

MONGREL

by Ron Edwards

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INTRODUCTION / DESIGN NOTES

Mongrel is presented as an example of High Concept Simulationist game design, as described in my essay, *Simulationism: the Right to Dream*. It's not intended to be startlingly innovative or improved over any existing games, but to exemplify some of the principles that can be directed toward specific goals of play.

For Mongrel, "What is role-playing" is answered in pure Simulationist terms: imagining and vicariously experiencing the operation of a fictional set of events, set in a particular place, using particular characters, that accord with a given, unifying aesthetic. That's way too abstract for game text; if I were writing up a role-playing section for publication, I'd call it something like, playing a character according to a particular genre.

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Design notes: Art would be a serious consideration in publishing this game, in order to communicate the look and feel of what is to be imagined. Since this is just a text example and not really "a game," I ask the reader to imagine lots of pictures. Think of really over-the-top SF comics art, or some of the more action-oriented anime, accompanying all the sections. The characters would be exceptionally cool, fascinating hybrids of human, demon, and animal, all done up in heraldic/chrome outfits.

THE SETTING

Three habitable worlds circle a hot yellow sun in a far-flung solar system. From nearest to furthest, they are:

- Aoka, no moons, beautiful and temperate
- Beruun, two moons, strange night-day cycle, some freaky features. The moons are aligned such that solar eclipses are very common and therefore nights are extremely long.
- Cath, surrounded by a ring of particles, savage and desperate, with storms and much harsh geography

History

Humans arrived in this system as a part of the space-faring Terran Empire to settle on Aoka. Their culture was already well-versed in cybernetics and cosmetic gene-splicing. This system offered them something new, though: an actual gate into what some called another dimension and others called Hell. Their relatively isolated location and the dangerous, unpredictable aspects of this new energy source both contributed to give the Aoka system a dubious reputation.

A widespread rebellion wracked the Known Worlds across the Empire, and the people of Aoka nominally joined the rebels. However, as the system was a long way off, they didn't manage to see much of the war. Its real impact was felt in the system's enforced isolation, including lack of materials, commerce, and communication. One outcome was the increased use of gene-splicing with non-human animals among the populace and the beginnings of colonization of the other two planets, in the search for resources.

The rebellion ended when Earth was destroyed and the Empire shattered, but there wasn't much to celebrate. Interstellar transport technology was lost, and the many solar systems inhabited by humans and human-derived peoples were isolated.

To survive, the already heavily genetically-altered people of the Aoka system made much more extensive use of Hell-spawned powers and ultimately produced the Mongrel: a combination of Man, Beast, and Demon. Now, many centuries later, everyone is a Mongrel.

Space travel among the three planets of the system is a commonplace, and the local forms of technology and occultism are hyper-developed. Current conflicts and resource crises have led to harsh, hotly-negotiated trading and living conditions, and society has become analogous to early modern Europe, in which families and organizations jockeyed for position and status in a dangerous, partly-fragmented society.

Design notes: In a real game, this stuff would be pages and pages – I'd toss in a lot of names, put in a war or two, put in the origins of the Houses, map out the planets, show some space-travel routes, work out the night-day cycles, and so on. A section on daily life and social interactions would probably fly well too. Overall, the section would be a wad of Color masquerading as Setting.

The Seven Houses

Aggak-Ko - the sophisticates, control most of Aoka

Mekag - the occultists, control most of Beruun

Druinar - the warriors, based on Aoka with strong presence on the other two planets as well

Esseth - the barbarians, widespread on Cath

Sfere - the weirdos, strong presence/post on Cath, decentralized elsewhere

Repta - the artists/mystics, strong presence on Aoka but also on Beruun

Nuin - the criminals, decentralized, but with one main outpost on the moons of Beruun

The Houses should not be understood as ethnicities or clans. This is a single society, not seven. They are political entities which control certain areas and resources, with tendencies toward certain behaviors and outlooks, but not as "tribes" or any kind of enclosed category.

Each House conforms to the two-thirds rule: about two-thirds of the members of a given House accord with the above stereotypes and the opinions about one another presented below. However, the remaining one-third are a pretty even mix of the other outlooks. Thus even the mainly-barbaric Esseth contains its own minority share of sophisticates, artists, etc; every House contains barbaric and criminal elements; and so on.

Aggak-Ko

The Mekag take themselves too seriously - The Druinar are nice to have around, for doing the laundry - The Esseth: who? - The Sfere worry us, what are they up to? - The Repta are so amusing - The Nuin are dangerous but necessary in small doses

Mekag

The Aggak-Ko are our main opponents in the war of secrets - The Druinar are our tools in the false war - The Esseth: such force and such ignorance - The Sfere must know something - The Repta are our real foes, in the real war - The Nuin are tools, nothing but tools

Druinar

The Aggak-Ko are pansies, but they've got the money and the status - The Mekag are a fine eye to direct us, the arm - The Esseth are cannon fodder, but cursed nasty on their own turf - The

Sfere have to be tolerated - The Repta are more pansies, not worth a second glance - The Nuin should be shut down and punished

Esseth

The Aggak-Ko are high and terrifying - The Mekag are witches and warlocks, burn them - The Druinar are the enemy - The Sfere must be holy, go light with them - The Repta: who *are* these people? - The Nuin are our friends

Sfere

The Aggak-Ko mistake manners for power - The Mekag mistake fear and fire for power - The Druinar mistake discipline and weaponry for power - The Esseth mistake numbers and hunger for power - The Repta know that meaning is power, but they are too playful to use it - The Nuin mistake secrecy for power

Repta

The Aggak-Ko are patrons, fortunately not very bright ones - The Mekag are a great source of inspiration - The Druinar are ignorant jar-heads - The Esseth present such thrilling vigor, as long as they are far away - The Sfere are our best friends - The Nuin provide that much-needed walk on the wild side

Nuin

The Aggak-Ko may disapprove of us, but they're our best customers - The Mekag are bad for business - The Druinar must be kept at arm's length, it's fortunate that they're stupid - The Esseth are our other best customers - The Sfere are onto us, damn it - The Repta are the best route to business, but not worth a goal in themselves

Design notes: There'd be a symbol for each House, and that would mean a little version of the symbol next to each one of the "what we think about them" phrases, and oh, you could have a different character sheet for each house with the symbol and slightly different graphics ... ah, padding, thy name is "clan."

Making up stuff like this is very easy – anyone can come up with funky names and these "opinion matrices" in about five minutes.

Why the Houses? The answer isn't very uplifting: they're included because they are familiar territory, reassuring the antsy reader by following the "new but not new" principle. However, unlike their antecedents in *White Wolf* games, they don't impact character-creation choices at all.

One of the manuscript reviewers hated the Houses with a passion, considering it to be an example of "habit and imitation" just like I criticized in the essay. My only defense, such as it is, is that I think a Dune-like noble-house context seems right for the setting and Color, so I went with it.

The Vow

An important feature of the culture: the Vow. Making a Vow means the character is wholly committed toward the well-being and advantage of the Vow's object. It can be made toward a person, toward a House, or toward a given goal.

CHARACTER CREATION

Identity

Divide 6 points among Man, Beast, and Demon scores. One of them, but not two, may be 0. Designate the highest as your "primary" Identity - if there's a tie for highest, choose one of them. These values affect your choices regarding Attributes below. Also, during play, they provide additional Effect to successful task resolutions.

A character's Primary Identity sets his or her basic physical form. A Primary-Human is easy: the basic human body structure. A Primary-Beast is also easy, and the player may choose between the basic animal template of a four-legged quadruped, or a two-legged primate or bird. A Primary-Demon is a bit more complex: the basic body-shape is actually set by the Beast or Human value, whichever is highest after Demon (or choose if Beast and Human values are tied). However, a Primary-Demon also features significant "unnatural" aspects and effects, such as tentacles, shadowy outlines, extensive spines, exposed internal organs, or anything similar.

The other scores contribute to appearance as details, to the degree indicated by their values. A score of 0 in an Identity score indicates no physical features pertaining to that Identity.

Examples of Identity

Ahvia is primarily Demon, with a small Man score and no Beast. She is a demonic humanoid, whose body's outlines often fade off into shadow. Her cape looks like it might be a pair of wings, or rather, her wings are cape-like when folded (Ahvia has wings; see the further explanations below). Her face is very beautiful (see her Beauty score, below), but disturbingly inhuman with a high forehead and bright yellow eyes.

Vooruk is primarily Beast, with low Demon and Man scores. He has a lion-like body form, with suggestions of human in the face and with some grasping ability in his front paws, as well as demonic tendencies – say, a heavily-spined tail. He's basically a manticore.

Ghiazza is primarily Man, with a bit of Beast and no Demon score. He is a wolflike human, with animalistic features like claws, pointed ears, large-irised eyes, and some feral movements.

Attributes

The six attributes are Size, Spirit, Physique, Beauty, Speed, and Social. They are used primarily as target numbers and resource banks during play.

Size + Spirit = 8.

If Man is primary, then your Size and Spirit are both 4; if Beast is primary, then Size must be greater than Spirit; if Demon is primary, then Spirit must be greater than Size.

Physique + Beauty = 8

Choose your character's sex: male or female. If the character is male, then Physique must be higher than Beauty; if the character is female, then Beauty must be higher than Physique. These guidelines may be ignored, but if they are, then the Social attribute (see below) cannot exceed 4.

Speed + Social = 8

Choose your character's age: young, adult, or old. If the character is young, then Speed must exceed Social; if the character is adult, then Speed and Social may be chosen to any values that sum to 8; if the character is old, then Social must exceed Speed.

Note that if you have chosen to ignore the gender guidelines, and if your character is Old, then Social must be taken at 4 and Speed must be dropped to 3 or less.

After Attributes are chosen, any of them may be lowered if the player desires. No points are "gained" by doing so.

Expertise

Expertise falls into three categories: Sorcery, based on Demon; Tech, based on Man; and Bestial, based on Beast. Expertise values set the number of d6 which are rolled during task resolution. They are also categorized by Area: (A) Awareness, (B) Violence, (C) Fear, (D) Charisma, and (E) Education.

Sorcery Expertise

Know (A), Resist (A), Burn (B), Chill (C), Lie (D), Occult (E), and Diabolic Power.

Tech Expertise

Missile (A), Melee (B), Bureaucrat (C), Convince (D), Negotiate (D), Information (E), Repair (E), and Borg Power.

Bestial Expertise

Stalk (A), Sense (A), Athletics (B), Balance (B), Rend (B), Threaten (C), Seduce (D), and Animal Power.

The Power expertise may only be taken for the Expertise corresponding to the character's Primary Identity.

For all the following steps, increases in a given Expertise do stack across the steps. However, a given Expertise cannot be increased more than once within the options of a given step.

- 1) Assign 1 to all Expertise within one's Primary Identity: Man, Beast, or Demon.
- 2) Assign each of two Expertises a level of 3 apiece. Assign as well an additional 1 to all Expertises which are included in these two's Area(s). These two Expertises may be from the same Area or two different areas.
- 3) Assign each of two Expertise (not including the two assigned above) a level of 2 apiece.
- 4) Assign each of two Expertise (not including the four assigned so far) a level of 1 apiece.

Derived scores

The two derived scores are Action Points, Wound Threshold, and Dark Resolve. Action Points are set equal to Speed, Wound Threshold is derived from the Physique/Size table, and Dark Resolve is set equal to Spirit.

Powers

The points allocated into the character's Power Expertise (Diabolic, Borg, or Animal) may be allocated in any fashion among the following options within each Power Identity.

Diabolic

Inhuman (waist down), Inhuman (arms), Tail, Wings, Inhuman Face

Borg

Body compartment, Implanted weapon, Information storage, Replacement limb (1 per limb), Enhanced-spectrum sense

Animal

Wings, Animal legs (both), Animal arms (both), Tail, Head

Powers are usually used to increase the value of any other Expertise which is appropriate for the situation (see below). On rare occasions they are used "by themselves."

Design notes: This section would be beefed up considerably to define and limit Powers. One of my chief concerns is that Powers would not duplicate any other Expertise, and I like the idea that they are principally used to augment rather than as abilities on their own.

Examples of character creation

Alwia of House Mekag

Demon 4, Man 2, Beast 0 - Demon is Primary Identity. Chooses to be Female and Young.
Spirit 6, Size 2, Beauty 5, Physique 3, Speed 6, Social 2

Know 4, Burn 1, Chill 1, Lie 4, Occult 1, Infernal Power 3, Missile 1, Bureaucrat 1, Convince 1, Negotiate 1, Stalk 1, Sense 1, Athletics 2, Balance 1, Rend 1, Threaten 2, Seduce 1, Diabolic Power 3 (wings 2, face 1)

Action Points = 6, Infernal Resolve = 6

Vooruk of House Mekag

Demon 1, Man 1, Beast 4 - Beast is Primary Identity. Chooses to be Male and Old.
Spirit 3, Size 5, Beauty 1, Physique 7, Social 5, Speed 3

Resist 1, Burn 2, Melee 2, Stalk 1, Sense 2, Athletics 4, Balance 3, Rend 6, Threaten 3, Seduce 1, Animal Power 1 (legs 1)

Action Points = 3, Infernal Resolve = 3

Giazza of House Nuin

Demon 0, Man 5, Beast 1 - Man is Primary Identity. Chooses to be Male and Adult.
Spirit 4, Size 4, Beauty 2, Physique 6, Speed 4, Social 4

Burn 1, Chill 1, Lie 1, Missile 1, Melee 4, Bureaucrat 3, Convince 1, Negotiate 1, Information 1, Repair 1, Sense 2, Athletics 3, Balance 2, Rend 1, Threaten 1, Borg Power 1 (implanted weapon 1)

Action Points = 4, Infernal Resolve = 4

Design notes: It's causal, step-by-step design, but I tried to minimize layering (got some in the skills though). I also tried to establish a strong tie to the necessary visuals and to the "internal logic" of what points cause what.

And if I do say so myself, I think making up these characters is kinda fun. One thing that I'd probably add would be some status levels regarding one's House, although at the start of character creation it'd be set strictly by the Social score and not permitted to be tweaked.

TASK RESOLUTION

Basics

Roll d6 equal to Expertise. The target number is set by a character's relevant Attribute, which may belong to the acting character (in which case one rolls equal to or under the TN to succeed) or to a target character or thing (in which case one rolls equal to or over the TN to succeed).

Several Expertise values offer special cases.

- How can I fail, if I am rolling to equal or exceed a 1? If half or more of the dice you roll turn up 1's, then you fail, regardless of the other values.

- How can I fail, if I am rolling to equal or below a 6? If half or more of the dice you roll turn up 6's, then you fail, regardless of the other values.
- How can I succeed, if I am rolling to exceed a 7? If half or more of the dice you roll turn up 6's, then you succeed with Effect = 1. This effect is not increased by the corresponding Identity score.
- What if I'm trying to do something that requires a particular Expertise, and my score in that Expertise is 0? You are permitted to roll 1 die twice. If it succeeds against the relevant target number both times, then you succeed with an Effect of 1. This effect is not increased by the corresponding Identity score.

The Effect is determined by adding the number of d6's which succeed and the TN, and the score for the Identity which governs the Expertise being used.

Example

Ahvia lies to a fellow courtier in order to get a rival assassinated. She rolls 4d6 (her Expertise in Lie) against the listener's Social of 3 (hence her target number is 3). Her dice turn out to be 6, 3, 1, 1. Two of her dice were equal to or over 3, so her Effect = 2 (number of successful dice) + 4 (her Demon value) = 6.

If Ahvia had tried to Negotiate with the courtier rather than Lie to him, she would roll 1d6 (her Expertise in Negotiate) against the target number (3, as before). Let's say she succeeds, with a 5. Her Effect would be only 3, based on her number of successful dice (1) + her Man value (2).

Vooruk must keep his feet on a windswept, dangerous ledge on a high building. He rolls 3d6 (her Expertise in Balance) against his own Physique of 7, which is modified to 5 due to the extreme conditions. His roll is 4, 6, 6, in which only one is equal to or under 5. His Effect = 1 + 4 (his Beast value) = 5.

Design notes: The system is by no means original; much of it can be seen in *Little Fears and Arrowflight*.

I'm toying with the notion of adjusting character creation so that 6 is the maximum score for anything, but so far, I'm not too worried about it. Playtesting will show whether 7's are a pain or not.

I've avoided the problem of "opposed vs. unopposed" design by using the *Little Fears* concept of rolling against oneself. Attribute scores, essentially, represent one's ability to deal with a situation, in which one's own concentration and skills are the make-or-break elements. They also represent one's ability to "resist" others' efforts.

I could have simply imitated *The Whispering Vault* in having all NPCs be simply comprised of target numbers for player-characters' rolls, but for a strongly-Simulationist game, I decided to stick with the ideal that "all characters, player and NPC alike, are under the same law."

However, the Action Points idea is mine, based on my thoughts about alternatives to "round" based conflict that still preserve the one-action-one-task model.

Effect

As a general rule, an Effect of 1 is sufficient to achieve the desired task to a minimal, not very impressive level. Increased Effect usually increases the degree of extent, and influence of the task's outcome, such that an Effect of 4 or greater is notably successful. Ahvia's Effect of 6 is enough to have the listener's assassination attempt be well paid-for, well-researched, and repeated if initially unsuccessful; Vooruk's Effect of 5 indicates that he merely adjusts his stance and keeps his balance with little apparent effort.

In most cases, Effect will be rather high, especially if the character acts mainly within his or her areas of competence. However, Effect may also be decreased by the features of a target character,

so even characters like Vooruk might sometimes see low Effects when using their Primary Identity based skills.

Design notes: one of the ideals of a Purist for System Simulationist game is to model all degrees of success or failure for every step of the resolution process. However, in a High Concept game, the ideal is directed more toward evoking a particular look and feel – and in Mongrel’s case, successes within one’s sphere of competence should be spectacular: blowing an opponent’s guts out of his back, ripping girders in half, bounding animalistically from catwalk to catwalk, steering a space-ship through a meteor shower, and so forth. Lower degrees of success should be observed only during conflict with a significant opponent or in dealing with extraordinary physical conditions.

Modifiers

Adjust target number to reflect unusually difficult conditions, from -1 to -4.

Design notes: One has to be careful with dials. There are two: (1) features of a target that lower the Effect of a successful task, and (2) conditions or circumstances that lower the chance of success in the first place. The Modifiers are clearly #2, and I think the game would be improved by specifying exactly when they apply.

Physical damage

Physical damage is treated as a point on the Size/Physique table. Ahvia, with Size 2 and Physique 3, would be shaded as follows

SIZE	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
PHYSIQUE							
1							
2							
3							
4							
5							
6							
7							

The player counts the Effect suffered from left to right, along the Size row, until he or she hits the character's Size, at which point the points are counted down the Physique column. Also, at this point, the character loses an additional Action Point. All of this “zone” on the table is unshaded.

If the remaining damage is less than or equal to Physique, then the character suffers a decrease in Physique (for purposes of the Size/Physique table and also for target-numbers) of 1. Again, we’re still in the unshaded zone.

If that damage exceeds the Physique score, however, moving into the gray zone below the clear one, then the character collapses, losing all remaining Action Points. If the character subsequently recovers an Action Point, he or she is no longer considered collapsed.

Terminal damage occurs under the following circumstances:

- When a character has collapsed and is hit again for any Effect (note: a collapsed character cannot defend).
- When a character receives Physique damage of more than twice his or her Size. For instance, Ahvia is killed if she receives nine points of damage. This row should be heavily shaded if it’s still on the table, or written below the table if it exceeds the table’s vertical range.

When a character takes terminal damage, he or she may expend one point of Infernal Resolve to avoid dying. This does not require an action or Action Point; however, it permits a full recovery

of Action Points, if necessary. The character is still considered to be in the terminal stage, however, and if Infernal Resolve is reduced to 0, the character will die.

Weapons increase the Effect of damage.

Armor lowers the initial Effect of damage. Damage may also be shunted to Beauty, decreasing Beauty temporarily on a 1:1 basis. One point of this decrease in Beauty is permanent.

Design notes: I figure I'd come up with the exact details of weapons and armor through playtesting. At this point they seem kind of boring to me, and I'd rather not tack on "Effect multiples" that give weapons such major splatter that the game becomes a gun-fest. I'm toying with the idea that weapons don't increase Effect very much, perhaps only by a point or two, but they do significantly affect healing and Action Point recovery rates.

Sorcery Expertise and spiritual damage

The world of Mongrel crackles with cybernetic energy and the roar of spacecraft engines. It also hums, just below the surface of hearing, with hellish, occult power.

The Burn and Chill Expertise are both used as short-term, immediate attacks. The former is direct damage: pure hell-energy unleashed onto physical reality. The latter is psychological drain and dominance and may be combined with specific commands. They are often augmented by a Diabolic Power.

Occult Expertise represents the ability to shape reality using the energies seeping from Hell. In game terms, it may mimic the effects of any other Expertise, but it takes one hour to perform per die rolled. Therefore one might gather information, strike an enemy, or carry out a bargain or seduction, but not right on-the-spot like most Expertises do. Its utility is vast, but its practicality is limited to situations in which a slow process is feasible.

When Occult Expertise is applied at long range or over large areas or time-scales, it receives Modifiers.

The Know Expertise concerns identifying any aspect of Occult Expertise, whether passive in the sense of assessing another individual's Demon Identity score or active in the sense of analyzing the use of the Expertise - who's doing it, what it's doing, and so on.

The Resist Expertise concerns defenses against Occult Expertise. It is carried out as a very slow-paced action as well. It is not used as the defense against the Burn or Chill Expertise.

Infernal Resolve is the fuel for Occult Expertise. One point must be expended at minimum in order to use the Expertise, and additional points may be spent to increase the Effect. These points are spent before the task roll.

Occult and Chill attacks hit Infernal Resolve directly, which has consequences for the ability to withstand terminal damage. If Infernal Resolve hits 0, then the character collapses, losing all remaining Action Points and with an imposed Action Point maximum of 1. Such attacks are defended against using the Resist Expertise.

Infernal Resolve refreshes to its full value within one hour, but the hour must be spent either quietly meditating, performing simple tasks, or interacting with another character in a non-stressful way. It can also refresh to its full value when the circumstances facing the character are in direct opposition to his or her Vow.

Infernal Resolve is also extremely useful in combat for resisting death; see below.

Complex task resolution

These rules apply to a situation in which many characters are taking action at once, and in which the order of actions is important. Combat is a common example of complex task resolution.

- 1) Set the order of the characters' actions based on highest to lowest Beast score. Ties are broken by highest Man score, and further ties are broken by highest Demon score. If all three Identity scores are identical for two characters, flip a coin to see which goes first.
- 2) Alter the order of characters' actions by spending Action Points. It costs 1 Action Point to move to the front of the order (i.e., to take the next action). No limit is set on how many times one can spend. This may also occur at any point during the entire complex task resolution, not only at this stage.
- 3) Attacks/actions are carried out as basic task resolutions. The target number is considered to be one's own attribute unless the target is defending. A targeted character is considered to be defending if he or she spends 1 Action Point upon being attacked/affected. If the target defends, the attacker is forced to spend one Action Point.

If the attacker hits a non-defending character, he or she does not spend an Action Point. If the attacker misses an attack of any kind, he or she loses an Action Point.

Here are the possible situations if Vooruk attacks Giazza.

- Giazza does not defend. Vooruk rolls his Rend dice against his own Physique score, hoping to roll low. If he hits, he spends no Action Points. If he misses (unlikely), he must spend one Action Point.
- Giazza defends, spending one Action Point to do so, and forcing Vooruk to spend one Action Point. Vooruk rolls his Rend dice against Giazza's Physique score, hoping to roll high. If he hits, he spends no further Action Points. If he misses, he is forced to spend one more Action Point.

4) All Effects take place upon their occurrence. No simultaneity occurs in Mongrel.

5) Action Points do not automatically refresh at any point. Actions simply continue based on who's next in the order; there are no "rounds" in Mongrel. Remember, at any time, the order may be changed by spending an Action Point. Characters may continue to act as long as they have Action Points and are willing to use them.

Design notes: I'm toying with the idea that Action Points *can* refresh for totals above their starting level, but they can't refresh if they're "full up" at that level. This means one can temporarily have very high Action Point totals, but only by waiting and biding time during combat itself. If I don't go with this option, then beginning totals will probably have to be higher. Definitely a playtesting issue.

For example, if the above option is stated, how much refreshment is allowed? Using a fraction of Speed, for instance, introduces rounding-breakpoints. But putting refreshment at Physique makes that score too central. I'm tempted merely to say "three points for everyone" something similar.

6) Recovering Action Points takes one action. This is the only action a character may make if his or her current Action Points = 0. If current Action Points = 0, then only one Action Point is recovered; if current Action Points are positive, then Action Points refresh to that character's

maximum value. When recovering an Action Point, a character may not attack, defend, or carry out any other action.

As a general rule, when a character's Action Points = 1, then he or she is rushed, perhaps slightly off-balance, and slightly disoriented, although no game penalties apply. When Action Points = 0, then he or she is "discombobulated," too focused on the last action performed to pay attention to anything else, as well as stressed and fatigued.

Infernal Resolve may be spent to increase Action Points on a 1:1 basis. This tactic increases the risk from terminal damage, however.

Design notes: I'm quite happy with the basic concept of this order/action system. I think it needs playtesting, especially in terms of multiple-on-one situations, but there's some potential there.

Fatigue

In the short term, Fatigue is represented by Action Points. However, for longer-term situations, use this rule: Action Points cannot be refreshed (as an action) indefinitely. A character may do so only as many times as his or her Physique score per hour, after which point Action Point refreshment will only yield one Action Point. After this point, the character must rest for one to six hours, as the GM judges depending on the actions taken, to regain the ability to refresh to full Action Points.

Design notes: Rules about fatigue and endurance have a way of growing bigger and bigger. I came up with all sorts of things about Physique rolls to carry things, about possibly collapsing after refreshing only one Action Point for so many instances, about what happens if you don't refresh to full Action Points within a day's time, and so on. When such text begins to outstrip the length of the resolution system explanation, it's probably time to stop, then go back and start scrubbing.

CHARACTER IMPROVEMENT

Character wealth and social status

Wealth in Mongrel is handled largely through House Credit. Each House is happy to issue what amounts to "accounts" to anyone. Characters start with an account equal to Social for their own House, and equal to 1 for each of the others.

When buying anything, one rolls the necessary Expertise (usually Negotiate, but others can apply as well) against the other individual's Social, but also to equal or under one's own Credit. The item (if available in the first place) is acquired only if the roll exceeds the other's Social score but is equal to or under one's own Credit. If it succeeds at the Credit but fails against the Social, then the item may still be acquired if Credit is sacrificed from the buyer to the seller.

Credit may be transferred among House accounts, but always at a 2:1 rate.

Design notes: Changes in one's Credit values would involve some rules, due to various deals, obligations, or other neat stuff.

Cash may also be utilized as a secondary means of exchange, but it's considered low-brow and not much different from trading chickens.

As play proceeds, when the Social score changes, credit with one's own House changes with it. If a character happens to be at Social 4, with Credit with his own House at 2 (having been reduced through events during play), and if Social improves to 5, then that Credit also goes up by 1, to 3. Credit with the other Houses does not change this way.

Character points

1-2 points are awarded to everyone who played in a given session, based on the length and intensity of the session. An additional point is awarded to characters who put themselves at risk when conforming to the standards of a Vow.

Points may only be spent on features that were used, successfully or unsuccessfully, during the previous session of play. Unspent points may be saved.

- To raise Expertise: current level x 5
- To raise Identity: current level x 2 if one of the others is reduced by 1; current level x 5 if nothing is reduced
- To raise Attributes: current level x 5 within the constraints of Identity, Gender, or Age

Design notes: In many ways, this section represents the most significant example of why Mongrel is an illustration rather than a “real game” – I would definitely come up with a more focused reward system for a real game. It also represents a common issue in Simulationist games, that the carefully-structured relationship among point-costs for character creation can be thrown all kerflooey as more points are gained. Mongrel presents the same not-especially-satisfying solution as many other games, which is to make character improvement so slow that, basically, real play never gets to the point of violating the characters’ initial point-structures.

Despite some cries of disappointment from previewers, I decided to go with a Hero System style of point-based character improvement, rather than an in-game learning-based approach. The wealth and status material represents a small nod toward the latter, though, which would increase character effectiveness without changing values on the character sheet.

The role of the Vow is also intended to draw a slightly closer link between points and in-game occurrences, as well as to provide positive reinforcement for role-playing rather than the punishment-mechanics usually found in Simulationist games. However, notice that it’s one-way – in a Narrativist game, it’s likely that the character would improve upon addressing the Vow at all, rather than simply by conforming to it, as here.

SCENARIO PREPARATION AND PLAY

Design notes: Overall, this section would include standard Illusionism text along the lines of Arrowflight, with a strong emphasis on social intrigue intertwining with confrontations. Scenarios would follow the Feng Shui model: three or four trains aimed straight at the player-characters, some directed toward them personally and some not, with a bit of colorful backstory to justify it all. Schemes of Houses and conflicts over resources would be paramount, as well as conflicting Vows. Resolutions would then include a massive crossfire and probably some politicking, similar to some applications of Vampire.

Some people might be seeing a “lack” here, and they’re right. In Gamist terms, it lacks an achievement-edge, such as profit in Shadowrun or magic items in D&D; in Narrativist terms, it lacks a Premise which rivets attention right onto the very next action of the protagonist. The Theme (not an especially deep one) is already there, much as in Arrowflight, Call of Cthulhu, or Godlike. It strikes me, though, that most High Concept Simulationist games are like this, so that’s what I’ve done. It’s the Color that’s supposed to carry the day, with the “point” already underlying everything.