

The Impulse RPG

A rulebook for roleplaying games

by Peter Johansen

The great path has no gates;

thousands of roads enter it.

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"When two people dream the same dream, it ceases to be an illusion."

-- Philip K. Dick

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"Knowledge, logic, reason, and common sense serve better than a dozen rule books."

-- E. Gary Gygax

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Foreward: Story and Dice

Welcome! If you're looking for a quick synopsis of the game system, you can find it on the last page of this book.

The idea for the Impulse RPG came from a conversation between a few friends online. We shared a mutual interest in a fantasy world, and we wanted to have our own adventures in it. My friends were relatively inexperienced, so I was tasked with creating a system that we could easily play over the Internet together. It needed quick resolution that could fade into the background as much as possible, yet be simple enough for my friends to understand.

As I researched other generic roleplaying systems, I found that a common complaint was that they could not effectively emulate certain genres. While the basic resolution was sufficient for common tasks, it lacked sub-systems needed to give the game style and flavor. I began to brainstorm how a simple mechanic could be manipulated to create these types of systems. Starting with this simple core system, I discovered that it was possible to bend, mold, and even break the rules to make them do almost anything I wanted them to do.

My goal for the Impulse RPG is to offer a simple resolution system that can be tailored to fit the preferences of your group's playstyle and the genre of your game world. Customize the rules to make the game your own, but let yourself enjoy playing with your friends in a world that inspires you.

Chapter 1 - Characters

Knowing others is wisdom.

Knowing yourself is enlightenment.

Characters in the Impulse RPG are defined by a handful of Traits that represent their abilities, be they fantastic or mundane. Each is rated on a scale of one to ten to represent each Trait's proficiency. The following steps will take you from your vision to a completed character sheet.

1.1. Building a Party

The first time your group gets together, talk over the basic premise of your game. What world will it be set in? What are the themes that you want to explore? Who will the protagonists be, and why? Are you modifying the basic rules in any way? The gamemaster may already have answers for these questions, but the other players should contribute as well, especially if they have ideas or preferences that the gamemaster can run with. Take the time to let everyone make some contribution to the world, and decide on your group's ground rules.

If you're having trouble thinking up good plot ideas to work with, start with social issues or themes that you find interesting. From these, you can build a skeleton of a plot, and flesh it out by tying in connections to the characters. Here are a few examples of social problems that can be used as sources of conflict:

- Free will vs. Predestination
- Manifest Destiny
- Tradition vs. Progress
- Justice vs. Retribution
- Revolutions and political upheaval
- Utopia vs. Compromise

- The role of religion in politics
- Corporate oligarchy
- Forbidden knowledge
- Absolute power corrupts absolutely
- The decline of a monarchy
- Middle class vs. Hereditary nobles

After everyone has agreed on the basic setting and premise, you can brainstorm characters together. Once you know what the game is going to be about, coming up with roles to fill should be fairly simple. Try to include a good mixture of skills and personalities so that the team is not deficient in an important area, and that everyone will have a chance to shine. It is highly recommended that the team have a unifying goal or purpose that motivates them to stay together and remain friendly with each other to reduce friction and keep the group together and on track. Characters who are habitual loners or antisocial can be difficult to integrate into a group. Your characters do not have to necessarily always get along, or even trust one another, but you should be willing to cooperate with one another, or your game may be fractured. There is a line between being fully immersed in your character and being a jerk.

Example: The group has decided to play a space opera game involving a seedy underworld of pirates and mercenary space pilots. We'll guide you through the steps of character creation with Adam MacDougal, our sample character.

Adam's player is interested in a rough, mercenary brawler with a history of ties to a criminal syndicate. Another player volunteers to create a thief character that knew Adam during his time in the syndicate, and suggests that they could work together to make some money for a new spaceship and crew of their own. Using these ideas as a springboard, the gamemaster can come up with some background plot hooks to bring the group together and give them an initial direction. He begins planning suitable background material, and gives the players his initial pitch of a smuggling run against an oppressive and corrupt interplanetary government.

1.2. Creating a Character

The first thing to define is the basic concept of your character. What kind of role do you want to play in the game? What will your character's personality be like? Think about where your character has come from, and why he is where he is today. Start with a strong concept that appeals to you, and then build a backstory around it. This is also a good place to come up with plot hooks, motivations, and goals for the character. You will use this vision as a basis to define your character's Traits in the next step.

Example: Adam was an unexpected child when his parents were already well into middle age. His overachieving brother received the majority of the parent's attention and resources, while Adam was viewed as more of a troublemaker. He left home as a teenager and ran away to join a mercenary company called the Space Demons. The friendly mercenaries took Adam in, and made him part of the team. The crew taught Adam how to fight, shoot a blaster, and fly a spaceship.

Unfortunately, the team didn't last long before falling into debt to a criminal syndicate. Adam was taken as a prisoner by the syndicate's collectors, and drafted into becoming a cage fighter on a distant planet. After a brutal training regime and series of tough bouts, Adam became an accomplished brawler and earned himself a low-ranking position as a syndicate soldier.

When the police finally busted the syndicate's operation, Adam escaped and found himself on his own. He plans to start over as an independent mercenary again, and he dreams of starting a new company for himself to keep the memory of his old crew alive. Adam's player discusses this background with the rest of his group, and they all approve. This backstory contains the seed of several potential allies and enemies that Adam has made during his career, which connect him to the rest of the game world.

Some people don't like coming up with complex and detailed backstories, which is fine. Your background only needs a couple of things; a description of your character, a concept of what he can do and why, and something that connects him to the game world. It's not strictly necessary to write out every detail. If your background has points of vagueness or unknowns in it, that's fine. These details can be improvised during play. You may also find it helpful to start each game session by having someone ask you one question about your character, and then adding the new information you reveal to your background.

Brainstorm as much as you feel you need to convey your character's history. Once you have a background, you should have a good idea of who your character is and what he is capable of. You will use this background to determine your character's abilities, and how skilled he is at using them. If you need ideas for more details to add, here are a few things that can help flesh out your character.

- Events that establish a facet of the character's personality and give him a connection to the world.
- Friends, romantic interests, family members, and old rivals.
- The character's secrets, and consequences if they are revealed.
- The passions that drive the character to adventure, such as the things he loves, hates, fears, and desires.
- His favorite personal belongings, or catchphrases.
- A physical description of your character.

The index card character sheet

For more mobility or greater focus on the group dynamic, try writing your character sheet on an index card instead of a piece of paper. Having something that is easy to slip into your pocket may make it easier to think of your character as a person and not as numbers on a sheet.

1.2.1. Motive

The next thing to write down is a Motive for your character. Why is he out risking his life adventuring, instead of staying home? What is his stake in the coming adventure? What are his goals, and how will he accomplish them? What does he believe in? How far is he willing to go to get what he wants? Your Motive is the direction that you want your character to take, and how he is connected to the world. It is a combination of both the character's desires and the player's priorities. Be specific. Wanting to make the world a better place is all well and good, but how are you going to do it? A grassroots political movement is one way to improve the world, but so is becoming a vigilante and beating up criminals. Describing how you will attain these dreams is helpful in direction your character to a course of action.

On a higher level, a Motive is a way for you to indicate what you, the player, want to happen in the game. It shows the gamemaster what directions you want the story to take, and what things you want to deal with. The Motive is YOUR stake in the story. Remember, your character does what you want him to do. The Motive gives you some direction as to how you want to obtain your goals and desires. The gamemaster will tempt you by bringing these desires into play, so both player and gamemaster must be ready to deal with the complications that may arise from the character acting on his passions. When two characters' desires come into conflict, drama is created.

Example: Adam's Motive is to stick it to both the syndicate and the planetary government that doesn't like mercenaries, and to make it on his own as a captain of his own crew. Adam plans to keep as much of his personal independence as he can to show that he doesn't need some huge organization weighing him down. His player wants to see some action in the game to make Adam's combat ability shine. The gamemaster takes this into consideration, and makes a note to include elements of syndicate and government conspiracies in the campaign to make Adam into more of a heroic figure. He also brainstorms a few ethical dilemmas to see how Adam responds when his morality is challenged.

Motives can evolve during play as you get to better understand how your character functions. You may find that you have more fun pursuing a different goal than what you originally planned for your character. If you want to take a different direction in the game, you can alter your character's Motive when it is appropriate to do so and the gamemaster approves. There is no cost or penalty to change your Motive. The Motive is a tool to help you focus your choices; it should never straightjacket your choices as a player, nor should it be used as an excuse to run roughshod over the plot and the other player's desires.

Example: After several game sessions, Adam has settled into the life of a Robin Hood-style thief, stealing from other criminals and helping those in need. Though this style of altruism never came up in Adam's original concept, his player wants to keep going in this direction. He erases "Stick it to the government" from Adam's Motive, and replaces it with "Helping people who cannot help themselves."

Whatever your Motive may be, it should be something that you're willing to take a risk on. You may be risking your social standing, your family fortune, or even your life. How much will you wager to accomplish your goal? What price is too high? These are questions you will have to figure out for yourself.

A simple Motive template

If you're having trouble writing a Motive for your character, just fill in these two blanks to get you started:

"I believe in _____, therefore I will _____."

1.3. Traits

The basic building blocks of the character are his Traits. These are the skills, fields of knowledge, aspects, life experiences, and talents of the character, which he has learned through training, education, or experience. A Trait can be almost anything, and it can cover either a very specific ability or a broad range of skills. Since this is intended to be a generic engine, a full list of Traits is beyond the scope of this document, but here are a few samples to give you an idea.

Eyes Like A Hawk	Drift Racing	Friends in High Places
Puzzle-Solver	Aikido	Tough as Nails
Backgammon	Deep Pockets	Sailing Savvy
Trained by Master Ailan of Bordeaux		Photographic Memory
Last Son of the White Horse Clan		Clockwork Repair

To choose your Traits, review your character concept and make a list of abilities that the character should have. Write down each one, along with a descriptive adjective to define how skilled you are with that Trait. You may have whatever Traits you wish and assign whatever adjectives best fit your image, so long as the group approves.

Example: Adam is a tough guy who has made a living as a brawler. He's also got some good reflexes from his training as a mercenary. However, he hasn't attended school since the 9th grade. Fighting skills are what first jump to mind for Adam's player. He's been fighting barehanded in a cage for sport for some time, so that's probably his best Trait. He also knows how to handle weapons like guns and knives, and he can fly a spaceship fairly well. We give him a couple more physical abilities like Toughness and Quick Hands. Rounding him out with some social skills, we'll give him an intimidating stare. He also knows a few things about underworld organizations, having been in one. Finally, we give him a few supporting Traits he's not so great at: First Aid, Mechanical Repair, and Sneaking.

If your character has any unusual or special abilities, write them down too, along with a descriptive adjective to show how skilled he is with that ability. We'll get to these in a moment. You can also give your character any equipment or possessions that would be appropriate as you see fit.

There are no checks and balances to character creation, nor are there any points to measure game balance. We'd never make you have to choose between taking Traits that are practical or ones that are flavorful. Take as many Traits as you feel you need. As long as the group approves of your character and his abilities, you can make whatever you like.

1.3.1. Trait Breadth

Traits can cover a broad range of abilities in one neat package, but how broad should a single Trait be? This varies from game to game. For example, a Piloting Trait is very useful in a space opera game, but not in a game set in a fantasy world. This takes some discretion on behalf of the group. Some groups prefer broadly defined Traits, while other will prefer their Traits to be more specific and detailed. You can put these issues to a vote to decide what to do.

If a Trait can be used in a very wide range of situations, try splitting it into two or three separate Traits. For example, in a game that has a lot of scientific research in it, the Science Trait can be split into Life Sciences, Research, and Physical Science. If all of the player characters would dearly love to possess a certain Trait, or if one Trait is responsible for a disproportionate amount of rolls in the game, you should consider splitting it up. This is to prevent players from pumping one or two over-broad Traits to astronomical levels and becoming masters too quickly. Once you have reached the top, there is nowhere else to go.

Traits with nearly universal use should be eliminated altogether. "Lucky" is an example of a bad Trait, since it could be used in far too many situations, and it doesn't really add anything to the character.

Example: Let's take a closer look at some of Adam's Traits. Adam's player defines his Piloting Trait as the ability to fly any kind of spacecraft, from one-man fighters to large transport ships. The gamemaster has hinted that there will be some chases and space battles during the game, but these events are not going to be a staple of the majority of game sessions. So Adam's Piloting Trait does not need to be changed.

However, there is going to be a lot of gunplay in this game. Almost every adventure is going to feature combat of some kind, and the gamemaster wants to make sure that any single gunfighter Trait will not get too much use. The gamemaster rules that there will be three Traits for guns; Pistols, Rifles, and Automatic Weapons. So, Pistols is an appropriate firearms Trait for Adam. He's good with small arms, but he doesn't have experience with larger weapons. Because of the way this Trait is now defined, we may want to add in other Traits later on.

1.4. The Competency Ladder

All character Traits are graded on a scale from one to ten. The competency ladder is a list of ten ordered steps that define how good a character is at a certain ability, with Rank one being the lowest step on the ladder and Rank ten being the highest.

Look at the list of your character's Traits and the way you describe how skilled he is with them. Using these descriptions, you can relate them to a rank on the competency ladder below, and then assign a rank to his abilities. Compare your standards with those of the other players to make sure that everyone is defining their character's ranks on a similar scale.

Rank 10 - Legendary

Wow! People call you a master at your trade, and you are likely famous for your achievements. Tasks that are difficult for others are a snap for you. Even in a high-powered game world, Traits at this level are exceptionally rare.

Rank 9 - Phenomenal

Near mastery. You are easily one of the best, if not the best, among a very large population. Only a handful people in the world are this good. You will never fail an average difficulty task. Traits at this level are rare.

Rank 8 - Superb

An expert. People stand up and take notice when you have a Trait this high. Routine tasks are a breeze, and you are capable of some truly terrific feats with some help or luck. You are recognized as being a leader in your field. This level is about as high as most people go.

Rank 7 - Excellent

An ability with a high level of proficiency. A person with this level of skill as his profession is noticeably better than his peers, and they have likely been training it for a very long time. Even a tricky task can be accomplished half the time. Anyone who knows you will almost certainly say that you're a pro at this Trait.

Rank 6 - Very Good

A solid ability, one that gets some regular practice. For most people, this is their main profession Trait, and they use it dutifully every day. Average tasks are easier, and with a little luck or help you can take on some real challenges.

Rank 5 - Good

A little bit above average. You have a solid grasp of the basics, with potential to take on difficult tasks if you have good luck. A Trait at this level gets regular practice and use. You will succeed at an average difficulty task about two-thirds of the time.

Rank 4 - Average

An average Trait is just that: an average level of competency. An average level Trait is a firm grasp of the basics, but complicated tasks may be beyond your reach. Someone who is trained but not especially talented or skilled is likely to be average. An average person will succeed at an average difficulty task about half the time. This is the default Rank for common skills and abilities that just about everyone has.

Rank 3 - Mediocre

Slightly below average. Traits at this level are untrained or seldom practiced. Normal tasks are more of a chore for you, but the disadvantage isn't too bad. This is the default Rank for technical skills that most people have a passing familiarity with, but lack in-depth knowledge.

Rank 2 - Poor

A noticeably weak Trait. You have only a tenuous grasp of the core principles or are noticeably deficient at this Trait. You can handle simple tasks, but you need help with anything more complicated than just the basics.

Rank 1 - Terrible

Completely unskilled. Either you are crippled in this Trait, or you only know a few very basic things about it. Even an average level task is difficult without help. Highly technical skills that the average person knows almost nothing about start from this Rank.

Lifepath

Traits aren't just things you can do, they're an integral part of who you are. Did your character run away to join the circus when he was young? That would make a terrific, flavorful Trait.

Don't worry if a Trait doesn't seem useful right away. You may find that it can give you help in unexpected circumstances later on in your career. Perhaps a few years in the circus has sharpened your hand-eye coordination when you learned to juggle.

Example: Listing Adam's Traits, we can give them ranks.

Very tough and strong (Rank 6)

A decent pilot (Rank 4)

Quick hands (Rank 5)

Good with knives (Rank 5)

Strong brawler (Rank 6)

Average intimidating stare (Rank 4)

Good shot with handguns and blasters (Rank 5)

Average knowledge about underworld organization (Rank 4)

Has a basic knowledge of mechanics (Rank 3)

Basic knowledge of first aid (Rank 3)

Quick 'n Dirty Non-Player Characters

Designing NPCs on the fly is easy. Just pick a Trait that describes their overall job and give it a rank. For example, an NPC might be an Average Guard (Rank 4), a Skilled Armorsmith (Rank 5), or an Elite Trooper (Rank 6). This one Trait allows them to do all of the things that would be associated with someone of that profession. If you want a little more detail, just give them another Trait or two at a slightly lower Rank. Minor NPCs should be capped to Rank 6 Traits. Anyone with a Trait at Rank 7 should be important to the game in some way, such as the Big Bad of your campaign.

1.4.1. Twinking Out

Some people like to fixate on one or two Traits, usually ones that are combat related, and raise them up as high as they can get away with. Before you let them declare themselves the absolute best in the universe, think about if it makes sense to do so given the scope of your campaign. A character that is already at the top of the ladder has nowhere to grow. Consider capping your starting Traits at Rank 6, and let the character earn his way up to those coveted higher ranks. Rewards are much more satisfying when they are earned instead of just given away. Of course, if you prefer to run a larger-than-life campaign, you can start with Traits as high as you like, though you may find your characters hitting the top of the ladder very quickly.

1.5. Specials

Specials are the extraordinary abilities, privileges, stunts, or powers that most people don't have. They are a subcategory of Traits and treated a little differently, so they need more explanation to define them.

If you want your character to start with a Special, talk it over it with your gamemaster first to define how it will work in the game. Specials are defined by answering three questions:

- What can it do?
- How does it work?
- What are its limitations?

Once you've defined your Special and gotten your gamemaster's approval, you can add it to your character sheet. If your ability to control your Special is likely to be checked during the game, you can give it a descriptive adjective, and then a rank. Some Specials don't have a rank assigned to them; either you have the Trait or you don't. The gamemaster decides whether or not a character can perform a certain stunt based on how their Special ability is defined.

The simplest form of Special is a rigidly defined ability that can do only one thing. Here's an example.

Example: Lara Kelli isn't your typical newspaper reporter. She can fly.

What it does: Lara's ability allows her to fly through the air like a superhero. She can travel at about 200 miles per hour, at any altitude as long as she has enough atmosphere around her.

How it works: The power comes from a unique genetic mutation in Lara's genes. The exact physical mechanism of how it works is a mystery.

Limitations: In Lara's world, people normally do not fly. If it were discovered that she had this ability, it would cause a public panic, or she may be targeted by a secret organization for study of her power. She is also limited to carrying with her as much as she can normally hold in her arms when she flies.

Another type of Special is one that can be used in a variety of different ways. A Special can confer a benefit that has a broad range of possible applications.

Example: Daniel Wyvern is the CEO of a major corporation, and as such, he's phenomenally wealthy.

What it does: Daniel has lots of money at his disposal. He can afford all sorts of high-tech toys, such as a personal helicopter and state-of-the-art electronics, and he can also finance personal projects as he desires. Daniel can also use his money for political influence.

How it works: As a young man, Daniel received a large sum of money from an anonymous benefactor. Through business deals and connections, he has grown that initial sum into a vast corporate empire, which he is the sole owner of. The company makes him lots of money that he can use as he sees fit.

Limitations: Daniel needs to spend some of his time every day managing his company and making executive decisions to keep it profitable. He also needs to be in the public eye and attend social events. And as Daniel will soon discover, there are some things money cannot buy.

Specials can also be supernatural in origin, if it suits your game world. They can come from magical powers, psychic abilities, or martial arts training. Magical or empowered items, such as a ring of invisibility, can also grant special abilities. Such Specials may need to recharge after being used, or they can become exhausted when used heavily over a short period of time. The conditions that recharge a Special should be included with the ability's definition.

Example: The Dragon is a master of ninjitsu, and his sixth sense and reflexes are so keen that he can catch arrows and other slow-moving projectiles.

What it does: The Dragon can grab slow-moving objects such as arrows, thrown knives, and even shuriken out of the air if they are being aimed at him or someone nearby.

How it works: The Dragon has developed a keen sense of impending danger from a lifetime of intense martial arts training. As long as he has at least one hand free, he can simply snatch an object out of the air as it flies towards him. Successfully catching a projectile requires a roll of the dice.

Limitations: The Dragon cannot use this gift to catch bullets or other objects moving at similar speeds. After using this ability, he cannot use it again until he meditates for one hour.

You can also use Specials to bend the rules of the game. While some special abilities do not give a new power, they may grant the ability to use existing abilities in a different way. By manipulating the rules, you can emulate these types of abilities.

Example: Shakal Vorinski is a master sniper at both long and short range. He can use his sniper rifle effectively even at very close ranges that the rifle was not designed for.

What it does: When wielding a sniper rifle, Shakal can use his Sniper Trait in place of a Longarms Trait.

How it works: Training as a sniper on the battlefield has given Shakal the expertise to use his sniper rifle like a shotgun or sporting rifle. While sniper rifles are not meant to be used at close range, Shakal can fire his weapon from the hip and use his skill with the sniper rifle to gun down nearby targets.

Limitations: After using this ability, the sniper rifle loses some of its accuracy. It cannot be used for long-distance shots until it is re-calibrated properly.

1.5.1. What Can't I Do?

While there is no list of every conceivable Special that the players could come up with, there are some that player characters shouldn't have. Mind probing or mental domination abilities are dangerous, since they can quickly ruin plots by exposing secrets, and also spoil other players' fun when used on their characters. Specials should also not give a constant bonus to a Trait, as such abilities are only ways to get around the normal limits of the competency ladder. However, they may give a bonus in very specific situations. Don't let a character's Special overshadow his personality, or become so important that it steals attention away from the rest of the group. If a player really wants an ability that could be too powerful, make sure the cost to use it is very steep.

1.5.2. Super-Abilities

One type of popular Special is that of a super-ability, such as a mutant strongman's super-strength or the super-reflexes of a cybernetic street samurai. If you have a character with such an ability, don't jump right away to give them a huge Rank in their Strength or Speed Trait. Instead, write down the Special and give it a rank as normal. Captain Lightning might be able to run at Mach 3, but he may also be a klutz or be uncoordinated. Use the Special for actions that use the superpower, and other Traits for everyday actions. Remember, such abilities should have an appropriate limitation to them. With great power comes great responsibility.

A superpowered Special like the above can give some characters the ability to perform feats beyond what a normal person can do. Consider a super-strong character, whose player defines his Special as the ability to lift a car. He writes down the Special, and gives it a rank. Obviously, an average person can't lift a car, but if our super-strong character wanted to, he could attempt it, just like with any other type of test. By his definition of what the Special can do, lifting a car is an average difficulty task for him, even if it would be impossible for a normal person. Likewise, the super-strong character shouldn't have to roll the dice to perform feats of strength that the average person can do. He can do those without any significant chance of

failure. The Special entitles him to this privilege. You may find it helpful to think of superpowered Specials as having their own competency ladder above that of the regular ladder. This ladder represents levels of ability for superpowered Traits. By virtue of having a superpowered Trait, the character is entitled to the privileges listed above.

1.6. Working Together

The character is your tool to interact with the game world. More than that, your character is a device for you to have fun. Roleplaying is a shared imagined activity. It requires everyone at the table to work together to shape it. Sometimes, in order to keep it going, you have to step outside of your character and help each other patch up the illusion so that you remain on the same page. Keeping the story afloat is more important than the fidelity of the character.

Intraparty conflict is inevitable in any game. However, the best kinds of conflict are those that lead to fun and opportunity. One thing that you should avoid doing is taking action that tanks the story or ruins everyone else's fun. The excuse, "But that's what my character would do," is not valid in this situation. Your character does what *you* want him to do. A savvy player can engineer motivation for a character to do anything he wants if he tries hard enough. Player priorities overrule character motivations. It's perfectly acceptable to discuss events out-of-character with your fellow players if it means the story continues and everyone has fun.

So if you find your characters in conflict and your first instinct is to do something that could destroy someone else's fun or wreck the game, stop for a moment and think through your options. It's perfectly fine to say to the group: "Here's what I'm thinking, but I don't want to spoil the mood. What do you think would be cool right here?"

Chapter 2 - Game Engine

When the Many are reduced to One, to what is the One reduced?

The Impulse RPG is designed to resolve both quick actions and large exchanges with one roll of the dice. When you use a Trait, you roll two six-sided dice and add your rank in that Trait to the roll.

2.1. Basic Mechanics

The simplest possible roll is a straight test of a character's skill and competency in one of his Traits against a static difficulty. When a Trait is tested, roll two six-sided dice and add your Rank in the tested Trait. So, for a Rank 5 Trait, you would add 5 to your dice roll. The gamemaster assigns a target number for the roll based on its difficulty. The harder the task is, the higher you will need to roll in order to succeed. If the total of your Trait rank plus your roll is higher than the target, you succeed. If your total is lower, you fail. If you tie, the result is a standoff, a partial success, or a success with a negative side effect.

Difficulty	Target
Simple; even a beginner can do it, no challenge for someone skilled	9
Average; the average person has a 50—50 chance of success	11
Challenging; a task for someone skilled, or with some help	13
Very Hard; a pro can do it, anyone else needs a lot of help or luck	15
Extremely Hard; even pros need help, beyond the reach of most	17
Insane; you need a lot of skill, help, and luck to have a chance	19

Example: Adam is behind the controls of a Myrmidon-class space fighter searching for an escaped enemy fighter. The trail leads him through an asteroid field. Adam must test his Piloting Trait to make it through safely. The gamemaster decides that this is an Average difficulty task, with a target of 11. Adam has Piloting at Rank 4. He rolls the dice and gets a 3 and a 6, then adds 4 for a total of 13. That's 2 higher than the difficulty, so Adam makes it through the asteroid field without trouble.

When two characters are in direct competition with each other, only one side rolls the dice. The other side adds 7 to their Trait rank to determine their result instead of rolling. Whenever possible, have the player roll and have the NPC take the 7.

Example: Having passed through the asteroid field, Adam is closing in on the bogey. Adam's player announces that he intends to close in to weapons range. The enemy ship will try to evade. Adam is still using his Rank 4 Piloting Trait. The enemy pilot only has Rank 3, so he adds 7 for a total of 10. Adam's player rolls a 2 and a 6, and adds 4 for a total of 12. Adam closes the gap and lines up to fire on the enemy ship.

Why Take 7?

The reason for this rule is that if both sides were to roll the dice, you're actually rolling four dice in disguise. This can cause a huge spread of margins of success and failure, and it plays havoc with the probabilities compared to rolling against a static target number. Taking 7 ensures that the dice probabilities will not change from situation to situation. It also de-emphasizes competition between the players and the gamemaster, since you're not obviously acting in direct opposition to one another.

2.1.1. Intent and Consequence

Knowing when to roll the dice is an important part of the game. Obviously, you don't have to roll for every trivial thing that comes up. A good general rule is to roll only when there is a significant risk of failure and a suitable consequence to go along with it. The player states his intent for the action before he makes his roll. If the roll succeeds, the player's intent happens. If the roll fails, the intent is not accomplished, and the opposing side can apply consequences. To summarize:

Player: "If I succeed, I get X."

Gamemaster: "Okay, but if you fail, Y happens."

The greater the margin of success, the more fully the intent is realized, as well as any possible positive side effects from achieving the stated goal. Likewise, a greater margin of failure indicates both the failure to achieve the intent and a greater consequence. A roll that succeeds by one is merely passable, but a roll that succeeds by five is an overwhelming success. Likewise, a roll that fails by one just barely fails to meet the goal, but a roll that fails by five would be an embarrassing failure. The players can offer suggestions as to how an action is resolved based on the results of the roll. In this way, they can have some greater control as to how their characters act, but they should not be allowed to spin failure into success.

Effect	Margin of success/failure
Just barely succeeded or failed. A poor quality success or a near miss.	1
A decent success or failure, with few additional effects.	2
A solid result, either a useful perk or a significant handicap.	3
A quality success or debilitating failure that can affect future rolls.	4
A stunning victory or an embarrassing defeat.	5

Example: Let's go back to Adam flying through the asteroid field. In our first example, the intent is for Adam to make it through the field safely, but fast enough to stay on the trail of his target. The consequences may involve either losing the target or hitting an asteroid, depending on the player's choices. Since Adam's stated intent is to keep his ship safe, that is the primary focus of the roll, with catching up to the bogey being a secondary goal. If he succeeds, he gets his primary intent, but he needs a better quality success to get any additional perks.

Success by 4: Adam passes through the asteroids with ease, catching the enemy by surprise and with an advantageous position to open fire on him.

Success by 1: Adam makes it though the field, but slowly. The bogey is about to escape into outer space, but Adam has a general idea of where he is heading.

Failure by 1: Adam runs into trouble and takes a little damage to his ship's shields. The enemy ship gets away before Adam finishes crossing the asteroid field.

Failure by 4: Adam's ship hits an asteroid. The enemy gets clean away while Adam struggles to make some emergency repairs.

Intent may also affect the difficulty of a roll. Forging a sword isn't difficult, but forging a true masterpiece of a weapon in a short amount of time is much harder. The players may propose adding extra effects to their intent, such as accomplishing a task quickly, silently, or in a particularly impressive fashion. Such improvements can be offset by either raising the difficulty or applying different types of consequences for failure. A hurried project may have flaws that are only revealed when it is too late. A risky stunt may offer additional advantages that would not be achieved by playing it safe. The gamemaster holds final approval over such proposals. Make the reward proportional to the risk.

2.1.2. Let It Ride

The gamemaster should never call for several rolls of the same Trait in rapid succession. The only point of this is to wait for the player's luck to run out, the dice to show a nasty failure, and then to punish the character. It's mean, and it sends the message that the gamemaster is out to get the players. On the other hand, this rule prevents the player from taking multiple rolls of the same skill to try and get a spectacular result. One roll covers an entire situation. Do not roll again until the situation changes significantly. Likewise, there are no retries for a failed roll unless something changes the situation.

The Armwrestler's Paradox

Consider an armwrestling competition between two men, one strong and one weak. Who do you think would win? The strong man, of course.

Now, let's put in some game terms. The strong man has Rank 6 physical strength, and the weak man has Rank 2. The strong man takes 7, giving him a total of 13. The weak man rolls a 12, giving him a total of 14. Amazingly, the weaker man has defied logic and beaten a much stronger opponent!

When you pick up the dice, you create the possibility that something like this can happen. Be sure you can deal with this improbable but still possible situation. In situations with very little randomness, it may be better to not roll the dice, and instead let common sense prevail.

2.1.3. The Penumbra and Amnesty

Traits are not just textbook information. They are fields of knowledge and abilities that form an integral part of who the character is, and they give him a sphere of relevant influence. For example, consider someone who is a Superb Egyptologist. (Rank 8) He is likely well known in his field, has many contacts related to this Trait, and he may have a job as the curator of a museum. You can make a roll if you wish to try and use a Trait as influence in this way, such as the Egyptologist gaining access to a restricted part of a museum library or knowing where to find someone who can read an obscure ancient language. Once you have found a contact in this way, that contact can become part of the story and used again.

Example: Adam's Underworld Connections Trait can allow him to find criminal contacts. If he makes a successful roll with this Trait, then there is an appropriate contact in the area, even though the gamemaster may not have explicitly planned for one. Adam's player can define who the contact is, what he looks like, and what his job is. This way, the player can make a contribution to the game world, and the contact can be used again without needing another roll.

Traits are fairly broad things, so you have a little bit of discretion on how to apply them. With your gamemaster's permission, you can use a Trait that doesn't quite apply perfectly to a situation, though the gamemaster can give your roll a penalty if it's a real stretch. Conversely, a highly specialized Trait can lower the difficulty of rolls that play well into that specialty.

Stormtroopers

The characters may sometimes find themselves in conflict with groups of relatively inconsequential grunts, such as battle droids, hordes of goblins, or angry protestors. These groups can be abstracted by having the players roll against a static target number relative to the challenge presented by the enemy mob. In this situation, the minor NPCs don't need Traits at all.

Example: Adam wants to get past a security system protecting the door to a building, but he doesn't have any Traits relating to defeating security systems or electronics. He does, however, have a Mechanics Trait, which is close. Adam has a general idea of what to do, but the gamemaster gives his roll a penalty because this task goes beyond the way Adam has defined this Trait.

If you don't have any Trait that fits a situation, you can ask the gamemaster for Amnesty. Take a quick look back at your character's concept and background, and decide a suitable Trait for him and a Rank for that Trait. With the gamemaster's approval, you can add that Trait to your sheet. If your background doesn't cover a suitable Trait, you can give him a Trait at Rank 4 for a very common ability that everyone should have, or at Rank 3 for a Trait that covers a skill that most people have at least some familiarity with.

Example: Looking back at Adam's character sheet, there's one thing that we forgot to give him: a perception Trait. When Adam tries to spot a hidden camera protecting a painting he's trying to steal, we haven't got an appropriate Trait! This is a good situation to give Amnesty, since everyone has at least some ability to notice things. We can write down "Average powers of perception" at Rank 4 on Adam's list of Traits, since there is nothing in his background that suggests that he is particularly good or bad at noticing things.

Requiring Traits

The gamemaster can ask that all of the player characters take a few Traits that he expects will come up often during the game. Perception, Agility, and Willpower are examples of frequently tested Traits.

Requiring these Traits helps give the gamemaster an easy way to gauge and compare the basic abilities of the characters, and prevents too much reliance on the Amnesty rule.

2.2. Getting Help

There are lots of useful things that can make a character's life easier, such as better equipment, a good hiding place to strike from, a solid strategy, and so on. We can't list everything that improves your odds, so instead we offer you these guidelines.

Whenever a character has something that gives him an advantage, he gets a bonus to his roll. When something puts a character at a disadvantage, he gets a penalty. Here's how the modifiers break down:

+1: A significant advantage. A +1 bonus is something that will help even the odds in an unbalanced match, though probably not enough to turn the tide. Good weapons and armor for a situation, a clever or well-roleplayed plan, or superior-quality equipment is worth a +1 bonus.

+2: A major advantage. A bonus at this level is enough to make up for a serious difference in skill. These are bigger versions of the edges listed above, or possibly a combination of several of them. A well-planned ambush or vastly superior gear could give a +2 bonus.

+3: An overwhelming advantage. These types of rewards should be given out sparingly, and only in situations where one side's tactics, gear, or support gives them enough to win what would otherwise be an unbalanced fight. The absolutely perfect weapon in a situation, or a brilliant and well-supported plan could earn a +3 bonus.

Example: Adam is making his escape from a secret government facility in a stolen prototype ship. The ship has extremely powerful engines and is designed for fast maneuverability. Adam rolls his dice for his Piloting roll as normal; however, the ship's engines give him a bonus of +2 to his Piloting roll.

2.2.1. One Plus Two Plus Two Plus One...

Advantages and disadvantages are not additive, though there are exceptions. Don't spend time nitpicking over every little modifier to a roll and adding them all up. Consider the biggest modifiers to the situation, judge how much advantage it confers, and use that to decide how much of a bonus or penalty it gives. There is no need to track and weigh everything that can affect your roll. Instead, step back and look at the big picture, remembering to frame it in terms of the desired intent of the player.

If both sides of a conflict have bonuses or if both sides have penalties, they can cancel each other out to bring the net modifier of one side back to zero. The maximum net situational modifier you can receive in any given roll is three. No matter how much of an advantage or disadvantage you have, you'll never have more than a total +3 or -3 modifier to the roll after any bonus or penalties on both sides have been canceled out. There are other types of bonuses, such as from teamwork, which will be explained further on.

Example: After all the examples Adam's been through, let's give him a break. He's now equipped with a state-of-the-art armored battlesuit, complete with a powerful assault rifle with targeting enhancement, night vision goggles, a tactical computer system, and a stealth module. Rather than adding up lots of potential +1 bonus advantages, we can just call it an overwhelming advantage and give him a +3 bonus. When Adam is facing an enemy who is similarly equipped with gear that gives him a +2 bonus, we can cancel out +2 from each side, leaving Adam with +1 and the enemy at +0. Adam can now seek out other advantages to boost his roll, since his net situational modifier is only +1 now.

2.3. Teamwork

When multiple characters are working together on the same goal, they can combine their efforts. One character is chosen to lead the effort. All players involved roll the dice. Each character that is helping rolls against a target number of 10. The margin of success or failure is divided by two and rounded up. This is then used to modify the leader's roll, which is taken to find the overall result. Teamwork modifiers do not count towards the maximum situational modifier of +3/-3.

Helping roll	7--8	9--10	11--12	13--14
Teamwork modifier	-1	0	+1	+2

Example: Adam and his partner in crime, Charlie, are carrying off a heavy piece of artwork to their ship. It's a very hard task with a difficulty of 15. Adam has a Muscle Power Trait at Rank 6, and Charlie's Average Strength gives him a Rank of 4. Since Adam is stronger, the players choose him to lead this roll. Adam rolls a 9 for a total of 15, and Charlie rolls a 7 for a total of 11. Adam's 15 is the roll kept since he's the leader, but he gets another +1 since Charlie rolled an 11. This pushes his total to 16, which beats the difficulty. Adam and Charlie make it back to their ship, but without much time to spare before the guards come. If Charlie's player had decided that he would scout ahead for guards instead of helping carry the stolen artwork, he could not help Adam's roll, since the characters now have different goals.

If a group of non-player characters that are all taking 7 are working together, the highest total of the group gets a +1 bonus for every two characters in the group, rounded up. For example, a group of 5 gives a +3 teamwork bonus. If a character's actions are in a purely support capacity, the gamemaster may rule that they are only able to provide help, and they cannot make the group's main roll. The gamemaster can restrict the maximum amount of the bonus or penalty on the helping roll depending on how useful the assistance is given the situation.

Example: While Adam and Charlie are trying to make a quick getaway, three enemy fighters are in hot pursuit. Adam fires up the engines of his ship. The pilots are all NPCs with a Piloting Trait of Rank 4. Since they are working together, they get +2 for the three people in the group. They take 7, plus 4 for their Trait, plus 2 from teamwork for a total of 13. Adam will have to beat their 13 if he wants to escape.

Adam will roll his Piloting Trait since he's at the controls, but Charlie can help by providing cover fire from the ship's turret with his Gunner Trait. The gamemaster rules that Charlie can only give help to Adam in this situation, since the group's intent is to escape, which forces Adam's Piloting roll to be the main roll for the team. If the players wanted to stay and fight, then Charlie's Gunner Trait could be the team's roll again because the players' intent would have changed.

2.3.1. Linked Tests - Helping You Help Yourself

A linked test is a quick sub-roll in the middle of a larger action that allows you to get a bonus to the main roll. You can use a linked test to gain a benefit from a Trait that is useful in a situation, but not the one being currently tested. Think of it as a helping roll that you give to yourself. Many Specials can be used this way. Each character may only make one linked test per main roll.

High-Risk Help

Certain types of stunts may be difficult to pull off, but may also offer a bigger payoff. By changing the way helping rolls and linked tests work, you can simulate high-risk high-reward maneuvers. Increase the difficulty of the helping roll to reflect a trickier stunt or one less likely to help. Double the bonus or penalty awarded by the helping roll to further up the stakes. This can be an exciting way to encourage players into crazy, over the top action that can potentially turn around a difficult challenge.

Example: The Dragon, our martial arts expert, is sneaking through a Shinto temple late at night. Two archers lie in wait in the shadows, and attempt to ambush him with a hail of arrows. The Dragon decides that he will use his Special trait of Catching Arrows to help protect him as he dives for cover with his tumbling skill.

When you make a linked test, describe what you are going to do and how it will affect the main roll. The gamemaster will then let you roll your linked Trait, and you get a bonus or penalty to your main roll, just like if you had made a teamwork roll. These modifiers do not count towards the situational maximum of +3.

Remember to look at both the way the Special is defined as well as its Rank. Having a high Rank in a Special does not necessarily make it more powerful, but rather it represents the character's ability to control it. The high Rank increases the character's ability to successfully use the Special and get a positive effect from it. In the above example, even if The Dragon's Special was at Rank 10, he could not use it to catch bullets because of the way the Special is defined.

Example: The main roll of this action is The Dragon's Acrobat Trait versus the assassin's Archery Traits. The Dragon's Catching Arrows Special is currently at Rank 6. His player rolls the dice, and gets an 8, for a total of 14. That will give The Dragon a +2 bonus on his Acrobatics roll.

Raising the stakes

Players want their characters to be cool. It's fun to be heroic, stylish, clever, or a bad-ass. Whenever possible, let them have fun. If a player comes up with a neat trick that adds some extra flair to their actions, you can use a linked test to resolve that part of the action. Set the stakes of the test to whatever you want, but make sure that you both understand the consequences for failure.

The main roll has a target of 13. The Dragon gets a +2 bonus to his Rank 5 Acrobat Trait, and rolls a 9 for a total of 16. With lightning-fast reflexes, The Dragon plucks a couple of arrows out of the air with his bare hands as he leaps behind a pillar.

2.4. Conflict and Combat

The following rules describe a system for resolving more complex situations. These rules are best used in situations where the stakes are high and the balance of the struggle may shift back and forth. Using multiple rolls and tangible consequences for failure, you can create more tension. These rules are best used to resolve detailed struggles between two parties, such as a battle, a debate, or a race.

Combat in the Impulse RPG is not based on a series of attack and defense rolls, but is instead conflict-based. Fighters don't just stand in one spot and swing at each other; they move around to try and land a hit while simultaneously avoiding the enemy's attacks. There is no need for multiple combat Traits for every possible situation. The Trait that the character uses covers everything. Characters can also use an appropriate Special instead if they are using that ability in battle. Each roll represents an exchange of attacks, defenses, and movement. After each roll, someone will be closer to defeat. If they want to keep fighting, they risk injury or worse. Don't let the dice do all the talking for you. Design strategies, play out the results you get, and savor victories.

Combat is treated like any other roll. Both sides select an appropriate Trait, receive bonuses or penalties, and add up their totals, with one person rolling the dice and the other taking 7 as usual. Whichever side rolls higher draws closer to their goal, and can apply strikes to the loser's side. The loser receives one strike, plus one additional strike for every full three points he lost the roll by. If there's a tie, it's a standoff for that exchange, and neither side receives strikes.

Margin of Victory	0 (tie)	1—2	3—5	6+
Strikes Inflicted	0	1	2	3

A strike is an abstract unit of disadvantage in combat. It can mean that you are backed up into a corner, stunned, injured, or at any other sort of hindrance. They are a way of conveying temporary weakness or disadvantage that indicates you may be about to lose the fight. Strikes are used to show how close you are to defeat. Strikes do not give any penalty to your rolls, but they do indicate that you are in danger of losing the battle.

Example: During his time in the fighting cage, Adam fought a relatively inexperienced scrapper named Gabriel. Both fighters select their appropriate fighting Traits to use in this combat. Adam has a Rank 6 Brawling Trait, and Gabriel has Aikido at Rank 4. Adam rolls a 9 for a total of 15, and Gabriel takes 7 for a total of 11. Adam wins by four, so Adam gives Gabriel two strikes. Adam's player describes this exchange as overpowering Gabriel, hitting him too fast and hard for Gabriel to defend himself, leaving him dazed and bloodied. If Adam had won by six, he would have given Gabriel three strikes and knocked him out in one roll.

Remember that a round of combat is not just one attack. It is the result of the character's strategy for a whole exchange of offense and defense. If you find that combat is going by too quickly for you, then take the time to add in details as to how things are playing out. In between rolls, give each side a chance to react and change their strategy if they wish to do so for the next round.

2.4.1. Striking Out

As you might have guessed, three strikes, and you're out. So what does that mean? When you're out, you've lost the fight. The winning side can decide how the fight ends however he likes. Depending on his intent, he can capture the loser, force him to submit, knock him out, or finish him off.

If a player character receives three strikes, the gamemaster should discuss some possible outcomes for the defeated character. Having your character die is no fun. If the player wants to keep on playing his character, in most situations the gamemaster

should let him. Regardless, there should be some serious consequences applied for striking out. The player characters should suffer a significant setback that cannot be fully mitigated.

Strikes are removed once combat ends and the characters have a chance to rest and regroup. Minor injuries are tended to, guns are reloaded, and people can catch their breath. After the action stops for a few minutes, all strikes are erased from anyone who is still up and fighting.

Try not to think of defeat as being the end of the game, or as a punishment. Rallying back from previous losses to win the war is a time-honored tradition in heroic stories. If you really don't want to lose, dip into your resources to save yourself. It's up to you how much you want to risk, and how much each battle means.

Sudden Death

If a combat is dragging on for too long, the gamemaster can invoke the Sudden Death rule. When combat is in Sudden Death, the winning side deals one strike to the losers for every point of margin of victory, rather than one for every three points.

2.4.2. Wounds

Strikes come and go, but wounds accumulate. If at the end of a fight your character has received two or more strikes, he takes a wound when those strikes are removed. A wound is a lasting effect that provides a penalty to the character's actions until it is treated or healed. Each wound beyond the first gives a -1 penalty to all of their rolls. Penalties from wounds do not count towards the maximum modifier of -3. While theoretically a player could keep on erasing strikes after multiple combats, eventually all those penalties from wounds will add up. Sooner or later, you'll have to stay down and admit defeat.

Example: After a long and difficult fight in the cage, Adam has triumphed after receiving two strikes. While he takes a breather, those strikes are erased, but he has to take a wound since he erased two strikes. Adam's player describes it as a deep bruise along his left shoulder from blocking some very strong attacks. Since this is Adam's first wound, he does not incur any penalties just yet, but he will receive a -1 penalty to all of his actions if he takes a second wound.

It is also possible to receive wounds from other hazards outside of combat, such as traps, falling objects, fire, or poison. If a situation could give a character a wound, the gamemaster should warn the players before giving them a chance to avoid the damage by either evading it or being tough enough to withstand it. For example, the characters can make a roll with a Dexterity Trait to see if they can dodge incoming falling rocks, or a roll with a Toughness Trait to shrug off the effects of an illness.

Wounds are not as abstract as strikes are. When a character receives a wound, it should be described in detail to give an idea of how the character has been hurt.

Wounds take longer to heal than strikes. A wound heals in about a week, although bed rest or a doctor's care can help them heal faster. Medical attention can temporarily cancel out one point of wound penalty.

2.4.3. Multiple Characters

When there is more than one fighter on a side, each character will generate his or her own total, and give or receive strikes. It is possible for one character to give strikes to the enemy from a good roll, while his ally receives strikes from a poor roll. All actions occur concurrently, so the players will have to wait until the next roll if they wish to change their intent.

When a character is fighting multiple opponents at once, the larger side uses the teamwork rules to generate one total. The outnumbered character must also divide any strikes he deals among all of his opponents. Strikes should be assigned evenly among the losers each round, though the lone character can choose to give strikes to

the same enemy over consecutive rounds. If the larger side wins, they deal strikes just as if they were a single character. This is one of the advantages the larger side has; it takes more successful rolls to defeat them.

If a character is providing help and not participating in the battle, he cannot give or receive strikes. Of course, the enemy may wish to change their intent to target the helper, in which case he becomes part of the battle and can receive strikes as usual.

Example: Adam and Charlie are ambushed by three pirates on their way to fence their stolen artwork. Adam uses his Brawling Trait, and Charlie uses his Dirty Fighting Trait. Since Adam is a better fighter, he decides that he'll take on two pirates at once. If Adam wins, he'll have to divide the strikes he deals up between those two pirates.

Adam gets a total of 15, and Charlie gets a 10. The pirates take 7, plus 4 for their Rank 4 fighting Traits to make their total 11. The two pirates fighting Adam have a total of 12, since they also have a +1 teamwork bonus. Adam wins by 3, and Charlie loses by 1. Adam gives out two strikes, one to each of his opponents, and Charlie receives one strike. Adam's player describes it as knocking the leader back into one of his henchmen while Charlie takes a punch to the gut from the third pirate. If Adam had rolled a total of 9 instead, he would have lost by 3, and taken two strikes himself. Remember, the two pirates he is facing are a team, and only give out one parcel of strikes if they win.

Neither side is willing to admit defeat yet, so the fight goes on for a second round. Charlie doesn't want to risk being wounded, so he falls back and throws a smoke grenade into the fray. Adam quickly puts on his infrared goggles so he'll be able to see the fight through the smoke. Charlie is now helping Adam make his roll, but Adam has to face three enemies by himself. If Adam fails, he'll have to take those strikes on himself, since Charlie is only providing support.

The pirates now have a +2 teamwork bonus for three people working together, but the smoke gives them a -1 penalty for a total modifier of +1 for their group. The pirates are still posting a total of 12. Charlie rolls first, using his Throwing Weapons Trait to drop the grenade in a useful place. He gets a 14, which gives Adam an extra +2 for his roll. Adam rolls a total of 16, good enough to give two more strikes to the pirates. Adam's player chooses to give one strike each to the two pirates he's already hit, describing it as waiting until the pirates are blinded by the smoke, then knocking the two of them closest to him down with sucker punches.

With two of the pirates in danger of striking out, the gamemaster decides that they have had enough. The pirates break off the fight and run away, leaving Adam and Charlie victorious. Picking up their bag of loot, they move on to meet their buyer before the pirates can come back with reinforcements. After the loot is sold, Adam and Charlie celebrate their heist at their favorite pub. While the characters unwind, Charlie's player erases the strike from his character sheet.

Strike Four

Three strikes is an appropriate amount for a fairly realistic game. If you prefer your action to be more cinematic, you can choose to have the player characters go down after four strikes instead, or reduce the penalties from wounds. This lets the player characters stay up longer, but they can still lose the battle if they hit a long streak of bad luck. Certain items or Specials can also confer abilities that tweak the basic combat mechanics. For example, a magical suit of armor may allow the wearer to avoid receiving one strike per adventure, or a healing potion could instantly remove a wound. Likewise, very large or tough enemies like Big Bads can have more than three strikes to represent greater difficulty in defeating them.

2.4.6. Social Combat

Not all battles are fought with swords and guns. The combat rules can be adapted for use in a social situation, where two people are trying to convince an audience through debate and rebuttal, with the winner gaining a concession from the loser. Political debates, courtroom battles, and demonstrations of proper etiquette to earn the favor of a king are examples of social combat. The intent, terms and concessions of the conflict should be agreed to before social combat begins.

In social combat, a strike represents a weakening of one participant's body of argument, and a wound is a temporary impairment of the character's social standing. The winner convinces the audience that his argument is the correct one, though he may need to offer compromises to the losing side if he took a strike or two during the debate. The basic mechanic of rolls, strikes, and wounds doesn't change.

Social combat is not a type of mind control. The goal is to convince the audience of the merits of your argument, not to change the opinions of the opposite side. Indeed, the loser may be even more convinced that he is right, or he may harbor a grudge against the winner for being defeated. The audience is convinced that the winner is right, and the loser must agree to the terms of the debate, if only for the time being.

The mechanics of strikes and wounds can be applied to almost any type of competitive effort if the players desire this level of added complexity. A motorcycle race, a political smear campaign, or almost any type of competition can be run using the combat rules if the players request it. Decide on the stakes, intent, and possible effects of the battle, and treat it like any other combat.

Example: The Adroit is a pirate sloop sailing the Caribbean with the player characters as the ship's officers. When the ship encounters a storm, the gamemaster chooses to use the combat rules. Each character in the group will be using one of their seamanship Traits. The navigator can try to keep the ship on course, while the quartermaster rallies the crew to secure the sails and work the pumps in the hull.

Each character will have a different result if they strike out. A failure by the quartermaster may leave the crew feeling mutinous.

2.4.5. One Versus One Hundred

Keeping track of all the strikes of a large group of NPCs can be a pain. For minor characters, you can choose to have them go down after just one or two strikes, depending on how much of a challenge you want them to be and the level of realism in your game. Likewise, you shouldn't keep track of wounds for minor NPCs, since they typically are not in play long enough for wounds to become an issue.

For massive battles, large mobs of enemies can also be treated as one unit to save on bookkeeping. The mob has a target number that the players make a normal roll against to represent how much of a threat they are and how difficult it is to damage them, and strikes to represent their morale or integrity. When the mob strikes out, they are defeated. In this situation, do not have the players use the teamwork rules. Instead, give them all a chance to roll. Each character can give strikes to the mob, or receive strikes.

For a mob, three strikes per player character in the fight gives a decent challenge that should require three or four rounds to defeat. So, in a game with three players, an average-level mob should require a total of nine strikes before they are defeated. Increasing the number of strikes gives the mob more staying power, making for a longer fight that is potentially more dangerous for the player characters. Decreasing the number of strikes makes the fight shorter, and tips the odds back into the favor of the players.

Large mobs can also suffer damage during a very long fight as their numbers dwindle or their morale falls. You can choose to lower the target number to deal damage to the mob once they reach a certain threshold of strikes to represent them growing weaker from attrition.

Example: A group of four superheroes is battling a massive swarm of battle robots that are trying to conquer the city. The robots are not tough individually, but there are a lot of them. The gamemaster gives the mob of robots a whopping twenty strikes to beat them all.

Once the heroes have racked up a total of ten strikes, the reserves of the robots begin to run out, and they can't swarm the heroes any more. The target number to deal damage to the robots decreases by one. However, the evil controller who created the swarm is now alert that his minions are losing, and is rushing to the scene to help...

The Armageddon Clock

Time pressure is a key element of dramatic tension. Consider making a stack of ten to twenty poker chips and keep them by your side. This is the timer that the players are fighting against. Whenever a significant amount of time passes, or things slow down due to a long battle, argument, or delay, take one of the chips away. Each chip represents an arbitrary unit of time, not a certain amount of minutes. When all of the chips are gone, something really bad happens. Perhaps the villain escapes, or enemy reinforcements show up.

The timer creates a very visual reminder that the characters do not have an infinite amount of time to achieve their goal. It can be a useful tool to add tension or to prod things along if the action slows down.

Chapter 3 - Coins

The bird of paradise alights only on the hand that does not grasp.

Lady Luck is not always a kind lady. Sometimes, despite how much we would like for our characters to win, the dice do not always cooperate. Likewise, the gamemaster should have a way to reward players who are making positive contributions to the story and making things enjoyable for the whole group. To help you in times of crisis, we offer Coins, a metagame resource that allows the player to help his character succeed at the things that are important to him.

At the most basic level, Coins represent a “carrot and stick” rewards system for the gamemaster. When the gamemaster hands out Coins as a reward, the players will feel encouraged to keep doing the things that earn them those Coins. Likewise, the gamemaster can withhold Coins to steer the players away from annoying or disruptive behavior.

All player characters start out each adventure with one Coin. During play, they may earn more Coins, and spend them to gain advantages in the game. There is no limit to how many Coins a player can have at a time.

If possible, use a physical representation for your Coins. Pennies, poker chips, glass beads, pieces of candy, or anything else that you can hold in your hand. It makes them much more interesting than just numbers on a sheet.

Break the Bank

Don't be afraid to take the initiative! If you rely too much on the gamemaster to spoon-feed you Coin opportunities, you may find yourself running out of Coins very quickly. Coins are to be earned, not given. Get yourself into trouble, and find opportunities to earn Coins for yourself.

3.1. Earning Coins

Coins are rewards from the gamemaster for making the game more fun and exciting for everyone. When a character does something to improve the game, he earns a Coin on the spot. Coins are a reward for actions that go above and beyond the call of duty. The gamemaster can present events that may stir the character's hopes and fears, but if the player doesn't act on them, the opportunity is lost. No risk, no reward.

- You can gain Coins through an act of dramatic heroism. Dramatic heroism requires a great risk to accomplish a deed that is important to the character and goes along with the overall plot and style of the game. Success or failure is of secondary importance; the courage of the character is more important than the luck of the dice. The stakes must be high, and it must advance the story along.

Example: Adam's nemesis, the syndicate kingpin Raimondi, is making his escape while several of his men cover him with gunfire. Throwing caution to the wind, Adam charges forward and blasts away at Raimondi's thugs, trying to catch up to the mobster before he gets gunned down. It's a very dangerous move, but Adam's player has decided that he wants to take down Raimondi regardless of the odds. The gamemaster hands Adam's player a Coin, though he may need to use it soon!

- You can gain Coins through exceptional roleplaying of your character's Traits and personality, especially when such actions detail a key point in the character's life. Major events that help accomplish the character's personal goals or times when they are faced with serious moral dilemmas can be worth Coins. Events or choices that play off your character's Motive are good sources of Coins. Your fellow players can lobby the gamemaster to award Coins for particularly clever or stylish moments of roleplaying that make the game more fun as well.

- You earn a Coin when things become more complicated for your character.

Complications arise when parts of a character's background or personality up the stakes of the conflict. Such complications shouldn't cause a major change to the plot, but instead make things more personal for the character. New things can be introduced, but the overall plot shouldn't be drastically derailed. Both the player and the gamemaster can propose complications, however, the gamemaster can veto anything that is either too distracting or is being used too much.

Example: Adam is hot on the trail of a notorious gangster. When the gangster is revealed to be Adam's older brother, Adam now has to deal with a possible conflict of interest. Does he take down his own brother, or let a dangerous criminal go free? Playing out Adam's inner turmoil earns his player a Coin.

Complications are an excellent way to encourage the players to take a more proactive role in deciding the direction of the story and adding extra dramatic tension.

Contributing their own ideas makes the players feel empowered, and offering Coins sweetens the deal. These complications should not come without a price, however. Anything that gives a Coin should significantly up the stakes, and it should be clear that the player is facing a decision. He will have to live with the consequences of his actions.

- When the characters suffer a major setback, either from bad luck with the dice or a twist in the plot that benefits the bad guys, the gamemaster can offer the players a Coin to soften the blow of getting hosed. For example, a miraculous escape that a recurring villain uses to avoid capture would refund a Coin to the players, since it unfairly detracts from their victory. Giving out Coins like this is a way to reward the players for ingenuity while the gamemaster saves his plot from a premature end. Think of this as the converse of introducing a new plot element.

3.2. Spending Coins

So, what can you do with your hard-earned Coins?

- You may spend a Coin to re-roll any one of your rolls, keeping the higher result. You may do this as many times as you wish.

Example: Adam needs to short circuit a force field holding him in a prison cell. He rolls the dice and gets a 1 and a 3. Adam's player spends a Coin to re-roll that roll, and he throws two 5s this time, giving him a new die total of 10 instead of 4.

- You may spend a Coin to introduce a new plot element into the game. This allows you to make an addition or change to the story that may make your life easier, such as knowing someone or something about your location that hasn't been explicitly mentioned before, or getting a lucky break. The gamemaster has veto power over such additions. Using a Coin in this way shouldn't completely sidestep or subvert a major element of the plot, but instead make things more convenient. Asking for small details that make sense in a given situation do not cost a Coin.

Example: After breaking out of his cell, Adam's player spends another Coin to discover an unlocked supply closet. Inside, he finds a jumpsuit to help him blend in with the rest of the people in the prison, as well as a heavy wrench he can use as a weapon. Finding a loaded gun or the prison's master key would have strained credibility too much, and the gamemaster would have vetoed it.

- When you are on the receiving end of an unpleasant consequence from missing a roll badly or losing combat, you can spend a Coin to ease your troubles. You cannot fully mitigate the effects of failure, but you can ask for a concession from the winning side.

- You can spend a Coin to “push” the ability of one of your Traits. This allows you to perform more powerful or stylish feats that you typically could not accomplish with the Trait the way it is defined. Spending a Coin this way extends the Trait’s capability, but only for that one action.

Example: Lana Kelli isn't very good at controlling her ability to fly. When her brother falls off of a tall building, Lana wants to catch him safely. Doing so pushes the power of Lana’s flying ability Special. The gamemaster allows it when Lana’s player spends a Coin.

- You can spend a Coin to ask for a hint from the gamemaster. The gamemaster can point out a clue that has been overlooked, or a detail that you may have forgotten.

- If you are about to receive a wound at any time, you can spend a Coin to avoid receiving that wound.

- You can turn Coins into experience points to improve your Traits at the end of an adventure. How this works will be explained below.

3.3. The Economy of Coins

Managing Coins is key to success, especially for the gamemaster. The more Coins that are in play, the more the players will use them. Likewise, if the gamemaster is more frugal with giving out Coins, the players will hoard them. Increasing the Coin rewards makes the action more cinematic, and encourages the characters to get into more trouble and improve their Traits faster. We recommend handing out around two or three Coins per game session, more if there is a lot of action, and less if there is mostly just downtime and roleplay. For games where the action moves more slowly, such as one played over the Internet, Coins should come slower as well.

Compare how the players are spending their Coins versus how often they are being given out. If the players are constantly broke, is it because the gamemaster is being stingy, or because they are spending their Coins frivolously, or because there are too many high stakes rolls going on?

3.3.1. The Gamemaster's Coins

Minor non-player characters typically don't have Coins, though some of the more important people in the game may have one or two. The Big Bads of an adventure should have several Coins, enough to give the PCs a significant challenge. Non-player characters do not improve their Traits with Coins, they seldom stick around long enough for wounds to become an issue, and only very important antagonists should be able to use a plot twist with a Coin. NPCs can use their Coins to either force a player to re-roll his dice, or to cancel the effect of a Coin that a player is spending.

At the end of an adventure, the gamemaster may give out a pool of bonus Coins for the players to divide among themselves. A good rule of thumb for this pool is a base of one Coin per player, plus one Coin for every Coin the gamemaster spent to bolster the enemies or otherwise make the player characters' lives more difficult.

Who wants to be a millionaire?

Rewards come in many types. Money, information, equipment, favors, and reputation all make great rewards for accomplishing a goal. Mix things up to create some variety and strengthen the characters' ties with their game world. Rewarding the party with a stronghold or similar base of operations can give them lots of fun in designing and ruling their home, as well as provide future plot hooks.

3.4. Improving your Traits

When there is a significant break in the action from the conclusion of a plot line or an adventure, the players may find themselves with a handful of Coins that are burning a hole in their pockets, and the characters should have a little time to regroup and reflect on their experiences. This is when characters can spend their Coins to improve their Traits.

Improving Traits to higher Ranks requires experience points, earned from spending Coins. One Coin can be turned into one experience point, which you can spend on any of your Traits. Put a tally mark next to that Trait on your sheet to indicate that you have spent an experience point there. After all of the experience points have been spent, everyone resets back to one Coin for the start of the next adventure. Coins and experience points cannot be “banked” and saved for later. You must use them.

To improve a Trait, you must accumulate a number of experience points for that Trait equal to its next Rank. So, increasing a Trait from Rank 5 to Rank 6 requires six experience points. To increase the highest-ranked Trait your character possesses, the cost is doubled. If several of your Traits are tied for the highest Rank, you need only to pay this extra tax once, since the others will no longer be the highest-ranked. Extremely difficult or intricate Traits, such as certain Specials, can also have their cost doubled to reflect the challenge of mastering these complex skills.

Example: Adam needs to be a better shot with his pistol. He currently has the Pistols Trait at Rank 5, so he needs six experience points to improve it. Adam’s player saves up a few Coins over the next few game sessions to buy the six experience points he needs, and increases the Trait’s Rank from 5 to 6. Adam now has Brawling and Pistols both at Rank 6. If he wants to increase either of these Traits to Rank 7, he will have to pay 14 experience points, since the cost for improving the highest-Ranked Trait is doubled.

New Traits can be bought for one experience point. The new Trait should be at Rank 3 or 4 depending on the rarity and complexity of the Trait, as per the Amnesty rule. For very complex Traits or Specials, the gamemaster can choose to start the new Trait at Rank 1.

3.4.1. Training

Characters can also spend downtime between adventures training their Traits to earn more experience points. It takes one week of training per Rank in a Trait to gain one experience point in that Trait. This rate assumes that the character is doing other things besides studying, such as getting rest, visiting friends, and having some leisure time. For extremely intense studies or access to exceptional trainers or teachers, this rate can be doubled to two experience points per week. Experience points may also be given as rewards in lieu of Coins if the player characters are spending a significant amount of session time roleplaying out their training.

Example: After Adam's last heist, he has enough money left to take an extended vacation. He finds a quiet place to lay low for a while and study up on his first aid skills, since he's had a few close calls lately. Adam's First aid Trait, defined on his sheet as treating simple injuries, is at Rank 3. Adam buys a new medical kit and field medic book and practices on himself while he relaxes on his vacation. Since his Trait is at Rank 3, it takes him three weeks to gain one experience point in this Trait.

Inheritance

If your player character dies or retires, you still get to keep your Coins. When you create or take control of a new character, you may use those Coins as normal right away. You may also turn those Coins into experience points and spend them on your new character, even if that new character will not join the story until the next adventure.

Chapter 4 - Extras

*We shape clay into a pot,
but it is the emptiness inside that holds whatever we want.*

While the core rules cover basic action resolution and combat, there are many ways you can modify them to add flavor and style to your games. The following optional rules demonstrate a few ways you can tweak the rules to customize your games. You can use these extras to fit the style of your gaming group and your story. Feel free to make your own new rules for your games as well.

4.1. Extra Specials

Specials break the rules. That's what makes them Special. Creative uses of Specials are good ways to change the way the game works. Here are some new ways you can use Specials.

4.1.1. Charge Specials

A Charge Special is a Trait that controls how other Specials connected to it work. The Charge Special represents a pool of "charges" that in turn can be used to activate other abilities, such as related Specials. When a charge is used, the Special temporarily drops by one Rank. At Rank zero, the pool is empty and no more charges can be used. Certain actions can add more charges to the pool and restore lost Ranks, up to the Special's normal maximum Rank. Coins can also be used to restore charges in a pinch, if the gamemaster allows it in your game. The exact properties of what a charge is and how they are recovered varies from game to game.

Example: Evelyn is a vampire in an urban horror game. All vampires possess a package of Specials that describes their powers. One of these is a Blood Power

Charge Special, representing the amount of energy the vampire has to sustain her unlife and power her mystical vampiric abilities. Blood Power is recharged when the vampire feeds on someone else's blood. Evelyn's Blood Power Special is Rank 5. Since it is currently at its maximum Rank, it has five charges.

Evelyn wants to use her vampiric power of hypnosis to seduce someone at a club who she thinks works for her rival. Using this power costs a charge from Evelyn's Blood Power, temporarily bringing it down to Rank 4. Evelyn rolls and adds her hypnosis Special's Rank, and succeeds. The lackey follows Evelyn into an alley and tells her everything he knows. Blood Power only indicates how many charges she has to spend. It doesn't affect how good she is at using her other powers.

After getting the information she needed, Evelyn decides to make an example of the lackey by killing him and drinking his blood. Draining a human is worth up to three points of Blood Power. Evelyn recharges one point, bringing her Blood Power back up to Rank 5. Since that is her maximum, she gains no benefit from the other two points that she could have gotten from killing the snitch.

Charge Specials are excellent ways to unite a package of abilities. This way, you can give a character many different tricks to play with, while at the same time giving them a unifying mechanic that links them together thematically. Charge Specials can also be a source of drama, if getting a charge is unpleasant, expensive, or requires something morally questionable.

4.1.2. Corruption Specials

Not all Specials are beneficial. Some can represent a slowly growing threat to the character, such as insanity, loss of humanity, drug addiction, or cybernetic-induced psychosis. Such undesirable Specials are most often used in horror or survival games. These effects are called corruption Specials. If you are using a corruption Special in your game, the group should work together to define it, how it works, and what kinds of events could trigger the Special to be tested.

When a character experiences something that might affect their corruption Special, the gamemaster can make them roll for it, adding the corruption Special's Rank to the roll. The difficulty of the roll should be proportional to the severity of the action that provoked it. Glimpsing a corpse is fairly minor, but watching your dead sibling climb out of her grave and attack you is much more disturbing and harder to endure. Minor things shouldn't make a character need to roll at all, since he is already too hardened against such horrors. If the roll succeeds, nothing serious happens. If the roll fails, then the character suffers a short-term consequence and immediately gains another Rank in the corruption Special. This way, the character becomes more jaded as he grows closer to maxing out the corruption Special, making it harder for him to be affected by the same things.

The gamemaster can also ask for corruption Special rolls to test for minor lapses of will when the character is tempted to give in to his corruption. He does not become more jaded, but he may partially lose control for a little while.

Example: In an occult conspiracy game, the main characters have a corruption Special called Horror, which is used to measure growing insanity from exposure to unnatural things.

While searching an old house, an investigator is surprised to find a mutilated body hanging in a closet. The investigator has Horror at Rank 4. The gamemaster makes the investigator's player roll his Horror trait, and he fails. The poor investigator has a panic attack, and his Horror increases to Rank 5. If a mad cultist with Rank 8 Horror had seen the body, it would be easier for him to shrug it off, since he adds 8 when making a Horror roll instead of 4 like the investigator just did. He may even not have to roll at all, since the mad cultist has seen so many mutilated bodies in his time they don't affect him very much any more. When the investigator captures the cultists responsible for the murder, the gamemaster lets the investigator's Horror drop by one Rank back down to 4, since he has triumphed over the forces of evil and regained some of his confidence and self-control.

If a corruption Special reaches Rank 10, then something very bad happens to the character. He may go insane for a longer period of time, succumb to his inner darkness, or whatever else is appropriate for your game. This should take the character out of play for a while, or possibly even permanently.

Obviously, the players wouldn't want a corruption Special to gain experience points and advance in Rank, so corruption Specials cannot gain experience. It is possible to lose Ranks in a corruption Special by defeating your demons or getting help from someone who can treat the affliction. A corruption Special's Rank cannot go lower than zero.

Certain items or deeds in the game may cause a character to irrevocably slide closer to corruption. If a player is willing to sacrifice some of his character's sanity for power, he can do so by agreeing to take on permanent ranks of corruption. Depending on the impact on the character's life and the game balance, taking on such a tainted power gives one permanent rank of a corruption special, or more than one rank if it is a particularly drastic effect. The gamemaster shouldn't force a character to take permanent corruption ranks; this must be something that the player agrees to have happen to his character. Permanent Ranks increase the character's minimum corruption level as well as increasing their current corruption Rank. Getting rid of these permanent Ranks should require at the very least that the ability or item that bestowed those Ranks must be given up, and even then some serious atonement may still be required.

Example: Sami is a cyberpunk character who wants to become a better fighter. She visits a cyber-doc who gives her wired reflexes; a type of cybernetics that makes Sami much faster. The characters in Sami's game world have a corruption Special called Cyberpsychosis, which represents how close they are to losing their humanity due to overindulgence in cybernetics and other psychologically-damaging alterations to their bodies. The gamemaster warns Sami's player that adding wired reflexes will give her permanent ranks of Cyberpsychosis, but Sami agrees to take

this burden. Sami receives two permanent ranks in Cyberpsychosis, since wired reflexes is a very invasive process that gives her a major advantage in combat. Sami's Cyberpsychosis Rank was previously at 3. Taking these two permanent ranks bumps her up to Rank 5. No matter what, Sami's Cyberpsychosis Rank can never go below 2, since she now has two permanent ranks.

4.1.3. Exotic Species

Players are naturally not limited to playing human characters. If there are other fantastic or alien species in the game world, they may choose to play a non-human character if the gamemaster allows it. Non-human characters often have special racial abilities that can allow them to do unusual things. Such characters can receive a predetermined package of Specials to represent these unique traits and privileges. Choosing a non-human race does not give any direct modifier to a character's abilities, but it can suggest guidelines as to what those abilities should be skewed towards to. Certain races may also require a minimum or maximum Rank for some Traits to represent areas their race is particularly strong or weak in. Be sure to add a few drawbacks if a new race is too attractive of a choice, otherwise all your players may want to take it.

Example: The highborn Elves are one of the oldest races of the magical lands of Laesah, and they have many abilities that set them apart from humans. Elves do not age, feel neither cold, nor heat, nor fatigue, and they have the ability to learn magical spell-songs. The gamemaster can simply create an Elven Racial Traits Special that confers all of these abilities in one easy package. All elf characters receive this Special. Elves also tend to have strong powers of perception and self-control, however, they are not as durable as humans. Elves must possess an Awareness Trait of at least Rank 5, and cannot have a toughness Trait higher than 7. While most elves are graceful and lovers of beauty, a player can certainly choose to play a brutish barbarian elf if the rest of the group approves of the concept. Sometimes, bucking a stereotype can be a good source of drama.

4.1.4. Magical Items

A staple of most fantasy games, magical items can bestow almost any type of extra ability on their bearers. They may have their own Trait with can be likened to, or they may confer a Special ability. Like a Special, you should define exactly what the item can do, and what limitations it has, if any. Here are a few ideas to help you think up your own magical items. Remember to give your special items some extra description to them. A “sword +1” isn’t very inspiring, but the “black-bladed Sword of Demonsbane (Rank 8)” sounds a lot cooler.

Shield of the Dwarven lords -- A magical shield that bears the crest of a master dwarven armorsmith. Once per adventure, the bearer of this shield can negate one strike received in combat.

Etherium elixir -- A vial of blue-green elixir made of condensed magical energy. When consumed, the potion restores three charges of an appropriate magical power Charge Special. This can increase the Special’s Rank above its normal maximum, but these extra charges are lost after a few minutes.

My Precious!

A powerful magical item may also have a hefty cost to using it. You can use the Corruption rules to represent a growing evil influence that comes with possessing a magical object.

Vicious kris -- An armor-piercing dagger characterized by its triangular shape and extra weight in the handle. When used in combat, it reduces any bonuses the enemy receives from armor to zero. The dagger must be polished with special oils once per month, or it loses this ability.

Bloodweed poison -- A bottle of lethal poison that is used to coat a bladed weapon. When used in combat, if a character inflicts any strikes on his opponent, he instantly gives his opponent a wound from the poison. The poison must be reapplied each combat round for it to have any effect.

4.2. Mass Combat

Large battle scenes between armies or ships can be run using the combat mechanics. Using these rules, ships are treated as extensions of the character. They give modifiers to rolls like weapons do, but they are also capable of receiving strikes and wounds like a character. The Traits that you assign your ship will give modifiers to the crew onboard when they make rolls to use or control the ship's functions.

For the purposes of the following rules, any large vehicle, group, or fighting force is referred to as a "ship," and is treated as one cohesive unit. A ship can be a pirate galleon, a space cruiser, or a military platoon, depending on the nature of your game. The rules are the same.

4.2.1. Defining the Ship

When designing a ship, you define its abilities just as you would for a character. Start with a basic description of what the ship is and what it can do. Define the ship's qualities in as much or as little detail as you wish, but you should at least define the ship's combat ability Trait, since ship-to-ship battles should occur often when using these rules. Powerful sensors, an experienced crew, or an armored hull are all examples of ship Traits. Sub-weapons, such as missiles or bombs, can give an additional advantage in combat, but are consumed when used. If the ship has enough sub-weapons to be able to use them for a long time, just count them as part of the ship's firepower.

Example: Adam's gamemaster is writing down the definition of the Myrmidon-class superiority fighter. It's a fast ship optimized for forward combat and engaging other fighters. The Myrmidon has strong lasers, good engines, and powerful shields. The Myrmidon has a Combat Ability Trait at Rank 6. However, after five rounds of combat without stopping to resupply, the Myrmidon's supply of missiles will be exhausted, giving it a -1 penalty in combat until the ship lands and reloads.

Ship Traits should be defined relative to other ships of roughly the same size. A pair of hyperlasers might give a one-man fighter a Rank 5 Firepower Trait, but a destroyer may need multiple heavy particle beams to get that same Rank 5. The effects of ship size come into play when two ships of different sizes are in conflict.

4.2.2. Ships in Combat

Like a character, the ship has strikes, and it can receive wounds when it is damaged. When a character uses his ship in combat, the ship is the one that takes strikes and wounds. The ship only counts as one participant in the battle for the purposes of assigning strikes, no matter how many crew are on board helping with the fight.

When a player character is at the command of a ship, he may use his Traits to improve the ship's performance. The player rolls his Piloting, Command, or similar Trait, and uses that as a helping roll to boost the roll made by the ship's Traits. However, in situations that are more dependent on the skill of the operator than the quality of the equipment, these roles may be reversed. The ship's Trait makes a helping roll to boost the character's roll instead. Regardless of where the help comes from, this does not count towards the one helping roll per character limit.

Example: The capital ship Victorious only has average sensors (Rank 4). However, the helm officer in charge of the sensor array is one of the best in the fleet (Rank 7). When the Victorious is scanning an asteroid field for traps, the helm officer may use his Rank 7 Starship Operations Trait as a helping roll to boost the Victorious' Rank 4 Sensors.

During the scan, the sensors pick up an anomalous reading. The helm officer has to rely on his experience and knowledge to accurately interpret it. In this case, the ship's Rank 4 sensors give a helping roll to his Rank 7 Starship Operations Trait. The helmsman succeeds his roll, and is able to correctly identify the readings as the energy signatures of stealth fighters! Frantically, he alerts the captain of a possible ambush. The captain sends out fighters to intercept the enemy. The fighter pilots are

heavily reliant on their own skills in a dogfight, so their ships' Traits will be helping their Piloting rolls. Depending on the scope of the battle and the resources of the players, each fighter can be treated as one participant in the battle, or the entire fighter squadron could count as one unit.

4.2.3. Scale

Ships can vary greatly in size, from a small rowboat to a first-class destroyer. Smaller ships may be more maneuverable, but they may not be able to effectively damage larger ships. If a ship's size gives it an advantage, assign a +1 or +2 modifier. The exact definition of what difference in size is worth a bonus depends on the game world and the gamemaster's judgment, but giving out a size bonus should indicate that the other ship is significantly outclassed in terms of overall ability by virtue of size alone. This size bonus does not count towards the maximum situation modifier of +3. Remember, a larger size may give you more firepower and toughness, but there are times when being small and maneuverable is a more important advantage. Size bonuses do not always automatically go to the larger ship.

If a size bonus is +3 or larger, then the difference in size is simply too great for the ships to fight each other effectively. However, the smaller ship can try to get close enough to the larger and target its weak points, while the larger ship fights them off with its point defenses. This can change things from combat between two ships to a series of rolls against a target number to indicate the difficulty of the smaller ship's goal. A group of smaller ships can also work together as a squadron to negate some of the larger ship's size bonus. Effectively, the group of small ships counts as one single unit of a larger size, and is treated as such for all combat purposes. How many ships it takes to count as a squadron depends on your game's theme.

Example: Adam's Myrmidon-class fighter is no match for a space station the size of a small moon. However, Adam has learned of an unguarded exhaust port that could destroy the station if hit accurately with a bomb. Of course, the port is well guarded by enemy fighters and laser batteries. Adam plans to fly along the surface of the

station to strike at the weak spot. He has to last long enough against the enemy fire to reach his target before his ship is destroyed. Adam's player must make a series of Piloting rolls before he receives three strikes and loses the conflict. The difficulty of these rolls is dependant on the station's point defenses.

Massive battles can be abstracted using these rules, but you don't need to make dozens of rolls for the events happening on the other side of the battlefield. Focus your attention on the player characters and their actions, and let the rest fade into the background. Combat far away from the player characters can be quickly resolved by only the gamemaster's ruling. No rolls are needed. The actions of the player characters should have an impact towards the final result of the larger battle, depending on how well they succeeded in their own fights.

4.3. Dueling

In games that heavily feature a certain style of fighting, such as sword dueling or dogfighting in planes, these rules can add more flavor to your fights. Each fighter in a duel chooses to attack in a certain style. If you can second-guess your opponent and pick the right style, then he will be at a disadvantage. The rules for dueling assume that the combatants are relatively equal in scale. A small plane could not effectively duel a huge zeppelin, for example.

When two characters are in a duel, each chooses a certain type of fighting style secretly before making their combat roll. Both sides reveal their choices at the same time. Each style is strong against some opposing techniques, while weak against others. Here is a simple system with three options, each one strong against one and weak against another. If you wish to customize your styles further, you can give them appropriate sounding names or add more choices. If you want your choice to have more of a consequence, you can give each style an additional perk to using it.

Power Attack -- Power Attack uses a strong offense that lacks in finesse but can crush through most defenses. It defeats Sure Attacks.

Fast Attack -- Fast Attack emphasizes agility to evade incoming attacks while striking back swiftly and repeatedly. It defeats Power Attacks.

Sure Attack -- Sure Attack is a technique that waits for the perfect moment to strike while relying on defense to ward off weaker blows. It defeats Fast Attacks.

When the duelists reveal their choices, the fighter who chose the defeated style receives a -2 penalty to his combat roll. If both duelists choose the same style, neither one gets a penalty.

Example: A cavalier is in a duel against a pirate. The cavalier expects that the pirate will try to crush him with a power attack so he picks a fast attack to counter him. Both the cavalier's player and the gamemaster (who controls the pirate) reveal their choices. Sure enough, the pirate has chosen a power attack. The pirate's combat roll is now at -2, because the cavalier's fast attack defeats the pirate's power attack. The cavalier dodges the pirate's incoming slash with his superior speed.

Adding fighting styles is a good way to split up a commonly used fighting Trait. Instead of just learning a Swordsmanship Trait, a sword fighter must take each of the three styles as separate Trait. When he chooses to use that style, he must use his rank in that style's Trait. If a character becomes too specialized in only one style of attack, he may find himself in trouble once he encounters enemies that will always pick a style that beats him.

If there are more than two people on a side in a duel situation, each character should decide who they are fighting against, and form their own sub-duel with only the enemies he is engaged with. Each sub-duel is resolved independently of the other fights. Characters who are solely providing help in a duel do not get the -2 penalty if their side picks the losing style.

The rules for dueling can be combined with the rules for ship combat. The choices available to you represent various tactics and maneuvers your ship may perform. For further customization, you can split up the ship's Combat Ability Trait for different maneuvers, just like you would for a duelist. For example, a ship that wishes to perform a power attack may use its Firepower Trait for that roll.

Example: In a world of World War Two-era dogfights, the gamemaster chooses to use the dueling rules to add more excitement to airplane combat. The Dogfighting Trait is broken up into three Traits for dogfighting: Nerve, Reflexes, and Awareness. All airplanes in the game world have the following three Traits: Firepower, Maneuverability, and Accuracy. A different combination of Traits is used to make each attack.

- For a Power Attack, Nerve and Firepower are used.

- For a Fast Attack, Reflexes and Maneuverability are used.

- For a Sure Attack, Awareness and Accuracy are used.

The game still includes a Piloting Trait for things that fall outside the scope of an aerial battle, such as weathering a storm or landing on the narrow surface on an aircraft carrier. While anyone who can fly will have a Piloting Trait, not all pilots are fighter pilots.

You can combine charge Specials with the dueling rules to make a more complex system. Continuing with the above example of dueling pilots, you can make certain maneuvers grant a charge of altitude, representing advantage from being higher in the skies. These charges can be used to activate more powerful maneuvers in turn, such as diving attacks.

4.4. Coin Tricks

Changing the way Coins work is another way to subtly change the pace and style of the game. When you change the way Coins work, you influence the interactions between players both with each other and with the story. Use changes like these to customize the “game” part of your roleplaying game to your style of play.

4.4.1. Hardcore Mode

This optional rule allows players to put their character’s lives on the line for the things that are very important to them. The player gets an immediate supply of Coins, but his character’s life is now in jeopardy. This lets the player decide when the stakes of a conflict are life and death. Hardcore mode is most appropriate for climactic scenes when the players may need some Coins in a hurry and character death should become a possible ending.

A player may choose to enter Hardcore mode at any time. When he does, he immediately gains one Coin, and any strikes he has are instantly erased, with no wound received. However, if that player’s character strikes out while in Hardcore mode, the character dies, and can no longer be played. No escape, no exceptions. He has no plot immunity to protect him from being killed; not even Coins can save him. Additionally, Hardcore characters cannot gain experience points by any means. Players can get out of Hardcore mode by repaying two Coins to the gamemaster.

4.4.2. Collaborative Authoring

If one of the players has an idea that they would like to add to the game, they can propose it to the gamemaster. Characters, locations, additional setting details, or even plot lines can be suggested to the gamemaster. If the gamemaster likes the offered ideas and adds them to the game, he may reward the player with a Coin. The gamemaster can veto such proposals if they would clash with his plans.

This is not the same as spending a Coin to introduce a new plot element. Rather, it is an attempt to add something to the game that does not give an immediate, direct benefit to the characters. Think of them as being long-term complications. Adding a friendly duke in a nearby castle would cost a Coin, but if the duke is hostile or far away instead, the gamemaster should give the player who suggested the complication a Coin when the duke becomes part of the story. If the party simply chooses to bypass the hostile duke they get nothing, since the story did not gain any complication.

4.4.3. Flaws

A flaw is a type of undesirable or double-edged Trait that represents a persistent negative influence on a character, such as a stringent code of honor, or a recurring nemesis. Like complications, they can make life more difficult for the character. However, a flaw can strike more often than just once. Flaws are a significant part of the character's background, which is why they are listed on the character sheet.

A flaw is treated like a plot complication. When a character's flaw makes his life more difficult, he earns a Coin. Both the player and the gamemaster can choose when and how the flaw affects the character. If the flaw is subverted, ignored, or played in a disruptive way, it should not earn a Coin. An archenemy who never shows up or a code of honor that the player uses to always twist the group's choices his way is worth nothing. Likewise, the player can refuse to bring his flaw into play when prompted by the gamemaster, but this should instead cost the player a Coin for avoiding an unpleasant handicap.

Steal Your Help

Flaws that have Ranks attached to them may be used for linked tests by other people if they are taking advantage of your weakness. If you have the flaw of Greedy, someone trying to bribe you can make a linked test using your flaw, and add it to his total.

Flaws can sometimes be used to gain a positive effect. A code of honor might help protect you from temptation, or a habitual drinker may have some liquor on him to start a fire when he really needs a distraction.

Like Traits, flaws are a part of who the character is. They should not be easy to get rid of. Removing a flaw should require some serious self-improvement and soul searching, not just throwing Coins at it to make it go away.

4.4.5. Breaking Down the Bank

This optional rule changes the way Coins are distributed. Each player has the ability to give out Coins to his fellow players as a reward, just like the gamemaster can, using the same criteria found in Chapter 3. You can choose to limit each player to giving out only one or two Coins per session, or you can have no limit and make the players the sole source of Coins. If a player has reached the limit for the session, he can give another player a Coin from his own stash instead. Once you have received a Coin from another player, you can use it normally. And no, you can't give Coins to yourself.

This rule changes the style of play by making the rewards come from your fellow players instead of the gamemaster. This will encourage the players to please each other to get Coins, and draws the focus from the individual into the group dynamic. It also creates a more competitive environment between the players, and pushes the gamemaster back into the role of narrator rather than the adversary. Groups where there is conflict between the player characters may benefit from this rule, but strong teams who want to crush the bad guys may be more interested in fighting a villain presented by the gamemaster instead, and would rather gain their Coins that way. The gamemaster may need to intervene if the players try to beat the system by just giving each other Coins for no reason.

4.4.6. Spare Some Change?

If a player is in need of a Coin but has none to spend, a fellow player can give him some of his own. Each time Coins are transferred from one player to another, the gamemaster charges a one Coin commission on the trade. The loaner must pay one more Coin than he intends to give to his friend, which the gamemaster keeps. For example, giving someone two Coins actually costs three, since the gamemaster takes one as his commission.

4.5. Game Hacks

These are a few new rules to tweak the basic mechanics in order to further customize the game to your particular style of play. You can change just about anything in the way the game works. For example, you could introduce a rule that causes something to happen when a player rolls doubles, even though there's nothing in the rules that mentions doubles. As long as everyone in your group agrees, try it to see if it's fun for you. Since changing the core mechanic can affect the game in unpredictable ways, you may want to playtest your new hacks for a little while first.

4.5.1. Three's a Crowd

This is an alternate way to roll the dice for more cinematic games, where the characters are still constrained by the normal rules of reality, but are much less likely to fail at the average task. When using this rule, the players roll three dice and keep the best two whenever they would normally make a roll.

Since this rule increases the average die roll slightly, any references to "Taking 7" should instead be replaced with "Taking 8." Minor non-player characters can continue to take 7 instead of 8 to further emphasize that the player characters are heroes who can easily defeat minor henchmen.

4.5.2. Instant Gratification

Here's a way to change how experience works. When a player spends a Coin to get a re-roll, the Trait that he is using immediately gets an experience point. This gives a further incentive to spend Coins during the game, but it may also reduce the tension from deciding whether you want to succeed versus having more experience points to spend later. While this rule seems simple, the effect it has on your game's style can surprise you. Use it with care.

4.5.3. Tiebreaker Traits

Certain abilities or privileges can confer a small advantage on a character, important in flavor but not enough to warrant a +1 bonus. In these cases, you can rule that such an ability is a tiebreaker in certain specific situations. A tiebreaker turns a tied roll into a success with a margin of victory of one. If two people on opposing sides of a conflict have applicable tiebreaker Traits, they cancel each other out. Two tiebreakers may be combined to give a flat +1 bonus. Characters may also have "negative" tiebreakers that cause them to lose ties instead.

Tiebreakers are good ways to implement abilities that may not make suitable Traits. They can be used to represent character quirks, emotional strengths, or personality flaws. Giving your character a few tiebreaker Traits can be a good way to better define the style of your character. Someone with a tiebreaker of "daring pilot" will always have an advantage in a battle in the skies, it's an integral part of who he is.

4.5.4. Everything in Moderation

If you find that the luck of the dice is causing too many improbable victories or defeats, you can choose to re-roll all rolls of two or twelve, or declare that these rolls count as sevens. This makes the lowest possible roll a three, and the highest possible an eleven. Using this rule will prevent huge margins of victory or defeat, and make stunning upsets less likely. This rule gives a slight edge to the players, since they will typically have the advantage in terms of skill and equipment.

4.5.5. Health Points

The mechanism of strikes and wounds can be replaced with a simpler hit point mechanic if you prefer it. All characters have a number of abstract Health points equal to the Rank of a suitable toughness or vitality Trait. Major characters, such as the player characters, have one more Health point to signify their importance in the game and their extra toughness as heroes, while minor characters may have one less. This gives the average player character five Health points.

In combat, the margin of victory is subtracted from the loser's Health points. If someone lost a combat roll by two, they would lose two Health points. Lost Health does not give penalties to rolls like wounds. Health points are restored at a flat rate instead of being recovered at the end of battle like strikes. One point of Health per day is a simple system that is easy to keep track of.

Health is a more ablative way of perceiving the toughness of your character. It portrays combat as slowly whittling down the characters' resources. If you use Health in your game, you may find it helpful to have abilities and objects that quickly heal damage, such as magical healing potions. For a more cinematic take on Health, you can choose to automatically restore up to one point of lost Health at the end of each combat, to represent shock and pain from getting hit.

4.5.6. The Joy of Six

If you don't like the randomness that comes with re-rolls from spending Coins, you can change the way that rule works as well. When you use this hack, Coins do not give a re-roll. Instead, spending a Coin allows you to turn either one of your dice to a six. You can only change one die, and you can only spend one Coin on a roll. The only way to get double sixes therefore is if one of the dice is already showing a six.

When using this hack, the gamemaster's use of Coins is not affected. The gamemaster can still spend Coins to either cancel out one of the player's Coins or to

force a re-roll. Overall, this hack makes the player's Coins a little more powerful from a purely statistical point of view, since the players will most likely use them to boost ones and twos into sixes. It will also prevent the players from burning several Coins at once if their re-rolls were also unlucky.

4.6. Diceless resolution

If you are playing somewhere where rolling dice is impractical, you can use these rules to replace the standard rules for rolling dice. When a character wishes to perform an action that would require a roll of the dice, he starts with a roll of 7, just as if he was an NPC taking 7. The player then plays two games of rock-paper-scissors with another player or the gamemaster. The player adds 2 to his roll for each game he wins, and he subtracts 2 for each game he loses. A tie is neutral, and adds zero. Spending a Coin allows the player to undo the effects of one rock-paper-scissors game and try again.

Example: Using the diceless rules, Adam MacDougal is attempting to repair his spaceship. It's an average difficulty task, with a difficulty of 11. Adam's Mechanic Trait is Rank 3, and taking 7 gives him a base result of 10. Adam's player plays two games of rock-paper-scissors with the gamemaster, winning the first but losing the second. Adam gets a +2 for winning the first game, and a -2 for losing the second. These cancel each other out, leaving Adam still at 10. Adam's player spends a Coin to retry the game he lost, and he gets a tie this time. Now with one win and one tie, Adam's final modifier is +2, giving him a total of 12.

4.6.1. Do You Feel Lucky?

For more customization when using this method, the players can choose how many points they want to wager on each rock-paper-scissors game, to a minimum of 1 and a maximum of 3. This gives the players the option to play things safe or to take a risk if they want to go for a larger effect.

Chapter 5 - Gameplay

How can the drops of water know themselves to be a river?

The following chapter explains some of the whys and wherefores of the Impulse RPG. It contains information about how to use the rules to your fullest benefit, and how to style your games for the most enjoyment. Most of this chapter is written with the gamemaster as the intended audience, but the ideas within are useful to anyone.

5.1. Light, Intuitive, and Abstract

The Impulse RPG is designed to operate on an intuitive and abstract level. Traits are defined not only by their Rank, but also by their connotation. The Trait “Great Athlete (Rank 6)” can have many possible implications. Does the person with this Trait compete in triathlons, or does he do sit-ups all morning? The connotation ties in with the character’s background to emphasize this part of his life.

The abstract and minimalist nature of the Impulse RPG is designed to let the rules fade into the background as much as possible so that you can focus on the story. Character generation is freeform, so don't let the rules define what you can and can't have for your character. Try to stay true to your vision and don't let the rules become a straightjacket. Take the time to enjoy being in character and interacting with the game world, and don't worry about having the best possible Trait setup. Use concepts to describe things, such as saying, “a very wide chasm, one that you don't think you can leap across,” rather than, “a twenty-foot chasm.” Of course, if the characters are perfectly capable of making that twenty-foot jump, describe it instead as “a tricky jump, but certainly possible.”

A generic and rules-light system does not have the ability to enforce a certain style of play in and of itself. To create your desired game, you need to add in extras. By adding in extra rules and details, you are emphasizing that aspect of the story. For example, if you use the rules for corruption, you send a signal to the group that the struggle against corruption is going to be an integral part of the game. Extras are mechanical reinforcement for a type of action. They create a way to reward the players for certain actions, or conversely, punish them for other actions. Pick extras that will accomplish this goal. The more powerful extras, such as Coin Tricks and Game Hacks, can change the style and tone of the game on a much deeper level. These extras are best used to customize the rules to your group's preferred style of play. For more player interaction, try using the Breaking Down the Bank hack and the Collaborative Authoring coin trick. If you want to play a certain way, add rules that make it fun to play that way.

Since there are so few rules to learn, it is easy to improvise. You won't find explanations on how to handle every possible situation in this book; otherwise you'd need a forklift to carry it around. There is no need to flip through large amounts of rules or background information to find the one sentence that will tell you what to do in every situation. Just make it up. As long as you remain consistent in your rulings, you can improvise as much as you need to.

The Pitch

When you've got an idea that you want to pitch to your friends, write a one-page long advertisement like a trailer for a movie. Try to convey the basic premises of the world and the themes you would like to explore in broad terms. This will help get everyone thinking along the same lines right away. Once you have a pool of players, you can then brainstorm the setting in much greater detail and begin putting the party together.

5.2. Bring the Awesome

The Awesome is a moment of fun caused by good luck, good drama, or both. Rolling double sixes is good; rolling double sixes to smack down a nemesis your character has been chasing for weeks is Awesome. The Awesome can most easily be recognized by the cheers that come from the entire group, and the retelling of the event for years to come.

Bringing the Awesome takes cooperation and effort from both players and gamemaster. You can't bring the Awesome if you're just coasting; you need to have interest and enthusiasm. The gamemaster must present a detail or situation that grabs the player's interest, and the characters must take action on it. Depending on the game's theme, you can find Awesome in elaborate plot twists, over-the-top villains, dashing rescues, or wonderfully atmospheric descriptions. If the players respond with a cool in-character action, give them a reward.

If a player comes up with an idea that will add more fun to the story, go with it. Even if it's something you haven't planned on, say yes as much as possible. Unless you have a very good reason to say "No", don't. It puts a roadblock in front of the players and stops the action cold. You can say "Yes, but..." if there are obstacles in the way, but don't shoot down an idea just because you haven't planned for it. Players can have incredible bursts of creativity and ingenuity, and conjure solutions that you would never have thought of.

This doesn't mean that they can take a short cut to the finish every time. If every problem can be solved in just a few minutes, where is the suspense? Reward clever ideas, but be prepared to add caveats into any situation. As long as you continue to offer the carrot, and use the stick only sparingly, the game will approximately follow your intended path. If you use a light touch, the players will enjoy their perceived freedom.

5.2.1. Reading Your Players

Being able to gauge your players' interests is a difficult skill, yet an important one to learn. When you're looking for ways to spice up the game, look at the characters' Motives. These are the hot buttons that will most likely get a response from the players. Another thing to be aware of is what issues the players talk about with each other the most, both in and out of character. Once you've found something to grab their interest, you can alter your plans slightly to let the players get involved in the plot elements they are interested in while you add in steps that move the plot forward. This requires some flexibility on your part. Don't force the players down along a plot that they're not showing interest in. If they don't bite at a plot hook, recycle the idea. You can bring elements of it back later in the game.

For example, in one of my games the player characters were freelancers in a space opera. I had originally planned for them to explore a political mystery, but instead they got distracted with a planet in the hands of a criminal cartel. I altered my plans, and created a conflict on this planet, which the players were happy to investigate. Eventually, it was revealed that the forces behind the conflict had their roots in the political mystery I had planned before, but was never explored by the players.

Another place to find ideas is in your player's character sheets. Look for the first couple of Traits that the player wrote down. These are typically the highest ranked Traits as well. These are the parts of the character that the player wants to emphasize. A character with high Ranks in combat skills wants to beat up the bad guys. A character with thieving skills wants to be sneaky. Likewise, a character with a favorite piece of equipment will want to use it. Plan ahead, and give the players a chance to use those Traits and have a moment in the spotlight.

If most or all of the players have taken a similar Trait, then you can make those skills central to your adventures as well. On the other hand, if no one has a certain Trait, avoid situations that require it.

5.2.2. Complications, Not Roadblocks

Consider a locked door, which the party must open to continue. If the players fail their roll to pick the lock, what happens? Do they go home because they have been defeated by a locked door and a bad roll? Of course not. Remember, when a roll is failed, consequences are applied. What kinds of consequences could occur from failing a roll like the one in the above example? Perhaps the guard patrol arrives and catches the party in the act, or the villain gets a step closer to escaping.

Example: The party is attempting to convince a king to assist another nation in a campaign against an invading goblin army. However, the players' luck turns bad, and they fail their rolls to persuade the king. How could this add a complication?

- The king could be insulted that someone is demanding his military help, and imprison the player characters for their impertinence.

- The king could pretend to help, but secretly choose to ally against the player characters and support the goblins.

- The king could demand monetary compensation before he commits any of his troops to the battle.

If you can't think of any suitable consequences, then don't roll the dice. If there is no pressure, assume that the characters will find the clue or open the lock eventually. Use failed rolls to make the situation more complicated, and not to bring the action to a screeching halt. This is especially true in investigation-heavy games, where the players must discover certain key clues to keep the plot moving forward.

It is unrealistic to assume that the players will always win. If you always let them win, the players may begin to think that they are invincible, and thus do not need to make strategies or play well with others. Think of ways to set the characters back if they fail. Losing a battle may cost the party some of their resources, such as money to replace broken equipment and time to heal from injuries. Alliances can be lost, and villains may escape to torment them again.

5.2.3. Be Prepared

Enthusiasm is contagious. If the gamemaster is projecting a positive attitude, it will spread to the rest of the group. If you arrive to the game listless or uninterested, you'll find it very difficult to have fun. Before you come to the table, take a little time for yourself to relax or meditate, and charge your creative batteries. Come to your game feeling refreshed and full of energy.

Playing games should be fun. Don't obsess over minutiae and rules. If you take things too seriously, you may find your games taking on the tone of a business meeting and soon your game may feel like work. Don't be afraid to relax and enjoy yourselves. After all, you're hanging out with your friends, why not have fun? If people are suffering from burnout, do something else for a while. Take time away from the main plot and develop something else, play a different game altogether, or even—gasp!—let someone else take on the gamemaster hat for a session or two.

I am not a television!

There is just no way to plan every detail of a game. Whenever a player asks for a detail that you haven't thought of--and this will happen often--ask him to fill it in. Tapping your player's imaginations makes them feel more involved in the game world, and can give you insights on how they would like things to go.

If a player scouts over a hill that you haven't planned anything for, have him make a roll. If he succeeds, give him a chance to improvise something. If it adds a fun complication, give him a Coin. If it gives a sudden plot twist in the character's favor, make him pay a Coin to make it stick. Take the other players' ideas and build on them.

5.3. Game Worlds

A generic system such as the Impulse RPG allows a group of players to easily adapt their setting to fit within the rules. Since these rules are intended for maximum flexibility, the group is encouraged to modify the rules to suit the particulars of their game world, rather than vice versa.

Adding extra rules to your game provides a mechanical emphasis on certain aspects. This can be useful, if you want to draw attention to a particular feature of your game world. Extra rules can also give you more structure in certain situations by adding details or themes that are at the core of your game's theme. However, adding more rules can also add complexity you might not need. When you add an extra rules subset to the game, you say to the group, “this is important enough to the game that it merits more rules for it.” Of course, no system of rules is perfect for every group or every conceivable type of game world. If you find something in the basic rules that doesn't fit with the theme of your game, just change it. The Game Hacks section has many examples of how you can tweak the rules in this way.

5.3.1. The Gazetteer and Little Details

When your group is discussing what type of game you want to play, you should brainstorm the details of your desired game world. This can be just a quick list of bullet points describing the key features and themes, or it can be a large document with lots of details on daily life and faraway places. These world books are called “gazetteers.”

Exactly how much detail your world needs is up to you. Handing someone a 300-page encyclopedia of background information can be intimidating. Instead, use broader strokes, and add in the specifics for places when they become important to the game. The gazetteer should serve to bring all of the players onto the same page, and give them a general idea of what to expect and how to act in the game world.

The settings of your favorite books, movies, and video games are popular choices for roleplaying games to be set in. The flexibility of the Impulse RPG rules allows you to easily adapt to such settings. The advantage is that the group will have a familiar world that they are enthusiastic about, but you must be doubly certain that there are no misconceptions between some players' beliefs and what will be in the game. Create your own stories and conflicts; don't retread on the original works if possible.

Since the Impulse RPG rules set is abstract, you don't have to worry about fitting your world to meet a set of specific criteria. For example, let's say that you are planning a game world where airplanes are used to travel between floating islands, and you want each plane to have a Speed Trait. Define what you consider to be average speed for your game world. A plane with average speed has a Rank 4 Speed Trait. A plane that is a little faster has a Rank 5 Speed Trait. Exactly how much faster one plane is over another in miles per hour is unimportant. When the pilots of the two planes are in a race, the faster plane will give an advantage to the Piloting roll. By using concepts instead of numbers, you can convey your intent without having to worry about calculations.

5.3.2. A Little Help From My Friends

If your group has only a few players in it, you may need to have some supporting non-player characters to help with some of the team's functions. These people can be squires, engineers, navigators, or technicians to name a few possible roles. When the main characters are unable to participate in a scene, the player can temporarily take control of one of the supporting characters so they can be part of the action.

Example: After a few story arcs, Adam and Charlie are now founding members of their own mercenary company, and have several crew members to fill in for skills that are needed to keep their spaceship working. During a space battle, Adam can hop into a fighter and engage in battle, but Charlie lacks any sort of piloting ability. Charlie's player can instead take control of the group's other fighter pilot so he can

join the battle. When the fight is over, the pilot returns to the control of the gamemaster, and control of Charlie returns to his normal player.

Supporting characters should have their own character sheets with a few Traits and a Motive for them. When a player is controlling another character, they take their Coins with them, and all normal rules for Coins still apply. Players should be limited to controlling only members of their entourage that are actively adventuring with them. They should not be allowed to take control of powerful NPCs who can easily trounce any opponent or reveal secrets key to the plot.

5.4. Campaigns From Beginning To End

The first adventure of your group often has some "growing pains" associated with it. The player characters need to gather and they need a direction. Hopefully, you've answered these questions before play began, but there may still be a need for some suspension of disbelief until the game gets under way. For the first adventure or two, focus on learning to work as a team, and build up your character's relationships with the other player characters. One way to overcome this obstacle is to begin "in media res," and throw the characters directly into harm's way. This quickly gets their attention and forces them to focus on the problem at hand.

The early game is also a time of exploration. The player characters will most likely need some base of operations, regular sources of information, and adventure hooks. The first adventure can afford to restrict the player's choices a little; just so that the first few plot elements can be revealed. Again, deciding on the first adventure can be part of the pre-game discussion, especially if you want to start the game in media res. After that, try offering a variety of plot hooks to the characters, see which ones they bite at, and let their desires drive the story forward. Once the characters have been established in their game world, they should broaden their available resources and get at least a general idea of what's going on. They can now be offered more freedom to pursue the things that interest them.

When designing a plot, I use the metaphor of the jigsaw puzzle. Each event or person is a piece of the puzzle, and through adventure and exploration the characters can see how they fit together. Once enough pieces are connected, the big picture is slowly revealed. Of course, you can include “red herrings,” leads that are dead ends, or false pretenses to keep the players guessing. However, resist the urge to punish them for no reason or reveal that all of their hard work was for nothing, or for an evil end. This leads to frustration and mistrust.

Do not rely on the player characters to do a specific set of events. There can certainly be an easy way to solve a problem, but you should never assume that the players will take this route, no matter how obvious you may think it is. If you're too committed to your plot, you may find yourself subconsciously trying to steer the players in that direction or even punishing them when they go against your plan. Learn to let go. Keep your ideas vague, and let the players forge a trail in that direction. Be willing to abandon ideas that are not working out. Try to design multiple solutions to a problem, and be ready to improvise when the players find a totally different one that you didn't plan for.

There is an old adage that says, “No plan survives contact with the enemy.” Trying to predict exactly what the players will do and how they will do it is nearly impossible; so don't build your plot around that preconceived notion. Instead, think about what the main non-player characters will do based on their own Motives. (You did give your important NPCs Motives, right?) What do they want, and what is their plan of action? If there are multiple major NPC groups in play, make plans for them as well. Finally, decide what will happen if there is no outside intervention from the player characters. Use broad strokes, since this scenario probably will not come to pass. When the player characters are introduced, they can choose sides in the conflict and wreak havoc among the NPC's plans. Once you understand the NPC's motives and goals, you can predict how they will react to the intrusion in their plans. This creates a very dynamic world as the NPC's plans are altered and they try to continue moving forward with their own agendas.

Improvisation is not as difficult as you might think. When you're trying to figure out what happens next, think about the background forces at work, and pick whatever seems like to most obvious choice to you. Remember, as the gamemaster you will have a lot more background information than the players' have, and you may take this for granted. Puzzles or mysteries that may seem completely obvious to you may not be so clear to your players. Don't worry about being grandiose or overly dramatic. Keep it simple to stay on track and keep the player characters as the stars of the show.

Near the end of the game, the player characters should be closing in on the main villain. He should be difficult to reach; otherwise the game might end prematurely. The villain may require a certain item, plan, or piece of information to make him vulnerable. He may be hiding in a lair that is either hidden or unassailable, and only come out to cause havoc once in a while. If your game has several layers of intrigue to it, the identity of the main villain may be hidden until the very end.

The end of the story should be the culmination of lots of preparation and experience. The characters should have grown stronger from the beginning of the game to be able to challenge the villain and his superior resources. Defeating the villain requires the best of plans and lots of resources. (Remember, as one of the main characters, the villain has Coins to use too, and probably a lot of them.) The climactic adventure should wrap up as many loose ends as possible, and leave the characters feeling that they have made a positive difference. When it's done, pop the champagne, celebrate, and retire your heroes into your group's Hall of Fame.

Of course, if you are reluctant to let go of a favorite character, there are always sequels....

The 1-page Rules Summary

All characters are defined by Traits, which represent their skills, talents, and other abilities. Each Trait is ranked on a scale from one to ten, with four being average. Special abilities, such as magic, super-powers, and other privileges are handled in the same way. The player defines what they can do, and how they work, along with any limitations on their power.

When a Trait is tested, the player rolls two six-sided dice and adds their Rank in the Trait. The margin of success or failure determines the quality of the attempt. When two characters are in direct competition with one another, one side rolls the dice, and the other adds 7 to their Rank. Supporting Traits can give modifiers to a roll.

In combat situations, the loser of the roll receives strikes depending on how badly he lost by. When a character receives three strikes, they have lost the battle and the winner receives their desired outcome. At the end of combat, all strikes are erased. If two or more strikes are erased, the character receives a wound that gives him a penalty until healed.

Characters also have a pool of Coins, which they can use to gain useful benefits, such as re-rolling their dice. More Coins are earned by contributing to the story in fun and useful ways. At the end of the adventure, Coins are converted into experience points, which may be spent to improve the character's Traits.

This is just the beginning! There are many ways to add to, modify, or customize the basic rules to add flavors or styles that you desire. The rules are designed to be modular and flexible so you can make the game your own.