THE AMAGI ARCHIVES

ISSUE ONE

CONTENTS

PLEASE WALK ON THE GRASS

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By definition, the act of playing a tabletop roleplaying game is a creative act. Tinkering with games is, too. And the greatest ability to build on one another's work, to share, to develop better tools, come when the barriers to that sharing and building, that remixing and refiguring, can only occurs without the looming idea that someone else has a claim to *control* over your creative work. No such claim is made here.

When dealing with Amagi materials, sharing and public tinkering isn't insulting. It's purest praise, the sweet sounds of "I did this once, and it rocked!" and "I want to do this!"… and even that amazing, intensely flattering "I think I can make this into something *better*. Let me show you how."

I hope you like what you see.

-Levi Kornelsen

PUBLIC DOMAIN DECLARATION

ACTION SCENERY

WHAT IS IT?
The characters, seeking a secret cult in the cellars under the palace, suddenly come into sight of the Theophant, supposedly a pure and virtuous soul, leading some awful ritual. The moment they do, a throbbing alarm begins to sound. Great. Well, it's a rat's nest of shelves, barrels, ladders, and ropes. Should make for an interesting fight, at least. Right? Well… It should. But in some games, or without some preparation, it doesn't. So let's talk about some of the scenery that makes a fight wild. Because these bits aren't game-specific, figuring out the exact applications and rules for using each one in your conflicts and encounters is left open. This is an article about the *what*, not the *how*. It's likely that any game with significant rules for fights will include some of this stuff; in that case, you may simply be adding to that list rather than creating one.

MAP, TOKEN, CARD
Possibly the fastest way to include action scenery is to simply not it's presence on a map. If you're using tiles or folded maps, you might want to make "Icon" tokens to represent the various active bits, and playing cards that can be dropped next to an area and include the rules for different zones. Or make a 'quick list' of your active bits, numbered, and just drop dice of a specific color on the map to indicate which one goes here (and tell players the green dice mark scenery options - here's a list!).

ZONES
These are action scenery that affect the whole area of play. If the fight takes place hip-deep in a river, that's a zone - though there may be places to go in the encounter that counteract the effect of the zone. You likely won't want to set all, or even most, of your encounters in a special zone, but one every few go-rounds can be entertaining. Some kinds of zones:

- **Hazard:** A hazard zone is one where simply staying in it presents a constant danger. The point of a hazard is often either to make the fight more draining or to give it time pressure. When creating a hazard effect, try to keep the rules very simple! Complicated hazard rules just add up to extra bookkeeping every round.
- **Slog:** A slog is an area where movement is impaired and slow. Most games with tactical combat already have rules for sloggy areas.
- **Clamber:** This is an area where the rules for movement are completely different. A vast chasm lined and balconied with nets made out of chains, which character climb down on, where "distance moved" is based on a roll, is a clamber. A set of rickety ladders bridging ruined rooftops might be, too, and so on.
- **Switchable:** An area where the basic terrain can be 'switched', such as the frozen surface of a lake, in a game with plenty of flamethrowing action available.

BITS
Where a 'zone' sets a condition on the whole field, a bit is just that - a singular thing the characters can interact with. Some zones, like the 'rickety ladders', are almost completely made out of bits. Regardless, the more intense the zone, the less bits are usually required. When the zone is totally stable, bits are fun. When it's not just stable, but the encounter is of a very predictable scale (a tavern brawl, say), you can go completely nuts with bits. While the basic 'mini-zone' and 'ten foot pit' remain standard, and yanking out the carpet to trip a group is classic, here are a few more...

- **Balances:** Running on tightropes, on poles bridging chasms, or (in high-end kung-fu opera) the branches of trees, is only appealing if it provides fast movement, keeps a character out of hazards, or the like. Place accordingly.
- **Boltholes & Squeezeways:** Boltholes are small places, often with good cover or out of hazards, that also severely limit the character's movement. Balancing these is always about making the benefits of protection and cover sometimes better than the problems, and sometimes not.
- **Burnables & Burstables:** Big barrels of water, wine, and grease can not only be dropped, but burst - glowing toxic waste, even more so. Thatch roofing can be set ablaze, and wooden structures incinerated. And combining the two - the big barrel of oil? Provides a magnet for incendiary weapons and powers.
- **Lifts & Throws:** Having the thief jump out the window with all the gold they can carry, and aim for the very back of the cart below in order to send his bodyguard and driver upwards may be unlikely, but it sure is fun. Likewise, giant vents gushing compressed hot air upwards, and mining conveyors.
- **Screens:** Paper walls and 'dividers' of varying levels of fragility can make something simple much less so. If the lights are out, and people are shoot at the glows through the walls and the noise, it might get worse.
- **Slides:** Every banister is a slide, but sometimes, you want more.
- **Swings:** Not in the mood to walk that tightrope? Hang on, and cut one end. Or grab that chandelier.
- **Tippables and Hanging Stuff:** Statues can be knocked down, chandeliers sent plummeting, and pianos can fall from their ropes (okay, maybe not pianos). Cutting down heavy drapes to drop them on foes can slow them down.

THE BIGGEST KEY
The most important thing you can do once you've got a handle on how to use this kind of stuff is to "call it out", to make it clear to your players that you're down for stuff like this. Whether you hand them crisp house rules, numbered and tidy, placing marker dice on maps, or just decide to "wing it all", and print this article to slap it down so they can surprise you? Get the group thinking about it as something they can do, and it'll start happening.

AFTER "YES"

Players declare actions for their characters *all the time*, stating that their character is doing this thing or that one. It's fun to say yes. Saying yes, telling them that things happen as envisioned, giving them what they're looking for, all keep energy up and running. When you can say yes without losing anything of value, it's the thing to say.

SOMETIMES, "YES" IS ENOUGH.

Minor details, actions that just 'fill in the backdrop' and are meant to move the characters on to the good stuff? These aren't the places to engage; these are 'yes' moments, and nothing more. The player wants to use their street lore to find a seedy bar where a fence hangs out? Yes. Move on, go, go, go.

SOMETIMES, IT'S NOT.

Let's say that you have the world's greatest swordfighter kicking around in your group. There will be swordfights. He will win them; most of them, without even breaking a sweat. You can say yes, all the time, but in this case, "yes" isn't enough. The character has gone right past the question "Will you succeed?" and into territory that requires other issues to remain interesting. So here are a few of those:

- **Rampant Confusion:** Having the ability to throw a punch that can knock down a building leads inevitably to the question of what happens next when buildings actually get knocked down during fights, and of the character that can't lose a straight fight being challenged not to win, but to either avoid dealing with incredible property damage, or face the problems that go with it.

- **Moral Choices:** The greatest swordsman in the world can easily disarm his foes, hold them at bay for hours, choose not to kill, turn them in to the law. Making this obvious to the player, and later, making it obvious to everyone that watches him fight, makes for an entirely different question from "can you beat them".

- **Showmanship And Spillover:** A superb poet at court, engaged in a contest of performance, might well be assured of victory. By changing the question from whether or not they are going to win, to what they are using the contest as a platform to do, things change. If they choose to lampoon the king with their exquisite verse, or reveal the peccadilloes of the Captain of the Guard's wife, or praise the virtues of a specific lady, things get more interesting - and it's sometimes true that the player won't even consider such possibilities unless you make a point of changing the context away from "do you win"?

- **Famous And Drafted!:** The highly skilled and the very best are often praised for their abilities, raising expectations, and potentially leading to odd repercussions. When the best gunfighter around starts getting challenges from fifteen-year-old wannabees, there are some decisions to be made. When the king decides that only you are capable of defeating the evil overlord of the north, and decides to ungraciously demand your service, likewise.

YOU'RE NOT ALWAYS THE BEST

The examples above are made especially clear by describing the characters involved as astonishingly skilled, the very best at what they do. Even so, the characters are often skilled enough that the same principle can be applied. Sometimes, victory simply isn't interesting, but the other stuff that might or might not come along with that victory is.

CHALLENGES OR CHOICES?

All of the ways of changing a 'simple win' into something more engaging do so either by presenting an opportunity to make a choice that comes out from success, or by creating yet another, more difficult challenge layered on top of the apparently simple one. It's possible to get 'stuck' in some of these situations, trying to figure out when to emphasize the challenge, adding the complications right in as part of dice-and-numbers resolution, and when to emphasize the choices, dropping hefty roleplaying right onto the players.

The way to determine whether to layer on more rules, or simply hit the player with a decision, is often best made not by following some special formula, but by looking at your players and figuring out which way would be most interesting to the group and the playing style to date. If the players were utterly engaged by combats until they got so big that the combat started to get weak? Layer it up - make it so the challenge isn't killing the goblins, but keeping someone important to them but vulnerable safe from harm; their artifex, their fence, the inside man they've been paid to extract; keep the fights rolling, with added difficulties and confusions. If, on the other hand, the fights were never really the big thing, and the players aren't especially engaged by tossing the dice around? Drop dilemmas in their laps, decisions only they can really make because in the place, at the time in question, they're the ones that have the capacity to decide.

THIS BARELY SCRATCHES THE SURFACE

This article is only the barest hint at some of the interesting ways to approach these kinds of situations. The basic point to be made here is that "saying yes" to an action is by no means needs to be the end of resolving something.

In many cases, it's just the beginning.

THE ATTENTION OF THE GODS

"Those whom the gods wish to destroy, they first make mad."

WHAT IS IT?

This is possibly one of the most focused plug-in ideas this site has yet seen. Imagine that, in your (probably fantasy, almost certainly polytheistic) game, there's a stack of cards (well, bits of paper in card sleeves, probably) next to the GM, and that each one has the name of one of the gods on it. And it's possible for you to get one of those - if you perform the task on it that is listed as "attracts the attention" of the named god, you get handed the card. It includes a nifty bonus that you get while you have the card, and a horrible penalty (or set). It also includes a way to give it to someone else.

WHY WOULD I WANT TO DO THAT?

Doing this kind of things gives a fantasy game a vaguely Greek feel - the idea that attracting the attentions of the gods is, while something worth competing for, also a horribly dangerous thing, and one that is fickle in nature. It also gives a set of gods personality in the game, without needing to have them appear personally in play; sometimes, that's a very desirable balance.

GETTING STARTED

Shown below is a set of four example cards (for a game that has yet to be released on the site, as of this writing). You might want to lay out your own, or search up one of the many trading card creators online. Each card should have a title, likely a visual identifier (a symbol, if there is one, is ideal), and the following components:

- **Boon:** The benefit provided by having the attention of the god in question; this should be something very useful, but not overwhelmingly powerful; about a 10% increase in success while doing something specific is plenty.
- **Bane:** Banes should be significantly larger, providing about four times as many potential problems as the boon grants. This actually tends to balance the cards fairly well; there will be one that someone wouldn't mind having, but the rest will be "ah, crap" moments. As it should be.
- **Pass:** The circumstances under which the character loses the attention, and a different on the scene gains it. Which means that large public events, such as courtly halls and tournaments, are good places to inflict the attentions of the gods on others (and for a GM to inflict them on players).

ATTENTIONS OF THE NOT-GODS

This basic mechanism can be adopted to other kinds of attention or "benefits", but if the other application doesn't have as much flavor, something is likely to be lost in translation.

THE ATTENTION OF BREGHED

GODDESS OF CREATION

Boon: A character with the attention of Breghed gains +1 to Endurance.

Bane: A character with the attention of Breghed has -1 to all other traits.

Pass: If any other character in your presence performs a feat of Grace worthy of song, they gain this card instead.

THE ATTENTION OF THE WILD

THAT WHICH WAITS

Boon: A character with the attention of the wild may discard it to ignore any one occurrence that inflicts strain on them.

Bane: A character with the attention of the Wild has –4 on all Face challenges, and appears feral and bestial in expression.

Pass: If a character in your presence demonstrates calm and inner balance exceeding your own, pass them this card.
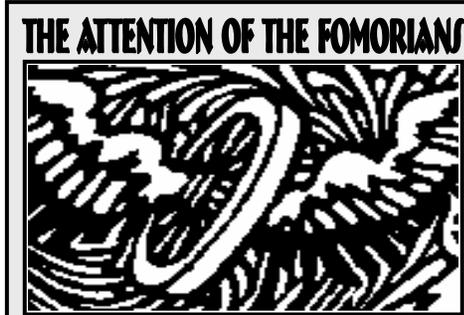
THE ATTENTION OF THE FOMORIANS

THE TAINTED ONES

Boon: A character with the attention of X gains +1 to Endurance.

Bane: A character with the attention of X has -1 to all other traits.

Pass: If any other character in your presence performs a feat of Grace worthy of song, they gain this card instead.

THE ATTENTION OF AGNA

GOD OF LAW

Boon: A character with the attention of Agna gains +1 to Face.

Bane: A character with the attention of Agna has -1 to all other traits.

Pass: If any other character in your presence performs a feat of Valor worthy of song, they gain this card instead.


THE COMPANY PICNIC

COMPATIBILITY: These rules suggestions assume that your game has a significant number of skills or skill-like traits. It further assumes that **if** those skills are used in combination with an 'attribute', that they could be separated and linked with another attribute relatively easy on the fly. If none of those are true of your game, this plug-in is likely incompatible.

WHAT IS THIS?

Thog the Barbarian, socially inept idiot, is the champion of drinking contests, and they love him. Forsythe from accounting is hugely dull to outsiders, but his stories about the copy room key and, ahem, where it's been, were the hit of the company picnic. Sometimes, social aptitude has very little to do with being generically diplomatic or intimidating or any such thing; sometimes, it's all about the context. That's what these suggestions are all about.

GM-DEFINED "PICNICS"

Most experience GMs have had a moment at some point where they allowed a non-social skill to be used socially. If Marius wants to impress the Countess by improvising poetry, well, poetry isn't a social skill necessarily, but we'll treat it like diplomacy for this; Marius can use his charm in place of his wits to make the roll. By deliberately and explicitly creating situations where this kind of thing takes place now and then, the GM can give their players opportunities to use their characters in new ways. Here's how:

- **The Picnics:** Choose a fistful of places in the setting the characters are likely to visit over the next session or two; for each, think of an interesting thing that has a social element (but isn't necessarily primarily social), and might be happening there when they visit. So, say, an illicit seasonal ritual just outside of town, the preparations committee for an annual imperial procession, a high-stakes gambling game, the hunt for a missing child in the woods.
- **The Skills & Conditions:** For each such event, assign a skill or two that 'acts as social' (and define which social use, as needed). So, for the ritual, religious knowledge might act as a disguise or acting skill *if* trying to infiltrate; if a character visits the processional committee meeting, knowing about nobility might act as diplomacy *if* the character is willing to take part in meeting protocol. And so on.
- **The Benefits:** For each "picnic", there should be some benefit for notable success (or some problem evaded). Using a survival skill as if it was leadership, to organize a large group and find a missing child, comes with accolades. Helping out the processional committee impresses them - and most of them are town councilors.
- **The Prompt:** This preparation isn't all that helpful unless the players know about it. You can prompt them about these little side bits either in or out of character, as desired, but don't force it; the idea here is opportunity, not to set up hoops to jump.

PLAYER-DEFINED "PICNIC SKILLS"

From the opposite side of the game, if the number of skills a given character actually has is relatively small, it can be interesting to have players go through each skill they possess (or a set number of them), and consider these things:

- **Their "community of practice":** Who did they learn the skill from, and who appreciates the use of it enough that it becomes the basis for some kind of social interaction? Almost every skill a character has, unless it was self-taught, comes with some group or community of others attached; skills are one way into where your character came from.
- **The conditions for use:** Under what circumstances does it act like a social skill, when dealing with those people? After all, even the hardiest drinking champion, relaxing with a crazed tribe of raiders, can't use their poison resistance socially until liquor enters the picture.
- **Approval & Notation:** After considering these things, the player can give a quick proposal to the group describing their thoughts. If the group thinks that the group and uses work, the player should likely make a quick note of it - either one that is clearly mechanical, such as "Acts like intimidation when dealing with Jongleurs", or something generally more evocative, like "The lore I learned at the feet of the Monks of Al-Mahra", whichever way strikes the group as more useful to their purposes.

THE EXTREME VERSION

The somewhat more intense version of this idea is to dispense with social skills altogether, and use everything else as social skills. This isn't as odd as it sounds.

For groups that prefer to roleplay out social interactions, only resorting to the dice when there's a factor that's hard to play through involved, many of those skills are secondary appendages, a cruft that can be done without; the value is in acting it out, and the 'normal' die rolls are a factor that doesn't actually deserve to be weighed into the equation. By restacking the actually social elements that are actually useful to this style into other skills, the excess can be done away with.

For other groups, social interaction rules (and even social conflict rules) can drive a game forward in new and awesome ways. In such groups, while this extreme is likely a bit much, changing up the mechanics in the ways described earlier can still act as the equivalent of setting fight scenes in different kinds of terrain (ones where, say, night vision or balance become deeply important); such changes can put a new face on game bits that might otherwise be a little too predictable.

THE COUNTDOWN STACK

WHAT IS IT?

A countdown stack is a pile of tokens, typically glass beads, candy, or poker chips, plunked down in the middle of the playing space. They drain away at a measured rate, people can spend them (or add to them) for various purposes, and when they're all gone, something happens. The purpose of having a countdown stack is to put pressure on the game to keep things moving, and to act as a visible reminder to the group of "the coming thing", and to get people engaged in, and totally onboard with, the endgame thing.

WHEN TO USE IT

When the game is all about the build-up to some event, and that event is something the characters are working to overcome a countdown stack may very well be appropriate. In a scenario where everyone is trying to survive the zombie attack through the night, the sun comes up when the stack is gone. In a scenario where the characters are racing to stop Dr. Whatever from unleashing atomic devastation on New York city, the countdown stack can mark the time until he *does*. The countdown stack can help make a high-pressure situation even more pressured.

THINGS TO SET

Before setting a countdown stack in the middle of the table, four things should be decided on:

1. **What happens when the stack runs out?** A happy ending for survivors of the zombies? Horrible destruction in atomic fire? The death of the king, planting the best-positioned character on the throne? Your pizza delivery is now late?
2. **How fast does it naturally deplete?** One token per hour of real time? One token per day of game time? Once per "scene" during the game?
3. **Does "hitting the stack" add or remove tokens?** As described below, one of the ideas here is that characters can gain benefits by 'hitting' the stack (either adding or removing a token). If the 'thing that happens' is a good thing for the characters, then hitting the stack adds tokens to it. If the 'thing that happens' is terrible, then hitting the stack should take tokens away from it. If the thing that happens *changes the situation*, then whoever acts as opposition to the player (typically the GM) either adds or takes one away, whichever they feel the character would want least at that moment.
4. **How many tokens to put out there?** This is figured by estimating the results of the above, and how long the actual game session or sessions are intended to run, and making a guess. After using countdown stacks a couple of times, estimating "the right size" should become easier.

HITTING THE STACK

This is where the idea of a countdown stack goes from being a simple timing device to actually making the play itself more interesting. As above, hitting the stack may either add or remove a token, depending on the outcome of an empty stack. Here are some possible uses for hitting the stack (there are plenty more possibilities):

- **Substitute Points:** Many games already have some kind of spend-able points, called Fate or Action or Drama points, or whatever. One of the easiest plug-ins is to simply say that a player can hit the stack and get any of the effect they would get from spending one of those points.
- **Do-Overs And Straight Wins:** If there are a whole lot of tokens in the stack, and they deplete pretty quickly, then allowing players to hit the stack to "do over" some rolls or other small bits can work well. If the stack is smaller, and depletes more slowly, the tokens are more valuable; in that case, simply saying "hit the stack to succeed at the roll, even if you failed", might be totally the right thing for the setup.
- **Reprieve:** In a situation that is a 'perfect storm' of bad stuff, it may be useful to let any player hit the stack to get a scene where they can rest, recuperate, reload, all those things. A GM that wants to really push it can make this the only way to hit the stack, remove the natural depletion, and just *pound on the characters constantly*, letting them set the timing of breaks by hitting the stack.

TEMPTATION HITS

Possibly one of the diabolical ways to use a countdown stack is for a GM to use it to *make offers*. Things like "Y'know, I'll give you that roll, if you hit the stack". If the players are cautious about hitting the stack, but dig the idea, a GM can have a lot of fun making such offers. However, GMs should be careful with their temptations; when offering such temptation, the offers should be spread mostly evenly among the group, or made to all of the players at the same time.

CAPPING STACK GROWTH

When the result of the stack running out is a good thing or something that changes the game entirely, it can be handy to set a limit on hits. Making this limit easy to see and judge, though, is essential. If, for example, the starting stack is ten white poker chips, and hitting it adds more, it might be declared that all hits add a red poker chip - and when the red chips outnumber the white ones, players can't hit the stack from there on out.

ARTICLE CREDIT: LADY LAKIRA & AMAGI GAMES

THE DEATH GIFT

WHAT IS IT?
Your character is overwhelmed by a swarm of unimportant thugs. By the rules, they're about to die, and it's a total anticlimax. It is, as it sits, a lame way to go out. But instead of finding a way to help you live - which might be cheap and unsatisfying unto itself - the GM looks at you and tells you that this is where you make a death gift, to choose a legacy that will live on beyond their death. Your character is still going to die - and their death itself is going to remain ugly. But something of the character will go on; the end of their life will not be the end of their effect.

WHY WOULD I WANT THAT?
Sometimes, in some settings and genres, life is supposed to be cheap. Yet, at the same time, it's not a lot of fun to create a character and see them go out like this, totally pointlessly, even if it does fit. The often - created compromise is to shift rules so that the player characters aren't really part of the genre; they're much tougher. Sometimes, that isn't the ideal compromise. Here are a few compromises that may be more ideal.

WHAT IF THEY CAN COME BACK?
In games where resurrection is a viable option, choosing to give a death gift might mean that the character has "made peace" with death, and cannot return. Alternatively, the 'gift' might simply fade if the character is returned to life.

OPTION 1: FROM FAILING HANDS
The falling feral-minded warrior throws their sword to the fair and perfect knight as they fall; they are dead before they hit the ground. Upon catching the weapon, the knight vibrates with rage, and explodes into a frenzy of feral wrath. This kind of 'passing the torch' might be a one-time transfer, a "have my abilities on top of your own for the encounter", or it might be lasting in some way, such as causing that weapon to become permanently magical - or a little of each, creating a weak item but a strong 'for the fight' effect. One caveat here: If this creates a lasting item, care should be taken that the item won't become defunct shortly; discarding the 'last gift' of a dying ally because the next sword on is better? That cheapens the effect - it's better to make the ongoing power weaker, and attach it in some other way; maybe the power passes into the 'lucky charm' the feral warrior hung from the hilt of the blade, rather than the blade itself.

OPTION 2: I SPIT AT THEE
A dying character, instead of giving a gift, might be allowed to level a terrible curse. If the rules system already includes curses, the GM will likely want to pick a fairly potent effect, and let the player choose the target and specific details, if any. If not, details will need to be invented or handled on the fly.

OPTION 3: THE LEGACY POOL
If this option is used, nothing special happens at the time of death. Instead, their character sheet (or whatever) is set to the side, and a "legacy pool" of points is created in their honor; the starting value of this pool is (2 points, plus 1 per session of play the character appeared in). Legacy points are not recovered naturally; once the pool is empty, that's typically it. Legacy can be spent by any player whose character was familiar with the dead one, with group permission, in the following ways:

- **A trick they knew:** By spending a legacy point, a character may make use of a single (generally only non-combat) skill that was possessed by the character that died; if this would generally require a dice roll, the roll should automatically be maximized. When using a legacy point in this way, the character should explain (inventing details as required) how the dead character 'showed them this trick'.

- **A helping hand:** If there are 'helping rules', a character might spend a legacy point when performing a task or a deed that the dead character would have approved of. If so, they receive 'help', as if the dead character was present and assisting, that takes the form of minor happenstance, sudden inspiration, or the like. The character will feel as if their dead ally was 'lending them a hand' in this task.

- **A story they told me:** A character might spend a legacy point to 'recall' information that was known by the dead character (or reasonably could have been), in the form of something the dead character once said to them while alive. They should relate or describe the information in this fashion - as 'something that so-and-so told them once'. If a knowledge roll of some kind would be needed by the dead character for that character to have known the information (but they did have the skill), maximize the roll.

THE GIFT IS ELSEWHERE / REFRESHING THE LEGACY
A dying character might well have 'things not done' that the characters might choose to take up as their own cause. In such a case, the 'death gift' of the character might be something stored, held, or left behind, which they will be given or can claim as part of 'wrapping up' that business. Alternatively, taking care of the business of a dead comrade might add points to the legacy pool.

GOING FURTHER WITH LEGACY
As a plug-in concept, the idea of a legacy pool can be employed in a number of other ways. It would be entirely possible to start a campaign about a group of young students of a single mentor, with the mentor dead before the campaign even begins, and a significant legacy pool to unify the group. In such a case, the character sheet for the mentor might be already filled in, or the players might create it as they use legacy points, giving that mentor the abilities the character wishes to draw upon.

DECLARE ACTION!

As a player, a significant amount of your time will be spent declaring and describing actions. Clarity, here, is deeply important; and often, it's not just clarity of what it is that the character is physically doing. So, here are a few different ways to work towards that in play - chat about these with your group and your GM, and see which ones are helpful to your style of play, and which aren't. There's a good chance some of these things have been done at your table; have you discussed them? Would it potentially be useful?

ASSUMING DETAILS

When you're describing actions, there are often moments where some small bit of setting detail has not been described, but is needed. Your character is standing at the bar, and for some reason, wants to spin around and crack someone with a bottle. The GM hasn't stated that there *is* a bottle, but you are in a bar, right? It may be entirely cool with your group to simply declare that you're doing so anyway, and it speeds up play if you can. But check if this kind of thing is cool first - some groups *prefer* that the GM maintain the fictional world with some pretty severe strength. And check how much this stretches; can you run up the stairs in the zeppelin, if it's never been declared if the way to the next floor was stairs or a ladder? In a gunfight in the street, can you declare that you're diving behind some water barrels for cover? Is it okay to declare, but occasional corrections are okay, too? Often, the big guides to what you can assume are how beneficial it can be to your character and how weird it can be.

CHECKING CONTEXT

Almost the opposite of assuming details, checking context is the simple act of asking "is my mental picture of this thing correct?" and getting an answer. Checking context is also a good way to remind the group of some detail you intend to use in an interesting way, or even to imply that some kinds of action are possible. If your character is in a loud crowd gathered to watch the execution of your characters' allies, and it's been mentioned that the crowd is annoyed… You might wonder if it's possible to start a riot. By checking up on that, specifically asking "If I did this thing and that, could I get this crowd to riot? What does it look like it would take?", you're not just gathering information, you may also be letting loose the idea of a riot into the mental pictures everyone has of the scene, paving your way ahead of you. Again, of course, this is something to talk about with the group - whether it's good to use a context check to get your intentions out there carefully, or whether it's better for you to simply take the plunge into action, declaring intentions along with the action (or, in some cases, even leaving them off entirely).

DESCRIBING EXECUTION

Good descriptions of action are concise; they are quick, without being baffling. While they might contain a wealth of detail and activity, each individual piece of the action should be kept quick. A description should state what your character is doing, what they're doing it to, and how they're doing it; the number of minor momentary glitches that can occur simply because a player was unclear on the target or the means of their action are astonishing - phrases like "I gank him!", leading to a half-a-minute of "Wait, you're drawing a weapon in the crowded bar?" and following discussion don't serve anyone well at all, especially if all the player meant was "I punch him!".

STATING INTENT & EFFECT

This is a point where groups and styles differ wildly. Some groups and GMs prefer that you keep your intended effects implied, whether by hinting as you check context, or by describing actions so that there's no doubt what you're attempting. Other groups and GMs prefer that rather than stretching things out, you just state your intentions overtly, saying "here's what I'm trying to do". And finally, in some cases, it's desirable for you to continue description straight through effects; you describe it just as you want it to happen, and resolution takes the form of "Let's see if that's the way it really happens". Which of these is correct doesn't just vary by group, but by subjects. It might be awesome for you to simply declare that you knock a minion sprawling, but absolutely not cool to say the same about the big boss; this ties right back to the idea of 'assuming details', treating some actions as totally trivial. And, as with details, big factors are benefits to your character and the oddness of the declaration. Additionally, though, many actions can tread on things that people at the table are invested in a specific image of and have intentions for; while it's rare to find a GM that deeply cares about whether there are stairs in the zeppelin, they might have ideas for that bit-part character, and not those tossed out on a casual assumption.

PROMPTING FOR RELATION

Whenever you declare an action, you can (and often already do!) prompt the group or the GM towards a specific relationship. By assuming things, you're prompting them to accept them, and be an audience for the moment. By aggressively asserting some things or asking 'how hard?', you may be asking-without-asking the GM to take on the role of challenging you. By picking up dice, you're prompting the GM to give you something to roll for. And so on. In some groups (and some games!), there's a 'baseline' relationship and subtly prompting for something else doesn't work out all that well. In other groups, the relationship is far more flexible. Some GMs are very skilled at reading prompts; some prefer overt statements and cues (like picking up the dice). Some groups and games see it as the GM's job alone, or almost alone, to decide when they should be an adversary and when in agreement, rather than a fully two-way street - and some of those groups and games work very well indeed.

DRIVEN

COMPATIBILITY: This plug-in is compatible with any game that has spendable resources (usually, but *not always*, ones that can be regained).

WHAT IS IT?

So, you're playing your character to the hilt, in ways that entertain the group, and the machinery of the game doesn't care? Maybe it should. Drives are motivations that a character possesses, which have been codified into   being 'rules bits', so that players can gain resources simply by playing to the motivations of their characters. The drives listed below are 'generalized' ones taken from Hoard, which in it's turn had that component inspired by an awesome game called The Shadow Of Yesterday.

PLUGGING IT IN

To plug drives into a game, you'll want to read over the list of drives, likely make up a few new ones, strip out a few that would be problematic at your table, and then make some decisions. Here are the decisions you'll need to make:

- **How do characters get them?** The simplest answer to this is for each character to automatically have 1-3 drives (depending how central you want them to be). It may also be possible to price them out as purchases in a point-buy game, but there's something very odd about different players gaining different levels of rewards for their play.
- **What happens when they're triggered?** As written, when you do whatever it is, a drive 'triggers'.   Which is a way of saying, the player gets something (not necessarily right at that instant, mind you). You'll need to decide what that is; it might be points of some kind (willpower, action, drama, experience), or it might be a really nice hat. The choice of reward shapes how drives will affect your game significantly.
- **Who judges, and when?** The drive doesn't do things at a game session; players and GMs do. Someone has to note the triggering of a drive, and reward it. So, decide who gives out the reward (and letting players take rewards on their own, to the surprise of many, often works fairly well, especially if the rewards are visibly and physically represented with tokens or the like). Also, and interval of time is needed: Once triggered, does a drive reward the player immediately and on the spot, or does the group check their drives at the end of each scene, or at the end of each game session?
- **Are they dynamic, and how?** Can a player get more drives, or swap one drive for another? People do change their views on the world over time, especially when thrown into the kinds of thorny thickets that PCs get shot through. A simple answer is to let a player swap one of their drives once per session, either at the end or at "dramatic moments". Sometimes, there are even better answers, but one swap per session is a solid baseline.

A DRIVE LIST

The list below is built to show drives as motivations, and assumes a campaign with fairly involved social activity. It may need to be adjusted (possibly significantly) for games and styles where conditions differ from the ones implied - in different styles, different drives are easier or harder to hit; tinker accordingly.

- **Defiant:** This drive triggers when you respond to social pressure, threats, or manipulation with sneering disdain or instant and vigorous opposition.
- **Dissonant:** This drive triggers when you question a plan or the stated intentions of another character, pointing out potential problems that might need solving and showing ways that they might be resolved.
- **Hierophant:** This drive triggers when you strike a lasting bargain with, *or* provide unpaid aid or assistance of some real substance to a member of [a named organization].
- **Radiant:** This drive triggers when you pay off an obligation, reduce the number (though not necessarily the value) of your possessions, consolidate your holdings or territories, or in some other way simplify your affairs.
- **Rampant:** This drive triggers when you make your intentions with regard to another named character or a group as plain as possible in advance, or cut through offered distractions to get straight to the point. This can include threats (but never hollow ones), open offers to deal, or the like.
- **Regnant:** This drive triggers when you make use of followers, underlings, familiars, or summoned assistants in a way that assists your group, but *not* when acting through your followers makes action by the players character irrelevant or unnecessary.
- **Resplendent:** This drive triggers when you acquire an item of significant value for yourself, or when your group as a whole acquires such an item, and the item is carried and displayed openly, with pride.
- **Savant:** This drive triggers when you create and explain a plan of action to overcome some challenge that faces your group, and which each of them has a part to play in.
- **Siblant:** This drive triggers whenever you manage to convince (or apparently convince) someone that helping you is in their interests, where it first appeared that it was not.
- **Valiant:** This drive triggers when you knowingly and deliberately commit to actions that will provoke a conflict between yourself and others, of a sort that will probably not be "done with" in a single engagement.

EVENT BOUNTIES

COMPATIBILITY: This plug-in assumes that your game uses tokens of some kind - whether as part of the rules, or to represent points of some kind (Fate,   Action, Drama, Experience, or whatever kind). If your game doesn't or can't do that, this trick is mostly limited to GM use, with the GM writing specific rewards on the cards, rather than putting on tokens.

WHAT IS THIS?

Often, there are sessions where "It would be totally cool if…" goes running through the head of someone at the table (often, but not always, the GM). So, consider this: In the middle of the playing area, or off to one side, there are a bunch of recipe cards. Each one has a "thing that happens" on it, and a stack of tokens - points you can use. If *your character* makes that thing happen, the tokens are yours. The GM can grab another card, write an idea on it, drop on a token (or several), and just put it over with the others, content in the knowledge that if a player is actually interested, it'll happen. Depending on the group and the game, *anyone* might be able to toss a card out there, putting *their own* tokens on it, and the GM might be able to collect on them.

WHEN TO USE IT?

This idea works well when the characters have a lot of flexibility in their actions; in high-pressure 'mission' games, there's not much point. At points where there's no set goals, and the characters have time to get into complicated nonsense (the kinds of things described under "bountiful events", below), it can be ideal.

...HEY, WE'RE BACK IN TOWN.

Another way this idea can work well, in games that jump between different pressured situations and a common "loose" one is if the events described only apply outside of the high-pressure situation. So, for a group of fantasy adventurers, these bounties might be something to chase "back in town", but which are set aside when in the midst of an orcish raid or down in some crumbling ruin.

REPLACING NORMAL REFILLS?

If the group thinks this method of gaining points is interesting, and finds that it fuels really great play, it *may* be desirable to remove some or all of the 'normal' ways to regain such points, and put even more of these cards out. This should only be done after trying it out in general, and after checking the game to see what kinds of things the normal method of gaining points encourages, if anything (can those be dome without? Should they be?)

BOUNTIFUL EVENTS

Here are a few criteria that make for good things to "put bounties on". If people other than a GM are allowed to place bounties, then either these or some other set of guidelines should be upheld, to ensure that bounties make play more interesting, rather than less interesting.

- **Are events, not goals:** An event shouldn't be "Your character falls in love", but "Two characters fall in love" - if some character decides to play matchmaker, to cause that event, that's *awesome*. Likewise, some other ideas include: 'A trap is sprung', 'A complicated plan is attempted', 'A pure heart triumphs', 'A damaging secret is revealed', and 'A rescue is carried off'. All of these can be approached in many different ways, and can be left open to interpretation. Not that repeatedly setting bounties on several similar events can flavor a game quite heavily - which can be good or bad, depending.
- **Are relatively easy to cause:** It's typically better to have several one-token events that add up to complete craziness that one several-token event that describes something huge. Easy bounties are things players will snap up quickly.
- **End up creating more action than they end:** When a bounty is placed, whoever places it should have a ready willingness to carry on based on the result, in order to create more action (and interaction) for the character that achieves it. This doesn't generally mean having a specific idea in mind (given the open nature of good events, it usually *can't*), but it does mean that the overall theme of the event is one they're interested in playing with further.

SPLITTING THE POT

It's very possible, depending on the event given, for an event to be caused by multiple characters. In this case, assuming the bounty is large enough, whoever placed the bounty in the first place divides the bounty between them, in whatever way they think is most appropriate. In the case of significant group efforts, it may be worth "rounding up" this division; in others, less so.

RAISING THE BOUNTY

Regardless of who placed a bounty, once a bounty is placed, anyone may add to it at any time out of their resources. In some games, this means that players may set bounties for events they'd like the GM to cause, and the GM can turn the idea directly back over to them by simply adding more tokens. If this becomes common, players may start brainstorming different kinds of things they're interested in, putting them out, and seeing which ones the GM "collects", and which decides to "boost up" for them. ...And vice versa, of course.

FOUR-STEP SITUATIONS

STEP ONE: A NETWORK
To start, draw a bunch of circles (or squares, or whatever) on a blank piece of paper. Put the name of an NPC, organization, or similar such thing in each - ones that you want to use in your situation.

I've got three circles on my sheet, here, and I'm going to put in "Baron Thurmond", "Goodman Randal", and "Outlaw Peasant Mob". I'm thinking of something vaguely Robin-Hood-esque.

Now, draw arrows from each to the others, and fill in what their relationships are to each other along the arrows. Use words loaded with conflict - hate, love, fear, jealousy, blackmail, stuff like that. Keep a list of these handy if you need one.

- *Goodman Randal leads the outlaw peasant mob.*
- *The outlaw peasant mob follows Goodman Randal.*
- *Baron Thurmond scorns the outlaw mob.*
- *The outlaw mob fears Baron Thurmond.*
- *Goodman Randal hates the Baron.*
- *The Baron fears Goodman Randal.*

STEP TWO: A CHAIN OF EVENTS
This is the 'history' of how the situation came to be. To build this, think up a critical moment, and then work backwards (and forwards, if needed) from there, cause-and-effect style. I've already got "Goodman Randal leads the oulaws into the woods and begins raiding Baron Thurmond". So....

1. *The King, away at war, demands greater levies from his lords.*
2. *Baron Thurmond raises taxes to punitive levels.*
3. *The peasants begin muttering.*
4. *Goodman Randal loses his business.*
5. *Goodman Randal attempts to see the Baron in an outrage.*
6. *Goodman Randal is arrested, but escapes, killing three guards, and hides with friends.*
7. *The Baron puts a price on the head of Randal and anyone helping him.*
8. *Randal and his friends steal several carts heading to the Baron, and take them into the woods, setting up an outlaw camp.*

Note how most of that is "nasty things people did to each other"? That's just right.

STEP THREE: GRABS
We've got a fine mess on our hands, which is just what we want. Time to figure how to drag the players into it. We need some grabs. A grab is firstly "what does this character want?" and second "how are they going to try and get the heroes to do it?"

- *The Baron wants Randal killed and the mob dispersed. He will send someone to the characters, and offer them money to help him. If they refuse, he'll assume that they're on Randal's side.*
- *Randal wants help bringing down the Baron. He is appealing to everyone that can operate strongly and in small numbers - player characters are good. He'll try to meet with them and do this personally, but he'll try to make sure that the meeting is safe for him. It'll look like an ambush.*
- *The peasant mob wants Randal pardoned, and the Baron's fangs pulled. They're trying to get a message to the Chamberlain of the King, and will try to enlist the help of the characters. They've got no money and no pride, so it's a good bet that they'll try pity. Or maybe one of them will aim for a seduction... maybe.*

Okay. The player characters are going to be in this. I don't know how, or on what side, and I'm not worried about it, either. It'll be fun regardless.

STEP FOUR: SPURS
I'm a big fans of "oh, hell, ninjas attack", but I prefer 'ninjas' that are appropriate to the moment and the game. Stuff to shake things up and get it going - little moments you can throw at the game when it starts to slow down. They can be keyed to specific characters, or just to the general mass of events. So, I make them up ahead of time, and use whichever ones I need - not all of them, but hey.

- The mob turns on the PCs thinking they are tax collectors. Escape, fight or reason with them?
- Randal's minions attempt to kidnap one or more of the PCs to question them, thinking they know something (like the chamberlain's location).
- The PCs come across a couple of tax collectors in the process of being murdered by the mob and/ or Randal. Either party appeals for help from the PCs.
- The PCs come across some tax collectors brutally gathering taxes from helpless members of the mob. The mob appeals for help from the PCs.
- The PCs are in the forest when it starts burning (due to the actions of the Baron's tax collectors).
- A scoundrel tries to convince the PCs to pose with him to mug a tax collector for his money and credentials, and then pose as tax collectors to steal from the mob for their own benefit.

FUN WITH HATS

YOUR HAT: A RESOURCE IN QUANTITIES OF ONE
Resources are things that you can gain and spend (and Hats are items you wear on your head). Many resources come in pools; you might have willpower or action points or the like in your game. However, when messing about with games, some of the most fascinating resources come in quantities of "one". Like hats! Or like 'mental focus' or 'being in the stance of the dragon' or other similar conditions; sometimes the character has it; they're cool, centered, ready for anything, have their feet lined up right, things like that. And then, sometimes, they spend it; they snap, freak out, expend the tension of the stance, have a 'little moment', lose their hat. Calling these things "hats" is a way to push towards taking a fresh look at things that have always been in games. From such a perspective, it's a bit easier to see if you may want to add one (or more) such pieces to a game, or modify them a bit.

WHERE DO THEY GO IN YOUR GAME?
Firstly, looking over the setting, the fiction of the game, and the stuff that the rules are meant to represent, check if there are any interesting "changes of state" that characters should be able to switch between, and which state is the normal, base state (with hat or without). For example, in games where a character can be knocked out as part of the rules, they're normally wearing their "I'm conscious!" hat, and losing it is almost always a bad plan. On the other side, in a game where a character can transform into a terrifying man-beast of doom for a short period, the 'normal' state is for the character to be hatless; putting on their doom hat is expensive.
- **An example:** *"Cool":* For a game about gangs with leather jackets, slicked-back pompadours, huge piles of cigarettes, and a lot of James Dean attitude, you might add 'cool' as a hat. Characters are normally cool, but they can lose their cool.

SEVERAL FASHIONS FOR SEVERAL HEADS
A shapeshifter that knows fourteen martial arts might well be able to wear a couple of hats at once: What stance are they in, and what physical form? So, when messing about with hats in your game, you will need to decide if they "overlap" with existing conditions, and if so, what takes precedence. If there are a dozen mental conditions that it's possible for a character to be in, ranging from 'centered' to 'panicked', you might want to simply list all of those from best to worst, and state that only the worst one applies - which can simplify things quite a bit.
- **An example:** *"Cool":* If you're busy being afraid or the like, you're not busy being cool. You lose your cool if you get any other ongoing condition.

THE FOUR PLACES TO PUT EFFECTS
When adding or modifying a hat, there are four different mechanical 'places' where you'll need to consider. These have been blocked up as groups of questions that you may want to consider.
- **Getting (and Regaining) the hat:** How is the hat gained or regained? Is it a matter of playing to character, an action in conflict, a blessed state that the character must seek out?
- **Wearing the hat:** Is wearing the hat the normal state? If not, does it grant some kind of bonus or penalty, allow the wearer to do things they couldn't normally do or block other things? Is the only benefit the ability to spend it?
- **Losing the hat:** How can a character lose their hat? Are there other conditions or actions that should force the character out of the state? Can it be spent, and if so, what can you spend it on - does it have a unique effect, or does it act like an 'extra point' of another resource? Is it possible to "lose it hard", so that it can't be regained at all without some special quest?
- **Hatlessness:** Is hatless ness the normal state? If not - does it grant a bonus, a penalty? Is the character blocked from certain actions, or can they finally see The Matrix (TM) for what it is and learn kung-fu? Will others mock their bald, bald cranium, and what are the rules for cranium-mocking, anyhow? Did I actually just ask that question?

HAT TRACKING
Depending on the complexity of the game, and the tone you're looking for, conditions and forms and state changes might be something players note down on sheets, something that you keep a stack of printed 'condition cards' for, or just a box on the sheet marked "Hat?", that a token can be placed on or removed from as needed. Matching up the tracking so that it occurs quickly and is as easy as possible to remember details keeps play quick and easy.

FOR DISCUSSION: THE HAT HUNT
As with most articles, this one has room for discussion on the website, something I don't normally work to prompt there. In this case, though, I'm interested in hearing about where you've spotted 'conditions as resources' being used in interesting or novel ways - hats you think are worth taking note of, and the games they're in. Let me know!

GET MORE PLAY IN YOUR GAME

Ever have a four-hour session with maybe two hours of actual, solid playing time, or something similar? Ever get bogged down in details, to the loss of play time? This is for you. Maybe you've heard most (or even all) of this before; it's not new advice. But it all bears repeating.

1. COMMUNICATE CENTRALLY
Getting everyone at least *aware* of dates and start times is critical. If there is any kind of social networking tool already built into the lives of your players, use it for setting up games. Are you all on a local gamer forum? All on Facebook? All on Livejournal? Trying to get everyone to "come over" to the same platform for networking isn't nearly as good as using one that's already part of what everyone does regularly; if my not be as pretty, but it's much more effective.

2. SCHEDULE & REMIND CLEARLY
Don't be afraid to check out online scheduling tools, and use them. Look for ones that are easy to access (requiring no registration) such as http://whenisgood.net/, or which again already connect everyone, like the calendar functions on Facebook.

3. SUPPLY THOROUGHLY
If there is food to order or supplies of other sorts to deal with, try to get these details in order well before game time - even if you're cooking during game as a group, try to ensure that other fussy details are ready to do that easily.

4. CHECK SPACES
A game space is generally split up between personal space, central space, and (sometimes) sideboard space. During preparation, the host should check to be sure that whatever is needed to make those spaces work is available. This can include hard surfaces for dice-rolling, surfaces to write on, and so on. In many cases, it's impressive how much difference shifting a few end tables a few feet can make, and how helpful a good central space (whether you're playing at a full-size table or not) and sideboard can be. As an interesting thought, consider grabbing a couple of markers a *picture frame* (handy die-keeping lip) either around a whiteboard, or with a framed grid (or blank page, or extremely high-brightness low-contrast map) under glass. Add a couple of felt "feet", and it's a nearly ideal central surface.

5. LIMIT SOURCES
Sorting through significant numbers of different books is a time killer. If the game you're going to be playing has a wealth of supplements, limit the ones used in the campaign as mercilessly as you can bear. Is it better to *have* four more cool abilities available, or to *do* one more cool thing during the game?

6. CROSS-REFERENCE & CONSOLIDATE
Many game systems enough have room on their reference sheets (character, GM, anything else) for you to add, in small text, a note on book and page number, for fast referencing. Some games have these built right in. If you're going to be referencing a bit even with book limits, use these! Or have everyone type (or copy, or whatever option is possible for your group) an added reference sheet that characters can use to doublecheck things.

7. GET KINETIC
If the play requires tracking a resource that changes rapidly, get tokens (poker chips, glass beads, whatever) to represent it. You can represent one resource this way very easily; if there are several that jump around, check how many token make easier, and at what point they just cause as much confusion as they save. Wise people that know obscure things about character sheets say that putting a piece of clear tape over the place you record this stuff, and using the right kinds of pens, means you can erase with a stroke (of tissue or thumb) and rewrite, which is quick and saves the sheet.

8. SKIP, MAXIMISE, CARRY, ROLL IN BLOCKS
When a roll is really, really easy, skip it entirely; call it successful and keep going. When it's not easy, but is possible to do over indefinitely, maximize the dice involved and declare a "time it took" to do that. When a scene might bog down in piddly rolls on the same skill, have one check made and carry the result for the whole scene unless the character changes tactics. Where two rolls would normally follow right after one another, roll all those dice (differ colors of dice, if needed) at once.

9. WING THE DETAILS
If the game has and kind of finicky subsystem that has very small effects (some kinds of combat systems do this), and unwarranted time is spent tracking these, discuss throwing the finicky figuring to one side and winging it. If the "little stuff" system is crucial to balance or an integral part of the fun, though, this will hurt more than it helps, so choose carefully.

10. STANDARDISE TRACKABLES
Tracking ten different durations, or needing to check a sheet for costs of powers that all range from three to five points, may supposedly add something to play. In reality, though, it mostly slows things down. Consider house-ruling standardized durations and common costs for such things; if you do, though, make a reference for these until they're habit; this can slow things for a session, but pays dividends over several.

THE HOUSEHOLD

In many games, the player characters are going to be interacting in a fair degree of depth with other characters in the world. And in many of those settings, the culture in which the characters interact is deeply important. Yet, despite the incredible amount of flavor and style often added to those cultures, the operations of the basic building blocks for those cultures are often handwaved… Households.

WHY ARE HOUSEHOLDS IMPORTANT?
If we know that 'hostage-taking' among aristocrats can mean genuine fosterage and care as a gesture of trust between allies, but can also mean keeping someone as a captive from another family to ensure their cooperation, and everything in between? That allows all sorts of interesting options for building situations. If men at home have authority over the 'dead' property and manage the books, while women own all crops, livestock, and children (the 'live' property), it has an effect on the whole culture. If households in a specific culture are ancestral, and pass to the child that won the household the most wealth in battle, that means something else. From one viewpoint, culture spans outward from the 'typical' household - and this is a specifically handy viewpoint when building a setting, because it gives you the keys to playing individuals and their lives more naturally. And this isn't necessarily specific to fantasy games; how the family of a Mob Boss is organized may matter hugely to a noir game.

WAIT. WE'RE ABOUT TO RUN INTO REAL ISSUES.
Yeah, we are. Sexism. Adoption. Authority, and potentially, abuse. Fidelity. Slavery. All these things (and more) become potential fodder for building situations as soon as you crack open a culture at this level. In addition, the situations aren't always quite as simple as "the Orcs burnt down our village and kept some captives"; in some cultures, a slaveowner might take pride in educating their slaves and in setting them up as minor business partners when the 'term' of their slavery expires, but still be entirely willing to beat one of those same slaves bloody in some kinds of circumstances. That slaveowner, in his culture, might be considered both admirable and wise. If the magistrate hires the characters to fetch back his kidnapped wife, how will they react to hearing that in reality, she ran away with her lover?

Putting these things on the table can make your play more compelling, more human, more engaging. The dangers are 'trapping' players, being offensive, or being preachy. So, when using material like this, part of the job of the GM is to provide players with specific reasons to be different if desired, and to keep presentation neutral. Painting these things as specifically good or evil to your players has to go out the window if you're looking to create depth in this way, though they can be painted as culturally normal or strange through the reactions of other characters in the scenes. Keep the straight-up evil on tap for the dragons, Orcs, and hit men (or whatever), though; for many groups, heavy culture is a sideline, and the main show is elsewhere.

ENOUGH JABBER. LET'S DO IT.
The biggest things to figure out for the 'template' household are how work, property, authority, and expectations are divided. Is grandma normally the boss of the house, or the most adept fighter? A few approaches...

- **Social Roles:** What are the household roles? Is there significant difference between elder/parent/inheritor/husband/wife roles? What about servants, slaves, and other second-class citizens? What about child/whipping boy/fosterling? Any others? After composing that list, carry on to...
- **Ownership Rights:** Who owns what? If one person in the household owns not only the property, but the other people as well, that's a big deal. If property is divided in a specific way among members of the house, that might be, too. If all property is held "in common", but subject to social roles and more general authority, this part of the equation slides into the background.
- **The Authority Tree:** Is there traditionally a single person in charge of a household, and how big does a household get, anyway? Is there a clear hierarchy, based on age or gender or capacity to work? Is it flexible enough that there are significant exceptions based on practical factors or powerful personalities, or would a change to this formula be utterly outrageous?
- **Working Divisions:** Who is responsible for what work? A culture where the elderly raise children, while parents are often away, differs from one where children are raised by family members of the same gender - or one where the whole tribe is effectively "one household", and children are raised by an entire segment of it. This is equally true of who brings in the food, and who is expected to fight in times of emergency (or who might be regularly called away to fight).
- **Rights and Duties:** The easiest way to compile all of this information is to list all your household roles, and list off their rights, and their duties, within the home. From that list? You can extrapolate how much of the culture functions. Note that authority can come with a duty, even a heavy one - if anyone that is knighted owns everyone in the household they create, but really can be tried and executed for a breach of this sacred trust, their authority has a somewhat different flavor.
- **Breaking Points:** Households are, often, generate the most engaging material when they are either large and tense, or when they're small and broken. What commonly goes wrong with these households?

MULTIPLE TEMPLATES?
Other engaging material can be generated by 'culture clash' in a community. If the invaders marry-and-own, but the natives give authority to the eldest, what occurs in a union of both? And how do those culture see each other? Different household structures can form around religions, around peasant / aristocrat divides, and many other ways, and can spin out some severely heavy stuff.

OVERLOADED

COMPATIBILITY: This plug-in is compatible only with games where players have pools of some kind of point that can be both spend and gained - health, willpower, sanity, action points, luck points, and so on.

WHAT IS IT?
You've been hunting the monsters a long time, and from time to time, it's messed up your head pretty bad. But it's okay; you've got a counselor, you talk things through. Gotta keep that sanity pool topped up. Until your counselor takes a holiday, and the one she referred you to checks you into a sanitarium, where they cure you. You're sane. You can't see the monsters anymore, though they can still see you just fine.

RIPPING THE TOP OFF THE POOL
In rules terms, the idea here is very simple; for each spendable resource pool, imagine if the 'normal' or 'full' level was, instead, the *safe* level. It's not that your character can only hold six mojo points; it's just that they recover to six, and if they get more than that amount, something happens; an overload occurs.

WHY WOULD I WANT TO DO THIS?
Adding an overload condition to a resource pool puts more game focus on the resource and increases complexity somewhat. Depending on the overload, it can create risks, gambles, or added material for roleplaying in relation to that resource.

KINDS OF OVERLOAD
Here are a few examples of ways a pool can overload:

- **The Pool 'Explodes":** Buff up with enough magically charged 'bonus health', and at some point, you cross a threshold; you start glowing, and everything you do heals people and drains your life force. Accumulate enough magical energy, and it suddenly takes on consciousness; you've got a daemon on your hands. Get enough luck, and destiny comes to pay you a visit in person, to find out why you're hoarding. Enough bonus strength, and you mutate - permanently. Basically, at some critical point the pool of whatever-it-is transforms, and causes something to happen as it does so.
- **Unfortunate Interference:** Too much sanity, and you can't see the monsters anymore. Too much willpower, and you become incapable of empathizing with people with less control, bringing you social dysfunction to match your perfect clarity. Too much social notice, and your privacy vanishes.
- **The Pool Overrides Another:** If each point of mojo you gain above your "mojo limit" takes up two points worth of your willpower pool, simply making those points vanish as mojo is gained, then the high-mojo hoodoo you can do by pushing the pool into an overload comes at a possibly tricky cost.

WEAPONISED BUFFS
When making any kind of overload modification, you'll need to decide if mechanics that give bonuses to the pool (if such exist) are naturally weaponised - that is, if there's a way to give someone more of whatever the pool is, can it be used to force an overload on someone? In some cases, allowing this creates interesting situations; in others, it's a plainly bad idea.

CALAMITOUS GAINS
Much of the time, overload is most entertaining if the system either contains weaponised buffs, or a randomized method for accumulating whatever the mojo is, or both. Taking the existing methods for gaining the resource and adding a slight degree of randomness to them is typically pretty simple.

PLUGGING IT IN
The steps to modifying a game in this way are generally something like this...
1. **Choose pool:** Only add overload to resource pools that you want players to pay more attention to, and where it generally 'feels right'.
2. **Brainstorm on meanings & tie-ins:** Rummage around the uses and meanings of the resource in the game, both in terms of what it does mechanically and what it means in the setting. List off anything that comes to mind.
3. **Describe overload effects:** Decide if overloading the resource should explode, interfere, or override something, and mess around with your list. In general, this is a process of simply tinkering about with the ideas until inspiration hits.
4. **Set thresholds, if needed:** In the case of 'interfering' overload, you'll likely need to build a sliding scale, possibly something like (at trait +1, this happens; at trait +3, this happens, and so on). In the case of overrides, thresholds aren't really needed. For 'exploding' effects, they're deeply important - at what point does the pool blow up, and can it be 'held back' by some means?
5. **Rule on buffs, and consider randomized gains:** These steps are as described above.

GETTING FANCY
There are plenty of other ways to hack a resource pool - the above effects can be combined, places where the resource is spent can be converted into gambling effects instead, 'explosions' can be made positive (or create random effects rather than fixed ones), and hard limits can be utterly erased in favor of tracking how much of the resource has passed *through* the character (creating a 'toxic' track that 'heals').

THE SACRIFICE

COMPATIBILITY: This plug-in is compatible only with games where players have health levels or points, and in which equipment and combat conditions are significant enough to have real value.

WHAT IS IT?
You've just taken a hit that will put you down and out of the fight. Considering your options, you offer the GM a "sacrifice" - you shield shatters under the blow, soaking up some of the damage. The GM takes a quick look at their notes, and names a 'soak number'; the amount he'll give you off the damage to blow off the shield. You take the deal, the shield shatters, and you fight on.

WHY WOULD I WANT TO DO THIS?
Item breakage rules are, for the most part, tacked-on extensions of the idea of a game as a physics engine, a simulation of another world. Sometimes, that's not nearly as interesting and useful to a play group as treating such things as 'last ditch' saving graces would be.

WHAT CAN BE SACRIFICED?
Here are some guidelines on what can and can't be sacrificed - note that these are not based on the idea of the physics of the matter, but the value-of-the-moment.
- The loss can be described by the player in a way that "fits".
- The item is applicable to the situation; it's something that is useful in the context of the fight or the situation immediately around it - in a dungeon, having the lantern blown out of your hand and shattered across the floor might or might not be very applicable to the situation, even if it's not going to seriously alter to the fight itself.
- The character doesn't have access to a duplicate of the item (or, if they do, they're willing to have the loss treated as entirely trivial). Just 'how close' a stand-in can be is up to GM determination; if the magician has half a dozen ways to make light, that might count as 'access to a duplicate' for the lantern.

ONE SACRIFICE PER SESSION?
It may be desirable to set a limit on sacrifices, so that players aren't constantly needing to replace battered and broken gear. Or, potentially, it might be desirable to have a mixed limit, say: *One sacrifice per session, except shields (break as many as you want!)*. This is something you'll need to consider based not only on player action, but the tone and details of the setting; the "break as many shields as you want" came out of a Viking Raider campaign, and fit well since the Norse considered shields to be disposable, and built them accordingly - a "three shield" fight in the campaign was an exercise in player lip-biting.

STEP ONE: DETERMINE A "BASIC SOAK"
A 'basic soak' is the minimum amount of damage that will be taken off the top when a player makes a sacrifice and has it accepted. This might be a flat number such as 'one health box', or a flexible guideline, like '3 + (Level / 3)'. This basic number should be a relatively small amount; with a big enough sacrifice, a character will be able to soak up to nine or ten times this amount.

STEP TWO: BUILD A "VALUE BLOCK"
When a player offers up a sacrifice, the GM will figure it's value by *how critical the item is to the character's 'stuff they do'*, and by *how long it will stay disabled*. An example value block is shown below. Note that the 'physics' of item toughness and durability aren't figured into the example at all, and neither is 'how easy is it to hit' - if a character relies on a special holy icon to use mystical powers, having it stop a bullet and break is just as valid to this kind of setup as having a shield fracture.

$Base\ Soak = Lvl\ /\ 2$	UNREADIED (For the conflict)	DISABLED (For the adventure)	DESTROYED (Gone!)
MINOR VALUE	Base Soak x1	Base Soak x2	Base Soak x4
NOTABLE VALUE	Base Soak x2	Base Soak x4	Base Soak x8
CRITICAL VALUE	Base Soak x3	Base Soak x6	Base Soak x12

STEP THREE: WHAT ABOUT REPAIRS?
Many sets of game rules have "item repair" abilities that may get called upon if rules for sacrifice are put into use. If you anticipate this being likely, you may wish to set up your value block to take this into account, putting in repair times and difficulties, spell effectiveness, and the like. If player characters have these abilities, it's more fun to take the extra time to give them another cool use for those abilities than it is to try and freeze such abilities out.

GOING FURTHER: SACRIFICE AND HIT LOCATION
The extreme application of sacrifice is using these same guidelines in place of hit location rules, allowing a player to lose a hand instead of their life. This, though, is a considerably more specific proposal to the game system in question, and will take a lot more tinkering. Applying such rules to both items and hit locations, and then reducing overall health (or increasing overall damage) can create some pretty grim and brutal fighting rules, as players get ugly decision set out for them in combat.

THE SETTING SESSION

Ready-built settings can leave your players in the lurch. Folks around the table often have differing levels of interest in such settings--when one person is excited about exploring some detail of the prebuilt setting, and a different person isn't, one or the both of them are due for some disappointment in short order. So, just as some people recommend "character creation sessions", here's a way to set up a "setting creation session" that helps build engagement for everyone. You can use this method to rework an existing setting - but you might not recognize it when you're done.

SETTING UP

To run a setting creation system, you'll want to get everyone together, and you want to have a short stack of tokens or coins (one per player). It might be possible to do something like this process by email or chat, but a lot of the best stuff comes from moment-to-moment inspiration, so it's not at all recommended. The more you can enable this method to flow like a natural conversation among friends excited about a common interest, the better it will work.

SEEDS IN ADVANCE

Before the session, it's likely that you'll want to lay out the foundations of the setting - things like "I'd like to use this system" and any basic guidelines for who the characters are and the kinds of things they'll be doing in the game, the central bits of style you want to hit, that kind of thing; this is an exercise in cutting down to the *really important* stuff. Get these to your players before the session happens. One example:

> **YOUR CHARACTERS ARE THE GOOD GUYS. PASSIONATE ONES.**
> - The game is basically modern, or with technology within the last 200 years.
> - They will take part in perilous, challenging battles against a terrible evil.
> - Evil has tentacles, and is ancient, but only recently returned to activity.
> - You will have the ability to call on forces to aid you.
> - Your power source for these will be the emotion of messed-up relationships.

BITS WITH BLANKS

Once you get to the table, you'll want to both 'warm up' the players with some potentially easy (or not so easy!) fill-in-the-blanks. See below for an example. As you'll note, even with the blanks empty, there's already something going on; the city is famous for something, and there's a "real power". Set up one or two similar blocks for your group, and aim for that same hint of "stuff going on". You'll want these on-hand when you're ready to get going; for each set of "blanks" you have, and each setting-concept seed you've laid out to begin with, print up a page of paper with a large-sized font with each item on a page of its own. The large font is so that everyone at the table can get a good read of what's on the paper. When everyone is gathered around the table, lay these pages out on the table. In many ways, these pages are a tangible manifestation of the fertile "soil" that you and your friends are going to plant your ideas in, and together grow a setting.

> **WE WILL BE PLAYING IN THE CITY OF _____ .**
> - Which is famed for it's _____ .
> - And is ruled by _____ .
> - But the real power is often considered to be _____ .
> - And the attitude of the people is _____ .

THE NIGHT IN QUESTION

When the actual session begins, you'll start by going over the basic seeds that you've laid out, giving further details on those as needed. If the questions cover stuff that isn't actually central to you, let the players know that you don't have an answer yet, and that you'll get to that. Once everyone is solid on the seeds, move on the fill-in-the blanks, holding group brainstorming riffs on those, until you've got them filled out. Then, on to the roundabout...

THE ROUNDABOUT

The GM starts the roundabout by putting one token per player on the table, and asking the group a question about the setting. Any player may pick up a token and answer the question, and unless someone just can't stand that answer, it becomes part of the setting. After giving an answer, that player may ask another question about the setting, and any other player may pick up a token and answer it. The person who picks up the token is the Answerer. Others may elaborate upon the answer given by the Answerer, but the Answerer gets to decide if they want to include that elaboration as a part of her answer, thus adding it to the setting. In short, the Answerer is where the buck stops, for that question. A player can't answer a question if they have a token; the last player to pick up a token asks a question, and the GM answers it. So, this process runs in rounds, with the GM starting and finishing each round. Keep in mind that this isn't a highly formal process, just a way to make sure everyone gets significant input on many, but not the first word on all, of the parts that interest them).

TOP DOWN ROUNDS

One way to organize the rounds of questions is to dedicate a round or two on each of the following topics; after that point, informal discussion should be enough to finish off the session. Rounds don't *need* to be organized like this; just the roundabout can be enough.

- **The big picture and how it got that way:** This round or rounds focus on big affairs; the overall structure of society, the large-scale conflicts, the events that shaped the culture.
- **The region and recent events:** This round or rounds focus more on the area where the characters will be active, the events that have made things interesting there, and the like.
- **The here & now:** This round or rounds focus on the immediate situation around where the characters will be starting play, the stuff there that they might engage with early on in play.

NONVERBAL ANSWERS

Not all answers need to be *spoken*. If there's a notepad and pen laying around, players can quite happily answer questions by sketching maps or pictures, drawing out "authority trees" for hierarchies, and anything else that comes to mind. As the GM, feel free to prompt the players to do exactly this kind of thing when it's appropriate or might be fun.

OKAY, YOU'VE DONE IT. WHAT DO YOU HAVE?

You have a new setting that everyone knows something about. All the players have a general sense of ownership, and you have players who each have a specific sense of authorship of some part of the setting: in play, you can tap them as "subject matter experts" to add in new details about something relevant to an answer they gave in setting creation. (If somebody created a Guild of Fire-Eaters, you can consider tapping them to name the Guild leader in play).

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THE SOAP OPERA

COMPATIBILITY: This plug-in assumes that your game has a central resource that characters possess that is gained and spent in a way fairly central to play (usually points - action, fate, willpower, mojo, or the like), and that you're representing it with tokens (or could) at the table. It also assumes that you want to turn your game into a soap opera. Just a warning, that.

WHAT IS IT?

The following plug-in is a way to rewrite your game so that character relationships are put front-and-center not only in play but in the mechanics as well. In addition, it works in such a way that those relationships will not only change, but cause serious problems, creating the potential for a whole lot of, well, *Drama!* Using this plug in means making a *big* change to a game - carefully set, it could turn the rules for Ars Magica into a set of rules for playing "Wizard High School", complete with angsty love and (literally!) explosive breakups.

YOU'LL NEED TRACKING PAGES

Either each player will need to write out the seven relationships, with four checkboxes beside each (labeled Implied, Overt, Abusive, and Murderous), of you'll want to visit the Amagi website and download the original version of this article, which includes a PDF form that you can use to track this (and which includes re-minder text as well).

FIND YOUR RESOURCE AND GUT IT

Your game must have a central resource that has a lot of uses, and which does see constant use (or would, if characters could just get more of it). Take that resource, and note down the normal ways to regain it easily and in significant quantities (including 'downtime refills'). Those methods for getting the resource aren't part of the game anymore. If this means that the only methods for getting the resource no require working for each token, that's about right.

ADD THE RELATIONSHIP SLOTS

There are seven relationship slots. Each character may have one other character each in one of the 'slots'. So, your character can have one Exemplar, one Keeper, and so on. These other characters must be named characters that appear regularly in play; they may only be the main characters of other players if those players give you permission to do so (in a really crazy soap opera game, permission should usually be given for this). You can't duplicate a character across slots; if someone is your Exemplar, they can't also be your Keeper.

THE RELATIONSHIP RULES

All the following rules apply… This may seem fairly hefty, but is actually pretty simple stuff.

- **Gaining a Relationship:** By gaining a new relationship at the 'Implied' level, your character refreshes their token pool (either filling it to the maximum, or, if there is no maximum, jumping up to a 'refresh level' set by the GM).
- **Reciprocality:** There is absolutely no requirement for your list of relationships to be reciprocated in kind. You can absolutely have a Paramour that thinks of you as their Rival - in fact, such mismatches are typically awesome.
- **Escalating a Relationship:** Relationships 'escalate' from Implied to Overt to Abusive to Murderous (note that the target of the relationship is not necessarily the one being abused or the target of murderous intent, and that many, even most, relationships won't get to 'murderous'). This escalation is not a question of realism, but of drama! After you have played out a relationship at a given level for at least three scenes, you can escalate it to the next level up and refresh your token pool again. You are never required to escalate a relationship; you can keep it at the same level for a long time; keeping a positive relationship at the overt level is how the system represents healthy relationships. Which are boring, in terms of play.
- **Removing a Relationship:** If the target of a relationship is effectively eliminated from regular play for some reason, they may be removed from your list for free. Otherwise, you must spend a number of tokens equal to the level you refresh to when gaining or escalating a relationship in order to remove it.
- **Playing Out Relationships:** Each of the relationships, listed below, describes how it is played out at each level. You should play to this level in any scene where the target of the relationship is present - especially the scene where you add the relationship to your sheet. If others at the table note that you're not doing so, and have the opportunity, they can call for you to do so or discard a token. Note that you can always play above this level of intensity; what's described is intended as the minimum level of drama, not the maximum.
- **Repeating A Relationship:** Naturally, you can break up and fall in love all over again, if you want. If you have an empty relationship slot, you can use it to gain a relationship to someone that you have already related to. However, if you have already had one or more relationships (as described by these rules) to a given target, the second relationship you take grants you one less token than normal for taking it and escalating it, for each such relationship you've had to the target. So if you break off your Paramour, and then get them as a Rival, you get one less token each step; if you break that off and make them into your Paramour again, you gain two less tokens each step of the way, and so on. This reduction in 'income' doesn't make it any cheaper to get rid of the relationship, however. You may insert a joke about the desirability of 'fresh meat' in long term play here, if you like.

RELATIONSHIP: ANATHEMA

Your Anathema is someone you want to *destroy*. An anathema is an enemy that your character wants to see reduced to nothing. While this relationship is merely implied, minor jabs and snarky witticisms, or just boiling glares, are sufficient for you. Once it has become overt, you will need to actually work to undermine them socially. At the abusive level, you begin looking for opportunities to hurt them physically (and get away with it), to mess up anything they care about deeply, to turn others against them. When this relationship becomes murderous, you'll begin looking for a way to end their life. These acts need not be direct, immediate violence; sabotage, 'accidents', and even serious challenges to honorable fights all express this level of relationship.

RELATIONSHIP: EXEMPLAR

Someone you want to *follow*. Your exemplar is someone that your character believes is somehow better, wiser, or simply greater, and that their greatness should be acknowledged by everyone else. At the 'implied' level, you may content yourself with small acts of admiration, possibly carrying a picture of them or trying to find opportunities to be near them. Once this relationship becomes overt, you should defend them against slanders in your presence, and will be plainly ready to do what they say when they're present. At the abusive level, you'll be ready to heap scorn and calumny on those that disagree with your Exemplar, and their enemies become yours. When this relationship becomes murderous, you'll be ready to kill to get them into a position of strength. (Note: Your Exemplar need not actually desire power. At all.)

RELATIONSHIP: KEEPER

Someone you want to *escape*, without leaving your own life. A keeper has some hold on your character - whether or not they know it; a man you are jealously obsessed with can be your Keeper just as surely as the serial-killing sister that your guilt won't let you stop taking care of. At the implied level, this may simply mean trying to interest others in them (in hopes of foisting them off). As this becomes overt, you'll begin making small attempts to eject them from your life, while still remaining in the realm of the socially acceptable. At the abusive level, you will likely begin to actively live in a way that you hope will repel them. And, finally, at the murderous level, you'll be ready to kill them - or to kill someone and frame them.

RELATIONSHIP: PARAMOUR

Someone you want to *obtain*. Your paramour is someone that doesn't fill the role that your character wishes them to in their life (a role which should, *eventually*, turn out to be one that the other will object to, even if it seems wonderful at first). At the implied level, this involves no more than significant and thoughtful looks and attempts to attract their attention. As it becomes overt, the first signs of how you want them to relate to you should be expressed, often with small attempts on your part to entice the other to take on that role. By the abusive stage, you will be entirely willing to harm or browbeat the person to act the way you wish towards you. And finally, by the time the relationship turns murderous, you'll do *anything*, however vile.

RELATIONSHIP: RIVAL

Someone you want to *defeat*. Your rival is a character that your own character sees themselves as competing with in some way, trying to gain something (or someone). Implied, you just view any competition (of any kind) that both of you are in as more intense, and may give small signs of just who you feel you're competing with. At the overt stage, you're obviously ready to take them on, anytime. Once the relationship becomes abusive, it's not enough to just contest with them and try to beat them; you want to rub it in, for them to grovel at your feet - and it's plain that you want this. In the end, once the relationship becomes murderous, the desire becomes such that you want them dead, and want everyone to know that you're the one who did it. A rival differs from an Anathema in that the desire isn't about annihilating them so much as it is about 'counting coup'.

RELATIONSHIP: PROTEGE

Someone you want to *mold*. Your protégé is someone that you think has great potential to be someone (preferably, someone that they don't really want to be), and that you are the one that can make them into that person. Like a Paramour, you want them to fill a role; unlike a Paramour, this role doesn't need to relate to you. At the implied level, you may simply be offering occasional advice or introducing them to 'the right people'. As the relationship becomes overt, you should be mentioning the role you want them to fill to them, and explaining why this is perfect. At the abusive level, you'll happily resort to blatant manipulation of the target, to teaching them 'hard lessons' through dirty tactics, and the like. Finally, by the time this relationship becomes murderous, you'll be ready to excise from their life the people that don't fit who you want them to become, by whatever means are necessary.

RELATIONSHIP: WARD

Someone you want to *protect*. Your ward is someone that you believe is endangered in some fashion by something (typically, by one or more of their relationships, or by the whole world), and whom you wish to keep safe. Of course, your ward should not want to be protected in the specific ways that your character will eventually choose to employ. At the implied level, this is the most innocuous kind of social presence and interference. Once it becomes overt, stern warnings to both the target and simple actions against whatever you think may harm them are the order of the day. At the abusive level, you'll act to drive off the malign influence - or even shove extra work on your ward, get them briefly detained, for their own good. By the time this becomes murderous, you'll shoot that boy if he comes around one more time.

SOME BASIC ADVICE

1. COME FOR A GOOD TIME:
If your primary goal at the table is something other than having an experience you enjoy, and that others can enjoy with you, you should be doing something else. Generally speaking, that means having fun. Sometimes it might be more specific - crafting a story together, or seeing things from the perspective of your character, in addition to or instead of classically fun stuff. But if what you want when you sit down at the table on any given night isn't enjoyable to you, or for others, do not sit down at that table.

**2. THIS IS YOUR GAMESPACE, THESE ARE REAL PEOPLE:**
Accept and understand that the players around you are real people that are also here to have fun. Nobody comes to the table to watch one player discuss their personal stuff with the GM when it could wait, or to watch two players crack inside jokes at each other and exclude everyone else. Nobody comes to the table to be treated to the personal aroma of another player, or to observe their food being chewed. Nobody hosts hoping for a marathon cleanup session. Nobody comes to the table to be the ego-boosting kick-toy of anyone else. Never forget that you are playing the game with real people.

3. ACCEPT RESPONSIBILITY:
Taking the same point as #2, and bringing it into the game - what you do at the gaming table is your responsibility, and you should accept this. What others do is their responsibility, and they should accept that, too. This absolutely includes what you decide that your character does. This absolutely includes the actions of the GM as world. If playing your character as written could very well interfere with the fun of others, you need to decide where to go with that – it's your call, though; excuses are lame. If you ruin the game by playing your character or the world 'correctly', then *you still ruined the game*.

4. GIVE FEEDBACK:
Anything from telling the GM "I had a good game tonight" to "here's a few moments of play I really liked, and a few moments I really didn't", can help. For the GM, telling the players what they loved about their play, and what they found dull, works the same way. The GM can't read the minds of the players, and the players don't know what's going on internally for the GM either. Unless they tell each other. This doesn't need to be formal – in fact, it seems that it often works best if it isn't. But clearer is better.
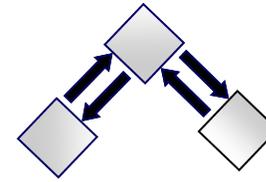
5. SHARE CREATIVITY:
No one person at the table has full control over what happens in the game. If someone does, you get some really boring shit. At the very least, a player generally controls most of one character in the game. There are an infinite number of little variants on how the GM and the players share control over who gets to put stuff in, and things work best once the group hits a level of input from each person at the table that they're comfortable with. Find that level. If you're looking for ways to muck about with that level of input, there are quite a few ways to do that.

6. SEEK CONSENSUS:
The people at your table have, if your game is actually running at all, a consensus. The ideas in their heads of what the game is and does match up well enough to produce good play. Sometimes a group will hit on little moments when their ideas just don't match up, and they'll need to talk about what this specific thing looks like in their heads and agree on one way to go about it. Once in a while, one of the people at the table will want to bring something in that they aren't sure will match up with what the others have in their heads, and it's a good idea for them to mention that before they do.

7. NEGOTIATE HONESTLY:
When problems come up in your group, the first step is to make sure that everyone at the table is onboard with at least the basic ideas of the first five things here – they don't have to be "skilled" at these things; being onboard is plenty. If they aren't, I don't really have any good advice for you – for myself, I likely wouldn't play with them for much longer. If they are, and you still have a problem, then it's time to sort that out. It's usually a very bad idea to try and solve out-of-character problems with in-game events. That's dishonest, and doesn't generally work. Also, using the rules to 'punish' your players or 'get back' at your GM? Same thing.

8. CONSIDER YOUR OPTIONS:
When someone makes an attempt to alter 'your part' of the fiction - the world if you're the GM, your character if you're a player, you have choices. You can simply agree, or disagree; you can put it to the mechanics, you can modify what they've stated and give it back to them. Limiting your options in this case is silly; most advice to limit these options in a 'positive' way comes from a desire to keep the energy of the game high, or allow for trust between players above and beyond the basic average; those are good goals, but instead of using limits on yourself and others to achieve them, simply remember that your decisions will affect those things as well as the specific matter at hand.

9. WATCH THE SPOTLIGHT:
At any given instant of play, someone has the spotlight. This doesn't just mean 'one person is talking'. It means that if there are a whole string of scenes, one person is usually "center stage"; the scene revolves around their stuff, whether that's world stuff or character issues or whatever. If that person isn't you, then you're a supporting character in that scene; try to play good support, whether that means keeping quiet, offering support or advice, playing up the effects the setting has on your character a bit, whatever. If that person is you, then fill that scene; it's there for you to step into. If nobody is sure who should have the spotlight, then act as support for each other, until the focus hits. But watch that spotlight, too. If you're getting more than a fair share, work to make more scenes about other characters. If you're getting less than your share, then when a scene doesn't really have a focus, step up and take it. Sometimes the players will think that different people are getting too much, or not enough spotlight time – talk about it; most of the time, whoever's being a hog or hiding away just needs to know about it.

10. PLAY THE GAME AT THE GAME
This is a close partner to sharing creativity. Sometimes, you'll have an idea about the game before you sit down at the table, about something you'd like to see happen there, or even a whole string of them. That's good stuff. But when those ideas start to look like a storyline, you need to be careful with it. A storyline is great raw material, but don't get too attached; if you stuck on it, you'll find yourself pushing to make it happen, and ignoring or working against all the other good ideas and creative input at your table. Don't play the game before it starts – *play the game when you're at the game*.

11. SHOW YOUR STUFF AS YOU GO
Almost everybody wants to feel like the fictional world, and the characters in it, are real to them enough to imagine. This is achieved by describing things, but nobody wants a drawn-out description, or huge whopping chunks of detail. If someone rattles off ten facts a scene or a character, only a few will be noted. The key is to describe as you go. If a player wants us to know that her character Jill is a graceful woman, she shouldn't simply tell the group that at creation; her character should 'glide' and 'move nimbly' in play – her description at creation need only be a single, vivid image, that she can build on by describing not only what the character does, but how. This works for the GM, too; when the characters walk into a abandoned study, it can simply be old, dusty, smelling of books; as the characters interact with it, the thick books, the puffs of dust as things are moved, come out. Good descriptions start small, and grow over time.

12. LEARN TO SPEAK THE SAME LANGUAGE
This is an ongoing effort that every group needs to make together. Every single person thinks that different phrases and wordings imply slightly different things, and this is one of the biggest things that can knock down even an honest attempt at talking to other people. Your group, to communicate both well and quickly, will sometimes need to hash out things related to this; accept that it's going to happen and try not to get too serious about a problem until you're sure this isn't it.
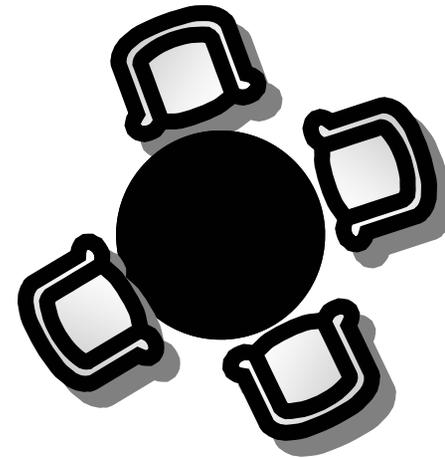
STRAIN

COMPATIBILITY: This plug-in is compatible only with games where players have selectable components for their characters (systems where character are static, or player choice isn't part of development, won't work here). It work most easily with point-based games, but can work with level-and-feature games as well.

WHAT IS IT?
Imagine if, while playing along, one of the normal side effects of failed rolls, of taking damage, and most other negative outcomes, was that you gained points called "strain", and could spend those points to change your character - not to make them larger, but to remove some features and replace them with others, making them dynamic in ways other than direct growth. That's the idea here. All the parts of integrating strain into a game are interlocked; while they're presented in a set order, each affects the others, and you'll want a solid idea of all of them before you try it.

ACCUMULATING STRAIN
The most obvious component of putting strain into your game is 'How do characters get strain?'. A quick list of good possibilities follows; the 'point values' given are generic suggestions, and you'll likely want to add to and remove from this list, alter values to suit your campaign and system, and so on.

- **Failed Roll:** *1 Point:* Anytime the character attempts and fails a roll during a stressful situation, they gain a point of strain.
- **Damage Taken:** *1 Point:* Anytime the character takes damage during a stressful situation, they gain a point of strain.
- **Conditions Applied:** *Varies:* Depending on the rules, some conditions might be worth strain - ones that take the character out of action, or change their role in the group, or their role in society, are especially appropriate.
- **Moments of Frustration:** *1 Point:* Whenever it is a character's turn to act during a stressful situation, and the situation is one where most of the characters have useful things to do but the specific character doesn't, they can declare a 'moment of frustration'. The character tries to find something useful to do, fails, and gains a point of strain.
- **Social Censure Or Expectations:** *Varies:* A character that is severely pressured to change by society, whether to stop acting in a certain way or to perform some task they are ill-suited for, may be given strain on an ad-hoc basis while the pressure remains.
- **Retraining Time:** *1 Point per Day:* Time a character spends deliberately working to retrain their skills, change their focus, break habits and learn to thing in new ways, that kind of thing, might generate strain - or this time might be a basic requirement for spending strain, or both; this is discussed a bit more further below.

THE PURCHASE LIST
In addition to "How to get it?", it's necessary to set "What can I use it for?". And this is answered by creating a purchase list. In a point-buy game, this is as easy as can be; simply set the amounts of strain gained so that by spending ten points of strain, you can remove something worth ten regular points from your sheet, and then add something else that's worth the same amount - remember, strain doesn't fuel character growth, it just allows for character change. In games with 'negative points' for problems, strain can let you swap one problem… for another problem.

In a game that isn't based on point-buy, you'll need to assign point values to everything that strain can be used to remove and replace. So, you might list "One character level: 100 strain (must be replaced with another level)", and "One class option: 20 Strain (must be replaced with a class option or feature)", or whatever is desired. This will likely take a bit of brainstorming, to get a list, and then some tinkering, to get income and costs balanced in a way that suits the game.

HOW TO SPEND IT
Finally, once the means of getting strain and the possible purchases are generally known, this just leaves the process for spending it. There are two basic options here...

- **Flashovers:** A 'flashover' is a dramatic moment or scene where a character changes something about the way they behave. The old man takes down his sword from the mantle and swears a terrible oath. The sheriff throws his badge in the fire and dons a mask instead. And so on. A flashover should always be assumed to 'take a little bit', but is comparatively sudden. If flashovers are used, retraining should grant added strain to help the process, rather than being a requirement.
- **Retraining:** The slower, steadier way. The swordmaster, hand hacked off, apprentices himself to a Magus. The princess, having shunned the court, takes up archery, and begins to lose her polished manner in exchange for lethal skill. To use this option, a set "retraining time per point" will need to be set.

THE FLASHBACK TRICK
In some games and settings, one trick to use with strain is to allow a character "one last scene" using the skills they trained away - and, depending on the scene, to offer them the chance to undo the change at the end of the scene, or confirm the changes (the strain stays spent either way). The princess gone feral returns for one last night at court, the swordmaster-turned-mage binds the Lich Blade to his arm for one more fight. Alternatively, a character with enough advancement points (or whatever) might be allowed to spend those at the conclusion of the scene, and keep both.

TEMPTATION DICE

COMPATIBILITY: This plug-in assumes that your game uses dice (in smallish numbers - typically one to three at a shot) to resolve tasks or conflicts, and that failed rolls are a distinct possibility. If you're ever seen someone miss their roll a couple of times in a row during a session with the system, and this wasn't a great shock, but was something of an irritation, this may be a good plug-in for you.

WHAT IS THIS?

Imagine if, when you were making your regular roll in a game, you rolled an extra die or two of the same type, and that these dice didn't count, right off the bat, but they *could*. If you just paid a little something extra. So, it looks like you missed the orc with that roll, yep - oh, but your temptation die would be good enough to make the grade, if you switched to it. Is it worth paying a point of your health, strain a little harder, and do that? And that's what Temptation dice are. They aren't (necessarily) there to tempt the character. They're there to tempt the *player*, and give them an extra option where the 'fail rate' is a irksome factor, but can't be written out.

TO PLUG THEM IN

To add temptation dice to a game, there are a number of decisions you'll need to make about how they will appear and be used.

- **Which rolls:** Depending on the game and the use you want, it may be best to use temptation dice only on combat rolls - or only on skill rolls, or every roll, or something else entirely. Decide what kind of rolls they'd help on.
- **How Many:** A game that uses a pool of dice and counts successes will usually only be benefit strongly from temptation dice if a few are used; a game that only uses a single d20 can do quite well with just a single such die.
- **What Color:** It may sound obvious, but it's rather important that temptation dice be a different color from 'regular' ones, to avoid confusion.
- **Added in or as replacements:** When someone 'gives in to temptation', do they add in the dice, or swap out other ones? In single-die systems, the best answer is *usually* 'swap them', but this can vary. In die pool games, the best answer is often to add them in, but again, this can vary.
- **Cost and representation:** You'll need to decide what it costs to 'activate' these dice and use them. This might be a normal spendable resource (points of some kind) or it might be something that's usually not spent in such a way, such as health. Or getting the dice might mean accepting a condition that you can later shake off (panic dice, for accepting fear conditions, is fun). Whatever the case, it must avoid creating "Wait, what?" - that is, if characters can make a grunting physical effort, burning health to get the die, being able to do so while picking a lock is a "Wait, what?" moment.

TEMPTATION, STUNTING & BONUS DICE

Some games already use bonus dice of various kinds, notably including "stunting dice" that are granted to a player for good description. In games that already do this, it's possible to simply state that those dice are temptation dice - you get to roll them in the normal way, but they only count if you pay the temptation cost. Note that this is possible, but not necessarily recommended; the usefulness and fun factor of this kind of application varies wildly by rules system.

TEMPTATION ON DEMAND

If temptation dice are used only on very specific rolls, or there's an outrageously creative GM running the table, it's also possible to leave off the cost of activating the dice altogether. If this is done, anytime the player wants those dice, the GM can tell them what will happen if they take them. So, if temptation dice were only used for mystical affairs, they might be 'side effect' dice; if you want them, you'll need to accept some strangeness.

UNNATURAL TEMPTATIONS

Of course, it's also possible to cast temptation dice as something meant to tempt the character as well as the player. In a game filled with laser swords (ahem), temptation dice might represent the darker side of things. This can be combined with temptation on demand; in a game where every character has voices in their head, or a horrible monstrosity lurking within them waiting to make them large and green, those voices might actually be offering real help. Of course, the price can be steep.

RECIPROCAL TEMPTATION

If temptation on demand is available to the characters on a really regular basis, it's often best to spread it out among the players. In this case, each player might act as "the tempter" to one other. Or you might roll a white temptation die and a black one with each roll, with the player to your right offering you noble self-sacrificing costs (and the white die), while the player on your left offers you depraved and awful side effects (and the black die). Reciprocal temptation concepts can be structured many different ways, but all of them require a group of players that will gleefully make offers that elicit a wince and a thoughtful pause. In addition, if temptation is going to be reciprocal and player-managed in this way, it's often a good idea to have a list of common, recommended temptations on hand for inspiration and to act as guidelines for what is 'about right'.

A "WHAT-I-LIKE" GLOSSARY

WHAT'S THIS FOR?

Tabletop gamers want different things, different kinds of fun, out of their games. However, it's often tricky to discuss that, when a lot of the common terms add up to "munchkin" and "actor", and other categories that oversimplify what people actually want out of their play. So, if your group wants to have a discussion *without* that clutter, and get a solid grip on what each person at the table wants from play, here are some less-simple, less-snarky terms.

- **AGON** is the thrill of winning *against another person at the table*. This is not quite the same as beating a challenge, or about winning against difficult odds; it's about *beating* the other people at the table. It's not the most common joy of RPGs - in fact, a lot of gamers want to avoid it, since problem agon is really, really bad stuff. But it does sneak in. When the GM takes on the role of adversary, playing not just to embody the challenge fairly, but in an attempt to whup the players, that's agon. When a couple of players engage in creative one-upmanship, trying to spout the coolest thing (in theatre terms, trying to *upstage* each other rather than collaborate), that's agon again. Agon can be good, but only if it's acknowledged and used, rather than festering quietly.
- **ALEA** is the gambler's thrill - the fun of taking a big risk, the tension that comes with it, win or lose. Games with dice rolls, and especially ones where big stakes are riding on that one throw of the dice, are good at giving alea.
- **CATHARSIS** is a feeling of release that follows an intense or overwhelming experience. Not necessarily a tragic or traumatic experience, but usually an emotional one. Catharsis is served best by very particular uses of the four modes; it's not that one or another is best, but each has very definite places and uses to a player out for the kinds of experiences that create catharsis.
- **CLOSURE** is the feeling that there is nothing more that need be done, and that the thing is finished. Closure requires resolution to whatever the matter at hand may be. This goal isn't especially tied to any of the modes, but does require that either the GM make the in-character goals and end points clear, or that they actively listen to the players (in a way that often has some features like slow-moving collaboration).
- **EXPRESSION** is the simple desire to be creative at the table; expressive players often spend plenty of time on description, might draw the characters, might write serious backgrounds (though big backgrounds also mark Kenosis and Kairosis)
- **FIERO** is the feeling of TRIUMPH, of winning, of defeating a challenge, or overcoming adversity. People looking for that feeling are on the lookout for adversity – and they tend to want adversity where they can be partisan for their characters and the GM is actually playing against them a bit. If it's not a real challenge, with real dangers, then there's no payoff for a fiero-chaser. If you've ever died again, and again, in a computer game, and then finally manage to succeed, and felt a rush where you could stand on your chair and scream? That's fiero.
- **HUMOUR…** Games can be played for laughs, and often are. Amusement is served by all four of the modes. Notably, a player that really pushes for it will often end up pushing for collaboration, even to the point of attempting to dictate the actions of other player characters, because some of the humor that comes to mind most easily can step outside the specific ideas of "who is in charge of what" the other modes often lay down.

- **KAIROSIS** is the feeling that of fulfilment that comes with change and development. When a character under tension is revealed to be more than they were previously thought, or when they change significantly (and become more engaging as a result), that's often a search for kairosis.
- **KENOSIS** is the feeling of being deeply engaged in their character or in the fiction as a whole; it's one version of "immersion". Players looking for this (especially really serious kinds) often aim for a lot of characterisation. They also often (but not always) want to avoid types of collaboration that will pull them "out of the groove". Serious kenosis is one of many "flow states" that goes on in tabletop gaming.
- **KINESIS** is tactile fun. Miniatures, maps, game book illustration, tokens, and dice are all visual and tactile things that are enjoyable about RPGs. I haven't yet met anyone that considers these things their number one priority, but they show up on a lot of lists.
- **LUDUS** is for people who take their rules seriously. The tinkerers and the optimal builders are chasing this kind of fun. To someone looking for ludus fun, the rules are the game, a toy that the group is here to play with. Wherever the mechanics of the game are, whatever modes they attach to, that's where ludus-seekers go. In order to support ludus, there needs to be enough complexity in the rules to allow someone to actually spend time exploring and playing with them as something interesting in their own right. D&D and Exalted both tend to satisfy ludus-oriented players.
- **NACHES** is the enjoyment of seeing someone that you have taught, or are responsible for, go on to do well with that knowledge. If there's a player at your table who is always happy to teach the others about how things work, chances are they like their naches. Many GMs, unsurprisingly, get a lot of good naches and enjoy it. Some players can get this same kind of enjoyment from seeing a student or smaller ally of their character do well.
- **PAIDA** fun is free-wheeling player fun, where rules are a convenience. Players looking to get some Paidial fun would prefer winging the rules-calls, going for whatever feels right at the moment. If there are involved adversity-resolving rules, Paidial players avoid adversity. Novelty and wonder are often, but not always, associated with this goal. Goofy characters are sometimes signals that someone wants this kind of fun.
- **SCHADENFREUDE** is delight in the suffering of another - the thrill of seeing the villain get what they deserve is a pretty common expression. A game session can only provide this really well if it has characters that players "love to hate" and whom they inflict real damage (not necessarily physical) on without serious guilt.
- **SOCIABILITY** is pretty central. For most gamers, the game and the acts that make up "playing the game" are a way of being social (for others, the event is also – or only – an excuse for being social outside of play). People looking to get especially significant gameplay-as-socialisation often try to match their other goals with the rest of the group, but do want to chat in general –if they aren't engaging in characterisation, they will often enjoy general table talk.
- **VENTING** is, simply, the desire to work out player frustrations or other emotions, using the game as a means. After a rough day working, smacking the hell out of some orcs can be pretty enjoyable.

WRATH TOKENS

COMPATIBILITY: This plug-in is compatible with most games that features significant physical combat with potent adversaries.

CREDIT & CAUTION

This plug-in grew out of discussion with Ryan Macklin of Master Plan about his upcoming Mythender RPG (and he's curious about your thoughts, too!). At the time of this writing, it has not yet been 'torture tested' in play.

WHAT IS IT?

The characters at engaged in a pitched battle with a gigantically powerful foe. The knightly hero has been carving it to ribbons, and the beast turns and… splatters the thief all over the wall. Wait. No, that's not right; the knight has five wrath tokens in front of him, and the thief only has one. It goes for the knight, and hits; he tosses away a wrath token. Next round, with the knight wounded, his squire takes a desperate gamble; she scoops up a gem the size of an egg and starts sprinting, hoping to draw fire away from her mentor; the GM checks her current Wrath (four!), and agrees that her actions push her up one more token, making her the main target.

WHY TO USE IT

When there's only a single foe, or the enemies facing the characters attack as a mob, wrath sorts out targeting and allows *tracking* of tactics for 'drawing fire' and the like.

A BASELINE

What follows is a mostly system-agnostic application of this idea; it's one that you'll likely want to hack a bit to fit your game, but it gives us a starting point.

- **The Basics:** At the start of a battle where Wrath is used, each character on the scene that looks like a combatant gets one (characters that appear to be total non-combatants start with none). An enemy will always choose to act against a target with more wrath than one with less if it reasonably able to do so, and if it can only reasonably attack another character, it suffers a one-point (or die, or whatever) penalty for each rank of difference between it's target's rank and that of the character with the most Wrath. Five wrath is the limit.
- **Getting Wrath:** A character gains three wrath each time they damage the foe (up to a maximum of five). They gain two wrath for harassing the foe or aiding others in attack (up to a maximum of four). And they gain one wrath for healing, hiding, or otherwise giving benefits to those that have more wrath than they do (up to a limit of three). The GM may add other actions to this list ad-hoc.
- **Losing Wrath:** Each time the enemy damages a character, they discard a wrath.
- **Tactics:** A character may gain two wrath, or discard one, as their turn, if the player describes a suitable action (normal minimum of one, maximum five).

HACKING TO FIT

So, generic version in hand, it's time to hack this idea into shape for the system and the campaign you're thinking of. Here are some of the important considerations:

- **The basic range:** Ranking wrath from zero through five is simple, and generally easy to remember, as well as being 'coarse-grained' enough that an enemy will still be able to pick between aggressive targets fairly often. Squeezing it down to an even smaller range, such as from one to three, creates more choice for the enemies while still keeping the basic functions. Enlarging the range is more 'fine-grained', but can also mean that enemies never get to make tactical decisions at all, and are basically 'robotic'.
- **Monstrous quirks:** It is possible to give different kinds of foes different (or simply longer) lists of 'what enrages them'. Dragons might consider a theft as bad as an attack; gangsters would likely take note of anyone shouting "Hello, police?" into a cell phone, undead might be enraged by the energy of healing magic, and so on. Some units might be specially trained to go after certain behaviors first - to always take down the ritualist, or the medic. Others might be blinkered enough that only damage to them will really get their attention.
- **Existing Abilities & Skills:** Some games have existing abilities, skills, or other such rules items that might be applied differently, or have new uses entirely, when these rules are used. A bodyguard's ability to shield someone might become the capacity to automatically have one more wrath than their charge; the brute that spits in the face of his foes might find that their skill instead allows them to gain wrath at a remarkable rate. Defenses that provide sanctuary or calming effects might reduce wrath; the ability to bluff might allow an assassin to make it seem as if someone else was the source of their attack.

WITH MULTIPLE FOES

As written, wrath is meant for big applies to fights with a single foe (or mob). In cases of free-ranging melee, wrath might simply indicate who 'unattached' enemies gravitate towards, or might be compared with how many attackers are 'on them' - any player with more wrath than attackers is a valid target, and the one with the biggest gap between wrath and attackers is the most valid target.

DICE OVER TOKENS: Instead of tokens, it's very possible to just give each player a big red six-sided die to put in front of them, and raise the maximums and minimums by one. Then, players just turn it to the right face as needed. If you do, though, make sure this die is easily spotted and read from across the playing area.