



CONTENTS

CH. 1: THE WYRD ENGINE.....	1
Types of Play.....	1
Design Goals.....	1
What The Wyrd Engine Is Not	2

PART 1: THE MECHANICS

CH. 2: CORE MECHANICS	5
Conflict resolution at a glance	5
Fudge dice (4dF)	5
Skills	6
Traits.....	9
Gear	11
Difficulty Levels	12
Basic Combat in The Wyrd Engine.....	16
Character Creation.....	19
Creating Non-Player Characters.....	21
CH. 3: THE WYRD TOOLBOX.....	25

The Tools in the Box	25
Balancing	26
Adapting Skills.....	27
Adapting Traits.....	27
Adapting Stress	27

CH. 4: COMBAT	29
Dealing damage	29
Recovery	29

CH. 5: MAGIC.....	31
Design Goals for Magic Systems.....	31
Building Magic with Core Mechanics	32
The Gift of Twilight	33
The Warden's Path.....	34
Codex Infinitum	35
The Known and the Named.....	37

CH. 6: RACES & CREATURES	39
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PART 2: ONE-SHOTS

CH. 7: CRAFTING ONE-SHOTS.....	43
What Makes One-Shots Unique	43

Strengths and Limitations	43
Designing for One-Shots.....	44
Tools for Success	45
Conclusion	46

CH. 8: WHAT LINGERS	47
Act I: Echoes Before the Silence.....	49
Act II: A Silence That Should Have Passed.....	50
Act III: What the Stone Remembers	51
Act IV: The Thing That Waits	53

PART 3: EPISODIC PLAY

CH. 9: EPISODIC SETTINGS	61
What Is Episodic Play?.....	61
Strengths and Challenges	62
Designing Your Episodic Setting.....	62
Episode Templates and Tools.....	64
Examples of Episodic Settings.....	64
Conclusion	65

CH. 10: THE GRAND CASEBOOK	67
Introduction	67
The World of the Grand Casebook	67
Playing in the Grand Casebook.....	68
Key NPCs	71
Example PCs.....	72
Case Files: The Scenarios.....	78
Murder at the Brass Orchid.....	79
The Clockmaker's Deception.....	87
The Silent Courier	89

PART 4: CAMPAIGNS

CH. 11: RUNNING CAMPAIGNS	93
What Is a Campaign?	93
Strengths and Challenges	93
Building a Campaign Framework.....	94
Structuring Arcs	95
Player Engagement and Story Ownership.....	96
Advancement and Growth	96
Ending a Campaign Gracefully	97
Conclusion	97

CHAPTER 1: THE WYRD ENGINE

he Wyrd Engine is designed for fast-paced, story-driven play, blending the narrative freedom of Fate with a more structured approach to character abilities. The system emphasises quick character creation and streamlined mechanics, making it an excellent choice for one-shots and episodic campaigns. Game Masters should be able to generate all player characters for a session in less than an hour, and players should be able to pick up a pre-made character and start playing within minutes, allowing for flexible, drop-in play that suits rotating groups or short, focused sessions.

With accessibility in mind, The Wyrd Engine is built to be intuitive for newcomers to tabletop roleplaying games. By reducing mechanical complexity and focusing on descriptive actions, it ensures that even those with no prior experience can easily engage with the game. The system provides a strong foundation for storytelling while avoiding cumbersome rules, making it ideal for groups that want to dive straight into adventure without an extended learning curve.

TYPES OF PLAY

Roleplaying games can be structured in different ways, each offering a unique experience. The Wyrd Engine is primarily designed for *one-shots* and *episodic play*, but it can also support longer campaigns with some adjustments.

ONE-SHOTS

A one-shot is a self-contained session that tells a complete story in a single sitting. These are excellent for introducing new players, testing out new settings, or running short, focused narratives without long-term commitment.

PROS:

- Easy to set up and play with minimal preparation.
- Great for newcomers and drop-in players.
- Allows for high-stakes storytelling without long-term consequences.

CONS:

- Limited time for character development.
- Less room for complex, unfolding plots.

EPISODIC PLAY

Episodic games consist of multiple short adventures featuring recurring characters. Each session is largely self-contained, but there may be ongoing story threads that connect them.

PROS:

- Balances flexibility with continuity.
- Easy to accommodate changing player rosters.
- Encourages character growth while keeping stories manageable.

CONS:

- May lack the deep, overarching narrative of long campaigns.
- Requires careful pacing to make each session feel complete.

CAMPAIGN PLAY

A campaign is a long-running game with an ongoing story, often spanning multiple sessions with the same characters and overarching narrative.

PROS:

- Allows for deep character development and long-term storytelling.
- Provides a sense of progression and investment.

CONS:

- Requires long-term player commitment.
- Can be difficult to maintain momentum if players miss sessions.

The Wyrd Engine is optimised for one-shots and episodic games, ensuring quick character creation and fast-paced play. However, it can support campaigns with minor modifications, such as introducing progression mechanics or expanding character options over time.

DESIGN GOALS

The Wyrd Engine is built upon the following key design principles:

NARRATIVE-DRIVEN MECHANICS

While many systems provide detailed simulationist mechanics, The Wyrd Engine prioritises narrative flow. Rules are designed to reinforce storytelling rather than constrain it, ensuring that mechanics facilitate player agency and character development rather than slow down the action.

MODULAR AND SETTING-AGNOSTIC

The Wyrd Engine is intended to be adaptable to multiple settings, from Victorian steampunk mysteries to cosmic horror and high fantasy. Core mechanics remain consistent, while setting-specific options allow groups to tailor the experience to their preferred genre.

ACCESSIBILITY AND EASE OF PLAY

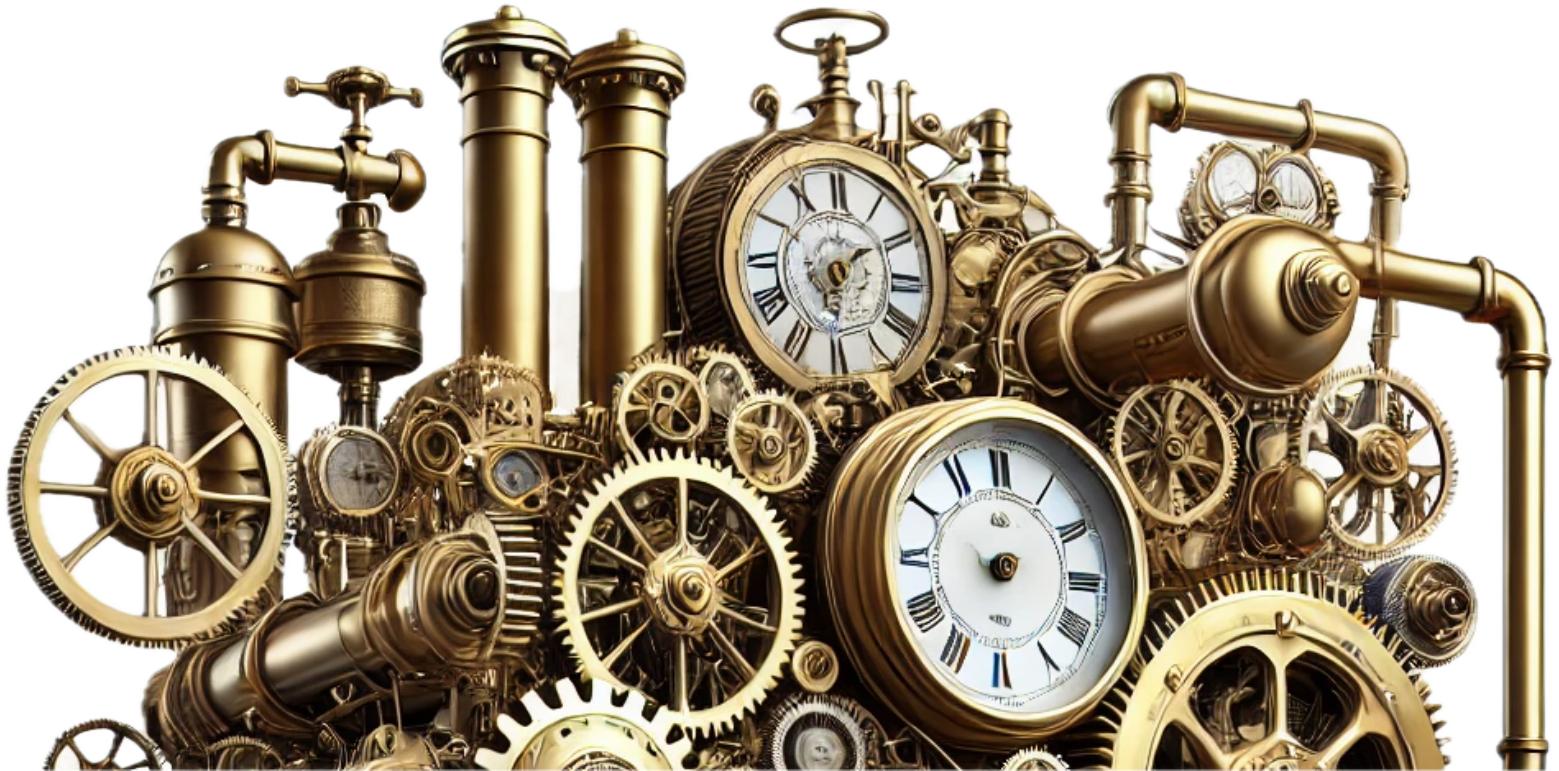
Complexity often serves as a barrier to entry for new players. Two staples of roleplaying games—*narrative play*, where players act out scenes, and *detailed rule sets*, rooted in strategy games—can be stumbling blocks. These two elements are paradoxically at odds: if improvisation is difficult, rules help resolve interactions, but overly complex systems slow down play. The Wyrd Engine leans toward narrative play, with most outcomes determined through roleplaying and the Game Master's discretion. However, its simple skills and traits system provides a structured resolution method when needed.

COLLABORATIVE STORYTELLING

Roleplaying is a shared experience, and The Wyrd Engine encourages player collaboration. Mechanics are designed to give all players opportunities to contribute meaningfully to the story, ensuring that every character has a role to play in the unfolding narrative.

WHAT THE WYRD ENGINE IS NOT

While the system borrows elements from both narrative and tactical games, it is not intended to be a rigid simulation of reality. It does not use attributes, equipment-heavy mechanics, or detailed statistical modelling. Instead, it focuses on storytelling flexibility while maintaining just enough mechanical structure to create meaningful choices in gameplay. By keeping these goals in mind, The Wyrd Engine offers a roleplaying experience that is both structured and freeing, supporting deep character development and immersive storytelling without unnecessary mechanical complexity.



PART 1

THE WYRD ENGINE MECHANICS

CHAPTER 2: CORE MECHANICS

The Wyrd Engine is a lightweight, narrative-driven tabletop roleplaying system designed for quick character creation, streamlined play, and minimal bookkeeping. It aims to provide a simple yet flexible framework that new players can easily pick up while still offering enough depth to engage experienced groups. The system leans into storytelling and improvisation, ensuring that the mechanics never overshadow the unfolding drama of the game. Unlike more complex RPG systems that emphasise character progression, detailed mechanics, and long-term development, The Wyrd Engine is built for episodic or one-shot adventures where characters are meant to be jumped into and played immediately. This makes it ideal for groups of mixed experience, casual game nights, convention play, or players who enjoy exploring different settings and tones without committing to long-term character progression. By focusing on scene-based resolution, simple skills and traits, and intuitive conflict resolution, The Wyrd Engine keeps the story moving forward while still offering a satisfying level of challenge and tension. While the system lacks deep specialisation mechanics, its flexibility allows players to create compelling, unique characters through traits, skills, and equipment that influence their play style. Success in the Wyrd Engine isn't dictated by meticulous number-crunching but rather by player ingenuity, teamwork, and the creative use of their abilities. Every character is designed to be compelling and memorable right from the start, ensuring they have the tools to make an impact within the narrative. The result is a game that emphasises momentum, character-driven storytelling, and high-action scenarios without getting bogged down in excessive rules.

CONFLICT RESOLUTION AT A GLANCE

Whenever characters encounter an obstacle—be it an unsolvable riddle, a desperate struggle to escape a flooded sewer or a battle against a coven of deadly necromancers—they must find a way to overcome the challenge. Whether through wit, skill, or sheer determination, resolving conflicts is at the heart of the game, driving the story forward and shaping the fate of the characters.

With The Wyrd Engine, all conflict resolution follows the same pattern that combines **4dF** Fudge Dice, described on this page, **Skills** described on page 6, and **Traits** described on page 9.

You combine these three and compare them to a **Difficulty Levels (DL)**, described on page 12, and the result determines the outcome of a conflict.

STEPS IN CONFLICT RESOLUTION

- Roll four Fudge Dice (**4dF**). Each die has **+** (plus), **-** (minus), and **0** (blank) faces. Add up the plusses and minuses.
- The roll result is added to a relevant **Skill** modifier.
- If relevant, **Traits** can be applied as bonuses.
- The final result is compared against a **difficulty level (DL)** to determine success or failure:
 - $4dF + \text{Skill} + \text{Trait} > \text{DL}$ (Success)
 - $4dF + \text{Skill} + \text{Trait} = \text{DL}$ (Tie)
 - $4dF + \text{Skill} + \text{Trait} < \text{DL}$ (Failure)

A **Tie** will usually qualify as a success, but the GM may decide that the outcome is a partial success or a compromise. This is up to the GM's discretion and should be based on the context of the situation and add minor complications to the success.

These steps will always be the general pattern for resolving conflicts, only differing in which skills and traits are involved, how the difficulty level is determined, and what the consequences of success or failure will be.

FUDGE DICE (4dF)

Fudge dice are dice that can give you one of three values: **–**, **0**, or **+**. You can buy this type of dice if you want, but you can also use any normal six-sided die and declare 1 and 2 to be **–**, 3 and 4 to be **0**, and 5 and 6 to be **+**.

Whenever we roll dice in The Wyrd Engine, we roll four such dice (we write it as **4dF**) and we add up the result, where **–** counts as -1 , **0** as 0 , and **+** as $+1$. So, for example:

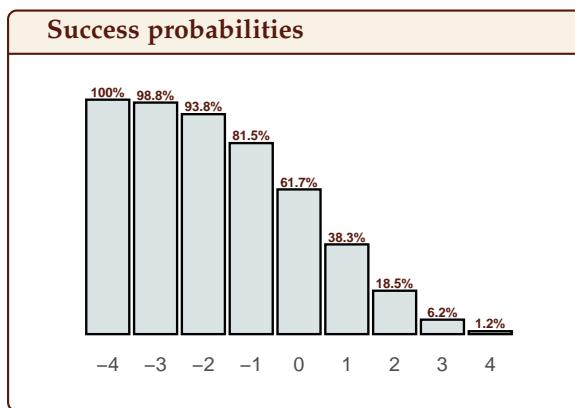
$$\begin{aligned} + + - 0 &= +1 + 1 - 1 + 0 = 1 \\ + - - 0 &= +1 + 0 - 1 + 0 = 0 \\ - - - 0 &= -1 - 1 - 1 + 0 = -3 \\ - + - 0 &= -1 + 1 - 1 - 1 = -2. \end{aligned}$$

Using **4dF** gives us a distribution of outcomes that look like this:



You are unlikely to roll the extremes; you should expect to hit ± 4 about 1% of the time (each)—about one time out of a hundred rolls, you should get +4, and about one time in a hundred, you should get -4. You expect to get an outcome above +3 or below -3 about 6% of the time (each)—about one in twenty for each.

Another way to visualise the outcome of a 4dF is as the chance you have of rolling higher than some threshold value:



It is impossible to roll lower than -4 with a 4dF roll, but you can tie with it (with probability 1/81). To roll higher than or equal to -3, you just have to avoid $\square \square \square$, and this outcome only happens one out of 81 rolls. To roll equal to +4 you *have* to roll $\square \square \square \square$, which also happens with probability 1/81. To roll *higher* than +4 is impossible, since this is the highest value you can roll.

In conflict resolution, this graph is relevant as it tells us how likely it is for a character without the necessary skills and relevant traits to succeed at any given difficulty level. It is this graph of success probabilities you should have in mind when setting difficulty levels, and we return to it later. The graph, as it is here, is the probabilities you get if you had to rely on 4dF alone, without any skills or traits.

SKILLS

Skills reflect a character's ability across a broad range of actions — from sharp observation and quick reflexes to combat prowess or persuasive charm. When a character attempts a meaningful action with an uncertain outcome, they roll 4dF and add the relevant skill modifier. For player characters and most non-player characters, skills are ranked as follows:

SKILL LEVELS IN THE WYRD ENGINE

Skill Level	Description
Untrained (0)	A character with no special training, relying on instinct or common sense.
Novice (+1)	Someone with basic knowledge or minimal hands-on experience in a skill.
Skilled (+2)	A well-trained individual who regularly practices and applies their ability.
Expert (+3)	A master in the field, capable of performing under extreme conditions.

For extreme monsters, e.g., demons, dragons, or killer robots, skills might go higher (e.g. **Superior (+4)** or **Epic (+5)**). You will usually not go lower than **Untrained (0)** unless a character is impaired, e.g., drugged or recovering after severe physical or mental trauma, in which case you can (e.g. **Weak (-1)**). Characters begin with a defined set of skill ranks, representing their strengths and weaknesses. Unlike systems with extensive skill lists, The Wyrd Engine keeps skills broad and flexible, allowing them to cover a wide range of related actions. For instance, a character with a high **Athletics** skill might use it to outrun pursuers, climb treacherous cliffs, or leap between rooftops. Similarly, depending on the character's background, Lore could represent expertise in ancient history, arcane knowledge, or scientific principles.

The list of skills a character can have will depend on the setting in which the game is taking place, and there is not a fixed list of skills for all Wyrd games. Generally, you should feel free to make up your own skills—remembering to keep them broad in scope—and decide between player and GM when a skill is applicable. If you like, though, you can make more detailed skill lists if that is more to your taste. In the sidebar, you can see an example of this from *The Grand Casebook* setting, a Victorian/Steampunk/Gothic Horror setting. When a character lacks a skill, they roll with a default modifier of 0, relying solely on luck and circumstance. This ensures that even untrained characters have a chance—however slim—of succeeding in tasks outside their expertise.

EXAMPLE SKILLS

INVESTIGATION & KNOWLEDGE

- *Investigate*—Analysing crime scenes, following leads, searching for hidden clues.
- *Lore*—Understanding history, science, the occult, and the unnatural.
- *Notice*—Spotting details, sensing danger, and staying aware of surroundings.

SOCIAL & INFLUENCE

- *Rapport*—Gaining trust, persuading, and negotiating.
- *Deceive*—Lying, creating convincing cover stories, and disguises.
- *Provocation*—Intimidation, interrogation, and getting a reaction from others.
- *Contacts*—Knowing the right people and gathering information through connections.
- *Empathy*—Reading emotions, understanding motives, and connecting with others.

PHYSICAL & DEXTERITY

- *Athletics*—Running, jumping, climbing, and escaping dangerous situations.
- *Stealth*—Moving unseen, tailing a suspect, sneaking into restricted areas.
- *Fight*—Engaging in hand-to-hand combat, fencing, or using melee weapons.
- *Shoot*—Firearms, throwing weapons, and ranged combat.

RESILIENCE & WILLPOWER

- *Will*—Resisting fear, staying composed under pressure, enduring mental strain.
- *Physique*—Strength, endurance, and the ability to withstand injury or exhaustion.

MECHANICAL & PRACTICAL SKILLS

- *Burglary*—Lockpicking, safecracking, and breaking into places unseen.
- *Resources*—Access to wealth, favours, or valuable possessions.
- *Crafts*—Repairing devices, modifying tools, or working with mechanical systems.

MAKING SKILL LISTS

The skills you can use in The Wyrd Engine are not fixed in the rules. Different settings and different kinds of games will have different skills, since the needs of the game will be different. Generally, you should feel free to make up your own skills—remembering to keep them broad in scope—and decide between player and GM when a skill is applicable. If you like, though, you can make more detailed skill lists if that is more to your taste.

THE RIGHT LEVEL FOR SKILLS

A good rule of thumb for creating skills is to think about the kinds of actions you want to be able to do in the game. For example, if you want to be able to do a lot of social interaction, you might want to have a *Social* skill that covers all social interactions. If you want to be able to do a lot of physical actions, you might want to have a *Physical* skill that covers all physical actions.

Equally important is the scope of each skill. They should generally be broad enough that you can reasonably expect to use each skill at least once per session. If you have a skill that you never use, it might be too narrow. On the other hand, if you have a skill that is so broad that it covers everything, it might be too powerful.

IT IS OKAY TO ADJUST SKILL LISTS

You can adjust the skill list as you go along. If you find that a skill is not being used, you can remove it from the list. If you find that a skill is being used too much, you can add a new skill to cover that area. This is a good way to keep the game fresh and interesting.



SKILLS IN ACTION

Let us throw the character *Inspector Julian Hargrave* (see sidebar) into some difficult situations and see how he can use his skills to resolve them.

EXAMPLE CHARACTER

INSPECTOR JULIAN HARGRAVE

Determined and methodical, Inspector Julian Hargrave is a seasoned detective. His years of experience have made him an expert at uncovering the truth, though his rigid approach sometimes clashes with the unpredictable nature of crime-solving.

Skills

Expert (+3)	Investigate
Skilled (+2)	Notice, Rapport
Novice (+1)	Will, Provoke, Athletics

ANALYSING A CRIME SCENE

Situation: A renowned socialite has been found dead in her study. The room appears to suggest suicide, but something about the scene seems off. Julian examines the area for inconsistencies.

Difficulty Level: The GM decides that the difficulty level is **Formidable (+3)** – The crime scene is staged well, but subtle clues remain for an expert to notice.

Resolution: Julian rolls $\oplus \oplus \ominus \square$ and adds +3 (**Investigate**) for a total of +4. Since he exceeds the DR, he notices an overturned chair that contradicts the suicide setup. A closer look reveals a footprint near the window, suggesting an intruder.

SPOTTING AN AMBUSH

Situation: Julian follows a suspect through the fog-laden streets when he hears an unusual shuffle behind him. Is someone trailing him?

Difficulty Level: The GM determines that the difficulty level is **Difficult (+2)** – The follower is cautious but not an expert in stealth.

Resolution: Julian rolls $\oplus \ominus \ominus \square$ and adds +2 (**Notice**), for a total of +1, meeting the DR. He catches the reflection of a blade in a shop window just in time to evade an ambush.

GAINING A WITNESS' TRUST

Situation: A frightened maid refuses to discuss her employer's illicit dealings. Julian must convince her to cooperate.

Difficulty Level: The GM decides that the difficulty is **Challenging (+1)** – She is hesitant but not impossible to persuade.

Resolution: Julian rolls $\oplus \ominus \ominus \square$ and adds +2 (**Rapport**)

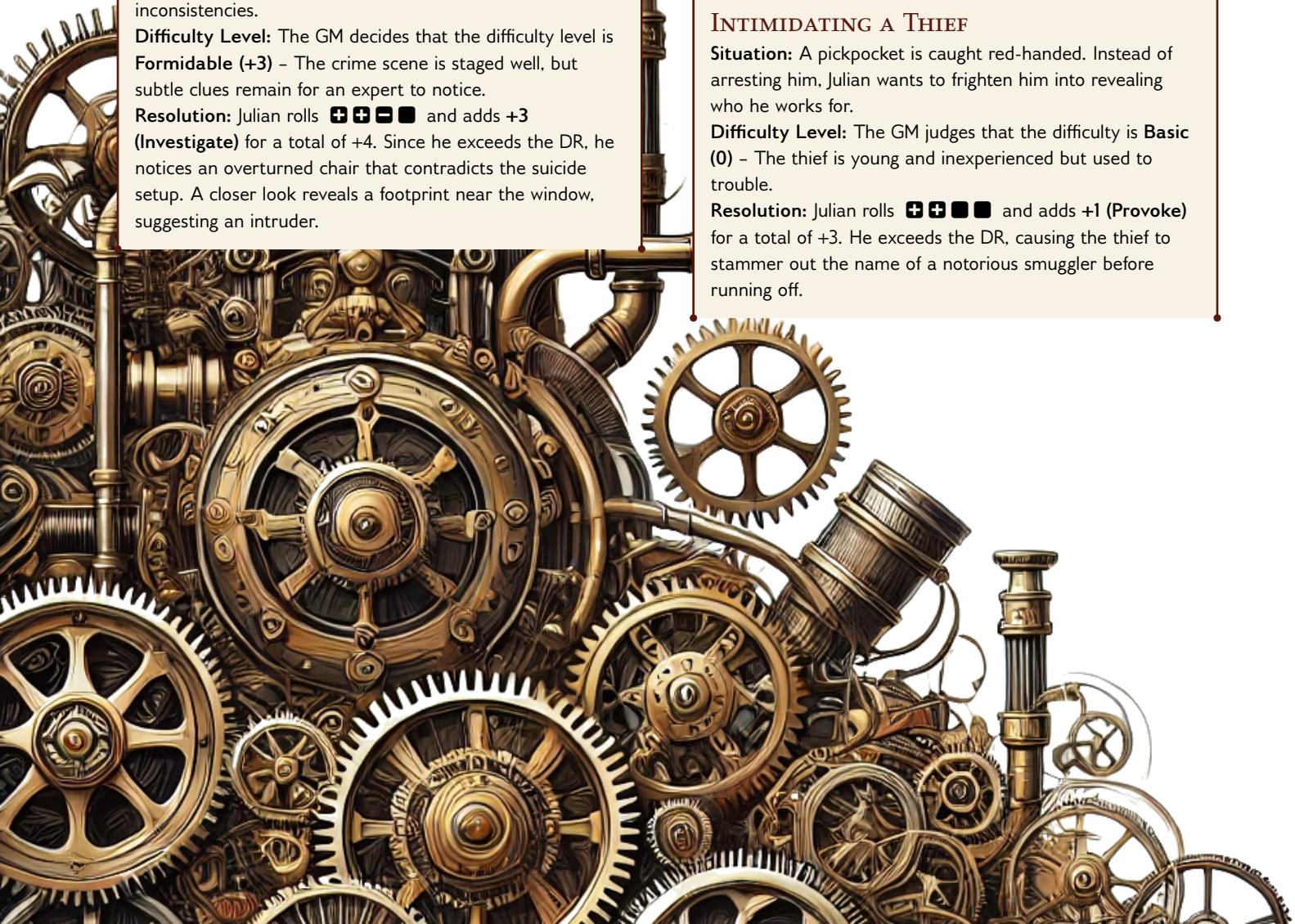
for a total of +0. A tie is a failure, or is it? If he changes his tactics or offers protection to try again, it might turn into a partial success.

INTIMIDATING A THIEF

Situation: A pickpocket is caught red-handed. Instead of arresting him, Julian wants to frighten him into revealing who he works for.

Difficulty Level: The GM judges that the difficulty is **Basic (0)** – The thief is young and inexperienced but used to trouble.

Resolution: Julian rolls $\oplus \oplus \square \square$ and adds +1 (**Provoke**) for a total of +3. He exceeds the DR, causing the thief to stammer out the name of a notorious smuggler before running off.



TRAITS

In The Wyrd Engine, Traits represent unique abilities, specialised knowledge, or personal characteristics that distinguish characters and items from one another. Unlike skills, which define general competence, Traits provide a *mechanical advantage* or *narrative permission* in certain situations.

Each player character has exactly **three Traits**, carefully chosen to enhance their strengths or reflect their backstory. Non-player characters and monsters can have fewer or far more traits. Traits are broader than skills and allow a character to *break* or *bend* normal rules in ways that make them feel distinct.

Items can also have traits (but not skills). This is a way to add game-mechanic flavour to non-creatures and replaces weapon bonuses and similar mechanisms in other role-playing rule sets.

HOW TRAITS WORK

Traits function in the following ways:

- **Situational Bonus:** A Trait can provide a *+2 bonus* to any relevant skill check if it clearly applies.
- **Expanded Capabilities:** A Trait may allow a character to attempt actions that others simply *cannot*, such as deciphering an ancient language or crafting elaborate mechanical devices.
- **Once per Scene/Session Special Ability:** Some Traits grant a powerful ability that can be used once per scene or once per session, such as instantly escaping a locked room or declaring an old friend in the right place at the right time.

Traits *do not stack*—if multiple Traits apply to a roll, the player must choose which one to use.

CREATING EFFECTIVE TRAITS

When designing Traits, they should:

- Be *broad* enough to be useful in multiple situations.
- Be *specific* enough to define a unique aspect of the character.
- Provide a *clear mechanical or narrative benefit*.

Traits can reflect personality, training, supernatural gifts, or anything else that defines a character's abilities. Below are examples of well-crafted Traits:

EXAMPLE TRAITS

- **Master Duelist** – Gain *+2 to Fight* when using a rapier or fencing techniques.
- **Shadow Walker** – Can move silently even in well-lit areas, allowing *Stealth rolls in places others couldn't*.
- **Unshakable Will** – Once per session, completely ignore the effects of fear, mind control, or intimidation.
- **Underworld Connections** – Gain *+2 to Contacts* when dealing with criminals, smugglers, or fences.
- **Inventive Genius** – Can craft *unique gadgets* with Crafts that would be impossible for an ordinary engineer.

USING TRAITS IN PLAY

In the following examples we see how traits can be used in different situations to help our characters resolve a situation they find themselves in.

APPLYING A +2 BONUS

Situation: Felix Cavendish, an eccentric inventor, is attempting to repair a damaged mechanical safe under a tight time limit. His player wants to use his Trait *"Inventive Genius"*.

Difficulty Level: The GM sets the repair difficulty at **Arduous (+4)**, as the damage is severe.

Resolution: Felix rolls  and adds his **Crafts** skill (+3) for a total of **+2** which would normally be a failure. However, because his Trait *Inventive Genius* applies, he adds an additional **+2**, bringing his final result to **+4** which is a success. The safe is repaired flawlessly and even runs more efficiently than before.

EXPANDED CAPABILITIES

Situation: Isadora Lovelace, a gifted spiritualist, wants to communicate with a recently deceased victim in order to uncover clues about a murder. Normally, the **Lore** skill wouldn't allow this.

Trait: *"A Glimpse Beyond the Veil"* allows her to attempt supernatural interactions.

Resolution: Since her Trait permits it, the GM allows a roll using **Lore**. The outcome determines how much information she can extract.

ONCE PER SESSION ABILITY

Situation: Cornelius Flint, a silver-tongued rogue, has been cornered in an alley by the city watch. Escape seems impossible.

Trait: *"Always an Escape Plan"* allows him, once per session, to declare he had an escape route planned all along.

Resolution: Instead of rolling, the GM allows him to describe a secret hatch in the alley leading to the sewers, letting him escape cleanly.

EXAMPLE CHARACTER

FELIX CAVENDISH

A brilliant but erratic inventor-for-hire, Felix Cavendish is both a mechanical genius and a walking disaster. His creations are revolutionary—when they don't explode. A rogue innovator who skirts the edges of legality, he thrives on the challenge of solving impossible problems with machines that push the limits of science.

Skills

Expert (+3)	Crafts
Skilled (+2)	Investigate, Resources
Novice (+1)	Lore, Will, Contacts
Untrained (0)	Notice, Stealth, Deceive, Athletics

Traits

- Master Tinkerer** — Gain +2 to Crafts when repairing or modifying machinery.
- Unstable Prototype** — Once per session, declare an experimental gadget with an unpredictable effect.
- A Calculated Risk** — Use Will instead of Athletics when escaping dangerous situations.



EXAMPLE CHARACTER

ISADORA "ISA" LOVELACE

A renowned spiritualist and occult investigator, Isa Lovelace walks the thin line between science and the supernatural. Some believe she is merely an expert in human nature, while others whisper that she truly communes with forces beyond the veil. With piercing intuition and an enigmatic presence, she seeks knowledge that others fear to uncover.

Skills

Expert (+3)	Empathy
Skilled (+2)	Investigate, Lore
Novice (+1)	Rapport, Will, Notice
Untrained (0)	Stealth, Deceive, Resources, Contacts

Traits

- A Glimpse Beyond the Veil** — Gain +2 to Empathy when sensing the emotions of the deceased.
- Foreboding Intuition** — Once per session, declare a warning based on an unseen force.
- The Cards Never Lie** — Use Lore instead of Investigate when predicting an outcome.

EXAMPLE CHARACTER

CORNELIUS "CORYN" FLINT

A silver-tongued thief and a master of misdirection, Cornelius Flint moves between high society and the criminal underworld with effortless charm. He lives by one rule—if someone is foolish enough to leave their wealth unguarded, it deserves a new owner. While he prefers to talk his way out of danger, he always has an escape plan ready when words fail.

Skills

Expert (+3)	Deceive
Skilled (+2)	Burglary, Rapport
Novice (+1)	Athletics, Stealth, Notice
Untrained (0)	Contacts, Fight, Will, Resources

Traits

- Master of Misdirection** — Gain +2 to Deceive when distracting someone in conversation.
- Sleight of Hand** — Once per session, declare you have already lifted a small item unnoticed.
- Always an Escape Plan** — Use Burglary instead of Athletics when escaping confinement.

FINAL NOTES ON TRAITS

Traits are not just mechanical advantages; they define a character's core competencies and role in the narrative. Players should use them creatively, and GMs should reward clever applications that fit the story.

GAME MASTER TIP

If a player wants to use a Trait in a way that isn't obvious, ask them to describe *how* it applies. Encourage creativity while keeping balance in mind.

GEAR

Unlike other systems that track individual items, inventory weight, and resource management, *The Wyrd Engine* keeps gear streamlined and abstract. Instead of worrying about encumbrance, ammunition, or minor supplies, characters only track **gear that truly matters**. This means that most mundane equipment is assumed to be available when reasonable, and only items that provide a mechanical or narrative advantage are recorded.

GEAR AS TRAITS

Gear in *The Wyrd Engine* functions similarly to Traits. Instead of listing specific damage values or weight, an item has a **trait** that defines its benefit in play. The *Wyrd Engine* gear should:

- Provide a *specific mechanical advantage* (e.g. +2 bonus to a relevant skill check).
- Offer a *unique function* that enables new actions.
- Be *narratively significant*—not just generic supplies.

Notice that the first two requirements closely resemble the description of traits. This is intentional, as it allows gear to have game mechanic effects while reusing the same rules already introduced.

EXAMPLE GEAR

Detective's Magnifying Glass Gain +2 to Investigate when examining tiny details or analysing documents.

Clockwork Grappling Hook Once per session, escape or reach a high place instantly.

Masterwork Dueling Pistol Gain +2 to Shoot in one-on-one confrontations.

Encrypted Notebook Allows the player to store complex cyphers or hidden information that only they can decode.

Hidden Blade Use *Stealth* instead of *Fight* in a surprise attack.

Reinforced Trench Coat Gain +2 to *Physique* when resisting blunt force trauma.

USING GEAR IN PLAY

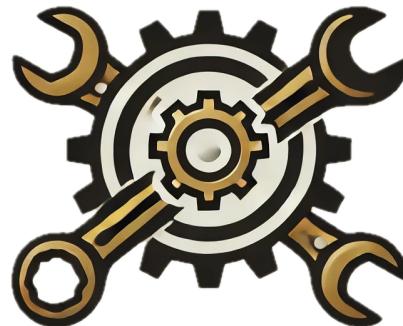
Gear should not be micromanaged but used to define a character's tools, specialities, and advantages. If an item logically fits a character's concept—such as a detective having a notebook or a thief carrying lockpicks—it's assumed to be available without taking up a slot. Only equipment that *enhances gameplay* or *creates narrative opportunities* should be explicitly listed.

The trait-like behaviour of gear can also serve a second purpose in *The Wyrd Engine*: Gear provides a way to boost characters abilities—quite substantially—by +2 bonuses whenever the gear's requirements are met. For advancing characters when preparing them for a battle with the final boss of a scenario, a Game Master can gift the players with increasingly powerful gear as rewards for minor battles. Using gear is a simple way to handle character advancement in *The Wyrd Engine*.

Once player characters start relying on such powerful items, a Game Master has a second trick to add excitement: unlike traits, gear can be taken away again. Recovering stolen gear necessary for the final confrontation is an excellent way to add side-quests to a game session.

GAME MASTER TIP

If a player asks, "Do I have this item?" consider whether it fits their role and background. If it makes sense, they do. If it would provide a major advantage, it should be a tracked piece of gear with a trait.



DIFFICULTY LEVELS

While *The Wyrd Engine* uses a simple resolution mechanic, it is important to establish how difficult a given action is. The Game Master determines the **Difficulty Level (DL)** based on the complexity of the task, the environment, and any obstacles the characters may face.

PASSIVE OPPosition

The **Difficulty Level (DL)** represents the challenge level of a task, and we write it as either numerically, as **DL +1** or **DL +3**, or use mnemonic names like **Challenging (+1)** or **Formidable (+3)**.

The simplest tasks involve no active opposition—where success or failure is determined solely by the character’s own abilities. This could be deciphering an ancient cipher, scaling a rocky cliff, or crafting a delicate mechanism—situations where the only obstacle is the task itself, rather than an opposing force.

In these cases, the player rolls **4dF** + their **Skill Modifier** and applies any relevant **Trait** or **Gear bonus** (Gear Traits). If the total meets or exceeds the DR, the action succeeds.

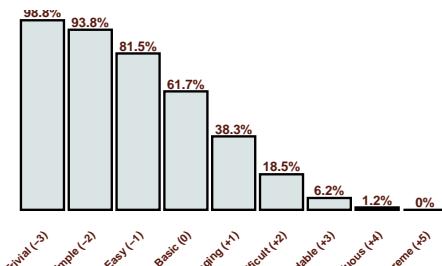
The GM determines the difficulty level based on two factors: how inherently challenging the task is and how critical it is to the game’s progression. A well-balanced difficulty keeps the players engaged—offering real challenges without creating dead ends. While setbacks can enrich the story, a GM should never impose an insurmountable barrier that halts progress entirely. Instead, every challenge should be an opportunity for clever thinking, teamwork, and dramatic tension.

The table on page 13 can guide you in determining the difficulty level for a task.

For levels up to **DL -1**, rolls are usually unnecessary unless dramatic tension is involved. For characters with appropriate skills, **DL 0** tasks can also be handled without rolls.

We can superimpose the difficulty levels on the **4dF** success rate graph to directly visualise how difficult it will be with just dice rolls to reach a given level:

4dF versus Difficulty Levels



The graph tells us that even **DL -3** tasks can fail if you are unskilled and unlucky enough, and **DL +1** tasks will fail a third of the time for someone without the necessary skills.

Adding skills effectively shifts the difficulty levels. When playing the game, we add skill levels to the **4dF** rolls, as this is the easiest way to calculate the result, but when setting difficulty levels, it is easier to think in terms of how difficult an unskilled character would find a task, and then shift the difficulty levels down by one for each skill level a character has.

A skill level of **Novice (+1)** adds one to the **4dF**, which effectively shifts the difficulties down by one. If we are adding **+1** to a roll, the unmodified range of **-4** to **+4** for an **Untrained (0)** character instead becomes the shifted range of **-3** to **+5**, for example. With this switch, the difficulty with which a **Novice (+1)** character hits a **DL +1** level will be the same as if he only had to reach the **DL 0** level.

A **DL 0** task, which has a 2/3 chance of success for an **Untrained (0)** character will be a success one out of twenty for a **Novice (+1)** and a guaranteed success for an **Expert (+3)** character. A **DL +5** task, which will be impossible for an **Untrained (0)** and not much easier for a **Novice (+1)**, but has a one-in-five chance of success for an **Expert (+3)**. Add in a **Trait (+2)**—which shifts the range by an additional two points—and an **Expert (+3)** character will, under the right circumstances, have a one-in-three chance of doing the impossible.



DIFFICULTY LEVELS IN THE WYRD ENGINE

Difficulty Level	Example Task
Trivial (-3)	A task so easy that failure is nearly impossible (walking across a stable floor, recalling your own name).
Simple (-2)	A straightforward action requiring minimal effort (identifying a common herb, climbing a ladder).
Easy (-1)	A minor challenge that most people can accomplish without effort (jumping over a puddle, recalling common knowledge).
Basic (0)	An ordinary action requiring some attention (spotting a misplaced item, balancing on a narrow beam).
Challenging (+1)	A moderate test of skill or effort (spotting a hidden compartment, climbing a wooden fence).
Difficult (+2)	A task requiring training or experience (tracking footprints in the rain, persuading a sceptical guard).
Formidable (+3)	A demanding task that pushes a character's limits (picking a complex lock under pressure, leaping between rooftops).
Arduous (+4)	A demanding task that pushes skill and focus to the limit (spotting inconsistencies in a forged document, hitting a target at long range under pressure).
Extreme (+5)	A rare and challenging feat requiring expertise and composure (gaining the trust of a bitter rival, performing a delicate operation in poor conditions).
Legendary (+6)	A remarkable accomplishment requiring extraordinary talent or luck (evading a sudden hail of gunfire, persuading a powerful ancient being to stand down).
Impossible (+7)	A feat beyond mortal capability under normal circumstances (overturning the natural order of the world, persuading a god to forsake its essence).

The table below shows the probability of success for the different difficulty levels at different skill levels:

SUCCESS PROBABILITY PER SKILL LEVEL

Difficulty	0	+1	+2	+3
Trivial (-3)	98.8%	100.0%	100.0%	100.0%
Simple (-2)	93.8%	98.8%	100.0%	100.0%
Easy (-1)	81.5%	93.8%	98.8%	100.0%
Basic (0)	61.7%	81.5%	93.8%	98.8%
Challenging (+1)	38.7%	61.7%	81.5%	93.8%
Difficult (+2)	18.5%	38.7%	61.7%	81.5%
Formidable (+3)	6.2%	18.5%	38.7%	61.7%
Arduous (+4)	1.2%	6.2%	18.5%	38.7%
Extreme (+5)	-	1.2%	6.2%	18.5%
Legendary (+6)	-	-	1.2%	6.2%
Impossible (+7)	-	-	-	1.2%

Players will not need to consult this table during a game—in The Wyrd Engine we are not keen on using tables for game mechanics—but it should give a Game Master a rough idea of how to set difficulty levels when planning a game session.

GAME MASTER TIP

When deciding on difficulty levels, you should focus on the narrative aspects of the game rather than realism in difficulty. You want to give the players exciting challenges, but any conflict resolution should have narrative relevance. Don't ask for dice rolls if you can act out a scene instead, and don't ask for dice rolls unless both failure and success will have exciting consequences. It is okay to have automatic wins and automatic losses if the alternative will break the story you are trying to tell, and it is okay to set unrealistically low or high difficulty levels if that is what it takes to tell a good story.

ACTIVE OPPPOSITION

When two characters compete directly but are not in combat (for that, see below), both roll **4dF + their relevant skill**. The highest result wins. If the

character that attempts to do something gets the higher result, he will succeed, but if the opponent gets the higher result, he will not.

If you want to add a little flavour to active oppositions, at the Game Master's discretion, you can add **boons** to active opposition resolution:

BOONS

- If one character beats the other by **1 or 2 points**, they succeed with a minor advantage.
- If they beat the other by **3 or more points**, their success is so impressive that the GM can, at their discretion, provide the winning character with a **boon**.

A **boon** is a one-use trait invented for the situation at hand. It is only active for the current scene and is lost if not used after the scene ends.

TIES AND PARTIAL SUCCESSES

Not every roll results in a clean success or failure. A roll that **ties** with the Difficulty Level can, at the GM's discretion, result in a partial success or a complication. This should still be a success, just with a twist that adds tension or drama to the scene. If the GM cannot think of such a twist, consider ties successes.

The complications caused by a tie could be a new obstacle, a delay, or a cost to the character. The GM should use ties to keep the story moving and the players engaged, not to punish them for bad luck.

- Success with a Cost:** The action succeeds, but at a price (e.g., escaping a pursuer but losing an important clue).
- Mixed Success:** The character achieves part of their goal, but not completely (e.g., unlocking a door but setting off an alarm).

- **A New Complication:** The failure introduces an unexpected twist (e.g., picking a lock only to find guards already inside).

INTERPRETING FAILURE

A failed roll doesn't necessarily mean the character is incompetent—it simply means their approach didn't work this time. The GM should ensure failures lead to new choices, not dead ends.

A failure can also be turned into a complication instead. This can be a way to keep the story moving forward and to keep the players engaged. A failure that leads to a dead end is not as interesting as a failure that leads to a new choice. If the players fail to pick a lock, they might set off an alarm, but they might also find a hidden passage or a secret compartment. Make failure complications harsher than ties, of course, but if a failure will interrupt the story, consider turning it into a complication instead.

GAME MASTER TIP

If a failed roll would stop the story in its tracks, offer the player an alternative: "You can still succeed but at a cost." This keeps the momentum going while making failure meaningful.

BOOSTS: OPTIONAL RULE FOR INCREASING SUCCESS

As an optional rule, you can allow players to create **Boosts**—temporary numerical bonuses such as +1 or +2 that can be applied to a relevant roll. Boosts represent situational advantages, quick thinking, or clever tactics that enhance a character's chance of success.

Boosts can take different forms, including:

- **Preparation:** Taking extra time to study a problem, setting up tools, or laying a trap.
- **Tactical Advantage:** Gaining higher ground, flanking an enemy, or exploiting a distraction.
- **Environmental Factors:** Using dim lighting for stealth, a rainstorm to obscure movement, or an echoing chamber to amplify a command.
- **Teamwork:** Coordinating efforts with allies, assisting with a skill check, or providing cover in combat.

To gain a Boost, a player must describe how their actions create an advantage and roll an appropriate skill or trait check. If successful, they gain a Boost that applies to their next relevant roll. Boosts typically last for a single action but may persist longer if narratively justified.

Boosts are a simple way to reward creativity, reinforce teamwork, and give players more control over their success in *The Wyrd Engine*.

EFFORT: OPTIONAL RULE

FOR COMPLEX TASKS

Closely related to boosts is to gameplay splitting an obstacle into multiple tasks.

Not every challenge can be solved in a single moment. Some obstacles are too complex, too dangerous, or simply too massive for one roll to resolve. In such cases, you can use the optional **Effort** rule to let characters build toward success over time.

The Effort rule allows a player to spend **multiple turns**, using **different skills**, to gradually construct a bonus that can help them overcome a task that would otherwise be impossible. This rule is especially useful when facing high difficulty thresholds, narrative bottlenecks, or complex multi-stage problems.

Each step in the process must be justified through the narrative. The player describes how each skill contributes to the larger goal, and the GM may call for a roll to determine how effective that contribution is. Each successful roll adds a cumulative **+1 bonus** toward the final test.

USING EFFORT

GM	"The vault is protected by a complex magical lock. It will take a total of +6 to bypass it."
Player	"I want to use Lore to study the runes and understand the locking glyphs."
GM	"That makes sense. Roll it."
Player	"Success. That gives me +1. Next, I want to use Craft to assemble a device that can mirror the unlocking pattern."
GM	"Good. Roll."
Player	"Another success. I've got +2 total. Finally, I'll use Presence to lead the group in synchronising the final activation—it needs perfect timing."
GM	"Perfect. That brings your total to +3. Add that to your actual Arcane Mechanics skill roll to attempt the final bypass."

The Effort rule is not meant to replace contests or challenges that already involve multiple rolls. Rather, it provides a mechanical way to reward creative multi-step problem solving when dealing with static, high-difficulty tasks.

GAME MASTER TIP

This approach can, in theory, build up bonuses to a level where nothing is impossible. To rain it in, there are several options.

- Limit the number of steps to three or four or cap the total bonus to a maximum of e.g. +3.
- Add consequences for failure, such as resetting the bonus or introducing complications from wasted time and effort. This works best if there are narrative consequences for failure.
- Require that each step be a different skill, or at least a different trait. This will force players to think creatively and use their skills in unexpected ways.

Consider using Effort when the challenge is dramatic, but not urgent. Time pressure is often a reason to deny Effort and force a direct roll instead. Likewise, Effort should not be used in combat unless the narrative supports a multi-round buildup (e.g., preparing a magical ritual or charging a weapon).

This optional rule encourages teamwork, creativity, and versatility. It gives characters a way to use more than just their best skill—and lets the story breathe while heroes rise to meet daunting challenges.

TEAMWORK: OPTIONAL RULE FOR ASSISTING ALLIES

In *The Wyrd Engine*, collaboration can be just as important as individual skill. As an optional rule, players may assist one another to increase the chances of success in a task or conflict. When a character

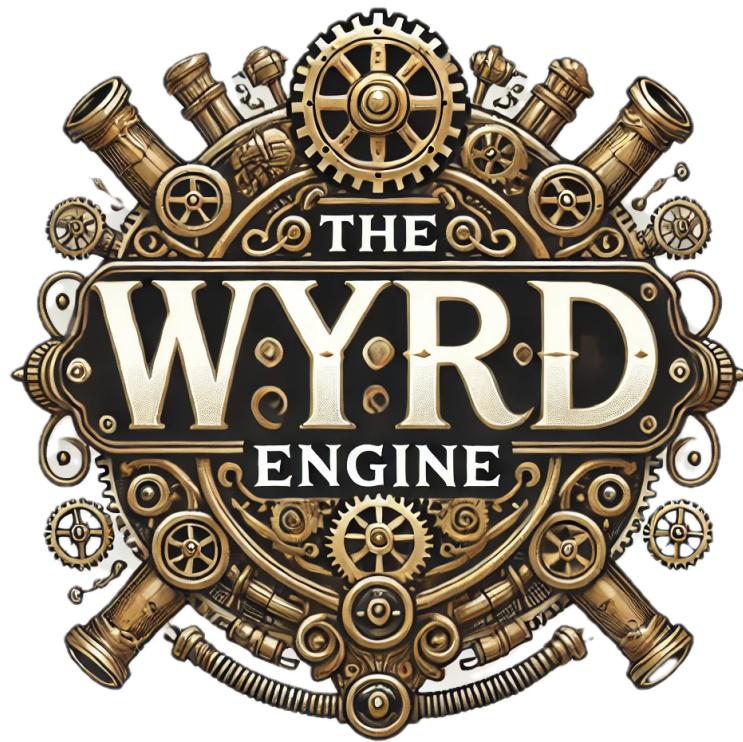
helps an ally, they provide a **Teamwork Bonus**, a small numerical boost that enhances the primary actor's roll.

Teamwork Bonuses can take different forms, including:

- **Direct Assistance:** Actively working alongside an ally, such as two people lifting a heavy object or multiple minds solving a puzzle.
- **Tactical Coordination:** Calling out enemy movements in battle, providing covering fire, or distracting an opponent.
- **Shared Knowledge:** Using past experiences or expertise to guide another character's actions, such as an engineer giving instructions to a less skilled mechanic.
- **Moral Support:** Bolstering an ally's resolve with encouragement, inspiration, or leadership.

To assist, the supporting player must describe how they are helping and roll an appropriate skill or trait check. If successful, they grant the primary actor a +1 **bonus** to their roll. In special cases—such as exceptional teamwork, well-planned strategies, or group efforts—the GM may allow the bonus to increase to +2.

Only one character can provide a Teamwork Bonus per roll unless the GM rules that multiple participants are required. This system encourages cooperation and allows players to combine their strengths to overcome greater challenges.



BASIC COMBAT IN THE WYRD ENGINE

The role of combat varies by setting, scenario, and playstyle. Some games favour **quick, brutal encounters**, where a single shot or swift blade ends a fight instantly, while others emphasise **heroic battles** against overwhelming foes. The **tone and pacing** should reflect the game's themes—whether it's gritty realism, where injuries are severe, or cinematic action, where characters endure incredible feats. Combat may be **tactically complex**, rewarding careful planning, or more **freeform**, focusing on dramatic exchanges over strict mechanics. The Wyrd Engine offers a flexible system to suit different narratives. For combat mechanics and customisation, see **CHAPTER 4: COMBAT**.

Basic combat in THE WYRD ENGINE, as described in this chapter, is designed to be **fast and cinematic**.

Most combat encounters resolve within a few quick rounds of opposition rolls, keeping the action moving without bogging down in excessive mechanics. At the same time, characters are relatively hard to take out. In real life, a single blow, stab, or gunshot wound is enough to kill a person, but in the combat rules in this chapter, taking out a character will take a few rounds unless the opponent is super-human in capabilities.

The combat rules do not distinguish between physical and mental combat. If your setting involves psychic or magic attacks, the wounds characters can suffer might all be on the inside, but the game mechanics will be the same as physical combat.

INITIATIVE: WHO ACTS FIRST?

Combat follows a structured yet flexible turn order:

DETERMINING INITIATIVE

- **Surprise & Readiness:** If one side is clearly ambushing the other, they act first.
- **Tactical Positioning:** If no clear ambush is present, the GM determines turn order based on readiness.
- **Rolling for Initiative:** If multiple characters are competing to act first, roll **4dF + Notice** (or another relevant skill). The highest roll acts first, with ties resolved narratively.

TAKING ACTIONS IN COMBAT

On their turn, a character can do the following:

- **One primary action** (Attack, defend, use an item, complex manoeuvre)
- **One minor action** (Draw a weapon, reposition, open a door, shout a command)
- **Free actions** (Speaking briefly, minor environmental interactions)

ATTACKING AND DEFENDING

Attacks are resolved using opposed rolls:

ATTACK RESOLUTION

- The attacker rolls **Attack = 4dF + skill + traits**
- The defender rolls **Defend = 4dF + skill + traits**
- If **Attack > Defend**, the attack lands and deals damage.

Relevant skills depend on the setting, but attack skills could be **Fight** for melee or **Shoot** for firearms, while defence skills could be **Athletics** for dodging or **Fight** for parrying. Traits are any relevant character or gear traits that match the combat situation.

If the defender has a higher score than or equal to the attacker, the attack is averted, and no damage is dealt. Ties are always in the defender's favour. If the attacker scores higher, the damage inflicted on the defender is the attacker's score minus the defender's.

CALCULATING DAMAGE

Stress = Attack - Defend when **Attack > Defend**.

Stress is determined by how much the **Attack** exceeds **Defend**. Effects such as weapons efficiency or armour thickness are considered through the gear's traits in the combat rolls. This has the same effect as adding weapon and defence bonuses within the existing conflict resolution system. We don't need extra combat rules if we don't want them.

EXAMPLE ATTACK

Jonathan Blackwood swings a cane at an enemy thug. He rolls **4dF +2 (Fight)**, while the thug rolls **4dF +1 (Athletics)** to dodge. If Jonathan's result is higher, the hit lands; otherwise, it is defended.

Jonathan rolls **⊕⊕⊕⊖** = 2 and gets a score of **Attack = +4** when combined with his **Fight** skill. The thug then rolls **⊕⊖⊖⊖** = -1, giving him a score of **Defend = 0** when combined with his **Athletics**.

Since Jonathan's score is higher, so he scores a hit, and the damage he inflicts is **Stress = Attack - Defend = +4 - 0 = +4**. The thug takes +4 in damage.

STRESS: FATIGUE AND WOUNDS

THE WYRD ENGINE uses the term **Stress** for all types of damage a character can sustain. This includes physical, mental, and social damage. Stress is a measure of how much damage a character can take before they are incapacitated. The term **Stress** is used to represent the overall damage a character can take, while **Fatigue** and **Wounds** are used to represent different types of damage.

THE WYRD ENGINE uses **Fatigue** to represent minor injuries and **Wounds** for more serious, lasting harm. Neither kind of stress is necessarily physical; mental damage is lumped in with physical stress in the core

rules. In games where reputation or social standing is important, social damage can be represented as stress or wounds. The GM and players should agree on how to represent these types of damage in the game.

FATIGUE AND WOUNDS

- Fatigue:** Represents minor setbacks, fatigue, or temporary injuries. These are automatically cleared after a fight.
- Wounds** come in three levels of severity. They take longer to heal, and adds penalties for future actions.

Any damage inflicted must be soaked up by either **Fatigue** or **Wounds**. Each player has four *Fatigue boxes*, , and five *Wounds boxes* where the wounds are split into three categories: three **Mild Wounds** ()**,** two **Moderate Wounds** ()**,** and one **Severe Wounds** (). These boxes, combined, are where a character can soak up damage.

Stress

Fatigue:	
Mild:	 _____
Mod:	 _____
Severe:	 _____

When a character sustains **Stress**, the damage dealt is converted one-to-one into these stress and wound boxes. Stress is soaked up by the boxes top-to-bottom; the fatigue boxes will soak up the first four points of stress. After that, the following three stress points are inflicted as mild wounds, the next two as moderate wounds, and finally, the character suffers a severe wound. If all stress boxes are ticked off, the character is **out of action** (see DEATH AND THE END OF COMBAT on page on page 18).

EXAMPLE: FATIGUE DAMAGE

As Captain Elias Mercer crouches in the engine room, setting the last charge to sabotage the enemy airship, he is caught off guard by a patrolling crew member. A swift jab to the ribs and a pistol whip to the shoulder deal +3 damage. With no previous injuries, the damage is absorbed entirely by his fatigue boxes.

Stress

Fatigue:	 O
Mild:	 _____
Mod:	 _____
Severe:	 _____

Gritting his teeth, he shoves the attacker aside and makes his escape—knowing the real danger will come when the explosives detonate.

When you tick off fatigue boxes, the damage has no noticeable effect. Fatigue is not considered lasting damage but the exhaustion accumulating from combat (or the “flesh wounds” from 90s action movies). Once the damage goes into wounds, however, future skill rolls are affected.

Wound Type	Effect
Mild Wound	-1 to relevant skill rolls
Moderate Wound	-2 to relevant skill rolls
Severe Wound	-3 to relevant skill rolls

When taking a wound of any of the three kinds, the player and Game Master decide on which relevant skills or traits are affected by the wound. The **-2** and **-3** penalties for **Moderate** and **Severe Wounds** can be split among multiple skills as long as the total penalty remains the same. Any future rolls involving those skills or traits will have the penalty applied until the wound is healed (see HEALING AND RECOVERY on page 18). Additional wounds of the same kind do not add additional penalties when using the core rules.

EXAMPLE: WOUND DAMAGE

While fleeing the engine room, Captain Mercer, the enemy he knocked aside, recovers, reaches for his gun, and fires off a shot ( + Shoot (+1) for an **Attack** of +2). Mercer attempts to duck ( + Athletics (+1) for a **Defend** of 0). The difference is a **Stress** of +2. Mercer only has one fatigue box left, so one of the damage points goes into a **Mild** wound, and the player and GM decide that the bullet grazes Captain Mercer’s shoulder, which would affect the **Athletics** skill.

Stress

Fatigue:	 X
Mild:	 Athletics (-1)
Mod:	 _____
Severe:	 _____

Taking the wound in his strides, he exits the room and continues his escape.

As long as a character has any damage in a wound category, the penalty applies. Additional stress to a wound category that is already marked does not add additional penalties. Penalties from different categories can stack, however.

EXAMPLE: WOUND DAMAGE

Captain Mercer rushes to the railing of the airship to throw himself off before the explosive device he planted detonates. The interruption in the engine room, unfortunately, has delayed him too long. The second he jumps, the bomb

detonates. The shockwave hits his back with a whooping +3 of damage. He can absorb two with his remaining **Mild** wounds, but one will go into his **Moderate** wounds. The **Moderate** wounds give him a penalty of -2, which he and the GM decide to split between **Atheletics** and **Awareness** (reasoning that getting blown up is likely to affect Mercer both physically and mentally).

Stress

Fatigue:	xxxx
Mild:	xx Athletics (-1)
Mod:	x Awareness (-1), Awareness (-1)
Severe:	_____

The two penalties to **Athletics** stack, so any roll involving **Athletics** will have a -2 penalty.

If all stress boxes are filled, the character is out of action. What this means is up to the GM, but games are usually more fun if player characters live to fight another day. For one-shot games, it is okay to kill off characters towards the end of the session, but don't do it early in the game.

HEALING AND RECOVERY

- **Fatigue** clears at the end of a scene.
- **Mild Wounds** require a short rest (a few hours) or first aid.
- **Moderate Wounds** require days of rest or professional medical care.
- **Severe Wounds** require weeks of rest, surgery, or supernatural healing (if applicable).

When healing wounds, *all* marked wound boxes are cleared at the same time. They are healed in parallel, so a character with both **Mild** and **Moderate** wounds will have the mild wounds healed the following day (regardless of how many wounds are ticked) and the moderate wounds after a week (with no delay because the mild wounds were healing at the same time).

COMBAT MANEUVERS

Instead of simply attacking, players can use tactical manoeuvres:

COMBAT MANEUVERS

- **Disarm:** Use **Fight** to knock a weapon from an opponent's hands.
- **Grapple:** Use **Fight** vs. **Athletics** to restrain an enemy.
- **Push:** Use **Athletics** to shove an opponent into hazards.
- **Feint:** Use **Deceive** to trick an enemy into missing a defence.
- **Suppressing Fire:** Use **Shoot** to force enemies into cover.
- **Intimidate:** Use **Provoke** to demoralize foes.

THE WYRD ENGINE does not have rules for all the myriad ways actions can be used in combat. However, the GM should generally convert an action into either an unopposed or opposed obstacle and let the outcome affect bonuses and penalties for future dice rolls. Using manoeuvres gives players a way to use skills besides the obvious combat skills (e.g. **Fight** or **Shoot**) as part of a combat encounter. A character with poor combat skills, with little chance of effectively dealing damage, might use other skills to stack up bonuses until an effective attack is possible.

WEAPONS AND GEAR IN COMBAT

Weapons do not deal numeric damage but affect combat through **Traits**. Weapon traits work the same way as any gear trait and can be used when attacking or defending.

TYPES OF WEAPON TRAITS

- **Weapons with Traits** grant +2 in relevant situations (e.g., "Mastercrafted Rapier" gives +2 to **Fight** in duels).
- **Firearms** can inflict instant Wounds if the shot is well-placed.
- **Improvised Weapons** may impose a penalty unless the character is skilled in their use.

When a weapon's **Trait** adds to the attack of a character, it will indirectly affect the damage the attack is inflicting. More interesting uses of weapon traits give other advantages to their wielder.

EXAMPLE WEAPON TRAITS

- **Fine Dueling Sabre** – +2 to **Fight** when dueling.
- **Hidden Derringer** – Once per scene, draw a concealed firearm unnoticed.
- **Reinforced Cane** – Can be used as both a weapon and a defensive tool.

DEATH AND THE END OF COMBAT

When a character suffers a **Severe Wound** and takes further damage, they are at risk of death. The simplest choice here is to equate all damage boxes ticked off and character death, but this is not always the best option. It might be fine for nameless mooks the players are fighting but for player characters or important (or just interesting) NPCs, it is often more interesting to consider such a character **defeated** rather than **dead**.

Instead of killing off characters, take them captured. Beat them up and leave them for death. Anything *interesting* that can still count as a defeat. Of course, depending on their situation and the setting you are playing in. A zombie is unlikely to capture a character, so true to the zombie genre, you might want to kill off characters there. A vampire, on the

other hand, could start monologing about vampiric superiority for long enough that the character could be rescued.

If you do consider the last wound as essentially death, you might still allow:

- A final desperate action before succumbing.
- A chance to survive if an ally intervenes.
- A dramatic consequence, such as permanent injury.

GAME MASTER TIP

If a player is at risk of death, consider instead narrative consequences rather than instant removal. A major wound or permanent injury can be more interesting than a sudden death.

CONCEDING THE FIGHT

Taking damage until every **Stress** and **Wound** box is filled isn't the only way to lose a fight. Aside from relentless automatons or mindless undead, few combatants fight to the bitter end if they can avoid it. Most will choose survival over certain death, whether that means surrendering, retreating, or negotiating terms. Even when capture is worse than death, most characters will attempt to escape rather than throw their lives away in a hopeless battle.

In **THE WYRD ENGINE**, conceding a fight is a structured choice, not a failure. When a character concedes, they avoid immediate defeat on their opponent's terms but **must accept significant narrative consequences**. The victorious side determines the outcome, though the conceding player can influence how events unfold. A character might escape, but only after dropping their weapons and fleeing unarmed. They might surrender and be taken prisoner, leading to future complications. A successful concession may even allow a character to bargain their way out, leaving them battered but still in play.

By conceding, players trade mechanical defeat for a **more dramatic and survivable consequence**, shaping the story in ways a simple knockout never could. Game Masters should encourage this approach—fights that end in death leave no room for development, but those that end in setbacks, bargains, or rivalries fuel engaging future encounters.

Combat ends when one side is defeated, flees, or surrenders. Survivors must then deal with the consequences of their wounds, the choices they made, and the path ahead.

GAME MASTER TIP

Avoid fights to the death if you can avoid them. Sometimes, the real story begins when the players choose to live. If they decide to retreat, create a scenario where escape comes at a steep price: perhaps a vengeful enemy is set on their trail, or a priceless artefact slips into the hands of their foes.

The same goes for foes. You can let the players kill their enemies if that is what the story calls for, but having enemies escape—to inform their superiors about the players' plans or to return with backup later—can be far more interesting.

Remember, death is merely the final chapter of a battle, but the consequences that haunt the survivors can turn a simple conflict into a rich, unfolding saga.

CHARACTER CREATION

Creating a character in **THE WYRD ENGINE** is a quick and streamlined process, designed to get players into the game with minimal preparation. Each character is defined by a small but meaningful set of attributes that shape their role in the story. Unlike systems with long-term progression, **THE WYRD ENGINE** prioritises narrative impact over mechanical advancement, making character creation simple yet flexible. Every player character is built using the following elements:

STEP 1: CONCEPT

Before assigning mechanics, players should develop a brief **character concept**. This is a short description of who the character is, their role in the story, and what makes them interesting. Concepts should be evocative but flexible, helping guide both roleplay and mechanical choices.

EXAMPLE CHARACTER CONCEPTS

- A disgraced noble turned detective, haunted by his past.
- An eccentric engineer whose inventions are as brilliant as they are dangerous.
- A silver-tongued con artist who survives by wit and charm.
- A fearless occult investigator seeking forbidden knowledge.

STEP 2: CHOOSE SKILLS

Each character has a set of **Skills** that determine their strengths and weaknesses. Skills represent broad areas of expertise rather than hyper-specialised talents, ensuring versatility.

Characters receive a total of **six skill ranks**, distributed as follows:

- 1 Expert (+3) skill
- 2 Skilled (+2) skills
- 3 Novice (+1) skills

All unselected skills default to **Untrained (0)**.

When assigning skills, players should consider their character's background and expertise. A veteran detective might prioritise **Investigate** and **Notice**, while a rogue might favour **Stealth** and **Deceive**.

The total sum of skill ranks should equal **10**. This ensures that every character is balanced in overall competence while allowing for specialisation.

STEP 3: SELECT TRAITS

Every character has exactly **three Traits**. Traits represent exceptional abilities, personal quirks, or special training that set a character apart.

Traits provide one of three benefits:

- A **+2 bonus** when applied to a relevant skill check.
- A **special ability** that can be used *once per scene or session*.
- A **narrative permission** to attempt actions that would normally be impossible.

EXAMPLE TRAITS

- **Master Duelist** – Gain +2 to *Fight* when using a rapier or fencing techniques.
- **Inventive Genius** – Can craft unique gadgets that defy conventional mechanics.
- **Unshakable Will** – Once per session, ignore the effects of fear or mind control.
- **Underworld Connections** – Gain +2 to *Contacts* when dealing with criminals.
- **The Cards Never Lie** – Use *Lore* instead of *Investigate* when predicting an outcome.

Traits should enhance a character's strengths and provide unique advantages in play. They should not be overly broad or cover multiple unrelated areas.

STEP 4: SELECT GEAR

THE WYRD ENGINE does not track mundane items or encumbrance. Instead, **gear** is used to track items that have a significant impact on gameplay. Unlike traits, gear is not inherent to a character but can be acquired or lost during play. At the Game Master's discretion, players can start out with a fixed number of gear items, say three per character. Alternatively, important gear can work as plot devices, with the Game Master deciding when and how to introduce them into the game.

Each piece of gear functions like a Trait, providing either:

- A **+2 bonus** when used appropriately.
- A **special ability** usable once per scene or session.
- A **narrative permission** to perform unique actions.

EXAMPLE GEAR

- **Clockwork Lockpick** – +2 to *Burglary* when opening mechanical locks.
- **Enchanted Mirror** – Once per session, reveal a hidden truth.
- **Mastercrafted Rapier** – +2 to *Fight* in one-on-one duels.
- **Detective's Notebook** – Use *Investigate* instead of *Rapport* when questioning suspects.
- **Hidden Derringer** – Once per scene, draw a concealed firearm unnoticed.

STEP 5: STRESS AND WOUNDS

Characters have a limited ability to absorb harm before suffering long-term effects. A standard character has:

- **Four Stress Boxes** – Used to absorb minor failures.
- **Mild, Moderate, and Severe Wounds** – Represent lasting harm or setbacks.

Stress

Fatigue: OOOO

Mild: ♥♥♥ _____

Mod: ♥♥ _____

Severe: ♥ _____

Wounds replace traditional hit points and can reflect physical, mental, or social strain. A "Mild" consequence might be a bruised rib, while a "Severe" consequence could be a permanent injury or a shattered reputation.

STEP 6: FINAL DETAILS

With mechanics in place, players can now define their characters' :

- **Name** – Fitting for the setting and character concept.
- **Appearance** – Distinctive traits, clothing, and demeanour.
- **Personality** – Key personality traits, motivations, or quirks.
- **Backstory** – A brief origin story or notable past experiences.

FINAL ADVICE FOR PLAYERS

Focus on character over numbers. The Wyrd Engine is designed for narrative-driven play, so build a character that fits the story rather than optimising for maximum efficiency.

Once these steps are complete, the character is ready for play!

CREATING NON-PLAYER CHARACTERS

Non-player characters, or **NPCs**, are any characters controlled by the GM that the players interact with. While NPCs can follow the same rules as player characters, this is often unnecessary and can slow down gameplay. Instead, THE WYRD ENGINE provides a flexible approach to NPC design, ensuring that simple characters are easy to run while important ones get the attention they deserve.

Not every NPC needs a full stat block. A faceless soldier or a bystander caught in the action doesn't require the same level of detail as a powerful antagonist or a recurring ally. To keep gameplay fluid and engaging, NPCs in THE WYRD ENGINE are divided into three categories:

- Mooks:** Nameless threats that exist to provide obstacles or increase tension.
- Dramatis Personae:** Named characters who have a role in the story but whose details may be fleshed out as needed.
- Living, Breathing Characters:** Fully realised NPCs with the skills, traits, and motivations to shape the world.

FOR NPCs, THE RULES DO NOT APPLY

For all three categories, the key rule of NPCs is this: **NPCs are not Player Characters.** The rules that apply to player characters see the previous section, *do not* apply to NPCs. NPCs can be both more powerful and far weaker than player characters.

NPCs CAN BREAK THE RULES

- NPC skill lists do not need to follow the distribution that player characters' do.
- NPCs can have more skills than players and often have fewer.
- NPCs can have skill levels below **Untrained (0)** and above **Expert (+3)**.
- NPC skills do not have to be taken from the official setting's list of skills—it is often more interesting if NPCs have special skills.
- What applies to skills also applies to traits: NPCs can have more powerful traits, have any number of them, and the traits can be more or less powerful than player characters' traits.
- The rules for stresses and wounds do not apply to NPCs; NPCs can have any number of stresses and wounds as long as they fit the story.

NPCs can break the rules in any way that improves the story the game is trying to tell. Furthermore, **NPCs do not have to be fully specified** when the game begins. NPCs are usually defined to

serve a particular role in the game and will only have the relevant stats for that. A bank clerk the players are supposed to interact with when solving a white-collar crime doesn't need fighting stats. However, if the players somehow get the clerk into a fight, it is perfectly valid to add stats on the fly. This is not cheating; the NPC could have had those stats from the very beginning, but it saves a lot of time for the GM to only worry about the most relevant stats when planning the game.

GAME MASTER TIP

While you *can* improvise stats for NPCs during a game and will have to more often than not, we do not recommend relying on this entirely. Having some idea of what NPCs can do, jotted down as stats, makes it easier to play these characters. Game stats can be seen as notes with mechanics effects.

MOOKS: QUICK AND DISPOSABLE

Mooks are the nameless henchmen, foot soldiers, or cannon fodder that serve as obstacles in an encounter. They are not designed to be major threats on their own but can become dangerous in large numbers. The purpose of mooks is to provide **fast-paced action and cinematic combat** without requiring complex stat tracking.

RUNNING MOOKS IN PLAY

Mooks are NPCs you do not have to interact with as individuals but rather groups of NPCs players interact with as a collective. Mooks typically:

- Have a single skill level for all actions.** This is usually set between **Weak (-1)** and **Skilled (+2)**.
- Have minimal or no stress boxes.** A single hit often takes them out.
- Do not have wounds.** Instead, the GM can describe their defeat narratively.
- Attack in groups.** Mooks can be treated as a collective, rolling as a single entity for simplicity. The same **Attack** or **Defend** result is then used for the entire group.

EXAMPLE MOOK

GANG ENFORCER

A hired bruiser working for the city's criminal underworld, easily replaced if taken down.

- Skill: Combat (+1)** (used for attacks and defence).
- Mook Rules:** Drops in one hit if the attack is successful.

Mooks keep combat **fast and exciting**, allowing players to feel competent against lesser threats while setting the stage for bigger challenges.

DRAMATIS PERSONAE: FUNCTIONAL BUT FLEXIBLE

Dramatis Personae (or "Characters of the Drama") are named individuals who serve a purpose in the story but don't need a full character sheet upfront. They might be **rivals, informants, recurring antagonists, or allies** that the players interact with frequently, but their exact abilities may be determined as needed.

KEY TRAITS OF DRAMATIS PERSONAE

Typical Dramatis Personae will have the following traits:

- **Have two or three defined skills** based on their role.
- **May have one or two traits** that give them an advantage in relevant situations.
- **Track stress, but often avoid wounds.** If they take significant damage, they are either removed from play or retreat.
- **Can be adjusted on the fly.** The GM does not need to finalise their full stats until necessary.

EXAMPLE DRAMATIS PERSONAE

CAPTAIN EVELYN GRAVES

A cunning airship captain known for running illegal cargo through dangerous territory.

- **Skills:** Pilot (+3), Deception (+2), Combat (+1)
- **Trait:** Born to Fly – Gains a bonus when piloting under pressure.
- **Trait:** Smooth Talker – Can reroll a failed deception check when negotiating.
- **Damage:** 2 stress boxes, no tracked wounds.

The Dramatis Personae NPCs **fill the world with interesting characters** without overwhelming the GM with excessive bookkeeping.

LIVING, BREATHING CHARACTERS: FULLY REALIZED NPCs

Living, Breathing Characters are the **central figures** of the campaign—the ones who drive the story forward, oppose the players or become long-term allies.

KEY TRAITS OF LIVING, BREATHING CHARACTERS

Living, Breathing Characters are often as fully fledged out as player characters (with the exemptions from strictly following the rules, however):

- **Have full skill allocations** (with the number of skills and levels of skills as appropriate).
- **Have 2-4 defined traits** that impact their playstyle (or as many as needed for the story).

- **Track stress and wounds**, just like player characters (as many and of which kind, as fit the story).
- **May have recurring influence in the game world.**

EXAMPLE LIVING, BREATHING CHARACTER

ADMIRAL LUCIUS DRAKE

The ruthless commander of the Imperial Fleet, obsessed with bringing rogue sky pirates to justice.

Skills

Superior (+4)	Strategy
Expert (+3)	Navigation
Skilled (+2)	Command, Combat
Novice (+1)	Resources, Deception, Awareness

Traits

Master Tactician — Gains a bonus when commanding fleet battles.

Iron Will — Once per session, ignore a mental or social consequence.

Unyielding Pursuit — Can reroll when tracking down a known fugitive.

Gear

Imperial Signet Blade — A ceremonial weapon that grants a +2 bonus to **Command** when used to inspire troops.

Sky Admiral's Compass — Once per session, automatically succeed on a **Navigation** check involving uncharted skies.

Stress

Fatigue: OOOO

Mild: ♥♥♥

Mod: ❤️❤️

Severe: ❤️

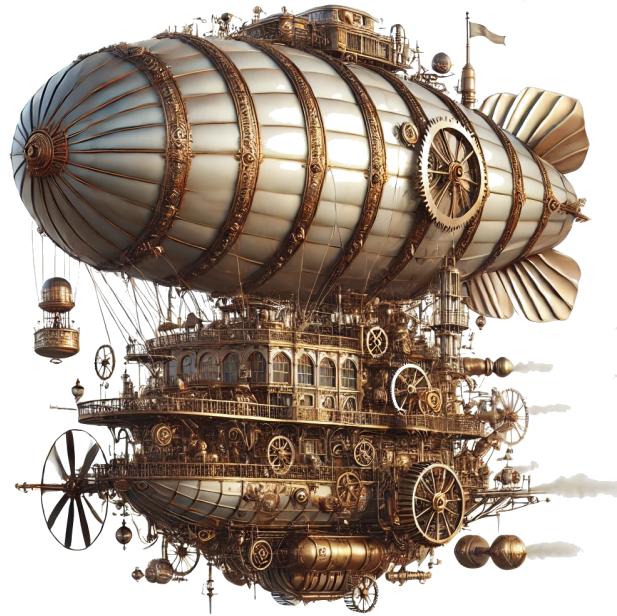
Living, Breathing Characters **serve as the driving force behind conflicts and challenges** in the campaign. They are **designed to be memorable** and should be treated as full characters in their own right.

CHOOSING THE RIGHT TYPE OF NON-PLAYER CHARACTER

When introducing an NPC, consider their **narrative function** first:

- If they exist to be fought and defeated quickly, they are mooks.
- If they are an ally or minor rival, they are *dramatis personae*.
- If they are a major figure who shapes the world, they are living, breathing characters.

By keeping NPC design streamlined and flexible, THE WYRD ENGINE ensures that GMs can **focus on storytelling, not stat sheets**. With these guidelines, every character—whether an unnamed mercenary or a legendary villain—can serve their role in the most engaging way possible.



CHAPTER 3: THE WYRD TOOLBOX

 XTENDING the game rules to fit your own settings and temperament, also known as **homebrewing**, is part and parcel of the roleplaying experience, and THE WYRD ENGINE is designed with this in mind.

The core rules are intentionally light, providing a solid foundation that can support a wide variety of genres and play styles. Whether you're running gritty pulp noir, whimsical faerie tales, or a post-apocalyptic dieselpunk odyssey, the core mechanics should serve you well with minimal adjustment.

That said, different settings often call for subtle (or not-so-subtle) variations in emphasis. A cyberpunk setting may need rules for hacking and digital warfare. A high fantasy world might benefit from expanded magic systems or creature creation tools. A campaign focused on interstellar diplomacy might want more structure around social interaction, negotiation, or influence mechanics. Likewise, a game centred on intense action could benefit from more detailed combat options or gear-related traits.

THE WYRD ENGINE will never be a hyper-detailed or simulationist system—but it doesn't need to be. It is a flexible engine. Think of it not as a finished machine, but as a well-stocked toolbox. Pick the tools that suit your table, refine them to your taste, and don't be afraid to build new ones when the need arises.

If you treat the rules as a starting point, rather than a strict framework, you can adapt THE WYRD ENGINE to power almost any story you want to tell.

THE TOOLS IN THE BOX

At the heart of THE WYRD ENGINE are three core mechanics: **Skills**, **Traits**, and **Stress**. These simple, flexible systems can be adapted in a variety of ways to support different genres, tones, or levels of complexity. Whether you're adjusting for a new setting or tailoring the rules to your group's preferences, these are the tools you'll be working with.

SKILLS

The skill list in THE WYRD ENGINE is intentionally broad and compact. Each skill is designed to cover a wide range of actions, making character creation quick and gameplay fast-paced. However, you may wish to expand or refine the skill list to better suit the tone of your game.

The setting will determine the general shape of the skill list. For example, a gritty noir game might include *Investigate*, *Deceive*, and *Stealth*. A high

fantasy setting might use *Lore*, *Magic*, and *Survival*. A science fiction game might feature *Technology*, *Piloting*, and *Engineering*. A horror game might include *Survival*, *Fear*, and *Occult*. A social drama might introduce *Politics* or *Etiquette* as distinct skills.

The **granularity** of the skills is also important. The basic skill list is designed to be broad enough to cover most actions, but you can break skills down into more specific areas if you want to focus on particular elements of gameplay. For example, in a game with a strong combat focus, you might divide *Combat* into *Melee*, *Ranged*, and *Unarmed*. You could go even further, creating skills for specific weapon categories such as *Swords*, *Guns*, and *Bows*, or even individual weapon types like *Rapier*, *Revolver*, and *Longbow*.

The type and granularity of skills affect the game in two main ways: they help set the tone of the game, and they influence the **complexity** of character creation and gameplay. A more granular skill list allows for highly specialised characters, but it can slow down character creation and add overhead during play. A broader skill list is easier to manage but may result in characters that feel more generalist. We return to ideas for using skills to adapt THE WYRD ENGINE to your needs on page 27.

EXAMPLE SKILL LISTS

- **Gritty Noir:** *Investigate*, *Deceive*, *Stealth*, *Combat*, *Contacts*, *Drive*.
- **High Fantasy:** *Lore*, *Magic*, *Survival*, *Combat*, *Crafts*, *Animal Handling*.
- **Science Fiction:** *Technology*, *Piloting*, *Engineering*, *Combat*, *Negotiation*, *Hacking*.
- **Horror:** *Survival*, *Fear*, *Occult*, *Combat*, *Investigate*.

TRAITS

Traits are the unique abilities, advantages, and edges that define what makes a character exceptional. They can represent training, supernatural powers, social status, species features, or personal quirks. In a science fiction setting, Traits might include *Cybernetic Interface* or *Zero-G Adaptation*. In a magical world, you might see *Pyromancer*, *Familiar Companion*, or *Blessed by the Moon*. Traits are one of the most adaptable parts of the system and offer a powerful way to express the flavour of your setting.

The core rules give each player character three Traits that either provide a **+2 bonus** to a relevant skill check, allow the character to attempt actions that others cannot, or grant a **once per scene/session** special ability. This is a solid starting point, but you can modify it to suit your setting. You might allow

different levels of bonuses, more flexible activation conditions, or variable Trait counts. You can also experiment with negative or limiting Traits. For example, a Trait that imposes a **-2 penalty** under specific circumstances could be exchanged for a stronger or broader positive Trait elsewhere—such as a larger bonus, wider applicability, or more frequent use. This approach supports more diverse and flavourful character builds.

We explore adapting Traits further on page 27.

EXAMPLE TRAIT TYPES

- **Situational Bonus:** A Trait provides a +2 bonus to any relevant skill check when it clearly applies.
- **Expanded Capabilities:** A Trait allows a character to attempt actions that others cannot, such as deciphering an ancient language or crafting advanced machinery.
- **Once per Scene/Session:** A Trait grants a powerful ability usable once per scene or session, like escaping a trap or declaring a helpful ally nearby.

STRESS

Stress in THE WYRD ENGINE is a simplified form of damage or pressure. It does not distinguish between physical, mental, or emotional harm. Instead, it represents the overall toll that events take on a character, supporting a more narrative-driven approach where the focus stays on the story. That said, you can use the same mechanism to track different types of stress. For example, a horror game might benefit from tracking physical injury separately from psychological trauma. A political drama might introduce a stress track for *Reputation* or *Favour*. This modular design allows you to shape the stress system around your setting’s themes.

You can also use stress tracks to monitor other expendable resources, such as magical energy, divine favour, or battery power—making stress a universal mechanic for whatever matters in your game. The number of Fatigue and Wound boxes a character has can be scaled up or down to fit the tone. A gritty, high-stakes game might give players fewer boxes, making every setback feel impactful. A more cinematic game might allow greater endurance, supporting fast-paced action and dramatic comebacks.

You can also adjust how stress is applied, what effects it imposes, and how characters recover. In horror, stress might linger or worsen over time. In pulp action, it might reset between scenes. These decisions shape not only the mechanics but the emotional pacing of the game.

We return to ideas for adapting stress on page 27.

BALANCING

Before we dive into the techniques for adapting the core mechanics, it’s worth taking a moment to discuss the role of **balance** in your game. Many

traditional RPG systems place a heavy emphasis on mechanical balance—ensuring that all player characters are equally powerful, or that monsters and NPCs scale precisely with the players’ capabilities. THE WYRD ENGINE takes a different approach.

BALANCING PLAYER CHARACTERS

In some systems, strict rules are used to ensure characters remain roughly equal in power. These systems often rely on classes, levels, or point-buy mechanics to produce balanced builds, and considerable effort goes into ensuring that a wizard and a warrior of the same level are comparable in combat effectiveness. In practice, however, these systems rarely achieve true balance—some builds will always be more effective in certain situations than others.

THE WYRD ENGINE does not assume that mechanical balance between characters is necessary or even desirable. The goal is not to make every character equally powerful in a mechanical sense, but to ensure that every player has a meaningful and enjoyable place in the story.

Balance in THE WYRD ENGINE is achieved at the **narrative level**, not the mathematical level. What matters is that each character has opportunities to shine, and each player gets a fair share of the spotlight. A party made up of one massive ogre and three nimble goblins may be wildly imbalanced in raw power, but it can still be balanced in terms of narrative weight, character focus, and fun. In fact, such contrasts often make for the most memorable stories.

As a GM, your role is not to enforce mechanical parity, but to ensure that every character has a role to play in the unfolding events. A character who is physically weak might be the only one who can read the ancient runes. Another might lack combat ability, but serve as the party’s voice in diplomatic scenes. So long as each character is relevant to the story being told—and given space to contribute—they are “balanced” in the ways that matter most.

BALANCING ENCOUNTERS

Many traditional RPGs structure progression around steadily increasing power. As characters advance in levels or gain equipment, they become stronger—and to keep the game challenging, enemies and obstacles are scaled up accordingly.

THE WYRD ENGINE does not assume this kind of scaling is necessary. Characters may improve over time, but improvement is generally narrative or situational, not exponential. More importantly, the mechanics are scale-independent. Since skill modifiers are relative, any change to a player’s abilities can be matched by adjusting the difficulty of the task or the capabilities of the opposition. There is no need to calculate experience levels, hit

dice, or challenge ratings. You do not need to scale up monsters or NPCs in order to make them “fair” for the players. Simply assess how difficult you want a given encounter to be, and assign it a target difficulty or build an NPC with abilities that present a meaningful challenge. A +2 bonus for a player or a +2 bonus for a monster works the same way—both shift the odds, but the relative difference is what really matters.

This makes encounter design fast, flexible, and focused on the fiction. You can decide how hard a challenge should feel, and adjust accordingly without needing to worry about perfect symmetry.

BALANCING THE GAME

In the suggestions for adapting the rules in the remainder of this chapter—and in the following chapters focused on specific rule variants—we often provide guidance for building characters using fixed numbers of “points” assigned to various aspects. This is not intended as a strict point-buy system, but rather as a helpful rule of thumb. Assigning the same number of points to each character can ensure that everyone has a similar range of abilities and options, which can be useful during character creation. However, as discussed above, mechanical equality is not the same as meaningful balance. Giving every character the same number of points does not guarantee a balanced or enjoyable game. What truly matters is that each character feels relevant to the story, has opportunities to act meaningfully, and receives a fair share of the narrative spotlight. If some characters are significantly more powerful than others on paper, that’s not necessarily a problem—as long as the story provides space for everyone to shine. A clever but frail investigator can be just as important as a combat powerhouse, depending on the situation. The key lies not in

rigidly enforcing parity, but in designing scenarios that offer a variety of challenges and highlight the strengths of different characters.

When adapting the rules, always keep this broader view of balance in mind. Create *interesting* characters with unique roles in the story, and shape your game around moments that let each of them take centre stage. That’s where true balance lies—not in the numbers, but in the shared spotlight.

A NOTE TO GMs: SPOTLIGHT OVER SYMMETRY

It can be tempting to obsess over keeping characters mathematically equal—but don’t. Your goal isn’t to ensure everyone has the same numbers; it’s to ensure everyone has a reason to be at the table. One player might solve puzzles, another might command in battle, and a third might charm their way through a tense negotiation. As long as the story makes space for them all, you’ve achieved balance where it counts.

ADAPTING SKILLS

SKILL PROGRESSION

Narratively enabling skills are a great way to add depth to your game. You can use them to create a sense of progression, or to add prerequisites for certain skills. For example, you might require that a character has the *Unarmed Combat* skill before they can learn *Martial Arts*. This can help to create a sense of realism and immersion in your game world.

LEVELS OF DETAIL

ADAPTING TRAITS

define narrative permission

ADAPTING STRESS

CHAPTER 4: COMBAT

HE core combat system, as described in the previous chapter, will suffice for any setting where combat is not a large part of the play. There is next to no combat in Agatha Christie's novels, so we don't need detailed combat mechanics in a setting modelled around such types of crime mysteries. They would only get in the way.

However, the role of combat in a game can vary significantly depending on the setting, the importance of combat in a given scenario, and the style of action you wish to create. Some settings favour **quick, brutal encounters**, where a single well-placed shot from a sniper or the swift blade of an assassin can end a fight in an instant. In contrast, other games may emphasise **heroic, drawn-out battles**, where warriors clash against hordes of monsters, trading blows in a struggle for survival.

The **tone and pacing of combat** should reflect the themes of your game. In a gritty, realistic setting, injuries may be devastating, making every decision in

combat critical. A high-action cinematic game, on the other hand, may allow characters to withstand multiple attacks, diving through gunfire or dueling atop a burning airship without immediate risk of death.

For those who prefer **tactical complexity**, combat may involve detailed positioning, cover mechanics, and resource management, rewarding careful planning and teamwork. Alternatively, a more **freeform approach** might abstract combat into a series of dramatic exchanges, focusing on storytelling rather than strict mechanics.

No matter the approach, THE WYRD ENGINE provides a flexible combat system that can be adjusted to suit your narrative and playstyle. That is the topic of this chapter.

DEALING DAMAGE RECOVERY

CHAPTER 5: MAGIC

 AGIC can do anything that the story demands—at least when it's in the hands of non-player characters, monsters, gods, or mysterious artefacts. In those cases, the Game Master can simply decide what magic does, how powerful it is, and what its limits are (if any). The power level is set not by fixed rules, but by what serves the narrative best.

However, as soon as player characters are expected to interact with magic in a consistent or mechanical way—especially if they can wield it themselves—we need structure. We need rules that define what magic can do, how it works, and how it fits into the rest of the system. Without that, magic becomes either arbitrary or unfair.

Whether your setting treats magic as rare and mysterious or common and scientific, this chapter provides tools and examples for creating magic systems that are flexible, balanced, and narratively satisfying. You can use these as written, combine elements, or use them as a foundation for crafting your own.

DESIGN GOALS FOR MAGIC SYSTEMS

Before diving into the mechanics of magic, it's important to consider what kind of magic best fits the story you want to tell. Not all magic systems are created equal, and not all of them need the same level of structure. In designing a system for your game, you should consider tone, genre expectations, and how much emphasis you want to place on magical abilities during play.

To help with this, we'll frequently refer to two ends of a spectrum: **soft** magic and **hard** magic.

SOFT MAGIC VS HARD MAGIC

A **soft magic system** is mysterious, unpredictable, and often unexplained. Magic might appear as divine will, ancient curses, or the unknowable power of nature. Its role in the story is usually thematic or atmospheric, and it's more likely to serve as a narrative device than a mechanical tool. Soft magic works well in games that lean into horror, wonder, or mythic storytelling, where the unknown is part of the appeal.

A **hard magic system**, by contrast, is defined, repeatable, and governed by rules. Players understand what magic can do and what it can't, and their characters are often trained practitioners who rely on clear mechanics. Hard magic systems shine in

tactical or high-fantasy games, where magic is a tool to be mastered, and players want to build characters who use it with precision and strategy.

Most games fall somewhere in between. A setting might use soft magic for gods and ancient powers, but provide a hard magic system for player spellcasters. Or it might begin with soft, mysterious magic that gradually becomes more structured as players learn its secrets.

SOFT VS. HARD MAGIC IN FICTION

SOFT MAGIC EXAMPLES

- *The Lord of the Rings* – Gandalf's magic is powerful but undefined. We never know exactly what he can or cannot do; his power serves the story and themes rather than a consistent rule set.
- *A Song of Ice and Fire* – Magic is rare, ancient, and often unknowable. Prophecies, shadowy rituals, and dragons contribute to an atmosphere of mystery.
- *Princess Mononoke* – Spirits and curses operate on symbolic and emotional logic more than mechanical rules. Magic enhances the mythic tone rather than offering player-like abilities.

HARD MAGIC EXAMPLES

- *Fullmetal Alchemist* – Alchemy follows strict rules based on equivalent exchange. Characters learn and master the system, and much of the story turns on its limitations.
- *Avatar: The Last Airbender* – Bending is tied to clear disciplines and elements. While fantastical, it has well-defined boundaries and is learned like martial arts.
- *Mistborn* (Brandon Sanderson) – The magic system is fully explained, involving specific metals and predictable effects. Characters strategically plan how to use it in conflicts.

Tip: Soft magic enhances wonder and mystery. Hard magic enables strategy and player agency. Choose the flavour that suits your story—or blend them.

THE GOALS OF MAGIC IN THE WYRD ENGINE

The Wyrd Engine treats magic as just another kind of narrative power—like stealth, combat, or persuasion. It should support character expression, meaningful choices, and dramatic moments. Whether magic is rare and ritualistic or common and codified, the goals for any magic system in THE WYRD ENGINE are:

- **Flexibility:** Magic should adapt to your setting. The system should be easy to customise, whether you're building druidic rites, psychic powers, arcane science, or divine miracles.
- **Narrative Focus:** Magic should enhance the story, not overwhelm it. Magical abilities should feel

- impactful, but they should also create interesting complications, choices, and consequences.
- **Player Agency:** Magic should be something players engage with actively. Whether casting spells or dealing with magical effects, player characters should have tools to shape outcomes and influence the world.
 - **Simplicity:** While magic can be powerful and varied, it should not require pages of rules or countless exceptions. The system should be simple to run and easy to learn.

In the following sections, you'll find guidance for building both soft and hard magic systems using the tools provided by THE WYRD ENGINE. You can use the included example systems as written, or treat them as a foundation to craft something unique for your world.

BUILDING MAGIC WITH CORE MECHANICS

THE WYRD ENGINE is built on three simple yet powerful components: **Skills**, **Traits**, and **Stress**. These same tools can be used to create a wide variety of magic systems, from subtle enchantments to world-shaking sorcery. By using the existing mechanics in flexible ways, you can design a magic system that fits seamlessly into your setting without adding complexity for its own sake.

USING SKILLS FOR MAGIC

One of the simplest ways to represent magic is to introduce a dedicated *Magic* skill (or multiple skills for different magical traditions). This allows characters to roll to cast spells, channel energy, decipher magical texts, or sense supernatural forces. How much you rely on skills depends on how "hard" your magic system is:

- In a **soft magic** system, a Magic skill roll might be used to determine success when calling on mysterious forces or interpreting omens. The effects are largely narrative.
- In a **hard magic** system, you might define clear actions or effects that can be performed with a Magic skill roll, possibly using fixed difficulties or cost thresholds.

You can also split the skill into multiple domains for more granularity—*Ritual Magic*, *Elementalism*, *Divination*, etc.—depending on how central magic is to your game.

USING TRAITS FOR MAGIC

Traits are ideal for granting magical capabilities and defining the flavour of magic in your world. A Trait can do any of the following:

- Provide a **+2 bonus** when using a skill to perform a magical action (e.g., *Fire Adept* might give +2 to

Magic when wielding flame).

- Allow a character to perform a unique magical action others cannot (e.g., *Speak with the Dead*).
- Grant a **once per scene/session** magical effect (e.g., teleporting a short distance, summoning a spectral ally).

By combining Traits with appropriate skills, you can model everything from specialised spellcasters to innate magical creatures. Traits also work well in soft magic systems—serving as vague, evocative powers that offer narrative permission to do magical things without strict limitations.

You can also create themed Trait sets—such as schools of magic, elemental affinities, or bloodlines—to further flavour your system and character options.

USING STRESS FOR MAGIC COSTS AND RISKS

Stress represents the toll magic takes on the caster. The toll doing magic does to the caster's system might be damage that the usual stress boxes will have to absorb. Casting a powerful spell might deal 2 points of Fatigue, or cause Wounds on a botched ritual. This reinforces the idea that magic is dangerous or exhausting, and creates tension when players must choose between casting and conserving energy. Alternatively, you can introduce a separate track of stress boxes, or "mana points", to represent magical energy. This allows for a more tactical approach to magic use, where players must manage their resources carefully.

In more structured systems, you can assign stress costs to specific spells or magical effects. You can also track magical corruption, instability, or backlash using separate stress tracks or consequences. For example:

- *Casting from life force*: Wounds as cost.
- *Psychic strain*: Fatigue or a separate "Mind" track.
- *Chaotic magic*: On failure, take stress or roll for a side effect.

Stress can also be used to limit magic-use in a more freeform system. Instead of spell slots or mana, the caster simply takes stress each time they cast—and must choose when to risk pushing too far.

TYING IT ALL TOGETHER

Most magic systems built in THE WYRD ENGINE will use all three, skills, traits, and stress, in some way. For example:

- A character has the Trait *Stormcaller*, granting +2 to Magic when controlling weather.
- They use their Magic skill to attempt to summon lightning during a scene.
- The GM assigns a difficulty based on conditions and scope, and on a success, the spell works.

- Casting the storm drains 2 Fatigue, and if the character pushes further, they risk a Consequence.

With just a few consistent mechanics, you can create highly flexible and thematic magic systems that feel integrated with the rest of the game.

In the following sections, we'll explore different examples of how to structure magic systems, both soft and hard.

THE GIFT OF TWILIGHT

The Gift belongs to old places—forgotten villages, mist-shrouded woods, windswept moors, and crossroads that never appear on maps. It lingers in lullabies and carved stones, in stories passed down by those who no longer remember why. Magic in these lands is not studied or controlled; it is felt, inherited, and feared. The boundary between the mundane and the mythic is thin, and those who bear the Gift often do so at a cost—marked by dreams, strange silences, or eyes that see too much. In such settings, the world itself seems to remember things long past, and sometimes it remembers you back.

The Gift of Twilight is a soft magic system—high in narrative freedom, low in mechanical constraint. It's not about control or precision, but about mystery, symbolism, and emotional resonance. Magic in this system emerges through intuition and memory, where the line between the real and the unreal is blurred. Effects are not measured in damage or distance, but in meaning.

The system relies on evocative Traits that grant narrative permission to perform strange or wondrous acts—such as speaking to stones, sensing lost things, or recalling forgotten names. When the outcome is uncertain, the GM may call for a skill roll—typically Lore, Presence, or Will. Success stirs old powers. Failure may draw their attention.

GAME MASTER TIP

The Gift of Twilight is a soft magic system, high in narrative freedom and low in mechanical constraint. Ideal for folk horror, fairy tales, mythic modern settings, or low-magic campaigns where mystery is key. It is not well suited for players who enjoy tactical gameplay or precise mechanics, as it relies heavily on narrative interpretation and the GM's discretion.

- **Pros:** Flexible, narrative-driven, encourages creativity and storytelling.
- **Cons:** Less predictable, may frustrate players who prefer clear mechanics or tactical options.
- **Best For:** Settings with a focus on folklore, mystery, and emotional resonance. Ideal for one-shots or campaigns where magic is rare and wondrous.
- **Not For:** Players who prefer hard mechanics, tactical gameplay, or a focus on combat and strategy.

USING THE GIFT: THE MECHANICS

The Gift isn't cast—it's invoked. It happens when the moment is right, when something remembered or promised is brought forward into the present. Magic often takes the form of subtle interventions, coincidences, or quiet revelations.

Player characters with the Gift should have one or more Traits reflecting their connection to the otherworldly, such as:

EXAMPLE GIFTS

- *Touched by the Old Road*
- *Knows the Names of Trees*
- *The Last of the Dreaming Blood*

These Traits don't provide fixed bonuses. Instead, they grant narrative access to supernatural effects. When a player wish to use the Gift, they describe what they want to do and how it connects to their Trait. The GM may ask for a roll if the outcome is uncertain, but the focus remains on the story rather than strict mechanics.

INVOKING THE GIFT

- | | |
|---------------|--|
| Player | <i>"I want to call on the old road to find a way through the fog."</i> |
| GM | <i>"That's a good use of your Trait. Describe how you do it."</i> |
| Player | <i>"I close my eyes and listen to the whispers in the mist. I remember the stories of those who walked before me."</i> |
| GM | <i>"Roll Lore to see if you can hear them."</i> |

In the sense of mechanics, *The Gift of Twilight* is as simple as it gets. We have added a special type of Trait called **Gift** and everything else is handled by improvisation. The Gift is not a skill, nor a power, nor a spell. It is a narrative permission to do something that is not possible otherwise.

For a player group that likes improvisation and storytelling, this is a great way to add magic to the game. But it does rely heavily on improvisation, and for new and less experienced players, it may be a bit overwhelming.

GUIDELINES FOR GMs

- Let players describe what their magic looks and feels like. Trust the tone of the moment.
- The Gift rarely solves problems directly—it changes the context, shifts fate, or reveals hidden truths.
- Magic should always have a cost, but not necessarily one tracked in stress. A memory, a favour, or an unwanted connection may be more appropriate.

OPTIONAL CONSEQUENCES

For tables that want a bit more mechanical tension, consider adding one of the following consequences:

- **Wyrd Tides:** After invoking the Gift, roll a die. On a **2**, something unintended stirs.
- **The Debt:** Each use of the Gift creates a narrative debt to a power or presence. It will call on the character—sooner or later.
- **The Mark:** Frequent use leaves visible or spiritual traces—glowing eyes, silence that follows them, or unsettling dreams. These may attract attention from beings better left undisturbed.

IN SUMMARY

The Gift of Twilight is for stories where magic is strange, subtle, and laced with consequence. It invites wonder, not certainty. Players who enjoy mystery, folklore, and the poetry of power will feel right at home.

THE WARDEN'S PATH

The Warden's Path winds through deep forests, high peaks, sunlit plains, and storm-wracked shores. It is not a road of cities or empires, but of roots, rivers, and stones warmed by ancient fire. Those who walk it do not command the elements—they listen to them, learn from them, and earn their trust.

A Warden feels the tremor beneath the ground before it speaks. They know when the rain is mercy and when it is warning. They do not cast spells—they shape their will through discipline, ritual, and connection to the world around them.

And when the balance is broken, they are the ones who rise to restore it.

The Warden's Path is a *medium-soft* to *medium-hard* magic system built on balance, focus, and elemental harmony. It is ideal for martial elementalists, ritual guardians, wandering monks, or nature-bound mystics. Power flows through alignment—not domination—and magic is shaped through action, breath, and will.

Where *The Gift of Twilight* is narrative and mysterious, the Warden's Path is equally narrative in structure, but building up magical effects involves the core mechanics to a larger degree. It offers players a structured but flexible toolkit, grounded in consistent effects and cinematic pacing.

GAME MASTER TIP

The Warden's Path is ideal for players who want magic that is rhythmic, grounded, and tactical. The build-up mechanic supports tension and dramatic releases, while elemental attunement reinforces character identity.

- **Pros:** Evocative, balanced, works well in both exploration and combat; supports big moments.
- **Cons:** Requires players to think ahead; less spontaneous than freeform systems.
- **Best For:** Elemental guardians, ritual casters, martial mystics, nature-based traditions.
- **Not For:** Chaotic or academic spellcasters (see *Codex Infinitum* for those).

THE MECHANICS OF THE WARDEN'S PATH

Magic in this system is built from two components: **Elemental Traits** and **Skills**.

- **Elemental Traits** represent the character's attunement to a specific element, such as fire, earth, water, or air.
- **Skills** represent how that element is directed—whether to attack, defend, reshape the environment, or endure hardship. These are the usual skills from the core rules.

ELEMENTAL TRAITS

- *Heart of the Flame* — attuned to fire and heat
- *Stonebound* — attuned to earth and endurance
- *Voice Like Thunder* — attuned to air and storm
- *Dancer of Tides* — attuned to water and flow

Together, the elemental trait and skills allow the character to channel magic through action. There are two primary modes of use **Build-Up** and **Release**.

BUILD-UP

A **Build-Up** action lets the caster use an element combined with a skill to channel magical energy into a new or held spell. Each successful build-up adds a **+2 bonus**. These bonuses stack until the spell is released.

RELEASE

A **Release** action combines an element + skill to perform an immediate magical effect (standard skill roll). The element only adds narrative flavour, not mechanical bonuses.

CASTING AND CHANNELING

When a Warden uses elemental magic, they declare which element and skill they are using. The GM sets the difficulty as normal.

- **Immediate use** = roll and resolve as normal. - **Channeling** = roll as a preparation action. On success, gain **+2** to your next elemental spell. This can be done repeatedly to build up energy over time.

USING AND BUILDING MAGIC

- Player "I want to raise a stone wall between the villagers and the raiders."
- GM "Using your Stonebound trait and Elemental Control? You can cast now or spend a round channeling."
- Player "I'll channel—try to raise something strong."
- GM "Great. Roll Elemental Control. Success gives you a +2 for when you release."
- Player "I got a Great (+4)!"
- GM "The stones tremble at your call. You may build up further, or release next round with a +2."

The player can now: - Channel again for another +2 (if successful), or - Release the spell and apply all accumulated bonuses to a dramatic effect.

This creates meaningful tension—does the Warden act now, or build for a greater impact?

ELEMENTAL LIMITS

Wards can only manipulate elements they are attuned to. A character with only *Dancer of Tides* cannot raise fire or command earth—unless they acquire another Trait through training, trial, or mystical revelation.

This encourages thematic specialisation and makes each Warden feel distinct.

OPTIONAL MECHANICS

- Burnout:** If a character fails a channeling attempt, they take 1 Fatigue. This adds risk to continued buildup.
- Unstable Cast:** If a character channels for more than +4 and fails their release, the spell misfires.
- Elemental Stress:** Channeling can cost stress instead of a roll, allowing automatic buildup—at a price.

MAGIC SKILLS

The core skill used for elemental manipulation is often called *Elemental Control*, but the GM may allow alternative skills like:

- Discipline — to contain or direct powerful elemental forces
- Endurance — to absorb an elemental effect
- Combat — to weaponise the element
- Survival — to sense or respond to natural conditions

Players are encouraged to describe how their action fits their skill.

IN SUMMARY

The Warden's Path is a disciplined form of elemental magic, focused on harmony, patience, and power

with purpose. Its unique build-up mechanic rewards foresight and character-driven expression. Players who enjoy cinematic timing, strategic tension, and the poetry of elemental balance will find themselves at home.

CODEX INFINITUM

The Codex is not a book you hold. It is written in the bones of the world, encoded in starlight, hidden in the spaces between words. But for those who study, who sacrifice, who inscribe its logic upon their minds—it opens.

In the Great Archive, beneath miles of stone, Arcinel traces the glyphs again. Not by rote, but by understanding. Geometry, breath, and balance. He speaks the final syllable and the construct animates, bronze limbs unfolding with a hiss of steam and spell.

One mistake would have meant ruin. But knowledge — true knowledge — is power. And he has earned it.

Codex Infinitum is a *hard magic* system—structured, tactical, and rule-bound. Magic is studied, codified, and practiced like an arcane science. Every spell has a defined effect, cost, and scope. It is ideal for high fantasy campaigns, magical academies, arcane duels, or settings where power comes through discipline and logic rather than intuition.

Unlike the symbolic ambiguity of *The Gift of Twilight* or the intuitive flow of *The Warden's Path*, this system prioritises clarity, precision, and balance. It appeals to players who enjoy mechanical depth, reliable outcomes, and strategic spell use.

GAME MASTER TIP

Codex Infinitum is a structured spellcasting system for players who enjoy crunchy mechanics, defined options, and tactical play. It's ideal for magical scholars, arcane tacticians, or campaigns with rigid magical laws.

- Pros:** Clear rules, consistent resolution, easy to balance, satisfying for planner-type players.
- Cons:** Less improvisational; may feel rigid in dreamlike or mythic settings.
- Best For:** Magical universities, wizard duels, fantasy warfare, arcane espionage.
- Not For:** Folkloric or mystery-focused campaigns (see *The Gift of Twilight* for those).

THE CODEX MECHANICS

The Codex system is built around **spell skills**. While the GM may require a Trait (e.g., "Trained at the Obsidian Spire") to justify access, it is not mechanically necessary—spells function like any other Skill.

To cast a spell, the player chooses one from their known list and resolves it like any action: the GM sets a difficulty, the player rolls, and the outcome determines the effect. Spells are either broad skills (e.g. *Warding*) or specific entries from a spellbook-like list.

SPELLS AS SKILLS

In the simplest approach, spells are purchased like any other Skill and function similarly. Each represents a broad domain of arcane expertise.

SPELL SKILLS

- *Veilcraft* — manipulate light, sound, or sensation to obscure or deceive
- *Frameworking* — conjure, shape, or project fire
- *Warding* — create magical barriers, seals, or protections
- *Chronoshaping* — manipulate time in small, focused ways

Because spells are purchased like Skills, they should have similarly broad scope. While magic invites narrative freedom, the goal is to keep effects consistent and balanced with the rest of the game.

GRIMOIRES AND SPELLBOOKS

Alternatively, GMs may define a separate spell list distinct from normal skills. This allows for more granularity in effect and cost, and supports different advancement rules. You can require spells to be purchased from a separate budget, or at higher costs than regular skills.

SPELLS WITH DETAILED EFFECTS

- *Mirror Veil* — Appear as another humanoid. Lasts until damaged or disrupted. Costs 2 stress. Opposed by **Notice** or magical detection.
- *Flame Tongue* — Imbue a weapon with fire. Grants +2 damage and ignition. Lasts one scene. Costs 2 stress.
- *Ward of Binding* — Seal an entryway. Lasts 1 hour or until dispelled. Costs 3 stress. Opposed by **Will**.
- *Time Slip* — Take two actions this round or gain +2 to initiative and evasion. Costs 3 stress. May not be used back-to-back.

MAGIC STRESS

Stress is used to limit spell use and create tactical pressure. Each spell costs stress to cast—either from your main Fatigue/Wounds tracks or from a separate **Magic Stress** pool. If you want a more heroic or flexible tone, use Magic Stress as a distinct track. If you want a grittier tone, use the normal stress boxes.

MAGIC FATIGUE

Player “Can I still cast Flame Tongue? I’m nearly out of Fatigue.”

GM “You can, but you’ll need to mark a Wound box instead. That fire has to come from somewhere.”

Player “Let’s do it.”

SPELL RANKS

To reflect increasing power, spells can be ranked. A spellcaster may only cast a spell at a rank equal to or below their Skill level in that spell. Higher ranks have stronger effects and higher stress costs.

SPELL RANKS

- *Mirror Veil* — Costs 1-3 stress
 - Rank 1: Appear as a specific person you’ve studied
 - Rank 2: Appear as any generic humanoid of chosen type
 - Rank 3: Shift appearance at will; mimic voice or gait
- *Flame Tongue* — Costs 1-3 stress
 - Rank 1: Weapon deals +2 damage
 - Rank 2: Weapon deals +4, ignites flammables
 - Rank 3: Weapon deals +6 and can emit a flame burst (area effect)

MAGIC SCHOOLS

Schools offer another axis for character customisation. Each school defines a category of spells. Characters may specialise in a school to gain bonuses or unlock more advanced spells.

MAGIC SCHOOLS

- *Elementalism* — Fire, water, air, earth. Terrain shaping, blasts, weather magic.
- *Necromancy* — Raise the dead, drain life, bind souls.
- *Illusion* — Glamour, misdirection, invisibility.
- *Divination* — Foresight, scrying, omen-reading.

Schools can be implemented as Traits or gating requirements. You may require a Trait like “Disciple of the Red Tower” to access spells of a given school—or allow open learning at reduced effect unless a school is mastered. Schools can also offer bonuses (e.g. +2 to fire-related spells) or unlock higher ranks.

GUIDELINES FOR GMs

- Define spells with your players. Leave room to expand as the campaign grows.
- Consider spell rarity. Forbidden or legendary spells might be unlocked via quests or secrets.
- Mastery tiers—Apprentice (Rank 1), Adept (Rank 2), Master (Rank 3)—help track progress.
- Adjust stress recovery based on your setting. In high-magic worlds, it may reset each scene. In darker ones, it might take a ritual or rest.

IN SUMMARY

Codex Infinitum offers a disciplined, tactical approach to magic. For players who enjoy clearly defined powers, mastery through learning, and meaningful resource trade-offs, it provides a rich and flexible

system. Magic, in this vision, is not wonder—it is knowledge made dangerous.

THE KNOWN AND THE NAMED

Mireya traces the final sigil into the chalk-drawn circle. Each stroke is deliberate, each angle precise. The name must be perfect. Not spoken aloud—never aloud—but inscribed with full understanding.

"To perceive the flame," she whispers, "you must know more than heat. You must know hunger."

Around her, candles gutter as unseen winds stir. She doesn't flinch. She lays her hand on the page beside her—six glyphs, etched in gold leaf, glowing faintly.

Perceive. Flame. Memory. Self.

She speaks the final syllable.

For a heartbeat, she sees the fire's history: who lit it, why, the pain it consumed. The flame flickers back, knowing it has been seen.

Magic is not in the word alone—but in the one who names it rightly.

The Known and the Named is *medium to very hard magic* with an elaborate system of rules and mechanics. It adds complexity and depth to the game, making it suitable for settings with a focus on magic, such as high fantasy or magical academies. It is ideal for players who enjoy tactical gameplay and character progression through mastery of magic. It is best avoided for one-shots.

CHAPTER 6: RACES & CREATURES

ON -player characters, also known as **NPCs**, are characters controlled

by the GM that the players interact with.

PART 2

ONE-SHOTS

CHAPTER 7: CRAFTING ONE-SHOTS

A one-shot is a complete story told in a single session, typically designed to last between two and four hours. Whether run at a convention, as a standalone evening of entertainment, or to introduce new players to the world of tabletop roleplaying, one-shots provide a focused, low-commitment narrative experience. They are an ideal format for groups who want a compelling story without the long-term investment of a full campaign.

Unlike ongoing campaigns or episodic series—where narratives can unfold gradually, subplots evolve over weeks, and characters undergo slow-burn development—a one-shot demands immediacy. The story must hook players quickly, progress cleanly, and resolve within a tight timeframe. This brevity encourages bold decisions, dramatic reversals, and heightened stakes, often resulting in intense, cinematic sessions that stick in the memory long after the final dice have fallen.

WHAT MAKES ONE-SHOTS UNIQUE

The beauty of a one-shot lies in its constraints. There is little room for filler scenes, wandering digressions, or downtime. Every moment must serve the core story. Because of this, one-shots reward focused design: a strong premise, clear player objectives, and a defined structure that builds tension and momentum. When done well, a one-shot leaves players satisfied—but also curious. It's not uncommon for a tightly written one-shot to linger in a group's imagination, tempting players to return to those characters, revisit that world, or ask what would've happened if they had made a different choice.

One-shots are a distinctive storytelling format within tabletop gaming. They are not simply shorter versions of campaigns, but a format with its own strengths, challenges, and design philosophy. Understanding what makes one-shots unique will help GMs craft more effective and satisfying sessions.

CONTAINED STORYTELLING

A one-shot begins and ends within a single session. There may be thematic connections to other stories or hints of a broader world, but the central conflict must be introduced, explored, and resolved within a tight narrative window. This sense of containment allows players to commit more fully to riskier choices, explore unfamiliar characters, or embrace tragic endings without long-term consequences. While the

story may leave a few mysteries unresolved—sometimes deliberately—it should feel whole and meaningful as a standalone experience.

LIMITED TIME, FOCUSED IMPACT

Time is the most precious resource in a one-shot. With only a few hours to work with, there's no room for elaborate exposition, slow builds, or aimless wandering. The session must begin with immediate tension or curiosity, and each scene must push the story forward. One-shots benefit from a clear goal, strong pacing, and a structure that avoids downtime. This focused design creates space for big character moments, daring actions, and impactful resolutions—all in a single sitting.

CHARACTER SIMPLICITY

Because one-shots don't allow for long-term arcs, character design should emphasise clarity and intent. Strong archetypes and bold personalities help players make fast decisions and stay engaged. Pre-generated characters often work best, especially if they're tied directly into the story through motivations, secrets, or relationships. Depth isn't sacrificed—it's condensed. A single moment of doubt, sacrifice, or revelation can define a one-shot character more than hours of gradual growth in a campaign.

TONE AND PACING

One-shots work best when they commit to a specific tone. Whether it's gothic horror, screwball comedy, gritty noir, or romantic tragedy, a one-shot has the freedom to lean hard into style without needing to balance it across multiple sessions. This makes one-shots excellent vehicles for experimenting with genre, mood, and emotional intensity. Pacing should match the tone—frantic in a heist, methodical in an investigation, eerie and lingering in horror. The best one-shots feel like a short story or a single, memorable episode of television: self-contained, stylish, and confident in what they're trying to do.

STRENGTHS AND LIMITATIONS

One-shots are not just shorter adventures—they are a distinct narrative form with their own design strengths and structural limitations. Understanding what they do best (and where they can falter) will help GMs make the most of the format and avoid common pitfalls.

STRENGTHS

One-shots offer a number of unique advantages that make them especially appealing for both new and experienced groups. Their flexibility, accessibility, and high-impact storytelling potential are ideal for fast, focused play.

- **Easy to run with rotating or new players.** One-shots require no long-term commitment and minimal backstory, making them perfect for players who are new to the hobby or only available for a single session. Their self-contained nature means players can jump in and out without disrupting a larger arc.
- **Ideal for playtesting ideas, systems, or settings.** Running a one-shot is a great way to test a new ruleset, character option, or narrative concept. GMs can experiment freely without needing to rebalance for a long campaign or worry about continuity between sessions.
- **Lower commitment encourages experimentation.** Both players and GMs can try bold or unconventional approaches in a one-shot. Characters can take big risks, explore flawed or extreme personalities, or even embrace tragic fates—all without worrying about long-term consequences.
- **Great for introducing your setting without overwhelming detail.** Because one-shots work best when focused, they offer an excellent way to showcase a setting in bite-sized pieces. You can introduce themes, factions, or locations without requiring players to memorise pages of lore.
- **Allows for high-impact, high-risk storytelling.** The time limit encourages fast pacing and big emotional or narrative moments. Characters might die, betray each other, or uncover terrifying truths. These stories can leave lasting impressions precisely because they don't have to be safe or sustainable over time.

LIMITATIONS

Of course, one-shots also come with certain constraints. Some of these are creative limitations; others are logistical or structural. Being aware of them helps ensure they don't become stumbling blocks in play.

- **Limited time for character development or emotional depth.** Without multiple sessions to build relationships or inner conflicts, characters may feel flatter or more archetypal. It's up to the players and GM to pack meaning into fewer scenes.
- **Harder to incorporate slow-build mysteries or subtle foreshadowing.** Complex plotlines that rely on gradually seeded clues, long-term suspense, or evolving dynamics often don't work in a one-shot. Stories must be front-loaded with intrigue and provide satisfying payoff without overcomplication.

- **Players unfamiliar with the system may need more support.** If the system is new to the group, valuable time can be lost to rules explanations. This is especially true if character creation isn't handled beforehand. Pre-generated characters and cheat sheets are strongly recommended.
- **Can feel rushed if poorly paced.** A one-shot with too many moving parts—or no clear goal—can collapse under its own weight. Without a tight structure, the story may lose momentum, leading to either an abrupt ending or an unsatisfying conclusion.

DESIGNING FOR ONE-SHOTS

Designing a one-shot is an exercise in precision. With limited time and a clear endpoint, every choice—plot, pacing, characters, setting—needs to serve the story efficiently. What follows are six key principles that will help you structure memorable, engaging one-shots that feel complete, even within a few short hours of play.

1. STRONG OPENING HOOK

The first ten minutes of a one-shot are crucial. You don't have time to build tension slowly or establish elaborate backstories. Begin in the middle of something already happening: a body on the floor, a letter in hand, a fire in the distance, a scream from the next room. Let the players start with a question they urgently want answered.

Opening “in media res” works especially well—drop them into a scene and ask how they got there. For example:

You're standing in the centre of a locked theatre. The lights have just gone out. There's blood on the stage. What do you do?

A strong hook creates buy-in. It immediately signals that something is happening, that it matters, and that the players have agency in how it unfolds.

2. SIMPLE, COMPELLING PREMISE

Your core premise should be easy to explain in a sentence or two. Avoid sprawling setups, multiple unrelated mysteries, or complex histories that require lengthy exposition. Instead, centre your story around a clear conflict or question. Good one-shot premises often contain a ticking clock or inherent mystery. For example:

- A murder occurs at a noble's estate just before a storm traps everyone inside.
- A long-sealed vault opens at sunset—and stays open for only one night.

- A ritual is underway. The players must decide whether to stop it, complete it, or escape before it finishes.

A simple premise isn't shallow—it's focused. It allows room for character development and twist endings without getting lost in setup.

3. MANAGEABLE SCOPE

It's tempting to include everything: rich worldbuilding, dozens of NPCs, multiple red herrings, and a twisty plot. Resist that urge. One-shots thrive on tight focus. Choose one primary conflict, three to five major beats (scenes or locations), and a handful of meaningful NPCs. Any more risks bloating the runtime or confusing the players. Instead of building a sprawling world, suggest it with detail. An overheard rumour, a newspaper headline, or a coded message can hint at a larger setting without stealing time from the current story.

4. CLEAR STAKES AND URGENCY

To keep the story moving, players need a reason to act—and act soon. Stakes should be personal, immediate, or irreversible. Give the players something to care about: a friend in danger, a mysterious disease spreading, a deadline that can't be ignored.

Urgency can take many forms:

- A ritual completing at midnight.
- A train leaving in one hour—with the killer on board.
- A crumbling structure where every moment increases the risk of collapse.

Whether dramatic or subtle, the stakes should always give the players something to lose and something to gain.

5. FLEXIBLE ENDINGS

One-shots often live or die by their final scene. Aim to prepare two or three possible outcomes, but remain ready to improvise based on player choices. A satisfying ending doesn't mean wrapping up every detail—just resolving the core conflict or answering the central question.

Let endings reflect the tone of the session. Horror one-shots may end in ambiguity or dread. Comedic ones might end in chaos. Don't be afraid of tragic outcomes, moral ambiguity, or unanswered questions—especially if they tie into character choices.

6. EVOCATIVE SETTING WITH MINIMAL EXPOSITION

You only have a few scenes to establish your world—make them count. Use vivid sensory detail to ground players: the smell of wet parchment in a forgotten archive, the flicker of blue flame beneath a

cracked cathedral dome, the screech of iron wheels on cobblestone tracks.

Avoid lore dumps. Instead, let the setting emerge through what the players see, hear, and interact with. A well-crafted description or strange encounter can do more than a page of backstory. Trust players to infer the world—they don't need to know everything, just enough to believe in it.

TOOLS FOR SUCCESS

Even the best story concept can stumble without the right preparation. Fortunately, one-shots don't require hours of worldbuilding or elaborate stat blocks. What they do require is clarity, pacing, and tools that support fast, immersive play. The following techniques will help you get the most out of your session while minimising prep and maximising player engagement.

PRE-GENERATED CHARACTERS

One of the most effective ways to streamline a one-shot is by using pre-generated characters. These should be more than stat blocks—they should come with defined goals, short backstories, and, most importantly, a connection to the central conflict of the session.

A good pre-gen character:

- Has a clear personality or archetype (e.g., "the bitter ex-soldier," "the naive apprentice," "the sceptical scholar").
- Possesses a reason to care about the unfolding events.
- May have secrets, suspicions, or goals that introduce tension or opportunity.

Offer players 4–6 pre-gens with distinct roles and tones. Encourage them to pick quickly—part of the magic of one-shots is diving into a character you didn't overthink.

SCENE STRUCTURE

While improvisation is a core strength of many games, one-shots benefit greatly from having a modular outline. Think of it like a four-act structure—enough to provide guidance without locking you into a rigid script.

- **Scene I – The Hook:** Start with a compelling problem or inciting incident. It should immediately raise questions and give the players something to react to.
- **Scene II – Investigation or Complication:** The players follow leads, uncover hidden truths, or realise things are worse than they seemed. Introduce new stakes or challenge their assumptions.
- **Scene III – Revelation or Confrontation:** This is the climax—whether it's a dramatic confrontation,

a moral dilemma, or a terrifying discovery. Choices made here shape the ending.

- **Scene IV – Fallout or Resolution:** Close on a note that suits the tone—whether satisfying or unsettling. Let players reflect on what they achieved... or unleashed.

This structure keeps the pacing tight while giving you the flexibility to adapt in response to player actions.

RUNNING TIPS

Even with strong design, the GM’s role in guiding tone and flow is essential. The following tips help ensure your one-shot delivers on its promise:

- **Keep things moving.** Don’t be afraid to cut away from slow moments. If a scene drags, fast-forward to the next turning point. Momentum matters more than completeness.
- **Let players shape the tone.** While you may have a vision for a dark horror story or light-hearted caper, players will bring their own energy. Adapt to it when possible. One-shots thrive when the group buys into the tone together.
- **Use flashbacks or revelations.** If characters feel disconnected, introduce flashbacks, visions, or sudden memories to tie them into the story. These techniques can deepen character engagement with minimal setup.
- **Embrace bold choices.** The best one-shots often veer off-course. Don’t resist it—lean in. Let the

story twist around the players’ decisions. That’s where the real magic happens.

CONCLUSION

One-shots are like ghost stories told around a fire—brief, powerful, and unforgettable when done right. They reward bold decisions, clear design, and creative risks. Whether you’re crafting a tense investigation, a surreal magical mystery, or a tale of tragic heroism, the one-shot format invites you to say something sharp and lasting, all in a single sitting. Think of one-shots not as smaller stories, but as distilled ones. They are opportunities to explore strange ideas, give players dramatic moments, and create a complete narrative arc in a fraction of the time. Whether you’re running a stand-alone adventure, testing a setting, or setting the stage for something larger, crafting a one-shot is an art worth mastering—and one of the most satisfying forms of play in tabletop gaming.

In the following pages you will find a set of one-shot adventures designed to showcase THE WYRD ENGINE. Each adventure is self-contained, with pre-generated characters, a clear premise, and a focused structure. They are designed to be run in a single session, but can be expanded or adapted to fit your group’s playstyle. Use them as a starting point, a template, or a source of inspiration for your own one-shot creations. And remember: the best one-shots are the ones that linger in the imagination long after the final dice have fallen.

CHAPTER 8: WHAT LINGERS



here are places the world forgets. Not through time or chance, but through silence—heavy, deliberate silence that settles like dust over memory, over names, over grief.

Saint Hieronymus Monastery was once such a place. Tucked in the hills beyond the reach of rail or road, it served as a haven for those seeking peace, penance, or oblivion. Decades ago, it fell silent. No letters, no pilgrims, no word. The world moved on, and most forgot.

But you did not forget. You couldn't. Because someone you once loved—someone you still remember—was there when the silence began. And now, an envelope has arrived. No return address. Just your name, written in a familiar hand that time should have erased.

Inside: a yellowed prayer card bearing the name *Abbot Rian*, a brief message: "*Come. Something remains. It must not.*"

The road to Saint Hieronymus is overgrown. The monastery stands still beneath a grey sky. No birds sing. The gates are open. What lingers in the silence... and what will it take to bring it to light?

What Lingers is a mystery of atmosphere and memory, intended to unfold slowly and build toward a climactic confrontation. Players arrive at the abandoned Saint Hieronymus Monastery, drawn by personal ties to those who vanished decades ago. The silence they encounter is not merely the absence of sound—it is a force, pervasive and oppressive, one that resists being broken.

The scenario is divided into four acts:

- **Act I** introduces the players and their shared connection to the monastery.
- **Act II** immerses them in the eerie stillness of the monastery, where they begin to experience the effects of the silence.
- **Act III** leads them into the crypts, where they confront echoes of the past and discover the *Campana Silens*.
- **Act IV** culminates in a confrontation with the Eyeless Abbot, where they must ring the Bell to break his hold over their memories.

Each act tests different facets of play—emotional resilience, problem-solving, and tactical cooperation—culminating in a single boss battle where success hinges on recovering what was lost: identity, remembrance, and the power to speak one's truth aloud.

SCENARIO OVERVIEW

Tone: Gothic horror, spiritual decay, emotional weight
Setting: Saint Hieronymus Monastery — a remote, long-abandoned spiritual retreat frozen in silence

Structure:

- **Act I – Echoes Before the Silence:** The characters meet at a rural waystation; they discover their shared summons and personal connections to the monastery
- **Act II – A Silence That Should Have Passed:** Arrival at the monastery; unnatural silence; signs of lost lives
- **Act III – What the Stone Remembers:** Exploration and hallucinations; discovery of the *Campana Silens*
- **Act IV – The Thing That Waits:** Confrontation with the Eyeless Abbot; ringing the Bell; final combat

Recommended Players: 2–4

Playtime: 2–4 hours

Key Themes: Memory, silence, spiritual erosion, the persistence of grief

Main Threat: The Eyeless Abbot — a spectral monk whose silence consumes names, voices, and identity

Key Item: *Campana Silens* — a sacred funerary bell that must be rung to make the Abbot vulnerable

THE PREMISE

Decades ago, Abbot Rian led the monks of Saint Hieronymus in a dangerous spiritual experiment. Obsessed with the idea of achieving divine purity through silence, he performed a ritual intended to sever worldly identity and bring the brothers into perfect spiritual stillness.

At the centre of the rite was the *Campana Silens*, a funerary bell traditionally used to preserve memory and guide souls to rest. Rian reversed its purpose—twisting the sacred toll into a metaphysical anchor that would bind the monks to silence, preventing both speech and spiritual passage. The rite succeeded—terribly. The monks were erased. Only their robes remained.

Rian himself became the Eyeless Abbot, a spectral presence held together by silence and grief. He is no longer truly human. The monastery has remained untouched ever since, locked in a state of unnatural quiet. The letter that summoned the players may have been sent by a fading fragment of one of the monks—or by the Bell itself. The silence is fraying. Something within still remembers.

To lay the Abbot to rest, the players must find and ring the Campana Silens—risking collapse, confrontation, and the return of names long buried.

THE LETTER

Each player begins the scenario having received a letter—plain, yellowed, and sealed with cracked red wax. There is no return address. Only their name is written on the front, in handwriting they each recognise intimately: a parent, a sibling, a grandparent, a lost lover. Someone who disappeared without a trace, many years ago.

Inside the envelope is a prayer card from Saint Hieronymus Monastery, bearing the name *Abbot Rian* and a half-faded devotional inscription. Alongside it, a simple note:

Come to the monastery. Something remains. It must not.

The letter offers no explanation, yet the handwriting is unmistakable—and impossibly preserved. Whether out of longing, guilt, curiosity, or fear, the characters set out for the hills where Saint Hieronymus stands in ruin. No traffic goes that way. The path is overgrown. The air feels thinner the closer they get. The monastery gates stand open, and the world behind them falls silent.

WHO SENT THE LETTERS?

The letters that summoned the players to Saint Hieronymus Monastery have no clear origin—and that is intentional. The handwriting belongs to loved ones long lost, yet the paper is pristine, the ink fresh. No mundane explanation fits.

The truth is this: the letters were sent by a lingering spiritual fragment—a faint echo of one of the monks who resisted the rite. His name is lost, his voice long silenced, but some ember of will remained. Drawn to the players by threads of memory and grief, this presence reached across the veil through the only tool it had left: the Bell.

The *Campana Silens* remembers. Though corrupted, it still resonates with the identities it once preserved. Through it, the spirit crafted the letters—not as messages, but as echoes of personal connection, imitating the handwriting of the loved ones each character lost. The Bell called out, and those who still remembered... heard.

GMs may choose to reveal this secret during the climax or leave it unsaid. The ambiguity strengthens the tone—some truths are better left incomplete.

RELEVANT SKILLS

This scenario emphasises emotional, investigative, and spiritual challenges over physical ones. Only one combat skill—**Fight**—is used, and only during the final confrontation. Most skill use centres around resisting silence (as a spiritual attack), uncovering forgotten truths, and interpreting haunting illusions.

MENTAL AND EMOTIONAL

- **Empathy** — Connecting with echoes, emotional projections, or grieving spirits.
- **Focus** — Holding concentration in hallucinations or performing spiritual attacks. **Focus** is used for spiritual combat in this scenario.
- **Insight** — Understanding visions, illusions, or lost memories.
- **Lore** — Interpreting the monastery's history, rites, and the Bell's purpose.
- **Will** — Resisting psychic pressure, spiritual erosion, and identity loss. **Will** is used to resist spiritual attacks in this scenario.

SOCIAL AND INTERPERSONAL

- **Etiquette** — Recognising religious traditions or sacred customs
- **Persuasion** — Calming others or convincing hesitant allies

PERCEPTUAL AND INVESTIGATIVE

- **Awareness** — Noticing details, spiritual distortions, or vanishing sounds
- **Investigation** — Examining rooms, deciphering inscriptions, finding hidden relics

PHYSICAL

- **Athletics** — Dodging debris, climbing, moving in collapsing areas (Act IV)
- **Fight** — Captures all types of ranged and melee combat. (Used only during the final act, once the Abbot becomes vulnerable)

SKILL HIGHLIGHTS BY ACT

- **Act I** – Insight, Empathy
- **Act II** – Awareness, Focus, Will, Lore
- **Act III** – Lore, Empathy, Insight, Will
- **Act IV** – Athletics, Fight, Focus, Will

ACT I: ECHOES BEFORE THE SILENCE

Before the players ever glimpse the monastery, they are drawn together by a shared summons—and a shared absence. This act sets the emotional foundation: grief unspoken, memory unresolved. It offers space to form connections and feel the first tremors of unease.

SETTING: THE LAST WAYSTATION

The journey begins in a rural village or isolated coaching inn—the last inhabited stop before the road to Saint Hieronymus disappears into mist and overgrowth. The air is chill and damp. Locals speak little of the monastery. Some seem to have forgotten it entirely; others go silent at its mention.

Each character arrives with a letter in hand. One by one, they realise they are not alone. Through handwriting, names, or the weight of shared grief, they begin to uncover what binds them: someone they loved once walked the monastery path—and never returned.

MECHANICAL FOCUS

This act is roleplay-heavy with minimal skill checks. Use **Insight**, **Empathy**, or **Lore** for interactions with villagers. Set the tone with subtle unease: a candle that flickers against the wind, a remembered voice, a shadow that lingers too long.

SCENES AND OPTIONS

The focus of Act I is tone and emotional resonance. The players should feel the ache of loss and the mystery of shared summons. It also introduces the party and the world they're stepping into.

POSSIBLE SCENES

- Arrival and Suspicion:** Each character enters the village separately. The innkeeper or a wary local reacts oddly—perhaps to the names on their letters.
- Recognition and Revelation:** A player recognises the handwriting on another's letter. Shared grief becomes the first bridge between strangers.
- A Shared Past:** Players discover their lost relatives once knew each other—or vanished together. A dusty ledger or forgotten trunk may reveal others who made this same journey, and never returned.
- A Warning:** A village elder, priest, or traveller mutters a cryptic warning: *"That place has been quiet too long. Whatever's there... remembers."*

Use this act to foreshadow the monastery's fate and the role of the *Campana Silens*. The players should not yet grasp the full threat, but subtle references to a bell and silence will seed the tension that blooms later.

HINTS AND CLUES

- The Bell:** A villager recalls a funerary bell that once rang from the monastery. No one has heard it in years.
- The Last Toll:** An old man remembers the final time the bell rang. "Something changed after that. Like the air forgot how to carry sound."

ENDING THE ACT

The act ends when the players choose to follow the overgrown path together. The wind stills. The trees thicken. And through the mist, the dark silhouette of Saint Hieronymus rises—waiting.

THE LAST VOICES BEFORE THE SILENCE

THE VILLAGERS OF ASHWICK

Ashwick lies in the shadow of Saint Hieronymus. Mist-choked and half-forgotten, its people are wary of strangers and grow uneasy at any mention of the monastery. Those who speak do so with long pauses—as if listening for something before they answer.

MARA WREN

Innkeeper – A hard-faced woman with silverying hair and a gaze like chipped granite. Runs the Crossed Keys, Ashwick's only inn.

What She Knows: Mara remembers when the monastery fell silent—but claims no one has gone up the hill in decades. Offers free lodging “for one night only” and bolts the doors at sundown.

MOTHER TILDA

Wandering Herbalist – Elderly, swathed in shawls, with a scent of lavender and peat. Carries folk charms and mutters old prayers.

What She Knows: Tilda speaks in riddles. She warns of “a bell that tolls in dreams” and calls the players “echoes walking backwards.” Offers charms, but insists they’re useless “where names go to die.”

JONAS PIKE

Stablehand – Young, skittish, and tight-lipped unless bribed with coin or drink.

What He Knows: Claims he saw a hooded figure watching from the tree line one foggy dawn. Swears he once heard a bell ring from the hills—though no one else did.

FATHER ANSELM

Village Priest – Frail and soft-spoken, tending a small shrine older than the monastery.

What He Knows: Cautions that the monks “reached too high and fell into silence.” Holds a faded registry of those who joined Saint Hieronymus. One name matches a player’s lost loved one.

ACT II: A SILENCE THAT SHOULD HAVE PASSED

The players arrive at Saint Hieronymus Monastery. Nestled deep in the hills, it stands as if held outside of time—weathered but unbroken, its gate ajar. The air is motionless. No birds call. No wind stirs. The silence is too complete.

From the moment they step within the grounds, sound begins to change. Footsteps muffle. Whispers vanish. Even breath feels swallowed. The monastery is not merely quiet—it is *hungry*.

EXPLORATION AND ATMOSPHERE

Players may explore key areas of the monastery. Each is more about tone than answers. They feel watched. The silence presses closer. Something stirs beneath memory.

THE COURTYARD

Overgrown but untouched. Prayer stones lie scattered. Names on the wall of remembrance are scratched away.

- A broken statue of Saint Hieronymus—its eyes are hollow, never carved. (Foreshadowing the *Eyeless Abbot*)
- An empty bell tower. A frayed rope dangles, the bell long gone. (Foreshadowing the *Campana Silens*)

THE DORMITORIES

Neat, undisturbed. Robes hang in place. Beds are made—some still warm.

- A torn journal entry speaks of “the Bell” and “the Abbot’s final rite.”
- A name scratched into the wall matches one player’s lost loved one.

THE LIBRARY

Dust-choked and silent. Books line the shelves. A few remain open on desks.

- A history of the monastery details the monks’ pursuit of purity through silence. The final chapter is missing.
- A map shows the monastery layout, with a hidden passage marked in red from the Chapel to the crypts.

A DL +1 Lore check reveals the monks’ interest in silence and healing. A DL +2 Lore or Investigate check reveals that a ritual involving the *Campana Silens* led to their downfall. On a DL +3 success, the bell’s twisted purpose is uncovered.

THE CHAPEL

Dusty but intact. Candles remain. Pages of scripture are overwritten with indecipherable symbols.

- A faded inscription on the wall: “*To remember is to suffer.*”
- A tear-stained prayer card bearing the name of a player’s lost loved one.

A DL +1 Investigate check reveals the hidden passage to the crypts behind the altar.

GAME MASTER TIP

Ensure the players find the passage. If they fail the check, provide narrative cues or bonuses. Consider:

- A spectral monk silently gesturing toward the wall
- Whispers or echoes leading in that direction
- A physical shift in the environment that draws their attention

The deeper they go, the more the silence weighs. Whispers intrude. Forgotten memories rise. Even names begin to slip away.

HAUNTING INCIDENTS

Add one or two surreal moments as tension escalates:

- A note in the player’s own handwriting appears inside a hymn book—dated years before.
- A bell tolls faintly from nowhere.
- A mirror reflects not their face, but someone they lost.
- One player speaks—but no one hears them for a full minute.
- A robed figure watches from the courtyard’s edge, then vanishes.

These events should disturb without threatening. The monastery is not yet hostile—but its memory is stirring.

TONE AND PROGRESSION

This act focuses on emotional erosion, ambient dread, and the loss of certainty. No enemies appear yet. The horror is slow, quiet, and watching.

As THE ACT ENDS, the players should have discovered the passage to the crypts, heard fragments of forgotten rites, and encountered references to the *Campana Silens*—a name that feels both sacred and dangerous.

ACT III: WHAT THE STONE REMEMBERS

The monastery has not given up all its secrets. Beneath the chapel, the players uncover the entrance

to the crypts—a place that feels older, colder, and heavier than the world above. The silence here is not just oppressive—it is consuming. Even thought feels muted. In these buried halls, the boundaries between memory and reality begin to unravel.

ECHOES AND ILLUSIONS

The crypts are haunted by the Spectral Monks—faded echoes of those who once lived, now reduced to emotional impressions imprinted upon stone and silence. They are not traditional ghosts, but fractured memories clinging to ritual and sorrow. Some kneel in prayer. Others write endlessly. A few seem to watch the players with wordless, unseen eyes.

Players may witness or interact with the following:

- A monk who endlessly copies names into a ledger—names the players recognise as their own.
- A vision of the final rite, led by Abbot Rian, in which the monks are stripped of their voices and vanish.
- A soundless plea scratched into the walls: “*Ring the bell. Let us be.*”

Interacting with the monks is emotionally exhausting. Each attempt may require a **Will** or **Empathy** check against **DL 0** or cost 1 **Fatigue**. With a successful **Empathy** or **Focus** check at **DL +2**, the monks may reveal fragmented memories, including glimpses of the ritual, lost loved ones, or the bell’s significance.

VISIONS AND ECHOES

- A vision of the Abbot leading a silent rite—robes falling, mouths closing, voices erased.
- A name scratched into the stone: one of the players’ lost loved ones.
- A shadowy loved one reaching out: “*When names were taken, the bell was sealed. To ring it is to suffer.*”
- A bell tolls in the distance. A whisper follows: “*You can’t fight him without it.*”

These clues establish that the funeral bell *Campana Silens* is key. They do not reveal its exact purpose of the bell—maintaining mystery while giving players a goal.

THE SILENT GATE

At the crypt’s far end stands a vast oak door, bound in black iron. It is unnaturally cold to the touch and engraved with the same words found on the players’ prayer cards: “*To remember is to suffer.*” When approached, the Spectral Monks emerge from the walls, form a silent circle around the door and the players, and then vanish—leaving only the sound of breath in the dark. In passing, one of the monks whispers: “*The door yields only to remembrance. The name must be spoken. The offering must be real.*”

The door cannot be opened by force. It is not only locked, but bound by a spiritual mechanism. It requires a deliberate act to pass through—one that acknowledges the weight of memory and breaks the spell of silence. *The players should feel the weight of the moment. This is not just a door—it is a threshold between silence and remembrance.*

OPENING THE DOOR

A player must speak the full name of their lost loved one aloud. This causes 1 Fatigue and opens the door with a low moan as if exhaling a forgotten breath.

Once opened, the door swings inward slowly, revealing the vast, hollow chamber beyond: the meditation hall, empty but for the echo of someone waiting.

GAME MASTER TIP

The solution to opening the door has been hinted at multiple places in the first three acts, with references to names of lost loved ones. If the players struggle, consider:

- A vision of the loved one, urging them to speak
- A player’s own voice echoing back at them, repeating the name

LINGERING ECHOES BOUND IN SILENCE

THE SPECTRAL MONKS

They were once devout—seekers of peace through silence. Now they are only fragments: flickering memories and slivers of spirit, trapped in the stone.

BACKGROUND:

Erased in the failed rite, the monks persist as ambient sorrow. During exploration, they are non-hostile and may be seen performing fragments of their old routines. They cannot speak, but may respond to a player invoking a lost loved one's name with an **Empathy** roll at **DL +2**.

COMBAT:

The monks become hostile only when the Abbot commands them. In combat, they use **Focus + Silent Screams** to cause **Fatigue**, but cannot inflict Wounds. They serve as a spiritual obstacle rather than a lethal threat, and will vanish once the *Campana Silens* is rung.

Skills

Skilled (+2)	Focus
Novice (+1)	Awareness

Traits

Spectral Silence — Cannot be harmed until the *Campana Silens* is rung. Bound to the monastery's silence.

Silent Screams — Use **Focus** to inflict **Fatigue Stress** through psychic silence. Targets may roll **Will** to resist.

Stress

Fatigue: 

CAMPANA SILENS

Campana Silens, the Silent Bell, is a sacred funerary relic once used to preserve the names of the dead. Forged in iron and consecrated in ancient rites, it was designed to protect memory during the final passage—ensuring the deceased would not be forgotten.

But Abbot Rian twisted its purpose. Instead of preserving memory, he used it to seal it away. The bell became an anchor for silence, stillness, and spiritual imprisonment. Now, it is the only thing capable of disrupting the unnatural peace he created.

Ringing the Bell shatters the silence, transforming the Eyeless Abbot to from his spirit back into flesh and bone.

Mechanics:

- Action:** A player may ring the Bell as an action. Doing so causes an immediate shift in the environment (dust, sound, collapsing illusions).
- Effect:** The Eyeless Abbot becomes vulnerable to **Wounds** and the Spectral Monks dissolve.
- Cost:** Each round after the Bell is rung, all characters gain 1 **Fatigue** as the veil weakens and the burden of memory floods back.

SILENCE INCARNATE

THE EYELESS ABBOT

Once Abbot Rian, a devout spiritual leader who sought to transcend worldly identity through perfect silence. He succeeded far too well. What remains is not a man, but a vessel of stillness—an unspoken wound in the fabric of memory.

BACKGROUND:

The Eyeless Abbot lingers at the heart of Saint Hieronymus Monastery, an immovable anchor of grief and spiritual ruin. During a failed rite meant to dissolve the self, he bound his own soul—and those of his brethren—into a silence so deep it became a presence. He does not see, does not speak, and cannot be harmed by mortal means. Only the toll of the *Campana Silens* can pull him into reach of the living.

CORPOREAL FORM:

Once the bell is rung, the Abbot's spectral shell collapses. What remains is a ravaged, half-human husk—robes torn and ritual-scars burned deep into pale, brittle flesh. His fused eyes cannot see, but he still perceives through the echoes of memory. He is no longer untouchable, but his presence remains overwhelming.

Skills

Expert (+3)	Will
Skilled (+2)	Focus, Insight
Novice (+1)	Fight, Awareness

Traits

Silence Hungers — At the start of each round, all player characters suffer 1 **Fatigue** unless they succeed on a **DL +2 Will or Focus** check. This Trait can only inflict **Fatigue**, not **Wounds**.

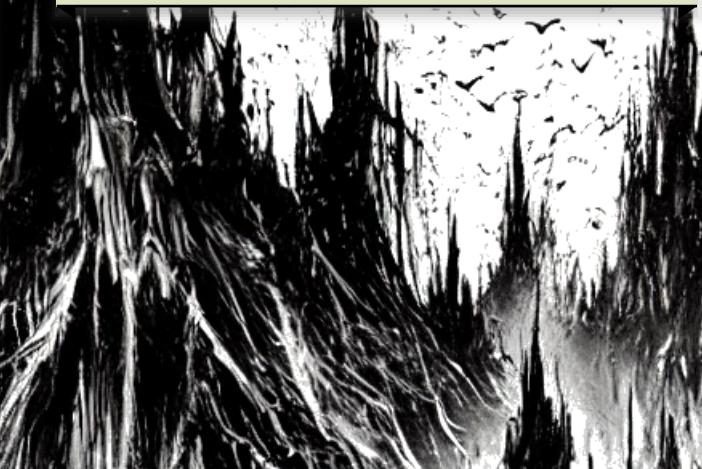
Untouchable Form — The Abbot is immune to all harm unless the *Campana Silens* has been rung. This Trait is suppressed after the bell tolls.

Aura of Dread — While in the Abbot's presence, characters take a -1 penalty to all rolls. Suppressed once the bell is rung.

Erase the Self — Once per scene, the Abbot may suppress one player's Trait of choice. It remains unusable until the player invokes a memory of their lost loved one.

Stress

Fatigue:	
Mild:	
Mod:	



ACT IV: THE THING THAT WAITS

The final confrontation takes place in the monastery's meditation hall—a vast, domed space of cracked stone, with faded frescoes on high walls and an oppressive weight in the air. Dust hangs unnaturally still. There is no sound.

The Eyeless Abbot is already there. He does not speak. He does not need to. His presence – vast and wrong – dominates the space. The silence deepens with every breath.

Above and behind him, partially veiled in shadow, looms the *Campana Silens* in its rusted iron frame. The way to it is treacherous: crumbling stairs, collapsing ledges, and a steep climb. It is visible, but distant.

The players cannot yet harm the Abbot. This is not a battle they can win – not until they ring the bell.

PHASE ONE – A LOSING BATTLE

The fight begins with the Abbot and a wave of Spectral Monks. The Abbot is untouchable, phasing through attacks and unraveling traits. The monks drain Fatigue, preparing the players for defeat. During this phase:

- The Abbot is immune to all damage. His **Untouchable Form** suppresses any attempt to harm him.
- At the start of each round, **Silence Hungers** forces all players to make a **Will** or **Focus** check (DL +2) or take 1 Fatigue.
- Spectral Monks (one per player) attack using spiritual pressure to deplete Fatigue.
- The **Aura of Dread** imposes a **-1 penalty** to all rolls while in the Abbot's presence.

Players quickly realise they cannot win by force.

REACHING THE BELL

As they fight, players may notice the *Campana Silens* above. Clues from earlier visions or carvings should now click into place. To reach the bell:

- A player must disengage and climb to the bell platform.
- Climbing takes four turns, each step requiring a successful DL +1 roll using **Athletics**.
- A **tied roll** means that the character slips and loses a turn, but does not fall to the ground.
- A **failed roll** results in a fall, causing 1 **Stress** and losing the turn.
- The Abbot may try to stop them by sending Spectral Monks to intercept.

When the bell is rung, the room convulses. Illusions shatter. The Abbot howls. His form becomes real.

THE ABBOT'S PHYSICAL FORM

When the bell tolls, the silence shatters. The Eyeless Abbot convulses, staggering backward as the weight of memory crashes down around him. The spectral veil rips away—and what remains is something horrifyingly human... and not. He is no longer a ghost. He is pain, preserved in bone. A wound in the shape of a man.

His robes hang in tatters, scorched and stiff with age, clinging to a body twisted by decades of spiritual torment. His skin is pale stone, stretched paper-thin over a gaunt frame. Symbols from the ritual are seared into his flesh—some burned, others carved, many half-erased as though even the rite tried to forget him.

PHASE TWO – BREAK THE SILENCE

The Abbot becomes corporeal. The Spectral Monks dissolve, and the silence breaks—but the bell takes its toll.

- The Abbot loses **Untouchable Form** and **Aura of Dread**.
- The **Campana Silens** causes all players to gain 1 Fatigue at the end of each round.
- The Abbot can no longer attack with **Focus** (for spiritual attack) but must use **Fight** (for physical attacks).
- He may use **Erase the Self** once, suppressing a player Trait until the end of combat.

Once the bell tolls, the Abbot becomes vulnerable, and as a physical opponent he should not be overly difficult for the players to defeat, even if they are fatigued.

Once defeated, the Abbot collapses into dust. A final toll echoes, and the silence ends.

VICTORY AND AFTERMATH

If the Abbot is defeated:

- The silence lifts. The air returns. Names are remembered.
- The monastery begins to collapse, dissolve, or fall into ruin.
- The players may each hear their lost loved one speak a final word, then fade.

If they fail:

- Their names are forgotten. Their voices fade.
- They remain in the monastery forever—silent, spectral echoes of themselves.

Some silences were never meant to be broken. But some names should never be forgotten.

DR. CLARA ASHCROFT

"Some stories are not told. They are buried. And they bleed through the silence."

A cultural anthropologist specialising in ritual practice and memory, Clara Ashcroft is quiet, meticulous, and emotionally withdrawn. Her life's work revolves around forgotten spiritual sites and fringe religious communities, but her most personal mystery lies within Saint Hieronymus. Years ago, her younger sister, Evelyn, joined the monastery's contemplative program—and was never heard from again.

BACKGROUND

Clara was a senior lecturer at a university in Edinburgh, well-regarded for her research into memory, ritual, and folk beliefs. When Evelyn disappeared, Clara left academia behind and began investigating isolated monasteries, vanished communes, and other places where silence clings. Her work has become solitary and obsessive—an academic pursuit turned personal.

APPEARANCE

Clara wears a long, functional raincoat with a laptop bag or field satchel always over her shoulder. Her hair is loosely tied, and she favours muted colours. Her eyes are sharp, but tired. She's often mistaken for a journalist or archaeologist—but speaks like someone who's seen too much.

PERSONALITY

Clara is thoughtful, distant, and deeply rational—but beneath her composed surface is a raw grief she's never allowed herself to feel. She treats emotion like data, but the closer she comes to the truth, the harder that becomes. She avoids connection but is fiercely protective once it's made.

CONNECTION TO THE MONASTERY

Evelyn Ashcroft disappeared at Saint Hieronymus while participating in a modern-day spiritual retreat. Clara always suspected something was wrong—but had no proof, no access. Now, the letter has given her the first lead in nearly twenty years.

GOALS

Clara seeks to uncover what happened to her sister, and by doing so, expose the truth about the monastery's silence. She also hopes, secretly, to find some version of forgiveness—for Evelyn, and for herself.



Skills

Expert (+3)	Lore
Skilled (+2)	Focus, Awareness
Novice (+1)	Empathy, Insight, Investigation

Traits

Driven to Understand — Gain a +2 bonus when analysing ritual, folklore, or spiritual mechanisms.

Buried Guilt — Once per session, may clear all Fatigue after confronting a painful memory. The memory must be shared aloud to the group. Confronting the painful memory takes one combat action.

Cold Logic, Quiet Grief — Reroll a failed Insight or Empathy check related to grief or memory.

Gear

Mysterious Letter — A letter in Evelyn's handwriting, written in a shaky hand. It speaks of "the silence" and "the bell." It is the only clue Clara has.

Stress

Fatigue:	OOOO
Mild:	♥♥♥
Mod:	♥♥
Severe:	♥

ISAAC BELLAMY

"The war ended, but not for me. Some fights just change their shape."

A former infantryman turned private security contractor, Isaac Bellamy is a man carved out of trauma and silence. After years spent in conflict zones, he returned to find his younger brother—his only family—had gone to Saint Hieronymus on a spiritual retreat. That was the last he ever heard from him.

BACKGROUND

Isaac joined the military straight out of school and served multiple tours before transitioning into high-risk private security work. He's seen what silence can mean in a firefight, and what it can hide in grief. His brother Elijah sought peace at the monastery after a breakdown—Isaac always feared it was a cult in disguise. When the place went quiet, Isaac went searching... but never found anything. Until now.

APPEARANCE

Isaac wears a weathered field jacket, dark jeans, and durable hiking boots. His close-cropped hair and guarded stance mark him as someone used to danger. A locket with Elijah's photo hangs around his neck, worn from years of handling.

PERSONALITY

Isaac is blunt, steady, and doesn't waste words. He's not easily rattled—but his silence isn't peace, it's armor. Loyalty means everything to him, and guilt weighs heavy on his shoulders. He's used to being the one who makes the hard choices when no one else will.

CONNECTION TO THE MONASTERY

Elijah Bellamy disappeared after joining a silent spiritual retreat hosted by Saint Hieronymus. Isaac never trusted it. When the monastery ceased all communication, he came looking. Now, years later, the letter has cracked the silence wide open.

GOALS

Isaac wants the truth about what happened to his brother. He's not afraid of ghosts, only of failing someone he loved—again. If he has to fight the dark to get answers, so be it.



Skills

Expert (+3)	Will
Skilled (+2)	Athletics, Fight
Novice (+1)	Awareness, Insight, Will

Traits

- Combat Tempered** — Gain a bonus when acting under pressure or facing fear head-on.
- The Locket** — Once per session, reroll a failed check after invoking a memory of his brother.
- Trained to Endure** — Reduce incoming Stress by 2 once per scene.

Gear

Mysterious Letter — A letter in Elijah's handwriting, written in a shaky hand. It speaks of "the silence" and "the bell." It is the only clue Isaac has.

Stress

Fatigue:	OOOO	
Mild:	♥♥♥	
Mod:	♥♥	
Severe:	♥	

MARGOT DELANEY

"Faith asks us to believe. But no one tells you what to do when belief breaks."

Margot Delaney is a former nurse and lifelong believer who once placed her hope in Saint Hieronymus Monastery. Years ago, her teenage daughter Eleanor was sent there to recover from a breakdown. When the monastery fell silent, so did the answers. Margot was told to let go. She never did.

BACKGROUND

Margot worked in palliative care for over twenty years, walking others through the long process of grief. She once found strength in faith, but the unanswered questions around her daughter's disappearance cracked something inside her. She left the church, left her job, and began quietly investigating on her own—looking for signs, for records, for anything the silence couldn't bury.

APPEARANCE

Margot wears a wool coat, boots, and practical layers—dressed for wind and wet ground. Her hair is pulled back neatly, with strands of grey at the temples. She carries a single worn photograph in her coat pocket, and her expression often lingers between sorrow and resolve.

PERSONALITY

Calm, warm, and unshakably determined. Margot is the kind of person others lean on—until they realise she's carrying more weight than she shows. She speaks softly, but never vaguely. When she commits to something, she sees it through.

CONNECTION TO THE MONASTERY

Margot sent her daughter Eleanor to Saint Hieronymus for spiritual healing after a mental health crisis. She visited twice. On the third attempt, she was told the monastery had closed its gates. No further contact was ever made.

GOALS

Margot wants the truth—not just for Eleanor, but for herself. She seeks closure, but also understanding. She hopes to find proof that her daughter mattered—that her story didn't simply vanish.



Skills

Expert (+3)	Empathy
Skilled (+2)	Will, Insight
Novice (+1)	Lore, Focus, Persuasion

Traits

Grief Made Graceful — Once per session, may grant a +2 to an ally's roll by offering emotional support.

Photograph in the Pocket — Gain a bonus when resisting psychic or emotional attacks tied to memory or identity.

Unanswered Faith — Reroll a failed Will or Empathy check when confronting spiritual or moral conflict.

Gear

Mysterious Letter — A letter in Eleanor's handwriting, written in a shaky hand. It speaks of "the silence" and "the bell." It is the only clue Margot has.

Stress

Fatigue:	OOOO
Mild:	♥♥♥
Mod:	♥♥
Severe:	♥

MICAH RIOS

"It's not the dead that scare me. It's what they remember—and what they want us to forget."

Micah Rios has always been able to feel the echo of things left unfinished. Whether it's ghosts, trauma, or silence itself, something in him is tuned to it. He never sought this gift—but when the letter arrived, written in the hand of an uncle who vanished before Micah was born, he knew exactly where he had to go.

BACKGROUND

Micah grew up in foster care, always knowing he was “sensitive” in a way that others weren’t. He’s spent time working at grief support groups, volunteering in spiritual communities, and studying dream psychology. He doesn’t talk much about his family—but he keeps a journal full of sketches and messages from dreams he hasn’t told anyone about.

APPEARANCE

Micah wears layered, practical clothes—a denim jacket over a hoodie, worn boots, and a small crystal pendant. He often pauses mid-thought, distracted by something no one else noticed. His calm voice hides a deep current of unease.

PERSONALITY

Empathetic and soft-spoken, Micah avoids conflict but isn’t afraid of difficult truths. He’s open-minded, intuitive, and carries himself like someone used to not being believed. Despite everything, he genuinely wants to help others find peace—because he’s never quite known it himself.

CONNECTION TO THE MONASTERY

Micah’s mother never spoke of her brother, but he appeared in Micah’s dreams for years. When the letter arrived in that uncle’s handwriting, Micah knew it wasn’t just a coincidence. Something old is calling to him—and he may be the only one who can hear it clearly.

GOALS

Micah wants to understand what’s haunting the monastery—not just for his uncle’s sake, but to better understand his own strange connection to death and memory. If he can help others find peace, maybe he can find some of his own.



Skills

Expert (+3)	Empathy
Skilled (+2)	Insight, Lore
Novice (+1)	Will, Fight, Persuasion

Traits

- Spirit-Touched** — Once per session, receive a vision or sensation tied to an echo or memory.
- Dream Journal** — Gain a bonus when interpreting symbols, hauntings, or unresolved grief.
- Sensitive Aura** — May reroll failed Insight or Awareness when detecting unseen presences.

Gear

Mysterious Letter — A letter in his uncle’s handwriting, written in a shaky hand. It speaks of “the silence” and “the bell.” It is the only clue Micah has.

Stress

Fatigue:	OOOO
Mild:	♥♥♥ _____
Mod:	♥♥ _____
Severe:	♥ _____

NINA MADDOX

"There's always a reason. Even if you don't like what it is."

Nina Maddox doesn't believe in ghosts. Or at least, she doesn't admit to it. A freelance investigator with a background in private security, Nina specialises in cleaning up messes no one wants to admit exist. She's not here because she believes in hauntings—she's here because someone thought she should be.

BACKGROUND

Nina served in law enforcement before moving into private security and missing persons work. She's seen cults, hoaxes, and grieving families manipulated by con artists. When she got a letter from her estranged father—dead over a decade—she assumed it was a prank. Still, she couldn't ignore the place it mentioned: Saint Hieronymus Monastery. She'd heard of it before, in the case files she was never supposed to read.

APPEARANCE

Short-cropped hair, sharp eyes, and a lean, athletic build. Nina dresses in a leather jacket and cargo jeans, always carrying a duffel with tools, water, and a flashlight. She walks like someone who's used to being underestimated—and making people regret it.

PERSONALITY

Blunt, sceptical, and resourceful. Nina doesn't buy into rituals or spirits, but she respects grief—and she knows that sometimes, belief can be more dangerous than truth. She doesn't scare easy, but what she finds at the monastery might just shake that.

CONNECTION TO THE MONASTERY

Her father investigated Saint Hieronymus decades ago and never spoke of it again. His death was ruled a suicide. The letter bearing his handwriting simply said: *"They never let me leave. Maybe you can."*

GOALS

Nina wants to find the source of the monastery's silence and put it to rest—by force, if necessary. She doesn't believe in ghosts, but she does believe in justice. And if there's something still trapped there, it's about to find out what she's made of.



Skills

Expert (+3)	Fight
Skilled (+2)	Awareness, Focus
Novice (+1)	Will, Investigation, Insight

Traits

No-Nonsense Grit — Gain a bonus when pushing through fear, injury, or disbelief.

Professional Instincts — Reroll a failed Awareness or Investigation check tied to danger or traps.

Break the Pattern — Once per session, ignore the effects of a supernatural influence for one round.

Gear

Mysterious Letter — A letter in her father's handwriting, written in a shaky hand. It speaks of "the silence" and "the bell." It is the only clue Nina has.

Stress

Fatigue:	OOOO
Mild:	♥♥♥
Mod:	♥♥
Severe:	♥

PART 3

EPISODIC PLAY

CHAPTER 9: EPISODIC SETTINGS

Episodic play is where THE WYRD ENGINE truly shines. Each session tells a complete narrative, yet together they form a patchwork of interwoven stories—an anthology of mysteries, misadventures, and quiet consequences. While campaigns may sprawl across months or years, episodic games provide a modular structure that balances continuity with flexibility. Players return to familiar characters and settings, but with the freedom to explore new themes, tones, and challenges from session to session. This approach is ideal for modern groups with limited availability or rotating players. Whether you’re running a mystery-of-the-week, a supernatural investigation society, or a steampunk courier guild, episodic play offers a rhythm that keeps the world alive while allowing for variety and drop-in accessibility. Best of all, it supports both deep lore and fast improvisation—letting players peel back layers of the setting gradually, without requiring encyclopaedic knowledge from the start.

This chapter explores how to structure episodic campaigns, how to keep stories fresh while maintaining cohesion, and how to use episodic tools—like recurring NPCs, thematic links, and flexible framing devices—to create a world that grows with each session.

WHAT IS EPISODIC PLAY?

At its core, episodic play consists of a series of self-contained adventures set within a shared framework. Each session (or “episode”) stands on its own, with a beginning, middle, and end. However, recurring elements—such as a cast of characters, shared locations, or overarching themes—allow the sessions to connect into something greater than the sum of their parts.

While there may be a loose progression over time, episodic stories rarely depend on strict linear continuity. Characters may grow, reputations may change, and mysteries may deepen—but players can join or leave at any point without breaking the narrative. This makes episodic play especially useful for groups with shifting availability or limited time to commit to long arcs.

Think of episodic play like a television series where each episode tackles a new case, conflict, or mission, but the world slowly evolves as a result of player choices. Some sessions may feel light-hearted, others tragic or strange—but all serve to reveal more about the characters and the world they inhabit.

KEY TRAITS OF EPISODIC PLAY

Successful episodic structures share a few core characteristics. These provide a stable framework that makes stories feel coherent without requiring rigid continuity:

- **Recurring characters or factions.** A stable core of PCs, NPCs, or antagonists helps maintain continuity and drive player investment across sessions.
- **Familiar environments or organisations.** Whether it’s a mysterious agency, a travelling caravan, or a city full of strange cases, a recognisable home base or central structure gives players a sense of grounding.
- **A thematic or structural formula.** Episodes may follow a consistent narrative rhythm—like “mystery, investigation, twist, resolution”—while allowing variation in content, tone, and stakes.
- **Flexible player rosters and character switching.** Characters may come and go between sessions, allowing the GM to accommodate changing attendance or different story needs without breaking immersion.

HOW IT DIFFERS FROM ONE-SHOTS

At first glance, episodic play and one-shots might appear similar—they both involve contained stories with defined beginnings and endings. However, their purposes and narrative structures are fundamentally different.

- **One-shots are standalone;** they begin and end in a single session with no expectation of continuity. Episodic play, by contrast, creates a narrative framework where stories connect loosely over time—even if each episode could function on its own.
- **One-shots often embrace riskier or more dramatic endings.** Because players aren’t expected to revisit the same characters, they’re more likely to take extreme actions, sacrifice themselves, or leave things unresolved. Episodic characters need longevity, so choices tend to be more measured—unless the group explicitly agrees on a rotating cast.
- **Episodic play builds familiarity and context.** Characters return, reputations change, and the setting evolves, even if slowly. One-shots rely on establishing everything—tone, stakes, world, and character—in a single sitting.
- **One-shots require tighter pacing and structure.**

They often follow a sharp hook, rising tension, and a single confrontation or twist. Episodic sessions have a bit more breathing room to explore side interactions or layered discoveries because the players already know the world.

The two formats aren't in opposition—in fact, many groups blend them. A good episodic campaign might even be built from modular one-shot scenarios, stitched together by recurring characters and evolving consequences. But recognizing the difference helps GMs prepare each session with the right expectations.

HOW IT DIFFERS FROM CAMPAIGN PLAY

While both campaigns and episodic series can explore deep character arcs and worldbuilding, their structural differences are significant:

- **Campaigns build long, interconnected arcs;** episodic play builds familiar rhythms with room for variety and experimentation.
- **Episodic games support drop-in/drop-out play more easily,** making them ideal for casual groups or shared settings with rotating casts or GMs.
- **Sessions can often stand alone, yet still reward continuity.** Players who attend regularly enjoy recurring themes and relationships, while newcomers can still jump into a coherent, complete story.

This flexibility is one of the greatest strengths of episodic design: it allows each game to stand on its own merits while contributing to an evolving world.

STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES

Like one-shots and campaigns, episodic play has unique strengths—and its own set of potential complications. Understanding these will help you lean into the format's best qualities while avoiding common pitfalls.

STRENGTHS

Episodic play thrives in a variety of real-world play environments, offering consistent, low-prep fun that grows over time.

- **Great for groups with irregular attendance or rotating GMs.** Because each session is largely self-contained, it's easy to adjust the roster of characters or even hand off GM duties without disrupting continuity.
- **Offers a sense of familiarity while still allowing creative range.** The same core setting or cast can support wildly different tones—from comedy to horror to noir—without feeling disjointed.

- **Easier to plan and prep in short bursts.** Episodic stories can be outlined in modular scenes, reused, or repurposed without extensive lore updates. This makes them especially practical for busy GMs.
- **Encourages experimentation with tone, themes, or guest characters.** A single episode can be a dream sequence, a flashback, or an alternate reality—allowing players to try out new ideas without committing to them long-term.

CHALLENGES

Though episodic structures are flexible, they come with their own limitations and design hurdles.

- **Risk of repetition if formula becomes stale.** Relying too heavily on the same episode structure can make sessions feel predictable. Variation in themes, locations, or emotional tone helps keep things fresh.
- **Requires tools for tracking continuity.** While each session may stand alone, small details—like character progression, world changes, or unresolved clues—can get lost without notes or a campaign journal.
- **Players may lose emotional momentum without long arcs.** Episodic play offers lighter engagement by design, but this can result in a lack of payoff if no threads carry over from session to session.
- **Harder to develop slow-burn mysteries without overarching structure.** If you want to introduce layered conspiracies or gradual reveals, you'll need to build in recurring elements that hint at a deeper pattern beneath the surface.

DESIGNING YOUR EPISODIC SETTING

A strong episodic setting doesn't just string disconnected adventures together—it creates a living backdrop against which short stories unfold. The goal is to build a world that welcomes return visits without requiring encyclopedic knowledge. The trick lies in structure, flexibility, and familiar touchstones that support a variety of scenarios without locking the players into a fixed path.

Below are five foundational principles to help you design an episodic setting that's both rich in narrative potential and easy to use.

1. ESTABLISH A CORE PREMISE

Every episodic game needs a unifying concept. What ties these seemingly standalone stories together? Are the players agents of a secret society investigating supernatural threats? Members of a skyship crew navigating post-industrial skies? Freelance troubleshooters in a city where magic and science collide?

The premise defines not only the type of stories you tell but how players enter them. It provides context for each session and a reason for characters to keep returning. Ask yourself:

- What is the group's shared purpose or role?
- Who sends them into these situations—or do they act on their own initiative?
- What's the tone? Investigative? Adventurous? Tragic? Surreal?
- What's the “glue” that makes each new episode part of a larger picture?

Your premise doesn't need to be complex. In fact, simpler framing often makes for stronger episodic play, especially when each session introduces a new twist or challenge within a familiar structure.

2. ANCHOR WITH RECURRING ELEMENTS

The best episodic games feel grounded not because they explain every detail, but because they provide recurring landmarks in the chaos. Reusable NPCs, returning locations, and institutional structures help build continuity without needing dense lore.

- **A Central HQ or Base of Operations** – This might be a tavern, an airship, a secret library, or a hidden lab. It gives players a narrative home between missions and offers opportunities for downtime scenes, upgrades, or character interaction.
- **Recurring NPCs** – A few well-drawn figures go a long way: a sarcastic handler, a mysterious benefactor, a rival agent. These characters help players measure change and develop long-term relationships.
- **Factions or Institutions** – Secret societies, corrupt guilds, religious orders, or government bureaus can appear across multiple episodes. Each appearance adds depth and reveals a bit more of the world.
- **Stylistic Consistency** – Consider naming each session like a serial: *Case File No. 13, The Night of the Violet Flame*, or *Episode VII: The Rusted Oracle*. Shared naming patterns reinforce identity and structure.

The goal is to make the setting feel cohesive, even if each session stands alone.

3. BUILD WITH MODULARITY IN MIND

Design your episodes to be modular—interchangeable and replayable with minimal adjustment. This allows you to swap players, reshuffle scenes, or shift tone as needed.

- **Each episode should be playable on its own.** Avoid required knowledge from previous sessions. If something must carry over, summarise it with a brief “previously on...” intro.
- **Include light connective tissue.** A recurring mystery, shared antagonist, or slow-burning secret

can link episodes. But don't make continuity a barrier to participation.

- **Design episodes that scale.** Make it easy to adjust difficulty or tone depending on which characters show up. Episodes should work whether the group is veterans or newcomers, investigative or action-focused.

This structure also makes it easier to publish, share, or rotate authorship of episodes—useful for collaborative storytelling or convention play.

4. TRACK CONSEQUENCES WITHOUT HEAVY LORE

Continuity is powerful, but it doesn't require an encyclopaedia. Instead of overloading players with timelines or faction trees, use simple callbacks and evolving motifs.

- **Recurring Symbols or Phrases** – A sigil, a phrase, a melody, or a specific item can echo across sessions to suggest hidden meaning or deepening mystery.
- **Character Choices That Echo** – Let player actions ripple forward. A suspect spared in one episode might reappear in another. A ritual disrupted may create consequences weeks later.
- **Flashbacks, Journals, and Rumours** – Brief “interlude” scenes can remind players of past events without lengthy exposition. Try in-character journals, overheard gossip, or mysterious messages left behind.
- **Table Recaps or Timeline Sheets** – For GMs, a simple session tracker or a shared player notebook helps preserve continuity without requiring formal campaign management tools.

Think of continuity as texture rather than architecture—it enriches the world without weighing it down.

5. ENCOURAGE ROTATING CASTS AND GMs

One of the great strengths of episodic play is its openness. Design your setting to support fluid participation and decentralised storytelling.

- **Rotating Protagonists** – Not every player has to appear in every episode. Treat the cast like a shared roster, with different characters starring in different stories. This prevents burnout and keeps sessions fresh.
- **Guest GMs or Co-GMs** – A well-documented setting with modular episodes allows others to run games in the same world. Consider sharing setting briefs, tone guides, and NPC profiles.
- **Drop-In Play Is Supported In-World** – Have an in-universe explanation for changing cast members: a dispatch board, a rotating investigation team, a courier guild's job roster. Players don't need to

justify why they're here—but you can if it adds flavour.

Building in this flexibility makes your setting not just sustainable—it makes it shareable, collaborative, and ever-evolving.

EPISODE TEMPLATES AND TOOLS

Episodic games thrive when structure supports spontaneity. The goal isn't to write a script—but to provide a flexible framework that helps each session land with clarity and impact. Even the most improvisational GM benefits from knowing the expected beats of an episode, while continuity tools ensure that the world remains coherent and rewarding over time.

SESSION STRUCTURE EXAMPLE

While every episode will differ based on its theme and tone, most follow a familiar rhythm. This structure provides a reliable framework that helps players feel grounded, especially when group composition shifts from session to session.

- **Opening Scene – Intro or Briefing** Establish the scenario and orient the players. This may be an in-character debriefing, a dramatic cold open, or a scene that introduces the conflict. Keep it short and active—ideally no more than ten minutes of exposition before the players start making choices.
- **Investigation or Journey – Uncover Clues or Face Obstacles** The bulk of the session involves exploring the problem. Players gather clues, travel through hostile territory, interview suspects, or perform rituals. This is your opportunity to showcase the setting, reveal character dynamics, and escalate tension.
- **Climax – Confront the Antagonist or Dilemma** The heart of the episode. This may be a direct confrontation with a villain, a moral dilemma, a supernatural revelation, or an unexpected twist. Player choices should matter here, even if the resolution doesn't tie off every thread.
- **Resolution – Wrap-Up or Leave a Loose Thread** Conclude with consequences. What changes? What does the world remember? Is there a haunting detail left unresolved, a rival who escapes, a clue that hints at something bigger? Even if the session is self-contained, a touch of continuity enriches the setting.

This format is modular. It works just as well for mystery-solving, exploration, or action-focused episodes. You can compress or expand each phase depending on the tone or length of your session.

CONTINUITY TOOLS

While episodic play is designed to function with a loose structure, some minimal continuity tools go a long way in maintaining coherence and deepening immersion. These tools are especially helpful when sessions are spread out over time or shared across GMs and players.

- **Shared Timeline or “Episode List”** A running log of past sessions helps players track what happened, when, and who was involved. Include the episode title, major events, and open threads. This can be in-universe (e.g., a case log) or purely mechanical.
- **NPC Roster with Notes** Keep a simple list of recurring characters, their relationships to the PCs, and how they've changed over time. Tag NPCs as allies, rivals, or enigmas, and note which players interacted with them. Even a short paragraph per NPC can make a huge difference later.
- **Central Map or Caseboard** A shared physical or digital map of the setting—be it a city, a region, or a network of mysteries—helps players visualise the scope of the world. Add pins, string, or post-it notes to show locations visited, factions revealed, or case connections uncovered.
- **Session Recaps or Flashbacks** Begin each session with a short recap or in-character flashback. This reinforces continuity and gives new or returning players a jumping-on point. You can rotate who gives the recap, present it as an in-world document, or even perform it dramatically.

These tools don't need to be complex. A single Google Doc, a corkboard with index cards, or a campaign wiki can provide structure and continuity without creating extra prep for the GM. Most importantly, they help your episodic world feel like it's growing organically—with every session leaving a mark.

EXAMPLES OF EPISODIC SETTINGS

One of the strengths of episodic play is its adaptability. Almost any premise can be restructured to support modular storytelling, provided it has a stable core and room to vary the tone, setting, or cast from session to session.

Here are three ready-to-use examples that demonstrate how episodic structures can support investigation, exploration, and action across different genres and play styles. The first, “The Grand Society of Inquiry,” is fleshed out in more detail in **CHAPTER 10: THE GRAND CASEBOOK**, while the other two are presented as brief summaries for you to expand on or draw inspiration from.

THE GRAND SOCIETY OF INQUIRY

Set in gaslit 1890s London, this setting follows the cases assigned to an elite—though unofficial—organisation of investigators, mystics, and scholars. Each session focuses on a different mystery, conspiracy, or supernatural occurrence within the city or its haunted outskirts.

Continuity builds through:

- Recurring factions like occult orders, secretive nobles, or rogue inventors
 - Return appearances from handlers, suspects, and rival investigators
 - A city map annotated with solved and unsolved cases, safehouses, and places better left unvisited
- The group's rotating cast of agents allows flexible player rosters, while layered mysteries hint at deeper truths that may emerge across episodes.

THE PHANTOM CIRCUIT

In this steampunk-flavoured setting, players are members of a shadowy courier guild known for taking on the jobs no one else dares—transporting arcane artifacts, dangerous documents, or fugitive passengers through hostile skies and corrupt cities. Each episode features:

- A unique destination with regional hazards and moral dilemmas
- Conflicting instructions from employers, allies, and enemies
- Travel complications—mechanical failures, skyship chases, or border inspections

While most jobs are stand-alone, a conspiracy slowly forms: who really runs the Circuit, and what is the cargo they keep asking you not to open?

THE WYRDWOOD COMPANIONS

This high-fantasy setting centres on a band of wandering guardians—knights, witches, outcasts, and storytellers—tasked with protecting isolated settlements from magical corruption and forgotten beasts.

Episodes vary in tone:

- One week may be tragic folklore; the next, a whimsical fairytale with a dark twist
- Local villagers, patrons, or fey courts request aid through messengers or dreams
- The “party” shifts each time based on which Companions answer the call

Over time, a map of the Wyrdwood grows—showing cursed ruins cleansed, monstrous myths encountered, and trails marked by starlight or shadow.

CONCLUSION

Episodic design is about rhythm, variation, and modular continuity. It thrives when each session is satisfying in its own right, yet still contributes to something greater—a sense of place, of growth, and of story unfolding just out of sight.

This format is ideal for groups who want to explore shared worlds without the pressure of rigid schedules or long-term plotlines. It allows for bold ideas, flexible casts, and layered mysteries that reward both new and returning players.

With the right framework—a clear premise, recurring touchstones, and room for improvisation—episodic games become more than just a collection of sessions. They become chronicles. Each story a piece of a puzzle. Each session a new chapter in a growing legend.

CHAPTER 10: THE GRAND CASEBOOK



ondon , 1896. A city of gaslit streets, towering factories, and secrets lurking in the shadows.

This is an era of progress, where steam and steel reshape the world—but beneath the veneer of industry and refinement, the old mysteries remain. The line between science and the supernatural is thinner than most would dare to believe.

You are part of The Grand Society of Inquiry, a clandestine organisation of detectives, scholars, and unconventional thinkers dedicated to unravelling the mysteries the world would rather forget. The police may handle mundane crimes, but when a case is impossible, when the authorities turn a blind eye, or when the answers defy reason, that is where you come in.

The aristocracy hides more than it reveals. The city's underworld knows whispers of truths the elite wish to bury. Strange happenings unfold in laboratories, occult circles, and long-forgotten ruins. It is your job to investigate, to bring truth to light—whether the world is ready for it or not. You will encounter murderers whose motives defy logic, inventions beyond their time, secret societies vying for power, and horrors that exist just beyond the veil of reason. Some mysteries should never be solved—but you have chosen to chase the truth regardless.

London may not thank you for what you uncover. The truth is rarely comforting. But if not you, then who?

So, tell me: What mystery has found its way to your doorstep tonight?

INTRODUCTION

The Grand Casebook is both a setting and a toolkit for running episodic investigations in a world of steam-powered wonders, occult secrets, and unsolved mysteries. Set in a fictionalised London in the year 1896, the stories told here blend elements of classic detective fiction, gothic horror, and speculative science. At the heart of it all is the Grand Society of Inquiry, a secretive organisation dedicated to uncovering truths that others fear to face.

This chapter serves as a guide for running stories in this world. Within, you'll find an overview of the setting, key factions, and recurring threats. It offers guidance for players creating characters within this shared universe, and for GMs constructing compelling mysteries. Each scenario is self-contained, making it ideal for one-shots or rotating player groups—but taken together, the cases reveal a wider world of intrigue, danger, and creeping dread.

Expect:

- Rich, gaslit atmosphere full of secrets and contradictions
- Investigations that challenge reason and morality
- Encounters with both human depravity and supernatural horror
- A flexible structure that supports drop-in/drop-out episodic play

Whether you're a veteran investigator or a newcomer to the shadows, this chapter provides all the tools you need to begin your journey into London's most perilous enigmas.

Read on, and mind the fog—it tends to linger near the bodies.

THE WORLD OF THE GRAND CASEBOOK

London in 1896 is a city of contradictions. At its heart lies a tension between progress and tradition, the rational and the arcane. Airships drift over soot-covered rooftops, automata assist in the factories, and steam-powered cabs rattle through cobbled streets. Yet for all these marvels of industry, old fears still linger in the fog. Ancient horrors persist in forgotten crypts, and whispers of the occult echo in gentlemen's clubs and back-alley gatherings.

This is a world where gaslight barely holds back the darkness, where rational minds struggle to explain the inexplicable. The Grand Casebook embraces the interplay between Victorian-era crime fiction, steampunk ingenuity, and gothic supernatural horror.

TECHNOLOGY AND MAGIC

London in 1896 stands at the precipice of modernity. Steam-powered inventions, mechanical marvels, and new sciences have transformed daily life for many of the city's citizens. Airships cross the Thames, pneumatic tubes shuttle messages through walls, and automata clatter away in factories and households alike. The line between miracle and machine is increasingly blurred, and the pace of progress shows no signs of slowing.

Yet beneath this veneer of industrial achievement lies something older—and far stranger.

Technology in the world of *The Grand Casebook* is advanced, but not unbounded. Engineers and inventors push beyond the limits of Victorian science, crafting devices that seem miraculous yet remain grounded in gears, steam, and brass logic. Devices such as:

- Aetheric resonators that detect unseen energies
- Self-writing pens linked to voice-capturing cylinders
- Steam-powered prosthetics with semi-autonomous reflexes
- Clockwork spiders used for surveillance and sabotage

While the upper classes marvel at these wonders, many working-class Londoners view them with suspicion or unease.

Magic, on the other hand, is not publicly acknowledged. It exists in the margins—rumours whispered in taverns, symbols etched into cellar doors, or strange phenomena dismissed as mass delusion. Most Londoners scoff at the idea of the supernatural, even as they shudder when crossing graveyards alone or burn sage to ward off nightmares.

Occult knowledge is rare and often dangerous. Practitioners speak of ley lines, dream-keys, and veiled realities that slip through cracks in the waking world. True magic is subtle, costly, and often maddening. Examples might include:

- A mesmerist who can force confessions through whispered suggestion
- A cursed mirror that reflects a different version of the past
- Blood-ink sigils that reveal invisible messages only at dusk
- Seances that summon not the dead—but something wearing their voice

The **Grand Society of Inquiry** stands at the intersection of these forces. Some members pursue strange sciences; others study grimoires or collect arcane relics. Most tread cautiously, for they know too well that the boundary between invention and invocation is perilously thin.

In this world, truth wears a mechanical face and a hidden name—and it is up to the investigators to uncover both.

THE GRAND SOCIETY OF INQUIRY

Founded in the wake of the Crimean War, The Grand Society of Inquiry was established by a coalition of scholars, detectives, and adventurers who recognised that certain mysteries lay beyond the reach of conventional authorities. Though their official purpose is to investigate “unusual” occurrences, they function as much as a secret society as they do an investigative agency. Its members hail from all walks of life—former police officers, rogue academics, disgraced aristocrats, and those who have glimpsed the supernatural and can never return to ignorance. The Society operates in secrecy, liaising with those who possess forbidden knowledge—whether they be alchemists, mesmerists, or reformed criminals. Their headquarters, a sprawling archive hidden beneath a London bookshop, contains a vast trove of esoteric knowledge accessible only to a select few.

THE POWERS THAT BE

While the Society pursues truth, others work to obscure it. Various factions hold sway over London, each with their own interest in the city’s secrets:

- **Scotland Yard:** The official enforcers of law and order. Most officers dismiss the supernatural, though a handful of seasoned inspectors know better. The Yard tolerates the Society only when their interests align.
- **The Ministry of Esoteric Affairs:** A clandestine government branch tasked with monitoring supernatural activity. Their agents operate with impunity, and their motives often clash with the Society’s.
- **The Order of the Silver Dawn:** An occultist cabal that seeks power through ritual and ancient knowledge. Some whisper their origins stretch back to the Elizabethan court.
- **The Industrial Magnates:** The city’s great industrialists have secrets of their own—from illicit experiments to pacts with entities beyond comprehension.
- **The Underworld Syndicates:** Smugglers and thieves have always known that London’s alleys and docks are haunted by more than mere criminals.

PLAYING IN THE GRAND CASEBOOK

The Grand Casebook is structured as an episodic, mystery-driven setting. Each session presents a new case to unravel, though overarching plots may weave between episodes. Every game is designed as a standalone investigation, with varying player characters and threats. Types of mysteries include:

- **Classic Crime:** Murders, thefts, and conspiracies with unexpected twists.
- **Scientific Anomalies:** Rogue automata, unstable inventions, or experiments gone awry.
- **Supernatural Encounters:** Hauntings, curses, and otherworldly horrors.
- **Political Intrigue:** Blackmail, espionage, and aristocratic conspiracies.
- **Exploratory Adventures:** Forgotten asylums, hidden laboratories, and haunted ruins.

CHARACTER ROLES

Players take on the roles of Society agents, each bringing unique skills and perspectives to the investigative team. Sample archetypes include:

- **The Detective:** A seasoned investigator with a sharp mind and keen eye for detail.
- **The Scientist:** A genius innovator whose inventions often outpace their safety.
- **The Occultist:** A scholar of forbidden knowledge, versed in ritual and arcane lore.

- **The Rogue:** A streetwise scoundrel with contacts in the city's underworld.
- **The Aristocrat:** A socialite with access to influential circles and hidden secrets.
- **The Soldier:** A hardened veteran, able to face danger head-on.

CREATING CONNECTIONS

Though each case in *The Grand Casebook* may introduce a different roster of investigators, shared history and interpersonal ties enrich the narrative and help players engage more deeply with one another. These connections don't need to be elaborate—they might stem from a single case, a whispered rumour, or a common enemy.

Here are a few ways to establish meaningful links between characters:

- **Shared Cases:** The investigators have worked together before. Perhaps one covered for the other's mistake, or they both saw something they swore never to speak of again.
- **Mentorships and Rivalries:** One character may have trained another, or they may have taken opposing stances in a past inquiry. Old rivalries can add drama to even the most routine investigation.
- **Family or Academic Ties:** Some investigators may be siblings, cousins, or former colleagues at a university or academy—connected by blood, scandal, or shared disgrace.
- **Secrets and Debts:** One character knows something the other must keep hidden. Or perhaps a favour was granted years ago—and the time has come to repay it.
- **Unfinished Business:** A case from the past remains unresolved, and its shadow looms over the current investigation. What went wrong, and who bears the blame?

To help generate quick connections, consider the following sample bonds:

- “*You were the only witness to what I saw that night—and you promised to never speak of it.*”
- “*We once faced something inhuman together. We haven’t spoken since.*”
- “*I saved your life in a fire. You’ve never asked how I knew to be there.*”
- “*We both tried to warn them, and they laughed. Now the laughter has stopped.*”
- “*You were meant to take the case. I took it instead, and someone died.*”

Players are encouraged to create new bonds at the beginning of each session or case. Even if characters change from one mystery to the next, those connections ensure that each team feels like part of a larger web—a living archive of shared secrets, triumphs, and regrets.

SETTING RULES

The Grand Casebook modifies standard play to reflect its distinctive tone. Consider the following adjustments:

- **Stress and Wounds:** Psychological stress plays a prominent role, with lingering trauma from particularly harrowing encounters. In less action-heavy scenarios, stress and wounds may be omitted entirely in favour of roleplay.
- **Tools of the Trade:** Players may use unique investigative gadgets such as aetheric spectrometers, spirit lenses, or sonic decoding rods.
- **Mystery Structure:** Adventures focus on gathering evidence, piecing together clues, confronting suspects, and unveiling the truth—sometimes at a cost.
- **Supernatural Threats:** Some threats cannot be overcome by force alone and require specific rituals, research, or cunning to defeat.

RUNNING THE CASEBOOK

The Grand Casebook is designed for episodic, mystery-driven play. Each scenario presents a self-contained case that can be resolved within a single session, though connections between investigations may form a broader narrative arc. Whether you’re running a one-shot or a full campaign, the goal is to deliver tense, atmospheric stories that blend deduction, drama, and the uncanny.

TONE AND STYLE

Mysteries in this setting walk the line between gothic horror and rational inquiry. While some cases may seem purely mundane at first glance, others hint at deeper, more unsettling truths. Even when a case has a supernatural core, the horror should feel restrained and eerie rather than overtly fantastical.

Embrace ambiguity. Some answers should remain half-glimpsed, half-understood. Let players uncover fragments of truth, and decide for themselves whether they’ve truly solved the mystery—or simply stopped it from spreading.

STRUCTURE OF A CASE

Most scenarios follow a common rhythm:

1. **The Hook:** A murder, anomaly, or strange event draws the investigators in.
2. **Initial Clues:** Clues and NPCs point in several possible directions. Dead ends, red herrings, and cryptic statements build tension.
3. **The Descent:** As the truth emerges, the tone shifts. Strange phenomena escalate. Players must make difficult choices.

4. **The Confrontation:** The truth is revealed or confronted. It may be stopped, understood, or escaped—but not always cleanly.
5. **Aftermath:** Each case leaves ripples—on the world, on the characters, and on the unseen forces watching from beyond.

EPISODIC PLAY AND CONTINUITY

Each case is self-contained, but recurring characters, unresolved threads, and subtle callbacks help create a richer world. Let players choose how much continuity they want—some groups may prefer standalone cases, while others enjoy a growing conspiracy in the shadows.

PACING AND PLAYER CHOICE

Don't railroad players toward a single solution. Instead, present a web of clues and allow the group to connect them in their own way. Keep scenes focused—each should either reveal something, raise a

question, or increase tension. Let the story breathe between moments of revelation and danger. Use quick NPC sketches, recurring motifs (a black carriage, an out-of-place clock, a phrase that recurs), and sensory detail to evoke the setting.

CONSEQUENCES MATTER

This setting thrives on ambiguity and moral tension. Solving a case may not mean saving everyone. Sometimes the wrong person goes free. Sometimes knowing the truth is worse than ignorance. Let the players' decisions shape future cases, and don't be afraid to revisit old threads in unexpected ways.

MIXING HORROR AND MYSTERY

Mystery is about uncovering what's hidden. Horror is about what should remain hidden. When blended, these genres create a powerful effect: the sense that knowing too much carries its own price. Use this interplay to your advantage. Offer tantalising truths—but ensure some doors are better left closed.

KEY NPCs

EXAMPLE PCs

Dr Alistair Hargrave (page 73) — A haunted physician turned occult researcher. Once a man of science, now a seeker of forbidden knowledge, Hargrave investigates unnatural afflictions with steady hands and a fractured soul.

Eleanor "Ellie" Fairchild (page 74) — A fearless investigative journalist with a sharp tongue and sharper instincts. Known for exposing high-society corruption, Ellie uses charm and determination to uncover the truths others want buried.

Jonathan "Jack" Blackwood (page 75) — A disgraced noble turned private investigator. Jack moves between London's underbelly and drawing rooms with equal ease, wielding secrets like daggers as he hunts for redemption—or revenge.

Margaret "Maggie" Holloway (page 76) — A brilliant and manipulative criminal psychologist. Maggie sees through people with terrifying ease, using intellect, charm, and psychological insight to bend others to her will.

Genevieve "Ginny" Harcourt (page 77) — A rogue intelligence agent and steampunk spy. Armed with gadgets, disguises, and a mind for intrigue, Ginny operates outside the law to expose the powerful and vanish before the dust settles.

DR ALISTAIR HARGRAVE

"Some afflictions cannot be cured, only contained."

Once a man of science and reason, Dr Alistair Hargrave now treads the blurred line between medicine and the arcane. What began as a pursuit of healing has become a descent into hidden truths that defy biology—and sanity. Calm, precise, and increasingly haunted, Hargrave seeks to understand what lies beyond the edges of knowledge... even if it consumes him.

BACKGROUND

Hargrave trained as a physician and researcher, once celebrated for his cutting-edge theories. But patients began whispering of dreams, disappearances, and impossible recoveries. A single case—a child who spoke in tongues not found in any human language—shattered his trust in reason. Since then, he's walked a solitary path, one paved with questions best left unasked.

APPEARANCE

Neatly dressed in a weathered frock coat, spectacles perched on a tired face. His hands are steady, his expression detached. A stethoscope hangs beside a worn leather satchel filled with instruments for both surgery and séance.

PERSONALITY

Brilliant, methodical, and burdened by knowledge. Hargrave is driven to discover, even when discovery cuts deep. He keeps his emotions buried beneath a surgeon's calm—but nightmares press ever closer to the surface.

CONNECTION TO THE CASEBOOK

His research into "unusual afflictions" brought him into contact with the Grand Society of Inquiry. Though not a formal member, he is often consulted when a case involves biology gone wrong—or something pretending to be biology.

GOALS

To identify, isolate, and if possible, contain the unnatural. Whether his goal is to save humanity or himself remains unclear—even to him.



Skills

Expert (+3)	Lore
Skilled (+2)	Investigate, Will
Novice (+1)	Rapport, Crafts, Empathy

Traits

Scientific Method — +2 to Investigate when analysing evidence, conducting experiments, or applying rational deduction.

Occult Intuition — Once per session, substitute Lore for any other skill when interpreting the supernatural.

Steady Hands, Sharp Mind — +2 to Crafts when performing delicate work or acting under extreme pressure.

Gear

Electro-Aetheric Analyzer — +2 to Lore when detecting or analysing supernatural phenomena; extended use may cause hallucinations.

Pocket Revolver — +2 to Shoot in close-quarters conflict; discreet and reliable.

Notebook of the Unknown — +2 to Lore when researching entities or events, though prolonged study risks psychological strain.

Stress

Fatigue:	OOOO	
Mild:	♥♥♥	_____
Mod:	♥♥	_____
Severe:	♥	_____

ELEANOR "ELLIE" FAIRCHILD

"Fear won't stop me. Lies won't fool me. Power won't silence me."

Eleanor "Ellie" Fairchild is an investigative journalist with a reputation for uncovering the truth—especially the kind others would prefer stayed buried. Armed with charm, wit, and a steel resolve, Ellie chases leads through high society soirees and back-alley whispers alike. She's not just looking for a story—she's looking for justice.

BACKGROUND

Ellie made her name exposing corruption in Parliament and industry alike. Her column in the underground press made waves until it was abruptly shut down after a scandal she never got to print. She suspects powerful hands buried the truth, and now she works freelance, answering only to herself—and the stories that need telling.

APPEARANCE

Stylish but practical—blouses with hidden pockets, corsets that conceal notebooks, and gloves perfect for opening locked doors. Her sharp green eyes miss nothing, and her confident posture keeps her one step ahead of suspicion.

PERSONALITY

Fearless, driven, and cunning. Ellie knows when to press for answers and when to play coy. She believes that stories can save lives—or ruin them—and she's not afraid to take that gamble. Her charm is real, but so is her steel.

CONNECTION TO THE CASEBOOK

A recent letter warned her off a lead she hadn't yet begun to chase—about strange disappearances tied to the Society of Inquiry. Now she's chasing the sender as much as the story.

GOALS

Expose the forces manipulating the truth. Whether it's a secret society or something older, she'll dig until she hits the nerve—and print it, no matter the cost.



Skills

Expert (+3)	Investigate
Skilled (+2)	Rapport, Empathy
Novice (+1)	Contacts, Notice, Will, Stealth

Traits

Follow the Lead — +2 to Investigate when pursuing a major story or unraveling a cover-up.

Silver-Tongued Reporter — Once per session, substitute Rapport for Deceive when gathering information.

Ink Over Iron — +2 to Will when resisting intimidation, coercion, or supernatural manipulation.

Gear

Press Credentials — +2 to Rapport when convincing someone to talk on the record.

Lockpicking Kit — +2 to Stealth when breaking into offices or restricted archives.

Hidden Notes and Records — +2 to Investigate when reviewing past leads or building a case.

Stress

Fatigue:	OOOO
Mild:	♥♥♥
Mod:	♥♥
Severe:	♥

JONATHAN "JACK" BLACKWOOD

"Justice? That's for men with clean hands. I settle for truth."

Once a privileged nobleman, now a disgraced investigator, Jonathan "Jack" Blackwood navigates the shadows of the same society that cast him out. Suave, jaded, and sharper than ever, he deals in secrets—especially the kind that destroy reputations. Though the city turned its back on him, Jack learned to thrive in its alleys, clubs, and drawing rooms alike.

BACKGROUND

Born into aristocracy, Jack lived a life of comfort until scandal drove him from polite society. The details remain elusive, but whispers of cover-ups and betrayal follow him still. He now works as a private investigator, using his knowledge of the elite to expose their sins—and perhaps, someday, redeem his own.

APPEARANCE

Trim and refined, but with a weariness in his eyes that betrays years of hard truth. Always impeccably dressed, though his coat bears the wear of back alleys and long nights. He moves with confidence, but not the kind that comes from wealth—it's the confidence of survival.

PERSONALITY

Witty and worldly, Jack is equal parts cynic and romantic. He sees the rot beneath the city's glittering mask but keeps a code of honour all the same. His charm is effortless, but his past is heavy, and it never stays buried for long.

CONNECTION TO THE CASEBOOK

The Society sometimes turns to Jack when an investigation involves the upper crust. His ability to blend into ballrooms or brothels alike makes him a valuable—if reluctant—asset.

GOALS

To uncover the truth behind his exile and hold the guilty accountable—if not in court, then in kind. And if that truth damns him too? So be it.



Skills

Expert (+3)	Investigate
Skilled (+2)	Rapport, Notice
Novice (+1)	Deceive, Stealth, Contacts

Traits

- Aristocratic Charm** — +2 to Rapport when dealing with upper-class individuals or navigating elite social circles.
- A Shadow Among Shadows** — Once per session, use Stealth to escape pursuit in crowds or dimly lit environments.
- Secrets Kept, Secrets Sold** — +2 to Contacts when dealing with informants or acquiring blackmail material.

Gear

- Forged Identity Papers** — +2 to Deceive when infiltrating parties, clubs, or restricted events.
- Hidden Dagger** — +2 to Stealth when concealing a weapon or retrieving it undetected.
- The Ledger of Secrets** — +2 to Investigate when researching aristocratic corruption or tracing hidden transactions.

Stress

Fatigue:	OOOO
Mild:	♥♥♥
Mod:	♥♥
Severe:	♥

MARGARET "MAGGIE" HOLLOWAY

"Every mind has a door. I simply know how to open them."

Maggie Holloway is a master manipulator wrapped in charm and poise. A criminal psychologist of rare brilliance, she dissects people the way others read poetry—elegantly, and without mercy. Whether uncovering a motive or planting a seed of doubt, she always knows what to say—and when silence will say more.

BACKGROUND

Maggie rose to prominence as a forensic psychologist, consulting for both the courts and the clandestine. Her insight made her enemies, her confidence made her dangerous. Officially, she "stepped away" from academia. Unofficially, she's still invited to solve the kinds of puzzles most professionals refuse to touch.

APPEARANCE

Always impeccably dressed in tailored black, Maggie's presence is commanding without being loud. Her voice is soft but sharp, her eyes calm but invasive. She speaks like she already knows what you're about to say.

PERSONALITY

Intelligent, composed, and subtly dangerous. She prefers manipulation to confrontation and keeps her emotions in a locked box. While her methods are unsettling, her results are undeniable.

CONNECTION TO THE CASEBOOK

Maggie consults for the Grand Society when cases require psychological nuance—or when suspects are best broken with words rather than force. She rarely seeks out mysteries, but they often find her.

GOALS

To study the darker corners of the human mind—and use that knowledge as both scalpel and sword. Whether her motives are pure is a matter of perspective.



Skills

Expert (+3)	Empathy
Skilled (+2)	Rapport, Investigate
Novice (+1)	Deceive, Will, Contacts

Traits

Mind Games — +2 to Empathy when analysing emotional states or hidden motives.

Persuasive Whisper — Once per session, use Empathy in place of Rapport to subtly influence a target.

Puppet Master — +2 to Deceive when manipulating someone into action against their interest.

Gear

Psychological Dossier — +2 to Investigate when reviewing notes or case files on a subject's behaviour.

Silver Locket — +2 to Rapport when forging emotional connections through shared memories or vulnerability.

A Hidden Letter — +2 to Contacts when calling in favours from influential acquaintances.

Stress

Fatigue:	OOOO
Mild:	♥♥♥
Mod:	♥♥
Severe:	♥

GENEVIEVE "GINNY" HARCOURT

"Secrets are just another kind of weapon."

Once a decorated agent of the Crown, Ginny Harcourt now moves through the shadows of the Empire, answerable to no one. Betrayed and disavowed, she has turned her considerable talents toward subterfuge, sabotage, and secrets. Her enemies never see her coming—only the aftermath.

BACKGROUND

A brilliant operative with a reputation for infiltration and extraction, Ginny was betrayed by her handlers and left for dead after uncovering secrets too dangerous for the Empire to admit. She now works as a rogue agent, unravelling conspiracies with a mixture of charm, cunning, and clever engineering.

APPEARANCE

Always dressed for movement, with hidden tools stitched into every layer. Her presence shifts to suit her role—noblewoman, servant, smuggler, spy. Her eyes are sharp, her smile misleading, and her pockets full of tricks.

PERSONALITY

Coldly efficient, but never without style. Ginny calculates three moves ahead and keeps her heart locked behind iron discipline. Trust is rare. Precision is everything.

CONNECTION TO THE CASEBOOK

The Grand Society occasionally requires the skills of someone who doesn't officially exist. Ginny helps with the cases no one else is allowed to know about.

GOALS

To uncover the truth behind her betrayal and dismantle the power structures that let it happen—one secret at a time.



Skills

Expert (+3)	Deceive
Skilled (+2)	Stealth, Investigate
Novice (+1)	Burglary, Contacts, Crafts

Traits

Master of Disguise — +2 to Deceive when impersonating others or assuming a false identity.

Escape Artist — Once per session, declare an escape plan was already prepared—automatically succeed at leaving danger behind.

Tinker's Friend — Use Crafts instead of Burglary when bypassing security systems or traps.

Gear

Hidden Blade — +2 to Fight when striking from stealth or ambush.

Encrypted Communicator — +2 to Contacts when sending or receiving secure messages.

Grappling Hook Gauntlet — +2 to Athletics when climbing or fleeing through vertical terrain.

Stress

Fatigue:	OOOO
Mild:	♥♥♥
Mod:	♥♥
Severe:	♥

CASE FILES: THE SCENARIOS

The following adventures are designed for 3–5 players and typically run between 2–4 hours.

THE CALL TO ADVENTURE

At the heart of every investigation lies the Grand Society of Inquiry, an esteemed and enigmatic organisation dedicated to the relentless pursuit of truth. Operating from the opulent halls of the Grand Hall, the Society employs a network of investigators, scholars, and specialists—each summoned based on their particular expertise.

When a new case arises, messages are discreetly dispatched via courier, pneumatic tube, or stranger means. These summons are determined by the **Grand**

Analytical Engine, a vast, steam-powered machine housed in the Grand Hall's lower levels. This device analyses a multitude of factors—past case data, personnel availability, skill profiles—and selects an ideal investigative team for each assignment.

FRAMING THE CALL TO ADVENTURE

This framing device helps explain varying character rosters from session to session. The Grand Analytical Engine provides an in-universe reason for episodic play with a rotating cast.

CASES

The list that follows is but a tiny fraction of the cases that have crossed the Grand Analytical Engine's path. Each case is a self-contained mystery, but they can be played in any order. The only requirement is that players must be willing to accept the call to adventure.

The Murder at the Brass Orchid — FIXME description

The Clockmaker's Deception — FIXME description

MURDER AT THE BRASS ORCHID

The investigators are called to **The Brass Orchid**. The establishment is filled with wealthy patrons, performers, and staff—each with their own secrets to hide. The club's reputation is at stake, and the clock is ticking before the police arrive to sweep things under the rug.

The players must piece together the events of the evening, question patrons and staff, analyse the crime scene, and determine who had the means, motive, and opportunity to commit the crime. However, the deeper they dig, the more they realise that this murder is just the tip of the iceberg.

PREMISE

A high-society soirée at the exclusive cabaret, The Brass Orchid, is cut short when a well-connected financier is found dead in a locked room. The party was attended by the city's elite, but none saw the murder happen—or so they claim. The investigators must navigate a world of secrets, deception, and hidden rivalries to uncover the truth.

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED

Beatrice Langley, a hostess at The Brass Orchid, killed the financier, **Edward Mercer**, to protect herself from blackmail. Mercer had uncovered details about Beatrice's past life and was threatening to expose her unless she paid a steep price. Desperate and out of options, she poisoned his drink and used the club's pneumatic tube system to dispose of the evidence. However, a miscalculation led to certain clues being left behind.



GAME MASTER TIP

The suggested passive opposition rolls in the following are only that, suggestions. Feel free to adjust the difficulty based on the investigators' actions, skills, and the pace of the game. Remember that the goal is to keep the story moving forward, not to bog it down with unnecessary obstacles.

ACT 1: INTO THE FRAY

At the Game Master's discretion, the summons to the **Grand Hall** may be role-played, allowing players to experience firsthand how the **Grand Society of Inquiry** assigns cases and selects its agents. The Grand Hall, with its towering bookcases, softly ticking machines, and ever-present scent of aged parchment, serves as a fitting backdrop for such moments. A Society Official—impeccably dressed and radiating an air of quiet authority—steps forward to present the latest mystery: a locked-room murder at the prestigious **Brass Orchid**, a cabaret favoured by nobles, artists, and the elite. According to the report, the club's owner, **Madame Yvette Duval**, contacted the Society in desperation, recognising that only the most capable investigators could unravel the enigma before her reputation—and her high-paying clientele—are irreparably damaged by scandal.

In episodic settings, the **Call to Adventure** often renders such introductory scenes optional, particularly when players are already invested in the campaign's rhythm. However, in the first few sessions—when characters are new to the world and the tone is still being established—engaging in a scene outside the primary investigation can add richness and immersion. Receiving a case assignment is a natural opportunity to set the mood, introduce memorable NPCs, and reinforce the Society's role in orchestrating these investigations, acting as both a guiding hand and an enigmatic presence behind the scenes. These moments can anchor the players in the setting, reminding them that every case is more than a puzzle—it is a mission, a responsibility, and a glimpse into the grand machinery of the world they now inhabit.

Once the players are gathered, the Society Official will provide a brief overview of the case, including the victim's identity, the circumstances surrounding the case. The Brass Orchid remains under lockdown, its golden doors barred to the public while the mystery remains unsolved. But such restrictions cannot last indefinitely. Its wealthy and influential patrons grow restless, and they will not tolerate confinement for long unless official investigators take charge. The pressure mounts: the players must reach the crime scene swiftly, before key witnesses slip away, memories fade, and vital evidence is lost beneath a veil of gossip, misdirection, or intentional sabotage.

THE ORCHID'S MOST ENCHANTING HOSTESS

BEATRICE LANGLEY

A captivating hostess at the Brass Orchid, hiding a desperate past behind a charming smile.

BACKGROUND:

Beatrice Langley built a reputation as one of the Brass Orchid's most sought-after hostesses, but her true past is far less glamorous. Once entangled in dangerous affairs, she sought refuge in the club's gilded halls, only to have her secrets catch up with her. When Edward Mercer threatened to expose her, she took the only way out she saw—murder.

Skills

Expert (+3)	Deception
Skilled (+2)	Stealth, Persuasion
Novice (+1)	Awareness, Empathy, Etiquette

Traits

Charming Manipulator — Gains a bonus when deceiving or misleading someone with her charms.

A Past Worth Killing For — Once per session, may create an advantage related to her hidden past.

Desperate Measures — Can reroll when acting under extreme pressure or life-threatening circumstances.

THE BRASS ORCHID'S MATRON

MADAME YVETTE DUVAL

The esteemed owner of the Brass Orchid. A woman who knows the price of every secret whispered in her establishment.

BACKGROUND:

Madame Duval built the Brass Orchid into London's most exclusive cabaret and gambling house, catering to the city's wealthiest and most influential figures. While she maintains a persona of graceful hospitality, she has survived in a cutthroat industry, using her intelligence and influence to navigate political and criminal circles alike.

Skills

Expert (+3)	Persuasion
Skilled (+2)	Deception, Resources
Novice (+1)	Awareness, Etiquette, Insight

Traits

Silver-Tongued Schemer — Gains a bonus when negotiating delicate matters or extracting information.

Web of Favors — Once per session, call in a powerful favour from a well-connected patron.

A Whisper Can Kill — Can reroll when leveraging blackmail or manipulating a dangerous individual.

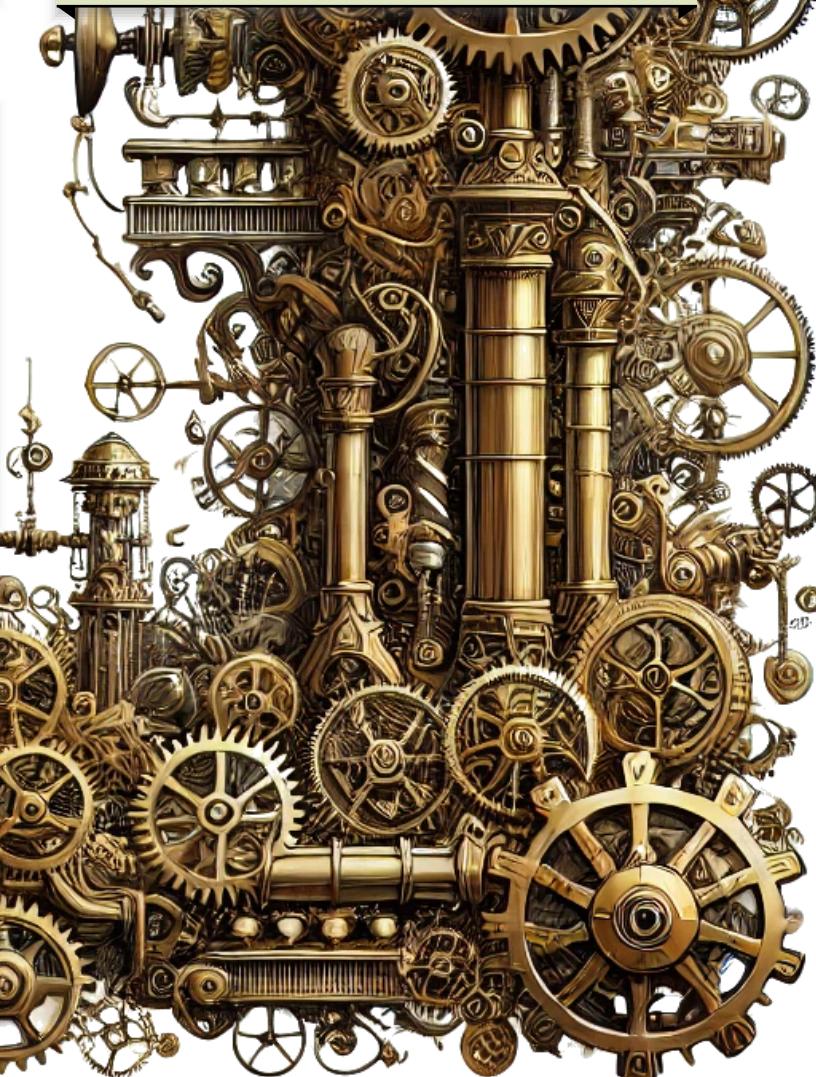
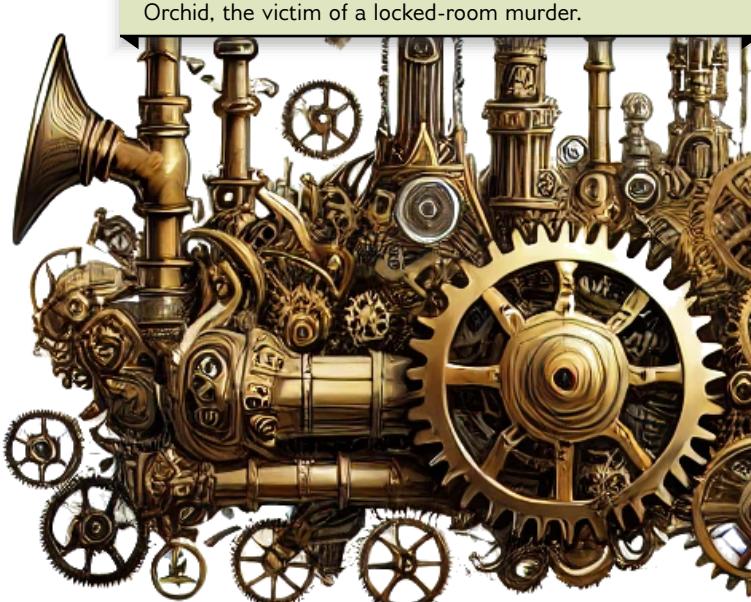
THE MURDER VICTIM

EDWARD MERCER

A cunning blackmailer who underestimated the desperation of those he ensnared.

BACKGROUND:

Edward Mercer was well-known in London's underworld for his talent for unearthing dirty secrets and using them to his advantage. He approached his victims with a cold, calculated patience, squeezing them for all they were worth. His last target, however, proved more dangerous than he anticipated—Beatrice Langley, a woman with too much to lose. He was found dead in his private lounge at the Brass Orchid, the victim of a locked-room murder.



ACT 1: THE CRIME SCENE

The investigators arrive at **The Brass Orchid**, where the air is thick with tension. The club's usual vibrancy is subdued, with hushed murmurs among staff and patrons alike. A staff member, **Delilah "Della" Moreau**, was the first to notice something was amiss. Mercer, a regular patron, had not emerged from his private lounge as he typically would during the intermission. Concerned, she knocked on his door. When he did not respond, she fetched **Madame Yvette Duval**, the only person with an extra key to the private lounges.

Upon unlocking the door, they were met with a grisly sight—Mercer's lifeless body slumped in his chair, his drink half-finished, a scrap of paper clutched tightly in his hand. The room, untouched since their discovery, remains eerily undisturbed. Knowing that the scandal could ruin the Brass Orchid, Madame Duval took swift action. Rather than contacting the authorities, she turned to the **Grand Society of Inquiry**, summoning the investigators to handle the matter discreetly.

From the moment the body was found, no one has been allowed to enter the lounge—yet the investigators will soon find that secrets have a way of slipping through even the tightest of locks.

EXAMINING THE CRIME SCENE

Upon entering Mercer's private lounge, the investigators find the room frozen in time. A single lamp provides dim lighting, casting long shadows across the plush furniture. A card game sits abandoned at the table, with half-smoked cigars in an ashtray. The air is thick with the scent of liquor, tobacco, and a faint, lingering trace of something bitter—something off.

The body of Edward Mercer remains slumped in his chair, untouched since discovery. His expression is frozen in surprise, his grip unnaturally tight around a crumpled scrap of paper. The investigators are free to explore the scene, but careful examination will be required to extract meaningful details.

After examining the crime scene, the investigators are free to explore the Brass Orchid in search of clues. The investigation takes place in Act 2, where they will question staff and patrons, analyse testimonies, and piece together the events of the evening. The order in which they explore the locations in the next act is up to them.

PRIMARY CLUES

- A **half-finished drink laced with poison**, still resting on the table near Mercer's body. A faint almond scent lingers, barely noticeable beneath the overpowering aroma of brandy.
- The victim's **missing pocket watch**, unaccounted for at the crime scene but later discovered in an unexpected location.
- A **scrap of torn paper**, crumpled tightly in Mercer's hand, as though grasped in his final moments—either in desperation or as a final act of defiance.
- The **pneumatic tube system**, a hidden network connecting various parts of the club, shows signs of recent tampering.

WHAT THE CLUES REVEAL

- The **poisoned drink** confirms the cause of death. The faint almond scent suggests cyanide or a similar fast-acting toxin but without an obvious delivery method.
- The **missing pocket watch**, later found in the servers' area, is not inherently suspicious—but its location is. It suggests that someone, likely a staff member, moved through that area after Mercer's death. **Henry "Rigs" Rigby**, the bartender, recovered it but might need some persuasion to reveal the circumstances.
- The **scrap of torn paper** remains tightly clutched in Mercer's hand. The jagged edge suggests it was ripped from a larger document. Whether Mercer seized it in a moment of panic or it was forcibly torn from him before he collapsed is unclear, but its contents might point to the motive.
- The **tampered pneumatic tube system** is the key to the locked-room mystery. It provides a discreet means of entry and escape, but only staff or someone intimately familiar with the club would know how to exploit it.



GAME MASTER TIP

The mystery is designed to be straightforward, making it ideal for new players still learning the rules and getting comfortable with investigative roleplay. However, you can easily heighten the challenge by introducing conflicting testimonies from staff and patrons, forcing them to untangle half-truths, personal biases, and hidden agendas as they piece together what really happened that night.

INVESTIGATING THE CLUES

THE POISONED DRINK

Sitting on the table near Mercer's body, the glass contains a dark amber liquid, partially consumed. A faint almond scent lingers beneath the brandy's aroma.

- **How to discover:** Simple observation will reveal the drink, but recognising the almond scent requires a **Basic (0) Notice** or **Investigate** check. Recognising this as the telltale scent of cyanide requires a success at the **Difficult (+2)** level.
- **Further examination:** A character with medical knowledge may confirm cyanide poisoning, but testing the drink will require resources outside the club.
- **NPC reactions:** Madame Duval insists no one could have tampered with drinks **without her bartenders noticing**, subtly diverting suspicion.

INVESTIGATING THE CLUES

THE MISSING POCKET WATCH

Mercer's prized gold pocket watch is conspicuously absent from his body.

- **How to discover:** Searching Mercer's belongings will reveal its absence, but noticing the absence of something requires that you expect its presence. Any of the staff will know that Mercer always shows off his pocket watch, so if **Madam Duval is present** when the investigators examine the body, she will notice. Otherwise, have other NPCs drop hints about a watch later in the investigation.

INVESTIGATING THE CLUES

THE SCRAP OF TORN PAPER

Clutched tightly in Mercer's lifeless hand, the small scrap appears hastily ripped from a larger document.

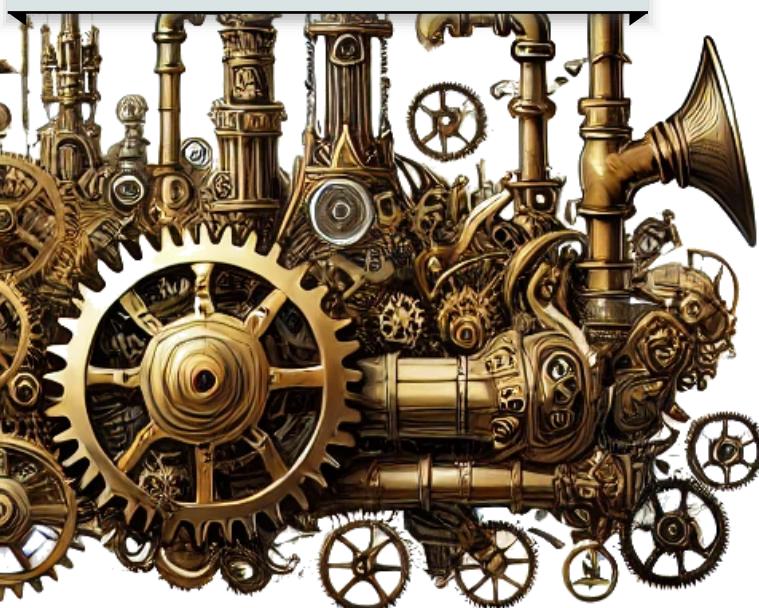
- **How to discover:** Anyone inspecting the body will notice the paper.
- **Further examination:** It is possible to pry the paper from Mercer's hands, but it must be done carefully to not tear it further.
- **What it reveals:** The scrap contains part of a name and a few words, possibly relating to Mercer's blackmail scheme.
- **NPC reactions:** Beatrice Langley, if questioned, will become visibly uncomfortable but will attempt to play innocent unless pressed. A **Basic (0) Empathy** roll will reveal her discomfort. At **Formidable (+3)** or higher, the investigators will recognise her emotions as fear.

INVESTIGATING THE CLUES

THE TAMPERED PNEUMATIC TUBE SYSTEM

A discreet brass panel built into the wall leads to the club's internal message system, normally used for sending notes and receipts between staff areas. However, someone has recently pried it open, and subtle modifications suggest it was used for more than just correspondence.

- **How to discover:** Searching the walls near Mercer's table reveals (with a **Difficult (+2) Investigate** or **Notice**) that the panel is slightly ajar, its edges scratched as if it was hastily forced open. Staff might mention the system in passing if prompted.
- **Further examination:** A **Challenging (+1) Crafts** check confirms that the panel has been modified. At **Difficult (+2) Craft** the examination reveals that the usual constraints, meant to restrict messages to small notes, have been bypassed—suggesting something larger was sent through. Additionally, the airflow mechanism appears to have been overridden, allowing the tube to function more like a one-way transport chute rather than a message system.
- **What it reveals:** The system connects to the servers' area, and traces of fine fabric fibres or a stray hair inside the tube hint that it was used to transport something—or someone. A close look reveals faint scuff marks on the panel's interior, possibly left by someone squeezing through.
- **NPC reactions:** Most staff will dismiss the idea that a person could fit inside, but a seasoned investigator might realise that someone **small or desperate** could have used the system as an escape route.



ACT 2: THE INVESTIGATION

Players must navigate the web of lies surrounding the Brass Orchid's elite clientele and staff. Key locations include:

KEY LOCATIONS

- **The performers' dressing rooms**, where whispers of illicit affairs and secret dealings emerge.
- **The club's bar**, where a bartender, **Henry "Rigs" Rigby**, may know more than he lets on.
- **The back office**, where financial records hint at Mercer's recent blackmail attempts.

GAME MASTER TIP

Encourage players to interact with the environment beyond skill rolls—describe how their characters examine the clues, interpret body language, and make logical leaps. If they become stuck, use an NPC to nudge them toward a promising line of inquiry rather than outright giving answers.

A chase scene or social confrontation may occur if a suspect attempts to flee or cover up crucial evidence. The club's owner, **Madame Yvette Duval**, will insist on discretion, urging players to avoid drawing attention.

THE PERFORMERS' DRESSING ROOMS

A backstage sanctuary for the Brass Orchid's entertainers, the dressing rooms are filled with the scent of perfume, powder, and secrets. Between costume changes and whispered conversations, this space holds clues about hidden relationships, illicit affairs, and last-minute confrontations. If anyone saw Beatrice Langley before the murder, it would have been here.

Speaking with the club's performers, the investigators learn that **Mercer** and **Beatrice** have been spending an unusual amount of time together lately. The prevailing gossip suggests an affair, though many find this unlikely—such a scandal would not go unnoticed, and **Madame Duval** would never tolerate it. Still, secrets have a way of slipping through even the most watchful eyes...

If the investigators take the time to search the dressing rooms carefully, they can uncover additional clues that paint a clearer picture of Beatrice's state of mind before the murder:

CLUES TO DISCOVER

- **Beatrice's Travel Bag**: A half-packed bag in her dressing room suggests she was preparing to leave in haste. Its hurried state implies she either abandoned the plan or ran out of time.
- **A Torn Letter**: A small stove used to heat the performers' dressing room contains scraps of partially burned paper that can be spotted with a **DL +1 Notice** roll. A **DL +2 Notice** or **Crafting** reveals that the paper matches the torn note found in Mercer's hand. If pieced together, it may hint at the nature of their final confrontation.
- **Testimonies from Performers**: Some performers recall Beatrice arriving shaken before her performance, while others remember her slipping away after intermission. None, however, can say where she went.

THE CLUB'S BAR

A bustling hub of conversation and vice, the club's bar is where fortunes are won and lost, secrets change hands, and alliances are forged over a well-poured drink. The air is thick with the mingling scents of brandy, cigars, and ambition. At the centre of it all stands **Henry "Rigs" Rigby**, a bartender with an ear for whispers and a knack for knowing when to keep his mouth shut. He's seen it all—but getting him to share what he knows will require a delicate touch or a not-so-subtle push.

As the investigators enter, they catch a glimpse of **Rigs** hurriedly slipping something into his pocket. Keen-eyed characters may notice a **hint of gold** flashing before it disappears (a **Notice** roll at **DL +2** will confirm this). It's **Mercer's pocket watch**, and Rigs isn't keen on explaining how he came by it. At first, he'll feign ignorance, but a successful **Interrogate**, **Intimidate**, or **Rapport** roll at **Formidable (+3)** will loosen his tongue—grudgingly.

CLUES TO DISCOVER

- **Mercer's Missing Pocket Watch**: Rigs found it in the servers' area after the murder, where Beatrice likely dropped it in her rush to escape. He will only admit this if pressured.
- **Unsettled Debts**: A bar ledger records Mercer's outstanding tabs—far higher than usual. However, in the past few weeks, he had been paying off large amounts, suggesting a new source of income.
- **Patron Gossip**: Some recall Mercer speaking privately with Beatrice earlier that night, while others overheard him boasting about a "big payday" that was going to change everything.
- **The Pneumatic Tube Exit**: The bar's pneumatic system, normally used to deliver drinks to private lounges, has a discreet access point beneath the counter. Investigators examining it will find **signs of forced entry**—a clear indication of tampering.

THE PEOPLE WHO KEEP THE ORCHID RUNNING

THE STAFF OF THE BRASS ORCHID

A well-oiled machine of waiters, bartenders, entertainers, and security staff, all working under the careful watch of Madame Duval. Each has their own secrets—and some know more about the murder than they let on.

GAME MASTER TIP

These are all Mook NPCs but can be fleshed out more (as Henry "Rigs" Rigby) if necessary. Most likely, you will not need their stats, though, but can use them simply to add flavour and drop clues and hints.

HENRY "RIGS" RIGBY

Bartender – Henry "Rigs" Rigby has served drinks and collected secrets at the Brass Orchid for years. A man with a sharp eye and a sharper tongue, he knows how to keep patrons talking—especially when they've had a few too many. **What He Knows:** Rigs found Edward Mercer's missing watch tucked behind the bar, likely dropped by someone in a hurry. He can also confirm that Beatrice Langley was seen speaking with Mercer earlier in the evening.

DELILAH "DELLA" MOREAU

Head Hostess — Poised and perceptive, Della keeps track of the Orchid's clientele and ensures the staff stay in line. **What She Knows:** Della saw Beatrice Langley looking distraught before her performance. She had a brief but intense exchange with Mercer in a quiet corner of the club, after which she rushed backstage, visibly shaken.

THEO FINCH

Croupier – A professional gambler with a silver tongue, Theo oversees the Orchid's high-stakes tables. **What He Knows:** Theo recalls that Mercer was in high spirits that evening, boasting about his luck finally turning. He also saw him flash a folded note to Beatrice at the bar—something that made her go pale.

LUCIAN "LUCKY" CALLOWAY

Security Chief – A former prizefighter turned bouncer, Lucky ensures that troublemakers are swiftly escorted out. **What He Knows:** Lucky was managing a rowdy patron at the time of the murder and didn't see much, but he did notice Beatrice leaving Mercer's booth looking like she'd seen a ghost. He suspects there was more to their history than either let on.

MARGUERITE "MAGGIE" LAVOIE

Cabaret Singer – The star performer at the Orchid, known for her breathtaking voice and her ability to read a room. **What She Knows:** Maggie saw Beatrice backstage, trembling before going onstage. She also overheard her muttering about someone "never leaving well enough alone" before she downed a glass of champagne and stormed off.

THE ELITE CLIENTELE OF THE ORCHID

THE PATRONS OF THE BRASS ORCHID

An exclusive mix of aristocrats, socialites, and shadowy figures seeking entertainment, influence, or illicit dealings. Many were present on the night of the murder—some more observant than others.

LORD ALISTAIR PEMBROKE

Wealthy Industrialist – A steel magnate with an imposing presence, known for both his ruthless business tactics and his excessive gambling. **What He Knows:** Pembroke had his own business to attend to at the tables, but he noticed Mercer acting smug and confident, calling for more drinks and toasting to "fortune smiling at last."

GENEVIEVE ASHDOWN

Scandalous Socialite – A striking woman with a penchant for dangerous liaisons and whispered rumours. She thrives on court intrigue and nightlife gossip. **What She Knows:** Genevieve witnessed Beatrice and Mercer talking earlier in the night. She saw Beatrice grab Mercer's wrist in desperation, pleading in hushed tones before Mercer simply laughed and pulled away.

DR. ELIAS FORSYTHE

Respected Physician – A surgeon with a growing reputation, attending the Orchid to enjoy his vices away from prying eyes. **What He Knows:** Dr. Forsythe noticed Beatrice downing a drink with shaking hands just before leaving for Mercer's booth. He was too focused on his own affairs to linger, but he distinctly recalls her expression—not anger, but sheer dread.

Any investigator willing to **crawl inside** will find it claustrophobic, the **walls cool and slick** from years of condensation. The air carries a **faint metallic tang**, mingled with the stale scent of old receipts and spilt brandy. A **DL +2 Notice** roll will reveal that a few **scraps of paper** cling to the corners of the passage, suggesting messages were hurriedly sent or torn up mid-transit. If they push forward, they may notice a **single dark thread caught on a rivet**—a clue that someone in dark clothing passed through recently. This passage is the key to unravelling **how the killer escaped the locked room**, but whether the investigators are willing to **follow the same route** remains to be seen...

WHAT CAN BE FOUND IN THE PNEUMATIC SYSTEM

- **Signs of tampering:** A bent latch, scratches, and disturbed dust suggest recent use.
- **A broken glass vial shard:** Found inside the tube, confirming poison use.
- **A service ladder with a bent rung:** Indicates someone climbed through in haste.
- **A split passage:** One leading toward the back hall, the other to the private lounges.
- **Traces of the killer's passage:** A dark thread caught on a rivet, scattered paper scraps.

HOW RIGS FOUND THE WATCH

Henry "Rigs" Rigby swears he had nothing to do with Mercer's murder—just bad timing. After the club locked down, he was doing his usual rounds when something **caught his eye**: a glint of gold beneath the counter near the **servers' area**.

Curious, he bent down and found **Mercer's pocket watch**. Rigs had no idea how it got there, but he knew he didn't want to be involved. Fearing suspicion, he **shoved it into his pocket** and went back to pouring drinks.

Under pressure, he'll admit he found it **near the back hall entrance**, where servers fetch drinks for the private lounges. This implies that **someone familiar with the layout passed through there after the murder**, and likely **dropped it while escaping through the pneumatic tube system**.

If pressed, Rigs recalls an odd **thud from the back hall** just before he found the watch—something he brushed off at the time but now suspects was **someone landing from the tubes**.

THE BACK OFFICE

Tucked away behind a locked door, the back office is where the club's finances are managed, and sensitive dealings are recorded. The ledgers here reveal an interesting financial pattern. Mercer had accrued a **significant gambling debt** at the Brass Orchid over the past year—yet, in the past few weeks, he had begun paying it off in unusually large sums. Where did the money come from?

CLUES TO DISCOVER

- **Financial Records:** The ledgers show that Mercer has made **several large payments** on his debt, suggesting he had recently come into a substantial amount of money. If the investigators follow this trail, they will discover that the timing aligns suspiciously with the time when **Beatrice** started spending substantially more time with him.

THE PNEUMATIC SYSTEM

Beneath the bar, tucked behind a row of gleaming brass pipes and aged mahogany panelling, lies a **discreet access point** to the club's **pneumatic tube system**. Normally, these tubes are used to send drink orders, notes, and discreet payments between the private lounges and the bar, but this particular panel has been **forcibly pried open**. The latch usually kept flush with the wall, is now bent slightly out of shape as if someone had wrenched it open in haste.

Upon closer inspection (**DL +1 Investigate**), faint scratches on the brass lining suggest that something—or someone—was pulled through recently. A **thin layer of dust** clings to the inner rim of the tube, disturbed in streaks where fingers or fabric may have brushed against it.

Investigators with a **keen eye** may notice a **small shard of glass** caught between the tubing's metal framework, its edges glistening under the low bar light. If examined, it matches the **broken vial** found at the exit point, the lingering scent of bitter almonds confirming its deadly purpose.

The tube itself is narrow, **just large enough for a slender person to squeeze through**. A metal **service ladder** is affixed to the interior, meant for maintenance workers to access the system when needed. However, one of the lower rungs has been bent, possibly from the weight of someone climbing through in a hurry. Looking deeper inside, investigators can see where the **tube splits**, with one passage continuing toward the back hall and another leading **upward**, toward the private lounges—including Mercer's.

ACT 3: THE REVEAL

With all the pieces in place, the investigators must confront **Beatrice Langley**. She is visibly shaken when accused but clings to her innocence, insisting that she had **nothing to do with Mercer's death**. However, as the investigators present their findings, cracks begin to show in her story.

EVIDENCE THAT BREAKS HER RESOLVE

- **Traces of poison:** A broken glass vial, found near the pneumatic tube exit, contained the same poison that killed Mercer. Traces of the toxin linger on Beatrice's clothing.
- **Witness testimonies:** Multiple staff members recall Beatrice acting erratically—arriving shaken, disappearing after intermission, and returning only once the club was in an uproar.
- **The torn letter:** Fragments of a document, partially burned in the dressing room stove, match the scrap found clutched in Mercer's hand—evidence of a final desperate message. **Witnesses will testify** that Beatrice added fuel to the stove a short time before the murder scene was discovered.
- **The missing pocket watch:** Dropped in the servers' area after she fled through the pneumatic tube; its location exposes her escape route.
- **Inconsistencies in her alibi:** She initially claimed she was in her dressing room before and after her performance, but no one can confirm seeing her at the critical moment.

Faced with undeniable proof, Beatrice's composure crumbles. If the investigators press her with a firm but measured approach, she may confess outright, revealing the truth about Mercer's blackmail and the desperate decision that led to his death.

However, if they push too aggressively or fail to secure a clear confession, Beatrice panics. She makes a break for the nearest exit—whether attempting to vanish into the crowd, lock herself in her dressing room, or even slip through the pneumatic tubes one last time. This could lead to a tense chase or a final dramatic confrontation as the investigators must decide whether to apprehend her themselves or alert the authorities before she disappears into the night.

GAME MASTER TIP

If you want to add tension, Beatrice's flight can turn into a frantic pursuit through the back halls of the Brass Orchid, with obstacles such as locked doors, security guards, or even club patrons unwittingly getting in the way. A climactic moment could see her cornered on a balcony, deciding whether to surrender or make a desperate escape attempt.

RESOLUTIONS

Depending on how the investigators handle the case, different outcomes may occur:

- **Justice Served:** Beatrice is arrested or confesses, ensuring the truth is revealed.
- **A Deal in the Shadows:** The investigators allow Beatrice to flee, leveraging her knowledge for future gain.
- **The Wrong Culprit:** A scapegoat is framed, or the authorities arrest someone else entirely.
- **A Mystery Unsolved:** The players fail to piece everything together, leaving The Brass Orchid haunted by unanswered questions.

Regardless of the resolution, this case's events ripple across London's elite, setting the stage for future intrigues.

Example Scenario

THE CLOCKMAKER'S DECEPTION

A shocking murder has thrown London's scientific and industrial circles into disarray. The esteemed inventor, **Dr Sebastian Thorne**, stands accused of killing a rival engineer, **Arthur Bellamy**, who was found dead in Thorne's workshop. The evidence against him seems irrefutable—Bellamy's body was discovered with blunt force trauma, and the only witness claims that one of Thorne's own clockwork creations struck the fatal blow.

But something about the case doesn't add up. The mechanical automaton, a prototype designed to assist in fine-detail engineering, should be incapable of such an act. Was this an unfortunate accident, or has someone manipulated the scene to frame Thorne? The investigators must untangle the mystery before the city condemns a man who may be innocent—or worse, before a hidden truth shakes the foundations of science itself.

PREMISE

A renowned inventor is accused of murder when his latest clockwork creation is found standing over a dead body. The case seems open and shut, but a deeper conspiracy lurks beneath the surface. Was the machine truly responsible, or is someone using technology as a convenient scapegoat?

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED

Arthur Bellamy had uncovered a secret — one that threatened powerful interests within London's scientific community. He arranged a meeting with Thorne under the guise of a professional discussion, intending to share his findings. However, before he could reveal the full truth, an unknown party silenced him.

The real killer staged the scene, positioning Thorne's automaton as the culprit. By tampering with the machine's mechanisms and manipulating witnesses, they ensured that suspicion would fall on Thorne. Now, as the city rushes to condemn him, the investigators must uncover the true murderer, reveal the secret Bellamy died for, and navigate the dangerous underworld of industrial espionage.

GAME MASTER TIP

As with the previous scenario, you can act out the summoning to **The Grand Society of Inquiry** as a way to introduce the investigators to the case. If the set of player characters in this scenario differs from the player characters in the previous one, this would give you an excellent way of introducing the new characters to the players.

GAME MASTER TIP

This case provides an excellent opportunity to explore themes of scientific advancement, ethical dilemmas, and the fear of technology gone rogue. The case may also lead into larger conspiracies within London's industrial elite, depending on how deep the investigators choose to dig.

ACT 1: THE ACCUSATION

The investigators are summoned to the scene of the crime—the locked workshop of Dr Thorne. The city's authorities have already decided his guilt, but the inconsistencies in the case suggest a deeper truth.

KEY ELEMENTS OF ACT 1

- **Examining the Crime Scene:** Bellamy was struck down in Thorne's workshop. The automaton is positioned near the body, but no command sequence should have allowed it to act violently.
- **The Automaton:** A marvel of engineering, yet it lacks any known capacity for independent action. Its gears and actuators show signs of tampering.
- **Thorne's Testimony:** The accused swears he is innocent, claiming he was in another room when the murder occurred.
- **The Witness:** A factory worker insists he saw the automaton move on its own to deliver the fatal strike. But is he telling the full truth?

With the evidence stacked against Thorne, the investigators must uncover what really happened in the workshop that night.

ACT 2: THE HIDDEN CONFLICT

As the investigation deepens, the players discover that Bellamy's death was not a simple case of mechanical failure—it was a carefully orchestrated act of sabotage.

KEY ELEMENTS OF ACT 2

- **Bellamy's Discovery:** The victim had uncovered something significant—plans, a prototype, or a hidden truth that made him a target.
- **The Secret Rivalry:** The industrial elite of London are at war behind closed doors. Bellamy and Thorne were both entangled in a larger battle over technological supremacy.
- **The Sabotaged Automaton:** Someone tampered with the machine's internal mechanisms. If the players investigate closely, they may find evidence of deliberate reprogramming or mechanical interference.
- **A Race Against Time:** The longer the investigators take, the more pressure mounts to convict Thorne. Influential figures want the case closed quickly, and the truth buried.

By the end of Act 2, the investigators should have a suspect—but proving their guilt will require uncovering their true motive.

ACT 3: THE MASTERMIND

With all the pieces in place, the investigators must expose the true murderer before Thorne is sentenced.

KEY ELEMENTS OF ACT 3

- **The True Killer:** A rival inventor? A corrupt businessman? Or someone from Thorne's own inner circle?
- **The Motive:** Bellamy's research, a dangerous secret, or industrial sabotage? What truth was worth killing for?
- **The Final Confrontation:** The players must gather the final proof, present their case, or prevent another murder before the truth is lost forever.

RESOLUTION: JUSTICE OR COVER-UP?

The players' choices will determine the final outcome:

- **If Thorne is cleared:** He is freed, but powerful enemies remain.
- **If the killer is exposed:** The consequences will depend on their connections—justice may not always be served.
- **If the truth is buried:** The industrial elite breathe a sigh of relief, but the players leave knowing they only scratched the surface of something far larger.

One thing is certain: the march of progress is unstoppable, but the cost of invention is often paid in blood.

THE SILENT COURIER

The investigators are drawn into the case when the body of **Henry Graves** is discovered in the early hours of the morning; his pockets turned inside out except for the strange, untouched letter. The local police dismiss it as a robbery gone wrong, but those with a keen eye know better.

The players must follow the trail of clues left behind, track down those involved in the message's delivery, and decipher the meaning of the letter. But they are not the only ones searching for the truth—dangerous individuals are watching their every move, determined to keep the past buried.

PREMISE

A messenger is found dead in a foggy alley, clutching a letter sealed in an unknown cypher. The contents of the letter are clearly valuable—valuable enough to kill for. Who was the intended recipient, and what secret was worth a man's life?

WHAT REALLY HAPPENED

The messenger, Henry Graves, was delivering a coded message between two rival factions of a secret society. The letter contained evidence of a betrayal within their ranks. However, a third party, fearing exposure, intercepted the courier and silenced him before he could complete his task. The letter remains intact, but its sender and intended recipient remain a mystery—one the investigators must unravel before the killers strike again.

ACT 1: THE BODY AND THE LETTER

The investigators arrive at the crime scene—a foggy alley where Henry Graves was found dead. The police have ruled it a botched robbery, but subtle inconsistencies suggest otherwise.

KEY ELEMENTS OF ACT 1

- Examining the Crime Scene:** Players can search for physical evidence—how was Graves killed? What does the positioning of his body suggest?
- The Letter:** The only item left untouched in his possession, written in an unfamiliar cipher. Why was it spared when everything else was taken?
- Witnesses and Leads:** The investigators may find someone who heard or saw something—a vagrant, a night watchman, or a fellow courier. Their accounts might be fragmented, but they hint at someone following Graves before his death.
- The Silent Pursuers:** A subtle but key element—players may not realize it yet, but they are being watched. The

moment they take an interest in the case, their names are added to the list of people who know too much.

Once the investigators realize this was no ordinary mugging, the mystery broadens. Who was Henry Graves delivering the letter to, and what was so important that it was worth his life?

ACT 2: THE TRAIL OF SECRETS

Following leads from Act 1, the investigators begin piecing together Graves' movements before his death. His route suggests he was in contact with powerful individuals who rarely leave behind traces.

KEY ELEMENTS OF ACT 2

- Tracking the Letter's Origin:** Discovering who wrote the letter is just as crucial as finding its recipient. The players must investigate Graves' recent commissions and any known associates.
- The Rival Factions:** As the investigation deepens, it becomes clear that the letter is tied to a schism within a secretive society. Who is working against whom, and what information was in the letter?
- Attempts to Stop the Investigation:** By this point, the players will have drawn attention. Shadowy figures may approach them with offers, threats, or outright attempts on their lives.
- A Key Betrayal:** An NPC the investigators have relied on may be compromised, leading to a moment where the players question who they can trust.

At the end of Act 2, the players should be closing in on the recipient of the letter. However, the conspiracy is still one step ahead, and the final piece of the puzzle remains missing—the full contents of the letter.

ACT 3: THE TRUTH UNVEILED

The final act sees the investigators face their most dangerous challenge yet. The true nature of the letter is revealed, and they must decide what to do with it.

KEY ELEMENTS OF ACT 3

- The Letter's Recipient:** At last, the players find the person who was meant to receive the letter. But will they be an ally, or do they have their own agenda?
- The Real Enemy:** The true mastermind behind the murder emerges—was it a rogue faction leader, a powerful noble, or someone much closer than the players realized?
- The Final Confrontation:** Whether it's a chase, a duel of words, or a desperate escape, the players must navigate the resolution carefully. The wrong choice could cost them their lives.

- **The Fate of the Letter:** The letter contains damning evidence—exposing corruption, revealing a dangerous truth, or holding the key to an even larger mystery. What the players choose to do with it will shape the story's aftermath.

- **If the letter is destroyed:** The conspiracy continues, but the players may have made powerful enemies or secret allies.
- **If the letter is revealed:** The truth spreads, but at what cost? Some factions may fall, others may rise, and new threats may emerge.
- **If the letter is delivered to its intended recipient:** The consequences will depend on who the recipient truly is and whether they were acting in good faith.

RESOLUTION: THE CONSEQUENCES OF TRUTH

The outcome of the scenario depends on how the investigators handle the final confrontation and the letter itself:

No matter the resolution, one thing is certain: **The Silent Courier** was only the beginning.

PART 4

CAMPAIGNS

CHAPTER 11: RUNNING CAMPAIGNS

WHILE THE WYRD ENGINE is optimised for one-shots and episodic sessions, it can also support full campaigns with long-term character growth, story arcs, and world evolution. Campaign play offers a deeper level of investment—at the cost of greater planning, continuity management, and player commitment. This chapter explores what makes campaigns unique, how to adapt THE WYRD ENGINE’s flexible system for sustained play, and the tools needed to maintain narrative momentum over multiple sessions.

WHAT IS A CAMPAIGN?

Campaign play is the long-form novel of tabletop storytelling. Unlike one-shots or episodic adventures, which are structured for brevity and modularity, a campaign unfolds over weeks, months, or even years. It allows players and GMs to invest in a story that grows over time, shaped by choices, consequences, and shared memory.

Where one-shots ask “What’s the story tonight?”, campaigns ask “What does this story become?”

DEFINING CAMPAIGN PLAY

At its core, a campaign is a sequence of sessions linked by continuity—of characters, of world state, and of narrative trajectory. It may follow a single central storyline, evolve through branching paths, or emerge organically through play. What defines it is duration and development: each session contributes to something larger than itself.

- A campaign is a connected series of sessions forming a single, branching, or evolving story arc.
- Players typically follow the same characters throughout, developing relationships, evolving goals, and growing through experience.
- The world itself changes. Towns are saved or destroyed, enemies return, rumours spread, and reputations form.

Campaigns are less about standalone payoffs and more about long-term arcs—both narrative and emotional. What begins as a simple job or investigation might spiral into a war, a revolution, or a personal reckoning.

HOW CAMPAIGNS DIFFER FROM OTHER STRUCTURES

Understanding how campaigns differ from one-shots and episodic play is essential when designing for them. Each structure has its own rhythm, strengths, and narrative expectations.

- **Compared to One-Shots:** One-shots are self-contained, prioritising quick setups, strong hooks, and immediate payoffs. Campaigns stretch those beats across sessions. Risks are slower to build, stakes escalate gradually, and character choices accumulate. One-shots might end in a blaze of glory; campaigns ask what happens next—and what that means.
- **Compared to Episodic Play:** Episodic games often feature returning characters and settings, but each session is modular and largely self-contained. Campaigns, by contrast, depend on consistent continuity. Character arcs unfold over time, and missing a session can mean missing a turning point. Episodic sessions reset the board; campaigns keep building on what came before.

A campaign is less a string of mysteries or missions, and more a shared history in the making.

STRENGTHS AND CHALLENGES

Campaigns offer some of the deepest experiences tabletop games can provide—but they also come with more demands on time, energy, and continuity. Understanding their benefits and limitations helps GMs and players decide when (and how) to commit.

STRENGTHS

Campaigns provide a storytelling depth that other formats can only hint at. They reward long-term investment by giving space for meaningful change—both in the characters and the world around them. With time, players begin to see their actions ripple outward, leaving permanent marks on the setting, shaping their own identities, and weaving a personal legacy through the fabric of the narrative.

- **Allows deep character growth and long-term goals** Players can explore arcs that unfold slowly—vengeance, redemption, obsession, or legacy—developing characters who evolve through relationships, failures, and victories.
- **Supports worldbuilding that evolves with the players** The world isn’t static. A campaign lets you build factions that change, cities that rise or fall, and NPCs who remember what the players have done.
- **Builds emotional investment through continuity and callbacks** Events from early sessions gain new meaning as stories develop. Returning threats, old allies, or unresolved choices create powerful emotional payoffs.

- **Facilitates complex mysteries, slow-burn plots, and faction politics** Campaigns allow for layered storytelling that doesn't need to resolve in a single night. Conspiracies, betrayals, hidden truths—these become richer when players have time to unearth them.

CHALLENGES

Of course, the very things that make campaigns rewarding also make them more demanding. They require coordination, consistency, and a willingness to adapt to a story that may span months or years. Without proper pacing and support tools, even the most promising campaign can lose momentum. Understanding these challenges early on helps you prepare for them—and design around them.

- **Requires consistent scheduling or active recap tools** Maintaining momentum demands regular sessions—or tools like journals, summaries, or shared calendars to keep the story coherent over gaps in play.
- **Players missing sessions can disrupt momentum** Absences have greater impact in campaigns. Important character moments or plot developments may leave absent players feeling lost or left behind.
- **Burnout or pacing fatigue over time** Without planning for arcs or tonal shifts, campaigns can stall. Players may lose sight of their goals or grow tired of slow-moving plots.
- **Needs more infrastructure for tracking advancement, consequences, and arcs** Unlike one-shots, campaigns require some method of tracking ongoing events—character growth, world changes, long-term NPC relationships, and unresolved threads.

Campaigns reward preparation and consistency—but they also benefit from flexibility, letting the players shape the world and story as they go. The best campaigns feel alive because they respond to player choices, not because every moment is pre-planned.

BUILDING A CAMPAIGN FRAMEWORK

A successful campaign begins not with an ending in mind, but with a compelling foundation. This foundation should offer just enough structure to support consistency while leaving room for organic player choices and unexpected developments. A good framework creates a world that responds, breathes, and evolves—driven by what the characters do, not just what the GM writes.

1. START WITH A PREMISE, NOT A PLOT

One of the most common pitfalls in campaign design is planning too much too early. Instead of outlining a

fixed storyline with predetermined outcomes, start with a compelling premise—an evocative situation, conflict, or question that the players can explore.

- **Premise Example:** “A team of magical troubleshooters repairs breaches between worlds as tensions rise between factions.” This raises immediate questions: Who controls the gates? What happens if the balance tips? Why these characters?
- **Premise Example:** “A dying city where time fractures nightly—only a few remember what changes.” This offers opportunities for memory-based mechanics, episodic mysteries within a larger arc, and character-driven exploration.
- **Avoid locking in outcomes.** Instead of deciding how the story ends, focus on what forces are in motion and how they might evolve depending on the players’ actions.

Let the campaign be a question that the characters help answer.

2. DEVELOP A LIVING WORLD

A strong campaign world isn’t just a stage—it’s a participant. It changes in response to the characters, remembers what they’ve done, and offers new stories as old ones resolve. It doesn’t have to be massive or overly detailed at first—just believable, reactive, and full of potential.

- **Track change.** Did the players dismantle a corrupt cult? That cult’s allies may now work in the shadows. Did a character burn a bridge with a powerful noble? That noble’s influence might now work against them.
- **Use faction clocks or evolving NPC agendas.** Let rival groups grow stronger or weaker over time, gaining new allies, switching tactics, or splintering.
- **Leave blank spaces.** Not every corner of the world needs to be mapped. Leave space for discovery—new locations, secrets, or even truths the GM didn’t know were there until the players asked the right questions.

Let the world be malleable. A setting that shifts with the players’ choices becomes far more immersive than one that simply waits for them to arrive.

3. CHARACTER EVOLUTION OVER TIME

Campaigns thrive when the characters change as much as the world. Whether mechanically, emotionally, or narratively, players should feel their actions have meaning and that their characters grow in response to what happens.

- **Reflect change in the fiction.** How do townsfolk treat the party now? Has a character gained a

- reputation—or notoriety? Do past choices close doors, or open new ones?
- **Support personal arcs.** Not every story needs to be epic. Let players pursue personal goals: reuniting with lost family, uncovering their past, or wrestling with inner flaws. Tie these arcs into larger stories when possible.
 - **Integrate growth into play.** As characters grow, let the types of stories shift. Early episodes might focus on small jobs or local politics; later ones might involve larger powers, responsibility, or world-changing decisions.

When characters evolve alongside the world, the campaign becomes a shared chronicle—one that neither GM nor players could have predicted alone.

STRUCTURING ARCS

Long-form stories benefit from structure—not to constrain player choice, but to create rhythm and momentum. While a campaign may evolve organically, having a sense of narrative architecture helps guide sessions toward satisfying payoffs and ensures that plotlines don't stall or sprawl out of control.

You don't need a full outline from session one. Instead, think in arcs: storylines that begin, build, and resolve across several sessions. A campaign may include one major arc or several interwoven ones. Below are three common structures you can adapt or combine, depending on your table's style.

THREE COMMON MODELS

- **Linear Arc:** A classic approach: the campaign follows a central story with a clear beginning, middle, and end. Players uncover a mystery, confront an emerging threat, or travel toward a climactic goal. Side stories may occur along the way, but all roads lead to a final confrontation or revelation. *Example:* A magical plague spreads through the land. The campaign follows the party's effort to trace its origin, stop its source, and choose what price they're willing to pay for the cure.
- **Branching Arc:** This approach offers key decision points that shape future sessions. Player choices matter not just in the moment but in how they affect the trajectory of the story. Alliances shift, locations change, and some content is locked or unlocked depending on the path taken. *Example:* The players must choose which faction to support during a political uprising. Their choice determines which cities they visit, who becomes an ally, and who becomes a recurring villain.
- **Nested Episodic:** Ideal for campaigns built from episodic sessions, this model introduces small, mostly self-contained stories that gradually reveal a deeper mystery or rising threat. Recurring motifs, hidden connections, and subtle consequences link

the episodes into a greater whole. *Example:* Each session involves investigating a strange phenomenon. Over time, clues point toward an ancient intelligence awakening beneath the city—and only those paying attention realise the danger before it's too late.

No single structure is “best”—each supports a different type of player engagement. Linear arcs work well when you want strong momentum and a shared goal. Branching arcs highlight agency and consequence. Nested episodic arcs reward curiosity, observation, and returning players.

You can even combine them: a campaign might begin as episodic, then shift into a branching arc as player choices uncover the deeper threat, and conclude with a climactic linear arc as the stakes become unavoidable.

MANAGING PACING

Good pacing doesn't just keep the story moving—it creates space for character development, surprise, and reflection. Campaigns often lose momentum not from lack of ideas, but from lack of contrast. Without shifts in tone and intensity, even the most engaging stories begin to feel repetitive.

- **Alternate between high-stakes and downtime sessions.** After a dramatic battle or major plot reveal, give players room to breathe. Let them revisit NPCs, repair gear, write letters, or pursue personal goals. Downtime doesn't mean nothing happens—it just means the pressure shifts from external to internal.
- **Use "arc breaks" (interludes, side-stories) to prevent burnout.** Between major arcs, consider a one-session side mission, a flashback episode, or a vignette focused on a single character. These breaks refresh creative energy and give you space to prepare for the next arc.
- **Reflect time skips or long journeys with montage scenes.** Don't feel pressured to play out every travel day or quiet week. Instead, use montage storytelling—brief scenes showing what each character does during the gap. This keeps the pace brisk while preserving narrative richness.

When you treat pacing like breathing—inhale, exhale, tension, release—you keep players engaged without exhausting them. The best campaigns don't just build up—they ebb and flow, guiding the group through moments of quiet, crisis, discovery, and consequence.

PLAYER ENGAGEMENT AND STORY OWNERSHIP

A successful campaign isn't just about a good story—it's about a story the players feel belongs to them. While the GM may provide structure, tone, and plot seeds, the players shape the emotional core of the campaign through their choices, relationships, and personal arcs. Giving them tools and space to participate in that creation helps ensure the story remains meaningful and collaborative.

SESSION ZEROS AND CHECK-INS

Before the first session, take time to align expectations. A "Session Zero" is a dedicated pre-game meeting where players build characters together, discuss tone and boundaries, and establish the campaign's foundational ideas. In long-form play, regular "check-ins" serve a similar function—helping ensure the story is still serving the group's needs and interests.

- **Align expectations for tone, themes, and character arcs.** Is this a gritty gothic tragedy or a pulpy adventure? Are players interested in moral ambiguity, political intrigue, or interpersonal drama? Clarify the emotional space the game will explore so everyone can build characters who belong in the same story.
- **Revisit goals regularly to keep the story meaningful to players.** As the campaign evolves, character priorities may shift. Take time between arcs to ask: what does your character want now?

Has their perspective changed? What kind of stories do you want to explore next?

These conversations don't need to be long or formal. A five-minute reflection at the end of a session can be enough to course-correct and deepen the group's sense of shared authorship.

IN-CHARACTER TOOLS

Once the campaign is in motion, offer ways for players to engage with the world beyond combat or investigation. These tools help develop emotional depth, reinforce continuity, and empower players to shape the narrative between sessions.

- **Character journals, private letters, or faction messages** Encourage players to write in-character notes, letters, or dispatches—especially during downtime. These can reveal inner conflicts, spark subplots, or feed new story hooks to the GM.
- **Flashback mechanics for revisiting past events** Allow players to introduce scenes from their character's past or reveal what they were doing "off-screen" during a previous session. Flashbacks can provide context, deepen motivations, or reframe existing events in a new light.
- **Interludes and spotlight scenes for emotional depth** Dedicate a short scene during or between sessions to focus on a single character's internal journey—confessionals, dreams, reunions, or moments of doubt. These interludes add weight to player choices and remind the group that their characters are more than just stats.

The more tools you offer for expression and reflection, the more invested your players become—not just in solving the mystery or winning the fight, but in inhabiting their characters and shaping the world around them.

ADVANCEMENT AND GROWTH

Although THE WYRD ENGINE is designed to work without traditional levelling systems, campaigns often benefit from some form of progression—both mechanical and narrative. Growth can come in many forms: new skills, evolving gear, stronger bonds, or a shifting sense of purpose. The goal is not power for its own sake, but meaningful change that reflects what the characters have endured and accomplished.

PROGRESSION OPTIONS

Because THE WYRD ENGINE is modular, you can introduce progression in ways that suit your setting and story. These changes might occur between arcs, during downtime, or after pivotal story events.

- **Optional trait swapping, skill upgrades, or gear evolution** After completing a major arc or

surviving a life-changing event, a character might improve a skill, refine a trait, or gain access to improved tools. Traits could be rewritten to reflect new beliefs, scars, or roles within the group.

- **Narrative advancement (new roles, titles, allegiances)** Characters might be promoted within a faction, become public figures, or inherit new responsibilities. A rogue might become a reluctant hero; a scholar might be named Warden of a hidden library. These narrative shifts offer rich new directions without altering stats.
- **Personal arcs influencing abilities or stunts** When a character completes a personal goal—reclaiming their honour, confronting their past, or embracing a hidden truth—they may unlock a unique ability or gain a once-per-session stunt that ties directly to their growth.

You don't need to implement progression on a fixed schedule. Let growth emerge from the fiction, tied to milestones the group recognises as meaningful.

MILESTONES AND BREAKPOINTS

In long campaigns, it helps to define natural “breakpoints” where change happens. These moments offer reflection and renewal—chances to evolve characters, shift the status quo, or recalibrate goals.

- **Define major arcs or story shifts with character changes** After the fall of a major villain or the discovery of a hidden truth, give players a chance to adjust their characters. These shifts may be mechanical or purely narrative, representing internal or external change.
- **Introduce “season breaks” or legacy mechanics if needed** For very long campaigns, consider dividing the game into seasons. Between seasons, you might time-skip, introduce new characters, or modify parts of the setting. Legacy-style elements—such as recurring villains, inherited gear, or consequences from past arcs—can link the old with the new.

Advancement in THE WYRD ENGINE should never feel mandatory—but when used sparingly and tied to real growth, it enhances the sense that this world, and these characters, are truly changing.

ENDING A CAMPAIGN GRACEFULLY

All stories end—even great ones. The best campaigns don't simply stop; they conclude. Whether it's the result of a planned finale or a need to step away, knowing how to end well can turn even a short-lived campaign into a story worth remembering.

KNOWING WHEN TO END

There's no shame in ending a campaign early. Whether the group has reached a natural stopping point or life simply pulls players in new directions, it's better to close the story with intention than to let it quietly drift away.

- **Wrap after a major arc or shared goal is complete** If the party defeats their main foe, uncovers the truth, or completes their central quest, celebrate the moment with a closing session—even if you originally intended more.
- **End early with an epilogue if momentum fades** If the group can no longer meet regularly or enthusiasm wanes, consider running a shorter final session. Use it to give each character a moment of closure, even if it's bittersweet.

Ending well respects the time and imagination everyone has brought to the table.

FINALES AND EPILOGUES

When the time comes to say goodbye, give the players a chance to shape their characters' final legacies. A strong finale doesn't need to tie up every thread—but it should honour the journey.

- **Use time skips to show the long-term impact of choices** Flash forward months or years. Did their choices change the city? Did they build something new, retire in peace, or vanish into legend?
- **Offer each player a “final scene” or closing moment** Let players narrate one last scene for their character—a farewell to an ally, a returned letter, a final confrontation, or a quiet reflection.
- **Consider legacy elements that shape future stories** If you ever return to the setting, let old events echo forward. A future party might find the monument built in their honour—or hear whispered rumours of the deeds they left unfinished.

The best campaigns linger long after the dice have been packed away. Give them an ending they—and you—will remember.

CONCLUSION

Campaigns offer unparalleled opportunities for deep characterisation, immersive worldbuilding, and thematic exploration. They invite players to invest in something bigger than a single night's adventure: a shared story that grows richer with every choice, every consequence, and every unexpected twist. While they require more structure and shared commitment than one-shots or episodic sessions, campaigns reward that investment with moments no other format can match—slow-burning revelations, earned triumphs, and emotional arcs that resonate long after the game ends.

A great campaign isn't just a story told by the GM—it's a world shaped by the table. With the right scaffolding—flexible pacing, evolving characters, responsive NPCs, and room for change—THE WYRD ENGINE campaigns become chronicles worth remembering.

Whether you plan a sweeping saga or simply let the threads unravel over time, trust your players, stay open to surprise, and follow the story wherever it leads. You may not know the ending when you begin—but that's what makes it magical.

INDEX

- 4dF, 5
- Active opposition, 13
- Adapting Skills, 27
- Adapting Stress, 27
- Adapting Traits, 27
- Balancing, 26
- Boosts, 14
- Character creation, 19
- Combat, 16, 29
- Attacking, 16
 - Defending, 16
 - Initiative, 16
- Combat actions, 16
- Conceding, 19
- Conflict resolution, 5
- Core Mechanics, 5
- Crafting One-Shots, 43
- Damage, 16
- Fatigue, 16
 - Stress, 16
 - Wounds, 16
- Difficulty levels, 12
- Episodic Settings, 61
- Fatigue, 16
- Fudge dice, 5
- Gear, 11
- Healing, 18
- homebrewing, 25
- Interpreting failure, 14
- Magic, 31
- Narrative Permission, 27
- Narrative skills, 27
- Non-Player Characters, 21
- NPCs, 21
- Dramatis Personae, 22
 - Mooks, 21
- Partial successes, 13
- Passive opposition, 12
- Races & Creatures, 39
- Recovery, 18
- Running Campaigns, 93
- Skill progress, 27
- Skills, 6, 27
- Adapting, 27
 - Narrative, 27
 - Prerequisites, 27
 - Progression, 27
- Spell skills, 35
- Stress, 16, 27
- Adapting, 27
 - Soaking up damage, 16
- The Grand Casebook, 67
- The Wyrd Engine, 1
- The Wyrd Toolbox, 25
- Tie, 5
- Ties, 13
- Traits, 9, 27
- Adapting, 27
- What Lingers, 47
- Wounds, 16