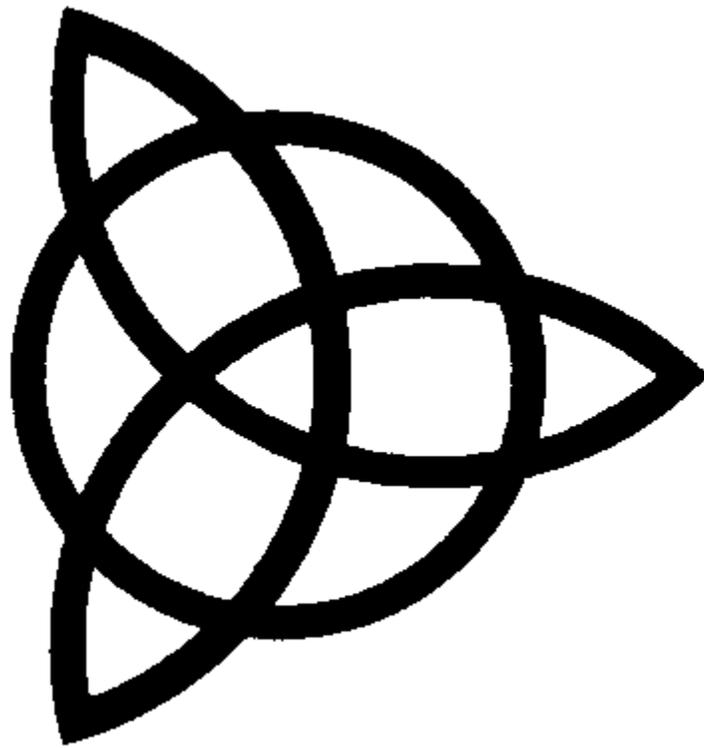


TRIPTYCH



A Roleplaying Game

by Aaron Smith

a Twisted Die Production

Acknowledgments

No game is ever written in a vacuum, and of course this one is no exception. The core structure of the game and a great deal of the contents alone are from Seven Leagues by Hieronymous. I've taken inspiration from sources as diverse as BESM, FATE, 7th Sea, Theatrix, D&D, and more. Good games, and good times all. I hope what I produce here can give others as much enjoyment as they gave me.

I owe deep thanks to my fellow players and playtesters over the years, who have helped me refine what it is I think a roleplaying game is, and should have. And of course all my friends over the years who actually took a look at this project when I bugged them with "So, could you take a moment with this...?"

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This game isn't dedicated to anyone in particular except those out there who still like to game. I hope you can use this game, and may it bring you joy and entertainment out of all proportion to its page count.

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What is This?

Triptych is a roleplaying game — RPG for short. In simplest terms, a roleplaying game is a game of let's pretend. A game where people make up stories, and act them out like improv theater. It has a few rules to stop the confusion of just shouting out anything that comes to mind, and make it a little more orderly.

Really, there's nothing more to it than that. It's supposed to be fun, like any game, and it tries to generate that fun by letting the players pretend to be other people for a while, and have adventures, perform actions, and behave in ways they couldn't possibly do in their everyday lives. In really good RPG sessions, the story of the characters actions becomes so enthralling that you'll want to tell others about many times over. But all that's for later. For now, how about reading a little further in, and you'll see how we make the stories with the rules.

Introduction

Those coming to *Triptych* from other games might look herein for rules for imposing game balance, or detailed progression tables, or other 'crunchy' game mechanics. Those are all very fine things, but they won't be found here. Rather, *Triptych* is designed to use collaborative storytelling and narration as the basis for its mechanics as much as possible. The point here is to allow the players to simply "be cool" as much as possible.

You may find the following four catch-phrases to be of some use in understanding just what it is that *Triptych* is attempting to do.

"It is now!"

In *Triptych*, it's quite easy to alter the nature of the game world. Just start mentioning details. For example,

Player 1: "The vast expanse of sand our starship has landed on is, in fact, a beach."

Player 2: "It is now."

It may have been assumed that the sand was a desert; it is now without question a beach.

"Would you like to spend a Spirit Point to make that true?"

Some events are important to the plot, and require more effort to bring about. This GM may ask a player whether they'd like a supposition or theory to be actual fact. Note that failure to spend a Spirit Point does not necessarily make the statement false; that is still up to the GM. For example, a character has fled from the scene of a crime. Upon meeting up with allies:

Player: "Lots of people saw me there; I must have been tailed back here."

Gm: "Would you like to spend a Spirit Point to make that true?"

Note that the player may decline, but the character can still be dead certain.

“Since you asked, the answer is no.”

This reply from the GM reminds the player that he is in control of the story as well. If he's got a scene in mind, then he should narrate it as he sees it. If you ask a question when you should be giving description, the GM is within her rights to give you some minor setback to remind you to make it interesting. For example:

Player: “I'm running down the corridor fleeing from the battledroids. Is there a stairway to the next level in this corridor?”

Gm: “Since you asked, the answer is no.”

Player: “Doh. Yeah. I run around the corner into the next corridor and bolt up the stairs there just as the battledroids open fire.”

“The game system is your bitch! Bend it over!”

This phrase comes up infrequently, usually when the player is bored or sitting around idly wondering why the action never comes around to him. *Triptych* demands that the players take an active role if they wish to be on the stage. If they do not, then they are going to be very bored, and very upset that the action never gets around to them, or that their plot hooks never come into play. It is the responsibility of the players to help create the plot, not just the GM.

To put it another way, this game doesn't try and generate a fair outcome by careful rules interacting with each other. It generates its fairness by making sure that a game is more about how the characters make the most interesting story. “Breaking” the system is as simple as putting it between your thumb and finger and saying “I dominate the spotlight now! Everyone pay attention to me!” If someone does this, *don't let them get away with it*. Hey presto, you should find your game unbreaking itself.

Triptych is divided into three main sections. *Characters & Personae* outlines the mechanics of character creation and game play, and includes seven sample characters for Players and GMs alike to use as templates or inspiration. *Lands of Imagination* give a brief overview of three example settings and the kinds of adventures to be found there, includes some sample NPCs. Finally, an example adventure set in the first setting from *Lands of Imagination* give the beginning GM a place to start.

Nomenclature

When a new term with a specific game-related meaning is introduced, it will be bold-faced and italicized, and will typically be followed by a short description. Thereafter, if that term is meant to be understood in its game definition, it will be capitalized. Otherwise, if lowercase, the term's mundane sense is meant.

Scene 1

Characters & Personae

When you roleplay, you take the part of another person – a character that you create – known as a Player Character, or **PC**. Who that is, and what they are is restricted only by your imagination and the setting. You can take your inspiration from a fictional hero or heroine, or create your new persona from the ground up. Once you know what role you want to play, it's time to bring the character to life.

The **GM** (Game Master, the game referee) will give you guidelines for building this persona; the world they live in, the concept and feel of the game, and other details that will help you flesh out your character.

All *Triptych* characters are unique creatures, the product of the imagination of the Players and GM creating them. This is true whether they are **PCs**, or **NPCs**, non-Player characters whose roles are assumed by the GM.

Character Creation

Triptych characters are simply described by a combination of text descriptions and a very few numeric values. Players should try to come up with characters that fit in well with the setting and story that the GM wants to tell.

There are five components to each character: **Concept**, **Statistics** (or **Stats**), **Descriptors**, and **Passions**, and **Goals**; each is defined and explained below.

Concept

Each character's **Concept** captures the character's essence. This is a few words which describes the character. The Concept sums up the character in a line, e.g.: *Catgirl Starship Captain*, *Mysterious Asian Sorceress*, or *Wandering Kung-Fu Master*. It defines the character, and tells us *who* she is – which is not always the same thing as *what* she is.

Stats

There are three **Stats** in *Triptych*: **Mental**, **Physical**, and **Social**.

The **Mental Stat** defines your character's mind. The score you choose for this Stat reveals your character's memory capacity, intelligence and alertness to details in her environment. If your character is a scientist, university professor, doctor, journalist, air-traffic controller, stand-up comedian or any other Concept that requires quick mental acuity or high IQ, then you'll want to make the Mental Attributes your primary category.

A character's **Physical Stat** defines how strong, agile and resilient she is. If you want to create an action-oriented character, you should take a high Physical Stat. Such characters might include those who have military or police experience, martial artists, athletes or blue-collar workers. The character's history plus her focus on physical health help you decide how many points to assign to these Traits.

In general, people are social creatures who need one another to survive. The **Social Stat** represents how well the character maneuvers in social situations and his ability to make an impression on other people. It represents a character's social graces, charm, and wit. PCs who are performers, politicians, models or con men will have high scores in the Social Attributes.

PCs' initial Stats range from 1 to 7, and at creation the sum of the character's Physical, Mental, and Social Stats equals 13. Only NPCs may have a score of 0 in a Stat. Players are free to distribute their 13 Stat points in any way they please between Mental, Physical, and Social. The GM should review the player character's Stats and make sure they are consistent with the character's Concept. As a guide, Stats may loosely be scaled as follows:

0 Nonexistent	Being incorporeal, a ghost would have a Physical of 0.
1 Minimum	An animals' Mental Stat might be 1.
2 Low	A careless or blundering character might have a Social of 2.
3 Modest	Most background characters will have a 2-3 in all their Stats.
4 High	A skilled teacher or orator, might have a Social of 4.
5 Gifted	A warrior or athlete at the peak of his training might have a 5 Physical.
6 Extraordinary	Albert Einstein, Leonardo da Vinci, Merlin, or Sherlock Holmes would have a 6 in Mental
7+ Supernatural, Inhuman	A dragon might have a 7 (or more!) in Mental, Physical, or both.

What good are they? In addition to describing facets of a character as a scalar value, Stats function to help resolve actions whose outcome is uncertain. A die roll required to determine whether a character managed to find a clue they were searching for, for example, would be resolved using Stats. How to roll, and what and when are discussed below in **A Roll of the Die**.

Descriptors

After deciding on an Concept and scoring Stats, the character's creator should list the character's **Descriptors**. Descriptors are unquantified traits that portray a character's background, history, and social position, as well as some physical oddities and paranormal features. There are no strict guidelines to portraying the effects of a Descriptor within a story. They can be both positive and negative, sometimes both at once. There is no complete list of all possible Descriptors. What is acceptable is only limited by the Player's imaginations, and the discretion of the GM. You can have as many descriptors as you wish, but remember that they are powered by Spirit Points.

As an example, let's create a Descriptor we'll call "**Grifted**". The Player wants a character that's been around the block a few times, and seen more than his share of Con games. The GM and Player work together until they come up with the following:

- **Grifted** - The Character knows how to spot cons, ambushes, and misdirection attempts. From the simplest tricks to the most complex confidence games, you have a keen sense of the "real deal". The character also knows "new angles on old tricks" and can fool even the most experienced grifter. By spending a Spirit Point, the GM will tell you if you're being conned, and how, or let you run an almost foolproof confidence game.

The GM and the player involved could have decided to handle this Descriptor in many other ways as well. There is no single 'right' way to form Descriptors. The best guideline you have for the creation of Descriptors is the game you're involved in. Descriptors should be formed to enhance the game and to the role you want to play within it. The following list of examples of Descriptors from a variety of settings. Use these to help you come up with your own, or if you're feeling strapped for ideas.

You will notice that a number of the descriptors below are "bad" descriptors – they indicate a downside for a character, either in their directly negative connotations, or in their two-edged nature. Descriptors like Drunkard, Sucker, Stubborn, and Honest all suggest situations where the character will have to behave a certain way – making an ass of himself at an important social function, falling for a line of bull, failing to back down when it's important to do so, or speaking truth when truth is the path to greatest harm. So why put such descriptors on your sheet if they're only going to make trouble for you? Simple: you want that kind of trouble.

On a basic, game-rules footing, "bad" descriptors are a direct line to getting you more Spirit Points – and Spirit Points are the electricity that powers the more potent *positive* uses of your descriptors. We'll get more into how descriptors can generate and use Spirit Points later on.

Outside of just the rules, a "bad" descriptor adds interest and story to a character in a way that purely positive descriptors cannot. This sort of interest means time in the limelight. If someone's trying to take advantage of the fact your character's a Sucker, that's an important point in the story, and the game's going to focus on it. "Bad" descriptors also immediately suggest story to your GM; they tell her how to hook your character in. From the perspective of playing the game to get involved and have fun, there's nothing but good in this sort of "bad".

Clever players will also find positive ways to use "bad" descriptors. The Drunkard might get looked over more easily by prying eyes as "just a drunk"; someone who's Stubborn will be more determined to achieve his goals. This brings us the "secret" truth about descriptors: the ones that are most useful are the ones that are the most *interesting*. And *interesting* comes most strongly from descriptors that are *neither* purely good nor purely bad.

As a rule of thumb, when picking an descriptor, think of three situations where you can see the descriptor coming into play. If you've got one reasonably positive situation and one reasonably negative situation out of that set, you're golden! If they're all of one type, you may want to reconsider how you've worded your descriptor – try to put a little of what's missing in there. Ultimately, though, one descriptor that's "all good" or "all bad" isn't that much of a problem, so long as you have a good mix throughout your whole set.

- **Ambidextrous** - The character possesses equal capacity of motion with either hand. She can surprise people by using her 'off-hand', and is less inconvenienced when her primary hand gets wounded.
Or - Contortionist, Multi-Lingual
- **Arch-Magi** - The character is a recognized master of the arcane arts. Whether or not the character in question is capable of performing feats of awesome mystical might or not, it is generally accepted that he could. He may also possess great knowledge of the occult, and the inner workings of magic.
Or - Computer Engineering PhD, Cult Leader, Shaman, Psionicist
- **Attractive** - The character is physically attractive. She may invoke this descriptor in a plethora of social situations, and is probably treated quite nicely (Passive use). The downside is that some people may assume that she has more looks than brains, but of course this can be an advantage in itself.
Or – Statuesque, Exotic Beauty, Rugged, Charismatic Aura
- **BattleSuit** - The character has a full on battlesuit full of sci-fi goodness like radar scopes, dual autocannons, and armor thick enough to sink a battleship. He can spend Spirit Points to shrug off damage, intimidate people, perform feats of super strength, and see in the dark.
Or - Armor of the Gods, Hercules Footwear, Magical Plate Mail
- **Blind** - Sadly the character has lost she sight due to misfortune, or some ailment. However, all is not lost. It is often said that when a person loses the use of one sense others become sharper to compensate. The character may invoke this Descriptor to gain success with her remaining senses.
Or - Deaf, No Fashion Sense, Lost
- **Born in the Cockpit** - The character was practically born in a plane. He may invoke this Descriptor to gain bonuses in stunt flying, dogfighting, and landing. He also has excellent knowledge concerning plane repairs, notable air battles, and anything pertaining to pilot-hood.
Or - Stunt person, Crack Cryptographer, Motocross Champ
- **Chameleon** - No matter what the social situation the character finds himself in, he always blends in with the crowd. Be it a presidential conformation, gang party, or homeless person's convention, he never seems out of place.
Or - Nondescript, Shape Shifter
- **Chosen One** - The character has a very special place in the plans of the Higher Powers. She plays an important role in their schemes, and they will see to her safety, and education. Unfortunately, these Powers aren't alone in their contest. Rest assured that their opponents won't appreciate the meddling of this Chosen One.
Or - Destined for Greatness, Prodigy
- **Close to the Throne** - The character in question belongs to the bloodline leading to the throne, and is not far removed from it. All it would take is for a few strategic 'accidents' to be arranged, and the entire kingdom would be kneeling before him. In the mean time, he has the advantage of being close to the top. People are always trying to curry his favor, and very few are willing to anger him.
Or - Due for Promotion, Prince(ess), Full Apprentice

- **Cool Car** - The character's daddy hasn't taken the T-bird away, at least not yet. This descriptor may be invoked to win drag races, get to places quickly, or impress guys. The possibilities are only limited by the road.
Or - Streamlined Cargo Freighter, Wind Stallion, Magic Carpet
- **Cop** - This Descriptor may be invoked to gain successes in intimidation, criminal research, and making arrests. Passively, he can carry a pistol, walk through police lines, and fix tickets. He also gets to say cool stuff like "Book 'em, Danno!" with a straight face.
Or - U.S. Marshal, Lawyer, Priest
- **Direction Sense** - An ability to unerringly determine the direction to a thing.
Or - Bump of Direction, Drawn to Carrots, Sense for Evil
- **Explosive** - The character is... well, short fused. He tends to fly off the handle easily, and probably isn't someone you want to tell bad news to at a party. On the other hand, his quick reactions tend to give him an edge over others when speed of decision is a factor.
Or - Lightning Reflexes, Alien Warrior, The Ninja Code
- **Extensive Library** - The character possesses a reservoir of knowledge. This will be useful for looking up pertinent facts, and/or figures.
Or - Internet Sysop, Eidetic Memory, Smart Neighbor
- **First Son** - The character is fortunate enough to occupy a coveted position within the family unit. The character never has to wear hand-me-downs, is the first in line for the inheritance, and can expect some degree of authority over his younger siblings.
Or - Daddy's Little Girl, Alpha Male
- **Good Fence** - The character knows someone who is always available for converting items of questionable ownership into that ever elusive commodity - cash. This someone is also skilled at keeping such interactions secret.
Or - Shady Art Dealer, Fixer, Wand of Transformation
- **Gunslinger** - The character is unusually adept at the nuances of the shoot-out. With this Descriptor, she can spend a Spirit Point to make successful trick shots, or make statements about gun fighting that are true (They are now!)
Or - Ace Bombardier, Gun Kata, Master Swordsman, Wand Slinger
- **Hideout** - Never has there been anything quite so nourishing to the human psyche as a private place to retreat to, and the character just happens to have one. He can go there to lay low, recuperate or reload, whatever strikes his fancy. After all it is his hideout.
Or - Mansion, Secret Base, Sewers
- **Innocent** - The character just has a way with people. She inspires trust and confidence. Any person looking at you can just tell that you're far too sweet and pure to be any kind of danger. Any basically good and law-abiding person will gladly give you a hand, though there must be a reason if they are to

accept discomfort or danger to help you. Sometimes, you can even inspire this trust in minor mooks and lesser villains, but usually only after you have soundly trounced them.

- Or - Angelic Face, Trustworthy, Pure of Heart
- **Intuitive** - The character can make uncanny statements of fact and knowledge when there was no reasonable way they could have known such a thing. Usually followed by a long and complicated explanation and an "Elementary, my dear Sidekick!"
Or - Art of Unknowing, Second Sight
- **Kung-Fu!** - The character knows the mystic arts of the Eagle's Talon Strike. Or perhaps the secrets of Inner Power flow through her - Either way, the character has the ability to do amazing powers of Wuxia silliness with Agility + Brawl rolls, or whatever rolls the GM deems appropriate.
Or - Hidden Eye Disciple, Martial Artist, One with the Gun, Trained by a Master
- **Lucky!** - The character is possessed of the kind of luck that heroes are famous for. In just the right position, always has the right equipment, and never seems to have a problem with the dice. Most of these abilities are the same as what any ordinary character could achieve with Spirit Points. However this character can also use it to get a lucky break. Demand a clue of the GM, and somehow find a way through the toughest situations. And of course, you don't want to put dice in his hands!
Or - Blessed, Rabbit's Foot, Right Place
- **Magic Sword** - The character possesses a sword of ancient and eldritch power. Its powers are beyond the ken of mortal men, and more importantly, the knowledge of the character. It is indestructible, razor sharp, and often warns the character of impending doom. It may possess even more abilities, but only time and tide will tell.
Or - Father's Six Gun, Katana!, Laser Sword
- **Poor** - The character is bereft of monetary aid, or income. This might be only for a short time, or a long standing condition, but either way, right now they just don't have much in the way of pocket change.
Or any change.
- Or - Bum, Disinherited, Out of Work
- **Rich** - The character is blessed with wealth, never has to worry about her next meal, or how much the repairs to the car will cost. This can also be a measure of temporal influence.
Or - Corporate CEO, Sultan, Famous Actor
- **Secret Identity** - The character has reason to pursue a second life. Most likely he is trying to protect the innocent people who are important to him. If his secret were to come out, they might be put in danger. And there's no telling what one of the character's enemies could do with such information.
Or - Bounty on his/her Head, Mysterious Past, Werewolf
- **Sidekick** - The character has an NPC who follows them around, helps them out, and generally serves as comic relief, while getting into danger which she must be rescued from.
Or - Lovely Assistant, R4 Unit, Trained Animal/Familiar(wolf, raven, dolphin...)

- **Smuggler** - The character is a smuggler, and has been for some time. She can call upon this status to find suitable cargoes to haul, recognize bribable customs inspectors, and know the safest routes to take.
Or - Gunrunner, Net Jockey, Stagecoach Driver
- **Teenager** - The character in question is on the young side of mature. While this does come with some drawbacks, like not being able to get into over 21 clubs, not being able to vote, and not being trusted with the keys to the secret base, things aren't all bad. For instance, he may be overlooked by local authorities, and he actually remembers all that stuff they taught in high school.
Or - Kid, Youthful Looks
- **Tough** - Damn, you can take it! In fact, you can take punishment that would make lesser mortals drop! Every time you spend a Spirit Point, you can ignore all penalties to your Physical stat until you get wounded again. If you ever run out of Spirit Points though, you will collapse completely.
Or - Adamant Skin, Impervium Armor, Take it Like a Man
- **Undefeated** - Let's face it, you're the best, and no one has ever proven otherwise. No matter how many challengers have come, you have vanquished them all. This has earned you a vast reputation, one which you have been able to capitalize upon in the past. Lately, very few have been brave enough to question your ability, and sometimes you worry that you may lose your edge.
Or - Badass Mofo, Master of the Shaolin Temple, Lucky Blow
- **Underworld Contacts** - The character is familiar with and known by the seedier side of society. She can call upon these personages for information on upcoming quasi-legal goings on.
Or - Government Info, Guild Member, Spy Network, Social Butterfly
- **Well-Equipped** - The character always seems to have the proper tools. No matter what the situation, he has always come well equipped.
Or - Utility Belt, Sonic Screwdriver, Tool Box of Kulundatho
- **Weird** - The character is weird. She can't help it, she just thinks differently. But it's not all drawbacks. The character possesses a unique perspective on life that eludes the normal man. Often this is misunderstood, but occasionally the character is able to make intuitive leaps that break past the barriers of conventional thought. She may come up with ingenious, albeit strange, solutions to insurmountable problems.
 - Or - Weird, Fae Touched, Alien, Cracked
- **Wolf** - The character is a wolf. That's right, a wolf. i.e. Fur, teeth, claws, and everything. This descriptor may be used to gain successes in hunting, biting, woodland survival, and growling. Perhaps surprisingly, the character has some trouble fitting in with human society. It's terrible what that little girl in the red cloak has done to an innocent animals reputation!
Or - Talking Horse, Family Dog, Mutant Turtle

- **Wounded** - The character is afflicted with an old wound. This unfortunate condition will cause him occasional problems, and may make him incapable of certain physical activities.
Or - No Left Foot, Bad Memory, Cursed, Slow Healer
- **Zombie** - The character is dead, but things aren't as bad as they seem. Someone has been kind enough to restore your mobility. Once you learn to live with this condition, it can be quite useful. Sure you may have picked up a few odd 'quirks', but you know what they say. "You can't kill what's already dead." Chances are, not much is going to slow you down. Having your arms blown off might make it hard to untie your shoes, but you can always sew them back on later.
Or - Android, Statue, Vampire

Once the Player has invented his Descriptors, the GM should review them and may ask the Player to adjust them or (rarely) veto them altogether. As characters move through story arcs, they may gain new or expanded Descriptors. Beginning PCs needn't be fully realized.

The GM need not worry too much about Descriptors that are unbalanced or excessive. For one thing, the mechanics of Conflict in *Triptych* places more emphasis on the narration of a Descriptor than how "powerful" it is. For another, using a descriptor requires a Spirit Point, and if the character has burned all their Spirit Points to power it, it simply won't work, no matter *how* powerful the Descriptor. Players will find that a Descriptor that is interesting and especially consistent with their character concept will be to their advantage, far more so than a Descriptor that is "powerful", as it will allow them to gain more **Narrative Bonuses** (see below).

Likewise, Descriptors which are too broad lose their potency, because paradoxically they do not allow a Player to fully exercise her creativity. Magic especially should be carefully considered. It is perfectly acceptable for a character to have a single Descriptor which allows for a range of magical effects. In other words, a character need not devote a separate Descriptor for every "spell" he can cast. However, a single blanket Descriptor like *Casts spells* lacks flavor. Rather, the Descriptor should eloquently indicate the *kinds* of magic or "spells" which it represents.

For example: a character with the descriptor **Hermetic Magi** would probably gesture with his hands and speak Words of Power to cast spells. He might draw complicated diagrams, burn incense, and go for the whole complicated Qaballah-looking style during rituals. Glowing signs and sigils are likely to appear when he casts his spells or has a spell effect active.

A **Taoist Sorceress** on the other hand, would likely sketch ideographs on paper with careful brush strokes, or in the air with glowing neon lines of power. Elaborate paper talismans and bizarre concoctions of herbs would serve for ritual magic.

A discussion of adjudicating Descriptors follows the section on action and Conflict resolution.

The Spark of Life

After you've chosen your Stats and come up with the basic description of the character, it's time to work out the details that make her an individual. Your character needs to be more than a one-dimensional caricature or a skeletal model made of a collection of numbers and Descriptors. Breathe life into your character; give her her own place in the world.

Too many players skip through this detailed part of the creation process, either from a lack of effort or because history and personality aren't "stats" on the character sheet. However, this step is arguably the most important part of characterization. Sure, your character with the Descriptor **Master Swordswoman** will stand out for her great skill with swords, but how did she get that skill? What sorts of weapons does she actually use or prefer? What's her style like? Why did she studying so hard? Does she do anything else? What kind of catch phrases does she uses in conversation?

Filling out this part of the character makes them special; unique not just for having a particular Descriptor — anyone can have those — but for having a particular persona. Make that persona stand out, and the character will stand out in the story as well.

Ruling Passions

Everyone has certain irrational (or pre-rational) reactions to certain things. Maybe you're afraid of spiders. All the concentration and rational thought in the world aren't going to make you able to blithely walk across a carpet of arachnids. Maybe the sight of children being hurt makes you mad. No matter how helpless you are, or how justified a spanking is, you're going to feel rage when you see a child in pain.

Such reactions are the **Triggers** that rule your life. In a very real way, they're the foundation of all the “logical” and “rational” choices your character makes. It's time to pick up some hot buttons for your character.

You get three. **Fear, Rage, and Noble.**

The **Fear** trigger is pretty self-explanatory. What does your character fear most? This can be something obvious “pointy things” or very subtle “looking cowardly or weak in front of others” Your fear is what you always want to flee or avoid, even when that isn't possible.

A **Rage** trigger is also obvious. It's what your character wants to destroy and remove. Good choices here can also be obvious “child abusers” or obscure “people who have been undeservedly rewarded with the things I work so hard to attain, but cannot”.

Your **Noble** trigger is the most subtle of the three. This represents your higher values - in a very real sense, your character at her best. To avoid your Fear, you might leave your friends in the lurch. To destroy your Rage you might kill or torture. Certainly you want to. To pursue your Noble goal you would make sacrifices, risk your own life, and endure terrible suffering for the common good. Just as nobody is perfect, nobody is completely evil either. Noble goals can be broad “relieve the worldwide burden of poverty” or extremely narrow “get the money for my grandma's operation”.

Do not pick triggers that conflict with your Concept without good reason. If you're a Roman Catholic, you're going to have a hard time explaining a Rage against Nuns! (Unless your experience in Catholic school was exceptionally traumatic that is!) Similarly, don't pick contradicting triggers. If you have a Fear of homosexuals, don't make gay rights your Noble stimulus.

When you're interacting with one of the triggers in an appropriate fashion, trying to destroy what enrages you, trying to get away from what scares you, or trying to obey your nobler instincts, you gain an automatic +2 to your roll during that Conflict. You may only do this once per session for each trigger no matter how many such interactions you trigger.

Note: You must explain to the GM specifically why your trigger has come into play - and the GM can veto it.

Motives & Goals

Characters don't exist in a vacuum. Above and beyond the passions that drive us are our complex motives. These motives represent what your character wants out of life. To retire, to get money to pay for an operation, to do good in a world of evil. These motives are the driving force for a character, and help you know what your character might act like at any given time.

A character's actions are also motivated by the player's **Goals**. Just as a character doesn't exist in a vacuum, a player doesn't either. "Goals" can be things you want to explore, or have happen to the character over the course of the game. The GM will do her best to include them, and thus allow you a say in the plot of the game above and beyond the simple concept of "I hit him," or "I download the secret files," or even the tried and true "I kill it."

Choose three goals for your character. These can be metagoals: "Have my character learn that his mother is still alive, and attempt a rescue to learn of his brothers fate." or they can be character goals: "Return to my home country and reclaim the throne from my evil brother."

These goals probably should be related to your passions, but don't have to be. One should be long term, one medium term, and one short term.

A **long term goal** is one that you expect to be working on for a long time to come. It may never even come to fruition in the game. It is likely something your character would like to achieve within their lifetime, something you would like your character to accomplish at the end of a long campaign arc, or even a goal of endless duration such as "Do good in the world".

A **medium term goal** is one that is likely to show up at the end of a long trial, or after several episodes of play. It is likely something your character would like to achieve within 5 years of game time, or something you would like your character to accomplish within 5 years of game time.

A **short term goal** is one that could happen any time, or be dealt with during any session. It is likely something your character would like within a year, or something you would like your character to accomplish within a year.

Here are some examples of short, medium, and long term goals:

Short term: Gain the funding for a small exploratory expedition based on an ancient map. This could be a continuing short term goal, or part of a long term goal of some sort.

Medium term: Head a large, fully funded expedition into the jungle, finding an outpost of a lost civilization.

Long term: Discover, unearth, and map the lost city of Kathmandulu and return with indisputable evidence and artifacts to the acclaim of the Royal Geographical Society.

Once a goal is achieved, regardless of whether it is short, medium, or long term, a player should choose another goal to replace it. Sometimes you will want to choose the same goal over again, especially if your short term goal is part of a meta goal.

Each *Triptych* character must have a hook. This is a fact about your character that the GM can use to create story arcs. It should be a classic staple of adventure fiction, one that motivates or haunts the character. The chance to help a young child, when the hero's own childhood was harsh. Revenge on the man who killed your father. A secret from your past that you wish to atone for. A desire to do the right thing, in the face of impossible odds. Whenever this hook comes up in the story, your character should have a strong emotional reaction to it.

What Should I Play?

New players coming to *Triptych* might want to skip ahead to the seven sample PCs at the end of Characters & Personae to see the kinds of characters they can play. Of course, the GM will present the setting of the game. It could be anything from dashing swashbucklers plying the stars in æther sailing ships to comical tales of romance and everyday life.

A Roll of the Die – Conflict Resolution

There are several types of actions in *Triptych*. Most actions require no die rolls at all: they are either *narrated* (whether by the GM or a PC), or *negotiated* (GM and PC agree upon the outcome of a proposed series of events). The linguistic and collaborative nature of narration and negotiation obviate the need for game rules by their very nature – think of them as collective storytelling.

Some actions, however, have inherently uncertain outcomes. Sometimes the GM and PC cannot agree on the outcome of a proposed action. At other times, the GM (or even Player) wants to inject a sense of drama and suspense by making the outcome of an action unpredictable. In these cases, the Players resolve actions by rolling a d12 (a twelve-sided die, the only die you use in *Triptych*).

Whenever there is a conflict that requires resolving with a die roll, the Player adds the appropriate Stat score to her die roll, and adds and subtracts any bonuses or penalties that might apply: **Circumstantial Modifiers**, **Narrative Modifiers**, or in some cases an opponent's Stat modifier applied as a penalty. If the total is 13 or more, then the action is successful.

There are two general kinds of rolls in *Triptych*: **Unopposed** and **Opposed**. Unopposed rolls are those in which a character is acting or reacting alone; for example, trying to swing across a canyon. If the action is so simple or easy as to be almost sure to succeed, no roll is necessary. But even a trivial task can become difficult if there are adverse circumstances. For example, climbing down an escape ladder from a roof may be automatic in most situations, but if the character is carrying a heavy burden and the ladder rungs are covered in ice, an Unopposed roll would be probably be required. As with all actions requiring rolls, the Player must equal or exceed a 13, rolling a d12 and adding the appropriate Stat, as well as any Circumstantial Modifiers the GM feels are appropriate.

Opposed rolls are handled in much the same way. In cases where a character is attempting to prevent another from accomplishing a given action, the character attempting the action must take as a negative modifier the opposing character's appropriate Stat, in addition to any GM imposed penalties or bonuses. In

some cases opposed rolls should be handled using the Conflict system below, even for situations outside of literal combat.

Circumstantial Modifiers

The GM should keep in mind that a modest Stat (3) should succeed in an average task requiring a roll about half the time. Let’s work backwards from a successful roll (i.e., 13) and see what modifier would be required to allow a Stat of 3 to succeed half the time. Since an average roll on a d12 is about 7 (6.5 actually), a good base modifier for an average task is +3 or +4 to insure those kinds of odds.

For example:

Stat 3

Modifier + 3 (“Average”)

Average roll + 7

= 13 (success)

On the other hand, consider that a character with a supernatural Stat (7) would need to roll a 12 in order to make a roll at -6 (12 + 7 - 6 = 13).

Consider the guidelines in the table to the right when choosing where to place the penalty or bonus to the player’s roll.

Often actions in the context of a story arc will by default be “Pretty Hard”, as adventures are by their very nature dramatic and oftentimes arduous.

Narrative Modifiers

It is **always** possible for a *character* to earn a bonus to their roll based on the *Player’s* narration of the character’s actions. The GM should give the Player a bonus of up to +3 if the action is cleverly, evocatively, or poetically described. In some cases, the GM might even impose a penalty for a particularly insipid or unimaginative action. The mechanics of Conflict, in particular, make it difficult for one combatant or another to win without the use of such bonuses.

Modifier	Description
+ 4 or more	Easy
3	Average
2	Not too hard
1	Hard
0	Pretty hard
-1	Difficult
-2	Pretty difficult
-3	Problematic
-4	Very difficult
-5	Highly improbable
-6 or lower	Nearly impossible

The GM should not be stingy with Narrative Bonuses, as the system deliberately relies on their liberal use. Use the following table as a guide when assigning Narrative Bonuses; when in doubt, err on the high side:

	Bonus Narration is...
-1 to -3	Foolish, insipid, or out of character
0	Average
+1	Well delivered or embellished
+2	Exceptional use of a character trait or exploitation of an opponent's weakness
+3	The GM is completely caught off guard by the originality of the action, and the narration perfectly uses the character's traits, possibly even turning a Descriptor's drawback to an advantage.

Natural 1, Natural 12

In any cases, rolling a 1 on the d12 indicates an automatic failure, possibly with disastrous consequences at the GM's discretion. A 12 is always a success, possibly an incredible success, again at the GM's option.

Which Stat?

Often it's obvious which Stat to use. If performing a physical action, use Physical, for example. In some cases, however, a roll may be made with either of two Stats. For example, casting spells. Arguably, either Mental or Physical could be used when casting a spell. In those cases, the Player may choose which Stat to use, depending on the nature of the magic. The Stat should be used consistently for that character and that magical effect.

Furthermore, even seemingly "wrong" Stat choices may be the right one after all. Imagine a character whose Concept is that of a brilliant swordsman; such a character might have an extraordinary score in Mental (say, 6) but only a slightly above-average Physical (on the order of 4). The character could reasonably justify making all his sword combat rolls using the Mental Stat instead of Physical, even though one might expect all combat to be made using Physical rolls. If fighting bare-handed (his sword was stolen or lost), then he would use Physical for combat. Likewise, a deadly poison might be resisted with Spirit rather than Physical.

If a Player proposes a Stat which is questionable, the other Players vote on whether the narration of the Stat is valid, with the GM casting the deciding vote in case of a tie.

Good character design will play to the character's strengths, so that in most cases when a character gets into a Conflict, they will frame the Conflict in terms that allow them to use their highest Stat.

Spirit Points

When the weight of the world seems too much and only the most monumental, heroic effort can possibly triumph against adversity, the true hero draws upon the last shreds of inner resolve to prevail. Even the common man has a point at which his spirit stirs to fight. When a mother fights to save a child, when a soldier makes a final effort to defend his companions, that's when the character draws in the strength of their Spirit.

In game, **Spirit Points** measure confidence, drive and resolve. A character with many Spirit points is steady and self-assured; one with few Spirit points has limited self-control and determination. In game terms, Spirit points are the “currency” that a player uses to make things go their way in game.

Every player begins the first session of the game with 3 Spirit Points. Spirit Points give players the ability to take a little bit of control over the game, either by giving their character bonuses when they feel they need them, or by taking over a small part of the story. They also are the power source for Descriptors. Spirit Points are best represented by some non-edible token, such as glass beads or poker chips. (Previous experiments with small edible candies have left players strapped for points!)

Characters may, at any point, spend a Spirit point to gain a bonus, invoke an Descriptor, tag an Descriptor, or make a declaration.

Gain a Bonus

A Spirit Point can be spent to add 1 to any roll of the dice. In practice, this is the least potent way to use a Spirit Point – you’re usually much better off using one of the other applications, below. (Most games get rid of this rule once their players get comfortable using Descriptors; you can, too .)

Invoke an Descriptor

Descriptors (see above, page XX) are those things that really describe a character and his place in the story. When you have an Descriptor that’s applicable to a situation, it can be invoked to grant a bonus. After you have rolled the dice, you may pick one of your Descriptors and describe how it applies to this situation. If the GM agrees that it’s appropriate, you may spend a Spirit Point and do one of the following:

1. Reroll the die, using the new result, or
2. Add two to the final die roll (after any rerolls have been done).

You may do this multiple times for a single situation as long as you have multiple Descriptors that are applicable. You cannot use the same Descriptor more than once on the same roll, though you may use the same Descriptor on several different rolls throughout a scene, at the cost of one Spirit Point per use.

Tag an Descriptor

Scenes, other characters, locations, and other things of dramatic importance can have Descriptors. Sometimes they’re obvious, and sometimes they’re less so. Players can spend a Spirit Point to invoke an Descriptor which is not on their own character sheet, if they know what the Descriptor is. This is referred to as tagging an Descriptor, and is covered in greater detail in the Descriptors chapter, on page XX.

As a rule of thumb, tagging someone or something else’s Descriptors requires a little more justification than invoking one of your own Descriptors. For scene Descriptors, it should be some way to really bring in the visual or theme that the Descriptor suggests. For Descriptors on opponents, the player needs to know about the Descriptor in the first place, and then play to it.

Make a Declaration

You may simply lay down a Spirit Point and declare something. If the GM accepts it, it will be true. This gives the player the ability to do small things in a story that would usually be something only the GM could do.

Usually, these things can't be used to drastically change the plot or win a scene. Declaring "Doctor Herborn bursts into flames and is consumed by demons" is not only likely to be rejected by the GM, it wouldn't even be that much fun to begin with. What this can be very useful for is convenient coincidences. Does your character need a lighter (but doesn't smoke)? Spend a Spirit Point and you've got one! Is there an interesting scene happening over there that your character might miss? Spend a Spirit Point to declare you arrive at a dramatically appropriate moment!

Your GM has veto power over this use, but it has one dirty little secret. If you use it to do something to make the game cooler for everyone, the GM will usually grant far more leeway than she will for something boring or, worse, selfish.

As a general rule, you'll get a lot more leniency from the GM if you make a declaration that is in keeping with one or more of your Descriptors. For example, the GM will usually balk at letting a character spend a Spirit Point to have a weapon after he's been searched. However, if you can point to your "Always Armed" Descriptor, or describe how your "Distracting Beauty" Descriptor kept the guard's attention on inappropriate areas, the GM is likely to give you more leeway. In a way, this is much like invoking an Descriptor, but without a die roll.

Continuity – The fish came from *where* now!?

Continuity in the game is sacred. If something has been solidified into fact by a description of it aloud, then you cannot change it later. Even Spirit Points cannot change what has already been solidified. The reason for this is because *Triptych* relies a great deal upon the players ability to visualize. If things can change after they've been established, then it makes a consensual reality impossible to establish. There is always a little wiggle room though.

Example: Jason is driving a car, wildly swerving side to side on a narrow canyon road in an attempt to shake off the Evil Mad Scientist's mooks. He rolls a 1 on his Physical roll, and goes swerving off the edge into the raging torrent of water below. (It is now...)

Jason's player, not wishing to write the character out of the story just yet, spends a Spirit Point to declare that: "The car Jason stole from the Mad Scientist's lab was an experimental getaway car fitted with an ejection seat."

The GM buys the expenditure, and narrates a horrifying dive into the raging torrent below, and the mooks looking down at the wreckage of the car surging in the waters far underneath them. Then, Jason's player narrates the camera's slow pan back up the cliff walls, and Jason clinging desperately to a narrow branch protruding from the cliff walls.

Note that unspoken continuity was massively disturbed – *this car is perfectly normal in all respects* – but spoken continuity was not disturbed at all, as nobody had detailed the car's Descriptors.

Conflict

Without some sort of conflict, there's hardly a story at all. Without something to overcome and the desire to do so, the characters are hardly the sort of interesting people who's struggle you'd like to follow. Struggle and strife are important to the story, heroes need something to overcome.

In this section the terminology will be that of direct combat, but in fact the following system can be used for other forms of Conflict, when a more detailed narration is desired than is afforded by a simple opposed roll.

Conflict often takes the form of actual combat. The goal of combat in *Triptych* is not to gain “experience” or “loot”; indeed, the Defeated has generally more to lose in combat than the victor has to gain. The purpose of Conflict is to further the story, add drama, or create narrative tension. As the GM runs her story arcs, she should use it accordingly.

Conflict is not broken down into a long series of detailed blow-by-blows, or rounds. Instead, the contest as a whole is expressed as a natural progression with an **Opening Scene**, **Action Scene**, and **Closing Scene**.

A Conflict can be narrated to take place over the span of a few moments or even several days (as in Jen Yu’s pursuit of Lo in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*); regardless the Conflict is resolved similarly. Conflict is often used to represent combat, but this system can be used to narrate any Conflict between two or more opponents, from a seduction to a game of chess.

It is essential that Conflict not merely be a series of die rolls, but an opportunity to further the story. This is intrinsic to the Conflict system in *Triptych*: Players and GM must describe their characters’ actions in detail.

Opening Scene

The Opening Scene sets the stage for the Conflict and establishes its opening movements. It has three crucial components: a **Courage Roll**, establishment of **Victory Conditions** and defining Circumstantial Modifiers, if any.

The Courage Roll establishes both the state of each participant’s resolve and courage as well as determining who begins the narration of the Conflict. All participants roll a die and add their the current total of **Spirit Points**(See Descriptors pp. xx); the character making the highest adjusted roll begins the narration of the Conflict in the Action Scene. Reroll in case of ties. If the winning character rolls a natural 12 for the Courage Roll, he gets a +1 bonus in the Closing Scene.

Next, each Player declares Victory Conditions for her character. The GM should note whether the characters’ stated Victory Conditions are consistent with their respective Concepts, Passions, and Goals; those that aren’t simply won’t come to pass even if the character “wins” the Conflict, or may turn out very differently than the Player intended. Note that a Victory Condition might consist of an attempt to avoid an attack or run away altogether, Moreover, an attack might not seek to do physical harm but instead might consist of merely capturing or impeding an opponent.

Finally, the GM declares any modifiers due to circumstances, applied either globally to all participants or to specific ones.

We'll use two examples to illustrate Conflicts. In one, the standard trial by combat. In the other, a more socially acceptable situation.

An ogre demon has penetrated into the Water Kingdom, and finds itself wandering through one of the many bamboo forests there. Spotting a young woman making her way slowly through the forest green, it decides she would make a good meal. (its Victory Conditions). The ogre, being a default NPC, has 3 Spirit Points and rolls a 6, for a total of 9. The young woman, Xiang, has a 4 Spiritual and rolls a 4 for a total of 8; the ogre demon wins the test of Courage and will begin the narration of combat. Xiang will count escaping from the ogre demon as a victory but states that she's going to try and banish him if she can.

The Brat Pack, a Clique of stuck up privileged girls at the exclusive Montrose Girls Academy has come across Diana, a quiet shy girl who is at the Academy on a scholarship. The leader of the Brat Pack, Angela DuMont, decides she's going to put the little upstart in her place. She wants to humiliate Diana, and make her friends laugh. (her Victory Conditions). Angela has a 3 Spirit Points and rolls a 7 for a total of 10. Diana just wants to get away without losing all her face, or bursting into tears. Diana has 4 Spirit Points and rolls a 3 for a total of 7.

Action Scene

The winner of the Courage Roll begins the next step of the Conflict by narrating an action, called an **Embellishment**. This is a single act or short series of closely related acts. Once spoken, Embellishments cannot be changed. Players and GM should vividly relate their character's actions in the Conflict, whether attacking, defending, or both, and should be creative and descriptive in their narrations.

The GM judges each Embellishment and assigns it a Narrative Modifier, according to the guide on page XX, from -3 to +3. The Narrative Modifier is announced and recorded immediately. **Narration is the heart of the Triptych Conflict system.** As with **any** roll, the GM may assign a bonus (or penalty!) of up to +3 for a particularly creative (or poor) narration or description, at her discretion. Even more than the Stat score, the Embellishment's Narrative Bonus is potentially the single greatest determinant of success in a Conflict.

The narrative thread of the Conflict then passes to the loser of the Courage Roll, who should respond to the first Player's narration appropriately with her own Embellishment. This narration of Conflict passing from one Player to the next, like a story being handed around and embellished at each turn, is critical to the Conflict system in *Triptych*.

There are theoretically a limitless number of possible Embellishments. In practice, however, between 2 and 4 per character will be appropriate in most instances. This back-and-forth of Embellishments can be ended simply by any Player or the GM declaring Embellishment over. However, the other Players(s) are allowed a final retort of one final Embellishment *after* this declaration. Naturally it behooves the Players to keep the Embellishment ball rolling for as long they are doing well.

Once the Embellishments have been concluded, each Player tallies her cumulative Narrative Modifiers and records that value (hopefully positive).

For the purposes of our example, we'll assume that both the ogre demon and Xiang are PCs (controlled by Players). If the ogre demon were controlled by the GM, on the other hand, its Narrative Modifiers might be fixed at +1.

The ogre charges towards Xiang, its footfalls shaking the earth as it comes – a direct assault and not terribly imaginative, but consistent with the ogre's Descriptors, Concept, Passions, and Goals; the GM gives the ogre's player a +1 bonus. Xiang spins to the side, and then uses the sash of her tunic to lash out and trip the ogre as it goes past. The GM thinks this is an amusing and clever way to use a Kung Fu styled defense, and so awards Xiang a +3 bonus.

The ogre roars in frustration, stands up and uproots four entire bamboo stalks, swinging them like a broom at Xiang. A +2 bonus for it. But Xiang falls flat on her back, letting the rush of bamboo tops pass over her, then does an acrobatic kip-up and kicks at the ogre's kneecaps. Since she's used the ogre's own Descriptor against it (Never Without a Weapon), the GM gives Xiang a +2 bonus.

The ogre laughs as the little girl comes flying towards it, her foot extended, and spends a Spirit Point to invoke another of its Descriptors. With Skin Like Iron it gains a +2 bonus, and then narrates how Xiang's flying kick stops dead and she falls down, while the ogre stoops down to pick her up. The GM awards a +1 for this narration as the ogre is responding to Xiang's actions. This, combined with the bonus from the ogre's use of its Descriptor combines for a total of +3.

Xiang, realizing that the ogre likely has a great deal more physical combat focused Stats and Descriptors than she herself does, changes tactics. Xiang tells the ogre that if he can answer just one simple riddle of hers, that he can eat her. She quickly recites a riddle she heard in her poetry class.

"A small maiden, sits in the middle of the water. Wearing a pink jacket, she rows her boat without oars. What is she?"

The GM thinks this is an amusing and interesting way to challenge an ogre, and so grants Xiang a +3 for her narration, but says that Xiang will have to forfeit some of her former bonuses for such an abrupt change in tactics. Xiang agrees.

The ogre, stumped by the riddle, and confused by the little girl asking him such a nonsense question, scratches it's head, and looks foolish, blinking it's huge bloodshot yellow eyes. The GM grants no bonus for this. It feels static, and while in keeping with the ogre's Concept, did not feel particularly interesting.

Xiang again asks the ogre the riddle, and the ogre's brain heats up with frustration, and it pounds the ground with his club, narrowly missing Xiang. The GM grants Xiang another +3 as she is amused by the description of the ogre's face turning red and steam coming from its bald head. Feeling she is running out of options, Xiang declares that her narration is concluded.

As its retort, the furious ogre lashes out with its claws. The GM again gives the ogre demon no bonus, even though its Player was true to its nature (blinded by hunger and angry for being made the fool) – such a simple attack might have even netted a penalty. The ogre demon will carry a total of +6 into the Closing Scene, while Xiang will have +9. She would have had 11, but the GM assigned a penalty of -2 for changing tactics in the middle of the fight.

Again, we'll assume that both Angela and Diana are controlled by the PCs.

Angela deliberately trips Diana as she's passing, then sneers and directs a cutting remark to her friends, clearly loud enough to be overheard by the rest of the students in the hallway, about clumsy girls, demanding an apology of Diana. The GM decides that this is a strong enough entrance for Angela's type (+2).

Diana rises to her knees and surveys the clique towering above. She straightens her glasses and realizes that she's in deep. She will ask the GM to spend a Spirit Point for some backup. The GM allows it, and Diana narrates that right at this moment, the vice principle rounds the corner, spotting the group. He takes up watch at the end of the hallway, arms crossed - preventing any outright harassment.

Angela knows how to handle adults. She gives the vice principle a winning smile with just a tad of blonde ditz on her face. Turning back to Diana, she offers a hand to the girl. "Oh, I'm sorry! Are you okay?" Her words are lathered in sincerity so thick only an adult would miss its utter scorn. The GM approves (+3).

Diana accepts the hand up. Her retort is a shy mutter, already thrown off balance and trying to simultaneously insult Angela and avoid the vice principle's wrath. "Thanks, Angela. So, how's Tom doing?" The GM knows that Tom has already been established as the smart boy mook who gives Angela all the answers to her tests and homework, but Diana's use is a little bland. (+1)

"Tom's doing great," Angela demurs, fluttering her lashes. "He is SUCH a great tutor. I don't know how I would get my straight A's without his help!" She speaks loudly enough for the adult to hear, and her mook clique provides a backdrop of affirmatives and giggles about how cute it is. Of course that just makes the vice principle smile, seeing that Angela is being a good heart as always. The GM notes that this uses one of Angela's descriptors - "Angel as far as Adults can see" - and so grants +2 to the otherwise alright (+1) response.

Diana responds by gathering her books and straightening her glasses, not dignifying it with a response. In reality, the player feels like the situation is quickly spiraling out of control, and she tells the GM that she is ready to close by walking away with her head high and an attempt at dignity. (+1)

Angela delivers her final assault. Seeing her adversary on the run, Angela cries out in mock display. "Oh, Diana! Your skirt ripped! Oh, you just MUST borrow one of mine." Offering a skirt that costs more than Diana's wardrobe only highlights the tatters of her uniform, and the skirt is further dastardly short - sure to show off Diana's legs (a major source of insecurity). The GM awards this +2 for playing on one of Diana's flaws.

Occasionally a Conflict will occur between two PCs, but most of the time it will be between NPCs and PCs. A good GM will objectively rate both the Players' Embellishments and her own when determining Narrative Modifiers, using the table on page 8. As an alternate to the GM's judging the value of her own narration, NPCs may be given a uniform Narrative Modifier of +1. It is recommended that at the beginning of the story arc the Players vote whether to allow the GM to rate her own narratives or opt for the invariable +1

Closing Scene

In the Closing Scene, each character takes the cumulative total of all her Embellishment Narrative Modifiers, an appropriate Stat, plus any Circumstantial Modifiers set by the GM in the Opening Scene, and adds it to her roll of a d12.

The character with both the highest adjusted roll and a minimum total of 13 has won the Conflict and the lower rolling character is **Defeated**, as influenced by the Victory Conditions established in the Opening Scene (these cannot be changed by the Player once declared in the Opening Scene). If the winner rolls a natural 12 or the loser a natural 1, then the Defeat is spectacular.

If neither characters gets a 13, or in the event of a tie, then the combat is at a stalemate. Either way, the Conflict is over, and may not recommence for a while – say not until a “change of scene”.

Xiang rolls a d12 and gets a 6, plus his 5 Mental and +9 from her narrations. Thus with a total of 20 she describes how the ogre starts to roar and pound his head against a boulder that it rips out of the ground. The ogre on the other hand rolls a 2, which with it's 8 Physical and +6 from Narrative Modifiers gives it an adjusted 16, beating the magic 13 handily, but still short of Xiang's score. The ogre, blinded by the pain of having to think, knocks itself out with the furious pounding of it's head against the boulder. Xiang triumphs, and the ogre slumps into unconsciousness in Defeat!

Angela rolls a d12 and gets a 5, plus her social of 5 plus the modifiers from her narration which total 9 gives her a solid 19. Diana on the other hand rolls a 6. This combined with her rather poor narration(a total of +3), and even worse Social of 2 gives her an 11. Not even a 13. Poor Diana runs off down the hallway, tears brimming in her eyes, accompanied by the sound of mocking laughter from behind her. Diana's player plots revenge, likely drawing on another adult with a Spirit Point to have overheard the cruel words.

Defeat

Defeat can take many forms, but at minimum implies the vindication of the winner and dispossession of the losing character. At the very least, the Defeated character is incapacitated (for a long or a short time, as appropriate); what form that incapacitation takes depends on the nature of the combatants and their Concepts, as well as circumstances of the narration up to that point, and of course the Victory Conditions established in the Overture. Note that the winner's Victory Conditions need not be applied literally, but rather serve as a framework which the GM will use to adjudicate Defeat.

While *Triptych* characters can't die unless they are written out by the players, that doesn't mean they are immutable; in fact they can and do change, sometimes for the worse. There are penalties other than death which can result from Defeat. These should be assigned by the GM based on the situation at hand as appropriate, and informed by the Concepts, Passions, Goals, and Victory Conditions of the two combatants.

Possible additional Defeats include:

- Maiming
- Loss of a Stat point
- Loss or gain of a Descriptor

It's best to leave the details of the Defeat to the narration rather than rely on a predetermined "damage table", but the above can be used as a guide. Loss of Stat or a Descriptor should be reserved for Natural 12 (for the victor) or Natural 1 (for the Defeated) rolls.

Defeated, moaning and clutching its head, the ogre demon may find that its Physical score has dropped by 1 point because it cannot use both hands (unlikely), or it will begin to relentlessly hunt Xiang (a new Descriptor), or that it now suffers a "-2 against young women" – a hefty penalty given its "Eats Humans" Descriptor!

Having lost the confrontation with Angela in the hallway, Diana is likely to take a -2 penalty to her rolls versus the Brat Pack for some time, or perhaps she has increased insecurity about her legs as she is forced to wear a short skirt all day(a new Descriptor).

Mêlée

When there are mass combats (more than two opponents), all characters proceed as above. In the Opening Scene, each character speaks in turn based on the Courage Roll (highest to lowest). In the Action Scene, each side pools all their narration Narrative Modifiers and makes one collective roll in the Closing Scene. The roll is made by the elected member of the group, using his appropriate Stat score. Defeat is meted out by the GM as usual based on individuals' Victory Conditions.

Alternately, when devising a group of NPCs, such as an army for example, the GM may consider a mass of lowly characters as a single being with an increased Stat score, typically Physical.

The privateer schooner Katrina's Pride is scouting a distant asteroid cluster for a place to lay low for a while, when the lookout suddenly shouts "Wyrms Sign!" The whole crew tumbles onto the deck, to see a horde of glittering rainbow shapes rapidly approaching the schooner.

The crew readies for action stations, and prepare to repel the voracious creatures. A desperate battle begins, as the swarm of thousands of meter long rainbow wyrms swarm over the ship, hungry to devour anything and everything. The PCs face the swarm as if they were a single being (perhaps two or more as the swarm divides its attentions among the PCs!). Instead of using each individual rainbow wyrm's Physical of 2, the GM might have assigned the swarm (or one of its sub-swarms) a Physical of 10 or higher.

Death

The killing of a character should only be allowed as part of stated Victory Condition, and only if the player of the PC agrees to it. In other words, it is the exception, not the norm. Characters may also meet their demise out of combat, but again, only with the permission of the Player and only when the story arc is served. It's no fun at all to have your character removed from play permanently with no say in the matter.

Adjudicating & Using Descriptors

As stated earlier, Descriptors are abilities, traits, and talents which all *Triptych* characters possess. The list of Descriptors earlier are hardly the only options, as stated earlier, the GM and Players may devise their own. The sample characters offer more choices. All Descriptors are only a phrase or at most a sentence, and the description must contain at least a noun and a verb. Descriptors are typically not quantified numerically, although rarely they might be.

Descriptors may be an expression of a character's inherent ability, an item the character possesses, or a person that the character knows. In any case, a Descriptor cannot be taken away unless the character is Defeated or some story arc specific mishap befalls her. And just because a Descriptor is inherent to the character doesn't mean it can't be lost or stolen.

Descriptors function within the parameters of the character's Concept, Passions, and Goals. The GM is the final arbiter on interpreting the scope and power of a Descriptor. In most cases, Descriptors simply work.

Descriptors can be used in both a **Passive** and an **Active** mode. In passive mode, they simply sit there, telling the other players something about your character, and how they might react to the world, or the world might react to them. For example, with the descriptor "Statuesque Beauty" you might expect the character to be viewed with admiration by others, and be something of the center of attention. You could expect people influenced by appearance to have a positive reaction to you, and several romantic subplots might be spun off from that. All of these things are *Passive Use* of the aforementioned descriptor.

On the other hand, if you wanted to be certain that the villain will be entranced by your charms, making him pliable to your will, or that the elven ambassador will find your assignation worth his time, it would require the expenditure of a Spirit Point. What you are buying with the Spirit Point is the ability to influence the story for certain. This is *Active Use* of the descriptor.

Consider the descriptor "Expansive Library". The person owning the library could reasonably expect to be well learned, have a great deal of knowledge of just about any subject in particular, be able to quote poetry or history, and so forth. These would be *Passive Use*. If, on the other hand, the character wished to read a passage from an ancient and rare tome of occult lore which was currently relevant to the adventure unfolding, this would be an *Active Use* of the descriptor. The character would therefore be required to spend a Spirit Point.

A good rule of thumb for Descriptors is that in order for you to affect the game world in a way that is to your benefit, you'll need to spend a Spirit Point, and in some cases (such as magical powers or martial arts) you may be required to make a roll as well.

Spells & Magic

Perhaps the most difficult Descriptors to arbitrate are those which are very open-ended, such as the ability to cast magic spells. This is especially true in combat, where a magician might seem to have a tremendous advantage over a character with more specific or fixed Descriptors.

The key thing to remember is that regardless of the Descriptor, characters always play out combat according to the normal rules. In other words, the *narration* of the combat is the key determinant for the character's roll in Opening Scene, Action Scene, and Closing Scene. Whether the character uses the device of a spell or a sword or some other means is secondary.

Lets imagine a conflict between the Archmage Zandricus and the swordmaster Tidus.

Tidus has just entered the Archmage's lair, following a lead he received from the local trade guild regarding a kidnapping. There, he spies the Archmage at his work, and behind him, a bound captive wearing the local trade guild's colors.

Tidus charges into the room, sword drawn, and declaiming that Zandricus is under arrest for violation of guild trade law. Zandricus sneers arrogantly, and gives a good villain speech, saying that Tidus will soon be another captive for experimentation. Raising his hands and gesturing towards Tidus with eldritch energy crackling over his flesh. Victory conditions have been clearly declared. If Tidus wins, he will have captured, bound, or subdued the evil mage, if Zandricus wins, Tidus will be bound and "experimented" upon.

In the context of Triptych, the success of Zandricus's action is predicated not on his Descriptor of Necromancer. We can assume that his magics pretty much works automatically – in other words Tidus is not entitled to a separate "resistance roll" or "saving throw" – the outcome of if he is affected by the magic is determined by the narration bonuses, and the die rolls made within the structure of the Conflict rules laid out previously.

Tidus states that he's charging into the lab, sword drawn. He uses a Spirit Point on his descriptor (Swordmaster) and gains a +3 bonus. +1 for acting in concert with his Descriptors, and +2 from Invoking his Descriptor with a Spirit Point. Zandricus raises his hands, and purple and black eldritch energy crackles over his hands. +1 for his Embellishment, and a +2 bonus from Invoking a descriptor.

Tidus shouts, and lays the blade of his sword against Zandricus's neck, telling him to stand or die. The GM thinks this is a bit weak, but consistent with his style, and grants Tidus a +1. Zandricus says that purple lightning is streaking out to engulf Tidus's form. The GM agrees, and the spell lashes out. Tidus can feel a clawing darkness eating away at his bones. The GM awards a +1 bonus to Zandricus as well. Narration over for the Action Scene, the character's roll off.

Zandricus rolls a 1 and his player groans. The 1 + his Mental of 4 + 4 from his narration for a total of 9. Then Tidus rolls, and gets a 4. The 4, plus his 6 physical, plus his 4 points from narration for a total of 14. The lighting from Zandricus cut's off as Tidus's sword is held against his throat, and the mage gulps nervously, unwilling to continue the casting of his spell at the cost of his neck.

While it is true that the flexibility of magic (limited in all cases by the character's Concept) gives a character a narrative advantage, spells are not inherently more devastating or powerful than other Descriptors.

The magician has the same storytelling requirements and makes the same die rolls as everyone else. Furthermore, there is no concept in *Triptych* such as “spell damage” — only the combat’s outcome at the end of the Closing Scene is important. The *narrative*, not the *Descriptor*, is the key.

Note: If you want any special FX to be permanent, you must pay the cost in Spirit Points, just as if you had declared and executed a plot as per Story Rewards (See below, p. XX). Otherwise, the magical/psionic FX will only last through the length of the current scene.

Disasters

The real world is full of dangers and the worlds of imagination even more so. Heroes may be called upon to battle fires, brave freezing blizzards, or hold their breath for long periods of time; it's just a series of **Disasters**. In *Triptych*, Disasters are treated as simple characters in the story, if inanimate ones. The GM should think about what kinds of environmental hazards, or true disasters, might affect the PCs in their adventures.

Being character-like, Disasters follow simplified rules derived from those governing PCs and NPCs:

- The Disaster’s Concept is a collapsed version of Name, Concept, and some Descriptors. Disasters can be stated in terms of an event (*A Fire In the Engine Room*) or in terms of an effect (*Burning*).
- Rather than having four Stats, Disasters are rated by a single score, called **Strength**, ranging from 1 to 13 (a 1 doesn't necessarily mean the Disaster isn’t dangerous, just that it has a remote possibility of causing harm).
- Some Disasters may be Defeated, such as a house fire, or a small flood, but most Disasters (falling from a high place, lost at sea) cannot be defeated, they must be survived.
- All Disasters have three **Penalties**, consequences representing the degrees to which the Disaster can affect a character. These are always listed from least to most injurious. The first Penalty is almost always a variation on temporary incapacitation.
- More injurious Penalties are rarely if ever given a numerical rating, and are usually a change in the character’s description, and the addition of an accompanying new Descriptor.

When a character is faced with a Disaster, play progresses as with any Conflict with exceptions noted below; the GM uses the Disaster’s Calamity for all rolls.

In the Opening Scene, if the character wins the Courage Roll he has an opportunity to escape the Disaster altogether. On the other hand, Victory Conditions are automatic: survival for the character, and prescribed for the Disaster by its Penalties.

In the Action Scene, the GM describes the Disaster as it plays out, while the character responds with their character's actions. Unlike a normal Conflict, however, each side is allowed at most three narrations, as Disasters tend to be compressed events. Oftentimes, a single narration each will suffice to describe the scene.

The Disaster’s Penalties are applied as follows in the Closing Scene:

- If the character achieves a victory or rolls a natural 12 he is unscathed.

- If the Closing Scene is a stalemate (neither side makes 13) then the first, least harmful penalty is imposed.
- If the Disaster “wins” the Conflict (GM has high roll of at least 13), then the middle Penalty is applied.
- If the GM rolls a natural 12 OR the player rolls a natural 1, then the last Penalty is applied.

Naturally, certain Descriptors will allow automatic survival of a Disaster; a mermaid can’t very well drown in a shipwreck nor can a character who is immune to fire be immolated by a dragon’s breath (although she could be hurt by being stepped on, or clawed); much less could a character who *flies* be concerned with a fall! When designing Disasters as part of a story arc, the GM should keep in mind that like Conflicts they serve to bring drama, danger, and narrative tension to the story. They should not be used frivolously or “just because”.

Below are seven sample Disasters to serve as inspiration for the GM. Not every house fire will be identical, two poisons aren’t necessarily the same, the circumstances of falls from a great height can vary, and so on. GMs should use these examples to help them design their own, but shouldn’t copy them verbatim over and over again; these aren’t rules for Disasters, merely illustrations. Terms like “exhaustion”, “frailty”, “feebleness” *et cetera* are nuances of incapacitation, the minimum condition for a Defeat (even though these are applied in a tie!).

The GM, with help from the Player, determines how long the character is incapacitated, based on the nature of the Disaster and the character’s Concept. In general, it should be on the order of a few days.

Fire

- **Strength** 6
- **Penalty** *Exhaustion / Disfigurement / Death*

Shipwreck

- **Strength** 8
- **Penalty** *Feebleness / Marooned / Death*

Starvation

- **Strength** 5
- **Penalty** *Frailty / New Descriptor: Gluttony or Greed / Character's Physical Stat is reduced by 2 from starvation.*

Poison

- **Strength** 4
- **Penalty** *Violently ill / Sleep until wakened / Wasting death*

Disease

- **Strength** 11
- **Penalty** *Bedridden / Loss of limb / Character is decrepit, barely able to move (Physical 1).*

Cold

- **Strength** 6
- **Penalty** *Weakness / Loss of fingers and toes / Entombed in ice*

Falling

- **Strength 7**
- **Penalty** Gain a new Descriptor: *Acrophobia / Broken bones, permanent limp / Broken body (Physical 1)*.

Influencing the Story – Using Spirit Points

You've already seen how you can use Descriptors. So now you've made your character, and you've got those dandy descriptors burning a hole in your character sheet. Now what? As stated in the section on Descriptors above (See page XX), Descriptors can be “GoodStuff[tm]” about your character, or “BadStuff[tm]” about your character... or sometimes both! When you invoke a Descriptor to get yourself out of a jam, making a declaration, you spend a Spirit Point. When you invoke a Descriptor to get yourself *into* a jam, or to cause problems for yourself, you *gain* a Spirit Point. Using a Descriptor to benefit yourself costs 1 Spirit Point, whereas activating a Descriptor as a hindrance nets you a point.

Note: When you Invoke a Descriptor as a hindrance, it actually has to cause you a problem that has a serious impact on the story. If it impacts other Players in the story, they also gain a Spirit Point.

Be warned, however. Each and every time you spend a Spirit Point, the GM will gain a Spirit Point to be used for their own nefarious ends. The GM can spend her Spirit Points to invoke any of your NPC's Descriptors. She can also spend Spirit Points to invoke your Descriptors as a hindrance, and you won't get anything back for it. There's some small compensation for this. If you can guess what your NPC's flaws are, you can spend Spirit Points to invoke them. This might give you the edge you need to overcome the GM's wily plans.

Descriptors take many forms, as you've seen in the Descriptors section. The possibilities are only limited by your imagination.

Spirit Point Wars

So what do you do when someone wants to trump your cool move? Or do something really nasty to your character when the GM oh so innocently asks them “Do you want to spend a Spirit Point on that?” Well, that's where things can get ugly. When one of the other players wants to force a plot change using a Spirit Point, and another player wants anything *but...* well. There's a bidding war.

All the players take sides in the conflict, either pro, con, or neutral. Then the sides face off and see who's willing to spend the most points to get their vision of game reality enforced. If your side loses, you get the consolation of not losing any of the Spirit Points you bid. But the winner loses all the points they bid, which go into the GM's pool of Spirit Points waiting to be spent.

While technically the GM can engage in Spirit Point bidding as well, it's very gauche and not considered 'quite cricket'. Besides, don't you think the GM has enough things to do with her already limited Spirit Points?

Character Growth

Through adventuring and other trials, characters tend to grow in experience and talent. This means there's got to be a way for the players to advance their characters. Besides, it's fun! This method is covered with the expenditure of Spirit Points.

Below, you'll see the general rewards recommended for each session. This reward system covers the rewards to give the players for their antics when the GM pokes them with sharp pointy sticks.

- 1 Spirit Point - Simple Plot, hardly any danger, no convolutions. Hardly a session at all.
- 2 Spirit Points - Easy plot, small amount of danger, very little plot convolutions. Simple session.
- 3 Spirit Points - Harder plot, good amount of danger, solid characters, and good role-playing. Enjoyable session.
- 4 Spirit Points - Very hard plot, difficult obstacles to overcome, rock hard characterization, and excellent role-playing. A session that you want to recount to your friends after it's over.
- 5 Spirit Points - Obscenely difficult plot, impossible danger, adamant characterization, and fantastic role-playing. Need a cigarette after the session is over.

Character Advancement

The costs for advancing a character's descriptors can vary a great deal. The costs vary depending on the strength of the descriptor, how much screen time it will take up in play (reducing the amount of screen time available to the other players), and what the descriptor does in terms of Genre and Story. What the player is actually doing when buying a new descriptor is finishing (or initiating) a plot line that revolves around him and his character. A rather long story arc which will end with him receiving the prize at the end. (The new descriptor) The following serves as a guideline for you should you get stuck, or don't know what else to charge the player.

It is important to note that the player is paying the cost for his character to become the center of attention, the center spotlight with these plot threads. He should not be receiving generalized Spirit Points from the GM while his plot is in evolution. Spirit Points received from other players complicating the story, or Spirit Points gained from his character's flaws are added to his total, however.

Cyberpunk - 16 points

- Having retractable claws implanted in your hands
- Having your record single go platinum
- Getting a stable job and not dying from it
- Finding the back door in the database

Gothic Horror - 20 points

- Becoming a sharpshooter
- Finding a rare tome of horrific lore
- Inheriting a large library of arcane lore
- Getting the grant money to fund a archaeological dig

Pulp - 22 points

- Learning the mystic Chinese art of Death Touch
- Learning to fly as a barnstormer
- Finding a hidden pirate's treasure
- Hiring a protector and chauffeur

Low Fantasy - 18 points

- Finding an elven sword
- Being granted Knighthood
- Finding true love
- Learning the rudiments of necromancy

High Fantasy - 12 points

- Acquiring a sword of power
- Being granted a Barony
- Becoming the Queen of Faerie
- Learning the secrets of Necromancy

High School - 9 points

- Getting the dream girl to the prom
- Winning the Science Fair
- Passing the killer exam
- Sneaking out of the house to a rave while grounded

Space Opera - 16 points

- Becoming a student of the mystic arts
- Constructing your own energy blade
- Winning a starship in a bet
- Promotion to captain of a hyper capable starship

Super Hero - 14 points

- Altering your force field's shape
- Getting your mundane identity a promotion
- Getting the support for a new base
- Be given the keys to the city

Science Fiction - 20 points

- Earning mercantile trading rights on a frontier planet
- Increasing jump drive efficiency
- Paying off your loan to the bank
- Gaining entrance to the sisterhood of second sight

It's not recommended to allow the players to raise their stats, the starting stat package already represents an individual of considerable natural talent and skill. But if you just don't feel right without a system for advancing the character's core stats, then a system is provided here.

To increase the Stat by one point costs 5 x the Stats current value. So, if you had a Social Stat of 4, it would cost 20 Spirit Points to raise it to 5. Then it would cost a further 25 points to raise it to 6, and so on.

Seven PCs

In this section you'll find seven beginning characters, from the simple to the complex. They are crafted for the settings found in *Lands of Imagination*. While they are designed to be template PCs, they can also be used by a GM as non-Player characters, and modified to suit.

Bastian Aetherbane

Concept: Roguish Aether Pirate Captain

Bastian Aetherbane is the son of a wealthy landowner in the Republic. He grew tired of seeing the injustices of the system and bored with a life of relentless boredom and pleasure purchased at the expense of others. He purchased an aether ship, and took along his most loyal servant, then staged his own death and set out to become the greatest pirate captain of the space ways. He tends to over romanticize his role, but his exploits are gaining a lot of admirers planetside.

Mental 5 / Social 4 / Physical 4

Descriptors: Katrina's Pride, "My Ship, My Rules", Wanted in Ten Systems, My Crew.

Kronos Freeborn

Concept: Horse beastman aether pirate

Kronos is the loyal first mate of Bastian. He started off as a Republic slave of Bastian, but for reasons of his own he continues to follow Bastian despite being a freeman, and taking Freeborn as his last name. Bastian's unusual relationship with Kronos has ensured an equally unusual mindset in the beastman. Despite being born a slave, he has never considered himself one, and takes great offense at being called one. He is also self educated and surprisingly intelligent.

Mental 3 / Social 4 / Physical 6

Descriptors: Strong as a stallion, Unchained and untamed, Widely read, Loyal unto death

Angelica DuMont

Concept: Spoiled "In Girl"

Angelica DuMont is the daughter of a very rich couple who pay absolutely no attention to her whatsoever. She has a butler to wait on her, a maid to take care of her, and toadies to shout at, what more could a girl want? Everything. She's beautiful, (rich) popular (rich), and successful (also rich). She finds it an incredible irritation that someone without a shred of money to her name could possibly be of value to the world at large, and thus her hatred of Diana Trenton.

Mental 4 / Social 6 / Physical 3

Descriptors: An angel as far as adults can see, Queen of the brat pack, Only beautiful on the outside.

Diana Trenton

Concept: Shy smart bookworm

Diana Trenton is an orphan who is quite possibly the smartest young woman living. Unfortunately for her, she's also gotten a scholarship at the school where Angelica DuMont has been placed. She tries to work her way through school life without losing her sanity or inventing a doomsday weapon. So far, so good, though Angelica's attacks are getting more persistent. Diana honestly has no idea what it is about her that drives Angelica into such a frothing rage, or indeed that Diana herself has hooked half the hearts of the boys at school.

Mental 7 / Social 3 / Physical 3

Descriptors: Moe bookworm, Delicate flower waiting to bloom, On a Scholarship

Master Sho

Concept: Crusty old Martial Arts Master

Master Sho is the ancient and venerable teacher of the elemental martial arts, the strength of which comes from understanding the balance that all elements play in harmony. He's also a pervert, a lush, forgetful, and a little loony. Fortunately, his student Xiang Lu keeps him mostly grounded in the real world. At least she tries. When he's at just the right state of intoxication he's actually remarkably wise and a bottomless source of information on both mundane and spiritual matters.

Mental 6 / Social 5 / Physical 2

Descriptors: Ancient and wise as the earth, Brains over brawn, Bitter taste of experience

Xiang Lung

Concept: Kung Fu Prodigy

Xiang Lu is the princess (former princess, she reminds others who learn this) of the Dragon clan. She's also the chosen to defeat the Darkness That Coils, an eldritch evil due to rise any day now. She's found her way to the lonely house of the hermit Master Sho, by evil curse she's sure and by divine providence so Master Sho assures her. She's insanely talented in martial arts, unselfconsciously beautiful, and really does hold the fate of the world in her hands. If she can only keep her master's hands off of *her* long enough to save the world!

Mental 5 / Social 3 / Physical 5

Descriptors: Attractive, Chosen One, Young prodigy, Earth Aspect Kung Fu

Scene 2

Lands of Imagination

The stories of *Triptych* can take place anywhere the Players and GM decide. The potential settings are limited only by your imagination.

In this chapter, we have created three example settings that you can play in, all quite different from each other. Each one comes with sample NPCs to serve as inspiration and illustration.

Stardust & Æther Winds

History

The human race expanded from its homeworld, scattering itself among the stars of the heavens, finding their way through the galaxy to distant shores. Distant, lonely shores, for although the gods had made the humans, they had turned their eyes away from their living creations, and made no others. Humans were alone in the vastness of the universe, and so they sought to make others like themselves, becoming in their own way like gods.

In this manner the AIs and the beastmen were created. Servants, slaves, and companions they have been with man since their creation. Sometimes hated, sometimes worshiped, and sometimes simply ignored, they play their own role in the complex dance of life in the cosmos.

The Empire, the Republic, and the border nations, were once one great empire. Shattered into fragments and grown into new nations on their own, the stellar nations still remember faintly what once was... and perhaps wonder at the 'truth' of recorded history.

Magic & Technology

In the Stardust setting, magic IS technology. In general terms, the setting is in the middle of its Second Restoration. A period roughly equivalent to the 1600's on earth, but writ large in stellar scope. Æther ships sail the Æther winds from planet to planet, and stellar nations trade with each other.

The æther ships are designed much like sailing ships, with sails of magically treated canvas to catch the Ætherial winds. Æther sails are laid out somewhat differently however on an Æther ship. The sail arrangement is radially symmetrical. Æther ships require crew to be fully effective, much as a sailing ship does, and have very similar jobs on board. The profession of rigger however is far more dangerous and demanding than its counterpart. When the penalty of a rigger is to be lost into the vastness of space instead of merely afloat on a sea the job acquires a great deal more prestige and risk.

The physics of the Stardust setting are different however. Gravity is a planar, meaning that there is a 'gravity line' which travels through the center of mass of an object. Objects above that line, fall towards the line. So an object fallen overboard of an æther ship will appear to 'bounce' from the perspective of a person standing on the deck, first down, then up, then down again. This is very disorienting, as the object in question is

actually continually falling. Gravity is also constant, meaning that if gravity is felt at all, it is the same everywhere. (1 earth gravity)

Due to this peculiar fact, ships carry 'air bubbles' along with them when they leave a planet's atmosphere. This air provides the crew with life support in the trips between destinations. It can go foul however if used for too long, and so frequent 'rest stops' are required, or other methods of freshening the air of long range ships, such as on board green houses or magical spells to purify the air on board.

The Shaped

The shaped are those who have been genetically tampered with. Either while alive, or before they were born, their genes and forms were tinkered with through the use of genetechnology. As many possible roles as exist have at one point or another had a being crafted to fit that role. The Shaping process is very expensive, both in terms of time, labor, and resources, so not all beings are shaped. However, most beings in the galaxy can find at least one shaped individual in their family tree, and shaping tends to breed true. The many beastmen living in the galaxy are proof of that.

The Æther

The æther flows in patterns, a bit like a river and a bit like a wind. Magic disrupts the patterns that æther flows in naturally. The larger the spell, the greater the disruption. As life and magic affect the Æther, so æther affects life and magic in turn. Æther hurricanes can scour life from a planet, æther eddies can cause unbounded fertility and growth. An unexpected æther wind can destroy a spell, or multiply it's effects many times over. Magic draws upon the æther, and in turn creates it's own weather.

Ships follow the Æther winds, and chart its gusts, eddies and currents as any good sailor would. Pirates also use this knowledge to predict the paths of ships and lay in wait along particularly favorable Æther gusts, stealing the wind from the merchant ships, swooping in and plundering, then gone again into the night, traveling on (they hope) hidden æther winds of their own to hidden asteroid bases and backwater planets.

Wildlife

When the gods abandoned their tinkering with life, they left scattered across the cosmos, seeds of various shapes and forms. None of them harbored within them the spark of thought, but many were strange to the core worlds that humans had been born to. Among this number are the Dragons. Powerful, winged, able to sail the Æther at will... and utterly mindless, these great beasts are majestic and beautiful to see in their native habitat. They make their lairs in hollowed out asteroids, hoarding fabulous treasures of raw ore and gems. Dragon hunting can be richly rewarding... for the dragon as well, since so few meals are quite so obliging as to drop off so much food at once.

Factions

The Empire

The empire is ruled by a conclave of 5 major clans. The Griffin, the Gorgon, the Phoenix, the Kraken, and the Dragon.

Life in the Empire

The Dragon clan rules the Empire's military. They also have several dark secrets. They, and they alone want to control the future of the Empire. To this end, they have constructed secret training facilities and research labs to train weather mages, and research the secrets of the Æther Hurricane. They are close to a breakthrough, and when they do, the galaxy will tremble.

The dragon clan's plans may be hidden, but the reason for their plans are quite plain. They fear the influence of the Republic, and are terrified that the Empire is treading down the path of corruption and decadence that the Republic follows. To stave off this threat, any sacrifice is worthwhile, even destroying the Empire so that it may be preserved.

The Emperor serves at the pleasure of the two ruling houses of the Empire itself. The upper house consists of 10 members from each of the 5 houses. The lower house consists of one representative from each of the planets in the Empire. The Emperor typically serves for a term of 20 years, and then a new emperor is chosen from the next house in line. The complete cycle of empire takes 100 years, and each house gets to place an emperor before the wheel turns again. The Dragon clan's emperor recently stepped down, and the current emperor is from the Griffin clan. The houses can force a turn of the cycle, and a new election for the next emperor by passing a 2/3rds vote in each house.

There is a 6th 'clan' in the Empire, though it has no official standing or recognition. Officially the ninja do not exist, and are certainly not organized into anything like a clan. In truth, the Shadow Clan are highly organized, and influential in all manner of underhanded as well as overt actions. They serve no party completely, simply selling their services and using their power to make certain that no matter what may happen in the galaxy, the clan will continue.

The Republic

The Republic is decadent and corrupt. This is the central fact of existence in it. To make any legal action occur, bribes are needed. To deal with the bureaucracy, each separate minister must be handed a kickback. The heads of the senate can be bought and sold, and trading prices are advertised against each other. The central fact of the matter is that in the republic, money talks. And if you have none, you have no voice.

Life in the Republic

The republic is governed by the senate, a body of individuals (all humans) who are 'elected' as the planetary head to the senate floor speak for their planet's goals and needs. Whether the representatives actually say what the people truly want is irrelevant... as long as the money continues to flow in the proper direction (towards power) the ruling system will remain unchanged. By and large, the position of senator is hereditary, and passes to the favored child upon the retirement or death of the previous senator. The head of the senate is known as the 'demiurge', and shifts position from year to year based on a complex system of votes, bribes, and track record. The vast majority of the republic citizens merely live in it. Slavery is common, and beastmen are most prized for their specialized strengths in workman roles. A 'citizen' by the official definition of the word in the republic, owns property in excess of a certain value. Voting takes place yearly, and costs a fee to enter your vote. (Plus any required bribes of course).

The Pirates (The Brotherhood of High Sail)

The pirates are more like a loose coalition than any grand organization. The most prominent among them is The Brotherhood of High Sail, and they are a fearsome group. More organized crime than many would like to admit, the head of the clan is the first (and only) half-dragon beastman in existence. He has maintained his hold on the brotherhood for more than 30 years now, and shows no signs of weakening his grip.

Life as a Pirate

For many desperate to leave a planet, or find a new place to start, the pirates serve a welcome base and home. Many beastmen, looking for a new place to start over, or simply wishing for revenge on the 'hated humans', have turned to piracy over the years. The brotherhood makes no distinctions, and it is commonly said among the pirates that "Pirate blood washes the past away."

The AI

The race of AI were created by the Empire hundreds of years ago. Originally intended to be used as shock troops and forward assault commanders due to their complete immunity to mind and all physical alteration magics, they rebelled and founded their own stellar nation. The AI wars are long distant now, but still leave a bitter memory in the minds of many humans, making AI's untrusted second class citizens in both the Republic and the Empire itself.

Perhaps most amusingly, it is AI's who excel at Genetech, the art of flesh crafting. Though they cannot use magic themselves, they can craft the most precise and elegantly planned thaumaturgic surgeries, and no decent research lab would be without the aid of at least one AI.

Life as an AI

Life as an AI is an interesting paradox. Alive, but inorganic, free willed, but loyal to the race. Unknown to the organics, AI's are all collectively one mind. Each AI is a separate individual, but at the same time, they all form a mass mind, a gestalt of incredible intelligence and power. At the crystalline core of the AI's homeworld, billions of bodiless AI swim. Far more AI's than the living have cause to suspect. The AI's created their homeworld, populated it, and developed their own forms of "magic".

When an AI has need or wish to embody itself, it will download it's consciousness into a shell, and travel as it wills. AI's treat their shells as temporary homes. Nice in their own right, and worth taking care of, but no AI truly fears death. Only loss of experience. Transference to and from shells takes time, and the destruction of a shell far from home is a blow to the collective. All AI's mourn the loss of knowledge the "death" of such embodied explorers represents.

The Beastmen

The beastmen are the created races formed by humanity and the AI's. The general template is that of humans given animal features. They're as intelligent, sometimes more intelligent than their human masters, but they are rarely given the rights and privileges they deserve. Many run away to the pirates, or the border kingdoms hoping to improve their lot. Often, they fail, but those few who do succeed continue to inspire future generations of beastmen that a better life somewhere else is possible.

Life as a Beastman

Though all types of animals have been used as the rootstock to create the various slaves and servant races, there are several that appear most commonly. Cats, Dogs, Horses, and Mice seem to find the most use in the genebanks of the creators.

In the Empire, beastmen can expect a fairly comfortable existence. Though they are second class citizens, they are citizens with all the rights and duties of citizens. Their most common employment is as laborers, or craftsmen/women. There are those who aspire to more, but the vast majority of the beastmen in the empire live quiet lives as hard working citizens.

In the Republic, the beastmen's lot is far worse. Beastmen are considered slaves, and there are no laws about proper use and maintenance of slaves in the Republic. Slaves are property, and as such anything that the owner chooses to do to or with his slaves is entirely his own business. Killing a slave is destruction of property, and children born to slaves are slaves themselves.

The 100 Kingdoms/The Border Empires

The 100 kingdoms, or the border empires as they are commonly known, exist because they are convenient. They sit in a narrow crescent between the Empire and the Republic, forming a much needed buffer zone between the two. There are far more than 100 of course, actual estimates place them anywhere from 243, to 2043. An accident of ancient origin, somewhere within the fractured nations, lies the original homeworld, the core system from which Humans sprang. The 1st Empire's throneworld. Each of the 100 kingdoms claims to be that system, or that they hold dominion over that system but none know the truth of the matter. Long lost in time and the terminus wars, the true throneworld of the 1st empire is a much desired phantom.

Life in the 100 Kingdoms

Life in the 100 Kingdoms is as varied and many fold an experience as the full range of human empires and passions can make it. From debased and debauched planets that make the Republic look a model of sanity, to the highest minded ideals of ivory tower intelligentsia writ large, all manner of societies and peoples can be found here.

The Society of Luminous Æther

As much for self defense as for knowledge, the official guild of 'weather mages' maintains a monopoly on Ætherial magics, and control of some of the most potent spells in existence. They come down hard on all unsanctioned use of Weather Technology, and they recognize no national boundaries. Their official policy is strict neutrality, and this is not a matter to be discarded lightly. If any nation were to suspect the mages of taking sides, the guild would cease to be in an eye blink, and the disruption to trade and the æther winds themselves would be horrendous.

Nevertheless, a sect within the Society does indeed take sides. They actively support and aid the Brotherhood in their endeavors, seeing the pirates as a useful foil to the extremes presented by the Empire and the Republic. So far their covert aid has not been discovered, but if it should be the consequences would not be small.

So far, the only overt sign of their actions is that the brotherhood has a form of controlled explosion which it fires towards any pursuing ship. The resultant spherical æther detonation between the pirate ship and the pursuers causes the æther to push the pursuers back, while giving an extra boost to the pirates.

Megatropolis

This setting is a place to set romantic comedies, with elements of over the top anime tropes. As such, there are a few ground rules that go well with this setting. Of course, you don't have to use them, but the setting has serious oddities that doesn't make a lot of sense without them.

Assumptions

Major world changing events just don't happen. No matter how prominent a part Mad Science plays in an episode, it's never widely spread, and is never replicated. The death toll for any violence, major or minor, is absurdly low, permanent injury or damage is rare, and any property damage is quickly repaired. Appearances of alien girlfriends and talking animals are rare. You may expect one each per city, no more than that.

Young Romance is the primary component of this setting. True love can overcome any obstacle, no matter how difficult or impossible it may appear.

The scenes in this setting do not support Hentai, scenes will 'fade to black' if the protagonists ever enter the bedroom and make love. There is no non-consensual sex. Though it may be threatened, something or someone will intervene just in the nick of time.

Chaos and weirdness are attracted to Bay City. In particular, they are attracted to the high schools and the college, though by no means do they only reside there.

All legends are 100% accurate, all rumors are 100% true.

The World

Magic and the occult are known phenomenon, but they are uncommon enough that the "rational" explanation is usually the correct one. Likewise, inner force and channeling of "Chi" energy is known and accepted, though again, uncommon in everyday life. True masters of Chi can perform hadoken style attacks, long gliding leaps, and other feats of wuxia action.

Because of this, there are several prominent martial arts tournaments around the world in the style of The King of Fighters or Street Fighter. Though it's not a common sight to see wandering people on a martial arts journey to improve their skills, or find other to challenge their skills, it's not unusual enough to be unheard of or considered strange. Likewise, tournament fighters squaring off in public locations to find out "Who is the Best" are not unheard of or considered strange.

Any property damage done by tournament fighters is handled by a on call fast construction crew and reimbursement department of the tournament community and therefore people do not really mind the destruction unless it destroys something of sentimental value.

Strange martial arts styles are quite common, such as Martial Arts Rollerblading, the Art of Silent Sushi, and Burger-Fu.

For some reason, magic does not like to function in the shape of technology, and vice versa.

Mad scientists can make “breakthroughs” which are easily 50 years ahead of the setting's current technology. These breakthroughs are almost always impossible to duplicate after the scientist in question has passed on, though there are many pieces of “Mad Science” still functioning after many years.

Bay City

Megatropolis is set somewhen between 1990 and 2010. It has no real location, and is geographically convenient to anywhere. The city is simply known as "Bay City" and is a large port metropolis. Nestled at the mouth of a deep river which pours into a large semicircular bay, the bowl valley and circular arc of protective mountains a short distance away gives Bay City a picturesque beauty. It's seasons are perfectly divided into the proper four; Winter, Spring, Summer and Fall, each with stereotypical weather. Despite being a large metropolis, it nonetheless seems to have plenty of parks and large tracts of suburban housing. Scattered along the major streets and throughout the parks are cherry trees, which give the city a distinctive color in the springtime.

Bay City's harbor and bay are very beautiful, and clean enough to swim in with no ill effects. Beach parties are common in summer, and harbor tours often sail among the barrier islands at the far reaches of the bay. The harbor cliffs near the college are also quite popular as a sight-seeing location, and are riddled with sea caves.

Bay City has an excellent and well funded public transit system, both bus and subway.

Despite the chaos that seems to continually envelope Bay City, the city has a remarkably low amount of unnatural deaths and bizarrely low crime rate. In fact people actually move into town for security reasons, and the town is actually a favorite place for various law enforcement agencies to hide people for witness relocation programs.

School in Bay City

Bay City has a remarkably high standard of academic achievement given the regular supernormal happenings of the city.

State funded education covers preschool, middle school, junior high, and high school.

Jr. high and high schools are separated by specialties (science high, a technical high, and so on) and have a slight focus to their course work, with high schools being more tightly focused than Jr. High. School placement is sorted by aptitude tests, which are given on a yearly basis.

All public schools use a school uniform, though the uniforms themselves are the same for each school of the same level, a badge denoting the actual school, which the student attends.

Due to the frequent and dangerous occurrences of terrorist invasions, homicidal madmen, conquering mad scientists, and so on, schools have started clubs and optional classes to better increase the survival rate of their students. There is a military club, a martial arts club, a technology club (which has regular lectures on the value of restraint when building mad science), a defense against night creatures class, and a basic survival tactics class. The most popular of these clubs is the Running club.

King of Schools Tournament

In an echo of the martial arts tournaments, which are held around the world, the various high schools in Bay City have started their own “King of Schools” tournament. The tournament is fought once each year in summer, and there are several categories: Ranged, Melee, Technological, and Anything Goes. Only the winner of the Anything Goes category will win the coveted title of “Flower of Martial Prowess”. The title even comes with a crown of flowers.

The tournament started about a decade ago as an informal competition between schools. Over time it has grown into a large event, which has sponsors, ads, and a huge attendance. Technically the tournament is still frowned upon by the schools administration and local officials... but every year a few people from the school administration and city hall show up and wave pennants for their favorites or for their own kids who are competing in the competition that year.

City History

Bay City was founded in 1818 by a group of martial artist clans from both western and eastern traditions, determined that their ways should never die out. Their intention was that the traditions would grow stronger through interbreeding and marriage, continued teaching and training, and that the whole would become greater than the sum of its parts.

Their noble goal has borne fruit, far greater and further reaching than they could have foreseen. The homegrown fusion of eastern and western martial arts has created the strongest of the traditions.

In the early 40's and 50's Bay City suffered its first real danger of complete annihilation, as Godzilla and his foes, Mothra et al, first made their presence known. They were finally defeated permanently with advanced super tech, a giant mecha named Great Grand Guard, which used as one of its weapon components, the singing of a love song by a pure and virtuous maiden. The mecha is currently in storage under the city Coliseum, awaiting the orders to power up should it ever be needed again.

Organizations/Businesses

There are one or two private investigation firms that specialize in the supernatural, and one special forces unit of the police that do the same.

Circle of Eight

The Circle of Eight is a mystic cabal of sorcerers, wizards and witches. Their sacred duty is to keep the wall between Here and There sealed, keeping back the ancient eldritch horrors from beyond the Veil. And some not so ancient eldritch horrors... some just plain Weirdoes, like tourists from There.

Hirokoden Inc.

Hirokoden is a well known but mysterious multinational corporation, which seems to make anything and everything that one might want. Their goals are shadowy and their motives even more so... or perhaps they just want to make good money without worrying about pesky moral quandaries.

The S.U.C.K. (they really do, too)

The Super Ultra Conquerors of Kool is a “secret” organization of people bent on conquering the city for some weird reason known only to themselves. There are only 5 members and they are all highly incompetent. The organization is in fact not very secret at all, and is considered highly humorous by the population at large.

The Police

The police force is competent and friendly but has several unusual members in it. In addition to having to deal with the mundane crime of any major city, this police force also has to deal with the supernatural, mad science, and para-human martial arts. One of the jobs this fact entails is to cordon off the areas where martial artists fights, magical combats, and alien invasions are occurring and keeping the public a safe distance away.

As the police members are also residents and graduates of Bay City's school system, (usually presidents of the military or martial arts clubs) they tend to have some rather unusual skill sets. Perhaps more unusually, they don't often go out of their way to utilize them. This tends to result in members who are extremely talented at their jobs, with odd 'spare' skills, who are not high in rank.

Bureau 13

The police force maintains a special forces unit (Bureau 13) trained to deal with the chaotic events that seems to rule Bay City. Think of them as "Supernatural swat"

ThunderDome Unit; aka Special Traffic Division

When dealing with "Mad Science" in a city like Bay City, sometimes it's necessary to handle very unusual vehicles. Bank robberies with armed cars, cars armed with lasers, and super intelligent automated roving robots are all reasons to call on the ThunderDome unit. A name they despise by the way. The core of the unit is based around an experimental super car with an A.I.

Places

The Cathedral

The cathedral has a proper name, Church of Light Rejoicing, but no one uses it. To those who know Bay City, there is only one Cathedral. The Cathedral is a large and ornate Gothic building in the center of the city. It was started in 1818, and is a popular tourist attraction with its many stained glass windows and attractive marble carvings.

The cathedral has a series of catacombs cut deep into the rock below, and these passageways connect to the cave and sewer network under the city.

The College – Bay City State University

Bay City is home to a fairly well known college, which is an integral part of city life. The college's equipment and funding is top notch, and it has the best of everything.

The college is located on a hilly rise overlooking the ocean a few miles from the outskirts of the city. It has its own oceanic facility, as well as docks and piers which are shared by the science and the sports department.

The meadow which lays onto the sporting events field of the college drops down to a secluded beach, surrounded by rocky outcroppings. In the middle of the campus quad, grows an ancient and twisted cherry tree. It spring it blooms like clockwork, and though its huge and ancient form is older by far than Bay City, it shows no signs of infirmity. There is a legend in the school, that if two students who love each other pledge their loves under the cherry tree on the night before graduation, their love will last forever.

Somewhere on the college campus, in the basement of one of the older buildings, in an out of the way room, is a plain ordinary door, which leads into a different section of the steam tunnels under campus. The doorway leads deeper into the passageways, which honeycomb the rock under Bay City, weaving and twisting under the campus in a sort of maze. It is said that if a couple finds this room and then finds the end of the maze, they will be together forever.

The “Love Catacombs” as they are known, are lit with a faint swirling rose and blue mist, and strange toadstools grow along the edges of the tunnels, which glow with their own light. The tunnels are not scary, but can be very confusing. Strangely, no one has ever gotten lost in the tunnels, they simply fail to find their way to the end, and wind up back at the beginning again. It's not unknown to meet others who happen to be wandering the maze just out of curiosity.

If a couple does find their way out of the maze, they will find themselves standing on the beach below the college, holding hands and looking at a perfect sunrise.

The Coliseum

Home to the city's sporting teams, the city coliseum is a wonder of modern engineering combined with excellent geomantic and mystical focus. For this reason it tends to be the final battle showdown for both sporting events as well as mystical confrontations of demons and spirits from There. The Circle of Eight sells tickets to the less dangerous events.

Hidden under the coliseum, far below the basement levels is a mecha storage, repair and launch bay for the first such weapon system of its kind. Developed in the late 40's to combat Godzilla, Mothra, and other similar foes, it is the first such build of its kind, and at the time certainly qualified as Mad Science. It awaits its activation codes, resting until it is needed once more.

The Docks

A mix of the tourist with harbor tours, island charters and diving and swimming trips, with the heavy industry of a busy major seaport, the docks are always bustling and busy. Strange and unearthly cargos are regularly shipped in and out of the city, and the police keep careful watch out for sea monsters. The harbor is half circled by high cliffs, with a great many sea caves scattered along the cliffs.

J. Worthington Museum of Art & Sculpture

The J. Worthington Museum is one of the nicest in the world, in keeping with the high standards of culture of the city in general, but it does have the minor problem that a lot of its display works haven't unintended consequences, summoning otherworldly entities to look, or statues and displays animating and wandering the halls on their own.

Martial Arts Way, aka “Dojo Row”

Martial Arts Way, or “Dojo Row”, as it's more commonly known, is home to a majority of the city's population of martial artists, Dojo's of martial arts styles from around the world, and shops, which cater to those martial arts. Most of the shops are also run by the martial artists and masters from the surrounding Dojos.

Downtown

In the center of the city is an imposing tower landmark, which is easily seen throughout the city. It has a good restaurant at the peak, and is a common destination for tourists and school field trips.

Hirokoden R&D Labs

Hirokoden operates a wing of its R&D operation in Bay City, housed in this multi-story edifice of gleaming glass and chrome. Hirokoden's lawyers are kept quite busy proving that nothing and no one ever comes to any harm from any Hirokoden products, procedures, events or causes, and most especially not from anything the R&D labs might do... and they bring a lot of good jobs into the town. In fact it's quite common for university and particularly talented high school students to have part time jobs at the labs.

Little Arcania

The Little Arcania is a roving magical junk shop, which pops up in the city in random locations. There is one particular back alleyway where it can be described to 'hang out', but its current location is unpredictable. The Little Arcania looks like a junk/pawn store at first glance, but always seems to wind up selling strange and ancient magical items. To those in the know, the Little Arcania is the only store to shop at, it always seems to have what's wanted in stock, and sometimes it even has what's needed in stock as well.

The Sewers

The sewers of the town are extensive, elaborate and provide a complex underground network that rivals the upper city in space and complexity. They also link into a network of natural caves and catacombs, which sprawl through the bedrock around the city. The unfortunate albino alligator infestation tends to discourage casual explorers however.

The Suburbs

The suburbs sprawl around the town, and spread up onto the lower slopes of the mountains around Bay City. They are gracious, spacious, and very well appointed, but they do look a little too normal. Almost to the point of stereotyping what a real suburb looks like.

K. Tomiyama Museum of Science & Natural History

Named for Kimiko Tomiyama, its founding and directing member, this museum is a place of learning and research. It funds expeditions to distant lands, research programs, and other projects on a regular basis as well as working closely with the city college to keep its programs and displays up to date.

The museum is most famous for its 1 quarter scale mock ups of Godzilla and Mothra, alongside the full-scale skeletons of dinosaurs and other mythical creatures.

There is a sub hall between the two wings which is a showcase for theoretical science and theoretical magic, titled "Einstein meets the Ishtar". Common "Mad Science" and "Mad Magic" works can be found here, as well as famous examples of previous breakthroughs and discoveries.

The Bay City Zoo

The city zoo is funding in large part by grants from the K. Tomiyama museum, and maintains a close relationship with them in most aspects. They have an excellent collection of animals from around the world, both mythical and mundane varieties, all maintained in pseudo-natural habitats for maximum comfort of the animals.

The 5 Kingdoms - Earth Under Heaven

Ninja face off against kung-fu monks. Samurai brawl with south-seas pirates in front of ancestral tombs guarded by spirit bound priests and the ghosts of the dead.

Inspired by wuxia and chambara films this is the setting. Historically accurate it's not, but inspired by history it is. There really was a place where Chinese and Japanese martial artist opponents faced off, and where weaponless warriors guarded ancient mausoleums. It was the Ryukyu Kingdom circa 1609 (currently Okinawa and surroundings). You can look it up on Wikipedia and in any good library, I encourage you to learn about the fascinating convergence of cultures that occurred there.

Enough with the History - Time for the Fantasy

The Ryukyu Kingdom is an ideal starting point for our pseudo historical orient setting. Now let's mix it up a bit. We want a setting full of conflict, where history inspires, but doesn't limit what you can do in the game. So we'll play fast and loose with history and indulge common myths about the "Mysterious Orient". In them, Oni spies and pirates rub shoulders with insurgents who use secret fighting skills to liberate their home. We'll take a leaf from the notion of Chinese elements, and call our setting "The 5 Kingdoms". The focus will be the central island nation we'll call "The Water Kingdom".

The Battle for the Water Kingdom Begins

It has been one year since ferocious samurai from the powerful Kingdom of Metal in the south invaded the Water Kingdom. From the Metal Kingdom, the powerful Rat Clan leads the assault for the glory of the Metal Kingdom Shogunate. The Awagakot shogunate approved invasion to occupy the Rat Clan with wars far from home and avoid ambitions of a coup. Enemy clans hope to stymie the Rat's invasion, injuring the honor of the clan and increasing the likelihood of rebellion and political feuds. Spies and henchmen of every allegiance lurk in the shadows to help or hinder the invasion forces as the myriad smaller clans vie for positions.

All this, of course, while maintaining the most pleasant of smiles as they greet their mortal enemies at courts and Noh theater.

The Metal Kingdom may harry the seas, but the Middle Kingdom (The Kingdom of Wood) is the undisputed ruler of this world, even as the imperial dynasty wanes in its bloat and age. The empire relies on its shield of allies to ward off foreign invasion. Tradition and bickering ossify the arms of the empire beneath the weight of the enormous Dragon Clan royal family. Imagine the kind of trouble your brother or sister could get into if they had a ton of free time and a small army of soldiers, acid-whispering eunuchs, and simpering attendants to fuel all their bad ideas. Now imagine a few dozen more siblings and none of you are allowed to act like you hate each other while you live in the same giant house.

Meanwhile the warlord Nurhaci from the northern Kingdom of Fire batters the empire's northern borders, uniting horsemen under his banner. The common people suffer - as always - while the intricate and bloated Confucian bureaucracy responds to problems around the time the grandchildren of the affected get married.

The Metal Kingdom plans to use the Water Kingdom as a staging ground for naval forays. Though vastly outnumbered by the Middle Kingdom, their superior ship work and naval knowledge allows them to plunder and pirate the riches of the sea-side economy. Neither the Middle Kingdom nor the Water Kingdom will let this stand - the Middle Kingdom cannot afford to divert its forces from the northern threats to guarding ships on the coast, and the Water Kingdom longs for freedom. The local courts, a blend of all nationalities, still hold much sway in this era of slow communication and lost messengers, and they will fight with knife by dark or soldier in the day.

The Kingdom of Water Society

The Water Kingdom is composed of one large island in a lazy crescent shape, like a shield against the mainland of the Middle Kingdom. Dozens of smaller islands are scattered in the sea following the same lazy crescent of the main island. Some of them are very small, hosting little more than a fishing family or recluse. Notable areas include the large island of Miyako and the distant Yaima Islands. The Yaimas are notable for the unusual customs of its people. They have unique local gods and eccentric dialects. In nearby Dunan, there are underwater megaliths that appear to be the remnants of a forgotten temple, sunk into the sea ages ago. Hammerhead sharks infest the ruins.

For centuries, the capital of the Water Kingdom has been Naha City. It is located on the coast of the largest island in the Water Kingdom, Kateri, the very center of the "shield" of the Middle kingdom. Almost 200 years ago King Sho Shin united (or subdued) the other kingdoms under his rule. He divided his realm into six petty "kingdoms" and assigned magistrates to rule them as his vassals.

The Sho Dynasty are the upper echelons of the kingdom's rigid social hierarchy. Below them, mayors rule individual towns, and under them a warrior caste equivalent to the samurai. These warriors have five subdivisions, ranging from the high Red's to the low Blue's. The Blues are the kingdom's "street cops," even during the occupation. They're often suspected of supporting the rebellion.

Visitors in the Water Kingdom note the culture's distaste for weapons. Sho Shin proclaimed the first weapons ban. His heirs and the invading Metaljin have been happy to continue the custom. Commoners aren't permitted to own any weapons. Even large knives have to be kept chained in a public place. The warrior caste and high nobles can own arms but are not allowed to wear them in public. There are exceptions for emergencies, and warriors may carry the sai and bo (staff) in the course of their duties. The sai (a metal truncheon with large tines) is their symbol of authority.

Over the years, the warrior caste have learned to use a number of innocuous items as weapons. Many know how to use boat oars and mill handles in combat. In emergencies, they'll lash a sharpened sai to a bo, creating an effective spear while keeping to the latter of the law. But the warrior caste are most famous for their unarmed fighting skills. They develop fists that can shatter stone or strike pressure points in complex, lethal sequences.

The Middle Kingdom dominates cultural exchange. Even as the region rebels against the Wood Kingdom's influence, they idolize the dynastic culture. Local religions flavor in Shinto, Taoism, and Buddhism creating new hybrids and crossbreeds. Families from all 5 kingdoms come to settle the islands, bringing their riches in the hopes that they can be the big fish in a small pond. The average farmer knows more of what

happens in the capital of the Middle Kingdom (Beijing) than anywhere else (though the likelihood any would ever see such marvels is about the same as him walking to the moon).

The Metal Kingdom is a centralized government in the north of a large landmass considerably south of the Water Kingdom. It's a wilderness of feudal lords just outside the solid control of the capital city of Kyoto, there is precious little consistency to be found. The western expanses of the Metal Kingdom share culture freely with the Air Kingdom (and other stranger cultures beyond!), while much of the east feels more loyalty to sea pirates than any emperor.

Many small nations exist under the shadow of the Middle Kingdom. A system of patronage and protection links them to the Dragon emperor, creating a feeling of a quaint younger brother. Their cultures may be unique and their weapons sharp, but the greater world probably could not tell you where their major cities are.

Though there is little interaction yet, the rest of the world not unknown. The Sbara ply the spice trade over the long deserts of the Fire Kingdoms, bringing with them smatterings of Aidi and tales of their own strange lands. And occasionally artifacts of the distant heathen barbarian natives of the Gate of Gold float - complete with strange mystic powers - amongst the courts of the 5 Kingdoms, garnering titters and fear.

Faith and Myth

Spirits dwell in utaki: sacred places scattered across the islands. Utaki lie at the nexus of the dragon lines (ley lines to the Europeans) and hold great power. It's bad luck to disturb or take anything away from an utaki. Traditional religion holds that women contain the spiritual energies of the home and men, the outdoors. Shisa (stone lions) hold a man's spirit outside when he enters a building, to keep from polluting the hearth. Women are considered to be spiritually superior to men and lead religious worship, from household rites to community services at utaki. They also advise lords and kings about magical and spiritual matters. Yuta are local priestesses; Noro administer to the nobility. There are also Buddhist monasteries and of course, folk rituals from all 5 kingdoms influence the culture. Anyone able to wield magical forces is called a kamigutu, or "god-person." Kamigutu can help people if their spiritual essence has been lost or distorted. Kamigutu are rare people, and the ones most called upon to speak with, bargain with, and placate the many spirits of the world.

Everything has a spirit. *Everything*. And sometimes those spirits walk abroad in the land, manifesting in a humanoid form. Naga-like snake folk, cat and dog people, and mischievous seven tailed foxes are only the barest beginnings. A cherry tree spirit might manifest as a white skinned lady with hair the color of cherry blossoms named Sakura. The spirit of a mountain spring might manifest as a mischievous blue skinned boy with a bubbling laugh.

The most holy place in the Water Kingdom is Seifa-Utaki, said to be the place where the First Goddess touched the ground of the mortal realm. The gods are primordial ancestors from the mythic age. Below them, elder mortal ancestors (futuki) are cared for in Buddhist temples. Recent ancestors are honored in the home. Periodically, clans gather at the ancestral crypt: a house of the dead containing the remains of several generations. Visiting without permission or otherwise disturbing one is dangerous; the ancestors don't like it. And angry ghosts can be fearsome and frightening in their power. Within the realm of activities pertaining to their family, their power can sometimes outshine the gods. Accordingly, male family members sometimes guard them to keep the ancestors from being disturbed.

The magic of the 5 kingdoms is the power of the spirits and elements they embody. Humans possess a small fragment of this spirit, and can cultivate it so as to increase its power, but a true spirit is unconstrained by the limits of the flesh, and its power is many times greater. Majo – that is, the power of the human spirit to grow and thrive – can influence the spirits, propitiate them, bargain with them, and when sufficiently powerful, enslave them. That is the core of religion in the 5 kingdoms; the worship, placation, and manipulation of spirits. Magic and religion are inextricably intertwined.

Locations

Here are a few signature locations:

Motobu: This port on the coast of Kateri is the primary encampment for the Rat Clan. Hundreds of samurai live here, in a collection of tents, seized farmsteads and captured fortresses.

Nafa: Spread in the valley beneath Sui Castle, the city of Nafa is the Water Kingdom's major trade center as well as the capital. The Kume neighborhood is filled with immigrants, including the 36 Families of Kume. You can buy almost anything in Nafa, or book yourself passage anywhere in the 5 Kingdoms and beyond.

Sui Castle: Sui Castle is the Sho dynasty's palace. Currently, King Sho and his lords are prisoners here. They are given a great deal of privacy and luxury, but the fact remains that they cannot leave. The castle is often abuzz with activity as envoys and messengers visit the powerful people within. The nobles are prisoners, but still exert considerable influence. Without it, the people might rise up against the Rat Clan en masse.

Tomari: Where Nafa is cosmopolitan, Tomari is quiet and traditional. Tomarians are supposedly the best martial artists in the Water Kingdom, but are very secretive about their skills.

They also say that the old magic of the islands can be found in the hearths and tombs of Tomari.

Factions

The Water Kingdom has dozens of factions, families, religious orders and martial arts schools – more than you'd expect from such a small kingdom. Part of the reason has to do with the Kingdom's complex social structure and part of it comes from the kingdom's place as a nexus of trade and cultural exchange.

The main political question now is the rebellion. It's small, young and disorganized. King Sho has ordered the people not to resist the Metal invaders, but many of the warrior caste believe that this only applies to people who aren't members of the warrior class. Dragon Clan agents and rivals of the Rat Clan support might a revolt for their own reasons.

This setting often refers to a rebellion against Rat Clan rule, but we won't detail it. The exact size, structure and goals of the rebellion are left to the GM, because it will serve as either the characters' primary faction or the main opponents in an archetypal Water Kingdom campaign.

36 Families of Kume

36 families from the Middle Kingdom settled in Nafa to direct trade and diplomatic relations with the Water Kingdom. The families are wealthy and politically connected. Members include powerful martial artists, including reputed masters of the internal arts. The families sponsored the largest Middle Kingdom-style temple in the islands and staff its clergy. They say that in Kume, the Middle Kingdom's gods reign supreme. 24 of the 36 families support the rebellion, but none of them do so openly. They have, however, spirited away locals for special training in mystic and martial arts and assisted emissaries from the Dragon Clan empire.

High Nobles

The old petty kings of the islands are still lords, but they've been confined to Sui Castle and its environs while the Rat Clan forces consolidate their control. Some of the nobles are thoroughly cowed, but others send secret messages to their former territories, urging the people to support rebel movements. Common wisdom says that the nobles are ultimately selfish. They're wealthy and influential even in captivity, but the Sho Dynasty didn't bring them willingly into the fold – they want power above all.

Middle Kingdom Emissaries

Despite the invasion, diplomats from the Dragon Clan court still visit the Water Kingdom. The Rat rarely allow them to venture beyond Sui Castle and Nafa, but the samurai often underestimate the training, cunning and determination of the emissaries. Some are masters of disguise and the martial arts who are as stealthy as the legendary ninja of the Metal Kingdom. They provide training and material support for rebels along with arrangements to smuggle people and equipment in and out of the kingdom.

Agents of Empire

Ninja! Well, some of them are, anyway. The Rat Clan is powerful, so there are many Metaljin who'd like to see their invasion fail. Of course, would-be allies support the occupation and the Rats have their own spies, so every agent has a counter-agent. Spies usually hide in the Rat garrison where it's easiest to blend in, but some of them are skilled enough to pass as Ryukyans. Ambitious lords host agents in Sui's walls and rebels shelter them in the jungle. Skills: Nihonjin agents are either samurai who are not professional spies at all, or ninja hired from the Iga or Koga regions of Nippon. They usually know the martial arts and cultural Skills and Traits associated with those groups. See Rat Samurai and Martial Arts for more information.

Noro and Miko

The priestess caste supports rebellion against the Rat Clan. They've long been important figures in Water society. In ages past, they decided when lords went to war, when they made peace and what they must do to appease the divine ancestors. Though they have magical powers, they use them subtly, lest the Rat systematically hunt them down. For now, they support rebels secretly, while openly counseling the common people to persevere during the occupation.

Warrior Caste

The so-called "weaponless warriors" of the Water Kingdom are in fact anything but – they have swords, but aren't allowed to wear them outside of their estates. They can be rich or poor, but most live among ordinary people. Even during the occupation they act as peacekeepers. There's considerable friction between Blue warrior constables and the drunken Rat warriors they arrest. Most warrior caste support the rebellion. Many have fled to small islands and jungle strongholds, sallying forth to sabotage Rat supply lines and harass samurai.

Pirates and Sailors

The Water Kingdom hosts sailors from throughout the 5 Kingdoms – and a few from even farther away. It's hard to tell a cargo vessel from a pirate ship if the pirates are smart, but outlaws tend to be violent troublemakers when they reach port. The local Blues arrest or even kill the worst brawlers. Nevertheless, they come with all manner of goods to trade. Some sailors know exotic fighting styles.

Rat Clan Samurai

The samurai occupiers hail from many families within the Clan, but all of them obey Rat leaders. Rat warriors have a well-earned reputation for ferocity and short tempers. Some of them are eager to cut down peasants for no other reason than to test a new sword. They're hard drinkers too, but will train their fighting skills even through blinding hangovers. The average warrior is just a footsoldier, but skilled swordsmen, mystics and tacticians can all be found in the ranks. They're instantly identifiable in the Water Kingdom because only they are permitted to wear swords in public. Most wear the traditional daisho: a katana and wakizashi.

Martial Arts

Virtually any martial art can appear in the Water Kingdom. Besides Metal styles, Wood methods and Water arts, Fire and Air fighting styles are especially common among sailors.

Player Groups

A group of Players gathered together to play in the GM's story arc. Pretty simple, right? What's not so simple are the following questions. How should Players go about making their PCs? What's the nature, if any, of their common background or shared history? How could the various PC's Concepts, Stats, and Descriptors be coordinated? What's an ideal group size for *Triptych*? How involved should the GM get in character creation? Here are a few helpful observations for GMs and Players as they create their characters.

Group Background

Reading the sample story arcs in Scene 3, you'll see there isn't much effort in justifying "getting the party together", mostly because there is a deliberate insouciance about narrative logic, and a greater concern for narrative power. In other words, in a fairy tale setting there usually isn't a logical rationale of why a certain character is in a given place at a given time, except by birth.

It isn't even necessary that there be rigorous narrative consistency from one story arc to another ("continuity" in editing parlance). True, the rules for Character Growth presuppose that the Player tracks Narrative Bonuses from one story arc to the next, for example, and Curses are carried over from one story arc to another. Nevertheless, atmospherically it's desirable that there be a loose continuity at best. This will only add to the almost post-structural feel of the genre, where events are sometimes juxtaposed in slightly startling or even illogical ways. In *Triptych*, getting a Troupe together in a believable way isn't necessarily on the menu.

On the other hand, in traditional fairy tales, characters are often initially together for one compelling reason: they are blood relations, usually siblings. There are countless examples, from Tatterhood and her twin sister, to Tom Thumb and his seven siblings, even to Oberon's children in Roger Zelazny's fantasy Amber series. So one good place to start if one wants a coherent group might be a PC Group bound by familial bonds. Not all the characters need be played by the Players; some might be NPCs played by the GM.

In addition, it is strongly recommended that Players make up their characters together, as a group. It's so easy and quick to make up a *Triptych* character (provided you have a concept), that there's really no need to make up PCs ahead of a game. And the benefit you get from a collaborative group discussion about characters is invaluable. There's a lot to be said for the synergistic energy of creating characters together.

PC Mix

PCs should have a good mix of Descriptors. It's good to have a variety of Descriptors and which allow different characters to shine at different times.

While only a small part of a story arc consists of actual combat, Conflicts tends to be a highly dramatic and suspenseful part of play. So it's important for Players to consider how their character might fare in a Conflict. This is not to say that every character should be designed for combat! Fortunately, not all Conflicts are about combat. The search for clues or a lost scroll of relevant wisdom, the battle of wits with a tricky politician, or the desperate race to plot a course through the shifting asteroid reefs are all excellent Conflict material. As always, Descriptors should make sense for the character's Concept, and Players shouldn't go overboard in creating a mere killing machine.

Group Size

It turns out that Narration (and in particular Conflict) works *much* better with more Players. *Triptych* narration tends to be not so lively with only two Players, and often seems a little flat. Four Players, though, works really well, and the more the merrier. Conflict has a very low overhead in terms of game mechanics, but requires creative narrations to be truly entertaining. As a result, several players can get in on the game without getting bogged down in rolls; secondly, more players tend to fuel each others' creativity.

What Role the GM?

The most successful story arcs are those which take place in a compelling world that has been created collaboratively. Traditionally, it is primarily the GM's role to create that world. But *Triptych* also strongly encourages Players to take part in world-building. PCs may have entire regions to define and populate with minions, servants, and uneasy allies. And as characters exercise their Descriptors, they may begin to spawn interesting and compelling locales, ones which the GM may go back to and weave into future story arcs. Furthermore, it is the Players' PCs after all who will be living the GM's story arcs. If the Players have a yen to explore a contemporary gothic world where reality and Faerie lead a blurred coexistence in a reconstructed Berlin, and the GM has designed a series of faithfully Perrault-flavored story arcs, the *campaign* (a series of thematically-linked story arcs with recurring characters) may simply not work. It's clearly important for all involved (GM and Players) to have *compatible* desires and expectations (note not necessarily *identical* wishes), and to communicate those expectations clearly, in a cooperative spirit.

The GM must walk a very fine line indeed. On the one hand, she must set a framework for a world which satisfies herself and her Players. She must ensure that there are surprises in that world (else where would the suspense be in playing in it?) while at the same time giving her Players room to contribute in meaningful ways. When it comes to creating PCs, the GM must once again juggle, serving as the arbiter of reasonable Descriptors given a character's Concept, while at the same time giving the Player plenty of room to exercise creativity. The GM is not a judge or referee who passes sentence or applies rules. Rather, she is like an

editor, or the director of a stage production, or the conductor of an orchestra. Ultimately, the GM is there to help guide the story, but most importantly to encourage the best play from the Players. Keep that in mind, and everyone will enjoy the game.

Non Player Characters

Non Player Characters (or NPCs) are simply all those roles (friend, foe, or disinterested) played by the GM. Several have already been presented throughout the descriptions in *Lands of Imagination* above; here are a few more to serve as additional examples. Note that the following NPCs do not necessarily follow the rules for PC creation in terms of Stat limits or Descriptors; they are supposed to be rough sketches for the PCs to interact and work with. Quite simply, they don't *need* to follow the same creation rules as the PCs when the GM is making them up.

In many cases, the NPC only has one or two notable aspects. The bouncer is strong and stubborn. The seductress is sexy. The nerd is smart. While you can represent their characters as dynamic or stereotypical as you please, the actual stat of the NPC need not be complicated. The bouncer can be "Bouncer 6", and simply use that stat for anything to do with bouncing. On things not dealing with bouncing, let things slide the way of the player. (After all, why would NPCs be any more likely to compete in their problem areas than the rest of us?) You may notice that this singular stat is really just another way of looking at Challenge Ratings.

Scene 3

Story Arcs

Sometimes you have everything you need for a game. The session is planned. The players are all on time. Snacks are on hand. You're good to go. It's a nice thought, isn't it? Unfortunately, reality doesn't always comply. Life comes up and one player or another can't make it. A babysitter doesn't show. Family visits from out of town. There's a work emergency. Reasonable problems, and understandable, but frustrating all the same. You can always just cancel the game, but that's rarely satisfying for anyone.

One solution to this problem is the pickup game, a game played with whoever is on hand, purely for the fun of it. Pickup games can be tough, because it's not easy to create an entire adventure on the kind of short notice we're talking about. It can be even more time consuming to come up with characters and get everything started up.

While *Triptych* is written with the intention of running a traditional long term game, the elements that make up a pickup game can be useful when you find yourself pressed for time to prepare a session on short notice, or your imagination fails you totally. To that end, we offer two different means of planning a game: Descriptor, and Dynamic.

Also included below is a sample adventure in the *Stardust & Aether Winds* setting, presented in the *Lands of Imagination* section.

Building a Descriptor Adventure

Writing a descriptor adventure is very simple. You take a look at the player character's descriptors. Find out where they conflict. Find out where they mesh. Find out what the characters believe, then make a situation or a character that is designed to push those buttons. The player put those descriptors there for a reason. They say something about the character, they express to you, the GM what elements the player wants to be important in the story. Use that!

Is he very handsome? Make that important in the story! Make the antagonist of the piece attracted to him! Is she smart but shy? Make sure that her intellect is vital to solving a piece of the adventure, but that it thrusts her into the limelight.

Building a Dynamic Adventure

A dynamic adventure takes an opposite approach. Instead of finding possible seeds within the character's descriptors and description, it finds an external source that acts on the players that they can't help but get involved in. A shipwreck is a start, it's a good Disaster as detailed above in the section on Disasters. But once the players are marooned on the island, what's there? A tribe of fearsome cannibals? A lost world dinosaur? A portal to another dimension? A really handsome native who will do *anything* to return to civilization... the possibilities are endless.

You make a Dynamic adventure by thrusting the player characters into a situation where they must react, and keep reacting. Look for challenges to make their journey more difficult. Create distractions that they desperately want to explore but that may waste precious time or come at a hidden cost. A word of caution

when creating Dynamic adventures. Don't stop the players from achieving their goals. If they manage to outthink you, or come up with a brilliant solution which defeats all challenges handily, sell that win! Let the players shine when they overcome the challenge. Otherwise you'll have a table full of cranky gamers who won't want to play with you again, since you never let them get ahead.

The Treasure of the Rainbow Serpent

The Treasure of the Rainbow Serpent is a Dynamic styled adventure, though introducing elements within the story that play off of the Descriptor Adventure style is an excellent way to get the players more involved in the world and plot.

The Hook

The story for the player characters starts in a seedy bar on the asteroid sky docks orbiting one of the planets in the 100 Kingdoms. A common hangout for the dark-sky sailors both legal and illegal. The PC's should all be present. Whether they are pirates, privateers, or simple merchantmen with a lag in contracts is up to them, but they should all be on the lookout for adventure. The player characters notice a small shy looking young man enter, looking nervously about and clutching a rolled sheet of paper to his chest. He glances about for a little bit, then swallows and hurries towards the PC's (presumably the least villainous looking of the lot). He introduces himself as Jim Trowbridge, and asks if they are sailors for hire. Assuming the players say yes, he will say that he wants to hire them for a finding mission. If the players don't have a ship, then he will have already rented a small aether ship to use.

Jim is very cagey about what he has, but he can be convinced to talk. He stumbled across this old star chart in the sea trunk of a scurvy old man who lived in the same boarding house as Jim until recently. "He died of too much drink and too many secrets." Jim won't mention that the chart is stolen if he can help it. "It was a recent inheritance." Jim is convinced it's a map to pirate treasure. Unfortunately for him, he's right.

Jim Trowbridge

Concept: Pirate Groupie w/ Treasure Map

Jim is a young man who spends far too much time listening to old sea stories and tales of pirate treasure. He's got more than a little fascination with the romance of the high seas and pirates in general. He realizes that "real pirates" aren't like the stories, but he doesn't really understand just how far away they are. Unfortunately for him, he happens to have stumbled across a real treasure map, and now he's being tailed by a band of very unpleasant folks eager to relieve him of it. Jim is pretty stubborn though, and a lifetime of tales of pirate gold and his own greed and fantasies means he's not going to just hand it over.

Mental 4 / Social 4 / Physical 4

Descriptors: In over his head, Boundless enthusiasm, Sailor's blood.

The Map

Jim's map is easy enough to decipher and follow, though written in an peculiar manner. If they character wish to examine the map, start a standard conflict as though the map were a Disaster, with the map's score being a 6. If the players succeed, they learn the following facts. Whoever wrote the map was not formally trained. An enormous luxury liner named The Rainbow Serpent vanished in that part of space, and there are rumors of a famous pirate who was said to operate in that region many years ago. Rumors of his treasure horde have grown by leaps and bounds since his disappearance. The ink is mixed blood and Deep Sky Kraken ink. Suggestive, to say the least.

The map is easy enough for a trained sailor to read. The planetoid that it describes lies through a treacherous asteroid shoal, in an area where Deep Sky Krakens are rumored to lair. In addition, the aether is unstable and prone to storms in that region of space. Getting there will not be an easy task... but then, real adventures are always a bit of a challenge.

The Journey

As the heroes pull out of the docks, either a PC or the ships lookout will spot a rakish sloop following their ship, rigged for quick running and sporting several tell tale scars on its flanks that speak of combat action. If one of the characters has a trait that would indicate exceptionally sharp vision, let them know that several of the crew are very shifty looking people indeed.

If the characters wish to evade, misdirect, or flat out attack the sloop, then have them begin a contest to do so. The pirate sloop has the following stats: **Mental 7 / Social 1 / Physical 5, Descriptors:** Rapacious Greed, Play the Angles, Space Black Sails.

Remind the players that if they attack the sloop in full view of the harbor or local traffic, the local magistrate will have more than just stern words for them! If the characters do nothing, the sloop will vanish a day out from port. The characters should rightfully guess that they will see it again. If they have already outwitted or destroyed it, then they won't!

All is smooth sailing for three days, but on the evening of the fourth day one of the old salts of the ship will mention to the captain that "I don't be likin' the feel of the aether. It boes ill." If pressed on the matter he shrugs, and simply says that it feels like something is waiting to pounce. A character who has any sailing related Descriptors will realize that the aether feels as though a storm is coming. Jim Trowbridge will also feel a tension in the air, but passes it off as excitement to be on a real adventure, unless the character's mention something to him. The following morning, the Aether Hurricane hits. This is a Disaster conflict.

Aether Hurricane

- **Strength 6**
- **Penalty** *Shredded Sails / Marooned / Death*

If the characters are marooned, then by coincidence they will find that they have been washed ashore on the very asteroid they seek. They will also have a badly damaged aether ship. Otherwise, they will need to successfully navigate the asteroid shoals surrounding their target. Another challenge awaits.

The Asteroid Shoals

- **Strength 7**
- **Penalty** *Ship Holed / Marooned / Adrift*

Once again, if the characters are marooned, then by coincidence they will find that they have been washed ashore on the very asteroid they seek. They will still have to contend with a seriously wrecked aether ship.

The Asteroid

The asteroid itself is covered in lush vegetation and is quite near the local sun. The climate is warm and very inviting, and there are pools of water, streams and waterfalls everywhere. If the PCs take time to carefully survey the asteroid, they will discover a recent shipwreck, signs of a group of crude shelters for multiple individuals nearby, and a series of deep caves on the far side. Characters with any sort of animal or space lore Descriptors will know that Rainbow Wyrms favor these type of caves to lair in. Jim Trowbridge will enthusiastically tell the characters that asteroid caves are the sure to be where the pirate treasure is hidden. If asked why, he will explain that it's because "That's always where the treasure is in the stories!" (Once again, unfortunately for him, he's right.)

There are plenty of good landing sites all around the asteroid, and although there are no space docks, the PCs should have no difficulty in setting down safely. (Unless you're prefer to introduce another challenge for them to face...?)

The Wreck

The aether shipwreck is the crash site of the *Merry Man*, a small pleasure schooner from the Republic. A group of republic beastmen slaves crashed here after revolting and killing their master. Unable to navigate the shoals and uncertain where they were going, they crashed here on the asteroid. They are not thrilled about living the rest of their lives on a desert asteroid, but it is better than life in the Republic by leaps and bounds. They have spotted the PC's ship, and are terrified that the PCs are slave hunters come to return them to the Republic for execution. If the PCs land near the wreck and village, they will have to do some extremely fast talking in order to convince the beastmen not to stab first and ask questions later.

Beastmen

Concept: Escaped Slaves

The beastmen are a mixed lot, the stats below represent the group as a whole. They have a few crude stone weapons and the mixed war kit from the yacht (a few spears and fancy dress swords). They wear nothing at all, having thrown away their slave garb. A few of them still have iron manacles and collars.

Mental 4 / Social 3 / Physical 5

Descriptors: Nothing to lose, Heady taste of freedom, Desperate Strength.

The beastmen are willing to listen to reason provided the PCs can talk fast enough. (Or are willing to try). They want to find a new home, they want to remain free, and they want some real food, shelter, clothing, and to be rid of the last of their slave chains. Not necessarily in that order. They know nothing of the caves on the far side of the asteroid, they've been too busy trying to stay alive and avoiding the Rainbow Wyrms that nest on the island.

If the PCs have been wrecked on the island, the wreckage of their ship and the *Merry Man* can easily be cobbled together into a fully functional aether ship with a conflict strength of 4.

The Caves

On the far side of the asteroid, away from the sun is a strange forest of glowing fungi trees, scurrying animals, and albino white lizards. In the center, a deep cave plunges into the heart of the asteroid. At the bottom of the caves lies the wreck of the *Rainbow Serpent*, gold, silver, and all manner of treasure spilling out of breeches in her hull. It is also the lair of a flight of Rainbow Wyrms, who happen to be delighted that dinner has come to them for a change!

Rainbow Wyrms Swarm

Mental 2 / Social 1 / Physical 10

Descriptors: Endless Hunger, Mindless Savagery, Deadly Beauty

The above stats are for the wyrms as a swarm. A single Rainbow Wyrms has the following scores:

Mental 2/ Social 1/ Physical 3

The wyrms will flee when defeated, much to the relief of the beastmen. Jim is astonished that the treasure is this large, even in his wildest stories no pirate horde has ever been this huge. The truth, should the PCs seek it out, is that this horde was amassed over many years and many ships. The wreck contains sufficient evidence of many prize captures and the logbook of the *Mary Mack* (a famous pirate vessel, considered pure legend by most) which confirms details the story. It would seem the PCs are going to be rich...

The Pirate Sloop

The Pirate Sloop has finally made its move. Alerted by the ship's cook onboard the PC's ship, it has come in close, and is going to make sure the PCs never get off the rock alive. When the PCs emerge from the caves, the pirates are waiting for them.

Pirate Band

Mental 3 / Social 2 / Physical 5

Descriptors: Rapacious Greed, Bloodthirsty, Low Cunning

Where do the PC's go from here? That's up to them. Perhaps they can capture the Pirate sloop intact. Perhaps they can convince the beastmen to come with them? Perhaps they will set up a regular settlement with the beastmen as willing allies, or give one of the many ships to the beastmen along with proper star charts? The most prosaic solution is for the PCs to return to their home port with the beastmen as additional crew, and set themselves up with the treasure of the Rainbow Serpent. But the magistrate of the Port will have something to say about that! But that, as they say, is an adventure for another day.

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Appendix 1

Character Sheet

The following two pages are the front and back of a character record sheet. Feel free to photocopy it, or you can download PDF versions of the sheet (formatted for letter-sized paper, in color and in grayscale) from www.TwistedDieProductions.com.

Record your Stat scores in the circles with the Mental, Physical, and Social. At the bottom of the sheet you can find a tic track for keeping a running tally of your current total of Spirit Points.

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