

# Iron Triangle

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# Intro

## Why roleplaying games?

Unlike almost any other activity, roleplaying games combine:

- Playing a role: portraying a character in a collaborative story with other people
- Playing a game: making choices constrained by rules in pursuit of a goal

## Why this game?

This game puts player choice first. When there's uncertainty about an outcome, players make simultaneous choices from clearly ranked options to find out what happens. Success or failure is up to the choices you make during play, not the luck of the dice or a "bad" choice during character creation.

## Materials

- Pencils
- Paper
- Printouts of the character sheet at the end of the book, or more blank paper
- Printouts of the cards accompanying this book, or index cards to write on
- Three different kinds of tokens. You can use coins, cubes, beads or whatever you have, as long as they're visibly different and you can conceal several of them in your hand. You'll need at least 10 per player.

## Participants

You need 2-5 people. One person is the Game Moderator (GM), the other players each create and control a Player Character (PC).

Players make decisions for their PCs. The GM is responsible for making decisions for all Non-Player Characters (NPCs). The GM isn't the author of the story, but they keep the story interesting by challenging the players with [Countdowns](#), [Problems](#), and [Conflicts](#).

# Setting

Before making characters, the players and the GM should agree on expectations and the setting for the story. This can be done collaboratively, taking turns to answer questions about the setting and asking others once you've added a detail. Or some of the work can be done by the GM in advance, with the players embellishing afterwards. This isn't a game where you just sit back and listen to the GM's story, so there does need to be player involvement.

## Setting Expectations

### Off-limits topics

Find out if there's a topic someone doesn't want to be part of the game. Politics, sex, religion, whatever it may be, don't ask prying questions, just note it and move on.

### Disruptions

Don't want phones at the table? Want regular snack / smoke / bathroom breaks, or keep playing when someone leaves? This may seem trivial, but clarify up front.

### Resolving player disputes

The rules specify who makes decisions in particular circumstances, but when players have disagreements of opinion outside of the rules, how do you want to handle it? By default, if the players get stuck arguing, the GM will move the story along by introducing new problems or consequences. If you want to agree on a different method (majority vote, draw straws, whatever) now's the time to do it.

## Setting the Story

### Genre

This game is inspired by kung-fu movies, samurai comics, and 80's action flicks. It can handle other stories where person to person conflict is important. If you're trying to play romance or interstellar space opera, try it out, but you should at least figure out what concepts like "grappling" translate to in a game about spaceships or suitors.

### What brought you together?

Are your characters part of the same gang, military unit, dojo, or secret government conspiracy? Do you have a shared enemy or past trauma? Are you seeking the same goal, perhaps even competing for it?

## **Antagonists**

Who is out to stop you, who is trying to get to your goal before you do, who do you want revenge against?

## **Level of technology or magic**

If it's a high-tech or high-magic setting, why is person to person conflict still relevant? Fights between element-bending wizards? Gun-fu? Personal forcefields that stop energy and ballistic weapons, making martial arts king?

## **A safe place**

Where do you go when you rest? A superhero clubhouse, hidden lair in the sewers, dingy flophouse?

## **A dangerous place**

Where does the music start getting ominous? The wrong side of the tracks, the haunted graveyard, the Triad territory?

# Creating a character

Write down your choices on paper using pencil, since your character will change over time. There's a blank character sheet at the end of the book, and an example filled out sheet at the end of this chapter.

Some of the sections of the character sheet have a blank checkbox ☐ next to them. During play you'll mark to indicate they've been used or achieved. These usage limits on things like backgrounds aren't a limit on how often you can portray your character. They are limits on how much guaranteed effect you have on the story via the rules, to keep things fair and share the spotlight. You'll have options to regain them, so don't be afraid to use them.

## Choose a name

## Choose a fighting style

Your fighting style is up to you, there are no rule benefits or restrictions. Unarmed, armed, multi-armed, as long as it fits the setting.

## Choose a description

I highly recommend you draw a picture, even if you think your drawing skills are bad.

## Level

Level represents how much your character has learned and advanced. You start at level one. As you [Level Up](#) you can learn specials (secret techniques that bend the rules) and combos (like a boxer following a jab with an uppercut), but you do not start with any at level one.

### NOTE

Beliefs, flaws, and goals are not just filler to be forgotten about. You cannot level up without playing them. A little friction with other players is good, but if you choose things they are adamantly opposed to, they can veto your approach to problems during play. It's in your best interests to talk things out with them in advance.

## Choose a belief

Your character's belief should be something that can complicate [Problems](#) and lead to hard choices. You'll mark once you've used it.

## Choose a flaw

Your character's flaw should be something that can lead to failure to overcome problems. You'll mark once you've used it.

## Choose a goal

Your character's current goal should be something potentially, but not trivially, achievable within one game session. The GM can deny trivial goals, but cannot choose a goal for you. You'll mark once your goal has been achieved.

## Veto

You start with one veto, and will mark once it's been used. [Using a veto](#) allows you to undo another player's choice regarding the outcome of a problem (not a conflict), and substitute your own.

## Choose backgrounds

Backgrounds are used to overcome problems, and are up to you. Be as creative as you like, whether that's "former cop" or "calligraphy instructor to the Exiled Prince of Xaran". You can choose up to 3 backgrounds. You'll mark next to each as you use them. You can wait until during play to decide on a background.

## Choose energy

Energy represents your mental and physical resources in a conflict. You start with a total maximum of 10 points of energy. Distribute them among the types Defend, Grapple, and Attack. Put at least one point in each.

### NOTE

Don't worry about optimizing, just go with what fits your concept of your character's fighting style. Defend represents things like blocking, dodging, and parrying. Grapple represents wrestling, throwing, joint locks, and chokes. Attack represents punching, kicking, stabbing, and slashing. If you want a balanced approach, put 4 in Attack, 3 in Defend, 2 in Grapple, and the last point wherever.

You'll keep track of your maximum separate from your current energy for each type. Your current energy is reduced as you make losing choices in a conflict. As you approach zero for a particular type, you're much less effective. However, reaching zero in at least one type is required to level up, since you learn by pushing yourself. When that happens, you'll mark next to the type of energy that reached zero.

Once your current energy is zero in all three types you're out of the conflict. Your current energy can be regained by [Resting](#). Your maximum energy can be increased by leveling up.

## Choose moves

Moves (as in "kung fu moves") are the main things you do in a conflict to reduce your opponent's energy. You'll learn more moves as you level up, but to start you know 4 out of the 9 listed on the character sheet. Make up cool names and write them down next to the moves to indicate you know them.

### NOTE

Don't worry too much about what the difference between moves is, as long as you pick a reasonable variety (i.e. not all 3 Attack moves). The [Conflicts](#) and [Conflict Turns](#) chapters will explain how they work.

## Example character

See the next page for an example of a filled out character sheet

Character Name: <i>Ada</i>				Description:		
Fighting Style: <i>Dirty Boxing</i>						
<input type="checkbox"/> Veto		Level: <i>1</i>				
<input type="checkbox"/> Belief: <i>Innocents should be protected</i>						
<input type="checkbox"/> Flaw: <i>Haunted by ghosts</i>						
<input type="checkbox"/> Goal: <i>Discover Elbow Clan's plan</i>						
<b>Backgrounds</b>						
<input type="checkbox"/> <i>Disgraced hockey player</i>						
<input type="checkbox"/> <i>Detective</i>						
<input type="checkbox"/>						
<b>Zero?</b>	<b>Current</b>	<b>Max</b>	<b>Energy Type</b>			
<input type="checkbox"/>		5	Attack			
<input type="checkbox"/>		3	Defend			
<input type="checkbox"/>		2	Grapple			
<b>Move</b>		<b>Stance</b>	<b>Base</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Combo</b>	<b>Combo</b>
Attack High		x2	3	<i>Overhand Right</i>		
Attack Low		x2	3			
Attack Mid		x2	3	<i>Groin Kick</i>		
Defend High		x1	2			
Defend Low		x1	2			
Defend Mid		x1	2	<i>Philly Shell</i>		
Grapple High		x2	4			
Grapple Low		x2	4	<i>Trip</i>		
Grapple Mid		x2	4			
<input type="checkbox"/> Special:				<input type="checkbox"/>		
<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>		
<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>		
<input type="checkbox"/>				<input type="checkbox"/>		



# Story

Storytelling plays out like improv. The GM describes a situation, the players narrate what they do, the GM describes an outcome if necessary, other players build on that description. As long as the narration is in line with the established setting and describes actions that don't have uncertain consequences, the players can generally do what their characters want. You can talk in character or simply describe, whichever is comfortable for your group.

Once there's some uncertainty about an outcome, play by the rules of [Problems](#), or [Conflicts](#) if it involves opposing NPCs. Player goals were already established to be non-trivial, so you're going to have to overcome some uncertainty before reaching your goal. You can't simply narrate "I got the gizmo I wanted" without any buildup. If on the other hand players aren't moving the story forward, the GM should remind them of their goals, then introduce more problems or threaten to mark [Countdowns](#).

If you're not familiar with improv, it's worth reading *Play Unsafe* by Graham Walmsley. In the meantime, here are a few suggestions:

Default to "Yes, and..." This means building on other people's narration and moving the story along, not contradicting their narration and blocking the story. The GM can redirect when people are straying outside of the rules or setting, so you generally don't have to worry about it as a player. In situations where there are potential negative consequences for your character, there will be uncertainty, so you will have rules support for making your choices matter.

Borrow mercilessly from fiction. Read, watch, or play lots of examples from the genre. Plot twists, character traits, it's all fair game.

Worrying too much about the quality of your ideas is the enemy of fun. Ideas that might seem cliched or obvious can work really well in a roleplaying game.

# Countdowns

Countdowns are a way for the GM to put pressure on players to keep the story moving, by reminding them that antagonists and other threats don't stop when they're offscreen.

Keep track of countdowns in a player-visible location. A group of 4-8 boxes per countdown drawn on a piece of paper that the GM marks off one by one works well. If you have giant dice or a doomsday clock or something similarly ominous, go for that instead.

Players should have a general idea of the threat or antagonist associated with a countdown, even if they don't know the exact details. You'll probably have multiple concurrent countdowns, so make sure they're named.

- "4 hours before the hostages are killed" is a short term countdown. They don't have to correspond to real world hours.
- "8 pieces of the demon statue before Amakusa is resurrected" might be a story-long countdown.
- Provide at least some information about a countdown, otherwise it isn't threatening, it's frustrating. "The Elbow Clan's plan" is good enough, even if players don't yet know exactly what it is.
- "The rope is about to snap in 5..4..3.." isn't a countdown, it's an immediate problem.

If players stop the threat before the countdown finishes, erase it. If the countdown finishes, the GM decides how to narrate the consequences. They can be as bad as makes sense for the story, but cannot involve PC death.

# Problems

The GM can add problems to the story that stand between the PCs and their goals.

Problems should have interesting potential consequences for both failure and success. Otherwise there's no point in using rules to determine the outcome, just continue the story. Problems typically involve inanimate circumstances or neutral NPCs; if an NPC is actively opposed to the PCs, it's a conflict.

- "Your bedroom door is locked" probably isn't a problem; it's your house, you have the key or can get a locksmith or kick the door in and nothing will happen.
- "The door to the library is locked" might be a problem, if something interesting will happen if you ignore it or take too long opening it.
- "The door to the library containing the forbidden scroll is locked, and you heard that the Elbow Clan are going after it tonight" is definitely a problem.
- "The door to the library is blocked by the Elbow Clan who are out for blood" is a conflict.

To decide the outcome of a problem, players simultaneously choose one of the following options by showing 1-4 fingers:

1. Succeed with a good idea
2. Succeed by spending a background point
3. Succeed with a significant complication
4. Fail in an interesting way

Higher numbered choices beat lower numbered choices, with one exception: if players only choose 1 and 4, 1 beats 4. Ties are broken in favor of the player who least recently decided the outcome of a problem, otherwise by the GM.

GM: The door is locked, this is a problem, what do you do? On the count of 3, ready...

If player A chooses 3 (Succeed with a significant complication) and player B chooses 4 (Fail), player B gets to decide.

If player A chooses 1 and the only other player chooses 4, player A gets to decide.

If player A chooses 1, player B chooses 2, and player C chooses 4, player C gets to decide.

If player A chooses 1, player B chooses 1, and player C chooses 4, it's a tie between A and B.

## Succeed with a good idea

Describe a good idea for how you overcome the problem, building on the prior established facts of the story and setting.

*Player: When we scoped this place out earlier, we saw the guard taking a break up on the roof. I bet there's a door there, maybe they left it unlocked.*

GM: So there's an unlocked door up there, what do you see when you open it?

## Succeed by spending a background point

Spend a background point in order to introduce new facts related to your background that help you overcome the problem. This could be physical items, knowledge, relationships to NPCs; it's up to you as long as it's plausibly related to your background. Any NPCs introduced are controlled by the GM after the current problem is resolved. You can't choose this option if you don't have the remaining background point.

*Player: Since I'm a detective, it makes sense that I'd have a lockpick gun, I can use that to open the door.*

GM: Maybe something less high-tech for our setting?

*Player: Yeah, regular lockpicks make more sense.*

## Succeed with a significant complication

Describe how you succeed, but with a significant consequence or hard choice. This typically involves your belief, or sometimes flaw. Mark which one you used on your character sheet. You can't choose this option if it was already marked.

*Player: I believe innocents should be protected. This guard is going to be in trouble if the Elbow Clan shows up, I'm sure I can explain to him why he should let us in and get out of here.*

GM: That doesn't sound like a complication. How about a hard choice - "protect" him by knocking him out, or explain the situation and he'll put himself in danger by looking for the ninjas.

*Player: Ugh, yeah, what would I do... knocking him out is probably the lesser of two evils*

## Fail in an interesting way

Describe how you fail, and the interesting outcome that results. This typically involves your flaw, or sometimes belief. Mark which one you used on your character sheet. You can't choose this option if it was already marked.

*Player: So I'm haunted by ghosts, yeah? The ghosts at the library are telling me that scroll is bad news, like Raiders of the Lost Ark bad. No way I'm going to touch that thing, we're just gonna wait for the ninjas to get their hands on it and see what happens.*

### NOTE

Why should players decide to create complications or failure? It makes for more interesting stories, and is required to level up.

## Consequences of problems

Failure can involve consequences such as setbacks towards reaching other goals, loss of energy, escalation to a conflict, or a mark on a countdown. Failure cannot involve player character death, this isn't a game where "rocks fall, you die."

## GM escalation of problems

The GM can redirect players that are contradicting established fact or breaking the rules, for instance by choosing failure but then describing success. If the player can't come up with a description within the bounds of the rules, move to the player with the next highest choice. The GM cannot choose for the players, but if all of the players refuse to make a choice, the GM decides the outcome of the problem.

## Don't repeat

The story should be meaningfully different after a problem, succeed or fail, so it doesn't make

sense to repeat an attempt at a problem.

## Using a veto

You can use a veto after another player has narrated an outcome and before play has moved on, to substitute your own choice. The vetoed choice doesn't take effect; the other player doesn't mark the background point, flaw or belief on their character sheet. You can veto any of the possible outcomes, but you must substitute it with a success, either via a good idea or spending a background point. You cannot threaten to veto; if you say the word veto, you've used it. You cannot veto a veto; the first player to say veto wins. If there's disagreement on a tie, the GM decides.

If vetos cause significant strife among players, talk it out and re-set expectations.

# Conflicts

When the NPCs in a scene are actively opposed to the PCs' goals, the GM can decide it escalates to a conflict.

Conflicts do not have to be violent, or even physical. The rules are the same for an alleyway chase, a samurai staredown to see who flinches first, or a bloody battle to the death.

To play out a conflict:

1. Establish the stakes.
2. Reveal energy.
3. Players decide who takes the first turn.
4. Play and pass turns.
5. Resolve the consequences.

## Establishing stakes

The players decide the end and the means, i.e. what they want and how they're going to achieve it. The GM decides the consequences, which should be proportional to the players' decision. If the players intend to kill, it's a lethal conflict, and their characters can be killed. Negotiate as necessary until the players agree with the potential consequences.

Entering a lethal conflict requires consensus from all players, and involves all player characters. In a lesser conflict, some PCs can sit it out, but will suffer any consequences. Characters with zero total energy cannot participate in a conflict, but will suffer any consequences. The GM controls whether NPCs enter a conflict; this means players cannot force a conflict.

If the players cannot make a choice in a reasonable time or choose not to enter the conflict, the GM decides the outcome. In that case, the consequence should be limited to a significant setback to reaching their goal, or a mark on a countdown, not death.

## Example stakes

*GM: As you enter the library, you see two ninja grab the forbidden scroll and jump out the window. What do you do?*

Players: Kill 'em so we can take the scroll back!

*GM: Ok, a loss means you die, and even if you win you won't know what their plan was.*

Players: Maybe we chase them down and interrogate them?

*GM: Then if you lose they get away and their masters will know you're after the scroll. If you win you'll get the scroll back and a chance to question them. Ready?*

Players: Yeah, let's go.

## Reveal energy

Once a conflict begins, remaining energy for NPCs and PCs is public information. Use tokens of 3 different colors, sizes, and/or shapes to track your energy, e.g. light for Defend, dark for Attack, and contrasting for Grapple. NPC available moves and specials are not usually public information, but PC moves and specials are (since the GM could memorize them anyway).

### NOTE

This means that unlike rolling dice behind a screen, the GM cannot fudge the numbers either for or against the players.

## First turn

Players decide who takes the first turn. There are no rules for surprise or ambush.

## Playing and passing turns

See the rules for [Conflict Turns](#) for determining the winner of a conflict turn. Once a turn is over, the winner decides who takes the next turn. In case of a tie, the GM decides. Players must pass to someone on their side who has not yet had an equal number of turns if possible, unless otherwise agreed.

## Resolving consequences

Once all characters on one side are out of the conflict, it's over. The winning side gets to narrate the outcome, within the boundaries of the established stakes. In case of a tie due to the last characters being eliminated at the same time, the GM's side wins. In case of disagreement, the



GM decides, including how the outcome relates to the next problem or conflict.

PCs can die only in lethal conflicts, not from problems or lesser conflicts. If a PC dies, the player may create another character. See [Replacement characters](#). The players decide how to introduce the new character to the story as soon as possible.

## Minor conflicts

For situations that are more than a problem but less than a full conflict, the GM can decide in advance that it's a minor conflict only worth playing a single turn. In that case the winner of the turn is the winner of the conflict. The consequences, win or lose, should be proportionally less than a full conflict.

## Repeating conflicts

Do not repeat a conflict, even a minor one, until the situation has meaningfully changed. Simply resting and trying again is not meaningful change.

## Resting

After a conflict, players can collectively choose one of the following:

- Take a breather to regain 1 point of energy in the type of your choice. You cannot take another breather until after a full rest.
- Take a short rest to regain up to your maximum for the type of energy with the **lowest** maximum (your choice if there's a tie). You cannot take another short rest until after a full rest.
- Take a full rest to regain all of your energy. The GM can mark a countdown.

The effects apply to all players equally, it is not possible for some to take a full rest while others take a short rest or breather.

# Conflict Turns

To play out a conflict turn:

1. Choose an opponent.
2. Choose a stance, then reveal.
3. Choose a move, then reveal.
4. Identify the winner based on move and disadvantage.
5. Resolve the consequences based on move, stance, disadvantage, and combos

## Ranking of actions

Actions represent **how** a move tries to beat an opponent. Defend blocks Attack, Grapple grabs Defend, Attack hurts attempts to Grapple. There is no "best" action, each of them can be beaten by the appropriate choice.

Table 1. Actions

	Beats
Attack	Grapple
Defend	Attack
Grapple	Defend

## Ranking of locations

Locations represent **where** on an opponent a move is aimed. Low ducks High, Mid crushes Low, High out-ranges Mid. Again, there is no "best" location, each of them can be beaten by the appropriate choice.

Table 2. Locations

	Beats
High	Mid
Low	High
Mid	Low

### NOTE

If you need a mnemonic, both actions and locations happen to be ranked in alphabetical order. G beats D beats A. H beats M beats L.

## Choose an opponent

If it's your turn, choose any character on the opposing side. There are no rules for range or cover, assume you can reach any character in the conflict.

If it's not your turn and the opposing side chooses you, the rest of the rules for this turn apply symmetrically to you. Being able to choose an opponent is a tactical advantage, but it doesn't determine whether you win or lose the turn.

## Choose a stance

Stances represent preparing to take a particular action. They make your actions more effective, but your opponent can see your stance before you choose a move.

To choose a stance, select a number between zero and your current energy corresponding to one type of action.

- If you choose a move corresponding to your stance and win, you keep the energy you committed. Your opponent will lose an amount equal to the energy you committed times a multiplier associated with your move.
- If you choose a move corresponding to your stance and lose, you will lose the energy you committed, but it is not multiplied.
- If you choose a different move, the stance was a feint, and has no effect on either side's losses. You did not commit the energy, you keep it, although it may still be reduced by other losses.

Remaining energy is public information, but conceal your total amount while selecting a stance so that you do not give away your choice before revealing. Hold out an unambiguous fist containing the number of tokens corresponding to your choice of stance. Open your hand once both sides are ready to reveal. Use an empty fist to indicate no stance.

### Example of choosing a stance

You have 3 remaining energy in Attack, and choose 2 Attack for your stance.

- If you play an Attack move and win, your opponent will lose energy equal to 2 times a multiplier.
- If you play an Attack move and lose, you will lose the 2 Attack energy.
- If you play a Defend or Grapple move, your stance will not affect losses to either side, but your 3 remaining Attack energy may be reduced by other losses.

## Choose a move

Choose a move by playing the corresponding card face down, then flipping to reveal once both sides are ready.

Your most important move is surrender. If you play surrender, you are out of the conflict, and will eventually take your side's consequences of winning or losing the overall conflict, but do not suffer any energy losses for this turn. Surrender is not retreat; if you surrender in a lethal conflict your opponent can choose to kill your character immediately. If for some reason you have no other remaining moves, you must play surrender.

Other moves are defined by the name you chose, an action, a location, a multiplier applied to the amount of stance energy you committed, and a base energy loss your opponent will suffer if you win.

*Table 3. Moves*

	Stance Multiplier	Base
Attack High	x2	3
Attack Low	x2	3
Attack Mid	x2	3
Defend High	x1	2
Defend Low	x1	2
Defend Mid	x1	2
Grapple High	x2	4
Grapple Low	x2	4
Grapple Mid	x2	4

When choosing a move, it is important to consider your potential disadvantage and combos.

## Disadvantage

If you lost your prior turn, and then play a move that matches the action **or** the location of your most recent losing move, it is at a disadvantage. If you lose, you will lose additional energy; you will also lose what otherwise would have been a tie.

Energy losses from disadvantage are cumulative with consecutive disadvantaged turns, at one point of energy per prior turn. Disadvantage ends once you end a turn without losing, play a move that doesn't match, or at the end of the conflict. It does not end once someone else is selected as an opponent, so leave your played move cards out face up to indicate disadvantage.

This does restrict your available moves.

### **Example disadvantage**

The prior turn you played Attack Low and lost, so that card is face up in front of you. You play Defend Low, which contains Low, so it is at disadvantage. You lose, and lose an additional point of energy. You keep Attack Low and Defend Low face up in front of you.

The next turn, you play Attack High, which does not match Defend Low, so it is not at disadvantage. You lose, but do not lose additional energy from disadvantage. You keep Attack High face up in front of you, and return Attack Low and Defend Low to your available moves.

## **Combos**

Combos are relationships between moves that are learned separately from moves. For example, a jab might be followed up with either an uppercut or a right cross. If the immediately prior turn was a loss for your opponent, check if the move that won is related to a combo followup that you know. The relation is based solely on the action and location of the moves. If you chose a move that is a combo followup and win, your opponent will lose additional energy. Combos do not affect ties.

Combo bonuses are cumulative with consecutive combo turns, at one point of energy per prior turn. Leave your played cards out face up in front of your opponent to indicate a combo. This does restrict your available moves. A player can voluntarily end the combo before choosing a move in order to return all the moves to availability. Combos end once you lose a turn, play a move that doesn't combo, choose a different opponent, or at the end of the conflict.

You can play up to 3 consecutive winning turns to continue a combo, then must pass. This counts as one turn for purposes of players taking equal number of turns. The character you pass to can continue the combo against the same opponent if possible.

### **Example combo**

You have played 2 consecutive winning turns, Attack Low then Grapple High. Your possible combo followups from Grapple High are Defend High or Attack High. You play Attack High and win. Your opponent loses an additional 2 points of energy. Leave Attack Low, Grapple High and Attack High face up in front of your opponent. You have played 3 consecutive turns, so you pass to another player on your side. If they know a followup to Attack High, they can continue the combo.

**NOTE**

Keep your face-up disadvantage cards closer to you than the cards for combos being played against you. Because combos end as soon as a different opponent is chosen, unlike disadvantage, it should be clear from context which is which.

## Identify the winner

Check in order:

1. If a move's action beats the other move's action, it wins.
2. If a move's location beats the other move's location, it wins.
3. If one move is disadvantaged, it loses.
4. Otherwise it's a tie.

### Example winner

- You play Attack High, your opponent plays Grapple Low. Attack beats Grapple, you win.
- You play Attack High, your opponent plays Attack Low. Low beats High, you lose.
- You lost your prior turn with Defend High, your opponent won their prior turn. You play Attack High at disadvantage, your opponent plays Attack High, you lose.

## Resolve the consequences

If you played the winning move, the opponent loses energy equal to the sum of:

- (your committed stance energy times the multiplier of your move)
- their committed stance energy, without a multiplier
- the base amount of your move
- one point per prior win in your successful combo
- one point per prior loss in their disadvantage

When you commit stance energy and lose, that portion of the loss comes from the type you committed. For remaining losses, the person controlling the character that lost energy decides how to distribute it among the different types.

### Example consequences of a win

- There has been one prior turn, in which your opponent played Attack Low and lost.
- This turn, your possible combo followups are Grapple High or Attack High.
- You choose 3 Grapple for your stance, your opponent chooses 1 Defend.
- You choose Grapple High for your move, your opponent chooses Defend Low.

Since Grapple beats Defend, you win. Your opponent loses a total of 13 energy:

- 3 times 2 because your stance matched your action
- 1 because their stance matched their action
- 4 due to the base amount of your move
- 1 due to your combo
- 1 due to their disadvantage

At least 1 point of those losses is applied to Defend and the remainder according to your opponent's choice.

In a tie, each character loses energy equal to the base amount for the other character's move, but no additional losses. Ties end combos and disadvantage.

### Example consequences of tie

You play Attack High, your opponent plays Attack High. Neither of you were at disadvantage, so it's a tie. You each lose 3 energy. No cards remain face up to indicate combo or disadvantage.

You can keep track of energy losses during a conflict by removing the corresponding tokens. Make sure to write down your current energy on your character sheet after the conflict ends.

If you reach zero energy for one action type, mark it on your character sheet for purposes of [Level Up](#). This does not restrict your ability to play moves of that type, only your ability to choose a stance of that type.

If you reach zero energy in all action types, you are out of the conflict, and suffer the consequence specified by the stakes. In particular, if it is a lethal conflict, your character is dead, even if your side wins the overall conflict.

# Specials

Specials can be used to modify the rules in different ways. Once a special is used, it cannot be used again until after a full rest. Each character can use at most one special per conflict turn.

The description of a special identifies at what time in a turn it can be used.

To use a special, play its card face down at the appropriate time. Before revealing it, give your opponent an opportunity to play a special of their own. If a special should be revealed at a time different from when it is used, the description will say so.

Some specials have requirements that must be met before learning, either in terms of character level reached, or specials learned first.

Some specials have multiple variations, each specific to a particular action type. For instance, Wax On Attack is different from Wax On Defend . Each variation must be learned separately and counts as a separate special.

If specials clash in regards to timing or effect, the player of the special closer to the bottom of the list below decides the outcome. If identical specials clash, neither takes effect. If there is still a question, the GM decides.

## Example clash between specials

You play Pressure Point, another player plays Yojimbo. There's a dispute about whether you get to choose where losses are distributed. Yojimbo is after Pressure Point on the list, so the player of Yojimbo decides that your choice of location takes effect on the original opponent, but not on the character that ends up taking the loss.

You play Scouter, your opponent plays Way of the Samurai. Even though Way of the Samurai is lower on the list, there is no interaction between the two specials, so your opponent cannot decide the outcome of Scouter.

### NOTE

You are welcome to re-theme specials to be more appropriate for your character. For instance, if your character suffering from a hangover isn't funny to you, Drunken Monkey could just as easily be a helpful but capricious spirit.



## Scouter

- Use before choosing an opponent, or before choosing a stance.
- One opponent's moves, combos, and specials are public knowledge for the rest of the conflict.

## To Blave

- Use at any time matching another special you know.
- Can be used twice per conflict instead of once per full rest.
- Has no other effect.

## There Can Be Only One

- Use before choosing an opponent, or before choosing a stance.
- Choose a character. You and that character cannot choose a different opponent until one of you is out of the conflict.
- Either of you can respond to opponents choosing you as normal.

## Pressure Point

- Use before choosing a move.
- Reveal before resolving the turn.
- You choose where your opponent's losses are distributed this turn.

## Wax On (Defend / Grapple / Attack)

- Use before choosing a move.
- Reveal before resolving the turn.
- If the type of your opponent's action matches this special, you lose no energy from their stance this turn.

## Santa Carla (Defend / Grapple / Attack)

- Requires: Level 5
- Use before choosing a move.

- Reveal before resolving the turn
- If the type of your stance and action matches this special and you win, regain energy equal to the amount you committed to the stance this turn.
- Do not multiply the gain by your move's stance multiplier.
- You choose where to distribute the gain, but you cannot regain more than your maximum.

## **Dig Two Graves (Defend / Grapple / Attack)**

- Requires: Level 5 and Wax On of the matching type.
- Use before choosing a move.
- Reveal before resolving the turn.
- If the type of your opponent's action matches this special, they lose energy equal to the amount you lose this turn.

## **I Already Know (Defend / Grapple / Attack)**

- Requires: Level 10
- Use before choosing a stance.
- For this turn your opponent cannot choose a move with an action matching this special.

## **Yojimbo**

- Requires: Level 5
- Use before resolving a different character's turn.
- This turn you lose the amount of energy they would have lost, and they lose 0.
- Does not count against your limit of one special per turn.

## **Liquid Metal**

- Requires: Level 10
- Duplicate the effect of a special that has been used by a different character in this conflict.
- Use and reveal at the time appropriate for the duplicated special.
- Cannot duplicate specials after it on the list.

## **Drunken Monkey**

- Requires: Level 10
- Use before choosing a move.
- Until this conflict ends, once per turn after revealing your move, you can choose to replace it.
- Your opponent selects the replacement randomly from your remaining moves (not including surrender).
- You cannot participate in the next conflict, even if you rest first.

## **The Way of the Samurai**

- Requires: Level 10
- Use before choosing a stance.
- Regain energy up to your maximum in all types.
- You cannot be removed from this conflict until it ends, even if you reach 0 total energy.
- At the end of the conflict, you die irrevocably.
- Play out the conflict; even if the outcome is inevitable, the fate of your allies is not.
- NPCs cannot use this special, for obvious reasons.

# Level Up

At the end of a session, ask the following questions for each player:

- Did you play out a problem with complications or failure based on your **belief** or **flaw**?
- Did you accomplish your **goal**?
- Did you reach zero energy in at least one type of action during a **conflict**?

The answers should have already been clearly marked during play, but if there is disagreement, the GM decides.

Yes marks in all three categories mean you can level up. Increment your level by one.

When you level up, choose **one** of:

- Learn a move.
- Once you have learned all the moves, you can learn a variant of an existing move. Choose either +1 multiplier and -1 base or -1 multiplier and +1 base compared to the existing move. You can learn up to two moves this way, and they cannot copy the same move. You may spend a level up to replace one of the variants you know with a different move. Variants are considered the same as the original move for combos.
- Learn or make changes to two combo followups. You're limited to two followups per starting move. You must already know the followup moves. You don't need to know the starting move as long as one of your allies does.
- Add one to your maximum energy for one type of action. It must be a type that reached zero during a conflict.
- Learn a special. You cannot learn multiple copies of the exact same special, e.g. if you know Wax On (Defend) you can learn Wax On (Attack), but not another copy of Wax On (Defend).

When you level up, **also** choose **one** of:

- Regain up to 3 background points. You can have at most 3 total.
- Regain up to 1 veto. You can have at most 1 total.

Once you level up, erase the following marks:

- Erase your goal and its mark.
- Erase all marks for reaching zero energy. This means you can't save marks for types you didn't choose to increase.

- Erase marks for your belief and flaw only if **both** are marked. This means you can't always use one of them to level up, you have to play them equally.

Make sure to choose a name for any moves you learn. If you want to change the name of a move you already know, you can do so for free.

If you do not level up, you can save yes marks for the next session, but cannot have multiple marks per question.

You can adjust goals, beliefs, and flaws at the end of a session even if you did not level up. Choose a new goal, either now, or before the beginning of the next session. If you think that your character's beliefs or flaws have meaningfully changed, you may rewrite them. The same caveats from character creation regarding goals, beliefs, and flaws apply.

You can change backgrounds with GM approval, but it should be rare.

## Replacement characters

If the replacement for a dead character continues the deceased's fighting tradition, they can start at a level up to 5 or the deceased's level, whichever is lower.

Choose energy and starting moves as for a level 1 character, then make decisions for each level up. The level ups can involve learning a move or combo known by the deceased, but not a special.

Character Name:			Description:		
Fighting Style:					
<input type="checkbox"/> Veto	Level:				
<input type="checkbox"/> Belief:					
<input type="checkbox"/> Flaw:					
<input type="checkbox"/> Goal:					
<b>Backgrounds</b>					
<input type="checkbox"/>					
<input type="checkbox"/>					
<input type="checkbox"/>					
<b>Zero?</b>	<b>Current</b>	<b>Max</b>	<b>Energy Type</b>		
<input type="checkbox"/>			Attack		
<input type="checkbox"/>			Defend		
<input type="checkbox"/>			Grapple		
<b>Move</b>	<b>Stance</b>	<b>Base</b>	<b>Name</b>	<b>Combo</b>	<b>Combo</b>
Attack High	x2	3			
Attack Low	x2	3			
Attack Mid	x2	3			
Defend High	x1	2			
Defend Low	x1	2			
Defend Mid	x1	2			
Grapple High	x2	4			
Grapple Low	x2	4			
Grapple Mid	x2	4			
<input type="checkbox"/> Special:			<input type="checkbox"/>		
<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>		
<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>		
<input type="checkbox"/>			<input type="checkbox"/>		