CONTENDERS

A ROLE-PLAYING GAME OF BLOOD & SWEAT, PAIN & HOPE.

By JJ Prince

Contenders

1,

2,

3,

4...

My vision returns at the count of five, I taste blood, my blood. The roar of the crowd is deafening, they want more. They always want more.

More blood, more pain.

I'm kneeling as the ref gets to seven, I can see in his eyes that he doesn't expect me to get up. Why would I?

Face more pain.

Now I see her, in the front row, tears black with mascara streaming down her face, I'm drawn to the eyes, deep pools, reflecting the pain.

My pain.

The moment seems to last an eternity. I needed that, that reminder of hope. This is for you babe!

Bring the pain.

I'm on my feet again at nine. The ref hesitates for a split second.
"Ok, box!"

Now feel the pain...

Contenders

Contents

Contenders

Contenders is a role-playing game dealing with the shady and painful world of boxing.

Each player takes on the role of a boxer, a would be CONTENDER. However, time is running out for these pugilists, it's now or never.

Setting

The game can be set in any country or era in which the sport of boxing is prominent and represents a means of escape from the gutter. Boxing tends to have quite a gritty urban feel, so it's useful if the setting reflects that. Some suggestions are: Las Vegas (any era), Brooklyn during the great depression, South London in the seventies; an Eastern block country during the Cold War.

A CONTENDER'S life is governed by four things:
- PAIN
- HOPE
- CASH
- REP

Pain

PAIN is central to the game and the themes explored.

PAIN represents far more than mere physical suffering. PAIN is a reflection of the despair and rage each contender feels. PAIN is integral to each CONTENDERS existence. PAIN helps one fight harder but ultimately leads to self-destruction.

Hope

HOPE is the light counter-balance to PAIN. HOPE keeps our CONTENDERS going, it's the HOPE of something better that helps them deal with the PAIN. In *Contenders*, HOPE springs from a CONTENDER'S CONNECTIONS and winning boxing matches.

Cash

It may be the root of all evil but we all need cash. In *Contenders*, CASH does not just represent money, CASH also represents time and energy. But in all honesty it's mostly about the green backs. CASH fluctuates a lot over the course of the game.

Contenders

REP

A boxer's reputation is all important. The better known you are the more CASH you can earn from boxing matches.

As well as the primary four stats, each CONTENDER is defined by his (or less frequently her) in-ring style.

Boxing style is described by four in-ring traits:
- TECHNIQUE
- COVER
- POWER
- CONDITIONING

TECHNIQUE

This refers to the CONTENDER'S technical ability to land blows and out-box their opponent. Accurate fighters, with good hand-speed and reach will have a high TECHNIQUE score.

COVER

This trait refers to a CONTENDER'S defensive abilities, how well they cover up and avoid taking damage. Boxers with good footwork tend to have high COVER scores.

POWER

Pretty self-explanatory, powerful pugilists hit hard and often win by means of knock-out (KO).

CONDITIONING

Physical conditioning is of paramount importance to boxers. CONDITIONING represents fitness, stamina, endurance, willpower and tenacity.

Contenders

Contender Creation

Once the setting has been decided upon then each player needs to create their CONTENDER.

Note there is no GM for *CONTENDERS*, each player runs a CONTENDER and plays NPCs as the need arises. Although if you're more comfortable with the traditional role-playing approach then there's no reason one player can't act as GM and play all the NPCs.

Steps to CONTENDER creation:
1. CONCEPT
2. CONNECTIONS
3. BEGINNING STATS
4. IN-RING STYLE

Concept

Who is your contender?
Where does he come from?
Why does he fight?
What kind of an individual is he?

When you have the answers to these questions write down your CONTENDERS name and some back-story. Don't worry if you can't come up with much at this point.

One proviso is that your CONTENDER must be relatively poor, as that's part of the game.

Connections

CONNECTIONS represent a positive influence in a CONTENDER'S life, someone or something that gives him HOPE. When a CONNECTION is conceptualised the player must determine what their CONTENDER'S eventual hope is for that CONNECTION and conversely what their ultimate fear is regarding the CONNECTION.

However, nothing in this life is free and a proviso for *CONTENDERS* is that each CONNECTION desperately needs CASH for some reason. Each CONTENDER begins with a single CONNECTION. Some examples of CONNECTIONS:

An ill family member, a priest, a fiancé in debt, a local orphan, a business venture, a hooker with a heart of gold; an elderly mentor.

E.g. Bob's decides that Jimmy's connection is his brother Jonathon. Jimmy's relationship with Jonathon gives him hope in the bonds of family. Jimmy's ultimate hope is that he and Jon can set up their own little bar in a nice area of town. However Jon is a heroin user and requires money to pay off his dealers and feed the monkey on his back. Jimmy's ultimate fear is that Jon will throw his life away for the junk.

BEGINNING STATS
Each player sets their CONTENDER'S starting PAIN, HOPE, CASH & REP. Players have 6 points to divide between the Stats.
Each Stat must be at least 1.

E.g. Bob's assigns his points as follows:
Pain 2
Hope 2
Cash 1
Rep 1

IN-RING STYLE
Each player now sets their CONTENDER'S starting TECHNIQUE, COVER, POWER & CONDITIONING.

Players have 10 points to divide amongst the four in-ring traits. Each must be at least 1. Traits will fluctuate during play but can never fall below 1 or above 9.

E.g. Bob's assigns Jimmy's scores as follows:
Technique 3
Cover 2
Power 2
Conditioning 3

NPC POOL
After all players have created their contender, each player is encouraged to design a non-player character (NPC) boxer to function as an opponent for the PCs.

When creating NPC boxers don't bother naming them or coming up with a back-story, just assign Stats and in-ring traits.

This will generate several opponent templates, which can then be used as the basis for NPC boxers as and when they are needed.

CONTENDERS

PLAYING THE GAME

Each player in turn gets to set a scene for their CONTENDER. This can be done in any order, but each player gets a scene before any player gets a second scene. How each scene turns out will affect a CONTENDER'S development.

The active player can narrate other CONTENDERS into their scenes if they wish.

If NPCs are present during the scene determine who will play them, if there is any disagreement then the player to the left of the active player makes the final decision.

SCENE TYPES

- Connection
- Thug Work
- Training
- Promotion
- Fight
- Miscellaneous

CONNECTION SCENES

These are important scenes as they provide a contender with HOPE. There are two types of CONNECTION scene: establishing a new CONNECTION or visiting an established CONNECTION.

Establishing a new CONNECTION is fairly straightforward, the player sets the scene and describes who/what the new CONNECTION is and their hopes and fears regarding the CONNECTION.

The player then role-plays a scene to show their CONTENDERS involvement with the CONNECTION.

Visiting an established CONNECTION is slightly different. In order to provide hope, the CONNECTION needs CASH. The player determines how much CASH they are spending on the CONNECTION this visit. Once again, the player sets the scene. The player then draws a number of cards equal to the amount of CASH they spent. Every red card counts as a success. The player to their left, representing the forces of adversity, draws a number of cards equal to the active player's PAIN, each red card counts as a success. If the CONTENDER has more successes, then there is a hopeful outcome. The contender gains a point of

HOPE and the rest of the scene should be role-played out to reflect this positive outcome.

If the CONTENDER does not gain more successes, but gains at least one or if no-one gains any successes then the scene has an ambivalent outcome. The contender gains a point of HOPE and a point of PAIN. The rest of the scene should be role-played out to reflect this.

If the CONTENDER gets no successes, and the forces of adversity get at least one then the scene has a bad outcome for the CONTENDER. They gain a point of PAIN and no HOPE. Again, the rest of the scene should be role-played out appropriately.

THUG WORK SCENES

These relate to the CONTENDER taking shady jobs for ready CASH. Typically this involves some sort of work as a heavy. The player sets the scene for thug work, narrating who gave them the job and what the job is. Thug work cannot involve another CONTENDER or one of their CONNECTIONS. The active player draws a number of cards equal to

his current PAIN, red cards are successes. The forces of adversity oppose this PAIN check by drawing a number of cards equal to the amount of CASH a CONTENDER is trying to earn from thug work. If the contender wins the check then the job goes well, they get the CASH. If the check is tied, then the scene has an ambivalent outcome, the job is done CASH is gained but a point of PAIN is also gained. If the contender loses the check then the job goes badly, no CASH is gained but PAIN increases by 1. The outcome should be role-played appropriately.

TRAINING SCENES

CONTENDERS have gotta put time in down the gym. Training scenes are pretty straightforward, the player sets the scene, spends CASH equal to the in-ring trait they want to improve and narrates a training montage (Eye of the Tiger is optional). The CONTENDER'S appropriate trait improves by 1. Anytime a CONTENDER trains pick an NPC template and add +1 to one of their in-ring traits.

CONTENDERS

PROMOTION SCENES

These scenes always precede a fight. Basically during a promotion scene a CONTENDER meets up with boxing promoters and gets themselves booked in a match. The opponent can either be another of the PC CONTENDERS (they must be in the promotion scene), or an NPC boxer. The fight purse split is also negotiated during a promotion scene. The purse will be half the number of rounds scheduled, with the majority going to the victor. As with other scenes, the active player gets to frame their contender's promotion scenes.

MISCELLANEOUS SCENES

Players are free to propose scenes not covered by the other categories. The only restriction on the player's control of a miscellaneous scene is that no scores may change.

FIGHT SCENES

Fight scenes are incredibly important, after all that's what the game is about.

CONTENDERS can gamble CASH on matches. All wagers must be announced clearly before the start of a match and to keep things simple the odds are always 1:1. For every 1 you gamble you'll get 2 back if you win.

CONTENDERS may also bet directly against one another if they wish.

Try and involve all players in each fight scene. If not boxing then they can play NPCs or have their CONTENDERS present in the crowd, clutching betting slips or perhaps giving a personal commentary on the match.

A CONTENDER always receives a CASH appearance fee for each match they box. This fee is equal to their REP (before the match).

After having a fight a contender gains +1 REP or +2 if they won.

CONTENDERS

BOXING MATCHES

Matches in CONTENDERS are broken down into rounds, like a standard boxing match.

At the beginning of each round both fighters choose their tactic then reveal their choices simultaneously.

There are four tactical options per round:

- Punchers' choice (*aggressive*)
  DOMINATE 1 - DAMAGE 5
- Work off the jab (*balanced*)
  DOMINATE 3 - DAMAGE 3
- Bob & weave (*defensive*)
  DOMINATE 5 - DAMAGE 1
- Street style (*illegal moves*)
  DOMINATE 4 - DAMAGE 4 DQ

After tactics are revealed a DOMINATION check is made to see who gets the better of the round.

Each boxer draws a number of cards equal to the DOMINATE score of their chosen tactic, plus their current TECHNIQUE score. Red cards count as successes. If one boxer scores more successes than the other then they dominate the round and do damage to their opponent.

If the DOMINATION check is tied then dominance is shared between the fighters, and both get to make a DAMAGE check.

A dominant fighter then makes a DAMAGE check by drawing a number of cards equal to their chosen tactic's DAMAGE rating plus their current POWER score. Their opponent can defend against DAMAGE by drawing a number of cards equal to their current COVER score. As always, reds are successes, each COVER success subtracts one from the damage successes. The number of damage successes determine the outcome of the round.

DAMAGE SUCCESSES

0 or less - the round is pretty even, 0 VP

1-2 - the fighter gains a marginal advantage, 1 VP.

3-4 - the fighter gains a significant advantage, perhaps even a knock-down, 2 VP.

5+ - the fighter overpowers his opponent, winning by KO or by the ref stopping the fight, a technical knock-out (TKO).

NARRATING THE ROUND

After damage has been calculated, then the round is narrated by whichever of the fighters' controllers drew the highest card at any point during the round. If the high card is tied then compare second highest, then third etc... to determine a narrator. The round is narrated to reflect tactics used and the outcome.

NEXT ROUND

Assuming both boxers are still standing, a new round begins.

A boxer may now impose a -1 trait penalty on an opponent for each VP (victory point) he has acquired through DAMAGE successes.

At the start of second and subsequent rounds each boxer subtracts 1 from their CONDITIONING. If CONDITIONING is already 0, then a boxer subtracts 1 from all his other in-ring traits.

DIRTY TACTICS

If a boxer is using street style, then the narrator may decide that the ref spots the dirty tactics and issues a warning to the offender, granting his opponent a VP. If a fighter receives 3 warnings during a match then they lose the match through disqualification (DQ).

GOING THE DISTANCE

If a match goes the distance (lasts all the scheduled rounds) then whoever has the most VPs at the end will be declared the victor. If VPs are tied then the match is declared a draw.

BRINGING THE PAIN

Once per match, a boxer can BRING THE PAIN upon his opponent. When doing so he gains a number of cards to his DOMINATION check equal to his current PAIN score. If he wins DOMINATION then he also gains a number of cards to his DAMAGE check equal to current PAIN minus 1. Pain begets pain. If a boxer KOs an opponent when BRINGING THE PAIN then he gains 1 PAIN despite winning the match.

CONTENDERS

BURNING HOPE

When things look really bleak for a CONTENDER, he can sacrifice part of himself to keep going.
A CONTENDER (not an NPC boxer) may permanently burn a point of HOPE at any time during a match to restore trait damage. The maximum amount of damage that can be repaired per HOPE spent is equal to the CONTENDER'S current HOPE. Burning HOPE in this way is a dramatic event and should be role-played appropriately.

MATCH OUTCOMES

CONTENDERS' attributes will change depending upon how the match turned out.

Winning a match +1 HOPE.

Losing a match +1 PAIN.

Each boxer also receives an amount of CASH equal to their share of the fight purse plus their REP. If the match was drawn then both fighters receive the losers purse. If the match ended in a DQ, then both fighters receive one less CASH than normal.

ENDING THE GAME

When a CONTENDER'S rep reaches 9 then Endgame is triggered. Each CONTENDER gets a final scene of their choice (it cannot be a fight scene though).

The next scene is automatically a promotion scene in which the big fight night is planned. All CONTENDERS pair off according to REP. If there is an odd number of players then the player with the lowest REP faces an NPC.

The big fights are played out as any other match, except that any HOPE gained from winning is doubled.

After the big fights have been concluded then the final act of the game is each player narrating their contender's epilogue.

EPILOGUES

As mentioned previously, the final act of play for each player is to narrate an epilogue for their CONTENDER.

There is one global constraint on epilogues: they may not deprotagonize another CONTENDER.

This means, an epilogue cannot be narrated in such a way that undermines the emotional and intellectual investment that other players may have in a given CONTENDER'S endeavours. A typical violation of this constraint would be a player trying to narrate the death of another CONTENDER or one of their CONNECTIONS.

A CONTENDER'S epilogue is also constrained based on their final values for HOPE and PAIN.

If HOPE is greater than PAIN then the CONTENDER ultimately triumphs over adversity! Their hopes regarding their CONNECTIONS come true and they escape to a better life.

If HOPE and PAIN are equal then the epilogue should retain an air of ambivalence and uncertainty. The CONTENDER'S eventual hopes for their CONNECTIONS are not yet realised. Nor are the CONTENDER'S ultimate fears. This epilogue can end optimistically or darkly, depending upon the narrator's preference.

If PAIN is greater than HOPE then the CONTENDER'S tale ends in tragedy as their world crashes down around them. The CONTENDER'S ultimate fears regarding their CONNECTIONS all come to pass. This is a dark and downbeat ending for the CONTENDER and the narrator is encouraged to make it as emotional as possible.

~ THE END ~

CONTENDERS

NAME

BACK STORY

IN-RING TRAITS

PAIN   TECHNIQUE

HOPE   COVER

CASH   POWER

REP   CONDITIONING

CONNECTION

ULTIMATE HOPE

ULTIMATE FEAR

CONNECTION

ULTIMATE HOPE

ULTIMATE FEAR

Contenders

Contenders owes a good deal to Paul Czege's *My Life with Master*
www.halfmeme.com
Thanks to Paul for coining the term deprotagonize. Great word!

And some ideas in *Contenders* can be traced back to my original
24hr rpg *Piledrivers and Powerbombs*
www.princeofdarknessgames.com/piledrivers_powerbombs.htm

Contenders was created for the Ronnies October 2005

More info here:
www.24hourrpg.com

www.indie-rpgs.com

www.1km1kt.net/24hourrpg

If you enjoyed this game please check out
www.princeofdarknessgames.com

For my other indie-rpgs

Any thoughts, questions or comments?
Please let me know.

shadowofpod@hotmail.com

Happy gaming!
- JoE

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