MECHANISMS

FOR TABLETOP ROLEPLAYING

SECOND SET

WHAT THIS IS

MECHANISMS IS a set of five simple, adaptable articles on rules pieces you can use in most tabletop roleplaying games. This is the second set of five such mechanisms, presented for your use and reconstruction.

CONTENTS

THIS IS A LIVING DOCUMENT. It might be updated every week for a month at some point; it might sit dormant for a few years.

THERE'S MORE THAN THIS. Searching for Levi Kornelsen (that's me) on DriveThruRPG will yield other game work, much of which is influenced by or connected to this in different ways. If you're interested in keeping up with me as I make things, search for me on Google+; that's my main channel.

BREATH

YOU KNOW THAT THIS IS GOING TO BE UGLY, so you get ready. You drop your backpack, let go of that back-of-the-mind focus you've been maintaining, and focus on what's in front of you. Limbered up, fully concentrated, you're ready to go. Your opponent, heavily armoured, benefits from that gear, but they just won't last as long. Here goes.

A BREATH POOL IS a resource, like "stunt points" or "magic points", but combines the functions of several such pools in an intuitive way. Each character has a set number of breath points. When spent, they can be recovered *very* quickly, but many of the uses involve investing them rather than spending them, which ties them up as long as you gain the benefits.

Be aware that implementing a breath pool can be a significant or trivial task, depending on the system it's being applied to.

EACH CHARACTER gets a pool of breath. As a baseline, assume that each character has ten breath, and then run through this list, making some notes, to get a feel for how this applies – and after, you may want to change the pool size too.

◆ WHAT STUNTS, ACTIONS, OR BONUSES could be fueled by breath? If the game already has stunt points, everything that costs stunt points can now cost breath; easy. If not, what actions could have a more acrobatic or cinematic version that could be improved with effort?

◆ HOW MUCH WEIGHT could a normal person in the setting carry at most? Divide that by ten. Any item weighing more than that requires that you invest one breath to carry it; anything weighing more than twice that requires that you invest two. While you carry that item, you can't access those breath points. This means you naturally get tired faster and can do less stunts while heavily-loaded. You may be able to discard an entire encumbrance system in favour of this simplified tracking, or just use this as your encumbrance.

◆ THE SPECIAL ABILITIES THAT RUN ON BREATH. If a game has magic that can be used an awful lot, simply making it cost breath is easy. If it can't be used often, you can install another state for breath (Like: *available, spent invested in gear, exhausted on magic*), and decide how you recover breath points from that state.

◆ RECOVERY SPEED. Part of the idea here is that basic recovery can be quick – take a turn catching your breath, regain a handful of breath points.

AN EXAMPLE

HERE IS A SIMPLE EXAMPLE of how a breath pool might be installed in a game (the statistics are invented to "feel right"; they don't matter much):

♦ STATES: Breath can be *Available*, *Spent*, or *Invested*.

♦ EQUAL TO ENDURANCE: Each character has breath points equal to their endurance statistic.

♦ RECOVER 1D6+BONUS: When you spend an action catching your breath, you regain 1d6 breath, plus your resilience bonus.

♦ SPEND TO RUN AND TUMBLE: Anytime you run or tumble, you must spend a breath. You can also spend a further point of breath to move a bonus space when you run, or to gain a bonus die on the tumble roll.

♦ INVEST TO REPRESS: Magic items are always active – burning swords never stop burning, hovering stones are fixed in the air, and so on. To switch them off, you must invest breath points on concentration.

♦ SPEND TO CONTROL: Magician's items, such as wands, tomes, and such, can only be used in a focused and controlled manner by first repressing them, and then spending breath (on top of the breath used to repress them) to elicit clear and useful effects.

♦ INVEST TO CARRY: The normal encumbrance system is ignored. Instead, for each ten pounds you want to carry, you must invest one breath in doing so.

♦ OUT OF BREATH: When you are at less than half breath available, you roll one fewer die on all physical actions. When you have none, you can't move past a slow trudge, and roll two fewer dice.

THE EXAMPLE CONFIGURATION emerges in play as three distinct extremes. The light, fast Rogue carries only the minimum in equipment, and can pull off plenty of acrobatics, stunts, and running. The Magus holds and keeps magic items, and uses breath to elicit effects. The Tank wears and carries plenty of heavy gear, and has only a little breath left for stunts or to focus with magical issues.

BY ADDING CHARACTER FEATURES, these three styles could be supported explicitly, rather than implicitly. The warrior class can wear armour and carry an in-hand weapon as if it each were one breath lighter. The rogue rolls two dice for recovery and takes the better die. The magus spends one fewer breath when controlling a magic item they have repressed, which can even make some items free to use.

MISTRUST

XENOPHOBIA and surly communities are staples in some genres, and sometimes deserve mechanical reflection that they don't get – especially in horror and investigation games.

To get started, have all the players fill out all the status details that matter in your game world. This may include religious presentation, ethnicity, gender presentation, apparent social class, apparent wealth, visible magical talent, mutations; whatever it is that people judge others on in the setting (do chat with players if there's anything that they'd rather not see, because they get enough real-life aggravations there).

Now, make some index cards, or use the sheet given on the next page, for places with lots of people (the docks, downtown, etc), describing point-form the "standard person here", in those terms (skip things that don't matter in the area), and hand everyone a die. When you arrive at a place, count out the ways you don't fit the list, set your die to that, and plop it down; that's the mistrust others feel for you there. Some places should be tolerant, some intolerant, some might have critical factors (2-3 mistrust if you lack X). Some might have secret traits that you don't know you don't have (the Guide knows, though)

Finally, for each place, note down or fill in the escalating condition applied to those that don't fit in; the more mistrust, the worse it gets. Violent ejection from the private temple, people feeling threatened in the sanctuary, people shunning the Norm that came to Undertown. You may want to detail this in numbers, so that it's (1) people don't care about the difference (2) people are quieter and won't start conversations (3) people avoid talking to you (4+) you are actively treated as invisible...

OPTIONS FOR CHANGING THE NUMBER, whether for the whole area or just for one individual, are the most obvious thing to add to this mechanism to flesh it out. If a game has rolls that can be used to affect attitudes or crowds, how do those shift the number on the die? If some already-available "NPC attitudes" come in clear levels within the system, can you arrange it so that mistrust numbers correlate directly to basic attitudes? If so, making that link makes this an almost instantaneous process. If not, you'll need to step through the system and consider which actions can raise or lower mistrust and by what amount.

NOTING THESE NUMBERS ON A MAP after they are determined is a quick way to remember them for later use, so that they don't need to be recalculated each time.

REPUTATIONS can be mechanically represented as "counts as X" for these purposes. A reputed friend to Elves doesn't have as many social problems in Elven communities, for example (though there might be places where a reputation simply doesn't extend).

Locale:

Traits:

Mistrust Effects:

Locale:

Traits:

Mistrust Effects:

Locale:

Traits:

Mistrust Effects:

Locale:

Traits:

Mistrust Effects:

THE DEATH GIFT

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.

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.

FROM FAILING HANDS

The dying feral warrior throws her sword to her ally, a holy knight, as she falls. She's dead before they hit the ground. Upon catching the weapon, the knight vibrates with rage, and explodes into a frenzy of 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.

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.

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.

UNFINISHED BUSINESS

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

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.

OVERLOAD

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 completely. You're sane. You can't see the monsters anymore, though they can still see you just fine... For now. You'll need to get a little less sane again before you can get back into it.

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.

REMOVING THE UPPER LIMITS of the resource pool is fairly simple in concept;for each resource, 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 reputation, 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.

POTENTIALLY 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.

PLUGGING IT IN

The steps to modifying a game in this way are generally something like this...

♦ Choose pool: Only add overload to resource pools that you want players to pay more attention to, and where it generally 'feels right'.

♦ Brainstorm on meanings and 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.

♦ 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.

♦ 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?

♦ Rule on buffs, and consider randomized gains.

GOING THE OTHER WAY

Rather than removing the "top" of a resource pool, you might want to remove the "bottom"; that is, allow players to keep spending the resource after they run out, at some alternate cost.

To take an example from this same document, you might allow players to spend health to gain the effects of breath (though if they're investing it, they might need to pay even more as 'upkeep' on that over time). In this way, a character could lift something ridiculous and get hurt doing so, or run until they begin coughing up blood, or similarly intense acts. Since such acts can be pretty heroic, there's some call for that kind of thing.

The alternate cost doesn't need to be points paid out of a different pool – it can easily be some other problem, or even a running debt, with various effects at different levels along the way. Rather than try and explain this last method in detail, however, I'll refer you to the master article: For a look at a magic pool handled as a pure "debt to the universe", get your hands on a copy of the Unlimited Mana article for GURPS. It's genius, with a risk of 'explosion' increasing as your debt grows, and dangers ranging from blighting the area around you to permanent loss of magical powers.

AURAS

This is a simple plug-in that works with almost any system; here's how it works:

◆ Each character gets one Aura! You can choose this trait from the examples given below, or create one that works similarly with group approval (you'll want the whole group to agree to it).

◆ Auras are triggered by the actions of other players. An aura is some kind of behaviour that others around you, and who know you well, are likely to take. When they do, the aura is triggered.

◆ You can reward others for triggering your Aura. If you like how they backed up your character play, you can tell them to mark down a reward. The most common reward is a set (and low) number of experience points, with a limit of two or three rewards you can give out each session. The group may want to work out some quiet, quick signal for this reward (tap your nose and then point at the person), have rewards given by players at the end of session, or whatever is needed. If some form of luck or other "meta" resource is available in the game, rewards in these points might be substituted. You're never required to reward someone for triggering your aura, but telling the group what you're looking for in a trigger is good practice.

◆ You can change your aura at the end of any session, so long as the group agrees with the switch.

◆ The purpose of auras is to let players applaud other players for reinforcing each others character concepts, in a way that's got a strong presence at the table.

◆ Bravo: You're intimidating and fearsome. This aura is triggered when someone shows respect or fear of your prowess, or makes it clear that someone else should.

◆ Eligible: You are adored and sought after romantically. This aura is triggered when someone showcases your attractiveness – whether in interaction with you or with others.

◆ Innocent: You're someone that others want to protect. This aura is triggered when others attempt to shield you from harm (of whatever sort).

◆ Specialist: You have a field of knowledge advanced enough that others defer to you in regard to it. This aura is triggered when others make a point of consulting your expertise, of clearing away distractions for you, or otherwise.

◆ Outsider: You simply don't belong, and most people don't know how to include you – so they often don't. This aura is triggered when someone pointedly ignores your odd behaviour.

ARCANA

This is a card-based situation builder and general utility based on the common tarot "spread". It uses nine of the major arcana, with a specific layout and interpretations given over the next couple of pages. If you don't have a deck, just write the names of the cards on nine index cards and shuffle *those*. For each, a general meaning is given in grey, a positive meaning is given in blue, a negative meaning is given in red, and a space is given for 'exemplars'.

If you have the Deck Of Fate from Evil Hat Games, you can just use the nine Core Arcana cards from there, and the alternate sheet for exemplars; cues for interpretation in blue and red are right there on the cards.

THE UNIVERSAL RANDOM TABLE

Even after you've generated the situation at large using the methods that follow, your deck can be used as a sort of universal random table. Some examples of using it in this way:

This person or small group is part of, or employed by (exemplar group for drawn card).

This evil is opposed to (grey concept for drawn card). It might prey on people with that virtue, target communities where it is prevalent, actively attack or "consume" that concept magically.

This place is dedicated to (grey concept for drawn card); this might be in practical terms (a hospice for empathy) or spiritual terms (a temple to abundance). If it's an evil place, it's hostile to that concept (locked shelves of forbidden tomes, each sealed with spells, in hostility to revelation).

There's a fatal flaw here, and it's all about (red text for drawn card).

This magic item has powers on the theme of (blue text for the drawn card).

TAROT ARCANA

These are the nine arcana used here. For each, consider what group is the exemplar (the "strongest example") of that arcana, and fill in the blank – make sure that these are groups you want to see in play.

THE HIGH PRIESTESS
Insight
Mystery, the subconscious.
Hidden agendas, inner conflict.

Exemplar:

THE EMPRESS
Abundance
Fertility, beauty, nature.
Creative block, dependence on others

Exemplar:

JUSTICE
Accountability
Truth, law, social accords & contracts.
Unfairness, corruption, dishonesty.

Exemplar:

THE FOOL
Freedom
Beginnings, innocence, spontaneity.
Naivety, foolishness, recklessness.

Exemplar:

THE LOVERS
Passion
Love, union, joyful relationships.
Disharmony, imbalance, misunderstanding.

Exemplar:

THE HANGED MAN
Perspective
Sacrifice, letting go.
Martyrdom, indecision, delays.

Exemplar:

THE MAGICIAN
Efficacy
Skill, concentration, action, resourcefulness.
Manipulation, poor planning, wasted talent.
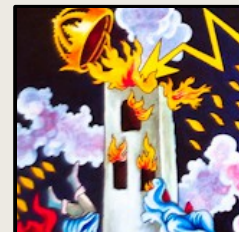
Exemplar:

THE HERMIT
Self-Knowledge
Soul-searching, solitude.
Isolation, loneliness, withdrawal.

Exemplar:

THE TOWER
Revelation
Early warnings, secrets controlled.
Upheaval, secrets explosively revealed.

Exemplar:

DECK OF FATE ARCANA

If using the Deck of Fate, look over the Core Arcana. For each, consider what person or group is the exemplar (the "strongest example") of that arcana, and fill in the blank – make sure that these are groups or figures you want to see in play.

MEMORY

Exemplar:

CUNNING

Exemplar:

PASSION

Exemplar:

EMPATHY

Exemplar:

SPEED

Exemplar:

ENDURANCE

Exemplar:

STRENGTH
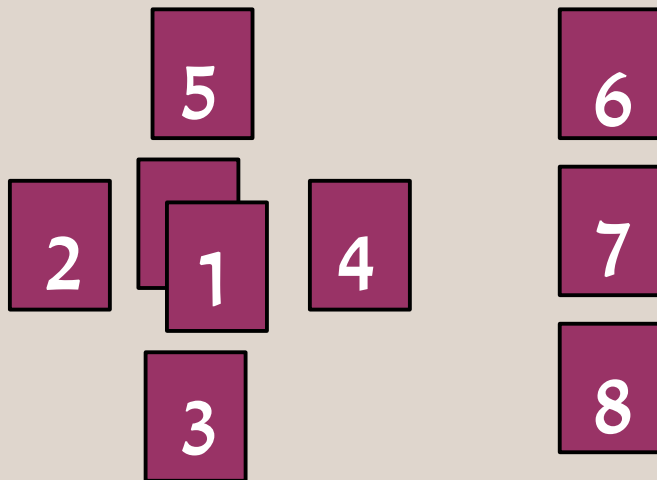
Exemplar:

INSIGHT

Exemplar:

WILLPOWER

Exemplar:

SITUATIONS: LAYING A SPREAD

Below is a basic "spread" of cards; just shuffle them and lay them out into the pattern given, face-up. You can then interpret them (use them as inspiration) to create a situation that the player characters might well get involved in.

```
    [5]           [6]
[2] [1] [4]       [7]
    [3]           [8]
```

1. THERE'S A CONFLICT BETWEEN:

...AND..

(Fill in the exemplars for the cards in position 1)

2. IT STARTED WITH A LACK OF:

(Fill in the grey line from the card in position 2)

3. AND WAS MADE WORSE BY A LACK OF:

(Fill in the grey line from the card in position 3)

4 + 5. THE OUTCOMES HANG BETWEEN:

...AND..

(Fill in a red term or phrase from the card in position 4, and a blue term or phrase from position 5)

6+. THIS IS SPILLING INTO PLAYER BUSINESS THROUGH:

Fill in exemplars, events inspired by lines, etc, from 6-8.