TWO FISTED TALES

ROLEPLAYING GAME

by Matthew Stevens

THRILLING
PULP
ACTION

FROM

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TWO FISTED TALES

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[The Hero] must be a complete man and a common man and an unusual man. He must be, to use a rather weathered phrase, a man of honor – by instinct, by inevitability, without thought of it, and certainly without saying it. He must be the best man in this world and a good enough man for any world...

The story is the man's adventure in search of a hidden truth, and it would be no adventure if it did not happen to a man fit for adventure. He has a range of awareness that startles you, but it belongs to him by right, because it belongs to the world he lives in. If there were enough like him, the world would be a very safe place to live in, without becoming too dull to be worth living in.

RAYMOND CHANDLER

Every player in *Two Fisted Tales* plays a hero. Heroes are men and women of unusual talents and unusual ambitions, driven to make the world a better place. Heroes may come from wildly different backgrounds – they may be cowboys or cat burglars, wealthy playboys or Tibetan mystics – but every hero observes a private code of honor, and every hero is willing to risk his life to see that justice is done in the end.

Five Steps to Building a Hero

As a player you have to follow five steps to build your Hero.

First, ask your GM what templates are available. These depend on the setting of her campaign, and what kind of team (if any) she wants the PCs to join.

Then ask her about the campaign's power level, as explained below.

Next, pick a template from the following list. Don't worry about one template being "more powerful" than the others. All templates are built under the same system, and you'll have plenty of opportunities to adjust scores later.

Then turn to Chapter 2, *What the Numbers Mean*, to understand what your character knows and how good she is at different tasks.

Finally, turn to Chapter 3, *Customizing Your Character*. Come up with a name for your character and other details to her him more than just a stereotype.

Change his or her scores as you please to fit your conception.

That's it, five steps and you're ready to play *Two Fisted Tales*. The next seventy pages tell you what to do in more detail.

Settings and Teams

The choice of templates depends upon the setting of the initial game, and whether the PCs start the game as a team. Templates should be appropriate for the setting of the first

game. Does the first adventure take place in a large American city? If so, cowboys and wild men probably won't belong there. Do the characters start out in the African jungle? If so, G-men and hard-boiled dicks might not fit in. Note that players can select "inappropriate" templates, but if so, they should explain why their character belongs there. Maybe the G-man is tracking down a fugitive in the Congo; maybe the cowboy is staring in a movie. Any template is acceptable if you make a convincing argument on its behalf.

Game Masters may also decide that the player characters start the game as part of a team. Team campaigns are easy to write adventures for, since the GM doesn't have to come up with complicated reasons to get the PCs working together. In a team campaign, every Hero is a member of an association, whether it's a business, a government agency, a social club, or even just a collection of friends. Here are some examples of pulp teams:

The characters have been sent into an unexplored jungle to search for hidden treasure.

They are partners in a small detective agency.

They work together for the FBI or the Secret Service.

The characters make up a squadron of fighter pilots.

They're mercenaries, fighting together in the Orient.

They're members of a club for pulp writers.

The characters are traveling together through the Wild West.

The characters are astronauts, traveling together through outer space.

The characters work together on a ranch.

All of the characters teach at a local university, and they solve crimes together as a hobby.

The characters are members of a crime-fighting organization, led by a mysterious masked avenger.

The characters are members of a criminal organization, stealing from the undeserving rich.

The GM and the players should talk about the type of team that they would like to play. Once the type of team has been agreed to, both the GM and the players should decide which of the following templates are available to the players.

For example, let's say that the team is going to be a private detective agency, and all heroes are going to partners in the agency. The GM may decide that all characters should be detectives of one sort or another. For example, they could be hard-boiled detectives, amateur detectives, scientific detectives or psychic investigators. They could not be costumed vigilantes, cowboys, or anyone else who would be out of place in a private detective agency, unless a player can explain how these characters would fit in.

Campaign Power

Some pulp stories featured ordinary people who were trapped in dangerous situations; other stories featured characters who were as tough and colorful as any superhero in the comic books; still other stories featured characters who were tough and competent, but realistically so.

Different players and GMs may have different ideas on the genres they want to simulate, and how powerful characters ought to be in their games. We take this into account in *Two Fisted Tales* by allowing GMs to establish the power level of their campaigns. There are at least four possible power levels for a 2FT campaign:

Gritty. In a gritty campaign, characters are a little more competent than the average man on the street. Heroes will have to be very smart, or very careful, or they could easily get themselves killed; combat should be avoided as much as possible. Examples: Cornell Woolrich's noir thrillers, H.P. Lovecraft's horror stories, a typical "cozy" mystery.

Escapist. Heroes are tough, and they can easily handle themselves in a fight with a few thugs, but they are still very human, and can easily get their butts kicked. Examples: Most Western, aviation or hard-boiled pulp stories could be seen as escapist campaigns.

Fantastic. In these campaigns, the characters are so close to perfect that they strain credibility. A fantastic character can fight a small battalion and come out ahead. Examples: Famous pulp-heroes like Tarzan, the

Shadow, or Doc Savage could come from fantastic campaigns.

Amazing. Heroes in these campaigns have, as the saying goes, powers and abilities far beyond those of mortal men. Examples include the weaker super-heroes of the Golden Age comic books and the heroes of E.E. "Doc" Smith's Skylark and Lensman books.

GM's should choose of these power-levels based on the type of material she wants to imitate and the level of "realism" she expects in her campaign. When in doubt, it's always safest for the GM to select an Escapist campaign, but the choice is entirely hers.

The GM may assign different power levels to different characters. For example, one player might have a Fantastic character, while the other characters (possibly sidekicks) are only Escapist. In these cases, I'd recommend offering a choice between multiple low-level characters or a single high level character. So in this case, one player may have a single Fantastic character, while all others get two Escapist characters apiece.

Characters shouldn't differ by more than a single power level in any event.

Templates

There was a bewildering variety to pulp characters. Pulp heroes included hobos and millionaires, buccaneers and G-men, swordsmen and scientists, cripples and supermen; far more than the stereotypical masked avengers and private eyes. Nevertheless, many character types were more popular than others, and these characters were widely imitated. Some of the more popular pulp archetypes are included in the templates you'll find on the next several pages.

Costumed Vigilante

"I know the evil that dwells in men's hearts! Yah-hah-hah-hah-hah!"

You've earned a healthy contempt for the Law. You've watched gangsters take over cities; you've seen hoodlums get away with murder; maybe you saw them kill a person you loved. You've had enough, and you're ready to fight back. Using the skills you picked up as a WWI spy, you've organized an army of agents, and taken a series of secret identities. During the day, you're a wealthy, lazy man-about-town. But when night falls, you're a weirdly cackling madman, a sinister dark avenger who guns down crooks with his twin .45's. You've made yourself an enemy of both the police and the underworld, but you aren't worried. You're willing to do whatever it takes to prove that Crime Does Not Pay.

Examples: The Shadow, the Spider, the Phantom Detective, the Green Hornet, the Phantom.

Abilities

Brains 12

Luck 11

Mind 14

Muscle 14

Reflexes 15

Savvy 14

Status 12

Weird 10

Reputation = Status [12]

Wealth = Status [12]

Specialties

Muscle (Climb)

Reflexes (Gun-Fighting)

Savvy (Disguise)

Hero Points

Gritty = 0

Escapist = 10

Fantastic = 20

Amazing = 30

Explorer

"What's the big deal? It's only a snake …"

When you were a kid, you listened, fascinated, to your father's stories of ancient treasures, lost cities, and far away adventure. As you grew older, you traveled the globe, picking up native languages and learning how to survive in the wild. Today, you and your faithful ethnic sidekick are ready to slash your way through miles of jungle to find out if any of those old legends are true …

Examples: Indiana Jones, Allan Quartermain, Captain Easy, and numerous other adventure heroes.

Abilities

Brains 15

Luck 11

Mind 15

Muscle 14

Reflexes 14

Savvy 10

Status 10

Weird 10

Reputation = Status [10]

Wealth = Status [10]

Specialties

Reflexes (Cowboy Weapons) or
Reflexes (Gun-Fighting)

Brains (Scholarship) or
Mind (Survival)

Hero Points

Gritty = 4

Escapist = 14

Fantastic = 24

Amazing = 34

Hardboiled Detective

"I won't play the sap for you, sweetheart!"

You spent several years as a policeman, but you were too outspoken, too quick to criticize your superiors when they ignored corruption on the force. After you were fired for insubordination, you set up your own private detective agency. Today, you work in a run-down office building, complete with a beautiful blonde secretary and a bottle of hooch in your desk drawer. You'll do anything other than divorce work, as long as it's legal and it makes sense. Once hired, you'll do just about anything, take any amount of punishment (from the crooks or the cops) to see the truth come out in the end. You usually speak in a colloquial voice, although you have a fondness for purple prose and colorful metaphors.

Examples: Race Williams, The Continental Op, Sam Spade, Philip Marlowe, Dan Turner, and countless others.

Abilities

Brains 10

Luck 11

Mind 16

Muscle 15

Reflexes 13

Savvy 13

Status 9

Weird 10

Reputation = Status [9]

Wealth = Status [9]

Specialties

Savvy (Empathy)

Mind (Alertness)

Reflexes (Gun Fighting)

Hero Points

Gritty = 5

Escapist = 15

Fantastic = 25

Amazing = 35

Tough Scientist

"O.K., Bucky, you pack the gas-guns. Hank, you start the rocket ships. Doctor Sin, you load the tractor beam. Margot, Jimmy, put on your parachutes and come with me…"

You've done just about everything, learned as much as you can know. You were a football star, you earned a Ph.D., you fought in a world war, and you traveled around the world. Eventually, you became the top practitioner in your field, an honorary police officer and a confidant of world leaders and businessmen. Yet somehow, you still don't feel as if you've done enough. You crave even more excitement, and you're eager to use your talents to fight wrongs and make the world a better place. After all, if you're not qualified for the job, then who in the world is?

Examples: Doc Savage, the Avenger, Captain Fury, Buck Rodgers, and a never-ending supply of science-fiction heroes.

Abilities

Brains 16

Luck 11

Mind 15

Muscle 14

Reflexes 14

Savvy 10

Status 12

Weird 10

Reputation = Status [12]

Wealth = Status [12]

Specialties

Brains (Science)

Reflexes (Boxing)

Reflexes (Gun-Fighting)

Hero Points

Gritty = 0

Escapist = 10

Fantastic = 20

Amazing = 30

Wild Man

"I am Grekor, Lord of the Jungle! None have challenged me and lived!"

Your parents died when you were a baby, while the family was travelling through uncharted wilderness. Miraculously, you survived in the wild after you were found and raised by wild animals. Eventually, explorers discovered you, and you have your hands full trying to protect them from fiendish cannibals, ferocious tigers, and sinister lost civilizations. You may speak in a crude, primitive style ("Me Tarzan, You Jane"), or you may be equally at home in the ballroom and the jungle.

Examples: Tarzan (of course) and all of his imitators.

Abilities

Brains 10

Luck 11

Mind 17

Muscle 17

Reflexes 17

Savvy 10

Status 5

Weird 13

Reputation = Status + 5 [10]

Wealth = Status − 5 [0]

Specialties

Mind (Stealth)

Mind (Survival)

Reflexes (Acrobatics)

Reflexes (Knife-Fighting)

Hero Points

Gritty = 1

Escapist = 11

Fantastic = 21

Amazing = 31

Everyman

Some players want to play very clearly defined and unusual characters. For example, a player might want a crime-fighting jazz musician who's also a master of hypnotism. None of the templates would resemble him very well; the player could customize one of the templates (as described in Chapter 3) to get the results he wants, but it would take a lot of unnecessary trouble.

In these circumstances, players can always use the Everyman template to create the character they want. The Everyman template is the only one that can't be played "as is"; players who use it will have to customize their characters, using the rules in Chapter 3.

Abilities

Brains 10

Luck 10

Mind 10

Muscle 10

Reflexes 10

Savvy 10

Status 10

Weird 10

Reputation = Status [10]

Wealth = Status [10]

Hero Points

Gritty = 25

Escapist = 35

Fantastic = 45

Amazing = 55

Let's say that a Hero wants to do something — beat up a stooge, leap across a chasm, break down a door, decipher a code or seduce a beautiful blonde. In each case, we say the Hero is performing an action, and the GM has to decide what the outcome will be.

Sometimes the outcome will be obvious. If a character is attempting a routine action — opening an unlocked door, walking down a flight of stairs, lighting a cigarette, ordering a cocktail — then the action automatically succeeds. Likewise, if a hero attempts to perform an impossible feat — such as shooting down the Moon, leaping to the nearest star, or walking on water — then he automatically fails. (We assume that the character doesn't have any special powers, of course.)

Many actions, though, won't be routine or impossible. We refer to these as chancy actions. All "chancy" actions in *Two Fisted Tales* are resolved through a basic mechanic: One number is compared to another number; if the first number is higher than the second number, the character succeeds; otherwise, he does not succeed. The rest of the rules tell you what numbers to compare and how to interpret them.

The Check

The simplest form of a comparison is the ability check (check for short). The character compares his or her ability score with a fixed target, or difficulty.

If his score is higher than the target, he succeeds; if his score is equal to or lower than the target, he does not succeed (this may not necessarily mean a "failure," as we'll see later).

The player may decide to spend a card to succeed at the action. This decision must be made before the check is made. When a card is spent, the player may add the value of the card to the character's ability score, for a single action only.

The Roll

With a "check," a character will a high skill will succeed at an easy action and beat a character with a low skill, every time; conversely, a character with a low skill score will fail at a difficult action and lose to a more skillful character in every single case. Sometimes this may be appropriate, but in other cases, the GM may decide to add a bit of uncertainty to a situation.

In such cases, the GM may ask the player to *roll two ten-sided dice, treating all 0s as zeros rather than 10s*. Before the dice are rolled, one of them should be designated the "bonus die," while the other should be designated the "penalty die." (The GM should color-code his dice, so for example, white dice are used for bonuses and colored dice are used for penalties.) Add the bonus die, and subtract the penalty die, to the character's skill to get the result.

If the bonus die comes up as a '9,' roll an additional bonus die and add it to

the result; keep rolling additional bonus dice until one of them doesn't give you a '9.' If the penalty die comes up a '9,' roll another penalty die and subtract the die value from the result; continuing to roll until you get something other than a '9.' This procedure is known as an ability roll or just a roll, and it serves as the primary method for resolving actions in the game.

Example: Mark Merlin, master magician, has been tied up by a pair of thugs, and poison gas is spilling into the room. He tries to slip out of the ropes, and the player makes an Reflexes roll. Mark Merlin's skill rating is 15. He rolls a '9' on his bonus die and a '4' on his penalty die. He rolls the bonus die a second time (because he rolled a '9') and he gets a '2'. The final result is 15+9-4+2 = 22. Mark Merlin easily slips out of the ropes.

The GM should tell the player what the target for the action is, and he should do after the dice are rolled. Remember that the dice are used to add suspense to an adventure, adding uncertainty to a character's activities. Players should not roll dice when they are performing pedestrian or routine activities or if success is necessary to the progress of the adventure (for example, if they're looking for clues).

Using Cards to Improve Checks and Rolls

Players may spend Cards to temporarily increase a character's check or roll. The decision to play a card must be made before the roll. When a Card is spent, *the value of the card is added to the check or roll, for one action only*.

Example: Mark Merlin is trying to slip out of his ropes, and he decides to spend a 9 of Hearts to improve his roll. He rolls a '2' on his bonus die and a '9' and a '5' on his penalty dice. Normally he would get a total of 3 (15 for the ability, plus 2 for the bonus die, minus 14 for the penalty dice), but after adding the 9 for his card he gets a 12 instead.

Face Cards (Jacks, Queens and Kings) may either add 10 points directly, or they may modify the values of other cards that are played. Jacks multiply card values by 2, Queens by 3 and Kings multiply card values by 4. Aces are worth 10 points, plus they can be added to *other cards* so the total bonuses are greater than 10. A character can use a number card, an ace and a face card to obtain huge bonuses, if he so chooses; a 10, Ace and King together, for instance, would add (10+10) x 4 = 80 points to a roll!

Example: Mark Merlin, having untied the ropes, now tries to pick the door to his cell. He plays two cards, an Ace of Diamonds and 4 of Spades. He gets another lousy roll – a 6 – but the cards bring it up to 6 + 10 + 4 = 20.

Diamond cards can be used to improve another PC's roll. So someone with a 6 of Diamonds, for instance, could spend the card and add 6 points to an ally's roll. Spade cards can be spent to subtract points from an NPC's roll. So if you spent an Ace of Spades, you could subtract 10 points from an enemy's roll, adding additional Spade cards to reduce the roll further. (Hearts and Clubs cannot be used to modify another character's roll, but they can alter the amount of damage inflicted on another character.

See the fighting and damage chapters for details.)

Advanced Resolution System

Sometimes the Simple System may not describe a character's actions in as much detail as you'd like, and you may prefer the Advanced System. Under the Advanced System, the character's ability roll is compared to the target, and one of the following results is specified, according the value of the total.

Total: Zero or Less

Fumble. Something really bad happens to the character.

Total: Less Than Target

Failure

Total: Equal To Target or 'Doubles'

Close Call. A success, but with complications.

Total: Greater Than Target

Success

Total: More Than Target + 10

Great Success. You succeed with remarkable ease.

An Overview of the Basic System

Here is an overview of the basic combat system, for those who found the example unclear:

First, every turn, all combatants declare who they're going to attack. (In this example, with only two fighters, this step was superfluous, but in a more complicated fight it's essential.)

Second, all combatants make Reflexes rolls to see who hits his opponent. If one has suffered more wounds than ½ his Mind, he subtracts an additional Penalty Die from his roll.

Then, see who has the highest combat roll. That person will hit her target. Everyone else will miss. (If two people are tied for highest, then both of them will hit each other, but at reduced damage.)

Fourth, find out how much damage is inflicted, based on the weapon and the attacker's Muscle. If the attacker rolled "doubles," or if he got the exact same combat roll as his opponent, he hits but does half damage. If the attacker beat his target's combat roll by more than 10 points (scoring a "Great Success"), add 2 points.

Subtract the defender's Resistance from this total, to get the number of wounds inflicted.

If a character takes 5 points (or more) from a single attack, he is either knocked unconscious or bleeding uncontrollably. If he takes 10 points from a single attack, he's killed.

If a character accumulates more wounds, over a series of attacks, than ½ his Mind score (rounded up), he takes a penalty die on all Combat Rolls. If he takes more wounds than his full Mind score, he will fall unconscious, and if he takes 20 points or more he will die.

You can read more about damage in chapter 9, *Hazards and Healing*.

The Basic System and the Advanced System

The basic system is designed for very specific circumstances. Certain narrow conditions need to be fulfilled if the Basic Combat System is going to work:

Everyone in combat should be attacking somebody else

All characters should be making some effort to defend themselves

All characters should be attacking each other at a relatively close range

No one should be hiding behind cover, and nobody should be aiming for a specific location on a target's body

Most fights, in fact, will fulfill these conditions. So most of the time the basic system should serve your needs. If the characters do anything other than attack each other, however, or if they attack under unusual conditions, you may want to use the advanced system instead.

The Advanced system is perfectly compatible with the Basic system, and as a GM, you should feel comfortable switching from one to another, as the situation requires.

Moving Silently

At some point, PCs will try to sneak past an NPC without being heard. The PC should make a Reflexes roll, and add the Size/Distance modifier (printed under Spotting Hidden Items, above). If the roll is greater than the victim's Mind score, she sneaks past undetected. Otherwise the NPC hears the PC. Subtract a penalty die from the PC's roll if she's walking through leaves, across a creaky floor, or some other noisy surface.

Hiding

Another way to sneak up or sneak past an NPC is to hide behind some cover — behind a door, under a table, even under a shadow — before the NPC gets a chance to see you. If an NPC is about to turn around and look in the PCs direction, the PC will have time to dodge behind cover if his Reflexes roll is greater than 10 (or greater than 20 in a fairly open area).

Hiding Objects

Sometimes a PC will want to smuggle a small item in a jacket or a coat pocket past some NPCs. This item could be a weapon, a string of pearls or a cigarette lighter engraved with a spider image. The GM should make a Mind roll for the NPC to see if he notices the bulge in the jacket or the glint of metal up the character's sleeve. Add a bonus die if the object's size is Tiny+, or subtract a penalty die if it's size is Tiny-; you can modify the roll as well depending on how much clothing the PC is wearing. If the NPC's roll is higher than the PC's Mind (Slight of Hand) score, the NPC notices something is wrong. Otherwise he doesn't.

Shadowing

Shadowing means following a suspect (as if you were that suspect's "shadow") without having him realize he's being followed. The shadower should make Mind (Shadowing) rolls every hour; if the roll is lower than his suspect's Mind score the suspect will know he is being followed.

There's no end of trouble that they can present for a group of hyper-sexed heroes, and for that reason, they are among a GM's most reliable plot devices.

Whenever a character wants to get romantically involved with an NPC, the GM should make a Savvy roll for that character. If more than one Hero is interested in the NPC, then the GM should roll for all player characters of the same sex (and not just the interested characters). Subtract 10 from a roll if the hero mistreated the NPC (thrown her in jail, shot her father in the head, or what have you). The target for the roll is the NPC's Mind score; add 10 to her score if she's already happily involved with someone else. Check the table below to interpret the results.

Fumble: The NPC finds the PC deeply unattractive.

Failure: The PC makes little or no impression on the NPC.

Close Call: Initially, the NPC doesn't like the PC. Or at least she thinks she doesn't like him. In fact, she's deeply attracted to the character, but she refuses to admit it to herself.

Success: The NPC finds the hero attractive.

Great Success: The NPC falls in love with the PC. (If more than one character rolled a Great Success, then the NPC falls in love with the character with the highest roll.)

These rules determine a non-player character's reaction to a PC. Matters are a bit more complicated, though, if an NPC tries to seduce a player character. The problem, as I've noted, is that romantic interests are good sources of plot hooks – and there's no reason for a Hero get involved with an NPC if the player knows that she's going to get captured or kill him in his sleep. While the character might get a lot out of a romantic relationship – such as sex, love, devotion, security and companionship – the player won't see any of these benefits during the game. As a result, PC heroes might find celibacy a lot more appealing than it ought to be.

One way to deal with this problem is to let NPCs make seduction rolls against the player characters, as described above. If the roll is successful, you tell the player that his character is attracted – possibly even in love – with the NPC, unless he gives a good reason why he wouldn't be attracted to her. If the reason is convincing, the GM can disregard the die roll – but the GM should demand to know what kind of person would interest the PC. Otherwise, the PC feels a strong sexual attraction, a feeling that the player should role-play, and possibly receive Performance bonuses for. (See chapter 4, *Character Improvement*.) Note that a player-character can be attracted to an NPC without becoming romantically involved with her. He just has to explain why a relationship wouldn't work, and his player has to role-play the character's pain in rejecting her.

Lying

Whenever one character lies to another character, the lying character should make a Savvy roll, subtracting a penalty die if he is facing imminent physical danger, but adding a bonus die if he is romantically involved with his victim. He should then compare his roll with the victim's Mind.

If the roll is 10 or more points below the victim's Mind, the victim can tell that the character is lying. Otherwise, the victim would not know that the character is lying, unless circumstances would lead her to believe otherwise. (For instance, the victim would still recognize a lie if it was particularly outlandish, if she knew that the first character was a habitual liar, or if she knew, from his own experience, that the character was telling her something that was patently untrue.)

Entertaining

If one character decides to entertain a group of people, he should roll for Savvy modified for performance-based specialties, such as Acting, Dancing, Juggling, Singing, Storytelling, or Slight of Hand. The target for the attempt is 10; add a penalty die for a particularly rough crowd. Interpret the results as follows:

Fumble: The audience boos loudly, throws vegetables, riots, or express their disgust in some other fashion.

Failure: The audience ignores the entertainer.

Sinister hypnotists were a staple of pulp stories and radio dramas, and even on those stories that prided themselves in their "realism," hypnotists could have powers far more advanced than in the real world. For that reason, GMs may want to make the following powers available to their players.

A player-character has to follow the usual procedures to learn hypnotic powers. Her Brains [Hypnotism] ability must exceed the following targets, and she must pay the cost of each power in Hero Points. Reduce the cost by 1 for every 5 points her Brains [Hypnotism] score exceeds the target.

Unless otherwise specified, these powers will only affect another character if the hypnotist can place her into a hypnotic trance. The following conditions have to met to place someone into a hypnotic trance against their will:

The victim must be able to see and hear the hypnotist;

The hypnotist must make a Brains [Hypnotism] roll which exceeds the victim's Mind (Mental Defense) score

Note that the invisibility power can be used without putting anyone into a hypnotic trance.

Hypnotic Powers

Control Bleeding

Target = Brains [Hypnotism] 16
Cost = 1
Duration = instantaneous

Normally, when a character receives five or more wounds, that character will bleed to death unless he receives proper medical treatment. This power allows a hypnotist to stop the victim's bleeding so that he won't die, unless he receives 20 wounds or more or 10 wounds from a single attack.

Emotional Control

Target = Brains [Hypnotism] 23
Cost = 4
Duration = 1 day

This discipline will change a subject's emotional state – making him angry, confused, despairing, or whatever.

Hypnotic Suggestion

Target = Brains [Hypnotism] 24
Cost = 5
Duration = 1 week

With this power, a character may order a subject to do one specific thing. It must be an action that takes a limited amount of time (no more than one week). Once the action is completed, the power no longer affects the subject.

Introduction

Good GMing takes a lot of hard work, a lot of time and good deal of creativity. This volume is designed to make a GM's job easier, saving time and filling in some of the details of an adventure. Most of this volume will tell a GM how to use tables and die rolls to outline adventures, describe settings, and individualize NPCs. Note, I am not saying that RPG adventures should be completely randomly generated. Whenever possible, a GM should rely upon her own judgement when outlining plots and creating NPCs. Instead these tables are provided as a list of options for GMs, and to provide them with a quick source of inspiration when they aren't sure what to do.

Most role-playing games offer different material in their "GM's Guides." In many cases, they're quick to tell us what we should include in our games without offering much inspiration, and without making the job any easier. A lot of advice is offered — "adventures should include opportunities for problem solving"; "your games shouldn't be difficult, and they shouldn't be too easy"; "describe things in detail"; "reward good role-playing"; "make your NPCs memorable", etc., etc. — without many concrete details. They tell us what are games ought to provide without helping to provide them. They help us distinguish good games from bad, but a beginning GM needs guidance more than pre-emptive criticism. He needs help in answering such questions as these:

How do I get the player-characters involved?

What do I do to keep the action moving?

How can I individualize my NPCs?

What should the setting look like?

How can I provide a strong atmosphere?

The purpose of this chapter is to provide "training wheels" for the apprentice GM or a "crutch" for a GM that's at a loss for inspiration. I hope you find it useful.

Designing Adventures: The Basics

Designing an adventure for a group of players is a lot different than writing a book, for one important reason: A book author decides what all of his characters are going to do, while in a role-playing game, the players decide what their characters are going to do. In some ways this makes GMing a game a lot easier; the GM doesn't have to write most of the dialogue, he doesn't have to worry about the characterization of his heroes. The players do that work for him.

Still, player-character freedom can provide plenty of headaches for the hard-working GM. Consider this example: An author is going to send his hero off to an archeological dig in Egypt, near Cairo. The author doesn't know much about Egypt, so he goes to the library and does a little research, picking up a few Arabic phrases, a little of modern Egyptian history, even a few landmarks in Cairo. Confident that he knows enough to write convincingly about the setting, he goes ahead and writes the next chapter.

A GM, expecting his player-characters will take a trip to Egypt, could do the same amount of research, but there's no guarantee it would do him any good. The players, for one thing, might want to know all sorts of things about Cairo the GM never considered: How strict are the gun laws? How good are the local universities? Is there a lot of local hostility towards Westerners? How much would a decent hotel room cost per night? If the GM doesn't know the answers to these questions, he isn't going to get a chance to research them; he'll have to make up an answer, and hope it satisfies the players.

Of course, in this example, we're assuming the PCs will actually go to Cairo, but they may decide to stay in Chicago instead, making all of the GM's research superfluous. Even worse, they may decide to go to Jakarta without any warning to the GM, and unless he's familiar with life in the Dutch East Indies in the early 1930's, he won't know any details about the region at all.

What should the GM do? He can't plan for every possible thing the PCs are going to do. One solution is to force the PCs down a single path determined by the GM: The characters all wake up to see armies of thugs pointing guns at them. These thugs force them to go to Cairo and steal the Queen Nefertiti's necklace. If they don't do it, they and their loved ones will be murdered, but if they do steal the necklace, they'll be paid fifty million dollars and receive the Congressional Medal of Honor. The player characters, no fools, decide to do as they're told.

If the tongue-in-cheek tone doesn't make my point, I'll say it explicitly: As far as I'm concerned, it's a bad idea to use heavy-handed coercion in this fashion, to force player-characters through a pre-designed plot. It may make a GM's job easier, but players want some control over their characters. Without any control, role-playing isn't much of a game — it's a travel monologue, narrated by the GM with occasional comments from the players. An illusion of freedom — if not the reality — is essential to keep players in your game.

A GM can direct his player-characters in far more subtle ways, using hooks suited for each individual character. A "hook" is simply a plot element designed to pull a character into an adventure. As an example, let's say again that the GM has an adventure planned in Egypt. The Reporter PC could be sent to Cairo to cover the King's coronation; the Archeologist could find a map to a long-forgotten crypt; the Private Detective could be sent to Egypt to find a tycoon's missing daughter. All of these hooks are specifically designed for each PC; all of them are fairly plausible situations; and every PC has a good, in character reason to travel to Egypt, meet each other, and get involved in the adventure. Once the GM comes up with a few decent hooks, a good deal of the work is already done.

What else does a GM have to do? One priority is to create well-rounded, colorful NPCs: villains, their henchmen, friends of the player-characters, their employers (if any) and other miscellaneous figures. The GM doesn't have to describe every single person, from the hotel bellboy to the beggars in the street; that would take

far too much work for few benefits. Instead these minor characters should be treated like "extras" in a movie, nameless and faceless, without even any lines. Devote your attention to the major figures in the adventure.

Once you've created well-developed NPCs, you can put them wherever you want, do whatever you can to make sure they get to meet the player-characters. For example, you may create a gambling playboy named Rick, who will draw the PCs into all sorts of dangerous schemes. You might expect the PCs to meet Rick at the local nightclub, but to your chagrin, they decide to go to a local coffee shop, instead. What can you do? The answer is simple: Say that Rick, after a night of highballs, decides to sober up by stopping by the coffee shop for a few cups of joe. The players won't know the difference, and the adventure moves as smoothly as before.

Once you've created your NPCs, you should decide what they're going to do. Don't just think about what they're going to do to the PCs (or with the PCs); give them agendas of their own, and think about what they will do when the PCs aren't around. If you

wish, you can give the players plenty of clues as to what these NPCs are doing. If the PCs manage to stop them (or help them), great! If the players ignore your clues, and don't intervene, that's also OK. They can have plenty of adventures dealing with the after-effects. The point is to give NPCs lives of their own, rather than think of them as "encounters" who vanish the second the player-characters leave the scene. This way, if they players do anything unexpected (as they are almost sure to do), you'll have some idea of what will happen.

To summarize, you can usually survive a game session, with your GMing reputation intact, and without having the spend a huge amount of effort, if you concentrate your attention in three main areas:

Hooks to get player-characters involved;

Well-developed NPCs;

A good idea what the NPCs will be doing.

The next two sections will provide a random method for determining hooks, and a few rules for designing NPCs.

Scenario Creation System

Most of the 'pulps' paid their authors a cent a word or less. It was difficult for a pulp writer to make a living unless he produced dozens of short stories or novelettes every year, an enormous amount of material. Typing all of these stories was hard enough. It was even more difficult to come up with effective, original story lines.

In desperation, many pulp authors turned to plot formulas for their ideas. These plot formulas — systematic, abstract outlines of a wide variety of story lines — were often quite helpful. Many high-quality stories were constructed with plot formulas, and they were used by such talented writers as Lester Dent, the primary author of the Doc Savage novels.

GM's are expected to produce as many "stories," in the form of game scenarios, as pulp authors were (and unlike pulp authors, they aren't paid for their troubles), so we've provided the following "Scenario Creation System" for pulp role-playing games. It's designed to provide skeletal frames for scenarios, to complement the GM's imagination, to provide him with ideas during a creative slump.

Creating Non Player Characters

As a GM, you have a lot to worry about, so devote as little time as possible to determining an NPCs game statistics. Here are a few basic guidelines when creating NPCs:

You don't have to determine an NPCs game statistics unless you think she's going to get in a contest or a fight with a player-character.

You can generally ignore an NPCs Savvy or Status scores. A vague idea of the character's wealth and social standing is enough in almost all cases.

Many non-player characters are interchangeable, nameless cannon fodder: The cops in the bank, the Nazi soldiers guarding the Ark of the Covenant, the mobster's gunmen hiding out in the speakeasy. In Two-Fisted Tales, we refer to these characters as "extras." You do not, and should not, have to calculate scores separately for each extra in your game. Instead, determine some "generic" scores that apply to all cops, all Nazis and all mob gunmen, and use them for each extra.

Finally, don't worry too much about Hero Point values. Give your NPCs whichever stats you think are appropriate, and worry about point-balance later. Just remember that most NPCs shouldn't be too tough, especially if they're going to fight the player-characters.

In this chapter, we'll provide some game statistics for generic "extras," along with templates for major villains and henchmen, and a simple system for individualizing NPCs.

"Generic" NPCs

As I noted, above, GMs should not spend a lot of time calculating game statistics for every minor "extra" in the game. In a lot of cases, the stats on the following table for "generic" NPCs will do just fine; assume all other abilities are 10.

Blue-Collar Worker
12 Muscle, 12 Reflexes, 12 Sense

White-Collar Worker
12 Brains, 12 Savvy

Housewife
13 Savvy

Elderly Widow
12 Savvy, 8 Muscle, 8 Reflexes

College Student
12 Brains

College Professor
16 Brains, 12 Status

Business Executive
12 Brains, 15 Status

Cab Driver
13 Reflexes

Cowboy
12 Muscle, 12 Reflexes

Private Eye
12 Mind

Wealthy Dilettante
16 Status

Doctor
14 Brains, 11 Status

Medical Examiner
16 Brains

Police Patrolman
13 Muscle, 13 Reflexes, 12 Status

Police Detective
12 Mind, 14 Status

Police Brass
12 Mind, 13 Savvy, 15 Status

Reporter
12 Mind, 12 Savvy

Mob Soldier
13 Muscle, 13 Reflexes

Mob Lieutenant
12 Reflexes, 13 Status, 12 Mind

Mob Boss
12 Mind, 16 Status

Struggling Performer
12 Brains

Celebrity
12 Brains, 16 Status

If you have any doubt about how to classify an "extra," you can always use the following method to determine a character's abilities. Roll 2D10 for each ability score and give him an appropriate Specialty. If any score is higher than the maximum given for the character's Weird, reduce the score to the maximum value. If they're lower than the minimum ability score, raise it to the minimum value.

Villain and Henchmen Templates

While "extras" can be given "generic" statistics from the table on the previous page, villains and their most important henchmen deserve a bit more attention. In fact, a good villain should be built with as much care and imagination as a PC. You can create a villain by modifying any of the templates listed below.

Note that while Hero Points have been provided for each template, GMs should not feel the need to stick to them. If a GM feels she needs 25 points, rather than 11, to build the Femme Fetale she wants in an escapist campaign, she should go ahead and spend 25 points. Point balancing is unnecessary when designing NPCs! Hero Points have been provided for these villains only for reference purposes, if the GM wants to know how powerful an NPC is, in comparison to the player-characters, or if the GM decides to run a pulp villain campaign (with each player running her own dastardly criminal). GMs should give their villains whatever abilities, skills or schticks they wish, without worrying about point costs.

Assassin

In the Middle East, he's called an assassin; in the Far East, a ninja. The names don't matter. For the player characters, the important thing is he's dressed in black, armed with a sword, and he's trying to kill them. He's dangerous as hell, and he doesn't work for cheap. Heroes will just have to kill him before he kills them first.

Abilities

Brains 10

Luck 10

Mind 13

Muscle 13

Reflexes 16

Savvy 10

Status 10

Weird 12

Specialty

Reflexes (Martial Arts)

Hero Points

Gritty = 10

Escapist = 20

Fantastic = 30

Amazing = 40

Evil Dictator

Like many villains, this character aims for world conquest. Unlike most villains, however, this character has an entire imaginary country at his disposal. With vast wealth, a ferocious army, and legions of scientists developing fantastic super-weapons, the dictator's dreams of world domination may very well become a reality.

Abilities

Brains 10

Luck 10

Mind 10

Muscle 10

Reflexes 10

Savvy 18

Status 19

Weird 18

Specialties

Savvy (Inspire Others)

Hero Points

Gritty = Not available!

Escapist = 9

Fantastic = 19

Amazing = 29

Femme Fetale

She was born poor, but through good looks, cleverness and a steely determination, she managed to claw her way up in the world. Now she's rich, having married into money, but things aren't quite right. Maybe she's caught in a loveless marriage; maybe someone knows the secret of her shady past, and he's ready to talk. It doesn't matter; with her brains, her body and her itchy trigger-finger, she can be deadly to anyone who stands in her way.

Abilities

Brains 10

Luck 10

Mind 15

Muscle 10

Reflexes 12

Savvy 16

Status 14

Weird 10

Specialties

Savvy (Deception)

Savvy (Seduction)

Reflexes (Handguns)

Hero Points

Gritty = 5

Escapist = 15

Fantastic = 25

Amazing = 35

MacGuffins

Alfred Hitchcock invented the term "MacGuffin." It refers to something that all of the characters want badly enough to kill for, but as far as the story is concerned, it doesn't really matter what the object is. A McGuffin can be a ceremonial African mask, an ancient book of magic, a briefcase full of plutonium, a truckload of stolen bank loot or a priceless string of emeralds. If it's valuable to a lot of people, is featured prominently in the story, and characters spend a lot of time chasing after it, it's a MacGuffin.

A number of 1990s films got away without describing their MacGuffins at all. In *Pulp Fiction* and *Ronin*, for example, the characters are chasing after briefcases, but we never learn what's inside them. This is fine for a movie, but it wouldn't really work in a role-playing game, since you can never be sure the players won't open the briefcase and ask for a detailed description of its contents.

The whole point of a MacGuffin, however, is that the details of the item doesn't matter much. For that reason, GMs who are stretched for time or at a loss can always turn to the following tables to determine what the MacGuffin really is.

The MacGuffin Tables

Roll percentile dice and check the following table (or chose a selection that you like) to determine the general kind of MacGuffin.

Roll	Item
01-04	armor
05-12	artwork
13-20	weapon
21-32	jewelry
32-40	gemstone
41-42	furnishings
43-44	human remains
45-46	animal remains
47-48	rare animal
49-50	rare plants or potions
51-62	manuscript
63-74	map
75-86	coins or other collectibles
87-98	cash
99-100	other

Then check one of the sections below for a more specific description of the item.

Armor

Roll	Armor
01-10	breastplate
11-20	chain mail
21-25	gauntlet or bracers
26-45	helmet
46-50	leather armor
51-70	complete suit of plate armor
71-90	shield
91-100	other armor

Artwork

Roll	Artwork
01-10	drawing
11-35	painting
16-45	photograph
46-55	relief
56-80	statue
81-90	tapestry
91-100	other

Weapon

Roll	Weapon
01-02	arrow
03-08	axe
09-16	bow
17-18	crossbow
19-34	dagger
35-36	flail
37-42	javelin
43-48	mace
49-50	morning star
51-52	pick
53	sling
54-65	spear
66-85	sword or scimitar
86-87	trident
88	net
89	throwing stick
91-95	war club
96-100	other

Time and Atmosphere

Pacing

Most GM's should observe the following rule: The more dramatic an event is (in other words, the greater the threat to the lives of the PC's or their loved ones) the slower the pace ought to be. Thus, when a PC is fighting a powerful opponent to the death, the pace should be slowed down slightly. If a PC is locked in a death trap, and he is facing certain death, the pace should be slowed down to a crawl (so that a minute in the trap may take up as much as a five minutes of real time). This rule gives players more time to think when their characters are in danger.

Keeping Track of Time

During the game, the GM may wish to keep track of time very carefully. There are two reasons for doing so. First of all, if the player-characters have to solve a mystery, then a careful record of events and timetables can help your players to evaluate a suspect's alibi. ("Look, Chief – Jackson didn't murder O'Maley! I saw him outside of Harry's Speakeasy

within five minutes of the killing!")

If the player-characters are facing any kind of time pressure — if their girlfriends had been kidnapped, if a bomb is about to go off, if their friend is due to be executed at 12:00 Midnight – then a careful record of the time can contribute to the suspense. ("It's 11:45 – only 15 minutes before Bobby goes to the chair! No time to lose!") This technique was commonly used in the Gray Seal stories and the Spider novels to build suspense and tension.

When PCs are facing real danger and intense time-pressure, you can use a kitchen timer to keep track of time. For example, if a bomb is about to go off in 10 minutes, you could give the players 10 minutes on the kitchen timer, so they are acutely aware of the pressure they're facing. (If the PCs are in a really tight spot – stuck in a deathtrap, for example – you can say that game time is moving more slowly than real time, and give them twice, three times, even five times as many minutes on the timer.) Players can always stop the clock by spending a Card.

Ending the Game

Most role-playing games will go on and on until the gaming room has to be vacated or a player has to go home. As a GM, though, you shouldn't be afraid to end a little early. Like all performers, you should leave your audience hungry for more.

One option is to end on a cliffhanger. The PCs are about to face certain death: They're about to be gunned down by a firing squad, their car is flying over a cliff, they're about to be dropped in a giant vat of acid. How will they survive? You end the game before your players can find out, leaving them gasping for breath waiting for next-week's episode. Not only does a cliffhanger add to the excitement, it also gives your players an entire week to think of ways to save their characters.

I wouldn't recommend that every game end in a cliffhanger. Eventually your story-arcs should come to a close, and your PCs should get a chance to lie back and feel good about saving the world (or the city, or their clients, or their skins) yet again. At the close of a story arc, I like to end with a good game quote, rather than a cliffhanger.

You may want to check the Nifty Bits box for the player who comes up with the best quote at the end of a story arc.

Description

A lot of role-playing games will offer advice like this:

As a GM, you should be as descriptive as possible. Don't just say, "You walk into a cave." Offer a description like this: "You step into the stygian blackness of an uncharted cavern. Stalactites hang menacingly from the ceiling while your footsteps echo throughout the endless mazes of rock and stone. You shiver mightily in the damp cold of the dim lantern light, as you descend, gingerly, into the nameless depths that await you far below."

There are two problems with advice like this. First of all, nobody talks like this, certainly not off the top of his head. No GM should expected to follow this example in the middle of a game. The second problem is even more serious: This is bad writing! It's over-written and melodramatic, pretentious and preposterous, reading more like a parody than a serious piece of literature.

Many pulp writers, of course, had a regrettable fondness for melodrama and purple prose. Many others, though, followed the example of Ernest Hemingway and Dashiell Hammett. They used spare, simple sentences, shorn of unnecessary description. It was a style that was well suited to the pulps, where the emphasis was on quickly paced, furious action. As a GM in a pulp game, you should follow this example, by describing your settings as briefly and as simply as possible.

For example, your characters are walking to the South Pole to investigate rumors of an alien base. You want to emphasize how deadly cold it is. What should you do? One way would be to just tell them the temperature every morning: "Your thermometer says its -50° F this morning. That's a little warmer than yesterday, but the wind is a lot more fierce." Your players will know that -50° F is bone chilling, and the strong wind will make it even worse.

You can also make the cold real by describing how it affects their characters. Their toes and fingers will go numb, a sign of encroaching frostbite; bare skin will stick to metal surfaces; on a sunny day, they'll have to worry about snow-blindness; their teeth may crack if they drink something hot. Keep track of fatigue from the cold, as described in Hazards and Healing; as the characters take fatigue, they'll appreciate how deadly their environment really is.

Sound Effects and Music

Another way to add atmosphere is to use sound effects during a game. You can purchase tapes or CDs of background noises and play them during the session. It won't be hard for your players to imagine a cold wind if your tape player is howling and whooshing in the background. Don't get too ambitious, though. Playing a 45-minute tape in the background is one thing; trying to simulate every sound in the game – from gunshots to footsteps in broken glass – probably isn't worth the trouble. At one point, I had a large collection of sound-effect WAV files on my laptop, and I would open them to simulate all sorts of game-world noises. I found all this work far too time-consuming, and it drew my attention away from other GM duties. You'll probably have the same problems unless you hire an extra GM.

While sound effects have their place in a game, I would not recommend using background music, except at the beginning of the game, the end of the game, and right before the lunch or dinner break – the same practice, incidentally, used in old-time radio shows. You may also use it whenever someone is the game world is playing music; for example, you might put music on if the PCs go to a nightclub, or if someone turns the radio on. I wouldn't use "mood music" during the game, though, for at least four reasons.

First of all, moods change during a game – from horrific to triumphant, from calm to suspensful, from sorrowful to joyous – and there's no way to predict how long a mood will be sustained. As a GM, you won't be able to match music to mood unless you spend all evening fiddling with the CD player.

Part of your job, as a GM, is to gauge the mood of your players. If they're bored, it's time to punch things up; if they're frustrated, you might want to throw them some goodies; if they're having a good time, then you should continue the good work. I find that music can distort a GM's judgement in this respect. If the Raiders of the Lost Ark theme is blasting in the background, for example, the GM may think the action is a lot more exciting than it really is.

If the music is loud, you and your players will have a hard time hearing each other. If it isn't loud, though, it probably won't make much of an impact.

Finally, tastes vary, and the GM's favorite music may just annoy the other players. You may think Rush's 2112 is a masterpiece (to mention an old RPG favorite), but your players might think that Geddy Lee sounds like a castrated chipmunk, and if you play it you might drive them crazy. Different tastes also make it harder to gauge the players' moods (as mentioned above).

Of course, I'm not the greatest GM in the world, and some of you may have more positive experiences with music and sound effects. By all means, trust your personal judgement and experience and don't take my word as gospel.

Mysteries and Dangers

If you want to keep a player's interest in your game, just remember the two magic ingredients: Mystery and danger. The player-character should see weird things, and he should face some threat to mind, body or spirit. This chapter will talk about a few sources for both ingredients.

The Simple Art of Murder

The 1920's and 1930's are regarded today as "the golden age of mysteries," and the pulps played an important part in making it golden. Not only were the detective pulps a genre unto themselves, but strange and bizarre murders popped up in just about every kind of pulp story, from Westerns to science-fiction. If you want to follow their example and present your players with fun and challenging puzzles, murder mysteries can be a great addition to your game.

The "Classic" Mystery and the Alternatives

"Classic" Golden Age mysteries followed fairly rigid conventions and these stories tended to unfold in similar ways. Here is the stereotypical Golden Age plot: First a dead body is found, preferably in an isolated place (a country manor, a luxury liner or a train car, for example). There are several suspects. The police conduct a lousy investigation and find nothing. The Master Detective conducts his own investigation. After conducting interviews and collecting physical evidence, the detective figures out who did it, without telling anyone who it is. All of the suspects are gathered together. The detective goes around the room and explains why each suspect could not have (or did not) commit the crime. The Great Detective then points out the killer, and explains how and why he committed the crime. The police arrest the suspect and everyone goes home.

Few mysteries follow this blueprint exactly, and by the mid-1930's stories like these were beginning to look a bit old-fashioned. By then the "hard-boiled school" had begun to break all of these conventions in a number of key ways:

Bodies could be found anywhere, from the bottom of a lake to the middle of an alleyway.

There wasn't a clear list of suspects. In fact, at first, there may not be any suspects at all. The detective has to work hard to find people with a reason to kill the victim, or to find people who knew what the victim was up to.

The police were not incompetent, but there were other reasons why they couldn't solve the mysteries. In vigilante stories, red tape and legal loopholes hampered the police; an outsider, not bound by such rules and regulations, had a better chance of delivering justice. In other stories, the police were brutal and corrupt; they could solve a mystery, but they didn't care enough to do so.

The detective does more than just collect clues – he stirs things up. He confronts each suspect, demands to know their angle, demands that they give him a straight answer. Sometimes he'll come across as a friend or an ally, other times as an enemy, to the point that no one knows where his true loyalties lie.

The detective doesn't gather all of his suspects together. He goes and confronts the killer himself, or he tells the police what he knows, or he tells his client the truth and walks away from the case.

Of course, while the hard-boiled stories broke a number of Golden Age conventions, they introduced plenty of cliches of their own: The curvy secretary, the run-down office, the mysterious blonde clients, the confrontations with the police, the bottle of hooch in the detective's desk drawer. Rather than substitute one set of cliches for another, the GM should borrow whichever conventions he likes from either story, and develop a synthesis of his own. In the end, that's the only way to keep the players from feeling that they've seen all this before.

Deathtraps

Our Heroes are dropped in a sealed metal chamber. The room fills with gas and the walls start closing in. Will Our Heroes survive this deadly trap? Stay tuned for the next thrilling episode to find out!

Deathtraps like these were common in the pulps, and even more common in the "cliffhanger" movie serials of the era. GMs should feel free to use them in adventures whenever a bit of danger or excitement is called for. Before you rush to fill your tombs and mad-scientist lairs with all sorts of fiendish and deadly traps, however, you should understand some of the differences between traps in the cliffhangers and the pulps, and traps we grew up with in fantasy role-playing games.

There are two kinds of deathtraps: Quick and Slow. Quick deathtraps, common in the "dungeon" adventures of fantasy role-playing, should be familiar to most readers. These tend to be fairly simple, meant to kill or injure an intruder as quickly as possible.

Typically, quick traps are the easiest to survive. In most cases, it should be obvious how to survive the trap: The character has to leap out of the way of the falling rocks, dodge the arrows, jump over the pit, hold his breath as long as possible. The character can survive these hazards, in other words, if his player makes a successful Reflexes roll against a target of 10 or so. Here are a few examples:

An arrow is fired at the victim, inflicting 4 points of damage.

A blast of fire is fired at a character, inflicting 4 points of damage every second until the fire is put out.

A sharp pendulum slides out from the wall, slashing at a character, doing 8 points of damage.

A huge rock drops from the ceiling, crushing the victim for 2D10 points of damage.

Two walls slam together, flattening the victim, inflicting 3D10 points of damage.

A trap door opens below a victim's feet, dropping her 20 feet onto spikes on the floor, inflicting 5 points of damage.

A trap door opens below the victim's feet, dropping him into a vat of acid, which inflicts 3 points of damage per second.

A room is filled with cyanide gas, instantly poisoning the victim, inflicting 2D10 points of damage over a 5-second effect period.

The victim is thrown into something unpleasant — the vacuum of space, a wall covered with spikes, or something else.

Slow deathtraps were far more common in the pulps and the movie serials, and in many ways they're much more fun for the players (certainly not for the characters!). In a slow deathtrap, the victim is stuck in some deadly situation that will eventually kill him, but will do so slowly and painfully. Here are some examples:

The victim is tied to a laboratory table, while a death-ray blast slowly inches towards him. The death ray will inflict 12 points of damage if it ever hits the character.

A character is trapped in a corner, while a giant pendulum swings around in an arc, getting closer and closer to the character with every revolution. The pendulum will inflict 8 points of damage if it hits the character.

The ceiling, covered with spikes, is slowly dropping towards the victim, and eventually it will stab and crush him, doing 8 points of damage.

Characters are trapped in a room and the walls are slowly moving together. Eventually they will crush the victims, inflicting 3D10 points of damage.

Characters are locked in a room and the floor is gradually retracting, eventually leaving them with nothing to stand on, falling into the alligator-filled pool below.

The victim is trapped in a cage, which is being lowered into a river of lava. The victim will suffer 8 points of damage every second while submerged in the lava.

A locked room is filling with water, gradually drowning the characters inside. (Use the drowning rules in Hazards and Healing to determine damage.)

Air is slowly being sucked out of a locked room, suffocating the victims inside. Characters take 1 point of damage every 5 minutes.

A "monster" is released into the locked room, and the victim has to fight the monster to survive.

Characters are trapped in an extremely cold, without food or water, and they will slowly die of exposure, taking 1 point of damage every 20 minutes.

As you can see, slow traps are similar to quick traps in many ways; the quick trap just kills the victim faster. The most important difference is that player-characters need different abilities to survive slow traps then they do to survive quick traps. A slow trap it will take more than a single Reflexes roll to survive; it will take a fair amount of ingenuity and quick thinking.

The simplest and most obvious solution should almost never work in a slow death trap. For example, characters should not be able to prevent the walls from caving in simply by putting a metal pole between them. The pole should break, and the characters should have to look for some other solution. At the same time, in almost all cases, player-characters should be able to find some way out of the trap. There are a number of approaches a GM can take to ensure the survival of the player-characters, without making things too easy for them:

My friend Brian Misiaszek uses this rule in his games: Players will have to come up with several ways out of a deathtrap. The first two will never work, but the third way out will work. Of course, if you use this technique too often, the players will catch on to it. So you may decide to let the players get out on the first or second attempt if they come out with a really clever way out of the trap. You may demand more than three attempts if none of their efforts seem too convincing.

You can have the characters face two dangers at once – say the room is filling up with water and the walls are caving in, for example. It may be possible that if the characters keep their cool, and find a way to survive just a little longer than expected, the two dangers will somehow cancel each other out. For example, maybe the water pressure will become so great in the rapidly-shrinking room that if the characters hold their breath for long enough, the water-pressure will force the walls open.

You can always end the session on a cliffhanger, before the characters are killed by the deathtrap. This will give the players more time to come up with a way out.

If the players are completely stumped, you can always just tell them the way out, in exchange for a card (and possibly without the Roleplaying Hero Point award at the end of the adventure).

As a last resort, you can always make sure an ally on the outside can come by and rescue them. This is an easy solution for the player-characters, however, so don't use it too often.

In any case, you as a GM should always be able to think of a way out of your own deathtraps. If you can't come up with a way for the characters to survive, you can't expect your players to come up with one, either.

This points to one important difference between deathtraps in Two Fisted Tales and traps in most fantasy role-playing games. Pick up Flying Buffalo's Traps books; I strongly recommend them, since they can be a great source of ideas for your games. Many of the offerings in these books, however, are designed to quickly kill off or maim characters who behave in completely understandable ways; for example, one trap will stab a character in the eye if he looks through a peephole. These traps will kill off unimaginative characters who respond reflexively, and they demonstrate the fiendish cleverness of the GM. But they don't simulate death traps in the pulps very well. Heroes, after all, are supposed to survive these things. If you want to punish them for a lack of imagination, let them fall into a deathtrap when they act without thinking. Just make it easy for them to get out.

TWO FISTED TALES
ROLEPLAYING GAME

This preview is just a few pages from the screen version of Two Fisted Tales, the definitive role-playing game of pulp action. Inspired by the pulp fiction of the 30s and 40s, the game lets you recreate the action and adventure of the pulp genre. Play Doc Savage, Tarzan, the Shadow or the Thin Man - Two Fisted Tales puts you in the action.

Twenty-one character templates let you recreate your favorite pulp icon, and easy-to-use customization rules give you the freedom to invent your own original hero. The fast and furious combat rules are easy to learn and keep the two-fisted action flying. A lengthy game master's section gives you all the tools you need to create exciting adventures and diabolical villains.

The full download of Two Fisted Tales includes a 120 page version formatted for print, a 166 page PDF formatted for easy reading on your screen, the character sheet, a page of useful tables, and the full-color cover.