

Primed by Cortex

MAGE

The Ascension



A guide to Cortex Prime system conversion of the game

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Mage: The Ascension Primed by Cortex

This is a tabletop roleplaying game inspired by rules originally published as CORTEX LITE, that was designed as a “generic” tabletop RPG to be used in any setting.

Mage: The Ascension Primed by Cortex is compatible with Cortex Prime roleplaying game system.

Mage: The Ascension Primed by Cortex is an adaptation of Mage: The Ascension, a classic World of Darkness game about mages living in the shadows of a world akin to ours.

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What is Mage?

Mage: The Ascension Primed by Cortex is a tabletop roleplaying game of urban fantasy, gothic punk, ambition, freedom, power and shifting realities built on rules inspired by Cortex. The simple yet extremely powerful and encompassing rules will allow you to experience a familiar world of *Mage* with new and exciting rules that are closer to modern narrative games.

In a tabletop roleplaying game such as this one, players each take a role of a character or multiple. **Mage: The Ascension Primed by Cortex** characters exist in a world much like ours, but darker, painted in gothic tones and punk sounds. The shadows are darker, the urban decay stronger, and the inequalities highlighted. Mages, vampires, demons, werewolves and countless occult creatures inhabit the shadows. They walk among mortals and pretend to be them, all while navigating their own complex worlds of intrigue, politics, secret wars and mysteries.

Who Are You?

You play as a mage, a person who can reshape reality through the sheer force of will. In a moment of clarity you Awakened to your potential and the true, mutable nature of reality, and such you are able to change the very reality with your belief and Awakened Will.

And you are not the only one. The world is filled with others just like you, forming spanning conspiracies and secret cultures. Mages walk among mortals and monsters, waging the age-old secret war over reality itself. Mystic mages of Crafts and Traditions combat the march of technology stewarded by the Technocracy and their vision of global progress, as reality is defined by the collective belief of humanity.

But as you can see by the very device you're reading this on, Technocracy is the dominant force in the world, who in their success calcified reality and human belief more and more, forcing every mage into the shadows, lest they be rendered apart by the static, opposing forces of human beliefs for performing the wonders of magick and hypertechology in clear view.

And now you are one of those extraordinary people, so who will you be in this world of mystery and strife?

How to play Mage

This section is inspired by and remixes some of the player-facing rules from CORTEX LITE and MOONLITE, you can get the games for free at <https://xineink.itch.io/lite> and <https://xineink.itch.io/v1e1>

PCs & ST

As in many tabletop role-playing games, one player takes on the role of the game moderator, called Storyteller, or ST in Mage, rather than playing their own character. The ST frames scenes, portrays supporting characters (called STCs, or Storyteller Characters), controls the opposition (including rolling dice), ends scenes, and maintains a special ongoing pool of dice called the peril pool.

The characters portrayed by everybody else are called player characters, or PCs.

Rolling Dice

During play, everybody contributes to the story, but at some point you break out dice, introducing just enough randomness so no one knows what will happen until events unfold during play.

Traits & Dice

Each character has a number of traits, which are things – qualities, abilities, skills, useful items, or magick – that can help them accomplish their goals.

Each trait is rated with one of five die sizes, each represented in this text with a symbol: a 4-sided die or 4, a six-sided die or 6, an 8-sided die or 8, a 10-sided die or 10, or a 12-sided die or 12. Each trait in a set is rated with a die size: 4, 6, 8, 10, or 12. Generally, larger die sizes make a trait more effective, so 6 is better than 4.

Trait Sets

Traits are organized into trait sets.

Examples of trait sets used in **Mage: The Ascension Primed by Cortex** are roles (**SCHOLAR**, **SCOUNDREL**, **SCOUT**, **SOLDIER**, and **SPEAKER**) and assets (items or other factors that provide an advantage, such as **ORNATE REVOLVER** or **PRIVATE LIBRARY**). One example trait set for a character might be the roles **SCHOLAR** 10, **SCOUNDREL** 6, **SCOUT** 4, **SOLDIER** 6, and **SPEAKER** 8.

When you want your character to do something, if there's nothing getting in your way, you just do it. If there is opposition (such as an opponent, difficult circumstances, a harsh environment, or a time limit), you roll the dice for certain traits to figure out if you succeed or fail.

Your Dice Pool

When you roll, you pick the most relevant trait from each set and roll the die for each of those traits, all together in one pool of dice. (An example dice pool might be **SCHOLAR** 10, **PHYSICS** 6, **FORCES** 8, and **CHAIN LIGHTNING** 6 to strike an enemy down with the force of a conjured lightning.)

Your Total

After rolling, you add two of the die results together for your total. The total is often, but not always, the two highest results.

So if my highest rolls were a 6 on a 6 and a 6 on a 10, I'd probably decide to add the two together for a total of 12.

Your Effect Die

After choosing die results for your total, you pick one of the other dice you rolled to be your effect die. This choice doesn't affect whether you succeed or fail. It's somewhat like rolling for damage in the original system is separate from your attack roll.

If I rolled **6** **6** **8** **10** for my dice pool, and used the results I rolled on the **6** and the **10** for my total, I'd use one of the remaining **8** as my effect die.

Opposition

When you roll, another player (often the Storyteller, ST) builds their own dice pool and rolls it. You compare your roll's total to theirs, and the higher roll succeeds.

If I roll and get a total of 12 and the opposition gets a 8, I win. The player who rolls first sets the bar for how difficult the roll should be, so that player wins ties.

Success

If you win, the size of your effect die (not the number it rolled) determines how big of an effect your success had. You might say, "My effect die is **8**."

For example, if you roll to hit someone with a weapon, your total determines whether you hit (like comparing an attack roll to armour class in the world's most popular RPG), and your effect die would be how much damage you inflict. Your total tells you whether the story goes your way; your effect die tells you how far it goes.

An Example of Play

Lydia, a fashionista Hermetic mage with small stature and large personality, is going home late in the evening after shopping for fabric, but a suspicious man is following her. You describe Lydia grabbing a burning spider amulet on her neck, recalling Pattern classifications, and whispering a perceptive spell to read the man's aura.

The ST asks you for a dice roll to see if she succeeds. You roll her traits **SCOUT** **6**, **ALERTNESS** **8**, **SPIDER IN THE WEB** **8**, and **PRIME** **6**, getting 4 and 7 on **8**s, 3 and 2 on **6**s.

You pick 4 and 7 to add together for a total of 11. You use one of the remaining **6**s as your effect die.

The man's total against her is 10, and since 11 is higher, Lydia wins. She gets to keep that **8** effect as her read in the man. Her eyes fall upon the man, the spell pierces a strange film concealing him, and Lydia sees the bright, yet pale reddish-pink aura of a vampire on the hunt, she's in trouble.

The Shape of Mage

If that explanation all made sense, then you know how to play **Mage: The Ascension**

Primed by Cortex. Everything else in the system fits into, bolts onto, or adds a twist to this single mechanic. The rest of this section breaks down more advanced rules that build on those fundamentals.

Session Zero and Safety Tools

Playing a tabletop RPG can become a bad experience if everyone involved isn't on the same page about the topics and themes they'll be exploring in play. The best way to align those expectations is usually having a formal process, making sure everyone has a chance to be heard and set appropriate boundaries. That process can be a part of a "Session Zero", a conversation before actual play begins that can also provide a chance to make characters together, discuss the game, build anticipation, and decide what kind of content should or shouldn't be a part of the game.

You should also use appropriate safety tools, such as [Lines and Veils](#), the [X-Card](#) by [John Stavropoulos](#) or Script Change by [Beau Jägr Sheldon](#). Script Change is especially recommended, because the framework it provides can improve the experience of playing a tabletop RPG even when content concerns aren't an issue. What's important is choosing the tools that work for you and your group.

Sessions, Scenes, & Beats

Games are played in sessions. A session is just however long you and your group gather to play at a time, whether in-person or online.

Each session is divided into units of story and action called scenes, just like a play, film, or TV show.

Player actions take place in units of time called beats. A beat is simply how long it takes to complete one action or one piece of a larger action (including both the die roll to do something and the roll opposing it).

Tests

The most basic kind of die roll is a test. You say you want to do something, and if it requires a roll, but it isn't directly against another significant character (or PC), the ST rolls peril pool against you. (Peril pool will be further explained in the Storyteller chapter.)

Action Order

Normally, a player can just roll a test or describe their character's actions whenever it makes sense, as part of the game's ongoing conversation. When it's helpful to organize things a bit more, the ST can move things into action order.

- ♂ When the game is in action order, the scene splits into *rounds*. A round is nothing more or less than the amount of time it takes for every participant in a scene to take one beat's worth of action (often called a *turn*).
- ♂ Usually, the ST chooses one player to go first. After a player takes a beat, they choose who goes next. The ST and any STCs active in the scene get to take their own beats as well. Once everyone has taken a beat to do what they want to do, the round ends.
- ♂ Whoever goes last in a round chooses who goes first in the next round, which can be themselves!

Plot Points

This game uses a special currency called plot points (abbreviated **PP**), which you can spend to affect the story. You'll likely earn and spend plot points all the time. Every player gets at least one **PP** at the start of each session.

The most important uses of plot points include:

- ❖ You can spend a **PP** to instantly create a **6** asset.
- ❖ When you add up die results for your total, you can spend one **PP** to add in the result from one additional die, increasing your total.
- ❖ You can spend a **PP** to make an asset useful to a whole group of people instead of just one.
- ❖ When an asset would go away at the end of a scene or session, you can spend a **PP** to keep it, starting the next scene or session with the asset still in play.

Unless specified otherwise, you can spend plot points at any time, even when it isn't your beat or turn.

Any unspent plot points are lost at the end of a session, so it's best not to hoard them.

The ST doesn't have plot points, but they can influence the story in a similar way by using the dice in their peril pool.

Hitches

When you roll 1 on a die, you can't count that die towards your total or use it for your effect die.

A die that rolls a 1 is called a hitch. When you roll a hitch, the ST can grant you a plot point to add a die to their peril pool. The more hitches you roll, the larger the die.

If every die in a pool hitches it's called a botch, and it means ST can use the hitches without paying you a plot point.

When the ST rolls a hitch, it's called an opportunity. When the ST rolls an opportunity, you can spend a **PP** to step up an existing asset or step down a complication.

ST Plot Points

When an ST activates a hitch, or when a PC gains a **PP** from using *Hinder* or a Limit, those plot points come from an infinite pile of plot points no one at the table needs to worry about monitoring or controlling. When players activate a ST opportunity, these **PP** go back to that pile.

However, when the ST wants to spend plot points to help a STC, they instead spend dice from their peril pool.

Extra Effects

When you want to achieve multiple outcomes from a single roll (including affecting more than one target), you can do so by spending plot points to keep extra effect dice beyond the first.

For each **PP** spent, you can choose one extra die from your roll to become an effect die. You can't choose hitches or dice that are already effect dice or part of your total. If you run out of dice to choose from, you can't keep more effect dice.

Each effect die must do enact a different effect. For example if you are fighting a duo of Technocratic automata in an Umbral realm, you can use two effect dice to assign a **STEPPING SIDEWAYS** complication to each automaton, or to assign both **STEPPING SIDEWAYS** and a **SHORT-CIRCUITING** complication to the same automaton, but you can't use extra effect dice to assign **STEPPING SIDEWAYS** to the same automaton more than once with the same roll.

Also, if you assign effect dice to multiple targets that each have their own dice to roll, each target gets their own opposition roll against you. Only those you beat take the effect.

When you step up a **12** effect die, you gain an extra **6** effect die for that roll.

Effect Dice

When you succeed on a roll, your effect die usually becomes an asset (a new temporary trait that benefits someone) or a complication (a new temporary trait that makes things harder for someone).

When an asset or complication is created, it gains a name to go with its die rating, such as **BOUND 10**, **CAREFUL PLAN 12**, **CHAIN LIGHTNING SPELL 6**, **HIDDEN 6**, **INVIGORATED 10**, or **RUNNING LOW ON MONEY 8**. The player who creates an asset or complication gets to name and describe it.

Assets and complications aren't added to every roll; like other traits, they only apply when it makes sense in the story for the particular action described. The default assumption is that assets and complications go away when a scene ends.

Most rolls create some kind of complication or asset, but there are a couple other things you can do.

You might simply roll to change your situation, such as by opening a locked door. In this case, your effect die just measures your degree of success: a 4 might be getting the door open just a crack, while a 12 busts it wide open.

You might also roll to step down or end a complication; this is called recovery, and the rules for it are explained later.

Heroic Success

When you succeed on a roll, if your total beats the opposing roll by 5 or more, you've scored a heroic success. This means that you not only achieve what you set out to do, but surpass your own expectations in doing so. For every 5 by which you beat the opposing roll, your effect die steps up by one size.

Comparing Effect Dice

Even when you fail a roll against someone, your effect die still matters. If your roll fails, but your effect die is larger than the opposition's effect die, the opposition's effect die steps down.

There's Always an Effect

Every roll always has a minimum of one 4 effect die. If stepping down dice, removing dice due to hitches, or any other situation would prevent a roll from having an effect die, give that roll one 4 effect die before resolving it.

Complications

A complication is a temporary trait that makes things harder for you, so you don't roll it yourself. Instead, your opposition can roll it against you, and if someone else has a complication, you can add it to your dice pool when rolling against them.

Here's a sample list of complications that you might inflict (or suffer) during play: **POISONED**, **ELECTROCUTED**, **ON FIRE**, **OUT OF MONEY**, **HEXED TO MISFORTUNE**, **BOUND AND GAGGED**.

No \spadesuit^4 Complications

Unlike other traits that run from \spadesuit^4 to \clubsuit^{12} ,

\spadesuit^4 complications do not exist in **Mage: The**

Ascension Primed by Cortex. When you take a new complication, if it would be \spadesuit^4 or smaller, it becomes a \clubsuit^6 . When an existing complication would step down to less than \clubsuit^6 , it just goes away.

Taken Out

If a complication on any character would step up to a die size larger than \clubsuit^{12} , the complication stays at \clubsuit^{12} , but that character is taken out.

When you are taken out, you are unable to influence the story – one way or another, you've been overwhelmed and can no longer take actions. When someone gets banished into the Umbra, is blown away by a tornado, knocked out by a brigand, or is petrified by magic, they've been taken out. Being taken out usually only lasts until the end of the scene.

Stepping Up Complications

An important rule of complications is that an existing one can be stepped up by further actions that inflict the same complication. So, if you already have a **ON FIRE \clubsuit^6** complication, and someone adds fuel to the blaze or fires a phosphorous round at you, that complication could step up to \clubsuit^8 . Each time another roll worsens your complication, its effect die steps it up. If the effect die is larger than the complication's rating, the complication steps up to that effect die's size.

When naming a complication, it is best to use a name that leaves room for things to get worse – it might get stepped up, after all.

Instead of naming a complication **PARALYSED**, it makes more sense to call it or **GOING STIFF** or **MUSCLE SPASMS**. So if a spell that would turn a character to stone inflicts a complication rather than taking the character out, the complication might just be called **TURNING TO STONE**, as the character's body slowly petrifies, their muscles stiffen, skin goes hard and brittle and their limbs become heavy and slow.

Complications can also be renamed when circumstances change. If a character already trapped in a net is then pushed into quicksand, their complication might go from **TANGLED UP \clubsuit^8** to **RESTRAINED \clubsuit^{10}** , changing the name to include all the problems limiting their ability to move and escape.

Stress

The most common forms of complications are called stress. These are the kinds of consequences that befall characters all the time. While they work just like complications in all other respects, they have their own rules for when they go away.

Stress vs. Complications

When something happens that makes things harder for a character, but it isn't covered by one of the stress types, represent it with a free-form complication instead, such as **TANGLED**, **GRAPPLED**, **BOUND BY SPELL**, **ELECTROSHOCKED**, **BLINDED**, **FADING INTO UMBRA**, **TURNING INTO A LAWN CHAIR**, etc.

Failure & Stress

When you fail a test, you take **6** stress. The opposition chooses the type of stress. Perhaps a character feels **DEMORALISED** by their lack of success, **DRAINED** by the wasted effort, or **ENTHRALLED** by an interesting problem they can't seem to solve yet.

Types of Stress

Five kinds of stress are used in **Mage**:

The Ascension Primed by Cortex: **DAMAGED** stress, **DEMORALISED** stress, **DRAINED** stress, **ENRAGED** stress, and **ENTHRALLED** stress. Each type of stress represents a different kind of situation, as follows:

DAMAGED stress is physical, bodily harm, like getting punched in the eye, cut by a blade, poisoned by an assassin, burned by flame, etc.

DEMORALISED stress is fear, insecurity, discouragement, worry, disillusionment, or any other mental state that makes you feel like you might be better off quitting.

DRAINED stress is lack of energy, fatigue or burnout for Sleepers, but for mages it is also depletion of their Avatar of Quintessence, the force of creation they can use to bolster their reality-altering magick.

ENTHRALLED stress is when you are fascinated, tempted, distracted, charmed, smitten, mind-controlled, or just caught up in your own thoughts.

ENRAGED stress is anger, wrath, and aggression.

Assets

An asset is a temporary trait that grants an advantage. When you create an asset, you choose whether it is for you or for another character. Usually, only the character you choose can use it. Sometimes, an asset becomes permanent, making it an ongoing advantage that a character uses all the time. Such assets are called signature assets.

Multiple Assets

A default rule for assets is that, unlike other types of traits, more than one asset can be added to the same dice pool, as long as each asset is being applied to the activity for which the player is rolling.

Assets are possibly the most basic trait in the game, but there are a lot of ways this versatile trait can feature in your fantasy game.

Creating Assets

You can create an asset with a test. Your effect die becomes the rating of the asset, which you may use for the rest of the scene. Here's some assets that you might create during play: **CONJURED THUNDER, COVERED BY TERRAIN, SUGGESTIVE APPEARANCE, EXPANSIVE RECONNAISSANCE.**

Shutting Down Assets

Whether it is disarming the garou's knaive, quashing the bloodlust of an angry mob, or unweaving a ward of your opponent, you may want to remove the assets of characters giving you trouble. To do so, you roll against that character, and they get to include the asset in their dice pool opposing you.

On a success, you either:

- ∅ shut down the asset if your effect die is larger than the asset
- ∅ or step down the asset if your effect die is equal or lower

When you step down an asset in this way or make it unavailable, it remains so until the end of the scene. Any player may do this by inflicting a complication larger than the asset's rating. You can do it all in one go, or by starting a low-level complication like **LOOSENERED GRIP** and stepping it up with later rolls. When you step down an asset in this way or make it unavailable, it remains stepped down or shut down until the end of the scene. If the asset would've gone away at the end of the scene, that happens normally.

Recovery

Complications and stress can be downright crippling. Getting rid of complications or stress is called recovery.

Downtime

During a scene when characters have a chance to recover – by resting or some other form of self-care and recovery – all stress usually dice step down. However, mages have the *Avatar Reserve* Limit, which means they can only step down their **DRAINED** stress using SFX.

Expiring Complications

Complications go away at the end of a scene or when they are no longer narratively appropriate.

Seizing an Opportunity

When the ST rolls an opportunity, you can spend a **PP** to step down a complication or stress.

Recovery Rolls

Other characters can try to help you recover. (Generally, you can't recover your own stress unless you have an SFX that allows it.)

To do so, the helping character rolls a test against a difficulty of **8•8** plus the complication or stress die that they are trying to help you with.

On a success, they either step down your complication or stress, if their effect die is equal or smaller to its die, or remove the complication or stress entirely, if their effect die is larger.

On most failures, nothing happens. If they fail with one or more hitches, your complication or stress steps up and the ST gives both of you a **PP**.

Fresh Start

At the start of a new session, all complications and stresses are removed – unless the last session ended in a cliffhanger and the new session picks up right where you left off. (If that's the case, players keep their **PP** as well.)

SFX & Dice Tricks

Your character gains SFX, special effects that give you added influence over the story. These reflect your character's extraordinary abilities or their powerful role in the narrative. Many SFX require you to spend plot points to activate them. Other SFX allow you to impose a disadvantage on your character in order to earn **PP** or another reward. For example, the *Hinder* SFX lets you earn a **PP** by rolling a smaller die.

Using an SFX is always a choice; you are never compelled to activate your character's SFX, unless that SFX is a Limit. A Limit is an SFX which can be activated by the ST.

Some SFX allow you to add your own complication to your dice pool. A complication included in a roll can't also be included in the opposing dice pool, so using such an SFX also prevents the other side from using that complication against you.

Doubling Dice

Sometimes, the rules tell you to double a die in your pool. When you double a die, you add another die of the same size to the pool before you roll.

One Roll

Unless the text of the SFX itself or another rule says otherwise, when you step up, step down, or double a trait using an SFX, you only do so for a single roll.

Reroll

Some SFX allow a reroll of some or all of the dice in your pool after you first roll them. You can't use SFX to reroll the same die roll more than once, though other players might use SFX to reroll it.

Usually, SFX of this type specify how many dice are rerolled. If an SFX says to reroll all the dice, or if it doesn't specify, reroll every die rolled as part of that dice pool.

Stepping Up & Stepping Down

The rules sometimes tell you to step up a die, changing it from a die of one size to one of the next larger size, (such as changing **4** to **6** or **8** to **10**) or to step down a die (the reverse, such as **12** to **10**).

When you step up a **12** in your dice pool, you keep the **12**, but add an extra **6** to your pool as well. When you step down a **4** in your pool, you remove that die entirely.

Stepping Down Assets

When an SFX allows you step down an asset for some benefit, that asset remains so indefinitely unless the SFX says otherwise. It can still be stepped up by normal means (such as activating an opportunity). If an asset is stepped down below **4**, it is eliminated. Signature assets are restored to their full value at the end of the scene.

Stepping Down Stress or Complications

When an SFX lets you step down a stress or complication, it remains stepped down indefinitely, as if with a successful recovery roll, unless the SFX says otherwise. (So if an SFX lets you step down someone's **DAMAGED**, for example, you have applied healing to their injury.)

Using Your Own Complications

Some SFX let you add your own complication or stress to your dice pool for a roll. When you do so, the opposition doesn't get to roll that complication or stress against you – you're already using it to your own advantage, so in that moment it isn't a disadvantage for you.

The Peril Pool

During play, the ST maintains their own special, ongoing pool of dice that represents the overall ebb and flow of trouble and danger across the entire adventure. This is the peril pool, and when a player rolls a test, the ST usually rolls the peril pool to oppose them. Dice in the peril pool are called peril dice.

At the opening of a new adventure, the ST establishes the peril pool as a matched pair of two dice. It usually starts each session at **6 6**, but it can be **8 8** or higher depending on the stakes of the story.

Whenever a player roll a hitch, if the ST wants to take advantage of it, the ST gives that player a **PP**, then adds **6** to the peril pool. If the player rolled multiple hitches, the ST can step up the new **6** peril die once for each additional hitch beyond the first (**8** for two hitches, **10** for three hitches, or **12** for four).

Also, whenever the rules say the ST would gain a **PP** (such as by activating a Limit for a STC), they gain a **6** peril die instead.

Whenever the ST would add a new die to the peril pool, they can instead choose to step up an existing peril die.

When the ST adds a peril die, they may also describe something that has happened in the scene to make life more complicated for one or more player characters.

The ST can also “spend” peril dice from the peril pool, removing them from the doom pool to activate certain special rules during play (as described in the ST section). For example, the ST can spend peril dice as if they were plot points for STCs, which is the main way peril dice are spent.

Paradox

During play, every character also maintains their own special challenge pool that represents the force of consensual reality fighting back against the enlightened will of the mage. This is their Paradox pool.

When Paradox grows ST either steps up one of Paradox dice or adds a **6** to Paradox – two if the pool was empty. A character grows their Paradox in multiple ways:

- ∅ Whenever they use vulgar magick, Paradox grows once and the player gains a **PP**.
- ∅ Whenever a Sleeper witnesses them use vulgar magick, Paradox grows twice and the player gains a **PP**.
- ∅ Whenever they roll a hitch using magick, the Storyteller may grow Paradox as per peril rules, paying for it as normal.
- ∅ Special circumstances: Certain special circumstances like encounters with Mad Ones may grow Paradox in unusual ways as well.

Paradox gets to roll against the character (as described in the ST section) if they performed magick and their Paradox isn't empty. If Paradox succeeds they get to inflict a complication or stress, representing the form Backlash takes, be it Quiet, Burn, a Paradox flaw or spirit.

If a PC accumulates enough Paradox, then the ST may spend from the peril pool to put them in a Paradox realm.

The PC can reduce Paradox by rolling against it, taking an action on their turn to steel themselves before the might of reality hitting them. Success depletes the Paradox dice, and results in a Paradox flaw that has a relatively harmless effect.

Conditions

Characters may find themselves experiencing all kinds of conditions: getting turned into a lawn chair, using magick to turn invisible, having a pursuer shoot out one of your tires, gaining increased confidence from an inspiring speech, and the like. In **Mage: The Ascension Primed by Cortex**, these kinds of conditions are modelled with assets, complications, and stress.

Spellcasting Conditions

As a default, hitches on rolls to use magick almost always inflict Paradox on the caster.

Sometimes mages use Quintessence to make their magicks blaze with reality, brilliance, and power, imposing their Will over the world.

DRAINED stress describes their Avatar's reserves dwindling.

Hitches might occasionally result in other conditions, as the ST determines. Channelling hitched lightning might shock you as well, for instance, and inflict **DAMAGED**, and a hitched prophecy might fill one with dread, inflicting **DEMORALISED** instead.

Botches can grow Paradox immensely, but they can also be opportunities for mistargeted, uncontrolled magickal effects going terribly awry.

Other complications can interfere with performing magick, depending on the mage's instruments. A mage relying on voice and vocalisations who is **SILENCED** or **GAGGED**, one who uses movement and gestures but has her fingers **BOUND**, or one who writes the code to reality but had **ELECTRONICS TAKEN AWAY** has those complications rolled against her in tests to perform magickal effects. Equivalent complications might afflict mages with different practices. A player might also **Hinder** a distinction to recognize the limitations of her training – and pick up a sweet **PP** for her trouble.

Tactical Conditions

A simple test can inflict complications such as **SURROUNDED**, **OUTFLANKED**, or **EXPOSED**, or create assets like **COVERING FIRE**, **IN POSITION**, or **GOT THE DROP ON YOU**. If an asset applies to multiple characters, spend a **PP** to let everybody in the group use it.

A feint can inflict a complication to the tune of **DISTRACTED** or **UNBALANCED**, which can then be leveraged in a later roll to inflict more lasting **DAMAGED**.

Disarming an opponent can also work as a complication. If the item is represented by an asset die, inflicting a complication of a higher die size makes the asset inaccessible until the complication is recovered.

Morale Conditions

Intimidation both on and off the battlefield is neatly handled by inflicting **DEMORALISED** stress. That stress, in turn, can be rolled into other actions seeking to inflict **DAMAGED** or other conditions. It can even be added to dice pools to scare opponents into quitting the battlefield altogether.

The trade-off is that, in most situations, **DEMORALISED** stress is likely easier to recover than “more serious” conditions like **DAMAGED**, which might require skilled help, specialized tools, or magick. Any character can offer encouragement to any other character as an action intended to recover **DEMORALISED** stress. Characters can even attempt to psych themselves up and recover their own stress.

Magical Conditions

A whole raft of magical conditions can simply be flashy ways of inflicting basic stress. A fascination charm inflicts **ENTHRALLED**. A prime effect draining your pattern of energy inflicts **DRAINED**. And of course fireballs inflict **DAMAGED**.

Sometimes you might want something a little more tailored to your circumstances, in which complications come into play. **ON FIRE** is a perennial favourite. **BLINDED**, **POISONED**, **BOUND INTO CONCRETE**, or even **CHILLED** work great, as well. Cursing a man to have a donkey’s head, if we want to get all Shakespearean, can also just be expressed as a complication.

Mages may also spend a **PP** to keep an extra effect die. This way you can inflict a standard stress like **DAMAGED** as well as a flashy complication like **ON FIRE**.

Some magical conditions, such as turning someone into a lawn chair, can get tricky. Here the intent is not to complicate their later actions, but to remove the character from the scene entirely. Such a complication may need to be rephrased as an active but unfinished process, like **BECOMING A LAWN CHAIR**.

Stealth Conditions

Characters sneaking past guards or into rooms without being noticed is usually resolved with a simple test. However if the player intends to leverage that “stealthed” status in later actions, they might spend a **PP** to gain the asset

STEALTHED or **IN THE SHADOWS**

Alternately, a character might take action to distract sentries or other opponents. Their intent may be to strike while distracted or shepherd less-stealthy characters past. Such a distraction can also be handled with a test, this time inflicting **ENTHRALLED** stress, to represent the target’s attention being focused elsewhere, or a temporary complication representing a specific distraction, such as **BURNING POLICE CAR** **8**. Both the surprise attack and other characters’ stealth attempts may then add the complication into their die pool.

Both assets and complications are eliminated whenever they are no longer relevant. When a **STEALTHED** character reveals themselves, the asset goes away. When the sentries are no longer distracted, the complication goes away.

The classic Rogue tactic of striking from the shadows can combine both a **STEALTHED** asset and a distracting complication, which is one of the reasons this tactic is so popular and effective.

Wealth Conditions

The love of money is the root of all evil, but we live in a society where people must spend to survive. ST can freely offer characters an asset to represent wealth gained an adventure: **FAT WALLET** **6**, **STOLEN CREDIT CARD** **8**, **BRIEFCASE FULL OF CASH** **10**. Alternately, players may search a location and create an asset to represent something valuable they find.

Shopping is as simple as creating an asset with a test. Wealth assets can be added to these rolls, and on a success might be renamed (**SLIMMED DOWN WALLET**), stepped down, or eliminated, depending on circumstance.

Like any other temporary asset, wealth assets only last for one session. A windfall is likely to be used immediately for something relevant to the plot.

If a wealth is stored away or saved up, it doesn’t disappear, but either it’s no longer relevant to the immediate story and therefore is no longer worth a die, or the character should spend the 5 XP required to gain it as a signature asset, representing more permanent wealth or a useful purchase they intend to carry with them on their adventures.

How to Be a Great Player

As a Mage: The Ascension Primed by Cortex

player, part of your job is to respond to the challenges the GM lays down as well as interact with fellow player characters. The game works best when you go hard: describe your actions with cinematic energy. Instead of “I strike the zombie with lightning”, you can draw your oaken want inscribed with sacred name of Baraquel, the angel of lightning and speak the Latin incantation of Creo Fulmen to put the dead back to rest, slap the gun out of the vampire’s hand, or any number of other options. There’s no increased risk to your character when you get creative, so let your imagination run wild.

One enthusiastically descriptive player is entertaining, but the good stuff is when the whole table starts riffing off each other’s antics. Keep an eye out for opportunities to interact and open yourself up to others piling on to your fun. Be vocal: say “I need to shake this **DEMORALISED** stress!” or “I’m gonna pin them in place with a complication, so you can finish them off!” The game works better – both tactically and narratively – if everybody is a part of everybody else’s stories.

There’s literally no limit on what any of you can describe except the nature of the story itself, which means the tone and mood of the game is entirely in your hands. This is a collaborative effort; it’s not the sole responsibility of any one player to decide what is or is not too silly, or too dark, or too outlandish. Talk about the kind of action, drama, and comedy you want to see in the game. If things start drifting in a direction that’s not fun for you, speak up so you can all stay on the same page.

Characters & Traits

Your character is a protagonist in the story you tell in the game, as well as your primary means of interacting with both the world and the rules. Their traits and die ratings help you figure out who your character is and what they can do.

A **4** trait is underdeveloped or problematic, a **6** is healthy and reliable, a **8** is excellent and noteworthy, a **10** is extraordinary and powerful, and a **12** is world-class, the absolute pinnacle of your potential and capabilities.

Character Creation

To create your fledgling Other character, you first choose your Kind, representing what variety of supernatural being you are. Once that is done, you populate five trait sets – distinctions, attributes, roles, specialities, signature assets, and Spheres – and assign a die rating to each trait in those sets.

For traits like roles, when making a new character, you are given an array of die ratings for each set – such as **10**, **8**, **6**, **6**, **4** – and you assign one of these ratings to each trait in the set. So a character's roles might be **SCHOLAR 6**, **SCOUNDREL 4**, **SCOUT 10**, **SOLDIER 8**, and **SPEAKER 6**.

When distributing these ratings, it is usually easiest to choose which of the traits is most significant, the one the character will rely on most and for which they would likely be most well-known to others. Assign the largest die rating to that one. Then choose their second best trait, one they are still really great with and can rely on, even if it isn't the most important one, and assign the second largest die rating to it. Then keep assigning in order from best to worst.

Faction & Focus

When creating a character, choose one Faction, which grants you SFX and Limits. Choosing a Faction should be your first decision because it defines many things about your character. The playable factions detailed in this document are: the Council of Nine Mystic Traditions and the Technocratic Union. Details on each appear in the Factions section. If you aren't affiliated with any Faction you are known as an Orphan, an unaffiliated mage.

Once you choose a Faction, you should also choose a focus, which describes the way you understand the reality and how you enforce your Awakened Will upon the world. focus has three parts making it up:

- ∅ A model for understanding how the world works. That's your paradigm.
- ∅ A system or multiple systems that allow to apply the paradigm in the real world. That's your practice.
- ∅ A number of tools, techniques and processes that prepare an act of magick in accordance with your practice, normally seven of them. Those are your instruments.

Later in the book examples of Foci will be given, but those are not exhaustive, so you should feel free to define your focus yourself.

Distinctions

Much of your character is defined by three distinctions, words or brief phrases describing core aspects of their identity. Each distinction is rated ♦. While attributes and roles describe what your character is good at, distinctions summarize who your character is.

Another difference between distinctions and some other trait sets is that you name your own distinctions, rather than assigning ratings to predefined traits. A young hermetic wizard might have the distinctions **BRILLIANT OVERTHINKER GRADUATE, HERMETIC CEREMONIAL MAGE**, and **ACHIEVE PERFECTION IN ALL I AM**, while his weathered grandmother, who's also secretly a mage might have **DAZZLING SEAMSTRESS, HOUSE VERDITIUS WONDERCRAFTER**, and **MUST PROTECT MY FAMILY IN SECRET**.

Together, your three distinctions should sum up your overall character concept. If your character were the protagonist of a book, movie, or video game, and you were describing them to a friend, your distinctions would feature prominently. Distinctions spell out how your character is different from others, and they impact every action you take.

Changing Distinctions

Distinctions aren't necessarily permanent features of your character forever. Characters often evolve during play. These changes can be expressed through distinctions as well. See Spending XP later for rules to rewrite your distinctions.

Character Creation: Distinctions

Define your character by picking three distinctions, as follows:

- ∅ One *background* distinction that includes some description of the character's identity in the mortal world along with a personality trait or some other idiosyncrasy. Most mages started life as normal humans, so this distinction often defines who the PC was before they joined the society of mages, but that is not all of them, some may have rather magickal upbringing, though that's quite rare. Examples might include **DAZZLING SEAMSTRESS, BRILLIANT OVERTHINKER GRADUATE, PESSIMISTIC RADIO TECHNICIAN, TRANSFORMED TREE**, or **BURNT OUR CHILD STAR**.
- ∅ One *Faction* distinction, that includes the faction of mages you belong to, as well as your role in it. Your focus should be included in the distinction, or added to the description. Some examples are **CHRONICLER OF A CELESTIAL CHORUS CHANTRY, HOUSE BONISAGUS YOUNGEST MEMBER, A PROMISING NWO OPERATIVE**, or **HOUSE VERDITIUS WONDERCRAFTER**.
- ∅ One *drive* distinction summing up a belief, focus, motivation, calling, paradigm, or mission that is central to your character. Some examples include **MUST PROTECT MY FAMILY IN SECRET, ACHIEVE PERFECTION IN ALL I AM, KEEP THE WHEEL OF DHARMA SPINNING, or FIND OUT ABOUT MY SISTER'S DISAPPEARANCE**.

Each of your distinctions is rated ♦.

For more inspiration when creating distinctions, including lists and optional die rolls, see Appendix A: Distinction Builder.

Hindering Distinctions

Every distinction benefits from the Hinder SFX, your character's first SFX. Hinder

Hinder: Roll this distinction as a \blacktriangledown^4 to earn a $\textcolor{purple}{\textcircled{P}}$.

Hinder is best used in situations where a distinction would actually make things harder for the character instead of easier (such as an **AWKWARD TEEN** trying to intimidate someone), or when no distinction really applies to what you're trying to do ("I'm a **DOCTOR**, not an engineer!"). Since Hinder earns you a $\textcolor{purple}{\textcircled{P}}$, which can be spent to include extra dice in your total, this allows you to accept a temporary disadvantage now in order to succeed more spectacularly later on.

Attributes

Another of your character's three major trait sets is your attributes, they represent the inherent characteristics your character possesses, there are six and for any situation there is at least one attribute that applies:

- ∅ **AGILITY** includes manual dexterity, swiftness, deftness, reflexes, balance, and hand-eye coordination.
- ∅ **ALERTNESS** includes perception, intuition, attention, sensory acuity, and overall awareness of your environment.
- ∅ **BRAINS** includes intellect, reasoning, memory, scholarship, and aptitude for learning.
- ∅ **BRAWN** includes physical strength, constitution, raw muscle, stamina, endurance, athleticism, and general health.
- ∅ **CHARISMA** includes presence, bearing, persuasiveness, social graces, force of personality, and personal magnetism.
- ∅ **COMPOSURE** includes willpower, self-control, tenacity, discipline, determination, resolve, and the ability to keep your emotions hidden or in-check.

Character Creation: Attributes

Assign the either of the following die rating arrays to your six attributes, in any order:

- ∅ $\textcolor{purple}{\textcircled{10}}, \textcolor{purple}{\textcircled{8}}, \textcolor{purple}{\textcircled{8}}, \textcolor{purple}{\textcircled{6}}, \textcolor{purple}{\textcircled{6}}, \textcolor{purple}{\textcircled{6}}$,
- ∅ $\textcolor{purple}{\textcircled{8}}, \textcolor{purple}{\textcircled{8}}, \textcolor{purple}{\textcircled{8}}, \textcolor{purple}{\textcircled{8}}, \textcolor{purple}{\textcircled{6}}, \textcolor{purple}{\textcircled{6}}$
- ∅ or $\textcolor{purple}{\textcircled{10}}, \textcolor{purple}{\textcircled{10}}, \textcolor{purple}{\textcircled{8}}, \textcolor{purple}{\textcircled{6}}, \textcolor{purple}{\textcircled{6}}, \textcolor{purple}{\textcircled{4}}$.

Roles

Your character has five role traits – **SCHOLAR**, **SCOUNDREL**, **SCOUT**, **SOLDIER**, and **SPEAKER**. While attributes represent your inherent qualities, each role trait represents a thematic grouping of experience, training, and skill. Your largest rated role usually corresponds to how you best contribute to a group, whereas for smaller rated roles, you're often better off relying on more proficient allies.

The five roles can be used any time they apply:

- ❖ **SCHOLAR** represents academic knowledge, including education, lore, the sciences, deduction, and research.
- ❖ **SCOUNDREL** sums up your knack for trickery, crime, spying, sleight of hand, defeating security measures like traps or alarms.
- ❖ **SCOUT** covers activities related to exploration, perception, and survival, such as tracking, navigation, animal handling, climbing, and simply noticing things.
- ❖ **SOLDIER** defines skill and experience when it comes to wielding weapons, enduring hardship, providing security, and fighting in general.
- ❖ **SPEAKER** includes communication, group dynamics, leadership, empathy, and various forms of self-expression, such as oratory, performance, and art.

Sometimes more than one role might apply. Sneak up on a poacher with **SCOUT** or **SCOUNDREL** sums up your knack for trickery, crime, spying, sleight of hand, defeating security measures like traps or alarms.? Give battlefield orders with **SOLDIER** or **SPEAKER**? In those cases, choose the one your character favours.

Character Creation: Roles

Assign the following die ratings to your five roles, in any order: **10**, **8**, **6**, **6**, **4**.

Specialities

Specialities are narrow skills that supplement the broad areas of expertise defined by your roles. Whenever a specialty applies, you roll it in addition to the appropriate role.

For example, you might use **SOLDIER** to display your general prowess with a weapon, but you might also have a specialty that you add when using certain types of weapons, such as **ATHLETICS** 6 or **WEAPONRY** 8. When you follow a trail through a dense forest, your dice pool might not only include **SCOUT** but also an extra die for your **NATURE** specialty.

A list of 17 suggested specialities is provided, but like distinctions, specialities can also be free-form traits you create yourself. Specialities should never be as broad as roles; as a general rule, a specialty should apply to about half as many situations as a basic role would (or less).

Though specialities are like more focused versions of roles, there are no limits on what role you must use to include a specialty that suits your action. Returning to the above example, if you show off your skill with a knife to intimidate someone into answering your questions, your pool might include both your **SPEAKER** role and an **ATHLETICS** or **WEAPONRY** specialty.

Character Creation: Specialities

You can choose to start a new character with either two or three specialty traits. If you choose two, one is rated at 8 and the other is 6 if you choose three, all three are rated at 6.

The faction you belong to adds one or more bonus specialities to your character as well.

Signature Assets

Signature assets are assets that have become permanent traits for a character, playing an ongoing and essential part in their story. Usually, they cover anything that gives you an advantage but isn't covered by your other trait sets.

Note that your signature assets do not include all of your character's gear or other advantages. When something is an asset, it just means that it's so important to your character's story that you gain an extra die when using it.

Most signature assets break down into one of five categories: things, creatures, places, people, and edges. Example signature assets for each category are listed below.

- ⦿ **Things** are the most common form of signature asset, including items or equipment that you own, carry, or have access to. Examples include **MAGIC CARPET**, **1971 DODGE CHALLENGER**, **ENCHANTED DAGGER**, **MY FAMILY'S HEIRLOOM SWORD**, **DIVINING ROD**, **CHAINSAW**, etc.
- ⦿ **Creatures** include pets, mounts, animal companions, familiars, and the like. Examples include **RACEHORSE**, **WELL-TRAINED CAT**, **MY CAT SNOWBALL**, **RAVEN FAMILIAR**, **SEMI-DOMESTICATED WOLF**, etc.
- ⦿ **Places** represent advantages gained from being in or having knowledge of a certain location. Examples include **SEASIDE HIDEOUT**, **PRIVATE LIBRARY**, **SPECIAL FORCES BAR**, **UMBRA DEMESNE**, **HIDDEN GLADE**, **PANIC ROOM**, **BASEMENT SANCTUM**, **PENTHOUSE**, **UNCLE'S ARMY SURPLUS STORE**, etc.

- ⦿ **People** are minor STCs who can be relied upon to help you, at least occasionally. Examples include **MY APPRENTICE**, **HIRED BODYGUARD**, **BLACKMAILED SENATOR**, **MASTER MAGE MENTOR**, **FENCE WHO DOESN'T ASK QUESTIONS**, **MOB INFORMANT**, **WITCH BOYFRIEND**, **PSYCHIC LITTLE SISTER**, etc.
- ⦿ **Edges** are supernatural capabilities you can access via your magickal powers, such as psychic powers, exceptional senses, frequently-used spells, sacred rituals, or more powerful versions of the magickal powers available to every Awakened. Examples include **MIND READING**, **LOCATOR SPELL**, **TELEKINESIS**, **CHAIN LIGHTNING ROTE**, **RITUAL OF FLAME IMMUNITY**, **LEVITATION**, **FOR CONJURATION**, **VORPAL CLAWS**, **FOX TRANSFORMATION**, etc. Anything that you and your ST agree suits your mage is fair game.

Character Creation: Signature Assets

You choose to start your new character with either two or three of these additional signature assets. If you choose two, one is rated at ♦8 and the other is ♦6 if you choose three, all three are rated at ♦6.

The faction you belong to adds an additional signature asset to your character as well.

Magick

Magick is represented by ten spheres, acknowledged, even if begrudgingly and by different names, by all Factions in the Awakened world. Whenever you are creating a magickal effect you roll an appropriate Sphere. If your effect requires multiple Spheres you must have all of them at the appropriate ranks, but you only roll one Sphere of your choice from those required.

- ∅ **CORRESPONDENCE** the element of connection between apparently different things.
- ∅ **DEATH** the ending of things, absence, inevitable destruction, and decay.
- ∅ **FATE** the principle of chance, destiny and possibility.
- ∅ **FORCES** the understanding of elemental energies.
- ∅ **LIFE** the mysteries of life and death.
- ∅ **MATTER** the principles behind supposedly “inanimate” objects.
- ∅ **MIND** the potentials of consciousness.
- ∅ **PRIME** an understanding of the Primal Energy within all things.
- ∅ **SPIRIT** comprehension of Otherworldly forces and inhabitants.
- ∅ **TIME** the strange workings of chronological forces and perceptions.

While those names are the ones understood by Traditions as the lingua franca of magic, every Faction has their own terminology and understanding for them, so you may feel free to rename the Spheres on your character sheet, so long as the rules themselves are maintained.

Magick is divided into eleven Practices by mages, each Practice describes broad kinds of effects a Mage can produce. You unlock more Practices as your Sphere increases:

Initiate 6

- ∅ **Compelling** spells nudge a preferred but possible outcome into reality. A coin toss can be made to come up tails (Fate), a bored worker can be made to take that coffee break now (Mind), or a spirit can be forced to avoid its bane (Spirit). Making the coin hover and spin in midair, making the worker walk into her boss's office and quit, or making the spirit ignore its favourite prey are beyond the bounds of a Compelling spell.
- ∅ **Knowing** spells deliver knowledge about something directly to the mage (or to another target). A mage can divine the cause of a corpse's death (Death), sense whether someone has a powerful destiny (Fate), or unerringly know which way is north (Space). This knowledge is a direct awareness of Supernal truth; the mage doesn't have to interpret evidence based on her senses or try to divine the truth out of cryptic riddles.
- ∅ **Unveiling** spells expose hidden things to the mage's senses. She might gain the ability to hear radio waves (Forces), peer across the Gauntlet or perceive things in Umbra (Spirit), or see the flow of Quintessence across the landscape (Prime).

Apprentice 8

- ⦿ **Ruling** spells grant fuller control over phenomena than a mere Compelling spell. Water can be made to flow uphill or into unnatural shapes (Matter), animals (or even human beings) can be commanded (Life or Mind), or time can be momentarily made to accelerate or slow down (Time). A Ruling spell can't fundamentally alter its target's abilities: Water can be directed, but not turned solid or gaseous. Time can be altered, but not overwritten. An animal can be commanded, but not made stronger or fiercer.
- ⦿ **Shielding** spells, sometimes called Warding spells, offer protection against phenomena under the Sphere's purview. A Shielding spell might protect against a ghosts (Death), make the mage immune to fire (Forces) or disease (Life), or allow her to survive in a caustic atmosphere (Matter).
- ⦿ **Veiling** spells are twofold: Firstly, they can conceal things under the Sphere's purview from detection: A target can be made to lose all sense of time (Time), a fire's heat and light can be hidden from view (Forces), or a building made all but impossible to notice (Matter). Secondly, they can conceal a target from concrete phenomena under the Sphere's purview: a mage can render herself invisible to ghosts (Death), or ward a powerful Locus from detection by spirits (Spirit), or walk unnoticed through a crowd (Life or Mind), or past a camera (Forces). Short of archmastery, it's impossible to Veil something against an abstract concept or force: a mage can't Veil herself against death or hide from time, for example.

Disciple 10

- ⦿ **Fraying** spells degrade things, weakening them and enhancing their flaws. Fraying spells can weaken targets under the Sphere's purview: damping a fire (Forces), sapping Strength (Life), or eroding the barrier between worlds (Death, Spirit, or others, depending on the worlds in question). They can also directly attack targets using the energies of the Sphere: inflicting damage via the chill of the grave (Death), psychic overload (Mind), or a blast of electricity (Forces). Damage inflicted by a direct-attack Fraying spell is always bashing.
- ⦿ **Perfecting** spells are the opposite of Fraying spells in many ways: they bolster, strengthen, and improve rather than weakening and eroding. A Perfecting spell might repair damage to an object or a person (Matter or Life), allow a machine to function perfectly with no wear and tear (Matter), or make a modest destiny into an earth-shaking one (Fate).
- ⦿ **Weaving** spells can alter nearly any property of a target without transforming it into something completely different. Solid steel can be transmuted to liquid (Matter), a sword can be enchanted to damage beings in Umbra (Death or Spirit), or a few seconds of time can be rewritten (Time).

Adept ⑫

- ❖ **Patterning** spells allow a mage to completely transform a target into something else that falls under the Sphere's purview. A memory can be replaced wholesale (Mind), the mage can turn herself (or a target) into an animal (Life), or she can teleport by "rewriting" her own location (Space). A spell that transforms the target into something that falls within the Purview of another Sphere, like transforming into a living pillar of fire (Life and Forces), requires a mage to know the Practice of Patterning for the destination Sphere. With a joined Patterning effect including Prime you could construct Patterns out of pure ambient Quintessence.
- ❖ **Unraveling** spells can significantly impair or damage phenomena under the Sphere's purview, or directly inflict severe damage using the forces of a Sphere. A raging storm might become a calm summer's day (Forces), or solid iron reduced to dust (Matter); even spells can be torn asunder (Prime). Mages can hurl fire (Forces) at their enemies, or cause aneurysms and heart attacks with a glance (Mind or Life). With a joined Unraveling effect including Prime you could rend Patterns into nothing but Quintessence.

Spending Quintessence

With the weight of Paradox growing stronger as they pull on threads of reality, and side-effects of a spell gone awry any use of magick can take a toll on a mage, but sometimes you may chose to exert yourself further, expending some of your reserve of Quintessence to make your workings blaze with truth and power of creation. You can do so with **Avatar Reserve** SFX that every mage benefits from.

Avatar Reserve: Gain a **PP**, then take **DRAINED** 6 at the end of the current beat. You can never recover **DRAINED** stress except via SFX.

Recovering Quintessence

There are other, more specialised ways of regaining Quintessence, but every mage benefits from **Channel Quintessence** SFX.

Channel Quintessence: In a scene with a free source of quintessence, channel it to step down your **DRAINED**, then shut down this SFX. Activate an opportunity to recover.

Character Creation: Magick

You choose to start your new character with either two or three of Sphere ratings. If you choose two, one is rated at 8 and the other is 6 if you choose three, all three are rated at 6.

The faction you belong to adds an additional Sphere to your character as well. If the Sphere your Faction provides is at 6 – step it up, if it is at 8 – choose another Sphere.

SFX & Limits

Each character has a handful of SFX, reflecting special capabilities associated with their Faction & Focus distinction as well as their Awakened nature. A PC also has at least one Limit. A Limit is a special type of SFX that imposes a disadvantage on your character in order to earn them **PP** or another reward. Whenever you gain an SFX or Limit that isn't specific to your Faction, you can rename it to better suit your character.

Non-stress complications named in SFX (such as **OVER-INDULGED** or **ON FIRE**) are mere suggestions and can always be swapped for something more creative or appropriate to the moment.

Some SFX are tagged as (**Gear**). These generally require you to have the equipment described in the SFX in order to use some or all of the options that SFX offers.

Character Creation: SFX

Your character begins play with all the SFX specified for mages, in addition to the **Hinder**.

Character Creation: Limits

You choose and gain one Limit from among those listed in Appendix B: General SFX and Limits.

Milestones

As you play, your character can gain Experience Points (XP), which can be used to change or augment your traits. You earn XP using milestones, lists of actions or events that advance your character's story and give them a chance to grow.

A character has two milestones at a time. A milestone usually has three levels, each of which provides a different amount of XP and can be tapped for XP at certain times:

- ∅ A 1 XP level that you can hit once per beat;
- ∅ A 3 XP level that you can hit once per scene;
- ∅ And a 10 XP level that you can hit once per session.

Once XP is gained, it can be spent between sessions to change or improve your traits, gain new traits, or unlock other benefits. After you complete the 10 XP level, you remove that milestone and replace it, starting a brand new milestone.

(Theoretically, you could choose to send your character on a new version of the same journey by starting the same milestone over again, if you feel it captures an aspect of your character that you'd like to explore more deeply, but it's usually more interesting to move on to a new one.)

Character Creation: Milestones

All new characters start play with two milestones. Unless you and your ST agree on alternate milestones, you start with the default *Goal-Driven* and *Levelling Up* milestones listed below.

Milestone: Goal-Driven

- ∅ **1 XP** when you act to either affirm or conceal your commitment to a goal.
- ∅ **3 XP** when you recruit a new ally in pursuit of a goal or you betray or abandon allies to attain that goal.
- ∅ **10 XP** when defeating a challenge with at least one trait at **12** moves you closer to fulfilling a drive-related goal, or when you finally abandon a goal you've made sacrifices to pursue.

Milestone: Levelling Up

- ∅ **1 XP** when you earn a **PP** from an SFX or Limit (such as *Hinder*).
- ∅ **3 XP** when you help someone else recover from stress or you succeed on a roll to create an asset for an ally.
- ∅ **10 XP** when you recover from stress of **12** or larger, or when an asset you created for someone else helps defeat a challenge that has at least one trait at **12**.

Bonus Enhancement

Once your other traits are determined, the rules grant you one final bonus, an enhancement to make sure your character is as close as possible to your vision for them.

Character Creation: Bonus Enhancement

After all traits, SFX, and Milestones are set, choose just one of the following added bonus enhancements, then adjust your character accordingly:

- ∅ Add a new **6** specialty
- ∅ Add a new **6** signature asset
- ∅ Add a new **6** Sphere
- ∅ Upgrade a **6** specialty of your choice to **8**
- ∅ Upgrade a **6** signature asset of your choice to **8**
- ∅ Upgrade a **6** Sphere of your choice to **8**
- ∅ Choose and gain one of your Faction SFX.

Orphan Bonus

If you do are an Orphan, you can choose two of the listed bonus enhancements to add to your character, instead of just one.

Completing Your Character

Once you have determined and recorded your distinctions, attributes, roles, specialities, signature assets, SFX, Limits, and milestones, you have all the mechanical elements of your character in place. If you haven't already, you need to choose your character's name and pronouns. Once this is done, your character is complete!

Factions

Choose one of the factions described in the following pages to define your character's alliances and their place among their fellow mages. A faction grants your character a signature asset, one or more specialities, and access to a specialized list of faction SFX. Though a faction does not grant a free SFX, during character creation you can use the bonus enhancement all PCs receive to gain one of your faction SFX.

Traditions

The Council of Nine Mystic Traditions seek a return to the days of High Magick or a new dawn of mystic potential. Bitter enemies of the Technocracy, they appear to have been losing the battle for reality.

Akashayana/ Akashic Brotherhood

Masters of mind, body, and spirit through the Arts of personal discipline.

Bonus Asset

Choose a person who helped you significantly along the path of enlightenment, then gain that person as an asset rated at **6**.

Bonus Specialities

Choose three specialities from **AWARENESS 6**, **ESOTERICA 6**, **MARTIAL ARTS 6**, **MEDITATION 6**. Gain them as bonus specialities.

Affinity Sphere

Pursuers of harmony between mind, body and soul, the Akashayana hone their physical forms to perfections, so that an even greater, ever-sharp mind can sprout from this vessel.

Gain **MIND 6**, or **LIFE 6** as an Affinity Sphere.

Faction SFX

Celestial Chorus

Sacred singers who give a human Voice to the Divine Song.

Bonus Asset

Choose one object or place that is instrumental to your faith, and gain that as an asset rated at **6**.

Bonus Specialities

Choose three specialities from **CEREMONY 6**, **EMPATHY 6**, **MUSIC 6**, **THEOLOGY 6**. Gain them as bonus specialities.

Affinity Sphere

A symphony of many in the worship of the resplendent and fractured One, the Celestial Chorus use their songs to bring forth divine Creation, commune with beings beyond or channel the heavenly wrath itself through light and lightning.

Gain **PRIME 6**, **FORCES 6**, or **SPRIT 6** as an Affinity Sphere.

Faction SFX

Cult of Ecstasy/Sahajiya

Visionary seers who transcend limitations through sacred experience.

Bonus Asset

Choose a place that helps you to unshackle yourself from the earthly drudgery, and gain that as an asset rated at **6**.

Bonus Specialities

Choose three specialities from **ARTISTRY**

6, **AWARENESS** **6**, **EMPATHY** **6**,

PHARMACEUTICALS **6**. Gain them as bonus specialities.

Affinity Sphere

Breaking through the illusions of human perception, the Sahajiya use the spectrum of sensory experience to exist beyond time itself, merging and diffusing their consciousness with the whole world, their bodies becoming a canvas for the artistry unimaginable to the common folk.

Gain **TIME** **6**, **LIFE** **6**, or **MIND** **6** as an Affinity Sphere.

Faction SFX

Dreamspeakers/Kha'vadi

Preservers and protectors of both the Spirit Ways and the Earthly cultures that have been looted, abandoned, and oppressed.

Bonus Asset

Choose an item that a spirit companion of yours elected to inhabit making it a Fetish, and gain that as an asset rated at **6**.

Bonus Specialities

Choose three specialities from **ETIQUETTE** **6**,

HERBALISM **6**, **MYSTICISM** **6**, **TECHNOLOGY**

6. Gain them as bonus specialities.

Affinity Sphere

The bearers of enduring wisdom from ages past, the Kha'vadi hear the voice of the Earth through spiritual lamentation, communing with it to shape the animal, the stone and even the energy bringing modern technology alive in all their permutations.

Gain **SPIRIT** **6**, **FORCES** **6**, **LIFE** **6**, or **MATTER** **6** as an Affinity Sphere.

Faction SFX

Euthanatoi/Chakravanti

Disciples of mortality who purge corruption and bring merciful release from suffering.

Bonus Asset

Choose a weapon or any other tool of choice you use to carry out your morbid responsibilities, and gain that as an asset rated at **6**.

Bonus Specialities

Choose three specialities from **ESOTERICA** **6**,

FIREARMS **6**, **MEDICINE** **6**, **SUBTERFUGE** **6**.

Gain them as bonus specialities.

Affinity Sphere

Guardians of the Wheel of Dharma, the Chakravanti take on the grim duties of its enforcers, taking ownership over domains of death and life, making sure nothing strays from its destined path.

Gain **DEATH** **6**, **LIFE** **6**, or **FATE** **6** as an Affinity Sphere.

Faction SFX

Hollow Ones

Dark romantics laughing in the face of ruin.

Bonus Asset

Choose an object taken from an established magickal practice that you use in your Willworking, and gain that as an asset rated at **6**.

Bonus Specialities

Choose three specialities from **ARTISTRY 6**, **OCCULTISM 6**, **STREETWISE 6**, **SUBTERFUGE 6**. Gain them as bonus specialities.

Affinity Sphere

Revelling in the absurd condition of humanity in the Universe, the Hollow Ones spit in the face of tradition and established order, embracing and directing the chaos of existence, in all of its morbidity and explosive nature.

Gain **FATE 6**, **DEATH 6** or **FORCES 6** as an Affinity Sphere.

Faction SFX

Order of Hermes

Rigorous masters of High Magick and the Elemental Arts.

Bonus Asset

Choose an effect that can be produced by any Initiate Practice that you have learned as a part of your training, and gain that as an asset rated at **6**.

Bonus Specialities

Choose three specialities from **ACADEMICS 6**, **ETIQUETTE 6**, **RITUAL 6**, **SCIENCE 6**. Gain them as bonus specialities.

Affinity Sphere

Excellence and knowledge made manifest, the Houses of the Order each wield great expertise in their fields of mystic art, though none shirk from the awe-inspiring displays of elemental prowess.

Gain **FORCES 6** or any other Sphere appropriate for your House as an Affinity Sphere.

Faction SFX

Society of Ether/Sons of Ether

Graceful saviours of scientific potential.

Bonus Asset

Choose a place where you conduct your research and create your marvellous devices safe from Consensus infringement, and gain that as an asset rated at **6**.

Bonus Specialities

Choose three specialities from **ACADEMICS 6**, **COSMOLOGY 6**, **CRAFT 6**, **TECHNOLOGY 6**. Gain them as bonus specialities.

Affinity Sphere

A volatile mixture of misunderstood visionaries and inventors, the Society is famous for its marvellous artifices that wield impossible energies and treat conservation of mass as a suggestion.

Gain **MATTER 6**, **FORCES 6**, or **PRIME 6** as an Affinity Sphere.

Faction SFX

Verbena

Primal devotees of rough Nature and mystic blood.

Bonus Asset

Choose an animal that is inhabited by a spirit with whom you are bound with in a familiar connection, and gain that as an asset rated at **6**.

Bonus Specialities

Choose three specialities from **ANIMAL KEN 6**, **BRAWL 6**, **HERBALISM 6**, **SURVIVAL 6**. Gain them as bonus specialities.

Affinity Sphere

Adherents of the Old Ways and primal Life made manifest, the Verbena are in sacred connection with nature, drawing power and favour from living beings and primordial terror of the elements.

Gain **LIFE 6** or **FORCES 6** as an Affinity Sphere.

Faction SFX

Virtual Adepts/Mercurial Elite

Reality-hackers devoted to rebooting their world.

Bonus Asset

Choose an informational system that you have access to and use for reality hacking, and gain that as an asset rated at **6**.

Bonus Specialities

Choose three specialities from **COMPUTER 6**, **ENIGMAS 6**, **STREETWISE 6**, **TECHNOLOGY 6**. Gain them as bonus specialities.

Affinity Sphere

Anarchist visionaries cracking the code to reality, Virtual Adepts disregard facades of space and natural order, going into the informational backdoors of reality to erase any degree of separation between objects and their motive energies.

Gain **CORRESPONDENCE 6** or **FORCES 6** as an Affinity Sphere.

Faction SFX

Technocracy

The Technocratic Union enforces global order under their Enlightened guidance and protection. Dedicated to wiping out Reality Deviants, they've spent over 500 years at war with the mystic Traditions.

Iteration X

Perfectors of the human machine.

Bonus Asset

Choose one hypertech Device that you created or integrated into your body, and gain that as an asset rated at **6**.

Bonus Specialities

Choose three specialities from **CRAFT 6**, **CYBERNETICS 6**, **SCIENCE 6**, **TECHNOLOGY 6**. Gain them as bonus specialities.

Affinity Sphere

Operating beyond the bleeding edge of technology, Iterators shackle the material world, the forces that animate it, as well as the flow of causality itself.

Gain **FORCES** **6**, **MATTER** **6** or **TIME** **6** as an Affinity Sphere.

Faction SFX

New World Order

Custodians of social order and global stability.

Bonus Asset

Choose one item that represents (or confirms, I'm unsure) your legal authority, and gain that as an asset rated at **6**.

Bonus Specialities

Choose three specialities from **ENIGMAS** **6**, **LAW** **6**, **MANIPULATION** **6**, **MELEE** **6**. Gain them as bonus specialities.

Affinity Sphere

The men behind the men, the NWO are the shepherds of humanity, who control both the masses, as well as the connections between them.

Gain **MIND** **6** or **CORRESPONDENCE** **6** as an Affinity Sphere.

Faction SFX

Progenitors

Innovators dedicated to the potential of organic life.

Bonus Asset

Choose one biological modification that assists your experiments, which you developed during training, and gain that as an asset rated at **6**.

Bonus Specialities

Choose three specialities from **ACADEMICS** **6**, **MEDICINE** **6**, **PHARMACEUTICALS** **6**, **SCIENCE** **6**. Gain them as bonus specialities.

Affinity Sphere

The guiding hand of evolution, Progenitors shape life itself and bring forth creatures that never existed before.

Gain **LIFE** **6** or **PRIME** **6** as an Affinity Sphere.

Faction SFX

Syndicate

Masters of finance, status, and the power of wealth.

Bonus Asset

Choose a business that you have appropriated as a Primal Venture, and gain that as an asset rated at **6**.

Bonus Specialities

Choose three specialities from **FINANCES** **6**, **LAW** **6**, **LEADERSHIP** **6**, **SUBTERFUGE** **6**. Gain them as bonus specialities.

Affinity Sphere

Money makes the world go around and the Syndicate are the money, finding value in everything that exists and had never existed, pulling the strings of weaker men, and exploiting the chaos of hypereconomics.

Gain ENTROPY 6, MIND 6, or PRIME 6 as an Affinity Sphere.

Faction SFX

Void Engineers

Explorers and protectors of extradimensional space.

Bonus Asset

Choose a Device that shields you from a particular hazardous environment and assists in employing Enlightened procedures, and gain that as an asset rated at 6.

Bonus Specialities

Choose three specialities from COSMOLOGY 6, FIREARMS 6, SURVIVAL 6, TECHNOLOGY 6. Gain them as bonus specialities.

Affinity Sphere

Brave explorers of the worlds beyond, Void Engineers are charting the expanses of dimensions real and not, and wielding the firepower to defend from threats without and within.

Gain SPIRIT 6, CORRESPONDENCE 6, or FORCES 6 as an Affinity Sphere.

Faction SFX

Evolving Characters

During play, your character will change. Some changes will be temporary; others will last the rest of your character's career.

Changing Milestones

By default, once you hit the 10 XP level of a milestone, the entire milestone is closed; after the session ends, the closed milestone is replaced with a new one. (In some cases, the ST may allow this "replacement" to just be a fresh copy of the milestone.)

New milestones can be created in collaboration by the player and ST, or chosen from those listed in Appendix C: Sample Milestones.

Spending XP

Once experience points are earned via Milestones, they can then be spent for the benefit of your character. **Mage: The Ascension Primed by Cortex** uses the following table for the most common uses of Experience Points:

Spend **1 XP** to:

- ∅ Start the next game session with one extra PP. (You can't start a game session with more than 5 PP's.)

Spend **3 XP** to do one of the following:

- ∅ Replace an existing distinction with a new one.
- ∅ Add or replace a Limit.
- ∅ Add a new ▼ specialty or signature asset
- ∅ Upgrade an existing specialty or signature asset from ▼ to ▲.

Spend **5 XP** to do one of the following:

- ∅ Add a new ▲ specialty.
- ∅ Convert a temporary asset into a ▲ signature asset.
- ∅ Replace an existing SFX with a new one.

Spend **10 XP** to do one of the following:

- ∅ Upgrade a ▲ role to ▲.
- ∅ Add a new signature asset rated at ▲.
- ∅ Upgrade an existing ▲ specialty or signature asset to ▲.
- ∅ Add a new Sphere rated at ▲.

Spend **15 XP** to do one of the following:

- ∅ Upgrade a ▲ role to ▲.
- ∅ Upgrade an existing ▲ specialty or signature asset to ▲.
- ∅ Add a new SFX.
- ∅ Upgrade a ▲ Sphere to ▲.

Spend **20 XP** to do one of the following:

- ∅ Upgrade a ▲ role to ▲.
- ∅ Upgrade an existing ▲ specialty or signature asset to ▲.
- ∅ Upgrade a ▲ Sphere to ▲.

Spend **25 XP** to:

- ∅ Upgrade a ▲ role to ▲.
- ∅ Upgrade a ▲ Sphere to ▲.

Spend **30 XP** to:

- ∅ Add a new SFX from a Faction you are not a part of.

ST Rules

There's more to STing a game than learning the rules, but assuming you've got a handle on the basics, there are a few extra rules the ST needs to know in order to run **Mage: The Ascension Primed by Cortex** games.

Scene Framing

Mage: The Ascension Primed by Cortex gives players a lot of power over their characters and what happens to them. The ST isn't an omnipotent narrator, just another player with specialized responsibilities, portraying the world and the creatures in it rather than one special character of their own. However, one major power the ST possesses is that they are the one who frames scenes.

To frame a new scene, the ST makes decisions based on the story so far. They determine where it happens, who is present, and what is already happening when the PCs arrive.

While you might have a rough plan, avoid all expectations as to how a scene might end or what the player will choose to do. Include elements you think will spur the PCs into action, but the goal isn't to move players along a predetermined track; play to find out what happens.

Scene Distinctions

Each scene can be framed with up to three scene distinctions, special traits that any character in the scene can include in their rolls (if a character has distinctions of their own, their player chooses whether to use a scene distinction or one of their character distinctions for each roll). Scene distinctions are rated at ♦8, and can be used to earn plot points with **Hinder**.

As a special rule, a character can include both a personal distinction and a scene distinction in the same roll, as long as one of the two distinctions is **Hindered**.

Scale

Sometimes, a creature or other part of the story differs from the player characters in power or size so dramatically that it commands an innate advantage (or disadvantage, if it is smaller or weaker). When necessary, an extra trait known as scale is assigned.

Scale ranges from ♦4 to ♦12. Most mages, Night Folk and humans, as well as most humans and animals, have a scale of ♦6. Master mages and elder Night Folk have a scale of ♦8. A creature with a higher scale isn't just larger or more powerful – it is *many times* larger or more powerful. In the film version of *The Fellowship of the Ring*, the heroes' long fight against the cave troll is a desperate one, because of the creature's massive superiority of scale (♦8 compared to the Fellowship members' ♦6). In the later film in the series, *The Return of the King*, the Witch-King of Angmar is also of greater scale – not because of his size, but because his level of power is beyond mortal ken.

When a character or other part of the story rolls against a PC of a different scale, the one with the greater scale includes their scale die in their dice pool. In addition, when you are the one with the greater scale, after you roll, you keep three dice to add together for your total, instead of just two. Obviously, this is a very powerful advantage.

A **4** scale is likely never going to be rolled (since there is no lower rating), but it exists to represent creatures with a level of power or size far beneath the scale of normal humans. A small child or animal, or a similarly smaller and/or weaker creature, would have a **4** scale. As a result, a PC would add a **6** scale die to its rolls against such a creature, though in general the ST shouldn't bother having a PC make such a roll.

Spending Peril Dice

The ST can remove dice from the peril pool, “spending” them for a number of uses during play, including:

As plot points: The ST can spend a die to obtain the same benefits for their STCs that a player gets for spending **PP** for their PC.

To add dice to a roll: Before a die roll is made, the ST can remove one or more peril dice from their pool, then add those die to the roll.

For surprise entrances: To introduce a new STC to a scene mid-conflict, the ST can spend a peril die equal to the new STC’s highest trait.

For sudden changes: The ST can add a new scene distinction mid-scene by spending a **8** or higher.

To interrupt the action order: When a player would take a turn, the ST can have a STC or challenge take their turn first by spending a peril die. This only works if the die spent is equal to or larger than the **SCOUT** trait of the character the ST is interrupting.

To split the PC group: The ST can spend a **10** or larger peril die to announce a sudden event that divides the party (such as a sudden building collapse, a huge crack opening in the street, a massive car crash, etc.)

To immediately end the current scene with dramatic twist The ST has the power to end scenes. However, if they want to end the scene in a cliffhanger or defeat for the PCs, or in a similarly dramatic fashion that the PCs might otherwise try to prevent, the ST can do so by spending **12**.

Storyteller Characters (STCs)

To help you make sure you don't do more work than necessary when creating STCs, the rules divide them into different types depending on the role you expect them to fulfil in the story.

Storyteller Characters

Mage: The Ascension Primed by Cortex

presents a world where mortals live in relative peace, but the secret world of the mages and Night Folk is full of conflict and dangerous rivalries. During a session, some STCs are meant to be challenging opposition, but others are bit parts and recurring secondary characters, so there are different ways of creating STCs.

STCs are split into three different types depending on the role you expect them to fulfil in the story: Extras, Analog STCs, and Challenge Pools.

Extras can be created as needed during play. Analog STCs and Challenge Pools work best for recurring characters who harry the player characters across multiple adventures. These may start as Extras or as Boss challenge pools; you can switch their type between sessions, and even use them as an Analog STC for a few adventures and then turn them into a Boss for a final showdown.

Extras

An extra is a nameless character in a scene who has just one trait describing their role in the story, like **BORED COP 10** or **SUSPICIOUS NEIGHBOUR 6**. This trait is added to other dice pools (such as the peril pool) rather than rolled on its own. When extras take a complication or stress larger than their trait die, they are taken out. Most extras are invented during play rather than created in advance.

Analog STCs

These are created much the same way you'd make a player character, although they can be simplified from that format. For example, instead of defining every trait in a trait set, they might only have the traits they are likely to use. Analog STCs may have whatever number of SFX or Limits seem appropriate (though generally not more than the ST can easily keep track of). They are taken out with stress or complications in the same way as a PC.

As Challenge Pools

A challenge pool is something the PCs have to deal with, and not only can it represent a STC, but also a hazard, dilemma, crisis, or anything else that could be an obstacle to the characters' progress. Challenge pools are the basic building blocks of **Mage: The Ascension Primed by Cortex** adventures, and they are described in their own section.

Upgrading STCs

If a STC's importance grows beyond initial expectations, you can always switch their type between sessions as the developing story requires. You can even convert a STC into a challenge pool or vice-versa.

STCs and Dice Pools

When a PC rolls a test where a STC might interfere with or oppose that roll, the ST can add one or more STC traits to the peril pool before rolling. If a PC acts directly against an analog STC or challenge pool, the ST usually builds a dice pool based on traits just as a PC would and rolls that as opposition, instead of rolling the peril pool.

Challenge Pools

A challenge pool represents a complex and difficult situation that requires sustained effort to overcome, rather than any single action. It can represent any crisis or series of obstacles the PCs face: a forest fire, breaking into a vault, escaping police pursuit, dispelling complex magical wards, rescuing people from a collapsing structure, steering a raft down rocky rapids, negotiating the various rivalries and agendas at a social event, etc. Powerful foes or groups of enemies can also be represented by challenge pools.

Challenge pools are the basic structure around which **Mage: The Ascension Primed by Cortex** adventures are built. A handful of challenge pools (including bunch of mobs, and one or two bosses, as described in this section) is all you need to tell a compelling story that lasts for an entire session.

The core of every challenge is a pool of dice that the players will step down and remove as they address the situation. This is its Challenge trait. The challenge remains a driving element of the story until the last die is removed from its pool.

Opposing The Challenge Pool

Player characters can use their action to reduce the challenge pool. When they do so, the entire challenge pool is rolled as a reaction against them. Usually, a PC tries to reduce the challenge pool by inflicting some kind of complication or stress on it.

However, challenge pools don't actually gain complications or stress, nor do they gain assets. Whenever a PC would inflict stress or a complication on a challenge pool, the player instead compares their effect die to a challenge pool die of their choice. If the complication or stress is bigger than that die, that die leaves the pool. If it isn't, the chosen die steps down. Similarly, whenever a challenge pool would gain an asset, that asset immediately converts into a new challenge die instead. When the last challenge die is removed, the challenge is defeated.

Trying to reduce a challenge pool is risky, however. Failing a roll to do so inflicts stress on the PC, just as failing a test would, but instead of a **6**, the ST can choose to inflict the challenge pool's effect die as stress.

Also, when a player hitches against a challenge pool, instead of giving the player a **PP**, the ST may spend a die from the pool's challenge trait to turn the hitched die into a complication on the PC.

Challenge Pool Actions

The PCs face challenge pools in action order, and once every PC has had a turn, the challenge pool gets a turn as well. Usually, it rolls to inflict stress or create a complication, but it can also roll to create an asset for itself (which becomes a new challenge die).

Instead of rolling, the challenge can use its turn to step up its smallest die or grant the ST a **PP**. The ST narrates how the challenge escalates or worsens, and then play moves on.

Finally, the ST can use the pool's turn to spend a die from the challenge trait and move a PC's complication to the challenge pool to replace it. The PC no longer has the complication, but the problem they were dealing with is now everybody's problem! (Obviously, the optimal use of this move by the ST would be replacing a smaller die with a larger one.)

STCs Vs Challenges?

If a challenge pool works against a STC, or vice-versa, or if STCs work against each other, the ST has two choices. They can let a PC roll determine the outcome, or they can simply decide what happens. GMs never roll dice against themselves.

Building Challenges

The ST creates the challenge pool by choosing three to six dice of the same size, from **6** to **12**. Die size describes difficulty, while the number of dice roughly determines how long the challenge will last.

A **6** **6** **6** challenge pool will probably be quick and easy, while a pool of **12** **12** **12** **12** **12** is likely to be long and difficult.

If you wish, you can also give a challenge pool other traits or SFX, just like a STC, but that isn't necessary if you'd rather keep things simple for yourself during play.

Mobs

A mob is a challenge pool variant representing a group of opposing characters or creatures: a pack of werewolves, a gang of thugs, anti-government terrorists, rioting cops, summoned demons, etc. A mob's challenge pool is called its Mob Dice and this trait sometimes gets a colourful name.

Instead of stepping down its dice, mobs take complications like STCs. When a complication steps up past the Mob Trait's die size, the mob loses a die from that trait and the complication is eliminated. When Mob Trait loses its last die, it is taken out.

A mob also has signature assets in addition to its mob dice (like those of a minor STC), which it can add to its rolls. Mobs can also have SFX, and most have at least one SFX like *All-Out Attack*, *Area Spell*, or *Impossible to Ignore* that allow the mob to target multiple characters on its action.

Bosses

A boss is a variation that represents one STC meant to challenge multiple PCs at once. A boss works exactly like a mob except that instead of a Mob Dice trait, it has Boss Dice trait.

Organization

A organization works much like a mob, but it is a much larger group operating on a level beyond what any single individual (even a mage) can do. Secret societies, military forces, spy networks, organized crime, oligarch families, corporations, covert rebellions, insidious cults, police forces, and occult conspiracies are examples of organizations. A organization possesses a scale trait of **8** or higher, giving it a powerful advantage when acting against the PCs. An organization has a Org Dice trait just like a mob has a Mob Dice trait.

Levelling Challenges

Tailoring dice ratings is more art than science. A challenge pool with fewer dice takes less time than a challenge pool with more. A challenge pool of larger dice will take more time still and will also require the PCs to tap more resources and push harder to bring down those dice. Larger ratings of signature assets, which rarely change, make the challenge harder still.

Additionally, the player characters may have traits and SFX that make them more effective against specific threats. A ghost-hunting exorcist is going to defeat a mob of poltergeists much faster than they would an equally-rated mob of well-armed mercenaries on the hunt, whereas a veteran Flambeau wizard armed with his amulets and wand will have a much easier time dispatching the mercenaries.

The best way to crack this chestnut is play. Throw a **6 6 6 6 6** mob at the players, followed by a **8 8 8 8** challenge, and then a **10 10 10** boss. Jot down notes as to how quickly they go down. Iterate for the next adventure. You will very shortly develop a good sense, not only of how long and difficult any given encounter will play out, but how well it fits into your friends' expectations of play and attention spans.

Sample STCs and Challenge Pools

These are some example enemies, allies, and challenges that you can use in your games. STCs and Challenge Pools can also be a useful shortcut to creating an adventure. Come up with a handful of these, figure out a situation that weaves them together and makes life tough for the PCs, and you pretty much have what you need to run a game session.

The dice in each challenge's main trait (like its mob trait or boss trait) are just a suggestion, which you should feel empowered to change. Part of the ST's job is deciding what die ratings to assign to challenge pools in order to best tailor the challenge to PCs.

Militia Leader's Bunker (Challenge Pool)

Hideout for incendiary insurgents and inconsistent ideologies.

POOL: FORTIFIED COMPOUND 10 10 10

TOO MANY GUNS 6

SPECIAL FORCES REJECTS 4

All-Out Attack: Spend a PP to target multiple opponents when you roll to inflict DAMAGED. For each additional target, add 6 and keep an extra effect die.

Spirits of Winter (Mob)

They're coming.

MOB TRAIT: HUNGRY GHOSTS 8 8 8

LIFE-STEALING CHILL 6

INVISIBLE UNTIL THEY STRIKE 6

Overwhelming Tenacity: When you roll to inflict DRAINED, spend a PP to affect multiple targets. For each additional target, add 6 and keep an extra effect die.

Corrupt Federal Agent (Boss)

They love other people's secrets.

BOSS TRAIT: NOSY INVESTIGATOR 6 6 6 6

PERSISTENCE 6

KNOWS EVERYONE 8

FORGED WARRANTS 10

This Just Got Real: When you roll to inflict DEMORALISED, spend a PP to affect multiple targets. For each additional target, add 6 and keep an extra effect die.

Off-the-Grid Vampire (STC)

Bloodsucking nocturnal marauder.

Shadow Roles: **SPEAKER** 8, **SOLDIER** 10

ILLUSION 10

UNDERGROUND LAIR 6

UNQUESTIONING BLOOD CULTISTS 8

OVERGROWN CLAWS AND FANGS 8

CENTURIES-OLD UNDEAD 8

Claws & Fangs: Reveal your natural weapons to add 6 to your pool and step up any stress inflicted.

Eternal Hunger (Limit): Each day at sunset, step down all stress except **DRAINED**, then take **DRAINED** 6 unless you've slumbered since the last sunset.

Relentless Thirst: Each time you inflict **DRAINED** stress on a living human or Night Folk, apply the same effect die as recovery to your own **DRAINED** stress. When you increase a creature's **DRAINED** to 12 or larger, it takes **DAMAGED** 12 as well.

Undead Might: Take **DRAINED** 6 to step down your **DAMAGED**, to gain a PP, or to step up **SOLDIER** until the scene ends. You can never recover **DRAINED** stress except via SFX.

Vampiric Weaknesses (Limit): Step down your roles whenever the sun is up. When you take **DRAINED** stress from sunlight, stakes, fire, or faith, step up that stress, gain a PP, and shut down **Undead Fortitude** until you sleep continuously for at least eight hours.

Appendix A: Distinction Builder

For help in building distinctions, this appendix presents five tables and the guidelines for using them. The tables are the Descriptor Table, the Noun Table, the Catchphrase Table, the Tradition Table, and the Convention Table. Use the tables however you want, whether as lists to pick from or as random tables you pull from by rolling dice. You can choose or roll a descriptor from the Descriptor Table, and then add it to a noun. You can also choose or roll a noun from the Noun Table, and then add a descriptor to it. Or if you really need inspiration you can do both (this is especially useful for your background distinction).

To use abt table, choose any entry on the table, or you can roll randomly. If you are rolling for descriptor or noun, first roll a 12 and find the row for the resulting number. Then roll a 4, and find the column for that result. Your random descriptor or noun is where the row meets the column. If you are rolling for a catchphrase roll a 8 for the row and a 4, for the result column. For a random Tradition roll a 10, and a 6 for a Technocratic Convention.

Descriptor Table

descriptor	1	2	3	4
1	AFFABLE	ARROGANT	BLUNT	BOOKISH
2	BROODING	CHARMING	CONFLICTED	CREATIVE
3	DASHING	DEFIANT	DUTIFUL	EARNEST
4	ECCENTRIC	FAITHFUL	FEARLESS	GENIUS
5	GENTLE	GRIM	ICY	INSECURE
6	LOGICAL	LONELY	LOYAL	MAVERICK
7	MISFIT	NAÏVE	NURTURING	OPTIMIST
8	PACIFIST	PASSIONATE	PESSIMIST	QUIET
9	QUIRKY	RECKLESS	RUDE	RUTHLESS
10	SARCASMIC	SHADY	STUBBORN	TENACIOUS
11	THOUGHTFUL	TIMID	VENGEFUL	VETERAN
12	WEIRD	WISE	YOUNG	ZEALOUS

Noun Table

noun	1	2	3	4
1	ARTIST	ASSASSIN	ATHLETE	BELIEVER
2	BODYGUARD	COMRADE	CRAFTER	CRIMINAL
3	DECEIVER	DETECTIVE	DIPLOMAT	EXPATRIATE
4	EXPERT	EXTROVERT	FREAK	FUGITIVE
5	GAMBLER	GUARD	HEIR	HISTORIAN
6	HUNTER	IMPOSTER	INTROVERT	INVENTOR
7	KID	LEADER	LONER	MEDIATOR
8	MERCENARY	NURSE	OCCULTIST	OUTSIDER
9	PARENT	PERFORMER	PHYSICIAN	REBEL
10	REFUGEE	ROMANTIC	SMUGGLER	SPY
11	STUDENT	TEACHER	THIEF	TRAVELLER
12	VAGABOND	VIGILANTE	VISIONARY	WARRIOR

Catchphrase Table

CATCHPHRASE	1	2	3	4
1	ACT FIRST, ASK QUESTIONS LATER.	ACTUALLY, THAT'S A FUNNY STORY...	COME AT ME!	COULDN'T STOP NOW IF I TRIED.
2	I HAVE A CUNNING PLAN.	I PLAY TO WIN.	I SAW THIS COMING.	I'M THE BEST THERE EVER WAS.
3	IT'S ALMOST TOO EASY...	I'VE SEEN THIS BEFORE.	LEAD FROM THE FRONT.	NEVER GIVE UP.
4	NEVER TELL ME THE ODDS.	NO ONE'S GETTING PAID ENOUGH FOR THIS	NOBODY ASKED FOR THAT.	SACRIFICES MUST BE MADE.
5	SOMEONE HAD TO DO IT.	SOMETHING DOESN'T FEEL RIGHT	STOP, OR BE STOPPED.	PERHAPS THERE'S A SIMPLER WAY...
6	THERE'S ALWAYS A WAY.	THINGS CAN ALWAYS GET WORSE.	THIS IS OUR DESTINY.	TIME TO RAGE!
7	VICTORY COMES AT PRICE.	WE DIDN'T GET DRESSED UP FOR NOTHING.	WE DON'T HAVE TIME FOR THIS.	WE HAVE UNFINISHED BUSINESS.
8	WELL, ISN'T THIS IRONIC?	WE'RE BETTER THAN THIS.	WE'VE GOT THIS.	YOU HAVEN'T THOUGHT THIS THROUGH.

Tradition Table

TRADITION	NAME
1	AKASHAYANA/AKASHIC BROTHERHOOD
2	CELESTIAL CHORUS
3	CULT OF ECSTASY/SAHAJIYA
4	DREAMSPEAKERS/KHA'VADI
5	EUTHANATOI/CHAKRAVANTI
6	ORDER OF HERMES
7	SOCIETY OF ETHER/SONS OF ETHER
8	VERBENA
9	VIRTUAL ADEPTS
10	REROLL

Convention Table

CONVENTION	NAME
1	ITERATION X
2	NEW WORLD ORDER
3	PROGENITORS
4	SYNDICATE
5	VOID ENGINEERS
6	REROLL

Appendix C: Example Milestones

These are milestones you can use for characters during play, or as examples to help you create your own.

Aggressive

- ∅ **1 XP** when you are the one who starts a conflict or you take charge in the midst of one.
- ∅ **3 XP** when you teach an ally to make them more formidable in the kinds of conflicts you consider your expertise.
- ∅ **10 XP** when you take over leadership of your group in a time of danger or leave your current group to join a more aggressive one.

Bad Influence

- ∅ **1 XP** when you try to convince an ally to commit or cover up an unlawful or antisocial act.
- ∅ **3 XP** when you try to convince someone to accept their own past misdeeds, true nature, or current infamy.
- ∅ **10 XP** when you decide to change your ways for good, or when you commit a transgression too egregious for your allies to forgive.

Cipher

- ∅ **1 XP** when you decline to reveal information about yourself but still betray stray details or clues.
- ∅ **3 XP** when you explain your motivation for an unexpected choice or action.

- ∅ **10 XP** when you finally reveal major details about your identity, background, or motivations in the face of a challenge with at least one **(12)** trait, hoping the revealed knowledge will help overcome it.

Comrade

- ∅ **1 XP** when you create an asset for a friend or ally who doesn't already have an asset from you.
- ∅ **3 XP** when you expose yourself to danger as part of a roll to create an asset to help someone or a roll to recover a stress or complication for an ally or STC.
- ∅ **10 XP** when an asset you earned XP for helps defeat a challenge with at least one **(12)** trait, or when you abandon comrades in a moment of need to pursue your own agenda.

Disruptor

- ∅ **1 XP** when you publicly disrespect an authority figure.
- ∅ **3 XP** when you undermine or outright attack an authority figure or one of their representatives.
- ∅ **10 XP** when you destroy the credibility or power of an authority figure who has at least one **(12)** trait or when you accept their authority.

Empathetic

- ∅ **1 XP** when you create an asset for an ally without them having to ask.
- ∅ **3 XP** when you succeed on a roll to create an asset for an ally in a situation where it is dangerous to do so.

- ♂ **10 XP** when an asset you earned XP for helps defeat a challenge that had at least one **12** trait, or when failing against such a challenge prompts you to leave the group and learn how to be practical or self-reliant.

Goal-Driven

- ♂ **1 XP** when you act to either affirm or conceal your commitment to a goal.
- ♂ **3 XP** when you recruit a new ally in pursuit of a goal or you betray or abandon allies to attain that goal.
- ♂ **10 XP** when defeating a challenge with at least one trait at **12** moves you closer to fulfilling a drive-related goal, or when you finally abandon a goal you've sacrificed to pursue.

Glory Hound

- ♂ **1 XP** when you take out an opponent after you dramatically declared them your target.
- ♂ **3 XP** when you attempt a reckless but glorious deed, or when you abstain from such a deed out of caution.
- ♂ **10 XP** when you assume leadership responsibilities due to your impressive deeds, or stand alone against a foe with at least one **12** trait.

Hiding In The Shadows

- ♂ **1 XP** when you take action to stay out of the spotlight.
- ♂ **3 XP** when you leave the shadows to accomplish something important.
- ♂ **10 XP** when you step into the spotlight in front of a large group in order to accomplish something important, or when you try to leave your group to survive alone.

Intuitive

- ♂ **1 XP** when you share insights based on looking at the big picture or create an asset based on perceiving deeper connections.
- ♂ **3 XP** when you succeed on a roll to create an asset based on spontaneously changing plans in the moment or doing something surprising.
- ♂ **10 XP** when an asset you earned XP for helps defeat a challenge with at least one **12** trait, or when failing against such a challenge prompts you to ask for guidance on how to be more logical or methodical.

Levelling Up

- ♂ **1 XP** when you earn a **PP** from an SFX or Limit (such as Hinder).
- ♂ **3 XP** when you help someone else recover from stress or you succeed on a roll to create an asset for an ally.
- ♂ **10 XP** when you recover from stress of **12** or larger, or when an asset you created for someone else helps defeat a challenge that has at least one trait at **12**.

Lone Wolf

- ♂ **1 XP** when you leave your allies to face a dangerous or hated enemy, or when you create an asset that requires taking time alone.
- ♂ **3 XP** when your actions prompt criticism or dismay in your allies, or when you issue a threat that risks alienating an ally.
- ♂ **10 XP** when you finally take out someone you've been hunting on your own that has at least one **12** trait, or when you give up your chance at doing so to achieve something greater.

Looking For Redemption

- ∅ **1 XP** when you point out someone else's wrongdoing or express regret for your own.
- ∅ **3 XP** when you refuse to grant leniency, or when you choose not to punish a wrongdoer.
- ∅ **10 XP** when you announce that you feel you have finally paid for your crimes, or when you announce your final acceptance of the fact that you never will.

Loose Cannon

- ∅ **1 XP** when you take reckless action without consulting anyone else.
- ∅ **3 XP** when you dismiss or diminish the fallout of your own actions.
- ∅ **10 XP** when you risk your life without calculation or planning and the risk either succeeds in bettering the lives of many or costs you deeply (or both).

Mending Fences

- ∅ **1 XP** when a long-time friend, family member, or loved one rejects you in some way, or when you try to get them to let you back into their life.
- ∅ **3 XP** when you try to get closer to someone you care about by taking on a new role or obligation.
- ∅ **10 XP** when you are stressed out while trying to protect or be closer to the person you care about, or when you destroy any progress you've made by stressing them out.

Mercenary

- ∅ **1 XP** when you seek payment.

- ∅ **3 XP** when you act callously to benefit yourself or when you receive payment for services rendered.
- ∅ **10 XP** when you betray a friend or ally for a big payout, or when you agree to do so but then refuse at the last moment.

Methodical

- ∅ **1 XP** when you create an asset based on planning ahead or attention to detail.
- ∅ **3 XP** when you succeed on a roll to create an asset based on noticing a flaw or using deductive reasoning.
- ∅ **10 XP** when an asset you earned XP for helps defeat a challenge that had at least one **12** trait, or when failing against such a challenge prompts you to follow the example of someone who is more flexible, intuitive, or spontaneous.

Natural Leader

- ∅ **1 XP** when you give orders to allies (whether or not they listen).
- ∅ **3 XP** when you create an asset based on working together or talking people into things.
- ∅ **10 XP** when your group officially recognizes you as their leader, when a rival claims a leadership role you believe should've been yours, or when you announce your realization that you're not the leader your group needs.

Obscure Knowledge

- ∅ **1 XP** when you share an insight based on your knowledge of academic subjects or niche trivia.

- ♂ **3 XP** when you express an embarrassing amount of excitement over encountering a thing or person you've learned a lot about.
- ♂ **10 XP** when your obscure knowledge saves a teammate from disaster, or when you quit the team because your contributions aren't appreciated.

Ongoing Drama

- ♂ **1 XP** when you could end a conflict by revealing a secret, but choose not to, or when your deeply held belief causes conflict with another PC.
- ♂ **3 XP** when your refusal to act against your belief or reveal a secret causes your group problems or conflict.
- ♂ **10 XP** when you reveal one of your secrets publicly, or when your belief or unrevealed secret causes you or another PC to be taken out.

Proving Yourself

- ♂ **1 XP** when you talk to a more experienced ally about your insecurities or about the difficult challenges you've already overcome.
- ♂ **3 XP** when a more experienced ally grants you an asset, or when you turn down a more experienced ally's offer of help.
- ♂ **10 XP** when you take an instrumental role in your group's defeat of a much more powerful enemy, or when you are stressed out while acting recklessly to try to defeat such an enemy.

Religious Believer

- ♂ **1 XP** when you take action in concordance with the dictates of your faith.

- ♂ **3 XP** when you refuse a temptation to transgress the rules of your faith.
- ♂ **10 XP** when the pursuit of your faith prompts you to confront a challenge with at least one **12** trait, or you refuse the challenge and abandon such a pursuit.

Schemer

- ♂ **1 XP** when you keep or reveal a secret.
- ♂ **3 XP** when you first use an asset you created before the current scene.
- ♂ **10 XP** when you complete a complicated plan to accomplish a great deed, or abandon the plan in favour of improvisation.

Seeking Justice

- ♂ **1 XP** when you declare a crime has been committed or pledge to help someone find justice.
- ♂ **3 XP** when you declare you are taking charge of an investigation or successfully track down a wrong-doer.
- ♂ **10 XP** when you leave behind a larger duty to focus on your current obligations, or vice-versa.

Unworthy?

- ♂ **1 XP** when you or an ally vocally question whether you belong in a group.
- ♂ **3 XP** when you dramatically succeed or fail in a situation where your allies depend on you, or when you inflict a non-injurious complication or stress on an ally who doubts you.
- ♂ **10 XP** when you are faced with the decision: step up and decide that you are worthy to be a part of the group, or leave the group because you believe you're unworthy.

Valiant

- ∅ **1 XP** when you declare that your actions forward your cause.
- ∅ **3 XP** when you create an asset representing dedication to your cause, either for yourself or others.
- ∅ **10 XP** when you abandon your grand cause to focus on more immediate needs

Wholesome

- ∅ **1 XP** when you promise to help someone or you unexpectedly aid someone who thought all hope was lost.
- ∅ **3 XP** when you take ♦ or greater stress trying to fulfil your promise to help someone.
- ∅ **10 XP** when you confront a challenge with at least one ⑫ trait as part of fulfilling a promise, or when you inform someone that your attempt to help them has proven too difficult for you.