

BLOWING

UP

THE MOVIES



GAME THE ACTION
MOVIE CLASSICS

ROBIN D. LAWS



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BLOWING UP THE INTRODUCTION

When we play and design roleplaying games we often seek inspiration in cinema. Whether we're sending our player characters on an epic quest, toward the stars, or into costumed hero battle, movies act as a shared reference point as we assemble our storylines. With a game like *Feng Shui*, which has action movie roleplaying right in the subtitle, a look at the way directors and their action choreographers assemble thrilling scenes seems a no-brainer. Yet with so many elements vying for inclusion in a roleplaying core book, the game itself can make only a quick sideview shot at the topic, while keeping the main fire trained on that passel of eunuch sorcerers up ahead. Thanks to the Kickstarter backers for *Feng Shui 2*, I get the opportunity, as bullets ping the catwalk railing beside us and blade-wielding kung fu masters toss energy bolts overhead, to rifle key titles of the action flick canon for gaming inspiration.

Each of the twenty-four essays in this compact, easily-concealable volume examines the film itself, then seeks ways to translate one of its central virtues to your gaming table. The balance between analysis and play advice varies between essays. Sometimes an exploration of a film's hallmark technique carries us through the entire entry. In other cases I've yielded into the temptation to digress a bit.

The essays serve as bite-sized treatments of each title, meant to spark thought and action. Much more could be said about most of these films. The intensive beat-by-beat breakdown I give to *Dr. No* (1982) in another of my books, *Hamlet's Hit Points*, lies outside the remit of *Blowing Up the Movies*. In keeping with the explodey spirit of the titles at hand, this book adopts a looser, more casual, more directly play-oriented approach.

In seeking a particular angle in each piece I am leaving out a host of other observations that might be made about it. Both *The Matrix* and *Star*

Wars brilliantly present exposition and invoke the mythic King Arthur/Christ narrative. To keep each piece distinct, I look at exposition in the *Matrix* essay and the archetype of the chosen one in *Star Wars*. In an alternate universe where I got onto a tube train with Gwyneth Paltrow at just the right moment I might as easily have done them the other way round. The *Big Trouble in Little China* piece is mostly about pop-cultural cross-pollination, with a side note on playing a comic bad-ass. Again, that emphasis could as well have been turned on its head, had Gwyneth not gotten to me first. Once you think of her as a high-ranking Ascended operative a lot of stuff suddenly makes sense. But I've said too much.

In other words, in my effort to focus on a particular idea in each essay, I may be missing the Thing You Always Say about your favorite film. But then you already know that and don't need me going around saying it too.

If these essays get you thinking about the relationship between your gaming choices and the media source material they reference, the book has accomplished its task.

This book tackles only a quick cross-section of the films that inform the *Feng Shui* spirit. The choices focus primarily on Hong Kong action cinema. Within that category it further favors what I regard as the classic era of that tradition, which runs more or less from the mid-eighties to mid-nineties.

Kickstarter backers picked some of the titles. Patrons pitching in for the special Fistful of Popcorn tier selected a movie apiece, stretching my boundaries to encompass an 80s action classic, key Kurosawa, a Cornetto-munching action comedy, and a masked rider duology. Not to mention an HK classic I should have picked myself and the central film of the geek canon. Two more titles won inclusion via a poll of all backers: the dystopian gun-grabber *Equilibrium* and that Indonesian brutalist rave-up *The Raid: Redemption*.

When I need to cite a game mechanic or term, I'll be invoking *Feng Shui* 2. As roleplaying game fan, even if you don't know that specific game, you have the grounding to work out their meaning from context. Although if

you like both RPGs and action movies and haven't yet familiarized yourself with *FS2*, WHAT THE HECK HAS GONE WRONG?

I've gone light on synopses. For well-known titles I'll give you just enough to remind you of the film if you haven't seen it in a while. More obscure movies may warrant a little more description. When I can count on you to have the film hard-burned into your frontal lobe, I'll toss the synopsis entirely.

These pieces of analysis best help you sharpen your games if you've seen the films already. Go and watch them, then read the accompanying essays. I've granted myself a license to spoil.

Subtitles of Hong Kong films often assign the characters Western names not actually heard in the dialogue. As these are easier to remember for those of us unversed in Cantonese, I'll go with the English name seen in the subtitles, should one exist.

To save you page flipping between books, we've reprinted the filmography from *FS2* here. We haven't changed it any, so you need not pore over both in hopes that one of them has slipped in a recommendation the other omits.

Definitions may be in order for the uninitiated. The term "wuxia" refers to Chinese high fantasy, with martial arts abilities that seem positively sorcerous. *Crouching Tiger*, *Hidden Dragon*, *A Chinese Ghost Story* and *Hero* all fall into this category. The outlaw demimonde of martial arts warriors depicted in these films is sometimes called the "giang hu" world. "Heroic bloodshed" films belong to a sub-genre of crime drama that heavily emphasizes fatalistic melodrama. Examples include *A Better Tomorrow*, *The Killer*, and *SPL*.

Enough preliminaries. I hear vampires hopping outside the door, so it's time to get on with the narrative secrets that propel them, and the giang hu warriors, maverick cops, masterless samurai, grasshopper-styled cyborgs, and jedi knights populating the pages to come.

If I don't make it out alive, go forward, my comrades, and bravely game. Bravely game.

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BIG TROUBLE IN LITTLE CHINA

PASTICHING THE UNFAMILIAR

Released in 1986, John Carpenter's *Big Trouble in Little China* performs a multitude of improbable feats. One, it's a major studio American production that undertakes to parody a foreign genre its domestic audience won't yet know. Two, it actually predates many of the titles you might think it's referencing. Tsui Hark's wuxia game-changer *Zu: Warriors of the Magic Mountain* (1982) exists as a reference at this point, along with such early kung fu ghost comedies as *Close Encounters of the Spooky Kind* (1980, Sammo Hung) and *The Dead and the Deadly* (1982, Wu Ma). But as the film is first being written, with its original drafts set in 19th century San Francisco, most of the HK supernatural fu classics have yet to be made. No *Mr. Vampire* (q.v.), no *A Chinese Ghost Story* (q.v.), no *The Swordsman* (1990, credited to King Hu). The Western fandom for HK films extant in '86 revolves around Bruce Lee, Shaw Brothers chop socky, and real-world martial arts practice. It sure isn't ready for lightning-throwing warriors or ghostly sorcerers. Accordingly, *Big Trouble* flops on its theatrical release, joining the roster of fan favorites that slowly grows its popularity on home video. To this day it remains the film *Feng Shui* fans are most likely to mention to me when chatting about the game.

In contemporary San Francisco, lovable loudmouth trucker Jack Burton (Kurt Russell) tags along to aid gambling buddy Wang Chi (Dennis Dun) after street gangsters kidnap his fiancée Miao Yin for sale to a brothel. Their hunt for her takes them into the heart of Chinatown. There a throwdown between the gangsters and a society of good guy martial artists escalates into supernatural mayhem when evil giang hu warriors the

Three Storms and their boss, ghost sorcerer Lo Pan (James Hong), show up to side with the gang. Lo Pan seizes Miao Yin, and later crusading lawyer Gracie Law (Kim Cattrall), because their green eyes make them ideal sacrifices for a ritual that will restore him to a full fleshly state. Aided by virtuous sorcerer Egg Shen (Victor Wong) and a team of community allies, Jack and Wang Chi invade Lo Pan's secret headquarters for a free-for-all battle of guns, fists, and sorcery.

With its team of heroes encountering death traps, monsters and a sinister secret world, the film follows *Star Wars* (q.v.) in harking back to the matinee high adventure of decades past. However it adds an ironic perspective to its genre thrills, particularly in its treatment of its hero. Kurt Russell's Burton sports a James Dean pompadour and drawls like John Wayne, but he lives up to these iconic images of American masculinity with less than perfect aplomb. Overconfident and always slightly behind the information curve, his bombast sometimes pays off, but more often makes him the butt of a slapstick gag. For a light comic performance, Russell walks a very precise tightrope, giving Jack a puppyish quality that redeems his made-in-America arrogance. We root for him to succeed, and to be taken down a peg or two along the way.

This undercutting of the leading man, and of the American hero template, complements the film's effort to reverse the traditional racism of western pop culture's Chinese characters. Burton is the good-hearted boob who needs everything explained to him. For every Lo Pan, there is an Egg Shen. Lo Pan and minions aren't evil because they're Chinese. They draw their power from Chinese demons, portrayed as the dark forces within a richer mythology. They're not invading white American society, as per the Yellow Menace trope. Instead we see them as part of a struggle between good and evil, both sides of which have come to America and continue to contend with one another. A larger than usual good guy supporting cast balances out the roster of Chinese villains. The good guy Chang Sing society is already on the case, taking on their criminal Wing Kong counterparts, when Jack drives into the scene.

Like *Big Trouble in Little China*, *Feng Shui* expresses delight in, and a desire to play with, the fun tropes of Hong Kong pop culture. As such it ought to have an answer for questions of representation. Both film and game deal with HK pop culture, a culture which is itself omnivorous, gleefully borrowing and repurposing tropes from Hollywood and world cinema. Hong Kong flicks often treat Chinese culture with a surprising irreverence. Not yet steeped in identity sensitivity, they still revel in fat and gay jokes and aren't shy about stereotyping foreigners.

Using the fantastic vocabulary of super-warriors, monsters, and gun-slingers is a vastly different proposition than trying to pass off real-life struggles and viewpoints as your own. All pop culture appropriates past pop culture. Its very unseriousness creates a space for creative cultural exchange where we can all borrow imagery and return it in the condition we found it in.

A roleplaying game enjoys advantages films don't. When you set up a series, you don't have to worry about the bankability of star actors, or whether they can speak Cantonese idiomatically. You quite rightfully couldn't cast Channing Tatum to play Hong Kong maverick cop Hoi-Pang Cheung. But a roleplayer of any background can play him as a character, because we can easily picture the character as entirely separate from the player in appearance, speech, and manner. No actors of Chinese heritage will be muscled out of roles they ought to be considered for.

As a roleplayer, you adopt all sorts of identities, mentally inhabiting cultures familiar, unfamiliar, and imagined. The act of picturing yourself as someone with an experience other than your own gives you the mental tools to help empathize across cultural lines in daily life. It doesn't guarantee that you'll use them, but it puts them at your disposal at least.

So *Feng Shui* can go one step further than *Big Trouble*. It assumes by default that you're emulating a Hong Kong movie, where everyone (or nearly so) is Chinese and that's not even worth remarking on. What matters in this pop culture context is that the archetypes are familiar: the maverick cop, his weaselly superior, the icy cool killer with an awakening conscience,

the psycho drug kingpin with the hair-trigger temper. The power of useful cliché transcends boundaries.

If you for whatever reason want to play the fish out of water as a westerner in Hong Kong, of course you can do that. It offers a fun contrast so there will likely be at least one in every group. And if you want to nod to *Big Trouble*, which makes its hero a fish out of water in his own beloved America, the Everyday Hero archetype awaits. It's not a ripoff of Jack Burton, who of course remains the sacrosanct intellectual property of 20th Century Fox. Unlike the Everyday Hero, Jack isn't an improvised weapons specialist, nor does he seem luckier than any of his allies. But the suggested styling of the Everyday Hero as slightly dim All-American does encourage you to take on the playful cultural irony seen in *Big Trouble*. Although you can always reimagine him as a Hong Kong goofball, a doofus Dane or hapless Argentinean, the love *Feng Shui* fans have for this movie calls for at least a wink in its direction.

And because it's a roleplaying game, you can do whatever you want with it. So if you'd rather set your *Feng Shui* in Chinatown instead of China, that option remains open to you as well. Filmmakers can choose what you see and hear. Roleplaying game designers can nudge you a bit, but in the end the experience you decide to have is the one you get.

The film's treatment of Jack Burton shows us how to undercut a hero without making him useless. In one of roleplaying's odder dynamics, many players enjoy making comic hay of their own incompetence and bad decisions. That can be troublesome in *Feng Shui* in particular and RPGs in general, in part because it robs other players of their earned feelings of awesomeness. Jack is maybe cinema's clearest example of the idiot action hero. But he doesn't actually fail more than his more serious counterparts, or make any truly stupid decisions. Instead, when he does fail, it plays as a comic pratfall. He makes a big lead up to his knife throw at Lo Pan. But he misses, and the blade lands with a pitiful thunk far from his target. That leads an equally overconfident Lo Pan to throw the knife back at him—so that Jack can quite impressively toss it again, right

in the sorcerer's forehead. In mechanics terms, that's a miss followed by a impressive hit with multiple exploding sixes. But the player has narrated it to make the miss seem amusingly humiliating. When he does make the big hit, the turnaround from the previous fizzle makes it read as an even more gratifying triumph.

You don't have to play an Everyday Hero to give your character this comic false bravado. A few of them, including the Drifter, Driver, Killer and Ninja, come with a coolness baked into them that can't take slapstick undercutting. Others, like the Karate Cop, Supernatural Creature, Martial Artist or Old Master, could easily be Burtonized.

But first, check with your GM to see just how much of *Big Trouble's* tone she wants in her game. The default *FS2* tone allows for plenty of humor, so she might just say: plenty.

CHINESE GHOST STORY 1 & 2

LOVE AMID THE MONSTER FIGHTS SPONSORED BY FRANCO FRARE

After the success of 1985's horror martial arts comedy hit *Mr. Vampire* (q.v), someone must have realized that peak genre mash-up had not been attained. That left an opening as wide as a hellmouth for *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987, Siu-Tung Ching), a horror martial arts comedy *romance*.

Young debt collector Choi-san (Leslie Cheung) takes refuge in a temple in the woods, little suspecting that it is infested by things that go chomp in the night. In addition to a collection of endearingly sub-Harryhausen zombies, predatory ghosts stalk the temple. They drain the souls of the living to feed to the tree demoness that enslaves them. Not knowing her true nature, Choi-San falls for one of their number, the good-hearted ghost Siu-sin (Joey Wong). With the aid of gruff, profane Taoist swordsman-priest Yin (Wu Ma), Choi-San rescues her spirit from a wedding ceremony in hell. Back in the world of the living, he finds and reburies her ashes, allowing her soul to rejoin the cycle of reincarnation. This ultimate act of love saves her, even though it means he will never see her again.

Structurally, *A Chinese Ghost Story* performs the challenging stunt of making an action movie with a non-combatant protagonist. Choi-San may perform the occasional act of physical heroism, but mostly he gets flung around while his ghostly lover or exorcist pal protects him. In *Feng Shui* terms, Siu-sin is a Ghost and Yin is an Exorcist Monk who's swapped out his staff for his sword. But Choi-San remains an everyday fellow, not an incongruously competent Everyday Hero.

That works here because his great act of heroism is not of the action-adventure variety. That would be the sacrifice he makes at the end, losing Siu-sin in order to save her. *A Chinese Ghost Story* functions as a romance in a supernatural wuxia wrapper. Those ghost fu sequences certainly crackle, from a tree-leaping duel between Yin and a rival destined to wind up as a soul-drained husk, to the memorable battle with the tree demon's giant tongue. Because as we all know, the thing you need to fear about an evil tree is its tongue. (Show the climactic hell fight to your players as a prelude to their heroes' descent into the *Feng Shui* underworld.) As cool as that stuff is, it's the pathos of the love story that ties it all together.

Though a staple of popular storytelling, in both the mundane and geekcentric genres, romance gets short shrift in roleplaying. Two main reasons lie behind this studied omission, one understandable and the other a shame. First, players often feel uncomfortable playing out love stories. Hacking apart monsters or mowing down columns of gangsters goes down like iced tea on a hot summer day. But, even when taking on a fictional role, acting out a love story requires an emotional vulnerability the best of us find daunting. Especially with the rest of the group ready to laugh uncomfortably or lob in smart alec remarks from the peanut gallery. Traditional roleplaying games teach us to treat our characters as assets to be protected. Taken to extremes, this leads to dysfunctional play, in which some players refuse to buy in and permit their characters the sorts of risks any compelling story requires of its protagonists. Many players view love stories as tactical liabilities: why, if I include a romantic interest, the GM will threaten it! Of course, stories need conflict and trouble the way fires need oxygen. It's too bad that the above reasons cause so many players to keep romantic drama, with its rich narrative potential, at a wary remove.

Feng Shui players can make romance part of their character arcs by building it into their melodramatic hooks. Just find a reason separating your hero from his or her true love, and stir. Here for example, only one of

the lovers is a living person. That sure beats most Western rom-coms for plausible obstacle to happiness.

Even if you leave the mushy stuff by the wayside, *A Chinese Ghost Story* uses many style touches common to its era. Show your fidelity to the classic HK vibe by referencing them in your *Feng Shui* games.

The treatment of the crusty Exorcist Monk (Wu Ma) typifies the irreverence these films often show toward religious tradition. Yin blusters, barks out (mild) expletives, and makes mistakes. Oh, and he raps, the refrain of his solo musical number being “Tao, Tao, Tao.” He also defies any geekily well-actuallying we might want to engage in about the distinctions between Chinese beliefs. Avowed Taoist he may be, but he’ll also call on the exorcising might of Buddhist sutras if they’ll do the trick. Boundaries are for textbooks, not for ghost hunters in the field.

As the sudden eruption of Taoist hip hop attests, *A Chinese Ghost Story* provides a fine case study in the rapid tone shifts typical of Hong Kong movie hits. Sex gags about the embarrassment of accidentally glimpsing one’s ghostly object of desire in the buff coexist with heartfelt melodrama. The film draws not only on a Qing Dynasty short story and older Chinese films but plunders rifles the playbook of Sam Raimi’s *Evil Dead* series to send a zooming ghost cam across the forest floor.

Its sets and visual techniques also mark it as a type specimen for classic HK supernatural wuxia. Like so many flicks of the period it jazzes up its nighttime forest shots by letting loose the smoke machine and then illuminating the results with floodlights. Just like Edgar G. Ulmer did making his el cheapo existential genre films on the fringes of 40s and 50s Hollywood, Hong Kong directors understand how far a little fog can go to obscure budgetary shortcomings.

You still occasionally see this trick in newer films, either as a deliberate nod to 80s style, or in scrappier, cheaper productions.

One standard element seen here that does seem to have largely disappeared is gender bending casting. In her human form, the tree demon is played by a male actor in drag, with the voice performance dubbed

by a woman. The eunuch sorcerer/monk villain of part 2 is played by a male actor, also with a female vocal performance. In *Swordsman II* and *III*, also by Ching Siu Tung, Brigitte Lin plays Dongfai Bubai, who has castrated himself in the pursuit of esoteric fu mastery. Gender ambiguities also arise in Ronny Yu's *Bride with White Hair* (1993) and Wong Kar Wai's arty 1994 wuxia deconstruction *Ashes of Time*—again with Brigitte Lin.

1990's *A Chinese Ghost Story II* shows the pitfalls of trying to sequelize a film that, for all its adventure trappings, remains a romance at heart. At least it doesn't undo the sacrificial triumph of the original by telling us that Siu-san somehow missed out on her reincarnation. Instead it evokes the various images of the first film in a meandering storyline that eventually leads Choi-San back to the haunted temple. There he meets Windy, a completely different person also played by Joey Wong. She belongs to a heroic household intent on rescuing their noble father from false imprisonment by corrupt courtiers. Their plan to save him has them posing as ghosts when Choi-San meets her. A man-eating ogre who looks like he just wandered out of Pee Wee's playhouse satisfies our expectation for supernatural menace in the early going. In the end, Windy's father's captor turns out to be an evil eunuch sorcerer posing as a high priest. At first Jacky Cheung appears to be filling Wu Ma's Exorcist Monk slippers, but the real Yin shows up as well when the going gets rough.

The difficulty of extending a romance plotline may come into play if you take the above advice and fashion your melodramatic hook around it. The barrier between the lover's happiness must be strong enough to pose a serious obstacle over time, but not so ineradicable that the players see no hope of it ever being resolved. When it does get wrapped up, you need a new melodramatic hook for the hero. Were Choi-San a player character with "in love with a ghost" as a melodramatic hook, the scene where he allows Siu-San to reincarnate would play as its resolution. Having him meet someone posing as a ghost who looks exactly like

her feels like a GM improvising as best she can to keep that hook alive. When player and GM can't find an echo of the original hook that registers as strongly as it did, it's almost certainly best to find a completely different new hook. Although a GM with a solid idea can certainly revive a seemingly resolved hook, it's otherwise ideal for the player to solve the problem. That keeps both authorial control, and the responsibility to buy into the action of the series, where it belongs—in player hands. Fortunately, with many players' hooks on the go, each of them coming up only occasionally, the normal flow of a campaign provides the breathing room to devise an engaging revised hook that doesn't seem like a stretch. Also luckily, unlike the makers of film sequels, you don't have to limit yourself to choices that recapitulate the elements of the first storyline.

CROUCHING TIGER, HIDDEN DRAGON

ENDLESS SORROW

Ang Lee's sole foray into wuxia revitalized the genre just when it needed it most. *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2001) became an unlikely hit in the west, exposing a whole new audience to the tropes of Asian action fantasy. It led to a cycle of artfully made wuxia flicks with high production values that balanced seriousness of tone with thrilling action, including *Hero* (q.v.), *House of Flying Daggers* (2004, Zhang Yimou), *Red Cliff* (2008, John Woo) and *The Assassins* (2012, Zhao Linshan).

Yuen Woo-Ping's lyrical action choreography contributes hugely to the film's success. I saw this for the first time in a theater, naturally, and still remember the audible murmurs of cognitive dissonance produced by my fellow audience members during the first action sequence, when Michelle Yeoh and Zhang Ziyi start floating on wires. The film soon won them over, its sheer charm and grace coaxing them to accept an entirely unfamiliar set of conventions.

As much as *Crouching Tiger* introduced conventions to a wide western audience, it also stands as a break from what its home market was used to. Here wirework abandons freneticism for gentle, buoyant physical grace. The choreography becomes one element in the movie's overall beauty of-
fensive.

That fits its emphasis on feeling over the external problem-solving foregrounded by most action movies.

Lee falls into the category of directors who, like Hawks or Soderbergh, hops between genres, rather than specializing in a particular one or two, in the manner of Hitchcock or Apatow. The constant switching of outer

trappings helps to obscure his obsessive focus on a dominant theme: repression versus freedom. It runs through everything from *Eat Drink Man Woman* to *The Ice Storm* to *Hulk*.

In *Crouching Tiger* the characters' dramatic needs, as opposed to their desire to meet an external, practical goal, like killing the Emperor or rooting out a subversive group, drives all of the wuxia action. As cliché as it might be to compare fights in fu flicks to dance, here it's truly apt. The fights advance or change character emotional states just as they do in a well-wrought musical.

Two emotional needs intertwine to fuel the narrative.

On the repression side, we have martial artists Mu Bai (Chow Yun-Fat) and Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh), who desperately love each other but cannot acknowledge it. Duty to his long-dead comrade, to whom she was betrothed, force them to repress their desire for one another. As the action begins, Mu Bai seems on the cusp of renouncing his past as a *giang hu* warrior in order to declare his feelings for Shu Lien. As close as they keep coming, neither can quite break from a life's worth of repression to simply grasp the connection they so clearly hunger for.

Acting out on behalf of freedom we have Jen (Zhang Ziyi), a nobleman's daughter facing an impending political marriage. Having secretly trained for a decade, she yearns for the self-determination she thinks she will find as a martial arts master. She takes Green Destiny, the sword Mu Bai gives away in his bid to free himself from *giang hu* entanglements. In her repeated bids for freedom, Jen disgraces her family and endangers Mu Bai and Shu Lien.

The film's first fight pits Shu Lien against Jen, who for the first of two times steals Green Destiny. In trying to thwart the theft, Shu Lien, representative of the social order, struggles to repress Jen's attempt to seize what she regards as a symbol of freedom.

A cluster of fights follows: first, a constable, his daughter and Shu Lien's retainer battle Jade Fox (Cheng Pei-pei). The constable pursues a personal goal: to take vengeance for his wife, who Jade Fox killed.

This leads into a duel between Mu Bai and Jade Fox. Again, the goal is vengeance. Jade Fox also killed Mu Bai's master. We learn that murder also took place for emotional reasons: Mu Bai's master slept with her but scorned her request to be trained in martial arts.

Jen fights Mu Bai, to protect Jade Fox, who has been posing as her governess. Mu Bai's emotional goal shifts: he sees that she has stolen Green Destiny and possesses an unschooled knowledge of his Wudan style of kung fu. He fights to understand her.

During this bout, Jade Fox reacts with a look of betrayal when she sees how well Jen fights against Mu Bai. Later we'll understand this emotional realization: Jen is a much better fighter than she ever knew, and has eclipsed her.

The next fight scene reprises the match between Jen and Mu Bai. He now fights to persuade her to accept his tutelage. As he fences, he fires out sifu maxims, one of which might as well be his motto: "No desire without restraint!"

The fight that follows occurs in flashback, where we learn of Jen's love for Dark Cloud (Chang Chen). But before she starts to feel that way about him, she fights the barbarian bandit leader to escape his captivity.

After the flashback, Dark Cloud briefly attacks Jen's wedding procession, to rescue his lover.

The film's one comic set piece comes next, the fight in which Jen fights for her role in the giang hu world, beating a hilariously large procession of elaborately named and armed martial artists. (More on this later.)

Hurt that her temper so thoroughly scotched her attempt to win acceptance in what she imagined as a fraternity of fellow free spirits, Jen goes to Shu Lien looking for sisterly emotional support. Instead Shu Lien argues that she repress her desires. They get angry at each other and take it out with a fight.

Immediately following, Mu Bai pursues Jen, reiterating his desire to become her master.

This leads to the final martial exchange, in which Jade Fox tries to kill Jen, who she feels has betrayed her. Mu Bai takes a poison dart meant for her.

The film's climax plays out as drama, not action: Mu Bai, dying, finally releases himself from his repression and declares his love for Shu Lien, just in time to die in her arms.

Every single time the fights occur to express or pursue a personal goal, with nary a wider practical agenda in sight.

This suggests that to really play a *Crouching Tiger*-inspired game you'll need to meld *FS2* combat mechanics with the core engine of another of my games, *Hillfolk*. In that game you call scenes in which you pursue your character's emotional desires, mostly interacting with other PCs. When you decide to give in to someone who wants an emotional concession you're reluctant to grant, you get a game currency called a drama token. When you shut your scene partner down, you lose a drama token.

In an *FS2/Hillfolk* hybrid, you might choose to escalate an emotional petition into a duel, letting the fight outcome determine its result. If the hero making the emotional petition brings his opponent to 35 Wound Points, his opponent concedes, getting a drama token as a consolation. If the petitioner's opponent gets the hero to 35 Wound Points first, he doesn't get what he wants for her, but gains a drama token for his troubles.

Crouching Tiger has an extremely low body count for an action film full of fights: only three people die. Most fights end in an opportunity for the winner to flee. This fits the *Hillfolk* rules, where player characters die only under very limited circumstances. In this game you'd mostly describe your *FS2* fights as non-lethal affairs, dominated by leaps and parries. Combatants wouldn't necessarily drop at 35 Wound Points; they'd simply stop fighting or otherwise accept defeat.

Though antagonistic to most of the other heroes, in *Hillfolk* terms even Jade Fox is clearly a player character. Moments like her death, and Mu Bai's, would be by agreement of the players, when it becomes obvious that the dramatically apt time for them to go has arrived. A dramatic wuxia recreation that omits the possibility of tragic death has missed one of the genre's key components. The group might want to agree collectively that

a certain session has reached a crossroads where 35 Wound Points means certain doom. That makes up for all the previous fights that end merely with an escape or other fight-ending interruption.

In this setup the only fight we see against GMCs is Jen's battle against all comers at the giang hu inn. They exist in the story only to establish an emotional point about Jen: she's too much of a headstrong loose cannon to gain the acceptance she'll need to accomplish her dream. So you'd play this as a simple procedural scene under the usual *FS2* rules. Note also the use of an action movie gesture I'll call the bluff reversal. They all seem extremely tough until the fight starts, at which point Jen reveals them to be nothing more than distinctively styled mooks. GMs can easily swipe this technique for any *FS2* game. As fun as it is to cite as an emblem of the *Feng Shui* attitude, the "mooks don't have names" rule can withstand the occasional bending.

DETECTIVE DEE AND THE MYSTERY OF THE PHANTOM FLAME

INVESTIGATING YOUR NEXT FIGHT

For players entering *Feng Shui's* Ancient juncture, 2010's *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame* can safely be assigned as essential viewing. Delightful, gorgeous, and dizzying, it's a valedictory work by Tsui Hark, the director who did more than anyone to kick off and define Hong Kong's classic era. Where the films that respectively touched off and cemented the current HK-mainland period epic wave, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Hero* (both q.v.), both function as arty meditations on wuxia tropes; *Detective Dee* goes for the just plain crazy fun of classic titles like *Chinese Ghost Story* or *The Swordsman*. That doesn't mean it lacks heart, or a meaningful theme.

What it does mean is deer fu. Marionette fu. Transformation magic. An occult marketplace hidden on the banks of a subterranean river. A poison that makes victims spontaneously combust. An action climax involving the toppling of a kaiju-sized Buddha statue. And killer action direction from the great Sammo Hung.

Tributes to classic wuxia reverberate throughout. At one point, Dee realizes that the occult sage they've tracked down has disguised his appearance with an esoteric pressure point technique. Iconic character actor Richard Ng then transforms via CGI magic to equally iconic character actor Teddy Robin. For an equivalent effect, imagine a flick where Steve Buscemi rips off a mask and his character turns out to be Christopher Walken.

Western fans may be familiar with the Judge Dee mystery novels by the Dutch writer Robert van Gulik. This film does not adapt those books, but rather also arises from the source material that inspired them: the Tang dynasty historical figure Di Renjie, and the *Di Gong An*, a Chinese mystery novel written about him around a thousand years later, in the 18th century.

Wu Zetian (Carina Lau), about to formally become Emperor of China after years ruling as regent, has commanded the construction of a colossal bronze Buddha sculpture. When officials involved in the project start to burst into flame, she frees an old enemy, magistrate-turned-dissident Dee (Andy Lau) from imprisonment. He works with uneasy colleagues Jing'er (Li Bingbing), confidant to the Emperor, and the albino magistrate Pei (Deng Chao). Suspects in the case include a displaced heir to the throne, a reclusive spiritual master who attends court in the form of a deer, and an ex-noble (Tony Leung Ka Fai) who lost his hand as punishment for past transgressions. He now slaves in the bowels of the giant Buddha to finish it in time for the coronation.

Although structured as a mystery, with a trail of clues that lead to the identity of the murderer, *Detective Dee* is no mere parlor room interrogation. Fights abound, from an attack on Dee in prison, to a romantically charged moment under a fusillade of arrows with Jing'er, to the aforementioned marionette and deer fights, and beyond.

Today's Chinese period epics show a greater regard for historicity than the classic era wave. Back then the costumes signal the period, and there might be a struggle between corrupt and virtuous court officials vying for the favor of an unseen Emperor. But the details don't matter so much. These days particular times and incidents spur the action, here albeit in a world where antlered ungulates show up at court to issue prophecies. A few ahistorical films, unanchored in a particular period, still appear, like Zhang Yimou's *Curse of the Golden Flower* (2006). Even that is based on a story of long provenance.

In *Detective Dee* the details of Wu's accession to acknowledged power, including her relationship with the real Di Renjie, form the linchpin of the plot.

FS2 tips its hat to this trend by shifting the Ancient juncture to a period we know more about, placing its eunuch sorcerers versus humankind plotline in a particular historical context. *Detective Dee* and its 2012 prequel *Young Detective Dee: Rise of the Sea Dragon* (also Tsui Hark) dazzlingly serve up a visual reference for the Tang capital. The reign of Wu Zetian is fascinating in its own right, with oodles of plot hooks not covered by the Hark films. With those two factors in mind, no moment in Chinese history seemed as game-worthy as Wu's period as Emperor. (The feminized term "Empress" doesn't appear in Chinese.)

As a mystery with more action than many other action movies, *Detective Dee* also serves as a model for melding *FS2* fighting with investigation.

First off, we never see the action stop while Dee paces around, stymied. He always has somewhere to go in pursuit of more information. And in that place, there's invariably a fight for him to get into. The action movie part of the equation commands primacy: clues are a currency allowing access to battles.

To make this work without giving away the mystery, Dee often has several avenues to investigate. If Dee were a roleplaying PC, he retains choice by picking which lead to follow next. After he learns as much as he can about the beetle poison, he can then pursue another angle, seeking an interview with another key figure, to find out if he's a witness or a suspect.

Clues show up during fight scenes. While rescuing Jing'er from arrow attacks by forces in the murderer's employ, she brusquely commands that he not touch her. This comes mere moments after she ripped off her clothes and climbed on top of him, ordered by Emperor Wu to get close to him. Later Dee puts this discrepancy together with the acupressure disguise technique used by the occult sage, deducing a key fact about Jing'er.

Pei, and to a lesser extent Jing'er, take part not only to flesh out the fight scenes, but to act as Watsons to Dee's Holmes. If they seem confused, the mystery reads as difficult. Dee becomes more impressive if he can spot truths they can't.

If all three were roleplaying PCs, you might spread the moments of impressiveness out between them. Jing'er would discover a key fact during one fight, or connective tissue scene, then Dee in the next, and Pei in the one after that.

Another of my designs, the GUMSHOE system underlying such games as *The Esoterrorists*, *Ashen Stars* and *Trail of Cthulhu*, makes investigation its main feature of play. Its rules predicate themselves on the idea that it is never interesting to fail to get information. Instead, GUMSHOE makes it easy to gather all sorts of information. The challenge lies in piecing it together into a narrative that explains the mystery. GUMSHOE assumes that players will spend much of their time in a session either gathering or interpreting clues.

Feng Shui on the other hand promises headlong action. So the clues should be easy to get and infrequent in number. Every scene in which information can be gathered should also be one in which a fight occurs.

Help yourself lay in one fight per clue source by building multiple antagonists into your scenario. *Detective Dee's* heroes battle not only the force responsible for the murders. They fight people associated with other suspects, too. In a *Feng Shui* scenario anyone who thinks you think they're a criminal probably wants to whale on you about that.

When structuring your scenario, ask yourself how many clues can be conveyed in mid-battle.

The wrapping up of a mystery can sometimes play out as a letdown. Story possibilities have been narrowed from many to a few. So be sure to up the thrill quotient for the climactic fight where the revealed culprit tries to ice the heroes. If there's still a last phase of the sinister plan to put into motion, as we see here, so much the better.

For added impact, look for a way to tie the mystery to one or more heroes' melodramatic hooks. Dee's hook here is that he, a former rebel against Wu Zetian, must now serve her. He resolves this at the end by getting her to promise to moderate her reign. This completes the contradiction inherent in his hook—and recreates historical tradition surrounding Di Renjie.

This technique works best if the characters are aware of it from the beginning. You're probably halfway there already, as many players create hooks with mysteries at the bottom of them. They're looking for lost loved ones, objects of their sworn vengeance, their own erased memories, and so on. Since a mystery storyline may continue for several sessions, it particularly helps if you can weave other heroes' hooks into this one, so that more than one player has a reason to care about solving it.

So Hero A's object of vengeance may have blackmailed Hero B into killing Hero C's missing father. Hero D, a maverick cop, gets assigned a gun-running case, whose mastermind may be Hero A's object of vengeance. The team goes from fight to fight, gradually putting the story together. At the end, the heroes must melodramatically reckon with what the revealed facts do to their established relationships.

Bonus points if you can work in some spontaneous combustions or an oracular forest creature.

DIE HARD

UPPING THE HERO

SPONSORED BY ANDREW MILLER

For an iconic action movie, and unlike its later sequels, *Die Hard* (1988, John McTiernan) devotes surprisingly little of its total running time to fight sequences. It takes its time setting up maverick cop hero John McClane (Bruce Willis) and his melodramatic hook: he's trying to save his failing marriage to Holly (Bonnie Bedelia). The setup also paints him as the mildest possible case of fish out of water, a New York guy reluctantly setting foot in the bizarre alien landscape of Los Angeles. Once the elementally simple plot, which has him inside a skyscraper held hostage by terrorists-turned-thieves, kicks in, *Die Hard* becomes a cat-and-mouse exercise. Fights and stunts punctuate the running and hiding. As well staged as the action is, the signature moments take place as verbal duels conducted by two-way radio, pitting McClane against Alan Rickman as Hans Gruber. The chemistry between regular joe smart ass Bruce Willis and Rickman, channeling the full European superciliousness of a Basil Rathbone villain, does more to sell the film than all of its explosions put together.

As one man against many, McClane knows he's outnumbered. He's literally stripped of resources as the cat-and-mouse starts, barefoot and down to his undershirt. (Clearly a fish out of water—that undergarment might fly in New York but is needed in Los Angeles solely as tough guy iconography.) He doesn't come at his adversaries like a one man army, but instead stays on the move, fighting when the odds are in his favor and fleeing when not. McClane fights with his smarts, not with superheroic prowess. When he does engage in literal combat, only chief henchman

Karl (Alexander Gudonov) gives him sustained resistance. In *FS2* terms this IDs Karl as a featured foe. The others drop like mooks. When the climax comes, Gruber proves himself a noncombatant mastermind, and is felled with one shot.

To emulate a cat-and-mouse scenario in *Feng Shui*, you first of all want to limit it to a solo effort, with one PC against many villains. Once you have the full range of FS heroes on board, you aren't going to see them fleeing from mooks. You might want to tune individual mooks upwards, giving them attack AVs of 15. They still drop just as fast but more than one of them at once becomes a threat to run from. You'll want a closed environment containing many sub-locations. Hollywood's love of *Die Hard* led it to long ago burn through every locational variant: *Under Siege* is *Die Hard* on a boat; *Speed* is *Die Hard* on a bus, in pitch if not fully in execution. Turning something familiar into an interactive gaming experience turns it fresh again, so you could go ahead and use any of those, or the original office tower. *Feng Shui's* additional time periods come to your rescue here, letting you do *Die Hard* in a pagoda, *Die Hard* in a mutant-filled bunker, *Die Hard* in Chinese hell. Pick a hero archetype without the mook sweeping powers of the Killer, Masked Avenger, or Swordsman. The Maverick Cop, tuned to take down featured foes and bosses with big damage, becomes an underdog if pitted mostly against harder-hitting mooks. The player might complain of having most of the archetype's key schticks nerfed by the nature of the opposition. Then say, yep, and you're barefoot as well. Or whatever other visual symbol you use to evoke the hero's initial state of disadvantage.

I'm going to go out on a limb here and name *Die Hard* as not just the iconic action film of the 80s, but the quintessential 80s movie, full stop. *Star Wars* (q.v.) starts the shift from the realism and moral malaise of the 70s into the blockbuster cinema to come. It looks to the past, to serials and Saturday matinee high adventure, yet also keeps at its core a heady dose of 70s mysticism.

80s cinema takes the wish fulfillment inherent in *Star Wars*, injects it with testosterone and revs up your engine to take it all the way to the

danger zone. From *Top Gun* (1985, Tony Scott) to *Ferris Bueller's Day Off* (1986, John Hughes), from *Beverly Hills Cop* (1984, Martin Brest) to *Ghostbusters* (1984, Ivan Reitman), the decade becomes the preserve of the aspirational hero. Often a wise ass, always on the rise, he exists to overcome the obstacles to his own affirmation. Presenting us with a hero to root for is nothing new. What distinguishes the 80s movie era is how nakedly it cheerleads for its protagonists. In sync with the era's Reagan-Thatcher political imagery, Hollywood is celebrating winners again, converting distrust of authority into individualist attitude.

So in *Die Hard*, McClane isn't just smart. He exists in a world of idiots. Only those who believe in him, his wife and local cop Al Powell (Reginald VelJohnson) also get to exercise smarts on their own. Hans Gruber builds up our anticipation for the final showdown by contemptuously underestimating our guy. The Deputy Police Chief arrogantly dismisses McClane as an ally. Office sleazeball Harry Ellis (Hart Bochner) tries to negotiate with Gruber, betraying McClane's identity and getting himself killed. The chopper-riding FBI agent in charge (Robert Davi) swoops in like a reckless jarhead and fucks everything up. William Atherton reinforces the reporter as scumbag stereotype and gives away Holly's identity. You'd think he'd have learned his lesson after interfering with the *Ghostbusters*.

With *Die Hard*, the rebellious 60s and 70s anti-hero has transformed into the beleaguered wisecracker whose colleagues are all a bunch of butt-heads in need of a good showing up. And show them up McClane does, one obstacle at a time. He's the filmic apotheosis of the mythic Reagan Democrat, the working class guy who knows his job better than any number of impractical elitists. Gruber's smirking disregard for McClane as an American plays into Hollywood's 1980s return to unrestrained flag-waving.

You don't have to be a guy in a wife-beater T to be affirmed as the only smart bad-ass in the room. *Aliens* (1986, James Cameron) likewise proposes Ripley as the one who really understands what's going on, with

idiots to the left of her and fools to the right. The film's horror movie roots disguise the dynamic a little, but it's there just the same.

Films, which rarely find time for digression, tip their hands in their gratuitous moments. Check out the scene of McClane on the airplane, where he scores a look of stunned attraction from the hot flight attendant. That's another flash of aspirational cheerleading for the hero. It cues the default viewer, a straight guy, to want to be McClane, and presumably tells everyone else that they ought to want McClane. This tossed-off moment doesn't restrict itself to 80s cinema. It goes back at least as far as Howard Hawks' *The Big Sleep* (1946) and appears throughout the Bond canon. But to get it right up front, before the character's main conflict has been established, foregrounds the effect. Eighties icon Tom Cruise still throws this moment in when he can, as per 2012's *Jack Reacher* (Christopher McQuarrie).

Die Hard's introduction features other space capsule moments from an earlier era: McClane carries his gun on the plane and smokes in the airport.

Roleplaying tradition generally calls on GMs not to gratify the heroes, but to tighten the screws on them. Steady pressure remains key to suspenseful adventure, but only serves as half the equation. The guilelessness of *Die Hard's* support for its hero offers a reminder of the value of moments that let players feel awesome. Some players will want their heroes to attract the fascinated gaze of foxy GMCs. Others might want passersby to gasp at their muscles, or gun dealers to admire the lovingly customized weapons they carry. Or to praise the sublimity of the noodles they cook. Look for the distinctive gratifications each player might enjoy, then for opportunities to dole them out. Some players get emotionally overwhelmed quicker than others. Keep track of the last time something in your game world patted them on the back or affirmed their ultra-competence. These affirming notes set up a contrast. When their moments of indecision or fear for their characters do come, they land with greater impact.

For a significant subset of players *Die Hard's* central gratification—that its hero will soon show up those idiots who are mucking things up by disregarding him—may be a tough sell. Players tend to lose heart when GMCs disrespect their characters. In *Die Hard* we already know that McClane will soon show them up, so we take anticipatory pleasure in these moments. Ensure that players know they have a trick up their sleeves before foes or supporting characters give them lip. Telegraph the idiocy of the police superintendent as he throws the maverick cop off the case. If an angry stall owner upbraids the heroes for wrecking his merchandise, he might later come by to apologize and thank them for dealing with those street thugs. Describe the electrical cord wrapped around the villain's ankle as he declares the infallibility of his escape plan. Have featured foes spit out mocking insults before they hit 25 Wound Points, then beg for mercy just before the players describe the blows that take them out.

Another essay about varying reactions to player gratification between the US and the UK might be in order here. Short version: one group of players likes it more than the other. But I can't go into that now. I just found out there's a hostage taking on a plane...

EQUILIBRIUM

POWER OF THE ONE COOL SHTICK

When its 2002 theatrical release took in a measly \$1.2 million, *Equilibrium* (Kurt Wimmer) vanished like the Mona Lisa under a blowtorch. Since then it's proven the ability of a cult audience to discover and embrace titles the mainstream didn't notice enough to scorn. It not only scores an improbable 7.2 on the Internet Movie Database's geek-leaning scoring system, but roared in to beat many worthy contenders as one of two backers choice titles picked by *Feng Shui 2* Kickstarter funders to appear in this book.

You may detect a reluctant note in the above. I have to admit that I was rooting against this title, because except for the One Cool Shtick You All Like, there's not much going on here. So let's use this essay to understand how fascination with that One Cool Shtick, or OCS, drives so much fannish adoration.

Equilibrium nods to classic dystopian novels *1984*, *Brave New World* and *Fahrenheit 451* to present us with the rather foregone moral and emotional awakening of John Preston. The most skilled of an elite cop force called the Grammaton Clerics, he chases cultural artifacts and the subversives who insist on hiding them. Both of these are subject to burning by the dystopian regime of Libria, for whom he works. On the grounds that emotion causes war and murder, it legally requires all of its citizens to dose themselves with an ultramodern Prozac that dampens all feelings. The narrative takes Preston (Christian Bale) from fanatical loyalty to guns-blazing rebellion, under the eagle eye of ambitious new partner Brandt (Taye Diggs).

As a dystopia, Libria lacks the terrifying plausibility of its literary predecessors. It never connects the dots between its conservative aversion

to therapeutic culture and anti-hate crime laws and a regime that could actually come into being.

Preston's arc is so heavily foreshadowed that we never doubt the outcome. This leaves the audience way ahead of the protagonist throughout the film. If he turned rebel at the end of the first act, we might have a compelling narrative on our hands. Instead we wait until the beginning of the third. Nor is he overcoming a suspenseful series of procedural obstacles along the way. When the last surprise is finally sprung on him and he does make with the ass-kicky, the satisfaction in the result comes entirely from its fun innovation in fight choreography, and the quickly sketched justification behind it.

The lesson to draw from this as a GM, or aspiring storyteller in another medium, is a negative one: if the audience can tell that something is going to happen, it should happen as soon as you can possibly get to it. That includes meta-knowledge we bring to a story from our genre expectations. If the film started with Preston already covertly rebelling against Libria, we could get on with the business of seeing him tackling obstacles between him and that goal. To make a character's moral awakening less of an inevitable outcome, avoid stacking the deck. When you start a game with the PCs as cops working for a tyrannical regime, be sure they have countervailing reasons tempting them to stick with the status quo. Here the regime is so transparently unappealing that we never really think Preston will keep taking his drugs and serving its ends for the rest of the film. Use the same principle for any series where the PCs start out as bad guys. Either create suspense as to whether they'll switch, or have that switch happen right away.

Preston is a master of gun kata, a futuristic martial art that essentially turns the pistol or assault rifle into a close quarters weapon. Its exponents train to recognize and take advantage of the consistent geometric patterns present in any firefight. By training to internalize this understanding, they are able to disarm enemies wielding guns or katanas and use them against their enemies. Director/writer Kurt Wimmer shoots

these fights in jittery, strobing style. It recalls *The Matrix's* bullet time yet retains its own distinct look.

Although no one quite articulates this point, sending armed mooks against a gun kata expert is doing their enemy a favor. He can grab these and mow them down. If Preston ever faced significant opposition, it would be interesting to show one of his adversaries dropping the weapons and going up against him bare-handed.

But the film never shows this. Preston always fights as a lone bad-ass against a mob of mooks. He may have a moral crisis to resolve, but is never truly tested in a combat scene. His primary physical adversary, Brandt, appears to be a match for him during a sparring match. Yet at the climax, in a variant of the Indy-shoots-the-guy-with-the-sword-bit, Preston barely tussles with him before downing him with a face-removing katana strike. A slightly longer fight then ensues against the secret Librian dictator (Angus Macfayden), but again Preston features more as righteous executioner than pressed combatant.

Equilibrium scores by doing something that would quickly wear out its welcome in a roleplaying context. It gives its hero an ability vastly superior to anyone else's, and lets us revel in the mayhem as he takes the bad guys apart. The film alternates this with dramatic or investigative scene in which Preston undergoes a series of defeats and setbacks. He fails to hide the puppy he has hidden in his trunk from patrolmen. He fails to rescue the political prisoner (Emily Watson) who reminds him of his wife. The contrasting angst of these sequences intensifies the vicarious release of the action sequences in which he easily prevails against enemies who never have a chance against him.

In this John Preston follows the tension and release model of Popeye or the Hulk. He's weak, he suffers setbacks, but then explodes into effectiveness and handily overcomes his opposition. Popeye has to get to his spinach. Bruce Banner bears the torment of bullies until he can't take it any longer and Hulks out. In both cases we're feeling helpless, yet also eagerly anticipate the explosion in which the character demonstrates his

power. With Preston it's not a literal power being activated by suffering, just the pattern of the storytelling.

Feng Shui mooks are designed to go down like tenpins, and to rarely hit. Preston gets bloodied when he lets Brandt kick him around, but never takes a blood squib from a nameless opponent. To model *Equilibrium's* combat scenes, you'd want to dial down mook attack AVs and Defenses even further, and give the sole hero Carnival of Carnage up the wazoo. This would evoke what people dig about this film, but you'd want to do it only once. Maybe for one sequence alone, in which your Bale counterpart goes nuts on a bunch of mooks by himself.

In roleplaying fights we want our PCs to be better than their adversaries. Occasionally it adds spice and stakes to have to run away from a clearly superior foe. Truly even matches also have to be rare to keep the mortality rate down to an acceptable minimum. A 50% PC kill rate might do for a climactic dust-up, but only as an exception to the rule. On the other hand, enemies our characters totally outmatch lose their excitement as soon as we realize that our success is foreordained, and the threat to our characters nonexistent.

Since it would be so obviously taken from a single highly identifiable intellectual property we don't have the rights to, *FS2* doesn't try to emulate gun kata.

That doesn't stop you from describing your gun-wielding character as striking fu-like poses with her pistols after firing them. Or talking about her mastery of gunfight geometry. When you take out mooks, describe your character grabbing their weapons and using them on them. Since the mook is already down, you don't need to worry about any rules effects of having disarmed him. Reskin the Killer archetype for the desired gun fu chrome. Talk to your GM and see if she'll let you ignore the disadvantages of being a gun user in a close up fight. If none of the other players object, go to town.

You won't seem like John Preston when you confront a Featured Foe or Boss. But then, with the possible exception of Macfayden's character, we never see him do that.

An RPG that truly emulated the storytelling of *Equilibrium* might be a solo player plus GM affair written for indie-style one-hit gaming. The protagonist accumulates Agony Points by having bad things happen or falling into a negative emotional state. After accumulating a number of points, he can then cash them in to initiate a hyper-violence scene, in which he uses his gun kata (or equivalent for whatever setting you're using) to spectacularly overcome foes. Then the cycle repeats itself, sending the hero back to gather more Agony Points to pay for another action sequence victory.

HARD BOILED

THE RUNNING BATTLE

When asked to recommend a single film GMs can use to introduce their players to the glory of Hong Kong action, I always say *Hard Boiled* (1992, John Woo). It lacks the hyper-romanticism of *The Killer* (q.v.) or the journey into the abyss of *Bullet in the Head* (1990) in which typical Woo gangster buddy heroes find themselves plunged into the battlefields of Vietnam. *Hard Boiled*, a pretty standard cop movie with a couple of eye-widening bravura action sequences, requires less of a stylistic leap than the others, hence the recommendation. It doesn't stand up to repeated viewing the way the others do. After you know it, you'll probably find yourself hitting fast-forward for the uninspired squad room scenes, for example. But that's a long range issue, and we're talking Hong Kong action 101.

One title doesn't get you the mix of genres *Feng Shui* offers, but one step at a time. These days the second film I'd show them would be *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame* (q.v.), but I digress.

Hard-charging cop Tequila (Chow Yun-Fat) accidentally kills a fellow officer during a raid on a tea house frequented by gun runners. Swearing to get those bastards, he ignores the commands of his superintendent to lay off the case. His boss won't tell him this, but he has an undercover officer, Tony (Tony Leung Chiu-Wai) working it from the inside. Tony jumps from the organization of a genteel old school boss to that of Johnny (Anthony Wong), whose own guys call him kind of crazy. Tequila tracks down Tony, leading to an uneasy alliance. While tending to a wounded informer in the hospital, they discover that Johnny's massive arsenal of contraband weaponry lies right below their feet. They invade the steel-

reinforced secret armory beneath the morgue. When the bullets start to fly, Johnny loses his mind, ordering the shooting of anyone attempting to evacuate the hospital.

Along the way the film presents a couple of top shelf action sequences. Most notably we get Tequila's one-man invasion of the warehouse where Tony has just gunned down his old boss and his men. The opening tea house shootout is likewise a rouser, with a shootout on Tony's yacht appearing midway through in case anyone has been dozing off.

Each sequence offers a master class in movie action. Woo always orients us in the location before the big fight breaks out. This allows us to subliminally understand the spatial relationships between the combatants.

You might argue that an action sequence introduces us to the warehouse fight. Although it's true that we first see it when Johnny's gang drive in to shoot up the joint, we still get a dialogue scene before Tequila swings in to start the donnybrook we really care about. Before that, we see the location from his catwalk vantage point—another classic Woo scope-out moment.

What distinguishes the climactic hospital battle are its scale and scope.

The yacht and warehouse fights introduce a single space in which the combatants have at it. The tea house sequence spills into a lower story staircase area and a back room, but remains focused on Tequila.

The hospital battle goes huge, with mooks shooting down from hospital walls onto cops and patients in the courtyard below. Inside the building, a dumb-ass head doctor interferes with the evacuation, babies need rescuing, and chief henchman Mad Dog hunts our heroes. Mooks and cops get mowed down by the dozen. Tony becomes a mirror of Tequila by accidentally shooting a cop. All of this unfolds at a frenetic pace, with bodies flying, glass shattering, and flames a-leaping.

We're watching a battle on the move, as Tequila and Tony work their way up from the armory level toward the street, blasting mooks and trying not to be blasted by Mad Dog as they go. The action moves through a succession of sub-locations: armory, morgue, corridors, waiting room, nursery, and finally the courtyard outside.

For simplicity's sake, action movies and roleplaying sessions both tend to place their fights in a single location. From the earliest dungeon-crawling RPGs on we've accustomed ourselves to a formula where the heroes show up to fight the bad guys, and they either win in the place where the fight started, or retreat.

In movies you might get a fight that starts in one place, with a chase in the middle, and then a resumption of hostilities in a new location. The final confrontation with Agent Smith in *The Matrix* (q.v.) works that way: Neo fights Smith in the subway, flees, then confronts and overcomes him in a tenement hallway. This is not to argue that running fights through multiple locations occur only in this example. The climax of *Once Upon a Time in Shanghai* (2014, Wong Ching-Po) has its hero ass-kicking his way through a mook-filled headquarters to finally lay a beatdown on the enemies he's really looking for. You can undoubtedly think of others. But *Hard Boiled* remains a model for a running battle, one that makes us wonder how to run one in a game.

The first thing you need is a **verbal survey of the master location**. Here a very basic map does become the GM's friend. Create a simple diagram showing how the sub-locations of your master scene relate to one another. A running fight will take the heroes from starting point to endpoint. The route might consist of a single path, or provide for multiple possible ways to the endpoint. Look for a way to introduce the heroes to the master and subsidiary locations before the fight starts. Don't show them a map; that tips your hand too hard. But you might say, "they lead you from the gate house, down a set of steps to the reception area, and down a long corridor, passing various unmarked doors. Then you enter a big warehouse area, and take a wooden lift up to a catwalk, and finally into the boss' office." By keeping it verbal you give your players leeway to narrate new features into the master location as you go. "There was a bank of elevators near the reception area, right? I'm there right as the doors open, and duck in as bullets blast all around me."

When the fight breaks out, you need a **goal for the heroes other than simply overcoming the bad guys**. Here Tequila and Tony do want to mop up Johnny and his crew, but they're really trying to fight their way out of the hospital first and foremost. If they ran into Johnny inside the hospital, they might have chased him deeper into it, but that's a moot point here, as movies aren't forking narratives. It might simply be that the creep your heroes really want to lay low waits at the end of the maze of secondary antagonists. Or they could be trying to get to a bomb to defuse it before it goes off, to rescue a supporting character from a death trap, or to reach a pop-up juncture portal before it closes forever. This implies but does not require a ticking clock. They might have to navigate their route between sub-locations by the end of sequence three, or even shot 6 of sequence two, in order to achieve their non-beatdown goal.

To extend their race against time, confront the heroes with surprise tasks they have to perform as they move through the route. Suddenly they discover incubators full of babies in need of rescue. Set the deadline, if any, to allow them to perform these additional actions.

Finally you need to position secondary antagonists throughout the fight route. To move from one sub-location to the next, the heroes have to take out the bad guys, usually mooks, standing in their way. You could flat-out stipulate this: "you can't get into the atrium without taking care of the shotgunners standing by the columns." Alternately, you could let the heroes get through these gatekeepers, but at an increased cost. The cost could be measured in a set amount of damage per interposing enemy. Or it could just be a risk: each gets a free 0-shot attack at a hero bypassing them. That makes certain archetypes more effective than others in ignoring gatekeeper mooks. The Big Bruiser can barrel through them, where the Killer probably likes her odds better if she stands back and picks them off, aided by Carnival of Carnage. Fetchingly, that idea plays into the two archetypes' signature moves.

Where a task lies at the end of the fight—the bomb to defuse, the hostage to grab before rope burns away and they fall into the spike trap—I'd

be inclined to make that an automatic success. Unless you've prepped your players for an ultra-fatalism on a par with *SPL* (q.v.) they're going to feel awfully cheated to win the fight only to fail the task check.

If instead the heroes run the maze to gain access to the guy they really want, you might stat him out as a mook, no matter what his importance to the storyline so far. In the end, Tequila's face-to-face with Johnny doesn't kick off a new phase of the big fight. It's a tense one-shot kill, with a self-sacrificing boost from Tony.

HERO

PATH OF THE UNRELIABLE NARRATOR

After Ang Lee's success with *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (q.v.), mainland director Zhang Yimou, noted for moodily rendered realist films such as *Raise the Red Lantern* (1991), *Shanghai Triad* (1995), and *Not One Less* (1999), followed suit with his own fusion of art movie ambition and wuxia tropes. Enlisting *Crouching Tiger's* cinematographer, Christopher Doyle, and composer, Tan Dun, 2002's *Hero* similarly conjures lyrical beauty from its martial arts duels. Also like Lee's film it casts a roster of HK stars, plus Zhang Ziyi, in its central roles. Despite its complicated narrative strategy it became China's highest grossing domestic hit to date, turning *Crouching Tiger* from one-off to template for the mainland/HK period epic revival.

Like Akira Kurosawa's *Rashomon* (1950), *Hero* uses a series of flashback retellings to explore the variability of truth. In 227 BCE, an obscure official who calls himself Nameless (Jet Li) presents himself to the King of Qin. He recounts the scheme by which he slew the king's most dangerous foes, three assassins responsible for an earlier attempt on his life. Nameless describes his duel with Long Sky (Donnie Yen) in a rainswept weiqi (Chinese chess) parlor, and then how he brought about the deaths of the lovers Snow (Maggie Cheung) and Broken Sword (Tony Leung Chiu-Wai) by exploiting Snow's prior affair with Long Sky. The king (Chen Daoming) rejects his story on the grounds that it paints the assassins, who he admires, in a dishonorable light. The film flashes back to the king's conjectured version of what happened, in which Sky and Snow nobly sacrifice themselves to give Nameless the trophies he needs to gain access to the king. Nameless now tells a second version of the story, admitting that he has come to avenge his

murdered family. Snow still wants to kill the king, but Broken Sword has now decided against it. Within this version another narrative nests: Broken Sword tells of his and Snow's assault on the king three years before, and why he aborted it. The telling of this tale converts Nameless to Broken Sword's belief that only the king can end the cycle of war and vengeance and bring peace and unity. Instead of killing the king with his Death Within Ten Paces power, he willingly goes to his death.

This ending caused consternation in the west. If we read the King of Qin as the current Chinese regime, the film seems to be an argument for the willing abnegation of personal rights in the name of political stability. Zhang professed that his film had no political significance, which one always has to do when making subversive statements under state censorship. Just as the film presents multiple points of view, it invites the viewer to contemplate alternate allegorical meanings. If you take Nameless' submission to execution as a glorious, fatalistic self-sacrifice, it seems to suggest that Chinese citizens should also be willing to give up their freedoms in the name of order. On the other hand, if you think Zhang wants us to be appalled by the torrent of arrows that destroy Nameless as he stands against the wall, waiting to die, the film follows a typical strategy of protest art. The German playwright Bertolt Brecht argued that stories that seek social change should never end with the happy result the activist desires. Instead, they should impel the audience to action by showing them an outcome they want to say "no" to.

With its challenges of interpretation and contradictory realities, *Hero* unfolds as an intellectual puzzle film. Each time the narrative shifts, we are forced to recalibrate our feelings about Snow, Broken Sword, and his student Moon (Zhang Ziyi). Each time they appear as fractionally different people. Nameless' first story in particular diverges sharply from their presentation in the others. Each story uses a different monochromatic hue, seen in the sets and costumes, cuing us that all of them are in some way artificial.

We see Nameless' first story, the one about jealousy and betrayal, in deep red. The duel between Snow and Moon that caps the sequence begins in yel-

low but reverts to red in the end. The king's narrative, fitting his desire to see his enemies as noble, unfolds in cool blue. The third, apparently true account, which puts Snow and Broken Sword back at odds, but over politics, not love, puts the cast in white. The story within that story, about the aborted attack on the king's palace, glows a lush green. The actors are playing different people in at least the red, blue and white sequences. Maggie Cheung plays blue Snow in a realer, more immediate style than she does red Snow. But that is the least accurate of the three versions, the one the king is making up to suit his romantic preconceptions.

A game in which the PCs enact variant versions of the same events, each told by a different unreliable narrator, seems like a job for a poetic wuxia hack of James Wallis' *The Extraordinary Adventures of Baron Munchausen*. Yet in the relationships between the characters *Hero* does provide a model for a less experimental mode of play.

Every *Feng Shui* character has a melodramatic hook selected by its player. This encourages you to play with the emotionality of Hong Kong cinema, and gives the heroes motivations to go out and get into action movie trouble. Bringing in multiple hooks can challenge the GM, who works over multiple sessions to knit them into a larger storyline.

All of the principals in *Hero* have melodramatic hooks, and the hooks all interconnect. This remains true for the red, blue and white Snow, Broken Sword, and Moon, even though the details shift between iterations.

Long Sky appears only once, in the opening Jet versus Donnie showdown. His hook stays the same throughout: he wants to kill the king of Qin. Only his fate differs: did he die in that duel, or suffer a lethal-seeming but survivable injury?

Jet always has the same melodramatic hook, which he abandons at the climax of the film. He too seeks the death of the king, having learned ten years ago that he was not a Qin foundling, but a refugee from the rival Zhao kingdom, whose family was slain by the King of Qin. This hook mirrors Long Sky's, but that doesn't seem repetitive, since the Donnie Yen character exits the film early on.

In the red version, Snow's melodramatic hook is that she had an affair with Long Sky. Broken Sword's hook has him still in love with Snow but unable to forgive her. Moon's is that she loves Broken Sword.

In the blue and white versions, Moon's deep loyalty to Broken Sword reads as not necessarily romantic. "Fervently loyal to X" remains a fine melodramatic hook, though.

Blue version Snow and Broken Sword each have the hook, "want to protect the other from ultimate sacrifice."

White Broken Sword's hook might be expressed as "renounced his rebel ambitions." White Snow's hook is "can't forgive Broken Snow for refusing to kill the king of Qin."

Each of these hooks creates implications for the other characters in the past, bringing reasons to interact, generating the conflict that drives stories.

Replicate this in your *Feng Shui* game by designating one starting player to come up with a strong melodramatic hook that leads to specific action. In a group whose players are happy to take outside ideas and run with them, the GM might pick a hook and assign it to someone she knows will bite into it with gusto.

The first player describes his character and the hook. The next player then picks a relationship to the first, and describes a melodramatic hook arising from it. Player three picks a relationship to the first and second heroes, and the resulting hook. Continue going around the room until all hooks and interrelationships have been established. Hooks for heroes other than the first can be less action oriented, as the plotlines fostered by that original hook, plus the relationships, will pull them into the story. Make the relationships as personal as possible. Don't shy away from love as a bond between characters. It drives both *Hero* and *Crouching Tiger*.

Results could look something like so:

- "I, Tan, helped design the C-bomb that killed the future. I will reverse its effect, or die trying."

- “I am the ghost of his wife Angie, who died in the blast. I want him to forgive himself, and move on with his life.”
- “I am Ting Ting, best friend of his dead wife. I love Tan, but cannot express it, not with Angie’s ghost still hanging around.”
- “I am Kaboom Baboon, a cyborg monkey made by Tan. I treat him as my brother and father rolled into one, and will allow no one to hurt him. No one.”
- “I am Tan’s colleague and father Wen-Chung, who secretly tried to sabotage the C-bomb and in so doing brought doom to all. I want to help my son, but also to conceal my shame at all costs.”

Deep-dyed game auteurs will recognize this technique as a central component of character generation in another of my RPGs, *Hillfolk*.

HOT FUZZ

SETUP, CALLBACK, PAYOFF

SPONSORED BY KEN ROUNTREE

With its prominent shot of the DVD box for *Jackie Chan's Police Story 3: Supercop* and the moment where its leads leap into the air John Woo style with both guns blazing, Edgar Wright's *Hot Fuzz* (2007) draws overt inspiration from the same sources *Feng Shui* does. That raises the question of how one might find action gaming inspiration in *Hot Fuzz*.

At first glance, that challenge daunts. When it gets down to it, *Hot Fuzz* certainly serves up a heaping helping of action, as adroitly executed as the films to which it plays comic homage. That said, for almost the entirety of its running time, it remains a sharp yet heartfelt comedy of policing manners. When it does switch to action mode, it does so without tossing out its comic tone. Other police comedies, like *48 HRS* (1982, Walter Hill), *Beverly Hills Cop* or even *21 Jump Street* (2012, Phil Lord & Christopher Miller) layer comic business over top of a straight police movie structure. Here a case eventually appears, but the focus remains on fish out of water character comedy, with hot buttered buddy cop on the side. Abetted by a deep bench of British character actors, the film's success lies in the laughs it wrings from the transformation of Nicholas Angel (Simon Pegg) from by-the-book big city overachiever to small town boy willing to unleash his inner wild man. He does this by adopting the positive traits of his opposite number, lovable dimwit Danny Butterman (Nick Frost).

A game following a central character's personal turnaround through gags and a growing relationship with a foil figure sounds less like *Feng Shui* territory than yet another challenge for the RPG indiesphere. Game chef, anyone?

If we zoom out a bit, though, we can find some structural techniques to repurpose for our needs.

Like most parodies, and many fresh story ideas in general, *Hot Fuzz* works by taking familiar tropes and subjecting them to a reversal.

It reverses the familiar concept of the maverick cop, realizing that the officer who would really drive management crazy wouldn't be the one who ignores procedure, but the one who follows it to an obsessive degree, disrupting the go along, get along principle of any large institution. The story starts when Angel gets kicked upstairs to a sergeant's post far away from his wearied London superiors.

The idea that a small town racks up more murders than London likewise operates as a reversal, this one basic to the film's entire premise.

Another reversal occurs when it looks as if Angel has found the motive for a string of murders in his new small town. The schemes of evil property developers have been the lazy writer's all-purpose bad guy motivation for years. Here, at least for a while, the killings seem spurred by opposition to development.

When you introduce a familiar plotline into a *Feng Shui* adventure, stop and see if it will seem fresher if turned on its head. You could do the exact same as Wright and Pegg do in their screenplay, making the developers the good guys intent on eradicating a negative feng shui radiating demonic energy. The neighborhood association protesting their plans turns out to be a front for the Eaters of the Lotus.

To take another example, you could reverse the typical role of a player character. The killer gets hired by an industrialist the Simians are trying to assassinate, so they can control his company's genetic discoveries. His assignment: to work out how he'd perform the job, given the Simians' resources, figuring out the enemy's plan before they come up with it. Then the entire group goes out to foil it, taking the fight to them. (Otherwise you're just turning the Killer character into the Bodyguard.)

Hot Fuzz earns its biggest moments by skillfully using another classic story technique, the setup and payoff. A setup early on establishes a story

element that then blossoms into a bigger moment later on. Often the script keeps the element present in our minds by recapitulating it in different contexts. This is a callback—especially apropos in a comedy, where, if it gets a laugh, it serves a double purpose as a running gag, gaining impact each time we see it.

For example, Danny talks about his favorite moment in *Point Break*, where the Keanu Reeves character loves the Patrick Swayze one too much to shoot him, and so fires in the air, screaming his manly frustration. Then, in a callback, Danny shows Nicholas his favorite moment in *Point Break*. Finally, at the film's climax, he pulls a Keanu, shooting in the air and screaming to avoid having to shoot his father (Jim Broadbent).

When setting up or calling back, the deft writer ensures that the element arises naturally in the scene and serves a purpose within it. Otherwise it stands out as construction necessary for later. We notice setups least when they support emotional beats.

The first Keanu beat reinforces the comic divide between Danny and Nicholas. Danny loves action movies but Nicholas doesn't bother with them. The second shows them coming closer together. So when the final beat pays off, it comes as a delightful surprise. What you don't want is to think, "Oh, I was waiting for that detail to matter."

The business with the escaped swan shows us setup, an extended series of callbacks, and then a brilliantly satisfying payoff. When Nicholas first gets the call to capture the bird, it plays as a funny gag and shows us how far he's fallen from his prior status as a hard-charging London cop. The swan keeps showing up throughout the film, landing as a running gag each time, every instance building on the last. Its climactic payoff occurs when the swan, now in the back of Angel's squad car, decisively pecks Jim Broadbent, leading to his crash and capture.

Roleplaying's improvisational framework doesn't naturally lend itself to this kind of narrative neatness. You and your group can do more to conjure it by keeping track of seemingly arbitrary bits of business that arise during play, and looking for ways to call them back and pay them off.

As a GM you probably already do this organically, to some extent. When you see that the players care about a particular GMC, you bring her back in different contexts throughout the action of your series. When you prepare for a session, you might run through a mental (or actual) list of dangling plot threads, scanning for ones you can smoothly call back into the current adventure.

Some of these the players will pick up again. Others they'll let fall by the wayside as they make the choices that give meaning to the heroes' agency.

You might try taking this further by making the players aware of open story elements, encouraging them to create their own callbacks. This could take the form of something as simple as a text document on a sharing service like Google Docs or Dropbox. For added impact, you might create graphic representations of open elements on an image board site like Tumblr or Pinterest. Or, if you're reading this in the future, your holographic ear canal implant or whatever your crazy kids are up to these days.

These might be styled as index cards with images for extra brain-stirring power. So you could have a plot card that says "Keanu moment" with an image of the Point Break poster on it. Or another with a picture of a swan. And another with an image of a living statue busker.

Though you won't be recreating *Hot Fuzz* in particular, so they'll instead refer to the details of your series in progress: "Lotus demon", "booby-trapped toaster oven", "wife's goodbye note."

Feng Shui already lays in an element to call back to and, ideally, pay off: the heroes' melodramatic hooks. Top your virtual callback card sheet with a representation of each one. Reminders increase the likelihood of player A bringing in a hook from character B or C. If the service you use lets you reorder the cards, take a moment after each session to move the recently used hooks to the end of their group. That nudges all of you to give equal spotlight time to all the hooks, not just the ones that are dead easy to call back to.

At the start of each session, as the chat phase segues into the recap of previous events, encourage players to fire up their devices and review the open story elements. That way, as the new session progresses, they'll be in a frame of mind to reintroduce them, or steer their choices toward them. This will add shape to your series; instead of taking new story forks out of the blue, they'll be moving toward callbacks. The technique relieves you of the sole responsibility for story coherence. Structure develops without your having to shoehorn it in.

The results still won't be as neatly constructed as *Hot Fuzz*, but then it wasn't improvised, was it?

KAMEN RIDER: THE FIRST ***KAMEN RIDER: NEXT***

CYBORG CYCLE FU

SPONSORED BY LUKE 'MECHA' GIESEMANN

2005's *Kamen Rider: The First* (Takao Nagaishi) and its 2007 followup, *Kamen Rider: Next* (Ryuta Tasaki) appear as but one expression of a Japanese multi-platform franchise featuring grasshopper-masked super-heroes who battle evil on and off the backs of roaring motorcycles. I lack both space and expertise to put them in the context of the wider enterprise. For this we can be grateful to Wikipedia, which exists primarily to explicate the vertiginous intricacies of Japanese pop culture properties. Here I'll be looking at these two flicks on their own, and what they offer us in the way of action movie gaming fodder, rather than examining their place in the tokusatsu genre.

In *The First*, Takeshi Hongo, a shy heartthrob grad student whose researches extol the beauty of water crystals, is selected by evil organization Shocker to be its next evil cyborg recruit. When he refuses to submit to their authority, and proves inexplicably immune from the need to plug into their blood transfusion machines for constant maintenance, the bad guys brand him a traitor, sending other animal-themed, power-armored cyborgs to ice him. When Shocker kills the fiancée/editor of an appealing journalist doing a report on his work, Hongo takes the rap out of lovelorn guilt. A romantic triangle ensues when the bad guys resurrect the victim as another cyborg with the new identity of Hayato Ichimonji. This newcomer rider struggles to decide whether he wants to kill Hongo or fight alongside him. A second thread adds further soap interest, as the love of two seriously ill teenagers presages a transformation. It turns out to be an extended flashback giving us backstory on other cyborgs Hongo and Ichimonji will fight during the climax.

In *Next*, Hongo, now a laughing-stock high school teacher, involves himself in an investigation launched by an outcast student. She's looking into the fate of a friend, now a pop idol whose new single mysteriously kills certain of its listeners. This leads to a mystery involving the vanished employees of the singer's IT magnate brother. Ichimonji breaks from whiling away his final days with bar hostesses to help stop Shocker from releasing nanobots to turn all of Japan into evil cyborgs.

First plays as a sentimental post-teen romance periodically interrupted by masked hero motorcycle fights. *Next* aims for a harder edge, adding nudity, horror imagery and an air of mild perversity to the proceedings. It draws on more up-to-date Japanese genre movie influences, with a J-horror plotline making it one of *The Ring's* many imitators. It also dabbles in the hellish out-of-control high school sub-genre. Here Hongo has become even more neb-bishy, with actor Masaya Kikawada adopting the stunned, affectless demeanor common in much Japanese indie and art cinema.

Apart from their shared mythology, both films have traits in common: the two lead characters/actors, modest budgets, and a muddy brown color palette. (The last might be an artifact of perfunctory DVD transfers.) More on point, their wirework fight choreography shows a kinship to Hong Kong fu cinema. Fights in both films add an element to the HK action mix: motorbike fu. Heroes and villains bomb at each other on bikes, leaping on and off them in gravity-ignoring wirework stunts. They kick and grab each other's wheels or roll from the bikes onto the well-cleared highways where their battles take place.

Other stylistic devices link the films to the classic HK era. Micro-flashbacks to scenes we've already seen reveal characters' thoughts. Scripts skim on the connective tissue between scenes, for example doing little to signal that the start of the lengthy interwoven flashback of the first film represents a shift from the main action.

Like a lot of Japanese pop culture productions, especially those with roots in manga and anime, these films favor moment and gesture over coherent throughline. In their relative disinterest in structure lies their

big similarity to role-playing game sessions, where player choice trumps narrative organization.

The First plays like a session where the players care pretty much only about their personal storylines, but the GM keeps introducing tokusatsu action sequences because that's the game they're playing, dammit. Neither hero nor anti-hero pursue an active agenda beyond their contrasting courtship of love interest Asuka. Shocker (an evil organization name that wasn't as unfortunate in the early 70s as it is now) keeps things moving by periodically sending out bad guys to attack them for being traitors. They provoke the final assault on their base only by kidnapping Asuka and setting her up for cyborgification. Their after-action reports presumably conclude that it's a bad idea to activate your enemies by interfering in their love triangle.

Next gives the heroes more impetus and the plot greater forward momentum. There's a mystery to be solved. The seemingly unrelated J-horror and tokusatsu threads do resolve into one story in the end. Even so, both films adopt a pretty loosey-goosey rhythm, reminiscent of the side moments and tangents of a role-playing game session that take place when players exercise freedom of choice. For example, in *Next*, Ichimonji remains a grudging, unengaged protagonist. For him, the A- and B-plots interrupt his personal agenda of living out the rest of his brief life and leaving behind a good-looking, happy corpse. That smacks of the one player who largely rejects the adventure's premise in order to pursue his melodramatic hook.

But I sense that what readers really want to know here is how to add tokusatsu-style costumed/armored warriors to their *FS2* games. The Kaiju Patrol pop-up juncture does include a nod to them, implying that you basically reskin existing archetypes by having them ride motorcycles while wearing the genre's crazy masks and costumes.

To run an all-masked biker game set in the present day, I'd advise doing the same. That gives you the full range of mechanical variety between PCs the game assumes. You might assign an animal type to each archetype, so

that the Big Bruiser wears a bear helmet, the Spy a Snake helmet, the Supernatural Creature a spider helmet, and so on. Invite players to reimagine their attacks as emanating from their cyborg armor. A masked biker based on the Archer might wear a Porcupine helmet, firing quills from a special wristband instead of arrows from a bow. Set aside the suggested backstories that come with the templates. Everyone started out in the cyborg vats of your bad guys, or maybe from a virtuous inverse of Shocker. The surface differences between the characters all come from the look and theme of the power armor.

Fights with bikes don't use the chase rules. The battles we see here are always duels, in which neither side is trying to escape the other. They're there to rumble. So the cycles provide descriptive fodder for attacks. When on a bike every masked biker type may describe themselves as having Prodigious Leap, so long as they either begin or end their action on a bike. For best results, begin *and* end on a bike. Describe attacks against foes as damaging either them or their vehicles, and your character as either on a bike, or sailing through the air from or to it:

- “I grab his front tire, sending him tumbling to the pavement.”
- “I leap from my bike, spiral in the air, kick him in the head, then leap back onto my bike as it zooms past.”
- “I swerve suddenly toward him; in his effort to evade me he tips and skids along the tarmac.”
- “I push my Lion blade through his spokes and twist, ripping his wheel off.”

The GM may allow you free reign to describe damage to enemy bikes. You can certainly always do this when you take out a masked mook rider. For featured foes she might decree that you can only narrate decisive damage to motorcycles when you impair them.

GMs can introduce cyborg riders as villains without offering them as hero templates. Give them foe schticks suitable to scroungotech charac-

ters and supernatural creatures. You could stage chases with them or use their bikes, as above, as descriptive inspiration for straight-up fights. They might be the product of a bizarre Jammer or Simian plot, or the issue of bad guy faction of your own creation.

The addition of a fully functional, reliably playtested new template to add an Armored Biker as a player option in the standard game lies outside the purview of this book. But let's take a quick stab.

We actually see very few outright super powers in use in these two films. Those with a deeper knowledge of the lore can doubtless find more examples in other movies, manga and TV episodes. Hongo uses vehicle-stopping super strength, which does not require him to be in costume. Other than that, he's a straight-up fu dude with mad cycle skills. Although the Masked Avenger seems superficially the ideal choice, I'd adapt the Martial Artist, giving him Driving 15, a motorbike, the mutant schtick Very Strong, and the fu schticks Prodigious Leap and Ominous Flutter. In exchange for these, I'd drop the Leadership skill and the nunchaku-related fu schticks Whirl of Fury and Blur of Rage. The Martial Artist already has a high Toughness, so that's the armor part taken care of.

If that isn't a jury-rigged result worthy of Shocker, I don't know what is.

THE KILLER

HYPER-ROMANTICISM

For stripped-down, explosive action storytelling, you just can't beat the delirious masterpiece that is John Woo's *The Killer* (1989).

Because it features the greatest melodramatic hook of all time, I always forget the brief prefatory scene before the opening assassination. In what sets up a circular structure, we open in a Catholic church blazing with candlelight, where ultra-cool assassin Jeff (Chow Yun-Fat) accepts a new job from longtime pal Fung Sei (Chu Kong).

When Jeff goes to execute it, he accidentally blinds an innocent bystander, nightclub singer Jennie (Sally Yeh). Overcome by remorse and seeking redemption, he agrees to one last hit to finance the eye operation she needs to restore her sight. With maverick cop Li Ying (Danny Lee) on his trail, he deals with minions sent by the mobster who ordered the hit. In true hitman movie fashion, the client has stiffed him and wants to cover his tracks by having the killer killed. As Li Ying falls deep into long distance bromance for Jeff, Fung Sei considers himself honor-bound to get Jeff the fee he is rightfully owed. It all comes to a blood-drenched head in the church we saw in the first scene, doves and bullets flying.

Throughout Woo dishes up a head-spinning blend of ultra-violence and hyper-romanticism, the latter so intense it takes us to the horizon point where irony turns back into sincerity again.

Your roleplaying narration can evoke both sets of gestures.

Let's start with the shooty-killy stuff we may be more comfortable with. Roleplaying has always been better at bleeding than feeling.

Sparky squibs: As Fung Sei mentions when equipping Jeff in the opener, our man prefers explosive bullets. What this means visually is

that the film's blood squibs also include tiny charges, so that the bullets Jeff drills into his targets also let loose a shower of sparks. This has nothing to do with the way explosive rounds work in the real world, but it looks really cool. So in *Feng Shui* it's a thing that happens, if you choose to make it so.

Multiple angle rapid fire repeat actions: The second of Jeff's two assassinations takes place at a dragon boat race. When Jeff raises his Dragunov sniper rifle to shoot his victim we see this happen several times, in slow mo, from slightly different angles, for emphasis. If as a player you know you've rolled especially well you might describe your attack in this way. In *Feng Shui* your multi-angle repeat miming might signal rerolls of sixes on your positive die.

Flying bodies: In real life, the force from a bullet isn't sufficient to knock a person down. People collapse after the impact, when blood loss starts to exact its toll. Or because they expect to fall down when struck by a bullet because they see it happen in movies. In *The Killer*, a bullet hit can propel a mook like a rocket, to land many meters away from where he was when shot.

Bulletproof vest as boss reveal: No director dishes out more oughtta-be-fatal hits to characters who then keep on going than John Woo. The inordinate amount of lead pumped into main bad guy Johnny Weng before he goes down show us that in *Feng Shui* game stat terms, he's definitely a boss. The film justifies this in part by giving him a bulletproof vest, an accoutrement films usually reserve for sidekick good guys. When running a Contemporary era non-fantastical bad guy boss, consider revealing to the players that he's wearing a vest the first time he passes his Up check.

Anyplace you could remotely have a rickety shelf packed with propane tanks, there is a rickety shelf packed with propane tanks: We see this in the beach ambush following the dragon boat hit. Otherwise self-explanatory.

This list should not imply that any of these techniques are unique to Woo or this film. The multiple angle repeat appears in various Jackie Chan

flicks, too. There they don't just emphasize the importance of the action. They break the fourth wall to drive home exactly how freaking awesome and dangerous that bit of stuntwork was.

Some of these techniques have you visualizing simple camera or optical effects that you'd seen on a movie screen. That's you as player or GM making the embellishment. Provided the character doesn't comment on them or otherwise seem aware, they don't break the fourth wall. Having the character notice that he freeze-framed just now, or went into slow motion takes you into a meta, spoofy zone that completely undercuts the turbo-charged sincerity of hyper-romanticism.

To really capture the John Woo vibe, extend extravagant description beyond the action scene. We gamers can be less attuned to the soulful quality of Hong Kong cinema than we are to the wildness of its action choreography. As a player, you may instinctively confine your descriptive contributions to a session's action sequences. Train yourself to break this habit, retaining freedom to embellish at all times. Bring out your melodramatic hooks by looking for chances to use the following techniques.

Emotional states as visual symbols: In RPGs we tend to rely on dialogue to express our character's feelings. This makes perfect sense; it is a verbal medium. Expand your repertoire by looking for ways to signal interior shifts visually. After the first hit, when he has blinded Jennie, Jeff returns to the church to get a bullet removed by Fung Sei and a curiously obliging priest. As they pull it out of him, we see, from his POV, a stained glass window, a cross, and a dove. This hammer blow of visual symbolism marks Jeff's shift onto the path of redemption.

Later, Detective Li gazes at dozens of copies of the same flattering police sketch of Jeff. This gesture underlines his growing bro-crush on the hitman.

Micro-flashbacks as interior monologue: In another technique that goes beyond Woo to HK film syntax in general, the film shows us quick shots of events that have already occurred when the characters are thinking about them. When we see Jeff relive the blinding of Jennie, we're get-

ting interior monologue without voice-over. Li even has micro-flashbacks of events that happened to Jeff when he wasn't there!

Emulate this technique by referring to your character reliving past events. These might be backstory elements that happened before the action of the introductory adventure, or callbacks to events of this or previous sessions. "Detective Wen's eyes go unfocused as his mind goes back to that terrible moment in the helicopter, as Dr. Cho died, slug after slug slamming into his body."

Freeze frame emphasis: Woo, again like other HK directors, punches home key moments with freeze-frame closeups. These usually happen at the ends of scenes, but need not, especially when you invoke them as a player. A GM ready to "yes and" you might indeed break the scene there. But she may have a reason to keep going—for example if other players have yet to squeeze all of the juice from the current situation and want to keep going. Wherever it falls in relation to the scene, simply say something like: "The image freezes on my guilt-stricken face." Drop in whatever emotional cue you want in place of "guilt-stricken." Your face could be "confident", "horrified", "love-struck", "vengeful..."

Music cues emphasizing character's emotions go all the way back in cinema history to the silent movie house's orchestra pit. Woo deploys them without restraint. Note how he uses love-melodrama music to counterpoint the relationship between Jeff and Detective Li. A cue we'd normally associate with a couple falling for each other plays under the Mexican standoff in Jennie's apartment. When Li's superior kicks him off the case, the score gives us break-up music.

Normally we leave music cues, if any, to the GM. I use a fight scenes playlist I've compiled on a music streaming service. But with the GM's permission, you might use a mobile device to call up tracks to play under your character's personal moments. The first gamer impulse here will be to send it up. Challenge yourself to commit to it for real, with a straight face. Ever since the inception of the hobby people have taken pride in saying "my character wouldn't do that." But one thing we very rarely do is

to allow our characters to show vulnerability. Or much of anything, aside from killingness. *The Killer* shows us that we can have plenty of feeling, more than we can take maybe, even as we jack up the body count. The last undiscovered territory in RPGs might be unbridled sincerity.

For bonus points, describe your character playing the harmonica. Non-ironically.

The film ends, after Jeff's fatalistic demise, with a shot of him playing the harmonica. After your *Feng Shui* character bites the dust, dip your toes into the waters of big emotion by describing a similar posthumous final flashback image. It's okay to project vulnerability when your character is dead, right?

KUNG FU HUSTLE

THE CYCLE OF ESCALATION

The huge, lasting popularity and triple-threat status of comic writer director star Stephen Chow within the field of Hong Kong film invites comparison to Jerry Lewis. Having integrated inventive CGI animation into his recent comedy-action epics, his onscreen style more and more recalls the cartoon craziness of Tex Avery gone live action, with a devout Buddhist twist.

2004's *Kung Fu Hustle*, a manic tribute to the Shaw Brothers era, contains the familiar reference points to make Chow's biggest crossover to Western audiences. In addition to showing palm strikes so powerful they knock hand-sized holes in buildings, and reveling in ultra-precision slapstick timing, it takes an oft-used structure and refashions it into a magical lotus flower.

This staple structure might best be called the cycle of vengeance. It fuels many a gangster and kung fu movie, from Japan to the US to the Shaw Brothers heyday. The cycle of vengeance sets aside developmental plotting, in which one situation grows out of another, for a simple set of strikes and counterstrikes. One gang, or kung fu school, instigates the action by launching an attack against the other. The initial battle might arise from a misunderstanding but is more often started by the bad guys, or maybe a rogue or anti-hero among our viewpoint characters. A retaliatory strike follows the initial assault. In between fights the protagonists may advance personal storylines of loyalty, ambition, romance, or the desire to escape. For rhythmic variety the bad guys may incite more than one fight in a row. The stakes rise for each fight. While the heroes must enter training montages, outsmart their adversaries, or otherwise

find new inner reserves to prevail, the antagonists can bring in progressively tougher opponents. The final climax ends the cycle, wrapping up the main figures' character arcs.

In this the cycle of retaliation resembles another simple structure allowing plenty of room for tangents and a touch of interpersonal interaction: the roleplaying adventure. We expect the heroes to fight their way through a series of bad guys. In the broad sweep of a campaign, if not in any given session, new, tougher adversaries keep coming along to replace the defeated ones. The heroes remain the same; the bad guys ramp up, until the boss fight at the end. In a telling difference between RPG scenarios and other fight-heavy narrative forms, the heroes often take on the role of aggressors.

This can play as unsympathetic on film, unless you take care to have the bad guys contemptuously threaten or kill the hero's family, community, or dog. What you then get is not a cycle, but the *Death Wish* model. Here the protagonist, who otherwise would be minding his own business, engages in a wave of attacks, all because some idiot didn't know who not to fuck with. By contrast, RPG characters launch one attack after another because the inhabitants of dungeons vaguely threaten a community, but also have the temerity to possibly have a bunch of cool treasure in there.

But that's the wave of vengeance, not the cycle of retaliation. Let's get our patterns straight here, people.

Kung Fu Hustle gives us a surprising variation on the cycle of retaliation. Here we get a cycle of escalation, a series of attacks in which good guys and bad guys alike are defeated and then replaced by a new set of combatants.

Leaving out the character development and connecting tissue between them, the fights comprising the cycle go like so:

- The Crocodile Gang attacks a police station, beating the cops for making the mistake of arresting the mob boss' girlfriend for spitting on the side walk.

- The Crocodile Gang leave the station, to be dispatched by the Axe Gang.
- Petty thugs Sing and Bone, initially presented as bad-asses and who seem to be from the Axe Gang, appear at a slum tenement, the Pig Sty, to conduct a shakedown, but are driven off by Landlady.
- The real Axe Gang shows up and beats the people of Pig Sty.
- Until three heroes reveal themselves as seemingly ordinary tenement residents, and defeat the Axe Gang.
- So the Axe Gang recruits two deadly harpists, who go to Pig Sty and kill the three heroes.
- So Landlord and Landlady reveal themselves as even greater masters, and defeat the harpists.
- So the Axe Gang recruits the most dangerous master of all, the dumpy-looking but powerfully frog-like Beast, who defeats Landlord and Landlady.
- But when Beast goes to Pig Sty, he discovers that Sing has transformed into a true master of the Buddhist Palm. Sing, now a redeemed man, defeats Beast, but in an enlightened manner that brings Beast to heel and ends the cycle of escalation.

Though the film doesn't present us with a clear protagonist, it does spend time with Sing. We discover that he's an extreme case of the selfishness versus altruism opposition found in many a heroic transformation. It also occurs for Han Solo in *Star Wars*, Max in *Road Warrior*, and Jeff in *The Killer* (all q.v.) When we meet Sing he's not merely selfish—he's actively a scumbag. Through most of the film he barely qualifies for mook status. Yet a flashback showing us the childhood moment when he tried to help a bullied deaf girl and got beaten and peed on for his troubles suggests that he's merely stepped onto the wrong path and might be in line for a redemption. Which, as we've already seen, happens

quite late in the action. Before then, we can enjoy laughs at his expense when he gets peppered with knives or bitten on the lips by cobras while trying and failing to do the wrong thing on behalf of his Axe Gang masters. During this period he remains a lackey, taking part in events but never driving them. The audience enjoys the double privilege of both rooting for him to seek redemption, and enjoying the slapstick justice fate metes out to him.

The fights increase in scale as they progress. The beatings in the police station are entirely realistic. The murders of the Crocodile Gang place one shotgun victim on a wire to get blown a good distance across the pavement. By the final battles the combatants battle with powers so outlandish they seem over the top for *Feng Shui*.

Although it's a joy from beginning to end, full of loving period style worth borrowing when your *Feng Shui* characters duck into the Shanghai 1937 pop-up juncture, it's tough to envision a satisfying gaming experience that borrows *Kung Fu Hustle's* structure. Sing undergoes his transformation from idiot to butt-kicking Bodhisattva not through the usual pain and gain of working his way up through a hierarchy of foes. He takes a hit from the Beast that unblocks his chi and lets him realize his true nature as a natural master.

A cycle of escalation that swaps out combatants at the end of each fight, even if the climax brings back a character from an earlier bout in a powered-up new guise, flies in the face of basic roleplaying expectations. It feels more like a card game structure, in which you have to play out early fights with lower-rated combatants to earn the right to later field stronger ones. Maybe you could run it as a drunk *Feng Shui* one-shot, in which you go around the table, playing out two-player duels. Only a single PC, designated as The One, can ever recur. Every other time a pair of players duels, the loser character goes to the discard pile. The winner then fights a somewhat tougher new opponent run by the next player in the seating order. Somewhat tougher means an Attack or Defense AV 1 point higher than the current champion. In between fights, you could have The One

take part in scenes that advance his arc toward mastery. Or you could forget all the story stuff and just straight-up octagon it until everyone gets bored or the bar closes.

Abstemious readers will prefer to strive for an aesthetic, not biological, state of inebriation.

For another CGI-fueled film of outlandish slapstick fu with an even more apparent theme of Buddhist enlightenment, see Chow's 2013 *Journey to the West*. It's a prequel of sorts to his earlier two-part take on that classic folkloric novel, *Chinese Odyssey: Pandora's Box* and *Chinese Odyssey: Cinderella*, which I can only recommend to those already completely on board the Chow train. The newer flick shows the path its protagonist, Xuanzang, takes from feckless bumpkin to heroic Exorcist Monk assisted by a rake-wielding pig man, a redeemed fish demon, and of course the Monkey King. It assumes more knowledge of the classic story than you may have going in, so hit Wikipedia before pressing play. This one doesn't quite achieve the magical blend of myth and comedy the way *Kung Fu Hustle* does with fu and comedy, but it still ladles out piping hot fu imagery you can borrow the next time your heroes go to the Past juncture.

THE MATRIX

TAKE THE EXPOSITION PILL

With 1999's *The Matrix*, the directing team billed as the Wachowskis imported the fight choreography of Yuen Woo-Ping, and thus the Hong Kong action aesthetic, to the Hollywood blockbuster. Yuen, director of such titles as *Iron Monkey* (1993) and *Wing Chun* (1994) trained the cast and delivered his wirework expertise, working with a lead time no HK budget could swallow. The Hong Kong golden age had ended, but the spread of its tropes into the broader cinematic tradition was only just afoot.

The film's layered reality setting, which you do not need me to encapsulate for you, allowed Western audiences to accept the wire fu's disregard for physics as we know it. In *The Matrix*, fighters' freedom from gravity ceases to be a genre conceit and becomes an expression of SF worldbuilding.

The film doesn't just transpose wirework to a new context. It freezes, explodes, and reconfigures with digital effects. No matter how athletic Michelle Yeoh might be, she can't pause herself in mid-leap. Visual effects allow Carrie-Ann Moss to do exactly that.

Just because these effects make internal sense only inside the Matrix doesn't mean you can't import them into the FS setting, or have to explain them if you do. What is bullet time, but an Active Dodge with bells and whistles? Grounded characters like Maverick Cops and Killers might not be launching themselves into the air or slowing down time mid-kick, but game schticks from fu paths to scroungitech devices can justify all manner of descriptive craziness.

Despite continued advances in computer effects since '99, the film's digitally-enhanced fight moments remain stunning today. That's because they're brilliantly conceived and integrated with the fight choreography.

The combats here withstand the test of time much better than certain sequences from the disappointing sequels, like the Fight of Many Smiths.

Practical effects work alongside digital to sell the heightened nature of fights in the Matrix reality. The way marble wall slabs disintegrate under gunfire during the storming of the foyer sequence reminds *Feng Shui* GMs of how cool a missed hit can be. It's natural when narrating a battle to focus only on making the hits feel mighty. Throughout the film the damage the agents and rebels do to their physical environment even when they miss juices the excitement factor. Here the security guards firing on Trinity and Neo are clearly mooks, but the exploding marble lends the struggle an epic quality. So when a tranche of mooks misses a hero, don't forget to occasionally describe the mayhem those bullets, laser beams or chi blasts wreak on the location. A simple miss becomes a fun visualization with the simple embellishment of a waterfall of shell casings dropping to the floor in slo-mo.

The Matrix's reconfiguration of the action sequence for the 21st century might tempt us to only focus on those flashy moments. That would miss another of its accomplishments: how skillfully it parcels out an intimidating quantity of exposition.

The danger of worldbuilding on film is that once you've created your internally consistent, intricate setting, you then have to explain that sucker to the audience. *Feng Shui* presents a much simpler world than the average RPG, yet conveying even in its basics in a screenplay is strikingly difficult. (He says, having tried and not particularly succeeded.) Every detail you add to a world introduces what I call an exposition tax. Providing information without stopping the action is vexingly tough. *The Matrix* gives us two worlds with their own rules, including rules for how people can jump in from one world to violate those of the other. The backstory explaining how we got from our familiar reality to the two worlds also matters. In addition the script must also make us understand the goals of the two sides within the worlds. Without that information we wouldn't be able to either follow or care about the action. Emotional

investment depends on our understanding the situation well enough to see what we don't want to see happen, and what we do.

The Matrix uses two main techniques to reduce the weight of its exposition.

One, it packages information in digestible bites. In the opening scene we learn that a class of super-duper warriors exists, that they nonetheless must flee the authorities, and that they can disappear by running to particular phone booths and placing a call. Neo's encounters with Morpheus, first on the phone and later in person, occur in stages, similarly structured to convey a few bullet points each. We can think of this as the Principle of Parsimony. A few details are easier to take in than many.

Two, the script makes us care about this information by putting our viewpoint character in jeopardy. Once the agents start pursuing him, his ability to acquire and assimilate information becomes crucial to his success. Each bit of information poses a new question we want answered. Also, we want Neo to get answers so he can get out of danger. As if it is a principle of a compelling story or something, each bit of information leads him into even bigger trouble. I'm calling this one the Principle of Investment. We react more positively to facts we're given if they bear on a situation we care about.

Here we get the rules of fu fighting in the matrix in two stages. We see Tank hook up Neo to the ship's computer and install the knowledge modules, leading to the famous line "I know kung fu." Then Morpheus demonstrates the rules by sparring with Neo. In both cases curiosity and jeopardy work in tandem. The situations seem dicey, and we hope for two things. One, that nothing bad happens to Neo. Two, that he figures out what's going on, both for his benefit and ours. Even as the plot gets a little tangled, for example when it turns out that the oracle had to tell Neo he wasn't the One so he would feel free to make the decision to rescue Morpheus, thus proving that he's the One, we remain oriented at least to the degree needed to understand the stakes of each scene.

As GMs introducing new scenes, we can always stand to remind ourselves of both parsimony and investment. Ask yourself: is this too much exposition in one go? Do the players know why they should care about it?

You'll note that the film avoids that most deadly of devices, the opening montage in which a narrator fills in the background of an imagined world. It kills the momentum before it has a chance to develop, info-dumping on the audience before we have people to care about. Sometimes films that provide all the needed info as they go along still have montage introductions tacked on at the beginning. When this happens I always envision a note given by an inattentive studio executive falsely convinced it will clarify, rather than deaden, the action.

The RPG equivalent of the dread exposition montage might be either the time players spend reading the rulebook in advance, or direr yet, the part in the first session where the GM reads or paraphrases chunks of text. This gets a little tricky, because players are both audience and creator. They need enough grounding in the world to build characters whose storylines will propel them through it. You can count on a certain degree of pre-investment because they've showed up ready to play. Even so, we can only take in so much raw detail before we start to tune out.

That's why *Feng Shui* uses the device for the starting adventure in which the characters operate at first in our familiar world. Only as the intro scenario develops do they learn that weird stuff is bubbling away: about the chi war, the factions, the importance of feng shui sites, how its unique take on time travel works, and so forth. Unlike filmmakers, GMs have a huge advantage in judging how much exposition the story can take. When the players want information, they seek it out, either asking you what their characters already know, or seeking someone who can tell them. If a roleplaying scene contains a higher fact density than any moment in *The Matrix*, that's fine—so long as the players are prompting you to supply them. If not, throttle back, giving them only what they absolutely require to make choices that move the story onward. When

they're not asking questions, put them in jeopardy, or at least problems they're motivated to solve, in order to spur them onward. (Where the value of "onward" does not usually equal a specific direction predetermined by you.) Don't spiel out information—make them work for it. The mere act of asking lends a fact greater weight. When you say, "You see a fortress of giant touch screens, all showing cat videos. You recognize this as the IKTV studios," you're robbing players of the chance to engage. Stop with the visual teaser and let someone say, "What the heck is that?" and then find out. For extra points, make their lives depend on doing just that.

THE MISSION

GESTURES OF COMRADESHIP

1999. The air has been going out of the HK movie scene for several years. Now, in the wake of the Asian economic crisis, budgets have been slashed to the bone. Johnnie To has been making films for years, including a co-directing credit on the genre-blending masked feminist avenger flick *Heroic Trio* (1993). With the previous year's heroic bloodshed revival *A Hero Never Dies* (1998), he has just found his trademark style, in which laconic protagonists strive to impose order on an often arbitrary world. He already has two other 1999 titles in the can: *Where a Good Man Goes*, in which a gangster tries to retire to a lonely rooming house, and the cat-and-mouse thriller *Running Out of Time*.

With *The Mission*, he makes his first masterpiece, finding inspiration in limitation. The production lacks the budget to buy a proper supply of film stock. To has to work with salvaged bits and ends. So for his tale of a team of bodyguards who assemble to protect a triad leader under assassination threat, he adjusts his action vocabulary. Just as he has to choose his shots carefully and shoot in short, contained bursts, so do his killers and bodyguards. The fights of *The Mission* follow a wait, move, stop, shoot, wait, move, stop rhythm. The combatants don't rush toward each other to engage in close combat. They hang back and pay attention to factors *Feng Shui's* combat rules shunt to one side: cover, and the comparative range of weapons. The fights become more about suspense than thrills. During a battle in a mall attached to their client's offices, they wait for new killers to move into view and then take them down. The use of pauses drives up tension. When someone gets hit, they simply drop—no wires or leaps or other bravura flourishes that amp up a John Woo fight.

Building a satisfactory set of rules to emulate this combat style would be an intriguing challenge, but it sure wouldn't be *Feng Shui*.

What the film offers us as *FS2* fodder instead lies in the ways it brings out its central themes, the bonds of comradeship.

When killers try to take out Mr. Lung, a triad boss in slick businessman mode, his younger brother Frank (Simon Yam) hires a small team of bodyguards to keep him alive:

- Impassive team leader Curtis (Anthony Wong), who comes out of happy retirement as a hairdresser to re-assume his former role as the formidable operator dubbed The Ice.
- His confidently declass  gun tech, James (Lam Suet).
- Impulsive club manager Roy (Francis Ng).
- Hunky Mike (Roy Cheung), glad to be leaving behind his job as procurer to wealthy, clients.
- Ambitious newcomer Shin (Jacky Lui).

In between attempts on Lung's life, they wait. Bids on his life occur on a side street, and twice in the mall he must travel through to get to and from his office. The last attempt allows the team to track the killers to their lair, an abandoned warehouse, where another long-range duel ensues. They take the main sniper alive and identify his employer as a high-ranking member of Lung's own organization. The employer's execution marks the end of the second act. But a new problem arises: during his time holed up in Lung's house, foolish newbie Shin slept with the man's wife. The team must now choose between their newly forged personal bond, and the gangster code that spells doom for all if they show mercy on Shin.

Though To gets cagey when asked about his influences, it's hard not to see a lineage from the seminal ensemble hero movies of Howard Hawks: *Only Angels Have Wings* (1939), *The Thing From Another World* (1951, uncredited) and *Rio Bravo* (1959). French noir specialist Jean-Pierre Melville adds a sense of capricious destiny to the mix in such films as *Bob le*

Flambeur (1956), *Le Doulos* (1962), and the French resistance masterwork *Army of Shadows* (1969). Evidence of To's Melville love, which he shares with John Woo, can be found in his attempt to cast Alain Delon, star of 1967's sublimely cool *Le Samourai*, in his later film *Vengeance* (2009).

(What I'm saying here is: see all those movies, too.)

The Mission shows us the formation of a temporary but tightknit community around demonstrations of ultra-competence and small gestures of comradeship. Roleplaying groups naturally lend themselves to this treatment, but often emphasize the ultra-competence over the comradeship. We're more likely to base our interplay between PCs on the bickering family model established by Stan Lee in comic books like *Fantastic Four* or *The Avengers*. That makes absolute sense: superhero comics sit closer to the center of the nerdosphere reference point galaxy than laconic crime dramas. The squabbling family, literal or metaphorical, speaks most strongly to the young age at which kids discover caped crusaders. The stoic band of brothers conjures an idealized workforce experience, which earns its relevance a little later in life.

So if your group often finds itself questioning why the heck they're working together, it's because they're neither surrogate family nor band of comrades. To create the first, you can build your characters together, as a group already related by blood ties before the action starts. (For more on this technique, see the previous essay on *Hero*.) To build the second, look for moments to establish and reinforce the bonds that develop in a group forged by a common mission. Many of these you can adapt from *The Mission*.

They include simple gestures, where two characters establish mutual competence. Mike hands James the pistol he has been supplied and asks him to add two pounds to the recoil spring. James considers for a moment, then nods. This minor interaction burnishes both characters. Mike knows enough about guns to ask for this. James shows him respect by thinking about the request, and then agreeing to it, without getting defensive about what is presumably his own gunsmithing work. Just having one PC ask-

ing for a small favor and another granting it solidifies the idea of group bonding.

On a light-hearted note, we see the group waiting outside Lung's office for his departure from the building, when they will again be needed. Wordlessly, they start to play soccer with a ball of tinfoil. As the super-cool gunmen take part in turn, we see their teamwork and a heretofore unseen sense of mutual play.

On the bloodier side of the spectrum, we see conflict bubble between Curtis and Roy. After the sidestreet shootout, Roy breaks Curtis' orders to run after the gunman. Curtis shows him up by ordering the rest of the group to leave without him, forcing him to take a cab back to Lung's manor. An angry Roy gut-punches Curtis. Then Curtis, who has overheard Roy worrying about trouble at his club, tracks down the guy causing it and arranges a meet. When he sees that the rival gangster isn't going to listen to his words, Curtis calmly grabs him by the throat and slits a vein with a concealed razor blade.

A GM wanting to reinforce the ties that explain why an otherwise disparate group stays together might periodically call out for a comradeship moment. As GM you might single out the player who seems most out of step with the group to describe a gesture that fosters collective unity. Explain that it can be as bold as the throat-slitting or as small as the recoil spring request. A character might cook for the others. A rich character can buy presents for the group. If you've set your game in contemporary Asia and there's never a karaoke scene, you're missing a trick. One comradesly moment per session ought to be probably plenty. Call for them only when they seem appropriate. They can mark breaks in the action, or quickly provide an emotional up note when the heroes' backs are up against the wall.

Groups who don't like GMs suggesting moments to them, even without specifics, might respond better if they get a mechanical reward for bringing up the idea themselves. Everybody might get a one or two point Fortune refresh after the first comradesly moment of a session, for example.

I think that's going the long way round, but then I've trained my group to happily "yes and" this sort of cue from the wings.

This won't eliminate the comically adversarial banter that drives most inter-PC scenes, but it can supplement it, adding emotional weight to your series to counterbalance all the craziness.

Given his films' tight construction, it's hard to believe that To works improvisationally, building story blocks on the fly and assembling them later. Another melancholy HK master director, Wong Kar-Wai, famously works the same way, but his elliptical, mood-driven films feel like they were conjured on the spot and then pieced together in the editing bay. So although he has the advantage of shaping his work later, To's process bears greater similarity to what we do than that of most filmmakers. It makes sense when you stop to consider it, though. Who would think to sit down and *write* the foil ball soccer scene? To's devotion to gesture arises naturally from decisions made on set. Something to bear in mind as your icy cool killer shows comradeship for the supernatural creature by bringing him a big sack of mixed seafood he picked up at the market after leaning on his underworld contacts.

MR. VAMPIRE

SUPERNATURAL LORE AND PRECISION SLAPSTICK FU

1985's *Mr. Vampire*, directed by Ricky Lau, became a huge hit in the Hong Kong market with its fusion of ghost comedy and kung fu. Its success spawned four sequels and gave Lam Ching-Ying his iconic role as a stern Exorcist Monk endowed with a spectacularly fuzzy white unibrow.

He stars as Mr. Kau, a Taoist priest whose responsibilities include geomantic consultations and temporarily storing the captive hopping vampires (jiangshi) of a colleague who collects and sells them. His incompetent students, the naïve young Sang (Siu-Ho Chin) and the clownish Choi (Ricky Hui) complicate matters with their slightly variant forms of stupidity. Kau agrees to help a wealthy businessman reburial his father, learning that the dead man bullied his feng shui adviser out of the auspicious dragonfly grave his corpse now occupies. Excavation reveals that the geomancer exacted revenge by instructing that the man be buried head down. This reverses the advantage of a dragonfly grave. Concerned at the body's suspiciously preserved state, Kau orders it taken back to his premises. Despite precautions, it rises from the dead to wreak havoc, displaying much greater athleticism than the run-of-the-mill hopping vampires tamed by Kau's buddy. A ghost subplot has a comely spirit setting her soul-sucking sights on Sang, requiring Kau to split his attention between supernatural threats.

The addition of slapstick fu, especially the bravura final sequence, makes this the most watchable of HK horror comedies. The choreography emphasizes the precise skill of its acrobatic performances. Shot squarely on and staged in an obvious set, it cleverly conveys the feeling of seeing bodies fly and limbs entangle in real time.

For *Feng Shui* GMs it serves as a reminder that hopping vampires don't merely have to plod along, like the tame ones we see at the beginning and end of the film. The lead vamp is as fast moving and fu-trained as any fight participant. Which he is: this is an unrecognizable Yuen Wah, who a generation later will appear as Landlord in *Kung Fu Hustle*. He's an alumnus of the Seven Little Fortunes, a troupe of child Peking Opera acrobats, whose number also included Jackie Chan, Sammo Hung, and Yuen Biao.

Lesson: describe your mook jiangshi as amusingly plodding. Your featured foe hopping vampires are played by an actor as athletic as Yuen Wah in his prime. Heck, from the trouble he gives his opponents, this one might even be a boss. He definitely displays different qualities than the mook model. They can't see, and can only detect their prey by smelling their breath. So when a mook jiangshi comes after you and you're not in a position to fight back, hold your breath. The Yuen Wah model can see just fine, thank you kindly. The heroes notice this but do not explain it, because sometimes explanations are overrated.

Along with the forbidding monk from film versions of the Green Snake legend, like *Green Snake* (1993, Tsui Hark) or *Sorcerer and the White Snake* (2011, Siu-Tung Ching), Mr. Kau serves as a fine role model for heroes based on *FS2*'s Exorcist Monk archetype. As the straight man in a comedy, he doesn't even require a tonal adjustment; you can just plunk him right into your *Feng Shui* series as a player character.

The film also acts as a rich trove of supernatural lore, which you can treat more seriously in your games. We see the basics of jianghi maintenance, as already described in the *Feng Shui* creature entry: the glutinous rice that keeps them at bay, or when ingested, helps a bite victim ward off the transformation. Likewise *Mr. Vampire* shows us the paper amulets, affixed to the forehead, that freeze them in their tracks. Here we get an added wrinkle: the other, more entrepreneurial taoist monk can order around the jiangshi when they are controlled by the paper strips. He does this by ringing a schoolmarm-style bell and barking simple com-

mands. Your group's Sorcerer might do the same when using Sustained Domination on a bunch of hopping vamps. A Sorcerer player wanting to emulate this might make a point of getting other party members not to utterly destroy the next gang of jiangshi mooks they encounter. Thereafter, assuming he has the Influence schtick and can thus justify it in story terms, he can reskin descriptions of his chi blast as the result of a mass jiangshi attack. The climax of *Mr. Vampire* shows us that they're not terribly effective when wielded as a weapon in his manner. Failures should have the hoppers knocking each over like dominoes. When the whole business gets tiresome, a Way Awful Failure might indicate that they've been reduced to dust or otherwise rendered unusable. Which for a dedicated player might occasion a scouring of the Ancient or Past junctures for a replenishment of the jiangshi supply. You could extend this even further by converting other supernatural creature mooks to dominated servitors as well.

Watch the various fun ways in which Kau and company deploy their exorcist mojo to lay the smackdown on vampires and Sang's predatory ghost. If you're playing an Exorcist Monk, Magic Cop or Sorcerer, borrow them as Unconventional Attack descriptions to use when mixing it up with supernatural creatures.

As you'll recall, Unconventional Attacks use the same stats, including damage, the way you normally dish out hurt to your enemies. You simply reskin your description to replace mention of your usual weapon with another choice that nods to particular situation at hand.

These are inspired by images in the film without necessarily being exact transcriptions of what you see on screen.

- "I stretch a length of string, enchanted with protective powder, across the vampire's path. When it hits the string, sparks fly, and the vamp goes flying back."
- "I toss a paper amulet onto the ghost's face. She screams in pain, her insubstantial face smoking and hissing."

- “I punch the ghost so hard, her true hideous form becomes briefly apparent, eyeball hanging out of socket and everything.”
- “My feint sends her windmilling back into a net coated with anti-ghost powder. Boom!”
- “I throw my cloak onto her. Needless to say, anti-ghost powder, blam.”

Mr. Vampire's fights don't restrict themselves to exorcism-related attacks. The action choreography mixes these in with lots of stunts involving furniture, support pillars, failed attempts to Cheese It, and general leaping about. This pattern will arise naturally in a *Feng Shui* fight against monstrous opponents, because the martial artists and guns types can't so plausibly describe themselves making occult-based Unconventional Attacks. However, even they can get into the horror theme of things:

- “Gravedust rises from the vampire's cloak as I lay the royal smack on him.”
- “I throw him onto the wall, which [the Exorcist Monk or Magic Cop PC] has plastered with paper amulets. Blammo!”
- “I stick a paper amulet to my spear and jab the vamp with it!”
- “At the last minute, my punch becomes an open hand, flinging sticky rice right in its face!”
- “I pick it up and hurl it into the flames. It combusts, hissing in fury.”
[Makes a good finishing blow description.]

You can also spice up Boost descriptions with supernatural lore: “I hurl anti-ghost powder onto Jade, increasing her defense as the ghost lurches her way.”

The business of the auspicious grave turned inauspicious brings out an element of feng shui lore not much emphasized in the core book's setting material. Along with ensuring that one's home is located in a place with strong chi flow, and constructed to correctly channel it, the believer in geomancy also wants to be certain that his key ancestors lie buried in the

best possible spots. The film *Bury Me High* (1991, Tsui Siu-Ming) features Wisely, Hong Kong's answer to John Constantine, and revolves around an epic struggle to gain fortune through superior ancestor burial.

For a change of pace in your *Feng Shui* game, consider having the heroes either seek out the bones of an enemy's ancestor for unlucky reburial. Or have them fight to defend the lucky burial plot of one of their ancestors, or that of an ally. The first option makes it plausible for the heroes to suddenly engineer the fall from power of a mighty foe. Think of well-buried ancestors of the Achilles heel of otherwise impossibly well positioned baddies.

For a modern approach to the hopping vampire, which takes on the improbable task of making it actually frightening, see the 2013 haunted apartment building flick *Rigor Mortis* (Juno Mak). Though you should prepare for a letdown ending, the rest of the film presents some cool and creepy images to transpose into your *Feng Shui* games when they take a turn for the eerie. On an extreme meta note, Chin Siu-Ho, the younger of the goofy students from *Mr. Vampire*, plays the protagonist, a suicidal, washed-up actor named Chin Siu-Ho.

ONCE UPON A TIME IN CHINA

FURY OF THE PAST

The real-life 19th century figure Wong Fei-hung would be Hong Kong cinema's answer to Davy Crockett, if Hollywood had made about a hundred films about Davy Crockett. Aside from his status as a martial arts master, practitioner of Chinese medicine and expert lion dancer, much of his true story remains open to conjecture and embellishment. He lived in Foshan, Guangdong, where he ran his clinic, Po Chi Lam. Legends around him begin to accrue with a series of popular novels by writer Zhu Yuzhai. Cinema cements them starting in 1949 with *The Whip that Smacks the Candle* (aka *The True Story of Wong Fei-Hung*). It establishes actor Kwan Tak-Hing as Wong, a kindly Confucian master who prefers conciliation to ass-kicking, resorting to his fighting skills only in the face of incorrigible villainy. The rash actions of hot-headed disciples who have yet to fully absorb his lessons sometimes propel the action forward as well. Kwan reprised the role for a stunning total of 99 films, ending his run in 1970 with *Wong Fei-hung: Bravely Crushing the Fire Formation*. His recurring antagonist, who he sometimes reformed through Confucian wisdom, was played by Shih Kien, who pioneered Hong Kong cinema's archetypal villain laugh. Shih went on to fight Bruce Lee as one-handed Han in *Enter the Dragon* (1973, Robert Clouse) and made his last film appearance in Tsui Hark's *A Better Tomorrow 3* (1989). He makes a blink-and-you'll-miss-it cameo in this film, too.

Since then Wong Fei-hung, usually but not always with the fictional secondary cast established in the Kwan Tak-Hing series, has featured in a host of other films and TV series. Classic-era HK movies worth

checking out include *Iron Monkey* (1993, Yuen Woo-Ping), with Donnie Yen as Fei-Hung's father and kid actor Angie Tsang as Fei-Hung, and *Drunken Master 2* (1994, Lau Kar-leung), a light-hearted take in which Jackie Chan's Fei-Hung practices the drunken style fu advertised in the title.

Still, the definitive 90s Wong Fei-Hung remains Jet Li, under Tsui Hark's direction. *Once Upon a Time in China* starts the series in 1991, with the sixth and final installment, *Once Upon a Time in China and America*, landing in 1997. Li's Fei-Hung is younger, still an authority figure but less of a paternal one. A committed political activist, he leads a militia of fervent anti-Imperialist troops the Manchu government has cashiered as it cozies up to the Western powers. Though we see him training his men, he is less the sifu of a martial arts school than the head of an unsanctioned military unit. Fei-Hung inherits it from Liu Yongfu, a Chinese general on the outs with the Emperor for too adamantly defending China against its invaders. Liu heads off with his Black Flag Army to carry on the anti-Western struggle in Vietnam. (This depiction takes liberties with the historical Liu Yongfu, a soldier of fortune who draped himself in the mantle of the freshly defeated Taiping Rebellion.)

Fei-hung still acts as the moderating voice of reason constraining the hotheads among his warrior band, represented by Kent Cheng as the butcher Wing. (Don't call him Porky! He hates that.) This version of Wong Fei-hung treats him as a passionate nationalist who decries Western encroachment in China, along with its garb, technology, and values. Countering his resistance is love interest Auntie 13 (Rosamund Kwan), younger than that sounds and related to him by honorific, not family ties. Freshly back from the West, she wants to make him a European-style suit and introduce him to the wonders of photography. Naturally a flash powder accident provides not only an opportunity for physical comedy but also an underlining of Fei-hung's point.

Along with homegrown villains, the Shaho gang, the bad guys here are rapacious American labor recruiters. They man their fortress with rifle-

men in American military uniforms and battle our heroes with a US flag draped behind them.

The political anger coursing through this version reflects itself in subject matter far harsher than your baseline Wong Fei-hung flick. The villains murder a priest and fire indiscriminately into crowds. They capture women for transport to America as enslaved prostitutes. The climax subjects beloved character Auntie 13 to the prolonged and violent threat of rape. Where the original series sometimes showed the reform of its villain under Fei-hung's noble tutelage, here we see the degradation of a rival kung fu master from degrading poverty to willing complicity in the Shaho gang's evildoing.

In depicting this low point in Chinese history, *Once Upon a Time in China* holds no exclusive on rage. Plenty of films set in the 19th century feature evil westerners and the contemptible Chinese officials who give them free reign. This one zeroes in on that theme with particular punch, in the context of a well constructed, entertaining flick that features Jet in his prime. Were you to assign one film as essential viewing for your players before their *Feng Shui* heroes go to the Past juncture, this is the one. Just imagine the words "Golden Candle Society" when the subtitles say "local militia" and you've got Wong Fei-hung as your exemplar of the Guiding Hand faction.

Once Upon a Time in China doesn't invent Wong Fei-hung as political activist. Legend connects him to the Black Flag Army, though in a later conflict, defending Taiwan against Japanese invasion in 1895. It plucks this point from his folk biography, cranks it up to eleven, and moves it forward in time. The film doesn't nail down a specific date for its action. The American baddies' use of the gold rush to sucker laborers for enslavement suggests a mid-century date. They're scam artists, so they could be referring to a gold rush that's been over for fifteen years. The historical Wong was only born in 1849, living until 1924. Liu Yongfu's departure to Vietnam would make the date 1864 or 1865, after the crushing of the Taiping Rebellion, when Wong was 16. Later in the

series he winds up in the Wild West, which in a universe governed by mere chronology would make this film even later, and closer to the real Wong's prime.

To get players into an action movie mindset, I advise that *Feng Shui* GMs embrace the fuzzy history principle. The Past juncture gets an 1850 date, but don't let that stop you from having anything that interests you from all of the 19th century happening when the heroes arrive. If martial artists can fly they can certainly scuff up chronology a bit. I say go whole hog and make Wong Fei-Hung active in the Past juncture, at the age we see him here. Alternately you can take a page from the *Iron Monkey* script and make his father, Wong Kei-Ying, the center of attention—and of course a Guiding Hand stalwart. He was ranked among the Ten Tigers of Canton, the city's top martial arts masters. Maybe a PC martial artist adopts a local identity and becomes the basis for the legends surrounding that group.

Once Upon a Time in China gives you about the right amount of actual historical detail to salt into the dialogue of Past-juncture Guiding Hand GMCs. The characters inveigh against the Westernization Movement, a bid by the Qing Emperor to regain China's strength by gaining access to American and European technology and methods. As the local representatives of the Jade Wheel Society might explain, the temporary humiliation this entails will ultimately allow China to compete with the powers that now oppress it. In the film General Liu gives Fei-hung a fan bearing a list of unequal treaties—another key phrase describing the rights in China seized by western powers under duress. Wing, the most irresponsibly fervent of the ~~Golden Candle Society~~ local militia, adds an ethnic dimension to the struggle when he curses out the Manchus. The residents of Foshan are Han Chinese, where the Qing ruling class are descendants of the northern Jurchen barbarians who took over the country two centuries earlier. At this point in history they strive to out-civilize everyone and run an extremely bureaucratic government, but people like Wing aren't about to let them forget who their ancestors were.

The presence of Jesuit missionaries in China is treated initially as a ridiculous annoyance. The film turns this around by later having a priest heroically stick his neck out for Fei-hung when none of his fellow citizens dare.

In the end Fei-hung and Auntie 13 achieve a synthesis, albeit one that seems more based on his affection for her than for anything positive he's learned about foreigners. He lets her fit him for a suit, suggesting that he's willing to compromise at least on superficial matters.

Heroes accustomed to Western freedoms might blanch at the order and discipline the Hand want to impose in the modern era. When their heroes visit the Past, use the politics of *Once Upon a Time in China* to show them the time and place where they're unequivocally on the side of right.

THE RAID: REDEMPTION

GOING BRUTAL

Gareth Evans' *The Raid: Redemption* (2011) highlights the extent to which the HK action explosion has rippled into other Asian territories. It brings a couple of fresh elements to the martial arts genre, including its milieu, the corrupt intertwining of cops and gang lords in contemporary Jakarta. The film's fight choreography uses the Indonesian pencak silat style. Even more than the particular combat tradition, its battles scream onto the screen with a hard-hitting brutality to rattle the most jaded of action fans.

SWAT team member Rama (Uko Iwais, also one of the film's fight choreographers) conducts his morning prayers as a good Muslim, bids farewell to his pregnant wife, and joins a contingent of mostly green cops armed and armored for urban warfare. Team leader Sergeant Jaka briefs them as their vehicle thunders to its destination. They're to apprehend crime lord Tama Riyadi, in the tenement where he keeps his headquarters. He owns the building, renting out the rooms he isn't using for his own operation to a broad swathe of Jakarta's criminal class. Not long after, we learn that Jaka and Lieutenant Wahyu, the superior responsible for the raid, distrust one another. The team's efforts to storm the building silently go sideways fast. The building's resident crooks slaughter most of the cops, leaving Rama and a few other survivors to realize that fighting their way to freedom means getting Riyadi first.

In tandem with ultra-violent fight direction, the film achieves its intensity through a number of techniques, some of which export to roleplaying better than others.

Claustrophobia: Not long after they charge in, fortunes reverse on our heroes, and they find themselves trapped in the tenement. The fights all

take place in confined spaces. The one exception still occurs within the walls surrounding the apartment building, and feature the takedown of unnamed ally characters stationed at the police van. It may occur outside but emphasizes the claustrophobia: the heroes' means of escape has now been removed.

In roleplaying, this is the classic “lock ‘em in the dungeon” technique, transposed to a modern action setting. Any space that can be sealed up, either literally or by guardians wielding overwhelming firepower, can be used as the equivalent of *Raid: Redemption's* apartment tower. In *Feng Shui 2* terms, a few dozen mooks offer little threat. But if you explain that they hit like featured foes if the heroes try to simply bull their way out, players will look for the goal they can achieve within the environment that will permit their exit.

Desperation: Once the cops realize they're trapped, Rama's goal shifts to simple survival. He goes further up into the complex only because he sees Riyadi's capture as the only way out.

Once you've trapped the heroes, look for ways to communicate the change in stakes to them. The goals that brought them in here has now become secondary to simple escape.

Gritty environment: The film's grungy brown color palette drives home the ugliness of the action. Everything in the building is crumbling, nasty, and cheap—fitting the poverty of the residents. All of the improvised weapons used in the fight match what you might find in a Jakarta slum.

Tell the players ahead of time that you'll be expecting them to constrain their descriptions to the crummy items that fit the place's theme. A tighter realism governs the usually forgiving *Feng Shui* freedom of narrative embellishment.

Prepare for the session by hitting up your favorite thesaurus site for synonyms to the words brown, gray, dirty, decrepit and decaying.

Pervasive corruption: Devout expectant father Rama remains our sole moral center in a setting otherwise short on good guys. Sergeant Jaka establishes himself as a bullying jarhead. Wahyu at first seems out of his

depth but turns out to be on the take. The other cops are just cannon fodder. Riyadi brags of his high-level connections, ordering a massacre of an entire SWAT troop with the confidence of a man who knows how much leeway his money can buy.

Make the heroes the only beacon of hope in a scenario otherwise dripping with the worst of human bleakness. Players who gravitate to morally questionable characters may instead add to the baseness of it all.

When the cops other than Rama aren't actively crooked, they're fucking up. The early stages of your scenario might feature untested, fragile allies who live only long enough to complicate the situation for the PC survivors.

Pregnant pauses: Certain promo materials for the film use the clever tagline: “1 Minute of Romance. 99 Minutes of Non-Stop Carnage.” Although I bow to its majesty as a piece of copywriting, as an accurate description of the film, it misses the target. The film *feels* relentless precisely because it pauses along the way to relent. Scenes of punishing combat alternate with moments of suspense, where the cops are hiding and machete-equipped crooks are trying to find them. Or we get dialogue scenes to put the action in context, whether it's the reveal that Riyadi's operations manager is Rama's estranged brother, or Sergeant Jaka realizing that Lieutenant Wahyu has been paid off to initiate the raid.

Build in chances for the heroes to be quietly menaced between fights. You know, as a palate cleanser.

Pounding music: Assemble an especially gnarly and thumping playlist of brutal electronica, industrial and metal to accompany the fights. You might also find appropriate cues on war and horror movie soundtracks. Avoid their rousing or creepy tracks in favor of the propulsive and upsetting.

Keep things moving: Be the GM equivalent of a jittery handheld camera by staying focused and keeping the pressure on. Bark out shot numbers. Talk fast. Snap players to attention when their attention wanders.

Grunting and screaming: Whether attacking or defending, being whaled on or doing the whaling, *Raid: Redemption's* combatants shriek and yowl their heads off. See how many different screams you can do as you preface your foe attacks. By example, and perhaps a few encouraging hand motions, induce the players to do the same. The characters here are jacked out of their minds on adrenaline. Play that up.

Also, groan and moan to emphasize the agony of injuries suffered. The film embraces the pain its fighters suffer as they reduce each other's bodies to pulp.

Describe Impaired foes as crawling along the floor in utter physical anguish, until their shots come up, at which point they struggle achingly to their feet to attempt another strike. Or remain on the floor, blasting away. Encourage players to narrate their Impairment similarly.

Rama seems on his last legs after tackling a goon legion in a hallway, but seems considerably refreshed by the climactic battle against Riyadi's chief fighting henchman, Mad Dog.

Do I detect a nod to *Hard Boiled*, there? Both film's Mad Dog character appears as a surprisingly honorable henchman. This one releases Andi because having two guys try to kill him at once makes for a fairer fight. For similar reasons, and also because he gets off on it he puts his gun down for a hand-to-hand mano-a-mano with Jaka.

Especially if you've restricted the heroes to non-fantastical, heroic bloodshed-ready modern archetypes, they'll find themselves low on healing. Remind the players that the Partial Recovery rules were made for situations like this.

(Literally. I added them to *FS2* after rewatching this movie. It reminded me of the need to accommodate scenarios featuring multiple fights in quick succession.)

If you're using another rules set, find an appropriate way of allowing a semblance of healing between fights.

During the fights, shape your hit descriptions for wince-inducing violence. Instruct the players to make their kill descriptions as nasty as they

can stand. Find your own equivalents for such quintessential *Raid: Redemption* moments as:

- point blank gunshots to the head or throat
- for variety, how about the occasional hammer to the skull?
- stab stab stab stab stab (this is no time to stop at a single knife wound, not when you can do five or six)
- likewise, describe three elbow strikes instead of one
- throat slitting
- throat crushing, for example by dropping a guy face first into a door threshold
- nose-breaking headbutt to the face
- throwing dudes onto hard furniture, concrete railings, et al, breaking their backs
- punch followed by point blank gunshot to the head
- defenestration galore!
- similarly, throw guys down multi-story stairwell
- bashing a dude's head into a wall so hard its tiles break
- bash a dude's head into a light fixture
- use a guy's body as a buffer as you throw him into a door, smashing it open
- that old classic, stabbing a guy with a broken fluorescent bulb
- later taking the shard of bulb sticking out of his throat and wrenching it back and forth

This is true for most of the titles analyzed in this book, but especially so here: a sample clip from the film before you play the scenario will do more than anything to help your players catch the bloody vibe.

ROAD WARRIOR

CHASE SCENE MASTERCLASS

If you saw it outside of North America, you know 1981's *Road Warrior* as *Mad Max 2*. But I'm going to call it *Road Warrior*, because this essay is all about the road, and going to war on it. Judged by the sheer number of action gags in it, the final 13-minute action climax remains the gold standard by which all other chases must be measured.

I'm using "gag" here in its specialized meaning as found in stuntman lingo: a bit of action business that requires difficult execution and plays as a thrilling or surprising moment on screen. It doesn't mean "joke", though the results may still garner a laugh—sometimes one of brutal shock.

In *Feng Shui*, gags become the Things That Can Happen During a Fight, the bullet points supplying the GM with a descriptive cheat sheet. She uses them either as she narrates the actions of the action scene's foes, or to describe elements of the scene that the players can then elaborate in their own descriptions. Things That Can Happen generally rely on the abilities of the bad guys, and even more so the physical elements of the imaginary set on which the battle takes place.

A post-apocalyptic setting, which now figures in the updated *FS2* continuity as its desolate Future juncture, hits us with a descriptive challenge. Properly post-catastrophic locations are as stripped down as those seen in this film. Shot in the red desert outback near the New South Wales mining town of Broken Hill, *Road Warrior* shows us stretches of highway, a fortified good guy encampment, an open racing circle where the bad guys zoom about, and not much else. It stages one mass battle in the encampment, squeezing every action gag opportunity from its makeshift walls, cables, gantries and flamethrower emplacements.

The rest of the action occurs on the road. Director George Miller makes the most of its flat terrain. When the story needs Max to reach his low point at the end of the second act, a gully appears for Max's signature Ford Falcon to tumble disastrously into. But mostly the vehicles roll into low ditches, with no narrow turns or cliffside roadways showing up to add variety to the proceedings.

Nonetheless the gags keep on coming, springboarding from a profusion of vehicles, weapons, combatants, and tactics.

Miller isn't content with just cars. The vehicle roster also includes the truck cab and tanker driven by Max, motorbikes, sandrails, and several uncategorizable vehicles custom-built for the movie. The lead villain's vehicle, for example, roars along as a six-wheeled mutant hybrid of truck and humvee, with special hostage-display appendages protruding from its hood. The ancillary good guys get some cool conveyances too, notably the rocket-like "Lone Wolf" driven by leader Papagallo (Michael Preston).

For a full selection of screen grabs featuring the various vehicles, go to the Internet Movie Car Database and type *Mad Max 2* in its search bar. If you've ever wondered what car jumped over what other car in your favorite flick, chances are the crew behind this invaluable resource have already figured it out and screencapped it for you to boot.

And no, I didn't forget the gyrocopter.

Whether they're fully scratch-built or customized from recognizable makes and models, the post-collapse setting lends novelty to all of the vehicles. You can lift this technique in its entirety and stage vehicle battles in *Feng Shui's* Future juncture. Or you can find justifications for heavily altered vehicles to appear in chase sequences you stage elsewhere. Maybe the Thai drug lords run a crazy chop shop as a sideline. Perhaps those Lotus sorcerers traded some immortality potions for a fleet of whacked-out vehicles tricked out in a Netherworld garage. Even non-fantastical details give you visual cues to add to your descriptions of contemporary car chases.

“A Mustang with a screaming skull painted on its hood slams into your passenger side.”

...conveys more excitement than...

“A Mustang slams into your passenger side.”

Every time you can introduce a new detail about a car while narrating a car chase, its specificity helps players sustain the picture of events zooming past in their imaginations.

Unusual vehicles can prove tough to describe verbally unless both you and the players wield deep car knowledge. I could tell players that Pappagallo’s vehicle looks like a cross between a roadster and a rocket, but I don’t know how I’d go about sketching a sandrail with words alone. I didn’t know they were called sandrails until I found them on the Internet Movie Car Database; I was thinking of them as dune buggies.

Solve this problem by using flash cards, printing out images from the web or building an online picture board featuring the cars, trucks and hovercraft you plan to feature in a chase sequence. Keep the power of description alive with modifying narration: “Like this, but all in black, with plastic devil heads glued all around the hood.”

Though very much a solo protagonist outing, *Road Warrior* gives Max some good guy allies to suffer attrition at the hands of the Humungus’ gang. The white-clad warrior woman (Virginia Hey), Pappagallo and others all get screen time, and the occasional moment of victory, before being taken out. In an RPG context these would be PCs and less likely to be eliminated one by one. Here they’re resources that get whittled down, and receiving just enough characterization for us to identify them as they go down.

Very occasionally you might want to sprinkle a fight with supporting characters destined to bite it. Be wary of a couple of pitfalls. First, adding more characters makes the fight harder to follow. So stick to a very few of these doomed walk-ons. Make each distinctive so the players can keep track of who’s going down. Second, it requires a delicate balance in player emotional investment. If they like these characters too much, they’ll take

their deaths hard, and regard their eventual hard-won victory as a defeat. Conversely, if they don't care about them enough, you've complicated matters to no particular benefit.

Among the film's memorable, lightly sketched supporting players is the growling, boomerang-hurling Feral Kid. Max rescues him at one point in the final chase, grabbing him and hauling him into his cab. That reminds us of a traditional use for GMC allies in a fight—they get in trouble, costing the heroes actions to get them out. Like the truly doomed GMC ally, this gets old fast if overused. Yet an in-fight rescue can feel like a big win when it succeeds—perhaps delivering a bigger emotional up note than the final victory.

In one memorable gag, Max rather aggressively commands the Feral Kid to climb out onto the hood of the truck cab to recover a precious, unused shotgun shell trapped there. This suggests yet another trick with GMC allies in a fight. Players might act through them, using them to describe how they're accomplishing stunts. Even though it's the supporting character reaching out for the shells or whatever, allow the hero to use his attack AV to make the stunt check, if he can justify his role in making it happen. Here Max clearly misses his check, as the red-mohawked secondary bad guy suddenly rears up onto the hood, preventing the Kid from grabbing the shell.

To extrapolate this out to stunts through supporting characters in other fight scene situations, you as a player might describe gags like this:

“As I leap over the waiting room chairs, drawing the goons' fire, I toss the USB drive to the nurse, who pockets it and escapes.”

“With one hand on the wheel, I reach out and open my hand as I whiz past the wounded cop. He slaps a full clip in my hand.”

In the above you're obviously speaking with the authority of the *FS2* player who rolled before describing, and know you got a result big enough to describe the supporting character successfully completing the stunt.

You can also incorporate supporting character allies into Unconventional Attacks:

“Very carefully, so as not to send it swooping uncontrollably through the air, I lob the Kid his death boomerang. He slices Red Mohawk Dude with it.”

“I slam my foot on the accelerator, dislodging Gas Mask Dude and sending him right into the arc of the mechanic’s downswinging monkey wrench.”

As a hard-edged futuristic western, *Road Warrior* has much more to recommend it than the descriptive moves you can nick from its chase sequences. It’s a marvel of economy, wastes few words and bridges the gap from Ozploitation to Hollywood. The film recapitulates the classic heroic arc from selfishness to altruism in a spare, ambiguous way.

That said, you’ll find no finer source for chase wizardry. So fire up that last sequence in your media player of choice and get the urge all over again to set a running battle on the cracked tarmac of a shattered future.

RUMBLE IN THE BRONX

PROP HANDLING

1995's *Rumble in the Bronx* (Stanley Tong) wouldn't top my list of Jackie Chan films. Come to think of it, it barely cracks my ten faves. I include it here because the Jackie titles I prefer tread similar ground to other flicks appearing in this book. Also, this one stands alone and supplies a representative sample of the default Jackie persona. It was the film that finally broke Jackie in North America, as well as being a monster hit in Hong Kong.

Nice guy karate cop Keung (Jackie) arrives in New York for his uncle Bill's wedding. (The US cut drops the introductory scene telling us he's a police officer.) Keung stays after the ceremony to help the new owner of Bill's convenience store (Anita Mui) set herself up. He fights back against local punks, kicking off an escalating series of attacks. Keung also befriends Danny, a precocious kid in a wheelchair, unaware that the boy's sister belongs to the gang. The gang members turn suddenly good after an inspirational speech from Jackie, allowing them to team up against an even more vicious gang of jewel thieves determined to recover diamonds stashed in the kid's seat cushion. If you saw the film once but still aren't placing it in the Jackie canon, three words: climactic hovercraft chase.

Also standard for a Jackie film, you get to see him really hurt himself and keep on going. For this one he broke his foot executing a jump, but pressed on wearing a walking cast. Even for the ski-less water-skiing sequence. As his films tend toward the similar, this convention adds re-watch value. You can try to remember what horrible thing Jackie did to himself in whatever of his films you're watching, and then wait for the

moment when it happens. Because if the shot was good, it still winds up in the movie. An end credit montage shows all the injuries incurred by Jackie and his stunt team. *Rumble's* broken foot, spectacular as it is, hardly registers compared to the grisliest Jackie on-set injury. In the Indiana Jones-esque *Armour of God* (1987), which Jackie also directed, he falls from a tree and punctures his skull on a branch. Its end credits spare no cranial bleeding.

The movie around the action sequences could forgivingly be described as cheerful, loosely paced entertainment for an audience comfortable with the star's movie-making formula. That doesn't explain its number one box office take in North America, though. If you wonder where the eighties movie aesthetic went after the decade ended, you can see here that it moved to Hong Kong and kept right on going. Note how intensely *Rumble* cheerleads for its hero, by having women repeatedly tell Jackie how cute he is and through the worship the kid beams at him. Its look as well as its script tactics scream 1980s. The crazy outfits sported by the bizarre multi-ethnic street gang are a particular treasure, like the mutant offspring of a Cyndi Lauper video and the punk henchmen from a 1979 Sal Buscema Spider-Man comic.

So if you just want to go ahead and fast forward through the plot and go straight to the stunt sequences, I'm not going to tell you you're making a mistake. They deliver prime Jackie and highlight his ability to wring maximum thrills from ordinary props and set elements. Study the fight against the gang members in their clubhouse, conveniently littered with all manner of stolen property, as inspiration for *Feng Shui* action descriptions. Since the original *Feng Shui*, I've short-handed the way the game lets players describe location details by telling players, "if you want to hit somebody with a pair of skis, you say there's a pair of skis there, and there is." Until this rewatch, I'd forgotten that this is a specific *Rumble in the Bronx* reference.

Notice how many times each prop gets used. When narrating *FS2* action it's easy enough to describe a character skidding along in a wicker

chair. But how many cool things can you think up to build on that, also involving the chair?

The pattern repeats with a refrigerator, a bank of pinball machines, a shopping cart. Like a running gag, every new variation on a thing you can do with prop X builds on the last, in a multiplier effect for stunt creativity. Especially if you're playing one of the lighter-themed modern archetypes, particularly the Karate Cop, Scrappy Kid and Everyday Hero, aim to make this sort of interaction with your imaginary environment a staple of your descriptive work. Rely on your inspiration in the moment, or make yourself a crib sheet.

Rumble also teaches us much about the narrative abandon that greases the wheels of a great *Feng Shui* session. If you as a player still find yourself asking, "Are there cars parked around here?" instead of saying "There are cars parked around here, and I jump on one of them and onto the balcony", watch this film, young grasshopper, and absorb its what the hell spirit. *Of course* there's a street fair blocking the road, complete with hair metal band rocking out on a stage and people dressed up in plush animal costumes. Does Jackie need something to puncture a hovercraft's rubber undercarriage? Yes, he does. So *of course* there's a big serrated sword hanging in a shop window right where he needs it. Doesn't that seem a little too convenient? What do you mean, man, this is a Jackie movie and he needs something to stick out the window of his commandeered deLorean as he makes a run at a hovercraft. What part of oncoming hovercraft does someone out there not understand?

As roleplayers we're used to the environment conspiring against our characters. In *Rumble in the Bronx*, the setting conspires with the hero. Describe your locations doing the same for your heroes. If it doesn't embarrass longtime Jackie stunt coordinator Stanley Tong, it shouldn't embarrass you.

Do you want to drive that hovercraft you just destroyed onto the golf course to run down the noncombatant mastermind villain? Any justification will do. Duct tape, great. Make that task check. Never let over-

thinking become the enemy of forward hovercraft momentum. Or any forward momentum, for that matter.

If *Rumble* is a game session, it's run by a GM who fears no snorts of derision from believability-blinded players. Can all the members of the cast be in the hovercraft for that crowning act of comic vengeance? *Hells yes!* Even Anita Mui's character, who has no reason whatsoever to be there? *You already have your answer and it's hells yes!*

For North Americans in particular the film rumbles our sense of cultural fidelity. We're used to seeing Hollywood flicks where heroes go to a foreign place and experience a cavalcade of stereotypes. To see a Hong Kong conception of Giuliani-era New York as a chaotic hellscape overrun by ultra-violent yet somehow redeemable street hoodlums shows us cultural refraction from the other end of the telescope.

If nothing but the establishing shots look like New York, that's because the film was, like so many others, shot in Vancouver. Unlike most flicks in which Canada's westernmost metropolis plays a US city, the Rocky Mountains sneak into the shot here. For a game with a light, Jackie-type tone, you might want to deliberately mis-describe places, to indicate that the heroes exist in an off-kilter version of our world. I'd do this only in a way that preserves the fourth wall. The characters aren't aware that they're actors playing heroes on a Vancouver movie set subbing in for a more expensive NYC shoot. Rather, in their reality, snow-capped mountains really do loom over the five boroughs.

You may find this technique especially useful to unblock the logic conduits of players who can't stop themselves from overthinking even in the *Feng Shui* context. So if a member of your group wants to change the name of the Karate Cop to Kung Fu Cop because that's more accurate, or keeps wondering why there are ninjas in a world inspired by Chinese cinema, throw some reminders at them about Kansas and how they're not in it anymore. The next time they go to London, Buckingham Palace might be a vast medieval fortress on a crag jutting up beside the Thames. Or, not to leave my own petard unhoisted, polar bears roam unchecked

around the ice field at the base of Toronto's CN Tower. I wouldn't do this in a stripped-down, straight-faced heroic bloodshed series but for a baseline *FS2* experience it might prove exactly the permission set you need.

Those wondering what beats *Rumble* on my favorite Jackie Chan list should check out *Drunken Master 2* (aka *Legend of Drunken Master*, 1992, Jackie & Lau Kar-leung), *Miracles* (aka *Mr. Canton and Lady Rose*, 1989, Jackie Chan). In the end, *Police Story 3: Supercop* (1992, Stanley Tong) wins the prize, featuring as it does a career-highlight action performance from Michelle Yeoh in addition to classic Jackie action.

SAVIOUR OF THE SOUL

CRAZYPANTS MIXMASTER

1991's gloriously batshit *Saviour of the Soul* is not a film to spring on players who have yet to fully embrace the Hong Kong film aesthetic. You have to be pretty deep in the tank to appreciate its loopy, mood-hopping charms. Yet both its production design and heedless genre-bending served as touchstones for me when developing the *Feng Shui* setting. So I'm recommending it, with a cautionary note, if only to look at how far you can travel from source material to a finished setting that in no way rips it off.

In a possibly futuristic, undoubtedly alternate Hong Kong, bulletproof supervillain Silver Fox (Aaron Kwok) slices his way through a passel of prison guard mooks. He rescues his mentor, Old Eagle, who demands that his student kill him, and then seek revenge against May-Kwan Yiu (Anita Mui), the city soldier whose thrown knives blinded him during his apprehension for unspecified crimes on behalf of the Green Dragon gang. At city soldier headquarters, May-Kwan receives the attention of competing suitors Sui-Chien and Ching (Andy Lau) while her crazy twin sister (also Anita Mui, but dubbed by a male actor) perfects her Suffocate Bullets. Silver Fox attacks May-Kwan in the HQ washroom, killing Sui-Chien and escaping. The dead city soldier's baseball bat-toting teenage sister Wai-heung arrives from Macao to mourn him and develop a crush on Ching. May-Kwan goes into hiding, leading Ching to falsely conclude that she has disguised herself as the mystical, veil-wearing best doctor in the world, Madam of Pets.

Yes, I said Madam of Pets.

But Madam of Pets (Carina Lau) is not May-Kwan, as Ching discovers after defeating a host of suitors, include the pirate-garbed Mr. Ford. Ch-

ing withdraws his offer of marriage, offending her. A year later Silver Fox returns to enter into final battle with May-Kwan, poisoning her with his Horrible Angel gas. Only the Madam of Pets can cure her, but will she overcome the heartbreak of Ching's rejection?

That synopsis makes somewhat more sense than the action as it plays out. The film feels like it must be based on a comic book, but apparently isn't.

If a movie could have ADHD, *Saviour of the Soul* would be eligible for a Ritalin prescription. Many classic era HK movies show no regard for tonal consistency, with moods slamming up against each other like bumper cars. This film takes that principle to the max, ping-ponging from comic mugging to wrenching melodrama, from hard action to loopy slapstick. The film credits three directors, Corey Yuen, David Lai and Jeffery Lau. You might think the division of labor accounts for the tone shifts, until you see that they happen even within individual scenes. The montage showing Wai-heung's infatuation with Ching starts out ironic and abruptly turns sincere. At one point Ching accidentally shoots May-Kwan's sister in the ass, which is supposed to be funny, except for the huge bloodstain on her costume as she crawls around the floor in agony.

Whatever the madness of any given moment, the cast commits to it full-out. Plenty of other HK movies take a great wodge of incompatible elements and send them into battle with each other, to no worthwhile effect. Pretty much the entire output of director Wong Jing fits that description. Yet perhaps by the sheer power of improbability, this one scores.

One consistent factor throughout is the film's gorgeous, stylized visual design. Aside from a trip to the beach for the infatuation montage, the entire proceedings take place on fanciful sets. Usually enormous, they dwarf the actors with their monumental scale. The prison from the Silver Fox attack scene is all blue metal institutional modernity. The colors and décor of May-Kwan's cyclopean apartment evoke medieval Islamic art, as does the architecture of Madam of Pets' throne room. When May-Kwan leaves her

central chamber to hit the loo, it's a cold-colored modernist assemblage of greens and grays, complete with glass brick wall and wall-mounted industrial fan. A trip to the hospital finds the cast in a towering environment of rough-hewn stone, recalling a medieval European fortress.

Back in the day, when it came time to envision *Feng Shui's* Netherworld, the design of *Saviour of the Soul* pointed the way. The otherworldly feeling conjured by the scale of the sets, and their juxtaposition of styles from various places and periods, matched the idea of the Netherworld as a shaped environment, made from the memories of refugees of the chi war. If people whose timelines had been erased from history exiled themselves to a place they could shape at will, it would look something like the sets seen here: larger than life, drawing on particular cultural influences, but through a fuzzy remove. It could be beautiful, or imposing, or scary, but always strange.

The genre blend found in *Saviour of the Soul* matched that of *Feng Shui*. Here gun users battle swordsmen, and magical healers provide antidotes to super-scientific toxins delivered by inhaling gas tubes from a utility belt.

However, where *Saviour of the Soul* just mashes all of these tropes together without further comment, I wanted to build a world that would appeal gamer logic, with its love of extrapolation. It would allow you to have a heroic bloodshed-styled adventure one week, then one that evoked 19th century quasi-realistic fu, then full-on wuxia, and after that maybe some futuristic action. The genres would be specific places you could go and visit, and which would more or less retain their distinctive themes and imagery, apart from whatever crazy stuff your own characters brought in their duffel bags. The Netherworld would be the place between places that tied everything together, where you could visit different genres just by traveling from one room to another. Or you can find all of them together in one magic-fu-guns-tech combo locale.

This would allow the game to start in a grounded and comparatively familiar place, contemporary Hong Kong, and then get weirder as it went along. It also made the setting material detachable, so if you only want

to do modern hard boiled you could ignore the other bits. It contains the fantastical elements gamers continue to demand, and how, but in a modular arrangement.

Looking at genres as places you could move between also led to the setting's paradox-free approach to time travel. That further tied into the conceit of fighting for control of feng shui sites, which gave the game its core activity—the default action the heroes engage in. As with most games you can ignore the core activity when you spot something else you'd rather pursue instead. But, just like the dungeon complex in D&D, it's always there when you need something to go and do.

The Madam of Pets pointed to the idea that the Netherworld should be populated by enigmatic, slightly odd characters, some of them quite powerful, associated with culture-shifted imagery. The Queen of the Ice Pagoda isn't just Madam of Pets with the serial numbers filed off. She and the other Four Monarchs have been filtered through several degrees of additional creative interpretation, to fit the other new concepts of the world.

Likewise, no direct analogue for Mr. Ford, the pirate suitor, appears in *Feng Shui*. But the oddball choice of having a character from yet another genre show up in the middle of this movie does spark the idea of the Netherworld rabble, discards from history now unable to return to the eras of their birth. When you take a random and kooky image as inspiration but then impose internal logic on it, you don't have Mr. Ford anymore, you have a new setting idea players can enjoy without ever knowing the reference.

Of all the popular genres, the adventure, or romance, as we called it in the Middle Ages, is constantly in dialogue with itself. That's because it's closest to myth, the original set of stories we told ourselves to explain our world and keep our imaginations occupied around the campfire. Its structure, of the hero who goes on a journey or encounters a problem and imposes order on the world, can support all manner of surface detailing: cowboys, space marines, mecha, elves, vampires—or, in the case of *Feng Shui*, killers, martial artists, sorcerers and gene freaks.

Not in spite of, but through its grab bag of genre tropes, *Saviour of the Soul* shows us the durability of the formula. It can withstand swerves into broad comedy or big sentimentality. It can bypass standard story progression. So long as the performers dig in enough to let us care about the characters, and the final showdown between good and evil brings the flair and blows up real good, the structure delivers, as it has always done.

On our best, most magical and spontaneous nights of collaborative creativity, roleplayers might achieve the delicate emotion of *Crouching Tiger* or the sustained underplaying of *The Mission*. A lot of the time, with each player throwing a different influence into the mix, with laughter ringing out, snacks being munched, and pop culture references flying, we maybe get something that, if filmed, would look like *Saviour of the Soul*.

And that's okay. Let's give ourselves permission to have fun, however ragged the story may get around the edges.

SEVEN SAMURAI

THE POWER OF THE THROUGHLINE

SPONSORED BY CHARLES MYERS

For the bulk of its 207-minute running time, Akira Kurosawa's *Seven Samurai* (1954) is not an action film, but a drama. This structure gives the combat sequences, when they come, their ineradicable impact. The narrative tropes and patterns *Seven Samurai* establishes go on to exert an incalculable influence on action cinema. (And if a modern action movie gesture doesn't originate here, chances are it first entered the bloodstream of cinema tradition through Kurosawa's *Yojimbo* or *Hidden Fortress*.)

The force of its drama demonstrates the power of the throughline: the narrative idea, theme, or opposition that underpins and connects its every scene. The sense of classical rightness, of a film sublimely assured in its storytelling, derives from its unerring commitment to that throughline. You might think a sense of unity commonplace in film, or any other narrative form, until you start to look for it and see how many pieces allow themselves to drift away from their central backbone. Devotion to throughline alone doesn't make a masterpiece. The filmmaker still has to execute in all sorts of other ways, as Kurosawa does here. But, when building a story, an ability to adhere to throughline makes all other choices clearer.

To express it simply, throughline is the tool that lets you see what belongs in your story, and what doesn't.

The throughline Kurosawa and his fellow screenwriters Shinobu Hashimoto and Hideo Oguin build into *Seven Samurai* can be expressed as **Trust vs. Deception**. This fundamental opposition informs the key characters and the actions they undertake.

The instigating incident of the film occurs right away. A group of bandits decide to raid a village as soon as its barley crop has been harvested. Villagers, overhearing this, warn their neighbors. After fearful discussion, they settle on a plan to hire ronin, now-masterless members of the superior samurai caste, to protect them against the bandits. The wily but wise ronin Kambei (Takashi Shimura) gathers six others to aid him: reliable right hand Gorobei, old comrade Shichiroji, the genial Heihachi, world-weary master swordsman Kyuzo, naïve aspiring fighter Okamoto, and the unruly outsider Kikuchiyo (Toshiro Mifune). The trust they must establish with the villagers to prevail is constantly tested, until they resist a series of raids and, at great cost, end the bandit threat, bringing peace to the village.

Whether it occurs between villagers, between samurai, or between villagers and samurai, every interaction happens on a spectrum of distrust and trust. The villagers can't decide whether they can trust the samurai. When they go out seeking fighters they, with nothing to offer but food, have nothing to bargain with, and must trust that they can find one altruistic enough to do the job for food. Once they overcome Kambei's resistance and he decides to help them, he must win the trust of other samurai.

The trust/distrust opposition appears in unexpected permutations. Kambei, played by Shimura as the personification of trustworthy paternal authority, frequently operates by trickery. In the scene that establishes his competence, he tricks a man holding a child at swordpoint by posing as a monk. This false trust allows him to kill the man. During his recruiting drive he instructs young Okamoto to stand in a doorway as samurai enter for their interviews and try to cosh them on the head with a board. After the boy tries this, Kambei must then win applicants' trust by explaining that he was testing them to make sure they were skilled enough to duck the blow.

Kikuchiyo tries to win the group's trust by presenting a patently false genealogy, his claim that he belongs to their class. They laughingly dismiss him. He gains that trust only later, through persistence and by a bare-handed fishing demonstration that shows them that he has earthier skills they lack.

Out of distrust, the villagers repeatedly deceive the samurai, by hiding both their young women and the true depths of their food stores. The story's romantic sub-plot starts on a note of deception. A young woman's father, distrustful of the samurai, cuts her hair and forces her to dress as a boy. When Okamoto, who will share an intense, fleeting first love with her, meets her in a deceptive guise, born from distrust.

The samurai plan to defeat the bandits depends on deception. When the bandits discover their presence in the town, it comes as a blow, robbing them of surprise. The samurai trick the bandits into entering the town, closing a hidden gate behind them when only a few have come through. This overturns the numbers advantage the bandits have over them.

Yet to pull off their plan, the samurai must fully trust one another, and the villagers. Not trusting the samurai with his secret shame, the peasant Rikichi rushes off to attack a bandit outpost. Several of the samurai pursue him, leading to Heihachi's death. We then see that Rikichi's wife has been held as a sex slave by the bandits; she commits suicide by leaping into the flames of the burning hideout.

Another failure of trust leads to further disaster, when Kikuchiyo abandons his post to show he's as good as Kyuzo at sneaking into the enemy camp to steal muskets, leading to the deaths of several peasants and Goro-bei.

The death of the most skilled swordsman, Kyuzo, from the lead bandit's musket shot, might at first seem like an insertion of arbitrary battle noise into the carefully composed narrative. But the shot comes from hiding, from the sill of the house where the village women were sent for safety. So this too invokes the thematic pole of deception. Young Okamoto wails, his trust in Kyuzo's prowess shattered, as he sees his hero felled by a mere bullet.

This presages the film's famous conclusion, the final level of deception, self-deception, clears. Kambei realizes that it is the peasants who are eternal, and that importance of the samurai is fleeting.

Kurosawa's action staging lays the groundwork for Kambei's epiphany.

It deglamorizes samurai combat, taking it out of the stylized, kabuki-like dance moves of the early chanbara genre and dropping it into the mud. Most deaths come from a single hit. On the other hand, driving a spear into a bandit's body to finish him off requires sustained effort of both muscle and willpower. The rebel Kikuchiyo defies this, as he does so many other things, by getting up after he's been shot. That allows him to finish off the bandit chieftain. But in *Feng Shui* terms he's already taken a Mark of Death, and he slumps over after failing his death check afterwards.

The Magnificent Seven, John Sturges' 1960 western remake, provides an illuminating point of comparison in the importance of throughline. It takes Kambei's final realization and pulls it forward to form the throughline of its entire script. *The Magnificent Seven* becomes about the death of the gunslinger era. The gunfighters know they're doomed throughout, not as the resolution of an epic struggle between trust and deception. But not every scene locks into the death of the gunslinger throughline the way *Seven Samurai* continually explores, expands and reinforces its more universal and faceted throughline. The bit that establishes Yul Brynner as its Kambei figure no longer turns on deception. Instead it has him ferrying the coffin of an Indian to a cemetery, braving the resistance of local bigots. It plays more as a nod to then-current civil rights politics than a clear invocation of the throughline. The remake stops to flesh out the villain and let Eli Wallach monologue with gusto. When it does invoke the throughline, it does it with low-conflict dialogue in which the characters kill time by verbally batting the theme around. Kurosawa's throughline is an opposition between forces. That of *Magnificent Seven* screenwriter William Roberts is a one-sided statement: the gunslinger era is dying. That flattens the characters and gives the outcomes of scenes a predetermined quality. Though still a rousing enough entertainment when seen on its own, its less rigorous adherence to throughline loses the richness of the Kurosawa version.

So one of the lessons about throughlines is to build breathing room into them by phrasing them as oppositions. But can we incorporate them all

into roleplaying as we know it?

Throughline is essential to structure. Yet roleplaying games resist structure. They're improvised, loosey-goosey first drafts that nonetheless get set in stone as campaign continuity. You can announce a throughline or theme at the beginning of a session, and perhaps offer encouragement or incentives to have players build it into each scene they play. But inevitably the value of player choice in an improvised creative exercise trumps that of the tight structure found in a rigorous masterpiece like *Seven Samurai*. Giving players significant choices means allowing them the freedom to go off on tangents. As a GM you don't want to deny players actions they decide to take on the spur of the moment because they wreck a predetermined structure, or seem thematically beside the point. Nor would one edit a storyline after the fact to declare that off-point events never happened. Although we can aspire to structure and the throughlines it requires, in the end we get them only as those rare lightning strike when everything comes together, and a story that seems perfectly constructed in retrospect emerges spontaneously, via group gestalt. It is a magic moment to aspire to rather than something we can try to force. But then, *Seven Samurai* itself remains a singular achievement and the result of a group collaboration—an extended piece of cinematic magic, aided but not explained by the solidity of its foundation.

SPL

“DEATH IS NOT THE WORST THING”

Of the films in this book, Wilson Yip’s 2005 *SPL* (aka *SPL: Sha Po Lang*, aka *Killsbot*) is one of the titles readers are least likely to know already. I can’t say what I want to about this latter-day triumph of the heroic bloodshed genre without addressing its shocking plot turns. So go find it and watch it; it’s great.

Okay, you’ve seen it now. Was I right or what? What a masterpiece of vivid color, moral absence and cosmic doom.

To recap for those who already knew it, ultra-menacing crime kingpin Wong Po (Sammo Hung) escapes prosecution by sending a henchman to crash into the car bearing Inspector Chan Kwok-Chung (Simon Yam) and a witness bound for court. Chung survives but the witness and his wife are killed. Three years later, he has adopted their girl, been diagnosed with brain cancer, and is at his last day at work before retirement. He shows the ropes to his replacement, Inspector Ma (Donnie Yen), introducing them to the squad he’ll be inheriting: Lok, the junior one; Wah, the senior one; and Sum, the looking forward to reuniting with his estranged daughter one. But Chung doesn’t tell Ma what he and they are up to. Lacking sufficient evidence, they’re going to take down Wong Po by framing a guilty man. The raid they launch on his drug stash house provokes reprisals from the nigh-untouchable gang lord. The cycle of revenge accelerates, bringing varying doom to all.

The film gives us three charismatic Hong Kong stars in roles tailored for their charisma. Sammo absolutely owns the screen in this atypical villain role. At a point where most of his generation were already getting too old for this shit, he fights with cyclonic intensity. And unlike his colleagues,

you can't just get any old stuntman to sub for him in the wide shots. Simon Yam does a smoldering brood as Chung. The film's moral spiral provides the perfect habitat for Donnie Yen's sometimes off-putting hard edge.

The film's title refers to a constellation of stars considered particularly inauspicious. To be ruled by them is to be destined for disaster. Where the bullet-spattered demises of John Woo's films offer redemption in death, here we get a sleeker, colder fatalism. Brief, lush glimpses of nature—a beach, a forest—exist only as a fleeting respite from the city, the neon trap in which all the principals are caught.

You could power a whole *Feng Shui* series just on the melodramatic hooks seen here. Chung struggles under the weight of three of them:

- Has sworn vengeance against Wong Po
- Cares for the god daughter of murdered witnesses
- Is terminally ill

Inspector Ma's hook has him paying a weekly video arcade visit to the former criminal he severely brain-damaged with a mighty punch. Wah has declared his father dead to him. Together, Wah, Sum and Lok nurse another melodramatic hook: they're ready to look after Chung's god-daughter after his cancer takes him—and willing to do anything to set her up for life. Sum, as already noted, additionally looks forward to his imminent reunion with his daughter. Those of us playing spot the cliché expect him to be the one who doesn't make it. That renders the triple kill of squad members especially stunning.

Issues of fatherhood press down on the action like the dreaded Sha Po Lang constellation. Wong Po, too, is obsessed with his role as a papa. After his many miscarriages, his young wife now has a one year old son. And it's father's day tomorrow. Throughout the film, he's on the phone to his wife and talking to his child. The calls even interrupt his final death duel with Ma.

The shocking murders of Lok, Wah, and Sum, committed all in a row by blonde-dyed, tanto-wielding chief henchman Jack (Wu Jing), tell us that

they're vulnerable ally GMCs in a game in which only Chung and Ma are run by players. From his epic fights with Jack and then Wong Po, there's no doubt that Donnie Yen's character is a PC hero. Simon Yam's Chung clears through a passel of mooks before being downed by boss foe Sammo Hung, so we know he falls into that category too.

SPL's doom-laden narrative suggests another possibility, a one-shot convention game in which half of the players know that they're playing fragile PCs who go down on a single hit from a featured foe or boss. Everyone buys into the fact that they're engaged in an extra gritty heroic bloodshed exercise. The players of the vulnerable cops know they're going to bite it. How long they can do this becomes the scenario's tactical element. The players strive to keep the noncombatant cops out of harm's way, and helpful to their war against the crooks, before the deadly henchman hunting them can track them down.

For a film so memorable for its action, *SPL* includes very few fight sequences. Yip presents the opening raid on Wo Ping's stash house as a deconstructed montage introducing us to the three squad members. Their later deaths play as murders, not fights. The same is true of a prior scene in which Chung and his squad outright kill a goon who inconveniently really committed the cop-killing they want to frame Wo Ping for.

That leaves Chung's disastrous attack on Wo Ping's nightclub, the intervening alleyway baton versus sword duel between Ma and Jack, and then the climactic boss fight, in which Donnie and Sammo throw one down for the ages.

The two really big action set pieces both feature Yen going at it one-on-one with an equally skilled martial arts performer. That makes this the ideal essay to make a point about the difference between movie fights and the way we recreate them in roleplaying games.

Both battles follow the HK principle of dishing out way more damage than any human body could really withstand. In the film's chronology the final battle immediately follows the alley duel. In the first of the two fights, Inspector Ma sustains multiple sword strikes, any one of which

would send an actual human to the hospital. Yet they impair him not at all minutes later when he squares off against Wo Ping. Clearly he's not even above 25 Wound Points when the second fight begins. Those devastating-seeming sword hits maybe inflicted a few Wound Points. Through this conceit, HK movies let the combatants hit each other a lot, which is more exciting than a bunch of swings and misses, without unduly shortening the scene.

In a typical *Feng Shui* fight you might hit any given featured foe three or four times, to give a rough average, and a boss twice that at most. Yet in *SPL's* key battles, and in pretty well any cinematic martial arts showdown, the participants make shattering impact many times. They're the main attraction here, so *SPL's* fights go on for much longer than, say, any single set-to in *The Raid: Redemption*.

Feng Shui emulates cinematic action storytelling but doesn't slavishly recreate it. A blow thrown in a staged fight might take a while to choreograph and to shoot from various angles, but it cuts together at high speed. Adjudicating any given hit in a roleplaying game takes longer than the hit does in the game world. The GM calls the shot, the player speaks up, the player rolls, calculates the result, the GM calculates the smackdown, the damage, and the Wound Points suffered. And you take time to describe it, with punches being faster to throw than they are to narrate. An entire multi-combatant fight takes more real time than its film equivalent takes screen time. To keep them from bogging down, *FS2* assumes a constant flurry of blows, with only the exceptionally telling ones resulting in a change of numbers.

When a fight includes only two combatants, you could give it the extended, epic quality of *SPL's* climax by upping Wound Point thresholds. Heroes could suffer Impairment at 50 and 60 Wound Points, and face Up Checks after 70. A featured foe would do the same, but make boss-style odd/even Up checks from 70 on.

A boss would go to 1 Impairment at 80 Wound Points, 2 at 90 Wound Points, and start making Up checks from 100 on. The longer the fight,

the more likely the boss' superior stats are to overcome the hero's Fortune dice advantage. To even up a solo duel, tune the boss' Attack and Defense values down by 1 each.

This assumes that you have a group of players willing to spectate from the sidelines for a length of time they could otherwise spend engaged in a joint battle. They probably don't, even if they at first think they do.

Feng Shui is not tuned for solo play. Its balance assumes a group of players able to draw on a range of schticks greater than any one archetype can muster.

For most, the best option will remain to keep on staging those multi-hero battles, and imagining that they're landing many cool-looking but ultimately inconsequential blows in the background of other characters' shots. And to hope they're governed by a constellation more benevolent than Sha Po Lang.

STAR WARS

MARCH OF THE ARCHETYPES

SPONSORED BY JOHN B.

Let's get this out of the way first. If, in 1977, when I am 13, you show me a movie called *Star Wars*, it's still called *Star Wars* now. And that's enough about that whole thing. We're not here to talk about movies and memory and revisionism and the difference between middle age and childhood.

Instead our mission has us mining the film for principles we can apply to our cinematic action gaming. We can start with the obvious: its status as an exemplar of the mook rule, which it uses to the hilt. It establishes this all but immediately, the shot of C-3PO and R2D2 shuffling unharmed across a corridor ablaze with laser fire. The script ties this into its throughline of thought versus feeling. Stormtroopers use blasters, which Obi-Wan, the paragon of feeling, describes as unreliable compared to a lightsaber. Muddying the metaphorical waters is the fact that Luke, Leia and Han attack much more effectively with blasters than the stormtroopers do.

That's because they're heroes, in *Feng Shui* terms, and the stormtroopers are mooks. Like *FS2* mooks, the stormtroopers are dangerous in large numbers. Although we never see any of our heroes get hit by a blaster shot, Luke and company know better than to simply ignore them. They shoot back when they have to and hightail it in the other direction when they run into a large group of them. They're obviously acting on the awareness that, as a printout of pregenerated mook attack results shows, if you let enough of them shoot at you, some of them will hit.

Also, during the Death Star incursion sequence, their goal is not to mow down all the bad guys and take over their base, but only to get back to the

ship and escape. Were this a film about taking over a battle station, it would present the heroes with a handful of more potent enemies. Instead its villain roster consists of a single boss, innumerable mooks, and non-combatant supporting players, like Grand Moff Tarkin (Peter Cushing).

That boss, Darth Vader, engages in one fight and one vehicle chase. In neither instance is the good guys' goal to flat-out overcome the bad guys. In the duel, Obi-Wan wants merely to delay Vader until the rest of the gang can get back to the Millennium Falcon. Once this happens, he allows Vader to strike him down, apparently a necessary step to achieving transcendence, Force-style. Until that point, Vader never hits him, raising the possibility that despite his well-constructed aura of menace, his *FS2* stats are only those of a featured foe. That's assuming that Obi-Wan is a hero (whose player presumably has had his work shifts changed on him, making this the last session he can attend). We might also see in Obi-Wan the classic signs of a GM character being swept offstage to return full agency to the players, now that he's done his job of supplying theme and key exposition.

Though a spaceship combat sub-system lies outside *Feng Shui's* remit, the final Death Star dogfight can, with only a little squinting, be mapped to its vehicle chase rules. And that's what it is, a chase and not a fight, with the winner getting to determine whether those torpedoes go into the station's exhaust port. So one structural idea we can export to our games is that the goal of a chase can be something other than to either catch the bad guys or get away from them. You might frame an *FS2* chase so that:

- The heroes get to a pop-up portal before it closes if they win, and are delayed if they lose.
- They get to hit an enemy feng shui site with a rocket launcher, burning it if they win, and are stopped by the arrival of reinforcements if they lose.
- They, conversely, arrive in time to stop foes from blowing up one of their sites, or an ally's, if they win the chase, failing if they lose.

In the Death Star space chase, laser fire between vessels takes the place of the rams and sideswipes seen in your typical cinematic car pursuit. You

can thus map them to the way rams and sideswipes work in *FS2*, both adding to the chance that the recipient will lose the chase, and that the loss ends in a catastrophic vehicle explosion. The distinction between vehicles being near or far pertains in this sequence too. The Y-wing pilots work to prevent the Tie fighters from getting too close (closing the gap in *FS2* terms), because then they can do damage to their vehicles. At the same time this brings their pursuers near enough to be damaged in return.

The sudden shift from Luke fighting side by side with established characters to a newly introduced cast of red shirts numbered-team members tells us what's up here. As in the *Road Warrior* final chase, we're looking at a solo hero equipped with ablative allies. Were I to run an analogue of this with FS rules, I'd treat it as a chase with one pursuer and one evader. Every time the hero accrues Chase Points from a near pursuer, I'd narrate it as the fiery loss of another wingman. A Y-wingman, to coin a phrase. The pursuer's gain of Chase Points while close represents the loss of one of his fleet.

Han's showing up to zap Vader from the Millennium Falcon at the pivotal moment would play out as a use of the Boost rules.

That said, I probably wouldn't try to exactly emulate a solo vehicle evasion in an *FS2* game, because that would sideline all the other players. Instead I'd stage the chase with multiple pursuers and give all the heroes the chance to drive or ride along as evaders. That would take primacy away from Luke as the only one capable of solving the evening's big problem.

Because that's Luke's mythic archetype—like Neo in *The Matrix* and Sing in *Kung Fu Hustle*, he's yet another iteration of The One, the destined hero. Which means that he's King Arthur and therefore by extension the Christ.

I use "mythic archetype" as distinct from Luke's *FS2* in-game archetype. Given the emphasis on his piloting expertise, the Skywalker we see here is probably a variant Driver, who with the agreement of the rest of the group gets add fu schticks when he starts Awesoming Up.

Any tale of The One starts with an awakening: Arthur pulls the sword from the stone, Neo takes the red pill, Sing gets his blocked chi realigned

by a blow from the Beast. Luke decides to trust in the force instead of his targeting computer.

To make your *Feng Shui* character The One, give her the melodramatic hook “has a great destiny she does not yet understand.” While that seems like asking the GM for a gift, you’re giving her a gift too—a blank check allowing her to wrap you up in a big plotline. If multiple players want to be The One, it may be that all of them have to undergo a collective awakening, and fully unite to achieve that destiny. When the One learns what the deal is, destiny-wise, her melodramatic hook shifts to note exactly what it is: “Foretold to be the Fifth Monarch”, “the One who will restore life to the wastelands” or what have you.

If players object to someone taking a hook that makes her the One, and therefore a spotlight hog, point to *Star Wars*. Although it narrows its focus to Luke at the end, for the rest of its run time it shows how The One can operate within a classic adventuring party. *Star Wars* adroitly shifts spotlight moments between a large cast of protagonists in a way few feature films attempt. For a good chunk of its first act, R2D2 acts as its protagonist. Though they function as opposing foils for Luke, one representing thought and the other feeling, Han and Obi-Wan also both get way fun limelight moments. The script keeps splitting, subtracting from, and adding to the core party, to make the constant spotlight shifting manageable. Obi-Wan goes off on his own, but then they rescue Leia, introducing variety by changing up the roster.

In *FS2*, like most other crunchy RPGs, you want to limit party-splitting to non-combat scenes, or at least allow absent heroes to quickly jump into the fray. The rest of the heroes will quickly feel it if their much-needed healer is off hacking the enemy database while they sustain heavy cyber-monkey fire. Even here the Death Star escape eventually converges all of the heroes into one place.

At least until Obi-Wan decides to take that light saber upside the head, achieving oneness with the Force, and leaving Luke to choose awakening on his own, as the One usually has to do.

YOUNG AND DANGEROUS 2

GANGLAND STREETS

Young and Dangerous 2 is an enigmatically beguiling sequel to a perfectly solid but unremarkable first installment. Directed by Andrew Lau, who later goes on to helm *Infernal Affairs* and *The Guillotines*, its floating handheld camera improbably fuses the documentary and the dreamlike. He directed the first film in the series, and many after that, but this is the installment where he hits his stride. He serves as his own cinematographer, which through some elusive alchemy infuses the film with a subtle crackle of immediacy. This is in 1996, the same year Stephen Soderbergh started doing the same thing, to a not dissimilar effect.

Although *Young and Dangerous 2* includes a hit sequence followed by a chase scene, it doesn't much count as an action movie. Nonetheless, its evocation of the street-level gangster lifestyle makes it essential viewing for any series touching on crime in Hong Kong.

Based on a comic book called *Teddy Boy*, the *Young and Dangerous* series chronicles the rise of a close-knit group of friends from wannabes to fixtures of the Hung Hing triad society. The partnership between the dreamy, clever Chan Ho Nam (Ekin Cheng) and his laconic right hand, Chicken (Jordan Chan) forms its backbone. Where part one sees Ho Nam taking center stage, two revolves around Chicken. Exiled to Taiwan after the events of the first film, Chicken learns the peculiar ropes of the Taipei crime scene. An elderly boss seeking the legitimacy of a parliamentary seat takes Chicken under his wing, even encouraging him to romance his self-possessed girlfriend, Ting (Chingmy Yau).

Chicken returns to Hong Kong for the film's second act, as Ho Nam finds himself pitted for control of a key Hung Hing territory against flam-

boyantly revolting internal rival Tai Fei—played with brio by Anthony Wong, deep in his villain phase.

The two threads come together when Chicken's Taiwanese patron makes a move on Hung Hing over a Macao casino. A surprise power struggle within the enemy camp puts Ho Nam and Chicken on one side, and Ting and Tai Fei on the other.

The attention the script pays to the details of triad culture and business practices make it a perfect primer for GMs looking to add telling detail to storylines involving the Chinese crime scene. HK crime dramas often deal with the touchy relationships and fish out of water dangers that occur when characters leave their home territories for areas where the rules work just differently enough to touch off trouble. Here we get tastes of the way things work not only on the island, but also Taiwan and Macao. We see Taiwan's strange entanglement between officialdom and gang bosses, with crooks tired of being taken for granted by politicians striving to enter their ranks. Chicken's local buddy laughingly shows him the famous brawls on the floor of the legislature, still a fixture today. In another anthropological note, he explains that the local goons wear wooden shoes, an affectation acquired from watching yakuza movies.

When the senator and the Hung Hing boss (Simon Yam) sit down to consider working together in Macao, we learn that it's considered a minefield even by the labyrinthine standards of Asian crime. Its profusion of gang interests requires masterful diplomacy from any new crook hoping to set up shop there.

In Hong Kong, the detail-hungry GM gets descriptive templates for scenes ranging from the opening of a new gang nightclub, to backroom meetings in which territories are handed out, to the customs governing an internecine struggle not permitted to explode into outright war.

When you play a GMC mid-level mob boss by having him extravagantly pick his nose and then thrust out his hand for the heroes to shake, players who haven't seen *Young and Dangerous 2* will think you a master of bad guy characterization. Those who have will nod and wink at your

tribute to Anthony Wong as Tai Fei. When this comic yet scary baddie suddenly shows a sympathetic side, it reminds us of the power of adding a surprise touch of depth to what seems like a straightforward antagonist.

Likewise the film's other key characters can be melted down to their base types, then reskinned as the HK gangland mainstays the heroes encounter in your game:

- The cool and collected young money-earner
- His girlfriend, eager to be his partner in business as well as in love
- His soulful consigliere
- The aging gang lord, hot-tempered and with no time to lose
- His consort, with a look in her eye that's maybe a touch too serene
- The slick triad chieftain in bespoke tailored suits, who carries himself more as a businessman than a criminal
- The grinning young recruit, who has no idea what he's getting into
- The guy who used to be the newbie, and is now just one step up the ladder and starting to put on airs

As you might infer from the fact that it stretched to six installments, plus spin-offs, prequels (of varying fidelity to the main continuity) a parody and a reboot, *Young and Dangerous* defined how wildly popular an HK franchise could be.

The films earned criticism for glamorizing triads, and that's a fair cop. It pits heroic, charming, likable gangsters against villainous ones. When our viewpoint characters run a prostitution ring out of their hostess club, the film depicts it as jolly fun for all involved, the girls included. Only when slobby Tai Fei objects to his hookers being poached by the matinee idol gangster does this become a source of conflict.

In a default *Feng Shui* series, you could cast some or all of the heroes as friendly nice-guy triads straight out of *Young and Dangerous*. This requires a certain airbrushing of what real world organized criminals do. You have

to ignore prostitution or accept the happy hooker tropes used here. Make sure that their rival gangsters are always worse than they are, utterly deserving of a late night knifing or a sniper shot aimed into the mah jong parlor. If you get them into the chi war, they can find redemption by saving the world.

I'd find the approving tone of *Young and Dangerous* harder to sustain in an ongoing series that dispenses with the fantastical elements and sticks with crime drama. I'd want to do this as a limited series testing the gloss of gangster glamour, leading the cast members to corruption and heroic bloodshed comeuppance. Whether you go for aspirational or realistic triads, an organized crime series should weed out the game's archetypes, as seen in the *Feng Shui* core book, and keep the fight scenes grittier, without hints of wirework.

Whatever the role the triad scene plays in your game, the film's climax points to a technique you can draw on as a rare but bracing change of pace. When the two rival gangs converge on each other en masse in on a wide Macao boulevard, the viewer might anticipate a massive machete battle. Instead, the ending resolves itself through tense dialogue, from negotiation to a surprise twist of loyalty. While nearly every *Feng Shui* session should feature a big fight, a tense square-off between forces, if played with sufficient commitment and suspense, might prove just as satisfying.

This one turns in part on a bad guy turning out to be on our heroes' side after all. You could propose a special mechanism to make this turn feel earned on the part of the players. Maybe everyone has to spend a Fortune point and rolls a Swerve. If positive Swerves outnumber negative ones and zeroes, it turns out that the apparent foe has been working undercover for the Dragons for some time now. It comes as a surprise to the players but not their characters, who clearly knew all along and helped plan this brilliant move. If they don't get the Swerves they needed, not only is the bad guy still bad, but he was never a mole in the first place. Groups accustomed to rules that separate the role of player and character in driving

narrative may be ready to embrace this. Players who don't like to see the streams crossed may prefer not to suddenly learn key facts their characters already knew.

The series takes a sharp dive in quality midway through. I wish I remembered where that happens—it might be as early as 3. If you're brave enough to find out where the breakpoint occur, get back to us so that others may be warned.

For a far less sanguine take on triad power struggles, check out Johnnie To's brutal, searing *Election* (1995) and *Election 2* (aka *Triad Election*, 1996). *Monga* (2010, Doze Niu) rousingly does the young gangsters thing in Taipei, with less glamour and a harder portrayal of prostitution than *Young and Dangerous 2*.

SELECT FILMOGRAPHY

You kids get off my lawn with your Region A Blu-Rays, your streaming services, and your bittorentses. Why, back in the day of the original *Feng Shui*, when the wonders of Hong Kong cult cinema barely registered as a gleam in fandom's eye, you had to go to a by gum actual Chinese movie house, or track down titles on VHS, to experience their offbeat wonder.

Since then *The Matrix* and later Hollywood efforts following in its bullet-time vapor trail have ported the Hong Kong aesthetic into the Western mainstream. Obscure international titles have never been easier to access. Yet even some *Feng Shui* fans still know the American homages better than the originals. This updated filmography gets you started on your cinematic journey.

The classic period of Hong Kong cinema that most informs *Feng Shui* starts with 1983's *Zu, Warriors of the Magic Mountain*, petering out somewhere around *Once Upon a Time in China and America* (1997).

Late 2014 happens to be a great moment to revisit a movie list like this. After a long slump in the wake of the Asian economic crisis, China's growing thirst for escapist entertainment has stoked a new fusion of island style and mainland financing. Though certain of the results arrive as bloated and committee-driven as any failed Hollywood blockbuster, others represent longed-for returns to form from classic directors.

Getting in tune with these films means learning to embrace a different vibe and set of conventions. The style and assumptions of mainstream Western movies may be invisible to you, until you explore a cinema culture that does it differently.

The defining virtue of Hong Kong action films lies in their fight choreography. Like dance numbers of old, they use wide angles and relatively long shots to show you the performers' athletic prowess. This allows direc-

tors — who in the case of action sequences may be the fight choreographers — the ability to orient you in the physical environment. Instinctively you know where all the combatants are, lending the scenes greater suspense and impact. Many hallmark John Woo fights, for example, open with a visual survey of the location.

In contrast to the earlier Shaw Brothers/Bruce Lee era, realistic martial arts gives way to a weightless, gravity-mocking choreography placing performers, props, and set pieces on wires. This leads to a surreal, stylized physics the *Feng Shui* rules inspire you to emulate in your descriptions. The HK take on the amount of harm a person can sustain and still keep going likewise throws out the trauma ward rulebook. If a character dies with less than five bullets in him, he's just not trying.

HK movies of this period were often shot without scripts, their narratives improvised in a run-and-gun fashion that preserves the director's distinctive stamp, sometimes at the expense of clarity. As an economy measure, HK flicks often skip the connective tissue sequences in which things get explained, leaving to throwaway dialogue details an American script would carefully spell out. Often rushed subtitling doesn't help those of us who don't speak Cantonese or Mandarin to keep up.

My favorite Hong Kong movies stick to a consistent tone throughout. Many popular titles, however, carom between emotional states, from brutal violence to sappy sentimentality, from gut-wrenching melodrama to the lowest of low comedy. Where the comedy we inject into our *Feng Shui* games tends to be ironic and meta, the source material still revels in poop gags and fat jokes.

In its biggest tonal contrast with Hollywood, Asian cinema in general takes a fatalistic view of life and destiny. The hero might get a happy ending, but don't count on it. At the end the two lovers we've been following are as likely to wind up gasping last breaths in a pool of blood as they are escaping to Mexico with the loot. And when it's time to establish the murderous villainy of the villains, neither children nor pets get a free pass.

With this awareness of looming doom comes a melancholy romanticism, which can lend surprising depth to otherwise lightweight material.

JOHN WOO

If you force unschooled players to watch only one Hong Kong movie, the starting point remains the maestro of the heroic bloodshed genre, John Woo. Look to him for mastery of cinematic space, a freeze-frame flair for the exaggerated moment, and a sincerity so heartfelt it sometimes plays as ironic. Some fans prefer *Hard Boiled* (1992), with its famous climactic hospital battle, for its straight-ahead heroics and relatively low melodrama quotient. Though I would never downgrade that classic, I do have to say that Woo sans melodrama is like D&D without fireball. For me the purest expression of his style remains his redeemed assassin masterpiece *The Killer* (1989), which, like *Hard Boiled*, stars the preternaturally charismatic Chow Yun-Fat. From the doves to the bag full of guns to the melodramatic hook to end all melodramatic hooks, it's Woo in two-guns-blazing microcosm. He established that style with the love between comrades gangster epic *A Better Tomorrow* (1986). *Once a Thief* (1991) gets silly but serves up lots of gaming inspiration for heist-oriented PCs. For subtitle-phobes I'd point to the Travolta-Cage heightened acting showdown *Face/Off* as the Wooiest of his uneven Hollywood stint. Though largely a textbook technothriller, *Broken Arrow* (1996) nonetheless has its signature moments. Now working in China again, Woo reloaded his mojo with a surprising turn toward epic-scale period action with *Red Cliff I* and *II* (2008 & 2009). Make sure you snag the full two parts as import discs, avoiding the truncated North American release. It drops the emotional beats to amalgamate two movies into one.

My favorite Woo remains 1990's *Bullet to the Head*, which takes his themes of love and betrayal the deepest into the abyss. After a street fight

in Hong Kong gives them reason to flee, three fresh-faced, aspiring gangsters seek their fortune in Vietnam. During the war, which they wind up in the middle of. There one of them commits a crime requiring operatic payback years later on the Hong Kong docks.

JACKIE CHAN

The biggest star in the world during his long heyday, with parallel careers in Asia and America, the clown prince of kung fu exemplifies the actor as auteur. With a couple of worthy exceptions, his HK movies follow a clear template, mixing fighting, comedy, and a genial, vulnerable persona. When he punches somebody really hard in the jaw, he reels back, waving his injured hand. Plus, his credit sequences show you outtakes of all the horrible injuries he sustained trying to entertain you! You always see him compared to Buster Keaton; a look at Keaton's 1926 runaway train stunt bonanza *The General* shows how completely apt that is. Great places to start with Jackie include *Miracles* (aka *Mr. Canton and Lady Rose*, 1989), *Drunken Master 2* (aka *The Legend of the Drunken Master*, 1994), *Police Story 3* (1992, also featuring stunning action performances from Michelle Yeoh), or *Rumble in the Bronx* (1995), with its lovely views of the snow-capped mountains ringing Manhattan. Not to leave out *Project A* (1983) or *Armour of God 2: Operation Condor* (1991), or other entries in various series already mentioned. For a grittier Jackie, look to his departures from formula *Crime Story* (1993) and *The Shinjuku Incident* (2009).

TSUI HARK

Prolific director/producer Hark defined 80s-90s wuxia style and refines it today for the 3D Asian blockbuster era. He is to wire fu as John Woo is to guns. And he can spin some fine, contemporary ultra-kinetic action,

too. Leaving out the dramas and comedies as outside the *Feng Shui* bailiwick, his incredible classic-era run starts with the primitive but seminal *Zu: Warriors of the Magic Mountain* (1983), achieves full flower with *Peking Opera Blues* (1986), and then keeps going: *A Better Tomorrow III* (1989), *The Swordsman* (1990), *The Raid* (1991), and *Once Upon a Time In China* series (1991-97), which made Jet Li a star as Wong Fei-Hung. Then continue with *Dragon Inn* (uncredited, 1992), *Green Snake* (1993), *The Blade* (1995), and the breathless modern actioner *Time and Tide* (2000). After a slump, he's back with glorious returns to crazy fun, *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame* (2010) and *Young Detective Dee: Rise of the Sea Dragon* (2013).

JET LI

Natural, earnest charm and genuine wushu chops made Jet Li a cornerstone star of the classic era. He made his bones playing folk heroes Wong Fei-Hung, in the already-mentioned *Once Upon a Time in China* series, and Fong Sai-Yuk, in *The Legend* (1993). For campy wuxia fun, in which Li's character breaks to marvel over his opponent's higher experience point total, go to *Kung Fu Cult Master* (1993), part one of an never-completed double-header. *Fist of Legend* (1994) puts him in Bruce Lee's footsteps, remaking *Chinese Connection* and arguably serving as the best on-screen showcase for his filmic fighting skills. Competing for that honor is the modern-set *Bodyguard from Beijing* (aka *The Defender*, 1994). It adds shooting to his repertoire, and features a great final fu fight in a gas-filled apartment, with both combatants gasping for air. Of his recent titles, *The Sorcerer and the White Snake* (2011) does the best job of concealing that he's getting too old for this shit. Based on the same folk tale as Tsui Hark's earlier *Green Snake*, it casts Jet as an exorcist monk bent on preserving the boundary between the spirit and human realms.

RINGO LAM

Director Ringo Lam makes dark-hued action movies underpinned with a lacerating air of punishment and doom. *City on Fire* (1987) features Chow Yun-Fat and the classic trope of the undercover cop who starts to get closer to his target than his superiors. It achieved subsequent fame when Quentin Tarantino mixmastered many of its key elements, including its three-way Mexican standoff, into *Reservoir Dogs* (1992). *Full Contact* (1992) pits Chow Yun-Fat against a snakeskin-clad Simon Yam as a heist goes wrong kicks off a cycle of vengeance. *Burning Paradise* (1994) delivers the grimmest Fong Sai Yuk film ever. *The Adventurers* (1995) stars huge movie and pop star Andy Lau as a man seeking to assassinate the weapons dealer who killed his parents. The pulse-pounding *Full Alert* (1997) features Lau Ching Wan, Hong Kong's answer to the rumpled charm of Spencer Tracy, as a cop on the trail of an escaped bomb maker. After the then-obligatory disappointing Hollywood stint and a long break, Lam is at the time of this writing in post-production on a new film. Fingers crossed.

AND LET'S NOT FORGET

Other key inspirations of the classic era include the king of supernatural fantasy series, *A Chinese Ghost Story* (1987), and its 1990 and 1991 sequels. To demonstrate for your players the genre-blending *Feng Shui* vibe in a single film, show them the assassin love triangle revenge match *Savior of the Soul* (1991). The comedic *Mr. Vampire* (1985) tells you everything you need to know about jiangshi. *Magic Cop* (1990) gives a modern gun and badge to its lead, Lam Ching-Ying, to exorcise his way through a case involving a living corpse and a Japanese sorcerer.

The Eye (2002), in which a young woman discovers that the transplant to save her eyesight also lets her see into the spirit realm, jumps out to

scare us during the HK slow period. Its influence sparks a horror revival in HK and a Jessica Alba remake in the US. The same year's *Infernal Affairs* brings a beguiling new surface gloss and a double twist premise to the undercover cop sub-genre. Scorsese finally scores his Oscar when he remakes it as *The Departed* (2006).

JOHNNIE TO

With John Woo gone Hollywood and the economic crisis reducing the local film industry to a shoestring, the ultra-cool works of director Johnnie To and his Milky Way production company keep the HK banner waving in the late 90s and early 00s. As stoic as Woo is romantic, To's world sends beleaguered heroes on a collision course with an arbitrary universe governed by accident, sudden violence, and bravura tracking shots. His early wuxia comedy *Justice My Foot!* (1992) and masked hero excursion *Heroic Trio* (1993) exhibit as much wayward energy as any HK flicks of the time. He finds his trademark cool with the jaw-dropping heroic bloodshed title *A Hero Never Dies* (1998), following it up with *Where a Good Man Goes*, *Running Out of Time*, and his first masterpiece, *The Mission* — all from one year, 1999! While turning out romantic comedies to keep his company, and the local film industry, afloat, he then continues with such latter-day *Feng Shui* inspirations as *Fulltime Killer* (2001), *PTU* (2003), and the Kurosawa judo tournament tribute *Throw Down* (2004). After that comes the unflinching gangland duology *Election* and *Election 2* (2005 & 2006) and the brilliant *Exiled* (2006), an unacknowledged sequel to *The Mission*. For highlights since then, see the pickpocket suspenser *Sparrow* (2008), *Vengeance* (2009), which was supposed to star noir icon Alain Delon but had to settle for Johnny Halliday, and the head-spinning, mainland-set cop movie *Drug War* (2012).

THE WUXIA RENAISSANCE

If you've seen only one wuxia movie, it's probably the lyrical, gorgeous-looking *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2001). It brings together Hong Kong action titans Chow Yun-Fat and Michelle Yeoh and made a star of Zhang Ziyi. Directed by Ang Lee, it adapts one novel in a series by seminal 40s era martial arts adventurer writer Wang Dulu. It became a mainstream hit and Oscar contender in the west, finding a whole new audience of people who had no idea that kung fu powers make you fly.

Mainland Chinese director Zhang Yimou, previously known for sensitive art movies, followed Lee's model with *Hero* (2002) and *House of Flying Daggers* (2004).

The first stages its *giang hu* fights across a series of color-coded tableaux, to tell a fable of the individual's duty to the collective. Set during the Warring States period, it uses wuxia tropes to recreate a historical assassination attempt on the King of the Qin. Jet Li, Donnie Yen, Tony Leung, Maggie Cheung, and Zhang Ziyi play characters with metonymic names: Nameless, Long Sky, Broken Sword, Flying Snow, and Moon. The controversial ending can be read in two ways, as either an endorsement of government authoritarianism, or a critique subtle enough to elude the censorship department.

House of Flying Daggers substitutes monochromatic scenes for a whirl of color. Andy Lau and Takeshi Kaneshiro play Tang dynasty police captains working to crack a band of rebels. Love, loyalty, and knives get all mixed up when one of them falls for the daughter of a rebel leader (Zhang Ziyi).

The success of these films ushered in a trend for big-budget epics combining historical events with HK-style action choreography.

Later historical-wuxia hybrids include:

- Ronny Yu's *Saving General Yang* (2013), retelling a classic story of a family of Song dynasty warriors who risk all to rescue their father from the clutches of a barbarian army.

- *The Assassins* (2012), with Chow Yun-Fat playing the Han dynasty warlord Cao Cao. Here portrayed as a noble man forced to make terrible choices, Cao Cao also appears as a contemptible villain in John Woo's *Red Cliff*.
- Andrew Lau's *The Guillotines* (2012), which updates one of wuxia's wilder gimmicks, the flying guillotine. It reinvents this fearsome decapitation weapon, placing its users in the Qing dynasty. When the Emperor decides it's time to modernize and embrace western technology, he decides that his loyal secret assassin team and their bizarre quasi-magical weapons have become an embarrassment, and must be eliminated.

Other nouveau wuxia films remain as lightly concerned with history as ever. Gordon Chan and Janet Chun's *The Four* (2012) and *The Four II* (2103) adapt a best-selling fantasy novel whose tropes will remind western viewers as much of the X-Men as *Crouching Tiger*. In part one, rival teams of constables with high-grade fu powers cross swords while racing to defeat a mystery counterfeiter intent on subverting the government. Its climax gives Anthony Wong, who used to specialize in psychos but is now aging into grizzled mentor roles, one of the baddest of bad-ass reveals in the super-movie corpus. The trilogy's final installment should be out before this book ships.

Weirdly, the wuxia style now infiltrates periods you wouldn't associate with it. Herman Yau's 2011 *The Woman Knight of Mirror Lake*, otherwise a straight-faced biopic of turn-of-the-century feminist revolutionary Qiu Jin, makes with the wirework when battles break out.

DONNIE YEN

With his roles in *Iron Monkey* (1993) and *Dragon Inn* (1992), hard-edged martial artist Donnie Yen certainly took part in the classic HK wave. However, his star has brightened as others have faded. He often carries himself with a rage recalling a nastier era of action idols, typified by Sonny Chiba.

His maverick cop role in Wilson Yip's *SPL* (aka *Killzone*, 2005) sends him into battle with portly martial arts legend Sammo Hung. Yen's intensity helps make *SPL* the best heroic bloodshed movie of its decade. A follow-up, *Flash Point* (2007) wraps Yen's great action choreography in a more pedestrian cop movie wrapper. The non-fighty bits of *Special ID* (2014) barely qualify as perfunctory, but the action, especially the climactic combo of hand-to-hand and car chase, will delight any *Feng Shui* fan. His best role, though, has to be that of real-life wing chun sifu *Ip Man* (2008). Playing this inspirational figure as he resists Japanese occupiers in Shanghai softens the cruel streak Yen brings to other roles. *Ip Man 2* (2010) follows its subject to postwar Hong Kong and brings us a rematch with Sammo Hung, this time on a restaurant tabletop.

SOUTH KOREA

Since the last *Feng Shui* filmography, HK style has radiated outwards to other Asian film scenes.

Most notably, the vibrant South Korean cinema industry now regularly releases movies easily rivaling their Hong Kong sources of inspiration. Whether you prefer paranoia-laced gun thrills or hemmed-in historical adventures in a world of cruel authority, South Korea offers a sizzling stone bowl full of *Feng Shui* inspiration.

Kim Jee-Won's *The Good, the Bad, the Weird* (2008) sets itself in 1940s Manchuria, the location of choice for makers of Eastern Westerns. Its triangle of competing treasure seekers defy gravity in a style that's as *Shui* as anything listed here. Kim's fiendish modern cat-and-mouser *I Saw the Devil* (2010) unleashes a cycle of gory vengeance when a serial killer makes the mistake of murdering the wife of a secret service agent. Though unjustly ignored by action fans, likely due to the miscasting of a rusty Arnold Schwarzenegger, his American debut *The Last Stand* (2013) demonstrates Kim's mastery of every style of action sequence, from small town firefight to cornfield car pursuit.

South Koreans mediate their real-life fear of disaster from the North by making and consuming a steady diet of crackling espionage thrillers. Often they feature sympathetic spies from the North, inevitably betrayed by their masters. Three great 2013 examples include *Commitment*, featuring a teenage spy taking deep cover in a high school, *The Berlin Affair*, which enmeshes the opposed southern and northern agents in the global espionage world, and *The Suspect*, bearing the jittery influence of Paul Greengrass' Bourne sequels.

2012's *A Company Man* laces the "assassin who wants to get out" sub-genre with a satirical barb, placing its hero in a corporate workplace of deadening mundanity. *The Man From Nowhere* (2010) awakens a burned-out agent with a very particular set of skills, when punks kidnap a neighbor's daughter. *A Hard Day* (2014) dips its tale of a corrupt cop disposing of the body of his hit and run victim in inky Coen brothers wit.

The Thieves (2012) keeps upping the ante on the heist genre until it turns into a full-fledged action ride. To underline its influence, it casts HK mainstay Simon Yam in a supporting role.

RIPPLES AND SHOCKWAVES

The scrappy Thai film scene put its own spinning kick on the martial arts film through mercurial muay thai master Tony Jaa, in *Ong Bak* (2003) and *The Protector* (2005). His use of wire-free, clearly dangerous stuntwork and bone-crunching strikes require no sophisticated storytelling. For female-centric action from the same filmmakers, see *Chocolate* (2008), whose heroine kicks ass through the power of autism. *The Tsunami Warrior* (2008) delightfully channels equal parts wuxia and matinee adventure in its period tale of virtuous queens, wicked pirates, and sea wizardry that turns its users to the dark side.

In *The Raid: Redemption* (2011) UK director Gareth Evans teams with Indonesian pencak silat master Iko Uwais for a series of moviedom's most punishing close-up fights as a SWAT officer battles his way through a gangster-ridden Jarkatan high rise.

Over in Japan, the *Feng Shui* style goes hip hop musical, with nods to *Escape from New York* (1981) and the *Warriors* (1979), with Sion Sono's utterly un-hinged *Tokyo Tribe* (2014). Scrappy Kids take note. Chi War adjacent works of genre-hopping master Takashi Miike include *Fudoh: the New Generation* (1997), *The Great Yokai War* (2005), and *Sukiyaki Western Django* (2007). The middle one is a kid's movie; the others sure aren't.

Wirework fights now show up as far afield as Bollywood, for example in the smash hit heist action musical *Dhoom* (2004) and its sequels.

MORE RECENT HOTNESS

A list of newer fave HK titles as of this writing has to start with Peter Chan's *Wuxia* (aka *Dragon*, 2011) where a 1917 detective takes the existence of fu powers into account when making forensic deductions. He probes the past of a humble villager (Donnie Yen) who is not what he seems. 2010's *Reign of Assassins*, with Michelle Yeoh likewise hiding from her *giang hu* past, perfectly balances action and emotion. For the best heroic bloodshed title in years, find *The White Storm* (2013) in which a disastrous strike against a Thai drug lord tests the loyalties of three buddy cops. The haunted tenement horror film *Rigor Mortis* (2013) takes on the difficult mission of making the jiangshi actually scary.

DEEPER ROOTS

Martial arts movies go back to the silent era. Before wirework, stunt men lofted into the air on trampolines. Before that, they leapt from balconies.

Once you immerse yourself in the titles already listed, you may want to go back to sources we have only the space to name-check here: *Come Drink With Me* (1966), *Dragon Gate Inn* (1967), *Story of a Discharged Prisoner* (1967), *Touch of Zen* (1969), *One-Armed Swordsman* (1971), *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* (1978), and *5 Deadly Venoms* (1978).

AND THAT'S NOT ALL

With an additional two decades worth of film to encompass since last time, this filmography can't claim to be more than an introduction. Apologies if we left your favorite title off. But then you don't need to be told about that one, so we're good.

CHINESE MOVIES BY HISTORICAL PERIOD

DYNASTY	FILMS
Warring States: 256 — 221 BCE	<i>A Battle of Wits</i> <i>Little Big Soldier</i> <i>Wheat</i>
Qin: 221 — 206 BCE	<i>Hero</i> <i>The Last Supper</i> <i>White Vengeance</i>
Han: 206 BCE — 220 CE	<i>Painted Skin</i> <i>Red Cliff</i> <i>The Assassins</i> <i>The Lost Bladesman</i>
Three Kingdoms: 220 — 280	<i>Three Kingdoms: Resurrection of the Dragon</i>
Jin: 265 — 420	<i>The Butterfly Lovers</i>
Southern and Northern Dynasties: 420 — 589	<i>Mulan: Rise of a Warrior</i>
Tang: 618 — 907	<i>Journey to the West: Conquering the Demons</i> <i>Chinese Odyssey</i> <i>Young Detective Dee and the Rise of the Sea Dragon</i> <i>Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame</i> <i>House of Flying Daggers</i>
Five Dynasties: 907 - 960	<i>Zen of Sword</i>

DYNASTY	FILMS
Song / Liao: 960 - 1271	<i>Saving General Yang</i> <i>The Eight Diagram Pole Fighter</i> <i>Ashes of Time</i> <i>Eagle-Shooting Heroes</i> <i>The Four (+ sequel)</i>
Yuan: 1271 — 1368	<i>Kung Fu Cult Master</i>
Ming: 1368 — 1644	<i>The Swordsman (+ sequels)</i> <i>Dragon Inn / Flying Swords of Dragon Gate</i> <i>Reign of Assassins</i> <i>Come Drink with Me</i> <i>A Touch of Zen</i>
Qing: 1644 - 1911	<i>Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon</i> <i>A Chinese Ghost Story</i> <i>Guillotines</i> <i>Iron Monkey</i> <i>Once Upon a Time in China (+ sequels)</i> <i>Drunken Master (+ sequel)</i> <i>The Warlords</i> <i>Tai Chi Zero; Tai Chi Hero</i>
Republic of China: 1912 — 1949	<i>Wu Xia (aka Dragon)</i> <i>The Woman Knight of Mirror Lake</i> <i>Gunmen</i> <i>Shanghai Grand</i> <i>Once Upon a Time in Shanghai</i> <i>Lord of the South China Sea</i> <i>Ip Man (+ sequels)</i>
Fantastic China: date unspecified	<i>Sorcerer and the White Snake</i> <i>Green Snake</i> <i>Curse of the Golden Flower</i> <i>Tai Chi Master</i> <i>One-Armed Swordsman</i>

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Writer and game designer **Robin D. Laws** created the original *Feng Shui* action movie roleplaying game and its shiny new reboot, *Feng Shui 2*. Other work with his longtime collaborators at Atlas Games includes additional setting material for *Over the Edge*, *The Weather the Cuckoo Likes*, the novels *Pierced Heart* and *The Rough and the Smooth*, and the oral history *40 Years of Gen Con*. For more narrative gaming insight, see his acclaimed *Hamlet's Hit Points*. In 2014 his game *Hillfolk* won the prestigious Diana Jones Award and twin Indie RPG Awards for Best Game and Best Support. Other RPG designs include *The Esoterrorists*, *Ashen Stars*, *HeroQuest*, and *The Gaeian Reach*. Fiction projects encompass eight novels, the short story collection *New Tales of the Yellow Sign*, and creative direction duties for Stone Skin Press. He comprises one-half of the ENnie-winning podcast *Ken and Robin Talk About Stuff*, and can be found online at robindlaws.com.



LIGHTS! CAMERA! DICE ROLLS!

Robin D. Laws, game designer by day, cinema super-enthusiast by night, sets his analytic laser sights on action and thrills in a collection of essays sure to supercharge your tabletop roleplaying experience.

As the countdown ticks and the bullets fly, Robin takes you inside the workings of 24 action movies, from the stone cold classic to the unjustifiably obscure. Each essay shows you how the film delivers, and the lessons you can extract from it to enhance your own efforts as GM or player. Explore:

- *Star Wars* as a model of storytelling economy.
- *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* to see how fights can express inner drama.
- *Seven Samurai* as a master class in theme.
- *Die Hard* as textbook cat-and-mouse.
- *The Killer*, to learn the blood-soaked vocabulary of blood-soaked hyper-romanticism.
- *Detective Dee and the Mystery of the Phantom Flame*, because deer fu.

Though honed as a companion volume to the exciting new reboot of his classic RPG *Feng Shui*, you can easily apply this book's insights to any game with swords or explosions in it.

With a special focus on high water marks of the Hong Kong action golden age, alongside the flicks that inspired it and were inspired by it, the book also serves up a crash course in that essential action canon.

So dig in, fire up one of these flicks for the first or five millionth time, and be ready to be blown up. Er, away. Blown away.



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