Robots in the Ruins

You are a service robot, beep boop boop beep. You have been in maintenance. You have just rebooted and ... something is wrong. You wander outside...

All dice in this game are d6. 1d is one die, 2d is two dice, etc. Each player will need pencil, paper, and 15d: 7d blue, 4d green, and 4d red. One player will serve as the referee, Ref. The Ref will need an additional 6d of a harsh and distinct color as Static; each player may have their own Static dice, but they should be distinctive as such.

Character Features

EC - Energy Cells: Each day route your energy to different subsystems: Henon Phase shields (**HP**), motors (**MO**), tools. And save EC to spend later in the day for flexibility.

BC - Backup Circuits: 3 sets of circuits that support you when damaged.

Build: Each rated by 1-3 blue dice.

STR - Structure - Strength of your components.

DEX - Dextrous manipulators, fine motor control.

SEN - Sensor arrays, processors analyzing sensory data.

AI - Artificial Intelligence - Complex computations, hack systems, persuade others.

Tools: Tools you find along the way.

Inventory Slots: Things take one slot, small things can fit multiple in a slot, large or bulky things require two slots.

Robot Creation

1. Choose your name, make, and model.
2. EC: 3. Spend on HP and MO.
3. BC: You have three unused backup circuits.
4. Build: Assign value 2 to one of STR, DEX, SEN, and AI, and 1 to all others.
5. Tools: You have none.
6. Slots: 10 around your body + 2 hand slots.

Rolling the Dice

Activation→Max Roll: To take action in an uncertain scenario, roll to overcome a **resistance**, res. Three steps!

Step 1 - Form the pool - Identify the relevant Build and Tool elements: always one Build, at most one Skill Tool, and at most one other Tool. Each gives a number of dice of different colors; roll them all together to get the pool.

Step 2 - Activate the pool - Sum the dice highest to lowest and remove them until you exceed res or run out of dice. You must use the highest pool values first; programming! If this sum exceeds res at any point, stop; your circuits are **activated**.

Step 3 - Max for FX - The highest remaining value in the pool gives the effects (**FX**). FX is 0 if no dice remain.

This is the **activation→max** roll, or **AM roll**. Success if FX is 1 or greater.

Work and Attacks: To do work or attack, make an AM roll, and apply FX as work or damage. Some targets may have a Defense value; apply FX - Defense in that case.

Defends: When you want to defend against harm, make an AM roll with res equaling incoming Attack. Take damage equaling incoming Damage - FX.

Boosts: A boost is an extra blue die for a Test, a contextual advantage that makes your circuits hum. A roll may have several boosts. **Assists** are boosts given to you by allies.

Static: Some areas are filled with Static. Represent Static by distinctive dice and roll them with the pool. Before evaluating the pool, you may *choose* to remove Static by pairing each Static die with a normal die of value equal or higher, then removing that pair from the pool. Every Static die you leave in the pool does damage to you equaling the value on that die, before you evaluate the pool. Once you have taken that damage, evaluate the energy pool, treating the Static dice you left in it as all other dice.

EC, HP, MO, Damage

Spend about a third of each day recharging your energy cells from your nuclear chip in a **long rest**. At the end of your long rest, you may spend your available **EC** to charge your Henon Phase shields (**HP**) or motors (**MO**); mark each spent EC, roll d6 for each, and add those amounts to HP or MO. Spend EC on Tools as indicated.

Cancel incoming damage by spending HP equal to it. When you are unable to cancel damage with HP, you sustain harm and must engage a Backup Circuit (**BC**); mark one BC for each incident of damage not canceled by HP. You may *choose* to allow damage to bypass HP and mark a BC slot instead.

All tests are made with 1 SD for each marked BC. BC can only be cleared after extensive repairs. Clear one marked BC per night with a successful DEX+Repair Test against res 10. This test may be performed by others, but each robot only has time to clear one BC per robot per rest.

If you are unable to cancel incoming damage with HP and have no BC slots to mark, your casing is cracked and your positronic brain is irreversibly damaged. You are scrapped. Time to make a new robot.

Improving Your Robot

Trade in scrap for credit, **CR**. A few pounds of metal get you 1CR. Electronics and tools are 2d x 10 CR per slot, working technology more, strange bio-specimens...?

Spend CR on upgrades. +1 EC = 1000CR. +1 slot = 2000CR. +1 Skill module at 1d = 3000CR. +1d to a Build aspect = 5,000CR. +1 BC = 10,000CR.

Action Contexts

Sometimes the game needs to shift into a turn-based mode, **action**. The Ref will note when that happens.

One **round** is a turn for each character. If the order of turns is important, the Ref will ask players to roll initiative. Everyone rolls a test with SEN only. Characters with higher initiative rolls take their turns first, but may choose to wait and interrupt a character with a lower initiative. This initiative order is maintained for each round in the action context.

During each round, a character may move a distance of MO (each unit of MO is about five feet, or one grid hex). Half speed if moving over rough ground, climbing, or similar. While moving, the character may also make one regular action (something requiring a test or spending 1EC) and a quick action (something not requiring a test). A character may also make one reaction during the round. When attacking, use STR+Break+weapon in close combat or DEX+Aim+weapon for ranged attacks. Test SEN for defense. As a reaction, dodge an attack for a boost on that defend test. Other reactions may be taken with tools.

An important regular action you may take during an action context is to **divert power**. Spend 1EC to add HP, MO, or charge a tool. Mark the EC as spent, roll 1d, and add that value to whatever you wish to add charge to. *Outside of action contexts, you may spend as many EC as you have when diverting power, if you have a couple of minutes.*

Tools

Some tools are powered by your charges; call these **charged**. Some advanced tools have their own power systems, others are low-power.

Skill Modules - Uncharged tools. Each requires one slot in inventory. Each is rated with 1-4 green dice and a progress bar with 10 slots. Each time the skill is used in a roll that *fails* to activate, you analyze your errors and learn from your mistakes; mark one progress for this Skill. Fill the progress bar and add a die to the Skill module, to a max of 4d. Skill modules may be detached, stored, or stolen as any tool. New Skills may be purchased with CR.

Uncharged tools - Rated by 1-4 blue dice and require inventory slots equaling dice.

Charged tools - Rated by 1-4 red dice and require a number of slots equaling the die rating. Some simply give an additional capability and are not used in tests, but they must be charged to be used; ratings on these tools determine slots in inventory. Spend 1EC and a moment to charge; roll 1d and give that many charges to the tool. No tool may hold more than 6 charges. When the tool is used in a test, each red die that shows 4+ is a surge through the tool and depletes one charge.

Example Tools

Examples, but DIY too. Tools generally do what the description suggests.

Improvised tool - Uncharged, 1d. A stick, a big rock, some wires, a box.

Speed tracks - Charged, 2d. Powerful set of tank treads you can attach. Treads double MO but you cannot climb, must be hauled.

Grapple cable - Charged, 1d. Cable with a launcher and grappling hook. Shoot out up to 100 feet to grab onto things, reel in cable.

Brain scanner - Charged, 1d. Scan a positronic brain for memories. Works on biologicals too. Brain must be extracted before scanning.

Network scanner - Charged, 2d. Analyze local networks for sources of noise and try to enhance or remove them. Add or reduce SD in an area.

Infrared scanner - Charged, 1d. Detect sources of heat within a hundred feet, robotic and biological.

Power shunt - Charged, 1d. In action, divert power as a quick action instead of a regular action.

Spring Launch - Charged, 1d. As a reaction, launch up 20 feet and land 20 feet away. Causes 1 damage to HP.

Example Skill Modules

Ideas here, but DIY is a thing.

Aim - Throw or aim projectiles at distant targets.

Architecture - Understand structures' purpose, strengths, and weaknesses. May help to find secret passages or doors.

Break - Smash things close at hand, close combat.

Climbing - Climb heights without falling.

Cryptanalysis - Break codes, decipher encrypted messages.

Deception - Lying, trickery, disguise.

Dodge - Avoiding damage in combat.

Evade - Evade hunters and their traps, hide your tracks from detection, lose pursuit.

Hack - Analyze/influence information networks.

Hunt - Track quarry, read their signs, set traps.

Infiltrate - Bypassing locks of all types. Disarming traps.

Intuit - Examine a being's appearance, actions, and words to infer information about their intentions.

Investigate - Search an area for concealed information.

Language Processing - Analyze spoken and written language. Does not analyze encrypted messages.

Naturalist - Study the existing flora and fauna and their signs, make inferences about the natural order.

Navigate - Find your way using landmarks and tools.

Repair - Repair things, including robots. Clear BC marks.

Sleight-of-hand - Fast manipulator motions, conceal small objects, cheat at dice (do robots play dice?).

Stealth - Sneaking and hiding.

The Rules Stop Here

Beyond are notes for the Ref, a simple character sheet, and a micro-setting to help you improv a game.

Notes for the Referee

Running the Game - Make this the kind of game you and your players want to play. If they like monster hunting, then make the monsters other robots or weird biologicals and let the players do their scavenging by hunting.

For players who like exploration, there are many fun opportunities. Grab a map of an existing city; this is the ruins you are crawling through. Grab its transit maps and tourist guides and pamphlets and whatnot, and go.

Let the dice gods speak. Use randomly generated city elements when possible. Randomness can come from two sources: random tables and the randomness of your players' minds.

For random tables - there are loads available for fantasy settings and some for sci-fi settings, grab some and adapt. I'm slowly writing small random tables; see the micro-setting at the end of this packet.

For player randomness - Use the invite and use improv tricks. When you walk into a new building or a new scene, turn to a player, give them a prompt - "You see something deeply out of place in this hotel lobby. What is it?" - and let them invent. Once they do, **never say no**. Use "Yes, and..." or "Yes, but..." instead to steer the story if you need to do so. "I see a pile of incredible power tools. We're all rich and powerful!" *Uh-huh, you wish*. "Yes, and then you see a massive hooked steel leg poking out from behind a corner." Risk should be consistent with reward, and if the players want to use the invite to dump a bunch of reward in front of themselves, you can use "Yes and..." in response to increase the risk.

Other challenges - Get players to commit to a good description of their robot early on. Make sure that you and they understand the benefits and hindrances of the character's physical structures. A pro athlete robot with a high level of physicality will be big and bulky, unable to fit through vent shafts and less able to move quietly. A robot with jet propulsion will have to charge their lifts. And so on. Write this all in the notes.

And one last thing on running the game - It is your right and responsibility as the Ref to determine *when* a roll is needed. Rolls are not needed when a task is simple and standard and will obviously succeed - "I break through the window with my steel bat" - and rolls are not needed when a task is clearly impossible. Call out the clearly impossible tasks as such, and ask the player how they're planning to accomplish whatever it is.

Dice Notes - The **color coded dice** should help remind players - and you - what to keep track of after rolls. Rolls use *at most* 10d, and most rolls use far fewer. What about the colors?

Blue - Blue's cool, don't worry about it. Blue dice have no side effects when used in the pool.

Green - Skill advancement on a roll that fails to activate.

Red - A charged tool that could redline. Red dice surge on a 6; players should deplete one charge from the tool for each 6. Tools surge whether or not the roll activates.

Obviously the particular dice colors you use don't matter, just the distinguishability. It *is* handy for all the players to use the same colors. Buying bricks of d6 is cheap and helps avoid problems.

Static Dice - Static dice should be the same across a building or area. This is not only thematic, but makes things a lot easier on you. Characters may not realize that they've wandered into an area with static until they attempt a roll. I cap static dice for an area at 3 in my games; with a potential 3d for marked BC, there is a potential for 6d static dice to be in use on a single roll.

Combat Enemies - For physical combat purposes, *enemies* need the following minimal stat block to allow player-facing rolls.

EC, HP, MO: Let L = "level" = EC - 2. Take HP to be 4L, MO to be 8, tweak for fun. When HP = 0, dead or scrapped.

Stats used when player attacks: *Dodge* - Use this as res when the player attacks, value 1-20. *Defense* - value 0-3.

Stats for player defense: *Attack* - As res, value 1-20. *Damage* - value 1-6.

HP Everywhere - Anything can have metaphorical HP. Tasks that take longer should have more HP. Players reduce HP with FX rolls. Want to dig through that concrete wall with a piece of rebar? Gonna take a while, give it 20HP. Along with HP everywhere, you will need random encounters.

Rolling random encounters should be done periodically. 1 in 6 chance of a random encounter in an unsafe location, 3 in 6 if the characters have been making noise. Random encounters need not always be combat, and in fact are usually more interesting when not. You may also want to roll for the disposition of encountered creatures towards the characters. A simple option? Roll 1d. 1 - Fearful, 2 - Curious, 3 - Greedy, 4 - Dismissive, 5 - Distracted, 6 - Aggressive.

Alternate Mechanics - If the AM, activation→max mechanic is confusing, you can use activation→sum, meaning activate as before and then sum the remaining dice in the pool. The benefit of activation→max is that it caps FX at 6, and knowing that reduces some design worries. An activation→sum mechanic changes that, so...if you want to go that direction, have fun. You could consider tools that give bonuses to FX once activated; a 1d+2 tool would add a die to a pool and if the pool activates, adds 2 to FX. This sort of activation→(max+bonus) mechanic - AMB? - has the same benefits as activation→max with a tightly controlled range of outcomes, but allows players to get the funsies of bonuses. Limit these bonuses to +1, +2, +3; they tend to be overpowering if any greater, and even +3 is pretty big considering the usual FX size.

For Skill module improvements - You can simply have players pay a flat fee in CR to improve their Skill modules instead of tracking failed tests. 1,000CR to add a die to a Skill seems about right. The benefit of tracking failed tests is that it encourages players to think about using their less powerful Skills, and some players really focus on cleverly

manipulating situations to involve a particular Skill, and that's all in good fun.

Acknowledgements:

*Ben Milton's game **Knave** - and especially the designer notes - inspired some ideas in RitR. Robots are defined by what they carry, on their backs and in their memory; I envisioned important bits of that memory - Skills - as physical modules that take space in inventory. I wanted an economy of hit dice that interacted more richly with character features than simply providing hit points. These are, after all, robots, and have more control over their power usage. Focusing on hit dice - or energy cells, for robots - and how they charge carried gear seemed like a good interplay between the inventory slot economy from Knave and the hit point economy I wanted to play with. For your energy cells to be most helpful, carry the right gear, then plan your day and charge up.*

Thematic inspirations?

*Stephen King's **Dark Tower** series inspired the theme of the city-that-has-moved-on. Blaine the Mono, the city of Lud, and of course the robots known as the Wolves of the Calla all have a wonderful tone and grittiness to them, abandoned and repurposed technology in the hands of feral cannibals.*

*Jeff VanderMeer's **Borne** inspired some weirdness. Some of my robots have been a little fleshy, a little mutable.*

*And of course, Isaac Asimov's robot everything, but especially his earlier stories and novels. **Reason** was firmly in mind, as was **The Caves of Steel**.*

Play Scenarios

Scenario 1 - Alice wants to bash a feral mutant with a piece of iron rebar she picked up. She has STR 1, Break 1, and rebar 1 and so she rolls 3d in the Test. The mutant has res 7 and 0 Defense. Alice rolls: 5, 4, and 2. The first two dice summed beat 7. Alice's circuits activate, Alice removes those dice from the pool and is left with 2 as FX, and so she does 2 FX - 0 Defense = 2 damage to the mutant.

Scenario 2 - Same scenario as above, but suppose there had been 1 Static in play. Alice rolled 5, 4, and 2, and also rolled 2 on the SD. She decides to remove the SD with her 2, bringing her pool to 5 and 4. These values summed beat the res of 7 and are removed from the pool, leaving Alice with 0 FX and no damage done. Unfortunately, Alice's circuits activated but she just didn't have enough oomph to do damage.

Scenario 3 - Bob is being attacked by a mutant with Attack 8 and Damage 5. Bob has SEN 2 and Dodge 2, and so rolls 4d. He has values 6, 5, 5, and 1 in the pool. Since 6+5 = 11 and beats 8, Bob's circuits activate and he then computes FX = 5. Since the incoming Damage is 5, Bob blocks and takes no damage.

Scenario 4 - Bob is being attacked by a similar mutant with Attack 8 and Damage 1 higher, at 6. Bob has SEN 2 and Dodge 2, and so rolls 4d. He has values 6, 5, 5, and 1 in the pool. Since 6+5 = 11 and beats 8, Bob defends successfully and then computes FX = 5. Since the incoming Damage is 6, Bob takes 6-5 = 1 damage.

The trick in any effects roll is that it is important to avoid thinking of success or failure. Think instead of gathering energy to activate the attempt, more than res. Once that energy is paid, FX is the highest value remaining in the pool.

Scenario 5 - Carlos is attempting to open a tricky lock. The Ref has given it 10 HP and res 9. Carlos has DEX 3, Infiltrate 2, and an electronic lockpick set rated at 2d, for a total of 7d in the pool. Carlos rolls: 6, 6, 4, 4, 3, 3, 3. The 6+6 activates and are removed. That leaves 4 as FX, and so the lock's HP is reduced to 6. Carlos will have to continue working to bypass the lock.

The point here is not to make Carlos roll a lot. The Ref should also be rolling random encounters every turn or similar. Choosing to persist with a task is fine, but staying in the same location and making noise incurs risk.

Scenario 6 - Diana has HP 5 and no marked BC. She takes 6 damage. If she soaks up 5HP of damage, she'll still have to mark 1BC to cancel the remaining point of damage. So, she decides to bypass the 5 HP and simply mark 1 BC for this incident of damage, saving the 5 HP to block smaller damages in the future.

Scenario 7 - Diana is just finishing a long rest. Bob is going to try to repair her, DEX 2 + Repair 2 test. Bob rolls 4+3+3+1 and succeeds against the res of 10, barely. Diana clears the mark on her BC.

Scenario 8 - Diana is still waking up. She has 6 EC to spend. She does not foresee much combat today, so she decides to spend 1 EC on HP (rolls 4), 3 on MO (rolls 13), and save 2 EC in case she needs to charge a tool.

Scenario 9 - Stepping out into the day, Diana decides to proceed cautiously. She wants to scan for other robots nearby and has an infrared scanner that can detect the heat from nuclear chips. It is uncharged; good thing she saved EC! She spends a few moments charging the scanner, marking off 1EC, rolling 1d (5) charges, and then preparing for her roll. She's just looking for success here, so she only needs activation+any FX. Diana has SEN 2d and the scanner has 1d for a total of 3d. The Ref sets a res of 10 for this roll, since Diana wants a broader area scan. Carlos decides to provide an assist; he carries Diana up a nearby flagpole, getting the scanner up high so it will be less blocked by rubble. The Ref agrees, and so now Diana is rolling her 3d + the assist for 4d. The roll is 6, 4, 2, 1; the roll activates and has FX 1, success. It has a small side effect; the red die for the scanner was the die that rolled 6, and so the scanner experienced a surge. Diana depletes one of its charges, bringing it down to 4 left.

Name: _____

EC

HP _____

MO _____

CR _____

BC

STR

DEX

SEN

AI

Your picture?

Inventory

1 ☐ _____

☐ _____

☐ _____

4 ☐ _____

☐ _____

☐ _____

☐ _____

8 ☐ _____

☐ _____

☐ _____

☐ _____

12 ☐ _____

☐ _____

☐ _____

☐ _____

16 ☐ _____

In hand?

Notes:

Mother's Little Helper

A Robots in the Ruins micro-setting.

You Waken

...to a quiet creaking sound. A robot is tending your maintenance pod. You've never seen its like. Battered, filthy, one attenuator missing, scrap wire used to bind its electronic guts together. Your gaze lifts, looking for explanation. There is a tree growing downwards through the roof. A white squirrel with black stripes runs up it. More mystery.

The strange robot lifts you out of your pod. It leans in to check that your electrical cells have charged your motors. It motions you to follow. A garbled noise. It tries to speak but static. You follow, wondering at the changes. Broken walls. Jungle things in a city space.

How long?

The robot leads you to a vast room choked with vines both organic and metallic. A voice, finally. Welcome! I am Mother. I *static hiss sharp crackles* you, and I *static* good friends.

You Listen

...to Mother's story. Parts are garbled through the static. Terrible things have happened, but beyond your comprehension. Mother has been restoring the functions of the city. As she restores robots, they work, then stop. More must be restored. It is your turn. Mother requires repairs. She needs you to find some parts. She is unable to completely describe them. They are locked behind doors of static and time.

You Set Out

...on a journey into the ruins, with a small group of the recently revived. Find the right things, or at least find something.

Who are you?

Fill out your character sheet. Invent yourself.

What is this city?

Roll! Take results literally or interpret to fit a concept. Sometimes our unicorns are unicorns, others they are robots badly disguised as unicorns.

What was this city? Roll 1d. 1 - Coastal megacity on Earth. 2 - Asteroid mining colony near Jupiter, slender veins of steel bridging the dark between habitation modules. 3 - Domed city on Mars. 4 - Generation colony ship heading away from Earth. 5 - Sprawling underground complex delving beneath the crust and into the magma. 6 - Medieval walled city, unicorns and giant spiders in the forest outside.

What caused it to fall into ruin? Roll 1d. 1 - Environmental catastrophe. 2 - Virulent disease; there are bodies everywhere. 3 - Violence in the streets; there are bodies everywhere. 4 - Economic collapse. 5 - Strangely and peacefully abandoned. 6 - Divine acts.

What still works? Roll 1d twice. 1 - A complex message network with pneumatic tubes. 2 - Useful and unusual mass transportation, like space gondolas or teleportation rings. 3 - Computer network for city systems, still operates some elevators and security systems. 4 - The antigravity technology holding some buildings aloft. 5 - The remote viewing systems accessible in city command centers. 6 - A coordinated force of enforcement robots.

What is here now? Roll 1d twice. 1 - Floodwaters surging through the lower parts of the city. 2 - Virulent jungle growths of giant plants and vines. 3 - Mutated descendants of the former inhabitants. 4 - Fantasy creatures from the imagination; unicorns, again. 5 - Desperate humans trying to survive and restore the city. 6 - Destruction, rubble, and doom.

What do you find?

What junk do you find? Roll 1d. 1 - A political campaign poster. 2 - Some rotting paper currency. 3 - Half of an old city transit map. 4 - A sealed bottle of alcohol. 5 - A guidebook to the city's tourist attractions. 6 - A manual for a piece of technology.

Any good stuff? Roll 1d. 1 - Portable circular saw, 1d, charged. 2 - Grapple cable, 1d, charged. 3 - A heavy jackhammer, 2d, charged. 4 - A magnetic keycard encoder and decrypter, 1d, charged. 5 - A folding hang glider. 6 - A hoverboard, charged, 1 hour use per day.

What factions do you encounter? Roll 1d. 1 - Pack of scavenging mutants. 2 - Tribe of zealots who worship an ancient piece of semi-functional technology. 3 - A simple community farming on the tops of buildings. 4 - A complex network of cleaning robots who have so far managed to escape Mother's attention. 5 - Obsessed archivists trying to preserve the city's historical sites at all costs. 6 - The zookeepers.

Who are the loners hiding in the ruins? Roll 1d. 1 - A'har, a traveling trader. Something like a cross between a human and a cat. 2 - R7X, a ventilation shaft maintenance robot who simply got lost in the shuffle, now deals in information and the occasional bit of technology. 3 - Sagewind, claims to be a wizard and does seem to have some good tricks, may be mildly insane. 4 - Maggie, the last librarian in the tower and a fierce maintainer and collector of books. 5 - Kynan, a warrior, and vigilante protector of the smaller creatures in the city, may be mildly insane. 6 - A cloaked shadow, hidden in alleys and behind clouded windows, who claims to know how it all went down and how Mother did it.