

# CONTENTS

<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>3</b>	The Heroes .....	11
What is Castlemourn? .....	3	The Villains and Other Characters .....	11
What is the Cortex System? .....	3	Other Antagonists .....	12
What is a Role Playing Game? .....	3	Other Supporting Characters .....	12
<b>GAME RULES</b> .....	<b>4</b>	The Objectives .....	12
<b>WHAT YOU NEED</b> .....	<b>4</b>	<b>SCENE 1 SETUP</b> .....	<b>12</b>
The Players .....	4	<b>PROBLEMS</b> .....	<b>12</b>
The Game Master .....	4	Aconite, Greenhag .....	12
The Dice .....	4	<b>RESULTS</b> .....	<b>13</b>
The Rules and the Story .....	4	<b>SCENE 2 SETUP</b> .....	<b>13</b>
<b>THE CHARACTER SHEET</b> .....	<b>5</b>	<b>PROBLEMS</b> .....	<b>13</b>
Attributes .....	5	Uldo Thelwood, Master of the Estate .....	14
Derived Attributes .....	5	Naeran Olyss .....	15
Skills .....	5	Thelwood's Guards .....	15
Traits .....	5	<b>RESULTS</b> .....	<b>15</b>
Plot Points .....	6	<b>SCENE 3 SETUP</b> .....	<b>15</b>
<b>ACTIONS</b> .....	<b>6</b>	<b>PROBLEMS</b> .....	<b>16</b>
Simple Actions .....	6	Kaei, Thaele Healer .....	16
Complex Actions .....	6	Results .....	17
Unskilled Rolls .....	6	<b>SCENE 4 SETUP</b> .....	<b>17</b>
Opposed Actions .....	7	<b>PROBLEMS</b> .....	<b>17</b>
Botches and Extraordinary Successes .....	7	Thelwood's Guards .....	17
<b>COMBAT</b> .....	<b>7</b>	<b>RESULTS</b> .....	<b>18</b>
Combat Turn .....	7	<b>SCENE 5 SETUP</b> .....	<b>18</b>
Life Points and Damage .....	7	<b>PROBLEMS</b> .....	<b>18</b>
Attacking and Defending .....	8	Moonskull .....	18
Attacks .....	8	Thelwood's Guards .....	18
Defenses .....	8	<b>RESULTS</b> .....	<b>18</b>
Calculating Damage .....	8	<b>SCENE 6 SETUP</b> .....	<b>19</b>
<b>MAGIC IN CASTLEMOURN</b> .....	<b>9</b>	<b>PROBLEMS</b> .....	<b>19</b>
Magic Traits .....	9	<b>SCENE 7A SETUP</b> .....	<b>19</b>
Casting Actions .....	9	<b>PROBLEMS</b> .....	<b>19</b>
Strain .....	9	Tangleclaws .....	20
Resisting Magic .....	9	Naeran Olyss .....	20
<b>THAT'S IT</b> .....	<b>9</b>	Chunk the Ogre .....	20
<b>ESCAPE FROM BLACKOON</b> .....	<b>10</b>	Animated Skeletons .....	20
An Adventure for Castlemourn .....	10	<b>SCENE 7B SETUP</b> .....	<b>20</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b> .....	<b>10</b>	<b>PROBLEMS</b> .....	<b>21</b>
<b>STRUCTURE OF THE ADVENTURE</b> .....	<b>10</b>	Naeran Olyss .....	21
<b>WHAT IS CASTLEMOURN?</b> .....	<b>10</b>	Chunk the Ogre .....	21
Things you should know about Castlemourn .....	10	Thelwood's Guards .....	21
Things your players should know about		<b>EPILOGUE</b> .....	<b>21</b>
Castlemourn .....	10		
Summary of the Adventure .....	11		
The Locale .....	11		



# INTRODUCTION

Margaret Weis Productions Ltd. is proud to celebrate Free RPG Day in 2008 with this book, the CORTEX SYSTEM QUICKSTART. With this book, which contains game rules, pregenerated characters, and an adventure, you and your friends can experience Ed Greenwood's exciting fantasy setting, CASTLEMOURN, using Margaret Weis Production's award-winning Cortex System.

## What is Castlemourn?

CASTLEMOURN is a fantasy world of intrigue and high adventure set against a backdrop of mysterious ruins, grim towers, and extraordinary heroes. Over three hundred years ago, the lands of Mournra suffered a cataclysmic war with unknown fell beings so terrible that none of the survivors remember it. Crawling from the wreckage of once-great empires, the people of CASTLEMOURN look to the future. Brave heroes seek to uncover what was lost, to solve the many mysteries left by the Fall, and lay the foundation for a new age. However, commoner and noble alike must now wonder: will the fell creatures return, bringing war? Who can now withstand them if they do? What dangers lurk in ruins all across Mournra?

Master storyteller Ed Greenwood has created a world rich in wonder and magic, with all the conflict and characters that fans have come to expect from the famed creator of one of the world's most popular campaign settings. Previously released under the Open Game License, CASTLEMOURN serves to illustrate the Cortex Systems ability to adapt to epic fantasy.

## What is the Cortex System?

The Cortex System is the award-winning set of rules featured in Margaret Weis Productions' licensed game products. From the far future drama of *Serenity* and *Battlestar Galactica* to the modern day action of *Supernatural* and *Demon Hunters*, the Cortex System has proven to be flexible and dynamic enough to handle any setting. We couldn't stop there, however! We wanted to show that the Cortex System could be applied to any genre, any world, which is why we're releasing the CORTEX SYSTEM ROLE PLAYING GAME this summer.

## What is a Role Playing Game?

The Cortex System is a role playing game, a framework with which to tell a story. Here, it's being used to tell a story set in the world of ED GREENWOOD'S CASTLEMOURN. You'll need dice, a copy of this book, pens or pencils, and scratch paper. One of the players is the Game Master and reads the adventure included in this book; the other players choose a hero from the pregenerated characters provided and the action starts. It's really as simple as that . . . but you'll want to get a fairly good understanding of the rules before you get that far.



# GAME RULES

The Cortex System game rules are fast and easy to learn, designed to be exciting and fun while staying out of the way of telling a good story. After all, if you're busy figuring all your modifiers instead of thinking about what the heroes and monsters are doing or saying than you probably won't be having as much fun. Just familiarize yourself and your players with the basics in this section and you'll be getting started in no time.

## WHAT YOU NEED

To play games using the Cortex System, you'll need:

- Pencils and character sheets;
- Polyhedral dice of different kinds: two-sided (d2), four-sided (d4), six-sided (d6), eight-sided (d8), ten-sided (d10), and twelve-sided (d12). You can find these at most hobby shops, game stores, and online vendors. If need be, coins can be used for d2s, blank dice can be bought and modified, or you can visit [margaretweis.com](http://margaretweis.com) to order some for yourself;
- A group of friends, including one Game Master and any number of players, though four to six players are recommended for this adventure
- A good place to relax and play comfortably.

## The Players

Watch any movie or television show, read a comic or a novel, and you'll see that each has one or more central characters that drive all the action. Role playing games have their own version. Player characters, or PCs, are the characters under the player's control. They're the heroes, and through them the players make decisions, take actions, and endure the consequences that shape the heart of the story.

Being a player means interacting with the Game Master's supporting cast, making decisions that will affect them as well as the other PCs, and when necessary rolling the dice to see how things turn out. It's your responsibility to be true to your PC's persona while working together with the other players and the Game Master to keep things moving along. It's very much like improvisational theater; quite often, despite having created a character in advance, you won't have a vivid image of them in your head until the story is in full swing, and that's okay. In fact, that's a good thing.

## The Game Master

Part referee, part casting director, the Game Master takes care of presenting the world the PCs live in as vibrantly and as fully as possible. Of course, without a special effects budget or a room full of character actors, the Game Master's resources are somewhat different from a movie or TV director. In addition, the Game Master is only in control of the supporting cast, not the PCs, so much of the drama comes from setting up situations and staging challenges so that the players can bring their characters to life.

The Game Master needs to know the rules better than the other players, if only because it is his job to adjudicate the rules and make judgment calls on the outcome of the players' actions. Being fair and objective is crucial; the Game Master

isn't the opposition, he just rolls the dice for them. While it's important that the Game Master has fun running the game, it shouldn't be at the expense of the players.

If you're using this book to run the CASTLEMOURN adventure, *Escape from Blackoon*, then the Game Master should also brush up on his knowledge of the setting ahead of time. You may download *A Player's Guide to Castlemourn* online for FREE at [www.drivethrurpg.com](http://www.drivethrurpg.com); just look us up in the Margaret Weis Productions section of the site.

## The Dice

The Cortex System uses polyhedral dice, common to other role playing games and available from your local hobby store or online hobby vendor. Dice form an ascending scale of ability and are assigned to Attributes, Skills, and Traits. Each die type, from two-sided (d2) up through twelve-sided (d12), represents a "Step" on this scale. Higher Steps, in general, represent greater ability, skill, damage, or whatever; a d6 is better than a d4, and a d8 is better than a d6. This scale can even extend above d12. At that point, a second die is added, making the next Step "d12 + d2." That makes the first eight Steps as follows:

**d2 • d4 • d6 • d8 • d10 • d12 • d12+d2 • d12+d4**

There is, theoretically, no upper limit, though it would be rare for anything to have a rating higher than d12 to begin with.

Most actions call for an Attribute die and a Skill die to be rolled and the results added together. If your character doesn't have the right Skill (but is still allowed to try it—some actions require the proper training), roll only the Attribute. The character might have a Trait that helps out, or even more than one Trait. And if that doesn't seem like it'll be enough, there are ways to influence the outcome by spending Plot Points to gain a bonus die.

Changes to rolls that make tasks harder or easier are called Step modifiers, and described in terms of positive and negative Steps. These modifiers move the die type up or down the scale. For example, a -1 Step would turn a d6 into a d4; a +2 Step would turn a d6 into a d10, and so on. While dice can be reduced below d2, at that point they become negated entirely (d0), and any further penalty is ignored.

## The Rules and the Story

First and foremost, this game is supposed to be fun. You're telling a story, hopefully one that's full of drama, tension, humor, and action. The rules are meant to support this idea, but there are rare times when they get in the way or just don't cover some crazy idea that the players might come up with. Just remember that the story should come first—wing it using the basic game mechanics, and when in doubt, give the players the edge in a given situation.

We've designed the game to be flexible and relatively simple. There isn't a special rule a to cover every situation that might occur, but the system allows Game Masters to easily find a way to resolve anything, without having to memorize books and books of specific information. If you are the Game Master for your group, take extra time to go over the information provided here, and you should be able to deal with anything your players throw at you.



# THE CHARACTER SHEET

A character sheet holds all the game information about your character. Six character sheets are provided in this book, representing heroes of CASTLEMOURN. Each sheet provides all the necessary information ready at hand while you're playing the game, so that players don't have to spend time flipping through the rules or shrugging your shoulders at the Game Master when he asks them what their Initiative is or whether they have any Complications that might come into play.

## Attributes

Each character has six primary **Attributes**, listed below. These represent broad areas of ability that a character possesses, and are rated in terms of the type of die rolled when a character is using that Attribute. Dice of a higher Step represent greater ability than lower Step dice, so an Attribute of d8 is much better than an Attribute of d4.

An Attribute of d2 is a crippling deficiency, and d12 is the extremely high end of normal human potential. Most characters have Attributes that average around d6, which represents a moderate score for a human adult. Of course, supernatural creatures and monsters may have Attributes much, much higher than this.

Most of the time, when the Game Master calls for a roll, a player rolls at least one of his character's Attributes, usually in combination with another die (either another Attribute or a Skill). Which Attribute(s) or Skill is used is determined by the situation. Generally, common sense gives an obvious choice, but the Game Master has the final word on which Attribute to use in a given situation.

**Agility** represents a character's grace, quickness, kinesthetic sense, and hand-eye coordination. A high Agility gives him an edge with most skills that involve movement, fine control, aiming, and so on.

**Strength** is a character's physical brawn. High Strength lets a character deal more damage with hand weapons, carry more, run harder, and the like.

**Vitality** is a measure of a character's health and fitness. A higher Vitality keeps him from catching colds, helps him avoid getting tired, and lets him resist poisons.

**Alertness** indicates how aware a character is, whether it's of somebody's body language, the environment, or a hidden clue. A high Alertness tells him when someone is lying, acting strangely, or sneaking up on him.

**Intelligence** represents the ability of a character to work out puzzles, think clearly, or understand things. A high Intelligence lets him figure out the answer to difficult riddles, win chess games, and crack codes.

**Willpower** is the strength of a character's psyche—his personal drive, inner fire, and determination. A high Willpower lets a character live when he should die, persuade others with the sheer force of his personality, and resist intimidation or fear.

## Derived Attributes

Listed below the six Attributes on the character sheet are four secondary values derived from them. These are called **Derived Attributes**, and they represent certain specific aspects of the character that come into play during dramatic scenes.

**Endurance** is Vitality + Willpower. This roll is used, among other things, when a character is fighting for his life and near death.

**Initiative** is Agility + Alertness. Roll this during combat scenes to determine the order in which a character acts.

**Life Points** are Vitality + Will, expressed as a total of the maximum results of both dice. Life Points are used to track injury.

**Resistance** is Vitality + Vitality. This roll comes into play when a character is fighting something off, from the frightful spells of a necromancer to a bad case of the pox.

## Skills

In addition to Attributes, a character also has **Skills**—ratings that determine how well trained or experienced he is in different fields. When attempting to do something that falls under one of these categories, roll the character's Skill die (which is rated in the same way as his Attributes, except that Skills have no minimum level) in addition to an Attribute. The Attribute varies based on the nature of the action, and is usually determined by the Game Master.

Skills are divided into two types: **General Skills** and **Specialty Skills**. General Skills are broad, covering a wide range of actions in a given area. Examples include Melee Weapons and Influence. No General Skill is ever rated at more than d6. To progress past a d6 rating, characters possess **Specialty Skills** that represent a narrow subset of a General Skill's area. Specialty Skills start at d8 and progress up from there. A character may have several Specialty Skills listed, each with a different rating, but all of them are considered to default back to the General Skill they fall under. Thus, if an action calls for Strength + Melee Weapons/Swords, a character with just Melee Weapons may simply use this rating when using a sword.

Some Skills may be used even if a character has no training in them, but others can't be used unless he has them at a rating of at least d2. These are usually specialized fields of knowledge, or Skills that are extremely dangerous—constructing a cross-dimensional circle of rune-obelisks or performing battlefield surgery are not things can try untrained with any hope of success. Some Skills require a rating in a Specialty Skill before certain actions may be attempted.

Each of the six character sheets included in this book lists the General and Specialty Skills known to the character. A short description is provided, giving a player a rough idea of when and how to use each Skill.

## Traits

A character is much more than a collection of numbers. In the Cortex System most things that describe a character may be thought of as Attributes and Skills, but sometimes they have less definable qualities. Is a character half-human, half-elf? Does he assume he's so skilled at swordplay that he can't lose? If he dies, do the gods always bring him back again? These are the kinds of things the Cortex System calls **Traits**.

Traits are broken down into two categories: **Assets**, which are generally positive Traits, and **Complications**, which are generally negative. Traits are rated according to a die type much like Attributes and Skills, although not all Traits have the same range of possible Steps; some are only available at one die.



Traits have a variety of different effects. Some provide a bonus or penalty to actions by letting you add the Trait's die to the roll. Others allow occasional rerolls for failed results or change the basic rules in some other way. The pregenerated heroes in this book possess a broad range of Traits; descriptions are provided on the sheet to allow a player to use the Trait without needing to consult a rulebook.

## Plot Points

Each character sheet has a space for recording **Plot Points**. These are the currency of drama in the Cortex System. They're used for a variety of things, such as keeping a character alive or improving his chance of succeeding at actions. In a sense, they're a means of changing the story and empowering you as a player.

Plot Points may be spent *before* a roll to **add an extra die** to the roll. The more points spent, the bigger the die—a single Plot Point adds a d2, two Plot Points add a d4, and so on. If the result on the die is less than the amount of Plot Points spent to add the die, add that amount to the result instead. Thus, if a player spends 6 Plot Points to gain a d12 and the die comes up with a 1, he would add 6 to the roll. Points may also be spent after a roll, but at reduced effectiveness; each Plot Point spent afterward adds 1 to the total result on the dice.

Plot Points may be spent to **reduce damage**, turning a fatal or incapacitating injury into just a flesh **wound**. When damage is declared, Plot Points may be spent to buy a bonus die as described above; the result of the die is instead subtracted from the damage, not added to a roll. Subtract Wounds first, then Stun.

Finally, Plot Points provide some measure of narrative control over the game world itself. This is called **story manipulation**, or “scene editing.” Depending on the number of Plot Points spent, a player may insert an element into the current scene—add in a relationship between a supporting character and his character that didn't exist (and is thus only now revealed), or suggest to the Game Master that there's a chandelier above the villain, and a lucky shot with his crossbow might cause it to fall . . . the effects and extent of this use of Plot Points are up to the player and the Game Master.

Although **no more than 12 Plot Points may be held** by a character at a time, and they will be spent frequently, playing up a character's Complications and sticking to his personality will ensure a constant supply.

Some major supporting characters in the adventure may have a supply of Plot Points listed, as well. Supporting characters don't get new Plot Points for doing stunts or being role played well; these are provided so that the Game Master may spend them on the character's actions. Once the listed Plot Points are gone, the supporting character won't have any more until the next encounter, at which point half of them are restored.

## ACTIONS

When a player wants his character to try and shoot a rampaging ogre, puzzle out a magical inscription, or jump between rooftops while running from the city guard, he is performing an **action** that might fail, and might well do so with dramatic consequences. In the Cortex System, these actions are resolved by rolling dice. The exact dice to be rolled

usually depend upon a character's relevant Attributes and Skills; what happens after the roll depends upon what type of action the character is attempting.

## Simple Actions

Most actions are **simple actions**. The Game Master decides which Attribute and Skill combination (or, in some exceptional cases, an Attribute and another Attribute) is most appropriate for that particular action in that situation. Roll the dice and add the results together. If the total is higher than the **Difficulty** set by the Game Master then your character succeeds. The Game Master sets the Difficulty based on how difficult the situation is supposed to be.

Most simple actions represent all that your character is doing in each game turn. Occasionally, you may need to do more than one action at a time, which imposes Step penalties. Some things take up very little time or concentration at all, such as shouting a command or flipping a switch, and these don't require a roll of any kind.

This is a fairly uncomplicated method of resolution, but players can take advantage of how flexible it is. The rules never permanently pair a single Attribute with any Skill, so it's up to the Game Master to think about the specific situation and then choose an Attribute and Skill pairing. This allows the rules to accommodate a broad range of possible scenarios and be adapted easily to almost anything.

For example, a player could roll Agility + Athletics to see how quickly a character runs through a patch of dense foliage (since he needs to take care not to trip or get entangled in the brush). Then again, he might roll Strength + Athletics when his character runs across an open field, when sheer muscle power is more important than grace and precision. Finally, should that open field turn out to be littered with deadly gas spores, the player might be rolling Alertness + Athletics to see if his character crosses it safely.

## Complex Actions

Some actions require more time to complete, which means you'll be making rolls over successive turns in order to reach a higher Difficulty (called a **Threshold**). There's an increased chance of failure, but that's the price of drama. Each turn, the player rolls the appropriate dice and adds the result to a running total. Once the total meets the Threshold, the action is a success. Each roll may even represent a longer period of time than a standard combat turn; complex actions often represent long-term efforts, with each roll representing a period of an hour, or even a day. There's no significant chance of failure, although if all the dice come up as 1 then the action has botched. The result of botching a complex action is up to the Game Master, but it usually means that further complications have arisen. The Threshold may be increased to the next level up, or the Attribute + Skill combination might switch to something else to account for it.

In the adventure provided, the most common example of a complex action is a casting action (for spells, bardic songs, devotee invocations, and so forth.) See **Magic in Castlemourn** for more details.

## Unskilled Rolls

When a character doesn't have the right Skill, his player just rolls his Attribute. General Skills are very broad, but they don't cover everything. The Game Master might allow a player to use a related Skill instead of the most appropriate one, especially a justification can be provided for it, but



no Skill should become a replacement for all the others. Remember also that some actions require actual training to be attempted at all.

## Opposed Actions

Sometimes a character must act directly against an opponent. When this happens, it's called an **opposed action**. It doesn't really matter how well the two opponents perform so long as one does it better than the other. Each character makes an appropriate roll, and the one with the highest total scores a win. Ties mean no clear winner is established and the contest continues into the next turn, unless the circumstances change.

In some cases, both characters roll the same Attribute and Skill. In others, different combinations are called for. As in all actions, the Game Master considers the situation and decides what each character has to roll.

Some events seem like opposed rolls but really aren't. If the action directly pits one character against another, use opposed rolls. If a minimum level of success exists, however, it's just two people making unopposed rolls and seeing who does better—for example, playing darts. Each character is rolling to hit the dartboard, so they each make separate, unopposed rolls against a Difficulty. After all, they might both hit the bull's-eye!

## Botches and Extraordinary Successes

A **botch** is a roll where all the dice come up 1. This means that your character has royally screwed something up, and it's usually up to the Game Master to determine how. An **extraordinary success**, on the other hand, is when you not only beat the Difficulty, but your total is seven or more points greater. In this case, you've scored a near-perfect result and the Game Master might throw some fringe benefits your way.

TABLE 1.2 DIFFICULTIES

Action	Difficulty	Extraordinary Success	Complex Threshold
Trivial*	—	—	5
Easy	3	10	15
Average	7	14	35
Hard	11	18	55
Formidable	15	22	75
Heroic	19	26	95
Incredible	23	30	115
Ridiculous	27	34	135
Impossible	31	38	155

\* Trivial actions are automatic except for Complex Actions.

## COMBAT

While most actions can be resolved very simply using the above set of rules, combat gets a little more complicated. The basics are the same, but because so many additional factors are involved the combat rules require a little more attention to specifics.

## Combat Turn—Initiative, Movement and Action

Combat is broken down into **combat turns** (or simply, **turns**) each of which is approximately three seconds long. During a turn, each character acts, what they do is resolved, and then the next turn begins. This repeats until the combat is over, which is usually when one side surrenders or is destroyed.

The order that characters act in is called the **Initiative order**. When combat begins, each character of creature involved must roll initiative. The character with the highest Initiative result goes first; their player (or the Game Master, if it's a supporting character) declares what the character is doing, the action is resolved, and the character with the next highest Initiative takes his turn. In the case of ties, player characters go before Game Master characters, and, if necessary, tied characters can roll their Agility dice until an order is established.

When it's a character's Initiative turn, he has the opportunity to both move and act. A character can choose to move or act first, and need not do both; however, moving only allows him to travel up to 15 feet at a fast walk. If he wants to go further, he can choose to have him run; running takes up their action for the turn, so he will not be able to attack, dodge, or perform other actions, but it allows them to move up to 30 feet in one turn.

Each turn, as long as he isn't running, a character can also perform one action. This could be used to make an attack, dodge to avoid an attack, attempt to kick down a door, or any number of other things. Most simple actions can be performed in one combat turn, but unless a complex action only takes one turn per roll (like most spell casting actions) they are out of the question.

## Life Points and Damage

When a character in the Cortex System is hurt, he takes damage. A character's **Life Points** represent the amount of damage he can withstand. Whenever a character takes damage, some of it might be considered to be **Stun** damage while another kind is recorded as **Wounds**. Stun represents concussions, fatigue, physical stress, and having the wind knocked out. Wounds are more serious and represent actual bodily harm, cuts, broken bones, and internal bleeding. Record how much of each type of damage is taken and compare this to the Life Point total. If a character's total damage, both Stun and Wounds, equals or exceeds his total Life Points, he is knocked out. If he takes his Life Point total in Wounds, he is dead. Stun is reduced by 2 points for every hour of rest, or 1 point per hour if a character is engaged in light activity. Once a day, a character may benefit from a **second wind**. Choose either Vitality or Willpower, and roll that die. Reduce current Stun damage by the result.

Wound damage is harder to recover. Magic, and some healing draughts, helps to eliminate Wound damage, but the only other way is bedrest. Every two days of rest a character may make an Endurance (Vitality + Willpower) roll. The Difficulty is TRIVIAL for 1-2 Wound, EASY for 3-4, AVERAGE for 5-6, HARD for 7-8, and so on. If he succeeds, he eliminates one point of Wound every 2 days. It's much more likely that the heroes in this adventure will recover their damage through magic and invocations, so mundane Wound recovery probably won't come up.



## To Roll or Not to Roll...

Rolling dice is part of the fun. Part of the game is chance but if there's too much rolling, the story disappears. One of the first things you need to learn is when to roll—which is the Game Master's call, but it helps for the players to understand, too.

Walking down the corridor, drinking a mug of ale, packing a satchel—none of these actions can be messed up easily. They should happen in the normal course of the game and be finished with quickly; the story moves along. There's no need to worry about their success.

Some actions have a chance of failure, but aren't meaningful to the storyline. This is especially bad when rolling the dice and failing it would only serve to derail the plot. For example, think about a long cross-country drive. Things can and do go wrong in even the most routine trips, and the longer the drive, the more likely it is. It's the same with basic maintenance on dangerous weapons and firearms, or injecting someone with an antidote, or negotiating with your creditors. Despite the chance of failure, if pausing to determine success, or the consequences of blowing it, is irrelevant to the storyline, don't roll. Just let it happen and move on. Even if there's a good chance of failure, the Game Master may not ask for a roll. Noticing a crucial clue in the ruins of a temple is not easy, but if the plot requires it, it's going to happen—the drama isn't about players making characters that can roll high on certain checks, it's about the story they tell by making choices. Of course, the same applies when the plot requires that the characters fail—hopefully this doesn't happen too often, but remember: the story comes first.

To sum it up, two factors must exist before any roll is made. First, the chance of success must be meaningful. Second, failure should not delay the game or play havoc with the story.

### Attacking and Defending

During combat, even if a character didn't initiate it, he's likely to want to avoid any harm to himself as much as he wants to inflict harm on his opponent. We represent this with attack and defense actions.

The basics of an attack are very simple: An attack is a simple action with a Difficulty set by the target's defense. If the attack roll is equal to or higher than the defense, then the attack hits, and damage is determined.

#### Attacks

There are as many different ways to attack, as there are people and weapons. However, for ease of use, the Cortex System breaks them down into a handful of combat Skills: Melee Weapons, Ranged Weapons, and Unarmed Combat. Whenever a character makes an attack, he uses one of these Skills and an Attribute for their attack roll. The Attribute used will often be Strength for close combat relying on brute force, or Agility for an attack made at range, but as with any Skill these are not set-in-stone pairings.

Making an attack uses the character's action for that combat turn, but it may force the target to spend their action while defending, leaving them open to further attacks and unable to make one of their own. An attack isn't necessarily a single swing or thrust with a sword—it could represent a string of quick movements, foot shuffles, and a jab or two—but it does represent an effort on the part of a character to inflict harm on his opponent.

#### Defenses

When a character is attacked, it's important to know what sort of defense is available, and that depends heavily upon the situation and the player's decisions.

If a character is surprised, asleep, restrained, or otherwise completely unmoving for some reason, he is an EASY target—with a defense set automatically to 3. Sneaking up on an enemy provides a significant advantage!

If a character is actively engaged in combat, moving around even a little bit (even if he isn't aware of the attack), and isn't using his action to defend—perhaps he's already used his action on that turn to attack or defend, or he's waiting to attack when his Initiative comes up—then he uses his innate defense. Roll the character's Agility die and use the result as the new Difficulty for the attack roll. This does mean that the result could be lower than 3! Such a thing would be unfortunate, but that's the problem with random chance. Sometimes a character accidentally blunders *into* an attack.

If a character has not yet used his action, and he's aware that an attack is coming, he can spend his action during that turn to defend himself. This would give him a normal Skill roll for his defense. Depending upon the type of attack, he could choose either to block or to dodge.

Against melee weapons or unarmed attacks (not crossbows or thrown daggers) your character has the option of using his Melee Weapons or Unarmed Combat Skill to block, along with either Agility or Strength. Dodging is a little more versatile, and is useful against any kind of attack; your character dodges using his Agility + Athletics. Of course, dodging doesn't help you to *inflict* damage—only avoid it.

#### Calculating Damage

When an attack roll is equal or greater than the defense, it's a hit, and the difference between the roll and the Difficulty of the defense translates directly into Basic damage. In some cases, the attacker may also roll a damage die and add that to figure out the final damage. Weapons list the damage die they provide, and fists have an effective damage die of d0. Basic damage is divided in two, with one half applied as Stun and the other half as Wound (round in favor of Stun).

If the defender has any armor or protection, his Armor Rating is subtracted from the damage.