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USR: Filmation's Ghostbusters

Jake Kong Jr.
USR
Action D8, Wits D10, Ego D6
Specialisms: Ghost Sensing Nose, Idea Man, Handsome
Hit Points: 18
Combat Gear: Dematerializer +2
Narrative Points: 5

Eddie Spencer Jr.
USR
Action D8, Wits D6, Ego D10
Specialisms: Loveable Goofball, Absent-Minded, Thinks Positive
Hit Points: 14
Combat Gear: Dematerializer +2, Flight Jacket +1
Narrative Points: 4

Tracy the Gorilla
USR
Action D10, Wits D8, Ego D6
Specialisms: Strong, GB Pilot, Loves To Eat
Hit Points: 18
Combat Gear: Dematerializer +2, Backpack of Gadgets +1
Narrative Points: 4

8/15/16

USR: Ghostbusters 1984

Talon Waite over at the USR Google+ page asked for the Ghostbusters (the 1984 "boys" and 2016 "girls") with his new Ghostbusters USR rules. I have the old West End Games d6 system box set, except for the box itself, and the dice: it has the rulebooks and the flimsy, perforated cards for items and "character sheets." They're all in a brown paper bag from my FLGS.

The cards are still perfectly playable, and I used them for inspiration for the USR characters. These stick to the rules in Ghostbusters USR (including 5 health and 3 Brownie Points each).

Peter Venkman
Goal: Sex
Action: d8
Wits: d6
Ego: d10

Specialisms: Smarmy Psychologist (Ego; background), Bluff (Ego), Seduce (Action), Parapsychology (Wits)

Ray Stantz
Goal: Serving Humanity
Action: d8
Wits: d10
Ego: d6
Specialisms: Enthusiastic Researcher (Wits; background), Occult (Wits), Run (Action), Driving (Action)

Egon Spengler
Goal: Soulless Science
Action: d6
Wits: d10
Ego: d8
Specialisms: Single-Minded Inventor (Wits; background), Physics (Wits), Good At Explaining (Ego), Focused (Wits)

Winston Zeddemore
Goal: Money
Action: d10
Wits: d6
Ego: d8
Specialisms: Secret Military Past (Action; background), Heavy Weapons (Action), Encourage (Ego), Bargain (Wits)

8/16/16

USR: Ghostbusters 2016

Finishing off the official Ghostbusters teams with the new gang... These are mainly thanks to someone on Tumblr (I think): shame on me for not getting credit on the character cards for the actual Ghostbusters RPG that I found.

Erin Gilbert
Goal: Serving Humanity
Action: d8
Wits: d10
Ego: d6
Specialisms: Physicist (Wits; background), Athletics (Action), Follows Her Instincts (Ego), Tell Fibs (Ego)

Abby Yates
Goal: Fame
Action: d6
Wits: d10

Ego: d8
Specialisms: Parapsychologist (Wits; background), Proton Gloves (Action), Notice (Wits), Convince (Ego)

Jillian Holtzmann
Goal: Soulless Science
Action: d6
Wits: d10
Ego: d8
Specialisms: Gadgeteer (Wits; background), Proton Pistols (Action), Acts Weird (Ego), Run (Action)

Patty Tolan
Goal: Serving Humanity
Action: d10
Wits: d6
Ego: d8
Specialisms: History Buff (Wits; background), Proton Tractor Beam (Action), Brawl (Action), Quick With A Comeback (Ego)

4/20/17

USR: Tequendria: Our Heroes

So, the creator of Unbelievably Simple Roleplaying, Scott Malthouse, has released a new USR-based game, Tequendria, inspired by the works of Lord Dunsany, which I have not read (I did start "The King Of Elfland's Daughter" thanks to Project Gutenberg).

A Dunsany-inspired game isn't a Tolkien-inspired one, and as a result there's no dwarf fighters or halfling clerics in this game. All characters can use magic, and the free-form style of USR means you don't need the traditional D&D-based races and classes. So, instead of a cleric/fighter/rogue/wizard team, let's create a more Tequendria-style adventuring party.

Because heroes who have access to intriguing ways to get around should be able to use them, we'll include an Aethership, where our heroes can cruise toward adventure.

Bramwell: He's a bold young sailor, whose imagination was captured the moment he saw his first Aethership soaring high above the small farm where he grew up. He loves exploring and finding new decorations for his ship, and meeting new people along the way.

Bramwell, Aethership Pilot
Action D8, Wits D10, Ego D6
Hit Points: 9
Specialisms: Aethership (Action), Navigator (Wits), Mechanic (Wits)
Equipment: 50 shards, telescope, goggles, duster jacket, short sword
Ability: Aether navigator

While the tales of Lord Dunsany aren't about wandering around, slaughtering thousands of nameless foes, there's a need now and again for a little muscle. And so we have a warrior.

Nohote: She is no stoic killer, but instead a friend to everyone. She has weapons, and knows how to use them, but prefers to out-think her enemies instead of strike them down. She takes great pride in making her foes surrender without a blade pulled or a bow fired.

Nohote, Tulthian Warrior
Action: D10, Wits D8, Ego D6
Hit Points: 9
Specialisms: Athletics (Action), Speed (Action), Tactics (Wits)
Equipment: 10 shards, Tulthian totem (a giant eagle's talon), lucky magma stone, leather armor, short bow, 10 arrows, light mace
Ability: Mighty

Every good fantasy adventure needs a warrior — and a wizard. Since Tequendrian characters can use any kind of magic, we don't need a dedicated healer or blaster as most fantasy games do. We can instead go for the most interesting character for the story.

Khiok: To use his Icur magic, Kihok has to be in the presence of three or more people. They don't have to be human, and they don't have to know he's working his magic, at least until they feel the pull of their souls. That makes him effective in royal courts, where he "encourages" rulers to follow his instructions, and on the battlefield, where stone and flame appear from thin air. Kihok tries not to seem devious and sinister when he does so, but sometimes, he just can't help himself.

Khiok, Icur Sorcerer
Action: D8, Wits: D10, Ego: D6
Hit Points: 9
Specialims: Ancient Lore (Wits), Mountaineering (Action), Religion (Wits)
Equipment: 30 shards, incense sticks, jet bracelet, half mask
Ability: Icur

I don't know about you, but I can picture Nohote and Khiok aboard a ship piloted by Bramwell, coming to dock outside the Hills of Hap. It seems they've heard about a long-lost treasure chest holding enough shards to finally pay off the merchant who's loaning an Aethership to Bramwell...

6/1/17

USR: Archetypes — Meet the Big Four

In USR, concepts like class and race are found in the form of archetypes, suggestions for ways to simulate character types long-time roleplayers are familiar with. In Halberd, the predecessor to Tequindria, a lot of the classic fantasy archetypes made an appearance.

Archetypes aren't a requirement, just a tool to help you visualize your character better. Every USR setting will probably have its own archetypes (Tequindra does). They're a good way to get a feel for the kind of characters that would appear in that setting, even if your character stands out as someone different.

Since I'm using my Domino Writing-style version of USR, I'm going to make a few changes to better fit my version of the game. Here's how they break down:

Primary Stat: This is the stat (Action, Wits, Ego) that should be assigned the d10, or d12 if using superhero rules. It's not a requirement, but emphasizing that stat is the quickest way to simulate most familiar character types. That said, a really buff wizard (with a d10 in Action) would be a unique take on the spellcaster! Some archetypes have a primary stat of "Any" — the archetype doesn't call for any specific stat to be favored. Just take your pick, like in the normal rules.

Suggested Specialisms: Several common skills, abilities or powers characters of the archetype usually have. You don't have to take all three, or even any, of your specialisms from this list, but it's a good starting point. In Domino Writing-style USR, a character's combat skills are represented with their gear, so combat specialisms won't be common. For example, an archer will have a Bow weapon rather than a Ranged Attack or Archery specialism. Also, Domino Writing-style USR doesn't assign Specialisms to stats; you'll have to do that yourself. I just represented supernatural powers as a Specialism, since USR has several different magic systems, which are worth looking at in another blog post.

Suggested Equipment: This includes weapons and armor, though you'll have to decide on their value (Light/Medium/Heavy), depending on how you picture your character, and how many Combat Gear points you have available. It also includes signature tools of the trade, such as a spellbook or thief's tools. It doesn't include money; assume your character has enough "pocket change" or credit for any ordinary purchase, unless the GM says something different, of course. It also doesn't include everything a character would be carrying (ordinary clothes, a bedroll, etc.), just the stuff that makes the character a hero.

Here's a few examples, the classic "Big 4" races and classes, with a lot borrowed from Halberd.

Dwarf
Primary Stat: Action
Suggested Specialisms: Mining, Brewing, Tough, Leadership, Appraise Valuables, Forge Weapons and Armor
Suggested Equipment: Battle Axe or War Hammer, Armor, Repair Tools, Mug of Ale

Elf
Primary Stat: Wits
Suggested Specialisms: Woods Lore, Magic Knowledge, Aloof, Move Silently, Alluring
Suggested Equipment: Long Bow, Cloak of Invisibility

Human
Primary Stat: Any
Suggested Specialisms: Blacksmithing, Inventing, Leadership, Persuasion, Trying New Things, Sailing, Riding, Driving
Suggested Equipment: none

Halfling
Primary Stat: Ego
Suggested Specialisms: Sneak, Hide, Charm, Bargain, Singing
Suggested Equipment: Short Sword, Food

Cleric
Primary Stat: Wits
Suggested Specialisms: Healing, Religion, Nature, Charisma, Inspiration
Suggested Equipment: Holy Symbol, Mace, Armor

Fighter
Primary Stat: Action
Suggested Specialisms: Athletics, Strong, Military Tactics, Leadership, Intimidation, Riding
Suggested Equipment: Sword, Shield, Armor, Dagger, Crossbow

Rogue
Primary Stat: Action
Suggested Specialisms: Sneak, Climb, Escape, Disarm Trap, Pick Lock, Disguise, Charming
Suggested Equipment: Dagger, Thief's Tools, Poison Vial

Wizard
Primary Stat: Wits
Suggested Specialisms: Spell-casting, Identify Magic Item, Monster Lore, History, Create Magical Item, Research
Suggested Equipment: Staff, Spellbook, Dagger

This is a starting point; there will be more archetypes to come, as we build up the range of settings available for USR.

Which archetypes have you created?

6/7/17

USR: Archetypes: Modern-Day Heroes

Last time we looked at the classic fantasy races and classes. Now let's move into modern-day action and adventure settings. Everyone's human (usually), but the range of skills heroes need to succeed is bigger. These archetypes cover a lot of ground; a sneak, for example, can represent a James Bond-style spy, a Jason Bourne-style secret agent, or even a Jake Gittes-style private eye.

Diplomat
Primary Stat: Ego
Suggested Specialisms: Charm, Negotiate, Language, Leadership, Etiquette
Suggested Equipment: none

Entertainer
Primary Stat: Ego
Suggested Specialisms: Art (music, oratory, writing, etc.), Charisma, Athletics, Hundreds (Possibly Millions) Of Fans, Target Of Paparazzi
Suggested Equipment: Musical instrument

Gadgeteer
Primary Stat: Wits
Suggested Specialisms: Repair, Invent, Hacking, Works Best Alone, Focused On The Task At Hand
Suggested Equipment: Miscellaneous Gadgets, Tools

Pilot
Primary Stat: Action
Suggested Specialisms: Driving, Flying, Repair, Adrenaline Junkie, Team Player
Suggested Equipment: Vehicle (if there's more than one character with a vehicle in the party, maybe they have one big vehicle, like a space cruiser)

Researcher
Primary Stat: Wits
Suggested Specialisms: Knowledge (in one topic), Dedication, Bravery, Support Of A University or a Military Organization
Suggested Equipment: Computer, Library Of Books

Sneak
Primary Stat: Action
Suggested Specialisms: Move Silently, Sleight Of Hand, Hacking, Disguise, Hide, Spot Clues
Suggested Equipment: Lock Pick (possibly an electronic one)

Soldier
Primary Stat: Action
Suggested Specialisms: Endurance, Intimidate, Leadership, Toughness, Military Tactics
Suggested Equipment: Guns, Knives

Which archetypes are best for the modern world?

6/28/17

USR Wednesdays: Creating Specialisms

One of the keys to USR's streamlined system is its use of Specialisms (another is the simple dice mechanic). It's the same concept as found in a lot of rules light RPGs, like the cliches

of Risus, the qualities of Cartoon Action Hour and the aspects of Fate. Specialisms represent skills, supernatural powers, personality traits and occasionally gear and character types, though in USR, races and classes are more often archetypes (as they are in Domino Writing-style USR).

What is a Specialism? As USR 2.0 puts it, "Specialisms are the things that make your character stand out from the rest. They give your character an edge at a specific task, making them more likely to succeed." They explain what a character can do, or how he or she does it, in a way that's appropriate to the setting.

What a character can do: Most often, Specialisms are skills, like lock picking, computers or sneaking (or hand-to-hand fighting, if you're using combat Specialisms). It can also stand for special talents, like magic or a super power like eye beams.

How he or she does it: Specialisms can also be personality traits that not only help define a character's background for role playing purposes, but can also be put to use as abilities. Think of the inspiring leader, the intimidating muscle man, or the even more intimidating loner with a creepy smile.

Appropriate to the setting: Since so much of rules light RPGs like USR rely on tropes and stereotypes familiar to fantasy and science fiction fans, most players probably start the game with a general idea of what fits the setting. But it's easy to be too broad: a sorcerer may not be specific enough; try a fire wizard or an illusionist instead. Likewise, think about Specialisms that won't be available all the time: a wise mentor is a great support for a hero — but Obi-Wan and Merlin aren't supposed to be part of every adventure, they're only supposed to lend a helping hand now and again.

Characters that gain levels in USR can either gain new Specialisms or improve their existing ones. In a classic adventuring party, each character has a role (healer, tank, etc.), so improving the existing Specialisms is more fitting. Adding a new Specialism should show how the character has made a major life change — finding a powerful magical item, taking on a whole new set of responsibilities, and so on.

Specialisms and similar characteristics are one of the defining elements of a rules light RPG: the game isn't "weighed down" by pages and pages of skills and abilities! But it can be hard to figure out just what Specialisms really are without a guideline, one like this:

Specialisms are what a character can do, or how he or she does it, in a way that's appropriate to the setting.

What Specialisms does your game have?

7/5/17

USR Wednesdays: Social Combat

Given the history of RPGs, finding ways to use the "Action" and "Wits" stats in USR is easy;

Action is everything from acrobatics to yo-yo tricks (admittedly, the latter is not a common Specialism...). Wits can handle research and the supernatural, like magic and psionic combat. Ego, or social skills, are less used in role playing. A character may need to roll to intimidate, seduce or seek information listening to rumors. But the number of times Ego is used compared to the other stats means Ego almost shouldn't even be a stat. Let's change that, and give debaters, manipulators and schemers a chance to fight the good fight.

The Song of Ice and Fire RPG, and my other game, Microlite 20, have rules for social combat. For ease of use, it's basically like standard combat, except with different Specialisms in play. In fiction, social combat is usually over much quicker than battle, so each character begins with "social hit points" equal to the highest value of his or her Ego stat (i.e. 6, 8 or 10). Each attack and defense uses Specialisms like Bargain, Stir up trouble, Stubborn or Immune to her charms.

There's no equivalent to weapons or armor, though one Ego roll can affect the next. For example, befriending a powerful political family can help quell (or stir up) a rebellion. Allow players to describe what their characters are saying in the conversation. If it's convincing or inspiring, grant an extra +1 to the roll.

Make a simple Wits roll as initiative, to represent the planning of meeting times and places that best suit the character's goals. Social combat usually "heals" immediately after the combat ends. Just like standard combat, a character that loses all of his or her social hit points is defeated, but this doesn't have to mean death or unconsciousness. Instead, political foes can be humiliated, and enemies can be outwitted (it's much easier to trick an ogre than to try and cut it to pieces). Adventures can be just as exciting, and a lot less hazardous to life and limb.

What are the best Specialisms for exciting social combat?

7/12/17

USR Wednesdays: Miniatures Rules

Rules-light games are known for being played "theater of the mind" style: everything is described by the GM and the players, including the stuff more crunchy rules sets use miniatures and maps for, like combat positioning and movement. Instead of moving a small plastic figure six spaces, then counting another few spaces to make sure your character is in range of a target, you just say, "I'm near the door, can I hit him?"

But if you're like me, and you want to use all the miniatures and maps and terrain and stuff you use in other games and have spend years collecting — and at the same time you want to play USR — you need another option. So I'm borrowing from my own Microlite 20 rules for USR miniatures rules.

If you have miniature figures (about 1 inch or 25 to 28 mm tall) to represent the characters and their enemies, you'll need a ruler or a battle map covered in spaces (squares, hexes or 1 inch measurements). One space equals 5 feet or 2 yards, and the average human-sized

character and monster moves 6 spaces per turn, even diagonally. This is the character's movement rate.

Small characters (like halflings or gnomes) move 5 spaces per turn, while characters wearing heavy armor (splint mail, banded mail, half-plate, full plate) move 1 space less each turn. On older-style (i.e. OSR) maps, where one space equals 10 feet, the average character moves 3 spaces per turn.

Characters can move through the same space as another character or enemy, but cannot end movement in the same space as another figure. Rubble, darkness, heavy growth and other difficult terrain "costs" 2 spaces of movement per space moved by the character. Moving up and down is the same as moving horizontally (a character does not have to "spend" extra movement to climb or fly). Moving just 1 space is considered a "free" action, as long as the character does not move any farther that turn.

If there's a question whether a character could see an enemy to hit it, draw an imaginary straight line from the center of the attacker's space to the center of the target's space (or one of its spaces, if it takes up more than one space on the map). If there is no major obstacle or enemy in the path, the character can make the attack. Allies of the attacker do not block its path. Characters can attack through windows and other partial obstacles at a -1 penalty to hit.

To avoid calculating attack ranges each turn, melee attacks must be made against an enemy in a space adjacent to the character. Thrown and short-range weapon attacks can be made against an enemy up to 10 spaces away. Long-range weapon attacks can be made against an enemy up to 25 spaces away.

There you have it, simple rules for miniatures. I've used them in several games I've written over the years, and they seem to be a good starting point. A character with a high Action stat or Specialisms related to agility and dexterity might move a space faster, and the difficult terrain and obstacles rules could get much, much more detailed (Action rolls to move through terrain? 1/4 cover?).

Do miniatures play a part in your USR games?

7/20/17

USR Wednesdays: Superheroes part 1: Tiers

There are some basic superhero rules in Domino Writing-style USR, mostly to emulate "elite" characters, like demigods in a fantasy world, or comic book super characters in a setting where most costumed heroes are a little more down to earth (think of Batman in Batman or Detective Comics). But with a few alterations, USR works just find for a bigger variety of superheroes (think of Batman in Justice League of America).

There are five tiers of characters in super hero comics:

1. Non-powered characters, the supporting cast of superhero comics (Mary Jane Watson, Jim Gordon).
2. Street-level heroes without many powers, like the 1930s/1940s pulp heroes (the Shadow, the Phantom) or characters like the Punisher or Luke Cage.
3. Standard superheroes, which range from the low end (Robin, Dazzler) to the "average" hero (Spider-Man, the Flash).
4. High-powered heroes, like Superman and Thor.
5. Cosmic entities that have power beyond what a USR character normally would have (Bat-Mite, Silver Surfer).

So, how to show that difference in the USR rules? First, select your basic character tier, then allow everyone at that tier and above to use the superhero rules (stats of d8, d10 and d12, and rolling twice, using highest result).

For each tier above or below the basic tier, award an additional 2 Narrative points.

Let's take the Avengers, specifically the movie version that's pretty close to the comics, and is really well-known. They're standard superheroes, so they start with stats of d8, d10 and d12. We've already stated that Thor is high-powered, so he starts with those high stats, and an additional 2 Narrative Points to represent his additional Asgardian awesomeness.

On the other end, Nick Fury fights with the good guys, but he's no match in terms of raw power. We'll make him a street-level hero. His stats are d6, d8 and d10, but he also gets 2 additional Narrative Points to help bring him level with Captain America and the rest.

Next week, we'll look at Specialisms and other elements of the genre you can bring to your USR superhero gaming.

7/26/17

USR Wednesdays: Superheroes part 2: Super-Specialisms and hit points

Specialisms for superheroes can be powers - which can be used as weapons and armor, unlike most specialisms — but also personality traits ("billionaire philanthropist," "mild-mannered reporter"). Because they're so free form, super power Specialisms don't have particular damage amounts or limits (for example, how many people are mind-controlled at one time?). Turn to the comics, animation and movies: if you can find an example of the power being used in the media, you can use it, though maybe with the use of a Narrative Point.

Almost every rules-moderate to rules-heavy superhero RPG (including my own Microlite 20 Costumes) has a catalog of super powers for characters to purchase, and which count as Specialisms in superhero USR. As with any Specialism, though, the descriptions that allow for more narration are often more interesting in play. The Punisher's Lots Of Guns is kind of boring as a Specialism, but the Flash's Runs Fast Enough To Access The Speed Force is a

simple to understand power with a unique twist (lots of heroes have Super-Speed, but don't also get access to the Speed Force). With the Ice Control Specialism, Iceman of the X-Men can fire ice darts at a villain, but he also creates ice slides to move quickly, duplicates of himself in ice form, and so much more.

Another superhero-specific element is hit points. Heroes can take a beating, and shrug off most ordinary damage. Boosted Action and Wits stats help represent that, and so does increasing hit points, to (maximum Action die value + maximum Wits die value) x2. Alternately, heroes can be delayed in the hospital, or outright killed, only to return dramatically in the next adventure.

The superhero card game Sentinels of the Multiverse keeps defeated characters in the game until the end with one simple rule. Characters that lose all their hit points can only take one action on a turn, and it has to be used to help another hero who is still in the game. It's described as inspiring the surviving characters to fight harder. The same concept can be used in USR, with knocked-out heroes offering a +1 to certain kind of die rolls, or a once-per-battle reroll to their surviving allies.

8/2/17

USR Wednesdays: Settings

By my count, USR has led to more than a dozen separate games, many found on RPGnow or on the creator's own website. Here's the list I have:

Anthropomorphic by Jay Murphy (animal people)
Beyond Fear by Scott Malthouse (cosmic horror/Cthulhu)
Blood And Silk by Shenron (samurai)
Ghostbusters by Shenron (um... Ghostbusters)
Go Wherever by Scott Malthouse (stonepunk among other ideas)
Halberd by Scott Malthouse (fantasy)
Halcyon Fantasy by Scott Malthouse (old school fantasy)
It Came From VHS! by Scott Malthouse (80s action)
Masquerade of the Sundered Sky by Scott Malthouse (gothic horror)
Sominum Void by Scott Malthouse (space opera)
Swarm Of Barbarians by Peter Segreti (Ancient Rome)
Tequendria by Scott Malthouse (Dunsany fantasy)
Fear & Loathing by Jay Murphy (gonzo adventure)
Sword & Sorcery by Jay Murphy (Conan-style fantasy)
Cyberpunk by Scott Malthouse (cyberpunk)
Moldvay Era by John Yorio (old school fantasy)

I also have a Western game that I don't have an author credit for, and there's a character sheet for USR Traveller farther down the USR Google+ page.

It's exciting thinking about all the opportunities for games that are in these rules sets — combining them, too, gives us Shadowrun (Cyberpunk plus Halberd) or Usagi Yojimbo (Blood

and Silk plus Anthropomorphic). I wanted to create this list to have a running total of all the USR rules sets in one place, and to spark ideas for settings that are "missing." I've touched on superheroes in my last few blog posts, but haven't created a full setting. We have Ghostbusters, but what about Star Wars (in all the eras of the story)?

I hope this list is an inspiration to you to find these games, try them out, and offer your own contributions to a future edition of the list. I'll be working on some settings, too...

What genre should we develop next?

8/9/17

USR Wednesdays: Vehicles

Cars, trucks, tanks, spaceships, pirate sloops... there are dozens of kinds of vehicles in adventure fiction, and given their size and their power, it may be a challenge to see where vehicles actually fit in a role playing game setting. Here are three ways of looking at vehicles in your Domino Writing-style USR game.

1. Vehicles as narration: In most settings, a vehicle is just a means to an end, a way to get from one place to another. In a modern-day action story, the characters drive fast cars or ride in helicopters, but only because it gets them across the city quickly, and to the next story point. There's no game rules when using a vehicle as narration; you can just say, "The heroes hop in their cars and get to the police station," or even "The heroes get on horseback and arrive at the entrance to the dungeon in about an hour." It doesn't matter how fast they're traveling, or what happens on the trip, only that they are traveling.

2. Vehicles as equipment: The flexibility of Specialisms in USR means it's easy to make a vehicle a piece of gear, just like a weapon or a special tool. Some characters who are closely linked to their vehicles might include the vehicle as one of their Specialisms (for example, Han Solo with his Millennium Falcon +2, or Jack Sparrow and the Black Pearl +2). A game master could provide a vehicle as equipment if it's going to be integral to the story, and more than just narration; for example, the Enterprise could be a +2 Specialism to everyone on the "Star Trek" crew. It wouldn't be a Specialism just for Kirk or Picard, because all of the heroes in the adventure make use of the Enterprise — as a weapon, as a research station, as a place of healing, and so on. Of course, Han Solo and Jack Sparrow have plenty of adventures not on board their ships, but no one else in their stories is so connected to those ships as they are.

Like weapons and armor, vehicles can be classified as "light" +1, "medium" +2 or "heavy" +3. A +1 vehicle could be a motorcycle or a horse, while a +2 would be a car or space fighter (an X-Wing or Viper), and a +3 vehicle could be something massive, like a semi-truck, a tank or the Enterprise itself.

Also like weapons or armor, you don't need a separate Specialism for Pilot, Driver or Vehicle Gunner, unless that's really a core element of a character. The vehicle Specialism includes its flying and shooting capabilities.

The Specialism would be used in any situation the vehicle could provide help — winning a race, carrying a heavy load, or firing its on-board weapons. If the vehicle is seriously damaged, it ceases to be a usable Specialism, until it's repaired.

3. Vehicles as characters: Some settings are all about their vehicles: Mad Max, Mobile Suit Gundam, even Transformers. In those settings, the single bonus a Specialism provides doesn't really offer enough to accurately represent the vehicle. So you can add more statistics to a vehicle, like top speed, armament, and maneuverability. Rules for that are in Somnium Void, starting on page 23.

We're taking a week off from USR Wednesdays next week, but we'll be back after that for a look at more genres.

How do you use vehicles in your game?

8/23/17

USR Wednesdays: Chases

A few weeks ago, we looked at vehicle rules — Vehicles as narration, as equipment and as characters. One of the most common uses for vehicles in adventure fiction is in a chase, where one vehicle (the pursuer) is trying to catch up with another (the target), to make an arrest, to get in a shootout, or just to beat the target to the final goal.

Let's take a page from the chase rules developed for the 3rd Edition d20 game system and track a chase in Domino Writing-style USR. In addition to the regular rules, you'll need a piece of paper and a pencil. Draw a line and put a series of evenly spaced marks across the paper, about every inch or so. Put the pursuer at the first mark on the left (write "P" or use a miniature) and the target two mark farther along the paper (write "T" or use a miniature for it too), so there's a mark in between them. The two vehicles will move across the line from mark to mark until they reach their goal — usually by going off the other end of the paper, or landing on the same mark.

Decide if the heroes are the pursuer or the target. Choose a target number based on the difficulty of the terrain (empty space is a 2, a crowded city street is a 7, lava flowing around you is a 10). Have the player acting as driver or pilot make a roll to control the vehicle (usually Action + relevant vehicle Specialism), and have NPCs who are pursuing or who are the target make the same roll.

If one group (heroes and/or NPCs) succeed at the roll, move them forward one mark. If the roll fails, the group doesn't move.

The character who is driver or pilot is usually using his or her turn to control the vehicle, but everyone else in the party who's in the vehicle can take a normal action, like firing the vehicle's weapons or shooting their own guns out a window. In a game with more detailed vehicle rules, a character might spend their turn trying to repair the vehicle, or perform a

scan for more enemies. If nothing else, a character can spend its turn offering support, providing a +1 to an attack roll or the driver or pilot's control roll.

What do you do to visualize chases on the tabletop?

8/30/17

USR Wednesdays: Monsters

A "monster," in a role playing game, is any enemy, from the little goblins and huge dragons of classic fantasy, to security guards and ninja in modern games, to little robots and huge mutants in science fiction. They don't have to be inhuman — even your evil twin is a monster, after all. Since our guiding principle in USR is to be simple and fast, let's create an entire Monster Manual in one chart.

This is inspired by the original monster chart, found in Scott Malthouse's Halberd Fantasy Roleplaying, page 26. It assigns levels to monsters, to approximate their power and competence. We'll streamline it here.

Power Level	Main Stat Die	Combat Bonus	Hit Points	Examples
I	D6	+0	5	Giant Rat, Goblin
II	D6	+1	10	Guard, Orc, Thug, Wolf
III	D8	+2	15	Ninja, Security Robot, Soldier
IV	D8	+3	20	Bear, Gang Boss
V	D10	+4	25	Ogre, Super-Soldier
VI	D10 (or D12)	+5	30	Dragon, Vampire Lord

Main Stat Die: The die used for most of the monster's rolls. In most cases, this will be its Action stat, but a psychic warrior might have its Mind as the main stat, to better use its powers.

You can assign the other stats as needed, based on what's appropriate for the monster (for example, the guard standing outside the emperor's throne room has Action as his main stat, representing his fighting skills with that halberd he's carrying. But if you're trying to convince him to let you pass, you'll have to decide what his Wits stat is — probably about the same as his Action, a D6). In the same way, Specialisms aren't listed for monsters, but they can be assigned as needed, probably offering a bonus of +1 or +2, like a starting hero. You might even assign a penalty to a monster's roll, say -2 if a big, dumb ogre is trying to solve the riddle your hero has posed. And trying to play a riddle game with a normal wolf simply won't work at all, no dice rolls, penalties, or bonuses needed.

Combat Bonus: This is used for both the monster's attacks and defenses, and represents weapons, armor, brute strength, magical ability, and whatever else is needed. It too can

fluctuate depending on the specific attack the creature is making: that vampire lord uses a +5 to lure your hero close to him, but only a +2 to throw a punch.

Hit Points: The maximum hit points for the monster, putting Power Level II and III monsters on par with most Domino Writing-style USR heroes. You can take a cue from Dungeons & Dragons 4th Edition and decrease a monster's HP to 1, if you want to have heroes wipe out a half-dozen monsters in just a few turns.

The math here is pretty easy to see, so you can create more monsters easily, though most things will fit somewhere on this scale.

Where do monsters in your game fit on the Power Level chart?

9/6/17

USR Wednesdays: Star Wars Part I — Classes

Now that we've looked at a lot of the basics to help expand your USR games, from Specialisms to vehicles and monsters, let's turn to settings. And if the sales charts from ICv2 are anything to consider, the most popular genre after medieval fantasy is "Star Wars." icv2.com/articles/games

For Domino Writing-style USR, "Star Wars" consists of the classic trilogy ("A New Hope," "The Empire Strikes Back," and "Return Of The Jedi"). The prequels and sequels have new ideas to offer the "Star Wars" universe but nothing as indelible as the original films. I won't be writing much about them, though I'm looking forward to someone providing stats for Qui-Gon Jinn and Kylo Ren.

In most fantasy RPGs, a character has a race and a class. Despite appearances, that's not the case for Star Wars, where a character's species really isn't that significant. A Wookiee might have Strong +2 as a Specialism, but a Rodian or Ithorian doesn't have particularly strong "racial" characteristics. Droids, on the other hand, are nothing but special abilities. Consider Multi-lingual +2 or Computer hacking +2 (Specialisms droids from the films might have).

A character's profession is best described using an archetype, like the ones we've seen for modern-day characters and in USR games like Somnium Void.

Scoundrel
Primary Stat: Action
Suggested Specialisms: Pilot, Bargain, Hide, Charm
Suggested Equipment: Pistol, Huge debt
Note: "Rogue With A Heart Of Gold" isn't really a good Specialism, since there probably aren't many ways to apply the bonus this would provide if it was a Specialism. It's a great description of the character's personality, though.

Jedi

Primary Stat: Mind
Suggested Specialisms: Dedication, Leadership, Inspiration, Athletics, The Force*
Suggested Equipment: Lightsaber

Warrior
Primary Stat: Action
Suggested Specialisms: Endurance, Military Tactics, Terrain Knowledge
Suggested Equipment: Rifle

Outworlder
Primary Stat: Wits
Suggested Specialisms: Invent, Survivalist, Riding, Bargain
Suggested Equipment: Droid parts, All-weather clothing

Sage
Primary Stat: Wits
Suggested Specialisms: Knowledge, Reference Tools, Etiquette
Suggested Equipment: Computer

Diplomat
Primary Stat: Ego
Suggested Specialisms: Negotiate, Leadership, Languages
Suggested Equipment: none

Technician
Primary Stat: Wits
Suggested Specialisms: Hacking, Computers, Repair, Jury-Rig
Suggested Equipment: Repair tools

*A note on The Force: To simulate the Jedi or other Force-users at the most basic level, the player simply makes a Wits roll against a target number determined by the game master, depending on the complexity of the power. We'll get into a more involved (but still Unbelievably Simple) version of The Force next time.

What classes need to be added to USR Star Wars?

9/13/17

USR Wednesdays: Star Wars Part II — The Force

The Force is one of the things that makes "Star Wars"... well, Star Wars. It's not quite magic or psionics as seen in other works of fiction, but it's easy to understand, and so well-known it's even referred to outside of fantasy and science fiction (I can't count the number of times someone has said "Use the Force" or "Jedi mind trick" without talking about Star Wars).

In the role playing games, novels and the video games they inspired, Jedi, Sith and other

Force-users have access to dozens of powers. But since this series is only focused on the original trilogy of films, there's only about a half-dozen abilities. Most of these names come from the d6 system Star Wars RPG, where they were created.

Battle Meditation, which Luke does while hiding from Vader in the Death Star throne room at the end of "Return Of The Jedi." Qui-Gon Jinn does it better in "The Phantom Menace," but remember, we're only covering the original trilogy here.
Enhanced Reflexes, used when Luke leaps out of the freezing chamber on Bespin.
Force Choke, Darth Vader's favorite gimmick.
Force Defense, which Vader used to block Han's blaster, and Luke used to parry the speeder bike shots on Endor.
Force Lightning, the Emperor's signature move.
Healing, which Obi-Wan does after Luke is attacked by the Tusken Raider.
Suggestion (the Jedi Mind Trick), Obi-Wan's favorite for the weak-minded.
Telekinesis, or as "Weird Al" Yankovic put it, "I picked up a box, I lifted some rocks, while I stood on my head."
Telepathy, Luke's message to Leia shortly thereafter in "The Empire Strikes Back."

That's nine Force powers. You could make each one its own Specialism, but let's take a cue from last week, where I described The Force (or Use The Force) as a Specialism itself. Each power, then, is just a way a character can use The Force. We don't even need to detail "power levels" or anything like that; in most of the Star Wars RPGs, there are specific rules for how much damage Force Lightning causes, or how far a message sent with Telepathy will reach.

But this is USR, and specifics like that are not Unbelievably Simple. Narratively, it doesn't matter. How high does Luke leap, on a successful Wits + The Force roll? As high as the game master decides works for the story. The target number is set based on the amount of stress the hero is under, the obstacles in the way of the leap and the need for the hero to succeed (in this case, our game master, George, set it at a 7).

Another example: the Emperor rolled well on his Wits + The Force roll when attacking Luke with Force Lightning, causing enough hit point damage to knock Luke to the ground and keep him sparkling with electricity. He doesn't need a separate listing of damage caused by Force Lightning. It's just an effect of this particular Wits + The Force die roll.

Training to gain powers is an important part of The Force in Star Wars. Since there's only nine powers to choose from, let's say a hero with The Force as a Specialism starts with two, and gains another after each level. You can increase or decrease that rate, of course, especially if you add more Force powers.

And then there's the Dark Side. In the other Star Wars RPGs, you collect a number of Dark Side points each time you use a Dark Side power (here it's Force Choke and Force Lightning), or if you do something else evil. Too many, and you've fallen to the Dark Side and become an NPC. You can do the same in USR Star Wars (say, a number of points equal to your Ego die value — 6, 8 or 10), or simply make it part of the story, where a character

turns to the Dark Side when it's dramatically appropriate.

The rules for The Force can probably be used for any other kind of supernatural power, too; because of the way combat is handled in Domino Writing-style USR, a killer fireball or a summoned mass of strangling vines is just a way to describe a successful Wits + Magic Specialism roll. Or it could be an Ego + Magic roll, to represent those characters who derive their power from their force of will.

What Force powers did I miss from our Original Trilogy list?

9/20/17

USR Wednesdays: Star Wars Part III — Vehicles, Monsters and Equipment

This time we'll use the Specialism rules for weapons, armor and vehicles.

Vehicles
You can use the "Vehicles as equipment" option, as listed below.
X-Wing +1, TIE Fighter +1, Millennium Falcon +2, Star Destroyer +4
Landspeeder + 1, Speeder Bike +1, AT-ST +2, AT-AT +3

Alternately, because space battles are so important to Star Wars, vehicles can get an entire set of stats, as found in Somnium Void. If you're using this option, characters who often fly starships (like Han, Luke and Vader) should have a Specialism like Pilot +2.

Star Wars	Sominum Void
X-Wing, TIE Fighter	Attack Ship
Millennium Falcon	Cruiser
Star Destroyer	Battleship
Landspeeder	Skimmer
Speeder Bike	Zoom Bike (add a blaster +1)
AT-ST	Tank

AT-AT
Type: Heavy
Maneuver: 8
Hits: 60
Armour: 6
Weapons: Heavy linked blasters +6

Monsters
Power Level I: Mynock

Power Level II: Dianoga, Gamorrean Guard, Stormtrooper, Tauntaun
Power Level III: Wampa
Power Level V: Rancor

Equipment
Bacta tank (heals 5 hit points per hour)
Blaster (light +1 ranged weapon)
Blaster Rifle (medium +2 ranged weapon)
Comlink
E-Web Repeating Blaster (heavy +3 ranged weapon)
Flight suit (light +1 armor)
Lightsaber (medium +2 melee weapon — it can also cut through anything except another lightsaber)
Pike (medium +2 melee weapon)
Stormtrooper armor (medium +2 armor — this also can be used for Mandalorian warriors, like Boba Fett)
Thermal Detonator (heavy +3 ranged weapon)

9/27/17

USR Wednesdays: Star Wars Part IV — Experience Levels

We'll wrap up our series on the original "Star Wars" trilogy with statistics for the heroes and villains from the films. But first, a note on levels: unlike Dungeons & Dragons, the Fantasy Flight Star Wars RPGs, and other professionally published games, USR doesn't rely on characters adding a host of new abilities as they gain levels. Yes, they may add Specialisms and hit points, but we don't have a list of special abilities added at each level for each class. We don't even have classes for characters. So here's the guideline I'm using for Domino Writing-style USR characters.

As seen in the USR rules, you gain 1 to 3 experience points per adventure, and go up a level every 5 XP. In other words, one level per two to three adventures, or roughly one level for every five or so game sessions (depending on how long your game sessions last). A character can gain unlimited levels, but by levels above 5, most monsters will no longer be a real threat. So let's say a level 6 character has to "retire" from adventuring, or at least stop gaining XP.

Here's "A New Hope," complete with experience point awards.

First game session: Luke Skywalker and Obi-Wan Kenobi join Han Solo and Chewbacca (and the droids) in the Mos Eisley cantina, where they have to make a quick escape off the planet Tattooine. They escape to Alderaan, per the "quest giver" Princess Leia hologram. But Alderaan has been destroyed, and their ship is captured. 1 XP for everyone!

Everything before the cantina — the death of Uncle Owen and Aunt Beru, the escape of C3PO and R2-D2 with the Death Star plans — is backstory, helping develop the personalities of the characters. Obi-Wan and Han (and probably Chewie, too) should be level 2 or 3,

really, but RPGs don't often work with characters of different levels in the same party, so we'll have to chalk it up to the difference between a movie and a tabletop RPG.

Second game session: In the Death Star, the party frees Princess Leia and Obi-Wan dies (soon to become a new Specialism for Luke). 2 XP for the dramatic conclusion to the game session.

Third game session: The Empire follows the Millennium Falcon to Yavin IV, triggering the dramatic space battle and destruction of the first Death Star. 2 more XP, and everyone goes up a level. The End.

You could define the events of the entire movie as one adventure (so they advance to level 2 at the end of "Return Of The Jedi"), but I want my heroes to gain XP a little more quickly. There are big challenges ahead; they need to be ready.

After "The Empire Strikes Back," they go up another level. And since we're only looking at the original films, that's where we'll stop. Despite what I said before, to "accurately" portray the characters, they'll be at different levels. That's what you'll see next week, when we provide USR statistics for the heroes of Star Wars.

How many game sessions will it take to play the Harry Potter novels?

10/4/17

USR Wednesdays: Star Wars Part V — Heroes

We wrap up our series on the classic "Star Wars" films with the main characters, as of the beginning of "Return Of The Jedi." Note that they have much less adventuring equipment than most RPG characters, since they don't need to carry medical packs for healing, extra weapons, rope, 10-foot-poles, and so much more.

Luke Skywalker, Level 3, Experience Points 10
Action D10, Wits D8, Ego D6
Specialisms: Jedi In Training (The Force) +2, Obi-Wan Kenobi, Force Spirit +1, Fighter Pilot +3, Impulsive +2
Hit Points: 28
Equipment: Lightsaber +2, Blaster +1
Narrative Points: 4

Han Solo, Level 4, Experience Points 15
Action D10, Wits D6, Ego D8
Specialisms: Millennium Falcon +2, Reckless +3, Quick Reflexes +2, Bargain +1, Loyal +1
Hit Points: 31
Equipment: Blaster Pistol +1
Narrative Points: 6

Leia Organa, Level 3, Experience Points 10

Action D6, Wits D10, Ego D8
Specialisms: Diplomat +3, Tough In A Fight +2, Galactic Etiquette And History +2,
Observation +1
Hit Points: 26
Equipment: Blaster Pistol +1, Data Files
Narrative Points: 6

Chewbacca, Level 4, Experience Points 15
Action D10, Wits D8, Ego D6
Specialisms: Pilot +3, Repair +2, Intimidate +2, Perception +2
Hit Points: 33
Equipment: Wookee bowcaster +2, Tool kit
Narrative Points: 5

10/11/17

USR Wednesdays: Star Wars Part VI — More Heroes

Just like last time, this is as of the beginning of "Return Of The Jedi," except for Obi-Wan).

Obi-Wan Kenobi, Level 4, Experience Points 15 (note: his statistics are as of the start of "A
New Hope" — after that, he becomes a Specialism for Luke)
Action D8, Wits D10, Ego D6
Specialisms: The Force +4, Inspiring +3, Investigation +2
Hit Points: 33
Equipment: Lightsaber +2
Narrative Points: 5

C3PO, Level 3, Experience Points 10
Action D6, Wits D10, Ego D8
Specialisms: Etiquette & Protocol +3, Languages +3, Storytelling +2
Hit Points: 26
Equipment: none
Narrative Points: 7

R2-D2, Level 3, Experience Points 10
Action D6, Wits D10, Ego D8
Specialisms: Computers +3, Repair +3, Deception +2
Hit Points: 26
Equipment: Electric Shock Probe +1 (note: R2-D2 doesn't use his rocket jets in the original
films, so they're not included here, either)
Narrative Points: 6

Lando Calrissian, Level 3, Experience Points 10
Action D8, Wits D6, Ego D10
Specialisms: Bureaucracy +3, Pilot +2, Gambler +3
Hit Points: 24

Equipment: Blaster +2, Expensive Clothes, Unlimited Line Of Credit (until it's called in by the bank)
Narrative Points: 5

Yoda, Level 5, Experience Points 20
Action D8, Wits D10, Ego D6
Specialisms: The Force +5, Inspiring +2, History +3
Hit Points: 38
Equipment: none (note: again, as this doesn't include the Prequel movies, Yoda is simply a wise mentor, not a super-acrobatic military leader)
Narrative Points: 7

10/18/17

USR Wednesdays: Star Wars Part VII — Villains

Our villains are presented as of the beginning of "Return Of The Jedi" — so they're all still alive... none of them actually survive the film!

Darth Vader, Level 4, Experience Points 15
Action D10, Wits D8, Ego D6
Specialisms: Pilot +2, The Force +4, Intimidate +3
Hit Points: 33
Equipment: Lightsaber +2, Body Armor with Breathing System +3
Narrative Points: 3

Jabba The Hutt, Level 3, Experience Points 10
Action D6, Wits D8, Ego D10
Specialisms: Command +2, Great Wealth +3, Underworld Contacts +3
Hit Points: 24
Equipment: None
Narrative Points: 7

Boba Fett, Level 4, Experience Points 15
Action D10, Wits D8, Ego D6
Specialisms: Bounty Hunter +3, Pilot +3, Negotiation +3
Hit Points: 33
Equipment: Mandalorian Armor +2, Blaster Rifle +2, Grappling Line, Rocket Pack
Narrative Points: 3

The Emperor works in the background, even during the final showdown at the end of "Return Of The Jedi" (all he physically does is shoot Force Lightning — and fall down a ventilation shaft, of course). He's better represented as a Power Level VI monster than as a character.

10/25/17

USR Wednesdays: Slasher Films

It's Halloween season, time for a look at this classic genre for role playing. There are many ways to mix horror and gaming — fantasy has plenty of horror-themed beasts, and no game is complete without a nod toward H.P. Lovecraft's creations. But today we're going back to the 80s and beyond.

Slasher films feature a supernatural creature attacking a bunch of nobodies. Think "Nightmare On Elm Street" and "Friday The 13th." This is not about setting the mood for a look into the darkness of the human soul; this is about teenagers having sex and showers of blood!

It's a perfect genre for a game like USR, because statistics are less important in a narrative game. No one in the setting can go toe-to-toe with Freddy or Jason; they're much too powerful. Instead, the protagonists have to out-think or at least out-run their enemy. You could have a game where players are the monsters themselves, but that's really just a superhero game (without the "hero"), and it's not what we're going for here.

In a slasher film game, each player creates three characters, using the standard Domino Writing-style USR rules (though without assigning equipment or spending Combat Gear points). Specialisms in this game should lean heavily toward stereotypes, like Cheerleader, Jock, Redneck, Naive, and Rebellious.

You can determine Narrative Points and Hit Points for the characters, but they probably won't use them. And don't forget to create a slasher — make sure it's got a signature weapon (a clawed glove, a chainsaw) and a gimmick (attacks in dreams, possesses the body of a doll).

When the slasher is ready to start its rampage, roll a die to decide which of the characters is the first victim. If there's three players, that's nine characters; roll a d10 to decide which one is first. Other characters may be in the scene, but the current victim gets the spotlight.

Create a scenario for that victim: what they're doing before the slasher shows up and what they do to escape or fight back. The scenario should have three die rolls built into it. Here's a few examples.

Run away from the slasher (Action)
Build a trap from stuff around the campsite (Mind)
Try to explain the horror that's just up ahead to the gullible county sheriff (Ego)
Grab a farm implement and start swinging it at the slasher (Action)
Summon magical powers you only have in your wildest fantasies to attack the slasher (Mind)
Talk the slasher out of fighting back (Ego)

Tell a story with those dice rolls mixed in. It's a "best two out of three" situation: if the character succeeds at two or three of the rolls, he or she survives... for now. After each character has told his or her own little story, count up the number of survivors. If more than

half are alive at the end, the players win, but that's the end of that horror movie franchise — fans are there for the clever kills, after all. If half the survivors, or fewer, remain, the slasher joins the fraternity with Michael Myers and Ghostface.

What does your slasher look like?

11/1/17

USR Wednesdays: Thor

Now that "Thor: Ragnarok" is coming to theaters, it's time to take a look at the USR superhero rules and visit Thor and his fellow Asgardians. As noted in the superhero rules, the Asgardians are high-powered (Tier 4) characters in a universe with a basic Tier of 3. They get stats of d12, d10 and d8 and a bonus 2 Narrative Points, because they're just that much more powerful. Note this is Marvel Thor, the noble, sometimes goofy blonde hero, not the quick-to-anger redhead of Norse mythology.

Thor, God Of Thunder (or as some Marvel media calls him, "Prince Of Thunder" to avoid any religious controversy... didn't roleplaying leave that behind in the 1980s?)
Level 3, Experience Points 10
Action D12, Wits D8, Ego D10
Specialisms: Strength +3, Lunkheaded Charm +2, Nobility +3
Hit Points: 30
Equipment: Armor +2, Mjolnir (hammer) +2
Narrative Points: 5

Loki the Trickster, Level 3, Experience Points 10
Action D8, Wits D10, Ego D12
Specialisms: Asgardian Magic +2, Deception +4, Loyalty To Asgard When He Has To Be Loyal +2
Hit Points: 28
Equipment: Armor +1, Magic Staff +2
Narrative Points: 6

Odin the All-Father, Level 5, Experience Points 20
Action D12, Wits D10, Ego D8
Specialisms: Leadership +3, Creation +3, Bravery +2, Battlefield Tactics +2
Hit Points: 42
Equipment: Armor +2, Spear +2
Narrative Points: 6

And now, just to change things up...
Jane Foster, Level 1, Experience Points 0 (Tier 1)
Action D6, Wits D10, Ego D8
Specialisms: Astrophysics +2, Medicine +2, Stamina +2
Hit Points: 16
Equipment: none

Narrative Points: 11

All four of these characters have a lot of Narrative Points, beyond the 3 a normal starting USR character has. As noted in the superhero rules, that's to represent their incredible raw power (for the Asgardians) or their ability to survive and contribute in a world that's much bigger than them (for an "ordinary" like Jane).

Which other superheroes need the USR treatment?

11/8/17

USR Wednesdays: Adventure Design

One thing I don't see in rules-light RPGs (or most that aren't professionally published, really) is much advice about adventure design — how to create balanced battles with monsters, how to construct a story, how to keep the action moving without it being all fights, etc. That's probably because adventures are tougher to write than rules are, since rules are simply math, while adventure writing is less easy to put into a structure. It's also because rules-light games are more about collective storytelling than traditional RPG adventures, where a game master can simply read off the description of a room and what's inside.

https://www.roleplayingtips.com/5-room-dungeons/
http://greywulf.net/2010/12/03/the-dungeon-delve-and-the-three-act-play/

Let's take a cue from the five room dungeon and the three act delve. This is a way to get an entire adventure in one night's session — when I play (not often enough), this is what works best. An ongoing campaign, with recurring villains that strike time and again, is fantastic, but it's hard enough to get people together to play once. Let's not start a story we can't finish.

This rules-light adventure design has six parts, in a row, which is why I call it the Six-Step Adventure.

1. Quest giver
The motivation to start the adventure. Traditionally, this is, "You meet at the tavern and a herald tells you about the captured princess" or "The king sends you to clear out the nearby dungeon." But in a narrative game, reverse it. Pick a starting point and have these creative players, who have already invented their own Specialisms, describe what's making them want to participate.

Yes, the beautiful elven princess has been kidnapped by the dragon. Why rescue her? Well, the dashing human rogue knows his answer, but what about the half-dragon berzerker? The real answer, of course, is that if he doesn't help rescue her, there's no game for the night. But in the world of the story, the player gets to stretch those creative muscles before he even picks up his dice.

2. Early encounter

A chance to try out the combat rules, or get a feel for the style of the adventure. This is the goblin skirmish outside the ruined temple, or the challenge of breaking into a locked building that is where the data files are stored.

3. Clue to final confrontation

This ties in to part 6, where the characters get an indication of they're up against or how to defeat it. They find a gem that's especially deadly against the final "boss monster" of the adventure, or rescue an insane man, babbling about the horrors he's seen (and that the heroes will see in the not-too-distant future).

4. Secondary encounter or challenge

A more serious threat, like the boss monster's number two guy or a massive dragon that's the pet of the real villain. This doesn't have to be a monster, either; the FBI can show up to take over the investigation just as the characters are making progress, or they have to figure out how to infiltrate the villain's hideout — during a lavish party.

5. Secondary challenge or encounter (the opposite)

The reverse of the previous part. Not everything in any adventure should be about combat! Even in violence-focused games like Dungeons and Dragons or Star Wars, characters do things other than fight. The group could have to solve a riddle (what's the Elvish word for "friend"?) or even face a moral quandary through role playing, without rolling the dice (should Chewie break free and rescue Han from the carbon-freezing chamber?).

6. Final boss

This is what everyone has been waiting for, the big finish. It's usually a fight, since so many RPG characters (including USR ones) are build around combat skills. But it could just as easily be a challenge: planting a bomb and making a getaway before the timer runs out, or getting to the valuable civilian to the safety of a military escort before the enemy government's goons recapture him.

This is a framework for adventures, one that can easily be expanded (the heroes need to collect several clues before they can move on) or shrunk (only one secondary encounter/challenge) to fit the time allowed for the game.

What does your Six-Step Adventure look like?

P.S. This is the first post at the new dominowriting.com/games site. My games are here, too; let's keep all the fun in one place.

11/15/17

USR Wednesdays: Dragons As Player Characters

I've been rewatching "Game Of Thrones" recently, in anticipation of the seventh season being released on disc (we're buying each season as it's released, and watching it then, so no spoilers). The CG for the dragons is impressive, for the most part, and every time I see

them on screen I'm reminded of an old game, the AD&D 2nd Edition "Council Of Wyrms," which boils down to "Dragons as PCs." This is full-size dragons, not dragonborn; the character's scale color stands in for race, and there are mages and priests and so on. I've never actually played in the setting, but "Dragons as PCs" is a great way to try the USR rules on an entirely different scale.

Dragons are, of course, powerful enough to rule entire kingdoms (as they do in the later "Dragonlance" novels) or destroy armies (as they do in "Game Of Thrones"). How do you recreate that level of power in USR? You could start with the superhero rules, setting them at Tier 4, but the tiers only work with varying levels of power — a Thor vs a Punisher. If everyone's a massive dragon, take a cue from Risus, and change the scale of target numbers for non-contested rolls, decreasing them all by two points. So it looks like this:

2 Medium
3 Making a Close Range shot
5 Hard
7 Making a Long Range shot
8 Very Hard
12 Nearly Impossible

The characters can still fail on a die roll, but it's a lot harder to do so, since they're physically and magically utterly powerful creatures. Monsters in this setting are scaled down, too. A single human or elf has stats of D4 and 1 hit point. A party of adventurers out to slay your hero is probably at Power Level I or maybe II. A giant, an actual threat to a dragon, might be a Power Level III or IV creature. The rules don't change, just the numbers. Then there's the adventures themselves. A group of dragons likely won't be crawling through dungeons, unlocking doors and fighting goblins. Instead, try adventures on a larger scale:

Seek a treasure — in the realm of the gods
Investigate the murder of an ancient dragon, dealing with armies of humans, elves and dwarves firing arrows at you as you search for clues
Negotiate with other societies (giants, demons) to make room for the ceremony that will bring an elder dragon to godhood

What will your party of dragons look like?

11/22/17

USR Wednesdays: Adventure Ideas

We're putting the Six-Step Adventure design to work, with two different adventure ideas. They haven't been playtested (yet), but they're examples of how the adventure design can be used for brief, but still satisfying night of role playing.

Fantasy Adventure: This one takes place in a generic fantasy setting (for example, Halberd or Tequindra). It's a pretty straightforward "dungeon crawl," the kind seen in RPGs since

the 1970s, and that makes it a good way to try out the format in a familiar context. Don't forget to add some unique elements to the combat encounters — a battle in an empty room or forest clearing isn't that exciting, but add obstacles, a time limit and different locations, like a high balcony to shoot down from, or the top of a moving train, and you're adding to the action.

1. Quest giver: The heroes are accompanying a merchant carrying a valuable treasure of some kind in a simple wooden box that's magically locked. The merchant doesn't know what the treasure is, only that he's supposed to get it to the sorcerer who hired him.
2. Early encounter: The merchant and his caravan are attacked by a group of bandits. There are more bandits than the heroes can handle, so that no matter how many they defeat, the merchant is killed and the treasure taken.
3. Clue to final confrontation: The heroes interrogate a bandit, or (more likely) find a map to a wizard's tower with the symbol of a rival wizard on it.
4. Secondary encounter or challenge: The map leads through obstacles, like a small battle with a bear, and a rickety bridge over a lake. These are meant to be brief encounters, a chance to experiment with unusual environments or unique ways to use their Specialisms.
5. Secondary challenge or encounter (the opposite): Once over the bridge, the heroes enter the wizard's tower and confront the wizard's monsters — for example, a dragon or a mechanical guard, or even more bandits.
6. Final boss: The rival wizard himself, who uses the treasure, which has some kind of combat effect (for example, it fires a beam of energy, or creates a magical force field). Defeating the wizard ends the adventure; the heroes can return the treasure to the sorcerer and earn gold and prestige.

Modern Adventure: Here's a story in a more contemporary setting, with a little bit more social interaction. The heroes meet a rival team of explorers, giving them a chance to compete with or cooperate with that group. Killing off the rival team also demonstrates the danger of the adventure, without keeping the heroes from completing the story.

1. Quest giver: A government agent hires the heroes as a salvage team to recover a lost treasure (gold from early explorers) on a shipwreck — it's in pirate-infested waters, so he doesn't want to risk veteran divers.
2. Early encounter: The heroes are attacked by a pirate ship that wants to take them over; another salvage crew appears to help fight off the pirates. They are from a private salvage company.
3. Clue to final confrontation: The other crew shares the location of the shipwreck from their research.
4. Secondary encounter or challenge: The heroes are lowered into the ocean with other team of searchers to begin the search, but their shark cage has been tampered with, and sharks attack.
5. Secondary challenge or encounter (the opposite): The two teams race to recover the treasure.
6. Final boss: No matter who recovers the treasure, the heroes and the private salvage crew return to their ships to find the government agent waiting there, with his own set of troops. The sailors on both ships are dead; the government agent wants the treasure for

himself.

How do these Six-Step Adventures work in your gaming group?

11/29/17

USR Wednesdays: Using Narrative Points

One of the things I like best about USR is the balance between a quick, rules-light narrative role playing game system and the "crunchy" rules sets of bigger games. Though Specialisms are meant to be very flexible, the rules around them provide more structure than games like Risus or Apocalypse World. At the same time, USR doesn't demand a page full of numbers, like Pathfinder or the Fantasy Flight Games Star Wars systems.

With Narrative Points, USR joins the ranks of games like Fate (Fate Points), Savage Worlds (Bennies) and even Fifth Edition D&D (Inspiration) in providing an option for players to have a more direct impact on the story, either by affecting die rolls, or in some cases outright changing the game master's description.

Don't use these to track your Narrative Points, you could eat them before they're spent. (image: candystore.com)

In Domino Writing-style USR, Narrative Points can do four things, as shown on the character sheet:

Add to or change a scene the game master has described.
This is very flexible, definitely on the rules-light side of things. There's no hard and fast rule, but a good guideline is that it should encourage the story. This use of Narrative Points isn't to affect die rolls, but to (usually) make the situation more advantageous to the heroes.
If a thug successfully shoots your hero, the game master shouldn't allow you to use a Narrative Point to say he missed (the dice already show that he hit). Instead, the police could show up — or just be heard in the distance, depending on the story the game master wants to tell. You could even spend a Narrative Point to say after that shot, the thug's gun jams. He doesn't run out of bullets, in case the game master wants the thug to attack again, but the moment or two while the gun is jammed may be enough for the heroes to make another plan.
Or imagine the heroes are trying to escape out of a building while guard dogs (or security robots) chase after them. They're deep in the building and need a place to hide. Spending a Narrative Point, one character "suddenly" discovers a storage room where the heroes can huddle in the dark until the threat passes. A Narrative Point probably wouldn't be used to "suddenly" find a door out of the building, on the other hand, since that could bring an abrupt end to the game — what if the heroes were supposed to be caught, or what if escaping the building means the adventure is over, and game night still has two hours to go?

Automatically succeed at a non-combat die roll.
This option also needs to be examined carefully by the game master, because it too can end

an adventure right away. It's a good way to speed up to more exciting parts of the story.

A thief character wouldn't spend a Narrative Point to automatically undo a lock — picking locks is part of what makes the character fun. But on the other hand, using a Narrative Point to automatically pick a lock guarantees it's opened safely, without triggering a trap or signaling an alarm.

It can also be helpful to avoid danger, like automatically crossing a swinging rope bridge, or to speed up time, like finding an important clue in the university library before the campus cops show up, wondering why there's a group of heavily armed men walking past the shelves.

Re-roll a die roll in combat.

No one wants to miss, of course, but because damage in USR is dependent on the attack and defense rolls, you don't just want to roll good enough, you want to roll as high as possible. There's no limit to the number of Narrative Points you can spend at one time; spend a bunch to keep "editing" the scene until that bullet hits the bad guy in just the right way.

Regain d6 lost Hit Points.

Though Domino Writing-style USR allows for more starting Hit Points than regular USR does, an action-adventure story will always come with the risk of injury and death. Remember to describe the way those Hit Points are being recovered. Is your hero stopping to catch his breath? Is he grabbing a nearby first aid kit? Is he taking a break for a refreshing afternoon snack? Mechanically, adding Hit Points is a simple procedure, but it too can be a fun part of the narrative of the game.

As always, game masters have the final say, and as always, it's more fun if the game master and players come to an agreement that makes for a more enjoyable story.

Narrative Points start with three, and you and add more if you don't spend all your Combat Gear points, and even more if you're using superhero rules and are at a different Tier than the base level of the game.

You regain your starting amount at the beginning of each game session, but you can also get them back during the game. How? We'll look at that next time.

How do you use Narrative Points in your game?

12/6/17

USR Wednesdays: Earning Narrative Points

The way to earn Narrative Points in a USR game is simple: have fun with the game while you're playing it. Years ago, I ran a game of Toon, where I awarded a Plot Point (that game's equivalent of Narrative Points) to one of my players for something I found funny. Toon, as the name suggests, is all about being cartoony, but my players took it the wrong way, deciding that the way to "win" was to get me to laugh so they could collect Plot Points, instead of telling an entertaining tale. The moral of that story is to hand out

Narrative Points often, so players see that they're available for just about any reason, and earning them is fun in itself.

You start with three Narrative Points, and may have a few more if you don't spend all your Combat Gear points when creating a character, or when you're using superhero rules. So you'll probably earn 2, 3 or maybe 4 back during a typical game session — enough to keep using them all through the game.

Then again, if the players and game master agree, Narrative Points can be handed out constantly. This creates a game where players are revising the story as they go, as in a fourth-wall-breaking cartoon (Daffy Duck or Deadpool), or boosting every attack and damage roll until heroes are blowing away legions of even very tough bad guys without a sweat (Arnold Schwarzenegger and Sylvester Stallone). It's all up to the kind of game everyone wants to play.

Here's a few ways to earn Narrative Points in your USR game.

Good roleplaying: Help tell the story in a way that makes it more fun for everyone, and in a way that makes sense. This can be suggesting an idea that improves a scene and that doesn't make your situation better (doing that would call for spending a Narrative Point). Suggest a better way for a monster to attack the heroes using its surroundings, or make your best effort at using the exact dialogue your character would use when talking to the king.

Be true to your character's behavior: When you created a character, you came up with a general idea of how he or she would behave. In other words, this is how you would actually role play your character (that's right, a video game RPG is not an RPG, it's a method of collecting virtual prizes). This could be sticking to an RPG cliche (following the law of the land, even if it would be easier to cheat) or taking a cue from a character from another work of fiction (talking at a rapid-fire pace, never stopping to take a breath).

Doing what makes sense for your character, especially when it makes the situation more challenging for the heroes, can be worth a Narrative Point. It should usually just happen once per game session — a character doesn't need to constantly be rewarded for literally being themselves. Also keep in mind that role playing games are social games about heroes; there's always someone who wants to be the lone wolf, going off on his own adventure, or who wants to murder everyone in town. In a typical game, that may be true to the character's personality, but it's not much fun, and shouldn't be encouraged by awarding Narrative Points. It probably shouldn't even be allowed for a character, unless you're trying to role play "Grand Theft Auto" or something.

Doing "cool stuff": This covers everything else, from making everyone at the table laugh at something related to the game, to rolling really well and describing how awesome your character's performance was for that action, to another RPG cliche, bringing pizza for the group to enjoy.

Surprisingly, most professionally published role playing games have little to say on their equivalent of Narrative Points. Savage Worlds suggests you earn Bennies for good play. Fate gives specific requirements on how to regain a Fate Point, with its jargon of "compel," "concede," and "invoke." Of the games I own, Toon actually offers the most help (interesting that it's much older than the other games, dating to 1984). Its ideas are similar to the ones I've listed here.

What "cool stuff" would earn a Narrative Point in your game?

12/13/17

USR Wednesdays: The Last Jedi

I didn't include stats for the new heroes of the "Star Wars" films in my series on the movies, but since opening weekend is this Friday, I have a perfect opportunity to do it now. This is as of the end of "The Force Awakens." If you're reading this a few years later, make updates based on what's happened in the other movies!

Rey, Level 1, 0 Experience Points
Action D10, Wits D8, Ego D6
Specialisms: The Force +2, Mechanical Repair +2, Survival +2
Hit Points: 18
Equipment: Quarterstaff +1, Blaster Pistol +1, Repair Tools
Narrative Points: 5

Finn, Level 1, 0 Experience Points
Action D10, Wits D6, Ego D8
Specialisms: Firearms +2, Gunnery +2, Leadership +2
Hit Points: 16
Equipment: Blaster Rifle +2
Narrative Points: 5

Poe Dameron, Level 3, 10 Experience Points
Action D10, Wits D8, Ego D6
Specialisms: Pilot +3, Navigate +2, Military Commander +2, Streetwise +1
Hit Points: 28
Equipment: X-Wing, Blaster Pistol +2
Narrative Points: 5

Kylo Ren, Level 2, 5 Experience Points
Action D6, Wits D10, Ego D8
Specialisms: Quick Temper Leading To The Dark Side +2, The Force +3, Interrogation +2
Hit Points: 21
Equipment: Lightsaber +2, Armor +1
Narrative Points: 4

What are the stats for other characters in "The Force Awakens"?

USR Wednesdays: More Archetypes

These are some of the most, well, archetypal kinds of characters found in role playing games, assembled in the Risus Companion and revisited here for USR characters in almost any setting. Some of these archetypes overlap in their suggested Specialisms or in their role in an adventuring party. That's fine; most characters have more than one dimension to their personality, and few adventuring parties have room for a dozen heroes.

Athlete (soldier, martial artist, jock)
Primary Stat: Action
Suggested Specialisms: Endurance, Honest And Reliable (And A Little Dim-Witted), Strong, Fast
Suggested Equipment: none

Charismatic (bard, con artist, rock star)
Primary Stat: Ego
Suggested Specialisms: Inspire, Perform (music, rousing speeches, etc.), Charm, Seduce
Suggested Equipment: Musical instrument

Detective (private eye, seer, psychic investigator)
Primary Stat: Wits
Suggested Specialisms: Investigate, Interrogate, Sneak, Perception, Hard Drinking
Suggested Equipment: Trenchcoat, Revolver

Driver (pilot, knight on horseback)
Primary Stat: Action
Suggested Specialisms: Driving/Piloting (multiple vehicles), Gunnery, Repair, Riding
Suggested Equipment: Vehicle — but only a basic model, one he can update and improve constantly

Mechanic
Primary Stat: Wits
Suggested Specialisms: Inventing, Repair, Research
Suggested Equipment: Tool kit, Several strange gadgets that nobody should touch unless they want to put a smoking crater in the wall

Medic (Doctor, Cleric, Therapist)
Primary Stat: Wits
Suggested Specialisms: Medicine, Psychology, Chemistry (or Alchemy)
Suggested Equipment: Medicine bag

Noble (CEO, King, General)
Primary Stat: Ego
Suggested Specialisms: Leadership, Resources, Inspiration

Suggested Equipment: An unlimited amount of money (temporarily)

Outdoors (Ranger, Hunter, Scout)
Primary Stat: Wits
Suggested Specialisms: Nature Knowledge, Perception, Survival
Suggested Equipment: Longbow (even for modern-day characters)

Scholar (Sage, Scientist, Professor)
Primary Stat: Wits
Suggested Specialisms: Research, Things Man Was Not Meant To Know, Ancient History
Suggested Equipment: Library (of books or material on an electronic device), A weapon that he's mastered after reading about its use in a long-extinct culture

Sneak (Thief, Spy, Assassin)
Primary Stat: Action
Suggested Specialisms: Move Silently, Observation, Remain Motionless, Lockpicking, Hacking, Agile Enough To Avoid Tripwires And Sensors
Suggested Equipment: Lockpicks, Black clothing

Warrior (Soldier, Fighter, Knight, Mystic Warrior)
Primary Stat: Action
Suggested Specialisms: Weapon Mastery, Endurance, Spiritual Control, Athletics, Unshakable Faith
Suggested Equipment: A big gun or sword, Armor

Wizard (Sorcerer, Gadgeteer)
Primary Stat: Wits
Suggested Specialisms: Inventing, Spellcasting, Knowledge Of Other Worlds
Suggested Equipment: Spellbook, Devices that violate the laws of physics

12/27/17

USR Wednesdays: Social Combat And Regular Combat

In the original discussion on social combat, we made it a parallel to regular combat, except the main stat we're using is Ego, not Action. The parallels can be the same for adventures, too, but they're probably harder to recognize.

Regular combat could be: a battle in a dungeon room with a handful of orcs
A showdown over a precarious bridge with a powerful evil wizard
A one-on-one fistfight with a giant robot
A suspenseful hunt through the building corridors, looking for a way out or the magic button that destroys the bad guy's headquarters

Social combat, on the other hand, is:
A confrontation in a courtroom (here's a good example, and here's another)
https://burneverythinggaming.com/2016/05/12/social-combat-in-fate-games/

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ace_Attorney#Gameplay
Talking a guard into letting you pass without attracting attention
Getting an informant to give up the information he's got that your heroes need
Rallying exhausted troops for one final assault on the enemy
Encouraging a crowd to join your side when all they want to do is run or turn against you

Social combat can use several Specialisms, like Intimidation, Seduction, Charm, Quick Wit, Etiquette, Detect Lies, Arrogant, and more. Each can be used just like a weapon attack, but is even more specific. A character with Plate Mail +2 can use it against any sword or axe — but a character with Detect Lies +2 isn't going to get much use out of that Specialism when facing a character using the Specialism Intimidation.

Combat, whether it's with Action or Ego (or Wits, in the case of supernatural powers), can be as detailed or as simple as the players want. One character's Action + Sword might be one character's action, after another character's use of Ego + Fast-Talk fails to get the guard to move out of the way. Everyone has a chance to participate: the mighty barbarian, the wise sorcerer, and the quick-witted minstrel.

How will your heroes use their social combat Specialisms?

1/3/18

USR Wednesdays: Quick Draw

In most USR combat, speed is a secondary consideration, represented by an initiative roll (in Domino Writing-style USR, that's Action + Wits) at the start of the battle, just to determine turn order. But in some kinds of combat, speed is much more significant: a Wild West showdown at high noon, or a situation where a bomb is triggered and starts counting down, and everyone (the good guys, at least) has to get out of the room before it explodes. So how can you simulate that while sticking with the Unbelievably Simple guidelines of USR?

Western USR, by an author whom I don't know, has a great idea: while normal initiative is a representation of reflexes (Action) and tactics (Wits), combat that relies so heavily on who goes first should instead add Ego to the mix. It represents the steely eyed glare of the veteran sharpshooter intimidating the uncertain novice, or the cool head needed to switch instantly from "I'm carefully setting the wires on this explosive device" to "Get out! Go! Go! Go!"

We can also take an idea from early versions of Dungeons and Dragons, weapon speed. The higher the speed rating, the slower the weapon was, and the longer it took for the attacker to get it ready to strike. The trade-off, of course, is that slower weapons are usually much more damaging. In USR, the bonus provided by a weapon or armor can also be used to adjust a character's initiative roll — but in this case, since higher initiative goes earlier in the combat round, subtract the weapon or armor bonus from the initiative roll. A dagger (+1) is a lot easier to flick at a foe than loading, chambering and firing a shotgun (+3) is. A fist (no bonus) is even faster, but unless your character has a Specialism like Martial Artist, it won't affect the outcome of combat much.

It makes combat encounters last a little longer, but roll initiative each round instead of just once at the start in a combat situation like the ones we're describing here. It keeps players on their toes if they don't know exactly where they're taking action in any given moment, appropriate for a battle so reliant on quick action.

Finally, if you're comfortable with a little more math in your USR game, start counting bullets. A Wild West showdown, in the movies, usually ends immediately: one guy is dead, or the other one is. But RPG combat lasts longer; both gunmen will probably fire a few times before it's over. And if one runs out of bullets first, bad luck for him. You could also assign a penalty for injuries. The easiest option here is simply a -1 to dice rolls if the character is below half of his starting Hit Point total, but a good hit could also knock a weapon from someone's hand, or strike a kneecap, forcing them to the dirt. It's more bookkeeping, but can really help bring a tense confrontation to life.

Where can you use quick draw rules in your games?

1/10/18

USR Wednesdays: Three Ideas For Descriptive Combat

Even though Domino Writing-style USR characters have a good number of hit points and variety in their weapons and armor (even if it is only differentiated as Light, Medium and Heavy), combat in a rules light game system will be quicker than in a more "crunchy" game like most on the market. That's one of the reasons people play rules light games, so they can tell a story, not play a wargame. Here's a few ways to get the best of both worlds — a battle that lasts a while, but isn't just:
"I swing my sword at the orc." (roll to attack)
"Your swing misses." (players fall asleep)

Terrain: a battle doesn't have to take place in a room with no features. At the very least you can have obstacles like furniture, walls or plant life. But you can also literally change the scenery as the combat goes on. What if the floor is shaking because the building is falling apart, or an earthquake is rattling the ground? What if a nearby lantern catches the furniture on fire, a fire that spreads further each round? What if there's several levels to the battle, where some of the enemies are high above, shooting down, while others are directly in front of the heroes?

Maneuvers: Disarming the enemy, throwing sand in his face — these are easy to forget while in the heat of combat, when it seems easiest just to keep cutting away at the foe's hit points instead of trying different tricks. A game master can encourage the use of maneuvers by changing the setting a little bit. One way is by making the characters chase the enemy, so they have to drive or fly at the same time they're opening fire. Another is to give the heroes, and villains, a chance to catch their breath. What if the laws of physics suddenly stop working, and everyone has an opportunity (say, one turn) to freely move around or come up with a quick plan before getting right back into the action?

Third-Party Problems: The heroes are on one side of the battle, the enemies on the other, and then a dragon comes bursting out of the ground? Or someone steps on a hidden trigger, and poisoned darts start flying across the entire room? Or the jewel that both the heroes and villains are competing to get is grabbed by someone else, and they start running of with it?

All of these options can lengthen the time spent in combat, while making it much more memorable than just adding hit points to a monster so it stays in the fight longer.

What are your favorite ways of describing combat?

1/17/18

USR Wednesdays: Marvel Superheroes

We've met Thor and Loki before, but what about some of the other stars of the Marvel Universe? These versions are, like most traditional superheroes, at Tier 3, and blend the best of each version of the character (comics, movies, animation, and so on).

Captain America, Level 3, 10 Experience Points
Action D12, Wits D8, Ego D10
Specialisms: Leadership +3, Military Tactics +2, Shield Throwing +3, Art (drawing) +2
Hit Points: 30
Equipment: Chainmail Armor +1, Mighty Shield +3
Narrative Points: 3

Iron Man, Level 2, 5 Experience Points
Action D8, Wits D12, Ego D10
Specialisms: Billionaire Playboy Philanthropist +2, One Man R&D Department +3, Multi-Talented Scientist +2
Hit Points: 25
Equipment: Multiple Iron Man armors +2 to offense and defense
Narrative Points: 3

Spider-Man, Level 1, 0 Experience Points
Action D12, Wits D10, Ego D8
Specialisms: Shoot Web +2, Chemistry +2, Photography +2
Hit Points: 22
Equipment: Webshooters
Narrative Points: 7

Wolverine, Level 3, 10 Experience Points
Action D12, Wits D10, Ego D8
Specialisms: What He Does Isn't Very Nice +3, Sense Danger +3, Lone Wolf Always Part Of Teams +2, Mutant Healing Power +2
Hit Points: 32
Equipment: Sharp Retractable Claws +2

Narrative Points: 4

1/24/18

USR Wednesdays: Team Benefits

The traditional RPG adventuring party is a group of strangers brought together to battle evil. We all know "You meet in a tavern," or "The government recruits you as a hand-picked team to fight the villain." But what about a team specifically put together before adventuring: a military unit (G.I. Joe), a school class (X-Men) or even a band (Josie and the Pussycats)?

You can simply say that's how the group came together; it provides a built-in quest giver (the General, the Professor, the Band Manager) and a reason to stick together for more than a single adventure. But it also provides an option for Team Benefits. Your adventuring party can select one of these when the characters are created, and can add more as they increase in levels (one suggestion is when all the characters reach level 2 or 3). They make characters slightly more powerful than ordinary Domino Writing-style USR characters, but only in certain situations. Like most rules options, it adds a little more "crunch," but the goal, as always, is to keep it Unbelievably Simple.

Team Benefits can be used by everyone in the group. They require one action per character, and it doesn't take effect until all the characters have "spent" their action on the Team Benefit. For example, the players may not want to all use their turn in the same round to use a Team Benefit during combat — if they did, the enemies would get a free attack (since no one would be attacking the enemies on that turn). A Team Benefit can only be used once per game session.

Here's a few examples of Team Benefits, inspired by similar rules from the Dungeons & Dragons Third Edition Players Handbook II, and the Fantasy Flight Games Deathwatch RPG.

Amazing Performance
The heroes automatically succeed at one action roll for an action that the entire group is doing together (for example, searching for tracks or inspiring the common people to rise in rebellion, but not picking a lock or driving a car).

Battle Fury
+2 to all melee attacks by heroes for the rest of the combat encounter.

Pack Tactics
One character (of the heroes' choice) can take another turn immediately.

Rally Cry
One character (of the heroes' choice) immediately regains all of his Hit Points or Narrative Points.

Stand Your Ground

+2 to all defensive rolls by heroes for the rest of the combat encounter.

Withering Fire
+2 to all ranged attacks by heroes for the rest of the combat encounter.

What kind of Team Benefits will your heroes use?

1/31/18

USR Wednesdays: Classic Magic

There are some very good rules sets for magic abilities in the USR world, including ones modeled after the Dungeons & Dragons rules we're all familiar with (that's what we see in USR games like Sword & Sorcery, and Halberd), and the more "need to interpret" rules I put together for the Force in Star Wars.

Spells often need to be limited — otherwise, why bother picking up a sword if a fireball can do much more damage, and used just as often? In Halberd, the solution is for spells to cost Hit Points from the spellcaster, which makes sense in terms of the traditional fantasy genre: the wizard is always weaker than the warrior, because he's sacrificing his health for magical ability.

And we can borrow from the mighty tomes of spells written for RPGs over the years, where characters can choose a handful of spells at each level, with a more powerful spell (a "higher level" spell) being just as easy to cast, but less likely to be cast since it costs so many hit points. To keep things Unbelievably Simple, as we like to do, we'll require spellcasters to select only two spells at level 1, and one at each additional level for a grand total of six, since characters in our USR games only go to level 5.

You can cast them as often as you like, but you have to spend the listed hit point(s) first. Casting a spell counts as your action for a turn, or is considered part of your attack action — for example, Magical Missile is an attack by itself, but casting Entangling Vines adds to an attack roll using the Wits stat. And of course, the exact details of the spell are up to the player and the game master to work out, provided it helps tell a better story.

Here's a few simple spells to choose from; you can probably think of hundreds more using the same guidelines. A rough guideline is a cost of 3 hit points per single die of effect.

Cure Heavy Wounds: +2d6 hit points to yourself or another individual (6 hit point cost).
Cure Light Wounds: +1d6 hit points to yourself or another individual. (3 hit point cost — yes, you can suffer more damage than you recover if you use this spell on yourself!).
Detect Magic: All magicial objects and creatures in an area the size of an average room glow a faint light blue for the next few moments, long enough for you to discern where they are (1 hit point cost).
Entangling Vines: Choose one enemy and make a Wits +2 roll, opposed by the enemy's Action roll; on a successful attack, that enemy cannot move for the rest of the combat encounter, unless it uses its entire movement and action on a turn to free itself (3 hit point

cost).
Fireball: Choose one enemy and make a Wits +3 roll, opposed by an Action roll; on a successful attack, the enemy suffers 2d6 damage (6 hit point cost).
Light: The spellcaster touches an object and for the next hour, the object glows like a lantern. It can only be "turned off" by the spellcaster (1 hit point cost).
Magical Missile: 1 automatic damage to an enemy you can see (2 hit point cost).
Teleport: One creature or object is instantly moved from its current location to somewhere else within eyesight of the spellcaster (5 hit point cost).

What spells will you bring to your USR games?

2/7/18

USR Wednesdays: One Big Hero

One thing that makes RPGs pretty unique among ways of telling heroic stories is that they're designed to present the stories of a team. Most of the time, a story — a movie, a comic, a novel — features one hero: James Bond. Conan. King Arthur.

Some heroes have allies, but they're definitely secondary characters: Little John to Robin Hood, Bucky to Captain America. There are teams in superhero comics (Justice League, Avengers), and of course in fantasy novels (Fellowship of the Ring, Companions of the Lance), but they're less common. So, how can you portray a story with one hero, when your RPG group is made up of several players?

One option is to use the tiers introduced for superhero characters, where one character is tier 4 or even 5, while the others are 1 or 2 (they're the base tier of character). Another is the option that games like The Legacy Of Zorro or Dr. Who take, where the main character isn't a player character option. They're off on their own adventures while the heroes of the game are doing something else to advance the cause.
https://www.amazon.com/Legacy-Zorro-Introductory-Adventure-Game/dp/189030526X
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Doctor_Who_Roleplaying_Game

Here's two examples of a "One Big Hero" setting for your adventuring party.

Night Time Guardians: Vengeance is a super-powered warrior, the only one in the City. Even with his amazing dark powers, he needs help to stop villains like the Klown, the Back-Breaker, and master thief the Cat Burglar. Vengeance is a tier 5 hero for one player, capable of saving the day and battling the villains by himself (thanks to his extra Narrative Points). But he needs drivers, hackers and young martial artists at tiers 1 and 2 to keep the Double-Man's minions in check while Vengeance goes after the big target. Vengeance's super powers alone won't solve the Questioner's puzzles, either; he'll need other heroes for that.

Hunters Of The Forgotten: Dr. Harry Smith is an explorer, searching pre-World War II jungles and deserts for valuable treasures. But he's busy battling other treasure hunters and power-mad army generals. So he's recruited you and the other heroes to find the ancient statues and mystical jewels hidden in ancient ruins and remote caverns that he doesn't have time

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to seek out. The heroes meet Dr. Smith at the beginning of each adventure. He points the way to get the action started — and drops in whenever the game master thinks the characters need a little extra help.

What kind of "One Big Hero" story will you tell?

2/14/18

USR Wednesdays: The Eternal War

Let's add a new setting to the USR catalog, a fantasy world that's not quite traditional fantasy (like we see in Halberd and Swords and Sorcery), or the "light" fantasy of Tequendria: The Eternal War.

Thousands of years ago, the sages say, Miolte, the goddess of light, and Gurias, the master of darkness, made a wager, another confrontation in their endless battle. The goddess said a single powerful soldier was the best weapon. The master of darkness argued that a horde of troops could do more damage. So, in this battle of quality versus quantity, two forces were conceived: the Soldiers of Light and the Dark Army.

Soldiers of Light are mighty warriors, crafty ninja and brilliant scholars. The Dark Army is made up of beasts, creatures spawned of hate and cruelty, that exist only to exterminate all life on the planet. Some are hideous fiends; others are beautiful and beguiling, seducing victims with their words. There are monsters like dragons and zombies in the world of The Eternal War, but only humans — no elves, dwarves, orcs or others of their kind, at least not that anyone has seen. There's also no magic, no spell-casting except for the arcane gifts Miolte and Gurias bestowed on their warriors.

For every Soldier of Light, there's 10, 50, maybe more of the Dark Army. But when a Solder of Light is killed, it is born again 24 hours later with the same strength and knowledge it had before death, with all the wounds it suffered healed fully. A Soldier of Light can never die (though clever members of the Dark Army trap Soldiers in boxes before killing them, or hang them from ropes: the Soldier is reborn in the same spot, trapped in an endless loop of death and rebirth).

A member of the Dark Army can be killed, torn apart with metal or wooden weapons like any creature. They aren't born again after death; instead, leaders of the Dark Army can corrupt ordinary humans, turning them into servants of Gurias. In this way, by capturing innocents and giving hope to the hopeless, the Dark Army grows forever.

Archetypes
Warrior
Primary Stat: Action
Suggested Specialisms: Strength, Weapon Forging, Battlefield Tactics
Suggested Equipment: Big Axe (+2), Heavy Plate Armor (+2)

Ninja

Primary Stat: Action
Suggested Specialisms: Stealth, Sleight of Hand, Acrobatics
Suggested Equipment: Fencing Sword (+1), Throwing Dagger (+1), Smoke Bomb

Scholar
Primary Stat: Wits
Suggested Specialisms: Research, History, Herbalism
Suggested Equipment: Books of lore on monsters and the Dark Army, Herbs for healing

New Rules
This is a classic fantasy world — you'll find swords, bows and chain mail here. There's no magic, so no need for spells or magic items. And since heroes are Soldiers of Light, there's also no need to create a new character if your old one is killed. Just move the story ahead 24 hours.

The setting is very action-oriented: note that both "warriors" and "ninja" have Action as their primary stat, and there's no archetype for an Ego-based character. Soldiers of Light are focused on battling evil, not negotiating with it. There's also little need for healers, since the Soldiers of Light are reborn, though it does take time for a Soldier to recover, and they can't always wait around if the Dark Army is on the march.

The Dark Army is made up of monsters of all power levels. As in most games, the majority are level II or III, though leaders can be IV or V. Dragons, giants and similar creatures are at level VI, like in most fantasy settings (not every adventure has to be a battle against the Dark Army).

Adventure
Here's a first adventure in the world of The Eternal War, using the Six-Step Adventure design concept.
1. Quest giver: The heroes find themselves in the city of Rivermoor, where Tykan, head of the guards, instantly recognizes them as Soldiers of Light, and asks for their aid against a band of Dark Army bandits. They have been raiding merchant caravans coming into Rivermoor, destroying the goods meant for sale and kidnapping young people to transform into more of the Dark Army. Tykan mentions an old stone watchtower a few days' ride out of Rivermoor that can be used as a base of operations.

2. Early encounter: Soon enough, a horde of Dark Army minions strike at a horse-drawn carriage coming toward Rivermoor. There is one minion per hero (or more if the encounter isn't challenging enough).

3. Clue to final confrontation: Whether by questioning a captured foe or following their tracks, the heroes come across the site where the Dark Army is making their wretched sacrifices.

4. Secondary encounter or challenge: The heroes arrive in time to break up a sacrifice, hopefully defeating the Dark Army cultists before the young man at the center of their

circle is transformed into one of them.

5. Secondary challenge or encounter (the opposite): No matter what happens, the man will be saved in time. But now he has to be escorted through the wilderness back to Rivermoor while wild animals and more Dark Army troops follow.

6. Final boss: Hearing that Soldiers of Light are in Rivermoor, Rolzier, a Dark Army general, is waiting with his best warriors for the heroes to return.

What stories will you tell in the world of The Eternal War?

2/21/18

USR Wednesdays: Divine Domains As Specialisms

One of the things I like best about Dungeons & Dragons is the distinction between arcane and divine magic. A wizard or sorcerer doesn't choose spells the same way as a cleric or paladin. While wizards have had schools of spells almost since the beginning of fantasy gaming, the divine equivalent — domains — is a newer invention. It was spheres in second edition, then domains in third edition and beyond.

You're probably familiar with domains: a small collection of spells and a few special abilities related to a theme, like "war," "light," or "death." Many fantasy games, tabletop and otherwise, that feature clerics or priests have a similar setup, where characters of that type can focus on healing, boosting allies, or attacking foes.

From a characterization perspective, domains often suggest a personality for a character, even if it is a little cliché (a fire cleric is hot-tempered, a cleric of death is quiet and slow-moving). And that makes a domain, or what we can call a divine domain, a perfect option as a Specialism in Domino Writing-style USR.

As I said early on in this series, "Specialisms are what a character can do, or how he or she does it, in a way that's appropriate to the setting." In this case, a divine domain is what a character can do — thematic attacks, changes in appearance, and so on. Let's take a look at a few divine domain Specialisms. Because these are related to magical powers, we'll say a character with a divine domain specialism can cast thematically appropriate spells. To keep things Unbelievably Simple, we'll let the players and game master decide exactly what the spells are (though it would be easy enough to use the Classic Magic or The Force rules ideas I've described before).

Life Divine Domain: A character with this divine domain is a healer most of all, though some also dedicate themselves to destroying the undead. They dress in light-colored clothes and offer aid on the battlefield, sometimes curing injuries and helping the mortally wounded to their final rest, without making attacks themselves. They offer curative magic, like restoring hit points, removing disease, and providing life-giving energy (i.e., a bonus to a hero's next attack).

War Divine Domain: This doesn't just have to apply to a character's ability to fight with hand-to-hand combat weapons, like it does in a traditional fantasy setting. War is also about strategy and tactics — a soldier with sword and a general with a map are both warriors, and a hero able to tap into the divine power of war is excellent at confrontation, with blades, guns and even their mind (isn't survival on a wind-battered mountaintop a battle against nature?).

Death Divine Domain: Death can be a natural choice for an evil priest who desires to see all creatures wiped from the face of the planet, or risen again as soul-less creatures like vampires and zombies. It's the opposite of the Life divine domain (and what kind of stories could be told with a hero who has both the life and death divine domains as Specialisms?). But it can also be used for good, for a hero who helps those in pain find a comfortable final rest, or for an undertaker who magically clears away scenes of horror and pain.

Fire Divine Domain: This divine domain immediately brings to mind priests dressed in red, hurling flames at their foes, and destroying buildings with a blazing hot touch. Like the Death divine domain, it can be used the opposite way, too, with a hero magically putting out fires and keeping evil priests with the Water divine domain in check. This divine domain makes it easy for players to describe their attacks ("I cause fire damage") and offers plenty of ideas for personality traits too, aside from the cliché of "hot headed." What about "simmering with rage" or "bright and energetic"?

What other divine domains can you create?

2/28/18

USR Wednesdays: Divine Powers

In most fantasy games, there's a pantheon of gods for cleric characters to choose from, that give them access to one or more domains, appropriate to the theme of the god (a god of fire gives access to the Fire and Light domains, for example). We took a look at Divine Domains last week; now let's put them into practice and create divine powers, gods that offer different Divine Domains to heroes.

The latest edition of Dungeons and Dragons gives you the Greek, Egyptian, Norse and Celtic gods, with domains that can easily be translated into USR Divine Domains. So let's go a little farther out for our sample deities, the Etruscan gods, which were absorbed into the Roman pantheon (as were the Greek gods), and in my case which are listed here.

Some of these gods don't lend themselves to traditional role playing positions — a cleric of the god of war, sure, but a cleric of the goddess of childbirth? That's where the flexibility and creativity of USR comes into play. Divine Domains aren't just a list of attacks; they're also a description of a character's behavior and even appearance. Is a priest of Thalna a midwife or doula? Is he taking a broad view of the term "childbirth" and summoning creatures to do battle with monsters? Is she "birthing" the world anew after a fight by healing wounds and cleaning up broken and ruined things?

Alpan: goddess of sexual love (suggested Divine Domains: Love, Passion)
Ani: two-faced god of the passages (suggested Divine Domains: Movement, Good, Evil)
Aplu: god of light and weather (suggested Divine Domains: Light, Storms)
Cautha: god of the sun (suggested Divine Domains: Light, Fire, Good)
Laran: god of war (suggested Divine Domains: War, Destruction, Death)
Menrva: goddess of family and strength (suggested Divine Domains: Strength, Life, Family)
Nethuns: god of water (suggested Divine Domains: Water, Storms)
Nortia: goddess of fate (suggested Divine Domains: Luck, Knowledge, Good, Evil)
Summamus: god of storms (suggested Divine Domains: Storms, Air, Water)
Thalna: goddess of childbirth (suggested Divine Domains: Life, Light, Birth)
Thesan: goddess of dawn (suggested Divine Domains: Light, Hope, Healing)
Tin: god of the sky (suggested Divine Domains: Air, Movement, Good)
Turan: goddess of romantic love (suggested Divine Domains: Life, Love)
Turms: messenger of the gods (suggested Divine Domains: Movement, Knowledge)
Uni: god of marriage (suggested Divine Domains: Light, Hope, Justice)
Voltumna: god of vegetation (suggested Divine Domains: Nature, Air, Earth, Fire, Water)

Which Divine Domains will your character use?

3/7/18

USR Wednesdays: Critical Hits

One of the few things USR doesn't do well, because of the way it uses dice, is represent critical hits. In the d20 system, for example, a roll of 20 is a critical hit, since all attacks and skill rolls use the same die. But in USR, a player could be rolling a d6, d8, d10 or d12, and using the "you score a critical on the max result of the die" idea doesn't work, mathematically speaking (you have a 16.6 percent chance of rolling a 6 on a d6, a 12.5 percent chance of rolling an 8 on a d8, a 10 percent chance of a 10 on a d10, and and 8.3 percent chance of rolling a 12 on a d12).

Critical Points

But scoring a critical hit is a lot of fun, and it opens the game to lots of different story opportunities — a quick search online turns up pages and pages of critical hit charts with different effects. The Unbelievably Simple option for critical hits is to simply add damage to the attack (called Critical Points in the chart below), hit points that the opponent loses, even if the enemy has a high enough roll to cancel them out.

Die Type	Critical Points
D6	1
D8	2

D10	3
D12	4

For example, Bragan the barbarian, with an Action stat of D10, rolls a 10 on the die, and adds his Greatsword +2 for a total of 12. Kyranathus the dragon, also with an Action stat of D10, rolls a 9 and adds +1 for his Scales, for total of 10. Normally, that means Bragan did 2 damage (since the defensive result is subtracted from the attacking result, and the leftover is applied to hit points). But with the Critical Hit roll, he gets 3 Critical Points, and the dragon takes a total of 5 damage. Even if the dragon somehow had a defensive total of, say, 15 (more than Bragan's attack total, which would ordinarily result in no damage at all), the Critical Points would still apply, and Kyranathus suffers 3 damage.

Special Effects

Another option is spending Critical Points instead, or in addition to applying damage. These can be spent on the following options (and, of course, feel free to create more options):

Mighty Blow: roll 1d6 for additional damage, which can be blocked like ordinary damage.
Quick Response: make another attack against the same enemy.
Special Maneuver: the enemy is tripped, drops his weapon, loses the bonus for his armor, or some similar effect (the attacker chooses at the time the critical is rolled).
Sudden Movement: your hero moves up to half his ordinary movement rate immediately after the attack.

Use The Charts

Finally, you can roll a number of times on any critical hit chart you want equal to the number of Critical Points you have, and pick the option you like best. This may call for some judgment on the part of the game master if the critical hit chart has game effects that aren't used in USR, but the simplicity of the system means it shouldn't be hard to figure out.

What do your characters do when they crit?

3/14/18

USR Wednesdays: American Pantheon

One of the reasons I introduced Divine Domains to Domino Writing-style USR is to feature these, the "American Pantheon" of god-like entities that represent aspects of modern American culture. They're meant to be tongue-in-cheek, obvious stereotypes, but still representative of the U.S. today. And in a modern urban fantasy game, they're probably more useful for heroes than gods are.

Here's the first few:
Uncle Sam (G.I. Joe, Great White Father, The Man)

God of patriotism
Suggested Divine Domains: Law, Protection, War
Favored Weapon: Assault Rifle
Colors: red, white, blue
Symbol: bald eagle
Uncle Sam, often seen as a tall, thin white man dressed a ragged suit and top hat, is often criticized for his militant behavior, but is usually appreciated when he lends a helping hand (though sometimes his help isn't wanted). He can be strict, telling the more fun-loving deities of the pantheon how they should live their lives, and sometimes interferes with divine powers of other pantheons. He is served by a donkey named Democrat and an elephant named Republican. His priests are politicians and soldiers, leaders of men and great warriors — and con artists who make others think they're leaders and warriors.

Blonde Bombshell
Goddess of desire and tragedy
Suggested Divine Domains: Love, Deceit, Luck
Favored Weapon: Whip
Colors: yellow, red, black
Symbol: red light
Blonde Bombshell often appears to mortals as a beautiful young woman, but she changes her hair color like she changes her mood (suddenly and often). She appears to have a perfect life on the surface, but the struggle to be what everyone wants her to be puts a strain on her and her priests. She likes looking good and doesn't like thinking about anything serious. Her followers use their blessings to get their way, and they see nothing wrong with that; they feel good making themselves happy.

Comic Relief
God of jokes and pranks
Suggested Divine Domains: Deceit, Chaos, Good, Evil
Favored Weapon: Club
Colors: yellow, green, gray, red
Symbol: smiley face
The great comedian exists to make people forget their troubles. Usually he makes them laugh, but in recent years, he's become darker and more cruel, making offensive jokes that hurt mortals. But to Comic Relief, any joke that someone laughs at is a good joke. His priests are comedians themselves, artists, musicians and writers.

Who else should be in the American Pantheon?

3/21/18

USR Wednesdays: American Pantheon Part II

Foreigner
God of the unknown
Suggested Divine Domains: Secrets, Knowledge, War
Favored Weapon: Bomb

Colors: orange, black, green
Symbol: face with mustache
Foreigner changes from time to time, from "Savage Redskin" to "Yellow Peril" to "Desert-Dwelling Terrorist." Though most legends put Foreigner in league with the other villainous members of the pantheon, like Monster, he's not evil, and doesn't encourage evil in his followers. He just has a different way of looking at the world and how his priests should behave.

Independent Woman
Goddess of femininity and justice
Suggested Divine Domains: Good, Freedom, Protection
Favored Weapon: Dagger
Colors: pink, white, purple
Symbol: full moon
She is the twin sister of Teen Hero, more serious and stronger, because her priestesses (and priests, there are some of both that follow her) are often the target of insult and injury. She appreciates the beautiful — like Blonde Bombshell — and the regal — like Lady Liberty, and gives the gifts of both to her followers as she can.

Lady Liberty
Goddess of women and cultural expansion
Suggested Divine Domains: Friendship, Knowledge, Protection
Favored Weapon: Spear
Colors: white, yellow, green
Symbol: scales
Lady Liberty is the mother who births both America's bounty and her peoples, and welcomes those who wish to join the great masses of the country. Lady Liberty first appeared as a native maiden, then gradually became Uncle Sam's partner in many ways, great and small. She represents not only motherhood but the things that make a family strong: love and concern for all people, to one degree or another.

3/28/18

USR Wednesdays: American Pantheon Part III

Lone Wolf
God of independence and travel
Suggested Divine Domains: Travel, Freedom, Strength, War
Favored Weapon: Sword
Colors: black, white, grey
Symbol: wolf's head
Lone Wolf is the protector of a world that never was, a place where an individual has to live or die all on his own, and always makes the right choice when both options have value. He claims to be alone all the time but that's not true; his priests are there to counsel people who feel like they're ready to follow the wolf, so no one is really ever by themselves. His followers are young men, who usually mature into followers of other deities. More serious adherents of the Lone Wolf are hunters, ranchers and creative people like actors and

writers.

Man In Black
God of vengeance, the night, anger
Suggested Divine Domains: War, Chaos, Darkness
Favored Weapon: Assault Rifle
Colors: black, red, dark blue
Symbol: full moon dripping blood
The Man In Black is not evil, not in all his forms. Most often he represents the dark side that all people have. He stands for the anger of a young man whose friend is gunned down in a city street, the impotent road rage that leads to accidents, even the guilt of a parent spending too much time at work and not enough at home with the kids. He has few priests, because The Man In Black prefers to work through individuals, twisting them from the inside. He does encourage worshipers under the names of "psychologist" and "self-help guru" because each person who considers him important enough to worship is a person who gives him power.

Monster
God of bloodshed and horror
Suggested Divine Domains: Death, Evil, Insanity
Favored Weapon: Claws
Colors: black, red, yellow, sickly green
Symbol: crossed knives
Monster was once The Man In Black's sidekick, a story told to make children behave, and a safe way to enjoy frightening things. He's every vampire and every zombie ever seen on screen or on the page. But in recent years Monster has left The Man In Black behind and threatens to overthrow even Uncle Sam himself — he's the patron of serial killers and mass murderers, powerful establishments and anyone who uses fear to control others.

4/4/18

USR Wednesdays: American Pantheon Part IV

Playboy
God of sex, money, and fame
Suggested Divine Domains: Luck, Wealth, Deceit
Favored Weapon: Dagger
Colors: gold, white, green
Symbol: diamond
Blonde Bombshell's son is infatuated with himself, and how he looks and acts at all times. He manipulates his followers, and the other deities, to get what he wants, all the while insisting that any bargain he makes helps not just himself but the other person too. In his more positive aspect, Playboy encourages men to find their playful side, and loves interacting with mortals, the better to spread his message and gain more followers. Playboy's priests are mostly male, with good grooming, the best clothes, and a lot of confidence.

Santa Claus
Father of imagination, god of children and gift-giving
Suggested Divine Domains: Good, Creation, Light
Favored Weapon: Quarterstaff
Colors: red, white, green
Symbol: Christmas tree
Santa represents not only commercialized Christmas but all holidays and special creatures, from the Easter Bunny to the Tooth Fairy. He represents the importance of children to families, and encourages good feelings in everyone. The dark gods of the pantheon dislike Santa's joyful light, but mostly ignore him, since he's rarely actively working to diminish them.

Science
God of research
Suggested Divine Domains: Creation, Community, Healing, Knowledge
Favored Weapon: Needle
Colors: black, white
Symbol: computer
The Great God Science has introduced many amazing and helpful things to the world, but he's also been responsible for some of its evils. He's very independent, sometimes even insisting that none of the other deities deserve any attention. He's been rising to a more prominent position in the pantheon over the last several decades, and his holy texts (science fiction) point to an even more lofty role in years to come.

4/11/18

USR Wednesdays: American Pantheon Part V

Teen Hero
God of optimism, enthusiasm, youth
Suggested Divine Domains: Good, Freedom, Movement
Favored Weapon: Switchblade
Colors: white, blue, yellow
Symbol: sunburst
He is the son of Uncle Sam and Lady Liberty, the one they count on to bring new worshipers to the pantheon. But most of the time Teen Hero is imagining himself champion of the world, the one who defeats all the villains and remains beloved by everyone while doing it. He wants to be a moody rebel like Lone Wolf or Independent Woman (though he's a little frightened of her), but he's too pure of heart and cute to make it happen. Some of his followers burn brightly, and flare out before their time. Teen Hero is what everyone wishes they could be, in a perfect world.

Wildman
God of nature
Suggested Divine Domains: Air, Animal, Earth, Fire, Plant, Water
Favored Weapon: Staff

Colors: green, blue, brown
Symbol: Tree
Wildman doesn't represent people, unlike most of the rest of the pantheon. He represents the earth itself, and often takes the female form of Mother Nature. But sometimes he needs to be more aggressive in defense of the earth, or more primitive for followers that want to test themselves against everything Wildman can throw at them. Wildman rarely speaks or acts unless he has to; he prefers to keep to himself and only reveals his true power to those who are quiet and peaceful in his presence.

4/18/18

USR Wednesdays: Influences, or Faction Specialisms

A Specialism has been defined in this blog before: "Specialisms are what a character can do, or how he or she does it, in a way that's appropriate to the setting." That includes skills like Computers, special abilities like Spellcasting, or traits like Charming. It can also include aspects that build the world the character lives in, like Captain Of The Starship Conquest (now the game world contains spaceships) or Former Member Of The Thieves Guild (now the game world contains enough thieves to form a guild). These kinds of Specialisms can lead to more things in the game — the Captain may own his own spaceship the heroes can use, if the game master allows; the Thieves Guild may be after the hero, a ready-made story hook for adventures.

But what if they're not important enough aspects of a hero to be one of his or her three starting Specialisms, or won't come into play in every single scenario? That's when they become Influences.

Influences are "minor" Specialisms. While an ordinary Specialism starts at +2 and goes up to +5, at least in Domino Writing-style USR, an Influence starts at +1 and only can reach +3. It's not meant to be an additional Specialism, just a bonus in certain situations that reflect the game world. The entire adventuring party could even have the same Influence.

Unlike a Specialism, which increases when the character reaches a new level, an Influence changes when the story calls for it. A hero who performs a great deed may earn a +1 to one of his Influences, while another character whose behavior indicates that she's turning away from the source of an Influence could lose the bonus (possibly even going into the negatives — another difference from Specialisms).

What is an Influence? Its other name, Faction Specialism, is one idea: a political or other authority in the world which can lend money, equipment or other resources, like a royal house (the Starks or Lannisters from "A Song Of Ice And Fire"), a military force (G.I. Joe or SHIELD), or a private organization (a mafia syndicate). A character with a +1 in the Sunburst Clan could use his Influence to impress members of the clan, or intimidate its enemies. A character with a +3 in Her Majesty's Royal Air Force could use the bonus to try and requisition the best planes for himself and his men.

Another kind of Influence is a characteristic that powers a character, or a lot of characters

in a certain kind of setting. This could be Honor or Sanity or even a pair of Influences — say, Light Side and Dark Side, where one increases when the other drops. Influence could also be more combat-related too, like the "power meter" a video game fighter needs to charge up to release his Ultimate Attack. Each time the hero performs a particularly cool move, his Power Influence goes up by one, making him more suave, tough and fast. When it's time to blow away the bad guy, it's all used in a single attack roll, and falls back to zero.

What Influences will be in your game?

8/25/18

USR Wednesdays: Tai-Rikuji

Tai-Rikuji, or Sun Land, is the home of the People, the farmers, merchants, soldiers and nobles of an island nation that rules the world — or at least all of the world they can see. For thousands of years, the great kingdom of Tai-Rikuji covered the length and breadth of the land, from the ice-covered mountains in the north to the dense, sweaty jungle in the south. They used spirit magic to control nature and sometimes settle disputes among one another, but nothing serious: there was never a revolution, nor civil war in the land. The Tai-Rikujin, the People, were safe, happy, and productive, until some 100 years ago, when the first ships of the foreigners landed on the eastern shore.

At first they seemed like friends, willing to trade goods and bring new learning to Tai-Rikuji. But the dream of peaceful harmony ended quickly. The strangers brought new weapons, deadly guns and massive tanks, but they weren't necessary. The strange men and women from over the Great Sea had their own horrifying secret: they were half human and half beast. They called themselves werewolves and wererats, wereboars and werejaguars, shapechangers of every kind. The People just called them Yonaka, the Night Creatures.

Some of the Yokana slaughtered the Tai-Rikuji, while others tricked them, stealing their land or claiming thrones for their own. The People learned to fight back with the Yonaka's own weapons and their own magical powers... though some find becoming Night Creatures themselves is the best way to win the war.

Archetypes
The classic fantasy hero types all have a place in Tai-Rikuji, though there are no elves, dwarves, or any non-humans (except lycanthropes). The setting is a fantasy Japan, so the warriors are samurai and ninja, the sorcerers meditate to regain spells, and healers touch pressure points to cure wounds. Thematically, spells reflect the 12 animals of the Chinese zodiac: a straightforward attack spell might be called "Tiger Claws," while a spell that lets the caster see into the future could be named "Eyes Of The Rabbit."

New Rules
The Tai-Rikuji setting uses the Influence rule in two ways.

Honor is something all characters and NPCs have. It starts at +1 for the Tai-Rikuji, and -1 for most Yonaka. It raises when a character does something helpful and good, and drops when a

character harms another without reason, or takes an action that ultimately damages his friends and family — physically, socially, or otherwise. Deciding on what is and isn't an honorable action is a big part of any adventure in the setting. Influence maxes out at +3 or -3, and a character at either of those ratings gains a special ability. Here's a few examples:

Blast: The character can fire a pulse of raw energy, swelling with good or evil light (depending on the character's Honor), that does 1d6 damage in addition to the regular damage applied when making an attack.

Aura: The character sends out a wave of mystic power, making allies stronger (+1 to their next action) or making enemies cower and fail at a die roll.

Elemental Control: The character can ask the spirits of the land for aid (for Honorable characters) or bend them to his will (for Dishonorable characters). He can walk on water, pass through fire without even a cinder, or crush stone into dust.

Influence is also used as Faction Specialisms; in the Tai-Rikuji setting, factions are clans of Tai-Rikujin, torn apart and suspicious of one another thanks to the plotting of the Yonaka. Like spells, the clans use the 12 animals of the zodiac — the Rooster Clan is reliable and firm in its decisions, while the Monkey Clan is clever and sly, sneaking and scheming to rid themselves of the Yonaka, and the other troublesome clans. A character with a +1 or more with a clan can call on its members for support: supplies, troops, whatever the clan can offer.

What stories will you tell in the world of the Tai-Rikuji?

5/2/18

USR Wednesdays: Weapons Rack

Though weapons and armor can be worth any bonus — in Domino Writing-style USR, they're +1 (Light) to +3 (Heavy) — some equipment is typically bigger and badder than others. Here's a weapon catalog to get your hero armed and dangerous, of archaic weapons. Look for guns and armor soon. This list of weapons is taken from an old role playing game I wrote years and years ago, which had a few good ideas in it, I think!

No bonus: kicks, punches, headbutts
Martial arts training offers a bonus of +1 (ninja mook) to +3 (black belt)

Archery weapons
+1 (Light) weapons: Slingshot
+2 (Medium) weapons: Crossbow, longbow
+3 (Heavy) weapons: Composite bow

Blade weapons
+1 (Light) weapons: Dagger (knife), cavalry saber, fencing sword (rapier, epee)
+2 (Medium) weapons: Hatchet (pick, tomahawk), laser sword, longsword, polearm (scythe,

halberd), scimitar, short sword (cutlass, machete), spear
+3 (Heavy) weapons: Battle axe, chainsaw, greatsword, pike (lance)

Blunt weapons
+1 (Light) weapons: Brawling weapons (brass knuckles, chain, large rock), club (baseball bat, cricket bat, baton), staff
+2 (Medium) weapons: Flail, mace, hammer
+3 (Heavy) weapons: Great hammer (maul)

Stun baton: This is a special weapon, which like other clubs has a +1 bonus to attack, but if it hits, the opponent loses d3 turns in combat.

Martial Arts weapons
+1 (Light) weapons: Caltrops, sai, throwing star (shuriken)
+2 (Medium) weapons: Katana, nunchaku

P.S.: since you're looking for it, the bo is a staff (blunt +1 weapon).

5/9/18

USR Wednesdays: Gun Locker

Continuing where we left off* last week, we're turning to firearms and explosives this time around. These weapons add new rules options to Domino Writing-style USR combat.

Ammunition: USR, in any form, is much too unbelievably simple to worry about ammunition. It's assumed a character has enough ammunition (arrows, bullets, explosive charges) to never run out. But to add a little more challenge to a combat encounter, consider the following option: on an attack roll where the die result is a 1, the weapon has enough ammunition for just a single attack before it will be completely useless (or it jams). The hero won't have time to refill ammo until it makes sense to do so in the story.

Pistol weapons
+1 (Light) weapons: Dueling pistol (1600s to 1800s), needler
+2 (Medium) weapons: Regular pistol (assault pistol or revolver: .357, .38, .44, .45, 9 mm, Wild West "six-shooter," WWII Mauser), laser pistol

Rifle weapons
+1 (Light) weapons: Matchlock rifle (arquebus), flintlock (musket, blunderbuss)
+2 (Medium) weapons: Carbine (Wild West "buffalo rifle"), WWII infantry rifle
+3 (Heavy) weapons: Hunting/sniper rifle, laser rifle

Ranged weapons
+1 (Light) weapons: Blow gun, bola, boomerang, sling, whip

Area of Effect weapons: When making an attack, the player names an enemy target, as usual. The attack is made with a +2 bonus to Action rolls. But an attack with one of these

weapons also affects every other character (enemy and ally) within 5 feet/1 space of the target at a +1 to Action rolls. All of these attacks count as the same action for the attacking character.

The assault rifle, sub-machine gun, shotgun, "Tommy gun," grenade, and the chain gun/mini-gun (which has a +3/+2 bonus) are all Area of Effect weapons.

Flamethrower: This is an Area of Effect weapon, which it continues to burn anything it hits, possibly causing more damage on the next turn.

Bombs and dynamite are Area of Effect weapons, but they're also explosives. A weapon that is on a timer doesn't rely on a hero's skill to make an attack. Instead, treat a bomb like it has an Action stat of d10, "attacking" whenever it's set to detonate. To disarm a bomb, a hero has to make a non-opposed Wits roll against a target number of 7 or more — and make sure the disarm attempt is appropriately tense!

Stun gun, taser: This is a special weapon that has a +1 bonus to attack, and if it hits, the opponent loses d3 turns in combat instead of taking damage. These rules can also be used for entangling weapons like nets, webs, and even whips and vines.

Tranquilizer gun: A larger version of a stun gun, with darts that attack with a +1 bonus. If the target is hit, the opponent loses d6 turns in combat instead of taking damage.

Chemicals: A chemical, whether coating a sword blade or fired from a grenade launcher, has an effect above and beyond the damage the weapon does to its target, if any.
Acid: d6 points of damage.
Nerve gas or tear gas: the opponent has -4 to his or her next die roll.
Poison: 1 point of damage per turn until the target is healed.
Sleep drug: the opponent loses d3 turns in combat.
Smoke gas: the opponent is unable to see on his or her next turn.

Even bigger guns, like a rocket launcher, bazooka, pulse rifle, and rail gun, may not be available to heroes to buy with Combat Gear points. If they are, the weapons probably provide a bonus of +4 or even +5.

5/16/18

USR Wednesdays: Superhero Movie Stars

Deadpool, Level 2, 5 Experience Points, Tier 3
Action D12, Wits D8, Ego D10
Specialisms: Weapon Mastery +2, Fourth Wall Breaking +3, Invulnerable +2
Hit Points: 25
Equipment: Guns +1, Pair of Katana +2
Narrative Points: 4

Black Panther, Level 2, 5 Experience Points, Tier 3
Action D12, Wits D10, Ego D8

Specialisms: King Of Wakanda +3, Black Panther Legacy +2, Endurance +2
Hit Points: 27
Equipment: Black Panther costume +2 (both weapon and armor)
Narrative Points: 5

Beast Boy, Level 1, 0 Experience Points, Tier 3
Action D10, Wits D8, Ego D12
Specialisms: Shapechange Into Green Animals +2, Friendly To Everyone +2, Practical Joker +2
Hit Points: 18
Equipment: none
Narrative Points: 7

Darkseid (or Thanos), Level 4, 15 Experience Points, Tier 5
Action D12, Wits D8, Ego D10
Specialisms: Lord Of Apokolips +4, Omega Beams +2, Hatred Of All Life +2
Hit Points: 35
Equipment: none
Narrative Points: 7

5/23/18

USR Wednesdays: Armor

Armor has a long tradition in role playing games of being assigned to light, medium, and heavy groups, just like it is in Domino Writing-style USR. The bonus that's provided is for defensive Action rolls in combat. We can get a little more specific here, though, since we're really concentrating on making armor distinct without making the rules for it more complex. Depending on the setting, certain kinds of armor may not protect against bullets and/or laser or energy weapons.

+1 (Light)
Bulletproof Vest: a lightweight coat worn under normal clothing, also a flak jacket.
Leather: a layer of toughened leather or heavy fur, sometimes strengthened with metal studs; also modern-day military flight suits, and even heavy sports equipment.
Shield: made of wood, metal or plastic, a shield is carried in one hand while still giving the attacker room to maneuver.

+2 (Medium)
Chainmail: the standard fantasy body armor, a coat of metal rings over a layer of padding, also bronze Roman-style plate armor.
Heavy Shield: a tall shield that can cover a human head to toe. It's usually used as a barrier, where the attacker stays fixed in one place and attacks from behind it.
Military: the standard modern-day body armor, thick plastic plates inside flexible, padded clothing.

+3 (Heavy)

Plate Mail: the classic gear of "a knight in shining armor." Flat steel pieces cover every inch of the warrior's body, from the top of his head to beneath his feet. This is also the decorative armor of the samurai.

Powered Armor: the most powerful armor available, electronics and mechanical parts (and often weapons) included with the armor almost make it into a vehicle rather than just something to wear.

Riot Gear: heavier than typical military armor, this often includes a full face mask and extra padding on the most vulnerable areas.

6/13/18

USR Wednesdays: Young and Old Characters

Most characters in adventure fiction (movies, novels, comics, games) are somewhere between age 20 and 40. Thanks to the popularity of young adult fiction — the "Hunger Games" and "Harry Potters" of the world — that age range is getting lower. Older characters are getting a little less attention, though for every wise "Obi-Wan" mentor there's a still-vibrant older protagonist: think of the "Taken" series, or "The Expendables." Older versions of Dungeons & Dragons have rules for younger or older characters, which basically boil down to: older characters have more mental ability but less physical ability, and vice versa. Very young children (under 10) are not playable because they can't keep up with adult characters. But of course there's plenty of child-focused action-adventure fiction: "PJ Masks" and "Stranger Things" on TV, Power Pack in the comics.

RPG rules adjusting character stats to account for age do seem to be a thing of the past. So instead let's look at a few potential settings for young and old heroes.

Kid Supers: Teen superheroes may be tortured with the angst of gaining unique, incredible powers while trying to fit in. But kids actually enjoy having powers: it's not a burden, it's a joy. Our kid supers are mutants, born with abilities and living with kind and loving families. No horrifying scientific experiments or orphaned children here; this setting isn't about grim darkness. These heroes have fun being super, and stopping bank robbers. Our model here is Dash from "The Incredibles."

Kid Paranormal: Like animals, kids can see the supernatural when adults can't. They can peer through the mystical illusion created by ghosts which makes them invisible, and the one cast by vampires which hides their undead nature. Kids know the truth; getting adults to believe them is difficult, so a lot of the time they have to stop the monsters on their own. A secondary trope of this genre is the power of belief; a child's courage or fear is more "pure," more powerful, than an adult's, which is tempered by skepticism and being too busy to think about things like monsters. The 1987 movie "The Monster Squad" and Stephen King's "It" are the models.

In both of these "Kid" settings, the children are as competent as adults, if not more. Giving them lower stats or fewer Specialisms would be a punishment, and not really represent the characters as seen in fiction. Instead, the players should be challenged not by game mechanics, but by societal rules that hamper what they can do. A young character can't get anywhere he wants to go, unless he can ride his bike there, or get someone older to drive

him. A young character isn't old enough to have a credit card... but she has resources, if she's good at using the internet (in a setting where it exists).

Older Heist: A bank robbery or a sting operation is fun to watch on screen — as long as the team making it happen knows what they're doing. The best way to guarantee the heist happens like clockwork is to bring in the long-experienced experts. Start characters at level 4 or 5, toward the top of the Domino Writing-style experience track. Pick skill Specialisms like Hacking, Lock Picking, and Getaway Car Driving. The heroes will be able to accomplish almost everything, but remember that the difference between the die roll result and the Target Number can tell the game master how well they accomplish a task: Say there's a thief making an Action roll against a Target Number of 6, to sneak past the guards. On a result of 12, he gets past them easily. On a result of 7, he still gets past them, but not without making a little noise — cut to a scene of the guard radioing to his partner that he's going to investigate a sound (on a result of 4, the guard wouldn't hesitate, he'd just sprint over to where the thief is).

Royal Intrigue: There's an old saying: Old age and treachery will always overcome youth and skill. Everyone in a royal court is scheming to increase their power and influence, but it's the veterans in the palace who have the connections, the money, and the ruthlessness to succeed. A character in this setting should put the d10 in the Ego stat, then follow up with the d8 in Action (for former generals) or in Wits (for master courtiers). Heroes don't fight the battles; they send poor saps out to do the fighting. A die roll in this setting isn't about quietly, carefully assassinating a foe — it's about how convincing the character is in pretending to grieve the "mysterious death" of a rival the next morning.

How old will your characters be?

6/20/18

USR Wednesdays: Breaking The Fourth Wall

The tropes of role playing games can really help when you're looking to make your game as unbelievably simple as it can be. We've already mentioned the ARCHETYPES of race and class, which after decades have become shorthand not only for what a character can do, but how he or she is expected to act (you know exactly what a dwarf paladin is as soon as you read the words. Same for half-orc ninja).

But there are other tropes that can shape your game, too, and, depending on the tone you're going for, can be folded into every game session.

Montage
A movie cliche for years, this is the series of scenes showing the characters getting ready — training for battle, building the ultimate vehicle, plotting the heist, even going on dates with not-quite-the-right-guy. If all the characters agree to be part of a montage, each one describes what they're doing during the montage. After the montage, each player gains a +3 to any one die roll related to what was happening in the montage. This can happen only once per game; after all, a montage song is expensive, and the movie studio can't afford to

buy two of them.

The mysterious man in the corner of the tavern told the party about the dragon's hoard in the nearby cavern. The heroes are gearing up for battle. During the montage, the warrior sharpens his sword and lifts weights, the wizard's hands crackle with electricity as she practices spells, and the thief slides daggers into his boots. A synth-rock song plays in the background. When the dragon rears its head, the song's chorus echoes in the cavern. The warrior gains a +3 to his first sword attack against the dragon.

Mooks

Mooks are, of course, the faceless, nameless troops of the bad guy, all in the same outfit: COBRA, Imperial Stormtroopers, orcs, various aliens, etc. They're meant as more of an obstacle than a threat, a way to introduce action without draining the heroes' ammunition, powers, or health. The traditional way to represent heroes wiping out armies of mooks is to give them 1 hit point each. If you're using MINIATURES RULES, you might want to give them 5 hit points each, so they stick around long enough to get placed on the battle mat. For an extra-violent (or extra-silly) take on mooks, a hero's die roll in combat isn't compared to the opponent's defense roll, like it normally is; instead, the attack automatically hits, and the total rolled is the number of mooks annihilated that turn.

The aliens come swarming over the hill as their queen scuttles behind them. The heroes grab their guns and open fire. An Action roll of 6 is enough to defeat the alien's 4; it falls to the ground. One less beast to deal with.

Deathbed Vow

In a "serious" game, a hero's death is very final. When the hit points are at zero, it's time to create a new character. But other settings -- superheroes, robots -- are meant for heroes who don't really die. In those kinds of settings, a hero at zero or fewer hit points just falls out of action (unconscious, or simply out of the line of fire, no longer a target for enemies). And a deathbed vow can revive them. Once per game, any hero can give a brief speech while next to or touching a character who's at zero or fewer hit points. As long as the speech includes phrases like, "He was the best of all of us," (even if he wasn't) or, "Your sacrifice will not be forgotten," the character will immediately regain half his or her total hit points. It's a special kind of healing that can be done for the victim once per game session (hopefully a character won't need it that often!).

"Commander! Say something!" called out Private Jackson, leaning over the officer's bloody body. "You took that bullet for me, I can never repay you..." The commander opened his eyes and reached in his pocket. He pulled out a small Bible with a bullet through the middle. "Always count on the good book, son," the commander said, and stood up.

Under-equipped or over-equipped

While writing stats for STAR WARS and SUPERHERO characters, I discovered something: the "spend 4 Gear Points" character creation rule doesn't quite apply to movie and comic characters the way it does to RPG heroes. Most screen characters have a single favored weapon, and no armor, especially in modern-day or future settings. Unspent Gear Points are added to NARRATIVE POINTS, which makes sense, given the amazing things most heroes do regularly. But a game master could also go back to the basic USR rules, and just give characters the equipment that seems appropriate for them. One hero might have a single

sword, while his partner carries an entire arsenal of guns — if the story they're telling is still fun, there's no need to "balance" heroes with Gear Points.

What's your favorite movie montage?

6/27/18

USR Wednesdays: Expanded Domains

Domains, sets of spells based on a common theme, are an unbelievably simple way to give a character personality and in-game benefits at the same time. I've already introduced domains for Domino Writing-style games, but didn't offer much in terms of game rules. Here's one option.

Most domains grant a Domain Die in certain situations. The Domain Die is an additional d6 that's rolled along with the regular stat die when attempting an action where the domain is relevant. If you're using the Domino Writing-style superhero rules, the Domain Die is a d10 instead of a d6. A hero can use the Domain Die (or use a domain ability) a number of times equal to twice his her or her level per day. In a game with more powerful characters, a hero can roll the Domain Die as many times as he or she wants, as long as the game master approves.

Air: add the result of the Domain Die to the stat die result when using magic that affects the air, like creating a thunderstorm or pushing someone from a distance using the wind.

Most other domains can use the same rule for the types of magic they cover. The domains listed elsewhere in this blog that this applies to are:

Animal, Birth, Chaos, Creation, Darkness, Death, Deceit, Destruction, Earth, Evil, Family, Fire, Freedom, Friendship, Good, Hope, Justice, Law, Life, Light, Love, Nature, Passion, Plant, Protection, Secrets, Storms, Strength, Travel, Water

Community: add the result of the Domain Die to any die roll another character makes, as long as the action that character is making is contributing to building a community (for example, an Ego roll to rally a group of rebels, or an Action roll to secure a kingdom's long-lost treasure). Combat rolls don't count: though slaying a roving band of orcs would help the halfling village survive, killing isn't building community!

Healing: after a battle, roll 2 dice and add them together. That's the total number of hit points the hero can restore to himself and/or his allies. A character with this domain can only roll once after each battle.

Insanity: once per battle, select one enemy and roll the Domain Die. On an odd number, that enemy does not move or attack for that many turns. On an even number, nothing happens.

Knowledge: add the result of a Domain Die roll to any activity related to learning or what

the character already knows, like how to repair a car, or what the hero remembers about the royal family. Most often, of course, these are Wits rolls.

Luck: if the character rolls a 1 on any die roll, flip the die over so it shows its highest result.

Movement: the character can move twice his or her normal speed for a full minute (or for an entire battle in combat).

War: once per battle, the hero can make a second attack immediately after the first, and rolls the Domain Die along with each attack.

Wealth: whenever the character needs money, roll the Domain Die and multiply the result by 5. That's how many gold coins, credits, or dollars the character is able to come up with at the moment. If the character needs to appear wealthy in high society, add the Domain Die result to an Ego roll.

7/4/18

USR Wednesdays: Warhammer 40,000

I didn't get to see the preview of "Wrath & Glory," the new Warhammer 40,000 RPG, at Free RPG Day a few weeks back, though it's coming to PDF soon. The mechanic that I am aware of in the game, the one that caught my eye, is a balancing mechanism to make sure super-soldier Space Marines can be in the same party with low-level Imperial Guardsmen... it's basically superhero TIERS, like in Domino Writing-style USR. In that game's case, the Guardsman has enhancements to reach the Marine's level; in USR, of course, the lower-Tier hero has extra NARRATIVE POINTS to accomplish the things other characters are expected to do normally.

But what if we added the 40K universe to the USR rules? There's plenty of reference material — you know what an Adeptus Astartes is, even if you've never played any 40K game of any kind — and USR is a great way to tell the expansive variety of stories that can be told in that universe:
A down-and-dirty gang war (to show how tough and non-heroic ganger characters are, limit them to 2 Gear Points, take away all their Narrative Points, and roll dice to determine starting Hit Points, like in regular USR);
A battle against the ravening ork horde (take a cue from our exploration of TROPES, and consider one ork blown away for each point of damage rolled by our heroes); or
A struggle between the mighty Space Marines and a daemon of Chaos (the main heroes and villains are at Tier 5 in a setting where the baseline character might be a Tier 2. Also, boost up their armor and weapons: Space Marine armor is probably worth more than a +3, maybe a +4, and Terminator armor is a +5 — higher than that and it will be tough for anyone to score a hit).

If you've ever read any 40K fiction, or even watched 40K video game cut screens, you'll know there's not much to most characters' personalities: with the exception of a few

Imperial Guard characters, everyone in the 40K universe just wants to kill somebody else (usually a lot of somebodies). In a role playing game, characters need to be distinct somehow, to be a "role" you can play. If you don't want to go too far off the traditional 41st Millennium character type, try Specialisms like "Lone Wolf," "Carries Big Guns," or "Quick To Anger" — they offer the right attitude without making the characters much more than traditional 40K killing machines.

Here's some other Specialisms for 40K: Team Player, Aggressive (all orks), Good With Native Populations, Devoted To His/Her Commander, Natural Leader, Perfect Physical Specimen, Hates Psykers, Lockpicking Tools, Likes Big Explosions, Stealthy, Historian

Who will you be in USR 40K?

7/11/18

USR Wednesdays: Mecha

Maybe it's a feeling of nostalgia, maybe it's wandering down the Transformers aisle in the supermarket toy section, maybe it's the need to round out my science-fiction gaming genre collection: I realized there are no rules out there for giant mecha combat in USR. Here's a few guidelines for your game. To start with, giant mecha (or mechs) in these rules refer mainly to the Transformers (G1 especially) and old-school, FASA Battletech. I don't watch much anime, and I can't say I was really impressed by "Pacific Rim" either, though I like the concept. It should't be hard to take your USR mecha game in any direction you like, though.

The biggest change is probably not what you're thinking: mecha, though more powerful than ordinary humans (say, Rick Hunter from "Robotech" or Sam Witwicky from "Transformers"), don't use the SUPERHERO TIERS rules. Humans can't possibly compete with a mecha, with one exception — if you stretch the definition of mecha to include robot suits, like Iron Man or the Space Marines of WARHAMMER 40,000, which we're not doing here. If you want a Transformers-style game, every character is created using the regular Domino Writing-style USR rules... they're just giant robots. If you want a Battletech game, where the humans are the ones with stories and the mechs are just gigantic weapons platforms, you can do that too. It's best in that case to make one human character, the pilot of a mech "character" you also create.

It's the game master's call on what each character can do; a mecha can't pick a lock, while a human can't change shape into a car. That's why you need both characters to simulate a lot of mecha fiction. The main way they interact in the rules is in damage. Combat is calculated normally for mecha-to-mecha or human-to-human fighting. But when they mix and match:

Mecha attacks human: double the damage the human suffers.
Human attacks mecha: if the human's attack total minus the mecha's defense total is 5 or less, it does 1 damage to the mecha. If it's 6 or more, it does 2 damage.

Destroyicon narrowed his optic sensors at Jack. "Get out of my way, puny human," he growled, his voice rumbling the rocks beneath Jack's feet.

"No way!" Jack shouted. "This is for the Herobots!" He squeezed the trigger on his laser pistol.

An Action roll of 6 +2 for his pistol is an 8. Destroyicon's defensive Action roll is a 4 +2 for his Villitron armor plating. Jack's 8 minus Destroyicon's 6 results in a 2, enough to hit for a single point of damage.

A scorch mark seared the giant robot's leg. He laughed coldly. "My turn, fleshling," he said, and swung his energy sword.

This time, Destroyicon rolls a total of 10, and Jack's total is 6, for a hit and a difference of 4. Doubled, Jack takes 8 points of damage.

Jack looked around frantically for the Herobots.

The Transformers change shape normally. That doesn't call for a die roll, but you can represent their "alt mode" as a Specialism. Optimus Prime, for example, has a "Transforms Into Semi-Truck" Specialism, while each of Voltron's pilots has "Voltron Form" as a Specialism. Keith, Pidge, and the rest are the heroes, and joining into Voltron is an action that doesn't call for a roll. The weapons and special abilities of Voltron do require a roll, though, by whoever is taking their turn at "controlling" Voltron.

What's your favorite mecha fiction?

7/18/18

USR Wednesdays: Tournament Fighting and Wrestling

There are a handful of pro wrestling-themed RPGs [https://ndpdesign.com/wwwrpg/], and even an official "Street Fighter" game. [http://sfrpg.com/] Yes, really, from the early 90s, when I was playing tournament fighting games. And though a setting that's 95 percent combat seems like it should require a complex combat system, tournament fighting and wrestling-themed games can work very well in USR. Here's how.

An ordinary character can be created, though most characters will have Action as their highest stat. But a player who wants to try something different, like a wrestling manager or a Vince McMahon-style macho businessman, could take Wits or Ego as the highest stat.

Combat Maneuvers

Combat Gear points don't really apply in the setting; wrestlers grab chairs but don't have one as a primary weapon. A fighter like "Mortal Kombat's" Scorpion does have his "Get over here!" spear, but that's not a weapon, in USR tournament fighting. Instead, it's a Combat Maneuver. Characters typically have one +1, one +2 and one +3 Combat Maneuver, and the another single Combat Maneuver of any bonus, selected when they're created. A heavy hitter might have two +3s, while a fast character has two +1s, staying in the fight for a long time by moving around swiftly. In game terms, there's no difference between one +1 attack and another; that's where your creativity comes in... although the narration can affect your attacks — if a character's hands are tied, he can't throw a punch. Name your attacks

something interesting and action-packed.

In addition, all characters start with these two Combat Maneuvers.
Punch (could also be a kick or even head-butt) +0: in other words, a basic Action die roll.
Block: if your character chooses a block, he doesn't attack on his turn, but until it's his turn in combat again, he can make his defense die roll twice and use the best result. This gives the character no Strain — but he doesn't recover Strain either (see below for more on Strain).

Here's a few examples of Combat Maneuvers:

Grab +1
Jab +1
Quick Kick +1
Taunt +1 (this uses the Ego instead of Action)
Tough Skin +1 (this is for defensive rolls, not attacks)

Body Slam +2
Force Field +2 (this is for defensive rolls, not attacks)
Spin Kick +2
Summon an ally (to make a sudden attack, then disappear) +2 (this uses Ego instead of Action)
Throw +2
Uppercut +2

Weapon (sword, spear, pistol) +3
Hadoken Fireball +3 (being magic, this uses Wits instead of Action)

Fighting game finishing moves aren't Combat Maneuvers; they're just fun to describe.

Combos

An attack roll that gets the highest result on the die (for example, a 10 on a D10) starts a combo. The attacker can continue to make attacks, as long as they are on the same target as the first attack, and as long as each one hits. When an attack misses, the combo is over. In this setting, everyone has roughly 15 Hit Points, like a typical player character, to keep them in the game for a while, and to give heroes someone to try and score combos on.

Strain

Combat Maneuvers are, in a sense, weapons: they offer a bonus to (usually) Action rolls. But they also come with a cost. A character in this setting has a Strain total, which starts at zero. Each time a character attacks or defends using a Combat Maneuver — only one of each per turn — add the bonus the Combat Maneuver provides to the character's Strain. If the Strain is less than or equal to the character's current Hit Points, there's no problem. If it goes above the Hit Points (or the Hit Points fall below Strain), the character can only

make a basic attack, simply rolling a stat to attack without any Combat Maneuver bonus. A character's Strain drops 5 points if he doesn't use a Combat Maneuver at all on a turn, though it can never go below zero.

Specialsms

Sure, you can simply create a few tournament fighters or wrestlers, set them up in a playoff bracket-style showdown, and duel it out. But there's more to the setting than fighting, believe it or not. Think of "Street Fighter's" struggle against M. Bison, or the romantic storylines of WWE. While you're thinking about what to call your character's Combat Maneuvers, don't forget they have Specialisms too. Even professional warriors have interests and skills — maybe your hero is a Spy, an Expert Pilot, or an Anthropologist who found another hero, a strange man-monster, deep in the Amazon jungle. Perhaps the hero is a former champion passing along his knowledge of Tournament History to the younger characters, or is Suave (or Wealthy) enough to impress non-player characters unimpressed with his talents in the ring.

What does your Tournament Fighter look like?

7/25/18

USR Wednesdays: Money

Everybody needs it, and no one ever has enough... Even in a game with so much narrative abstraction like USR, money is something to consider. After all, it's the most classic of roleplaying game goals (slay the dragon to collect its treasure). But in USR, heroes don't start with money, and don't have a "shopping list" of weapons or other equipment. Domino Writing-style USR does limit characters to 4 Combat Gear points of weapons and armor, though that's pretty abstract too: it's really about the bonus, not the actual item that the character is buying.

A simple way to represent money is as an INFLUENCE, a temporary Specialism with a bonus of +1 to +3. The bonus, in this case, is how much money the character has. The warrior and wizard splitting the dragon's hoard get an influence of Treasure Hoard +2, at least until it's spent on wine, women, and song (for the warrior), and valuable spell components (for the wizard). The thief who steals the rare diamond has an influence of Reputation +1 — he can't sell the diamond, after all, but everyone in the black market community knows he pulled off the audacious caper. And the Billionaire +3 can do quite a bit with his money, though an enemy with the Corrupt Businessman +2 Specialism might try to instigate a hostile takeover, in the form of several Ego and Wits-based die rolls.

Going Shopping

Now that you've represented the character's wealth with a Specialism, what can you do with it? As mentioned, it can assist in Wits and Ego die rolls — for example, roll Ego to pay off the right people and smuggle goods over the border, or roll Wits to determine the value of a famous painting (it takes money to know money, you see).

It's less common to use a money-related Specialism with an Action die roll, but you could transform a point of bonus into a Combat Gear point, if your game master allows. In that case, your character is buying a new weapon or item. Obviously, a Treasure Hoard +1 should purchase more than a single Sword +1, but it's balanced by the guideline that the bonus granted by the treasure will gradually disappear, while the sword is more or less permanent. These extra Combat Gear points can even be translated into extra Narrative Points: when things look their most desperate, the hero pulls out his credit card and is back in action.

Financial Status

For a character whose net worth is a fundamental part of their background (i.e., an actual Specialism, not a temporary one), consider these.

Not Important: +5
This character is from a society that does not care about money, like an alien race, or has the ability to create money at any time.

Multimillionaire: +5
This character is head of a major multinational corporation or foundation, or is a member of a nation's royal family, and has almost unlimited access to funds and technology. He or she has multiple residences and forms of transportation.

Wealthy: +3
This character is a self-made millionaire or celebrity. He or she has a large house and expensive transportation (like a carriage or luxury car).

Sponsored: +2
This character works for a government agency, army, or other organization that takes care of living expenses and gear.

Comfortable: +0
This character has a steady day job that brings in decent pay, or some other way of making ends meet without much worry. The character can occasionally afford a major expense. He or she has a house and access to typical transportation for the time period (horse, automobile, or starship).

Struggling: -2
The character has difficulty finding enough money to pay the bills at the end of the month, and has to skip some basic necessities from time to time. The character has very little money, few items and may be homeless or nomadic. The character depends on friends and family for support. He or she has a small residence (such as a wooden hut or apartment), and an inexpensive means of transportation (mule, bicycle, old car, etc.).
This (and Comfortable) isn't really a Specialism, but helps give perspective on the other financial statuses, and could be an interesting roleplaying challenge... and it gives me an

idea for next Wednesday's post.

How much money does your hero have?

USR Wednesdays: Disadvantages

One of the first RPGs I really played was GURPS, Steve Jackson Games' flagship game before Munchkin. I played a lot of modern-day adventures: spies and treasure hunters and so on. The sourcebooks are still great reads, with so much background on the topic at hand without even looking at any game stats. GURPS itself is a little dense, especially compared to the rules-light approach of a lot of modern games (USR included). But one idea that can come from the old to the new is disadvantages.

As the name suggests, these are negative aspects of a character — physical ones like One Eye or Mute, mental ones like Bloodthirsty or Addicted, or background ones like Dependent or Enemy. A Disadvantage is like a negative Specialism, providing a penalty to relevant die rolls and an indication of how to roleplay the character. It offers a penalty of -1 to -5, though most are probably -1 or -2; more than that, and the character is probably severely hampered from doing anything exciting (i.e., what you're playing a roleplaying game for).

Here's a few examples of Disadvantages.

I mentioned the Struggling (-2) Financial Status last time. A character with few material goods or much wealth isn't necessarily struggling, though. As the song goes, "When you've got nothing, you've got nothing to lose."
Severe Body Odor -1: Game masters, remember the character is going to make social interaction a lot more difficult with this Disadvantage!
Bad Temper -2: In a stressful situation, make a Wits roll, applying this Disadvantage. On a failure, your character attacks or at least screams at any nearby target, including his or her allies.
Code of Honor -1: This is a set of rules the character has sworn (if only to himself) to live by — don't kill, always obey superiors, give away extra money, and so on. The player should choose a few rules when selecting this Disadvantage. If the character fails to act according to his code, all following die rolls are affected by the penalty until the character redeems himself somehow. For example, a woodsman who vows to rob from the rich and give to the poor, but who hangs onto his ill-gotten gains instead of donating to the less fortunate, will suffer a -1 to all die rolls until he gives that money away.
Non-Stop Talking -1: This is just annoying and is more of a roleplaying guideline, instead of something that will be applied to many die rolls. That is, unless the character is trying to be silent (a ninja or spy character would probably have this Disadvantage at a -2).
Pyromaniac -2: Your character has to start fires, and when things need to be destroyed, she makes sure they're destroyed in the most explosive way possible. Like Non-Stop Talking, this makes it difficult to be subtle — or to get into melee combat (a fist or knife doesn't blow things up).
Dependent -2: The character's girlfriend is always being kidnapped by villains, or his elderly

aunt can't be mixed up in his heroic world, or her life will be at risk. The player should select the Dependent when creating the character; it can't be another player character. The Dependent probably won't show up in every adventure, but the penalty can apply even when the person isn't there; for example, a wizard may struggle to cast spells without his apprentice there to bring him spell components and tomes of lore.

A new character can start with, and gain, any amount of Disadvantages, though it's uncommon to have more than one or two at most. In compensation for taking a Disadvantage at character creation, a character can either:

- Add an equivalent bonus to an existing Specialism (a -2 Disadvantage gives a +2 to a Specialism or +1 to two Specialisms, meaning the character has Specialisms of +4/+2/+2 or +3/+3/+2).
- Start with another Specialism with the equivalent bonus; for maximum roleplaying fun, try to tie the Disadvantage and the extra Specialism together (for example, a character with a Debt To A Crime Lord -2 is also One Step Ahead Of The Law +2).
- Start with a number of extra Narrative Points equal to the bonus.

Disadvantages can be removed from a character if the story demands it: a Deaf -3 character who has surgery or cybernetic implants to allow for hearing no longer has the Disadvantage. He or she doesn't lose the bonus Specialism or Narrative Points that were awarded at character creation.

8/8/18

USR Wednesdays: Animal-Folk Part I

Animals, standing on two legs with human-like arms and speech, are a classic character type in many games — the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, of course, but also creatures like the Minotaur and cartoon characters like Mickey Mouse.

Here's a general list of animal types to choose from. Given USR's very broad character types, one animal can cover a lot. An elephant can also be a rhinoceros or a hippopotamus, or even an Apatosaurus; a hawk can be everything from a condor to a sparrow. A wolf can be a large dog, or a werewolf, if the important thing in your game is the "wolfishness" of the character, not the horror element of changing from human to monster. The hawk and wolf will be in the next blog entries.

The primary stat for an animal can represent several different things.
Action: brute strength or lean, quick agility
Wits: raw cunning or near-human-level intelligence
Ego: an intimidating presence or "take me home with you" cuteness

There is a great anthropomorphic USR game already, which suggests Specialisms based on the character's background. In this version, the stereotypes associated with each animal in popular culture and nature are the suggested Specialisms.

Ape
Primary Stat: Wits
Suggested Specialisms (3): Tool Use, Swing Through The Trees, Brute Strength

Bull
Primary Stat: Action
Suggested Specialisms (3): Furious Anger, Sharp Horns, Intimidating Stare

Cat
Primary Stat: Action
Suggested Specialisms (3): Self-Absorbed, Physically Flexible, Plans Within Plans

Dog
Primary Stat: Ego
Suggested Specialisms (3): Fiercely Loyal, Brave, Maybe Too Friendly

Duck
Primary Stat: Action
Suggested Specialisms (3): Flight, Quick Temper, Good Friend

Elephant
Primary Stat: Action
Suggested Specialisms (3): Thick Hide, Stampede, Good Memory

8/15/18

USR Wednesdays: Animal-Folk Part II

Fish
Primary Stat: Action
Suggested Specialisms (3): Swim And Breathe Underwater, Quick Reflexes, Explore The Depths

Frog
Primary Stat: Action
Suggested Specialisms (3): Prehensile Tongue, Leap, Disguise

Hawk
Primary Stat: Action
Suggested Specialisms (3): Flight, Sharp Eyesight, Noble

Horse
Primary Stat: Action
Suggested Specialisms (3): Endurance, Running, Handsome

Insect

Primary Stat: Wits
Suggested Specialisms (3): Wall-Crawling, Annoying Harassment, Agility

Lizard
Primary Stat: Action
Suggested Specialisms (3): Camouflage, Sharp Teeth, Sinister

8/22/18

USR Wednesdays: Animal-Folk Part III

Rat
Primary Stat: Wits
Suggested Specialisms (3): Cunning, Easy To Overlook, Master Of The Urban Environment

Tiger
Primary Stat: Action
Suggested Specialisms (3): Lord Of All He Surveys, Sharp Claws, Intimidating Roar

Turtle
Primary Stat: Wits
Suggested Specialisms (3): Hard Shell, Swimming And Breathing Underwater, Longevity

Tyrannosaur
Primary Stat: Action
Suggested Specialisms (3): Terrifying, Sharp Teeth, Brute Strength

Wolf
Primary Stat: Action
Suggested Specialisms (3): Pack Hunter, Relentless Chases, Intimidating

8/29/18

USR Wednesdays: Rock and Roleplay

Way back in the early days of D&D 3.0, the Open Gaming License allowed for many, many variants on the system — game creators could use the d20 rules set that was so familiar to so many and create their own classes, races, worlds, and more. And it was all legitimate; anyone could sell what they created (this was long before Drive Thru RPG, most everything was print books that filled shelves and shelves of hobby shops).

Paizo Publishing, which took over publication of Dragon and Dungeon magazines at the time, joined in too. For about 20 to 30 issues, Paizo resurrected an old magazine title, "Polyhedron," and slapped it on the back of Dungeon. There, they promoted new gaming products, with even a few reviews. But mostly Polyhedron was part of the new d20 stuff movement, with mini-RPGs with settings like mecha, sword and planet, and to date the last

version of "Spelljammer." Later, the magazines disappeared, Fourth Edition appeared, and Pazio took D&D in a different direction with "Pathfinder."

I collected most of those Polyhedron-era Dungeon magazine issues, mostly to get a lot of more-or-less official mini-games (in other words, with games that would probably be pretty playable — the OGL let anybody publish anything, even if it was likely to not be very good).

I told you all that to tell you this.

Polyhedron 158, June 2003(!), has a game called "Hijinx," which despite its art style is designed specifically to recreate "Scooby-Doo," "Jabberjaw," "The Monkees," and all those pop band/lightweight misadventure shows from the 60s and 70s. By the late 80s, popular music was worth far too much money to make a goofy show. Sure, there are still silly songs, but nothing to match "The Monkees," or the originator of the genre, "A Hard Day's Night."

Hijinx tries its best to blend 2003 and 1966 — classes are musical instruments: vocalist, guitarist, bassist, drummer, keyboardist, DJ, and horn player. They send out "bad vibes" to bad guys and wear "cool threads" to add to their Defense... but it's basically regular old D&D. And so it's also easy to translate to USR. That's next week.

9/5/18

USR Wednesdays: Hijinx

Picking up where we left off, we're skipping classes because USR doesn't have 'em. It doesn't have damage types, either, except as a story-telling element (being struck by lightning or frozen by ice is damage either way, but each looks and sounds different). But the D20 Hijinx game makes damage types into types of vibes, which is useful for our USR version. In our case, the damage types are Specialisms.

Rockin': An intense song, either about having a party or about how the world is really unjust to wealthy rock and hip hop stars.
Ballad: Just the thing to calm everyone down and win over parents who worry that your music is corrupting their children.
Catchy: An earworm that makes everyone remember your band long after the show. Don't roll too high on this kind of "attack," or you may become a one-hit-wonder!
Comedy: Everyone likes a funny song, either a parody of someone else's well-known song or a faithful cover of a song that was once popular and is now cheesy.
Dance: Get the crowd moving and they'll be on your side forever.

And opposed to our music superstars? Critics and bad crowds of different types. They can be treated like any other MONSTER (no higher than Power Level III — this is a game about playing music, not saving the world).

Angry: Any anti-music fan, from an over-zealous censor to an internet critic who loves to make fun of anything and everything.
Bored: Someone who doesn't want to hear any music, like a parent who had to chaperone

their child to the club's bartender, who just wants to go home.

Distracted: Everyone under age 20 — they're too busy looking at their phones! Also, that couple making out in the corner.

Jealous: Wannabes who couldn't: rock critics, hip hop managers, and so on.

Snooty: People who overlook the band, like greedy record executives and hipsters who insist your group is too mainstream to be any good. "I only like bands you've never heard of."

And we can't have a game setting without a Six-Step Adventure. The band is the characters. They'll have to decide what kind of music they play before the game starts, though if one person wants to rap while the others play pop, it looks like they're adventuring with a guest star this time around.

1. Quest giver
The band's manager, Marcus, says he's booked the group at Rock Stock, where they'll be among legendary rock groups on the first day (so the veterans can go home and recover) and indie artists on the last day (so the concert can claim to support new artists, though everyone will be gone by then). But there's a problem — the band doesn't have money to get to the show.

2. Early encounter
In order to raise the cash, the band members will have to find a solution. This can either be a wacky montage like "The Monkees" TV show, where everyone tries different silly jobs, or more serious, where the band is hired by Marcus' uncle to investigate a robbery — a robbery at a music shop, of course.

3. Clue to final confrontation
After raising the cash, they head out to Rock Stock. There's probably a few music critics and even a hostile concert organizer giving them a hard time trying to get in the door and to the dressing room. They don't find a "clue" in the traditional sense; instead, they get a look at the acts on the stage and get a feel for how they're performing against the crowd: what kind of music is winning them over?

4. Secondary encounter or challenge
The challenge: something goes wrong behind the scenes. Maybe the instruments disappear (darn that robber!) or an earthquake strikes. Can our heroes do something besides make music and help their reputation by being helpful in a natural disaster?

5. Secondary challenge or encounter (the opposite)
Finally, the big moment comes, and our band takes the stage. But there's plenty of opposition, like music journalists hunting for their next target, or a crowd that just doesn't care.

6. Final boss
And just when the concert is getting underway... the cops show up. For a hip hop or metal show, sure; the censors are always there. But what if the band's music is G-rated, family

friendly stuff? Well, blame the stage crew, with all their exposed wires and safety hazards. It's one thing after another. Our heroes are constantly struggling to get a good reaction from the crowd and sell albums.

9/12/18

USR Wednesdays: Characters For Every Game

This week, I'll look a back at some of my recent rules and settings and provide characters for them.

Tournament Fighting and Wrestling
Ryu, Level 1, 0 Experience Points
Action D10, Wits D8, Ego D6
Specialisms: Focused On Training +2, Barely-Contained Dark Side +2, Strong But Silent +2
Hit Points: 18
Equipment: none
Narrative Points: 7
Combat Maneuvers

+0 Punch
Block

+1 Side Kick
+2 Hurricane Kick
+3 Hadoken Fireball
+3 Dragon Punch

Animal-Folk
Donatello (Turtle-Folk), Level 1, 0 Experience Points
Action D8, Wits D10, Ego D6
Specialisms: Does Machines +2, Computer Nerd+2, Swimming And Breathing Underwater +2
Hit Points: 18
Equipment: Bo Staff +2, Shuriken +1, Shell +1
Narrative Points: 3

Hijinx
Elvis, Level 1, 0 Experience Points
Action D6, Wits D8, Ego D10
Specialisms: The King, Baby +2, Ballad Singer +2, Party-Time Fun Singer +2
Hit Points: 14
Equipment: Microphone, Guitar, Sequin Jumpsuit
Narrative Points: 7

9/19/18

USR Wednesdays: Wild West

Cowboys and gunslingers is one of those sub-genres that hasn't had too much of a history in the RPG realm, aside from the Weird West of the "Deadlands" RPG. The original tabletop western RPG is "Boot Hill" from TSR, and most of the generic game systems have had their own western component, from Rolemaster's "Outlaw" to GURPS "Old West."

USR is no different; Western USR has been out for several years. Today's post isn't throwing anything that came before it away. Instead, it's just blending the old with the new. Well, new in reference to things on this blog. There were Quick Draw rules and some rules for Guns.

As always, a weapon provides a bonus to attack rolls. Using the Quick Draw rules, it also has a penalty to a character's Initiative. Here's the list again, scaled down to classic western weapons.

+1 (Light) weapons: Derringer, Bowie knife, cavalry saber
+2 (Medium) weapons: Wild West "six-shooter," carbine (Wild West "buffalo rifle"), pick, tomahawk

A gatling gun has a +2/+1 attack bonus, and dynamite follows the gun rules from earlier in this blog except it uses a D8 instead of the modern explosive's D10.

A horse gives its rider a +1 to Action rolls when riding is involved — chases, stunts — or maybe a +2 for that perfect mount.

And that leaves us room for an adventure for our band of desperadoes or lawmen (or even magic-using card players or steampunk gadget-makers, if you like).

Six-Step Adventure design
1. Quest giver
There's gold in them thar hills! At least, there was, until the Black Jacks, a gang of ruffians led by Black Jack himself (his Ego is a D12, and would be higher if he could), stole a half-dozen wagonloads of bullion and took it somewhere. That's all the old prospector can tell you, even after you buy him a drink.

2. Early encounter
The mayor and the banker don't know where the Black Jacks are. Nobody really wants to talk about the gang in the town of Patience, even after you rescue the mayor's daughter from a pack of ravenous coyotes (these could be actual canines, or demon animals, or even a rival gang of thugs).

3. Clue to final confrontation
At the hoedown the evening after the heroes rescue the mayor's daughter, she says she knows something about where the Black Jacks are: she overheard some of the town's elders talking about needing money to solidify a deal with Duke Abbey, an English nobleman who's

been to town a few times before.

4. Secondary encounter or challenge
Investigation of bank records and the mayor's papers reveal a letter describing a meeting between the Duke and Black Jack in two days, at the old mine two days' ride from town.

5. Secondary challenge or encounter (the opposite)
The journey to the mine is loaded with trouble, from a flash flood that turns to a mudslide to an angered grizzly bear wandering into camp.

6. Final boss
Arriving at the mine in time for the meeting, the heroes find Black Jack and his gang, the Duke (who has a few deadly gadgets in his sword-cane), and the mayor himself, who never told his daughter about the gambling debts he owes to Black Jack. Jack can have as many lieutenants as he needs to make sure every player character gets to have a quick draw showdown.

9/26/18

USR Wednesdays: Video Game Variety and Free-Form Specialisms

I don't play many video games. My work time is spent in front of a screen, and I use a computer a lot at home, too (to write this blog, for example!). I'm more of a fan of traditional games — card games, board games, tabletop role playing games. I always raise an eyebrow when YouTube suggests "gamer" content to me, because nine times out of 10 it's "Minecraft" or "Fortnite" or something. Those are games, but not my kind of games.

I think the problem I have with video games, besides screen time, is the options: there's just too many things to keep track of at once. Take a classic video game, "Space Invaders." There's two options: move and shoot, and move is limited to left/right. Very simple. Move to the later generations of games, and we have two buttons on the NES controller, six (I think) on the Genesis, and after that I lose track (10 or so on a modern controller?). With a first person shooter-type game, you have weapons and abilities to scroll through, a heads-up display, maps, hit point tracks, and several other things on every screen.

A game like that is still a lot of fun to play — but it's a lot more fun if you can keep track of everything, to make use of it the way it's meant to be used. I could learn that, if I put in the screen time, but I'd rather bring the concept to a game I already enjoy... Domino Writing-style USR.

The ancestor of a first person shooter with its dozens of things to track is of course our favorite tabletop role playing games, where you mark all the things you need to track on a sheet of paper instead of letting a computer do everything for you. But USR is on the other end of the spectrum, a simple system that gets players up and running in no time. Instead of a list of a dozen abilities, USR offers bonuses that can be used any way a player wants. I call them Free-Form Specialisms, though they're not really Specialisms; they aren't even recorded on a character sheet!

A beginning character doesn't select three Specialisms, each with a +2 bonus; instead, the character begins with 6 "+1s" to spend on any roll you wish. The bonuses can be added to any roll, before or after the die is rolled. Any number of bonuses can be added to the same roll. A character regains all his or her "+1s" at the beginning of every game session, but can never go above 6.

If a player decides on a Specialism for his or her character, the Specialism is written on the character sheet, with a +2 bonus (for a starting hero). In return for choosing a Specialism, the character immediately loses two "+1s." So a character with a single Specialism would have a +2 in the Specialism and four "+1s" to spend during the adventure.

Free-Form Specialisms are a little like Narrative Points, but they're more specific, and represent a character's wide range of knowledge and expertise, rather than his or her capability to change the story. They're mainly to get the game started even more quickly — all a player has to do now is decide which stat gets which die, and spend Combat Gear points — or to help players who want to see how their character develops over time.

Free-Form Specialisms are things your character can do well: things you don't have to specifically keep track of, things that let you do whatever you need to do to have the most fun you can in the game. All without staring at a screen.

10/3/18

USR Wednesdays: Espionage

Last week, I introduced the concept of Free-Form Specialisms, where instead of pre-determined skills and abilities, a character can use his "+1s" to do anything he needs to do on an adventure. You lose two "+1s" if you settle on a Specialism. Let's put this concept to work in a popular RPG setting: the world of secret agents, master thieves and assassins.

In fantasy and space opera-type science fiction, the character archetypes are instantly familiar (and have already been created for USR on this very blog): wizard, rogue, pilot, bounty hunter. Espionage games have their archetypes too — hacker, mastermind, femme fatale — but secret agent characters have more than one ability.

To represent this, give your hero a single Specialism as his archetype, and then also put four "+1s" on the character sheet. This is something like Pierce Brosnan-era Bond or the efficient, nick-of-time thieves of the "Ocean's" movie series. If you're playing a high-level espionage game, like a Roger Moore-era James Bond or Marvel S.H.I.E.L.D. story, you might want to tack on another "+1" or two, and that's not counting any bonuses awarded for super-spy gear. Characters in a more down-to-earth game (say, Jason Bourne, or even something like "Taken") could have fewer "+1s."

If a character is only in the story for a moment, they're probably best represented as NPCs. Q, the gadget-maker for James Bond, shows up just long enough to deliver a few spy tools to 007, then disappears. If he traveled with Bond, creating weapons and devices while

James was seducing women and negotiating with super-villains, then he'd be a player character.

What's a good spy archetype? I mentioned a few before, but there are more:
Brawler — hand-to-hand fighting, martial arts
Detective — seeing clues others miss, following rumors and suspicions to the end of the line
Driver — every spy can drive (or fly) fast; only drivers can pull off stunts that strain vehicles to their maximum
Femme Fatale — seduction, keeping attention on herself (or himself) so others can do their jobs
Gadgeteer — inventing tools, detecting and defusing traps
Hacker — breaking into computer systems, writing viruses
Infiltrator — breaking into buildings, slipping through locks, defusing security systems
Mastermind — conceiving a plan, changing the plan on the spur of the moment when it goes wrong
Politician — con artist who's good at making allies and using his words to cool everything down
Sniper — master of all firearms, expert at extremely long-distance shots
Soldier — punching, shooting, staying in the fight longer than anyone else

10/12/18

USR Friday: War and Military Campaigns

Due to life happening, this is a Friday entry; I'll get back to normal Wednesdays next week.

War! What is it good for? Well, in game terms, it's good for a lot of fun adventuring. War doesn't necessarily translate into RPGs — the military is for big units of soldiers, a role playing game is for one person per player — but military-style action does make for good gaming. Here's a few ideas for a team of adventurers in a military game setting:

Commando raids to defeat or capture an enemy leader
Silent scouting raids to infiltrate enemy lines
Demolitions teams that plant explosives in strategic spots
Recruit reinforcements to bring to the battle
Negotiating peace talks despite extreme tension between the warring sides

But of course a military action campaign does need some guidelines for simulating the military action. Dozens or even thousands of troops are charging at one another or opening fire while the heroes slip off to the side to get their mission done. The heroes could take a turn as temporary battlefield commanders (think of the big battles in "The Lord Of The Rings" or many "Captain America" comics). Or the story could lead to an extra level of challenge if the enemy forces win the day: if the Nazis cut off the Allied supply lines but the adventuring party is pushing toward Berlin, they'll have to make do with the resources available to them.

The conflicts between the forces the heroes support and the enemy army can be simulated

with a die roll, called a Battle Roll. The simplest way to do this (the USR way) is to assign each force a bonus, depending on a few factors:

Size
The force with the bigger number of troops gets a +1. If they're reasonably evenly matched, no bonus to either side.
Ability
A well-trained, disciplined force of elite troops (like Warhammer 40,000 Space Marines) gets a +1. A force of wild barbarians is strong and intimidating, worth at least a +1. A rag-tag group of insurgents or freedom fighters, or an unruly mob armed with pitchforks and torches, is probably a -1. Most troops, though, are the "average" soldier and offer no bonus (Star Wars stormtroopers, World War II grunts, and so on).
Equipment
Tanks and fighter jets, when the other side doesn't have them, provides a +2 bonus. A samurai katana and a knight's longsword are equal, but the force with assault rifles has a +1 against them.
Heroes
If the player characters take direct part in the battle, they provide a +2 bonus to the combat.

Add up the bonuses, and roll 1d6 + that total for each side. The higher result wins the round of fighting (representing a few moments to months of battle, depending on the story that you're telling), and the losing force earns a -1 penalty to future Battle Rolls. If the rolls are a tie, there's no penalty applied; the battle just slogs on. When one force's roll is zero or less, the battle is over. There may be more battles to fight, or this may mean the end of the entire war, leading to time for peace talks or for a vanquishing army to add more territory to its holdings.

If the heroes' side of the battle loses a round of fighting, one of the characters is personally affected (choose one randomly). It could simply be hit point damage, or it could affect the story: maybe a valuable item is lost, or a close friend is killed in the fighting.

Sir Lacren turned to face the men and women behind him. Last night, elven scouts had reported an army of trolls on the march. Lacren, the mage Ysellius, and the nature priest Berrak agreed: they would lead the army of South Watch against the trolls. The trolls were on foot; their slow movement gave Ysellius and Berrak time to create a few catapults and trebuchets to support the archers, mounted knights, and swordsmen and women South Watch could call to arms.

Adding up the bonuses, we have:
Trolls: Strong +1
Humans: Led by heroes (player characters) +2, War machines +1

The battle commences! After the players fight through one-on-one combats between their characters and specific trolls, a Battle Roll is made. The heroes roll a 5 and add 3 for a total of 8. The game master rolls for the trolls, and gets a total of 4. The trolls lose this

round of the battle, and have a -1 to their Battle Rolls until the battle is over.

10/17/18

USR Wednesdays: Animal Heroes

Not long ago, I released a series of archetypes for ANIMAL-FOLK, from apes to wolves. I called them animal-folk because I was thinking of bipedal creatures, basically humans in animal costumes, with maybe one or two of the real animal's natural abilities.

But there's another way to role play animal heroes: as actual animals who can talk. They don't interact with humans (except maybe that one special human) but they can talk with one another. Animated movies like "Ratatoullie" and "The Secret Lives Of Pets" or novels like "Watership Down" or "Animal Farm" fit the bill. And even Aslan, the lion of "The Chronicles Of Narnia" books, is this type of character, though he's more of a special fantasy race than part of a talking animal setting.

The animal-folk archetypes work just as well for animal hero games: strong, tough, or sneaky animals should have Action as their stat with a D10, while clever, scheming characters can make their best stat Wits or Ego. The major changes are in combat.

An animal hero only uses the highest value of its Action stat to determine its starting Hit Points (so it would be 10, 8, or 6).
Also, animals don't normally carry equipment — yes, a knight's warhorse wore armor and had a lance mounted on it, but it was to help the knight accomplish his goals, not for the horse to fight on its own. So animal heroes don't get Combat Gear Points, nor the bonus Narrative Points regular heroes earn for not spending all 4 Combat Gear Points.
This means animal heroes are weaker than human adventurers, which makes sense for the genre (humans rarely enter the story, and if they do, they're as an all-powerful master or threat). The exception to this is super-pets, like Superman's dog Krypto or He-Man's Battle Cat. They're somewhere between ordinary animal heroes and normal heroes. Krypto, being a Kryptonian dog, should have a d12 Action, and the Flight Specialism. He-Man's Battle Cat has +2 Magic Armor and +1 Claws.

Since the characters are weaker, the game master needs to tone down the level of challenge in the adventure, too. Crossing a rushing river might take an Action roll to leap over it, or a Wits roll to build a makeshift bridge in an ordinary game. In an animal hero game, though, lashing together a few branches is impossible! The players will have to come up with something different. And a confrontation with a wild raccoon, not even a combat encounter in an ordinary adventure game, could be a major fight sequence with animal heroes.

10/24/18

USR Wednesdays: Kaiju

Giant monsters are, literally, off the scale for most USR games. They're bigger than a

POWER LEVEL VI MONSTER or a TIER 5 SUPERHERO. They're not really appropriately represented using our simple MECHA rules, either, because a kaiju game isn't about humans vs. monsters (not really: the tanks and jets are a nuisance, not a threat). It's about monsters in battle with one another, with lots of property damage in the meantime.

Yes, you can role play a kaiju, though of course combat is what really matters. Instead of using the Action stat to get into physical combat, a kaiju character instead gains a new stat, Fight, and everyone has it at a d12 (or d10 if you're keeping with the traditional USR dice). Then determine the other stats normally:

Action is for non-combat physical tasks, like flying or jumping.
Wits is for using supernatural powers, like atomic breath or sonic booms (along with a Specialism describing that power).
Ego is to demonstrate that you're a friend of the humans, so they'll let you do what you need to do to destroy all monsters. It's also for negotiating a team-up with another heroic kaiju.

Specialisms: Natural weapons like spikes are counted as Combat Gear, but supernatural attacks — Flame Breath, Poison Gas — are Specialisms. Physical talents are Specialisms too: Climbing, Running, Web-shooting. It's unlikely a kaiju will have much need for skills like Research or Negotiation, but a monster could reasonably have a good Sense Of Smell or Echolocation.

A kaiju character will probably use all 4 of its Combat Gear points on claws, teeth, tails, tough, rubbery skin, and other natural weapons and armor.
Even if you want to make your game more than just a big fight scene, double each character's starting Hit Points. When it comes time for the big brawl with the bad beasts, a kaiju needs to stick around for a few turns.

As for adventures, here's a few suggestions:

A signal generated by a mad scientist's machine is making your team of kaiju crazy; get to the source of the signal and turn it off by any means necessary. This is the plot of the film "Rampage."
Your home under the sea or on a distant island of monsters has been disturbed. There are alien kaiju invading. You can see the alien mothership high above you — but how do you get up there? Perhaps one of the alien kaiju will go back the way it came, and you can tag along...
You're used to stomping through city streets and crushing skyscrapers. So what was that magical portal that sent you to a fantasy world all about? A knight on horseback is no more of a threat than a tank was. A fire-breathing dragon, on the other hand, is both a challenge and a valuable source of treasure for your new human/elf/dwarf allies.

10/31/18

USR Wednesdays: Zombies

What better way to mark Halloween than with the most popular horror creature of all (right now)? In a game where the heroes are survivors of a zombie apocalypse, there's several ways to approach central threat:

The zombies are an endless horde that's easy to kill; the trick is to get away before you're overwhelmed.
The zombies are a scary surprise as you try to come to terms with the new rules of living day by day. They're easy to avoid — if you see them coming.
The zombies are a part of the environment around you, like having to try and maneuver through a heavy snowstorm. These stories take place several months after the apocalypse, when everyone is used to dealing with zombies, and a new world order is sorting itself out. The real danger isn't the living dead; it's other humans who don't like that you're not under their control.

I'm sure you can think of movies and books with each of these kinds of zombie settings, and more. Any of them can be a great zombie RPG setting — an action-oriented one, if the players are in the mood to slay zombies; a suspenseful story where the existence of zombies might be a plot twist; or a tale heavy in negotiation and tough combat, fighting off both the undead and the very much alive.

Hordes

The ever-present threat of zombies can be represented in USR with a simple rule for hordes. When the story begins, as the first zombies appear (unless you're starting in media res, with an enormous mob of zombies), there's 2d6 somewhere nearby. As the plot advances, or whenever the heroes make too much noise, or whenever the gamemaster sees fit, add zombies equal to (1 + the number of players)d6.

Zombie stats are usually low — d6 or even d4 for every stat, with no Specialisms or equipment. Maybe even use the mook rule, where a zombie has only one Hit Point (an attack total of 7 against a zombie's total of 3 doesn't mean a single zombie lost 4 Hit Points; it means 4 different zombies were destroyed). Don't forget that zombies move slowly, and are unable to move past obstacles or think their way out of simple traps.

Survivors

The two big rules for survivors in a zombie story are searching, where a successful Wits roll against a target number of 4 means the survivor found food, medical equipment, a working car, or a weapon. A failed roll means nothing turned up. And a die result of 1 means something was knocked over during the search, or a window shattered: the perfect time for more zombies to join the horde.

The second rule is for "horror saves," or resisting the shock and fear of a close encounter with the dead. It can be a Wits die roll (for characters trying to rationalize their way out of

the encounter) or an Ego die roll (for characters who can bluff and bluster their way through anything). Use the higher stat for a high action or comedy-type game, and use the lower stat for characters in a traditional horror story. Failing a horror save means the hero just wants to get away from the zombies, maybe at the cost of his or her allies. And rolling a 1 on a horror save or an Action roll when in battle with zombies means the worst: an infected bite that transforms the hero into a zombie, whenever it's dramatically appropriate.

11/7/18

USR Wednesdays: Willpower

Psychic defenses are almost as commonplace in fantasy and science fiction as swords and fireballs. Heroes are always gritting their teeth and powering through blasts of supernatural force, struggling mightily to resist a villain's mental domination (often with their friends urging them to, "Remember who you are!"), or gathering their thoughts after being confronted by a horror from beyond the stars.

That's willpower, the mental stamina to resist what can't be blocked by shield or armor. There's no formal rule to represent willpower in the USR rules, though of course Strong Willpower can be a Specialism. As I mentioned LAST WEEK, the "horror save," which is willpower used defensively, either uses a Wits die roll, for characters trying to use logic to explain the illogical, or an Ego die roll, for characters who have a forceful personality — in this situation, they're "keeping their cool."

Which stat should characters use in your game? It depends on the tone: the higher of the two works for most games, where heroes are supposed to be capable of things most people can't do. But for a "grittier" game, use the lower of the two stats whenever a character needs to make a willpower roll/horror save. The target number of the danger is determined like any other die roll: 4 for a medium-grade threat, 7 for hard, 10 for very hard.

And for a traditional "Call of Cthulhu" feel, where characters are eventually going to have their sanity shattered no matter what, there's "Beyond Fear," Scott Malthouse's rules for USR Cthulhu. It offers the Madness Roll, a simple roll of the character's Wits stat die, not against a target number. Instead, a result of 1 or 2 on the die means the character has lost his or her marbles and gets a token, or simply a mark on the character sheet. Three tokens means the character is irretrievably insane. I inadvertently borrowed the idea of the Madness Roll last week in the zombies post, where a die result of 1 means zombie infection.

Most often, willpower is used on the defensive, resisting attacks or scary things. But it can also be used as an attack, where your hero uses his "force of will" to make someone else do something. That's similar to spellcasting — a Wits or Ego die roll instead of an Action die roll against the opponent's Wits or Ego die roll.

11/14/18

USR Wednesdays: Simple Dice

If you're like me, you have a pile of miniature figures and battle maps that don't get nearly the amount of time on the tabletop as you'd like. And you have dice... so many dice, of different shapes and colors. Some unique dice with unusual faces — but most of them are the types seen in so many role playing games: d4 through d20. In USR, only the d6, d8, and d10 are used (also the d12 in a Domino Writing-style superhero game). But what if you don't have those dice at hand?

Unlikely, since if you're reading this you undoubtedly have gaming dice, or at least access to a free die-rolling app. But I've roleplayed on a backpacking trip, and when on a trip away from home in the pre-cell phone days, when the only gaming material on hand was a deck of playing cards and a partial Monopoly game. Monopoly has tokens you can use as miniatures, and more importantly for our purposes it has two six-sided dice, or 2d6.

You can use 2d6 to simulate the die results for the typical USR game:

Die Size	D6s to roll	Range of Results
d6	1d6	1 to 6
d8	1d6+2	3 to 8
d10	2d6-1	1 to 11
d12	2d6+2	4 to 14

As you can see, you're more likely to see higher results than with ordinary USR dice, especially after adding in Specialisms, weapons and armor. It also doesn't work if you need to roll a critical success (highest result on the die) or critical failure (lowest result on the die), as the odds of rolling each are very skewed. This option isn't really meant to replace the standard rules, but instead fill in when needed.

11/20/18

USR Wednesdays: Vampires

Creatures of the night are, of course, one of the most popular character choices in role playing, thanks to a slew of White Wolf games created in the 1990s and beyond. It inspired dozens of similar games, like "Nightlife," and is still pretty popular; a new edition was released only a few weeks ago.
White Wolf-style vampires are very distinct from traditional RPG characters, with an emphasis on mood and personality, versus an emphasis on killing monsters and taking their stuff. But that's not the only way to play a vampire game — a vampire can just as easily be a superhero, a character with abilities far beyond those of an ordinary person. There's Marvel's Morbius and Blade (a half-vampire, technically). Angel from the old "Buffy" TV show has the advantages but not many of the drawbacks that bedevil Dracula. There's a vampire protagonist in at least a few of the "Castlevania" video games.
Here's a few vampire-related personality Specialisms that make for heroes, or at least

antiheroes:
•Hideous Fiend
•Mysterious Noble
•Refined Artiste
•Savage Killer
•Tortured Hunter Of His Own Kind
The word "vampire" usually conjures thoughts of a tuxedo and a cape (Bela Lugosi in the 1931 "Dracula") or a leather jacket (Edward Cullen in the "Twilight" movies). The looks may change but the powers remain fairly stable. Being fictional, there's no hard and fast rules about what vampires are capable of, but here's a few traditional abilities that can make for good Specialisms:
•Animal Control
•Animal Summoning — specifically, bats, rats, or wolves
•Flight
•Rapid Healing
•Shapeshifting — specifically into bats, rats, wolves, or mist
•Super-Speed
•Super-Strength
•Walk On Walls
And, of course, the one thing that makes a vampire a vampire: the ability to stay in "un-life" by drinking the blood of the living. In some fiction, the reverse, where a living creature drinks the vampire's blood, turns it into the vampire. In others, a single vampire bite will do the trick. Sometimes, especially in stories where vampires are essentially dark superheroes, using supernatural abilities "costs" blood. In game terms, it reduces the vampire's Hit Points. In fiction, a vampire can only use powers a few times before it's too weak to go on — it needs to drink or sleep to recover.
Bloodsucking is a melee/hand-to-hand attack, made without any bonuses from weapons. If the victim isn't willing, the vampire must succeed at an Action roll to hold the victim in place long enough to drink blood (which takes a single action — unless you want it to take longer for dramatic effect). Each Hit Point that's drained from a victim is restored to the vampire, like any other healing.

11/28/18

USR Wednesdays: Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles

Leonardo (Turtle-Folk), Level 1, 0 Experience Points
Action D10, Wits D8, Ego D6
Specialisms: Turtle Leader +2, Spirit Of The Samurai +2, Swimming And Breathing Underwater +2
Hit Points: 18
Equipment: Pair of Katana +2, Shuriken +1, Shell +1
Narrative Points: 3

Donatello (Turtle-Folk), Level 1, 0 Experience Points
Action D8, Wits D10, Ego D6
Specialisms: Does Machines +2, Computer Nerd +2, Swimming And Breathing Underwater +2

Hit Points: 18
Equipment: Bo Staff +2, Shuriken +1, Shell +1
Narrative Points: 3

Raphael (Turtle-Folk), Level 1, 0 Experience Points
Action D8, Wits D6, Ego D10
Specialisms: "Cool But Crude" Moody Loner +2, Aggressive +2, Swimming And Breathing Underwater +2
Hit Points: 14
Equipment: Pair of Sai +2, Shuriken +1, Shell +1
Narrative Points: 3

Michaelangelo (Turtle-Folk), Level 1, 0 Experience Points
Action D10, Wits D6, Ego D8
Specialisms: Party Dude +2, Friend To Everyone +2, Swimming And Breathing Underwater +2
Hit Points: 16
Equipment: Pair of Nunchaku +2, Shuriken +1, Shell +1
Narrative Points: 3

As brothers, the Turtles are excellent at working as a team. They can select team benefits, including the following that are more closely linked to how they operate in the comics and on screen.

Turtle Power: +1 to melee attacks and +1 to defense rolls for the rest of the combat encounter.

Silent Strike: +3 to initiative rolls for one encounter, as long as each turtle is able to approach the enemy without being seen or heard

I Love Being A Turtle: +3 to any die roll to befriend, intimidate, or research, usable on one die roll.

12/5/18

USR Wednesdays: After-Apocalypse Auto Action

That alliterative name is probably all you need to picture this otherwise unexplored Domino Writing-style USR setting. Thank "California Love," "Car Wars," the opening of the trailer for "The Lego Movie 2"... oh, and the Mad Max films. So there's one thing this setting can't go without: vehicles.

Scott Malthouse's "Somnium Void" rules are great for the more complex vehicles [8/9/17] rules we want in a 4A setting (I just came up with that name!). But we'll tweak them a bit to bring them in line with the rest of the Domino Writing-style rules. Here are their stats.

Maneuver: The target number needed to successfully perform a stunt that's above and beyond the regular driving or flying needed to get from place to place. In a 4A setting,

water is very rare; there probably aren't any boats to pilot, and getting into space... forget it. Specialisms like Driver and Cool Under Fire are helpful here, along with the Action die.

2 Easy (dodging debris on a smooth road)
4 Medium (changing direction on a rough road)
7 Hard (pushing your car past its speed maximum without losing control)
10 Very Hard (driving smoothly through a crowded city street)
14 Nearly Impossible (jumping over a canyon)

In combat, vehicles are monsters — literally. We'll use the same guidelines we used for monsters to generate generic cars, trucks, and bikes.

Type	Armor	Hit Points	Examples
Bike	+1	10	Motorcycle, Urban Mini Car
Small Car	+2	15	Commuter Car
Large Car	+3	20	Luxury Car, Pickup Truck
Small Truck	+4	25	Sport Utility Vehicle
Large Truck	+5	30	Semi-truck, RV

Armor: This is the vehicle's own armor combat bonus, added to the hero's Action die roll if they're hiding behind the vehicle, or driving it as they're being shot at.

Hit Points: When a vehicle loses all its Hit Points, it's no longer drivable. A vehicle can regain Hit Points with a successful Wits roll and time — usually 1d6 per hour in the auto repair shop; 1 point per successful Wits roll when in the middle of a battle. Vehicles can have extra armor bolted on, but something with too many Hit Points takes a frustratingly long time to defeat: no fun in the world of the story, or in the real world.

Chases were described in an earlier post, and they're a key part of the 4A genre. Essential, even. Grab some toy cars and stick spikes and guns and mohawks all over 'em. The chase rules are written for two "markers" to represent a Pursuer and a Target, but for this setting, don't just use the simple straight line to show the chase. Add broken-down vehicles as obstacles, and the harsh desert sands. Let the vehicles swerve and skid, barreling toward one another on a last-chance power drive. That's what the 4A setting is all about!

Last but not least, the best part of all, weapons. A vehicle can carry weapons with bonuses equal to the vehicle's Armor bonus before it's too heavy and unwieldy to move. A Small Car (+3 Armor) can have:
A roof-mounted machine gun in a turret +2 and a crossbow +1
A flamethrower +3
A spiked front bumper +1, a shotgun on the door frame +1, and a net that can deploy from the rear bumper +1
Don't forget about gimmicky weapons like tire-puncturing blades, oil slicks, and the roof-mounted heavy metal guitar player on a bungee cord (not a weapon himself, but definitely

a Specialism used in combat!)

12/12/18

USR Wednesdays: Solitaire Role Playing — Part 1

Playing a tabletop pencil-and-paper RPG is always more fun with a group of people, but sometimes schedules don't work out, or you just want to test a new rule or adventure you've written. There's only one Rule Of Solitaire Role Playing:

Do what makes sense for whomever you're playing as at that moment.

When you're playing by yourself, you have to play each PC, all the NPCs and all the monsters. Obviously, since you're both GM and players, you can't really keep secrets — but you can do what makes sense to the characters.

For example, a fantasy adventure may indicate a secret door in the wall of the dungeon room the heroes have just entered. As GM, you know the door is there, but as the PCs, you have no idea. So, make "search" rolls, just as other players would if they were taking part in the game. Another example: you roll initiative for each side in a conflict. When the villains are taking action, they're trying to defeat the heroes just as much as the heroes are trying to defeat them. You can even "fudge" dice rolls, if you like, but usually that's done to keep a PC alive or keep the story on track, and when you're GM and players, you don't necessarily have to worry about that!

Dialogue with NPCs, developing relationships with other player characters, and investigation scenarios don't really work in solitaire role playing, since they're so dependent on interaction with other players in the game, at least not how they're traditionally done. However, you can write out a sample interaction, as if you were composing a bit of game fiction, based on the personalities you've developed for each hero.

Combat in Solitaire Role Playing

Solitaire role playing is best-suited for detailed combat encounters, making it almost like a board game. Many games have tactics for monsters (like "use magic to enhance the villain's defenses, then move into combat," or "fight until slain"), but leave the combat tactics for PCs up to the players, as they should. However, when you're both GM and players, you'll need to have a tactic for each PC, too.

Choose one combat tactic from the list for each PC in the party, or roll 1d6 two times (you'll see what I mean below) for each when creating the characters. That tactic is the PC's default action in combat — obviously, a "Selective" character that prefers to hang back and fire arrows at enemies from a distance won't keep firing if there's an orc right in his face. But at the beginning of the battle, he'll stay toward the back of the room, instead of charging in like another hero might.

Feel free to let the tactic reflect the PC's personality, too; an "Opportunistic" hero who

hunts for treasure before fighting will probably be hard to keep in line in an open-air market.

Two characters with the same tactic might have different approaches to combat. A "Controlling" wizard who likes to cause area of effect damage might summon lightning in every battle, while a "Controlling" barbarian could cause area effect damage by moving into the middle of a horde of enemies, then swinging his sword in a circle to slay a half-dozen foes at once.

Character motivations may be different, too: two heroes may both be "Vengeful," in an enemy's face when delivering the final bit of damage. But one does it because he's an assassin who needs to know his target is down, and another does it because her god calls his servants to prove their worth in warfare.

First Roll: 1 or 2

Second Roll:
1. Ambitious: Eliminates the greatest threat first
2. Cautious: Stays in the back of the battle and aids allies, only fighting if he must
3. Commanding: Gives orders (which may or may not be listened to) then follows his own orders to the letter
4. Controlling: Prefers area of effect attacks, trying to defeat as many foes as possible at one time
5. Curious: Wants to know how things work (technology, unusual creatures, magic, etc.) and spends time investigating them for a possible advantage instead of simply taking them out of action and moving on
6. Determined: One-on-one duelist — finishes off one enemy before moving to the next

First Roll: 3 or 4

Second Roll:
1. Dramatic: Flashy, prefers making unique stunts to simple attacks — he might have a pile of unique gadgets he wants to try out, or likes playing pranks on his foes
2. Efficient: Eliminates the easiest threat first
3. Negotiating: Tries to neutralize threats without bloodshed ("talks down" foes, intimidates them, etc.)
4. Opportunistic: Makes sure he knows where the treasure (or the door to the next room) is before getting into the fight
5. Partnership: Finds a combat partner (animal companion, another PC, etc.) and performs a reliable, effective attack
6. Pragmatic: Uses the environment (furniture, the natural world, vehicles, etc.) as his preferred weapons, often strikes from behind cover

First Roll: 5 or 6

Second Roll:

1. Quick: Hit and run strikes, constantly moving and making attacks from different directions and/or against different enemies
2. Reckless: Charges in, regardless of consequences, sometimes even before the party has made a plan
3. Selective: Prefers to attack from a distance
4. Slaying: Moves into the thick of battle and attacks anyone and everyone who comes near
5. Unexpected: Does something different each time — roll once on this table before each encounter; if you roll "Unexpected" before an encounter, the character has the same combat tactic as he did in the last encounter
6. Vengeful: Gets up close and personal with enemies to deliver a killing blow

12/19/18

USR Wednesdays: Solitaire Role Playing — Part 2

When I buy board games, I look for ones that can be played solo, as most of my gaming is done that way. There's a few games that are designed for a single player, mostly variants of traditional games like... Solitaire (with a deck of playing cards), or Yahtzee.

But more often, and more thematically, there's co-operative games, where two to five players can take part, working as a team to defeat the game itself. Usually it's a puzzle that needs to be solved in a limited amount of time, or there's a set of instructions for monsters and obstacles that the players follow to simulate the opposition. If every player has one character on the same team, it's easy enough to have one player as all the characters on the team, as long as you keep track of who's doing what. That's what I'm trying to add to Domino Writing-style USR here.

These two options build on the solitaire rules introduced LAST WEEK, and expand them so you can play USR, or any tabletop RPG, without using a game master.

Co-Operative Play (no Game Master)
The rule for solitaire role playing (do what makes sense for whomever you're playing as at that moment) can also be used for co-op role playing, where all players are taking the role of adventurers, and there is no game master. If an adventure or monster description doesn't provide an enemy's combat tactics, assume its tactic is, "Move into position to make the most effective attack and fight until death." The most effective attack is usually the one that does the most damage against the greatest immediate threat, though some enemies will take a few turns to enhance their abilities with spells or other powers before attacking.

The Recovery Action
To make an adventure more of a challenge, the player or players may want to limit the amount of healing available during the adventure. In combat (which starts when the first Initiative roll is made and ends when the last enemy is defeated), characters can use healing spells, medical kits and other healing available to them as described in the game's normal rules. However, characters cannot heal outside of combat, except for a Recovery action: The character instantly regains half his or her total Hit Points, round up. Recovery

can be done only once per character per game session. For an adventure that lasts several days of game time, a character also regains all health each morning when he or she wakes up. The Recovery action means characters can't expect to eventually fully heal from even the worst combats, and means the player or players may even fail to finish adventure successfully, and lose the game.

12/26/18

USR Wednesdays: Solitaire Role Playing — Part 3

Way back in the early 2000s, when D&D 3.0 variants ruled the hobby shop shelves, there was a tabletop version of the computer game Rune. The PCs were slaughter-happy Viking types, pretty standard for D&D. But what made the game stand out what that you could score points for playing a role playing game.

Scoring points in a tabletop RPG isn't new; I think the early tournament modules for D&D were similar, or at least rewarded you for getting farther than other groups before dying in a dungeon designed to kill characters. But Rune had an entire scoring system.

Competitive Role Playing

Players and a game master who are comfortable with one another's style and okay with the idea of inter-party conflict may want to try competitive gaming. Each character gains 1 Victory Point each time he or she accomplishes one of the following tasks. The character or characters with the most Victory Points at the end of the game session wins. If a character is killed, the player loses all the Victory Points earned by that character.

Note that the characters still must accomplish the goals of the adventure as a group, and no character receives Victory Points for something that the entire party does together (like discover a treasure). Characters also earn no Victory Points for attacking, stealing from, or otherwise harming one another.

Optionally, a game master can complete too, earning 2 Victory Points per task marked with an asterisk (*) that the enemies of the adventure accomplish; the other tasks are PC-only. Use the list below to create other tasks worth Victory Points.

Be the character who makes the action that defeats 2 opponents that are weaker than the characters in a single combat encounter (every 2 opponents defeated equals 1 Victory Point)
Be the character who makes the action that defeats a single opponent with a power level equivalent to the characters (a more powerful opponent may be worth 2 or more Victory Points) *
Cause maximum possible damage on a dice roll, not counting "open ended" dice rolled again *
Do something appropriate to the character's personality that greatly helps the party
Do something appropriate to the character's personality that greatly hinders the party
Do something that makes the GM and/or players laugh out loud *

Roll a critical failure or critical miss *
Roll a critical success or critical hit *
Survive attacks by 2 or more opponents in the same turn without suffering any damage *
Use a power or ability intended for combat to accomplish a non-combat activity
Use a power or ability not intended for combat to make a successful attack

1/2/19

USR Wednesdays: Motivation

What drives your hero to do what he or she does? For many RPG characters, the answer is simple: to collect the treasure, to stop evil from destroying the world, or even because it's just the right thing to do. Of course, the quest-giver in step 1 of the six-step adventure design can also provide motivation for a specific adventure.

But sometimes you need to give the heroes a "kick in the pants" to get started. Though you can do anything in a role playing game — that's probably the best part of playing them — some guidelines need to be in place. A hero can't be good at everything, which is why stats have different ratings, and Specialisms only apply in some cases. A character needs to get along with the other characters in the party, too. A lone wolf is a cool concept, but it doesn't work in a typical adventuring group, where everyone contributes something unique to every adventure. And in most games, the player characters need to be heroes, doing something that helps themselves and society as a whole. A thief may steal, but not from his buddies. Heroes carry swords and guns, and know how to use them, but the weapons are specifically meant for orcs, Nazis, and evil minions, not anyone and everyone.

If your players need a push in the right direction, supported by game mechanics, try giving them a motivation. This is their particular reason for doing "hero stuff." It may relate to their Specialisms, but it doesn't provide a bonus to die rolls itself. Instead, whenever a character does something that relates to his or her motivation, award the hero a Narrative Point (probably about once per game session). A motivation is a tool to get characters (and players) moving, and to help give characters more well-rounded personalities. You can even take a Narrative Point away if a player doesn't play the character according to the motivation that's been selected, though if you're using motivation in your game, your players probably are embracing the characters they've created.

What are good character motivations? The model for this is the classic Ghostbusters RPG from West End Games, way back in 1986. It had five Goals for characters, which are just as relevant for modern-day heroes:

Fame: You want to live forever, you want to learn how to fly. No, actually, a fame-seeker wants to be known by everyone. You achieve this motivation when you get outsized attention: you're on TV, bards compose a song about you, or crime lords summon you by name, because they've heard of your badass reputation.

Money: Every RPG character has this as a motivation at some level. But you're especially interested in wealth and the possessions it brings. The abstract nature of USR means you

don't need to keep track of cash (unless you want to). But you can also achieve this motivation by talking the hotel owner into paying the heroes double their normal rate to bust ghosts, or by acquiring a rival company, whether that's by making a deal or threatning to take proof of the CEO's dirty deal to the feds.

Serving Humanity: Humanity, or whatever species you are, benefits when you're around. This is the motivation of the classic paladin or good cop, to protect the innocent and be a shining light of goodness in the world. But don't forget that slaying demons and keeping eldritch horrors at bay is just as helpful to humanity.

Sex: This means what you think it means, if you want it to (think of the classic Dead Alewives skit: "If there's any girls there, I want to do them!"). It can also mean charming people who don't want to be charmed. It can have nothing to do with wanting to have an intimate relationship with another person — this motivation can be achieved by convincing the king that you're the right man for the job on your charm alone.

Soulless Science: The advancement of knowledge (even magical knowledge) is what matters. You don't want people to suffer as a direct result of what you're doing — switching the brains of two living organisms without their permission is the work of evil — but a house can move into another dimension while you study the effects of the transport, as long as it gets put back at the end of the day. You like taking things apart... putting them back together isn't always as interesting.

1/9/19

USR Wednesdays: DC Superheroes

We've touched on Marvel's heroes before 11/1/17 1/17/18, but what about DC's? These versions are, like most traditional superheroes, at Tier 3, and blend the best of each version of the character (comics, movies, animation, and so on).

Superman, Level 4, 15 Experience Points, Tier 4
Action D12, Wits D10, Ego D8
Specialisms: Super-Strength +4, Journalist +2, Role Model To All +3
Hit Points: 37
Equipment: Invulnerable +3 (not equipment, but used in combat)
Narrative Points: 6

Batman, Level 3, 10 Experience Points, Tier 3
Action D10, Wits D12, Ego D8
Specialisms: World's Greatest Detective +2, Wealthy Sponsor Of Gotham City And Superheroes +2, Obsessive Hunter +2, Bat-Gadgets (Free-Form Specialism) +2 9/26/18
Hit Points: 32
Equipment: Martial Arts Expert +2, Batarangs +1, Grappling Hook
Narrative Points: 3

Robin, Level 1, 0 Experience Points, Tier 1

Action D12, Wits D10, Ego D8
Specialisms: Detective In Training +2, Friend To Other Superheroes +2, Teetering On The Dark Side +2
Hit Points: 22
Equipment: Martial Arts +2, Staff +1
Narrative Points: 8

Wonder Woman, Level 2, 5 Experience Points, Tier 3
Action D12, Wits D8, Ego D10
Specialisms: Princess Of Themyscira +2, Representing The Power Of Women +2, Always Does The Right Thing +3
Hit Points: 25
Equipment: Sword +2, Deflecting Bracelets +2
Narrative Points: 3

1/16/19

USR Wednesdays: More Magic

We first looked at CLASSIC MAGIC about a year ago: discrete spells with specific results, as opposed to the game master- and player-interpreted rules that most of USR uses. Fantasy gaming has been using huge spell lists for decades; there's no reason to stop doing it now. I created just a handful of spells in that first post. This time around, we'll make the list bigger. Our guidelines are simple:

Any spellcaster can use any spell — there's no divine vs. arcane magic, for example. There's no "spell level," so even an apprentice can summon a mighty elemental force… or at least he can try. A high Target Number is probably in order in that case. Also, spells are measured by the number of hit points they cost the spellcaster whenever the spell is cast. A wizard can have a few very powerful spells, but he won't be able to cast them often!
You can cast spells as often as you like, but you have to spend the listed hit point(s) first. Casting a spell counts as your action for a turn, or is considered part of your attack action — for example, Magical Missile is an attack by itself, but casting Entangling Vines adds to an attack roll using the Wits stat. Don't forget that Specialisms (like Wizard or Fire Magic) apply to these Wits and other stat rolls also, above and beyond what a spell offers.
A spellcaster at level 1 starts with two spells, and adds one more at each level. Domino Writing-style USR goes to level 5, so a fifth-level sorcerer can cast six spells — enough for variety, not enough to require you to spend a half-hour writing spell text on your character sheet.
To create a new spell, just decide on its hit point cost: a good measure is a cost of 3 hit points per die of effect. The exact details of the spell are up to the player and the game master to work out, provided it helps tell a better story.

As with all USR rules, it's easy to add options to make the game the way you want it. Maybe each spellcaster has a signature spell that doesn't cost as many hit points, spellcasters have a "mana pool" to cast spells from instead, or spells need to have subtle effects, and loud, flashy spells attract unwanted attention.

So, let's mix all our spells together (the old and the new), grouped by Hit Point cost.

1 Hit Point cost
Detect Magic: All magical objects and creatures in an area the size of an average room glow a faint light blue for the next few moments, long enough for you to discern where they are.
Enhance: This spell boosts other die rolls. It costs 1 hit point to cast. Each additional hit point spent on the spell provides +1 to any one die roll, for the spellcaster or anyone else he chooses.
Light: The spellcaster touches an object and for the next hour, the object glows like a lantern. It can only be "turned off" by the spellcaster.
Magic Blast: Choose one enemy and make a Wits roll, opposed by an Action roll; on a successful attack, the enemy suffers 1d3 damage.
Prestidigitation: A small, harmless, obviously magical effect takes place, like flowers appearing from nowhere, or a room tidying itself up.

2 Hit Point cost
Charm: For the next hour, the spellcaster or one ally adds +1d6 to all Ego rolls when positively interacting with others (when trying to request help, or to calm them down, but not to intimidate or confuse them, for example).
Confusion: Make a Wits +2 roll, opposed by your target's Wits roll; on a success, your target loses his or her next turn, trying to figure out what's happening to him or her. He or she can still make rolls to defend against attacks, but can't apply Specialisms (armor bonuses will still apply).
Magical Missile: 1 automatic damage to an enemy you can see. This damage cannot be avoided in any way, except by a more powerful magical defense.

3 Hit Point cost
Cure Light Wounds: +1d6 hit points to yourself or another individual.
Entangling Vines: Choose one enemy and make a Wits +2 roll, opposed by the enemy's Action roll; on a successful attack, that enemy cannot move for the rest of the combat encounter, unless it uses its entire movement and action on a turn to free itself.
Shape Change: You magically shift your body, clothing, and possessions to appear like someone else of roughly the same shape and size. You add +3 to any Wits roll if you need to convince someone else you are who you are pretending to be. The basic spell lets a human change into an elf or halfling. For 4 hit points, you can look like a specific individual whose appearance you are familiar with, like a famous person. For 6 hit points, you can look like a creature of a different size or shape, from a mosquito to a dragon.

4 Hit Point cost
Lightning Bolt: Choose one enemy and make a Wits +1 roll, opposed by an Action roll; on a successful attack, the enemy suffers 1d6 damage.
Magical Sheld: For the remainder of the current combat encounter, add +1d6 to your defensive rolls (roll this die along with the stat die you roll to defend against the attack). On a die result of 6, the shield instantly fades and does not provide any more defensive bonus.

5 Hit Point cost
Summon Creature: Make a Wits roll, with a Target Number depending on the type of creature you want to summon (a wolf is 4, a barbarian warrior is 7, a demon is 14). It is called to you and will help you however it can for the next hour/combat encounter.
Teleport: One creature or object is instantly moved from its current location to somewhere else within eyesight of the spellcaster.

6 Hit Point cost
Cure Heavy Wounds: +2d6 hit points to yourself or another individual.
Fireball: Choose one enemy and make a Wits +3 roll, opposed by an Action roll; on a successful attack, the enemy suffers 2d6 damage.

1/23/19

USR Wednesdays: Cool Cars

It was so much fun bringing back SPELLS last week that I'm going to pull another one out of the archives… vehicles. We visited the 4A SETTING not long ago, and that's all about cool cars. Vehicles have hit points and an armor bonus (which is also the total bonus of weapons they can carry). It was suggested on the USR discussion group that vehicles also have a Handling rating, on top of the Target Numbers established for a maneuver. Makes sense as a Specialism:

Bikes: +2 Handling
Small Cars, Large Cars, Small Trucks: +0 Handling
Large Trucks: -2 Handling

A Civic (Small Car) and an Expedition (Small Truck) perform about the same at high speed while dodging bullets, at least in fiction. You might want to add a few categories here if you're really getting detailed with your cars. A Mustang or Camaro probably has a +1 or +2 Handling, while a rickety old truck has at least a -2 Handling.

Batmobile (Large Car)
+4 Armor, 20 Hit Points
+1 missiles, grappling hook, and I'm going to boost its armor rating above a standard Large Car because it's often portrayed as super, super durable.

General Lee (Small Car)
+2 Armor, 15 Hit Points
Let's give this one a +1 to Handling because of all its jumps and swerves. It's pretty large to be considered a Small Car, but it's known more for its ability to move than its ability to take a hit.

Pursuit Special (Large Car)
+3 Armor, 20 Hit Points
Mad Max's car isn't armed itself, but it carries a lot of riders who have weapons.

Aston Martin DB5 (Small Car)
+2 Armor, 15 Hit Points
James Bond's signature ride has +1 machine guns and +1 tire slashers, plus an ejection seat and a few other gadgets that will come in handy just in time (part of Bond's Super Spy Specialism?).

Hell Cycle (Bike)
+1 Armor, 10 Hit Points
The flaming tires are the most memorable part of Ghost Rider's demonic vehicle (traditionally — more recent Ghost Riders drive cars) and they provide a +1 attack bonus.

1/30/19

USR Wednesdays: Signature Actions

One of the great things about USR's flexibility is how much you can say with a single Specialism: a classic fantasy Thief is assumed to be good at sneaking, picking locks, quickly assessing the value of an object, backstabbing enemies, and so on. Someone with an Assault Rifle weapon doesn't just have a powerful gun; they also know how to use it, carry it, maintain it and so on.

But sometimes you have a signature action — a way you use the skill, tool, weapon, or other Specialism that no one else does the way you do, or no one else does at all. Think of the cowboy gunslinger who has an extra single-shot derringer secreted away in his boot when his trusty sixguns are out, or the druid who doesn't just talk to animals — they come to him to pass along information, without even being asked.

A signature action is chosen at the same time you select a Specialism. Each Specialism can only have one signature action at a time, though you can switch to another one at any time, as long as the game master approves. It should make sense for the story, though; a captain who's a master at keeping his ship steady through a storm won't suddenly become an America's Cup yacht race champ, even though both signature actions would apply to the Sailing Specialism, or something similar.

A signature action awards an additional +1 to any die roll where it applies, so it's one better than the Specialism, no matter what bonus the Specialism provides.

Here's a few ideas, with a suggested appropriate Specialism.
Called shot: You gain this bonus when using a Gun or Bow to fire at a specific target, like a shoulder, a kneecap, or the weapon in an opponent's hand.
Death from above: You're especially effective at sneak attacks when Jumping onto an enemy.
Evocation: If you are a Wizard or Spellcaster, you're especially good at one particular type of magic. Work with your game master to determine just what kinds of spells qualify as your type of magic.
Inspiring speech: A Military General or Leader Of Men can always rouse the troops to battle

or keep them on task even when they're exhausted, but you're one of the best at doing it. You don't need to roll for this, but some of your sayings show up when people are looking for motivational quotes.

Like a native: If you have French (or Elvish, or a Specialism for any language and culture), you not only know the language and customs like someone who's lived there all their life, you also know things that most natives don't know, from obscure history facts to slang terms that young people have just started using.

2/6/19

USR Wednesdays: Companions

I took a look back at the community on the USR Google+ page, before it disappears, though of course nothing ever really disappears from the web. A few years back, there was a discussion on playing puppets, creatures that work with a hero as a kind of support staff. Puppets and their controller — in other words, companions of a hero. In classic fantasy role playing games, this is the druid or ranger with their wolf, hawk, or other animal partner. Helper robots in a science fiction settings are a pretty popular concept too.

What's a companion?

A companion, in the terms we're using here, is more than a simple Specialism. A private eye who has a trusty bartender informant doesn't have a companion; he has a Bartender Contact +2 Specialism. All the bartender does is pass along information (and pour drinks). He doesn't join the detective in a fight, and really doesn't even leave the bar, in the story.

On the other hand, a dark elf two-blade ranger's magical black panther is a companion (probably a Magical Black Panther +2); it's useful as a warrior, but also a scout, a guard, and likely some other stuff, I haven't read all the books. He literally never leaves his hero.

So, if both the bartender and the panther are designated as Specialisms, what's the difference in game terms between a companion and a non-companion? On the surface, not much. Both offer a +2 bonus... but the panther's bonus applies a lot more often. It all depends on how the player and the game master have decided how the companion works. That's part of what defining a Specialism in the first place is all about — what kind of die rolls it applies to.

Other companion-type Specialisms
The puppets we talked about on Google+ are another companion-type specialism. The example I used was this:

> (A) puppet could be a manifestation of a Specialism (Flight +2 is on your character sheet, but you can't literally fly. One of your puppets can, though, and whenever you need to fly you summon the puppet to carry you).

That's just "flavor text," as they say in CCGs. This character can fly, it's just being described as something the puppet does for the hero. It does open the game to more role

playing opportunities — what if the puppet is missing or stolen? Is the hero's need to fly somehow powerful enough that the puppet comes racing across continents to do its job? Or is the character just a little less capable now that his puppet is out of action?

Then there's the situation where the companion is more powerful than the hero. There are a few superheroes who have this trait — young Billy Batson becomes the mighty Captain Marvel (or Shazam now, I guess), and timid scientist Bruce Banner transforms into the Hulk. Though in USR terms, Shazam and Hulk are the heroes, and Batson and Banner are the Specialisms (maybe Young Boy +1, capable of being ignored by most people, and Genius Scientist +2). But the example I was really thinking of is Aladdin, who has an extremely powerful wish-granting Genie, who is a companion, especially in the well-known Disney version of the fairy tale. The genie isn't a character himself, because he can't do anything until Aladdin makes a wish.

Companion ideas

Like all Specialisms, companions, in whatever form they take, follow our guideline for creating Specialisms: They explain what a character can do, or how he or she does it, in a way that's appropriate to the setting. A hero with a companion-type specialism might be able to:

Lift heavy things, thanks to a robot buddy
Fly with the help of a winged puppet
Coordinate attacks against orcs and dragons
Cross between the world of the living and the land of the dead
Scout out the enemy fortress, seeing it through a robotic bee's eyes
And more...

2/13/19

USR Wednesdays: Combat Variants

I've certainly looked at ways to mix up combat before. [Regular Combat, Critical Hits, Tournament Fighting] Let's take a look today at a few more options to add something extra to your Domino Writing-style USR game.

Multiple Attacks
One of the biggest problems with classic role playing games is that boss monsters are just too easy to kill. Sure, the dragon has lots of hit points, and its breath weapon can knock everyone down by a third of their health if it hits, but the dragon only gets one attack. If the fighter, rogue, wizard, and cleric work together, they can take out the beast in no time. The answer is often give the dragon some orcish minions to fight alongside it, or allow it to breathe fire and scratch with its claws at the same time. Either way, the dragon can make several attacks, evening the odds it faces in battle.

In USR, we can do the same thing, giving a monster multiple attacks, instead of the one it normally gets (remember, in Domino Writing-style USR, a combat turn includes one move

and one other activity, usually an attack). The limit is determined by the monster's [Monster] Power Level.

- The number of extra attacks a monster can have, above and beyond its regular attack, is equal to its combat bonus (Power Level I means no extra attacks, Power Level VI can have up to 5 for a total of 6 attacks in a turn).
- Each extra attack a monster has costs it 3 starting hit points (one extra attack means the monster starts with 3 fewer hit points; five extra attacks means -15 hit points before the battle begins).

Note this only applies to monsters (which can be, of course, wolves, ninja, soldiers, trolls, robots, guards, or anything else). Heroes can't buy extra attacks this way.

The Upper Hand

This one is borrowed from the Fate RPG, and it's great for those games where combat is the exception, not the rule. You may need a marker of some kind, like a spare die, to represent having the "upper hand," having fortune smile on you. The character who wins initiative starts with the "upper hand." It stays with him or her until an enemy tries to steal it. If your ally has the upper hand when it's your turn in combat, you can't make use of it. But if an enemy has it, you can try and grab it from them. Then you'll have it on your turn.

To "seize the upper hand," you first make a non-contested die roll against a target number set by the game master (usually a 4 or a 6 — this should be relatively easy to do so the upper hand moves around a lot). On a success, you have the upper hand. On a failure, the upper hand stays where it is.

Whether you succeeded or failed on the upper hand roll, you can still make an attack roll on this turn (yes, you make two die rolls in one turn). If you succeeded at the upper hand roll, or you already had the upper hand from earlier in the battle, add your level to the attack roll, and even if you miss, you still cause 1 point of damage. If you don't have the upper hand, you just make an ordinary attack.

The "upper hand" roll can be against any stat you wish on your first try, but it has to be against a different stat each time you try to seize it. The entire point is to generate cool combat maneuvers that aren't necessarily damage-causing themselves:

Grabbing a rope and swinging into the fray
Dropping the perfect one-liner before opening fire
Calculating the exact coordinates for your attack to cause maximum damage
Mystically stopping time — for just a moment — to get into position
Spreading your wings as wide as they can reach, to strike fear in the heart of your foe

Nemeses

A discussion on the USR Google+ group about playing Pokemon in USR led to this idea: When a battle begins, select an opponent, who becomes your nemesis. You gain +2 on die rolls

against the nemesis, as long as the nemesis is in the combat. If it's defeated or otherwise leaves combat, you can name a new nemesis on your next turn.

Both heroes and monsters can select a nemesis on their turn, but someone can only have one nemesis at a time. A character can't name an opponent as a nemesis if another character has already done so. Nemeses don't have to be against one another: If you're a police sergeant whose nemesis is Mario the mafia thug, but Mario has named your buddy the psychic detective as his nemesis, you get a +2 against Mario, but he doesn't get a +2 against you.

2/20/19

USR Wednesdays: Robot Revolution

If the robots rise up against the humans, there will be war, at least with the survivors, the humans that aren't wiped out by being at the wrong place at the wrong time, or the humans that can't make it without electronics. Thanks to the ingenuity of people, there are robots of every size and shape available in the robot army, and it's easy enough for them to start producing still more robots, including kinds that don't exist in the real world yet. So that's where we start:

Monster Power Level and examples
I: Tiny, mostly harmless service robots like vacuum cleaners or checkout machines
II: Human-size robots that aren't built for combat — a manufacturing arm or a translator
III: The classic security robot that moves and acts like an ordinary human with a gun
IV: An advanced security robot, bigger, tougher, and more maneverable — maybe with wheels, treads or spider-type legs
V: A robot transport, which provides cover fire before it drops off a load of killer robots
VI: A self-driving vehicle — one bristling with weapons, like a tank or fighter jet

Characters in this setting are action-oriented; they have their highest stats in Action (if they're the gun-toting soldier kind) or Wits (if they're the genius programmer that turns the robots against themselves kind). Ego is less important in this genre, though a typical adventure probably has at least one opportunity for a hero to pretend he's a robot to get through a dangerous situation, or to talk another group of survivors into joining forces.

Specialisms
Think of Specialisms that offer skills: Robot Programming, Discipline, Driving, Stealth. And make sure your character isn't a generic hard-bitten warrior with personality traits like Practical Joker, Silent And Deadly, or Master Negotiator.

2/27/19

USR Wednesdays: A Package Of Specialisms

It only takes moments to create a Domino Writing-style (or really any) USR character, but the one part of character development that does require a little bit of time is coming up

with Specialisms. They've been discussed before; remember:

> Specialisms are what a character can do, or how he or she does it, in a way that's appropriate to the setting.

This includes:
Skills (Climbing, Computers, etc.)
Natural abilities (Charming, Tough, etc.)
Supernatural abilities (Magic, Psionics, etc.)

But it also includes:
Races (Animal-Folk, Elf, etc.)
Traditional RPG classes (Gunslinger, Wizard, etc.)
Personality traits (Lone Wolf, More Interested In Machines Than People, etc.)
Setting-specific characteristics (Disgraced Member Of The Royal Family, Knight Of Eagle's Watch, etc.)
Signature equipment (All-In-One Pocket Tool, Fast Car, etc.)

The one thing a Specialism usually isn't is a combat-specific ability: guns, swords, shields, and the rest is represented as weapons and armor and "purchased" with Combat Gear points. That said, there's nothing wrong with a Specialism like Sharpshooter or A Dagger In Each Hand, to add to attacks, or other actions (a Sharpshooter is just as good at putting out a flickering candle from across a room as he is at taking out a bandit gang).

How can you get a character ready to play instantly? Try a Specialism package: One personality trait and two skills (or one skill and one class, if you're playing in a setting with archetypes the players and game master all understand). That gives you some abilities to use in the adventure, and a little bit of background to make your character more than just a set of combat statistics.

Here's a few more kinds of Specialisms that can be used to put that package together, borrowed from the great RPG Risus:

Adventuring necessities (Athletics, Persuasion, Observation, Driving, Technology, Medicine, Wilderness, Knowledge, Spying)
Degree of dedication (Master Of Martial Arts, Laser-Focused On Fire Magic, etc.)
Social and financial status (Billionaire, On The Streets, etc.)
Appearance (Dashingly Handsome, Scheming, etc.) — you can use celebrities or stock characters to help with Specialisms, too (Albert Einstein, Casanova, etc.)
Relationships (Father Figure, Falls In Love With All The Women, etc.)

3/6/19

USR Wednesdays: Health Variants

Hit points may be the most significant "mechanic" that roleplaying games introduced to the world of games. Before Dungeons & Dragons, game characters were either "up" or "down"

(think of Pac-Man's lives or even the one-hit armies of chess). And while there's no exact agreement on precisely what hit points represent — Physical health? Willingness to keep fighting? Raw toughness? — there's many ways to represent them. Domino Writing-style USR calls for a lot of hit points: your character's maximum Action stat plus maximum Wits stat (both physical and mental fortitude). Standard USR replaces maximums with a die roll from both stats, but the idea is the same. Here's a few ideas to change the way health is used in your game. Note that most of these variants are best in a game with lots of combat, where the health amount will change repeatedly.

Conditions
This comes directly from the most recent editions of Dungeons & Dragons: other effects besides straight hit point loss; things like being stunned, poisoned, or even charmed. They lend themselves very well to simple effects in combat, or occasionally negative Specialisms. Here's some of the most common:

Confused: Before the character starts his or her turn, roll a d6:
1-2 — the character can act normally
3-4 — the character loses his or her turn, babbling incoherently
5-6 — the character causes 1d6 damage to him or herself from shock, accidentally bumping into something, or for some other reason
Fascinated: The character stays in place, and takes no actions this turn. Any obvious threats to the character immediately end the fascination. This includes a magical charm like hypnosis or even seduction.
Frightened: More severe than shaken, the character suffers a -2 penalty on all appropriate die rolls until he or she gets away from what was frightening.
Poisoned: The character suffers a -1 penalty to all approprate rolls until the poison is eliminated (by waiting it out or by taking an antidote). This can also represent disease.
Shaken: Less severe than frightened, the character suffers a -1 penalty on his or her next appropriate die roll.
Stunned: The character skips his or her next turn in combat. This can be extended to more than one turn to represent things like being tangled in vines or even frozen in ice.

Decreasing Dice
One of the "unrealistic" things about hit points, especially in older games, is how they don't have an effect until the end. A hero with 50 hit points can fight just as well as one with 3 hit points — but they both keel over at 0 HP. A simple way to debilitate characters (and monsters) a little bit is by decreasing dice: Each time a character loses 10 hit points from the character's maximum, they also decrease stat dice by one rank, from D12 to D10 to D8 to D6 to D4. This decrease goes away by one rank as the character heals.
For example, a hero with 22 hit points and an Action stat of D10 who falls to 12 hit points now has an Action stat of D8. At 2 hit points, his Action stat is D6. If he goes back to 3 hit points, it returns to a D8, and at 13 or more hit points, he's back to his original D10 Action stat.
Usually this effect only applies to a single stat (say, Action if the character is attacked by a life-draining ghoul, or Ego if a character's honor and status in society is completely obliterated).

This variant can also be used to represent serious injury. The D20 versions of the Star Wars Roleplaying game and the Palladium system games like "Rifts" use something like this, where serious damage has long-lasting effects. Hit points can be healed fully (or at least up to half the character's original hit points) after every combat encounter, but serious wounds — as judged by the game master — result in a lower die for a stat, and stick around until an appropriate time in the story.

Flashback
This comes from the Savage Worlds RPG: A character can heal back to full health at any time — as long as they narrate their recovery. It can be a scene where the character is sitting and talking about his or her past, and how it led to today. It can fill in the gaps in the narrative, explaining how something happened that the players haven't yet heard about (think of a heist movie, where you get filled in on how part of the caper was pulled off after the action is over). The goal is to add more to the story and the world of the characters. The reward for the player is to heal back to full hit points.

3/13/19

USR Wednesdays: Two Adventures

Fantasy Intrigue — with inspiration from RPG writer Ryan Macklin. [http://story-games.com/forums/discussion/11646/political-intrigue-done-easy]
Ask of each character:
* What does he or she want? (That could be to change something or to maintain the status quo. Don't fight for change 100% of the time).
* Why can they not just have that? (That could be adversity, incomplete needs, a bit of both).
* Point to another character when answering these questions (either or both of them).
1. Quest giver: The heroes are a team of bodyguards hired by the local lord to protect his cousin and superior, the duke. The duke came to your city with his own set of guards — you are backup. The duke is kind but cheap, and his guards aren't very loyal. You are paid well by the lord.
2. Early encounter: While out hunting, the duke wanders off and is attacked by a monster. His guards flee or are killed in the battle.
3. Clue to final confrontation: Searching the bodies of the monsters, you find the mark of a wizard from your city. If the bodies aren't searched, indications of a spy watching the battle are noticed by one of the heroes or an ally.
4. Secondary encounter or challenge: With the threat to his life, the duke is confined to the castle until the lord conducts an investigation. The heroes are assigned to the investigation and head to the wizard's tower. An illusion of him appears to speak with the characters, and when they ask him about the monsters, he disappears and sends them into a portal to battle a monster.
5. Secondary challenge or encounter (the opposite): Escaping the battle, the characters rush back to warn their lord and the duke of the treasonous wizard. But the wizard emerges from the shadows to the surprise of the heroes and the duke. The lord and wizard have conspired together to overthrow the duke, and the heroes weren't supposed to get this far.

6. Final boss: The wizard fires spells at the heroes. For an extra challenge, the lord can be a skilled warrior or even a shapechanged monster like a doppleganger or a lycanthrope. If the heroes win the battle, the duke rewards them by inviting them to his court… and a smaller than expected reward.

Superhero — this is a classic "team of heroes vs. a villain"-type story.
1. Quest giver: Each hero is in their secret (or public) identity when they see a news report or get an alert that the First National Bank has been robbed in broad daylight, and millions in bills and paper securities has been taken.
2. Early encounter: A trail of destruction leads the heroes to an abandoned steel-mining factory on the east side of the city. Inside is Catastrophe, the Mountain of Muscle, and/or Commander Pulsar, who fires beams of solid light. They're ready for a fight.
3. Clue to final confrontation: Only some of the stolen cash can be found in the factory, in a pile that Catastrophe and Commander Pulsar were building. The rest is being carried away on long, withered vines — the sign of Blight, the Queen of Pollution.
4. Secondary encounter or challenge: The heroes know McArthur Park is where Blight usually makes her hideout. Getting to her is difficult, with dozens of traps and plant-based minions in the way.
5. Secondary challenge or encounter (the opposite): Blight is in the park, as expected, but she's not hoarding the money. Instead, she's transformed the paper fibers in the cash and securities into a giant plant creature that joins her in the battle.
6. Final boss: Blight and her monster have to be defeated together before she can, of course, be sent to jail.

3/20/19

USR Wednesdays: Other Horror Monsters

You've read my take on ZOMBIES and VAMPIRES already, but what about the remaning classic creatures of the night, or at least a few of them?

Golems: Frankenstein's monster, the original clay golem of Jewish folklore, living statues, and other creatures made of organic material are all types of golem. They're usually supernaturally strong and tough, and almost always under the control of their creator. In USR terms if created as a character, they probably have a +2 or +3 toughness bonus as a regular Specialism (above and beyond any armor bonus they're assigned by spending Combat Gear points). But their Ego stat is usually low, and they're easily ordered around by more forceful personalities.

Werewolves: A hero that can shapeshift into an animal (and possibly also into an in-between, hybrid wolf-man state) is really created as several characters:
The standard human, created like any other Domino Writing-style character
The in-between creature, which starts like the human character — but a player can adjust its bonuses from Specialisms to better reflect the character's hybrid form. In other words, a human hero with a Computers +2 Specialism would lose that Specialism when shifted into the hybrid form, but it would gain a Bite +1 attack, and a Scent +1 Specialism as well. The

character's Action, Wits, and Ego stats stay the same. Create one set of Specialisms for each form.
The animal form, which is a type of MONSTER, usually Power Level II or II (but maybe as low as I or as high as IV).

Ghosts: Call them phantoms, apparaitions, spirits… they all have the ability to appear and disappear at will, and phase through solid matter. A ghost character gains the ability to interact with the living at will. As in most ghost lore, a ghost that accomplishes a particular goal it was trying to achieve in life will move on. But if it's slain by some other means, it dissolves into nothingness, or is sucked into a horrifying dimension where it has no identity of its own, and is just fuel for the mad whim of a greater terror.

3/27/19

USR Wednesdays: The End

Well, this is it… Google+ goes away in a week, before the next entry in this series would appear there. Of course, we're on MeWe now, so it's a moot point, but it does give me an excuse to write about this topic: Bringing an end to your game.

If your roleplaying game experiences are anything like mine, your games nearly always end because players stop showing up, and it's impossible to schedule a game session. So usually you have stories that end somewhere in the middle. But in this case, we're talking about a satisfying ending, something dramatic and exciting that leaves your fictional world different (better?) than before.

The first thing that comes to mind is a literal end, like a 4A or ROBOT REVOLUTION story, where the world faces an apocalypse and is never the same. The player characters are the heroes of your story; why not make them the people who literally change the world forever? They may defeat the villain, but at a dramatic cost to the land around them. Or maybe the world has always been decayed from a great, fanciful Golden Age, and the heroes have made it a little less difficult, at least for the people they have to live with every day.

Another option is for the characters to drastically improve. Of course the end of an adventure is a great time to level up — but let's take this post-apocalypse concept a little farther, and show how, in the words of Lucy from "The Lego Movie 2," "This new life has toughened and hardened us all." Give the heroes a bonus +1 or +2 to spend on their existing Specialisms or to create a new one. It represents them developing their skills and honing their survival instincts in the time between the old world and the new, post-apocalyptic one. It may be just days since the nuclear bombs fell, months after the zombies rose, or even two years after the melted ice caps raised the water level 20 feet and drowned millions before the heroes start adventuring again. No matter what happened, the heroes have had a chance to improve in the chaos following the apocalypse.

Or maybe it's time to recreate characters entirely — they keep their personalities and inherent qualities (stats), but their abilities (Specialisms) and equipment (Combat Gear)

changes. What if the fantasy heroes fall through a magical portal into the modern world? And a high-tech cyberpunk's talents with a computer won't help if he's dragged into the poverty-stricken underworld of the megaopolis. Their first adventure in their new setting will be a struggle, as they're literally not "built" for the experience. But after each successful adventure, give the heroes a chance to swap a no-longer-useful Specialism for one they've had a chance to learn, and trade out their equipment for something more useful.

P.S. I'm using the opportunity of "The End" to take a little break, too. USR Wednesdays will be on hiatus for a few weeks. I plan to come back to it with more setting ideas, adventures, and characters. In the meantime, I want to work on the website where you're reading this, and also turn these blog posts into a book — a "Pathfinder" to USR 3.0's "Third Edition," if you will. I will come back here and update. I appreciate the readership, and I will keep checking in for other great USR ideas.

7/17/19

USR Wednesdays: Endgame, or, I'm Back

Well, "on hiatus for a few weeks" ended up being a few months, as it often does. In the meantime I revised the website [LINK] to put more emphasis on my games and the ones I'm working on. The USR book? That's still under development. I do have a miniatures combat game, VSGMR, in my portfolio, but it's a little clunky; I've seen better and even simpler games out in the wide world, so I want to fold the good parts of VSGMR into USR, and add even more than what I have in this blog to date. Maybe that's too ambitious.

In the last post [LINK] I wrote about ways to end a campaign. There's one other ending that got a lot of attention this past spring: "Avengers: Endgame." It brought the story to a close (well, not counting "Spider-Man: Far From Home" and all the future Marvel movies). It brought together a massive "end boss"-style opponent and a lot of heroes. What can you do to recreate that massive battle experience in your USR game?

Parts of that experience take time: an end boss isn't satisfying unless many other villains have been confronted along the way to this final showdown. And a RPG campaign isn't the same as a comic book universe; every hero has a chance to shine in their own comic or movie, while a campaign can only feature a handful of characters, one per player. So you may have to plan ahead.

Take a break from your regular campaign for a short adventure with characters who are similar to, but not the same as, your players' regular characters — a bard instead of a rogue, a psionic instead of a spellcaster, etc. They could even be from another time; thanks to USR's flexibility, an elf swordswoman could be instead an Olympic-level fencer, or a swashbuckling space pirate, with only slight changes to their Specialisms and equipment. Then, when it's time for the "Endgame" battle, the space pirate flies in to help, and the psionic unleashes his pyrokinesis while the sorcerer fires a blast of magic energy.

A time-traveling or galaxy-spanning villain on the level of Thanos or Voldemort isn't going to

be at the end of your heroes' first adventure — at least, not in their final form (the bad guy can always be an illusion, or have an appropriate level of hit points, only to escape while swearing vengeance rather than being fully defeated). There's plenty of opportunity for the heroes to hone their skills or accomplish other tasks. Just make sure to reference the big bad every so often. After all, the Rebels had a lot of other things to do to be prepared for the opportunity to take on the Emperor. They couldn't just rush to the Death Star right away.

7/24/19