

# *The Monitors*

an RPG by Sandy Antunes

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## **I. Brave New Backstory**

### *YOU SHALL NOT FIGHT.*

On the post-occupation Earth, peace reigns. Well, more accurately, war is gone. Humanity still bickers as usual, but any violence-- any-- is forbidden. The otherworld visitors ensured that.

They visited Earth just once, and only stayed 24 hours. In that time (while artillery splashed uselessly against them and nuclear weapons somehow failed to go off), they stated that Earth might one day be admitted to the Galactic Federation and, until that time, we would be Monitored.

They are gone, but their invisible Monitors remain. No one has yet figured out how they work, but the process is simple. Think whatever you want, but as soon as you move to potentially injure another person, \*pop\*. You and the target are suddenly unconscious for 30 seconds. Try again, same result.

Try to hit someone with a car, and \*pop\*, you wake with the car stopped and both of you laying still. 30 seconds is lost.

It is simply impossible to do violence against another. The invisible Monitors are unfallable. They stop accidents, they stop intentional acts. They can tell the difference between roleplay and real. They stop anyone from becoming a victim of violence, pure and simple. Assault, rape, murder, all disappear. Whether the target is awake or asleep, conscious or drugged, informed or not, they never fail in their judgement.

Oddly enough, this meant boxing still survives as a sport.

Faced with no more threat of violence, there's... not much change. There are still economic realities. Someone has to man the factories, someone has to own them. People still need laws for social order, even if cops are reduced to ticket-writing.

And people still crave power. This is your world, one where influence and reputation are the coin of the land. Sure, cash is nice, but with the leveling of the field by the Monitors, there are massive upheavals. Cops can't arrest people-- if they resist, both Cop and target go under. Theft is a problem, for if it doesn't involve violence, well, what stops it? Protests are safer with no fear of arrests or thugs. Change is easier.

But corporations whose products kill people, a lot of people start losing 30 seconds at a time. The Monitors take a big picture. If you approved a product and it kills someone, well, you get 30 seconds out of the loop. Each person in the decision chain gets it for each person that dies. Frankly, some tobacco executives aren't expected to be conscious ever again. And the remaining CEOs and middle managers, they're now looking at the human cost of products again.

This is a world where no means no, where you can't stop anyone from doing what they want. It's also a world where, on a whim, you can steal 30 seconds from someone. It's a world where money still exists, but decisions always come back to you. Yeah, the tricky could pay someone to steal 30 seconds from someone else, but it'll happen to them to.

In a world running under an twisted golden rule, how will you get to the top?

## **II. At A Glance**

It's an Earth where one cannot do violence due to the extra-worldly monitors. Therefore, all interaction is social, political, or economic.

Pick a home country. Define your role in society. Record your stats. Pick some Resources. Then go conquer the world.

Oh, and this is an RPG, aka a roleplaying game. The Players each create a player Character (PC), and then run that PC in the consensual hallucination called the Game World that is partially created and heavily refereed by the Game Master (GM). This GM creates and manages the antagonists, bit characters, and useful scenery of the world. People the GM 'creates' are called non-player characters, or NPCs.

So the players explain to the GM what their actions are, and the GM (using the rules, and pre-planned materials) determines the likely outcome and, having informed the player, that outcome is now what really happened. When one player decides to set her Character in opposition to another player's Character, the GM acts purely as a referee and, using the rules, adjudicates the character's actions in a more or less fair manner.

In short, the rules are there to keep everyone in agreement, while the ultimate goal is for each player to have fun, each Character to suffer great success and harrowing failures, and for the GM, to enjoy watching what the players create in her world.

We recommend each person get to say, in turn, what their Character does, and that get resolved before the next gets to speak. This makes play go as a turn-based RPG, thus ensuring each player gets a fair game.

### III. Mechanics

Character are defined by **Pull** and **Rep**(utation). They also possess **Skills** and have **Resources** they may use. With this, they do **Actions** against other characters, non-player characters (**NPCs**), or the world at large in order to gain more **Resources**, more **Pull**, more **Rep**, or to **Tilt** the general worldview to one favorable to themselves.

#### A) **PULL**:

**Pull** is how much influence you have to make things go your way. It is a measure of the way you can pull society to do your bidding. You use pull when you ask a senator to vote your way, or convince the cop you really didn't run that traffic light. It's a perfectly legitimate measure of your place in the social order.

In different parts of society, you may have different pull. A streetwise person may have pull with the local drug lord, but not the senator. The drug lord may have pull with the streetwise person and the senator. The senator may have a bit of pull everywhere. In this game, though, we consider **Pull** to be your measure just about everywhere.

**Pull** never goes below 0, but can cost **Rep** if it dips that low.

You spend **Pull** to do **Actions**-- convincing people to do things for you, gaining power, hassling competitors, and manipulating society as a whole. While you temporarily 'spend' your **Pull** doing this, it comes back in time. So you can only do so much at once, but given time, eventually you'd be able to **Pull** everyone your way, if you were unopposed.

#### B) **REPUTATION**:

**Rep** (reputation) is the measure of your standing in society. This standing tends to go up and down over time. While **Pull** is your ability to actually get things done, **Rep** is the measure of how society views you. Put simply, **Pull** tells you what you can try, **Rep** lets you know what you can get away with.

When you do stuff that fails, that cuts down your Rep. When you do stuff that works, it builds up your Rep. The higher your Rep, the more **Resources** you can reach. If your **Rep** is low, you won't have as much raw material to work with.

In order to be truly powerful, you need to have much **Pull** and **Rep**. Someone who has little **Pull** but high **Rep** is safe from opposition, while someone with high **Pull** and little **Rep** is always risking defeat.

**Rep** never goes less than 1, no matter how bad things get.

**C) SKILLS:**

Skills are the abilities you have to actually interact with the world. Typical starting skills include Orate, Slander in public, Libel in print, Debate, Campaign, Ad blitz, Preach to choir, Grassroots, Satirize, Investigate, Use Resource, Time sink, Bribery, Forgery, Theft, Spying, and others. These will all be defined broadly in Section XIII.

What is useful to know now, is that to affect the world you must apply your **Pull** to a **Skill** in order to do the **Action** you seek.

**D) RESOURCES:**

Some things in this world you can do yourself. For everything else, there's **Resources** to draw upon. Resources let you go beyond the level of an individual. If you want to debate someone, fine. If you also bring along your Fan club, though, you're going to have an edge in that encounter.

**Resources** are in different categories and range in strength from 1 to 5. In general, you get to add your choice of **Resource** to any **Action** to increase your chance of success. While accumulation of **Resources** isn't necessarily a goal itself, it is a very useful step on the path to personal success.

Resource categories include Followers, Media, Black Ops, Materials, Power-players, and Industry. GMs and players are encouraged to come up with new 'trees' at will.

**Followers.** Whether as simple admirers or an organized religion, many influential people have followers. These followers are helpful. They include Fans, Clubs, Organizations, Mobs, and the teeming Masses themselves

**Media.** Access to media lets you get your message out. Until you are heard, it's hard for anyone to be influenced by you. The media starts in the Neighborhood, then extends past the City and State to the Country then, finally, the World.

**Black Ops.** Even in this Age of the Monitor, it is useful to have people willing to do stupid or illegal things for you. It keeps you from having to dirty your hands directly. A Monitor can trace violence through anyone you directly hire or order, and force a 'time out' on you, but there are many other things covert followers can accomplish other than direct violence. Black Ops teams start with Thugs, go up to Cells and Units, then branch into a Corps and an Army. Remember, an Army need not fight, merely occupy the land. It can be very helpful having hordes of people able to mass anywhere you need for a specific goal, like finding that last rare CCG card.

**Materials.** Raw and processed materials, aka 'stuff', is handy to have. People like it, people buy it. Maybe at first you know a Local supplier, then have a Wholesaler in your pocket, then have access to City-level resources, State-level, or even the World.

**Power-players.** The masses love famous people, and famous people that work for you are a definite plus. It also takes the heat off when a famous person promotes your agenda, rather than you stepping out directly. Sure, that famous person may just be a local street Punk when you start out, but soon you have the Local Hero, the State Heavy, the National Star, or even the World Superstar parroting your agenda. Whether it be a best-selling pop star or the President, world-level talent is always handy to have in your pocket.

**Industry.** Access to the industry that drives the world's economy gives you power. Most poor economies have only Piecework, but soon a Factory produces a lot more, then an Industrial Zone turns into a powerhouse production area, then Regional control gives you a leg towards getting your world Cartel.

**Other.** We heartily encourage players and GMs to create other 'ladders' of power and influence, or nix ones they don't like. While **Resources** seem to be fairly abstract, they greatly help with interpretation of game results.

	<i>Level 1</i>	<i>Level 2</i>	<i>Level 3</i>	<i>Level 4</i>	<i>Level 5</i>
<b>Followers</b>	Fans	Clubs	Organization	Mob	Masses
<b>Media</b>	Neighborhood	City	State	Country	World
<b>Black Ops</b>	Thugs	Cell	Unit	Corps	Army
<b>Materials</b>	Supplier	Wholesaler	City	State	World
<b>Power-players</b>	Punk	Local Hero	State Heavy	National Star	World Super-star
<b>Industry</b>	Factory	Industrial	Regional	Monopoly	Cartel

### E) **ACTIONS:**

You get things done through Action. An Action is anything a Character tries to do. You can do Actions against other Characters, against the world, against NPCs, or to gain further resources. We are using a turn system where your **Pull** limits how many **Actions** you can do, after which it's the next Character's turn., So choose wisely which to do, when.

**Actions** against others is covered in Section VI, while **Actions** to gain **Resources** is covered in Section VII.

## F) **TILT**:

**Tilt** is a measure of how much the world as a whole is in agreement with your own basic principles. Initially, it's a fairly neutral world the characters face. As the characters become powerful, they may **Tilt** the worldview their way. We cover **Tilt** in section V.

## IV. Starting Out:

Okay, choose a character name. It's not important, it's just who that character is initially. Once you're powerful, you can give yourself a cooler nickname. No, really, only your enemies would bother to pick on you for your choice of name, right, Chancellor Ducky? Hmm... okay, pick a good name.

And, choose what your avocation is. Again, this will change through play, but think of how your character approaches the concept of succeeding in life. Is she an Academic, or an Underworld Spy? A Politician or a Demagogue? A Veterinarian or a Veteran? Give yourself a handle on your character by giving them an avocation, or an occupation, or some sort of role, by gum!

Now you get to start out with 2 **Pull**, 2 **Rep**, and your choice of two level-1 **Resources** and 2 **Skills**. That's it for stats!

You need to choose your underlying ideologies, and this is something that you have to work with the other players on. Remember, players are friendly, Characters may or may not be. In Section V, we discuss how to determine your basic underlying principles and how this affects the world's **Tilt**.

Once the game starts, for each turn, you first regain lost **Pull** equal to your **Rep** (if you were down, having spent or lost **Pull** earlier). For example, at 3 **Rep**, you regain 3 **Pull** each turn. You can then do any sort of defense, aggression, shift, or resource manipulation, all of which we grossly lump as **Actions**. Since it costs **Pull** to do anything, your **Pull** limits how much you can try before the next player gets a chance.

You may or may not gain **Resources**, **Rep**, or **Pull** in a turn. You may or may not gain or lose **Resources**, **Rep** and **Pull** in other people's turns, too. The world may or may not **Tilt** in your favor. And ultimately, you may or may not accomplish the given adventure or scenario's short-term goal (see the sample adventures for more on this.)

After each player goes, the GM can step in (before the next player starts) and do any **Actions** with their NPCs or world that is necessary, appropriate, or desired.

The goal is to do good, become dominant and control the world. Of course.

### V. TILT:

Each game session will typically start with a scenario lead. For example, perhaps you and the other characters have to stop a local crime wave. That's your short-term goal.

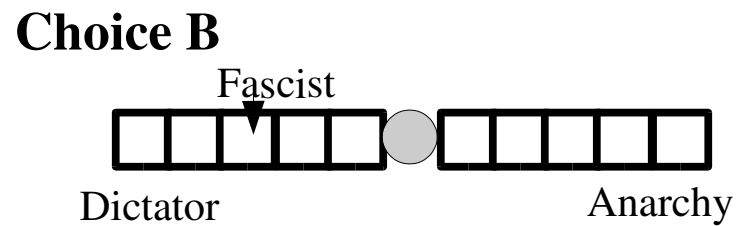
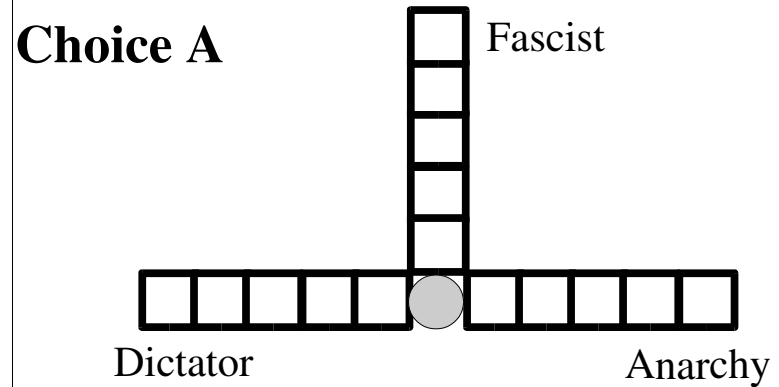
As a big-picture sort of goal, though, you constantly should attempt to make the world more like your views. This assumes you have views, so let's make some.

For each set given below, decide if you have a stance, then come up with the values you represent.

Then all the players get together for each set and make a radial scale, 5 units long. Think of the center as the neutral balance, and each of you are spokes leading out towards your own ideological high ground. Five players, for example, means different views and thus five different spokes.

But since you are each defining these for yourself, rather than relying on a textbook, anyone can agree to 'share' a line with someone else, partially or fully. Or you can simply change your views and form an initial cooperative stance on some or all axes.

For example, say there are 3 players and they each want a governmental form-- one favors facism, another wants dictator, the third wants anarchy. They could do it like Choice A, where each has their own 'axis'. Or, the Fascist could think, hey, I'm close to being a dictator, why not partially ally-- hence Choice B.



Why would they do this? Well, now the fascist and the dictator are mostly working together against the anarchist. On the other hand, if things slide too far to the left branch, the fascist and the anarchist might start working together. It's a tricky scale. Here's how it works.

You'll make one of these nifty radial/axes charts for each value in play in the game.

Initially, put a coin or marker at the center circle. As the game progresses, you'll shift things towards your side, which gives you some advantages. This is **Tilt**, and it's purely a GM call. Whenever any Character succeeds in some scheme, plan, or even a straightforward but potent **Action**, the GM can decide to **Tilt** the world towards them along one of their axes.

Every time things **Tilt** past the center (in your half) towards you, you gain 1 **Pull**. Each time you lose a **Tilt** in your half, you lose 1 **Pull**. Note in the 2-axis 'Choice B' model above, the anarchist loses **Pull** for each left movement, but the fascist loses **Pull** if it goes right of center \_or\_ left of its arrow, while the dictator only loses **Pull** if it goes right of center.

Under this system, you don't gain or lose **Pull** if the system is Tilted against you, only when you're the 'power side', when the marker is past the center and towards you.

In general, the GM can moderate successes and, more importantly, failures according to how much **Tilt** is in your favor. And, in the end, **Tilt** determines who 'wins', as it measures who has effected the world the most.

Here are some sample values and possible axes values. As usual, players and GMs are encouraged to choose and create their own. Everyone need not take a stand on everything.

The GM should also control how rapidly axes shift. Shift for every player action, and you have a fast-paced high-power game. Shift only for major incidents, and you get a more leisurely romp as characters slowly gain experience and seasoning.

- \*Governmental form (democratic, dictator, libertarian)
- \*Nationalist stance (protectorate, isolationist, free borders)
- \*Economic system (capitalist, socialist, myob-ist)
- \*Social agenda (control morals, stand-off)
- \*Resource allocation (maximum profit, functionalist, welfare state)
- \*Civil liberties (police state, anarchy, high privacy)
- \*Environmental stance (save forests, pave the earth)
- \*Pure research stance (pro-space, industry-only, luddite)
- \*Gender relations (equality, patriarchal, matriarchal)



## VI. **ACTIONS** Against Others (the main mechanic!)

“Actions against others” covers the broad class of 'things Characters do', and is the primary interaction mechanic.

To do something, first, state what you are trying to do. Some sample actions might be:

- \* Argue out of a speeding ticket.
- \* Be allowed into the FBI investigation.
- \* Convince a local hood to leave another Character's service.
- \* Persuade a candidate not to run for office.
- \* Build a new stadium.
- \* Acquire nuclear weapons material.
- \* Reduce someone to poverty.
- \* Marry a rock star.

You first spend 1 **Pull** just to try this, sight unseen. Ante up!

The GM has to then assign a Difficulty level to it, ranging from 1 (easy) to 10 (impossible). The easiest way to visualize the scale is as a logarithmic progression using actuarial statistics within the given domain of interest taking into account the current CIA factbook entry for the domain of

interest that... oh heck, just let the GM guesstimate it.

*1: Easy, 2 : Likely, 3-5: Moderate, 6-7: Pretty Hard, 8: Darn Tricky, 9: Are you really that good?, 10: Yeah, right.*

Having chosen a worthwhile goal and knowing your target difficulty, you have to see if you can do it.

State which relevant **Skill** you will use. GM and other players can weigh in on the appropriateness. Choose 1 **Resource** to add to it, if you want. It has to be a **Resource** that you haven't already used that turn (no double-duty here). You can only do 1 **Action** per turn without a **Resource**-- that particular **Action** represents you personally handling the matter.

Now roll a d6 and add in the **Resource**, if any, and as much additional **Pull** as you want to spend-- remember you spent 1 **Pull** just to try this, so you get to include that 1 in your total. You have to get a total equal to or greater than the Difficulty:

**1 'Ante' Pull + d6 roll + Resource + extra Pull >= Difficulty**

Now, by the time you get to this equation, it's pretty clear that, knowing the die roll, you know whether to spend the extra Pull to succeed or not. If you do pay, and you succeed, the GM gets to adjudicate the result.

## CONTESTED ACTIONS (against PCs)

But wait, if you are acting against another player's Character, well, they have a choice. They can spend their own **Pull** to shrug off your **Action** by raising its Difficulty. This can be done like bidding-- they spend enough **Pull** to make your Action fail, you add more **Pull** to make it succeed, and so on until one side calls it quits.

**Ante+d6+Resource+Pull + more Pull >= Difficulty + spent Pull**

Now, if your **Action** fails, for any reason, you lose 1 additional **Pull**. If this puts your **Pull** below 0, you lose 1 point of **Rep** too (and **Rep** does not regenerate each round.)

## VII. Gaining RESOURCES:

We've said that having **Resources** is handy, so now let's talk about how to get more **Resources**. It's an **Action** that costs 1 **Pull** to try. So you can do it as many times as you have **Pull** to burn. Each time you try to increase a **Resource**, there's a coin flip involved to see if it worked.

You use a **Resource** to try to get another, different **Resource** track started (at level 1), i.e. using your existing Media to start a Black Ops track. Or, you can try to promote/support an

existing **Resource** to increase its value/level, i.e. raising a Media-3 to Media-4, or using a Media-3 to add a Media-4.

To try to promote a **Resource**, it costs 2 **Pull** per level. So, if you're in looking at your Black Ops resources and want to raise Thugs-1 to Cell-2, the cost is 4 (2 times the cost for the new level 2 resource you want). You would now have both a Thugs-1 and a Cell-2. Then, to try to move from Cell-2 to Unit-3 is a cost of 6 **Pull**, and if it works, you have all three **Resources** in that Black Ops track.

You can only try to increase 1 level with any one **Action**, but of course you can do as many **Actions** in your turn as you have **Pull** to support them. And any given **Resource** can only be used for one **Action** each turn. *New Resources cannot be used the same turn they are created.*

You can also use an existing **Resource** to try to start a new, different track of **Resources**. This starts at level 1 only. This cost is 6 **Pull**, minus the level of **Resource** you are using. So, using a Punk-1 (Black Ops) to get started in Industry with a Factory-1 costs 5 **Pull** to try. Using a State\_power-3 to get Factory-1 costs only 6-3, or just 3 **Pull** to try.

When you try to promote or start a new **Resource**, after you pay the cost in **Pull**, you flip a coin. If it's heads, the attempt works. If it fails, not only did it not work, not only do you not

get the new **Resource**, but you lose 1 **Rep** unless you spend a sum of **Pull** equal to the level of what you using to snag.

For example, if you fail your try using Punk-1 to get Thugs-1, you'll lose 1 **Rep** unless you spend 1 **Pull**. If you fail using State\_power-3 to get Thugs-1, you'll lose 1 **Rep** unless you spend 3 **Pull**. So using higher powers to get new stuff can be cheaper, but riskier.

Your resources can, of course, be attacked and lost through other people's **Actions** or by GM fiat.

## VIII. Gaining **Rep**

At the end of the day, where do you stand? After each adventure is over, the players get to decide who gained the most Reputation, through an in-game vote.

First, each Character gains 1 **Reputation**, just for being there.

Second, each player secretly writes down the name of a Character that their own Character thought did best-- the Character most deserving of an extra point of **Rep**. They can vote for themselves, of course. Make sure to your vote. If your character wishes, they can vote anonymously by neglecting their name.

All the votes are collected by the GM. If there is 1 Character who has the most votes, that Character gets 1 extra point of **Rep**-- and every Character who voted for him or her and signed their vote also gets an extra point of **Rep** (for chosing the 'winning side'). If there are 2 Characters tied for most votes, it's the GM's call whether to allow **Rep** increases for both (and their voters) or not.

Note that Rep can increase for terrible deeds as well as good. It's as useful to be infamous as famous, as long as the other Characters agree.

## IX. **SKILLS** List

Skills are just tools for carrying out appropriate actions. While one could, in theory, force any **Skill** to do any **Action**, the GM and other players are encouraged to enforce 'reasonableness'. Also, they can invent any skill they like.

Skills for motivating individuals include things like oration, bribery, and using resources. Skills for removing the influence of individuals include oration, slander, libel, debate, ad blitz, satirizing, bribery, and forgery.

Skills for getting access to things include investigation, theft, and spying. Skills for acquiring stuff include theft, using grassroots activism, and using resources.

Skills for manipulating crowds or public opinion include debate, advertising, grassroots campaigns, and preaching to your followers.

Skills for being really mean to others include slander, libel, theft, satire, and time sinking. Time sinking is a unique Monitor-era technique.

The curious practice of time sinking relies on the subtlety of responsibility. If you order someone to attack someone else, you'll get popped for 30 seconds of unconsciousness just like the perp and victim. But if you have folks who like you, and you mention that you strongly dislike a person, and they start getting harrassed and popped a lot, well, they're going to lose a lot of time unconscious (as will your followers) but you're safely out of the loop. But it takes a bit of skill to bypass the Monitors with this, since they are nearly omniscient.

To gain a new *Skill*, at the end of each scenario, a player need just ask the other players if their Character can gain the new *Skill*. If a quick open vote (show of hands) yields a majority saying 'Yes', they get it. Note this creates a social game, of 'say yes to me, and I might say yes to you.'

## **X: Post-script:**

Discussion of this game appears in RPG.net Soapbox, Oct '04.

## **XI. Adventure Seeds**

Now, what to do? Here are some adventure seeds!

*Starting Out:* You're all councillors for a small town that is having a crime wave. The 'opponent' is an intangible 'lawless society' (*Pull* 6, *Rep* 4, *Resources* = (6) Black Ops/Thugs-1, *Skill* = Theft) Try to shut it down while leaving yourself in charge. Whomever has the highest *Rep* at the end is elected Mayor.

*Moving On Up:* Figure out whether Dolphins are intelligent and, if so, enlist their help to control all of the ocean's resources, allowing you to take over the U.N. And dominate world affairs. Or at least learn to speak Dolphinese. Beware the tuna fisherfolk, anti-ecologists, and Kyoto treaty non-signers. (Dolphin: *Pull* 1, *Rep* 3, *Resources* = (1) Other Dolphin-1, *Skill* = Ocean mastery. Fishing lobby: *Pull* 10, *Rep* 3, *Resources* = (2) Power-Players/Politicians-3, (1) Materials/State-3, (1) Industry/Regional-3, (1) Black Ops/Thugs-1. Anti-Eco: *Pull* 5, *Rep* 2, *Resources* = (1) Media/State-3, (1) Followers/Mob-4. GM create other force as necessary.)

*The Ultimate Mystery:* Figure out the secret of the Monitors, and remove their influence on Earth. Opponent = *Pull* 100, *Rep* 100, *Resources* = (100) Followers/Monitors-5, *Skill* = Monitoring. Consider this a free-for-all, or ask for an official "The Monitors" supplement!