start on improvising scenes that make sense for those characters. Don't saddle your players with a session that has nothing to do with their characters.



## DEFINING SITUATIONS

As the GM, you get to decide what the session's situation is, which is to say, what's going on when the PCs enter the story in the first couple of scenes and begin to interact with the GMCs and their goals, as well as any locations and resources. Figure out what the status quo is at the beginning, and some circumstances that take place at various times that you expect the players to react to. More about these circumstances—or reveals—later.

Back in the late 19th century, Georges Polti wrote about the *36 Dramatic Situations*, and people who work with stories continue to use this handy list or others like it. Here's his list to use as a baseline for your own session prep; you can find expanded descriptions of these online. These are prompts, not plots! Don't try to write the whole story. They're just the set of circumstances the protagonists—in this case, the player characters—find themselves in. Pick one or two of these, flesh them out a little (that's in the next section), then put them right in front of your characters—the story soon writes itself with the players' reactions to them. Choose prompts, not plots!

A session can have more than one situation. Sometimes it's fun to go with the A-Plot/B-Plot approach, where one situation is the primary one that involves most of the PCs, but there's a second parallel situation that only involves one or two of the PCs. On rare occasions, and with smaller groups of players, you could have a situation defined for each player character. That's a lot of work, but it can be rewarding to try once in a while. Just be aware that the more situations you introduce, the more screen time you'll need to split up in your session's actual play time.

## DEFINING CONFLICTS AND ANTAGONISTS

The situations you choose should inspire the central conflict of your session, motivate your PCs to respond, and give you an idea as to what sort of GMCs to include. In some cases, you don't actually need any GMCs to act as antagonists—if the players have conflicting goals of their own, they can serve that role without any major "bad guy" of your own creation. Looking at the list of 36 situations, many of these kinds of conflict jump right out at you.

**36 DRAMATIC SITUATIONS**

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Abduction | Enmity of kin | Pursuit |
| Adultery | Erroneous judgment | Recovery of a lost one |
| All sacrificed for passion | Falling prey to cruelty/misfortune | Remorse |
| Ambition | Fatal imprudence | Revolt |
| An enemy loved | Involuntary crimes of love | Rivalry of kin |
| Conflict with a god | Loss of loved ones | Rivalry of superior vs inferior |
| Crime pursued by vengeance | Madness | Self-sacrifice for an ideal |
| Crimes of love | Mistaken jealousy | Self-sacrifice for kin |
| Daring enterprise | Murderous adultery | Slaying of kin unrecognized |
| Deliverance | Necessity of sacrificing loved ones | Supplication |
| Disaster | Obstacles to love | The enigma |
| Discovery of the dishonor of a loved one | Obtaining | Vengeance taken for kin upon kin |

> Mary Rose considers the situation Discovery of the Dishonor of a Loved One. In that situation she's got the Discoverer and the Loved One as the two principal characters. The conflict is that the Discoverer finds out that the Loved One either did something wrong or has been accused of wrongdoing. Is the Discoverer a PC, and the Loved One a GMC? Maybe. They could both be GMCs, and the PCs blunder into this scenario. Or they could both be PCs, and this is a story about what happens when one PC either finds out that another PC did something terrible in a previous session or hears nasty rumors spreading about another PC. Mary Rose might leave some of this up to discover in play, or she might make a decision now and prepare a little more ahead of the session.

Action-oriented games favor the use of GMCs as antagonists, so the players feel as if their characters are the heroes and the GM is playing the villains. That's a classic setup and works for most of the situations on the list. However, you can also run the occasional dramatic primetime TV sort of session, which inverts those tropes and makes the PCs the "bad guys" perhaps as a result of their past actions—or has the group of PCs turn on each other, not necessarily violently or in bad faith but as a result of competing goals.

Don't forget to look at the PCs' character files for inspiration, too. Distinctions and trait statements are fuel for great conflict that your players will want to engage with. While you prep your session, take some notes on which of those seem particularly fun to play with. If you're using a pathways map or some other collaborative setting construct, those connections provide all the juice you need to stir things up and present a situation that your players can really engage with.

## DEFINING REVEALS

A **reveal** is an event, a twist in the story, or a piece of information that prods the players to take additional action or make a difficult choice. A reveal often looks like a clue, which helps direct the players toward a new location or a confrontation with an antagonist. But a reveal can also be a new GMC, a shift in a goal, or a surprise encounter with something or someone that changes the status quo and forces the players to look at their character files and consider their options.

With your situation in mind, you can prepare a list of reveals for the session that, when they're all presented and dealt with, resolve the situation and bring an end to the session. This could be a set of encounters, or a set of clues, or a string of cool locations to have the PCs visit, or some combination of these. A good rule of thumb is to have at least one reveal per PC, even if they're not specifically targeted toward that character, and one or more reveals for each major GMC, antagonist, or location you plan to include.

> Using the Discovery of the Dishonor of a Loved One situation, Mary Rose establishes that the antagonist is a relative of Tina's Sage, a Loved One who's done something to dishonor the family. So, she needs at least the reveal of the dishonorable thing, but that's not enough for a whole session (unless her players are really good at just taking this kind of thing and running with it). She adds in two more reveals: a blackmail letter written by another GMC who has learned of this insult to the Sage's family, and a forgotten basement chamber in the Sage's family home out in the country, wherein all manner of secrets are buried (and which might lead to other sessions later on).



DOMINIQUE RAMSEY

# GAME MODERATOR CHARACTERS

**GMCs** are the characters that the GM incorporates into the session and gets to roleplay, for better or worse. Most sessions have at least one major character, usually a bad guy or villain, who deserves a full-fledged character file like the PCs have. Sometimes, however, the villain just needs a couple of traits because the true opposition for the PCs is the villain's lieutenant or majordomo. In that case, they're the ones whose files are more detailed.

GMCs can reappear session after session, plaguing the PCs at every turn. Even if you used the villain's full stats in a previous session, you're under no obligation to re-use the same stats in another session. GMCs don't have to follow the same rules as the players when it comes to character files or even XP and growth (although it's often interesting if they do).

We split GMCs into a few specific types, which we detail after this section, but here's a list for easy reference.

- **Major GMCs:** Characters on par with the PCs, with about as much detail and the same traits.
- **Minor GMCs:** Characters with fewer traits and less detail but still significant.
- **Location GMCs:** Set pieces for scenes that may have their own traits.
- **Extras:** Unnamed background characters or support characters with only one trait.
- **Mobs:** Groups of extras that act together as a single character.
- **Bosses:** Individual characters that act like a group of extras.
- **Factions/Orgs:** Much larger mobs that operate at a higher scale than a standard mob.

## MAJOR GMCS

A **major GMC** has the same traits as the PCs do. In a sense, they're a PC that the GM happens to make the decisions for. Make sure that major GMCs have enough resources on their files to stand up to the PCs. It's important that they always have at least two or three dice to roll to ensure that they're worthy antagonists.



### CREATING MAJOR GMCS

Major GMC characters have three power levels in Cortex Prime: light, medium, and heavy. **Light** characters should be the majority, as the PCs should be able to maintain the spotlight in most scenes. **Medium** characters are more like the PCs themselves and should be used sparingly. **Heavy** characters should be extremely rare, representing unique threats and obstacles. To keep major GMCs consistent from session to session, consider using the following guidelines when creating them:

**Light:** Prime set die ratings are on average a step behind the PCs, so if the PCs have a 8 in their attributes, affiliations, or values, the GMC has a 6. The GMC has fewer total steps (or points) in traits like skills or signature assets, usually by about half.

**Medium:** Prime set die ratings, skills, signature assets, and other traits all function at the same average rating and number of steps or points as the PCs.

**Heavy:** Prime set die ratings are on average the same as the PCs, but at least one if not more of them is a step ahead of the PCs. Add half again as many skills, signature asset points, and other traits.




LIE SETIAWAN

# MINOR GMCS

A **minor GMC** isn't a significant headliner in the session but will nevertheless interact with the PCs in some fashion. The powerful villain may be a minor GMC if your players are mostly interacting with her lieutenants.

## CREATING MINOR GMCS

Minor GMCs get at least three traits that can be anything—they don't have to be attributes, skills, or distinctions. They're just dice with appropriate descriptive labels, like Corrupt Lawman d8, Out of Shape d4, Big Shotgun d8.

You can also start with a light major GMC and scale them back a lot—give them the same prime sets as the PCs, but not a lot else other than one or two key traits. The traits should provide details about the GMC and some ideas of which rolls use a higher level of skill, so don't use a character's name as a trait (such as Sherlock Holmes d8). You have a lot of flexibility with minor GMCs and it's usually quick to come up with them if needed.

Minor GMCs always have a name, even if you come up with it on the spur of the moment. This helps separate them from the extras that populate the setting.



THOMAS SCHOLES

# LOCATIONS AS GMCS

Locations can have traits like minor GMCs when they might be used to oppose your PCs. These are like fixed assets or complications that help the GM describe where the action takes place. If a player can justify using a location-based trait in their own dice pools, they can do so. Locations may be listed on a character file, too: see "Resources" on page 56. If you're using a character creation system like pathways (page 73) to create the setting collaboratively, spend some time writing up the locations on the pathways map and assign them traits if you want them to feature strongly in sessions.

## CREATING SCENE DISTINCTIONS

You can also give a location some personality by applying scene distinctions. These work like distinctions on characters, complete with the *Hinder* SFX, but can be used by any character in the scene.

- Stockyard 8
- Minefield 8
- Panicked Crowd 8

You can expand this by adding location-specific SFX to a location's scene distinctions, such as spending a PP to create location-specific assets.

### PANICKED CROWD 8

- *Hide in the Chaos:* Spend a PP to create a Hidden 8 asset and turn Panicked Crowd 8 into Panicked Crowd 6 6.

Both GMCs and PCs might make use of scene distinction SFX if they are made available.

If you're using an action order or similar turn-tracking system to handle action scenes, a location that's behaving like a GMC should have its own turn in the action order, especially if it's using its traits to make attacks on the PCs. Otherwise, assign the location to a major GMC or any character that's in control of it, and have it help that character instead of taking its own turn.

# EXTRAS

**Extras** are unnamed characters with only one die rating. Extras may be a part of a character file: see "Resources" on page 56. Extras come into play as an additional die the GM includes in an opposition dice pool for a test. They can also gang up (page 100) with a minor or major GMC by adding their die to a GMC's dice pool in a contest.

## CREATING AN EXTRA

Something as simple as Hired Assassin 10, Grizzled Fur Trapper 8, or Cut-Rate Thief 6 works just fine. If you like, add another trait during play as things progress; you can upgrade any extra to a minor GMC this way. If the extra is part of a character file, it might already have a die rating, so you can use that in a pinch. Extras can be taken out by complications or stress higher than their base trait die.

While prepping your session's situation and reveals, you can jot down a list of fun extras to include. But I'll tell you a secret: I never prepare extras in advance. They're so easy to make, I toss them in whenever they're needed.

# MOBS

A **mob** is a group of extras that acts together like a minor GMC. You can use them just like you'd use any single GMC, but they represent a whole bunch of thugs, mooks, pawns, or goons. You can also use this rule for swarms of things. For a variation on this approach see the Crisis Pools mod on page 33.

## CREATING A MOB

Mobs have a single **mob trait** with multiple dice representing the size of the mob. All of these trait dice are included in the mob's dice pool. A useful rule of thumb is:

| DICE QTY | NUMBER OF INDIVIDUALS |
|---|---|
| 2 | a handful of people |
| 3 | a dozen |
| 4 | a roomful of people |
| 5 | a large crowd |

The size of the dice depends on the relative skill or experience of the mob's members:

| DICE SIZE | SKILL LEVEL |
|---|---|
| 6 | rabble or thugs |
| 8 | trained guards or soldiers |
| 10 | elites and veterans |

ANTHONY "ROBOTPENCIL" JONES



You can assign traits to a mob that all of the members possess and include the traits in the mob's dice pool when appropriate. Mobs act as a single unit but can be reduced in size and power by targeting their mob trait with attacks; each time the attack would create or step up a complication or stress that exceeds the mob trait die rating, one die is knocked off (from 6 6 6 6 to 6 6 6, for example) and the complication is removed. This represents one or more members of the mob being taken out. When all of the mob trait's dice are removed, the whole mob is taken out.

## EXAMPLE MOBS

Here are three examples of mobs of varying sizes and strengths.

### PITCHFORK-WIELDING VILLAGERS

*You stand between them and grassroots justice against the monsters.*

**MOB TRAIT:**
Mob of Villagers

- 6 Pitchfork
- 6 Angry




ZOE BADINI

### HIT SQUAD

*Highly trained cadre of professional murderers.*

**MOB TRAIT:**
Mob of Assassins

- 8 Tactics
- 8 Sabotage
- 10 Hand-to-Hand
- 10 Rifle
- 6 Intimidation




JESSICA FONG

### GOBLIN REPAIR TEAM

*They've got pipes to fix and don't take kindly to interference.*

**MOB TRAIT:**
Mob of Goblins

- 8 Engineering
- 8 Stabbing
- 10 Flee
- 6 Rowdy




ANNA "SARIANNE" NEUMANNOVÁ

# BOSSES

A **boss** is like a mob, except it's a single character. A boss can represent a powerful opponent like a huge rampaging monster, or it may be a foe who outclasses the PCs not only in traits and skills, but in an abstract dramatic sense.

## CREATING A BOSS

Bosses have a single **boss trait** that has multiple dice. They can also have distinctions, SFX, or anything else you want to add in. Bosses can replace major GMCs in your games if you prefer not to do all the work of making opponents who have the same game stats as your PCs.

In either case, a boss can't be completely taken out of any scene until all of the boss trait's dice are removed. If you're using major GMCs with boss traits, ignore the usual rules for taking out characters and use this method instead.

## EXAMPLE BOSSES

Here's three boss-level opponents using a fairly basic trait set-up.

### TITANO-GIGANTOSAUR




ORIANA MENENDEZ

*Humans woke him from his slumber under the sea and now he's ready to smash their tiny cities.*

**BOSS TRAIT:**
GIANT RADIOACTIVE DINOSAUR

- 12 ATOMIC BREATH
- 12 STOMP
- 10 THICK HIDE
- 8 ROAR
- 8 SWIM

- *Collateral Damage:* Step down **STOMP** by one and keep up to three additional effect dice. Additional effect dice may only be used to create complications on the scene.
- *Truly Huge:* When making attacks on buildings, vehicles, or structures, Titano-Gigantoasaur includes an additional die in his result and gains an **EASY TARGET** 6 complication.

### GLOVE-WIELDING SPACE TITAN




ANTHONY "ROBOTPENCIL" JONES

*He's a tyrant from outer space who wants to end all life. Or most of it.*

**BOSS TRAIT:**
TITAN OF SPACE

- 10 POWER GLOVE
- 10 INVULNERABILITY
- 10 COSMIC SENSES

- *Come at Me:* When reacting to an attack from more than one opponent, Glove-Wielding Space Titan adds a 6 to his dice pool and keeps an additional effect die for every opponent attacking him.
- *Snap:* Spend a PP to double **POWER GLOVE** and include an extra die in Glove-Wielding Space Titan's result, then shut down **POWER GLOVE**.

### QUEEN OF THE ELVES




VANESSA MORALES

*She's got more fey magic in her little finger than... you know the rest.*

**BOSS TRAIT:**
ELVEN QUEEN

- 10 FEY MAGIC
- 8 ELVEN PRESENCE
- 8 POLITICS
- 8 SWORD OF THE SIDHE

- *Glamour:* When creating magical assets using **FEY MAGIC**, the Queen of the Elves adds a 6 to her dice pool and steps up her effect die by one. Her magical assets persist until dispelled or targeted by silver, salt, or church music.
- *Air and Darkness:* The Queen of the Elves may shut down **FEY MAGIC** and step up **SWORD OF THE SIDHE** to 12, changing its name to **BLADE OF THE UNSEELIE**. Spend a PP to restore **FEY MAGIC** and **SWORD OF THE SIDHE**.

# FACTIONS AND ORGS

Factions and orgs are like mobs, but they're much larger and operate at a scale above the player characters. They can be a simple trait with multiple dice that also uses the scale rules (page 100), such as keeping three dice instead of two. Or they can be a more complicated character, something like a cross between a location GMC and a minor GMC with a scale die.

A **faction** is a group of characters who follow the same ideology, goal, or purpose, even if they don't always work together. An **org** is a group of characters who all work together to do something, even if they don't all believe the same thing. So, they're really just two names for a large-scale group.

## CREATING A FACTION OR ORG

Begin with an idea of what the role of the faction or org is in the game. Make that one of their traits, such as Dangerous Gang 8, or Political Action Committee 10. Then multiply that die rating to create a mob trait. Add other single-die traits to give some context and additional dice to the faction or org's pool (since they work on a scale above the PCs). You can give the faction or org one or more SFX and distinctions to introduce some tricks that seem relevant to their overall purpose and scope.

If the faction or org is connected to a PC (see "Resources," page 56) you might not need to do a full write-up, but if you want them to have a role beyond just being something to aid the PCs, writing them up is a good idea.

### ANTAGONIST PAC

*This is a political action committee dedicated to making life as difficult as possible for PCs involved in politics, law enforcement, or activism.*

**MOB TRAIT:**
Political Action Committee

- 10 Economics
- 8 Bureaucracy
- 10 Wealth




**SCALE**

- *Smear Campaign:* Add a 6 and step up Antagonist PAC's effect die when targeting individuals in public life with rumors, gossip, or lies.
- *Back Again:* When Antagonist PAC is reduced to a single Political Action Committee die, it's taken out. Recover all dice and return to activity in the next session when a PC rolls a hitch.

TAMMY & CHAD STREET

## EXAMPLE FACTIONS AND ORGS

Here's three examples of factions and orgs using simple traits.

### THE SOUTH STREET JACKDAWS

*This gang of miscreants and brutes operates behind the scenes to rough up the PC's informants, friends, and allies.*

**MOB TRAIT:**
Dangerous Gang

- 8 Violence
- 10 Threats
- 8 Crime




**SCALE**

COUPLE OF KOOKS

- *Send in the Boys:* Choose up to 4 Dangerous Gang dice and form a mob to attack the PCs directly. Dice that are taken out from this mob reduce Dangerous Gang for this org for the remainder of this session and recover for the next session. Traits for this mob are stepped down by one from the org's traits (Violence 6, Threats 8, Crime 6) until the next session.
- *Shakedown:* When attacking another org, the South Street Jackdaws add a 6 and step up their effect die by one. If they fail their attack, their opponent may keep an additional effect die.

### ORDER OF SHOG-THEMA

*This secretive cult worships a mysterious entity from beyond the stars.*

**MOB TRAIT:**
Mystic Cult

- 8 Ritual Magic
- 8 Subterfuge
- 10 Occult Library
- 8 Kidnap




**SCALE**

GRACE P. FONG

- *Infiltrate Org:* Spend a PP and remove one Mystic Cult die to create an Infiltrator 8 asset within an enemy org or faction. The Order or any of its affiliate GMCs may use this asset when acting against the infiltrated org or faction. If discovered, it becomes a Turncoat complication on the Order.
- *The Stars Are Right:* When creating a Summoned Demon asset, spend a PP and remove one Mystic Cult die to step up Ritual Magic by one. Set aside any hitches as bonus effect dice to use on additional Summoned Demon assets.

# RUNNING A SESSION

Now that you've got a situation or two, your conflicts and reveals, and your GMCs, you're ready to put it all together and see what happens when the players get involved.

D. Vincent Baker has an excellent turn of phrase: "Play to find out what happens." This is a good mantra for Cortex Prime and reminds us that the game is collaborative and full of discovery. But it's also a game that relies on a shared narrative sense based on movies, television, and other media. So, we want to combine all of that into a loose structure that looks like this:

1. Play opening scenes to introduce each PC, either alone or in groups.
2. Introduce the situation and the first reveal.
3. Use action and bridge scenes to introduce more reveals, following the PCs' choices.
4. Bring things to a climactic scene once all reveals are checked off.
5. Play tag scenes to wrap things up and take care of growth, XP, or milestones.

All of the types of scenes discussed here are explained in greater detail in Prime Scenes, beginning on page 89.



HAO SHUANG



## OPENING SCENES

As the GM, you need to know where all of the PCs are before you spring the first situation on them. Your opening scenes serve two purposes. The first is to establish what's going on before the session starts, what each PC's current status is. Are they traveling? Are they with their friends in a bar? Are they locked up in a jail, awaiting sentence? Are they neck-deep in social obligations at court?

The second purpose is to give you a chance to tease parts of the situation before you actually bring it in. Drop a couple of hints in each scene about what's to come, such as a storm on the horizon (literally or figuratively), or by asking leading questions of the players, like "How well did you pack for this trip?" or "Who did you leave behind when you set out to the bar this evening?" or "Which of the Queen's handmaidens is missing from the gala?"

## INTRODUCING THE SITUATION

Your first big action scene drops the PCs right into the story to establish the situation, bringing at least some of them together and letting them play off each other and off any GMC you use here. Classic story structure confronts the protagonists (the PCs) with something they can't resolve right away—a villain is too strong for them and has them on the ropes before she takes off—or a mystery they don't have the answers to just yet. Some players really don't like to have their PCs made examples of right off the bat, so a common technique is to foreshadow a later conflict or telegraph the main antagonist's goals through smaller or less important characters. This implies that there's some greater force at work but doesn't make the PCs look like chumps.

You want to drop the first reveal in this scene. This sets up the format for the rest of the session, with each scene framed and designed around a reveal for the PCs, one step toward that climactic resolution of the situation. This first reveal is often some kind of clue dropped by the villain, or a supporting character giving some important news about the conflict that's to come. The reveal might be the scene itself, as the status quo starts to change, and the PCs are forced to confront that.

## BRIDGE SCENES

After playing a few sessions, you'll have a sense of when the PCs need to take a break and regroup, recover, or research. A good rule of thumb is to run a bridge scene once every PC has been involved in an action scene of some kind, either alone or in groups. Often a bridge scene comes at a time that seems obvious—everyone's taken loads of complications or stress, information or resources are sparse, and so on—but it's a good idea to frame one or more bridge scenes to connect one reveal to another either across time or space (putting the PCs in downtime, or in travel time).

## MODERATING GM CHARACTERS

In each session it's the GM's responsibility to use GMCs to demonstrate the situation, serve as antagonists, allies, or obstacles, and to take part in one or more reveals. They're your characters, but they're more pliable and transient than the PCs. The key to successfully moderating GMCs is to use them both as part of the setting and as a tool to move the story along. Don't get too attached to them, but make sure they're as appealing and notable as they need to be.

When a GMC is present in the scene, introduce them as part of your scene framing. Don't forget to paint a picture of them in your players' minds with more senses than just the visual. Looking over your GMC writeup (or your hastily scribbled prep notes), find at least three things to say about them, and make sure you say those things at some point early in the scene.

GMCs aren't just for action scenes. Especially when you're using a GMC to push against the connections between your PCs, or to remind the players about the themes and goals of your setting, you should make use of your GMCs in bridge scenes and flashbacks as well as in the standard action scenes.

## RUNNING THE CLIMAX

Once everything seems to have come to a head, all reveals are known and checked off your list, and you've got the PCs all together working toward the same outcomes, you've got a climactic scene to run. Here's where the villain's plan is foiled for good (or until next time), the disaster is thwarted, the challenge is overcome, and so on.

Here's the big, big, big secret with this part of the session: *you have not prepared for this part*. Seriously. This isn't something you should have written notes on before the session, because you never know where the players will take your situation and your conflict and your reveals. So, in some ways, it's flying by the seat of your pants time.

A good climax brings back all of the various decisions and choices the players made during the session in one way or another. This is where consequences of earlier actions come to the fore. The players get to use some of the assets, complications, and PP they've built up in past scenes. And it resolves the situation for the PCs, even if it creates another one for the next session, and even if the PCs didn't come out ahead.

It's tempting to wrap everything up here, in this last big scene, but you've still got some tag scenes to go. Leave some story threads to be picked up and woven into the growth of the PCs during those scenes. You don't need to resolve the tangled weave of minor and major GMCs in the climax, because some of them will get their just deserts later. Recurring characters provide continuity, after all! What's important is that the players feel as if, despite some loose ends, the status quo has changed.

## TAG SCENES

Find a way to reflect the session's overall themes and motifs in tag scenes. As you go around the table and frame scenes with questions and reflections about what the PCs have done, you can also insert a bit of exposition and update the players on what happened to GMCs or other people who they perhaps lost sight of, or who didn't show up again in later scenes.

Tag scenes are also about growth, marking XP, checking off milestones, and so on. Make them poignant, make them specific, and most of all make them short.



# SESSION TRICKS

So, you've run a few sessions and have a handle on them. What now? Here are a few suggestions for mixing it up a little.

## VERY SPECIAL EPISODES

If your usual sessions are heavy on group-based conflict against external antagonists (good guys vs bad guys, for example) think about what those TV shows back in the Eighties and Nineties did, and have a very special episode that's more introspective, more inward focused, and highlighting some cause, relationship problem, or complex issue.

In these sessions, there might not be a classic antagonist. Instead, some external yet deeply personal thing gets in the way of the PCs' existing relationships. Look over the player character files and see what exciting "negative" traits might make for a good subject. Addiction? Long-lost uncle? Mysterious past? Unhealthy attitudes toward violence or food or the government? Pick one and see what happens when it becomes the situation.

## FLASHBACK SESSIONS

Maybe you've used flashback scenes in your sessions, but have you ever set the entire session in the past? This is a great way to explore character backstory that up until this point has only been brought up in hindsight. Play out that last pitched battle with the Empire alongside the rebels. Get an insight into that moment the world-threatening supervillain became the terrible threat he is now. See how that faction or org became the influential agency that the PCs know it as—and what the PCs did at the time to help make it that way.

Flashback sessions are also fun for taking a break from the primary PC group and playing one-shot PCs just for this purpose. Play out the days from when the zombie plague broke out—it's less of a concern if one-shot PCs die or lose to the overwhelming forces of the past. Make one of the PCs the primary character, while everyone else plays that PC's hapless former squad, whose fates were never revealed—until now.

## ROTATING GM DUTIES

After a few sessions as GM, a lot of folks like to jump into the story as a player for a special one-shot episode, and let another player take on the GM role. You can tie this in with a flashback session or you can instead play it out as something that happened at the same time as the previous session.



HAO SHUANG

This works best once everyone knows enough about the setting that one of the players can take the reins. Rotating GMs can afford a player the chance to get some experience running the game when they're not ready to commit to regularly running sessions.

When you're a one-shot GM in a long-running serial, be fair to the regular GM and the other players and don't uproot the entire setting, wipe out popular locations, or kill off favorite GMCs. By all means, introduce your own GMCs, locations, and motivations. The events that transpire in a session with a new GM can easily be reincorporated to the regular GM's game, too.

## IT WAS ALL A DREAM

You can't pull this too often, but a dream session is a nice way to explore ideas the players might have for the game that didn't fit in previous sessions. Write up notes for a dream session with the premise that the PCs are dreaming an alternate reality in which their actions had other consequences. Or it's an illusionary world created by a mystical antagonist GMC, and the PCs spend the whole session in strange garb from another setting (such as pirates or fantasy heroes).

You can declare that the previous session was the dream as a way to reset things (especially if several PCs died, or horrible things happened to them that were upsetting or discouraging). Used like this, the It Was All A Dream session is damage control that everyone can buy into.


KINIXUKI



CHAPTER 5

# PRIME SETTINGS

While characters are the heart of Cortex Prime, the world they inhabit gives context and meaning to their stories. Cortex evolved from a variety of licensed settings with wildly different expectations and tropes, and this book wouldn't be complete if it didn't address the need for every Cortex Prime game to have a setting of its own.

## CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

**This chapter includes advice and ideas for building a setting of your own or collaborating with your players to create the world together. This is followed by three pre-made settings for your use and inspiration.**

**An Introduction to Genres:** This section runs down the basics of genre-based roleplaying settings, including the degree to which you make your game realistic, injecting the proper "feel," and preparing appropriate situations for them.

**Pick Three and Add Cortex:** This is a buffet of genre ideas and how to mash them together to create something new and different…or astonishingly familiar.

**Eidolon Alpha:** A Spotlight setting of neo-classic fantasy that focuses on heroes who summon powerful spirits to battle the forces of darkness, and sometimes each other.

**Hammerheads:** A Spotlight setting of rescue and recovery in the near future as crisis response teams respond to disasters both natural and man-made.

**TRACE 2.0:** A Spotlight setting of modern-day crime and punishment, featuring multidisciplinary law enforcement units in a fictional city in southern California.



# AN INTRO TO GENRES

Embracing familiar genres makes your setting approachable and identifiable to players. Genres are wide-ranging and include numerous subgenres within them, so there's an abundance to choose from when establishing your setting's specific tropes of your setting. A genre typically defines the tone, common elements, or content of the setting; if your setting is based on superhero fiction, the way sessions are played out and the way characters interact with the setting are framed in a different way from, say, a setting based on tragic romance.

**Note:** For those of you who studied literature or Plato in college: the term "genre" is criminally misapplied in popular media. Here, we're talking more about the application of genre as trope or sets of tropes. Apologies in advance for continuing this practice. Language is always evolving and so on.

## FANTASTIC VS REALISTIC

Roleplaying games are almost always escapist in one way or another, and the most popular genres in RPGs are likewise quite fantastical even though they might involve realistic elements. Genres that embrace more of the fantastical provide a creative outlet for players and GMs, but realism helps ground the setting in at least a handful of recognizable or identifiable ways.

### ELEMENTS OF THE FANTASTIC

Fantastic elements aren't limited to magic or super powers. Anything that stretches the imagination, breaks the rules of what we'd call reality, or introduces cinematic or dramatic behavior to how the world works counts as fantastic. Some examples of fantastic elements in RPGs include:

- Movie-style computer hacking
- Wizards, sorcerers, or summoners
- Science-fiction technology like spaceships
- Mythological creatures or characters like dragons
- Rapid court trials that take place over days rather than months

### ELEMENTS OF THE REALISTIC

Realism often involves game mechanics or session tricks that emphasize gritty or realistic approaches to characters and stories. Historical genres draw on real-world events as anchors for stories; modern day settings rely on factual places, people, and events as well as authenticity when it comes to technology and procedures. Some examples of realistic elements in RPGs include:

- Tracking gear, ammunition, or other resources
- Fatigue, exhaustion, and encumbrance
- Long recovery times for damage or illness
- Real-world timelines of events and notable people
- Language systems that rely on comprehension and learning

### FOLLOWING THE GENRE

Use your choice of genre to guide how much fantasy you want to mix in with reality—or how much reality you want to temper your fantasy. Obviously, fantasy and science fiction have heavy fantastic elements, but players often love to worry about details like economics, languages, and the travel times or distances to places in the setting. If the subgenre places some emphasis on those elements, such as with military science fiction, highlighting those elements helps reinforce the genre.

You can use the rules to support some level of fantasy or realism in Cortex Prime, but most of it can be taken care of with narrative description. Descriptive traits like distinctions let the GM and players find the balance they want. The way the GM describes locations, GMCs, contests, and tests lets you tweak these dials even from scene to scene. Focus on that balance of realism and fantasy that suits your game, your group, and your genre and let the rules adapt along the way.



ALEXANDRA MIMS COOK

## THEME AND MOOD

Genre lends itself to establishing themes that recur from session to session, as well as the mood or "feel" of each session. Broadly speaking, a genre sets up expectations for the kinds of things players should experience in play, whether that's a gritty and dark atmosphere punctuated by violence and crime, or a bright and airy atmosphere featuring songs and friendship. There's no reason you can't twist expectations from time to time—it's a common trick on television to have a "very special episode" or a "musical episode" or a "flashback episode." These break up a little of the predictability of theme and mood that otherwise make the setting immersive for the players.

### WHAT'S THE THEME?

The theme of any setting is, at its simplest, "What is this setting about?" Consider what stories are typical for the setting, and that should reveal the prevalent themes. Most genres lend themselves to a number of themes, and not every story that takes place in a specific genre includes or even touches on all of those themes.

The high fantasy genre usually features themes like the existence of a chosen one, the price of power, the old vs the new, the importance of family or fellowship, and so forth. Science fiction centers on ideas like the dangers of progress, the nature of identity or humanity, fear of the unknown, colonialism, crawling back from the wreckage of an apocalypse or collapsed empire, and so on.

### WHAT'S THE MOOD?

A setting's mood is how it feels when you play characters in it and look back on the situations that arise in it. A fantasy setting that's almost entirely urban—a cosmopolitan city wracked with crime and intrigue, for example—feels a lot different from a fantasy setting that revolves around epic quests to far lands and mysterious continents. Likewise, a sci-fi setting that features hardboiled detectives on a mining world should feel very different from a space opera with cosmic superheroes.

Just like the theme, the mood can vary from session to session. The key to a successful game is maintaining enough of the original mood that your players come back for more and *feel* as if their characters are a part of the world they're in.

## STORIES THAT SUIT

Your setting's genre helps define what sorts of stories you'll tell in that setting. Or, to be more accurate, the types of situations you might present to your players in each session can be usefully constrained by the tropes of the setting you've settled on.

Drawing on the western genre, you're more likely to come up with situations like a revenge plot, or the consequences of seizing land from the people who live there, or a sheriff protecting a frontier town from an outlaw gang. There's no reason you can't prepare a session with a situation revolving around a family's dark secret, but that's not a defining storyline in a western.

If you're using giant robots as your primary genre, you'll feature colossal duels between the PCs and their opponents, as well as grouchy generals or engineers, youthful mecha pilots embroiled in love triangles with pop singers and other pilots, and the occasional enormous radioactive monster. You're not as likely to feature horrific kidnap scenarios with torture-loving antagonists who want to put the PCs through a nightmare, or dark lords from an ancient cabal of wizards who seek to gather their armies and crush the noble rulers of a utopian society.

With Cortex Prime, as with any modular game, there's no reason you can't spring those kinds of left-field situations on your players. You could even hang a lampshade on them and make them a feature of your hybridized, multi-genre setting. Going in, however, you can do wonders communicating your setting to your players if you make use of the common stories. It's a kind of short hand that cuts down a lot of the exposition and lets players create characters that feel as if they're part of the setting, not fighting against it.

# PICK THREE AND ADD CORTEX

## A BUFFET OF GENRES

Now that you've got your genres under consideration and have a good sense of what kind of tropes you'd like to feature in your setting, you can begin assembling it. Something I've found works really well is to pick three genres, subgenres, tropes, or concepts and mash them together before adding Cortex Prime's mods to bring those ideas to the foreground.

Here's a list of genres and subgenres to give you a sense of the range of settings you can use with Cortex Prime.

- **Comedy:** Played for laughs, with ridiculous situations, comedic characters, outrageous game traits, and satire.
- **Dark Fantasy:** Edgy and loaded with doom and dread, with an emphasis on blood, violence, sorcery, spikes, and often low-powered characters in perilous situations.
- **Espionage:** Spies, con men, or secret agents dominate this genre which also includes high tech gadgets, stealth operations, government agencies, and crime.
- **Giant Robots:** Whether it's mecha or self-aware transforming robots, this genre usually throws in advanced technology, factions that square off against each other over ideology, epic duels, loads of explosions, and melodramatic situations.
- **High Fantasy:** Inspiring and epic, often drawn from mythology or Tolkien, characterized by elves, dwarves, the chosen one, wizards of good and evil, no gray areas.
- **High School:** Teenagers are complicated, and so are the adults that share their worlds, especially when the drama is dialed all the way up because of exams, proms, drugs, and bullies.
- **Horror:** Fear and helplessness drive this genre, along with helplessness, alien terror, supernatural creatures, ordinary people in dire situations, and locations that double as traps, prisons, or occasionally shelters from the darkness.
- **Military:** War and the people who engage in them, often focused on the grunts who have to fight them and the officers who struggle with those orders from higher-ups.
- **Post-Apocalyptic:** The wastelands of the future, after some global crisis, war, or disaster, and populated by mutants, zombies, tribes of violent humans, and the quest for lost technology or knowledge.
- **Religious:** Often drawn from Abrahamic religions by way of the occult, this swings between angels and resurrection all the way to demons and a looming Apocalypse, but religious themes can come from any world religion and its associated fiction tie-ins.
- **Road Movie:** Not limited to movies, obviously, but heavily reliant on travel from town to town, meeting new allies and enemies, sharing a car or bus or train, and dealing with dramatic situations from week to week.
- **Romance:** With highly-charged emotional entanglements, conflicts between tradition and desire, and the focus on relationships as a motivator, this genre appeals to those who enjoy sweeping family sagas, romantic comedies, and period dramas.
- **Science Fiction:** Not always the future, but always the portrayal of the human condition against the backdrop of advanced technology, progress, other planets, or other dimensions.
- **Superhero:** People with powers and abilities beyond the normal human limits, whether they're mutants, high tech heroes, or vigilantes, often engaged in the struggle against organized crime, global conquest, or nefarious plots.
- **Swashbuckler:** Icons of this genre are pirates, musketeers, and scoundrels, but it really extends to anything where the characters engage in flashy exploits, daring escapes, over the top swordfights, and perilous relationships.
- **Western:** Lawmen, cowboys, and outlaws in the American West or analogues of it, dealing with revenge, corrupt landowners, or gangs and featuring gunslingers, horses, and railroads.

## MIXING THINGS UP

Let's take a look at how this method plays out with a handful of setting examples from past Cortex games. I've filed the serial numbers off these, but I'm sure some of them ring a bell.



### SCIENCE FICTION + WESTERN + SWASHBUCKLERS

In this setting, players are the crew of a spaceship in a future setting that draws on many of the tropes of the western, including plucky underdogs defending themselves from corrupt government agents, loads of cowboy frontier aesthetics, and rugged settlers on the fringe of society. Add in dashing and charming protagonists, wicked gang bosses, and firefights, and you've got a popular blend that's sure to provide material for dozens of sessions right off the bat.

You can do all of this with a standard attribute + skill prime set set-up, with distinctions and SFX lending the bulk of your setting's theme for characterization.

Add in mods for reputation, colorful signature assets, and ships as characters, and don't worry too much about extensive background generation. For the most part, you can flesh out the PCs and their antagonists from session to session, so long as you've got a good handle on their basic archetypes going in.

This kind of game is one of the easiest to run using Cortex Prime, if only because the rules are good at handling quick, punchy scenes and characters who are really good at the things they're good at. Your choice of mods can make a big difference to the feel at the table, but even a traditional set-up works well.



### HORROR + ROAD MOVIE + COMEDY

This mashup is all about monsters of the week across the United States with occasional moments of levity and humor to give the horrific supernatural grind some context. It helps if the characters are all brothers and sisters in either the literal or the figurative sense—sharing a common interest in fighting werewolves, vampires, ghosts, and demons as part of a loose fraternity of hunters makes an episodic session-based game much easier to pull off. Everyone loves a big bad, but sometimes you just want to engage in the family business without a lot of bells and whistles.

Games with a variety of monstrous antagonists with supernatural abilities benefit from extensive use of powers and SFX with limits to key off their specific weaknesses. Use roles that represent the multiple stylistic approaches to the family business. Have the PCs rate their competence when using Lore (book learning, mostly), Tech (laptops with a good WiFi), Guns (including silver bullets), or Magic (the real deal). Allow for specialties on those, and maybe pair the roles with affiliations: Solo, Buddy, and Team. The comedic element can be worked into the game with on-the-nose SFX attached to distinctions, such as *Eye of the Tiger* or *Carry On My Wayward Son*.



### SUPERHEROES + ROMANCE + HIGH SCHOOL

When you are the last son of a dying planet and you're still a teenager, life is full of dramatic moments. This sort of mashup sweeps so many of the core concepts of these genres together into a melodramatic soup that it makes coming up with new situations almost entirely painless. Just look at how many tangled relationships are on display, and push hard on those to create conflicts the players need to deal with.

You need powers and power sets, but the prime sets here are values and relationships, hands down. Why default to values and relationships? Because in games like this, the non-super PCs are on the same level as their super friends, and what's most important is how you feel about somebody and what you're willing to do to help them or stop them. Using trait statements, occasional signature assets, lots of resources, and of course building your characters with pathways is a sure-fire way to get this kind of game off to a good start.

## HIGH FANTASY + POST-APOCALYPTIC + WESTERN

Okay, this wasn't a Cortex game, but... Take the traditional elements of high fantasy: elves, dwarves, warriors, and wizards. Set it after a global cataclysm, when the kingdoms of good are still recovering and crawling from the wreckage of the past age. Then add in some of the frontier tropes of the Wild West, including tribes of natives with ancient spiritual knowledge, bands of heroes gathered together to protect small towns from bandits, and stretches of wilderness at the edge of civilized lands, and you've got a recipe for an extensive story of fellowship, redemption, and discovery.

High fantasy benefits most from clear, modular packages of backgrounds so that everyone can be certain of who their characters are and where they stand at the beginning. You can handle this with roles instead of skills—in which case it's Cleric, Fighter, Rogue, Wizard, and so on—and have each PC take a distinction that covers their ancestry or cultural background. Or you can go the traditional route, with attributes and skills, and rely on archetypes to give players guidance on how to create their characters.

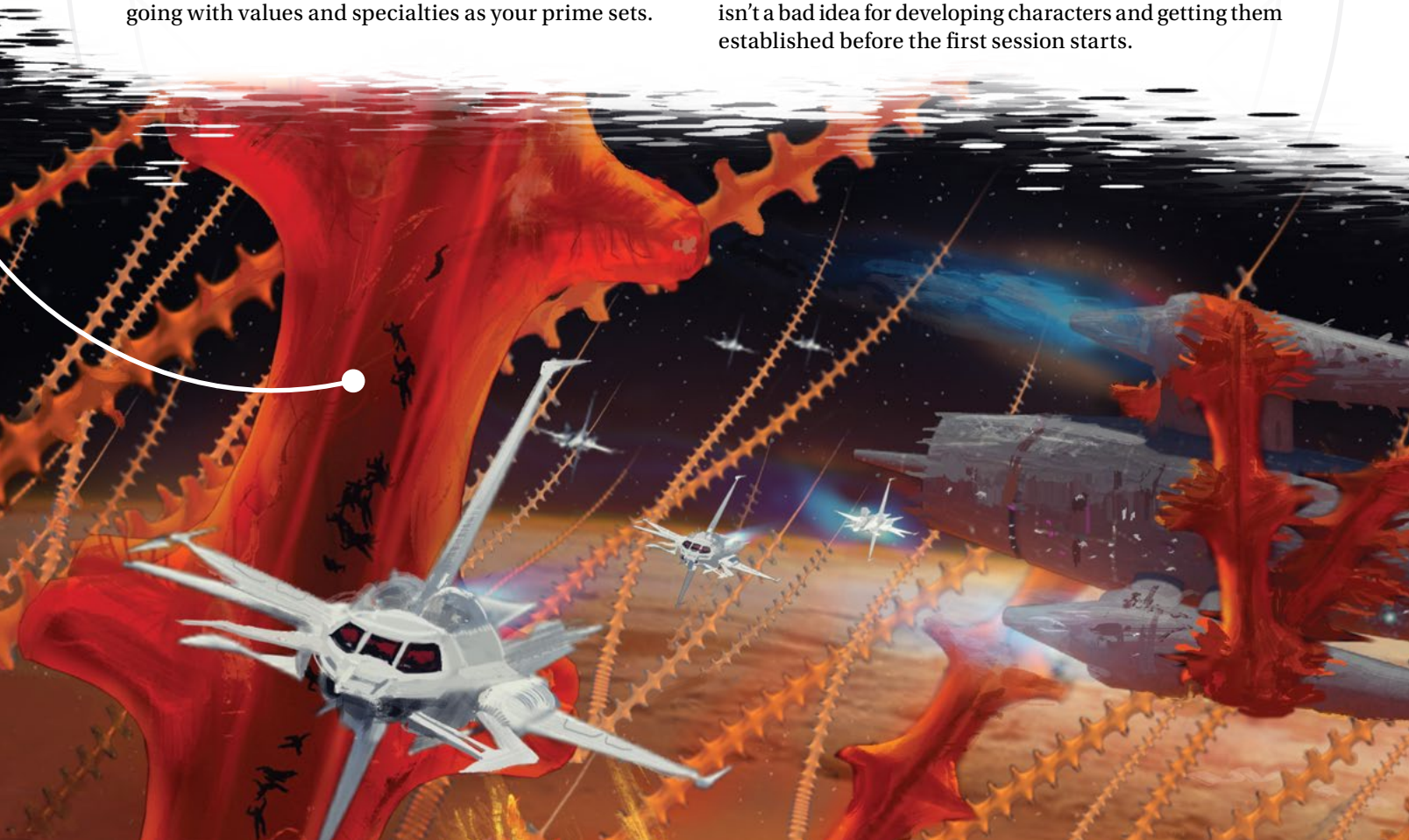
To emphasize the notion of discovery, ruins, and so on, the game might include a lot of powerful signature assets that PCs must attune themselves to after they find them on quests into dangerous swamps, sunken cities, and volcanic lairs. The assets might only be a single die rating for anyone who acquires them, but spending time attuning themselves unlocks SFX. This game might play up milestones for XP advances, also unlocking new powers or resources: powerful allies, ancient magic, or their own personal army.

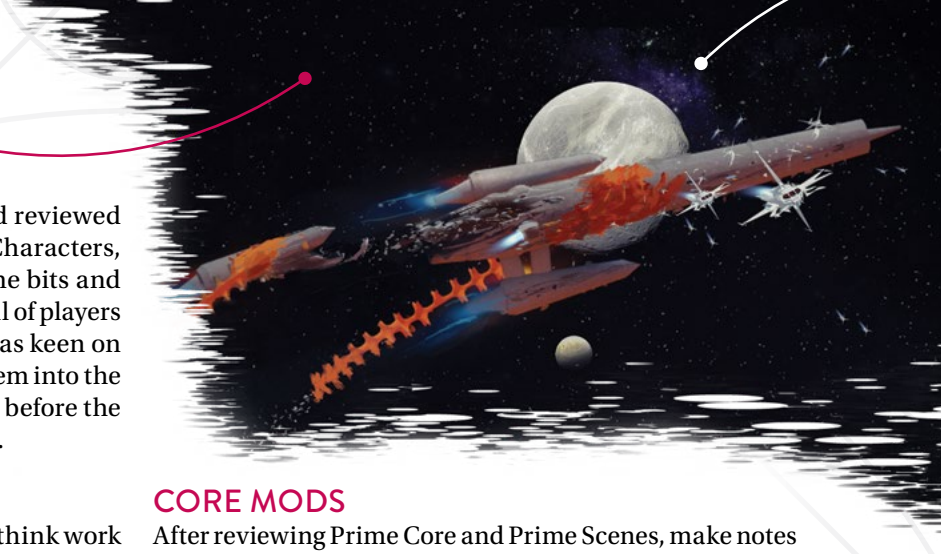
## MILITARY + SCIENCE FICTION + RELIGIOUS

Combine the rigors of life in a military structure with the distant future, then sprinkle in prophesy, spiritual themes, and of course the paranoia of being replaced or corrupted by evil, and you've got the recipe for a long-running game of a rag-tag space fleet trying to find a new home in the stars. There's a lot of metaphor and allegory in this kind of thing, but it's a key part of creating the overall mythology of your story.

This is also doable with a standard set-up but consider going with values and specialties as your prime sets. Values in this case might reflect attitudes towards parts of society: Military, Politics, Science, Faith, or Crime, for example. Specialties refine your character's areas of expertise. Use distinctions to nail down your basic archetypes, such as Hotshot Pilot, Grizzled War Veteran, or Troubled Engineer. There's a lot you can play with when it comes to resources, too, especially as the PCs acquire more and more influence and authority in the setting.

Knowing who your character was before the invasion of the robot replacements is also a good thing, so pathways isn't a bad idea for developing characters and getting them established before the first session starts.





## FLESHING IT OUT

Once you've picked three genre elements and reviewed the various mods in Prime Core and Prime Characters, it's time to actually build something out of the bits and pieces. Fortunately, you've got a whole table full of players who are willing to help you out. If they're not as keen on world building as you are, you can still rope them into the process during the character creation session before the game, especially if you make use of pathways.

### TRAITS AND TRAIT MODS

Sort out which traits you like, which ones you think work best for your genres, and the preferences of your players. You should at least sketch out what will go on their character files before they start making characters. You don't necessarily need to write up a lot of distinctions or other things in advance; you can either work with the players on creating their own distinctions, or you can write a list of distinction names and leave the details for later. Only do as much work as you feel like doing. You can crib skill lists, attribute sets, and other things from other Cortex Prime games or look back in Prime Characters for more examples.

### PATHWAYS, POINTS, OR PRE-GENS?

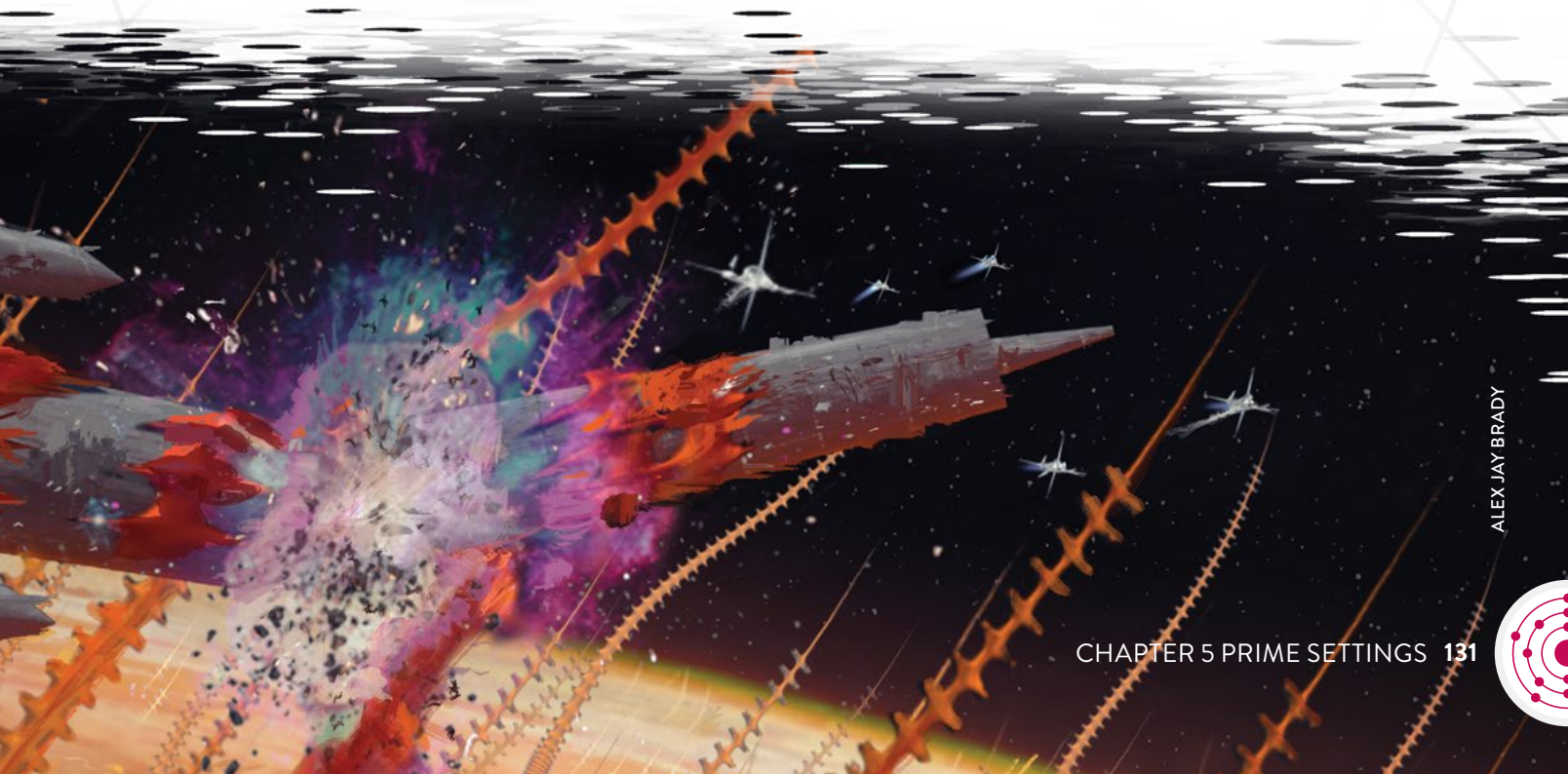
Next, decide if you want to implement a pathways style collaborative character and setting creation, or if you'd like to do some work up front on creating archetypes or packages of traits. The latter options are much easier for new players to get up to speed, but you don't get nearly as much shared investment into the process from the players. On the other hand, pathways can be a bit more work on your part, especially if you have to tweak the stages and other factors for your preferred trait sets.

### CORE MODS

After reviewing Prime Core and Prime Scenes, make notes on what gameplay mods you want to use in your setting. How you decide to handle tests and contests, die rolls, and other mechanics can influence how the setting plays out almost as much as the character traits do. If you've got a swashbuckler military superhero setting and you're not using scene mods that allow for flashy, cinematic super activity, you won't convey some of the best parts of those characters. On the other hand, who needs detailed rules about equipment, resources, and assets if the game's a light-hearted comedy fantasy pastiche of candy-themed characters and shapeshifting yellow dogs?

### GMCS AND GM MODS

Finally, explore how you plan to handle things on your end as you run the game. Some GMs like things fast, loose, and improvised. Others need pages of stat blocks, situations, and scene distinctions pre-built and on hand when playing the game. Decide how to frame antagonists and major GMCs before play actually starts. You can always switch this up later, of course—with practice it becomes relatively easy to "fake" a lot of this stuff and run Cortex Prime on the fly once you've had some experience using the rules and how GMCs work.



ALEX JAY BRADY

# EIDOLON ALPHA

*It came to me in my sixteenth summer, calling from within the Echo, as I was told it would. As we were all told it would. For so long, I hoped that I would be spared the blessing, that I would be left alone to live a life among the citizens of Iadrum. I would be a fisherman, or a goat herd, or perhaps a musician like my brother and my father. But on that hot, quiet evening, after the ceremonies and the feasting and the revels, and in the quiet of the night, it came to me.*

*Its coils unwound from the pillar in the great hall, its silver wings unfurled and spread and shone in the firelight. I knew that only I was seeing it, for nobody stirred around me. I alone could feel its heavy presence, which seemed to give added weight to every stone in my clan's homestead. From its tusked head, the head of a boar, the great Eidolon spoke my name: "Arvad!"*

*It was the Gorgon, Iadrum's mighty guardian, and it had come for me. I was not to be a fisherman, or a goat herd, nor even a musician. I was to be an endarch, as I was told I would.*

*Eidolon Alpha* is a setting for Cortex Prime. It's a world of fables and legends and godlike spirits who watch over a thriving civilization of city-states ringing a bright sea. In *Eidolon Alpha,* you play an **endarch**, an individual chosen by one of these spirits, these **eidolons**, to act as a vessel for their power and an instrument of their will in the world. Only a handful in each generation are chosen for this blessing, though many others serve the eidolons as acolytes and lay folk. For the endarchs, the ability to embody their eidolon's mystical powers grants them abilities above and beyond those of their fellow citizens, as well as a responsibility to use that power to further their eidolon's cause.

Each of the ten Great Eidolons confers a different set of abilities to its endarchs. Each of them also feuds with one of the other Great Eidolons, which manifests as an ancient rivalry between their respective city-states. Yet all of the Great Eidolons share a common enemy in the **Skotos**, the Darkness that quiets the Echo, and the servants of the Skotos are foes of every endarch.

In this game, you create an endarch by selecting a Great Eidolon as your spirit patron, choosing a role that best reflects how you want to play your endarch, and then assigning trait dice based on these choices. As you play, you unlock more abilities and acquire greater status within the cult of your Great Eidolon, perhaps one day becoming your guardian spirit's greatest champion, the **Alpha**.



## GENRE AND TROPES

*Eidolon Alpha* borrows from a variety of sources, mostly Hellenistic Greek and Mycenaean folklore and mythology, Japanese computer RPGs such as *Final Fantasy,* and adjacent manga and anime such as *Record of Lodoss War* and *Neon Genesis Evangelion.* The concept of heroes who summon great magical monsters to battle is a popular trope in Japanese fantasy and this dominates the setting's actions, with a secondary focus on the sort of wandering party of influential heroes that has been a feature of fantasy RPGs since the beginning.

### NEO-CLASSIC FANTASY

Neoclassicism is the revival or reflection of ancient cultures in music, literature, and architecture. In this case, it means we take inspiration and ideas from Greek myths and use them to create larger-than-life fantasy stories featuring huge monsters, pirate queens, hardy merchants, and sword-wielding warriors.

### SUMMONING SPIRITS TO BATTLE

Heroes are brave and skilled on their own terms, but to truly rise above the rest in the story, they have magical powers. These powers come from channeling the Great Eidolons for miraculous effects or bringing them into the mortal realm in the form of giant battling spirit-monsters. Each of these monsters embodies a number of virtues and vices of their own and forms a tribe around it that players can engage with in the story even outside of battle. The world is alive with spirits, and everyone knows it.

## WHAT YOU NEED TO PLAY

To play a game of *Eidolon Alpha* you need this *Game Handbook*, enough dice for each player and the GM, and copies of the various Great Eidolon archetypes and roles to choose from. Having a blank character file (page 244) for each player is recommended.

### CORTEX PRIME RULES AND VARIANTS

This setting uses **attributes** (Courage, Grace, Guile, Reason, and Vigor), **roles** (page 58), and **distinctions** (page 50). Some of the distinctions (linked to the Great Eidolons) are expanded to include **power traits** (page 51) and their **SFX** (page 61) refer to those powers.

*Eidolon Alpha* uses standard **tests** and **contests**, **difficulty dice**, and other Prime Core rules. It's an example of a fairly straight-up application of Cortex Prime, albeit one with some quirks. For action scenes, use an **action order** (page 98) to determine who usually goes when.

For the most part, **complications** (page 36) serve the usual function in *Eidolon Alpha* as a way to represent hindrances and other obstacles, but *Eidolon Alpha* uses the **Shaken and Stricken mod** (page 42) to represent actual targeted damage, injury, or harm. That is, when something attacks an endarch, the effect die of any successful attack is applied to one of the endarch's attributes, and this can potentially reduce the endarch's ability to use that attribute effectively in a dice pool.

## EIDOLONS AND ENDARCHS

An eidolon is a spirit that dwells within the **Echo**, the astral dimension alongside the mortal world. Eidolons have the power to manifest in the mortal world through **anchors**, which are specific locations where the walls are thinnest. They may also be channeled by mortals attuned to spirits, who can in turn use the eidolon's supernatural gifts as if they were their own. These mortals are known as endarchs.

Every PC in *Eidolon Alpha* is an endarch. Some GMCs are endarchs, but most are not.



# THE GREAT EIDOLONS

The strongest and most notable of these spirits are the **Great Eidolons**. Their might is such that they can be channeled by more than one endarch at a time, which in turn has led to somewhat informal cults or societies devoted to them and those who can manifest their powers. Every endarch develops a unique relationship with one of the Great Eidolons. In addition to being able to tap into the power of minor local spirits in hearths, shrines, and temples, an endarch can draw upon and manifest the power of a Great Eidolon anywhere.

The Great Eidolons have no human elements depicted in their icons, although many endarchs who manifest them fully within themselves often take on hybrid forms that in turn inform artistic depictions in cult scriptures, temples, and shrines.

Here follows the **Dekantheon**, or the ten Great Eidolons. This describes the powers they grant their endarchs, the locations of their great temples, and the foes and allies of their cults. In *Eidolon Alpha,* only five of the ten Great Eidolons may be chosen by players for their endarchs. The remainder are limited to GMCs and are suitable as antagonists or cautious allies.



## ARCHETYPE TRAITS

Each player endarch archetype includes a distinction with power traits (all rated at 8), SFX, and key attributes (two attributes that are stepped up by one during character creation). Players get one endarch archetype and its connected distinction and it won't change. Choose wisely.

**EXAMPLE ATTRIBUTES**

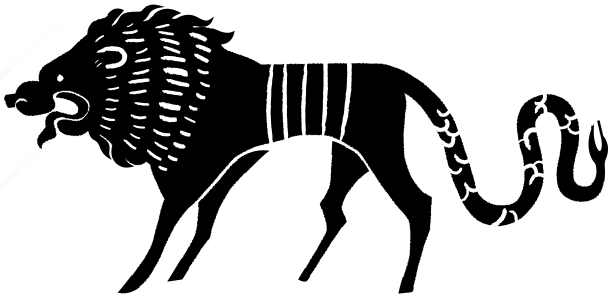
| STEPS | Courage | Grace | Guile | Reason | Vigor |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Base | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 | 6 |
| Wyvern Archetype | **+1** | **+1** | +0 | +0 | +0 |
| Scout Role | +0 | **+1** | **+1** | +0 | +0 |
| Final | 8 | 10 | 8 | 6 | 6 |

Eidolon power traits aren't detailed—they can be included in a dice pool if they seem appropriate to a test or contest. A power like Stretching or Fire Breath more or less does what it seems to do. You can look up these powers or their equivalents in the Power List on page 182 if you'd like more details.

Endarch distinctions are the only ones in the setting that come with more than just the standard "*Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4" SFX. At the beginning of play, *Summon* and another SFX of the player's choice are unlocked and ready to use. More SFX may be unlocked by spending XP from callback sessions.

# THE CHIMERA

The body of a goat, the head of a lion, and the tail of a serpent



| | |
|---|---|
| **NOTABLE POWERS** | Fiery Breath, Mighty Roar, Adaptation |
| **TEMPLE** | Conomora |
| **FOE** | Hydra |
| **ALLIES** | Wyvern, Leviathan |

## ENDARCH ARCHETYPE: THE CHIMERA

You gain the distinction Chimera's Mutarch, including the power traits, SFX, and highlight attributes.



The cult of the Chimera is strongest in the agricultural city-state of Conomora, located high in the Belleric Valley. The Belleric River winds down through the valley from the mountainous northeast region and empties into the Sea of Corsi where Conomora's port Phonos acts as a gateway town. The ever-changing nature of the cult makes it difficult to identify who's who within its chaotic organization, and which shrine or temple is dominant is likewise impossible to know to outsiders. It's said that the Chimerans prefer their cult this way because it reflects the impermanence of life itself and keeps things from getting boring.

Chimerans have the uncanny ability to understand all of these changes, of course, and thus the worship of their protean Great Eidolon endures. Endarchs of the Chimera alternate between conducting grand religious services in the city-state on one day, to serving simple meals in isolated farm communities without ceremony on the next. Channeling the Chimera grants endarchs the ability to instill fear and set things ablaze—all useful in defending the cult and lay people from external threats—but their greatest power is perhaps the ability to alter their appearance at will.

The Chimera cult's most implacable foe is the insidious Hydran cult. A long-lasting war in the shadows has arisen between shapeshifting Chimeran endarchs and the innumerable host of the Hydra's cultists. Because the Hydrans can duplicate themselves over and over, all it takes is one Hydran endarch in a community to swiftly overcome its leadership. Any rumor of a Hydran hiding among other citizens in Conomora is met with swift and fiery wrath by Chimeran endarchs.

### Chimera's Mutarch ◆8

*Fierce and mercurial, your breath can set the world afire.*

◆8 Fear ◆8 Fire Breath ◆8 Shapeshifting

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's ◆8 for a ▼4.
- Add a 6 to your pool for each additional target of your Fear attack. Assign an effect die to each target after you roll.
- Spend a PP to re-roll your dice pool when using Shapeshifting to defend against physical attacks or effects.
- *Summon:* Shut down this distinction to summon the Chimera. The Chimera appears on your next turn.

**Highlight Attributes:** Grace, Guile

The Gorgon's cult spreads throughout the coastal region around Iadrum. The winged boar-snake emblem of the cult is carved on the lintels of stonemasons and architects, as well as on many mausoleums. The cult's central message is death as stasis, not an end; they believe that when the living die, their souls are trapped in stones and earth, held there until the new cycle of the world. This affords them a stoic outlook on life, taught not to fear death but neither to revere it. Instead, Gorgonites celebrate the rigidity and permanence of stone and the welcome comfort it provides to those who meet their mortal ends.

Endarchs of the Gorgon are likewise known for their stoicism and stalwart natures. The poisonous powers they manifest by channeling this Great Eidolon bring about a thick, calcified layer of skin on the targets, inducing paralysis and usually coma. In this they are quite different from the endarchs of the Manticore, whose neurotoxins directly attack the nerves and brain. Like many other endarchs, they have the gift of flight. Their most celebrated power, however, is the ability to transform themselves into living stone, looking for all the world like animated statues.

Gorgonites routinely oppose the cult of the Siren, as their regions overlap; the Siren's cult of pirates and freebooters frequently raids the coastal towns around Iadrum, striking from their island holdfasts within the Sea of Corsi. Gorgonites number among the warriors of those towns, with a handful of endarchs leading the Iadric military.

The chief allies of the Gorgon cult are the priests and priestesses of the Griffin to the north, and the Wyvern-worshiping nomads to the south. Iadrum maintains a peaceful relationship with both regions and their respective cults return the favor, lending a hand from time to time to deal with the Siren's pirates.

### Gorgon's Petrarch 8

*Dauntless and stubborn, neither spear nor sword can pierce your stony hide.*

8 Flight 8 Petrification 8 Stone Skin

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.
- Step up your **Stone Skin** die when defending against manufactured weapons.
- Spend a PP to join or leave a scene that is already underway.
- *Summon:* Shut down this distinction to summon the Gorgon. The Gorgon appears on your next turn.

**Highlight Attributes:** Courage, Reason

## THE GORGON

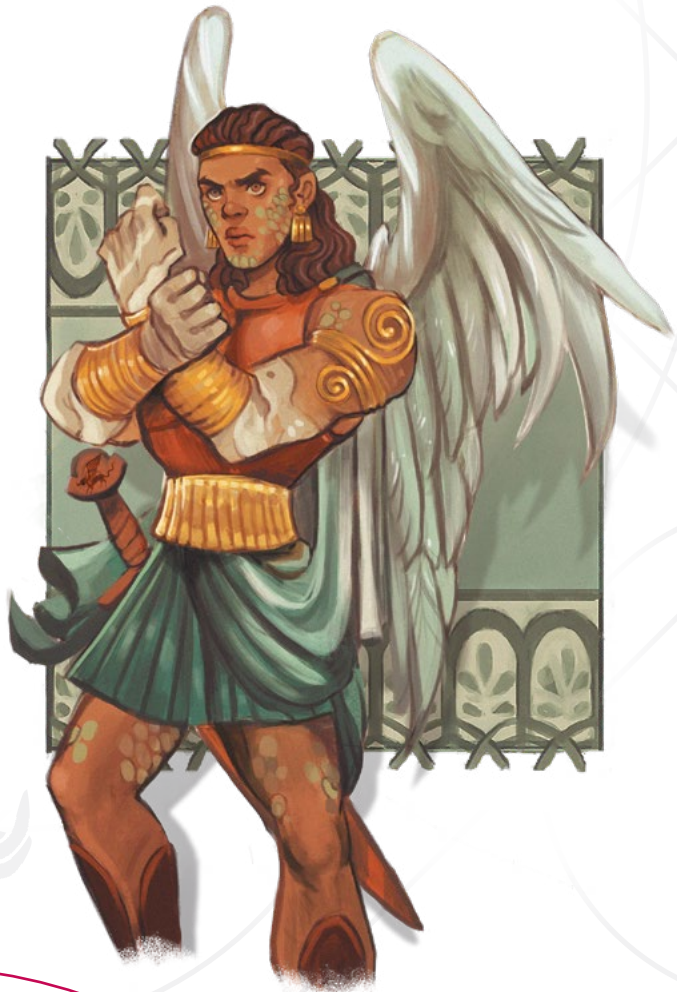
A winged boar with the tail of a snake



| | |
|---|---|
| **NOTABLE POWERS** | Flight, Transformation into Stone, Poison |
| **TEMPLE** | Iadrum |
| **FOE** | Siren |
| **ALLIES** | Wyvern, Griffin |

### ENDARCH ARCHETYPE: THE GORGON

You gain the distinction Gorgon's Petrarch, including the power traits, SFX, and highlight attributes.



# THE GRIFFIN

The body of a lion, and the head and wings of an eagle



| | |
|---|---|
| **NOTABLE POWERS** | Flight, Speed, Deadly Claws |
| **TEMPLE** | Drepanos |
| **FOE** | Manticore |
| **ALLIES** | Gorgon, Minotaur |

## ENDARCH ARCHETYPE: THE GRIFFIN

You gain the distinction Griffin's Onycharch, including the power traits, SFX, and highlight attributes.



Drepanos is a sprawling mountain city-state high in the peaks to the north, administered and fiercely defended by the Griffin cult. Priests and priestesses of the cult, armed with the curving talon-swords of the Onycharchy, are known for their fearlessness and martial training. Drepanos deals in textiles, pigments, and of course highly trained mercenaries. The Onycharchy supports the Drepanosn economy and spreads its cult throughout the other regions as a result, making it perhaps the most disparate cult of the Great Eidolons.

With feathered wings and razor-sharp claws, endarchs of the Griffin are prized as military leaders. Their belief that spirit must be keen and justice swift makes them recognized everywhere they go. This high-minded code of honor can bring them down, however, when facing opponents who don't share their fervor. They nevertheless attempt to soar above this apparent flaw, accepting that not everyone shares their principled lifestyle.

The Griffin cult's antipathy with the Manticore cult is reinforced constantly by the fact that the Manticorans, who are also mercenary by nature, have no qualms with dealing in underhanded tactics or breaking contracts. Aggression and brutality are anathema to the Griffin endarchs, so every Manticoran who crosses their path creates an immediate problem. In rare cases, the Griffinites may be forced to fight on the same side as the Manticorans, which can lead to some heated and persistent conflict at camp.

### Griffin's Onycharch d8

*Swift and deadly, your claws tear through your foes like a scythe through wheat.*

d8 Claws | d8 Flight | d8 Speed

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's d8 for a d4.
- Step up your Speed die when defending against two or more foes.
- Spend a PP to join or leave a scene that is already underway.
- *Summon:* Shut down this distinction to summon the Griffin. The Griffin appears on your next turn.

**Highlight Attributes:** Grace, Vigor

The mighty labyrinth temple of Sulenium takes up almost half of the island upon which the Minotaur cult makes its home base. The rest of the city-state produces the finest metals in the world, with armories and smithies of various kinds, in addition to smelters and underground mines. Sulenium is the first city-state to attempt to work with iron and steel, but with limited results. Chiefly, they're seen as the best place to source bronze cooking vessels, pots, tools, and armor. The Minotaur's iconography—usually horns in the center of a circular maze—is everywhere. It marks the forbidding entrances to the cult's shrines, and is emblazoned on the walls and doors of the city-state's smithies.

Minotaur endarchs don't interact often with the lay folk of the Minotaur cult. They sequester themselves in the temples and shrines behind concentric walls and in tunnel complexes, thinking of more ways to spread their cult's ideals of strong, forceful reason. Minotaurans come at all problems indirectly, as if arguing and fighting their way out of a maze. Outsiders frequently view them as either mad philosophers or perhaps just introverted brutes. Neither, of course, is a fair assessment of this cult's warrior-monk ideology.

Since the Minotaur endarchs can transform their bodies into bronze for short periods of time, they take a lot to beat down or subdue—which may be why the Leviathan cult is so insistent on crushing them. Possibly, the Leviathanites just don't like the Minotaur cult because Sulenium sits there in the Sea of Corsi, stubbornly refusing to go away despite all of the storms and rain. Either way, the Minotaurans have clashed with the Leviathanites repeatedly. To avoid wholesale destruction, Minotaurans and Leviathanites confront one another on neutral ground, leading to legendary battles.

### Minotaur's Metallarch d8

*Cunning and powerful, your bronze hide turns aside tooth and claw.*

d8 Bronze Skin | d8 Senses | d8 Strength

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's d8 for a d4.
- Step up your **Bronze Skin** die when defending against natural weapons.
- Spend a PP to find your way out of any building, trap, or maze.
- *Summon:* Shut down this distinction to summon the Minotaur. The Minotaur appears on your next turn.

**Highlight Attributes:** Guile, Vigor

## THE MINOTAUR

An ape's body and a bull's head



| | |
|---|---|
| **NOTABLE POWERS** | Keen Senses, Great Strength, Transformation into Metal |
| **TEMPLE** | Sulenium |
| **FOE** | Leviathan |
| **ALLIES** | Griffin, Hydra |

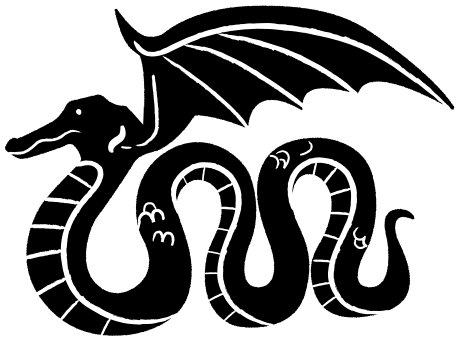
### ENDARCH ARCHETYPE: THE MINOTAUR

You gain the distinction Minotaur's Metallarch, including the power traits, SFX, and highlight attributes.



# THE WYVERN

A serpent with wings and a crocodile's head



| | |
|---|---|
| **NOTABLE POWERS** | Flight, Sharp Teeth, Crushing Coils |
| **TEMPLE** | Ophelaeum |
| **FOE** | Phoenix |
| **ALLIES** | Chimera, Gorgon |

## ENDARCH ARCHETYPE: THE WYVERN

You gain the distinction Wyvern's Helicarch, including the power traits, SFX, and highlight attributes.



Along the southern coast of the Sea of Corsi, where deserts and lofty plateaus make life difficult and dangerous, the Wyvern cult of the Helicarchy holds sway. The temple at Ophelaeum, built into the side of a great cliff, looks out over dozens of interconnected hilltop communities that form the basis of the city-state. Orchards and groves bring green life to these places, in contrast to the brown scrub and sand of the rest of the lands around them. The people praise the vigilance of the Wyvern cult for their good fortune, and for enabling the brisk spice trade with the other city-states.

Endarchs of the Wyvern draw from their Great Eidolon's reptilian qualities, affording them the power to extend their limbs out like snakes or to open their mouths unnaturally wide like that of a crocodile. They make use of their powerful wings to fly between the communities of the Ophelaeum and watch over the roads below for signs of assault or danger. Several endarchs of the Helicarchy band together as sentinel bands near the edge of the great desert, always alert for the minions of the Skotos emerging from the wasteland at night.

The rivalry between the cult of the Wyvern and the cult of the Phoenix comes from a competition over natural resources—spices, tinctures, and minerals. The Phoenix cult jealously guards trade routes to the east from the Sea of Corsi and occasionally makes inroads through Wyvern territory, triggering skirmishes or even open war for several weeks.

### Wyvern's Helicarch d8

*Impulsive and daring, your snakelike limbs can envelop the most evasive foe.*

d8 Flight | d8 Bite | d8 Stretching

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's d8 for a d4.
- Step up your Stretching die when grappling or restraining a target.
- Spend a PP to join or leave a scene that is already underway.
- *Summon:* Shut down this distinction to summon the Wyvern. The Wyvern appears on your next turn.

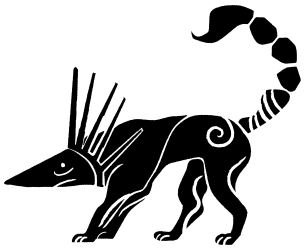
**Highlight Attributes:** Courage, Grace

# ANTAGONIST EIDOLONS

The remaining five Great Eidolons of the Dekantheon are given here in an abbreviated format. Use this information when creating antagonist GMCs for the PCs. None of this information is necessarily hidden or secret. Some player endarchs might end up being allied with one or two of these groups, so it's important to note their foes and locations.

## THE MANTICORE

Body of a lion, head of a shark, tail of a scorpion

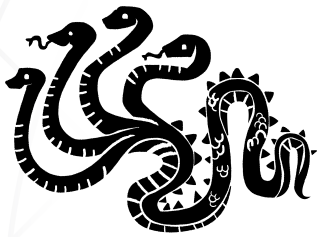


| NOTABLE POWERS | |
|---|---|
| Poison, Sharp Teeth, Withering Breath | |
| TEMPLE | Drysclud |
| FOE | Griffin |
| ALLIES | Leviathan, Siren |

The Manticorans of Drysclud are deadly mercenaries who sell their brand of violence to the highest bidder around the northern coast of the Sea of Corsi. They often run afoul of the Griffinites, who are also warriors-for-hire.

## THE HYDRA

A great serpent with many heads



| NOTABLE POWERS | |
|---|---|
| Regeneration, Poison, Aquatic | |
| TEMPLE | Helchaeum |
| FOE | Chimera |
| ALLIES | Minotaur, Phoenix |

These tireless foes of the Chimera cult are famous for their numbers and their tendency to infiltrate other communities, especially the cult in Conomora. Their endarchs possess the ability to recover quickly from being injured, even when brought near death, and can breathe underwater.

## THE PHOENIX

A fiery eagle with the head of a rooster

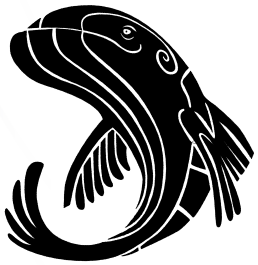


| NOTABLE POWERS | |
|---|---|
| Rebirth, Flight, Fiery Breath | |
| TEMPLE | Regnium |
| FOE | Wyvern |
| ALLIES | Hydra, Siren |

Due to its prized goldmines and fruit orchards, great Regnium has had to withstand centuries of warfare and conflict. The Phoenix cult has kept this fortress-like city-state and its half-dozen trade routes protected from threats, real or imagined. Blessed with the power to return from certain death to fight on, Phoenix endarchs are terrifying opponents.

## THE LEVIATHAN

A whale with iron scales



| NOTABLE POWERS | |
|---|---|
| Great Strength, Armor, Aquatic | |
| TEMPLE | Rheolfa |
| FOE | Minotaur |
| ALLIES | Chimera, Manticore |

The Leviathan cult is blunt and direct and avoids any semblance of subtlety or nuance. As a people, the citizens of Rheolfa are likewise terse, living open and forthright lives absent of complication. They clash frequently with the Minotaurans of Sulenium, who stubbornly get in the way of Leviathanite dominance of the Sea of Corsi.

## THE SIREN

An owl with the head of a jackal



| NOTABLE POWERS | |
|---|---|
| Deafening Scream, Deadly Claws, Flight | |
| TEMPLE | Corsaeum |
| FOE | Gorgon |
| ALLIES | Manticore, Phoenix |

The pirates of Corsaeum strike out from their island dens and raid along the coastline, often under cover of fog or darkness. The Siren endarchs each lead a gang of pirates, and many of them style themselves as pirate kings; the cult's priests and priestesses give their blessing to these rapacious gangs of cutthroats. Some Siren cultists are just trying to make a living from scarcity, but they are rare exceptions.

# EIDOLONS IN PLAY

In a setting that prominently features summoning powerful spirits, it's good to be familiar with what this actually means. This section breaks down the use of Great Eidolons in play and new rules to manage them.

## SUMMONING EIDOLONS

Each endarch is able to summon their Great Eidolon from the Echo. The spirit gathers a physical body from the elements around it and appears as a giant creature embodying the traditional aspects the Eidolon is said to possess. Doing this prevents the endarch from using any of their Eidolon-gifted powers for the duration of the summoning, though the endarch may dismiss the Great Eidolon at any time.

## GREAT EIDOLON STATS

A Great Eidolon has the power traits of the corresponding endarch archetype at 12. It also has 12 in the highlight attributes of that archetype, and 8 in all other attributes. Great Eidolons are huge; they have a 8 scale die and enjoy the benefits of scale (keeping an additional die in their total when performing actions and reactions). They don't have roles or distinctions, but they have 10 10 linked to their name that serves as a combined role and distinction. If they're trying to do something that's outside this trait (something that they're not known to have any influence or association with) they use 4 4 instead.

For example, here are the stats for the Minotaur if it's summoned by an endarch. It can easily put together a dice pool of 10 10 (from base trait) + 8 (from scale) + 12 12 (from attribute and power), and it keeps three dice for its total instead of two. Players may spend their own PP on summoned Eidolons, who don't have any PP of their own.

### SUMMONED MINOTAUR EIDOLON

**BASE TRAIT**
10 10 *or* 4 4

12 Bronze Skin
12 Senses
12 Strength

**SCALE** 8



Courage 8
Grace 8
Guile 12
Reason 8
Vigor 12

## ALLIES AND FOES

Great Eidolons never enter into battle with the cultists or manifestations of allied Great Eidolons. For example, a manifestation of the Griffin doesn't fight cultists or manifestations of the Gorgon or the Minotaur. When Great Eidolons ally with or team up with other manifestations (such as may happen when two or more player endarchs summon their Great Eidolons to fight opponents) they can fight cultists or Great Eidolons that are ordinarily allies of theirs, but they won't use the ganging up or aiding rules to fight them (i.e., handing over dice to contribute to their dice pools) if such a conflict of interest exists.

If Great Eidolons enter into battle against cultists or manifestations of their listed foe, they gain the following SFX that they can always use (and is activated by the endarch who summoned them):

- If Great Eidolons enter into battle against cultists or manifestations of their natural foe, add the summoning endarch's distinction die to the Great Eidolon's dice pool.

Two foes clashing with one another is a terrible thing to see, as both eidolons gain this benefit against one another.

## CONTROLLING GREAT EIDOLONS

The summoning endarch may issue direct commands to their summoned Great Eidolon, for as long as the Great Eidolon remains in line of sight. Giving a Great Eidolon a command doesn't use up the endarch's action. A Great Eidolon always acts immediately after the endarch who summoned it in the action order. For the purposes of making actions and reactions, the endarch's player handles the Great Eidolon in battle. GMs may feel free to embellish or roleplay the Great Eidolon's behavior outside of any direct commands from the endarch.

## MULTIPLE MANIFESTATIONS

In any given square mile, only one manifestation of a Great Eidolon may be active. This prevents groups of endarchs of the same Great Eidolon from summoning multiple manifestations. It does mean that endarchs of the same Great Eidolon continue to use their endarch distinction powers even if there's a manifestation of their Great Eidolon within range.

If an endarch wants to summon a Great Eidolon when one is already manifested, the two endarchs engage in a contest using their endarch distinction, their Priest role, and usually Courage, Guile, or Reason. The endarch that wins this contest seizes control of the Great Eidolon. This may cause problems later on, depending on the endarchs. How this resolves later is up to the individual endarchs, of course. Great Eidolons don't get involved in spats.





# ROLES

Every PC in *Eidolon Alpha* has ratings in at least three roles—Warrior, Priest, and Scout—which represent training and experience in some of the adventurous careers of the neoclassical world of the Dekantheon. Anything a player endarch wants to do that doesn't somehow fit into one of these roles is assigned a baseline ▼4.

Each role has a rating and lists several example distinctions, which only have one SFX: the base *Hinder* SFX all distinctions have. For their 10 role, players should choose one of these distinctions or create their own original distinction using these as guidelines.

Each role lists two highlight attributes, which are stepped up by one during character creation.

Roles may be enhanced by specialties; no character starts with a specialty but can acquire them as part of character growth. A specialty works as described on page 59 and begins as a 6.

## WARRIOR

*The warrior is trained to fight and to use violence to get what they want. An endarch's rating in this role indicates how much this philosophy and view of the world influences their actions.*

12: You have no equal in war.

10: You are a peerless fighter, the scourge of your foes in battle.

8: You are a skilled veteran of many skirmishes.

6: You are familiar with weapons and their use.

▼4: You eschew violence and favor other approaches to resolving disagreements.

### WARRIOR DISTINCTIONS

- Keen-Eyed Archer
- Strong-Armed Hammerer
- Fleet-Footed Swordmaster
- Hard-Hearted Captain
- Blood-Sworn Lancer

**Highlight Attributes:** Courage, Vigor



## PRIEST

*The priest is educated in the lore and mysteries of the Great Eidolon cults, using knowledge and secrets to get what they want. An endarch's rating in this role indicates how much their actions are influenced by faith and learning.*

12: You are one of the learned masters.

10: You are a towering intellect, sure in your beliefs.

8: You have an acute understanding of lore and letters.

6: You can recite the great stories and understand their teachings.

4: You leave knowledge and studying to others.

### PRIEST DISTINCTIONS

- Scholar of the Sciences
- Student of Letters
- Chronicler of the Mysteries
- Acolyte of the Numbers
- Adept of the Prophesies

**Highlight Attributes:** Guile, Reason



## SCOUT

*The scout knows the pathways and the roads between city-states, using awareness and clues to get what they want. An endarch's rating in this role indicates how their success or failure can be influenced by their familiarity with the world around them.*

12: You are a tracker without equal.

10: You are one with the road and the wilderness, both at home and far away.

8: You know of many places and the roads that connect them all.

6: You can follow a path and find your way in the world.

4: You would prefer not to travel if you can avoid it.

### SCOUT DISTINCTIONS

- Tireless Hunter of Beasts
- Cunning Tracker of Men
- Hardy Pathfinder of Armies
- Patient Warden of Borders
- Friendly Guide of Caravans

**Highlight Attributes:** Grace, Guile

# OTHER ROLES

There are other approaches to action, informed by other philosophies and worldviews. The following are suggestions for other roles, which might inspire new distinctions. If one of these is chosen as a 6, 8, or 10, then one of the primary roles must be assigned a 4. Otherwise, all of these potential roles default to a 4 for any endarch.

- **Crafter:** Using your skill in building, carving, weaving, or other crafts.
- **Merchant:** Using your skill in engaging in mercantile activities, buying and selling and negotiating prices.
- **Seer:** Using your skill in divining possible futures, understanding signs and portents, or confusing foes with prophesy.
- **Singer:** Using your skill in performance and song to inspire others, make a living, and recall great epics.
- **Thief:** Using your skill in larceny to filch things, steal others' belongings, or break into places you aren't supposed to be in.

# CREATING AN ENDARCH CHARACTER

The character creation process in *Eidolon Alpha* is fairly straightforward.

1. Choose an endarch archetype (pages 136 to 140).
2. Choose one role at 10, one at 8, and the third at 6 (Warrior, Priest, Scout, or Other).
3. Beginning with a 6 in each attribute (Courage, Grace, Guile, Reason, Vigor), step up each endarch highlight attribute by one, and step up each highlight attribute associated with your 10 role by one.
4. If desired, step one attribute down by one and step up another attribute up by one.
5. Note your endarch distinction (from under the archetype name) and choose one SFX to unlock. *Hinder* and *Summon* are automatically unlocked.
6. Choose one role distinction.
7. Write a third freeform distinction (personality or secondary background).
8. Name your character (Greek, Macedonian, or Hellenic names, such as Alexios, Hektor, Koios, Niobe, or Theia) and write a short description.

# GROWING CHARACTERS

*Eidolon Alpha* uses the session callback system of character growth, framed as the endarch retelling their heroic feats and experiences, to gather strength and expertise for their ongoing struggle against the Skotos. At the end of each session, players write it on their session record and may use it in future sessions for callbacks or to spend it on training.

## TRAINING UP

Here is a summary of the advancements and upgrades players might spend their sessions on. Note that no trait may be raised higher than 12. Switching out an endarch distinction is extremely rare and should be prefaced with a session devoted to that endarch's relationship with their Great Eidolon and the potential new one. Otherwise, consider it to be as unlikely as a person switching out a limb or other essential part of their being.

- **Turn an asset from a session into a signature asset:** 1 session
- **Switch out a freeform distinction for a new one:** 1 session
- **Switch out a role distinction for a new one:** 3 sessions
- **Switch out an endarch distinction for a new one:** 5 sessions
- **Add a signature asset SFX:** 1 session
- **Step up a signature asset:** 2 sessions
- **Add a new specialty or add a die to an existing specialty:** 2 sessions
- **Unlock a new endarch distinction SFX:** 2 sessions
- **Step up a role:** 3 sessions
- **Step up one attribute and step down another:** 4 sessions

# GMCS

*Eidolon Alpha* uses the standard rules for minor and major GMCs (page 114). Typically, opponents such as cultists or mercenaries can be represented either as a mob or individually using three descriptive traits in place of other stats. These minor GMCs mostly serve to provide difficulty for tests; add the cultists' trait to the difficulty dice pool and have the players test against that. Major GMCs should have a list of their attributes and roles.

You don't technically need to assign a GMC any distinctions—most of the time they won't even use SFX or powers. However, in the case of opponents who are also endarchs, they should have a base trait of 8 8 (or higher) that they can use for anything that depends on their powers, or flip to 4 4 to earn a PP like a distinction.

# RUNNING EIDOLON ALPHA

The typical *Eidolon Alpha* session is the endarch group opposing antagonist endarchs, foiling agents of the Skotos, and undertaking heroic adventures along the coast of the Sea of Corsi. In some ways, play is a lot like any other fantasy adventure setting—the PCs are exceptional individuals called to a life of mayhem and magic. On the other hand, as endarchs they are also living representatives of powerful spirits that guide the hearts and minds of this fantasy setting. For this reason, and because this game is intended to recall many of the tropes of Greek mythology and certain Japanese video games, hardly anything the endarchs do is mundane or without significance.

## YOUR FIRST SESSION

The players should decide as a group which city-state they congregate in at the start of the first session. They don't have to actually be citizens of that city—however, it would be helpful if at least one of them had a connection to the people of that city. Give them a summary of the five "player" city-states as described in the descriptions of the Great Eidolons. If they're unsure or don't have a strong opinion, make a decision for them and carry on.

Once the starting location is established, you can introduce the first situation to the players.

## CONOMORA



**The Enemy:** Hydra

**The Situation:** Cultists of the Hydra have successfully infiltrated the city and are gathering together for a combined strike against the city's prized grain stores. Several city officials are found dead, their bodies wracked with poison.

### HYDRA POISONER ENDARCH

**BASE TRAIT**

8 8 *or* 4 4

8 Warrior

6 Priest

10 Scout




### HYDRA CULTIST

8 Cautious 8 Infiltrator

8 Toxic



## IADRUM



**The Enemy:** Siren

**The Situation:** A Siren pirate queen has brought dozens of ships under her banner and is preparing to mount a coastal assault on Iadrum from the mists of the Sea of Corsi, sinking any merchant ships in the harbor. The attack is timed during one of the most sacred rituals, the Fire Festival, leaving the port of Phonos poorly defended.

### SIREN PIRATE-QUEEN

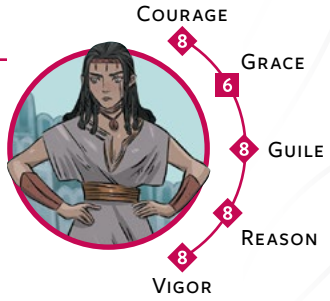
**BASE TRAIT**

8 8 *or* 4 4

10 Warrior

8 Priest

6 Scout




### SIREN CULTIST

8 Brash 8 Drunk

8 Pirate



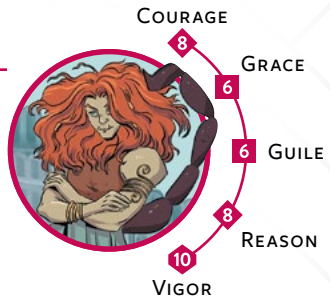
## DREPANOS



**The Enemy:** Manticore
**The Situation:** The brutal Manticore mercenaries have intimidated several villages near Drepanos, drawing the attention of the Griffin cult. They claim to be providing protection services for the villages, but in truth they are extorting the village councils out of gold and copper.

### MANTICORE MERCENARY ENDARCH

**BASE TRAIT**
8 8 *or* 4 4
10 Warrior
6 Priest
8 Scout




### MANTICORE CULTIST

8 Bullying 8 Cutthroat
8 Mercenary



## SULENIUM



**The Enemy:** Leviathan
**The Situation:** Storm-princes of the Leviathan cult have declared a nearby island notable for its zinc and copper mines as their own. They've used their magic to batter away all ships and are holding the locals prisoner on their own island.

### LEVIATHAN STORM-PRINCE

**BASE TRAIT**
8 8 *or* 4 4
6 Warrior
10 Priest
8 Scout




### LEVIATHAN CULTIST

8 Direct 8 Greedy
8 Mighty



## OPHELAEUM



**The Enemy:** Phoenix
**The Situation:** The Phoenix cult leader has issued an order for the capture of one of the endarchs defending Ophelaeum. Not long after this, caravan guards along the spice routes contested by the Wyvern and the Phoenix have been doubled in anticipation of a Phoenix attack.

### PHOENIX CULT LEADER

**BASE TRAIT**
8 8 *or* 4 4
6 Warrior
10 Priest
8 Scout




### PHOENIX CULTIST

8 Bold 8 Obsessive
8 Tireless





## THE SHOCKING TWIST

Although it's a cult belonging to the Dekantheon that's turned on the others and made an attack, their newfound aggression is due to the Skotos, or Darkness. The Skotos has infected the minds and hearts of some of the enemy (for example, the Pirate Queen) and has provoked this new deadlier conflict. When the endarchs finally confront the leader of the foe, it's revealed that he or she is completely under the sway of the Skotos.

The Skotos provides an "out" for the player endarchs as far as feeling bad for fighting one of the cult leaders of another faction. But the Skotos-leader may implement a shift in scale (add in a 8 and keep the best three dice) unless the endarchs can summon their own Great Eidolons and meet the Skotos-leader on his own, dark terms. This represents the Skotos' terrible darkness powers manifesting around the infected endarch.

Skotos



8 **SCALE**

The Skotos infection exists as its own trait (it's the scale die of 8, effectively). If the endarchs can use their own magic or abilities to target the darkness within the leader, they can reduce or even eliminate the die, exorcising the Skotos spirit. To do this, they must announce they're targeting the trait die and roll against a difficulty of 6 6 + any additional factors. If they succeed and their effect die is greater than the Skotos scale die, the scale die is eliminated. If they succeed and their effect die is equal to the Skotos scale die or smaller, step down the Skotos scale die by one.

The Skotos-infected antagonists can be negotiated with once the Skotos infection is exorcised from them, and you should encourage the players to consider several possible solutions. Some players won't feel satisfied until they've beaten their opponents handily, but others might want to preserve the general détente of the Sea of Corsi's city-states and restore things to a semblance of normal.



AMAGOIA AGIRRE

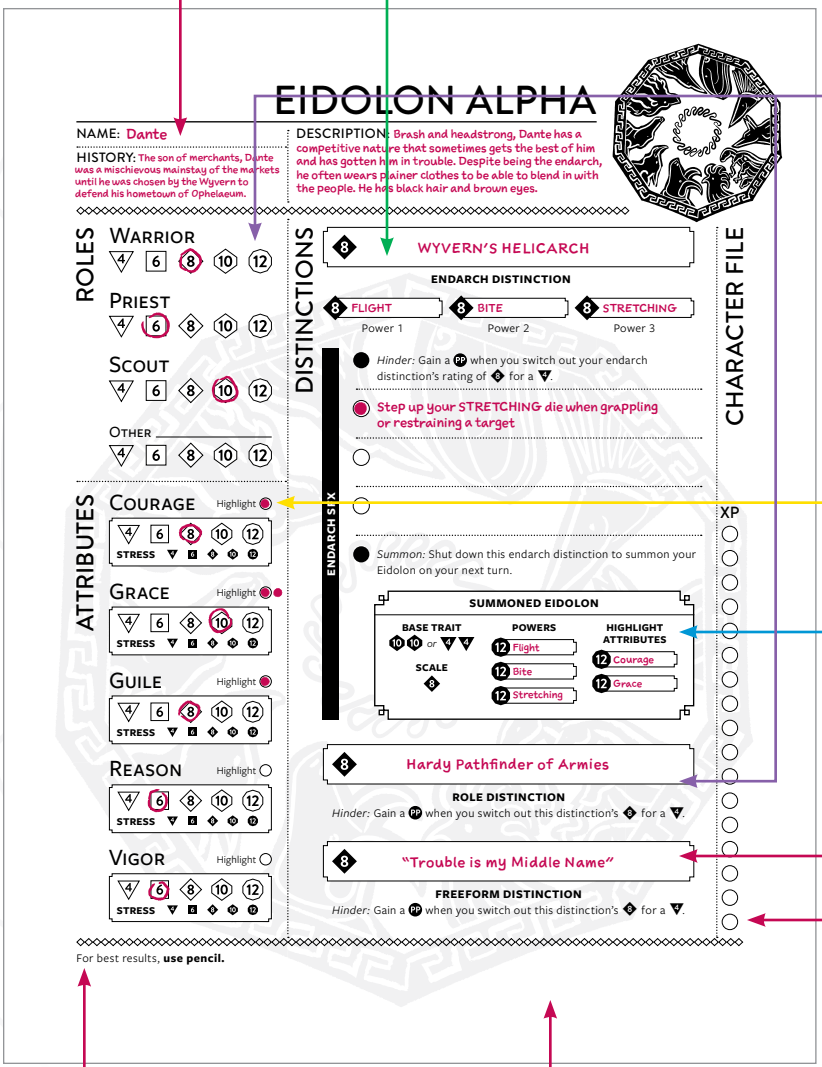
## WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Future sessions of *Eidolon Alpha* draw upon this initial revelation and set-up. You can introduce other Skotos-infected cultists or endarchs, but not every session needs to feature one of these (and probably shouldn't). Here are some suggestions for future situations in which the endarchs' assistance is needed:

- Trading dispute
- Death of a city official or leader
- Mysterious illness or plague
- Rogue spirits attack a village or community
- Feud between families over inheritance
- Lovers request help escaping troubled family
- Rare materials needed for major ritual or ceremony
- Festival of the seasons stricken by bad weather or natural disaster

# HOW TO FILL OUT YOUR EIDOLON ALPHA CHARACTER FILE

The steps below cover how to fill out a file for a character named Dante, who is an endarch of the Wyvern. The character creation process is covered on page 145.




1 It's best to have an idea of who our character is, especially what Great Eidolon to choose. We named our character Dante and provided a brief history, and a description of what they look like and brief notes about their personality.

2 We chose the Wyvern as our Great Eidolon so our distinction is **Wyvern's Helicarch** (page 140). We write the name of our distinction above "Endarch Distinction" and fill out the powers below. *Hinder* and *Summon* are automatically unlocked. The highlight attributes from this distinction are **Courage** and **Grace** so we fill in the "Highlight" circles next to those attributes in the first column. We can unlock an additional SFX, which we write under *Hinder*.

3 Dante's roles are chosen as follows: **Scout** 10, **Warrior** 8, **Priest** 6. We note the highlight attributes of **Grace** (again) and **Guile** from the roles, so we fill in the circle next to "Highlight" for **Guile** and put a mark next to **Grace** to remind us that it's been highlighted twice. The role distinction chosen is **Hardy Pathfinder of Armies** which is written above "Role Distinction."

4 All attributes start at 6. We look at the highlight attributes of Dante's endarch and role distinctions and step up accordingly (**Grace** twice, and **Courage** and **Guile** once). We chose not to alter any other attributes, but you could choose to step down an attribute to step up another.

5 As an endarch, Dante gets the *Summon* SFX unlocked automatically. Summoned Eidolons get the same powers and attributes as your endarch character, but their powers and highlight attributes are rated at 12.

6 Finally, we write in a freeform distinction that works in universe with the character. We chose "Trouble is my Middle Name."

**Note:** As these are meant to be multi-session sheets, we recommend using pencil if you're not using a digital character file. Attributes and other traits can change during the course of a series.

**Note:** Use the margins for notes or to keep track of assets (which can become signature assets with XP).

### THE XP TRACK

Use the XP column to keep track of your completed sessions. Each session counts as a single XP point which you can use in different ways to advance your character.

See "Training Up" on page 145. When XP is spent, erase the filled circles or just cross them out.

PRINTABLE FILE ON PAGE 244

ALSO AVAILABLE AT CORTEXRPG.COM



# HAMMERHEADS

*The winds had already picked up, which meant the fires were spreading faster and faster. It was like staring right into hell. The whole forest was burning, the flames leaping across the ravine as if it wasn't even there. Our team came in low and fast, Hammerhead Two pushing itself to the limit to get us there and over the blaze so we could maybe, just maybe head it off before it hit the highway. With hundreds of stranded cars and the town on the other side, things were going to go from really bad to really freaking worse.*

*We had the rig packed with extinguishers and loaded with water tanks, but there wasn't anything we could do directly. Our engineer, Rex, had a plan that involved setting charges and firebreaks. But all I could think about was getting down there and getting those people out of their cars and away from the burn as fast as possible.*

*I'd say this was just another day for the Hammerheads, but that's the thing. There's no day like any other in this job. And it's my job. My name's Ulrich Engström, callsign Ragnar. And I'm a Hammerhead.*

*Hammerheads* is a setting for Cortex Prime. It's set in the near future when the world is besieged by the ravages of climate change, corporate catastrophe, and crisis. You play a **Hammerhead agent**, recruited from the ranks of first responders, the military, and the scientific community to join this elite global disaster management organization. Only the best and brightest, those individuals who run toward danger rather than run away, are sought out by the mysterious World Crisis Agency to serve. Equipped with state-of-the-art technology and the mighty High-Altitude Multi-Mission Emergency Response Headquarters—the



Hammerheads—you and your team answer the call when nobody else can do it. In a world of disaster, you are the heroes the world needs.

Each Hammerheads crew has its specialists to cover a wide array of disaster scenarios, and their Hammerhead is likewise outfitted and designed to get them to the scene of the crisis and help them manage it as soon as possible and with minimal loss of life and resources.

In this game, you create a Hammerhead agent by picking training packages, assigning attribute dice, defining distinctions, and establishing your relationships among the various characters. As you play, you can upgrade your training packages, step up your relationships, and customize your own Hammerhead vehicle.

## GENRE AND TROPES

*Hammerheads* is a love letter to *Thunderbirds*, the ITC television show by Gerry Anderson, in all of its various incarnations. This game aims for the feel of an action-adventure TV show without a lot of violence or conflict, instead shifting the driving motivation to natural and man-made disasters. This also means it's inspired by disaster movies from *Only the Brave* and *Dante's Peak* to *San Andreas* and *Contagion*. The heroes are the brave and the bold, but they have their own problems and baggage from a life spent on the front lines of catastrophes.

### CRISIS RESPONSE

Hammerhead agents are recruited for their willingness to go into dangerous and volatile situations and do what they can to solve problems, rescue endangered people and wildlife, and deal with threats from both environmental and corporate origins. They're not mild-mannered, they don't have better things to do, and they're not in it for the money. A Hammerhead agent, regardless of their background or specific skills, is there to do what needs to be done on a team of others who are likewise committed to this line of work.

### CLIMATE CHANGE

Regardless of what some politicians and corporate interests want you to believe, the world's climate is damaged. Over the last hundred years, human activity has altered weather patterns; and in the world of *Hammerheads* this continues to worsen. Floods and erosion from rising sea levels, polar ice shelves dropping tons of ice into the ocean and creating tsunamis, widescale firestorms and heat waves, and monstrous hurricanes and ice storms are all symptoms of this shift. Isolated extinction events have begun to hit every continent on the planet, and the race to respond to these long-term problems has consumed world governments even as they are stymied by opposition.

# WHAT YOU NEED TO PLAY

To play *Hammerheads*, you need this *Game Handbook*, enough dice for each player and the GM, a copy of the character file (page 246) for each player, and a copy of the vehicle file (page 247). Share around a copy of the training package descriptions if needed.

## CORTEX PRIME RULES AND VARIANTS

This setting uses **attributes** Physical, Mental, and Social (page 49), **roles**—renamed training packages (page 58), **relationships** (page 55), and **distinctions** (page 50). The distinctions define your character's former life and background, their approach or attitude, and their most identifiable quirk or quality. **SFX** (page 61) for each of these three types of distinction are fixed, and all of them are available at the start of the game.

*Hammerheads* uses standard tests but difficulty dice are replaced with **crisis pools** (page 33). Almost all scenes are either action scenes with players deciding what their Hammerhead agents do while the crisis pools represent a gradually worsening threat, or downtime with players recovering from their missions and working on their relationships. Contests aren't used in this game. **Stress** (page 39) is used and applied to the attributes, along with **complications** (page 36) that are created during play and made worse by the crisis pools on the GM's turn.

## AGENT ATTRIBUTES

Every Hammerhead agent has the Physical, Mental, and Social attributes. These are a prime set for the characters and they're also how any stress is applied to the agents during the mission. *Hammerheads* uses the **Shaken and Stricken mod** (page 42) to represent targeted damage, injury, or harm. When an agent is harmed or affected by a crisis pool, the effect die is applied to one of the agent's three attributes, and this can reduce the agent's ability to remain effective on the mission.

## AGENT TRAINING PACKAGES

Every PC in *Hammerheads* has a die rating in each of the fourteen specialist areas, called **training packages**. These reflect the agent's capability in undertaking specific rescue or crisis management operations. A training package follows the same rules as roles (page 58); training packages are considered a prime set for *Hammerheads*.

- **Crowd Control:** Dealing with masses of people in stressful situations, riots, or panic.
- **Emergency Medical:** First response medical assistance, triage, and paramedic treatment.
- **Firefighting:** Dealing with fires and arson.



- **Hammerhead Pilot:** Piloting any of the Hammerhead vehicles.
- **HAZMAT:** Dealing with chemical-based hazards, toxic spills, gas, radiation, and pollutants.
- **High-Altitude Recovery:** Rescues in the air, such as on mountains or aircraft, using cables or parachutes.
- **Legal Specialist:** Understanding local, state, federal, and other laws and the application of laws in crisis situations.
- **Logistics:** Understanding the flow of resources to and from crisis areas and rescue operations.
- **Marine Recovery:** Rescues at sea and on lakes, on boats or ships, and underwater.
- **Network Specialist:** Resolving issues connected to or involving information or computer networks and systems.
- **Mechanic:** Using, repairing, modifying, and understanding machines, engines, vehicles, generators, and appliances.
- **Tactical Response:** Dealing with armed, military, or security problems using counter-terrorism or law enforcement.
- **Technical Analyst:** Understanding electrical systems, including power networks, cables, broadcast devices.
- **Urban Recovery:** Rescues in cities, inside buildings, underground tunnels, cramped spaces, and traffic.



## AGENT RELATIONSHIPS

Each Hammerhead agent has a relationship of some kind with the other agents on their team, which defines how they see or associate with the other agents and the nature of the backstory they share. Each relationship has a die rating. Choose a pre-built relationship from the list below. Relationships aren't necessarily reciprocal; your relationship die rating with another agent might be a different size than theirs for your agent. If there's any disagreement about the backstory, the players should settle that before the game starts.

For each agent on the team, one of the following is assigned, from the perspective of your agent. That agent...

| | |
|---|---|
| ...saved my life | ...owes me big |
| ...is a troublemaker | ...knows their stuff |
| ...is a liability | ...is dependable |
| ...is good for a laugh | |

Use relationship dice when your Hammerhead agent is assisting or helping another agent to perform a test. *Hand over your relationship die with that agent to that agent's player for their dice pool.* When assisting another agent, it's always your relationship die with them that's added, not their relationship die with you.

## AGENT DISTINCTIONS

Every Hammerhead agent has three distinctions, each of which covers a different element of the agent's background, personality, and approach to their work. Each distinction also has three specific built-in SFX and is rated at ◆8.

### YOUR LIFE BEFORE:

- Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's ◆8 for a ▼4.
- Spend a PP to step up an attribute when you connect to your old life.
- Add 6 to the crisis pool to double your attribute die when you connect to your old life.

### YOUR APPROACH OR ATTITUDE:

- Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's ◆8 for a ▼4.
- Spend a PP to reroll your dice when you align with your true nature.
- Add 6 to the crisis pool to step up your training package die when you align with your true nature.

### YOUR QUIRK OR QUALITY:

- Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's ◆8 for a ▼4.
- Spend a PP to double your relationship die when your assistance embraces your quirk or quality.
- Add 6 to the crisis pool to step up a relationship die you include in your pool when you embrace your quirk or quality.



# HAMMERHEAD VEHICLES

A Hammerhead team is assigned to and operates from their own Hammerhead vehicle. The name is a retronym of **High-Altitude Multi-Mission Emergency Response Headquarters**, and this more or less says it all: the team can operate out of the Hammerhead no matter where they are in the world, achieve a position in the upper atmosphere without undue strain on the vehicle, and respond to almost any problem or crisis. Usually, the Hammerhead vehicle connects with a supply vehicle to restock necessary recourses while on a mission.

## CREW AND PASSENGERS

Each Hammerhead has a cockpit area that seats four including the pilot, with additional agents sitting in one of the cargo areas dedicated to mission specialists or personnel. When needed, a Hammerhead vehicle can ferry up to thirty people out of a disaster area at a time, or sixty if it jettisons its resource module.

## HAMMERHEAD TRAITS

There's a little customization to do before you start play, but not much.

- **Distinctions:** Resource Support Vehicle, Top of the Line, Broad-Spectrum Sensors (all work as standard, with the default *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4).
- **Attributes:** Systems, Engines, Frame (all start at 8, per "Vehicle Traits" on page 216; choose one attribute and step up to 10).
- **Resource Pools:** Medical Supplies, Food/Shelter, Tactical Support, IT/Network Support, Land/Sea/Air Support (base of 6 in each, assign 7x 6 among the pools, maximum of 6 6 6 6 on any pool; see "Resource Pools," to the right).






## RESOURCE POOLS

Each Hammerhead vehicle has multiple pools of dice that function as prop resources (page 56). Any player can spend them out of the pool, rolling them and adding the highest rolling die to their total for a test. For example, if a player chooses to spend 6 6 6 from a pool, they roll all three dice and choose the highest result. The other dice are discarded—they do not go back into the resource pool. The resources in question must align with the test they're being used for; players who spend the dice come up with some narrative for what that resource is and how it's being applied.

Resources must be committed to a specific test before the test is rolled, and once spent out of the pool, they aren't refreshed until a downtime scene (page 89), or until a player adds a 6 to a crisis pool to refresh one. The latter effect represents a knuckle-biting last-minute airdrop of supplies that may make things worse. Any player may spend resources and refresh resources.

One player is assigned the role of tracking resources in each mission. Before each mission, this player, with the advice of the group as a whole, decides how many dice the pools contain for that mission. This decision can't be changed after the mission starts, but the team is given the briefing before any dice need to be assigned. Each pool starts with 6, and the team may assign 7x 6 among the five pools. No pool may have a rating of more than 6 6 6 6.

- **Medical Supplies:** Antiseptics, medicines, vaccinations, trauma surgery tools, oxygen tanks, etc.
- **Food/Shelter:** Portable stoves and lanterns, canned goods, purified water, pop-up tents, awnings, cold-weather beds.
- **Tactical Support:** Firearms, explosives, barriers, signals, smoke grenades, flak jackets, riot shields.
- **IT/Network Support:** Hardbody laptops, rugged tablets, portable WiFi hotspots, satellite dishes, cabling, power supplies.
- **Land/Sea/Air Support:** Life rafts, parachutes, rigging, portable outboard motors, flares, inflatable pontoons, SCUBA.





# CREATING AN AGENT CHARACTER

Creating your character in *Hammerheads* involves answering a few questions about who your agent is and where they came from before they joined the Hammerhead team. It uses the scratch-built character creation method, rather than archetypes or pathways.

1. **Assign dice to attributes:** 10, 8, and 6, or all three (PHYSICAL, MENTAL, and SOCIAL) at 8.
2. **Assign dice to training packages:** one at 10, four at 8, four at 6, and the rest at 4 (see list on page 152).
3. **Define your three distinctions:** your life before, your approach or attitude, and your quirk or quality (page 153).
4. **Choose a relationship for each of the other agents and assign dice:** one at 10, one at 8, the rest at 6.
5. **Finish your Hammerhead agent:** write a physical description, describe your personality, and pick your callsign (such as Ricochet, Thunderbolt, Bigwig, Hogshead, Little Bear).

# GROWING CHARACTERS

*Hammerheads* uses the **session callback system** (page 82)—in this case, mission callback—of character growth, here representing past missions that stand out as being significant moments in the lives of the Hammerhead team. If a mission takes more than one session to complete, only record the mission on the log after the mission ends, not after each session ends. Logged missions may be used on future missions for callbacks or they can be checked off for training.

## TRAINING UP

Here is a summary of the advancements and upgrades players might spend their missions on. Note that no trait may be raised higher than 12.

- **Rewrite a relationship at the same die rating:** 1 mission
- **Step up a relationship or training package:** 2 missions
- **Rewrite a distinction:** 3 missions
- **Step up one attribute and step down another:** 4 missions

# GMCS

*Hammerheads* uses a variation on minor GMCs. If the GMC is important enough to be included in any dice pools—acting against the agents or aiding the agents in their efforts—they get a die rating. Otherwise GMCs typically show up as complications; the GM might produce OVERBEARING LAW ENFORCEMENT OFFICER 8 as a complication, for example. The focus in *Hammerheads* is on the Hammerhead agents, their Hammerhead vehicle, and the crisis pools associated with the disaster on their mission. Other characters tend to just be elements associated with those, flavorful descriptions, or the like.

If your player group isn't very large, you might consider creating GMC Hammerhead agents to flesh out the team. Create them just as you would a player's Hammerhead agent, including noting down their relationships so that, when assisting the player agents, their die ratings are defined ahead of time.

# DISASTERS

Every Hammerhead mission is in response to some kind of disaster, either one that's ongoing or one that's imminent. Hammerhead teams aren't sent out on patrol, or to clean up, or to rebuild; someone else handles that, overseen by the World Crisis Agency. The Hammerheads have one job, and it's to deal with some kind of natural or man-made crisis as it's happening.

## TYPES OF DISASTER

Each session has a primary disaster to deal with, and sometimes there are secondary concerns that make the Hammerheads' jobs difficult. Even a single disaster is usually made up of several smaller issues that together create the crisis. The following are some examples.

**Floods:** Rising tides provoked by offshore storms, or icemelt bursting the banks of rivers, or damaged dams that lead to submerged streets, cars, houses, and property, as well as contaminated water, power outages, and erosion.

**Wildfires:** Forested areas or vegetation set alight by arson, carelessness, lightning strikes, or volcanic activity, and which creates fast-moving flames, extreme heat, particulate air pollution, destruction of homes and property, weather patterns.

**Earthquakes:** Shifting tectonic plates or crumple zones within the earth that produce temblors leading to collapsed buildings, cracks in roadways, fires, explosions, mudslides, and disruption of power and traffic.

**Cyclones:** High-intensity air masses rotating around a central low-pressure area, creating heavy rain, high winds, thunderstorms, tornados, floods, lightning, widespread destruction, and power outages.

**Rogue Transport:** Runaway trains with broken brakes, airplanes with systems failure, ships with impact damage or without steering capability, and other forms of transport that involve passengers or potential crashes leading to explosions, loss of life, and property damage.

**Avalanches:** Snow pack, scree, or rock that's dislodged by vibrations or tremors and slides down the side of mountains, sweeping aside trees, buildings, people, and roads, often trapping people in isolated locations without means of support.

**Chemical Spills:** Toxic waste from factories dumped into streams, rivers, lakes, or seas, or oil spills from container vessels, or irradiated material from nuclear plants, that spread out and contaminate large areas and threaten people and wildlife.

**Tsunamis:** Enormous displaced water masses appearing as a series of waves that collide with coastal regions or lakes and cause widespread destruction of life and property, sweeping aside cars, people, ships, wharves, and buildings.





# DISASTERS IN PLAY: USING CRISIS POOLS

Every disaster is broken down into one or more crisis pools; the size and composition of the pools reflect the scale and intensity of the disaster and its elements. The primary role of the crisis pools is to act as the opposition for the Hammerhead team's efforts to deal with the disaster. Their secondary role is to act as a threat to the Hammerhead team and create or worsen complications at the disaster site.

## CHOOSING THE CRISIS POOL SIZE

A typical crisis pool is anywhere from 6 6 6 to 6x 12, based on the following guidelines:

**Number of Dice:** How long the specific element may take to resolve or address. Three dice can be dealt with fairly quickly by competent specialists. Six dice might require multiple specialists or more time.

- Is it large?
- Does it involve dealing with a lot of victims or at-risk individuals?
- Is it spread out over an area?

**Size of Dice:** How difficult the element is to resolve or address. Crisis pools based on 6 aren't complicated or tricky. Pools based on 12 are extremely complex, difficult, and risky.

- Is it deadly?
- Are there many moving parts?
- Is it in a remote or hard to access area?
- Is it entangled in a structure or system that would be harmed if it were moved or addressed?

Aim to have at least two and no more than four separate crisis pools, with one or more of them rated at 8 8 8 or higher. Two crisis pools of 6 6 6 don't present much of a challenge for any Hammerhead team.

Use the Crisis Pools sheet on page 247, or write up an index card or some other kind of note for each crisis pool and put the appropriate number of dice on each one. When the Hammerhead team arrives on site, make it clear what each pool represents. ("This is the runaway train. This one over here is the hacker who's infiltrated the railway system's signal network. And this one's the mudslide on the track just outside the town.")



## TARGETING THE CRISIS POOLS

When a Hammerhead agent wants to do something to reduce the crisis pool, they assemble their own pool and roll against the crisis pool they're trying to reduce. The crisis pool is rolled first to establish the difficulty; if the Hammerhead agent's roll beats that difficulty, they succeed at their action. The effect die generated either eliminates a die from the crisis pool (if the effect die is bigger than a die in the crisis pool) or steps down a die in the pool (if the effect die is equal to or smaller than a die in the crisis pool). The player may choose to apply this effect to any die in the pool.

When any die in the pool is stepped down below 4, it's removed. When a crisis pool is reduced to no dice, that particular aspect of the disaster is entirely dealt with.

If a player rolls one or more hitches, the GM may create a complication or place stress on one of the Hammerhead agent's attributes. The GM spends a die out of the crisis pool to create a complication or to inflict stress at a rating equal to the die that rolled the hitch. So, if a player rolls a 1 on a 10 in their pool, the GM may spend a die from the crisis pool (even one as small as a 4) to create a 10 complication or 10 stress. The GM may spend more than one die out of the crisis pool to activate additional hitches and create additional complications or stress. The GM can't step up existing complications or stress on a player's turn, nor may they activate multiple hitches to create a single stepped up complication or stress. It's strictly one-for-one when a player generates hitches.

| RUNAWAY TRAIN'S STARTING RATING | DIFFICULTY TO BEAT FOR BELOW TABLE |
|---|---|
| 8 8 8 8 | 12 |

| AGENT'S ROLL | TOTAL | OUTCOME | TRAIN RATING |
|---|---|---|---|
| 3 6 5 | 11 | nothing | unchanged |
| 6 8 5 | 14 | eliminate a die | 8 8 8 |
| 5 7 9 | 16 | step down a die | 8 8 8 6 |
| 1 6 3 | 9 | GM creates a 6 complication or stress | 8 8 8 |
| 1 6 1 | 6 | GM creates a 10 and a 6 complication or stress | 8 8 |

## CRISIS POOLS AS THREATS

On the GM's turn, active crisis pools may do one of two things: threaten a Hammerhead agent or strengthen the crisis pool.

To threaten an agent, the GM rolls the crisis pool as if it were some kind of attack, describing how that part of the disaster is doing something to the Hammerhead agent, or producing some sort of new wrinkle involving them. Obviously, most disasters aren't intelligent, so this "attack" is just a stroke of bad luck or worsening of the situation, not something malicious.

On the other hand, some disasters have a human cause or human element that creates problems for the Hammerheads, so this also represents that. The GM rolls the crisis pool, creates a difficulty, and the player must test against that difficulty. If they fail, the GM chooses an effect die from the crisis pool, applying it either as stress or a complication. This does not take dice out of the crisis pool! The GM may also use the effect die to step up existing stress, or an existing complication.

| HACKER CRISIS POOL'S ROLL | DIFFICULTY TO BEAT FOR BELOW TABLE |
|---|---|
| 2 3 6 | 9 |

| AGENT'S ROLL | TOTAL | OUTCOME |
|---|---|---|
| 3 2 8 | 11 | Hacker does not succeed |
| 2 3 5 | 8 | GM creates a 8 complication or stress or steps up an existing complication or stress |
| 5 4 4 | 9 | Crisis pool's effect die is stepped down to 6 but is still applied as a complication or stress |

The crisis pool can instead strengthen on the GM's turn. This is as simple as stepping up the lowest die in the pool by one. There's no roll needed; the GM just describes the way things are getting worse and steps up the die. If all of the dice are the same size already, then one steps up to a bigger size. Alternately, the crisis pool may absorb an existing complication into it, replacing a die in the pool with the complication's die. This reflects that the crisis itself is now increasing in intensity from the cumulative effect of problems around the disaster area. For example, if an agent has a FLUSTERED BY THE DETAILS 10 complication, the GM can take it from the agent and replace a 6 in the crisis pool with that 10. The complication is no longer attached to the agent, but the same issue the agent was dealing with is now a much more prevalent problem.





**Hammerhead One** has Systems 10: it's more agile and possesses more precise sensors and instruments

# RUNNING HAMMERHEADS

*Hammerheads* missions are formulaic and episodic. If you can fit an entire mission into a session, that's ideal. If you have to break a mission across multiple sessions, end on a cliffhanger or introduce something new and dangerous to keep the players hanging until next time.

## YOUR FIRST SESSION

As a group, the players should have created their Hammerhead team, picked relationships, and decided which of their Hammerhead vehicle's traits is stepped up to 10 for their game. Choose the appropriate Hammerhead vehicle based on which trait was stepped up. Mark it on the vehicle file (page 247).



**Hammerhead Two** has Engines 10: it's faster and has more power and range

To establish a mission for the team, pick one of the disaster types. Pay attention to which training packages your team has picked, especially those at 10 and 8. If there's an agent with High-Altitude Recovery 10, consider including a disaster on a mountain, a skyscraper, or involving aircraft. If there's an agent with Logistics 10, consider a disaster that requires the movement of resources and supplies as a key part of dealing with it.

Once the disaster is chosen, take two index cards and write up two crisis pools at 8 8 8 8. Split the disaster into two concrete crises that the Hammerhead team needs to resolve.

As the mission brief comes into the Hammerhead vehicle from the World Crisis Agency, set dice on top of the index cards and explain what the disaster is, where it's located, and other details. The players may then assign their Hammerhead resource pools based on the information you provide them.



**Hammerhead Three** has Frame 10: it's bigger, tougher, and more rugged

## WHO GOES FIRST?

One Hammerhead agent is assigned as the team leader. The players can nominate who this is, or the GM might select the assignment based on the mission or some other criteria. It's the leader's responsibility to determine the order in which all of the agents and the crisis pools act. Unlike the standard action order, this is pre-set at the beginning of each sequence; each team member takes their turn, the GM takes a turn for each crisis pool, and then the sequence ends. The GM can, at any point, spend a 6 or greater crisis die to have a crisis pool act out of this assigned order as an additional turn, but only one crisis pool may do this per sequence. Once the sequence is over, the team leader chooses the order for the next round.

Team leaders should keep the advice of the other players in mind when determining the action order. If something happens to the team leader (such as taking too much stress resulting in them being taken out), another agent must take over their duties as team leader.

On their turn, a player can ask for assistance or help from other agents, assuming the circumstances permit. Agents can't lend aid to more than one agent per sequence, although lending aid does not use up that agent's own turn in the action order. Frame all assistance and activity in terms of where the agents are, which crisis they're dealing with, and so on.

## DISASTER AVERTED!

Once all of the active crisis pools are taken care of, the disaster has been resolved; anything else is clean-up, which is someone else's job. If there are complications still present, they expire or are considered to be resolved as the disaster itself is over. Complications don't prevent the disaster from being resolved, but as the GM you might consider carrying one or more of them over to the next mission if that seems appropriate. For example, an agent with Loss of Confidence 8 might carry this complication over to the next mission, and need time in the field to shake off the insecurity.





TEN TEN STUDIOS

## WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

All players recover any stress to their attributes, remove any complications that aren't sticking around, and log the mission. Missions can be spent to grow their Hammerhead agents' traits. If the resource pools on the Hammerhead vehicle were refreshed during play, the team gets an additional resource die for their next mission. This should be logged as well.

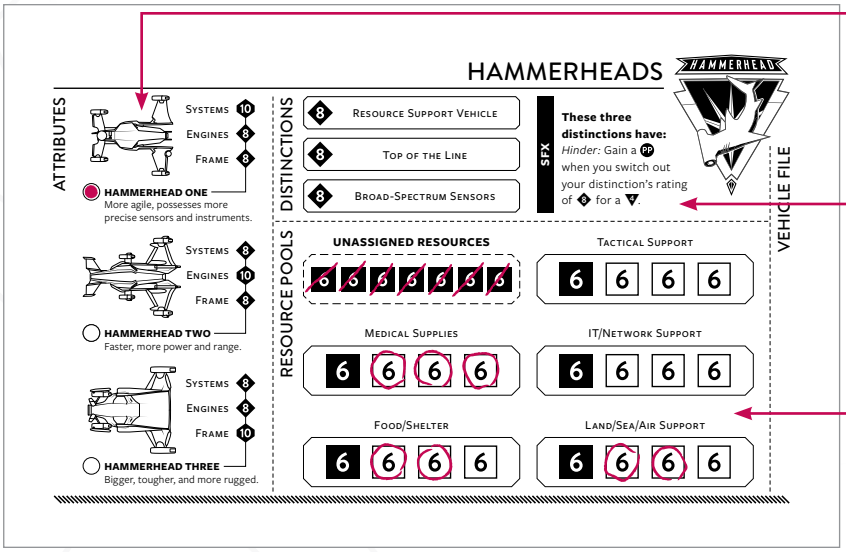
The group can play multiple sessions like this, one after another, without any real connective tissue beyond the character growth, the changes in relationships, and the number of logged missions.

However, you can start to build an ongoing, longer-term narrative if you choose to. This might include any number of story threads, such as:

- A rival Hammerhead team or agency
- A suspicious or interfering politician or lobbying group
- An antagonistic or irresponsible company that contributes to the disasters
- Something extraordinary, such as evidence of super-science, aliens, or the occult

# HOW TO FILL OUT YOUR HAMMERHEADS AGENT AND VEHICLE FILE

*Hammerheads* has both character and vehicle files. For these examples, we put together an agent character named Uhtred Ran (callsign "Cold Harbor") and prepped one of the Hammerhead vehicles for his first mission: rescuing victims of an avalanche.




1. Pick the best vehicle for your mission parameters by filling in a circle next to either Hammerhead One, Two, or Three based on which trait they stepped up to 10. Uhtred wants to find survivors after the avalanche, so we picked One for its precise sensors and instruments. Note that any vehicle would work; it depends on what the PCs want to accomplish.

2. All Hammerhead vehicles come with 3 distinctions unlocked, all with the same *Hinder* SFX.

3. All resource pools come with at least one 6 already allocated. Since this would be a remote rescue with some possible casualties in a harsh environment, we maxed out Medical Supplies and put 6 6 in Food/Shelter and Land/Sea/Air Support.

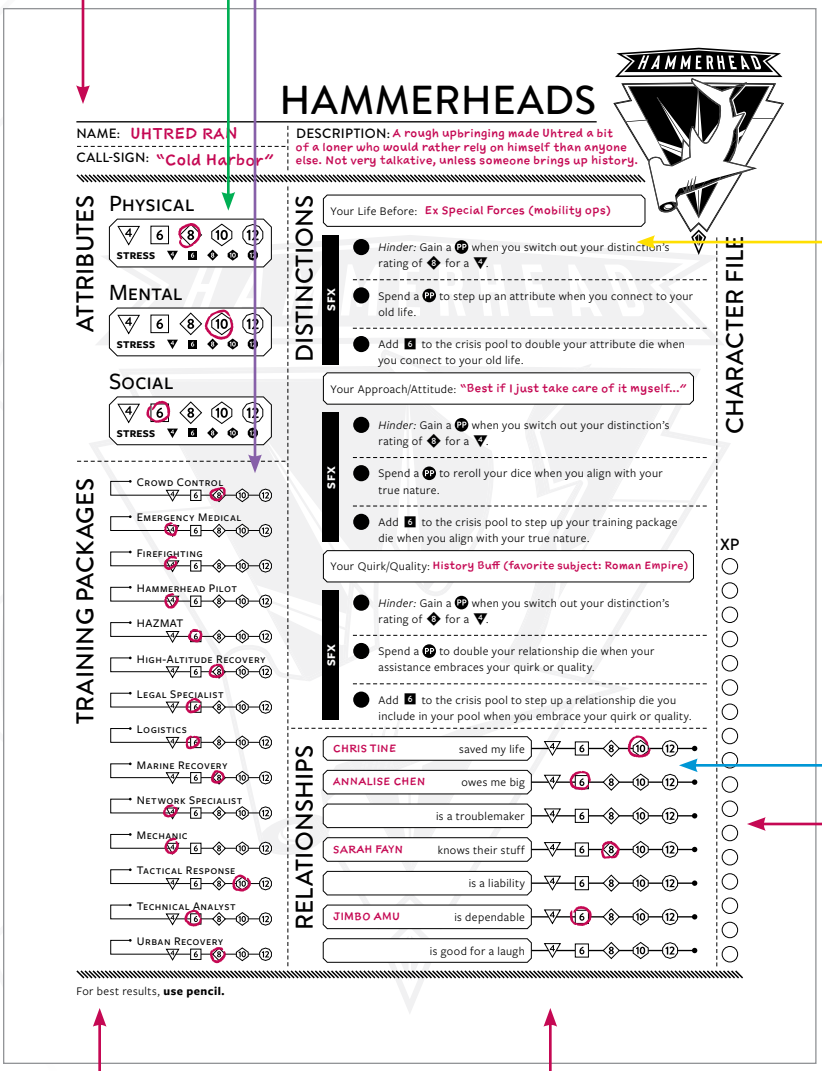
1 Before writing anything down, we already have an idea of who Uhtred is. Having a rough childhood, he grew up a loner and joined the military before he joined the Hammerheads. His call-sign, "Cold Harbor," is based on his inability to feel at ease with people and in places that are home for now.

2 Next we assign ratings to our agent's attributes. They can all be set at d8 or, alternatively, one at d10, one at d8, and one at d6. Based on Uhtred's history and personality, we assign his **Mental** at d10, his **Physical** at d8, and his **Social** at d6. Please note the stress track under each attribute. *Hammerheads* uses the Shaken and Stricken mod (page 42).

3 All packages start at d4, but you can bump four to d6, four to d8, and a single package to d10. We decide that Uhtred is a tactical-minded loner with more than a few crises under his belt, so we put his strongest rating in **Tactical Response** and then distribute the rest to reflect his military experience. We bumped **Crowd Control**, **High-Altitude Recovery**, **Marine Recovery**, and **Urban Recovery** to d8 as these make sense as situations he would have encountered in the past. With that reasoning, we also bump **HAZMAT**, **Legal Specialist**, **Logistics**, and **Technical Analyst** to d6 as analogous skills.

4 Now we can flesh out Uhtred as a person with the three distinctions. Each comes with three SFX that are all unlocked from the beginning. This gives a framework to roleplaying that also allows you to use a number of mechanics to gain advantages throughout the session. With a rough childhood, ex-military experience, and being a loner, that fills out each distinction easily.

5 Finally, we define Uhtred's relationships with his fellow agents. All of them start at d6; step one up to d10 and one to d8. There aren't enough players to fill all the fields, and that's okay! Who knows who Uhtred might meet during his missions.



# HAMMERHEADS

NAME: UHTRED RAN
CALL-SIGN: "Cold Harbor"
DESCRIPTION: A rough upbringing made Uhtred a bit of a loner who would rather rely on himself than anyone else. Not very talkative, unless someone brings up history.

ATTRIBUTES
Physical — STRESS
Mental — STRESS
Social — STRESS

TRAINING PACKAGES
Crowd Control d8
Emergency Medical d6
Firefighting d4
Hammerhead Pilot d4
HAZMAT d6
High-Altitude Recovery d6
Legal Specialist d6
Logistics d6
Marine Recovery d8
Network Specialist d4
Mechanic d4
Tactical Response d10
Technical Analyst d6
Urban Recovery d8

DISTINCTIONS
Your Life Before: Ex Special Forces (mobility ops)
SFX
- Hinder: Gain a PP when you switch out your distinction's rating of d8 for a d4.
- Spend a PP to step up an attribute when you connect to your old life.
- Add d6 to the crisis pool to double your attribute die when you connect to your old life.

Your Approach/Attitude: "Best if I just take care of it myself..."
SFX
- Hinder: Gain a PP when you switch out your distinction's rating of d8 for a d4.
- Spend a PP to reroll your dice when you align with your true nature.
- Add d6 to the crisis pool to step up your training package die when you align with your true nature.

Your Quirk/Quality: History Buff (favorite subject: Roman Empire)
SFX
- Hinder: Gain a PP when you switch out your distinction's rating of d8 for a d4.
- Spend a PP to double your relationship die when your assistance embraces your quirk or quality.
- Add d6 to the crisis pool to step up a relationship die you include in your pool when you embrace your quirk or quality.

RELATIONSHIPS
CHRIS TINE — saved my life — d10
ANNALISE CHEN — owes me big — d6
is a troublemaker
SARAH FAYN — knows their stuff — d8
is a liability
JIMBO AMU — is dependable — d6
is good for a laugh

CHARACTER FILE
XP

For best results, **use pencil.**

**Note:** As these are meant to be multi-session sheets, we recommend using pencil if you're not using a digital character file. Attributes and other traits can change during the course of a series.

**Note:** Use the margins for notes or to keep track of assets (which can become signature assets with XP).

## THE XP TRACK

Use the XP column to keep track of your completed missions. Each mission counts as a single XP point which you can use in different ways to advance your character. See "Growing Characters" on page 82. When XP is spent, erase the filled circles or just cross them out.

## THE VEHICLE FILE

Don't forget to include the vehicle file—for what's a Hammerhead agent without their Hammerhead? See previous page for how to fill out a vehicle file. It goes hand-in-hand with the Hammerhead character file. Always fill a vehicle file out for every mission according to its needs and goals.

PRINTABLE FILES ON PAGES 246-247

ALSO AVAILABLE AT CORTEXRPG.COM

# TRACE 2.0

*I didn't have it in me anymore. Twelve years on the force, if you don't count the eight months that I took off to recover from that raid in Amontillado. Twelve years of putting up with being passed over, ignored, shot at, spat at, nobody doing nothing to make things actually better in the neighborhoods I grew up in. Twelve years, putting on a tie every morning, putting on my shoes, slipping that badge into my pocket. One more case where the kids we're supposed to nail to the floor after hauling them into the precinct get sent upstate and the real perpetrators get away. I just couldn't.*

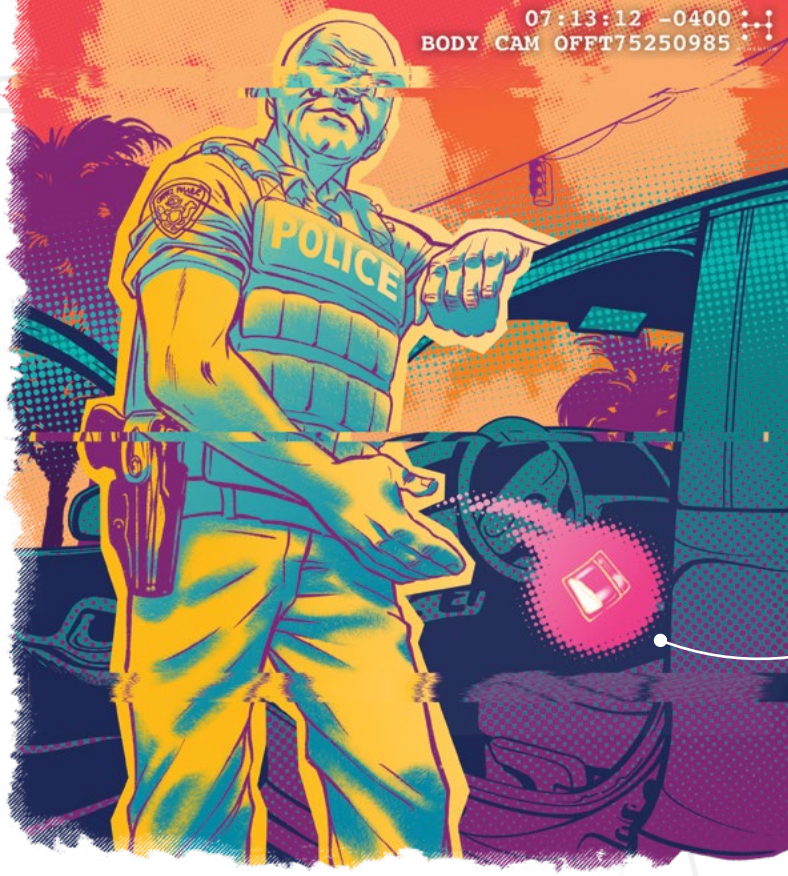
*Then the power goes off, the lines go down, there's smoke, there's fire. Whole city shut down for four days. Woke everybody the hell up and hit the reset button.*

*Now I'm assigned to a taskforce where my voice is heard, my gut tells me we're making a difference. City's shaking off the dust and climbing out of the wreckage, and we're here to help make sure that this time, no kid has to shoulder the blame. No neighborhood has to put up with how it used to be. I don't know how many more years I have left in me, but I'm here until it gets better or until it kills me.*

Law enforcement, criminal justice, and emergency medicine are core institutions in an American democracy, but corruption has been undermining them for a long time. *TRACE 2.0* builds on the original TRACE setting introduced in the *Classic Cortex Roleplaying Game* book, updating it for a new era and a new system: Cortex Prime. In *TRACE 2.0,* you play the cops, EMTs, lawyers, and investigators assembled in the wake of a citywide crisis to help rebuild a fictional West Coast city and root out corruption before it can take hold once again.

TRACE stands for **Targeted Response Anti-Corruption Engagement**. Unlike *Hammerheads,* TRACE squad members aren't here to take on disasters. They're not superhuman or gifted with amazing powers, like the endarchs of *Eidolon*. Each member of a TRACE squad is a highly qualified but deeply human person, brought together by a visionary new mayor to ensure that the citizens are free of inequality and protected from those who seek to exploit and divide them for profit and power.






# GENRE AND TROPES

*TRACE 2.0* seeks to emulate a television drama with some elements of a police procedural. There's action, but it's not the central aspect of the setting. Of all three settings in this book, *TRACE 2.0* draws the most from the scene-based structure laid out in Prime Scenes (page 86). Interpersonal drama is high on the list of GM responsibilities. In terms of the key tropes, *TRACE 2.0* puts the spotlight on corruption and change.

## CORRUPTION

Before the attack on the city's infrastructure, corruption was rife in Cortez City and San Narciso County. From Amontillado to the Norton Estates, from the Civic Center to the Ridgetop industrial sector, grift and pay-offs were covered up and reinforced by lies, misinformation, and violence. Now, as the city is under emergency management and much of the old networks are being rebuilt, corruption seeks to rise again within the city's many communities. Corruption at all levels leads to crime, poverty, bigotry, and division, and the TRACE teams are on the front line against it.

## CHANGE

Cortez City is a city in flux. The old ways of handling crime and law enforcement are changing, and not everyone is happy with it. Organized crime is struggling to return to the city and take back what it once held, but they're not alone—long-held traditions and those who benefited from them are hard to shift. The TRACE teams are the leading edge of that change, but they are as challenged by it as anyone. Can they organize and implement the new approach that the mayor is asking them to embrace, or do older methods prevail?

# WHAT YOU NEED TO PLAY

To play *TRACE 2.0* you need this *Game Handbook,* enough dice for each player and the GM, and copies of the character file (page 245) for each player. Share around the archetypes for everyone to look at.

## CORTEX PRIME RULES AND VARIANTS

This setting uses **affiliations** Solo, Partner, and Squad (page 48), **roles** (page 58), **talents** (page 66), **resources** (page 56), and **distinctions** (page 50). SFX exist as talents, so the distinctions only have the default "*Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4" SFX. Roles cover the various aspects of the TRACE squad's purview: forensics, investigation, legal, and so forth. Resources connect the characters to external sources of assistance, from contacts in other organizations to favored locations.

*TRACE 2.0* uses tests and contests—between GMCs and PCs, and sometimes between PCs. Scenes are set up to challenge the PCs, putting them in situations that may create stress. **Stress** (page 39) is organized into specific types: Afraid, Angry, Anxious, Exhausted, or Injured. Complications work as they normally do, usually as external hindrances or difficult circumstances.

*TRACE 2.0* uses **archetypes** (page 68) for character creation. GMs can use the archetypes to create new or modified archetypes. There's always a place for customization if desired.

## AFFILIATIONS

Each TRACE squad member is defined by how well they function under three specific conditions: when they're **solo**, when they're with a **partner**, and when they're with a larger **squad** of three or more members. The default for PCs is a 8 in each affiliation; starting PCs may choose to stick with that or assign a 10, a 8, and a 6 instead.

If a TRACE squad member is operating under one of these conditions and wants to change, they need to take steps to do so before they can use another affiliation. For example, if a squad member is moving through a warehouse with their Squad, they might signal one of the other members to join them down a flight of stairs to a basement area, thus putting them into the Partner condition. If they then suggest their partner go back upstairs, they've shifted to the Solo condition.



## ROLES

To represent the substantial number of skillsets possessed by TRACE squad members, this setting uses roles set up as broad, career-defined categories. They function as described on page 58. Characters start with a 10 in their primary role, a 8 in their two secondary roles, a 4 in a sub-par role, and 6 in the remaining three roles.

The roles in TRACE are as follows:

- **Forensics:** Gathering, processing, and evaluating physical evidence from crime scenes.
- **Investigation:** Gathering, analyzing, and assessing information and eye-witness evidence from multiple sources.
- **Legal:** Understanding and applying state and federal laws, in both civil and criminal cases.
- **Medicine:** Diagnosis, treatment, and prevention of disease and injury.
- **Psychology:** Recognition and treatment of behavioral conditions and disorders.
- **Tactics:** Use of weapons, procedures, and non-lethal methods to apprehend or incapacitate offenders.
- **Technology:** Use, repair, and application of computers, electronics, and gear in and out of the field.

## TALENTS

To distinguish characters with similar affiliation and role dice ratings, each starting TRACE squad member has two talents. Talents are grouped into role-based talents and general talents. Characters must take at least one general talent. Characters aren't required to take a role-based talent, and you must have at least a 8 in a role-based talent's associated role to take it. Additional talents can be acquired with experience but they're costly; it's less costly to switch out one talent for another.

Role-based talents are listed with each of the seven archetypes. General talents are listed here. Many refer to vices, which are discussed on page 173.

### BEFORE THE FALL

When you're pursuing a case linked to the Pride vice, you may step up one of your stress dice by one to double your Partner or Squad affiliation die for a test or contest. If you fail the test or contest, step up another stress die by one.

### BULL IN A CHINA SHOP

When you pick a fight with someone, step up your Injured stress and step down your Angry stress. Spend a PP to step down Angry twice.

### ECSTASY OF GOLD

When you're pursuing a case linked to the Greed vice, you may spend two of your resource dice to recover stress. If the resource dice are greater in size than the stress die, the stress is eliminated. If the resource dice are equal to or less than the stress die, the stress die is stepped down by one.

### FEET OF CLAY

When you're pursuing a case linked to the Sloth vice, you may add a 4 to any test or contest in order to step up your effect die by one. If you roll a hitch on the test or contest, the GM can step up your stress or create a complication without giving you a PP.

### GIVE ME SHELTER

When you turn tail and leave a tense scene to lay low, step up your Afraid stress and step down your Exhausted stress. Spend a PP to step down Exhausted twice.

### GREEN-EYED MONSTER

When you're pursuing a case linked to the Envy vice, you may step up your choice of stress by one to double your Partner or Squad affiliation die for the duration of one test or contest.

### I KNOW A GUY

When you spend a PP to create a contact-based asset, you may step up the asset by one (to 8).

### ONE FOR THE ROAD

When you take a drink on the job, step up your Exhausted stress and step down your Anxious stress. Spend a PP to step down Anxious twice.

### RIDE THE LIGHTNING

When you shoot up or take a hit of something narcotic, step up your Anxious stress and step down your Injured stress. Spend a PP to step down Injured twice.

### ROAD TO WELLNESS

When you're pursuing a case linked to the Gluttony vice, you may step down your affiliation die by one on a test or contest in order to step down your choice of stress dice before you roll.

### SEEING RED

When you're pursuing a case linked to the Wrath vice, you may step up your Angry stress by one to step up your role die by one on a test or contest.

### SOCIAL CENTER

When you're in the same scene as another PC, you can exchange up to PP PP PP with them (giving or taking). They must be willing to give or receive the PP for this to work. Step up your Anxious or Exhausted stress for each additional player character in the scene you want to exchange PP with beyond the first.

### TAKE A DARK TURN

When you throw yourself into your caseload, step up your Angry stress to step down your Afraid stress. Spend a PP to step down Afraid twice.

### THE HEART WANTS WHAT IT WANTS

When you're pursuing a case linked to the Lust vice, you may add one of your stress dice to your dice pool for a test or contest instead of the opposition. When you have resolved the test or contest, step that stress die up by one.

## RESOURCES

TRACE squad members have access to a wide range of resources. Their connection to, and the reliability of, these resources is expressed in the size of the die ratings attached; each resource also has specific tags indicating which roles it may be used to assist with.

Like standard resources described on page 56, a TRACE squad member's resources can be spent and rolled separately from a test or contest. The highest rolling die is added directly to the test or contest total. Spent dice are recovered later during the tag scene or may be recovered using a flashback.

The resource's die rating determines the number of role tags attached to it. A 10-based resource gives three tags; 8-based resources have two tags; and 6-based resources have one tag.

## STRESS

*TRACE 2.0* tracks "damage" using five types of stress: Afraid, Angry, Anxious, Exhausted, and Injured. Any time a character loses a contest, they take stress equal to the opposition's effect die to one of their stress types. The GM can also step up stress by passing over a PP when the player rolls a hitch, much like creating a complication. Stress usually starts at a 6 unless the effect die from a contest happens to be a 4. Otherwise, stress works as described on page 39.

Stress is used to create dice in the growth pool at the end of the session. Make a note of the highest die rating each of the five types of stress reaches each session, even if they're recovered during play. That die rating is added to the growth pool for the purposes of character growth. As many as five dice can be added in this way, one for each stress type, but if no stress was gained of a specific type, no growth die is added for that type.

Stress can be recovered in a scene shared with a second PC if that PC's player succeeds at a test with a difficulty that includes the stress die to be recovered. If the test succeeds, compare the effect die to the stress die. If the effect die is greater than the stress die, the stress is eliminated. If the effect die is equal to or smaller, the stress is stepped down by one. If the test fails, the second PC may choose to step up their own stress of that type to step down the first character's stress die by one.

At the end of any given session, all stress is stepped down by one if it wasn't already recovered.



# TRACE ARCHETYPES

Character creation in *TRACE 2.0* uses archetypes to quickly get started. Each archetype comes with the following preassigned traits: two distinctions, one talent, affiliation dice, role dice, and resources. Finishing the character file allows for some customization of the archetype. To create a character, do the following:

1. **Choose an archetype:** there are seven basic archetypes to choose from.
2. **Write a third distinction:** pick something that distinguishes your character from others like them.
3. **Pick a second talent:** pick one talent from the general list. *Alternately:* switch out the archetype's talent and pick two talents from the general list.
4. **Choose a name and any other defining background details.**

Each archetype comes with one 10 10 resource, one 8 8 resource, and two 6 6 resources. Players may switch around the specific resources if they wish, using the lists of suggested resources provided under each of the Cortez City locations.






## CRIME SCENE INVESTIGATOR

*You're usually the first on the scene if there's a homicide, break-in, or fatal accident. You've got the tools and training to perform forensic evidence collection and a lab at the Sheriff's Office to process it. As part of the TRACE team, you're involved the whole way through, as a consultant and an expert.*

### Affiliations

8 Solo | 6 Partner | 10 Squad

### Roles

Forensics 10
Investigation 8
Legal 6
Medicine 8
Psychology 6
Tactics 4
Technology 6

### Distinctions

Evidence Never Lies; Won't Get Fooled Again

### Resources

- San Narciso County Sheriff's Office (*Legal, Forensics, Technology*) 10 10
- TRACE HQ (*Legal, Tactics*) 8 8
- Four Seasons Nightclub (*Psychology*) 6 6
- Cortez City Chronicle (*Investigation*) 6 6

> **CSI Talent: Who Are You** When using Forensics to identify a suspect or victim, add 8 to your roll to create a forensic asset. Spend a PP to double the effect die (and therefore create two forensic assets).



## POLICE DETECTIVE

*You've spent years on the force, a veteran criminal investigator. Now you're assigned to a TRACE team, taking lead on a case from the time it gets called in to when the sentence is passed. You're perhaps the most involved in the local communities your team works in, even though you're fighting against considerable resistance to police presence.*

### Affiliations

10 Solo | 8 Partner | 6 Squad

### Roles

Forensics 8
Investigation 10
Legal 8
Medicine 4
Psychology 6
Tactics 6
Technology 6

### Distinctions

The Devil is in the Details; No Rest for the Wicked

### Resources

- TRACE HQ (*Legal, Tactics, Technology*) 10 10
- San Narciso County Sheriff's Office (*Legal, Forensics*) 8 8
- Nico Nova, Informant (*Investigation*) 6 6
- Quiet Path Counseling Services (*Psychology*) 6 6

> **PD Talent: Ear to the Ground** When you're gathering information in a community, add 8 to any *Investigation* test you make to create an asset. Spend a PP to add 6 stress to an informant you question (your choice of stress).



## DEPUTY DISTRICT ATTORNEY

*You're a rising star in the DA's office with hundreds of cases under your belt, many as first chair. Now assigned full time to the TRACE team, you handle legal briefs, advise City Hall and the Sheriff's Office of their limitations, and root out corruption in the justice system as you uncover it. You've made some enemies in the DA's office already, a sure sign that you're on the right track.*

### Affiliations

8 Solo | 10 Partner | 6 Squad

### Roles

Forensics 8
Investigation 6
Legal 10
Medicine 6
Psychology 8
Tactics 4
Technology 6

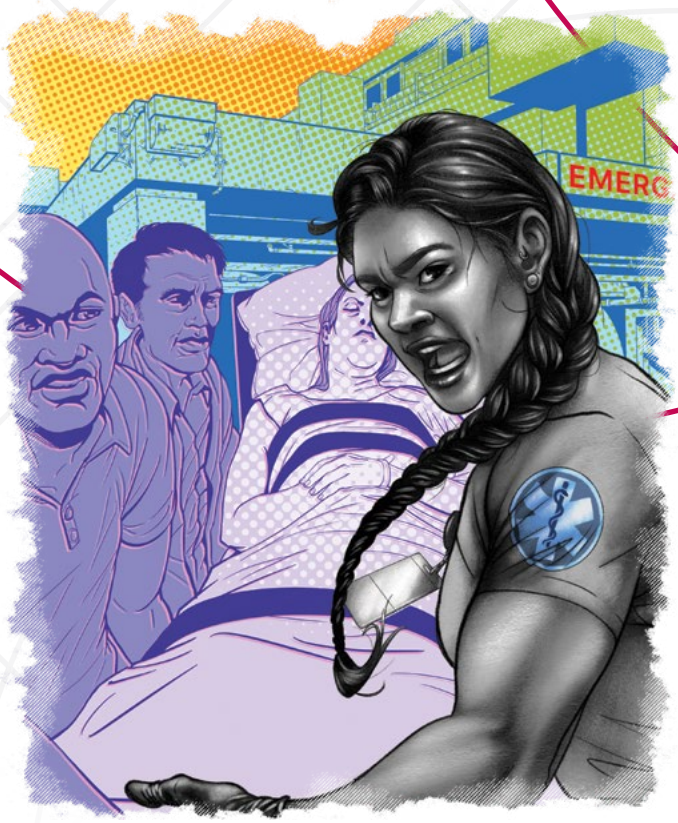
### Distinctions

I Serve the Law, Not the Dollar; Liberty is Messy

### Resources

- City Hall (*Legal, Investigation, Psychology*) 10 10
- TRACE HQ (*Forensics, Technology*) 8 8
- San Narciso County Sheriff's Office (*Tactics*) 6 6
- Hair of the Dog Irish Bar (*Psychology*) 6 6

> **DDA Talent: Line it Up** When you deliver a speech, statement, or series of questions to a suspect, witness, or defendant, keep an extra effect die and use it on your next roll as an asset. Spend a PP to step up the asset or give it to someone else.







## EMERGENCY MEDICAL TECHNICIAN

*Long weeks of no sleep, ambulance driving, transporting patients to the ER, and pairing up with cops on site still didn't prepare you for your assignment to the TRACE team. You're their EMT but you're also the primary liaison with first responders in general, because you speak their language. There's never any shortage of people needing your skills.*

### Affiliations

8 Solo | 8 Partner | 8 Squad

### Roles

Forensics 6
Investigation 4
Legal 6
Medicine 10
Psychology 6
Tactics 8
Technology 8

### Distinctions

Look for the Helpers; No Time Like the Present

### Resources

- Tristero Regional Hospital (*Medicine, Psychology, Technology*) 10 10
- TRACE HQ (*Legal, Tactics*) 8 8
- Four Seasons Nightclub (*Investigation*) 6 6
- SimpyriMed (*Medicine*) 6 6

> **EMT Talent: Take It On** Whenever you take time to aid or assist another character, you may take or step up 6 stress of your choice in order to step down one stress on that character. Spend a PP to repeat this.

## CRISIS NEGOTIATOR

*You started out as a volunteer counselor and now you talk people down from rooftops for a living. You have the bullhorn, the relatable voice, the clear vision of a path toward de-escalation. You're responsible for taking the energy out of a hot scene, redirecting angry civilians, and overseeing a crisis.*

### Affiliations

10 Solo | 6 Partner | 8 Squad

### Roles

Forensics 4
Investigation 8
Legal 6
Medicine 8
Psychology 10
Tactics 6
Technology 6

### Distinctions

Now We Do It My Way;
Listen to the Sound of My Voice

### Resources

- TRACE HQ (*Investigation, Tactics, Technology*) 10 10
- Quiet Path Counseling Services (*Medicine, Psychology*) 8 8
- San Narciso Sheriff's Office (*Legal*) 6 6
- City Hall (*Investigation*) 6 6

> **CN Talent: Sea of Calm** When a squad member fails a roll in a test or contest within earshot or on radio with you, you may give them your Squad die for their next roll with no additional consequences. Spend a PP to eliminate one of their complications, if any.







## SWAT

*You've been through months of rigorous training in managing high-stress law enforcement operations and you've honed your skills with the best of the best, but all of this muscle memory is born from bruises. You're not sure where you start and the ragged blue line ends.*

### Affiliations

6 Solo | 8 Partner | 10 Squad

### Roles

Forensics 4
Investigation 6
Legal 8
Medicine 6
Psychology 6
Tactics 10
Technology 8

### Distinctions

I Just Work Here; Easy Does It

### Resources

- TRACE HQ (*Legal, Tactics, Technology*) 10 10
- San Narciso County Sheriff's Department (*Forensics, Tactics*) 8 8
- Hair of the Dog Irish Bar (*Psychology*) 6 6
- Tristero Regional Hospital (*Medicine*) 6 6

> **SWAT Talent: Threat Assessment** Whenever you make a successful *Tactics* test against a target, the GM must tell you the target's highest rated trait. If you spend a PP, the GM also tells you the target's lowest rated trait.

## CYBERCRIME SPECIALIST

*There's no hiding the ignorance, viciousness, or desperation of humanity online. Every day you see the result of a veil of anonymity on society's worst. As much as you love technology, the hatred it fosters in people never fails to piss you off.*

### Affiliations

10 Solo | 6 Partner | 8 Squad

### Roles

Forensics 8
Investigation 8
Legal 6
Medicine 6
Psychology 6
Tactics 4
Technology 10

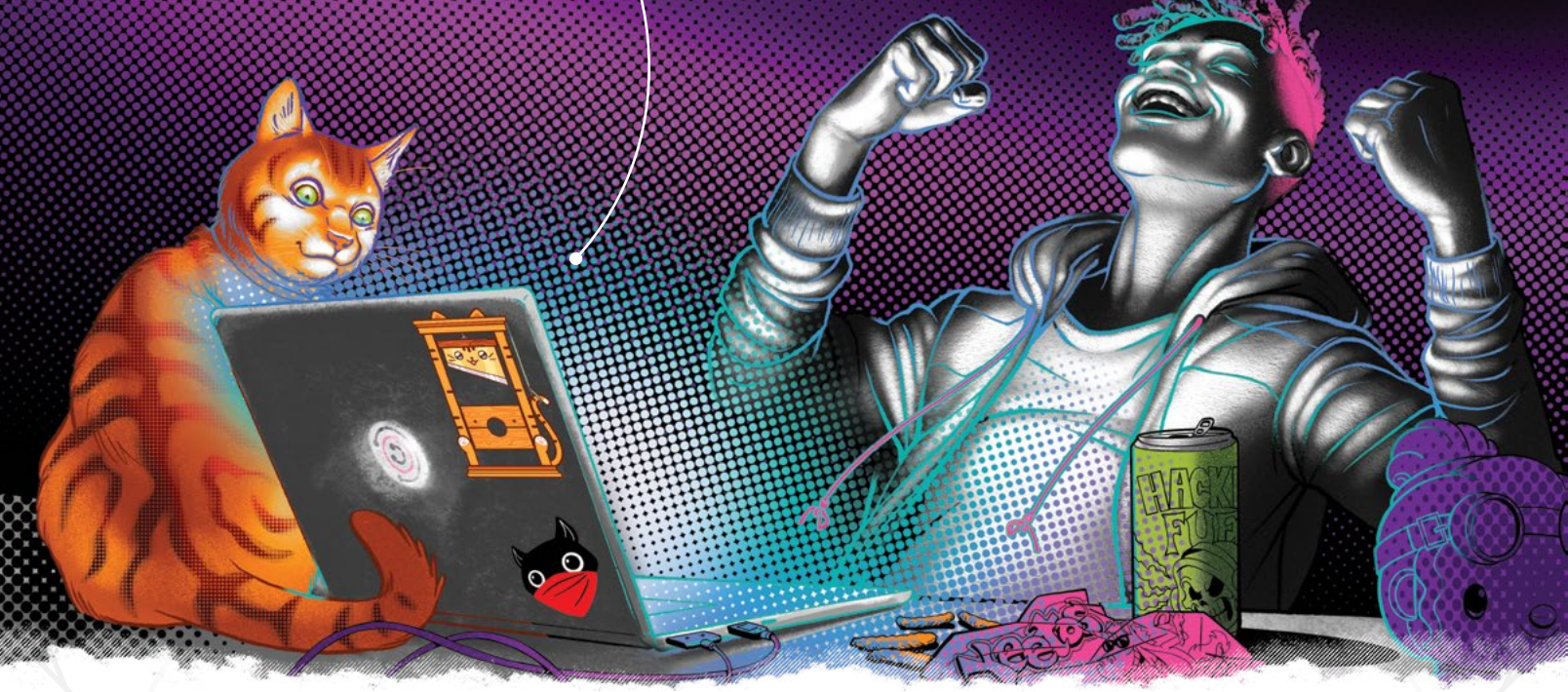
### Distinctions

I Can See for Miles and Miles;
Ghost in the Machine

### Resources

- TRACE HQ (*Forensics, Legal, Technology*) 10 10
- Rogue Link Syndicate (*Investigation, Technology*) 8 8
- San Narciso County Sheriff's Office (*Legal*) 6 6
- Humentum (*Technology*) 6 6

> **CS Talent: Are You Going to Log In or Whistle Dixie?** When you roll your *Technology* die in a test or contest against another computer expert, add 8 to your pool. If you spend a PP, double it to 8 8.



# GROWING CHARACTERS

*TRACE 2.0* uses the growth pool mechanic to advance characters between sessions. The growth pool is almost entirely generated by taking stress, since *TRACE 2.0* doesn't use statements.

During tag scenes, players may play out their character's examination of their struggle and pain from the session, perhaps in connection with significant events or actions that took place. Start with a base 6 6 growth pool; for each of the five stress types, add a growth die equal to the highest level of stress that was reached during the session. For example, if the character took ANGRY 10 stress and INSECURE 6 stress during the session, they can add a 10 and a 6 to their base growth pool, giving them 10 + 6 6 6 growth dice.

| STRESS RATINGS | GROWTH POOL |
|---|---|
| with no stress | 6 6 |
| with ANGRY 10 and INSECURE 6 | 6 6 6 10 |

The maximum size of a growth pool is five dice—if the character took more than three types of stress, replace the 6 6 base dice with the growth dice. If a character has taken no stress at all by the end of the session, they may still create a growth pool using 6 6. However, the total is equal to the single lowest rolling die, compared to the opposition. It's still possible to advance in this way, just significantly less likely.

## TRAINING UP

Players may choose one or more traits to add, replace, or step up. If they choose more than one, they must split their growth pool between the traits. For example, if a player has five dice in their growth pool (the maximum) they might choose to roll three dice to raise a role and two dice to rewrite a distinction.

Dice used to attempt growth are spent and go away after the session ends. Dice may be banked between sessions. The maximum size of the growth pool is capped at five, even with banked dice. If more than five dice are generated by the end of the session, keep only the five largest dice for the growth pool.

Roll the growth pool as a test versus the difficulty dice listed below.

- **Affiliation 12 12:** To switch around affiliation dice, stepping up one and stepping down another.
- **Distinction, Role, or New Talent 10 10:** To rewrite a distinction, step up a role, or add a talent.
- **Existing Talent or Resource 8 8:** To replace an existing talent with a new one or add a die to a resource.
- **Resource 6 6:** To step up a resource die rating or add a new 6 6 resource.

Unlike other tests, you can't use PP to affect the outcome of this one. Ignore all hitches. If you win, you get to step up your trait or add a new one. In this version of the growth pool, failure doesn't allow you to modify the trait, but you may bank a 6 growth die for next time for each growth test that fails.

**TRAINING GOAL**

Player wants to step up their role, MEDICINE 6 to 8. They have a growth pool of 6 6 6 10 from previous example.

| PC'S ROLL | PC'S TOTAL | GM'S ROLL | GM'S TOTAL |
|---|---|---|---|
| 3 3 4 9 | 13 | 4 6 | 10 |

Player beats the difficulty and steps up their MEDICINE 6 to 8

# GMCS IN TRACE

*TRACE 2.0* uses minor and major GMCs. Major GMCs have **vice traits** that replace the role traits of the PCs. They have at least two distinctions, and their affiliations are rated at either 8 baseline or a 6 baseline (6 is the most common, but important or significant GMCs should have 10). Here's an example of Donita Exardopolous, a corrupt official:

### DONITA EXARDOPOLOUS



Envy 6
Gluttony 6
Greed 10
Lust 6
Pride 8
Sloth 4
Wrath 8

10 Solo
6 Partner
8 Squad

- Corrupted by the System
- No Strings on Me

Although minor GMCs can be described in simple terms of a die rating, such as Informant 8 or Humentum Quality Assurance Tech 10, you can make abbreviated versions of major GMCs, including two or three vice traits from the major GMC's list; assume all the other vice traits are 4. So, Carlos Emerson, a fixer in the employ of Donita Exardopolous, might be described as follows:

### CARLOS EMERSON



Cautious 8
Envy 8
Lust 6

Some resources are extras, such as Nico Nova. These are essentially minor GMCs but they function as resources when so invoked. It's possible for a GMC to be an extra and have their die ratings as an extra and as a minor GMC be different; the resource die rating reflects the connection between the extra and the PC, not their own skills or abilities. For example, a PC might have Carlos Emerson as a 6 6 resource with the tags *Investigation, Legal,* in addition to his minor GMC stats above.

GMCs exist primarily to introduce problems into the lives of the PCs, to antagonize them, and to act as wedges between the PCs; they are a way to create problems that affect the PCs' jobs, give them stress, and in turn help the PCs grow. It's a good idea to prepare a list of important GMCs that the players will interact with during the game, depending on which archetypes they play and who they're interested in dealing with.

## GMC VICES

The vices possessed by GMCs in *TRACE 2.0* are:

- **Envy:** Being motivated by the status, position, or relationships of others, including jealous behavior or theft.
- **Lust:** Being motivated by and acting on desire, hedonism, or pleasure without consequence.
- **Gluttony:** Being motivated by and acting on the desire to consume, or a selfish disregard for the poor and disadvantaged.
- **Greed:** Being motivated by and acting on acquisition of material wealth, resources, and goods.
- **Pride:** Being motivated by personal status, power, ambition, and hubris at the expense of others.
- **Sloth:** Being unwilling to act for or care about others, not contributing to society, creating work for others.
- **Wrath:** Being motivated by hatred, antipathy, revenge, self-destructive behavior, or impatience.

Not all GMCs are corrupt or actively criminal, of course. A vice's die rating reflects the degree to which the GMC exploits, acts on, or presents an obstacle to the PCs with that vice. A major GMC has the same spread in vices as PCs have in their roles: a 10 in one vice, 8 8, 6 6 6, and a 4. Minor GMCs with vices should have no more than three, with a spread of 8/6/6. Any other vices are rated at a 4 baseline for a minor GMC should it come up.

Depending on how a PC's investigation takes them and the situations a GMC ends up in, the GMC's vice might present quite a lot of opposition to the resolution of the case or rather little. If a GMC is accused of sabotaging another GMC's business because of jealousy, this would use Envy as opposition. If they're instead accused of sabotaging the business to get revenge, it'd be Wrath. Having a low die rating in a vice means that the GMC is much easier to read in that area, more likely to reveal their nature than to cover it up or lie about it. A GMC with a low Sloth can't conceal lazy behavior, and a GMC with low Pride is obvious when they make a power grab.

# RUNNING TRACE

*TRACE 2.0* is a setting that plays out against a long-term effort to rid a broken city of rising corruption. It can be mostly episodic, but you and the other players are revealing a story of individuals on the front lines of change, individuals who deal every day in the consequences of a system that is stacked against the average citizen of San Narciso County. Each session should focus on some aspect of corruption, embodied by one of the seven vices featured in the "GMCs in TRACE" section (page 173).

## VICE AND CORRUPTION

In addition to coming up with major GMCs who possess varying levels in vice, you as GM should establish similar die ratings of vice in each of the neighborhoods and locations of Cortez City. In effect, you're tracking how much corruption is feeding into the community and causing systemic issues that in turn lead to inequality, injustice, and disruption of community standards. This is called an area's **vice profile**.

Because the blackout led to such widespread disorder and chaos, the emergency management teams have been overwhelmed with the effort to maintain a baseline of normalcy, and all of the larger, entrenched companies and organizations have been hit hard. It's up to the TRACE teams to coordinate local service groups that have sprung up to fill the gaps left behind.

Start by assigning a 6 in all vices to each neighborhood: Amontillado, Triple C, El Rio Dorado, and so forth. Then, with the players, assign each city area a 8 and a 10 in two vices. Now you have your starting vice profiles.

Corruption can be targeted in a city area using tests, but only by taking on a manifestation of that vice. For example, if you've got Greed 10 in El Rio Dorado, the TRACE team needs a scene or two responding, investigating, or resolving a rich property developer who's been intentionally screwing over business owners in an effort to buy up land for a billion-dollar project. Successfully getting in the way of his personal Greed also steps down El Rio Dorado's Greed to 8.

## YOUR FIRST SESSION

Have all of the players choose archetypes, customize their characters, and discuss their common backgrounds. Give them a rundown of the city and the overall state of the metro area in the wake of the blackout. Their goal as a team is to work together on cases that help expose and eliminate not only corruption and its effects throughout the city, but also their own baggage and history. It's not necessary to ramp up the drama a lot but remind them that they should look toward putting themselves in stressful situations in order to grow as characters and reveal more of who they are and what they can do to make their city better.

Choose any city area to start. It helps if at least three resources in the area are linked to the PCs. Look at that area's 10 vice, and come up with a simple situation of corruption, injustice, or inequality that could lead to trouble. Consider which archetypes are being played and then start by framing opening scenes for each PC, focusing on two things: the situation you've come up with, and the PC responding to a problem related to their primary role. For example:

- **Forensics**: A crime scene
- **Investigation**: A medical emergency
- **Legal:** A witness testimony
- **Medicine:** An injured victim
- **Psychology:** A distressed family member
- **Tactics:** An armed standoff
- **Technology:** A social media hit

Each player should resolve at least one test or contest in their opening scene, possibly acquiring stress, and maybe creating an asset for use later. Then, link these opening scenes to an action scene with at least two if not more TRACE members together, pursuing a lead or responding to a follow-up incident.

Perhaps the witness interviewed by the Deputy DA gave up a URL for an online hangout that's frequented by drug traffickers. These drug traffickers are connected to the social media trolling the Cybercrime Specialist was dealing with. Or the armed standoff leads to a bust on a residence where the distressed family member's close friend was said to live.

With each scene, build on the threads being tugged by the players and move the situation further toward a crisis point. You don't necessarily need to have all of the PCs in one scene together at the end of the session, but you should provide as many opportunities as you can for them to get together with each other, discuss the case, follow leads, and get into trouble. Three or four scenes is usually plenty before a final confrontation with whoever or whatever is behind the problem. This final confrontation may even be in the courtroom; this is a great way to get everyone in the same scene, because the other TRACE members can act as expert witnesses or otherwise assist the Deputy DA to lock down a defendant.

Once the situation is resolved, step down the vice die rating by one. If it was resolved with complications or the problem didn't necessarily go away, the vice die rating is still stepped down by one—but you can choose another vice in the city area to step up by one in response.




## CORTEZ CITY

Located along the California coastline between San Diego and Los Angeles, Cortez City is west of the Anza-Borrego desert and boasts a mild coastal climate with hot summers. Six months ago, the city's primary connection to the power grid was brought down for four days, either through sabotage, terrorist attack, or accident. The cause is still being investigated, and some locations still experience the occasional brown-out (this could be a major part of your game, or it might not be interesting to you at all, in which case the cause isn't important).

The following locations summarize the key traits of each Cortez City neighborhood, including sample resources linked to them, as well as the current state of the neighborhood six months after the blackout.



### AMONTILLADO

The Amontillado barrio is divided between a dominant Chicano population and a rising influx of immigrants from the Dominican Republic. It was hit hard by the blackout, and the last area to have power fully restored. Small businesses and shops were forced to close down permanently. Residents lost work and had to find new jobs in other parts of the city, which has overwhelmed public transportation.

Many members of TRACE (and, indeed, the District Attorney himself) were born and raised in Amontillado. The neighborhood is entirely located inland to the east of the Triple C. Consequently, corruption tends to flow from Amontillado toward the stockyards, the Marina, and El Rio Dorado.

### SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

- Dio Sanchez, a Dominican gang (*Investigation, Tactics, Psychology*)
- Milagro Princes, a Mexican gang (*Investigation, Tactics, Psychology*)
- Amontillado Community Center (*Investigation, Legal, Technology*)
- Paloma Alba Clinic (*Forensics, Medicine, Psychology*)
- Nico Nova, an informant (*Investigation, Psychology, Technology*)
- Terry Suárez, a community organizer (*Investigation, Legal, Psychology*)



## CORTEZ CIVIC CENTER

The "Triple C" is the business and political hub of Cortez City. Here the county courthouse, District Attorney's offices (including TRACE HQ), sheriff's office, and other locations important to city and county government may be found, looking out over the Pacific Ocean and the San Narciso Marina. During the blackout, emergency management was set up here first, including rows and rows of large fuel-powered generators and relief tents. Despite the swift response from the governor, however, considerable damage to the city's operations was done.

Large office towers, most of which are loosely inspired by Spanish missions, house the local branches of major West Coast banks, corporations, and foundations, all of them affected to some degree by the blackout. Among these are the head offices of Humentum, a growing technology and metadata services company that pitched in soon after the blackout to restore operations; and SimpyriMed, a pharmaceuticals corporation that has recently spearheaded a large investment in San Narciso County's business sector, including drug treatment for opiates and other medicines they were previously making a profit from.

### SUGGESTED RESOURCES

- City Hall (*Investigation, Legal, Technology*)
- San Narciso County Sheriff's Office (*Forensics, Investigation, Legal, Tactics*)
- TRACE HQ (*all tags*)
- Humentum, a tech company (*Forensics, Investigation, Technology*)
- SimpyriMed, an Rx company (*Forensics, Medicine, Psychology*)



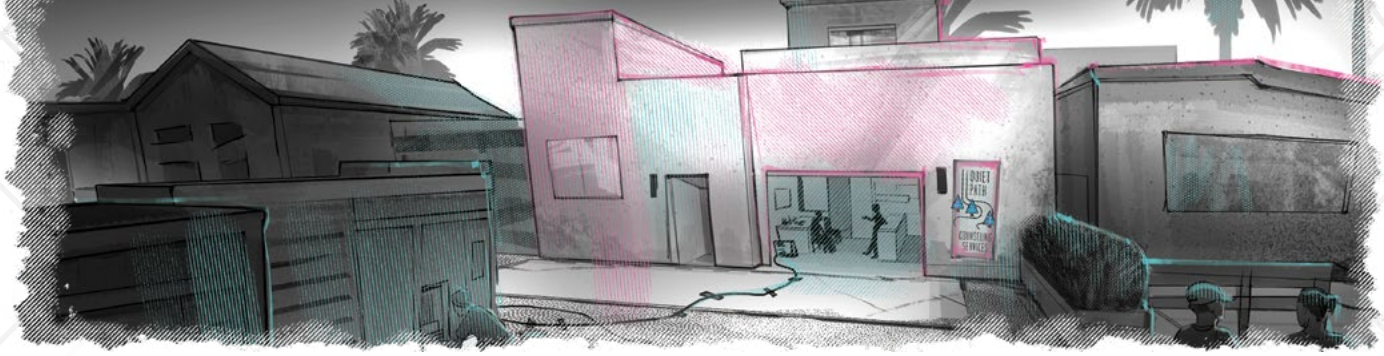

## EL RIO DORADO

This long stretch of commercial and residential properties, once characterized by the rich and famous, extends northwards away from the Triple C, and includes extensive beachfront property, private wharfs, and ritzy nightclubs. It was devastated by the blackout, and recovery was slow, despite the wealthy interests invested in the area, because the emergency management team prioritized it below the other more populated areas. Six months later and it's a shell of its former self, but a real estate goldmine for new investors...and for enterprising smugglers. Strip malls and open-air markets have altered the glitzy aesthetic.

The powerful law firm of White, Argyle, Yeoman, Custer & Standish, who represented a number of millionaire clients, celebrities, corporate board members, and the like have since relocated to Ridgetop.

### SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

- Four Seasons, a nightclub (*Investigation, Psychology, Technology*)
- ERD Investigations, a private investigation firm (*Forensics, Investigation, Legal*)
- Bim-Bam-Boom Studios, a film studio (*Investigation, Psychology, Technology*)
- Caveat, a seaside private club (*Investigation, Legal, Psychology*)
- Maas Muscle Inc, a private security firm (*Forensics, Legal, Tactics*)



## NORTON ESTATES

Norton Estates is one of several outlying suburban areas, populated mostly by middle class professionals and their families. It has an excellent school system, a pair of shopping malls, cineplexes, and several park areas. The blackout cut the suburbs off from the city, but the emergency management team set up numerous relief centers, including trucking in generators. Local politicians have been accused of doing so as election year stunts.

TRACE has responded to domestic abuse cases, schoolyard shootings (three in the past ten years), drug dealers, and robbery. Crime rate was dropping overall in the Estates, primarily due to the renewed focus of the San Narciso County Sheriff's department on suburban law enforcement. But the blackout set off a series of small fires in the community, both literally and metaphorically.

### SUGGESTED RESOURCES

- KTRS 94.9, a contemporary rock station (*Investigation, Psychology, Technology*)
- Quiet Path Counseling Services (*Forensics, Investigation, Psychology*)
- Norton High School (*Investigation, Legal, Psychology*)
- Cineventure-12, a multiple screen movie theater (*Forensics, Psychology, Technology*)
- Estate Security Services, a private security firm (*Forensics, Legal, Tactics*)




## RIDGETOP

Ridgetop is a major industrial and commercial area built on reclaimed desert land, north of the Triple C. It wasn't as high a priority for power restorations. In response, several commercial organizations pulled strings and had generators, water, and other resources brought in during the blackout. Ridgetop is a major opponent to the emergency manager and the governor's policies and positions.

SimpyriMed maintains three large processing plants in Ridgetop, holds a seat on the Tristero Regional Hospital board of directors, and owns more land here than any other commercial landowner. This created friction between SimpyriMed's CEO and other company executives in the city, but SimpyriMed responded with aggressively low rent arrangements for new and expanding businesses who set up offices and plants on SimpyriMed land.

### SUGGESTED RESOURCES

- Cortez City Factory Workers Union (*Legal, Psychology, Tactics*)
- Desert Flower Labs (*Forensics, Medicine, Technology*)
- Tristero Regional Hospital (*Medicine, Psychology, Technology*)
- White, Argyle, Yeoman, Custer & Standish, a law firm (*Investigation, Legal, Psychology*)
- Yoyo Diamond, a medical lobbyist (*Investigation, Medicine, Technology*)




NOÉ LEYVA

## SAN NARCISO MARINA

The Marina once enjoyed considerable seasonal business from summer tourists and wealthy visitors as well as year-round sailing enthusiasts. This gave it a ritzy reputation that it largely didn't deserve, since any affluent yacht owner tended to patronize one of the private clubs further up the coast. After the blackout, the Marina fell apart, and is only now seeing a return to regular business. At least half of its patrons were forced to sell their boats or failed to maintain them, which left many unclaimed yachts and warehouses along the wharves, easy prey for criminal enterprise.

TRACE teams are often called out to the Marina to investigate smuggling, trafficking, and break-ins. However, it's also a popular place for surfers; new businesses catering to the brave souls who take to the waves are making headway. There's also a very popular Irish bar frequented by TRACE squad members.

### SUGGESTED RESOURCES:

- Horatio Ling, a warehouse tycoon (*Investigation, Legal, Medicine*)
- Hair of the Dog Irish Bar (*Investigation, Legal, Psychology*)
- Rogue Link Syndicate, a white-hat hacker's group (*Forensics, Investigation, Technology*)
- Left Shark Surf Shop (*Forensics, Investigation, Psychology*)
- Three Dragons Martial Arts Studio (*Medicine, Psychology, Tactics*)

TAMMY AND CHAD STREET



## WHAT HAPPENS NEXT?

Take notes about how the players responded to various scenes, which resources they called on to help them out, and what problems they voluntarily brought on themselves and each other. That's grist for the mill in the long term. Over the next few sessions, introduce more corruption situations in different parts of the city.

Once you have the hang of it, you can start introducing situations that cross into multiple areas, growing somewhat more complicated. Introduce major GMCs such as CEOs, politicians, the emergency manager or his replacement, celebrities, gang bosses, organized crime leaders, and so forth. Put them in scenes with the PCs when they're not the subject of the investigation but get in the PCs' way. Eventually, you should have a cast of GMCs that the players are personally invested in.

Obviously, reducing all of the city's vice profiles to 6 (or less!) is a herculean task. Maybe the players are happy with just getting rid of all those 10. You can measure long term success this way, or you can just continue to explore the lives of the PCs on the TRACE team as they meet each situation with their expertise and their commitment to a better, brighter Cortez City.

# HOW TO FILL OUT YOUR TRACE 2.0 CHARACTER FILE

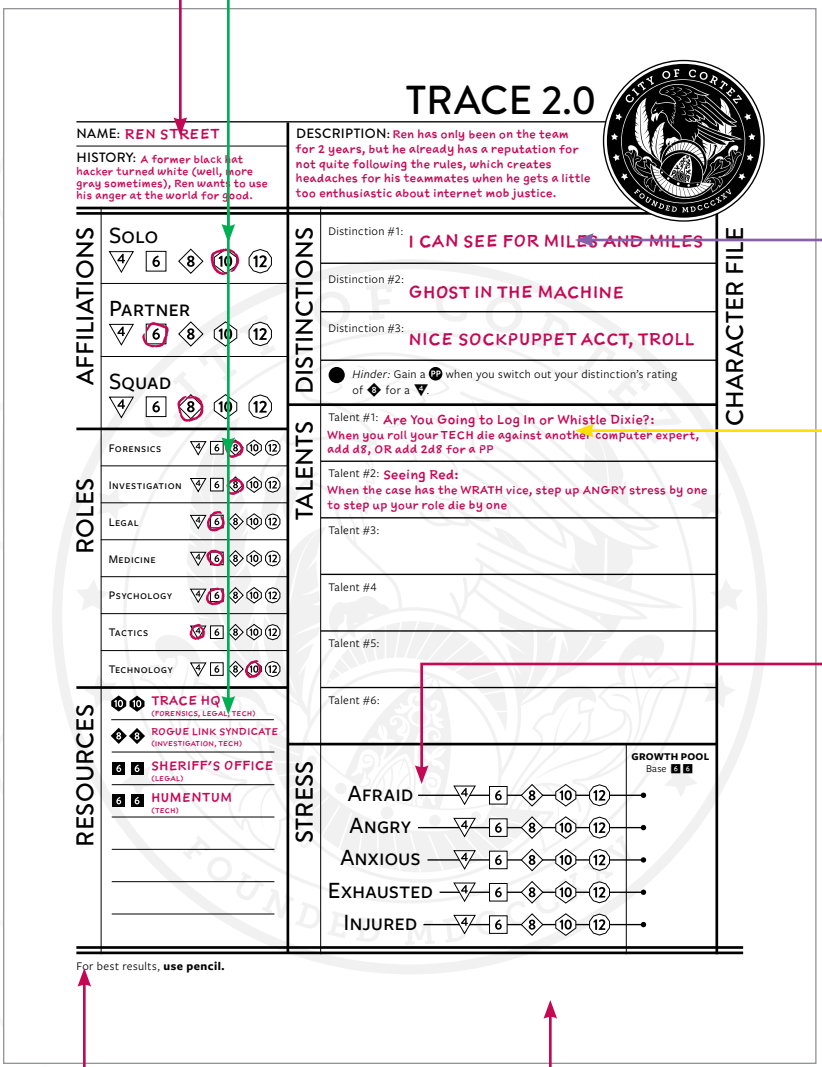
Below is an example of a filled-out character file for our Cybercrime Specialist, Ren Street, with explanations of the steps and choices we made.

**1** The first thing we do is choose an archetype to build Ren from. We chose Cybercrime Specialist. We jotted down some notes about his background and what he looks like.

**2** We fill out the values for affiliations, roles, and resources from the archetype text. Only fill in the first 4 fields for resources; the rest are for any future sessions when we might spend our growth pool to gain another resource (or step up an existing one).

**3** Next we write down the two prewritten distinctions for the Cybercrime Specialist, plus a freeform third one. We chose to write a distinction about Ren's ability to see through misleading internet tactics, "**Nice Sockpuppet Account, Troll**." All distinctions come with the basic *Hinder* SFX already unlocked.

**4** We fill in the prewritten talent, "Are You Going to Log In or Whistle Dixie" into the first field. You can choose a different talent from the pre-built archetype but we chose not to. We chose the second talent from the list on page 166 and filled it in. The other blank talents are for future sessions, if we choose to gain a new talent by spending our growth pool. That's the last step to fill out the sheet before our session!



TRACE 2.0

NAME: REN STREET

HISTORY: A former black hat hacker turned white (well, more gray sometimes), Ren wants to use his anger at the world for good.

DESCRIPTION: Ren has only been on the team for 2 years, but he already has a reputation for not quite following the rules, which creates headaches for his teammates when he gets a little too enthusiastic about internet mob justice.

AFFILIATIONS: Solo 4 6 8 10 12; Partner 4 6 8 10 12; Squad 4 6 8 10 12

ROLES: Forensics 4 6 8 10 12; Investigation 4 6 8 10 12; Legal 4 6 8 10 12; Medicine 4 6 8 10 12; Psychology 4 6 8 10 12; Tactics 4 6 8 10 12; Technology 4 6 8 10 12

RESOURCES: TRACE HQ (FORENSICS, LEGAL, TECH); ROGUE LINK SYNDICATE (INVESTIGATION, TECH); SHERIFF'S OFFICE (LEGAL); HUMENTUM (TECH)

DISTINCTIONS:
Distinction #1: I CAN SEE FOR MILES AND MILES
Distinction #2: GHOST IN THE MACHINE
Distinction #3: NICE SOCKPUPPET ACCT, TROLL
*Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out your distinction's rating of 4 for a 6.

TALENTS:
Talent #1: Are You Going to Log In or Whistle Dixie?: When you roll your TECH die against another computer expert, add d8, OR add 2d8 for a PP
Talent #2: Seeing Red: When the case has the WRATH vice, step up ANGRY stress by one to step up your role die by one
Talent #3:
Talent #4
Talent #5:
Talent #6:

STRESS: Afraid 4 6 8 10 12; Angry 4 6 8 10 12; Anxious 4 6 8 10 12; Exhausted 4 6 8 10 12; Injured 4 6 8 10 12

GROWTH POOL Base 6 6

CHARACTER FILE

For best results, **use pencil.**

## STRESS AND THE GROWTH POOL

During your sessions, your character might incur stress of five different types, shown to the left, either from contests or by using talents. At the end of each session, take the highest die rating of each type of stress and add it to the growth pool column to the right. If you incurred no stress of a type, you do not get any growth die from that stress track. If you incurred no stress of any type, you still get to roll a base of 6 6.

Using the guidelines on page 172, roll against the difficulty to determine if you get that growth or not. The growth pool is reset after every session to its base.

**Note:** As these are meant to be multi-session sheets, we recommend using pencil if you're not using a digital character file. Some traits can change during the course of a series.

**Note:** Use the margins for notes or to keep track of assets, the vice profiles of neighborhoods, etc.

PRINTABLE FILE ON PAGE 245

ALSO AVAILABLE AT CORTEXRPG.COM



COEY KUHN



CHAPTER 6

# PRIME LISTS

Prime Lists is a chapter full of lists. There are lists of examples of SFX, powers, abilities, and milestones. It also includes supplemental mods on vehicles, expanding how these work in the game beyond signature assets or traits on a character file. There's an eclectic collection of pre-built characters you can use as inspiration for your own game and characters.

## CHAPTER BREAKDOWN

**Here's what you can find in this chapter of miscellanea. Much of it is aimed squarely at fantasy or superhero settings, but any of it can serve as inspiration for Cortex Prime games using supernatural, science fiction, or surreal genre elements.**

**The Power List:** A list of power traits, SFX, and limits for use in superhero and supernatural settings.

**The Ability List:** A list of abilities, suitable for use in more narrative-heavy settings with superpowers or supernatural traits.

**Fantasy Milestones:** A list of milestones for use in traditional fantasy and other fantastical settings.

**The Motor Pool:** Rules for creating vehicles in Cortex Prime.

**Characters from the Cortex Multiverse:** A collection of sample characters created by backers you can use as written or as inspiration for creating your own characters.

# THE POWER LIST

This section goes into greater detail about the individual power traits listed in Prime Characters on page 51, as well as power-based SFX and limits. Powers can be used as part of power sets or incorporated into other aspects of the rules (such as distinctions or talents) or re-skinned to serve as the building blocks of spells for heroic fantasy or the abilities of monsters and supernatural creatures.

A power set generally looks something like this:

### STRANGE VISITOR FROM ANOTHER DIMENSION

| | |
|---|---|
| Enhanced Speed 8 | Superhuman Durability 10 |
| Enhanced Stamina 8 | Superhuman Strength 10 |
| Heat Vision 8 | Supersonic Flight 10 |

- **SFX:** *Bulletproof:* Spend a PP to ignore physical stress or complications for a test or contest unless caused by magic.
- **SFX:** *Mightiest Mortal:* Use two or more Strange Visitor from Another Dimension powers in a single dice pool and step each power down by one for each additional power beyond the first.
- **Limit:** *Tellurite Allergy:* When exposed to tellurite mineral or anything powered by tellurite energy, shut down a Strange Visitor from Another Dimension power and gain a complication of the same size to gain a PP. Once out of range of the tellurite, eliminate the complication to recover the power.

## POWER DESCRIPTIONS

In the following descriptions, we assume you're using stress as well as complications. If you're not, all instances of stress can be replaced with complications without much effort. Other mods can be integrated by following the general guidelines for those mods.

Some powers start at 8, rather than 6. These include Durability, Intelligence, Reflexes, Stamina, and Strength. There's no reason you can't include a 6 die rating level for them, but we assume that any of these enhancement powers truly kick in at 8, with 6 being "human level."

As always, you can change the names or customize the specific version of these powers as needed. "Attack" or "movement" are general categories rather than actual powers, for example.



VENUS BAMBISA

### ATTACK POWERS (BLASTS, WEAPONS)

Whether it's an energy blast or razor-sharp claws, any power that represents an attack fits in this category. Use these guidelines for rating attack powers in a power set:

> At 6, the power is roughly equivalent to small arms fire or dangerous close combat weapons.
>
> At 8, the power is capable of greater injury or harm, roughly equivalent to automatic rifles or grenades.
>
> At 10, the power is equivalent to heavy explosives or lightning bolts.
>
> At 12, the power is truly devastating, even if the area of effect isn't widespread.

An attack power's name gives you more suggestions about when it works. Often, the attack uses a specific type of energy, such as fire, electricity, cold, or radiation. This may affect how you describe the effects of stress caused by the attack and by other powers or SFX that provide resistance to those types. A generic Energy Blast is usually explosive plasma or cosmic energy with few side effects, unlike Flame Blasts or Lightning Bolts that might set things on fire, or Cold Blasts that freeze. Psychic Blasts can target heavily armored foes but they're useless against opponents without minds.

Some attacks may be used at range, while others are only effective in close quarters. Whether this is an advantage or a drawback varies on the situation. It's easier to target a flying target with a Force Blast than with Elbow Spikes, but in a confined space the Force Blast poses problems the Elbow Spikes do not.

## DURABILITY

Whatever the reason, the character is more resistant to injury and harmful effects than the average human.

> Enhanced Durability 8 represents toughened skin and muscle, as well as the ability to withstand most minor blunt trauma or pain and low-level extremes of heat or cold.
>
> Superhuman Durability 10 is bulletproof skin and resistance to extreme temperatures or hazards.
>
> Godlike Durability 12 indicates invulnerability to almost all conventional forms of injury and harmful effects.

Durability is also used in power sets that represent force fields or hardened objects. Use common sense and the descriptions in the power set as your guide for when you can factor in Durability. A character that can project a force field may not be able to apply that Durability against light-based attacks, while a character whose Durability represents steel-hard skin can't apply it against psychic blasts.

Durability usually, but not always, comes with an assumed level of life support or protection from the environment. This might indicate that the character can shrug off certain environmental conditions such as heat or cold. Whether this life support is continuous or only when the character is using the power may depend on SFX or how the Durability is described.

Energy powers are typically resisted by Durability. Some SFX protect against other, more specific types of harm—such as disease or toxins—over and above any protection Durability might give. For example, a power set that includes Durability might have the *Immune* SFX against poison. For protection against magic or psychic powers, use Mystic Resistance or Psychic Resistance.

## ELEMENTAL CONTROL POWERS (INCLUDING INFLUENCE, MASTERY, AND SUPREMACY)

The ability to control the elements is a common power trait for superheroes. How "elements" is defined can vary from character to character. They aren't necessarily elements in the periodic table sense, or the classical elements of air, fire, earth, and water—in many cases they're more properly categorized as energy types or compounds.

For the purposes of the game, the material, energy, or substance being controlled is called an element. Each elemental control power trait must be specified, i.e., Fire, Light, Magnetic.

> Elemental Influence 6 gives minor or basic control: extinguishing the candles in a room; cooling the air in a room; shorting out household appliances.
>
> Elemental Control 8 gives significant local control: extinguishing a burning room; snap-freezing the air in a room; shorting out the electrical system of a building.
>
> Elemental Mastery 10 provides citywide control: extinguishing a burning skyscraper; freezing over a city street; bringing down a city's power grid.
>
> Elemental Supremacy 12 provides regional control: extinguishing a forest fire; freezing over Lake Michigan; rerouting the national power grid.

Elemental control powers offer many opportunities for stunts; when tied together with SFX, they may be applied in dozens of ways. The basic rule of thumb is that the larger the die rating, the greater the scope of the power's control effect. Elemental Influence 6 usually only extends to one or two types of effect, while Elemental Supremacy 12 indicates the unsurpassed ability to manipulate the controlled element.

### ELEMENTS TO CONTROL

Here's a list of the common elements in comic book universes.

**Air:** Moving air masses around, increasing or decreasing air pressure, creating whirlwinds

**Cosmic:** Channeling and redirecting the quantum power of the universe, altering or destroying the bonds between energy and matter, and connecting with the cosmos

**Earth:** Moving soil, dirt, and rock; shaping it or altering its consistency

**Electric:** Strengthening, weakening, redirecting, and otherwise altering the properties of electrical current

**Fire/Heat:** Rapidly increasing the thermal properties of the environment, shaping existing flame, combusting materials

**Gravity:** Intensifying or diminishing the hold the Earth's gravitational field has on objects, shifting centers of gravity

**Ice/Cold:** Rapidly decreasing the thermal properties of the environment, producing ice, freezing things

**Kinetic/Telekinetic:** Intensifying or diminishing the stored kinetic potential of objects, moving things around, holding them in place

**Light:** Intensifying or diminishing the ambient light in the environment, creating bright flashes, forming holograms

**Magnetic:** Strengthening, weakening, redirecting, or otherwise manipulating magnetic fields, affecting ferrous metals

**Negative:** Summoning and manipulating negatively charged energy or darkness

**Sonic:** Intensifying or diminishing the ambient sound in the environment, altering sound waves, mimicking noises

**Weather:** Anticipating, directing, and manipulating local and regional weather patterns to create meteorological effects from rain and snow to wind and drought

**Water:** Moving aqueous masses around, increasing or decreasing water volume and pressure, dehydrating a living target

Note that Mind Control and other psychic powers aren't considered elemental control powers. The same is true for Sorcery, which is its own power trait type. Psychics or sorcerers often possess some of these elemental powers, of course; Kinetic/Telekinetic Control, Fire Control, and Weather Control are frequently psychic in nature.

Some elemental control powers overlap; you can create frosty conditions using both Ice Control and Weather Control, though the former has more accuracy and depth than the latter. Magnetic Supremacy could alter electrical currents and other types of energy, though this is likely better represented by a stunt than SFX. This sort of overlap is more likely at the Mastery and Supremacy levels; Influence and Control rarely allow the character to step outside the standard boundaries of those elements.

To properly represent the kinds of abilities associated with characters with elemental control, these power sets also include powers like Energy Blast, Flight, or Senses, and SFX like *Area Attack*, *Energy Absorption*, and *Multipower*.

## INTANGIBILITY

The character is able to become less solid, either through reduced molecular density, shifting phase, or becoming fluid. The primary effect of this power trait is that passing through obstacles becomes much easier, and physical objects pass through the body.

> Intangibility 6 lets you mildly disperse your molecules, reducing the impact of some physical attacks and allowing you to slowly move through highly porous or permeable obstacles such as chicken wire fences or barred gates.
>
> Intangibility 8 represents substantial fluidity or dispersal, giving you the power to seep through tiny holes in obstacles and reduce the impact of most physical attacks.
>
> Intangibility 10 makes you ghostlike or out of phase, letting you walk through almost any physical obstacle other than super-high-density substances, and making very little noise. Physical attacks rarely affect you.
>
> Intangibility 12 makes you completely out of phase with reality, including even energy waveforms. You're essentially not even there.

Intangibility is frequently associated with power sets that describe transforming into liquids or, at low ratings, the ability to deform or compress your body. A close cousin to Stretch, it's often included in the same power sets. If the power set represents molecular or dimensional phasing, powers like Flight or Airwalk are common.

SFX in power sets with Intangibility include being able to disrupt people or things by phasing or passing through them and sharing your Intangibility with others.

## INTELLIGENCE

The character has enhanced reasoning, mathematical, or analytical faculties linked to intelligence. Many people are smart, but this superpower puts you above the rest. It's almost always used to create assets or apply complications, and to enhance the use of several specialties.

> Enhanced Intelligence 8 means you're able to handle complex mental problems easily, including calculation, recall, and applied knowledge.
>
> Super Intelligence 10 means you're a living computer, with a mind that processes information and sensory input with dazzling speed, running numerous simultaneous rational operations, and able to recall vast amounts of information and data when needed.
>
> Godlike Intelligence 12 places you beyond terrestrial computers, forming connections in your mind between apparently unrelated facts, solving impossibly difficult puzzles or mathematical problems, and possessing nigh-instant access to countless storehouses of knowledge that you've collected.

Intelligence pairs well with Senses, as well as other powers such as Reflexes or psychic powers. It acts as a sort of generic "smartest guy in the room" power that substitutes in for specialist knowledge from skills or specialties but doesn't entirely replace them: even having Godlike Intelligence doesn't mean you can't also benefit from having a high rating in the Know skill.

## INVISIBILITY

The character can hide in plain sight, whether through the bending of light waves, high-tech chameleon technology, or shifting out of phase with this dimension.

> Invisibility 6 blurs or obscures your visual image; it's often limited to obscuring your image in mirrors or electronic surveillance, or in situations where vision is already impaired, such as at night. It may also be a psychic field that makes others pay less attention to you, even though you're still visible.
>
> At Invisibility 8, you're concealed to a greater degree, such as with chameleon-like blending, ghostlike transparency, or psychic misdirection. While still visible to others if they focus, you've got the equivalent of a stealth field.

> Invisibility 10 renders you completely invisible to standard visual means. You can move around without being noticed, and you don't leave a shadow or other sign of being there. Certain spectrums of visual detection may spot you, such as infrared or dimensional locators.
>
> At Invisibility 12, you are impossible to detect with any visual-based sense. You never show up on any device, and likely don't even give off energy signatures of any kind.

Depending on how this is defined within a power set, Invisibility may be psychic or physics based. If it's psychic, that affects how others might detect the character. If it's physics, sometimes all you need to do is to turn up the sound detection to realize an invisible character is nearby. This power trait when combined with others like Intangibility or Flight can essentially make the character a phantom or apparition.

## MIMIC

This power isn't changing shape into other forms or to look like other people—that's Shapeshift. Mimic is copying or even stealing powers from others. It may also be used to represent a character who has no fixed powers but instead spontaneously creates them as the need arises.

To manifest a power, the character must create an asset with a test or contest using this power's die. Sometimes, the character must physically touch or cause stress to the target; in other cases, the character can just develop a power. The description and SFX usually define how this works. The asset created serves as the power trait in the short term.

Mimic's die rating directly corresponds to the character's ability to effectively copy or mimic another power. The scope and extent of the copied power is limited by Mimic's die rating. If you want to copy or steal Flight as a power and only have Mimic 8, you won't be capable of supersonic speed. You might create a 12 asset to represent Flight and roll that die into any tests or contests, but the actual speed won't be the equivalent of space flight.

Heroes with Mimic usually have a number of SFX and limits that refine the power. Including other powers in the power set, such as Shapeshift, allows the character to also copy others' appearance and form.

## MOVEMENT POWERS (SPEED/FLIGHT/SWING/AIRWALK/BURROW/LEAP/SWIM)

Movement powers confer the ability to move at greater than human speed. Speed is ground or surface travel, while Flight is air or space travel. The actual speed each die rating represents differs between Speed and Flight.

> At Speed 6, you can run as fast as the world's fastest humans; Flight 6 is the speed of a hawk or news chopper.
>
> At Enhanced Speed 8, you can run at the speed of a horse; with Subsonic Flight 8, you can fly as fast as a missile or passenger airliner.
>
> At Superhuman Speed 10, you're faster than a bullet train; with Supersonic Flight 10, you can fly as fast as a jet fighter.
>
> At Godlike Speed 12, you can travel around the world in moments; Space Flight 12 permits swift interplanetary travel.

Other movement powers appear in power sets, too. Swing, Airwalk, Burrow, Swim and so forth are all movement powers. They generally operate at the same speed as the Speed power trait, but how and when they might be used differs. Swing lets some characters swing through city streets above the traffic, giving them access to areas others don't have. Burrow is something subterranean creatures can do that surface-dwellers can't. Leap describes traveling large distances with mighty bounds or spring-like steps. Swim is being able to move through water as fast as—or faster than—an Olympic medalist.

Teleport gets its own entry since it represents crossing distances without movement at all.

Movement powers are often included in power sets with Reflexes or Stamina, but not always. Similarly, Strength and Leap are often found in the same power set. They're usually used to guide how quickly and in what ways someone can get to places. Stunts created with movement powers factor in the velocity and speed of the power more than, say, the reaction time or endurance of the character.

Movement powers that explicitly allow travel in specific environments are assumed to include the ability to survive in those environments at or beyond the 8 level. So, Enhanced Swim 8 affords the ability to breathe underwater or an air supply, while Subsonic Flight 8 means you don't suffer the negative effects of high velocity. If you have Space Flight 12, you're not worried about the vacuum of space.

## PSYCHIC POWERS (MIND CONTROL/TELEPATHY/ANIMAL CONTROL/PLANT CONTROL)

Psychic powers affect or influence other minds, although most people don't include plants as minds. The two most

common are Mind Control and Telepathy. Psychic powers are used to create complications on their targets. If the complication is stepped up beyond 12 and the target is stressed out, your effect is total. Until then, the target gets a chance to resist it or fight it off, with the complication making things tough for them. To cause mental or emotional stress, use Psychic Blast instead.

Mind Control relies on planting suggestions, influencing perceptions, and altering behavior—it's getting people to do what you want, especially when they wouldn't otherwise. A complication you create with Mind Control (such as Fight your Friends! Or Let Us In!) hampers your target if they resist or try to oppose what you want them to do. If they go along with it, the complication doesn't pose any problem for them.

> At 6, you can push the target to do something they were inclined to do already, such as buy something they like or make advances on someone they're attracted to. You can also intensify their senses to a degree—making the room seem colder, a smell seems stronger, or other mild effects.
>
> At 8, you can override the target's impulse control, remove inhibitions, or provoke irrational behavior. You can make them see, smell, or hear things that aren't there for short periods, enough to distract them.
>
> At 10, you can take over the target's motor control and movements, create vivid and believable hallucinations that last for hours, or cause them to go against their core beliefs for a short time.
>
> At 12, you can completely possess the target, create entire fictional universes within their mind, and permanently alter their beliefs or perceptions.

Telepathy is communicating with other minds, although it also allows reading surface or deeper thoughts, anticipating actions, and sharing or altering memories. A complication you create with Telepathy might hamper your target if they're trying to block you out, screen their thoughts, or remember something you've made them forget. Much of the time you won't need to roll this power, especially if it's used on willing targets. If the target isn't willing, you need to take out your target (step it up beyond a 12 die rating) with the complication before you can pull out the information you want.

> At 6, you can maintain a link with another mind with some effort, using the link to talk or share thoughts.
>
> At 8, you can read surface thoughts, discern emotions, and share one or two senses (like sight and hearing), as well as link a half-dozen minds together for the purposes of communication.
>
> At 10, you can probe minds for memories, thoughts, and instincts, create persistent mental links among large groups of people across great distances, and even block or influence a specific target's memories.
>
> At 12, you can remain in constant communication with vast numbers of people, skim the surface thoughts of everyone on the planet, and implant entirely new life histories within specific minds.

Animal Control is used to make animals do what you want, though how this happens can vary. Plant Control is the same, only with vegetable matter. These powers, while psychic in nature, are really a kind of elemental control (page 183), with the die rating representing the scope and power of the control. At 6, your influence and ability to connect with animals or plants is limited to nudges or suggestions; at 12, you have supremacy over all animal or plant life, and you may even be connected directly to the living web of life on the planet.

### MIND CONTROL, POSSESSION, AND CONSENT

Many groups aren't comfortable with characters having the ability to control other characters with their mind or with mystic spells or possession, and that's something that should be determined before you progress with your games. Possession and mind control remove agency from players, and in some cases that's perfectly fine when there's a high degree of player trust, but in other cases (especially in games with new players or strangers at a convention) it's a no-no. Just don't.

It's important that consent form a part of your group's conversation about social standards at the table, as important if not moreso than "don't look at your phone while it's somebody else's turn" or "don't show up late without letting us all know."

For more information on consent in your game and safety tools to make your games better, visit sites like **goldenlassogames.com/tools** for helpful links and advice.

## REFLEXES

The character has a greater response time, physical agility, and aim than an average human.

> Enhanced Reflexes 8 represents two to three times the normal human response time and hand-eye coordination.
>
> Superhuman Reflexes 10 indicates as much as ten times the response time and coordination of an ordinary human.
>
> Godlike Reflexes 12 confers the ability to react as if the world around you had slowed to a crawl; you have lightning-fast hand-eye coordination.

Many characters with a Reflexes power also have movement powers, although they aren't synonymous. It's more common to have both when the Reflexes power trait is rated at Superhuman or Godlike.

## RESISTANCE

The character is resistant to types of harm or attack that most people have no defense against. It might be something intrinsic or provided by equipment or gear. The most common types are Mystic Resistance and Psychic Resistance. Other resistances are frequently provided by Durability or show up as SFX for a power set (such as being immune to toxins or disease).

> A Resistance 6 is slight, but still more than any normal person would have.
>
> A Resistance 8 is enhanced, enough to turn aside most standard attacks of this type.
>
> A Resistance 10 is superhuman, giving substantial defense against most attacks of this type.
>
> A Resistance 12 is godlike, representing nigh-invulnerability to attacks of this type.

These power traits are similar to Durability in that they provide resistance or protection from harmful or damaging attacks. SFX may also provide protection against specific types of attack, on top of whatever protection is given by a Resistance or Durability. Most characters with mystic or psychic powers also possess a Resistance of that type in their power set.

## SENSES

The character's senses are more acute, keen, or developed than a normal human.

> Enhanced Senses 8 represent extraordinary levels of awareness, closer to those of predatory animals.
>
> Superhuman Senses 10 reach beyond nature, offering incredible levels of awareness.
>
> Godlike Senses 12 touch upon cosmic threads of information and perception.

It's more or less assumed that most people have Senses at the 6 level and included in other core attributes or skills. Senses at a 6 rating are usually additional senses that might be brought in, like Cybernetic Sense or Mystic Sense, mostly to give you other ways to pick up on information.

Extraordinary senses, such as a sonar sense or sixth sense, are often represented by SFX that build on the characters' Senses power traits to let them reroll dice in their pool. An android's Cybernetic Senses on the other hand might let you include computer network access in a dice pool where non-synthetic people don't have access.

These power traits don't specify which senses are heightened. In the game, this is left up to individual character description. For the most part, characters with a Senses power enjoy heightened awareness across the spectrum, at least in terms of acquiring information from their immediate environment.

Senses often goes hand-in-hand with Intelligence in power sets, with Intelligence focusing on what the character is able to do with the sensory input rather than the ability to detect it.

## SHAPESHIFT

The ability to alter how you look or to take on the form of something else is a great stealth power. It can also represent the use of magic to disguise one's appearance, like a faerie, or the power to transform into non-human shapes, like certain lycanthropes or mecha characters.

> At 6, you can make minor changes to your facial features or aspects of your appearance, but not enough to closely mimic anyone in particular.
>
> At 8, you can take on the external form of someone else, fooling most onlookers and passing as the person you're imitating. You may also be able to take on the external form of an animal or other living creature.
>
> At 10, you may fully shift into another living physical form or shape, even down to the cellular level, fooling scientific instruments, extraordinary senses, and so on. Non-living shapes still register as organic.
>
> At 12, you may shapeshift into anything—living and non-living forms—fooling even cosmic senses. For all intents and purposes, you become that other thing.

Shapeshift can be used to acquire things that a character doesn't normally have access to, such as claws or wings. These can be represented by assets that last for the remainder of the scene, which might be extended with PP. If the character regularly creates wings or claws, they're probably represented by other power traits in the power set. A character who shapeshifts wings all the time probably has Flight as a power trait to avoid having to create them as a stunt or asset. A character might also have the Mimic power, giving them the ability to copy other powers, instead of or together with Shapeshift.

Shapeshift is frequently in a power set with Stretch, with size-changing powers like Grow or Shrink, and with physical enhancement powers like Durability, Stamina, or Strength.

If a character only ever shapeshifts into one form, they probably don't have this power. Instead, their power set would include powers that describe their other form (such as Durability or Reflexes), and a limit that shuts down these powers when they're not in the alternate form.

## SIZE-CHANGING POWERS (GROW, SHRINK)

With these powers, the character can grow or shrink.

> At 6, you can bulk up considerably (Grow) or compress your mass tightly (Shrink). This doesn't change your overall height or weight so much as it represents being able to snap out of or slip from restraints, fit into cramped spaces, or look somewhat more menacing.
>
> With Grow 8, you can grow to at least fifteen feet, more than doubling in size. With Shrink 8, you can reduce your size to that of a doll or small animal.
>
> With Grow 10, you can grow to the size of a building, upwards of a hundred feet. With Shrink 10, you can become insect sized.
>
> With Grow 12, you can become truly massive, perhaps without limit, almost a geographic formation of your own. With Shrink 12, you can become microscopic, reducing your size to the sub-molecular level.

Use size-changing powers when you think that being really big or really small could be helpful in a dice pool or let you change the situation in a scene. They're almost always included in a power set with other power traits—Grow with Strength, Durability, or Stamina; Shrink with Reflexes, Flight, or Senses. You cannot use both size-changing powers at the same time—it makes no sense to roll both Grow and Shrink. Power sets with these powers have a limit that shuts down associated power traits along with Grow or Shrink. In other words, if you have Superhuman Strength and Superhuman Durability while you're a giant, shutting down Grow shuts those down also.

Is it easier for opponents to hit you when you're fifty feet tall? Are you less of a target when you're the size of an ant? Ensure that a limit in your power set handles the former (*Huge*: Earn a PP when your Grow becomes a complication for you) and use your die in a contest to handle the latter (that Shrink 10 sure helps avoid danger!).

## SORCERY

The character has the ability to alter or change magical fields or to channel power from other dimensions to affect change in this one.

> At Novice 6, you can achieve the equivalent of parlor tricks, prestidigitation, and conjuring without needing stage magic equipment. Nothing more than pulling out long scarves, lighting a candle with a snap of the fingers, or concealing doves in a cage.
>
> At Adept 8, you have genuine powers of summoning and controlling mystic forces—usually to create constructs and illusions, commune with other dimensions, and invoke changes in the laws of physics.
>
> At Master 10, you have great mystical powers, channeling power into longer lasting constructs or objects, bending the laws of physics, and dispelling the magical works of others.
>
> At Supreme 12, you can draw on world-shattering mystic power to affect far-reaching changes, bring things to and from other dimensions, and empower mystical objects or creatures of frightening strength.

Sorcery may seem overwhelming or too powerful, but it's really just another form of elemental control. The descriptive nature of Sorcery makes for flashy effects and interesting stunts, assets, and complications, but the power itself shouldn't be more potent than others. It's included in power sets with power traits that represent specific magical effects, from Mystic Blast and Flight to Strength and Teleport. Sorcery can't usually inflict stress on its own, but it can create assets and complications.

Note that an Enchant or Know (*Occult*) skill allows for other avenues into occult lore, including rituals, items of power, and knowledge. Heroes with Sorcery usually have a skill or specialty like this.

## STAMINA

The character has increased endurance and staying power, as well as recuperative ability and resistance to fatigue or toxins.

> Enhanced Stamina 8 indicates faster than normal healing and recovery, resistance to minor diseases, and the ability to perform at maximum effort for an hour or more.
>
> Superhuman Stamina 10 allows for rapid recovery from injury, resistance to most terrestrial diseases or

toxins, and the ability to operate at maximum effort for several hours.

Godlike Stamina 12 indicates extremely rapid recovery from even near-fatal wounds or trauma, resistance to even extraterrestrial diseases, and almost limitless ability to operate at maximum effort.

Stamina is most used for recovery, but it can also be used against attacks that target a character's endurance or staying power, or try to induce paralysis, sleep, or fatigue. If a character is holding their breath or some other more active effort, you might use Stamina in the dice pool.

Stamina extends the character's lifespan, too, if that ever comes into question, though it won't necessarily prevent aging so much as keep the effects of aging from slowing the character down. Heroes with a Stamina power are more resistant to chemical substances like drugs, alcohol, and caffeine and can't get drunk or high.

## STRENGTH

The character has strength and muscular power beyond that of a normal human.

Enhanced Strength 8 allows you to flip cars, break through solid barriers, and bend ordinary iron bars.

Superhuman Strength 10 allows you to lift and throw vehicles, smash through stone and metal, and tear apart most barriers.

Godlike Strength 12 confers the power to hurl objects into orbit, push over tall buildings, and demolish most structures.

This very common superpower represents everything from mutant-enhanced musculature to high-tech powered armor. As with many power traits, it's often assumed to just work if there's nothing challenging the character, or if using Strength is part of the goal of a test (like ripping a telephone pole out of the ground to smash a tank).

It's usually, though not always, included in a power set with Durability, often at a different die rating. It may also be used with Leap, representing the use of Strength to leap great distances.

If the Strength is only in one limb or otherwise limited to specific conditions, this is just part of the power set's definition. There's usually no reason to worry about your character only having Superhuman Strength 10 in their cybernetic right arm unless the situation specifically talks about needing strength in the legs or the left arm.



## STRETCH

The character can elongate or increase the length of their limbs or other body parts, often to great distances. This could be through prosthetic devices like tentacles, or it might be a metamorphic ability like having a rubbery or elastic body.

> At 6, you can reach across a normal room or access high places. It's the equivalent of having double the usual reach with arms or legs.
>
> At 8, you can reach across a street, up the side of a building, or down an elevator shaft.
>
> At 10, you can stretch to considerable distances, several city blocks away. You can clear buildings, rivers, or ravines with your elongated legs and arms.
>
> At 12, you can reach ridiculous distances, perhaps without limit—across lakes, oceans, and even into orbit—although the further you stretch the less you're able to make use of your limbs.

Stretch can be used like a movement power (long legs make travel easier), a defensive power (an elastic body can mitigate a bunch of damage), or an offensive power (a punch hurled across a street can hurt). While the way the power set is defined should inform how it's used, Stretch is primarily a means of extending reach and access. Stretch is often coupled with powers like Durability, Intangibility (at low ratings), Grow, Strength, Reflexes, Shapeshift, and Elemental Control.

A power set with Stretch includes SFX like *Area Attack, Grapple,* and *Versatility.*

## TELEPORT

The character may travel instantaneously from one point to another. Usually, no actual distance is traveled; the character just vanishes from one place and appears in another. The power rating defines teleport distance.

> At 6, you can blink in and out of place in a single location, crossing a room or a gap between buildings, effectively eliminating the need to walk. Line of sight is usually required.
>
> At 8, you can teleport across several miles, such as from place to place in a metropolitan area or, by taking multiple jumps, from one city to another.
>
> At 10, you can travel around the world in single or multiple jumps, and perhaps as far as the moon.
>
> At 12, you can travel across vast distances, even to other planets or galaxies.

Depending on the nature of the power (sorcery, technology, alien, etc.) the way the teleportation works can vary greatly. If the teleportation is through portals or wormholes, this might affect the SFX used in the power set.

Some characters may use this power to grab people and teleport them, either bringing them along as a passenger or making portals to send them away. This is represented best with SFX or by using the power with a stunt as part of an attack.

At the 10 and 12 rating, you can choose to have the power *only* allow travel to other dimensions or other worlds; travel between locations on Earth in such instances would be a stunt.

## TRANSMUTATION

The character has the power to transmute one substance to another. Mystics call it alchemy, while to scientists it's known as matter alteration; the specific details may vary.

> At 6, you can affect the integrity or cohesion of a target, causing it to soften or harden, perhaps degrade or take on other qualities, but not actually change into another substance.
>
> At 8, you can alter the properties of the target to make it solid, liquid, or gas, or change it from one kind of solid, liquid, or gas to another within the same category, i.e., inorganic or organic.
>
> At 10, you can operate on the chemical or elemental level and can change one substance, living or nonliving, into another. Stone can be made flesh, water can be transmuted into oil, and so on.
>
> At 12, you can change any object into another, regardless of its original substance, shape, or other qualities.

Transmutation is very powerful and, as such, typically doesn't confer long-lasting effects. Most Transmutation tests or contests create assets or complications that represent the change in quality. The power can be used to inflict stress—such as a disintegrator ray—but unless the target is stressed out, the effect isn't complete or permanent. The die rating of the power also typically informs how well it can alter a target that has Durability or Resistance.

Transmutation is often found in power sets with elemental control, Shapeshift, Stretch, or an attack power. A character's ability to transmute or change themselves into different forms of matter is best represented by Shapeshift or powers like Durability or Strength, with the actual elemental change being descriptive.

# POWER SFX

Here's a list of thematically appropriate SFX to use with power sets or to adapt for distinctions. It's a good idea to rename SFX for flavor; rather than *Absorption* you might have *Reflective Constructs* or *Energy Channel*.

These SFX use some mods described in other chapters, such as stress (page 39). You can switch out any mention of "stress" with "complication" or whichever variation of damage-tracking your Cortex Prime game uses.

## ABSORPTION

*If you succeed in a <type of attack> contest, instead of inflicting stress or a complication, convert your opponent's effect die into a stunt asset for yourself or step up a power by one for your next roll. Spend a PP to create this stunt asset if your opponent succeeds.*

Usually included in a power set with some kind of Energy Control, Energy Blast, Strength, or Reflexes linked to the type of attack described in the SFX. This is an example of something that could be represented with a power trait but works best as SFX, e.g., *Energy Absorption* or *Kinetic Absorption*.

## AFFLICT

*Add a 6 and step up your effect die by one when inflicting <type> complication on a target.*

Usually appears in power sets that represent gear, grappling, entangling, etc. The type of complication is usually connected to the power set.

## AREA ATTACK

*Spend a PP to add a 6 and keep an additional effect die for each additional target past the first.*

Frequently included in power sets with Strength, Blast, or Control power traits.

Useful against mobs (similar opponents grouped together as a single threat). Rolling hitches when using *Area Attack* generally causes collateral damage, represented by complications.

**CONFRONTING THE MOB**

Adam spends a PP to use his area effect Quantum Blast 8 against Mob of Enemy Agents 6 6 6.

| CHARACTER | DICE POOL EFFECT |
|---|---|
| Adam's Agent | add 6 6 |
| Mob of Enemy Agents 6 6 6 | only get a single pool |

If Adam wins, he can apply up to three effect dice to the mob.

## BOOST

*Shut down your highest rated <power set> power to step up another <power set> power by one. Activate an opportunity to restore the power.*

Great for power sets that represent powered armor, cybernetics, or robotic systems.

## BURST

*Step up or double a power die against a single target. Remove the highest rolling die from your pool and add 3 dice together for your total.*

Usually appears in power sets that represent some kind of gear. Represents a concentrated effort, such as autofire or rapid attacks.

*Burst* represents a wide spread of attack such as covering fire or the attack ricocheting from one or more surfaces and thus around corners, obstacles, and so on.

**AREA ATTACKS AND AREA EFFECTS**

Many attacks allow for a special kind of SFX called an **area effect** or **area attack**. At the cost of a PP, the benefit allows the character to add an additional 6 to the dice pool for each additional target. After the roll, when determining effect dice (stress, complications, etc.) an additional die may be chosen for every additional 6 that was added. Area effects are resisted individually by all targets, who roll to set or raise the difficulty against the attacking character's single total. This SFX is especially useful against mobs (see page 117).

> Adam's superpowered agent in Mary Rose's superspy game has an area effect SFX attached to his Quantum Belt power set. Adam's defined this as an explosive effect that uses the Quantum Blast 8 power trait. In a contest with a Mob of Enemy Agents 6 6 6, Adam can add up to 6 6 to his dice pool—one for each of the extra dice in the mob past the first—and keep three effect dice if he succeeds. The mob gets a single opposition dice pool to try to beat it.
>
> If Adam was confronting three separate GMCs, Adam adds 6 6 to his dice pool and each of the GMCs gets their own opposition dice pool to avoid being affected by the SFX. Adam assigns each of his three effect dice to a different GMC. It's possible to lose against one GMC and succeed against the other two, in which case only the effect dice assigned to the losing GMCs are applied.

**CONFRONTING THREE SEPARATE GMCS**

Adam spends a PP to use his area effect Quantum Blast 8 against three GMCs, rated 8, 8, and 6.

| CHARACTER | DICE POOL EFFECT |
|---|---|
| Adam's Agent | add 6 6 |
| GMC 1 8, GMC 2 8, GMC 3 6 | each GMC rolls their own opposition pool |

Adam sets aside up to three effect dice. For each contest he wins, he applies one of those effect dice.

## CONSTRUCTS

*Add a 6 and step up your effect die by one when using <power set> to create assets.*

Usually included in power sets that represent summoning control over elements like earth or fire, etc. A variation is GRAPPLE, which creates complications.

## DANGEROUS

*Add a 6 to your dice pool for an attack and step down the highest die in pool by one. Step up the effect die by one.*

Included in power sets when representing some dangerous use of the character's abilities, like claws or fangs.

## FOCUS

*If a pool includes a <power set> power, you may replace two dice of equal size with one die one step larger.*

Great for heroes who have a lot of skills or whose power sets represent skill, training, or conditioning.

## HEALING

*Add <power> to your dice pool when helping others recover complications. Spend a PP to recover your own or another's <complication type> by one.*

This might represent psychic healing, empathetic healing, chi healing, or spiritual aura.

## IMMUNITY

*Spend a PP to ignore complications from <specific attack type>.*

Attack types include poisons, disease, psychic attack, magical attack, electricity, radiation, and so forth.

## INVULNERABLE

*Spend a PP to ignore <type of complication> for a test or contest unless caused by <specific attack type>.*

Similar to *Immunity* but restricted to a specific type of complication with an exception for a specific attack type. For example, POISONED (*except alcohol*), PARALYZED (*except magical paralysis*).

## MULTIPOWER

*Use two or more <power set> powers in a single dice pool and step each power down by one for each additional power beyond the first.*

Usually appears in power sets with several power traits and when the character has no other power sets. Only step down the power dice, not all the dice in the dice pool.

## SECOND CHANCE

*Spend a PP to reroll when using any <power set> power.*

Good for power sets that represent luck or fortitude.

## SECOND WIND

*Before you put together a dice pool including a <power set> power, you may give the GM a complication attached to you to re-assign as a complication at any time. Step up the <power set> power by one for this roll.*

Almost always appears in a power set with the STAMINA power trait. Variations might work with emotional or mental stress and be tied to a different power trait.

> Tina's Sage has the *Second Wind* SFX in Mary Rose's superspy game. Her Sage has acquired EXHAUSTED 8. When she confronts the villain of the session, she gives the EXHAUSTED 8 complication to Mary Rose and steps up the power die she's using in her dice pool against the villain. Mary Rose can re-assign the 8 complication as she likes once the contest is done, including giving it to another player!

## UNLEASHED

*Step up or double any <power set> power for one roll. If the roll fails, you gain a complication equal in size to your power die.*

Pairs well with power traits that are at the 8 or 10 rating. Represents a hero or villain who maintains strict control over his own powers and sometimes cuts loose.

## VERSATILE

*Split power trait die into two dice, stepped down by one; or three dice, stepped down by two.*

Usually appears in power sets with power traits rated 10 or 12 and when the character has no other power sets. Splitting a 10 in this way gives you 8 8 or 6 6 6. Splitting a 12 gives you 10 10 or 8 8 8.

Dice that result from *Versatile* are each considered power trait dice for the purposes of other SFX that step up or step down the power.

# POWER LIMITS

The primary purpose of limits in power sets is to represent vulnerabilities that let players acquire plot points in keeping with their character's specific powers. A hero is nothing without their flaws and weaknesses, and most superheroes have an Achilles' heel, even if it's just that their powers wear them out!

Players aren't the only people at the table who can activate a limit. The GM may also spend PP to activate them in some circumstances. This doesn't earn the player a PP, so *the option to activate a limit is always given to the player first.* If the player decides not to, the option then goes to the GM, so it's almost always beneficial to the player to take them up on it.

Each limit includes a description of how to restore a power that's shut down by a limit.

## CONSCIOUS ACTIVATION

*If taken out, asleep, or unconscious, shut down <power set>. Restore <power set> when you awake.*

This limit is common when the character's powers stop working if the hero is unconscious, incoherent, or otherwise taken out. It usually only applies to a specific type of stress, such as physical or emotional.

## EXHAUSTED

*Shut down any <power set specific> power to gain a PP. Activate an opportunity to restore the power.*

This limit is straightforward. The character gets tired, and one of his powers stops working. Note that it isn't the whole power set but only specific power traits.

## GEAR

*Shut down <power set> and gain a PP. Test to restore.*

This limit represents a piece of equipment or another powered item that, if lost or stolen or knocked away, shuts down the character's use of it. The power is restored by making a test to get the gear back, reset it, fix it, or otherwise recover it. The GM sets the test's difficulty based on the likelihood of getting it back.

## GROWING DREAD

*Both 1 and 2 on your dice count as hitches when using a <power set> power.*

This is a good limit for mystical or very powerful heroes who make situations worse when they use their powers to their fullest extent. If the power set represents a pact with a demon, a dangerous power source, or something along those lines, this limit makes it clear that using those powers comes at a greater cost.

## MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE

*Shut down <power set A> to activate <power set B>. Shut down <power set B> to restore <power set A>.*

Use this limit when your use of one set of powers depends on another set of powers being inactive.

## UNCONTROLLABLE

*Change any <power set> power into a complication and gain a PP. Activate an opportunity or remove the complication to restore the power.*

This limit represents powers that aren't necessarily dangerous, but they're unreliable or prone to causing immediate problems. When a power is turned into a complication through a limit like this, it can be targeted and recovered like any other complication. Eliminating the complication restores the power.



BURAK KIRK



VANESSA MORALES

# THE ABILITY LIST

It's true that this list overlaps a good bit with the Power List (page 182), but the Ability List has a more cinematic, prime time drama approach to superpowers and SFX. It's not a good idea to mix the two; if you have superheroes or aliens or fantasy monsters in your Cortex Prime game, they should all use powers, or all use abilities. See "Abilities" on page 66 for more details about this trait.

Depending on your method of creating characters, not all SFX attached to abilities come unlocked when the character is created. Usually each ability comes with one free SFX, and the rest can be unlocked later when you step up the die rating of your ability—one SFX at 8 and one SFX at 12. During growth, you can choose to add a new descriptor, and thus a new way to use your ability, rather than stepping up your ability's die rating.

### SFX THAT STEP DOWN EFFECT DICE

Many SFX in this section represent armor, damage reduction, or invulnerability to other abilities by stepping down an effect die, incoming stress, or complication. When you use the SFX, compare your effect die to the ability die being used against you.

- If your effect die is the same size or smaller than the ability die, step your opponent's effect die down by one.
- If your effect die is a larger size than the ability die, ignore your opponent's effect die completely.

All abilities in this chapter use this format:

## ABILITY NAME

A short description and a suggestion of when to include the ability's die in your dice pool.

**Effect:** All abilities fit into one of the six effect categories: Attack, Sensory, Movement, Control, Defense, and Enhancement.

**EFFECT SYMBOLS**

ATTACK SENSORY MOVEMENT CONTROL DEFENSE ENHANCEMENT

**Descriptors:** Ultimately, the players create the descriptors, but we provide some examples.
**Limits:** Again, these are just examples, and which limits apply depends on the circumstances and the descriptors. Feel free to create your own limits. Ability limits are almost always "Earn a PP when this ability is shut down."
**SFX:** Players may choose from the list or create their own.

## ABSORPTION

You can absorb a single kind of energy, whether directed at you or at characters in the same scene as you. Sometimes this energy can be stored and released later; sometimes it can be used to power your body to perform great feats. Include the ability in your dice pool when you absorb, release, or use energy.

**Descriptors:** *Electricity, Heat, Radiation*
**Limits:** *Broken Concentration, Cold, Grounding*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to absorb energy to step down your opponent's energy-based effect die against you or another character.
- Spend a PP to absorb the energy out of an attack on you or another character to create an asset of the same die rating.
- Spend a PP to use absorbed energy to perform feats of super-strength.
- Spend a PP to release the energy you've absorbed to power technology.
- Spend a PP to release absorbed energy behind you, propelling you forward at great speed.

## ADAPTATION

Your body is able to survive in, and may actually prefer, an environment that's normally hostile or hazardous to others. This can be as simple as thick, hairy skin to resist the effects of extreme cold temperatures, or as complicated as gills to allow you to breathe underwater. Some people with this ability can change their physiology to adapt to different environments, though it's not usually an instantaneous process. Include the ability in your dice pool when you are fighting to overcome the elements or when your adaptation gives you an advantage.

**Descriptors:** *Amphibious, Heat Shield, Modification*
**Limits:** *Dehydration, Cold, Heat, Vacuum*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to adapt your physiology to new conditions.
- Spend a PP to extend your adaptation to other characters as long as you touch them.
- Spend a PP to blend in to your chosen environment.
- Spend a PP to reveal additional details of your chosen environment.
- Spend a PP to find useful resources in your chosen environment.

## ANIMAL CONTROL

You have some form of psychic link with a single species or type of animal. Sometimes this means being able to communicate with that type of animal or being "one of the pack." You might form a close enough bond that one of these creatures is a constant companion, possibly bonded so strongly that you and the animal share each other's pain and see through each other's eyes. Include the ability die when you deal with your chosen animal or when one of your animal friends helps you.

**Descriptors:** *Wolf, Cat, Fish*
**Limits:** *Eye Contact, Pain Transference, Psychic Feedback*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to see through an animal's eyes in another scene.
- Spend a PP to see an animal's recent memories.
- Spend a PP to summon an animal that you can control.
- Spend a PP to take on features of your chosen animal.
- Spend a PP to take an animal out of the scene.

## ANIMAL MIMICRY

Perhaps you have an unusual tie to the natural world, or your genetic structure slips back and forth on the evolutionary ladder. You can call upon the gifts and abilities of animals, gaining the speed of an antelope, the fantastic sense of smell of a bloodhound, or the jumping ability of a kangaroo. Include this ability's die when you use the gifts of the natural world.

**Descriptors:** *Primal Power, Genetics, Tribal Traditions*
**Limits:** *Concentration, Natural Enemies, Fire*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to mimic the natural abilities of an animal.
- Spend a PP to combine the natural abilities of two animals to use in conjunction.
- Spend a PP to grow claws to step up your effect die on any physical attack.
- Spend a PP to grow a thick hide to step down your opponent's effect die from incoming attacks.
- Spend a PP to retire in feline seclusion and recover your own stress or complications.

## ASTRAL PROJECTION

You can leave your physical body behind and travel as a psychic entity or ghost. While in this form, your body is usually unconscious and defenseless, but your astral form is nearly invisible to normal detection and can walk through solid objects as if they weren't there. Include the ability die when you invisibly eavesdrop, or in any contest with other astrally projected characters.

**Descriptors:** *Psychic, Magic, Spirit*
**Limits:** *Psychic Feedback, EMP, Tethered to Body*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to take another character with you.
- Spend a PP to disrupt electronics while astrally projected.
- Spend a PP to astrally project one body part to see or touch the astral world.
- Spend a PP to project "deeper" into otherworldly spirit realms.
- Spend a PP to take along the astral form of a material object.

## BLAST

Whether it's primal forces like water, lava, and fire or energy sources such as light, heat, or electricity, the Blast ability covers a wide spectrum. When weaponized, these can be quite scary. This ability must be acquired multiple times if you want to project more than one kind of energy or element and should be renamed to suit, i.e., Radium Blast or Heat Blast. Include the ability die when you're using your Blast to threaten, scare, or injure an opponent.

**Descriptors:** *Super-Breath, Fire, Water, Lava, Heat Ray, Electricity Blast, Shadow, Light*
**Limits:** *Heat, Ice, Rubber, Lead Shielding, Cold, Vacuum*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to create an area effect.
- Spend a PP to destroy an inanimate object as big as a car. Spend 2 PP for an object as big as a house. Spend 3 PP for an object as big as a skyscraper or a river.
- Spend a PP to make geysers of your element shoot up from the ground beneath your foes.
- Spend a PP to encase a person or an object in ice for a scene with Ice Blast or Super-Breath Blast. Breaking free requires a test with your effect die added to the opponent's difficulty as a complication.

## BODY TRANSFORMATION

You can change the molecular makeup of your body to change into another element. In most cases, you can only turn into one type of form, but there are rare individuals that can take on multiple forms. When in other forms, you take on the aspects of that form: metallic forms are subject to magnetism, fiery forms can be doused with water, and gaseous forms are dispersed by high winds. Include the ability die when you use the aspects of your form to your advantage.

**Descriptors:** *Steel Skin, Liquid Body, Gaseous Body*
**Limits:** *Corrosion, Heat, Wind*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to turn to a gaseous or liquid form and escape through a crack.
- Spend a PP to become a rock-hard statue for a scene, ignoring physical stress or complications.
- Spend a PP to turn another character into your chosen element.
- Spend a PP to turn yourself into living fire, adding the effect die to future hand-to-hand attacks.
- Spend a PP to hide in a large amount of your chosen element.

## CHI MASTERY

Through training and mastery, you've taught your body to respond to your conscious control. You can manipulate your own metabolic rate, sense other characters and animals around you, and direct your life force into your every movement. Include this ability die when your body and your expert control of it come into play—when you fight, run, or leap, and when you perceive the life force of others.

**Descriptors:** *Discipline*
**Limits:** *Dark Chi, Sorcery, Distraction*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to channel your chi into a powerful blow, stepping up your effect die for this attack.
- Spend a PP to recover your own stress or complications from injury or exhaustion.
- Spend a PP to sense an incoming attack, avoiding surprise.
- Spend a PP to act in the darkness as if you could see.
- Spend a PP to step up or double a martial arts or combat-based trait die for a test or contest.

## CLAWS

With long claws, nails, or knives you slash and hack at your foes. It causes as much fear as it does blood and gore. You can include the ability die in your pool when trying to cause fear or bodily harm, as well as for other uses of your claws, such as climbing or wedging open blast doors.

**Descriptors:** *Metal Nails, Energy Claws, Natural Talons*
**Limits:** *Electricity, Magnetism, Terrifying*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to step up your effect die when inflicting stress or complications with your claws.
- Spend a PP to rip apart solid, inert obstacles.
- Spend a PP to stop your fall by using your claws as pitons.
- Spend a PP to regrow your claws if they are damaged or broken.
- Spend a PP to cling to a surface with your claws despite adverse conditions.

## COMBUSTION

You create explosive charges that can detonate and cause damage commensurate to the size of the bomb. The larger the bomb, the bigger the blast. Given enough time and energy, you could blow up a building or possibly much, much more. Include the ability die when you use your bombs to destroy, threaten, or distract.

**Descriptors:** *Explosion, Heat, Psychic*
**Limits:** *Time, Water, Vacuum*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to cause an explosive effect that inflicts stress or complications.
- Spend a PP to reveal that you left a bomb in a location you were in earlier in the episode.
- Spend a PP to draw everyone's attention to an explosion so you can escape a scene.
- Spend a PP to create shaped charges that can take down obstacles without damaging the surrounding structure.
- Spend a PP to create a time bomb set to go off after a certain amount of time has passed.

## COMPREHENSION

You're a savant, able to understand unusual languages and decipher impenetrable codes. Even if you've never seen or heard the language before in your life, or the ciphers are alien or otherwise impossible to understand, you have a handle on it. If it's encoded in symbols, you can puzzle it out. Include the ability die when reading or deciphering strange languages or codes, or when using what you've learned.

**Descriptors:** *Psychic, Networking, Intuition*
**Limits:** *Auditory, Visual, Time*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to instantly understand a spoken language you've never heard before.
- Spend a PP to figure out alien technology well enough to use it…once.
- Spend a PP to deduce the language or code's origin in general terms.
- Spend a PP to write or speak in response to what you've deciphered.
- Spend a PP to read binary code to reconstitute data files or understand a program's function.

## CRYOKINESIS

You control cold, ice, and all things related. You can draw moisture from the air to create structures of ice, or mess with the temperature of a room. Include the ability die when you drop the temperature, ice things over, or manipulate chunks of ice.

**Descriptors:** *Ice, Cold, Frost*
**Limits:** *Heat, Sunlight, Passion*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to entomb another character in ice, in a form of suspended animation.
- Spend a PP to create walls of ice to block a path or pursuer.
- Spend a PP to jam mechanical devices with frost and ice.
- Spend a PP to "skate" across ice.
- Spend a PP to freeze a large mass of liquid or even gas into a solid state.

## DENSITY CONTROL

You can change the space between molecules in your body. In effect, you can walk through walls, become hard as stone, or both. Include the ability die whenever your altered density benefits you.

**Descriptors:** *Phasing, Hardening, Intangibility*
**Limits:** *Electricity, Water, Wind*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to walk through a wall.
- Spend a PP to become hard as stone and step down your opponent's effect die when they're trying to harm you.
- Spend a PP to reach into another character's body—as an attack or as medical attention.
- Spend a PP to decrease your density.
- Spend a PP to make your fists super-dense and step up your effect die when smashing somebody.

## DREAM MANIPULATION

Entering people's dreams is a tricky thing. You get to know parts of them they keep hidden. For you, it's an art. You must see the sleeper to enter their dreams. Once inside, you aren't subject to the rules of the dream. You can control elements within the dream and leave when you choose to do so. Include the ability die whenever you're within a dream, whether you are mining for information, inflicting harm through nightmares, or soothing the subject's fears.

**Descriptors:** *Psychic, Magic, Memory*
**Limits:** *Psychic Feedback, Strong Emotion, Dreams About You*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to bring other characters into a dreamscape with you.
- Spend a PP to create an item, location, or event within a dream.
- Spend a PP to force a dream to recall a memory of the dreamer.
- Spend a PP to make the dreamer sleepwalk.
- Spend a PP to enter the dreams of a comatose dreamer.

## DUPLICATION

There are more than one of you. Perhaps there are an infinite number of you; perhaps you can make more yous when you wish. By default, only one of you has your abilities. Each of your duplicates has its own stress or complication tracks. Include the ability die when you gang up on another character, work "together" with yourself, or when being in two or more places benefits you.

**Descriptors:** *Holographic Copy, Clones, Magic*
**Limits:** *Psychic Feedback, Pain Transference, Split Attention*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to create a duplicate with one of your abilities, stepped down by one. Spend additional PP to give your duplicate additional abilities.
- Spend a PP to stash a duplicate in a convenient place you've been in before.
- Spend a PP to merge two duplicates together, sharing memories.
- Spend a PP to "share" stress or complications across duplicates, stepping down the die rating by one for each shared dupe.

## EARTH CONTROL

You can control the very ground beneath your feet, bending it to your will. Include the ability die when you create earthquakes, volcanic vents, or other tectonic disturbances, or when you mold stone or sand to trap your foes or shield your friends.

**Descriptors:** *Seismic Manipulation, Lava Control, Glass Manipulation*
**Limits:** *Must be Grounded, Cold, Water*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to encase another character in stone.
- Spend a PP to create a sweeping effect of quakes that inflict stress or complications.
- Spend a PP to raise a barrier of stone before you, stepping down your opponent's effect die.
- Spend a PP to seal a corridor with a wall of stone.
- Spend a PP to make the earth swallow up a vehicle, a building, or a whole town.

**EFFECT SYMBOLS**



## ELECTROKINESIS

Electricity, whether man-made or naturally occurring, is your plaything. You might create the electricity yourself or need to have an external source, but the end result is the same. Include the ability die when you create a spark of electricity, override some electrical device, or disperse the power in an electrical cable.

**Descriptors:** *Electricity, Lightning, Magic*
**Limits:** *Grounding, Rubber, Conductive Materials*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to create a powerful storm.
- Spend a PP to channel lightning to a point on the ground.
- Spend a PP to charge your body or conductive material with electricity to be released later.
- Spend a PP to activate electronic devices using your electrical abilities.
- Spend a PP to create an electromagnetic pulse to disable all electronic devices within a scene.

## ENERGY AURA

A swirl of flame, a looming patina of decay, or a shining halo—whatever form it takes, you're surrounded by an aura of energy. It protects you and repels your opponents through force or violence or perhaps sheer nausea. Include this ability die when your aura protects you or when you extend it out into the world around you.

**Descriptors:** *Fire, Radiation, Holy Light*
**Limits:** *Water, Corruption, Concentration*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to use your aura to envelop another PC or GMC who's in the same scene as you.
- Spend a PP to step down an opponent's effect die from an incoming physical or energy attack.
- Spend a PP to cause feedback and interference with electronics in your presence.
- Spend a PP to set flammable objects on fire.
- Spend a PP to step up your own effect die when making a close-combat attack.

## FLIGHT

You can defy the pull of gravity and soar through the skies, no need for an aircraft. You may use wings, gusts of wind, or anti-gravity, or just have the superpower to defy humanity's evolutionary misfortune of being a land-bound mammal. Roll this ability's die when performing evasive maneuvers in mid-flight, chasing down another flying opponent, or getting a bird's eye view of a situation.

**Descriptors:** *Wings, Gliding, Levitation*
**Limits:** *Short Distances, Sonic Boom, Wind*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to carry something large or ungainly along with you.
- Spend a PP to support a falling object such as a floundering aircraft.
- Spend a PP to dive bomb an enemy and step up your effect die for this attack.
- Spend a PP to change direction quickly to fly around an obstacle; you may use this obstacle as a 8 stunt or asset.
- Spend a PP to join a scene you aren't part of, even if you can't get there by ground.

## FORCE CONSTRUCTS

You have the ability to create objects out of sheer energy. Whether you build towers to the sky, wrap chains around your enemies, or create a parachute when you fall out of an airplane, your constructs last just long enough to be of use and then disappear into nothing. Include this ability die when using your force constructs as tools, obstacles, or any other clever thing you think up.

**Descriptors:** *Hypertech, Magic, Psychic*
**Limits:** *Specific Substance, Concentration, Line of Sight*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to create a wall of force that prevents another character from escaping a scene.
- Spend a PP to create a net of force that catches a large, falling object.
- Spend a PP to dispel a force construct made by another character.
- Spend a PP to create a force construct inside a machine that causes it to malfunction.
- Spend a PP to create a path through the air that you can run along.




NOÉ LEYVA

## FORCE FIELD

You can create a barrier made of energy or force. It might be a visible energy field or an invisible bubble. It can protect you and your friends, or trap your foes while you determine their fate. Roll the ability die when you use your force field to help you in conflicts or emergencies.

**Descriptors:** *Energy Shield, Telekinetic Field, Electric Shield*
**Limits:** *Psychic Feedback, Mental, Concentration*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to step down stress or complications imposed on all characters within the force field.
- Spend a PP to entrap another character in a force field.
- Spend a PP to fly short distances within a force bubble.
- Spend a PP to slip from the grasp of an adversary by sliding out of your force field.
- Spend a PP to keep all forms of gas in or out of the force field; this can provide a bubble of breathable air in an airless environment or keep harmful gases in or out.

## GRAVITY CONTROL

You can manipulate the pull of Earth's gravity on yourself or another person or object. Increasing the pull of gravity can make the subject so heavy it can't move; decreasing the pull of gravity can make the subject light enough to fly. Include this ability die when manipulating weight could affect the outcome.

**Descriptors:** *Gravity, Magic, Centrifugal Force*
**Limits:** *Concentration, Density, Magnetism*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to hold another character or object in place with powerful gravity.
- Spend a PP to fly short distances or hover in place.
- Spend a PP to toss another character out of a scene.
- Spend a PP to make a character or object so light that it can float in the breeze.
- Spend a PP to increase the gravity in a scene; you may use the crushing gravity as a 8 stunt for the remainder of the scene.

## HEALING

You can heal physical or mental trauma inflicted on others, sometimes with just a touch. Curing wounds—stress or complications, depending on your mods—might end with you getting the stress in place of the injured character. Roll this ability's die in any situation that calls upon your restorative talents.

**Descriptors:** *Physical Healing, Mental Healing, Repair*
**Limits:** *Emotional Trigger, Damage Transfer, Touch*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to recover another character's stress or complications that relate to being anxious or angry.
- Spend a PP to recover another character's stress or complications relating to being afraid or shocked.
- Spend a PP to stave off a disease or similar affliction for a short period of time.
- Spend a PP to identify any poison or toxin in your subject's body.
- Spend a PP to remove another character's physical stress or complication and add it to yourself.

## HYDROKINESIS

You have complete control over water, ice, and steam, allowing you to move water as if with telekinesis and to create structures like walls or orbs of water. Roll this ability's die in tests or contests involving water or aqueous liquids.

**Descriptors:** *Water, Ice, Steam*
**Limits:** *Cold, Heat, Sand*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to create a small storm or thick fog within a scene; you may use this as a 8 stunt.
- Spend a PP to create bubbles of air to allow others to survive underwater.
- Spend a PP to create huge tidal waves.
- Spend a PP to turn any large body of water, such as a lake, into steam or ice or vice-versa.
- Spend a PP to create a wall of water that moves to act as a shield for you or an ally, and step down the effect die of the appropriate opponent.

## ILLUSIONS

You can create images that others can see and hear, and which seem very real. Roll this ability's die when you're trying to pull the wool over somebody's eyes, trick them with some sleight of hand, or create misdirection.

**Descriptors:** *Mental, Magic, Visual*
**Limits:** *Psychic Feedback, Concentration, One Target*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to create illusions so real that another character thinks they can be seen, heard, smelled, and even touched.
- Spend a PP to create illusions that appear for all characters in a scene.
- Spend a PP to create an illusion of a scene, changing the surroundings.
- Spend a PP to create an illusion pleasing enough to step down the effect die of any incoming fear or sadness-based attack.
- Spend a PP to create an illusion scary enough to step up the effect die of any fear or terror attack.

## INSECT CONTROL

You can communicate with and control insects, usually of a single type. In some circumstances, you might be seen as a hive or a queen by the insects; in others it's simply a form of mind control. Regardless, the connection can have side effects such as transference of pain as well as seeing through the eyes of the insects, which could get quite confusing. Include your ability's die when the situation involves insects or could be improved by controlling insects in the area.

**Descriptors:** *Bees, Locusts, Ants*
**Limits:** *Pain Transference, Psychic Feedback, Bug Spray*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to see through the eyes of an insect in another scene.
- Spend a PP to swarm insects on another character for a scene. Any other character can use the swarm as a 8 stunt.
- Spend a PP to take on aspects of the insects that you control.
- Spend a PP to call insects of the type you control to come to you.
- Spend a PP to direct insects to infest large electronic or mechanical devices in the scene to disrupt them and render them inoperable.

## INVISIBILITY

You can disappear from view at will. This might be a result of a mass telepathy convincing others you're not there, you might simply turn transparent, or you might refract light around you, so others see what's behind you instead of you. If vanishing from sight would help you in a test or contest, include the ability's die.

**Descriptors:** *Perception, Blending, Magical*
**Limits:** *Mental, Scent, Audible*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to disappear, escaping from the scene.
- Spend a PP to hide for an entire scene to listen in without being noticed.
- Spend a PP to shadow someone for a whole day without them noticing you at all.
- Spend a PP to see other invisible people or objects.
- Spend a PP to turn another person or object invisible for a scene.

## INVULNERABILITY

You are able to avoid pain and trauma. This might be because you're simply tough and hardened, or your body might be rubbery or liquid and thus impossible to hurt. Include this ability whenever you're engaged in a struggle to resist or oppose physical attacks, showing off your impenetrable skin, or ignoring hostile conditions to achieve some goal.

**Descriptors:** *Mental, Physical, Magic*
**Limits:** *Energy, Electricity, Magic*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to step down an opponent's effect die.
- Spend a PP to recover your stress or complications relating to injury or exhaustion.
- Spend a PP to ignore the effects of exposure to extreme temperatures such as arctic cold or volcanic cores.
- Spend a PP to ignore hunger or exhaustion due to lack of sleep.
- Spend a PP to ignore the need to breathe in an airless environment such as underwater.

**EFFECT SYMBOLS**



## LIGHT CONTROL

You can control light, using it to blind or daze or light up a dark room without a flashlight. Include this ability's die when making attacks with light, revealing things with light, or making the ambient light improve the way you look to others, or when you're trying to perform well in an overly bright or dark environment.

**Descriptors:** *Light, Laser, Flash*
**Limits:** *Shadow, Diffusion, Mirror*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to create a dazzling blast, temporarily blinding everyone in a scene.
- Spend a PP to create a dizzying light show, hypnotizing anyone that can see the lights.
- Spend a PP to use a focused light beam to burn through an inanimate object or burn a message onto a surface.
- Spend a PP to shine brightly into the ultraviolet spectrum, imitating sunlight.
- Spend a PP to create holographic shapes from light that can remain for an entire scene.

## LUCK

Things have a tendency to go your way, whether this is a conscious decision or not. There are people with the opposite ability to cause bad luck to happen to other people. They are not fun to be around. Include this ability die in any roll that hinges almost entirely on luck or chance, rather than skill or effort.

**Descriptors:** *Luck, Jinx, Magic*
**Limits:** *Mental, Emotional Trigger, Magic*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to reroll a die in a test or contest that includes a hitch (you can reroll the hitch).
- Spend a PP to force your opponent to reroll the highest die in a test or contest.
- Spend a PP to allow another PC or major GMC to reroll a die in a test or contest that includes a hitch (they can't reroll the hitch).
- Spend a PP to chance upon a clue when you aren't looking for it.
- Spend a PP to step down an effect die that would obviously cause you harm.

## MAGNETISM

You can affect not only the massive magnetic powers of the planet, but the minuscule magnetic properties in every piece of metal, allowing you to create walls of metal to defend yourself or perhaps even slow the blood in a human body due to the iron content. Roll this ability's die when a situation's outcome might be affected by magnetic forces.

**Descriptors:** *Magnetism*
**Limits:** *Electricity, Plastics, Concentration*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to wrap metal around a character, trapping them.
- Spend a PP to wipe computer data storage and memory banks.
- Spend a PP to scramble electronic devices for the remainder of the scene.
- Spend a PP to manipulate the iron in the blood of another person to stun them or cause stress or complications.
- Spend a PP to move big metallic objects around as defined by the scope of your die rating:

  4: office chair
  6: refrigerator
  8: small car
  10: truck
  12: jumbo jet

## METAHUMAN SENSE

You can identify those with power like your own. That information may come to you through a sixth sense or be a variation of your other senses like sight or smell. By default, you detect metahumans like yourself: if you're meteor-infected, you can only detect other meteor-infected metahumans. Include this ability die when you find other metahumans or when you use that information to your benefit.

**Descriptors:** *Perception, Insight, Experience*
**Limits:** *Line of Sight, Lead, Time/Focus*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to get a vague sense of a metahuman's abilities—usually their descriptors or limits.
- Spend a PP to identify power sources beyond your own.
- Spend a PP to identify a target's limit.
- Spend a PP to identify any existing assets, complications, or stunts the abilities are linked to.
- Spend a PP to "tag" a metahuman so that you can track their location for a day.

## MIND CONTROL

You can control or influence other people's minds without them realizing, although it's hard to make them go against their deepest beliefs. You might use psychic influence, or pheromones, or subsonic vibrations. Include the ability die when trying to coerce, seduce, influence, or mislead someone. Mind control works best when you're in the same scene; its effects may be overcome in later scenes by a test, especially when your influence conflicts with the subject's true convictions.

**Descriptors:** *Mental, Magic, Pheromones, Tech Implant*
**Limits:** *Psychic Feedback, Eye Contact, Auditory*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to insert a post-hypnotic suggestion in your target to be acted upon later.
- Spend a PP to erase a memory, such as a secret identity.
- Spend a PP to insert false memories into a target.
- Spend a PP to make a target into your stalwart defender without having to maintain control over every action.
- Spend a PP to make a target oppose his friends without having to maintain control over every action.

> **Note:** Please read the note on Mind Control, Possession, and Consent on page 186.

## PARALYSIS

You can lock someone in place, incapable of moving or doing anything physical. This could be due to some sort of ray or beam, perhaps some kind of mental control, or a poison that causes paralysis on contact. Roll this ability's die when immobilizing someone—whether to terrorize them or escape from them—would be to your advantage.

**Descriptors:** *Mental, Poison, Stun*
**Limits:** *Psychic Feedback, Touch, Duration*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to make another character unable to move, speak, or act.
- Spend a PP to release a paralyzing agent that slows everyone in a scene except you. You may use this as a 8 stunt.
- Spend a PP to stun a target from a distance so that they can no longer run away.
- Spend a PP to make a target fall asleep.
- Spend a PP to step up your effect die when causing fear, anger, or injury-based stress or complications.

## PLANT CONTROL

You can command plant life to grow or wither at will, to wind around your enemies, and to communicate with you as if it were another person. Roll this ability's die when the plant life around you could help you achieve your goals.

**Descriptors:** *Tree, Spore, Fungus*
**Limits:** *Pain Transference, Psychic Feedback, Cold*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to make vines burst from below, binding a character to the ground. Anyone but the target may use the vines as a 8 stunt for the rest of the scene.
- Spend a PP to send messages through plant life in scenes you're not in.
- Spend a PP to grow a large plant pod to escape a scene through the ground.
- Spend a PP to ask plant life in the scene for residual memories.
- Spend a PP to cause plants in a scene with you to secrete toxins. You may use the toxins as a 8 stunt.

## POISON

Your touch or scent can destroy the inner workings of the human body. This may involve breathing in your released vapors, venomous injection, or a simple kiss. Include this ability's die when trying to overcome someone with your toxic or chemical talents.

**Descriptors:** *Gaseous, Kiss, Injection*
**Limits:** *Touch, Wind, Water*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to make your poisonous gas affect everyone in a scene as an area effect.
- Spend a PP to infect a target with a poison that activates one or more scenes later.
- Spend a PP to conceal the toxin from normal medical science.
- Spend a PP to recover yourself or somebody in the same scene from any stress caused by a toxin.
- Spend a PP to step up your effect die when you're trying to cause harm with your poison.

## POSSESSION

You can inhabit another's body for a short time. Often the victims of this kind of control have no memory of the event. Include this ability's die when you're possessing someone and want to hide your possession, convince people your host is still in charge, or engage in psychic warfare with the mind of the host.

Possession includes a few special rules. When you possess someone, you use your own mental traits, but you may use your host's physical traits where appropriate. If you attempt a test or contest while in your host's body in which their highest mental trait die rating is higher than your own, they may attempt to shake your control by spending a PP and interfering with their own roll. If they roll higher than you, the possession is ended. Possession for more than a single contest or test requires a contest against the target in addition to the PP spent; if you succeed, you step in and act while the PC or GMC takes a back seat.

**Descriptors:** *Mental, Magic, Spirit*
**Limits:** *Psychic Feedback, Duration, Concentration*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to seize control of a minor GMC in the same scene as you for the rest of this episode, or until they break free of your control.
- Spend a PP to control all minor GMCs in a scene. Rather than inhabiting everyone's body, you are merely in the back of their minds, making suggestions that everyone seems to agree are good ideas. The effects only last for this scene.
- Spend a PP to use someone else's SFX for the rest of the scene.
- Spend a PP to take control of a PC or GMC in another scene for a single contest or test.
- Spend a PP to take control of a PC or GMC for the remainder of the scene or until they break free. This also requires a contest against the target.

**Note:** Please read the note on Mind Control, Possession, and Consent on page 186.



COUPLE OF KOOKS

## POWER LEECH

You're the bane of the powered community, existing to either imitate other abilities or temporarily take them away. You roll this ability's die when facing down someone else with abilities or when trying to control stolen abilities. To actually take abilities away, you must use SFX.

**Descriptors:** *Alien Mineral, Power, Magic*
**Limits:** *Uncontrollable, Touch, Concentration*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to gain an ability of another PC or GMC in the same scene. The die rating of the stolen ability is the lower of your Power Leech die rating and the stolen ability's original die rating.
- Spend a PP to shut down an ability of another PC or GMC in the same scene. Your die rating must be equal to or greater than their ability's die rating.
- Spend a PP to use an SFX from gear in the same scene.
- Spend a PP and step this ability down by one to step down all abilities other than your own in the same scene as you by one.
- Spend a PP to step up another ability of yours by stepping down an opponent's ability.

## PRECOGNITION

You see things before they happen. Sometimes only seconds before; sometimes far, far ahead. This power doesn't mean you can automatically understand the context of what you're seeing; it simply means that you see something that's coming. Roll this ability's die when trying to solve a problem, understand information, or get insight into something using your precognitive ability.

**Descriptors:** *Mental, Magic, Touch*
**Limits:** *Traumatic Flashes, Psychic Feedback, Uncontrollable*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to sense an opponent's next move in a fight. Remove the highest rolling die from their next roll.
- Spend a PP to learn about an object or person's future just by touching them.
- Spend a PP to act on your precognitive abilities; reroll your entire pool, minus any hitches.
- Spend a PP to have gained a precognitive clue that leads you to a scene you aren't part of.
- Spend a PP to have left a clue or message in a scene you aren't part of but have visited before.

## PYROKINESIS

Your control over fire and heat lets you manipulate temperature as well as flame. You might create your own flame or require something else to make the flame for you, but the end result is the same. Add this ability's die when handling fire, impressing others with your grilling techniques, or sensing heat sources in your area.

**Descriptors:** *Fire, Heat, Temperature*
**Limits:** *Water, Cold, Vacuum*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to melt an inanimate object with a scope defined by your die rating:

  4: ice cubes
  6: frozen pond
  8: gold brick
  10: steel bars
  12: vault door

- Spend a PP to create a ring of fire, trapping another character.
- Spend a PP to absorb existing fire and heat into your own body.
- Spend a PP to surround yourself with flames and step up your effect die when making a burn attack.
- Spend a PP to create a wall of flame to step down a damage-causing effect die from physical attacks.

## REGENERATION

You are able to heal physical or mental stress and trauma you've been subjected to. Include your ability die when your regenerative ability would let you successfully struggle through painful or harmful situations.

**Descriptors:** *Physical, Mental, Magical*
**Limits:** *Emotional Block, Elemental Trigger, Vampirism*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to recover stress or complications caused by injury or fatigue.
- Spend a PP to recover stress or complications caused by fear or anxiety.
- Spend a PP to grow back a severed limb or other body part.
- Spend a PP to cure yourself from any ailment or disease.
- Spend a PP to return from the dead. You must step this ability down a step as a consequence.

## SHADOW CONTROL

A creature of shadow, you can create shadows where there are none and cause existing shadows to do your bidding. Include this ability die when shifting shadows around, drawing them closer, or dispersing them would help you achieve your goals.

**Descriptors:** *Shadow, Magic, Darkness*
**Limits:** *Light, Fire, UV Light* (including *Sunlight*)
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to turn someone else into a shadow.
- Spend a PP to restrain another character with their own shadow.
- Spend a PP to attack someone with their own shadow.
- Spend a PP to envelop an entire scene in darkness, snuffing out all light.
- Spend a PP to temporarily blind everyone in a scene by covering their eyes in their own shadows.

**EFFECT SYMBOLS**

ATTACK | SENSORY | MOVEMENT | CONTROL | DEFENSE | ENHANCEMENT



## SHADOW WALK

You can dive into shadows or move as a shadow to get from place to place. Include this ability in any test or contest where your unique talent at moving in and through local shadows would be an advantage.

**Descriptors:** *Shadow, Magic, Darkness*
**Limits:** *Light, Fire, UV Light* (including *Sunlight*)
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to slip into holes and cracks too small for pursuers to follow.
- Spend a PP to jump into one shadow and out of another.
- Spend a PP to spread a shadow across a scene to jump in one end and out the other.
- Spend a PP to jump into another person's shadow and jump out of the same person's shadow at a later point in time.
- Spend a PP to jump into a shadow on a flat surface like a wall and out on the other side of the surface as if the shadow was a doorway or portal.



## SHAPESHIFTING

You can alter your appearance or shape to imitate other people, creatures, or inanimate objects. Include this ability's die when you're trying to pass off your assumed shape or appearance as your own, engaged in a fight where changing shape might help you out, or retaining your shape while fatigued or hurt. If you've been taken out, you might return to your native form unless you spend a PP to keep it stable.

**Descriptors:** *Imitation, Animal, Object*
**Limits:** *Concentration, Scent, X-Rays*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to change shape into an object the same size as yourself.
- Spend a PP to imitate another character down to fingerprints and retinal patterns.
- Spend a PP to grow in size to two or three times your normal height.
- Spend a PP to shrink to miniscule size.
- Spend a PP to change into an animal that would be indistinguishable from the real thing at a genetic level.



## SIZE ALTERATION

Six feet tall? A demure five four, perhaps? How about twenty feet toes to nose or a mere six inches? You can drastically grow and shrink your body size. Contrast this with SHAPESHIFTING, which is about fooling other characters: nobody will be fooled by a twenty-foot-tall you. Include this ability die when your shifting size plays to your advantage—towering over others, shrinking down to slip through small crevices, or simply parlaying your size advantage.

**Descriptors:** *Strange Biology, Physics, Wishes*
**Limits:** *Insecurity, Concentration, Air*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to grow toward terrifying proportions, stepping up your effect die when trying to intimidate or exert force on something.
- Spend a PP to be so tiny you're not detected.
- Spend a PP to grow so big you destroy the building you're in.
- Spend a PP to shrink and escape any bonds that are constraining you.
- Spend a PP to grow into the way of an attack against another character, interfering with a contest.



## SONIC BLAST

You can let loose a cacophony of noise that could take out a city block. Include this ability die when you're using your sonic attack to harm someone, freak them out, or break a lot of glass.

**Descriptors:** *Sonic Scream, Music, High Frequency*
**Limits:** *Silence, Requires Vocals, White Noise*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to affect everyone in a scene who can hear you. Treat this as an area effect test, one that all affected characters in the scene must test against to avoid taking stress or complications related to hearing injury or vibration damage.
- Spend a PP to emit a low frequency scream and cause a localized earthquake.
- Spend a PP to emit a high frequency scream that scrambles electronics in a scene and calls to all nearby canines.
- Spend a PP to emit a scream of the exact frequency required to shatter a specific glass object in the same scene as you.
- Spend a PP to emit a scream of such force that it deteriorates concrete and other materials back to its rocky and sandy origins.

## STRETCHING

You can bend and twist into nearly any shape, becoming both like liquid and stretching far beyond human reach. Include this ability's die when your elastic or rubbery nature would help you get a positive outcome.

**Descriptors:** *Plastic, Rubber, Putty*
**Limits:** *Electricity, Cold, Heat*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to force yourself through narrow spaces including pipes and cracks.
- Spend a PP to stretch long distances to reach great heights.
- Spend a PP to stretch in all directions like a net in order to catch a falling object or person.
- Spend a PP to change your appearance in minor ways to hide your identity.
- Spend a PP to step down your opponent's effect die from physical attacks against you.

## SUMMONING

Whether they come from the luminiferous ether, another plane of existence, or are conjured up from your own imagination, you can summon forth all manner of creatures. They assist you, defend you, fight for you, and perform tasks for you. Include this ability when your creatures assist or defend you or when you use their powers as your own.

**Descriptors:** *Magic*
**Limits:** *Magic*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to summon a creature, which serves as a 8 8 extra. This creature disappears once it reaches zero dice.
- Spend a PP to boost a summoned extra's die rating.
- Spend a PP to grant a summoned creature an ability appropriate to its nature.
- Spend a PP to banish a creature summoned by you or another summoner.



## SUPER-SENSES

Your senses are broader and keener than any mortal's should be. You may have superhuman versions of your five senses, or senses outside of the human spectrum. Start with one Super-Sense descriptor at 4 and add a new one every time you step the rating up or add a new SFX—yes, adding descriptors to Super-Senses is easier than most abilities. Include this ability's die when using your super-senses to help you stay alert, aware, or aid you in perceiving things in your immediate environment.

**Descriptors:** *Super-Hearing, Telescopic Sight, X-Ray Vision, Infrared Vision, Radar*
**Limits:** *Lead, Overload, Interference, Magic*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to see through objects.
- Spend a PP to hear or see into a nearby scene you're not in.
- Spend a PP to get the scent of any person or object and track the scent to its source.
- Spend a PP to see microscopic details beyond what's possible with an electron microscope.
- Spend a PP to see in all directions at once.
- Spend a PP to hear signals along the radio band or see beyond the electromagnetic spectrum.



TEN TEN STUDIOS

## SUPER-SPEED

You can move so fast you're rarely seen as more than a colored blur. Include this ability die whenever your ability to move quickly might directly help you out, whether it's to get something done faster or to cover more distance. When dealing with someone else with Super-Speed, you can spend a PP to keep pace with them or counter their Super-Speed effects; this turns it into a contest.

**Descriptors:** *Quickness, Kinetic, Hypersonic*
**Limits:** *Unstoppable, Sonic Boom, Out of Touch*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to join a scene or switch to a new scene regardless of distance.
- Spend a PP to run so fast you run up a vertical surface.
- Spend a PP to perform multiple activities in the time it takes others to perform a single activity.
- Spend a PP to run fast enough to cross water as if it were solid ground.
- Spend a PP to zip around an obstacle during a chase; you may use this obstacle as a 8 stunt against your pursuer.

## SUPER-STRENGTH

You're capable of staggering feats of superhuman strength, even if you don't look all that muscular. Include this ability die when your amazing strength would directly help you succeed. When facing another character with Super-Strength, you may spend a PP to counter an SFX they use against you; this makes it into a contest.

**Descriptors:** *Muscles, Tactile Telekinesis, Size*
**Limits:** *Uncontrollable, Anger Trigger, Needs Focus*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to perform a fantastic feat of strength.
- Spend a PP to throw or knock another character out of a scene.
- Spend a PP to pound on the ground, creating a shockwave that knocks over everyone in the scene.
- Spend a PP to break through a wall—even a brick or stone wall—to grab a target or object on the other side.
- Spend a PP to wield a large inanimate object, like an automobile, as a weapon (and as a 8 stunt).

## SWIMMING

You can move through the water at great speeds, more like a dolphin or shark than a human. Usually this ability includes an adaptation for surviving underwater, making it possible for you to sustain those speeds deep underwater without coming up for air. If you don't want this to come with underwater breathing, add that as a limit. Add this ability's die into any roll that involves aquatic activity or movement.

**Descriptors:** *Swimming, Water, Fins*
**Limits:** *Dehydration, Ice, Earth, Not Amphibious*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to move through water at high speeds—join another scene regardless of distance if it's accessible by water.
- Spend a PP to escape a scene by jumping into a nearby body of water and disappearing into the depths.
- Spend a PP to leap from the water onto a nearby shore, boat, or low flying aircraft to surprise your foes.
- Spend a PP to resist the pressure of very deep water without a pressure suit or submarine.
- Spend a PP to step down any incoming stress or complications while you're in the water by dodging around your opponent.

## TECHNOPATHY

You can control technology remotely with your mind, accessing even unfriendly devices as if they were your home computer. Include this ability die when you interact with computers and technology.

**Descriptors:** *Mechanical, Mental, Computer, Electronic*
**Limits:** *Electricity, Psychic Feedback, Magnetism*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to break through a computer system's firewall.
- Spend a PP to control any electronic device n the same scene as you; you may use this device as a 8 stunt for the rest of the scene.
- Spend a PP to turn on and control vehicles as if you're physically driving them.
- Spend a PP to see through the "eyes" of electronic devices in scenes other than your own.
- Spend a PP to override security codes on door panels or electronic vaults.

## TELEKINESIS

You can levitate and move people, objects, even yourself with your mind. Telekinetics can usually maintain flight and create shields to stave off physical trauma. With this ability you may be able to create telekinetic bolts to damage an enemy or throw another person aside like a rag doll. Include this ability die whenever you're using your mind to help you manipulate something.

**Descriptors:** *Mental, Magic, Spirit*
**Limits:** *Psychic Feedback, Concentration, Emotion Trigger*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to knock a character out of a scene.
- Spend a PP to create a telekinetic shield to step down the effect die of an incoming physical attack.
- Spend a PP to push, pull, or lift something really heavy.
- Spend a PP to fly or levitate a short distance. Spend another PP if you want to carry others with you.
- Spend a PP to shoot bolts of telekinetic force.

## TELEPATHY

You can access the mind of others, conveying messages or reading thoughts and memories. Include this ability die when you're using telepathy to help you communicate with others, get a read on somebody, or sense the presence of stray thoughts in a room.

**Descriptors:** *Mental, Magic, Spirit*
**Limits:** *Psychic Feedback, Concentration, Eye-contact*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to read another character's surface thoughts.
- Spend a PP to send messages psychically to a character in a different scene.
- Spend a PP to create a mental shield to block other mental powers from invading your mind.
- Spend a PP to sense the location and well-being of any one person that you've met before.
- Spend a PP to attack another person with a mental blast.

**EFFECT SYMBOLS**



## TELEPORTATION

You can move from one place to another without moving at all. You might open a large portal like a doorway from one place to another place miles away, or you might just blink out of existence and re-appear someplace else. Some dissolve into glowing light, then reform with a similar light show somewhere far away. You can roll this ability's die into tests and contests where teleporting and jaunting around might directly affect the outcome.

**Descriptors:** *Portal, Magic, Mental*
**Limits:** *Concentration, Slow, Mental*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to join a scene or switch to a new scene regardless of distance.
- Spend a PP to quickly teleport away to escape from a scene.
- Spend a PP to take another character with you.
- Spend a PP to create a small portal capable of teleporting objects.
- Spend a PP to create a portal that alters your falling trajectory, landing safely or off to the side.

## TIME CONTROL

You can manipulate the flow of time around you, slowing or speeding it up to suit your needs. It's said that some with this ability can use it to reverse time in short bursts, but that might only be a rumor. Roll this ability's die if tweaking the flow of time would directly influence a test or contest's result.

**Descriptors:** *Time, Age, Magic*
**Limits:** *Time, Concentration, Psychic Feedback*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to stop time for up to ten subjective minutes.
- Spend a PP to slow time around you, allowing you to switch to a new scene instantly.
- Spend a PP to stop time for five subjective minutes but bring another person with you.
- Spend a PP to reverse time for a few seconds to change one error, allowing you to reroll your last dice roll—however, you must keep the second roll.
- Spend a PP to slow time so you can perform multiple activities in the time it takes others to perform one; treat this as an area effect, with a maximum number of added 6 equal to the number of steps above 4 in this ability to create assets, complications, or stress.

## TIME TRAVEL

Yesterday, today, tomorrow—these are all open to you as destinations. You can travel through time. Whether you disappear now and appear then or hit some sort of cosmic rewind or fast forward button, the result is the same. When you travel through time, you remain in the same place relative to the Earth; if you travel from 2020 Quebec to 1400, you'll meet some Algonquins. Include this ability when you seek information or resources in another time or when you slip back or forward for tactical advantage. Careful, though—this ability is prone to causing serious amounts of continuity trouble.

**Descriptors:** *Psychic, Hypertech, Unmoored in Time*
**Limits:** *Grandfather Paradox, Observer Effect, Lead*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to find a cache of necessary items you left for yourself.
- Spend a PP to receive a message from your possible-future self (accuracy not guaranteed).
- Spend a PP to escape a scene you're in.
- Spend a PP to travel in space as well as time.
- Spend a PP to take another character with you to another time.

## TRANSMUTE

You can create stuff out of thin air and other things by reconfiguring the basic attributes of matter. At the smallest level, you can change an object's atomic or molecular structure; you can also change its overall shape or structure. You can't change an object's mass, only shift it around; nor can you change the amount of energy the object stores as heat or chemical energy. Include this ability when you turn air into useful tools, convert the ground under an opponent into a slippery morass, or bend your surroundings to assist in a chase.

**Descriptors:** *Magic, Super Science, Divinity*
**Limits:** *Distraction, an "Unworkable" Substance, Scarcity*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to create exactly the tool you need as a 8 stunt or asset.
- Spend a PP to create a hole or doorway in a wall or other obstruction.
- Spend a PP to sense if an object has been transmuted.
- Spend a PP to change an object's mass.
- Spend a PP to create a bomb, the explosion of which counts as an area effect attack.

## TUNNELING

You can dig deep under the ground as fast as a person can walk, allowing you to tunnel to and from your destinations. You probably don't need to worry about tight or confined spaces, and you might have some wicked claws. Include this ability die when moving through dirt, spraying up loose earth, or slashing away at stone or an opponent.

**Descriptors:** *Stone, Earth, Dirt*
**Limits:** *Misdirection, Water, Earthquake*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to make tunnels that last for the rest of the session as 8 stunts.
- Spend a PP to escape a scene by digging an escape tunnel.
- Spend a PP to find a weak point in any floor by digging beneath it; this becomes a 8 stunt you can use for the rest of the scene.
- Spend a PP to make tunnels collapse behind you so that you can't be followed.
- Spend a PP to use your claws to step up your effect die when damaging something.

## WALL WALKING

You can move up and down walls and across ceilings as easily as walking across your living room floor. You can even stick to a ceiling and stay there where no one can see you. It's not like anyone looks up anyway. If you're making use of your clingy condition in combat or hiding up in the rafters, roll the ability's die to help.

**Descriptors:** *Magnetic, Sticky, Spines*
**Limits:** *Slow, Slick Surfaces, Water*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to hide on a ceiling, making it easy for you to jump down into the middle of those below.
- Spend a PP to escape a scene by a convenient window or similar exit to an outside wall.
- Spend a PP to take another person with you as you walk on the wall or ceiling.
- Spend a PP to jump from wall to wall, keeping your grip as if on a flat surface.
- Spend a PP to step down incoming stress or complications when something you're clinging to collapses or falls.

## WIND CONTROL

You have the power to control the movement of air, whirling it around or redirecting powerful winds. Include this ability die to use whirlwinds and gusts of air to tilt a test or contest in your favor.

**Descriptors:** *Wind, Air, Storm*
**Limits:** *Grounded, Dirt, Vacuum*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to fly a short distance.
- Spend a PP to create a localized tornado.
- Spend a PP to create a powerful wind that delivers stress or complications.
- Spend a PP to lift another person or inanimate object off the ground and into the air.
- Spend a PP to hold a target, object, even a moving car in place with powerful gusts of wind.




BETHANY BERG

# ABILITIES AS GEAR

From jetpacks to suits of armor to freeze rays, any ability in the game can be replicated with a device. These nifty gadgets work like abilities, except they all share the same limit—gear can be lost, broken, or stolen. This limit deprives you of your gear and, without it, you don't have the ability at all (no die or SFX). And in the wrong hands, your own ability could potentially be used against you.

Gear is frequently custom-created for your character and doesn't need to map exactly to any single ability. Borrow SFX from abilities that match your gear's effect; weapons, such as a Tricked-Out Compound Bow, fall under the attack effect, while a Jetpack is a movement effect.

To design your own gear, you need an effect, a descriptor, and SFX. You may add more SFX through growth or advancement, which might represent sending the gear to the lab or tinkering with it. Instead of stepping up your die rating, you can add a new descriptor to a piece of gear, making it multi-purpose. For example, instead of using growth to step up your Human Turret gear 8 (*Attack* descriptor) to 10, you could add the *Defense* descriptor to it, expanding the kinds of dice pools you could roll it in.

## CLOAKING DEVICE

When it's tapped, this small electronic pendant briefly emits a low hum and a soft green light. Then it refracts light around the wearer so that they seem invisible.

**Descriptor:** *Perception*
**Limit:** *Gear*
**SFX:** Spend a PP to disappear and escape from a scene.

## EMP BLASTER

This modified taser can shoot an EMP pulse in an aimed direction, allowing it to specifically disable single electronic devices rather than everything around it.

**Descriptor:** *Electromagnetism*
**Limit:** *Gear*
**SFX:** Spend a PP to disable any electronic device, including gear.

## PERSONAL GRAVITY GENERATOR

This device lets the wearer create gravity fields of low and high gravity, affecting the wearer and others.

**Descriptor:** *Gravity*
**Limit:** *Gear*
**SFX:** Spend a PP to hold a nearby character in place with a powerful gravity field.

### MODS FOR ARMOR AND WEAPONS

Many players enjoy creating specialty weapons or armor in games where their non-powered characters deal with supernatural or superpowered threats. Gear represents that technology in a single trait, and these mods add more detail to gear. They add some complexity to the rules, so only use them if weapons and armor are a Big Deal in your game.

**Ablative Armor:** Abilities that represent armor or protection may prevent damage at the cost of being stepped down afterward. Compare your armor ability die rating to the attacker's ability die (or, if no ability is used, the attacker's skill or attack trait). If your ability die is greater than their die rating, their effect die is ignored and you take no effect from the attack. If your ability die is equal to or less than their ability die, their effect die is stepped down by one.

| ARMOR | ATTACKER | IF ATTACKER SUCCEEDS |
|---|---|---|
| Breastplate 8 | Iron Spear 6 | Breastplate 8 stepped down to 6, effect die ignored. |
| Breastplate 8 | Iron Spear 8 and up | Breastplate 8 stepped down to 6, effect die stepped down by one. |

**Weapon Ranges:** To represent the effect of various distances on ranged weapons, determine if attacking the target with your chosen weapon would be within its **standard range**, if it'd be a **stretch**, or if it'd be **almost impossible**. Assign a difficulty die to the opposition dice pool of 8 if it's a stretch and a 12 if it's almost impossible. You can come up with individual range bands for various weapons if you like, but something simple like this works for most games.

## POWERSUIT

This powered suit of metal armor protects the wearer from most forms of attack. Additional SFX and descriptors can make it a walking arsenal as well.

**Descriptor:** *Iron*
**Limit:** *Gear*
**SFX:** Spend a PP to step down your opponent's effect die when they're trying to harm you.

## TRICKED-OUT COMPOUND BOW

This compound bow has been modified with the most advanced upgrades in bow-making technology available. Most of its SFX are attributed to hi-tech arrows.

**Descriptor:** *Graphite Bow*
**Limit:** *Gear*
**SFX:**

- Spend a PP to use an electrically charged arrow that releases its charge on impact.
- Spend a PP to use an EMP arrow to disable all electronic devices within a scene.
- Spend a PP to use a grappling arrow to entangle a target and keep it from getting away.
- Spend a PP to use a tranquilizer arrow to step up any sleep-inducing stress or complication.

# FANTASY MILESTONES

Here's a variety of milestone examples from a heroic fantasy genre that you can adapt to any other genre. Most are universally applicable if you change the descriptive text a bit, and the XP rewards can be inspiration for creating your own milestone goals in other settings.



NATALIA BACETTI

## ACCURSED

*The infernal forces of the multiverse have picked you to play some role in their unfathomable plans. Others call you unlucky, but you recognize a growing blackness in your heart...*

- **1 XP** when your attack demonstrates the sinister nature of your abilities.
- **3 XP** when you add at least a ◆8 to the doom pool, either from rolling two or more hitches on a single roll or by using an SFX that adds to the doom pool.
- **10 XP** when you are finally claimed by a villainous power for dark deeds, or you strike a major blow against a villainous power by using their own dark powers against them.

## ASCETIC

*How can one attain focus if they remain as the magpie, always seeking what shines instead of what matters?*

- **1 XP** when you abstain from a worldly pleasure.
- **3 XP** when you participate in an indulgence that leads to trouble.
- **10 XP** when you found an institution devoted to abstaining from worldly pleasures or abandon the path of the ascetic to live it up in one long party.

## BLESSED

*You were born under a divine star and followed a god's calling. You spread the Word as you see fit so that you can spread your god's blessings.*

- **1 XP** when you perform a religious rite.
- **3 XP** when you inflict stress upon a blasphemer.
- **10 XP** when you complete a grand work in your god's name(s) or become a martyr for your god's cause.

## COMFORTABLE IN THE SHADOWS

*Don't look at me, I'm not important or interesting. I just want to stay alive and help from a safe distance.*

- **1 XP** when you hide or otherwise choose to stay out of the spotlight.
- **3 XP** when you leave the shadows to accomplish something important.
- **10 XP** when you step into the spotlight in front of a large group to accomplish something important or decide to fade away forever.

## HAUGHTY NOBLE

*You were born into aristocracy. You are well aware of your station in life and take pains to remind others of theirs.*

- **1 XP** when you say something dismissive about the lower class.
- **3 XP** when you try to buy your way out of a problem or situation.
- **10 XP** when you surrender your noble station for adventure or give up for a life of nobility.

## HOMEBODY

*They say you can never go home. But if I can't go back, I can bring home with me.*

- **1 XP** when you remark to another character that something reminds you of home.
- **3 XP** when you do something adventurous that you could never do at home.
- **10 XP** when you retire home and write about your adventures, or you embrace the adventurous life and admit you can never go home.

## HONORABLE WARRIOR

*I live by my reputation and the honor that burdens my existence. Stand fast, foe! We shall let fate and our martial skills determine your destiny!*

- **1 XP** when you state that a decision brings honor or dishonor.
- **3 XP** when you put yourself in a position to take stress because the alternative would be dishonorable.
- **10 XP** when you perform an inexcusable act of dishonor in the course of the greater good or sacrifice yourself to maintain your honor.

## LEADER

*Adventurers are a chaotic, undisciplined bunch. You lead by example, trying to get your teammates back alive to enjoy the sweet taste of success.*

- **1 XP** when you give an order to a member of your group.
- **3 XP** when a member of your group uses an asset you created for them.
- **10 XP** when you are recognized for your achievements in a great adventure, or you are deposed as leader in a mutiny.

## MYSTERIOUS SAGE

*Apocryphal, people say your wisdom is.*

- **1 XP** when you make a cryptic observation.
- **3 XP** when you encounter something that you can't explain.
- **10 XP** when you are exposed as not that wise, or when someone in your group is the Chosen One the prophecy spoke of!

## NATURE'S GUARDIAN

*I have been granted so many boons by our mother Earth. I merely seek to honor her through my respect and devotion.*

- **1 XP** when you eschew something artificial for a tool from nature.
- **3 XP** when you create an asset for someone else.
- **10 XP** when you lay down your life to protect the sanctity of nature, or if you allow nature to be harmed in a major way to complete an adventure.

## PLANAR TRAVELER

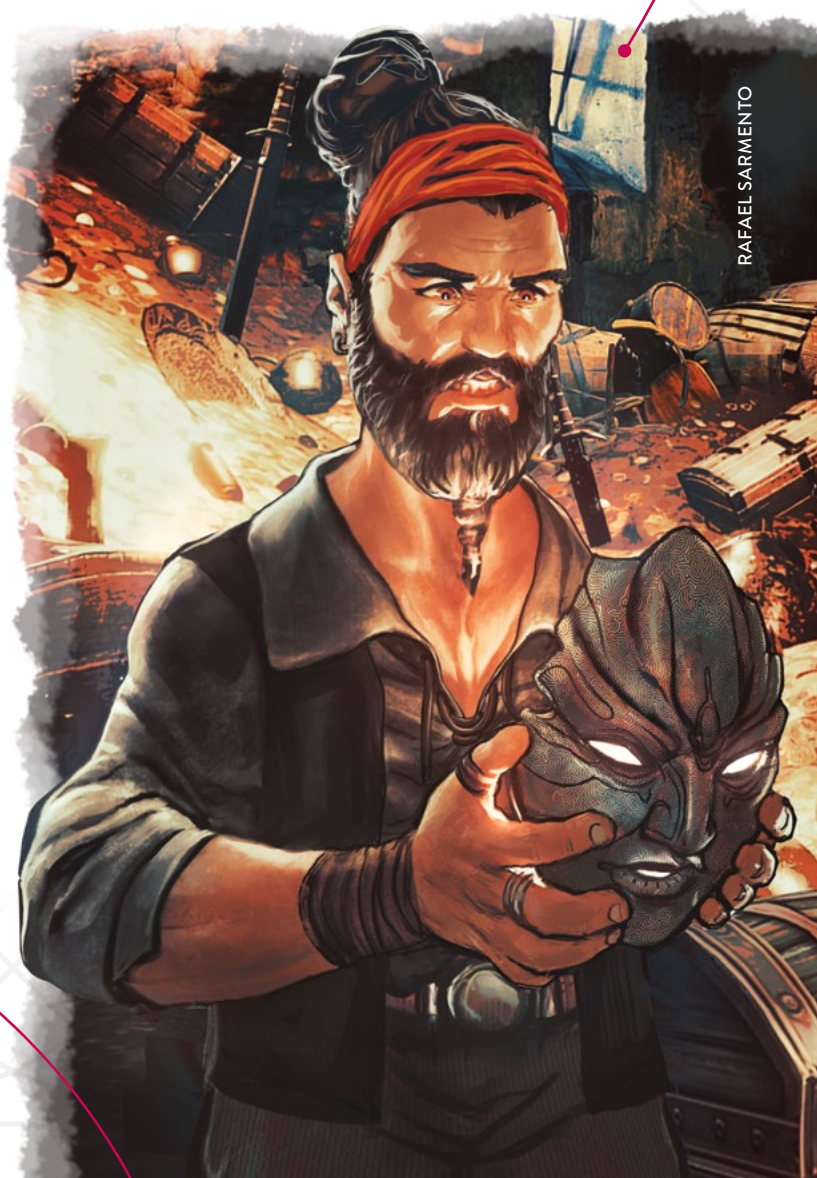
*Open your eyes to the realities outside your limited senses. There are other realities one must always consider.*

- **1 XP** when you follow a custom that's unfamiliar to your companions.
- **3 XP** when you tune out of the material world in a way that endangers your companions.
- **10 XP** when you become bound to the material world, so you can never travel the planes again, or depart the material world for a new one.

## TREASURE HUNTER

*It's not about amassing riches; it's about acquiring and disposing of it in the most thrilling and entertaining manner possible. You consulted maps, scoured rumors, raided ruins, and killed monsters and it's not even noon yet.*

- **1 XP** when you acquire or spend money.
- **3 XP** when you search for treasure during a battle.
- **10 XP** when you find the big score, or when you spend all of your money in an act of altruism.


RAFAEL SARMENTO

# THE MOTOR POOL

In some settings, such as *Hammerheads* on page 150, vehicles like spaceships, sailing ships, or RVs need more of a mechanical role than signature assets provide. If they're as important to the story as the characters are, then they deserve more attention. To make vehicles come to life, each group of players maintains a **vehicle file**, a bit like a character file, that contains attributes, distinctions, and signature assets. Players can use their vehicle to accomplish goals such as chasing down criminals or staging attacks on enemy installations.

## VEHICLE TRAITS

In addition to the traits of the vehicle's pilot, engineer, and other PCs, the vehicle itself possesses several traits that can be added to rolls made when PCs make tests or contests. These traits sometimes replace (attributes) and sometimes complement or supplement (distinctions and signature assets) existing PC traits.

### VEHICLE ATTRIBUTES

Primarily, vehicle attributes replace team attributes when a PC is assembling a dice pool that involves the vehicle. There are as many as four different attributes:

- ENGINES measures the agility and speed of your vehicle, including how well it handles and the kind of problems the engine might have. The higher the ENGINES die rating, the faster and more agile it is. A lower ENGINES die rating might indicate the vehicle is awkward to maneuver or just plain slow.
- FRAME is the structure that contains the interior of the vehicle and keeps everything together. A higher FRAME means that your vehicle is strong and secure, while a weaker FRAME might indicate perpetual problems with the exterior.
- SYSTEMS helps the vehicle operate, including life support, communications, internet access, computers, and navigation. The higher the SYSTEMS die rating, the more technically sophisticated the vehicle is. A lower SYSTEMS die rating indicates a no-frills vehicle, or one with a lot of hotwired parts.
- CREW represents the skill of the crew of a GMC-operated vehicle. A higher CREW die rating indicates trained professionals, while a lower rated CREW is either unskilled or flying with a skeleton team. (PC-operated vehicles don't have a CREW score.)

### VEHICLE DISTINCTIONS

Vehicles have vehicle distinctions with SFX like basic character distinctions. Vehicle distinctions may be added to a roll when a character is using the vehicle to accomplish a task. A player may add both a vehicle distinction and a personal distinction to a single roll.

Vehicle distinctions come in three types, and each vehicle has one distinction from each category:

- **Model** determines the vehicle's starting attributes and indicates the vehicle's base type.
- **History** reveals how old or new the vehicle is. It can also indicate the vehicle's current use.
- **Customization** reveals how the vehicle has been modified, remodeled, or upgraded since its initial build.

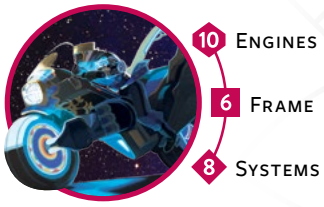
Each vehicle distinction comes with a *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4 SFX, but other SFX are also unlockable. Like personal distinction SFX, vehicle distinction SFX are constructed by selecting appropriate benefits ("reroll a die, step down a complication, earn a PP") and drawbacks ("spend a PP, step up a complication, choose to do something risky").

### VEHICLE SIGNATURE ASSETS

Like individual PCs, vehicles have signature assets that can be added to a dice pool. These assets represent modifications or resources that are available on the vehicle, ranging from a SOPHISTICATED GPS to LETHAL MACHINE GUNS. Typically, vehicle signature assets have a rating of 8.

#### HIGH-TECH STREET BIKE

*This is a sweet road-worthy motorcycle that has all the newest tech for elite riders.*




**F88 BLUE RACER** 8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.

**FRESH OFF THE CUSTOM RACK** 8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.

**UPGRADED HANDLING** 8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.

| SIGNATURE ASSETS | |
|---|---|
| RACING WHEELS 8 | PROTECTIVE SHIELD 8 |

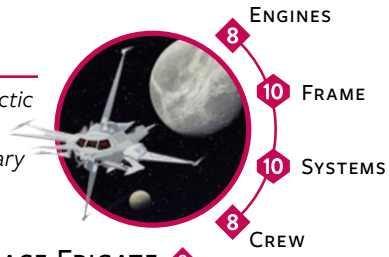


H. WON

ALEX JAY BRADY

## STAR FRIGATE

*A proven vessel in the Galactic Federation's stellar navy, ideal for protecting planetary installations from orbit.*




### Quantum-Class Space Frigate 8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.

### Veteran of the Last War 8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.

### Planetary Defense Systems 8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.

| Signature Assets | | |
|---|---|---|
| Turbolasers 10 | Defense Shield 10 | Long-Range Scanners 8 |

## TRAINING UP VEHICLE RESOURCES

Players can spend a session to train up vehicle resources instead of improving their own character files. As with an individual PC, vehicles can swap distinctions, add or step up signature assets, and unlock new SFX. PCs can also pool session expenditures to purchase improvements to the vehicle. It's impossible for a vehicle to swap out its model distinction.

# USING VEHICLES

PCs make tests or engage in contests using the vehicle's traits any time the vehicle's Engines, Frame, or Systems matter more than the individual PC's attributes.

## BUILDING DICE POOLS

Vehicle dice pools are assembled by pairing an attribute with a skill—or an equivalent pair of traits (such as an affiliation, role, or specialty). One of the PC's prime traits is paired with the appropriate vehicle trait, resulting in rolls that combines the vehicle's features with the PC's skills.

## THE SCALE OF SUCCESS OR FAILURE

It's important to remember that success or failure in vehicle tests typically affect the whole group. If a failed roll leads to the complication Failing Coolant System, the results of that complication affect everyone on board the vehicle. Be careful not to lay on the costs of failure too quickly, as a single bad roll could potentially knock out the whole group in one hit.

## ASSETS AND COMPLICATIONS

Players can purchase assets and acquire complications that affect their vehicle just as they can for individual characters. Any asset purchased by a player for the vehicle starts at a 6 and lasts for a scene, and any hitches rolled on a vehicle test can be activated by the GM to add complications to the vehicle. If the result of a test or contest would take out a vehicle, any PC may spend a PP to take a complication equal to the highest rolling die in the opposing pool to keep the vehicle in the fight.

# BUILDING YOUR VEHICLE

Creating vehicles is a fairly simple process similar to the scratch-built character creation method in Prime Characters (page 44). To construct a new vehicle, players should follow these steps:

## STEP 1: PICK A MODEL

Players start vehicle construction by selecting the model distinction, such as F92 Stealth Fighter, Autogyro Class X, or Resolute-Class Frigate. In addition to adding the first distinction, assign a d8 to each of the three attributes of Engines, Frame, and Systems. Step up one attribute by up to two steps, but step down another attribute or both additional attributes by the same total number. So, you might have d12, d8, and d4; d12, d6, and d6; or d10, d8, and d6. You can also choose to keep all three at d8.

| OPTIONS | Engines | Frame | Systems |
|---|---|---|---|
| Base | d8 | d8 | d8 |
| Example 1 | d12 | d8 | d4 |
| Example 2 | d10 | d6 | d8 |

## STEP 2: CHOOSE 2 MORE DISTINCTIONS

In addition to the model distinction, players should choose two more distinctions for the vehicle. One represents the vehicle's history, and another its customization. For example, you might take Years in the Service and Custom Interior; Only One Previous Owner and Overhead Gun Rack; or Made the Omega Run and Smuggler Refit.

## STEP 3: CHOOSE DISTINCTION SFX

Each distinction gets the *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's d8 for a d4 SFX for free. Players should choose two additional SFX to unlock (if you have prepared distinctions in advance for your group) or come up with two additional SFX to attach to one or two of your distinctions.

## STEP 4: CHOOSE SIGNATURE ASSETS

Each vehicle gets two d8 signature assets. Players should select two that represent special features you'd like on the vehicle (such as Gravity Grapplers), something the vehicle gives access to that other vehicle owners might not have (such as Intergalactic Trade License), or minor GMC or crew that come with the vehicle (such as Pit Crew). If vehicles are a central part of your game, consider preparing a list of signature assets for players to choose from or unlock later in the game during advancement.

## STEP 5: NAME YOUR VEHICLE

Finally, the players should name the vehicle and discuss some biographical information, such as:

- Who owns the vehicle? How did they procure it?
- How do you keep the vehicle up? What sort of jobs do you usually take?
- What improvements have been made to the vehicle? What's always broken and can't be fixed?



SABINA LEWIS



ARTUR TREFFNER

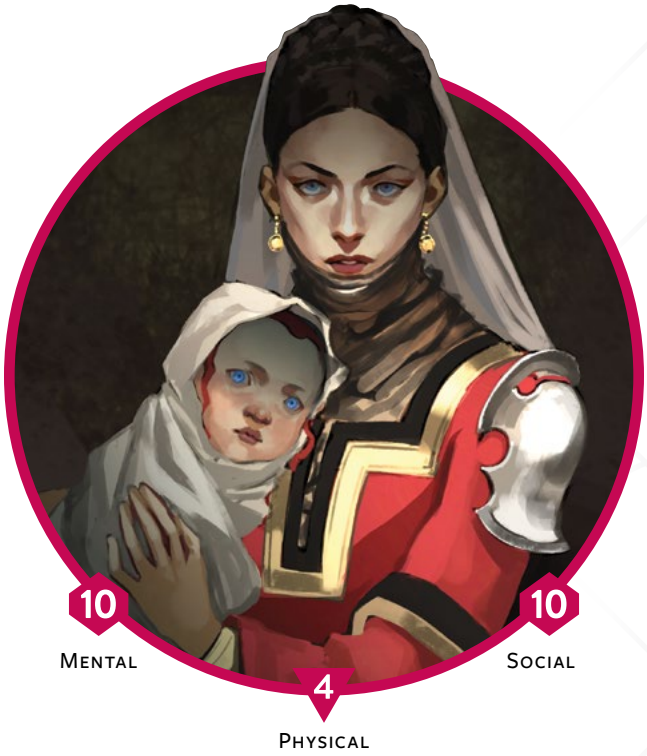
# CHARACTERS FROM THE CORTEX MULTIVERSE

As part of the Cortex Prime Kickstarter, several backers pledged for the opportunity to have Cortex characters of their own creation included in this *Game Handbook*. Herein are eight such characters, built from combinations of traits and SFX found throughout this book. You can use them as the seed of an all-new Cortex setting, or try your hand at adapting them to your own ongoing game.

# MARIELLA ASHFORD

Created by **Amanda Valentine**

*The formidable young matriarch of a family in a sweeping courtly drama set in a grim fantasy world much like England's Wars of the Roses. Her son Bowen was fated to be stillborn until Mariella made a deal with a shadowy power so that he might live. Now, the child has mystical powers all of his own, powers that Mariella can occasionally call upon.*




## RELATIONSHIPS

**LORD ASHFORD** (YOUNGER BROTHER) 8

*Aidan needs me, even if he doesn't realize it.*

**TIERNAN** (YOUNGER HALF BROTHER) 8

*Tiernan knows the deep mysteries of the world.*

**TORI** (LADY'S MAID/BODYGUARD) 6

*Tori is my secret weapon.*

**ELLORY** (HUSBAND) 6

*Ellory is everything I need in a spouse.*

## DISTINCTIONS

### Lady of the House 8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.

### I Would Do Anything for my Children 8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.
- *Mother's Love:* Spend a PP to use Mental to defend against a Physical threat to you or your children.

### Words Can Kill Surely as Blades 8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.
- *Paper Bullets of the Brain:* Spend a PP to create a 8 asset representing a secret or rumor you know would affect a person in the scene with you.

## VALUES

- 6 Duty
- 6 Integrity
- 10 Loyalty
- 8 Power
- 4 Vengeance

## RESOURCES

- Chamber of Physick (*Lore, Medicine*) 6 6
- Lord's Small Council (*Political, Military*) 6 6 6
- Ashford Castle (*Political, Safety*) 6 6
- Mystic Baby (*Scary, Magic*) 6 6 6 6

# AVENGING SPIRIT

Created by **R Holds**

*The Avenging Spirit is a mysterious supernatural figure, ideal for a noir setting set in the 1920s or 1930s that focuses less on action and more on intense dramatic moments.*



CAROLAZEVEDO

## RELATIONSHIPS

**LINDA TRUMAN** (EX-WIFE) 8

**ROGER ASHBURY** (FORMER BOSS) 8

**NICOLAI KOSTEVSKY** (CRIME KINGPIN) 8

**KELLY HWANG** (SCHOOL TEACHER) 6

**MOSTHENES** (ELDER GHOST) 6

EVERYONE ELSE 4

## DISTINCTIONS

### Spirit of Trauma 8

*A victim of a horrific crime, the spirit is now trapped between the land of the living and the afterlife.*

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.
- *Being of the Fade:* Spend a PP to ignore physical objects like walls, furniture, and other inorganic obstacles for the rest of the scene.
- *Wrathful Glare:* Spend a PP to double your **Wrath** when turning your anger against a mortal.

### Curious About the Material World 8

*Possessed of insatiable curiosity about the mortal realms, the spirit has learned to focus on the details rather than see the forest for the trees.*

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.
- *Inquisitive:* Spend a PP to reroll when you are investigating clues or secrets in a scene.

### Uncertain Future 8

*With no clear path to the afterlife, the spirit must make choices that resolve their fate.*

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.
- *The Endless Guilt:* Earn a PP and step down a complication when you give in on a contest because you don't feel worthy.

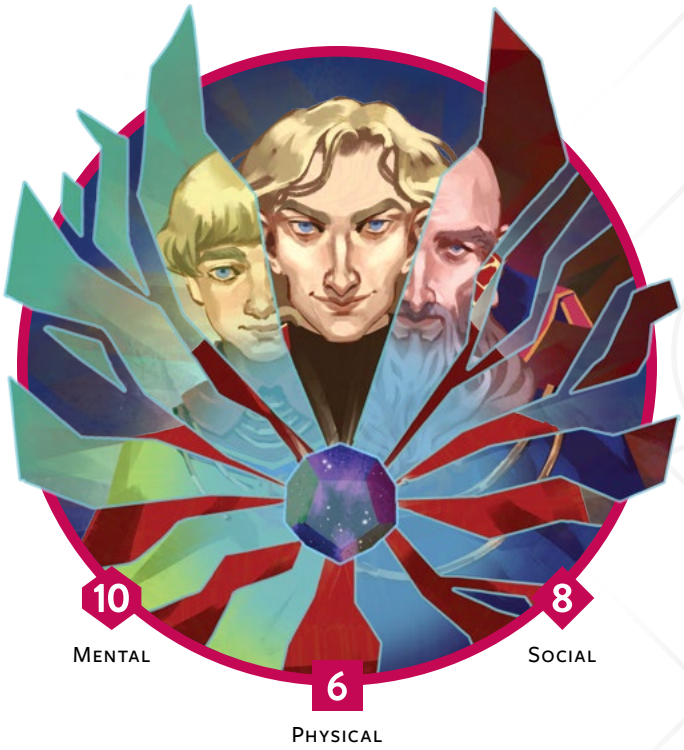
## VALUES

| | |
|---|---|
| 6 Envy | 8 Pride |
| 4 Gluttony | 6 Sloth |
| 6 Greed | 10 Wrath |
| 6 Lust | |

# BELMARIUS

Created by **Marcus Morrisey**

*Belmarius is a former Archmage of the Circle in a sword and sorcery setting whose pursuit of powerful magicks split him into countless versions of himself. He now travels the world, freeing those in chains while encountering his duplicates in all of their myriad lives.*




**ROLES** 10 Wizard · 8 Engineer · 6 Rogue

## DISTINCTIONS

### Divided We Stand 8

*A shame my bifurcation spell faltered, scattering pale shards of my former self throughout the realms. Or did I choose this life of 100 selves at once? Sometimes I forget...*

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.
- *The Other Me:* Gain a PP when you drop everything to interact with another self that just showed up in person or in your head.
- *Life Once Lived:* Add a 6 and step down your role die when you reveal a moment from your previous life. Then step up your effect die.

### Abdicated Archmage 8

*To become an Archmage of the Circle required magical skill and power the likes of which the gods themselves take heed of. And avarice to match. Renouncing my blood oath prompted none of my adversaries within the Circle to do the same. Quite the opposite I suspect.*

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.
- *Entropic Master:* Spend a PP to reroll your dice when you trust in luck and charge into a risky situation without hesitation or preparation.
- *Circle Interference:* Gain a PP when agents of the Circle appear or otherwise interfere with something very important to you.

### Freedom! 8

*I will break the chains the Circle binds their people with one by one, then pull their towers down around their ears to wake them from their torpor.*

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.
- *Liberator:* Spend a PP to create a 8 asset for the rest of the scene when someone you have liberated decides to pay you back.
- *They Know Me:* Gain a PP and create a 8 complication because you must interact with bandits or authorities who might recognize you.

**SIGNATURE ASSET**

Dodecahedron 8: A portable pocket dimension within which is enough living space to comfortably fit 6 people.

## POWER SETS

### The Circle Unleashed

Primal Chaos (Sorcery) 10

Belmarius's Bedevilman (Psychic Blasts) 8

- **SFX:** *Scion of Chaos:* Spend a PP to reroll when using a The Circle Unleashed power.
- **SFX:** *Unleashed:* Step up or double any The Circle Unleashed power for one roll. If the roll fails, gain a complication equal in size to your power die.
- **Limit:** *Uncontrollable:* Change any The Circle Unleashed power into a complication and gain a PP. Activate an opportunity or recover the complication to restore the power.

### Emissary of Entropy

Growth 6 Shrinking 6

Shapeshift 6

- **Limit:** *Mutually Exclusive:* Shut down The Circle Unleashed to activate Emissary of Entropy. Shut down Emissary of Entropy to restore The Circle Unleashed.

# ADMIRAL CHANTEE

Created by **Tina Lam Collier**

*Pirates whisper to each other of a mysterious woman's voice that precedes the disappearance of their compatriots without a trace. She collects these stories like medals, and she gleefully shares the emerging legend of the ship by signing to the deaf crew of The Black Shanty.*



CAROL AZEVEDO

8 MENTAL · 10 SOCIAL · 6 PHYSICAL

**DISTINCTIONS**

### Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea 8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.
- *Light it on Fire, Lads:* Spend a PP to add a 6 and step up the effect die on any attack roll using a ship's signature assets.

### Pipe Down! 8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.
- *War Drums:* Spend a PP to step up or double your Social die in any contest involving intimidation or threats while at sea.

### Pirate Queen 8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.
- *And Up She Rises:* If you would be taken out during a scene while on a ship or at sea, spend a PP to enact a daring escape or mysterious death. Spend a PP to join any subsequent scene that you were not already in.

## THE BLACK SHANTY



TITHI LUADTHONG

6 ENGINES · 10 CREW · 8 FRAME

*This state-of-the-art brigantine towers over most ships of its class in the region—so they say.*

*No one really knows, as it comes suddenly out of nowhere to prey upon its quarry, making not a sound upon the waves.*

**ABILITIES**

### WATER SWORD DANCE 8

- Spend a PP to step up or double your Physical attribute die.
- Spend a PP to reroll a dice pool that includes Water Sword Dance.

### SIREN'S SONG 10

- Spend a PP to use this as an area effect.
- Gain a PP when you attract the wrong sort of attention from your song.

### CREW LOYALTY 10

- Gain a PP when one of your crew defies your orders.
- Gain a PP when you must rescue a crew member in a crisis.

**DISTINCTIONS**

### Shadow in the Fog 8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.

### Deathly Quiet Rigging 8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.

### Sign Language Communication 8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.

| SIGNATURE ASSETS | |
|---|---|
| Ancestral Split Drum 8 | Tapping Boots 8 |

| SIGNATURE ASSETS | |
|---|---|
| Whistling Cannons 8 | Whispering Sails 8 |

# DR. JEREMIAH CROWE

Created by **Jeremy Puckett**

*A Civil War era physician, Dr. Crowe was murdered in cold blood by a hateful mob while trying to protect another man. Brought back to life by alchemy as an ageless crusader, he has since turned his unique skills and abilities to thwart injustice and bring hope to a dark modern world.*



**DISTINCTIONS**

### Deathless Revenant 8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.
- Spend a PP to reroll your dice when you align with your true nature as a deathless revenant.
- Gain a 8 complication to step up a specialty when you align with your true nature.

### Student of Medicine 8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.
- Spend a PP to step up an attribute when you connect to your old life.
- Gain a 8 complication to double your attribute die when you connect to your old life.

### Swift Stroke Against Injustice 8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.
- Spend a PP to double your resource dice when you embrace your obsession.
- Gain a 8 complication to step up your resource dice when you embrace your obsession.

| Courage | Grace | Guile | Reason | Vigor |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 10 | 6 | 6 | 8 | 10 |

**SPECIALTIES**

- 8 Combat Expert
- 10 Crime Master
- 8 Medical Expert
- 8 Science Expert
- 6 All Others

## RESOURCES

- Secret Lab (*Occult, Science*) 6 6 6
- Blue Mountain City Police Department (*Legal, Tactics*) 6 6
- University of Kentucky: College of Medicine (*Medicine*) 6 6 6

| SIGNATURE ASSETS | |
|---|---|
| Plague Mask 8 | Cane Sword 8 |

# EUGENE DOHERTY

Created by **Jonathan Oakes**

*Eugene is a second-generation Irish-American investigator in a 1920's Lovecraftian game. A former radical, he has turned toward more peaceful forms of protest and confronts eldritch horrors with the grit and determination of a seasoned WW1 veteran.*



CAROL AZEVEDO

10 MENTAL

6 SOCIAL

8 PHYSICAL

## DISTINCTIONS

### Grizzled Dough Boy Who Has Seen Too Much ◆8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's ◆8 for a ▼4.

### Father Murphy Guides and Protects Me ◆8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's ◆8 for a ▼4.

### Green Revolutionary Anarchist ◆8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's ◆8 for a ▼4.

## TALENTS

### FEAR TO TREAD

When you first enter an area hidden by darkness, you may step up your Exhausted stress to step down your Afraid or Anxious stress.

### AGAINST THE DARK

When you're pursuing a case linked to the Mythos, you may add a ▼4 to any test or contest in order to step up your effect die by one. If you roll a hitch on the test or contest, the GM can step up your stress or create a complication without giving you a PP.

| SIGNATURE ASSETS | |
|---|---|
| Colt 1911 Pistol ◆8 | Bible ◆8 |

## SKILLS

- 10 Burglary
- 6 Contacts
- 10 Cthulhu Myths
- 10 Firearms
- 10 Notice
- 6 Rapport
- 8 Repair
- 6 Stealth
- 8 Theology

# ELIX

*Elix is one of the few humans left scattered across the galaxy. Growing up between worlds wasn't easy and Elix is ready for Terra 2.0. Using ancient Terran magic with a space-age twist, they travel with a team of interplanetary problem solvers to reunite humanity and make the galaxy a better place to be.*

Created by **Mary Rose Valentine**



| | |
|---|---|
| Agility | 10 |
| Alertness | 6 |
| Intelligence | 8 |
| Strength | 8 |
| Vitality | 8 |
| Willpower | 10 |

**DISTINCTIONS**

### Intergalactic Connection and Communication ◆8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's ◆8 for a ▼4.
- *New Visions of Interaction:* Spend a PP to reroll a dice pool that includes **Willpower**.

### Old Magic in a New World ◆8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's ◆8 for a ▼4.
- *Spell Twisting:* Spend a PP to step up or double an attribute when you include **Sorcery** in your dice pool.

### When Nowhere is Home, Everywhere is Home ◆8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's ◆8 for a ▼4.
- *Centering:* Spend a PP to ignore a complication for the next test or contest.

**POWER SET**

## TERRAN MYSTICISM

Sorcery ◆8

Transmutation 10

- **SFX:** *Call of Old Earth:* Add a 6 and step up your effect die by one when using **Transmutation** to create assets.
- **SFX:** *Thread of Life:* Add **Sorcery** to your dice pool when helping others recover their stress or complications. Spend a PP to recover your own or another's physical-based stress or complications.
- **Limit:** *The Old Power:* When using a Terran Mysticism power, both 1s and 2s count as hitches.

**ROLES**

| | |
|---|---|
| 10 Diplomat | 4 Muscle |
| 6 Leader | 8 Scholar |
| 6 Mechanic | |

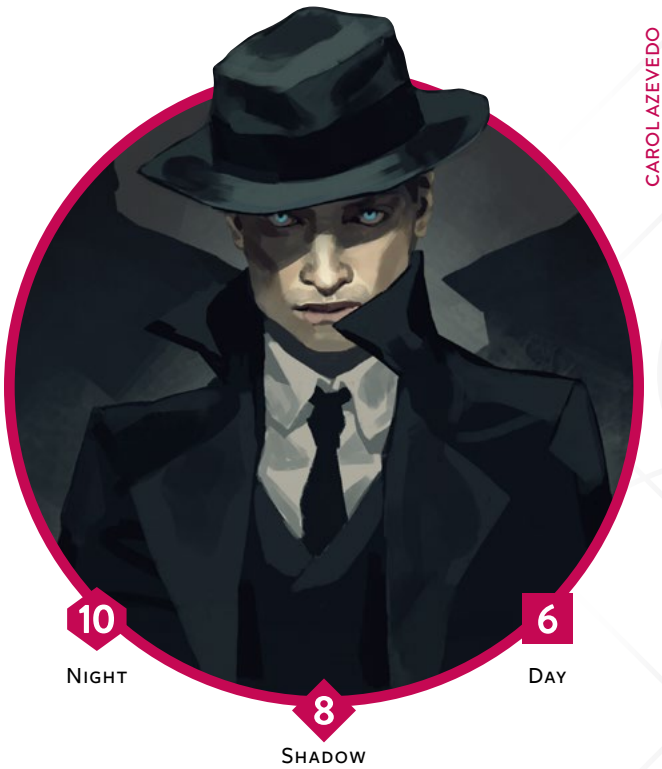
**SIGNATURE ASSET**

Spell Tablet ◆8

# MIDNIGHT-BLUE

*Paull Cross takes on the identity of Midnight-Blue when fighting crime with the sacred powers entrusted to him by the Goddess Nyx.*

Created by **Christopher P. Crossley**



CAROL AZEVEDO

10 NIGHT

6 DAY

8 SHADOW

## DISTINCTIONS

### Love Gets You Killed 8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.

### Investigator of the Unknown 8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.

### Not a Morning Person 8

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.

## POWER SETS

### FAVORED OF NYX

Mystic Vision (Senses) 10
Shadow Influence 8
Superhuman Reflexes 8

- **SFX:** *Midnight Whispers:* On a failed reaction, spend a PP to add Teleport to your dice pool (or step up by one if already in the pool) and reroll all dice.
- **SFX:** *Midnight Revelation:* Add 6 to your dice pool and step up the effect die by one when you use Mystic Vision or Shadow Influence to create an asset or complication.
- **SFX:** *Night Promises:* Add 6 emotional stress to include Flight, Invisibility, Intangibility, or Teleport from the Power of Night power set in a dice pool. Step down both power dice by one to include two.
- **Limit:** *Embrace the Night:* Shut down Favored of Nyx to activate the Power of Night power set. Shut down Power of Night to restore Favored of Nyx.

### POWER OF NIGHT

Cold Blast 10
Flight 8
Godlike Stamina 12
Intangibility 10
Invisibility 10
Mystic Vision (Senses) 12
Shadow Mastery 10
Teleport 8

- **SFX:** *Caress of Midnight:* When in shadow, spend a PP to use your Godlike Stamina to recover your physical stress. Upon nightfall, step down physical trauma by one.
- **Limit:** Spend a PP or take 6 emotional stress at the beginning of each of your turns if Power of Night is active.

## MILESTONES

### THE SUPERNATURAL AND MYTHS ARE REAL?

- **1 XP** when your attack demonstrates the sinister nature of your abilities.
- **3 XP** when you add at least a 8 to the doom pool from rolling two or more hitches on a single roll.
- **10 XP** when you are finally claimed by a villainous power for dark deeds, or you strike a major blow against a villainous power by using their own dark powers against them.

### CALL OF THE NIGHT

- **1 XP** when you take emotional stress to draw on the powers of Nyx, primordial goddess of the night.
- **3 XP** when you use a power trait for a reaction and your reaction is successful.
- **10 XP** when you accept Nyx's love and merge with her, or when you spurn her love and deny her full melding with your body and mind.

## SPECIALTIES

8 Cosmic Expert | 10 Covert Master | 8 Crime Expert | 8 Menace Expert | 8 Mystic Expert

# GLOSSARY & INDEX

## A

**Ability 54, 194**
A trait used to describe narrative-focused superpowers, usually with SFX.
- Detailed list 195-212
- as gear 213
- List 237

**Action 24, 98**
A mod that replaces tests and contests for dealing with more traditional turn-taking resolution. Actions are rolled first and then opposed by a reaction from the target or a difficulty set by the GM.

**Action Order 24, 98**
- in Eidolon Alpha 133
- in Hammerheads 161
- Locations in 116

**Advancement**
Improving your character between or sometimes during a session.
- *See Player Character, Growing*

**Affiliation 48, 71**
A trait that represents a character's ability to succeed in a variety of social environments.
- Example 165, 168-171

**Archetype 68-69, 131**
A tool for creating characters, usually with pre-determined traits and a thematic background.
- Endarch 135-140
- Example 68-69, 168-171

**Area Attack/Effect 191**
An SFX or quality that allows characters to affect multiple targets with a single roll.

**Asset 9, 34-35**
Helpful trait that you may include in your dice pool when appropriate.
- as clues 35
- Creating 28, 32
- Sharing 29
- Signature 56, 64-65, 104-107, 216-217, 218
- Stepping up 37

**Attribute 49, 70, 71**
A trait set of basic areas of innate ability, such as MENTAL, PHYSICAL, and SOCIAL.
- Example in play 104-107, 133
- Vehicles 218

## B

**Baker, D. Vincent 120**

**Balsera, Leonard 63, 104-107**

**Banks, Cam 26, 91-92, 94-96, 110, 116**

**Beat 88**
The subjective unit of time it takes for a character to carry out a single test and alter or affect the progress of the story.
- Timed Test 101-103

**Beat the Difficulty 18**
Getting a total that's higher than the difficulty set by the opposition's dice roll.

**Benefit 62**
The part of an SFX that gives you something beneficial.

**Boss 118**
A single GMC that acts like a mob, with multiple dice forming a boss trait that must be eliminated in order to take them out.
- Example Boss 118

**Botch 17, 19, 28**
A critical failure. All your dice come up hitches, so your total is zero. The GM can introduce a free 6 complication and step it up as many times as you have hitches past the first. No PP for you.

## C

**Callback 82, 96, 135, 145, 156**
Referencing a previous session in which you did something similar to something that's happening in this session; you get a bonus roughly equal to a single PP.

**Challenge 65**
A mod where players may challenge their PC's traits to get 3x the die rating, at the cost of stepping down the trait die.
- and character growth 82
- Reputation 55

**Character File 47, 111**
The player record sheet that holds all of your game stats and information.
- Blank printable 244-247
- Example 81, 104, 149, 162-163, 179

**Complication 8, 28**
Unhelpful trait that your opposition gets to roll

in their dice pool to make your own actions that much more difficult.
- Creating 34, 36-37
- Crisis pool and 159
- Example in play 105-107, 133, 152
- Instead of being taken out 29, 37
- Recovery from 37-38
- Stepped down to 4 38
- Stepped up beyond 12 22, 37
- Stepping down 37
- Stepping up 37

**Complication Mods**
- Life Points 43
- Pushing Stress 40
- Shaken and Stricken 42, 133, 152
- Stress 39, 152, 167
- Trauma 41

**Conflict Mods**
- Action Order 98
- Advantage of Scale 99
- Dramatic Order 98
- Multi-level Scale 100
- Taking Initiative 99

**Connections 67**
- in pathways 73

**Consent in Play**
- Mind control and possession 186

**Contest 19, 133**
A series of dice rolls between opponents, each trying to beat the previous roll until one side chooses not to roll and gives in, or fails to beat the previous roll and takes a complication or is taken out.
- Example Throwdown 105-107
- More than two characters 23

**Contest Mods**
- Action-based resolution 24
- Add All the Dice 25
- No Effect Dice 25
- Reroll for Effect 25

**Cortex (older versions) 4, 6, 12, 25, 27, 43, 59, 99, 129-130, 165**
Previous Cortex games are compatible with Cortex Prime, depending on which trait sets and mods you use.

**Cost 62**
The activating part of an SFX, to counterbalance the benefit.

**Crisis Pool 33**
A pool of dice similar to a doom pool only smaller, more focused, and able to be targeted by characters.
- in Hammerheads 152, 158-159

**Crowbar**
- That matters 35

## D

**Dice 16-17**
Polyhedral randomizers.
- Botch 17, 28
- Difficulty 18
- Doubling 62
- Effect 20, 159
- Hitch 17, 20, 28, 36-37
- Key to examples 17
- Opportunity 17, 20, 28, 36-37
- Ratings 16
- Rerolling 62
- Result 16, 29
- Rolling 17
- Scale 99
- Steps 16
- Symbol reference chart 6
- Total 16, 17, 18
- Types of dice 11

**Dice Pool 17**
All of the dice you get to roll when you make a test or engage in a contest.
- Crisis 33, 152, 158-159
- Doom 17, 32-33
- Example in play 104-107
- Growth 83, 167, 172
- Opposition 17, 18, 19
- Resource 155
- Vehicle 217

**Difficulty**
The measure of how hard it is to succeed at a test or contest.
- Crisis pool 33, 158
- Dice 18, 133
- Doom pool 32-33
- Growth pool 83, 172
- Recovery 37-38, 40, 41
- Static 25
- Timed test 101

**Difficulty Dice 18**
A pair of dice that represents how hard your test is going to be.



GRACE P. FONG

**Disaster** 157-159
Terrible things that happen; the antagonists in Hammerheads are usually disasters.

**Distinction** 50
A trait that represents a character's background, personality, and role in the game and differentiates them from other PCs and GMCs.
- in archetypes 68, 168-171
- in character creation 70, 76, 133, 152
- Examples 68, 104, 118, 119, 136-140, 153, 168-171
- Scene 116
- and SFX 61
- Universal trait set 26, 47
- Vehicle 218

**Distinction Mods**
- Highlighting Other Traits 50
- Rating Distinctions 50
- Statements as Distinction Alternates 66

**Doom Pool** 17, 32-33
A mod that introduces a pool of dice that replace GM plot points and difficulty dice.

**Dramatic Order** 98
The order in which PCs act during a dramatic scene using contests.

**Dramatic Situations** 112

**Drawback** 17
The part of an SFX that costs you something.
- pushing stress 40
- vehicle distinctions 216

**Dream, It Was All A** 123

## E

**Effect Die** 20, 159
A die chosen from the roll that wasn't used for the total, which then gets used for things like creating assets or complications. Usually the largest size die remaining.
- Example in play 105-107
- and SFX 21, 194
- Versus opposition effect dice 21

**Eidolon Alpha** 132-149, 226

**Extra** 74, 116, 173
A GMC defined with a single trait. Not usually named as an individual.
- *See also Resources*

## F

**Faction** 116
A group of characters who follow the same ideology, goal, or purpose, even if they don't always work together. Works like a mob, but with a scale die.
- Example Faction/Org 116

## G

**Game Moderator (GM)** 10
The person who facilitates the game, presents the session, and plays the parts of every other person and thing in the game.
- Action order 98
- Antagonists 112-113, 121, 141, 148
- Choosing prime sets 46-47
- Ending scenes 92-93
- Framing scenes 90-92, 122
- and pathways 77

Plot points 27, 63
Preparing a session 110-113
Responsibilities 10, 121
Rotating 111, 123
Running a session 120-123
You're not prepared 122

**Gang Up 100**
Having more than one character provide assistance on a test or contest.

**Gear 51, 64, 193, 213**
Stuff you have that lets you do things. Not always represented by traits.
as abilities 213
as powers 51, 193
as signature assets 64

**Gear Mods**
Ablative Armor 213
Weapon Ranges 213

**Genre 126-131**
A style or category of setting that can be loosely defined by various literary or cinematic conventions, such as science fiction, fantasy, or horror.
Apology 126
Examples 128-130, 133, 151, 165
Types of conflicts 97

**Give In 19, 28**
When called to make a roll, usually in a contest, you instead choose not to roll and accept the consequences on your own terms.
Example in play 104-107

**GMC 114-119**
Game moderator characters, including major, minor, and extra GMCs.
Boss 118
Extras 116
Faction 119
Ganging up 100, 116
Locations 174, 175-178
Major 114
Minor 115
Organization 119
Vices 173-174

**Group 5, 10**
All of the characters that the players at the table are playing; the GM and players as a group.
Comfort at the Table 73, 186
Example 12, 26
One-shots with 110
and vehicles 216-217

**Growing Characters Mods**
Growth 83
Milestones 84-85, 214-215
Session Records 82

**Growth 83**
An advancement mod that lets players advance their characters as a result of challenging their trait statements and recovering from stress.

H

**Hammerheads 150-163, 225-226**

**Hero Dice 30-31**
Dice you earn from heroic successes that you can use on future rolls.
- Compared to resource dice 56
- Static difficulty 25

**Heroic Success 20**
A total that's 5 or more points higher than the difficulty set by the opposing roll.
- Example in play 104-107
- Ganging up 100
- Hero dice and 30-31
- No Effect Dice mod 25
- Timed Test 101-103
- Unrelenting Force talent 66

**Highlight Trait 50**
Traits, such as skills, that a distinction or archetype steps up for free.
- Archetype 68
- in Eidolon Alpha 136-140
- Pathways 78
- Scratch-Built 70
- Skill pyramid 59

**Hitch 17**
A die that came up as 1 in your roll for a test or contest. The GM may give a player a PP to turn a hitch into a complication. Additional hitches in the same roll step up the complication.
- Archetype 68
- in Eidolon Alpha 136-140
- Pathways 78
- Scratch-Built 70
- Skill pyramid 59

I

**Initiative 99**
A mod for determining the order in which characters act based on dice rolls.
- *See also Action Order and Dramatic Order*

**Interfere 23, 98**
An interfering character spends a PP to enter a contest that's already underway, hoping to beat both of them.

L

**Life Points 43**
A mod that provides a score of points that are either reduced by damage or serve as a threshold of cumulative damage.

**Limit 63**
A type of SFX that allows players to shut down a power set.
- Ability 194
- Gear 213
- Power 52, 193

**Location 56**
Where a scene takes place, may have traits that can be used by characters in the scene.
A location can be a resource on a character file.
- in Eidolon Alpha 146-147
- as GMCs 116
- in reveals 113
- in scenes 90-91, 94-95
- in pathways 74
- in TRACE 2.0 174-178

M

**Major GMC 114**
A GMC that has game stats roughly equivalent to a PC and always has a name and some significant role in the story.
- Bosses as 118
- Example 146-147, 173
- Vices 173

**Meta-reality 27**
You are in this right now.

**Milestone 84-85, 95**
A list of goals that earn a player character XP during a session; XP is used to unlock new traits or upgrade old ones.
- Example 84-85, 214-215

**Minor GMC 115**
A GMC with just a handful of game stats. May or may not have a name. Somewhat less important or significant than a major GMC, but certainly more than an extra.
- Example 146-147, 173

**Mob 100, 117**
A group of extras that acts as a single minor character. They have a mob trait rated with multiple dice. Mobs can be weakened in strength until eliminated.
- Area attack 191

**Mod 13**
A Cortex Prime rules module that can change the expressions of other rules. You choose which mods to include to give your game the feel and tone you want.

**Mod Categories**
Asset and Complication Mods 39-43
Conflict Mods 98-100
Distinction Mods 50, 66
Doom Pool 32-33
Gear Mods 213
Growing Characters Mods 82-85
Hero Dice 30-31
Plot Point Mods 29
Power Mods 52, 54
Relationship Mods 55
SFX Mods 63
Skill Mods 58-59, 152
Test and Contest Mods 24-25

O

**One-shot 110-111**
A single session story, often with pre-made player characters, good for trying out ideas.

**Oops 123**

**Opportunity 37**
A GM hitch. When the GM rolls a 1 on the dice it gives the players an opportunity to spend a PP to step down a complication or step up an asset. More opportunities mean more steps.
*See Hitch*

**Org 119**
Short for organization. A group of characters who all work together to do something, even if they don't all believe the same thing. Works like a mob, but with a scale die.

**Outcome 19**
What happens after the dice are rolled and all game effects are decided, shaping the direction the story takes.

P

**Pathways 73-80, 110, 131**
A collaborative method of character creation that also builds a setting and a relationship map.
Default table 76-77
Example 78-80

**Player**
One of the people playing the game, specifically the people who are not the game moderator.
Plot points 28-29
Responsibilities 10, 13

**Player Character (PC) 10**
A character played by a player, one of the stars of the show.
Aiding other PCs 100, 103, 161
Character file 46-47
Creating 67-80, 145, 156, 168
Growing 82-85, 95, 96, 135, 145, 156, 194

**Plot Point (PP) 8, 27**
A resource earned by getting invested in the game and taking risks, and spent to alter the outcome of tests and contests, or to do other cool things.
Bank 27
Earning 28
Example in play 105-107
Pile 27, 36
Spending 28-29
Tokens 11

**Plot Point Mods**
No Bank 29
Starting Plot Points 29

**Poker Chips 11, 27, 102**

**Polti, Georges 112**

**Power 51-52**
A trait that represents superhuman abilities or qualities.
in character creation 72, 76
Example 133, 136-140
Limit 193
List 182-190
SFX list 191-192

**Power Mods**
Abilities 54
Power Sets 52, 72

**Power Set 52**
A group of power traits collected together under a thematic name and linked to a set of SFX and limits.
in character creation 72, 76
Example 182
with SFX 61

**Prime Set 26, 47**
A trait set that's an essential source of dice for dice pools in tests and contests.

**Prompts, Not Plots! 112**

R

**Reaction 24, 98**
In a contest, the dice roll made by an opponent to beat the acting character's roll. If using the Action Order mod, a reaction serves the same purpose.

**Relationship 55**
A trait that represents close connections to other characters.
Example 153

**Relationship Mods**
Reputations 55, 72

**Resource 56**
A trait that represents contacts, locations, or other external sources of aid.
in character creation 72, 74
Example 167-171
Pool 154

**Reveal 113, 121**
A plot element prepared in advance of a game session.

**Result 16-17**
The number that comes up on any given die after it's been rolled.

**Robot**
Zzt! zzt! Ro-bot! Ro-bot!
Giant 127, 128
Killer 24
Mech 100, 127
Pet 64
Replacements 130
Spider 37
Systems 191
Two-week-old 75

**Roby, Josh 104-107**

**Role 58**
A type of trait that serves as a thematic bundle of related skills and training.
in character creation 72
Examples 143-145, 166, 168-171

**Roll and Keep 8, 17**

S

**Scale Die 99**
A die added to the dice pool of one side of a conflict if it has a significant size advantage over the other side.
in Eidolon Alpha 142, 148
Factions/Orgs 119
Multi-level 100

**Scene 88**
A unit of time that basically covers a series of connected tests and beats in a story. Usually in one location, and usually with one set of characters.
Action 89, 94
Bridge 89, 95, 121, 122
Distinctions 116
Ending 92-93
Exploration 89, 95
Flashback 89, 96, 122
Framing 90-92, 105
High stakes 21, 22
Opening 89, 94, 121, 174
Tag 83, 89, 96, 122
Types 89

**Scratch-built Character 70-72**
Example 70-71
Vehicle 218

**Session** 109
All the gameplay that takes place in one sitting around the table or online, roughly equivalent to an episode from a TV series in story length.
Centered 5
Parts of 16
Preparing for 110-113
Running a 120-122
Variations on 123

**Session Record** 82
All of the sessions a PC has played through prior to the one they're in, useful for callbacks.

**Setting** 12, 25
The shared game world in which scenes and sessions take place.
Connecting PCs to 67, 127
Creating through pathways 70-74
Genre 126-131

**Setting the Difficulty** 18
Generating a total that indicates how difficult it is for the other side to succeed.

**SFX** 61-63
A special effect that allows a player to influence the story in some way.
and abilities 54, 194
in character creation 70, 72
in Eidolon Alpha 133
Examples 68, 104-107, 136-140, 153, 191-192, 195-212, 213
and powers 191
and signature assets 64

**SFX Mods**
Limits 63

**Shaken and Stricken** 42
A mod that applies stress directly to traits such as attributes or skills. Once one trait has more stress than its die rating, the character is shaken. When this happens to two, the character is stricken.
Example 133, 152

**Shut Down**
The act of making a trait inactive or unavailable until it is later restored.
Power limits 193
Power set 52
SFX 62-63

**Signature Asset** 64-65
Asset that belongs to the PC and represents important things or connections that may sometimes help the PC out.
in character creation 70
Example in play 104-107
Compared to resource dice 56
Vehicles 216-217

**Situation** 110, 112
A central hook or story idea for a session. The "what" of "What is this session about?"
Dramatic, list 112
Eidolon Alpha 146-147
Examples 7, 102-103, 104-107, 146-148, 174
and genre 127
Introducing 121
Jane DeFalt 7
Sage's timed test 102-103
Throwdown 104-107



**Skill 57-59**
A trait that represents training, expertise, and talent.
- Character creation 68-69
- Default list 57
- Example in play 104-107
- Pyramid 59
- Training Packages 152

**Skill Mods**
- Multi-level Specialties 59, 72
- No Skills, Just Specialties 59
- Roles 58, 72
- Skill Pyramid 59
- Skill and Specialty Split 59, 72
- Specialties 59
- Training Packages 152

**Specialty 59**
A trait that represents a narrow area of focus.
- Character creation 68-69, 70, 72
- Example in play 104-107

**Spend**
Using a point or die or other tracked currency from a pool to do something.
- Hero dice 25, 30
- Plot points 28-29
- Sessions 82

**Statement**
A mod that connects contextual statements to traits.
- *See Trait Statement*

**Step Down 9, 16, 62**
Replacing a die with the next lowest die type, i.e., a 6 becomes a 4.
- Below 4 38
- Traits 83

**Step Up 9, 16, 62**
Replacing a die with the next highest die type, i.e., a 6 becomes a 8.
- Beyond 12 21, 22, 37
- in character creation 68-69, 70-72
- Traits 83

**Stress 39-40, 152, 167**
A type of complication that represents harm and hinders action.
- Recovery 167

**Stunt 34**
An asset created by an SFX or another rule, starting at 8.

## T

**Tag**
A keyword or descriptor used to guide when a resource or ability might be used.
- Descriptor (abilities) 54
- Effect (abilities) 54
- Resource 56

**Taken Out 19, 21, 22**
When you fail to beat your opponent in a contest and lose, suffering the consequences on your opponent's terms. Also applies to characters who fail a test in a high-stakes scene or who have a complication or stress die stepped up beyond 12.
- Avoiding 28-29, 37, 106-107, 217
- Recovery 22

**Talent 66, 72**
SFX set apart as specific character elements without die ratings.
- Example 166-167

**Test 18, 133**
A use of the dice to determine the outcome of an objective or goal, needs to beat the difficulty set by the GM.
- Timed 101-103

**Test Mods**
- Action-based Resolution 24
- Add All the Dice 25
- No Effect Dice 25
- Reroll for Effect 25
- Static Difficulty 25

**Total 16-17**
The number you get when you add at least two of your dice together after rolling your dice pool. Usually, your two highest rolling dice results added together.

**TRACE 2.0 164-179, 227**

**Train**
Choo choo! It goes on rails.
- Bullet 185
- Chicago to Minneapolis 88
- Road movie 128
- Runaway 33, 157, 158-159
- Western 128

**Train Up 82**
Improving your traits with practice and effort.
- in Eidolon Alpha 145
- in Hammerheads 156
- in TRACE 2.0 172

**Trait 8, 26, 46-66**
Game stats rated by dice of various sizes, usually included in a dice pool and belonging to a trait set.

- Abilities 54
- Affiliations 48, 168-171
- Attributes 49, 133, 152
- Boss 118
- Choosing 129-131
- Distinctions 26, 47, 50, 61, 133, 153
- Mob 117, 119
- Powers 51-52, 133, 182-190
- Relationships 55, 152
- Reputations 55
- Resources 56, 72, 74, 167
- Roles 58, 72, 133, 165, 168-171
- SFX 54, 61-63, 133, 153, 191-192
- Signature assets 64-65
- Talents 66, 72, 166-171
- Temporary 26
- Trait statements 47, 65-66, 83, 96
- Values 60
- Vehicle 154-155, 216

**Trait Set 26**
A category of traits grouped together.

**Trait Statement 47, 65-66**
A mod that connects contextual statements to traits.

**Trauma 41**
Long-term stress that is harder to recover from, gained when a character is stressed out.

*See also Stress*

## U

**Unlockable 85**
An advancement benefit unlocked by spending XP, such as improved traits or in-game story benefits like access to important locations.

## V

**Value 60**
A trait that represents deeply held beliefs or attitudes.

- in character creation 72
- Trait statements and 65, 82

**Vehicles**
Things that you drive, fly, pilot, ride, or otherwise get around in, represented in game terms.

- Building 218
- Dice pool 217
- Hammerhead 154-155, 160, 162
- Tests 217
- Traits 216, 218
- Training up 217

**EXAMPLE VEHICLES**

Black Shanty (Backer) 223
Hammerhead One (Hammerheads) 162
High-Tech Street Bike 216
Star-Frigate 217

## X

**XP**
Points earned during play using the milestone advancement mod.

*See Player Character, Growing*




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Sebastian Achlys, Cassandra Addams, Charles Allen, Andy, Angelus, Christopher Baerman, Paul Baker, Battlefield Press, Inc., j beaumont, David Belcastro, Brodie Bensend, Michael Bentley, Chris Bernhardi, Bez Bezson, Phil Binkowski, Don Bisdorf, blackheart, Adam Blackman, Michael Blair, Michael Blanchard, Andrew Bleecker, Brian Blonski, Blue, Jeb Boyt, Elizabeth Brandow, Allan Bray, Sean Breen, Nicolas Brian, Michael M. Brislawn, Sean Brislen, John Britch, Dylan Brooks, T. Rob Brown, Tim W Brown, Joe bruna, Bryan, Glenn Butcher, Andrew Butula, Adam Canning, Capellan, Chris Caporaso, W Ryan Carden, Dwayne Carnachan, James Carpio, Luka Carroll, Simon Carter, Andrew Castner, Robin Lee Chadwick, Matt Chapman, Clement Chow, matthew clarke, Claybor, Keith E. Clendenen, Ewen Cluney, Eric Coates, Herbert Coddington, Scott Cohen, Justin Cole, Adam Coleman, Dave Coleman, Jeffrey Collyer, Garrett Colon, Jacob Converset, Thozmp Corris, Cryoban, Jonathan Culler, Chris Czerniak, Jason D'Angelo, Emily Burt Daniels, Eric Daniels, David, David, John Davies, Dead Gentlemen Productions, Density Media, Johua DeSanto, Mark Dodson, John Donoghue, Hannah Downs, Darrin Drader, drnuncheon, Willy Dupont, e-sabbath, Andrew Eaton, Paul Edwards, B. Eidsor, Brian Engard, Brent Erdman, Extra-Dimensional Publishing, Jason Feldman, Robert Ferency-Viars, Paul Fiero, Lettuce Fish, FkT, Jason Flowers, Eric Franklin, Zachery Gaskins, Carl Gerriets, David Ginsburg, Giuseppe, Andrew Goode, Timothy Grant, Joe Grib, Aaron Griffin, Daniel Grondin, Andrew Gronosky—Shewstone Publishing, Ollie Gross, Tom Gudella, Guy, Matt Gwinn, Jereme Haack, Michael Harrel, Sam Harris, Dave Harrison, Todd Haynes, Cameron Hays, Nathan Henderson, William Hensley, Niklas Herbold, Ari Herbstman, Nathan Hill, Scott W Hill, Christopher Hobdy, Damian Holter, Mike Holyoak, Stephen Hood, Kyle Hopkins, Tom Huber, William Huet, Alex Hunter, Hans Marc Hurd, Aidan Hurst, Chris Jackson, Jamiro, Jason, Jason, Jayhad, Fada Joe, Jeffrey Jones, Sebastian A. Jones, Bryan Jonker, Doug Jorenby, Joshua, Jeffrey Kelly, Kyle Kiefer, Stephen Kilpatrick, Chris King, Geoff Kloess, Patrick Knowles, Mike Kochis, Paul Kohler, Thomas Kollman, Jonathan Korman, Rick Kranghand, Richard Kreutz-Landry, Steve Kunec, Molly Landgraff, Marvin Langenberg, Laura, Rebecca Lawrence, Kirk Leeson, Jonathan Leistiko, Collin Leverette, Denis Lobazob, Chris Longhurst, Steven Lord, Ken Lowery, Jesper Lund, Russ Luzetski, Dain Lybarger, M, Dave M, Warren M, Adam MacDonald, Christopher Mackie, Lisa Maddock, mandramas, Frank Manna, Jason Marks, IAN MARTIN, Andru Matthews, Jeremiah McCoy, Paul McErlean, Jon Meerdink, Hans Messersmith, Jeremy Mettler, Curt Meyer, Michael, James Miller, Kristopher Miller, Rhys Miller, Theodore Miller, Greg Mohler, Stefano Monachesi, kevin mowery, David Mullins, Ilan Muskat, Adam Ness, Kayne Newell, Thomas Niven, Joddie Noblit, Doug Nordwall, Jack Norris, Brennan O'Keefe, M.P. O'Sullivan, Rafael Ortiz, Owen, Craig Oxbrow, Trey Palmer, Shadrick Paris, Isabelle Parsley, Sarah Peloquin, Guillermo Peral Fontova, Josh Peters, Martin Pickett, Michael Pineda, Robert Posada, Anturo Prada, Cenate Pruitt, Dev Purkayastha, Tommi Putkonen, Mike Quintanilla, Rabbit, Steve Radabaugh, Catherine Ramen, Daniel Ravipinto, Red Dice Diaries, Restoration Games, Rhonda, Scott Rhymer, Noe Ridgway, SeanOwen Roberson, Jon Robertson, John Rogers, CJ Romer, John "johnkzin" Rudd, Joseph Russo, Scott Rutter, Andrew Sadler, Adam Sallean, Myranda Sarro, Kathryn Schiller Wright, Stefan Schloesser, Jeff Schmidt, Mike Schulz, Robert J Schwalb, Dougal Scott, Topher Scott, Sterz Sebastian, Jim Sensenbrenner, Caleb Shelley, Timothy W. Shiflet, Dylan Shinn, Scott Shupe, Simon, Joel Siragher, Stewart Skeel, skirza, J.J. Sloane, Jon Smejkal, Aaron Smith, Anders Smith, Tess Snider, Sorcerer Ninja, Michael Sorensen, Joshua Sorenson, Lonnie Spangler, MD Spangler, Keiran Sparksman, Ryan St.Wrba, Shannon Stallard, Jason Starks, Thorbjørn Steen, Adam Stein, Steven, Michael Stevens, Russell Strand-Poole, George Strayton, Stuart, Aaron E. Sullivan, Simo Suutala, Table Top Interactive™, Sarah Templeton, Terry, Therese, Aaron Thorne, Jon Thorvaldson, Christopher Trezise, James Tubb, Uemei, Sheena C Vandevanter, Dave Van Domelen, Z. Vanetti, savanxayadeth vanny-brayan, Kyle J Varneke, Scott Vesely, Emanuele Vignola, Greg Walters, James Wang, Steven Warble, Corey Watson, David Wetzel, Steve White, George Stephen Wilcox, Clint Williams, Mike Williams, Erick Wilson, Jason Wilson, Shelton Windham, Charles Wotton, Matt Wrycraft, Wayne Wyant, Chris Yee, John Zmrotchek

## PRIME HARDCOVER

Guest 261337069, AKA_Kira, Eric Aldrich, Brian Allred, Adrian Álvarez Polegre, Nicklas Andersson, Joshua Anglin, aragaer, Dacar Arunsone, Andrew Assaad, Bryan Bailey, Ric Baines, PeterM Ball, Tracy Barkley, Tracy Barnett—Exploding Rogue Studios, Dan Behlings, Larry Behrendt, J.W. Bennett, Raymond Bennett, Demi Benson, Jonathan Beverley, billk, Dane Black, Max Boivin, Nick Bower, Jonathan Breese, Brev, Nick Brown, Vasco A. Brown, Jared Buckley, Thomas Burgess, Andrew Buse, Cade, callithrix, Dustinian Camburides, Daniel Campbell, John M Campbell, Charlie Cantrell, Bryce Leland Carlson, Mathieu Castex, Chad, Dave Chalker, Patrick Chapman, Charles, Christian, Matt Clay, Greg Conant, Seamus Conneely, Gabriel Creek, Chris Crouch, Stephen A Cuyler, Neal Dalton, Darkshifter, Dave, Robert Davis, Steven Davis, Thomas Deeny, Thierry DeGagné, Patrick Alan DeMinico, Kevin Denehy, Rob Deobald, Jason Dettman, Charles DeVault, Mark DiazTruman, Jeff Dixon, Steve Dodge, Bryan Dracker, Dreamer, Chris Dron, Craig Duffy, Darren Edwards, Simon Emmins, Philip Espi, Evgeny, Ezekiel, Ryan Ferguson, Robert J. Finamore, Mark Francis, Victor Gaigaia, David Gallo, Clay Gardner, Rik Geuze, Sion Gibson, David Gilbert, Deanna Gilbert, Angry Goblin, D Goth, Dean Graham, James Graham, Jerry D. Grayson, Martin Greening, gregalodon, David Paul Guzmán, Gwarh, Ben Hale, C. Michael Hall, Brandie Hanson, Matt Harrop, Frank Hart, Seth Hartley, Leighann Harvey, Shaun Hayworth, Kevin Heil, George Heintzelman, Kenneth W Hensley II, Fred Hicks—Evil Hat Productions, Michael Hill, NolanJ Hitchcock, Joshua Hoade, Christopher Hogan, Daniel Holdren, James Holdridge, Howard, Chris Huddleston, Steve Ironside, Colin J, David Jarvis—Gun Metal Games, Mikko Jauhiainen, Ian Johnston, John P Jones, Pete Jones, JustChris, KamiSaotori, LFJM Kanters, Ray Karnes, John Kasab, Corby Kennard, Shoshana Kessock—Phoenix Outlaw, Nick Keyuravong, patty kirsch, Jody Kline, Michael Koorey, Ed Kowalczewski, Sebastian Kramer, Benjamin Kugler, Kun, Oleg L, Sophie Lagace, Dan Layman-Kennedy, Lazislacker, Shan Lewis, Jason Light, Brent Litster, Zed Lopez, Luke Lowbrow, Mike M, Kevin M., Mike MacMartin, Shane Maesenko, Scott maguire, malarky, david male, Hal Mangold—Atomic Overmind Press, Maple Maniac, Emily Marriott, Chris Marten, Jason Martin, Kevin Martin, Matt, MichaelW. Mattei, Nathaniel Mattingly, Ryan McCabe, Tim McCaffrey, Gordon McDonald, Casey McGirt, Phillip McGregor, Ben McKenzie, Andrew McLaren, Arthur McMahon, Ryan McPherson, Christopher D Meid, Thorin Messer, Marshall Miller, Nathan Mitchell, chris mobberley, Benjamin the Monkey, Chris Moore, Jeremy Morgan, David Murphy, Jim Nicholson, nick418, Nathan Nolan, John Olson, Wes Otis, Juan Oviedo, Jim Pacek, Chris Paladino, Krista Parker, Scott Parker, Amanda M. Penn, Brandon Perkins, Matthew Petruzzelli, Greg Pohlman, Jenevieve Power-De Fer, Bernd

Pressler, David Priestley, Ben Quant, Andrew Rachunok, zak ralston, randomcitizenx, Ian Raymond, Philip Reed, ROUGERON Renaud, Josh Rensch, Mark Richardson, James Ritter, Seth A. Roby, Nestor Rodriguez, Garrett Rooney, Richard Schwerdtfeger, Antonio Segarra, Tom Sias, Eric Smailys, Smith, Bob Smith, Kristina Smithman, Kristen Solindas, Spacekaze, Bob Stoffel, Krister Sundelin, Cody Swatek, SoSo T, Targilnar, Justin Thomason, Joseph ZombieChan Thompson, Ross Thompson, Jeff Tidball, Jes Toft Kristensen, Michael Tree, Tucker, Ashton Vail, Evan Van Duzer, Todd Vandecasteele, Greg Videll, Von Plat, Jae Walker, Petri Wessman, Claire West, Jim White, Stephen Whitehead, Robert Wiesehan, Matthew Williams, Sarah Williams, Steaven Woyan, Randall Wright, Trent Y, Adam Yellin, Mikey Zee

## PRIME SOFTCOVER PLUS

Guest 892185661, John Alexander, Apromor, Aristel, Ian B., John Bailey, Duncan Bain, Barry, Alan Batson, Joe Beason, Pat Bellavance, Jack Berberette, Jason L Blair, Matt Blair, Joseph E Blake, Boyer, Francis Bradley Biggar, Brand, Steve Butts, Jamie Caffee, Tadeusz Cantwell, Christopher, Orion Cooper, Matt Corkum, Justin Cranford, Bruce Curd, Jim Dagg, Jeremy Dake, Jim Del Rosso, Steve Donohue, Daniel Ellingsen Lund, Matthew Elmslie, Ben Erickson, John Evans, Jonathan Finke, Justin Folkerts, Gregory Ford, Raymond Fowkes Jr., Richard Fryer, marc grasmugg, Teline Guerra, Matthew Harvey, Stefanie Hasler, Scott Heyden, Ben Heywood, Alyssa Hillen, Steve Holder, William Hultqvist, Infinite Jest, Matt Johnson, Rick Jones, JTB3, Craig Judd, Brad Knipper, Mischa Krilov, Kevin Lawless, Brad Lawrence, Jessie Lawton-Crane, Chris Lee, Andy Leighton, Christian Leonhard, Jeph Lewis, Peter Liaw, Brian A Liberge, Mitchell Lightfoot, Marc Majcher, Jamie Manley, Justin Martin, Thomas McDonald, Paul Messenger, Matthew Miller, Darren G. Miller—CCS Games, John Morgan, Mt Fierce, Eric Myers, Tomoki N, Nekosluagh AKA Necroslug), Lawrence Newman, Randy Newton, Paul Normandin, Andria Osborne, Jon Oz, Jason Parker, Jason Pasch, Joel Pearce, Joseph Perry, Jay Pingol, Jimmy Plamondon, Christopher Raslan, rchaddick, Rei, Rob, Jim Roberts, Miguel Angel Rodriguez, Matthias Rohde, Jim Roof, Chris S.—Pepsiman, David Scharf, David Scott, Michael Shannon, Andrew Sheeler, Brie Sheldon, Shotofentropy, Steven Sick, Richard Slater, Philip Snyder, Mathew Spaan, Speshul, David Spitzley, David Steiger, Gordon Stephen, Matt Sutton, Tablesaw, reagan taplin, tauther, David Terhune, Theodrax, William Thompson, Josh Thomson, Todd, Trevor, Michael Tully, Chris Venus, Janne Vuorenmaa, Jim W, Robert Walker, Steven Watkins, Rhonda Weeks, Wild Card, James Wood, Victor Wyatt, yongi, Yragael

## PRIME HARDCOVER PLUS

Jayme A., Rob Abrazado, Stras Acimovic, ailelie, Josh Albritton, Alexandria, Manuel Alfredo, Kane Aliffi, Victor Allen, Gary Anastasio, Svend Andersen, Darryl Anderson, Matt Anderson, Andinel, Russell Andrews, Antonio, Nicholas Arroyo, Richard Christopher August, Austin, Matthew B, Christopher Badell, Douglas Bailey, Jonathan Baldridge, Neil Barnes, Michael Barrett, Zachary Barrett, Fernando Barrocal, Paul Beakley, Kyle Bedell, Steve Beleck, Eric Bennett, Binary Codex, Johnathan L Bingham, Carl James Black, Ron Blessing, Dylan Boates, Jacob Boehmer, Goolius Boozler, Yves Boudart, Brian, Paul Browning, Brian J. Burke, Jesse Burneko, Orson Bushnell, Matt C, Matt C, Tom Cadorette, Caelestis Designs, Daniel Campos, Joel Cannon, Kevin Carboni, Christi Cardenas, Frank Carver, Joshua Cash, Nicholas Cassidy, Cgeist7, Chris Challacombe, Kevin Chauncey, Stephen Cheney, Chiiovanni, Jason Childs, Michael Chui, Elizabeth Clark, Nicholas Clements, Lyal Clough, Wayne Coburn, L Collins, Richard Comfort, Contesse, Brendan Conway, Lucas Cooperberg, Sherman Cordle, Daniel Cox, Tyson B. Cram, Keith Cripe, Xander Crowe, David Csobay, Andrew Cummings, Mike Curry, Julien D, Amanda d'Adesky, David Dalton, Stephen Damm, Luis Dantas, Steve Darlington, Game Dave, David, Brennan Dawson, Tommy Day, Shane Deagan, Chris Del Gigante, Jyan Craig Delamotte, Robert DeLuna, Anthony "LibrariaNPC" DeMinico, Van Der Veken, N DeVita, Matthew Dickson, Kirk Dilbeck, JT Dimino, Ghost DM, dmjalund, Dominic, Joe Donlon, David Dorward, Nathan Dowdell, Dread Domain, Roy Dreyer, Jason Durall, Bill Eastman, Edgar, Korey Enright, Declan Feeney, Chad Feldmann, FelTK, Rafael Ferreira, Scott Fitzpatrick, Daryl Fladung, Chris Flipse, Marcus Flores, Kevan Forbes, Matthew Frederickson, Elliott Freeman, Jeromy French, Ben Fried-Lee, Slaine Fullerton, Jeremiah Ganner, Chris Garland, Bill Garrett, Mike Gibbons, Darryn Goble, Edgar Gonzalez, Horacio Gonzalez, Gordon, Sean Gore, Alexander Gräfe, Alan Graham, Mark Green, Mathias Green, Wade Gregory, Panagiotis Grigorakakis, Jack Gulick, Angus H, Fred H, Phil Hanley, Brandon Hare, Mike Hargreaves, Marion G. Harmon, Robert Harrison, Byron J. Hartsfield, Chris Harvey, Katie Harwood, Christopher Hatty, David Havelka, Mike Headden, Jim Henley, Marc Hertogh, Mike Hill, M. Alan Hillgrove, Matthew Hoeveler, Mike Holmes, TravisM. Holyfield, Jerome Hope, Nick Hopkins, Ian Houlihan, Alexander Hrebluk, Dan Hunsaker, Jérémie Huteau, Ryan Lester Isaacson, Brian Isikoff, Gilbert Isla, Jason Jackson, Jason, Jeff, Jess, Jesse, Neal Jesse, B. Ernesto Johnson, Sean Johnstone, Jonathan, Mikko Kämäräinen, Jon Kelley, Khyron, Jacob Killens, Paul Andrew King, Ross Kingston, Gerard Christopher Klug, Joseph Kogin, Jaroslav Kraif, Kevin W. Kulp, Christopher Lackey, Maggie LaMothe, David Lanza, Lars Erik Larsen, mark lawford, Greg Leatherman, William Lee, Olivier LEFEBVRE, leloupuk, Maricella Lemus, Richard Libera, Michael Linke, Sigurd Løberg, Matt Logan, Dan Luxenberg, Glen Lyons, Keith M, e macgregor, Frank X Madrid, Charlie A Main, malakim2099, Philippe Marcil, Aaron Marks, Fernando Marquez, Steve Marsh, David Martel, Dan Martland, Matt, Mikel Matthews, Doug McAuliffe, Michael McCall, Craig McRoberts, Shiny McShine, Me, John Mehrholz, Lucias Meyer, Adam MH, Milanee, David Millar, David Miller, J Miller, Robert Miller, Richard Miyares, Byron D. Molix, M. Sean Molley, Ann Moormann, Morgan, Mozusuke, natb, nathanial, Dustin Niehoff, James Norton, Kristoffer Nortun, Brian O'Connell, Patrick O'Shea, Etienne Olieu, Jason Olsa, Dave Olson, Mike Olson, Ols Jonas Petter Olsson, Michael D Opdyke, John Oram, Randall Orndorff, Owlglass, paul, Matt Penn, Ryan Percival, Matt Perez, Garrett Petersen, Brandon Peterson, Kyle Pinches, Prime Loki, Samuel Puddleduck, P. R., John Rafter, Andrés Ramírezde Arellano, Luther Ramsey, Michael Ramsey, Reise Reise, Jay Richards, IanA. Richmond, Gina Ricker, Kenny Riehle, Beth Rimmels, Dustin Rippetoe, Rishi, Brett Ritter, Don Roberts, Ron Roberts, Christopher Robichaud, ronald robinson, Brian Rock, Tim Rodriguez, Roger, Dylan Ross, James ross, Tim Rudloff, ruemere, Ed S, Nick Salony, Eric Samuels, David Santos, Aaron Sapp, Dean Schallhammer, Gary Schaper, Jason Schindler, Erica Schmitt, Marc Oliver Schneeberger, Jason Schneiderman, Martin Schramm, Jacob Schwartz, Jeremiah Schwennen, Scott, Scott, David Sealy, Hudson Shock, Killer Shrike, Noelle Siddall, DL Sigmon, James Silvers, Oscar Simmons, Sin, adam smith, dan smith, James Smith, Michael Smith, Ron Sojourner, Mark Solino, Rich Spainhour, Daniel Stack, Paul Stefko, Richard Steinfeldt, Todd Stephens, Rene Christopher Suarez, PK Sullivan, Charles Summerhill, James Sutton, Matthew Swetnam, John Taber, Glen Taylor, Adam J. Thaxton, Christian Theriault, this_is_Dan, Matt Thompson, Kit Thornton, Patrick Thurston, Jeremy Tidwell, Tim,

Matias Timm, Tripp, Jason "JiB" Tryon, Jared Twing, umbralwarrior—Phoenix Rising, Nicola Urbinati, Matías Vain, David K. van Hoose, George VanMeter, David Viars, Victory Condition Gaming, Shervyn vonHoerl, Mike Wallace, don walsh, Conan Ward, Jay Ward, Che Webster, John Wedoff, Brandon Whittington, Clayton Wick, Christopher Wilson Barrett, Kyalomé Wintermoon, Matt Wiser, David Wood, Mellow Yellow, Daniel Zak, Zane, Andres Zanzani, Roy Zemlicka, Zita, 郭志良

## PRIME HARDCOVER SPOTLIGHT

2nirwana, Guest 480388891, 7thPawn, Sharif Abed, Michael Adair, Aescleal, James Allen, Cousin Artaud, BADJRM, Juanma Barranquero, Garth Bauman, Gabriel Bell, Belorgey, Trentin C Bergeron, Ryan Blackstock, Joel Blackwell, Joe Blomquist, John Bogart, Patrick Bonier, Charles Boucher, Kevin Brennan, Brian, Bruyat, Dillon Burke, Andrew Byers, Robert C., calixus, Allen Cardozo, Isaac Carr, Timothy Carroll, Neale Carter, Christopher, David Cole, Chris Collins, Gord Colter, Rogue Comet, Joshua Conboy, Christopher Conner, Garry Corbin, Jason Corley, William Cosgrove, Brian Creswick, Edward DaFonseca, Hanse Davion, Benjamin Davis, Charlie Day, Sasha "TK" De'ath, Chuck Dee, Mark Delsing, Alban DEROUX, Nick DeShane, DexX, Rob Donoghue, Luke Dore, Clint Doyle, John Doyle, Drake, Henry A Driskill, DrSammy, Mark Edwards, Elegiac Catalyst, Alex Essery, Jeff Fa Fa, Faerol, Stefan M. Feltmann, Vladimir Filipović, Brook Freeman, Mitchell Freeman, Mirko Froehlich, Leif Erik Furmyr, furstenberger, David Futterrer, Anders Gabrielsson, Antero Garcia, Keith Garrett, Geek2theRight, Napoleon Genereux, Chris George, Dr. Neil Glassford, Martin Goodson, Axel GOTTELAND, Richard Greene, Wesley Griffin, Peter Griffith, Skull Guy, Anders Håkon Gaut, Halion, Jerry Hamlet, James Hardie, Evan Harding, Melody Haren Anderson, Andrew Harter, Adam Hattrell, chris hauschild, Morgan Hazel, Patrick Healey, Sam Heazlewood, Francis Helie, John Henry, Michael D. Hensley, John Michael Hess, Carl Hickman, Andrew Hide, David Higgins, Paul Hiscock, Sara Hochleitner, Nicolas Hornyak, Tessa Howe, Aston Howes, Andrew Huang, Hubnutzen, Richard Hudspeth, Teofilo Hurtado, Ross Isaacs, Thomas J., Matthew Jackson, Keith Jacobson, Robert James, Jarval, Jason, Jason, Mad Jay, Jimmy Jerenfelt, Douglas Jessup, Jetstream, Matt Jones, Jordan, Rob Justice, Justin, Zanshi Kaijin, Jack Kessler, Kevin, Kickbacker, Corey King, Brian Koonce, Nick Kremenek, Michael Kruckvich, Red L, Reg Langford, Robben Leaf, David Lee, Ted Lee, Jason Leigh, Matt Leonard, Brian LeTendre, David Lewis, Daniel Ley, Patrick Ley, Locke, Tom Lommel, Longspeak, Josh Lueck, César Luz David, Kyle MacKay, Chris Marcellus, Mathew Marolt, Kevin Matheny, Ralph Mazza, Matthew McFarland, Joao Medeiros, Mendel, James Mendez Hodes, Dan Miley, James Miller, Wu Dao Ming, Will Mitchell, Josh Moeller, Luis Montero, Joseph Moon, Christopher Moreno, Murno, Scott Edward Nash, Rick Neal, Carey Newhouse, Nick, Matthew Nielsen, Sebastian Niesen, Christian Nord, Semen Nosnitsyn, Cheryl Orosz, Anthony Orozco, Shawn P, Lisa Padol, Michael G. Palmer, Paride, Michael Parker, Salek Peetz, Penguin King Games Inc., Pablo Pérez Gómez, Christopher Phipps, Troy Pichelman, Nick Pilon, Richard Plemons, Frédéri "V.K Friedrich" POCHARD, Ian Porter, John M. Portley, Osye Pritchett, Phil Pugh, Patrick Purcell, Jason R, Markus Raab, Geoffrey Rabe, Martin Ralya, Ross Ramsay, Ravelli, Abhishek Ray, RDP, David Rennie, Joshua Ridens, Nathan Rockwood, Ron, Ron, Joshua Rowell, RPG_Fetish, Pól Rua, Daniele Ruggeri, Greg Sanders, Michael Sandlin, Ben Scerri, Walter B. Schirmacher, Karl Schmidt, Raymond Schneider, Louis Brian Schoener, Scott, Scott, Alan Scott, S Naomi Scott, Sean, Rupert Sedlmayr, Shane, Alek Shrader, Dave Shramek, Lars-Emil Silvstål, Benedikt Simon, dan sinclair, Darrell L. Sisson, Ron Smay, Becky Smith, Scott Smith, Phillip Snarkayde, Luc Snider, David Snyder, Richard Sorden, spacht, Birgir Steinarsson, Chris Stone-Bush, Stu, Ari Suntioinen, Patrick Tarantino, Chris Tavares, John Templeton, terrasaur, Harold Tessmann III, thompgc, John W. Thompson, Michael Tisdell, Alex Truman, Markku Tuovinen, Bruce Turner, Donald A. Turner, Michael Van Strander, Steven Vest, Michael Wachter, waelcyrge, Matthew "J Wall" Wallace, Joe Walsh, Simon Ward, Skyler Weaver, Claude Weaver III, Dave Weinstein, Mikhael Weitzel, David A Wendt, Matthew Wetzel, Adam Whitcomb, Mark Wiand, Andreas Wichter, John Wick, Thimo Wilke, Scott Williams, Kevin Wine, Stacie Winters, Wlad, Dawid Wojcieszynski, Benjamin Yendall, Jason Yoakam, Zakero, Aaron Zirkelbach

## PRIME CHARACTER CREATOR

Caitlin Helms, R Holds, Midnight Blue, Marcus Morrisey, Jonathan Oakes, Matt Parkes, Robert Politte, Jeremy Puckett, Laurie Rich, Duane Sibilly

## PRIME RETAILER

Roland Bahr, Jim Crocker, Brian Dalrymple, Dragon's Lair Comics & Fantasy Austin, Grange Live Gaming, Sean Holland, Oryan Interator, Darren Johnson, Scott Martin, Jason Pitre, Nathan Thompson

## PRIME SPOTLIGHT CHARACTER CREATOR

Marion F. Carpenter Jr., Rose Davidson,Udo Femi, Jeremiah Frye, Dean M Lewis, Sheldon Robert Morley, Neosect, Matthew Orwig,Unicornmaiden

## PRIME ART DIRECTOR

Aaron Dykstra, Turing Church Eret, Jesse Roberge, Mathew Sforcina, Michael Wight

## PRIME CREATIVE PACKAGE

Tim Bannock, Bradley Hunter, Luke Martinez, Ronald Nealy



YANGTIAN LI

# EIDOLON ALPHA



NAME:

HISTORY:

DESCRIPTION:

## CHARACTER FILE

## ROLES

**Warrior** 4 6 8 10 12

**Priest** 4 6 8 10 12

**Scout** 4 6 8 10 12

**Other** _____ 4 6 8 10 12

## ATTRIBUTES

**Courage** Highlight ○
4 6 8 10 12
STRESS 4 6 8 10 12

**Grace** Highlight ○
4 6 8 10 12
STRESS 4 6 8 10 12

**Guile** Highlight ○
4 6 8 10 12
STRESS 4 6 8 10 12

**Reason** Highlight ○
4 6 8 10 12
STRESS 4 6 8 10 12

**Vigor** Highlight ○
4 6 8 10 12
STRESS 4 6 8 10 12

## DISTINCTIONS

8 _____

**ENDARCH DISTINCTION**

8 _____ Power 1 | 8 _____ Power 2 | 8 _____ Power 3

**ENDARCH SFX**

● *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out your endarch distinction's rating of 8 for a 4.

○

○

○

● *Summon:* Shut down this endarch distinction to summon your Eidolon on your next turn.

**SUMMONED EIDOLON**

**BASE TRAIT**
10 10 *or* 4 4

**SCALE**
8

**POWERS**
12 _____
12 _____
12 _____

**HIGHLIGHT ATTRIBUTES**
12 _____
12 _____

8 _____

**ROLE DISTINCTION**

*Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.

8 _____

**FREEFORM DISTINCTION**

*Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4.

## XP

○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○ ○

For best results, **use pencil.**

# TRACE 2.0

NAME:

HISTORY:

DESCRIPTION:

## CHARACTER FILE

### AFFILIATIONS

**Solo** 4 6 8 10 12

**Partner** 4 6 8 10 12

**Squad** 4 6 8 10 12

### ROLES

| | |
|---|---|
| Forensics | 4 6 8 10 12 |
| Investigation | 4 6 8 10 12 |
| Legal | 4 6 8 10 12 |
| Medicine | 4 6 8 10 12 |
| Psychology | 4 6 8 10 12 |
| Tactics | 4 6 8 10 12 |
| Technology | 4 6 8 10 12 |

### RESOURCES

10 10

8 8

6 6

6 6

### DISTINCTIONS

Distinction #1:

Distinction #2:

Distinction #3:

● *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out your distinction's rating of 8 for a 4.

### TALENTS

Talent #1:

Talent #2:

Talent #3:

Talent #4

Talent #5:

Talent #6:

### STRESS

**GROWTH POOL**
Base 6 6

| | |
|---|---|
| Afraid | 4 6 8 10 12 |
| Angry | 4 6 8 10 12 |
| Anxious | 4 6 8 10 12 |
| Exhausted | 4 6 8 10 12 |
| Injured | 4 6 8 10 12 |

For best results, **use pencil.**

# HAMMERHEADS

NAME:

CALL-SIGN:

DESCRIPTION:

## ATTRIBUTES

### Physical

4 6 8 10 12

STRESS 4 6 8 10 12

### Mental

4 6 8 10 12

STRESS 4 6 8 10 12

### Social

4 6 8 10 12

STRESS 4 6 8 10 12

## TRAINING PACKAGES

- Crowd Control 4 6 8 10 12
- Emergency Medical 4 6 8 10 12
- Firefighting 4 6 8 10 12
- Hammerhead Pilot 4 6 8 10 12
- HAZMAT 4 6 8 10 12
- High-Altitude Recovery 4 6 8 10 12
- Legal Specialist 4 6 8 10 12
- Logistics 4 6 8 10 12
- Marine Recovery 4 6 8 10 12
- Network Specialist 4 6 8 10 12
- Mechanic 4 6 8 10 12
- Tactical Response 4 6 8 10 12
- Technical Analyst 4 6 8 10 12
- Urban Recovery 4 6 8 10 12

## DISTINCTIONS

Your Life Before:

SFX

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out your distinction's rating of 8 for a 4.
- Spend a PP to step up an attribute when you connect to your old life.
- Add 6 to the crisis pool to double your attribute die when you connect to your old life.

Your Approach/Attitude:

SFX

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out your distinction's rating of 8 for a 4.
- Spend a PP to reroll your dice when you align with your true nature.
- Add 6 to the crisis pool to step up your training package die when you align with your true nature.

Your Quirk/Quality:

SFX

- *Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out your distinction's rating of 8 for a 4.
- Spend a PP to double your relationship die when your assistance embraces your quirk or quality.
- Add 6 to the crisis pool to step up a relationship die you include in your pool when you embrace your quirk or quality.

## RELATIONSHIPS

- saved my life 4 6 8 10 12
- owes me big 4 6 8 10 12
- is a troublemaker 4 6 8 10 12
- knows their stuff 4 6 8 10 12
- is a liability 4 6 8 10 12
- is dependable 4 6 8 10 12
- is good for a laugh 4 6 8 10 12

## CHARACTER FILE

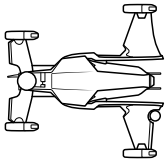
XP

For best results, **use pencil.**

# HAMMERHEADS

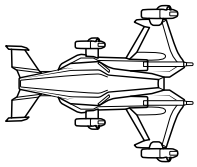
VEHICLE FILE

## ATTRIBUTES



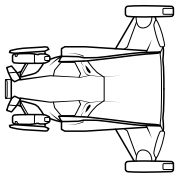
Systems 10
Engines 8
Frame 8

**HAMMERHEAD ONE**
More agile, possesses more precise sensors and instruments.



Systems 8
Engines 10
Frame 8

**HAMMERHEAD TWO**
Faster, more power and range.



Systems 8
Engines 8
Frame 10

**HAMMERHEAD THREE**
Bigger, tougher, and more rugged.

## DISTINCTIONS

- 8 Resource Support Vehicle
- 8 Top of the Line
- 8 Broad-Spectrum Sensors

**SFX**

**These three distinctions have:**
*Hinder:* Gain a PP when you switch out your distinction's rating of 8 for a 4.

## RESOURCE POOLS

**UNASSIGNED RESOURCES**
6 6 6 6 6 6 6

Tactical Support
6 6 6 6

Medical Supplies
6 6 6 6

IT/Network Support
6 6 6 6

Food/Shelter
6 6 6 6

Land/Sea/Air Support
6 6 6 6

**Instructions:** Write the name of the crisis pool in each quadrant, then write the number for its initial die rating above the appropriate dice icons. Place the dice for each crisis pool in the large blank area.

# CRISIS POOLS

Name | INITIAL RATING 6 8 10 12

Name | INITIAL RATING 6 8 10 12

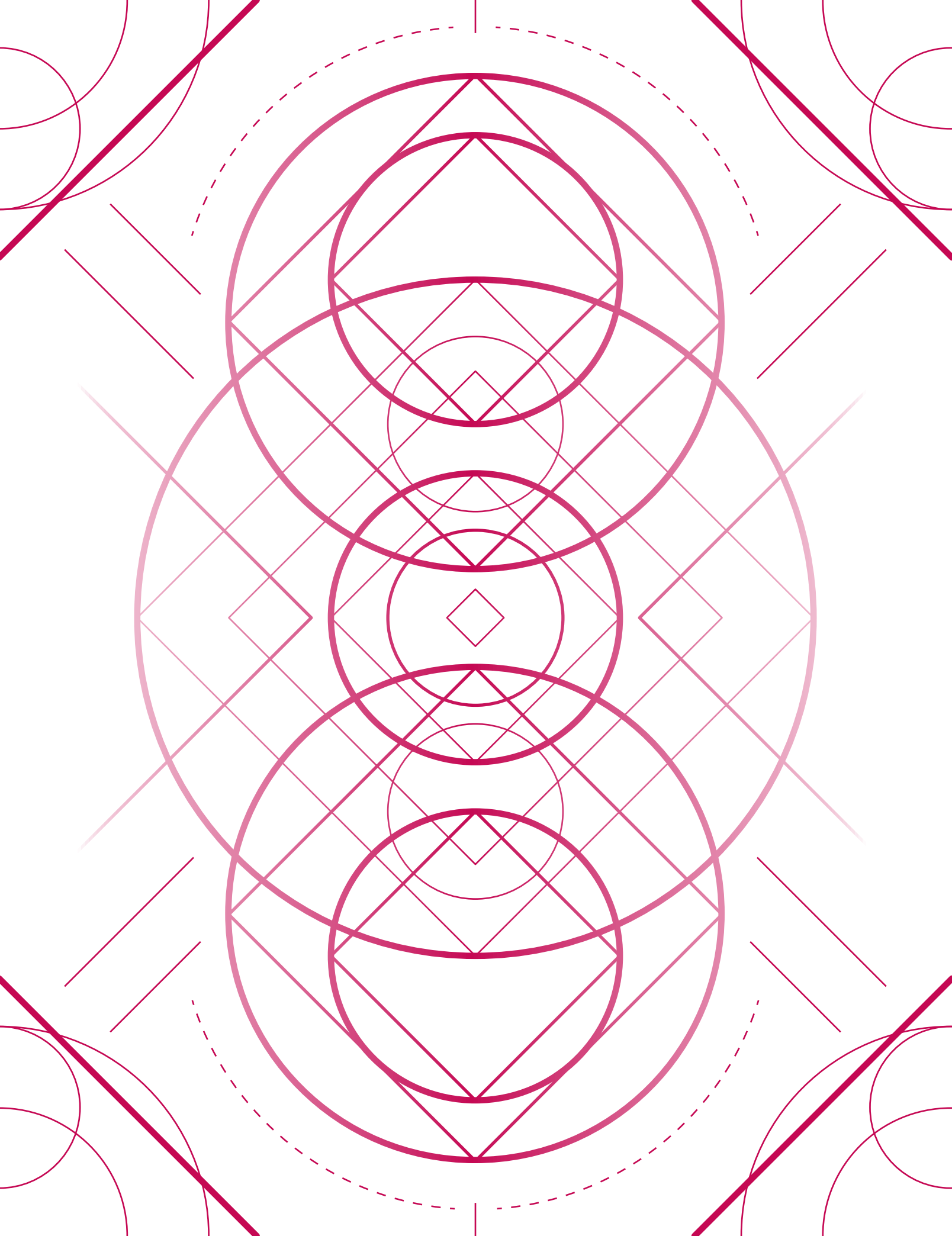
Name | INITIAL RATING 6 8 10 12

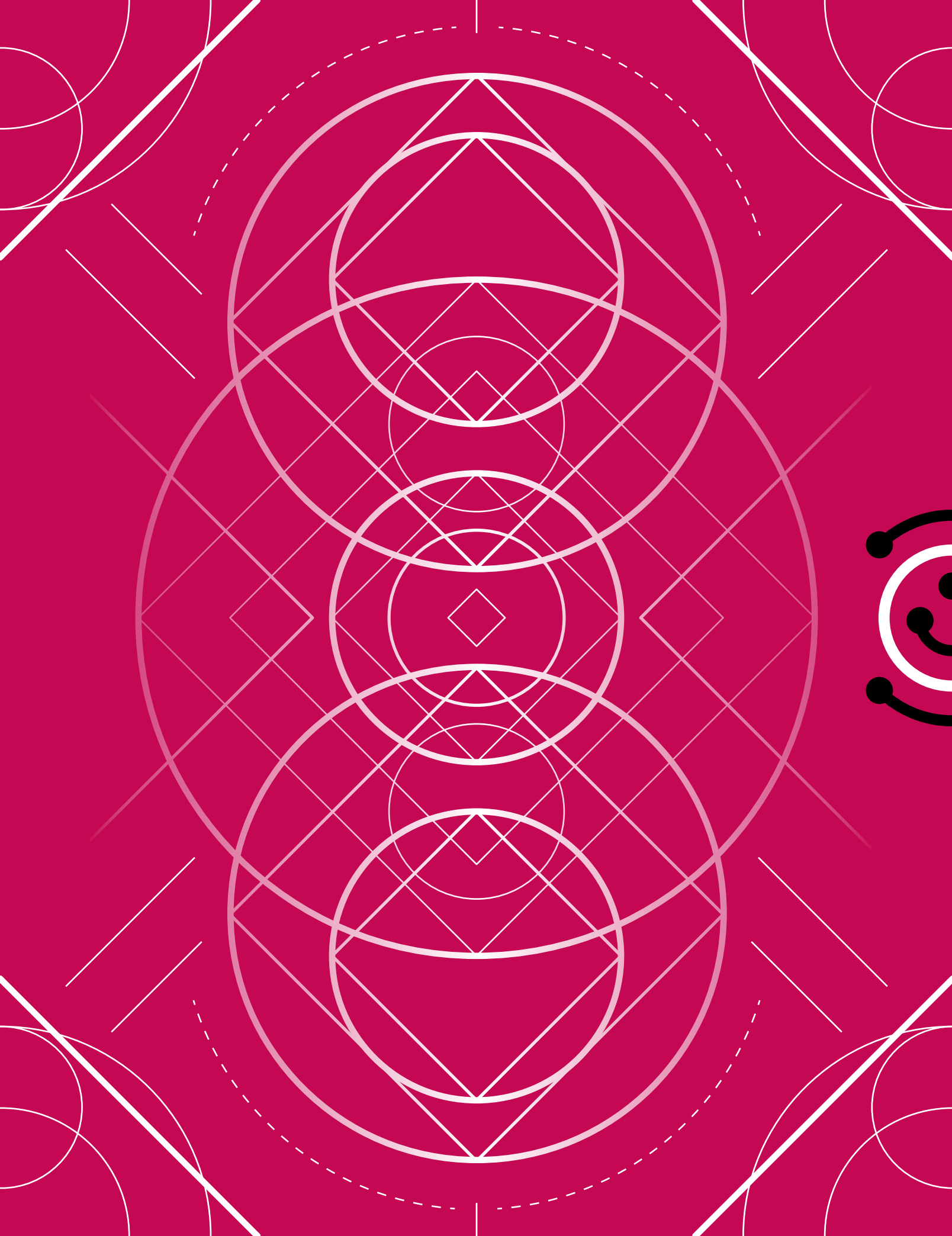
Name | INITIAL RATING 6 8 10 12

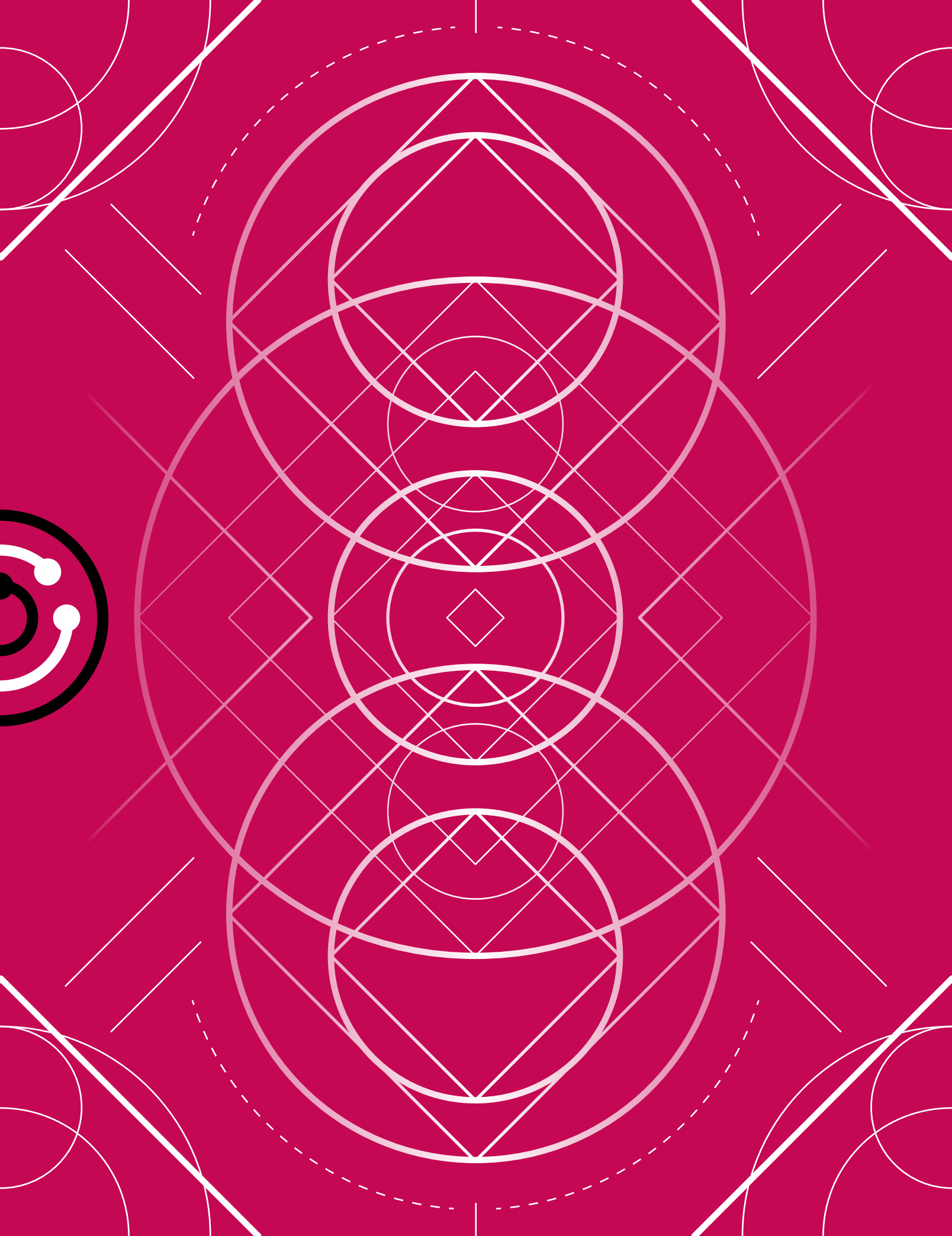
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COVER BY **MERILLIZA CHAN**

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