

# CRIMINAL ELEMENT



**A 24 HOUR RPG  
DESIGNED BY MICHAEL P OSULLIVAN**

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## A 24-HOUR RPG

Designed, written and illustrated by Michael P. O'Sullivan

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Inspired by Scott McCloud and the Forge crew.

*Food consumed:* a burrito with homemade sweet salsa and lots of iced tea.

*Music listened to:* Placebo's "Sleeping with Ghosts", the new Zach DeLaRocha track, Elliot Smith, Mudvayne, Poison the Well, At the Drive-In, 30 Seconds to Mars, Incubus.

*Slept for:* five hours

*Movies watched at work before starting design:* Heist and Killing Zoe

Created between 12.30 am 8 April 2003 and 12.30 am 9 April 2003.

Why the hell was I here anyway?

I felt the cool steel of the gun in my hand, the dead weight of it. It was starting to warm up from use and little twirls of smoke were finding their way out of the barrel of it. I took a look around the room and took everything in. A couple of security guards were tied up on the floor with thick silver duct tape, others left in a small heap on the floor, blood slowly seeping out of them and forming a scarlet pool for each of them to swim in. Gordie was working on the vault door, pressing a drill machine into the surface of it, little bits of hot metal flying up into the air. Lenny and Bastard Billy were standing by the doors, waiting expectantly for more guards to arrive.

I walked up to Two-Jack Tommy and patted him on the shoulder.

“What the hell are we doing here, Tommy?” I asked, wiping a little splatter of blood off of my face.

Tommy pointed at the vault and gave me a punch in the shoulder. “That’s why we’re here, man,” he said, a smile starting to spread its way across his normally placid face. “Once we crack that, we’re out of the game! Don’t you remember why you joined up with this gig?”

I mulled it over for a moment. I tried to remember why I would have joined up with these guys and try and heist three million dollars in diamonds from Sebastian Jones. I thought about my wife for a moment, I think it had something to do with her, but I couldn’t get it right in my head. Instead, the only thing that I could think of was getting caught by that insane Jones fucker and what he would do to us if we dropped the ball here. I’d heard that he keeps a vat of maggots in his basement.

I heard something then. It wasn’t too loud and, honestly, I don’t know how I heard it over Gordie’s drilling machine boring its way through the vault door, but I heard a floorboard creak. I grabbed a little trinket off of a night table and threw it at Gordie, hitting him in the shoulder with it. He turned around, ready to punch me, when I held my finger up to my lips and started taking a look around. Gordie shut off his drill and I switched off the safety on my gun.

A guard jumped out of one of the closet doors, a small black rifle gripped tightly in his hands. He starts firing off shots and before I can even think of it I’m jumping through the air, ducking behind a couch. The guard was screaming like a banshee and firing wildly, bullets punching holes in everything, dust and little bits of shrapnel flying up in the air. Then I heard his gun click.

I immediately shot up from behind the couch and lined up a shot on the guard. My finger lightly pulled the trigger back and suddenly half of the guard’s head was a smear of red mist hanging in the air.

“Is everyone okay?!” Tommy yelled out. I took a look around and saw Lenny laying on the ground, his gut laying open like a biology class experiment. No one answered Tommy’s question.

A moment later we heard the squeal of a bullhorn being turned on.

“Well boys, I’m home now.” It was the voice of Sebastian Jones, coming from the next room over. “Now you are truly fucked.”

What the hell was I even doing here anyway?

## **INTRODUCTION**

Criminal Element is a role-playing game set in that dark and seedy underbelly populated by gangsters, thugs and hoodlums, a genre that can be seen in popular films and novels as well as other pop entertainments. Here we explore what happens in the dark recesses and the hidden places within our societies. Players portray characters that fully believe that “who dares wins” and are willing to put everything on the line to prove it.

## **YOUR GEAR**

*What you need to play*

All that you will need to play Criminal Element is some paper and pencils, a standard deck of playing cards without jokers, a set of poker chips to represent Drama Points in play and an active and devious imagination.

## **WHO THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?!**

*The Roles of players in a game of Criminal Element*

There are two kinds of players in Criminal Element: Protagonists and Directors. In short, Protagonists portray the main characters and help envision a story that is in part controlled by the Director. Each group of players will have one Director, the other players being Protagonists.

### *The Director*

Criminal Element is a game for telling stories. As such, one player is selected to be the lead storyteller of the game. Other games use various different names for their lead story maker. Some call him the Referee, others the Game Master. Some even call him the Storyteller. Criminal Element refers to this player as the Director

The main purpose of the Director is to weave together different plot elements to create a functioning storyline for the Protagonists to play in. The Director also acts as the rules arbiter, being the final word on the outcome of conflicts.

Directors also control the remaining cast of characters that the Protagonists don't control; the Antagonists, the Supporting Cast and Lames. Antagonists are characters that both directly oppose the Protagonists and are also of some importance to the story. Supporting Cast Members, or SCMs, are characters that are important to the game but

don't necessarily oppose the Protagonists. Lames are characters that are not of any great importance to the game but instead populate the background, making things seem full and real. The Director is also responsible for describing the action of the game, making things quick-paced and entertaining.

### *The Protagonist*

Protagonists are the lead characters of the story as well as the characters portrayed by the players. The Protagonists are the characters that the storyline of the game centers on and the action revolves around. Being a Protagonist does not imply that the character is a kind hearted or good-natured person, the term simply states that the story being told is one that is lead by this character.

# I. PLAYING THE SYSTEM

## *The basics of playing Criminal Element*

As with most other Role-playing games, Criminal Element uses a system to arbitrate most conflicts and questions that may arise during gameplay, as well as add an element of suspense and randomness. Below the system is laid out in detail.

### *Defining Conflict*

Whenever a character encounters a task that he wishes to accomplish but there is some doubt as to whether or not he will be capable of succeeding he is in Conflict. Conflict Resolution is something that helps the player figure out whether he is capable of succeeding in said action or if he fails miserably in the attempt.

Criminal Element uses a conflict resolution mechanic that utilizes a standard deck of playing cards with jokers included. Basically, the system is a variation on the core rules of Blackjack. Every conflict boils down to a series of card draws between the characters involved. Cards are drawn and compared as described below.

The Director is always the person to decide whether a character is in Conflict and is the final word on the matter.

### *Traits, Knacks and Vices*

Characters in Criminal Element are defined by three basic game concepts: Traits, Knacks and Vices. While all characters will have Traits, only Protagonists and Antagonists will have Knacks and Vices.

Traits are simply qualities that a character has that may be of note. While basic one-word descriptors such as “Strong” or “Quick” can be Traits, others named with a bit more flair also can count, such as “Gift of Gab” or “Cool as a Motherfucker”. Traits are ranked on a scale of one through three, a one showing certain ability with the trait, a two showing a good skill with it and three displaying a mastery of the trait. Having a rank in a Trait will help a character succeed on actions that involve that Trait.

Knacks are not only something that a character is good at but is something that they define themselves by. Some people call their Knack their calling, their bag or perhaps their talent. It’s what they do best and is what they’re known for.

All Protagonists and Antagonists have one Knack, which is not ranked. Common Knacks are “Hitman”, “Driver” or “Leader of the Pack”.

Vices are certain things that a Protagonist or Antagonist has a soft spot for, something that is a hang-up that they can just never get over and will always trip them up. Protagonists and Antagonists always start a game with one Vice. Vices make it harder to succeed at actions that involve them. Examples of Vices include “Boozehound”, “Never allow a woman to be hurt” or “Adrenaline Junky”.

### *Conflict Resolution*

When a conflict is first declared each player draws two cards from their deck. In most situations the first card drawn is set down face up so the other players can see the value of the card, the other face down. If a character has a Knack that is related to the task at hand all cards played are kept face down. If a character has a Vice that is somehow related to the conflict all cards are kept face up. If a character has both a Knack and Vice that relate to the conflict, ignore both and act as if the character had neither.

Next, each player should look over their character’s Traits. Try and find one that is closely tied to the conflict. A player may draw as many extra cards, either face up or face down, as he has in the highest ranked trait that is related to the conflict at hand. These extra cards can only be used if the trait can be reasonably seen as helpful in the conflict. Only one Trait may be used by a character in any given draw. A player does not have to draw these cards if he doesn’t want to and can draw less than their Trait rating if they chose to do so.

It is likely that a character will not have a Trait related to the Conflict. If this is so the draw is calculated from the two original cards drawn.

Finally, each character should try and put together their best hand possible in an attempt to get as close a total from their cards to 21 without going over. All face up cards must be used to create this total but any face down cards that the player doesn’t want can be discarded. In conflicts where two or more characters oppose each other, players compare their hands and the person with the highest total that doesn’t exceed 21 succeeds.

After the end of each conflict, shuffle all cards back into the deck.

### *Margin of Success/Failure*

Sometimes it becomes necessary to know by how much a character succeeded or failed on a draw. In

order to figure this out, simply compare the draws of the two characters involved, or the character and difficulty draw in the case of a Static Challenge. The difference between the two draws is the Margin of Success, as applied to the person succeeding in the challenge, or the Margin of Failure for the character that failed the check.

A Margin of Success of one or two points shows a minor victory, just overcoming a conflict. A Margin of Success of three or four shows a true success, but nothing fancy. A margin of success of five or six represents an action that is spectacularly successful. Any Margins of Success over six show a truly fantastic level of accomplishment.

### *Tied Draws*

The winner of a tied draw is the one with the single highest card in their draw. Thus, while two players may have both drawn a 17, the one with a Jack in their hand will beat the one that only has a 9 as their highest card.

### *Static vs. Opposed*

There are two types of conflict: Static and Opposed. Static Conflicts are conflicts that have no direct opposition to the character involved and simply involve a certain amount of difficulty in the attempting of the task. Trying to pick a lock or hotwire a car are both Static conflicts.

Opposed conflicts are those in which two characters directly oppose each other with their actions. Examples of Opposed conflicts are: A person trying to hit another person or two characters trying to outdo each other in a push-up contest are both involved in.

Whenever involved in an Opposed conflict both characters will derive their drawing from their traits like normal and compare their draws, the higher of which that doesn't go over 21 succeeding. In static conflicts the Director draws a number of cards in comparison to how difficult the action being attempted is.

#### **Static Conflict Difficulty Chart**

<i>Difficulty</i>	<i>Draw</i>
Simple	1 up, 1 down
Average	1 up, 2 down
Difficult	1 up, 3 down
Arduous	1 up, 4 down
Intimidating	1 up, 5 down

### *Drama Points and Dramatic Shifts*

Protagonists also have one more thing that put them ahead of the pack: Drama Points. Drama Points, or DPs, can be used in a number of ways. Most frequently a player will use their DPs to advance their character, spending the DPs to buy new ranks in Traits or to purchase brand new Traits.

Drama Points can also be used to modify the direction of the game, allowing players to have a certain amount of narrative impact over the game. These uses of DPs are called Dramatic Shifts. The effect that the player is attempting to achieve will impact the number of DPs spent to create the outcome. DPs can be used to insert a back-up pistol for your character into the game, create a contact in the police force or to even save you from a rather unpleasant demise.

In order to activate a Dramatic Shift in game play a character must reserve a Collapse. A Collapse is when a character succumbs to his or her Vice and tumbles headlong into it. Players should keep track of the kinds of Drama Shifts that they have created in game as these correlate to the severity of the Collapse that the character will suffer from later.

Players may elect to undergo a Collapse at anytime they wish in order to eat up some of their accrued Collapses. Directors may also elect to force a Protagonist into a Collapse at any time. Collapses forced by the Director cannot be delayed through the use of Drama Points.

#### **Drama Shifts**

<i>Game Effect</i>	<i>DP Cost</i>
Minor (creating a minor item)	5 DP
Serious (creating an important contact)	10 DP
Major (uncovering a major secret)	20 DP

### *Gaining Drama Points*

Drama points are accrued by a player in two ways. Firstly, a player can earn drama points by simply role-playing their character well and making the game interesting for the other players involved. The director awards these drama points at the end of every session.

The other way to earn drama points is by betting them on the outcome of a Conflict that you are involved in. A player may bet as many drama points as he has face up cards in their hand. If the action is successful, you gain back as many drama points as you bet plus an additional half over. If the player bets

Drama Points on an action while suffering a Collapse the player earns back double their investment. If a character fails at an action that they have bet drama points on then those points are lost.

## 2. GET A LOAD OF THIS CHARACTER!

### *Creating characters in Criminal Element*

This chapter outlines the process of creating a character for play in Criminal Element. It is encouraged that all players make their characters as a group to insure that every character has a place on the team and to keep characters from being repetitive.

### *Concept*

The first step in creating a character for Criminal Element is to come up with a basic concept for you to work from. What kind of character do you want to portray? Do you like playing brainy guys? Maybe you enjoy the thought of playing a character that hits people with a rather well worn baseball bat instead. Perhaps you would like to play a young kid, new to the scene, or maybe an old guy, a natural player who isn't letting the years pull him down.

Think of a couple of defining ideas for your character and talk these ideas through with the rest of the players in your group. Refine them a little and take note of them on a piece of paper.

### *Motivation*

Everyone running a job has a reason to do it. Some people have mouths to feed, or, for that matter, a habit. Some think that this is the only thing that your feels he can do well, or perhaps it's the only thing that he feels good doing. Some people do it for the money while others do it for the ladies.

Motivations are role-playing tools, as well as hooks for the Director to use to get your character involved in a story. Design a Motivation for your character, thinking of the loose background and personality that you have some up with for him. Talk with the other players and Director about your character's Motivation and how it impacts your character. Once you have finalized the ideas behind your Motivation you can write it down.

### *Knack*

There is something that separates you from the rest of the lames that try and work the grift and your Knack is that one thing. Some people think of them as a natural talent, almost like a reflex, others see them as something that they have aspired their entire lives to become. Some characters are incredible Bare-Knuckle Boxers while others are Ruthless Mafioso's.

Discuss with the other players the possible

Knacks for your character. Decide upon your favorite one, trying to steer clear of Knacks that other players have decided on for their characters, and write it down.

### *Vice*

Just as there is one thing that your character is good at, there is also one thing that he is horrible at and that is fighting his Vice. Vices are personality flaws that can be almost crippling in the worst of situations and are the mark of those who have turned to a life in the dark recesses of the criminal world. Some characters are horrible womanizers; others have anger that can't be kept in check.

Define a Vice for your character. Make it one that both matches your character's personality and the background you have started to imagine for him as well as one that will be interesting to play out in the game.

### *Traits*

Now that a basic framework has emerged from the jumbled bits of notes that you started your character with we can now further define what he is capable of with Traits.

Traits are used to further define a character by showing what fields they are gifted in. This could include such tangible things as a strong or handsome person to characters that are good brawlers to those who are just really convincing speakers.

While traits can be simple, one-word descriptors, the way a trait is phrased can also help give a character a bit more personality. Perhaps a player envisions their character as a strong person. He could simply use the Trait "Strong", or he could get into more detail and say that his character has "Massive Muscles" or is "Fuck-Off Huge". All three create the same outcome but the latter two have more character to them.

Traits are ranked in a scale from one through three, the higher the rank, the better the character is with that Trait. A Trait ranked at one shows a character that is a novice in the Trait; while you may have more experience than the average Joe, there are those that are better than you. Traits ranked at two show a person who is experienced, a character who has been doing this kind of thing for a while and knows a thing or two about it. A character with a Trait ranked at three is a master of it; you're the beat in the game and everyone knows it.

Beginning characters start play with six traits,

three ranked at one, two ranked at two and one ranked at three.

Think for a moment about what your character is good at, what his past would have gotten him some experience in. Jot down six things that your character can be described as being good at and rank them.

### *Health and Wounds*

It is inevitable that, in the cutthroat world of Criminal Element a character will run into a couple of scrapes. There are three kinds of wounds that a character can receive: Light, Serious and Mortal.

All characters start play with three wounds per Wound Level. This means that a starting character can receive three Light, three Serious and three Mortal wounds before succumbing to the total damages and dying. A character gains a new wound level for each Trait that they have that relates to durability, endurance and pain tolerance. These new wound levels go up the scale from Light to Mortal. Thus, a character with two Traits that can help him from being wounded in combat would receive an extra Light and extra Serious wound.

### *Tying up the loose ends*

After going through the process of designing a character's Concept, Knack, Vice and Traits, you can start to fill in some of the blanks about the character himself. Start thinking about their past, where they may have come from. Perhaps you can figure out where your character got his training from, where he got started, what he's been up to recently. If there are any important people in your character's life such as a wife or child you should define them now.

All characters begin play with five Drama Points. You should also ask the Director for any equipment you may see your character having at the beginning of the game and write down what he gives you.

### *Telling Your Story*

The final step in creating a character for Criminal Element is to tell a quick story to the other players involving your character. This story should be told in character, using the personality traits that you have developed through character creation. This is a great opportunity to "try on" your character and experiment, seeing if you like what you have created.

It shouldn't take more than a couple of minutes

to tell it and can involve any point in the character's life. Perhaps you want to talk about the dime that he pulled in Folsom for the Manslaughter charge. Maybe you want to talk about the best friend that what shot back in your youth. You could even talk about why you got into this thing you do in the first place.

### 3. FIGHTING, OF THE DIRTY VARIETY

#### *Combat in Criminal Element*

There is a certain brutal beauty in combat. Fighting is savage and kinetic and can be entrancing.

#### *Telling Time*

Combat is always broken down into rounds. Each round is approximately ten seconds in length.

#### *Initiative*

Getting into a fight is a dangerous thing and a split second can be the difference between walking home and going home in a coffin. To determine the speed that a character reacts at during combat you have to determine Initiative.

At the beginning of a combat all characters make a draw tied to a Trait involving speed or remaining calm under pressure. All of these cards are played face up.

At the beginning of every round the Director will start counting down from the top ranking card in a standard deck of playing cards, from King down through Ace, ignoring suits. Every card called for is referred to as a segment and represents a point in time during the round when a character can act. Every character gets the chance to act once per round, acting on any segment that matches a card from his initiative pool.

When a character elects to act, he declares his intent and, at the end of the action, discards the card for that segment from his initiative draw back into his deck and draws a new card to replace it. All unused cards are kept in your initiative pool until used or the end of the combat.

#### *Attacking and Defending*

Attempting to hit someone is a rather simply resolved Conflict. All attacks are Opposed Conflicts, the attacker using a draw based upon any Traits that relate to the type of attack that he plans on using.

In opposition to this draw, defenders use a draw based upon a Trait that could be used in a way to defend the character. The person who succeeds in the conflict determines the outcome, whether it be the damaging of the opponent or the appropriate defense for an attack.

#### *Dealing Damage*

Whenever a character successfully attacks another

character he causes damage. Damage is calculated based upon the way in which you attack. To figure out how much damage has been done to a character the attacker draws a number of cards from their deck equal to the damage rating of their attack plus the Margin of Success from their attack draw. For every card drawn that has a red suit, (either Diamonds or Hearts) one point of damage is suffered by the character being attacked. This draw is normally referred to as “Drawing Blood”.

Whenever all of a character’s Wound Levels have been checked off they die.

<b>Attack Forms and Weapon Damages</b>	
<i>Attack or Weapon</i>	<i>Damage</i>
Punch/ Kick	1
Knife	2
Sword	3
Pistol	4
Shotgun	6

## 4. WORKING THE GAME

### *Directing Criminal Element*

Criminal Element is a game that seeks to emulate crime fiction of any medium, ranging from the bloody and stylized vision of Reservoir Dogs to the hard and unforgiving writing of James Ellroy.

As the Director, it is not only your job to settle disputes but to create an entire world, a world that the Protagonists interact with. Criminal Element employs a system that allows for a lot of leeway for all players, Protagonists and Directors both, to insure that a great story will not be hindered by a system that simply gets in the way.

### *Antagonists*

Antagonists are the characters that directly oppose the Protagonists in a game of Criminal Element. For lack of a better term, the Antagonists can be considered “Bad Guys”, though in a game like Criminal Element, good and bad are both relative terms.

Antagonists are created using the same rules as Protagonists. It is not necessary to tell the Protagonists a story involving the Antagonist, though it could be fun to tell one in the form of a rumor circulating about the Antagonist.

### *The Supporting Cast*

Supporting Cast Members are normally the average people that the Protagonists will interact with. The bartender at the local pub, the girlfriend and the little brother are all examples of Supporting Cast Members.

It's a good idea to normally have SCMs be of lesser capability than the Protagonists. Most SCMs will have two Rank One Traits and one Rank Two, though certain characters concepts may call for more. SCMs never have Knacks or Flaws.

### *Lames*

Lames are the dupes on the job, the basic background person that can screw a protagonist's line of sight when they're in a firefight or accidentally walk in on them breaking into a bank. Lames are often security guards and inept police officers.

Most Lames will have one or two rank one Traits and never have Knacks or Vices. Most Lames can be easily discerned from other characters by their lack of name. Once a Lame is named, they normally become SCMs.

### *Awarding and Using Drama Points*

As characters grow and learn from their experiences, so their Traits should change to reflect such growth. At the end of a given session of Criminal Element a Director should reward his Protagonists with Drama Points, which can be used to increase a character's Traits or saved up for use in game play.

#### **Rewarding DPs**

<i>Action deserving reward</i>	<i>DP Gain</i>
Playing in the game	1 DP
Making the experience fun for everyone	1 DP
Coming up with a brilliant idea	1 DP
Playing your character well	1 DP

#### **Spending DPs**

<i>New Rank of Trait</i>	<i>DP Cost</i>
Rank One	10 DP
Rank Two	30 DP
Rank Three	50 DP

### *Drama Points and the Director*

You may be asking yourself right now: why doesn't the Director get any Drama Points of his own to spend? Well, to borrow a gambling euphemism, the Director is the House. The Director doesn't need any Drama Points to effect change in his game. It is the job of the Director to create opposition for the Protagonists for without opposition the Protagonists would have nothing by which to define them. Players want a challenge for their characters. If every session they sat down to play Criminal Element and easily defeated every bad guy that came down the pike then the game would be no fun at all. If the Director wants an Antagonist to carry a back up weapon with him, then he simply does.

Yet, you shouldn't beat up and ruin every character that the players make simply because you have no need for DPs. Every player is there to enjoy the game, and as the Director it is your job to ensure that this happens. Honestly, it is hard to play a game without any players.

## **INSPIRATO!**

### *Watch these movies!*

Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels

Snatch

Killing Zoe

Reservoir Dogs

Pulp Fiction

Sexy Beast

Way of the Gun

The Usual Suspects

Heist

The Spanish Prisoner

L.A. Confidential

The Killer

Hard Boiled

### *Steal these books!*

*L.A. Confidential* by James Ellroy

*Get Shorty* by Elmore Leonard

*Blossom* by Andrew Vacchs

*100 Bullets* by Brian Azzarello and Eduardo Risso

### *Play these games!*

*Nobilis* by R. Sean Borgstrom

*Torchbearer* by Shreyas Sampat

*Unknown Armies* by John Tynes and Greg Stafford