Fight Sphere

The Role-Playing Game of Futuristic Gladiatorial Combat

The Sphere is the size of a large city. Those who walk within its layers do so with the aid of a strong artificial gravity field. From its surface can be seen an eternal night sky above and below it a flat never ending desert. No one knows where the Sphere is. No one knows who built it. No one knows why it exists. No one knows how they got there.

Every inhabitant of the sphere was plucked from their former lives and woke up here. Some survive, some die. No one leaves. On the sphere there is no government and there are no rules. A select few are different. These few wake up with a weapon beside them and a digital display device embedded in their left hand. The device constantly cycles a sequence of names and faces. The sequence ends with a simple phrase, "Kill or Be Killed..." These few are called "Gladiators." No one is really sure what happens to the last one standing, maybe you'll find out.

Introduction

This is a game about playing Gladiators, people plucked from their former lives and forced to kill each other for an unknown prize. Unfortunately, it's not that simple. A lot more people than the Gladiators have been snatched from their former lives and forced to live on The Sphere. These people have formed their own gangs, tribes, governments and other communities and come with all the complications of everyday human life.

One of the design goals of Fight Sphere is to focus the game on the Gladiators' interactions with these communities. The more the character's engage with the situations and conflicts found among these people the greater their chances of surviving Gladiatorial Encounters.

The primary influences on this game are the films Series 7, Cube and Escape From New York. Episodic television series such as The Fugitive and The Hulk are also major influences. The mechanics borrow heavily from the games The Pool, Trollbabe, My Life With Master and The Farm.

Character Creation

At the start of the game each player makes up two (or more, for longer games) Gladiators. One Gladiator will be the player's own character. The other(s) will become NPCs. Regardless they are created the exact same way and it is recommended that the player make the characters first and then pick which one they prefer to play.

Note: There are some mechanical concepts referenced here that will not be explained until later. Your patience and cross-referencing skills are appreciated.

Who Was I?

The first thing to decide is who your character was before they were brought to The Sphere. Gladiators come from all walks of life. There's nothing more frightening that a school teacher with a machine gun. Players should write up a 50 to 100 word summary of the character's back story.

Whenever a detail from the character's back story is relevant to a conflict the player gains a single bonus die for that roll.

Death wish or Reason To Live

Next the player should choose either a Death wish or a Reason To Live. A Death wish is some element of the character that drives them towards death. A character may have had his whole family die in a car accident or been diagnosed with cancer before being brought to The Sphere. Conversely, a Reason to Live is something that propels the character towards life. The character may have just found out his wife was pregnant or he may be driven to find out who's behind The Sphere.

Gladiators opposing a character with a Death wish add a number of dice equal to the number of Relationships the Death wish character has to their Conflict Pool at the start of a Gladiatorial Encounter. However, all of the character's Relationships are rated one die higher than their actual value.

Characters with a Reason To Live add a number of dice equal to the number of Relationships they have to their Conflict Pool at the start of a Gladiatorial Encounter. However, all the character's Relationships are rated one die less than their actual value.

Once per game (the whole run of play), a character may trade a Death wish for a Reason to Live or vice versa. This switch should be rooted in in-game events. The switch can not happen during an Episode.

Weapon

Every character wakes up in The Sphere with a weapon nearby. The player should define what weapon the character found near them.

This has no mechanical effect whatsoever but a lot can be said about a character from the weapon chosen for them.

Conflict Pool

Each character starts out with a Conflict Pool value of 5.

Game Structure

The Sphere is constructed like an onion with many inner Layers that ultimately end up in The Core. Each character engages in one Episode (adventure, scenario, whatever) per Layer. There may be multiple simultaneous Episodes running on each Layer depending on whether the PCs choose to be in the same Episodes or not (see below). There must always be at least two Gladiators in an episode, even if one of them is an NPC.

Each player takes turns in a round-robin fashion. On his turn a player may frame their character into a Scene or have the GM frame their character into a Scene. Within the Scene their must be a Conflict. The Scene ends when the Conflict is resolved.

An Episode ends when there is only one Gladiator left standing. Note: PCs are guaranteed to reach The Core. If they are defeated on an earlier Layer they are "left for dead" or "fall through the ground into the darkness" or otherwise exit the Episode and recover in the next Episode on the next Layer. NPC Gladiators are always considered dead when they are defeated.

The game progresses through Episodes and Layers until all NPC Gladiators are dead. The next Episode is the last Episode and takes place at The Sphere's Core. This is just one single Episode and all the PCs must be present within it. Player character defeats are considered permanent at The Core and the game ends when there is only one player character left standing.

Episodes & Layers

At the start of each Layer (the first being the surface of the sphere) the players should decide if their characters are going to be in Episodes with each other or not. There must be at least two Gladiators in each Episode, so the GM should fill out any gaps with an NPC Gladiator. If there are no NPC Gladiators then the players need to collapse their episodes together until there are no more lone Gladiators. The GM is free to insert as many NPC Gladiators (from those available) as he likes but does not have to use all of them.

Example:

Alice, Bob, Cary, Danny, Elmer are all playing together. Alice and Cary decide their characters will share an Episode. Bob and Danny decide their characters will share an Episode. The GM picks an NPC Gladiator for Elmer's Episode and decides to make things interesting and throws an NPC Gladiator into Alice and Carry's Episode. Assuming this is the top of the game that leaves three unused NPC Gladiators who will not be appearing in any Episode on this Layer. The GM now needs to prep three Episodes that will be running concurrently on this Layer.

Later...

At the top of a much deeper Layer, Alice, Bob and Danny all decide to join an Episode together. Cary and Elmer each want an Episode to themselves but alas, there is only one NPC Gladiator left. Cary and Elmer can join together in their own Episode or one or both of them can join Alice, Bob and Danny in their Episode. The GM can assign the NPC Gladiator as he sees fit.

Scenes and Conflicts

Each player takes turns in a round-robin fashion. On their turn a player may frame his character into a Scene or have the GM frame his character into a Scene. Each scene should center around a Conflict. The Scene ends when the dice are rolled and the Conflict is resolved. Play then proceeds to the next player.

Conflict Resolution
      Each Layer has a Threshold Value. This Threshold Value is the number of six-sided dice the GM rolls in opposition to the player. The object is to roll more ones with your die pool than the opposing side rolls. The Threshold Value starts at five at the surface and increases by one each time the characters descend to a new Layer. Each player rolls a minimum of one die.

Modifiers

- *Background:* If the Conflict is relevant to the character's background before coming to The Sphere then a one die bonus is granted. "Relevant" can be anything from skill sets to emotional triggers.

- *Gambling:* The player may gamble (see Conflict Outcome) any number of dice from his Conflict Pool and add them to the roll.

- *Relationships:* By spending a die from the character's Conflict Pool the player may bring in an NPC they have formed a Relationship with. The player must narrate how the character is involved in the conflict (even as an enemy, if necessary). The player may then add a number of dice equal to the Relationship's value to his roll.

Conflict Outcome
      Regardless of Success or Failure the Scene should be role-played to a satisfactory conclusion based on the Conflict outcome. Narrated details should clearly express the consequences of the success or failure as this is good material for setting up subsequent scenes.

Success
      If the character succeeds the player may do ONE of the following:

- Add one die to the character's Conflict Pool.

- Create a Relationship with an NPC involved in the Scene. The Relationship starts at a value of two if the character has a Death wish, or zero if the character has a Reason To Live.

- Add one to an existing Relationship. The Relationship in question must have been present in the Scene but need not have been purchased as a modifier for the Conflict roll.

Failure
        If the character fails the player must do ALL of the following.

● Dice Gambled from the Conflict Pool are lost.

● All Relationships used as modifiers can not be used again for a number of Conflicts
   equal to the Relationship's value. These characters may appear in Scenes they just can
   not be used as modifiers. Also, while role-playing the end of the Scene something bad
   should happen to these NPCs as part of the consequences narrated.

        In addition, when a character fails the GM should narrate a short cut-scene
involving one of the surviving NPC Gladiators. This NPC need not be in the current
Episode or any Episode at all. When doing so the GM may do one of the following for
that NPC:

● Add one die to the NPC's Conflict Pool.

● Create a Relationship between the NPC Gladiator and a non-gladiator NPC involved
   in the Scene. The Relationship starts at a value of two if the NPC Gladiator has a
   Death wish, or zero if the NPC Gladiator has a Reason To Live.

● Add one to an existing Relationship. The Relationship in question should be part of
   the short cut-scene the GM narrates.

        Alternatively, instead of narrating a cut-scene, the GM may opt to resume a
Gladiatorial Encounter that was previously Disengaged between the failing character and
an NPC Gladiator.   This happens the next time the failing player has a turn and the NPC
Gladiator is considered to have the Initiative. The GM may NOT use this option to
initiate a Gladiatorial Encounter, only resume one that had been broken off by
Disengagement.

Relationships
        Relationships exist between Gladiators and Non-Gladiator NPCs. Gladiators can
not form relationships with each other. When a relationship is formed the GM continues
to play the NPC as normal but should make an effort to include that NPC in subsequent
Episodes that the Gladiator is involved in. However, when purchasing a Relationship to
be used as a modifier for a Conflict the player has full control over what the NPC's role is
in the scene, although the GM role-plays the details.

Shared Relationships
        It is legal for two or more Gladiators to have the same NPC as a Relationship.
The value of the Relationship is tracked separately for each Gladiator. However, during
Gladiatorial Encounters (see below) it only requires one Gladiator to purchase a
Relationship as a modifier for ALL the Gladiators to gain the modifiers from their
Relationships with the same NPC.

Gladiatorial Encounters

Eventually, two or more Gladiators will meet in a Scene. When this happens the Conflict must be between the Gladiators. The actual clash need not be physical but the fallout will always be devastating. Also, all Gladiators recognize each other on sight. Attempts to hide or disguise oneself simply fail (although attempts to do so might add some interesting color to the setup of a Gladiatorial Encounter).

Starting a Gladiatorial Encounter

To start a Gladiatorial Encounter a player must frame his character into a Scene with another Gladiator who is in the same Episode. Only players can do this. The GM can not frame Gladiatorial Encounters even for NPC Gladiators (see the conflict failure rules, for the one exception). For this reason players should know which NPC Gladiators (if any) are in the Episode with them at the start of the Episode.

Death wish and Reason to Live

The first time two Gladiators meet in an Episode the Death wish and Reason to Live Conflict Pool bonuses should be given out appropriately. The opponents of a Gladiator with a Death wish receive a Conflict Pool bonus equal to the number of Relationships the character with the Death wish has. A character with a Reason to Live receives a Conflict Pool bonus equal to the number of Relationships that character has for each Gladiator in the encounter they have not previously met in this Episode.

Initiative

The player who framed the Scene has the Initiative. What this means is they construct their Conflict Roll first. They declare how many dice (if any) they are gambling from their Conflict Pool and purchase any Relationship modifiers.

Then, in normal turn order, the other Gladiators construct their roll with one limitation. They can not gamble more dice from their Conflict Pool than the player with the Initiative did.

Resolution

The Threshold Value is irrelevant for Gladiatorial Encounters. The winner is the Gladiator who rolled more ones than his opponent. The difference between the winner's and loser's number of ones is the number of Victories. The loser must do all of the following:

In addition to his Gamble the loser loses a number of dice equal to the number of Victories from his Conflict Pool. If this brings the Conflict Pool to less than zero then the losing Gladiator is dead. For NPC Gladiators this truly means deaths. For player characters this means they are out of the current Episode unless this is The Core Episode in which case they are dead.

Also, the loser must subtract from the value of the Relationships purchased as modifiers a total number of points equal to the number of Victories. This may be distributed across the Relationships used anyway the player wishes. If this brings the Relationship Value to less than zero, then that NPC dies, goes irrevocably insane or otherwise permanently removed from the game. If this NPC was shared those Gladiators lose this Relationship as well.

Example:

Alice loses to Bob who won with three victories. Alice loses three additional dice from her Conflict Pool. Alice also used two relationships as modifiers on her roll one at three and one at two. She could apply all three points to the two point Relationship and lose it or she could lose two points from the three point Relationship and one point from the two point Relationship, or any other distribution of three points across the two used Relationships.

Multiple Gladiators

Conflicts in a Gladiatorial Encounter are not targeted. All Gladiators are presumed to be working against each other. When there are more than two Gladiators in a Gladiatorial Encounter simply compare every possible pair of Gladiators and apply the above Resolution method.

Disengaging from a Gladiatorial Encounter

When a Gladiatorial Conflict is resolved the Scene ends as normal. However, the Gladiatorial Encounter does not. Instead, the next time a player involved in a Gladiator Encounter has a turn he MUST frame a scene that continues that Gladiatorial Encounter although the time, location and any other details may be vastly different from the previous Scene. This, of course, means this player now has the Initiative for this Conflict.

However, a player may attempt to Disengage from a Gladiatorial Encounter by declaring that his Conflict is an attempt to Disengage. This happens after the player with the Initiative sets the gamble limit. If the roll succeeds (against EVERYONE if there are multiple Gladiators) then the character disengages from the Gladiatorial Encounter and play returns to normal for that player.

The Enemy of My Enemy is My Friend

It is possible for two Gladiators to declare a temporary truce. This option is ONLY available if the Gladiators are not the only two gladiators in the Episode. Also the truce ends the moment they become the only two Gladiators in the Episode.

Two Gladiators who have a truce can share Scenes without it being a Gladiatorial Encounter. However, the Conflict of the Scene can not be between them and they must each face their own separate Conflicts, even if one is a subset of the other. There is no way for two Gladiators to truly "team up" or "aid another" or "pool resources" or anything like that.

Also, two gladiators who have a truce do not need to compare their rolls in a Gladiatorial Encounter. However, truces are double edged swords. If a gladiator decides to betray a truce during a Gladiatorial Encounter (the player declares this after everyone is done constructing their conflict rolls) then that player gains a bonus to his Conflict Pool equal to the Threshold Value of the current Layer.

Death, Last Man Standing and the Judgment Pool

As mentioned, if a character dies in an Episode that is not The Core Episode they are simply knocked out of the Episode. They will recover in a new Episode on the next Layer. Their Conflict Pool will be equal to the Threshold Value of the new Layer.

On the other hand, the Episode also ends if the character is the Last Man Standing (the only Gladiator left in the Episode). That character proceeds to the next Episode and Layer with a Conflict Pool equal to its previous value plus the Threshold Value of the new Layer.

Players can not advance to a new Episode and Layer until ALL the players are done with their Episodes on that Layer. This means that characters can be out of the game for a while. However, this does not mean that the player is out of the game. Players whose characters can no longer participate in the game either through knock out, last man standing, or death in The Core receive a Judgment Pool of dice equal the Threshold Value of the current Layer plus the number of Relationships their character has.

Players with characters still active in Episodes can request that a player with a Judgment Pool frame a scene for them instead of the GM or themselves. Also, players with Judgment Pools may gamble dice from it in an attempt to sway any Conflict going on in the game. The consequences for this gamble are reversed from that of the normal Conflict Pool. The player only loses the dice from his Judgment Pool if the side he gambled on succeeds.

The Core

Once the last NPC Gladiator dies and everyone finishes out their current Episode the very next Episode is the final Episode and it takes place at The Sphere's Core. This Episode plays out exactly like the previous Episodes with a few exceptions. First of all, there are no NPC Gladiators present because they are all dead by this point. Second, all the player characters must be present in the single unified Episode. Finally, player character death is permanent. The Episode (and the game) ends when there is only one surviving player character left.

What is its Purpose?

So, we're down to the last player character, what happens? What do they win? What was the meaning of it all? Actually, I don't know. The player of the surviving character gets to decide. That player should narrate an epilogue that happens after the last Gladiatorial Encounter ends. This can be as short or as complex as that player likes. Whatever he decides, he should take a moment to consider the events of the game. A good epilogue is one that reflects on the contents of the game as whole.

GM Advice

The Sphere

To better visualize The Sphere think of an extremely high powered magnet that sucked together all the scrap and junk in the universe that was even remotely magnetic. Then dump a bunch of people on it who take all that scrap and start building tunnels and cities and colonies out of it. That's the Sphere. You can also think Escape From New York meets M. C. Escher.

Who Lives There?

  People wake up on The Sphere and not all of them are marked as Gladiators. These people must survive in what ways they can. These people and their problems make up the meat of the GM's prep work for each Episode. Here are some ideas:

Gangs

  Gangs are your basic group of thugs who have banded together for mutual protection and aggressive pillaging. All kinds of gangs exist on The Sphere.

Cults

  Similar to gangs but these people have banded together over a common faith or ideology.

Media Hounds

  A crude broadcasting system exists on The Sphere and some people are out to find the truth (or not) and disseminate it to the masses. And who knows, if you keep broadcasting maybe someone off The Sphere will pick it up.

Micro-Nations

  Slightly bigger than gangs and (usually) less aggressive some people have opted to setup a small form of local government controlled by the usual array of tyrants and bureaucrats.

Native Sphere Tech

  Occasionally, entities that appear to be native to The Sphere appear. They might be Robotic sweeper teams that wipe out a Micro-Nation for no apparent reason or floating devices that appear to be taking some kind of census. These robots, traps and other unintelligible devices appear to be under the control (or at least built) by whoever constructed The Sphere in the first place. They occur with much more frequency as you get closer to The Core.

Ask Only the Essential Questions

  The Sphere is not a place designed to make sense. If you want a biker gang in your Episode you might find yourself asking, "But where does the gas come from?" Don't. Just don't. From the above description of The Sphere one might very well ask, "Where does the food and water come from?" Don't ask. Don't tell.

  Alternatively, you could make these kinds of questions central to an Episode. A biker gang invading a micro-nation because they're running out of gasoline is a pretty good basis for an Episode. Ask only the questions that interest you.

The Core

  Since ultimately The Sphere's purpose is decided by the player of the surviving character it doesn't do much good for a GM to nail down in advance what's at the core or what the function of The Sphere Tech is. However, the GM might want to develop some vague notions and sprinkle pieces of those notions throughout the Episodes. Remember, that a good Epilogue is one that reflects on ALL of the game content including the GM's contributions.

The World They Came From
       It is worth noting that all of the inhabitants of The Sphere come from the same place. They are not gathered from around the universe or across dimensions or anything like that. The group should discuss what the world they came from was like. Was it already a futuristic place or was it more like our modern times?

Episodes

       The model here is early episodic television, like The Fugitive, or The Hulk, or even Star Trek. The idea is that there is an existing situation Out There that is rife with problematic human conflict. Then enters the main cast who quickly starts making judgment calls, taking sides and separating the wheat from the chaff. The GM's job is to create those outstanding independent situations for each Episode and then give the Gladiators the room to start getting involved.
       Something to keep in mind is that everyone who lives on The Sphere knows about the Gladiators and can recognize one on sight. People know that Gladiators bring death and destruction and some even view them them as a kind of "chosen one." More than likely people will try and want to get the Gladiator's involved in their problems and be that asking for special aid or trying to manipulate them to nefarious ends.

A Final Word On Engaging Situations
       The initial setup leaves each Gladiator alone and without any established ties. The only apparent concern is surviving and eliminating the other Gladiators. Initially, it may be a little difficult to see why we should care about the Gladiators as characters or indeed why the Gladiators should care about anything other than their immediate survival.
       The idea is to re-construct the Gladiator's personal value system from the ground up during play. Players should decide what their Gladiator values and apply those values to the Episodic situations provided by the GM. Consider Snake from the film Escape From New York. In the beginning he only cares about getting the poison out of his system by finding the president and getting out. However, as soon as he comes into contact with the locals he starts making judgments and taking sides. Although, he ultimately succeeds in his original goal, he manages to get everyone he cares about killed in the process. Maybe you can do better.