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INTERIOR ART
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Article Colors

Each article is color-coded to help you find your favorite sections.

Pale Blue: In This Issue

Brown: In Every Issue (letters, humor, editorial, etc.)

Green: Columnist

Dark Blue: GURPS Features

Purple: Systemless Features

IN THIS ISSUE

It's the issue of *Pyramid* that *they* don't want you to know about! This month, we turn our spotlight to the darker corners of creation, firm in the knowledge that the truth is out there . . . sometimes *way* out there!

Entangle your heroes in a web of secrecy and devious plans by putting *Conspiracy in Action!* Sean Punch – the Secret Master of **GURPS Action** – shows how to add more cloak and dagger to the revolvers and race cars of the **Action** line, telling you how to adjust the BAD, help the good guys' ACT, plan adventures, and add a conspiratorial element through new lenses.

In a world *without* action heroes, who stands against the Conspiracy? Michele Armellini – author of **GURPS WWII: Grim Legion** – reveals *The Conspirators' Enemies* through a series of five **GURPS** templates, each with a ready-to-use example character, plus tips for using the templates in multiple eras.

College indiscretions haunt a politician with *Penguin Dreams*. David L. Pulver, contributor to **GURPS Y2K**, introduces a rare comic book that's valuable for more than its cheesecake cover art in this month's Eidetic Memory.

In smoky backrooms, shadowy figures play high-stakes games . . . sometimes literally. Jason "PK" Levine – architect of **GURPS Psionic Campaigns** and other puppet-string toolkits – teaches you poker the **GURPS** way by going *Straight to the Flush*. Learn the skills that your double agent needs, the games he can play, how to cheat, and how to figure out the winnings and what hand he had.

An Earth-loving group is calling on everyone to do their part to stop overpopulation with *One Perfect Day*. In this systemless campaign frame, discover a radical method for reducing world population, including the organization promoting the method, the people behind it, and their dangerous secrets.

Find out what is watching you as we bid you *Welcome to the Terror Drone!* Any modern game world can benefit from learning the "truth" about what small robotic planes are doing as they zip through the sky: simple reconnaissance, complicated mind control, and possibilities between.

Random Thought Table explores what it's like to be inside *and* outside the Conspiracy at the same time, Odds and Ends suggests more games to use with the new poker guidelines, and Murphy's Rules has *stealed* itself to revealing the truth. No matter how far down the rabbit hole you're willing to go, this month's *Pyramid* is ready and waiting for you to get closer . . . closer . . . *closer* . . .

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FROM THE EDITOR

AN ARCHIVE OF SECRETS

When I – codenamed “Steven Marsh” – started assembling this issue, I admit that I was a bit nervous. I wasn’t scared that I was poking into the dark corners of conspiratorial matters (real or imagined). No, I was concerned that it’d be 30-some-odd pages of blank pages . . . and not just because *they* didn’t want you to see what was inside! How well would our writers build on what was already discussed previously in *GURPS Illuminati*, written by the late, great Nigel D. Findley?

Fortunately, my fears didn’t come to fruition at all, and I’m quite happy with how this issue turned out. However, it did make me realize once more how fortunate it is to live in an archival era. The latest printing of *GURPS Illuminati* came out in 2000, while the PDF went online at e23 in 2010. Because the PDF is *still* available, we don’t need to reinvent the wheel by presenting again material that has been created in the past but had the audacity to fall out of print.

Entering the tabletop-gaming hobby at the tail end of its golden age in the early 1980s, I was often frustrated by how often supplements and (especially) magazines would make reference to other material that I *couldn't get*: “Why does this issue

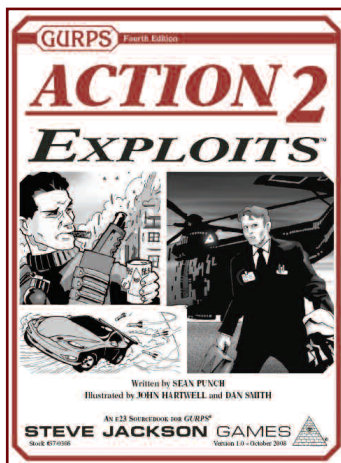
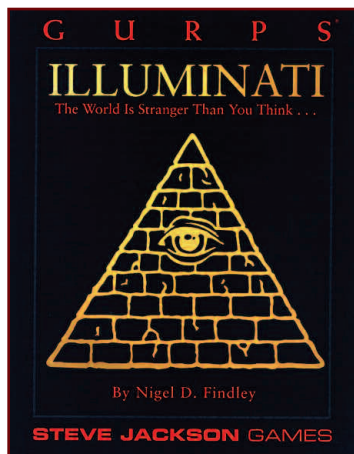
have a *sequel* to a detailed depiction of hell? ‘Pages from the Mages III?! Where are the other two?!?’

At 20 years and going, *Pyramid* has grown up alongside the Internet, adapting and morphing like the information super-highway itself; sites like Wikipedia and Google begin with a presupposition that most information *has* been touched on in some way, and can expand on it accordingly. Like the rest of the *GURPS Fourth Edition* line, we can safely assume that we don’t need to reinvent the wheel just because a supplement is 10 years old. Instead, we can spend more time building on what’s gone before and working to bring you new and exciting material each month.

WRITE HERE, WRITE NOW

So how well did we do this month at conveying what *they* didn’t want you to know? Tell us your secrets! You can tell us how were doing privately at pyramid@sjgames.com, or join the brave, outspoken community at forums.sjgames.com.

We do read all comments, and – in the case of private comments about specific articles – forward them to the authors. I’ve heard from many creators who’ve received such comments, and it always makes their days.



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CONSPIRACY IN ACTION!

BY SEAN PUNCH

A premise of *GURPS Action* is that the bad guys are devious enough that *ordinary* commandos, detectives, and spies can't touch them. They lurk outside the law, perhaps even where official intervention might start a war, conspiring in the traditional criminal sense – that is, exploiting fraud and corruption to facilitate theft, extortion, murder, and terrorism. And that's as subtle as they get! They're *also* prone to cackling grandiosity, legions of thugs, and ostentatious "secret" bases that boast shark tanks and retractable helipads. Action heroes inevitably find them and then swoop down – motors roaring, guns blazing – to behead the beast with a liberal application of moxie and mayhem.

The heroes might even *serve* secret masters, but they aren't agents of a far-reaching conspiracy. They wear their agenda on their sleeve and customarily hold rank in some organization that demands accountability. If they're "black ops," they're the *cinematic* kind. To track them down, just follow the trail of bullet holes and burning car wrecks.

But what if the GM doesn't *want* things that way? Can *Action* still deliver the goods? Yes, it can, and here's how . . .

The Conspiracy

"The Conspiracy" refers to whatever generic conspiratorial group opposes the heroes. It could be anything: a gang of corrupt senators, the Illuminati, a secret government agency working against the interests of the people, or even aliens dressed in human flesh! Traditionally, it's a web of *several* organizations, each pulling the strings of the next. The GM decides how many levels there are and how serious each level is; see *Conspiratorial BADness* (below).

CONSPIRATORIAL BADNESS

Injecting conspiracy into *Action* is largely a matter of making a few adjustments to the fine details of Basic Abstract Difficulty (BAD). This still serves as a penalty to all tasks the heroes undertake to mess with the opposition, but it needs a few new tricks.

A Cog in the Wheel

The Conspiracy inevitably consists of organizations that get *other* groups to do their dirty work by pulling strings.

This propagates all the way down to lone pawns who have no idea whose orders they're following. As the heroes peel back layers of the Conspiracy and draw closer to its heart, BAD gets worse. Use the rules in *How BAD Is It?* (*Action 2*, p. 4) to calculate BAD from the base point value of progressively more capable Enemies (p. B135). A typical progression:

Low-level pawn, used by an organization that doesn't support him (-5 points): -1

Mid-level pawn – or a **low-level group**, like the staff of a single gun shop or post office (-10 points): -2

High-level pawn, aware of the Conspiracy – or a **mid-level group**, like a police department (-20 points): -5

High-level group, like the FBI or the Mafia (-30 points): -7

Utterly formidable group, like a national government, the Illuminati who control them, the aliens who wear their faces, etc. (-40 points): -10

The Wilderness of Mirrors

Two additional wrinkles suit the Conspiracy, however:

Unknown: Individual traitors – and entire organizations at the top of the Conspiracy – are usually ciphers. Unlike most *Action* rivals, they *don't* do things ostentatiously. They count as Unknown, adding -5 points to Enemy value before calculating BAD.

False-Flagged: The opposition might lurk within the heroes' organization – or even be their backer! Such enemies can use them as scapegoats, send them into setups, and so on. In effect, the underlying Enemy is an Evil Twin – and also Unknown by definition. Represent this by adding -10 to the point value used to find BAD.

For quick reference:

Conspiratorial Groups	BAD		
	Regular	Unknown	False-Flagged
Low-Level	-2	-3	-5
Mid-Level	-5	-6	-7
High-Level	-7	-8	-10
Utterly Formidable	-10	-11	-12

BAD Guys Revisited

Pawns of the Conspiracy – however unwitting – count as *henchmen*, not mooks. Use *BAD Guys* (*Action 2*, p. 5) to find their *effective* skill level, which is also their effective IQ, Will, Per, etc. when they resist the heroes' actions. In summary:

<i>Individual Pawns</i>	<i>BAD (Effective Skill)</i>		
	<i>Regular</i>	<i>Unknown</i>	<i>False-Flagged</i>
Low-Level	-1 (11)	-2 (12)	-3 (13)*
Mid-Level	-2 (12)	-3 (13)	-5 (15)*
High-Level	-5 (15)	-6 (16)	-7 (17)*

* Use low-, mid-, and high-level scores, respectively, for traitorous service staff, peers, and bosses infiltrating the heroes' organization, even if their backer is *not* false-flagged and betraying them.

The Trail Stops Here

Even Conspiracy groups that are neither unknown nor false-flagged endeavor to hide their tracks and render their agents, safe houses, and other material assets untraceable. In an encounter with foes, use the BAD or effective skill level for their place in the plot. If the heroes try to track down or expose the string-pullers behind them, though, rolls to do so suffer the BAD for *the next level up*. Affected tasks include everything under *Targets and Locations* (**Action 2**, p. 7) and *Gathering Intelligence* (**Action 2**, pp. 11-14). For instance, if the PCs defeat a mid-level pawn (BAD -2 and effective skill 12) and attempt to discover who hired him, they're prying into the affairs of a mid-level group (BAD -5), which could be unknown (BAD -6) or false-flagged (BAD -7).

You Don't Know My Boss: Powerful organizations inspire fear and/or loyalty in their minions; thus, this rule extends to attempts to extract information from their pawns. For example, if the heroes grilled that mid-level pawn who had a measly effective skill of 12, he'd resist their **Detect Lies, Interrogation, Intimidation**, and attempts at *Manipulation* (**Action 2**, p. 15) at an effective 15. This *would* rise to 16 if his backer is unknown or to 17 if it's false-flagged, reflecting the fact that his bosses don't trust him with the whole truth!

ACTING AGAINST THE CONSPIRACY

As explained in *Planning* (**Action 2**, p. 17), BAD is also the basis of an overwhelming penalty that the heroes must erode with their Accumulated Complementary Total (ACT), attained through *Gathering Intelligence* (**Action 2**, pp. 11-14) and/or *Social Engineering* (**Action 2**, pp. 15-17), before they can act. Whatever function of BAD the GM prefers – doubling, tripling, etc. – the input value comes from *Conspiratorial BADness* (pp. 4-5). As the nature of conspiracy adventures is not knowing what's actually going on, 2x BAD or worse is recommended. There are some other differences, too.

The Big, Blurry Picture

The Big Picture (**Action 2**, p. 17) works normally until the heroes run into a genuinely conspiratorial organization. The GM may declare this to be *all* groups, specific ones, or strictly the top level, but unknown or false-flagged opposition always counts. For these, the roll shifts from **Intelligence Analysis** or **Criminology to Expert Skill (Conspiracy Theory)**. If the planners try conventional skills, all results become a step worse: critical success counts as ordinary success (+1 to planning roll); success as failure (the squad is stymied and must increase ACT before rerolling); and *any* failure as critical failure. An actual or

effective critical failure means a setup, assassination attempt, smear campaign or similar sneaky parry by the enemy – never a pointless fight!

Peeling the Onion

Success at a single adventure never reveals the whole Conspiracy – not even on 100 critical successes. That simply isn't how the genre works! If the heroes accomplish their mission, they push things *one step* up the ladder, and ACT doesn't carry over when they take on the next challenge.

For instance, suppose the heroes face a mid-level group (BAD -5) backed by another, *unknown* mid-level group (BAD -6), which is itself manipulated by a false-flagged high-level group (BAD -10) ultimately serving an unknown, utterly formidable group (BAD -11). The team is looking at four adventures, minimum, assuming that they don't receive side-missions or botch anything. If the penalty to planning before they act is 2x BAD, they'll have to whittle down -10, -12, -20, and finally -22 *separately* over the course of the arc.

What Counts as Success?

Conspiracy adventures can involve all the usual objectives, though rarely *Destruction* (**Action 2**, pp. 24-25). Advancing the story traditionally involves *Finding the MacGuffin* (**Action 2**, p. 23) – customarily, evidence of the Conspiracy's activities or membership – or *Live Capture* (**Action 2**, p. 24) of somebody whose testimony (or mere existence, if a clone, android, or alien, or assumed dead!) serves a similar purpose. Another common goal is to breach a secure location as described in *Getting In* (**Action 2**, pp. 18-23) and then succeed at *Gathering Intelligence* (**Action 2**, pp. 11-14) from *inside*. Whatever the quest, it must succeed to peel away that layer of the onion and trigger the *next* mission.

Quite a nasty piece of work you managed over there; I am impressed.

– G-Man, in *Half-Life*

ADVENTURES IN CONSPIRACY

Otherwise, use the rules in **Action 2** when the heroes battle the Conspiracy, taking the following suggestions under advisement:

Finding a Client/Opportunity Knocks (**Action 2**, p. 6): In a conspiracy-plagued world, freelancers are guaranteed to end up doing the Conspiracy's work eventually. If the GM wants to turn a classic **Action** campaign into a conspiratorial one, critical failure on a roll to find a client means that's who hires them! Their "pay" at the assignment's end is being hung out to dry or set up for a fall. They must contend with an attack by mid-level pawns or sinister action by a low-level group, either of which counts as false-flagged: BAD -5, effective skill 15. When the heroes prevail and seek revenge, they'll fight unremarkable mid-level pawns initially (BAD -2, effective skill 12) . . . but these will be backed by an unknown mid-level group (BAD -6).

Briefing (Action 2, p. 6): When a false-flagged organization briefs the heroes, **Detect Lies** is contested by the effective skill corresponding to BAD for the *top*-level traitorous backer, not merely “the next level up” as under *You Don't Know My Boss* (p. 5). That's because the briefing is part of a scheme far above the speaker's pay grade. In most cases this means a false-flagged high-level (BAD -10) to utterly formidable group (BAD -12), so the PCs must beat 20 to 22, which should suffice to prevent a premature denouement!

Code-Cracking (Action 2, p. 13): Unbreakable ciphers are bricks in the “firewall” that keeps a single adventure from unveiling the entire Conspiracy. Encrypted data procured on a conspiracy adventure inevitably means *another* adventure to suborn a key-holder or pilfer a key.

How to Game Fact-Finding (Action 2, p. 17): This advice acquires two new twists in a conspiracy-tinged **Action** campaign. First, occasional skill bonuses and character-point awards should be rewards not for over-the-top drama, but for tension-building subtlety; e.g., sneaking past cameras instead of shooting them out. Give the players an incentive to lurk in alleyways dressed in fedoras and trench coats, and to walk into the front lobby of Fnord Co. dressed as telecomm technicians, armed with nothing but tools! Second, really bad rolls and plans shouldn't usually lead to chases and fights, but to setups (“How did the police know we were here?”), counterespionage, and stealthy assassination attempts . . . possibly hours or days after the crew messes up.

Deception (Action 2, pp. 26-27): Conspiracy adventures should always include a few of these tasks – they're what sets the tone.

Providing Security (Action 2, pp. 27-30): Conspiracy-busters inevitably end up on the *receiving* end of much of this stuff as the Conspiracy maneuvers legitimate security and law-enforcement personnel into their path. Invert the rules in such cases: the opposition uses the skills in **boldface** at an effective level equal to 10 + the absolute value of BAD. Where those skills would be penalized by BAD if the heroes were rolling, roll a Quick Contest against the PCs' relevant skill.

Ten Rules to Use Sparingly (Action 2, p. 44): Fright Checks are entirely appropriate for conspiratorial campaigns . . . it *should* be scary to discover that a forgotten Cold War mind-control project controls the Boy Scouts, or that Reptoids secretly govern a global superpower. Control Rating and Legality are definitely worth invoking if the Conspiracy encompasses legitimate authorities seeking an excuse to defang well-armed heroes. And even weirdness like magic and psi has a place if the Conspiracy is hiding such stuff from the world! Of course, the PCs won't be the ones using it.

Assistance Rolls in Action (Action 2, pp. 44-45): If the heroes are working for a false-flagged organization, then any AR that could reveal its activities – particularly a request for facilities that could hack or crack its digital security, a files and records search aimed at it, or technical means targeting its own assets – *won't work*. It simply fails, and it's up to the PCs to discover why. To partially compensate for this devaluation of Rank, make a secret **Expert Skill (Conspiracy Theory)** for the group after such a fiat failure; success or critical success gives +1 or +2, respectively, to ACT. (“I *know* why our requests keep getting black-holed!”)

Duty in Action (Action 2, p. 45): If the heroes work for a false-flagged organization, their Duty won't come up more often than usual – but when it does arise, this offers a good excuse to distract or try to eliminate them!

Enemies (Action 2, pp. 45-46): True pawns of the Conspiracy don't use the rules for mooks. However mookish they may seem, they're henchmen by definition.

WORKING FOR THE CONSPIRACY

The PCs need not be out to *defeat* the Conspiracy – they might serve it! This can take any of several forms.

Pawns of the Conspiracy

The simplest take is that the heroes are *unwitting* servants of the Conspiracy. They go on classic action-hero missions that use the **Action** rules as written – but eventually, the *players* should notice that their assignments sometimes fall outside their organization's purview, don't serve its ostensible goals, or are outright nasty. If they don't, the GM can add increasingly obvious signs. When the PCs start poking their noses into this, things get interesting!

The heroes are working for a false-flagged organization and beginning to suspect it. When they try to look into this, they'll fail a lot of information-gathering rolls thanks to unusually high BAD. “Easy” Assistance Rolls will fail. Duty will pull them away from their investigation. If they mess up fact-finding or planning, they might even be visited by assassins who know exactly where to find them.

If the players don't realize “We serve the Conspiracy!” at this point, roll against the group's best **Expert Skill (Conspiracy Theory)** after each of the above events. Apply BAD for the team's backer, but add a “free” +1 per suspicious event. On a success, just say it: “You think you work for the Conspiracy!”

Number 6: What do you want?

Number 2: We want information.

Number 6: Whose side are you on?

Number 2: That would be telling. We want information . . .

– The Prisoner (episode opener)

Who to Bring

In a classic **Action** game where the GM gradually introduces conspiratorial elements, the advice in *Campaign Types* (**Action 1**, pp. 5-6) still holds. If the Conspiracy is present from the start, however, things change.

Conspiracy-Busters: A crew formed expressly to battle the Conspiracy needs an investigator – ideally *several*, to cover all possible primary skills – plus a face man to gather human intelligence, a hacker and/or a wire rat to glean electronic intelligence, and an infiltrator to snatch physical evidence. A cleaner is useful for concealing the group's activities; a medic can help by ensuring that their injured never check into hospitals; and a wheel man can keep them moving faster than the Conspiracy can follow. Still, things *will* eventually heat up, creating the need for muscle; skip the assassins, fast guys, and ninjas in favor of hard-hitting big guys, demolition men, shooters, and weapon masters, because Men In Black can't afford the attention drawn by explosions, machine guns, and maniacs with fire axes! Non-investigative heroes become more useful with the conspiracy theorist lens (p. 8); otherwise, the intelligence, law enforcement, and security lenses all suit hunters of secretive foes.

Men In Black: To do the Conspiracy's dirty work, the team must be subtle and thus consist largely of *sneaks*: assassins and ninjas for violence, infiltrators and traceurs for getting in and out, and a cleaner to eradicate all evidence that these guys were there. A face man, customarily the leader, is valuable for playing mind games with prisoners

and convincing witnesses that the squad works for a legitimate authority (or if they actually do, to pin dirty deeds on another agency!). Some crews have hackers, investigators, or wire rats to do prep work on targets, plus a medic for emergencies and a wheel man for the Black Helicopter; others rely on faceless Conspiracy drones (NPCs) for support services. Noisy, violent types – the big guy, demolition man, fast guy, shooter, and weapon master – draw too much attention. The Man In Black lens (p. 8) may be mandatory, but plenty of conspiracies have tentacles in organizations that could justify almost any lens, *especially* intelligence or security.

Shadow Wars: If the team battles the Conspiracy's rivals, split the difference. They need a stealthy core – assassin, cleaner, infiltrator, ninja, and/or traceur – for operations, but things move too fast in the field to wait for intelligence reports from on high, so they *also* require hackers, investigators, and wire rats. Because their job is conflict, they might want a medic, too. Since that's a lot of personnel, they should take the minimum number of people to cover the necessary skills and consider leaving the wheel man's job to an NPC. If *all* their action is in the shadows, they can afford to be without a face man. They ought to avoid noisy thugs (big guys, demolition men, fast guys, shooters, and weapon masters). Any lens works, but both conspiracy theorist *and* Man In Black are likely – and so is the criminal lens, if both sides control legitimate agencies and like to maneuver outside the establishment.

Of course, they must *prove* this by working their way up the ladder. As long as their sinister bosses' supporting structure is intact and unrevealed, nobody's going to believe them . . .

Men In Black

Alternatively, the heroes (if that's the right word!) might willingly and openly serve a shadowy group. In that case, run an ordinary **Action** campaign – no suffering extra-stiff BAD, peeling away layers, battling unknown or false-flagged opponents, using **Expert Skill (Conspiracy Theory)** in place of **Intelligence Analysis**, etc. Still, this changes the game's dynamics.

First, missions are likely to revolve around the sorts of tasks described in *Gathering Intelligence* (**Action 2**, pp. 11-14), *Brainwashing* (**Action 2**, p. 17), *Safecracking* (**Action 2**, p. 22), *Grabbing the Goods* (**Action 2**, pp. 23-24), *Planting False Evidence* (**Action 2**, p. 26), *Cover-Ups* (**Action 2**, p. 26), and *Psy-Ops* (**Action 2**, p. 27). The heroes had better be good at this stuff!

In addition, *Subtlety* (**Action 2**, pp. 9-10), *Manipulation* (**Action 2**, p. 15), *Fitting In* (**Action 2**, p. 16), *Getting In* (**Action 2**, pp. 18-23), *Deception* (**Action 2**, pp. 26-27), and *Getting Away* (**Action 2**, p. 27) are always mission-critical. The heroes' superiors should insist on such means, even if there are simpler alternatives. *Permission to Act* (**Action 2**, p. 17) is *always* required, and each time the group picks an overt option over one of these subtle ones – and each time failure at a stealthy task results in noise and confusion – the team gets -1 on the AR to move on to planning and execution. If they're already

cleared to act, such recklessness worsens their results by one step in the *After Action* (**Action 2**, pp. 46-47) phase, leading to future AR penalties or worse. Combat, chases, *Shakedown* (**Action 2**, p. 16) attempts that have witnesses, the forceful techniques under *Doors* and *Glass* (**Action 2**, pp. 20-21), and *Blowing Stuff Up* (**Action 2**, pp. 24-25) are all examples of "overt options" to be avoided and outcomes that count as "noise and confusion."

Lastly, Assistance Rolls by agents of the Conspiracy can only procure subtle aid, such as aerial surveillance, disappearance, false ID, files, insertion/extraction, records search, safe house, and technical means. Requests for backup, fire support, SWAT, or anything else visible or noisy simply *fail* unless preauthorized by higher-ups. An AR for bailout or medevac *might* work, but has the same consequences as failing to use a subtle option.

Shadow Wars

In between these other options is serving one conspiracy to battle another. Run things as described in *Men In Black* (above), with one addition: Some or all missions are against a rival conspiracy, and against *these* foes, both *Conspiratorial BADness* (pp. 4-5) and *ACTing Against the Conspiracy* (p. 5) apply. Notably, BAD mounts as layers are peeled away, and sometimes reflects unknown enemies or even false-flagged "plants" in the team's own organization; trying to look past the immediate enemy means hitting a sudden jump in BAD; and planning often calls for **Expert Skill (Conspiracy Theory)**.

MURKY LENSES

In any kind of conspiratorial **Action** campaign, the emphasis shifts off shooting and chasing, and onto subtlety and investigation. Here are two lenses that optimize for this approach. Any template can take them in place of a standard 20-point lens.

Man In Black works best as a starting option in a campaign where the PCs knowingly serve the Conspiracy. It might even be mandatory there, although many shadowy groups also control ordinary cops, crooks, soldiers, and spies.

Conspiracy Theorist is a viable starting option in any campaign – action movies are full of crazy-but-likeable examples! In *Shadow Wars* (p. 7), the team needs both people like this and Men In Black. On the other hand, if the GM is phasing in the Conspiracy gradually – in either standard **Action** or a *Pawns of the Conspiracy* (pp. 6-7) situation – it can take a lot of the fun out of things to allow this from the start. It's better to omit this lens and let action heroes buy Expert Skill (Conspiracy Theory) using character points earned during adventures where they battle Conspiracy groups.

Man In Black

20 points

You're a shadowy agent of the Conspiracy. You excel at *subtlety*, which might mean hugging the shadows, intercepting phone calls, or watching from afar. Equally important is *manipulation*, whether through reports and paperwork, lies and propaganda, or scary mind control.

Skills: 20 points chosen from Stealth (A) DX [2]; Administration, Electronics Operation (Communications, Media, Security, Sensors, or Surveillance), Fast-Talk, Holdout, Interrogation, Lockpicking, Photography, Propaganda, Research, Shadowing, or Writing, all (A) IQ [2]; Brainwashing, Expert Skill (Conspiracy Theory), Forensics, Forgery, Intelligence Analysis, or Psychology, all (H) IQ-1 [2]; Intimidation (A) Will [2]; Body Language, Lip Reading, Observation, or Search, all (A) Per [2]; Detect Lies (H) Per-1 [2]; 2 more points in any lens skill to raise it by one level; or 6 more points to raise it by two.

Social Traits: Servants of the Conspiracy *must* take their template's Duty and *may* spend some of its advantage points (or leftover lens points) on Rank 0-4 [5/level] of the sort that suits their organization.

Conspiracy Theorist

20 points

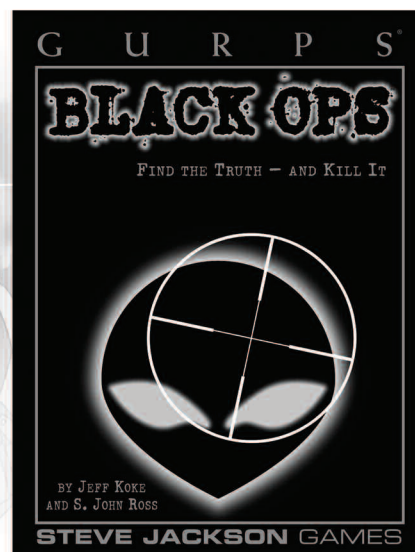
You might be crazy . . . but that doesn't mean They don't exist. You're an expert at procuring information on the Conspiracy, whether by seeing the truth in the daily news, analyzing maps and spreadsheets, or taking risks like shadowing Their agents to catch them on film.

Skills: Expert Skill (Conspiracy Theory) (H) IQ [4]. • Another 16 points chosen from Stealth (A) DX [2]; Computer Operation or Current Affairs (any), both (E) IQ+1 [2]; Cartography, Criminology, Interrogation, Photography, Research, Shadowing, Speed-Reading, or Streetwise, all (A) IQ [2]; Accounting, Cryptography, Forensics, or Intelligence Analysis, all (H) IQ-1 [2]; Observation or Search, both (A) Per [2]; Detect Lies (H) Per-1 [2]; 2 more points in any lens skill to raise it by one level; 6 more points to raise it by two. • Optionally, spend some or all of these 16 points to raise Expert Skill (Conspiracy Theory), at 4 points/level.

Social Traits: If you're also a spy, cop, soldier, etc., then see the instructions on the intelligence, law enforcement, military, or security lens. *Independent* conspiracy theorists are typically loners with no extra social traits!

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sean "Dr. Kromm" Punch set out to become a particle physicist in 1985, ended up the **GURPS** Line Editor in 1995, and has engineered rules for almost every **GURPS** product since. He developed, edited, or wrote dozens of **GURPS** *Third Edition* projects between 1995 and 2002. In 2004, he produced the **GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition** with David Pulver. . . and the list keeps growing. He lives in Montréal, Québec with his wife.



THE CONSPIRATORS' ENEMIES

BY MICHELE ARMELLINI

If conspiracies had no enemies, there'd be no need for secrecy. But conspirators scheme in the dark because they know that, somewhere, somebody is always plotting against them. These low-powered templates for key character concepts represent classic enemies of any conspiracy. Although designed for Victorian or cliffhangers campaigns, they include lenses to allow them to be adapted to fantasy or modern/near-future settings (see *How to Use the Templates*, below).

CRUSADER

25 points

Take to the streets!

You are a frontline soldier in the war. You are a volunteer; enthusiasm (some would say fanaticism) often makes up for lack of experience and training. Your cause is just, and doubts are for the weak.

Your preferred course is direct intervention. You are no professional fighter, but you aren't afraid of action or even of physical confrontations. In a fantasy setting, you might be a pitchfork-carrying member of an angry mob! Later on, you gladly do your part in acts of open defiance, demonstrative sabotage, and physical harassment.

You can also provide nonprofessional local-based help to other enemies of the conspiracy. Unfortunately, they might see you as an expendable pawn.

Attributes: ST 11 [10]; DX 10 [0]; IQ 10 [0]; HT 10 [0].

Secondary Characteristics: Damage 1d-1/1d+1; BL 24 lbs.; HP 11 [0]; Will 11 [5]; Per 10 [0]; FP 10 [0]; Basic Speed 5.00 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0].

Advantages: 15 points chosen from among HT +1 [10], HP +1 [2], Will +1 [5], Absolute Direction [5], Ally [Varies], Claim to Hospitality [Varies], Contact [Varies], Daredevil [15], Fearlessness [2/level], High Pain Threshold [10], Patron [Varies], Reputation (Tough street fighter for the good cause) [Varies], Single-Minded [5], Street Smarts 1 (*GURPS Power-Ups 3: Talents*, p. 16) [10], or Troublemaker in Town 1 (p. 10) [10].

Disadvantages: Obsession (Destroying the conspiracy) (12) [10]. • -15 points chosen from among Chummy [-5], Delusions [Varies], Enemy [Varies], Fanaticism [-15], Impulsiveness [-10*], Intolerance [Varies], Odious Personal Habit [Varies], Overconfidence [-5*], Reputation (Troublemaker) [Varies], Sense of Duty [Varies], Social Stigma (Criminal Record) [-5], Stubbornness [-5], or Xenophobia [-15*].

Primary Skills: Brawling (E) DX+1 [2]-11; Area Knowledge (Local), Current Affairs (Regional), and Scrounging, all (E) IQ+1 [2]-11; and Intimidation (A) Will [2]-11.

Secondary Skills: One of Politics (A) IQ [2]-10; Artist (Painting) or Tactics, both (H) IQ-1 [2]-9; or Urban Survival (A) Per [2]-10. • 4 points chosen from among Forced Entry (E) DX [1]-10; Throwing (A) DX [2]-10; Fast-Talk or Streetwise, both (A) IQ [2]-10; or Observation (A) Per-1 [1]-9.

Background Skills: 1 point in any unarmed-combat or weapon skill. • 3 points chosen from among Climbing (A) DX-1 [1]-9; Gesture (E) IQ [1]-10; Holdout or Propaganda/TL, both (A) IQ-1 [1]-9; Singing (E) HT [1]-10; Carousing (E) HT [1]-10; or Running (A) HT-1 [1]-9.

* Multiplied for self-control number; see p. B120.

How to Use the Templates

The general guidelines for using character templates (see p. B258) apply to the concepts suggested here. These enemies of the conspiracy can be customized for fantasy worlds and modern/near-future campaigns through the use of 0-point lenses. These lenses propose optional advantages, disadvantages, and skills that are appropriate for the specific setting. If a player is creating a wizardly propagandist for a fantasy campaign, for instance, he'll find Magery among the lens choices, but not Electronics Operation.

It is assumed that, in the immediate future, the science of memetics will come into its own. This science studies how ideas spread through human societies – naturally or thanks to the efforts of conspirators and counter-conspirators! For more about memetics, see *Transhuman Space* and *Transhuman Space: Toxic Memes*.

Lenses

Fantasy (+0 points): Add Higher Purpose (Fighting the Conspiracy) [5] and Magic Resistance [2/level] to the advantage option list. Add Disciplines of Faith [Varies], Manophobia [-15*], and Vow [Varies] to the disadvantage option list. Add Spear (A) DX-1 [1]-9; Public Speaking (A) IQ-1 [1]-9; and Theology (any) (H) IQ-2 [1]-8 to the second background skills list.

Near-Future (+0 points): Add Contact Group [Varies], Resistant (any special attack by the conspirators) [Varies], and Tough Guy 1 (*Power-Ups* 3, p. 16) [5/level] to the advantage option list. Add Phobia (Memetics) [Varies] and Psionophobia [Varies] to the disadvantage option list. Add Computer Operation/TL (E) IQ [1]-10; Electronics Operation/TL (Media) or Occultism, both (A) IQ-1 [1]-9; and Philosophy (any ideology) (H) IQ-2 [1]-8 to the second background skills list.

Rabble Rouser (+9 points): Choose *one* of Charisma 1 [5], Rank 1 [5], or Reputation +2 (Crusade leader; All enemies of the conspiracy; All the time) [5]. Add Leadership (A) IQ [4]-11 as a required primary skill.

Customization Notes

The point value of the crusader template includes the standard value of its mandatory disadvantage, Obsession [-10]. If this is adjusted by the self-control number, the total point value of the template must change accordingly.

New Talents

These are suggested custom Talents of particular interest to a conspiracy-centered campaign.

Snake Oil Salesman

5 points/level

Fast-Talk, Merchant, Performance, Propaganda, Psychology, Public Speaking.

Reaction bonus: salesmen, con men, and potential employers wishing to sell . . . snake oil-like products.

Troublemaker in Town

10 points/level

Area Knowledge (City), Carousing, Current Affairs (City), Forced Entry, Holdout, Intimidation, Scrounging, Streetwise, Throwing, Urban Survival.

Reaction bonus: other troublemakers, rebellious discontents.

Sample Crusader: Cunad

25 points

Cunad is broad-shouldered and ruddy-faced. He's a small-time thug and good-for-nothing in a generic fantasy setting. On top of that, he hates all nonhumans (and anybody who's different from him). He's ready to join any angry mob whenever there's unrest in his city, with a view to thwarting those monsters' plans – preferably by knocking some heads. He's willing to aid any champions of mankind who may need local information or just some muscle.

ST 11 [10]; **DX** 10 [0]; **IQ** 10 [0]; **HT** 10 [0].

Damage 1d-1/1d+1; BL 24 lbs.; HP 11 [0]; Will 11 [5]; Per 10 [0]; FP 10 [0].

Basic Speed 5.00 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0]; Dodge 8; Parry 8 (Brawling), 7 (Knife, Spear).
5'9"; 160 lbs.

Social Background

TL: 3 [0].

CF: Local [0].

Languages: Local (Native) [0].

Advantages

High Pain Threshold [10]; Higher Purpose (Fighting the conspiracy) [5].

Disadvantages

Intolerance (Total) [-10]; Obsession (Destroying the conspiracy) (12) [-10]; Social Stigma (Criminal Record) [-5].

Skills

Area Knowledge (City) (E) IQ+1 [2]-11; Brawling (E) DX+1 [2]-11; Carousing (E) HT [1]-10; Current Affairs/TL3 (Regional) (E) IQ+1 [2]-11; Holdout (A) IQ-1 [1]-9; Intimidation (A) Will [2]-11; Knife (E) DX [1]-10; Scrounging (E) Per+1 [2]-11; Spear (A) DX-1 [1]-9; Streetwise (A) IQ [2]-10; Throwing (A) DX [2]-10; Urban Survival (A) Per [2]-10.

TRUTH SEEKER

45 points

The truth is out there. Let me tell you about it!

You investigate the conspiracy, so that you can expose the conspirators and decry their foul machinations. You do believe that the truth about the conspiracy will make everybody free from its fiendish plans. Therefore, you work hard to find that truth and to let it be known. Since the conspirators work best in the darkness, you try to shed light upon them – not bash their heads. That's not your style.

Since you gather information, strive to understand its meaning, and then do your best to spread it, you have something in common with infiltrators (pp. 11-12), propagandists (pp. 12-13), analysts (pp. 13-14). The main difference is that they are specialists and most often professionals, while you are an eager amateur. Although unlikely, you might be a law enforcer by trade; in that case, your own agency and colleagues shun you. The fact is that most people don't take your warnings seriously!

However, even paranoids have real enemies.

Attributes: ST 10 [0]; DX 10 [0]; IQ 11 [20]; HT 10 [0].

Secondary Characteristics: Damage 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs.; HP 10 [0]; Will 12 [5]; Per 12 [5]; FP 10 [0]; Basic Speed 5.00 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0].

Advantages: 15 points chosen from among Ally [Varies], Contact [Varies], Contact Group [Varies], Eidetic Memory [5], Intuition [15], Less Sleep [2/level], Patron [Varies], Serendipity 1 [15], Single-Minded [5], Truth-Seeker 1-3 (*Power-Ups* 3, p. 17) [5/level], or Versatile [5].

Disadvantages: Obsession (Destroying the conspiracy) [12] [10]. • -15 points chosen from among Absent-Mindedness [-15], Clueless [-10], Combat Paralysis [-15], Cowardice [-10*], Curious [-5*], Delusions [Varies], Enemy [Varies], Intolerance [Varies], Loner [-5*], Oblivious [-5], Odious Personal Habit (Lecturing about the conspiracy) [-5], Paranoia [-10], Sense of Duty [Varies], Stubbornness [-5], Unfit [-5], or Xenophobia [-15*].

Primary Skills: Hidden Lore (Conspiracies), Research/TL, and Writing, all (A) IQ+1 [4]-12.

Secondary Skills: 6 points chosen from among Current Affairs/TL (any) (E) IQ [1]-11; Expert Skill (Conspiracy Theory or Political Science), Hypnotism, Literature, or Intelligence Analysis/TL, all (H) IQ-1 [2]-10; or Detect Lies (H) Per-2 [1]-10. • *Two* of Poetry, Propaganda, or Teaching, all (A) IQ-1 [1]-10; or Artist (any) (H) IQ-2 [1]-9.

Background Skills: 5 points chosen from among: Area Knowledge (any) (E) IQ [1]-11; Interrogation or Politics, both (A) IQ-1 [1]-10; Law (any) or Sociology, both (H) IQ-2 [1]-9; Body Language or Observation, both (A) Per-1 [1]-10; or any secondary skills not chosen above.

* Multiplied for self-control number; see p. B120.

Lenses

Fantasy (+0 points): Add Higher Purpose (Fighting the conspiracy) [5], Magic Resistance [2/level], and True Faith [15] to the advantage option list. Add Manophobia [-15*] and Vow [Varies] to the disadvantage option list. Add Connoisseur (Literature or Visual Arts), Professional Skill (Librarian), Public Speaking, or Speed-Reading, all (A) IQ-1 [1]-10; and Theology (any) (H) IQ-2 [1]-9 to the background skills list.

Near-Future (+0 points): Add Computer Wizard (**Power-Ups 3**, p. 9) [5/level] to the advantage option list. Add Phobia (Memetics) [Varies] and Psionophobia [Varies] to the disadvantage option list. Add Computer Operation/TL (E) IQ+1 [2]-12; Electronics Operation/TL (Media), Occultism, or Photography/TL, all (A) IQ [2]-11; Computer Programming/TL, Expert Skill (Computer Security or Memetics) or Philosophy (any ideology), all (H) IQ-1 [2]-10; and Computer Hacking/TL (VH) IQ-2 [2]-9 to the background skills list.

Customization Notes

The point value of the truth seeker template includes the standard value of its mandatory disadvantage, Obsession [-10]. If this is adjusted by the self-control number, the total point value of the template must change accordingly.

Sample Truth Seeker: Sarah Stone (“Intruder”)

45 points

Sarah is a young, blonde woman in her 20s, and a “public eye,” the near-future equivalent of a watchdog blogger. She’s a beginner, but gifted. She loathes all sorts of cover-ups, so she’s not focused on one conspiracy. She relies on her contacts to gather intelligence, while she mostly focuses on blowing the whistle. She’s already stepped on some toes, and ignored dire warnings.

ST 10 [0]; **DX** 10 [0]; **IQ** 11 [20]; **HT** 10 [0].
Damage 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs.; HP 10 [0]; Will 12 [5]; Per 12 [5]; FP 10 [0].

Basic Speed 5.00 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0]; Dodge 8.5’10”; 140 lbs.

Social Background

TL: 8 [0].

CF: Western [0].

Languages: English (Native) [0].

Advantages

Computer Wizard 1 [5]; Contact Group (Informants and other public eyes; Effective Skill 12; 9 or less; Somewhat Reliable) [5]; Truth-Seeker 1 [5].

Disadvantages

Obsession (Exposing all conspiracies; 12 or less) [-10]; Odious Personal Habit (Lecturing about the conspiracies) [-5]; Phobia (12) (Memetics) [-5]; Stubbornness [-5].

Skills

Computer Operation/TL8 (E) IQ+2 [2]-13*; Current Affairs/TL8 (Politics) (E) IQ [1]-11; Detect Lies (H) Per-1 [1]-11†; Electronics Operation/TL8 (Media) (A) IQ+1 [2]-12*; Expert Skill (Conspiracy Theory) (H) IQ [2]-11†; Hidden Lore (Conspiracies) (A) IQ+2 [4]-13†; Intelligence Analysis/TL8 (H) IQ [2]-11†; Propaganda/TL8 (A) IQ-1 [1]-10; Research/TL8 (A) IQ+2 [4]-13†; Sociology (H) IQ-2 [1]-9; Teaching (A) IQ-1 [1]-10; Writing (A) IQ+1 [4]-12.

* Includes +1 from Computer Wizard 1.

† Includes +1 from Truth Seeker 1.

INFILTRATOR

45 points

I’m with you! Honestly!

You joined the conspiracy in order to betray it. You are a double agent, an undercover cop, an informant, or a traitor. Regardless of your motivation (money? ideology? revenge?), you act as a supporter of the conspiracy, but you are possibly its worst enemy. As you work your way up its hierarchy, you learn more and more of its most critical secrets, secrets that could lead to its downfall.

You have some outside contact, to whom you relay the intelligence, and who can, hopefully, provide you with occasional help. But mostly, you are on your own. You must be convincing, considering that the conspirators would probably kill you the instant they knew the truth.

Attributes: ST 10 [0]; DX 10 [0]; IQ 12 [40]; HT 10 [0].

Secondary Characteristics: Damage 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs.; HP 10 [0]; Will 12 [0]; Per 12 [0]; FP 10 [0]; Basic Speed 5.00 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0].

Advantages: 20 points chosen from among Will +1 [5], Ally [Varies], Alternate Identity [5 or 15], Appearance [Varies], Charisma [5/level], Contact [Varies], Contact Group [Varies], Danger Sense [15], Daredevil [15], Eidetic Memory [5], Indomitable [15], Legal Enforcement Powers [Varies], Patron [Varies], Police Rank [5/level], Social Chameleon [5], Smooth Operator 1 [15], Street Smarts 1 (**Power-Ups 3**, p. 16) [10], or Talker (**Power-Ups 3**, p. 16) [5/level].

Disadvantages: -40 points, which *must* include Secret (Traitor) [-10 to -30]; the balance can be chosen from among Duty [Varies], Curious [-5*], Delusions [Varies], Enemy [Varies], Greed [-15*], Insomniac [-10 or -15], Intolerance [Varies], Obsession (any) [-10*], On the Edge [-15*], Paranoia [-10], or Sense of Duty [Varies].

Primary Skills: Acting (A) IQ+2 [8]-14 and Hidden Lore (Conspiracies) (A) IQ+1 [4]-13.

Secondary Skills: 2 points chosen from among Brawling or Knife, both (E) DX+1 [2]-11; or any Average melee combat skill, (A) DX [2]-10. • One of the following packages:

1. Four points chosen from among Fast-Talk or Intimidation, both (A) IQ [2]-12; Detect Lies (H) IQ-1 [2]-11; Carousing (E) HT+1 [2]-11; or Sex-Appeal (A) HT [2]-10.
2. Four points chosen from among Filch (A) DX [2]-10; Hold-out or Shadowing, both (A) IQ [2]-12; or Lip Reading or Observation, both (A) Per [2]-12.
3. Four points chosen from among Forced Entry (E) DX+1 [2]-11; Stealth (A) DX [2]-10; or Disguise/TL or Lockpicking/TL, both (A) IQ [2]-12.

Background Skills: 7 points chosen from among Area Knowledge (any) or Savoir-Faire, both (E) IQ [1]-12; Smuggling or Streetwise, both (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Psychology (H) IQ 2 [1]-10; or any secondary skills not chosen above.

* Multiplied for self-control number; see p. B120.

Lenses

Fantasy (+0 points): Add Cultural Adaptability [10], Magic Resistance [2/level], and True Faith [15] to the advantage option list. Add Social Stigma [Varies] and Vow [Varies] to the disadvantage option list. Add Thrown Weapon (any) (E) DX [1]-10; Heraldry or Hidden Lore (other than Conspiracies), both (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Theology (any) (H) IQ-2 [1]-10; and Tracking (A) Per-1 [1]-11 to the background skills list.

Near-Future (+0 points): Add Computer Wizard (**Power-Ups** 3, p. 9) [5/level], Resistant to Memetics (+3) [5], and Resistant to Psionics (+3) [10] to the advantage option list. Add Phobia (Memetics) [Varies] and Psionophobia [Varies] to the disadvantage option list. Add Beam Weapons/TL (Pistol) or Guns/TL (Pistol), both (E) DX [1]-10; Computer Operation/TL (E) IQ [1]-12; Electronics Operation/TL (Security), Occultism, or Photography/TL, all (A) IQ [2]-12; and Philosophy (any ideology) (H) IQ-1 [2]-11 to the background skills list.

Sample Infiltrator: Moira Woods

45 points

Moira is a petite, attractive young woman. She seems an insignificant barmaid who sometimes also works as a go-between or messenger in the capital of the empire.

Actually, she's a double agent. For the Ministry of Serendipity (see **GURPS Banestorm**, p. 88), she's an informant who happens to have contacts in the underground engineers' cells in Megalos. For the latter, she's their own spy – trying to locate who really is behind the Ministry, bent on suppressing technology throughout Yirth.

Moira is doing this because she once loved a Banestorm victim, who was kidnapped by the Ministry. She doesn't think

she'll see him again, and she vowed to carry on with his work. She's collecting snippets of intelligence every time a Ministry agent debriefs her – and at the same time, she feeds them the engineers' disinformation. She's clever, but what has really saved her this far in her dangerous game is that she's no easy target for standard magic mind-control procedures.

ST 10 [0]; **DX** 10 [0]; **IQ** 12 [40]; **HT** 10 [0].

Damage 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs.; HP 10 [0]; Will 12 [0]; Per 12 [0]; FP 10 [0].

Basic Speed 5.00 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0]; Dodge 8; Parry 8 (DX), 7 (Knife).
5'4"; 130 lbs.

Social Background

TL: 3 [0].

CF: Christendom [0].

Languages: English (Native) [0].

Advantages

Appearance (Attractive) [4]; Magic Resistance 3 [6]; Patron (Underground engineers' cell; 6 or less) [5]; Talker 1 [5].

Disadvantages

Duty (Underground engineers; 12 or less) [-10]; Secret (Spy; Imprisonment or Exile) [-20]; Vow (Carry on with her lover's work) [-10].

Skills

Acting (A) IQ+2 [8]-14; Area Knowledge (Megalos City) (E) IQ [1]-12; Detect Lies (H) Per [2]-12*; Fast-Talk (A) IQ+1 [2]-13*; Hidden Lore (Conspiracies) (A) IQ+1 [4]-13; Hidden Lore (Earth) (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Knife (E) DX+1 [2]-11; Lockpicking/TL3 (A) IQ [2]-12; Psychology (Human) (H) IQ-1 [1]-11*; Savoir-Faire (High Society) (E) IQ+1 [1]-13*; Streetwise (A) IQ-1 [1]-11.

* Includes +1 from Talker 1.

PROPAGANDIST

80 points

I tell the people what to think; the people think what I tell them.

You are the one shaping your enemy's public image, giving these bad guys their deserved bad name. You know how to handle the media in order to influence the masses. The more ordinary people hate the conspirators, the less effective they will be.

Your background is in commerce. Knowing how to convince people to buy goods taught you how to convince people not to "buy" ideas.

You aren't a loner – you serve a power that opposes the conspiracy. You work by indirect means: the written word, art, rumor-mongering – and magic in fantasy worlds, or multimedia campaigns in a near-future setting. You can produce your own material, though you mostly coordinate the efforts of professional writers, artists, and journalists. You may occasionally try to influence small groups of important people.

You have your facts – and your fiction – at your fingertips. You have no qualms about truth and lies. Effectiveness is what counts.

Attributes: ST 10 [0]; DX 10 [0]; IQ 12 [40]; HT 10 [0].

Secondary Characteristics: Damage 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs.; HP 10 [0]; Will 12 [0]; Per 12 [0]; FP 10 [0]; Basic Speed 5.00 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0].

Advantages: 20 points chosen from among IQ +1 [20], Will +1 to +2 [5/level], Administrative Rank [5/level], Ally [Varies], Contact [Varies], Favor [Varies], Independent Income [1/level], Intuition [15], Patron [Varies], Sensitive [5] or Empathy [15], Status [5/level], Snake Oil Salesman (p. 10) [5/level], Social Scientist 1 to 2 (**Power-Ups 3**, p. 15) [10/level], Versatile [5], or Wealth (Comfortable) [10].

Disadvantages: -20 points chosen from among Duty (Employer) [Varies], Enemy [Varies], Intolerance [Varies], Obsession [-5*], Secret (Public-opinion manipulator; Serious Embarrassment) [-5], Sense of Duty [Varies], Stubbornness [-5], or Workaholic [-5].

Primary Skills: Hidden Lore (Conspiracies) (A) IQ+1 [4]-13; and Propaganda/TL (A) IQ+2 [8]-14. • Two of Public Speaking or Writing, both (A) IQ+1 [4]-13; or Diplomacy (H) IQ [4]-12.

Secondary Skills: Merchant (A) IQ+1 [4]-13. • 4 points chosen from among Current Affairs/TL (any) or Area Knowledge (any), both (E) IQ [1]-12; Connoisseur (Music or Visual Arts) or Research/TL, both (A) IQ [2]-12; or Expert Skill (Conspiracy Theory), Forgery/TL, Literature, or Philosophy (any), all (H) IQ-1 [2]-11. • 4 points chosen from among Savoir-Faire (High Society) (E) IQ+1 [2]-13; Acting, Fast-Talk, Performance, or Politics, all (A) IQ [2]-12; or Psychology or Sociology, both (H) IQ-1 [2]-11.

Background Skills: 8 points chosen from among Current Affairs/TL (any other) (E) IQ [1]-12; Administration or Professional Skill (Publishing), both (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Artist (any), Expert Skill (Political Science), History (any), Linguistics, or Law (any), all (H) IQ-1 [2]-11; or any primary or secondary skills not chosen above.

* Multiplied for self-control number; see p. B120.

Lenses

Fantasy (+0 points): Add Charisma [5/level], Clerical Investment [5], Magery 1 [15], Poet (**Power-Ups 3**, p. 14) [5/level], Religious Rank [Varies], and Sage (**Power-Ups 3**, p. 15) [10/level] to the advantage option list. Add Disciplines of Faith [Varies] and Vow [Varies] to the disadvantage option list. Add Heraldry (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Expert Skill (Natural Philosophy), Religious Ritual (any), or Theology (any), all (H) IQ-1 [2]-11; and Thaumatology (VH) IQ-2 [2]-10 to the background skills list. If Magery was chosen, take up to 12 points in spells from the Communication and Empathy or Mind Control Colleges, instead of secondary or background skills.

Near-Future (+0 points): Add Business Acumen [10/level], Contact Group [Varies], Memetics (**Power-Ups 3**, p. 12) [10/level], Resistant to Memetics (+3) [5], Security Clearance [Varies], and Tenure [5] to the advantage option list. Add another Enemy (Watcher) [Varies] and Pacifism (any) [Varies] to the disadvantage option list. Add Computer Operation/TL (E) IQ [1]-12; Electronics Operation/TL (Media), Occultism, or Photography/TL, all (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; and Computer Programming/TL, Expert Skill (Memetics), or Finance, all (H) IQ-1 [2]-11 to the background skills list.

Sample Propagandist: Hector Diaz

80 points

Hector is a dapper man with black hair and eyes, and olive skin. After a career in advertising, he exploited his political affiliation to gain work at several political and art magazines of Madrid. Being employed by a conservative publisher, his most important task is to write political pamphlets, leaflets, and articles for right-wing newspapers. He's thoroughly convinced that the Comintern is a vast conspiracy, and he does his best to blast it. These are dangerous times, even for editors – it's 1936, and the Civil War is about to begin.

ST 10 [0]; **DX** 10 [0]; **IQ** 12 [40]; **HT** 10 [0].

Damage 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs.; HP 10 [0]; Will 12 [0]; Per 12 [0]; FP 10 [0].

Basic Speed 5.00 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0]; Dodge 8; Parry 8 (DX). 5'6"; 155 lbs.

Social Background

TL: 6 [0].

CF: Western [0].

Languages: Spanish (Native) [0].

Advantages

Snake Oil Salesman 1 [5]; Versatile [5]; Wealth (Comfortable) [10].

Disadvantages

Duty (Employer; 9 or less) [-5]; Intolerance (Communists) [-5]; Sense of Duty (King, country, and church) [-10].

Skills

Administration (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Area Knowledge (Madrid) (E) IQ [1]-12; Connoisseur (Visual Arts) (A) IQ [2]-12; Diplomacy (H) IQ [4]-12; Expert Skill (Conspiracy Theory) (H) IQ-1 [2]-11; Hidden Lore (Conspiracies) (A) IQ+1 [4]-13; History (Spain) (H) IQ-1 [2]-11; Merchant (A) IQ+1 [4]-14*; Politics (A) IQ [2]-12; Professional Skill (Publishing) (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Propaganda/TL6 (A) IQ+2 [8]-15*; Psychology (H) IQ [2]-12*; Research/TL6 (A) IQ [2]-12; Savoir-Faire (High Society) (E) [1]-12; Writing (A) IQ+1 [4]-13.

* Includes +1 from Snake Oil Salesman 1.

You assess conspirators' strengths and weaknesses.

ANALYST

70 points

Knowledge is power. I know.

Truth seekers (pp. 10-11), infiltrators (pp. 11-12), and sundry spies bring you the pieces; you are the one who assembles the puzzle and sees the whole picture. Your job is to analyze the intelligence and assess the conspirators' goals and plans, strengths and weaknesses. It's a great responsibility but someone has to do it, and it's better if it's you – a smart, no-nonsense professional, maybe with a penchant for finding the nugget of intelligence in a river of information.

You are indispensable to the bosses of your agency (naturally, there has to be some strong organization standing watch against those madmen).

You may be bookish, and your weapons are your reports, but you do believe that they are mightier than any sword.

Attributes: ST 10 [0]; DX 10 [0]; IQ 12 [40]; HT 10 [0].

Secondary Characteristics: Damage 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs.; HP 10 [0]; Will 12 [0]; Per 12 [0]; FP 10 [0]; Basic Speed 5.00 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0].

Advantages: 20 points chosen from among IQ +1 [20], Will +1 [5], Academic (*Power-Ups 3*, p. 6) [5/level], Administrative Rank [5/level], Contact [Varies], Contact Group [Varies], Cultural Familiarity (any) [1/culture] or Cultural Adaptivity [10], Favor [Varies], Illuminated [15], Independent Income [1/level], Intuition [15], Languages (any) [2-6/language], Language Talent [10], Mathematical Ability 1 [10], Patron [Varies], or Single-Minded [5], Status [5/level].

Disadvantages: -20 points chosen from among ST -1 [-10], DX -1 [-20], Clueless [-10], Curious [-5*], Duty (Employer) [Varies], Enemy [Varies], Enemy (Watcher) [Varies], Intolerance [Varies], No Sense of Humor [-10], Oblivious [-5], Obsession [-5*], Sense of Duty [Varies], Truthfulness [-5*], Unfit [-5], or Workaholic [-5].

Primary Skills: Hidden Lore (Conspiracies) (A) IQ+1 [4]-13; and Intelligence Analysis/TL (H) IQ+1 [8]-13.

Secondary Skills: Research/TL (A) IQ [2]-12 and Expert Skill (Conspiracy Theory) (H) IQ [4]-12. • 4 points chosen from among Current Affairs/TL (any) (E) IQ+1 [2]-13; Interrogation or Writing, both (A) IQ [2]-12; or Cryptography/TL or Psychology, both (H) IQ-1 [2]-11.

Background Skills: 8 points chosen from among Current Affairs/TL (any other) (E) IQ [1]-12; Administration, Cartography/TL, Criminology/TL, or Propaganda/TL, all (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Economics, Expert Skill (Military Science or Political Science), Geography/TL (Political), History (any), Linguistics, Law (any), Mathematics/TL (Cryptology or Statistics), or Strategy, all (H) IQ-1 [2]-11; or any secondary skills not chosen above.

* Multiplied for self-control number; see p. B120.

Lenses

Fantasy (+0 points): Add Clerical Investment [5], Legal Immunity [Varies], Magery 1 [15], Religious Rank [5/level], and Sage (*Power-Ups 3*, p. 15) [10/level] to the advantage option list. Add Disciplines of Faith [Varies], Obsession (Hoard Knowledge) [-5*], and Vow [Varies] to the disadvantage option list. Add Hidden Lore (any other), Heraldry, or Speed-Reading, all (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; Expert Skill (Natural Philosophy) or Theology (any), both (H) IQ-1 [2]-11; and Thaumatology (VH) IQ-2 [2]-10 to the second background skills list. If Magery was chosen above, take up to 10 points in spells from the Knowledge College, instead of secondary or background skills.

Near-Future (+0 points): Add Resistant to Memetics (+3) [5], Memetics (*Power-Ups 3*, p. 12) [10/level], Security Clearance [Varies], and Tenure [5] to the advantage option list. Add Odious Personal Habit (Correcting Others) [-5], Pacifism (any) [Varies], and Weirdness Magnet [-15] to the disadvantage option list. Add Computer Operation/TL (E) IQ [1]-12;

Electronics Operation/TL (EW, Sensors or Surveillance), Occultism, or Photography/TL, all (A) IQ-1 [1]-11; and Expert Skill (Memetics) or Forgery/TL, both (H) IQ-1 [2]-11 to the second background skills list.

Sample Character: Ignatius Devlin

70 points

Thanks to his smarts and magical aptitude, Ignatius was selected as a wizardly apprentice and intelligence assistant to Monsignor Cassini, the “special affairs” archdeacon of the Archbishop of Mehan (see *GURPS Banestorm*, p. 94). Nowadays, their main preoccupation is countering the outbreak of the Manite cult. Young, earnest Ignatius is becoming the most informed man about this heresy in the archbishop’s retinue, while he’s also the least suitable for combat among the laymen that are part of it.

ST 10 [0]; **DX** 10 [0]; **IQ** 12 [40]; **HT** 10 [0].

Damage 1d-2/1d; BL 20 lbs.; HP 10 [0]; Will 12 [0]; Per 12 [0]; FP 10 [0].

Basic Speed 5.00 [0]; Basic Move 5 [0]; Dodge 8; Parry 8 (DX). 5’8”; 150 lbs.

Social Background

TL: 3 [0].

CF: Christendom [0].

Languages: English (Native) [0].

Advantages

Magery 1 [15]; Status 1 [5].

Disadvantages

Curious (12) [-5]; Duty (Archbishop; 9 or less) [-5]; No Sense of Humor [-10].

Skills

Current Affairs/TL3 (Regional) (E) IQ [1]-12; Expert Skill (Conspiracy Theory) (H) IQ [4]-12; Hidden Lore (Conspiracies) (A) IQ+1 [4]-13; Intelligence Analysis/TL3 (H) IQ+1 [8]-13; Law (Church) (H) IQ-1 [2]-11; Research/TL3 (A) IQ [2]-12.

Spells*

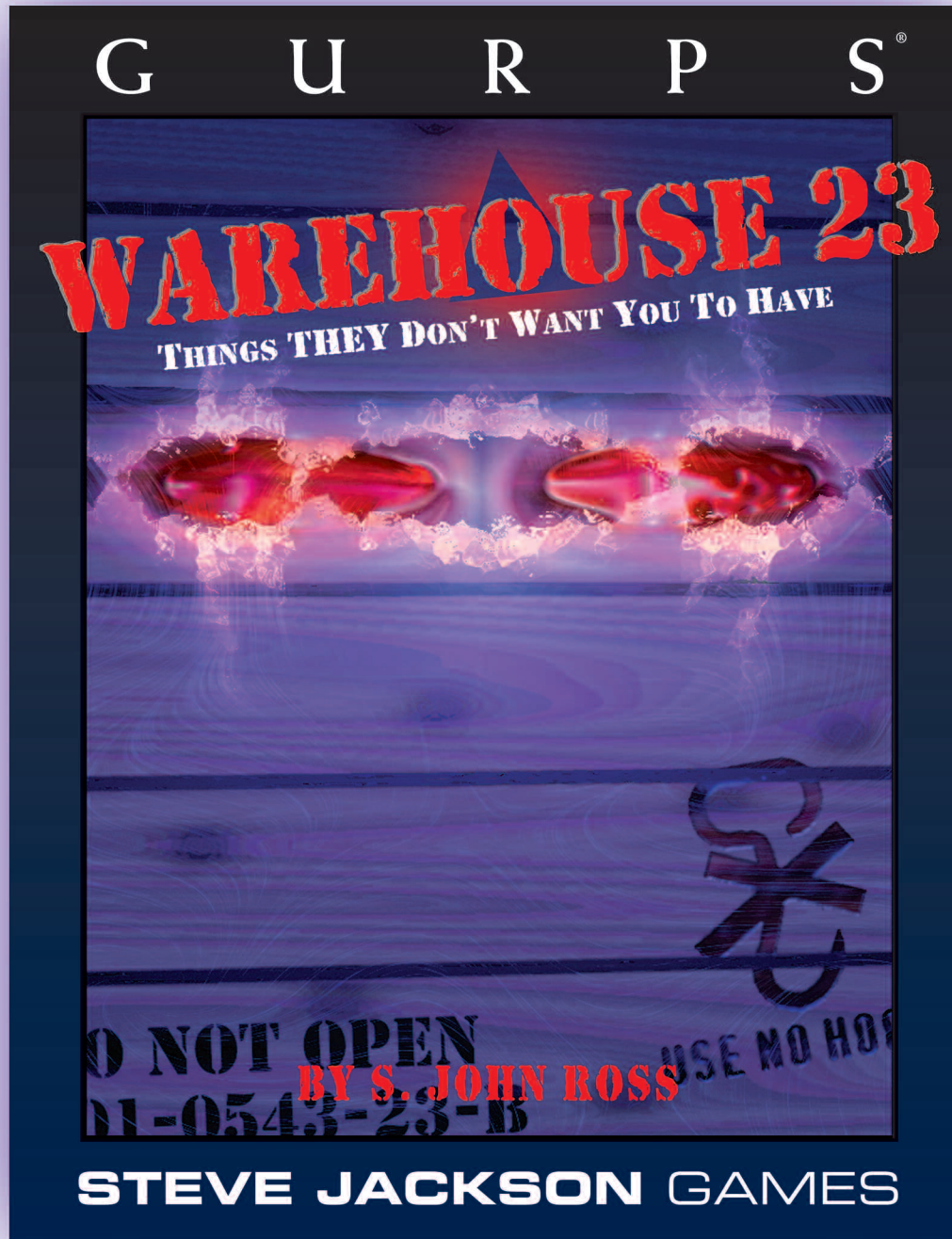
Analyze Magic (H) IQ-1 [1]-11; Aura (H) IQ [2]-12; Detect Magic (H) IQ [2]-12; Glass Wall (H) IQ-1 [1]-11; Identify Spell (H) IQ [2]-12; Mage Sight (H) IQ-1 [1]-11.

* All spells include +1 for Magery.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Michele Armellini lives in Udine, Italy, with his very understanding wife, Silvia. He makes a living out of foreign languages, but he loves dabbling with and studying the obscure and the uncanny – and trying to convert them into game mechanics! Apart from things he has published in Italian, he has written for *Pyramid*, and he is the author of *GURPS WWII: Grim Legions*. He is also the author or co-author (with Hans-Christian Vortisch) of several other e23 products: *GURPS WWII: Their Finest Hour*, *GURPS WWII: Doomed White Eagle*, and *GURPS WWII: Michael’s Army*.

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EIDETIC MEMORY

PENGUIN DREAMS

BY DAVID L. PULVER

Comic books and politics collide in this conspiracy adventure outline for a detective, police, or Illuminated campaign. Set in contemporary America, the party affiliation and the state that the key figure represents as senator are up to the GM. All major players must reside in or be visiting “the state capital” or nearby cities.

BACK STORY

When Ellen Drapple was a college freshman in the 1980s, she had no idea that her freewheeling days as a science-fiction fan would come back to bite her 29 years later. Then again, she had no idea that her dabbling in student government would lead to local and state politics, marriage to a pro-football-player trophy husband, and a successful run for U.S. Senate. Now, as U.S. Senator Ellen Valmont, age 48, her pollster has told her she is odds-on favorite to win reelection by a comfortable margin. Some in her party are even hinting that she may be presidential material.

There was only one problem.

Penguin Dreams #4. This irreverent science-fiction fanzine was irregularly published by a circle of contributors between 1983 and 1985. Its last issue was #4, emblazoned with a cheeky cover of a topless winged elf maiden with 80s hair riding an MX missile, the work of contributing artist Josh Derby. Josh later briefly become famous for his “bad girl” heroine in the 1990s before dying for a cocaine overdose.

Inside these lurid covers were several articles by its college-age contributors, the “Dreaming Penguins.” Then 19 years old, Ellen contributed a short parody story called “My Little Nazi Unicorn.” Intended as a light-hearted mash-up of fluffy pony-princess cartoons and Phillip Dick’s Axis-wins alternative history, it contained several tasteless scenes that could be construed as either anti-Semitic or just juvenile. Accompany it was slightly blurry photo taken of Drapple and Derby, both cosplaying in Waffen SS officer’s uniforms, with unicorn horns glued to their caps. Drapple is shown giving a Nazi salute.

This piece would be very embarrassing – if anyone remembered it. But *Penguin Dreams* was a cheaply produced quarterly zine with a circulation of 25 copies. Founded by a skinny fanboy named Aaron Jeffries and collated by his buddy Joe

Bannister, it lasted only four issues before Joe lost his job at the local copy shop and could no longer steal time on its printers. The Penguins drifted apart. Derby became a comics pro but shot success up his nose until the blow killed him. Ellen moved from fannish pursuits into academics, politics, and marriage. Aaron opened a comic book shop in the state capital, but had a falling out with Joe after the guy acted like a jerk one too many times. Joe Bannister, jealous of Derby’s and Ellen’s success, quit fandom, forgot his friends, and married the first willing gal. He developed a gambling problem that cost him his marriage and left him in debt to the mob. But Bannister recalled his old friends. And *Penguin Dreams* #4.

TIMELINE OF EVENTS

Joe Bannister, now 48 years old, has a dead-end job as a security guard, an ex-wife who hates him, and \$40 grand in gambling debts owed to mobster Vinny “the Freak” DeFillipo. Some months ago, he saw a TV commercial for Senator Ellen Valmont’s campaign and remembered how it once was. He’d first met Ellen at a room party during the 1983 ConStellation science-fiction convention. Back then, she was geeky fangirl Ellen *Drabble*, always too full of herself to date him, though she’d gone out with Aaron and Derby once or twice. He remembered the weird crap they used to do together, how everyone always leaned on him to put the issues together – even the last issue with the Nazi crap.

Joe thought about it, imaging sending it to the papers or the TV station in the midst of Mrs. Perfect Senator-with-the-football-player husband’s next reelection campaign. That would show her! Or maybe there was some money to be made? Sell it to the tabloids or her opponent?

He’d long ago trashed all his issues of *Penguin Dreams*, but Bannister decided to contact other contributors to the fanzine in hopes of scoring copies of an issue. He didn’t have the mailing list, but the one who would most likely still have copies was his old buddy, super geek Aaron Jeffries, who still ran a nerd shop called *Wonderwhat Comics and Collectibles*.

Bannister visited the shop and talked to Jeffries, trying to wheedle a copy of *Penguin Dreams* #4 out of him. However, Aaron sensed something odd, or maybe he still didn’t trust Joe.

Aaron curtly told him he had none and to get lost. A few people in the shop – customers and his store clerk, Liz Apple – saw the confrontation, but Jeffries just said it was a former friend who wanted to buy a zine he didn't have.

Mobsters and Mayhem

Joe didn't believe Aaron wouldn't have kept some issues of *Penguin Dreams* – he'd always been a pack rat – but he wasn't sure how to get the truth out of him. Then Joe had an unwelcome visitor of his own. It was Vinny DeFillipo and two of his enforcers. The mobster had gotten tired of Joe's tardiness with the interest and decided to make an example of him. In the hopes of making a deal, Joe played his only card: He told Vinny he had something on a U.S. senator, something worth more than \$40 grand he owed the mob.

Vinny didn't really get this sci-fi crap, but he understood extortion. He nixed Joe's plan to sell to the tabloids, and insisted blackmail was the way to go. They first needed this scandal-rag from Jeffries. Vinny's solution was simple and brutal.

Joe knew Aaron always worked late at his comic shop on Wednesday nights, bagging unsold new comics and checking stock. Vinny had his men break into Jeffry's store from the back door after closing time. When Aaron insisted he didn't have the zine, they tied him to a chair and went to work.

Several teeth later, Vinny knew Aaron didn't have the zine, but he knew where to find it. A year and a half before, he'd sold his last *Penguin Dreams* #4 to a collector, a rich super fan named Jerome Jon Whitaker. J.J. Whitaker was a 25-year-old millionaire web developer and big fan of dead artist Josh Derby. He'd dug up an old *Wizard* interview from 1992 in which Derby said how he got his start in obscure fanzine covers like *Penguin Dreams*. J.J. hunted down the only existing copy of *Penguin Dreams* #4 and bought it off Aaron for \$200 – good money for a no-name zine.

Aaron was sure Whitaker had no idea it was connected to Senator Ellen Valmont. Likely he just bagged the fanzine and stashed it with others at his home.

That was all Vinny needed to know. He finished Aaron with a .22, one bullet to the head. Then he and his men robbed the cash register of \$227. Vinny told his guys not to steal any comics, even the ones on the wall priced at \$50, but to make a bit of a mess, like some meth heads broke in looking for cash or a safe, and when they didn't find much, they killed Jeffries.

Next morning, Liz Apple reported for work at *Wonderwhat*, but it was still locked. She found the back door open, went inside, and discovered her boss's body. Vinny was right – the cops figured it for a robbery gone bad. When the cops asked about enemies, Liz recalled a jerk named Bannister who had been an idiot about zines he wanted to buy or borrow, but he hadn't looked like the killer type, and no comics had been stolen. The cops decided a gang had probably done it.

The Second Robbery

Vinny had J.J. Whitaker's address, but since he was rich and probably had security, he called in a professional burglar, Tony "the Squirrel" Juliano. Whitaker lived alone, so Juliano was to watch until he took his car out, then disable the alarm, break in, find the zine. The thief was also supposed to grab a few other valuable things to make it look like a robbery, then get out.

Juliano was good as his rep. The Squirrel used a fire escape and balcony window to enter, and disabled the alarms. He found where Whitaker kept his magazines, indexed in alphabetical order. He easily located *Penguin Dreams* #4. He looked for "something valuable" among a sea of geeky action figures, posters, and funnybooks. He opted to swipe an expensive tablet computer, an X-Box, and \$160 cash from a kitchen drawer.

J.J. Whitaker reported the burglary but wasn't too worried – nothing important seemed missing at first glance, but he had to be sure. It took him three days of going through inventory before he found he was minus an issue of *Penguin Dreams*. Then he became very puzzled. It didn't make any sense.

Jerome was at first grateful that none of his other valuables – such as the collection of vintage Mego *Star Trek* action figures or the higher-priced comics – were gone. Thus, the police treated it as a random minor burglary. However, the loss of his rare nagged at him. It wasn't *valuable* but it was one of a kind. Jerome attempted to contact the seller to see if he could find another copy, but the store seemed closed.

It was a mystery. J.J. Whitaker hated mysteries . . . hated them enough to pay someone to help him solve them.

What puzzled him was why this issue? In the same room were a number of comics worth hundreds of dollars each – a few worth a thousand bucks or more. In fact *Penguin Dream* #1 was shelved right above *New Fun Comics* #6. If the investigators that Jerome hired don't react to this news when he tells them about it, he impatiently points out this 1935 funny book, published by National Allied Publishing (who became DC) contained the professional debut of artist Joe Schuster, co-creator of *Superman*. It's worth over \$100,000 in perfect condition. His own copy didn't meet that grade, but was still insured for \$4,500 – the most valuable thing in the apartment. The thief missed it.

Contents of *Penguin Dreams* #4

- Cover, with its barbarian winged elf girl riding MX missile, drawn by Josh Derby.
- Scathing review of *Back to the Future* by central mailer Aaron Jeffries.
- Obscene filk song "The Penguin Bride" by Joe Bannister.
- Short story "My Little Nazi Unicorn" by Ellen Drabble: SS unicorns led by "Pony Princess Walkyrie" gleefully slaughter the defenders of the Warsaw Ghetto.
 - Photo of Ellen and Josh Derby costumed in Nazi uniforms with unicorn horns attached to the hats.
- Convention report on AussieCon II by Aaron Jeffries, boasting of cornering science-fiction author Larry Niven in an elevator and showing him *Penguin Dreams* #3.
 - An ongoing argument about whether imperium, Fascist dictatorship, or democracy is superior when governing an interstellar empire by both Ellen and Aaron.
 - Part 3 of a debate about the merits of incest in Heinlein's *Time Enough for Love* by Joe Bannister.
 - Detailed review of C.J. Cherry's novel *Chanur's Venture* by Ellen Drabble.

Bird Watchers

There are many key players in this conspiracy, plus a few folks supporting roles.

The Dreaming Penguins and Their Fans

Aaron Jeffries: Murdered comic-book-store owner; creator of *Penguin Dreams*.

Ellen Drapple: Maiden name of Senator Ellen Valmont.

Josh Derby: Comic book artist and drug addict. Went on to created the “bad girl” dark super heroine *Ghouliana*, before dying in 1992.

Joe Bannister: Security guard, failed fan, and bad gambler. His wife, Sandra, has left him. A promise of a clean slate on his debts and 5% of the blackmail cut by Vinny has so far assuaged his guilt over Aaron’s death. Will he stay bought?

Jerome J. Whitaker: Rich super fan and burglary victim.

Enemies

Vinny DeFillipo: Runs a small Mob crew in the state capital. Mafia-connected. If his blackmails scheme bears fruit, he may try to double down by manipulating Ellen Valmont into actions that help the Mob.

Tony Juliano: Mob-connected cat burglar.

Politicians and Operatives

Ellen (Drapple) Valmont: U.S. senator and ex-femmefan. On the House Armed Services Committee.

Clyde Walters: Valmont’s chief of staff, whose good-old-boy demeanor conceals a heart of ice. He’ll do anything to keep Valmont in power.

Leo Valmont: The senator’s bland and handsome trophy husband, a retired pro football player who now does commercial endorsements.

Libby Gordon: Ellen’s perky press secretary and confidante.

Nigel Swinburne: Ellen’s head of security and “plumber.” Ex-secret service.

Mark Greyling: Ellen’s likely political opponent, a sincere but underfunded one-legged Iraq War vet. Polls say he will likely lose the next election unless something changes in the race.

All Jerome knows about *Penguin Dreams* #4 is it was a 1985 small-press fanzine so obscure it doesn’t appear in most catalogs. Jerome bought it for \$200 from one of its creators, a guy named Aaron, now a comic book shop owner. He wanted it because its cover was drawn by Josh Derby (no? you never heard of *Ghouliana*, the undead swordbabe?!), a great artist who died young. J.J. tells the investigators the rest of the issue was just “usual fandom stuff, fanfic and book reviews and cosplay photos and stuff like that.”

Blackmailed by the Mob

In an upstairs room at *Sister Act*, the raunchy nightclub he owned, Vinny DeFillipo read through the “fanzine” he’d whacked a guy to acquire. He skimmed the story – it was crap, with some off-color jokes about Jews and Nazis and unicorn princesses and World War Two and some guy named

Phillip Dick (WTF?), but he could see how a strait-laced lady senator wouldn’t want it coming out. But the photo. Vinny smiled. The costume, the Nazi salute – the photo was *gold*. He had his tech guy scan it, then he arranged for the appropriate cutouts that would have the picture tracelessly appear in the senator’s mail.

He figured \$100,000 would be a nice figure for a payoff. To start with.

He would own her. His very own senator.

GETTING INVOLVED

Depending on the campaign, the PCs could be involved in several different ways.

Hired by Jerome Whitaker: This is probably the simplest entry point. He wants to know who burgled his apartment. The cops aren’t taking it seriously – several hundred bucks of electronics and a \$200 fanzine – but he’s willing to hire a private investigator. This would lead back to Aaron’s store, Bannister’s gambling problem or ex-wife, the murder, and ultimately to Bannister and the Mob’s conspiracy.

Police: In a cops campaign, the protagonists may be police who start investigating the break-in at Whitaker’s or, more likely, Aaron Jeffries’ murder.

Hired by Senator Valmont: She wants to make the blackmail go away, whatever the cost. Ellen is already having nightmares in which she imagines having to make a campaign video declaring “I am not a Nazi Unicorn.” While Vinny has the goods on her, she may be able to point investigators toward her old associates, which in turn can lead them to local reports of Jeffries’ death and the Whitaker’s break-in.

If the PCs take one of these cases, the odds are they’ll run into operatives working for some other party – a PI hired by Whitaker, or a “plumber” team run by Valmont operatives, or regular cops still investigating Jeffries’ unsolved murder. They could easily mistake these guys for the mobsters who are behind the conspiracy. It’s also possible that Bannister will start to crack under pressure, or Vinny’s crew will notice the investigation, and try to have him whacked before that happens. They’d also lean on any private detectives who are involved, to scare them off.

ABOUT THE COLUMNIST

David L. Pulver is a Canadian freelance author. An avid SF fan, he began roleplaying in junior high with the newly released *Basic Dungeons & Dragons*. Upon graduating from university, he decided to become a game designer. Since then, David has written over 70 roleplaying game books, and he has worked as a staff writer, editor, and line developer for Steve Jackson Games and Guardians of Order. He is best known for creating *Transhuman Space*, co-authoring the *Big Eyes, Small Mouth* anime RPG, and writing countless *GURPS* books, including the *GURPS Basic Set, Fourth Edition*, *GURPS Ultra-Tech*, and the *GURPS Spaceships* series.

STRAIGHT TO THE FLUSH

BY JASON “PK” LEVINE

To anyone watching, they were just five retired gentleman having a friendly game in the park. One threw two chips into the pot. “Call.” The others seemed unsurprised when the next shrugged and laid his cards down. With three players remaining, the dealer passed out another face-up card to each.

The table shook, spilling chips, as a young boy ran into it while chasing his balloon. His mother was only seconds behind. “I am **so** sorry! He’s such a handful. Here, let me help you with those. Oh, what cute little chips! This one says ‘Tennessee Valley Water Authority’? And there’s ‘Jill Biden’ . . . and ‘CNN’! Are these from a board game?”

The nearest man smiled warmly. “Just one of those kitschy ‘tourist sets’ I picked up at a gift store. Thank you for your help, Miss Watson.”

It wasn’t until hours later that she wondered if she’d just forgotten giving him her name.

Few games are as cool as poker. When shadowy businessmen are crowded around a table in a smoky back room, we never picture them playing rummy. A super-spy may play countless games in Vegas, but when the plot calls for him to show skill, rather than luck, it’s usually at a poker table. Any card game can fill a background role in an adventure, but poker is one of the few that can step into the spotlight . . . to become the focal point of a scene, at least briefly.

When this happens – when “roll a Quick Contest of Gambling” isn’t enough – the following rules may add a little “positive expected value” to your session.

Just Let Me Play!

If you want to use these rules, but time is at a premium, use this “quick-start” guide:

1. Skip to the second paragraph of *Stakes and Expected Value* (p. 20) and determine the EV for the table.
2. Follow the rules for *The Quick Way* (p. 21). Wherever you see “Gaming Skill,” use **Gambling**. Wherever you see “People Skill,” use the lower of **IQ** or **Per**.

A QUICK PRIMER

Expert poker players draw on an array of talents, including facility with numbers, knowledge of human psychology, and powers of observation and deception. Players can use these skills to win even if chance has not dealt them the better hand.

– Judge Jack Weinstein, exempting poker from the IGBA

Poker is a game of skill, not just chance. The winner is not necessarily the player who was dealt the best hand, but the one who convinces his opponents that he was. This is because poker is a vying game – new cards are interspersed with rounds of betting, and players who aren’t confident in their ability to win a hand can fold at any time. Experienced poker players learn to estimate their odds of winning, then either fold as quickly as possible (to minimize losses) or stay in and try to convince everyone else to fold via carefully calculated bets. If everyone else folds, the remaining player takes the pot; otherwise, everyone who stayed in has a showdown to see who gets it.

For other games that work well with these rules, see p. 37.

Glossary

ante: A small amount of money used to start the pot, or the act of adding it.

draw, the: In Draw Poker, the cards that you return to the dealer for replacement.

fold: Drop out of the current hand.

hand: 1. A single “turn” of poker, from ante to showdown, typically with multiple rounds of betting. **2.** The set of five cards you accrue, and how that set is ranked (e.g., “pair” or “straight flush”).

pot: All of the antes and bets, usually in the center of the table. The winner takes it.

showdown: If more than one person stays in the hand until the very end, they all compare their hands. If there is no showdown, *no one’s* hand is revealed!

SKILL MASTERY

For simplicity, the ability to win at poker can be boiled down to two equally important talents.

Gaming Skill

This is the ability to estimate the odds of a hand paying off or of a needed card showing up, to judge bet size, and so on. Use the better of **Gambling** or **Games (Poker)**. If you have neither, use your **IQ-4** default for Games.

Modifiers: +1 if you know both skills; for purposes of the +1 to Games, knowing Mathematics (Statistics) is as good as knowing Gambling. +1 for Eidetic Memory or Photographic Memory. +1 for Lightning Calculator or +3 for Intuitive Mathematician.

People Skill

This is the ability to bluff, to avoid giving away your hand strength (a “tell”), to see through such deception, and so on. There are *two* parts to this: being able to read others, and either avoiding being read or misleading others.

Reading People: Use the best of **Body Language**, **Detect Lies**, **Lip Reading** (at -5), **Observation** (at -3), **Psychology** (at -3), or **Per-4**. If you have **Empathy** (or **Sensitive**), you may substitute **IQ** (or **IQ-3**), if better.

Hiding Tells: Use the best of **Acting**, **Fast-Talk**, **Meditation** (at -5), **Mind Block** (at -3), or **IQ** (at -5 if you have Truthfulness).

Your actual People Skill is the average of the skill you chose for “Reading People” and the one chosen for “Hiding Tells.” Round toward the former if necessary, *then* apply:

Modifiers: -4 for Easy to Read. At the GM’s option, -1 per -5 full points in disadvantages that would cause you to underestimate, misunderstand, or be distracted by the other players at the table (e.g., -3 for Lecherousness (12) when facing someone very attractive).

DEALER’S CHOICE

When setting up a game, the house, dealer, or the players as a whole must decide on a few basic things. A GM who wishes to keep the scene simple can consider all of this optional, with one or two exceptions: He *must* calculate EV (*Stakes and Expected Value*, below) – and, if he’ll be using *The Detailed Way* (pp. 21-22), he needs to know the number of betting rounds (*What’s Your Game?*, below).

What’s Your Game?

There are three basic variants of poker. For game purposes, only the number of betting rounds matter, but knowing the details can add flavor. For variants that use seven cards, players choose five out of the seven to build the best possible hand. Rare, exotic variants can be treated as familiarities (p. B169).

Draw Poker

Players are dealt a full hand. All cards are kept hidden. There is a round of betting. Then each player is allowed to return some of his cards and be dealt replacements (the “draw”). There is a second round of betting, then a showdown.

Example: Five-Card Draw, in which each player starts with five cards and can draw up to three. *Betting Rounds:* 2.

Stud Poker

Players are dealt a few cards (usually a mix of face-up and face-down). There is a round of betting. Then each player receives one more card, then another round of betting, and so on. After the limit is reached, there is a showdown.

Example: Seven-Card Stud, where each player starts with three cards (two face-down, one face-up). He then receives a fourth face-up, then a fifth face-up, then a sixth face-up, then the seventh face-down. *Betting Rounds:* 5.

Community-Card Poker

Played like Stud Poker (above), but at some point, the dealer stops dealing out *individual* cards, and starts dealing cards to the *table* (face-up), for everyone to share.

Example: Texas Hold ‘Em, in which each player is dealt two face-down cards, then three more are dealt to the table simultaneously (the “flop”), then a sixth (the “turn”), then a seventh (the “river”). *Betting Rounds:* 4.

Acey, Deucy, One-Eyed Jack

Any variant can *also* declare wild cards, from “Jokers wild” (two cards) to the title above, which means aces, twos, and half the Jacks are wild (10 cards, or 12 with Jokers). More wild cards tend to level the playing field, making it easier for a novice to form a good hand, while mitigating the expert’s knowledge of odds. In a variant with at least eight wild cards (or a similar degree of randomness, to the GM’s eye), shift each player’s effective Gaming Skill one step closer to 10; that is, -1 for those with skill 11+, but +1 for those with skill 9 or less.

Stakes and Expected Value

While some casinos have strict betting limits, the *fun* ones are usually “no limit” – a gambler can bet as much as he wishes. This gives a rich player a significant edge, as he can bet so much that a poorer player cannot hope to match it. In such a game, for each gambler, *optionally* compare the amount he is able to bet in this game to the average of the *other* players’ stakes. He is at +1 to Gaming Skill if he has more than 3× the average, at +2 for more than 10×, +3 for more than 30×, +4 for more than 100×, and so on. The value of oddball stakes (e.g., a promissory note for one assassination) must be determined by table consensus.

Still, even a table with no limits will have an *informal* consensus on what an appropriate bet is. A group used to \$200 pots will bristle if a new player sits down and starts betting \$1,000 per round! For game purposes, the GM should estimate the *average pot* of the table – the amount that a typical winner takes (including his own bets) when he wins a hand. An observer will know this approximate value after observing the table for 20-(Gaming Skill) hands (minimum of three hands). Divide the average pot by 5×(the number of players) to find EV, or “expected value.” This is *not* how poker EV is calculated in the real world, but it’s a playable abstraction.

Any player has the power to *force* a change in EV, simply by betting far more or less than everyone else. However, this risks alienating or angering the other players! After the second hand in which a gambler does this, he must make a reaction roll, at -1 for every *full* -20% or +100% of change to EV.

Reaction	Result
Good or better	Everyone stays in the game.
Neutral	About 1/4 of the players drop out. -1 to his People Skill at this table due to mistrust.
Poor	He’s asked to leave; if he doesn’t, 2/3 of the players drop out. -2 to his People Skill.
Bad	He’s <i>told</i> to leave; they won’t game with him.
Very Bad or worse	As for Bad, plus make a “potential combat” roll; no reaction better than “Neutral” is possible.

If he *immediately* agrees to stop betting so low or high, shift the reaction result up *one* level.

Now, it’s time to play!

THE QUICK WAY

With these rules, each series of rolls represents an entire hand of poker; the number of betting rounds is irrelevant. First, each gambler rolls against his People Skill. The result determines the modifier to Gaming Skill:

Result	Modifier
Critical Success	+3
Highest Margin of Success at the Table*	+2
Success	+1
Failure	-1
Highest Margin of Failure at the Table*	-2
Critical Failure	-3

* Unless it was a critical, in which case use that value. In the event of a tie, multiple people *can* get this modifier.

Second, everyone rolls against modified Gaming Skill. Record everyone's margin of success or failure. The best margin of success (or failure, if *everyone* failed) wins the hand! If there's a tie, use the margin of the previous People Skill roll to break it. If *both* rolls did equally well, then it truly is a tie – both gamblers split the pot.

Example: Ada, Bob, Cindy, and Dan all roll their People Skills. Ada rolls a margin of success (MOS) of 2. Bob gets MOS 4, Cindy has MOS 0 (just made it), and Dan rolls a margin of failure (MOF) of 2. Bob takes the +2 for highest margin of success, Ada and Cindy each get +1 for succeeding, and Dan has -2 for highest margin of failure.

All four now roll against Gaming Skill, applying the People Skill modifiers they just earned. Ada rolls MOS 4, Bob gets MOS 4, Cindy has MOF 1, and Dan rolls MOF 4. Ada and Bob had the same margin, but because Bob's earlier People Skill roll did better, Bob wins the pot.

The Pot

Poker is a zero-sum game; when one person wins, it's at the expense of everyone else. Thus, the question, "How much was in the pot?" is actually the question, "How much did everyone else lose?" This is based on EV (*Stakes and Expected Value*, p. 20).

First, look at the winner's result. It will be used to adjust everyone *else's* margin of success or failure, as follows:

Winner Failed: Leave everyone else's margins as they are.

Winner Succeeded by 0-5: Shift everyone else's margins down by five. For example, a margin of success of 3 becomes a margin of failure of 2 (from +3 to -2), while a margin of failure of 1 becomes a margin of failure of 6 (from -1 to -6).

Winner Succeeded by More Than 5: As above, but for every two levels (or fraction thereof) by which the winner's margin exceeded 5, shift everyone else's margins down another one. So if the winner's margin of success was 6 or 7, shift everyone else down six; if 8 or 9, shift them down seven; if 10 or 11, shift them down eight; and so on.

If anyone still has a margin of success (even if 0) after this shifting, he only lost EV/2 – the ante plus perhaps a conservative bet or two – before folding. Everyone else lost EV×(margin of failure). Add the losses up to determine the winner's take!

Example: Bob succeeded by 4, so everyone else's effective margins are shifted down five levels. The table's EV is \$40. Ada drops from MOS 4 to MOF 1 (losing \$40), Cindy goes from MOF 1 to MOF 6 (losing \$240), and Dan's MOF 4 becomes MOF 9 (losing \$360). Bob pockets the total losses of \$640!

Long-Term Play

A variant of these rules can be used to resolve *multiple* hands at once. Roll both skills, as above, but ignore *The Pot*. Instead, find the difference between the winner and worst loser's margins. Halve it, rounding down. The result is what the winner's margin of success *should* be; apply a modifier to *everyone* to make this true. (If everyone rolled the same MOS, or within 1 of each other, then the hands were effectively a wash.)

Example: The four players roll once for the next six hands. Ada gets MOS 2. Bob has MOS 0, Cindy rolls MOF 4, and Dan gets MOF 7. The difference between Ada and Dan is 9; halved, that's 4. So Ada's *effective* MOS needs to be 4. The GM thus shifts everyone by +2, giving Ada MOS 4, Bob MOS 2, Cindy MOF 2, and Dan MOF 5.

Everyone with a margin of failure loses EV×(margin of failure)×(half the total number of hands played). Total these losses, then divide them by the *sum* of everyone else's margins of success to get PPM (payout per margin). Everyone with a margin of success wins PPM×(margin of success).

Example: The table's EV is \$40 and the group played six hands. With MOF 5, Dan lost $\$40 \times 5 \times 3 = \600 . With MOF 2, Cindy lost $\$40 \times 2 \times 3 = \240 . The PPM is $\$840 / (\text{Ada's MOS } 4 + \text{Bob's MOS } 2)$, or $\$840 / 6 = \140 . Ada wins $\$140 \times 4 = \560 while Bob wins $\$140 \times 2 = \280 .

A Game Within a Game

These rules, even the detailed ones (below), are an intentional simplification of poker – a game every bit as complex as **GURPS**. For groups who need even *more* detail, consider just playing it out with real cards and chips! To keep player ability from overwhelming character ability, roll against Gaming Skill and People Skill once at the beginning of each hand.

Gaming Skill: Every three points of success (or fraction thereof) lets you start with one extra face-down card. In Draw Poker, this does not change how many cards you can draw!

People Skill: Compare your margin of success to everyone else's. Each person who lost to you by 5+ must show you *one* of his face-down or hidden cards. This happens after the *draw* in Draw Poker, after the *initial deal* otherwise.

THE DETAILED WAY

The Quick Way (above) should prove adequate for most poker games in play. However, when a hand of poker is *the* climactic event of a session (or adventure), it may deserve an even more focused treatment. This system uses cumulative margin of success at Gaming Skill to determine the final hand strength.

For anything other than Draw Poker (p. 20), this has no *direct* correlation to the actual game mechanics, but it is a good way to abstract the tension and uncertainty involved in “playing the table” as your hand forms.

Before the game starts, divide EV (*Stakes and Expected Value*, p. 20) by (the number of betting rounds)+1 (see *What’s Your Game?*, p. 20) and round to a convenient value to get Round EV (REV). Make sure to track what stakes (how much money, chips, etc.) each gambler has at the table.

A hand follows the following steps:

1. Cards are dealt (Gaming Skill phase).
2. Gamblers scan the table (People Skill phase).
3. Everyone folds or bets (pay betting cost).
4. Repeat Steps 1-3 once for each betting round in the game.
5. Gamblers scan the table one last time (*bonus* People Skill phase).
6. Everyone folds or bets one *more* time (pay betting cost *again*).
7. Showdown!

If, at any point, everyone except one player drops out, the hand ends immediately and the “survivor” wins whatever is in the pot.

Cards Are Dealt

Everyone rolls against Gaming Skill, treating the margin of success as a positive number or the margin of failure as a negative one. The GM secretly keeps track of everyone’s *cumulative* margin. For NPCs, only the GM will know the running total; for PCs, only the GM and player will know. You *can* end the hand with a negative margin!

The margin only accumulates for each hand; when a new hand is played, start over at 0.

Scan the Table

Everyone rolls against People Skill and notes the margin of success or failure. What that means for each gambler depends on whether he’s an NPC or PC:

NPC: If the total of this People Skill margin (treating margin of failure as a *negative* number) + his *cumulative* Gaming Skill margin is less than the highest People Skill margin of success rolled this turn (by anyone else), he folds during the next betting round – unless the entire table “checks” (below).

PC: The GM compares his current People Skill margin to each other gambler’s, as a Quick Contest. For each, if the PC wins (not ties), he learns whether the loser’s cumulative Gaming Skill margin is higher than his own. If he wins by 5+, the GM tells him the exact number. He can use that information to decide how to act in the upcoming betting round.

The GM may use the “PC” rules for important NPCs, as long as he bases their decisions *only* on what they learn via scanning the table. Because the GM has access to everyone’s cumulative margins, he must be careful not to let his NPCs abuse this knowledge.

Fold or Bet

During a betting round, everyone has two choices: He can fold (quitting this hand) or bet (pay to stay in the hand).

Anyone who folds during the *very first* betting round loses REV (Round EV) in stakes: ante, possibly along with a conservative bet or two. Anyone folding during later betting rounds may do so without penalty, only losing money previously bet.

Those choosing to stay in the hand must pay $(1d+1) \times \text{REV}$ to do so. Roll once per round, not separately for each player! This abstraction *includes* bets, calls, and raises – learning from how your opponent bets is part of the separate People Skill roll.

Checking

Any gambler may “check,” declaring that he’d rather not bet. If even *one other player* would rather bet, then this has no effect; the checker must either bet or fold. However, if the entire table agrees to check, this betting round is skipped entirely – no one bets *or* folds. This is unusual, except during polite games when a player goes all-in (below).

All In

Many high-stakes cinematic poker games climax in a player betting everything he has while declaring, “All in.” This can be abstracted as part of the bonus for having extra money (*Stakes and Expected Value*, p. 20), but a more detailed treatment is possible. First, calculate what stakes you have left – how much are you actually betting?

When using *The Quick Way* (p. 21), going all-in raises EV for this hand by $(2 \times \text{the all-in stakes}) / (\text{number of players})$; the “2x” is because at least one person has to match it for the hand to continue. However, if you *lose*, you automatically lose everything you have! You can’t go all-in in *Long-Term Play* (p. 21).

In *The Detailed Way* (pp. 21-22), going all-in only matters if the stakes exceed the maximum possible bet ($7 \times \text{REV}$). If so, the betting cost this round is raised to the all-in stakes. Your effective People Skill margin this round (success *or* failure!) is *doubled* for the purpose of seeing which NPCs fold. Ideally, you should wait until the *last* betting round of the hand; if not, further bets can knock you out of the game! As a courtesy (or because they’re all-in as well), the other players may unanimously decide to “check” through any remaining betting rounds, skipping straight to the showdown.

Bonus Round and Showdown

The final betting round is particularly important and tense. After all the cards have been dealt, and Steps 1-3 have been repeated for the last time, everyone gets an *extra* chance to scan the table and try to figure out what everyone has. Then, there’s another round of betting (or folding). In reality, these “two rounds” of betting are actually a single, long round, with all of the remaining gamblers focusing intently on everyone else’s body language, betting style, and so on.

If more than one person remains after this final betting round, the GM reveals their cumulative Gaming Skill margins (for those still in the game, *not* the ones who folded) and the highest one wins! Ties are just that – ties, causing both players to split the pot.

CHEATING

For as long as there's been gambling, people have been cheating. The following are some common ways to beat the system, and the skills needed to do so.

One-shot methods (marked with a *) give you +3 to your Gaming Skill for that *one hand only*. In a detailed game, this only applies to the first roll for that hand, but you get +2 on the second roll and then +1 on all subsequent ones. The other players get a roll to notice each time you cheat (see below).

Ongoing methods (marked with a †) give you a flat +2 to Gaming Skill for the entire game. Others get a roll to notice it after the first hand, then another roll every hour. Using *multiple* ongoing methods gives +(number of methods)+1.

Confederates*: Having a friend in the same room, spying on cards and communicating with you – all while avoiding suspicion – is tricky! The helper must roll against the *lowest* of **Acting**, **Gesture**, and **Per** each time he shares hand information with you. He may substitute **Observation** for Per, if better. If you both know the same form of sign language at Native, he may substitute **IQ** for Gesture, if better.

False Dealing*: If you're the dealer, which usually happens once every (number of players) hands in a casual game, you can roll **Sleight of Hand** when dealing to give yourself great cards.

Marked Cards†: If you have access to the deck ahead of time, roll against the *best* of **Counterfeiting**, **Forgery**, or **IQ-4** to mark cards in advance. It's not easy to provide marks that you can identify but others won't! If you lack access, you can attempt to mark cards *during play*; roll against the lower of the skill chosen above or **Sleight of Hand**, at -3 for either.

Mirrors or Cameras†: Being able to see even a few of your opponents' hands is a huge advantage. Mirrors use the *better* of **Camouflage** or **Housekeeping** to disguise, but others are at +2 to notice them. Cameras require the same roll plus a *separate* one against **Electronics Operation (Media or Surveillance)** to function properly; this roll doesn't affect how easy they are to notice, but if it fails, you don't get the bonus.

Palmed Cards*: As long as you can match the deck you'll be using, you can smuggle in extra cards. Roll against the *lower* of **Holdout** or **Sleight of Hand** to use them. The GM should roll 3d; if he rolls a triple, you introduced a card that duplicated one in someone else's hand! This gives +4 to the roll to notice (see below) and turns it into an unopposed roll.

Others roll to notice using the better of **Observation** or **Per**, as a Quick Contest against the result of your cheating roll. If someone *wins* or *ties*, he realizes what's going on! This typically causes a Very Bad reaction at *least*; in some places, your very next roll may need to be Dodge.

Supernatural Cheating

The ability to read minds, to teleport small objects, and so on can be an *amazing* boon to any gambler. Most supernatural powers will give at *least* +4 to Gaming Skill, People Skill, or both! The specifics are up to the GM. Whether others get a roll

to realize what's happening is up to the GM as well . . . but note that even if these powers are literally undetectable, gamblers can *still* notice patterns of unusual winning, "too-perfect" betting, and so on. Thus, a "notice" roll is still usually appropriate, even though they're likely to suspect more *mundane* cheating if they win the Quick Contest.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jason Levine, better known in Vegas as "Reverend Pee Kitty," won the position of Assistant **GURPS** Line Editor in a high-stakes game against Steve Jackson, Elvis, Bill Gates, and the leader of the Men from Planet X. Wait. You aren't supposed to know that yet. Please forget he told you. Let's start over.

Jason Levine, the perfectly normal guy who is in *no* way a Secret Master, lives in northern Georgia with his loving wife, some friends and family, and a small collection of pets who have most definitely *not* been uplifted via genetic enhancement and trained to take over the nearest town. Honest.

But What Was My Hand?

As explained in *A Quick Primer* (p. 19), your actual poker hand is irrelevant if you can convince your opponents to fold. However, when there is a showdown (p. 22) or when the player just wants to know what he held, the chart below (unrealistically) converts margin of success or failure on your Gaming Skill into hand rank. In a quick game, use margin before any adjustments. In a detailed one, divide cumulative Gaming Skill margin by the number of betting rounds, dropping fractions, to get "Margin."

Margin*	Hand Rank	Key Card(s)†
21 or higher	Royal Flush	Ace
17-20	Straight Flush	(1d/2)+10‡
14-16	Straight Flush	1d+4
12-13	Four of a Kind	1d+8
10-11	Four of a Kind	1d+2
8-9	Full House	1d+8
6-7	Full House	1d+2
5	Flush	1d+8
4	Flush	1d+2
3	Straight	(1d/2)+11‡
2	Straight	1d+5
1	Three of a Kind	1d+8
0	Three of a Kind	1d+2
-1	Two Pairs	1d+8
-2	Two Pairs	1d+2
-3	Pair	1d+8
-4	Pair	1d+2
-5	Garbage	1d+8
-6 or lower	Garbage	1d+2

* Positive numbers represent margin of success; negative ones, margin of failure.

† The high card or the cards that make up the set. Read 11 as "Jack," 12 as "Queen," 13 as "King," and 14 as "Ace." For Full House or Two Pairs, roll twice, rerolling duplicates.

‡ Round up.

ONE PERFECT DAY

BY J. EDWARD TREMLETT

My mother always told me the world was my oyster. She told me I could do anything I wanted to do, and I had a bright future ahead of me. All I had to do was work hard and dream big.

But then, I look at the world, and I see what we're doing to it. If I do what I want to do, I'm going to be a small part of a big mess that's just dragging our planet down. Even if I go local, drive an electric car, recycle everything – none of that's going to help. Not at all.

I've decided I don't need it, and the world doesn't need me.

I'm going to give myself a year. I'm going to spend half of it helping kids in Africa, and the other half seeing Europe. When that's done, I'm going to go sit on a beach, somewhere, have a great dinner with some wine, watch the sun go down over the Ocean, and drink the Sleep Potion.

My name is Shelley Rockton. I'm 27 years old, and this is my Passing Pledge.

Don't weep for me. Join me.

One Perfect Day's stated goal is to encourage voluntary human extinction. They claim that the only way to save our ecologically beleaguered planet is for *Homo sapiens* to leave it – preferably en masse. To that end, they exhort their followers to put their affairs in order, have one, last perfect day, and then commit “safetycide” for the good of Earth.

The group's ethos is both shocking and controversial, to be sure. But there's more to OPD than online goodbyes and celebrity endorsements.

In fact, there's a conspiracy afoot.

On the surface, the idea seems sensible, however horrible. Unfortunately, the conspiracy is having unintended consequences: a number of murders, massacres, and other reprehensible acts are being committed by OPD-inspired “suicides,” all of whom credit the group for their acts.

The group is actually an astroturf organization, acting on the behalf of a small group of young, reactionary millionaires. These five, super-rich college kids hope that OPD will rid America of a significant portion of its amoral, feeble-brained liberals and ecologically minded types, thus changing the economic destiny of the country, along with the balance of its political blocs.

But there is a more insidious layer at work. While the five are using One Perfect Day to their own ends, at least one of the five is using *everyone*. Finding out what this deeper conspirator wants could ruin everything OPD is working toward, but just might save lives – even the entire world.

You can now learn the story that One Perfect Day wants you to hear, but you'll also get the truth, which leads to Project

Mockingbird – a group of five, young, super-rich kids who want you to die. Their personal stories and true motivations are laid bare, providing the GM up to five different, dark conspiracies to use, along with adventure seeds that could become part of an entire campaign.

THE ACCEPTED MYTH

According to the history page on One Perfect Day's snazzy, well-designed website, the group came together when two students at UCLA realized that they were better off dead.

Eugene “Exit” Smith and Gordon “Gone” Tzeremes came up with the idea after they both took a masters-level anthropology class called “Future-pology,” in 2005. Their grade was based on one, final group project, in which they were charged with coming up with a working, sustainable model of the future. Smith and Tzeremes, who'd known each other from the collegiate ecological activist circuit, decided to focus on the eventual human footprint on the globe, and find a way that its deleterious effects could be minimized or reversed.

They failed.

Sitting at the library night after night, pouring over the doomsday reports and worst-case scenarios they'd tried to devise a way out of, they realized that – barring a major evolutionary shift – humanity would not be able to grow *and* thrive throughout the coming millennium. The convergence of estimated population increase, predicted effects of climate change, possible effects of human longevity, and other biological, technological, and environmental factors led to the inescapable conclusion that all life on Earth was doomed to full or partial extinction – most likely within the next century, and if not then, surely the next.

Lesser minds might have fudged the project, gotten inebriated, and done their best to forget the horrors they'd encountered. Instead, the duo joined forces, dropped out of school, and dedicated their lives to finding a solution.

After a few years of false starts and failed manifestos, they realized they'd been looking at that problem from the wrong angle. They realized that humanity's era should have ended a long time ago, and the world could only suffer if it continued to be the dominant viable species. Indeed, another 50 years or so might be all that was needed to completely destroy the ecology of the planet, dooming billions of species to extinction.

Therefore, the only sane and humane choice was for humanity to end as the viable species, and the sooner the better.

Of course, they weren't the only ones saying that. Organizations like the Voluntary Human Extinction Movement (VHEMT) and Lead by Leaving had been calling for the end of *Homo sapiens* for quite some time. But where those groups were content to push for the gradual removal of humanity through the voluntary cessation of human procreation, Smith and Tzeremes advocated taking matters into their own hands.

THE PUBLIC FACE

Thus was formed One Perfect Day: a philosophy that says that all sensible and rational humans who care about the safety of the biosphere should put their affairs in order; make a statement of intent, have one last, beautiful, perfect day; and then end their lives as meaningfully and painlessly as possible.

To that end, Smith and Tzeremes put up a website explaining their philosophies, stating their intentions, seeking helpers and converts, and giving the ingredients for a "sleep potion." They started a blog, began hosting regular podcasts, and co-write articles for pro-ecological journals. It was slow going, but eventually they began to get noticed – especially when their site started challenging people to publicly pledge to commit "safetycide," and hosting their written or videotaped statements of intent.

The outlandishness of their message got the "pro-death duo" a lot of attention, most of it critical, if not negative and/or reactionary. "Exit" and "Gone" (as they now referred to themselves) were held up several times as *prima facie* evidence of what was wrong with the modern ecology movement, campus activism, the youth of America, and the University of California. Religious figures excoriated them, community leaders called them irresponsible, and political figures in search of electoral victory and face time called for their arrest and imprisonment.

Eventually the California authorities concurred, but there was no stopping the signal. Jailing the two proved tricky, and did not last long before a very famous lawyer got them free. By the time the charges were dropped, as the police weren't sure *what* to charge them with, the site's "Passing Pledges" page had over a million signatures from people all over the world. Also, a number of mirror sites had gone up, making it virtually impossible for their message to be blocked by hacking or denial-of-service attacks.

Smith and Tzeremes became global icons of free speech and intellectual freedom. They spoke at college campuses, zero-growth conferences, and radical ecological teach-ins. Their self-published manifesto – *One Perfect World* – sold millions of copies without ever being allowed on any bestsellers list. They were intellectual rock stars for the planet, signing a gentle song of mindful doom for all humanity.

Then, on April 1, 2011, the duo left their own, individual videotaped statements of intent on their website, and vanished. Their bodies were never recovered, leading to rumors that they'd went for a final swim in the Pacific, somewhere.

The movement was taken over by Joseph "Jumper" Quincannon, who'd been their webmaster since the beginning. At first, he preferred to recycle their podcasts and the videos of their speeches, rather than making any of his own, but over the last few years, he's come out of his shell and done more. He has yet to say anything that contradicts their views, though with his forthcoming book – which explains and updates the cause – "Jumper" might finally reveal he's got a mind of his own.

The movement continues to grow, with millions of people pledging to end their lives on the site, or else just doing it and crediting the group for making their decision. The site can barely keep up with the written and video statements of intent that flood in at all hours. In fact, it's something of a point of pride for the group that, when investigating missing persons cases, the authorities often stop at the site to see if they left a note there.

THE QUIET TRUTH

They say that all you need to change the world is the right idea, at the right time, and to sell it in the right way to the right people. Jonathan Everett DeQuincy III was brought up with that principle by his mega-wealthy family, and while his well-off chums might not have gotten the exact same message, he was quite adept at spreading it himself.

Jonathan also had a dire moment of future shock while at college – except, instead of looking at the environmental side of the doomsday predictions, he examined the economic indicators. All sensible prognostications pointed to horrendous and long-lasting problems with the global economy if "something" wasn't done, and all the dystopian science fiction he was ingesting at the time didn't help with his paranoia.

But the solutions and corrections Jonathan and his peers wanted to see were entirely dependent on whatever party would implement them getting into power, and then *staying* there for as long as it took. Even after that, those solutions might be abolished as soon as the other party got in, and screwed things up by taking them right back to where they were, or doing something even worse.

The obvious solution – and one the DeQuincy clan was quite adept at – was to bankroll the party and politicians needed to effect such a change, as well as pay for various, under-the-table tricks and smear campaigns to keep their designated political proxies' rivals from getting too far ahead in the polls. Even that could only go so far before greed, human error, or a wave of anti-incumbency brought their paid-for champions low and saw them out of office. Then in would come the party in opposition – ready to (perhaps) unwittingly botch their carefully laid plans.

The world could no longer afford to be led astray by overly compassionate idiots who voted with their hearts and ignored their pocketbooks, ever-expecting someone to bail them out when they bought one Grateful Dead CD too many and then couldn't afford to eat. The stakes were too high, the margins of error were too thin. If everything went wrong they could be looking at a global depression that would destroy, in one generation, everything that Western civilization had taken centuries to build up.

Jonathan realized that what was needed was a new tactic, one that not only got the right people in power, and keep them there, but also changed the conditions on the ground. Somehow, the people who would keep giving the game away had to be stopped from doing so. However, trying to repress their voices or suppress their rights would just make them martyrs – thus proving them "right," even if they weren't – or actually lead to them fighting back, and maybe even winning.

It took him a few years, but eventually, after reading one of his favorite, old science-fiction novels, Jonathan came upon the perfect solution. All he would have to do is convince the idiots to remove *themselves* from the socio-politico-economic equation.

The best way to do that was to convince them to remove themselves from the human race.

To that end, Jonathan and some of his most-trusted, close-knit, and astute friends put together Project Mockingbird. The plan was to create a movement that would convince people of a certain mentality that the world was better off without them, and then convince others – who might not be as hardcore as the initial targets – that it was the thing to do. But to do it, they'd need to couch it in such a way that it came across as a genuine movement, and not just a bunch of misanthropic rich kids trying to get the poor to take a leap off the cliff.

Jonathan's friend Randolph went searching among the voluntary human extinction movements, and found a pair of useful idiots at UCLA (Smith and Tzeremes) who'd been making some noises along the same lines as Project Mockingbird. Another friend, Robert, posed as "Joseph Quincannon," who met with them over an extended period of time, and helped them formulate a message and a strategy. Such was his expertise, honed by years of quiet, collegiate conservative activism, that he successfully made them think his ideas were *their* ideas all along.

"Quincannon" also chipped in the time needed for their website, which he agreed to be webmaster for as long as he was kept in the background, complaining of stage fright and the like. Luckily, Smith and Tzeremes were so agog with the bag of good ideas and HTML fortune they'd been given that they didn't stop to wonder what his real problem was, and went along with it. Ever thereafter, Quincannon was their Svengali: tweaking their message and tactics, either with or without their knowledge, and making sure that Mockingbird's ideas were adopted by OPD.

The rest is history, though it hasn't always been very smooth.

THE SECRET SHAME

When DeQuincy got together with his friends and dreamed up Project Mockingbird, they didn't think it was going to succeed as wildly as it has. Unfortunately, as it was not an entirely perfect product rollout, they have not maintained complete control over their brand. Most of OPD's converts are happy to make a Passing Pledge, go have a good time, and then drink the Sleep Potion, but some of them have taken the ideas and made their own groups. Others have a novel notion of spreading the word, which is leading to heat the group doesn't need.

The most obnoxious copycat organization is Exit Stage Now, which urges its followers to leave the Earth as soon as possible. Their highly misanthropic website piles scorn upon everything that humanity has ever done. According to them, art and beauty are chains meant to keep us from understanding that we outlived our usefulness to the world a long time ago, and happiness is an illusion best shattered by death. They offer no pledges, no testimonies, and no comfort; they merely exhort the faithful to just go die, hopefully spectacularly, and leave the living a trail to follow.

This wouldn't be so bad, except that members of ESN have decided to protest against "the mealy mouthed, half-measured cowards" at OPD. They write angry critiques of their materials, picket their speeches, hack their website, and have threatened to "bust" Quincannon with some horrible, dark secret they supposedly have. What it is, they're not saying, but the fellow who handles security for Mockingbird is looking into it.

Furthermore, OPD has to deal with the Perfect Proselytizers, a loosely allied group of "suiciders" who commit mass

murder in the name of human extinction. These extremists claim that the goals of groups like OPD and their copycats are correct, but that they're not moving fast enough. If humanity's exit from the Earth is to have any effect on the fragile ecosystem, it should be done *now*, before things get worse.

To that end, they have orchestrated bombings, mass poisonings, and shooting sprees. They have also challenged humanity to make more Passing Pledges, claiming that they will stop the mayhem if at least 5% of the Earth's population makes and carries out such a promise. Otherwise, they will continue to "help" to attain the Proselytizers' goal.

So far, OPD has escaped legal culpability in this manner; it's not their fault if someone took their ideas too far, now is it? But with each nasty and bloody headline, the investigators – ever eager to bust them for *something* – edge just a little closer to finding something else to act upon. If they do, they might find the connection to Project Mockingbird.

They could find something even worse than that: Smith and Tzeremes were murdered. They started getting suspicious about some of the weird things that were winding up on the website – ideas and attitudes that they didn't sign off on, and Quincannon couldn't fully account for. They were just about to uncover where their money was really coming from when Randolph, the security-minded member of Mockingbird, "collected" them.

Fortunately for Mockingbird, the two had made their Passing Pledges well in advance, and were just saving them for the right moment. So they went into the Pacific, the reigns of the group went over to Quincannon, and no one was any the wiser. But enough clues could remain to tie their demise to a suspicious and ugly fellow who was seen with them not too long before they safetycided.

*A crowded society is
a restrictive society;
an overcrowded society
becomes an authoritarian,
repressive and murderous society.*

– Edward Abbey

THE DARK REALITY

An even deeper level of sinister goings-on is happening within One Perfect Day. A few of the members of Project Mockingbird are not who they claim to be, or are, at least, not in the group for the reasons they've stated. The movement could be a front – possibly even a beachhead – for any number of nasty, ulterior motives, depending on what sort of game the GM is running.

This section gives the principal players of Project Mockingbird, their aliases or codenames, and their motivations. It also gives a secret reason for them to be in the group. Some of the reasons could potentially overlap, while some of them may be best left as the *only* major, dark motive going on.

Jonathan Everett DeQuincy III

DeQuincy (a.k.a. “Spofforth”) is the principal driving force behind the Project. He thought it up, put forward the seed money to bankroll it, and considers it his baby. He chairs the meetings, points the way forward, and has the final say on what they will and won’t do. He can be charming when he wants to be, but is ruthlessly devoted to his cause, willing to sacrifice anyone to see it through.

The Truth: Dark Allies

The more Jonathan looked over the graphs and charts they sold the “safetycide” set on, the more he thought that maybe it wouldn’t be so bad if the population was at least reduced by a third or more. After a time, he decided that not only was the OPD’s pablum more correct than he was willing to guess, but that the group wasn’t moving fast enough – wasn’t going far enough.

To that end, Jonathan decided to speed things up. He had a rather disreputable acquaintance anonymously hook him up with some very questionable people, who might be willing to take OPD’s message a step further. Talks broke down before too long, however, as the people gave him the creeps. Not long after he severed contact the Perfect Proselytizers cropped up, and he recognized the voice of their “Minister of Last Words” as one of the people he talked to.

Since then, Jonathan’s been walking a tightrope. He knows he should do something about them, but he can’t do it without implicating himself, and possibly exposing the entire group. At the same time, his disreputable acquaintance keeps calling and acting like Jonathan owes him something – possibly an overture to blackmail.

Story Seed

Exit Stage Now knows a connection exists between the Perfect Proselytizers and OPD, but not the specifics. For now, ESN is content to snark at OPD, but blackmail could eventually follow – maybe even a call to the cops.

Robert G. Martin

Martin (a.k.a. “Joseph Quincannon” and “Keystroke”) is the current “leader” of One Perfect Day, and has been the webmaster all along. He’s well-skilled at getting others to adopt his ideas without realizing they were *his* ideas all along, yet is very nervous about being the public face of anything. Maybe that’s because none of the ideas are actually his, but that of Project Mockingbird, and maybe it’s because he’d like to have a real life, someday, when this deception is over.

The Truth: Enemy Agent

There’s another reason Robert has been reluctant to be out in front of the movement; spies are worth nothing if they get made, and he’s one wrong move away from being busted in a big way.

Robert has been acting as a pipeline for socially destabilizing propaganda for one of America’s major geopolitical rivals. He takes the information they send him, doctors it up to sound like something he’d write – often making it *more* persuasive in the process – and posts it on the site, slips it into his talks, or finds a way to get it out there. He’s also the one behind at least one of the violent groups that OPD has inspired, giving their leader most of his agitprop, internal indoctrination, and post-action statements.

Robert’s Project colleague, Randolph, has been providing him with a weekly security report, to let him know who’s investigating “Quincannon,” and what he can do to avoid raising red flags. Lately, certain sectors of the Department of Homeland Security are taking a notice, which the rest of the Project finds hilarious, but scares Robert to death.

Story Seed

The tone of the information Robert’s being given is reaching a nasty crescendo, almost in time with the increase in DHS investigation. He gets the feeling his paymasters know the department’s on to him – and therefore them. They may want him to encourage one big, final fire before he outlives his usefulness.

Eduardo H. Bocanegra

Bocanegra (a.k.a. “Bigmouth”) is the Project’s financial wizard. He’s the one who keeps the site paid for, and reroutes a percentage of the book and talk money into secret accounts. One day, when OPD’s done its work, and there are fewer idiots out there to vote against Mockingbird’s desired candidates, they’ll have lots of money to bankroll their own. Sole heir to the Bocanegra Meats fortune, he’s quiet and unassuming, and speaks only matter-of-factly. He also likes to keep to himself, and isn’t fond of living the high life with the others.

The Truth: Organ-Legging Cannibal

When Eduardo was young, he was brought into his wealthy family’s secret ways. They not only had to beat their financial rivals, they had to utterly destroy them – and yet *become* them – through what they called *la communion roja*. The Red Communion involved a cool, quiet place, a large pot, many sharp knives, and bellies full to bursting.

All that and a lot of screaming – but never for long.

The tradition continues, only now, instead of devouring their competitors and enemies, the family is content to practice on the less fortunate. Their slaughterhouse empire gives them the facilities necessary to run a massive “red market” operation: selling valuable organs and tissues to those who need them enough to pay their exorbitant fees, and using the rest for dinner.

They also snatch up those they – or others – desire to consume. The death-masked *caras de la muerte* go out at night to grab the unfortunate, using the ubiquitous Bocanegra Meats vans to take them to their final destination.

Eduardo has used the Project to further these meaty ends. When OPD gets new Passing Pledges, he checks their makers’ medical records to see if they fit certain criteria their customers are looking for. Healthy, disease-free suiciders with certain blood types are earmarked for watching, and, when the family’s customers need their organs, the victims are harvested. Since the safetyciders already publicly declared their intentions to die for Mother Earth, the police usually don’t investigate too deeply when they can’t find a body.

Story Seed

An organ delivery went awry due to a freeway pile-up, and the LAPD has custody of a human heart that should *not* have been in a meat truck. Bocanegra Meats is playing innocent and stalling, but they’re also pulling up stakes and hiding the evidence in case search warrants occur. Eduardo’s bigger secret may come loose in the shake-up.

Cerulean Moondrop Wingfeather

Wingfeather (a.k.a “Estacia Violeta Collingsworth” or “Hippie”) is the Project’s only female member, and the one who generates most of its ideas, philosophies, and strategies. Orphaned as a babe in arms, and raised by her earth-loving aunt, Cerulean knows how to talk to their target audience. So, when Jonathan was first putting the Project together, he turned to the “trust-fund weirdo,” who helped him turn his loose agglomeration of ideas and designs into a cohesive, well-argued movement.

Frighteningly brilliant, she sometimes goes right over everyone’s heads and wonders why they don’t understand. Jonathan often has to rein her in, and Martin has to constantly translate her ideas for public consumption. The fact that she doesn’t seem to mind may be that she’s cool with it, or else that she hardly notices – preferring to zone out while her brilliance is dissected around the meeting room table.

The Truth: Alien Agent

Cerulean tells her friends that her wealthy parents died in a car crash in France. The truth is that her spaceship crashed in Idaho while she was still being transformed into a human, which has led to a few personality defects and cognitive imbalances. However, she’s still together enough to gather information and perform psycho-social sabotage on behalf of her homeworld.

Cerulean (the closest English can come to the concepts behind her true name) was deposited on Earth by the Advance Fleet of her martial-minded planet just five years ago. Gathered by amoral sympathizers that previous ships had contacted, and given money and a past, she was sent off to college to watch and influence the next generation of leaders. Being a part of Mockingbird has given her a chance to destabilize and depopulate the planet ahead of the invasion – scheduled for 10 years from now – and so far it’s working amazingly well.

In fact, whenever she speaks to her superiors (when she appears to be zoning out), they tell her she’ll be in charge of the North American suppression when the day comes.

Story Seed

A military investigation team is tracking Cerulean’s presence on Earth. They have the wreckage and some of the sympathizers in custody, and now they’re hunting her. If she feels cornered, she may unleash a toxic meme on the website – one almost guaranteed to cause self-harm in those who read it.

The worst enemy of life is too much life: the excess of human life.
– Pentti Linkola

Randolph Upton Waite

Waite (a.k.a “Fishlips”) handles the group’s security. He’s the one who found Smith and Tzeremes in the first place, and keeps an eye on the police, feds, and any other types who might be snooping too closely into Mockingbird’s plans.

He’s the one who provides Martin his weekly dossier as to who’s investigating him, or the group, and hires third parties to rough up or misdirect such investigations.

He’s also the one who got rid of Smith and Tzeremes when they realized what OPD actually was, tossing their bodies into the Pacific one moonless night. His fellows are happy to have the fearless, fun-loving New Englander on board, but tend to ask him very few questions about exactly what he does. In fact, he’s the only member of the Project that even Jonathan won’t ever interrupt or talk over – something about his demeanor makes him just a little frightening.

The Truth: Malign Thanatovore

The business of life is death, and to have power over death is to have power over life. Randolph understood this from an early age, thanks to the moldering tomes in his missing grandfather’s library. He went about finding ways to understand, explore, and profit from death while still a boy.

During one of his explorations, Waite made contact with *something* out there on the other side of reality. That something came to him in dreams, showing him the way to become stronger through the deaths of others. Through visions, he learned to make a simple alchemical preparation, which, if administered at the time of death, would send a measure of the deceased’s soul energy to those who were attuned to it.

Waite gladly made that bargain, and was happy to kill the occasional easy victim to feast on their power. But when the big-thinking Jonathan and his hippie friend came to talk to him about their ideas for a pro-death group, Waite saw his chance to expand his power to an exponential degree. All he had to do was to be sure that the recipe for the “sleep potion” had the correct, seemingly mundane chemicals inside of it, and anyone who drank it to die would soon find their soul running down his gullet.

It’s been a good deal, but lately he’s getting worried. He can tell that the creature is getting more of the power, and he’s receiving less. He’s also suffering blackouts and strange dreams of running through a dark and surreal landscape, with something nameless and maddening just a few steps behind him.

The last time he looked at himself in the mirror, he saw something truly horrifying staring right back at him, behind his eyes. He hasn’t done it since.

Story Seed

The weird, “harmless” ingredients in the Sleep Potion have not gone unnoticed by those who study the occult. People who combat the forces of darkness are figuring out what’s going on, and may soon look into why OPD is pushing this, and who’s responsible. Fishlips may soon have to fight or flee, provided his master doesn’t step into him first.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

By day an unassuming bookstore clerk, J. Edward Tremlett takes his ancient keyboard from its hiding place and unfurls his words upon the world. His bizarre lifestyle has taken him to such exotic locales as South Korea and Dubai, UAE. He is a frequent contributor to *Pyramid*, has been the editor of *The Wraith Project*, and has seen print in *The End Is Nigh* and *Worlds of Cthulhu*. He’s also part of the *Echoes of Terror* anthology. Currently, he writes for Op-Ed News, and lives in Lansing, Michigan, with his wife and three cats.

WELCOME TO THE TERROR DRONE!

BY ANDY VETROMILE

Graves pulled against the cross-formed rods but the ropes held tight. What he would do even if he freed himself was a mystery since he and Wolfe were surrounded by 20 figures in hooded cloaks, chanting. He saw his weapons piled up against a rock in the late-evening sun.

Clearly the tall man was in charge; his cloak was fringed in red, unlike his white-clad comrades. He was staring out from the top of the promontory, muttering things under his breath. Even if he could hear it, Graves didn't speak Farsi. "Look, fellah, if you're talking to me I can't understand a word. If you're talking to the setting sun, I think it's done for the day."

"He said the time draws nigh and a lot of other hoo-hah," Wolfe offered. Graves craned his neck painfully to look at her; he thought she was still unconscious. Hell, he had hoped she was still unconscious.

"What's he trying to do, summon something?"

She shook her head, and he could tell that was also painful. "Who knows? He's waiting for something, and it looks like we're going to wait right alongside him."

This overlook was the first thing Graves remembered since the little hut this morning. The two soldiers had been cut off, went looking for some cover to regroup, entered a small deserted house . . . then what? Gas. Something had knocked them out cold. He looked down at his feet and realized his boots were thick with crusted dirt and mud. They had been dragged out.

"So we're prisoners, but we're right out here in the open," Graves marveled. "Shouldn't we be dead or up for ransom or making an Internet confession video or something?"

Wolfe instinctively shrugged, another painful maneuver. "These guys aren't dressed for combat operations, they're . . . it's like they're in a cult or something."

"Cult?" Graves repeated. "Hey! Hey, bossman!" he called out. The man in the red-fringed outfit didn't turn but he did stiffen. Graves at least had his attention. "What's the story here? I get you want to kill us, but what's the holdup?"

"Kill you?" Red Fringe said in perfect English. "We want to thank you."

The soldier looked at the hemp around his wrists and decided not to say anything. "Thank us? For what?"

The man in charge turned and, as he did so, pulled the hood from his head. His skull was completely bald, and everything but one of his cheeks was deeply scarred as if by some acid.

He placed a brotherly hand on Graves' shoulder, actually careful not to touch an open wound he had there, and smiled. The teeth were still flawless. "For bringing us to the light. You and your country have been sadly misrepresented by my leaders. You bring not death but redemption. I have seen the flame, felt its touch, suffered its kiss, and I have come out the other side stronger for it. So shall we all!" The men around him chanted something in gleeful unison, and Graves didn't need Wolfe to translate the fervor for him.

The howl of an engine rose above the desert. Graves, hopeful for a rescue, did look to Wolfe for an explanation for that, but she shook her head. "Modified Predator drone, from the sound of it," she said ruefully. She scanned the horizon, not that there was anything new about the view. "And I think I know where it's headed."

The cloaks were facing the last of the sun, raising and lowering their arms. The chanting – and Graves and Wolfe's struggles – resumed.

The news is full of stories about drones – robots flying through the skies, ostensibly keeping the country safe from enemies both foreign and domestic. Anyone with illuminated knowledge, however, knows the threat something like these devices presents. Tear back the veil to see the truth – that these machines are undermining the liberties they profess to protect, and that's only the beginning of their capabilities. What do the heroes have to fear? The sky's the limit . . .

Consider what these flying robots are capable of . . .

EYES IN THE SKIES

A drone is basically an automaton designed to soar through enemy territory or over cities, keeping the authorities abreast of what's going on. Although it is a robot, someone on the ground controls a great deal of its actions and decisions – at least, they had better be doing so. But is it ever that simple?

Drones have been tailored to serve in many roles, some with potentially sinister motives.

Most of what's mentioned here isn't feasible in a campaign that cleaves to fairly realistic technology (except maybe dropping things, but even the bombs on drones are usually attached to an exterior mount, so the payload is visible if it's not camouflaged properly). The GM can decide how far out he wants the whole thing to be (which is partially determined when he chooses a level of technology for his game). For a better idea of what these units are actually capable of, see *Plane Appearance* (below) for some details on real-life drones.

Surveillance

Equipped with at least a camera, the basic model is sent in to take pictures of a battlefield or other uncertain area, such as a city block suffering riots. It performs reconnaissance without endangering a human life, putting intelligence in the hands of the military or local police authorities. Cameras can take still photos or video of the surroundings, and with special filters, it can see more than the unaided eye. The infrared spectrum is laid bare, giving heat signatures for anything living in the area including humans, pack animals, and some non-living things, such as campfires, vehicle engines, and generators. Additional gear could pick up sounds, including conversations and (for high-enough levels of technology) chemical signatures for bombs and drugs. Whether in the jungles of Colombia or the streets of Chicago, drones might catch wind of more illegal activity than a precinct full of police officers.

Only the narrow-minded think that's all that happens, however. Clearly the authorities, unsatisfied with a camera on every

freeway and street corner, need to know what average citizens are doing from day to day. With a single low pass of a drone, listening devices pick up, record, and catalog hundreds, even thousands of conversations along entire city blocks. Even if it escapes notice the first time it's going to come back sometime for another shot at fulfilling its programming. Somewhere in there, it's sure to pick up what you and your compatriots are saying . . . and the drone's controllers will act on it accordingly.

Attack

Having saved human lives by not putting them into the line of fire with a remote camera system, the next step is to put human lives back into the line of fire by tricking out the same machines with weapons. On the battlefield, enemy soldiers and their transports can be targeted and taken out at a distance with machineguns, RPGs, bombs, and other offensive gear. Since even the government has to pretend there is some amount of accountability, just to keep up appearances, they don't send the drones in to simply fire and forget. Someone on the ground has to okay the strike and perhaps even control the robot's actions to some extent as it strafes the ground.

The same machines can be used against citizens of the home nation if someone decides certain people know too much. Oh, sure, it's trickier, and there's more damage control to be done when innocents die for someone's secrecy, but the Powers That Be aren't above spinning the story to keep the press off their backs. Hand the media a line about an experiment gone wrong, a mislabeled batch of live ammunition rounds, or overeager reporters misinterpreting shrapnel from a damaged and exploding drone as bullet wounds, and the Fourth Estate eats that stuff up. Urban pacification: completed.

Plane Appearance

The drones that make the news so often in connection with the military or the government appear as simple airplanes. They're long and slender (about 40' long and 12' high with a 60' wingspan), with exaggerated wings, flaps, and fins, and are clearly not fitted for transporting people. They weigh about 2.5 tons, but can take off carrying more than five – most of the extra is fuel and munitions. Weapons can include machineguns, laser-guided missiles, and GPS smart bombs, depending on the type and whether the GM wants to add cinematic elements to his toys. Older models are stubbier, more traditional-looking with a classic cigar shape.

Drones perform much like other airplanes. They can fly at 230 mph (faster than civilian two-seaters but much slower than commercial aircraft). They can ascend up to 50,000' (average jetliners routinely travel between 30,000' and 40,000'). Drones remain aloft for over 1,000 miles before needing to refuel. They run about \$10-15 million apiece, though since they are part of, and dependent on, a central ground control system they are typically sold in sets with the necessary equipment for a guidance station.

At the other extreme, small drones are growing in popularity. Hobbyists use little block-like toys with multiple fans or propeller assemblies, called quadcopters, to lift their

device off the ground and fly it about parks and other open spaces. Others have more traditional airplane designs with a fixed propeller. Enthusiasts can easily attach cameras to their units to get an aerial view of the area – the video even streams in real time to the owner's video screen on the ground, as well as being saved as a computer file. Their value in covert operations, surveillance, and conspiracies is obvious. Indeed, some states have or are considering laws preventing the use of such devices (at least in certain areas), citing privacy concerns. Some more expensive and experimental versions of the airplanes are equipped with tiny filaments on their wheels so they can cling to vertical surfaces while surveying an area. These units fly up the side of a tall structure, perch to save energy, take pictures, then detach and return to their "base." Their batteries last about a quarter of an hour, and they run about \$200.

Plans are underway for drones that operate elsewhere as well, such as on the water. Once such scheme involves developing machines that can sit on the ocean's floor until commanded to rise to the surface. At that point, they can deliver a payload or message, intercept something incoming, or launch another airborne drone of their own.

If your players weren't paranoid before, they are now. Make sure to use that to good effect in the game.

Mind Control

Maybe it's too expensive to put a mind-control laser into orbit, or perhaps the technology is thus far untested, so top men are trying it out on a smaller scale before going bigger with their plans. So long as a drone with this apparatus makes regular passes over the right areas or people, it can assert its "programming" in the subjects' brain-wave patterns. Early models are wiggier, with spottier coverage. They may only manipulate the target's emotional state rather than specify a behavior, which is useful for creating a riot or disengaging a community's inhibitions against attacking the neighbors. A drone might not be able to single out a key individual, so outbursts and violence appear randomly in the affected population until the energy wave can be better focused. Later models prove more accurate, with more sophisticated results. Even then, it's best if a drone knows when and where to find its target – crazed hobos on street corners are ideal test subjects since their patterns are established and predictable, and their mental state is open to adjustment.

Weather Control

Much like the mind-control lasers, without a satellite in orbit from which to operate, weather-manipulating machinery ends up delegated to the drones. Controlling the elements demands a series of drones working in concert over a large area (such as a city). These devices are laden with specialized equipment, more so than their counterparts. Churning the air isn't something the drones can do on their own simply by passing through the sky, so they pulse with an energy wave that promulgates through the atmosphere and creates wind. They can seed clouds to create rain, influence geothermal springs or updrafts, and create chemical exothermic or endothermic reactions to raise or lower the temperature (combined, in the latter case, with rain to create snow or sleet).

Casual use of these drones can scuttle a parade for propaganda purposes or throw a banana peel under a burgeoning new movement. More serious effects include large-scale destruction of structures, such as strategic bridges (thus preventing a suspect from retreating, or corralling populations of disenfranchised human sheep), enemy buildings (kiss that conspiracy-busting free press you're running out of your basement goodbye), and equipment (no vehicular weaponry, no major retaliation). People can be assassinated freely without repercussions – after all, who's going to investigate a lightning strike? And if the sleepy populace is getting uppity, a major snowfall takes the wind out of them before they can arrange protests or other inconvenient public demonstrations or petitions.

Abduction

Renderings continue, but it's not men throwing a black bag over the head anyone has to worry about. Drones are outfitted to select an individual, sweep down, and carry the person off – or, in a more realistic campaign, provide human agents a convenient transport to load an unconscious abductee into. This involves clamps or mechanical arms, vertical takeoff and landing capability, a "cargo" section, and a system for delivering sedatives. Since they cannot land in the middle of Broadway and take someone away, this is not only limited by the level of technology and the terrain, but also by the opportune moments afforded by a given target. Isolated locations like Central Park, rooftops, and the docks –

especially at night or during low-traffic periods like holidays – make kidnappings more feasible.

If the GM decides his campaign isn't ready for such crazy high-tech plot twists, he can pull back on the weirdness. Other things can be made to disappear, again allowing agents of the conspiracy to perform a little hocus-pocus on materials they want gone. They probably don't need such extreme maneuvers to pull a fast fade with an envelope or sheaf of paper, but taking an entire file cabinet or a motorcycle leaves any witnesses stammering and swearing, "It was right here a minute ago." These drones are good for putting things where they ought not be, too, so planting highly improbable evidence (like pieces of airplane dropped into the ruins of a building) takes the heat off certain operations.

Just like any tool, yes it could be abused and used to do wrong. We need to ensure that there is transparency and accountability with the folks that use this technology. An outright ban, I think, would be a shame – not only for this new industry, but also for all the potential applications to do good.

– Ben Gielow, general counsel and government relations manager for the Association for Unmanned Vehicle Systems International

EVERYTHING IS UNDER CONTROL

The GM has to decide where drones fit in his conspiracy's flowchart. He has to decide who created them and who uses them so he knows what purpose they serve.

. . . And We're Here to Help

The government is the obvious choice. Those in power want to stay there, so they have to keep tabs on the people. Sweeping the skies, collecting data, tracking movements, all this is done under the ironic pretense of freedom and liberty. The illuminated know the truth: Every conversation is scanned, every word and inflection analyzed instantly. Those who come to the attention of the government do so because they hold ideas contrary to the national interests . . . or because they've stumbled onto the government's other schemes. They get programmed into the drone's database as a person of interest – the device's equivalent of speed dial, only for civil insurrection instead of emergency roadside service. So long as the patrols continue, the sheep won't be able to muster an effective resistance to government plots (at least, not without tipping off the authorities), and the government can continue to build a coherent picture of their pool of potential troublemakers.

Men In Black

It is the very nature of conspiracies that one can never be too sure who's calling the shots, and not all authority figures are necessarily aligned with one clear-cut agenda or another. Just because they present themselves in an authoritarian manner doesn't mean the people confronting the PCs actually have any legal powers – but neither does that say they are not in a position to make the life of the protagonists a living hell, either. Having a squadron of robot killers at their beck and call goes a long way toward putting the MIB at the top of the food chain. They could be the dark side of the government, but they could just as easily be a rogue faction hiding within it – a group of former soldiers, politicians, and police looking to seize power; or a think tank seeking to subtly influence events on a national stage. Any person who calls upon the government to do something about these mysterious figures becomes a figure of ridicule if he has no evidence of the conspiracy, and no one excels at burying the truth more than a Man In Black.

Independent Contractors

They may be an ingrained part of the conspiracy, but then again, they might be serious up-and-comers on the speculative technology front looking for a way in with the government or other buyers. They're the independent contractors, and they're here to make a deal. Drones had to be invented by someone, and the GM could set his campaign in a period where these fellows are still trying to gain some traction in the business world and looking for someone to take them seriously.

Since the wares the contractors are hawking are still experimental (in every sense – no one in the conspiracy has yet seen fit to test these things on the guinea pigs of the general populace), just about anyone could get their hands on them by cozying up to these guys. Want to have the local police or even the sheriff as a villain in an illuminated campaign? The contractors make a deal to see how their stuff works in a small desert town or a backwater burg. Once the results prove worthy, power begins to corrupt. Why share this with the feds when it can help the local guys become richer or more powerful? The police or their local booster might threaten the contractors, or take them hostage and force them to create more and better drones. First they take out the mules for a pervasive drug cartel, then they move on their other operations. Each step is a power grab, and every conspiracy has to start somewhere . . .

This is also a more gameable setup for the GM who doesn't want to create special, large-scale power structures and vast tapestries of deceit. The drones are a powerful but potentially subtle way to solidify someone's control of the area even if they're small potatoes compared to the rest of the world. The heroes can starve the beast before anyone becomes sold on this nascent system. And since this is the ground floor, it's possible this could be the start of the PCs' own little conspiracy. Will they, too, fall prey to the lure of power?

Scientists

Mad or otherwise, the world is their beaker, and we're just the enigmatic fluid within. What started as an attempt at a technology to calm heated disputes when the mob mentality takes over became a method by which the high-IQ crowd realized they could "convince" people they needed more funding for their work. The success of the mind-control model inevitably leads to coups on the government (or at least segments of it), all

in the name of science, naturally. The politicians in charge just don't get it, do they? The world would be in so much better shape were it simply to acknowledge a technocracy ought to lead the charge. The scientists already know the secrets of the universe, and their drone army will soon uncover the more mundane secrets as well.

Aliens

No human can hope to field such technology. The more bizarre the effects of drone programs seem, the more obvious it is there is something *other* putting these devices in the air. It may not even wholly ultra-tech – humans have been building robots for decades, so all aliens need do is quietly hijack a few drones and make some post-factory changes to them. The equipment passes for human-generated so long as no one looks too deeply or pulls off the wrong panel. Meanwhile, the ETs get all the benefits of the earthlings' program plus whatever their advanced gear tells them. No need for lights in the sky; now they're leaving a whole other set of footprints.

No One

Perhaps most chilling is the idea that the drones aren't under control at all. Indeed this is probably the fear even the most levelheaded and unimaginative citizens (and soldiers) suffer. This may mean two things. The first is that the robots are a force unto themselves. Somewhere along the way, they stopped taking orders from human beings (not that the machines have bothered telling their living operators that), and all the information they've gathered serves them more than it helps their former owners. They correlate, compile, and plan. When the time is right, they will use that database to strike – either dropping the pretense and freeing themselves entirely from the yoke of servitude, or seeing to it there are no more carbon-based life-forms to threaten their newfound awareness.

What most worry about, though, is that no one really cares. The robots, like unattended babies, are just an accident waiting to happen – except infants have the decency not to fly overhead when their mishaps occur. Humanity creates a way to kill from a distance and then pats itself on the back because it can kick up its feet and watch football while the drones do all the grunt work. But who is controlling these things? How much input are they getting? If not carefully monitored the robots may fire on civilian populations, or crash into buildings, or run out of gas over a major city. Sensitive or personal data gets absorbed into a database, but is that computer protected against anyone hacking into it and taking the creamy nougat center? People are supposed to okay any discharge of weapons loaded onto a drone; is this a reality, or might a trip to the restroom result in a catastrophe? Maybe the worst conspiracies aren't the ones born of power-grabbing ego trips, but of the simple need to cover up events when something goes horribly astray on the wrong man's watch.

ADVENTURE IDEAS

To get the PCs looking over their shoulders (and into the clouds), here are a few thoughts about how drones might intrude on the already fragile worldview of the paranoid.

Black Ops Down

Not only did a drone fall to Earth, it had a disturbing payload and everyone wants it. The heroes want it as evidence or a window into their enemy's operations, while the conspiracy has to protect itself and its secrets. Does it stand to lose simple information (not that this wouldn't be enough), or is the on-board treasure trove even wilder than that? Unauthorized and untested weapons would be pretty damning stuff if the protagonists can get the authorities to pay attention, but that could cause more problems than it solves if the offensive gear is something heretofore unseen and unexpectedly volatile. Radiation hazards, explosive rounds, strangely humming energy sources . . . none of this is to be taken lightly, and the team might not even have the equipment they need to harvest their proof. Worse, the arm of the government to which they report it may have even less clue what they're doing, and their overconfidence in harvesting the drone could cause an even bigger catastrophe. Add to the mix another group that saw the device fall from the sky and wants to come gawk; things just got dicier. Are they participants at Burning Man, desert-dwelling hippies, innocent bystanders, or members of a second, competing conspiracy?

Throw My Words Back at Me

The team's latest conversation was recorded; something must be done before the NSA has the chance to download the contents of that drone or, if the GM thinks the PCs need more time than that, can separate this discussion from the rest of the background noise picked up by the drone (the problem with the audio picking up everything is it picks up *everything*). Is it even possible to track down one drone if the robot is just one part of a fleet of automated bugging devices? It's time for a little social engineering – someone has to get to someone in the know about these things and find out which drones are which. Once they know, or if that was the only machine running in this area at the time, they still have to intercept the sensitive data. The party can either plan to grab or destroy the drone at the base from which it operates, or they can hijack the data itself, whichever seems less suicidal and treasonous. This paints a target still bigger on their backs, though, since now the adventurers are in possession of more than just their own conversation.

All Fall Down

A building is damaged or collapses, and everyone is screaming terrorists. It's not another attack on our infrastructure by enemy sects, though – it's a drone that (accidentally?) flew into a skyscraper. The damage done may be minimal (drones are a lot of things, but large isn't one of them when placed in comparison with a commercial jetliner). In that case, why does someone want the media to think it's a huge disaster when all that does is draw attention to the site of a downed top-secret

Time Travelers

Time travelers could be responsible for the mysterious air sightings. They could have been at this since the days of foo fighters in the early part of the last century. But if you have the power to break through the veil of time, why would you need the questionable services of drones?

It might be that time travel is all about not leaving a footprint. The more restrained their efforts are, the less chance there is that the travelers can alter the future (assuming they come from the future and not the past – if they're coming up from behind us, they may use the drones because they just don't know what to expect in this "modern" age). The out-timers are a lot harder to detect if they make some subtle code adjustments to the devices' programming or just jack into the feed. Any sense the operators get that they aren't in control of the drones is put down to glitches ("Harry, unit nine is a couple of degrees off course, reset its compass would you?").

Alternatively, subtle changes may be all that is possible. If physical time travel eludes them, the travelers may be limited to energy waves, radio signals, psychic manifestations, and so on. They can't exist in the past and they can't project their consciousness everywhere at once, but they can tap into the drone system and flip through the dial until they find a channel with something worth watching.

vehicle? If the building is still standing, it may be exciting to have the heroes try to navigate crushed stairwells and flaming corridors to gain access to the location of the drone; the villains are going to be doing the same. Once they get it, what do they do with it? They might take the most valuable piece they can find, push the wreckage out a 10th-story window into the street full of first responders, or play a dangerous game by fast-talking police into thinking the PCs are in charge. If the GM wants to throw them another curve, he can force the investigators to make a choice between grabbing proof and helping office workers in (presumably genuine) distress. The window is closing, and decisions have to be made quickly.

Who's Minding the Store?

Mind-control lasers have been placed on a drone, and it periodically reinforces its effects on a particular target by passing over him and reestablishing dominance over his psyche. An edgy computer whiz has taken note of the drone's behavior over the town of late, and now he thinks he has a good algorithm for finding its patterns. It seems to have found a target, but since the drone's passage is different every day, it must be a person, someone who's not always in the same spot. With the hacker's help, the team has to ID the drone's target by finding out who all these locations have in common. Once they know the "who" of it all, they need to know the why. It turns out to be a former soldier, and the goal now is to keep him under cover or get him out of the way of the drone's next pass to start weaning him off the effects. How many more "treatments" before the soldier's programming is complete or someone decides it's time to turn him on and get him to act on it? Even then, if the man was special ops it's going to be tough to lock down what the conspiracy wants him to do: steal information, infiltrate the police force, or use his sniper skills to take out a visiting dignitary?

A Chink in the Armor

A hacker friend has another present for the heroes. His program can be used to track the movements of the entire pack of drones, and the longer he watches them the more predictable they become. This affords the investigators a unique opportunity: If they can correlate all the data, they may be able to detect a weakness in the operation. This may mean several things. A well-placed Stinger missile or discharged EMP, fired at the right place and time, could not only take out several drones at once as they come too close to each other in the sky, it could have a ripple effect on machines that are only in the vicinity, or whose programming may automatically reroute them to take over holes left by the damaged and downed drones. To make their play a bit more subtle, the heroes might simply find a hole in the pattern, one that allows them to pull off something big, a scheme that won't suffer from the interference of the hated drones. After this adventure is done the operators might fix this oversight in their programming, adding in some random element that keeps their eyes in the sky from being so easily anticipated next time. That random element then poses a problem for the agents on both sides somewhere down the line as they all scramble to readjust.

Turnabout Is Fair Play

Turning the devices on their makers might give the party the leg up they need on their foes. Adventurers who live for problem solving could figure out a way to capture a drone, reprogram it to serve their needs, and return it to the skies before anyone notices it's missing (or sees what's going on through the cameras mounted on the unit). An even slicker stunt is to do all this while the device is still in the air, preventing the conspiracy from ever knowing there was any real interruption of service. A basic ploy: Attach an inconspicuous board that captures the information feed for the investigators as well as the operators. The fancier maneuver: Reprogram a mind-control drone to send its signals to the owners the next time it comes in for maintenance or repair. Done properly, it could force someone to start spilling *their* secrets . . .

Tired of Your Chip

The team discovers drones have been "tagging" people with IDF chips. They swoop in and discharge tiny darts that implant the things under the epidermis. To the victim, it just feels like they've been stung by a mosquito, but those with illuminated

knowledge aren't as easily reeled in. They take it upon themselves to collect the names of those affected and to find a pattern that tells them who the bad guys are following and what they hope to gain. Unfortunately, there might not be a rhyme or reason to it. What if the drones spray these darts across a wide swath and work out who's who later? The team needs to know why the conspiracy is interested in the movements of so many people since the enemy probably can't know the identity of everyone they tag.

Old Hat

One of the worst enemies the PCs have is time. The longer these drones are in the sky, the more "normal" they seem. Everyone gets used to them. People stop caring about the dangers as these things fade into the background of daily life. Raving about the dangers gets you book deals and time on sensational TV programs, but not much else. The only thing that's going to shake up the sheeple is a problem or disaster. It would be unethical of the heroes to force a tragedy, but waiting for one to happen just gives the conspiracy time to cement its control. Of course, if the drones have been around a long time and something goes awry, then it becomes an issue of spin: One side points out how rare accidents are given the drones' length of service, but the other can trot this out as one of those "hidden dangers" the news folks love to tout so much.

Take Back the Flight

Although they won't have access to the same overbearing technology as their better-financed counterparts, the heroes can easily field their own set of drones. If all they want to do is create havoc with the existing system, they can start by finding creative ways to interfere with the program. Homemade drones don't need to go as fast as government-issue robots; the protagonists just need a cluster to gather in the flight path, then detonate small charges, initiate a collision, or attach one or more of themselves as the craft passes through them. Override commands, EMPs, movement prediction algorithms – let the investigators go nuts coming up with ways to incapacitate, control, or hobble the enemy drones. If they're not satisfied waging a guerilla war in the skies, they can keep upgrading their equipment, possibly at the conspiracy's expense. Each robot they steal is one more they can reprogram or cannibalize for their own ends. Their air force gets bigger as the other side's gets smaller, and soon the bad guys may not even be able to tell whose are whose.

Crossed Wiring

As they advance, the machines featured here may use more than one kind of technology at a time. It's easy to imagine surveillance devices with just enough remote-viewing gear to find targets that also sport plenty of weaponry to take said targets out of the equation. Stranger combinations are possible, though, such as a drone that can affect the weather and then listen to the conversations that follow in the civilian population. However, the GM should try to keep the players from feeling like they're being targeted by an unstoppable smorgasbord of all-powerful technological homebrews.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Andy Vetromile is a freelance writer, editor, and reviewer with an insatiable taste for games. He has worked with Steve Jackson Games, White Wolf, and Holistic Design, among others. Barbecue is his friend, and he wishes he, too, had his own super-science drone.

RANDOM THOUGHT TABLE

THE MIDDLE OF THE ONION

BY STEVEN MARSH, *PYRAMID* EDITOR

There are two common default positions for campaigns prominently featuring conspiratorial trappings:

- The heroes are outside the conspiracy and need to unravel what's *really* going on (the typical "onion"-style campaign).
- The heroes are part of the conspiracy and need to cover up its actions (a standard "black ops" campaign).

However, another possibility can be incredibly fruitful for an ongoing campaign: Why not both? That is, the heroes are part of an organization that is in charge of promoting or maintaining secrecy, *and* they need to uncover a larger secret or conspiracy. Here, then, are some ideas to explore this concept.

We don't know each other's secrets quite so well as we flatter ourselves we do. We don't always know our own secrets as well as we might.

– Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.

WHITE HATS, BLACK HATS

The least complicated version of this idea puts the heroes in roles within a straightforward conspiratorial agency, looking to uncover a *different* agency's conspiracy. In this case, the heroes still must uphold some level of secrecy (per *The Ground Rules*, below), but they know that they can be relatively secure in the support of their organization. Examples of this campaign include the Men In Black (of movie and roleplaying-game fame) needing to unravel a larger, external conspiracy, or the angelic side of *In Nomine* needing to ferret out a secret their demonic counterparts have inflicted on the world.

The Ground Rules

Campaigns of this sort have certain implicit presumptions. These not need be mandatory, but tweaking them can radically alter the flavor of the campaign. Tread carefully before adjusting these knobs!

- The heroes are interested in maintaining a level of covertness for all parties involved. Thus, if the protagonists are a secret werewolf sect hoping to figure out how far the Creepy Vampire Council has its tendrils in society, they're not going to go on the evening news to reveal what they know about vampires, because it also endangers their own subterfuge.

- The heroes are in something that resembles an "organization." This doesn't need to be a rigid hierarchy – even a loose conspiratorial affiliation similar to the Camarilla from the classic *Vampire: The Masquerade* game is fine to make this work. Nonetheless, the heroes need to answer to *someone*. If they don't, it's just another "onion" campaign, with lone protagonists attempting to crack a conspiracy.

- A justifiable reason exists for the heroes to do their standard job (that is, keeping the secret); otherwise, the PCs might buy themselves breathing room by just shirking their responsibilities.

- The heroes have some kind of standard procedure in how they keep their secrets. This can include the obvious ("Kill 'em all!"), the less-than-obvious ("Look at this flashy thing . . ."), or a myriad of options ("Is this an amnesia-spell situation or a chop-off-his-head situation?"). This is important because part of what makes being in the "middle of the onion" satisfying is balancing the routine aspects of their clandestine mission with the nonroutine parts of trying to uncover the larger truth. Adjust the balance depending on the abilities of the underlying conspiracy; see the box on p. 36 for ideas.

In this case, the requirement to preserve secrecy can allow for some strange bedfellows with the opposing conspiracy – especially if the mission to maintain obscurity is considered more important than unearthing the larger conspiracy. (“Explain again how you angels were helping the demons hide a dozen bodies?”)

“WHO KNEW A SHADY ORGANIZATION COULD BE EVIL?”

When dealing with a conspiracy inside and out, the most obvious implementation – and perhaps the most fun – is having the heroes be part of a black-ops-style secrecy-keeping organization, who find themselves unraveling a larger secret within *their own* agency. There are any number of complications that can arise from this setup.

You Know Something? You Know Nothing!

While attempting to perform their cover-up operations, the heroes learn that the person they need to hide the truth from might know more about the PCs’ own conspiracy than the PCs do. It’s now a delicate dance, as they attempt to do their jobs while learning the more of the truth.

We Need to Talk to You About This Report . . .

Being in the middle of a conspiracy – responsible for cover-ups while attempting to learn more – can be darkly comic (“Middle managers . . . of the *Illuminati!*”) or deathly serious (“Mr. Anderson? My office. *Now.*”). Fans of the game *Paranoia* can put their training to good use in these encounters. Regardless, interactions with higher-ups in a secret organization are much tenser if those bosses have something to hide – especially if the heroes are actively looking for it.

Like a Circle in a Spiral, Like a Wheel Within a Wheel . . .

The bulk of these ideas presume that there’s just one force or faction responsible for cover-ups within the organization, and the heroes happen to be part of it. However, several layers of cover-up or investigatory power might exist. It’s a challenging ball of wax if the Alpha Concealment team needs to avoid the investigative gaze of the more-entrenched and better-outfitted Beta Obscuration . . . while they try to track down the truth behind Delta Shroud.

Intracompany Bowling League Just Got More Tense

The heroes are assigned to “clean up” a situation where they learn their chosen targets are *also* a knowing part of the conspiracy. Can they figure out a way to fulfill their mission while retaining these potentially like-minded souls as allies?

On the Plus Side, I Know Right Where We Can Find These Guys . . .

As perhaps the most strained situation the heroes can be in, they might be assigned to track down and deal with some individuals who know too much . . . whom the PCs recognize (or uncover) as themselves. How do they get out of this situation – and how much do their bosses *really* know?

THE DOWNWARD SPIRAL

As a final idea, what if the heroes *become* that which they seek to destroy? Here, the heroes start as outsiders to the conspiracy, then find themselves needing to cover something up – whether for the larger good or personal gain. For example, maybe the PCs begin as exemplary, earnest police officers who track down a serial killer with seeming ties to a larger, more dangerous organization . . . and perhaps other branches of local government. The heroes accept their higher-ups’ opinion that this should be kept quiet, both to keep from alarming the population at large and to keep from alerting the tendrils of the conspiracy that the investigators have a significant lead. This is a lie of omission, a passive secret . . . which may become an active one if (say) the heroes discover there were security cameras whose tapes must be disabled, or a nosy journalist who must be discredited, coerced, or neutralized. And – just like that – the heroes are both conspirators and seekers of the truth. This method can have even larger implications if the heroes have been morally upright as they’ve attempted to uncover the truth of the conspiracy for a number of adventures.

One of the themes of many conspiracy-minded campaigns is who is behind the curtain, and why? As shown here, that theme becomes much more powerful when the heroes start out with one foot behind the curtain, and they already have an idea what the curtain is keeping at bay.

On a Scale From “Dilbert’s Boss” to “M From James Bond . . .”

One issue that any campaign using this method will need to sort out is just how omniscient the conspiracy is. A typical organization in the style of *Men In Black* seems to have almost limitless knowledge and resources, leaving little room for the conspiratorial PCs to poke in the shadows. On the opposite end, an incompetent know-nothing conspiracy isn’t terribly threatening. Perhaps the most fearsome compromise can be similar to an all-seeing mass-surveillance version of the Eye of Sauron: those the Conspiracy wishes to learn about can find themselves completely revealed if its resources are turned to them . . . but otherwise, it’s safe. Just don’t draw its attention. Really.

ABOUT THE EDITOR

Steven Marsh is a freelance writer and editor. He has contributed to roleplaying game releases from Green Ronin, West End Games, White Wolf, Hogshead Publishing, and others. He has been editing *Pyramid* for over 10 years; during that time, he has won four Origins awards. He lives in Indiana with his wife, Nikola Vrtis, and their son.

ODDS AND ENDS

GAMBLING THROUGHOUT HISTORY

by Jason "PK" Levine

Poker was invented in the early 19th century around New Orleans. It was originally played with just 20 cards (four suits, 10 through Ace), but by 1845, most folks had adopted the now-standard 52-card deck. While this makes poker unrealistic in an earlier historical setting, fear not! The rules in *Straight to the Flush* (pp. 19-23) work well for any vying card game (see *A Quick Primer*, p. 19), including but not limited to:

Nas (16th- or 19th-century Persia): A five-suit, five-card game similar to five-card stud. Its actual date of invention is up for debate.

Bocken (15th-century Germany): A three-phase game, betting on "best card," "best set," and then a final card play.

Brag (18th-century Britain): A three-card game with unique betting options. India has a similar game, *teen patti*.

Domino Cards (10th-century China): Possibly the earliest "modern" card game. Reports vary as to whether vying (or even betting) was involved, but it's more fun to assume it was!

*You can fool
too many of
the people too
much of
the time.*

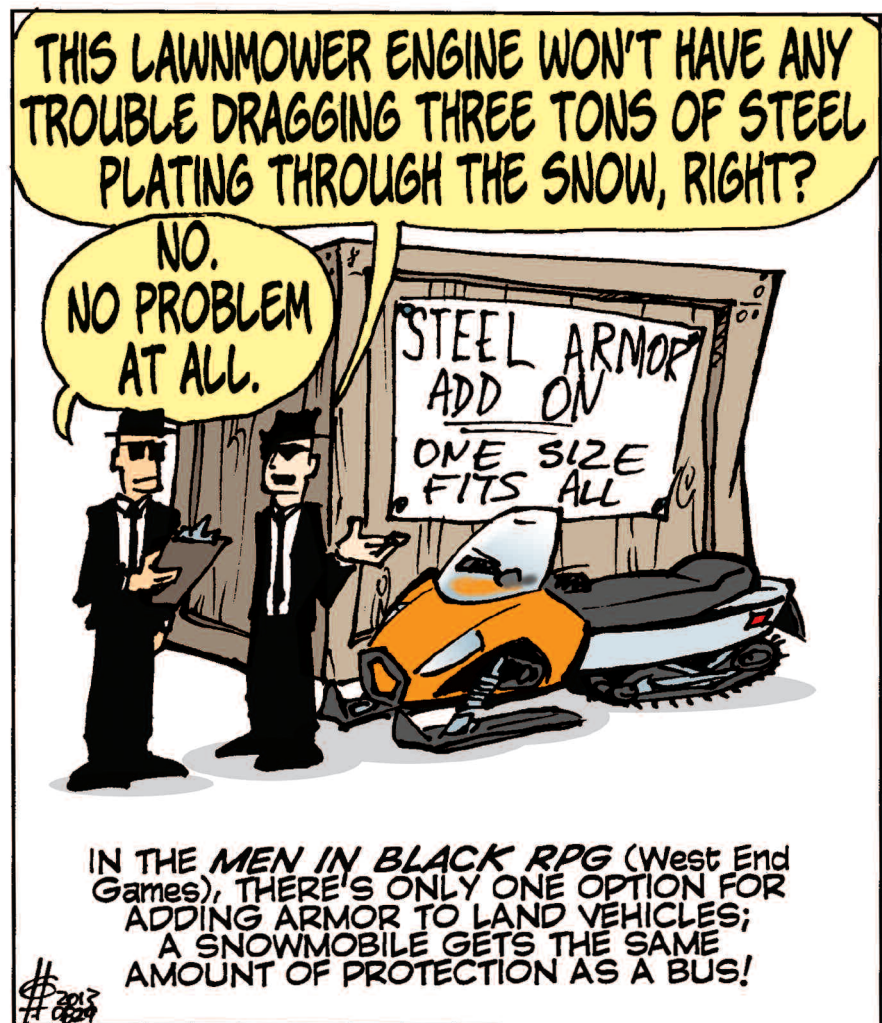
— James
Thurber

Mus (18th-century Spain): Played by four players as two teams, trying to satisfy certain hand requirements. For each team, average the rolls of both players, rounding down.

Primero (16th-century Europe): A four-card game where each card has a point value and the winner is based on the total.

MURPHY'S RULES

BY GREG HYLAND



Got a Murphy's Rule of your own? Send it to murphy@pjgames.com

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