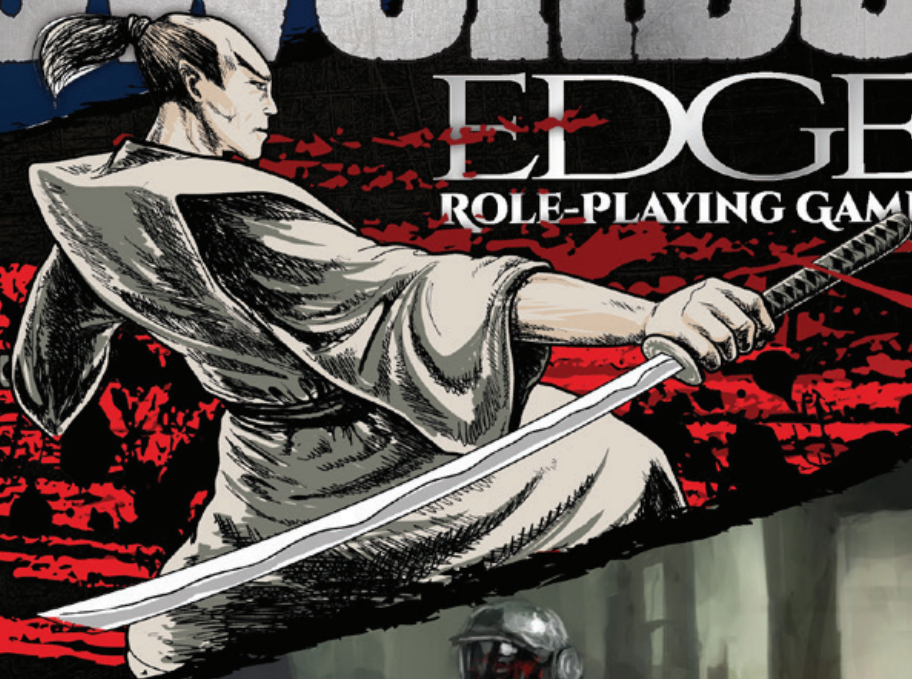


SWORDS EDGE

ROLE-PLAYING GAME



BY FRASER RONALD

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SWORDS

EDGE

ROLE-PLAYING GAME

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**Based on the RPG games *Sword Noir: Hardboiled Sword & Sorcery*
and *Kiss My Axe: Thirteen Warriors and an Angel of Death* by Fraser
Ronald**

**System inspired by the RPGs *PDQ*, *The Shadow of Yesterday*, *Fate 3.0*
and *Lady Blackbird***

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SWORDS

EDGE

ROLE-PLAYING GAME

Do you want to protect the innocent villagers from the rampaging orcs? Rob the vaults of the East India Company on its secret island fortress? Get into a showdown with an ornery clan out by the corral? Hunt down terrorists in a failing Central Asian republic? Or seek out new planets and the new life that might be on them? These are all stories that can be told with *Sword's Edge*.

Sword's Edge (or SE) is a roleplaying game (RPG) and the assumption of this book is that you, the reader, have played RPGs and understand what they are. If you haven't played an RPG previously but have somehow found yourself in possession of this book, you are a bit of an anomaly. Basically, an RPG is a game in which you, the player, take on a role and play "make believe" within a set of rules that provide structure. It's difficult to learn RPGs without an experienced player or GM, but it can be done.

SE is the basis for *Sword Noir* – a game about hardboiled plots in sword & sorcery settings – and *Kiss My Axe* – a game that mixes historical Vikings, the Viking sagas, and movie depictions of Vikings, especially *The 13th Warrior*. Those games included specific mechanics to make SE better fit their genres. SE on its own lacks those customizations, and is intended more as a generic system.

System matters, so it's likely SE won't do complete justice to specific genres, but it has been tried and tested with heroic fantasy, western, and space opera and it has done well. It's likely that SE will do the job you need it to do even if it isn't a perfect fit.

Terms

The terms described below aren't specific to *Sword's Edge*, but their definition might be hazy or imprecise, so let's consider their use in this game.

Session: A single sitting of gaming. A session is a period in real-life rather than in the game. The session begins when the participants begin to play, and ends when the playing ends. The players may continue with discussion or a few drinks, or they may part ways and head home, but the session ends when the assembled group stops playing.

Adventure: A scenario or story that may last a few sessions, but rarely longer than that. Think of it as a story arc in a comic, an episode in a TV series, or a single novel in a series. *Neuromancer* – the novel by William Gibson – and *Tower of the Elephant* – the Conan short story by Robert E. Howard – would both be adventures.

Campaign: An interlinked series of adventures that tells a larger story. Think of the James Bond novels *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*, *You Only Live Twice*, and *The Man with the Golden Gun*. Each tells a separate story (or adventure), but together they're part of an overall story arc. An even longer campaign could be a TV series with a meta-plot, like *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, *Jessica Jones*, or *Fringe*.

Scene: A set of actions or movements revolving around a specific, short-term goal or problem. You may have encountered this term through reading William Shakespeare or other plays or screenplays. Those of us familiar with TV and movies should know this term. Those of us who read comics and other literature know it as well, though the term is rarely used in those media.

A single fight is a scene. The scene begins when the characters encounter their opponents and ends when the opposition has been overcome in some way – killed, incapacitated or driven off. An encounter with a snitch at a bar is a scene. The scene opens when the characters enter the bar and ends when their discussion with the snitch ends. If the characters then got into a fight at the bar with opponents other than the snitch, that would be a different scene – it has a different goal and a different purpose in the story.

Player: Someone in the real world either acting as the Game Master or controlling a character in the adventure the Game Master is facilitating.

Game Master: A player who facilitates an adventure, also known as a GM. Basically, the GM controls the world and the narrative forces that the characters encounter. They generally prepare and adjudicate campaigns and adventures.

Character: A fictional construct created using the rules of the system that represents an individual within the fictional universe of the game.

Player Character: Known as a PC, this is a character controlled by a player. These are the player's representatives within the game – their avatars.

Narrative Character: Known as an NC, this is a character controlled by the GM. The NCs populate the world in which the PCs act. NCs also include challenges – obstacles that are not individuals, like a lock that needs to be picked or a computer system that the PC is trying to repair.

Mechanics: This is when rules are applied to the story. If one needs to roll dice or otherwise use the rules presented here, that's the mechanics of the game.

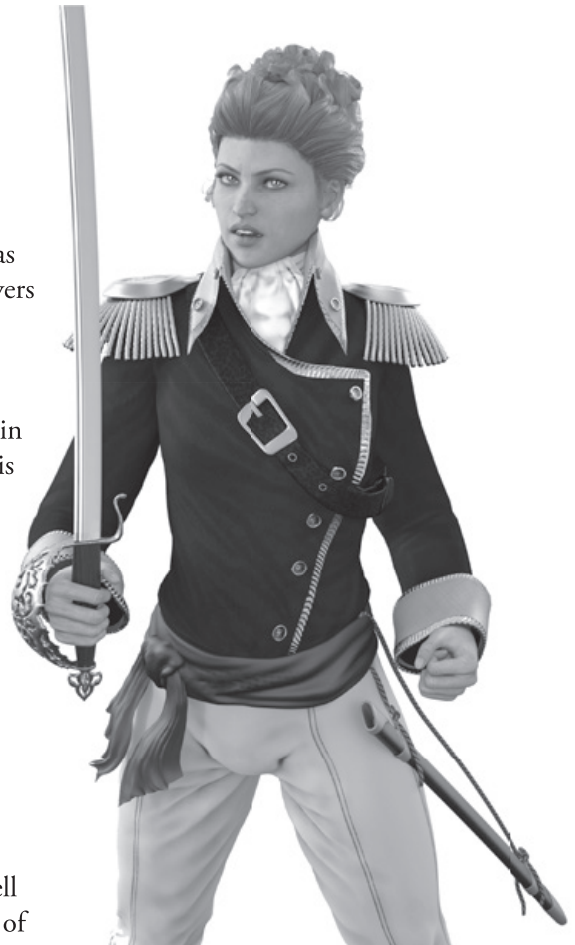
Narrative: This is when one's imagination is applied to the story. When one player tells the story of what their PC is doing, or what an NC is doing, describing the setting or the characters within it, this is the narrative. Narrative and mechanics often blend in a roleplaying game, and so while a narrative solution to a problem does not include dice, a mechanical solution likely will.

Basics

The basic mechanic of *Sword's Edge* is to roll two ten-sided dice (notated as 2d10) adjusted by modifiers against a Target Number, with an equal or greater result indicating success. Only players with PCs roll dice. The GM does not roll dice at all. Modifiers are provided by the character's description – these are some of the mechanics of the character. Characters are described by narrative explanations called Qualities, which have a Rank that can indicate both a modifier and a Target Number.

While the GM has responsibility for facilitating and generally adjudicating the game, it is not the GM's possession alone. Each player should be provided as much narrative control as possible. Players can create people, places, organizations – whatever they want. This hopefully improves both their enjoyment of the game and their immersion in it, which in turn increases the GM's enjoyment. This means that a GM needs to avoid being possessive of the settings, adventures, and campaigns that they facilitate. It may help if the GM avoids creating too much in advance, giving the players a chance to help in improvisational creation during the game.

Of the games which use the *Sword's Edge* system, *Kiss My Axe* first made mention of the idea of “don't ask me, tell me,” but this has been an intrinsic part of



Sword's Edge Publishing's games. The basic premise is that players should not ask the GM if something exists, but rather they should include elements in the narrative as desired. Rather than ask if there's a chandelier, simply narrate the character swinging from it. These additions provide no mechanical benefit for the PC so there's no reason to reject them. If it's an issue of players attempting to short circuit games using their narrative control – such as narrating an end to the adventure or including anachronistic equipment – then the problem is likely to be expectations and the player–GM dynamic rather than a specific system.

The mechanics presented in this book are only part of the game. The vast majority of it is the narrative, which the players and the GM create together. That said, what's presented here are the mechanics for those moments when the narrative needs structure and conflict needs resolving.

Qualities

The most common element to describe a character in SE is the Quality. Qualities are short descriptors, usually a single word or a short phrase. All of the “statistics” that make up your character are Qualities of one sort or another. A Quality might be “Pilot” or “Wanderer.” “Sleight of Hand” or “Stealth” could also be Qualities.

Qualities modify actions to which they apply. If the Quality is “Woodsmen” and the character is faced with climbing a tree, the Quality applies. Were the character faced with building a cart, the application becomes a bit trickier, unless the character can convincingly argue how being a woodsman relates to the building of a cart. If the character were trying to fashion a sword using a smithy, the Quality of “Woodsmen” would not apply. “Blacksmith” or, even better, “Swordsmith” certainly would.

Some Qualities are tied to a character's Traits – Physique, Charisma and Cunning. Other Qualities are not. This will be further explained in the specific sections relating to the Qualities that make up a character.

Ranks

Each Quality also has a Rank, which measures the mechanical effectiveness of the Quality. Ranks are also used to measure the difficulty of a task. A Rank provides either a modifier or a Target Number. When a Rank is used to measure a PC's Quality, it provides a modifier. For example, a Quality with the Rank of Good modifies a roll by +2 – as shown in the table below. Qualities cannot increase beyond Legendary, and so no Quality has a modifier greater than +8.

When a Rank is used to measure the difficulty of a task, including interactions with NCs, it provides a Target Number. Trying to climb a tree would likely be a Basic task, and so the Target Number for the Test would be 8. Climbing a greased pole would have a difficulty of Great, and therefore the Target Number would be 23.

Trait or Quality Ranking and Modifier

Ranks	Modifier	Description using	
		<i>Strength</i>	<i>Intelligence</i>
Weak	-6	Physically challenged	Intellectually challenged
Poor	-4	Child or elderly	Ignorant
Basic	-2	Couch potato	A little slow
Average	0	Normal Person	
Good	+2	Some exercise	Good grades
Great	+4	Athlete	Honour roll
Exceptional	+6	Professional athlete	Noted intellectual
Legendary	+8	Olympian	Super genius

Task Ranking and Target Number

Ranks	Target Number	Complexity Example	
Weak	3	Walking	Simple words
Poor	5	Jumping	Literacy
Basic	8	Catching a frisbee	Basic math
Average	12	Running an obstacle course	Basic physics
Good	17	Swinging from vines	Astrophysics
Great	23	Parkour	Quantum mechanics
Exceptional	31	Tightrope walking	String theory
Legendary	40	Running and jumping on a tightrope	Theory for faster than light travel
Mythic	51	Scaling a glass wall	Explantion of everything



The Target Number Rank of Mythic is not available as a modifier, since there are some tasks that are beyond the ability of mortal men. This does not mean that it is impossible to accomplish a Mythic task, just that it requires extreme amounts of skill, fortune or both. Modifiers, Target Numbers and their use in Tests are discussed in more detail later.

Player Character Creation

Those characters controlled by the players – known as Player Characters (PCs) – tend to be exceptional and their creation works differently than the creation of Narrative Characters (NC) – controlled by the Game Master (GM).

The following are the steps undertaken when creating Player Characters. Later, in *Narrative Characters*, there is a similar list of steps for NC hero, regular and minion characters. Each step is explained in greater detail following the list.

Note: The player has six Ranks total to use to advance their initial Qualities at character creation.

1. Create a *Concept*. This Quality represents the basic idea or concept of a character. The Concept starts at a Rank of Good, and is not linked to a Trait. Concept can be advanced using the six Ranks available at character creation, but advancing it is not mandatory. See *Concept* later.

2. Create a *Background*. This Quality represents the character's past. This could be a culture, a place or even a previous occupation. The Background starts at a Rank of Good, and is not linked to a Trait. Background can be advanced using the six Ranks available at character creation, but this is not mandatory. See *Background* later.

3. Create a *Faculty*. This Quality represents a character's aptitude, which is usually, but not necessarily, linked to the character's Concept, and is generally a skill or talent. Faculty starts at a Rank of Good, and **is** linked to a Trait. Faculty can



be advanced using the six Ranks available at character creation, but this is not mandatory. See *Faculty* later.

4. Rank the *Traits*. Physique, Charisma, and Cunning all begin at Average. These Traits can be advanced using the six Ranks available at character creation, but this is not mandatory. This is the only time that Traits can be increased, except for the case of Critical Failure (see *Critical Failure* in *Tests* later). See *Traits* later.

6. Create *Elements*. The player has six Ranks total to use to advance Concept, Background, Faculty, and Traits. If the player has not yet spent all six Ranks available at character creation, the player can use their remaining Ranks to create and advance Elements. Elements are Qualities and begin with the Rank of Good, but may be advanced by spending more Ranks. Elements are each linked to a specific Trait. See *Qualities* later.

7. Create *Pivots*. This is a goal or other character quirk that helps to define the character. Touching on a Pivot in a scene provides Advancement for a character. The character may have up to three Pivots. See *Pivots* later.

Character Creation Example

So let's make a character to illustrate the process. I'm going to create a bounty hunter named Sarah X for a Western campaign.

For the Concept, since I'm making a bounty hunter, I might as well use that. So Sarah's Concept is Bounty Hunter, and it begins at Good for a +2 modifier.

For the Background, my image of her is the daughter of an army officer who travelled around and saw lots of the country, so Military works, which also begins at +2.

I'm going to make her Faculty Hunting, which to me includes both tracking and using a rifle, two things that are also pretty important to hunting bounties, but it also has a context of survival in the wild. That also begins at +2. I'm linking it to Cunning as it's a lot about awareness, decision-making, and knowledge.

I now have 6 Ranks to spend improving this character. I want to push up her Cunning, as it's going to be her primary Trait – even when she fights, she fights smart. I'm going to put 3 of those Ranks into Cunning for +6. I'm using two more Ranks to improve her Concept of Bounty Hunter, making that also +6.

It's not necessary to create an Element now – in general, it's normal to improve existing Qualities before creating Elements – but having an Element provides an extra Quality to use for Momentum Tests (see *Tests* later). If I don't use it for



Momentum, I can still apply it to Action Tests. So I'm creating the Element Sharp Eyes with that last Rank, and I'm going to link it to Cunning.

For her Pivots, she can have a Goal, a Quirk and a Style. For her Goal, let's say that she feels guilt over what she witnessed her father participate in when he was an army officer, so her Goal is to make amends. For her Quirk, she's obsessed with the quality of soil as she plans to someday settle down with her own farm. Finally for her style, she's stoic – always quiet, cool, and precise.

So this is the character we have created:

Sarah X

Concept: Bounty Hunter +6

Background: Military +2

Faculty: Hunting +2 (Cunning)

Trait *Element*

Physique +0

Charisma +0

Cunning +6 Sharp Eyes +2

Pivots

Make amends for her father's actions.

That's some fine dirt.

Stoic

Character Qualities

The Qualities that make up a player character in *Sword's Edge* have been explained briefly earlier, but let us consider them in more depth.

Concept

This Quality describes what the player intends the character to represent. Think of the definition of a character in movies, comics, TV or literature. Han Solo is a "Rogue Smuggler." Ivanhoe is a "Noble Knight." MacGyver is a "Mechanical Genius." Examples include "Highlander," "Mercenary infantryman," "Farmboy in the Big City," and "Ex-Underworld Thug." *Concept begins at Good* and can be advanced using the six Ranks available at character creation, though advancing it is not mandatory.

Background

This Quality represents the character's past. This could be a culture, a place or even a previous occupation. Robin Hood could be "Outlawed Saxon Lord." Athos could be "Wronged French Nobleman." For John Blackthorne from the novel *Shogun*, it would be "English Pilot" (while his *Concept* could be "Foreigner Amateur Samurai"). *Background begins at Good* and can be advanced using the six Ranks available at character creation, though this is not mandatory.

Faculty

This Quality represents a character's aptitude, and is usually a skill or talent. It is linked to one of the character's Traits. Examples of a Quality for Faculty include "Linguist," "Pickpocket," and "Poet." *Faculty begins at Good* and can be advanced using the six Ranks available at character creation, though this is not mandatory.

Traits

Each character has three *Traits*. They begin at Average, but may be advanced by the player at character creation if the player wishes. It is not necessary to advance any of the Traits, and they may be left at Average. Traits can only be advanced at character creation, except in the instance of a Critical Failure (see **Critical Failure** in *Tests*, later). The Traits are:

Physique: This represents a character's strength, endurance, and agility.

Charisma: This represents a character's personality, force of will and presence.

Cunning: This represents a character's intelligence, awareness, and knowledge.

Traits can be used in any situation in which the player can explain how they apply. A commander might use Charisma in a combat situation when they're leading troops into battle. A martial artist might use Physique for intimidation to persuade an opponent to do things his way. An engineer might use Cunning to identify the weakest part of a door before he tries to kick it down. All of these uses are fine, as long as they're logical and within the accepted nature of the setting, Traits should be given a wide latitude. This allows players whose characters might not be designed specifically for a task to still feel somewhat competent and therefore enjoy a given scene.

Elements

A player may wish to further define a character beyond the opportunities already provided. If so, the player may create one or more Elements for the character to help describe those extra details. When creating an Element, the Quality begins at Good. Advancing a Good Quality to Great would cost another Rank, and from Great to Exceptional would cost another Rank, etc.

A Quality is a descriptive word or phrase, as discussed earlier. There is no limitation for creating a Quality, but it's generally a good idea to build on the character's Concept, giving the character a strong niche for the stories ahead. The GM may disallow a Quality too broad, such as "Fighting," or may require the player to spend extra Ranks to create and advance, such as requiring three Ranks just to create the Quality at Good. By the same token, a Quality that is too narrow, such as "Fighting Terriers with a Stick" will have little application in the game. "Stick fighting" or "Quarterstaff" would be good Qualities to represent martial prowess with a specific style or weapon.

A unique or special item or piece of equipment may also be a Quality, and this is discussed later in *Items*.

Elements are tied to one Trait. “Spent Time Among the Northern Barbarians” might be attached to Physique on the understanding that the culture is about strength and endurance, or it might be attached to Charisma because it is the barbarian’s force of will that elevates the character within the tribe.

Whenever a Quality is used to modify an action, the Trait to which it is linked is used as well. If the character has “Spent Time Among the Northern Barbarians +2” (the +2 is because the Quality is ranked Good) and it is attached to Physique, which the character has at Great (+4), when using the “Spent Time Among the Northern Barbarians” Quality the player would also use Physique for a total modifier of +6. For more information on Tests, see *Tests*.

During any Test, only the Qualities attached to a single Trait may be used. Since Concept and Background are not linked to a Trait, they may be used in any Test to which they apply. Faculty *is* tied to a Trait, so it can only be used when that Trait and/or Elements for that Trait are applied.

For example, let’s say the character has “Seminary Training +2” linked to Cunning. The character further has “Persuasive +2” linked to their Charisma. The character’s Concept is “Friar +2”. The character could use “Seminary Training” or “Persuasive” but not both, because the two Qualities are linked to different Traits. The character could use “Friar” in either case, given that the Concept is not tied to a Trait.

Items

Characters should have whatever equipment and wardrobe is reasonable for them to have, and need not be listed. They can certainly be included in the character’s description in order to add a level of granularity otherwise absent from the character description. Such items provide no mechanical advantage and are purely narrative. Do you want your character to have a massive two-handed sword with a serrated



edge? Awesome! Does your character wear expensive suits and handmade silk ties? Fantastic! Neither of those things will provide any particularly major advantage, but they certainly help to imagine the character and make them unique.

Some items, though, might be Qualities. Things like a signature weapon, a magical device, or a particularly well-made tool could be taken as Qualities. These items will modify any action in which they are used for their purpose – Good lockpicks wouldn't modify an attack while an Exceptional sword wouldn't help when baking a cake. Even though these Qualities are items rather than inherent features of the character, the Qualities are still linked to Traits.

Special or signature weapons are good examples of items that can be represented as Qualities, like a pair of pearl-handled six-shooters or a Walther PPK. While the Grey Mouser always has a rapier or other side-sword named Scalpel, it would not be a Quality because this is merely the name he gives to whatever sword he happens to be using. A better example would be Gandalf's sword, Glamdring, in *The Hobbit* and *The Lord of the Rings*, which was a specific heirloom weapon of significant importance and power.

These items are intrinsic to the character, and if they are lost or removed, the loss should only be temporary. The character should be provided with a Quality of equal Rank to compensate for the temporary loss of the item. Once the character has the item returned, the compensatory Quality would be lost.

Weakness

A Weakness is a Quality that inflicts a penalty rather than a bonus. It's an Element and so only mechanically applies when the Trait to which it is tied is used in a Test. It can be invoked by any player or the GM when the character attempts an action to which it applies, or is in a situation in which the weakness could lead to poor judgement, but in exchange, the player receives Luck (see **Luck** later). A Weakness could be something like "Let It Ride!," "One for the Road," or "Rage-ohol."

A player may choose to start with a Weakness at character creation, and if they do so, it begins at Basic Rank, and this provides a free Rank to spend advancing another Quality (in addition to the six Ranks already provided at character creation). Beyond character creation, a Weakness may be imposed by a Doom (see **Damage** later), but is generally not otherwise added to a PC.

Unlike other Qualities, Weaknesses can be invoked by any player or the GM when the character attempts an action to which it applies; however, when this is done the player earns Luck (see **Luck** later). A Weakness can also be invoked when the character faces a temptation or other situation in which the Weakness applies, also at the cost of a Luck. In such a case, the player or GM who invokes the Weakness

pays the Luck to the character's player and the player describes how the flaw affects the action. If the character's player cannot narrate the Weakness in some manner, the invoking player can do so.

A Weakness such as "Let It Ride" or "One for the Road" can draw the character into dangerous or inconvenient situations and may require a Charisma or Cunning Test to resist. Weaknesses linked to Physique, such as "Shattered Arm" or "One Eye" generally modify character actions rather than drawing the character into bad situations. "Shattered Arm" might modify combat, and "One Eye" could modify anything in which depth perception is an issue.

An example of temptation would be a character with "Let It Ride!" getting drawn into a game of chance at an inopportune moment, like when they're supposed to execute a specific part of a detailed plan. It might also lead the character to bet too heavily and leave the character in debt to a questionable NC. "One for the Road" could leave the character too intoxicated to participate effectively. "Rage-ohol" could lead the character into a fit of anger, provoking conflict – physical or otherwise.

Weaknesses can be improved using Advancements (see *Advancement*), and if improved to Average, a Weakness would be mechanically removed. It can remain as a narrative quirk of the character, but they have learned to overcome their Weakness and so it no longer hinders them.

Pivots

Pivots further describe and illustrate characters, but instead of being used for mechanical interaction, these are narrative elements and objectives for the players and GM to use, and provide story rewards when facets of them are used in some way. Pivots signal the GM as to the kinds of situations and hooks that the player desires for their characters. They provide the GM a method to put the spotlight on the character. Pivots are broken down into Goal, Quirk, and Style. A PC can have one of each, but these are not mandatory, and the PC can have some of the Pivots or none of them, as the player decides.

A Goal describes something the character seeks to achieve. The Goal can be anything, from a desire to better the character – like seeking enlightenment or the perfect sword technique – to trying to find a particular person or object – be that a sibling, a fabled master, or the best lip balm in the world.

A Quirk describes a special or unique feature of a character. This can be as simple as a constant craving for coffee or as complex as a ritual the character undertakes at specific times or in specific places.



Style describes the way the character approaches tasks. This might be something like “Flamboyant,” “World-weary,” or “I use everything in my reach on my road to victory.”

Whenever the player works one of these into the scene or uses them in some way, the PC gains an Advancement (see *Advancement*). Only one Advancement can be earned per scene, so having overlapping Pivots isn’t helpful, though they can give players or the GM options of how to approach scenes in the story.

A character may have one of each of the Pivot types – Goal, Quirk, and Style – and these can be removed or changed at the beginning or end of a session, but not at any other time. If a player is adding a Pivot to a character who already has one of that type, the existing Pivot needs to be removed – so if a player wanted to add a Goal, the existing Goal would need to be replaced by it.

For a character like Robin Hood, his Goal could be summed up as “Equality.” His style could be “Flamboyant with bow and sword.” As his Quirk, maybe “Lighthearted bravery.” Han Solo in the original trilogy could have a Goal of “Be a better man.” That might not be a conscious goal, but it does kind of follow his

character arc through the three movies. His Quirk could be “Not my fault!” and his Style could be “With utter confidence.”

Luck

Luck is a reward used to reinforce a desired play style or character activity and is then spent to gain mechanical advantages. Luck can be represented by markers, such as poker chips, beads, coloured stones or anything else you can think of. Luck must be spent in the session in which it is earned and does not carry into subsequent sessions.

Luck may be spent to do any of the following:

Exertion: Generally, in a Test, only one Trait and one Element can be used. Spending a Luck allows the player to add an additional Trait or Element to a Test, as long as the player is able to explain how this Trait applies. When adding another Element, it must be linked to the same Trait as the first Element unless Luck has already been used to add another Trait, in which case the Element may come from that Trait as well. Luck must be spent individually for each added Trait or Element, so if one wanted to add both another Trait and one of its Elements, that would cost a total of two Luck. If one wanted to add two Elements from the already applied Trait, that would also cost two Luck.

Remove Stress: This allows the player to remove Penalty Ranks (see *Tests*, *Damage*, and *Sorcery* later). At the end of a scene, Luck can be spent to remove Penalty Ranks incurred during that scene. Luck cannot remove Penalty Ranks incurred in any previous scenes. See *Recovery* in *Damage* later.

Reroll: This allows the character to reroll one of the 2d10 used in a Test. The better of the two results – the original or the reroll – is used. A player can reroll dice as many times as they desire, but each reroll costs a Luck and only one die is rerolled at a time.

Luck may also be used in any manner a player proposes to the GM to which the GM agrees. Once Luck has been used that way, this method then remains viable for all players.

An Advancement can be used as Luck if so desired (see *Advancement* later). If used in this manner, a single Advancement is the same as a single Luck.

Gaining Luck

At the beginning of a session, the GM should provide each player with three Luck. Depending on the style of game and the threat to the PCs, this may be enough for

OPTION

An interesting technique for providing Luck is to have the players provide it to each other. This is generally good in a game in which the GM wants Luck to flow regularly, and it can be done by using a central Luck repository. This works particularly well if the NCs have access to Luck and use it in the same manner as the PCs. In this method, players provide each other Luck and when they spend Luck, it goes to the GM. The GM can spend Luck for NCs as though they were PCs and when the GM spends Luck, it returns to the central repository, available once more for the players to share out.

an entire session. Luck is also provided to a player when their character's Weakness is applied to a Test by the GM or another player.

A GM can always provide more Luck through the session in response to preferred or desired activities. Anything that helps craft atmosphere, moves the plot along or develops character or conflict can be rewarded with Luck. Some games have need for specific player actions or behaviour that Luck can help reinforce. For example, in a horror game, the characters need to ignore warnings about entering into the haunted house or forest, and so when characters refuse to heed common sense and put themselves at risk, the player should receive Luck. Think of a game in which the characters are action-philosophers: the players could be rewarded for bringing philosophical ideas into combat, or having

their characters spout off one-liners and puns based on past philosophers and their philosophies.

In the end, Luck can be provided as an incentive to promote any kind of practice, activity, or attitude that the GM or group believes will improve the game, such as highly cinematic descriptions, assisting other players on an action, or getting someone else a drink while getting one's own.

Advancement

Advancements are gained in two ways: when a character rolls a Critical Failure – rolling a natural 2 during a Test, described in *Tests* – and by involving a Pivot in some way through play, described in *Pivot* earlier. Advancements are generally represented by some kind of token, like a blue poker chip.

An Advancement gained through a Critical Failure must be used in a very specific manner – to increase a Quality from Concept, Background, Faculty, or Element which was used in the Test in which the Critical Failure occurred. A Trait can also be increased as a result of a Critical Failure, but only if it was the only Quality to modify the Test – if a Concept, Background, Faculty, or Element modified the Test, the Trait cannot be advanced. See *Critical Failure* in *Tests* later.

In other cases, Advancements can be used in one of four ways. An Advancement can increase an existing Quality from Concept, Background, Faculty, or Elements by

one Rank, or it can be used to purchase a new Quality at the Rank of Good. Only one Advancement per session can be used in this way. An Advancement can be used at the end of a session to remove all of a character's Penalty Ranks from Damage. Finally, Advancements can also be used as Luck (as per *Luck* earlier) at a ratio of one Advancement to one Luck (that is, one Advancement replaces one Luck).

If desired, an Advancement can be used to avoid a Doom (see *Damage* later). The character is not healed, nor does the character avoid any linked negative impacts – such as receiving a Weakness (see *Damage*) from a Legendary damage result – however, the character is **not** dead and does not receive any of the penalties for receiving a Doom.

Even though the Doom has been avoided, the character is removed from the scene in which the Doom occurred, perhaps left for dead or ignored as insignificant. For whatever reason, the NC(s) no longer act against the character and cannot be interacted with mechanically for the remainder of the scene. At the end of the scene, the character is once again playable and can attempt Recovery as normal (see *Damage* later).



Tests

Tests are undertaken when a character attempts an action for which there are consequences or rewards. Not all actions require Tests – even those actions that have an associated difficulty and therefore a Target Number. A character probably doesn't require a Test if they're climbing a tree, unless they're being chased, or the tree is hanging over a cliff. If failure or success doesn't really shift the story or change the characters in a meaningful way, you probably don't need a Test. If the characters are putting up tents and building a fire for a night's camp, is it important to go through a Test? Probably not, unless that's what your players love. If your group just loves rolling the dice, then do it. Roll them for everything, except when it stops being fun.

In the following, obstacles for PCs are termed Narrative Characters (NCs). An NC may be someone in direct opposition to a PC, or it may also be some kind challenging situation. So an NC could be one of the cardinal's guards or it could be attempting to navigate through a snowstorm.

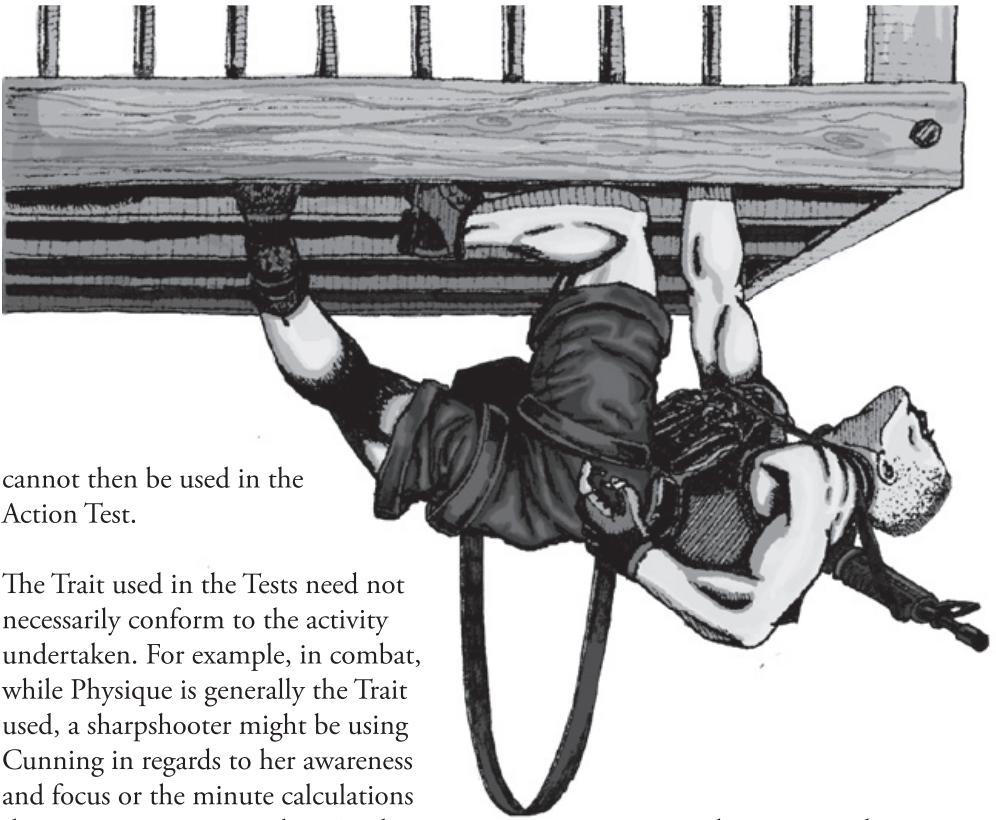
There are two parts to a Test – Momentum and Action. The Momentum Test occurs once, and it resolves which party – PC(s) or NC(s) – acts and which reacts. The Action Test resolves the activity – whatever it is that the character is attempting to accomplish.

In both the Momentum and Action Test, a player uses their character's Qualities by explaining how they apply to the activity which they're attempting, for example, "Pilot" during aerial combat. The sum of the Ranks in these Qualities provides the modifier for the roll. The player then rolls 2d10, adding the modifier for a final result.

Only the players roll dice in the *Sword's Edge* RPG. Characters and other obstacles controlled by the GM (NCs) provide Target Numbers only and never roll dice. Even when the PCs are reactive, the players roll dice to represent the defence.

In a Momentum Test, the only Quality the player can freely apply is a Trait. Qualities from Concept, Background, Faculty, or Elements can be used, but then cannot be applied to the following Action Test. On the other hand, a Trait used in the Momentum Test **can also** be used in the Action Test. If the player uses a Trait in the Action Test it **must be** the same Trait used in the Momentum Test.

In an Action Test, the player can apply a character's Qualities from Concept, Background, Faculty, the Trait used in the Momentum Test, and one Element (more Traits and Qualities can be used if Luck is used, as per **Luck** earlier). Any Quality from Concept, Background, Faculty, or Elements used in the Momentum Test



cannot then be used in the Action Test.

The Trait used in the Tests need not necessarily conform to the activity undertaken. For example, in combat, while Physique is generally the Trait used, a sharpshooter might be using Cunning in regards to her awareness and focus or the minute calculations that go into a precision shot. By the same token, a martial artist might be highly trained and rely on knowledge of combat and special strikes, so he uses Cunning. The team leader might use Charisma in combat, where mechanically they're making the Tests, but narratively are commanding the rest of the team to engage in a certain way or undertake a certain task.

However, if a Trait is used in the Action Test, it must be the Trait used in the Momentum Test. Any Quality from Faculty or Elements used in the Action Test must be linked to the Trait used in the Momentum Test, unless Luck is used to include another, different Trait.

When applying Qualities to a Test, those Qualities linked to a Trait (like Elements or Faculty) must all be linked to the same Trait. For example, if a character is climbing a tree and has the Quality "Monkeyman" linked to Physique and "Grew Up in a Treehouse" linked to Cunning, the player would need to choose one or the other Quality, since they are linked to separate Traits. The Trait to which the chosen Quality is linked is also applied as a modifier to the Test.

During a Test, time is measured in **turns** and **rounds**. Neither are a specific period of time, but rather, they're defined by the actions taken within them. The period in

which a single character acts is a turn. The period in which each character has had a turn or the chance to act or react is a round. So once a PC has acted, that's their turn over. The PC doesn't act again until the next round – once all the PCs and NCs have had a chance to act on their turn and a new round begins.

When a PC acts against an NC(s), they succeed if the Test result is equal to or greater than the Target Number (TN).

The TN is provided by an NC (which may be a challenge). For example, let's say a PC is arm-wrestling an NC. In this example, the NC has a Great Physique (TN 23) and the Concept "Man-bear +2," so the TN would therefore be 25. The player's modified roll must be equal to or greater than 25 for the PC to succeed.

Momentum

Momentum is all important in *Sword's Edge*. If your PC is not the attacker, they cannot act, and can only react. Whether it's performing surgery, climbing a mountain, or fighting a foe, a PC that fails a Momentum Test cannot succeed – they can only stop their opponent from succeeding. In order to overcome an obstacle – be that electronic countermeasures or remaining hidden from the lion stalking them – the PC must be an attacker. Momentum is key.

The order in which the PCs of a group act is not significant. On the other hand, each PC's Momentum against their opponent(s) is quite important. What this means is that if there are a group of four PCs, it doesn't matter if one PC has their turn first or if another does – the players can take their turn in any order.

When a PC faces an NC, the PC must equal or exceed a TN in order to succeed. One Trait – the Trait the player intends the PC to use in the Action Test that follows the Momentum Test – modifies the 2d10 roll. Qualities from Concept, Background, Faculty, and Elements can also be used to modify the Test but these Qualities cannot then modify the following Action Test. Any of the Qualities used for Momentum Tests in this way cannot be used again in that scene.

The winner of the Momentum Test is considered the active character or attacker, and acts upon the loser of Momentum, who is considered the passive character or defender. The action need not be combat, just that the attacker is proactive while the defender is reactive.

Remember, only an attacker can affect the status quo – a defender cannot achieve anything except for stopping the attacker from achieving a particular outcome.

For example, the PCs are in the middle of a debate regarding the fate of a failed officer following a battle. Ambassador Holloway is going to use her Charisma (+2) in

the Momentum Test, and so the player rolls 2d10+2. Ambassador Holloway argues with a basic minion with TN 8 (see *Narrative Characters* later). As long as the player rolls a 6 on the 2d10, the good Ambassador will win the Momentum Test and can be the attacker.

However, let's say that Ambassador Holloway is concerned because she's facing the Competitive General. If she fails to gain the Momentum, Ambassador Holloway will be left with trying to defend against the General's arguments rather than mounting her own. As a defender, Ambassador Holloway can't actually impact the debate, only stop the General from influencing it. In this case, the player decides getting Momentum is very important, so applies Ambassador Holloway's Faculty of "Persuasive" (at Great) and linked to Charisma – which is already being applied. This will provide a +6 modifier, which the player hopes will be enough. However, in the Action Test that follows, Ambassador Holloway cannot use "Persuasive."

The General is an average regular, with the Concept of "Political Animal +2" and Charisma +2. Just like PCs, NCs cannot use a Quality other than a Trait for Momentum or that Quality is unavailable for the action, therefore the TN is 14 (TN for Average is 12, plus the Trait modifier of +2). The player needs to roll 8 or above on the 2d10 to succeed.

This is the same for combat. Let's say a PC Viking is facing an NC Anglo-Saxon Warrior average regular in combat. This begins with the Momentum Test. For the Momentum Test the PC Viking uses Good Physique (+2) and is concerned enough about getting Momentum that they also use the "Lightning Fast Axe +2" Element. The NC Warrior uses Physique (+2), so the TN for Momentum is 14. The player rolls a 6 and 7, for a roll of 13 and a total of 17 after adding Physique (+2) and "Lightning Fast Axe +2". The PC Viking is the attacker.

As noted later in *Levels of Success*, high results can provide advantages, and for Momentum, this is generally a bonus provided in Action Test by that PC which immediately follows the Momentum Test. For each success level above Average, the attacker gains a +2 bonus. So, +2 for a Good success, +4 for a Great success, etc. See *Levels of Success* for the specifics on judging the level of a success.

When facing multiple NCs in a Momentum Test, the same basic structure is used. The players divide up the NCs among the PCs, meaning that if facing ten NCs, PC One might face three while PC Two faces two, PC Three faces two, and PC Four faces three. In this manner, each PC is involved in a Test with NCs. The order in which the PCs act is unimportant, but the 'position' of each PC in the Momentum is.

NCs combine their Momentum into a single TN. The NC with the highest Rank sets the base, and each other NC uses their TN as a modifier, with a minimum of

an increase of one Rank (+2) for each extra NC. For example, if facing three poor minions, the highest Rank would be Poor so 5 would be the base TN. Usually, a Poor modifier would be -4 , but the minimum modifier is one Rank (or +2) per extra NC, so the total modifier is +4, and the final TN for the Momentum Test is 9.

As a further example, if a PC Viking faced an Anglo-Saxon Warrior average regular and two Anglo-Saxon Villager basic minions, the average regular has the highest Rank, and the base TN would therefore be 12. The modifier for Basic is -2 , but the minimum is +2 per extra NC, so this would be +4 with a TN of 16. Given that the player in the earlier example had a 17 for their Momentum Test, the PC would still be the attacker.

When multiple PCs face a single NC, the PCs combine their Qualities for a single Momentum Test, but then each undertakes their own Action Test. Only one player makes the roll for the group, but all of the PCs engaged can use Qualities in the Momentum Test. As with all Momentum Tests, only the Trait can be used in both the Momentum and the Action Test. Any other Quality used for Momentum cannot then be used for the Action Test.

For example, the leader, the martial artist and the sharpshooter are all engaging a crimelord. The TN for Momentum is 31. The leader is using Charisma (+6), the martial artist is using Physique (+8), and the sharpshooter is using Cunning (+6). Without applying any other Qualities – which the PCs would then not be able to use for their Action – the PCs have a modifier of +20 on their Momentum Test. If the players were concerned about losing Momentum, they could then also add Qualities, and a good strategy for this is to have one PC sacrifice any Qualities they'd use on an Action Test on the Momentum Test instead.



In this example, the leader might use her “Commander +4” Concept and her “Persuasion +6” Faculty, saying that she is directing the fight and boosting the team’s morale, persuading them that victory will soon be theirs. That gives the team +30 on their Momentum. Because the Leader used her Concept and Faculty for the Momentum Test, she could not use them for the Action Test; however, since the PCs have Momentum, the Leader is under no threat since the NC is reactive and cannot “attack” her. The three PCs would then all act separately against the crimelord.

Seize the Momentum

If you want your PC to succeed in an Action Test, the PC needs the Momentum first, but if you failed the Momentum Test, all is not lost. During a character’s turn, that character can attempt to Seize the Momentum. When this happens, the character makes a Momentum Test, and the opponent(s) make an Action Test (meaning the restriction on using Qualities for Momentum does not apply to the opponents).

When a character attempts to Seize the Momentum, the character is essentially engaging in a new Momentum Test, meaning that the player can use any Qualities which apply. As with any Momentum Test, only a Trait can be used in both the Momentum (or Seize the Momentum) Test and the following Action, so if the player uses Concept, Background, Faculty or a Quality from Elements in the Seize the Momentum Test, those Qualities cannot then be used in the following Action Tests.

For example, if the Negotiator PC is attempting to Seize the Momentum against the Competitive General mentioned earlier, the TN would be 14. If the Negotiator uses any Qualities other than a Trait, those Qualities cannot then be used in the following Action Test. So if The Negotiator not only uses their “Persuasion +6” Faculty but also their Charisma Element of “See It in Your Eyes +2” for the Momentum Test, they cannot then use it for the following Action Test.

If attempting to Seize the Momentum against multiple opponents, each of those opponents undertake a joint Action Test just as they would have a joint Momentum Test. This means that one NC or PC is the actual primary actor who provides the base TN or rolls the 2d10 and the other NCs or PCs provide Qualities just as they would in an Action Test – meaning they can all apply their individual Concepts, Backgrounds, Faculties, and one Trait and Element each (except if they used a Quality other than their Trait in the Momentum Test, in which case it cannot be used for an Action Test, including this situation).

In the multiple PC Momentum Test example earlier, if the crimelord attempted to Seize the Momentum, the TN would be set as if the crimelord were undertaking a Momentum Test. The PCs, however, would be undertaking an Action Test, meaning the martial artist and the sharpshooter, who had only contributed a Trait to the joint

Momentum Test, could use their Qualities as normal for a Test, while the leader could only use those Qualities not used in the Momentum Test – and her Trait, of course.

If a single PC were facing three basic minions when attempting to Seize the Momentum, because the NCs use an Action Test, the restriction on minion Momentum would not apply, so if – for example – in a debate, the PC were facing three minions with a Concept of “Bureaucrat +2”, the TN for Seize the Momentum would be 16 (first minion provides base TN of 8, and all three apply their “Bureaucrat” Concept for a total modifier of +6).

Succeeding at a Seize the Momentum Test means the character switches from passive to active – from defending to attacking. If the character fails to Seize the Momentum, the attacker’s Action Test result is applied against the character as though *Undefended* (see *Undefended* later). If it is a PC attempting to Seize the Momentum who fails, the TN of the NC(s)’ Action Test for the attempt is compared against the *Undefended* TN of 5 for the purposes of assessing the Level of Success (see *Levels of Success* later).

So let’s say a PC attempts to Seize the Momentum against a TN of 27 and has a modified roll of 23. As this fails, the TN of 27 is compared against 5, which indicates an Exceptional success (5 is Average, 12 is Good, 19 is Great, and 26 is Exceptional as per *Levels of Success* later). The Damage inflicted on the PC is as per an Exceptional Level of Success.



Action

Whether the PC is the attacker or the defender, the mechanics of the Action Test remain the same, and only the possible outcomes change. Success by the attacker in an Action Test inflicts Stress on the defender (see *Damage* later). The player can apply Concept, Background, Faculty, the Trait used for the Momentum Test, and one Quality from Elements. The player can also use Luck to add more Traits and/or Qualities from Elements. Any Qualities from Concept, Background, Faculty, or Elements used for a Momentum Test cannot be used in the Action Test, even with the use of Luck.

Within a round, each character (PC or NC) can undertake only one action without penalty – which is either to act or to react. Once the character has acted or reacted, any further action is penalized at one Rank (–2). This is cumulative, meaning that if the character is in a debate, and three other characters have attacked the character’s position, the second time the character reacted (as a defender) they would be penalized by one Rank (–2), the third time by two Ranks (–4). Note that characters need not undertake extra actions, so the second time the character acts as a defender, the character need not react. In such a case, the character is treated as Undefended (see *Undefended* later). However, the penalty for Undefended is so great that it is unlikely a character would not take the penalties for multiple actions unless the number of attacks is so great, the penalty for the multiples is worse than just being Undefended.

As an example, let’s say the PC is arm-wrestling an NC. The PC’s Concept is “Brawler +2,” and the player indicates that this keeps the PC in shape. The GM accepts that, so that is +2. The “Military +2” Background is brought in as the player narrates that the soldiers often arm-wrestled in their off-duty hours, so that’s another +2. The player is at a loss for applying the Faculty of “Streetwise,” but the PC has Physique (+2) and an Element (linked to Physique) of “Power Fist +2” for a total of +8.

In one of the combat examples earlier, a Viking PC was the attacker against a single Anglo-Saxon Warrior Average regular. The Anglo-Saxon Warrior has Physique (+2) and “Sword Fighting +2.” The TN for the Viking PC’s combat Test would be 14 (the TN for average is 12, modified by +2 for “Sword Fighting”). The PC Viking uses their “Viking Raider +2” Concept, “Bloodshed +4” Faculty, and Physique (+2). In this example, the player cannot use “Lightning Fast Axe” because it was used for the Momentum Test. The PC would have total modifiers of +8, so must roll at least 6 with the 2d10 used for resolution.

It’s important to note that players have narrative control during their actions, and can argue for any application of Qualities even those that might seem counterintuitive. For example, a player might apply Charisma to combat by

describing how their PC is commanding or inspiring allies, or even distracting enemies. The successes this character has in combat may not necessarily be that character physically assaulting another, but might be the result of allies doing so, or even sapping an opponent's will to fight.

In the arm-wrestling example earlier, what if the PC's Concept was "Loanshark" and had a Physique of -2? In this case, the player might try to intimidate the opponent and win that way. The character has Charisma (+2) with a Faculty of "Intimidation +2" and the Element "Tough Talking +2." That would provide a total modifier of +6. Perhaps in the narrative the PC rattles the NC so badly with trash-talking or intimidation that when the arms lock, the NC just can't pull themselves together.

When multiple characters face a single character, there's a penalty for multiple actions by the single character. This occurs when multiple PCs face a single NC or multiple NCs face a single PC. As discussed previously in *Momentum*, each of the multiple characters (PCs or NCs) undertakes their action against the singular character separately, so if the single character faces four opponents, that's four actions against them.

If the single character is the active character – meaning the single character won the Momentum Test and is the attacker – the single character may choose to act against only one opponent and would suffer no penalties. In the case of four-on-one, the single character might attack the strongest of the opponents and not act further. The other three opponents, which the single character has not acted against, do not get to act against the single character since that character has the Momentum. If the single character decides to attack each opponent in turn, there's a cumulative one Rank penalty (-2) for each action beyond the first. So in the case of a single character facing four opponents, the first action inflicts no penalty, the second action inflicts a one Rank penalty (-2), the third action would be at -4 and the fourth action would be at -6.

The single character may only act once against each opposing character before going on to a new round. Of course, unless the opponents Seize the Momentum, the single character is free to act again, since that character holds the Momentum.

If the single character is the passive character – meaning the single character lost the Momentum Test and is the defender – the single character will likely need to defend against multiple attacks. For each action after the first – and this includes defence – there is a cumulative one Rank penalty (-2). This means that for a single character defending against four opponents, the character's first defence is not penalized, the second would be penalized by one Rank (-2), the third by two Ranks (-4) and the fourth by three Ranks (-6).

Depending on the number of opponents faced, the character may decide not to defend themselves, so they'd be considered *Undefended* for actions against them (see *Undefended* later). The player will need to decide which looks like a better option.

Critical Failure

When a player rolls a natural 2 (a 1 on each of the two ten-sided dice), this is a Critical Failure. In a Momentum Test, the character cannot Seize the Momentum after failing with a Critical Failure. In an Action Test, a Critical Failure always indicates the character has failed the action.

We also learn far more from our failures than from our successes, and therefore a Critical Failure provides the character with an Advancement that may be used to increase any Quality from Concept, Background, Faculty, or Elements applied to the Test. The Advancement cannot be used to increase the Rank of a Quality of any kind that was not used in the Test that resulted in the Critical Failure.

The player can also increase a Trait used in the Test in which the Critical Failure occurred, but this may only be done if no other Quality (Concept, Background, Faculty, or Elements) was used in the Test. If the player only applied the modifier provided by a Trait to the Test, then that Trait can be Advanced. There is no other way to improve character Traits.

A Critical Failure need not be an epic fail of the sort that might embarrass an individual, but given that this provides an epiphany – the failure teaches the PC a valuable lesson – it is generally treated differently than a standard failure. A good option is to allow the player to narrate the failure. Otherwise, try to make it memorable somehow without making the PC look incompetent. A good way to narrate a Critical Failure is to make it a success for the NC. This still provides for a notable failure, but also increases the apparent ability of the opponent, making a final success by the PC more impressive.

Critical Success

When a player rolls a natural 20 (a 10 on each of the two ten-sided dice), this is considered a Critical Success. In a Momentum Test, a Critical Success means the opponent cannot attempt to Seize the Momentum. A Critical Success always indicates the character has succeeded in an Action Test. Further, a Critical Success on a Test provides the character with a Stunt. A Stunt is a permanent Quality ranked at Good (+2), and is tied to the Trait applied to the Critical Success and the situation in which it occurred.

For example, if the character had a Critical Success climbing a cliff using Cunning (arguing that his character carefully planned his ascent and judged handholds and

footholds), then the Stunt would be linked to Cunning and would be something like “Cliff Climbing” or “Solid Footwork.” This Quality would be added permanently to the character’s Elements.

As another example, if the character had a Critical Success using the Qualities “Sword and Dagger,” and “My Father’s Blade” with Physique during a combat with three opponents, the Stunt would need to be linked to combat with multiple opponents using bladed weapons, and would be linked to Physique.

A Critical Success, even if it doesn’t end a scene or conflict, should be exciting. This is the punch that knocks the opponent off their feet and sends them flying. It’s the gunshot that hits so hard it spins the target around. It’s a retort that leaves the other party stunned for a moment. Players can have fun narrating the spectacular success and its impact on the scene.



Undefended

There are times in combat when a character is considered Undefended. For example when a character attempts to Seize the Momentum and fails.

The attacker still makes an Action Test against the Undefended character. The Target Number for this Test is 5 and those attacking an Undefended character may use Qualities from Concept, Background, Faculty, Traits, and Elements as normal.

If an Undefended PC is attacked, the PC must make a Test against TN 17 (remember, only players roll dice, even when PCs are attacked). Defenders may not use Qualities from Concept, Background, Faculty, Traits, or Elements to modify the Test, and only modify the Undefended Test with Penalty Ranks (see **Damage** and **Sorcery** later). The difference between the result and 17 is used to determine the Level of Success for the purposes of Damage. So if an Undefended PC has a result of 11–17, the success would be Average, while 5–10 would be Good and 3–4 would be Great. A Critical Failure (natural 2) by an undefended PC is considered a Legendary result for the purposes of damage to an Undefended character.

Range

Ranges are not necessary for the abstract level of mechanics in *Sword's Edge*, but in some cases they can add a level of verisimilitude that you might want in a more serious campaign. Even if used, ranges are approximate only. In order of increasing distance, the range categories are **touch**, **close**, **near**, **medium**, **far**, **excessive**, and **sight**. A weapon such as a sword or axe can only be used when in *touch* range.

A longer weapon, like a pike, might be suitable for *close* range. Any other range requires a ranged weapon, such as a bow or crossbow.

A temporary Penalty Rank is applied to any combat Test with a ranged weapon at medium range, two temporary Penalty Ranks are applied at *far*, three at *excessive*, and if a weapon can reach *sight* range, it would have four temporary Penalty Ranks. The distance for these ranges is based on the capability of the weapon itself, so medium range for a bow would be a greater distance than for a thrown stone. In general, medium is the maximum effective range of the weapon, meaning the range at which an individual with basic training on the weapon can hit a human-sized target half of the time. Near would be one-quarter of this.

For example, the maximum effective range of the Canadian C-7 assault rifle is about 450 m, however its maximum range can be up to 3,000 m. For the

Range	Modifier
Touch	-
Close	-
Near	-
Medium	One Penalty Rank
Far	Two Penalty Ranks
Excessive	Three Penalty Ranks
Sight	Four Penalty Ranks

C-7, *near* range would be 115 m and *medium* would be about up to 450 m and it could reach *sight*. An easy way to divide up the *far* range and *excessive* is to have *far* as double *medium* – so up to 900 m for the C-7 – and then *excessive* as halfway between its maximum, so *excessive* would be between 900 and 1,950 m with *sight* being between 1,950 and 3,000 m.

A medieval crossbow – and there were a plethora of types and designs, but we'll go with an average – had a maximum effective range of about 150 m but could kill at up to 300 m. This one won't go to *sight*, so up to 300 m would be its *excessive* range. For the crossbow, *near* would be about 40 m, with *medium* being 40 to 150 m. That would make *far* 225 m and 225 to 300 m as *excessive*.

It has to be said that this level of granularity is unnecessary, but can be useful in some genres. If running a campaign based on the wire-fu, wuxia movies of China and Hong Kong, ranges tend to be contrary to the assault on the laws of physics integral to most of these movies. On the other hand, a modern military campaign might benefit from using ranges to add a level of realism that the rules otherwise lack.

Levels of Success

When a character succeeds in an Action Test, this is considered an Average success. However, for every 7 points the result exceeds the required TN, the success of the Test increases one Rank.

So if the TN for a Test was 5, and the character achieves a result of 12, that's a Good success. This means the character completed the action particularly well. Perhaps the character climbed the tree faster than normal. A result of 19 would have meant a Great success, which may or may not carry a further benefit, depending on the action and the GM's decision.

During Momentum, better than Average Levels of Success can provide an advantage in the first round of a Test. Generally, the attacker gains a +2 bonus per Level of Success for the first round (but *only* in that first round). If the GM provides some other advantage for better than Average successes in Momentum, this bonus should not also be provided.

Levels of Success also provide a basis for the amount of Stress a successful action inflicts upon the defender. This Stress exists for all kinds of actions, not just those in combat. While combat will deal Stress to Physique, a puzzle or debate might cause Stress to Cunning and personal interaction might cause Stress to Charisma. See **Damage** later for specifics.

When defending, meaning that the character lost the preceding Momentum Test, a greater than Average success can provide benefits. A *Good* success for a defender provides them with a +2 bonus the next round in the Action Test.

A *Great* success for a defender provides a free opportunity to Seize the Momentum (as per *Seize the Momentum* earlier). Should this attempt fail, there's no further penalty, such as being Undefended as occurs in regular failures to Seize the Momentum. Other than this, the attempt to Seize the Momentum works as per normal attempts. A defender who failed the Momentum Test due to a Critical Failure does not gain this benefit, but instead gains the +2 bonus next round as per a Good success.

An *Exceptional* success allows the defender to both have a free opportunity to Seize the Momentum and undertake a **riposte** – a reactive attack – which is a counterattack against their attacker. A defender who failed the Momentum Test due to a Critical Failure does not gain this benefit, but instead gains the +2 bonus next round as per a Good success.

A riposte is run the same as any other Action Test. While the term riposte refers to a combat maneuver, this is merely a reactive attack in whatever activity the characters are engaged in, from debate to seduction to chess to competitive throat singing.

A *Legendary* success allows the defender to immediately Seize the Momentum without undertaking a Test and also provides the defender (now attacker) a riposte with a one Rank temporary bonus to the attack (+2). Even a defender who failed the Momentum Test due to a Critical Failure gains the benefits of a Legendary success.

Damage

In an Action Test, a successful attacker inflicts Stress on the defender. The difference between the successful result and the TN defines the level of Stress as per *Levels of Success* earlier.

Therefore, if a character succeeds in an Action Test, this counts initially as an Average success. For every 7 points the result exceeds the required TN, the success increases one Rank. For example, if the TN for the Action Test is 16, and the player's result was 23, this would be a Good success. A result of 30 would be a Great success.

Damage, or Stress, is recorded as a Penalty Rank applied to the Trait used by the defender for each Level of Success an opponent gained. For example, if the defender was using Cunning in the Action Test, the Penalty Rank would be applied to Cunning. If using Physique, the Penalty Rank would apply to Physique.

If the success is Average, a single Penalty Rank is inflicted on the Trait. A Good success inflicts two Penalty Ranks, while Great inflicts three. Exceptional and Legendary successes inflict special penalties

Exceptional: Four Penalty Ranks are inflicted on the Trait, plus the defender is unable to act or react for the remainder of the scene. The defender is now Undefended.

Legendary: Five Penalty Ranks are inflicted on the Trait. The defender also receives a Doom (see later). If the defender is not killed or otherwise eliminated from the game, the defender receives a Basic (-2)Weakness, which is usually linked to the kind of activity that led to the Legendary Stress. This Weakness would be in addition to the Weakness required as a result of a Doom.

Stress	
Level of Success	Stress Result
Average	Inflicts one Penalty Rank
Good	Inflicts two Penalty Ranks
Great	Inflicts three Penalty Ranks
Exceptional	Inflicts four Penalty Ranks, opponent now Undefended
Legendary	Inflicts five Penalty Ranks, opponent receives a Doom

Doom

A Doom is applied to a PC when either a Weak Trait receives a Penalty Rank or as a result of a Legendary damage result. Damage and Doom work differently for NCs (see *Narrative Characters*). In general, a Doom results in the death or removal of the defender from the game; however, this may not be true in your game. If not death, a Doom can be removal of a character for at least the scene, or perhaps a longer period of time. Perhaps they're exhausted, or they've had a mental breakdown, or have been embarrassed socially.

When a character survives a Doom, the character gains a Weakness at Poor, such as "One Arm -4" or "Easily Distracted -4" linked to the Trait affected by the Doom. If the Doom is a result of Legendary damage, and the character has not died, the Weakness created by the Doom is in addition to the Weakness created due to the Legendary result.

A character can use an Advancement to avoid a Doom (see *Advancement* earlier). The character is not healed, nor does the character avoid any linked negative impacts – such as receiving a Weakness (see *Damage*) from a Legendary damage result – but the character is **not** eliminated from the game. The character is removed from the scene in which the Doom occurs, but at the end of the scene returns and can recover as per *Recovery* later. A character that is removed from a scene cannot mechanically interact in the scene nor do NCs mechanically interact with the character. How the

GM and players use the narrative to explain this is open to them, but once the scene is over, the PC is once again able to act as normal.

Recovery

At the end of a scene, a character may make a **Recovery Test** against a Good TN (17). A success removes Stress that was acquired during that scene only – this will not allow Recovery from Stress received in an earlier scene. Recovery Tests are out of turn and do not require a Momentum Test. They’re never modified by a Trait, although other Qualities may modify them, so something like “Sturdy Frame” or “Iron Will” could apply. An Average or Good success allows the PC to remove one Penalty Rank of Stress, while a Great or Exceptional success removes two Penalty Ranks, and a Legendary success removes three.

At the same time – the end of a scene – players can spend Luck to remove Penalty Ranks at a ratio of one Luck to one Penalty Rank. Any amount of Luck can be used at this time, but as with the Recovery Test, only Penalty Ranks received during the scene that’s just finished can be recovered.

Recovery

Level of Success	Recovery Result
Average	Remove one Penalty Rank
Good	Remove one Penalty Rank
Great	Remove two Penalty Ranks
Exceptional	Remove two Penalty Ranks
Legendary	Remove three Penalty Ranks

At the end of each game day, a character can make another Recovery Test against a Good TN (17) in order to remove a Penalty Rank. A Good success will remove two Penalty Ranks, while Great will remove three, etc. The character automatically removes one Penalty Rank at the end of each in-game week.

At the end of a session, a player can use an Advancement to remove all their character’s Penalty Ranks, as per *Advancement* earlier.



SFX

In many genres, your players want magic, psychic abilities, superpowers, or some other special effects (SFX) outside of the mundane. *Sword's Edge* can accommodate this in a variety of ways, from the extremely simple to the complex. Both *Sword Noir* and *Kiss My Axe* have extensive magic systems, and both are similar save for certain narrative elements, and the backbone of that is provided in **SFX Qualities**. However, first consider what it is that you need in your game.

In general, the method of achieving mechanical success in *Sword's Edge* is completely narrative. Whether a character uses fists, a sword, or an anti-materiel rifle, this is a narrative component. The mechanical aspect to this comes from the Qualities used to describe the Test. The sniper might have “PGM Hecate II” as a Quality, referring to a preferred weapon, or simply the “Precision Strike” Quality, and the player narrates the action as the sniper firing their PGM Hecate II. Either way, the Quality modifies the roll.

SFX doesn't need to be any different. Rather than the anti-materiel rifle, a PC might use “Precision Strike” along with their mind blast to achieve the same result. The mechanics don't change, only the narrative – the Qualities still modify the roll as usual. In an SFX game, the players narrate their characters' actions using magic, superpowers or psychic abilities, and there's no added complexity, only a narrative shift. However, suddenly narrating a character in a modern military game using a mind blast is a problem: neither psychic abilities in general nor this character's mind blast specifically have been described previously. There should be some basis for this description of the action and if you intend to have SFX in your campaign, a discussion among the players in advance in order to set expectations would be helpful.

The easiest way to include SFX in your game is to use them as Qualities. The sniper might carry a PGM Hecate II anti-materiel rifle and have the Quality “Mind Blast” at Good. That character can then use their psychic powers or their huge rifle to solve particular problems. A superhero might have “Super Speed” at Exceptional or “Cloud People's Minds” at Good as Qualities, relating their particular SFX.

This works for all kinds of SFX, and can easily be tailored to fit any setting or genre without adding another layer of mechanics or complication. This can even be used to describe non-humans. A character might have the “Elf” or “Dwarf” as a Quality. This should have some kind of explanation, an agreed consensus of what an elf and dwarf is and what makes them different from a human.

The application of these SFX Qualities need not require constant Tests. In most cases, an elf probably doesn't need to use the Quality “Elf,” except perhaps for



something like understanding a foreign dialect of the character's native language, remembering ancient and arcane myths of the elves, or something similar. By the same token, a character with "Flight" should not have to roll to fly. Only when used in combat, in a race, or some other situation in which success or failure could impact the plot and be interesting should these Qualities be used mechanically.

SFX Qualities

While a subsystem for SFX is not necessary, both *Sword Noir* and *Kiss My Axe* have special mechanics for magic that use SFX Qualities. SFX Qualities require some extra mechanics to make SFX a separate and difficult skill. SFX based on Qualities are built similar to other Qualities – by giving a short description – such as "Bolt of Fire" or "Hypnotism." An SFX Quality is purchased at Basic rather than Good, but can be advanced – with either an Advancement or, at character creation, with one of the free Ranks. These count as Elements, so every SFX Quality is linked to one of either Physique, Charisma or Cunning.

Use of SFX Quality

Other than their unreality, an SFX Quality is used the same as any other Quality – if the player can explain how it applies to a Test, the character gains the bonus. SFX Qualities allow characters to undertake actions that physics and common sense would say cannot be done.

However, when using an SFX Quality, the player must make a Test to activate the SFX rather than a Test against the opponent. Just as with any other Test, this

OPTION

The Fetish

The Fetish provides a bit of supernatural to the SFX. It fits better with magic than a psychic or superpowers setting. A Fetish is a Weakness taken at Basic when a new SFX Quality is purchased, and is linked to that SFX Quality. This is an item, ritual, or flaw created by the PC's SFX. Many shamans and witches have been depicted as having some special item or taboo that is important to their connection to the supernatural. Some shamans lived apart, and avoided washing themselves. The regular ingesting of hallucinogenic substances, which was common in some cultures for those deemed magical, could also be a Fetish.

If your game uses the Fetish, then in order to gain access to SFX, a PC accepts a Fetish, which can be an item, quirk, or taboo such as "Pouch of Shrivelled Ears," "Unwashed," or "Fetish Tattoo." As mentioned earlier, each SFX Quality is an Element and so is linked to a Trait – Physique, Charisma, or Cunning. The Fetish is linked to the same Trait as the SFX Quality. Unlike a normal Element, which the player can apply as desired, the Fetish modifies all Tests in which the player applies its Trait. For example, if the Fetish were "Facial Tattoo -2" and was linked to Charisma, then any Test using Charisma, even when the PC was not using their SFX Quality, would be penalized by -2. Should the player ever remove the Fetish (for example, by advancing it to Average), the character no longer has access to the SFX Quality.

begins with the Momentum Test. The TN for the Momentum Test is equal to the Area of Effect modified by the Energy/Strength, as per the **SFX Component Table**.

So, for example, if the PC were attempting to use a blast of lightning to attack a giant, the Area of Effect could be Average (a giant is larger than a single person) and the Energy would be Great (perhaps not a very strong). The Area of Effect provides TN 7 (Basic), which is modified by Energy/Strength +4 (Great) for a Momentum Test TN of 11.

If the player loses the Momentum Test, the SFX is not necessarily lost. The character becomes the defender with the SFX themselves becoming the attacker. The player has two choices: the character can simply surrender the SFX, giving up on trying to use it, or attempt to Seize the Momentum. If the character does not do one of these things, the SFX will attack the character each turn until the character either

OPTION

Casting Time

If your campaign setting has magic as incredibly rare or difficult to control, you can include *casting time* into the equation. This works more with ritualistic magic, and removes magic as an effective combat tool. With this option, when the player wants the character to use the SFX Quality, the character must take time to prepare the spell. During the preparation period, the character loses all Momentum Tests and if the character loses any Test as a defender, the magic fails. Once the period is complete, the player casts the spell as usual. The period of preparation is based on the **SFX Component Table**. For each criteria on the table, find the Rounds Required and add these together for the total casting time.

So let's say a wizard is trying to teleport into another room. The Reach would be *close* which requires 2 rounds as per Rounds Required. The Duration is *instantaneous*, so a round minimum for 0 rounds, the Area of Effect is *personal*, so also 0 rounds, and for Energy, let's just say *adult* – as the wizard is an adult – which requires 1 round. In total, it would take 3 rounds to cast this spell. If at any time during those 3 rounds the wizard is involved in a Test, he loses Momentum. If he then fails at an Action Test, the spell will be lost and he will need to start all over again.

abandons its use or Seizes the Momentum. If the character fails any Test as a defender, the SFX is lost. The narrative for this struggle can take different forms – the energies of magic seek release, the character's doubts affect their ability to use their psychic abilities, their superpowers require force of will that the character is having a hard time mustering, or there might be an actual physical response, such as the character going into shock or even bursting into flame.

When the PC is the attacker, they must make an SFX Action Test. The TN for this is based on the **SFX Component Table**. When using this table, the player considers each of the criteria – Reach, Duration, Area, and Energy. The highest Rank among the components is the *base* TN. The modifiers for the rest of the components are added to their base TN to calculate the final TN.

For example, if a character was trying to use “Hypnotism” to cloud a goon’s mind, it would be *close* with a Duration of a *minute* (to let the PCs make a suggestion). The Area of Effect would be *personal* (single person), and the Strength would be that for an *adult*. For the TN, the highest Rank among the components is Good (*close*), and this is modified by the other components (+1+0+1), for a TN of 19.

When using SFX against a regular or a hero, Qualities from that character modify the TN as well. A regular or hero’s Trait always modifies SFX TN, the specific Trait based on the intent of the SFX (so in the case of “Hypnotism” that would be Charisma). Other Qualities might apply, such as Stubborn in the event of “Hypnotism” or “Stoneskin” if attacked with fire. In the example earlier, if the goon were a regular with an Average Charisma (+0), the TN would be modified by +1 (per the **SFX Component Table**), for a total of 19. The Qualities of a regular or hero always modify the TN for an SFX (Action or Momentum) Test and never act as the base TN – that is always the highest of the criteria on the **SFX Component Table**.

If a player fails an Arcane Test (Momentum or Action), a Penalty Rank is applied to both the SFX Quality itself and to the Trait to which the Arcane Test is linked. These Penalty Ranks are on top of any Penalty Ranks such as those from Stress. Penalty Ranks for failure are cumulative, and an SFX Quality cannot be used once it reaches Weak.

SFX Component Table

Rank	Reach	Duration	Area of Effect (space/people)	Energy/Strength	Modifier	Rounds Required
Basic	Personal	Turn	Personal	Candle/child	/	0
Average	Touch	Minute	pantry/5	Hearth/adult	+1	1
Good	Close	Hour	room/10	Bonfire/sturdy adult	+2	2
Great	Far	Day	field/100	Smithy/horse	+3	3
Exceptional	Sight	Week	village/500	Forest fire/elephant	+4	4
Legendary	Known	Month	city/1000	Volcano/titan	+5	5
Mythic	Described	Year	province/10,000	Beyond comprehension	+6	6

Reach indicates the distance to the target of the magic.

Duration/Period indicates the amount of time the spell will be in effect. Period is also used for effects such as divination in which the Period would be the amount of time forward into the future or back into the past into which the character wishes to view, as well as the duration that period is being viewed.

Area of Effect indicates the area or number of individuals that the magic affects. If both categories of people and space are relevant in a given situation, only the larger of the two is used. For example, if the character wished to cast a spell that affected 5 specific people in a village, the Rank would be Exceptional. Were those same 5 people in the same room as the character, the Rank would be Good.

Energy indicates the amount of power or the strength required to effect the spell's purpose. If it is a physical object, consider which of those options could physically affect the object. A child likely could not pick up a table, but an adult surely could. An adult would not likely be able to pull down a tree, but a horse could. For Energy, a candle could light a sheet of paper on fire, but it could not melt a sword blade – that would take a smithy. This, like all the components, is inexact and subjective.

Rounds Required indicates the number of rounds needed to focus on the task, shaping and controlling the magical energies. The player adds together the “Rounds Required” for each component, and the sum is the total number of rounds needed to prepare the magic.

Modifier indicates the modifier to the Target Number.



Example of Play

While there are examples sprinkled throughout the rules earlier, here is a somewhat more comprehensive example of how play generally runs. This is not to say that your games must be run in exactly the same manner, but this should provide some context for the various rules you have encountered earlier.

The scene is an ancient desert planet that holds the key to precursor technology – the super science of an ancient alien race. The setting is science-fiction fantasy with a feudal-style hierarchy and government, not unlike *Dune*. They are pursued by the legions of the Baron Helles led by the dreaded Shock Troopers. The group has crash-landed in the Infernum Wastes, said to be uninhabitable.

Here are the characters that will be used in this example of play:

Jyrell

The commander of Tella of Jost's Lifehost, her company of elite bodyguards. She rose from being a gladiator in the Baron Helles' death carnivals to a trusted and loyal vassal of the House of Jost.

Concept: Warrior Saint +4

Background: Gladiator +2

Faculty: Sword-Staff +2 (Physique)

Trait

Elements

Physique +4

Blades +2; Fist and Feet +2

Charisma +2

Cunning +0

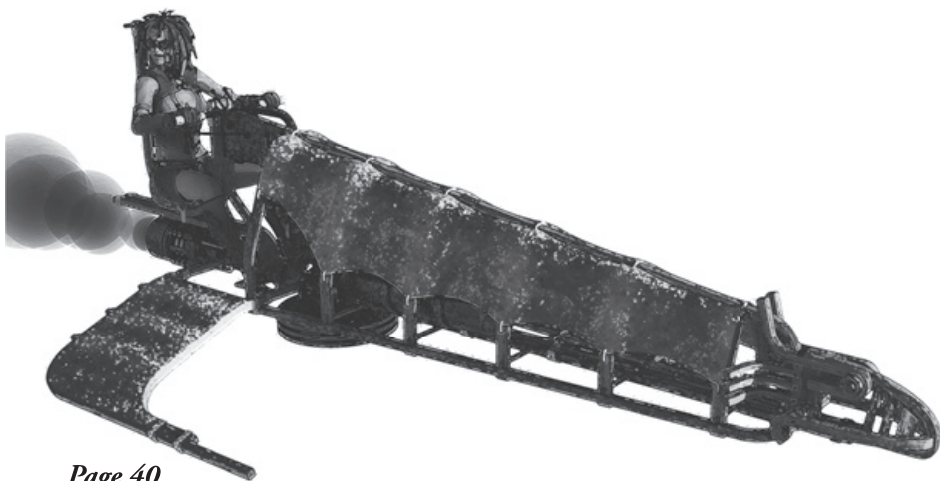
Cat's Eyes +2

Pivots:

Make amends for a life of sin.

Purity of heart.

Fluid lethality.



Kyle Devos

Once a brilliant scientist, Kyle was almost killed during a terror strike by Baron Helles' Shock Troopers. The House of Jost did not abandon him, but he is now more machine than man.

Concept: Cyborg +4

Background: Scientist +2

Faculty: Computers +2 (Cunning)

Trait

Elements

Physique +2

Wrist-Laser +2

Charisma +0

Cunning +4

Personal Electronic Device (PED) +2

Pivots:

Find the secret of his lost past.

For science!

Holding on to humanity.



Tella of Jost

Scion of the House of Jost and third in line for the Ducal title, Tella is an adventurer at heart. Her mother recognized her aptitudes early, and she has become a beloved leader in the legions of Jost.

Concept: Noble Commander +4

Background: Royalty +2

Faculty: Persuasion +2 (Charisma)

Trait *Elements*

Physique +0

Charisma +4 Voice of Command (SFX) +2; Jovial Connection +2

Cunning +2

Pivots:

Dynastic succession.

It's the mission that matters.

Each player will be noted first with a full designation (Game Master, or Player One) and then an abbreviation (GM, P1).

Game Master: The cavern is dark except for the light streaming in through the gate you just opened. It doesn't reach far, and you can't really tell what the dimensions of the place are.

Player One (Jyrell): Jyrell has Good "Cat's Eyes" linked to Cunning. Do you want me to roll?

GM: Nope. Jyrell can see well into the cave, and she sees what appears to be a vast space above, only comparable to the gladiator halls in which she trained. There are ledges skirting the edge, and in the centre is a great pool of water.

Player Two (Kyle): Wait a minute. I thought this was a desert planet.

Player Three (Tella): To the best of our knowledge, it is. Remember how expensive water was in the market? I mean, aren't we drinking our piss with these survival suits?

GM: That's all true.

P2: Kyle activates his PED and sets it to scan.

GM: Do you want to do this mechanically or narratively. I'm okay with either.

P2: I'd actually like to roll some dice.

GM: Good enough. Let's do the Momentum Test.

P2: Okay, so I'm going to chance it and just use my Cunning.

The GM has "Uncover the Cavern's Secrets" as a weak minion, with an Element "Mysterious +4" specifically for use with Momentum, meaning the TN for the Momentum Test is 7. Kyle's Cunning is +4. P2 rolls 2d10 and gets a 7 and an 8 for a total of 19.

GM: Okay, you've got a Good success, so Kyle is the active participant and he has a +2 on his first Action Test.

Kyle: Well, I'm attacking the unknown with my super science! (chuckles) You know what I mean. Anyway, I'm going to apply "Cyborg," "Scientist" and "Computers" since this is him using his cybernetic PED in a scientific manner. And I'll be using the PED sensors to try to get a better idea of the size and shape of this cavern, which is linked to Cunning. All told, that's +14. With the +2 bonus, that'll be +16 for the Action.

"Uncover the Cavern's Secrets" has the Concept of "The Unknown +8" and another Element "Vast and Unlit +4" so that the Test is challenging but only one success is needed since it's a weak minion. The TN is 15. P2 rolls 2d10 and gets a 2 and a 3, for a result of 21 (2+3+16).

P2: Crap. Luckily my science is so super that 5 turns into a 21!

GM: And 21 isn't that bad. It's a success. Average, but a success. The cavern is basically a big circle about 30 metres in diameter. There's a portal in the far wall. The freshwater here is safe to drink. Based on its composition, you'd guess it's spring water.

P2: How deep?

GM: It's about 20 metres deep.

P3: That's quite a pool. Do these survival suits have lights?

GM (smiles): I don't know. Do those survival suits have lights?

P3 (chuckles): Right. Okay, so Tella activates the lights on her survival suit to get a better look around.

P1: That messes with Jyrell's nightvision.

GM: But not Kyle's sensors, and they're detecting movement at the portal on the other side. Lots of movement. Jyrell also hears something just beyond the gate. While your attention has been on this strange cavern and the pool of water, your group didn't notice the squad of Shock Troops that have followed your tracks from the ship. There are twelve of them.

P1: Jyrell moves to block the gateway. She stands just inside it, draws her sword-staff and starts spinning it before her.

GM: That's cool. There's no way they can get through the door without forcing Jyrell back. I mean, they can still start shooting through it, which they do, but only two at a time. Okay, so let's do the Momentum Test.

P1: Okay, facing two of them? Along with Physique, I'm actually going to use "Fist and Feet" because Jyrell is getting ready to throw down.

GM: That works for me.

The Shock Troops are poor minions, so the TN is 7 – the base TN of 5 and a one Rank increase because of the second NC. P1 rolls an 8 for a result of 14. This is actually a Good success (7 above the TN), and so P1 will get a +2 bonus on the first round of the Test.

GM: Well done. Jyrell is the attacker and gets a +2 bonus in the first round.

P1: Excellent. Okay, the way I see it, the Shock Troops are firing through the door and Jyrell is trying to deflect their blasts back at them with her sword-staff. That's a trick she learned in gladiator academy. She's protecting her friends as a "Warrior Saint" as well. So that's "Warrior Saint," "Gladiator," "Sword-Staff," "Physique and "Blades."

GM: That sounds about right.

The Shock Troopers have the Concept "Fearless Soldier" at Good, making the TN 9. P1 has a bonus of +14 for her Qualities and that +2 bonus for her Good Momentum success. Her result is 22, which is a Good Level of Success (difference of 13, one less than a Great success) that inflicts two Stress. Minions are removed by one Stress. The GM decides that in this case, inflicting two Stress can remove both enemies that she is facing. That's not a rule for multiple opponents, but it does fit the scene really well.

GM: Jyrell took out both. Do you want to narrate that?

P1: So they're leaning in through the gate, firing at Jyrell, but the sword-staff is deflecting the laser bolts all over the cavern, creating a kind of lightshow. Finally,



Jyrell gets sick of this, and timing it perfectly, swings out with the staff and takes off one of their heads and then pivots the staff and drives it into the gut of the other, dropping him too.

P2: That escalated quickly!

GM (*handing P1 a Luck*): Yeah, that was pretty brutal, but very gladiatorial. It makes the Shock Troops back away for a moment. But they then surge forward, almost feral-like.

P2: That's not good.

P3: And we still have the other group coming at us from across the cave. What do we do about them?

P2: Did the sensors detect any weapons?

GM: You can do a sensor search for that on your turn if you like.

P2: Okay, does Jyrell want to try to hold the gate?

P1: That's what she was born for.

GM: And Tella?

P3: Can she wait for whatever Kyle finds?

GM: That's cool. How about Kyle goes first?

P2: Okay, for Momentum, I want to focus on just the lead figure. I don't want to deal with all of them.

GM: It's going to be an obstacle, so you won't actually be rolling a Test against the group, just the situation.

P2: Okay, so I'm going to include Cunning and "Cyborg," since I'm using one of my grafted parts.

The GM has created the NC obstacle "Scanning for Weapons" as a basic regular. There are three specific pieces of information, so for each success, the players get one piece. "Cave Signal Diffusion +2" and Cunning (+2) makes the scanning just slightly more difficult, but not much. The TN for the Momentum Test is 10, since only the Trait is used. P2 rolls, and their total result is 20.

GM: You got a Good result on your Momentum Test, so that's a bonus Rank for the Action Test.

P2: I certainly hope I won't need it. Okay, so I used "Cyborg" on Momentum, so it'll be "Scientist," "Computers," Cunning, and "PED" for a total of +10. With the added Rank, that's +12 total.

The TN is 12. P2 rolls a 9, so that's 21. It's a Good success, revealing two pieces of information.

GM: There are about 20 figures approaching and each of them is armed with a fusion rifle. There's more information available if you want to try again next round. What will Tella do?

P3: Tella's going to use her "Voice of Command" spell to make them halt and identify themselves.

GM: You speak their language then?

P3: Magic speaks every language.

GM: Good enough. Unfortunately, with 20 of them, that's going to be quite difficult.

P3: All right, then I'm going to turn to the Shock Troops. How many of them are there?

GM: There are eight left.

P3: Wow, Momentum is going to be tough. Jyrell, can you try to thin them out?

P1: Okay, Jyrell will take her turn and then Tella can have hers. You said they were surging forward? How many am I facing?

GM: Three.

P1: Then I'm going to use "Gladiator" along with Physique for Momentum since she was trained to fight both singular combats and groups.

Because there are three Shock Troops, the TN for Momentum is 9. P1 rolls 12, which results in an 18. A Good result providing a +2 bonus to the PC's first action.

P1: Jyrell is actually going to meet their rush with a charge of her own, intending to bowl them back. I'm applying "Warrior Saint," "Sword-Staff," Physique and "Blades" for +12.

GM: And your +2 bonus from your Good Momentum success.

P1 rolls 11, which gives her 25 – a Great success. That’s three Stress, and keeping with the flow of the game the GM decides it’s enough to remove all the opponents – because that’s just more fun.

GM: She takes out all three with that attack. What does that look like?

P1: So this time isn’t as gory. They are piling through the door and she has her staff held horizontal, rams into them, knocks the air out of them, knocking two back through the door and pinning one against the wall with her staff.

P3: So Tella is facing five? That’s still pretty rough. Can she just focus on the leader of the unknown group in the cave?

GM: Absolutely. What’s she doing?

P3: She’s going to use her “Voice of Command,” which is an SFX Quality. So for Momentum, it’ll be Charisma, which is linked to that Quality. I want to also use “Royalty” for Momentum since the magic is part of her royal heritage.

GM: That works for me.

The unknowns in the cave are Desert Acolytes – religious warriors – and their leader is an average regular, meaning her TN is 12. This is about the force of the leader’s will, so she’ll be using Charisma (+2). The TN is 14. P3 rolls a 2 and a 4. With her +6, that only gives a total of 10, and that’s not enough.

P3: You’ve got to be kidding me. Okay, I’m going to spend a Luck to reroll.

P3 hands the Luck to the GM and rerolls the 2. She rolls a 7 for a new total of 17.

P3: That’s not much better.

GM: Maybe, but it’s a success. Go ahead and try the Voice.

P3: Tella uses the Voice on the leader and says: ‘Halt your approach and tell me who you are.’ I already used “Royalty,” so I can’t use that, but I’ll use “Noble Commander” because she projects authority, “Persuasion,” Charisma, and “Voice of Command.” All told, that’s +12.

The GM feels the leader’s Concept “Assassin Monk +2” applies since resistance was part of her assassin training. The TN will be 16. P3 rolls two 10s, a Critical Success, which gives Tella a Stunt. P3’s result is 30, a Great success.

GM: Whoa! Fantastic. So you have a Stunt that is about forcing others to stop and provide information.

P3: Okay, the Stunt is going to be called “Stand and Deliver” linked to Charisma.

So that should give a basic idea of how the game runs at the table. Not every rule was used, but the basic flow of the game and application of some mechanics should provide a good idea of the intent of the game.



Running the Game

The GM plays an integral role in *Sword's Edge*. Being a pretty traditional roleplaying game, the Game Master in *Sword's Edge* has the responsibility for the world in which the PCs adventure, and that means the GM builds the setting, embodies the NCs, and keeps the story moving. Without the GM, there really isn't a game. That isn't to say that the GM's responsibilities must be undertaken by a single individual. The roles of the GM can be rotated through the players, or even shared within a session. The game needs a GM, but who the GM is, and how the roles are divided, is up to you.

What Does the GM Do?

In *Sword's Edge*, the GM is responsible for adjudicating the game when it's in session, for moving the story forward, and sometimes for designing adventures and campaigns. This means that the GM is the one that plans ahead – though the level of preparation can be quite different depending on the GM's style. The GM describes and embodies the world, and is the final arbiter of the rules.

Adjudication

What does it mean to adjudicate *Sword's Edge*? It means that the GM is somewhere between a movie director and a judge. The GM is both the driving force behind the story – like a movie director – and makes the final decision on rules applications – like a judge. The thing is, unlike a director, the GM should not control the story or the actors in it (those being the players). This is a shared story, one that the players have as much an investment in as the GM. And hopefully the game will not be competitive, so the GM shouldn't have to restrain the players from acting against each other like the adversarial aspect of a courtroom.

It's hoped that the rules presented in *Sword's Edge* are clear and understandable. However, it's unlikely that a rules system has been created on which everyone agrees. In cases where a group doesn't find the rules clear or the players have varying interpretations of the system, it's the GM who decides how the rules will be applied. When doing so, the GM should consider the intended *feel* of *Sword's Edge*.

This system has been designed so that a PC working within a particular niche should succeed most of the time, and should only be challenged by hero-level NCs and obstacles that are Exceptional. A PC built with a niche in mind should have a modifier of +18 to any Action Test – assuming no Quality other than a Trait was applied during the Momentum Test. Given that, a PC acting within their niche should almost always overcome an Average challenge – even when that challenge can apply a Concept and Trait at +2 each. Such a challenge should have a TN of around 16, meaning that as long as the player does not roll a Critical Failure, the PC will



succeed. Think of a Good hero, with a Concept at +4, a Trait at +4, and an Element at +4 – that’s a TN of 29. This is a minor challenge for a starting PC, probably only requiring a roll of 11, but after a few Advancements, that’s going to get even easier.

The mechanics are built to allow PCs to succeed within their niche on a regular basis. There will be difficult obstacles and NCs, ones that may even Doom a PC, but in general, the PCs win. And that’s entirely the feel of *Sword’s Edge*. The PCs are the heroes, the protagonists of the story, and they do cool things, and when the GM adjudicates the game, they should consider this. It’s not that the GM should make the game easy for the PCs, but the challenges should come at climaxes, or maybe at the end of a session. Not every scene the PCs enter should lead to a Doom or a collection of broken and exhausted characters. This isn’t a competitive game in which the GM is trying to beat the players. So when adjudicating the game, the GM should use fun as the guideline for decisions. So, what would be the most fun?

Moving the Story Forward

Sword’s Edge exists to help tell a story. What story it tells is up to the players, including the GM. Although all the players should feel responsible for advancing the plot, it’s generally the GM who provides the underlying narrative on which the story is built. They have a special role. The GM has a better idea than any other player where the story is intended to go. That might be an exceptionally abstract and vague notion, but by undertaking their role, the GM accepts that they have some kind of plan. It might only be 12% of a plan, but as a certain walking tree has said, that’s better than 11%.

Given that they’re the one with some narrative direction in mind for the story, when the players run out of steam or creativity, they’ll generally look to the GM to get the story moving again. This might be as simple as a man with a gun walking through a door, or the mayor of the town coming to the PCs to ask for their help with goblins who are raiding the local farms. If there’s a goal in mind, the GM can provide signals to get the PCs moving toward that goal.

This doesn’t mean that the GM should be directing the story entirely. Instead, they should act to nudge the players in certain directions, but be willing to improvise and adapt to the needs of the group. The PCs are supposed to have free will in the game, just as the players have it outside of the game. Even 12% of a plan won’t survive contact with a collection of players. It may be that the story the GM planned has been bent beyond any recognition before it slowly sputters to a halt. When the GM needs to get the story moving again, that might mean trying to direct the PCs back to the original narrative, but really it should be about moving the narrative the PCs have crafted forward. This is the most difficult part – deciding what happens next in a story that you didn’t create.

The GM can provide the next scene, or dangle a hook to entice the PCs to act or otherwise find a way to spark interest and investment. This is all done by simply deciding what happens next and moving the PCs into that. It can't always be climactic or epic. What happens next might be a quiet scene in which the private detectives need to pay their taxes, or – probably better – have a scene of character interaction in which we learn something personal about these PCs. It might start with: “So after all that, you find yourselves in a bar, getting a meal and having a drink ...” as the GM tries to get the players to reveal details that help to illustrate their character's interior, bringing the characters “to life.”

As with any skill, improvisation in roleplaying game stories improves with practice, and it is often the case that GMs are “apprenticed.” Most GMs learn by being players. They internalize lessons of how to GM based on what they like and dislike as a player. Running a game for the first time is daunting given that there's so much more to decide and keep track of than what is necessary as a player. The rewards, though, are also greater, since many players credit the GM with a good game, even if that GM has simply facilitated a story driven and created by the players. Seeing players enjoy themselves and having them crave more of one's game is very fulfilling, and it's a huge part of why some players prefer to GM. For some, it might be control, but for most, I would venture, it's about fulfillment. As with many other entertainers, the enjoyment of others feeds their own.

Preparation

In order to play *Sword's Edge*, there needs to be some kind of framework, some story in which the PCs are the protagonists. The level of preparation for this framework is a spectrum, stretching from minimal to extensive. At the most basic, the GM needs to have some idea of the general shape of the story, and this might be just a single paragraph. The GM might also have each scene in an adventure prepared, with maps, character outlines, a relationship network, or anything else that helps to inform the game. Preparation need not be intimidating, and one only prepares what is necessary for one's play style.

Consider the Player Characters

When preparing for a game, it's important that the GM consider the PCs, who are built with some very specific outcomes in mind. A player builds their PC to reflect what they want that character to do in the game, and it's not going to be as much fun if they don't get to shine. If your group includes PCs with interpersonal, technical, and fighting skills, the adventures that they undertake need to include at least one scene in which they need to talk their way into or out of a situation, a scene in which the obstacle is technical in nature, and a fight. As long as the PCs are built with specific niches in mind, each PC will have their moment to shine.

Be careful during character creation of players coming up with overlapping niches for their characters. If every PC is a fighter of some sort, who gets the spotlight when it comes to combat? If this happens, you and the players can discuss each character having different fighting styles. So, in such a situation, one fighter might be a martial artist, another a gunfighter, and the third uses melee weapons, or something like that.

And don't forget PC Pivots! These signal to the GM the kinds of scenes or spotlights in which the players want their characters to engage. This is an explicit hook for the GM that the player has agreed they will bite. There's no better way to keep the players invested and the story moving forward than by doing what they have explicitly said they want to do. Because Pivots can change as play progresses, players can further inform the GM when their interest in a specific storyline or activity has waned, and this can allow the GM to tie that one off or ignore it moving forward.

Finally, if you intend to include ideas and tropes that aren't normal to a given genre, this should probably be discussed in advance. The GM should know their group reasonably well, and a discussion of the game is unlikely to diminish enjoyment. In fact, it helps get everyone onto the same page around certain expectations. If you want to pull an *Alien* or *Aliens* and have your players expecting a hard SF or action



campaign to only then inject them into survival horror, you'll know best how your players will react to this.

In summary, the idea is that each PC should have a chance to shine, and the story that the GM presents needs to take into consideration what the players want to do.

Structure

A GM who is very comfortable creating a story immediately at the table in response to PC actions and Test results might need only minimal preparation. A rough idea of the story might be sufficient for this kind of GM style, and this could be as short as “The PCs are recent arrivals to modern New York from a war-torn African country.” The activities and ideas of the players will then inform how the story might unfold. This could lead to a meditation on racism and cultural identity, a light-hearted romp as the PCs become accustomed to their new home, a crime drama where desperate PCs are subsumed into the underworld, or a campus comedy as they attend a community college.

A slightly more robust framework could include features that the GM or the players want to include in their story. In this case, the game might have a kind of elevator pitch or mission statement that hits on the various characteristics desired. For example “The PCs are recent arrivals to modern New York from a war-torn African country and their debt to a local fixer forces them into criminal undertakings. Success will see them rise through the ranks of organized crime until they are approached by a federal taskforce that wants them to help destroy the criminal structure from within – using their own particular method of solving problems.”

The One-Pager

A slightly more robust level of preparation that still allows for plenty of improvisation at the table is the one-pager. This is a rundown of the most important narrative aspects of the planned story for a session, and might include a basic rundown of the story, some places of interests and possible events, along with the mechanical information (or stats) and a quick synopsis of important NCs. This might fit roughly onto a page or two, and provides a good foundation from which to expand.

An example one-pager is included later in *Appendix 2: Preparation Examples*.

The Module

One can also write out complete scenarios, including a selection of expected scenes, NCs and events. This can run to dozens of pages, depending on the size of the scenario and the detail required. Most published adventures are “modules” – a term derived from the classification of early commercial *D&D* adventures – and generally run from 30 to 50 pages. Each module is an adventure but can be part of a larger campaign. A module is generally built around expected course of actions. This was

much simpler when a module mapped out and described a single complex, such as a group of caves or a labyrinthine dungeon. In such a case, each room was linked to a text description, sometimes split into an actual script that the GM read, and then the mechanical description of any opponents or obstacles (their stats).

The creation of a module is much harder when there isn't a clear set of rooms or choices. For example, let's take an adventure where the PCs are trying to track down a terrorist in a city. There are innumerable choices and courses of action, and it is impossible to provide narrative and mechanics for all of them. In such a case, one can expand on the one-pager. The module could describe the timeline of events and actions taken by NCs if the PCs don't intervene. NCs require goals and motivations since once the PCs act, the situation will change and the GM will need to decide how the NCs will react. This module might also include important locations the PCs are likely to investigate or visit, such as the antagonist's safehouse, a bar the bad guys frequent, the home or business of an ally, or even a warehouse that will become the target of a raid. Expected events might also be included, such as the antagonist visiting a dead drop for instructions or a supplier to get weapons or explosives.

The idea of the module is to provide a framework for running the adventure and provide information and guidance for those not as comfortable with improvisation or who simply prefer to consider in advance how the adventure might run. The module should not close down too many options or force the GM to follow its structure at the actual gaming table. The idea of *Sword's Edge* is to allow for the exploration of a narrative. The module can give the GM a huge amount of information with which to play, and even if events and locations aren't used as presented, the information in them can be used at a later date or in a different scene. The PCs might never identify the antagonist's dead drop and so that part of the module is not used, but an NC that is part of that scene might appear in another scene, and perhaps the location could be used when the PCs are involved in a clandestine meeting of their own.

A module should provide resources and options for the GM and PCs, but should never constrain the play and the story.

It is important in *Sword's Edge* that the players do not feel they are being "railroaded." Railroading is when the GM has mapped out a series of events from which the PCs feel as though they cannot stray. The GM has, in essence, commandeered the story and is forcing the PCs to follow specific courses of actions decided in advance regardless of what the players would like to do. Players in SE should have a similar level of narrative control as the GM, allowing them to play their characters as they see fit, and engage in the story by helping in its creation. This leads to greater investment by the players and more enjoyment for everyone. As such, when creating a module, if the GM maps out a series of events and expects the PCs to undertake these events exactly as planned, the players will likely feel



constrained – railroaded. Will the players have fun? Maybe. It's very likely, though, that they could have more fun if given the opportunity to truly play their characters and make choices with minimal constraint.

An example of a scene as it might be presented in a module is included later in *Appendix 2: Preparation Examples*.

The Campaign

The adventure or module may stand alone, or it may be part of a larger story. This is similar to many TV and movie series. In the James Bond movies, other than a few recurring characters, there's generally no link between movies. *From Russia With Love* didn't really inform *Thunderball*, and the changes to the status quo seen in one movie didn't translate into character growth or new additions in the other. This is also similar to how *Star Trek* (the Original Series) operated. There was never a real change to the circumstances in which the crew found themselves. One episode might have the crew isolated from the Federation while the next sees them at a Federation outpost. These would be representative of connected standalone stories, with recurring PCs but no linking plot.

Another kind of adventure has multiple modules following an ongoing story. In the Marvel series of movies, each movie builds the setting and the characters that inhabit it. Tony Stark's attitude can be seen to change from *The Avengers*, through *Iron Man 3*, into *Avengers: Age of Ultron* and culminating in *Captain America: Civil War*. Captain America also changes: his trust in SHIELD and the government as a whole is degraded through *The Avengers* – when he realizes SHIELD was using alien

technology to build weapons to use against present allies – into *Captain America: Winter Soldier* – in which he questions the motivations and integrity of Nick Fury and in which he found out that his ‘employer,’ SHIELD, was riddled with the enemy – to *Captain America: Civil War*.

TV series that have a single story that they follow, such as *Avatar: The Last Airbender* or *Hell on Wheels*, are similar in that the outcomes of earlier episodes inform both the characterizations and setting of the latter ones. What is needed in attempting a multiple adventure campaign is both a known goal and discrete elements that can be divided off to create their own stories. So in *Avatar: The Last Airbender*, each season was an element Aang needed to master, and within these stories, each character had a through line – their own story – that allowed those character to grow. All of it culminated in the final season. That takes a lot of planning, but a campaign doesn’t need to be so explicitly designed to move toward a final moment.

As long as the game is moving towards a general goal – let’s say fighting a secret alien plan to infiltrate all of Earth’s governments and rule the planet – and discrete elements that could form their own adventure – find out who’s behind the actions of certain politicians, then find out who’s directing the plan, then learn how they can be defeated, and finally defeat them – that’s all you really need to have a campaign. Within that campaign one should plan to use each PC’s niche to help move the story forward and provide a moment of spotlight in each session or at least within each adventure (which might carry over multiple sessions).

Like with adventures, the level of preparation is based on the play style of the GM. Some will only need a paragraph that provides the basics of the campaign, others will want a flow chart showing how adventures are linked and how they all contribute to the final goal. There’s no right or wrong answer, and instead there are just various tools that move one toward a final destination.

Narrative Characters

A large part of putting scenarios and campaigns together is creating Narrative Characters (NCs). An NC might be an individual, an animal, or some kind of obstacle or a challenge. Basically, anything that the PCs interact with mechanically is built as an NC.

NCs are divided into **NC types**, which include heroes, regulars, and minions. All NCs have a Rank that provides their base TN. They will also have Qualities that may modify that TN if they apply. For example, an Exceptional hero has a base TN of 31 while a Poor minion has a base TN of 5. The NC type is not necessarily a guide to their Rank, but rather it refers to their resilience, as mentioned later in this chapter. Your story is free to have Weak heroes and Exceptional minions, though it does tend to be the other way around.



Generally, NCs are ranked between Weak and Exceptional. There are Legendary and possibly even Mythic NCs, but these should be incredibly rare. When PCs increase in their capabilities, Legendary NCs might become more common, but given a TN of 40, which can be modified by Qualities, a Legendary NC is a serious threat to even a group of PCs.

Momentum and Actions Tests are made by Player Characters against the NC's Target Number (remember: only players roll dice, not GMs). NC Qualities are used in the same way as those of PCs. When a Quality applies and modifies the Test, it is added to the base TN. If the Exceptional hero is applying their Element "Super-fast +6" to their base TN of 31, the TN for the Test would be 37.

Just as for PCs, one of an NCs' Traits always modifies Momentum but any other Quality used for Momentum cannot modify the following Action. Unlike PCs, NCs cannot use Concept to modify a Momentum Test. Only if the NC has Elements – generally NC heroes – can they then modify Momentum with something other than a Trait.

Damage to an NC is applied differently depending on the NC type. Minions are defeated after receiving one Stress, meaning that a minion is removed from a scene on a successful Test by an attacker. Regulars are removed upon receiving three Stress (so a Great damage result would remove a regular). Stress to heroes is removed from the NC's Rank. For example, if an Exceptional hero (TN 31) regular receives Stress, the quality of the NC is reduced to Great (and therefore the TN is reduced to 23). When a hero NC with a Weak Rank (TN 3) receives Stress, that NC is defeated and removed from the scene.

An NCs' type is based on their role in the story. Heroes are significant characters who can affect the plot and can have impact on the narrative. These NCs might be the main villain, a rival captain, or a trusted contact at a foreign port. The *Genres* section provides many examples of the different NC types.

An NC hero has a Concept at Great (+4), and a hero's Traits are generally ranked with one at Good (+2), one at Great (+4), and one at Exceptional (+6). NC heroes also have multiple Elements, generally one at +4 and another at +2; however, these Ranks are based on the intent and needs of the adventure. More Elements can be included, the Ranks of which are based on the intent of the design. Since heroes have multiple Elements, one of these is generally used to modify Momentum if it applies.

Regulars are non-significant characters in the narrative. While not as important as a hero, a regular plays a role in the narrative and has a specific identity. Crewmembers of the rogue freighter on which the characters serve, a favourite barkeep, or the town

sheriff could all be regulars. A regular NC has a Concept at +2, and all three Traits – one at +2, one at 0 and one at –2. A regular character has no other Qualities. As mentioned earlier, a regular is removed from a scene after receiving three Stress.

Minions are insignificant characters in the narrative. These are faceless characters who exist only as a minor obstacle to the PCs. A minion rarely has a name or a personality beyond that which is required to drive the plot. A minion NC has only a Concept ranked at +2, and no other Qualities. As mentioned earlier, minions are defeated after receiving one Stress.

Obstacles that are non-sentient can also be built as NCs. For example, let's say your wizard is researching a potent potion, or your spy is trying to crack a code. In these cases, the obstacles are built the same as an NC, using Qualities. Although such an obstacle doesn't act of its own accord, it might still be considered an attacker, and the narrative for this indicates the way the PC gains Stress through their failure. The spy who fails their Momentum Test is facing a crisis of confidence, and the Action Test will tell you if the Trait applied gains a Penalty Rank. In general, more complex obstacles can be created as regulars or heroes.



Let's look at an example where the PCs have to crack a code to complete their objective. Cracking the Code is presented as an obstacle requiring Cunning to overcome. The PC can't really beat the code into submission nor can they persuade the code to reveal itself. The obstacle counts as a Good regular, so it takes three Stress (or a Great success) to remove it from the scene. Each success could have a narrative aspect explaining what the PC is doing to decipher the code. Alternatively, each success might reveal a part of the encoded message or information. Later, in the Spec Ops part of *Genres*, other obstacles will be presented as NCs.

Cracking the Code (Good regular) TN 17

Concept: Cryptographical Conundrum +2

Physique +0; **Charisma** +0; **Cunning** +4

For another example of NCs as obstacles or challenges, rather than direct opponents, let's look at the Silent Takedown. This is the approach and termination of a sentry NC who might be a Regular or Hero. The Silent Takedown challenge provides a direct route to quickly and quietly remove that NC. For this obstacle, a single success will overcome the obstacle, meaning that it is created as a minion, removed with a single Stress. However, this is not supposed to be easy, so it's ranked at Good and given a Concept. This will be a very difficult shot, but not impossible and one success will remove the target.

Silent Takedown (Good minion) TN 17

Concept: Hard Target +8

If your game includes supernatural creatures, you'll need to cook up some monsters. Monsters sit between heroic and regular characters. In general, a monster is a regular character plus any Qualities that helps to simulate the powers and abilities of the mythic creatures. It may be easier to build particularly formidable opponents – like frost giants – as heroic characters.

Let's take the Scandinavian troll as an example of a monster. They're big, not too bright, and change to stone when exposed to sunlight.

Troll (Average regular) TN 12

Concept: Troll Warrior +4

Physique +6; **Charisma** -2; **Cunning** -4

Flaw: Sensitive to Light -4

Note: When exposed to sunlight, the troll loses a Rank of its TN every 30 seconds until brought below Weak, at which time it changes to stone.

More examples of monsters or special opponents are presented in *Genres*.

When creating a scene with mechanical obstacles, having two to three minions



per PC should provide a sense of challenge without undue risk to the characters. To really challenge the characters, one regular level NC of Average to Good Rank creates risk without being a major threat. A single heroic Great or Exceptional NC should be a tough challenge for most starting PCs, as would two heroic NCs or a heroic Legendary NC – this last one probably provides a good boss fight.

The Cardinal Rule

The GM's purpose is the same as the purpose of this system: to facilitate enjoyment. That's the only real measure of success. This is a game, and we play games to have fun. It's hoped that this system will help GMs to deliver entertainment in a structured manner that provides enough mechanics to adjudicate events of significance within the narrative, but it's ultimately the GM in cooperation with the players that truly brings the fun.

In the end, any decision made by the GM should be guided by what would be the most enjoyment for everyone. If the group – including the GM – has fun, the game is a success. No other measure is needed.

Genres

As a generic RPG, *Sword's Edge* can be used in games of all sorts of settings and stories. The following provides some ideas for characters, opponents, and inspiration that could be used in different genres.

Fantasy

Fantasy is one of the root genres of RPGs, being the well from which *D&D*, *Tunnels & Trolls* and *Runequest* were drawn. This umbrella covers heroic fantasy, high fantasy, and sword & sorcery, to name but a few permutations. For the purposes of SE, let's define fantasy in the simplest way: a setting that includes a secondary world



(a setting other than Earth) or magic of some sort. This could include alternative histories with the inclusion of magic or modern urban fantasy. There's even space fantasy, if you want to call the Force magic.

Characters

Although fantasy, as defined, can include modern and even future settings, these characters would fit into a pre-industrial second world – as in a world that's created rather than an alteration of our existing world. They would fit into a world of dungeons filled with dragons and treasures, and could hunt down monsters that threaten innocents.

Crag

Concept: Barbarian +2

Background: Hunter +2

Faculty: Stealth +2 (Physique)

Trait *Element*

Physique +4 Battleaxe +4; Wrestling +2

Charisma +0

Cunning +0 Tracking +2

Pivots

Deeds of renown will bring me glory.

Civilization is weak.

Sir Vonnegut

Concept: Knight Errant +2

Background: Nobility +2

Faculty: Riding +2 (Physique)

Trait *Element*

Physique +2 Swordplay +4; Lance +2

Charisma +2 Leadership +2

Cunning +0

Pivots

Evil will always fail if men of good heart stand fast.

Grim purity.

Code of honour.



Robin Hode

Concept: Ranger +4

Background: Scout +2

Faculty: At One With Nature +2 (Cunning)

Trait *Element*

Physique +2 Fencing +2; Bow +2

Charisma +0

Cunning +2 Survivalist +2

Pivots

I will take from the rich and give to the poor.

Honest thieving.

Myrrdin

Concept: Mage +4

Background: Academic +2

Faculty: Arcane Knowledge +2 (Cunning)

Trait *Element*

Physique -2

Charisma +0

Cunning +4 Charm of the Flame +4; Hypnotism +2; Ancient Tongues +2

Pivots

I will learn those secrets forbidden to others.

Mysterious.

Speaks in riddles.

Opponents

The opponents in most fantasy are monsters of some sort. They might be derived from mythology, be part of the fantasy RPG canon that's grown-up since the 1970s, or be created for a specific fantasy setting.

Goblin (basic minion) TN 8

Concept: Feral Scavenger +2

The goblin is the standard low-threat opponent, providing a kind of feral human monster with a society and sentience.

Goblin Group (average regular) TN 12

Concept: Warband +2

Physique +2, *Charisma* +0, *Cunning* -2

With a monster like a goblin, the GM can either present them singularly or include multiples as one opponent, providing a greater threat to the PCs.

Giant (good regular) TN 17

Concept: Sturdy Warrior +2

Physique +6, *Charisma* +0, *Cunning* -2

The giant's physique makes it formidable, and this could present an actual challenge to a single PC.

Gorgon (great hero) TN 23

Concept: Supernatural Guardian +4

Physique -2, *Charisma* +6, *Cunning* +2

Stone Gaze (Charisma) +4; Create Fear (Charisma) +2

Medusa in Greek mythology was one of the gorgon sisters. This depiction of the gorgons is that of guardians of something of value, perhaps a treasure or a clue.

Demon (exceptional hero) TN 31

Concept: Immortal Tormentor +4

Physique +4, *Charisma* +4, *Cunning* +4

Fires of Hell (Physique) +4; Gaze of Damnation (Charisma) +2; Tempting Voice (Charisma) +2

This supernatural creature – call it what you will if you have an aversion to the connotations of the term demon – is a good choice for a climactic battle with PCs. The demon not only has significant combat abilities, but can certainly hold its own in a debate or in the use of falsehoods.



Dragon (legendary hero) TN 40

Concept: Immortal Engine of Destruction +4

Physique +6, *Charisma* +4, *Cunning* +4

Monstrous Size (Physique) +4; Aerial Assault (Physique) +2; Breath of Fire

(Physique) +4; Hardened Scales (Physique) +2; Spread Fear (Charisma) +4

This dragon is based on Vermithrax from *Dragonslayer*, still one of my favourite dragons. Vermithrax may have been intelligent, but it didn't communicate or have magic, as some other incarnations have had. This dragon is purely a monster of rage and strength, and you don't want to get in its way.

Inspirations

There are very many sources from which to draw inspiration for fantasy games, and those have been pretty prevalent in most of the RPG literature. You may have encountered some of the below elsewhere, but here are a couple of non-fantasy genre inspirations for fantasy games.

Samurai Cinema

Known as chanbara, movies about samurai are a staple in Japanese cinema and there are some amazing movies from which one can draw inspiration. That is especially true of the work of Akira Kurosawa, who was not only responsible for *The Seven Samurai*, possibly the finest movie ever made, but also the movies *Yojimbo* (from which we get a *For a Few Dollars More* and *Last Man Standing*) and *Sanjuro*. Along with Kurosawa, there are the more modern entries such as Takeshi Kitano's *Zatoichi* and Takashi Miike's *13 Assassins*. These movies have great plots with fantastic conflicts and villains that are extremely easy to port into the fantasy genre. Consider the much-maligned *47 Ronin* with Keanu Reeves, which is a pretty good fantasy-romp, but wasn't a good rendition of the actual legend. The makers of that movie basically did the same thing as is suggested here – they took a lot of really great inspiration and injected a bunch of fantasy.

Modern News

Although there are generally huge differences in society and politics between our world and those of fantasy, what happens in the real world can be adapted for the pre-industrial setting of most fantasies. If you're playing a modern fantasy, the point is pretty much moot. However, if you're working with the pre-industrial monarchies that are the general fare for high fantasy, the motivations and actions of individual and groups can certainly inform the same in your group. Fights for independence from foreign domination – real or imagined – have happened all through history. Criminal groups battling the authorities and innocents getting caught in the middle is also nothing new. Even economic bubbles are not modern inventions – research Dutch 'tulip mania' from the 1630s. Look at what is happening in the world around you and then apply it to your fantasy world. Even something like climate change could work, but in fantasy it could be the result of the machinations of a powerful witch or warlock.



Hardboiled Fiction/Film Noir

SE is an extension of the mechanics created for *Sword Noir: A Role-Playing Game of Hardboiled Sword & Sorcery*, so it should come as no surprise that hardboiled fiction can inspire fantasy. In fact, there's significant overlap of attitudes and character-types between hardboiled fiction and sword & sorcery fiction. It is certainly possible to borrow plots as well, especially since there's a fair tradition of finding/stealing/protecting a MacGuffin¹ in both noir and S&S, and the characters from hardboiled fiction and their motivations are generally easy to transfer into fantasy.

Swashbuckling

Although this might have some general overlap with fantasy, swashbuckling games are generally set during some period of history rather than on a second world. There can be overlap with many of the tropes, plots, and heroes between swashbuckling and fantasy, so many of the characters and inspirations used for that genre could also be applied to swashbuckling campaigns. Swashbuckling is basically an action-adventure campaign with virtuous heroes during a period in our pre-industrial history after the introduction of firearms but before those became a form of primary weapon. These adventures are replete with unrealistic action, coincidences, and cliffhangers.

¹ Wikipedia defines a MacGuffin as “a plot device in the form of some goal, desired object, or other motivator that the protagonist pursues, often with little or no narrative explanation.”

Characters

From a hive of scum and villainy like Tortuga to the Siege of La Rochelle, these are the kinds of characters one might find undertaking daring rescues and physics-defying combats.

Masked Avenger

Concept: Knight Errant +2

Background: Noble +2

Faculty: Fencing +2 (Physique)

Trait *Element*

Physique +2 Flexible +2; Sword of Justice +4

Charisma +2 Icon of Justice +2

Cunning +0

Pivots

Justice for all.

Explosive enthusiasm.

The mark of the white clover.

Musketeer

Concept: Swordsman +2

Background: Soldier +2

Faculty: Brawling +2 (Physique)

Trait *Element*

Physique +2 Fancy Footwork +2; Flashing Blades +4

Charisma +2 Come Here Often? +2

Cunning +0

Pivots

Bitter history of lost love.

I do what I need to win.

The Pirate

Concept: Pirate Captain +4

Background: Naval Officer +2

Faculty: Seafaring +2 (Cunning)

Trait *Element*

Physique +0 Swordsmanship +2; The Pistol +2

Charisma +2 Do As I Say +2

Cunning +2

Pivots

I will have my revenge on those who destroyed my family.

Civilized barbarity.



Opponents

Since the swashbuckling genre is set in a historical period, such stories generally don't have monsters or magic. However, if you are running an alt-history or fantasy swashbuckler could have evil wizards and monstrous villains. In consideration of this, monstrous and magical foes have been included.

Cardinal's Guard (basic minion) TN 8

Concept: Brawling Fencer +2

This is a representative of the usual opponent facing swashbucklers getting involved with some kind of political intrigue.

Goblin Guard (basic minion) TN 8

Concept: Blade-bearing Monster +2

For a second world/fantasy campaign, the opponents might be humanoids in ruffled collars with sabres. It could happen!

Recurring Guard (average regular) TN 12

Concept: Professional Soldier +2

Physique +2, *Charisma* +0, *Cunning* -2

This is a guard or other opponent who has a history with one of the PCs or with all of them. This NC is a cut above the average guard, but is not quite in the PCs' league.

Mage of the Guard (great hero) TN 23

Concept: Spell Soldier +4

Physique -2, *Charisma* +0, *Cunning* +2

Blast of Mage Fire (Cunning) +2; Freezing Touch (Physique) +2; Hypnotism (Charisma) +2

You could mash up swashbucklers with magic, be it alt-history or second world, so one of those pesky guards is going to have access to magic.

Captain of the Guard (exceptional hero) TN 31

Concept: Professional Soldier +2

Physique +4, *Charisma* +2, *Cunning* +2

Deft Blade (Physique) +4; Crack Shot (Physique) +2

This is the primary physical opponent for the PCs, and should be a character with whom they are acquainted. The Captain likely wouldn't engage in combat with the PCs until the penultimate scene, just before the PCs meet their real opponent.

The Cardinal (legendary hero) TN 40

Concept: Politician +4

Physique -2, *Charisma* +4, *Cunning* +4

Voice of Reason (Charisma) +2; Prepared (Cunning) +4; Connected (Charisma) +4

While this character is presented as a religious official, they can be any scheming official or leader – perhaps a criminal boss – who motivates and directs the opponents of the PCs. The Cardinal might even occasionally be an ally of the PCs, when their interests align. The Cardinal is pragmatism personified.

Inspiration

Although swashbucklers are generally very visual – swashbuckling itself is often much more about style and looking cool than efficiency – the roots of the genre are in literature. Here are three books, one a classic and two more of more modern lineage, that offer different takes on swashbuckling.

The Three Musketeers

The classic tale of country bumpkin but adventurer par excellence D'Artagnan as he meets and then joins three of the most capable swordsmen during the Wars of Religion: Athos, Porthos, and Aramis. The Three Musketeers – soon to become four – protect the king's interests from those of Cardinal Richelieu, a church bureaucrat who believes only he can truly make France great. This is kind of the ur-swashbuckler, and one aspect of it I love is that the Cardinal is not an evil villain. He does not believe the King of France can truly protect France's interests and so the Cardinal must be the one to do so, forcing him to sideline the King and subvert his authority. The Cardinal also recognizes that the Musketeers have their uses, and so isn't interested in destroying them, only in stopping them from interfering in his machinations.

Captain Alatrisme

Captain Diego Alatrisme y Tenorio is a Spanish soldier of fortune and sword for hire whose adventures in early 17th-century Europe – the same period as Dumas' Musketeers novels – are the subject of a collection of novels from Arturo Pérez-Reverte. Alatrisme's stories are much grittier than the Musketeers, and while Alatrisme is a hero in the sense that he is bound by his own particular ethics, he does not have the selfless loyalty to an ideal that the Musketeers embody and he would probably find himself in the employ of the Cardinal rather than fighting for the King. In this way, he's probably like a fair number of typical PCs in RPGs.

Tales of the King's Blades

This series – the first trilogy in Dave Duncan's *King's Blades* series – is a second world/fantasy swashbuckler that has technology and society closer to the High Middle Ages than the Enlightenment, but retains many of the tropes of swashbucklers. The stories are an obvious homage to swashbucklers in general, and

The Three Musketeers in particular. The novels provide insight into inserting magic into the genre and how its tropes can be translated into differing time periods and places.

Westerns

The Western originated as a uniquely American genre, one inspired by the inexorable move west of that nation, and one that ignored the price paid for it by the indigenous people of that territory. It has grown into a universal genre and one that has reached a level of post-modernity in which it is used to criticize that which it once glorified. The period of the Westerns generally runs from the end of the US Civil War but there is no firm end-date, and Sam Peckinpah's classic *The Wild Bunch* is set in 1913. Stories set in the 20th century are generally critiques or investigations of the tropes of Westerns, and this might make an interesting story for an RPG adventure. Generally set on the frontier, far from civilization, a Western might not even take place in the American southwest, as the Korean movie *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* – one of the inspirations referred to below – illustrates.

Characters

These characters might be found at home on the range, in a frontier town like Tombstone, or out on the plains driving or rustling cattle. It's also possible for such characters to be found outside their usual milieu, perhaps acting as a soldier of fortune, or even an explorer.

The Leader

Concept: Natural-born Leader +2

Background: Rawhide Cattle Driver +4

Faculty: Wide Open Spaces +2 (Cunning)

<i>Trait</i>	<i>Element</i>
Physique +0	Straight Shooting +2
Charisma +2	
Cunning +2	See It In Your Eyes +4

Pivots

Don't fence me in.

Stoic.



The Rogue

Concept: Gambler +2

Background: Dentist +2

Faculty: Quicker Than the Eye +4 (Physique)

Trait *Element*

Physique +0 Six-gun God +6; "Lunger" -2

Charisma +2

Cunning +2 Cardsharp +2

Pivots

Hedonist.

It's an honest profession.

Gunfighter

Concept: Duellist +4

Background: Union Soldier +2

Faculty: Like Lightning +2 (Physique)

Trait *Element*

Physique +2 Gunfighter +4

Charisma +2 Shadow of Fear +2

Cunning +0

Pivots

I will keep to my ideals.

Flamboyant.

Something to prove.

Scout

Concept: Scout +2

Background: Plains Rider +4

Faculty: One with Nature +2 (Cunning)

Trait *Element*

Physique +2 Hawkeye +4; Shadow of the Wolf +2

Charisma +0 Outsider -2

Cunning +2 Live off the Land +2

Pivots

I will keep my culture alive.

Proud defiance.

Opponents

The traditional opponents of Western heroes are generally mirror-images of them. This is not to say heroes face their doppelgangers, but just as there are gunslingers, scouts, ex-military, and even lawmen who are the heroes of Western tales, this also describes the villains the heroes will likely face. What you will not find in this list are Native Americans/American Indians, since the use of a specific ethnic group as villains is an unwelcome, prejudicial, and ugly practice. A Western game



should include the indigenous people of the region, but these are individuals, not a monolithic bloc of villains (or saints), and one should keep in mind the impact of expansion on the Native American population.

Frontier Thug (basic minion) TN 8

Concept: Six-shooter +2

This is the standard tough-guy who follows the main villain. They'll rough up townsfolk or farmers and threaten the heroes, but when it comes to actual violence, they won't be much of an obstacle.

Frontier Muscle (basic minion) TN 8

Concept: Fisticuffs +2

Another kind of thug is the one that isn't even very talented with the standard armaments of the West. This minion can certainly beat townsfolk into submission, but won't have much luck with the heroes.

Frontier Scout (basic minion) TN 8

Concept: Hunter +2

The scout is an essential part of most Western groups because the action happens on the frontier and there are very few known routes and roads.

Black Hat (good regular) TN 17

Concept: Pistols +2

Physique +2, *Charisma* +0, *Cunning* -2

This is a named villain, an important underling of the boss. Black Hat represents a moderate challenge for a single PC and their Ranks should be modified to ensure they're not too underpowered, depending on PC abilities.

Gambler (average regular) TN 12

Concept: Hustler +2

Physique -2, *Charisma* +2, *Cunning* +0

This opponent provides a non-physical threat to the PCs, especially another gambler or card-player. It's especially difficult to protect oneself should one decide to engage in games of chance or skill with a Gambler since they don't necessarily need to cheat to win.

Marshall (average regular) TN 12

Concept: Bring Order +2

Physique +2, *Charisma* +0, *Cunning* -2

The PCs may be duly authorized agents of the state, but more often than not, they're vigilantes, acting without real legal authority. In such a case, an officer of the law may pose difficulties, especially as heroes can't just slap leather to remove this obstacle.

Fastest Gun (great hero) TN 23

Concept: Gunslinger +4

Physique +4, *Charisma* +2, *Cunning* +0

Lightning Fast (Physique) +4; Precise Shot (Physique) +2

This is a real challenge for a gunfighter PC. This villain should be spoken of with reverence, but not actually encountered in combat until towards the climax of a story. This is the bad guy the PCs go through just before they reach the actual boss.



The Spider (exceptional hero) TN 31

Concept: Manager +2

Physique -2, *Charisma* +4, *Cunning* +2

Silver Tongue (Charisma) +4; Organization (Cunning) +2; Business Acumen (Cunning) +2

The Spider is the actual boss character, the one that has set all the pieces in motion and knows the purpose of each. The Spider is a manipulator and has ambitions for dominance, generally as a business interest, but they might actually be within the governing structure of the frontier region. The Spider is as happy to subvert as they are to destroy the PCs.

Inspiration

I will admit that while there is a large canon of iconic Western literature, I have never delved into it. My encounters with Westerns have always been of the visual media kind – TV and movies. For TV, I grew up with reruns and as an adult have encountered some attempts to revive the Western as a viable TV genre, but few of these have made a strong impression. I have been a huge fan of Western movies as far back as my early teens. Some of my favourites are classics, or at least in the classic mould, filmed within the Hollywood system. Others, though, are more esoteric.

Traditional Westerns

The traditional Western movies are not just the classics. Sure, *Stagecoach* and *The Searchers*, both with John Wayne, are traditional and classic. We might call *Tombstone* a classic today, even though it was released in 1993 and it arguably was made within the traditional framework. Traditional Westerns need not be staid and conformist. Some of them are homages to what came before, like *Silverado*. Some are remakes, like 2007's *3:10 to Yuma* and 2010's *True Grit*. Even post-modernist Westerns like *Unforgiven* and *Dead Man* were made within the traditional framework. All of these provide excellent inspiration for some good adventures.

Spaghetti Westerns

In the 1960s and early 1970s, European companies would import some American actors – sometimes only a single “star” – and then locally produce a Western. These derivations of the American genre became hugely influential on traditional Westerns, especially the work of Sergio Leone, an Italian film-maker who, with his main muse and star, Clint Eastwood, redefined the Western with gritty anti-heroes and socially progressive messages. *The Good, the Bad, and the Ugly* is almost always cited near or at the top of lists of the best Western movies. The spaghetti Westerns provide plenty of cool and colourful characters and plots for your Western campaigns.

Outsider Westerns

This section exists almost singularly due to *The Good, the Bad, the Weird*, the Korean action-adventure that is really a Western set in Japanese-occupied Manchuria in

the 1930s. The fusion of Western tropes with Korean action style produced a very significant and enjoyable addition to the canon, even if purists of the form might argue for its exclusion. *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* is not alone in adapting the Western to other locales. One can see a much earlier version of this in *The Drifting Avenger*, which was shot in Australia and starred Ken Takakura, who is probably best known in North America for his role as Detective Matsumoto in *Black Rain* or Chief Uchiyama in *Mr. Baseball*. This movie took a Japanese hero and inserted him into the West. Following in the footsteps of *The Drifting Avenger* was *Sukiyaki Western Django*, a Japanese homage to spaghetti westerns. These outsider Westerns help to bring a new perspective to reinvigorate the genre and maybe even your game.

Spec Ops

A sub-genre in modern action-adventure is special operations/military. These highlight the uber-competent, highly secretive military operators who undertake extreme or deniable missions and are the ones who truly have a licence to kill. When sabotage, assassination, or recovery are required, national governments often turn to these exceptional soldiers, and that makes them enticing fodder. Some movies and novels attempt to approach verisimilitude, especially those stories from operators who have retired from the community.

Characters

This team from an unnamed special operations force might be found hunting terrorists, shutting down a drug baron, or going plainclothes to collect information in an insecure region.

The Boss

Concept: Military Officer +4

Background: Military Intelligence +2

Faculty: Voice of Command +2 (Charisma)

Trait

Element

Physique +0

Pathfinder +2

Charisma +2

Hard Man +2

Cunning +2

I Know What You're Thinking +2

Pivots

Leave no one behind.

Quiet professional.

Doc

Concept: Medic +2

Background: Search and Rescue +4

Faculty: Trauma Medicine +2 (Cunning)

<i>Trait</i>	<i>Element</i>
Physique +0	Weapons Qualification +2
Charisma +0	
Cunning +2	Medical Training +4; Science +2

Pivots

Gave up a practice to serve.

This ain't heroism, this's my job.

Always chill.

Hardware

Concept: Technician +2

Background: Information Technology +4

Faculty: Electronics Engineering +2 (Cunning)

<i>Trait</i>	<i>Element</i>
Physique +0	
Charisma +0	Fast Talker +2
Cunning +2	"Hacker" Life +4; Electronic Surveillance +2

Pivots

The service is the family business.

Aw, shucks, just doin' my job.

Jury-rigging genius.



Shooter

Concept: Sniper +4

Background: Hunter +2

Faculty: Linguist +2 (Cunning)

Trait *Element*

Physique +2 Precision +4; Stealth +2

Charisma +0

Cunning +0 Outdoorsman +2

Pivots

Outsider.

Ghost.

Opponents

Spec ops opponents are the members of foreign militaries or security services. In an alternate reality, these opponents might have access to magic or other paranormal powers. Another kind of opponent for a spec ops team could be the very difficult shot to remove a target or even the security device on an objective building.

Third World Military (weak minion) TN 3

Concept: Thug with an AK +2

Most third world militaries are poorly trained and poorly armed. Given an AK-47 of uncertain age, a soldier will get some basic lessons in marching and then sent into the field. In some areas, the military is made up of various rebel groups cobbled together due to a peace agreement. In general, when these guys are faced with a nail, they will go full cyclical and hope they hit something. Hammers are for losers.

Trained Military (poor minion) TN 5

Concept: Competent with a Gun +2

In the parts of the world in which the military has the respect and support of its government, soldiers are trained to be effective projectors of force, though even the best military retains a certain portion of thugs and villains.

Questionable Cop (poor minion) TN 5

Concept: Enforcer +2

Most police in the world are not highly-trained bringers of order, but are rather there to provide the semblance of order and protect the status quo. As such, they know less about the law than about violence.

First Rate Military (basic minion) TN 8

Concept: Soldier (or Sailor or Airman or Marine) +2

A fully trained and professional military can do more than just project force. These militaries are trained in a wide variety of capabilities, meaning that they can assist civilian authorities or help provide aid to foreign nations following disasters.

Police Officer (basic minion) TN 8

Concept: Law Enforcement +2

The best of the police understand that they exist to serve and protect the citizens of their political unit and do this through established laws and procedures. That doesn't mean that there are no thugs or empty uniforms amongst their ranks though.

Breaching Security (poor minion) TN 5

Concept: Electronic Lock +4

Not just characters but also actions can be represented using the NC template. In a case like this example, it is the circumvention of a security system, like an electronic lock or the protection on a computer network. More complex, dangerous, or difficult obstacles can be presented as regulars or even heroes, as the example of the Silent Takedown discussed in *Narrative Characters* earlier illustrates.

Veteran Military (average regular) TN 12

Concept: Soldier (or Sailor or Airman or Marine) +4

Physique +2, *Charisma* -2, *Cunning* +0

Those members who remain in and excel at professional military service become stronger adversaries, having become more competent in their field but also gaining important life experience.

Military Police (average regular) TN 12

Concept: Maintain Order +2

Physique +2, *Charisma* +0, *Cunning* -2

Military police can be found patrolling important sites and will likely be the ones tasked with counterintelligence, or finding and capturing the PCs if they are someplace they should not be.

Red Force (great hero) TN 23

Concept: Elite Military +2

Physique +4, *Charisma* +0, *Cunning* +2

Marksmanship (Physique) +4; Danger Sense (Cunning) +2

This is the PC's opposite number – a highly-trained, elite, military opponent. Such a character can be modified to create elite scouts, medics, engineers – everything the PCs might have on their own team. The Red Force will likely be guarding high value targets as well as seeking out the same on the PC's side.

The Commander (exceptional hero) TN 31

Concept: Military Leader +4

Physique +0, *Charisma* +4, *Cunning* +4

Strategic Planning (Cunning) +4; Command (Charisma) +4; Connected (Charisma) +2

This is the leader of the opposing force, or perhaps within the PCs' own force or national military, against whom the PCs have been striving. If an opposing officer, the PCs might be sent on one final (suicide?) mission to kill or capture them. If within their own military structure, the PCs might finally become aware when the Commander reveals himself as a traitor and the PCs need to deal with the aftermath.

Inspiration

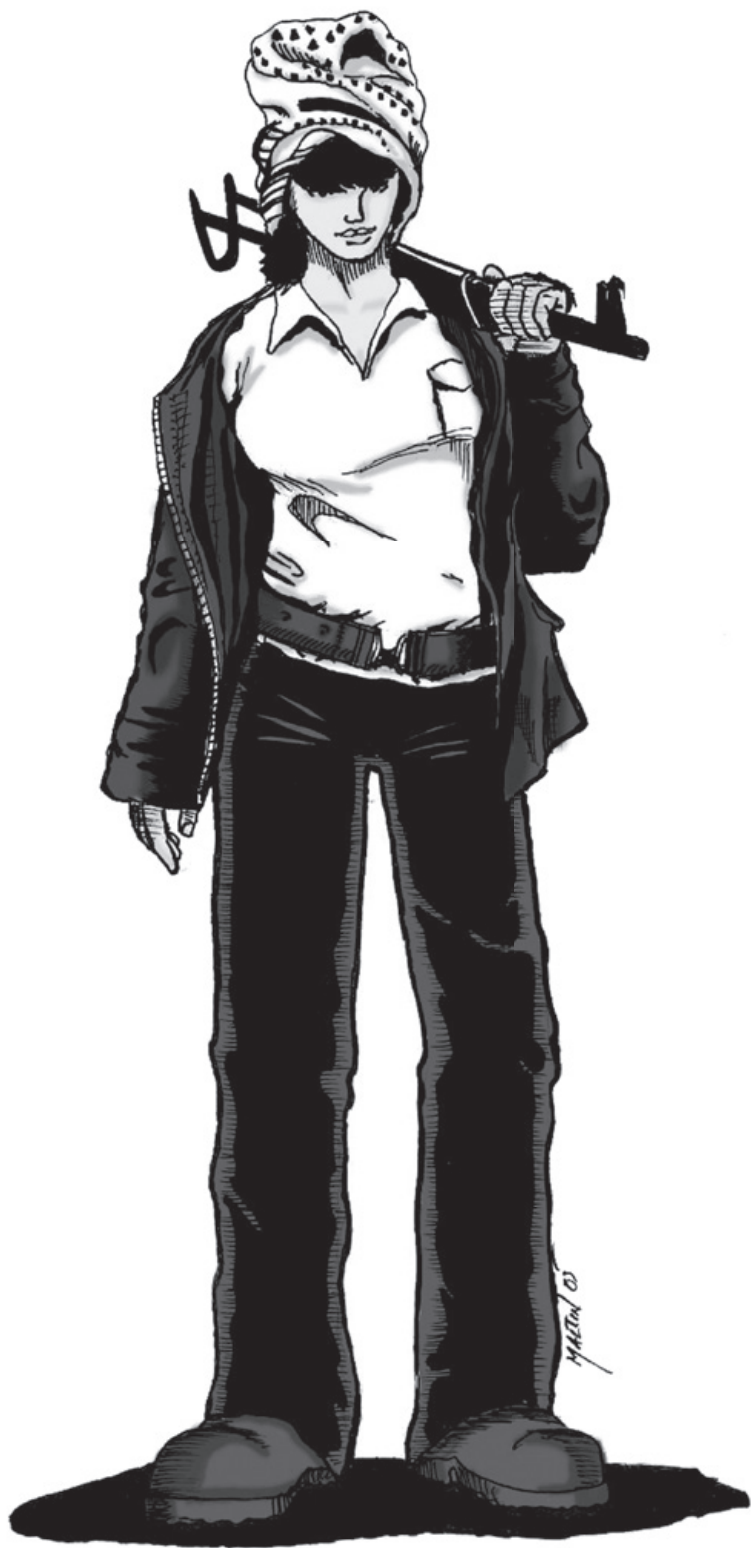
There is a lot of fiction and non-fiction available right now for those seeking inspiration for a good spec ops campaign. Below, are three categories of media with some examples of inspiration in each, but this is by no means extensive. Missing are great investigative books like *Black Hawk Down* and *Killing Pablo* by Mark Bowden or *Killer Elite: The Inside Story of America's Most Secret Special Operations Team* by Michael Smith. There are also TV series, the individual episodes of which are of varying quality, such as *The Unit* and *Ultimate Force*. Even a minor amount of time spent researching will bring up plenty of diverse and sometimes even credible sources.

Movies

Because of their renown for competency and their recent involvement in missions that have received extensive media coverage, special operations forces are a common component of action movies. Many action heroes have had a background as a special operator, like Rambo or John Matrix in *First Blood* and *Commando*, but it's common now to have movies focused on special operations forces (SOF) undertaking operations. A particularly striking example is *Act of Valor*, which includes active duty SEALs undertaking the action. *Act of Valor* has some questionable acting and a plot pieced together from the kinds of training the filmmakers were allowed to capture. *Tears of the Sun* also provides solid action with actors doing a credible job of portraying SEALs. It has a much more coherent plot and is much more of a single story rather than a collection of loosely connected action set-pieces. *Forces spéciales* (*Special Forces*) provides a glimpse of French SOF, though it's light on firefights and high on cat and mouse.

Video Games

When one thinks of spec ops and video games, it's likely the first thought would be the *Call of Duty: Modern Warfare* and *Black Ops* series. These are very potent as inspiration and while the mechanics and interface might be different, the format is very similar to that of RPGs. Each of these provides a campaign with discrete adventures leading to a climactic confrontation. Along with *Call of Duty*,



Counterstrike: Condition Zero's "Deleted Scenes" campaign also provides a collection of adventures for SOF, as do the *Rainbow Six* and *Ghost Recon* series.

Comics

While there are far fewer comics that consider SOF, due to the existence of *The Activity*, it really needs to be included. While it only lasted for 16 issues, Image Comics' *The Activity* purported to tell the story of the direct action team of the Intelligence Security Activity, a highly classified branch of the US military, deeper than Delta and with unknown capabilities and profile. What's known is that it has some of the highest tech signals intelligence gear and operators in the US. Does it have a direct action team? It doesn't really matter, because the stories are great. There's also a more light-hearted, action movie-style comic series – fittingly enough made into an action movie – called *The Losers*. A reboot of a venerable DC title, *The Losers* told the story of a special forces A-team betrayed by a rogue agent within the CIA who ran a shadow government. *Queen & Country* is also a great series for inspiration, though it focuses on a special operations team within the UK's MI6, and is as much about the politics of intelligence agencies undertaking special warfare and the toll it takes on agents as about the missions those agents undertake.

Science Fiction

Science fiction generally looks at the far future or settings with technology beyond that available in the modern world. SF might look at the world tomorrow, when nanotechnology is introduced or a millennium hence when humanity has evolved into beings completely unlike our present form. It might consider questions of philosophy or it might be about shooting aliens in the face – SF envelops a huge variety of stories and adventures.

Characters

These characters might be found onboard a starcraft seeking new life and new civilizations, or fighting off evil alien menaces.

Captain

Concept: Starcraft Officer +4

Background: Military Training +2

Faculty: Hand-to-Hand Combat +2 (Physique)

Trait *Element*

Physique +0 Hand Weapons +2

Charisma +2 Follow me! +4

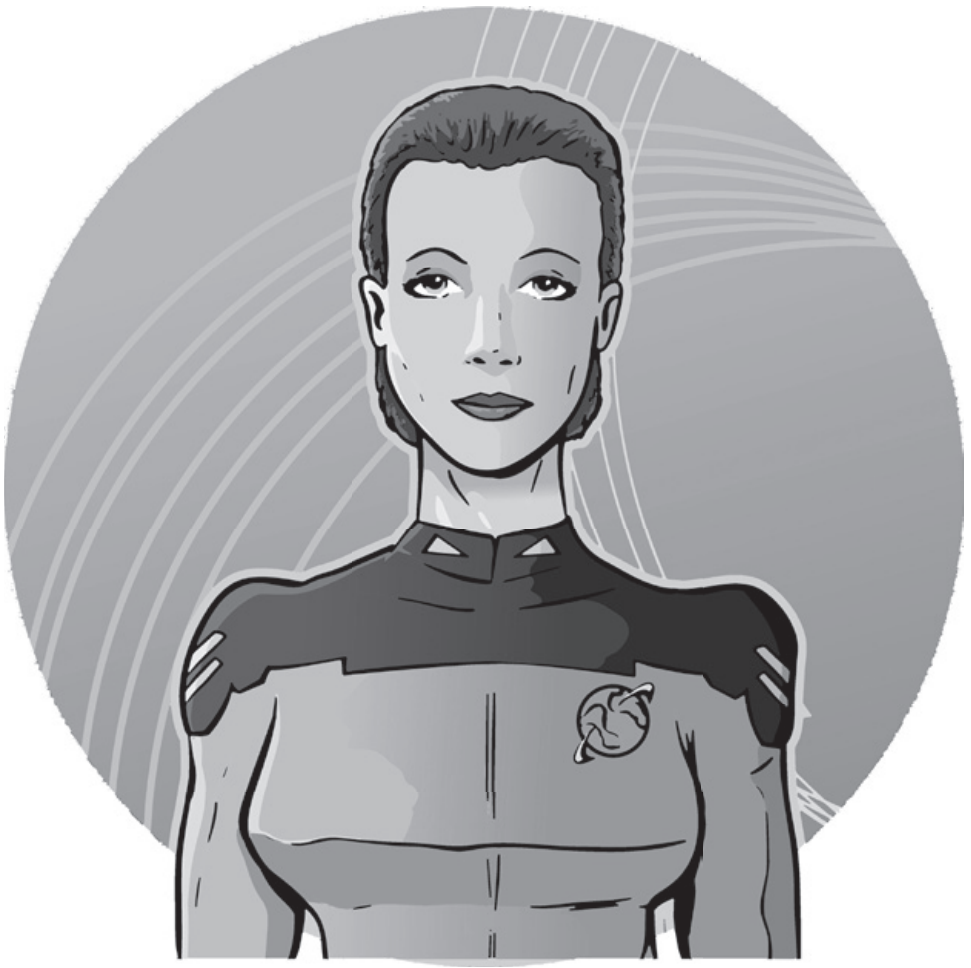
Cunning +2

Pivots

Family discord led me to serve.

Responsible rebel.

Person of action.



The First Officer

Concept: Military Officer +2

Background: Traveller through the Stars +2

Faculty: Social Chameleon +2 (Charisma)

Trait

Element

Physique +0

Sidearm +2

Charisma +4

Trustworthy +2

Cunning +2

Starcraft Systems +2

Pivots

Be all that I can be.

Leads by example.

Dashing.

Ship's Doctor

Concept: Surgeon +2

Background: Medical Training +4

Faculty: Xenobiology +2 (Cunning)

Trait *Element*

Physique +0

Charisma +0

Bedside Manner +4

Cunning +2

Battlefield Medicine +2; Surgery +2

Pivots

I'm here to help.

Fear of technology.

Chief Engineer

Concept: Mechanical Genius +2

Background: Risen through the Ranks +2

Faculty: Ship's Systems +4 (Cunning)

Trait *Element*

Physique +0

Charisma +0

Cunning +2

Jury-rig +4; Find the Problem +4

Pivots

My crew are my family.

We don't have ten minutes, so I'll do it in four!

Opponents

The number of possible opponents in SF is as varied as the kinds of stories it can tell. From the alien captain to insect-like invaders to all-too human bureaucrats and businesspeople, pretty much any opponent found in any genre can be used in SF.

Alien Swarm Menace (basic minion) TN 8

Concept: Destroy! +2

This is the standard alien military threat, some kind of foot soldier or extraterrestrial creature that represents a physical threat to the PCs.

Alien Nobody (basic minion) TN 8

Concept: Curiosity +2

This is an unremarkable member of an alien society who may interact with the PCs. Such aliens can have the same Concept as their human counterpart – an alien store clerk is still a store clerk.

Robot Assassin (average regular) TN 12

Concept: Computerized Killer +2

Physique +4, *Charisma* -2, *Cunning* +4

This regular is built like a monster, not following the exact structure for a regular but also not quite a hero. This android might be encountered hunting down the PCs in the far reaches of the 'Verse, or at a near-future amusement park where it's gone off script and become a real threat.

Time Travelling Meddler (good regular) TN 17

Concept: Chrononaut +2

Physique -2, *Charisma* +0, *Cunning* +2

This chrononaut is not a master or lord of time, rather this is one of the lesser of those who move along the river of moments. While their foreknowledge and possible technological edge might give them a minor advantage, they are no match for a competent PC.

The Bodyguards (good regular) TN 17

Concept: Close Personal Protection +2

Physique +2, *Charisma* -2, *Cunning* +0

Alien leaders might present a threat, but a party of four or more PCs will likely overcome them. The Bodyguards will help to beef up the encounter, increase the challenge and prolong the encounter.

First of Many (great hero) TN 23

Concept: Hive Leader +2

Physique -2, *Charisma* +0, *Cunning* +2

Shared Knowledge (Cunning) +4; Adaptive Armour (Physique) +4; Mind Control (Charisma) +4

Although this leader comes from a hive mind, they have a level of independence that allows them to direct their fellows. Probably sending forth an alien swarm menace, First of Many will stand behind a wall of minions to soften up the PCs. They will remain a distant threat until the end, only then stepping forth and using their immense power to threaten the PCs, flanked by their Bodyguards of course.

The Conqueror (legendary hero) TN 40

Concept: Immortal Tyrant +2

Physique +6, *Charisma* +6, *Cunning* +2

Unimaginable Strength (Physique) +4; Power Blasts (Physique) +4; Voice of Command (Charisma) +4

This is the leader of a vast galactic empire, a creature of science blending into magic. This NC might even threaten a full PC group. Imagine if the Conqueror proved to be the power behind First of Many, finally appearing before that leader is destroyed!

Inspirations

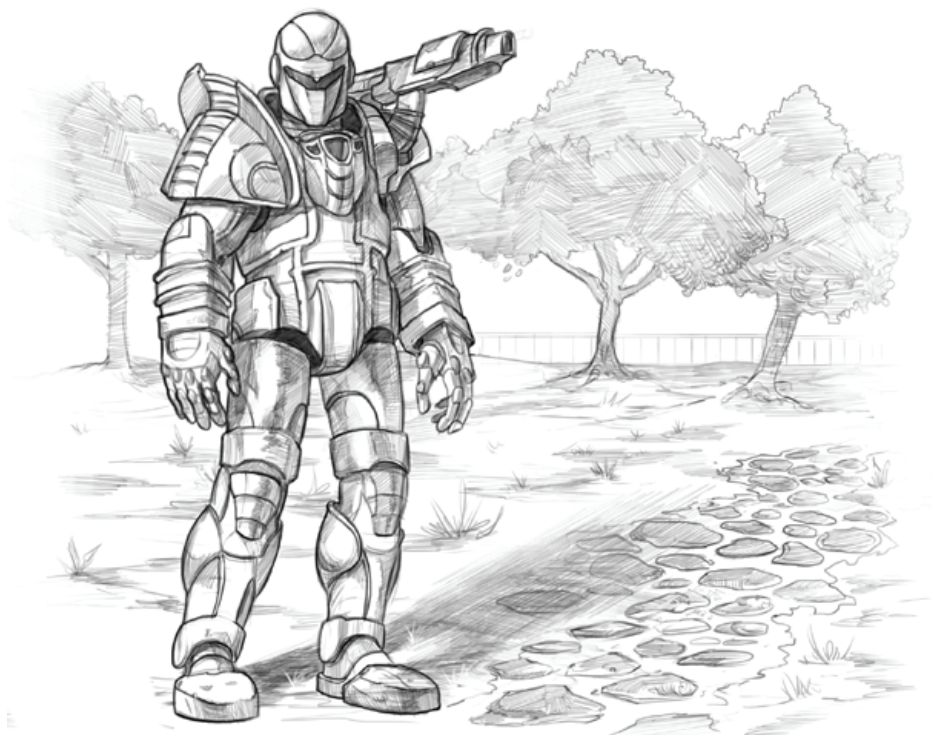
Unlike a lot of the other genres considered – except for Westerns – SF has had a huge impact on television and has been represented – for better or worse – since the earliest incarnations of TV series. SF has a history of movie representations that also reach back almost the whole way to the introduction of the medium and a huge literary canon; however, TV allows for the long form narratives in a visual medium that have proven exceptionally important to the evolution of the genre.

Star Trek: The Next Generation

The most fully-realized of the many *Star Trek* series, TNG had many of the same tropes as *Star Trek: The Original Series*, but had a longer time to find its feet and the knowledge of the impact of TOS on SF to inform it. While certainly not unerringly good, TNG has some amazing moments and if you intend to run a game of space exploration or utopian society in the far future, it is required viewing (if you haven't seen it already).

Fringe

It was either this or *The X-Files*, and *Fringe* had a more coherent through line and had fewer monster of the week episodes. Also, it didn't have the same kind of drop-off near its end that *The X-Files* encountered. Both are great at providing SF stories within a modern world, or perhaps a world just a week beyond ours. *Fringe* told the story of a collection of freak events that all proved to be linked and which introduced lots of SF elements into what began as an investigation story.



Firefly

If I have to pick only three, *Firefly* needs to be presented. With a space-faring story that is overtly set in the far future of our own reality, *Firefly* didn't last long, but it has become almost its own genre, with a movie, comics, and at least one book of essays analyzing it. The story of petty criminals/big damn heroes on the edges of colonized space and their beloved spacecraft would fit an RPG campaign perfectly. The characters are bigger than life but complex and believable, and their adventures are relatable but also filled with action.



Appendix One: Preparation Examples

As mentioned in the text earlier, this appendix provides two examples of different levels of preparation. The “one-pager” provides enough information to situate the GM and give them some references for what is expected to happen in the game. It also provides a minimum of mechanical details. The particular example provided here is from a series of modern special operations/secret operative adventures in which the PCs are part of the Security Reconnaissance Detachment who have been tracking the extremist leader, Abbas, from Libya, through Pakistan and now into the fictional Central Asian republic of Albenistan. Albenistan and the city of Khorforjan are both part of a series of *d20 Modern* adventures published by Sword’s Edge Publishing between 2004 and.

The one-pager presented fits roughly on a single letter-sized page (North American). Some other one-pagers are cheats, with the main narrative information on one page while mechanics – the NCs – are on a second page. Sometimes there isn’t even enough to fill a page. The one-pager rules are honoured in the breach.

The second example is a scene from a module. In this case, it’s the second scene from a high fantasy adventure. The PCs in this adventure are villagers in a remote (though not necessarily isolated) location, or possibly visitors to the village there due to the rumours of supernatural occurrences. In the opening scene, the players are introduced to the village, some of its inhabitants, and the recent concerning events that have led many to believe the village may be haunted or the target of evil forces. At the end of that scene, children seek the PCs’ aid after their brother was grabbed by what they can only describe as a werewolf.



The Dirty Bomb

The PCs (as the Security Reconnaissance Detachment or SRD) have tracked the terrorist ringleader – Abdul Meghdessian, who is also known as Abdel Aziz al Qurdhud or Abbas Masoud – to Khorforjan in Albenistan (fictional nation from SEP Spec Ops series of adventures). He is travelling with Faraj al Al-Goul, a Pakistani physicist he met in Libya, and Ali Kushayb, a Darfuri Islamicist and Abbas’ bodyguard. Faraj has promised to build Abbas a dirty bomb, and Abbas will be using a facility on the borderlands for his main laboratory. He’s been unable to acquire enriched uranium until now. But while Abbas has the yellowcake he acquired in Pakistan, he’s still waiting for the processing machinery to arrive. Abbas needs to wait in Khorforjan for the delivery. The CIA and the Russians have both increased their presence, and the local UN peace and stability operation is manned mostly by peacekeeping forces (PKFs) from Central and South Asia.

Machinery

The machinery is being transported through Pakistan, and will be delivered by convoy through the NW Frontier Province, then through Afghanistan, and into Albenistan. The convoy is protected by Pakistani intelligence agents. Local tribal leaders have been bribed. Its entry into Albenistan will come D+2 (second day after scenario starts). The info will come almost immediately if the SRD has cultivated local CIA contacts, or within a day through other sources of information, including the local security forces (completely untrustworthy).

Operational Halt

Abbas has commanded a halt to kinetic operations along the Afghanistan border. Interest in the region could uncover the convoy. He is also aware an operational halt *will* draw attention, so he has bribed the secessionist forces to increase their operations in the Autonomous Region. This is an almost complete reversal over the last year, which saw increasing activity along the border (mostly IEDs along main supply routes) alongside a relaxing of hostilities in the Autonomous Region. This is something contacts will bring to SRD’s attention.

Competition

A team from Russia’s SVR (Foreign Intelligence Service) is also tracking Abbas. They believe he’ll assist other Islamic extremist and separatist groups in the Caucasus. There are two men and two women who are a liaison team to the local security forces, while an “illegals” team (deep cover agents with falsified identities) is hunting Abbas. The liaison team will put the SRD under surveillance if they notice them. This will almost certainly leak out through the local security forces to the terrorists. Abbas will send a hit team to remove the SRD, but will also seek to remove the Russians.

Hideout

Abbas is waiting at an abandoned pottery factory near the eastern bend on Road 88. Local contacts, or even the CIA, can point this out as a no-go area for the security forces. Abbas’ extremists are not shy about carrying their AKs openly, and a good reconnaissance should identify the old factory as an area of force concentration. If the hideout is under surveillance, the delivery should be noted.

Local Forces (poor minion) 5
Concept: Lawful Thugs +2

Terrorists (basic minion) 8
Concept: Violent
Extremist +2

UN Troops (basic minion) 8
Concept: Incompetent
PKFs +2

Russian SVR (average regular)12
Concept: Black Operative +2
Phy +2 *Cun* +0 *Cha* –2

Kushayb (average hero) 12
Concept: Protective Killer +4
Phy +4 *Cun* +0 *Cha* +2
Precise Shot (Phy) +4, Fast
(Phy) +2

Abbas (great hero) 23
Concept: Extremist Leader +4
Phy +0 *Cun* +2 *Cha* +4
Exhort Violence (Cha) +4, Sly
Shot (Cun) +2

Scene: The Hunt

This scene assumes the PCs have decided to immediately set out to track the beast that captured the boy from the village. The attack on the village comes when the PCs are away, but if they decide not to track the boy – which should create severe tensions with the villagers – they will be on hand for the actual attack.

If the PCs do not attempt to save the boy, four of the young men from the village will do so. They will not return, and later investigation can lead the PCs to the ruin. There they will discover the bodies of two of the young men, but there's no trace of what happened to the boy, the other two, and the beast who took them.

Obstacle: Tracking

The sun has set, and darkness is falling, but there is little time to lose. The child's screams are still fresh in your ears just as the trail through the forest is fresh for the hunt.

Success in Tracking the Beast reveals (1) What becomes obvious is that it was likely a wolf that took the child, though a wolf larger than any you have ever seen; (2) The wolf ran on four legs, not two, as the witnesses claimed; (3) The wolf weighed around 400 kg (880 lb) when it's rare for a wolf to weigh more than 55 kg; and (4) It looks like the wolf dragged the child, and didn't carry him, as the witnesses claimed.

Tracking the Beast (average regular) 12

Concept: Path of the Wolf +2

Phy +2 *Cun* +0 *Cha* –

If no PCs have skills that can track the wolf, just apply narrative.

Fight: The Ruins

The wolf track leads to one of the many ruins in the area. Most of these are the foundations of what may have once been great buildings. The particular one the tracks leads to has a foundation of stone with five bases that may have been for pillars. Mosaics that once tiled its floor are now broken and scattered, but a few remain. Lying, groaning, on the edge of the ruin is the Widow Sheen's youngest – the boy who was taken from the village.

From out of the darkness leaps the beast, a huge shadow of dark fur, flashing red eyes, and long, curved fangs. It looks taller at the shoulder than most of the PCs.

When the Dire Wolf is defeated, its body evaporates into smoke, the smoke itself dissipating into the night. As it does, smoke begins to coalesce in the centre of the ruin. It takes shape and solidifies, revealing the corpse of a regular wolf. Any damage done to the Dire Wolf will be evident on this wolf corpse.

Dire Wolf (average hero) 12

Concept: Demon in Wolf Form +4

Phy +4 *Cun* +0 *Cha* +2

Incredible Speed (Phy) +4; Sharp Fangs (Phy) +2

The boy doesn't respond well to questioning since he's in shock. He'll be shivering with his teeth chattering, but he won't cry. Not yet. That will come later.

There are no tracks or traces around the ruin that might explain from where the Dire Wolf came. While the ruin has markings and writings, none of these are recent and are all quite old.

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Trait or Quality Ranking and Modifier

Ranks	Modifier	Description using	
		<i>Strength</i>	<i>Intelligence</i>
Weak	-6	Physically challenged	Intellectually challenged
Poor	-4	Child or elderly	Ignorant
Basic	-2	Couch potato	A little slow
Average	0	Normal Person	
Good	+2	Some exercise	Good grades
Great	+4	Athlete	Honour roll
Exceptional	+6	Professional athlete	Noted intellectual
Legendary	+8	Olympian	Super genius

Task Ranking and Target Number

Ranks	Target Number	Complexity Example	
Weak	3	Walking	Simple words
Poor	5	Jumping	Literacy
Basic	8	Catching a frisbee	Basic math
Average	12	Running an obstacle course	Basic physics
Good	17	Swinging from vines	Astrophysics
Great	23	Parkour	Quantum mechanics
Exceptional	31	Tightrope walking	String theory
Legendary	40	Running and jumping on a tightrope	Theory for faster than light travel
Mythic	51	Scaling a glass wall	Explantion of everything

Recovery

Level of Success	Recovery Result
Average	Remove one Penalty Rank
Good	Remove one Penalty Rank
Great	Remove two Penalty Ranks
Exceptional	Remove two Penalty Ranks
Legendary	Remove three Penalty Ranks

Range	Modifier
Touch	-
Close	-
Near	-
Medium	One Penalty Rank
Far	Two Penalty Ranks
Excessive	Three Penalty Ranks
Sight	Four Penalty Ranks

Stress	
Level of Success	Stress Result
Average	Inflicts one Penalty Rank
Good	Inflicts two Penalty Ranks
Great	Inflicts three Penalty Ranks
Exceptional	Inflicts four Penalty Ranks, opponent now Undefended
Legendary	Inflicts five Penalty Ranks, opponents receives a Doom

SFX Component Table

Rank	Reach	Duration	Area of Effect (space/people)	Energy/Strength	Modifier	Rounds Required
Basic	Personal	Turn	Personal	Candle/child	/	0
Average	Touch	Minute	pantry/5	Hearth/adult	+1	1
Good	Close	Hour	room/10	Bonfire/sturdy adult	+2	2
Great	Far	Day	field/100	Smithy/horse	+3	3
Exceptional	Sight	Week	village/500	Forest fire/elephant	+4	4
Legendary	Known	Month	city/1000	Volcano/titan	+5	5
Mythic	Described	Year	province/10,000	Beyond comprehension	+6	6

WHO ARE YOU?

WHAT ARE YOU PLAYING?

Concept

THIS IS WHAT YOUR CHARACTER REPRESENTS. USE FOR MOMENTUM **OR** ACTION.

Background

THIS IS YOUR CHARACTER'S PAST. USE FOR MOMENTUM **OR** ACTION.




Faculty




TRAIT:

THIS IS YOUR CHARACTER'S APPETITUDE. USE FOR MOMENTUM **OR** ACTION.

Traits

YOUR CHARACTER'S STRENGTH, PERSONALITY, AND INTELLIGENCE. USE FOR MOMENTUM **AND** ACTION.

PHYSIQUE  CHARISMA  CUNNING 

-1 -2 -3 -4 -5 -6 -7  -1 -2 -3 -4 -5 -6 -7  -1 -2 -3 -4 -5 -6 -7 

Elements

ADDITIONAL QUALITIES TIED TO A TRAIT. CHOOSE **MOMENTUM** OR **ACTION**.

TRAIT: 

TRAIT: 

TRAIT: 

TRAIT: 

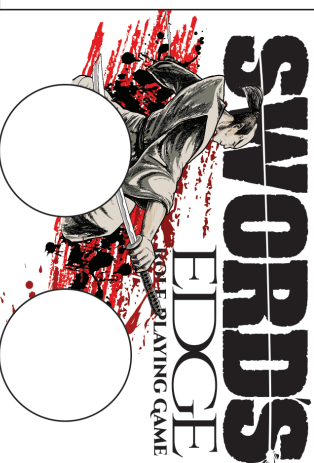
TRAIT: 

CHARACTER NOTES/SKETCH

CHARACTER NOTES/SKETCH

LUCK

ADVANCEMENT



SEIZE MOMENTUM!
MOMENTUM VS. OPPOSED'S ACTION.
FAILURE RESULTS IN YOU BEING **UNDERDEFENDED**

Pivots

YOUR CHARACTER'S MOTIVATIONS IN THE GAME. CHOOSE ONE QUIRK, ONE STYLE, AND ONE GOAL. GAIN ONE **ADVANCEMENT** AT END OF SCENE WHEN ANY PIVOT USED.

RANKS	MODIFIER	TARGET #
WEAK	-6	3
POOR	-4	5
BASIC	-2	8
AVERAGE	+0	12
GOOD	+2	17
GREAT	+4	23
EXCEPTIONAL	+6	31
LEGENDARY	+8	40
MYTHIC		51