

GUMSHOE SRD CREATIVE COMMONS VERSION

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Introduction

This standard reference document provides the GUMSHOE rules made available via the terms of the Open Gaming and Creative Commons-By Attribution licenses. It is a reference for game designers, and is not tuned to teach the game, or provide a playable game experience. If you're looking for a playable game, seek out such Pelgrane Press titles as *The Esoterrorists*, *Trail of Cthulhu*, *Ashen Stars*, *Night's Black Agents*, *Mutant City Blues*, or *Fear Itself*. Or watch for games the users of this license will build with it.

Notes appearing in italics within square brackets provide guidance for designers basing their own games on these rules. Avoid unsought hilarity (and violation of the OGL) by remembering to cut them from your finished manuscript.

This document provides text you can cut and paste into your games. It naturally assumes that you have acquired a fundamental understanding of GUMSHOE by reading and extensively playing at least one GUMSHOE game. When creating core rule books, you will want to interleave this text with examples of your own devising, which show new readers how the rules work, and, at the same time, convey the tone, spirit and entertainment value of your setting.

This open license document does not grant rights to use the settings of Pelgrane's GUMSHOE games. You might however use it as the basis for generic scenarios GMs can adapt to their horror, space opera, or spy thriller GUMSHOE worlds of choice.

Your Character

Create player characters by choosing your **character concept**, **investigative abilities**, and **general abilities**.

Investigative abilities allow you to find the information your character needs to move forward in a mystery-solving narrative, plus occasional additional benefits.

General abilities help you survive while you're gathering information and solving problems. You create characters by spending build points on your character's abilities. Each ability has a numerical rating. Every rating point costs 1 build point to purchase.

The GUMSHOE rules define your character by what he or she can accomplish in an investigative scenario. The component elements of each ability don't matter in rules terms. The rules don't care if your Forensic Accounting ability is one part native mental acuity to two parts training or vice versa, although you can mention them when describing your character to others. All that matters is how you solve cases, and overcome other obstacles arising from them.

Ratings and Pools

The number you assign to each ability is called a **rating**. Although you may improve them gradually over time, ratings remain static over the course of the typical game session.

For each ability your character has a **pool** of points, which fluctuates over the course of each session. You begin each case, or scenario, with pool points equal to your rating. You might then immediately spend some of them during a prelude phase to the investigation itself. You will definitely spend points as you conduct the investigation. At times your pool may increase,

sometimes **refreshing** to equal its rating again.

The distinction between ratings and pools is a crucial one; keep it in mind as you read and interpret the GUMSHOE rules.

Step One: Concept

[Describe the sorts of mystery-solving characters the players will play in your setting, and any preliminary creative decisions each player will make about her character.]

Stereotypes

[In some games you may wish to guide players to choose genre-appropriate concepts by supplying a list of stereotypes as a starting point in character creation.]

Sample Stereotype: Good Girl

The good girl is an ordinary young woman. If not chaste, she's more modest and circumspect about her sexuality than the other young women in the cast of characters. Smart and cautious, she becomes the ultimate prize of the shadowy forces stalking the group—often proving herself more determined to survive than those around her.

[From Fear Itself]

Packages

[In some games you may choose to give additional mechanical heft to the stereotypes by turning them into Packages.]

Each package sets out minimum requirements in both Investigative and General abilities. Before spending any points elsewhere, make sure you have those covered.

Sample Package: Communications Officer (Hailer)

You establish, receive and route communications with other ships, planetary installations, and space stations. More than a glorified space receptionist, you serve as a combination of public relations frontperson and psychological warrior. You facilitate the decision-making process of the crew and convey its intentions to the outside world. In crisis situations, you keep vital information flowing to the stratco, so that the right decisions get made at lightning speed. During space combat, you launch hack attacks on the enemy's computer system, while defending your own from penetration.

Investigative: Linguistics 1, Flattery 1, Reassurance 1, Decryption 1, Data Retrieval 1

General: Communications Intercept 6, Sense Trouble 4

[From Ashen Stars]

Occupations

[A variant of the Package sub-system, the Occupation, appears in Trail of Cthulhu. Rather than

providing minimums to qualify for a package, an Occupation provides key abilities at half-price, and often a Special mechanical benefit as well. Future Pelgrane GUMSHOE designs will likely stick to the faster, simpler ability minimum approach found in Packages.]

You get two rating points in **Occupational abilities** for every one build point you spend. For example, 12 rating points of Occupational abilities cost you 6 build points. Left over half-points are lost, so assign an even number points to Occupational abilities.

Sample Occupation: Private Investigator

There are things that cops can't do, and things that cops won't do, and you'll take money to do either. Sometimes you get dragged into something the cops want you out of, but you gotta stay in it to keep the cops honest. What keeps you honest? Now, that's the real mystery, ain't it?

Occupational Abilities: Accounting, Disguise, Driving, Law, Locksmith, Photography, Assess Honesty, Reassurance, Scuffling, Shadowing.

Special: Private eyes with point pools in Disguise or Shadowing may spend points *after* rolling the die for a test. For every 2 points you spend *after* rolling the die, you increase the die result by 1. This *only* applies if you are undistracted and not directly observed. It never applies during a contest. You must describe the thing that almost went wrong, and how you caught it barely in time or succeeded through sheer luck.

[From Trail of Cthulhu]

Step Two: Assign Investigative Abilities

Investigative abilities are central to any GUMSHOE character; they enable you to gather information and drive the plot forward. The number of points each player spends on investigative abilities varies according to the number of regularly attending players, according to the following table. The GM leads the group through the list of investigative build points, ensuring that each one of them is covered by at least one member of the group.

[Complete this chart with values based on the total number of investigative abilities you include in your game. That number is x . The final numbers don't have to be dead on, so fudge them upwards if desired for a prettier-looking numerical progression.]

# of players	Investigative Build Points
2	80% of x
3	60% of x
4	55% of x
5+	50% of x

Players who can only attend every now and then get the same number of investigative build points as everyone else, but are not counted toward the total when deciding how many points to allocate.

Free Rating

[If your setting concept assumes all characters will have a particular ability (like Cop Talk if everyone is a police officer), indicate what it is, and that everyone gets 1 rating point in it for free.]

What Good Are Investigative Ratings?

Players used to the bumbling half-competence of their characters in other investigative game systems may be surprised to learn how effective even a single rating point is.

Any rating in an investigative ability indicates a high degree of professional accomplishment or impressive natural talent. If you have an ability relevant to the task at hand, you automatically succeed in discovering any information or overcoming any obstacles necessary to propel you from the current scene further into the story.

You may ask to spend points to gain **special benefits**. Sometimes the GM will offer you the chance to spend points. In other circumstances she may accept your suggestions of ways to gain special benefits. Use them wisely; spent points do not return until the next investigation begins.

Once all of the abilities are covered, you are permitted, if you desire, to reserve any remaining build points to spend as situations arise during play. You may assign yourself additional abilities, or increase your ratings in the ones you've chosen, as seems appropriate to your character and the situations she finds herself in. When you choose to do this, you are not suddenly acquiring abilities on the spot, but simply revealing for the first time what the character has been able to do all along.

If you want, you can save build points from character creation to spend later. If your GM is running an ongoing series, you will accumulate additional build points during play.

Investigative Benchmarks

When choosing investigative abilities it is better to get a large number of abilities with fairly low ratings. Even a 1-point rating is worth having. You'll rarely want to spend more than 3 or 4 points on any one investigative ability.

You must have an investigative ability at a rating of at least 1 to get useful information from it.

Step 3: Assign General Abilities

Each player gets 60 points to spend on general abilities, regardless of group size.

General abilities use different rules than investigative ones, which allow for possible failure. They help you survive while you investigating. When choosing general abilities, you'll want to concentrate your points among a few abilities, giving your comparatively higher ratings than you want in the investigative category.

[To support 60 as the value for general build points, include approximately 12 broadly useful general abilities. Some games may also support specialized general abilities on top of the 12. You may wish to assign an additional build pool to another class of general abilities unique to your setting.]

You start the game with 1 point *[each]* in Health and *[any other similar ablative ability required]*

for the setting's genre emulation, like Stability in most GUMSHOE horror games.]

Although there is no set cap on abilities, the second highest rating must be at least half that of the highest rating.

What Good are General Ratings?

General abilities use a different set of rules and are measured on a different scale than investigative abilities. The two ability sets are handled in different way because they fulfill distinct narrative functions. The rules governing general abilities introduce the possibility of failure into the game, creating suspense and uncertainty. Uncertain outcomes make scenes of physical action more exciting, but can stop a mystery story dead if applied to the collection of information. This division may seem aesthetically weird when you first encounter it, but as you grow used to the GUMSHOE system you'll see that it works.

GUMSHOE focuses not on your character's innate traits, but on what they can actually do in the course of a storyline. Why they can do it is up to each player. Your characters are as strong, fast, and good-looking as you want them to be.

General Ability Benchmarks

A rating of 1-3 indicates that the ability is a sideline. 4-7 is solid but not off the charts. 8 or more suggests a dedicated bad-assery that will be immediately apparent to observers when they see you in action.

0-Rated General Abilities

If you have a rating of 0 in a general ability, that is you have put no build points into it, you cannot make a test on that ability. That is not to say you can't do the thing at all; it's only if you want to attempt something requiring a roll that you will not succeed. You character might be able to drive, but with a Drive rating of 0 you will not be able to deal with a car chase or potential crash.

Investigative Abilities

The following abilities are the bread and butter of GUMSHOE characters.

Ability descriptions consist of a brief general description, followed by examples of their use in an investigation. Creative players should be able to propose additional uses for their abilities as unexpected situations confront their characters.

Certain specific actions may overlap between a couple of abilities. For example, you can enhance image resolution with either Data Retrieval or Photography.

Some abilities, like Research, are broadly useful, and will crop up constantly. Others may be called for many times in the course of one scenario, and not at all in others. When building your character, strike a balance between the reliable workhouse abilities and their exotic, specialized counterparts.

Investigative abilities are divided into the following sub-groups: Academic, Interpersonal, and Technical. The purpose of the sub-groups is to allow you to quickly find the best ability for the

task during play, by scanning the most likely portion of the overall list.

[Rewrite investigative ability descriptions and example bullet points as needed for your setting. Rename abilities for desired flavor. Create new abilities keyed to your setting. Include only abilities relevant to your setting in your game. Some investigative abilities tie into specific general abilities and vice versa; make sure you either include both relevant abilities, or drop the cross-references between them.]

Anthropology (Academic)

You are an expert in the study of human cultures, from the stone age to the Internet age.

You can:

- identify artifacts and rituals of living cultures
- describe the customs of a foreign group or local subculture
- extrapolate the practices of an unknown culture from similar examples

Archaeology (Academic)

You excavate and study the structures and artifacts of historical cultures and civilizations. You can:

- tell how long something has been buried
- identify artifacts by culture and usage
- distinguish real artifacts from fakes
- navigate inside ruins and catacombs
- describe the customs of ancient or historical cultures
- spot well-disguised graves and underground hiding places

Architecture (Academic)

You know how buildings are planned and constructed. You can:

- guess what lies around the corner while exploring an unknown structure
- judge the relative strength of building materials
- identify a building's age, architectural style, original use, and history of modifications
- construct stable makeshift structures
- identify elements vital to a building's structural integrity

Art History (Academic)

You're an expert on works of art from an aesthetic and technical point of view. You can:

- distinguish real works from fakes
- tell when something has been retouched or altered
- identify the age of an object by style and materials

- call to mind historical details on artists and those around them

Astronomy (Technical)

You study celestial objects, including the stars, planets. You can:

- decipher astrological texts
- plot the movement of constellations
- study and debunk UFO reports

Ballistics (Technical)

You process evidence relating to the use of firearms. You can:

- identify the caliber and type of a bullet or casing found at a crime scene
- determine if a particular gun fired a given bullet

Botany (Academic)

You study plants and fungi and can:

- △ identify the likely environment in which a plant sample grew
- △ identify plants which might be toxic, carnivorous, or otherwise dangerous
- △ spot the symptoms of plant-derived poisonings

Bullshit Detector (Interpersonal)

You can tell when some people are lying. You must usually be interacting with them or observing them from a close distance, but sometimes you can spot liars on television, too. Unfortunately, nearly everyone lies, especially when facing possible trouble from the authorities. Sometimes you can infer why they're lying, but it's hard to reliably discern motive or get at the facts they're working to obscure. This sense doesn't tell you what they're lying about, specifically, or see through their lies to the truth.

Not all lies are verbal. You can tell when a person is attempting to project a false impression through body language.

Certain individuals may be so adept at lying that they never set off your bullshit detector. Some people believe their own falsehoods. Psychopathic personality types lie reflexively and without shame, depriving you of the telltale tics and gestures you use to sense when a person is deceiving you. Sometimes you need leverage to get information out of people who you know are lying – re-interviewing suspects in the light of additional facts is a genre staple.

Bureaucracy (Interpersonal)

You know how to navigate a bureaucratic organization, whether it's a governmental office or a large business concern. You know how to get what you want from it in an expeditious manner, and with a minimum of ruffled feathers. You can:

- convince officials to provide sensitive information

- gain credentials on false pretences
- find the person who really knows what's going on
- locate offices and files
- borrow equipment or supplies

Bureaucracy is not a catch-all information gathering ability. Bureaucrats wish to convey the impression that they are busy and harried, whether or not they actually are. Most take a profound, secret joy in directing inquiries elsewhere. When players attempt to use Bureaucracy to gain information more easily accessible via other abilities (such as Research), their contacts snidely advise them to do their own damn legwork.

Camping (Technical)

You are familiar with working and living outdoors and in the wild. You might be a farmer, cowboy, or logger, or an amateur (or professional) fisher or hunter, or work for the Park Service. Perhaps you were merely an Eagle Scout, grew up in the back of nowhere, or served in a military unit with sufficient patrol experience “in country.” You can:

- ♣ tell when an animal is behaving strangely
- ♣ tell whether an animal or plant is natural to a given area
- ♣ find edible plants, hunt, and fish
- ♣ make fire and survive outdoors at night or in bad weather
- ♣ navigate overland, albeit more easily with a compass and a map
- ♣ track people, animals, or vehicles across grass or through forests
- ♣ hunt with dogs, including tracking with bloodhounds, assuming you have friendly dogs available

Chemistry (Technical)

You're trained in the analysis of chemical substances. You can:

- among a wide variety of other materials, identify drugs, pharmaceuticals, toxins, and viruses
- match samples of dirt or vegetation from a piece of evidence to a scene

Craft (Technical)

You can create useful physical objects, working with materials like wood, metal, jewelry, and so forth. Although the resulting cabinets, kettles, or rings may be beautiful, your focus is utility, not art. Like the Art ability, you may focus on one craft (blacksmithing, cabinetry, coopering, etc) or diversify into many; the same rules apply.

You may be able to use your Craft ability to specific investigative ends: discover a secret drawer in a desk if you are a cabinet-maker, and so forth.

Comparative Religion (Academic)

You study religions in their various forms, both ancient and modern. You can:

- ✦ supply information about religious practices and beliefs
- ✦ quote relevant tags from the major scriptures
- ✦ recognize the names and attributes of various saints, gods, and other figures of religious worship and veneration
- ✦ identify whether a given religious practice or ritual is orthodox or heretical
- ✦ fake (or in some traditions, officiate at) a religious ceremony

Cop Talk (Interpersonal)

You know how to speak the lingo of police officers, and to make them feel confident and relaxed in your presence. You may be a current or former cop, or simply the kind of person they immediately identify as a solid, trustworthy citizen. You can:

- coolly ply cops for confidential information
- get excused for minor infractions
- imply that you are a colleague, authorized to participate in their cases

Cryptography (Technical)

You're an expert in the making and breaking of codes, from the simple ciphers of old-school espionage tradecraft to the supercomputer algorithms of the present day.

Data Retrieval (Technical)

You use computer and electronic technology to retrieve and enhance information on hard drives and other media. You can:

- recover hidden, erased or corrupted computer files
- increase the clarity of audio recordings, zeroing in on desired elements
- miraculously find detailed, high-resolution images within a blurry video image or blurry JPEG

Document Analysis (Technical)

You're an expert in the study of physical documents. You can:

- determine a document's approximate age
- identify the manufacturer of paper used in a document
- tell forged documents from the real thing
- identify distinctive handwriting
- match typed documents to the typewriters that produced them
- find fingerprints on paper

Electronic Surveillance (Technical)

You're adept at the use of sound recording equipment to gather evidence. You can:

- trace phone calls
- plant secret listening devices
- locate secret listening devices planted by others
- make high-quality audio recordings
- enhance the quality of audio recordings, isolating chosen sounds

Evidence Collection (Technical)

You're adept at finding, bagging and tagging important clues. You can:

- spot objects of interest at a crime scene or other investigation site
- note relationships between objects at a crime scene, reconstructing sequences of events
- store objects for forensic analysis without contaminating your samples

Explosive Devices (Technical)

You're an expert in bombs and booby-traps. You can:

- defuse bombs and traps
- reconstruct exploded bombs, determining their materials, manufacture, and the sophistication of the bomb-maker
- safely construct and detonate explosive devices of your own

Fingerprinting (Technical)

You're an expert in finding, transferring and matching fingerprints. This includes expertise in the computer software used to compare sample fingerprints against large databases of criminal defendants and government personnel.

Flattery (Interpersonal)

You're good at getting people to help you by complimenting them, as subtly or blatantly as they prefer. You can get them to:

- reveal information
- perform minor favors
- regard you as trustworthy.

Flirting (Interpersonal)

You're adept at winning cooperation from people who find you sexually attractive. You can get them to:

- reveal information
- help you in small ways
- date you

It's up to you whether a high rating in Flirting means that you are physically alluring, or simply exude a sexual magnetism unrelated to your looks.

Forensic Accounting (Academic)

You comb through financial data looking for irregularities. In the words made famous during Woodward and Bernstein's investigation of the Watergate scandal, you know how to "follow the money." You can:

- tell legitimate businesses from criminal enterprises
- spot the telltale signs of embezzlement
- track payments to their source

Forensic Anthropology (Technical)

You perform autopsies on deceased subjects to determine their cause of death. In the case of death by foul play, your examination can identify:

- the nature of the weapon or weapons used
- the presence of intoxicants or other foreign substances in the bloodstream
- the contents of the victim's last meal

In many cases, you can reconstruct the sequence of events leading to the victim's death from the arrangement of wounds on the body.

You also perform DNA analysis on samples found at crime scenes, matching them to samples provided by suspects.

Forensic Entomology (Technical)

You specialize in the relationship between corpses and the legions of insects who dine on them. By studying eggs and larvae in a decomposing corpse you can:

- determine approximate time of death
- identify a crime scene, in the case of a dumped body

Forensic Psychology (Academic)

You apply psychological insight to the solving of criminal cases. From the details of a crime scene, you can, based on past case studies of similar offenses, assemble a profile detailing the perpetrator's likely personal history, age, habits and attitudes.

You can also glean useful information from simple observation of certain individual, especially as they react to pressure.

Geology (Academic)

You are an expert on rocks, soils, minerals, and the primordial history of the Earth. You can:

- ✦ analyze soil samples, crystals, minerals, and so forth
- ✦ determine the age of a rock stratum
- ✦ date and identify fossils
- ✦ evaluate soil for agriculture or industry
- ✦ identify promising sites for oil or water wells, mines, etc
- ✦ anticipate volcanism, seismic events, avalanches, and other earth phenomena

High Society (Interpersonal)

You know how to hang with the rich and famous, and how to chat them up without getting security called. You are comfortable with “old money” aristocracy, with the Davos elite, with the televised chattering classes, and with the crassest of nouveau riche vulgarians and celebutantes. Yachts, Gulfstreams, and three-star restaurants are your seeming natural habitat. You can:

- ✦ dress fashionably for any occasion
- ✦ get past the velvet rope at exclusive clubs and parties, or past the concierge at a four-star hotel
- ✦ drop brand names, allude to current trends, and generally blend in culturally with rich scenesters of all types
- ✦ identify the best wine, liquor, food, jewelry, and other luxury goods
- ✦ successfully schmooze for an introduction to, e.g., a celebrity, elected official, or financier
- ✦ recall specific or relevant gossip or news about the tastes, lifestyles, or sordid behavior of a rich or famous person
- ✦ know where and when the best parties, most culturally important openings, or other gala events in any city are due to happen
- ✦ score drugs or otherwise find the seamy side (if any) of high-society functions, happening nightclubs, etc.
- ✦ interact with the rich and famous as an accepted equal

Note that this ability does not necessarily convey any actual wealth or fame. The Director can, if she wishes, allow an agent to use family connections or a liberated Company slush fund to explain it.

History (Academic)

You're an expert in recorded human history, with an emphasis on its political, military, and economic and technological developments. You can:

- recognize obscure historical allusions
- recall capsule biographies of famous historical figures
- tell where and when an object made during historical times was fashioned

- identify the period of an article of dress or costume

Impersonate (Interpersonal)

You're good at posing as another person, whether briefly misrepresenting yourself during a phone call or spending long periods undercover in a fictional identity.

Successfully disguising yourself as an actual person known to those you're interacting with is extraordinarily difficult. Brief voice-only mimicry requires a spend of at least 1.

Face-to-face impersonation requires a spend of at least 2 to 3 points for every five minutes of sustained contact between you and the object of your impersonation. Especially wary or intelligent subjects cost more to hoodwink than dull-witted walk-on characters.

Inspiration (Interpersonal)

You convince reluctant witnesses to supply information by appealing to their better selves. After a few moments of interaction you intuitively sense the positive values they hold dearest, then invoke them in a brief but stirring speech.

Interrogation (Interpersonal)

You're trained in extracting information from suspects and witnesses in the context of a formal police-style interview. This must take place in an official setting, where the subject is confined or feels under threat of confinement, and recognizes your authority (whether real or feigned.)

Intimidation (Interpersonal)

You elicit cooperation from suspects by seeming physically imposing, invading their personal space, and adopting a psychologically commanding manner. Intimidation may involve implied or direct threats of physical violence but is just as often an act of mental dominance. You can:

- gain information
- inspire the subject to leave the area
- quell a subject's desire to attempt violence against you or others

Languages (Academic)

For each rating point in Languages, you are verbally fluent and literate in one language other than your native tongue. You may specify these when you create your character, or choose opportunistically in the course of play, revealing that you just happen to speak Javanese when circumstances require it. You are not learning the language spontaneously but revealing a hitherto unmentioned fact about your character. You may elect to be literate in an ancient language which is no longer spoken.

Law (Academic)

You are familiar with the criminal and civil laws of your home jurisdiction, and broadly

acquainted with foreign legal systems. At a rating of 2 or more, you are a bar-certified attorney. You can:

- assess the legal risks attendant on any course of action
- understand lawyerly jargon
- argue with police and prosecutors

Linguistics (Academic)

You are an expert in the principles and structures underlying languages. You can probably speak other Languages, but that is a separate ability that must be purchased separately. You can:

- given a large enough sample of text, decipher the basic meaning of an unknown language
- identify the languages most similar to an unknown language
- identify artificial, alien and made-up languages

Locksmith (Technical)

You can open doors and locks, and disarm alarms, without benefit of the key. (You can also find convenient windows to jimmy or coal-cellar doors to force, if need be.) Many locks require specialized tools, possession of which without a locksmith's license is a criminal offense in most jurisdictions. Very complex or tricky locks may require spends to open them speedily, to avoid noise or damage, or to relock afterward.

Using Locksmith is, in other words, a way to gather clues. A lock that won't open is like a witness that won't talk or a bloodstain you can't find: antithetical to mystery-solving, investigative-adventure design. Only safes, bank vaults, and the like – locks that exist to drive drama or conflict, rather than locks which merely hold clues — require actual tests against Difficulty.

Natural History (Academic)

You study the evolution, behavior, and biology of plants and animals. You can:

- tell when an animal is behaving strangely
- tell whether an animal or plant is natural to a given area
- identify an animal from samples of its hair, blood, bones or other tissue
- identify a plant from a small sample

Negotiation (Interpersonal)

You are an expert in making deals with others, convincing them that the best arrangement for you is also the best for them. You can:

- haggle for goods and services
- mediate hostage situations

- swap favors or information with others

Occult Studies (Academic)

You're an expert in the historical study of magic, superstition, and hermetic practice from the stone age to the present. From Satanists to the Golden Dawn, you know the dates, the places, the controversies, and the telling anecdotes. You can:

- identify the cultural traditions informing a ritual from examining its physical aftermath
- supply historical facts concerning various occult traditions
- guess the intended effect of a ritual from its physical aftermath
- identify occult activities as the work of informed practitioners, teenage posers, or *bona fide* Esoterrorists

Your knowledge of the occult is that of a detached, even disapproving, outsider. This ability does not allow you to work magic or summon supernatural entities. Doing either of these things is bad, the work of Esoterrorists. It weakens the fabric of reality and warps the practitioner's psyche. You can, at best, fake your way through a ritual while attempting to pass yourself off as a believer. Even in this situation, your actions do not evoke supernatural effects. Your covertly hostile presence may, in fact, be enough to prevent an Esoterrorist ritual from achieving efficacy.

As mentioned earlier, all characters built for the Esoterrorist setting get Occult Studies 1 for free.

Oral History (Interpersonal)

You can find sources willing to talk, win their confidence, and gather (usually lengthy) oral testimony about historical events, local traditions, folklore, family legend, or gossip. This is an excellent way to do research in illiterate or semi-literate societies, and in rural or small-town communities in general. This ability also covers taking shorthand notes or making recordings without spooking your sources.

Pathology (Academic)

You are trained in carrying out medical examinations of living human subjects and forming diagnoses based on your findings. You can

- diagnose probable causes of sickness or injury
- identify the extent and cause of an unconscious person's trauma
- detect when a person is suffering from a physically debilitating condition such as drug addiction, pregnancy or malnutrition
- establish a person's general level of health
- identify medical abnormalities

If you have 8 or more points in **Medic** you get **Pathology** 1 for free.

Photography (Technical)

You're proficient in the use of cameras, including still and video photography. You can:

- take useful visual records of crime scenes
- spot manual retouching or digital manipulation in a photographic or video image
- realistically retouch and manipulate images

Reassurance (Interpersonal)

You get people to do what you want by putting them at ease. You can:

- elicit information and minor favors
- allay fear or panic in others
- instill a sense of calm during a crisis

Research (Academic)

You know how to find factual information from books, records, and official sources. You're as comfortable with a card catalog and fiche reader as with an Internet search engine. The contacts file on your personal digital assistant brims with phone numbers of exotic and useful contacts.

Respect (Interpersonal)

Your knowledge of social rituals allows you to gain information and favors with a culturally appropriate show of respect for a subject. This ability applies to subjects who consider themselves figures of authority, or who hold real or imagined power over you. By showing respect, you preserve your status as well as the subject's.

Streetwise (Interpersonal)

You know how to behave among crooks, gang-bangers, druggies, hookers and other habitués of the criminal underworld. You can:

- deploy criminal etiquette to avoid fights and conflicts
- identify unsafe locations and dangerous people
- gather underworld rumors

Tradecraft (Interpersonal)

You know how to utilize the techniques of conventional espionage agents, and how to talk to them if you must hold a meet. You can:

- ♣ set up and check a dead drop
- ♣ spot or conduct a brush pass or car toss
- ♣ determine which agency trained a covert operative by examining his tradecraft, surveillance methods, etc.
- ♣ identify good places for recognition signs, cleaning passes, etc.

- ✦ recall notorious or relevant episodes of spying, covert ops, etc.
- ✦ gather rumors in the covert ops world
- ✦ make contact with operatives without scaring them off
- ✦ convey information or threats elliptically without tipping off eavesdroppers

Textual Analysis (Academic)

By studying the content of texts (as opposed to their physical characteristics of documents) you can draw reliable inferences about their authorship. You can:

- determine if an anonymous text is the work of a known author, based on samples of his work
- determine the era in which a text was written
- identify the writer's region, and level of education
- tell a real work by an author from a false one

Traffic Analysis (Technical)

You know how to boil down a mass of data — probably raw signals intel, a tranche of phone records, or possibly a whole lot of surveillance tapes — and extract its meaning and patterns. Given the data, you can:

- determine which numbers in a set of phone records are calling who, when, about what
- determine which cars in a city's traffic pattern are driving where, when, and how long they're staying there
- find patterns in the data flow, e.g., more murders in August, or the same museum guard on duty during all the incidents
- work out the daily (and weekly, monthly, etc.) routine of an office, military base, museum, etc. and answer questions like: When is payroll made? Who takes delivery of parcels? When does the cleaning staff arrive?
- find anomalies in the data flow, e.g., missing records or “dogs that didn't bark”
- find weak spots in security that follows a regular pattern
- identify the source of information (or disinformation) by tracking its route through the system
- assemble a communications or organizational picture of a social network such as a criminal conspiracy, academic email list, or division of border guards

Trivia (Academic)

You're a font of apparently useless information that would stand you in good stead as a contestant on a quiz show. You're especially good in the following spheres of interest:

- celebrities and entertainment
- sports records and statistics

- geography
- arts and letters
- names in the news

This catch-all ability also allows you to know any obscure fact not covered by another GUMSHOE ability. (In moments of improvisatory desperation, your GM may allow you to overlap with abilities which none of the players at the current session possess, or which no one is thinking to use.)

Exotic Investigative Abilities

[Evocation of your setting and genre may prompt you to introduce general abilities allowing characters to glean information via means, inherent or technological, unavailable to nonfictional characters. Here are two examples.]

Analytic Taste

Your sense of taste is superhuman, and you have, by trial and error, trained yourself to use it as a precision instrument. You function as a walking, talking chemical analysis lab, able to instantly detect the composition of nearly any object you can touch your tongue to. By distinguishing fine gradations of taste, you can, for example, match a sample of heroin to the precise batch it came from, or conduct a comparative analysis of soil samples. Although you may for good reason be reluctant to do so, you can even identify blood types from small samples, or derive similar identifying or typing information from other bodily fluids.

Some individuals with analytic taste suffer from high revulsion thresholds and can only enjoy the purest, most perfect foods. Others become inured to traditional pleasures associated with the sense of taste, or become passionate connoisseurs of substances ordinary people consider inedible.

When using this sense, you consume, at most, only trace quantities of the substances you test. Analytic taste grants no ability to digest inedible matter.

Although this power grants no poison immunity, only the most toxic of substances will harm you in the tiny trace quantities required for analysis.

{From Mutant City Blues}

Aura Reading

To those with the sight to see, every living organism is surrounded by a nimbus of energy. By studying the color and movement of this energy, you gain insight into people and animals.

When you read a person's aura, you can:

- ♣ examine the subject's general emotional state, determining which of the following adjectives best fits his current condition:
- ♣ joyful, depressed, angry, amused, confused, frightened, or relaxed. (Costs 2 points per attempt.)
- ♣ tell whether the subject is healthy or determine if the subject is under the influence of a

spirit or other supernatural being. (Costs 4 points per attempt.)

[From Fear Itself]

General Abilities

[Rewrite general ability descriptions as needed for your setting. Rename abilities for desired flavor. Create new abilities keyed to your setting. Include only abilities relevant to your setting in your game. Some investigative abilities tie into specific general abilities and vice versa; make sure you either include both relevant abilities, or drop the cross-references between them.]

Almost every General ability has a **cherry**, a feature that kicks in when the character has 8 rating points or more in it. Agents can always use that special benefit, even if their pool in that ability has dropped to 0.

Some GUMSHOE iterations, including Night's Black Agents, permit the following:]

Many General abilities also function as **Investigative** abilities, either when used to gather a clue (rather than to overcome opposition) or to interact with people devoted to those abilities' use: Hand-to-Hand, for example, can be used investigatively to infiltrate a dojo or gymnasium, and to gather information or gossip from the clientele or managers.

[Some GUMSHOE games, like Ashen Stars, maintain a tighter separation between investigative and general abilities, so that the general Business Affairs ability, used to keep a crew's finances humming, doesn't garner you the clues you get from the investigative Forensic Accounting ability. To use this more restrictive approach, omit the above paragraph.]

Athletics

Athletics allows you to perform general acts of physical derring-do, from running to jumping to dodging falling or oncoming objects. Any physical action not covered by another ability, probably falls under the rubric of Athletics.

If your Athletics rating is 8 or more, your Hit Threshold, the Target Number your opponents use when attempting to hit you in combat, is 4. Otherwise, your Hit Threshold is 3.

Business Affairs

You know how to run a profitable business.

Conceal

You can hide things from view and conceal them from search. Your methods might include camouflage, holding items out on your person, snaking things into drawers unobserved, building secret compartments, or even altering a thing's visual signature with paint or plaster.

This ability also allows you to discover things intentionally concealed.

Disguise

This is the skill of altering your own appearance, posture, and voice to be unrecognizable. Disguising others in anything more complex than a baseball cap or false mustache is good only

for brief periods, as posture and body language are vital components in any successful disguise.

This ability also covers selling yourself as a different person: vocal mannerisms, altered body language, dress and motion sense, and realistic-seeming reactions.

Successfully disguising yourself as an actual person already known to those you're interacting with is extraordinarily difficult. Brief voice-only mimicry pits you against a Difficulty of 4. Face-to-face impersonation requires a successful roll against a Difficulty of 7 for every five minutes of sustained contact between you and the object of your impersonation.

Driving

You're a skilled defensive driver, capable of wringing high performance from even the most recalcitrant automobile, pick-up truck, or van. You can:

- evade or conduct pursuit
- avoid collisions, or minimize damage from collisions
- spot tampering with a vehicle
- conduct emergency repairs

For every additional rating point in Driving, you may add an additional vehicle type to your repertoire. These include: motorcycle, transport truck, helicopter, or airplane. You may choose exotic types, like hovercrafts and tanks, although these are unlikely to see regular use in an investigation-based game.

Explosives

You're an expert in bombs and booby-traps. You can:

- ✦ defuse bombs and traps
- ✦ handle nitroglycerine or other dangerously unstable materials with relative safety
- ✦ given time, blow open safes or vaults without damaging the contents
- ✦ mix explosive compounds from common chemicals
- ✦ safely construct and detonate explosive devices or booby-traps of your own

Explosives doubles as an investigative ability when used to:

- reconstruct exploded bombs
- for any bomb (exploded or unexploded), determine the method and materials of the bomb-maker, and deduce his sophistication, background, and skill

Filch

Your nimble fingers allow you to unobtrusively manipulate small objects. You can:

- pilfer clues from a crime scene under the very noses of unsuspecting authorities
- pick pockets
- plant objects on unsuspecting subjects

Fleeing

Although you are not a strong overall athlete, you can boot it like a bat out of hell when chased by dangerous people, beings, or moving objects.

If your Fleeing rating is more than twice your final Athletics rating, you can buy rating points in Fleeing above the value at a reduced rate, getting 2 rating points for each build point spent. Hence, if your Athletics rating is 0, all your Fleeing is half-price.

Gambling

You are conversant with the rules and etiquette of all forms of gambling, from Texas hold 'em and roulette to horse racing and numbers rackets. To win (or strategically lose) at a game of chance or sporting flutter requires a Gambling test, or a contest if played against an NPC with the Gambling ability. In addition to playing by the rules and winning, you can:

- ♣ spot cheating, either by the house or by another player
- ♣ stack a deck, rig a horse race, load dice, or otherwise cheat

Palming cards, tiles, or dice is allowed as a Gambling test; anything else requires Conceal or Filch.

Gambling doubles as an **Investigative** ability when used to:

- ♣ calculate the odds of events ruled by probabilities
- ♣ use Bullshit Detector on professional gamblers despite their poker faces
- ♣ interact with gamblers and blend in at casinos

Health

Health measures your ability to sustain injuries, resist infection, and survive the effects of toxins¹. When you get hit in the course of a fight, your Health pool is diminished. A higher Health pool allows you to stay in a fight longer before succumbing to your injuries.

When your Health pool is depleted, you may be dazed, wounded, or pushing up the daisies. For more on this, see "[Exhaustion, Injury and Gruesome Death](#)."

Hypnosis

This ability represents medical hypnosis as depicted in pulpy genre sources; it is not psychic mesmerism or Dr Caligari-style mind control. You can only hypnotize a *willing* subject, and only one subject at a time. Using Hypnosis requires a Test against a Difficulty Number that varies depending on what you are using it for.

- *Simple hypnotic state*: To place a patient in a hypnotic trance, you must succeed against Difficulty 3. During this trance, she is calm and placid.

- *Establish analytic rapport*: Once you have successfully hypnotized a patient, your Psychoanalysis pool increases by 3 during any future use of Psychoanalysis on them. Your

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Psychoanalysis rating must be at least 3 to gain this benefit, and the 3 points must be spent on the patient.

- *Recover memories*: The patient's fragmented or buried memories, as of dreams, traumas, or murky monster attacks, can be called to the surface and "relived." This is a Difficulty 4 test. Reliving an experience that cost Stability will cost the patient the same amount again, although you may practice immediate Psychological Triage to minimize the patient's shock. The GM is free to provide false memories if she feels you are "leading the witness."

- *Post-hypnotic suggestion*: Upon lifting the trance, you may cause your patient to perform a single action without apparent thought. You may require a "trigger phrase" or simply specify a time: ("When you get home, you'll leave the book on the desk.") Spells and other complex activities cannot be post-hypnotically induced. The patient will not accept a suggestion contrary to her normal behavior. This is a Difficulty 4 or higher test; the GM may increase the Difficulty based on the suggestion.

- *Ease pain*: You can relieve symptomatic pain in a patient. This removes the mechanical penalties for being hurt and lasts until the patient is wounded again. This is a Difficulty 4 or higher test; the GM may increase the Difficulty depending on the pain's severity. *This does not work under battlefield conditions.*

- *False memories*: You can purposely implant false memories in the patient or bury real ones. This is extremely unethical without a direct therapeutic benefit (such as easing a remembered trauma). This is a Contest between your Hypnosis and the patient's Stability. Your Difficulty Number is 5; the patient resists with Difficulty 4. Again, the GM may increase your Difficulty based on the severity of the memory change. At the GM's discretion, if the patient suffers a further trauma (such as her Stability dropping below -5 again), she may suddenly recall the truth.

Infiltration

You're good at placing yourself inside places you have no right to be. You can:

- pick locks
- deactivate or evade security systems
- move silently
- find suitable places for forced entry, and use them

Despite its name, Infiltration is as useful for getting out of places undetected as if its for getting into them.

Mechanics

You're good at building, repairing, and disabling devices, from classic pit-and-pendulum traps to DVD players. Given the right components, you can create jury-rigged devices from odd bits of scrap. Mechanics doubles as an investigative ability when used to:

- evaluate the quality of workmanship used to create an item
- determine the identity of a handmade item's maker by comparing to known work by that individual

[You may wish to maintain the flavor of certain settings by splitting this into multiple disciplines, each specializing in its own particular subset of technology.]

Medic

You can perform first aid on sick or injured individuals. For more on the use of this ability, see “Exhaustion, Injury, and Death.”

If you have 8 or more points in Medic, you get 1 point in Pathology.

Piloting

You can fly one or more airborne vehicles. You can:

- ♣ evade or conduct pursuit
- ♣ anticipate bad weather
- ♣ avoid collisions, or minimize damage from collisions
- ♣ spot tampering with a vehicle
- ♣ navigate by compass or the stars, read maps, and maintain a sense of direction
- ♣ conduct emergency repairs

[You may require the player to specify a particular type of craft, gaining 1 vehicle per 2 rating points. Rewrite to reflect the air vehicles prevalent in your setting. In some settings you might include water craft in this ability.]

Preparedness

You expertly anticipate the needs of any mission by packing a kit efficiently arranged with necessary gear. Assuming you have immediate access to your kit, you can produce whatever object the team needs to overcome an obstacle. You make a simple test; if you succeed, you have the item you want. You needn't do this in advance of the adventure, but can dig into your kit bag (provided you're able to get to it) as the need arises.

Items of obvious utility to a paranormal investigation do not require a test. These include but are not limited to: note paper, writing implements, laptop computer, a PDA with wireless Internet access, mini USB drive, cell phone, various types of tape, common tools and hardware, light weapons, flashlights of various sizes, chem lights, batteries, magnifying glasses, thermometer, and a no-frills audio recording device.

The utility of traditional anti-supernatural accoutrements such as crucifixes, holy water, and silver bullets is a matter of great debate within the Ordo Veritatis. Whether you choose to include them in your basic kit reveals your attitude toward the supernatural. Is it purely the work of the Esoterrorists, or are there other unnatural forces out there? Decide for yourself, and pack wisely.

Other abilities imply the possession of basic gear suitable to their core tasks. Characters with Medic have their own first aid kits; Photographers come with cameras and accessories. If you have Shooting, you have a gun, and so on. Preparedness does not intrude into their territory. It covers general-purpose investigative equipment, plus oddball items that suddenly come in handy in the course of the story.

The sorts of items you can produce at a moment's notice depend not on your rating or pool, but on narrative credibility. If the GM determines that your possession of an item would seem ludicrous or and/or out of genre, you don't get to roll for it. You simply don't have it. Any item which elicits a laugh from the group when suggested is probably out of bounds.

Inappropriate use of the Preparedness ability is like pornography. Your GM will know it when she sees it.

Public Relations

You manage the public image of your team or others. You unruffle feathers, burnish reputations, downplay failures, and trumpet successes.

When keeping the locals onside during a case, the GM may allow you to spend Reassurance or Respect points on Public Relations tests.

Riding

Although staying on a tame, untroubled walking horse (on flattish terrain, anyway) is relatively easy once one gets the hang of it, and staying on a mule or burro even easier, you are a gifted equestrian. You can gallop even recalcitrant or spirited horses, donkeys, and mules past distractions and across the countryside. You can:

- ♣ evade or conduct mounted pursuit
- ♣ care for, groom, shoe, and stable mounts
- ♣ take care of, prepare, and use riding gear such as saddles and bridles
- ♣ calm a nervous mount
- ♣ drive a horse-drawn wagon or cart
- ♣ wield a weapon while riding

For every additional 2 rating points in Riding, you may add an additional riding animal: camel, water buffalo, or elephant.

Scuffling

You can hold your own in a hand-to-hand fight, whether you wish to kill, knock out, restrain, or evade your opponent.

[To preserve the flavor of certain settings you may wish to break this out into two abilities, for armed and unarmed close combat.]

Sense Trouble

Keen perceptions allow you to spot signs of potential danger to yourself and others. Information gained from this ability might save your skins but doesn't directly advance the central mystery. You might use it to:

- ♣ hear someone sneak up on you
- ♣ see an obscured or hidden figure

- ✦ smell a gas leak
- ✦ have a bad feeling about this

Players never know the Difficulty Numbers for Sense Trouble before deciding how many points to spend, even in games where GMs generously inform the players of other Difficulty Numbers. Players must blindly choose how much to spend.

When more than one player is able to make a Sense Trouble test, the group decides which of them makes the attempt. Only one attempt per source of trouble occurs, conducted by the chosen PC.

Shrink

You can provide comfort, perspective and solace to the mentally troubled. You may be a therapist or counselor, a priest or pastor, or just a empathetic and intuitive individual. You can restore panicked characters to a state of calm, and treat any long-term mental illnesses they accrue in the course of their investigations.

Shooting

You are adept with firearms.

Stability

Jarring or stressful events can exert a damaging long- psychological toll. Your Stability rating indicates your resistance to mental trauma.

You get Stability 1 for free.

Surveillance

You're good at following suspects without revealing your presence. You can:

- guide a team to follow a suspect for short periods, handing off to the next in sequence, so the subject doesn't realize he's being trailed
- use telescopic viewing equipment to keep watch on a target from a distance
- find undetectable vantage points
- hide in plain sight
- perceive (either with sight or other senses) potential hazards to yourself or others.

8 or more points in Surveillance grants you 1 free point of the investigative ability Electronic Surveillance.

Exotic General Abilities

[Fidelity to your setting and genre may prompt you to introduce general abilities allowing characters to perform fantastical actions impossible in our world, or to interact with imaginary technologies. Here are some samples.]

It costs 5 build points to gain a rating of 1 in any [*exotic general ability*] and 1 build point for each additional build point after 1.

Mutant Power: Blood Spray

You can perform a ranged attack in which you send a high-pressure spray of your own blood gushing from your mouth. You hit your target on a successful Blood Spray test. If you hit, the opponent must make an Athletics test, the Difficulty of which equals 4 plus any Blood Spray points you spent on the attack. If he fails the test, he is knocked over and must, in lieu of his next attack, make an Athletics test (against the same Difficulty) in order to regain his footing. If he fails, he continues to slip on the blood, losing further attacks until he finally succeeds.

A blood spray attack inspires instinctive revulsion. Anyone within direct visual range must make a Stability test or suffer the urge to flee. Victims with the Olfactory Center power add your Blood Spray pool to the Difficulty of this test.

Characters who do not flee suffer ill effects while they remain able to see and smell your blood: their Hit Thresholds decrease by 1, and the Hit Thresholds of anyone they're attempting to attack effectively increases by 1.

In addition to any Blood Spray points you spend, each use of this power costs you 3 Health points. Health points lost to Blood Spray use can be refreshed with a large meal of red meat, washed down with large quantities of orange juice or a similarly sugary drink, followed by an hour's nap.

[From Mutant City Blues]

Pathway Amplification

You can heighten another mind's ability to recall, process and interpret information. Once per episode, you may designate a PC recipient and an investigative ability that character possesses. The PC adds your Pathway Amplification rating to his pool in that ability. The pool refreshes to normal at the case's conclusion.

[From Ashen Stars]

Viroware Enhancement: Dominator

You emit pheromones provoking the instinct of intelligent beings to obey high-status individuals in a social hierarchy. When an interaction with a supporting character has turned against you, spend 4 points from your Bureaucracy, Cop Talk, Downside, Interrogation, and/or Intimidation pools. The GM then plays the character, subtly or overtly, as if you have gained the upper hand. The subject must be within 4m of you when you first initiate the effect.

[From Ashen Stars]

Cherries

[In some games, you may wish to trick out general abilities with the following fillip:]

Almost every General ability has a cherry, a feature that kicks in when the character has 8 rating points or more in it. Agents can always use that special benefit, even if their pool in that

ability has dropped to 0.

Example Cherry: Crackers' Crypto

If your Digital Intrusion rating is 8 or more, you get 1 free rating point in the Investigative ability Cryptography. You can also encrypt your team's electronic communications against all but government-level (NSA, GCHQ, MID, DGSE, GRU, Unit 8200, etc.) cracking.

[From *Night's Black Agents*]

Potential Points

[Useful in some settings; best when restricted to one, or a few, abilities you wish to highlight.]

Some abilities are more abstruse, difficult, or complex than others, enough so that they can't simply be bought "from scratch" during character improvement. They require a prerequisite: teaching by a master, learning from an ancient text, or some other specific in-game experience. That prerequisite experience conveys "potential points" in the ability; when the character spends build points from experience on that ability, she can only do so up to her "potential."

Drives

[In some games you may wish to require players to select drives for their characters, ensuring that their characters are well motivated to get into the kinds of investigative trouble the genre demands.]

Each PC follows a **drive**, a personal motivation giving him, her or it good reason to act heroically and curiously. By following your drive, you keep the story moving and ensure that your behavior is in keeping with the *[insert name of genre]* genre.

Sample Drive: Altruism

You instinctively act for the benefit of others, especially when they're unable to help themselves. As far as you're concerned, the fees the crew earns for its cases are just a means to an end. They keep the ship operational and the group sufficiently equipped to go out and do good in the world. If the Combine were still active, you might well have signed on with them as a patrol officer. Without them, the need for strong men and women to act selflessly is greater than ever. This sector of space has taken some hard knocks, and people are scared and discouraged. But if enough folks put the common good over their own petty interests, someday—maybe someday soon—the Bleed will go back to what it was before the war.

*[From *Ashen Stars*]*

The GUMSHOE Rules System

This section describes the basic GUMSHOE rules system and is addressed to players and GM alike. But first bear with us for a little explanatory theory.

Why This Game Exists

GUMSHOE speeds and streamlines the time-honored form of the investigative roleplaying

game. The central question a traditional RPG asks is:

Will the heroes get the information they need?

Assuming that they look in the right place and apply appropriate abilities to the task, GUMSHOE ensures that the heroes get the basic clues they need to move through the story. The question it asks is:

What will the heroes do with the information once they've got it?

If you think about it, this is how the source materials we base our mystery scenarios on handle clues. You don't see the forensic techies on CSI failing to successfully use their lab equipment, or Sherlock Holmes stymied and unable to move forward because he blew his Zoology roll.

You don't see this because, in a story failure to gain information is rarely more interesting than getting it. New information opens up new narrative possibilities, new choices and actions for the characters. Failure to get information is a null result that takes you nowhere.

In a fictional procedural, whether it's a mystery novel or an episode of a cop show, the emphasis isn't on finding the clues in the first place. When it really matters, you may get a paragraph telling you how difficult the search was, or a montage of a CSI team tossing an apartment. But the action really starts after the clues are gathered.

Investigative scenarios are not about finding clues, they're about interpreting the clues you do find.

GUMSHOE, therefore, makes the finding of clues all but automatic, as long as you get to the right place in the story and have the right ability. That's when the fun part begins, when the players try to put the components of the puzzle together.

That's hard enough for a group of armchair detectives, without withholding half the pieces from them. Every investigative scenario begins with a crime or conspiracy committed by a group of antagonists. The bad guys do something bad. The player characters must figure out who did it and put a stop to their activities.

When you do see information withheld from characters, it's seldom portrayed as a failure on the part of the competent, fact-gathering heroes. Instead the writers show an external force preventing them from applying their abilities. In a space opera show, you might get the proverbial ion storm that prevents the crew from scanning the planet before they go down. Information is only withheld when it makes the story more interesting—usually by placing the heroes at a handicap while they move forward in the storyline. In GUMSHOE terms, they're not trying to get an available clue and failing; they're using an ability for which no clue is available.

Historically, story-based roleplaying, of which investigative games were an early if not the earliest example, evolved from dungeon-bashing campaigns. They treat clues the same way that dungeon games treat treasure. You have to search for the clue that takes you on to the next scene. If you roll well, you get the clue. If not, you don't—and the story grinds to a halt.

However, treasure gathering isn't the main event in a dungeon game. There, the central activity is killing the monsters and enemies who live in the dungeon. The treasure-finding phase comes afterwards, as a mere reward. If you don't get all the treasure in a room, you lose out a bit, but the story keeps going, as you tromp down the hallway to the next monster-filled chamber.

Imagine a dungeon game where you always had to roll well to find another room to plunder, or

sit around feeling frustrated and bored.

Many of our favorite roleplaying games use the traditional roll-to-get-a-clue model. You may have been lucky enough to play in them without ever seeing your game ground to a halt after a failed information roll. Perhaps your GM, or the scenario designer, has carefully crafted the adventure so that you never have to get any specific clue to advance the story.

More likely, your GM adjusts on the fly to your failed rolls, creating elaborate workarounds that get you the same information by different means. When you think about it, these runarounds moments are essentially time killers. They bring about a predetermined, necessary result while giving you the illusion of randomness and chance. GUMSHOE cuts out these filler moments in favor of scenes that actually advance the story. With the time saved, you can construct more detailed, compelling mysteries for the players to sort out. That's where the streamlining comes in.

If you've never had a game stop dead on a missed clue, you may naturally figure that it never happens to anyone. Having run GMing seminars at conventions for years, I can assure you that this is not the case. People come up to me all the time to share their horror stories of games that literally go nowhere on a blown spot test. This should not be surprising. GMs are doing what the rules tell them to do, and failing to see the unwritten rule that they should then spend five to twenty minutes of game time introducing a workaround.

GUMSHOE gives you the rules you should actually use as written, and skips the workaround.

But even if you've never noticed this problem, play it because it focuses and streamlines play, eliminating the elaborate workarounds your GM has to use to make the missed information rolls invisible to you. It replaces these moments of circular plotting with more interesting scenes that move the story forward.

Mystery Structure

[Alter as needed for your genre.]

Every investigative scenario begins with a crime, conspiracy, or other act of disorder committed by a group of antagonists. The bad guys do something bad. The player characters must figure out who did it and put a stop to their activities.

Your GM designs each scenario by creating an investigation trigger, a sinister conspiracy, and a trail of clues.

The investigation trigger. This is the event, that attracts the attention of investigators.

- *The discovery of a murder victim, obviously slain during a ritualistic killing.*
- *The discovery of a corpse slain by supernatural means, perhaps by a creature.*
- *Sightings of supernatural creatures or phenomena.*

The sinister conspiracy. This sets out who the bad guys are, what they've done so far, what they're trying to do, and how the investigation trigger fits into the overall scheme. The GM also determines what has to happen to prevent the plot from going forward. This, unknown to the players, is their victory condition — what they have to do to thwart the bad guys and bring the story to a positive conclusion.

Once the GM has the logic of the story worked out from the villain's point of view, she then thinks in reverse, designing a **trail of clues** leading from the investigation trigger to an understanding of the sinister plot and its players, sufficient to get to work destroying it.

Optionally, the GM may also plan a series of **antagonist reactions**. These lay out what the bad guys do when they find out that they're being investigated. The GM determines what conditions trigger them, and what the antagonists attempt to do. These may include further crimes, giving the team more to investigate. They may try to destroy evidence, hinder the investigation by planting false leads, or to intimidate or dispose of potential witnesses, including accomplices they no longer trust. They may attack the investigators. Foolish, overconfident or risk-taking antagonists may take them on directly. Clever antagonists will strike from a distance, taking great pains to cover their tracks.

Ordinary crime dramas may call for a simpler structure. The bad guys could still be furthering a sinister plot, or they may be doing nothing after committing the triggering crime other than hoping that the investigators don't catch up with them. In this case there is no ongoing conspiracy to disrupt. To achieve victory and bring the scenario to a successful conclusion, the investigators need merely prove their case against the criminals. The climactic scene might involve wringing a confession from the wrongdoer, or provoking him into revealing the crucial bit of evidence which will ensure his conviction.

From Structure To Story

The GM's structure notes are not a story. The story occurs as you, the team of players, brings the structure to life through the actions of your characters. The story proceeds from scene to scene, where you determine the pace, discovering clues and putting them together. Your characters interact with locations, gathering physical evidence, and supporting characters run by the GM, gathering expert and eyewitness testimony.

The first scene presents the mystery you have to solve. You then perform legwork, collecting information that tells you more about the case. Each scene contains information pointing to a new scene. Certain scenes may put a new twist on the investigation, as the initial mystery turns out to be just one aspect of a much bigger story. As clues accumulate, a picture of the case emerges, until your characters arrive at a climactic scene, where all is revealed and the bad guys confronted. A wrap-up scene accounts for loose ends and shows the consequences of your success—or, in rare instances, failure. (Why is failure possible at all? Its possibility creates urgency and suspense.)

To move from scene to scene, and to solve the overall mystery, you must gather clues. They fuel your forward momentum.

[[[BEGIN SIDEBAR]]]

Tip For Players: Containing Speculation

Investigative scenarios often bog down into speculative debate between players about what *could be* happening. Many things *can* be happening, but only one thing *is*. If more than one possible explanation ties together the clues you have so far, you need more clues.

Whenever you get stuck, **get out and gather more information**.

[[[END SIDEBAR]]]

Gathering Clues

Gathering clues is simple. All you have to do is: 1) get yourself into a scene where relevant information can be gathered and 2) have the right ability to discover the clue and 3) tell the GM that you're using it. As long as you do these three things, you will never fail to gain a piece of necessary information. It is never dependent on a die roll. If you ask for it, you will get it.

You can specify exactly what you intend to achieve: "I use Textual Analysis to determine if the memo was really written by Danziger."

Or you can engage in a more general informational fishing expedition: "I use Evidence Collection to search the crime scene."

If your suggested action corresponds to a clue in the scenario notes, the GM provides you the information arising from the clue.

Some clues would be obvious to a trained investigator immediately upon entering a scene. These passive clues are provided by the GM without prompting. Scenarios suggest which clues are passive and which are active, but your GM will adjust these in play depending on how much guidance you seem to need. On a night when you're cooking with gas, the GM will sit back and let you prompt her for **passive clues**. When you're bogging down, she may volunteer what would normally be **active clues**.

Core Clues

For each scene, the GM designates a **core clue**. This is the clue you absolutely need to move to the next scene, and thus to complete the entire investigation. GMs will avoid making core clues available only with the use of obscure investigative abilities. (For that matter, the character creation system is set up so that the group as a whole will have access to all, or nearly all, of these abilities.) The ability the GM designates is just one possibility, not a straight jacket – if players come up with another plausible method, the GM should give out the information.

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Special Benefits

Certain clues allow you to gain **special benefits** by spending points from the relevant investigative ability pool. During your first few scenarios, your GM will offer you the opportunity to spend additional points as you uncover these clues. After that it's also up to you to ask if there's anything to be gained by spending extra time or effort on a given clue. You can even propose specific ways to improve your already good result; if your suggestion is persuasive or entertaining, the GM may award you a special benefit not mentioned in her scenario notes.

Each benefit costs either 1 or 2 points from the relevant pool, depending on the difficulty of the additional action and the scope of the reward. When asking you if you want to purchase the benefit, the GM always tells you how much it will cost. Additional information gained provides flavor, but is never required to solve the case or move on to a new scene. Often it makes the character seem clever, powerful, or heroic. It may grant you benefits useful later in the scenario, frequently by making a favorable impression on supporting characters. It may allow you to leap forward into the story by gaining a clue that would otherwise only become apparent in a later scene. On occasion, the additional information adds an emotional dimension to the story or ties into the character's past history or civilian life. If you think of your GUMSHOE game as a TV series, an extra benefit gives the actor playing your character a juicy spotlight scene.

The act of spending points for benefits is called a **spend**. The GM's scenario notes may specify that you get Benefit X for a 1-point spend, or Benefit Y for a 2-point spend. Sometimes minor non-core information is available at no cost.

GMs of great mental agility who feel comfortable granting their players influence over the details of the narrative may allow them to specify the details of a special benefit.

If you wish to make a spend in a situation where the GM has no special benefit to offer you, and cannot think of one that pertains at all to the investigation, you do not lose the points you wish to spend.

Inconspicuous Clues

Sometimes the characters instinctively notice something without actively looking for it. Often this situation occurs in places they're moving through casually and don't regard as scenes in need of intensive searching. The team might pass by a concealed door, spot a droplet of blood on the marble of an immaculate hotel lobby, or approach a vehicle with a bomb planted beneath it. Interpersonal abilities can also be used to find inconspicuous clues. The classic example is of a character whose demeanor or behavioral tics establish them as suspicious.

It's unreasonable to expect players to ask to use their various abilities in what appears to be an innocuous transitional scene. Otherwise they'd have to spend minutes of game time with every change of scene, running down their abilities in obsessive checklist fashion. That way madness lies.

Instead the GM asks which character has the highest current pool in the ability in question. (When in doubt for what ability to use for a basic search, the GM defaults to Evidence Collection.)

If two or more pools are equal, it goes to the one with the highest rating. If ratings are also equal, their characters find the clue at the same time.

Simple Searches

Many clues can be found without any ability whatsoever. If an ordinary person could credibly find a clue simply by looking in a specified place, the clue discovery occurs automatically. You, the reader, wouldn't need to be a trained investigator to find a bloody footprint on the carpet in your living room, or notice a manila envelope taped to the underside of a table at the local pub. By that same logic, the Investigators don't require specific abilities to find them, either. When

players specify that they're searching an area for clues, they're performing what we call a simple search.

Vary the way you run simple searches according to pacing needs and the preferences of your group. Some players like to feel that their characters are interacting with the imaginary environment. To suit them, use a call-and-response format, describing the scene in a way that suggests places to look. The player prompts back by zeroing in on a detail, at which point you reveal the clue:

You: Beside the window stands a roll-top desk.

Player: I look inside!

You: You find an album full of old photographs.

At other times, or for players less interested in these small moments of discovery, you might cut straight to the chase:

You: You find an album full of old photographs in the roll-top desk.

In the first case, the player who first voices interest in the detail finds the clue. In the second, it goes to, at your discretion:

- the character to whom the clue seems most thematically suited (for example, if you've established as a running motif that Agent Jenkins always stumbles on the disgusting clues, and this clue is disgusting, tell his player that he's once again stepped in it)
- a player who hasn't had a win or spotlight time for a while
- the character with the highest Evidence Collection rating

Die Rolls

All die rolls in GUMSHOE use a single ordinary (six-sided) die.

Tests

A test occurs when the outcome of an ability use is in doubt. Tests apply to general skills only. Unlike information gathering attempts, tests carry a fairly high chance of failure. They may portend dire consequences if you lose, provide advantages if you win, or both.

Even in the case of general skills, the GM should call for tests only at dramatically important points in the story, and for tasks of exceptional difficulty. Most general ability uses should allow automatic successes, with possible bonuses on point spends, just like investigative abilities.

There are two types of test: simple tests and contests.

Simple Tests

A simple test occurs when the character attempts an action without active resistance from another person or entity. Examples include driving a treacherous road, jumping a gorge, sneaking into an unguarded building, binding a wound, shooting a target, disconnecting a security system, or remaining sane in the face of creeping supernatural horror.

In the game world, expenditure of pool points in this way represents special effort and concentration by the character, the kind you can muster only so many times during the course of

an investigation.

The GM does not reveal Difficulty Numbers beforehand. This rule is meant to force players to decide how much they want to commit to the situation, with the gnawing emotional dissonance that comes from the possibility of making the wrong move.

Difficulty Numbers and Story Pacing

Just as the GUMSHOE system keeps the story moving by making all crucial clues accessible to the characters, GMs must ensure that tests and contests essential to forward narrative momentum can be easily overcome. Assign relatively low Difficulty Numbers of 4 or less to these crucial plot points. Reserve especially hard Difficulty Numbers for obstacles which provide interesting but nonessential benefits.

For example, if the characters have to sneak into the cannibal campground in order to stage the final confrontation, assign the relatively low Difficulty Number of 4 to the task. If it seems to the characters that they ought to have a tougher time of it, insert a detail justifying their ease of success. The cannibal assigned to patrol duty might be found passed out at his post, say.

Where it is essential to overcome a General obstacle in order to reach a core scene, allow success whatever the result, but give a negative consequence other than failure for the test. For example, the PC climbs a fence, but receives an injury. This rule never protects characters from Health or Stability loss.

The test represents the character's best chance to succeed. Once you fail, you've shot your wad and cannot retry unless you take some other supporting action that would credibly increase your odds of success. If allowed to do this, you must spend more pool points than you did on the previous attempt. If you can't afford it, you can't retry.

Piggybacking

When a group of characters act in concert to perform a task together, they designate one to take the lead. That character makes a simple test, spending any number of his own pool points toward the task, as usual. All other characters pay 1 point from their relevant pools in order to gain the benefits of the leader's action. These points are not added to the leader's die result. For every character who is unable to pay this piggybacking cost, either because he lacks pool points or does not have the ability at all, the Difficulty Number of the attempt increases by 2.

In most instances a group cannot logically act in concert. Only one character can drive a car at one time. Two characters with Preparedness check their individual kits in sequence, rather than checking a single kit at the same time.

Cooperation

When two characters cooperate toward a single goal, they agree which of them is undertaking the task directly, and which is assisting. The leader may spend any number of points from her pool, adding them to the die roll. The assistant may pay any number of points from his pool. All but one of these is applied to the die roll.

Continuing Challenges

For tasks where drama, verisimilitude or suspense call for a feeling of repeated effort, assign the obstacle a pool representing the base Difficulty of doing it all at once unaided: this will generally be 8 or higher, often much higher. The tests per se use the standard Difficulty of 4.

The players may take turns, cooperate on each action, or use any other means at their disposal in a series of tests: Athletics to batter down a door, or Digital Intrusion to penetrate a firewall, for example. The points they roll and spend accumulate; when they have enough points to overcome the initial Difficulty, the task is done. No points or rolls spent on a failed test add to the total.

Characters can't render an impossible task possible just by applying the continuing challenge rules.

Zero Sum Contests

A zero sum contest occurs when something bad or good is definitely going to happen to one of the PCs, and you need to find out which one takes the hit. Each player makes a test of a general ability. A zero sum contest can be positive or negative. In a positive contest, the character with the highest result gets a benefit. In a negative contest, the one with the lowest result suffers an ill consequence. When embarking on a contest with an open Difficulty, inform the players that this is an open Difficulty, and whether this is a positive or negative test. They then decide in advance how many points to spend to modify their rolls, keeping this number secret from other players by writing it down on a piece of paper. They then roll the dice, reveal their expenditures, and announce their final results. You can cap the maximum spend.

Be cautious when treating events with negative outcomes as zero sum contests. Because they guarantee that something bad will definitely happen to one of the PCs, make sure that the negative consequence is distressing but does no permanent harm to the character.

Worse results of zero sum contests are acceptable if the characters have had some other fair chance to avoid exposure to the bad situation.

If players are tied for best result (in the case of a positive test) or worst (in a negative test), the tied players may subsequently spend any number of additional points from the pool in question, in hopes of breaking the tie in their favor. Should results remain tied after additional expenditures, the GM chooses the winner based on story considerations.

General Spends

Occasionally you'll want to create a task at which there is no reasonable chance of failure, but which should cost the characters a degree of effort. To do this, simply charge the character(s) a number of points from relevant general ability pools. Where tasks can be performed by cooperative effort, multiple characters may contribute points to them. 1 or 2 points per character is a reasonable general spend.

Making General Tests Without Abilities

[Decide whether you want your game to be unforgiving (grim settings, horror atmosphere) or heroic (upbeat settings featuring omni-competent protagonists), then choose your options from

the two choices below.]

[Forgiving]:

You can always make a test of any general ability, even when you have no points in its pool, or even if you have a rating of 0.

[Unforgiving]:

You can always make a test of any general ability if your rating is 1 or more, whether or not you currently have points in its pool. You can never test a general ability when your rating is 0.

Lucky Shots

[Forgiving settings only.]

In a desperate situation, you may be called on to use an general ability you don't have. Once per episode, a character with a rating of 0 in a given ability may attempt a lucky shot. The other players must grant unanimous permission for the character to try a lucky shot. They have a vested interest because the once-per-episode rule applies to the *entire cast*. If they let you use the lucky shot, none of them will be able to try it later on.

If allowed to go forward, you spend up to 4 points from your highest current general ability pool, and add it to your roll.

Should you succeed, you get the result you wanted, but are required to describe the outcome as somehow fluky or embarrassing. Thus you preserve the sense that the players who invested real points in the ability are the real masters, and you succeeded through sheer happenstance. Alternately, you can succeed with a straight face, but then explain how the victory really belongs to the PC with the highest rating in the ability. Maybe she taught you a few tricks between episodes. Or perhaps you remember something bad-ass she did earlier, and are simply aping it now.

Toll Tests

[First seen in Ashen Stars, you might find this rule worth including in settings where the investigators regularly build things, or encounter other situations more about cost-benefit than pass-fail.]

In a toll test, your success is assured, if you want it enough, but the cost of your effort is not. The GM informs you of the Difficulty; you roll the die without announcing an expenditure. Once you see the die result, you then decide whether to spend the points needed to bridge the gap between die roll and Difficulty, or to allow yourself to fail. The base Difficulty of a toll test is 6, which may be modified upwards as circumstances warrant.

Contests

Contests occur when two characters, often a player character and a supporting character controlled by the GM, actively attempt to thwart one another. Although contests can resolve various physical match-ups, in a horror game the most common contest is the chase, in which the investigators run away from slaving entities intent on ripping them limb from limb.

In a contest, each character acts in turn. The first to fail a roll of the contested ability loses.

The GM decides who acts first. In a chase, the character who bolts from the scene acts first. Where the characters seem to be acting at the same time, the one with the lowest rating in the relevant ability acts first. In the event of a tie, supporting characters act before player characters. In the event of a tie between player characters, the player who arrived last for the current session goes first in the contest.

The first character to act makes a test of the ability in question. If he fails, he loses the contest. If he succeeds, the second character then makes a test. This continues until one character loses, at which point the other one wins.

Typically each character attempts to beat a Difficulty Number of 4.

Where the odds of success are skewed in favor of one contestant, the GM may assign different Difficulties to each. A character with a significant advantage gets a lower Difficulty Number. A character facing a major handicap faces a higher Difficulty Number. When in doubt, the GM assigns the lower number to the advantaged participant.

Throughout the contest, GM and players should collaborate to add flavor to each result, explaining what the characters did to remain in the contest. That way, instead of dropping out of the narration to engage in an arithmetical recitation, you keep the fictional world verbally alive.

Fighting

Fights are slightly more complicated contests involving any of the following abilities:

- **Scuffling vs. Scuffling:** the characters are fighting in close quarters.
- **Shooting vs. Shooting:** the characters are apart from one another and trying to hit each other with guns or other missile weapons

Initiative: Determine whether the character who attempts to strike the first blow seizes the initiative and therefore gets the first opportunity to strike his opponent, or if his intended target anticipates his attack and beats him to the punch—or shot, as the case may be.

As GUMSHOE is player-facing, how this works depends on whether the PC in the situation is the aggressor or the defender.

In a Scuffling contest, the PC gets to go first if his Scuffling rating equals or exceeds that of his target.

In a Shooting contest, he gets to go first if his Shooting rating exceeds that of his target.

Otherwise, the opponent goes first.

In the rare instance where two PCs fight one another (when one of them is possessed, say), the PC with the higher applicable rating (Scuffling or Shooting) goes first. If their ratings tie but their pools do not, the one with the higher pool goes first. If both are tied, roll a die, with one player going first on an odd result and the other on even.

A contest proceeds between the two abilities. When combatants using the Scuffling or Shooting abilities roll well, they get the opportunity to deal damage to their opponents.

Hit Thresholds: Each character has a Hit Threshold of either 3 (the standard value) or 4 (if the character's Athletics rating is 8 or more.) The Hit Threshold is the Difficulty Number the character's opponent must match or beat in order to harm him. Less competent supporting

characters may have lower Hit Thresholds. Creatures may have Hit Thresholds of 4 or higher, regardless of their Athletics ratings.

Dealing Damage: When you roll on or over your opponent's Hit Threshold, you may deal damage to him. To do so, you make a damage roll, rolling a die which is then modified according to the relative lethality of your weapon, as per the following table:

Weapon Type	Damage Modifier
Fist, kick	-2
Small improvised weapon, police baton, knife	-1
Machete, heavy club, light firearm	0
Sword, heavy firearm	+1

For firearms, add an additional +2 when fired at point blank range.

Supernatural creatures often exhibit alarmingly high damage modifiers.

Characters may never spend points from their combat pools to increase their damage rolls.

The final damage result is then subtracted from your opponent's Health pool. When a combatant's Health pool drops to 0 or less, that combatant begins to suffer ill effects, ranging from slight impairment to helplessness to death; see sidebar.

Unlike other contests, participants do not lose when they fail their test rolls. Instead, they're forced out of the fight when they lose consciousness or become seriously wounded.

Exhaustion, Injury and Death

Unlike most abilities, your Health pool can drop below 0.

When it does this, you must make a Consciousness Roll. Roll a die with the absolute value² of your current Health pool as your Difficulty. You may deliberately strain yourself to remain conscious, voluntarily reducing your Health pool by an amount of your choice. For each point you reduce it, add 1 to your die result. The Difficulty of the Consciousness roll is based on your Health pool *before* you make this reduction.

If your pool is anywhere from 0 to -5, you are **hurt**, but have suffered no permanent injury, beyond a few superficial cuts and bruises. However the pain of your injuries makes it impossible to spend points on Investigative abilities, and increases the Difficulty Numbers of all tests and contests, including opponents' Hit Thresholds, by 1.

A character with the Medic ability can improve your condition by spending Medic points. For every Medic point spent, you regain 2 Health points—unless you are the Medic, in which case you gain only 1 Health point for every Medic point spent. The Medic can only refill your pool to where you were before the incident in which you received this latest injury. He must be in a position to devote all of his attention to directly tending to your wounds.

² In other words, treat the negative number as a positive. For example, if your Health pool is at -3, the Difficulty of the roll is 3, and so on.

If your pool is between **-6 and -11**, you have been **seriously wounded**. You must make a Consciousness roll.

Whether or not you maintain consciousness, you are no longer able to fight. Until you receive first aid, you will lose an additional Health point every half hour. A character with the Medic ability can stabilize your condition by spending 2 Medic points. However, he can't restore your Health points.

Even after you receive first aid, you must convalesce in a hospital or similar setting for a period of days. Your period of forced inactivity is a number of days equal to the positive value of your lowest Health pool score. (So if you were reduced to **-8 Health**, you are hospitalized for 8 days.) On the day of your discharge, your Health pool increases to half its maximum value. On the next day, it refreshes fully.

When your pool dips to -12 or below, you are **dead**. Time to create a replacement character.

Bigger Fights *Combat becomes more chaotic when two groups of combatants fight, or a group gangs up against a single opponent.*

If one group of combatants is surprised by the other (see sidebar), the surprising side goes before the surprised side.

Otherwise, determine initiative as follows.

Close-up fight: if any PC has a Scuffling rating equal to or greater than than any combatant on the other side, the PCs act first.

Shoot-out: if any PC has a Shooting rating equal to or greater than than any combatant on the other side, the PCs act first.

Shoot-outs may devolve into scuffles; this does not alter the already-established initiative order.

The time it takes to go through the ranking order once, with each character taking an action, is called a **round**. When one round ends, another begins.

In the course of each round, either the PCs or their enemies go first, as already established by the initiative order. Then the other side responds. The order in which the two sides act remains unchanged from round to round.

During the portion of the round devoted to the PCs, each participating PC makes an attack in sequence, according to the players' seating order, from left to right. Sequence becomes irrelevant, obviously, when only one PC is participating (or still standing) in the fight.

In their portion of the round, opponent(s) respond with their own wave of attack attempts, ordered by the characters they're targeting, again using a left to right player seating order. Where multiple opponents attack a single PC, the GM determines their order of action in whatever manner she finds convenient—usually the order in which she's tracking them in her rough notes.

The order of action can therefore change slightly from round to round for the PCs' opponents, but not for the PCs.

Some beings may strike more than once per round. They make each attack in succession, and may divide them up between opponents within range, or concentrate all of them on a single enemy. GMs order these attacks in whatever order they find convenient, so long as they fall

within portion of the round devoted to enemy attacks. Usually it's easiest to have them act against multiple PCs at once, starting when they reach the first target in the seating order

When called upon to act, each character may strike at any opponent within range of his weapons.

Creatures may choose to use their actions to deal additional damage to downed or helpless opponents rather than engage active opponents. They automatically deal once instance of damage per action. Only the most crazed and bestial human enemies engage in this behavior.

Characters who join a combat in progress come last in order of precedence. If more than two characters join during the same round, the GM determines their relative precedence using the rules above.

The fight continues until one side capitulates or flees, or all of its members are unconscious or otherwise unable to continue.

Surprise

Player characters are surprised when they find themselves suddenly in a dangerous situation. Avoid being surprised with a successful Surveillance test. The basic Difficulty is 4, adjusted by the opponent's Stealth Modifier.

Player characters surprise supporting characters by sneaking up on them with a successful Infiltration or Surveillance test. The basic Difficulty is 4, adjusted by the opponent's Stealth modifier.

Surprised characters suffer a +2 increase to all general ability Difficulties for any immediately subsequent action. In a fight, the penalty pertains to the first round of combat.

Armor

Armor may reduce the damage from certain weapon types. If you're wearing a form of armor effective against the weapon being used against you, you subtract a number of points from each instance of damage dealt to you before applying it to your Health pool. Light body armor, as worn by police officers, reduces each instance of damage from bullets by 2 points and from cutting and stabbing weapons (knives, swords, machetes) by 1 point. Military-grade body armor reduces bullet damage by 3 points.

Light body armor is heavy, hot, and marks you out as someone looking for trouble. All of these drawbacks apply doubly to military-grade body armor. Investigators can't expect to walk around openly wearing armor without attracting the attention of the local SWAT team. Armor and heavy weapons may prove useful in discrete missions conducted away from prying eyes.

In choosing to make contemporary body armor highly effective against firearms, we're drawing on the portrayal of Kevlar vests in cop shows and movies. We make no claims for any resemblance between these rules and real life. The rules also favor close-up physical confrontations, which are more in keeping with the horror genre than firefights. GMs using the GUMSHOE rules in more realistic, horror-free investigative settings may wish to reduce the effectiveness of body armor against gunfire.

Creatures often have high armor ratings. They may possess hard, bony hides or monstrous

anatomies that can take greater punishment than ordinary organisms. Most supernatural creatures are more resistant to bullets and other missile weapons than they are to blunt force trauma, slashes, and stab wounds.

[Delete or modify references to supernatural creatures as needed for your genre.]

Cover

In a typical gunfight, combatants seek cover, hiding behind walls, furniture or other barriers, exposing themselves only for the few seconds it takes them to pop up and fire a round at their targets. The GUMSHOE rules recognize three cover conditions:

Exposed: No barrier stands between you and the combatant firing at you. Your Hit Threshold decreases by 1.

Partial Cover: About half of your body is exposed to fire. Your Hit Threshold remains unchanged.

Full Cover: Except when you pop up to fire a round, the barrier completely protects you from incoming fire. Your Hit Threshold increases by 1.

One Gun, Two Combatants

If your opponent has a gun well in hand and ready to fire, and you charge him from more than five feet away, he can empty his entire clip or chamber at you before you get to him, badly injuring you. You are automatically hit. He rolls one instance of damage, which is then tripled. Yes, we said tripled. And, yes, the tripling occurs after weapon modifiers are taken into account. This is why few people charge when their opponents have the drop on them.

If your opponent has a pistol but it is not well in hand and ready to fire, you may attempt to jump him and wrestle it from his grip. If he has a pistol well in hand but is unaware of your presence, you may also be able to jump him, at the GM's discretion. The characters engage in a Scuffling contest to see which of them gets control of the gun and fires it. The winner makes a damage roll against the loser, using the pistol's Damage Modifier, including the +2 for point blank range.

If you jump an opponent with an unready rifle, a Scuffling combat breaks out, with the opponent using the rifle as a heavy club.

Ammo Capacity

The Esoterrorists sets aside the loving attention to firearm intricacies characteristic of most contemporary-era RPG systems. For example, characters need reload only when dramatically appropriate. Otherwise, they're assumed to be able to refill the cylinders of their revolvers or jam clips into their automatic weapons between shots.

When reloading is an issue, GMs may request a Shooting test (Difficulty 3) to quickly reload. Characters who fail may not use their Shooting ability to attack during the current round.

Range

The effect of range on firearms combat is likewise simplified nearly out of existence. Handguns and shotguns can only be accurately fired at targets within fifty meters. The range

limit for rifles is one hundred meters.

Non-Lethal Weapons

In GUMSHOE, non-lethal attacks never take an opponent out faster than standard combat. Otherwise players will have their characters simply knock their enemies out and kill them in cold blood, which is unsympathetic and out of genre. Thus tasers and stun guns work less effectively in the game than in real life.

Fighting Without Abilities

A character with a Shooting rating of 0 is not allergic to guns. Anyone can pick up a revolver and empty it in the general direction of the foe. Likewise, a character with no Scuffling ability is not going to just ignore the fire axe sitting on the wall when a blood bursts through a partition wall.

However, such characters will use their weapons ineffectively and hesitantly. Using a weapon (including fists or feet) without ability has the following drawbacks:

- You automatically do an additional -2 damage
- You must declare your action at the beginning of each round and cannot change it if the tactical situation alters.
- You automatically go last in each round.
- If you are using a firearm, a roll of 1 means you have accidentally shot yourself or one of your allies, as selected (or rolled randomly) by the GM. Do damage as normal (including your automatic -2 penalty).

Called Shots

[Use only for especially combat-oriented GUMSHOE games.]

In certain situations simply hitting an enemy isn't enough: you need to get him in a particular spot. When taking a called shot, specify the desired location of the strike and any additional intended effect other than injury to the opponent. The GM decides whether this is a likely outcome of such a hit. If it is clearly not a likely outcome, and your character would logically know this, she warns you in advance, so you can do something else instead.

The GM then adds 1 to 4 points to the target's Hit Threshold, depending on the additional difficulty entailed. Use the following table as a guideline. Body locations assume a human of ordinary size. Hit Threshold modifiers for ordinary body parts of extraordinary creatures are left as an exercise for the GM. *Vehicle locations are in italics.*

<i>Desired Location</i>	<i>Modifier to Hit Threshold</i>
Large carried object (rocket launcher, laptop computer, backpack)	+1

Torso, <i>windshield</i>	+1
Chest (if attacker is facing target)	+2
Gut, <i>specific window, tail rotor</i>	+2
Head or limb	+2
Hand or foot, joint, <i>tire</i>	+3
Heart, throat, mouth, or face	+3
Weapon or other hand-held object	+3
Eye, <i>headlight</i>	+4
Chest (if target faces away from attacker)	+4

With the new Hit Threshold determined, you then make a combat ability test, as per the standard rules. If you succeed, your specified effect occurs as desired.

If you struck an ordinary person in the head, throat, or chest with a weapon, add +2 to the damage; hitting the heart adds +3 to the damage. Neither can be combined with a point-blank gunshot, which is already assumed to hit a vital location.

If you struck an ordinary person in a joint (wrist, knee, etc.) or throat with an aimed hand-to-hand blow, lock, or kick, add +2 to the damage; hitting an eye adds +3 to the damage.

This assumes a trained, targeted strike intended to disable or cripple. You may narrate some other crippling strike to suit your own specific martial arts idiom, but the modifiers remain the same if you want to do the extra damage.

If, after this damage is dealt, the victim is already Hurt but not Seriously Wounded, you may then pay an additional 6 points from the fighting ability you are using to reduce the target to -6 Health. If the target is already Seriously Wounded you may then pay an additional 6 Shooting, Weapons, or Hand-to-Hand points (whichever applies) to kill the target outright.

Combat Options

[Games featuring extensive fight sequences may benefit from the addition of combat options. Examples include Night's Black Agents and the Special Suppression Forces series frame for The Esoterrorists.

Combat options provide extra benefits during a fight. They require:

- ♣ that the character meet a prerequisite rating in one or more fighting-related General abilities

and/or

- ♣ the expenditure of points from one or more fighting-related General abilities.

Example Combat Option: Mook Shield

Prereq: Hand-to-Hand 8+

If you have a Hand-to-Hand *rating* of 8 or more, you can drag a convenient mook, henchman, or minion into the path of incoming gunfire. Spend 3 Hand-to-Hand points and then make a Hand-to-Hand attack against any mook in Point-Blank range, or 3 Hand-to-Hand and 2 Athletics and then make a Hand-to-Hand attack against any mook in Close range. (Those points do not add to your attack.) If no mook is closer than Near range, you cannot use Mook Shield.

If you succeed, all ranged attacks that miss you hit the mook instead until your next turn; the mook can do nothing. Additionally, the mook provides -4 Armor against incoming fire, losing 4 points of Health for each bullet that hits you. Holding a mook up in front of you gives you full cover, and increases your normal Hit Threshold by 1. On your next turn, you may fire a weapon, but must either drop the mook (or, more likely, his corpse) or spend 3 additional Shooting points to fire from under his arm.

[From *Night's Black Agents*]

[Many combat options and cherries allow an immediate ability pool refresh. For example:]

Example Combat Option: Martial Arts

Characters with a Scuffling rating of 8 can specify that they are trained in one or more martial arts. Once per fight, their players may gain a 4-point Scuffling refresh by uttering a brief, evocative narrative description of his or her elegantly bone-crunching moves:

- “With a flowing Kata Gurama, I try to sweep him up onto my shoulder and down to the pavement.”
- “Using my krav maga training, I target the back of his knee with a pivoting, angled kick.”
- “Remembering the sweat and humidity of that sweltering Bangkok gym so long ago, I summon up all my strength to tag him with a ferocious cross jab.”

At the GM’s discretion, especially poetic or believably obscure descriptions may fetch a 5-point refresh.

These utterances needn’t be improvised; players can prepare key phrases in advance, then adapt them to the situation at hand.

[From *The Esoterror Fact Book*.]

Running Away

Fleeing from an ongoing fight requires an Athletics test. The Difficulty is 3 plus the number of foes you're fleeing from: to flee one enemy is Difficulty 4, fleeing two enemies is Difficulty 5, fleeing four enemies is Difficulty 7. On a success, melee ends and you flee; if they intend to chase you, your foes must roll first in the ensuing full contest of Athletics. If you fail, the opponent with the highest damage value automatically deals one instance of damage to you. Melee still ends, but you must roll first in the ensuing chase.

In situations where it seems appropriate to make flight more difficult, on a failure, any directly engaged opponent might spend 3 Athletics to block you from fleeing—interposing himself

between you and the exit, tackling you, slamming the garage doors, or whatever the narrative description warrants. In this case, your enemies forgo the damage they would otherwise deal.

Stability Tests

[Not all genres require a system for psychological resistance. In horror games, Stability marks the downward spiral of your diminishing faculties. In Mutant City Blues, it's just a resistance to mental attacks. Ashen Stars doesn't use it at all. Adjust as needed for your setting.]

Mental stresses can take you out of commission, temporarily or permanently, as easily as physical injury.

When an incident challenges your fragile sanity, make a Stability test against a Difficulty Number of 4.

If you fail, you lose a number of Stability points. The severity of the loss depends on the situation. As with any other test of a general ability, you are always permitted to spend Stability points to provide a bonus to your roll. However, it's never a good bet to spend more points than you stand to lose if you fail.

Your Stability loss from failed tests is capped at the worst incident in that scene. Points spent on providing bonuses are still lost.

Incident	Stability Loss
A human opponent attacks you with evident intent to do serious harm	2
You are in a car or other vehicle accident serious enough to pose a risk of injury	2
A human opponent attacks you with evident intent to kill	3
You see a supernatural creature from a distance	3
You see a supernatural creature up close	4
You see a particularly grisly murder or accident scene	4
You learn that a friend or loved one has been violently killed	4
You discover the corpse of a friend or loved one	6
You are attacked by a supernatural creature	7
You see a friend or loved one killed	7
You see a friend or loved one killed in a particularly gruesome manner	8

GMs should feel free to assess Stability Losses for other incidents, using the examples provided as a benchmark. Some especially overwhelming creatures may impose higher than normal Stability losses when seen from a distance, seen up close, or ripping your lungs out.

Characters make a single roll per incident, based on its highest potential Stability loss.

Groups craving an additional point of complexity can occasionally alter Difficulty Numbers for Stability tests depending on the character's attitude toward the destabilizing event. Characters who would logically be inured to a given event face a Difficulty of 3, while those especially susceptible face a 5. A character whose daytime identity is that of a surgeon or coroner might, for example, face a lowered Difficulty when encountering gruesomely mutilated bodies. A stock car racer would get a better chance against car accidents. No character type gets a break when encountering supernatural creatures.

Losing It

Like Health, your Stability pool can drop below 0.

If your Stability ranges from 0 to -5, you are **shaken**.

Difficulty Numbers for all general abilities increase by 1, and it becomes more difficult to use investigative abilities.

If you want to make an Investigative spend, make a test with the absolute value³ of your current Stability pool as your Difficulty. You may deliberately strain yourself, voluntarily reducing your Stability pool by an amount of your choice. For each point you reduce it, add 1 to your die result. The Difficulty of the Stability test is based on your Stability pool *before* you make this reduction. If you fail, you still make the spend, but you should roleplay this failure.

If your Stability ranges from -6 to -11, you acquire a **mental illness**.

This stays with you even after your Stability pool is restored to normal. See below for more. You also continue to suffer the ill effects of being shaken. Furthermore, you permanently lose 1 point from your Stability *rating*. The only way to get it back is to purchase it again with build points.

When your Stability reaches -12 or less, you are **incurably insane**. You may commit one last crazy act, which must either be self-destructively heroic or self-destructively destructive. Or you may choose merely to gibber and drool. Assuming you survive your permanent journey to the shores of madness, your character is quietly shipped off to a secure Ordo Veritatis psych facility, never to be seen again. Time to create a new character.

Mental Illness

[Alter as needed for the flavor of your setting.]

If the incident that drove you to mental illness was mundane in nature, you suffer from Post-Traumatic Stress Syndrome (PTSD.) You are haunted by dreams of the incident, and spend your days in a constant state of anxiety and alert, as if prepared for it to repeat itself at any moment. Whenever your senses register any input reminding you of the incident, you must make a Stability test (Difficulty 4) or freeze up. If you freeze up, you are unable to take any action for fifteen minutes and remain **shaken** (see above) for twenty-four hours after that. Tests to see if

³ In other words, treat the negative number as a positive. For example, if your Stability pool is at -3, the Difficulty of the roll is 3, and so on.

you show symptoms of PTSD do not in and of themselves lower your Stability pool.

If driven to mental illness by a supernatural occurrence, you face a range of possible mental disorders. The GM rolls on the following chart or chooses a disorder based on the triggering circumstance. The player is then sent out of the room, while the GM and other players collaborate on a way to heighten his sense of dislocation and disorientation.

1. **Delusion.** The other players and GM decide on a mundane detail of the world which is no longer true and has never been true. For example, there might be no such thing as a squirrel, a Volkswagen, or orange juice. Maybe John Lennon was never assassinated, or never existed in the first place. PCs and supporting characters deny knowledge of the chosen item, person, or event.
2. **Homicidal Mania.** The GM takes the player aside, tells him that he knows one of the other players is a supernatural creature, and tells him just how to kill the monster.
3. **Megalomania.** When the character fails at a dramatic moment, the GM describes the outcome of his ability attempt as successful, then asks the player to leave the room. Then the GM describes the real results to the other players, and invites the megalomaniac player back into the room.
4. **Multiple Personality Disorder.** At moments of stress, another player is assigned control of the character, speaking and acting as if he's an entirely different person.
5. **Paranoia.** The other players are instructed to act as if they're trying to keep straight faces when the affected player returns. Occasionally they exchange notes, make hand signals to the GM, or use meaningless code words, as if communicating something important the player is unaware of.
6. **Selective Amnesia.** The group decides on an event that did happen in the world that the player has now forgotten all about. He's married, or killed someone, or pseudonymously written a best-selling book. Everyone he meets refers to this new, verifiable fact that he has no knowledge of.

Psychological Triage

A character with the Shrink ability can spend points from that pool to help another character regain spent Stability points. For every Shrink point spent, the recipient gains 2 Stability points.

If a character is acting in an erratic manner due to mental illness, another character can spend 2 points of Shrink to snap him into a state of temporary lucidity. He will then act rationally for the remainder of the current scene.

Head Games

Mental illness can be cured through prolonged treatment using the Shrink ability. At the beginning of each scenario, in a prologue scene preceding the main action, the character administering the treatment makes a Shrink test (Difficulty 4.) After three consecutive successful tests, and three consecutive scenarios in which the patient remains above 0 Stability at all times, the mental illness goes away.

However, if the character ever again acquires a mental illness, he regains the condition he was

previously cured of. Permanent cure then becomes impossible.

A successful Shrink test undertaken during the course of a scenario suppresses its symptoms until the patient next suffers a Stability loss.

Regaining Pool Points

Spent points from various pools are restored at different rates, depending on their narrative purpose.

Investigative ability pools are restored only at the end of each case, without regard to the amount of time that passes in the game world. Players seeking to marshal their resources may ask you how long cases typically run, in real time. Most groups finish scenarios over 2-3 sessions. Players may revise their sense of how carefully to manage point spending as they see how quickly their group typically disposes of its cases.

(GMs running extremely long, multi-part investigations may designate certain story events as breakpoints where all investigative pools are refreshed. For example, a globe-hopping investigation where the team meets a separate team of Esoterrorists enemies in five different locales might allow refreshment of investigative pools after each group of enemies is neutralized.)

Use of the Shrink ability permits limited recovery of Stability points in the course of an episode. Full refreshment occurs between cases. It is possible only when the character is able to spend calm, undisturbed quality time with friends and loved ones uninvolved in the shadowy world of the Ordo Veritatis. In campaigns where the teammates' personal lives are a matter of background detail only, refreshment automatically occurs between episodes.

GMs who wish to add a soap opera element to their campaigns, in which the characters must balance the everyday pressures of ordinary life against their activities as covert battlers of the supernatural, can complicate this process. In this campaign type, the characters must work to keep their support networks intact. If they fail, they regain no Stability between episodes. As part of the character creation process, players must detail their network of friends and loved ones in a paragraph or two of background text, which is then submitted to the GM for approval.

The Health pool refreshes over time, at a rate of 2 points per day of restful activity. (Wounded characters heal at a different rate, over a period of hospitalization.) Use of the Medic ability can restore a limited number of Health points in the course of a session.

Pools for the physical abilities of Athletics, Driving, Scuffling, and Shooting are fully restored whenever twenty-four hours of game-world time elapses since the last expenditure. The remaining general abilities refresh at the end of each case, like investigative abilities.

[[[BEGIN SIDEBAR]]]

What Do Pool Points Represent?

Pool points are a literary abstraction, representing the way that each character gets his or her own time in the spotlight in the course of an ensemble drama. When you do something remarkable, you expend a little bit of your spotlight time. More active players will spend their points sooner than less demonstrative ones, unless they carefully pick and choose their moments

to shine.

Remember, all characters are remarkably competent. Pool points measure your opportunities to exercise this ultra-competence during any given scenario. Even when pools are empty, you still have a reasonable chance to succeed at a test, and you'll always get the information you need to move forward in the case.

Pool points do not represent a resource, tangible or otherwise, in the game world. Players are aware of them, but characters are not. The team members' ignorance of them is analogous to TV characters' obliviousness to commercial breaks, the unwritten rules of scene construction, and the tendency of events to heat up during sweeps.

We represent this most purely in the case of investigative skills, which are the core of the game. Their refreshment is tied to a purely fictional construct, the length of the episode.

However, where a pool could be seen to correspond to a resource perceptible to the characters, we handle refreshment in a somewhat more realistic, if also abstract, manner. Characters' ebbing Health scores are perceptible to the characters in the form of welts, cuts, pain, and general fatigue⁴. Stability is less tangible but can be subjectively measured in the characters' moods and reactions. Physical abilities, also tied to fatigue and sharpness of reflexes, are also handled with a nod to the demands of realism.

[[[END SIDEBAR]]]

Improving Your Character

At the end of each investigation, each player gets 2 build points for each session they participated in. (This assumes a small number of 3-4 hour sessions; if you play in shorter bursts, modify accordingly.) Players who had characters die in the course of the investigation only get points for each session involving their current character.

These build points can be spent to increase either investigative or general abilities. You may acquire new abilities or bolster existing ones. If necessary to preserve credibility, rationalize new abilities as areas of expertise you've had all along, but are only revealing later in the series.

Opponent Statistics

You usually only need game statistics for characters, including ODEs, that the investigators in some way have to overcome through general abilities. Most witnesses, suspects and non-combatants require only a text description, indicating for example which interpersonal abilities they're most likely to respond to.

Opponents use the same Hit Threshold and Weapon Damage rules as player characters.

When choosing Health ratings for dramatically unimportant foes, don't worry about simulating their relative robustness in comparison to the general population. Focus on how many hits they ought to be able to take before dropping, according to dramatic logic. If you want

⁴ The publisher uses Health to represent the narrative plausibility of a character subject to peril not dying. A GMC with 1 Health might be bad-ass, but drop the first time he's hit because his not important to the narrative.

a thug who falls to a single burst of automatic fire, give him a Health of 1 or 2.

An **Attack Pattern** is an optional game statistic suggesting how the opponent might spend its Scuffling and/or Shooting points from round to round of a fight. GMs should always consult story logic and dramatic needs first and resort to the attack pattern second. You might want a vast lumbering creature to smash doors and walls around the PCs, and a small vicious ODE to attack with unerring precision. These numbers are a fallback if you can't decide how the opponent would spend, or are uncomfortable choosing to spend enough to guarantee a hit each time. Don't use them just because they're there, even if you find the pull of numbers—oh, sweet, beautiful numbers—generally irresistible.

When you do use the Attack Pattern, increase the spends after each miss until the opponent either starts to hit, or runs out of points. Once engaged, opponents figure out how hard the PCs are to hit, and adjust their efforts accordingly.

Armor is subtracted from each instance of damage the opponent takes. Where a weapon or weapons is listed in brackets after the number, the Armor reduces damage only from those weapons. Some Armor may protect against all Scuffling attacks but not Shooting attacks, or vice versa.

An opponent's **Alertness Modifier** represents its ability to sense your activities, whether through standard senses like sight and hearing, or exotic ones like echolocation, pheromone recognition, or energy signature reading. When you try to sneak past it, the Alertness Modifier is applied to your base Infiltration Difficulty, which is usually 4. It also applies to Surveillance tests when you're trying to observe the opponent without being observed in turn. The Alertness Modifier reflects all of the individual's sensing capabilities, both natural and technological. A second number appearing after a slash represents the opponent's Alertness if its gear is somehow neutralized or taken away.

An opponent with a **Stealth Modifier** is either significantly harder or easier to spot with Surveillance. It alters the difficulty number for that or similar tests.

Sample Creature Stat Block: Lipovore

Abilities: Athletics 6, Health 18, Scuffling 12, Shooting 8, plus one shipboard ability at 8 and another at 4.

Scuffling Weapons/Damage: punch +2

Shooting Weapons/Damage: disruption pistol +1

Hit Threshold: 3

Typical Tech: Disguiser, Personal Bluffer, Tether

Alertness Modifier: +2

Stealth Modifier: +2

Savvy Modifier: +2

Special: At -12 hit points a lipovore falls into a deep coma that may be mistaken for death.

[From Ashen Stars]

Sample Creature Stat Blocks: Various Animals

Aggressive Herbivore, Cattle-Sized

Abilities: Athletics 8, Health 8, Scuffling 8

Scuffling Weapons/Damage: gore/trample +2

Hit Threshold: 2

Armor: 0

Alertness Modifier: -2

Stealth Modifier: -2

Aggressive Herbivore, Rhino-Sized

Abilities: Athletics 12, Health 12, Scuffling 12

Scuffling Weapons/Damage: gore/trample +4

Hit Threshold: 2

Armor: 2

Alertness Modifier: -3

Stealth Modifier: -3

Aggressive Herbivore, Triceratops-Sized

Abilities: Athletics 12, Health 24, Scuffling 16

Scuffling Weapons/Damage: gore/trample +6

Hit Threshold: 2

Armor: 3

Alertness Modifier: -3

Stealth Modifier: -3

Aggressive Herbivore, Sauropod-Sized

Abilities: Athletics 24, Health 36, Scuffling 24

Scuffling Weapons/Damage: trample +8

Hit Threshold: 1

Armor: 1

Alertness Modifier: -4

Stealth Modifier: -4

Apex Predator, Lion-Sized

Abilities: Athletics 12, Health 8, Scuffling 8

Scuffling Weapons/Damage: bite +1

Hit Threshold: 4

Armor: 0

Alertness Modifier: +1

Stealth Modifier: +1

Apex Predator, Megafauna-Sized

Abilities: Athletics 16, Health 8, Scuffling 8

Scuffling Weapons/Damage: bite, swipe or claw +4

Hit Threshold: 3

Armor: 1

Alertness Modifier: +1

Stealth Modifier: -3

Apex Predator, Monster-Sized

Abilities: Athletics 16, Health 18, Scuffling 18

Scuffling Weapons/Damage: bite, swipe or claw +6

Hit Threshold: 2

Armor: 2

Alertness Modifier: +1

Stealth Modifier: -3

Pack Predator, Dog-Sized

Abilities: Athletics 8, Health 3, Scuffling 4

Scuffling Weapons/Damage: bite -1

Hit Threshold: 4

Armor: 0

Alertness Modifier: +1

Stealth Modifier: +1

Pack Predator, Wolf-Sized

Abilities: Athletics 8, Health 3, Scuffling 4

Scuffling Weapons/Damage: bite +0

Hit Threshold: 4

Armor: 0

Alertness Modifier: +1

Stealth Modifier: +1

Tests and Supporting Characters

Game statistics in GUMSHOE are, whenever possible, player-facing. When you as GM have the choice between making a determination based on a player test, or on a test made by you on behalf of a supporting character, always choose the player. For example, you may want to specify that there's a chance a harried relative of a kidnapping victim might eventually lose her patience with the investigators and participate in a damaging press conference. Rather than having her make a Stability test to see when and if this happens, set it up so that a player makes a Reassurance spend to forestall her.

Likewise, if you want to have a supporting character steal something in a situation where the PCs are in no position to affect the outcome, simply decree that it happens. Don't bother testing the character's Filch ability. To do otherwise is to engage in false branching: you are creating unpredictability for yourself in a way that remains invisible to the players. They don't get a chance to alter the outcome, and thus gain no benefit from the uncertainty you've introduced.

Hazards

In or out of combat, the characters' survival may be threatened by assorted hazards, from electrical shock to poisoning.

Electricity and Other Shocks

Damage from exposure to electricity varies according to voltage. You can suffer:

Mild shock, equivalent to briefly touching an ungrounded wire or damaged electrical appliance. You lose 1 Health and are blown backwards for a couple of meters.

Moderate shock, equivalent to a jolt from a cattle prod. You lose 2 Health and (if in combat time) your next four actions. You always lose at least one action, but may buy off the loss of other actions by paying 3 Athletics points per action.

Extreme shock, equivalent to a lightning strike. You suffer one die of damage, with a +4 modifier.

The GM should always give you some opportunity to avoid being shocked, whether it be an Athletics test to avoid unexpected contact, or a Surveillance test to spot the danger.

If you are reduced to -6 or fewer Health, the current is assumed to have traveled through your heart or brain, causing cardiac arrest or brain damage, respectively. The GM describes appropriate symptoms and futuristic treatments during your sick bay convalescence.

Many other hazards can be emulated using the mild/moderate/extreme breakdown above. Simply change the narrative description and side effects, keeping the Health pool losses.

Example Hazard Description: Alien Fungal Infection

Mild: For the next two intervals, you lose 2 Health every time you make an Athletics test.

Moderate: Make a Health test against a Difficulty of 4. If you fail, you suffer an extreme shock at the beginning of the next interval.

Example Hazard Description: Ion Storm

Mild: For the next interval, you lose all benefits from your cybernetic enhancements.

Moderate: Your cybernetic enhancements all go offline, returning after three intervals. You may activate any or all of them before this time by spending 2 Health per enhancement.

Example Hazard Description: Temporal Shock

Mild: For the remainder of the interval, you lose 1 Health each time you use an Academic or Technical ability.

Moderate: For the remainder of the interval, the Difficulty of any general ability rolls increases by 2.

[Hazard descriptions from Ashen Stars.]

Fire

Damage from exposure to fire varies according to the surface area of your body exposed to the flame, and repeats for each round (or, outside of combat, every few seconds) you remain exposed to it.

Minor exposure, most often to an extremity like a hand or foot, carries a damage modifier of -2.

Partial exposure, to up to half of your surface area, carries a damage modifier of +0.

Extensive exposure, to half or more of your surface area, imposes a damage modifier of +2.

The GM should always give you a chance to avoid being set on fire. The difficulty of extinguishing a flame is usually 4, but might be higher for anomalous flame-like manifestations, or when you are coated with a futuristic accelerant.

Suffocation

When deprived of air, you get two minutes before the nastiness kicks in. After that point, you lose 1 Athletics every ten seconds, as you struggle to hold your breath. Once that pool depletes, you start losing Health, at a rate of 1 point every five seconds.

Toxins

Toxins are either inhaled, ingested or injected directly into the bloodstream. They vary widely in lethality. A dose of a low-tech cleaning substance may impose a damage modifier of -2, where a viro-active nerve gas might range from +6 to +16. Inhaled toxins tend to take effect right away. Injected and ingested toxins take delayed effect, anywhere from minutes to hours after exposure. Their damage might be parceled out in increments, and may prevent you from refreshing Health points until somehow neutralized. As with any hazard, the GM should always give you a chance to avoid exposure to them.

Designing Scenarios

The GUMSHOE system supports a certain style of scenario design. The rules are less

important to the success of your game than the way you structure your adventures.

Clues

If a piece of information is essential to move the story on, it's a **core clue**. It costs nothing. You can also offer minor tidbits of information at a 0 points, if the information not consequential enough to be worth a point spend.

If you have a piece of information that offers a fun sidelight on the action but is not essential to move through the story, you can make this available with a 1- or 2-point spend. Choose the cost of the spend according to the entertainment value of the information, not the game-world difficulty of completing the task. The whole point of the system is to make clues easy to acquire, so that players can get on with the fun of figuring out how they fit together. Facilitate this by making choices that get information into the hands of players. Habits die hard, so make sure you're not slipping back into the old paradigm and making the clues hard to get.

If an action's consequence of failure might be madness, death or injury, by all means make it a test. If game world logic suggests that a supporting character will actively oppose the PC, make it a contest.

Clue Types

Special clue types are as follows.

Floating Core Clues

It can be useful to structure a scenario with one or more free-floating core clues. These typically advance the story from one distinct section to another. Where an ordinary core clue is linked with a particular scene, a floating clue can be gleaned in any one of several scenes. The GM determines during play which scene gives up the clue.

Floating clues allow you to control the pacing of a scenario. They allow the characters to play out all of the fun or interesting experiences in one section of the scenario before the story takes a dramatic turn. For example, you might want them to separately meet all of the suspected esoterror suspects before they, and the Investigators, get locked up for the night in an old dark house. To achieve this, withhold the core clue that moves the investigators to the dark house until after they've met all of the relevant supporting characters. That way, you prevent them from leaping ahead into the narrative without getting all the information they need to fully enjoy what follows.

Likewise, a floating clue allows you to perform like a ruthless editor, skipping unnecessary scenes when you need to kick the narrative into a higher gear. Let's say you've chosen five possible scenes in which the Investigators might logically get a necessary core clue. You figure that this phase of the adventure should take about an hour. If the players breeze through the scenes in ten minutes apiece, you can save the core clue for the last scene. If they linger, taking twenty minutes per scene, you'll want to make the core clue available after the third scene.

Player frustration level usually serves as a better trigger for a floating core clue than a predetermined time limit. If they're having obvious fun interacting with the vivid supporting

characters you've created, or being creeped out by uncanny phenomena, you can give them more of what they want by saving the core clue for the final scene. On the other hand, if you see they're getting bored and frustrated, you can slip in the floating clue earlier.

Leveraged Clues

A staple element of mystery writing is the crucial fact which, when presented to a previously resistant witness or suspect, causes him to break down and suddenly supply the information or confession the detectives seek. This is represented in GUMSHOE by the **leveraged** clue. This is a piece of information which is only available from the combined use of an interpersonal ability, and the mention of another, previously gathered clue. The cited clue is called a **prerequisite** clue, and is by definition a sub-category of core clue.

Pipe Clues

A clue which is important to the solution of the mystery, but which becomes significant much later in the scenario, is called a pipe clue. The name is a reference to screenwriting jargon, where the insertion of exposition that becomes relevant later in the narrative is referred to as "laying pipe." The term likens the careful arrangement of narrative information to the work performed by a plumber in building a house.

Pipe clues create a sense of structural variety in a scenario, lessening the sense that the PCs are being led in a strictly linear manner from Scene A to Scene B to Scene C. When they work well, they give players a "eureka" moment, as they suddenly piece together disparate pieces of the puzzle. A possible risk with pipe clues lies in the possible weakness of player memories, especially over the course of a scenario broken into several sessions. The GM may occasionally have to prompt players to remember the first piece of a pipe clue when they encounter a later component.

Restricted Clues

Certain clues which are necessary to the solution of a mystery will not be known to everyone with the ability required to access them. Instead, these are restricted clues—secret, esoteric or otherwise obscure facts which one member of the group just happens to know.

Only a select few people know about OPERATION CORNWALLIS, but if it is necessary to the completion of an investigation, an investigator will be one of them.

To preserve the sense that the group has access to little-known facts, only one group member knows the information in question; its revelation comes as news to all of the other investigators, even those who have the same ability. The first character with the relevant ability to take an action that might trigger the clue is the one blessed with this fortuitous knowledge. Where no clear first actor exists, as in a clue provided as soon as the investigators enter a scene, the GM chooses the investigator with the highest current pool in that ability (if applicable) or the investigator who has had the least recent spotlight time or most requires a positive reversal of fortune. Alternately, the GM may allow applicable background considerations to determine the possessor of the restricted clue: for example, a character with high Bureaucracy might recognize an esoterror suspect from back office work.

Timed Results

The following structural technique applies to any GUMSHOE game where the characters have access to the services of a forensic lab, and rely on tests performed by others.

You can shape the pacing of a case with a **timed result**. This occurs when believability requires a suitable interval between the submission of evidence to forensic experts and the results of the testing they perform. In police procedurals, it is common for the direction of an investigation to be suddenly changed when the lab results come in. The scientific evidence may exonerate the current top suspect or point the investigators toward new witnesses or locations. Alternately, it can change the meaning of previously gleaned information, causing the investigators to conduct re-interview previous witnesses, or conduct closer searches of crime scenes.

A timed result can serve as a delayed-reaction core clue, directing the PCs to a new scene. These are useful devices in cases where the scenes can be connected in any order. If the PCs get bored or bogged down in one scene, they can receive a phone call from the lab techs calling them in to receive some much-needed exposition, which sends them in a new direction.

The arrival of a timed result can also change the players' interpretation of their current case notes without moving them to a new scene. They might dismiss a suspect's alibi, alter their timeline of events, or reject information provided them by a witness whose perceptions are revealed as unreliable.

News of a lab report requiring the team's attention can also be used to cut short a scene that the players won't abandon, even though they've already collected all available clues.

[[SIDEBAR]]

Records are your Friend

In addition to your adventure notes, there are two other documents you need to run the game.

When you are creating your adventure, make a note of the investigative abilities you've used on the Investigative Ability Checklist. It's a good idea to add clues for as wide a range of abilities as possible. You can also use the Checklist during character creation to ensure all the abilities are covered, and that redundant abilities are left out.

Secondly, during character creation, have your players note their choices of investigative abilities on the GM's Investigator Roster. This enables you to pick out which characters might notice obvious clues, and ensure spotlight time is evenly spread.

When you prepare your next session, you can use the Investigator Roster to see what interests your players. If someone has a 3-point rating in Art History, you could add a some forged artwork or a menacing sculpture to your notes. This is particularly useful in an improvised game.

[[SIDEBAR]]

Scene Types

Having planned out your mystery, it's time to arrange it into scenes. Each of these takes place in a different location or involves an interaction with a different supporting character—usually both. Under the title of the scene, write the scene type, and the scene or scenes which lead to the

current scene, and scenes which lead from it. Here is an example scene header from the introductory adventure.

The Good Reverend

Scene Type: Core

Lead-In: The Briefing

Lead-Outs: The Visionary, The Skeptic, Newshounds of Sequoia City

Scenes fall into the following types.

Introductory

This is the first scene of the episode. It establishes the premise of the mystery. If it's the characters' first meeting, have the agents first rendezvous with one another. Then, they meet Mr. Verity in a second secure locale where you provide the briefing and answer questions. When sent to deal with an emergency already in, they go direct to the scene and are briefed there by Mr. Verity. You can extend this scene if it's your first session of the Esoterrorists. See the Introductory scene in Operation Prophet Bunco.

Core

Core scenes present at least one piece of information necessary to complete the investigation and get to the climactic scene.

Each core scene requires at least a single core clue.

A core clue typically points the group to another scene, often a core scene.

Avoid hard sequenced core clues, which can only lead to one another in a single order.

You're constructing one way to move through the story to another core clue, not the only way. In play, you may find yourself placing the core clue from one scene in another, improvised scene inspired by the logical actions undertaken by the players. (This is also true of published scenarios, by the way.) The scene structure guarantees that there's at least one way to navigate the story, but should not preclude other scene orders. By following the structure you also ensure that you're creating a branching narrative driven by player choices. This avoids the syndrome of the story driven by the actions of supporting characters, which the players observe more or less passively.

[[[Begin Sidebar]]]

Placing Information

A core scene typically includes many pieces of information in addition to its core clue. Facts may provide understanding and context. Or they may obscure the mystery, by focusing attention on irrelevant details. Creating a scene is about anticipating the questions the players will ask and figuring out which answers ought to be available to the investigative experts their characters happen to be.

Don't make all non-core clues spends. Add spends when:

- you think of facts that seem enjoyably arcane
- a piece of information is tangential or obscure
- lasers might get information more quickly than they otherwise would
- they might secure some other practical advantage

If a spend doesn't make the character giving up his points seem more impressive, or confer some other advantage, it shouldn't be a spend.⁵

[[[End Sidebar]]]

Alternate

Alternate scenes provide information which may be of some use in understanding and solving the central mystery, but aren't strictly necessary to reach the conclusion. They often provide context and detail. Or they might provide the same information as core scenes, but in another way. As a third option, they might allow the group to eliminate a red herring possibility. These exculpatory facts are valuable; they let the lasers narrow their search to the real answer, even though they don't strictly speaking, lead to another core clue.

Antagonist Reaction

This is a scene of danger or trouble in which supporting characters opposed to the group's success take action to stop them or set them back. This might be a fight scene, but could just as easily be a political hassle, act of sabotage, or other less direct challenge. If it helps you keep track, you might note in brackets that the enemies faced are tangential rather than primary opponents. Antagonist reactions can be floating, that is, you can use them to kick up the pace if things are flagging.

Hazard

A hazard scene presents the crew with an impersonal obstacle to their safety or ability to continue the investigation. It must typically be overcome through tests or contests.

Sub-Plot

A sub-plot scene gives the characters an opportunity to wheel, deal, explore and interact without directly altering the course of the investigation. These may arise from personal arcs, side deals, public relations efforts, or simply the curiosity of one or more agents. Where the central mystery provides structure and forward momentum, the sub-plot adds flavor and character. Sequences arising from it may be what the group remembers long after the mystery has been put to bed. Sub-plots are more suited to long-running campaign play.

⁵ The publisher goes out of his way to make sure that players consider every point spend to be worthwhile.

Conclusion

The conclusion brings the group to the end of its investigation and often confronts it with a moral dilemma, physical obstacle, or both. Functionally, it's a final hazard or antagonist reaction scene, although it may be initiated by the players busting in on esoterrorists or ODEs. The classic conclusion of an RPG mystery is a big fight. Your group may insist on a climactic scrap, or prefer to avoid it through quick talking and clever thinking. It's easy to make a fight or other action scene feel exciting and conclusive. In *The Esoterrorists* conclusions tend to be gory and sanity-threatening.

Hybrid Scenes

Some scenes double up, most often when a general challenge leads to an information opportunity. It's okay to give out a core clue as a reward for overcoming an obstacle only if that core clue is also available by other means. Otherwise you risk creating a situation where a core clue becomes unavailable, violating the central tenet of the GUMSHOE system.

[[[Begin Sidebar]]]

Scene Diagrams

To check that player choice matters in your scenario, diagram its scenes. Connect them with arrows, checking to make sure that they can be unraveled in any order. It's acceptable to add unpredictability and variance with non-investigative scenes (antagonist reactions, hazards, and sub-plots), but better form when the players can connect the core and alternate scenes in more than one way.

Activating Players

A common complaint about investigative scenarios is that they "railroad" players into tightly following a slavishly predetermined story path. Although you rarely see the opposite complaint voiced, a significant number of groups flail in confusion when not steered in an obvious direction.

Let players weigh options for as long as the discussion seems lively and fun. If you see the group get frustrated and unable to make a collective choice, gently insert yourself into the discussion. Summarize the various suggestions made and direct the discussion toward a conclusion. Guide the players in eliminating choices without nudging them to a preferred answer. This detachment is easier to attain when you don't settle on one.

Remind the players that the only way forward in a mystery scenario is to gather more information. When things get static, refer to the characters' drives. Ask them which choices before them most suit their specific drives.

Be ready for moments where players feel overwhelmed, either because there are too many choices to choose between or, more likely, no obviously risk-free choice. Nudge them onward by invoking their drives. Remind them that they've been trained by the OV as problem-solvers. Perhaps unlike the players, the characters are used to forming hypotheses, testing them by gathering information, and revising their theories, and moving forward. They respond to

dilemmas by breaking them down into steps. With a little coaching, they'll quickly internalize this problem-solving methodology. Your players will learn to take the initiative, abandoning the "wait for clues" passivity trained into them as they were run through more predetermined scenarios.

Avoid Negation

When running a mystery scenario, it helps to think two or three scenes ahead of the players. It's often useful to have a possible climactic sequence in mind, too. That allows you to foreshadow enough to make the ending appear to be a logical outgrowth of the scenes that preceded it. (For more on this, see the next section.)

Don't let the possible plot forks you have in mind become too fixed in your imagination. Instead, keep them provisional, so that you can turn away from them and substitute new choices more in keeping with player input.

This is a long-winded way of restating the basic principle of improvisation used by stage actors: never negate. If, as a sketch unfolds, one performer identifies the other as his mother, the second performer must embrace and build on that choice. To simply swat down the choice and say, "I'm not your mother," is extremely poor form. It stops the story dead and punishes the other participant for attempting to advance it.

In a like vein, train yourself to respond to unexpected possibilities by embracing them and building them into the ongoing storyline. You may have decided that the pathologist Elsa Hower is an innocent dupe in an esotererror scheme which requires fresh corpses. However, the players heavily invest themselves in seeing her as a villain, you might consider setting aside that planned revelation, so they can feel a sense of unmitigated triumph when they bring her to justice.

You don't have to accept every piece of player direction at face value. Keep the story surprising by building twists onto the elements you do incorporate. When in doubt, make the player half-right. Perhaps Elsa has been parasitized by an ODE which can be extracted and subjected to an emotionally satisfying comeuppance, allowing the team to both save an innocent and punish the guilty.

It's not necessary to turn the narrative on a dime with every piece of player input. The key is to avoid a scene in which nothing happens, or in which your scene is less interesting than the one suggested by the player. When a player says that the computer archive in the ruined citadel must have a holographic librarian, it's a disappointing to rule it out, or prevent the players from finding it because they haven't the right skill to spend from. Extracting useful information from a holo-character is more fun, and more plot-advancing, than not. This doesn't mean, however, that there the program shouldn't afterwards spring a nasty surprise on them.

Leading and Following

Improvising is a technique, not an ultimate goal. Occasionally you'll find that it's more entertaining for all involved if you seize the narrative reins and steer them in a particular direction. This will tend to happen more near the end of a scenario, when you're trying to wrap all of the threads together into a coherent and satisfying conclusion.

Again this is a matter of responding to the mood and attitude of the players. When they're

actively engaged in the story and throwing out fun suggestions, follow their lead. When their creativity hits the wall, pick up the slack. Improvisation is an organic process of give and take.

Running Scenarios

The GUMSHOE Rules System covers much of what you need to run *The Esoterrorists*; this section supplements that with additional GM-centric advice.

Giving Out Clues

To give out information, the PC needs to be in the right place, with the right ability, and use that ability. This section deals with each of these preconditions. In short though, whatever you've done in other games, you should always err on the side of giving out information, not holding it back.

Having the Right Ability

The rules offer a number of ways to call on abilities, depending on the situation. Choosing the right way to call on an ability is crucial to the forward momentum of your investigative plot. Make this choice according to the consequences of failure.

If the consequence of failure is that a character fails to get a piece of crucial information, success should be automatic provided that the character has the ability in question, and the player thinks to ask for it. However, **any credible attempt to get information that would yield a given clue yields that clue, whether or not this is the ability you've specified in the scenario.**

(Even at that, you may need to improvise during play if no player steps up to claim the needed clue, bending the details of the scenario so that the same information can be garnered with a different ability, possibly by another player.)

Using the Right Ability

You can give out clues both actively and passively. By default, though, GUMSHOE assumes that the use of interpersonal abilities is active; the players have to correctly choose an appropriate ability and describe how they're using it to open a contact up to questioning. When you see that players are hesitant, tell the player with the relevant ability that his experienced OV character can sense that it will work here:

- “You get the feeling that this guy will crack if you lean on him a little.”
(Intimidation)
- “He seems kind of smitten by you.” (Flattery)
- “The squeal of a police scanner tells you you've got a wannabe cop on your hands.”
(Cop Talk)

Being in the Right Place

GUMSHOE procedural series require their own conceits in order to keep the story moving in

an entertaining manner. They require the audience's complicity in looking the other way. Here GM and players handwave certain elements that break the rules of realism in order to keep the game running smoothly, just as TV scriptwriters. For example, *the conceit of primacy* in shows such as Law and Order ensure that the lead characters get the juiciest cases and more action than any cop is likely to experience in a lifetime. Just as the aforementioned devices arise from the requirements of TV drama, GUMSHOE's conceits grapple with the limitations of a roleplaying session.

The major device you'll want to adopt, needed for all but the smallest groups, is the conceit of *elastic participation*

Use the concept of elastic participation to ensure that there is always a PC in the right place.

GUMSHOE works best when you assume that everyone is kind-of sort-of along for every scene—without squinting too hard at any resulting logic or staging absurdities.

Rolling for Clues and the GUMSHOE Style

Just as in games where you roll for clues, players always have to describe a logical course of action that might lead to their getting information, directly or indirectly suggesting the ability you use to get it. In the traditional model, there's a roll; you supply the information on a success. In GUMSHOE, this step is skipped—but it's the only step skipped.

Traditional style:

Player: I examine the body looking for a cause of death .

GM: Roll Forensic Anthropology

Player: I succeed.

GM: It's blunt force trauma to the back of the skull. There are traces of a slimy residue

GUMSHOE style:

Player : I examine the body looking for a cause of death.

GM: [*Checks worksheet to see if the player's character has Forensic Anthropology, which she does.*] It's blunt force trauma to the back of the skull. There are traces of a slimy residue.

In neither style do you see players grabbing their character sheets as soon as they enter a new scene and shouting out "Anthropology! Archaeology! Art History! Evidence Collection!" They don't do this because it would be weird, boring, and stupid—and because in neither case does it fill all the requirements necessary to get information from a scene.

The only difference between GUMSHOE and those systems is the lack of a die roll. You know your group. Give out information in the same way you would usually give out information, actively, passively: GUMSHOE doesn't care. Your players will solicit it, or you will give it out, just as you always do. There will be a strong effect on your gaming, but from a subtle change.

Ending Scenes

In a novel or TV episode, writers can freely cut to the next scene when their characters have acquired all of the clues available in the current one. The characters might stick around for hours

tying up loose ends and pursuing fruitless questions, but this doesn't happen on screen. We, the audience, are not forced to sit through such sequences.

This kind of concise editing isn't so easy in the roleplaying medium. Players don't know when they've got all the clues.

Here's a simple trick to gently steer them onwards, without unduly breaking the illusion of fictional reality:

Before play, take an index card and write on it, in big block letters, the word SCENE. As soon as the players have gleaned the core clue and most or all of the secondary clues in a scene, and the action begins to drag, hold up the card. When the players see this, they know to move on. (Of course, you have to explain the cue to them before play begins.) Easy, efficient, yet somehow not nearly as disruptive or jarring as a verbal instruction.

Even better, use one of the musical stings available from the Pelgrane Press website for just this purpose.