CORTEX PRIME GAME HANDBOOK

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PRIME INTRO

What is Cortex Prime?

Cortex Prime is a **multi-genre**, **modular**, **session-centered roleplaying game**. It is based on the same underlying system of rules that have previously been used in several award-winning RPGs based on comic books and television shows. Although each of these games were different from one another in ways both major and minor, the heart of Cortex was evident through all of them. With the *Cortex Prime Game Handbook*, the tools and resources to create your own custom-built game from a myriad of switches and dials are now yours.

Multi-Genre

Cortex Prime handles multiple genres from books, television, movies, and video games. Almost any genre you can imagine can be represented with this system. In fact, you can cross genres, mixing them up and using elements from more than one in your game, as you like.

Cortex has been used in the past for science fiction, fantasy, space opera, prime time drama, super heroes, crime capers, and supernatural action. It works best for genres that emphasize a cast of interesting characters who are connected to one another in settings that let them show off their talents, personalities, and relationships.

Modular

Cortex Prime is not a single fixed set of rules. It could be considered as a toolkit, or a big box of building bricks. From a central system of **dice** and descriptive **traits**, you can assemble your own game from modular parts (or **mods**) to best suit the way you and your friends like to play. You include only those mods that suit your genre preferences and leave out those that you aren't as excited by. You might even switch out some mods for others after you have played a few sessions, just as you might switch out the characters that you play.

Session-Centered

Cortex Prime has been designed to suit groups of players who meet together in person around a table or online around a virtual tabletop, ready to collaborate together on an adventure of one sort or another. Each session of play is its own experience. String a few sessions together and you get a story arc or something more episodic. By focusing more on individual sessions, **Cortex Prime** gives groups the flexibility to tell stories together that are short and sweet or long and involved.

Cortex makes significant use of terminology from the scripted entertainment it gets its inspiration from. The stories unfold in scenes, including opening and tag scenes, bridge scenes, and flashback scenes. And we talk about beats, reveals, and conflicts when setting up those scenes and the session overall. Even classic traditional RPG stories such as dungeon crawls or space battles can be included in this kind of structure, making those stories come alive in **Cortex Prime**.

Roleplaying Game

In the tradition of similar tabletop games from the Seventies onwards, **Cortex Prime** is a game in which players create characters and make decisions for them, playing their roles as if they were a combination of actor and author. **Cortex Prime** has rules, like any other game, and uses dice to provide an element of randomness and unpredictability. But because it embraces player imagination, decision-making, and agency, it has rules for affecting the outcome of the dice and the fate of their characters.

Cortex players are encouraged to really embrace their characters' motivation, personality, and backgrounds. In many cases those elements are hardwired into their character file as traits. As the stories develop, everyone is invited to really sell these characters' victories and failures, their highs and their lows, true to who their characters are. As sessions go by, these characters grow in meaningful ways, and reveal more of themselves and the settings they are in.

What you Need to Play

To play **Cortex Prime**, you need a few other people, somebody to manage the rules and prep the session, some dice, and a handful of other supplies. Most of all, you need this *Game Handbook* and a few hours to play the game.

Players

Cortex Prime works best with two to six players, each creating and playing their own **player character** or **PC**. A player character is part of the **group**. Each player character gets their own **character file** for players to record important game statistics and details.

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

Game Moderator

One player doesn't take a player character and instead takes the role of the **game moderator.** They manage the **session**, present exciting **scenes**, **locations**, and **game moderator characters** (or **GMCs**). Often, but not always, the GM is the person who bought the game and has read it through at least once or twice before play.

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

Game Dice

Cortex Prime uses game dice of various sizes. You can pick them up from hobby stores or from places online. Dice come in sets much of the time or can be purchased individually. For each session, you need a bunch of four-sided, six-sided, eight-sided, ten-sided, and twelve-sided dice. You won't need the twenty-sided die, or dice that are marked with special symbols, or those with percentage numbers. You will, however, need a healthy amount of dice. We recommend a communal pool of dice for the table, with at least three or four of each type. The more dice you have the better.

If you're playing online, you might have dice simulators available that you can use to simulate dice rolls. Make sure everyone playing approves of whatever method you end up using.

Pens and Paper

Tabletop RPGs are called pen-and-paper RPGs for a reason. Every player as well as the GM should have access to scratch paper and writing implements. A whiteboard or dry-erase gaming mat large enough to draw maps and other diagrams on is helpful. You can substitute any of these with a digital version, such as using a tablet to take your notes and look up rules or sharing a document among the players that can be accessed by a laptop or even smart phones.

For online play there are a number of virtual tabletop apps, websites, and platforms that are designed to be used for this purpose. Many of them feature the ability to upload maps and keep track of images and character files as well. Because **Cortex Prime** invokes a lot of temporary story elements during play, some way to represent them as virtual index cards or notes is essential.

Game Tokens

In addition to dice and some way to keep notes and track your character details, you also need a set of game tokens. These can be in the form of poker chips, coins, glass beads, or plastic counters. You need enough so that you can put together a pile of them in the middle of the table and so the GM and players can reach them.

When using an online game platform to play **Cortex Prime**, it's especially great if the app or site allows for the tracking of points or currency.

How to Use This Book

The *Cortex Prime Game Handbook* is divided into six chapters, each covering an important part of the game. These chapters are as follows:

Prime Intro: You're reading this chapter already.

Prime Core: The basic rules of any Cortex Prime game and how they work, including dice, traits, and plot points.

Prime Characters: Defining, describing, and creating characters for Cortex Prime.

Prime Scenes: Framing, moderating, and resolving scenes.

Prime Sessions: How to plan for and manage Cortex Prime sessions, including GM advice.

Prime Settings: How to build and use your own settings. Features three pre-made settings for use as-is or as inspiration.

Prime Lists: An appendix of lists.

If you're going to be the game moderator, you should read through the entire book at least once, and pay special attention to the Prime Core, Prime Characters, Prime Scenes, and Prime Sessions chapters as they contain the bulk of the game's rules. More than likely you should read the Prime Settings section for ideas on what sort of world you and your players want to set your game in. Use the Prime Lists chapter for reference as you need to.

Players should be familiar with Prime Core and Prime Characters over time, but as the GM it's one of your responsibilities to introduce the rules and concepts to the players. There isn't anything in this book that's especially secret or that needs to be hidden from the players, but if you plan to make use of one of the example settings then you may want to encourage the players to let you brief them on those, to avoid spoiling secrets.

Using Mods

This book includes a lot of **mods** to the basic game mechanics explained in Prime Intro and which expand the rules presented in other chapters such Prime Characters and Prime Sessions. In truth, everything about this game can be hacked, drifted, modified, and changed as you see fit. That's part of the whole modular approach **Cortex Prime** takes. Where possible, the book tells you what to expect when you use specific mods, and in some cases, what happens when you use two or more mods together. In this way you can assemble the right version of **Cortex Prime** for your game table.

Mods are called out using this symbol. You might see this symbol a lot. Where there's a stated rule or game mechanic and there's no mod symbol next to it, assume that you're reading a Prime Core rule.

Glossary of Terms

This is not an exhaustive list but includes most **Cortex Prime** game terms.

advancement	Improving your character between or sometimes during a session.
affiliation	A type of trait that represents a character's ability to succeed in a variety of social environments.
assets	Helpful traits that you may include in your dice pool when appropriate.
attributes	A trait set of basic areas of innate ability, such as Mental, Physical, and Social.
beat the difficulty	Getting a total that is higher than the difficulty set by the opposition's dice roll.
beats	The subjective unit of time it takes for a character to carry out a single test and alter or affect the progress of the story.
benefit	The part of an SFX that gives you something beneficial.

boss	Also called a large-scale threat, a boss is a single GMC that acts like a mob, with multiple dice forming a boss trait that must be eliminated in order to take them out.
botch	A critical failure. You're screwed. All your dice came up 1. Total zero. In addition to the normal result of the failed roll, the GM also introduces a sweeping complication without spending a PP.
callbacks	Referencing a previous session in which you did something similar to something that's happening in this session in order to a get a bonus roughly equal to a single PP.
challenge	A mod where players may challenge their PC's traits in order to get 3x the die rating, at the cost of stepping back the trait die.
complications	Unhelpful traits that your opposition gets to roll in their dice pool and make your own actions that much harder to succeed.
contest	A roll of the dice to settle the outcome of two or more conflicting goals set by characters in a scene.
core	The heart of Cortex Prime is its Prime Core, which consists of assembling a dice pool and rolling them in a test or contest. The core isn't sacrosanct, of course – mods can change any and all parts of it depending on the genre and style you're after.
character file	The player record sheet that holds all of your game stats and information.
dice pool	All of the dice you get to roll when you make a test or engage in a contest.
difficulty die	A die that represents how hard your test is going to be.
distinction	A trait that represents a character's background, personality, and role in the game and differentiate them from other player characters and GMCs.
doom pool	A mod that introduces a pool of dice that replace GM plot points and difficulty dice.
drawback	The part of an SFX that costs you something.
effect die	A die selected from one of the dice not used to generate a total, which is then used to represent how effective the outcome is. Usually the largest size die remaining.
escalating contest	A series of die rolls between opponents, each trying to beat the previous roll until one side chooses not to roll and gives in or fails to beat the previous roll and is taken out.
extra	A GMC with only a single trait to define them, never has a name.
game moderator	The person who facilitates the game, presents the session, and plays the parts of every other person and thing in the world.
gang up	Having more than one character provide assistance on a test or contest.
GMCs	Game moderator characters, including major, minor, and extra GMCs.
give in	When called to make a roll, usually in an escalating contest, you instead choose not to roll and accept the consequences on your own terms.
group	All of the characters that the players at the table are playing; all the player characters as a group.
growth	An advancement mod that has players gather dice from successfully challenging their character's trait statements in play or getting help from other characters.
hero dice	Dice you earn from heroic successes that you can use on future rolls.
heroic success	A total that is 5 or more points higher than the difficulty set by the opposing roll.
interfere	An interfering character spends a plot point to enter a contest that is already underway, hoping to assist one of the contestants or beat both of them.
life points	A mod that provides a score of points that are either reduced by damage or serve as a threshold of cumulative damage.
limit	A type of SFX that allows players to shut down a power set.
major character	A GMC that has game stats roughly equivalent to a player character and always has a name and

	some significant role in the story.
milestone	A list of goals that earn a player character XP during a session with which to unlock new traits or upgrade old ones.
minor character	A GMC that has only a handful of game stats and may or may not even have a name. Somewhat less important or significant than a Major GMC, but certainly more than an Extra.
mob	A group of extras that acts as a single minor character with multiple dice called a mob trait. Mobs can be weakened in strength until eliminated.
mod	A Cortex Prime rules module that may or may not be included in your game, and that can change the expressions of other rules.
opportunity	When the GM rolls a 1 on the dice, and thereby gives the players an opportunity to step back a complication. Additional opportunities in the same roll step back a complication additional times without the expenditure of additional PPs.
outcome	What happens after the dice are rolled and all game effects are decided, shaping the direction the story takes.
player character	A character played by a player, one of the stars of the show.
plot points	A resource that is earned by getting invested in the game and taking risks and is spent to alter the outcome of tests, contests, or to do other cool things.
power	A trait that represents superhuman abilities or qualities.
power set	A group of power traits collected together under a thematic name and linked to a set of SFX and limits.
prime set	A trait set that is an essential source of dice for dice pools in tests and contests.
push	An asset created by spending a plot point, starting out as a d6.
reaction	In a contest, the dice roll made by an opponent to beat the acting character's roll.
relationship	A type of trait that represents close connections to other characters.
reveal	A plot element prepared in advance of a game session.
result	The number that comes up on any given die after it's been rolled.
scale die	A die added to the dice pool of one side of a conflict that has a significant size advantage over the other side.
scene	A unit of time that basically covers a series of connected tests and beats in a story, usually in one location, and usually with one set of characters.
session	All the gameplay that takes place in one sitting down around the table or online, roughly equivalent to an episode from a TV series in story length.
session record	All of the sessions a player character has played through prior to the one they're in, useful for making callbacks.
setting the difficulty	Generating a total on the dice that indicates how difficult it's going to be for the other side to succeed at what they want to do.
SFX	A special effect that allows a player to influence the story in some way.
signature assets	assets that belong to the player character and represent important things or connections that may sometimes help the player character out.
skills	A trait set that represents training, expertise, and talent.
specialty	A trait set that represents narrow areas of focus.
spoiler	A die that came up as 1s when you rolled for a test or contest. The GM may give a player a plot point to turn a spoiler into a complication. Additional spoilers in the same roll step up the complication.
statement	A mod that connects contextual statements to traits.

step back	Replacing a die with the next lowest die type, i.e. a d6 becomes a d4.
step up	Replacing a die with the next highest die type, i.e. a d6 becomes a d8.
stress	A type of complication that represents harm and hinders action.
stunt	An asset created by an SFX or another rule, starting at d8. Contrast with **push**.
taken out	When you fail to beat your opponent in a contest and lose, suffering the consequences on your opponent's terms. Also applies to characters who fail a test in a high-stakes scene.
timed test	A series of tests that must be attempted before a certain length of time elapses.
test	A use of the dice to determine the outcome of an objective or goal, opposed by the environment or by ambient difficulty.
total	The number you get when you add at least two of your dice together after rolling your dice pool. Usually, your two highest rolling dice results, added together.
traits	Game stats that are rated by dice of various sizes, usually a name and a die rating, usually included in a dice pool, and belonging to a trait set.
trait set	A category of traits grouped together.
unlockable	An advancement benefit unlocked by spending XP, such as improved traits or in-game story benefits like access to important locations.
value	A type of trait that represents deeply-held beliefs or attitudes.
XP	Points earned during play using the milestone advancement mod.

PRIME CORE

This chapter covers the core of **Cortex Prime**, what most roleplaying games call "the rules" or "the game mechanics." Everything else builds on these systems and procedures. Once you understand how these work, and the mods that can change how they work, you can pretty much do whatever you want with the system.

Chapter Breakdown

Here's what's in this chapter.

Time and Pacing: How the game considers time and narrative.

Dice: How the dice work and how to roll them.

Tests and Contests: How characters deal with the situations they are confronted by.

Traits: The elements of every character.

Plot Points: The way players can influence the outcome of the game.

Assets and Complications: The positive and negative influences that can tip the outcome and shape the story.

Time and Pacing

Every time you sit down to play **Cortex Prime,** it's called a **session**. The flow of the session can be broken down into **scenes**. Scenes can be further broken down into chunks called **beats**, and a **test** is a character's attempt to do something (usually involving rolling some dice), typically over the course of a single beat. These concepts are the basic building blocks for creating a narrative.

For more on managing and running scenes, see Prime Scenes. For more on handling sessions of Cortex Prime, including preparing the situation and GMCs, see Prime Sessions.

Dice

Five different kinds of dice are used: d4, d6, d8, d10, and d12. The number tells you how many sides—or **steps**—the die has, and the more steps, the bigger the numbers. If you see a number in front of the d—such as **2d6**—it means you roll that many dice of that type. If there's no number before the d, it's assumed to be only one die. A handful of dice together is called a **dice pool**.

Any time you roll a die, the number that comes up on the uppermost face is called the **result**. Most of the time you're going to add results together to get a **total**.

In **Cortex Prime**, you never add or subtract a flat modifier number from a result or a total, except when you add more results to the total from other dice. In fact, adding two or more results together is about the only math you need to do.

Die Ratings and Steps

Almost every trait in the game is rated with a die, so they're called **die ratings**. Whenever you use the trait, you pick up a die of that size for your dice pool. Occasionally, you're told to swap out one or more dice for bigger or smaller dice. This is called **stepping up** or **stepping back** a die rating. To step up a die by one, swap it for a die that's one step larger than the original. To step a die back by one, swap it out for a die that's one step smaller.

Die ratings usually correspond to how much effect that trait has on the outcome of any given test or contest. They're a useful shorthand for how strong, smart, skilled, or important a character is.

Sometimes all a larger die means is that the trait has much more influence over the outcome than a trait of smaller size, even if the scope of the trait isn't the same as the scope for another trait. Having a d12 in a trait like Strong versus a d12 in a trait like Justice doesn't mean that strength or adherence to justice are on the same scale. It just means that for the former character, being inhumanly strong means the character affects the outcome just as much as being irrevocably dedicated to justice.

The Dice Pool

Every test or contest starts with assembling a dice pool out of relevant trait sets on your character file, in addition to bonus dice from other sources. It reflects all of the contributing factors in any test or contest from the perspective of your character. There's no maximum number of dice in a dice pool but generally the pool includes anywhere from three to eight dice.

The GM assembles a dice pool (the **opposition pool**) based on what your character is up against. This usually starts with a **difficulty die** chosen by the GM based on the situation:

d4: Very easy

d6: Easy

d8: Challenging

d10: Hard

d12: Very hard

In addition to the difficulty die, the GM picks up one or more dice based on appropriate traits from the location, opposing GMCs, or the scene itself. When in doubt, the GM can simply add one or more six-siders to represent increasing risk, threats, or challenges.

Rolling Dice

Usually when you roll two or more dice, you choose two results to add together for your **total**, and a third die to use as the **effect die**. If you're rolling one die, your total is equal to the result of that die. If you don't have a third die, your effect die starts at a d4.

After rolling dice, leave them on the table in view of everyone. Only pick up the dice once a test or contest has been resolved. The GM does not hide dice from the players; all rolls are done out in the open.

You and the other players make decisions for the group in response to the challenging situations the GM presents. *Not every decision needs to follow up with dice*. Unless the outcome of a roll—success or a failure —would be interesting or move the story along, or unless there's something keeping the player from doing what they want to do, then don't bother picking up the dice. The GM can always rule that the attempt is automatically successful or fails outright. It's often better just to move things along and describe what happens.

You are free to choose *any two dice* for your total. You do not need to choose the two highest rolling dice. The GM may decide to let the dice fall where they may and always keep the two highest rolling dice or use the choice of two dice as a way to moderate the opposition without simply fudging dice.

Spoilers and Botches

If you roll a 1 (a **spoiler**) on a die, it doesn't count toward your total at all; set those aside for now. You can't use them for your effect die. The GM might activate those spoilers to do things on their side of the table, so they have a function.

If all your dice come up as 1, that's called a **botch** and is a sure sign of trouble, especially since your total is effectively zero. With a typical failed test or contest, not everything is bad. The story still moves forward, just not how the character might like. With a botch, there is no ambiguity about it—things are bad for that character, and sometimes their story hits a brick wall for a moment.

Game mechanics that allow you to re-roll dice can be used to re-roll spoilers or even a whole botch, so long as they haven't been used to trigger any other game effect (such as a complication).

Tests and Contests

The central mechanic of rolling dice to resolve a situation is called a **test**. We just want to find out if there's a successful outcome or a challenging failure. Tests are almost always called for by the GM as a result of asking the player: "What do you do?"

When a character is acting against one or more other characters, this is called a **contest**. Here we want to find out if any other character can intervene, thwart, or oppose the character. Contests are almost always initiated by a player, who picks up dice and essentially says, "I'm doing this. Who's stopping me?"

Difficulty and Opposition

Whenever you roll dice, you want to get a higher total than your opposition. This is the core principle of **Cortex Prime**'s dice mechanics. The key difference between tests and contests is who rolls the dice first.

Tests: Success or Failure

If it's a test, then the GM assembles a dice pool and rolls it, setting the difficulty. That means the GM chooses two dice from the roll, adds them together, and announces what that total is. When you roll your own dice for the test, that difficulty is the number you need to beat with your own total. If you beat it, the test is a **success**. If you didn't beat it, the test is a **failure**.

Tests are usually uncomplicated. A success means the character did what they wanted to do, and a failure means they didn't.

In some cases, the player is the one setting the difficulty for the GMC's tests. In this case, the player rolls first and the GM rolls to beat the difficulty set by the player. In general, however, **Cortex Prime** is largely *player-facing*; it's useful for the GM to set up scenes where the players are rolling tests to change the status quo being maintained by the GMCs.

Contests: The Struggle

If it's a contest, then you're the one initiating it, so you're the one who picks up the dice and rolls first, adding together two results for a total. If your opposition decides against opposing you after seeing what you rolled, then you win the contest automatically. If your opposition decides to stop you, they assemble a dice pool and try to beat the difficulty you just set.

If your opposition doesn't beat your difficulty, you've won the contest, and you get what you want. If they do, then the ball's back in your court. You can choose to **give in**, in which case you define the failure on your own terms and you get a plot point. Otherwise, your opposition's total becomes the new difficulty, and you must roll again to try to beat it. Failing to beat your opposition means your opponent gets to define how they stopped you.

Contests can go back and forth until one side gives in or fails to beat the difficulty. Depending on what's being contested, the losing side might be **taken out** of the scene—they're unconscious, demoralized, or forced to flee. Anyone who loses a contest can spend a plot point to avoid being taken out, but they still experience the loss.

Just as with tests, sometimes the GM may initiate a contest when a GMC chooses to do a thing and the GM is essentially asking the players, "what are you going to do about it?" Because **Cortex Prime** games are about the PCs more than the GMCs, however, this shouldn't be something you do too often in any given session.

Outcomes

When a player wins a test or contest, they got what they wanted, and they can narrate the **outcome**. What this means usually depends on what they said they were trying to do. Was a player character trying to hack the mainframe? It's done. Knock out the bad guy? They did that, too. The player describes it and then the story moves on. (If the player can't think of what might happen if they succeed, the GM can do the honors, and remind them to think about what the consequences of success are before they roll the dice next time.)

When a player fails, however, they should try to be entertaining in how they describe their failure. They're not going to have any lasting effects other than the story heading in a different direction than they wanted, unless they picked up a complication or they rolled all spoilers and came up with a total botch.

It's important to note that in many cases, whether a test is a success or a failure, *the outcome is not a game mechanic outcome*. Instead, the result is described in terms of how it changes the story. Whatever outcome is determined is true for the purposes of the narrative and play continues with that being the case. However, in cases where a mechanical outcome is needed, the game uses effect dice.

Effect Dice

The **effect die** is a die chosen from the dice pool after rolling and after the dice used for the total are taken out and added together. It is used in such things as determining the size of an asset or complication. The number rolled on the effect die has no further use in the roll; only the size of the die (number of faces/steps) matters.

For example, a player rolls a pool of five dice: a d12, two d8s, a d6, and a d4. The two d8s each come up 8, which add together for a total of 16, but the d12 comes up 2 so the player chooses the d12 as the effect die. This means that whatever

the test was for, the effect die of d12 shows that the outcome is going to be truly spectacular. Perhaps it was an attack that has now created a d12 complication on the target. Perhaps it was an attempt to rip open a door, and the d12 effect easily eliminates the door's d8 lock.

Ineligible Dice

You can't choose a die that produced a spoiler for an effect die. If you spend plot points to add more dice to a total beyond the first two, those dice can't also be used as effect dice. If there are no dice left in the pool once the total is determined (or the remaining dice are spoilers or otherwise spoken for), the effect die is always a d4.

SFX and Effect Dice

SFX may often refer to effect dice. For example, an SFX might be: *spend a PP to step up the effect dice by one when the moon is full*. If any rule or SFX steps up the effect die beyond d12, either the effect becomes an automatic take out or victory, or another die from the pool is turned into a second effect die.

Some SFX let you choose more than one effect die. In this case, you have to choose from the remaining unused dice from your roll. If there are none left, use the d4 default. If an SFX tells you to step up or step back an effect die and you have multiple effect dice, only modify one of them for every SFX that you're using.

Effect Dice in Opposition

When rolling dice for tests, the effect die serves as a useful indicator for the scope of the action's outcome. A d12 effect die means the test had a mind-blowing outcome, while a d4 means it was marginal at best. There's usually no need to compare your effect die with the opposition's effect die.

When rolling dice for contests, the effect die is more important. If you win a contest, you compare your effect die against the opposition's effect die (from the roll they just made to try and beat you). If your effect die is larger than your opponent, they're **taken out** of the scene. If their effect die is equal to or larger than yours, or they spend a plot point to avoid it, your opposition isn't taken out. Instead, they take a complication equal to your effect die.

Being Taken Out

Not every test or contest carries with it the risk of failure so bad that it takes a character out of a scene, but when it does, you as GM must make this clear from the beginning. Examples may include a character testing to stay awake after being exposed to knock-out gas, a character in a contest with another character who wants to knock them unconscious, or a deadly trap that needs to be overcome before it brings doom to all of the occupants in a room.

Defining a scene as a **high-stakes scene** such as this, one that carries the risk of a character being taken out of the scene if they fail, is up to the GM. Often, as GM you present the players with a number of options that include some with this potential outcome, usually with a commensurate greater reward. Players can then decide if the risk is worth it.

Being taken out means the character may no longer perform any test or contest and no longer participates in the scene. As the GM you may rule that certain tests are still possible, or that a character's SFX may still be activated. Generally, however, a character that is taken out of a scene has no further impact on the scene's outcome.

Recovering in a Scene

It's possible that being taken out of a scene can be reversed by other characters in that scene, such as those who have healing abilities, magic, or the ability to change the circumstances that took the character out in the first place. If a character returns from being taken out, they usually come back with at least a d6 complication that reflects their traumatic experience.

Heroic Success

If the player raised the difficulty by 5 or more, then they've got a **heroic success**. They not only got what they wanted, their test produces unexpected yet beneficial results. In a test, they performed beyond their expectations; in a contest, they were the clear victor. Just as with any success, the GM should ask them to describe their amazing efforts, but that's just icing on the cake. There's an added benefit, as well.

The effect die is stepped up by one for every 5 points the player raised the difficulty by. For example, if the player makes an attack and beats the opponent's difficulty by 10, and the effect die is a d6, then the complication or stress created from the attack is a d10 (d6 stepped up twice).

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

Older Cortex-based games sometimes called heroic successes "extraordinary successes."

Interfering in a Contest

If there's another character in the scene that wants to get involved in a contest, they can attempt to **interfere**. Usually this means they want something neither of the other two characters wants, or maybe they want the same thing as one of them but on their own terms. An interfering character spends a plot point to jump in and rolls dice before the outcome is resolved. If they beat whatever the highest roll of the other two characters was, they become the current winner.

You can use interference as a way to represent all-out scrambles for some kind of object, goal, or prize. The highest roller is the successful character. Interference requires investment, however, hence the use of plot points. Interfering characters who fail to beat the difficulty of one or both of the other characters lose, and their fates are determined by the GM (it may be the same fate as the losing character in the contest, or it may be some entirely different outcome).

Test and Contest Mods

Although the test and contest mechanics are the core of **Cortex Prime**, you can apply mods to them to affect how they are used and implemented. Some of these mods actually make the rules simpler, others add complication.

Action-Based Resolution

This mod reframes all tests and contests not as situations to resolve or settle but as efforts on the part of characters to change their environment or circumstances. In this case, anything a player character or GMC does is called an **action**. Aside from framing it this way, the rules generally work in the same manner: if you want to carry out an action, you declare it, and the GM sets a difficulty. When the difficulty is set by another character's roll rather than a difficulty die, it becomes a **contested action** and the opposing roll is a **reaction**.

An action-based resolution approach also places heavier weight on who goes when and what order actions take place. That means scenes are more structured, each player tends to take their own turn, and an **action order** is established. Action orders are also used in scenes using tests and contests but are essential in an action-based method since contested actions do not go back and forth the way contests do and it matters who's rolling the dice first.

Actions are always rolled first, before difficulty dice or opposing reactions are rolled. This can make actions seem chancier, as players may not know whether they should include more dice into their totals with plot points or not. To offset this somewhat, the GM's difficulty total or the reaction total must exceed the action's total in order for the action to fail.

Add All the Dice

With this mod, all dice rolls lead to adding together every die in the pool after rolling and comparing the total to the opposition total (which likewise is every die added together). Using this mod, either the No Effect Dice or Re-Roll for Effect mods that follow should also be used, as adding together all of the dice leaves no die for the effect die.

This mod still keeps the rule about spoilers. Any die that comes up as a 1 isn't included in the total, and if it's the GM who rolls it, it's an opportunity.

Using this mod does place a much higher value on added dice to the dice pool. For this reason, you should be aware that assets and complications become much more potent. Games using this mod likely won't have character files with more than three trait sets to ensure that totals don't become astronomical.

No Effect Dice

In this mod, effect dice are dropped entirely, and all tests and contests have simple success and failure outcomes. The degree of success or the measure of the outcome remains story-driven and descriptive, rather than being represented by a die rating. If you use this mod, any time that a test or contest should generate a complication or asset, simply assign a d6 and step it up with heroic successes.

Re-Roll for Effect

This mod doesn't use the original die roll to generate the effect die, but instead has the player or GM re-roll their dice pool and take the highest rolling die as the effect die. If this mod is used, certain SFX that call for choosing more than one effect die or stepping up or back an effect die instead apply to this new roll. IF SFX or other mechanics altered or stepped up dice in the pool after they were rolled, those effects do not apply when re-rolling; instead, you pick up the original dice pool and roll it.

Static Difficulty

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

Static difficulty is based on the same scale as difficulty dice, as follows:

3: Very easy

7: Easy

11: Challenging

15: Hard

19: Very hard

If the PC has a complication that would add to the opposition, the complication die is rolled and added to the static difficulty. For example, if a PC is trying to do something the GM has determined is *Hard* and is also suffering from a Broken Leg d10 complication, then the GM would roll the d10 and add it to the *Hard* difficulty of 15.

If you're using the hero dice mod, they are earned in the same way, with heroic successes (exceeding the difficulty by 5). Spending hero dice is a good way to ensure a success when complications are making things difficult for the player.

With a static difficulty, there is no option for the GM to roll an opportunity, unless you decide that rolling a 1 on a complication die would count. In place of opportunities, GMs are encouraged to let players spend hero dice to achieve the same outcome, i.e. instead of spending a plot point to activate a 1 on a GM's dice, you'd spend a hero die, and either eliminate a complication (if the hero die spent is equal to or greater than the complication) or step a complication back by one (if the hero die spent is less than the complication).

GMs still roll dice for their GMCs as normal and can even roll against a static difficulty if they are not opposed by another GMC or a player. It's a good idea to keep this to a minimum, however—this is not a game about the players sitting back and watching the GM play their GMCs off each other.

Classic Conversion note: This is essentially the same difficulty system presented in **Classic Cortex**. You may want to experiment with SFX and drawbacks that make static difficulty easier and harder as fixed numbers rather than dice, but it's important to take note of how tests and plot points work differently in **Cortex Prime** than they do in the classic system before implementing this mod.

Traits

Each player character's character file is mostly a list of **traits** and related game stats. Traits are what defines a character and how they interact with the world the character lives in. Traits paint a picture of who a character is and what they can do, not just in terms of their skills and abilities but also their personality, background, or aspirations.

Traits are represented in the text by using SMALL CAPS, like this. Each trait has a die rating, usually between d4 and d12. When that trait comes into play, the player rolls that die as part of their dice pool.

Many different types of traits are used in **Cortex Prime** games. These include (but are not limited to) **attributes**, **skills**, **affiliations**, **relationships**, **powers**, **roles**, and **values**. The choice of which traits are used goes more toward defining how a **Cortex Prime** game is played than almost anything else. Read more about which traits you might use in your own **Cortex Prime** game in the Prime Characters chapter.

Trait Sets

Any collection of traits that belong to the same basic type as others is assumed to be part of a **trait set**. "Attributes" is a trait set, as is "skills." The rule of thumb in **Cortex Prime** is that you may only add one trait from any given trait set to a dice

pool without added cost. If you want to include more, it costs a plot point. Some **Cortex Prime** games might even limit the ability to spend PP to include more than one trait from a trait set to specific trait sets.

Every **Cortex Prime** game assumes at least one if not more trait sets are **prime sets**. These are considered to be the source of almost every dice pool used in tests and contests. Attributes and skills are common prime sets, for example. Powers and specialties, on the other hand, are not generally considered prime sets.

A character may be defined by as few as three and as many as six or seven trait sets, depending on the game.

Descriptive Traits

Many traits are **descriptive** as well as definitive. That means that you can tell a lot about the character just by reading the names of their traits. Often, these traits come in the form of phrases or sentences. Even a standard sort of trait is descriptive, however, especially when coupled with its die rating. You can tell a lot about a character that has Physical d4 versus one that has Physical d12.

Temporary Traits

Occasionally, characters may gain **temporary traits**, which last only for a short time—a scene, or maybe a session. Temporary traits might also be assigned directly to a scene or to a location, and either go away when circumstances make them irrelevant (like a Flaming Torch d6 once it's doused in a lake) or when some kind of other time limit is reached.

Assets and complications are the most common examples of temporary traits.

The Trait Standard

Cortex Prime is designed to be modular and customizable, but these rules assume certain prime sets as a standard to be modified and tweaked depending on the genre and tone of the game you choose to play. The standard trait sets default to an action-adventure approach that's common to most roleplaying games and is the easiest to grasp for players coming from those games.

The standard prime sets are attributes, skills, and distinctions. Most dice pools in a standard game should include at least three dice drawn from these prime sets.

Just because there's a trait standard in this book doesn't mean all **Cortex Prime** games should or must have those trait sets. In fact, the three example settings in Prime Settings don't follow this trait standard. Attributes and skills can be switched out for other trait sets depending on the game's tone, genre, and style. The only trait set that should belong in every **Cortex Prime** is distinctions.

Plot Points

Plot points are a game currency that players spend to affect the plot over the course of the story. Plot points give players more dice, make the dice they have more powerful, and may be used to activate certain traits or trait special effects (**SFX**) on a character file. Players need to keep track of plot points somehow. One way is to write them on their character files as tally marks. Another option is to use poker chips or some other kind of token (pennies, paperclips, spent ammunition…you get the idea).

Every player starts a session with at least 1 plot point. Unspent plot points are carried over from session to session, but players will likely spend PP like it's going out of style and it's not hard to get more during play.

The Game Moderator and Plot Points

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

The Bank

At the start of each session, the GM gets 1 plot point for every player in the game to spend on GMCs. These PP are solely for keeping GMCs from being taken out in a fight, for using SFX, or other GMC-related things.

When the GM spends these points, they go back to the pile instead of to the player who was affected by the roll, just as if a player character had spent the points on the roll. The GM can add more points to the bank by activating GMC SFX, including taking distinctions as a d4 instead of a d8.

The Pile

In addition to the limited pool of points set aside in the bank, the GM has an unlimited number of PPs to give to the players when appropriate. The GM uses this pool to purchase complications when the players roll spoilers or hand over PP to the players when SFX call for it, depending upon the situation. Because it's an unlimited number, there doesn't actually need to be a space at the table for it. Most of the time, when players or the GM spend plot points, they return to this pile of unlimited points.

Earning Plot Points as a Player

There are several ways for players to earn plot points during play. These are summarized below. Unless otherwise stated, these plot points come out of the pile, not the GM's bank.

Complications: The GM may hand over a plot point from the pile to activate a complication when players roll spoilers. Complications start at d6, but additional spoilers in the same roll step up the complication without the GM needing to spend additional PPs. The GM may choose to create multiple complications if there is more than one spoiler, but each new complication requires handing over a PP. For example, if a player rolls four spoilers, the GM can spend a single PP and create a d12 complication (d6 from the activated spoiler, stepped up three times to d12 for the three other spoilers). Or, the GM might hand over two PP and create two d8 complications (d6 from each activated spoiler, each one stepped up by one for an additional spoiler).

Using d4 in your roll: If you include a d4 complication (or stress, if you're using those rules) in your dice pool, you get a plot point. This does not apply to players who use d4 rated skills, attributes, or other traits in their dice pool.

Giving in: If you give in during an escalating contest and let your opponent succeed rather than rolling the dice to beat their total, you earn a plot point. You only get this plot point if you've already rolled at least once in the contest; you don't get a PP if someone starts a contest and you choose not to oppose it.

SFX: Some SFX (including the default SFX for all distinctions) give you a plot point.

No Bank Mod: If the optional No Bank mod is used then players may earn plot points when the GM spends a plot point on a GMC.

Roleplaying: The GM is always free to hand out plot points for truly remarkable moments in play, including making everyone laugh, doing something truly heroic and in character regardless of your distinctions, and so forth. This is something that each table agrees to and isn't mandated by the rules the way other methods of earning PP are.

Spending Plot Points as a Player

Plot points can be spent by players to include more dice into your total, to activate some distinction SFX, to create new assets, and use hero dice. Here's how this works in detail.

Adding more dice: Before you roll, you can include more dice in your dice pool from a trait set by spending a plot point, so long as you can give a reasonable explanation as to why. This includes including more than one skill, more than one attribute, or perhaps another power.

Including more results: After any roll, you may spend a plot point to include more results out of those you just rolled in your total. In this way, your total may be three, four, or five dice added together. The only limit to how many results you may add to your total is how many dice you rolled to begin with and how many plot points you have available.

Activating SFX: Some of your SFX (from distinctions, signature assets, SFX, etc.) may have effects that must be activated by spending a plot point. Any effect that's activated like this only lasts for the duration of the roll you're using it on; once you do something else, the effect must be activated again.

Creating push dice: Players can create a **push die** by spending a plot point. This is an asset that starts out as a d6 and lasts for the rest of the scene. If you spend two plot points, you can keep it for the rest of the session—assuming something doesn't happen to remove or eliminate it. This allows you to give some dramatic weight to an item (Length of Pipe d6), part of the scenery (Unlocked Door d6), or even effectively create a new GMC (Handyman d6), as if to say, "this thing's important to the story."

Staying in the fight: Players may spend a plot point to turn being taken out into a complication. The size of the complication is equal to the effect die of the opposing dice pool. If you're using the life points mod, you can spend a plot point to stay conscious or active in the scene when your life points exceed your threshold.

Share an asset: If you've created an asset either as a push die or through the Test-Created Assets mod, you can let other characters use it by spending a plot point. This effectively makes it an asset anyone in the scene can include in their dice pool.

Bank an asset: If you're using the Test-Created Assets mod, you can spend a plot point to "bank" the asset for a later scene, rather than using it in the scene you created it.

Rolling a hero die: When using the Hero Dice mod, players can spend a plot point to roll one of their banked hero dice and add it to their total, even after their opponent has rolled to beat the difficulty.

Create a relationship: When using relationship traits, you can spend a plot point to create a d6 relationship with another character that you don't already have a relationship with. This relationship goes away at the end of the session unless you use advancement or XP to keep it around.

Interfere in a contest: If you're using the Interference mod for contests, you can spend a plot point to join in a contest that's already underway.

Spending Plot Points as the Game Moderator

Plot points can be spent by GMs to include more dice into a GMC's character's total, to activate a GMC's SFX, and to help a GMC avoid being taken out in a conflict. Here's how this works in detail.

Including more results: After any roll involving a GMC, the GM may spend a plot point from the bank to include more results beyond the initial two results that make up the total. In this way, the GM's total may be three, four, or five dice added together. The only limit to how many results the GM may add to the total is how many dice the GM rolled to begin with and how many plot points are left in the bank.

Activating SFX: Some of the GMC's distinction SFX may have effects that must be activated by spending a plot point. Any effect that's activated like this only lasts for the duration of the roll; once the GMC does something else, the effect must be activated again.

Avoiding being taken out: The GM may spend a plot point to prevent a GMC from being taken out and instead to take a complication. The size of the complication is equal to the effect die from the opposing dice pool.

Plot Point Mods

These rules alter the way the plot point flow works in the game, including how they're spent and tracked by players and GMs.

No Plot Point Bank

With this mod, spent plot points go into the big pile in the middle of the table, in front of the GM. The GM may spend plot points on their rolls, too, but doesn't have a private supply the way players do. Instead, when the GM spends plot points in a roll against a player, they pick up a plot point from the pile and slide it over to that player.

Whenever players get plot points spent by GMCs, they keep the points separate from the plot points they already have until the end of the current roll. Players can't use PPs they just earned when the GMCs spent the PP to improve their current rolls or activate SFX.

If the GM is using this mod, a major GMC doesn't earn a plot point when a distinction is used as a d4. Instead, the GM can bank a d6 for that character and drop it into a future action when needed. There's no limit to how many of these bonus dice a major character can save up, but regardless of how many are used on any given roll, the GM may still only use two dice for a total.

Hero Dice

Using this mod, the primary benefit from rolling a heroic success is the creation of **hero dice**. When a player gets a heroic success, they may "bank" a die equal to the highest rolling die in the opposing dice pool. These banked dice are called **hero dice**, and players may save as many of them as they like. There's a space on the character file to indicate how many hero dice players have earned and what size they are.

In some games, players might only be able to bank one hero die of any given size. In such a game, the character file has space to mark off each of the five die sizes (d4 through d12). You may opt to step back a hero die you earn from a heroic

success to the next lowest available die on your sheet if you already have a banked hero die of the size that you created with your heroic success.

Using this mod does not also negate the standard function of a heroic success, which is to step up an effect die.

Using Hero Dice

To use a hero die, a player spends a plot point and rolls the die, adding it to their total in any test or contest. They may do this at any time after rolling the dice to get a total, even if they rolled first and the opposition rolled their own dice. It must be done before the GM announces the outcome of the roll. Players may be so successful that they get another heroic success and earn another hero die. Whatever happens, the player should erase the hero die they used from their character file.

For example, if the GM sets the difficulty on a test with a roll of 12 and a player only rolls a 10, the player might choose to spend a plot point to roll a d8 hero die they banked earlier. The die comes up a 4, which kicks the player's total up to 14. Good enough for a success!

Hero dice can backfire. If the die comes up 1—a spoiler—the GM may introduce a complication as if you had rolled a 1 on any other die. You may choose to take back your hero die, however, instead of accepting a plot point from the GM.

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

Hero dice don't stick around after they're used for a roll. If your contest escalates and you roll your dice again, you can't use the hero die you used in the last roll.

Hero Dice as Plot Point Analogues

In some games, there's no additional cost to use hero dice if the player chooses to include them in their dice pool before they roll; they simply erase the die from their character file and add it into their dice pool like any other trait. The hero die may also be used in place of a plot point in any situation where a plot point is needed, and the player does not have any.

Some SFX may specify the use of hero dice instead of plot points, usually when the SFX is particularly strong. The size of the hero die does not matter unless specified.

Hero Dice as Effect Dice

In some games, hero dice may also be spent out of the "bank" to substitute for low effect dice from dice rolls. Used this way, the player spends a plot point and uses the hero die as the effect die instead of one of the dice from the roll. If this application of hero dice is used in a game, the heroic success does not also step up this new effect die. That only applies to effect dice sourced from the die roll itself.

Multiple effect dice may be created in this fashion for a single outcome by spending more PP.

The Game Moderator and Hero Dice

The GM doesn't pick up or use hero dice. If the GM rolls 5 or more than the player on their rolls, they instead remove a hero die from the player character in question equal to or less than the highest rolling die on the GM's roll. If the player character had no hero dice banked yet or no hero dice of equal or lesser size, nothing happens. Either way, the GM narrates something to justify the bad guy upstaging the player character in that moment!

The Doom Pool

The **doom pool** is a mod that entirely replaces the GM's own plot points and instead serves as a combination of ambient threat level, GM resource, and pacing mechanic.

When the GM has a doom pool:

* they do not have a bank of plot points;
* players earn and spend their plot points directly into and out of a central pile;
* the GM spends dice out of the pool.

The doom pool is sometimes called the trouble pool, the danger pool, or some other thematic title.

At the beginning of each session, the GM starts with a doom pool of at least 2d6. If the session is going to be of global or even cosmic scale, the pool may start with 3 or even 4 dice. If the session is a major breakpoint in a campaign, the size of

these starting dice might be d8 or even d10.

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

The GM may spend a die from the doom pool to add it to a GMC's dice pool during a contest, before the dice pool is rolled. This die is removed from the doom pool and doesn't go back in once the GMC's roll is resolved.

Doom dice may also be spent like plot points, where a d6 from the doom pool is equivalent to a single plot point. This usually happens when activating a GMC SFX or avoiding being taken out of a fight. If the doom pool only has larger dice in it, the next highest die must be spent in place of the d6.

The doom pool increases when the GM activates spoilers rolled by players. This takes the place of spoiler-created complications. Instead of adding a complication to the table, the GM adds a die of the same size as the one that rolled the spoiler to their doom pool. For example, if the player rolled a 1 on a d10, the GM adds a d10 to the doom pool and the player gets a plot point. The GM can also choose, instead of adding a die, to step up an existing die by one step.

The doom pool can be used for additional scene effects, depending on the game. Some of the most common uses are:

Create a complication, asset, or scene distinction: Spend a die from the doom pool and create a complication or asset attached to the scene equal in size to the die spent. Or, spend at least a d8 and add a distinction to the scene that may be used by players and GMCs alike.

Interrupt the action order: Spend a doom die equal or greater in size than the largest combat or senses-related trait of the player character whose turn is up next. One of the GM's own GMCs gets to go instead, and the GM then picks who goes afterward (not necessarily the player who was interrupted).

Add a new extra: Spend a doom die and create an extra with a single trait rated at the size of the doom die spent.

Introduce a minor or major GMC: If there's a GMC who isn't present in the scene but could conceivably show up, spend a die from the doom pool equal to that GMC's highest rated trait and drop them into the scene, ready to act whenever the action order gets to them (which could be right away, if the GM is the one deciding who goes next).

Split the group: Spend at least a d10 from the doom pool and some environmental or narrative event takes place that divides the group into two (minimum one PC in each new group). The PCs have to spend time reuniting their group, which may lead to more problems.

End the scene immediately: Spend 2d12 from the doom pool and cut the scene off right there before it's resolved, with the GM deciding how it ends. Usually, the GM should have scenes play out until there's a reasonable ending point, but this way they can just smash cut to a new scene with plot threads dangling. Or stage an auto-win by the villains.

Non-Opposition Doom Pool
In this mod, the doom pool is not used to set the difficulty for tests. Instead, the difficulty is determined as usual based on the situation's overall difficulty and by any GMC traits that factor into it. Doom dice are then spent out of the doom pool to add dice to the difficulty or to include more dice into the total after the dice are rolled, as per the standard doom pool rules. In this mod, doom dice continue to replace plot points for the GM.

Assets and Complications

Not all traits are part of a player character or GMC's character file. Some traits are temporary, reflecting conditions, circumstances, or objects that help (**assets**) or that make things difficult (**complications**). These, too, are given die ratings and are included in dice pools where appropriate.

Both assets and complications are created by the GM and the players on-the-fly, representing the situational advantages and disadvantages that the group will encounter during a session. Assets are short-lived, lasting only for a scene unless players are willing to spend additional resources to keep them around; complications are sticky and last until the player character has either overcome them or the complication is irrelevant.

Assets

Assets are included in a player's dice pool when they're applicable and helpful. Some examples:

- Press Pass, which helps a player character slip into a restricted location without being stopped.
- Thermal Jacket, which makes surviving in the icy cold much easier.

They can be environmental, too:

- Footholds Everywhere is an asset that would help a player character climb a cliff face.
- Handy Info Kiosk is an asset that any player character might use to look something up.

Creating Assets

Players can create assets during the game by spending plot points. When they create them this way, they spend 1 PP and create a d6 asset with a name they come up with. This is sometimes called a **push**.

Some SFX may allow for assets that start with a d8 die rating. These are also called **stunts**.

Assets may also be created by making a test against a difficulty chosen by the GM; this is a way to create assets that are larger than the standard push or stunt and works even if the PC has run out of plot points. See "Tests and Contests" for more about test-created assets.

Assets last until the end of the scene, unless there is some reason within the story for them to no longer be relevant, or until some other game effect steps them back or eliminates them.

During play, any number of assets can be added to any appropriate dice pool for free. The players do not need to spend a second time to include an appropriate asset; they spent for the asset itself when they created it. Players can add as many fictionally appropriate assets to a roll as they would like to include.

Once created, assets are largely static. Players may not step up assets without a distinction or signature asset SFX that explicitly permits them to do so, but they can spend an additional PP to make the asset last for the rest of the session. If a player does not spend the additional PP, the asset goes away at the end of the scene.

Once created, an asset is assumed to belong to the character of the player that created it, and by default can't be included in anyone else's pool. If a player creates an asset with the intent to use it to help another character (another PC or a GMC), they can declare the ownership of the asset to be another character instead. In this case, the other player (or the GM) may use it in that character's dice pool and the player that created it may not. Players may spend an additional plot point to declare an asset to be usable by any character in the scene (including GMCs); this is in addition to any plot point used to make it last longer than one scene.

Freeform Assets and Complications

While narrative twists and turns move the story forward after rolls, sometimes successes and failures lead to new assets or complications. When the situation calls for it, the GM may allow a successful test to create a d6 asset for free. A player character may then spend 1 PP to make that asset last for the session rather than just the scene.

Similarly, the GM may rule that a failed test may lead to a d6 complication. Complications that arise from failures should be only be generated when the situation does not result in a character being taken out; staying in the fight should generate its own complications. Like other complications, the character can attempt to remove these complications through a recovery test or wait for the complication to wear off.

This rule may be used even if the Test-Created Assets rule is being used, to represent occasions when the outcome surprises even the player.

Using Tests to Create Assets

Players can create assets greater than d6 and without spending plot points by making a test. The player declares what their character does to create the asset, assembles an appropriate dice pool, and rolls against an appropriate difficulty. Usually, this difficulty is something average like 2d6. The effect die of the test becomes the die rating of the asset.

The GM may set a cap on the size of the assets generated in this fashion by setting the difficulty die to that die rating. The asset created may not be larger than this die cap.

For example, the GM may set the cap on a die rating for an asset created by a detective player character trying to discover dirt on a crime boss to d10, suggesting that there simply isn't enough evidence to justify a d12 asset under any circumstances. The difficulty die is set to d10, the GM adds a d8 for the crime boss' trait of Plays Cards Close to His Chest d8, and the dice are rolled to set the difficulty. If the player beats the difficulty, even if the effect die is a d12, the size of the asset remains capped at d10.

Clues as Assets

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

The GM usually calls for the roll, though it's just as valid for a player to ask for it. The difficulty for an asset test is set by rolling a straight 2d6—unless the GM decides otherwise. The player's dice pool for the test is assembled from appropriate senses- or perception-related traits.

With a successful asset test (the player beats the difficulty), the player gains some crucial information or gathers some useful intel. If the player spends a plot point after they succeed at their test, they can bank the asset until they need it, give it to another character, or keep it for longer.

With a failed test, the player character doesn't gain any useful advantage. If they don't beat the difficulty set by the GM, it's business as normal, essentially. If there are complications, they generally represent the consequences of poking around places trying to find stuff out: Enhanced Security, I'm Being Followed, Skittish Bystanders, Tripped Alarms.

The Logic of Assets

If a player character picks up a crowbar to beat up some gangsters but doesn't spend a plot point, should they still get an asset? After all, they've still got a weapon, right?

Well, no. Here's the thing—the player character's one of the stars of the story. If they get into a fight, they use whatever's on hand to their best advantage—that's just a given. Picking up the crowbar, going after the weakest guy, or looking scary, this is all assumed to be part of kicking ass and taking names—and having a high rating in Fight or Shoot.

Spending the plot point doesn't magically make the crowbar they picked up into something that's more dangerous than some other weapon. Instead, spending that plot point makes a statement. That statement is "this crowbar matters." When they tell the story of the fight, it's "that time I beat up a gangster with a crowbar" rather than just another fight where they picked up whatever was on hand.

This is equally true for almost any kind of weapon or tool. If it exists in the story, if it's something the GM or players have been using as part of their description, then it should be a part of determining the outcome of a test or contest, but it won't confer any more dice rules-wise unless it's turned into an asset by spending a plot point or some other way.

In short: most objects in the game are color, setting, or flavor, until they get a die rating, when they become an asset.

Signature Assets

Signature assets work like regular assets—they give players an extra die to include in their dice pools when they're able to justify their use. They're in a sense the opposite of skills or attributes: they're about things a player character has or people they know, not about qualities innate to them. Not every player character has a signature asset, but as a means of representing heirlooms or unique weapons or special relationships, they're a great way to further reveal a player character's personality.

Signature assets begin with a d6 die rating but can be stepped up during play. They aren't tied to a distinction, attribute, or skill, but may complement any one of those traits. Some examples of signature assets include:

Organizational Ties: Chicago Police Department, Southside Disciples Gang, CTRL-ALT-DEL Hacker Collective, Aurora Hunting Club, Free State Bikers

Vehicles: My Favorite Bike, HUM-VEE, Souped-Up Station Wagon, M1 Abrams Tank

Weapons: Ruger MK III, Magnum Research Desert Eagle, LR-300 5.56 Auto Rifle, Louisville Slugger

Gear: All-Season Thermal Jacket, Talon TSA-Ready Multitool, Handheld Tablet, Bundle of Baling Wire

Signature assets can be left as they are, simply a die rating affixed to a character file, or the player can unlock an SFX for the asset much like the SFX on distinctions or power sets. There is no default SFX for a signature asset, and no two signature assets are the same, so typically there needs to be a conversation with the GM about appropriate options before one can be added. Good SFX for signature assets are those that allow the player to spend 1 PP to step up a skill when the signature asset is used with the skill, especially when the signature asset is itself a tool of some kind. A good rule of thumb is for no more than three SFX to be attached to a signature asset, in total, with one being the most common number.

Signature assets can be temporarily knocked out, eliminated, rendered unusable, or damaged during play because of actions taken by the group or a GMC, but as they are a featured element of the player character's sheet the player can recover the signature asset between sessions or by spending a plot point at the beginning of the next scene (and some

narrative justification for getting it back/fixed). Signature assets cannot be shared between player characters; if someone "borrows" a signature asset from a character (picking up the other character's heirloom sword or driving their custom sports car), the borrower must spend to create an asset as normal to get any benefit from the asset borrowed, and the asset is rated as a d6 push die like any other plot point created asset.

Complications

Complications go into the opposition's dice pool and make it harder to succeed. (Adding dice to the opposition is preferred to removing dice from the dice pool.) Complications might include things like:

- Extra-Alert Security
- Slippery Floors
- Broken Leg

If your opponent has a complication attached to them, you can use it whenever you oppose them, and the complication makes sense as something that would hinder or get in your opponent's way. Adding a complication to your dice pool doesn't cost anything. There's no real limit to how many complications you can add in this way, or how many complications you can be saddled with.

Double Jeopardy

Generally, only one complication applies to a specific hindrance or problem. You likely wouldn't suffer from a Broken Leg and Sore Leg complication at the same time—the first complication assumes the other. If you want to make a complication worse, it should be stepped up.

Creating Complications

If a player rolls a 1—a **spoiler**—on any of their dice, the GM always has the option of introducing a complication. Whether the player character succeeds or fails at the test or contest, a complication means something else has gone wrong, making life difficult.

When the GM introduces a complication, the player gets a plot point from the GM's supply; aside from distinctions, this is the main way for players to gain plot points. The GM notes down the complication, giving it a descriptive name—sticky notes or index cards work well for this—with a d6 die rating. For the rest of the adventure, if that complication comes into play, the GM gets to roll an extra d6.

If more than one spoiler comes up on a player's dice, the GM may choose to step up the complication by one step for each additional spoiler that shows on the dice. For example, if the player rolled three spoilers on their dice, the complication starts out as d10. However, the GM still only pays a single plot point.

The GM may also choose to step up an existing complication instead of introducing a new complication, putting pressure on players who are locked in a fight or trying to escape the authorities. For example, a player may incur a d6 Wanted by State Police complication when they roll a single spoiler, but the GM may up that complication to a d10 when their next roll includes two more spoilers.

If a complication is ever stepped up beyond a d12, it has overwhelmed the player character and keeps them from acting further in the scene until it's removed or no longer hinders them. The player can overcome this for a single test or contest by spending a plot point, but they may only keep one die for their total rather than two. This is a severe handicap, but sometimes it's necessary.

Opportunities

If the GM rolls a 1 on their dice, this is known as an **opportunity** (i.e., an opportunity for the player to do something), and any player can spend a plot point to step an existing complication back to a smaller size die. A d6 becomes a d4, and a d4 goes away. If the GM's dice include multiple 1s, you may step back existing complications by more than one step. The player still only pays a single plot point per complication affected.

Complications as Consequence

Complications may also represent those times when characters are hurt or suffer some manner of debilitating setback—physical, mental, or social. Instead of being struck down, captured, or defeated by being taken out, a player can choose instead to take a complication. This works just as if they had rolled a spoiler on their dice, but they don't gain a plot point. Instead, it costs a plot point to avoid being taken out. Complications acquired this way should represent the player

character's injury or setback, such as Broken Arm or Identity Theft.

The die rating of any complication picked up in this manner is equal to the effect die of the opposition. So, if the GMC's attack roll had an effect die of d10, then the complication starts out as a d10. If the complication comes from something other than a die roll, it begins at a default d6.

The GM can decide that the player must step up an existing complication by one when they take this option or when they roll a spoiler on a subsequent roll of the dice, if the existing complication is equal to or larger than the die rating of the new complication. In this way, characters may eventually be taken out once the complication is stepped up beyond d12. For example, if the player fails to stop an attack and already has a Battered and Bruised d10 complication, and the highest rolling die in the GM's roll for the attack was a d8, the GM can say that the Battered and Bruised complication steps up to d12 instead of the player character acquiring a new d8 complication.

Like the players, the GM may decide to accept complications on a GM character instead of allowing that GMC to be taken out. If the GMC loses a contest to a PC that would result in them being taken out (such as being shot or struck in the head) the GM may hand over a plot point to the player who won the contest and add a complication to the GMC equal to the effect die in the player's roll. This should be used sparingly and only to drive the story forward, rather than frustrate the players. The GM may even ask the player what to name the complication!

Recovering from Complications

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

Getting rid of or reducing a complication is a test vs. a dice pool consisting of the complication and an appropriate difficulty die (see Tests and Contests). Other traits may also affect the roll, as it's easier to heal a gunshot wound in a Hospital and harder to shake off a concussion in a Noisy Room. In addition, the player character or their circumstances must be capable of improving the situation to make a roll.

When the roll is completed, one of the following will happen:

If the player beats the difficulty and the effect die is equal to or greater than the complication, the complication is eliminated.

If the player beats the difficulty and the effect die is smaller than the complication, the complication is stepped back by one. The player can't try to recover that complication again until time passes.

If the player fails to beat the difficulty, the complication remains as it is.

If the player rolls a spoiler on a successful attempt to recover a complication, the GM may hand over a plot point and introduce a new complication related to the one that was just recovered, turning a Broken Arm d10 into a Splinted Arm d6.

If the player rolls a spoiler on a failed attempt, the complication is stepped up by one step for every spoiler rolled, turning a Broken Arm d10 into a Broken Arm d12.

d4 Complications

It's possible a complication might be stepped back to a d4. In cases like this, the very next time the complication might affect a character, rather than adding it to the opposition dice pool or difficulty, the player adds it to their own dice pool and earns a plot point (much like a distinction being used negatively). Immediately after any test or contest in which it is used in this fashion, it is stepped back to zero and is eliminated—unless the dice come up with one or more spoilers, in which case the GM may choose to activate them and step up the complication to d6 or more.

This rule keeps the lowest rating of complications from creating more problems for the opposition than they do as hindrances for the players. It also adds an added chance of a new complication being created because of the increased chance of rolling a spoiler on a d4, or the current complication getting worse as a result of continued activity by the player.

Asset and Complication Mods

These mods change the way that assets and complications work in your **Cortex Prime** game.

Stress

Instead of using complications to track injury, damage, or other negative effects on characters outside of circumstantial problems, some **Cortex Prime** games might formalize a distinct trait called **stress**.

Stress replaces the rule about players choosing to spend PP to take a complication instead of being taken out. Stress doesn't require players to spend PP.

Any attack or effect that can take out a character either inflicts stress equal to the effect die in the attack (if the PC currently has no stress or a lower die rating of stress than the new stress die) or steps up stress (if the PC already has a die rating in stress equal to or greater than the new stress die).

For example, if a PC has d8 stress and takes d8 additional stress, it steps up the existing stress to d10. If the PC has d8 stress and instead takes d12 additional stress, this die replaces the current d8 with d12.

Stress rated at d4 functions just like a complication rated at d4 functions; it goes into a player's dice pool instead of being added to the opposition dice pool and earns the player a plot point. Right after that test or contest, it either goes away or—if the player rolls a spoiler on one of their dice—gets stepped up as the injury gets worse.

Only one type of stress can hinder a character at any given time, unless the GM pays the player a plot point to add in an additional stress die to the opposition dice pool. Characters can be affected by both stress and complications at the same time, however.

Types of Stress

Typically, a character can be afflicted by one or more types of stress, depending on the game. Some games simply have a single stress track; others might distinguish between types as follows:

Physical, Mental, Social

Afraid, Angry, Exhausted, Insecure, Injured

Stress is useful in games where you want SFX on distinctions to key specifically into types of harm or the recovery of that harm. It reduces the need to track quite so many complications at any given time, making them more likely to be short-term hindrances with stress carrying over from one scene to another. Stress also leads to other mechanical tricks, such as using stress to help instead of hindering at the risk of making things worse.

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

Recovering Stress

Stress is recovered in much the same way as complications are overcome in the basic game, with one additional rule: all stress die ratings are always stepped back by one during any scene specifically framed to act as a rest period, downtime, or transition between action-heavy scenes. If a character takes stress in one scene from a battle, and the next scene is another battle soon after the first, without any time spent resting up, then no stress is recovered.

Stressed Out

If any stress die rating is ever stepped up past d12, the character is taken out (or **stressed out**) and no longer take part in the scene they're in. By default, there's no way for a player to spend a PP to delay this effect, though certain SFX or other rules may be implemented to do that.

Trauma

Trauma is like long-term stress. Any time a player character's stress is stepped up past d12, they are stressed out of the scene they are in, and they gain d6 trauma of the same type as the stress that just increased. Trauma functions just like stress but is much harder to recover.

During any scene in which a character is stressed out and has taken trauma, additional stress to the character goes directly to trauma. Once trauma is stepped up beyond d12, the character is permanently out of options—they're dead, hopelessly incoherent, lost to their own psyche, or whatever seems most appropriate.

If the next scene is a recovery, transition, or otherwise restful scene in which the player character can be taken care of or allowed to recuperate, the character's stress is reduced to zero, but the trauma remains at the level it was at the end of the previous scene. Recovering trauma works like recovering stress (or complications), but the effect die isn't used, as follows:

If the player beats the difficulty, the trauma is stepped back by one.

If the player fails to beat the difficulty, the trauma does not get any better or worse. The player can't try to recover that trauma again until time passes.

If the player rolls a spoiler on a successful attempt to recover trauma, the GM may hand over a plot point and introduce either a complication that will hinder the player in the next scene or inflict stress of a different type than the trauma that was being recovered, starting at d6 (or stepping up by one if the PC already had stress of that type).

If the player rolls a spoiler on a failed attempt, the trauma gets worse, stepping up by one for each spoiler rolled. If this steps the trauma up past d12, that's all, folks.

Shaken and Stricken

With this mod, stress is assigned to specific traits, such as attributes or skills. In a sense, all stress is untyped stress but when taken it is linked to a trait and acts against it. The decision should be made before the game starts which category stress is applied to, or if it remains open to the GM or players to decide on an ad hoc basis.

For example, a PC gets shot with a blunderbuss in a Georgian era swashbuckling action game. The player elects not to be taken out of the scene, and instead takes stress. The GM takes the effect die and applies stress equal to that die to the player's Physical attribute.

Stress applied to an attribute is added to the opposition's dice pool whenever the player uses that attribute in a test or contest. The exception is when the stress is a d4, in which case the player includes the d4 in their own dice pool as per the basic d4 complications rule.

If the stress applied to a trait is equal to or greater than the attribute it's assigned to, the PC is considered **shaken**. They're only able to keep one die when they roll dice, rather than adding their two best rolling dice together. If they're already shaken and take stress to another attribute that would make them shaken, they're considered **stricken** and are taken out of the scene until they can recover.

A character who has stress applied to a trait which is at any point later stepped up beyond d12 is also stricken. Stress under this mod is recovered in the same way as it is in other stress-based mods.

Pushing Stress

With this mod, players may choose to have their character shoulder through their pain and suffering and use it as a motivator rather than a setback. To do this, the player spends a plot point and instead of adding the stress to the opposing dice pool, they add it to their own dice pool for that test or contest.

Using stress in this fashion has an additional cost, however. After the test or contest is resolved, the stress die included in the player's dice pool is stepped up by one. This may result in the player character being stressed out if the die is stepped up past d12.

In some games, this rule may be built into an SFX on a distinction or a power set. If this is the case, the SFX usually doesn't require a plot point to activate; the drawback on the SFX is the worsening of the stress die.

Life Points

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

All characters have an amount of life points based on two of their traits. The die rating of those traits is added together, and this becomes the baseline life points score. Which traits are added together depends on the game and which traits are being used. Using the trait standard, life points are equal to Physical + the higher of Fight, Focus, and Survive. For example, a PC with Physical d8, Fight d10, Focus d6, and Survive d6 would have 18 life points (8 from Physical d8, and 10 from Fight d10, which is the highest of those three skills). If you're using different prime sets, base life points on two traits that emphasize hardiness, willpower, or stamina.

Life points can be handled in one of two ways. The first is an ablative method; the second is a threshold method. In either method, rather than take the effect die and adding it as a complication (or stepping up an existing complication), the GM or player takes the difference between what the player needed to roll to beat the difficulty and what the player actually rolled and applies that as damage. Some games may have the character roll an additional die from a signature asset, or gear, or some kind of power, and add that to the damage.

Ablative Life Points

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

Threshold Life Points

With this method, damage is split evenly into **wounds** and **stun**, before any additional damage from weapons or signature assets or powers is rolled; that additional damage is applied either to stun only, wounds only, or evenly split between both. Wounds and stun are marked off on two separate tracks that start at zero and go to as high as the life point score.

If the accumulated wounds and stun, added together, exceed the life point score, the PC is unconscious.

If accumulated stun exceeds the life point score, the PC is also unconscious.

If the total wounds (not counting stun) exceed the life point score, the PC is dead.

Classic Conversion Note: Threshold life points is the method use in Classic Cortex games. When creating **Cortex Prime** games that approximate the classic approach, GMs are encouraged to use both weapon or attack damage dice ratings and keep an eye on how many life points are being derived from character profiles.

Recovering Life Points

Characters who have taken damage and need to either recover lost life points (ablative method) or get rid of accumulated damage (threshold method) need to make recovery tests. The difficulty is usually a standard difficulty die plus any relevant complications or other traits that might factor into making it difficult. The amount that the player beats the difficulty by is the number of life points recovered (ablative) or is divided equally into recovered wounds and recovered stun. Player characters using the threshold method can recover all stun damage at the end of any scene assuming they have an opportunity to rest, heal, or seek treatment; proper medical treatment during downtime can eliminate wounds with tests beyond the PC's own recovery tests.

PRIME CHARACTERS

Without characters, **Cortex Prime** would be a suggestion of a story, static and going nowhere. **Cortex Prime**'s modular nature extends even to how characters are defined and presented. It's one of the biggest decisions your group has to make, but the right traits and dice make all the difference.

Once you have your character traits settled, your next decision is how each player creates their own character for the game. Which method (or methods) you use can inform the way the game plays out over time and what the first session of play looks like.

Finally, you should also determine how characters grow and change over multiple sessions, if at all. Some groups want to see a noticeable change in game traits, others just want to record what happened in the session to use later on for flashbacks. This chapter covers several ways to handle this sort of experience-framing.

Chapter Breakdown

This chapter explains how characters work, what a character file includes, and how to create characters for your game. Here's how it breaks down.

Defining Characters: Which traits do you use, and which are your prime sets?

Creating Characters: How do you create the character from concept to character file?

Growing Characters: How do you represent character growth, advancement, or experience?

Defining Characters

Because the characters are the heart of the game, it's important that they are defined in a way that helps players get into their fictional roles and also have a good time at the table. If the character is defined by traits that are action-adventure oriented, then that's a sign you want to test them in ways that resemble blockbuster action movies or thrilling adventure stories. On the other hand, if your characters are mostly loaded with traits representing relationships with other characters and the values that drive them toward challenging social situations, it means you want to play a more dramatic kind of game.

There's no right or wrong way to define characters in **Cortex Prime**. You should figure out what trait sets make the most sense for the genre you want to play in, the style of play you like, and the sorts of things you want to use to tell characters apart from one another.

Character Files

A character file is the record sheet of any character. All players maintain their own character file and the GMC maintains (often abbreviated) files for important GMCs. Character files serve double duty, however: on the one hand, it's where you record all of the die ratings, points, and important information about your character. On the other hand, it's kind of a wish list to the GM. The choices players make when creating characters, which ratings and dice they assign to their characters, tell the GM what sort of character they want to play, and in turn what sort of stories they're hoping to be part of.

There's no fixed character file for **Cortex Prime** because there's no fixed set of trait sets. What's important is that a character file include space for all of the information players need to record and maintain. Each of the settings in Prime Settings includes a blank character file by way of example, and every **Cortex Prime** setting published outside of this book should also include a blank character file.

Prime Sets

A prime set is one of at least two trait sets that serves as the core of any **Cortex Prime** character. Because the trait sets you use in your game are up to you and the decisions you make for your group, there are also no pre-defined prime sets. The trait standard for this book defaults to attributes and skills as prime sets, but you might have attributes and roles, affiliations and values, relationships and skills, and so forth.

Prime sets provide the baseline dice for your dice pool on any test or contest; they're the dice you reach for when you want to do something. As such, there should always be at least a d4 in any of the traits in these sets, and if there isn't one (such

as a trait that would be required in a test not having a die rating) it usually defaults to a d4.

Readymade Prime Sets

Here are some prime set choices made for you based on popular genres or tropes. Note that distinctions are always a prime set for **Cortex Prime** games, even if they're not fully-loaded with SFX or other features.

> **Super Heroes:** Affiliations + Powers
>
> **Grim Fantasy:** Attributes + Skills
>
> **Romantic Fantasy:** Relationships + Skills
>
> **Soap Opera:** Values + Relationships
>
> **Heist Action:** Attributes + Roles
>
> **Paranormal Mystery:** Roles + Powers

Expanding Prime Sets

Prime sets can be expanded by adding SFX or trait statements to them. This is especially common with powers, but it also makes attributes, roles, and relationships more interesting. Do this if you want a specific prime set to carry more story weight in the game through description or deeper definition.

For example, you might take the standard attribute triad of Physical, Mental, and Social and have players choose a statement for each of the three traits that further clarifies what the die rating in each attribute means. Having Physical d10 is one thing, but Physical *Raw, unchecked strength* d10 is another.

Keep in mind that if you add SFX or statements to a prime set, you shouldn't include them with more than one other trait set in the game. For example, having your relationships and values use trait statements is fine, but don't also include trait statements for powers and skills. Similarly, if your powers and distinctions each have SFX, your relationships and values shouldn't.

Trait Statements

A statement is a sentence or phrase that clarifies or refines a trait that it is attached to. One or more trait sets may be assigned trait statements. They are especially useful when assigned to values, relationships, or attributes. They signify which trait sets you want at the center of your game's dramatic tension.

A statement might be something like *I'm not afraid of danger* or *Everyone deserves respect* (for values), *He's my brother from another mother* or *Why doesn't she understand me?* (for relationships), and *Tough as nails* or *Genius runs in the family* (for attributes).

Trait statements differ from distinctions, which they are narratively similar to, in that a statement is there as a truth about your character that you may **challenge** and then grow from. When you challenge a trait that has a statement attached to it, you act contrary to the statement and your trait die is tripled for that roll.

For example, your character might challenge the statement *Nobody matters but me!* attached to a Social d8 attribute by doing something for somebody else at the cost of their own safety or wellbeing. If this happens, your Social is tripled to 3d8 for the roll.

Once a trait is challenged, the trait it's attached to steps back by one. At the end of the session or whenever character growth is resolved, that statement must either be rewritten to reflect a new belief or truth and the die returns to its original rating, or the statement remains the same and the die remains stepped back. If the latter occurs, often another trait must be stepped up to balance it out, especially if the trait set has a fixed number of assigned steps.

It's possible to have a **Cortex Prime** game where trait statements replace distinctions entirely. In such a game, it's important that there still be at least three prime sets so that dice pools remain centered around a set of three dice. If this happens, distinction SFX are usually separated out and reskinned as **talents**.

Affiliations

Instead of using attributes that describe the various areas of activity, some **Cortex Prime** games might use **affiliations**, which reflect how well the player character performs in specific contextual situations. In games like this, raw talent and ability are subsumed into skills or other traits, such as distinctions.

When to Use Affiliations

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

An affiliation set for a mission-based or super hero-based game looks like this:

Solo: The character's ability to act when alone

Buddy: The character's ability to act when partnered with another character

Team: The character's ability to act when part of a group of three or more characters

An affiliation set for a medieval setting based on the three estates might look like this:

Clergy: The character's ability to act in the context of religion and religious institutions

Nobility: The character's ability to act in the presence of aristocracy and ruling powers

Commons: The character's ability to act among peasants and the bourgeoisie

Rating Affiliations

Because most affiliation sets only have three traits, and it's assumed everyone is rated in each of them, the default die rating is a d8. If one of them is a d10, another of them has to be a d6.

d6: **Disadvantaged**. Your character tends to get in more trouble or functions at the lower end of their ability.

d8: **Stable**. Your character is comfortable in these situations and performs neither at their best nor their worst.

d10: **Advantaged**. Your character performs at their best in these situations.

Attributes

Attributes represent raw ability, prowess, and effort. They rarely offer an insight into a character's experience, training, or external circumstances; they make a good baseline for a prime set. If you're not sure where to start with prime sets in a **Cortex Prime** game, start with attributes.

When to Use Attributes

Any conceivable test or contest can fall into one of three areas: Mental, Physical, and Social. You can use these three as your attributes, or you can expand on this and shape the tone and flavor of your **Cortex Prime** game with a different list.

A classic attribute set is as follows:

Agility: Speed, reaction time, and hand-eye coordination.

Alertness: Mental acuity, perception, and awareness of your surroundings.

Intelligence: Reason, logic, and ability to use what you have learned.

Strength: Physical power, muscle, and athleticism.

Vitality: Physical endurance, stamina, and ability to survive in hostile surroundings.

Willpower: Mental resolve, concentration, focus, and force of will.

A swashbuckling attribute set might look like this:

Courage: Determination and steel in the face of danger.

Faith: Belief and conviction in higher powers or in others.

Guile: Capacity for wit, cunning, and subterfuge.

Reason: Raw logic and mental comprehension.

Vigor: Physical fitness, strength, and endurance.

Rating Attributes

Attributes usually have a rating from d6 to d10, although exceptions are possible. Everyone has a rating in each of them, and they usually default to a d8. Higher rated attributes must be balanced out with lower rated ones.

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

d4: **Poor**. Notably deficient in this area.

d6: **Typical**. An average degree of ability.

d8: **Excellent**. Above-average performance.

d10: **Remarkable**. Greatly above average.

d12: **Incredible**. Peak levels of ability.

Distinctions

Player characters have three **distinctions** that paint a clearer picture of their background, personality, and role in the story. They are used to inspire you to roleplay your character. Just by looking at your character's three distinctions you should have a clear impression of who they are.

When to Use Distinctions

For a given **Cortex Prime** game, distinctions might be player-created (just pick three backgrounds, personality quirks, catch phrases, or job descriptions) or the GM might prepare a big list of them to choose from.

Distinctions are one of the main ways to earn plot points. Almost every **Cortex Prime** game should include three distinctions as one of the prime sets.

Distinctions are frequently paired up with SFX, and in fact all of them have the "Gain 1 plot point when you switch out this distinction's d8 for a d4" SFX. You can assign more SFX to a distinction but leave them locked until the player earns experience or growth (see Growing Characters).

The most basic distinction looks something like this:

Apocalyptic Cult Survivor d8
What you experienced in the cult had a profound effect on your life and what you do now, a decade later.

- Gain 1 plot point when you switch out this distinction's d8 for a d4

The text in italics should be no more than one or two sentences and give context for what this distinction means or implies. The choice of when to use a distinction is the player's, but it must make narrative sense to do so.

Rating Distinctions

Distinctions are always rated as d8 and as such don't necessarily need to have the die rating included in text when referring to them. That said, you might decide to apply a mod to this rule and have distinctions rated from d4 to d12 like other traits; if so, the average of the dice should still be d8.

Powers

A power is a special kind of trait that represents superhuman ability or some extraordinary quality that most normal humans or baseline characters do not have. The origin or source of powers varies from setting to setting—radiation, genetic mutation, sorcery, high-tech gadgets, etc. Powers can also be used to represent gear or special equipment, making it possible to mix heroes of varying power origins together with the same system.

When to Use Powers

Powers are central to superhero games but are also appropriate for fantasy games or science fiction games with aliens. They are incredibly flexible and—paired with SFX and limits—they can represent almost any kind of super-powered character. There's a big list of powers on page XX that you can start with; renaming and tweaking this list is one of the key parts of defining a game that uses powers.

Rating Powers

A power has a die rating range between d6 and d12; the rating usually defines how far-reaching, extensive, or significant the power is. If you don't have a power, you have no default die rating in it.

d6: **Minor** (or **Influence**). A power with this rating allows the character to do something most people can't do, but it doesn't have a great degree of effect on ordinary tests and contests nor is it likely to be a character's signature power. Powers that permit levitation, additional senses, or low-level enhancements are often rated d6.

d8: **Enhanced** (or **Control**). A power with this rating represents a level of performance beyond ordinary human beings, and one that the character likely uses most of the time. Flight at subsonic speeds, strength or stamina at the absolute peak of human capability, control over an element or energy type in a local area, or attacks that are the equivalent of automatic weapons are rated at a d8.

d10: **Superhuman** (or **Mastery**). A power with this rating is rare among superheroes or aliens and reflects someone with extensive training or use in their power, an individual who stands out among others with this power, or performance at a truly superhuman level.

d12: **Godlike** (or **Supremacy**). Very few have a power at this rating, as it represents a level of control beyond superhuman or at the very peak of potential with a specific ability. It is reserved for truly godlike characters and aliens, or superhuman individuals whose signature power puts them among the top tier of those who have it.

By themselves, powers don't have any costs or limits. They simply do what they say they do and can be used as benchmarks for performance on automatic success (the GM can simply say that because you have a power at d8 or d10, you can just do that thing if the outcome is not really in question). Powers are not usually part of a prime set in any test or contest but instead are added to a dice pool when their use can be justified as being key to the test or contest's success or failure.

Power Sets

A **power set** is a trait set of power traits with a negative-weighted **limit** that governs them, one or more helpful SFX and a single origin or source from which they are all derived. A power set might be something like Russian Science Experiment or Alpha Centauri Heritage or Dwarfish Traits.

In a **Cortex Prime** game that uses power traits, power sets are a useful way to control the use of those powers, assigning them at character creation, and generally keeping them tied to a setting. As such they are highly recommended if you decide to use power traits.

A power set must have at least one SFX, which helps to flavor the use of the powers and usually comes in the form of a way to double specific power dice, step up dice, or roll an additional d6 when using the power trait. Power set SFX are always linked thematically to the power set's theme. In some cases, just using a specific power trait in a specific way is sufficient activation for the SFX (such as, "step up Superhuman Strength d10 when you are submerged in water") while others key off plot point spends.

A power set must always have at least one **limit**, which specifies what happens to the power set under certain conditions. Limits almost always exist in the form of a plot point gain in return for the power set (or, in some cases, specific power traits included with the power set) being **shut down**. A shut down power set no longer works and its power traits can't be included in dice pools until a specific recovery condition is met.

Limits can sometimes be activated by the GM (especially those limits that activate based on in-game events or situations), though like with distinctions the intent is that players may always decide when and where their powers create problems for them.

There is no set number of powers in a power set (though it's usually at least two) or a cap on the die ratings of the power traits (though most do not have more than one trait at d10 or d12). Individual power traits within a power set might be stepped up as a result of growth, or entire power sets might be acquired or swapped out during play, depending on the game.

Characters may have more than one power set. In this case, each of them counts as a different trait set for the purposes of including dice in your dice pool for free; if you have two power sets, you may include one power from each of the sets in your dice pool at no cost.

Relationships

Relationships are traits that represent the intensity and importance of a character's connection to another character or even a group of characters. This connection may be positive or negative in nature, so long as it motivates and empowers the character who has it. PCs start with relationships with other PCs and some GMCs but can even add more during play. This makes them flexible and not as limited as some other trait sets.

When to Use Relationships

A relationship contributes its die rating to a dice pool when the test or contest involves the character to whom the

relationship is linked, or if that character has influence over or inspires the PC. This makes them great to use in **Cortex Prime** games that center around emotional drama, large ensemble casts of characters, soap operas, or interconnected groups. Use relationships if the connections between characters are as significant to the outcome of a story as any other character measurement.

Rating Relationships

A relationship's die rating tells you how much the subject of the relationship matters to the character.

> d4: I don't have anything for this person.
>
> d6: This person matters, but so do a lot of people.
>
> d8: I'm invested in this person.
>
> d10: This person matters more than most.
>
> d12: There's nobody who matters more than they do.

Relationships between other PCs are assigned during character creation. If characters are created using a simple trait assignment process (such as picking distinctions, assigning dice to attributes and skills, etc.) then one relationship is assigned a d10, another a d8, and the rest d6. Characters created using another system such as pathways begin as a d6 until stepped up as a result of pathways choices.

Relationships can be created during play using a plot point much like an asset. They last for the duration of the session, and when experience or growth is resolved they can be either dropped or made permanent. These relationships start in play as a d6 and if made permanent will remain as a d6 until stepped up in later sessions.

If a PC has no relationship to a character for any given test or contest, they can either create one with a plot point or assume a d4 relationship default, just like any skill.

Reputations

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

Reputations change as often as relationships do. They can also be affected by the actions of the character during play, especially when paired with trait statements. A player might challenge their reputation in order to get a short-term benefit only to see their standing drop in the long term. Similarly, increasing reputation might be a good use of milestone-based XP, as players take concrete actions in support of a group or organization in order to raise their status.

Resources

A **resource** is a category of traits that supplements a character's prime sets in the same manner as signature assets or specialties do. There are four types of resource: **extras**, **locations**, **organizations**, and **props**. Resources are represented usually by two or more dice of the same size, which may be included in any die pool to represent that resource being helpful or significant. Players may choose how many resource dice to include in the pool; any that are used are considered spent and recover later during downtime. Thus, if a character has 3d6 in a resource and uses 2d6 in a pool, those two dice are spent, and one remains.

When to Use Resources

Include resources when you might otherwise use signature assets but want them to behave more like an exhaustible currency. You might use all four kinds of resource or just one or two types.

> **Extra:** An extra is a type of GMC, but if its attached to a player character it represents a contact or ally the player may draw on to help out.
>
> **Location:** A location is a place in the game setting that may be used to set scenes or provide valuable resources.
>
> **Organization:** An organization is a group of people who function under a specific ideology, structure, or goal. As a resource, an organization is useful because it may open up channels that the player character doesn't have alone. (Compare this to a reputation, which is a type of relationship trait).
>
> **Prop:** A prop is a tool, object, or item that aids the player character. Props can broaden the scope of what a player

might be able to achieve in a specific area of expertise or endeavor.

Rating Resources

Every resource has a name, a die rating (in multiples of d6, but sometimes larger dice), and (optionally) some kind of tag or label to indicate what kind of field or quality that resource belongs to, such as Politics, Crime, Academics, or Military. If you're using tags, each listed resource should have two of them, and they should inform you of the kind of test or contest that the resource might apply to. A GM is also free to invoke GMC resources by spending plot points to add to an opposition dice pool.

For example, if you have an org resource like Cortez City Police Department, it could have the tags *Investigation* and *Law*. This means that when the player is investigating a criminal case or researching a legal matter they could bring in one or more resource dice to their dice pool from this org. On the other hand, if they're trying to break into a bank and there are cops out looking for the PC, the GM might spend a plot point to activate a police chief GMC's Cortez City Police Department resource for the opposition dice pool.

Skills

Skills represent natural talent, training, or experience. If you can describe it as a verb it's a good candidate for a skill, and indeed the default skill list for **Cortex Prime** consists of verbs.

When to Use Skills

Because it's so easy to describe characters in roleplaying games by what they can do and how they are trained, skills are a natural trait set for inclusion in a **Cortex Prime** game. If you aren't using skills, you're probably either focused more on dramatic flavor or you've got a similar kind of trait such as roles or specialties, which work a lot like skills.

Although you can and should create a skill list for your game based on the genre and sorts of activities you expect to be common in the game's world, the default list has been provided for you as a baseline.

> **Craft:** Crafting things, includes building, assembling, or creating stuff.
>
> **Drive:** Land and surface vehicles, including cars, boats, and trucks.
>
> **Fight:** All kinds of close-combat, including weapons or fists.
>
> **Fix:** Repairing things.
>
> **Fly:** Piloting air vehicles or spacecraft.
>
> **Focus:** Concentrating on something, to study or steel your will or whatever.
>
> **Influence:** Making others do, think, act, or feel the way you want them to.
>
> **Know:** General knowledge and recall. Use specialties to cover specific areas: *Business, Navigation, Religion, Animals, Fine Arts.* Know always includes a free specialty that doesn't count against the others.
>
> **Labor:** Carrying out tasks of manual labor, lifting, pushing, digging, pulling, hauling.
>
> **Move:** Running, jumping, climbing trees.
>
> **Notice:** Spotting things. Perception, basically.
>
> **Operate:** Using things like computers, gadgets, and devices.
>
> **Perform:** Acting, putting on a show.
>
> **Shoot:** Guns, big rocket launchers, things that you point and shoot.
>
> **Sneak:** Sneaking around. Sneakily.
>
> **Survive:** Surviving in the outdoors or wherever.
>
> **Throw:** Throwing things.
>
> **Treat:** Taking care of people. Heal, treatment of injury, but also counseling.
>
> **Trick:** Deceiving or conning somebody, sleight of hand, using spin.

Rating Skills

Every player character has at least a d4 in each skill, which represents being untrained, with proficiency and expertise

represented by ratings between d6 and d12. Most characters start with 18 points (roughly equal to the number of skills in the skill list) to put into skills die ratings, with one point stepping a die up by one step; half of these points may be pre-determined from distinctions or archetypes or an equivalent character creation method.

d4: **Untrained**. You have no idea what you're doing, and you're likely to create trouble when you try it, but who knows.

d6: **Competent**. Sufficient training to get by. You're comfortable doing this.

d8: **Expert**. Able to do this for a living. This is second nature to you.

d10: **Master**. One of the best in the field. Likely known to others who possess the skill.

d12: **Grandmaster**. One of the best in the world. Known even to those outside the field.

Roles

Roles are skill-like traits that replace skills in some expressions of **Cortex Prime**. A role acts like a skill group or skill set, rather than a specific skill, and reflects a player character's experience, training, or proficiency in a broad thematic area. Games that use roles should generally have no fewer than three and no more than six roles.

Roles are rated from d4 to d12, like other traits. Each player character usually has at least one d10, one d8, and one d4. The rest are usually d6.

> **Three roles:** d10, d6, and d4.
>
> **Four roles:** d10, d8, d6, and d4.
>
> **Five roles:** d10, d8, d6, d6, and d4.
>
> **Six roles:** d10, d8, d6, d6, d6, and d4.

An example set of roles for a tactical action game might be as follows:

> **Commander:** Making strategic decisions; inspiring the troops; talking with authority
>
> **Engineer:** Repairing and maintaining equipment; jerry-rigging gear; understanding science
>
> **Medic:** Applying first aid and medical treatment to others; recognizing disease; using medical equipment
>
> **Sniper:** Using ranged weapons; patiently waiting in a hidden location; being familiar with terrain
>
> **Soldier:** Close-combat fighting; use of military weapons; making use of formation and defenses

An example set of roles for a fantasy action game might be as follows:

> **Warrior:** Use of all weapons, armor, and combat training; small unit tactics; maintaining gear
>
> **Priest:** Use of healing spells; channeling divine energy; knowledge of religion
>
> **Wizard:** Use of elemental spells; using arcane items; knowledge of magic and lore
>
> **Rogue:** Use of thief tools; sneaking, spying, and scouting; opening barriers; knowledge of crime

For a **Cortex Prime** game that requires specialization without removing the ability to use certain skills, roles are a good choice. This includes action-heavy or team-oriented games of all genres. When using roles, specialties allow for narrow focus in a role's area of proficiency.

Since roles replace skills, a game using this mod doesn't use highlight skills, although each distinction may come with a single highlight role, which would step up that role by one (the assignment of dice to roles should accommodate this if it's used – a good rule of thumb would be to have players add a number of steps to the role dice equal to the number of roles minus 2.)

The Skill Pyramid

One way to ensure that players aren't quickly maxing out their skills or other traits is to require them to adhere to a skill pyramid. This means that if you want a d10 rating, you need at least two d8 rated skills and three d6 rated skills. If you want a d12, you need at least two at d10, three at d8, and four at d6. In order to maintain the skill pyramid, it may be necessary to step up a d4 skill before subsequently stepping up other, larger dice until the pyramid is restored.

If this mod is used with highlight skills associated with distinctions, players must "fill in" skills to account for any unbalanced skill pyramid once the bonus steps from the highlight skills are resolved.

Specialties

A **specialty** is a narrow area of concentration or focus within a skill. Specialties confer a bonus d6 to any test or contest

that involves the skill they are attached to and which would fall into that narrow area. There is no fixed list. Specialties may include: *Grappling*, *Seduction*, *Rifles*, *Pickpocket*.

If you're using specialties without using skills, specialties essentially replace skills but can't be used by default. They start out at a d6 and can increase to as much as d12, but if you don't have a specialty you don't have a rating in it. See No Skills, Just Specialties for more information.

Multi-Level Specialties

With this mod, specialties start at d6 but can also be increased either during character creation or through experience to multiple dice or larger dice. They are usually grouped as follows:

>**Trained:** d6
>
>**Expert:** d8 or 2d6
>
>**Master:** d10 or 2d8 or 3d6
>
>**Grandmaster:** d12 or 2d10 or 3d8 or 4d6

No Skills, Just Specialties

Some **Cortex Prime** games that remove skills as a basic trait group (in place of relationships or values, for example) may choose to keep specialties as a trait on their own. In this case, they are best set up as multilevel specialties rated from d8 to d12 rather than set at d6 If used like this, there is no default specialty level for all characters, unlike skills; if you don't have a specialty, it's assumed the kinds of activity included in the specialty aren't relevant or significant to your character. For example, without a Guns specialty, the character can still fire a rifle, it's just that they won't gain any special additional die for doing so beyond what they might have from other basic traits.

Without skills, it's useful to create a master list of specialties to choose from so that the thematic aspects of the setting are maintained. For example, listing Computers, Spacecraft, and Laser Weapons tells players that those things are a part of the setting.

Skill and Specialty Split

Under this mod, characters have basic skills at a rating of d4 (Untrained) or d6 (Competent), but to have higher ratings they must specialize. Ratings of d8 (Expert), d10 (Master), and d12 (Grandmaster) are reserved for specialties of that skill, and a character may have multiple specialties at different die ratings.

For example, your general skill of Shoot only goes as high as d6 and requires you to focus to a specialty such as Rifles to have a d8 or higher. You might end up with Shoot d6 (Rifles d8, Pistols d10, SMGs d10).

If you use this mod, you do not add both the skill and the specialty to the dice pool. Your character's specialty replaces the skill die rating, which you continue to use for all tests and contests where your specialties do not apply. In other words, your skill rating is your default die for all tests or contests in which a specialty might apply if you had a rating in it.

This mod emulates the way skills work in **Cortex Classic** games and is a good option for those who want to encourage many high-rated but narrow skills.

Values

Values represent how much specific things matter to the player characters, and in turn, how much they influence the outcome of tests and contests. They can embody such things as societal mores, cultural principles, or elements of a code of honor or behavior. In modern day **Cortex Prime** games they tend to be focused on aspirational goals rather than classic medieval or Renaissance ideals.

When to Use Values

Values are useful in games where differences in physical or mental attributes matter less to a character than what they are motivated by and what they believe. Soap operas, YA stories, political drama, and other personality-driven and emotion-driven genres are all excellent candidates for the values trait set.

A dramatic set of values for a superhero game might be:

>**Duty:** Motivated by what one feels they must do for others.
>
>**Glory:** Motivated by praise, acclaim, and renown.
>
>**Justice:** Motivated by adherence to fairness and what's right.

Love: Motivated by affection and compassion for others.

Power: Motivated by control, wealth, and influence.

Truth: Motivated by facts, fidelity, and rejection of deceit.

A dramatic set of values for a dark supernatural romance game might be:

Envy: Driven by coveting the status, traits, or possessions of others.

Gluttony: Driven by appetite, excess, and consumption.

Greed: Driven by avarice and a desire to possess more than what one has.

Lust: Driven by sexual or carnal desire.

Pride: Driven by hubris and placing one's own needs and successes before others.

Sloth: Driven by apathy and laziness.

Wrath: Driven by anger and vengeance.

Rating Values

Between five and seven values is usually enough. Values have the same range of dice as attributes: usually one at d10, one or two at d8, one at d4, and the rest at d6. When a value changes, either stepping up or stepping back by a die size, one other value must change at the same time in the opposite direction. Thus, the total number of die steps in the dice assigned to values in any given **Cortex Prime** game should always stay the same.

The die rating of a value measures how much the value matters to the character, as follows:

d4: "I'm really not into this."

d6: "Sure, this thing matters. But so do a lot of things."

d8: "This is definitely on my radar."

d10: "I'm all over this thing."

d12: "This is my heart and soul."

SFX and Other Tricks

SFX is short for "special effect". It's usually some kind of benefit or bonus that only occurs under certain conditions. In Cortex Prime, SFX are used as a way to introduce exception-based rules for trait sets that possess them. They're a way to break the rules of the game, modify the outcome of tests and contests, and add more texture to the story. All distinctions get the "Gain 1 PP when you roll a d4 instead of a d8" SFX for free, and power sets usually have one or more SFX to give the powers in the set context.

Creating SFX

One way to look at SFX is as a combination of a **drawback** and a **benefit**. The standard SFX for all distinctions has the drawback of "use the distinction as a d4" with the benefit of "Earn a plot point."

Here's the list of sample drawbacks to choose from.

Spend a plot point (very common)

Step back a beneficial die (usually an attribute, skill, or asset)

Step up a non-beneficial die (usually a complication)

Choose to do or introduce something risky/ill-advised/complicated ("When you walk right into the cult gathering and start causing trouble...")

Create a d8 complication

Shutdown a trait set

Here are some useful benefits:

Earn a plot point

Add a d6 to the dice pool

Step up a beneficial die (usually a specialty or asset, like "step up Pistols")

Double a beneficial die (usually a specialty or asset, like "double Pistols")

Step back a non-beneficial die (usually a complication)

Introduce a non-mechanical story detail ("Hey, I think I know that guy's brother…")

Rename a complication ("I'm not Sickened, I'm Angry")

Reroll a single die

Create a d8 asset for the rest of the scene

Some SFX may switch out the drawback for a different sort of triggering condition. This can include rolling a heroic success, or some roleplaying-based triggering effect. SFX may even combine both a drawback and a triggering condition, especially if the benefit is somewhat broader or more potent than usual.

Classic Conversion Note: By using this system of SFX and distinctions, almost every **Classic Cortex** asset or complication can be folded into the new system and converted. In some cases, multiple assets or complications may be combined into a single distinction, with some becoming specific SFX under a broader distinction.

Power SFX

Here's a list of SFX that is thematically appropriate for use with power sets. You can adapt a lot of these for distinctions, also. It's often a good idea to rename SFX for flavor. For example, rather than "Absorption" you might want to call an SFX "Reflective Constructs" or "Energy Channel" or something like that.

These SFX use some mods described earlier, such as stress. You can switch out any mention of "stress" with "complication" or whichever variation of damage-tracking your **Cortex Prime** game uses.

Absorption

If you succeed in defending in a <type of attack> contest, convert your opponent's effect die into a stunt asset for yourself or step up a power by one for your next roll. Spend 1 PP to use this stunt asset if your opponent succeeds.

This is an example of what might otherwise be represented with a power trait but that works best as SFX, e.g., Energy Absorption or Kinetic Absorption.

Usually included in a power set with some kind of Energy Control, Energy Blast, Strength, or Reflexes.

Afflict

Add a d6 and step up your effect die by one when inflicting <type> complication on a target.

Usually appears in power sets that represent gear, grappling, entangling, etc.

The type of complication is usually connected to the power set.

Area Attack

Add a d6 and keep an additional effect die for each additional target past the first.

Frequently included in power sets with Strength, Blast, or Control power traits.

Useful against mobs (similar opponents grouped together as a single threat).

Rolling spoilers when using Area Attack generally causes collateral damage, represented by complications.

Boost

Shutdown your highest rated <power set> power to step up another <power set> power by one. Activate a spoiler to recover the power.

Great for power sets that represent powered armor, cybernetics, or robotic systems.

Burst

Step up or double a power die against a single target. Remove the highest rolling die from your pool and add 3 dice together for your total.

Usually appears in power sets that represent gear. For heroes with a lot of skills, this supports the extra dice skills often add.

Represents a wide spread of attack, or ricocheting the attack from one or more surfaces and thus around corners, obstacles, and so on.

Constructs

Add a d6 and step up your effect die by +1 when using <power set> to create assets.

Usually included in power sets that represent control over substances, the ability to summon things, etc. Compare with Grapple, which is used to create complications.

Dangerous

Add a d6 to your dice pool for an attack and step back highest die in pool by one. Step up the effect die by one.

Included in power sets when representing some dangerous use of the character's abilities, like claws or fangs.

Focus

If a pool includes a <power set> power, you may replace two dice of equal size with one die one step larger.

Great for heroes who have a lot of skills or whose power sets represent skill, training, or conditioning.

Healing

Add <power> to your dice pool when helping others recover complications. Spend 1 PP to recover your own or another's <complication type> by one.

Depending on the stress type that it recovers, this might be psychic healing, chi healing, empathic healing, or spiritual aura.

Immunity

Spend 1 PP to ignore complications from <specific attack type>.

Attack types include poisons, disease, psychic attack, magical attack, electricity, radiation, and so forth.

Invulnerable

Spend 1 PP to ignore <type of complication> for a test or contest unless caused by <specific attack type>.

Similar to *Immunity* but restricted to a specific type of complication and with an exception for a specific attack type.

Multipower

Use two or more <power set> powers in a single dice pool and step each power back by one for each additional power beyond the first.

Usually appears in power sets with several power traits and when the character has no other power sets.

Step back only the power dice that you include, not all of the dice in the dice pool.

Second Chance

Spend 1 PP to reroll when using any <power set> power.

Good for power sets that represent luck, fortitude, or chance.

Second Wind

Before you put together a dice pool including a <power set> power, you may give a complication attached to you to the GM to re-assign as a complication at any time. Step up the <power set> power by one for this roll.

Almost always appears in a power set with the Stamina power trait. Variations might work with emotional or mental stress and be tied instead to another power trait.

Unleashed

Step up or double any <power set> power for one roll. If the roll fails, you gain a complication equal in size to your power die.

Pairs well with power traits that are at the d8 or d10 rating.

Represents a hero or villain who maintains strict control over his own powers and sometimes cuts loose.

Versatile

Split power trait die into two dice, stepped back by one; or three dice, stepped back by two.

Usually appears in power sets with power traits rated d10 or d12 and when the hero has no other power sets.

Dice that result from Versatile are each considered power trait dice for the purposes of other SFX that step up or step back the power.

Power Limits

Limits are SFX whose primary goal is to introduce vulnerabilities that provide plot points to characters. A hero is nothing without his flaws and weaknesses, and most super heroes have an Achilles' Heel, even if it's just that their powers wear

them out!

Players aren't the only people at the table who can activate a limit. The GM may also spend plot points to activate them in some circumstances. This doesn't earn the player a PP, so *the option to activate a limit is always given to the player first.* If the player decides not to, the option then goes to the GM.

Conscious Activation

If taken out, asleep, or unconscious, shutdown <power set>. Recover <power set> when you awake.

This limit is common when the character's powers stop working if the hero is unconscious, incoherent, or otherwise taken out. It usually only applies to a specific type of trauma, such as physical or emotional.

Exhausted

Shutdown any <power set-specific> power to gain 1 PP. Activate a spoiler to recover the power.

This limit is straight forward and to the point. The character gets tired, and one of his powers stops working. Note that it isn't the whole power set but only specific power traits.

Gear

Shutdown <power set> and gain 1 PP. Test to recover.

This limit represents a piece of equipment or other powered item that, if lost or stolen or knocked away, shuts down the character's use of it.

Recovery is by making a test to get the gear back, reset it, fix it, or otherwise recover it. The GM sets the test's difficulty based on the likelihood of getting it back.

Growing Dread

Both 1 and 2 on your dice count as spoilers when using a <power set> power.

This is a good limit for mystical or very powerful heroes whose use of their fantastic abilities typically makes things worse. If the power set represents a pact with a demon, a dangerous power source, or something along those lines, this limit makes it clear that using those powers comes at a greater cost.

Mutually Exclusive

Shutdown <power set A> to activate <power set B>. Shutdown <power set B> to recover <power set A>.

This limit represents someone whose use of one set of powers depends on their other set of powers being inactive.

Uncontrollable

Change any <power set> power into a complication and gain 1 PP. Activate a spoiler or remove the complication to recover the power.

This limit represents powers that aren't necessarily dangerous, but they're unreliable or prone to causing immediate problems.

Powers turned into complications with limits like this one can also be targeted like any other complication. Eliminating the complication recovers the power.

Talents

A **talent** is special trait that does not have a die rating and consists of some descriptive or narrative text with an SFX, separate from a distinction. Talents are often associated with another trait group, such as skills or the roles mod. They can also be grouped together based on such things as professions, cultures, past experiences, membership in a group, faction, or organization, or just thrown into a single generic list.

Talents are useful in **Cortex Prime** games where characters from similar origins need to be distinct from one another, or where the other traits might not be as numerous or are broad in scope. Because talents don't have a die rating, they are frequently used to boost or accent another trait or series of traits that do have die ratings. An example might be a talent like Elite Sniper that steps up both a Shoot skill and a Notice skill under specific circumstances.

Most characters in games using talents start with two and can add more.

The following is the standard template for talents:

Talent Name

Descriptive text (optional)

Associated trait: (skill, role, etc)

Activation: (drawback)

Effect: (benefit)

Creating Characters

To create a player character for use in the **Cortex Prime RPG**, players have three options:

> Use an **archetype** to quickly create an original character
>
> Build a player character **from scratch** using the rules provided
>
> Use **pathways**

You might even introduce some sort of hybrid of the three options. Perhaps you have every player pick two backgrounds (archetypes of a sort), apply the dice and traits from those, then "level up" each character through a short three-step pathways process to generate some backstory, then add a handful of steps (the scratch-built method). It's up to you.

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

Forming Connections

Even if the game you've decided to create with Cortex Prime is as traditional hack n' slash as you can possibly make it, connections between the player characters and the world you've created are crucial.

Connecting Characters Together

It's important when coming up with your means of creating characters that you remember how important it is for the player characters to share some sort of bond, relationship, or background. A **Cortex Prime** game that starts out in the first session with four to six completely random characters who happen to be in the same place at the same time does stretch credibility. But even in that case, there's no reason you can't ask each player what their PC thinks of the other PCs, based on their snap first impression.

Connecting the PCs might only be flavor, but it's important. Even if the PCs are supposed to be rivals or enemies, they share something that motivates them to get in each other's business. When in doubt, make them all part of the same organization, family, or local culture at a specific starting event. That often provides players with plenty of ideas to link these different backstories together before play starts.

Connecting Characters to the Setting

Once you've established that the characters should share something in common with other characters, even if it's not the same backstory for all of them, you can move onto the next most important part: the setting.

Characters live in and inhabit their worlds. They belong in them and they've usually grown up in them, so it's a fair guess to say that each PC has a connection to the setting's GMCs, locations, and timeline. You can achieve this through the character creation process as a matter of discussion around the table, or more formally through a pathways method. **Cortex Prime** games are much stronger when players have input into not only their characters, but the setting's specifics as well. If you're the player who named the local bar the Skunk Pangolin, then every time the bar is introduced into a session as a location for a scene, you feel a sense of ownership.

Archetypes

An archetype is a partially-created character that players can use to generate their own characters quickly. Archetypes have background information and suggestions for how to play the character, as well as three pre-assigned distinctions, pre-assigned attributes or other traits, and a choice of two signature assets. Each of the distinctions has the base d4/d8 SFX already unlocked, and more SFX that may be unlocked initially or later on in play. The distinctions also **highlight skills** that are appropriate to that distinction and, by implication, that archetype.

Highlight Skills

Each distinction lists three **highlight skills** that are considered to be associated most often with that distinction. If you're making distinctions from scratch, these skills should be chosen by the player. If the distinctions are pre-built by the GM or included in a specific **Cortex Prime** Spotlight or world setting, they should already have their highlight skills provided.

Highlight skills start out at d6 rather than d4. If a character has a highlight skill that appears on two distinctions, it starts out as d8; if it's on all three distinctions, it starts out as d10.

If a **Cortex Prime** game doesn't include skills, highlight skills are usually not included with distinctions. They might be replaced by some other character creation tool or used in another way.

To build a character using an archetype, players select one of the archetypes provided, choose two distinction SFX to unlock from the three distinctions provided, and select one of the two listed signature assets for each character. The archetype includes the skill list common to all characters and may include bonus specialties. Note: Some **Cortex Prime** games with trait mods may use slightly different archetypes.

Any skill that is listed as a highlight skill on the archetype's distinctions starts as a d6, not a d4. Once these are adjusted, each player has 9 points to spend on stepping up skills. Each point may be spent to step a skill die up one step; the GM may set a cap on starting skill dice (d10 is common). In addition to stepping up skills, players should also assign a third specialty to finish fleshing out the character. If the character has a Know d6 or higher, the player also adds a Know specialty to the character file.

Scratch-Built

Some players will prefer to build their own characters rather than play an archetype. To scratch-build characters, players should do the following. Note that if you're not using the trait standard of attributes and skills, keep reading to see how various character mods affect this checklist.

Step 1: Adjust Attributes

All characters start with a d8 in each attribute: Mental, Physical, and Social. Players may step back an attribute (from d8 to d6) to raise a different attribute from d8 to d10. No starting characters have an attribute lower than a d6 or higher than a d10 at character creation.

Step 2: Choose Distinctions

Players should choose three distinctions to add to their character file, noting the highlight skills associated with each distinction. Distinction can represent roles, relationships, quirks, personality types, character histories, or any other descriptor that helps to flesh out who the player character is in the game.

Step 3: Choose Distinction SFX

Once players have selected their distinctions, they should also select their distinction SFX. The first three SFX are preselected for players as "Gain a plot point when you use this die as a d4 instead of a d8." Players should choose two additional SFX for their player character to use throughout the sessions. If players design custom distinctions, GMs may need to develop new SFX or use SFX from other distinctions to create SFX for the custom distinction.

Step 4: Step Up Skills

As with the archetypes, custom characters are given nine skill points to step up skills. Before spending those, however, players should step up their skill dice with highlight skills listed in their distinctions. If a skill is listed more than once across your distinctions, you should step it up one for each time it appears (up to a d10 skill). Once you've stepped up those highlight skills, step up skills using skill points. Each point steps a skill up by one step.

Step 5: Choose Specialties and Signature Assets

Players have five points to assign to specialties and signature assets at character creation. Each point may be used to:

> Add a specialty to a skill rated at a d6 or higher
>
> Create a signature asset at a d6
>
> Step up a d6 signature asset to a d8

With your five points you might:

> Assign 5 specialties and create no signature assets
>
> Assign 4 specialties and create one d6 signature asset
>
> Assign 3 specialties and create one d8 signature asset
>
> Assign 2 specialties and create three d6 signature assets

Assign 1 specialty and create one d8 and two d6 signature assets

Step 6: Biographical Information

Last, but certainly not least, you'll want to add a few details:

Your Name: Refer to the end of this chapter to find sample character names.

Background: Where were you born? Where did you grow up?

What you look like: Got a tell-tale birthmark? Blonde hair? Tall and stout? Short and thin?

To further flesh out your character background, look at the distinctions you've chosen and think about:

Where you've been the last few years

Where you're going in the near future

What you're doing to keep your head above water

How you feel about the politics of the world

Character Building with Other Traits

Many **Cortex Prime** worlds use variations on the baseline traits, and so building characters differs slightly when, for example, powers and power sets are added to the game, or attributes are replaced by affiliations.

In each case, the number of options within each trait set is a good indicator of which dice to assign and whether there's a default rating. What follows are guidelines for implementing trait mods into character building.

Affiliations

Use the same rules as for attributes: start out with a d8 in all three, or (if there are more than three) a d6 for any additional affiliation.

Attributes

The baseline is three at d8, but if you have a longer list, each additional attribute beyond the first three starts out at d6.

Multi-Level Specialties

Using this mod, instead of adding additional d6 specialties in step 5 you can step up specialties from d6. Generally, starting characters won't start out with grandmaster specialties (d12).

Powers

If your game uses powers and power sets, assigning powers to characters depends in large part on the scope of super-powered characters in the world the game is set in. If superhuman characters are common, perhaps in step 3 every character gets two power sets, each with 2 SFX and one limit. If they're rare, drop this to one power set, or offer the choice of a power set or 5 additional points in skills, talents, etc. A player might choose to drop a power set entirely in order to add an SFX to another and increase their starting number of powers by one.

The number of actual powers within those power sets also varies based on the game. A good rule of thumb is that each character should start with a number of d8 powers equal to the number of power sets plus one. Stepping up powers uses the same points used for specialties in step 5, and powers may be stepped back to step others up. No power should start above d10 unless the game features godlike heroes. No power may be stepped back below d6; if it is, the power trait goes away.

More SFX may be added in the same way that distinction SFX are added or switched out. If using powers, the game should probably not use SFX with distinctions at all to avoid cluttering up the character file and making it too busy.

Tweak all of these guidelines as needed. It's important to note that **Cortex Prime** does a good job of balancing out characters even if some have high rated powers and others do not. It can make a bigger difference to have more SFX than it does to have larger power dice.

Relationships

When assigning relationships, most PCs should have a relationship with each other PC at d6 for free. Step these up using the points in step 5 that otherwise are used to step up signature assets or add specialties. Alternately, set one relationship at d10, one at d8, and the rest at d6. Assign a relationship to any GMCs the players might want to start the game with

relationships with.

Reputations

See relationships, above. It's often a good idea to cap the die ratings of reputations to something that matches the level of notoriety or fame you expect the PCs to start with. For example, if you think you'd like to set the cap to d8, give the players a reputation at d8, two at d6, and any others at d4.

Roles

Characters using roles instead of skills ignore step 4 and assign the following based on how many roles are used in the game:

> **Three roles:** d10, d6, and d4.
>
> **Four roles:** d10, d8, d6, and d4.
>
> **Five roles:** d10, d8, d6, d6, and d4.
>
> **Six roles:** d10, d8, d6, d6, d6, and d4.

Skill and Specialty Split

Using this mod, assign points as noted in step 4 to skills, but no skill may be advanced above d6 except as a specialty. Points later assigned in step 5 may also be used to step up those specialties but may not be used to step a d4 skill to a d6 skill. Therefore, the 9 points from step 4 and any steps from highlight skills from distinctions are the only way to raise a skill from d4 to d6.

Talents

Choose talents from a list provided by the GM or the world, or create them from scratch using the SFX rules, during step 3. Players usually start with 2 talents, linked thematically to either the highest rated role or skill, or some other important trait.

Trait Statements

If using trait statements, write these during the last step once you have a good grasp on the other PCs and the overall direction of your character.

Values

When using values, dice are assigned to them during step 1. Assign dice to them as you assign dice with attributes: d8 for the first three, and d6 for the rest, with the option to step values up by stepping others back. Usually this looks like one at d10, one at d4, two at d8, and the rest at d6.

Pathways

Pathways is an interactive and collaborative setting and character creation process. It creates a kind of map that shows the connections between characters, places, events, and objects that helps provide the basis of a **Cortex Prime** campaign. It's best to set aside an entire session for it, and it's intended for use in a long-term campaign.

Pathways doesn't come loaded with character trait assignment rules or points. Used as-is, it's excellent for creating the setting the players may then use to create their characters using either of the two previous methods. Alternately, each stage that is advanced through in the pathways process should be used to assign some of the points or steps that create a character beyond their starting values. For example, if you know you're going to need to assign a total of 9 points to skills, and there are 9 stages, have each player assign one point to a skill each stage. Use major stages to decide things like values or attributes; use meta stages to pick distinctions or power sets.

Getting Started

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

If you're doing this in person you'll need a large piece of paper (or some other surface you can write on), and if you're

doing it online you'll need shared drawing tool, such as the Google Drawings format in Google Drive or the map-drawing tools in Roll20.

Round Robin Setting Creation

The idea is simple: go around the table taking turns adding ideas to the game's setting and adding traits to your character until you have the "play area" of your campaign and a set of characters connected to it. If the group finds any created element problematic you can ask that person to change it or come up with something else.

Mapping Tips

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

If you have a small number of player characters, placing the circles representing them towards the outside of the map can make things a little easier.

If need be, you can put "warp zones" on the map. Put an A in a circle in two places to indicate a jump, and then move on to B and so on as needed.

Elements

The pathways map consists of several different kinds of **elements**. These can be relationships, characters, assets, situations, etc. By themselves, elements don't concern characters' actual abilities, though they can imply a whole lot, and in story terms can help reinforce a character's traits. Many archetypes imply a mentor or school that can be a secondary character or set, and a membership in an elite organization helps show that the character is in fact an elite.

Relationships (Lines)

Relationships are the connections between things, and thus they're represented by lines between different elements. Each relationship should end up with a description written along the length of the line. These descriptions don't need to be detailed, but they do need to explain what it is that joins the two elements together.

Examples: Business rivalry, has a crush on, uses for transportation, has terrible nightmares about

Secondary Characters (Circles)

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

Examples: Classmate, Colleague, Lover, Parent, Sibling, Teammate

Situations (Triangles)

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

Examples: Occupation, Pending Invasion, Pogrom, Power Manifestation, Questionable Experiments

Resource (Diamonds)

A **resource** is something in the world connected to the character. Resources connected to your character aren't necessarily ones her or she can use—resources cover plenty of things that could be adversarial to or simply desirable to a character—so make it clear in the relationship description what your connection to the resource is. There are four different kinds of resource: **extras**, **organizations**, **props**, and **locations**. They can be used purely as setting creation tools or may be represented as traits on a player character file (see Resources).

Extras

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

Examples: Alchemist, Doctor, Gadget Guy, Servant, Scholar, Security Team, Scientist, Soldiers

Organizations

Organizations are established groups of various kinds. Depending on the scope of your campaign this could range anywhere from a powerful government to a school club. Think about how your character relates to a given organization.

Examples: Army, Corporation, Government Agency, Religion, Re- search Facility, Secret Society, Thieves Guild

Props

A prop is an object of major importance to the story. It is most likely a MacGuffin in the classic sense; a thing that the characters desire enough for it to help drive conflicts. Props are usually, but not always, signature assets.

Keep in mind that a prop element doesn't necessarily mean a character gets to possess some particularly powerful thing. A sword that people would fight wars over might not have the slightest hint of magic if it's got the right history behind it instead.

Examples: Autographed Baseball, Crown Jewels, Legendary Sword, Magical Key, Special Formula, Suitcase Everyone Wants, Vial of the Z Virus, Vitally Important Data Crystal

Locations

Locations are places of significance to the characters. A location can be a place they specifically own or control, or just a place that is somehow significant to their affairs. A team's secret base, the bar a character owns, and a pizza place where they hang out can all be locations.

Examples: Bar, Bowling Alley, Café, Mansion, Military Base, Newspaper, Restaurant, School, Store

Stages

During pathways, players go through a series of stages that represent different periods in the characters' lives. Different characters' stages don't necessarily correlate in time, so a 200-year-old elf and a 2-week-old robot could still go through the same number of stages if it comes to that. Instead, the stages represent more the thrust of their formative experiences and connections. On the other hand, if your game is based around several pivotal events, you could deliberately make each stage correspond to a particular time period.

The number of stages the group goes through determines the complexity of the resulting pathways map and how long it takes to create. Five stages make for a good average. The pathways table has a suggested default pattern of stages, but of course you can customize it to your tastes. We get into the types of stages below, but the first and last stages should be Major Stages.

Before you get into the normal stages, you need to place the PCs on the map. For each PC, draw a square with the character's name in it. Draw two lines between each of the PCs, representing their relationships with one another.

Taking Turns

It isn't absolutely necessary to have the players take turns adding elements to the map, but it makes things less confusing. For each element allowed in a stage (Major and Meta stages have two each), go around the table once letting each player add their element.

Types of Stages

There are three types of stages—standard, major, and meta—that work a little differently in terms of what kinds of elements players get to put in.

Standard Stage

During a standard stage, each player gets to add one new element. You can add a character, asset, or situation and draw a line from it to your character, or just draw a line from your character to an existing element.

Major Stage

A major stage is one that represents a major turning point in the characters' lives. During a major stage each player adds two new elements instead of one, but otherwise it works like in a standard stage. Roughly one out of every 3 stages should be a Major Stage.

Meta Stage

A meta stage is a stage where players also get to play with other aspects of the pathways map. In addition to adding one new element like in a standard stage, each player gets to do one of the following things:

> Draw a line between any two non-PC elements and define a relationship between them.

> Destroy a line between their PC and a given element and add a new element and relation- ship. This implies that something happened to sever one relationship and foster another.

Introduce an element/relationship to another player character. The other player gets to de- fine the nature of their characters' relationship with that element however.

Roughly one out of every 4 or 5 stages should be a Meta Stage.

Does the GM Get a Turn?

Chances are the map is more than sufficiently large and convoluted at the end of pathways with just the players adding to it, but if as the GM you want to have some creative input into the whole thing you can simply fill in stuff on each stage as per a player, adding new elements that relate to the PCs and GMCs. The only difference is that as the GM you don't have a character of your own, and thus aren't limited to elements that connect to a given character.

Using the Finished Map

The story map will provide you with a whole lot of ideas, but it will still take some a little thought to fully flesh out the story.

Triangular Relationships

One key thing to look out for on the story map is places where multiple characters have conflicting relationships with a given element. The classic love triangle is an obvious example, but anything where relationships are at odds is a potential place to make things more interesting.

Wedges

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

Implied Elements

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

Late Additions

For any number of reasons, you could find yourself needing to introduce new PCs after the fact. You may need to update the map to reflect things that have changed in the game, so go ahead and do that before a newcomer gets started. The simplest way for a player with a new character to go about things is to just run through the same stages as for the original PCs. That gives them plenty of opportunities to give their character ties to existing elements, as well as to add some new ones.

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

Stage	Type	Title	A	B	C	D	E
1	Major	Origin	*Rich*	*Ordinary*	*Gifted*	*Strange*	*Alien*
2	Standard	Youth	*Jock*	*Average*	*Geek*	*Outsider*	*Paragon*
3	Meta	Focus	*Money*	*Life*	*Status*	*Technology*	*Paranormal*
4	Standard	Road	*Risky*	*Straight & Narrow*	*Lofty*	*Underground*	*Ethical*
5	Major	Life-Changing Event	*Advancement*	*Tragedy*	*Manifestation*	*First Contact*	*Destiny*
6	Standard	Priority	*Friends & Family*	*Work*	*Moving Forward*	*Looking Back*	*Performance*
7	Meta	Modus Operandi	*Loyalty*	*Shady Business*	*Against the Grain*	*Outside Normal*	*Special Gifts*

							Channels	
8	Standard	Motivation	*Others*	*Self*	*The Cause*	*The Job*	*The World*
9	Major	Identity	*The Sidekick*	*The Foil*	*The Rebel*	*The Specialist*	*The Hero*

Growing Characters

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

Session Histories

Each time the players complete a job with their group, they should make a note of the session's name on their character file. This is the player character's personal **session record**, and over time it provides an account of the group's accomplishments and checkered past.

Callbacks

Each player character may use their own session record to make **callbacks**, references to events from other sessions that may be useful towards the current storyline. To make a callback, the player has their player character make an in-character reference to a session in their session record while performing a task.

While the name of the session might be referenced explicitly, it's more stylish to say something like "This is just like that time in Montana…." When a callback is used in this way, the player may gain a benefit immediately for anything that a plot point could be used for—activating an SFX, keeping an extra die result in your total, or creating an asset to reflect their previous experiences with the task.

Players can only make a callback to a specific session once per session. A checkbox next to each session is useful for this purpose. Players should erase the checked boxes when a new session begins (and add the last session's name to the record).

Training Up

A player can "spend" sessions from their record to make permanent improvements to their player character. A spent session remains on the record but can no longer be used for callbacks or to train a second time.

Turn an asset from a session into a signature asset (or relationship): 1 session

Switch out a distinction (or trait statement) for a new one: 1 session

Add a signature asset SFX: 1 session

Step up a signature asset (or relationship): 2 sessions

Add a new specialty: 2 sessions

Unlock a new distinction SFX: 2 sessions

Step up a skill (or resource, role, value, or power): 3 sessions

Step up one attribute (or affiliation) and step back another: 4 sessions

Training can happen anytime during downtime between sessions. Maximum die ratings of d12 apply in all cases to skills, attributes, and assets. If you switch out a distinction, your new distinction has as many SFX unlocked as the original, although they may be entirely different SFX.

Growth

The best dramatic heroes grow with the story and are changed by the challenges they face. Indeed, to some, that's the very definition of a hero—or, at the very least, a protagonist. Even antagonists, if they're interesting, change over the arc of their story.

With this mod, player characters don't track a session record but instead gain new traits and advance current traits through a mechanism called the **growth pool**, which is a pool of dice they build up over the course of the game. This

method uses the Trait Statements mod extensively but can be adapted in other ways depending on your game.

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

> Challenging a trait statement

> Successfully recovering stress or complications with someone else's help

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

Tag Scenes

At the end of every session you have the opportunity to do a special kind of scene called a **tag scene**, where you can try to improve your character's traits.

Tag scenes shouldn't be very long—just enough narration for everyone to get an idea of how you want your Lead to change. After that, you get to do two things: rewrite statements and step up traits.

Rewriting Statements

For every trait statement you've challenged in the session, you get to make a choice: did your PC change perspectives? If so, you can rewrite your statement to reflect your new belief about the trait in question and put it back to its original die rating. Jason *would never let me down* d8 might become Jason *isn't the friend I thought he was* d8 or Jason *will answer to me* d8.

If your PC didn't change perspectives, you can keep the statement the same, but the trait the statement is attached to must stay at the reduced die rating. For values or other traits that share a fixed number of steps across the entire category, pick another value or values to increase by that same amount, so your total number of die steps remains the same. So, if you stepped back Love from d10 to d6 (two steps) during a session and decide to stay there, you'd pick one value to step up by two, or two values to step up by one.

For relationships or other traits that aren't governed by a fixed number of steps, if you stay at the lowered die rating, add another die to your growth pool equal to the new die rating. So, if you stepped back Jason from d8 to d4, you'd add a d4 to growth in addition to the d8 you added when you originally challenged it.

Stepping Up Traits

You may select one trait to step up or pick a new one to add. New traits begin at d4. You can't step a trait up higher than d12.

To raise the trait, you must succeed at a test. You roll your growth pool plus your current highest stress or complication level. The GM sets the difficulty at one die equal to the trait level you want to step up to and a second die based on what kind of trait it is:

Attribute or Affiliation d12

Distinction, Role, or Power d10

Skill or Value d8

Relationship, Resource, or Signature Asset d6

Unlike other tests, you can't use plot points to affect the outcome of this one. Ignore all spoilers. If you win, you get to step up your trait or add a new one. If you lose or tie, you can do it anyway, but you have to step something else back to compensate.

Milestones

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

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

Milestones contain three different levels:

> A **1 XP** level that can be hit as many times as it applies (or once per test or contest).

A **3 XP** level that can only be hit once per scene.

A **10 XP** level that can only be hit once per session. If it is a shared milestone among the party, once this milestone is hit, it is unusable until the next session. If it is a personal milestone, it closes that milestone completely, and the player should choose a new one at the end of the session.

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

The following is an example of a group milestone for a **Cortex Prime** game based heavily on classic heroic fantasy:

Heroic Adventurers Milestone

You're out there for the thrills and the fame, but mostly for the thrills. If there are monsters to vanquish and people in need of adventurers, your troupe is there!

1 XP when your party defeats an adversary.

3 XP when you emerge successfully from a battle or conflict.

10 XP when you complete or abandon a major quest.

However, if you are running a game where fighting is downplayed, you might change the focus of the milestone to match your game's theme. For example:

Dungeon Delver Milestone

You heed the call of all the riches found in lost ruins, forgotten tombs and strange abandoned temples. Finding the dungeon is half the fun; clearing it is where it's at!

1 XP when you find new treasure.

3 XP when you explore a new area.

10 XP when you finish exploring a complete dungeon or abandon a dungeon because it's too dangerous.

Example Personal Milestones

Here's a variety of milestone examples from the same heroic fantasy genre as those listed above.

Accursed

The infernal forces of the multiverse have picked you to play some role in their unfathomable plans. Others call you unlucky, but you recognize a growing blackness in your heart...

1 XP when your attack demonstrates the sinister nature of your abilities.

3 XP when you add at least a d8 to the doom pool, either from rolling two or more opportunities on a single roll or by using an SFX that adds to the doom pool.

10 XP when you are finally claimed by a villainous power for dark deeds, or you strike a major blow against a villainous power by using their own dark powers against them.

Ascetic

How can one attain focus if they remain as the magpie, always seeking what shines instead of what matters?

1 XP when you abstain from a worldly pleasure.

3 XP when you participate in an indulgence that leads to trouble.

10 XP when you found an institution devoted to abstaining from worldly pleasures or abandon the path of the ascetic to live it up in one long party.

Blessed

You were born under a divine star and followed a god's calling. You spread the Word as you see fit so that you can spread your god's blessings.

1 XP when you perform a religious rite.

3 XP when you inflict stress upon a blasphemer.

10 XP when you complete a grand work in your god's name(s) or become a martyr for your god's cause.

Comfortable in the Shadows

Don't look at me, I'm not important or interesting. I just want to stay alive and help from a safe distance.

1 XP when you hide or otherwise choose to stay out of the spotlight.

3 XP when you leave the shadows to accomplish something important.

10 XP when you step into the spotlight in front of a large group in order to accomplish something important or decide to fade away forever.

Haughty Noble

You were born into aristocracy and you are well aware of your station in life. You take pains of reminding others of theirs. When the going gets tough, you expect your bloodline to make problems disappear.

1 XP when you say something dismissive about the lower class.

3 XP when you try to buy your way out of a problem.

10 XP when you surrender your noble station for adventure or wrap up your adventuring party up for a life of nobility.

Homebody

They say you can never go home. Such truth is the adventurer's lifestyle. But if I can't go back, I can bring home with me.

1 XP when you remark to a party member that something that reminds you of home.

3 XP when you do something adventurous that you could never do at home.

10 XP when you return home to retire and write about your adventures, or you embrace a life of adventure and realize you can never go home.

Honorable Warrior

I live by my reputation and the honor that burdens my existence. Stand fast, foe! We shall let fate and our martial skills determine your destiny!

1 XP when you state that a decision brings honor or dishonor.

3 XP when you put yourself in a position to take stress because the alternative would be dishonorable.

10 XP when you perform an inexcusable act of dishonor in the course of the greater good or sacrifice yourself to maintain your honor.

Leader

Adventurers are a chaotic, undisciplined bunch. You lead by example, trying to get your teammates back alive to enjoy the sweet taste of success.

1 XP when you give an order to a member of your group.

3 XP when a member of your group uses an asset you created for them.

10 XP when you are recognized for your achievements in a great adventure, or you are deposed as leader in a mutiny.

Mysterious Sage

Apocryphal, your wisdom people say is. No matter it is, for knowledge sharing is reward in itself.

1 XP when you make a cryptic observation.

3 XP when you encounter something you can't explain.

10 XP when you are exposed as not that wise, or if someone in your group is the Chosen One the prophecy spoke of!

Nature's Guardian

I have been granted so many boons by our earthly mother. I merely seek to honor her through my respect and devotion.

1 XP when you eschew something artificial for a tool from nature.

3 XP when you create an asset for someone else.

10 XP when you lay down your life to protect the sanctity of nature, or if you allow nature to be harmed in a major way to complete an adventure.

Planar Traveler

Open your eyes to the to the realities outside your limited senses. There are other realities one always needs to consider.

1 XP when you follow a custom that is unfamiliar to your companions.

3 XP when you tune out of the material world in a way that endangers your companions.

10 XP when you become bound to the material world so you can never travel the planes again, or depart the material world for a new one.

Treasure Hunter

It's not about amassing riches; it's about acquiring and disposing of it in the most thrilling and entertaining manner possible. You consulted maps, scoured rumors, raided ruins, and killed monsters and it's not even noon yet.

1 XP when you acquire or spend money.

3 XP when you search for treasure during a battle.

10 XP when you find the big score, or when you spend all of your money in an act of altruism.

Session Milestones

Milestones can be offered by the GM at the start of a session or revealed after major turning points in the session's ongoing narrative. Session milestones tie the player characters directly into the story, giving them personal motivations (and XP!) for becoming involved.

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

An example session milestone might be:

Rescue the Prince of Flowers

My son the prince has been abducted by the Bandit Queen! I won't stand for this affront to our family! Save him before it's too late.

1 XP when you ask somebody you just met about the Prince of Flowers.

3 XP when you get a clue towards the Prince's location.

10 XP when you rescue the Prince or decide to leave him with the Bandit Queen.

Unlockables

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

Many unlockables are created by the GM to provide greater access to story elements such as important GMCs, previously unavailable locations, or property. Sometimes an unlockable represents a one-shot benefit that is significant enough to warrant earning XP towards it, other times it becomes a permanent option in your repertoire.

Tailor the following menu of options to the specific traits and mods you're using for your game. This list can also be customized and adapted for games that eschew milestones but feature the GM handing out XP directly each session for such things as entertaining roleplaying or achieving story goals.

5 XP: Train a new specialty at Expert.

Unlock an SFX in a distinction.

Add a d6 signature asset.

10 XP: Upgrade an existing trait from d6 to d8.

Add a d8 signature asset.

Add a new locked SFX to a distinction or signature asset.

15 XP: Upgrade an existing trait from d8 to d10.

Upgrade an existing Expert specialty to Master.

Add a d10 signature asset.

20 XP: Upgrade an existing trait from d10 to d12.

Upgrade an existing Master specialty to Grandmaster.

Add a d12 signature asset.

PRIME SCENES

Every session of play can be broken down into scenes that involve characters trying to resolve the challenges and obstacles in their path toward success, victory, or character growth. This chapter looks at scenes and explains the different sorts of scenes characters might be involved in, and what goes in to each scene from a rules point of view.

What are Scenes?

A scene is where most of the action takes place in the game. Scenes are always framed by the GM, which means the GM describes where the scene takes place, which of the player characters is there, and what is going on. The GM is encouraged to ask leading questions of the players to give them an opportunity to explain why their player character is present, what they're doing, and so forth. A scene doesn't need to involve the dice until the back and forth of GM presenting the situation and players saying what they're doing comes to a point of conflict or decision.

Breaking a session into scenes allows the GM to skip past otherwise uninteresting periods of time or storyline and get right to a charged situation, a set of circumstances that might reveal interesting developments of the story. Travelling by train from Chicago to Minneapolis isn't a scene, but the group chatting over bad dining car food right as the bridge ahead gets blown up by explosives is a scene.

A scene ends when the primary objective or situation of the scene is resolved. There's no need to wrap up the scene beyond its logical ending point or let conversations between the characters continue to ramble. The GM can just call "scene!" or something like that, and go immediately to "Okay, three hours later…"

Types of Scenes

Cortex Prime game divides scenes into different types that serve specific functions. This may be useful in pacing out sessions and giving certain characters more opportunities for using their skills and abilities with some regularity.

Opening Scenes

Also called establishment scenes, these are designed almost purely to set up the core problem or situation of any given session. They set up what the characters are doing when the session starts, establishes where they are, who they're with, and what they've been doing since the previous session. You can manage book-keeping in opening scenes, introduce or foreshadow characters and ideas you plan on confronting the players with later, and so forth.

Action Scenes

These are the standard scenes involving high stakes, cinematic action, and encounters with opposing forces in combat or challenge. An action scene almost always draws on the action order for managing beats, features a lot of tests and contests, and in some cases may take up the bulk of a session's activity.

Exploration Scenes

These scenes are often reduced to montages or red lines drawn across maps. They may feature tests against the environment or even traps and puzzles, but the focus is less on action and more on getting from one place to another, finding the way to the next action scene. They're similar to transition scenes in that they link action scenes, but they can serve the specific purpose of being used to pass time without simply hand waving the experience.

Bridge Scenes

These scenes represent down-time or periods of low activity between action scenes. In some games, they might be the only scenes in which characters can create, recover, or upgrade assets and eliminate or recover complications without high difficulty. Use bridge scenes when the characters are regrouping, checking in on contacts or extras, or making plans.

Flashback Scenes

A flashback scene is often used in tandem with a callback, but not necessarily. Flashback scenes serve the primary purpose of establishing an asset or relationship and filling in some of the backstory that the GM or players want to bring up in the "current" scenes. A flashback scene might even interrupt another type of scene, but if so, it shouldn't be drawn out. Flashback scenes often involve only one or two PCs and the GM, and so if they take too long the other players are made to

sit around and wait.

Tag Scenes

A tag scene is the last scene in any given session and represents the "here's what we learned" scenes between the characters. This is generally an important type of scene if the game uses growth and trait statements to represent advancement; players can roleplay that growth in tag scenes.

A tag scene is short, summarizes or ties up loose ends, and each character may be in several tag scenes at the end of a session depending on how many relationships they might have.

Running Scenes

The primary goal for the GM in any scene is to set it up (frame it) and then see what happens. A lot of the time, the GM has no idea what the end of the scene is going to look like, so there's as much of a sense of discovery in framing scenes as there is in playing them. But first, let's break down some more components.

What are Beats?

A beat is basically the smallest dramatic unit of the story. If two player characters try to crack a bank vault's door, then that's a beat. If a player character guides a boat through a harbor filled with mines, that's a beat. If a player character hides in a closet while a creature stalks through the house, that's a beat. If a player character spends hours online researching a corrupt mining conglomerate, then that's a beat. The trick is that it doesn't matter how long or short the activity is, but how simple it is.

A player character may spend all night pulling out the guts of a pickup truck's engine, but it's a single beat because it can be boiled down to "My player character fixes the pickup truck's engine." In contrast, within the span of thirty seconds, another player character slides under a closing garage door, takes a wild shot at a chasing security guard, shoots out the garage door opener, and jumps onto the back of a delivery truck that's taking off—four separate beats.

There's no fixed number of beats in a scene; they're just a convenient use of time within which you can frame something that a player character tries to do—a test. This should give you a gut sense of the scope of the outcome, and hopefully that comes across clearly while you're juggling the tests of the whole group. A player character makes a test to slide under the garage door (success), then takes one to shoot at the guard (failure), fry the garage door opener (success), and then jump onto the truck (success).

What is Conflict?

Using the rules for tests and contests, any struggle between characters and the environment or each other can be managed. The degree to which conflict dominates your **Cortex Prime** game is up to you as GM and players. Some genres are more traditionally prone to extended battles or fights than others. A game that revolves around interpersonal drama is just as conflict-heavy as one that revolves around medieval warfare or resistance to an alien invasion.

Heroes vs Villains

If your game is predominantly about heroic characters striving against wicked villains, conflict might be a series of scenes in which players test their traits against minor GMCs and extras in the form of monsters, minions, and mooks. A major GMC in the form of a warlord or mastermind serves as the climactic contest, one that might shift from location to location, perhaps with a chase in between.

In a heroes vs villains set-up, action order is crucial for larger set-piece scenes with multiple antagonists and every player character doing something different, sharing a spotlight. Use escalating contests occasionally for one-on-one duels.

Dramatic Leads

If your game is predominantly about a cast of player characters who may work toward conflicting or opposing goals, even if they're not aggressive or violent in nature, most scenes are escalating contests. Players might test their traits against GMCs or difficult circumstances in between these scenes, often to establish their own storylines. The group does not have to be internally agreeable. In fact, when emulating television dramas, the player characters do not even like each other all the time, let alone want to spend time with one another or work toward a single goal.

In a dramatic leads set-up, don't use action order unless necessary. Instead, establish who is an active character and who is a reactive character, and play out contests. Use the rules for interfering liberally. Escalating contests form the bulk of player vs player drama.

Hexcrawls

If your game is predominantly an exploration or investigation game, including those with a "sandbox" setting or one that plays out through a mystery, most of the conflict is the players testing their traits against the environment or abstract difficulty. From time to time, threats such as monsters or henchmen or supernatural phenomena show up as tests. Contests are much less likely, but may be used to represent extended chases. Timed tests are common.

In a hexcrawl set-up, action order comes into play when there are fights with threatening elements but generally the pacing of each scene is freeform and organic.

Action Order

If it ever matters what order things happen in a scene, it's often a good idea to shift from a relatively unstructured conversation back and forth between the players and GM to an **action order**. This is especially true of fight scenes or moments when there is chaos and confusion and it becomes important to know who goes first and when.

Who Goes First

The GM always decides who goes first in the action order based on a snapshot of the scene at that moment. Quite often the first to act is a player character who starts a fight, draws a gun, shouts something insulting, or bursts in on a room full of unpleasant people. If a GMC has the drop on the group, then they of course go first in the action order.

All characters — player and GM — get a turn. Play progresses around the table, starting with the first to act, and then the next character as chosen by the character who just acted. Players are free to choose another player's player character to go next or a GMC, however they like. Once everyone has had a chance to do something, the last one to go chooses who starts the next action order (and this could include nominating themselves.)

How it Ends

As the GM, you can drop the game out of action orders at any time. If it's a fight and one side scores a decisive win, then obviously, the action order is over, and play carries on as it did before, with a shared spoken narrative. Or it's possible that nothing interesting can happen any longer, and so the scene ends and with it, the action order. It's also possible that, when it's not a player's turn, another character acts against the player's character and they are called upon to describe how they're reacting to the acting character's action and in what manner they're opposing them. This doesn't "use up" the reacting character's turn in the action order, but it very well might influence what they do when their action is up.

Tracking Action Order

Using **turn markers** to clearly show when a player or GMC has taken their turn in the action order is highly recommended. A turn marker can be something as simple as a two-sided card, with one side showing green and the other red, or a painted miniature of a character where it's standing up if the character hasn't acted yet and laying on its side if they have. Some companies publish turn markers specifically for the purpose of tracking conflicts like this.

Contests in the Action Order

When using an action order to track conflict, contests should not escalate. In a sense, escalating contests take the place of action orders because they represent multiple beats of activity back and forth; instead, the character whose turn it is in the action order rolls dice, their opponent tries to roll higher than them in defense, and then the outcome is established.

Taking Initiative

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

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

> **Each side in a conflict chooses a leader**, who assembles a dice pool appropriate to the situation (usually one that includes traits reflecting tactical or strategic know-how) and rolls. The side with the highest total chooses one of its group to go first, then the next highest rolling side chooses one of theirs, and so on.

> **Everyone in the conflict rolls dice for themselves**, and characters make tests or contests in order from highest rolling total to lowest.

> **Each character has a fixed initiative rating** based on the highest possible total of two traits (such as Physical +

Mental) and everyone acts in order of that rating, or each character rolls a single die (such as a d6, or perhaps a d8 if they can justify a distinction that's appropriate or d4 if they can justify a distinction that's a hindrance) and adds it to their initiative rating and acts in that order.

Whichever way you implement a mod to the standard action order method in your game, make sure that there are SFX, powers, and other elements in the game that complement your mod.

Classic Conversion Note: Classic **Cortex** games used this initiative system and included SFX that altered initiative rolls to represent those who were especially combat-ready or combat-inept. You can duplicate that easily using talents or distinction SFX that allow players to add a die to their initiative score or somehow penalize their score by only allowing them to use a single trait instead of two. You can make these persistent SFX or require a plot point to activate them (or in the case of the combat-inept characters, allow them to earn a plot point if they choose to act last.)

Advantage of Scale

In some cases, a conflict might take place between two groups of radically different sizes, degrees of power, or scale. An example might be a lone player character taking on somebody in an armored car, or a fighter jet taking on an enemy aircraft carrier. The GM may adjudicate a simple scale advantage as being outright impossible (human being tries to punch spaceship) or with a **scale die** (which is a bonus d8 added to whichever side has the advantage). If a scale die is awarded, the side that gets this bonus die also adds an extra die result into their total for free (the equivalent of spending a plot point on their total).

This additional die represents a pretty profound advantage. The GM may even decide to make it a 2d8 scale and keep two additional included dice, but this is considered an overwhelming advantage. Most times it's almost best just to make a ruling and move on ("The armored car's machine gun sprays a hail of bullets, you're a mess and need an ambulance.").

As a rule of thumb, when the mismatch is so unfair that it would never work for a normal person, but a player character might be able to pull it off, that's the cue to go to the extra dice. Players can earn a scale die if they vastly outnumber or outgun their opponents, but in most cases, such odds will cause GMC opposition to simply surrender.

Multi-Level Scale

Using this rule, the scale die is not set at d8 but instead may be any size from d4 to d12, each step representing an increasingly larger target. Much like the multilevel specialties mod, the GM may always split the scale die up into smaller dice: a d12 can become 2d10, 3d8, or 4d6. Even if this is done, the larger scale side still only keeps one additional die into their total (rather than an additional die for each additional scale die.)

Ganging Up

GMCs, especially antagonistic ones, often **gang up** in large numbers because they think that's going to help. Sadly, they've never heard of the inverse ninja rule, which states that the more bad guys there are, the weaker they individually are. So, if they keep doing it, here's how you handle it.

Each additional opponent adds a single die to the opposition's dice pool equal to the highest trait they could use in the fight. This doesn't change the number of dice added together to set or beat the difficulty (it's still two), just the number of dice rolled. The most common example of this is a gang of six Thugs d6 all of which amounts to a roll of 6d6 (first thug is d6, each additional thug adds another d6, so it's 6d6). This is often formalized in some games as a **mob GMC**.

Every time a player beats the difficulty against a side that's got multiple assisting characters, they knock one of the supporting dice away and those characters don't provide any more help. This represents whittling away the opposition, one ugly mug at a time. If the player happens to beat the difficulty by 5 or more with a heroic success, they take out two of the extra GMCs. Once the player character gets down to a single opponent, though, no more dice get knocked off, and a success is a success.

A player character group can gang up in the same fashion, handing over a single die of the appropriate type to the player whose player character is leading the charge. This is risky because if the opponent beats the difficulty, that die gets removed, and the helping player character is taken out (as if they had lost the fight). Most player characters find this risk is a good argument for letting the professionals do their jobs. Even if you help a player character out on one roll, though, you can always choose to drop out before the dice are rolled to beat the difficulty next time. You can also spend a PP to take a complication instead of being taken out, but you can't keep helping the primary player character regardless.

Note that some player characters might prefer to simply make a test on their turn to create a helpful asset to hand over to

their ally. This eliminates the chance that the assisting player character gets taken out, but can take some organizing, and has a chance of failure.

Timed Tests

Quite often the real challenge comes not from whether a player character can succeed at a task, but whether they can succeed at it fast enough. This is a great option for characters like the technician, pilot, or medic when the other members of the group are off doing something like shooting bad guys.

A **timed test** is a special kind of test that handles situations where there's a clock counting down or a limited window in which to carry out a task. The GM determines the difficulty the players face and how much time they have. Timed tests use a series of standard tests, either several of the same kind (Mental + Fix, for instance) or a series of different tests based on attempting something that has different steps (Physical + Sneak, then Mental + Focus, then Social + Influence). The number of tests (the GM setting the difficulty and the players trying to beat the difficulty) depends on the time limit the GM puts into place.

The time's measured in beats—the more beats, the longer you have. Each time the players roll the dice, they lose one beat. Use checkboxes or tokens to keep track of beats. It's a countdown, because they've only got a finite amount of time; once that's gone, they're done.

If the player beats the difficulty, it only costs them the time they spent i.e. one beat. A heroic success means they found a shortcut and don't lose any time at all. They don't lose a beat for that roll.

If the player fails to beat the difficulty, that part of the test took too long, and an additional beat is lost. Have them move on to the next stage of the timed test.

Failing Doesn't Mean Game Over

Notice that the rules don't say that the player didn't succeed at completing their intended activity. **Cortex Prime** frequently boasts people who are some of the best in the world at what they do, and the timed test is a pacing mechanic. It's a given that the group's hacker is going to break through that firewall. But can she do it before the enemy's intsec agent notices? How many complications does she create by rolling spoilers? Does she grab any opportunities from the GM? Those are the places where major twists and turns happen, not in failing to roll higher than the opposition's dice.

Running Out of Time

If the player runs out of beats—zero or less—they're out of time, and whatever bad thing was going to happen happens. They might have a chance to escape, depending on the situation, but they can't finish their objective. The GM should have something in mind for when this happens, but if not, the player should feel free to suggest something to the group and see what happens next.

Completing the Timed Test

When the GM finishes with the obstacles planned for that test and the player succeeds with time left on the clock, they've achieved their objectives (including a clean getaway, if that's what they're looking to do). If they succeed but have zero beats left, they must choose between a clean getaway or achieving their objective (or a choice between achieving their objective and saving some money, or achieving their objective and being proud of their work, etc.)

Buying Time

If a player character is running dangerously low on time, the rest of the group might be able to help them out. They can make a test of their own—causing a diversion, trying to delay the bad guys with conversation, eliminating some security guards—and with a success, they give the player back one of the beats they've lost. If they get a heroic success, it's two beats. Failure means that player character can't help any more for the rest of the timed test. No matter what, only one attempt at buying time can happen in between each step of the timed test.