The Gamecrafters' Guild Presents

Saga

A Universal Role-Playing System

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Version Beta 4

What is *Saga*?

Saga is a role-playing system. It's a set of rules, devoid of setting, that you can use to create and run your own games. *Saga* is designed to be a universal system. That is, there is no implied setting or even implied genre within *Saga*, though there are ways for you to customize it to your needs, tying the mechanics to the setting as you see fit.

Version Beta?

While this book represents a reasonably final product, *Saga* is still, to some extent, a work in progress. At this point, major changes to the mechanics are unlikely. However, this system is still undergoing playtesting, and some of the mechanics may change in relatively minor ways. Thus, this is version beta of the *Saga* system. As with a video game or piece of software, while *Saga* is in beta, I encourage feedback from you, the reader and user. If you think something needs tweaking, or needs changing in some way, feel free to contact me. You can find contact information at my website, the Gamecrafters' Guild (http://www.gamecrafters.net).

Open Source?

Yes, *Saga* is an open source role-playing system. The entirety of this book is free, and falls under the following Creative Commons license:

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Note: You can find a *Saga* character sheet at the Gamecrafters' Guild (http://www.gamecrafters.net).

Chapter 1: Anatomy of a Character

Your character is really two things. First (and most importantly), your character is the imaginary projection of yourself in the fictional world of the game. This doesn't necessarily mean that your character should resemble you, even a little (though it is often difficult not to put at least a little of yourself into your character). You might, for example, be a mild-mannered school teacher in real life, but you might want to play a cold-blooded gunslinger with so many notches on his guns that he might need to get new ones soon.

The thing to remember, despite what's about to be discussed in this section of this text, is that your character is not merely a collection of statistics. Your character should feel like a living, thinking, feeling person to you—at least eventually—and should have desires, friends, family, goals, enemies, fears, and all those other things that most normal folk have. This is a long-term goal, though, and won't necessarily come immediately; in fact, it probably won't come immediately. Some of it might, but more likely than not, your character's personality and history will be revealed to you over time, as you play. And that's exactly as it should be.

Now that we've discussed that, let's get right down to it: the mechanics of a character. Your character, rules-wise, is going to be made up of a number of stats and token pools, each of which serves a distinct purpose. Your *skills* are the things that you're good at, in a general sense. Are you athletic? Do you tend to notice things? Do you have skill with arms? Skills cover these kinds of questions. Skills, in turn, have *specialties* associated with them; specialties serve to focus skills, allowing you to excel in specific areas of that skill. You might be pretty good at hitting things from a ways away, for example, but you might be a crack shot with a high-powered sniper rifle. Skills are the broad strokes, while specialties are the details.

Also very important are *assets*. Assets are used to power your skills (among other things), and they generally represent your favored approaches to solving problems, rather than natural aptitude. Do you tend to push your way through problems, or do you handle them with finesse? Tied to assets are *perks*, special mechanical benefits that allow you to use your assets in new ways. There's an implied analogy here, to some extent; perks are to assets what specialties are to skills. They serve to focus the generalities.

Next, you've got *traits.* Traits are what really set you apart from every other person with the same skills and assets as you. They represent elements of your background, natural talents, virtues, vices, social status, group affiliations, magical powers, cybernetic implants or any number of other things. They're double-edged, though, so they can be used against you just as you can use them to your advantage.

A character wouldn't be much without things that were important to her, right? Those are your *drives*. Drives are goals, ambitions, philosophies, religions, concepts, people, or anything else that might be important to you. They guide how your character should act, and they're also going to (more likely than not) be your primary source of Spark (see below).

You've also got *gear*. While every character is pretty much assumed to have the basics implied by their skills, traits, and assets, gear represents those extra-special pieces of equipment, things with a personal attachment or superior quality.

All these things help you overcome challenges, but what happens when the challenges threaten to overcome you? That's where *damage pools* come in. Damage

pools are based on your assets, and they represent how much punishment you can take before bad things start happening to you. They could represent physical trauma, damage to your reputation, or any number of other things. When you take to much damage, you start to suffer *consequences*, which are persistent negative qualities that you have to deal with. You've also got your *Doom Track*, which essentially represents your mortality; when this thing fills up, it's game over.

Finally, there's *Spark*. Spark represents that something special that makes a hero a hero—or a villain a villain. It acts as a way for you to develop your character mechanically over time, as well as a way for you to affect the game world in potentially significant ways. It's a reward mechanic, but it's also a vehicle by which you are able to be the GM for short periods of time.

Skills

Skill Ranks

All skills are based on *ranks*. Ranks are a mechanical way of measuring how competent you are with a particular skill; each rank that you have in a skill allows you to roll one die on a roll utilizing that skill.

Specialties

In addition to your skills ranks, each skill can have one or more *specialties*. A specialty is a specific area of expertise within a particular skill, an area in which you excel. There is no limit to the number of specialties that you can have in a particular skill, and it's possible that more than one specialty could apply to a single roll. In mechanical terms, any time you make a roll in which one or more of your specialties applies, each applicable specialty grants you a +2 bonus. You do not have to spend additional tokens in order to activate specialties; they are activated when their parent skill is activated, provided they apply to the action being performed.

It is possible for a specialty to apply to a roll made with a skill other than the parent skill. For example, you might have a Marksmanship specialty with pistols, and that specialty would likely apply to a Weaponry roll made using a pistol. In such a case, the specialty applies, but it only confers a +1 bonus.

The Skill List

Academia

Academia represents your accumulated knowledge and learning. With a high Academia skill, you have gleaned significant amounts of knowledge from books and theoretical learning. Most of the time, an Academia roll is used to determine what you do and do not know; however, theoretical knowledge often has practical applications, and creative uses of this skill can spell the difference between success and failure in some situations.

When you spend tokens on Academia, you're most likely spending acuity tokens. Spending an acuity token on an Academia roll generally means that you're using a combination of knowledge, perception, and deductive reasoning to puzzle out the problem in front of you. When you spend a grace token on Academia, it could mean that

you're combining your knowledge with flashy turns of phrase and fast-talk in order to convince others that you know what you're talking about, even if you don't. When you spend force tokens on Academia, it could represent using sheer willpower to recall information that you need, or forcing yourself to pour over musty old tomes in order to find the answer you seek.

Areas of specialty include, but are not limited to: occult, theology, linguistics, history, natural sciences, earth sciences, literature, philosophy, music, or any other area of theoretical study conceivable.

Athletics

Athletics represents a combination of physical fitness, strength, agility, and pure athletic ability. Those with high Athletics skills are both strong and physically fit, and may even be more resistant to damage, extreme temperatures, diseases, poisons, and other such things. You can also use Athletics in physical combat to represent your degree of skill with unarmed attacks and the martial arts.

Tokens spent on Athletics are usually either force or grace tokens. Spending a force token on Athletics generally represents using brute strength or a very direct approach to overcoming a physical obstacle or attaining a specific goal, or to defeating an opponent unarmed. When you spend a grace token on Athletics, you're probably using speed and agility rather than raw power, whether you're dodging blows, making quick attacks, or even running away. If you spend acuity tokens on Athletics, you might be using a combination of perception and training instead of raw physical ability, perhaps fighting smart instead of fighting hard.

Areas of specialty include, but are not limited to: lifting, running, jumping, physical resistance, hand-to-hand combat, tumbling, or any other type of similar physical activity.

Awareness

Awareness allows you to keep track of what's going on around you. The skill represents your physical senses, as well as less physical senses like intuition or kinesthetic memory. Awareness also covers things like reflexes and reaction time, and even social empathy.

Nine times out of ten, you're going to be spending acuity tokens on Awareness rolls. This doesn't mean that you can't spend force or grace tokens on Awareness, just that the skill isn't particularly well-suited to those token types. You could, for example, spend a force token to represent the fact that you're keeping yourself awake and alert through sheer willpower. Similarly, you could spend a grace token to represent performing an action that requires extreme attention to detail as well as hand-eye coordination.

Areas of specialty include, but are not limited to: sight, smell, touch, hearing, taste, intuition, empathy, kinesthetic memory, reflexes, or other things that require being aware of your environment.

Influence

The Influence skill is primarily social in nature, representing your ability to convince others to do what you want them to do. It does not just represent a skill with

social manipulation, however; Influence also encompasses your social status and even your wealth, as well as other things that might impact how influential you are.

When you spend a force token on Influence, it generally represents dealing with someone in an honest and straightforward manner, though not necessarily a friendly manner; it could range from simple diplomacy to intimidation and brow-beating. If you spend a grace token on Influence, it can mean that you're pulling on flowery words, double-talk, or even outright lying, and might even mean that you're drawing on your social status or using bribes or other methods of subtle coercion. When you use acuity tokens, you're generally trying to appeal to a person's sense of reason. It could mean that you're being honest, but honesty is not a requirement; just that you're using intellect as opposed to pure charisma or force of personality to get what you want.

Areas of specialty include, but are not limited to: bartering, diplomacy, intimidation, interrogation, or other methods of convincing people to do what you want them to do.

Legerdemain

This skill represents your ability to execute acts of fine manipulation, generally with a bent toward trickery. Sleight-of-hand, picking pockets, jury-rigging devices, palming small objects, picking locks, and other such feats of manual manipulation are all uses of the Legerdemain skill.

Grace is easily the most commonly used type of token when it comes to Legerdemain, though this is followed closely by acuity. When you spend a grace token on Legerdemain, it generally means that you're relying primarily on manual dexterity and muscle-memory to perform the act. If you spend an acuity token, you're drawing more on your senses of sight, tough, and hearing and on your training and learned skill. Force tokens generally represent a last resort, using a direct, ungentle method to do what you want, though this usually means that you're not performing the action with any particular subtlety.

Areas of specialty include, but are not limited to: picking pockets, picking locks, sleight-of-hand, concealing items, shoplifting, jury-rigging, and other such methods of fine (and, usually, underhanded) manipulation.

Marksmanship

Marksmanship allows you to shoot things. Bows, guns, slingshots, thrown daggers; if you're more than twenty feet or so away, you're probably using Marksmanship. Closer than that, and you're usually using the Weaponry skill instead.

When you use a force token with Marksmanship, you're effectively shooting from your hip. It represents a quick, direct shot with little finesse or accuracy behind it, but such a shot can be deadly effective nonetheless. When you use a grace token, you're firing a shot that's meant to cripple more than kill. You're lining up a shot, targeting a specific part of your target's anatomy to inflict a very specific injury. When you use acumen, you take your time aiming before shooting. It may not have the style or machismo of other types of shots, but you drastically increase your chance of hitting your target.

Areas of specialty include, but are not limited to: bows, crossbows, pistols, rifles, scatterguns, thrown weapons, and any other weapon that can be used at long range.

Subterfuge

Subterfuge is the skill of deceit. It covers things like lying, but it also covers using disguises, concealing large objects, hiding, sneaking around, and setting ambushes.

Force tokens are very rarely used with the Subterfuge skill, though such a thing is not impossible. It could, for example, represent a straightforward, simple lie or simply hiding quickly behind a large object. When you use grace tokens, you're using agility to keep yourself hidden or silent, or you are using elaborate falsehoods to cover your true intentions. When you use acuity, you're utilizing your environment or the weaknesses of others to remain undetected.

Areas of specialty include, but are not limited to: lying, cheating, disguises, sneaking, hiding, shadowing, ambushing, dirty fighting, or other activities that mask your intentions or presence.

Weaponry

While Athletics can be used to fight unarmed, it takes the Weaponry skill to execute armed, close-quarters combat. Whether you're using a sword, an axe, a stout club, or even firing a gun at point-blank range, Weaponry is the skill for using weapons in melee combat.

Using a force token with Weaponry usually represents using brute strength, attacking with the intent to inflict maximum pain and physical trauma. If you use a grace token, you're attacking with finesse rather than might, using quick, flashy moves to distract your opponent while you attack vital areas. When you use an acumen token, you're fighting with your brain, using your senses and your intuition to find an opening in your opponent's defenses.

Areas of specialty include, but are not limited to: swords, axes, clubs, knives, spears, and other close-quarters implements of destruction, but you could also have a specialty in pistols or some other ranged weapon, to represent skill at point-blank shooting.

Skill X

Skill X is a special case, and is going to be different in every setting. Mechanically, it works the same as the other eight skills, but it will probably be thematically tied to the setting more strongly than the other skills. More on Skill X will be discussed later in this book, in the chapter entitled "Running the Game".

Asset Pools

Actions are accomplished using skills and *asset pools*. Each character has nine skills, each with a number of ranks assigned to it. There are also four basic asset pools that all characters have: force, grace, acuity, and fortune. When you attempt an action in which the outcome is in doubt, you make a skill roll with dice equal to your ranks. During a conflict, you must *spend* at least one token from one of your various asset pools on a skill roll in order to activate the skill that you're using; the type of token (or tokens) that you spend determines what situational bonuses apply to your roll. Outside of a conflict you still spend tokens, but they're recovered somewhat differently (see Regaining Tokens). The asset pools are as follows:

Force: Force tokens represent your ability to accomplish tasks in the most straightforward manner possible. They are used to succeed through brute strength, overwhelming personality, or sheer willpower. When you spend a force token on a roll, you get a +2 bonus on the roll for each force token that you spend.

Grace: Grace tokens represent a combination of finesse and subtlety. They are used to accomplish tasks through charm, agility, speed, or sheer panache. When you use grace, you're drawing on your own strengths or your opponent's weaknesses, or utilizing the environment in some way. When you spend a grace token on a roll, you get to invoke or invert one trait (getting the normal +1 to +3 bonus or inflicting a -1 to -3 penalty on an opponent) for the duration of the roll. If you use a grace token to invoke or invert a trait that you've already spent fortune to invoke or invert, you double its effect for the duration of the roll. You can't gain more than double benefit from a single trait, though each grace token spent allows you to invoke or invert one trait.

Acuity: Acuity tokens are used to represent training and focus. They are used to draw upon your knowledge, intelligence, aptitude, and perceptiveness. When you spend an acuity token on a roll, every applicable specialty grants an additional +1 bonus; multiple acuity tokens grant cumulative benefits.

Fortune: Fortune tokens represent luck, fate, divine providence, and other such intangible, ephemeral forces. When you spend a fortune token on a roll, you can re-roll two dice for each fortune token spent, taking the new roll. You have to re-roll your dice before your roll is compared to the opposing roll. In addition, fortune tokens can be used for any of the following purposes:

- You may spend a fortune token in order to invoke a trait—either yours or another player's—for one scene (see below).
- You may spend a fortune token in order to invert a trait—either a scene trait or another player's—for one scene (see below). If you invert another player's trait, that player gets a fortune token.
- You may spend one fortune token after determining the result of a roll (that is, after you've compared it to the opposing roll) in order to re-roll a single die of your choice and take whichever result you want, including a kismet die (see below).
- You may spend one fortune token in order to eliminate points of temporary consequences equal to your current fortune tokens (including the one just spent).
- You may spend one or more fortune tokens in order to have a *stroke of luck*. This, in effect, allows you to briefly take control of the narrative, steering it in a direction that might benefit your character or his allies. For example, you might spend fortune tokens to decide that a subway train's emergency kit has an air horn in it, or to establish the fact that you're good friends with a local bartender and information broker, or even to 'remember' that you hid a wad of cash under a loose floorboard in your house, just in case. The cost of a stroke of luck varies depending on how potent it is, and should be handled on a case-by-case basis and agreed upon by both players and the GM. By way of example, the aforementioned air horn might cost only 1 token, while the wad of cash might cost 2 or 3, or even more if cash plays a major role in the current game. Note that it's possible, through a stroke of luck, to add traits to a conflict, which you can

then use to your advantage. In this case, the act of adding the trait also activates it for one round.

Unlike other asset pools, you have a starting value for your fortune pool, which your pool defaults to at the beginning of every chapter. However, you can (and probably will) hold more fortune tokens than your starting value. You do not automatically regain all of your spent fortune tokens at the end of the scene as with other asset pools (see below); instead, fortune tokens are always effectively spended, recovering in the following ways:

- The GM or another player may invert one of your traits for one scene (see Traits) by giving you a fortune token. In addition, any time the GM invokes a scene trait for the remainder of a scene, all players gain one fortune token.
- Your fortune tokens reset to their starting value at the beginning of every chapter.

Regaining Tokens

During a conflict, you regain spent force, grace, and acuity tokens at a rate of one token of your choice per round. At your option, you can spend an entire round recovering, performing only actions that require no token expenditure. If you do so, you recover all spent tokens for one of your asset pools. At the end of the conflict, you regain all spent force, grace, and acuity tokens.

The GM tells you when you recover a spent token (or multiple spent tokens) outside of a conflict. Typically this is in response to a specific action or event, something that would allow you to regain some of your spent effort; for example, learning some tidbit of information might allow you to recover a spent acuity token, while overcoming an obstacle in your way might recover a spent force token. In addition, you recover all spent tokens at the end of the scene, or at the beginning of a conflict (whichever comes first), representing either rest during down-time or the surge of adrenaline you get from entering a conflict.

Reflexive Rolls

A *reflexive roll* is a roll that takes almost no conscious effort on your part to make. Examples of an action represented by a reflexive roll could be noticing something small but in plain view, resisting the effects of a poison, determining initiative order in a player-versus-player conflict, or something similar.

When you make a reflexive roll, the GM chooses which skill you get to use ("Make a reflexive Awareness roll"); this roll does not use any of your assets, though you can choose to spend an asset token on the roll in order to improve your chances of success. You can spend fortune tokens to power traits, and other aspects of your character such as drives and skill specialties apply as normal.

Pushing a Roll

Whenever you roll marks above and beyond what you need to merely accomplish a task, you get to *push* the roll. The effects of the push are dependent on the kind of roll you're making (attack, block, or neither) and the asset used on the roll (though you can also push on reflexive rolls). Rolling the exact number of marks needed doesn't allow you to push; that's a qualified success, barely sliding by. However, every mark that you roll beyond what you need allows you to push once.

Effects of Pushing

Now, that all makes sense, but what does pushing actually do? In game terms, it can either give you a mechanical bonus or a story- or role-playing-related benefit. Use the following as guidelines:

- When you push an attack, you can simply push for damage. An attack with no net marks effectively connects but does no damage (though it may have story effects). However, each net mark you roll allows you to push for one point of damage. You can also, instead of pushing for damage, push to create a temporary trait that you (or someone else) can later invoke. A temporary trait lasts for the rest of the round and all of the following round, plus one additional round per additional push that you devote to it.
    - When you make a physical attack, you might knock the wind out of your opponent (force), disarm him (grace), or strike a vital or painful area (acuity).
    - When you make a social attack, you might browbeat your opponent into temporary submission (force), distract her with your witty repartee (grace), or make some extremely pointed comment that strikes a nerve (acuity).
    - When you make a mental attack, you might strike fear into your opponent's heart (force), cause a distraction or diversion (grace), or spot a fleeting weakness that you can exploit (acuity).
- When you block, each push allows you to negate one token of damage from an attack. If you have extra pushes left over (or if you choose to simply take some of the damage), you can use those pushes to make a reflexive counterattack. This roll requires no tokens and is considered to be made with the same skill that you used to block. You get your full ranks and any relevant specialties, traits, gear, et al, but the maximum number of dice you can roll for your counterattack is equal to the number of pushes that you devote to it. A counterattack is usually directed at the opponent who attacked you in the first place, but it need not be. If your counterattack results in any pushes, they follow the rules for attacking.
- When you make a roll that is neither an attack nor a block, pushing can be used for either reflexive follow-on actions or story benefits.
    - When you make a follow-on action, it uses the same skill as the original action, and any relevant specialties traits, or other modifiers apply to it; it requires no token expenditure. However, the maximum number of dice you can roll on a follow-on action is equal to the number of pushes you devote to it. It's possible to create a chain of multiple follow-on actions from a single 'catalyst' action, with enough pushes available.
    - When you gain story benefits, you get to describe the benefits you get, within reason. A qualified success generally means that you just barely achieve what you wanted to; for example, you might just barely open that lock with your Legerdemain skill, but it's probably noisy and messy and it might have damaged your tools. A single push might allow you to preserve your tools, while a second might allow you to pick the lock silently and with no real traces of your passage. A third push might allow you to pick it with exceptional speed, while a fourth might allow you to

pick the lock in such a way that it immediately locks once you close the door again, revealing virtually no trace of your passage at all.

- Regardless of what you're doing, pushing with fortune generally means that outside forces—such as luck, fate, divine will, or the goodwill of others—intercede on your behalf. A fortune push on an attack roll might mean that the enemy is blinded by the sun or that someone else cuts him with a verbal barb that helps your case. A lucky counterattack might represent the enemy stumbling backward over a rock or it might mean that the crowd turns against him, shouting at him and demoralizing him. A follow-on action or story benefit based off of fortune pushes could be virtually any act of serendipity.

Perks

Perks are special abilities that you pick up along the way, tied to one of your four asset pools. They are usually learned, though some perks are inborn abilities that can manifest later in life. The thing that separates perks from other some other aspects of your character is that they are specifically defined rather than being open-ended. Some, like other qualities, are activated by spending tokens, while others are always active. There is a list of perks later on in this book, though you should not consider this list exhaustive. The perks list can—and should—change and grow based on the needs of the setting and the specific game.

Traits

Traits are things that make your character special. Each trait represents something unique about your character, though it does not always represent something that your character is good at. When you create a trait, you come up with a phrase that says something about your character. For instance, you might have a trait called "mean right hook", or another one called "criminal". Ideally, traits should be double-edged swords, rather than being wholly positive or wholly negative. Though there is no specific rule against making a trait that is completely positive or completely negative, consider what traits are used for.

You can *invoke* one of your traits by spending a fortune token; if the trait is clearly very relevant to the action being performed (such as activating your "mean right hook" trait while punching someone), you get a +3 bonus on the roll. If it's only moderately appropriate (such as using the same trait while fighting with a baseball bat), you get a +2 bonus. If it's only tangentially appropriate (such as using the strength implied by that trait to throw a baseball), you only add a +1 bonus. Further, the GM can *invert* one of your traits by giving you a fortune token. Similar guidelines apply for appropriateness of the trait to the situation, except that an inverted trait imposes a penalty. Thus you should keep in mind that, if you have a trait that is only positive (such as "strong"), it can't be used against you, but you won't get any fortune tokens from it, either. Similarly, if you have a trait that is only negative (such as "weak"), you will probably get a lot of fortune tokens from it, but it will impede you frequently and you won't usually be able to use it to your advantage.

Scenes can have traits, as well; these operate in the opposite manner as your own traits. The GM can invoke a scene trait by giving a fortune token to every player involved in the scene, and doing so invokes it for the rest of the scene. In addition, you

can invert a scene trait for the rest of the scene by spending a fortune token. An invoked scene trait imposes a penalty on your rolls, while an inverted scene trait grants you a bonus. Note that, when you invert a scene trait, it's only inverted for you; it remains invoked for everyone else.

Drives

All characters have things that are important to them, and these are represented by *drives*. A drive could be anything from "fame and glory" to "my little sister" to "Catholicism" to "doing the right thing"; all that matters is that it is something that is important to your character.

At the start of a chapter, you can put one token on one of your drives. When you act in a manner that furthers or is in accordance with one of your drives, the GM may reward you with a drive token, which you then put on that drive. Any time you perform an action in which one or more of your drives is a significant factor, you can spend any number of tokens on that drive in order to increase your chances of success; each token that you spend grants you a +2 bonus to the roll. In addition, if the action is successful, you gain one Spark as a result (you never gain more than one Spark per roll). However, if you act contrary to one of your drives, you immediately lose one token from that drive. Also note that you can't gain a drive token from a roll that you spend drive tokens on; you have to either gain one or spend one or more, not both.

Sometimes drives change. Given sufficient justification, you can change the nature of one of your drives at any time. Doing so can be advantageous, allowing you to accumulate drive tokens more quickly and reap their rewards more often. However, any tokens built up on the discarded drive are lost.

In addition, it's entirely possible for you to complete a goal represented by one of your drives. When this happens, any drive tokens on that drive are immediately converted into Spark, on a one-for-one basis. Furthermore, you get a new drive to replace the old drive, with a free drive token automatically allocated to it.

Finally, at the end of the chapter, any remaining drive tokens that you've built up but not spent get pooled with your remaining fortune tokens and are converted into Spark at a rate of 1 Spark per 2 fortune/drive tokens. As mentioned above, you start every chapter with 1 drive token, placed in the drive of your choice.

Gear

Most of the time, you shouldn't worry too much about the stuff you carry around. You're assumed to have just about everything you need in order to get the job done; if you've got ranks in Legerdemain and a "lockpicking" specialty, chances are you've got lockpicks. If you're good at fighting with Weaponry, you probably have a sharp sword at your side. When you're talking about *gear* as a character quality, though, it means really special equipment, stuff that can really help you out in a pinch. A piece of gear has a rating, from 1 to 3. This rating means different things, depending on what kind of gear it is, as follows.

- A *buff* is a piece of gear that provides a static bonus to appropriate dice pools. Whenever you make a roll using the gear for its intended purpose—using a gun to shoot someone, or using a fancy suit to impress someone—you gain a bonus on the roll equal to its rating. So a rating 2 sword would give you a +2 bonus on

attack rolls or block rolls using that sword, but it wouldn't give you that same bonus if you were using it to threaten someone, or to pry open a door.

- A *lucky charm* grants you a pool of dice instead of a static bonus, equal to three times its rating. You can use these dice on whatever rolls you want (assuming sufficient justification exists), but once you use a die from the gear's pool, it's gone for the rest of the chapter (the pool replenishes at the beginning of the next scene, though). A good example of this would be a lucky coin, which could influence just about any roll, but its luck won't hold out forever. In addition, you can voluntarily limit the influence of a lucky charm in order to increase its dice pool. For every skill that you exclude from its influence at creation, you can add 1 die to its total number of dice. For example, if you decided that your rating 3 lucky coin didn't help at all with Academia, it would grant 10 dice per chapter, but you wouldn't be able to use it on any Academia rolls.
- A *font of healing* is gear that grants you a pool of points that you can use to eliminate damage tokens that you're currently suffering from, or even temporary consequences. A font of healing grants you points equal to twice its rating. Each point can be spent to remove one token from your fear, doubt, or pain pools, while two points can be spent to remove a kismet token. These points must last you the whole chapter, though; they replenish at the start of every chapter, not every scene (as with a lucky charm). A first aid kit might be a font of healing, as could a magical pendant or bag of herbs. In addition, you can restrict the gear's effects in order to increase your pool of points; excluding fear, doubt, or pain from its area of influence increases the point total by 1 each, while excluding kismet increases it by 2. For example, you might have a flask of whisky that can dull pain and steady your nerves (allowing you to heal pain and fear), but does nothing to overcome doubt or to treat real, lasting damage (kismet). At rating 2, that flask of whisky would grant you 7 points, each of which could be used to heal either pain or fear. You can also use a font of healing to eliminate a temporary consequence (with sufficient justification); you can spend 3 points to overcome 1 point of temporary consequences.

Damage

When you take damage, damage tokens go into one or more of four damage pools; the damage pools are pain, doubt, fear, and kismet. Each damage pool (except for kismet) has a threshold determined by two of your assets; this threshold represents the amount of that type of damage that you can take safely, before it starts to affect you. Once you've put tokens equal to your threshold in a damage pool, you can continue to do so, but each additional token that you put in that damage pool forces you to take a consequence appropriate to the type of damage suffered. Kismet damage is unlike fear, pain, or doubt (see below).

Whenever you take damage tokens, the GM tells you which type or types of damage you take, and how many of each. Usually the type you're risking taking will be obvious; if someone is attacking you physically, you'll probably take pain, while if someone is browbeating you with insults and threats, you'll usually take doubt. You can, at your option, spend a fortune token to decide for yourself what kind of damage you take

(though you have to justify the change), and you can always put damage in your kismet pool instead.

You can also, at your option, willingly take damage tokens independent of an attack in order to gain the benefit of having spent one of the corresponding types of asset tokens. For example, you could take a fear token when performing an action in order to gain the benefits of having spent a force token or an acuity token. Note that you can take kismet tokens voluntarily, as well; doing so immediately provokes a kismet roll (see below), but also grants you one fortune token.

Pain: When you take pain damage, you are usually suffering some form of physical trauma. Pain usually has overt symptoms—cuts and bruises, for example—though this is not always the case. Pain is usually inflicted in physical conflicts, where physical injuries are possible. Consequences gained from pain usually take the form of physical injuries, such as a broken leg or punctured lung. Your pain threshold is equal to your force plus grace, divided by two (rounded down).

Doubt: Doubt is almost the opposite of pain, representing damage that you deal to yourself, as a result of failure or perceived failure, or a lack of confidence in your own abilities due to the words or actions of others. Doubt most often arises in social conflicts, where words are exchanged and social status is paramount. Consequences gained from doubt usually include lingering feelings of inadequacy, inferiority or superiority complexes, constant, paralyzing anxiety, or other forms of semi-self-inflicted impairment. Your doubt threshold is equal to your grace plus acuity, divided by two (rounded down).

Fear: When you take fear tokens, your self-preservation instincts are kicking into full gear, often to your detriment. Fear can be a powerful and paralyzing force, and can represent fear of injury or death, fear of finding out a horrible truth, or fear of becoming a pariah or social outcast. Fear most often comes from mental sources (and can represent the simple fear of failure), but is the easiest type of damage to justify for any type of conflict. Consequences gained through fear often manifest as phobias or other types of potent, lingering aversions. Your fear threshold is equal to your force plus acuity, divided by two (rounded down).

Kismet: Kismet works differently from the other damage pools. Kismet tokens represent your mortality, your fate, and the forces that conspire against you. They are a combination of external forces working against you, as well as your desire to simply let them win. Any time you take damage tokens, you can choose to put them in your kismet pool. In addition, there is no limit applied to your kismet pool, and you do not gain consequences from kismet damage. Every time you gain one or more kismet tokens from a single attack, you must roll one die for every kismet token you currently have (including the ones you just gained). These dice are chance dice; they roll a mark on a 5 or 6, but they result in a hitch on a 1 or 2. Every hitch that you score on a kismet roll advances your Doom Track by one step. If you don't roll any hitches, you suffer no ill effects . . . this time. If you don't roll any hitches *and* you roll at least one mark, you gain one Spark for each mark that you rolled. Marks rolled do *not* cancel out hitches; if you roll even a single hitch on a kismet roll, all marks are ignored.

Healing

At the end of the scene, all pain, doubt, and fear tokens are removed from your character. However, your kismet tokens are removed at a much slower rate. At the end of every scene, you may remove one kismet token from your character; at the end of the chapter, any remaining kismet tokens are removed. Kismet represents much more lasting damage than do the other damage pools.

The Doom Track

The *Doom Track* represents the path that brings you to your ultimate end. Your Doom Track has a maximum of 24 steps on it (though in reality, you'll probably be using far fewer); at character creation, underline the number on your Doom Track equal to twice your fortune rating (or 24, whichever is lower); this is the end of your Doom Track. Every time you roll a hitch on a kismet roll, you mark off the lowest unmarked number on your Doom Track. When you mark off the space at the end of your Doom Track, your character has met his doom and is no longer playable. For example, if you have a fortune rating of 4 (as most starting player characters do), your character meets his doom when the 8th step on his Doom Track is marked off. This doom may not necessarily be death (though it often is); it may be permanent insanity, crippling fear, permanent incarceration, or even old age; it depends on the circumstances.

At the end of every chapter, you can clear the highest marked off step on your Doom Track. With each passing day that you do not meet your doom, it gets just a little bit further away.

In addition, you can use your drives and spend Spark to clear off steps on your Doom Track. Any time you would normally gain a drive token, you can instead clear the highest marked off step on your Doom Track, representing the surge of confidence that you get from getting that much closer to your goals, and the distance that it puts between you and eventuality. At the end of the chapter, you can also spend Spark to clear marked off Doom Track steps (always starting with the highest marked off step), with each token spent clearing a single step. You are a hero—an extraordinary individual—after all, and fate looks out for you to some extent.

Consequences

Consequences are bad things that happen to you when you take too much punishment. Consequences can represent physical trauma, social stigma, or any other kind of disadvantage. The GM decides what your specific consequences are when you receive them; however, you can spend one fortune token any time you suffer a consequence in order to decide its nature, yourself. Each consequence that you suffer imposes a penalty on any relevant rolls. For example, if you have a consequence of 'injured leg', you'd suffer a -1 penalty to any rolls that require you to use your leg, such as running, jumping, or climbing. In addition, it's possible to suffer the same consequence multiple times, with the penalty being additive. For example, if you suffer the 'injured leg' consequence three times, you would suffer a -3 penalty to appropriate rolls; it effectively increases the severity of the existing consequence. Each point of severity for that consequence counts as a separate consequence for the purposes of recovery. There are four different levels of consequences.

- *Temporary* consequences are fleeting impairments, not lasting injuries. They go away at the end of the scene (it's usually easier for the GM to keep track of these, to avoid unnecessary scribbling and erasing on your character sheet).
- *Lasting* consequences are slightly more persistent. You lose all lasting consequences at the end of the chapter.
- *Permanent* consequences are almost always the result of barely escaping your doom. They do not go away on their own; the only way to get rid of permanent consequences is to buy them off with Spark (more on that later).

Spark

Throughout the game, you will earn *Spark* for furthering your character's goals, for overcoming adversity, and for other things. Spark is, put simply, *Saga's* reward mechanic, though it's a bit more than that, too. You can spend Spark to increase your character's statistics at the end of a chapter, as well as to diminish those aspects of your character that are working against you (like consequences, or your Doom Track).

However, character advancement is not the only use for Spark. You can also spend Spark in order to gain narrative control, effectively taking on the roll of the GM briefly. The scope of this aspect of Spark is not governed by any form of rules mechanic; instead, it is—and should be—governed by you and your gaming group, and by what you, the GM, and the other players feel is just *right*. Simply put, you can spend a Spark in order to make up a fact about the world, or describe a scene, or otherwise become the GM for a minute or two.

Gaining narrative control consists of two parts; while these are rough mechanical guidelines, they are just that: guidelines. You and your group can feel free to ignore or change them as you see fit. First, you make an *offer*. Similar to making an offer in improvisational theater, you push one of your Spark tokens into the middle of the table and describe the fact or scene that you're making up. You might offer up the fact that your cousin is the mayor of the town you're currently in, or you might say that magic works more strongly at night, under the full moon. You have to direct your offer at someone, and that someone has to be the person that your offer most affects. In most cases, when you're changing things about the game world, that person will be the GM. In some cases, however, it might be one of the other players; for example, you might make an offer to another player that changes some aspect of his history or personal goals.

The second part is *acceptance*, when the person you make your offer to either accepts your offer or does not. If you're making your offer to the GM and he accepts, he simply takes your Spark and allows your offer to become part of the game. If he rejects it, you get your Spark back. If he's particularly pleased with your offer, he might allow it and *also* allow you to keep your Spark, effectively allowing you narrative control for free.

If another player accepts your offer, that player allows the offer to affect her character and takes your Spark, placing it in her own Spark pool. If the GM thinks that the offer was particularly good, he may reward you with a Spark, as well (allowing you to effectively break even).

Character Creation

When you create a new character, you follow the following steps:

1. *Character Concept:* First and foremost, you come up with a character concept. Whether you're a grizzled gunslinger or a smooth-talking politician, you need to know what kind of character you want to play before you start picking priorities and assigning ranks.
2. *Prioritize Assets or Assign Asset Points:* Then you assign priority to your force, grace, and acuity asset pools: one as primary, one secondary, and one tertiary. Your primary asset has a rating of 5, your secondary has a rating of 3, and your tertiary asset has a rating of 1. Regardless of these choices, all players start with a fortune pool value of 4. In addition, you may choose a perk for either your primary asset or for fortune. At your option, you can instead assign a number of points to your assets, buying them a la carte. When you do so, each of your four assets starts with a rating of 1. You then have 9 points to distribute amongst them, with one caveat: to increase one of your assets beyond a rating of 5 costs an extra point (so a rating of 8 would cost you 8 points rather than the normal 7). You still gain one perk for free, though it must be assigned to an asset with a rating of at least 4. This option allows for more customization, but it tends to take longer, and it can create characters who suffer from generalist syndrome, or who are over-specialized.
3. *Prioritize Skills or Assign Skill Points:* Next, you assign priority to your skills, choosing which are important to you and which are not. You may choose two primary skills, three secondary skills, and all other skills are rated as tertiary. Your two primary skills start with 4 ranks while your secondary skills have 2 ranks each; all of your tertiary skills start with 0 ranks. In addition, you may choose one specialty for each of your primary skills. At your option, you can instead assign a number of points to your skills, similar to the a la carte option for asset generation. When you use this method, all of your skills start at 0 ranks, and you have a pool of 14 points to distribute amongst them. Note that your sixth or eleventh rank in a skill costs an extra point (so 11 ranks would cost you 13 points). In addition, you can assign a specialty to two of your skills, provided you have at least 4 ranks in that skill. It's possible to create a jack-of-all trades character with this option, but that character will truly be a master of none.
4. *Determine Traits:* The fourth step is to come up with traits for your character. Each character starts with five traits, which you come up with on your own. Bear in mind that traits should be double-edged. If a trait is entirely positive, you won't gain any fortune tokens from it, while if it's entirely negative, you won't be able to gain any bonuses from it.
5. *Determine Drives:* Every character gets three drives, three things that are important to him or her above all else. Players should come up with drives that are likely to come into play from time to time, and that are likely to generate interesting role-playing opportunities.
6. *Determine Gear:* You also start with one or more pieces of gear. The only limit is that no single piece of gear can have a rating higher than 3, and the combined rating of all of your starting gear cannot be higher than 5.
7. *Spend Finishing Points:* Finally, you get 12 finishing points to spend as you wish, as follows:

- You may increase one of your assets by 1 point for 4 finishing points. Doing so increases the threshold of its corresponding damage pools, as well; increasing fortune increases your Doom Track as appropriate.
- You may purchase skill ranks at a rate of 1 rank for 3 finishing points.
- You may purchase skill specialties for 1 finishing point each, provided you have at least 1 rank in the parent skill.
- You may purchase a new trait for 3 finishing points.
- You may purchase perks for 2 finishing points each.
- You may purchase gear for finishing points equal to twice its rating.

Character Advancement

As you play, you will earn Spark that you can use to improve your character at the end of the chapter. Spark is earned in the following ways:

- Whenever you make a kismet roll, any marks rolled grant you one Spark each. This represents the lessons you learn from overcoming adversity.
- Any time you spend a drive token on a roll that succeeds, you gain one Spark. This represents the confidence that you gain from furthering your goals. Note, however, that you can't get more than one Spark from a single action in this manner, regardless of how many drive tokens you spend on the action.
- Whenever one of your drives is completed or attained, any tokens on that drive are immediately converted to Spark on a one-for-one basis, and you gain a new drive with 1 drive token allocated to it. This represents the surge of confidence that you gain from attaining a goal or completing an important task.
- At the end of the chapter, all of your fortune tokens and remaining drive tokens are pooled and are traded in for Spark at a rate of 1 Spark for 2 fortune/drive tokens (rounded up). This represents the fact that you are a hero (or villain), an exceptional individual.

You can then spend this Spark in order to improve your character's abilities. You can spend Spark in the following ways:

- You can increase the rating of one of your assets by one point by spending Spark equal to your current rating plus 1. This also increases your corresponding damage pool (or Doom Track, in the case of fortune).
- You can increase the ranks of one of your skills by spending 3 Spark, +1 Spark per 5 full ranks you have in that skill.
- You can purchase a skill specialty by spending 2 Spark, provided you have at least 1 rank in the parent skill.
- You can purchase one trait by spending 5 Spark.
- You can eliminate one point of severity from a consequence by spending 2 Spark.
- You can purchase one perk for 3 Spark.
- You can purchase gear for Spark equal to twice the gear's rating.
- You clear off the highest marked off space on your Doom Track by spending 1 Spark.

Chapter 2: Rules Systems

All role-playing games have various systems of rules used to adjudicate various situations, and *Saga* is no different in that regard. By now, you're already familiar with some of these—those governing what your character can do and what can be done to him—but there are other rules that are used to govern the world at large.

Game Time

For the sake of being able to keep track of discrete chunks of your game, time in *Saga* is broken down into a number of pieces. Perhaps predictably, perhaps appropriately, the largest unit of time is called the *saga*. A saga is, put simply, an entire story arc, from beginning to end, or even a collection of related story arcs. To put it in terms of literature, an entire book would be a saga, but an entire trilogy (or larger series of books) could also be considered a single saga. In television terms, you could designate one season as a saga, but you could also make a saga that consisted of the entire series as a whole. Like many things in *Saga*, game time is fluid and flexible.

A saga, in turn, is broken down into *chapters*. A chapter is a smaller story arc or segment of a story arc that is part of the greater whole. To continue the above analogy, a chapter in *Saga* is equivalent to a chapter in a book, or a single episode of a television series. A chapter is often—but not necessarily—a single game session.

Chapters are further broken down into *scenes*. Each scene is a segment of time that revolves around a specific event or set of related events, such as a town meeting, a car chase, or a bank holdup.

Sometimes, but not always, a scene will contain a *conflict*. A conflict is simply when there's an extended event where the outcome is in question. A fight might be a conflict, or a game of chess, or even the process of doing research in a library. Conflicts can be physical, social, mental, or any combination of the three.

Finally, conflicts are divided into *rounds*. A round is a variable amount of time; it could be three seconds, it could be an hour, depending on the scope of the conflict. During any given round, the characters get to perform their actions and spend their resources, and they get to recover some of their resources each round, as well.

Basic Mechanics

All tasks in *Saga* utilize the same resolution system: you roll one or more six-sided dice, and each die that comes up a five or six generates a *mark*. Your roll is then compared to the roll of another set of dice, called an *opposing roll*, rolled by either the game master or another player. If your roll generates more marks than the opposing roll, your action is successful.

When you perform a task that isn't specifically opposed by another character—such as breaking down a door, picking a lock, or shooting a bottle at long range—the roll is called a *challenge*. Every challenge has a rating, a number of dice (called *challenge dice*) rolled by the GM in opposition to your roll. Should you roll more marks than the GM rolls on his challenge dice, your action is successful. If you roll fewer, your action fails. A tie generally goes to the player, indicating success, though this is usually considered a *qualified success*. When you roll a qualified success, you succeed in your action, but just barely. Often your success is messy, loud, clumsy, or otherwise sub-optimal, and occasionally it might mean that it is accompanied by some negative effect.

For example, you might break your lock picks in the process of opening a lock, or injure your shoulder while breaking down the door. Normally the GM describes what happens, though you can spend a fortune token in order to describe the negative side-effect yourself.

When your roll is opposed by that of another character, this is called a *contest*. Both parties roll the appropriate number of dice, and the character with more marks is successful. For example, if you swing a sword at another character, you would roll for your sword swing while the other character rolls for her defense. If you succeed, your sword connects, while if she succeeds it does not. A tie generally goes to the defender, though if there is no clear defender it could result in a neutral outcome.

In any given successful roll, your number of *net marks* is important. Your net marks are determined by subtracting the opposing roll's marks from your own. A single net mark is enough for a definitive success, though each additional net mark may improve the final result of the roll, allowing you to push.

Resolution without Rolling

There will be times, particularly when you're playing to your own strengths, when you might be rolling huge handfuls of dice. To make things a little easier, any time you roll dice to resolve an action (in other words, any roll other than a kismet roll), you can trade dice in for automatic marks. For every three dice you trade in, you get one automatic mark on the roll. You can trade in as many dice as you want to, and roll any remaining dice. Note that this rule is usually more advantageous when you're rolling lots of dice.

For example, if you're rolling fifteen dice, you could trade them all in for five marks (which might be enough for you to succeed and even push a few times), or you could trade in six of those dice for two marks and roll the other nine. If you're only rolling six dice in the first place, though, trading them all in for two marks might not be to your advantage, especially if you're attempting to do something difficult. Sometimes it's better to take a risk than to play it safe.

Challenge Dice and Ally Dice

Any given task (unless it is opposed by another player) is opposed by a number of *challenge dice*. As previously explained, if you get more marks than the GM's challenge dice, you succeed; if you tie, you get a qualified success. The number of challenge dice varies by task; typically, 1-5 challenge dice represents something easy to overcome, like vaulting over a low wall, while a very difficult challenge like leaping over a twenty-foot chasm might carry a challenge rating of 6-15 dice. Exceptionally difficult tasks carry challenges of 16 or more dice. For very difficult challenges, it's possible for players to cooperate, pooling their skills. When you do so, you and your friends should describe who's doing what and how you're each contributing to the overall task. The GM then divides the task's challenge dice amongst all participating player characters, as appropriate. Everyone should make their rolls at more-or-less the same time, but if even a single roll fails, it's possible that the whole task could fail (this depends largely upon what the task is, and which rolls failed; it should be judged by the GM on a case-by-case basis).

Sometimes the players might have allies, non-player characters who can help with the completion of a task. Rather than making up a separate character for each NPC that might be useful in a given situation (which could bog down play if some of these NPCs were created on the fly), the GM can simply represent their assistance as *ally dice*, bonus dice that are added to appropriate rolls made by the player characters. Ally dice can be seen as a mirror to challenge dice; 1-5 ally dice might represent a single ally with few skills, while a whole group of highly skilled allies might provide 6-15 ally dice. Similarly to challenge dice, ally dice can be divided amongst multiple player characters, when you and your friends are cooperating on a single task or trying to accomplish multiple tasks simultaneously.

Bonuses and Penalties

Your dice pool can be affected in two ways: with a bonus or a penalty. A *bonus* comes from something good, like a skill specialty, a trait, a well-crafted weapon, or something similar. A bonus adds dice to your roll, which act the same as the other dice that you already had. For instance, if you have three ranks in Academia and you're using a book that adds a +2 bonus on Academia rolls, you'd roll five dice and count any marks.

A *penalty* subtracts dice from your roll. These usually come from consequences, though traits can cause penalties, as well. Note that your dice pool can never be reduced below a single die as a result of penalties. However, if a penalty would logically give you zero or fewer dice, your roll becomes a *chance roll*. You can score a mark as usual with a chance roll; however, if you roll a 1 or 2 on a chance roll, you suffer a dramatic failure of some sort. Usually this translates into either damage or a temporary consequence that lasts until the end of the scene, though GMs are encouraged to be creative.

Conflicts

Whenever an extended or complicated action or event has an outcome that is in doubt, you're talking about a conflict. Most simple actions (breaking down a door, picking a lock, jumping from one rooftop to another) can be resolved with a simple challenge, but anything more complicated should become a conflict.

Round Sequence

In most conflicts, the players will all take the same side while the GM takes the side of the opposition. In conflicts such as this, the order of phases is as follows:

1. Setup
2. Player Actions
3. GM Actions
4. Token Recovery

Setup: During this phase, the GM determines which elements of a conflict will be used against which players. The GM need not use all of a conflict's elements in a single round, though nothing prevents him from doing so either. While allocating elements, the GM describes the scene in ways suggested by where the elements are being allocated and what (if any) traits are being activated.

Player Actions: The players can declare their actions in whatever order they wish, and this order can change from round to round; the person who acted first last turn need not

act first in every subsequent turn. Generally, players will be planning on making launching their own attacks to defeat their opponents, though players are not limited to attacking opponents that are attacking them. Depending on how an action is described, it's entirely possible that a player could attack an element allocated to another player, or even an element not being used. Players may perform as many actions as they want to during a single round, but each action has to be activated by the expenditure of an asset token. Any given action can be declared as an attack, a block, or as neither.

GM Actions: Once the players have acted, the GM's conflict elements get their turn to act. Each conflict element can make a single attack and a single block, or can make two attacks. At the GM's option, this phase can come before the players' actions; however, if this happens, each player gains one fortune token. This can be decided on a round-by-round basis. During this round, players can spend tokens to take block actions opposing the GM's attacks.

Token Recovery: At the end of the round, all players regain one spent token of their choice. If a player takes no actions during a round, he regains all spent tokens for a single asset pool. If there is a pool of ally dice available, and any of them have been used, the pool refreshes completely during this phase of a conflict.

Player vs. Player Conflicts

In the case of a conflict involving players on more than one side, the Player Actions phase is broken down into multiple sub-phases, one for each player. In addition, each player should make an Athletics or Awareness roll (reflexive; no token expenditure is required) to determine turn order, with the highest number of marks going first, the second-highest second, and so on. In the case of a tie, use the number of ranks in the given skill as a tie-breaker. If it's still a tie, re-roll.

If there are ally dice available in a player-versus-player conflict, it's usually necessary to divide them amongst the sides in the conflict, as different allies take different sides.

Conflict Elements

Each conflict has a number of components, called *elements*, associated with it. Elements are used to represent individual opponents or even groups of opponents, or major obstacles in the players' way. Each element has three dice pools: physical, social, and mental. These dice pools are effectively challenge dice, used to oppose player rolls and make the appropriate types of attacks. A physical attack—shooting a gun, for example—would require a roll with the element's physical dice, while an attempt at intimidation would require either social or mental dice. In any given round, an element can take two actions. These actions can be attacks, blocks, or neither, just as with character actions, and they follow the same rules.

Any time damage is dealt to an element, each point of damage reduces the appropriate dice pool by one. Having a dice pool reduced to zero can have differing results, from provoking incoherent rage in an enemy to knocking him unconscious or terrifying him into submission. Having a particular dice pool reduced to zero does not necessarily remove that element from the conflict, but it usually does.

Some elements may also have traits tied to them; these function in the same way as conflict traits, but they specifically affect that element, rather than the entire conflict.

For example, a zombie might have a trait called "Undead Horror" that, once invoked by the GM, might add bonuses to appropriate rolls. Some even have conditions (see below) attached to them, giving them special attacks or abilities that can be used from time to time.

Conditions

Sometimes a conflict is more difficult (or less difficult) as a result of some constant or intermittent effect, something that is more than a simple penalty, as is the case with conflict traits. Sometimes there are ways to end a conflict other than one side being completely defeated. Such things are represented by *conditions*. Conditions can take two basic forms.

Some conditions are constant or intermittent effects, or even one-time effects, that do things that traits simply can't. For example, perhaps the player characters are facing off against a creature of pure nightmare, something so horrible and ancient that it threatens to break their minds. Such a thing might be represented by the following condition:

Creeping Fear: Once per round, each player character must make a reflexive roll to resist the fear (challenge 3), or spend one force token. Failure indicates that the player takes one fear token of damage immediately. Ally dice must make a similar roll each round, or lose one die to damage.

Other conditions might be alternate paths to victory, other ways to end a conflict rather than defeating the opposing conflict elements. As an example, perhaps the player characters are running away from the law, and if they get far enough away they manage to give their pursuers the slip. An alternate victory condition like that could be represented by the following condition:

Hot Pursuit: Every round, each player can make a single Athletics roll, opposed by their pursuers physical dice pools. Each player should keep track of his total net marks over the course of the conflict; all net marks for these rolls are cumulative. Once the player characters get a cumulative total of at least 10 net marks between them, they've managed to escape their pursuers, and the conflict ends in victory. If their pursuers accumulate an equivalent total of net marks, they catch up to the player characters and the conflict's nature changes.

Allies in a Conflict

NPC allies in a conflict can be represented in one of two ways. Extremely important allies (those who the GM wants to have their own turns in the round) can be represented as elements of the conflict, and are handled in much the same way as standard elements. They have the same components: a pool of dice, an attack rating, and a defense rating, as well as any applicable traits. They act at the same time as the rest of the GM's characters, and they can attack and be attacked by other elements of the conflict. Unless there's a compelling reason for them not to, allies represented in this way should start each conflict with a full dice pool. Long-term allies might even get additional dice over time.

Less important allies, or allies who are only with the PCs for a short time, can instead be represented as a pool of ally dice that you and your friends can draw from. The pool is communal, so if there are six ally dice in the pool and you take three of them

for your roll, your friends only have three more to draw upon that round (the pool refreshes at the same time that you get back a token). In addition, it's possible for conflict elements to attack ally dice. When this happens, the GM rolls the dice for the attacking conflict element, while you or one of your friends rolls the ally dice in opposition. Any damage inflicted upon the ally dice reduces the total pool for the duration of the conflict by one die per point of damage.

Attacking and Defending

When you declare an action, you can declare it as either an *attack* or a *block*, or as neither. If an action is an attack, it has the potential to deal damage to the opposition. If it is a block, it has the potential to prevent damage to the player.

When you declare an action as an attack, you roll it as normal and determine its success or failure. If an attack succeeds, you deal damage according to your net marks: each push can be used to deal a point of damage. Each point of damage that you deal reduces the attacked conflict element's challenge in the appropriate area—mental, physical, or social—by one. If you fail, you simply fail to deal any damage and any tokens spent are effectively wasted.

If you declare an action as a block, you can use it to oppose attacks directed against you. A block roll effectively grants you a pool of pushes (provided you actually roll marks) that you can use to cancel out points of damage directed against you on a one-for-one basis. Note that, if you block, you don't necessarily have to block your *own* damage; you can block someone else's damage, provided that you declare that you're doing so when you describe your actions.

You can't declare a single action as both an attack and a block, but you can perform both an attack and a block in a single round, and you can make a roll that is neither an attack nor a block (such as a challenge or contest of some sort). However, each roll that you make in a round requires you to spend at least one token in order to activate the skill being used. There is no prohibition against activating a single skill multiple times in order to do different actions with it.

Stakes

All conflicts have *stakes*. The stakes of a conflict represent what you're risking by entering that conflict, and what kinds of consequences you suffer as a result of that conflict.

Minor Conflict: A minor conflict will have little in the way of lasting consequences for either side. Wounded pride, bruised egos, and slightly tarnished reputations might be about the extent of it. Many social conflicts or duels of wits are minor conflicts. All consequences gained from a minor conflict are temporary consequences.

Serious Conflict: A serious conflict might involve somewhat more than harsh words. While a social conflict can certainly be serious, the consequences are more lasting. A debate in front of a large group, a fist fight, or something of similar severity could be a serious conflict. All consequences gained from a serious conflict are lasting consequences.

Severe Conflict: Severe conflicts often involve dangerous weapons or potent accusations, and the consequences of such a conflict last for quite a while (though time

still allows them to fade, if slowly). All consequences gained from a severe conflict are permanent consequences.

Deadly Conflict: The highest of stakes, a deadly conflict could very well end in a person's death. Pistol duels, sword fights, and other such confrontations are all deadly conflicts. All consequences gained from a deadly conflict are permanent consequences. In addition, any time you take consequences during a deadly conflict, you have to make a kismet roll with at least one die, even if you have no kismet tokens; there's always the threat of doom in a deadly conflict.

Conflict Escalation

If you and your friends are in the middle of a conflict and things don't seem to be going your way, you (or the GM) can choose to escalate the conflict to the next set of stakes. When a conflict is escalated, each player regains all spent force, grace, and acuity tokens, and may remove all damage from either fear, doubt, or pain, or a single kismet token.

Sometimes conflict escalation can cause more harm than good for you and your friends, though. As appropriate to the stakes and nature of the new conflict, the GM might decide that a specific dice pool of a conflict element—one that you've reduced significantly—no longer has any bearing on the conflict. After all, if you're arguing with an officer of the law who's not very good with words, and you decide to escalate it to a gunfight, it's entirely possible that he's considerably more dangerous in such a situation.

Giving In

At any point in time, you may attempt to give in, removing yourself from a conflict and admitting defeat. The advantage of doing so is that you stop accruing damage and, therefore, consequences, and you won't have to make any kismet rolls. In effect, you live to fight another day. However, you've got to be able to come up with a way for your character to be removed from the conflict, and the GM has to approve it. You may give in during a fist fight by being knocked unconscious, or you may simply cede the point to your opponent in a debate.

Conflict Rewards

Not all conflicts have, or even need, rewards associated with them, but those that do should have rewards commensurate with the stakes of the conflict. Rewards can take a number of forms, from gear to temporary (or even permanent) traits to more story-oriented rewards, like access to certain locations or the gratitude of important people. Generally speaking, these rewards should last roughly as long as the consequences associated with the stakes of the conflict would have. That is, the reward for a minor conflict should only last for the rest of the scene, while the reward for a deadly conflict should be more permanent.

Chapter 3: Running the Game

Up until this point, I've been talking to the players and referring to the GM in third person. This chapter, however, is aimed directly at the GM, so when I say 'you', that's who I mean.

So, your players have characters in mind and you want to start playing, but you've never run a *Saga* game before. What do you do? This chapter contains some advice to the fledgling GM, or to more seasoned GMs who simply want to learn the nuances of the *Saga* system. I'm going to go ahead and assume that you've run a game in another system before; as such, I won't be explaining what a role-playing game is, or how to craft a compelling story. Instead, I'm going to focus on how running a game in *Saga* differs from running a game in other systems.

Keep it Loose

Saga's strength lies in the vagueness of the rules. Characters' stats are defined in broad strokes, and things like assets and skills deal in generalities rather than specifics. This allows you—and the players—a great deal of flexibility while playing. It also allows the players—and you—to improvise somewhat. After all, if you've got a skill called "Daggers" and there are no daggers on hand, you've got a problem on your hands. However, if you've got a skill called "Weaponry", a number of options open up to your players.

Similarly, you have flexibility when it comes to creating opposition for your players' characters, a flexibility born of the simplicity of the rules governing non-player characters. It's easy for you to improvise when you don't need full statistics for each of the six thugs that the players pick a fight with in the local bar. All you have to do is come up with physical, mental, and social dice pools, and maybe a few traits to spice things up.

Because *Saga* is intentionally general and vague, it helps to approach scenario creation in the same way. Come up with the generalities, some of the back story—those same broad strokes that define the characters—rather than getting bogged down in every character or every potential conflict. Design a situation rather than a set storyline; after all, with the flexibility and power that the players have in *Saga*, it's pretty likely that they'll do something you don't expect them to do, again and again. If you keep things vague and create the specifics on the fly, in reaction to what your players do, you'll find that playing a *Saga* game is easy and intuitive.

Power to the Players

Saga is designed to give the players a great deal of power and freedom. They can fully stat-out their characters before play even starts, and still have a lot of wiggle room when it comes to defining the specifics of their characters. In addition, players can affect the game world in ways that range from relatively minor—like spending a fortune token to make sure that there's a fire extinguisher handy when it's needed—to pretty major—like making an offer with Spark in order to completely change the nature of the town they're about to visit. This can seem scary to a GM who's not used to his players having that much control over the story. Your initial instinct might be to rein the players in, to make them adhere to the story in your head. Try to overcome this instinct.

Remember that this is *their* story just as much as it is yours. You may be the narrator, but they're the main characters. This ties into the philosophy of reactionary

story-telling that I just explained above. If a player makes you an offer that's really cool, and has the potential of making the story even better, run with it. It'll probably help everyone have a good time, and it'll make the players feel like their decisions affect the world in meaningful ways. And really, they should.

That said; keep in mind that sometimes the world doesn't revolve around the players, great heroes that they may be. Sometimes the main characters make up plot as they go, but sometimes they have plot thrust upon them. Reactionary story-telling is great, and it is a strength of *Saga*, but you also have the power to make offers to your players, and you have the freedom of being able to do so as often as you want, without spending resources like Spark. You shouldn't see this as a license to run roughshod over your players and railroad them into doing what you want them to do, but if it doesn't seem like they're getting anywhere, there's nothing wrong with steering them in the right direction by dropping plot into their midst.

Dealing with Motivations

In an ideal world, role-playing is its own reward. Sometimes you can attain this. A lot of the time, though, you might need a little help and the players might need a little enticing. That's where things like drives and traits can be your best friend.

Whenever a player does something that's particularly in keeping with his character's drives, give him a drive token. Your players should be rewarded for staying in character and for contributing to the game in meaningful ways, and that's really what drives are all about. Remember, though, that you can use them, too. There's nothing wrong with offering a player a drive token in order to entice him to act in a certain way, and if he seems leery, there's nothing wrong with sweetening the deal by offering him one or two more. Drives are not there simply for the players' convenience, after all, and they aren't Spark-filled bubble-gum machines, either. Sometimes their drives will pull on them at the worst times, and if they go along with that, and it helps the narrative, they should definitely be rewarded for it.

You can use traits in a similar way. The players are probably going to use traits a lot to get bonuses, and you might occasionally use them to make things harder on the players (and to give them much-needed fortune tokens). However, don't be afraid to bribe your players with fortune tokens. If you're going to do this, approach it as an offer, similar to what you can do with drives, rather than simply inverting a trait in order to create a role-playing effect. Think of what a trait means, what it implies. If someone's got a trait called 'Cop', you can feel free to hold out a fortune token to her while asking her to act like one; after all, you might need someone to chase down that mugger. As with drives, you can feel free to offer more than one token if you think it's necessary.

Making it Your Own: Skill X

Eight of the nine skills in *Saga* are specifically defined, but are broad enough to cover most actions that a character might want to take. However, when you create your own setting, there's almost always going to be something that you want your players to be able to do that simply doesn't have a perfect mechanical corollary in this system. To that end, Skill X is a setting-specific skill, meant to be defined along with the setting, and meant to be unique to the setting, or at least to the genre.

Skill X can be virtually anything you want it to be. In a dark horror game, it might be Mettle or Courage. In a high fantasy game, it could be Magic. It might be something like Cyberspace for a futuristic cyberpunk game, or Survival for a post-apocalyptic wastelands game. It's even conceivable that, in your setting, Skill X might be character-specific, defined by each player when she makes her character. It's really just a way for you to tweak *Saga* and make it your own, for your own setting.

Appendix 1: Perks

Perks are specifically defined mechanical aspects of your character, but they can very from setting to setting and game to game. Below is a short list of perks that would work well in most games. This should not be considered exhaustive; you can, and should, add more perks when you create your own game with *Saga*.

Agile (Grace)

You have a graceful stance that helps you avoid attacks. When you block, every grace token you spend grants you a +2 bonus to the roll, in addition to any other benefits.

Aware (Acuity)

You are constantly aware of your surroundings. Whenever you recover one or more spent force, grace, or acuity tokens, you automatically recover one additional acuity token.

Better Lucky than Good (Fortune)

You have an uncanny knack with a particular skill, allowing you to rely on luck rather than actual ability from time to time. You can emulate the effects of spending another type of asset token by spending a fortune token. For example, you might spend a fortune token to gain the benefit of spending a force token, instead.

Brave (Force or Acuity)

You have a deep reservoir of courage from which to draw. Once per scene, you can spend 1 force or acuity token in order to reduce your total number of fear tokens by a number equal to your current number of tokens in that asset pool (including the one just spent).

Confident (Acuity or Grace)

You do not allow your doubts to inhibit you. Once per scene, you can spend 1 acuity or grace token in order to reduce your total number of doubt tokens by a number equal your current number of tokens in that asset pool (including the one just spent).

Deliberate (Acuity)

You act with such deliberate precision that you succeed more often than not. After making a roll (but before determining its success or failure), you can spend acuity tokens to roll additional dice, adding any marks to the roll, at a rate of +1 die per acuity token spent.

Destined (Fortune)

You have a greater destiny, and it sometimes intervenes when you are in trouble. Once per scene, you may ignore a single hitch rolled on a kismet roll.

Expert (Acuity)

You have a preternatural affinity for a particular skill. Choose one skill. From now on, if you make a roll with that skill using acuity, you gain a +1 bonus on the roll for each applicable specialty (this is in addition to the normal specialty bonus, with a

minimum benefit of +1). You can take this perk multiple times; each time it must be applied to a different skill.

Heavy-Handed (Force)

You take straightforwardness and unstubtleness to extremes, often to devastating effect. After making a successful attack roll, you can spend force tokens to deal additional points of damage, on a one-for-one basis.

Lucky (Fortune)

Fate seems to smile upon you more often than usual. If you have fewer than 2 fortune tokens at the beginning of a scene, add 2 fortune tokens to your pool.

Nimble (Grace)

You are quick-witted and fleet of foot. Whenever you recover one or more spent force, grace, or acuity tokens, you automatically recover one additional grace token.

Relentless (Force)

You are a force that cannot be denied. Whenever you activate a skill with force and succeed, you get one free force push on that skill (even if you normally would not get any).

Sharp (Acuity)

You have a knack for accuracy and knowledge. Whenever you activate a skill with acuity and succeed, you get one free acuity push on that skill (even if you normally would not get any).

Smooth (Grace)

You always seem able to accomplish tasks with added style. Whenever you activate a skill with grace and succeed, you get one free grace push on that skill (even if you normally would not get any).

Strong-Willed (Force)

You have a deep reservoir of willpower that never seems to run out. Whenever you recover one or more spent force, grace, or acuity tokens, you automatically recover one additional force token.

Tough (Grace or Force)

You can withstand more punishment than normal. Once per scene, you can spend 1 grace or force token in order to reduce your total number of pain tokens by a number equal your current number of tokens in that asset pool (including the one just spent).

Appendix 2: 50 Traits

Traits are one of the more flexible things about characters in *Saga*, and they can really help you to define your character in ways that skills and assets simply can't. Traits allow you to narrow your focus, and they often imply things about your character's background, appearance, or personality. However, sometimes it can be daunting to come up with five traits right off the bat. A generous GM might allow you to define some of your traits during play, once you've figured out what kind of character you really want to play. For a little more help, though, below is a list of 50 example traits (in no particular order).

1. Swagger
2. Lawman
3. Man about Town
4. World Traveler
5. Two Steps Ahead
6. Trick up my Sleeve
7. Winning Smile
8. Face in the Crowd
9. Unpredictable
10. Fastidious
11. Psychic Sensitivity
12. Quiet Grace
13. Perceptive
14. Cold Blue Eyes
15. Quick on the Draw
16. Faith
17. Killer with a Conscience
18. Nobleman's Son
19. Fatalist
20. Charm School Graduate
21. Magical Talent
22. Stubborn
23. Hypocrite
24. Press Pass
25. Trivia Maven
26. First-Person Shooter
27. Quick Reflexes
28. Paranoid
29. Caffeinated Reflexes
30. Mean Right Hook
31. Friends in Low Places
32. Criminal Record
33. Badass
34. Authority
35. I Need a Drink
36. Quick Temper
37. People Person
38. Gamer Geek
39. Movie Buff
40. Old-Fashioned
41. Self-Preservationist
42. I'm a Lover, Not a Fighter
43. Connected
44. 1337
45. Curiosity
46. Skeptic
47. Cybernetic Arm
48. Speed Demon
49. Thrill-Seeker
50. I See Dead People