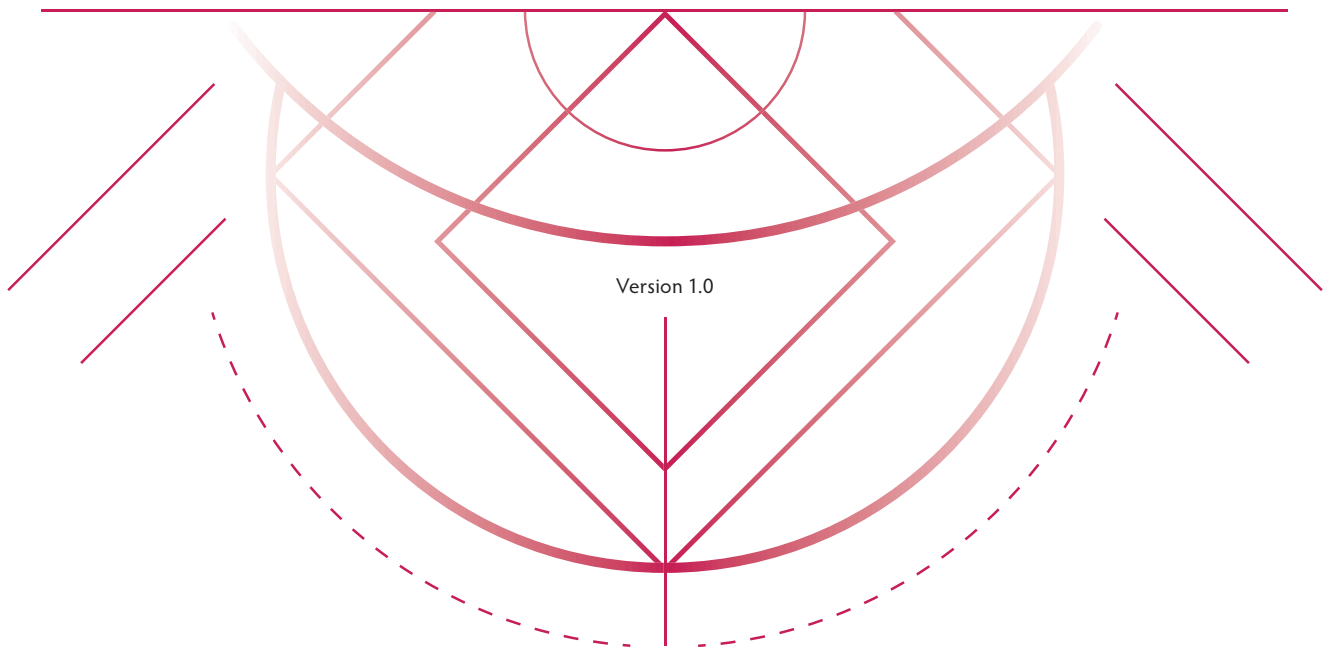


cortex™

— CODEx —

Cortex Prime is a multi-genre, modular, session-centered roleplaying game. It's based on the same underlying rules system previously used in several award-winning RPGs based on comic books and television shows. These games were different from one another in ways both major and minor, yet the heart of Cortex was evident through all of them. With the **Cortex Prime Game Handbook**, you have the tools and resources to create your own custom-built game using a myriad of switches and dials, and with the Cortex Codex, it's now easier than ever.



Version 1.0

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THE FOLLOWING CORTEX BOOKS PROVIDED MATERIAL AND INSPIRATION

Sovereign Stone Game System (1999)

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Cortex System Role Playing Game (2008)

Jamie Chambers with Cam Banks, Jennifer Brozek,
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Leverage: The Roleplaying Game (2010)

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Smallville Roleplaying Game (2010)

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Dragon Brigade Roleplaying Game (2011)

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Marvel Heroic Roleplaying (2012)

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Cortex Plus Hacker's Guide (2013)

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Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game (2022)

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Mellie Doucette, and Wonderstorm

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HOW TO USE THE CODEX







The Cortex Codex is intended to be used as a companion document to the *Cortex Prime Game Handbook* for creating and running your own Cortex Prime games. It does not contain examples of rules, lists of options, or artwork; it solely presents rules text collected for ease of reference. If you're learning the game, we recommend using the *Cortex Prime Game Handbook* or a complete game such as *Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game* prior to using this Codex.

Each mod and rule has its own entry in the Codex, with all associated rules and mods listed or described. The table of contents lists the rules, mods, and terms contained in the Codex. Those without entries themselves direct you to where they can be located.

The rules in the Cortex Codex include all of those that appear in the *Cortex Prime Game Handbook*, many that appear in other published Cortex Prime settings, and some that are new.

SYMBOLS

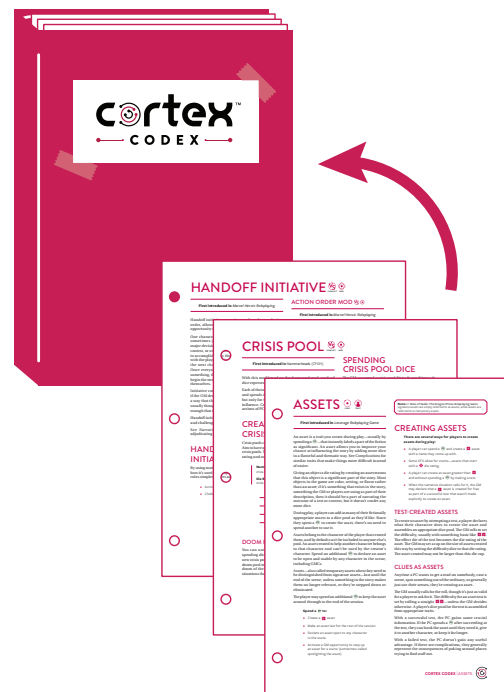
The Cortex Codex uses symbols throughout to note the six different kinds of rules and mechanics. They are:

-  **Character:** Player and game moderator characters
-  **Conflict:** Mechanics that serve the conflicts in the game
-  **Core:** Central rules and terms of Cortex
-  **Growth:** Rules tied to growing characters
-  **Mod:** Rules that alter a prior existing one
-  **Trait:** Character-defining elements that can be used for a player characters or game moderator characters

UPDATING YOUR CODEX

The Codex is a living document and will continue to be updated as new content is released. As each entry has its own page or set of pages, you can easily update even a printed version of the Codex when a new version is released.

Updated or new pages will be listed in each version of the Codex for your ease.



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ABILITIES



First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

Abilities are a trait set mod of powers that create a cinematic, prime time drama approach to superpowers and SFX. Abilities are intended to make superpowers or alien qualities a more narrative-shaping element rather than a simple dice pool builder.

A list of example abilities and SFX is available in the *Cortex Prime Game Handbook* (pages 194-213).

USING ABILITIES

For a low powered game or character, choose one ability. For a superpowered game or character, choose two abilities. Choose one of the SFX listed under the ability for free. Choose one effect tag and appropriate descriptor tags.

Abilities simply do what they say they do and can be used as benchmarks for performance on an automatic success (the GM can simply say that, because the player has an ability at **8** or **10**, their PC can just do that thing if the outcome isn't really in question). Abilities aren't usually a prime set; instead they're added to a dice pool when their use can be justified as key to the test or contest's success or failure.

In games that use growth, the die rating of an ability may be stepped up and additional SFX may be unlocked, or additional descriptor tags may be added to make the ability more versatile.

RATING ABILITIES

Abilities are rated on a short scale from minor **6** to godlike **12**. The rating usually defines how far-reaching, extensive, or significant the ability is. The baseline rating is **8**; if a character has two abilities, they could instead have one at **6** and one at **10**. If a character doesn't have an ability, they don't have a default die rating in it.

6 Minor (or Influence): An ability with this rating allows the character to do something most people can't do, but it doesn't have much effect on ordinary tests and contests.

8 Enhanced (or Control): An ability with this rating represents a level of performance beyond ordinary humans, and one that the character likely uses most of the time.

10 Superhuman (or Mastery): An ability with this rating is rare and reflects someone with extensive training or use in their ability, an individual who stands out among others with this power, or performance at a truly superhuman level.

12 Godlike (or Supremacy): Very few have an ability at this rating, as it represents a level of control beyond superhuman or at the very peak of potential with a specific ability. It's reserved for truly godlike characters and aliens, or superhuman individuals whose ability puts them among the top tier of those who have it.

ABILITY SFX

Almost all ability SFX expand what **PP** can do in the game. When creating a character with an ability, choose one of the SFX listed underneath the ability for free (or create your own). A list of example abilities and SFX is available in the *Cortex Prime Game Handbook* (pages 194-213).

In games using a growth mod, others can be unlocked when the die rating of the ability is stepped up during growth—one SFX at **8** and one SFX at **12**.

SFX THAT STEP DOWN EFFECT DICE

Many ability SFX represent armor, damage reduction, or invulnerability to other abilities by stepping down an effect die, incoming stress (if using that mod), or a complication. When you use the SFX, compare your effect die to the ability die being used against you.

If your effect die is the same size or smaller than the ability die, step down your opponent's effect die by one.

If your effect die is a larger size than the ability die, ignore your opponent's effect die completely.



EFFECT TAGS

An effect tag suggests ways the player might roll when using the ability in a test or contest. There are six effect tags:



Attack effects hurt people; used in rolls to give others complications or stress.



Sensory effects allow the character to better perceive and understand their surroundings; roll them in perception-based tests and contests.



Movement effects help characters get from place to place in unusual ways; roll the die in tests or contests that depend on speed or travel.



Control effects allow characters to manipulate aspects of their surroundings; roll the die when you alter the environment to influence the outcome of a test or contest.



Defense effects protect the character from types of harm; roll the die when it would help against attacks or rolls to inflict complications or stress.



Enhancement effects let the character change, shift, boost, or alter their body or talents in some amazing way; roll the die when a PC's enhancements give them an advantage.

DESCRIPTOR TAGS

When using the abilities trait set, descriptor tags are used to establish the details of how and why an ability works or to specify something about how the ability contributes to the story. They may end up being used in place of the ability's generic name in a character file.

In games that use growth, you can choose to add a new descriptor tag, and thus a new way to use your ability, rather than stepping up your ability's die rating.

ABILITY LIMITS

An ability's limit is the opposite of a descriptor tag in that it establishes the details of how and why an ability stops working or specifies something about how the ability can be disruptive to the story.

A limit can also be expressed as an SFX for earning **PP**.

ABILITIES AS GEAR

Any ability in the game can be replicated by a device. These nifty gadgets work like abilities, except all gear shares the same limit—it can be lost, broken, or stolen. This limit deprives the character of their gear and, without it, they don't have the ability at all (no die or SFX). And in the wrong hands, the character's own ability could potentially be used against them.

Gear is frequently custom-created for a character and doesn't need to map exactly to any single ability. Borrow SFX from abilities that match the gear's effect tag; weapons are an attack effect and something like a jetpack is a movement effect.

See *Gear* for more.



ACTION ORDER



First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

An action order can be used when the order in which things happen in a scene matters. This is especially true of fight scenes or moments when there's chaos and confusion and it becomes important to know who goes first and when.

When using an action order to track conflict, tests and contests are temporarily replaced with actions and reactions. An action is like the initiating roll of a contest; a reaction is a defensive or reactive roll to avoid it and only defensive traits apply. The character whose turn it is chooses which character they target with their action. If there is no opposing character, use difficulty dice as the reaction.

See *Narrative Order* for alternative methods of adjudicating the order that things happen in the story.

ACTION LEAD

Action order uses handoff initiative. The action lead is the character who goes first in an action order. The GM chooses the action lead for the first turn. All characters—player and GM—get a turn. Play progresses around the table, starting with the action lead, and then that player chooses the next character—either a PC or a GMC—to act. Once everyone has had a chance to do something, the last one to go chooses the action lead for the next round (this could include nominating themselves).

See *Handoff Initiative* for more.

HOW AN ACTION ORDER ENDS

The GM can drop the action order at any time. If it's a fight and one side scores a decisive win, then the action order is obviously over and play carries on as it did before, with tests, contests, and a shared spoken narrative as normal. Or it's possible that nothing interesting can happen any longer and so the scene ends, and with it the action order.

LOCATIONS IN THE ACTION ORDER

Locations can have traits like minor GMCs when they might be used to oppose the PCs. When using an action order to handle action scenes, a location that's behaving like a GMC should have its own turn in the action order, especially if it's using its traits to take actions against the PCs. Otherwise, assign the location to a major GMC or any character that's in control of it, and have it help that character instead of taking its own turn.

See *Location* for more.



ACTION ORDER MODS

By using mods with the action order mod, you can change how it's used and implemented. Some mods make the rules simpler; others add complexity.

- Action-Based Resolution
- Leader-Bet Action Order

On their turn, a player can ask for assistance or help from other agents, assuming the circumstances permit. Lending aid doesn't use up that agent's own turn in the action order. Agents can't lend aid to more than one agent per round.

See also *Crisis Pool*.

ACTION-BASED RESOLUTION


First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

This mod replaces all tests and contests. All conflicts in games using action-based resolution utilize action order.

LEADER-SET ACTION ORDER

First introduced in *Hammerheads* (CPGH)

One PC is assigned as the team leader. The players can nominate who this is, or the GM might select the assignment based on the mission or some other criteria. The team leader determines the order in which all of the PCs and the crisis pools act. Unlike the standard action order, this is pre-set at the beginning of each round; each team member takes their turn, the GM makes a turn for each crisis pool, and the round ends.

The GM can, at any point, spend a  or greater crisis die to have a crisis pool act out of this assigned order as an additional turn, but only one crisis pool may do this per round. Once the round is over, the team leader chooses the order for the next round.

Team leaders should consider the advice of the other players when determining the action order. If something happens to the team leader (such as taking too many complications resulting in them being taken out), another PC must take over their duties as team leader.



AFFILIATIONS

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*





Affiliations are a trait set of usually three rated traits that reflect how well the character performs in specific contextual situations, like environments, social structures, or circumstances.




USING AFFILIATIONS

Affiliations are useful for games where something like teamwork or solo activity is a key factor in how successful a PC's tests or contests are. They're a good alternative for attributes if the interest is less about a character's internal capabilities and more about how they fit in with the world around them. If the game is based on squad missions, pair affiliations with roles. For comic book superheroes, pair affiliations with power sets.

The affiliation used in a dice pool is determined by the conditions the PC is operating under. As those conditions change, the affiliation used also changes.

RATING AFFILIATIONS

Most affiliation sets are made up of three traits and every PC is rated in each of them. The default die rating is a . If one affiliation is a , another one has to be a . Any affiliations beyond the first three start at .

-  **Disadvantaged:** The character tends to get in more trouble or functions at the lower end of their ability.
-  **Stable:** The character is comfortable in these situations and performs neither at their best nor their worst.
-  **Advantaged:** The character performs at their best in these situations.



ARCHETYPE

First introduced in *Firefly Role-Playing Game*

One method of character creation uses archetypes, which are partially created character files that enable players to create their PCs quickly. Archetypes are often provided with a premade setting, such as the Spotlight settings *TRACE 2.0* and *Eidolon Alpha*. The GM can create their own archetypes appropriate to the game they're preparing, either from scratch or by adapting existing archetypes.

A typical archetype has:

- Background information about the archetype
- Suggestions for how to play the archetype
- Three pre-assigned distinctions with SFX
- Pre-assigned attributes or other traits
- A choice of two signature assets or other traits

Each distinction has the *Hinder* SFX already unlocked, and more SFX that may be unlocked initially or later in play. Each distinction also lists highlight traits that are appropriate to that distinction and, by implication, that archetype.

Each player chooses an archetype and makes choices to complete the character file.

To build a character using an archetype, players:

- 1 Select one of the archetypes provided
- 2 Choose two distinction SFX to unlock from the three distinctions chosen
- 3 Select one of the two listed signature assets (or other traits) for the archetype

HIGHLIGHT TRAITS IN ARCHETYPES

Each distinction in an archetype lists at least two highlight traits that are appropriate for that distinction. If you're making distinctions from scratch, these traits should be chosen by the player. If the distinctions are pre-built by the GM or included in a specific Spotlight or world setting, they should already have their highlight traits provided. Highlight traits start out with the die rating stepped up by one. If a highlight trait appears on two distinctions, it starts out stepped up by two; if it's on all three distinctions, it starts out stepped up by three.



ASSETS



First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

An asset is a trait you create during play—usually by spending a **PP**—that instantly labels a part of the fiction as significant. An asset allows you to improve your chance at influencing the story by adding more dice in a flavorful and thematic way. See *Complications* for similar traits that make things more difficult instead of easier.

Giving an object a die rating by creating an asset means that this object is a significant part of the story. Most objects in the game are color, setting, or flavor rather than an asset; if it's something that exists in the story, something the GM or players are using as part of their description, then it should be a part of narrating the outcome of a test or contest, but it doesn't confer any more dice.

During play, a player can add as many of their fictionally appropriate assets to a dice pool as they'd like. Since they spent a **PP** to create the asset, there's no need to spend another to use it.

Assets belong to the character of the player that created them, and by default can't be included in anyone else's pool. An asset created to help another character belongs to that character and can't be used by the creator's character. Spend an additional **PP** to declare an asset to be open and usable by any character in the scene, including GMCs.

Assets—also called temporary assets when they need to be distinguished from signature assets—last until the end of the scene, unless something in the story makes them no longer relevant, or they're stepped down or eliminated.

The player may spend an additional **PP** to keep the asset around through to the end of the session.

Spend a **PP** to:

- Create a **6** asset
- Make an asset last for the rest of the session
- Declare an asset open to any character in the scene
- Activate a GM opportunity to step up an asset for a scene (sometimes called spotlighting the asset)

Note: In *Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game* signature assets are simply referred to as assets, while assets are referred to as temporary assets.

CREATING ASSETS

There are several ways for players to create assets during play:

- A player can spend a **PP** and create a **6** asset with a name they come up with.
- Some SFX allow for stunts—assets that start with a **8** die rating.
- A player can create an asset greater than **6** and without spending a **PP** by making a test.
- When the narrative situation calls for it, the GM may declare that a **6** asset is created for free as part of a successful test that wasn't made explicitly to create an asset.

TEST-CREATED ASSETS

To create an asset by attempting a test, a player declares what their character does to create the asset and assembles an appropriate dice pool. The GM rolls to set the difficulty, usually with something basic like **6 6**. The effect die of the test becomes the die rating of the asset. The GM may set a cap on the size of assets created this way by setting the difficulty dice to that die rating. The asset created may not be larger than this die cap.

CLUES AS ASSETS

Anytime a PC wants to get a read on somebody, case a scene, spot something out of the ordinary, or generally just use their senses, they're creating an asset.

The GM usually calls for the roll, though it's just as valid for a player to ask for it. The difficulty for an asset test is set by rolling a straight **6 6**—unless the GM decides otherwise. A player's dice pool for the test is assembled from appropriate traits.

With a successful test, the PC gains some crucial information. If the PC spends a **PP** after succeeding at the test, they can bank the asset until they need it, give it to another character, or keep it for longer.

With a failed test, the PC doesn't gain any useful advantage. If there are complications, they generally represent the consequences of poking around places trying to find stuff out.



ASSET VS SIGNATURE ASSET

Unlike a regular asset, a signature asset belongs to a PC and is recorded on their character file. It acts like any other trait and gives the player an extra die to include in their dice pools when they can justify their use.

In *Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game* signature assets are simply referred to as assets, while assets are referred to as temporary assets.

See *Signature Asset* for more.

ASSET MODS

By using mods with assets, you can change how they're used and implemented. Some mods make the rules simpler; others add complexity.

- Growth-Created Relationship Asset
- Urgent Assets

GROWTH-CREATED RELATIONSHIP ASSET

First introduced in

Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game



Using this mod of the growth pool, players can choose to spend any growth die from their collected growth pool and turn it into a temporary relationship asset at the growth die's rating. Relationship assets can be kept until used in a subsequent session of play. Once used, you get to use it for a whole scene, in any tests, contests, or challenges, but at the end of the scene the relationship asset goes away. You may still care about the person or place, but you no longer have a specific asset to represent that in the game.

See *Growth Pool* for more.

URGENT ASSETS

First introduced in

Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game

When using this mod, assets created by spending  or that are created as the result of a test last only for a single test, contest, or challenge. You can still spend a  to have that asset persist for the rest of the session.



ATTRIBUTES

First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*

Attributes represent raw ability, prowess, and effort. They rarely offer an insight into a character's experience, training, or external circumstances. They make a good baseline for a prime set.

USING ATTRIBUTES

Any conceivable test or contest can fall into one of these three areas: MENTAL, PHYSICAL, and SOCIAL. You can use these three as your attributes, or you can shape the tone and flavor of your game with a different list.

RATING ATTRIBUTES

Attributes usually have a rating from **6** to **10**, although there are exceptions. Everyone has a rating in all of them, and they default to a **8** for the first three. If you have more than three attributes, the rest default to a **6**. Higher rated attributes must be balanced out by lower rated ones. During typical character creation, no character should have any ratings lower than a **6** or higher than a **10**.

These ratings may scale differently depending on your game, but in general they follow this basic scheme:

- 4 Poor:** Notably deficient in this area
- 6 Typical:** An average degree of ability
- 8 Excellent:** Above-average performance
- 10 Remarkable:** Greatly above average
- 12 Incredible:** Peak levels of ability

VEHICLES WITH ATTRIBUTES

In some settings, vehicles are as important to the story as the characters are. To make vehicles come to life, each group of players maintains a vehicle file, a bit like a character file. Vehicles typically have three attributes. The default attributes are ENGINES, FRAME, and SYSTEMS, each rated at **8**. An attribute rating may be stepped up, as long as there is a corresponding step down in another attribute.

See *Vehicles* for more.



BEAT, AS IN STORY BEAT

A beat is the smallest dramatic unit of the story. It doesn't matter how long or short the activity is, but how simple it is. If a PC spends hours on something that can be easily summed up in a sentence, it's one beat. If a PC spends thirty seconds escaping, it might be four or five separate beats.

There's no fixed number of how many beats make up a scene. They're a convenient way to frame the time it takes a PC to carry out a single test and alter or affect the progress of the story.

Thinking in terms of beats should give the GM a gut sense of the tests a player needs to make to do what they want to do.

See *Test* for using story beats as a countdown in a timed test.



BEAT, AS IN BEAT THE TOTAL

Beating a total or a difficulty means rolling *higher* than the difficulty total. If a total is the same as the difficulty's total, the difficulty wasn't beaten and that counts as a failure.

In a test or challenge, typically the GM rolls the difficulty for a PC to beat.

In a contest, the player (or, rarely, a GMC) initiating the contest rolls first and sets the difficulty for the opposition to beat. The difficulty may be set multiple times until someone fails to beat it.


When using an action order, the action lead rolls first and the opposition or difficulty rolls in reaction. The reaction must beat the total set by the action lead.



First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

A boss is a type of GMC that might represent a powerful opponent like a huge rampaging monster, or it may be a foe who outclasses the PCs not only in traits, but in an abstract dramatic sense. Bosses can replace major GMCs in your games if you prefer not to do all the work of making opponents who have the same game stats as your PCs.

CREATING A BOSS

Rather than a full character file, a boss has multiple dice of one size that make up a boss trait, such as . They can also have distinctions, SFX, or anything else the GM wants to add in. The dice pool for a boss typically consists of large and/or many dice.

DEFEATING A BOSS

A boss is defeated when all of their boss trait dice are removed. Each time the outcome of a PC's roll would create or step up a complication or stress that exceeds the boss trait die rating, one die is knocked off, and the complication or stress is removed. When all of the boss trait dice are eliminated, the boss is defeated.

If you're using major GMCs with boss traits, ignore the usual rules for taking out characters and use this method instead.



CATALYST



First introduced in

Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game

Catalysts are a mod of major GMCs. They are a character, similar in traits to the PCs, with a catalyst trait die that replaces one of the PCs' prime sets and changes size based on interactions with the PCs, and another trait set (such as values) that steps up or down after each contest with a PC. Games that use catalysts have at least one in every tale (or story), and most should have two or more.

CATALYST DIE

In place of an equivalent PC's attributes (or other prime set), a catalyst has a catalyst die. This die is always included in any dice pool rolled for that catalyst. It begins at a 6 if there are three or more catalysts in the tale, or at a 8 otherwise.

After every session in which the PCs engage with the catalyst—usually with one or more contests—the catalyst die is stepped up. If the PCs engage with multiple contests in a session, the catalyst die still only steps up by one.

If catalysts are in competition with one another, the GM may decide to step up one catalyst's die and step another's down. A catalyst die of 12 can't be stepped up, nor can a 4 be stepped down.

A catalyst die can never be higher than the catalyst's highest value die rating (or other equivalent prime set). A catalyst without a 10 value die rating can't have a 10 catalyst die. Without a 12 value die rating, they can't have a 12 catalyst die.

Once a catalyst's die steps up to 12, they are fully realized as a major ally or major antagonist of the PCs. This unlocks the following SFX, which the GM can use at any time in a scene where the catalyst is present or where their influence is felt strongly:

- *Twist*: Step down the catalyst die to end the current scene in the catalyst's favor. Award each PC in the scene PP.

This can be used for the catalyst to escape, defeat a number of foes, undergo some kind of mysterious transformation, rescue an important PC, or any other outcome that the GM chooses to exploit.

However, it can't take a PC out of the scene, nor can it change the outcome of a test, contest, or challenge that's already been completed. Once used, the catalyst die steps down to 10. The *Twist* SFX is unavailable for that catalyst until the catalyst die steps up again to 12.

If the PCs didn't interact with a catalyst (or their agents) in a session, the GM may step down the catalyst die to represent their lack of involvement and investment. The players should receive fair warning; if each player spends a PP, the catalyst remains at their current die rating.

CATALYST VALUES

Catalysts have fifteen steps in their value die ratings, but they usually don't start with any value rated higher than 8. This means most have the following die ratings assigned to their values: one at 4, one at 6, and the rest at 8. A catalyst's value die ratings are a constraint on the size of their catalyst die. A catalyst die rating can't be higher than the highest value. A 10 value is required for a 10 catalyst die, a 12 value for a 12 catalyst die.

Catalysts should have value statements (see *Statements* for more) as a way for the GM to note what the catalyst thinks about each value and why.

CHANGING CATALYST VALUES

Catalyst value die ratings may change during play based on the outcomes of contests with the PCs.

- If a catalyst wins a contest against a PC, the GM may step up the value they used in the contest by one step. If that value is already 12, the GM can step up another value that complements it.
- If a catalyst loses a contest against a PC, the player of that PC may choose one of the catalyst's values to either step up or step down. If it's already a 12 or a 4, another value must be chosen.
- The GM must then step up or step down another value's die rating to keep the same number of steps in total (fifteen).

When the players win a contest against a catalyst and change a value, this should impact the catalyst's future actions. This is a way you can show the players that their choices have meaning.



CATALYST DISTINCTIONS

Each catalyst has three distinctions, just like a PC, using the same general guidelines as player characters do, including adding the *Hinder* SFX onto each distinction. You can add additional SFX to a catalyst, but it's not required.

Like PCs, catalysts can have distinctions with higher die ratings, as long as their catalyst die is equally as high. If a catalyst die steps down during the course of play, any higher rated distinctions must be rolled at the lower die rating, as well.

CHALLENGE



First introduced in

Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game

Challenges are a mod of crisis pools. Challenges represent problems that are many-faceted, presenting different, smaller issues to tackle before being fully resolved, or problems that are big or take a lot of time.

Challenges take place over several rounds. Each round represents some passage of time; it could be a few seconds, or it could be hours or even days. The challenge gets to act on its own turn and can either get worse or create problems for the PCs in response.

If there's no time-sensitive element to the challenge, success becomes a matter of how long it takes the players to overcome the challenge without getting taken out of the scene. The GM may declare that something happens after a certain number of rounds; if this happens, the challenge may be a failure.

Note: When you see tests or contests in a Codex entry, you can often include challenges as well.

CHALLENGE POOL

A challenge pool is a dice pool that represents the difficulty and duration of a challenge; it's rolled by the GM to set the difficulty for each PC's turn, and for the GM to roll against the PCs on the challenge pool's turn.

To create a challenge pool, the GM chooses base difficulty dice the same way as they would in a test. Then, they add up to 3 additional dice of the same die rating depending on how long the challenge should take to overcome.

TAKING TURNS IN A CHALLENGE

Challenges use handoff initiative. The GM decides which PC goes first, but once a PC has had their turn, that player chooses which remaining PC goes next. Each player gets one turn per round. On a PC's turn, the GM rolls the challenge pool to set the difficulty, just like in a test.

Once every PC has had a turn, the challenge pool acts.

The GM can choose to either:

- Target a player with a negative effect, or
- Strengthen the challenge pool by stepping up one of its dice or adding a **6**

If the GM targets a PC, their player rolls to set a difficulty for the challenge pool first, and the GM rolls the challenge pool second, giving the PC stress (or a complication) on a success.

Once the GM has had their turn, it's back to the players. The player who went last in the previous round gets to choose who goes first, including nominating themselves.

CHALLENGE OUTCOMES

If a PC beats the challenge difficulty on their turn, they make progress, and compare their effect die to one of the dice in the challenge pool. If it's bigger, the challenge die is removed from the challenge pool. If it's equal to or smaller, the challenge die is stepped down by one step. If a challenge die would be reduced below **4**, it's taken out of the pool.

If the PC doesn't beat the difficulty, they fail to progress the challenge, and take stress (or a complication) of the GM's choice equal to the challenge pool's effect die.

A heroic success in a challenge lets a PC overcome it faster. Each heroic success lets them step up their effect die by one step, or keep an additional effect die from their remaining dice; with the latter, they can compare this added effect die to another die in the challenge pool and either eliminate it or step it down, as well. See *Heroic Success*.

Once the challenge pool is reduced to zero dice, the challenge is over, and the PCs have won. Alternatively, the GM may declare that something happens after a certain number of rounds. If this happens, the challenge may be a failure if players don't overcome the challenge in time.



DOOM VS CRISIS VS CHALLENGE

Doom pools, crisis pools, and challenge pools share similar mechanics, but they represent different kinds of opposition.

A doom pool is an overarching threat that dominates the setting. It serves as the opposition for all tests and can aid major GMCs. The doom pool grows larger and smaller in the size and number of the dice that make it up, but it's never completely eliminated. Dice from the doom pool can be spent to do the same things as **PP**, in addition to a variety of other actions.

Crisis pools are a mod of doom pools that represent smaller localized problems. There are often several crisis pools at a time, pulling the attention of the PCs in various directions. A crisis pool can spend its dice much like a doom pool, but only for things related to the crisis. The PCs can directly affect and eventually eliminate crisis pools.

You can use both crisis pools and the doom pool, spending dice directly from the doom pool to create a new crisis pool.

Dice spent in this manner go from the doom pool to the crisis pool, thus reducing the overall doom of the session but creating specific, localized situations the players can directly affect.

A challenge pool is a mod of crisis pools that represents a single multi-faceted problem that the PCs can directly affect and eventually eliminate. Unlike a crisis pool or doom pool, the challenge pool cannot spend dice as if they were **PP**.



CHARACTER FILE

A character file is the central record of essential game details for a character. All players maintain their own character file and the GM maintains (often abbreviated) files for important GMCs. Character files change throughout the game, so it's important to be able to take notes on them.

A character file needs to include space for all of the information players need to record and maintain, such as the different trait sets and their ratings, plus possibly stress, session records, hero dice, signature assets, and other important game statistics. There's no fixed character file for Cortex Prime because there's no fixed array of trait sets—every Cortex game is potentially different in that way.

Any officially published setting primed by Cortex includes a blank character file designed specifically for the traits and mods used in the setting, but sheets of paper, online documents, or sticky notes are other ways to collect your character's details.

Digital toolsets are also a common way of managing a character file. Some Cortex Prime games even come fully equipped with official digital toolsets, such as *Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game*.

For examples of Cortex Prime character files, see the *Cortex Prime Game Handbook*, and *Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game*.

In *Tales of Xadia*, character files are called character journals.



COMPLICATIONS



First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

A complication is an unhelpful temporary trait that the opposition includes in their dice pool to make the opposed roll harder for the character with the complication. Complications should be given descriptive names and a die rating, usually a **6** to start.

Stress is the most used mod of complications. When you see the word stress in a Codex entry, you can often switch it out for the more general complication. Likewise, you can often replace complication with stress.

CREATING COMPLICATIONS

When a player rolls a hitch (a 1) on any of their dice, the GM can hand over a **PP** to create a complication. This doesn't affect the success or failure of the roll—a complication means something else has gone wrong, making life difficult.

Complications start at **6**, and additional hitches in the same roll step up the complication without the GM giving the player more **PP**. The GM may choose to create multiple complications if there is more than one hitch, but each new complication requires handing over a **PP**. If the player rolls a botch, the GM creates a **6** complication without giving the player a **PP**, and steps it up for each hitch past the first.

Complications are persistent and last until either the PC has recovered from them, or the complication is made irrelevant.

WORSENING COMPLICATIONS

Whenever a player or the GM has the option to give a character a complication, they can instead choose to step up an existing complication, making it worse for the affected character.

Generally, only one complication applies to a specific hindrance or problem. To make a complication worse, it should be stepped up.

USING COMPLICATIONS

Whenever a player or the GM is rolling against a character that has a relevant complication, they may add it to their dice pool. Doing so doesn't cost anything, and there's no limit to how many applicable complications can be included in a dice pool, nor is there a limit on how many complications a character can have.

COMPLICATIONS AS CONSEQUENCE

Outside of hitches, complications can arise as a result of a lost contest or failed test. This usually occurs during a high stakes scene. In either situation, the GM can decide that a player must step up an existing complication by one if the existing complication is equal to or larger than the die rating of the new complication.

See also *Stress*.

COMPLICATIONS IN A CONTEST

In a contest during a high stakes scene, complications can represent those times when characters are hurt or suffer a debilitating setback—physical, mental, or social—but the character wants to continue to engage. Instead of being taken out, a player may spend a **PP** and take a complication instead. The die rating of the complication is equal to the effect die of the opposition. If the complication comes from something other than a die roll, it begins at a default **6**.

Similarly, when a GMC loses a contest that would result in them being taken out, the GM may hand over a **PP** to the player who won the contest and add a complication to the GMC equal to the effect die in the player's roll. This should be used rarely, and only when it will drive the story forward.



COMPLICATIONS IN A TEST

The GM may rule that a failed test results in a **6** complication of their choice. The player does not receive a **PP**. Additionally, if a test is high stakes and a PC is at risk of being taken out of the scene, the player may choose to spend a **PP** to take a complication instead.

RECOVERING COMPLICATIONS

Many complications are temporary problems that will go away before the next scene begins. Complications that represent major consequences, however, stick around. To get rid of them, PCs must test their traits to recover.

Getting rid of or reducing a complication is a test vs a dice pool consisting of the complication and a base difficulty of **8** **8**. The GM may rule that other traits affect the roll, similar to a standard test. Narratively, to make a roll the PC attempting the test and the circumstances surrounding it must be capable of improving the situation.

When the test is complete, one of the following happens:

- If the PC beat the difficulty and the effect die is greater than the complication, the complication is eliminated.
- If the PC beat the difficulty and the effect die is equal to or smaller than the complication, the complication is stepped down by one. Time must pass before another test can be made to recover the complication.
- If the PC failed to beat the difficulty, the complication remains as it is.
- If the PC beat the difficulty but rolled a hitch, the GM may hand over a **PP** and introduce a new complication related to the one that was just recovered.
- If the PC failed to beat the difficulty and rolled a hitch, the complication is stepped up by one step for every hitch rolled.

STEPPING COMPLICATIONS UP AND DOWN

Complications attached to a character can be stepped up or down throughout play.

Existing complications may be stepped up:

- For each hitch in a single roll beyond the hitch used to create the **6** complication
- Instead of creating a new complication
- When a hitch is rolled on a recovery test
- When an SFX instructs you to do so

When a **12** complication needs to be stepped up, the character is taken out of the scene until the complication is removed or no longer hinders them. The player may overcome this for a single test or contest by spending a **PP**, but may only keep one die for the total instead of two.

See also *Taken Out* and *Last-Ditch Effort*.

Existing complications may be stepped down:

- With a successful recovery test
- By spending a **PP** to activate an opportunity
- For each additional opportunity in a single roll
- When an SFX instructs you to do so

If a complication is stepped down to **4**, the very next time it might affect a character it's added to that character's dice pool, rather than the opposition's dice pool, and the character earns a **PP**. Immediately after it's used this way, it's stepped down and eliminated—unless the dice come up with one or more hitches, in which case the GM may choose to activate them and step up the complication to **6** or more.



COMPLICATION MODS

By using mods with complications, you can change how they're used and implemented. Some mods make the rules simpler; others add complexity.

- Stress
- Life Points

STRESS AS A COMPLICATION MOD

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

Stress is the most popular mod for complications, and can be used either instead of or in conjunction with them. Stress is implemented as a distinct trait set with one or more traits that can define the way PCs and GMCs can inflict harm on one another. In addition to how it works in complications, stress works with the growth pool mod of growing characters, and has a number of mods to further customize it for your game: last-ditch effort, pushing stress, shaken and stricken, and trauma.

See *Stress* for more.

LIFE POINTS MOD

First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*

The life points mod is a classic option that uses damage solely as a pacing mechanism for conflict. It eliminates the hindering aspect of damage used by complications (or stress) to reflect harm to characters.

See *Life Points* for more.



CONSENT

Every group playing Cortex Prime brings their unique ideas and experiences to the table, which is one of the reasons why tabletop roleplaying can be so full of excitement and surprise. While one goal of the game is to create a story together, an equal part is to create a fun experience for everyone involved.

Consent should form a part of the group's conversation about social standards at the table, whether playing with old friends, new players, or strangers at a convention. For example, some players aren't comfortable with characters having the ability to control other characters, especially player characters, with their mind or with mystic spells or possession.

Safety tools can help ensure that your table stays a safe, welcoming, and enjoyable space for you and your players. Introduce a safety tool before beginning your game. There are many tools to choose from, so work with your group to discover which tools you will all find most empowering to use. Safety tools can also be mixed and matched to best serve your group of friends.

For more information on consent in games and safety tools to make games better, visit sites like goldenlassogames.com/tools or try Beau Jágr Sheldon's Script Change safety toolkit.



CONTEST



First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

A contest is a series of dice rolls between opponents, each trying to beat the previous roll until one side chooses not to roll and gives in, or fails to beat the previous roll and takes a complication or is taken out.

When a PC gets into a conflict over something they want, a contest determines if any other character can intervene, thwart, or oppose the PC. Contests are almost always initiated by a player, who picks up dice and essentially says, “I’m doing this. Who’s stopping me?”

If no one opposes the PC, there’s no need to roll dice—the contest’s outcome is determined as if the player succeeded. If an effect die is required, use the largest die in the initiating player’s dice pool.

ENGAGING IN A CONTEST

A PC initiates a contest when they state they want to do something, and another character (either another PC, or a GMC) wants to stop them. The player who initiated the contest picks up the dice and rolls first, adding together two results for a total. If the opposing player decides against engaging in the contest after seeing the difficulty, the initiating character automatically succeeds in the contest. Otherwise, the opposing player assembles a dice pool and tries to beat the difficulty the initiating character set.

If the opposing character doesn’t beat the initial difficulty, the initiating character wins the contest. If the opposing character beats the initial difficulty, the ball’s back in the initiating character’s court.

They can choose to give in, in which case they:

- define the failure on their own terms
- cannot immediately initiate another contest with the opponent, and
- get a **PP**

Otherwise, the opposition’s total becomes the new difficulty, and the initiating character must roll again to try to beat it. Failing to beat the opposition means your opponent wins, giving them the opportunity to define how they stopped you.

Contests go back and forth until one side gives in or fails to beat the difficulty. The winner can push the story forward with an advantage by giving the opposition a complication (or stress) using the effect die from their winning result. The opposing character, or another character in the scene, might still want to stop the initiating character, but the stakes have been changed in a meaningful way. In a high stakes scene the loser might instead be taken out of the scene. Players can spend **PP** to avoid being taken out, but they still take a complication.

Sometimes the GM may initiate a contest when a GMC chooses to do a thing; the GM is essentially asking the players, “What are you going to do about it?”

ABOUT GIVING IN

Giving in during a contest may seem counterintuitive. After all, a player or the GM is choosing to lose and give their opponent what they want. However, they get a **PP** when they do this and get to describe the terms of the loss. It’s possible the opponent’s goal is to knock the character out, or trap them, or seize them, or worse. A player should never be forced to hand over control of their character as a result of giving in. That’s what makes it different from being taken out or being given complications (or stress)—you have a say in how that outcome plays out.



INTERFERING IN A CONTEST

If a PC wants to get involved in a contest between two other characters, they can attempt to interfere—but it costs a **PP** and comes with a bit of risk. Usually this means the PC wants something neither of the other two characters wants, or maybe the same thing as one of them but on their own terms. After each side has rolled at least once, a player can spend a **PP** and describe how they're trying to get between the characters. The player rolls their dice and compares the total to the current difficulty in the contest.

If the PC doesn't beat the total, the characters ignore the interruption and, when the contest concludes, the winner gives the PC a complication (or stress) equal to their effect die for getting in the way. If the PC beats the total, they've stopped the contest in its tracks. No one loses, gives in, or takes any complications—yet.

If both sides are committed to continuing the contest, their players (or the GM if a GMC is one of the contestants) each hand the interfering PC a **PP** and describe how they work around, over, or through them to continue their contest. Neither can give in until both have rolled again.

An interfering PC may elect to interfere again by spending another **PP**, but if either contestant rolls higher, they can inflict a complication (or stress) on the interloper equal to the contestant's own effect die—that means the interfering character may get two complications if they don't roll high enough.

GROUP CONTEST

Contests can be used as a way to represent all-out scrambles for some kind of object, goal, or prize. One player initiates the contest, then any other character that wants to be involved in the contest can join in, one at a time as determined by the GM. The highest roller is the successful character. After the first roll to enter the contest, any character that chooses to stay in the contest takes a complication (or stress) if they aren't the winner. They may otherwise give in as normal.

If a PC loses in such a contest, the player should describe how things went badly for them. The winner chooses their effect die and gives it to all of the other contestants as a complication (or stress), but they can decide to make it a different type for each character if they like, though it still uses the same effect die to determine the size of the die.

CONTEST MODS

By using mods with contest mechanics, you can change how they're used and implemented. Some mods make the rules simpler; others add complication. Contests and tests share many of the same mods.

- Action-Based Resolution
- Add All the Dice
- No Effect Dice
- Reroll for Effect

ACTION-BASED RESOLUTION MOD

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

When using the action-based resolution mod, anything a PC or GMC does is called an action, which is contested by an opposing reaction. This replaces all tests and contests.

See *Action Order* for more.

ADD ALL THE DICE MOD

First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*

All the dice rolled in the dice pool are added together for the total, then compared to the opposition total (which likewise is every die added together).

See *Dice* for more.

NO EFFECT DICE MOD

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

In this mod, effect dice are dropped entirely, and all tests and contests have simple success and failure outcomes. The degree of success or the measure of the outcome remains story-driven and descriptive, rather than being represented by a die rating.



REROLL FOR EFFECT MOD

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

This mod doesn't use the original die roll to generate the effect die; instead the player or GM rerolls their dice pool and takes the highest rolling die as the effect die.

See *Effect Die* for more.

CRISIS POOL



First introduced in *Hammerheads* (CPGH)

With this mod based on the doom pool mod, pools of dice represent multiple localized problems.

Each of these smaller problems gets its own crisis pool and spends dice from it just like a doom pool would, but only for things that the problem might be able to influence. Crisis pools can be directly affected by the actions of PCs. In this way, they are a lot like mobs.

CREATING A CRISIS POOL

Crisis pools can range anywhere from **6 6 6** to **6x 12**. Aim to have at least two and no more than four separate crisis pools. To create a crisis pool, the GM selects a die rating and number of dice based on two conditions:

Number of Dice: How long will this crisis take to address?

Die Rating: How difficult is this crisis to address?

| | |
|----|-------------|
| 4 | VERY EASY |
| 6 | EASY |
| 8 | CHALLENGING |
| 10 | HARD |
| 12 | VERY HARD |

DOOM POOL & CRISIS POOL

You can use both crisis pools and the doom pool, spending dice directly from the doom pool to create a new crisis pool. Dice spent in this manner go from the doom pool to the crisis pool, thus reducing the overall doom of the session but creating specific, localized situations the players can directly affect.

SPENDING CRISIS POOL DICE

The GM can spend a crisis pool die to do anything a PP would normally accomplish, as long as it is within the crisis pool's realm of influence. Crisis pools can also spend dice in the same way that the doom pool can. These vary depending on the game. Some of the most common uses are:

- Creating a complication, asset, or scene distinction
- Interrupting the action order
- Adding a new extra GMC
- Introducing a new minor GMC or major GMC
- Splitting the group
- Ending the scene immediately

OVERCOMING A CRISIS POOL

To eliminate a die in a crisis pool, a player makes a test opposed by the crisis pool. If they beat the crisis pool's difficulty, they can apply an effect die of at least one step larger to the crisis die they want to get rid of. This takes the pool die out of the crisis pool entirely. If they don't have a die that's larger, they can use one of the same size or smaller to step down a crisis die instead. Crisis pools reduced to zero dice are no longer problems.



CRISIS POOLS AS THREATS

When the GM uses the crisis pool to act against the players, they can choose to do one of two things: threaten a PC, or strengthen the crisis pool.

To threaten a PC, the GM rolls the crisis pool in a test as if it were an attack. If the PC fails the test, they take a complication equal to the crisis pool's effect die. If they succeed, they avoid the complication, but don't take a die out of the crisis pool.

To strengthen the crisis pool, the GM can step up the lowest die in the crisis pool. Alternatively, the crisis pool may absorb an existing complication into it, replacing a die in the pool with the complication's die.

CRISIS POOLS AS DISASTERS

First introduced in *Hammerheads* (CPGH)

Disasters are for when the antagonist is literally a force of nature or some other complicated situation. Typically, a session has a primary disaster to deal with, and sometimes there are secondary concerns that make the PCs' jobs difficult. Even a single disaster is usually made up of several smaller issues that together create the crisis.

Every disaster is broken down into one or more crisis pools; the size and composition of the pools reflect the scale and intensity of the disaster and its elements. The primary role of the crisis pools is to act as the opposition for the PCs' efforts to deal with the disaster. Their secondary role is to act as a threat to the PCs and create or worsen complications at the disaster site.

DOOM VS CRISIS VS CHALLENGE

Doom pools, crisis pools, and challenge pools share similar mechanics, but they represent different kinds of opposition.

A doom pool is an overarching threat that dominates the setting. It serves as the opposition for all tests and can aid major GMCs. The doom pool grows larger and smaller in the size and number of the dice that make it up, but it's never completely eliminated.

Dice from the doom pool can be spent to do the same things as **PP**, in addition to a variety of other actions.

Crisis pools are a mod of doom pools that represent smaller localized problems. There are often several crisis pools at a time, pulling the attention of the PCs in various directions. A crisis pool can spend its dice much like a doom pool, but only for things related to the crisis. The PCs can directly affect and eventually eliminate crisis pools.

You can use both crisis pools and the doom pool, spending dice directly from the doom pool to create a new crisis pool. Dice spent in this manner go from the doom pool to the crisis pool, thus reducing the overall doom of the session but creating specific, localized situations the players can directly affect.

A challenge pool is a mod of crisis pools that represents a single multi-faceted problem that the PCs can directly affect and eventually eliminate. Unlike a crisis pool or doom pool, the challenge pool cannot spend dice as if they were **PP**.

CRISIS POOL MODS

By using mods with the crisis pool mod, you can change how it's used and implemented. Some mods make the rules simpler; others add complexity.

- Challenge Pool
- Leader-Set Action Order

CHALLENGE POOL MOD

First introduced in

Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game

In this mod of crisis pools, the GM presents a single pool of dice as a challenge pool—which represents a single multi-faceted problem—as opposed to multiple crisis pools representing focused areas of conflict. Unlike a crisis pool, the challenge pool cannot spend dice as if they were **PP**.

See *Challenge* for more.



LEADER-SET ACTION ORDER MOD

First introduced in *Hammerheads* (CPGH)

This mod combines crisis pools with the action order mod. One PC is assigned as the team leader. The players can nominate who this is, or the GM might select the assignment based on the mission or some other criteria. The team leader determines the order in which all of the PCs and the crisis pools act. Unlike the standard action order, this is pre-set at the beginning of each round; each team member takes their turn, the GM makes a turn for each crisis pool, and the round ends.

See *Action Order* for more.

DICE

Cortex Prime uses five kinds of dice: , , , , .






The number indicates how many sides the die has: the more sides, the bigger the numbers. A handful of dice is called a dice pool.

When a die is rolled, the number on the uppermost face is the result. Add results together to get a total.

The dice introduce a random element to play, helping us resolve tests and contests. Bigger dice (more sides) means potentially better outcomes, and more dice means more reliable outcomes.

A communal pool of dice for the table is recommended, with at least three or four of each type. If playing online, use dice simulators for making virtual dice rolls. Make sure everyone playing approves of the method used, and that everyone can see the results of each die in the dice rolls. All dice rolls are made in the open.


DIE SIZE

Cortex Prime uses game dice of various sizes: four-sided , six-sided , eight-sided , ten-sided , and twelve-sided  dice. The more sides a die has, the higher the numbers it might roll. For effect dice, the size is the only thing that matters.

DIE RATING

Every trait in the game has a die rating. Whenever you use the trait, you pick up a die of that size for your dice pool. Die ratings usually correspond to how much effect that trait has on the outcome of any given test or contest.

ROLLING DICE

Usually when you roll two or more dice, you choose two results to add together for your total, and a third die to use as the effect die. This is a roll and keep method of resolving an outcome. If you're rolling one die, your total is equal to the result of that die. If you don't have a third die, your effect die starts at . All rolls, including the GM's, are done in the open. After rolling dice, leave them on the table in view of everyone. Only pick up the dice once a test or contest has been resolved.

You are free to choose any two dice for your total. You don't need to choose the two highest rolling dice. You may want to save a die with more sides for your effect die, even if it was the highest result. Likewise, the GM may decide to let the dice fall where they may and always keep the two highest rolling dice, or use the choice of two dice as a way to moderate the opposition without simply fudging dice.



RESULT

When you roll a die, the number on the uppermost face is the result.

TOTAL

The total is the number you get when you add at least two of your dice results together after rolling your dice pool. Usually, it's the two highest rolled dice results in a dice pool added together. There may be more or fewer results added together, depending on the circumstances.



ROLLING A HITCH

Any 1 (a hitch) rolled on a die does not count toward the total at all and can't be used as an effect die. It's called a hitch because it's a little obstacle that could lead to an inconvenience—a complication—without ensuring failure. The GM has the option to activate those hitches to give the PC complications, giving the player a  in exchange. If the player's dice include multiple 1s, the GM can step up the complication for each additional hitch without giving any additional .

The GM might also roll hitches—called opportunities—which the players can activate.

See *Hitch* for more.

ROLLING A BOTCH

All the dice roll 1s. A critical failure. The total is zero. The GM can introduce a  complication without paying a  and step it up as many times as there are hitches past the first.



ROLLING AN OPPORTUNITY

When the GM rolls a 1 on their dice, this hitch is also known as an opportunity. Any player can spend a PP to activate the opportunity to either:

- Step down an existing complication to a smaller size die. A 6 becomes a 4, and a 4 goes away.
- Step up an existing asset—to a maximum of 12—for the rest of the scene. Even signature assets can be temporarily stepped up in this way.

If the GM's dice include multiple 1s, players may step up or down their asset or complication multiple times and still only pay a single PP per trait affected.

See *Hitch* for more.

CHOOSING AN EFFECT DIE

The effect die is chosen from the dice pool after the dice used for the total are taken out and added together. Usually the effect die is the largest size of die that wasn't used in the total. Only the size of the effect die (number of sides) matters; the result rolled on the effect die has no further use in the roll.

See *Effect Die* for more.

DIFFICULTY DICE

The difficulty is a measure of how hard it is to succeed, represented by a pair of dice that make up the foundation of an opposition pool. The specific details depend on the situation.

See *Difficulty* for more.

SCALE DIE

A die added to the dice pool of one side of a conflict if it has a significant size advantage over the other side.

See *Scale* for more.

DOUBLE A DIE

Doubling a die means adding another die of the same size to the dice pool before the dice are rolled.

REROLL A DIE

Rolling a die or dice again, ignoring the previous result and using the new result.

STEP UP OR STEP DOWN A DIE

Occasionally, you're asked to swap out one or more dice for bigger or smaller dice. This is called stepping up or stepping down a die rating. To step up a die by one, swap it for a die that's one step larger than the original. To step down a die by one, swap it out for a die that's one step smaller. Stepping down a 4 makes it go away.

A 12 has special results when being stepped up, depending on the circumstances:

- In your dice pool, a stepped up 12 adds an additional 6
- As an effect die, a stepped up 12 is an automatic takeout or adds a second effect die
- As a complication or stress, the character is taken out

DICE MODS

By using mods with the core dice rules of Cortex, you can change how they're used and implemented. Some mods make the rules simpler; others add complexity.

- Add All the Dice
- Hero Dice
- No Effect Dice
- Reroll for Effect
- Static Difficulty



ADD ALL THE DICE

First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*

Using this mod, all the dice rolled in the dice pool are added together for the total, then compared to the opposition total (which likewise is every die added together). This mod places a much higher value on adding dice to the dice pool, so assets and complications become much more potent.

Use either the No Effect Dice or Reroll for Effect mods when using this mod, as adding together all of the dice leaves no die for the effect die.

This mod still keeps the rule about hitches. Any die that comes up as a 1 isn't included in the total, and counts as a hitch to be activated by the players or the GM, depending on who's rolling.

Games using this mod likely have character files with no more than three traits to ensure that totals don't become astronomical.

HERO DICE MOD

First introduced in *Dragon Brigade Roleplaying Game*

Using this mod, the primary benefit of rolling a heroic success is the creation of hero dice. On a heroic success, you may bank a die equal to the highest rolling die in the opposition pool. These banked dice are called hero dice, which players can use to perform impressive feats.

See *Heroic Success* for more.

NO EFFECT DICE

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

In this mod, effect dice are dropped entirely, and all tests and contests have simple success and failure outcomes. The degree of success or the measure of the outcome remains story-driven and descriptive, rather than being represented by a die rating. Any time a test or contest should generate a complication or asset, assign a **6** and step it up with heroic successes.

No effect dice means you can't compare effect dice to modulate the outcomes of contests.

High stakes scenes result in opponents being taken out unless they spend a **PP**, and low stakes scenes result in opponents taking **6** complications or having existing complications stepped up by one.

REROLL FOR EFFECT

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

This mod doesn't use the original die roll to generate the effect die; instead the player or GM rerolls their dice pool and takes the highest rolling die as the effect die. SFX that call for choosing more than one effect die or stepping up or down an effect die apply to this new roll. If SFX or other mechanics altered or stepped up dice in the pool after they were rolled, those effects don't apply when rerolling; pick up the original dice pool and roll it.

STATIC DIFFICULTY

First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*

With this mod, players only roll against opposition dice pools in a contest, not in a test. When a player rolls in a test, the difficulty is a static target number instead of a difficulty die.

Static difficulty is based on this difficulty dice chart:

| | |
|----|-------------|
| 3 | VERY EASY |
| 7 | EASY |
| 11 | CHALLENGING |
| 15 | HARD |
| 19 | VERY HARD |

If the PC has a complication that would add to the opposition, the complication die is rolled and added to the static difficulty.



DICE POOL CORE

When rolling dice for a test or contest, assemble a dice pool by choosing an appropriate die from each of the prime sets and any other relevant trait sets on the character file, plus any bonus dice from other sources. The dice pool represents all of the various things that might contribute to success. There's no maximum number of dice in a dice pool, but generally the pool includes anywhere from three to eight dice.

OPPOSITION POOL

A dice pool assembled by the GM based on what the player character is up against. For a test, this usually starts with two difficulty dice chosen by the GM. See *Test* for more.

For a contest, whoever acts first—usually a player—puts together a dice pool. Instead of difficulty dice, the opposition puts together their own dice pool once they see how the initiating character does on their roll. See *Contest* for more.

There are numerous mods that replace difficulty dice with a pool of dice defined by that mod, such as the doom pool. Any reference to difficulty dice usually also applies to games using one of these mods.

VEHICLE POOL

When using vehicles in a Cortex Prime game, players may sometimes create dice pools for that vehicle instead of for their PC. This is referred to as a vehicle pool, which is usually made up of a combination of the vehicle's traits and the traits of the PC making the roll.

See *Vehicles* for more.

DICE POOL MODS

By using mods with the core dice pool mechanics of Cortex, you can change how it's used and implemented. Some mods make the rules simpler; others add complexity.

- Doom Pool
- Crisis Pool
- Challenge Pool
- Limited Doom Pool
- Growth Pool
- Resource Pool
- Static Difficulty

DOOM POOL MOD

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

The doom pool is a mod that serves as a combination of ambient threat level, GM resource, and pacing mechanic. The doom pool is sometimes called the trouble pool, the danger pool, or some other thematic title. The doom pool replaces difficulty dice for all tests, and the dice in the pool replace **PP** for the GM.

See *Doom Pool* for more.

CRISIS POOL MOD

First introduced in *Hammerheads* (CPGH)

With this mod based on the doom pool mod, pools of dice represent multiple localized problems. Each of these smaller problems gets its own pool of dice and spends dice from it just like a doom pool would, but only for things that the problem might be able to influence. Crisis pools can be directly affected by the actions of PCs.

See *Crisis Pool* for more.



CHALLENGE POOL MOD

First introduced in

Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game


In this mod of crisis pools, the GM presents a single pool of dice as a challenge pool. Challenges take place over several rounds. Each PC gets to take a turn within a round to attempt a test to lessen or resolve the challenge. Each round represents some passage of time. The challenge gets to act on its own turn and can either get worse or create problems for the PCs in response.

See *Challenge* for more.

LIMITED DOOM POOL MOD

First introduced in

Cortex Prime Game Handbook

In this mod, the difficulty is determined as usual for a test, based on the situation's overall difficulty and by any GMC traits that factor into it. Doom dice are then spent out of the doom pool to add dice to the difficulty or to include more dice in the total after the dice are rolled, as per the standard doom pool rules. Doom dice continue to replace  for the GM.

See *Difficulty* for more.

GROWTH POOL MOD

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

With this mod, PCs gain new traits, advance current traits, create relationship assets, and more through a mechanism called the growth pool, which is a pool of dice you build up over the course of the game.

See *Growth Pool* for more.

RESOURCE POOL MOD

First introduced in *Hammerheads (CPGH)*

With this mod, a vehicle has multiple pools of dice that function as prop resources, which are decided at the start of each mission. Any player can spend them out of the pool, rolling them and adding the highest rolling die to their total for a test. The other dice are discarded—they do not go back into the resource pool.

See *Resources* for more.

STATIC DIFFICULTY

First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*

With this mod, players only roll against opposition dice pools in a contest, not in a test. When a player rolls in a test, the difficulty is a static target number instead of a difficulty die.

Static difficulty is based on this difficulty dice chart:

| | |
|----|-------------|
| 3 | VERY EASY |
| 7 | EASY |
| 11 | CHALLENGING |
| 15 | HARD |
| 19 | VERY HARD |

If the PC has a complication that would add to the opposition, the complication die is rolled and added to the static difficulty.








DIFFICULTY

Difficulty is a measure of how hard it is to succeed at something, typically represented by a pair of dice that make up the foundation of an opposition pool. The specific details depend on the situation.



Most difficulties are a variation of a test difficulty. For a test, the GM assembles an opposition pool and rolls it, setting the difficulty by adding together two dice from the roll and announcing the total.

That difficulty is the number the player needs to beat with their own total when they roll their dice for the test. If they beat it, the test is a success. If they didn't beat it, the test is a failure. Beating a difficulty means rolling higher than the difficulty total. If the player's total is the same as the difficulty's total, they didn't beat it, so this still counts as a failure.

The difficulty dice are always two dice of the same number of sides, based on the situation:

| | |
|---|-------------|
|  | VERY EASY |
|  | EASY |
|  | CHALLENGING |
|  | HARD |
|  | VERY HARD |

ASSET TEST DIFFICULTY

When a player rolls to create an asset in the game, the GM rolls to set the difficulty, usually with something basic like  . The effect die of the test becomes the die rating of the asset. The GM may set a cap on the size of assets created this way by setting the difficulty dice to that die rating. The asset created may not be larger than this die cap.






CHALLENGE POOL DIFFICULTY

First introduced in

Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game


Using the challenge mod, the GM sets a difficulty for players using a dice pool that represents the difficulty and duration of a challenge. It's used by the GM to set the difficulty for each PC's turn, and for the GM to roll against the PCs on the challenge pool's turn.

To create a challenge pool, the GM chooses base difficulty dice the same way as they would in a test. Then, they add up to 3 additional dice of the same die rating depending on how long the challenge should take to overcome.

| | |
|---|-------------|
|  | VERY EASY |
|  | EASY |
|  | CHALLENGING |
|  | HARD |
|  | VERY HARD |

See *Challenge* for more.

COMPLICATION RECOVERY DIFFICULTY

Getting rid of or reducing a complication is a test against a dice pool consisting of the complication and a base difficulty of  .

See *Complications* for more.



CONTEST DIFFICULTY

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

For a contest, whoever acts first—usually a player—puts together a dice pool. Instead of difficulty dice, the opposition puts together their own dice pool once they see how the initiating character does on their roll. The current highest roll in a contest is the contest's difficulty.

See *Contest* for more.

CRISIS POOL DIFFICULTY

First introduced in *Hammerheads* (CPGH)

Crisis pools represent small, localized problems and replace difficulty dice for tests related to things each crisis pool might be able to influence. To set the difficulty, the GM picks up all of the dice in the crisis pool and rolls them, taking two of the dice results and adding them together, as normal. The GM can spend a die not used in the total and add its result to the total; this spent die is removed from the crisis pool. The remaining dice, including the two that were added together for the total, remain in the crisis pool.

See *Crisis Pool* for more.

DOOM POOL DIFFICULTY

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*





The doom pool replaces difficulty dice for all tests. To set the difficulty, the GM picks up some or all the dice in the doom pool and rolls them, taking two of the dice results and adding them together, as normal. The GM can spend a die not used in the total and add its result to the total; this spent die is removed from the doom pool. The remaining dice, including the two that were added together for the total, remain in the doom pool.

See *Doom Pool* for more.

GROWTH POOL DIFFICULTY

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

To raise a trait during growth, the GM sets the difficulty at one die equal to the trait level you want to step up to and a second die based on what kind of trait it is:

-  Attribute or affiliation
-  Distinction, role, or power
-  Skill, SFX, or value
-  Relationship, resource, or signature asset

Unlike other tests, you can't use  to affect the outcome of this one. Ignore all hitches.

See *Growth Pool* for more.











PACED GROWTH POOL DIFFICULTY

First introduced in

Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game

In the paced growth pool mod of the growth pool mod, the GM instead sets the difficulty at two dice based on what kind of trait it is, and one die equal to the target die rating.











-   Attribute
-   Distinction
-   Specialty, SFX, swap distinction
-   Asset, swap locked SFX

See *Growth Pool* for more.

STRESS-ONLY GROWTH POOL DIFFICULTY

First introduced in *TRACE 2.0* (CPGH)

In games that use stress, but that don't use any traits with statements or goals, the growth pool can be adjusted. The GM rolls based on a set difficulty:




-   Affiliation, step one up and one down
-   Rewrite a distinction, step up a role, add a talent
-   Replace an existing talent or add a die to an existing resource
-   Step up a resource die rating or add a new   resource

See *Growth Pool* for more.

LAST-DITCH EFFORT DIFFICULTY

First introduced in

Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game

With the last-ditch effort mod, a PC can be temporarily roused after having been taken out of the scene. This requires a test using any appropriate traits vs a base difficulty of   plus the  complication or stress die. On a success, the PC's effect die is given to the recovered PC as an asset.

See *Last-Ditch Effort* for more.

STATIC DIFFICULTY

First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*

With this mod, players only roll against opposition dice pools in a contest, not in a test. When a player rolls in a test, the difficulty is a static target number instead of a difficulty die.

Static difficulty is based on this difficulty dice chart:



| | |
|----|-------------|
| 3 | VERY EASY |
| 7 | EASY |
| 11 | CHALLENGING |
| 15 | HARD |
| 19 | VERY HARD |

If the PC has a complication that would add to the opposition, the complication die is rolled and added to the static difficulty.



STRESS RECOVERY DIFFICULTY

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*











Recovering stress requires a test using any appropriate traits against a base difficulty of   plus the stress die.

See *Stress* for more.

TEST DIFFICULTY

For a test, the GM assembles an opposition pool and rolls it, setting the difficulty by adding together two dice from the roll and announcing the total.

The difficulty dice are always two dice of the same number of sides, based on the situation:

| | |
|---|-------------|
|   | VERY EASY |
|   | EASY |
|   | CHALLENGING |
|   | HARD |
|   | VERY HARD |

See *Test* for more.

TIMED TEST DIFFICULTY

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*



Timed tests are a series of standard tests, either several of the same kind or a series of different tests for something that has multiple steps.

The GM sets the difficulty for the tests and decides how much time the PCs have. By default, the number of story beats is the number of tests—three or four is a good baseline. For an easier timed test, give them one or two additional beats to accomplish it. For a harder test, give them one or even two fewer beats.

See *Test* for more.

TRAUMA RECOVERY DIFFICULTY

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

Recovering trauma requires a test using any appropriate traits against a base difficulty of   plus the trauma die.

See *Stress* for more.



DISTINCTIONS



First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

Distinctions are a trait that represents a character's background, personality, and role in the game and that differentiates them from other PCs and GMCs. Distinctions are usually a prime set in any Cortex game. Distinctions might be player-created or the GM might prepare a big list of them to choose from.

USING DISTINCTIONS

To inspire roleplaying, PCs have three distinctions rated at **8** that paint a clearer picture of their background, personality, and role in the story. Just by looking at your character's three distinctions you should have a clear impression of who they are and how their past has shaped them. The choice of when to use a distinction is the player's, but it must make narrative sense to do so.

Distinctions are one of the main ways to earn **PP**. Every Cortex Prime game should include distinctions as one of the prime sets, which means your distinctions should be varied and broad enough that one of them will apply almost every time you put together a dice pool.

Distinctions are frequently paired up with SFX—in fact, all of them have the *Hinder* SFX: “Gain a **PP** when you switch out this distinction's die for a **4**.” You can assign more SFX to a distinction but leave them locked until the player earns growth. See *SFX* and *Growth* for more.

SCENE DISTINCTIONS

You can give a location some personality by applying scene distinctions. These work like distinctions on characters, complete with the *Hinder* SFX, but can be used by any character in the scene.

You can expand this by adding location-specific SFX to a location's scene distinctions, such as spending a **PP** to create location-specific assets. Both GMCs and PCs might make use of scene distinction SFX if they're made available.

See *Location* for more.

VEHICLE DISTINCTIONS

In some settings, vehicles are as important to the story as the characters are. To make vehicles come to life, each group of players maintains a vehicle file, a bit like a character file. They receive distinctions just like PCs.

Players start vehicle construction by selecting the model distinction. In addition to the model distinction, players should choose two more distinctions for the vehicle. One represents the vehicle's history, and another its customization. Each distinction gets the *Hinder*: Gain a **PP** when you switch out this distinction's **8** for a **4** SFX for free. Players should choose two additional SFX to unlock (if you have prepared distinctions in advance for your group) or come up with two additional SFX to attach to one or two of your distinctions.

See *Vehicles* for more.

DISTINCTION MODS

By using mods with distinctions, you can change how they're used and implemented. Some mods make the rules simpler; others add complication.

- Highlight Other Traits
- Rating Distinctions
- Statements as Distinction Alternatives

HIGHLIGHT OTHER TRAITS MOD

First introduced in *Firefly Role-Playing Game*





With this mod, you can have each distinction include two highlight traits, which are traits from a specific trait set (like skills or powers) that the distinction is most usefully linked to. If you use highlight traits, choosing the distinction means those traits get stepped up by one during character creation.






See *Archetype* for more.



RATING DISTINCTIONS MOD

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

By default, distinctions are always rated at , but you might decide to apply this mod and have distinctions rated from  to  like other traits. If so, the average of the dice should still be .

While three distinctions is the default number for Cortex Prime games, you're under no obligation to limit your characters to that many. Some Cortex Prime games allow for the option of several distinctions, rated anywhere from  to . In games like this, consider connecting the unlocking of SFX to the die rating, rather than XP spending: unlock one SFX at , another at , and the last one at .

STATEMENTS AS DISTINCTION ALTERNATES MOD

First introduced in *Cortex Prime Game Handbook*

A trait statement is a sentence or phrase that usually clarifies or refines the trait it's attached to. As a mod, you could have a Cortex Prime game where trait statements replace distinctions entirely. It's important that there still be at least three prime sets so that dice pools remain centered around a set of three dice; ensure there's another prime set or sufficient other ways to add dice (such as through talents or specialties) so that it remains consistent.

See *Statements* for more.



DOOM POOL



First introduced in

Smallville Roleplaying Game (as “Trouble”)
Marvel Heroic Roleplaying (as “Doom Pool”)

The doom pool is a mod that serves as a combination of ambient threat level, GM resource, and pacing mechanic. The doom pool is sometimes called the trouble pool, the danger pool, or some other thematic title.

When the GM has a doom pool:

- They do not have a bank of PP.
- Players earn and spend their PP directly into and out of a central pile.
- The GM spends dice out of the doom pool instead of using their own PP.

At the beginning of each session, the GM starts with a doom pool of at least 6 6. If the session is of global or cosmic scale, the pool may start with 3 or 4 dice. If the session is a major breakpoint in a campaign, the size of these starting dice might be 8 or even 10.

The doom pool replaces difficulty dice for all tests. To set the difficulty, the GM picks up some or all the dice in the doom pool and rolls them, taking two of the dice results and adding them together, as normal. The GM can spend a die not used in the total and add its result to the total; this spent die is removed from the doom pool after resolving the outcome. The remaining dice, including the two that were added together for the total, remain in the doom pool.

The GM may spend a die from the doom pool to add it to a GMC’s dice pool during a contest, before the dice pool is rolled. This die is removed from the doom pool and doesn’t go back in once the GMC’s roll is resolved. Doom dice may also be spent like PP, where a 6 from the doom pool is equivalent to a single PP. This usually happens when activating a GMC SFX or avoiding being taken out of a fight. If the doom pool only has larger dice in it, the next highest die must be spent in place of the 6.

The doom pool increases when the GM activates hitches rolled by players. Instead of adding a complication to the PC, the GM adds a die of the same size as the one that rolled the hitch to their doom pool. Alternatively, the GM can use a smaller die to step up an equal or larger existing die in the doom pool by one step.

SPENDING DOOM POOL DICE

In addition to spending a doom pool die for anything a PP could normally accomplish, the GM can spend a die to do a variety of special actions. These vary depending on the game.

Some of the most common uses are:

- Creating a complication, asset, or scene distinction
- Interrupting the action order
- Adding a new extra GMC
- Introducing a new minor GMC or major GMC
- Splitting the group
- Ending the scene immediately



DOOM VS CRISIS VS CHALLENGE

Doom pools, crisis pools, and challenge pools share similar mechanics, but they represent different kinds of opposition.

A doom pool is an overarching threat that dominates the setting. It serves as the opposition for all tests and can aid major GMCs. The doom pool grows larger and smaller in the size and number of the dice that make it up, but it's never completely eliminated. Dice from the doom pool can be spent to do the same things as **PP**, in addition to a variety of other actions.

Crisis pools are a mod of doom pools that represent smaller localized problems. There are often several crisis pools at a time, pulling the attention of the PCs in various directions. A crisis pool can spend its dice much like a doom pool, but only for things related to the crisis. The PCs can directly affect and eventually eliminate crisis pools.

You can use both crisis pools and the doom pool, spending dice directly from the doom pool to create a new crisis pool. Dice spent in this manner go from the doom pool to the crisis pool, thus reducing the overall doom of the session but creating specific, localized situations the players can directly affect.

A challenge pool is a mod of crisis pools that represents a single multi-faceted problem that the PCs can directly affect and eventually eliminate. Unlike a crisis pool or doom pool, the challenge pool cannot spend dice as if they were **PP**.

DOOM POOL MODS

By using mods with the doom pool, you can change how it's used and implemented. Some mods make the rules simpler; others add complexity.

- Challenge Pool
- Crisis Pool
- Limited Doom Pool

CHALLENGE POOL MOD

First introduced in

Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game

In this mod of crisis pools, the GM presents a single pool of dice as a challenge pool. Challenges take place over several rounds. Each PC gets to take a turn within a round to attempt a test to lessen or resolve the challenge. Each round represents some passage of time. The challenge gets to act on its own turn and can either get worse or create problems for the PCs in response.

See *Challenge* for more.

CRISIS POOL MOD

First introduced in *Hammerheads* (CPGH)

With this mod based on the doom pool mod, pools of dice represent multiple localized problems. Each of these smaller problems gets its own pool of dice and spends dice from it just like a doom pool would, but only for things that the problem might be able to influence. Crisis pools can be directly affected by the actions of PCs.

See *Crisis Pool* for more.

LIMITED DOOM POOL MOD

First introduced in

Cortex Prime Game Handbook

In this mod, the difficulty is determined as usual for a test, based on the situation's overall difficulty and by any GMC traits that factor into it. Doom dice are then spent out of the doom pool to add dice to the difficulty or to include more dice in the total after the dice are rolled, as per the standard doom pool rules. Doom dice continue to replace **PP** for the GM.

See *Difficulty* for more.



DRAMATIC ORDER



First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

If the primary focus of your session is intense conflict between characters, or the conflict plays out over longer periods of time between scenes, dramatic order is your default.

In dramatic order the decision about who goes first is determined by a character, usually a PC, stating that they want something and another character, sometimes a PC but often a GMC, saying they want to stop them. The initiating character is called the dramatic lead.

Play carries on as normal with the dramatic lead starting the contest by rolling dice and their opposition trying to roll higher, just as with the standard rules for contests. Once these contests are resolved they can transition to another contest shortly afterward, with or without a change in location or circumstances, determined by the first contest's outcome.

When there are multiple players active in the same scene and one player starts a contest, the other players can try to aid the dramatic lead, interfere with the contest (because they want something else from the scene), or wait to see what happens.

If everyone wants to go first and it's not clear who would, the GM can call for all the players who want to start the dramatic order to roll their dice for the contests they want to start. The highest rolling player starts and uses that roll for the contest; the other players pick up their dice and can interfere, assist, or sit out the contest as it plays out. Move on to other contests as appropriate, varying the dramatic lead when possible.

See *Narrative Order* for alternative methods of adjudicating the order that things happen in the story.



EFFECT DIE

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

An effect die represents the impact of a success, and might be used in many different ways depending on the context.

The effect die is chosen from the dice pool after the dice used for the total are taken out and added together. Usually the effect die is the largest size of die that wasn't used in the total. Only the size of the effect die (number of sides) matters; the result rolled on the effect die has no further use in the roll.

INELIGIBLE DICE

You can't choose a die that produced a hitch for an effect die. If you spend **PP** to add more dice to a total beyond the first two, those dice also can't also be used as effect dice. If there are no dice left in the pool once the total is determined (or the remaining dice are hitches or otherwise spoken for), the effect die is always a **▼**.

EFFECT DICE IN OPPOSITION

If you win a roll an opposed roll against another character, such as a contest or an action taken during the action order, you compare your effect die against the opposition's effect die (from the roll they made to try to beat you). If your opponent's effect die is bigger than yours, your effect die is stepped down by one before you use it for a complication (or stress). If it's equal to or less than yours, it doesn't change your effect die.

USING EFFECT DICE

The effect die is used for things like determining the size of an asset or complication, or (if you're using the mod) stress. You won't always need an effect die, especially when you're only concerned with pass/fail outcomes.

ADDING EXTRA EFFECT DICE

You can spend a **PP** to keep an additional effect die. This is used to represent doing multiple things with a single roll. Additional effect dice can be used for different things, such as inflicting other types of complications or creating assets.

If you have a heroic success with an **12** effect die, you can add an extra effect die. Either choose a second effect die from unused dice, or start with a **6** as your second effect die.

EFFECT DICE IN AUTOMATIC OUTCOMES

When a test or challenge isn't opposed and you need an effect die, use the largest die in the player's dice pool if it's an automatic success, or in the opposition pool if it's an automatic failure. For a contest, use the largest die in the initiating dice pool. Most of the time, however, you won't need an effect die if no dice are actually rolled.

EFFECT DICE IN CHALLENGES

If you beat the challenge difficulty, you make progress, and compare your effect die to one of the dice in the challenge pool. If it's bigger, the challenge die is removed from the challenge pool. If it's equal to or smaller, the challenge die is stepped down by one step. If a challenge die would be reduced below **▼4**, it's taken out of the pool. If you don't beat the difficulty, you fail to progress the challenge, and you take stress equal to the GM's's effect die.

See *Challenge* for more.



EFFECT DICE IN CONTESTS

If you win a contest, you compare your effect die against the opponent's effect die (from the roll they just made to try to beat you).

In a scene that the GM has determined is high stakes, if your effect die is larger than your opponent's, they're taken out of the scene. If their effect die is equal to or larger than yours, or they spend a **PP** to avoid it, your opposition isn't taken out. Instead, they take a complication equal to your effect die.

If the contest isn't a high stakes scene and there's no perilous outcome to worry about, the losing side just takes a complication or stress equal to the effect die of the winning side—unless the opponent's effect die is equal to or larger than yours, in which case your effect die is stepped down by one before being applied as a complication.

See *Contest* for more.

EFFECT DICE IN TESTS

When rolling dice for tests, the effect die serves as a useful indicator for the scope of the action's outcome. A **12** effect die means the test had a mind-blowing outcome, while a **4** means it was marginal at best. There's usually no need to compare your effect die with the opposition's effect die.

When you roll to create an asset using a test, your effect die will usually be the rating of the new asset.

See *Test* for more.

SPECIAL RULES AND EFFECT DICE

If any rule or SFX steps up the effect die beyond **12**, either the effect is an automatic take out or victory, or another die from the pool is turned into a second effect die.

Some SFX let you choose more than one effect die. You can also spend a **PP** to add an extra effect die. In both cases, you have to choose from the dice left over from your roll. If there are none, use the **4** default. If an SFX tells you to step up or step down an effect die and you have multiple effect dice, only modify one of them for each SFX that you're using.

EFFECT DIE MODS

By using mods with effect dice, you can change how they're used and implemented. Some mods make the rules simpler; others add complexity.

- No Effect Dice
- Reroll for Effect

NO EFFECT DICE

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

In this mod, effect dice are dropped entirely, and all tests and contests have simple success and failure outcomes. The degree of success or the measure of the outcome remains story-driven and descriptive, rather than being represented by a die rating. Any time a test or contest should generate a complication or asset, assign a **6** and step it up with heroic successes.

No effect dice means you can't compare effect dice to modulate the outcomes of contests. High stakes scenes result in opponents being taken out unless they spend a **PP**, and low stakes scenes result in opponents taking **6** complications or having existing complications stepped up by one.

REROLL FOR EFFECT

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*



This mod doesn't use the original die roll to generate the effect die; instead the player or GM rerolls their dice pool and takes the highest rolling die as the effect die. SFX that call for choosing more than one effect die or stepping up or down an effect die apply to this new roll. If SFX or other mechanics altered or stepped up dice in the pool after they were rolled, those effects don't apply when rerolling; pick up the original dice pool and roll it.



First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

Extras are often unnamed background characters or support characters with only one trait. They can be contacts that provide information or services, or just flunkies at a character's beck and call. Extras can even include a group of people, such as a squad of soldiers, who mostly act as one character in the story.

CREATING AN EXTRA

Extras need only a single die with a flavorful trait attached to them. That trait does not need to be equivalent to the PCs. Something as simple as HIRED ASSASSIN  or CUT-RATE THIEF  works just fine. If you like, add another trait during play as things progress; you can upgrade any extra to a minor GMC this way. If the extra is part of a character file, it might already have a die rating, so you can use that in a pinch.

USING AN EXTRA

Extras come into play as an additional die the GM includes in an opposition dice pool for a test. They can also gang up with a minor or major GMC by adding their die to a GMC's dice pool in a contest. See *Game Moderator Character (GMC)* for more.

Extras acting as allies to the PCs might contribute their die to a PC as an asset, but doing so could put the extra at risk of taking a complication or being taken out.

Extras can be taken out by complications or stress higher than their base trait die.

EXTRAS AS RESOURCES

An extra is a type of GMC, but when it's attached to a PC it represents a contact or ally the player may draw on for help. Resources are usually represented by two or more dice of the same size, which may be used to aid a test or contest where that resource is helpful or significant.

The resource die rating reflects the connection between the extra and the PC, not the extra's skills or abilities, so it's possible for the die ratings of an extra as a GMC and as a resource to be different.

See *Resources* for more.



FACTIONS & ORGS

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*



A faction is a group of characters who follow the same ideology, goal, or purpose, even if they don't always work together. An org is a group of characters who all work together to do something, even if they don't all believe the same thing. So, they're really just two names for a large-scale group.



Factions and orgs are like mobs, in that they are a group of extras that act together like a minor GMC. However, unlike mobs, they're much larger and operate at a scale above the player characters. They can be a simple trait with multiple dice that also uses the scale rules, such as keeping three dice instead of two. Or they can be a more complicated character, something like a cross between a location GMC and a minor GMC with a scale die.

CREATING A FACTION OR ORG


Factions and orgs are typically made up of the following:

- A mob trait
- Additional trait dice
- Special SFX and/or distinctions
- A scale die

Begin with an idea of what the role of the faction or org is in the game. Make that one of their traits, such as DANGEROUS GANG , or POLITICAL ACTION COMMITTEE . Then multiply that die rating to create a mob trait.

Add other single-die traits to give some context and additional dice to the faction or org's pool, giving them evocative names such as BUREAUCRACY  or OCCULT LIBRARY .

You can give the faction or org one or more SFX and distinctions to introduce some tricks that seem relevant to their overall purpose and scope.



Since they work on a scale above the PCs, most factions and orgs also get a scale die of a .

If the faction or org is connected to a PC as a resource, you might not need to do a full write-up, but if you want them to have a role beyond just being something to aid the PCs, writing them up is a good idea.

See *Resources* for more.

SCALE MOD

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

A conflict might take place between two groups of radically different sizes, scale, or degrees of power. As GM, you may adjudicate a simple scale advantage as being outright impossible (human being tries to punch a spaceship) or with a scale die, which is a bonus  added to whichever side has the advantage. Along with a scale die, that side also adds an additional die result into their total for free (the equivalent of spending a  on their total). This additional die represents a pretty profound advantage.

See *Scale* for more.

TOPPLING A FACTION OR ORG

A faction or org is toppled when all of their mob trait dice are removed. Each time the outcome of a PC's roll would create or step up a complication or stress that exceeds the mob trait die rating, one die is knocked off, and the complication or stress is removed. When all of the mob trait dice are eliminated, the faction or org is toppled.



GAME MODERATOR (GM)



The game moderator is the person who facilitates the game, presents the session, and plays the parts of every other character and thing in the game. In some versions of Cortex, this role may have a different name; however, the responsibilities are the same.

The GM is responsible for:

- Preparing and presenting the session to the players.
- Deciding how the GMCs react to the group's actions.
- Asking leading questions of the players to lead them into further adventure.
- Revealing the important details of the setting to the players.
- Facilitating the game rules at the table and maintaining the pace of the session.
- In general, bringing the world to life around the other players.

GAME MODERATOR CHARACTERS

GMCs are the characters that the GM incorporates into the session and gets to roleplay, for better or worse. We split GMCs into a few specific types, listed here for easy reference.

Major GMCs: Characters on par with the PCs, with about as much detail and the same traits

Minor GMCs: Characters with fewer traits and less detail but still significant

Location GMCs: Set pieces for scenes that may have their own traits

Extras: Unnamed background characters or support characters with only one trait

Mobs: Groups of extras that act together as a single character

Bosses: Individual characters that act like a group of extras

Factions/Orgs: Much larger mobs that operate at a higher scale than a standard mob

Catalyst: A special type of major GMC that changes based on how the PCs interact with them

See *Game Moderator Character (GMC)* for more.

GM PLOT POINTS

Unless mods are applied, the GM has two pools of **PP**: the bank and the pile.

THE BANK

At the start of each session, the GM gets a **PP** per player in the game added to the bank, which they can spend on GMCs and influencing the story. The same bank of **PP** is shared by all of the GMCs in play; they don't each keep track of their own plot points. When the GM spends these **PP**, they go to the pile instead of to the player who was affected by the roll, just as if a PC had spent the **PP** on the roll. The GM can add more **PP** to the bank by activating GMC SFX, including using distinctions as a **4** instead of a **8**.

These **PP** can be spent to:

- Include more results in a total
- Activate SFX
- Avoid a GMC being taken out

In general, the GM should strive to spend these **PP** when it makes the story more interesting, and not to target their players.

THE PILE

In addition to the limited pool of points set aside in the bank, the GM has an unlimited number of **PP** to give to the players when appropriate. The GM uses this pool to purchase complications when the players roll hitches or to hand over **PP** to the players when an SFX calls for it. It's called the pile because if you're using physical tokens to keep track of them, it's best to just make a big pile of those tokens in the middle of the table. Most of the time, when players or the GM spend **PP**, they return to this pile.



RUNNING THE GAME

As the GM, you are a player with special responsibilities at the table to guide your players through the game and story. More guidance can be found in the *Cortex Prime Game Handbook* Chapters 3-4, and *Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game* Chapter 6.

RUNNING SESSIONS

Sessions can be short or they can be long, and you could play multiple “sessions” in a single day around breaks for lunch or dinner. But generally, a session is about three to four hours of play with a beginning and an end, allowing for bookkeeping, advancing a story along, and giving everyone enough time in the spotlight.

The central hook or story idea for any given session is called the situation. This isn’t the same as the plot, because roleplaying games aren’t pre-written stories, but it’s the “what” when you look back at a session and think, “What was that about?”

With the situation at hand, play follows through a series of scenes that are further broken into various tests or contests, until you reach a suitable conclusion or cliffhanger to end the session on.

See *Session* for more.

RUNNING SCENES

A scene in Cortex Prime is much like a scene in a movie, a novel, or a play: a unit of story in which characters interact with each other and the setting. Scenes are always framed by the GM, which means the GM describes where the scene takes place, which of the PCs are there, and what is going on.

Breaking a session into scenes allows the GM to skip past otherwise uninteresting periods of time or storyline and get right to a charged situation, a set of circumstances that might reveal interesting developments.

A scene ends when the primary objective or situation of the scene is resolved. There’s no need to wrap up the scene beyond its logical ending point or let conversations between the characters continue to ramble. The GM can just call “Scene!” and move on.

See *Scene* for more.

SETTING THE DIFFICULTY

Difficulty is a measure of how hard it is to succeed at something, typically represented by a pair of dice that make up the foundation of an opposition pool. The specific details depend on the situation.

See *Difficulty*, *Test*, and *Contest* for more.

Most difficulties are a variation of a test difficulty. For a test, the GM assembles an opposition pool and rolls it, setting the difficulty by adding together two dice from the roll and announcing the total.

That difficulty is the number the player needs to beat with their own total when they roll their dice for the test. If they beat it, the test is a success. If they didn’t beat it, the test is a failure. Beating a difficulty means rolling higher than the difficulty total. If the player’s total is the same as the difficulty’s total, they didn’t beat it, so this still counts as a failure.



GAME MODERATOR CHARACTER (GMC)



GMCs are the characters that the GM incorporates into the session and gets to roleplay, for better or worse. Most sessions have at least one major character, usually a bad guy or villain, who deserves a full-fledged character file like the PCs have. Sometimes, however, the villain just needs a couple of traits because the true opposition for the PCs is the villain's lieutenant or majordomo. In that case, they're the ones whose files are more detailed.

GMCs can reappear session after session, plaguing the PCs at every turn. Even if you used the villain's full stats in a previous session, you're under no obligation to re-use the same stats in another session. GMCs don't have to follow the same rules as the players when it comes to character files or even XP and growth (although it's often interesting if they do).

We split GMCs into a few specific types, listed here for easy reference.

- **Major GMCs:** Characters on par with the PCs, with about as much detail and the same traits
- **Minor GMCs:** Characters with fewer traits and less detail but still significant
- **Location GMCs:** Set pieces for scenes that may have their own traits
- **Extras:** Unnamed background characters or support characters with only one trait
- **Mobs:** Groups of extras that act together as a single character
- **Bosses:** Individual characters that act like a group of extras
- **Factions/Orgs:** Much larger mobs that operate at a higher scale than a standard mob
- **Catalyst:** A special type of major GMC that changes based on how the PCs interact with them

BOSS GMC

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

A boss is a type of GMC that might represent a powerful opponent like a huge rampaging monster, or it may be a foe who outclasses the PCs not only in traits, but in an abstract dramatic sense.

Rather than a full character file, a boss has multiple dice that make up a boss trait. They can also have distinctions, SFX, or anything else the GM wants to add in. The dice pool for a boss typically consists of large dice and/or many dice.

See *Boss* for more.

CATALYST GMC

First introduced in *Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game*

Catalysts are a mod of major GMCs. They are a character, similar in traits to the PCs, with a catalyst trait die that changes size based on interactions with the PCs. Games that use catalysts have at least one in every tale (or story), and most should have two or more.

See *Catalyst* for more.



EXTRA GMC

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

Extras are minor characters that make themselves useful to a character in some way. Unlike secondary characters, relationships with extras are pragmatic. They can be contacts that provide information or services, or just flunkies at a character's beck and call. Extras can include a group of people, such as a squad of soldiers, who mostly act as one character in the story.

See *Extra* for more.

FACTION & ORG GMC

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

A faction is a group of characters who follow the same ideology, goal, or purpose, even if they don't always work together. An org is a group of characters who all work together to do something, even if they don't all believe the same thing. So, they're really just two names for a large-scale group.

See *Factions & Orgs* for more.

LOCATION GMC

First introduced in *Cortex Prime Game Handbook*

Locations can have traits like minor GMCs when they might be used to oppose your PCs. These are like fixed assets or complications that help the GM describe where the action takes place. If a player can justify using a location-based trait in their own dice pools, they may do so.

See *Location* for more.

MAJOR GMC

First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*

A major GMC has the same traits as the PCs do. In a sense, they're a PC that the GM happens to make the decisions for. Make sure that major GMCs have enough traits on their files to stand up to the PCs. It's important that they always have at least two or three dice to roll to ensure that they're worthy antagonists.

Major GMC characters have three power levels in Cortex Prime: light, medium, and heavy. Light characters should be the majority, as the PCs should be able to maintain the spotlight in most scenes. Medium characters are more like the PCs themselves and should be used sparingly. Heavy characters should be extremely rare, representing unique threats and obstacles.

See *Major GMC* for more.

MINOR GMC

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

A minor GMC isn't a significant headliner in the session but will nevertheless interact with the PCs in some fashion. The powerful villain may be a minor GMC if your players are mostly interacting with her lieutenants.

Minor GMCs get at least three traits that can be anything. They're just dice with appropriate descriptive labels. You have a lot of flexibility with minor GMCs and it's usually quick to come up with them if needed. Minor GMCs always have a name, even if you come up with it on the spur of the moment. This helps separate them from the extras that populate the setting.

See *Minor GMC* for more.



MOB GMC

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

A mob is a group of extras that act together like a minor GMC. You can use them just like you'd use any single GMC, but they represent a whole bunch of thugs, mooks, pawns, or goons. You can also use this rule for swarms of things.

See *Mob* for more.

GANGING UP

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

GMCs, especially antagonistic ones, often gang up in large numbers.

Each additional opponent adds a single die to the opposition's dice pool equal to the highest trait they would contribute in the conflict. This doesn't change the number of dice added together to set or beat the difficulty (it's still two), just the number of dice rolled. This is sometimes formalized as a mob.

Every time a player beats the difficulty against a side that has multiple assisting characters, they compare their effect die to the supporting dice and knock away a single supporting die that's smaller than their effect die. This represents whittling away the opposition, one ugly mug at a time. If the effect die is equal to or smaller than all of the supporting dice, it's used as a complication.

If the player beats the difficulty by 5 or more with a heroic success, they can either step up their effect die to take out a single, larger supporting die or they can keep two effect dice to knock out two smaller supporting dice.

Once the GMCs are whittled down to only one remaining, no more dice are knocked off, and conflict resolution is treated as normal.



GEAR

Gear may encompass armor, weapons, handy tools, and more. In Cortex these can be represented using any number of traits or mechanics. However, gear can also be solely narrative; it's not always represented by traits. A piece of gear doesn't require a die rating associated with it to be a part of the story.

To include gear as part of your game or setting, explore these options:

- **Abilities:** Gear receives a die rating, effect tag, descriptor tag, SFX, and gear limit.
- **Distinction:** Gear is a part of a character's distinction.
- **Narrative:** Gear doesn't receive a die rating, SFX, or other mechanics, and is only used narratively.
- **Powers:** Gear receives a die rating. It may also receive SFX and a limit in some games.
- **Resources:** Gear are additional dice that are exhaustible and renewable.
- **Signature Assets:** Gear is an integral part of a character.
- **Vehicles:** Gear takes the form of vehicles, which have unique mechanics that impact the game.

GEAR AS ABILITIES

Any ability in the game can be replicated by a device. These nifty gadgets work like abilities, except all gear shares the same limit—it can be lost, broken, or stolen. This limit deprives the character of their gear and, without it, they don't have the ability at all (no die or SFX). And in the wrong hands, the character's own ability could potentially be used against them.

Gear is frequently custom-created for a character and doesn't need to map exactly to any single ability. Borrow SFX from abilities that match the gear's effect tag; weapons are an attack effect and something like a jetpack is a movement effect.

See *Abilities* for more.

DESIGNING YOUR OWN GEAR

You need an effect tag, a descriptor tag, and SFX for your abilities as gear. You may add more SFX through growth or advancement (in games using a growth mod). Instead of stepping up your die rating, you can add a new descriptor to a piece of gear, making it multipurpose and expanding the kinds of dice pools you could roll it in.

GEAR AS DISTINCTIONS

Gear may be part of one of a PC's distinctions. That distinction's die, and therefore the gear, can be included in a dice pool when appropriate.

See *Distinctions* for more.

GEAR AS NARRATIVE

Gear may simply be narrative—part of a character's physical description that's mentioned when describing how the character makes an attack, or interacts with the world around them. No die is added to a dice pool when narrative gear is used in this way, but both GMs and players can take inspiration from narrative gear for creating complications.

Narrative gear can also act as fictional permission to use some traits, such as a SHOOT skill that requires a gun or bow to use.

Players can spend a PP to turn a narrative piece of gear into an asset for the duration of a scene. See *Assets* for more.

GEAR AS POWERS

A power is a trait that represents super-human ability or some extraordinary quality that most normal humans or baseline characters don't have. Powers can also be used to represent gear or special equipment, making it possible to mix heroes of varying power origins together with the same system.

See *Powers* for more.



GEAR AS RESOURCES

One of the four types of resources is props, which can include gear. Gear that is exhaustible and renewable works well as a resource.

See *Resources* for more.

GEAR AS SIGNATURE ASSETS

Some characters have iconic weapons, tools, or pet robots that contribute to their dice pools in tests and contests. These are signature assets that the character doesn't have to create during play as they "belong" to the character and act much like any other trait.

See *Signature Assets* for more.

GEAR AS VEHICLES

In some settings, vehicles like spaceships, sailing ships, or RVs need more of a mechanical role than other trait sets can provide. If they're as important to the story as the characters are, then they deserve more attention.

See *Vehicles* for more.



GEAR MODS

By using mods with gear, you can change how they're used and implemented. Some mods make the rules simpler; others add complexity.

- Gear Range, aka weapon range
- Protective Gear, aka ablative armor

GEAR RANGE MOD

First introduced in *Cortex Prime Game Handbook*

If you want to represent the effect of various distances on ranged weapons (or any other gear with a range), determine if attacking the target with your chosen weapon would be within its standard range, if it'd be a stretch, or if it'd be almost impossible. Assign a difficulty die to the opposition pool of  8 if it's a stretch and a  12 if it's almost impossible. You can come up with individual range bands for various weapons if you like, but something simple like this works for most games.

PROTECTIVE GEAR MOD

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

Gear that represents armor or protection may prevent damage at the cost of being stepped down afterward. Compare your gear's die rating to the die rating of the trait the opposition used for the attack.

If your gear die rating is greater than their attack die rating, their effect die is ignored and you take no effect from the attack.

If your gear die rating is equal to or less than their attack die rating, their effect die is stepped down by one.

In either case, the die rating of your gear is stepped down by one.



First introduced in

Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game

A goal is a specific, measurable, and achievable activity or event that players want to pursue in play. This mod works with the values trait set, and the growth pool mod for growing characters.

If a goal can be broken down into several standalone achievements, it's possible they should be established as multiple goals.

Goals are important not just for helping you guide the story as a player, but because completing (or achieving) a goal contributes to your growth pool.

SETTING GOALS

Prior to the first session, and between each session, players can set new goals. At any time, a PC can have up to three goals.

Goals are rated from **6** to **12**, and they're linked to one of your values. To determine which value a goal is linked to, consider the overall theme or motivation behind the goal, and then choose the value that most strongly aligns with that. If the value has a trait statement attached to it, the goal does not need to align to the statement.

The goal's die rating should be based on how difficult the goal is to achieve. You can't assign the same die rating to more than one goal, and the value's die rating is the maximum die rating you can set your goal to. This means that for the things you're most driven by, small goals don't make as much of an impact as bigger ones.

- 6** Simple to achieve
- 8** Challenging to achieve
- 10** Hard to achieve
- 12** Very hard to achieve

ACHIEVING GOALS

Achieving a goal in play is entirely up to the flow of the story. Most goals require an amount of risk or effort to achieve, usually in the form of dice rolls. During a session, if you manage to do what you set out to do, mark your goal achieved and check it off. If you don't, save the goal for the next session.

At the end of the session, look at your character file for completed goals. For each you've completed, put a die into your growth pool equal to the size of the goal's die rating. Then, set a new goal to replace the completed one.

SURRENDERING GOALS

At any time, a player can surrender their goal to assist them in doing something in denial of, contrast with, or opposition to their goal. This allows them to put the goal die in their dice pool like an asset; it lasts until they use it in a test, contest, or challenge.

When a player surrenders their goal, they cross it off their character file; it won't contribute to growth or otherwise play a role in the game. If they do something that would have achieved the goal, it no longer matters.



GROWTH

While PCs start out as competent, experienced professionals, they can change and grow during play, with each job they take giving them more to grow on. The more adventures the group undertakes, the more benefits they can enjoy and the richer their backstory becomes.

All methods of growing characters are mods. You can play many games of Cortex Prime without growth of any sort outside of the kind that happens in the story or fiction. Many Cortex Prime characters are just fine as they are for several sessions, and if you're doing a one-shot or limited session story, you won't worry much about growth either. However, many players love to change things about their characters, so you should—as a group—decide how you want growth to work in your Cortex Prime game.

GROWTH MODS

By using mods with growth, you can change how it's used and implemented. Some mods make the rules simpler; others add complexity.

- Growth Pool
- Milestones
- Session Record

GROWTH POOL MOD

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

With this mod, PCs gain new traits, advance current traits, create assets, and more through a mechanism called the growth pool, which is a pool of dice you build up over the course of the game. This method uses the trait statements mod extensively but can be adapted in other ways depending on your game.

You can get dice for the growth pool in several ways:

- Questioning a trait statement
- Successfully recovering stress or complications with someone else's help
- Completing a goal

You can then use that growth pool to add new traits or improve existing ones at the end of the session, in a special kind of scene called a tag scene.

See *Growth Pool* for more.

MILESTONES MOD

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

Milestones are an alternative way to track progress and earn experience points (XP) that players then use to unlock character file upgrades, as well as story unlockables and other narrative benefits. With this mod, players hit milestones through the choices they make for their characters in play.

Milestones have three different levels:

- 1 XP:** can be hit as many times as it applies (or once per test or contest)
- 3 XP:** can only be hit once per scene
- 10 XP:** can only be hit once per session

Milestones can be individual, or shared by the group. If a 10 XP milestone is shared among the party, once this milestone is hit, it's unusable until the next session. If it's a personal milestone, it closes that milestone completely, and the player should choose a new one at the end of the session.

Milestones are usually hit by the players' tests or contests, with the GM verifying if there's any question whether one has been hit or not.

See *Milestones* for more.



SESSION RECORD MOD

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

With this mod, at the end of each session, the players make a note of the session's name on their character file. This is the PC's personal session record, and over time it provides an account of the group's accomplishments and checkered past.

Players can then use the session record to their benefit in play as a callback to do anything they would normally spend a **PP** to do, or they can spend sessions from their record in exchange for making permanent improvements to their character file.

See *Session Record* for more.

GROWTH POOL



First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

With this mod, PCs gain new traits, advance current traits, create assets, and more through a mechanism called the growth pool, which is a pool of dice you build up over the course of the game. This method uses the trait statements mod extensively but can be adapted in other ways depending on your game.

You can get dice for the growth pool in several ways:

- Questioning a trait statement
- Successfully recovering stress or complications with someone else's help
- Completing a goal

You can then use that growth pool to add new traits or improve existing ones at the end of the session, in a special kind of scene called a tag scene. Tag scenes shouldn't be very long—just enough narration for everyone to get an idea of how you want your PC to change. After that, you get to do two things: rewrite statements and step up traits.

GROWTH BY QUESTIONING TRAITS

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

When a PC questions a trait with a statement attached to it, they act contrary to the statement and triple the trait die for that roll. Once a trait statement is questioned, the player puts a die of that trait's size into their growth pool, and then steps down the attached trait by one.

See *Statements* for more.

REWRITING STATEMENTS

For every trait statement you've questioned in the session, you get to make a choice: did your PC change perspectives?

If so, you can rewrite your statement to reflect your new belief about the trait and put it back to its original die rating.

If not, you can keep the statement the same, but the trait it's attached to must stay at the reduced die rating. For values or other traits that share a fixed number of steps, pick another value or values to increase by that same amount, so your total number of die steps remains the same.

For relationships or other traits that aren't governed by a fixed number of steps, if you stay at the lowered die rating, add another die to your growth pool equal to the new die rating.

GROWTH BY RECOVERY

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

When an ally or a friend helps you recover a complication or stress, you can add a die to your growth pool equal to the size of the stress die recovered. Each complication or stress can only contribute one die to your growth pool per session. If you later take and recover that same type of stress, it isn't added to your growth pool unless it's a larger die, which replaces the smaller one. If your stress is stepped down or recovered without any assistance by spending time in a recovery scene or between sessions, it isn't added to growth.

See *Complication*, *Recovery*, and *Stress* for more.



GROWTH BY COMPLETING GOALS



First introduced in

Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game





Whenever your character achieves a goal during play, they can add their goal die rating to their growth pool.


See *Goals* for more.

STEPPING UP TRAITS WITH GROWTH

Once you've decided how you want your character to grow and adjusted your trait statements, you may select one trait to step up or pick a new one to add. New traits begin at  (unless otherwise specified), and you can't step a trait up higher than .

To raise the trait, you must succeed at a test. The GM sets the difficulty for you, using one die equal to the target die rating of the trait, and a second die based on the type of trait it is.

-  Attribute or affiliation
-  Distinction, role, or power
-  Skill, SFX, or value
-  Relationship, resource, or signature asset

You roll your growth pool plus the highest stress or complication you had during the session, even if it was recovered. Unlike other tests, you can't use  to affect the outcome of this one. You also ignore all hitches; you still can't use them, but the GM can't activate them, either.

If you win, you get to step up your trait or add a new one and the dice in the growth pool are spent.

If you lose or tie, you can do it anyway, but you have to step something else down to compensate; the dice in the growth pool stick around for next session.

PACED GROWTH POOL





First introduced in


Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game

In this mod of the growth pool, your growth pool dice are only rolled at the conclusion of every tale (or story), and not every session.

At the end of a session you still rewrite trait statements and set new goals. In addition, you can choose to spend any growth dice from your pool and turn them into a temporary relationship asset at the growth die's rating. Relationship assets can be kept until used in a subsequent session of play. Once used, you get to use it for a whole scene, in any tests, contests, or challenges, but at the end of the scene the relationship asset goes away. You may still care about the person or place, but you no longer have a specific asset to represent that in the game.

At the end of a tale (or story), the growth pool can be used to improve or step up your traits. Doing any of these things requires a test against a difficulty set by the GM based on the type of trait being changed, and the die rating you want the trait to become (or what it currently is, if you're not planning to step it up).

-  Attribute
-  Distinction
-  Specialty, SFX, swap distinction
-  Asset, swap locked SFX

You roll dice from your growth pool, choosing at least two to commit to the roll after seeing the difficulty. For this test, hitches can't be activated but still can't be used for your total. You don't need to choose an effect die for this test; it's a simple pass or fail, so use your two best results. You can't use  to affect the outcome of these tests.

If you succeed at a growth test, the improvement is made. The growth dice are spent and removed from your growth pool.

If you fail, you don't change or affect the trait, but you keep the growth dice and they roll over to the next story.



STRESS-ONLY GROWTH POOL

First introduced in *TRACE 2.0* (CPGH)

In games that use stress, but that don't use any traits with statements or goals, the growth pool can be adjusted.

The growth pool starts with a base of **6 6**. Then, for each stress type (five is the default), a growth die is added equal to the highest level of stress from that session. This growth pool can only have up to five dice. If a character took more than three types of stress, they can replace the base dice.

During tag scenes, players may play out their character's examination of their struggle and pain from the session, perhaps in connection with significant events or actions that took place. Then, they decide what traits they want to add, replace, or step up.

Roll the growth pool as a test versus a difficulty set by the GM based on a set difficulty:

- **12 12** Affiliation, step one up and one down
- **10 10** Rewrite a distinction, step up a role, add a talent
- **8 8** Replace an existing talent or add a die to an existing resource
- **6 6** Step up a resource die rating or add a new **6 6** resource

Dice used to attempt growth are spent and go away after the session ends. Dice may be banked between sessions. The maximum size of the growth pool is capped at five, even with banked dice. If more than five dice are generated by the end of the session, keep only the five largest dice for the growth pool.

Unlike other tests, you can't use **PP** to affect the outcome of this one. Ignore all hitches. If you win, you get to step up your trait or add a new one. In this version of the growth pool, failure doesn't allow you to modify the trait, but you may bank a **6** growth die for next time for each failed growth test.



HANDOFF INITIATIVE

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

Handoff initiative, sometimes referred to as elective order, allows every character in a scene to have an opportunity to act in a more formal structure.

One character—usually determined by the GM, but sometimes just the character who makes the first major decision in a scene—goes first, doing one test, contest, or other interaction that takes about one beat to accomplish. Play then progresses around the table, with the player who just completed their beat choosing the next character to act (either a PC or a GMC). Once everyone in the scene has had a chance to do something, the last one to go chooses the character to begin the next round, which could include nominating themselves.

Initiative concludes when the scene does, or earlier if the GM decides that the scene has changed in such a way that the turn order no longer serves the story—usually though, this means the scene has transitioned enough that it ended, and it's best to move on.

Handoff initiative is used as a part of the action order and challenge mods, but can also be used on its own.

See *Narrative Order* for alternative methods of adjudicating the order that things happen in the story.

HANDOFF INITIATIVE MODS

By using mods with handoff initiative, you can change how it's used and implemented. Some mods make the rules simpler; others add complexity.

- Action Order
- Challenge

ACTION ORDER MOD

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

An action order can be used when the order in which things happen in a scene matters. When using an action order to track conflict, tests and contests are temporarily replaced with actions and reactions.

See *Action Order* for more.

CHALLENGE MOD

First introduced in
Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game

In this mod of crisis pools, the GM presents a single pool of dice as a challenge pool. Challenges take place over several rounds. Each PC gets to take a turn within a round to attempt a test to lessen or resolve the challenge. Each round represents some passage of time. The challenge gets to act on its own turn and can either get worse or create problems for the PCs in response.

See *Challenge* for more.



HELPING OTHERS

A group of PCs working together in a single scene may want to help one another. Outside of a player having their character take their own actions and make decisions in a scene to progress the action and story, these game mechanics let you offer more direct assistance.

- SFX
- Assets
- Ganging Up
- Moral Support

HELPING WITH SFX

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

A wide variety of SFX (special effects) allow characters to help one another, usually by creating assets, or by helping them to recover complications or stress.

See *Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game* (Appendix) for examples of SFX in this style, and see *SFX* for more on special effects.

HELPING WITH ASSETS

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

At any time, players can spend a **PP** to share an asset they have with every character in the scene, or to create a relevant **6** asset for themselves or another PC for the duration of the scene.

Alternatively, on their turn a PC can attempt a test to create a new asset, which they can give to another PC if they succeed.

See *Assets* for more.

HELPING WITH GANGING UP

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

Just like a group of GMCs, PCs can choose to gang up in support of one of their team members. To do this, they hand over a single die of the appropriate trait to the character leading the charge, who adds them to their dice pool to roll. This doesn't change the number of dice added together to set or beat the difficulty (it's still two), just the number of dice rolled.

This comes with a risk. If the opponent beats the leading PC, they can compare their effect die to one of the supporting PC dice, possibly causing the helping PC to be taken out as if they had lost the fight. As usual, a PC can spend a **PP** to take a complication to avoid being taken out, but even if they do, they can't continue to gang up with the leading PC.

TEAM UP

First introduced in *Hammerheads* (CPGH)

In this mod of relationships and ganging up, each agent PC has an established relationship trait with each other agent that defines how they see or associate with the other agents and the nature of the backstory they share. Each relationship has a die rating. Relationships aren't necessarily reciprocal; your relationship die rating with another agent might be a different size than theirs for your agent. If there's any disagreement about the backstory, the players should settle that before the game starts.

Use your relationship dice when your agent is helping another agent perform a test. *Hand over your relationship die with that agent to that agent's player for their dice pool.* When assisting another agent, it's always your relationship die with them that's added to their pool, not their relationship die with you.

Each agent PC can only assist one other PC each round, but assisting another PC does not use up their turn in the action order.



MORAL SUPPORT

First introduced in

Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game

This mod for helping others uses the values trait set. On another player's turn in a challenge, or when they're in a contest, you can step down one of your value die ratings by one in order to step up that same value in their own dice pool for that roll. Your value remains stepped down until the end of the session.

HELPING DURING A TIMED TEST

If a PC is running dangerously low on time during a timed test, the rest of the group might be able to help them out. They can make a test of their own—causing a diversion, trying to delay the bad guys with conversation, eliminating some security guards—and with a success, they give the player back one of the beats they've lost. If they get a heroic success, it's two beats. Failure means that PC can't help any more for the rest of the timed test.

No matter what, only one attempt at buying time can happen in between each beat of the timed test.

See *Test* for more.



HEROIC SUCCESS

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*
(as “Extraordinary Success”)

When you roll a truly spectacular total, you can achieve a heroic success.

In a test if you beat the difficulty by 5 or more on a roll, you’ve got a heroic success. You not only get what you want, your roll produces unexpected beneficial results.

In a contest, if your opponent loses by 5 or more, you’ve got a heroic success and are the clear victor.

As with any success, the GM should ask you to describe your amazing efforts, but the effect die is also stepped up by one for every 5 points you beat the difficulty by.

In the event that your effect die is a **12** and you gain a heroic success, or you get multiple heroic successes that would step up your effect die past a **12**, follow the usual rules for stepping up a die rating after **12**.

You can:

- Include a second unused die from your roll as a second effect die to create another asset or different type of complication starting at **6**
- Add a second effect die at a **6** if you have none leftover
- Take your opponent out instantly

Some SFX might specify a heroic success as the activating element. Often, these sorts of SFX create additional assets or complications beyond the one that may have been created from the test or contest, or they change the story in some interesting way by introducing a specific flavor to the outcome.

HERO DICE

First introduced in *Dragon Brigade Roleplaying Game*

Using this mod, the primary benefit of a heroic success is the creation of hero dice. On a heroic success, you may bank a die equal to the highest rolling die in the opposing dice pool. These banked dice are called hero dice, and players may save as many of them as they like.

In games that use this mod, there’s a space on the character file to indicate how many hero dice you’ve earned and what size they are.

The GM might rule that players can only bank one hero die of any given size. In such a game, the character file has spaces to mark off each of the five die sizes (**4** through **12**). You may opt to step down a hero die you earn from a heroic success to the next lowest available die on your sheet if you already banked a hero die of that size.

Using this mod does not negate the standard function of a heroic success, which is to step up an effect die. In other words, a heroic success not only earns the player a hero die, it steps up their effect die as well.

To use a hero die, you spend a **PP** and roll the die, adding it to your total in any test or contest. You may do this at any time after rolling the dice to get a total, even if you rolled first and the opposition has already rolled their own dice. It must be done before the outcome of the roll is decided. You might be so successful that you get another heroic success and earn another hero die. Whatever happens, erase the hero die you used from your character file.

Hero dice can backfire. If the die comes up 1—a hitch—the GM may introduce a complication as if you had rolled a 1 on any other die. However, instead of accepting a **PP** from the GM, you may choose to take back your hero die and not add it to your total. You still lose the **PP** you spent to activate it.

Hero dice require **PP** to activate them because adding dice after you roll your test or contest is a powerful advantage. This is one of the few cases in Cortex Prime where you have the ability to roll more dice to add to your total after you’ve rolled your dice pool.

Hero dice don’t stick around after they’re used for a roll. During a contest, if your opponent beats your total even after you added a hero die to it, you can’t use the same hero die on your next roll.


RESOURCES VS HERO DICE



Resources and hero dice are both expendable. Resource dice are more helpful than hero dice because they don’t require **PP** to activate them, but the downside is that they can only be used in specific circumstances, represented by that resource’s tag. Hero dice can be used on any test or contest, regardless of the nature of that test or contest.



HERO DICE AS EFFECT DICE

First introduced in *Cortex Prime Game Handbook*



With this mod, hero dice may be spent to substitute for low effect dice from dice rolls. Used this way, you spend a  and use the hero die as the effect die instead of one of the dice from the roll. A heroic success does not step up this new effect die. That only applies to effect dice sourced from the die roll itself.


If you've got some kind of effect active that lets you keep more effect dice from your roll, such as an SFX, you can spend  to switch out any or all of those effect dice with hero dice; it just costs a  for each switch, and you must have enough hero dice banked to do it.

HERO DICE AS PLOT POINTS

First introduced in *Firefly Role-Playing Game*

With this mod, hero dice are not added as an additional value to your total and there's no additional cost to use hero dice if the player chooses to include them in their dice pool before they roll; they simply erase the die from their character file and add it into their dice pool like any other trait die. It's simply another die in your pool that might end up contributing to your total.

The hero die may also be spent in place of a  in any situation where a  is applicable, and you don't have any. This also means spending it, so it's erased from your character file.

Some SFX may specify the use of hero dice instead of , usually when the SFX is particularly strong. The size of the hero die doesn't matter unless specified.



First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

A hitch occurs when a 1 is rolled on a die. Hitches don't count toward the total at all and can't be used as an effect die. It's called a hitch because it's a little obstacle that could lead to an inconvenience—a complication—without ensuring failure. The GM has the option to activate hitches to do things on their side of the table.

The GM might also roll hitches—called opportunities—which the players can activate.

CREATING COMPLICATIONS

When a player rolls a hitch, the GM can hand over a **PP** to create a complication. Complications start at **6**, and additional hitches in the same roll step up the complication without the GM giving the player more **PP**. The GM may choose to create multiple complications if there is more than one hitch, but each new complication requires handing over a **PP**. If the player rolls a botch, the GM creates a **6** complication without giving the player a **PP**, and steps it up for each hitch past the first.

BOTCH

First introduced in *Firefly Role-Playing Game*

When all of the dice roll 1s, that's a botch. A critical failure. The total is zero. The GM can introduce a **6** complication without paying a **PP** and step it up as many times as there are hitches past the first.

OPPORTUNITY

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

If the GM rolls a 1 on their dice, it's called an opportunity instead of a hitch.

The different terms are used because some game effects, such as SFX, may activate based on one or the other.

When an opportunity is rolled, the player can spend a **PP to do one of the following:**

- Step an existing complication down to a smaller size die
- Step up an asset—with a maximum of **12**—for the rest of the scene (including a signature asset). This is sometimes called spotlighting the asset.

Multiple opportunities let a player step their complication or asset up or down once for each opportunity the GM rolled at the cost of only a single **PP**. If the player wants to target multiple complications or assets, they'll need to spend an additional **PP** for each.

If the GM rolls an opportunity and the player doesn't spend a **PP** to activate it, these are considered unclaimed. These results of 1 are still problems, because they don't add into any totals, can't be used for effect dice, and otherwise are just wasted. If there's another player involved in the scene, the GM might offer them the choice of claiming the opportunity. If this happens, that player spends the **PP** to activate it for the same benefit.

PRIME OPPORTUNITY MOD

First introduced in *Cortex Codex*

In this mod for botches, a botch rolled by the GM when setting the difficulty for a test, action (when using action-based resolution), or challenge becomes even more valuable to players.

A GM's botch is an automatic success for the PC, who doesn't need to roll their dice pool.

The PC can choose one of the following results, which doesn't cost them any **PP:**

- Their action is an automatic heroic success. The player chooses an effect die from their unrolled dice pool
- They step down one complication (or stress)
- They step up one asset for the rest of the scene



INITIATIVE



First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*

This mod calls back to roleplaying games where the order in which characters act is determined by a die roll or some other mechanic at the beginning of the fight. The order proceeds from the highest rolling total to the lowest, and then either starts over again at the top of the next sequence and repeats, or there's another die roll to establish the order again.

There are several ways to determine who takes initiative using this mod. They include:

- Each side in a conflict chooses a leader, who assembles a dice pool appropriate to the situation (usually one that includes traits reflecting tactical or strategic know-how) and rolls. The side with the highest total chooses one of its group to go first, then the next highest rolling side chooses one of theirs, and so on.
- Everyone in the conflict rolls dice for themselves, and characters make tests or contests in order from highest rolling total to lowest.
- Each character has a fixed initiative rating based on the highest possible total of two traits (such as **PHYSICAL + MENTAL**) and everyone acts in order of that rating.
- Each character has a fixed initiative rating but rolls a die such as a **6**, or perhaps a **8** if they can justify a distinction that's appropriate, or a **4** if they can justify using the Hinder SFX of a distinction. Add the die to an initiative rating derived from two traits and then act in that order. Any hitches rolled do not add to the initiative rating, as usual, and can be activated by the GM once initiative order is settled.

See *Narrative Order* for alternative methods of adjudicating the order that things happen in the story.





LAST-DITCH EFFORT


CONFLICT MOD

First introduced in

Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game


When your character is taken out of a scene through complications or stress, you are unable to continue to act in the scene. With this mod, you may be able to temporarily recover enough to do what is called a last-ditch effort.

This must be prompted by somebody trying to rouse you, which is treated like a recovery test against a  difficulty plus your  complication or stress. This does not recover you, however. If the ally succeeds in rousing you, they give you their effect die as an asset to use in your last-ditch effort. If they fail, there's no rousing you until the scene is over.

In a last-ditch effort, you can do a short or immediate activity—anything you can accomplish over the course of a standard test. You roll the test as normal, but only keep one die for your total. You can spend one or more  to include more dice in your total. Once you succeed in your last-ditch effort, you return to being taken out.

You cannot use, change, or recover the complication or stress that took you out using a last-ditch effort.

ROUSING YOURSELF

You can attempt to rouse yourself for a last-ditch effort, making the recovery test for yourself. You cannot add any dice to your total—your total starts at zero. You may then spend one or more  to add results to try to beat the difficulty. Otherwise, the rules are the same as if someone else has roused you.



LIFE POINTS

First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*

Instead of using complications or stress to reflect harm to characters, some Cortex Prime games might choose to use a system of life points instead. Life points are a classic option that eliminates the hindering aspect of taking damage and instead uses damage as a pacing mechanism for conflict.

All characters have a number of life points based on two of their traits. The die rating of those traits is added together to get the baseline life point score. Which traits are added together depends on the game and which traits are being used. Depending on your prime sets, determine life points using two traits that emphasize hardiness, willpower, or stamina.

Life points can be handled in one of two ways. The first is an ablative method; the second is a threshold method. In either method, rather than adding the effect die as a complication (or stepping up an existing complication) as a result of conflict, the GM or player takes the difference between what the player needed to roll to beat the difficulty and what the player actually rolled and applies that as damage.

Some games may have the damaging character roll an additional die from a signature asset, or gear, or some kind of power, and add that to the damage.

ABLATIVE

First introduced in *Cortex Prime Game Handbook*

With this method, the damage taken from attacks is subtracted from the player's life point score. If the PC's life points drop to 0 or a negative amount, they are taken out of the scene and are clinging to life. Without some first aid or intervention, the player must spend a **PP** to keep their character alive. Any additional damage taken by the PC forces the same **PP** spend until the total negative amount of damage is equal to the original life point score. If this happens, the PC is dead.

THRESHOLD

First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*

With this method, damage is split evenly into wounds and stun, before any additional damage from weapons (see Gear), signature assets, or powers is rolled; that additional damage is applied either to stun only, wounds only, or evenly split between both. Wounds and stun are marked off on two separate tracks that start at zero and go as high as the life point score. If the accumulated wounds and stun, added together, exceed the life point score, the PC is unconscious. This includes having no wounds and stun that exceeds the life point score all by itself. If the total wounds (not counting stun) exceed the life point score, the PC is dead.

RECOVERING LIFE POINTS

Characters who have taken damage and need to either recover lost life points (ablative method) or get rid of accumulated damage (threshold method) must make recovery tests. The difficulty is typically the standard difficulty dice of **6 6** plus any relevant complications or other traits that might make it difficult. The amount that the player beats the difficulty by is the number of life points recovered (ablative) or is divided equally into recovered wounds and recovered stun.

PCs using the threshold method can recover all stun damage at the end of any scene, assuming they have an opportunity to rest, heal, or seek treatment; proper medical treatment during downtime can eliminate wounds with tests beyond the PC's own recovery tests.



First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

A limit is an SFX mod that introduces vulnerabilities in exchange for **PP**. Most limits use a shutdown cost with the benefit of earning a **PP**.

With a shutdown cost, there's always a specific situation in which the character can restore the shutdown trait, even if it's just "restore the trait at the beginning of the next scene" or something along those lines.

The GM can activate limits in some circumstances by spending a **PP** from their personal bank (or a doom pool die, if that mod is used). If the GM chooses to do this, they should first offer the player the option to activate it themselves, in order to gain the **PP** benefit. If the player decides not to, the option then goes to the GM, and the **PP** the GM spends goes to the pile, not to the player.

See *SFX* for more.

LIMITS FOR ABILITIES

An ability's limit is the opposite of a descriptor tag in that it establishes the details of how and why an ability stops working or specifies something about how the ability can be disruptive to the story.

A limit can also be expressed as an SFX for earning **PP**.

See *Abilities* for more.

LIMITS FOR GEAR

All gear shares the same limit—it can be lost, broken, or stolen. This limit deprives you of your gear and, without it, you don't have access to the trait's die or SFX. And in the wrong hands, your own gear could potentially be used against you. There is usually a way to restore your gear, such as spending a **PP**, making a test, or starting a new session.

See *Gear* for more.

LIMITS FOR POWER SETS

Power set limits represent vulnerabilities that let players acquire **PP** in keeping with their character's specific powers. Each limit includes a description of how to restore a power that's shut down by a limit.

See *Powers* for more.



LOCATION

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*




A location is where a scene takes place, but it can be a character in its own right: having traits, taking actions, or even being a resource on a character file.

LOCATIONS AS CHARACTERS

Locations can have traits like minor GMCs when they might be used to oppose your PCs. These are like fixed assets or complications that help the GM describe where the action takes place.

If a player can justify using a location-based trait in their own dice pools, they can do so.

CREATING A LOCATION

Locations, like minor GMCs, get at least three traits that can be anything— they don't have to be attributes, skills, or distinctions, etc. They're just dice with appropriate descriptive labels, like HIGH GROUND , DARK AND STORMY , RUNAWAY TRAIN .

The traits should provide details about the location and some ideas of which rolls have a higher influence over the narrative. You have a lot of flexibility with location GMCs and it's usually quick to come up with them if needed.

LOCATION GMCS IN THE ACTION ORDER

When using an action order, a location that's behaving like a GMC should have its own turn, especially if it's using its traits to make attacks on the PCs. Otherwise, assign the location to a major GMC or any character that's in control of it, and have it help that character instead of taking its own turn.

LOCATIONS AS RESOURCES

One of the four types of resources are locations. When PCs can use a location as a service that is exhaustible and renewable, it can make an excellent resource.

Resources are usually represented by two or more dice of the same size, which may be used to aid a test or contest where that resource is helpful or significant. Players choose how many resource dice to roll—after they're rolled, those dice are considered spent and can be recovered later during downtime.

See *Resources* for more.



MAJOR GMC

First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*

A major GMC is an important character on the same footing as the PCs, who often has the same traits as the PCs do. In a sense, they're a PC that the GM happens to make the decisions for. Make sure that major GMCs have enough traits on their files to stand up to the PCs. It's important that they always have at least two or three dice to roll to ensure that they're worthy antagonists.

MAKING A MAJOR GMC



Major GMCs have three power levels in Cortex Prime: light, medium, and heavy.

Light characters should be the majority, as the PCs should be able to maintain the spotlight in most scenes.

Medium characters are more like the PCs themselves and should be used sparingly.

Heavy characters should be extremely rare, representing unique threats and obstacles.

To keep major GMCs consistent from session to session, consider using the following guidelines when creating them:


- **Light:** Prime set die ratings are on average a step behind the PCs, so if the PCs have a  in their attributes, affiliations, or values, the GMC has a . The GMC has fewer total steps (or points) in traits like skills or signature assets, usually by about half.
- **Medium:** Prime set die ratings, skills, signature assets, and other traits all function at the same average rating and number of steps or points as the PCs.
- **Heavy:** Prime set die ratings are on average the same as the PCs, but at least one if not more of them is a step ahead of the PCs. Add half again as many skills, signature asset points, and other traits.

USING A MAJOR GMC

With their own version of a character file, major GMCs have the potential to interact with the game in a similar way to a PC, but they won't often be attempting tests or initiating contests, which is the realm of the PCs.

Instead, GMCs will:

- Engage in contests a PC initiates
- Contribute a trait die to the difficulty of a test
- Take an action or reaction (when using action-based resolution)

A major GMC can be overcome in the same way a PC can be: by beating them in a high stakes contest, or by stepping up one of their complications above .

Major GMCs often have minor GMCs or extras that help them out as allies against a group of PCs. This is called ganging up.

GANGING UP

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

GMCs, especially antagonistic ones, often gang up in large numbers.

Each additional opponent adds a single die to the opposition's dice pool equal to the highest trait they would contribute in the conflict. This doesn't change the number of dice added together to set or beat the difficulty (it's still two), just the number of dice rolled. This is sometimes formalized as a mob.

Every time a player beats the difficulty against a side that has multiple assisting characters, they compare their effect die to the supporting dice and knock away a single supporting die that's smaller than their effect die. This represents whittling away the opposition, one ugly mug at a time.

If the player beats the difficulty by 5 or more with a heroic success, they can either step up their effect die to take out a single, larger supporting die or they can keep two effect dice to knock out two smaller supporting dice.

Once the GMCs are whittled down to only one remaining, no more dice are knocked off, and conflict resolution is treated as normal.



MILESTONES



First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

Milestones are an alternative way to track progress and earn experience points (XP) that players then use to unlock character upgrades, as well as story unlockables and other narrative benefits. With this mod, players hit milestones through the choices they make for their characters in play.

Characters have two milestones. Often, one is shared by the entire group, while the other is chosen personally. The personal milestone might be built into your archetype, suggested with a distinction, or be developed for your specific character.

Milestones have three different levels:

- 1 XP:** can be hit as many times as it applies (or once per test or contest)
- 3 XP:** can only be hit once per scene
- 10 XP:** can only be hit once per session

If a 10 XP milestone is shared among the party, once this milestone is hit, it's unusable until the next session. If it's a personal milestone, it closes that milestone completely, and the player should choose a new one at the end of the session.

Milestones are usually hit by the players' tests or contests, with the GM verifying if there's any question whether one has been hit or not.

SESSION MILESTONES

GMs can offer milestones at the start of a session or reveal them after major turning points in the session's ongoing narrative. Session milestones tie the PCs directly into the story, giving them personal motivations (and XP!) for becoming involved.





As you have two milestones, you can replace your current personal milestone with the session milestone, or if the GM allows, replace the group milestone until the session milestone is completed.

UNLOCKABLES




XP earned from achieving milestones may be spent between scenes to increase a PC's traits or to unlock other benefits. You may spend as much XP as you've earned to unlock multiple upgrades at once.

The standard menu of unlockables for milestones covers usual traits, but can be customized to fit each game. The GM may create unique unlockables outside of character file improvements that provide greater access to story elements such as important GMCs, previously unavailable locations, or property. Sometimes an unlockable represents a one-shot benefit that's significant enough to warrant earning XP towards it; other times it becomes a permanent option in your repertoire.






5 XP

- Train a new specialty at 
- Unlock an SFX
- Add a new signature asset at 
- Upgrade an existing trait from  to 




10 XP

- Add a new signature asset at 
- Add a new locked SFX to a distinction or signature asset.
- Upgrade an existing trait from  to 

15 XP

- Upgrade an existing specialty  to 
- Add a new signature asset at 
- Upgrade an existing trait from  to 

20 XP

- Upgrade an existing specialty  to 
- Add a new signature asset at 




MINOR GMC

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

A minor GMC isn't a significant headliner in the session but will nevertheless interact with the PCs in some fashion. The powerful villain may be a minor GMC if your players are mostly interacting with her lieutenants.

MAKING A MINOR GMC

Minor GMCs get at least three traits that can be anything—they don't have to be attributes, skills, or distinctions, etc. They're just dice with appropriate descriptive labels, like **CORRUPT LAWMAN** , **OUT OF SHAPE** , **BIG SHOTGUN** .

You can also start with a light major GMC and scale them back a lot—give them the same prime sets as the PCs, but not a lot else other than one or two key traits. The traits should provide details about the GMC and some ideas of which rolls use a higher level of skill, so don't use a character's name as a trait (such as **SHERLOCK HOLMES** ). You have a lot of flexibility with minor GMCs and it's usually quick to come up with them if needed.

Minor GMCs always have a name, even if you come up with it on the spur of the moment. This helps separate them from the extras that populate the setting.

USING A MINOR GMC

Minor GMCs can be used like an asset or complication, depending on whether they're helpful or a hindrance to the PCs. If a minor GMC helps a PC with a test, for example, the GMC may add their most appropriate trait die to the PC's dice pool. Alternatively, the GM can add the minor GMC's trait die to a test's difficulty pool if they're making things harder for the PC.

If PCs are opposing a minor GMC, they can take them out of a scene by beating them in a high stakes contest, or by giving or stepping up a complication on the GMC higher than their highest trait rating.

Minor GMCs might also be working with a major GMC that opposes the PCs. This is called ganging up.

GANGING UP

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

GMCs, especially antagonistic ones, often gang up in large numbers.

Each additional opponent adds a single die to the opposition's dice pool equal to the highest trait they would contribute in the conflict. This doesn't change the number of dice added together to set or beat the difficulty (it's still two), just the number of dice rolled. This is sometimes formalized as a mob.

Every time a player beats the difficulty against a side that has multiple assisting characters, they compare their effect die to the supporting dice and knock away a single supporting die that's smaller than their effect die. This represents whittling away the opposition, one ugly mug at a time. If the effect die is equal to or smaller than all of the supporting dice, it's used as a complication.

If the player beats the difficulty by 5 or more with a heroic success, they can either step up their effect die to take out a single, larger supporting die or they can keep two effect dice to knock out two smaller supporting dice.

Once the GMCs are whittled down to only one remaining, no more dice are knocked off, and conflict resolution is treated as normal.



First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

A mob is a group of extras that act together like a minor GMC. You can use them just like you'd use any single GMC, but they represent a whole bunch of thugs, mooks, pawns, or goons. You can also use this rule for swarms of things.

For variations on this approach, see *Crisis Pool* and *Factions & Orgs*.

CREATING A MOB

Mobs have a single mob trait with multiple dice representing the size of the mob. All of these trait dice are included in the mob's dice pool. The size of the dice depends on the relative skill or experience of the mob's members.

In addition to the mob trait, you can assign traits to a mob that all of the members possess and include the traits in the mob's dice pool when appropriate.

OPPOSING A MOB

Mobs act as a single unit but can be reduced in size and power by targeting their mob trait dice. Each time the outcome of a PC's roll would create or step up a complication or stress that exceeds the mob trait die rating, one die is knocked off, and the complication or stress is removed. This represents one or more members of the mob being taken out. When all of the mob trait's dice are removed, the whole mob is taken out.



MODS

A mod (short for module) changes the expressions of other rules. You choose which mods to include to give your game the feel and tone you want. Individual mods are listed under the traits or rules that they modify.

ABILITIES (TRAIT)

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

Abilities are a trait set mod of powers that create a cinematic, prime time drama approach to superpowers and SFX. Abilities are intended to make superpowers or alien qualities a more narrative-shaping element rather than a simple dice pool builder.

See *Abilities* for more.

ACTION ORDER (CONFLICT)

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

An action order can be used when the order in which things happen in a scene matters. This is especially true of fight scenes or moments when there's chaos and confusion and it becomes important to know who goes first and when.

See *Action Order* for more.

ACTION-BASED RESOLUTION (CONFLICT)

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

This mod replaces tests and contests, replacing them with actions and reactions. All conflicts in games using action-based resolution utilize the action order mod.

See *Action Order* for more.

ADD ALL THE DICE (CORE)

First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*

All the dice rolled in the dice pool are added together for the total, then compared to the opposition total (which likewise is every die added together).

See *Dice* for more.

CATALYST (GMC)

First introduced in

Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game

Catalysts are a mod of major GMCs. They are a character, similar in traits to the PCs, with a catalyst trait die that changes size based on interactions with the PCs. Games that use catalysts have at least one in every tale (or story), and most should have two or more.

See *Catalyst* for more.

CHALLENGE (CONFLICT)

First introduced in

Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game

In this mod of crisis pools, the GM presents a single pool of dice as a challenge pool. Challenges take place over several rounds.

Each PC gets to take a turn within a round to attempt a test to lessen or resolve the challenge. Each round represents some passage of time. The challenge gets to act on its own turn and can either get worse or create problems for the PCs in response.

See *Challenge* for more.



CONSEQUENTIAL FAILURE (CONFLICT)

First introduced in

Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game

With this mod, the opposition's effect die in a test becomes more important. If you fail a test, the GM might give you a stress die equal to the opposition pool's effect die. If you succeed, the opposition's effect die doesn't matter.

See *Test* for more.

CRISIS POOL (CONFLICT)

First introduced in *Hammerheads* (CPGH)


With this mod based on the doom pool mod, pools of dice represent multiple localized problems. Each of these smaller problems gets its own pool of dice and spends dice from it just like a doom pool would, but only for things that the problem might be able to influence. Crisis pools can be directly affected by the actions of PCs.

See *Crisis Pool* for more.

DOOM POOL (CONFLICT)

First introduced in

Smallville Roleplaying Game (as "Trouble")
Marvel Heroic Roleplaying (as "Doom Pool")

The doom pool is a mod that serves as a combination of ambient threat level, GM resource, and pacing mechanic. The doom pool is sometimes called the trouble pool, the danger pool, or some other thematic title. The doom pool replaces difficulty dice for all tests, and the dice in the pool replace  for the GM.

See *Doom Pool* for more.

DRAMATIC ORDER (CONFLICT)



First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

If the primary focus of your session is intense conflict between characters, or it plays out over longer periods of time between scenes, dramatic order is your default. It focuses on stringing a number of contests together, one after the other.

See *Dramatic Order* for more.

GEAR RANGE (TRAIT)

First introduced in *Cortex Prime Game Handbook*

If you want to represent the effect of various distances on ranged weapons (or any other gear with a range), determine if attacking the target with your chosen weapon would be within its standard range, if it'd be a stretch, or if it'd be almost impossible. Assign a difficulty die to the opposition pool of  if it's a stretch and a  if it's almost impossible. You can come up with individual range bands for various weapons if you like, but something simple like this works for most games.

See *Gear* for more.

GOALS (GROWTH)

First introduced in

Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game

A goal is a specific, measurable, and achievable activity or event that players want to pursue in play. This mod works with the values trait set, and the growth pool mod for growing characters.

See *Goals* for more.



GROWTH POOL (GROWTH)

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

With this mod, PCs gain new traits, advance current traits, create assets, and more through a mechanism called the growth pool, which is a pool of dice you build up over the course of the game.

See *Growth Pool* for more.

HANDOFF INITIATIVE (CONFLICT)


First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

Handoff initiative, sometimes referred to as elective order, allows every character in a scene to have an opportunity to act in a more formal structure. One character goes first, doing one test, contest, or other interaction that takes about one beat to accomplish. Play then progresses around the table, with the player who just completed their beat choosing the next character to act. Once everyone in the scene has had a chance to do something, the last one to go chooses the character to begin the next round.

See *Handoff Initiative* for more.

HERO DICE (CORE)


First introduced in *Dragon Brigade Roleplaying Game*

Using this mod, the primary benefit of a heroic success is the creation of hero dice. On a heroic success, you may bank a die equal to the highest rolling die in the opposing dice pool. Hero dice can be used by spending a  to roll them and add them to a player's already determined total.

See *Heroic Success* for more.

HERO DICE AS EFFECT DICE (CORE)

First introduced in *Cortex Prime Game Handbook*



With this mod, hero dice may be spent to substitute for low effect dice from dice rolls. Used this way, you spend a  and use the hero die as the effect die instead of one of the dice from the roll. A heroic success does not step up this new effect die. That only applies to effect dice sourced from the die roll itself.

See *Heroic Success* for more.

HERO DICE AS PLOT POINTS (CORE)

First introduced in *Firefly Role-Playing Game*

With this mod, hero dice are not added as an additional value to your total and there's no additional cost to use hero dice if the player chooses to include them in their dice pool before they roll; they simply erase the die from their character file and add it into their dice pool like any other trait die. It's simply another die in your pool that might end up contributing to your total.

The hero die may also be spent in place of a  in any situation where a  is applicable, and you don't have any. This also means spending it, so it's erased from your character file.

See *Heroic Success* for more.

HIGHLIGHTING OTHER TRAITS (TRAIT)

First introduced in *Firefly Role-Playing Game*

With this mod, you can have each distinction include two highlight traits, which are traits from a specific trait set (like skills or powers) that the distinction is most usefully linked to. If you use highlight traits, choosing the distinction means those traits get stepped up by one during character creation.

See *Archetype* and *Distinctions* for more.



INITIATIVE (CONFLICT)

First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*

This mod calls back to roleplaying games where the order in which characters act is determined by a die roll or some other mechanic at the beginning of the fight. The order proceeds from the highest rolling total to the lowest, and then either starts over again at the top of the next sequence and repeats, or there's another die roll to establish the order again.

See *Initiative* for more.

LAST-DITCH EFFORT (CONFLICT)

First introduced in

Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game

When your character is taken out of a scene through complications or stress, you are unable to continue to act in the scene. With this mod, you may be able to temporarily recover enough to do what is called a last-ditch effort.

See *Last-Ditch Effort* for more.

LEADER-SET ACTION ORDER (CONFLICT)

First introduced in *Hammerheads* (CPGH)

This mod combines crisis pools with the action order mod. One PC is assigned as the team leader. The players can nominate who this is, or the GM might select the assignment based on the mission or some other criteria. The team leader determines the order in which all of the PCs and the crisis pools act. Unlike the standard action order, this is pre-set at the beginning of each round; each team member takes their turn, the GM makes a turn for each crisis pool, and the round ends.

See *Action Order* for more.

LIFE POINTS (CONFLICT)

First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*

Instead of using complications or stress to reflect harm to characters, some Cortex Prime games might choose to use a system of life points instead. Life points are a classic option that eliminates the hindering aspect of taking damage and instead uses damage as a pacing mechanism for conflict.

See *Life Points* for more.

LIMIT (TRAIT)

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

A limit is an SFX mod that introduces vulnerabilities in exchange for **PP**. Most limits use a shutdown cost with the benefit of earning a **PP**.

See *SFX* for more.

LIMITED DOOM POOL MOD

First introduced in

Cortex Prime Game Handbook

In this mod, the difficulty is determined as usual for a test, based on the situation's overall difficulty and by any GMC traits that factor into it. Doom dice are then spent out of the doom pool to add dice to the difficulty or to include more dice in the total after the dice are rolled, as per the standard doom pool rules. Doom dice continue to replace **PP** for the GM.

See *Difficulty* for more.



MILESTONES (GROWTH)

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

Milestones are an alternative way to track progress and earn experience points (XP) that players then use to unlock character upgrades, as well as story unlockables and other narrative benefits. With this mod, players hit milestones through the choices they make for their characters in play.

See *Milestones* for more.

MORAL SUPPORT (TRAIT)

First introduced in



Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game

This mod for helping others uses the values trait set. On another player's turn in a challenge, or when they're in a contest, you can step down one of your value die ratings by one in order to step up that same value in their own dice pool for that roll. Your value remains stepped down until the end of the session.

See *Helping Others* for more.

MULTI-LEVEL SCALE (CONFLICT)


First introduced in *Cortex Prime Game Handbook*

Using this mod, a scale die may be any size from  to , each step representing an increasingly larger target.

See *Scale* for more.

MULTI-LEVEL SPECIALTIES (TRAIT)





First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

With this mod, though specialties start at  as normal, they can be increased to multiple dice or even larger dice either during character creation or through growth.

See *Specialties* for more.

NO BANK (CORE)

First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*

With this mod, the GM doesn't have a private supply of . When the players spend , they go into the big pile in the middle of the table, in front of the GM. When the GM spends  in a roll against a player, they slide a  from the pile to that player.

See *Plot Points* for more.

NO EFFECT DICE (CORE)

First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*






In this mod, effect dice are dropped entirely, and all tests and contests have simple success and failure outcomes. The degree of success or the measure of the outcome remains story-driven and descriptive, rather than being represented by a die rating.

See *Effect Die* for more.



NO SKILLS, JUST SPECIALTIES (TRAIT)

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

A Cortex Prime game that doesn't use skills as a trait set may choose to use specialties as a trait on their own. With this mod, specialties are usually rated from  to , rather than being set at . Some games may start specialties at  instead, but they don't use a  rating. See *Specialties* for more.

PACED GROWTH POOL (GROWTH)

First introduced in
Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game

Using this mod of the growth pool, players can choose to spend any growth dice from their collected growth pool and turn them into a temporary relationship asset at the growth die's rating. Relationship assets can be kept until used in a subsequent session of play. Once used, you get to use it for a whole scene, in any tests, contests, or challenges, but at the end of the scene the relationship asset goes away. You may still care about the person or place, but you no longer have a specific asset to represent that in the game.

See *Growth Pool* for more.

POWER SETS (TRAIT)

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*


A power set is a mod that adds thematic strength to a collection of power traits. Power sets usually come with a limit that governs them, one or more helpful SFX, and a single origin or source that explains why your character has these powers. Each power set counts as a trait set of its own.

See *Powers* for more.

PRIME OPPORTUNITY (CORE)

First introduced in *Cortex Codex*

In this mod for botches, a botch rolled by the GM when setting the difficulty for a test, action (when using action-based resolution), or challenge becomes even more valuable to players.

A GM's botch is an automatic success for the PC, who doesn't need to roll their dice pool. The PC can choose one of the following results, which doesn't cost them any :

- Their action is an automatic heroic success. The player chooses an effect die from their unrolled dice pool
- They step down one complication (or stress)
- They step up one asset for the rest of the scene

See *Hitch* for more.

PROTECTIVE GEAR (TRAIT)

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

Gear that represents armor or protection may prevent damage at the cost of being stepped down afterward. Compare your gear's die rating to the die rating of the trait the opposition used for the attack.

If your gear die rating is greater than their attack die rating, their effect die is ignored and you take no effect from the attack.

If your gear die rating is equal to or less than their attack die rating, their effect die is stepped down by one.

In either case, the die rating of your gear is stepped down by one.

See *Gear* for more.



PUSHING STRESS (CONFLICT)

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

With this mod, players may choose to have their character shoulder through their pain and suffering and use it as a motivator rather than a setback. To do this, you spend a **PP** and instead of adding the stress to the opposing dice pool, you add it to your own dice pool for that test or contest. After the test or contest is resolved, the stress die included in your dice pool is stepped up by one.

See *Stress* for more.

RATING DISTINCTIONS (TRAIT)

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

By default, distinctions are always rated at **8**, but you might decide to apply this mod and have distinctions rated from **4** to **12** like other traits. If so, the average of the dice should still be **8**.

See *Distinctions* for more.

REPUTATION (TRAIT)

First introduced in *Firefly Role-Playing Game*

A reputation is a relationship trait mod that may be used alongside relationships or in place of them. Reputations work like relationships do, except they represent a character's standing with a group, organization, company, or culture. PCs might start with a cap on their reputation die ratings because of inexperience or lack of fame or popularity, and steadily increase their reputations as play continues.

See *Relationships* for more.

REROLL FOR EFFECT (CORE)

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

This mod doesn't use the original die roll to generate the effect die; instead the player or GM rerolls their dice pool and takes the highest rolling die as the effect die.

See *Effect Die* for more.

RESOURCE POOLS (TRAIT)

First introduced in *Hammerheads* (CPGH)

In this mod, each vehicle has multiple pools of dice that function as prop resources. One player is assigned the role of tracking resources in each mission.

Before each mission, this player, with the advice of the group as a whole, decides how many dice the pools contain for that mission. This decision can't be changed after the mission starts, but the team is given the briefing before any dice need to be assigned.

See *Resources* for more.

RESOURCE TAGS (TRAIT)

First introduced in *TRACE 2.0* (CPGH)

When using this mod for resources, each resource introduced has specific tags indicating which roles (or other trait, if using a different trait set) it may be used to assist with. The resource's die rating determines the number of role tags that can be attached to it.

See *Resources* for more.



ROLES (TRAIT)

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

Roles are a skill-like trait that replaces skills in some expressions of Cortex Prime. A role acts like a skill group or skill set, rather than a specific skill, and reflects a PC's experience, training, or proficiency in a broad thematic area.

See *Roles* for more.

SCALE (CONFLICT)

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

A conflict might take place between two groups of radically different sizes, scale, or degrees of power. As GM, you may adjudicate a simple scale advantage as being outright impossible (human being tries to punch a spaceship) or with a scale die.

See *Scale* for more.

SESSION RECORD (GROWTH)

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

With this mod, at the end of each session, the players make a note of the session's name on their character file. This is the PC's personal session record, and over time it provides an account of the group's accomplishments and checkered past. Players can then use the session record to their benefit in play as a callback to do anything they would normally spend a PP to do, or they can spend sessions from their record in exchange for making permanent improvements to their character file.

See *Session Records* for more.

SHAKEN & STRICKEN (CONFLICT)

First introduced in *Dragon Brigade Roleplaying Game*

This mod applies stress directly to specific traits, such as attributes or skills, as opposed to giving stress its own trait. If the stress applied to a trait is greater than the trait it's assigned to, the PC is considered shaken. While a PC is shaken, they can only keep one die for their total instead of two.

If they're already shaken and take stress to another trait that would make them shaken, they're considered stricken and are taken out of the scene until they can recover. A character also becomes stricken if any of their stress is stepped up beyond 12.

See *Stress* for more.

SKILL AND SPECIALTY SPLIT (TRAIT)

First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*

With this mod, characters have general skills at a rating of 4 (Untrained) or 6 (Competent), but to have higher ratings they *must* specialize. Ratings of 8 (Expert), 10 (Master), and 12 (Grandmaster) are only available for specialties of that skill, and a character may have multiple specialties at different die ratings.

See *Specialties* for more.

SKILL PYRAMID (TRAIT)

First introduced in *Cortex Prime Game Handbook*

Using this mod, if you want a 10 rating in a skill, you need at least two 8 rated skills and three 6 rated skills. If you want a 12, you need at least two at 10, three at 8, and four at 6, and so on. As skills have a baseline of 4, there's no required number of 4 rated skills in the pyramid.

See *Skills* for more.



SPECIALTIES (TRAIT)

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

A specialty is a narrow area of concentration or focus. Specialties can be used in many different ways, both in conjunction with skills and separately.

See *Specialties* for more.

STARTING PLOT POINTS (CORE)

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

The rule of a single **PP** per character is a reasonable default in all cases, but you can mix it up. You might have players start with more than one **PP** as a default, or you might say that every session, all players get a **PP** on top of any remaining from the last session.

Alternatively, you may decide that at the beginning of each session, all players roll dice to determine how many **PP** they start with. For instance, every player could roll **4** and get as many **PP** as the result of that die.

For a more predictable spread of **PP** around your table, have each player pick up all of the dice in one of their prime sets, such as attributes, relationships, or roles. They roll this dice pool, add two dice together for a total, and compare totals with the other players. The player with the highest total gets three **PP**, the one with the lowest gets a single **PP**, and the rest get two.

The more **PP** a player starts out with, the more likely they are to spend them at the beginning of a session, rather than at the end or at a climactic point. This isn't a good or bad thing, but it's useful to keep in mind.

See *Plot Points* for more.

STATEMENTS (TRAIT)

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

A statement is a sentence or phrase that clarifies or refines the trait that it's attached to. One or more trait sets may be assigned trait statements. They're especially useful when assigned to values, relationships, or attributes.

See *Statements* for more.

STATEMENTS AS DISTINCTION ALTERNATIVES (TRAIT)

First introduced in *Cortex Prime Game Handbook*

A trait statement is a sentence or phrase that usually clarifies or refines the trait it's attached to. As a mod, you could have a Cortex Prime game where trait statements replace distinctions entirely.

See *Statements* for more.

STATIC DIFFICULTY (CONFLICT)

First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*

With this mod, players only roll against opposition dice pools in a contest, not a test. When a player rolls in a test, the difficulty is a static target number.

See *Difficulty* for more.



STRESS (CONFLICT)

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

With this mod, instead of using complications to track injury, damage, or other negative personal effects on characters, you implement a distinct trait called stress.

Characters can still choose to inflict complications on their opponents; these are created in the same manner as stress, but represent such things as deliberately hindering an opponent, creating distractions, and so on.

See *Stress* for more.

STRESS-ONLY GROWTH POOL (GROWTH)

First introduced in *TRACE 2.0* (CPGH)

In games that use stress, but that don't use any traits with statements or goals, the growth pool can be adjusted. With this mod, the growth pool gets a minimum base set of dice, and every type of stress gained in a session contributes to a growth pool of up to five dice.

See *Growth Pool* for more.

TEAM UP (TRAIT)

First introduced in *Hammerheads* (CPGH)

In this mod of relationships and ganging up, you use your relationship dice when your agent is helping another agent perform a test. Hand over your relationship die with that agent to that agent's player for their dice pool. When assisting another agent, it's always your relationship die with them that's added to their pool, not their relationship die with you.

See *Helping Others* for more.

TRAINING PACKAGES (TRAIT)

First introduced in *Hammerheads* (CPGH)

A reskin of roles, training packages aim to be more of a collection of similar skills than an indicator of a character's position or identity. Training packages are useful when you want to heavily theme your setting's expected areas of expertise.

See *Roles* for more.

TRAUMA (CONFLICT)

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

Trauma is like long-term stress. Using this mod, any time a PC's stress is stepped up past **12**, they're stressed out of the scene, and they gain **6** trauma of the same type of stress that just increased. Trauma functions just like stress but is much harder to recover. During any scene in which a character is stressed out and has taken trauma, additional stress to the character goes directly to trauma.

See *Stress* for more.

URGENT ASSETS (CORE)

First introduced in
Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game

When using this mod, assets created by spending **PP** or that are created as the result of a test last only for a single test, contest, or challenge. You can still spend a **PP** to have that asset persist for the rest of the session.

See *Assets* for more.



VICE (TRAIT)

First introduced in *TRACE 2.0* (CPGH)

In games where the PCs have roles, vice traits can replace role traits for minor and major GMCs. Vice traits give GMCs acting in opposition to PCs a negative role built to fit the game setting.

See *Roles* for more.

NARRATIVE ORDER

Narrative order refers to the standard method the GM uses to pace sessions and scenes when running a game. Using narrative order, tests, contests, and all choices players want their PCs to make, happen in the order that make the most narrative sense.

Narrative order can be used for an entire Cortex series. Alternatively, it can be used in conjunction with, or replaced altogether by, these mods for determining turn order:

- Action Order
- Dramatic Order
- Handoff Initiative
- Initiative
- Leader-Set Action Order

ACTION ORDER MOD

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

An action order can be used when the order in which things happen in a scene matters. When using an action order to track conflict, tests and contests are temporarily replaced with actions and reactions.

See *Action Order* for more.

LEADER-SET ACTION ORDER MOD

First introduced in *Hammerheads* (CPGH)

This mod combines crisis pools with the action order mod. One PC is assigned as the team leader. The players can nominate who this is, or the GM might select the assignment based on the mission or some other criteria. The team leader determines the order in which all of the PCs and the crisis pools act. Unlike the standard action order, this is pre-set at the beginning of each round; each team member takes their turn, the GM makes a turn for each crisis pool, and the round ends.

See *Action Order* for more.

DRAMATIC ORDER MOD

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

If the primary focus of your session is intense conflict between characters, or it plays out over longer periods of time between scenes, dramatic order is your default. It focuses on stringing a number of contests together, one after the other.

See *Dramatic Order* for more.

HANDOFF INITIATIVE MOD

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

Handoff initiative, sometimes referred to as elective order, allows every character in a scene to have an opportunity to act in a more formal structure. One character goes first, doing one test, contest, or other interaction that takes about one beat to accomplish. Play then progresses around the table, with the player who just completed their beat choosing the next character to act. Once everyone in the scene has had a chance to do something, the last one to go chooses the character to begin the next round.

See *Handoff Initiative* for more.

INITIATIVE MOD

First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*

This mod calls back to roleplaying games where the order in which characters act is determined by a die roll or some other mechanic at the beginning of the fight. The order proceeds from the highest rolling total to the lowest, and then either starts over again at the top of the next sequence and repeats, or there's another die roll to establish the order again.

See *Initiative* for more.



PATHWAYS

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

Pathways is an interactive and collaborative setting and character creation process. It creates a kind of map that shows the connections between characters, places, events, and objects and helps provide the basis of a Cortex Prime series. Pathways are best used for long-term series of Cortex play.






In pathways, the group uses the first session as a designated pathways session, during which they create a pathways map by collaborating on various elements of the game world and making choices for their own character.

Each stage in the pathways process can be used to assign some of the points or steps that create a character beyond their starting die ratings. The game—or the GM, if the group is using pathways to craft their own game—should list the trait sets that will be used and provide guidance on how these points and steps will be allocated.

GETTING STARTED

Pathways requires the group to have some idea of what the game will be about, and each player should have at least a basic character concept. This shared understanding is important to ensure that the elements the players pick work with the intended setting and tone. In creating the pathways map, players have a lot of freedom to create or introduce characters, organizations, and situations, so it's important to be on the same page about what's suitable for the game.

The pathways map is built using the following shapes, referred to as elements:

-  Rectangle (player character)
-  Line (connection)
-  Circle (GMC)
-  Triangle (situation)
-  Diamond (resource)

If you meet in person you'll need a large piece of paper (or some other surface you can write on), and if you meet online you'll need a shared drawing tool.

As your group progresses through pathways, you'll all add these elements to create a story map.

To start, each player adds their PC as a rectangle to the pathways map and connects them to one another with a line. This is the first step to creating your story map.

MORE ON ELEMENTS

The pathways map consists of several different kinds of elements. These can be relationships, characters, assets, situations, etc. By themselves, elements don't concern characters' actual traits on their character files, though they can imply a lot; in story terms, these can help reinforce a character's traits.

Connections (represented by lines) are the links between things, and thus they're represented by lines between different elements. Each connection should get a description written along the length of the line. These descriptions don't need to be detailed, but they do need to explain what joins the two elements together. A connection might imply the existence of a relationship trait, if your game uses those.

Secondary characters (represented by circles) are the people and other actors that take part in the story. These will become important GMCs and can range from valued friends to desperate enemies.

A situation (represented by a triangle) is an event or potential event that's important to the character(s) in some way, whether it's a past event that shapes them, something currently ongoing, or a possible future problem.

A resource (represented by a diamond) is something in the world connected to the character. Resources connected to your character aren't necessarily ones they can use (such as a resources trait or signature asset)—resources cover many things that could be adversarial, advantageous, or simply desirable to a character. There are four different kinds of resources: extras, organizations, props, and locations.



MAPPING TIPS

The story map you create in pathways can very quickly get complicated and confusing. Here are a couple of tips:

- If you have a small number of player characters, placing the rectangles representing them towards the outside edges of the map can make things a little easier.
- If need be, you can put “warp zones” on the map. Put an A (or other symbol) in a circle in two places to indicate a jump, and then move on to B (or another sequential symbol) and so on as needed.

CREATING THE PATHWAY

During pathways, players go through a series of stages that represent different periods in the characters’ lives. Different characters’ stages don’t necessarily correlate in time; rather, the stages might represent the thrust of each character’s formative experiences and connections. So a 200-year-old elf and a 2-week-old robot could still go through the same number of stages. On the other hand, if your game is based around several

pivotal events, you could deliberately make each stage correspond to a particular time period.

The number of stages the group goes through determines the complexity of the resulting pathways map and how long it takes to create. Each stage has a set number of choices available which are typically presented in a pathways table that depicts a list of the stages and their type, as well as the choices available at each stage.

The following is a standard, blank template for a six-stage pathway. A filled in example can be referenced in the *Cortex Prime Game Handbook* (page 76).

When a choice is made in one stage, the choice in the following stage must be directly below the choice you made in the current stage, or the choice to the left or right of that one. Choosing B during Stage 1 in the table below would give a player the option of A, B, or C in Stage 2.

Along with introducing a new element at each stage and building the map, the decisions a player makes should influence which trait they gain or step up. The available traits depend on the trait sets chosen for the setting or defined by the GM.

There are three types of stages—standard, major, and meta—that each work a little differently in terms of what kinds of elements players get to add to the pathways map and what traits they add to their character files.

| STAGE | TYPE | TITLE | OPTION A | OPTION B | OPTION C | OPTION D | OPTION E |
|-------|----------|-------|----------|----------|----------|----------|----------|
| 1 | MAJOR | | | | | | |
| 2 | STANDARD | | | | | | |
| 3 | META | | | | | | |
| 4 | STANDARD | | | | | | |
| 5 | MAJOR | | | | | | |
| 6 | STANDARD | | | | | | |
| 7 | META | | | | | | |
| 8 | STANDARD | | | | | | |
| 9 | MAJOR | | | | | | |



STANDARD STAGE

During a standard stage, each player gets to connect their character to an element. You can draw a connection from your character to an existing element, or you can add a new supporting character, resource, or situation to the map and draw a connection from it to your character.

Based on the element you added, gain a trait such as a resource, signature asset, skill, or specialty, depending on the traits used in the game. You can add a new one at **6** or step up an existing one by one step.

MAJOR STAGE

A major stage represents a major turning point in the characters' lives. Roughly one out of every 3 stages should be a major stage.

During a major stage, each player adds two new elements instead of one, drawing connections to them. In addition to gaining or stepping up a trait as in a standard stage, also define and add a **8** distinction to your character file.

META STAGE

In a meta stage, the players get to play with other aspects of the pathways map. One out of every 4 or 5 stages should be a meta stage.

In addition to adding one new element like in a standard stage, each player gets to do one of the following:

- Draw a connection between any two non-PC elements and define a relationship between them.
- Destroy a connection between their PC and a given element and add a new element and connection. (This implies that something happened to sever one connection and foster another.)
- Introduce an element for another PC. The other player defines the nature of their character's connection with that element however.

In addition to gaining or stepping up a trait as in a standard stage, also define and add a **8** distinction and, if one of these traits is being used, add a power set, ability, or talent. If you add a power set, you can now add powers on future standard or major stages.

TAKING TURNS

It isn't absolutely necessary to have the players take turns adding elements to the map, but it does make things less confusing. For each element added or changed in a stage (major and meta stages have two each), go around the table letting each player add an element.

The GM does not need to take a turn. Chances are the map is more than sufficiently large and convoluted at the end of pathways with just the players adding to it. But if as the GM you want to have some creative input into the whole thing, you can fill in your ideas on each stage as per a player, adding new elements that relate to the PCs and GMCs. Since you don't have your own character, you can add elements connected to whatever you like.

USING THE FINISHED MAP

As the GM, you'll take the completed map to create a story based on the collaboration of your players. The pathways map will provide you with plenty of ideas, but it still takes a little thought to fully flesh out the story.

TRIANGULAR RELATIONSHIPS

One key thing to look for on the pathways map is places where multiple characters have conflicting connections with a given element. The classic love triangle is an obvious example, but anything where connections are at odds is a potential place to make things more interesting. Look for places where three elements all have connections with one another.

As the GM, your job is to drive the conflicts in the game. Use the pathways map and look for places to drive wedges, to threaten and mess with existing relationships. If there's a triangular connection, look for something to exacerbate it. Even if a connection is non-triangular, you can find interesting ways to mess it up.



IMPLIED ELEMENTS

The pathways map covers most of the major elements that go into the game, but it can't be truly comprehensive. An organization has leaders and members, characters have other characters around them, locations have any number of people associated with them, and so on. While the map is a very useful tool, it shouldn't limit what you bring into the game.

LATE ADDITIONS

When a new player, or new PC for a returning player, joins the story after the game is underway, they can also create a character using pathways. The simplest way for a player with a new character to be introduced to the game is to just run through the same stages as for the original PCs. That gives them plenty of opportunities to give their character connections to existing elements, as well as to add some new ones.

It's up to you whether you want the new PC to start off with connections to all the other PCs. Sometimes this makes perfect sense, and other times it's tricky to pull off, so you may want to have a new character start without connections to other PCs until the player draws them in (though in that case you may want to give them a couple extra element choices).



PLAYER

Each of the people playing the game, specifically the people who are not the game moderator (GM). Each player takes on the role of one player character, or PC.

See *Player Character (PC)* for more.

Players are responsible for:

- Deciding what their PCs do.
- Confronting any problems that the GM throws in front of them.
- Pointing their PCs in directions that make for good stories.
- Supporting other PCs and giving them a shot at what they're good at.
- Deciding how their PCs change and grow over time.
- In general, telling the story of their PCs.

Additionally, each player is responsible for helping ensure that the gaming experience is enjoyable for everyone. Consent should always be part of a group's conversation about social standards at the table. See *Consent* for more.

PLAYING A CHARACTER

As a player, your interaction with the rules of a Cortex game setting comes down to playing the game, which you do through your player character, or PC. As you make decisions for your character and help to tell the story at the table, you'll refer to your PC's character file to decide what traits and other game statistics or facts about them would come into play.

A character file is the central record of essential game details for a character. All players maintain their own character file and the GM maintains (often abbreviated) files for important GMCs. Character files change throughout the game, so it's important to be able to take notes on them. See *Player Character (PC)* and *Character File* for more.

Using that character file and the traits listed on it, you'll gather dice together to form dice pools when you try to accomplish something where the outcome is uncertain or would be interesting to roll for. See *Dice* and *Dice Pool* for more.

PLAYER PLOT POINTS

Plot points (PP) are a way for players to affect the plot beyond the roll of the dice. Plot points can be spent to give players more dice, make the dice they have more powerful, or activate certain traits or special effects (SFX) on a character file. You need a way to keep track of PP. You can write them as tally marks on your character file, file or use poker chips or some other kind of token.


Every player starts a game session with at least one PP. Unspent PP are carried over from session to session, but it's best to spend PP when the opportunity arises—it's not hard to get more during play.

The following are the standard ways to earn and spend PP as a player, which may differ depending on the game and setting.

Earning PP:

- Roll a hitch (a 1) that the GM activates
- Give in during a contest
- Activate an SFX like *Hinder*
- Engage in remarkable moments of roleplaying

Spending PP:

- Activate SFX
- Add two dice from a trait set instead of one
- Activate an opportunity (a 1) that the GM rolls
- Avoid being taken out
- Create a  asset for the scene, or to keep an asset for the rest of the session
- Include an additional result in your total
- Interfere in a contest
- Keep an extra effect die
- Share an asset with everyone in a scene



PLAYER CHARACTER (PC)

A character played by one of the players; one of the stars of the show.

PLAYER CHARACTER FILE

A character file is the central record of essential game details for a character. All players maintain their own character file and the GM maintains (often abbreviated) files for important GMCs. Character files change throughout the game, so it's important to be able to take notes on them.

A character file needs to include space for all of the information players need to record and maintain, such as the different trait sets and their ratings, plus maybe stress, session records, hero dice, signature assets, and other important game statistics. There's no fixed character file for *Cortex Prime* because there's no fixed array of trait sets—every *Cortex* game is potentially different in that way.

Any officially published setting primed by *Cortex* includes a blank character file designed specifically for the traits and mods used in the setting, but sheets of paper, online documents, or sticky notes are other ways to collect your character's details.

For examples of *Cortex Prime* character files, see the *Cortex Prime Game Handbook* and *Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game*.

In *Tales of Xadia*, character files are called character journals.

HELPING OTHER PCS

A group of PCs working together in a single scene may want to help one another. Outside of a player having their character take their own actions and make decisions in a scene to progress the action and story, these game mechanics let you offer more direct assistance.

- Activating SFX
- Creating or sharing an asset
- Ganging up
- Moral support

See *Helping Others* for more.

CREATING PCS

To create a player character in *Cortex Prime*, GMs or groups building a game have three options.

Once a game setting is built, one or more of these may be presented to players:

- Archetype: Use an archetype to quickly create an original character
- Scratch Built: Build a PC from scratch using the rules provided
- Pathways: Use pathways to collaborate on settings and characters with your group

GMs or groups might also opt for some sort of hybrid of the three options. You could have every player pick two backgrounds (archetypes of a sort), apply the ratings and traits from those, then “level up” each character through a short three-step pathways process to generate some backstory, then add a handful of steps (the scratch built method). It's up to each group.

Plan to devote most, if not all, of the first game session to creating characters and, in some cases, the setting the characters exist in. If you're using pathways, that's a big chunk of the process.



ARCHETYPE CHARACTER CREATION

First introduced in *Firefly Role-Playing Game*

This method of character creation uses archetypes, which are partially created character files that enable players to create their PCs quickly.

A typical archetype has:

- Background information about the archetype
- Suggestions for how to play the archetype
- Three pre-assigned distinctions with SFX
- Pre-assigned attributes or other traits
- A choice of two signature assets or other traits

See *Archetype* for more.

PATHWAYS CHARACTER CREATION

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

This method of character creation also includes setting creation. The group dedicates a session to creating a pathways map, adding elements to the story setting and developing their PCs with each element they add. This method is best for long-form Cortex series.

See *Pathways* for more.

SCRATCH BUILT CHARACTER CREATION

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

This method of character creation has players create their PCs using a set number of steps, points or guidelines for their traits.

See *Scratch Built Characters* for more.

GROWING PCS

While PCs start out as competent, experienced professionals, they can change and grow during play, with each job they take giving them more to grow on. The more adventures the group undertakes, the more benefits they can enjoy and the richer their backstory becomes.

All methods of growing characters are mods. You can play many games of Cortex Prime without growth of any sort outside of the kind that happens in the story or fiction. Many Cortex Prime characters are just fine as they are for several sessions, and if you're doing a one-shot or limited session story, you won't worry much about growth either. However, many players love to change things about their characters, so you should—as a group—decide how you want growth to work in your Cortex Prime game.

- Growth Pool
- Milestones
- Session Record

PC GROWTH POOL MOD

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

With this mod, PCs gain new traits, advance current traits, create assets, and more through a mechanism called the growth pool, which is a pool of dice you build up over the course of the game. This method uses the trait statements mod extensively but can be adapted in other ways depending on your game.

See *Growth Pool* for more.

PC MILESTONES MOD

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

Milestones are an alternate way to track progress and earn experience points (XP) that players then use to unlock character upgrades, as well as story unlockables and other narrative benefits. With this mod, players hit milestones through the choices they make for their characters in play.

See *Milestones* for more.



PC SESSION RECORD MOD

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

With this mod, at the end of each session, the players make a note of the session's name on their character file. This is the PC's personal session record, and over time it provides an account of the group's accomplishments and checkered past. They can later spend sessions from their record in exchange for making permanent improvements to their character file.

See *Session Record* for more.



PLOT POINTS

First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*

Cortex Prime games run on a narrative currency called plot points (PP) that influence the plot. They're the fuel for the system's engine. The cycle of earning, spending, and then earning more plot points is something that you must maintain when deciding what mods to use.

So long as there are various ways to earn PP, spend PP, and explain what it means to do this within the context of the story, you're set. If you rely too heavily on PP being generated by utterly random occurrences (such as rolling hitches), players may feel that their PC's progress is arbitrary and out of their control. Always include some way the player can make a risky or challenging choice and gain PP in the process. Don't leave this to the GM to manage—it should be in the hands of the players.

PLAYER PLOT POINTS

Plot points (PP) are a way for players to affect the plot beyond the roll of the dice. Plot points can be spent to give players more dice, make the dice they have more powerful, or activate certain traits or special effects (SFX) on a character file. You need a way to keep track of PP. You can write them as tally marks on your character file or use poker chips or some other kind of token.

Every player starts a game session with at least one PP. Unspent PP are carried over from session to session, but it's best to spend PP when the opportunity arises—it's not hard to get more during play.

The following are the standard ways to earn and spend PP as a player, which may differ depending on the game and setting.

Earning PP:

- Roll a hitch (a 1) that the GM activates
- Give in during a contest
- Activate an SFX like *Hinder*
- Engage in remarkable moments of roleplaying

Spending PP:

- Activate SFX
- Add two dice from a trait set instead of one

- Activate an opportunity (a 1) that the GM rolls
- Avoid being taken out
- Create a 6 asset for the scene, or to keep an asset for the rest of the session
- Include an additional result in your total
- Interfere in a contest
- Keep an extra effect die
- Share an asset with everyone in a scene

GM PLOT POINTS

Unless mods are applied, the GM has two pools of PP: the bank and the pile.

THE BANK

At the start of each session, the GM gets a PP per player in the game added to the bank, which they can spend on GMCs and influencing the story. The same bank of PP is shared by all of the GMCs in play; they don't each keep track of their own plot points. When the GM spends these PP, they go to the pile instead of to the player who was affected by the roll, just as if a PC had spent the PP on the roll. The GM can add more PP to the bank by activating GMC SFX, including using distinctions as a 4 instead of a 8.

These PP can be spent to:

- Include more results in a total
- Activate SFX
- Avoid a GMC being taken out

In general, the GM should strive to spend these PP when it makes the story more interesting, and not to target their players.

THE PILE

In addition to the limited pool of points set aside in the bank, the GM has an unlimited number of PP to give to the players when appropriate. The GM uses this pool to purchase complications when the players roll hitches or to hand over PP to the players when an SFX calls for it.

It's called the pile because if you're using physical tokens to keep track of them, it's best to just make a big pile of those tokens in the middle of the table. Most of the time, when players or the GM spend PP, they return to this pile.






PLOT POINT MODS




These rules alter the way the plot point flow works in the game, including how they're spent and tracked by players and GMs.




- Starting Plot Points
- No Bank


STARTING PLOT POINTS

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

The rule of a single  per character is a reasonable default in all cases, but you can mix it up. You might have players start with more than one  as a default, or you might say that every session, all players get a  on top of any remaining from the last session.





Alternatively, you may decide that at the beginning of each session, all players roll dice to determine how many  they start with. For instance, every player could roll  and get as many  as the result of that die.




For a more predictable spread of  around your table, have each player pick up all of the dice in one of their prime sets, such as attributes, relationships, or roles. They roll this dice pool, add two dice together for a total, and compare totals with the other players. The player with the highest total gets three , the one with the lowest gets a single , and the rest get two.




The more  a player starts out with, the more likely they are to spend them at the beginning of a session, rather than at the end or at a climactic point. This isn't a good or bad thing, but it's useful to keep in mind.

NO BANK

First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*

With this mod, the GM doesn't have a private supply of . When the players spend , they go into the big pile in the middle of the table, in front of the GM. When the GM spends  in a roll against a player, they slide a  from the pile to that player.

Players can't use  they just earned when the GMCs spent the  to improve their current rolls or activate SFX, so they should keep those  separate until the end of the current roll.

Using this mod, a major GMC can't earn a  when a distinction is used as a , so the GM can bank a  for that character and drop it into a future action as needed. There's no limit to how many of these dice a major GMC can save up, but regardless of how many are used on a roll, the GM may still only use two dice for a total.



POWERS

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

A power is a special kind of trait that represents superhuman ability or some extraordinary quality that most normal humans or baseline characters don't have. The origin or source of powers varies from setting to setting—radiation, genetic mutation, sorcery, high-tech gadgets, etc. Powers can also be used to represent gear or special equipment, making it possible to mix heroes of varying power origins together with the same system.

USING POWERS

Powers are central to superhero games but are also appropriate for fantasy games or science fiction games with aliens. They are incredibly flexible and—paired with SFX and limits—they can represent almost any super-powered character.

RATING POWERS

Powers are rated on a short scale from minor to godlike. Power ratings are rungs of broad ability and scope, as well as significance.

The fine grains are seen in choice of SFX and in all of the other traits the superhero possesses, from their distinctions to their skills, relationships, or values.

A power has a die rating range between **6** and **12**; the rating usually defines how far-reaching, extensive, or significant the power is. If you don't have a power, you don't have a default die rating in it.

6 Minor (or Influence): A power with this rating allows the character to do something most people can't do, but it doesn't have much effect on ordinary tests and contests nor is it likely to be a character's signature power. Powers that permit levitation, additional senses, or low-level enhancements are often rated **6**.

8 Enhanced (or Control): A power with this rating represents a level of performance beyond ordinary human beings, and one that the character likely uses most of the time. Flight at subsonic speeds, strength or stamina at the absolute peak of human capability, control over an element or energy type in a local area, or attacks that are the equivalent of automatic weapons are rated **8**.

10 Superhuman (or Mastery): A power with this rating is rare and reflects someone with extensive training or use in their power, an individual who stands out among others with this power, or performance at a truly superhuman level.

12 Godlike (or Supremacy): Very few have a power at this rating, as it represents a level of control beyond superhuman or at the very peak of potential with a specific ability. It's reserved for truly godlike characters and aliens, or superhuman individuals whose signature power puts them among the top tier of those who have it.

Powers simply do what they say they do and can be used as benchmarks for performance on an automatic success. Powers aren't usually a prime set; instead they're added to a dice pool when their use can be justified as key to the test or contest's success or failure.

POWER LIMIT

Power set limits represent vulnerabilities that let players acquire plot points in keeping with their character's specific powers.

The GM may also spend **PP** to activate power set limits in some circumstances. This doesn't earn the player a **PP**, so the option to activate a limit is always given to the player first. If the player decides not to, the option then goes to the GM, so it's almost always beneficial to the player to take them up on it. Each limit includes a description of how to restore a power that's shut down by a limit.

SFX

SFX is short for "special effect." It's usually some kind of benefit or bonus that only occurs under certain conditions. In *Cortex Prime*, SFX are used as a way to introduce exception-based rules for trait sets that possess them. They're a way to break the rules of the game, modify the outcome of tests and contests, and add more texture to the story.

All distinctions get the "Gain a **PP** when you switch out this distinction's **8** for a **4**" *Hinder* SFX for free, and other trait sets may have one or more SFX to give context to the traits in the set.



POWER MODS

By using mods with the powers trait set, you can change how they're used and interpreted.

- Abilities
- Power Sets

ABILITIES MOD

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

Abilities are a trait set mod of powers that create a cinematic, prime time drama approach to superpowers and SFX. An ability is a rated trait with a number of SFX, effect tags, and descriptor tags attached to it along with a limit. Abilities are intended to make superpowers or alien qualities a more narrative-shaping element rather than a simple dice pool builder.

See *Abilities* for more.

POWER SETS

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

A power set is a mod that adds thematic strength to a collection of power traits. Power sets usually come with a limit that governs them, one or more helpful SFX, and a single origin or source that explains why your character has these powers. Each power set counts as a trait set of its own.

Using power sets helps in a number of ways:

- It allows you to pre-build standardized “power sources” for your superhero characters, ready for players to choose at character creation.
- It links powers thematically with a limit that can provide **PP** or other benefits.
- It makes it possible to group SFX together in flavorful ways that accentuate the powers you're using, rather than seeming disconnected.

A power set must have at least one SFX, which helps flavor the use of the powers. SFX are usually a way to double specific power dice, step up dice, or roll an additional **6** when using the power trait. Power set SFX are always linked to the power set's theme. In some cases, using a specific power trait in a specific way is sufficient activation for the SFX, while others require **PP** spends.

A power set must have at least one limit, specifying what happens to the power set under certain conditions. Limits always exist in the form of a **PP** gain in return for shutting down the power set or, in some cases, specific power traits included with the power set. A shut down power set no longer works and its power traits can't be included in dice pools until a specific recovery condition is met.

The intent behind limits is that players have the freedom to choose when and where their powers stop working, act uncontrollably, or trigger negative effects. It's up to you to decide if the GM has the power to actually trigger limits, too—if that's the case, the GM should always ask the player if they want to activate the limit on their own in order to get the benefit of activating it on their own terms.

There's no set number of powers in a power set (though it's usually at least two) and no cap on the die ratings of the power traits (though most don't have more than one trait at **10** or **12**). Individual power traits within a power set might be stepped up as a result of growth, or entire power sets might be acquired or swapped out during play, depending on the game.


Characters may have more than one power set. Each of them counts as a different trait set; if you have two power sets, you may include one power from each of the sets in your dice pool at no cost.



PRIME SET CORE

First introduced in *Cortex Prime Game Handbook*

A prime set is one of at least two trait sets, in addition to distinctions, that serve as the core of any Cortex Prime character. There are no predefined prime sets, because the trait sets you use in your game are up to you and the decisions you make with your group.

Prime sets provide the baseline dice for your dice pool on any test or contest; they're the dice you reach for when you want to do something. Each trait in these sets should have a die rating. If no die rating is noted, it typically defaults to a .

Note that distinctions are always a prime set for Cortex Prime games, even if they're not fully loaded with SFX or other features.

Prime sets can be expanded by adding SFX or trait statements to them. This is especially common with powers, but it also makes attributes, roles, and relationships more interesting. Do this if you want a specific prime set to carry more story weight in the game through description or deeper definition.

Keep in mind that if you add SFX or statements to a prime set, you shouldn't include them with more than one other trait set in the game. Having your relationships and values use trait statements is fine, but don't also include trait statements for powers and skills. Similarly, if your powers and distinctions each have SFX, your relationships and values shouldn't. Two sets with trait statements and two sets with SFX? Fine.

See also *Traits*.



RECOVERY



CONFLICT CORE

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

Many of the things that hinder PCs (complications, stress, etc.) go away before the next scene begins. But those that represent major consequences stick around and require tests to recover.


- Complications
- Life Points
- Being Taken Out
- Stress
- Trauma

COMPLICATION RECOVERY

Getting rid of or reducing a complication is a test vs a dice pool consisting of the complication and a base difficulty of  .



Other traits may also affect the roll, and the PC or their circumstances must be capable of improving the situation to make a roll.

When the test is complete, one of the following happens:

- If you beat the difficulty and your effect die is greater than the complication, the complication is eliminated.
- If you beat the difficulty and the effect die is equal to or smaller than the complication, the complication is stepped down by one. You can't try to recover that complication again until time passes.
- If you fail to beat the difficulty, the complication remains as it is.
- If you beat the difficulty but roll a hitch, the GM may hand over a  and introduce a new complication related to the one that was just recovered.
- If you fail to beat the difficulty and roll a hitch, the complication is stepped up by one step for every hitch rolled.

LIFE POINTS RECOVERY



First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*


Characters who have taken damage and need to either recover lost life points (ablative method) or get rid of accumulated damage (threshold method) must make recovery tests. The difficulty is typically the standard difficulty dice of   plus any relevant complications or other traits that might make it difficult. The amount that the player beats the difficulty by is the number of life points recovered (ablative) or is divided equally into recovered wounds and recovered stun.

PCs using the threshold method can recover all stun damage at the end of any scene, assuming they have an opportunity to rest, heal, or seek treatment; proper medical treatment during downtime can eliminate wounds with tests beyond the PC's own recovery tests.

RETURNING FROM BEING TAKEN OUT

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

If a complication attached to a character is somehow stepped up beyond , that character is automatically taken out of the scene. Complications that are stepped up beyond  are such a significant hindrance that they effectively keep the character from being able to act or play any part in the scene.

It's possible that being taken out of a scene can be reversed by other characters in that scene, if they have healing abilities, magic, or the ability to change the circumstances that took the character out in the first place. If a character returns from being taken out, they usually come back with at least a  complication that reflects their traumatic experience.





LAST-DITCH EFFORT MOD

First introduced in

Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game



When your character is taken out of a scene through complications or stress, you are unable to continue to act in the scene. With this mod, you may be able to temporarily recover enough to do what is called a last-ditch effort.

This must be prompted by somebody trying to rouse you, which is treated like a recovery test against a  difficulty plus your  complication or stress. This does not recover you, however. If the ally succeeds in rousing you, they give you their effect die as an asset to use in your last-ditch effort. If they fail, there's no rousing you until the scene is over.

See *Last-Ditch Effort* for more.

STRESS RECOVERY


First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

All stress die ratings are always stepped down by one during any scene specifically framed to act as a rest period, downtime, or transition between action-heavy scenes. If a character takes stress in one scene from a battle, and the next scene is another battle soon after the first without any time spent resting up, then no stress is recovered. To recover any remaining stress, is a test vs a dice pool consisting of a base difficulty of  , plus the stress die.

Other traits may also affect the roll, and the PC or their circumstances must be capable of improving the situation to make a roll.

When the test is complete, one of the following happens:



- If you beat the difficulty and your effect die is greater than the complication, the complication is eliminated
- If you beat the difficulty and the effect die is equal to or smaller than the stress, the stress is stepped down by one. You can't try to recover that stress again until time passes.
- If you fail to beat the difficulty, the stress remains as it is.

- If you beat the difficulty but roll a hitch, the GM may hand over a  and step up a different stress related to the one that was just recovered.
- If you fail to beat the difficulty and roll a hitch, the stress is stepped up by one step for every hitch rolled.




See *Stress* for more.

TRAUMA RECOVERY

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

Unlike stress or a complication, trauma does not recover on its own. Recovering trauma is a test vs a dice pool consisting of a base difficulty of  , plus the stress die. In some games, like *Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game*, this test can only be made by another PC.

When the test is complete, one of the following happens:

- If you beat the difficulty, the trauma die rating is stepped down by one.
- If you fail to beat the difficulty, the trauma does not get any better or worse. You can't try to recover that trauma again until time passes.
- If you beat the difficulty but roll a hitch, the GM may hand over a  and introduce either a complication that will hinder the PC in the next scene or inflict stress of a different type than the trauma that was being recovered, starting at  (or stepping up by one if the PC already had stress of that type).
- If you fail to beat the difficulty and roll one or more hitches, the trauma gets worse, stepping up by one for each hitch rolled. If this steps the trauma up past , that's all, folks.

See *Stress* for more.







RELATIONSHIPS

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

Relationships are traits that represent the intensity and importance of a character's connection to another character or group of characters. This connection may be positive or negative in nature, so long as it motivates and empowers the character who has it. When using this trait set, PCs start with relationships with other PCs and some GMCs but can add more during play. This makes relationships flexible and not as limited as some other trait sets.

Relationships are commonly paired with statements.






USING RELATIONSHIPS




If characters are created using a simple trait assignment process, then one relationship is assigned a , another a  and the rest . Characters created using another system such as pathways begin as a  until stepped up as a result of pathways choices.



A relationship contributes its die rating to a dice pool when the test or contest involves the character the relationship is linked to, or when that character has influence over or inspires the PC. This makes them great to use in Cortex Prime games that center around emotional drama, large ensemble casts of characters, the dynamics of a prime time drama, or interconnected groups. Use relationships if the connections between characters are as significant to the outcome of a story as any other character trait.

RATING RELATIONSHIPS

A relationship's die rating indicates the intensity of the character's feelings or attachment to the subject of the relationship. A high die rating doesn't mean you necessarily like the subject more than a low one.

-  I don't feel anything for this person.
-  This person matters, but so do a lot of people.
-  I'm invested in this person.
-  This person matters more than most.
-  There's nobody who matters more than they do.

When using this trait set,  relationships can be created using a  during play. The relationship lasts for the duration of the session; when XP or growth is resolved, it can either be dropped or made permanent. If made permanent, the relationship remains as a  until stepped up using some kind of growth.

If a PC has no relationship to a character for any given test or contest, they can either create one with a  or assume a  relationship default.

RELATIONSHIP MODS

By using mods with relationships, you can change how this trait is used and implemented. Some mods make the rules simpler; others add complexity.

- Reputation
- Growth-Created Relationship Asset
- Team Up

REPUTATION

First introduced in *Firefly Role-Playing Game*

A reputation is a relationship trait mod that may be used alongside relationships or in place of them. Reputations work like relationships do, except they represent a character's standing with a group, organization, company, or culture. PCs might start with a cap on their reputation die ratings because of inexperience or lack of fame or popularity, and steadily increase their reputations as play continues.

Reputations change as often as relationships do. They can also be affected by the actions of the character during play, especially when paired with trait statements. A player might challenge their reputation statement to get a short-term benefit, only to see their standing drop in the long term. Increasing reputation might be a good use of milestone-based XP, as players take concrete actions in support of a group or organization in order to raise their status.



GROWTH-CREATED RELATIONSHIP ASSET

First introduced in

Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game

Using this mod of the growth pool, players can choose to spend any growth die from their collected growth pool and turn it into a temporary relationship asset at the growth die's rating. Relationship assets can be kept until used in a subsequent session of play. Once used, you get to use it for a whole scene, in any tests, contests, or challenges, but at the end of the scene the relationship asset goes away. You may still care about the person or place, but you no longer have a specific asset to represent that in the game.

See *Growth Pool* for more.

TEAM UP MOD

First introduced in *Hammerheads* (CPGH)

In this mod of relationships and ganging up, each agent PC has an established relationship trait with each other agent that defines how they see or associate with the other agents and the nature of the backstory they share. Each relationship has a die rating. Relationships aren't necessarily reciprocal; your relationship die rating with another agent might be a different size than theirs for your agent. If there's any disagreement about the backstory, the players should settle that before the game starts.

Use your relationship dice when your agent is helping another agent perform a test. Hand over your relationship die with that agent to that agent's player for their dice pool. When assisting another agent, it's always your relationship die with them that's added to their pool, not their relationship die with you.

Each agent PC can only assist one other PC each round, but assisting another PC does not use up their turn in the action order.



RESOURCES

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

There are four types of resource: extras, locations, organizations, and props.

Resources are usually represented by two or more dice of the same size, which may be used to aid a test or contest where that resource is helpful or significant. Players choose how many resource dice to roll, although only the highest result is added to the total. Resource dice are rolled separately from the dice pool and, after they're rolled, those dice are considered spent and can be recovered later during downtime.

USING RESOURCES

Include resources when you want an asset that is exhaustible and renewable. You might use all four kinds of resource or just one or two types.

- **Extra:** An extra is a type of GMC, but when it's attached to a PC it represents a contact or ally the player may draw on for help.
- **Location:** A location is a place in the game setting that may be used to set scenes or provide valuable resources.
- **Organization (org):** An organization is a group of people who function under a specific ideology, structure, or goal. An org resource may open channels that the PC doesn't have alone.
- **Prop:** A prop is a tool, object, or item that helps a PC broaden the scope of what they can achieve in specific situations.

A resource die is *committed* before the test or contest dice pool is rolled but *rolled* separately. If more than one resource die is spent to aid a test or contest, only the highest rolling die is applied. This result is then **added to the total**.

Resources are recovered at the beginning of every session, or during any narrative period of downtime (such as a week of relaxation). You might also decide that resources can be refreshed by spending **PP** on a one for one basis (one **PP** for one resource die recovered).

RATING RESOURCES

Every resource has a name, a die rating (nearly always in multiples of **6**, but sometimes rated with larger dice), and (optionally) a tag or label to indicate what kind of field or quality that resource belongs to, such as *Politics*, *Crime*, *Academics*, or *Military*. If you use tags, each listed resource should have two of them, and they should inform you of the kind of test or contest that the resource might apply to. A GM can spend a **PP** to invoke GMC resources to add to an opposition pool total.

RESOURCES VS SIGNATURE ASSETS VS HERO DICE

A resource is similar in many ways to a signature asset in that it's a trait that represents an external person, object, place, or thing that contributes to a character's dice pool total in a test or contest. It's also similar to a hero die in that it's rolled separately and added to the total.

Resource dice are more helpful than signature assets because they always increase the potential total in a test or contest, but the downside is that they're spent, whereas a signature asset can be used as many times as is justifiable. See *Signature Asset* for more.

Resource dice are more helpful than hero dice because they don't require **PP** to activate them, but the downside is that they can only be used in specific circumstances, represented by that resource's tag. Hero dice can be used on any test or contest, regardless of the nature of that test or contest.

See *Heroic Success* for more.

RESOURCES IN PATHWAYS

When using the pathways method of character creation, a resource is a type of element that can appear on the story map as a diamond-shape element. This is separate from resources as a trait set. You aren't required to use the resources trait set if you use pathways to create your characters and setting, nor does adding a resource to a pathways map automatically provide a PC with that resource on their character file.

See *Pathways* for more.



RESOURCE MODS







By using mods with resources, you can change how this trait is used and implemented. Some mods make the rules simpler; others add complexity.

- Resource Pools
- Resource Tags


RESOURCE POOLS

First introduced in *Hammerheads* (CPGH)

In this mod for resources and vehicles, each vehicle has multiple pools of dice that function as prop resources.

One player is assigned the role of tracking resources in each mission. Before each mission, this player, with the advice of the group as a whole, decides how many dice the resource pools contain for that mission. This decision can't be changed after the mission starts, but the team is given the briefing before any dice need to be assigned. Each pool starts with , and the team may assign 7x  among the five pools. No pool may have a rating of more than    .

Any player can spend the resources out of each pool, rolling them and adding the highest rolling die to their total for a test. The other rolled dice are discarded—they do not go back into the resource pool. The resources in question must align with the test they're being used for; players who spend the dice come up with some narrative for what that resource is and how it's being applied.

Resources must be committed to a specific test before the test is rolled, and once spent out of the pool, they aren't refreshed until a bridge scene, or until a player adds a  to a crisis pool to refresh one. The latter effect represents a knuckle-biting last-minute airdrop of supplies that may make things worse. Any player may spend resources and refresh resources.




The five example resource pools can be found in the *Cortex Prime Game Handbook*, page 155.

RESOURCE TAGS

First introduced in *TRACE 2.0* (CPGH)

When using this mod for resources, each resource introduced has specific tags indicating which roles (or other trait, if using a different trait set) it may be used to assist with.

The resource's die rating determines the number of role tags that can be attached to it.

-  One tag
-  Two tags
-  Three tags



ROLES

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*


Roles is a skill-like trait mod that replaces skills in some expressions of Cortex Prime. A role acts like a skill group or skill set, rather than a specific skill, and reflects a PC's experience, training, or proficiency in a broad thematic area. Games that use roles should usually have no fewer than three and no more than six roles, though exceptions can be made.


USING ROLES


Roles are a good choice for a Cortex Prime game that requires specialization without removing the ability to use certain skills. This includes action-heavy or team-oriented games of all genres. When using roles, specialties allow for narrow focus in a role's area of proficiency.


RATING ROLES


Roles are rated from  to , like other traits. Each PC usually has at least one , one , and one , with the rest at . A role's die rating represents a PC's training and skill level when acting within that role.

 **Untrained:** You have no idea what you're doing, and you're likely to create trouble when you try it, but who knows.

 **Competent:** Sufficient training to get by. You're comfortable doing this.

 **Expert:** Able to do this for a living. This is second nature to you.

 **Master:** One of the best in the field. Likely known to others who possess the skill.

 **Grandmaster:** One of the best in the world. Known even to those outside the field.

ROLE MODS





By using mods with roles, you can change how this trait is used and implemented. Some mods make the rules simpler; others add complexity.

- Training Packages
- Vice

TRAINING PACKAGES

First introduced in *Hammerheads* (CPGH)

A reskin of roles, training packages aim to be more of a collection of similar skills than an indicator of a character's position or identity. Training packages are useful when you want to heavily theme your setting's expected areas of expertise.





Because training packages are more skill based, you might have a dozen or more of them in your game. Like roles, PCs have a die rating in every training package. Aim for one , several each of  and , with the rest at .

If you're using session records for growth, training packages can be stepped up by spending two sessions.

VICE

First introduced in *TRACE 2.0* (CPGH)

In games where the PCs have roles, vice traits can replace role traits for minor and major GMCs. Vice traits give GMCs acting in opposition to PCs a negative role built to fit the game setting. In *TRACE 2.0*, this takes the form of self-serving motivations.

Not all GMCs are corrupt or actively criminal, of course. A vice's die rating reflects the degree to which the GMC exploits, acts on, or presents an obstacle to the PCs with that vice. A major GMC has the same spread of vices as PCs have in their roles. Minor GMCs with vices should have no more than three, with a spread of , , and . Any other vices are rated at a  baseline for a minor GMC should it come up.

Depending on where a PC's investigation takes them and the GMC, the GMC's vice might present quite a lot of opposition to the resolution of the case or rather little. Having a low die rating in a vice means that the GMC is much easier to read in that area, more likely to reveal their nature than to cover it up or lie about it.







SCALE

CONFLICT MOD

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

A conflict might take place between two groups of radically different sizes, scale, or degrees of power. As GM, you may adjudicate a simple scale advantage as being outright impossible (human being tries to punch a spaceship) or with a scale die.













A scale die is a bonus  added to whichever side has the advantage. Along with a scale die, that side also adds an extra die result into their total for free (the equivalent of spending a  on their total). This additional die represents a pretty profound advantage.

You could decide to go with a   scale and keep two additional dice for the total, but this is an overwhelming advantage. Usually it's best to make a ruling and move on.

As a rule of thumb, when the mismatch is so unfair that it would never work for a normal person, but a PC might be able to pull it off, that's the cue to go to the extra dice. Players can earn a scale die if they vastly outnumber or outgun their opponents, but usually such odds cause GMC opposition to simply surrender.

MULTI-LEVEL SCALE

First introduced in *Cortex Prime Game Handbook*

Using this mod, the scale die may be any size from  to , each step representing an increasingly larger target. You can choose to split the scale die into smaller dice: a  can become   or    or    . The larger scale side still only keeps one additional die in their total, rather than an additional die for each additional scale die.

SCENE CORE

A scene in Cortex Prime is much like a scene in a television show, a movie, a novel, or a play: a unit of story in which characters interact with each other and the setting. Scenes are always framed by the GM, which means the GM describes where the scene takes place, which of the PCs are there, and what is going on.

Breaking a session into scenes allows the GM to skip past otherwise uninteresting periods of time or storyline and get right to a charged situation, a set of circumstances that might reveal interesting developments.

A scene ends when the primary objective or situation of the scene is resolved. There's no need to wrap up the scene beyond its logical ending point or let conversations between the characters continue to ramble. The GM can just call "Scene!" and move on.

Scenes can be further broken down into beats, which is how we track all of the things that happen in a scene.

FRAMING SCENES

During framing, the GM decides the most basic things about the scene: where it is, who's there, what's going on, why it's happening, and when all of this takes place.

Distinctions can be added to the scene that any PC or GMC can use, complete with SFX. Predefined assets or complications can also be added.

See *Location* for more.

ENDING SCENES

Here's a few guidelines about how to determine if your scene has hit the ending point.

Always leave them wanting more: keeping some questions unanswered keeps people interested in what will happen next.

Cut off before the second lull: let players charge back in after a mid-scene pivot, and then cut away before you lose any of that momentum.

Impasse: if nothing meaningful happens for several rolls, end the scene and return to the conflict later.

The button: end the scene after an appropriate dramatic, action-packed, or funny moment.

HIGH STAKES SCENES

Most tests and contests don't carry a risk of failure so dire that it takes a PC out of the scene. When those stakes do exist, it becomes a high stakes scene. It's up to the GM to make it clear from the beginning when players enter a scene like this, or when a scene changes to high stakes, so that players know failure may mean being taken out. Often the GM presents players with a number of options that include some with this potential outcome, usually with a commensurate greater reward. Players can then decide if the risk is worth it.

See *Taken Out* for more.

TYPES OF SCENES

The following are the types of scenes that are used in a typical Cortex game:

- **Opening Scene:** Also known as an establishment scene, introduces the core situation of the whole session
- **Action Scene:** Also known as an adventure scene, involves charged situations and cinematic action
- **Exploration Scene:** Also known as a discovery scene, involves getting from one place to another or discovering something new
- **Intrigue Scene:** Involves narrative drama between characters
- **Bridge Scene:** Also known as a recovery scene, represents downtime between other scenes
- **Flashback Scene:** Serves the purpose of establishing something new in the narrative
- **Tag Scene:** The last scene in a session, often used to wrap up growth in games using one of those mods

ACTION SCENES

Also called adventure scenes, action scenes involve charged situations, cinematic action, and opposing forces in conflict. They typically feature tests, contests, and challenges, or might use the action order to manage beats. Action scenes often make up the bulk of the scenes in a session.

BRIDGE SCENES

Bridge scenes, also called transition scenes or recovery scenes, represent downtime between action scenes. In some games, they might be the only scenes in which PCs can create, recover, or upgrade assets and eliminate or recover complications without high difficulty. Use bridge scenes when the PCs are regrouping, checking in on contacts or extras, or making plans.

There isn't a lot of dice rolling in recovery scenes, although tests to recover stress are common.

EXPLORATION SCENES

Exploration scenes, also called discovery scenes—and a variation on bridge scenes—are often reduced to montages or red travel lines drawn across maps. They may feature tests or challenges against the environment or traps and puzzles, but the focus is less on action and more on getting from one place to another, finding the way to the next action scene. They're similar to bridge scenes in that they link action scenes, but they can serve the specific purpose of passing time without simply hand waving the experience.

FLASHBACK SCENES

A flashback scene is often used in tandem with a callback when using the session record mod for growth, but not necessarily. Flashback scenes serve the primary purpose of establishing an asset or relationship and filling in some backstory that the GM or players want to bring up in the current scene. A flashback scene can interrupt another type of scene, but it shouldn't be drawn out, since flashback scenes often involve only one or two PCs and the GM.

INTRIGUE SCENES

Intrigue scenes involve the PCs scheming, convincing, pleading, or otherwise influencing the GMCs, catalysts, even each other. Intrigue is all about moving people around on the story track. A lot of contests happen in intrigue scenes as PCs confront a GMC and try to get something from them, whether it's their help or their surrender.

OPENING SCENES

Opening scenes, also known as establishment scenes, are designed purely to set up the core problem or situation of any given session.

They set up what the characters are doing when the session starts, establish where they are, who they're with, and what they've been doing since the previous session. You can manage bookkeeping in opening scenes, introduce or foreshadow characters and ideas you plan to confront the players with later, and so forth.

TAG SCENES

A tag scene is the last scene in any session and represents the "here's what we learned" scenes between characters. This type of scene is important in a game that uses growth and trait statements to represent advancement; players can roleplay that growth in tag scenes. A tag scene is short, summarizes or ties up loose ends, and each character may be in several tag scenes at the end of a session depending on how many important characters (PCs or GMCs) they might be tangled up with.



SCRATCH BUILT CHARACTERS

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

One method of character creation has players build their own characters completely from the ground up, rather than use partially created character files (like archetypes) or use a guided world creation with the group (like pathways). This is referred to as scratch built.

Each step of scratch built character creation depends on that setting's prime sets and other trait sets, as well as any additional mods that the Cortex game setting is using. The suggested die ratings provided in each trait within the Cortex Codex can be used as a guideline for scratch built characters.

One example of scratch built character creation using attributes, distinctions and skills as prime sets, and specialties and signature assets as additional traits can be found in the *Cortex Prime Game Handbook*, pages 70-71.

After assigning all traits, die ratings, distinctions, SFX, and statements based on the requirements of the setting, all scratch built characters conclude with the final stage: biographical information.

Answer these questions as if answering as your character:

Your Name: Pick a favorite name or use an online name generator.

Your Pronouns: What pronouns do you use?

Background: Where were you born? Where did you grow up? What is your family like?

Appearance: Got a telltale birthmark? Blonde hair? Tall and stout? Short and thin?

To further flesh out your character background, look at the distinctions you've chosen and think about:

Where you've been the last few years.

Where you're going in the near future.

What you're doing to keep your head above water.

How you feel about the politics of the world.



SESSION

Cortex Prime is designed around session-centered play. Each session is its own experience. By focusing more on individual sessions, Cortex Prime gives groups the flexibility to tell stories together that are short and sweet or long and involved. String a few sessions together and you get a story arc or something more episodic. A series is a string of multiple Cortex sessions in the same setting that together tell a complete story.

A session is generally about three to four hours of play with a beginning and an end, allowing for bookkeeping, advancing a story along, and giving everyone enough time in the spotlight.

The central hook or story idea for any given session is called the situation. This isn't the same as the plot, because roleplaying games aren't pre-written stories, but it's the "what" when you look back at a session and think, "What was that about?"

The loose structure of a Cortex Prime session often looks something like this:

- 1 Play opening scenes to introduce each PC, either alone or in groups.
- 2 Introduce the situation and the first reveal.
- 3 Use action and bridge scenes to introduce more reveals, following the PCs' choices.
- 4 Bring things to a climactic scene once all reveals are checked off.
- 5 Play tag scenes to wrap things up and take care of growth, XP, session records, or milestones.

USING SCENES

Sessions are broken into scenes, which can be further broken down into beats (which you can keep track of using tests, contests, and challenges).

A scene in Cortex Prime is much like a scene in a television show, a movie, a novel, or a play: a unit of story in which characters interact with each other and the setting. Scenes are always framed by the GM, which means the GM describes where the scene takes place, which of the PCs are there, and what is going on.

Breaking a session into scenes allows the GM to skip past otherwise uninteresting periods of time or storyline and get right to a charged situation, a set of circumstances that might reveal interesting developments.

The following are the types of scenes that are used in a typical Cortex game:

- **Opening Scene:** Also known as an **establishment scene**, introduces the core situation of the whole session
- **Action Scene:** Also known as an **adventure scene**, involves charged situations and cinematic action
- **Exploration Scene:** Also known as a **discovery scene**, involves getting from one place to another or discovering something new
- **Intrigue Scene:** Involves narrative drama between characters
- **Bridge Scene:** Also known as a **recovery scene**, represents downtime between other scenes
- **Flashback Scene:** Serves the purpose of establishing something new in the narrative
- **Tag Scene:** The last scene in a session, often used to wrap up growth in games using one of those mods

REVEALS

A reveal is an event, a twist in the story, or a piece of information that prods the players to take additional action or make a difficult choice. A reveal often looks like a clue, which helps direct the players toward a new location or a confrontation with an antagonist. But a reveal can also be a new GMC, a shift in a goal, or a surprise encounter with something or someone that changes the status quo and forces the players to look at their character files and consider their options.



SESSION RECORDS

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

With this mod, at the end of each session, the players make a note of the session's name on their character file. This is the PC's personal session record, and over time it provides an account of the group's accomplishments and checkered past.

Players can then use the session record to their benefit in play as a callback to do anything they would normally spend a PP to do, or they can spend sessions from their record in exchange for making permanent improvements to their character file.

CALLBACKS

Each player may use their own session record to make callbacks, references to events from other sessions that may be useful towards the current storyline.

To make a callback, have your PC make an in-character reference to a session in their session record while performing a task. When you use a callback, you may gain a benefit immediately for anything that a PP could be used for.

You can only make a callback to a specific session once per session. A checkbox next to each session is useful for this purpose. Erase checked boxes when a new session begins and add the last session's name to the record.

FLASHBACK SCENES WITH CALLBACKS

When making a callback, you or the GM might decide to start a flashback scene. Flashback scenes serve the primary purpose of filling in some backstory that the group wants to bring up in the current scene. A flashback scene can interrupt another type of scene, but it shouldn't be drawn out, since flashback scenes often involve only one or two PCs and the GM.

TRAINING UP

By spending sessions from your record, you can make permanent improvements to your PC. A spent session remains on the record but can no longer be used for callbacks or to train a second time.

Training can happen any time during downtime between sessions. Maximum die ratings of 12 apply in all cases. If you switch out a distinction, your new distinction has as many SFX unlocked as the original, although they may be entirely different SFX.

The following standard improvements are usually available when using this mod:

1 session

- Turn an asset from a session into a signature asset (or relationship):
- Switch out a distinction (or trait statement) for a new one

2 sessions

- Step up a signature asset (or relationship):
- Add a new specialty
- Unlock a new SFX

3 sessions

- Step up a skill (or resource, role, value, or power)

4 sessions

- Step up one attribute (or affiliation) and step down another

A setting may have its own unique menu of options for training up characters with sessions from the record that differ from the standard. See *Hammerheads* in the *Cortex Prime Game Handbook* (page 156) for an example.



SETTING

A setting is the shared game world in which scenes and sessions take place.

Every Cortex Prime game needs a setting, although in some cases the setting is created by the players and GM during the first session. Even if collaborative setting creation is your goal, you should have an idea of what kind of game you want to play, and what sort of world, background, and shared space your group expects to create characters and stories inside.

PATHWAYS SETTING CREATION

Using the pathways setting and character creation mod, a group of players and their GM go around the table taking turns adding ideas to the game's setting and adding traits to your character until you have the "play area" of your campaign and a set of characters connected to it. If the group finds any created element problematic, you can ask the person who suggested it to change it or come up with something else.

See *Pathways* for more.

LOCATIONS IN A SETTING

A location is where a scene takes place, but it can be a character in its own right: having traits, taking actions, or even being a resource on a character file.

See *Location* for more.

CURRENT CORTEX SETTINGS

As of this edition of the Cortex Codex, there are four official Cortex Prime settings currently available.

- *Eidolon Alpha* (CPGH)
- *Hammerheads* (CPGH)
- *Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game*
- *TRACE 2.0* (CPGH)

See *Spotlight Settings* for more.

PAST CORTEX SETTINGS

Past editions of Cortex have contributed to the current edition's many rules and mods. Evidence of these past settings are clear throughout this Codex:

- *Sovereign Stone Game System*
- *Serenity Role Playing Game*
- *Battlestar Galactica Role Playing Game*
- *Cortex System Role Playing Game*
- *Supernatural Role Playing Game*
- *Leverage: The Roleplaying Game*
- *Smallville Roleplaying Game*
- *Dragon Brigade Roleplaying Game*
- *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*
- *Cortex Plus Hackers Guide*
- *Firefly Role-Playing Game*



First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

SFX is short for “special effect.” It’s usually some kind of benefit or bonus that only occurs under certain conditions. In *Cortex Prime*, SFX are used as a way to introduce exception-based rules for trait sets that possess them. They’re a way to break the rules of the game, modify the outcome of tests and contests, and add more texture to the story.

All distinctions get the *Hinder* SFX for free, and other trait sets may have one or more SFX to give context to the traits in the set.

- *Hinder*: Gain a **PP** when you switch out this distinction’s **8** for a **4**.

WHEN TO USE SFX

SFX are especially useful when you want to add depth and variety to trait sets or assets. In general, you should decide which trait set in your game features SFX, and use that trait set as the key area of differences between otherwise similar characters. In games with power sets or pre-set distinctions, SFX provide ways to further define and shape what those traits actually represent.

Because SFX are used to break the rules or provide additional ways to earn and spend **PP**, create assets, or alter die rolls, they’re a mechanical way to represent special abilities, tricks, or maneuvers your character has knowledge of. SFX are best when they allow you to differentiate your character from other characters with otherwise similar traits, and to flesh out trait sets that form the core of a character.

When you use SFX with distinctions, they let you further define what a character with that distinction can do beyond just getting the **8** in a dice pool. When you use them with power sets or skills, they allow you to attach fun and interesting tricks to those traits without having to create narrow or specific traits. And they provide an ideal means of tracking character growth, especially when they’re used in pre-built character archetypes; distinctions can come with three or more SFX that the player can unlock over time and experience.

COMMON TRAIT SETS FOR SFX

Though you can attach SFX to any trait set, the most common trait sets for using SFX are:

- Abilities
- Distinctions
- Powers
- Power Sets
- Signature Assets

CREATING SFX

When creating your own, one way to look at SFX is as a combination of a cost (or a drawback) and a benefit.

Some SFX may switch out the cost for a different sort of triggering condition. This can include rolling a heroic success, or some roleplaying-based triggering effect.

SFX often combine both a cost and a triggering condition, especially if the benefit is broader or more potent than usual. In some cases, an SFX may include a narrative condition that explains when and how it’s used to give context to the SFX.

BENEFIT

A benefit is the part of an SFX that provides something helpful. It’s usually paired with a cost.

Here are some standard benefits:

- Earn a **PP**
- Add a **6** to the dice pool
- Step up a beneficial die
- Double a beneficial die
- Step down a non-beneficial die
- Introduce a narrative detail
- Rename a complication
- Reroll a single die
- Create a **8** asset for the scene (stunt)



COST

A cost is the part of an SFX that must be paid in order to activate the beneficial part of an SFX.

Here are some standard costs:

- Spend a **PP**
- Step down a beneficial die
- Step up a non-beneficial die
- Choose to do something risky
- Create a **8** complication
- Shut down a trait set

SIX STANDARD SFX

When creating your own SFX, it's helpful to look at examples of SFX such as those on page 191 of the *Cortex Prime Game Handbook* or page 268 of *Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game*.

Here are some standard templates for SFX that game designer Leonard Balseira uses.

- **The Exchange:** Step up or double one useful die for the scene but step down one other die in exchange until you do a recovery action.
- **The Price:** Step up or double one useful die for the scene or take a **8** asset for the scene (choose one benefit, not both), but also take a **8** complication.
- **The Swap:** Spend a **PP** to use a different die than would normally be appropriate for a given action, based on your distinction.
- **The Edit:** Spend a **PP** to declare a beneficial thing to be true in the fiction, based on your distinction.
- **The Folly:** Earn a **PP** when you choose to do something detrimental related to the distinction.
- **The Shutdown:** Earn a **PP** when you declare that, due to appropriate circumstances based on your distinction, you have lost access to one or more of your [specific trait] for the scene and cannot use it in any actions.

SFX DICE TRICKS

Here's a summary of the dice tricks that SFX frequently use.

- Stepping up means increasing the size of a die by one step.
- Stepping down means decreasing the size of a die by one step.
- Rerolling means rolling a die or dice again, ignoring the previous result and using the new result.
- Doubling a die means adding another die of the same size to the dice pool before the dice are rolled.

Aside from rerolling, most SFX tricks affect the unrolled dice in the pool, although SFX that call for stepping up or stepping down an effect die obviously take place after an effect die is chosen.

Good SFX make it unambiguous when an effect takes place, usually after a specific trigger and before the total is declared or effect dice are put into play.

AREA ATTACK/EFFECT

Many attacks allow for a special kind of SFX called an area attack or area effect. At the cost of a **PP**, the benefit allows the character to add an additional **6** to the dice pool for each additional target. After the roll, when determining effect dice (stress, complications, etc.) an additional die may be chosen for every additional **6** that was added. Area effects are resisted individually by all targets, who roll to set or raise the difficulty against the attacking character's single total. This SFX is especially effective against mobs.



LIMIT MOD

A limit is an SFX mod that introduces vulnerabilities that provide **PP**. Most limits use the shutdown cost with the earn a **PP** benefit. With a shutdown cost, there's always a specific situation in which the character can restore the shutdown trait, even if it's just "restore the trait at the beginning of the next scene" or something along those lines.

The GM can activate limits in some circumstances by spending a **PP** (or a doom pool die, if that mod is used). If the GM chooses to do this, they should first offer the player the option to activate it themselves, in order to gain the **PP** benefit. If the player decides not to, the option then goes to the GM, and the **PP** the GM spends goes to the pile, not to the player.

See *Limit* for more.

SIGNATURE ASSETS

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

Some characters have iconic weapons, gear, pets, or trustworthy allies that contribute to their dice pools reliably throughout play. These are signature assets that the character doesn't have to create during play as they "belong" to the character and act much like any other trait.

In *Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game* signature assets are simply referred to as assets, while assets are referred to as temporary assets.

USING SIGNATURE ASSETS

A signature asset belongs to a PC and is recorded on their character file—it doesn't need to be created during play and it gives the player an extra die to include in their dice pools when they can justify their use. Unlike skills or attributes, signature assets are about things a PC has or people they know, not about qualities innate to them. These assets are a great way to further reveal a PC's personality as a means of representing heirlooms or unique weapons or special relationships.

Signature assets can be temporarily knocked out, eliminated, rendered unusable, or damaged during play; but as they're a featured element of the PC's character file, the player can recover the signature asset between sessions or by spending a **PP** at the beginning of the next scene (with some narrative justification for getting it back/fixing).

RATING SIGNATURE ASSETS

Signature assets begin with a **6** die rating but can be stepped up during play. They aren't tied to a distinction, attribute, or skill, but may complement any one of those traits. The die rating of your signature asset represents how much the asset can help you, as well as your own bond with it.

- 6** Something helpful and everyday, or that you've grown accustomed to
- 8** Something special and interesting, or that you have a strong connection to
- 10** Something rare and potent, or that you are defined by
- 12** Something truly unique and powerful, or that transcends even your innate abilities

SIGNATURE ASSETS AND SFX

Signature assets can simply be a die rating on a character file, or the player can unlock an SFX. There's no default SFX for a signature asset, and no two signature assets are the same, so typically a conversation with the GM about appropriate options is necessary before an SFX can be added. Typical SFX for signature assets allow the player to spend a **PP** to step up a trait when the signature asset is used with it, especially when the signature asset is itself a tool of some kind.

SHARING SIGNATURE ASSETS

A signature asset is made up of two things: your connection to something, and the something you're connected to. The die rating belongs to your connection, not to the thing itself. You and another character might both possess a signature asset, but at different die ratings.

Signature assets cannot be shared between PCs; if someone "borrows" a signature asset from a character (picking up the other character's heirloom sword or driving their custom sports car), the borrower must spend a **PP** to create an asset as normal to get any benefit from the asset borrowed, and the asset is rated at **6** like any other **PP** created asset.



VEHICLES WITH SIGNATURE ASSETS

In some settings, vehicles are as important to the story as the characters are. To make vehicles come to life, each group of players maintains a vehicle file, a bit like a character file. Like individual PCs, vehicles can have signature assets that can be added to a dice pool. These assets represent modifications or resources that are available on the vehicle. Typically, vehicle signature assets have a rating of **8**.

See *Vehicles* for more.

RESOURCES VS SIGNATURE ASSETS

A resource is similar in many ways to a signature asset in that it's a trait that represents an external person, object, place, or thing that contributes to a character's dice pool total in a test or contest.

Resource dice are more helpful than signature assets because they always increase the potential total in a test or contest, but the downside is that they're spent, whereas a signature asset can be used as many times as is justifiable.



SKILLS

First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*




Skills represent natural talent, training, or experience. If you can describe it as a verb, it's a good candidate for a skill. Most skill lists for Cortex games consist of verbs.


USING SKILLS


Because it's so easy to describe characters in roleplaying games by what they can do and how they're trained, skills are a natural trait set to include in a Cortex Prime game. If you aren't using skills, you're probably either focused more on dramatic flavor or you've got a similar kind of trait such as roles or specialties, which work a lot like skills.


Each game can frame its own list of skills, usually as verbs, which cover the different ways that PCs are intended to interact with the setting, GMCs, and even each other.


RATING SKILLS


Every PC has at least a  in each skill, which represents being untrained. Proficiency and expertise are represented by ratings between  and . PCs should start with a number of points equal to roughly two thirds the number of skills in the list (12, in the Cortex Prime default), which they can put into skills' die ratings. One point earns one step in a skill's die rating. Depending on the method of character creation, some or all of these points may be predetermined.

 **Untrained:** You have no idea what you're doing, and you're likely to create trouble when you try it, but who knows.

 **Competent:** Sufficient training to get by. You're comfortable doing this.

 **Expert:** Able to do this for a living. This is second nature to you.

 **Master:** One of the best in the field. Likely known to others who possess the skill.

 **Grandmaster:** One of the best in the world. Known even to those outside the field.

SKILL MODS

By using mods with the skills trait set, you can change how they're used and interpreted.

- Roles
- The Skill Pyramid
- Specialties

ROLES MOD










First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

Roles are skill-like trait mods that replace skills in some expressions of Cortex Prime. A role acts like a skill group or skill set, rather than a specific skill, and reflects a PC's experience, training, or proficiency in a broad thematic area.

See *Roles* for more.


THE SKILL PYRAMID

First introduced in *Cortex Prime Game Handbook*

One way to ensure that players aren't quickly maxing out their skills or other traits is to require them to adhere to a skill pyramid. Using this mod, if you want a  rating in a skill, you need at least two  rated skills and three  rated skills. If you want a  , you need at least two at  , three at  , and four at  , and so on. As skills have a baseline of  , there's no required number of  rated skills in the pyramid.

SPECIALTIES MOD

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

A specialty is a narrow area of concentration or focus within a skill. Using this mod, specialties confer a bonus  to any test or contest that falls into that narrow area and involves the skill they're attached to. There's no fixed list of specialties. Instead, PCs are encouraged to work with their GM to think about what specialty might be attached to the skill they want to specialize in.

See *Specialties* for more.



SPECIALTIES



First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

A specialty is a narrow area of concentration or focus. Specialties can be used in many different ways, either in conjunction with skills, the trait set they are a mod for, or separately.

- Specialties with Skills
- Multi-Level Specialties
- No Skills, Just Specialties
- Skill and Specialty Split

SPECIALTIES WITH SKILLS

Skills represent natural talent, training, or experience. If you can describe it as a verb, it's a good candidate for a skill. The default skill list for Cortex Prime consists of verbs. See *Skills* for more.

A specialty is a narrow area of concentration or focus within a skill. Using this mod, specialties confer a bonus **6** to any test or contest that falls into that narrow area and involves the skill they're attached to. When the PC uses that skill and their specialty also applies, they use both dice in their pool.

There's no fixed list of specialties. Instead, PCs are encouraged to work with their GM to think about what specialty might be attached to the skill they want to specialize in.

MULTI-LEVEL SPECIALTIES

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

With this mod, though specialties start at **6** as described in *Specialties with Skills*, they can be increased to multiple dice or even larger dice either during character creation or through growth.

They're usually grouped as follows:

Trained: **6**

Expert: **8** or **6 6**

Master: **10** or **8 8** or **6 6 6**

Grandmaster: **12** or **10 10** or **8 8 8**
or **6 6 6 6**

NO SKILLS, JUST SPECIALTIES

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

A Cortex Prime game that doesn't use skills as a trait set may choose to use specialties as a trait on their own. With this mod, specialties are usually rated from **8** to **12**, rather than being set at **6**. Some games may start specialties at **6** instead, but they don't use a **4** rating.

- 6** You're trained.
- 8** You're an expert.
- 10** You're a master.
- 12** You're a grandmaster.






Unlike skills, there's no default specialty level for all characters—if you don't have a specialty, it's assumed the kinds of activity included in the specialty aren't relevant or significant to your character.

Without skills, it's useful to create a master list of specialties to choose from so that the thematic aspects of the setting are maintained. This list is usually provided by the game setting, or by the GM.



SKILL AND SPECIALTY SPLIT

First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*

With this mod, characters have general skills at a rating of  (Untrained) or  (Competent), but to have higher ratings they must specialize. Ratings of  (Expert),  (Master), and  (Grandmaster) are only available for specialties of that skill, and a character may have multiple specialties at different die ratings.

Using this mod, you don't add both the skill and the specialty to the dice pool. Your character's specialty replaces the skill die rating, which you continue to use for all tests and contests where your specialties don't apply.

This mod emulates the way skills work in Classic Cortex games and is a good option if you want to encourage many high-rated but narrower skills.



SPEND

There are various game mechanisms that will ask you to spend something. Doing so means to use a point, die, or other tracked currency from a pool to do something in exchange. The following are the various ways spend may be used.

Spending...

- Plot points
- Dice from a doom pool
- Dice from a crisis pool
- Hero dice
- Resources
- Growth dice
- Sessions
- XP

SPENDING PLOT POINTS

Cortex Prime games run on a narrative currency called plot points (PP) that influence the plot. They're the fuel for the system's engine. The cycle of earning, spending, and then earning more plot points is something that you must maintain when deciding what mods to use.

See *Plot Points* for more.

SPENDING PP AS A GM

Unless mods are applied, the GM has two pools of PP: the bank and the pile.

In the pile, the GM has an unlimited number of PP to give to the players when appropriate; these are not spent when used. The GM uses this pool to purchase complications when the players roll hitches or to hand over PP to the players when an SFX calls for it.

All of the GMCs in play use the same bank; they don't each keep track of their own plot points. When the GM spends these PP, they go to the pile instead of to the player who was affected by the roll, just as if a PC had spent the PP on the roll. The GM can add more PP to the bank by activating GMC SFX, including using distinctions as a ▼ instead of a ◆.

Spend PP from the bank to:

- Include more results in a total
- Activate SFX
- Avoid a GMC being taken out

In general, the GM should strive to spend these PP when it makes the story more interesting, and not to target their players.

SPENDING PP AS A PLAYER

Players can spend PP to do many things. Additional options may be added to, and some options may be removed from, this standard list depending on the game setting:

Spend PP as a player:

- Activate SFX
- Add two dice from a trait set instead of one
- Activate an opportunity (a 1) that the GM rolls
- Avoid being taken out
- Create a 6 asset for the scene, or to keep an asset for the rest of the session
- Include an additional result in your total
- Interfere in a contest
- Keep an extra effect die
- Share an asset with everyone in a scene



SPENDING FROM THE DOOM POOL

When using the doom pool mod, the GM doesn't have any PP and can spend dice from the doom pool to do anything a PP would normally accomplish. In addition, the GM can spend a die to do a variety of special actions. These vary depending on the game. Some of the most common uses are:

- Creating a complication, asset, or scene distinction
- Interrupting the action order
- Adding a new extra GMC
- Introducing a new minor GMC or major GMC
- Splitting the group
- Ending the scene immediately

See *Doom Pool* for more.

SPENDING FROM A CRISIS POOL

When using the doom pool mod, the GM doesn't have any PP and can spend dice from crisis pools to do anything a PP would normally accomplish, as long as it is within what that crisis pool could reasonably affect. In addition, the GM can spend a die to do a variety of special actions. These vary depending on the game. Some of the most common uses are:

- Creating a complication, asset, or scene distinction
- Interrupting the action order
- Adding a new extra GMC
- Introducing a new minor GMC or major GMC
- Splitting the group
- Ending the scene immediately

See *Crisis Pool* for more.

SPENDING HERO DICE

To use a hero die, you spend a ● and roll the die, adding it to your total in any test or contest. You may do this at any time after rolling the dice to get a total, even if you rolled first and the opposition has already rolled their own dice. It must be done before the outcome of the roll is decided. You might be so successful that you get another heroic success and earn another hero die. Whatever outcome occurs, this spends the die.

When using the hero dice mod hero dice as plot points, hero dice are not added as an additional value to your total and there's no additional cost to use hero dice if the player chooses to include them in their dice pool before they roll. They can be spent in place of a PP wherever spending a PP would be applicable, or the player can spend the hero die to add it as an additional die in their dice pool.

See *Heroic Success* for more.

SPENDING RESOURCES

Resources are helpful traits outside of a character's own capabilities that are usually represented by two or more dice of the same size, which may be used to aid a test or contest where that resource is helpful or significant. Players choose how many resource dice to roll—after they're rolled, those dice are considered spent and can be recovered later during downtime.

A resource die is *committed* before the test or contest dice pool is rolled but *rolled* separately. If more than one resource die is spent to aid a test or contest, only the highest rolling die is applied. This result is then **added to the total**.

See *Resources* for more.



SPENDING GROWTH DICE

When using the growth pool mod for growth, PCs gain new traits, advance current traits, create assets, and more through a mechanism called the growth pool, which is a pool of dice you build up over the course of the game.

Growth dice can be rolled during a special kind of scene called a tag scene to improve traits. On a successful roll, the growth dice are spent.

When using the paced growth pool mod for the growth pool, growth dice can also be spent to create temporary relationship assets.

See *Growth Pool* for more.

SPENDING SESSIONS

When using the session record mod for growth, players make a note of each session's name on their character file. They can use this to generate a callback in play, or they can spend it to improve traits on their character file.

By spending sessions from your record, you can make permanent improvements to your PC. A spent session remains on the record but can no longer be used for callbacks or to train a second time.

See *Session Records* for more.

SPENDING XP

When using the milestones mod for growth, PCs have up to two milestones with three XP-earning actions each. XP earned from achieving milestones may be spent between scenes to increase a PC's traits or unlock other benefits. You may spend as much XP as you've earned to unlock multiple upgrades at once.

See *Milestones* for more.



SPOTLIGHT SETTINGS

Premade settings that provide what's needed to start a game of Cortex when used in conjunction with the *Cortex Prime Game Handbook*.

These are the official spotlight settings available now:


- *Eidolon Alpha*
- *Hammerheads*
- *TRACE 2.0*

EIDOLON ALPHA

First introduced in *Cortex Prime Game Handbook*

Eidolon Alpha is a world of fables and legends and godlike spirits who watch over a thriving civilization of city-states ringing a bright sea. You play an endarch, an individual chosen by one of these spirits, these eidolons, to act as a vessel for their power and an instrument of their will in the world. Only a handful in each generation are chosen for this blessing, though many others serve the eidolons as acolytes and lay folk. For the endarchs, the ability to embody their eidolon's mystical powers grants them abilities above and beyond those of their fellow citizens, as well as a responsibility to use that power to further their eidolon's cause.

***Eidolon Alpha* at a Glance:**

- **Trait Sets:** Distinctions, attributes, roles, powers
- **Character Creation:** Archetype
- **Advancement:** Session record
- **Difficulty:** 
- **Resolution:** Tests and contests, action order for action scenes
- **Consequences:** Complications, stress
- **Other Wrinkles:** Mobs, scale

EIDOLON ALPHA SETTING INSPIRATION


Eidolon Alpha borrows from a variety of sources, mostly Hellenistic Greek and Mycenaean folklore and mythology, Japanese computer RPGs such as *Final Fantasy*, and adjacent manga and anime such as *Record of Lodoss War* and *Neon Genesis Evangelion*. The concept of heroes who summon great magical monsters to battle is a popular trope in Japanese fantasy and this dominates the setting's actions, with a secondary focus on the sort of wandering party of influential heroes that has been a feature of fantasy RPGs since the beginning.

HAMMERHEADS

First introduced in *Cortex Prime Game Handbook*

Hammerheads is set in the near future when the world is besieged by the ravages of climate change, corporate catastrophe, and crisis. You play a Hammerhead agent, recruited from the ranks of first responders, the military, and the scientific community to join this elite global disaster management organization. Only the best and brightest, those individuals who run toward danger rather than run away, are sought out by the mysterious World Crisis Agency to serve. Equipped with state-of-the-art technology and the mighty High-Altitude Multi-Mission Emergency Response Headquarters—the Hammerheads—you and your team answer the call when nobody else can do it. In a world of disaster, you are the heroes the world needs.

***Hammerheads* at a Glance:**

- **Trait Sets:** Distinctions, attributes, relationships, roles
- **Character Creation:** Scratch built
- **Advancement:** Session record
- **Difficulty:** 
- **Resolution:** Crisis pool
- **Consequences:** Complications, stress
- **Other Wrinkles:** Leader-set action order, resource pools, vehicles



HAMMERHEADS SETTING INSPIRATION

Hammerheads is a love letter to *Thunderbirds*, the ITC television show by Gerry Anderson, in all of its various incarnations. This game aims for the feel of an action adventure TV show without a lot of violence or conflict, instead shifting the driving motivation to natural and man-made disasters. This also means it's inspired by disaster movies from *Only the Brave* and *Dante's Peak* to *San Andreas* and *Contagion*. The heroes are the brave and the bold, but they have their own problems and baggage from a life spent on the front lines of catastrophes.

TRACE 2.0

First introduced in *Cortex Prime Game Handbook*

TRACE 2.0 is a setting for Cortex Prime. TRACE stands for Targeted Response Anti-Corruption Engagement. You play the cops, EMTs, lawyers, and investigators assembled in the wake of a citywide crisis to help rebuild a fictional West Coast city and root out corruption before it can take hold once again. Each member of a TRACE squad is a highly qualified but deeply human person, brought together by a visionary new mayor to ensure that the citizens are free of inequality and protected from those who seek to exploit and divide them for profit and power.

TRACE 2.0 at a Glance:

- **Trait Sets:** Distinctions, affiliations, roles, talents, resources
- **Character Creation:** Archetype
- **Advancement:** Stress-only growth pool
- **Difficulty:** 10
- **Resolution:** Tests and contests
- **Consequences:** Complications, stress
- **Other Wrinkles:** Resource tags, vice traits

TRACE 2.0 SETTING INSPIRATION

TRACE 2.0 seeks to emulate a television drama with some elements of a police procedural. There's action, but it's not the central aspect of the setting. Of all three settings in this book, *TRACE 2.0* draws the most from the scene-based structure laid out in Prime Scenes (CPGH page 86). Interpersonal drama is high on the list of GM responsibilities. In terms of the key tropes, *TRACE 2.0* puts the spotlight on corruption and change.



STATEMENTS

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

A statement is a sentence or phrase that clarifies or refines the trait that it's attached to. One or more trait sets may be assigned trait statements. They're especially useful when assigned to values, relationships, or attributes. They signify which trait sets you want at the center of your game's dramatic tension.

USING STATEMENTS

You should use statements in games with dramatic, interpersonal, or introspective tensions, where characters questioning, changing, or redefining those statements will make your game more interesting. You can assign statements to multiple trait sets in the same game, but it's recommended to keep it limited to one, or at most two trait sets.

Trait statements pair well with the growth pool mod. See *Growth Pool* for more.

QUESTIONING A STATEMENT

When a PC questions a trait with a statement attached to it, they act contrary to the statement and triple the trait die for that roll. Once a trait statement is questioned, the trait it's attached to steps down by one.

At the end of the session or whenever character growth is resolved, that player must either:

- Rewrite the statement to reflect a new belief or truth and return the die to its original rating, or
- Keep the statement the same and the die rating remains stepped down. This may mean stepping up another trait to balance it out.

If a  trait is questioned, it is shut down until the end of the session. Its trait statement must be rewritten to return it to a  die rating.

STATEMENTS AS DISTINCTION ALTERNATIVES

First introduced in *Cortex Prime Game Handbook*

As a mod, you could have a Cortex Prime game where trait statements replace the distinctions prime set entirely. It's important that there still be at least three prime sets so that dice pools remain centered around a set of three dice; ensure there's another prime set or sufficient other ways to add dice (such as through talents or specialties) so that it remains consistent.

See *Distinctions* for more.



STRESS



First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

With this mod, instead of using complications to track injury, damage, or other negative personal effects on characters, you implement a distinct trait called stress. Characters can still choose to inflict complications on their opponents; these are created in the same manner as stress, but represent such things as deliberately hindering an opponent, creating distractions, and so on. Alternatively, stress can entirely replace complications, acting as the sole marker of consequence.

Stress is a useful mod to use when you want your SFX or other game mechanics to cause or affect specific types of harm. It reduces the need to track quite so many complications at any given time; instead, you just track one or more stress dice. Stress also leads to other mechanical tricks, such as using stress to help the character at the risk of making things worse.

Stress is the most used mod of complications. When you see the word complication in a Codex entry, you can often switch it out for stress. See *Complications* for more.

TYPES OF STRESS

Typically, a character can be afflicted by one or more types of stress, depending on the game. Some games simply have a single stress track; others might distinguish between types, drawing a line between physical and emotional stress, or defining a full list of stress types that define the type of setting and character interactions for the game.

The standard list of stress is:

- PHYSICAL
- MENTAL
- SOCIAL

INFLECTING STRESS

Stress replaces the rule about players choosing to spend **PP** to take a complication instead of being taken out. Stress doesn't require players to spend **PP**; any time a failure at a test or contest might take you out or cause harm, you take stress instead.

Any attack or effect that can take you out:

Inflicts stress equal to the effect die in the attack (if the PC currently has no stress or a lower die rating of stress than the new stress die).

Steps up stress (if the PC already has a stress die rating equal to or greater than the new stress die).

STRESSED OUT

If any stress die rating is ever stepped up past **12**, the character is taken out (or stressed out) and no longer takes part in the scene. By default, you can't spend a **PP** to delay this effect, though certain SFX or other rules may be implemented to do that. When you're stressed out, you are assumed to have **12** stress for the purposes of taking any additional stress, even though you can no longer act in the scene.

USING STRESS

Just like a complication, whenever a PC engages in a test or contest where their stress would make things more difficult for them, the GM (or an opposing PC) can add the stress die to their opposition pool as if it were an asset.

Stress rated at **4** functions just like a complication rated at **4**; it goes into a player's dice pool instead of being added to the opposition dice pool and earns the player a **PP**. Right after that test or contest, it either goes away or—if the player rolls a hitch on one of their dice—gets stepped up as the injury gets worse.

Only one type of stress can be used against a character at any given time, unless the GM pays the player a **PP** to add an additional stress die to the opposition dice pool. Characters can be affected by both stress and complications at the same time, however.



RECOVERING STRESS

All stress die ratings are always stepped down by one during any scene specifically framed to act as a rest period, downtime, or transition between action-heavy scenes. If a character takes stress in one scene from a battle, and the next scene is another battle soon after the first without any time spent resting up, then no stress is recovered.

To recover any remaining stress, characters can attempt a recovery test vs a dice pool consisting of the stress die and a base difficulty of **8** **8**. The GM may rule that other traits affect the roll, similar to a standard test. The PC or their circumstances must be capable of improving the situation to make a roll.

When the test is complete, one of the following happens:

- If the PC beat the difficulty and the effect die is greater than the stress, the stress is eliminated.
- If the PC beat the difficulty and the effect die is equal to or smaller than the stress, the stress is stepped down by one. Time must pass before another test can be made to recover the stress.
- If the PC failed to beat the difficulty, the stress remains as it is.
- If the PC beat the difficulty but rolled a hitch, the GM may hand over a **PP** and introduce a new stress or complication related to the one that was just recovered.
- If the PC failed to beat the difficulty and rolled a hitch, the stress is stepped up by one step for every hitch rolled.

STRESS MODS

By using mods with the stress mod, you can change how it's used and implemented. Some mods make the rules simpler; others add complexity.

- Last-Ditch Effort
- Pushing Stress
- Shaken and Stricken
- Trauma

LAST-DITCH EFFORT MOD

First introduced in

Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game

When your character has been taken out of a scene due to taking complications or stress you become unable to continue to act in the scene. With this mod, you may be able to temporarily recover enough to do what is called a last-ditch effort.

See *Last-Ditch Effort* for more.

PUSHING STRESS

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

With this mod, players may choose to have their character shoulder through their pain and suffering and use it as a motivator rather than a setback. To do this, you spend a **PP** and instead of adding the stress to the opposing dice pool, you add it to your own dice pool for that test or contest.




Using stress in this fashion has an additional cost. After the test or contest is resolved, the stress die included in your dice pool is stepped up by one. This may result in the PC being stressed out if the die is stepped up past **12**.




SHAKEN & STRICKEN

First introduced in *Dragon Brigade Roleplaying Game*



This mod applies stress directly to specific traits, such as attributes or skills, as opposed to giving stress its own trait. Determine which trait set before the game starts. Any time a character would take stress, the opponent chooses which trait in that set takes it.


Stress applied to a trait is added to the opposition's dice pool whenever the player uses that trait in a test or contest. The exception is when the stress is a , in which case the player includes the  in their own dice pool as per the basic  complications rule.



If the stress applied to a trait is greater than the trait it's assigned to, the PC is considered shaken. While a PC is shaken, they can only keep one die for their total instead of two. If they're already shaken and take stress to another trait that would make them shaken, they're considered stricken and are taken out of the scene until they can recover. A character also becomes stricken if any of their stress is stepped up beyond .

TRAUMA




First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

Trauma is like long-term stress. Using this mod, any time a PC's stress is stepped up past , they're stressed out of the scene, and they gain  trauma of the same type of stress that just increased. Trauma functions just like stress but is much harder to recover.

During any scene in which a character is stressed out and has taken trauma, additional stress to the character goes directly to trauma. Once trauma is stepped up beyond , the character is permanently out of options—they're dead, hopelessly incoherent, lost to their own psyche, or whatever seems most appropriate.

If the next scene is a recovery, transition, or otherwise restful scene in which the PC can be taken care of or allowed to recuperate, the PC's stress automatically steps down by one, but the trauma remains at the level it was at the end of the previous scene. Recovering trauma requires a test using any appropriate traits vs a base difficulty of   plus the trauma die. In some games, like *Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game*, this test can only be done by another PC.

When the test is complete, one of the following happens:

- If you beat the difficulty, the trauma die rating is stepped down by one.
- If you fail to beat the difficulty, the trauma does not get any better or worse. You can't try to recover that trauma again until time passes.
- If you beat the difficulty but roll a hitch, the GM may hand over a  and introduce either a complication that will hinder the PC in the next scene or inflict stress of a different type than the trauma that was being recovered, starting at  (or stepping up by one if the PC already had stress of that type).
- If you fail to beat the difficulty and roll one or more hitches, the trauma gets worse, stepping up by one for each hitch rolled. If this steps the trauma up past , that's all, folks.



A keyword or descriptor used to guide when a resource or ability might be used. There are several types of tag:

- Descriptor
- Effect
- Resource

These shouldn't be confused with a tag scene (see *Scenes*), which is a scene at the end of a session to wrap up the story's events and accomplish character growth.

DESCRIPTOR TAGS

When using the abilities trait set, descriptor tags are used to establish the details of how and why an ability works or to specify something about how the ability contributes to the story. They may end up being used in place of the ability's generic name in a character file.

In games that use growth, you can choose to add a new descriptor tag, and thus a new way to use your ability, rather than stepping up your ability's die rating.

EFFECT TAGS

An effect tag suggests ways the player might roll when using the ability in a test or contest. There are six effect tags:



Attack effects hurt people; used in rolls to give others complications or stress.



Sensory effects allow the character to better perceive and understand their surroundings; roll them in perception-based tests and contests.



Movement effects help characters get from place to place in unusual ways; roll the die in tests or contests that depend on speed or travel.



Control effects allow characters to manipulate aspects of their surroundings; roll the die when you alter the environment to influence the outcome of a test or contest.



Defense effects protect the character from types of harm; roll the die when it would help against attacks or rolls to inflict complications or stress.



Enhancement effects let the character change, shift, boost, or alter their body or talents in some amazing way; roll the die when a PC's enhancements give them an advantage.

RESOURCE TAG

First introduced in *TRACE 2.0* (CPGH)

When using this mod for resources, each resource introduced has specific tags indicating which roles (or other trait, if using a different trait set) it may be used to assist with.

The resource's die rating determines the number of role tags that can be attached to it.

 One tag

 Two tags

 Three tags



TAKEN OUT



First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

A character can be taken out of a scene due to the consequences of a roll, or due to their complications overcoming them for that scene. This is alternatively called stressed out when using the stress mod.

When a character is taken out, they may no longer perform any test or contest and no longer participate in the scene. Generally, a character that's taken out of a scene has no further impact on the scene's outcome.

BEING TAKEN OUT

Most tests and contests don't carry a risk of failure so dire that it takes a PC out of the scene. When they do, it's called a high stakes scene. It's up to the GM to make it clear from the beginning when it's a high stakes scene where failure may mean being taken out. Often the GM presents players with a number of options that include some with this potential outcome, usually with a commensurate greater reward. Players can then decide if the risk is worth it.

A character may be taken out when they:

- Fail to beat their opponent in a high stakes contest and lose, suffering the consequences on their opponent's terms
- Fail a test in a high stakes scene
- Have a complication or stress die stepped up beyond 12.

Instead of being taken out, a player may spend a PP and take a complication instead. The die rating of the complication is equal to the effect die of the opposition. If the complication comes from something other than a die roll, it begins at a default 6.

Similarly, when a GMC loses a contest that would result in them being taken out, the GM may hand over a PP to the player who won the contest and add a complication to the GMC equal to the effect die in the player's roll. This should be used rarely, and only when it will drive the story forward.

RECOVERING IN A SCENE



First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

If a complication attached to a character is somehow stepped up beyond 12, that character is automatically taken out of the scene. Complications that are stepped up beyond 12 are such a significant hindrance that they effectively keep the character from being able to act or play any part in the scene. A complication, even one stepped up above 12, lasts until the complication is removed or no longer hinders them.

It's possible that being taken out of a scene can be reversed by other characters in that scene, if they have healing abilities, magic, or the ability to change the circumstances that took the PC out in the first place. If a PC returns from being taken out, they usually come back with at least a 6 complication that reflects their traumatic experience.

See *Complications* for more.

TAKEN OUT MODS

By using mods with the mechanics for being taken out, you can change how it's used and implemented. Some mods make the rules simpler; others add complexity.

- Last-Ditch Effort
- Trauma





LAST-DITCH EFFORT MOD

First introduced in

Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game



When your character has been taken out of a scene due to taking complications or stress you become unable to continue to act in the scene. With this mod, you may be able to temporarily recover enough to do what is called a last-ditch effort.


This must be prompted by somebody trying to rouse you, which is treated like a recovery test against a  difficulty plus your  complication or stress. This does not recover you, however. If the ally succeeds in rousing you, they give you their effect die as an asset to use in your last-ditch effort. If they fail, there's no rousing you until the scene is over.

See *Last-Ditch Effort* for more.

TRAUMA MOD

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

When using the stress mod, you can also choose to include this mod. Trauma is like long-term stress. Using this mod, any time a PC's stress is stepped up past  and they're stressed out of the scene they gain  trauma of the same type of stress that just increased. Trauma functions just like stress but is much harder to recover.

During any scene in which a character is stressed out and has taken trauma, additional stress to the character goes directly to trauma. Once trauma is stepped up beyond , the character is permanently out of options—they're dead, hopelessly incoherent, lost to their own psyche, or whatever seems most appropriate.

See *Stress* for more.



First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

A talent is a special trait that doesn't have a die rating and consists of some descriptive or narrative text with an SFX, separate from a distinction. Talents are helpful in a game where characters from similar origins need to be distinct from one another, or where the other traits are less numerous or are broad in scope. Because talents don't have a die rating, they're frequently used to boost or accent another trait or series of traits that do have die ratings.

USING TALENTS

Talents are often associated with another trait group, such as skills or roles. They can also be grouped together based on things such as professions, cultures, past experiences, membership in a group, faction, or organization, or just thrown into a single generic list. In each case, making it easy and quick to skim the lists of talents and identify which ones might be appropriate during character creation is a good idea.

Most characters in games using talents start with two and can add more as part of character growth.

This is the standard format for talents:

TALENT NAME

Descriptive text (optional)

Activation: Cost (see SFX) or triggering event

Effect: Benefit (see SFX)

A triggering event is either a narrative or mechanical occurrence in the game that allows the PC with that talent to activate its effects.



TEST

CONFLICT CORE

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

A test is the central mechanic of rolling dice to resolve a situation by determining if there's a successful outcome or a challenging failure. Almost always, tests are initiated by the GM asking the player, "What do you do?"

If the outcome is guaranteed, a test can be resolved without rolling dice. The GM can declare that the test is an automatic success, or the player can choose not to respond to a test and find another way forward. There's usually no need for an effect die, but if one is needed, use the largest die in the player's dice pool if it's an automatic success, or in the opposition pool if it's an automatic failure.

ENGAGING IN A TEST






The GM assembles an opposition pool and rolls it, setting the difficulty by adding together two dice from the roll and announcing the total.


The difficulty is the number the player needs to beat with their own total when they roll the dice for the test. If the player's total beats the difficulty, the test is a success. If the player's total is lower or equal to the difficulty, the test is a failure.

Tests are usually uncomplicated. A success means the character does what they wanted to do, and a failure means they don't.

SETTING THE DIFFICULTY FOR TESTS

The difficulty dice are always two dice of the same number of sides, based on the situation:

| | |
|---|-------------|
|  | VERY EASY |
|  | EASY |
|  | CHALLENGING |
|  | HARD |
|  | VERY HARD |

In addition to difficulty dice, the GM picks up one or more dice based on appropriate traits from the location, opposing GMCs, or the scene itself. The GM can also add one or more  to represent increasing risks or threats.

Occasionally a player might set the difficulty for a GMC's test. In this case, the player rolls first and the GM rolls to beat the difficulty set by the player. Most often, though, tests are the realm of the PCs.



SPECIAL TYPES OF TESTS

There are various types of tests you might use in your Cortex game:


- Asset Test
- Growth Test
- Recovery Test
- Timed Test

ASSET TESTS

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

To create an asset by attempting a test, a player declares what their character does to create the asset and assembles an appropriate dice pool. The GM rolls to set the difficulty, usually with something basic like  . The effect die of the test becomes the die rating of the asset. The GM may set a cap on the size of assets created this way by setting the difficulty dice to that die rating. The asset created may not be larger than this die cap.

This can also be used to create assets representing clues. Anytime a PC wants to get a read on somebody, case a scene, spot something out of the ordinary, or generally just use their senses, they're creating an asset.

With a successful test, the PC gains some crucial information. If the PC spends a  after succeeding at the test, they can bank the asset until they need it, give it to another character, or keep it for longer.

With a failed test, the PC doesn't gain any useful advantage. If there are complications, they generally represent the consequences of poking around places trying to find stuff out.





See *Assets* for more.




GROWTH TESTS

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

When using the growth pool mod for growing characters, PCs collect dice throughout play that form a growth pool. Between sessions or at a time determined by the GM, each player can decide how they want to improve their character. To do so, you must succeed at a test. The GM sets the difficulty for you, using one die equal to the target die rating of the trait, and a second die based on the type of trait it is (or what it currently is, if you're not planning to step it up):

-  Attribute or affiliation
-  Distinction, role, or power
-  Skill, specialty, SFX, value, or swap distinction
-  Relationship, resource, signature asset, or swap unlocked SFX

You roll your growth pool plus the highest stress or complication you had during the session, even if it was recovered. For this test, hitches can't be activated but still can't be used for your total. You don't need to choose an effect die for this test; it's a simple pass or fail, so use your two best results. You can't use  to affect the outcome of these tests.



If you succeed, you get to step up your trait or add a new one, and the dice in the growth pool are used up.

If you lose or tie, you can do it anyway, but you have to step something else down to compensate; the dice in the growth pool stick around for next session.

See *Growth Pool* for more.


RECOVERY TESTS

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

Getting rid of or reducing a complication is a test vs a dice pool consisting of the complication and a base difficulty of  .

Other traits may also affect the roll, and the PC or their circumstances must be capable of improving the situation to make a roll.

When the test is complete, one of the following happens:

- If you beat the difficulty and your effect die is greater than the complication, the complication is eliminated.
- If you beat the difficulty and the effect die is equal to or smaller than the complication, the complication is stepped down by one. You can't try to recover that complication again until time passes.
- If you fail to beat the difficulty, the complication remains as it is.
- If you beat the difficulty but roll a hitch, the GM may hand over a  and introduce a new complication related to the one that was just recovered.
- If you fail to beat the difficulty and roll a hitch, the complication is stepped up by one step for every hitch rolled.

See *Recovery*, *Complications*, and *Stress* for more.



TIMED TESTS

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

A timed test is a special kind of test that handles situations where there's a clock counting down or a limited window in which to carry out a task. Timed tests use a series of standard tests—either several of the same kind or a series of different tests—for something that has multiple steps.

A timed test is measured in story beats—the more beats, the more time the PCs have. Each time a player rolls the dice, it uses one beat. Use checkboxes or tokens to keep track of beats. It's a countdown, because there's a finite amount of time; once the beats are gone, they're done.

The GM sets the difficulty for the tests and decides how much time players have. By default, the number of beats is the number of tests—three or four is a good baseline. For an easier timed test, give them one or two additional beats to accomplish it. For a harder test, give them one or even two fewer beats.

If you beat the difficulty, it only costs you the time you spent, i.e., one beat. A heroic success means you found a shortcut and don't lose any time at all. You don't lose a beat for that roll.

If you fail to beat the difficulty, you succeeded but that part of the test took too long, and an additional beat is lost. Move on to the next stage of the timed test.

If the player runs out of beats—zero or less—they're out of time, and whatever bad thing was going to happen happens. They might have a chance to escape, depending on the situation, but they can't finish their objective.

If the player succeeds with time left on the clock, they've achieved their objectives (including a clean getaway, if that's what they're looking to do). If they succeed but have zero beats left, they must choose between achieving their objective and a clean getaway (or between achieving their objective and saving some money or between achieving their objective and being proud of their work, etc.). A test completed with no more beats remaining is a conditional success.

If a PC is running dangerously low on time, the rest of the group might be able to help them out. They can make a test of their own—causing a diversion, trying to delay the bad guys with conversation, eliminating some security guards—and with a success, they give the player back one of the beats they've lost. If they get a heroic success, it's two beats.

Failure means that PC can't help any more for the rest of the timed test. No matter what, only one attempt at buying time can happen in between each beat of the timed test.

TEST MODS

By using mods with test mechanics, you can change how they're used and implemented. Some mods make the rules simpler; others add complication. Tests and contests share many of the same mods.

- Action-Based Resolution
- Doom Pool
- Crisis Pool
- Challenge
- Limited Doom Pool
- Add All the Dice
- No Effect Dice
- Reroll for Effect
- Consequential Failure
- Static Difficulty

ACTION-BASED RESOLUTION MOD

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*


When using the action-based resolution mod, anything a PC or GMC does is called an action, which is contested by an opposing reaction. This replaces all tests and contests.

See *Action Order* for more.



DOOM POOL MOD

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

The doom pool is a mod that serves as a combination of ambient threat level, GM resource, and pacing mechanic. The doom pool is sometimes called the trouble pool, the danger pool, or some other thematic title. The doom pool replaces difficulty dice for all tests, and the dice in the pool replace  for the GM.

See *Doom Pool* for more.

CRISIS POOL MOD

First introduced in *Hammerheads* (CPGH)

With this mod based on the doom pool mod, pools of dice represent multiple localized problems. Each of these smaller problems gets its own pool of dice and spends dice from it just like a doom pool would, but only for things that the problem might be able to influence. Crisis pools can be directly affected by the actions of PCs.

See *Crisis Pool* for more.

CHALLENGE MOD

First introduced in

Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game


In this mod of crisis pools, the GM presents a single pool of dice as a challenge pool. Challenges take place over several rounds. Each PC gets to take a turn within a round to attempt a test to lessen or resolve the challenge. Each round represents some passage of time. The challenge gets to act on its own turn and can either get worse or create problems for the PCs in response.

See *Challenge* for more.

LIMITED DOOM POOL MOD

First introduced in

Cortex Prime Game Handbook

In this mod, the difficulty is determined as usual for a test, based on the situation's overall difficulty and by any GMC traits that factor into it. Doom dice are then spent out of the doom pool to add dice to the difficulty or to include more dice in the total after the dice are rolled, as per the standard doom pool rules. Doom dice continue to replace  for the GM.

See *Difficulty* for more.

ADD ALL THE DICE MOD

First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*

All the dice rolled in the dice pool are added together for the total, then compared to the opposition total (which likewise is every die added together).

See *Dice* for more.

NO EFFECT DICE MOD

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

In this mod, effect dice are dropped entirely, and all tests and contests have simple success and failure outcomes. The degree of success or the measure of the outcome remains story-driven and descriptive, rather than being represented by a die rating.

See *Effect Die* for more.

REROLL FOR EFFECT MOD

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

This mod doesn't use the original die roll to generate the effect die; instead the player or GM rerolls their dice pool and takes the highest rolling die as the effect die.

See *Effect Die* for more.



STATIC DIFFICULTY

First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*

With this mod, players only roll against opposition dice pools in a contest, not in a test. When a player rolls in a test, the difficulty is a static target number instead of a difficulty die.

Static difficulty is based on this difficulty dice chart:



| | |
|----|-------------|
| 3 | VERY EASY |
| 7 | EASY |
| 11 | CHALLENGING |
| 15 | HARD |
| 19 | VERY HARD |

If the PC has a complication that would add to the opposition, the complication die is rolled and added to the static difficulty.






TRAITS

Each PC's character file is mostly a list of traits and related game stats. Traits define a character and how they interact with the world they live in. They paint a picture of who a character is and what they can do, not just in terms of their skills and abilities but also their personality, background, or aspirations.

Almost all traits have die ratings, usually between 4 and 12. When that trait comes into play, the player rolls that die as part of their dice pool.


TRAIT SETS

Any collection of traits that belong to the same basic type is assumed to be part of a trait set. The rule of thumb in Cortex Prime is that you may only add one trait from any given trait set to a dice pool without added cost. If you want to include more, it costs a PP. Some Cortex Prime games might limit this use of PP to specific trait sets, such as skills or attributes, while others might eliminate this PP ability altogether.

Every Cortex Prime game needs at least two prime sets in addition to distinctions. These are the source of almost every dice pool used in tests and contests. Games can have additional trait sets beyond their prime sets. These are not included in every dice pool, only when they are relevant.

A character may be defined by as few as three and as many as six or seven trait sets, depending on the game.

TEMPORARY TRAITS

In play, characters may gain temporary traits, which last for a short time—a scene, or maybe a session. Temporary traits can also be assigned directly to a scene or to a location, and either go away when circumstances make them irrelevant (like a **FLAMING TORCH** 6 once it's doused in a lake) or when some other time limit is reached. Assets and complications are the most common examples of temporary traits.

PC TRAITS

Each of the trait options provided here has its own entry in the Cortex Codex, or is otherwise described in the entry listed with the trait here.

Possible PC trait are:

- Abilities
- Affiliations
- Attributes
- Distinctions
- Powers
- Power Sets (See *Powers*)
- Relationships
- Reputations (See *Relationships*)
- Resources
- Roles
- Signature Assets
- Skills
- Specialties
- Talents
- Values

ABILITY TRAIT

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

Abilities are a trait set mod of powers that create a cinematic, prime time drama approach to superpowers and SFX. An ability is a rated trait with a number of SFX, effect tags, and descriptor tags attached to it along with a limit to give PCs incredible, specific superpowers.

See *Abilities* for more.

AFFILIATION TRAIT

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

Affiliations are a trait set of usually three rated traits that reflect how well the character performs in specific contextual situations, like environments, social structures, or circumstances.

See *Affiliations* for more.

ATTRIBUTE TRAIT

First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*

Attributes represent raw ability, prowess, and effort. They rarely offer an insight into a character's experience, training, or external circumstances. They make a good baseline for a prime set.

See *Attributes* for more.

DISTINCTION TRAIT

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

A trait that represents a character's background, personality, and role in the game and differentiates them from other PCs and GMCs. Distinctions are considered a universal prime set, so regardless of what sets are used in your game, every character should have three distinctions broad and varied enough that you can narratively justify including one in almost any dice pool.

See *Distinctions* for more.

POWER TRAIT

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

A power is a special kind of trait that represents super-human ability or some extraordinary quality that most normal humans or baseline characters don't have. The origin or source of powers varies from setting to setting—radiation, genetic mutation, sorcery, high-tech gadgets, etc. Powers can also be used to represent gear or special equipment, making it possible to mix heroes of varying power origins together with the same system.

See *Powers* for more.

POWER SET TRAIT

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

A power set is a mod that adds thematic strength to a collection of power traits. Power sets usually come with a limit that governs them, one or more helpful SFX, and a single origin or source that explains why your character has these powers. Each power set counts as a trait set of its own.

See *Powers* for more.

RELATIONSHIP TRAIT

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

Relationships are traits that represent the intensity and importance of a character's connection to another character or group of characters. This connection may be positive or negative in nature, so long as it motivates and empowers the character who has it.

See *Relationships* for more.

REPUTATION TRAIT

First introduced in *Firefly Role-Playing Game*

A reputation is a relationship trait mod that may be used alongside relationships or in place of them. Reputations work like relationships do, except they represent a character's standing with a group, organization, company, or culture.

See *Relationships* for more.

RESOURCE TRAIT

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

Resources are helpful things outside of a character themselves that are expendable and recoverable. There are four types of resource: extras, locations, organizations, and props.

See *Resources* for more.



ROLE TRAIT

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

Roles are a skill-like trait mod that replaces skills in some expressions of Cortex Prime. A role acts like a skill group or skill set, rather than a specific skill, and reflects a PC's experience, training, or proficiency in a broad thematic area.

See *Roles* for more.

SIGNATURE ASSET TRAIT

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

A signature asset belongs to a PC and is recorded on their character file—it doesn't need to be created during play and it gives the player an extra die to include in their dice pools when they can justify their use.

Unlike skills or attributes, signature assets are about things a PC has or people they know, not about qualities innate to them. These assets are a great way to further reveal a PC's personality as a means of representing heirlooms or unique weapons or special relationships.

See *Signature Assets* for more.

SKILL TRAIT

First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*

Skills represent natural talent, training, or experience. If you can describe it as a verb, it's a good candidate for a skill. Most skill lists for Cortex games consist of verbs.

See *Skills* for more.

SPECIALTY TRAIT

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

A specialty is a narrow area of concentration or focus. Specialties can be used in many different ways, both in conjunction with skills, the trait set they are a mod for, and separately.

See *Specialties* for more.

TALENT TRAIT

First introduced in *Leverage Roleplaying Game*

A talent is a special trait that doesn't have a die rating and consists of some descriptive or narrative text with an SFX, separate from a distinction. Talents are helpful in a game where characters from similar origins need to be distinct from one another, or where the other traits are less numerous or are broad in scope.

See *Talents* for more.

VALUE TRAIT

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

Values represent how much specific things matter to the PC and, in turn, how much they influence the outcome of tests and contests. They can embody such things as societal mores, cultural principles, or elements of a code of honor or behavior.

See *Values* for more.






MAKING TRAITS SPECIAL

Traits can be as simple as a name and a die rating, but can also add additional depth or complexity by using SFX and trait statements.

TRAIT SFX

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

SFX is short for “special effect.” It’s usually some kind of benefit or bonus that only occurs under certain conditions. In Cortex Prime, SFX are used as a way to introduce exception-based rules for trait sets that possess them. They’re a way to break the rules of the game, modify the outcome of tests and contests, and add more texture to the story.

All distinctions get the *Hinder*: Gain a  when you switch out this distinction’s  for a  SFX for free, and other trait sets may have one or more SFX to give context to the traits in the set.

See *SFX* for more.

TRAIT STATEMENTS

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

A statement is a sentence or phrase that clarifies or refines the trait that it’s attached to. One or more trait sets may be assigned trait statements. They’re especially useful when assigned to values, relationships, or attributes. They signify which trait sets you want at the center of your game’s dramatic tension.

See *Statements* for more.

GMC TRAITS

Major GMCs typically use the same or similar trait sets to PCs, but some traits are exclusive to game moderator characters and have special rule interactions when used.

- Boss Trait
- Mob Trait
- Vice Trait

BOSS TRAIT

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

Bosses have a single boss trait that has multiple dice of a single die rating. A boss can’t be completely taken out of any scene until all of the boss trait’s dice are removed. If you’re using major GMCs with boss traits, ignore the usual rules for taking out characters and use this method instead.

See *Boss* for more.

MOB TRAIT

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

Mobs have a single mob trait with multiple dice of the same die rating representing the size of the mob. All of these trait dice are included in the mob’s dice pool. The size of the dice depends on the relative skill or experience of the mob’s members.

See *Mob* for more. *Factions & Orgs* also use mob traits.

VICE TRAIT

First introduced in *TRACE 2.0* (CPGH)

In games where the PCs have roles, vice traits can replace role traits for minor and major GMCs. Vice traits give GMCs acting in opposition to PCs a negative role built to fit the game setting. In *TRACE 2.0*, this takes the form of self-serving motivations.

See *Roles* for more.



VEHICLE TRAITS

When vehicles need more mechanical weight than a signature asset, they can be assigned several traits that can be added to dice pools when PCs make tests or contests. These traits sometimes replace and sometimes complement or supplement existing PC traits.

See *Vehicles* for more.

URNS

In a standard Cortex Prime game, outside of a contest, there is usually no set turn order to determine when each PC or GMC acts. This is referred to as narrative order. Different mods introduce ways to adjudicate an order when many things happen at the same time.

URNS IN A CONTEST

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

A contest is a series of dice rolls between opponents, each trying to beat the previous roll until one side chooses not to roll and gives in, or fails to beat the previous roll and takes a complication or is taken out.

The initiating PC always rolls first in a contest, followed by the character opposing them. Rolls go back and forth until one character fails to beat the difficulty, or chooses to give in.

INTERFERING

If a PC wants to get involved in a contest between two other characters, they can attempt to interfere—but it costs a **PP** and comes with a bit of risk. After each side has rolled at least once, a player can spend a **PP** and describe how they're trying to get between the characters. The player rolls their dice and compares the total to the current difficulty in the contest.

If both sides are committed to continuing the contest, their players (or the GM if a GMC is one of the contestants) each hand the interfering PC a **PP** and describe how they work around, over, or through them to continue their contest. Neither can give in until both have rolled again.

See *Contest* for more.

URNS IN AN ACTION ORDER

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

When using an action order to track conflict, tests and contests are replaced with actions and reactions. An action is like the initiating roll of a contest; a reaction is a defensive or reactive roll to avoid it and only defensive traits apply.

The action lead is the character who goes first in an action order. The GM chooses the action lead for the first turn. All characters—player and GM—get a turn. Play progresses around the table, starting with the action lead, and then that player chooses the next character—either a PC or a GMC—to act. Once everyone has had a chance to do something, the last one to go chooses the action lead for the next round (this could include nominating themselves).

See *Action Order* for more.

LEADER-SET ACTION ORDER MOD

First introduced in *Hammerheads (CPGH)*

This mod combines crisis pools with the action order mod. One PC is assigned as the team leader. The players can nominate who this is, or the GM might select the assignment based on the mission or some other criteria. The team leader determines the order in which all of the PCs and the crisis pools act. Unlike the standard action order, this is pre-set at the beginning of each round; each team member takes their turn, the GM makes a turn for each crisis pool, and the round ends.

See *Action Order* for more.



URNS IN A CHALLENGE

First introduced in

Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game

The GM decides which PC goes first, but once a PC has had their turn, that player chooses which remaining PC goes next. Each player gets one turn per round. On a PC's turn, the GM rolls the challenge pool to set the difficulty, just like in a test.

Once every PC has had a turn, the challenge pool acts. The GM can choose to either:

- Target a player with a negative effect, or
- Strengthen the challenge pool by stepping up one of its dice or adding a **6**

If the GM targets a PC, their player rolls to set a difficulty for the challenge pool first, and the GM rolls the challenge pool second, giving the PC stress (or a complication) on a success.

Once the GM has had their turn, it's back to the players. The player who went last in the previous round gets to choose who goes first, including nominating themselves.

See *Challenge* for more.

URNS IN HANDOFF INITIATIVE

First introduced in *Marvel Heroic Roleplaying*

Handoff initiative, sometimes referred to as elective order, allows every character in a scene to have an opportunity to act in a more formal structure. One character goes first, doing one test, contest or other interaction that takes about one beat to accomplish. Play then progresses around the table, with the player who just completed their beat choosing the next character to act.

Once everyone in the scene has had a chance to do something, the last one to go chooses the character to begin the next round.

See *Handoff Initiative* for more.

URNS IN A DRAMATIC ORDER

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

In dramatic order the decision about who goes first is determined by a character, usually a player, stating that they want something and another character, sometimes a player but often the GM, saying they want to stop them. The initiating character is called the dramatic lead.

Once the contests with the dramatic lead are resolved they can transition to another contest shortly afterward, or to another scene entirely.

If everyone wants to go first and it's not clear who would, the GM can call for all the players who want to start the dramatic order to roll their dice for the contests they want to start. The highest rolling player starts and uses that roll for the contest; the other players pick up their dice and can interfere, assist, or sit out the contest as it plays out. Move on to other contests as appropriate, varying the dramatic lead when possible.

See *Dramatic Order* for more.

URNS IN INITIATIVE

First introduced in *Serenity Roleplaying Game*

When using the initiative mod, the order proceeds from the highest rolling total to the lowest, and then either starts over again at the top of the next sequence and repeats, or there's another die roll to establish the order again.

See *Initiative* for more.



TURNS IN PATHWAYS

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

The pathways method of character creation has the group work together to build the setting for their story and the connections that their characters have to each of its elements. They do this through a series of stages, with each player adding one element in each stage.

It isn't absolutely necessary to have the players take turns adding elements to the map, but it does make things less confusing. For each element added or changed in a stage (major and meta stages have two each), go around the table letting each player add an element.

The GM does not need to take a turn. Chances are the map is more than sufficiently large and convoluted at the end of pathways with just the players adding to it. But if as the GM you want to have some creative input into the whole thing, you can fill in your ideas on each stage as per a player, adding new elements that relate to the PCs and GMCs. Since you don't have your own character, you can add elements connected to whatever you like.

First introduced in *Smallville Roleplaying Game*

Values represent how much specific things matter to the PC and, in turn, how much they influence the outcome of tests and contests. They can embody such things as societal mores, cultural principles, or elements of a code of honor or behavior. As with relationships, a high rating in a value doesn't mean your character likes or stands out as a paragon of that value, but rather that they are more invested and concerned about that value than if they had it at a lower die rating. A 10 in TRUTH could still mean the character is a liar, but the concept of truth and falsehood is one of the things that drives them the most to succeed.

USING VALUES

Values are useful in games where differences in physical or mental attributes matter less to a character than what they're motivated by and what they believe. Prime time drama, YA stories, political drama, and other personality-driven and emotion-driven genres are all excellent candidates for the values trait set.

RATING VALUES

Values have a range of die ratings: usually one at 10, one or two at 8, one at 4, and the rest at 6. When a value changes—either stepping up or stepping down by a die size—one other value must change at the same time in the opposite direction. Thus, the total number of die steps in the dice assigned to values in any given Cortex Prime game should always stay the same. Values can never be lower than 4 or higher than 12.

The die rating of a value measures how much the value matters to the character, as follows:

- 4 I'm really not into this.
- 6 Sure, this matters. But so do a lot of things.
- 8 This is definitely on my radar.
- 10 I'm all over this thing.
- 12 This is my heart and soul.

Values are commonly paired with trait statements to let players further define how their PC feels about each value.

See *Statements* for more.

VALUES MODS

By using mods with values, you can change how this trait is used and implemented. Some mods make the rules simpler; others add complexity.

- Catalysts
- Moral Support

CATALYSTS AND VALUES

Catalysts are a special kind of major GMC whose values change through game play. Catalysts typically have the same array of values as PCs.

Catalysts have fifteen steps in their value die ratings, but they usually don't start with any value rated higher than 8. This means most have the following die ratings assigned to their values: one at 4, one at 6, and the rest at 8. A catalyst's value die ratings are a constraint on the size of their catalyst die. A catalyst die rating can't be higher than the highest value. A 10 value is required for a 10 catalyst die, a 12 value for a 12 catalyst die.

Catalyst value die ratings may change during play based on the outcomes of contests with the PCs:

- If a catalyst wins a contest against a PC, the GM may step up the value they used in the contest by one step. If that value is already 12, the GM can step up another value that complements it.
- If a catalyst loses a contest against a PC, the player of that PC may choose one of the catalyst's values to either step up or step down. If it's already a 12 or a 4, another value must be chosen.
- The GM must then step up or step down another value's die rating to keep the same number of steps in total (fifteen).

When the players win a contest against a catalyst and change a value, this should impact the catalyst's future actions. This is a way you can show the players that their choices have meaning.

See *Catalyst* for more.



MORAL SUPPORT

First introduced in

Tales of Xadia: The Dragon Prince Roleplaying Game

This mod for helping others uses the values trait set. On another player's turn in a challenge, or when they're in a contest, you can step down one of your value die ratings by one in order to step up that same value in their own dice pool for that roll. Your value remains stepped down until the end of the session.

VEHICLES



First introduced in *Firefly Role-Playing Game*

In some settings, vehicles like spaceships, sailing ships, or RVs need more of a mechanical role than other trait sets can provide. If they're as important to the story as the characters are, then they deserve more attention.

To make vehicles come to life in settings like this, each group of players maintains a vehicle file, a bit like a character file, that contains traits like attributes, distinctions, and signature assets. Players can use their vehicle to accomplish goals such as chasing down criminals or staging attacks on enemy installations.

USING VEHICLES

PCs make tests or engage in contests using the vehicle's traits any time the vehicle's attributes matter more than the individual PC's attributes (or equivalent trait).

Vehicle dice pools are assembled by pairing one of the vehicle's attributes with a PC's other traits, usually a trait that relates specifically to handling the vehicle in the situation presented by the GM.

Success or failure in vehicle tests typically affects the whole group. If a failed roll leads to the complication **FAILING COOLANT SYSTEM**, the results of that complication affect everyone on board the vehicle. Be careful not to lay on the costs of failure too quickly, as a single bad roll could potentially knock out the whole group in one hit.

Players can purchase assets with their **PP** and acquire complications that affect their vehicle just as they can for individual characters. Any asset purchased by a player for the vehicle starts at a **6** and lasts for a scene, and any hitches rolled on a vehicle test can be activated by the GM to add complications to the vehicle. If the result of a test or contest would take out a vehicle, any player may spend a **PP** for their PC to instead take a complication equal to the highest rolling die in the opposing pool to keep the vehicle in the fight.

VEHICLE TRAIT SETS

In addition to the traits of the vehicle's pilot, engineer, and other PCs, the vehicle itself possesses several traits that can be added to rolls made when PCs make tests or contests. These traits sometimes replace (attributes) and sometimes complement or supplement (distinctions and signature assets) existing PC traits.

VEHICLE ATTRIBUTES

Primarily, vehicle attributes replace team attributes (or an equivalent trait) when a PC is assembling a dice pool that involves the vehicle. There are three default attributes, which each start at a **8** die rating. An attribute rating may be stepped up, as long as there is a corresponding step down in another attribute. Vehicle attributes can go up to **12** or down to **4**.

The three default attributes are:

- **ENGINES:** This measures the agility and speed of your vehicle, including how well it handles and the kind of problems the engine might have. The higher the **ENGINES** die rating, the faster and more agile it is. A lower **ENGINES** die rating might indicate the vehicle is awkward to maneuver or just plain slow.
- **FRAME:** This is the structure that contains the interior of the vehicle and keeps everything together. A higher **FRAME** means that your vehicle is strong and secure, while a weaker **FRAME** might indicate perpetual problems with the exterior.
- **SYSTEMS:** This helps the vehicle operate, including life support, communications, internet access, computers, and navigation. The higher the **SYSTEMS** die rating, the more technically sophisticated the vehicle is. A lower **SYSTEMS** die rating indicates a no-frills vehicle, or one with a lot of hotwired parts.

GM vehicles have a fourth attribute:

- **CREW:** This represents the skill of the crew of a GMC-operated vehicle. A higher **CREW** die rating indicates trained professionals, while a lower rated **CREW** is either unskilled or flying with a skeleton team.



VEHICLE DISTINCTIONS

Vehicles have vehicle distinctions with SFX just like basic character distinctions. Each vehicle distinction comes with a *Hinder*: Gain a PP when you switch out this distinction's 8 for a 4 SFX, but other SFX are also unlockable.

Vehicle distinctions may be added to a dice pool when a character is using the vehicle to accomplish a task. A player may add both a vehicle distinction and a personal distinction to a single dice pool.

Vehicle distinctions come in three types, and each vehicle has one distinction from each category:

Model determines the vehicle's starting attributes and indicates the vehicle's base type.

History reveals how old or new the vehicle is. It can also indicate the vehicle's current use.

Customization reveals how the vehicle has been modified, remodeled, or upgraded since its initial build.

VEHICLE SIGNATURE ASSETS

Like individual PCs, vehicles can have signature assets to add to a dice pool. These assets represent modifications or resources that are available on the vehicle. Typically, vehicle signature assets have a rating of 8.

BUILDING A VEHICLE

Vehicles are typically built using the scratch built character creation method, though some settings where vehicles are more important may offer other options.

Building a vehicle follows these steps:

- 1 Pick a model distinction and assign a 8 to each attribute.
- 2 Step up one attribute by one or two steps, and step down one or both of the attributes by the same total number of steps. Alternatively, keep all attributes at 8.
- 3 Pick a history distinction.
- 4 Pick a customization distinction.
- 5 Assign the Hinder SFX to each distinction.
- 6 Choose or create two additional SFX to attach to one or two distinctions.
- 7 Create two signature assets rated at 8 representing a special feature or minor GMC.
- 8 Name the vehicle, and discuss biographical information.



TRAINING UP VEHICLES

In games using a growth mod, players can spend their growth to improve the vehicle instead of their individual PC. As with an individual PC, vehicles can swap distinctions, add or step up signature assets, and unlock new SFX. It's impossible for a vehicle to swap out its model distinction.




PCs can also spend dice from their growth pool to purchase improvements to the vehicle.

See *Growth* for more.


RESOURCE POOLS

First introduced in *Hammerheads* (CPGH)

In this mod for resources and vehicles, each vehicle has multiple pools of dice that function as prop resources.

One player is assigned the role of tracking resources in each mission. Before each mission, this player, with the advice of the group as a whole, decides how many dice the resource pools contain for that mission. This decision can't be changed after the mission starts, but the team is given the briefing before any dice need to be assigned. Each pool starts with , and the team may assign **7x**  among the five pools. No pool may have a rating of more than .

Any player can spend the resources out of each pool, rolling them and adding the highest rolling die to their total for a test. The other rolled dice are discarded—they do not go back into the resource pool. The resources in question must align with the test they're being used for; players who spend the dice come up with some narrative for what that resource is and how it's being applied.

Resources must be committed to a specific test before the test is rolled, and once spent out of the pool, they aren't refreshed until a bridge scene, or until a player adds a  to a crisis pool to refresh one. The latter effect represents a knuckle-biting last-minute airdrop of supplies that may make things worse. Any player may spend resources and refresh resources.

The five example resource pools can be found on the *Cortex Prime Game Handbook*, page 155.

