

A Fistful of Darkness



Pat Gamblin



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A Fistful of Darkness is my first submission to the 2011 Movie Mash-up RPG design contest.

I've always liked westerns, and the Man With No Name trilogy is my favourite. Originally I planned to use The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly, but the warring factions from Fistfull of Dollars turned out to fit better, so I made a switch.

I'm also a huge fan of Dark City, so trying to put the two of them together into something fun and interesting was the first idea I had. Many thanks to the organizers for giving me a reason to watch both of them again.

The system itself was inspired by the one Fred Hicks used in Don't Rest Your Head. I loved that idea of rolling multiple dice pools at once and determining the action's results from the results. Hopefully my version of that idea turns out to be even half as fun.

Most of the game ideas that I have worked on have been for open sandbox-y settings, with long-term play in mind. This is a bit different, probably working best over a few sessions, then ending. If it works as intended, that is.

Let me know what you think of it.

Pat Gamblin



The World

Hey there. This is the part of the book about the game world. The first section, 'What is Believed,' contains what is fairly common knowledge to the people living in the area, whether it's true or not. The second section, 'What is True,' clears up the parts of the first section that are incorrect and presents additional information that is not commonly known to the population of the region. I would suggest that players stop when they get to the second section and skip ahead to the Rules chapter, to avoid spoiling any surprises from there that the GM may want to use.

What is Believed

The game is set primarily in a large city somewhere along the eastern coast of the United States of America sometime during the last few decades of the 19th century. Where exactly is it? What's the exact year? Those are up to the GM. Any large city such as Los Angeles or San Francisco will do. As for the year, it could be as early as the end of the American Civil War or as late as the turn of the century. Making it a time and place you are familiar with may help with the realism.

Things aren't quite what the characters remember, though. Things feel more oppressive. The Sun is harsher during the day and the nights are colder and darker than it feels like they used to be. No-one is sure quite why this seems to be so, but few people have the time to look into it.

City life is much as it has always been. Busy. Dirty. Crowds bustling all over. Some areas are getting a bit rundown, however, as nobody is keeping up the maintenance. In the villages outside the urban sprawl life is quieter and slower, with the occasional report of some strange beast to keep things lively. No one has yet captured anything beyond the pale, but that doesn't keep the stories from spreading. Stories laughed at by the city-dwellers when they hear them.

The news from back east has been late in arriving,



as well, increasing the feeling of isolation people are feeling. Even if they have never in their lives travelled more than a few days ride from home, it's still nice to read about what's been happening in northern, eastern, and southern U.S.

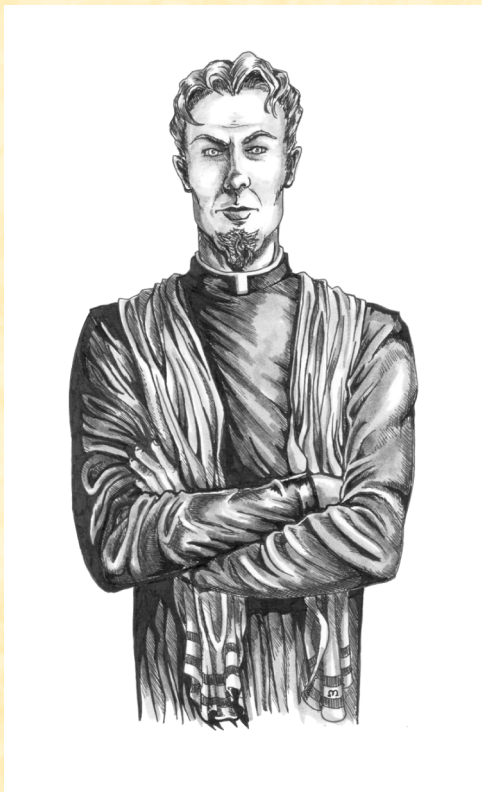
The player characters have been a part of this. Working in the city, or in a village, they have all of the same feelings and thoughts that others around them have.

At least until they Awaken.

What is True

Waking up is at first a puzzling situation, but should quickly become overwhelming for most characters. The first thing that happens is everyone around them falling asleep and all the clocks stopping. Any vehicle that was in motion slows to a stop quite quickly as well, as if it was just turned off. No matter what the characters do, they cannot wake anyone up. To anyone with medical training it looks more like the people are in a coma rather than asleep.

Just after this, if the characters are unlucky, they may see the Examiners. Thin, gaunt, grey-skinned people who often travel by floating through the air or along the ground, any player character who sees them



feels repelled by them. If they get a look at the face of an Examiner, the thing they will notice immediately are their eyes. Not only do the Examiners seem not to have any, what they have in their place are deep pits of shadow. Nothing can be seen of an Examiner's eyes. it is as if they suck in all the light that reaches them, leaving nothing.

If the Examiners see the characters, the characters should run, fast.

This period of stopped time lasts usually for several hours from the point of view of the player characters, and ends as suddenly as it started. None of the 'Sleepers' ever notices it happen. Usually, some of the sleepers have had their lives or selves altered by the Examiners during their slumber. When they awaken, they have a different job, house, even personality and memories. In effect, they are a new person in the old person's body.

This can be quite disconcerting to a player character if it happens to someone they know. The person is usually no longer able to remember the character and may react with fear or anger if the player character insists that they do. If this happens to a loved one of one of the player characters, that character may become quite distraught. It is only known by the Examiners if it is possible to revert someone to an earlier set of memories, and they're not telling.

If a character sees an Examiner, or one of their hu-

man collaborators (there are dozens), force this change onto a person, what they see is the Examiner inject the person with some sort of liquid. The injection is made into the middle of the forehead. Medically-trained will know it seems to be targeting the pineal gland. The liquid is an organic, possibly living, compound that can do a number of things, depending on the mixture. Most of the time these injections are used to erase the subject's memories and surface personality traits (deep, core personality traits are almost impossible to erase, but may be modified) and replace them with the ones the Examiners desire. Sometimes, though, other mixtures are produced, ones capable of enhancing the subject instead of altering their mind. These are almost exclusively used by the Defender faction (see below).

Soon after their awakening, and usually during a stressful situation, the character will start to experience bursts of psychic energy. These are always a use of the character's special psychic ability and are quite taxing (and, usually, quite shocking). After this happens, the character will begin to notice that reality often seems to give in to their desires in small ways. In terms of the game mechanics, whenever a character uses their Control stat successfully to do something or as resistance on another character's roll, the world changes in a minor way. Maybe a window temporarily disappears in a wall, blocking an attacker's shot, or a set of steps grows much longer than it really could be so that people chasing you must move much faster to keep up with you. All of these effects are temporary, lasting no more than a few rounds or minutes unless the character initiating them has a Control stat of at least 5. At level 5 and 6, the character has attained nearly godlike ability in altering reality and can make long-lasting or permanent changes.

But who are the Examiners, as they call themselves? They are an alien species that has been conducting a huge ongoing experiment on an American city and the surrounding area. It has been going on for years, maybe decades. Few Awakened ever find out why, for if the Examiners find out there is another Awakened running around in their experiment, they do their best to hunt them down and eliminate them. The Examiners have a sort of localized hive-mind. They are telepathic, and any time two or more Examiners are within a few dozen metres, their personalities temporarily fuse into one personality with aspects of each of them. The larger the group, the more powerful the mind, and the more unified the actions. Examiner personalities are strong on curiosity, particularly scientific curiosity, logic, and

analysis. They are weak on empathy and many of their emotions (such as sadness, anger, or joy) are quite muted.

Fortunately for the Awakened there is another faction operating as well. This group of Examiners calls itself the Bax (Defenders in their language), separating themselves from the main group of Examiners (called the Ro, 'Analysts' in their home tongue). Where the Ro faction, lead by the enigmatic Shepherd, focus on an in-depth analysis of humans and their reactions to different situations, the Bax only wish to end the experiment and move on. The two groups also strongly disagree on what is to become of humanity. The Ro have been conducting the experiment to see how Earth can be most easily subsumed into the Empire, turned into a productive part of the greater whole. Once they have found, analysed, and replicated the spark of humanity (encompassing compassion, anger, joy, creativity, ambition, and similar human traits) they will use that knowledge to bring Earth into the Empire, by force if necessary (they try never to waste anything useful). This is referred to by them as the Great Work.

The Bax want to end the experiment now. Lead by the strangely emotional Keeton, the Bax want to use their technology to turn humanity into a military force. The Examiners have never seen a species that fights quite so readily as humans. The Bax believe that we are a risk to the Empire and should be used up assailing its enemies. Neither group has humanity's best interests at heart, but for the moment the Ro are in control and the Bax work around the edges of the region, sabotaging the experiment, usually with the aid of human collaborators. The Bax cannot directly engage the Ro because the Bax lack numbers. If they were to encounter a Ro group, they would quickly be swept up into the localized hive mind, becoming Ro and involuntarily passing on their secrets. So the Bax use human agents just as they would like to use all of humanity, to eliminate their enemies, and, hopefully, be eliminated in the process.

One of the benefits to humans of this is access to the occasional gift from Keeton or his associates. Gifts such as 'boosters.' Boosters are a form of the organic liquid used to erase and replace memories. Boosters, however, enhance the user for a short time, increasing one of their stats by 1 (2 if injected directly into the pineal gland) for a day. No human can take more than one booster without going insane for several days. There is a down side, however. For a day after the booster wears off, the character gets a penalty to the boosted

stat equal to the level of the boost). Boosters can also be used to send messages to the user in the form of implanted false memories. This is the primary method Keeton uses to communicate with his agents.

One final element of the mystery of the Examiners is the Great Machines. They are powerful devices buried far below the ground, and they are the source of the Examiners' (and the characters') power. The Examiners only true ability is a telepathic link to the machines they brought here to run the experiment. The ability that the characters develop is the same sort of connection to the machines, though one they do not initially understand. The Great Machines are psychic devices that amplify the mental abilities of anyone on the surface and that warp reality nearby when commanded to. They cannot change the base laws of physics, but can easily alter the shape and substance of materials in the area. They can even alter and control the flow of energy, such as with the Kinesis ability (see the character creation section).

But what about the rest of the world? Why do they not interfere? Nobody inside the area knows. If anyone has been able to get past the Examiners' border guardians and reach the rest of the world, they have not returned. Perhaps the Great Machines make anyone who approaches the area uninterested in continuing on. Maybe the Examiners actually transported the humans being tested to another world and all that lies outside the test area is alien wilderness. Exactly what the truth is in this case is up to the GM. If the players ever leave the experiment, or manage to end it, make it something memorable.

Non-Player Character Ideas

If an NPC does not have one of the normal stats, it isn't listed because it's 0.

Field Examiner

Control: 3 or 4

Endurance: 2 or 3

Skill: 3 or 4

Willpower: 4 or 5

Special Abilities:

Kinesis, Telepathy, and one other.

Other Notes:

These are the Examiners most likely to be encountered by the characters, unless they go hunting

for Shepherd or run across Keeton.

Ro Tracker

Control: 3 or 4

Endurance: 4

Skill: 3 or 4

Willpower: 3 or 4

Special Abilities:

Kinesis, Telepathy, and one of: Empathy, Extra-Sensory Perception, or Object Reading.

Other Notes:

These are the Examiners sent to hunt down an Awakened or a Bax agent.

Human Bax Agent

Endurance: 2 or 3

Luck: 2

Skill: 2 or 3

Willpower: 2

Special Abilities:

None, though they may have special equipment, including boosters.

Other Notes:

These are the human collaborators used by the Ro to monitor the subjects and by the Bax to infiltrate the city. Most know something is going on, but are well rewarded for their betrayal of humanity or memory-altered so they don't care or don't remember.

Keeton

Control: 6

Endurance: 5

Skill: 5

Willpower: 5

Special Abilities:

All of the ones listed in the character creation section.

Other Notes:

Keeton is the leader of the Bax faction. You can also use these stats for Shepherd, the leader of the Ro faction. They are identical in ability, only differing in goal and philosophy. Keeton rarely uses any equipment other than boosters (Examiners can use

up to 2 different ones at the same time, but most rarely do). Shepherd never carries anything other than the notebook for the experiment.

Small Border Monster

Endurance: 3

Skill: 3

Willpower: 1

Special Abilities:

May have light armour (reduce incoming damage by 1), spikes/claws/teeth (+1 damage in hand to hand fighting), special senses (ability to see at night), or even abilities from the character creation section for the stranger ones. Think of the types of things you would see in a Lovecraft story. Strange weirdness.

Other Notes:

Some seem to be things from other worlds.

Large Border Monster

Endurance:

Skill:

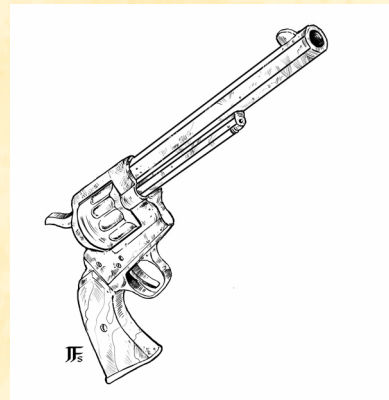
Willpower:

Special Abilities:

May have armour (reduce incoming damage by 1 or more), spikes/claws/teeth (+1 or more damage in hand to hand fighting), special senses (ability to see at night), or even abilities from the character creation section for the stranger ones. Think of the types of things you would see in a Lovecraft story. Strange weirdness.

Other Notes:

Some seem to be things from other worlds.



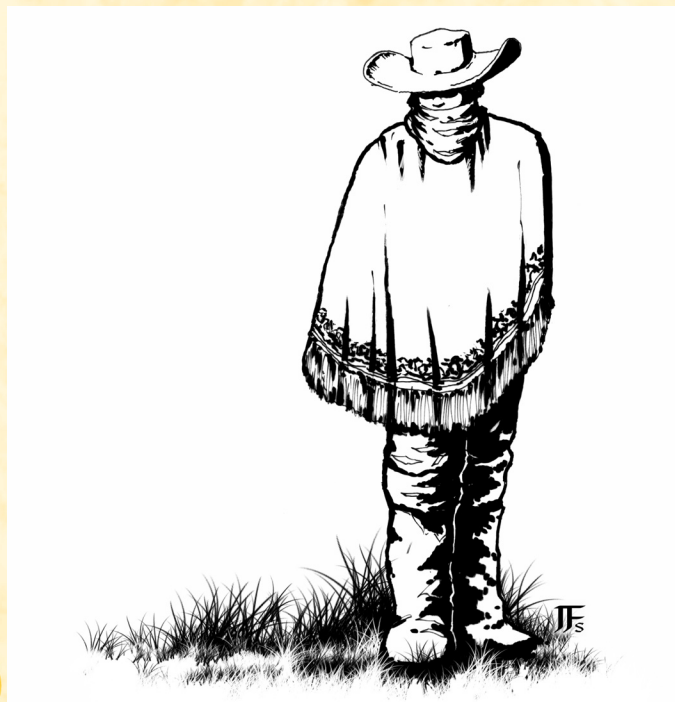
The Rules

Welcome to A Fistful of Darkness, a game of cowboys and reality-warping evil. I hope you enjoy your stay. In this section you will find rules for creating a character and for using that character in the game.

For this game you will need around a dozen standard six-sided dice, in three different colours (Preferentially white, black, and either red, green, or blue), as well as a copy of the character sheet.

Making a Character

The first thing to do is come up with a basic idea for who the character will be. The characters are people from the wild west who, for reasons unknown to them



at first, get involved in strangeness. Their first involvement in the game will be when everyone around them falls asleep suddenly and they do not. After that the character will begin to show the development of supernatural psychic powers. And after that things will only



get wierder.

What is their occupation at this point? This is an important, first step, as it decides what sort of things they will be good at. Are they a cowhand, a gunslinger, a dance hall girl, a card sharp, a native warrior, a tracker, a banker? You can be anything that suits your fancy, though take into account that once the wierdness starts to happen your job may not be easy to maintain.

Stats

The second step is the character's statistics, or stats for short. There are five of them. Some of them are rolled for tasks, some have temporary points that are spent for abilities or bonuses, others are used when recording damage to the character. When making a roll using a stat that has been reduced, use the reduced score, not the regular score.

The stats:

Control: This is the stat used when the character attempts to use thier newfound psychic abilities. It starts at 1 and cannot be raised during character creation.



Endurance: This stat is a measure of the character's energy and durability. It can be spent, indicating tiredness, or reduced by damage, indicating injury. It starts at 3.

Luck: Luck is rolled when you want to represent the effect of random lucky breaks on an action. Luck can be spent for re-rolls, temporarily reducing the stat for the session. Luck starts at 3.

Skill: This stat represents the character's training and general skill. When making a roll for something not generally covered by the character's occupation, you only roll half as many dice, rounded up. This stat starts at 3.

Willpower: Willpower is rolled if mental resistance or resilience is needed. Willpower starts at 3.

After writing down the starting stat scores, you have 5 more points to increase the character's stats with. They can be spent on any stat except for Control. No stat can be raised above 5.

Example of character creation: Mindy wants to make a gunslinger. This occupation will help with any roll or resistance involving stuff a gunslinger would commonly do. As for stats, she gets the standard Control of 1, Endurance of 3, Luck of 3, Skill of 3, and Willpower of 3. She then splits



her five extra points to raise her skill to 5 (she's a very good gunslinger) and all of her other stats to 4. She is now ready to go on to step 3.

Special Abilities

Step three is where you choose a special ability for the character. All of the characters start with a small ability to affect reality around them. Moving things around, changing things, creating temporary openings where there were none before. Most of these are relatively minor, temporary things. They are represented by you choosing to use the character's Control stat on a roll instead of one of the others. At first this is a little dangerous, since it can only be level 1 at the start, but using the Control stat on important rolls is the only way to get better with it.

In addition to this general ability to control reality, each character has their own specialty in it as well, represented by a special ability. Experienced characters can learn more specialties, but beginning characters only get the one. Pick one from the following list and write its details down on your character's sheet.

Most special abilities cost Willpower to use, but some cost Endurance. A power that costs endurance can be used even if it will bring a character to 0 (unconsciousness), but not any lower.

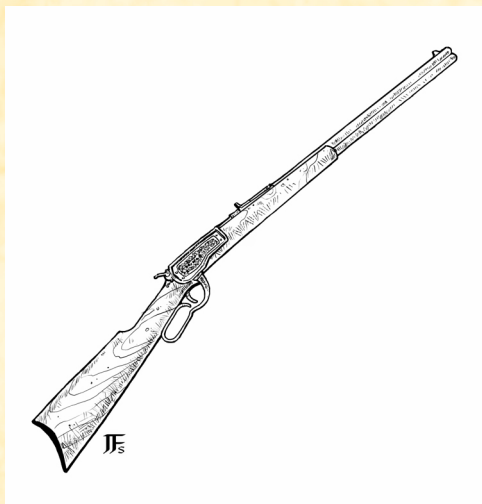
The special abilities:

Empathy: The character can automatically sense the thoughts of someone nearby, if the target does not have any points in Control. To read the thoughts of someone with Control of 1 or higher, you must spend a Willpower point and succeed on a Control + Willpower roll.

Extra-Sensory Perception: You can spend a Willpower point to give your character superhuman senses for the round. *Examples: The character can zoom in their vision to closely see something half a mile away; enhancing their hearing so they can hear someone's heartbeat; Using their sense of smell to tell if someone with a particular scent was nearby recently.*

Healing: You can spend 2 Willpower points and 2 Endurance points to have your character restore all of a target's lost Endurance and Skill, as long as they were not below -1 Endurance originally. This can only be used once each day on a given target. This ability has a range of touch and requires a few minutes of full concentration.

Kinesis: You can spend a Willpower point to have your character telekinetically move something or someone, as



long as the weight of the target is no greater than that listed on the following chart. If used as an attack, the damage done is equal to the Control level. If it is used to empower a melee attack, add the Control level to the damage done (this cannot bring the melee attack's damage any higher than double what it is with-

out this). If the character has a Control score of 2 or higher, they can make themselves fly slowly with this ability).

Control 1: 10 kg

Control 2: 100 kg

Control 3: 1 tonne

Control 4: 10 tonnes

Control 5: 100 tonnes

Control 6: 1,000 tonnes

Multiple Attack: You can spend a Willpower point before your character makes an attack to have the attack affect 1 additional target for each point of Control they have. The Resistance of the roll is that of the highest Resistance out of all of the targets, plus 1 more for each additional target.

Object Reading: You can spend a Willpower point while your character is touching an item to give them a vision of the most recent important situation the item was involved in. The GM describes the vision.

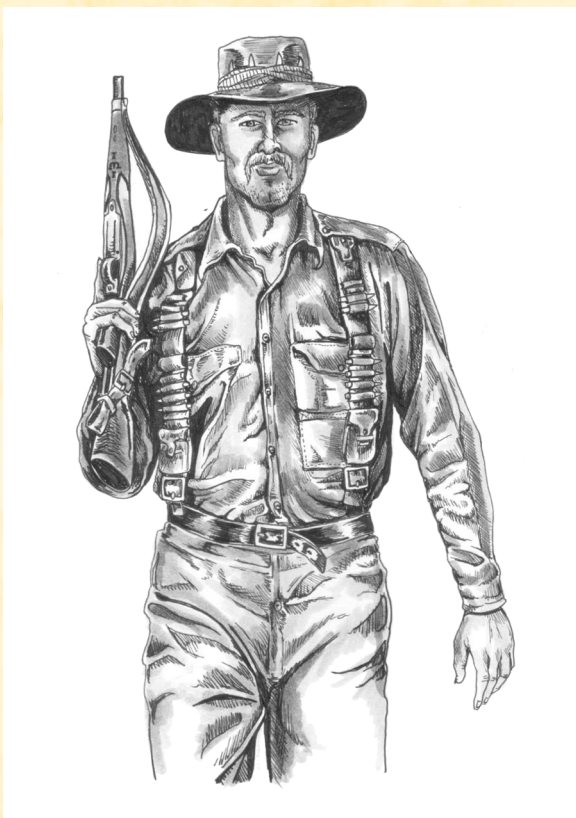
Persuasion: You can spend a Willpower point to have your character change the target's mind about something or give them a command. If the command will obviously do harm to the target, or the target's Control stat is higher than your characters'.

Precognitive: The character gets precognitive flashes a few seconds before something dangerous happens. The character cannot be surprised by dangerous events and may spend a Willpower point to raise stat they are resisting the attack with by 2 in such situations.

Speed: You can spend a Willpower point to have your character move as fast as a speeding car for a few minutes. If the character does this in combat, it gives them +2 to stats for initiative or to resist physical actions made by those with no points in Control.

Stealth: You can spend a Willpower point to be invisible to anyone without points in the Control power, as long as you do not touch or attack them.

Telepathy: Your character can talk at will with anyone they have met, mind-



to-mind. If you spend a Willpower point your character can send and receive images as well. If they also have the Persuasion ability, you can spend a Willpower point to use the ability over the telepathic link.

Tough: When the character is about to take damage, you may spend a Willpower point to reduce the damage by 2.

Example of character creation 2: Mindy decides her gunslinger will have the Multiple attack ability. She pictures her character as the group's tough-girl.

The Final Details

Now that you have the numbers down, it's time to finish the character. What is their name? What do they look like? How do they act? You may also write down any equipment that you figure the character would have as well as where they live. The GM must okay any equipment that might give you a bonus to a roll. There is no equipment list in this game. Items that would give a bonus just give an extra level to the character's Skill score when the item is used.

Lastly, think about the character's psychic awak-

ening moment. This is the moment, soon after they discover something is going on, when their psychic powers start to show up. Usually in a way that utilizes their specialty. Talk it over with the GM and come up with a basic idea for the GM to work into that first session. It may even be something that happens in conjunction with the character meeting the other recently awakened characters. Make it something memorable.

General Rules

A Fistfull of Darkness is meant to be a very simple system. The most basic idea is that you roll a pool of dice of three separate colours and what die (or dice) comes up the highest tells you roughly what happens.

Rolling

Only roll dice when necessary. If a character is driving downtown, or climbing a wall, don't roll unless there is some sort of opposition or danger. For example, if there is someone chasing the character's car, and the character is trying to get away, make a roll. If the character is trying to leap from roof to roof and might fall off and get hurt or killed, make a roll. If a character is trying to climb over a short wall to see what's on the other side, don't bother rolling, just let them do it.

When you want to roll for something, pick two of your stats to roll. You roll a number of dice of a distinct colour equal to the stat's current level. To this roll, you add a number of Resistance dice equal to the current score of whatever stat your opponent is using to resist your action with. If this is a roll that is not being opposed by someone, the GM must tell you how many resistance dice to roll for the difficulty and danger of the action.

Remember, if you are rolling Skill and the roll is for something outside the training of your occupation, you halve the number of dice to be rolled, rounding up.

The 'winner' of the roll is the stat die that rolls the highest. In the case of a tie, check the next highest die in each applicable pool.

If a Resistance die wins, the character has failed. That player describes what they were trying to do, then whoever was opposing their action (usually the GM) narrates what actually happens. If a Resistance die wins and the character had used their Luck stat in the roll, they may choose to spend a temporary Luck point to

reroll one of their Luck dice. They may do this as many times as they wish, unless they only have 1 luck point left.

If one of the acting character's other dice wins the roll, the characters succeeds. they should narrate what happens based on which stat the winning die was from.

If a Control die wins, and the opposition was resisting with their Control stat, and their Control stat was higher than your character's, your character has an immediate revelatory moment. They understand a bit more about Control and what they are doing with it. Their Control stat goes up by 1 permanently. At the end of the session, their player may pick for them an additional Special Ability that they can now use. Write it on their sheet.

If a Luck die wins, the character succeeds primarily through luck and your narration should reflect this. If you rolled Luck and failed the roll, your character loses a temporary Luck point.

If a Skill die wins, the character has won because of their training rather than supernatural abilities or mystical luck.

Willpower Points

After a roll is made, but before its effects take place, Either involved party may spend a Willpower point to change one of the Control dice to a 6. This can be done any number of times, as long as you have at least one Willpower left to spend. Only the player whose character was the current active character, and the player whose character opposed the roll, may do this.

If the active character spends a point for this and succeeds against an opponent with a higher Control score, they do not gain a new level in Control. That only comes from naturally beating an opponent.

Initiative

Sometimes two or more characters want to go first. If you need to figure out who gets to go first, compare Skill ratings (any character using Control instead uses their Control score). Whoever has the lowest rating goes first, but can be interrupted by whoever has a higher rating.

Damage

In some situations, a character will take damage. Usually after one of their opponents makes a successful

attack roll on them.

In a fist fight, damage is only 1 point. Fisticuffs damage cannot bring the target's Endurance below 0. If it would it affects Skill instead. If it cannot affect either, it has no effect. Melee weapons and pistols do 2 damage. Rifles and shotguns do 3 damage.

Sticks of dynamite do 3 damage per stick to anyone in the blast area. The blast area is 5m for every stick used. The damage taken by a target is reduced by 3 for every 5m away from the blast point the target is.

Other sources of damage are decided upon by the GM (or listed in the special abilities section), but rarely exceed 4 or 5 damage, unless it's a fall off a really tall building or something.

Taking Damage

Each time a character takes damage that character's controller must choose how the damage is applied (yes, the target's player decides it, not the attacker's player). Each point of damage reduces either the target's Skill stat or their Endurance stat. Damages of 2 or higher can be split between the two stats.

If a character is reduced to 0 Endurance or Skill, they are knocked out until healed. If a character's Endurance stat is reduced below 0, they are killed. Only Endurance can go below 0. The other stats cannot go into negatives.

Natural Healing

Characters regain all lost Endurance points with a night's rest. Their new powers give them enhanced healing.



Characters regain all lost Luck points at the end of each session.

Characters regain 1 lost Skill point with a night of rest.

Characters regain 1 lost Willpower point at the end of each session.

End Word

Well, I can see by the clock on the wall, it's time to bid you, one and all, goodbye. I've got only a few minutes before the 24 hours is up and I still have to turn this into a pdf and submit it. Thanks for reading it, I hope you enjoyed my attempt to mash together a couple of my favourite movies.



Name: _____

Occupation: _____

Description: _____

Stats:

Control: ____/

Endurance: ____/

Luck: ____/

Skill: ____/

Willpower: ____/

Abilities:

Equipment:

