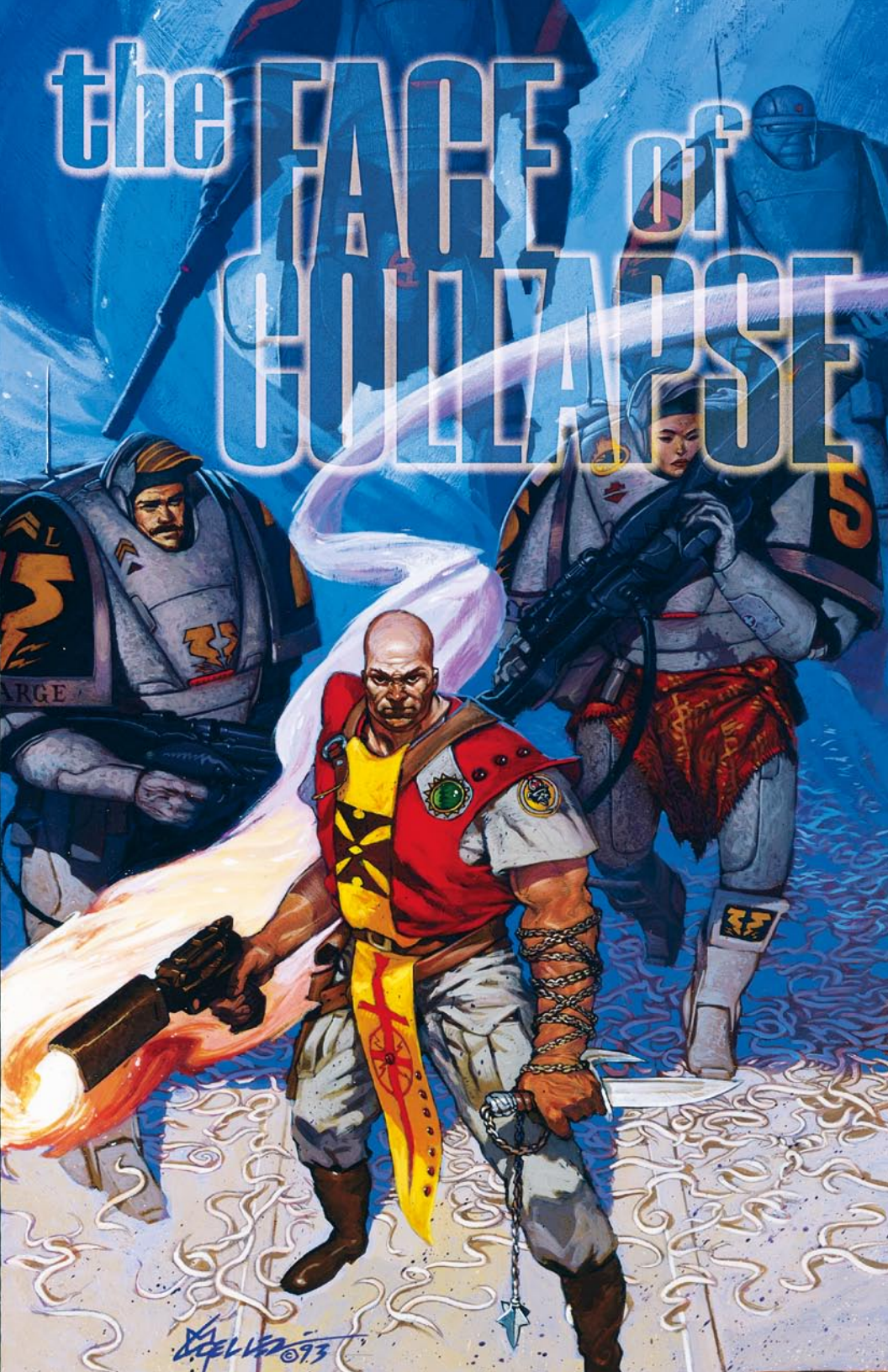


the FACE of GOLLYAROSE



DELLE 93



THE FACE OF COLLAPSE

All life as we know it is ending. It seems too dramatic a statement to believe, almost trite. What's more, daily lives carry on heedless of the danger, full of concern and hurry: Love is had and hearts are broken; wars are fought, blood spills; sweat is spent, money earned; children are born; the old wither and die.



But the end times have come. Some have seen the face of collapse—have witnessed its gemini essence, human and inhuman, and it has shaken them to the core. Shivering and near mad, these survivors have returned to the light and security of worlds untouched by this terror. They preach warnings in vain; those who haven't experienced the terror themselves can never understand. The drama of life itself is too seductive, too important, to fully grasp the breadth of the end, to understand that it is real this time. Inevitable.

Perhaps they cannot grasp the breadth of it because the end has come upon us so slowly, almost gently. It has taken millennia to arrive. There has been no dousing of the suns, no cataclysmic implosion; only an infection eating at the edges, a darkening of the outer rim—as if a shadow has passed over the moon.

Perhaps it is because the end wears a human face. It seems so unbelievable, so far-fetched: a race of aliens whose utmost desire is to be human, to wear our skin, to think our thoughts.



But it is true: They want us—need us. They have come, and it is the end. This time we live in is the very face of collapse.

Once, the human race was great, creating a wondrous civilization that spanned a galaxy. Unthinkable, but true, but all things come to an end, and this sprawling utopia has sunk into desuetude, riven with infighting, strife, pride and greed. Only the core remains, the center. What was once little more than the Capital Sector of the Central Prefecture of the Federated Empires is now the total span of human civilization. What was once one harmonious government is now eight squabbling empires vying for supremacy, yearning for the glory days and ignoring their inevitable, impending end. Casiguran, Comoran, Darikahn, Dunedin Gonzagin, Karsan, Kudus and Urfan—vast realms, containing myriad worlds each, but tiny and impotent compared with the glory of the past.

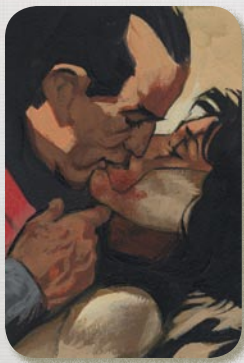


It's not that we wish to die. We simply cannot agree on who should be the one to restore us to our former glory. And so bitter are we—are all of us!—that we say 'tis better to watch our neighbor gutted by the enemy than support him against a common foe.

To the galactic south of these powerful and petty empires, engulfing what were once the Sovereign, River, Golden and Glorious Prefectures of the great empire, dwells the enemy: the terror, the worm, the Vaylen.

Inexorably and fiercely, the Vaylen have preyed upon our divisiveness, upon our nature to be unique, individual and independent. Preyed upon

THE FACE OF COLLAPSE



us and swallowed us, world by world. Taken body and *mind* of countless billions. Farmed us, hulled us and used us—as vessels, templates and surrogates.

In humanity, the Vaylen have found what they have fundamentally lacked: emotion, unpredictability, utility, artistic creativity and most importantly, true, unbounded sentience. Without us, *they* are doomed, confined to an animal state, or something less than human. Placed inside the human mind, they are complete. They can dwell in our minds and live the lives they would never—could never—have without us.



The worm comes now, again, hungry for hosts for their trillions of offspring. The eight empires are all that remain to stem their feverish tide. Now is the last push. Surrounded and doomed, now is humanity's final moment to burn brightly. To stave off the end and live to rebuild, perhaps even attain greater heights!

Is there hope left? It is up to you. What will you choose? Will you sacrifice your duty, your obligations, your loves, your entanglements, your concerns, your children, your very life to fight this shadow war? Or will you fail to



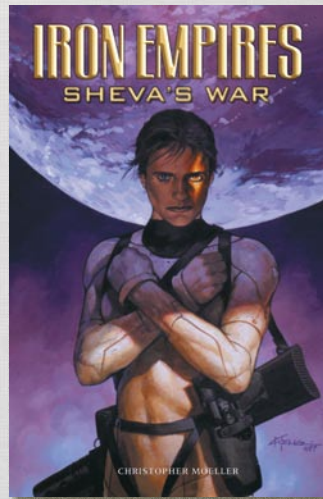
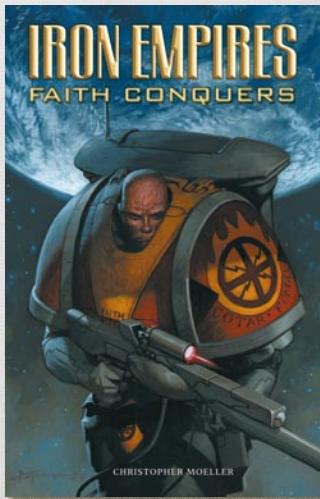
recognize that the end times have come, and succumb to the worm—tragically remaining true to what you believe, what you think is important, until it is too late. Until what you hold dear—your mentors, your companions, your lovers, spouses and children—have all become one of them, the worm, the terror. Until they take you firmly by the arm and lead you to a chamber

where a surgeon awaits, strange tool in hand, a worm for you writhing in a jar beside him. *Your* end, but the birth of another Vaylen, your memories now part of the Vaylen, while you watch, powerless, through eyes that were once your own.

Choose wisely. And pray you are wise enough to recognize which choice you have made.

The Iron Empires

The term “Iron Empires” refers to a factionalized galactic government on the brink of destruction. It also refers to the critically acclaimed comic books of Christopher Moeller: *Faith Conquers*, *Sheva's War*, *The Passage* and *The Second Passage* (from *Negative Burn*). These are stories of people entangled in the fate of their homes, their families, their vocations and their communities. People forced to make decisions about what is most important to them. Complex characters with divided loyalties who may objectively know the right course, but find that following it is far from an objective matter. Powerful individuals, vulnerable to their own humanity.



The stories of the Iron Empires take place in a future where humanity is a great spacefaring civilization. Where nations span multiple systems, governable only with distortion drives that carry cargo and people faster than light. Where humanity has surpassed the zenith of its development, and now slowly slips toward its nadir.

What do We do in This Game?



This game allows the player to take on the role of a protagonist in a story that decides the fate of his world. It is not a single player game. In fact, it works best with three to six people. The group uses the rules to create a world, decide what the conflict on the world will encompass, build characters who are a part of that conflict and then play out the fate of the world as mirrored by the struggles of the characters. One player plays the opposition to the main group, and both sides play to win.

These conflicts and struggles are resolved using the abilities of characters within the context of the game's structure. Infection, Duel of Wits and Firefight are the main methods of resolution.

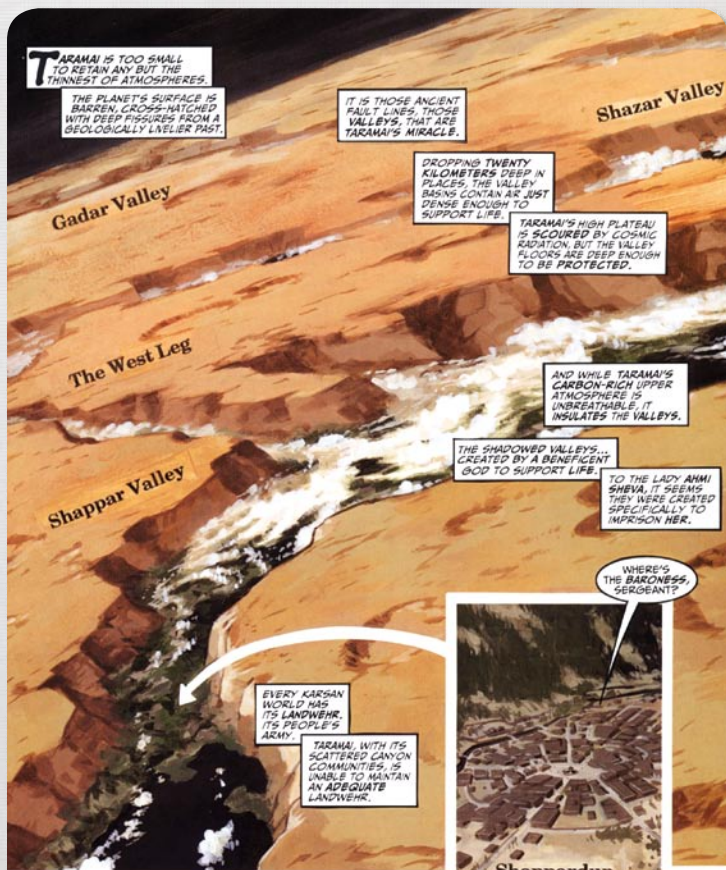


Reading Material

This game is designed so that the players can create stories similar to those found in Christopher Moeller's comics. All of the mechanics and descriptive color focus on that task, which makes the game fairly alien reading material. It certainly doesn't read like one of Chris' comics. Nor does it attempt to dump Chris' setting into the lap of the reader in the form of 30 pages of fiction. Instead, the setting is portrayed in the fabric

of the game mechanics—the feel and structure of the comics emerges in play. In fact, the text presents the barest of details, hints of setting and culture in order to spark your imagination so that you will go and create your own unique worlds. If you're interested in more setting, background and fiction, buy *Faith Conquers* and *Sheva's War* from Dark Horse Comics, www.darkhorse.com. They are excellent comics.

3



The Face of Collapse



IT REVOLVES ON THIS

Burning Empires is a roleplaying game. Its rules contain a philosophy: There are consequences to your choices. Moreover, recognizing that the system *enforces* these choices will help you navigate play. These consequences range from the very black and white, “If I engage in this duel, my character might die,” to the more complex, “If my character undertakes this task, he’ll be changed, and I don’t know exactly how.” I always encourage players to think before they test their characters. I ask them, “Are you prepared to accept the consequences of your actions?”

In the game, players take on the roles of characters inspired by history, current events and works of science fiction. These characters are represented by a series of numbers that designate their abilities, and a list of player-determined descriptions and goals. The synergy of inspiration, imagination, numbers and priorities is the most fundamental element of Burning Empires. Manipulating these numbers and goals within situations presented by the game master (GM) is what the game is all about.

The mechanical consequences of the players’ decisions are described in this chapter, in the World Burner, Character Burner and the Burning Wheel. The emotional, ethical and moral ramifications are left to you.

Voices of Iron Empires

As you read through the rules, you will encounter three characters. These characters represent the author’s voice and attitude in



certain parts of the text. The voices are portrayed as characters from Chris' comics, but don't worry. You don't have to be familiar with them to navigate the game.



Lieutenant Urci Fox was Trevor Faith's trusted ally on Hotok during the story of *Faith Conquers*. In the text, Urci will appear to give the reader commentary or further advice on various rules.



This is *Gopher*. He's a Kern and a member of Trevor Faith's unit, the Grey Rats. Gopher rears his ugly head whenever we need harsh advice or warnings regarding the limits of Burning Empires. Take what he says with a grain of salt. He's kind of crazy.



Rhiannon is a strange one. She's Vaylen—Philippe of Artois' handler in *Sheva's War*. Beneath her calm visage lurks the worm, the terror. She's volunteered to offer some advice and commentary on the darker parts of the Burning Empires rules.

Basic rules text is not preceded by any of the characters. This “rules voice” is used to convey most of the information in the game. The characters offer comment on the rules.

STRUCTURE of The Book

This book is divided into four major sections: The Face of Collapse, the World Burner, the Character Burner and the Burning Wheel.

The Face of Collapse and It Revolves on This—which you're reading right now—give a taste of the setting and mechanics.

The World Burner throws the players into the thick of it: Make your setting now. While the players make their setting, they learn about the Iron Empires as a whole and put their own stamp on it as well. The fabric of the setting is integral to the game. It shapes the mechanics at play.

The Character Burner provides setting and color for the players as it walks them through the process of creating a protagonist for this story.

Lastly, the Burning Wheel describes all of the conflict resolution mechanics that will be used in play. It also details how advancements and rewards work.



It
Revolves
on This



The Flow of the Game

Burning Empires is inherently a social game. You play face to face with your friends. As you interact with one another, you come to decisions and have your characters undertake actions.

There are two sides you can take: Either your actions are helping humanity overcome the Vaylen threat, or you're aiding the Vaylen. You may choose to remain philosophically neutral, but if you're not actively helping the human side, you're helping the Vaylen. The struggle for the fate of each world is too desperate to be otherwise.

One of you must be the GM (game master). The GM plays the side the other players aren't on. Usually it's the Vaylen, but sometimes it'll be the human side. The GM makes all of the strategic, tactical and personal decisions for his side. He expresses these decisions through the Infection mechanics, which guide the action and pacing of the events of the story at hand. The GM is, quite literally, trying to ensure that his side *wins*. (The mechanics ensure there is no abuse of power.) In addition, he plays the roles of the relationships and background characters for both sides. Lastly, he arbitrates rules calls and interpretations so that play progresses smoothly.

Everyone else plays a protagonist (a.k.a., "a character") in the story. Even if the players decide to take on the roles of farm boys, no matter how green or naive, their exploits are the main focus of play. The conflicts created by the players' priorities for their characters shape the situations to resolve. Resolving conflicts (and creating new ones) is the mainstay of play.

As conflicts develop, the players use their characters' abilities to overcome challenges and survive. To do this, scenes are roleplayed, dice are rolled and the results interpreted via the rules presented in this book.

As a group, the players are responsible for their "side," human or Vaylen. They make the strategic, tactical and personal decisions to ensure *their side wins*: Either the planet is saved from Vaylen incursion, or it falls to the worms. Through play, you'll determine how it happens.



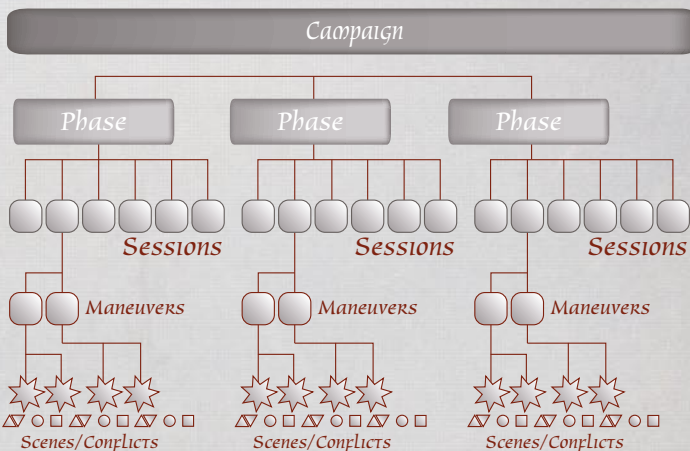
Structure of Play

There are five levels of play for this game: campaign, phase, session, maneuver, scene. The overarching umbrella is called a campaign. This level contains a story arc that is going to span the entire battle for the planet. A full campaign happens over about 18 sessions of play and is divided into three parts, called phases.

The phases of a Burning Empires campaign are: infiltration, usurpation and invasion. They correlate to the stage of the Vaylen infection on the planet: Are they just arriving and trying to set up inroads? Infiltration. Have the Vaylen managed to create a beachhead on the planet and hull key individuals so that they are poised to take over more? Usurpation. Or have the Vaylen come in force in a gambit to conquer the planet with pure military might? Invasion. The players can play out the fate of their world using all of the phases, or just pick one or two.

Contained in each phase are a number of sessions. These are the actual units of play—the time you have agreed to get together with your friends and play this game. An ideal Burning Empires session lasts four to five hours. A phase lasts, on average, about six sessions of play. In the first phase, one session is dedicated to world burning and character burning. The other five determine the outcome of the conflicts and the end result of the phase.

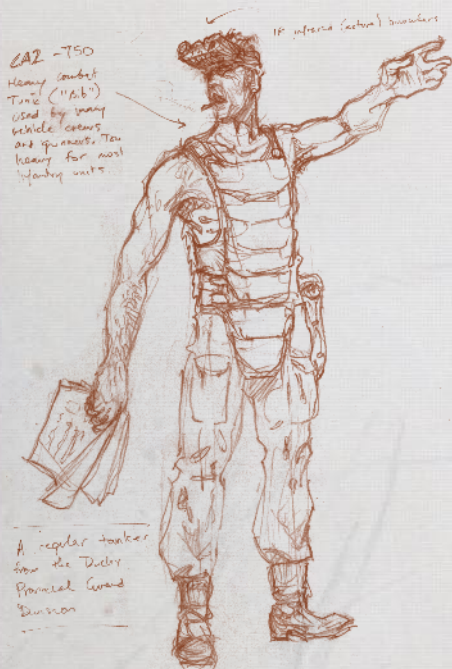
Each session is subdivided into what we call *maneuvers*. Maneuvers are twofold in nature. They are goals, scenarios or adventures in which the characters participate. They are also moves in the strategic game. Players strategize about maneuvers before diving into the scenes. There are one or two maneuvers per session.



It
Revolves
on This

THE FACE OF COLLAPSE

Scenes are the most valuable unit of play. They exist for the player to attempt to push his agenda forward. In scenes, the players take on the roles of their characters—almost like in a performance. Each player usually engages in at least one major scene per maneuver. Within the scenes, the players use their characters' abilities to initiate and resolve conflicts. These conflicts are tests for the character. Tests earn experience and reward, and they grant a small degree of narrative control with which the player can push his agenda forward. In order to enact the strategy decided upon for the phase, session and maneuver, a player must engage his character in a series of conflicts.



Sheets of Paper

Each player is required to keep a written record of his character. Character sheets are provided in the back of this book and on burningempires.com for just this purpose. Characters in *Burning Empires* evolve and grow as play progresses, so I recommend using a pencil to mark the sheet. There are a few other sheets used in play to keep track of moment-to-moment stuff, but they'll be discussed later down the line.



The GM must keep track of the characters he uses in play. Most don't need to be fully fleshed

out—a few numbers usually suffice. But there are certain characters that will need to be described fully in order to give them their due.

Dice

D6

Burning Empires uses common six-sided dice for all rolls. From here on out, these dice are referred to as "D." Groups of them are referred to as 3D, 4D, 5D for short: three dice, four dice, five dice, etc.



It
Revolves
on This

Yes and Worms

Dice in Burning Empires are rolled in handfuls (or pools) of usually three to six dice. In each roll, every die is counted as its own result, either a “yes” or a “no.” The more yeses, the better. Any die that comes up as a “no” result is a traitor to your cause and doesn’t count toward success. We call them “worms.”



A “yes” result is a 4, 5 or 6 on a die. A “no” result is a 1, 2 or 3. (Worms!).

Successes

When a die comes up a 4 or higher, we call it a *success*. After the dice are rolled, count up all your successes.

Rolling a handful of five dice, my luck gives me a 1, 2, 2, 4, 5 result. Two of the dice came up 4 or higher, thus I rolled two successes.

When a player rolls dice, he needs successes so that his character passes the tests set before him in the game.

The Little S

Sometimes you will see a number listed as “2s”. This notation is shorthand for “two successes.” Successes represent dice already rolled that came up successes. The “s” notation is used most often when describing a pool of successes the players must attack and reduce via successes from their own rolls.

Ability Ratings

Exponent

The number next to your character’s stats, attributes and skills— Perception 3, Resources 4, Tactics 5, for example—indicates how many dice to roll when that ability is called upon. We here at Burning Wheel Headquarters call that number the *exponent* of the ability. In the

dictionary, exponent is defined as “one that represents” (not X to the Nth power). In the game, the number is representative of the character’s ability in that area. Throughout the text, you’ll see me refer to an ability as, for example, exponent 3 or even exp 3. That’s just me saying, “You roll three dice for that, bub.”

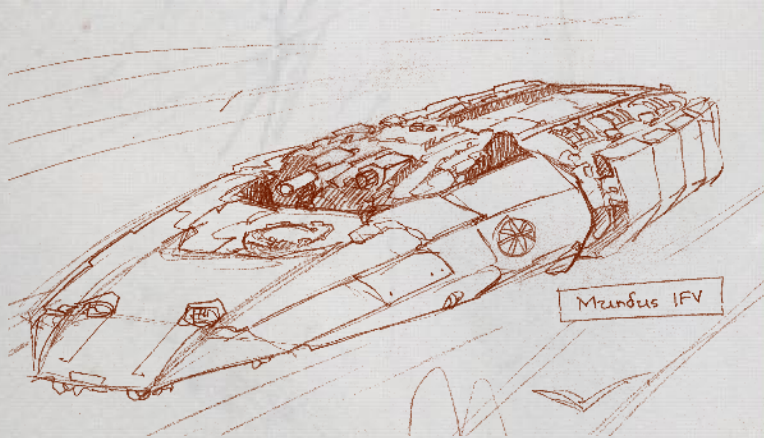
Expertise by Exponent

Below is a list of exponents (exp) in Burning Empires and what they imply about the ability they represent. This list should help you get a feel for the system:

- Exp 1 is naturally disinclined, crippled or utterly incompetent
- Exp 2 is untrained, raw, weak or unpracticed
- Exp 3 is nominally trained and practiced
- Exp 4 is competent; everyday stuff doesn’t pose a challenge
- Exp 5 is expert
- Exp 6 is near mastery
- Exp 7 is excellence defined
- Exp 8 is total mastery, complete understanding
- Exp 9 is uncanny; incomprehensibly good
- Exp 10 is as near perfection as the system allows

When to Roll

Burning Empires is very much a game. Although players undertake the roles of their characters and embellish their actions with performance and description, rolling the dice determines success or failure and, hence, where the story goes.





It
Revolves
on This

Tests

Tests are the teeth in the gears of this game. They are the most basic unit of currency. Without tests, nothing moves forward. In fact, in a situation involving conflict, tests are *required*. A player cannot narrate an act in the game that will affect another character without testing an ability to back it up.

When a player's character comes into conflict with another element of the game, the player must test one of his character's abilities to try to overcome the obstacle or accept that his opponent has "won this round." Both are mechanically binding in game.



Testing abilities is a good thing! Not only do tests drive the story by providing tangible results for our embellishments and performances, they allow the character a chance to improve his abilities so he may succeed at more difficult tasks in the future.

Tests are described in detail in the Scenes and Conflicts chapter.

Obstacles to Overcome

So now we know how to test an ability—roll the number of dice indicated, 4s or better count as successes, the more successes the better. Why do we need multiple successes?

Players need to generate multiple successes in order to pass more difficult tests. The number of successes needed to pass a test is called the *obstacle* (*Ob*). It is the GM's role to assign appropriate obstacles based on the inherent complexity of the task at hand and the examples in this book.

The higher the obstacle, the more difficult the test, and the more skilled and lucky the character will need to be to pass it:

Difficulty by Obstacle

- Ob 1 Easy
- Ob 2 Routine
- Ob 3 Difficult
- Ob 4 Extremely Difficult
- Ob 5 Master-Level
- Ob 6 Heroic Effort
- Ob 7 Ludicrously Difficult
- Ob 8 Nearly Impossible
- Ob 9 Phenomenally Difficult
- Ob 10 Miraculous





PROBABILITIES

	Ob 1	Ob 2	Ob 3	Ob 4	Ob 5	Ob 6	Ob 7	Ob 8
1D	50/50	—	—	—	—	—	—	—
2D	3 in 4	1 in 4	—	—	—	—	—	—
3D	●	50/50	1 in 10	—	—	—	—	—
4D	◆	2 in 3	1 in 3	↘	—	—	—	—
5D	★	●	50/50	1 in 5	↘	—	—	—
6D	★	◆	2 in 3	1 in 3	1 in 10	↘	—	—
7D	★	◆	3 in 4	50/50	1 in 5	↘	↘	—
8D	★	★	●	2 in 3	1 in 3	1 in 10	↘	↘
9D	★	★	◆	3 in 4	50/50	1 in 4	1 in 10	↘
10D	★	★	★	●	2 in 3	1 in 3	1 in 5	↘

It
Revolves
on This

Key to Exponent vs Obstacle Table

The coordinate number lists rough odds for gaining success with a given number of dice against the indicated obstacle. For example, for a 1 in 3 chance, say to yourself, “I am going to pass this test about once every three times I throw the dice.” Aside from the listed odds, the symbols equal:

- = Not possible without artha
- ↘ = Not very likely (~ 1 in 20)
- = Very likely (~ 8 in 10)
- ◆ = Extremely likely (~ 9 in 10)
- ★ = Near-guaranteed success (better than 9 in 10)

BASIC DICE in BRIEF

- Roll dice when a conflict arises.
- The number of dice rolled is determined by the character’s ability that applies to the conflict.
- The number of dice thrown is equal to the number next to the ability. This is called the *exponent*.
- 4s and better are *successes*. 3s and lower are *worms*.
- The *obstacle* is the inherent difficulty of the task being attempted. You need successes equal to or greater than the obstacle to pass the test.
- *Open-ended rolls*—6s on Steel tests allow you to pick up another die for each 6 and roll it again, hopefully adding more successes.

Iron Empires Terminology

- Ahmilakh**— the six-fingered prophet. Founder of the Mundus Humanitas.
- Anvil**— planet-based armed forces: soldiers, tanks and planes. Also refers to unpowered infantry armor.
- Bright Mark**— a scar that the vast majority of psychologists bear. It glows when they use their psychological power.
- Corvus**— ritual depilation required of anyone who joins the lords-pilot.
- Crucis**— a cross-shaped cybernetic interface implanted at the base of the skull. A crucis is necessary to pilot iron and hammer.
- Distortion Drive**— a drive technology that manipulates the value of time to allow faster-than-light interstellar travel.
- Fusor**— a squad support weapon that projects a tongue of plasma, energized to the point of nuclear fusion, at great distance and with great effect.
- Grav/Pressor**— a technology that manipulates gravity to provide reactionless drive inside a gravity well.
- Hammer**— space-based naval forces: battleships, cruisers and transports.
- Hanrilke**— the last dynasty to rule the old Federated Empire. Their collapse brought on the age of the Iron Empires.
- Iron**— powered battle armor symbolic of and exclusive to the nobility in the Iron Empires.
- Kerrn**— a plant-based species artificially created by the Vaylen. They rebelled and now fight against their creators.
- Lord-Pilot**— a noble rank that allows its bearer to own and operate iron or hammer-class spacecraft.
- Mukhadish**— a bioengineered slave race created by the Vaylen as a labor force. They and the Kerrn despise one another.
- Mundus Humanitas**— the foremost religion of the Iron Empires. Their symbol is a burning wheel. They believe all fate is predetermined.
- Naiven**— a worm. It is the natural state of a Vaylen. Once implanted in a host, a Naiven becomes Vaylen.
- Psychology**— the power to read thoughts, communicate telepathically and forcefully alter a target's behavior or personality with only a thought.
- Sléd**— a small vehicle, typically using grav/pressor technology.
- Vaylen**— a creature consisting of a host and an implanted Naiven worm. The worm dominates the host's personality and intelligence with its own. Vaylen is the common name for the enemies of humanity. Also referred to as "the worm" and "the terror."