

In a Wicked Age...

In a wicked age...

...A company of desert horsemen, hiding a woman amongst them...

...A wandering spirit, visible at will, an inflamer of human passions...

...The marriage of a region's most beautiful girl, necessarily virgin and without blemish, to the dead stone effigy of a harvest god...

...A wandering exorcist, severe, who accepts no payment for his services but who lasts after carnal congress...



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In a Wicked Age

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Invitation

what: In a Wicked Age

who: You and three or four of your smartest, boldest, most creative, and hottest friends

where: In your living room, or around your dining room table

when: Once a week or twice a month, for several weeks or a few months

bring: Mixed dice

The Four Oracles

A deck of cards (with the jokers out)

Copies of the sheets

Pencils

Snacks: tea, wine, nuts, chocolates, fruit

For dice, you'll need a few of every size (except twenties). Be sure you have sixes with numbers and sixes with pips, both, too.

For sheets, you'll need a story sheet, a character sheet for each player, a handful of NPC sheets, a few particular strength sheets, and an owe list. The first time, just write "we owe" at the top of a blank sheet; after that, keep the same owe list going.

The first time



Consulting the oracle

Someone choose an oracle. Your choices are **Blood & Sex**, **God-kings of War**, the **Unquiet Past**, and a **Nest of Vipers**. It doesn't matter who chooses.

Someone shuffle the deck and deal four cards where everyone can see.

Someone go to the oracle and read out its entries for your four cards.

Suppose for example that you chose **Blood & Sex**, and you dealt the king of diamonds, the 10 of spades, the 10 of clubs, and the 9 of hearts. That's the desert horsemen hiding the woman, the spirit of passion, the marriage of the girl to the stone effigy, and the exorcist, severe.

One of you needs to be the GM. GM, don't choose, deal or read – have your friends do those. You write. Copy the entries onto your story sheet.

All together, read the entries out into a list of characters. (You write, and lead the reading.) Read the explicit characters, and read the implied characters too, and decide as you go and by your gut what counts as a character.

Elements: a company of desert horsemen, hiding a woman amongst them; a wandering spirit, visible at will, an inflamer of human passions; the marriage of the region's most beautiful girl, necessarily virgin and without blemish, to the dead stone effigy of a harvest god; and a wandering exorcist, severe, who accepts no payment for his services but who lusts after carnal congress.

Characters: the chief of the horsemen, any individual one of the horsemen, the woman they're hiding; the wandering spirit; the beautiful girl, the priest or priestess of the harvest god's cult, the harvest god himself (oh yes, in this wicked age even the gods aren't off-limits), any individual person of the region; the exorcist, and are there demons, or is the inflamer of passions demon enough?

Choosing characters

Everyone chooses one character from the list, except you the GM. You get the rest. Since you have the list in your hands, read out the characters and the elements whenever someone asks. It doesn't matter who chooses first and who chooses second, and I'm certain that if any two of your friends come to a dispute you'll be able to help them resolve it.

As a group you can expand and contract the list as you go, at need. The demons, for instance, exist just now in a kind of limbo – maybe they'll exist and maybe they won't, depending on who chooses to play them or who doesn't. It's the same with individual horsemen and individual people of the region – if a player thinks of a young man of the region who's in love with the beautiful girl, for

instance, or the chief horseman's right hand man, then there they are. Also, the woman the horsemen are hiding might be, in fact, the beautiful girl, and that's the choice of whatever player chooses her.

Let's suppose for our example that the players choose for their characters the chieftain of the desert horsemen; the region's most beautiful girl, whom the horsemen are hiding; a boy from the region who is in love with her; and the exorcist, severe and lustful. This leaves for NPCs the wandering spirit, the harvest god and his priest or priestess, and whatever horsemen, people of the region, and demons the GM likes.



Creating a new character sheet

In any order:

Give your character a name. Make one up or choose one; I've included lists of names with the oracles.

Copy your character's description straight from the GM's story sheet.

For now, leave the space for your character's best interests empty.

Choose whether your character's going to have a particular strength. If she is, choose and list it now.

Choose one that already exists or name a new one – you'll get to create it in just a minute.

Assign one die each to the six forms. The forms are **covertly**, **directly**, **for myself**, **for others**, **with love**, **with violence** (and thanks to Tony Dowler). Assign a d12, a d10, a d8, a d6, a d6, and a d4. The higher the die, the more successful your character will be when she acts accordingly.

Here's an example of a character sheet:

Amek, the chieftain of the desert horsemen

Covertly d8

Directly d10

For myself d4

For others d6

With love d6

With violence d12

No particular strength

No best interests yet.

Here's another example:

Bolu Ta, the exorcist, severe but lustful

Covertly d6

Directly d12

For myself d10

For others d8

With love d4

With violence d6

Particular strength: exorcism

No best interests yet.



While the players are creating their character and strength sheets, GM, you have to create sheets for your characters too. (It's an artifact of history that in these games the GM's characters are called NPCs. It's a similar artifact that calls you the GM, the "game master," even though that title makes no sense for this game at all.)

Creating a new NPC sheet

In any order:

Give the character a name.

Copy the character's description from the story sheet.

Assign two dice each to the three NPC forms: **action**, **maneuvering**, **self-protection**. Assign d12 d8 to one form, d10 d6 to another, and d6 d4 to the third. The higher the dice, the more successful the NPC will be when she acts accordingly.

Choose whether the character's going to have a particular strength. If she is, choose and list it now.

Make your NPCs quickly! You have to get them all done by the time the players have made their characters. Don't deliberate, go. The obvious thing is the best thing.

Have more NPC sheets at hand than you have NPCs. If a character comes up in play whom you haven't predicted, you can create a sheet for her then and there.

Here's an example of an NPC sheet:

Shahu Seen, the wandering spirit, inflamer of passions.

Action d12 d8

Maneuvering d10 d6

Self-protection d6 d4

Particular strength: the power to inflame passions

No best interests yet.

Here's another example:

Ba Il Shar, the high priest of the harvest god.

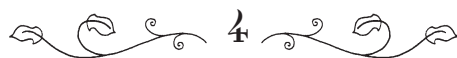
Action d6 d4

Maneuvering d12 d8

Self-protection d10 d6

No particular strength

No best interests yet.





Whichever couple of your friends finish making their character sheets first, have them create particular strength sheets.

Particular strengths are unusual skills, magical arts, innate powers, allies, and treasures that characters can have. As you play you'll create a variety of particular strengths for your various characters. Some of them will take on much significance, and some of them will be just things in the game.

Creating a new particular strength sheet

In any order:

Give the strength a name.

Describe the strength. You may be able to copy its description straight from the GM's story sheet.

Describe the strength's special effects: what it requires, and how it appears in action.

Choose a form (the forms are **covertly**, **directly**, **for myself**, **for others**, **with love**, and **with violence**). To use the strength, your character has to act accordingly. Choose an NPC form too (the NPC forms are **action**, **maneuvering**, and **self-protection**).

Significance is the measure of the strength's power in the story. All new strengths have significance 1.

Significance 1 means, choose one of these options (you'll find them as checkboxes on your strength sheet):

- ♦ **It's potent.** Its die is a d10. If you don't choose this option, its die is a d8.
- ♦ **It's broad.** Add a second form: if your character acts in either way, she can use the strength. Don't add a second NPC form.
- ♦ **It's consequential.** List a form of your choice, and an NPC form of your choice. When your character uses the strength, she's threatening her enemy in that form, above and beyond.
- ♦ **It's unique.** If the strength is written on one character's sheet, it can't be written on any other.
- ♦ **It's far-reaching.** Your character can use the strength to act beyond her normal human reach.

In the abstract, particular strengths are, yes, pretty abstract. Look at my examples, but the best way to see how they work is to create a few of your own.

Here's an example of a particular strength:

Exorcism, the holy ceremonies that expel demons and protect people and places from them

It requires you to call upon certain warrior gods and recite their holy names and deeds. It's not dramatic; no flashy effects.

It has to be used **for others**. For NPCs, it's good for **self-protection**.

Significance 1: it's **far-reaching**. You can use it to do battle with demons and other unseen, obscure, spiritual enemies.

Its die is a d8.

Here's another example:

The power to inflame passions, such as a wandering spirit might possess.

Whisper in someone's ear and fan their passions into flame.

It has to be used **covertly**. For NPCs, it's good in **action**.

Significance 1: it's **consequential**. It threatens **for others**; for NPCs it threatens **self-protection**.

Its die is a d8.



Wait here until everyone's made all their character sheets and particular strength sheets (for those who do). If you're finished early and waiting, maybe it's time to pour the wine?



Naming your characters' best interests

GM, you start. Start with one of your strongest NPCs, and name two best interests for her. Each should represent a direct attack on at least one player's character.

From there, you and all the players take turns, until every player's character has at least two best interests named and every NPC has at least one (and many have two). Just jump around the circle, with you as GM taking a turn whenever you like.

For players

In order to make your character a recurring protagonist of the story, you have to have her go into conflict against other characters where they are strong. You have to challenge her.

Accordingly, when you're naming her best interests, look at the other characters and guess where they're going to be strong. Cast your character's best interests against them there.

You can cast your character's best interests against your fellow players' characters, or against the GM's characters, freely, without any distinction between the two.

Your character needs two best interests. You don't have to name them at the same time, but you do have to name two before you can play. You can name three if you must, but two is best.

Your character's best interests don't even have to be mutually compatible. Since their value is in the conflicts they create for her, you don't have to worry about whether they're even achievable, let alone achievable together.

On the other hand, there aren't any rules that will tell you that something cool *isn't* achievable. "It's in the beautiful girl's best interests to become pregnant by the harvest god," for instance, or "it's in the exorcist's best interest to bind and command, not exorcise, the wandering spirit" – can a harvest god's stone effigy make girls pregnant? Can an exorcist bind and command spirits? In this wicked age, no one can say that they can't.

For GMs

Your characters can't ever become recurring protagonists, so you don't have to cast their best interests against anyone's strengths. You can – and should! – ruthlessly threaten the players' characters, where they're weakest.

It's fine to occasionally cast one of your NPCs against another, but it doesn't do anything for the game. If you find that you're naming NPCs in your NPCs' best interests, STOP. Go back and do over.

Look for hooks and curves. If on paper a player's character and an NPC are allies, think flexibly and find a best interest that threatens or undercuts their alliance. "It's in the horseman's best interests to prevent his niece's marriage." "It's *what*?"

You'll take the lead by naming best interests that are direct threats to the players' characters. If you've led strong, look for the players to react to your attacks, then pass new attacks on to each other.

Jump in with your NPCs' best interests opportunistically, whenever you can add threats, complications, or the potential for violence, or whenever two players' characters are starting to look too cozy together. If you look for the angles, the leverage you can use to wedge them apart, you'll find it.



Going into this, you won't have much or any backstory. That's fine; don't plan or speculate. Instead, watch the backstory emerge. Let the characters' best interests show you what's been going on between them up to now. Why are the horsemen hiding the beautiful girl, for instance? And this includes also any events specified by the oracle. The marriage of the beautiful girl to the stone effigy: has it already happened, or is it still to be seen? We won't know until someone names a best interest that answers it.

If someone names a best interest for her character and you can't see it immediately, you may, if you need to, ask why. Why is *that* in her best interests? Don't make this a challenge, though; if she answers you it's to help you understand, not because she must or because she has to win your assent to what she's said. If she shrugs and says, "we'll find out I guess," you have to content yourself with that. No discussing, no contradicting, no second-guessing.

At the end, you should have a situation not easily untangled and about to turn really bad. Some of the characters will be able to achieve their interests, conceivably, but only by fighting and meaning it, and only by taking other characters' best interests away. Dedicated rivals, aggressive enemies, and alliances fragile at best.

It's time to start the game.

Here are our example characters, ready to go.

I'll list them in the order that we named them, so you can see how best interests develop. They're nice and tangled:

Shahu Seen, the wandering spirit, inflamer of passions, an NPC: it's in its best interests for the beautiful girl to be no virgin for her marriage to the harvest god, and to murder or arrange the murder of the exorcist.

Tajie, the region's most beautiful girl, hidden amongst the desert horsemen, a player's character: it's in her best interests to become pregnant by the harvest god (and not by any other!). It's also in her best interests to stay hidden, especially from the boy who loves her, until she reaches the shrine and is married. (Aha, there's our answer.)

Mekha, the young man in love with Tajie, a player's character: it's in his best interests to prevent Tajie's marriage to the god, and to marry her himself.

Fa Il Shar, the priest of the harvest god's cult, an NPC: it's in his best interests to marry Tajie to the god's effigy, and to make a fool of the exorcist.

Bolu Ta, the exorcist, severe but lustful, a player's character: it's in his best interests to cast down the harvest god's cult and put his own gods' cult in its place, and to bind and command, not exorcise, Shahu Seen. ("And sleep with Tajie, of course," his player says. "To accomplish the first or as a result of the second, it doesn't matter to me!")

Amek, the chieftain of the desert horsemen, a player's character: it's in his best interests to deliver Tajie safely to her marriage to the harvest god, and to seduce and take Mekha as a lover. ("Really?" says Mekha's player, and "really," says Amek's.)

Esan, Amek's right-hand-man and Tajie's uncle, an NPC: it's in his best interests to see Tajie married to a man, not to a dead stone.





A chapter

In this wicked age, a company of desert horsemen cross their barren domain and come down to the city on the flood plain. They have with them, hidden amongst them, dressed scandalously in trousers and man's coat, a beautiful girl, virgin and unblemished, pledged fiancé to the dead stone effigy of their cult's harvest god. But as they go, another traveler meets them, a stern man in the severe plain robe of an exorcist...



Bringing life to this wicked age

Characters: presence, voice, discovery & revelation.

Scenes: who's where with whom, when, and what's up?

Details: say the obvious, and a detail; use your senses.

Conflict: rush toward it, circle it, draw it out.

Dice: action and interference.

Playing your character

Play is all about the characters. I talk for my characters, you talk for yours. Say what your character says and does; sometimes make little monologues about your character and sometimes converse in your character's voice.

The first time your character appears, describe her. It's an important moment, and you should take some care, and you should play with the details.

Going forward, anybody can ask anybody for descriptions, details and explanations, and anybody can suggest anything. Usually you have final say what suggestions you accept about your own character, the GM has final say about everything else, but you might find exceptions – times when the GM has final say over some element of your character's backstory, for instance, or times when you and a fellow player have to agree about something in order for it to be so.

Playing a character is a fun and funny business. It has two parts, quite entangled: *discovering* your character, and then *revealing* her. She'll start out kind of abstract, a half-person made of modes of action (her forms) and impulses (her best interests). It's in action and in interaction that the two multiply into a personality, into a person with history and psychology and positions relative to the others and to the events that happen. Your game is to bring her out and bring her into focus.

If you've roleplayed before, you know what I'm talking about. If you haven't, don't worry, you'll see it quickly. For now, just be ready to describe your character, and to say what your character says and does.



Playing with scenes

GM, it'll mostly fall to you to open and organize scenes. Here are some rules, and some tricks you can play to keep it lively.

Start the chapter by zooming in. In this wicked age, a desert place, a city on the flood plain; then: at this certain place where there's a stone waymarker half-buried in the sand, but you can see water shimmering in the air to the east where the city is.

Also, start the chapter with at least one player's character, always, and start with a meeting. Choose characters with something to say to one another – characters with a chain or knot of best interests between them.

Once the chapter's underway, feel free to make concurrent scenes, and maintain them parallel. "While they're arguing in the camp, Mekha, where are you?"

Ah yes: "where are you? What are you doing? Who's with you?" These are toys you can play with. So are "you are creeping toward their tents, with money to bribe the sentry." Mix them up: opening scenes is always an interplay. If you're asking, be ready to prompt, make suggestions and fill in details. If you're telling, you can freely say what a player's character is doing, as GM, especially while you're setting a scene. But even so, always be willing and ready to defer. "No – I don't have any money at all," the player might say, "let alone money to waste on bribes. I have a sap, I intend to hit the sentry in the back of the head." "Oh! So be it." Or even, "no way, sneak in? I'm going to wait until they make camp, then come out with some friends looking for novelty and news, instead."

However you start, once you've established who is there with whom, and where, and what's up, turn it over to the players. "What do you do?"

Then just choose a likely moment and switch back to the first scene, or open a third. (There's a likely moment built right into dice play, which I'll be sure to point out when it comes.) Find a rhythm, then vary it. Play!

Playing with details

Whenever you describe something – describe your character or her actions as a player, describe a scene or the weather or a building or a mob as GM – whenever, say exactly what makes sense to you, and then say at least one concrete detail. Don't stretch for it, it doesn't have to be startling or the coolest thing ever said, it just has to be some clear detail such as an observer might notice.

Use your senses, including senses beyond the five, like your moral sense, your sense of humor, your sense of direction. Give your observer a voice. Remember "dressed scandalously in trousers and man's coat"? It's a scandal because my observer has a moral sense. I might instead have said that even though she's smaller than the horsemen, the dust and their shrouding scarves make them look all the same, giving my observer sight. Or maybe I'd've said that she's hidden but sometimes in their banter you can pick out a lighter-toned voice.

When you say details like this, you make the world of your game's fiction more intimate, more alive, and more concrete, all three.

Playing with conflict

Like a movie with only action sequences, it's a poor game – a one-tone game – that drives relentlessly from one conflict to the next.

To rush up to a conflict:

Choose two characters who want to do harm to one another. Arrange circumstances so that one of the characters has a sudden, momentary, immediate advantage – act now and seize it, or hesitate and lose; and furthermore that if she should leave her enemy capable, the advantage will dramatically reverse.

For instance, take Bolu Ta and Shahu Seen, the exorcist and the spirit of passion, both of whom intend harm to the other. Suppose that Bolu Ta has not yet encountered the spirit, and in fact is only dimly aware of some strange influence about (although of course Bolu Ta's player has seen Shahu Seen in action several times). Here's Bolu Ta arguing with Fa Il Shar, the priest he means to overthrow. "But a strange light comes into his face," you might say, as GM, "and in the middle of your learned disputation he cracks his stick down on your head." It's Shahu Seen, of course, but if Fa Il Shar fails to murder Bolu Ta, Bolu Ta will no doubt answer the spirit back.

To circle a conflict:

Choose two characters who want to do harm to one another. Arrange circumstances so that they have to interact, but so that neither of them have any upper hand, and in fact so that if one should attack the other, she will do so at a significant disadvantage.

For instance, take Tajie and Mekha, the harvest god's chosen bride and the young man in love with her. He's seeking her among the desert horsemen – let's say that they've drawn an encampment on the borders of the flood plain, and are taking their leisure, eating and drinking and performing music. Mekha is one of a dozen people come from the town, the rest for the novelty, but he with his plan. Tajie sees him, but he can't see her for her disguise. So he moves among the horsemen, peering and testing, and she can't flee or confront him, nor take any leisure herself..

To draw a conflict out:

Choose two characters who want to do no harm to one another at all, but whose interests don't mesh well or overlap. Arrange circumstances so that one has the opportunity to pursue her interests, but only by threatening the interests of the other. Also arrange it so that the other will see her do it, or have evidence that she's done it, or have some reason to blame her for doing it – so that the offense is unignorable.

For instance, take Amek and Esan, the chieftain of the desert horsemen and his right hand man. Amek trusts Esan with Tajie's well-being, naturally, Esan being her uncle and his good lieutenant as well. However, here he is, walking a last circuit around the encampment before night, and what should he hear? Voices in Tajie's tent, hers and some man's, some town-born stripling's, and Esan's post outside her tent vacant.

Playing with dice

When do you roll dice?

Roll dice when one character undertakes to do some concrete thing, and another character can and would try to interfere. Every player with a character involved, including you as GM, rolls dice for their own character. If you have more than one NPC involved, roll separate dice for each.

Don't roll dice when two characters are having a conversation, no matter how heated it becomes; wait until one or the other *acts*.

Don't roll dice when a character undertakes to do some concrete thing and no other character can or would try to interfere.



Here are some examples:

Amek and Tajie are in some private circumstance, taking a meal maybe, and Shahu Seen whispers in Amek's ear, pointing out the curve of Tajie's lip and the way the light falls on her throat, inciting Amek's passion. You as GM roll dice for Shahu Seen, and Amek's and Tajie's players roll dice for their characters.

Bolu Ta confronts Fa Il Shar and argues with him that his harvest god is just a stone, and his religion is just foolish superstition. Nobody rolls any dice.

Bolu Ta and Fa Il Shar are arguing, and finally Fa Il Shar tires of the argument and hits Bolu Ta with his stick. Bolu Ta's player rolls dice for him, and you as GM roll dice for Fa Il Shar.

Mekha comes into the horse company's encampment with his friends, peering from face to face to find Tajie. His player rolls dice for him, Tajie's and Amek's players roll dice for them, and you as GM roll dice for Esan, Tajie's uncle and Amek's lieutenant.

Mekha finds Tajie in her tent and confesses his love to her. Shahu Seen whispers in their ears. Tajie's player considers the situation and decides that Tajie doesn't resist, but gives in to Shahu Seen's whispers and Mekha's passion. Nobody rolls any dice.

Shahu Seen has overcome Tajie and Mekha together, and Amek bursts in. Mistaking Tajie's cries for distress, and himself coming under Shahu Seen's sway, he drags Mekha away by the hair and chops into him with his sword. Amek's and Mekha's players roll dice for their characters (and Tajie's player can roll dice for Tajie too, if she chooses to).

Bolu Ta corners Shahu Seen, calls the spirit by name and invokes the warrior gods of his cult, and commands Shahu Seen to be bound and to do his bidding. Bolu Ta's player rolls dice for Bolu Ta, and you as GM roll dice for Shahu Seen.

And at last let's say that Tajie wins through and comes to be before the harvest god's effigy with Fa Il Shar. Fa Il Shar performs the ritual wedding and pronounces them married, then withdraws to give them their privacy. Mekha is lying in the sand, wounded, far away; Shahu Seen is grappling with Bolu Ta in some other place; only Amek is there, and he stands guard. Nobody rolls any dice.



Dice, action & consequences

One on one

One on one is the simplest way, so let's start there.

One character has taken some concrete action, right? Here's a good one: Amek drags Mekha by the hair and chops into him with his sword. And furthermore the other – Mekha – can and would interfere. Let's say for now that Amek's your character, and Mekha is mine.

Look at your character sheet and I'll look at mine. Choose two forms, always two, that match what your character's doing and why. If three or more apply, that's okay, choose whichever two of them you like.

Amek's clearly, clearly acting **with violence**. Which do you prefer for his second, **directly** or **for others**? You won't always want the higher, but for now the higher's good. So you take up a d12 for **with violence** and a d10 for **directly**.

I have to choose how Mekha's going to respond. If he were an NPC I'd obviously choose **self-protection**, but he's a player's character, so I'll choose **directly** and **for myself**. Let's say that he has **directly** d8 and **for myself** d10. I take those up.

The first round:

You roll your d12 and your d10. I roll my d10 and my d8.

Read your higher die first. You roll a 5 on your d12 and a 6 on your d10, so you've got a 6. I roll a 9 on my d10 and a 6 on my d8, so I've got a 9. Mine's higher, so it's my move.

My move:

I leave my dice on the table undisturbed – my 9 and 6 stand. You pick your dice up into your hand – your 5 and 6 don't stand.

I say what Mekha does. Since I've rolled **direct** and **for myself**, it has to be direct and for himself. It can't be violent, or I'd have rolled **with violence** instead.

"Mekha tears away, leaving Amek with a handful of hair, and dives out of the tent."

Because it's my move first, I get to choose how much of Amek's action – grabbing and chopping – Amek has already carried out. I can't deny or preempt his action, but I can interrupt it. Naturally I skipped back to some time before the actual chopping occurred.

Your answer:

You roll your dice again. Now's when we find out whether my move carries, or how much of it you get to block:

If your higher die *doubles* mine (impossible in this case: you can't double a 9 on a d12), then Amek wins absolutely, the fight ends, and you get to set terms.

If your dice *match mine or better*, but not by double, then Amek takes the advantage, the fight continues, and you roll an extra die.

If your dice *don't match mine*, but are better than half, then Mekha takes the advantage, the fight continues, and I roll an extra die.

If your higher die is *half mine or less*, then Mekha wins absolutely, the fight ends, and I get to set terms.

You roll a 9 on your d10 and a 2 on your d12.

Compare them to my standing 9 and 6, and your dice don't match mine. (The lower die breaks ties; my 9-and-6 beats your 9-and-2.) In your answer, you have to say what happens and what Amek does, that prevents Mekha from carrying out his action, but leaves Amek at the disadvantage.

"Mekha's diving for the tent's door, and Amek like body-checks him. They both go down, and Mekha lands a solid heel in Amek's face."

The second round:

We both pick up our dice now. I add to my dice a d6 with pips, the advantage die. Advantage dice are always d6 with pips.

Now, before we roll our dice, we have an opportunity to negotiate. Is there something we'd both prefer to rolling forward? I'll say more about negotiating in a minute, but for now let's just note that we could negotiate but we choose not to.

Also before we roll our dice, we add Mekha's name to the owe list. I'll explain that in a minute too.

And now we roll! You roll poorly: a 3 and a 3. I roll a 9 on my d10, a 1 on my d8, and one pip on the advantage die.

Whenever someone rolls an advantage die, it adds to their high die. My one pip goes with my 9 to make 10 (I'll write it $9+1=10$). My move again.

My move:

I leave my dice alone; my $9+1=10$ and my 1 stand. You pick your dice up.

I'm feeling good about my roll. It's not unbeatable, but it's quite high.

"Mekha plants a second solid kick, twists away, and runs," I say.

Your answer:

You roll your dice again. You roll a 9 and a 7, which makes me crow. Close but no banana, we said when we were kids.

I still haven't won, though, as I still haven't doubled you. I just keep the advantage.

"Argh," you say. "Amek tears out after him, shouting for his men."

The third round:

We pick up our dice. I keep the advantage die, because I managed to hold onto it with my roll.

Do we negotiate? Again, we could, but let's not.

Does Mekha go on the owe list again? No, only after the first round.

So we roll again. You roll a 10 and a 3. I roll a $7+3=10$ and a 1. Your move!

Your move:

You leave your 10 and your 3 standing. I pick all three of my dice back up into my hand.

"Out on the ground Amek just runs Mekha down." You pantomime chopping someone in the back with a sword, two-handed.

My answer:

The third round is different from the first two. The middle drops out of the outcomes. Now, If I match or beat your roll, Mekha and I win absolutely; if my roll falls short, you and Amek win absolutely. No series of rolls goes past the third round.

I roll my dice, including the advantage die. I roll ... crap. A $2+5=7$ and a 1.

So my answer has to admit your character's action, more or less in full. "You hack me and I fall in the sand."

Consequences:

The winner exhausts the loser. Mekha's worn out, and I knock a die size off of his **directly** and his **with violence**, both...

Or else, the winner injures the loser. Mekha's wounded, and I knock a die size off his **covertly** and his **for others**, both...

Or else, we negotiate and agree to some other consequence we both prefer.



I promised you a likely moment to cut from one scene to the next. It's between rounds of rolling.

GM, just make eye contact with the players as they're picking up their dice to reroll into the next round. "Hold those dice, don't roll them yet." Then turn to the next player: "Bolu Ta, while this is going on, where are you?"

Cut back when it seems good.

Before I tell about negotiating, let's do that fight over. Same characters, same setup, same opening, same dice.

The first round:

You roll a 10 and a 3. I roll a 7 and a 2. Your move.

Your move:

Your 10 and 3 stand; I pick up my dice.

"Amek lifts Mekha off the ground by his hair and chops him open."

My answer:

I reroll my dice. I roll a 5 and a 4.

Your 10 *doubles* my 5. You and Amek win absolutely, and the fight ends.

Mekha doesn't go on the owe list.

Consequences:

Same deal: exhaust, injure, or negotiate.



And one more time, the same fight:

The first round:

You roll a 6 and a 2. I roll a 6 and a 2 – hey, it happens.

We have a choice. We can back away from the fight, both of us, mutually. No further rolling, and our characters each go their way. If either of us chooses to fight, though (and let's say that we do), we each reroll our lower die. So now your roll's an 8 and a 6, and mine's a 7 and a 6. Your move.

Your move:

Your 8 and 6 stand. I pick up my dice.

"Amek lifts Mekha off the ground by his hair and chops him open."

My answer:

I reroll, for a 9 and a 7. My roll beats yours but doesn't double it; in my answer, I should have Mekha seize the advantage.

"Mekha kicks out and knocks over the tent's central pole. The whole thing comes down and Mekha twists away."

The second round:

We take up our dice. I take the advantage die.

We could negotiate, but let's not. Also, Mekha's name goes on the owe list.

We roll. You roll a 7 and a 7; I roll a 5+3=8 and a 1. My move.

My move:

My 5+3=8 and 1 stand. You pick up your dice.

"By the time Amek gets untangled from the tent, Mekha's gone," I say.

Your answer:

You reroll, for a 12 and a 10 (dang). Since your roll matches mine or better, you and Amek seize the advantage from me and Mekha.

“Oh no you don’t,” you say. “You bring down one of our tents? We’re all over you. By the time Amek gets untangled, one of my men has your arms pinned behind you and he’s blacked your eye.”

The third round:

We take up our dice. I pass you the advantage die.

We could negotiate – and in fact I want to, pretty bad. What can I offer you? Nothing? Are you certain? Damn.

We roll. You roll an $8+6=14$ and a 7. I roll a 4 and a 4 – your move.

Your move:

Your $8+6=14$ stands. I pick up my dice.

“Kill him,” Amek says.”

My answer:

It doesn’t matter what I roll. Because this is the third round, it’s final; if I don’t beat your roll, you and Amek win absolutely. Unfortunately, you’ve got that $8+6=14$ showing, so I need a 14 just to match you, and the best number I can roll is a 10.

Consequences:

As always, exhaust, injure or negotiate.



If you’ve played many other roleplaying games, you probably recognized how this works: we roll for initiative, and the high initiative roll stands as that person’s attack roll. The other person rolls for defense. Instead of giving each other wound levels or taking away hit points, we seize and relinquish the advantage die, until one of us finally wins – either by doubling, or just by taking the advantage in the third and final round. The point of this is to make the rules work for any conflict between characters, not just for physical fights.



Notice that the worst that can really happen here is that someone gets injured. No matter how hard Amek chops Mekha, he can’t out-and-out kill him.

This doesn’t mean that you shouldn’t make potentially-lethal moves. “I slit your throat!” “My war-elephant tramples you into crushed bones and gore!” “I chop your head clean off your shoulders!” In fact, those kinds of moves put you in a very strong bargaining position (as you’ll see).

When you make a lethal move, just be prepared to scale back at consequence time.

Negotiating Consequences

Emily Care Boss calls it “negotiating with a stick.” Here’s how it works.

By default, the winner exhausts or injures the loser. It’s the winner’s choice which.

Or else and instead, the winner and loser can agree to some other outcome, if there’s one that they both prefer.

- ♦ It can include reducing the loser’s forms. “How about I lose a die size from my **for myself** and my **with violence** instead? That makes more sense to me.”
- ♦ It can include other changes to the loser’s character sheet. “How about you lose your ‘exorcism’ particular strength? That’ll teach you.”
- ♦ It can include wholly in-fiction circumstances. “How about you capture me and chain me in your cellar?”
- ♦ It can include death, even if the forms’ dice don’t say so. “How about I kill you dead, yeah?”
- ♦ It can include a mix. “How about you knock a die size off my **for myself**, plus manage to get past me?”

But at any moment, either of you, winner or loser, can end negotiation and insist upon the default instead. “Forget it. You exhaust or injure me. Which?”

Negotiating as the winner

A lot of the time, you’ll go into rolling dice against someone with an outcome already in mind. Sometimes it’ll be to exhaust or injure them, but often it’ll be something wholly unrelated: to get past them, to capture them and chain them in a cellar, to take the stone from the box, to reach the wall with the water – it could be anything.

Propose it! This is how you get it.

If, on the other hand, what you want is precisely to exhaust or injure them, they’ll still probably propose alternatives they like better. Listen with an open ear, but there’s no earthly reason for you to compromise if they can’t come up with something you like. Give them a fair chance, but when it comes down to it, they can suck it up.

Exhausted & Injured

Exhausted: lose a die size from both **directly** and **with violence**.

Injured: lose a die size from both **covertly** and **for others**.

When you lose a die size from a d4, that die goes to 0. You don’t roll a die for that form from now on.

If two of your dice go to 0, your character’s out of the rest of the chapter. Killed, disabled, or otherwise, but out.

For NPCs, **exhausted:** lose a die size each from both **action** dice. **Injured:** lose a die size each from both **maneuvering** dice.

For NPCs too, if any two dice go to 0, the character’s out.

Negotiating as the loser

Getting exhausted or injured sucks, but even though you’ve lost you can still avoid it. All you have to do is volunteer for consequences that the winner likes better.

Think hard.

But don’t get burned. There is absolutely no reason for you to accept any consequences worse than being exhausted or injured, by your very own, very personal definition of “worse.” If I’m proposing consequences beyond what you can accept, tell me to forget it. Lose the dice instead.

(GM, when you lose, remember that sometimes having your NPC get killed outright is way better than having her get injured. Be open to the suggestion or even suggest it yourself.)

Don't negotiate for...

♦ Future actions. "How about I don't oppose you when you attack us later?" Nah. Sometimes this is okay, but more often it turns bad and awkward.

Promises are fine, though, if extracting a promise is really worth it to the winner. "How about I *promise* not to oppose you when you attack us later?"

♦ Direct consequences on anybody else. "How about instead you injure Bolu Ta?" "Okay!" Or "how about instead the townspeople all get some plague?" "Sure!" Bogus.

♦ Improvements to the winner's character sheet. "How about instead of injuring you I get to bump all my forms up to d12?" "Yeah, that's good with me." No, sorry.

Negotiating mid-dice

Normally when I win a roll but not by double, and not in the third round, we keep rolling and I get an advantage die. We can, if we like, negotiate an end then instead.

The rules for negotiating these consequences are exactly the same. The only difference is the stick. By default, we roll forward and I get an advantage die; this is a smaller stick than my exhausting or injuring you. Negotiate accordingly.

The Owe List

You get to add your character's name to the owe list when your character goes up against someone stronger, but doesn't lose to them outright. Here's how it works:

- ♦ If you're rolling smaller dice than your opponent; and
- ♦ If it's the end of the first round (not subsequent rounds); and
- ♦ If you're still in the fight; then
- ♦ Add your character's name to the end of the owe list.

There's an important exception: GM, your NPCs' names never go on the owe list. It doesn't matter whether you roll against bigger dice or what. The owe list is for the players' characters exclusively.

Smaller dice means, for instance, that I'm rolling a d10 and a d6 but you're rolling a d8 and a d6, or a d10 and a d4, or two d6, or whatever. Compare the bigger dice first and use the smaller dice only to break ties: if I'm rolling a d12 and a d4 and you're rolling a d10 and a d8, you're rolling smaller dice, even though your dice total to more sides.

You'll use the owe list to set up future chapters, as I'll explain fully soon. For now, the significant thing to understand is that if your character's name is on the owe list, your character's guaranteed to be in a future chapter (and the more times it's there, the more future chapters). If your character's name isn't on the owe list, there's no such guarantee. This could be the last or only time you get to play this character.

There's an immediate advantage to having your character's name on the owe list, too: you can scratch it off in return for an advantage die. You're trading your character's future for better odds right now. Here's how: whenever you're rolling dice, if you want to, erase one occurrence of your character's name from the owe list. Take an advantage die, a d6 with pips. Keep it through this whole series of rolls, through the third round or until somebody doubles somebody. Roll it with your dice and add it to your high die same as you would with any advantage die.

Advantage dice stack, so if you win another one, add them both. You're psyched.

Finally, in future chapters you may well have more than one character of yours listed on the owe list. You can scratch off any of your characters' names for an advantage die now; it doesn't have to be this character.

Particular Strengths in Action

When your character has a particular strength, you can use it to your advantage when you roll dice. All you have to do is have your character use it in some action according to its required form.

For example, Bolu Ta, our traveling exorcist, has exorcism as a particular strength. Suppose that he's practicing this art on the spirit Shahu Seen; suppose further that he's acting for others, along with any second form as usual. His player takes up exorcism's die, a d8, in addition to the dice for his forms. She rolls them all together and then play proceeds as always, reading the high die first, with the high dice standing for a challenge and so on. The only caveat is that Bolu Ta's player should actually have him use his art in her challenge or answer, since she got the die for it.

A particular strength can also give you other benefits, depending on what you chose for it:

- Potent** Its die is a d10 instead of a d8. If it's doubly potent, it's a d12, and I'll tell you how to get a doubly potent particular strength in the next chapter.
If exorcism were potent, Bolu Ta's player would roll a d10 instead of a d8.
- Broad** You aren't required to use it with one single named form, but instead with either of two named forms.
If exorcism were broad, it'd list another form in addition to for others – for myself, let's say. Then Bolu Ta's player could use it when Bolu Ta's acting for others or when he's acting directly (or both, of course).
- Consequential** If you use it and win, the outcome for the loser is more severe than usual. In addition to exhausting or injuring me, or whatever we negotiate between us – in addition to that, I lose a die size from the listed form.
If exorcism were consequential, it'd list a form – directly, let's say. Then if Bolu Ta's player won with it, after exhausting or injuring the loser or whatever they agree to instead, the loser would additionally lose a die size from directly.
- Unique** There's no extra effect on your dice, but only one character can have it at a time.
If exorcism were unique, Bolu Ta would be the only exorcist in the world. He would have to somehow lose exorcism before anyone else could take it up.
- Far-reaching** There's also no extra effect on your dice, but it does allow you to act and to interfere with others' actions, and thus roll dice and inflict and suffer consequences, where normally you could not.
Exorcism is far-reaching. If it were not, Bolu Ta wouldn't be able to contend with spirits on their own terms. Shahu Seen could, for instance, possess a person, and Bolu Ta would have no ability to interfere or intrude.

Exorcism, as you'll recall:

Exorcism, the holy ceremonies that expel demons and protect people and places from them

It requires you to call upon certain warrior gods and recite their holy names and deeds. It's not dramatic; no flashy effects.

It has to be used for others.

For NPCs, it's good for self-protection.

Significance 1: it's far-reaching.

You can use it to do battle with demons and other unseen, obscure, spiritual enemies.

Its die is a d8.

Two-on-one & beyond

How about this one? Mekha comes into the horse company's encampment with his friends, peering from face to face to find Tajie. His player (Martha) rolls dice for him, Tajie's and Amek's players (Tom and Amy) roll dice for them, and the GM (Erin) rolls dice for Esan, Tajie's uncle and Amek's lieutenant. Recall that Tajie's disguised as a man to prevent Mekha's finding her, and that while Amek doesn't want him to find her, Esan does. Let's play it out.

The first round:

Mekha is acting **with love** and **covertly**, so Martha rolls a d12 and a d6, for a 6 & 1. Tajie is acting **for herself** and **covertly**, so Tom rolls a d12 and a d8, for a 7 & 7. Amek is acting **directly** and **for others** (for Tajie), so Amy rolls a d10 and a d6, for a 10 & 1. And Esan is **maneuvering**, so Erin rolls a d10 and a d6, for a 10 & 4.

Erin's got the high roll, so it's Esan up first, and her 10 & 4 stand.

Everybody else commits their order to mind, by descending roll - Amy's 10 & 1 beats Tom's 7 & 7 beats Martha's 6 & 1, so it'll go Amy for Amek, Tom for Tajie, then Martha for Mekha. They pick their dice back up into their hands; their rolls don't stand.

Erin's move:

"Esan catches Mekha's eye and then looks significantly over at Tajie, to direct Mekha to her," she says. "Amy, Tom, you both answer." She names Amy and Tom because Amek and Tajie will oppose Esan's action and Mekha won't.

Amy's answer:

The order for the round goes Amy, Tom, Martha, so it's Amy's answer first.

Amy rolls her dice again, for a 2 & 4, a terrible roll, amply doubled by Erin's standing 10.

"Crap," says Amy. "I'm out. I must be seriously distracted somewhere else."

Erin and Amy negotiate consequences right now. Erin has the stick.

"You're injured," she says, going straight to the default. "How about you're breaking up a fight

elsewhere in the camp and in the middle of it someone cracks you one in the face?"

"The hazards of the job," Amy says. She knocks a die size off her **covertly** and her **for others**, scowling.

Now Amy won't get a move, because she had to answer before her turn (and besides that she's out of the action).

Tom's answer:

Tom's up next, for Tajie, answering Esan's move. He rerolls his dice for a 9 & 6, not matching Erin's 10 & 4. In his answer he doesn't have to cede success to Amek, but he does have to give him the advantage.

"I'm playing a game of skill with stones and sticks with my brothers. There's lots of moving around, so you indicate the group, but Mekha can't pick me out of it."

Erin grabs a d6 with pips for her advantage die.

She also picks up her dice. She's had her move and everyone's answered who's going to. If someone challenges her, she'll reroll her dice to answer.

Now Tom won't get a move either, because he had to answer before his turn.

Martha's move:

Since it came to Martha's turn without her having to answer anyone, she gets to make a move. She rerolls her dice for a 3 & 6.

"I join in the game," she says. "I play pretty badly, knocking the stones around so that everybody else has to move awkwardly. I figure that way I can pick a woman out of the group, she'll be the most graceful."

Strictly, Martha should add that Tom is to answer, not Erin, but it's obvious so she doesn't bother to say it out loud. She can't require Amy to answer, because Amek's out.

Tom's answer:

As long as you're still in, you get to reroll your dice and answer anyone who challenges you.

Tom rerolls for a 10 and a 4, beating Martha's 3 & 6 but not by double. He gets to take the advantage.

"You play badly? Jerk. We point and laugh and ridicule you, you don't find out a thing."

He takes a d6 with pips for his advantage die.

The end of the first round:

Who goes on the owe list, if anyone? Mekha and Tajie both might: Amek can't because he's out of the action before the end of round 1, and Esan can't because he's an NPC. Did Martha or Tom roll against bigger dice? Martha did, her d12 and d6 against Tom's d12 and d8. Tom didn't, as his d12 and d8 are the biggest dice on the table. So Martha adds Mekha's name to the bottom of the owe list.

Do they negotiate consequences now instead of rolling forward? They could, but let's say that they don't.

Also, finally, notice that both Tom for Tajie and Erin for Esan won and get to roll advantage dice. That's fine.

The second round:

Martha rolls an 11 & 5. Tom rolls a 9+1=10 & 8. Erin rolls a 5+4=9 & 1. Martha's up first, and her 11 & 5 stand. Then Tom, then Erin, and they both pick up their dice.

Martha's move:

"My move! Great. I retreat, a little wounded by your teasing, but I watch, and I catch some of your 'brothers' deferring to you."

Tom's answer:

Tom rerolls for an 11+4=15 and a 7, beating Martha's 11 & 5 and so taking the advantage.

"Amek would kill them dead if they gave me away. We are spectacularly equal."

He keeps his advantage die.

Tom doesn't get a move, because he had to answer before his turn.

Erin's move:

Erin rerolls for a 9+5=14 & 6.

"Oh, but when I go into the circle? I defer. I surely do."

Tom's answer:

Tom rerolls for a 7+6=13 & 1, not matching Erin's 9+5=14 & 6. He has to give Esan the advantage.

"I act confused by your deference, but yeah, it's enough to cast suspicion."

Erin keeps her advantage die too.

The end of the second round:

The owe list isn't a consideration except at the end of the first round.

Who wants to negotiate consequences now instead of rolling forward? Well, Erin and Martha are double-teaming Tom, but Tom's rolling the best dice. It's not clearly to anyone's advantage to give over now, so let's roll forward.

The third round:

Martha rolls a 12 & 3. Tom rolls a 7+5=12 & 4. Erin rolls a 9+2=11 & 5. Tom's up first and his 7+5=12 & 4 stand. Then Martha, then Erin, and they both pick up their dice.

Tom's move:

"Now the noises of the fight reach us. While you're both distracted, I slip away and go back to my tent. Both of you answer."

Martha's answer:

Martha looks at Tom's standing 7+5=12, and she looks at Mekha's name on the owe list. "I'm going to cash my future in," she says. She erases Mekha's name and takes a d6 with pips in exchange.

Martha rerolls, including her new-bought advantage die, for a 4+2=6 & 2. Tom's roll doubles hers. "I – crap. What a waste. Okay, you get away."

They negotiate now.

"You want to just exhaust yourself looking for me? Eating, drinking, playing games, hearing music, getting in fights all night?"

"Sounds just right," Martha says. She knocks a die size off her directly and her with violence. She's out.

Erin's answer:

Erin rerolls for a 9+1=10 & 3. Not doubled, but since this is the third round it's an absolute loss anyway.

"How about I'm not exhausted or injured but someone tells Amek about my misstep?" she says.

"That, plus you lose one die size from maneuvering?"

"Sure thing. Perfect."

And that's it.

Dice, action & consequences summary

- ♦ To begin the round, everybody rolls dice for their forms, according to their characters' actions, and including dice for particular strengths as appropriate.
- ♦ Everybody gets a turn, in order from high roll to low.
- ♦ The high roll stands; everybody else picks up their dice.
- ♦ On your turn, reroll your dice, unless your turn is first and thus your dice stand.
- ♦ On your turn, make a challenge. Say who has to answer it.
- ♦ Everybody who has to answer, gets to answer, in turn order.
- ♦ On your answer, reroll your dice and compare.
- ♦ If you have to answer before your turn, you lose your move. You get a move only if it comes to your turn and no one's challenged you.
- ♦ Once the last person's had her turn, the round ends.
- ♦ After the first round, write names on the owe list.
- ♦ In the third round, all winning and losing is absolute. It never goes past the third round.

The owe list:

After the first round, write names on the owe list. Write your character's name if:

- ♦ You're a player, not the GM, and
 - ♦ You rolled smaller dice against bigger, and
 - ♦ You're still in the action.
- Before any time you roll dice, if you choose, you can buy an advantage die:
- ♦ Scratch one appearance of one of your characters' names off the owe list, and
 - ♦ It can be any of your characters, not just this one, and
 - ♦ Take a d6 with pips and include it in your roll, and
 - ♦ You get to keep it and keep rolling it until the end of this action sequence.

When you compare dice:

- ♦ If your roll's half your challenger's or less, you lose absolutely: you're exhausted or injured, or negotiate other consequences.
- ♦ If your roll's less than your challenger's, but more than half, you lose the advantage: roll forward, and your challenger gets an advantage die (or you can negotiate consequences here, too).
- ♦ If your roll matches or beats your challenger's, but not by double, you win the advantage: you roll forward and you get an advantage die (or you can negotiate consequences here, too).
- ♦ If your roll doubles your challenger's, you win absolutely: you exhaust or injure your challenger, or negotiate other consequences.
- ♦ In the third round, losing the advantage means losing absolutely, and winning the advantage means winning absolutely.

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