

WUSHU

The Ancient Art of Action Roleplaying



Black Belt Edition

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Wushu is a roleplaying game where groups of friends sit safely on their asses and tell each other a shared story of high-flying, hyper-stylized action. The emphasis is always on entertainment; this isn't a game where smart tactics and careful resource management lead to clearly-defined victories. It's more like improv theater or a radio play or a drunken bullshit session. The only way to win is to make sure everyone has a good time.



Roger Price (Wikimedia)

This omnibus edition includes new and improved core rules, expanded advice for Directors, and three sample settings for zero-prep play. It also compiles the four Wushu Guides, which provide voluminous examples of play for everything from car chases to ritual magic.

<http://DanielBayn.com/wushu>

PLAYING THE GAME

Since you're reading this, chances are good you'll be the one running the game. (Good on ya!) That means you'll be the facilitator and referee, as well as a player. You'll be responsible for the setting and every supporting character, from helpful allies to epic villains. There's advice just for you under Running the Show, but first we need to cover the basics. These are the core rules that you and your players need to know.

For the most part, your Wushu sessions will play out like this...

You: Ninjas fall from the sky like rain. They create a ring of swords, chains, staves, ginsu knives, green clovers, and purple horseshoes all around you.

Lauren: "I crack my knuckles, curl my fingers into kung-fu fists, and trace a line in front of me with one foot, daring them to cross."

Jeremy: "I throw my arms open wide and an automatic pistol pops into each hand from spring-loaded holsters up my sleeves. I hold the triggers down, spin down onto one knee, and spray them with lead!"

In short: a bunch of creative types with violent tendencies trying to one-up each other with quick bursts of action movie imagery.



Photo Credit: Steve Collis (Wikimedia)

Within the imagined world of your shared narrative, *everything the players describe happens exactly how they describe it*, when they describe it. This is called "the Principle of Narrative Truth" and it's the nitrous that makes Wushu fast and furious. Actions should always be phrased in the present tense: "I kick him," "I fly over that," "They crash through the wall like wrecking balls." No need to wait for the dice to tell you what happens.

However, that doesn't mean the players always get what they want. It's your job to place obstacles in their path. Some of these obstacles will be represented by piles of poker chips. Others will be characters under your control. To overcome either, your players will need dice. Dice are earned by narrating **details** and rolled

against their heroes' defining **traits**. Successful rolls score **hits** on the opposition or defend the heroes from harm. Once your obstacles have been whittled down to nothing, the players get to narrate their victory. It's as simple as that.

Maybe not quite as simple as that...

It's all Geek to me.

If you've never played an RPG before, I might use a few terms that are unfamiliar. I've tried to get away from the usual acronyms (inscrutable ciphers like NPC and GM), but a little definition goes a long way. When I talk about...

Players, I mean the closeted sociopaths who sit next to you at the game table and describe scenes of unspeakable carnage. As opposed to the Director, who is also a player, but has other unspeakable things to do, too.

The Director, I mean the person who's running the game. One person needs to be in charge of guiding the session, setting the scenes, and narrating for the bad guys. Everyone is encouraged to think like a movie director, but players only need to worry about their heroes.

Heroes, I mean the point-of-view characters controlled by the players. You'll learn all about them under **High-Flying Heroes**.

Dice, I mean 6-sided dice, just like you'll find in most board games. Gamers collect strange dice like numismatists collect rare currency

(look it up), but you won't have to worry about that. Just swipe some dice from the Parker Brothers and you're ready to go.

Dice for Details

You'd be surprised how many things can count as a detail: fight choreography, car stunts, one-liners, special effects, camera movements, internal monologue, tactical maneuvers, techno-babble, hocus pocus... anything that's appropriate to your story.

It's up to the rest of your group to let you know if you've strayed too far from the desired tone or genre. If they don't like what they hear, try something else. I refer you to Rule Zero: Don't Be a Dick.

Each detail earns you 1 die. More dice = more control over the next round of the narrative. For example, I would give Jeremy 3 dice for the narration above: 1 for the props (spring-loaded sleeve holsters) and 2 for the stunts (quick-drawing the guns, then shooting in a circle).

A generous Director might divide it up even more...

1. I throw my arms open wide
2. and an automatic pistol pops into each hand from
3. spring-loaded holsters up my sleeves.
4. I hold the triggers down,
5. and spray them with lead!

Your best bet is probably somewhere in between.



Photo Credit: Ashcoounter (Wikimedia)

Dice Pools

For each scene, the Director will set a max number of dice per player per round, usually 4–10. (I default to 5 or 6.) This is called the dice pool Limit. Smaller limits encourage shorter, punchier rounds of narration and give players more chances to alter their dice rolling strategies. Higher limits allow for longer, more elaborate bouts, but fortunes can change drastically from one round to the next.

Once everyone has reached the limit, or is just happy with how many dice they've earned, you all roll at once. (You may have to split your dice into offensive and defensive sets, see below.)

Scoring Hits

Each character will have a number of Traits, each rated from 1–5. Compare the result of each die roll to your character's most relevant Trait, discarding any dice that roll over that number. (If you don't have a relevant Trait, the default is 2.) The remaining dice are your hits. How hitting things works (i.e. well) is explained below. If there's no opposition, you only need one hit to secure victory.

When there is opposition, your conflicts will flow through three phases. First, a round of narration sets the stage. Then, dice are rolled and hits are scored. Repeat until victory is achieved or denied, then the victor(s) get to narrate their success.

Why use dice at all?!

Dice are far less powerful in Wushu than they are in other roleplaying games, but they still serve an important purpose: They provide a mechanical benefit for thrilling stunts and cinematic flourishes. They give players a reason to describe how the force of a punch ripples across a mook's face in slow motion or how the "camera" follows a bullet as it streaks across a crowded nightclub. Rolling dice also injects a certain amount of chaos into the narrative. It's never enough to derail the story, but just enough to keep conflicts interesting.

The first round of a conflict is always freeform. The goals for this round are simple: determine who's in the conflict and what they're

trying to do. In the example above, you introduced a bunch of ninjas and the players described their reactions (i.e. fighting, as opposed to running for cover or trying to talk their way out).

Depending on how much effort you want to put into this scene, you'll create a threat and/or a nemesis (or several nemeses).

Threats are things that stand between the players and their goals: mooks (see below), time bombs, burning buildings, security systems, stubborn witnesses, polite conversation, anything. Place a stack of poker chips (or some other counter) on the table to represent each threat. This is the number of hits the group needs to score before they can narrate victory.

Mooks are a special kind of threat. They're those nameless, faceless goons that infest all action movies: ninjas, robots, gangsters, trolls, soldiers, cops, thugs, whatever. Mowing them down by the dozens, if not hundreds, is a proud wire-fu tradition. Players are free to describe however many mooks they want, wherever they want, in order to describe all the rapid-fire ass kicking they want.

All threats are assumed to score 1 hit per round on any heroes within their reach. (If a hero is off fighting a Nemesis while their friends handle the mooks, you should probably give them a free pass.) This means that the players will always have to worry, at least a little bitty bit, about defense.

Nemeses are, quite simply, your villains. When you want to roll up your sleeves and bloody your narrative knuckles, put opposition characters into the fight. There's no telling how many hits it will take to defeat a nemesis, since they earn and roll dice just like the

players. They have traits and chi (see below), just like the heroes. When fighting a nemesis, whoever takes a hit first loses.

Once all the pieces are in play, everyone narrates themselves their first dice pool (as described above). Then, you let 'em roll!



Photo Credit: Gisling (Wikimedia)

Rolling the Dice

Depending on the circumstances, you may need to split your dice into various pools before you roll. Most of the time, you only have to worry about offense and defense, but complex conflicts may involve multiple threats. Your table should be adorned with at least two colors of dice...

Yang dice are directed against your enemies. They take points off a threat or put nemeses in their place. Sometimes, you may need to split your Yang dice between multiple goals.

Yin dice are for self-defense. One is all you need to take care of the automatic hit from a Threat. A nemesis, on the other hand, might hit you many times in one round. It takes 1 Yin to block 1 Yang.

You score a hit for each die that rolls below, or equal to, your character's most relevant trait. Notice that "hits" can be both offensive and defensive; they can happen in combat and out of combat. Hits tell you who's winning, no matter the game.

As soon as you take a hit, your opponent gets to narrate their coup de grace. Yin dice are your first line of defense, but all heroes can fall back on their **Chi** in times of trouble. At the beginning of each scene (or whenever you feel like allowing it), each player gets 3 Chi tokens. Nemeses can have anywhere from 0–5 Chi, depending on how tough you wanna make 'em. One chi can be cashed in for 1 Yin success *after* the dice are rolled.

You're not out of the fight until you take a hit and can't pay for it. Being at zero Chi means you're brushing plaque from the jaws of defeat, but you're not out of the fight yet.

Continuing our example, Lauren's hero has a trait called "Curiously Strong Chi 4." She goes on the offensive with 5 Yang dice and 1 Yin. She rolls 1,1,1,3,4 (Yang) and 4 (Yin). Those all count as hits, because none of them exceed 4, her trait rating. That means 5 hits on the mooks and 1 hit to defend herself.

Jeremy's hero has a Trait called "Ballet of Bullets 4." He rolls 4 Yang dice and gets 2,4,5,5. Only the 2 and 4 count as hits, so two more points come off the threat. His 2 Yin dice are boxcars: 6,6. Both exceed his Trait rating, so he gets no defensive successes and will have to cash in one point of Chi.

Remember, everything happens as you describe it, when you describe it. Dice are rolled afterward and they only tell you what should happen next...



Photo Credit: Francisco Diez (Wikimedia)

Success Through Failure

Since all details are treated the same, you can play a character who routinely gets their ass handed to them... and still win. Your intrepid archaeologist can trip every trap and trust the wrong hired goons, but still make good her escape. Your scrappy boxer can spend a whole fight on the ropes, bleeding profusely from the face, and then come back for a K.O. punch in the final round. A detail is a detail is a detail.

Rising Action

Use the results of each round to frame your descriptions in the next round. If a hero really lays into some mooks, keep the momentum going. If you have to cash in some Chi, describe the tide of battle turning against you. If a hero and a Nemesis fight each other to a standstill, describe your tense face-off or compliment each other's kung-fu.

In our example, Lauren rolled a heap of hits and slashed the ninja's threat in half. Next round, she's entitled to go hog wild on the black-clad bastards...

Lauren: "I stab the first ninja with his own sword; kick the second in the throat, crushing his trachea; duck a staff swing and leg sweep the fourth; then flip over the fifth and let him catch a volley of

shuriken in the chest. Finally, I kick him into the shuriken-thrower, crushing them together like a jagged metal Oreo."

Jeremy wasn't so lucky. He got a couple of offensive (Yang) hits, but not a single defensive (Yin) hit. He has to cash in 1 of his Chi to counter the mooks' one automatic hit. Next round...

Jeremy: "My gunfire decimates the first wave, but more appear out of the shadows. Two of them catch my arms in their chain weapons, so I can't reload. Their friends close in with knives. I parry their attacks with a few well-timed kicks, then lock my feet around one ninja's neck and hurl him into a chain-wielder. I reload with my free hand and shoot the other chain-wielder in the face."

If a hero and a Nemesis score hits on each other in the same round, hits that neither of them can block with Yin or Chi, then whoever takes the most hits loses. If they tie, victory goes to the player. So remember: If you really want that coup de grace, consider throwing all your dice Yang and hope you kill them deader than they kill you.

Advanced Techniques

The Pass — Improvising beautiful violence is hard work. One way to help each other out when exhaustion sets in is to narrate things that the other players can incorporate into their descriptions. Say I throw a mook across the room; rather than send him through some furniture, I could leave him hanging in mid-air and pass to the next player. They might have him collide with the mook they're fighting,

drop his weapon in their hand as he sails past, crash into a lantern and set the room on fire, etc.

The Filibuster — It's not just for Senators anymore. If you don't feel like counting out your dice, or just want to show off, feel free to narrate a carnival of carnage so elaborate that it more than justifies the maximum dice pool. Of course, the other players are well within their rights to cut you off at any time, but they'll let you keep going as long as you keep them entertained.

The only thing you cannot narrate is victory, not until you've earned it. After someone scores that fateful hit, or lops off that last point of threat, their following round of description is called a **coup de grace**. You won't earn any dice, because you won't need any. Victors are entitled to narrate their spoils.

Of course, Rule Zero still applies, so don't be a dick about it. Directors shouldn't execute heroes and players shouldn't humiliate Nemeses. Try to stay focused on the stakes you set way back in the beginning of the conflict. If you get greedy, someone will let you know.

After two rounds of conflict, our example players have wiped out the ninja Threat. They collaborate on their coup de grace...

Jeremy: "I slide between a ninja's legs, pop up behind him, and use him as a meat shield while I ventilate his remaining friends."

Lauren: "With his last breath, the meat shield pulls a poison dart from his black pajamas and tries to stab my partner in the face, so

I grab a kama off a corpse and throw it, severing the bastard's arm at the elbow."

Jeremy: "I look down at the dart in his still-twitching hand, scowl, and snap his neck on principle."

Keep in mind that anyone can concede a conflict at any time. What that means depends on how you set the stakes. If two groups are trying to kill each other, either side can give up and flee. If some mooks have outlived their usefulness in a scene, you can call a retreat or replace them with a nemesis. If the dice aren't done with a conflict by the time the players are, too damn bad for the dice.

You're doing it all wrong!

Traditional roleplaying games have a hard time with wuxia, and cinematic action in general, because they insist on things like turn-taking and situational modifiers that cramp a fight choreographer's style. Wushu throws those conventions out the window with glee. Specifically, there are three things Wushu doesn't do...

Weapon Damage - A character's choice of weapon should have more to do with their personality than tactical advantage. That's why Wushu doesn't have rules for weapon damage. Getting kicked hard in the chest hurts just as much as getting stabbed in the face, at least mechanically. This frees players to select weapons that say something interesting about their characters.

Situational Modifiers - Similarly, Wushu is not a game about smart tactics. Things like taking cover and flanking an opponent

make great details, but Wushu never slows down to look up maneuvers or consult tables of modifiers. If you want your players kicking down doors and crashing through windows, don't penalize their foolhardy bravado.

Initiative - There are no rules for initiative in Wushu. Who acts before who is irrelevant most of the time and, on the occasion when someone does want to cut in, they can just ask! As long as it's for a cool stunt, nobody will mind. (In dramatic situations, like quick-draw contests or samurai duels, you can devote the entire first round to determining who strikes first.)

Example of Play

That's it for rules. Seriously, that's it. The rest of this section explains by example, using the **Clockwork Wuxia** setting.

Mark and Julie are trying to hijack a fortress. This particular fortress rides its own railroad through the rocky mountains of the New World. Mark's Zen Psychologist is in the engine room, trying to take control of the locomotive. Julie's Cyborg Swordsman is seeking sweet revenge in the Governor's glass-bottom parlor.

You put a stack of 6 chips on the table and introduce an angry mob of grimy laborers to thwart Mark's hero. You take 3 Chi for the Governor and jot down a combat Trait: "Kung-Fu Science! 4." Then, you let the players kick things off...

Julie: "I try to draw my steam-powered sword, but there's not enough space in the parlour to get it out of the scabbard, so I assume Iron Tiger stance and wave the Governor over."

Mark: "Oh, wait! Meanwhile, I'm weaving my way through the throng while these slave drivers crack their electrified whips across the bulkhead. One of the laborers swings at me with this huge wrench and, when I dodge, he knocks a valve loose. Steam blasts him in the face and the train lurches to a stop."

Julie: "Which causes the Governor to fly off his feet and into my waiting hands! Or, more to the point, my mechanical tiger claws!"



Photo Credit: Casimiri (Wikimedia)

You: "Fortunately, the Governor knows precisely where to kick your elbow joint to temporarily reduce pneumatic pressure in those claws. He gets smacked, but not shredded."

Julie: "I lean forward and press his face into the glass. Cracks start to spider out..."

You: "The Governor takes hold of your arm, shifts himself to the side, and pushes your center of gravity out from under you! All 300 pounds of you crash into the glass. He slaps the floor with one hand, sending himself spinning like a rolling pin back to his feet as the glass explodes beneath you!"

Julie: "Lying down, I have enough room to draw my sword! I extend the blade so it impales the far wall, then drive one foot into the near wall, suspending myself over empty air."

Mark: "Which is right about the time the engineers compensate for the broken valve and the train starts accelerating again."

You decide that everyone's earned at least 6 dice by this point, so it's time to roll. Here's how the numbers shake out:

Dice Pools

Mark: 6 Yang

Julie: 5 Yang / 1 Yin

You: 4 Yang / 2 Yin

Relevant Trait

Mark: "Let's enemies defeat themselves 4"

Julie: "Get revenge on the Governor! 5"

You: "Kung-Fu Science! 4"

Rolls

Mark: 1,2,4,4,5,6

Julie: 2,2,3,3,6 / 3

You: 2,3,4,4 / 1,6

Hits

Mark: 4 Yang

Julie: 4 Yang / 1 Yin

You: 4 Yang / 1 Yin

Mark's pretty sure he can take care of these mooks before they run him out of Chi, so he decided to go all offensive and reduces the Threat from 6 to 2. He cashes in 1 Chi token to counter the mooks' automatic 1 hit per roll, leaving him with 2 Chi in reserve.

Julie is counting on her higher trait rating to carry her through, but the Governor gets lucky and matches her hit for hit. They both have to cash in all their Chi (4 hits = 1 Yin + 3 Chi). The next round will be do or die.

You: "The Governor kicks off the wall and plants both fists in your abdomen, folding you in half so your foot slips its moorings, then he flies to the safety of the doorway."

Julie: "I collapse my sword blade and bring it under me, pushing myself up with one, quick jab. The rails devour it, but it's enough to get me upright and clinging to the wall. I turn to the Governor and growl, 'That's coming out of your salary.'"

Mark: "A dozen laborers lie unconscious or disabled, but there are dozens more coming. I spot an exhaust pipe above me and flash back to my childhood. I'm sitting in a cave with some monks.

Noxious gas seeps in from the mountain's depth, but the monks are perfectly calm. I meditate with them, slowing my heart and stilling my lungs.

"Back in the engine room, I charge one of the slaves, run right up his chest, steal a wrench out of his hands, and leap onto the upper catwalk. I smash open the exhaust pipe, then calmly sit down as thick vapors pour into the room, concealing me and asphyxiating everyone else."

Julie: "Back in the parlour, I'm leaping around the edges of the room, tearing down every piece of art and ornamentation that looks expensive. They rain down into the tracks, following my trusty sword into oblivion."



Photo Credit: chensiyuan (Wikimedia)

You: "Oh, that'll piss him off. The Governor waits until you're in the middle of a jump, then runs along the wall and snags a handful of your hair as you pass each other. He yanks you clean off your feet!"

Julie: "I slash through my own hair with my working claw and roll to a stop in the doorway. Down on all fours, I roar at the bastard and leap again!"

You: "The Governor does likewise and you meet in the center of the room, suspended over the kill zone..."

Whew! That was one filibuster from Mark and at least 6 details from everyone else. It's an aggressive round and everyone goes on the offensive:

Dice Pools

Mark: 6 Yang

Julie: 6 Yang

You: 6 Yang

Relevant Trait

Mark: Lets enemies defeat themselves 4

Julie: Get revenge on the Governor! 5

You: Kung-Fu Science! 4

Rolls

Mark: 2,2,3,4,6,6

Julie: 3,3,5,6,6,6

You: 1,3,4,5,5,6

Hits

Mark: 4 Yang

Julie: 3 Yang

You: 3 Yang

Both heroes manage to squeak through the round. Again, Mark cashes in 1 Chi token to counter the mooks' automatic hit, but he reduces the Threat to -2 and earns a coup de grace. Julie rolls the number of the beast, leaving him with 2 Yang hits and zero defense. Your roll isn't quite that bad, but your lower Trait rating means you still only get 3 hits. Without any remaining Chi, both the Governor and the swordsman take 3 hits. Since ties go to the players, Julie also gets a coup de grace.

Mark: "Once I stop hearing bodies hit the floor, I stand up and slowly seal the exhaust valve. While the air is clearing, I round up the watchmen's electrified whips and resuscitate anyone who stopped breathing. With their slave drivers neutralized, I'm able to convince the laborers to mutiny and flee with us into the mountains."

Julie: "The Governor's kick hits me in the throat, crushing my trachea, but he made the mistake of thinking I'd defend myself. Instead, I envelope him in a bear hug and we plummet together through the shattered floor. The railroad tracks tear us both to pieces. The train shears off his head when he hits the back wall, but I manage to anchor myself with one hand. They salvage my head, arm, and most of my organs, then rebuild me into an even more powerful murder machine!"

Rules Summary

1. The Director creates a Threat (pile of poker chips) or Nemesis (opposing character) that the Heroes need to overcome.
2. Players describe the scene in the present-tense. Everything happens as the players describe it, when they describe it. Each detail earns the player 1 die, up to some limit.
3. Players may need to divide their dice into Yin and Yang pools. Yang dice are directed against Threats and Nemeses. Yin dice are used for self-defense.
4. Each roll is compared to the Hero's most relevant Trait, a number from 1–5. Dice that roll over are discarded. The rest are considered “hits.”
5. Threats score 1 hit per round on each Hero; Nemeses may score more. Use Yin hits and Chi tokens to defend. If you take a hit, you lose.
6. If both sides take a hit, whoever takes the most hits loses. Ties go to the Heroes. Threats lose 1 chip per hit; they're out of the game when they run out of chips.
7. The winner gets a Coup de Grace, where they narrate a resolution to the conflict.

HIGH-FLYING HEROES

Every wuxia hero needs an excuse to give physics the finger. This will have a lot to do with the setting you've chosen, so sit down with everyone and discuss the setting, decide on a premise, and brainstorm characters together. (See **Running the Game** for more advice on zero-prep gaming.)

Traditionally, the source of a kung-fu master's abilities is Qi cultivation: They've trained for years to focus their energies and survived brutal physical conditioning at the hands of their iron-willed masters. As a result, they can skip across rooftops and shatter stone with their fists. Specialists can even manipulate other people's Qi to cause paralysis, unconsciousness, or death. It has a lot to do with Taoist ideas like "wu wei;" if you want to adopt a suitably wuxia mindset, there's no substitute for research.

Or you can just say "they're vampires" and be done with it. Works for Hollywood.

Traits

Heroes and villains are defined by their most exceptional qualities. Don't waste ink on the things that make a character normal: language fluency, common skills like swimming or driving, average strength, etc. Just pretend every hero and nemesis has an unwritten Trait called "Everything Else 2." That gives you a pretty good odds of rolling at least 1 hit with six dice.

All Traits are rated with a number between 1 and 5. This is the highest hit you can roll with that Trait.

If you're in a high-stakes poker game and your most relevant Trait is "Lucky Devil 5," you only fear the number 6. Everything else is a hit. If you're a slightly less lucky devil, say your most relevant Trait is "Poker Face 4," then you throw out both 5's and 6's.



Photo Credit: Greg Walters (Flickr)

You can write Traits in many ways. Skills like "Gunsmith," "Ninjutsu," and "Weaponized Origami" are popular, as are professions like "Soldier," "Enlightened Master," and "Masked Vigilante." You can also use broad adjectives, signature quotes, bits of backstory... anything that helps you articulate who this character is and makes them unique.

Here's the structure I recommend, particularly for heroes...

Motivation - Why does this character fight? Make it specific, like "End the False Emperor's Tyranny" or "Keep my Ship Sailing." A good motivation tells everyone where you want this character's story to go and it only kicks in at truly dramatic moments. **Give your motivation a rating of 5**, so the character is always at their best when it counts.

Action! - You're not a wuxia hero if you're no good in a fight. It's important to put a particular spin on a character's fighting style, since all heroes will be equally competent. Classics like "Preying Mantis Style" and "Buddha's Palm" are excellent choices, as are broad schools like "Judo" and "Capoeira." (If you're stuck, see below.) At least make sure you cover an action scene niche like "Parkour," "Speed Demon," or "Kung-Fu Chef." **Give your action trait a rating of 4**, so your hero can pull their own weight.

Big Ol' List of Action Traits

- Crane Style
- Iron Shirt Technique
- Horse Stance

- Tiger Claw
- Bullet Ballerina
- Dim Mak
- She of the Blood-Soaked Spear
- Sixgun Samurai
- Enfrightened Master
- Feral Street Fighter
- Inventive Anarchist
- Reluctant Assassin
- Flying Swordsman
- Frying Dutchman
- Circus Juggler
- Super Soldier
- Blow It Up!!!
- I Know Kung-Fu
- Telekinesis
- Precog Pugilist
- Hatchetman
- Piano Wire Virtuoso
- Subspace Ninja
- Whirling Dervish
- Hundred-Hander
- Monkey Fist

Profession - What does your character do besides fight? Do they have any notable training, abilities, or talents? This one should be broad: "Manhunter," "Respected Elder," "Hacker," "Occultist," "Eunuch Bureaucrat," "Silver Tongue," "Millionaire," etc. Give your

profession a rating of 3, since you're just a bit better than average at these sorts of things.

Weakness (Optional) - Weaknesses are funny things. They can add depth to a hero and enforce genre tropes, but characters should consider them Things Best Avoided. Superman doesn't get any credit for handling Kryptonite, it just kicks his ass. Hence, Wushu players are not rewarded for roleplaying their Weaknesses, they're penalized for roleplaying against them. A Weakness is a Trait that's rated 1. It's worse than default, but your players should never actually roll against it. They should avoid it, just as their characters would.

This rule is optional, because it's all stick and no carrot, but it can be a useful stick. Say you're running a noir-inspired cyberpunk game and you want to motivate your characters with a classic femme fatale. Trouble is, your players are the suspicious type and there's no way they'd fall for such a thing. Give one of them the following Weakness: "Sucker for a Pretty Facsimile 1."

The player can be suspicious all they want, but they gotta play their character like a two-time sucker. If they don't, this becomes their most-relevant Trait and any dice that roll higher than 1 get thrown out. They're better off being a chump and dealing with the consequences, which is so damn noir it hurts.

Let's say you're running a game set in India and the heroes are all modern Bodhisattvas, people who've turned back from the brink of enlightenment so they can help others. You want to make sure they stick to their Buddhist morals, so you give them all the following Weakness: "Virtuous 1." This means no lying, stealing, drinking,

sexual misconduct, or (and here's the tough one) killing. That rules out about 90% of all actions performed in a typical roleplaying game. By assigning the players this Weakness, you've given them a mechanical reason to stay in character and find new ways to solve problems.

In other words, Weaknesses are for making your players do things the hard way.

Traits on the Fly

Maybe you've got a player who just can't make up their mind, or maybe your players want to make sure they pick a Profession that's going to be relevant to the plot. Maybe your game involves a group of amnesiacs who wake up in a Mexico City meth lab soaked in someone else's blood. For whatever reason, you just don't want to write down all your character's Traits before you start playing.

Fine! Have it your way! Just jot down the three Trait values (5, 4, 3) on a notecard, placing each on its own line. It should look something like this:

Blood-Soaked Amnesiac

5 -

4 -

3 -

Now, start playing. Your players can go the whole game without filling in a single Trait, as long as they don't mind rolling against 2 (the default Trait rating) all the time. Once that gets old, they'll have to start filling in the blanks.

Amnesiacs are easy (every new skill is as much a surprise to them as anyone else), but the same trick works with anything. Say you're running a traditional wuxia adventure set during the Warring States period. One of your players can't decide on a fighting style until she's ambushed in a tea shop. She writes in "Drunken Master" as her Action Trait, tosses back a few drinks, and makes with the monkey fist.



Photo Credit: Manjunath Doddamani Gajendragad (Wikimedia)

Or you could be running a modern occult investigation and one of your players wants to make sure they pick a useful Profession. He leaves his "3-" blank until the group finds itself in possession of an ancient Egyptian spellbook. He jots down "Egyptologist" and says, "Let me take a crack at that invocation!"

The only catch is that a Trait cannot be moved or changed once it's written down. I highly recommend this method for pick-up games or any time you just want to hit the ground running.

Point-Allocation Method

If the 5/4/3 method is too confining for you, here's how to rate your Traits the old-fashioned way. Just write down your character's traits, no more than six of them, and default each to a rating of 2. Now, distribute six points among them; each point increases the rating by one. i.e. Raising a Trait to "3" costs one point, "4" costs two points, and "5" costs three points. If anything's still rated 2 when you're done, erase it. That's the default for everything, anyway.

If you're working with Weaknesses, give yourself 1 additional point for each Weakness. I'd cap this at 2 Weaknesses per character, but season to taste.

There, now you can have a 4/4/4 structure, a 5/5/3/1 structure, or even a 3/3/3/3/3/1 structure. Enjoy!

Character Development

Wushu has no tradition character advancement: no skill progression, no leveling up, no experience points of any kind. No waiting for weeks to play the character you actually want. With Wushu, you create exactly the hero you want to play. And then you play them.

Even so, all characters naturally develop as you write their history and establish their relationships. They also change the world around them, whether it's by resolving a plot or solving a mystery or dismantling a web of organized crime that's been slowly suffocating their beloved city.

There may be times when a change to a character's Traits is in order. Maybe you're trying to create some kind of Hero's Journey or maybe Dr. Feng hit you with the Dim Mak and totally blocked your chakras. In any case, there are several ways you can handle this kind of character development...

Shuffling Traits - You should allow your players to change their Traits between sessions. (If you used the point-allocation method, let them move those points around on a 1:1 basis.) Most commonly, their motivations will change as they resolve their personal subplots. They might also want to try a new kung-fu style or tweak their profession to match a bit of backstory. As long as they're not changing things in the middle of a session, it should be fine.

Milestone Traits - To really get Campbellian on their asses, you should plan out a series of three milestones for any new Trait. Each time the player meets one of these challenges, or makes a milestone choice, the Trait increases by one. For example, a hero trying to master an ancient and cursed weapon might have the following milestones ahead:

1. Use the weapon to defeat an enemy in combat.
2. Use the weapon to defend an enemy from harm.
3. Use the weapon to prevent a fight you want to win.

At first, using this weapon would mean rolling against the default target number of 2. After their first combat victory, the relevant Trait increases to 3. After successfully defending a hated enemy, the Trait increases to 4. Finally, after learning the true value of human life (awww), the Trait increases to 5. Only those who do not seek power are fit to wield it.

Two-Sided Traits - If you want to drive home a character's dramatic arc, consider giving them a pair of opposed Traits like Occult Power and Sanity, Honor and Freedom, or Loved and Feared. These two Traits always have 6 points between them; increasing one means decreasing the other. You could have Occult Power 4 and Sanity 2 ($4+2=6$), but never Occult Power 4 and Sanity 3 ($4+3=7$). Pushing either Trait to level 5 means turning the other into a Weakness.

Unlike normal Traits, these are meant to be adjusted during play. Any time the player makes a choice that pushes in one direction, increase/decrease the Trait ratings accordingly. Do this before the dice are rolled, so the player is always faced with the temptation of quick power. Never let them adjust it back in the other direction right away, though. Choices mean little without consequence.

Wuxia Archetypes

To illustrate all of the above, and just in case you don't have five free minutes to write up a character, here are a half dozen pre-written heroes from the Warring States period to modern-day

Hong Kong. Source material, both cinematic and semi-historical, is cited where appropriate.

You may notice that there are way too many Traits in each slot. I just can't help myself; I need to give you options. Only have your players copy down the one they want to use. The Weaknesses are still optional, so ignore them if they're not wanted.

The Enlightened Master

You have seen reality's true face and made it your ally. While others struggle against nature, you go with the flow and let your enemies defeat themselves. You might be a Taoist who acts through inaction or a rave kiddie who steps to the beat of the word. In any case, you're also highly principled and a paragon of self-control.

5 - Help others find enlightenment. / Sever your last ties to samsara.

4 - Wue Wei / Flying Swordsman / Shaolin Kung-Fu / Wudan Master

3 - Chinese Medicine / Auteur / Right Place, Right Time

1 - Virtuous / No Attachments = No Money

See Also: Li Mu Bai (CTHD), Iron Monkey, Wong Fei-Hung (Jet Li's version).



The Kung-Fu Witch

The masters wouldn't teach you their secrets, so you stole them. Maybe it was a powerful kung-fu style or experimental tech from a super-soldier program. In any case, your power is not entirely yours. Short-cuts were taken, best guesses made. You filled in the gaps with tricks of your own and now you're something unique.

5 - Get revenge on the order that shunned you. / Live free or die.

4 - Striking Snake Style / Dirty Tricks / Kill Reflexes

3 - Thief / Hacker / Runaway

1 - Pride (won't bow down to anyone)

See Also: The Jade Fox (CTHD).

The Drunk Monk

You don't have to be inebriated in order to fight, it just so happens that you usually are. Whatever you were before, now you're just a bum with strong Qi. Maybe you drink to forget your past or maybe you're too enlightened to care what other people think. In any case, you're in no hurry to climb out of the gutter.

5 - Find something you lost. / Make up for a past mistake.

4 - Drunken Fist / Curiously Strong Chi

3 - Vagrant / Brewmaster

1 - Dirt Poor (a social and economic Weakness)

See also: Beggar So, Wong Fei-Hung (Jackie Chan's version).



The Loose Canon

Technically, you're here to enforce the law. You might be an imperial magistrate with a quick blade or a hardboiled cop with too many bullets. In any case, you tend to shoot, stab, or kick first and forget about asking any questions. Until your superiors tell you otherwise, the ends justify the means.

5 - Bring a killer to justice. / Clear your name.

4 - Sixgun Samurai / Righteous Fist

3 - Cop / Manhunter / Authority

1 - Until Proven Guilty (duty-bound to protect the innocent)

See also: Chow Yun-Fat (Hardboiled), Liu Jian (KotD).

The Reformed Assassin

Killing is the only thing you're good at. Now that you've quit, killing is the only way to stay alive. Maybe you fell in love, developed a conscience, or couldn't run from the ghosts of your victims any longer. Your former employers are still on your trail, but you're determined to put your talents to good use.

5 - Take down your former employers. / Protect a former target.

4 - Bullet Ballerina / Ninjutsu / Piano Wire Virtuoso

3 - Master of Disguise / Criminal

1 - Most Wanted (your famous face makes life difficult)

See also: Chow Yun-Fat (The Killer, The Replacement Killers.)

The Half-Breed

You're not entirely human. Maybe your father was a god or your mother was bitten by a vampire. It makes you powerful, but it also alienates you. You can keep one foot in each world, but neither will ever accept you. Alienation drives you to violence and only the fact that you murder monsters makes you a hero.

5 - Find the thing that made you... and end them!

4 - Demon Within / Invulnerable / Tooth & Claw

3 - Hunter / Occultist / Runaway

1 - Outcast (all social interactions must be hostile)

See Also: Blade, The Black Mask.

RUNNING THE SHOW

This section provides specific advice on how to make the most of Wushu's dice mechanics, including more optional rules and guidelines for zero-prep gaming. Wushu's a great system for busy Directors. You can run satisfying one-shots, or even serial episodes, entirely on the fly. (See also **Part III: Terrible Vistas.**)

Raising the Stakes

Wherein we discuss advanced techniques and optional rules.

Setting the Threat

How many points of Threat you should assign to a scene depends on several factors...

- How many players do you have?
More players = more hits per round.
- What are their most relevant Traits?
Higher Traits = more hits per round.

- What's your dice pool limit?
Higher limits = more hits per round.
- How many rounds do you want?
Bigger Threats = longer scenes.

Let's say you have a group of three players and a dice pool limit of six. If they've all got combat-related Traits rated 4, and only devote 1–2 dice to defense, you can expect each of them to score about three hits per round. That means your Threat will lose nine hits per round, give or take. If you want the fight to last three rounds, you'll want to set the Threat somewhere around 30 ($9 \times 3 = 27$, plus change).

Side Goals

You can add complexity to your conflicts by layering in side goals. Like Threats, these can be just about anything: protecting bystanders, covering your tracks, stopping someone from escaping, preserving the evidence, etc. Also like Threats, they can be represented by a pile of poker chips. To achieve the side goal, your players have to score a number of hits equal to its value.

Unlike Threats, side goals don't fight back, so there's no need to devote Yin dice to them. However, they're called "side" goals for a reason: they should be added to a scene that already has a Threat and/or Nemesis in play. You might end up with several stacks of tokens on the table, so keep note cards on hand for easy labeling.

A classic example: Your heroes are chasing a Nemesis across the rooftops of some sprawling metropolis. Said Nemesis fires a few rockets into a building, causing it to collapse. You grab a handful of

chips and put them on the table, telling your players that they represent a boy's choir composed entirely of orphans. If they want to save those lives, they'll have to throw some of their hits against the side-goal, leaving fewer for your Nemesis to fend off.

In situations like that, feel free to put a time limit on the side goal. If you only give your players 2 rounds to reach the goal, it means even more dice diverted.



Photo Credit: David Gordillo (Flickr)

Mono-A-Mono

Speaking of diverted dice, it's not fair for groups of players to gang up on a single Nemesis. Rolling more dice than the other guy is a serious advantage, so your dice pool limits will need some adjustment when fights aren't one-on-one.

There are two ways to go...

If you're feeling ambitious, let the Nemesis rack up a separate dice pool for each hero aligned against them. If two players get 6 dice each, you get a total of 12. Only 6 can be directed against a single hero, though. Fair is fair. If you're feeling exhausted, make your players split a dice pool between them. If the Nemesis gets 6 dice, two players get 3 dice each. Three players would get 2 dice each. If that's not enough, raise the limit a little (you get 8 dice, two players get 4 dice each).

One on One

I know it means "monkey-to-monkey" in Spanish. The wordplay is Latin. Stuff it.

Last Mook Standing

If you want to cap off a mook fight with a little something extra, consider turning the last few points of Threat into Chi for a Nemesis. Then, you'll get a chance to roll up your sleeves and engage your players in a final round of fisticuffs.

Let's say your heroes are mowing down wuxia thugs in a tea house (again), but the players come up short and leave 2 points of Threat on the table after 5 rounds. They're running low on stunts and you're getting bored, so you grab the remaining chips and declare them Chi for a minor Nemesis. The gang's enforcer knocks down the doors with his massive war club!

You only need to give the enforcer one Trait: the one he'll be using to knock your heroes around, something like "Massive War Club 3." (I wouldn't give the Last Mook Standing anything above 3. He's only meant to last a round or two.) You start stunting, which gives your players something to riff on. The fight proceeds as normal from there.

A Detail is a Detail

Don't let my enthusiasm for massive overkill fool you. Wushu's core mechanic can handle any kind of roleplaying challenge, because it doesn't discriminate between details. A wire-fu stunt is not mechanically distinct from a well-executed crossfire or a clever cross-examination, a frantic flight through dark woods or a bout of witty wordplay. Consider these examples...

Tactical Combat

If you can convince the group that your selection of firearm, angle of attack, or dirty trick would provide a tactical advantage, it's worth a die. No need to compare or quantify. A detail is a detail.

Lauren: "We use shaped explosives to breach the front door and toss flashbangs inside. I crouch and swing in around the corner, covering the left side of the room, while my partner comes in behind me and covers the main area."

You: "The thugs in the main room don't put up much of a fight, being temporarily blind and deaf, but the ones guarding the hostages

quickly barricade themselves in the back room. One waits a few seconds for you to approach, then fires wildly through the door."



Photo Credit: MatthewG. Bisanz (Wikimedia)

Lauren: "Bullet impacts knock me off my feet, but my kevlar vest is more than enough to stop their low-rent rounds. I return fire with three-round bursts of high-velocity, armor-piercing ammo."

That's easily worth six dice of gritty, tactical action, and you didn't even have to pause when the door was knocked down.

Investigation

Most leads don't pan out, but they're all worth dice. Fingerprints, fluorescent lights, bank accounts, interrogations, they're all equal in the eyes of Wushu. As long as your players roll at least one

success, and were barking up remotely the right tree, you should reveal whatever clues you've got up your sleeve.

Jeremy: "First, I separate the suspects and run the old prisoner's dilemma on their asses. When one inevitably turns on the other, I put them both on ice and head out to verify their story."

You: "Fair enough. The husband confesses, says he forced his wife to help him dispose of the body, but that's all."

Jeremy: "If that's true, there should still be gunpowder residue on his clothes or hands. We swab his nails and send all his confiscated clothes to the lab."

That's at least 4 dice of solid police work. You let 'em roll and Jeremy nabs the 1 requisite success.

You: "Nothing. There's no way this guy fired a gun recently. He's trying to protect his homicidal hausfrau."

Horror

The tricky thing about fear is that it requires protagonists who are less powerful than their opposition, quite the opposite of Wushu's default mode. That doesn't mean you have to hamstring your players, though. Everyone should delight in harrowing the heroes.

Julie: "Well, somebody has to go into the basement and check the fuses! I find a flashlight and tip-toe down the stairs, each step creaking like the screech of a bat. Shadows leap across the room as I cast my feeble light around."

You: "A cat pops out from beneath the stairs! You scream and drop the flashlight. It rolls to a stop and reveals a tiny, crouched figure in the back corner..."

Julie: "Holy shit! I stare at it in disbelief for a few seconds, just until it shifts a little and I'm sure it's alive. Then, I run screaming from the basement!"

You: "Something gets a fistful of your hair right before you reach the door and yanks you back down into the darkness..."

Just make sure everyone understands the stakes. Julie isn't trying to defeat the creature in the basement, just escape from it (and maybe change those fuses).



Photo Credit: David Sagarin (Wikimedia)

Romantic Comedy

I can't say I've ever tried this one, but it's sound in theory. The stakes in an emotional conflict might be getting a phone number, controlling your temper, or embarrassing yourself in public. In any case, a detail is a detail.

You: "Okay, she's sitting at the bar with a friend. This is your chance to get her number, big shooter. Wadaya do?"

Mark: "I walk up to her friend and say, 'Hi. I'm thinking of hitting on your extremely attractive friend,' I say, gesturing over my shoulder. 'How do you think I should go about it?'"

You: "The friend looks at you like something she found in the back of the fridge and says, 'She's standing right behind you, dumbass.'"

Mark: "'Oh, right.' I turn around to face the girl and say, 'Hi. I'm thinking of hitting on you. How do you think I should go about it?'"

You: "Well-played, sir. She laughs and introduces herself, but claims to only have a few minutes. 'I'm just waiting for my boyfriend to get off work. He's the bouncer.'"

Mark: "'Well, then it looks like I only have a few minutes left to live. How do you think I should spend them?'"

You: "'Don't most people say, 'Have a crazy orgy?'"

Mark: "'I think that's if everyone only has a few minutes to live.'"

You: "'Right. You could hit on a girl who's way out of your league.'"

Mark: "'I'll let you know how it turns out.'"

Zero-Prep Gaming

Busy people deserve gaming, too. Wushu makes it easy to run one-shots on the fly. Just show up to the table with a setting idea and a few friends. You can have heroes, nemeses, and a plot outline put together in thirty minutes or less.

Step the First: Pick a Premise

Everything that comes after will be easier if everyone agrees on what kind of game you're sitting down to play. Action, probably, but the action oeuvre is a long and diverse buffet: traditional wuxia, martial arts epic, steampunk, Hong Kong bullet ballet, spy thriller, comic book supers, sci-fi actioner, and on and on.

The easiest way to align expectations is to reference a movie everyone has seen. If you're gaming with real action aficionados, pick a couple and mix their tropes together or use one genre to put a twist on another. I like to navigate by directors; a Yuen Woo-Ping game is very different from a John Woo game, but Wushu handles them both with equal aplomb.

Part III: Terrible Vistas provides three settings tailor-made for zero-prep gaming. If you bring one of them to the table, it should only take a few minutes to give your players a tour.

This step isn't just about setting, though. You also need to decide on a premise: What will your heroes be doing? Are they fighting a cabal of evil eunuchs, waging a bullet-ridden war against crime, pillaging the high seas, dismantling an army of cyborg zombies, or

just getting revenge on a hated foe? Starting with a coherent premise makes for more cohesive heroes.



Say you've just sat down to play some Clockwork Wuxia. You tell your players, "It's a steampunk wuxia alternate 1700s where the Ming Dynasty is the world's great colonial power." They're all onboard. You give them the option of playing pirates or American freedom fighters. They pick pirates and they want to be on the run from the Dynasty's most-feared enforcer. Step one: Done.

Step the Second: Who Are the Heroes?

Having just picked a premise, you should already have some idea of who your heroes are and what they do. Now comes the part where you grab a note card and write down some Traits. If this takes more than ten minutes, consider using the sample heroes or creating Traits on the fly.

Pro Tip: Try to make sure each character has a motivation that's directly tied to the premise, but don't duplicate. Having characters with subtly conflicting goals adds depth to their interactions. In the example above, you could suggest the following motivations:

- Protect your ship and your crew!
- Give me freedom or give me death!
- Take what you can, give nothing back!

As long as they can stay one step ahead of their pursuers, there's little conflict between these motivations. Once they have to start choosing between their fellows and their own freedom, things will get interesting. However, none of them are in direct opposition and you could play out the whole scenario without any internal conflicts, if that's the way you roll.

Next, make sure everyone's got a distinct fighting style and your heroes are good to go.

Clockwork Wuxia comes with some suggested heroes: Cyborg Swordsman, Kung-Fu Scientist, and Zen Psychologist. Your players each pick one of the three, jot down motivations and fighting styles, and decide to leave their third Traits blank for now.

Step the Third: Brainstorm Scenes & Nemeses

When improvising a session, the Director cannot be solely responsible for the plot. Take a few minutes to talk about the kinds of things you all want to do in the next few hours: types of challenges, fight locations, nemeses, mooks, etc. It shouldn't take long for an outline to emerge.

Your steampunk pirates want to commit some actual piracy, charge through a naval blockade, cross swords with shaolin cyborgs, and duel their nemesis in the burning rigging of his flagship. Sounds like a rich, full evening. You jot all those things down on a sheet of paper, whip up a Trait or two for their nemesis, and you're ready to rock.

Don't spend more than a few minutes on this. It's often best to charge headlong into your session with no real plan, just an idea of where to start (e.g. attacking and boarding a tramp steamer on the high seas) and where you want to end up (e.g. committing acts of arson and aggravated assault on the Ming dynasty's naval flagship). Connecting the dots will be a breeze, because your players will help you do it.

Plan on 3–4 big set pieces per 4 hours of game. If you run low on time, cut to the chase.

Step the Last: Go Play!

When you're running a one-shot, you don't have time to waste making travel arrangements, browsing the local market, or rolling for random encounters. Frame each scene aggressively.

Drop your players into a situation that demands a response. You can figure out how they got into it later. This isn't a blank check for non-sequiturs, I'm just telling you not to waste time worrying about it if no one's worried about it. For example...

You: "You're gaining fast on the *Salty Mare*, a huge merchant freighter. They're not supposed to be armed, but you can plainly see a concealed port open up in her stern as a clap of thunder peals out over the waves. The cannonball whistles past your foredeck, either a miss or a warning shot. Care to respond?"



Photo Credit: Robert Cutts (Flickr)

Why are they chasing the *Salty Mare*? Because they wanted to board and pillage a ship on the high seas! Do they have any history with the freighter or its crew? If your players think it's interesting, they're free to invent some! Don't be afraid to break

character and discuss these things during the game. Table talk isn't just allowed during a Wushu session, it's mandatory.

Once the conflict is resolved, cut to the next scene. If you're not sure which scene that is, ask your players for input. In our example, we know that Shaolin cyborgs and a naval blockade need to precede the finale. Maybe your heroes have to run that blockade in order to make port and sell their ill-gotten gains, which would be a good place to cross swords with cyber-monks.

You: "Having gutted the *Salty Mare*, you set sail for an Indonesian pirate den. Unfortunately, the Chinese have established a blockade around the string of tiny islands. The crew have no stomach for further delays, so it looks like you'll have to make a run for it!" You put a stack of chips on the table, representing the Threat of being captured or sunk by the blockade, and tell your players to start hatching a plan.

Be willing to give up on a scene if it's played out, even when the game mechanics say otherwise. When this happens, it's usually because you put too many points on a Threat or everyone's just running out of steam.

Your blockade run has gone a few rounds, but the players rolled poorly and there are still chips on the table. You decide that the pursuing vessels are suddenly called back to the line, allowing the pirates to escape more or less unscathed... because a team of Shaolin cyborgs have already snuck aboard to infiltrate the pirate fortress!

It's *exactly* that easy.

Asynchronous Play

If you're playing Wushu online, via a forum or a wiki, aggressive scene framing is even more important. You have to keep the pace blistering; the moment you lose your players' interest, game over. Most online games die with a whimper.

I once ran a Play-by-Post (PbP) game set in The Matrix. Each scene began at the end of a mission, when something had already gone wrong and Agents started showing up. As soon as the last free mind disconnected, we moved on to the next scene. We skipped all the set-up and connected each scene with the barest threads of backstory. I'm proud to say that game ran at a brisk pace all the way through to a suitably climactic end.

You can also keep things moving by encouraging players to filibuster. If they can earn all their dice in a single post, you reduce the wait time between rounds. Less waiting means fewer chances for players to drop offline or lose track of the narrative. You don't get those furious back-and-forth exchanges, but you can still use Passes to weave things together.

My last bit of advice is to handle all the rolls yourself; don't make the player report their own rolls. Again, it means less waiting because you can count up the dice, roll the results, and do the bookkeeping all at once. Post the new Chi and Threat counts and you're ready for the next round. Lather, rinse, repeat.

Flashbangs

Sometimes, introducing your players to a new plot is like sending them on a blind date. They meet someone in a tavern; they engage a stranger in awkward, probing conversation; and hours later there's still very little action. Flashbangs let you start your story in the middle and reward your players for helping you fill in the blanks.

Here's how...

1. Start with an unambiguous action sequence in the middle of your story, something with easily understood stakes.
2. Write down details from this scene that will need to be explained.
3. Flash back to the beginning of your story.
4. Each time your players explain away one of those details, setting it up for the flashbang scene, add 1 die to a shared pool.
5. Players can draw bonus dice from the shared pool only after they catch up with the flashbang.

For example, you could start your game in the middle of a chase sequence. Tell you players that they're screaming down the freeway in a rental car. There's a bag full of diamonds in the back seat and a swarm of armed men on motorcycles crowding their back bumper.

Your players don't know how they got into this situation or why, but the situation itself is pretty clear: fight off the bikers and escape

with the diamonds. Put a stack of Threat tokens on the table and let the festivities commence.

You've already established several facts that will need to be explained: the bikers, the rental car, the diamonds, and being on the freeway. Write each of those down on a piece of paper and leave it in the middle of the table. If your players want to invent a few facts of their own, write those down, too.



Photo Credit: freestock (Wikimedia)

After a few rounds, or at some dramatic moment, pause the action and flash back to the beginning of your plot. In our example, you could reveal that someone's locked in the rental car's trunk or introduce a Nemesis in the form of a helicopter gunship. Make a note of how much Chi each of your heroes has remaining and then cut to "1 hour earlier..."

Now that your players have something to work toward, the plot should be an easy sell. When you mention a thieving biker gang,

they'll perk up their ears. When you dangle a rental car in front of them, they'll jump on it. Each time they do something like this, you get one step closer to the flashbang and they get one more bonus die in their pool.

When you finally catch up to your opening scene, flash through the rounds of action you've already played. Remind everyone of where they ended up, what they were doing, and how much Chi they had left. Then, dive back into the action, but now the players can start using those bonus dice. If they were in over their heads before, this should even things up.

Flashbang dice don't have to be earned with a detail; players can just grab one or more when it's time to roll. Each die can only be used once, but they allow players to exceed the dice pool limit for the scene. This is a serious advantage.

Say our example flashbang ended with the arrival of a helicopter gunship. After a quick recap, the players begin a new round. The driver jumps their rental car off a construction sign, to lose the last of the bikers, and two of the other heroes leap onto the helicopter. Everybody takes one or two dice out of the shared pool and rolls them with their normal dice.

If there are any flashbang dice left in the pool after the conflict is resolved, the players can continue to use them as they please. You shouldn't let these pools get ridiculously huge, however. Six to ten dice are more than enough for a group of 3–5 players.

Devil's Dice

When you want power with a price, reach for the Devil's dice. Use this mechanic for volatile powers, dangerous magic, unstable super-weapons, or anything else that might blow up in a player's face.

Give the player in question a pool of bonus dice to keep in front of them. Four to six dice should be plenty. Any time they use their power/magic/super science device, they can grab as many of these bonus dice as they like, even exceeding the normal dice pool limit.

Here's the catch: They may have to roll a "self-control check" with the unused dice. (Unless the hero has a dedicated "Self-Control" Trait, roll against the default 2.) If they fail the roll, the figurative feces hit the proverbial fan. That could mean their powers get out of hand or their magic has unintended side effects or their high-tech doodad literally blows up in their face.

Either the Director or the player may decide what happens, but it really should cause some kind of undesirable complications for the hero.

Say you're a werewolf who doesn't subscribe to that "full moon" nonsense; you can draw on your feral side to boost your strength, fortitude, senses, whatever any time you want. Use too much, however, and the wolf takes over completely. Devil's dice are perfect for this.

You give the lycanthrope a pool of 5 bonus dice. In one scene, they need to track a fugitive's scent. They earn a few dice

describing how they focus their senses, reach down into the dark abyss of their soul, and pull up just a tiny bit of the beast. The player adds 2 bonus dice to their roll and gets plenty of hits.

Then, you have them roll the remaining 3 dice as a self-control check. Their hero doesn't have a dedicated "Self-Control" Trait, so they're trying to roll 2 or lower. They get 5,4,2... and keep it under control. One hit is all they need.

Later, the lycanthrope is running down that same fugitive. They narrate a chase sequence in which they partially transform, galloping on all fours. They add 4 of their bonus dice to the roll and get more than enough hits to take out the nemesis... but that only leaves 1 die for their self-control check. Not good odds. They roll a 3 (failure!) and transform completely.

Now, the other players have to save the fugitive from a ravenous hellhound without (one would hope) killing the friend within.



CUT-FU

Cut-Fu is about kicking unholy ass with anything that chops, slices, or stabs. It's about cutting the cardinal's men to ribbons with a bow and a flourish! It's about swinging from the rigging of your pirate ship while turning aside the blades of imperial soldiers. It's about dispatching your old nemesis with a single, lightning stroke.

The first section of this Wushu guide covers the essentials: types of blades, basic fencing maneuvers, and cinematic stunts. Next, I'll show you how to run one-on-one duels with the Wushu system, for all your Nemesis-slaughtering needs. Then, I'll give you plenty of reasons to bring knives to gunfights, so you can incorporate blades into modern and sci-fi games. Finally, you'll get to see Cut-Fu in action via some extended examples of play.

Soon, you'll be a whirling dervish of steel and blood!

Sword Fights

Wushu treats all weapons the same as far as tactical issues like damage, reach, and speed are concerned. That leaves you free to choose the weapon that best fits your character. To do that, though, you have to know how various types of bladed weapons are meant to be used...

Knives & Daggers

These tiny terrors are as varied and numerous as all of their big brothers combined. They range from pocket-sized utility knives to massive bowie knives to slim sleeve daggers. Modern knife fighting techniques teach you to hold the blade forward, like you would a steak knife, and attack with quick jabs and slashes. Medieval techniques used an underhand grip, usually to stab downward through the ribcage and into the heart. You can also use a dagger with a long sword, as an off-hand parrying weapon, and they're easy to throw.

Short Blades

There's no clear line between a dagger and a short sword, but the latter tend to look more like swords. The Japanese wakizashi is an excellent example, as is the Roman gladius. They are faster than their larger cousins, meant for quick thrusts and slashes. They are also easier to conceal in a coat or gym bag. Their primary disadvantage is lack of reach; an opponent with a long sword can hit you before you get close enough to hit them.

Slashy Blades

Most of your traditional swords (broad swords, katanas, sabers, etc.) fall into this category. They're good at stabbing and parrying, but their weight and length make them best for slashing attacks. They can hack off limbs, split open abdomens, and lop off heads with relative ease.

Stabby Blades

During the Renaissance, long swords became lighter and faster, like modern fencing foils. Rapiers are lightning quick, but lack the mass for slashing or chopping attacks. Instead, they channel their force into the tip, which can deliver extraordinarily precise thrusts to vital areas. They are archetypal dueling weapons.

Choppy Blades

Heavy blades like axes and machetes are far too slow to provide any kind of defense. Instead, they must be wielded with such aggression that your enemy has no opportunity to attack. Screaming like a madman never hurts, either.

Wacky Blades

In the Middle Ages, most soldiers carried polearms; these spear-like weapons could keep swordsmen at a safe distance and even take out knights on horseback. There are countless martial arts weapons with blades of one type or another: the hook swords seen in CTHD, the sickle-like kama, and so on. Oh, and don't forget the scythe, official melee weapon of the grim reaper!

Fencing 101

In a Wushu game, the key to victory is creative and exciting narration. To describe a sword fight well, you need to know the basic vocabulary. This is not meant as a technical glossary, only

as a way to give you terms more colorful than “attack” and “defend.”

Thrust

A direct, stabbing attack. A long-distance thrust is usually called a “lunge.” This is the most efficient form of attack for most sword types. The key to embellishing a thrust is in the peripheral details: your target (hand, heart, leg, eye), the speed of the attack, your footwork, the way the sun glints off your blade, and so forth.

Slash

I use this as a general term for any swinging attack. You can make long, slow slashes to sever limbs, quick slashes designed to exploit momentary weaknesses, and fancy-looking, spinning slashes that resemble dance moves more than combat. As with a thrust, the key is in the peripheral details.

Parry

Any move that blocks an incoming attack. This is usually done with your own sword, but there are other options. Shields are always popular, from tiny bucklers to the full-body shields preferred by the Romans. You can also parry with a weapon in your off-hand, usually a dagger. There are even fencing techniques that use a cape or coat in the off-hand to parry attacks and blind opponents.

Feint

A fencer is always most vulnerable once they’ve committed to a move, whether in offense or defense. A feint is a fake attack designed to get your enemy to commit to a particular defense,

creating vulnerabilities elsewhere. The attacker then switches the direction of their attack, striking where it will be most difficult to parry.

Riposte

An attack made after parrying an enemy's attack. Many times, skilled fencers will intentionally leave themselves vulnerable in order to bait their opponent into a particular attack, then execute a particularly fast or clever counter-attack.

Lock

This one's a cinematic favorite, because it can be used to bring two fighters together for a dramatic close-up. You can take control of an enemy's blade by trapping it in a wall, grabbing it with your off-hand, tangling it up in another enemy's ribcage, pinning it with your own blade... the possibilities are endless. In the movies, both combatants lock each other's blades at the same time, drawing them face-to-face so they can trade snappy one-liners.

Disarm

Any attack that is designed to take an opponent's weapon away from them, rather than injure them directly, is a disarm. In a Wushu game, an unarmed opponent is just as dangerous as any other, so you might not get much mileage out them. Still, it's something to keep in mind, especially if a gun is involved... or are you calling Batman a pansy?



Photo Credit: Buster Brown

Duels

Sword duels between masters of equal skill (like a hero and a Nemesis) have a style all their own. Understanding that style, and how to recreate it using Wushu, is essential to running truly climactic duels.

Pacing

The spotlight is held on one character at a time during most Wushu rounds, but a sword duel requires much faster back-and-forth between combatants. Each side (usually a player and the Director) should limit themselves to 1-2 details at a time. That's enough to describe most feints, ripostes, and other maneuvers. You may

need to increase the maximum dice pool so you don't have to roll as often.

The Duel Is In the Mind

It is said that two masters can fight an entire duel without ever drawing their swords. If you're familiar with the principle of the psych-out, you're half way there. You can spend the entire first round of a duel just circling your opponent, measuring their skill, and/or intimidating them into submission. For a more artistic approach, you could fight a "shadow" round that takes place in the characters' minds. (See "Hero" for the quintessential example.)

Advantage, Not Injury

A good duel can go on for quite some time without either side scoring a solid hit, but that's not to say no one's winning in the meantime. In a duel, the first few hits on each character should be considered losses of tactical advantage, not necessarily wounds. The attacker has moved into a better position, pushed their opponent into a worse position, put them in a lock, disarmed them, whatever. The victim then spends Chi just to stay in the fight, not to negate the lock or keep their weapon.

Witty Repartee

Most duels are not just about physical confrontation. At their core is some deeper conflict between the characters themselves, perhaps a philosophical difference or personal rivalry. The resolution of the duel should reflect the resolution of this conflict,

and the way you do that is through dialogue (which earns dice, naturally). Usually, the dialogue goes something like this:

1. Villain taunts hero into making the first attack, then counters.
2. Hero defends himself, then refutes the villain's position.
3. Villain tells Hero why they are wrong, and either gains the upper hand or makes a fatal mistake.
4. Hero sums up their position in a snappy sound bite, then delivers the coup de grace!

Bringing Knives to Gunfights

Okay, so swords are cool. We can all agree on that. But there's a reason that modern soldiers don't use them: they're no good against guns. Fortunately, the role-playing milieu allows us to take certain liberties with tactical reality. If you want to use blades in a setting dominated by guns, just pick your favorite excuse...

You Can Dodge Bullets!

Bullets are tiny and only threaten a particular point in space for a fraction of a second. Characters with preternatural reflexes have no trouble ducking or sidestepping them. In fact, most handguns and SMGs are inaccurate enough that your average mook won't be able to hit a normal person at a distance... as long as they keep moving. (Just ask John Woo.) Even trained shooters will have a hard time drawing and firing at a target who's within a few dozen

feet. Rush them and get in close enough that they can't bring their gun to bear, then cut 'em up!

You Can Block Bullets!

Think of this one as the Jedi Principle. Bullets have very little mass, so it's easy to knock them out of the air with a decent sword blade, provided you have the reflexes, precognition, or cybernetically-augmented senses to pull it off. Kevlar armor also does an excellent job of blocking bullets, but a good knife (or arrowhead) will slice through it like silk sheets.

Hey, That Tickles!

Most gunshot deaths are caused by shock, not blood loss or any kind of catastrophic injury. In the genres most beloved by role-players, many hostile entities are not so easy to put down. On the other hand, even a regenerating soldier, walking corpse, or killer cyborg will be averse to losing an arm, an intestine, or their head. Again, possessing such a power will also make players less afraid of firearms, freeing them up to rely on their trusty axe or rapier.

Bullets Are Expensive!

Okay, they're pretty damn cheap in most settings, but your average post-apocalypse is quite another story! You can also artificially limit access to ammunition during an adventure by trapping your heroes in a remote wilderness, or just not giving them any spare clips. When bullets become a commodity, a weapon that works as long as you have the strength to swing it starts to look better and better.

Bullets Are Traceable!

Modern forensics can match a bullet to a gun based merely on the pattern of scratches the latter leaves on the former. In sci-fi settings, ballistics might be even more traceable, and/or tightly regulated by the government. Assuming your characters are engaged in some manner of illicit activity (gasp!), they might opt for more discreet weaponry.

No Mojo for Bullets!

A key difference between bullets and blades is that the former does its work when beyond the user's immediate control, both physically and mystically. The sword is an extension of the self, and therefore an extension of its wielder's will. Got superhuman speed? So does your sword. Know how to channel lightning? Steel is notoriously conductive. Bullets pale in comparison.

Bad Mojo for Bullets!

Conversely, bullets may also be easier for your adversaries to work their mojo on. Telekinetics will have a much easier time turning away bullets than wrestling away your broadsword. A gun's inner workings are easily sabotaged by magic, but steel never misfires.

Why Decide?

Blades and bullets... two great tastes that taste deadly together! Even if one of the above excuses is in effect, there are many ways to use a gun and a sword in tandem. First, you could use the sword as a parrying weapon against bullets, as described above. Second, you could save the gun as a hold-out weapon, either

because bullets are expensive or because bullets are traceable. Many gunfighters used their flintlocks as parrying weapons after firing their single shot at point blank range. Finally, there's always the bayonet: a blade mounted on the end of a gun.

Guns are Despicable!

On the other hand, there are plenty of character types for whom guns could be simply too distasteful to wield in combat: honorable samurai, anachronistic duelists, Luddites who refuse all modern tech, and other endearing weirdos.



Photo Credit: Till Krech (Wikimedia)

Swashing Your Buckle (or Buckling Your Swash)

While the crew of the Kraken is ashore, burying their booty, an Imperial boarding party draws alongside the ship. It's up to the cook and the cabin boy to repel the scurvy invaders! The cabin boy rushes into the hold to grab his cutlass and pistol, while the cook retrieves his favorite weapons from the galley: a pair of enormous cleavers. By the time they've armed themselves, the Imperials are climbing onto the deck!

The Cabin Boy (Spunky 4) sails up from the cargo hold, pulled skyward by a severed cargo line. He fires his pistol at the closest Imperial and screams the wild battle cry of his Gurkha ancestors as he zips up into the rigging. (5 dice)

This boarding party is just the appetizer before the game's main course (an all-out assault by the Imperial battleship), so you give them a mild Threat of 15. The Cabin Boy rolls 4 dice for attack and keeps one for defense, getting 3 Yang hit and 1 Yin hit. He suffers no gunshot wounds for his daring stunt and knocks the mooks' Threat Rating down to 12.

Now that the Imperials are out of ammo, the Cook (Slice & Dice 4) wades into battle, swinging his twin meat cleavers with abandon! He hacks off a mook's sword hand, rendering him helpless, and knocks another over the side with a well-placed kick. Quickly, he

blocks a pair of sword thrusts on his left flank and yells, "You look like a meaty one! I'd love to have you for dinner!" (6 dice)

The Cook maxes out his dice pool at 6. He chooses to roll 5 Yang and 1 Yin, getting 4 Yang hits, but no Yin. Not being used to this kind of exertion, he loses a point of Chi. However, he also brings the mooks' Threat Rating down to 8.

The Cabin Boy sees his friend faltering and rushes to the rescue! He cuts loose some of the rigging and swings down into the fray, claiming a powdered wig (and the head beneath it) with his cutlass. He lets go of the rope and does a quick back flip before landing on the deck. He grabs his pistol by the barrel and uses the grip to parry a vicious swing, then runs the brigand through! (6 dice)

Still on the offensive, the Cabin Boy rolls just one Yin die and the other 5 for attack, getting 1 Yin hit and 4 Yang hits. He loses no Chi to the mooks and drops their Threat to a rapidly fading 4.

The Cook has had just about enough of these salty wankers! He goads one of the two remaining mooks into a foolish attack by juggling his butcher knives, appearing to leave himself undefended. When the mook lunges forward, the cook steps to the side and lets the mook stab his comrade (who is fighting the Cabin Boy behind him) right in the spine! Then, the Cook snatches one of his cleavers out of the air and buries it in the clumsy oaf's neck. (6 dice)

The Cook knows the end is near, and he's still got Chi to burn, so he goes all-out offensive, rolling 6 Yang dice. He loses 1 point of Chi for not defending himself, but nabs 4 hits, which is just enough to send the last of those Imperial swine to Davy Jones' Locker!

Samurai Psych-Out

Zi (Kendo 5) stares into the Black Heron's eyes (Artist with a Blade 5) and watches the entire duel play out in her mind. Every stance, every move unfolds before her. They face each other on a silent battlefield of anticipation, where conviction and character, not physical reality, dictate the course of events. Only when this psychic duel is won will she deliver the real stroke. (In other words, this a handy excuse for wuxia stunts in an otherwise mundane setting.)

She draws her katana like a lightning bolt and snaps it's chiseled edge towards her opponent's throat. (2 dice) The Black Heron shifts his weight back, just out of reach, then pulls his mammoth war sword from its scabbard and swings it straight down, cleaving the air above Zi's head. (4 dice) She raises her blade and gently guides the heavier weapon to the side, then runs up her adversary's chest, kicks him in his armored face and backflips out of reach. (4 dice) The Black Heron leaps into the air like his namesake, covering the distance in a heartbeat, and brings his war sword down at a sharp angle across Zi's body. (3 dice) She kicks off the ground and floats up to the lowest of the temple's three

tiered roofs, well out of harm's way. (2 dice) Her enemy snarls in frustration and follows her skyward. (2 dice)

That's a whole lotta dice! Both characters earned a total of 9. Zi takes a balanced stance, rolling 5 Yang and 4 Yin. The Black Heron is on the war path, so you devote 7 dice to attack and roll just 2 Yin. Zi gets 4 Yang hits against the Black Heron's 2 Yin, so he cashes in 2 of his 3 Chi. However, you roll a much more impressive 6 Yang hits against Zi's 3 Yin, wiping out her Chi in the first round! In this instance, that means that Zi has been driven onto the defensive; the Black Heron is intimidating her.

Now atop the roof, Zi slips into "Lunatic's Revenge," a wildly offensive stance. (2 dice) Her nemesis adopts the "Wu Shan's Relentless Onslaught." (1 die) Zi swings wide, striking at his left flank. (1 die) When he moves to parry, (1 die) Zi drops her weapon, grabs his sword arm, and twists the blade into his abdomen. (3 dice) He bellows in agony, pulls a concealed knife from the hilt of his sword, and stabs Zi in the chest, driving towards her heart. (4 dice)

The evenly-matched combatants, both near the end of their Chi, know victory will be a matter of chance. So, they each hedge their bets by rolling 3 Yang dice and 3 Yin dice. It all comes down to the roll: Zi gets 3 Yang hits for her spectacular feint, but only 2 Yin hits. The Black Heron slips up with 2 Yang hits, not enough to get through Zi's defenses. You roll only 1 Yin hit, reducing him to -1 Chi. Zi has turned the tables by exploiting her adversary's

over-confidence. Now, she gets to narrate a coup de grace...

Back in the real world, Zi glimpses defeat in her enemy's eyes. She springs forward like a striking snake, whips her katana from its sheath, and slices his neck open. Arterial blood sprays behind her like a crimson fan. Her blade is back in its scabbard before his body hits the ground.



Photo Credit: Rudiger Wolk (Wikimedia)

Defending a Lady's Honor

The Earl of Saint Nazine (Duelist 4) has suffered a most egregious insult at the hands of a Spaniard (Swordsman 5). The blackguard had the gall to say, in public, that the Earl's female companion had an "inviting smile." Well, you can imagine the Earl's outrage at such a vulgar insinuation! Why, the mere idea was so ghastly that the Earl drew his saber on the scoundrel right then and there.

However, as dueling is forbidden within city limits (by the Earl's own decree), he had to settle for the Spaniard's promise to meet him outside the city gates at sunset. Now is the appointed hour...

"So," the Earl says as the Spaniard arrives, "you are a man of your word, after all. I would have thought you'd be aboard the fastest ship in the harbor." (1 die)

"And I would have thought a man with such a beautiful woman on his arm would spend his evenings in bed" replies the Spaniard. (1 die)

"I shall cut that foul tongue from its moorings!" The Earl draws his saber and lunges forward. (2 dice) The Spaniard parries with his rapier, then draws a dagger and slashes at the Earl's throat. (2 dice) Ducking under the riposte, the Earl spins around, getting close enough to smell his adversary's fetid breath, and delivers a punishing elbow smash to his face. (4 dice) The Spaniard disengages with a quick step back and removes the Earl's powdered wig with the tip of his sword. "Bald. I thought so." (3 dice)

That's a pretty good opening bout. The Earl gets a total of 7 dice; he chooses to roll 4 of them in offense and 3 in defense. You take the Spaniard's 6 dice and splits them evenly between Yin and Yang. The Earl rolls 3 Yang hits and 2 Yin hits, while you get 3 of each. The Spaniard is just getting warmed up, but the Earl must cash in one of his Chi to make up the difference. His anger has plainly put him at a disadvantage.

The Earl, his bald head flushed with rage, rushes forward and swings savagely for the Spaniard's left leg. (2 dice) The Spaniard moves his parrying dagger to block, (1 die) but it was a feint! The Earl's saber has already pivoted up to strike at the Spaniard's head! (1 die) He is forced to parry with his rapier, stopping the saber just inches from the tip of his nose. (2 dice) The Earl leans hard on his weapon, driving it through the block. (2 dice) The Spaniard whips his parrying dagger up from its lowered position, slides it into the saber's crossguard, and rips the sword out of the Earl's grasp. (3 dice) This time, it's the Earl's turn to retreat. (1 die)

The Earl was definitely on the offensive this round, so he rolls 4 Yang dice and 2 Yin dice. Once again, the Spaniard splits his 6 dice evenly. This time, you roll a couple of sixes, resulting in 2 Yang hits and 2 Yin hits. The Earl rolls lucky on all 4 Yang dice, and 1 of two his Yin. The Director gives up 2 of the Spaniard's 3 Chi, and the Earl loses one more of his, leaving both characters with a single point.

“Rendered impotent, once again,” the Spaniard gloats. (1 die) The Earl pulls a knife from his belt and charges. (1 die) The Spaniard intercepts this wild attack with the point of his rapier by stabbing the Earl’s sword arm. (2 dice) Pain flows into the Earl’s mind, clearing it. He leans into the sword thrust, pushing the rapier clean through his forearm and trapping it between his ulna and radius. (4 dice) The Spaniard brings his dagger to bear, (1 die) but the Earl impales his off-hand on its blade and twists it up against the Spaniard’s throat. (2 dice)

You are so impressed with the Earl’s mettle that you call the round then and there. The Spaniard only gets 4 dice, which you split evenly once again. The Earl takes his 7 dice and rolls 5 Yang and 2 Yin. He gets an impressive 4 Yang hits and 1 Yin hit. All of your dice turn up hits, but it’s not enough to save the Spaniard. The Earl loses his last point of Chi, but the Spaniard loses 2, dropping him to -1. Now, the Earl gets to execute his coup de grace...

The Spaniard struggles, but cannot liberate his blades from the Earl’s body. He begs for mercy. “You can only push a gentleman so far,” replies the Earl. “Let this serve as a reminder.” He drags the dagger up the Spaniard’s cheek, drawing a ragged line from chin to temple. Then, he rides back to his mansion and the virtuous woman who awaits him there.

Butchering Gunbunnies

Three super-powered vigilantes find themselves under siege! Their nemesis, the insidious Doctor Fang, has tipped off the cops as to their hideout. A small army of kevlar-coated SWAT guys surrounds the derelict warehouse, seals off the exits, and fills the place with a hail of hot lead!

The Reaper (Bringer of Death 5) just walks towards the nearest mob of goons, letting their bullets tear through his regenerating flesh. He drinks in their sweet, sweet fear as he raises his scythe and lops off three consecutive heads. (5 dice)

The Blind Man (Perfect Aim 5) runs through the gunfire, knocking bullets out of the air with his wakizashi. His scarlet blindfold trails behind him like a parade streamer as he draws a desert eagle and plugs a dozen bullets into a dozen unarmored necks. (5 dice)

The Savage (Hunter 5) leaps into the rafters above, dodging a stream of bullets as he disappears into the shadows. Moments later, his twin machetes hurtle out of the darkness and cleave both the kevlar and sternums of two mooks. The Savage's victorious howl echoes through the warehouse. (5 dice)

Everybody gets 5 dice this round. You give the SWAT mooks a Threat Rating of 30, because you want this to be a showcase fight. The Reaper is an unholy bad ass, so he rolls 4 Yang dice and just a single Yin; he gets 4 successful attacks, but his Yin die comes up a failure. Apparently, even the undead should fear a solid wall of bullets! He cashes in a point of Chi. The Blind Man and the

Savage both roll 4 Yin and 1 Yang; they both get their obligatory 1 Yin success, plus a total of 7 Yang hits. That's a grand total of 11 hits, dropping the mooks' Threat Rating to 19.

The Reaper lets the next rank pepper him with bullets until they run out of ammo. Then, he chops one off at the knees and continues his swing up into the skull of the neighboring mook. He pulls back the hood of his black sweater jacket, exposing a rictus grin and milky white cataracts. The last goon is on the run before he even gets to say "Boo!" (6 dice)

Now behind cover in the back of the warehouse, the Blind Man senses SWAT guys approaching from both sides, so he leaps out into the open before they can flank him. When they open fire, he uses his waki to deflect bullets from each side into SWAT guys on the other side, turning their face plates into clouds of face-slashing shrapnel! (6 dice)

Meanwhile, the Savage dives out of the rafters like a hawk, hits the ground in a forward roll, yanks his machetes out of two corpses, and comes to his feet smack in the middle of a crowd of four. He drives his blades up into the jaws of the SWAT mooks to either side, kicks the one in front of him square in the jimmy, and reverse head butts the one behind him. By the time they hit the floor, only his howling remains. (filibuster)

The Savage's filibuster nets him 6 dice, same as his two compatriots. Everyone rolls 4 Yang dice and 2 Yin dice. The Reaper gets 3 Yang hits and 2 Yin hits, much safer than last round.

The Blind Man gets lucky on all 4 Yang dice, but both of his Yin dice come up sixes! He loses a point of Chi. The Savage scores 3 successes to attack, and the obligatory one to defend. That's a total of 10 Yang hits, which leaves the SWAT team at Threat 9.

Sensing the end is near, the Reaper takes his time with the last two on his side. First, he spins his scythe like a windmill and nails one mook to the wall. Then, he reaches towards the other with a skeletal hand, sinks his fingers into the guy's chest, and stills his heart's panicked beating. (6 dice)

Guided by tiny disruptions in the room's feng shui, the Blind Man locates five SWAT snipers in elevated positions around the warehouse. Holding his gun and wakizashi across his chest, the Blind Man spins out into the center of the room and uses his blade to block the snipers' bullets. His desert eagle barks like a machine gun as four rounds explode from its chamber and puncture the eyes of four different snipers. As he finishes spinning, he extends his sword arm and throws his waki right through the kevlar vest of the fifth. Smoke rises from his gun barrel as he comes to a rest. (filibuster)

The Savage leaps on one of the last goons like a snarling leopard and rakes his chest with both machetes. The goon's partner rushes to the rescue, but the Savage parries his kick with the flat of one machete and hacks his kneecap with the other. As the mook falls to the ground, the Savage brings the first machete up, burying it deep in his skull. (6 dice)

Once again, everyone earns or filibusters the maximum dice pool. The Reaper puts in 4 Yang and 2 Yin. The Blind Man and the Savage both go in for 5 Yang and 1 Yin. Everyone gets their obligatory 1 Yin hit. The Reaper contributes 3 Yang hits, the Blind Man earns 5, and the Savage pulls in 4 more. That's a grand total of 12, which reduces the mooks' remaining Threat to its component atoms. Of course, our anti-heroes' place has been turned into a corpse-filled block of Swiss cheese. Easy come, easy go.

GUN-FU

The ancient art of the gun fight is all about giving you more options than just "I shoot him" and "I dive for cover." It's about dodging bullets with balletic displays of acrobatic prowess. It's about mixing martial arts with your gunplay, grappling for point blank shots and smashing faces with shotgun barrels. It's about the sniper as your high-caliber guardian angel. It's about running through a hail of lead without fear, auto-firing into a wall of mooks, reloading in the blink of an eye, and lookin' good while you do it!

This is your introduction to the fascinating world of cinematic gunfights, including a summary of gun types and the standard stable of Hong Kong stunts. Next, you'll explore ways to incorporate guns into melee combat, the true meaning of Gun-Fu. Then, snipers are given the Wushu treatment. Finally, you'll see Gun-Fu in action via voluminous examples of play.

By the time we're done, you'll be a fully loaded arsenal of ballistic mayhem!

Gunfights

The following is by no means an exhaustive, or even factually correct, catalogue of firearms. Rather, it's a summary of the types of guns seen in action movies, organized according to the stunts and Details you'd use in a Wushu game.

Revolvers

These puppies are seen most often in westerns, but police officers used them well into the 20th century. They hold six or eight rounds in a rotating chamber. A pull of the trigger fires one round and rotates another into position. They are notoriously slow to reload.

Semi-Auto Pistols

Modern handguns load ammunition from a clip (which is usually inserted into the grip) and eject a spent casing after each shot. They can carry up to two dozen rounds, give or take, depending on the size of the gun. This is by far the most common type of firearm in modern settings.

Shotguns

A perennial favorite among role-players! Despite their name, shotguns can fire both shot (bundles of tiny pellets) or slugs (traditional, solid bullets). The most famous type is the pump-action shotgun: ammunition cartridges are carried in a tube below the barrel and loaded into the chamber by pulling back a slider that wraps around said tube. Older models are breach-loaded: the chamber opens on a hinge and you have to slide each new cartridge in by hand. Double-barreled shotguns cut that reload rate

in half. There are even fully automatic shotguns. Don't forget to saw off a few inches of the barrel for improved concealability.

SMGs

Short for "submachine gun," these models are exemplified by the Israeli-made Uzi. They're larger than a handgun, smaller than an assault rifle, and can fire a stream of bullets with a single pull of the trigger. They are a deadly combination of concealability and destructive power.

Assault Rifles

The venerable AK-47 is the archetypal assault rifle; its most famous predecessor was probably the Tommy Gun. They're big, nearly impossible to conceal, and carry gigantic clips of high-caliber rounds. They can fire bursts or streams of bullets. Plus, you can administer some painful bludgeoning with those rifle butts!

Sniper Rifles

These guns are designed for high accuracy over extreme distances. That means long barrels and tons of gunpowder. High-powered scopes and recoil compensation are popular options. They are often disassembled for transportation. Large and/or armor-piercing slugs help ensure fulfillment of the sniper's motto: One Shot, One Kill.

Exotic Ammo

Now that you've got your gun, you gotta load it with something. Most people just go with good, old fashioned lead, but there are plenty of other options...

Non-Lethal Rounds

To hit a target without killing them, bullets need to distribute their force over a larger area. Soft materials, like rubber, do this by flattening on impact. You can also use a wider projectile, like the bean bag ammo used with shotguns.

The Face Eraser

This is a nasty one. (You might want to save it for your big bads.) Take a shotgun cartridge and pack it with glass shards instead of, or in addition to, buckshot. The result is a cloud of razor blades that slash their way through anything that gets on your bad side. In a pinch, you could just dump some shrapnel down the barrel for pretty much the same effect.

Armor-Piercing

The simplest way to punch through armor is to make bigger, heavier bullets that channel their momentum through smaller, sharper points. You can also use special alloys that vaporize on impact, forming a shell of plasma that burns through even the heaviest armor plating.

Explosive Rounds

Usually, the big BOOM is accomplished with a grenade launcher or bazooka. There are also incendiary rounds that can turn any standard shotgun into a flame thrower. If you want to stretch plausibility a little (and who doesn't?), you could build tiny warheads into normal handgun bullets.

Smart Bullets

In sci-fi settings, miniaturization makes self-guided bullets possible. Tiny scramjets provide additional propulsion, greatly extending the range of handguns and SMGs. Computerized radar systems track targets and miniature rudders allow the bullet to make modest course corrections in flight. You barely have to aim!



Photo Credit: Angel Riesgo Martinez (Wikimedia)

Cinematic Gunplay

Gun-Fu is about going beyond the simple "I shoot him from behind cover" tactics of realistic gunfights. These basic stunts are cribbed from the time-honored traditions of Hong Kong action choreographers. It's basically a whole lotta jumpin' around with guns a' blazin'!

Bullet Dodging

Always remember: if you keep moving, no one can hit you. It's best to run sideways relative to your attacker's line of sight. Throw in a few flying leaps, somersaults, cartwheels, and coat-flaring spins to keep things interesting. This isn't necessarily the gravity-defying, slo-mo stuff you know from The Matrix; Hong Kong gunfighters have been doing it without wires forever.

2 Guns are Twice the Fun

Using a gun in each hand not only doubles your rate of fire, it also looks cool! There's the "running down the hall and shooting mooks on both sides" trick. There's the "crossing your arms and shooting guys on either side of you" trick. There's the "spraying two full arcs of bullets with your twin SMGs" trick. Go ahead and use them all.

Dramatic Reloads

In a Wushu game, running out of bullets is an opportunity, not an inconvenience. Dropping your clips after a particularly furious exchange is a great dramatic flourish. Check Equilibrium for a couple of clever reloads: spring-loaded clips concealed in sleeves and clips weighted to stand on end after being thrown onto a

battlefield. For some wire-fu style, try flicking new shotgun cartridges into your breach-loaded sawed-off or tossing new clips into the air and slamming your guns down onto them. Or, don't reload at all. Why spend time fumbling for clips when you could just carry more guns?

Quick Draws

It can be hard to stunt a single action that takes place in a fraction of second. The secret of the quick draw is in the buildup: staring down your opponent, muscles stretched taught in anticipation, senses attuned to your enemy's every twitch. This is also a good way to ensure one-shot kills in duels: run down the gunfighters' Chi with a round or two of intimidation and buildup before they draw their weapons. You can also take a note from classic samurai duels by following a dramatic pause with details of the shot's aftermath: gun smoke, blood sprays, bodies toppling over, etc.

Collateral Damage

a.k.a The John Woo Principle. All gunfights can be improved by adding copious amounts of flying debris, from wood to plaster to glass. Every bullet that leaves a gun has to hit something, and it's very rarely one of the heroes. Just make sure your gunfight locations feature plenty of windows, mirrors, vases, wine bottles, and miscellaneous containers marked "flammable."

Creative Cover

Between sprints and jumps, it may still be a good idea to grab some cover. Don't worry about the penetration power of various firearms; even a bed mattress is solid cover in most action movies.

You can hide around corners, crouch behind furniture, use a car door as a shield, and so forth. If there isn't any cover handy, make your own by flipping a table over or using your guitar case as a shield.

Human Shields

They're not just for the bad guys anymore! The classic move is to grapple a mook and hold him in front of you to soak up bullets. If the mook has a gun, grab it and return fire. You can also spin a guy around like a top to attract enemy fire while you dive to the side. Oh, and if you have moral qualms about all this, just make sure your shields are either already dead or wearing some of that delicious kevlar.

Don't Forget the Slo-Mo

So many things are more dramatic in slow motion! Describing actions in slo-mo lets you narrate bullets in flight, turn desperate dives for cover into graceful leaps, and dodge bullets in a very literal sense. (If you've ever seen an episode of "Fastlane," you've seen these principles put to excellent use!)

Guns as Melee Weapons

It can be surprisingly difficult to draw, aim, and fire a gun at an adversary who is already within a few yards. They'll close in and grapple (or stab, or kick) you before you can get off a reliable shot. Unfortunately, modern combat (and Wushu combat) increasingly takes place indoors, where all combat is close range combat.

One solution to this problem is to integrate guns into traditional martial arts. Grappling for an opponent's gun would go from an artless tussle to a choreographed series of blocks, locks, throws, and disarms. Instead of diving for cover, you'd close in with a flip, kick your attacker's gun away, and take them out at point blank range. Whether or not Gun-Fu constitutes a "good" idea for the real world, one thing is undeniable: it's damn cool.

Point Blanking

Gun-Fu stunts are all about the point blank shot. Bury that barrel in your target's stomach and blast away! The real fun comes in using martial arts techniques to get your gun into position and/or prevent your adversary from doing likewise. He jabs his gun in your face, you sweep it to the side with one hand and bring your own gun to his temple with the other. He blocks with his off-hand, holding your gun just clear of his head, and so forth. This works best when you get into a rhythm.

Handgun Hammerfist

Pistol whipping is just hitting someone (usually in the head) with the side or grip of a handgun. In the Gun-Fu version, you flip the gun around and hold it by the barrel, using the grip like it's the business end of a hammer. Just make sure your safety stays on!

Shotgun Short Staff

Since you don't have to worry about breaking your imaginary shotgun, there's no reason you can't wade into combat swinging it like a baseball bat! You can parry attacks, smash knee caps, club people in the face, and punctuate each victory with a thunderous

blast of buckshot! Put a sawed-off in each hand for twice the skull-crackin' action.

Rifle Fencing

You can Point Blank with a rifle, but those long barrels put a little too much distance between you and your target for kung-fu style blocking and grappling. Instead, you'll want to use it like a sword; parry your opponent's attempts to line up a shot while simultaneously moving your own gun into position. You can also forego the shooting and jab them with the barrel or bash them with the rifle butt. Attach a bayonet for even more stabby fun.

Disarms & Ripostes

If you ever lose your gun, there are plenty of ways to turn the tables. First, you can knock your enemy's gun out of their hands, too. Even better, you can take your enemy's gun out of their hands and put it in yours. Even more stylish is turning an adversary's gun around and then making them shoot themselves! You could grapple for the weapon and then break free with a baseball bat swing to their face. Last, but certainly not least, you can render your opponent's gun useless by disassembling the chamber, immobilizing the hammer, stealing their ammo clip, or just switching the safety on before you beat them senseless.

Blocking Bullets

If you're shooting for some serious wire-fu wackiness, you can allow characters to actively block bullets, not just dodge out of the way. You can go the Wonder Woman route and use some kind of shield (or armored accessories). If you're using a handgun

(preferably two handguns), you can turn your gun to the side and bounce incoming bullets off the barrel. Finally, there's the anti-bullet bullet move, where you shoot incoming bullets out of the air! Remember, we're not going for realism, here. We're going for, "Holy shit awesome!"

Snipers

There's nuthin', and I mean nuthin', like good sniper support! Having a sniper on your side is like having a guardian angel... who strikes down, with furious anger, anyone who gets in your way. When they're not on your side, life can be a very painful place.

One Shot, One Kill

Unlike most Wushu characters, snipers don't engage in fast combinations of actions. They are masters of stealth and surveillance. They take their time and pride themselves on killing each target with a single bullet. You just have to make it sound exciting.

First, focus on the gritty details of marksmanship: how you set up your rifle, what kind of ammo you use, all the bells and whistles you've added to your sight. Describe the things you have to take into consideration for long-range shooting: the pull of gravity, wind resistance, leading off by a wider margin because the bullet will take longer to reach its target. You can also earn dice for hit details: kill shots aimed at the head or heart, disabling shots in the leg or knee, and (of course) crimson sprays of blood.



Next, don't try to fit your entire narration into the seconds before and after you take your shot. Snipers must be patient. You can earn dice for a shot by describing hours worth of sneaking around, stalking your target, and maintaining invisibility. This works even better in a sniper duel scenario, where both sides are taking their sweet time.

During a fight scene involving other players, taking your time will only work for the first shot or two. After that, the sniper has to keep pace with the rest of the scene. "One shot, one kill" works great in a mook fight, since you can take out a new target (or many new targets) with each successful Yang die. If the target is a Nemesis, you'll have to wear down their Chi with those marksman details we talked about.

Snipers don't dodge; their defense is invisibility. Yin dice will come from cover: either their camouflage or solid objects around their position. Once that gets old, you can wax poetic with Details like "I strike like the vengeful hand of God!" or "He's dead before he hears the gunshot, rolling like thunder from out of the blue."

In sci-fi games, snipers can take advantage of endless technological advancements: Smart Bullets extend their range almost indefinitely. Remote surveillance drones let a sniper "see" their targets from every angle. Virtual reality displays make objects and buildings appear transparent. Cloaking devices make them truly invisible.

Keeping Snipers Involved

By their very nature, snipers aren't usually in the thick of the action. They're more the "crouch on a rooftop a quarter mile away and pop people's heads off without fear of retaliation" type. The down side is that it's easy to get left out of a scene that way. To keep your snipers involved in the action, you'll have to give them other things to do.

When I say that every character in a Wushu game should be able to handle themselves in a fist fight, I mean it! At an inconvenient moment, spring a minor nemesis or a few mooks on your sniper. Every second they spend tangling with their new assailant(s) is a second their friends go without cover!

As long as they're already getting a bird's eye view through those big, high-tech scopes, they might as well feed the rest of the team valuable intelligence. This trick works particularly well in sci-fi

games, since the sniper will probably want to have some of those handy surveillance drones around.

Similarly, snipers make good dual job characters. They can provide that ever-so-valuable support fire up front, then switch to hacking security or driving the getaway car. One interesting approach would be to give your sniper some kind of non-combat magical power. They could perform dark rituals, coordinate demonic activity, or muck around in the astral plane before and after picking off the wall guards with a their high-caliber rifle. Put some tarot cards or rune stones in the sniper's nest to turn this magic wackiness into a surveillance tool, too.

Bullet Ballet

Confound always turns up where she's least expected. In this case, at the end of the alley behind her nemesis' strip club, right as his limo is leaving for the airport. At first, the driver just stops, as if waiting for this pedestrian to take her leather coat and move along, but the bodyguards know better. They appear from behind dumpsters, in alley doorways, on the fire escapes, right out of the woodwork! The alley echoes with the telltale sound of guns being cocked and loaded. Fortunately, she's protected from above...

Perched on a catwalk, Recoil (Old Soldier 5) clicks his assault rifle to full-auto and sprays both sides of the alley with the dispassion of a man watering his lawn. Mooks fall like bloody dominoes. (5 dice) At the same moment, Confound (Hail of Lead 5) leaps onto the limo's hood and transforms the windshield into a cloud of shrapnel

with her twin Uzis. She then launches into a cartwheel and sails over the rest of the limo, shooting straight down through the roof while upside-down. (6 dice)

The bodyguards are only meant as a momentary diversion, so you give them the most pitiful Threat Rating imaginable: 6. Recoil rolls 4 dice to attack and 1 for defense. Confound doubts there'll be much left when her partner's through. She gets 6 dice and rolls 3 of each. Both players roll at least 1 Yin hit, so they don't lose any Chi. Recoil nabs 4 Yang hits on his own, and all 3 of Confound's come up roses, so the mooks are history.

The blood-soaked form of Eddie the Viper (Vicious Bastard 4) rolls out of the wasted limo and comes up with his gun to Confound's temple. (3 dice) She drops her spent Uzis and grabs Eddie's gun arm, pulling it to one side just as a bullet rocket's from its barrel. She twists his arm around, pulls a Glock from the small of her back and buries the muzzle in his spine. (6 dice) Eddie kicks into a backflip and slips out of the arm lock. Confound's bullet grazes his heel. (2 dice)

You pick up 5 dice for Eddie the Viper and choose to make them 3 Yang and 2 Yin. Confound earned the max pool of 6 dice and comes out swinging: 4 Yang and 2 Yin. Eddie's lower Target Number (4) gets him 2 Yang hits and 1 Yin, while Confound rakes in 3 Yang and 2 Yin. She easily avoids her nemesis' attacks and

scores 2 hits on him. The Director cashes in 2 of Eddie's 3 Chi.

Up on the catwalk, Recoil is snapping a new clip into place when he catches a whiff of gun oil. He spins around to see one of Eddie's legbreakers (Thug 3) sneaking up behind him with a shotgun! He uses the barrel of his assault rifle to parry the shotgun; a blast of buckshot erupts harmlessly to his left. (2 dice) The thug returns the favor by pushing Recoil's rifle upwards with his shotgun barrel and smashes the butt into the old soldier's face. (2 dice) Recoil takes it like man, then stabs his rifle barrel into the thug's kneecap. (2 dice) The goon falls backwards, gasping in pain, then uses the distance to level his shotgun and fire another round. (3 dice) Recoil tilts his weapon up a few degrees and holds down the trigger! (2 dice)

You get 5 dice for this 1-Chi Nemesis, but since he was never meant for a long and fruitful life, you decide to roll them all in offense. Recoil knows it won't take much to defeat the legbreaker, so he splits his 6 dice evenly between Yin and Yang. Only 2 of your dice are hits, and Recoil gets all three of his Yin, so no harm done. On the other hand, Recoil's 2 Yang hits are enough to soak up the thug's only point of Chi and then blast him into oblivion!

Eddie the Viper now stands alone against our two heroes. He dives across the alley and grabs a second gun off a dead mook. He comes up with his arms crossed and a sneer on his lips, then opens up on each of his would-be killers. (5 dice) Recoil falls backwards over the side of the catwalk, hangs upside down by his

legs, and cuts a long line of bullet holes into Eddie's side of the alley. (3 dice) Confound spins out of the way, lands in a classic Chow Yun-Fat kneeling pose, and empties her clip into the Viper's cold, black heart. (3 dice)

Eddie's horrible life is flashes before his eyes. You declare all 5 of his dice Yang, directing 3 at Confound and 2 at Recoil. Recoil gets 4 dice and chooses to divide them evenly between offense and defense. Confound wants this bastard good and dead, so she rolls all 4 of her dice for attack and counts on her 3 points of Chi to save her. You roll 2 hits on Confound and 1 hit on Recoil. Both of Recoil's Yin dice are good, which more than protects him, and his 1 Yang hit takes out Eddie's last point of Chi. Confound cashes in 2 Chi to eat Eddie's bullets, then shoves 4 big Yang hits down his throat! The Viper is dead and then some.

Old West, New Style

An outlaw called Dead Bang (Let God Sort 'Em Out 4) has been raisin' quite a ruckus in the Peacemaker's town (Quick-Draw Justice 5). The latter has tried to arrest the former on numerous occasions, all without success. Now, the lawman has called the fugitive out. It's kill or be killed, with the town's future hanging in the balance...

Dead Bang swaggers out onto main street, his duster flaring around him in the desert wind. He plucks the cigar from between

his teeth and asks, “Had your last rites, lawman? You’ve got just over a minute to make peace with your Maker, before I send you to meet him.” (4 dice)

The Peacemaker finishes loading his trusty Smith & Wesson revolver, twirls it forward, backward, and sideways, then drops it into his holster. “If you spent half as much time shootin’ those guns as you do shootin’ off yer mouth, I just might have felt compelled to go to church this mornin’.” (4 dice)

Both characters earned 4 dice for this opening round of intimidation. You decide to go in swinging with 3 Yang dice and 1 Yin die. The Peacemaker takes a more guarded approach, rolling 2 of each. You get 3 Yang hits for Dead Bang, but his Yin die is a bust. The Peacemaker rolls 2 Yin hits and 1 Yang hit. Both characters have to cash in 1 point of Chi, which leaves them each with 2 to spare.

The Peacemaker breathes deep, relaxes his muscles and extends his senses. A bramble of sage brush blows across main street as the big town clock ticks its way towards high noon. When the moment comes, he will act without thought and righteous purpose will guide his hand. (5 dice)

Dead Bang feigns apathy as he slowly grinds his cigar butt into the dirt. Under the rim of his black Spanish hat, he examines his enemy’s every twitch with eyes as cold as a tomb. His hands drift ever closer to the twin revolvers at his sides. (5 dice)

This is the quick-draw round. You pick up 5 dice for Dead Bang, rolling 2 Yin and 3 Yang. The Peacemaker also gets 5 dice, going with 2 Yang and 3 Yin. The outlaw gets 2 Yang hits and 1 Yin, while the Peacemaker nabs 3 Yang and 1 Yin. The Peacemaker's player cashes in 1 point of Chi, but you have to lose 2, leaving Dead Bang at zero. It looks like the lawman's tai chi ain't so sissy, after all.

The clock strikes noon and both gunslingers draw their weapons! The Peacemaker's gun snaps up faster than the eye can follow. He squeezes the trigger and fans the hammer back six times. The first bullet flies towards the outlaw's heart like one of Zeus' thunderbolts. The next four bullets knock Dead Bang's shots clean out of the air. The sixth is aimed right between his cold, dead eyes. (6 dice)

Dead Bang's twin revolvers fly into his hands, eager to taste the lawman's blood! His right hand fires off a round, while the left blocks the Peacemaker's first bullet by deflecting it off gun metal. Then, he unloads the rest of his ammo so fast that the gunshots sound like a single cannon blast! (6 dice)

The street falls silent as the dice are rolled... The Peacemaker still has 1 point of Chi left, where his adversary has none, so he decides to go on the offensive. The player picks up 4 Yang dice and 2 Yin. You split Dead Bang's dice evenly, 3 of each. He rolls a pair of Yang hits and a pair of Yin hits. The Peacemaker only gets 1 hit in defense, but he has the point of Chi to cover it. His 4 Yang

hits, however, are more than enough to overcome the outlaw's defenses and send him straight to hell!

Dead Bang remains standing as the clock tower finishes tolling, despite the hole bored through his skull by the Peacemaker's last bullet. His cadaver takes three steps forward, as if used to operating in the absence of a soul, before finally falling to earth. Dust to dust.



Cyber-Sniper

Terminal is hacking into an enemy's bank account when one of his online buddies sends him a message: "Expect a collect call this evening. Long distance." That's code for "Someone hired a sniper to take you out." Great, just great. This is one headache he doesn't need!

First, Terminal (Ballistics 5) sets up a decoy sniper's nest on a rooftop near his home. He takes an old mimetic cloaking device he has lying around and screws with its thermal filter until there's a .05% inefficiency. That should be just enough to draw attention without looking like a decoy. Then, he sets up a low-tech sniper's nest on the second floor of his condo by tearing apart some furniture and concealing himself beneath the wreckage. Finally, he deploys surveillance drones outside and plugs in his cyber-specs for a virtual view of the cityscape. Now, he waits. (6 dice)

You narrate the Nemesis' actions, even ones that Terminal might not be aware of, in order to generate a dice pool for this deadly game of cat and mouse...

The hitman (Sniper 5) parks his hover car beside a high-rise about a half mile away from Terminal's building. He deploys surveillance drones of his own, which quickly identify Terminal's drones & the malfunctioning mimetic cloak. (Here, you decide to fall for the trap on purpose, because it's a good ploy and the player deserves to be rewarded for his efforts.) He pokes the barrel of his smart rifle

out the car's back window and fires off three laser-guided rounds before the first hits its mark! (6 dice)

Since the combatants are not actually attacking each other this round, any loss of Chi will represent a loss of advantage, not an injury. Terminal's meticulous preparations earned him a total of 6 dice, which he chooses to split evenly between Yin and Yang. You also earned 6 dice, but choose to roll 4 Yang and 2 Yin. Terminal matches your 3 Yang hits with 3 Yin, but your 1 Yin hit is no match for Terminal's pair of Yang, so you cash in 1 of the hitman's 3 Chi. Terminal has managed to catch his assailant flat-footed!

When the first shot is fired, Terminal's surveillance drones lock onto the hitman's position. His cyber-specs light up with 3-D images, augmenting his view of the skyline with tactical data. Terminal activates the warhead on his smart bullet and fires a single shot at the hitman's vehicle. The resulting fireball reduces the hover car to slag and sends it plummeting earthward. (5 dice) Hungry flames lick the hitman's reactive body armor as he leaps out of the falling wreck and crashes onto a roof. He touches a button on his arm and activates the railgun concealed in one of his spy drones. It immediately begins remodeling Terminal's condo into a tastefully decorated pile of rubble! (6 dice)

This time, Terminal takes only 5 dice and decides to roll 3 Yang and 2 Yin. You split your 6 dice evenly between offense and defense. Terminal rolls 2 Yang hits and 2 Yin hits, but you beat that with 3 of each. The hitman escapes the wreck that was his car

without a scratch. Terminal manages to survive the barrage of bullets that tears through his condo, but only at the cost of 1 point of Chi. That evens the score to 2 Chi apiece.

The sounds of shattering glass and splintering plasteel assail Terminal's ears as he clutches his rifle and waits for death. Then, the floor creaks beneath him and he falls through, dropping into the kitchen below. He lands on his feet and sees the hitman through his cyber-specs, flips his smart rifle to armor-piercing ammo, and fires a shot through the bastard's eye! (6 dice) The hitman's drones see Terminal fall through the floor and transmit the data to his tactical display. He snaps his rifle up to his shoulder and fires 3 bullets: one to the heart, one to the neck, and one through Terminal's brain stem. (6 dice)

Both duelists rake in 6 dice this round, and both of them go on the offensive by rolling 4 Yang dice and 2 Yin dice. You roll 3 attack successes, but only 1 Yin. Terminal pulls in all 4 Yang hits, which is just enough to get through the hitman's Yin and 2 remaining points of Chi. Terminal also rolls 1 Yin hit, so he has to cash in his last two points of Chi, but he wins fair and square.

Terminal takes those bullets to the chest and neck, graciously, but manages to stay conscious long enough to call a black market meat mechanic. The cops find the hitman's corpse an hour later, minus one eye and most of his brain.

Bar Brawlin'... with Bullets!

The vigilante known as “The Cellist” is casing a speak-easy that may be a front for the Diamondbacks, a local street gang. Unfortunately, his reputation for pandemonium got there first. One of the bouncers eyeballs him and alerts his fellow mooks, who instantly pull guns from every nook and cranny...

The Cellist (Vengeful 5) throws open his cello case and dives right in! Two metal canisters pop over the lid and roll across the floor as the mooks raise their weapons. Dense smoke billows out of them, filling the bar as The Cellist clicks his tommy gun's safety off. He runs sideways through the fog, perforating the advancing goons as enemy fire peppers the wall behind him. (7 dice)

The Cellist is fighting alone, but he can be expected to score about 4 hits per round. You want this to be a pretty significant fight, so you give the mooks a Threat Rating of 20. The Cellist earned 7 dice and decides to roll 5 Yang and 2 Yin. Both of the latter come up hits, so no Chi is lost this round. Two of his Yang dice comes up sixes, so the 3 hits reduce the mooks' Threat to 17. We're just getting started!

The tommy gun's ammo runs out just as the ceiling fans start to disperse the fog. The Cellist looms out of the smoke like the shadow of death, slips a choke hold on the nearest mook, and uses him as a shield. He disconnects his ammo drum with one hand and kicks it into another mook's face, breaking his nose.

Then, he switches his grip on the tommy gun and swings like Babe Ruth, knocking a third goon on his ass. (filibuster)

The Cellist gets the max pool for his filibuster, which you have set at 8 dice. He decides to roll 5 Yang and 3 Yin. He gets all 3 Yin hits, which is more than plenty for these mooks! He also rolls 4 hits with those Yang dice, which reduces the Threat to 13.

Leaving his human shield to bleed on the floor, the vigilante dives back into his cello case and emerges with a pair of sawed-off shotguns. He rolls under a table, comes up between two mooks, and clubs them both in the back of the head. Both barrels are leveled at the bar a moment later, blasting two more goons back into a wall of liquor bottles. They're baptized in a river of hooch and glass. (filibuster)

Another filibuster, another 8 dice. This time, the Cellist throws caution to the wind with 7 Yang and 1 Yin. The gamble pays off: the Yin die is a hit, so no Chi is lost, and 6 of the Yang dice get lucky, nearly cutting the Threat in half!

The Cellist spins on his heel and leaps backward against the bar, using it for cover. He digs two cartridges of incendiary ammo out of his pocket and tosses them into the air. He breaks open his shotguns, catches the cartridges on their way down, and snaps the guns closed with a flick. Next, he reaches over the bar, places one

barrel against a bottle of 150 proof vodka, and fires an explosive face eraser at the remaining mooks! (filibuster)

The Cellist expects this to be the last round. He gets another 8 dice and rolls 6 to attack, 2 to defend. Unfortunately, he rolls boxcars on his Yin dice. The player cashes in a point of Chi. He “only” gets 6 Yang hits, so the mooks still have 1 point of Threat left...

The Cellist gets up from behind the bar and admires his handiwork. Suddenly, the bar manager kicks open his office door, points the business end of a Winchester rifle at him, and fires! He can almost see the bullet as he dives to the side. It cuts through the smoke in slow motion and grazes his right ear. As the manager loads a new round, the Cellist jumps through one of the bar’s blacked-out windows and fires his last shot at the alcohol-soaked bar. (6 dice)

With only one Threat point left, the Cellist can afford to play it safe. He splits his 6 dice evenly between Yin and Yang, getting 3 Yin hits and 2 Yang hits. Plenty.

A biblical pillar of flame engulfs the bar and its manager as the Cellist tumbles into the street. He’ll have to come back for his cello case.

CAR-FU

Your standard, Hollywood car chase is to Wushu-style Car-Fu as your standard, Hollywood fight scene is to Hong Kong-style wire-fu: boring and pedestrian! One of the unique advantages to role-playing is that you are not bound by physics, budgets, or concern for anyone's safety. Car-Fu is about using that freedom to create impossibly acrobatic car chases packed to the gills with over-the-top stunts, death-defying jumps, and enough property damage to bankrupt a major insurance company!

First, I'll outline the basics of running Wushu car chases, including game mechanics and stunt driving. Then, I'll show you how to use cars as melee weapons, the true nature of Car-Fu! The following section covers those flying cars you're always hearing about. Finally, I'll round out the guide with profuse examples of play.

If all goes as planned, you'll be both inspired to engage in some impossibly agile automotive action, and better equipped to describe it in vivid detail.

Car Chases

Wushu car chases end when someone crashes, which makes them remarkably similar to combat...

Traits

Normal driving actions don't require a roll, so they don't require a Trait. When you find yourself in vehicular combat, most combat-related Traits will do. A driving-specific Trait would be nice for really over-the-top autobatics, but don't worry if none of your heroes have one.

Yin & Yang Dice

Roll Yang dice to force your adversaries off the road by weaving through traffic, shooting out their tires, jumping over chasms, crashing headlong into them, etc. Roll Yin dice to stop your adversaries from doing the same to you, either by evading them or by duplicating their stunts.

Chi

Like Yin dice, Chi is spent to keep your wheels on the road. The driver should be the one paying this toll, even if there are other heroes in the car. If the driver gets taken out, the car gets taken out. Generous Directors may restore some or all of a driver's Chi immediately after a crash (i.e. if no one was injured).

Mooks

Yes, you can (and by all means should) have car chases with mooks! Swarms of police cars are great, but don't discount biker

gangs and Shriners. As usual, let your players describe the positions and actions of these mooks any way they wish.

An action that reduces a mook's Threat need not be a direct attack. In a chase situation, Threat means pursuit. To get away clean, you have to knock out that Threat rating. Until that happens, there are always more mooks around the next corner.

Stunt Driving

If you're going to perform car stunts in a Wushu game, you'll have to know how to describe them, so pardon the brief digression into matters of mechanical reality...

Spins

There are two ways to spin a car: by changing its direction or its orientation. The former is useful for forward 180s and whipping around tight corners. It usually involves cranking on the emergency brake to make the rear tires to skid. Then, you turn the wheel until the car has spun around to the desired direction, and stomp on the gas! Don't forget to mention the squealing tires, burning rubber, and sweeping skid marks.

The second kind of spin involves reversing the vehicle's orientation without changing its direction. Most of the time, you'd do this when you're already in reverse and need to turn the car around without stopping. However, you could also spin the car from forward to backwards so you can shoot at someone behind you. (My stunt

driving instructor could do reverse 180s, with one finger on the wheel, and only lose 5 mph.)

Box Slides

This stunt involves turning a vehicle 90 degrees from its direction of motion and then sliding to a sideways stop. It's much more expedient than traditional parallel parking. Again, the trick is using the e-brake to make one set of tires skid, then applying the regular brakes at just the right moment. This is a good way to turn tight corners at high speeds and an even better way to squish a few mooks (but more on that later).

Wheelies

This venerable stunt is much easier to pull off with a motorcycle. Cars usually need ramps to lift one side into the air, then it's all a matter of (unbelievable) balance. However, since it is possible to flip a car without a ramp, it's also possible to put a car into a wheelie without a ramp... by almost flipping it. This is quite useful for hurtling between oncoming vehicles, negotiating narrow alleys, and driving along vertical surfaces.

Now that the realistic stuff's out of the way, let's dive into the cinematic craziness!

The Bumper Car Principle

Car-Fu requires an unreasonable degree of durability from your imaginary vehicles. In the real world, even a low-speed collision can cause structural damage to some makes and models, and few survive a high-speed collision in working order. In a Wushu car chase, expect even the most delicate of sports cars to endure

numerous high-speed collisions with other vehicles, stationary objects, and many hundreds of bullets.

Jumps

Gravity is always the first rule of physics you should break, since it's such a constant pain in the ass. Compared to their real world counterparts, vehicles in a Wushu game should 1) part with the ground much easier and 2) remain parted much longer. In fact, they should be able to jump at the drop of a hat: over railings, off speed bumps, even over each other.

You can add an acrobatic twist to any jump by starting a spin just before you leave the ground. When jumping into an intersection, a 90 degree spin (or a 270 degree spin, if you're feeling flashy) will put you in excellent escape position when you land. An 180 degree spin will put you on the ground in reverse, ready to blast away as witless pursuers sail over your head!

Rolls

Wushu cars should be able to roll over like the family dog. You can pull out of a roll by hitting the gas and turning into the rotation, thus putting the car's wheels back under its center of gravity. Keep the pedal down and you'll end in a forward or back-wards spin. Escape a head-on collision by turning to the side (or box-sliding) at the last second, bouncing off the other car's hood, and rolling right over them.

Backflips

Hit a short wall or railing at high speeds to turn a jump (not a crash, see above) into a backflip. The front of the car bounces upwards,

providing lift for the jump and allowing the back tires to swing underneath. After a full rotation (or two, or three), land gracefully and continue in your original direction. To turn a back flip into a forward somersault, let the back tires slam into the wall or railing, too; they'll bounce back and swing above the rest of the car, reversing the direction of your flip.

Cartwheels

This is a tricky one, but well worth the effort. Going into a jump, you'll tip the front tires down and to one side (or just run into a conveniently placed object). The back of the car will continue into the jump, like a back flip. When combined with the rotation you created by tipping to the side, the car should be right-side-up and facing backwards after half a flip. Then, land the sucker and either put it in reverse or floor the accelerator and drive straight beneath your pursuers!



Cars as Melee Weapons

In the real world, the most common way to kill with a car is by running someone over. In a Wushu game, trying that shit is just askin' for an ass whupin'! Unless they're a mook, your victim will probably jump up on the hood of your car, pull out a pair of uzis, and paint your upholstery arterial red. Or maybe they'll pull a Morpheus: dive to the side and take out your tire with a sword. Or they might hop up, extend one foot, and let the car's momentum carry your squishy face into their spike-heeled boot.

It's not the car's fault, though. Oh no. The car is both a mobile suit of armor and a gas-powered bludgeon. No one is ever unarmed behind the wheel.

The Spin-Whip

Remember those spins from Stunt Driving 101? While they're changing your direction, they also channel a tremendous amount of force into the spinning end of your car. It's like swinging a club, if the club weighed about a ton, were made of metal, and was traveling 60 mph. Just speed towards your target, whip that car around, and send 'em flying into the brick wall across the street!

The motorcycle version is a bit different, since bikes have neither the mass nor the size of a car. Instead, they should combine the spin with a wheelie and smack pedestrian adversaries around with their front or back wheels. If it's the front wheel, remember that it can also rotate on its own for a nice 1-2 punch.

The Box Slide Smack Down

This one's a personal favorite. It's exactly the same as the regular box slide, except there's someone standing between where your car is and where it's going to be in a couple of seconds. Since you're hitting with the long side of your car, this trick is great for smackin' down whole groups of mooks at once. Then, take aim and shoot any survivors through the side windows. Makes a dramatic entrance.

In the motorcycle version, you'd tip your bike over and slide along the ground, knocking your enemies' legs out from beneath them. Since this is Wushu, you'd then be able to hop back up onto your wheels and either beat a hasty retreat or segue into a spin-whip!

The Monkey Dodge

Defensive Car-Fu consists exclusively of evasive maneuvers, the kind anyone would try when pursued by a truckload of gun-toting hillbillies or a hoard of ninja on motorbikes. Where the monkey dodge differs is that its evasive ducking and weaving is designed to send attackers careening into buildings, diving off cliffs, or crashing into each other!

Squish!

Just what it sounds like: finish a jump by landing on top of an enemy. Squishing makes a great beginning or end for any Car-Fu combo. You can land on one enemy, then use the momentum for a box-slide smack-down. Or you could monkey dodge down an alley, jump over a fence, and squish the mooks waiting for you on the other side.

The Land Torpedo

Use this trick as either a desperate last resort or a fiery diversion. Stick some kind of detonator on your car (explosives in the engine, oily rag in the gas tank, whatever), lay some weight on the accelerator, and point it at whatever you want to go BOOM! It's especially classy when the torpedo crashes through something on its way to the target, e.g. a garage door or a few panes of glass.

Flying Cars

Some of my favorite movie car chases have taken place exclusively in the air. Freed from gravity, flying cars are even more agile than the ridiculous autobatics described above. The other benefit is that you get to deal with a full three dimensions of oncoming traffic!

Now, we're not talking about airplanes or helicopters, here. We're talking about flying cars in a sci-fi setting, which are usually powered by some kind of "hover" technology. They can float, they can spin, they can tilt in any direction, and they can achieve incredible degrees of acceleration and agility. In other words, you get to careen between skyscrapers a mile above the ground with the speed of a jet fighter and maneuverability that would put a hummingbird to shame.

Use Car-Fu stunts and combat moves as described above, but don't bother with all that physics-related hand-waving. A spin is still a spin, whether you do it by skidding on your back tires or just because your vehicle can move in any direction. Either way, the

mooks you squashed with that box-slide smack-down aren't gettin' up any time soon!

Dogfights

Regardless of the technology that makes it possible, aerial combat remains fundamentally the same. The closer you are to a target, the easier it is to hit. That's why it's best to attack from above and behind your enemy: you can dive towards them (using gravity to gain speed), take your shot up close and personal, then rocket past them to a safe distance. Ambush tactics are usually the best tactics. If you're really a bastard, try to get between your enemy and the sun, so it shines right in their eyes.

When being attacked, there are two things you probably don't want to do: dive and climb. If you dive, your attacker will just follow suit... and open fire. If you climb, you'll have to fight gravity, and that means losing speed. A much better option is to weave back and forth evasively, trying either to lose them or to loop around behind them. If you've got guts, roll your vehicle upside down and pull "up," diving towards the ground. Once you've pulled around 180 degrees, you'll be heading back towards your attacker at even greater speed!

Of course, the miracle of hover technology does give us a few new options...

The Drop

If you've got a bogie bearing down on you fast, make like you're going to pull up into a vertical climb. Then, cut the power and fall backwards towards the ground. Fire straight up and perforate your opponent with an unholy hail of bullets!

The Reverse Drop

Same bogie as before, but now put your car in reverse and tilt so you're facing down, but backing straight up. Shoot the crap out of the mook as he flies in front of and beneath you, then put it back in drive and blast off in almost any direction!

The Millennium Falcon

Flying around inside a large structure makes for an exciting car chase! It's also a great way to shave off a few dozen mooks who just won't leave you alone. Buildings under construction are always good, since they tend to have fewer intact walls and floors. The key is to monkey dodge like a mad man and get your pursuers to hit every available girder, scaffold, or exploding power generator!

Crash Safety

Finally, there are a few things you'll need to consider when, not if, your hover car goes the way of the dodo. First, crashes are a lot more deadly when you fall a mile or so before hitting the ground. Second, it's harder to roll out of a vehicle at the last second when there's no ground to roll out onto. Fortunately, these are problems that the manufacturers of hover technology will have already put some thought into (I hope)...

Residual Charge - The first option is to build your hover devices so that they retain their charge for a few minutes, even when damaged or without power. That way, you'd at least have enough time to crash into a nearby building. A weaker, back-up hover system would do the same job.

Hover 'Chutes - Think of these as personal hover back-ups. They envelop the wearer in a zero-g field that lets them jump to safety, survive long falls, or even float in place for a minute or two. Note that such devices could also be used for the occasional wall-running stunt or gravity-defying gymnastics trick. (Hell, give 'em longer battery life and you'd have Matrix-style wire-fu in the real world!)



Rushing to the Rescue

Overdrive (Car-Fu 5) has a friend who's being held prisoner on a zombie-infested cargo ship. Overdrive's partner crept aboard a few minutes ago and Overdrive is his cavalry. He's idling his Ferrari 456M on the far side of the dockyard when the rat-a-tat-tat of his partner's auto pistol shatters the stillness.

He rockets over the wooden planks, straight towards a tugboat docked near the freighter. He crashes through its cabin wall and sails upward, using the boat as a ramp. Two members of the zombie crew barely have enough time to look up before Overdrive's death car crushes them into the deck. He slams on the e-brake and twists into a box-slide, smacking down three more undead sailors. (6 dice)

Zombies don't tend to stay down, so you give the mooks a Threat rating of 9. Overdrive has Chi to burn, so he goes on the offensive: 2 Yin dice and 4 Yang. He rolls his obligatory Yin hit and puts a nice dent in that Threat rating with 3 Yang hits.

His partner and the hostage pile in the back seat while Overdrive covers them with angry bursts of fire from his Heckler & Koch UMP. He jumps the car forward to slam the door closed, then throws it into reverse and spin-whips a half dozen zombies, launching them over the starboard railing and into the drink. He zips through the gap in the zombies' perimeter and guns for the railing. (5 dice)

The zombies are still a respectable Threat 6, which is plenty to challenge a single player. Again, Overdrive rolls 2 Yin dice and 4 Yang. They all come up roses. Overdrive's Ferrari remains amazingly unscathed and the zombies lose over half of their Threat rating.

Overdrive hits the starboard railing and pops over it, flying across the watery gap to a freighter on the next dock. Sailors dive for cover as the Ferrari blasts across the deck, hits the far railing, and leaps onto a cargo crate being lifted off the ship. He pauses for a moment while the crane swings the crate over the wharf, then hurtles off, drops onto the dock with a seismic THUD, and tears off into the night! (filibuster)

Overdrive grabs his 6 dice, keeps 1 for defense, and rolls 5 to make sure those zombies think twice about pursuing him! Unfortunately, his Yin die is a failure, so he cashes in a point of Chi (and laments the damage to his Ferrari's shocks). On the other hand, 4 of his Yang dice hit, which annihilates the Threat. He and his companions get away clean.

The players move directly to the next scene. Had they not beaten the Threat on that roll, the Director would have created another obstacle or unleashed a wave of zombie pursuers (on poorly-tuned motorcycles, I'd imagine).

Warring on the Road

Krazy Klyde (Wheelman 5) and the Sixgun Samurai (Death Machine 5) are being chased across a post-apocalyptic wasteland by a trio of leather-clad road pirates (Kill People & Take Their Stuff 3). The pirates have an armored truck with two machine gun nests on sidecars. Our heros have a nitrous-boosted stock car. Having decided that dodging machine gun fire isn't as much fun as he'd imagined...

Klyde weaves onto the shoulder and backflips off a vaguely ramp-shaped bit of rubble. Two streams of bullets follow him as the car rotates in mid-air, then lands right atop the armored truck! His shocks groan in protest. (6 dice) The two pirates hoot and holler like crazed hyenas as they let loose hundreds of red-hot rounds at their prey. The truck's driver hits the brakes, trying to knock Klyde off his perch. (4 dice)

Klyde collects his 6 dice, keeps 2 Yin for dodging bullets, and puts the rest into his insane backflip maneuver. He gets 2 Yin and 2 Yang hits. You roll a fistful of Yang and get 2 hits, but it's not enough to beat Klyde's pair. You cash in both of the driver's 2 Chi. (That's a total of 6 Chi for the nemeses, equal to the two players' total.)

Sixgun climbs out the passenger window, trench coat flaring around him. He jumps into the air and unloads his revolver into one of the gunners. (4 dice) Klyde floors the accelerator as Sixgun clears the car, launching himself out in front of the truck. (2 dice) Both

henchmen abandon their machine guns to climb onto the roof, while the driver tries in vain to keep up with Klyde. (2 dice)

Since he's not being actively attacked, Sixgun puts all 4 of his dice into killing that pirate. He rolls 3 Yang hits. The pirate rolls 1 die for defense, but it comes up a failure. He takes 3 hits and doesn't have the Chi to cover it. He's road rubble. The other pirate climbs onto the roof unopposed. Klyde declares all 3 of his dice Yin, just in case that truck driver gets lucky. He only gets one Yin hit, but your one remaining die isn't enough to cause Klyde any trouble.

Back atop the truck, Sixgun spins his sidearm back into its holster and draws his sword. The acid-etched blade glints brightly as he slashes across his enemy's throat. Then, another gun pops into his hand from its spring-loaded sleeve holster and more bullets blast towards his adversary. (6 dice) Surprised by the ferocity of this attack, the pirate brings an armored forearm up to deflect the blade, spins sideways to avoid the bullets, and kicks savagely at Sixgun's knees. (4 dice)

Sixgun rolls 4 Yang and 2 Yin, getting 3 Yang hits and 1 Yin. The pirate devotes 3 dice to defense and 1 to attack, netting only 1 hit of each. Sixgun's knees escape serious injury, but the pirate loses 2 points of Chi, which is all he had. He's still up, but he's feelin' the pain.

Meanwhile, Klyde's getting fed up with this armored truck. He hits the nitrous, spins the car around 180 degrees, slams the stick into reverse, aims his shotgun right between the truck driver's eyes, and blasts a slug through both their windshields! (5 dice) Said truck driver rebounds off his seat and slumps over the wheel, leaning on the gas... (2 dice)

Klyde rolls all of his dice to attack and gets 5 Yang hits. The truck driver's meager 2 Yin both come up lucky, but it's not enough to save him. If he had "lived," you would have continued to menace Klyde with an out-of-control truck. As it happens, Klyde gets to describe the crash as his Coup de Grace.

Sixgun has his opponent on the ropes when the truck lurches sideways, so he smoothly sheathes his blade and leaps towards the stock car, firing backwards at the pirate. (4 dice) The pirate hugs the chassis and prays to his pagan gods. (2 dice) Klyde cuts the nitrous booster and taps the brake, trying to nudge the car into position beneath Sixgun's fall. (3 dice)

Trusting Klyde to catch him, Sixgun declares all 4 of his dice Yang and rolls 3 hits. The pirate rolls 2 Yin dice, but only gets 1 hit and joins his departed brothers in henchman hell. Klyde's action is unopposed, so he just rolls all 3 dice and hopes for at least one success, which he gets!

Sixgun hits the hood in a backwards roll and flops down on the roof, safe and sound. The armored truck is a spectacular wreck!



Racing Across Rooftops

The Hound (Bounty Hunter 5) pursues his next collar, Scarab Jones (Gangbanger 5), as the latter flees across the city's skyline on his signature Harley. Scarab's engine roars like a lion as he leaps over an alley and bites into the rooftop on the other side. He fires two shotgun blasts over his shoulder, turning the jump into a kill zone. (5 dice) The Hound's Yamaha purrs like a chrome kitten as he leans to the left, scraping his knee on the gravel just as the buckshot flies past. He sails over the chasm, hot on Scarab's heels. (5 dice)

You roll 5 dice for Scarab and make them all Yang, getting 4 hits. The Hound also rolls 5; since he just wants to see where Scarab is going, he puts them all into defense and gets 4 Yin hits. All of the dice cancel out, so no one has to spend any Chi.

Scarab continues his flight by using a stack of pottery to jump through the back wall of a greenhouse, leaving a mine field of broken glass for the bounty hunter, then rockets through an apartment window across the street. (5 dice) The Hound hits the roof with a spray of tiny stones and weaves left around the greenhouse. He hits the skids a split second before reaching his own jump and flies towards the apartment, using his bike as a shield. (5 dice)

Once again, Scarab puts all 5 of his dice into offense and The Hound sinks his into defense. Scarab only manages to roll 3 Yang hits, which The Hound easily turns aside with his 5 Yin.

Scarab commands the half dozen ganger mooks inside the apartment to grab their guns and put his pursuer in the dead book! The Hound lets their bullets ricochet off his cycle as he crashes through the window and squishes two thugs. He pops back up into a front wheelie in the center of the room and spin-whips a few more with the back tire. Then, he pulls his desert eagle on Scarab. "You're under arrest!" (6 dice)

The chase segues into mook combat. You assign a Threat level of 3 to the thugs, because you want this resolved in a single round. The Hound gets 6 dice, keeps one for defense, and sinks the rest into whackin' mooks. He gets his obligatory 1 Yin, so loses no Chi, and more than beats the mooks with 4 Yang hits.

With nowhere left to run, the Scarab drops his weapons and demands his phone call.

Escaping Captivity

Rave (Rogue Super-Soldier 5) is peeling military police (MPs) off of her stolen hummer as she tries to escape from a military R&D installation. She fires a quick burst from her micro uzi through the passenger side door, turning it and an MP into Swiss cheese. Then, she steers the hummer into a building, scraping more MPs off the other side. (5 dice)

This is an in-media-res opener. You set the dice pool limit at 8 and put 12 points of Threat between Rave and freedom. The player keeps her obligatory Yin die and rolls the other 4 Yang. All come up hits. That reduces the Threat to 8.

Another hummer rushes straight toward Rave from the base's perimeter. "Chicken," Rave notes. "Delicious." She roars towards her keeper... and cranks the wheel at the last second, tipping her

hummer sideways and rolling over the other car's hood! She hangs on as the vehicle rolls twice more, then regains verticality and makes for the fence. (7 dice)

Rave keeps 1 Yin die and rolls the other 6 as Yang. Her Yin die comes up a 6, so she cashes in a point of Chi to stay in the game. However, she does score 5 Yang hits, slashing the Threat to 3.

The enemy hummer gets its bearings and turns to pursue. Rave aims for a stack of large, metal pipes in front of the perimeter fence. She jumps one side of the hummer off the pipes, which sends her into a cartwheel that barely clears the fence. Its razorwire scrapes across the hummer's grill, shooting sparks into the night air. (6 dice)

Still smarting from last round, Rave chooses a safer split: 2 Yin and 4 Yang. Both of those Yin come through for her, so she gets to keep her Chi, but she only gets 2 Yang hits. There's a hellhound still on her trail.

The hummer hits the ground in reverse and Rave brings her uzi to bear. She shoots through her own windshield, through the chain link fence, and peppers the other hummer's tires with lead! (4 dice)

Rave wants to make damn sure she's not followed, so she throws caution to the wind and rolls all 4 dice for her attack. She automatically loses a point of Chi for not having any Yin, but it's a

small price to pay. Rave nets 3 hits, which is just enough to make her getaway.

Its tires rendered useless, the enemy hummer wipes out on the stack of pipes and rolls into the fence. Rave spins a reverse 180 and takes off into the night.

Flying Through Factories

Free Radical (Cyber Punk 5) is stopped at an intersection, thinking she lost the feds ten blocks back, when she spots flashing lights in her rear viewscreen. A cop's coming in fast, at a shallow dive from two traffic levels up.

She disengages her skycar's auto-pilot, puts the hover drive in reverse, and pitches her nose down. As the cop flies beneath her, struggling to brake, she opens fire with a pair of concealed railguns! (6 dice)

What Free Radical doesn't know is that this is just the first of several squad cars on her tail! You gives the mooks a Threat of 12. Free Radical decides to play it (relatively) safe and splits her 6 dice evenly between attack and defense. She rolls 2 Yin hits (she only needs one) and 3 Yang. That squad car's in a world of hurt!

Three more bogies light up Free Radical's viewscreen, so she dives straight down, weaving through one traffic layer after another

at breakneck speed! Finding herself surrounded by the smokey lights of an industrial complex, she pulls into a loose spiral and crashes through the upper-level windows of an automated factory. (5 dice)

Feeling a bit more confident, Free Radical keeps only 1 Yin die and declares the other 4 Yang. She gets 3 Yang hits, reducing the Threat to 6. The bad news is that her Yin die failed, so the player has to fork over a point of Chi.

One of the squad cars misses the turn, but the other two soar in after her. Free Radical streaks over the factory floor, looking for a good place to lose her pursuers. She dips down towards an assembly line and begins weaving between the arc welders like a slalom skier with a death wish. With her off hand, she cues up her onboard AI and runs a schematic analysis of the factory. (5 dice)

Wincing from last round, Free Radical goes more defensive: 2 Yin dice and 3 Yang. This time, she has plenty of Yin, but only manages 2 Yang hits. That leaves the mooks' Threat level at 4.

Free Radical's viewscreen fills with architectural overlays of the factory's various systems. Veering into a service corridor, she heads for the plasma conduits that feed a foundry on the floor below. She box-slides to a stop in full view of the pursuing squad cars... and waits. Just as the lead car opens fire, she cuts her hover drive and drops to the floor. The bullets sail over her and

rupture the conduits, spraying plasma over her head and down the corridor! (6 dice)

Free Radical would like to avoid getting any plasma on her sweet ride, so she splits her 6 dice evenly again. She gets 2 Yin hits and 3 Yang hits, leaving the cops with just 1 Threat level. The hood of the lead car literally melts away in the plasma stream, but the second car bursts through the wreckage, still in hot pursuit!

Free Radical decides it's time to go Millennium Falcon on this jerk. She amps up the hover drive and pulls into a steep climb, weaving through the unfinished levels on the back side of the building. She opens up with her railguns, filling the already cramped space with falling debris. (5 dice)

Free Radical rolls 2 Yin and 3 Yang, pulling in 1 Yin hit and 2 Yang hits. More than enough.

The cop collides with one bit of shrapnel too many and veers into a support beam. The explosion blasts Free Radical through the last story and back into open sky!

WYRD-FU

"Magic" should not be a synonym for "mobile artillery." Forget about range, duration, and area of effect. Forget about dots and spheres. Forget about forgetting spells once they're cast. (That bit never did make much sense.) Magic shouldn't feel like technology. It should be mysterious and fluid. It should feel magical, and no spell list or point system is going to deliver that.

Wyrd-Fu gives you the freedom to work your will. It rewards you for describing your spellcasting in lurid detail, which makes it more about the casting than the spell. To make the most of your magic, you'll need to lay down a thick coat of atmosphere: pentagrams, incense, incantations, apparitions, levitating tables, anything that adds authenticity to your spellcraft. In most games, these kinds of details are either lost amidst a sea of effects-obsessed rules or paid lip service with no real benefit for those who go the extra mile.

Wyrd-Fu is all about reveling in the details.

This Wushu Guide offers advice on creating black arts of your own, based on real world models or cut from whole cloth. A little forethought will go a long way towards preparing you for the furious improvisation that Wushu requires. Several ready-to-run traditions are provided, followed by two demystifying Examples of Play.

Once your training is complete, you'll be a maven of malevolent mojo!

Slingin' Spells

Before you can work your mojo, you gotta know how your mojo works. Don't worry so much about what your magic can or can't do, focus on how it does what it does. Specifically, you should know where your magic comes from, which tools you use to direct it, and what kinds of side-effects it brings along for the ride.

What are you invoking?

Do you manipulate the arcane forces that underpin reality or does power come to you second hand from supernatural beings? The former requires a keen intellect; the latter calls for the skills of a used car salesman. Are you a gnostic who rebels against reality by sheer force of will or are you an illusionist who can only alter people's perceptions of reality? Sometimes, less power equals more fun.

What tools do you use?

Do you pray to gods or learn the True Names of spirits? Do you shape mystical forces with runes, talismans, or arcane rituals? Are you a new-ager who surrounds himself with pentacles, candles, incense, and wands? Or would you rather go old school with drums, rattles, masks, bones, and really big fires? Postmodern types might replace all of the above with trance music, laptops, action figures, and corporate logos.

What are the side effects?

Does your spellcasting unleash poltergeist whirlwinds, pretty lights, or other flashy FX? Do you suffer headaches, fatigue, or loss of

self-control? Supernatural entities may demand favors in exchange for their services. Newton's third law and the law of conservation may produce backlashes or byproducts that must be managed. Particularly dire forms of magic may siphon energy from surrounding plants and animals or balance the spell's beneficial effects with equivalent bad luck. Nobody gets a free ride.

Improvisation is the heart and soul of Wyrld-Fu, but preparation has its place. Shamans should come to the game table with a few familiars or patron spirits in their pocket. Magi need to know their favorite tools, particularly the ones they carry on their person, and maybe one or two signature spells. (Such characters have studied for years to learn hundreds of spells by rote, even if their players are pulling tricks out of their proverbial hats.) Psychics and will-workers must determine the price of their power, whether it's mind-shattering pain, the slow erosion of their morals, or opposition by infernal forces.

Magic Tricks

Details = Dice. That's the only rule you need to run any kind of magic. Yet, here we are, starting off a section on game mechanics. The thing is, spellcasting differs from many other in-game actions, because rituals are often performed long before their effects are felt and in places far removed from their targets. Magicians also deal with inhuman intermediaries who may or may not feel invested in their masters' well-being. It's a little more complicated than

throwing a punch. The following are just a few ways you can twist Wushu's core mechanic to tackle these challenges.

Rituals, Then & Now

Ritual actions make excellent Details, but it can be difficult to get all those black candles lit in the middle of a gunfight, ya know? Wushu offers you two coping mechanisms. First, you can let players describe their rituals in advance, then hold the dice they earn until the spell's effect comes into play. Conversely, you can let them wait until they need a spell effect, then describe the necessary ritual in the past tense, as if they had performed it in advance! This second option can get old if overused, but it's perfect for Hellblazer-style double bluffs.



Photo Credit: Moncrief (Wikimedia)

Incantations

Fairy tale spellcasting often involves incantations that summarize a spell's terms and conditions in rhyming verse. This works great in Wushu because 1) you have to define each spell as you improvise it and 2) each new term and condition can count as a separate Detail. Defining the intended effect should only take a line or two, so the rest of your dice can come from describing the spell's Out Clause. Every spell has one. Traditional favorites include solar eclipses and True Love's Kiss.

Slipping the Leash

Power corrupts, and magi wield ridiculous amounts of power. Under this system, each spellcasting character gets to hold a pool of 6 dice (or however many you want). When they use their magic, they draw their dice out of this pool. Then, they roll whatever dice remain against a Trait related to self-control. If they don't get at least one success, they go a little crazy. The Director can decide what that means, but it's often more entertaining to let your players screw themselves. (See also **Devil's Dice**.)

Faustian Bargains

The classic method for binding spirits is to trap them in a summoning circle and refuse to release them until they promise to perform a service for you. Needless to say, spirits hate that shit. When they inevitably try to stab you in the back, you can treat the conflict as a mook fight or a Nemesis battle.

Mooks - Every time the magician calls upon a bound spirit, they have to devote dice to keeping it under control. If they don't get at

least one success on those dice, the spirit does something bad or (if you're the forgiving sort) flees back to the hell pit from whence it came.

Nemeses - Powerful spirits should have Traits and Chi of their own. In this case, you should resolve their struggle against oppression as you would any other conflict. Note that losing Chi in the normal course of a game will make heroes more vulnerable to demonic back-stabbing. This means they may not be able to count on their more powerful spirits when the chips are down, but that's the price of dealing with demons.

Arcane Arts

It's always good to start with the classics. (We'll get to more obscure and original fare in a bit.) Just about anything from film, fiction, or folklore should fit into one of these categories. Even so, this isn't meant to be an exhaustive accounting of the world's magical traditions, just some broad generalizations to get you barking up the right trees.

Animism

Simply put, this is the belief that invisible spirits inhabit everything in nature and that humans can control the material world by communicating with these spirits. Details come from making deals and sacrifices, allowing spirits to creatively (mis)interpret instructions, and describing the methods through which you

communicate. Examples include most pagan and pantheistic religions, ancestor worship, and demonology.

Low Magic

“Like Produces Like.” The Law of Sympathy states that we can influence people and objects in the world by manipulating symbols that are linked to those people and objects. Low magi earn dice by coming up with creative sympathetic links (dolls, photographs, religious icons, masks), homeopathic links (hair or nail clippings, personal possessions, blood), and ritual actions (nailing something down to paralyze it, burning it to cause injury, putting it in a safe to provide protection). This is DIY magic at its low-budget finest.

Numerology

Any number of mystical traditions based on the mathematical relationships between numbers or other symbols. Kaballah, the Pythagorean mystery cults, and the magic of the Cthulhu Mythos are excellent examples. Details come from knowing the True Names of spirits or gods, divining information by interpreting randomly occurring numbers or decoding holy texts, constructing objects or symbols with strange angles, and adorning amulets or talismans with special combinations of numbers and letters.

Hermeticism

In the late 1800's, Victorians picked up bits of arcane lore from Egypt, India, China, and the Middle East, then stirred them all together in a big jug. From Aleister Crowley to the Rosicrucian Order, all of these wand-waving magicians can be called "Hermeticists." They combine alchemy, astrology, and theurgy

(trafficking with spirits) into complex, almost scientific belief systems. Do your research, because your Details will need to sound like the footnotes from a Ph.D. thesis (or maybe the rantings of a conspiracy nut).

Gnostic Crap

If you absolutely must do your will-working without any interesting accouterments, at least employ an interesting cosmology like that of the Gnostics or Buddhists. The former believed that God and the angels ("archons") were degenerate beings bent on keeping mankind's divine spark confined to the flesh. Buddhists seek to escape the cycle of reincarnation by severing their ties to the material world and ascending to Nirvana. In both cases, creeping closer to enlightenment often comes with kewl powerz.

Psi

Psychic abilities are rarely portrayed as magic, but they're definitely wyrd. The big three are telepathy (sensing or altering the thoughts of others), clairvoyance (the proverbial sixth sense), and telekinesis (mind over matter). Pyrokinesis, psychomancy, precognition, and astral projection are popular niche abilities. Bearing such awesome power is never easy. Pain, fatigue, and loss of self-control are common side-effects.

Affinities

When all else fails, go the superhero route. Affinities are Traits that give a character a supernatural connection to some specific force, substance, or phenomenon. Magnetism, love, ice, insects, blood... the subject of the affinity can be damn near anything. Through this

connection, the magus can sense, control, alter, create, and/or destroy anything related to their Affinity. It's an easy way to model mutants, gods, and mad scientists alike.

Now, on to the more interesting fare...

Hoodoo

Invokes: The Law of Sympathy - "Like produces like."

Tools: Sympathetic links, mojo bags, herbs, & curios.

Side FX: Few. Hoodoo is a subtle form of magic.

Hoodoo doctors are pragmatists in the extreme. They've combined central African folk magic with elements of Native American herbalism, Vodoun, and Protestant Christianity to create a unique form of low magic with an emphasis on personal power. Though they revere certain Vodoun Loa and many kinds of spirits, they're far more concerned with finding quick-and-dirty, supernatural solutions to common, everyday problems.

Their most famous tool is the infamous "voodoo doll." It creates a sympathetic link to a specific person simply by resembling them, literally or symbolically. Extra power (and extra dice) can be gained by incorporating some of the target's personal items, bits of hair, or a photograph. Anything that resembles, or was once a part of, the target will strengthen the sympathetic link.

Then, it's just a matter of doing to the doll what you want to happen to the target. This can be metaphorical (placing it under a stone to slow it down, performing a funeral to make it sick) or quite literal (lighting it on fire, stabbing needles in its eyes, breaking its limbs, and so forth).

However, the most common hoodoo tool is the mojo bag. These African fetishes are small, cloth bags that contain objects that are symbolic of some desired effect. Protection spells often contain salt. Luck spells might contain pennies, a folded up Ace of Spades, or a rabbit's foot. They can be hung in a home or near a doorway, but most are carried on your person. Harmful mojo bags are usually hidden in the victim's home or buried under a place they're known to walk. There are strong taboos against touching another person's mojo bag, as this can dispel its magic, so they are commonly concealed beneath clothing and worn against the skin.

Crossroads are very important. Burying or abandoning things at a crossroads is a part of many hoodoo spells and is considered a safe way to dispose of ritual implements. When an actual crossroad is not available, hoodoo doctors can make do with a drawing of two crossed lines inside a circle. When discretion is needed, substitute the cross for a "five spot:" four equidistant dots (where the lines would meet the circle) with a fifth dot in the center (where the lines would cross).

Footprint magic is another hoodoo mainstay. Every footprint carries a sympathetic link to the person who made it. The dust from a footprint can be used in dolls, mojo bags, and other spells. Scratching crosses or other symbols on someone's footprint is a good way to put a hex on them. This is why most hoodooists use floor sweeping and washing rituals to cleanse their homes on a daily basis.

Beyond that, just play fast and loose with the Law of Sympathy. Dress up action figures to represent your enemies. Use Hot Wheels to run cars off the road. Hold a handful of gravel over a

lighter to engulf a dirt road in flames. Chip a piece off a cement wall and crush it to create an instant escape route. Use maps for divination or to trap your victims in an endless Moebius crossroad.

It's important to decide ahead of time exactly how strong you like your hoodoo. If you want to stay true to the source material, you should play it subtle and limit hoodoo to effects that can be dismissed as coincidence or hallucination. On the other hand, there's no denying the inherent fun in crushing an enemy's skull with just your thumb. Be sure to talk it over with the rest of the group before you get to the gaming table.

Similarly, you probably don't want to let this stuff work for just anyone, as every sketch artist would become a deadly assassin. It would be reasonable to say that all hoodooists need a natural "knack" for magic, or must have been "touched by the other side" in some way. Many two-faced men, as they are also called, claim to hear spirits in their heads. Maybe you have to be a little bit crazy.

Non-Euclidean Geomancy

Invokes: Strange angles and Qi flows.

Tools: Geomantic compass, acupuncture needles.

Side FX: Space-time distortions, madness.

Traditional geomancers and acupuncturists are on the right track, but their perspective is sorely limited. Qi is the substance of creation! How could it be bound into the familiar dimensions of space and time? No, Qi also flows through the invisible dimensions of reality, ones both beyond and below the range of the natural senses. To understand it, to control it, you must become something unnatural.

The true geomancer's first and most important tool is a geomantic compass, one with additional rings that reveal extra-dimensional vectors. Through such a device, the Qi flows will tell a geomancer many things: who has visited a location, where lost objects can be found, when magic is being used, the best place to put a sofa, and just about anything else. There are pocket-sized models, but they're for amateurs. Full-sized versions can stretch 2-3 feet in diameter and may need to be carried like a backpack.

In time, true geomancers gain an intuitive sense for how Qi flows through and around them. They begin to see the crucial points in space and time where this flow can be altered, blocked, or amplified. With only a needle or a precision strike at just the right angle, a skilled geomancer can cause pain, paralysis, blindness, or sleep. They can shatter stone or bend steel. Qi is life, but even inanimate objects are sensitive to its ebb and flow.

The masters learn to alter space itself. They move at unnatural angles, appear and disappear at will. They can stretch and fold the fabric of space to redirect attacks, or change a bullet's frame of reference so that it seems to hover in midair. Gravity has no dominion over them and no prison can contain them. (In other words, this is a blank check for all your favorite wire-fu stunts.)

However, geomancers are not masters of all creation. There are rules even they must obey. Since their magic is all about strange angles, curves confound them. Summoning circles and rooms with rounded corners are sure protection against a geomancer's magic, but even the slightest angle will render such defenses useless. They cannot hide the wake of their warping, for even the uninitiated

can sense the wrongness of a place where a true geomancer has stepped sideways or warped space.

They must also contend with dangers that do not hound lesser men. The mind recoils from comprehension of the unnatural, so true geomancers erode their sanity every time they peer into higher dimensions. (Devil's Dice might be a good mechanic to use.) Such realms are inhabited by alien forms of life that are inimical to our own... and who do not look kindly upon trespassers.



Photo Credit: DavidJGB (Flickr)

Virtual Animism

Invokes: Nature spirits of the urban jungle.

Tools: Internet, text message, T.V., radio, etc.

Side FX: Malfunctions & poltergeist crap.

Animists believe that everything in nature has an animating spirit. Historically, that has meant plants, animals, rocks, lakes, forests, and even the wind, but what if the same thinking applied to cars, elevators, skyscrapers, sewers, freeways, and radio broadcasts? Virtual animists trade favors and influence with beings who dwell on the other side of the computer screen, ride the airwaves, and prowl the power grid. They are the shamans of the street.

Where traditionalists use masks, drums, and psychedelic drugs to contact the spirit world, Virtual Animists use text messages and email. They stare at television static and see the future. Hardcore TV freaks will sit in front of a dozen tubes, all tuned to different stations, and wait for the cacophony to speak to them. It's popular to make your cellphone a familiar, so it can relay quick text messages to other spirits. Hacker types and urban taggers will recruit spirit allies from an entire network or neighborhood, so someone's always got their back.

However, spirits rarely work for free. They have needs, just as people do, and human beings are in a unique position to fulfill many of them. Most simply want their homes protected; they ask shamans to whitewash graffiti, fix plumbing, upgrade hardware, and generally do the repairman gig. They have enemies whose homes they'd like to see vandalized, hacked, or set on fire. Simple offerings are also common, anything from burning a quart of motor oil to microwaving an AOL installation disk. Your loyal cellphone

may demand to never be set on silent or taken outside its coverage area.

Directors should allow players to earn dice in advance by role-playing through these obligations. Players can save these dice and add them to related rolls later on, even if it puts them over the normal pool limit. Neglecting one's obligations can also be a source of dice, if the player is willing to describe their spirit allies abandoning them at inconvenient moments. Obviously, this means that their magic fails them, but the dice thus earned can still be applied towards resolving the scene. A detail is a detail.

If you're willing to make these sacrifices, trafficking with spirits is a quick path to power. Unfortunately, it is also a treacherous path fraught with hidden dangers. Spirits are capricious by nature and few have a solid grasp on how the human world works. They misinterpret instructions, taking some things too literally and other things too figuratively. (The less trustworthy ones do it on purpose. They think it's funny.) The result is a lot of nasty side effects: power outages, mechanical failures, spontaneous combustion, levitating furniture, and the like.

Not all spirits are created equal, Great Spirits least of all. Each of a city's major infrastructures is the domain of a Great Spirit: water, power, roads, telecommunications, etc. They are as god-kings among the other spirits; their authority is absolute, for they are all-knowing (within their sphere of influence) and can unmake lesser spirits at will. Animists who devote themselves to a Great Spirit gain immense power, but their loyalty must be unwavering. The slightest hint of betrayal could leave a shaman powerless,

dead, or hollowed out for use as a soulless meat puppet called a "skinwalker."

The Two-Faced Man

The summer of 1928 is not going well for Hotfoot Jackson. He's embroiled in a turf war with a bunch of bootleggers who want him to pay protection money. They'd have better luck extorting cash from the fish in the sea. Unfortunately, such logistical considerations rarely stop mobsters from resorting to violence. They'll probably just rub him out as an example to others.

Now, mundane violence is nothing a top notch hoodooist can't handle, but there are plenty of other root workers and occultist in the Big Easy. Thus, Hotfoot is being particularly meticulous in sweeping up his shop at the end of the day, to make sure he doesn't leave any footprints behind. He's just getting ready to sweep the last pile of dirt into his dustpan when a strange-looking, Asian fellow comes to his door.

Jackson points to the "Closed" sign, but the stranger vanishes into thin air! (1 die) The hoodooist's patented "One Eye Open" mojo bag raises the hair on his neck moments before the Geomancer strikes! (It contains the "eye in the pyramid" logo from a dollar bill, the powdered ears of a rabbit, and a policeman's whistle.) Hotfoot dodges backwards just as... (6 dice)

The Geomancer materializes in the corner of the ceiling and dives towards his target with a flying kick! His feet barely brush the floor

as he delivers a series of savage spin kicks that drive Hotfoot across the room. (5 dice)

You started this fight off with the Geomancer's vanishing act, but Hotfoot's player worked himself up to 6 dice before your subsequent attack. Hotfoot goes defensive; he splits his dice into 4 Yin and 2 Yang, then rolls them against his "Hoodoo You Do 5" Trait. He gets 3 Yin hits and 1 Yang.

You go the opposite route, allocating 4 dice to attack and 2 to defense. You roll against the Geomancer's "Eldritch Ninja 4" Trait and get lucky on those Yang dice: 4 hits! Hotfoot takes one to the teeth and cashes in 1 of his 3 Chi. You also score the 1 Yin you need to defend, so the Geomancer gets through the round without a scratch.

Hotfoot stumbles back and falls ass-first into an empty barrel. (1 die) The Geomancer changes direction so fast that he seems to bounce off empty air, flips upside-down to stand on the ceiling, and quickly retreats into the shadows. A few moment's later, a hatchet sails out of the darkness and buries itself in the side of the barrel! (4 dice)

The two-faced man pulls his trusty revolver from an ankle holster and sends six bullets speeding into the space from whence the hatchet came. "Can't you read the sign?! We're closed!!!" he screams over the gunshots. (4 dice) Space seems to stretch out until the bullets slow to a crawl, then they fall out of the air like

raindrops. (2 dice) "Oh shit," Hotfoot whispers to himself and throws his empty gun at the elusive assassin. (2 dice)

The player knows how Non-Euclidean Geomancy works, even if Hotfoot doesn't, so he earns that first die by "accidentally" hiding inside a curved barrel. That hatchet trick is intended to create a right angle the Geomancer's magic can act upon, but you ran out of dice before you could use it. That will have to wait until next round. To make sure the assassin gets there, you choose a conservative 3/3 split. This time, your actions involved more magic than martial arts, so you roll against the Geomancer's "Strange Angles 5" Trait and get 2 hits of each type.

The player decides to go on the offensive with a 1/5 split, counting on his Chi to keep him alive. There was no hoodoo in his description, so he rolls against Hotfoot's "Rough & Tumble 4" Trait. He gets no Yin hits, but 4 of his Yang dice get lucky. Hotfoot cashes in his last 2 Chi, but manages to cut the Geomancer's Chi down to 1.

The Geomancer blinks into the space right in front of Hotfoot and delivers a precision strike to the point where the hatchet blade meets the barrel. It explodes in a cloud of splinters! (3 dice) Jackson bum rushes his assailant and tears out a bit of his hair in the tussle. (2 dice) The Geomancer knife-hands him in the armpit, blocking the qi flow to his left arm. It goes slack at his side. (3 dice) Jackson snags a rusty nail from a shelf on his way down to the floor, then rolls over to that unswept pile of dirt and drives the nail

into a footprint the Geomancer left during one of his spin kicks. Sympathetic magic pins the assassin's foot to the floor! (4 dice)

Hotfoot's player needs to tread carefully, so he opts for another 4/2 defensive split and rolls against his Hoodoo Trait. You repeat your previous 3/3 split. This time, Hotfoot puts up a mighty wall of Yin with 3 hits, but scores only 1 Yang hit. You can't get enough Yang to do any damage, but you do get the 1 Yin you need to stay in the fight. No one gets the upper hand, this round.



The two-faced man scrambles to his feet on the other side of the room, plucks a cloth hoodoo doll off the shelf, and stuffs the Geomancer's hair through a slit in its back. (3 dice) Once he

realizes that yanking on his leg with both hands makes him look like an idiot, the Geomancer crosses his arms at a strange angle and pushes them towards the nail in his footprint. An invisible wave of qi slices through the floorboards, scattering his footprint and breaking the spell. He closes on his victim like a striking snake! (4 dice) Hotfoot just smiles and presses the hoodoo doll against a five-spot on the wall. Magic surges through the sympathetic link! (3 dice)

Everyone thinks this would make an excellent climax to the fight, so you roll with only 4 dice. You split them 1/3, scoring 3 hits and no defense. The player takes a 2/4 split and rolls a failure in each set. That gives him enough Yin to block 1 hit, bringing him to -2 Chi. His 3 Yang hits blast the Nemesis' last Chi, which brings him to -2 as well. Since ties go to the hero, Hotfoot gets the Coup de Grace...

A little pressure flattens the doll and crushes the Geomancer's rib cage. His body drops to the floor in a sickeningly soft heap. Hotfoot notes with irritation that the assassin's death has not restored sensation to his arm. Looks like he'll be asking the acupuncturist down the street for a favor.

The Skinwalker

Analog's mentor was a maverick of the invisible world. He walked the line between warring spirits... until he made a desperate deal with the Great Spirit of the Mains. He lost his soul and gained a mission: hunt down every mortal who has ever trespassed against

the city's water system. Analog won't let the Great Spirit use her mentor like that, not even if she must destroy his body to save his soul.

First, she has to find him. She turns on her vintage television and tunes the antenna to a dead channel. "Swift and all-seeing spirits of the airwaves, it is I who shut down the pirate station that once trespassed on your territory. Now, I need your help. Show me my mentor's destination." (5 dice)

Analog's player is acting without opposition, so all she needs is one success. She earns one die for describing her divining tool, one for a ritual action (tuning it to static), two for sweet-talking the spirits (flattering them and reminding them of a past favor), and one more for actually asking the question. She rolls them all against her "Techno-Shaman 5" Trait and gets 4 hits. The Director decides to answer her question and give her a few bits of additional info.

As she stares into the static, an image of the city begins to emerge. It zooms in on an apartment building north of downtown, then in through a window on the fifth floor to reveal a forty-something, balding man in the middle of unclogging his sink. The sound resolves itself into a year-old news story about city workers breaking a sewer line. A crime worthy of the death sentence, to be sure.

Analog thanks the spirits, plucks her cell phone from its charger, and flies out the door. On the northbound bus, she negotiates with

the apartment's spirits via text message. [skinwalker coming. need U 2 help stop.] (1 die)

Her cellphone familiar ushers the message into the astral. The response comes back in moments: [NO WAY].

They're playing hard ball. [life or death. what U want?] (1 die)

This time, it takes several, anxious minutes. [NEW WIRES. WHOLE BLDG.]

Analog spares herself a moment to mourn her bank balance. Rewiring an entire apartment building will take some serious scratch. [U got it. wait 4 my signal.] She gets from the bus to the elevator in a heartbeat. On the way up, she scrapes a political campaign sticker off the wall and gives the elevator a friendly pat. (3 dice) She may need to count on it for a quick getaway.

The skinwalker will have control of the building's pipes, so Analog is securing the loyalty of the electrical system. That's more her thing, anyway. All of these preparations are meant to pay off in the future, so you tell Analog's player to put those 5 dice off to the side and hold them for later. She'll need 'em.

The man's door is locked, but deadbolt spirits are surprisingly cooperative. Analog lets herself in. The man protests, at high volume, but good negotiators know how to convey the seriousness of any situation. "A man is coming here to kill you and I don't know if I can stop him. You have to get out of here right..."

The door explodes off its hinges and plows through the living room table! A man in rumpled overalls raises an accusing finger from what remains of the doorway. "This is not your concern," he says in a voice as deep as a well. "It is above you, beyond you. Leave now."

"I'm not gonna let you do this, you soul stealing sonofabitch!" Analog draws her Glock and taps the barrel twice with her index finger, signaling its spirit to wound, not kill. She closes her eyes and fires half the clip. (3 dice) The skinwalker pulls a lead pipe from behind his back and knocks the bullets out of the air. Her mentor's dead eyes roll back in his head as he commands dozens of jagged, metal pipes to tear through the walls! (4 dice) Fortunately, Analog's new pals got her back. Electrical wires snake out and wrap around the pipes, dragging them off target. (1 die)

This isn't the stunt Analog had in mind when she made her deal with the electrical spirits, so she says they do this one on their own initiative. However, the player does decide to draw one die out of the held pool, just to be safe. She goes with a defensive split of 3 Yin and 2 Yang, rolls against "Techno-Shaman 5," and they all come up hits!

You take 3 Yang dice and keep one for defense. Rolling against the skinwalker's "Affinity: Plumbing 5" Trait, you get 2 Yang hits and 1 Yin. That's not enough to overcome Analog's defenses and only enough to block one of her Yang hits. You cash in 1 of the skinwalker's 5 Chi and consider it a momentary loss of advantage.

The skinwalker growls and walks towards them through the tangle of plumbing and wires. Fresh blood glints off the surface of his lead pipe. (2 dice) Analog hits SEND and the spirits get their signal. The lights shut off with a resonate thud and all the other electronics fall silent. A transformer outside explodes as the power for an entire city block rushes into the fuse box behind Analog and blasts across the apartment like cannon fire! (4 dice)

The lightning bolt strikes the skinwalker square in the chest! He's thrown backwards through the door and slams into the opposite wall. The current surges through him and into the building, grounding out five floors below. His overalls catch fire around the edge of the charred entrance wound. (4 dice) Analog grabs the slack-jawed plumber and they run to the elevator. It's waiting for them, doors open and lights on. (2 dice)

That was Analog's big moment, so she's going to throw the rest of her held dice into the pool. That gives her a total of 10 dice, which she splits into 4 Yin and 6 Yang. They come up as 2 Yin hits and a whopping 5 Yang!

You earned most of your dice by describing the skinwalker's injuries, but that's no reason to go on the defensive. You roll 2 Yin and 4 Yang against his "Souless Assassin 4" Trait and count on his Chi to keep him in the fight. Only 1 of the Yin dice is a hit, so he goes from 4 Chi to zero. He's still breathing, but barely. He gets luckier with his Yang dice, nabbing 3 hits; Analog has the Yin to block all but one. She takes her last 2 Chi and heads for the hills!

Of course, the elevator's lights don't stay on for long. With the power grid burned out, the lift spirit can only disengage its winch and let gravity take it to the lobby. Four floors whiz past the still-open door before the emergency breaks engage and the elevator lurches to a stop. (2 dice)

Analog and the plumber are outside in a blink, but the skinwalker ain't done yet. The sound of breaking glass floats down to them from high above. They look up in time to see the skinwalker plummet past the second floor and slam into the sidewalk right behind them! Cracks spread out from the point of impact like the threads of a spider's web. Her mentor stares up at them with a predatory grin. (4 dice)

Analog looks right and left down the dimly-lit street before dragging the plumber across the median. They stand there as the skinwalker charges... and gets plastered by the 8:15 bus! We flash back to Analog's ride to the apartment. In between text messages, she scrawls a note on her bus ticket: "Tell your pals I may need some help. Life or death. I'll owe you one." (4 dice)

Her mentor's body lies, broken and bloody, at the front of the bus. "Help me, Ana," he pleads. "You're the only one who ever cared." (2 dice)

Playing on her sympathies is a pretty soulless move, so you roll that last bit of psychological manipulation into the rest of his "Soulless Assassin 4" stunt. The end is nigh, so you keep just one die for defense and roll the rest Yang. You scores 4 hits, but no defense.

Analog's player came up with a pretty good flashback finale. She got one die for the ritual tool (the bus ticket) and one for promising the buses a favor. She still has 2 Chi, so she decides to go with a 2/4 offensive split. She gets 1 Yin hit and cashes in her remaining Chi, which takes her to -1. However, she also rolls 2 Yang hits, which reduce her mentor to -2. She wins the right to a Coup de Grace...

"I guess you know me pretty well," she says as she raises her gun and taps it once on the barrel. She puts two shots in his head. "Rest in peace."

CLOCKWORK WUXIA

*“Zheng He sailed the ocean blue
in fourteen hundred and thirty two.”*

The Chinese discover the New World and all of history is changed. The Ming Dynasty becomes the world's sole colonial power, unleashing its vast population on the Pacific islands and the western coast of the Americas. For the next three centuries, all the world's wealth flows into Asia.

Wealth, like power, breeds corruption. Confucian scholars lose influence as power shifts from the Ministries to the merchant class. The West Asia Trading Company secures contracts to administer all Chinese colonies, and the Jinyi Wei (secret police) control all information that reaches the Emperor's ear. One inch at a time, these shadow forces usurp imperial power.

They say the sun never sets on the Middle Kingdom, but it casts deep shadows. On the high seas and the far-flung frontiers, an enlightened few dream of a better world. Gewu Scholars build fantastic machines, cure the sick, and kick ass with an empty hand. Clockwork Youxia defend the weak with feats of spring-powered strength and alchemically-enhanced alacrity.

Zen Psychologists help the lost find their path and make sure the corrupt get what they deserve.

The Tao of Steam

According to the Neo-Confucian principle of "gewu," true understanding of the Tao can only be achieved through objective investigation of the material world. However, gewu scholars do not pursue the kind of easily-communicated, academic knowledge you might expect. Rather, they achieve a more profound comprehension of the fundamental forces that shape the universe. This, in turn, allows them to intuit everything from the best treatment for an infection to the best way to build a steam-powered automaton. They are masters of all trades.

They are also masters of kung-fu, as derived from their understanding of physics and biomechanics. They call it The Empty Hand. Scholars know precisely where to strike a bone in order to break it and how to lever a joint so as to pop it out of place. They can effortlessly redirect an opponent's momentum to make them gravity's bitch.

It doesn't stop with physics and medicine, either. Gewu science has also unlocked the true power of Chinese alchemy and feng shui. On the cutting edge of technology, you'll find inventors who can harness lightning, levitate objects, predict the future, and reanimate dead tissue. It's not magic, but only the most enlightened minds know for sure.

Clockwork & Steel

In these times of corruption, the only things a man can rely upon are his sword and his honor... and his steam-powered limbs, iron skin, and telescoping eye. After the West Asia Trading Company destroys the Shaolin temple, hundreds of highly-trained warriors are cast to the four winds. Many befriend scholars who treat their injuries and/or use them as guinea pigs. Thus, mechanically augmented and alchemy-enhanced swordsmen wander the globe.

Unlike the Youxia of legend, these warriors do not sail lightly through the air. No, these guys are HEAVY. They can leap great distances, to be sure, but they leave an impact crater when they land. Most end up with increased strength, fast healing, and lightning reflexes, but each has a special trick or two up their sleeve.

Youxia are guided by a strong moral compass, but it rarely points in the direction that the West Asia Trading Company would prefer. The Youxia are such a problem for colonial governors that the Jinyi Wei has started augmenting their own elite soldiers. Cyborg-on-cyborg violence has shaken many a colonial province to the ground.

Zen Psychology

While the scholars look outward for enlightenment, students of the Buddha look inward and the truths they find inside the human mind are no less profound. Zen psychologists learn to control their bodies and minds to an almost superhuman degree. They believe

that ignorance is the source of all suffering and self-knowledge is the only path to salvation.

Meditation focuses the mind to achieve hyper-awareness of one's self and one's surroundings. Zen Psychologists can hear an arrow's approach and snatch it out of the air. Masters can listen in on every conversation in a crowded bazaar and recall them verbatim. They learn to control their breathing and heart rate such that they can remain underwater for hours or stop blood loss from a wound by force of concentration.

When opposed, a Zen psychologist allows her enemy to defeat himself. They are adept at profiling and can usually talk their way out of most confrontations, but violence is sometimes unavoidable. Their fighting style consists of almost prescient dodges, blocks, and counter-attacks that turn their adversary's every weakness against them. They exhaust the aggressive, unbalance the strong, disable the quick, and confuse the dull-witted. Consider it a lesson in the value of self-knowledge.

Dawei opens his mind and takes in every detail: Ten men and two women, all with augmentations of one kind or another. The big one carries a meat cleaver the size of a cow; his entire exoskeleton must be steam-powered. Several of his friends have trouble maintaining eye focus, a sure sign that their Qi has been altered to quicken their reflexes. Others have the throbbing, overgrown scar tissue of ginseng junkies. No, there's no way he can take them all at once.

The big one is showing off for his woman, describing for her the indignities he plans to inflict on Dawei's corpse, but there's

something strange about her body language as she fawns over him. She's not just flirting with him, she's displaying herself for the rest of the group... for one person in particular.

"Quite colorful," the Zen psychologist cuts in, "and I'm sure the sight of you crushing my skull between your ass cheeks would normally be more than enough to reinforce your alpha male status, but tell me... how do you save face when your female is sleeping with your lieutenant?" The gang's social machinery seizes up like an autogyro in a sandstorm. Now, it'll be just Dawei against the mountain of meat. Still not a fair fight, but the Buddha teaches compassion.

The Hack Tao

Not all practitioners of gewu science are the scrupulous sort. Some sell their services to the military or the Jinyi Wei. Others use their knowledge to exploit the ignorant. These dark arts are perversions of Taoism's most noble pursuit. They are the Hack Tao.

Hackers don't have the same enlightened, all-encompassing knowledge of science as true gewu scholars. They just know a few tricks. Some are flesh mechanics who can turn a simple soldier into a walking armory, though such augmentations tend to malfunction in surprising and spectacular ways. Others know how to concoct phony cures, usually for ailments they themselves have caused (by tainting the village well, for instance).

Arguably, the most dangerous are those who fake spiritual powers like being able to communicate with the dead. Such con artists get their hooks into people of wealth or power and prey upon their deepest insecurities. Not only that, they also perpetuate belief in

the supernatural. Scholars and Zen psychologists spend a lot of their time debunking this bullshit.

Pirates of the Indonesian

A notorious pirate ship called the Wokou's Revenge wages war on the West Asia Trading Company. Its captain is a Zen psychologist and brilliant naval strategist who's always two steps ahead of the law. His first mate is a Youxia who wields a sword as big as a galley oar. The ship itself is festooned with advanced weapons and gadgets. Their quest is to break the Company's stranglehold on the empire by disrupting the flow of New World silver into its coffers.

Great Places to Cross Swords:

- Flying across the multitudinous decks of an Imperial armada as it lays siege to a pirate fortress in the Hawaiian islands.
- Anywhere along the 30-mile excavation site for the Strait of Panama. Massive earth-moving machines, deadly mudslides and flash floods, locomotives for hauling the dirt away, and dense forests of rickety scaffolding.
- Teetering atop the gargantuan cranes of Shanghai's dockyards. Shanty towns infest their support beams and thriving markets fill the canyons between towering mountains of shipping containers.

Great Swords to Cross:

- Imperial naval officers who take their orders (and bribes) from the West Asia Trading Company.
- Island natives who've been turned into blood-thirsty, steam-powered automatons by an insane alchemist.
- Jinyi Wei assassins hired by the West Asia Trading Company to sink the Wokou's Revenge and put her crew in the dead book.

All Under Heaven

Gewu scholars and Zen psychologists try to expose a team of Hackers who've fooled the emperor into thinking they can summon up his ancestors' spirits... whose advice always seems to play into the Jinyi Wei's hands. Debunking their scam will mean figuring out (and reproducing) all of their tricks, not to mention earning the trust of an isolated and paranoid emperor. It will also mean fighting off the Jinyi Wei assassins who'll protect their conspiracy at any cost!

Great Places to Fight the Man:

- Flying across the rooftops of Beijing towards the Forbidden City, past volcanic smokestacks and rich merchants' mile-high penthouses.
- Inside the chthonic furnaces and boiler rooms that power the Forbidden City, where convicts are used as slave labor and their guards crack electrified whips.

- Rampaging through the Emperor's immaculate gardens, where many of his most revered ancestors are buried... and "summoned."

Great Men to Fight:

- The Hackers' frontman is a charismatic Zen Psychologist and master of the cold read. Her enlightened kung-fu isn't bad, but she prefers to avoid most fights.
- Their Hack Tao engineer is a failed gewu scholar and part-time sociopath. He gets paid in pretty girls with no one at home to miss them.
- Their Jinyi Wei handler is a young and ambitious officer with some discreet augmentations (e.g. a spring-loaded rope dart embedded in his forearm).

How the East was Won

On the American west coast, a megalomaniac governor has carved a personal kingdom out of the Rocky Mountains. He rules from a fortified locomotive, a monstrosity of steel and steam born from his own designs. His right-hand man is a cyborg called the Angel of Knives (run with that in any direction you like). The people under his dominion are mostly indentured servants, but they dream of independence.

Great Places to Rebel:

- The glass-bottomed parlor of the Governor's fortress train as it hurtles, out of control, across a matchstick bridge above a jagged mountain pass.
- Clinging to the side of a cliff face created by the Governor's blood-soaked mining project, where hundreds of indentured servants have fallen to their deaths.
- Dodging between the lightning rods and Tesla coils of the Governor's secret laboratory high atop a snow-capped peak during a blizzard.

Great Rebels:

- A gewu scholar making her last stop on an around-the-world walkabout. She's seen how the Empire corrupts every shore it discovers.
- A Zen Psychologist who dons a mask and cape to fight the Governor's lackeys as the dreaded and mysterious Huli Jing!
- A former miner who lost his limbs, and nearly his life, to one of the Governor's homicidal machines. Now, he IS a homicidal machine.

PURGATORY

In 2050, virtual reality is as common as the wheel. Soldiers use it for training, universities use it for instruction, and everybody uses it for fun. Prisons use it for rehabilitation.

Purgatory is a simulated city employed by governments across the globe to reform convicts into productive members of society. It's as close to reality as you can get: people get sick and injured, they need to eat and sleep, and everybody has to work for their living. Those who get along, practice a trade, and obey the law can shave years off their sentences.

Those who return to lives of crime, or get caught hacking the system, are punished. Harshly. Still, many are willing to risk it for profit, power, or just for a few minutes of contact with the outside world. Hackers can do all kinds of things...

- Edit the system logs to cover up a crime or fabricate one.
- Build hidden rooms and shortcuts between distant places.
- Set up “half-way houses” that connect to external VRs.
- Spy on other convicts by analyzing the real system logs.
- Create untraceable, virtual objects like drugs and weapons.

- Make your avatar faster, stronger, harder to kill, harder to track, light as a feather, etc.

Making a habit of this sort of thing will rack up a life sentence in short order. That's why the people who do it are called "Lifers." Many of them have amassed so much power and influence inside that they'd rather stay in Purgatory forever. They've made themselves at home.

Modern Day Sci-Fi

Despite being set in the not-too-distant future, and despite its high-tech premise, Purgatory is intended for use as a modern-day setting. People use cellphones, watch television, and drive cars that roll along the ground. It's the world you know, just a few years down the line.

Feel free to inject little bits of future-tech here and there, but try to keep things as "normal" as you can. First off, it'll make the setting easier for your players to pick up. A game of Purgatory will require much less explanation than the other two Terrible Vistas. Second, it'll provide contrast for your action scenes, when the sci-fi hackery and wire-fu weirdness really kick in.

Not that there aren't still risks. Anyone who draws the Wardens' attention gets disconnected from the system. This can be done remotely, but Wardens often expedite matters by tearing the suspect's avatar in half. It hurts like hell. (Feeling the pain of death is therapeutic for violent criminals, or so the theory goes.)

They wake up in a tiny, windowless pod, tubes and wires flowing through their bodies like thread through a loom. Depending on how much they've pissed off the Wardens, they may remain in this state for minutes, hours, or days. It's called "wake-up time."

When they decide they want to talk, the suspect is reconnected and their avatar inserted into a City Hall interrogation room. Wardens will threaten them, lie to them, offer them deals, try to turn them into a snitch, or just let them stew. If you want out, you'd better be prepared to give them something. It's like paying Charon to ferry you across the River Styx.

After that, you just have to deal with whatever got you in trouble in the first place.

For the most part, however, the inmates are allowed to govern themselves. Too much supervision would render the simulation useless for rehabilitation. Wardens only investigate capital crimes and system hacks. If you want justice for a petty crime, like theft or extortion, you'll have to turn to...

The Outfit

Disciplined, professional, and connected, this corporate cabal is for serious criminals. They draw from such esteemed legacies as the Yakuza and the Cosa Nostra. Personal loyalty is valued above all else.

Officially, the Outfit provides security and arbitration for paying members, but they also maintain a vast network of halfway houses and traffic in all manner of contraband. Wiseguys patrol the streets

and keep the other gangs in line. Bosses maintain friendly relationships with Wardens.

The Tribes

Racists of any stripe can find a tribe to call their own. Goose-stepping Neo-Nazi tribes, Bible-thumping fundamentalist tribes, voodoo tribes, Asian tribes, Brazilian tribes, even French-Canadian UFO-worshipping tribes. (Well, probably only one of those.)

They value purity above all else, however they define the term. Tribes are known for muscling “others” out of an area and then guarding it jealously. These territories aren’t very stable; tribes seem to form, break up, and migrate all the time. Their turf wars are eternal.

The Libertines

Some people believe so strongly in victimless crimes that they go out of their way to perpetrate them. Libertines run illegal spaces for gambling and prostitution, but they also take care of their own. Their pimps and legbreakers can, and do, throw down with wiseguys every day of the week.

The business of vice also lends itself to blackmail, which is how the Libertines extort favors from the Wardens. (Few people are principled enough to resist temptation forever.) Libertines don’t acknowledge bosses or ranks, but one’s influence is directly tied to the number of dirty secrets locked away in one’s databases.

The Unions

Most governments who run a Purgatory encourage the formation of trade unions, but they don't wield much power. Like gangs, they provide security and arbitration for their members, but they rarely run their own rackets. This limits their popularity and income, which limits their influence.

However, a union that maintains a monopoly on technical expertise can bring any gang to its knees. Unions for private security can give them a good run for their blood money, as can bankers' and sex workers' unions. Finally, some unions are just tribes in blue collars; they thrive on the same mix of contraband and extortion.

Seven Deadly Weaknesses

Wrath - More than mere anger or violence, Wrath is the love of vengeance. Wrathful characters can't let evil deeds go unpunished, even when it's the smart thing to do.

Greed - A dangerous Weakness, Greed motivates one to take whatever they can and give nothing back. If a Greedy character has a chance to steal or rob, they take it. Period.

Pride - The Prideful simply cannot let a challenge or an insult go unanswered. Whether they think they're the fastest gun in the (virtual) west or the world's greatest criminal mastermind, they're 100% ego.

Lust - Men, women, whatever. Lustful characters aren't necessarily violent, but they're definitely obsessed. They'll always choose to chase the object of their obsession over wiser goals.

Sloth - Don't think sloth just means laziness. The Slothful will take the fastest, quickest, easiest path to any goal. If killing someone is easier than persuading or deceiving them, killing is what they'll do.

Gluttony - There's something you just can't get enough of. Maybe it's booze. Maybe it's drugs. Maybe it's racing a motorcycle down crowded streets at breakneck speeds. The only restriction is this: it can't be good for you.

Envy - The envious want what someone else has, someone specific. Maybe they want their boss' job or their best friend's girl. Whatever it is, they'll do anything and betray anyone to get it.

Honest Joes

Your heroes are all convicts, but that doesn't have to mean they're bad people. When some more-or-less law-abiding Union members are all wronged by the same Lifer, they team up for sweet, juicy revenge. They wait until he's on the brink of war with a hostile tribe, then do their damndest to push things over the edge.

Now, your heroes are the unseen third side in a hate triangle. They can use the chaos to get close and assassinate their target, or they can make sure his side loses spectacularly. They could set him up for a fall, letting either his higher-ups or an ambitious

subordinate pull the trigger. Make sure Wrath and Envy are on your players' characters sheets and you'll be all set for some serious fireworks.

Great Lifers to Hate:

- "E.K.O." is a tribe leader who's hacked himself an army of cloned avatars. He can jump between them at will, so you gotta kill 'em all.
- Mr. Stitch is an Outfit boss whose avatar simply refuses to terminate. He's been sewn back together more times than a daycare teddy bear.
- Sindy is a Libertine madame who changes her face and sex as easily as her mind, and almost as often. She's impossible to track, must be lured into the open.

Great Places to Serve Something Cold:

- On the tangled staircases of "Escher's Trashbin," an underground dance club with twisted physics. Ownership changes hands regularly.
- Crashing through the endless storage shelves of a halfway house where drugs are being coded in ridiculous quantities.
- High above the city, on the tiled rooftops of a Lifer's skyrise mansion, then down the side of the building as you race him to the pavement 100 floors below.

Return to Sender

Your boss is being blackmailed. Here's what you're gonna do about it. First, stake out a ransom drop and identify the culprit. Second, figure out where they're hiding the blackmail and destroy it. Third, bust the bastard's kneecaps with a nine iron.

Here's the thing: It turns out the culprit is a Warden who has his own blackmailer to pay. When he catches you sniffing around, he might hire a tribe to keep you busy or just find an excuse to put you in wake-up time. Either way, the only solution is to help the Warden solve his problem... or steal his dirty secrets for yourself.

Great Places to Chase a Blackmailer:

- Through a crowded street market where rival tribes are waging a turf war.
- Through a hospital where Wardens are standing guard over a beaten snitch.
- Through a union factory where the locals don't much care for gang enforcers.
- Through the claustrophobic cars of an elevated train, until the blackmailer derails it.
- Through all of the above, as the blackmailer ducks through a network of shortcuts.

Great Places to Secure a Secret:

- Steganographically coded into the pixels of paintings in an art gallery.
- In a vault at the bottom of a lake on the outskirts of the city.
- Locked in a halfway house that only connects to Purgatory at certain times.
- Hanging from the top of an elevator shaft. (You have to ride on top to reach them.)
- Steganographically coded into billboard images. (You have to read them at 110 mph.)

Shaw Shanked

It takes more than a red pill to break out of Purgatory. Your best bet is to swap IDs with some patsy who's already scheduled to be released. That kind of hack requires inside access to City Hall and/or the pods themselves. Getting yourself arrested is a good start, but then you'll have to break out of the interrogation room and make your way through the glass labyrinth that is City Hall. Better bring a mighty fine distraction, like a city-wide riot.

I can't recommend setting the climax of your escape in the real world, since you'll be weak and naked and totally devoid of wire-fu. Instead, your heroes can access a VR copy of the real world pod facility, track down their bodies, and make the switch. Once their bodies are disconnected, consider them home free.

Great Places to Escape:

- Interrogation rooms are featureless, white cubes with uncomfortable furniture. No doors or mirrors. Getting out means tricking, or strong-arming, your interrogator.
- The maze of shiny walls and lens flares that is City Hall. Imagine if government offices were designed by J.J. Abrams. Then, fill it with super-powered egomaniacs.
- The pod facility, on the other hand, is 100% mechanical dystopia. Imagine a jungle of hanging wires, blinking lights, and catwalks without railings.

Great Escapees:

- Delve is a hacker who's managed to rack up a life sentence, but he's not a Lifer. Doesn't have it in him. He knows how to make his escape, but he'll need help...
- Recoil is an innocent man and a former soldier, serving life for someone else's crime. There's no way he'll be able to find the real murderer behind virtual bars.
- Skip Trace is a silver-tongued grifter who doesn't have the patience for long cons, much less twenty years in prison. Folks always said he could talk his way out of prison.

CELESTIAL

Thousands of years in the future, human technology has become so miniaturized and pervasive that it is considered a natural part of the environment. It's just one more bit of the air and the earth and the water. It's woven into the DNA of every living thing. It makes the universe bend to human will.

The First Emperor was the last person to fully comprehend this technology. Enlightenment allowed him to rearrange the stars themselves and forge an interstellar empire that has endured for centuries. His masterwork was the Forbidden City, a palace whose wings sprawl across dozens of worlds, bound together by portals whose inner workings were known only to him. For the residents of these dynastic worlds, interstellar travel is as easy as walking through an open door.

He left to his descendants an artificial plant whose fruit grants eternal life. These Immortals live isolated lives of leisure and excess. When they do get involved in events beyond the Forbidden City's walls, it is solely for their own amusement. Common folk have learned to cover their heads and wait for the madness to pass.

Real power lies in the Celestial Bureaucracy, an AI "spirit world" built upon the nano-computer network that permeates the empire.

The Jade Emperor, master AI, was built from a neural map of the First Emperor's brain shortly before he died/ascended/disappeared/whatever. In all the ways that matter, they are one and the same. Similar neural imprints are made of every citizen who can afford the burial rites.

Through the Celestial Bureaucracy, one's virtual ancestors can be consulted at any time, day or night. Of course, no system is perfect and ancestor programs do occasionally run on their own. These "hungry ghosts" tend to show up as sensory illusions in their descendants' homes and get rather upset if there's not a place set for them at the head of the dinner table.

The First Emperor lives on in one more way: The Corpus. Poets like to characterize the imperial army, navy, and administration as the Hands, Feet, and Voice of the Emperor. (There is a fourth branch, a secret police called the Emperor's Eyes, but wise men speak of it only in whispers.) The Corpus is responsible for enforcing the law throughout the empire, but they rarely project considerable force beyond the dynastic worlds.

Holograms dance over the navigator's geomantic compass.

"Another ship is moving to flank us, General." Wei's soldiers are already busy holding off the main fleet. If this ambush breaks their blockade, all is lost.

"Maintain course and await my return." He spins on his heel, plucks his farblade off the wall, and steps out onto the deck. The stars rush past like a river, serene in a nebula's blue glow. Wei closes his eyes and meditates, expanding his senses through the

nano-computer network until he can feel the approaching ship's inertial dampeners. Then, he refocuses on the Fire nanites that infuse his body, bends slightly at the knee, and leaps into space.

Immense force fields envelope him, propel him forward. The rebel ship opens fire with its beam weapons, but Wei's farblade is ready. His arms move in a blur, deflecting hundreds of energy bolts as he closes the distance. Then, he extends his weapon's planar force field and draws it down in a perfect stroke that splits the hull open.

Moments later, Wei lands on the foredeck and swings his sword again, cleaving the ship in half. Sailors and soldiers rush forward with murder in their eyes, but the General is already gone. He pushes off the wreckage and flies back on invisible wings as the rebels are reduced to cosmic dust.

Merchant Worlds

Away from the hallowed halls of the Forbidden City, people use the River of Stars to get around. Via the lost art of galactic feng shui, the First Emperor created a branching region of space-time wherein starships can travel much faster than light. The prosperous planets along the river's main branches are commonly called the Merchant Worlds.

Here, the empire's influence is felt primarily through the Resplendent Carnival, a flying city built by the Immortals. Its primary purpose is to collect taxes, but it also plays several political roles. First, it is a grandiose display of the dynastic worlds' wealth. Second, it acts as a mobile base of operations for the Corpus. Finally, it allows the Immortals to visit their far-flung

subjects in person. (They take turns, as leaving the Forbidden City is considered a profound imposition.)

In the carnival's absence, daily life is dominated by the trading companies. There are hundreds of them and each wields varying degrees of power over different star systems. As commerce carried people away from their home planets, usually to seek employment in trade centers, the companies emerged as an extension of familial clans. As such, their members tend to share the same last name. Some are fleets of merchant vessels, others are professional guilds, and a few are bands of mercenaries. (Soldiers who used to be the Emperor's Hands, but deserted or were cast out, are colloquially referred to as "demons.")

Religion plays a much larger role along the River of Stars. On dynastic worlds, life is structured by a form of legalism that venerates the empire and its laws. On merchant worlds, the First Emperor is often deified and one's ancestors are the main authority. Members of the middle class adhere to strict codes of conduct, for fear of being ostracized from the trading companies, their surrogate families.

Cults also drink deep from the River's metaphorical waters. The Clavigers believe they carry the keys to lost technology within their bodies. They await the First Emperor's return, for he will remake the galaxy in their image. The Reclamation seeks to follow in the First Emperor's footsteps by unlocking the secrets of advanced technology. Enlightenment through science.

Fringe Worlds

The First Emperor's final miracle was a vast region of impassable space-time, a cosmic wall erected against an enemy known only to him. The star systems along the edge of this void are called Fringe Worlds. They are the backwater havens of criminals and outcasts.

The underworld of heaven is ruled by a loose confederation of gangs known as the Family. They are the remains of ruined trading companies and failed rebel clans. Young people, far from their home planets and desperate for cash, are lured into the Family with promises of wealth and power. Most find only an early grave.

Though fiercely independent and notorious for their rivalries, the gangs are united by a blood oath to the Fathers. These overlords pull imperial strings from the edge of space, trading favors and blackmail with power players from the River of Stars to the Forbidden City. The fringe worlds are their fortresses and fiefdoms.

Truly remote planets are inhabited by outcast races of transformed animals. Granted sentience by Wood geomancers (see below) whose ambition exceeded their wisdom, these "pariahs" have been exiled from every star system in heaven. Most are humanoid with feral features, but some are animals with human traits (large brains, opposable digits, etc). Foxes and monkeys are by far the most common, but the entire zodiac is represented: roosters, snakes, oxen, tigers, rats, you name it.

Five Elements Nanotechnology

The First Emperor created five kinds of nanotechnology, each identified with one of the Taoist elements. No one since has mastered them all. In fact, most people master just one and have rapidly decreasing skill with the others. This is a matter of social class, determined by birth, and it defines almost everything about a person.

Celestial characters have five Traits: one for each Element. Rank order them from 1 to 5 and you're ready to play. Your lowest element is considered your Weakness. (Minor Nemeses should default to 2's in most Elements and 3-4 in their primary Element.)

These Traits cover a lot of ground. First, they allow you to manipulate nanotech of a particular kind (see below), a practice known as geomancy. Second, they include at least a working knowledge of any skills associated with its traditional occupations, as well as social interactions with members of that class.

Finally, each Element has its own type of kung-fu. That's right, everyone in Heaven knows how to fight, even the cooks and calligraphers.

Wood Geomancy

Farmers and doctors specialize in Wood. These nanites bind to living tissues; they fight disease, heal injuries, and prolong life. By learning to control the nanites in other organisms, Wood geomancers can facilitate agriculture, control animals, create new species, heal the sick, and inflict illness upon their enemies.

Masters of Wood kung-fu learn to harden their flesh and increase their strength. They turn their bodies into living weapons. Their signature attack is called the Poison Palm; with a touch, it can shut down an opponent's entire nervous system.

Earth Geomancy

Craftsmen specialize in Earth, the industrial nanites that build everything from tea cups to starships. They remain a part of all objects even after manufacture, so Earth geomancers can reshape, repair, or destroy just about anything.

Those with a mind for combat often learn to transform common objects into lethal weapons. They are known for breaking swords and shields with their bare hands. Their signature weapon is the Teeth of the Dragon, a whip of micro-serrated chain that can slice through steel.

Metal Geomancy

Priests and bureaucrats specialize in Metal. Unlike the other elements, Metal does not have its own class of nanite, but represents the computing network created by all nanites. This is the home of the Celestial Bureaucracy. Metal geomancers often act as messengers for AI and advocates for citizens.

Masters of Metal kung-fu use the network to expand their senses and quicken their reflexes. Many specialize in a weapon called the Scholar Sword. Its nearly microscopic blade is designed to keep up with their lightning-fast movements.

Fire Geomancy

Soldiers specialize in Fire. They learn to use power-generating nanites to project fields of unimaginable force. The offensive applications are obvious, but Fire can also be used to levitate objects, deflect projectiles, and leap incredible distances. Masters of Fire are limited only by their ability to comprehend and control these forces.

Hands of the Emperor are issued “farblades” as badges of office. These devices look like blunt practice swords, but they are infused with billions of Fire nanites. In the hands of a master, they can project two-dimensional blades of energy that span miles.

Water Geomancy

Sailors and thieves specialize in Water. Named in honor of the River of Stars, its most famous application, Water geomancy can stretch and warp space-time itself. Sailors use it to provide artificial gravity and to propel their ships. Thieves use them to fly over walls and walk on ceilings.

Water kung-fu’s only signature weapon is a curiosity called the Other Oar, as in “go get the Other Oar.” It’s a gargantuan sword, far taller and heavier than any real oar. Masters manipulate its Water nanites to make it light enough to swing, then increase its effective mass at the moment of impact!

Pinched Peach

Estranged relatives come together when a family elder falls ill. To save his life, they must infiltrate the Forbidden City and steal a peach of immortality. Their journey starts with the Resplendent Carnival and takes them through the back alleys and ivory towers of the Dynastic Worlds. They will have to contend with the Emperor's Eyes and sophisticated security systems devised by the First Emperor himself. Then, it's a race against time to return home with the entire Corpus hot on their heels!

Resplendent Fight Locations:

- Dodging airborne daggers, torches, and spinning plates as you weave through a crowd of jugglers and clowns.
- Deep within the coils of a massive, robotic dragon as it dances in a parade.
- Smashing your way through an ornate tea house near the imperial palace.
- Through a “freak show” of transformed animals who don't like being upstaged.
- High above the street in an acrobatic troupe's trapeze, while the acrobats assail you with flying kicks.

Forbidden Fight Locations:

- Down an impossibly long hallway that passes through many planets. Also, it's filled floor to ceiling with priceless, fragile artworks.

- Demolishing a sparring room stocked with every kind of weapon you can imagine.
- Skipping across the steam-filled imperial baths, more like a cavern filled with hot springs and angry Immortals.
- Evading booby traps in the botanical garden that houses the Fruit of Immortality.

Eye of the Dragon

A fringe world is being held hostage by hungry ghosts. Clavigers don't venerate their ancestors, which makes those ancestors a little testy. One of them has seized control of an orbital weapons platform called the Eye of the Dragon. Unless the Clavigers renounce their faith and build a gargantuan temple in his honor, he'll start turning cities into sheets of radioactive glass.

Solving this problem will mean a sojourn through the AI spirit world. Heroes will have to contend with an army of hungry ghosts, track down the Eye of the Dragon, and tame its ancient (and possibly insane) self-defense AI, before confronting the rogue ancestor program who started it all. Sending someone into orbit to physically disable the weapons platform might not be a bad idea either.

Heroes of the Fringe:

- Chen Zen is a scholar who specializes in terminating troublesome ancestor programs.
- Sai Yuk is a Brotherhood gambler who uses Metal kung-fu to beat the odds at any game.
- The Demon of Xian Zhou is a dishonored Hand who wants to put his sword to good use.
- Sun Wukong is a transformed monkey who claims to be a king without a kingdom.
- Fei Hung is a Reclaimer who wants to study the Eye of the Dragon, not destroy it.

Great Places to Fight in Heaven:

- Hacking and slashing through a bamboo forest where every tree is made of glass and every leaf is as sharp as a razor blade.
- Skipping across the jagged hilltops of a misty river delta towards a stone temple.
- Leaping up the side of a towering cliff / waterfall.
- Charging over the back of a storm dragon in mid-flight... through a storm.

City of Glass

A Reclaimer studying the Great Wall has made contact with... something on the other side. It taught him how to merge his consciousness with a nanite swarm and “uplift” himself to a cybernetic intelligence. Now, he thinks everyone else should do the same, so he’s on his way to the Forbidden City, to kill the Jade Emperor and uplift the rest of the human race.

His starship is a nanite swarm the size of a city. With a thought, he can create soldiers and weapons by the thousands. The Jade Emperor has cut him off from the Celestial Bureaucracy and sent a Corpus armada to intercept him. If they can’t stop him from assimilating the Forbidden City, the empire will blow away like sea foam in a gale.

Sites to See in the City of Glass:

- The City has no hull, but is surrounded by a system of interlocking, rotating, razor-sharp rings. Invaders will have to run along them without getting sliced.
- The Gallery of Sins confronts invaders with images of all the suffering they’ll cause by preventing uplift, then those images attack!
- The City is powered by an antimatter reaction in its core. The chamber is surrounded by powerful electromagnets; disabling even one would devastate the ship.

- The Throne Room is a hall of monuments, all venerating their creator. For a final confrontation, bring them to life or fill the place with clones (see below).

Simulacra to Smite in the City of Glass:

- Hopping Vampires, created to depict the countless generations who will die if the invaders prevent uplift.
- Foo Dogs, traditional protectors of the nobility, have been recreated to guard the master's throne room (or anyplace else you like).
- Paper Tigers stalk the City's service corridors. The master folded them out of carbon nanotube sheets that are stronger than steel.
- Mirror Match! Crystal doppelgangers of your heroes, with identical traits and extra Chi, make challenging nemeses for your climactic battle.

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