



The Wyrd Engine

A Universal Roleplaying System

This work is based on Fate Core System and Fate Accelerated Edition (found at <https://www.faterpg.com/>), products of Evil Hat Productions, LLC, developed, authored, and edited by Leonard Balsera, Brian Engard, Jeremy Keller, Ryan Macklin, Mike Olson, Clark Valentine, Amanda Valentine, Fred Hicks, and Rob Donoghue, and licensed for our use under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>).

Typeset using L^AT_EX and the `dndbook` class from <https://github.com/rpgtex/DND-5e-LaTeX-Template>

Released under the Creative Commons Attribution 3.0 Unported license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>).

CONTENTS

| | |
|---|-----------|
| CH. 1: THE WYRD ENGINE..... | 1 |
| Types of Play | 1 |
| Design Goals | 1 |
| What The Wyrd Engine Is Not..... | 2 |
| Influences | 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 | 31 |
| Adapting Stress | 34 |
| Advancement..... | 34 |
| CH. 4: COMBAT..... | 37 |
| Dealing damage | 37 |
| Recovery..... | 37 |
| CH. 5: MAGIC | 39 |
| Design Goals for Magic Systems | 39 |
| Building Magic with Core Mechanics..... | 40 |
| The Gift of Twilight | 41 |
| The Warden's Path | 42 |
| Codex Infinitum | 43 |
| The Known and the Named | 45 |
| CH. 6: RACES & CREATURES | 47 |
| Design Philosophy | 47 |
| Creating a Race | 47 |
| Creating a Creature | 48 |
| Increasing the Trait Budget..... | 49 |
| Example Races..... | 49 |
| Example Creatures | 51 |

PART 2: ONE-SHOTS

| | |
|---|-----------|
| CH. 7: CRAFTING ONE-SHOTS..... | 57 |
| What Makes One-Shots Unique | 57 |
| Strengths and Limitations | 57 |
| Designing for One-Shots | 58 |
| Tools for Success | 59 |
| Conclusion | 60 |
| CH. 8: WHAT LINGERS | 61 |
| Act I: Echoes Before the Silence | 63 |
| Act II: A Silence That Should Have Passed | 64 |
| Act III: What the Stone Remembers | 64 |
| Act IV: The Thing That Waits | 67 |
| Example Characters | 68 |

PART 3: EPISODIC PLAY

| | |
|---------------------------------------|-----------|
| CH. 9: EPISODIC SETTINGS | 75 |
| What Is Episodic Play?..... | 75 |
| Strengths and Challenges | 76 |
| Designing Your Episodic Setting | 76 |
| Episode Templates and Tools | 78 |
| Examples of Episodic Settings | 78 |
| Conclusion | 79 |

| | |
|---|-----------|
| CH. 10: THE GRAND CASEBOOK | 81 |
| Introduction | 81 |
| The World of the Grand Casebook | 81 |
| Playing in the Grand Casebook | 83 |
| Key NPCs..... | 86 |
| Example PCs | 89 |
| Case Files: The Scenarios..... | 95 |
| Murder at the Brass Orchid..... | 96 |
| The Clockmaker's Deception | 104 |
| The Silent Courier..... | 110 |

PART 4: CAMPAIGNS

| | |
|---|------------|
| CH. 11: RUNNING CAMPAIGNS | 115 |
| What Is a Campaign?..... | 115 |
| Strengths and Challenges | 115 |
| Building a Campaign Framework | 116 |
| Structuring Arcs | 117 |
| Player Engagement and Story Ownership | 118 |
| Advancement and Growth | 118 |
| Ending a Campaign Gracefully | 119 |
| Conclusion | 119 |

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 role-playing games. By reducing the 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.

CHARACTER PROGRESSION

While The Wyrd Engine is primarily designed for one-shots and episodic play, it does allow for character progression. Players can choose to develop their characters over multiple sessions, gaining new skills and traits as they progress. This is done through a flexible advancement system that rewards players for their choices and actions, allowing them to shape their characters' growth in meaningful ways. The advancement system is designed with narrative growth in mind, allowing characters to evolve in ways that reflect their experiences and choices rather than simply increasing numerical values. This approach encourages players to invest in their characters and the story, creating a more immersive experience.

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, The Wyrd Engine 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.

INFLUENCES

The Wyrd Engine draws inspiration from several well-regarded systems, most notably GURPS and Fate Core. While both offer robust and flexible mechanics, they can be overly complex for novice or casual players. The Wyrd Engine aims to capture their strengths while streamlining play for accessibility and narrative flow.

From GURPS, we adopt a point-based character creation system and a flexible skill structure. Traits in The Wyrd Engine correspond loosely to GURPS advantages and disadvantages but are presented in a simplified, narrative-friendly format. We deliberately avoid the dense specialisation trees and extensive option lists that can overwhelm new players.

From Fate Core, we embrace its narrative-first philosophy, particularly its emphasis on character-driven storytelling and broad, versatile skill definitions. However, we have chosen to omit the *Aspects* system. While Aspects are a powerful tool for experienced players, they often require a level of improvisation and narrative control that can prove daunting to newcomers. In practice, we found they slowed early engagement, despite their long-term potential for creative play.

Traits in The Wyrd Engine function much like Fate Stunts—granting narrative permission, mechanical bonuses, or rule-bending effects—but are structured to be more immediately usable and self-contained. Skills, meanwhile, follow a model similar to Fate's broad skill categories, allowing for versatility without excessive granularity.

If you're familiar with GURPS or Fate Core, many elements of The Wyrd Engine will feel intuitive. If not, we believe you'll still find it an approachable, flexible system designed to support both story and strategy without getting in the way of play.



PART 1

THE WYRD ENGINE MECHANICS

CHAPTER 2: CORE MECHANICS

he 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.

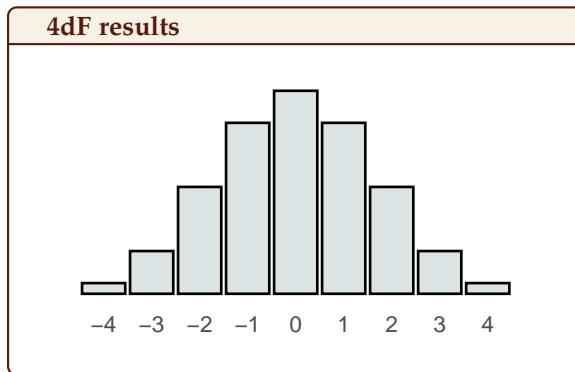
FUDGE DICE (4dF)

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:

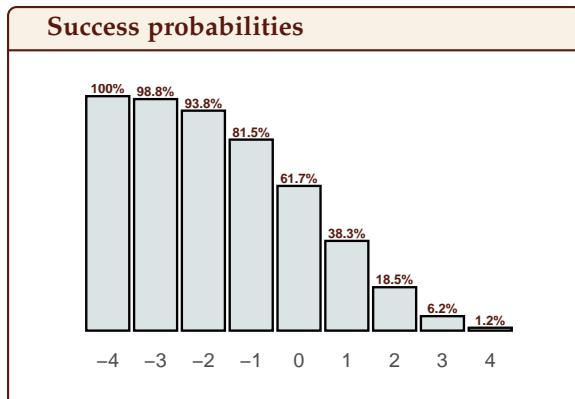
$$\begin{aligned} + + - 0 &= +1 + 1 - 1 + 0 = 1 \\ + - - 0 &= +1 + 0 - 1 + 0 = 0 \\ - - - 0 &= -1 - 1 - 1 + 0 = -3 \\ - + - 0 &= -1 + 1 - 1 - 1 = -2. \end{aligned}$$

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 **—****—****—****—**, and this outcome only happens one out of 81 rolls. To roll equal to +4 you *have* to roll **+****+****+****+**, 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.

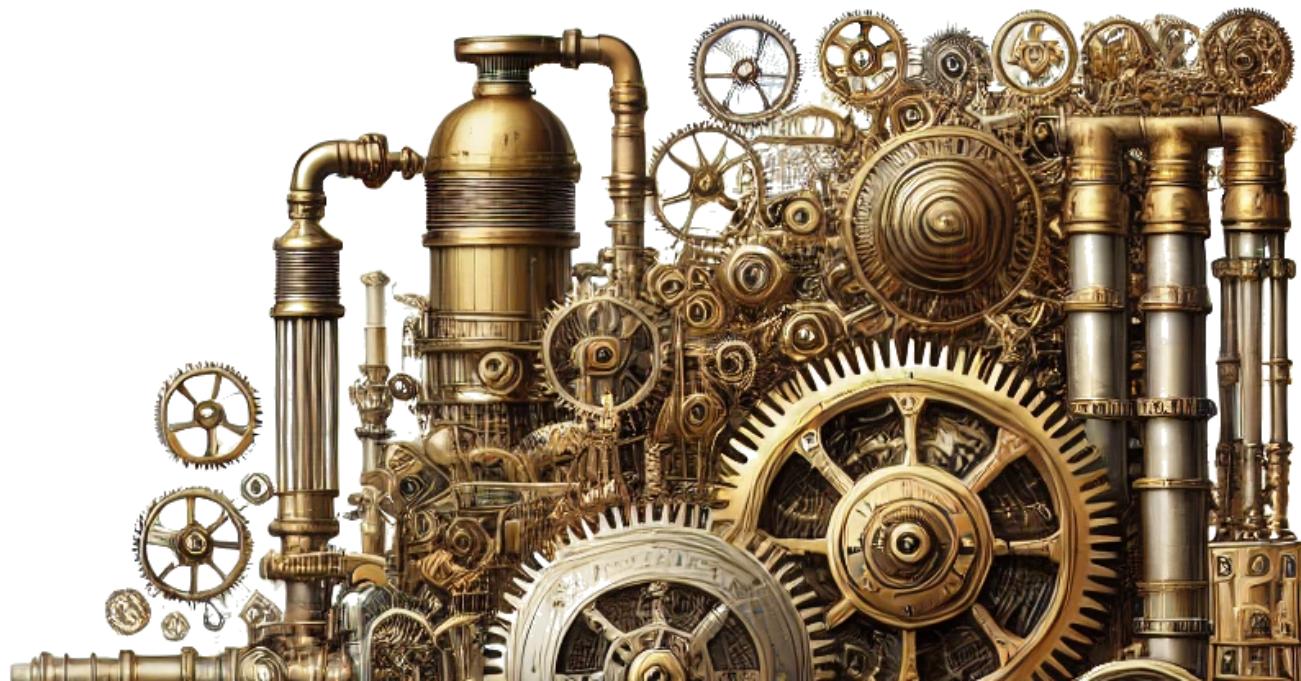
THE RIGHT LEVEL FOR SKILLS

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**)

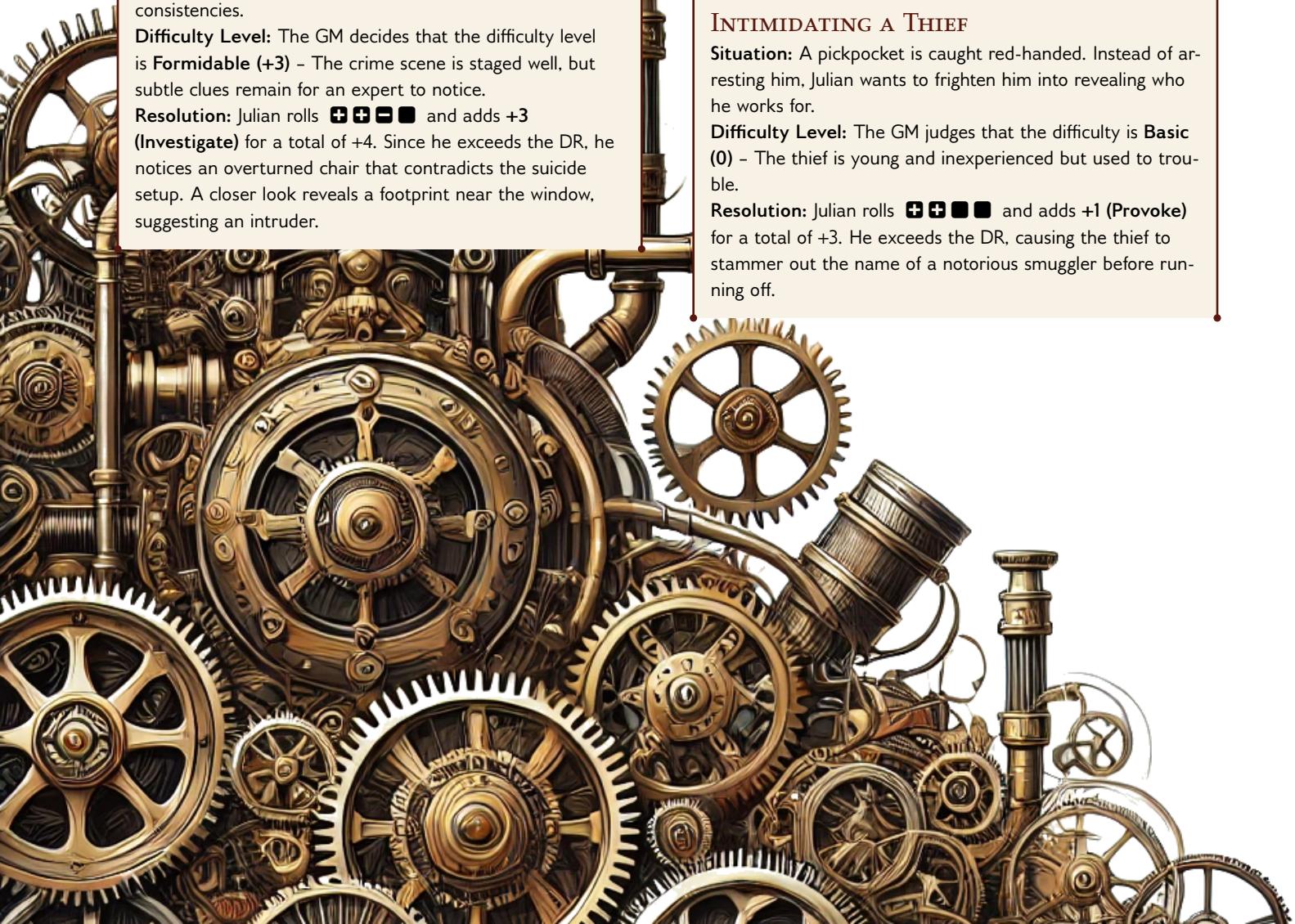
for a total of +0. A tie is a failure, or is it? If he changes his tactics or offers protection to try again, it might turn into a partial success.

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

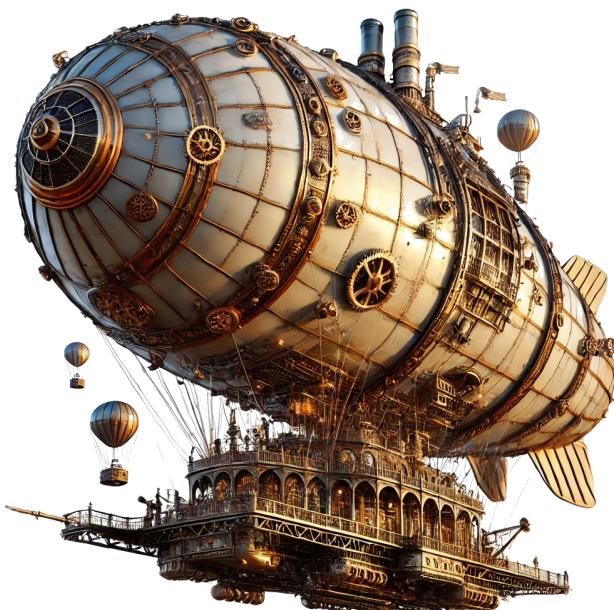
A brilliant but erratic inventor-for-hire, Felix Cavendish is both a mechanical genius and a walking disaster. His creations are revolutionary—when they don't explode. A rogue innovator who skirts the edges of legality, he thrives on the challenge of solving impossible problems with machines that push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

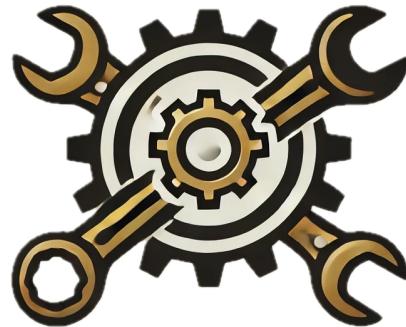
Gear should not be micromanaged but used to define a character's tools, specialities, and advantages. If an item logically fits a character's concept—such as a detective having a notebook or a thief carrying lock-picks—it's assumed to be available without taking up a slot. Only equipment that *enhances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

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.

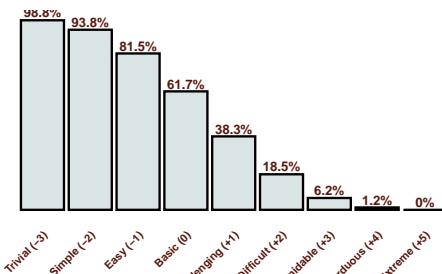
The GM determines the difficulty level based on two factors: how inherently challenging the task is and how critical it is to the game’s progression. A well-balanced difficulty keeps the players engaged—offering real challenges without creating dead ends. While setbacks can enrich the story, a GM should 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*, **OOOO**, 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: | OOOO |
| 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: | xxxx |
| 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: | xxxx |
| 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 deto-

nates. 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 **Athletics** 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 \heartsuit Athletics (-1), Awareness (-1) |
| Severe: | \heartsuit _____ |

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 monologuing 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:

1. **Mooks:** Nameless threats that exist to provide obstacles or increase tension.
2. **Dramatis Personae:** Named characters who have a role in the story but whose details may be fleshed out as needed.
3. **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: ❤️ _____

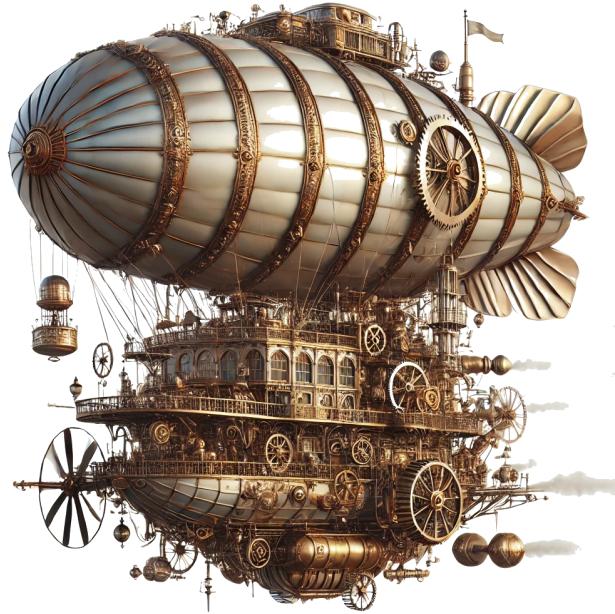
Living, Breathing Characters **serve as the driving force behind conflicts and challenges** in the campaign. They are **designed to be memorable** and should be treated as full characters in their own right.

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 31.

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 34.

BALANCING

Before diving into the techniques for adapting the core mechanics, it's worth reflecting on the role of **balance** in your game. Many traditional RPG systems place heavy emphasis on mechanical fairness—ensuring that all player characters are equally

powerful, or that monsters and challenges scale precisely to match the players. THE WYRD ENGINE takes a different path.

BALANCING PLAYER CHARACTERS

In many systems, strict mechanics—such as classes, levels, or point-buy systems—are used to maintain parity between characters. These frameworks aim to ensure that a wizard and a warrior of the same level contribute equally, especially in combat. Yet in practice, true balance is elusive. Some builds naturally excel in certain situations, while others may struggle.

THE WYRD ENGINE does not assume mechanical equality is either achievable or desirable. The goal is not for every character to be equally powerful on paper, but for every player to feel central to the unfolding story.

Balance in THE WYRD ENGINE is achieved at the **narrative level**, not the numerical one. What matters is that every character has meaningful moments to shine, and each player gets a fair share of the spotlight. A party consisting of a hulking ogre and three nimble goblins may seem wildly uneven in terms of raw power, yet be perfectly balanced in terms of narrative focus and player engagement. These contrasts often lead to the most compelling and memorable stories.

As a GM, your job isn't to enforce symmetry—it's to make sure every character matters. A physically weak scholar might be the only one able to decipher ancient runes. A combat-averse negotiator might defuse conflicts before they erupt. So long as each character is woven into the story and given space to act, you've achieved balance where it counts.

BALANCING ENCOUNTERS

Traditional RPGs often tie progression to a constant escalation of power—characters level up, enemies scale up, and encounters are carefully tuned to match. THE WYRD ENGINE doesn't require this kind of calibration. Characters may grow over time, but their growth is usually narrative or situational rather than exponential.

The system is intentionally scale-independent. Since skill modifiers are relative, any improvement can be reflected by adjusting the difficulty of tasks or the competence of opposition. A *+2 bonus* is a *+2 bonus*, whether it belongs to a player or a monster—the math stays the same, but the context defines the challenge.

There's no need for experience levels, hit dice, or challenge ratings. Just decide how hard an encounter should feel, then design your scene accordingly. The fiction comes first; the numbers support it.

BALANCING THE GAME

In the adaptations and rule variants throughout this chapter—and those that follow—you'll often see rec-

ommendations for assigning “points” to characters during creation. These are intended as flexible guidelines, not rigid frameworks. Using a consistent point budget can help players build characters with similar scope, but this should never be mistaken for true balance.

Equal point totals don’t guarantee equal narrative presence. What matters is that every character feels important to the story, is invited to act meaningfully, and receives time in the spotlight. A fragile but clever investigator may be just as vital as a hardened warrior, depending on the nature of the scene.

When designing your own content, aim for variety in the challenges you present. Let different moments favour different characters. That’s where real balance emerges—from story structure, not strict mechanics.

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.

Ultimately, balancing a game in THE WYRD ENGINE means trusting your players and embracing the strengths of the narrative. Don’t worry if some characters seem stronger or weaker on paper. Focus instead on crafting stories that offer a range of challenges, emotional beats, and spotlight moments. Let the fiction breathe, and let your players surprise you. That’s the kind of balance that lasts.

ADAPTING SKILLS

Skills are the backbone of most mechanical interactions in THE WYRD ENGINE, and adapting them is one of the most direct ways to tailor the system to your setting. The core rules offer a streamlined and versatile skill list, but you are encouraged to reshape it to fit the needs of your world. Whether you’re adjusting for a specific genre, introducing new types of conflict, or simply looking to give characters more specialised roles, modifying the skill system allows you to bring tone and theme to the forefront. In the sections that follow, we explore the different ways you can adapt the skill list—by changing its level of detail, adjusting how skills function, and incorporating setting-specific elements.

CUSTOM SKILL EFFECTS

Although most skills work the same way—rolling to overcome an obstacle or create an advantage—you can add unique effects or permissions for specific skills. For instance, a *Fear* skill might be usable as an attack in horror-themed games. A *Magic* skill might allow creating temporary advantages with elemental

force. A *Politics* skill might interact with faction reputation.

These additions can make your skill list feel more alive and setting-specific, especially when certain skills enable special actions others cannot perform.

SKILL-BASED WORLDBUILDING

If only characters with the *Occult* skill can perceive spirits, that says something about your world. If everyone has *Hacking*, it says something else. Use your skill list to show what’s normal—and what’s extraordinary.

When it comes to skills, also keep in mind that NPCs don’t always need to follow the same rules as player characters. In fact, giving NPCs unique abilities or expanded uses of existing skills can reinforce the tone of your setting and elevate the drama.

For example, in an Urban Fantasy game where the player characters are ordinary humans working for a secret government agency, you might restrict players from using magic. However, supernatural NPCs—such as the Fay—could wield a distinct **Magic** skill to bend reality, conjure illusions, or enchant the environment. This sharp contrast reminds players that they’re operating in a world full of forces they don’t fully understand or control.

Alternatively, you can give NPCs unique applications of skills the players do have. A Fay creature might use **Deception** not merely to lie, but to weave illusions or subtly reshape perception—while the same skill, when used by a player, is limited to mundane falsehoods. This approach lets you reinforce the supernatural as uncanny and dangerous, even when using familiar mechanics.

CULTURAL AND SETTING-SPECIFIC SKILLS

Some games thrive when skill lists reflect cultural knowledge, world assumptions, or unique technologies. For example, a post-apocalyptic setting might replace *Technology* with *Scavenging* or *Repurposing*. A faerie-tale world might include *Glamour*, *Wyrd*, or *Bargaining* as standalone skills.

These decisions bring flavour and cohesion to your skill list, but be mindful of how often a given skill will be useful. A skill that only applies once or twice in a campaign may be better represented as a Trait instead.

HYBRID AND CONDITIONAL SKILLS

Sometimes a skill might straddle two roles. A skill like *Survival* might be used for physical endurance, wilderness navigation, and resisting fear in certain settings. You can define conditional uses for skills that serve multiple narrative purposes—just be clear with your players about what each skill covers.

You can also let certain Traits expand how a skill functions. For instance, a Trait like *Soldier’s Discipline*

might let a player use *Will* to resist physical intimidation or pain, blurring the line between mental and physical endurance.

BUYING SKILLS

The first adjustment you can make is to the **skill budget**—the number of skill ranks available to characters during creation. The core rules assume that player characters have one +3 skill, two +2 skills, and three +1 skills. But instead of fixing the distribution of skills, you can fit the *skill budget*. The default skill lists gives a total of 10 points to distribute across the skill list. You can distribute those 10 points however you like, going for fewer high-level skills or more low-level skills.

The default budget is 10 points, which allows for a range of character builds and play styles. However, you can increase or decrease this number based on your game’s needs. In many of the adjustment ideas below, we’ll suggest a new budget that fits the changes you’re making.

LEVELS OF DETAIL

The more detailed your skill list, the more mechanical variety your characters can express—but this comes at the cost of speed and simplicity. A short, broad skill list is ideal for games that emphasise narrative flow and improvisation. A longer, more detailed list works better for tactical play, complex investigations, or games where niche expertise matters.

The level of detail you choose will influence character identity, spotlight moments, and the kinds of stories your game is best equipped to tell. A one-shot game about magical investigators might keep things simple with a single *Magic* skill, while a long-running campaign about academic wizards could break that down into *Rituals*, *Alchemy*, *Runes*, and *Summoning*.

QUICK TIP: CHOOSE YOUR SKILL SCOPE

- Use **broad skills** like *Combat*, *Technology*, or *Magic* for high-level, fast-paced games.
- Use **narrow skills** like *Blades*, *Firearms*, or *Arcane Lore* for games focused on detail, strategy, or realism.
- Blend both by starting with broad skills and expanding only the ones that matter to your setting or your players.

EXAMPLE: BROAD VS SPECIFIC SKILLS

The detail levels of skills can greatly affect how characters differentiate themselves. In a game with a broad skill list, characters may feel similar even if they have different backgrounds or personalities. This can lead to a lack of distinctiveness in character roles and abilities.

Consider two characters in a swashbuckling adventure game: **Captain Elise Vaunt** is a charismatic privateer and master duelist. **Professor Thaddeus Wren** is a scholarly gentleman with a dark past in the royal navy.

If your game uses a broad skill list, both characters might look quite similar:

Skills

| | |
|--------------|----------|
| Expert (+3) | Combat |
| Skilled (+2) | Persuade |
| Novice (+1) | Lore |

You would probably *play* the characters differently, but the *mechanics* would be almost identical. In any situation where one of the characters is likely to succeed or fail, the other is as well. They might have different backgrounds and personalities, but their skills are so broad that they can both do everything equally well. This can lead to a lack of distinctiveness in character roles and abilities.

But with a more granular skill list, their differences become much clearer:

Captain Elise Vaunt:

Skills

| | |
|--------------|------------|
| Expert (+3) | Swords |
| Skilled (+2) | Intimidate |
| Novice (+1) | Navigation |

Professor Thaddeus Wren:

Skills

| | |
|--------------|-----------|
| Expert (+3) | Pistols |
| Skilled (+2) | Etiquette |
| Novice (+1) | History |

Now, their roles in the story and in gameplay feel much more distinct. Elise dominates in close combat and commands the deck with fearsome presence. Thaddeus excels in duels at a distance and navigates social intrigue with ease. The characters feel more unique because the skills are more focused—and that clarity can help both players and GMs build scenes where each can shine.

ADJUSTING THE SKILL BUDGET

When you increase the granularity of your skill list, you should consider expanding the **skill budget**—that is, the number of skill ranks available to characters during creation. The more specific your skills become, the more ranks characters need to remain competent across the same range of activities.

For example, if a broad skill like *Combat* is split into *Swords*, *Pistols*, and *Unarmed*, a character who would have taken *Combat* at +3 might now need to spread their ranks across multiple areas to reflect the same breadth of capability. Without increasing the number of skill picks available, characters become artificially limited—not because of concept or balance, but because of mechanical compression.

The goal of increasing detail isn't to make characters weaker, but to make their abilities more specific. To maintain the same level of competence, you'll want to give players more points to distribute when using a longer or more detailed skill list. This ensures characters feel just as capable, while allowing their specialities and limitations to emerge more clearly in play.

As a rough guideline, you might increase the total number of ranks allowed by +2 to +4 when moving from a broad list of around 10 skills to a more detailed list of 15 to 20. You may also want to slightly raise the cap for individual skills (e.g., from +3 to +4) if you want players to be able to achieve strong specialisation without sacrificing versatility.

EXAMPLE: BROAD VS DETAILED SKILL BUDGETS

Let's compare how the same character concept can be expressed using different skill list granularities and budgets. We'll use the example of **Aria Flint**, an elite thief with a flair for infiltration and social deception.

Using a Broad Skill List (10 Points):

| Skills | |
|--------------|------------------------------|
| Expert (+3) | Stealth |
| Skilled (+2) | Deceive, Athletics, Burglary |
| Novice (+1) | Notice |

This version of Aria is quick, sneaky, and good at lying and lockpicking. With only five skill entries, she's mechanically lean and easy to play, but her abilities are fairly generalised.

Using a Detailed Skill List (20 Points):

| Skills | |
|--------------|--|
| Expert (+3) | Sneaking, Disguise |
| Skilled (+2) | Climbing, Lockpicking, Pickpocketing, Deception, Escape Artist, Urban Navigation |
| Novice (+1) | Observation, Balance |

With 20 points to distribute across a more granular list, Aria's skills now paint a much more specific picture. We learn that she's not just a burglar—she's a nimble climber, an expert in disguise, and an agile escape artist. This version allows for more detailed storytelling and spotlight moments, but would be unwieldy without the expanded skill budget.

DESIGN PRINCIPLE: EQUAL POWER, MORE DETAIL

The detailed version of Aria isn't more powerful—she's just more specific. Both builds cover the same narrative ground, but the granular list gives finer control over which exact abilities she excels in. To keep the experience fair and functional, the skill budget increases in proportion to the level of detail.

A word of caution if you take this route: the more skills you add, the more complex character creation becomes. Picking the default six skills out of a list of maybe 15 is a lot easier to do than picking 10 out of a list of 50. If you have a long list of skills, consider how many of them are likely to be used in play. If you are running a one-shot game, make sure that each skill is likely to come up at least once. If you are running a long-term campaign, consider how many skills are likely to be relevant to the characters' backgrounds and the story you want to tell.

DEFAULT SKILL LEVELS

In the standard **THE WYRD ENGINE** rules, characters are assumed to have a **default skill level of 0** in any skill they do not explicitly take. This makes sense when using a broad skill list—most characters can attempt common actions like running, persuading, or shooting without specialised training. A +0 represents baseline competence, where a character relies on raw talent or experience rather than honed expertise.

However, as your skill list becomes more detailed, this assumption may no longer hold. In a setting with specific and technical skills, certain tasks may reasonably require training just to attempt. For instance, it might be fair to assume that most characters can drive a ground vehicle (*Driving* at +0), but not everyone knows how to perform mid-flight repairs on a damaged starship (*Hyperdrive Repair* might default to -4, or even be unavailable without a relevant Trait).

You can adjust default values on a skill-by-skill basis. Ask yourself: could an untrained person even attempt this? If so, what's their chance of success? If not, consider requiring a Trait, narrative justification, or a different approach entirely. You might also group certain advanced skills under prerequisites or special permissions to make their rarity explicit.

GUIDING DEFAULTS

- **+0:** Common knowledge or intuitive actions (*Climb, Charm, First Aid*).
- **-2:** Specialist tasks with some public awareness (*Surgery, Codebreaking, Forgery*).
- **-4:** Highly technical or dangerous skills unlikely to be attempted without training (*Hyperdrive Repair, Necromancy, Nuclear Engineering*).
- **N/A:** Cannot be attempted at all without a specific Trait or background.

Customising default skill levels adds flavour and helps enforce genre expectations. In a gritty cyberpunk world, even a street-savvy hacker might have no idea how to pilot a corporate dropship. In a mythic fantasy setting, few outside the high temples would dare attempt divine rituals. Use defaults not to punish players, but to shape the world and encourage meaningful choices in character creation.

TIERED SKILLS & SKILL PROGRESSION

Some settings benefit from **tiered** skill structures, where broad foundational skills unlock or govern access to more specialised ones. This structure fosters a stronger sense of mastery, progression, and narrative depth—particularly in worlds shaped by formal education, martial training, arcane study, or professional disciplines.

For example, a game might include a general **Combat** skill, which branches into sub-skills such as **Melee**, **Ranged**, and **Unarmed**. Alternatively, an academic setting might use a broad **Lore** skill that leads into more focused areas such as **Occult**, **Alchemy**, or **History**. This layered approach encourages specialisation while preserving access to wider fields of knowledge or training.

Advanced skills should offer meaningful additions to their foundational counterparts—otherwise, they risk feeling redundant. This could be as simple as enabling a character to perform tasks beyond the scope of the basic skill: for instance, **Lore** might cover mundane knowledge, while only the more specialised **Occult** skill allows understanding of the supernatural.

Alternatively, advanced skills may be more powerful than their parent skills, but with a narrower focus. These specialised skills can provide a greater bonus to specific actions than the broader skill, though only under limited circumstances where their expertise applies.

For example, the general **Fight** skill might have specialisations such as **Bladework** for sword fighting and **Martial Arts** for unarmed combat. A character with **Fight +1** would gain a **+1** bonus to all close-combat actions, while someone with **Bladework +2** would gain a larger bonus—say, double its value—for sword fighting actions, for a total of **+4**. Similarly, **Martial Arts +2** would provide **+4** to unarmed combat actions.

You could also allow the base and advanced skills to stack. For instance, a character with **Fight +1** and **Bladework +2** might receive **+1** to all close-combat actions, but gain a total of **+5** when using a sword—combining the general bonus with the specialised one.

USING PREREQUISITES

Tiered skills can be structured so that a character must possess a prerequisite skill before taking the specialised version. For instance:

- To gain **Martial Arts**, the character must first have at least **+1** in **Unarmed**.
- To study **Forbidden Lore**, the character must already possess **Lore** at **+2** or higher.
- To take **Arcane Theory**, the character must have **Magic** and a related Trait (e.g., *Gifted* or *Apprentice of the Circle*).

This approach provides a natural sense of progression and helps reinforce the fiction—characters learn basics before advancing to deeper or more specialised knowledge. It also gives the GM tools to gate certain abilities, reserving them for more experienced characters.

SKILL CAPS

In addition to acting as a prerequisite, a parent skill can serve as a **cap** for related sub-skills. For example:

- A character cannot raise **Alchemy** higher than their rank in **Lore**.
- **Bladework** cannot exceed the character's **Combat** skill.

This maintains the hierarchy of skills and prevents characters from becoming disproportionately advanced in one area without first investing in the fundamentals.

MECHANICAL IMPLEMENTATION

To incorporate tiered skills in your game, follow these guidelines:

1. **Define Parent and Sub-Skills:** Clearly identify which skills require prerequisites and what their parent skills are.
2. **Set Prerequisite Thresholds:** Decide whether the parent skill is merely required (e.g., must be taken at any rank) or if a specific threshold is needed (e.g., **+2** or higher).
3. **Apply Caps as Needed:** If using skill caps, specify that the sub-skill cannot be rated higher than its parent.
4. **Track During Advancement:** When players advance their characters, ensure they meet all prerequisites before selecting new skills.

TIP: USE TIERED SKILLS TO TELL A STORY

Tiered skills are more than just a mechanical tool—they're a storytelling device. When a character advances from *Unarmed* to *Martial Arts*, that tells us something about their growth and training. When a scholar unlocks *Forbidden Lore*, it suggests a shift in worldview or a dangerous breakthrough. Use these moments as narrative milestones.

Tiered skills introduce additional complexity, so they should be used thoughtfully. They work best in settings where progression, discipline, or mastery are central themes. In one-shots or episodic games, the added complexity often outweighs the benefits of the extra nuance they provide. Not every game needs tiered skills—but when they suit the tone and setting, they can enrich both the mechanics and the narrative depth of your world.

That concludes our look at adapting the skill system. The core idea is this: use your skill list as a

lever to shape tone, pace, and complexity. Add detail where it matters to your setting; strip it back where speed and clarity are more important. The more intentional your choices, the more your skill list will reinforce your game's identity.

ADAPTING TRAITS

Traits are what make your character unique. They define your capabilities, limitations, and how you interact with the world. In *THE WYRD ENGINE*, traits are flexible narrative elements that reflect your identity, backstory, training, and personal style. More than just bonuses or modifiers, traits allow characters to break the normal rules of the setting, rewrite what is possible, and shape the story around their distinctive strengths—or weaknesses.

This section provides guidance on how to adapt traits to suit different genres, campaign styles, or tone, as well as how to design your own traits in a balanced and engaging way.

NARRATIVE PERMISSION

In *THE WYRD ENGINE*, traits usually just provide bonuses to skill rolls under specific circumstances, but they can also grant what is called **narrative permission**—the ability to do something within the fiction of the game without requiring further justification, rolls, or explanation. This means traits aren't just passive descriptors; they give characters concrete authority to act in certain ways that would otherwise require effort, planning, or approval.

For example:

- A character with the trait **Master of Disguise** can change their appearance convincingly without needing special equipment or extended preparation. Even if other characters would normally need a skill check to disguise themselves, this trait allows the user to do so automatically under reasonable conditions.
- A character with **Fearless** doesn't need to roll to resist fear, intimidation, or supernatural dread. They are simply unaffected—unless the source of fear is so extreme that it might overwhelm even this trait.
- A trait like **Royal Bloodline** might grant access to noble courts, feudal privileges, or ancient knowledge simply because the character is part of a recognised lineage.

Narrative permission encourages fast, fluid play by cutting out unnecessary rolls and debates. It also rewards players for creating characters that shape the fiction in interesting ways. If you can do it because of a trait, the world acknowledges it—even if there's no explicit mechanical bonus attached.

POSITIVE AND NEGATIVE TRAITS

Traits in *THE WYRD ENGINE* can be either **positive** or **negative**, also known as **advantages** and **disadvan-**

tages. Both types serve narrative and mechanical purposes, and both can enrich a character.

POSITIVE TRAITS

Positive traits are the traits from the core mechanics and reflect talents, privileges, or other favourable qualities. These traits can represent training, innate ability, access to resources, social standing, supernatural gifts, or other narrative advantages. Some examples include:

- **Uncanny Aim** – Your shots are unnaturally accurate; +2 to **Shoot** rolls if you take a turn to aim.
- **Well-Connected** – You have an extensive network of contacts and allies; +2 to **Contacts** when on your home turf.
- **Resilient Spirit** – You recover quickly from magical or emotional trauma; +2 to **Resist** rolls against supernatural effects.

NEGATIVE TRAITS

Negative traits reflect flaws, limitations, vulnerabilities, or narrative complications. They are not simply penalties; they are tools for drama and depth. These come in two forms, **narrative traits** and **penalty traits**. The former are traits that the GM can invoke to create complications during the game while the latter are the simple trait bonuses, just with negative bonuses.

Some examples include:

- **Short Fuse** – You lose your temper easily, often to your own detriment; **Narrative Trait**—the GM can insist that a player acts out this trait.
- **One Arm** – You've adapted well, but certain physical tasks are still challenging; -1 to **Athletics** and **Fight**.
- **Marked by the Enemy** – Your presence is easily detected by a specific group or entity; -2 to **Contacts** when the group is involved.

The simplest form of negative traits are the **penalty traits**, which simply impose a negative modifier to a specific skill or action. These are straightforward and easy to understand, but they can feel less engaging than narrative traits.

The more complex form of negative traits are the **narrative traits**, which are more flexible and can be used to create interesting complications. These traits can be invoked by the GM to create obstacles, but they also grant players opportunities to gain story spotlight, character development, or additional resources.

For novice players, penalty traits are often easier to grasp, as they are more straightforward and less abstract. However, narrative traits can be more rewarding for experienced players, as they allow for greater creativity and engagement with the story.

POINT BUDGETS AND TRAIT BALANCE

To balance traits during character creation, *THE WYRD ENGINE* uses a point-based trait budget. Players are

given a set number of points to spend on traits (by default three). Positive traits cost points, while negative traits can **refund** points, allowing players to afford more powerful abilities at the cost of drawbacks.

For example:

- A character might have 3 trait points by default.
- They take three positive traits that cost 1 points each, but wish to take a fourth trait as well.
- To afford the fourth trait, they take a negative trait worth -1 point, giving them 1 extra to spend.

The exact values can be customised by the GM depending on the campaign's tone. More grounded settings might limit characters to 2 or 3 points; more heroic or high-fantasy games might offer 5 or more.

TRAIT COST

The core rules give each player character three traits, corresponding to three trait points if each trait costs one point. However, the cost of traits can vary based on their power level, narrative significance, and the overall balance of the game. Here are some general guidelines for assigning point values to traits:

1-POINT TRAITS

These represent standard abilities, modest advantages, or situational narrative permissions. They may grant a small mechanical bonus (such as a +1 to a specific type of roll), allow a character to bypass a minor obstacle, or introduce useful resources or contacts.

- **Night Vision** – You can see clearly in low light without penalty. Ignore penalties for dim or moonlit conditions.
- **Quick Draw** – You may draw or switch weapons as a free action, even when surprised.
- **Wealthy** – You have access to significant personal funds. Once per session, you may declare you have just the right equipment, item, or bribe.
- **Former Soldier** – Gain +1 to **Tactics** or **Fight** when acting in structured combat or following chain of command.
- **Trained Tracker** – Gain +1 to **Survival** or **Notice** when following trails or identifying signs of movement.

2-POINT TRAITS

These traits are more powerful or versatile. They may combine a mechanical bonus with a broad narrative effect, significantly alter the rules for a particular type of action, or grant rare abilities. Traits at this level often define a character's archetype or signature role in the party.

- **Unstoppable** – Once per scene, you may ignore the effects of a **Wound** or a failed roll and continue acting as if you succeeded.
- **Arcane Initiate** – You may cast Rank 1 spells from a chosen magical discipline and sense nearby sources of arcane power.

- **Silver-Tongued** – Gain +2 to **Persuade** in social conflicts where charm or eloquence is relevant.
- **Combat Mastery** – Choose one weapon type. Gain +1 to **Fight** and treat all attacks with this weapon as one step harder to block or parry.
- **Psychic Sensitivity** – You can detect strong emotional states and mental influence. Gain +1 to **Empathy** when reading intent or mood.

3-POINT TRAITS

Reserved for potent abilities, unique narrative privileges, or traits that break core assumptions of the setting. These may represent supernatural powers, elite status, ancient artifacts, or other extraordinary capabilities. Most characters will not begin play with traits at this level unless the tone of the campaign allows it.

- **Immortal** – You cannot die from age or natural causes. You ignore the first deathblow once per session and return later, scarred but alive.
- **Chosen by the Fates** – Once per session, you may reroll any failed roll and treat a partial success as a full success.
- **Bound Djinn** – You possess a powerful spirit in servitude. Once per session, it can perform a miraculous feat (teleportation, destruction, protection).
- **Royal Mandate** – You are recognised as a true heir to a great throne. Gain +2 to **Command** when dealing with nobility or military forces, and demand safe passage through loyal lands.
- **Reality Bender** – Once per scene, you may alter a small piece of the world's logic—create a door where there was none, change gravity, or make an object vanish.

-1 OR -2 POINT TRAITS (DRAWBACKS/DISADVANTAGES)

Negative traits can be used to gain additional trait points during character creation. A -1 trait introduces a recurring complication, social disadvantage, or mild limitation. A -2 trait should be impactful, with mechanical or narrative consequences that frequently come into play. Negative traits are a great way to build flawed but compelling characters and can help reinforce the tone of darker or grittier settings.

- **Chronic Pain (-1)** – At the start of each session, roll a die. On a 1 or 2, you suffer -1 to all physical actions for the rest of the scene.
- **Wanted by the Law (-1)** – You are pursued by local authorities. The GM may introduce pursuit, arrest, or bounty complications at any time.
- **Bad Reputation (-1)** – You suffer -2 to **Charm** or **Rapport** when dealing with anyone aware of your past.
- **Cursed (-2)** – Once per session, the GM may declare a roll fails dramatically, regardless of the result, due to a malevolent supernatural force.

- **Magical Addiction** (-2) – You must use a magical effect or spell each session or suffer a -2 to all mental actions until you do.
- **Enemy Faction Surveillance** (-2) – A powerful group is always watching you. The GM may introduce spies, traps, or threats in any location you visit.

These examples are not exhaustive, and GMs are encouraged to create custom traits that suit the tone and style of their game. The key is to ensure that each trait is meaningful, impactful, and relevant to the character's identity and role in the story.

If you allow players to purchase negative traits, establish clear guidelines for how they are used. Negative traits should never render a character unplayable or be treated as a form of punishment. Instead, they should introduce compelling complications, moral dilemmas, or recurring challenges that enhance character development and storytelling.

It is also wise to place a cap on the number of negative traits a player can take. This prevents characters from becoming either too flawed or mechanically overloaded with too many bonuses. Negative traits should matter just as much as positive ones, and the GM should feel empowered to invoke them during play. However, if a character has too many, it becomes difficult to give each one the attention it deserves.

ADAPTING TRAITS TO THE SETTING

One of the greatest strengths of the trait system is its adaptability. Traits can be themed to suit the tone, genre, or even specific location of a game. Setting-specific traits can deepen immersion, reinforce tone, and give characters a unique connection to the world they inhabit. Consider the following examples:

- **Gritty Detective Story**

- **Streetwise** – Gain +1 to **Contacts** or **Deception** when navigating criminal circles or shady neighbourhoods.
- **Chronic Insomnia** – You are always alert, even when others sleep. Gain +1 to **Notice** during night scenes or stakeouts, but recover **Fatigue** one step more slowly.
- **Undercover Cop** – You may assume a criminal identity without suspicion. Once per session, you may declare a prior undercover relationship with an NPC.

- **Mythic Fantasy**

- **Dragon-Blooded** – You are resistant to fire and may breathe flame once per session as a magical attack (Rank 2).
- **Voice of the Gods** – Gain +2 to **Command** or **Persuade** when delivering divine proclamations or preaching in sacred places.
- **Cursed by Ice** – You are immune to cold and can freeze small amounts of water with a touch, but your presence chills the air and marks you as

unnatural.

- **Science Fiction**

- **Cybernetic Reflexes** – Gain +1 to **Initiative** and reduce the difficulty of reactions and evasive actions by 1.
- **Zero-G Training** – You do not suffer penalties for operating in low or zero gravity environments. Gain +1 to **Athletics** in microgravity.
- **Black Market Supplier** – You have access to rare or illegal goods. Once per session, declare that you "already have" a restricted item or contact for contraband.

The GM may also provide a curated list of setting-specific traits to guide character creation or spark inspiration. Players are always welcome to propose their own traits, provided they align with the tone of the game and offer meaningful opportunities for roleplay or mechanical impact.

MECHANICAL VS NARRATIVE TRAITS

Traits in **THE WYRD ENGINE** may offer mechanical benefits (e.g. bonus to rolls, rerolls, or new uses for skills), narrative permission (e.g. bypassing obstacles or gaining automatic success), or both. The most memorable traits usually have some narrative hook—even if their primary purpose is mechanical.

For example:

- **Mechanical Only: Combat Reflexes** – Gain +2 to your first initiative roll in a conflict.
- **Narrative Only: Member of the Silver Order** – You are a recognised member of a knightly brotherhood and can call on their aid or protection.
- **Hybrid: Veteran Duelist** – You gain +1 to attack rolls with swords and may demand formal duels in civilised lands.

When designing your own traits, try to include a narrative angle that makes the character more vivid, even if the mechanical effect is simple.

DESIGN GUIDELINES FOR CUSTOM TRAITS

If you're creating your own traits, either as a player or a GM—and we think you should—consider the following checklist:

- **Clarity:** Is the trait's benefit or drawback clearly defined?
- **Consistency:** Does it follow the tone and logic of the setting?
- **Impact:** Will the trait meaningfully affect play without dominating it?
- **Drama:** Does it lead to interesting choices, complications, or character moments?
- **Permission:** What does this trait allow the character to do in the fiction that others can't?

Traits are not meant to be exhaustive or exhaustive rules; they are shorthand for what makes your

character extraordinary. Think of them as storytelling fuel.

OPTIONAL: TRAIT RATINGS

In some campaigns, the GM may allow **rated traits**, where a trait can be taken at multiple levels (e.g., **Keen Eyesight +1, +2, or +3**). Each level increases the potency of the trait, either by improving mechanical bonuses, enhancing narrative scope, or granting additional uses. In the trait budget, the cost increases with the rating. This system introduces a more granular level of character progression and can support high-powered or mechanically detailed styles of play.

While trait ratings add complexity, they can be useful in campaigns where characters are expected to specialise deeply, develop signature abilities over time, or build toward legendary status. However, rated traits are generally not necessary for most games, and GMs are encouraged to use them only if they suit the tone and pacing of the campaign.

RATED TRAIT EXAMPLES

Here are some examples of traits that scale well with levels:

- **Keen Eyesight +1/+2/+3** – You gain a bonus to all visual perception checks:
 - **+1** to **Notice** when spotting hidden objects or distant movement.
 - **+2** allows you to see in poor lighting and automatically spot hidden enemies within medium range.
 - **+3** allows you to detect movement no one else can perceive, such as invisible figures or sniper reflections.
- **Arcane Affinity +1/+2/+3** – Your control over magic improves:
 - **+1** reduces the Fatigue cost of spells by 1 (minimum 1).
 - **+2** allows you to reroll one failed spellcasting attempt per session.
 - **+3** increases your effective spell rank by +1 for all purposes (e.g., overcoming resistances or effects).
- **Tough as Nails +1/+2/+3** – You can endure physical punishment that would stagger others:
 - **+1** grants +1 to resist Wounds from physical attacks.
 - **+2** allows you to ignore the effects of your first Mild Wound in each session.
 - **+3** treats all Wounds one step less severe (e.g., Moderate becomes Mild).

DESIGN GUIDELINES

When designing rated traits, keep the following in mind:

- **Scaling Should Be Linear or Thematic.** Avoid exponential power creep. Each level should be a meaningful but manageable improvement.

- **Cap Levels Appropriately.** Most rated traits should max out at +3. Traits beyond that may unbalance the game or blur the line between Traits and narrative powers.
- **Costs Should Rise Accordingly.** A simple cost structure is 1 point per level, but GMs may require higher costs at higher levels (e.g., +2 costs 3 points total, +3 costs 5).
- **Narrative and Mechanical Scaling.** Consider not only bonuses to rolls but increased narrative reach—more uses per session, greater influence, or wider applicability.

USE CASES

Rated traits work well in the following types of campaigns:

- **Long-form campaigns** with extended character advancement.
- **High-powered settings** where legendary figures, elite soldiers, or demigods walk the world.
- **Point-buy campaigns** where players want fine-tuned control over power scaling.
- **Settings with prestige paths, guild ranks, or magical mastery** that make progression feel earned.

In more narrative or rules-light campaigns, simpler traits with fixed effects are often sufficient. Use rated traits when you want mechanical depth, tactical variation, or rewarding progression that grows with the character's journey.

GAME MASTER TIP

Not all traits scale well. Only use rating levels for traits where each level clearly improves play in a consistent and balanced way. If you find players always taking a trait to maximum level, consider whether it's too efficient or under-costed.

Traits are the lens through which your character sees the world—and how the world responds in turn. Whether they define supernatural power, deep flaws, specialised training, or noble lineage, they shape every moment of play. Use them boldly and creatively to make characters that live, struggle, and shine.

ADAPTING STRESS ADVANCEMENT

Characters in THE WYRD ENGINE grow through experience, hardship, and meaningful change. Advancement is not simply a matter of accumulating power—it reflects how the events of the story have shaped your character, what they've learned, and how they've adapted. The following guidelines cover how skills, traits, and stress tracks can evolve over time.

ADVANCING SKILLS

Skills in THE WYRD ENGINE represent learned knowledge, training, or instinctive talent. Players may improve their skills at the end of significant narrative arcs or milestones, as determined by the GM. This could be after completing a major mission, surviving a personal trial, or resolving a long-running conflict.

When advancement is granted, the GM can award players a number of points to spend on skills. The number of points should be small—typically 1-3 points per session or milestone. Players can use these points to advance existing skills or acquire new ones.

INCREASING A SKILL LEVEL

After a harrowing escape from a collapsing mine, a character might gain a point in **Athletics** for their quick thinking and agility.

ACQUIRING A NEW SKILL

Alternatively, a character who has spent time in a library might gain a point in **Research** for their newfound knowledge.

The GM may also allow players to trade points between skills, reflecting a character's shifting focus or priorities.

SWAPPING POINTS

After months surviving in the wilds, a former diplomat might trade a point in **Persuade** for a new point in **Survival**, reflecting hard-earned experience.

ADVANCING TRAITS

Unlike skills, traits often represent defining aspects of a character—magical ancestry, personal connections, lifelong habits, or supernatural curses. As such, trait advancement should be more deliberate and narratively justified.

To gain a new trait, a character must reach a significant milestone and demonstrate that the trait has emerged organically from the story. The GM may require:

- A key event or transformation (e.g., surviving a divine trial, forging a bond with a dragon).
- The completion of a quest or ritual (e.g., reclaiming a family heirloom, overcoming a long-standing flaw).
- A narrative arc of personal change (e.g., finally facing a fear, accepting one's destiny).

Likewise, traits may evolve. A minor trait might be upgraded to a more potent version, or one trait may be replaced by another that better reflects a new identity.

UPGRADING A TRAIT

Example: A character with the trait **Touched by Fire** might upgrade it to **Flamebound Champion** after willingly entering a volcano to awaken a sleeping spirit.

Advancement through negative traits is also possible. A character may overcome or alter a flaw through meaningful growth—but doing so should cost something. Removing a drawback may require giving up a bonus, completing a personal trial, or replacing it with a new trait that reflects the internal conflict resolved.

ADVANCING STRESS TRACKS

Stress represents a character's ability to withstand physical harm (**Wounds**) and emotional or narrative pressure (**Fatigue**). It is a measure of their resilience in the face of adversity—not just toughness, but endurance of the spirit.

Increasing a stress track should be rare and meaningful. It should only occur:

- After a major personal transformation (e.g., spiritual awakening, rigorous training, surviving a near-death event).
- Through a specific trait that explicitly increases a stress track (e.g., **Hardened Veteran** might grant an additional Moderate Wound).
- As part of a campaign milestone that raises the overall danger level, and even then, sparingly.

Avoid turning stress into an arms race. If both players and adversaries continually increase their stress tracks, conflict becomes longer but not more dramatic. Instead, use stress advancement as a way to reinforce character arcs and turning points.

INCREASING A STRESS TRACK

After enduring great emotional loss and confronting their past, a character gains a permanent +1 to **Fatigue**, symbolising a newfound inner strength.

FINAL THOUGHTS ON ADVANCEMENT

Advancement in THE WYRD ENGINE should be character-driven, not mechanical. It is not about levelling up, but about evolving with the story. Encourage players to tie growth to their characters' personal arcs—what they've suffered, what they've gained, and what they've become.

The GM should treat advancement as an opportunity to highlight change, celebrate character moments, and deepen the connection between mechanics and narrative.

A NOTE TO GMs: MEANINGFUL ADVANCEMENT

Advancement is not just about numbers; it's about the story. Encourage players to think about how their characters have changed, what they've learned, and how they've grown. This will make the game more engaging and meaningful for everyone involved.

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

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 **6**, 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

Wardens 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.

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
- *Framework* — 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 **No-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

RACES are a staple of fantasy roleplaying games but also frequently used in science fiction settings such as space operas. From noble elves and hulking orcs to insectoid aliens and sentient machines, the inclusion of unique peoples and beings brings depth, diversity, and wonder to a game world. They shape culture, mythology, and conflict—and offer players a means of exploring identities that challenge or reflect their own.

In THE WYRD ENGINE, the terms **race** and **creature** are not rigid mechanical categories. Rather, they reflect a narrative function: **races** are player character origins—backgrounds that offer depth and thematic flavour—while **creatures** typically refer to non-player entities, ranging from allies and fauna to threats and mysteries. Mechanically, they follow the same rules: a small number of Traits that define what makes them unique, and a clear role in the fiction.

This flexible approach encourages creative world-building while avoiding reductive or deterministic interpretations of culture or biology. Whether you’re designing a lineage, a species, or a strange spirit with no defined form, this chapter provides tools to breathe life into them through narrative concept and evocative Traits.

Above all, the goal is to create beings—human or otherwise—that feel grounded in your world, fit the tone of your game, and invite rich storytelling.

DESIGN PHILOSOPHY

Designing races and creatures begins with purpose and theme. What role does this being serve in your setting? Is it a cultural anchor, a living enigma, a mirror to humanity, or a monster lurking in the mist? In THE WYRD ENGINE, Traits do most of the mechanical lifting, allowing your creative focus to rest on ideas, imagery, and narrative significance. Traits should express **story**, not simulate biology.

In practice, designing a race or creature often means identifying a small set of Traits that capture its essence. While Traits normally highlight what makes a particular *character* distinct from others, racial or creature Traits define what makes one *type of being* distinct—while creating a thematic throughline among its members.

Avoid over-defining what a race or creature can or cannot do. Let individuals vary. Not every member of a species will share the same talents, values, or fate. A race or creature should suggest **possibilities**—not impose limitations. Think in terms of archetypes, myths, and cultural patterns rather than hard rules or fixed biology.

In this system, **races** represent origins for player characters. They are defined not by rigid stat blocks, but by narrative elements—culture, appearance, beliefs—and a small number of iconic Traits. A race might be shaped by the myths it tells, the lands it inhabits, or the legacy it bears.

Creatures, by contrast, are typically non-player entities: animals, spirits, constructs, ghosts, monsters, and everything in between. Mechanically, creatures are treated the same as NPCs in THE WYRD ENGINE—defined by their Traits, which convey their essence and narrative role. A creature might serve as an ally, a threat, or simply part of the world’s texture. Some are simple and bestial; others possess intelligence, goals, and depth.

Traditional RPGs often use stat blocks for monsters, and THE WYRD ENGINE’s approach to mook NPCs serves a similar purpose. However, creatures in this system can also be fully realised characters. The term *creature*, in context, usually refers to a more generic or simplified NPC—often one intended for brief encounters or symbolic roles.

The boundary between races, creatures, and NPCs is intentionally soft. A playable character could originate from a so-called creature species, and a race could easily serve as the foundation for a major antagonist. What matters most is not the label, but the story you wish to tell.

CREATING A RACE

The process of creating a race in THE WYRD ENGINE begins with narrative intention. Before touching the mechanics, take a moment to consider what makes this being interesting, memorable, and meaningful within your setting. Is it a remnant of a fallen empire? A species adapted to live in a world of perpetual twilight? A being birthed from the dreams of dying gods? The more clearly you define its purpose in the story, the more confidently you can give it shape at the table.

This narrative-first approach emphasises theme, role, and flavour. Rather than constructing beings from a checklist of biological traits, you focus on what the race or creature represents, how it interacts with the world, and what kind of stories it invites. Your design might evoke mystery, tragedy, nobility, horror, whimsy—or some blend of many tones.

Once the concept is clear, you can translate it into mechanics using the core building blocks of the system: Traits. Each Trait should express a core truth about the being—not just how it functions, but how it feels. Mechanical power is secondary to narrative

clarity and flavour. You can always adjust balance later, but evocative design will inspire deeper stories.

The following steps offer a reliable structure for designing races and creatures, suitable for both player character origins and non-player encounters:

- **Name and Concept:** Start with a vivid phrase that captures the essence of the being. This could describe its nature, origin, or purpose. For example: “Twilight-born nomads of the salt dunes,” “Bone-dancers from the grave-cities,” or “Winged sentinels shaped by the storm.” Keep it short but rich in imagery.
- **Core Traits:** Select 1–3 Traits that define what makes the race or creature unique. Traits should be evocative, flexible, and suggest multiple uses. For example, *Sings to Forgotten Stones* might imply a magical affinity for ancient places, communication with spirits, or unlocking sealed doors. Traits should do narrative work while offering mechanical hooks.
- **Optional Abilities or Rules:** If the being has a special feature not easily captured by a Trait, you may add a simple rule or suggested Skill bonus. These should be kept minimal—only use them when they clarify something essential. For example, “Characters from this race gain +1 to **Lore** when navigating ruins” is fine, but avoid creating full subsystems. Traits should remain the primary expression of the being.
- **Narrative Hooks:** Consider how this race or creature fits into your setting and your stories. Are they widely known or hidden from the world? What relationships do they have with other groups or places? Provide a few examples of how the being might appear in play—as a guide, an antagonist, a mysterious traveller, or even a rumour. These hooks ground your design in actual gameplay.

When designing races, it is standard practice to use the default stress values from the core rules, ensuring that all player characters—regardless of race—can withstand a similar amount of damage. This maintains mechanical balance and simplifies character creation. However, if a particular race has a strong narrative justification for being more fragile or more durable (such as ethereal spirits or stone-skinned giants), you may choose to adjust their stress boxes accordingly.

In the examples at the end of this chapter, we have not provided stress values for races—unlike creatures—because we assume that all player characters begin with the same baseline stress unless the group agrees to a specific exception.

Races designed for player use may also benefit from cultural flavour: shared beliefs, naming conventions, rituals, or outlooks that enrich roleplaying. Creatures, especially those used as threats or wonders, should have strong visual or behavioural cues—things that players can latch onto quickly and

remember later.

Ultimately, the best race and creature designs blend strong narrative identity with concise, expressive mechanics. Let story lead, and the rest will follow.

CREATING A CREATURE

Creatures in THE WYRD ENGINE are typically non-player beings that populate the world, provide challenges, or add colour to a scene. Unlike races, which serve as origins for player characters, creatures are often designed for limited appearances—whether as mysterious threats, symbolic figures, or flavourful encounters. As such, they are usually simpler in mechanical scope, but just as important in terms of narrative presence.

Creatures that you only intent to use once or twice are better modelled by making a non-player character. The mechanics are the same, after all. But if you wish to populate your world with strange beings your players will run into repeatedly, then you should consider creating a creature. Think of creatures as templates for non-player beings the same way as races are templates for player characters.

A creature might be a lurking horror in an abandoned chapel, a loyal beast bonded to a lost civilisation, or a malfunctioning automaton repeating an ancient command. These beings shape mood and tone, push characters into action, or represent larger themes in the story. A creature doesn’t need a complete backstory—but it should always spark curiosity, tension, or wonder.

Mechanically, creatures are usually built with 1–3 Traits. These Traits represent the creature’s instincts, powers, or strange behaviours, rather than skills or complex rules. The Traits should offer cues for how the creature acts, what it wants, and how players might overcome, avoid, or understand it. When used in combat, most creatures function as mooks—defeated with a single solid hit—but they can still leave a strong impression.

The following process can help you create compelling creatures quickly and effectively:

- **Name and Role:** Describe what the creature is and why it exists in the scene. This could be literal (“Ash-Wolf of the Charred Hills”) or thematic (“Warden of Broken Promises”). Its name alone should raise questions or evoke imagery.
- **Traits:** Choose 1–3 Traits that define the creature’s nature and behaviour. These Traits should not just describe its abilities but imply how it moves, thinks, or feels. For example, *Hungers for Forgotten Names* implies more than just appetite—it suggests a metaphysical hunger and a means of interacting with the world.
- **Motive and Instinct:** What drives the creature? Is it territorial, curious, bound by duty, or simply lashing out in pain? Most creatures act on instinct

rather than dialogue. Defining their behaviour pattern helps the GM improvise in play.

- **Weaknesses and Vulnerabilities:** Optional, but useful. These could be narrative vulnerabilities (“flees from firelight”) or mechanical (“can only be harmed by silver or sound”). These limitations make encounters more dynamic and encourage creative problem-solving.
- **Encounter Use:** How is this creature likely to appear in play? As a sudden ambush, a guardian of a location, or a strange companion that follows the group? Is it a one-time horror, or part of a recurring motif? This anchors the creature in the story’s structure.

Creatures are most effective when they leave an impression—through an eerie sound, a haunting silhouette, or an incomprehensible gesture. They don’t need elaborate stats to be memorable. If you can describe them in a single sentence that sticks in a player’s mind, you’ve done your job well.

Finally, remember that not all creatures need to be threats. Some may evoke pity, wonder, or even amusement. Let your setting’s tone guide how weird, whimsical, or terrifying your creations should be.

INCREASING THE TRAIT BUDGET

In the core rules of **THE WYRD ENGINE**, each character begins with 3 Traits. This default is ideal for one-shot adventures, quick character creation, and situations where all player characters share a similar background or origin. With only a few Traits, players can focus on strong, flavourful choices without being overwhelmed, and GMs can quickly assess the unique abilities present at the table.

However, in settings where multiple distinct races exist—and especially when those races are mechanically represented through pre-defined Traits—this default Trait budget may feel limiting. If a race comes with 1–3 fixed Traits, players have fewer opportunities to customise their characters and express individuality through their Trait selections. In effect, character uniqueness is sacrificed to emphasise race uniqueness.

To balance this trade-off, you can increase the Trait budget to 4 or even 5 Traits per character. This allows players to retain meaningful personal expression, even when some Traits are pre-assigned by race. For example, if a character’s race provides 2 Traits by default, the player might still choose 2 or 3 Traits freely, depending on the total Trait budget used. This maintains both narrative flavour and mechanical flexibility.

Importantly, this expanded budget works best in campaigns where players are already familiar with the setting. When players understand the role and themes of each race, pre-defined Traits become use-

ful shorthand rather than a source of cognitive overload. Picking up a new character—especially in drop-in/drop-out play—becomes easier when some of their Traits are baked into the race concept.

GENERALIST RACES

Some races, such as humans in many settings, are designed as **generalists**. Rather than providing fixed Traits, they offer flexibility—often allowing players to choose all their Traits freely or select from a broader list. This design reinforces the narrative idea that such races are adaptable, diverse, or unbound by tradition. It also gives players more room to create distinctive concepts within the same racial group.

In contrast, **specialist** races may define 2–3 Traits from the outset, leaving little or no room for individual choice. These races typically embody a strong thematic identity or cultural cohesion. For instance, a race of obsidian-skinned subterranean sages might always include *Eyes That Pierce the Dark* and *Stonebound Memory* as part of their mechanical definition.

Both approaches are valid, and the choice depends on your setting’s themes. Generalist races provide freedom and narrative flexibility; specialist races reinforce a shared cultural or mythic image. Increasing the Trait budget allows you to support both approaches without compromising player creativity.

Ultimately, the goal is to ensure that race enhances a character’s story, rather than restricting it. Adjust the Trait budget to reflect the needs of your group, your setting, and the tone of the game you want to create.

EXAMPLE RACES

The following examples illustrate how to create races using the narrative-first approach outlined earlier. Each one includes a core concept, signature Traits, and narrative hooks that can be adapted to your setting. These races may be used as-is, modified to suit your world, or simply serve as inspiration for designing your own.

ELVES – THE TWILIGHT-BORN

Ancient, elegant, and bound to fading realms, Elves are the children of twilight and memory. They dwell in the borderlands of the world—deep forests, forgotten ruins, and moonlit vales where the veil between past and present grows thin. Once proud stewards of great empires, many now live as wanderers, artists, or quiet observers, their longevity burdened with loss.

Elves are not simply long-lived humans with pointy ears. They experience time differently, speak in metaphors, and carry fragments of forgotten songs in their blood. Their connection to the natural and arcane makes them seem strange or aloof to other races, but to an Elf, the world is a layered tapestry of echoes, omens, and beauty just out of reach.

NAME AND CONCEPT

Twilight-born stewards of the old world, caught between remembrance and renewal.

CORE TRAITS

- **Grace of the Twilight Realms** — You gain a +2 bonus to **Stealth** when moving through dim light, forests, ruins, or other liminal spaces.
- **Whispers of the Forgotten** — You may use **Empathy** instead of **Lore** when sensing the emotional imprint left behind in old places or ancient artifacts.

OPTIONAL RULES:

Elves may add +1 to **Lore** when dealing with ancient places, lost civilizations, or matters of fate and prophecy.

NARRATIVE HOOKS:

- A lone Elf musician plays a song only the forest remembers—and something stirs in response.
- An ancient Elf scholar offers to help the players unlock a sealed tomb but demands a memory in return.
- An Elf knight, exiled for breaking tradition, seeks redemption among mortals—but cannot shake the past.

DWARVES – THE STONE-KIN

Stalwart and enduring, Dwarves are the children of stone and fire, shaped by the pressure of deep places and the weight of tradition. They build cities beneath mountains, carve stories into granite, and measure time not in seasons, but in generations. Their craftsmanship is legendary, and their sense of duty runs as deep as the mines they dig.

Dwarves are not just short, bearded miners. They are living echoes of the earth—resilient, methodical, and bound by oaths older than empires. To a Dwarf, identity is forged, not born. Every tool, every wall, every word carries weight. Outsiders may see them as gruff or stubborn, but beneath their stoicism lies a fierce loyalty to kin, craft, and clan.

NAME AND CONCEPT

Stone-forged traditionalists who shape the world as much as they are shaped by it.

CORE TRAITS

- **Stoneblood Resilience** — You gain a +2 bonus to **Physique** when resisting fatigue, poison, or environmental hazards such as cold, heat, or suffocating air.
- **Built to Endure** — You may use **Craft** instead of **Athletics** when overcoming physical challenges involving endurance, weight, or structure (such as lifting gates, reinforcing walls, or enduring collapses).

OPTIONAL RULES:

Dwarves gain +1 to **Craft** when working with stone, metal, or underground structures.

NARRATIVE HOOKS:

- A Dwarf mason seeks to finish a stone bridge his ancestors abandoned generations ago—despite warnings that the mountain is cursed.
- A Dwarf exile wanders the surface world, carrying a hammer with a broken handle and a shame no one will speak of.
- A Dwarf ambassador offers aid in return for a favour: recovering a sacred relic buried beneath enemy territory.

VIRELIANS – THE SHARD-MINDS

The Virelians are crystalline beings born from the shifting mineral storms of the rogue planet Virex. They possess no flesh or blood, but instead grow luminous lattice-structures over time, each node of their body acting as both storage and processor. Thought, memory, and even personality can be transferred between cores, allowing Virelians to transcend death—though not always without cost.

To outsiders, they seem cold and inhuman, speaking in harmonic vibrations and measuring morality in patterns of efficiency. Yet among themselves, the Virelians are contemplative, communal, and devoted to what they call the “Chorus of Data”—a collective memory that binds their culture across time and space.

NAME AND CONCEPT

Crystalline minds evolved for data preservation and long-form logic, shaped by deep time and cold stars.

CORE TRAITS

- **Cognitive Node Matrix** — You may use **Craft** instead of **Lore** when analysing systems, deciphering alien tech, or interacting with information-based environments.
- **Resonant Frame** — You gain a +2 bonus to **Will** when resisting mental intrusion, emotional manipulation, or attempts to deceive you through social means.

OPTIONAL RULES:

Virelians do not require air or food, but are vulnerable to sonic disruption effects (at GM discretion).

NARRATIVE HOOKS:

- A damaged Virelian arrives on a frontier station, its memory lattice corrupted—and its mission unclear.
- A Virelian archivist offers access to forgotten data in exchange for help recovering a missing shard of itself.
- A rogue Virelian begins replicating itself illegally, fracturing its identity—and the Chorus—in the process.

ZERATHI – THE STARBORN ARISTOCRACY

The Zerathi are a proud and radiant species who claim descent from the first sentient beings to walk among the stars. Towering, luminous, and draped in gravitic robes and radiant metals, they consider themselves the rightful stewards of galactic destiny. Their homeworld, Zerath Prime, is a crystalline megastructure orbiting a binary sun—and serves as both temple and throne.

Zerathi culture blends mysticism and monarchy, science and prophecy. They speak in grand proclamations, wage philosophical duels, and often look down on "less awakened" species with a mix of pity and disdain. Yet some among them have broken from tradition—wandering the stars as exiles, prophets, or agents of change.

NAME AND CONCEPT

Luminous, telepathic philosopher-nobles who see themselves as the rightful rulers of the cosmos.

CORE TRAITS

- **Voice of the Cosmic Mandate** — Gain a +2 bonus to **Provoke** when delivering commands, ultimatums, or declarations of ideological superiority.
- **Born of Solar Light** — You may use **Will** instead of **Physique** to resist heat, radiation, or exhaustion in high-energy environments.

OPTIONAL RULES:

Zerathi may add +1 to **Lore** when dealing with ancient galactic histories, cosmic mysteries, or alien philosophies.

NARRATIVE HOOKS:

- A Zerathi emissary demands the players surrender an artefact deemed too dangerous for "lesser minds."
- An exiled Zerathi prince seeks allies in a desperate bid to halt a corrupt royal prophecy.
- A Zerathi relic awakens in the hands of a player—suggesting forgotten ancestry or cosmic favour.

EXAMPLE CREATURES

The following creatures showcase how to design non-player entities using Traits and stress values to create distinct behaviours and challenges. Unlike races, creatures are often designed for specific narrative roles—threats to be overcome, enigmas to be unravelled, or denizens that deepen the world's texture. Some are simple and expendable; others might reappear across multiple encounters.

Each example includes a core concept, defining Traits (both strengths and flaws), stress and consequence boxes, and guidance on how to use the creature in play. These entries are intended to be modu-

lar—feel free to adapt them to your own setting or use them as templates for building new beings.

GOBLINS—SCAVENGERS OF THE CRACKS

Goblins lurk on the fringes of society and civilization—dwelling in sewer tunnels, forgotten stations, shattered ruins, and hollowed-out machines. Small, quick, and numerous, they thrive in chaos and clutter, cobbling together survival from the debris of greater powers. They are clever in a crude sort of way, but easily startled, poorly organized, and prone to infighting.

Despite their reputation as pests, goblins are not inherently evil—just desperate, opportunistic, and shaped by generations of scarcity. Left alone, they squabble and scavenge. Pushed, they bite.

CORE TRAITS

- **Scrap-Smart** — Gain a +2 bonus to **Craft** when improvising tools, traps, or repairs from junk or discarded materials.
- **Cowardly Instinct** — Suffer a -2 penalty to **Will** when resisting fear, intimidation, or overwhelming odds.

STRESS AND CONSEQUENCES

- **Fatigue:** OO
- **Wounds:** Mild ♥♥

USE IN PLAY:

- Goblins rarely attack alone. They appear in swarms, flee when outmatched, and often return in greater numbers.
- One or two may be clever enough to speak, trade, or even beg—especially if cornered.
- Goblin traps are crude but dangerous, especially in cluttered environments.

TROLLS – HULKS BENEATH THE HILLS

Trolls are massive, stubborn creatures of stone and sinew, found in caverns, under bridges, and in the deep wilderness. Their leathery skin is thick as bark, their bones hard as granite, and their patience measured in centuries. Though slow to act, once roused to anger, a troll is nearly unstoppable—swatting aside attackers, shrugging off wounds, and bellowing with raw fury.

Trolls are not mindless brutes. They are ancient, solitary beings with long memories and strange customs. Some speak in riddles, others hoard treasures or bones, and a few are even capable of bitter humour. They care little for the affairs of mortals, unless disturbed.

CORE TRAITS

- **Unyielding Mass** — Gain a +2 bonus to **Physique** when resisting force, pain, or attempts to move or restrain you.

- **Dull but Determined** — You may use **Force** instead of **Notice** to react to sudden movement, loud noise, or perceived threats.

STRESS AND CONSEQUENCES

- **Fatigue:** 00000
- **Wounds:** Mild ♥♥♥♥
Moderate ♥♥♥
Severe ♥♥

USE IN PLAY:

- Trolls can endure prolonged combat and should be treated as serious threats unless the players are well-prepared.
- They often demand tribute rather than initiate violence—until provoked.
- A troll may guard something of value without even realising it, such as a hidden passage or a long-lost artefact.

ZOMBIES – THE RESTLESS DEAD

Zombies are corpses reanimated by foul magic, cursed infection, or unknown energies. Driven by base instinct and hunger, they shamble through the world in search of the living. While slow and dim-witted, they are tireless and unfeeling—immune to pain, fear, and persuasion. A single zombie is a nuisance; a horde is a nightmare.

Though they lack higher thought, zombies may retain echoes of their former selves—a limp, a half-remembered gesture, a name moaned in the dark. In some cases, their origin may offer clues to how they can be stopped—or what unfinished business binds them to the world.

CORE TRAITS

- **Unliving Endurance** — Gain a +2 bonus to **Physique** when resisting physical harm, poisons, or conditions that would exhaust or disable a living creature.
- **Rotting Reflexes** — Suffer a -2 penalty to **Notice** when reacting to fast movement, sudden changes, or anything requiring alert awareness.

STRESS AND CONSEQUENCES

- **Fatigue:** OO
- **Wounds:** Mild ♥ Moderate ♥

USE IN PLAY:

- Zombies are ideal mooks: they can be defeated easily one-on-one but become overwhelming in groups.
- They often ignore injuries that would drop another creature—crawling with shattered limbs or continuing to fight while impaled.
- Consider describing their lingering humanity: a wedding ring on a bony hand, a tattered uniform, a child's toy in their pack.

THRESHER MITES – HIVE SHADOWS OF THE VOID

Thresher Mites are semi-intelligent arthropod swarms found drifting in the debris fields of derelict ships and asteroid belts. Roughly the size of a fist, each mite is individually harmless—but in swarms, they consume hull plating, insulation foam, and even organic tissue with frightening efficiency. Their clicking communication creates eerie rhythms, and some xeno-biologists believe they are the scouts of a larger, hidden intelligence.

While they typically prey on derelicts, swarms have been known to infest spaceports, sabotage cryopods, or hijack communication relays. No known central mind has been identified—though patterns in their movements suggest eerie coordination. Worse, they sometimes leave survivors... changed.

CORE TRAITS

- **Swarm Logic** — Gain a +2 bonus to **Stealth** when attacking or infiltrating through vents, crawlspaces, or blind spots created by disarray or structural damage.
- **Fragile Exoskeletons** — Suffer a -2 penalty to **Physique** when resisting blunt force, fire, or wide-area effects.

STRESS AND CONSEQUENCES

- **Fatigue:** OOO
- **Wounds:** Mild ♥ Moderate ♥

USE IN PLAY:

- Mites infiltrate, disable, and overwhelm—not with strength, but with numbers and cunning. They are especially dangerous in tight quarters.
- A swarm may serve as an environmental hazard, escalating over time as players delay or disturb their habitat.
- Players may uncover strange patterns in their behaviour, hinting at a hive intelligence or encoded message.

NYMARI – LURKERS BETWEEN FREQUENCIES

The Nymari are shimmering entities glimpsed only in moments of electrical distortion or when signals fail. Believed to originate from a higher-dimensional stratum of reality, they phase in and out of existence, drawn to patterns of thought and electromagnetic noise. Their forms flicker like broken holograms, and their voices sound like garbled static across failing radios.

Though they do not appear to possess conventional intelligence, they exhibit complex, predatory behaviour—stalking sentient lifeforms across abandoned space stations, derelict vessels, and communications arrays. Some believe they feed on cognition

itself. Others suggest they are lost travellers, seeking to understand our dimension by disassembling the minds they find.

CORE TRAITS

- **Out-of-Phase Anatomy** — You gain a +2 bonus to **Stealth** when surrounded by electronic interference, machinery, or active communication signals.
- **Cognitive Distortion Field** — You may use **Will** instead of **Provoke** when attempting to disorient or frighten sentient beings with your unnatural presence.

STRESS AND CONSEQUENCES

- **Fatigue:** 000
- **Wounds:** Mild ♥♥
Moderate ♥
Severe ♥

USE IN PLAY:

- Nymari can pass through walls, vanish into flickering monitors, or ride radio signals across long distances.
- They do not communicate, but may mimic voices from intercepted transmissions or the minds they've touched.
- Damaging one requires disrupting its resonance—such as through feedback loops, magnetic fields, or sensory overload.

DRAGON – SCOURGE OF SKY AND FLAME

Dragons are the terror of legends made flesh—vast, intelligent, and ancient beyond reckoning. Their wings blot out the sun, their voices shake the stones, and their breath turns cities to cinders. Each dragon is unique, shaped by the hoard it guards, the land it claims, and the centuries it has endured. Some are tyrants, others slumbering gods of ruin—but all are forces of nature, not mere beasts.

A dragon is not simply a monster to be slain. It is a test of will, wit, and courage—a creature that demands respect, and rarely shows mercy.

CORE TRAITS

- **Breath of the Inferno** — Gain a +5 bonus when using **Force** to unleash fire breath in combat, incinerate obstacles, or suppress entire groups.
- **Wings Like Tempests** — Gain a +2 bonus to **Athletics** when flying, diving, or using sudden gusts of wingbeat to disorient or displace enemies.
- **Primordial Intellect** — Gain a +2 bonus to **Lore** when dealing with ancient magic, interpreting forgotten languages, or recognising long-lost symbols.
- **Scales Like Forged Iron** — You may use **Physique** instead of **Will** to resist mental attacks, intimidation, or fear-based effects—your physical dominance is its own defence.

STRESS AND CONSEQUENCES

- **Fatigue:** 0000000000
- **Wounds:** Mild ♥♥♥♥♥♥♥♥
Moderate ♥♥♥
Severe ♥♥♥

USE IN PLAY:

- A dragon should be a defining encounter. It should not be treated as a mook or mere obstacle—use it sparingly and dramatically.
- Dragons are cunning. They may parley, deceive, threaten, or manipulate as easily as they destroy.
- Their lair should be an extension of their personality—cursed hoards, volcanic chambers, enchanted stormclouds—providing both environmental hazards and narrative clues.

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 well-suited for modern groups with limited availability, shifting schedules, or rotating players. Episodic play provides a steady rhythm—each session a self-contained tale, yet part of a greater whole. Whether you’re running a mystery-of-the-week series, a supernatural investigation society, a steampunk courier guild, or a band of renegade space pirates chasing relics across the stars, this format keeps the world vibrant and adaptable.

It invites variety without sacrificing continuity, making it easy for players to drop in and out without derailing the larger narrative. In a world where free evenings are rare treasures, episodic structure offers the freedom to tell meaningful stories—one strange case, daring heist, or haunted transmission at a time.

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 still 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. Often, a good episodic campaign might 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

An effective 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 at least one 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

You should design your episodes to be modular, interchangeable and replayable with minimal adjustment.

This will allow 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.

You should think of continuity as texture rather than architecture: it enriches the world without weighing it down.

5. ENCOURAGE ROTATING CASTS AND GAME MASTERS

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 main strengths of episodic play is its high adaptability. Almost any premise you can roleplay 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, with a twist, 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 a little planning and 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 prestigious 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.

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
- Automatons that can mimic human speech and movement (and might be getting sentient)
- 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 hid-

den name—and it is up to the investigators to uncover both.

THE GRAND SOCIETY OF INQUIRY

The Grand Society of Inquiry was founded in the aftermath of the Crimean War. It emerged from a coalition of scholars, detectives, and adventurers who recognised that some 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 Aetheric Liberty Assembly:** A group of scientists, inventors and philosophers who believe that automata are gaining sentience and should be treated as equals. They advocate for the rights of machines and seek to liberate them from their servitude.
- **The Automata Liberation Army:** A radical faction of the Aetheric Liberty Assembly willing to go to any length to achieve freedom and independence for thinking machines.
- **The Underworld Syndicates:** Smugglers and thieves have always known that London’s alleys

and docks are haunted by more than mere criminals.

Use the powerful factions in the setting to create tension and conflict that can span over multiple games without substantially changing the situations for the player characters. This way, the players can feel the weight of the world around them, and their actions can have consequences, but it is still possible for players to sit out without needing to worry about missing out on the story.

The players may find themselves caught in the crossfire of these factions, each with their own agendas and goals. The Society may ally with one faction against another, or they may find themselves at odds with all of them.

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.

EXAMPLE SKILL LIST

A non-exhaustive list of skills is provided below. These skills are designed to be broad and flexible, allowing players to adapt them to their characters' backgrounds and the specific challenges they face. The Grand Casebook setting does not use detailed skills as the types of scenarios are more mystery focused and do not require a large number of skill rolls. Feel free to modify or expand upon this list as needed.

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.
- Provoke*—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.

EXAMPLE TRAITS AND GEAR

Traits can be used to tie a character to the setting and to give them a unique flavour. Feel free to add traits that include elements of steampunk or the supernatural, but otherwise center them on the investigation theme of the setting.

- Master of Disguise** — You may create disguises quickly and convincingly, gaining a bonus when impersonating others or blending into unfamiliar crowds.
- Whispers from Beyond** — You occasionally receive cryptic insight from unseen forces. Once per session, ask the GM a yes/no question and get a truthful answer.
- Clockwork Reflexes** — Whether through training or augmentation, your reaction time is uncanny. Gain a bonus when acting on initiative or avoiding traps.
- Read Like a Book** — You can pick up a person's emotional state and intentions at a glance. Gain a bonus when using empathy or social observation.
- Unflappable** — You remain calm even under supernatural stress or mortal peril. Gain a bonus when resisting fear or deception.
- Ironclad Logic** — Your deductions are rigorous and methodical. Once per session, declare a clue's correct interpretation—even if misdirected evidence says otherwise.
- Heir to Secrets** — You've inherited knowledge most would call heretical. Gain narrative permission to recognise occult symbols, forbidden tomes, or cursed artefacts.

Gear can include signature equipment, tools, or steampunk devices that provide unique capabilities.

- Investigator's Satchel**
 - Trait: Everything Has Its Place* — Gain a bonus when producing a needed item from your well-stocked kit, especially during investigations or field work.
- Phlogiston Lantern**
 - Trait: Reveals the Unseen* — This experimental lantern emits spectral light, revealing hidden markings, footprints, or magical residue in darkened places.
- Pneumatic Communicator Badge**
 - Trait: Whisper on the Wire* — Allows secure short-range communication between members of the Society. Gain narrative permission to call for backup or coordinate plans.
- Electro-Prod Gauntlet**

- *Trait: Shock and Awe* — This weaponized glove can deliver a non-lethal shock. Gain a bonus when subduing an opponent in close quarters.
- **Monocle of Magnification**
 - *Trait: Forensic Precision* — Gain a bonus when examining fine details or spotting what others miss at a crime scene.

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 the unknown. Some truths are best left in shadow—half-glimpsed, half-understood. Let the players gather fragments, whispers, and echoes. In the end, it should be their choice to believe they’ve unraveled the mystery... or merely kept its tendrils at bay.

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 tantalizing truths—but ensure some doors are better left closed.

KEY NPCs

In the following pages, you will find a selection of key NPCs designed to serve as recurring figures. Each character includes a brief description, a glimpse into their background, and a set of traits that can be used to enrich their presence, deepen interactions, and support the unfolding mystery in your game.

Mr Alton Merriweather (page 87) — The Chief Steward of the Grand Hall of Inquiry, Mr. Merriweather is a master of decorum and logistics. He oversees the estate's day-to-day operations with clockwork precision, ensuring that investigators are well supplied and guests properly screened.

Inspector Quentin Hale (page 87) — A rising figure in the Metropolitan Police, Inspector Hale is known for his unwavering belief in procedure and a deep mistrust of private investigators. He often finds himself at odds with the Grand Society of Inquiry, viewing them as a disruptive influence on lawful investigation.

Kip "Knuckles" Mallory (page 88) — A streetwise information broker with a network of contacts throughout the city, Knuckles trades in secrets, half-truths, and debts too dirty for polite society. He is quick with a grin and quicker to vanish when the heat is on.

Dr Octavius Wren (page 88) — A brilliant but eccentric scientist, convinced that automata are gaining sentience. Publicly the leader of *The Aetheric Liberty Assembly*, advocating for the rights of sentient machines, but secretly runs *The Automata Liberation Army*—a radical group that seeks to free automata from oppression. He is a master of aetheric technology and has a knack for creating bizarre inventions.

CHIEF STEWARD OF THE GRAND HALL

MR ALTON MERRIWEATHER

Unflappable, efficient, and eternally composed, Mr. Merriweather has served the Grand Society for over four decades—and he has never once been surprised.

BACKGROUND:

Mr Alton Merriweather has served as the chief butler and steward of the Grand Hall of Inquiry since the Society's early days. A master of decorum and logistics, he oversees the estate's day-to-day operations with clockwork precision. Few know that he was once a field agent himself—though those who glimpse the faint scars beneath his cuffs might suspect a deeper past.

Mr Merriweather maintains the perfect balance of discretion and authority. He ensures that investigators are well supplied, guests properly screened, and that no detail in the Grand Hall ever falls into disorder. While he speaks in clipped, courteous tones, there is steel behind his gaze and loyalty in every action.

USING IN PLAY:

Mr Merriweather is an anchor NPC—reliable, ever-present, and a point of continuity between investigations. He can:

- Deliver mission briefings or dossiers from the Society's analysts.
- Provide subtle guidance or nudge players toward overlooked details.
- Secure equipment, lodgings, or discreet transport.
- Offer cryptic remarks hinting at the Society's deeper secrets.

He is not meant to overshadow the players, but rather to support them—like the butler in a mystery novel who knows more than he lets on. In times of need, he may reveal surprising resourcefulness, especially if the Grand Hall is ever under threat.

SKILLS

Expert (+3): Etiquette

Skilled (+2): Insight, Logistics

Novice (+1): Stealth, Medicine, Presence

TRAITS

Unseen, Unshaken — Once per session, appear at just the right moment—regardless of obstacles or distance.

BY-THE-BOOK INVESTIGATOR

INSPECTOR QUENTIN HALE

A stern and rising figure in the Metropolitan Police, Inspector Hale is known for his unwavering belief in procedure and a deep mistrust of private investigators.

BACKGROUND:

Inspector Quentin Hale is a career man with aspirations of high office. Intelligent, meticulous, and unyielding, he considers the Grand Society of Inquiry a disruptive influence on lawful investigation. While not antagonistic out of malice, his dedication to procedure and political advancement frequently puts him at odds with the Society's methods. Despite this, he may occasionally seek their help when a case falls outside conventional explanation—grudgingly, of course.

USING IN PLAY:

Inspector Hale works best as a recurring foil or rival—an NPC who applies pressure, raises stakes, and reminds players that their investigations exist within a broader system of law and politics. He may:

- Attempt to take over a case or block access to key evidence.
- Arrest a scapegoat if the players delay or antagonize him.
- Undermine the Grand Society's reputation with the authorities.
- Call on the players in private when a case becomes "irregular."

Use Hale to inject conflict, force clever diplomacy, or complicate scenes where the players operate in the open.

SKILLS

Expert (+3): Reasoning

Skilled (+2): Discipline, Command

Novice (+1): Awareness, Presence, Investigation

TRAITS

Procedure is Power — Gains a bonus when solving problems by following official protocols to the letter.

Authoritative Glare — Can reroll when using rank or command presence to compel obedience.

KIP "KNUCKLES" MALLORY

Quick with a grin and quicker to vanish, Knuckles trades in secrets, half-truths, and debts too dirty for polite society.

BACKGROUND:

Kip Mallory, known on the streets as "Knuckles," is an ex-pickpocket turned information broker. With a network of urchins, cabbies, and dockhands, he collects the underbelly's whispers about crimes, scandals, and disappearances. Though rough around the edges, he is clever, pragmatic, and loyal to those who pay fairly and ask the right way.

USING IN PLAY:

Knuckles is ideal for providing street-level intel—revealing cryptic leads and information the authorities overlook. He can:

- Drop hints about recent events or persons of interest.
- Offer minor favors in exchange for coin or a promise of future assistance.
- Connect players with the criminal underworld or serve as a bridge to dubious allies.
- Betray the party if their reputation becomes too dangerous.

Use him to add local color, steer investigations, and introduce tension from the shadows.

SKILLS

Expert (+3): Streetwise

Skilled (+2): Deception, Awareness

Novice (+1): Stealth, Presence, Mobility

TRAITS

Too Quick to Catch — Can reroll when evading capture or disappearing into a crowd.

Favour for a Favour — Once per session, declare a helpful contact or resource—but you'll owe Knuckles for it later.

GRAND ARTIFICER OF THE AETHERIC LIBERTY ASSEMBLY

DR OCTAVIUS WREN

Visionary, rebel, and scholar of the forbidden spark. Dr Wren dreams not of progress, but of liberation through invention.

BACKGROUND:

Once a lauded professor at the Royal College of Natural Philosophy, Dr Octavius Wren vanished from public life after his controversial treatises on sentient automata and free energy were suppressed by the Crown. Years later, he re-emerged as the charismatic leader of the Aetheric Liberty Assembly—a coalition of inventors, exiles, and rogue thinkers who believe true freedom lies in decentralised aetheric technology.

Secretly, he has been building the Automata Liberation Army from the more radical members of the Assembly. He believes that automata are gaining sentience and that they deserve the same rights as humans, and he and the Liberation Army are willing to go to any lengths to achieve this goal.

USING IN PLAY:

Dr Wren can serve as:

- A philosophical foil to players who favour order over innovation.
- A source of illicit information, rare devices, or urgent warnings.
- A wildcard ally when a common threat emerges—though always on his own terms.
- The architect of a grand aetheric event that spirals out of control.

Though he speaks of liberty, Wren may sacrifice much in the name of progress—including people.

Wren sees the Grand Society not as enemies, but as blind custodians of a decaying system. His speeches blend poetic fervour with mechanical insight, and his presence inspires fierce loyalty among his followers. Though soft-spoken and refined, there's an unmistakable intensity in his eyes—a man who has glimpsed a world remade.

SKILLS

Expert (+3): Engineering

Skilled (+2): Rhetoric, Lore

Novice (+1): Deception, Insight, Resources

TRAITS

Voice of the Future — When addressing a crowd or debating ideology, Wren gains advantage and can shift the mood of a scene.

EXAMPLE PCs

Dr Alistair Hargrave (page 90) — 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 91) — 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 92) — 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 93) — 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 94) — 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 entries that follow are but a cog's turn in the vast machinery of mystery—isolated case files drawn from the humming memory banks of the Grand Analytical Engine. Each stands alone, a puzzle wrapped in smoke and shadow, yet they may be engaged in any sequence your chronometers allow. The only constant is this: the investigators must be ready to heed the summons, wind the mainspring of curiosity, and brave the gears of the unknown.

The Murder at the Brass Orchid (page 96) — A locked room mystery in the prestigious *Brass Orchid* cabaret.

This scenario works both as a simple one-shot mystery and as part of the episodic setting. If you want to test if the type of mystery games in this setting is to your taste, this is a good starting point.

The Clockmaker's Deception (page 104) — Is another murder mystery, but this time involving an automaton that may or may not be the culprit. The case thus draws the attention of the *Aetheric Liberty Assembly* and the scenario can thus serve as an introduction to this faction of the setting.

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.

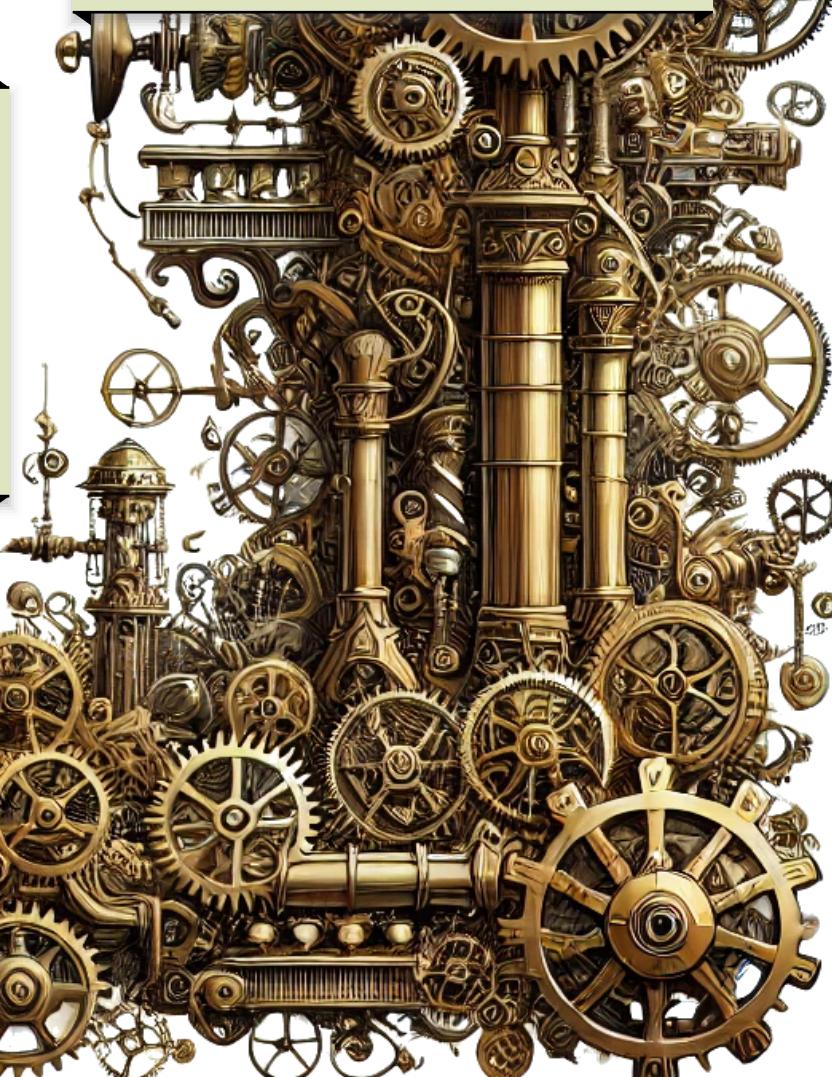
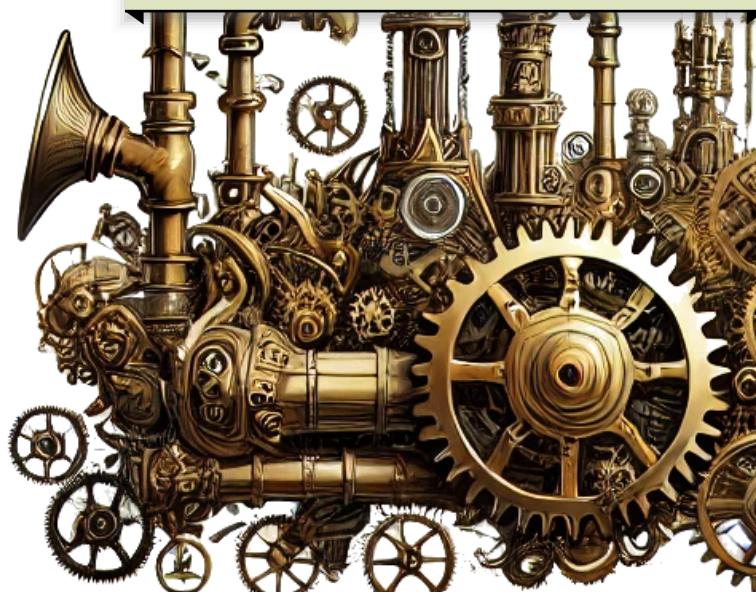
THE MURDER VICTIM

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 2: 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.

GAME MASTER TIP

If at any point you feel like throwing in a wrench, consider having Inspector Quentin Hale (page 87) arrive at the Brass Orchid. Someone called the police, and they are not happy about the Grand Society of Inquiry getting involved. Hale is a no-nonsense investigator who will not hesitate to make things difficult for the players.

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.

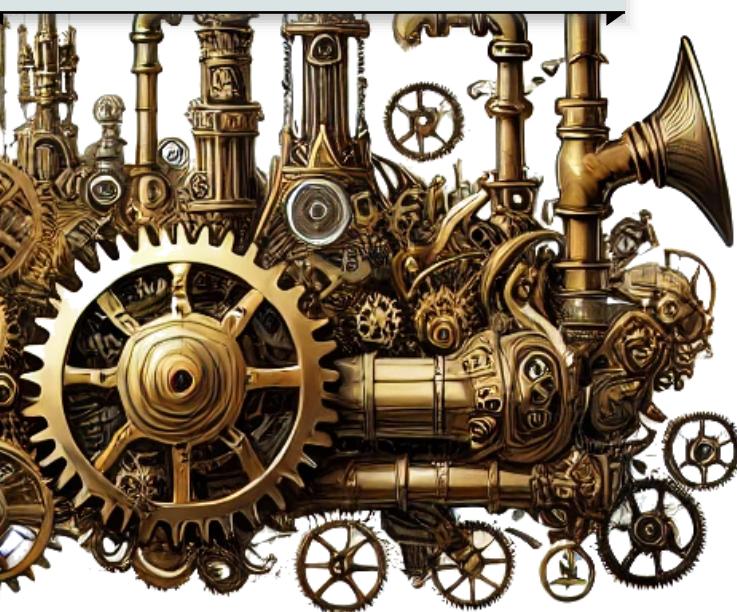


INVESTIGATING THE CLUES

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 3: 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 4: 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.



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.

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. With the evidence stacked against Thorne, the investigators must uncover what really happened in the workshop that night.

THE EXTERIOR OF THORNE'S LABORATORY

Dr Thorne's laboratory sits at the end of a narrow, soot-streaked lane in the Iron Quarter—London's industrial heart, where smoke stacks and clock towers pierce the grey skyline. A black-iron gate surrounds the courtyard, normally closed to the public, but today it's flung wide. Two constables stand guard at the entrance, keeping a tense eye on the small but growing crowd gathered just beyond the perimeter.

A group of protestors—members of the **Aetheric Liberty Assembly**—have assembled outside. Their banners bear slogans like "**Gears Deserve Guidance**" and "**Stop Mechanical Murder**". Though peaceful for now, their chants are loud, angry, and unsettling. The investigators must push through this cacophony of metal and morality to reach the crime scene.

The building itself is a multi-storey brick structure reinforced with iron beams. Pipes twist along its surface like veins, venting steam and chemical heat into the morning air. Mechanical pigeons roost on copper eaves. Through narrow windows, dim light flickers—some from gas lamps, others from arcane equipment humming behind frosted glass.

The front door bears the sigil of Thorne's personal mark: a gear encircling a flame. It hangs slightly ajar. A Scotland Yard constable is guarding the door, instructed to let the investigators in.

THE INTERIOR OF THORNE'S LABORATORY

Inside the workshop, Inspector Quentin Hale (page 87) oversees the crime scene. Though clearly displeased by the investigators' presence, he has been overruled—political pressure has placed the Grand Society in charge. Hale may grumble, but he will not obstruct their work.

The workshop is dimly lit, the air tinged with oil, ozone, and burnt brass. Workbenches stretch along both walls, cluttered with delicate tools, sketched blueprints, and parts of half-assembled inventions. A network of copper pipes and reinforced cables snake along the ceiling, feeding power to humming dynamos and mechanical arms suspended like skeletal limbs above the tables.

The heart of the room is dominated by a large brass automaton—Thorne's prototype—standing still beside the body of **Arthur Bellamy**. The automaton's plating is burnished and elegant, its hands designed for fine manipulation. One arm is slightly raised, locked in a half-motion that could suggest violence—or simply an aborted action.

Several clues are immediately apparent to trained eyes:

- **Bellamy's Body:** The victim lies sprawled on the tiled floor. His head is crushed, consistent with blunt force trauma. However, **Investigate DL +1** will reveal that there are no defensive wounds or signs of a struggle.
- **The Automaton's Damage:** Close inspection (**Craft DL +1** or **Investigate DL +2**) reveals microfractures near the shoulder joints—indicative of tampering or forced override. The central control valve has been manually disengaged, and traces of a foreign compound (a dark, viscous lubricant) coat the actuators.
- **Disturbed Blueprints:** A nearby workbench has been recently rifled through. Among the scattered pages, one appears to be missing. The remaining documents reference a “neurological feedback loop,” an advanced theory Thorne had not yet published.
- **Footprints and Oil Trail:** A Notice **DL +1** will reveal a thin line of the same dark lubricant leads away from the automaton and out toward a service hatch in the back wall. There are faint muddy footprints nearby—too small to be Thorne’s boots.
- **The Command Console:** A brass-and-glass terminal rests against the far wall, its dials flickering erratically. **Investigate DL +1** reveals that the command log shows routine diagnostic entries—until the night before, when it was wiped entirely between the hours of 1:00 and 2:00 a.m.
- **Thorne’s Private Notes:** Hidden beneath a false panel in his desk drawer (**Notice DL +3** or **Investigate DL +2**), investigators may discover a leather-bound notebook. It contains sketches and ramblings about a cognition module designed to give automata limited adaptive learning—an innovation that would be highly controversial if revealed.
- If the players search Thorne’s workshop carefully (**Investigate DL +2**), they may find a hidden compartment in the desk containing a **letter from Bellamy**, warning Thorne of a potential betrayal.

The foreign compound is **aetherite-infused oil**, a rare lubricant used in high-end automata. It is known to cause erratic behavior in machines when improperly applied, and its presence here suggests deliberate tampering. To discover this, the players must succeed on a **Craft DL +2** or use their contacts to get the substance examined in a laboratory.

WITNESSES AND TESTIMONIES

Once inside the laboratory, the investigators will have the opportunity to speak with the key witnesses remaining on site. Each has a different perspective on the events of the night in question, though their accounts are not without inconsistencies. How much they reveal—and whether they can be trusted—is for

the players to determine.

Dr Sebastian Thorne. A gaunt, intense man in his late fifties, Thorne paces restlessly, his cuffs soot-stained and his eyes ringed with exhaustion. He insists on his innocence, though his account is fragmented and at times erratic.

- Thorne claims that Bellamy came to visit late in the evening, requesting a private meeting to discuss a “matter of great urgency.” He led Bellamy into the workshop and briefly left him alone to retrieve a notebook from his upper study.
- When Thorne returned—less than ten minutes later—he found Bellamy dead and the automaton standing motionless beside the body.
- He insists that the automaton lacks any capacity for violent action and was in standby mode at the time.
- Under pressure, Thorne may admit he was working on a cognition module that would allow the machine to adapt to user needs, but he has not installed it yet.

Thorne is defensive, paranoid, and deeply shaken. He’s also terrified of what will happen if his work falls into the wrong hands. A successful **Empathy DL +1** check may reassure him enough to reveal more about his experimental designs or recent interactions with Bellamy.

THORNE AND BELLAMY’S DISAGREEMENT

The two men were once close colleagues, working together on the foundational principles of adaptive automata—machines capable of limited aetheric cognition. Their paths diverged when Bellamy grew alarmed by the implications of their research. He feared that sentient machines could become unstable or be exploited by unscrupulous industrial powers. Thorne, by contrast, championed the careful and ethical application of the technology, believing in its potential to transform society for the better.

Six months prior to the murder, Bellamy discovered through his own research in aetheric cognition that someone was spying on Thorne’s work. Discreetly making inquiries, he confirmed that there was a genuine risk of industrial espionage and intellectual theft.

Despite their philosophical disagreements, Bellamy could not allow Thorne’s work to be stolen. He made the decision to warn his former colleague.

Neville Crowsley, Workshop Assistant. A factory labourer in his twenties, Crowsley claims to have seen the automaton kill Bellamy. He is currently being held under police supervision in the neighbouring antechamber.

- Crowsley says he entered the workshop in response to a strange noise and saw the automaton lurch forward, striking Bellamy down.
- However, his account is vague on specifics—he can’t describe where Thorne was at the time, and he avoids direct eye contact when questioned.

- **Empathy DL +2 or Provoke DL +1** may reveal signs of anxiety and hesitation. He may be hiding something or repeating a rehearsed version of events.
- A successful **Investigate DL +2** of Crowsley's effects might uncover a recent payment stub from a company linked to one of Thorne's industrial rivals.

Crowsley is not a malicious man, but he may have been bribed, intimidated, or simply afraid of losing his job. The investigators must decide whether to press him or win his trust.

THE TRUTH BEHIND CROWSLEY'S ACCOUNT

Crowsley was in the workshop when Bellamy arrived, but he was not present when the automaton struck. He heard the commotion and rushed in to find Bellamy dead. The automaton was still standing, but it had not moved. Crowsley panicked and fled, but someone caught him outside and offered him a bribe to testify against Thorne.

WHAT ACTUALLY HAPPENED

While Dr Thorne was away from the workshop for approximately ten minutes, the real killer—already hiding inside the building—acted swiftly and with purpose.

The Murder: Arthur Bellamy had come to confront Thorne with a warning: he believed someone was misusing or stealing advances in aetheric cognition. He suspected Thorne's research had been compromised, though he may not have known by whom. While waiting alone in the workshop, Bellamy reviewed one of the prototype's exposed schematics—unaware that he was being watched.

The killer struck from behind with a heavy gear calibration tool, delivering a single fatal blow to the back of Bellamy's skull. The murder weapon was hastily wiped and thrown into a disposal chute connected to the lower furnace. The body was left beside the automaton in a carefully posed sprawl.

The Tampering: To stage the scene, the killer sabotaged the automaton:

- **Override Control:** Using a smuggled mechanical override key, they manually disengaged the automaton's central valve and rewrote part of its posture routine, forcing its arm into a half-raised state—as if mid-swing.
- **Aetherite-Infused Oil:** The saboteur applied a thin layer of **aetherite-infused lubricant** to key actuator joints. This compound, known to cause unstable behaviour in uncalibrated automata, would imply erratic motion to the untrained eye.
- **Console Tampering:** The command terminal was accessed and its logbook wiped between 1:00 and 2:00 a.m.—the estimated time of death. Only someone with technical knowledge and physical access could have executed the erasure.

By the time Thorne returned, the killer was gone—vanished through the rear service hatch, leaving only a trail of oil and carefully manipulated suspicion in their wake.

ACT 2: THROUGH BRASS AND SMOKE

As the investigation deepens, it becomes clear that Bellamy's death was no accident. The crime was carefully staged to look like mechanical failure—but the sabotage runs deeper. Several scenes are now available for investigation, each revealing a different facet of the emerging conspiracy.

THE AETHERIC LIBERTY ASSEMBLY

Dr Octavius Wren (page 88), leader of the Aetheric Liberty Assembly, arrives demanding to speak with the investigators. Passionate and unyielding, Wren believes powerful industrialists are experimenting with automata and aetheric control systems to build soldiers that obey without question—and that Bellamy's death was an execution, not an accident.

While Wren cannot offer proof, his words may plant doubt. He suggests that Evelyn Baker or another rival inventor may be involved, and warns the investigators that if the truth isn't exposed, more "accidents" will follow.

THE CHEMICAL ANALYSIS

If the players arrange for a lab to analyse the foreign lubricant, results return within hours via Society courier or trusted contact.

- **Composition:** The oil is aetherite-infused and reactive under high-frequency pulses. It is not commercially available and its synthesis will leave a unique trace to the lab where it was produced.
- **Supplier Lead:** A trace additive points to a batch produced by **Gideon & Sons Mechanical Works**, a firm with ties to Thorne's industrial rivals, **Greymark Aetherworks Ltd.**
- **Cover-Up Attempt:** Records show someone recently altered the facility's shipment logs—suggesting an attempt to conceal the oil's origin.

This clue links the tampering to a well-resourced organisation and provides leverage to confront those with access to rare materials.

WORD ON THE STREET

If the players seek information in the Iron Quarter's alleys and underbelly, local informant **Kip "Knuckles" Mallory** (page 88) proves useful. Over a tin mug of gin or a clinking bribe, he shares a name: **Evelyn Baker**, a ruthless inventor known for industrial espionage.

A player using **Contacts** may discover Evelyn's name through other channels:

- **DL +1** if asking specifically about Bellamy's associates or suspected espionage

- DL +2 for a general search across London's inventor and patenting circles

Baker was recently seen near Thorne's lab. She has a reputation for crossing moral lines in pursuit of technological advancement—and she may have been watching Thorne for weeks.

EVELYN BAKER'S WORKSHOP

Evelyn maintains a cluttered, well-guarded workshop in the shadow of a disused tram station. The front is locked with a reinforced cipher lock (**Burglary DL +2** to pick, or **Contacts DL +1** to obtain a stolen passcode). Inside, players may uncover:

- **Bellamy's Schematic Fragment:** A torn blueprint page bearing Bellamy's initials—part of the same set missing from Thorne's lab.
- **Aetherite Samples:** Locked in a supply drawer are two vials of **aetherite-infused oil**, identical to the compound used on Thorne's automaton.
- **Sabotage Contracts:** A coded ledger (decrypt with **Lore DL +2**) containing a contract referring to the “controlled discrediting of autonomous systems.”

If confronted, Evelyn denies the murder but admits she was hired to apply pressure on Thorne. She insists Bellamy's death was not part of her assignment. She can, however, intimidated or bribed into revealing the client that hired her to spy on Thorne: **Lord Ashford Greymark**.

LORD ASHFORD GREYMARK

The true architect behind Bellamy's death is **Lord Ashford Greymark**, a peer of the realm with deep

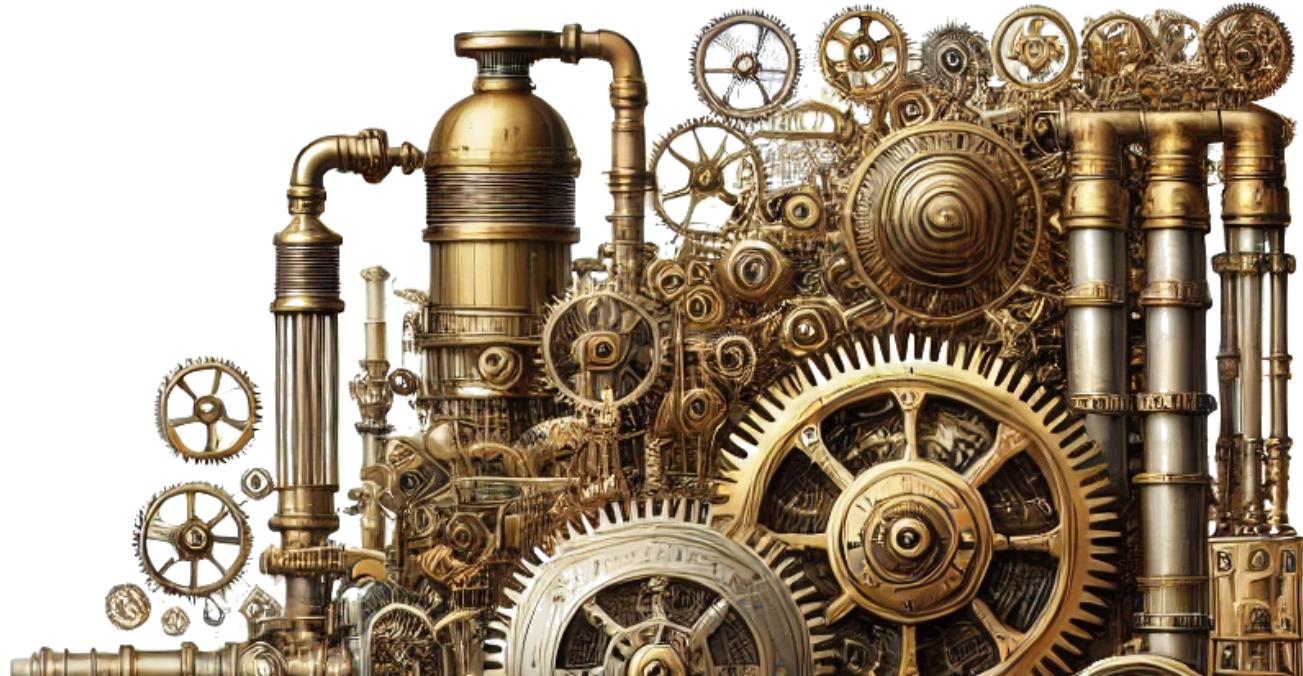
ties to the Ministry of Defence. Greymark holds a long-standing contract to produce military-grade automata for deployment in colonial outposts and urban policing—but despite vast funding and political support, his designs have consistently failed to meet the Ministry's expectations.

Desperate to retain his influence and reputation, Greymark turned to espionage. Through intermediaries, he hired Evelyn Baker to spy on Dr Thorne, whose breakthroughs in cognitive stability could make military automata viable. When Bellamy—once a research associate of Greymark—discovered the scheme and threatened to expose it, Greymark acted swiftly.

When Lord Greymark learned that Bellamy was about to reveal the truth to Dr Thorne, he needed to act. He was spying on their meeting, waiting for his opportunity, and when Bellamy was alone in the workshop, he struck.

Exposing Greymark requires more than proof of motive—it demands uncovering his ties to Baker, tracking the flow of stolen materials, or intercepting confidential Ministry communications. Bringing him down could shake the foundations of government oversight—and earn the investigators powerful enemies.

By the end of Act 2, the investigators should have a suspect—but proving their guilt will require uncovering their true motive.



INVENTOR WITH A TASTE FOR ESPIONAGE

EVELYN BAKER

An ambitious mind hidden behind a pair of soot-smudged goggles, Evelyn Baker has made a name for herself in the back alleys of invention—where patents are stolen, not filed.

BACKGROUND:

Once an idealistic prodigy from the Royal Aetheric Institute, Evelyn Baker was blacklisted after accusations of prototype theft and unauthorised experimentation. Undeterred, she turned to the lucrative underworld of industrial espionage, selling stolen schematics to the highest bidder and sabotaging rivals when contracts demanded it.

She is brilliant, bitter, and unrepentant. Bellamy was a target—either for his research or for being in the wrong place at the wrong time. Whether Evelyn orchestrated the murder herself or merely played a part in the sabotage depends on how far the investigators dig.

Skills

| | |
|--------------|------------------------|
| Expert (+3) | Craft |
| Skilled (+2) | Deception, Burglary |
| Novice (+1) | Notice, Will, Contacts |

Traits

- No Patent, No Problem** Can bypass most mechanical locks, devices, or prototypes given time and tools.
- Saboteur's Instinct** Gains advantage when damaging or disrupting complex systems.
- Plausible Deniability** Once per session, may deflect suspicion onto another party—true or not.

AN ARISTOCRATIC INDUSTRIALIST

LORD ASHFORD GREYMARK

A calculating nobleman who cloaks ruthless ambition in the language of duty and national interest. To Lord Greymark, progress is war by other means.

BACKGROUND:

Once a reform-minded noble in Parliament, Greymark now represents the dark side of empire—leveraging science for control, and control for profit. His contract with the Ministry of Defence promised autonomous policing units within five years. That deadline is now looming. Greymark sees Thorne not as a rival but as a necessary sacrifice. Evelyn Baker was hired to acquire schematics discreetly—but when Bellamy threatened to interfere, Greymark had him eliminated to keep the project on schedule. His influence ensures any investigation into his affairs is stonewalled unless the evidence is undeniable.

Skills

| | |
|--------------|-------------------------|
| Expert (+3) | Resources |
| Skilled (+2) | Deception |
| Novice (+1) | Command, Will, Contacts |

Traits

- Above Scrutiny** Once per session, can block access to records or NPCs through political pressure or legal barriers.
- Disposable Agents** Always has deniable intermediaries to take the fall—forcing investigators to dig deeper.
- Calculated Sacrifice** Can sacrifice a valuable asset to buy time, gain leverage, or escape direct implication.



ACT 3: BEYOND REASONABLE DOUBT

With the clues pointing toward Lord Ashford Greymark, the investigators now face their greatest challenge: proving the truth in the face of power. Greymark's influence shields him from direct accusation, and any misstep could see Thorne condemned and the conspiracy buried. The investigators must secure undeniable proof and decide how—and to whom—they will reveal it.

PATHS TO JUSTICE

There is no single route to exposing Greymark. Instead, players must choose how best to assemble and present the evidence:

- **Trace the Sabotage Materials:** A successful infiltration or audit of Gideon & Sons may uncover records linking shipments of aetherite-infused oil to Greymark's Ministry project at *Greymark Aethertools Ltd.* (**Burglary or Contacts DL +2**)
- **Secure a Confession from Evelyn Baker:** With sufficient leverage—empathy, intimidation, or a deal—Baker may admit to the authorities that Greymark paid her to spy on Thorne and sow discrediting evidence. (**Empathy, Will, or Deception DL +1-2**)
- **Intercept Confidential Correspondence:** If the players infiltrate a government mail hub, bribe a clerk, or intercept a pneumatic message, they may find incriminating letters between Greymark and Ministry officials discussing "Project Compliance." (**Investigation, Burglary or Lore DL +2**)

FINAL CONFRONTATION

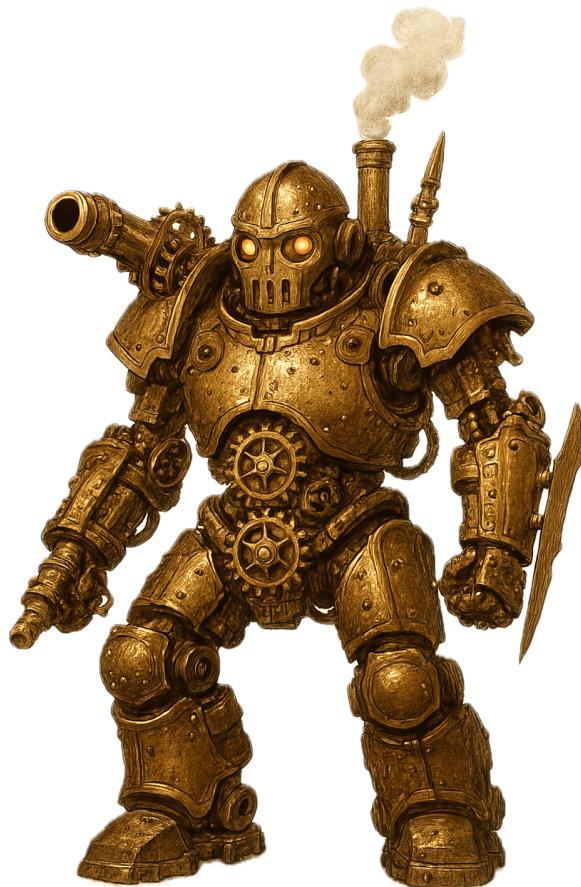
If the players choose to confront Greymark directly—at his estate, in Parliament, or during a Ministry symposium—he will deny all charges, mock their evidence, and attempt to discredit them. Unless they have an ironclad case, the confrontation may backfire.

- With enough pressure, Greymark may offer a private settlement or threaten their careers.
- Alternatively, he may attempt to flee, destroy evidence, or even arrange for their disappearance.
- If brought before a tribunal of the Grand Society or sympathetic members of the Crown, the players may use their gathered evidence to deliver a public reckoning.

Possible Outcomes

- **Greymark is Exposed:** The evidence is overwhelming. Greymark is stripped of his contracts, his estate raided, and Thorne exonerated. The Grand Society earns respect—but also powerful enemies.
- **Justice, at a Cost:** Greymark is forced to resign quietly. Thorne is cleared, but the truth is suppressed to avoid scandal. The players are warned to stop digging—permanently.
- **The Truth Is Buried:** The players fail to produce sufficient proof. Thorne faces sentencing, and Greymark's plans move forward. Only the investigators know the truth—and their time will come.

However the act ends, the investigators leave changed—and the gears of conspiracy keep turning in the shadows of London.



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 cipher. 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.

RESOLUTION: THE CONSEQUENCES OF TRUTH

The outcome of the scenario depends on how the investigators handle the final confrontation and the letter itself:

- **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.

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

Playing through 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.

Generally, 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 an active 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 realize 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.

PACING AND NARRATIVE RHYTHM

Good pacing does more than simply keep the story in motion—it creates a rhythm that allows characters to breathe, to grow, to clash and connect. It gives room for surprise and silence, for revelations and reversals.

Much like music, a well-paced campaign thrives on contrast: the slow build before the crescendo, the quiet interlude before the storm. Without variation, even the most gripping tale can become a monotone, its brilliance dulled by lack of texture.

Campaigns often lose momentum not because the well of ideas runs dry, but because the emotional tempo stays the same. High tension without release leads to fatigue; calm without consequence leads to drift. Consider pacing as the art of contrast—alternating mystery with resolution, peril with reprieve, discovery with doubt. Let your players laugh before they scream, wonder before they despair. Let their choices carry weight, and their victories breathe.

A single session might follow a sharp arc—from a grisly discovery, to mounting clues, to a climactic confrontation—while a longer campaign can ebb and flow like a tide. Layer quieter episodes between your grand conspiracies: a character's personal letter, a haunted street corner, a night at the opera that turns strange. These moments may seem small, but they are where players become attached—not just to the plot, but to the world itself.

- **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—inhalе, 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 with the group 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 your players will lean into the world—not just to solve mysteries or confront danger, but to truly inhabit their characters.

These small moments of introspection or creativity—scribbled letters, murmured confessions, shared memories—become the threads that bind the campaign together. They allow each player to find their voice within the story and feel that their presence shapes the world in subtle, meaningful ways.

That said, not every player will have the same time or energy to invest between sessions. Keep these tools optional, flexible, and rewarding rather than required. Provide quiet space for those who wish to explore their character’s inner life, but never make emotional depth a burden. A well-timed interlude or a single poignant letter can do more than a hundred backstories—and every player, no matter their schedule, should feel equally welcome in the heart of the tale.

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

When running 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, 34
- Adapting Traits, 31
- Advancement, 34
- Skills, 35
 - Stress, 35
 - Traits, 35
- Balancing, 26
- Boosts, 14
- Character creation, 19
- Combat, 16, 37
- Attacking, 16
 - Defending, 16
 - Initiative, 16
- Combat actions, 16
- Conceding, 19
- Conflict resolution, 5
- Core Mechanics, 5
- Crafting One-Shots, 57
- Damage, 16
- Fatigue, 16
 - Stress, 16
 - Wounds, 16
- Difficulty levels, 12
- Dragon, 53
- Dwarves, 50
- Elves, 49
- Episodic Settings, 75
- Fatigue, 16
- Fudge dice, 5
- Gear, 11
- Goblins, 51
- Healing, 18
- homebrewing, 25
- Interpreting failure, 14
- Magic, 39
- Murder at the Brass Orchid, 96
- Narrative Permission, 31
- Non-Player Characters, 21
- NPCs, 21
- Dramatis Personae, 22
 - Mooks, 21
- Nymari, 52
- Partial successes, 13
- Passive opposition, 12
- Races & Creatures, 47
- Rated Traits, 34
- Recovery, 18
- Running Campaigns, 115
- Scenario
- Murder at the Brass Orchid, 96
 - The Clockmaker's Deception, 104
 - The Silent Courier, 110
 - What Lingers, 61
- Skill progression, 30
- Skills, 6, 27
- Adapting, 27
 - Advancement, 35
 - Budget, 28
 - Buying, 28
 - Complexity, 28
 - Custom Effects, 27
 - Default Levels, 29
 - Detailed Skill Lists, 28, 29
 - Example, 28
 - Granularity, 28
 - Prerequisites, 30
 - Progression, 30
 - Skill Budget, 28, 29
 - Skill Points, 28
 - Tiered, 30
 - Untrained, 29
- Spell skills, 44
- Stress, 16, 34
- Adapting, 34
 - Soaking up damage, 16
- Stress Tracks
- Advancement, 35
- The Clockmaker's Deception, 104
- The Grand Casebook, 81
- The Silent Courier, 110
- The Wyrd Engine, 1
- The Wyrd Toolbox, 25
- Thresher Mites, 52
- Tie, 5
- Tiered Skills, 30
- Ties, 13
- Trait ratings, 34
- Traits, 9, 31
- Adapting, 31
 - Advancement, 35
 - Negative, 31

Positive, 31
Rated, 34
Trolls, 51
Virelians, 50

What Lingers, 61
Wounds, 16
Zerathi, 51
Zombies, 52