



# WITCH DOCTORS

PLAYTEST EDITION

Written by Marin O'Connor



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# WITCH DOCTORS

is a tabletop roleplaying game about people who are born different. Apart. Awake to the subliminal forces that permeate our world and bend others' ideas and beliefs towards a more acceptable norm, rife with judgement for those who live outside it. These forces, driven by the collective unconscious called the Geist, coerce the vast majority of humankind. Promoting peace and stability through the aegis of conformity and appropriation.

**Players take on the role of Witch Doctors.** The awoken. The aware. Those who can feel changes in the forces that shape perception and reality, defy them, and disrupt influences that prey upon the unsuspecting in unpredictable ways.

Sometimes these forces are commonplace, even routine. But some are the result of magick, twisting human perception and the laws of reality for the sake of someone with knowledge and ambition. In such cases, the Witch Doctors must find the source and discover a way to fracture the spell or spells that coldly victimize innocent lives.

Within WITCH DOCTORS, the process of uncovering the truth and attempting to stop harmful magicks and those behind them is called a Mystery. But the more Players dive into a Mystery, the more likely their characters enter the line of fire and risk it all against the twisted and the depraved.

Welcome to our world. From bustling metropolis, to mountain village. Only now, open your eyes.

## OVERVIEW

In WITCH DOCTORS, Players will create a Witch Doctor to portray. They will think on the character's behalf and do their best to speak and act from the character's perspective. Most things they attempt will simply happen: Words will be exchanged, implied abilities will be used, and their choices will shape consequences sometimes in and outside their line of sight.

Managing all of this is the Guide, another person who populates the world around the Players' characters, builds the Mysteries they encounter, and shifts the agendas and motives of forces both benign and malignant in nature.

On occasion, the Players will attempt to do something that carries with it substantial risk of failure or consequence. A pivotal moment that will shape what comes next in a distinct fashion. When that occurs, the Guide will ask the Player(s) to roll three 20-sided dice to determine the outcome.

Once the outcome is determined, the story continues - with the consequences of the roll, itself a function of their choices, informing what comes next.

## INSPIRATIONS

WITCH DOCTORS has a wide array of inspirations, making it impossible to credit them all, so instead I will focus on a handful that have proven significant.

The Fiction is inspired quite a bit from real-life magick practice, as well as interviews and creative works by Grant Morrison and Alan Moore. *The Invisibles*, in particular, is a major influence.

Its narrative structure, and even some mechanics, were inspired by the show *House M.D.* and other such procedurals.

Mechanically the game uses a system called WITCHCRAFT inspired by our own *Aperture System* and the *Apocalypse System* by Vincent and Meguey Baker. Though it's neither in whole, it is a hybrid love-child in part, and we owe gratitude to the Bakers for their contribution to this and the hobby in general.

The magick system, Token, was designed in line with the concept of 'Hard Magic Systems' as first proposed by Brandon Sanderson.

To all others who in one way or another affixed an idea into my mind during the creative process, I sincerely thank you.

- Marin O'Connor -

# EXPECTATIONS

Whether you act as a Player or the Guide, there are certain steps you should take to improve the odds of success in your role and help everyone to have a good time.

These are:

- ✦ **Come to the game prepared.** Bring your 20-sided dice and Character Sheet. Also, make sure that you've read through The Playbook (what you are reading now) in its entirety. If you're the Guide, read the whole book; it will make things easier rather than harder.
- ✦ **Participate.** This means you engage with your fellow Players and the Guide. You speak, you laugh, you support. If your character would involve long periods of time spent looking out a window into the night, festering in the sullen pain of their own soul, please consider another character concept. Go write a poem. We need more poems in the world.
- ✦ **Support one another.** It is your job to make sure that each person is engaged in a positive way and having a good time. Yes. You. Not him, not her, not them. You. Be mindful towards others at the table and protect them. You each are more important than any story you will ever tell in the course of playing this or any other game.
- ✦ **Don't be a jackass.** If you don't want to put forth a genuine effort to play the game and be an active participant, don't bother playing. Better to have an empty spot in a roster than a black hole.

## No More Kid Gloves

In most RPGs, your plucky group of characters run into everything from reality-warping wizards to fierce dragons, but the threat of violence is muted by the dull thud of attacks and spells as they land, march along their polite circuit, and ultimately fall away without long-term consequence.

Violence in WITCH DOCTORS is different. Violence is something you engage in when you cannot avoid it. A poor roll or tactical blunder could lead to your character being different from that point on. Sometimes, this will get nasty. Detailed. Brutal.

If you choose to play this game, it's with that understanding.

# MYSTERIES (aka the Structure of Play)

## 1| You discover a problem.

By the time Witch Doctors get involved, something bad has already happened or is still happening. You might get a phone call from someone who has retained memories of what you can do. You may hear something on the news, through your workplace, or feel something aggressive on the periphery of your senses as you walk to a store or take a subway train.

Like a contagion, it – whatever it is – is already out there. Uncontained, and affecting people without their knowledge or consent.

## 2| You apply a band-aid fix.

Most often this is magical, medical, or psychological in nature. You stop someone from bleeding to death, administer an anesthetic to knock someone out; use a spell to offset suicidal depression or seal them to a space so they can't hurt anyone.

## 3| You talk to witnesses / seek out leads.

Based on your patient or client's symptoms, you determine how to dig deeper into the cause. This may involve interrogating or casually questioning family, friends, or witnesses. Maybe you're reminded of something / someone in particular that you can follow up on.

You are trying to narrow options. Is the threat personal or environmental? Malicious or benign, even accidental?

## 4| You expose yourself to potential risk.

Whether the effects were applied by malice or ignorance, targeted or incidental, at some point you must invariably step into the line of fire to discover the truth.

Jumping headfirst into the threat, this step brings your natural gifts to bear, allowing you to gather vital clues of what the hell is happening.

## 5| You confront the source.

Once you've identified what is happening and why, it's time to ensure it doesn't impact innocent people further. This may involve fighting a twisted magician or fracturing a token within the offending spell.

This is the part of the story where rubber meets road and you attempt to permanently settle things.

Due to the nature of magick in the game, it is sometimes not going to be possible to save everyone. You might have to cut your losses or settle for the lesser of two evils. An innocent you promised to help may go unaided; lives may be lost. You operate on a tether of what is possible within the hard structure of magick and the forces you confront each time you step into the path of the storm.

# PLAYING THE GAME

As odd as it may appear, we're going to begin Playing the Game with a discussion about the Guide. I know. Odd. But it's to set the stage for how the game works, why it works that way, and what your role in it is.

## THE GUIDE

**The Guide's overarching role is to manage what is in the Fiction and what is not.** You'll see the term 'Fiction' a lot, so let's make sure we're clear what it means.

*The Fiction is everything that happens within the confines of the game's setting. Its tone; its flora and fauna; its history. Some of which the Players' characters will see and interact with; much of which they won't.*

What sets the Guide apart from the Players is their ability to add to the Fiction – or 'Establish' Fiction – without permission or many rules binding them in doing so. For Players, Establishing events, people, or actions within the Fiction is bound by certain rules and mechanics. It's why you roll dice at all. You provide the cause, the dice provide the effect. The dice take something you're proposing about the Fiction and determine what's true about it.

To make it real.

Whether that punch landed. Whether the bleeding stops.

Whether the spell a character was put under ends.

Based on what you know about the Fiction, you come up with a course of action, do all you can to make it successful – and roll the dice.

Now, this may sound unfair. The Guide has so many liberties, while the Players have to move heaven and earth. But what gives Players power within the game and its Fiction is the following: The Guide does not have power over you. You are their blind spot. The one thing in the Fiction that the Guide can't just do whatever they want with. Your choices and rolls decide what is Established and what isn't as it relates to your character.

**And once it's Established, it's Established.** For all of you. The Guide cannot pretend it didn't happen or marginalize the outcome, whether it was good for you or them or no one.

When it comes to you, the Guide can attempt to Establish something, but your choices and the roll of the dice determine whether it goes from an idea to an Established part of the game.

From theory to fact.

So, what triggers the Guide to do something is when what's happening would have a material effect on the Fiction beyond the routine. Your drive to work isn't interesting? No roll. Casually speaking to someone? No again. But if the tire on your car blows out? Roll. If the *way* you're saying something to someone may lead them to attempt murder against you or a family member? *Roll.*

Sometimes *why* you're rolling might not be clear, but it's because the Guide has to know what they're allowed to Establish with respect to you and your character.

They have to know what to trigger. It's not that they're out to hurt you. But the Guide needs clarification – given the Established Fiction – what the likely outcomes of something are and determine which to go with.

**WITCH DOCTORS is intended to feel responsive, to revolve around what you've done, and one of the Guide's responsibilities is to make that true.**

Thus: You aren't the most important people in the game simply because you're the Guide's friends in real life and they dig your characters. You're the most important people in the game because you're the only source of chaos in their life they aren't allowed to ignore.

## THE PLAYER

**The Player's role is to create a character and make decisions on behalf of that character, in line with what the character knows and is capable of.** Most of the time this amounts to participating in a conversation about the Fiction of the game. The Guide sets the scene, provides context around what and who plays a part in it, and then looks to you and your fellow Players to see what you're doing.

*Get used to hearing "What do you want to do?" a lot.*

To follow up on the many paragraphs above about the Guide, that question gets to the heart of the Guide's dilemma: Their job is to have the Fiction respond *to you*. Yes, they can prompt something. Introduce a looming threat. But that's a heavy-handed approach that they're meant to avoid.

Now, there is a standardized Turn Order across the game's activities... basically a schedule for the Guide to check in with each Player and give them their chance to participate... but that's a mechanical bit to encourage quieter people to engage.

*If you're already engaged, engage.*

If you don't grab initiative, the Guide will. Because they have to. They don't know what's going to happen to your character unless you roll a die any more than you do.

Most things that you do won't even prompt a roll. The Guide will determine that the consequences or risks are small enough that they'll just Establish it in the Fiction as fact and respond to it. Given that, crouch most of your contributions to the conversation as what you're doing – not what you're rolling. If you ask for a roll, the Guide will give you one. Which may not work out in your favor.

The Guide knows things about the Fiction that you don't. Assume you can do things until informed otherwise. Whether that's performing open-heart surgery or sneaking into a hotel, default to the assumption that you'll get away with it.

**Again: Say what you're doing, not what you're rolling.**

One of the long-running ironies in tabletop gaming is that Players want initiative but are habitually trained to wait for the person running the game to give it to them.

You might say, "This guy's annoying me. I'm going to sweep his leg and knock him on his ass." You might even imagine this would prompt a roll of some kind, but you could be wrong.

The Guide may reply, "Your foot catches his ankle and jerks his leg sideways, sending him to the floor. You're standing over him. What do you want to do?"

# WHEN YOU ROLL & HOW

WITCH DOCTORS operates on a resolution system called WITCHCRAFT that uses three 20-sided dice (D20s in common gaming parlance) when characters attempt to perform an action that suffers a real risk of failure or consequence. Rolls reflect cases in which the character is attempting to do something outside of what a normal person should be expected to do.

When a roll is performed, all three dice should be rolled simultaneously. The top and bottom rolls are dropped (i.e. ignored). Any Attributes which support the roll are added to the remaining die and this final tally – called the ‘Action Score’ – is compared to three ranges of values to determine the outcome.

The default ranges and their outcomes are:

20+. *Optimal.*

The Player’s character achieves what they intended without issue.

13+. *Passable.*

The Player’s character *technically* gets what they wanted but suffers a minor penalty or consequence. This should be interpreted by the Guide as a trigger to introduce a negative shift in the situation or story. Any such consequence can be immediate or revealed later.

<13. *Disastrous.*

The Player’s character not only fails to achieve what they intended, but a more serious penalty or consequence occurs as a result of their failed action. Similar to the consequence occurring in *Passable*, the outcome can be immediate, delayed, or both.

The thresholds associated with each range of values and outcomes can be modified based on the character’s Skill Level in the action being undertaken. For each point of Skill Level, the *Optimal* threshold goes down. As the *Passable* threshold is always 7 below the *Optimal*, it goes down similarly.

Thus, if the character’s Skill Level in *Acrobatics* were 3, the ranges and their outcomes would appear as:

17+. *Optimal.*

The Player’s character achieves what they intended without issue.

10+. *Passable.*

The Player’s character *technically* gets what they wanted but suffers a minor penalty or consequence. This should be interpreted by the Guide as a trigger to introduce a negative shift in the situation or story. Any such consequence can be immediate or revealed later.

<10. *Disastrous.*

The Player’s character not only fails to achieve what they intended, but a more serious penalty or consequence occurs as a result of their failed action. Similar to the consequence occurring in *Passable*, the outcome can be immediate, delayed, or both.

When a threshold number is followed by +, such as 20+ or 13+, the range of values includes the number in front of the sign.

Skills reflect expertise, not a basic understanding of the practice or field of study. Characters do not need to have a Technology-based Skill to drive a car or operate a smartphone. So long as what they are attempting to do would be routine for an average person, it simply happens unless doing it is challenged by someone else.

Players make all rolls (other than one lone exception to do with Conditions). The Guide sets up a threat and allows the Players to decide how to deal with it. If they don’t, or fail any and all attempts to do so, the threat is realized.

If the Skill Level were 6, they would become 14+, 7+, and <7, respectively.

Etc. and so on.

## THE IMPACT OF ADVANTAGES & DISADVANTAGES

Based on circumstances, the Player's character may be either in a better or a worse position to achieve the desired outcome. When the weight of the situation is notably advantageous for the character, the high roll is used rather than dropped; when notably disadvantageous, the low roll is used.

*In either case, the "Collapsing the Low-End" rule (see below) does not apply, so do this only when it seems absolutely necessary. The majority of rolls should use the standard method.*

Some Weapons and elements of spellcasting within the game feature pipes {} in their information. These reflect growing complexity as the use-case grows further apart from the norm. For example:

BOW

*Ranged. Uses Arrows.*

Ammo: 1 ||| 2

Range: 100 | 150 | 200 | 250 | 300

Based on the above, it is possible to fire two arrows at a time and reach targets up to 300 feet away. But each comes with its own challenges, represented by the | symbols throughout. The way to read this is: *For every pipe crossed, the complexity escalates to a point that threatens to add a Disadvantage to the roll.* Each pipe stacks.

So if a character attempted to fire two arrows up to 200 feet away, it would require crossing 5 pipes. So long as that number is equal to or less than the character's Skill Level, it can be rolled without Disadvantage. Else, the Player would have to use the die with the lowest roll result.

Spellcasting works similarly. So long as the character's Skill Level is equal or beyond the amount of complexity a spell requires, it can be cast normally.

## CRITICALS

When a roll qualifies for an *Optimal* outcome without adding in the character's Attribute, it is a Critical. In combat, a Critical triggers the Guide to apply a Condition that makes sense based on what was done; outside of combat, Criticals improve the effect of an action, reduce costs associated with it, etc.

## STRAINING AN ATTRIBUTE

Prior to the roll, the Player may choose to 'Strain an Attribute' to increase the odds of success. When this is done, the Attribute's contribution to the Action Score is doubled for the one roll. Regardless of the outcome, the Attribute's score is temporarily reduced by 1 until such time as they are able to rest for 1 hour per reduction.

When you 'strain' to support a Skill, only its primary Attribute is doubled. When you 'strain' a Save, it impacts both Attributes that support it.

## COLLAPSING THE LOW-END

If the die remaining after dropping the high and low rolls is less than or equal to the character's Skill Level, the Player has the option to strain the Skill's Attribute after the roll to improve the outcome.

## ON A CHARACTER'S TURN

On a Player character's Turn, they are allowed to roll any Saves required of them, take a Move (or two Move Activities), and perform a Skill.

A Move means traveling some distance from their current location in order to do something. For more detail-oriented games, this distance would represent the character moving (Athleticism + 1) x 10 feet. For games which are less interested in such detail, use the calculation as a rough estimate and make sure to indicate whether they could reach a spot in a single Turn or not.

A Move Activity is a bit of business that the character can engage in in place of a full Move. This may include swapping weapons, bracing something, tossing an object to another character, taking time to aim, etc. In addition, a Move Activity can be used to travel half their usual Move distance.

## TARGETED EFFECTS

When using a Skill, Players may request a Targeted Effect to guarantee a specific – even oddly specific – outcome. Prior to rolling, the Player and Guide have to agree on the criteria for achieving that outcome. Depending on what the Player wants to do, the ante for achieving the effect may be anything from *Getting an Optimal*, *Rolling a Critical*, and/or *Putting Yourself at Risk*.

If the Player performs the criteria properly, they get what they want. Period. There are no take-backs. If they do not, the Skill fails outright even if it would normally have succeeded – and any penalties as part of the requirements still apply.

## CONDITIONS

In WITCH DOCTORS, Conditions are meant to be brutal, potentially even permanent. Like, you really, really don't want these things. Once a Condition has been successfully applied, rolls to remove it use the lowest die roll and require an *Optimal* outcome. This is true whether the method for removing it is a Save or a Skill. Further: If a Condition has been applied by a Spell, the Condition may be controlled via a character's intervention, but the Spell itself will remain in place until dispelled properly. [Doing that is covered in the section on *Token*.]

For Conditions affecting NPCs, the Guide rolls at the start of the responsible Character's Turn. *Yes, the intention is for Players to enjoy watching roll after roll fail.*

There are two parts to managing a Condition:

- 1] **Label the Condition.** There are almost no named Conditions in this game. Each Condition, however, must be labeled with respect to the intent of the person who applied it. Labels might be things like *Hobbled*, *Poisoned*, or *Charmed*.
- 2] **Note the Effect.** This is what the Condition actually does.
  - a. If it causes damage over time, such as a *Bleed* or *Poison*, use the responsible character's base Attribute Score for the Skill that applied it as the damage done per Turn and write it beside the Label.
  - b. If it hampers movement or would logically interfere with using Skills, use the high or low roll where it makes sense. Else, make sure to capture the effect in the Fiction.

A looming threat doesn't require a Save roll. The Player can select how to deal with it before its impact occurs or not. Using a Save indicates that the Player's primary goal is to avoid damage or vulnerability. Using a Skill suggests they have a different priority, which the Guide needs to discover.

Characters may not always know a Condition has been applied to them. Regardless, their body and subconsciousness do, and will tirelessly attempt to remove it until it is no longer present.

The only time the Guide ever rolls is to determine if a Non-Player Character (NPC) is able to succeed against a Condition that was applied to them in a prior Turn. Else, they simply do things and the outcomes are determined based on the Players' rolls.

# EXCERPTS OF THE FICTION

This is an opportunity to provide some information about the Fiction underlying the world of WITCH DOCTORS so it can be taken into account as you build characters and confront Mysteries.

- ✦ Witch Doctors are people born with an amplified sensitivity to the behaviors of the Geist and the subliminal forces that both drive it and are driven by it. When something causes a change in those forces, Witch Doctors are able to feel the change, defy it, and determine the locus from which it originated to disrupt its actions.
- ✦ The Geist's influence controls and manipulates human perception, ideas, beliefs, and socio-political ideologies, but also the laws of reality as we know them.
- ✦ Magick is the practice of intentionally disrupting the flow of those subliminal forces and the information they carry. The effect of magick has weakened over time as the Geist has grown stronger.
- ✦ Magick weakening has forced its practitioners to evolve their methods dozens, if not hundreds, of times throughout history.
- ✦ Magick is easier and more lasting when Subliminal – i.e. acting within a person's mind or body – than when it materially changes the physical world or environment.
- ✦ A natural extension of how magick works is that it is unable to heal people. As such, there are no explicit healing spells in the game. No, this isn't an invitation to introduce one. They simply cannot exist.
- ✦ Token, the magick system presented in the game, is merely the most effective school of practice at this time, as its interpretation of magick's grimoire – which is unknowable in its entirety – is structured, simple to learn, and leaves little room for error.
- ✦ Witch Doctors are talented magick practitioners due to their natural gift, but they are not born knowing it, nor do all of them learn it in their lifetimes. *A character in the game may choose to never learn magick.*
- ✦ Witch Doctors can be an angry teen who feels tortured by the constant bombardment of subliminal forces on their senses, a hippie who perceives their gift as a source of freedom from the powers of conformity that others are subject to, or someone in between. Most will land somewhere in the middle.
- ✦ There is an alliance of Witch Doctor families called The Demiurge, but it may play minimal, if any, role in the game or the characters. The Demiurge uses its gifts to manipulate the political and economic spheres largely for its own benefit.

The prevailing opinion for why the Geist has become so strong is population growth and the ease by which information moves across all aspects of human life.

Some also tie it heavily to the Industrial Revolution, relating it to the increase of electromagnetic forces and their possible impact on human brain chemistry.

- ✦ People who are exposed to magick are often distrustful of their experience, assuming psychosis or exhaustion. Even if told explicitly that what they've experienced is magick in nature, they ordinarily forget over time as the Geist compels them with thoughts that such things cannot exist.
- ✦ There are no real supernatural creatures within the world of WITCH DOCTORS. No vampires, no werewolves, no angels or demons or Cthulhu. Anything that presents as such, and in fact all supernatural encounters, are driven by the thoughts and intentions of human beings.
- ✦ Evil is not convenient. Those who practice or worship it always believe themselves to be right and just.
- ✦ A Mystery is only mysterious when you're on the outside looking in. *Get your heads around this one, Guides. It will save you lots of pain.*

## SETTING UP

The world of WITCH DOCTORS is generally set as a rough facsimile of our own. There are smartphones, tablet computers, and unfortunate bumps in the social and political landscape. Therefore, we won't go to great length to explain to you what the world looks like or how stuff you already know works.

However, before you create characters and start thinking through all the factors that play a roll in their lives, it's worth having a discussion with your fellow Players and Guide about the particulars surrounding *where* and *when* your games will take place.

There could be flip-phones, laptop computers, and yet other unfortunate bumps in the social and political landscape.

The fact that WITCH DOCTORS is most often contemporary in Setting doesn't mean it has to be set right now. Anytime in the last several decades would likely be served well by the game and the information in this book, with some adjustments that should be obvious. So if you're looking to create stories and characters back in the 80's? No problem.

Though it's technically possible to have a game set in the Renaissance or Dark Ages, as Witch Doctors have existed throughout the entirety of human history, clearly much of what's contained in this book would no longer be material. Going back far enough, Token – the leading magick system in the world – wouldn't even exist and some other school of magick might be leading the way, resplendent during a time when the Geist had not yet reached its prominence.

(Frankly, that sounds pretty cool. Why didn't we write that book?)

*Ahem.*

At any rate, this is a long-winded way to say that you're free to use the general setting of WITCH DOCTORS however you please. It's your game, after all. Just know that the further back you go, the more you're on your own.

## *When Are We?*

This is a good first question to ask. After all, different locations become more or less interesting depending upon the era in which you consider them. 1980's Seattle would look hilariously different than the modern day version.

You don't have to be overly specific about the timing within the decade, per se, unless you want to run a game built upon a specific real-world event. An Olympic Games. A political debate. An assassination (or attempt).

Again, this is our world. What the game offers you as Players and Guide is the opportunity to fictitiously 'peel back the onion' and reveal something about history simulated within the understanding of a Witch Doctor's unique senses. The historical outcomes might be identical. They just got there along a different path.

At any rate, *When* is important. Figure that out first.

## *Where Are We?*

Literally 'where'. From towns to vast metropolitan areas like Chongqing, China, Witch Doctors can show up anywhere. Target a locale that you either connect to or are fascinated by in some way. So long as everyone is onboard and excited about it, that's awesome.

This doesn't need to be a marathon to figure out, but it's an important detail to acknowledge prior to diving into character creation or a session.

Keep in mind that *When* your game is set impacts not only what technology is available, but also some choices available to you during Character Creation, such as Profession, vehicles, etc.

Being a Witch Doctor is largely genetic, with less than a 1 in a million chance of someone being born one without precedent. Setting your game in a small town, then, likely means that at least two, maybe three, of the characters are blood relations.

# INSTRUCTIONS FOR THE CHARACTER SHEET

Below is the Character Sheet for this playtest edition of WITCH DOCTORS.

<b>WITCH DOCTORS</b>		WITCHCRAFT	
NAME		<b>RESOURCES</b>	<b>HEALTH</b>
PROFESSION			
ASSETS			
CONCEPT, ETC. & SO ON		CONDITIONS <i>Include [P] if Prevailing</i>	
<div style="display: flex; justify-content: space-between; align-items: center;"> <div style="text-align: center;"> <p><b>ATTRIBUTES &amp; SKILLS</b></p> <p><small>Example</small> <span style="color: red;">Acrobatics</span> <span style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 50%; padding: 2px;">0</span> <span style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 50%; padding: 2px;">13</span> <span style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 50%; padding: 2px;">20</span> <span style="color: red; font-size: small;">As Skill Level Increases</span> <span style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 50%; padding: 2px;">3</span> <span style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 50%; padding: 2px;">10</span> <span style="border: 1px solid black; border-radius: 50%; padding: 2px;">17</span></p> </div> </div>			
<b>ATHLETICISM</b>	<b>EMPATHY</b>	<b>WILL</b>	<b>INTELLECT</b>
<small>LVL PASS OPT</small>	<small>LVL PASS OPT</small>	<small>LVL PASS OPT</small>	<small>LVL PASS OPT</small>

Based on your character's concept and profession, please allocate 10 points between these in the large white circles available for each one. The maximum of any score is 6, which represents the utmost of human potential. An average person is a 2 in each.

Skills represent expertise the character has acquired in a field of study or training up to this point. When you want to do something, you use a Skill. Skills are supported by specific Attributes and should be written in one of the rectangles under its Attribute. An example Skill List is available below to select from, but if you don't see what you're looking for to make the character all that they can be, feel free to add one and assign it to the Attribute that most makes sense.

Don't write down every Skill listed below. Just those your character has expertise in. If it isn't written down, it's assumed that your character is average in it relative to most people.

The example Skills below are formatted as follows:

### ATTRIBUTE

Domain *Example Skill #1, Example Skill #2, etc.*

Domains are used to help guide you towards assigning an Attribute for Skills that are not listed; as a means of saying, "Such Skills live here." Where you have questions, work with your Guide to decide what makes sense to you both.

### ATHLETICISM

Athletics *Baseball, Gymnastics, etc.*  
Melee Combat *Knife, Martial Art, etc.*  
Piloting *Motorcycle, Commercial Car, etc.*  
Ranged Combat *Handgun, Rifle, etc.*  
Survival *Tracking, Camping, etc.*

### WILL

Artisanship *Woodcraft, Sculpture, etc.*  
Food & Drink Prep *Baking, Brewing, etc.*  
Musicianship *Composing, Violin, etc.*  
Strategy *Business, Naval, etc.*  
Subterfuge *Lockpicking, Sneaking, etc.*  
Token *See the section 'Token' for information on this one.*

### EMPATHY

Animal Handling *Dogs, Horses, etc.*  
Awareness *Environmental, Interpersonal, etc.*  
Deduction *Relationships between Things, Relationships between People, etc.*  
Inducement *Calming People Down, Riling People Up, etc.*

### INTELLECT

Engineering *Architecture, Electrical, etc.*  
Mathematics *Algebraic Geometry, Finance, etc.*  
Medicine *Forensics, Cardiology, etc.*  
Science *Physics, Biology, etc.*  
Sigils *See the section 'Token' for information on this one.*  
Technology *Computers, Heavy Machinery, etc.*

### PROFESSION AS SKILL

When selecting Skills, include the character's Profession as one of them - and it's important to note that it behaves differently than a traditional Skill.

If a character attempts to do something that exemplifies what their Profession is about, it is reasonable to have them use the high die. A surgeon attempting surgery is at a notable advantage versus someone who has studied surgical procedures - has the Skill Surgery - but doesn't do it multiple times every day.

In addition, there are a number of cross-functional aspects that people in a Profession deal with that study alone does not cover. Professions act as catch-all Skills due to navigating employer and employee expectations, managing time, dealing with people, etc.

If it's reasonable that a Profession would engage in an activity on a regular basis, the Profession can be rolled to cover it. But, again, it should be 'reasonable' and not use the high die in such cases.

The surgeon doesn't get to cover deadlifting a heavy object because they often help move a patient from a litter to a surgical table.

Between those you wrote down, allocate 20 points between them. Write the number you assign in the white icon with 'LVL' above it. Then, subtract your Level for each one from 20 and write the result under the 'OPT' column. Subtract 7 from the 'OPT' and write that number in the 'PASS' column. These are your revised Success thresholds anytime you roll these Skills.

The higher number is the threshold for your *Optimal* range; the lower one is for your *Passable* range. When the result of a roll is in the *Optimal* range, you get what you want without issue; in the *Passable*, you technically get what you want but there may be a consequence for doing it. Below that? Things go bad. When you roll, tell the Guide the outcome, not the number: "Optimal", "Passable", or "Disastrous".

*Don't worry, we're almost done.*

### SAVES, HEALTH, RESOURCES & ASSETS

Saves are what you use when you don't want something bad or questionable to impact your character or another one. Each is composed of two Attributes and deals with a different type of potential injury or vulnerability, notated below them..

Your Health is 50. Write it in the white box. If you become injured, write the new number into the grey box.

Resources is based on your Profession and represents - in the white box - how much you get paid per year. Think of a reasonable annual salary for such a person, round up to the nearest \$10,000, and divide it by 10,000 to get your total Resources. Write that number in the white box. Example: *The character gets paid \$54,000. Round up to \$60,000 and divide by 10,000. Max Resources (white box) is 6 in that example.*

If your character lives modestly, reduce their maximum Resources by 1 or 2. Scale up from there. Work with the Guide to determine an appropriate amount. Do the same for if they have a vehicle: 1 if \$20,000 or less; 2 if up to \$40,000; with each \$20,000 increment in the vehicle's value adding another decrement to the Resources value. Write their final Resources number - what's available to them to use for other purposes - in the grey box. Include information about their living situation and mode of transport in the area for Assets.

Congrats. Your character is done.

**An abridged version of these instructions is available on the page immediately preceding the Character Sheet at the back of this book.**

### HOW RESOURCES WORK

At times, the characters will run into a situation that appears to be at an impasse or dead-end. In which they lack the right item or the right knowledge to move deeper into the Mystery.

In such cases, they may attempt to Establish something new in the Fiction - either a person or an item, whichever makes sense - that up to now no one knew about.

Such occasions lead to a **Resources Test**. A character with expertise in a Skill relevant to the type of person or object rolls their Skill - but uses their available Resources in place of the Skill's usual Attribute.

On an *Optimal* result, they can immediately access the item or person they need. On a *Passable* result, what they reveal is only marginally useful or requires some cost to get access to.

Prior to the roll, the Guide may deem that the knowledge or item is so rare or obscure that a Disadvantage should be applied.

# DEATH & THE FINE ART OF LIVING

Inevitably, Players will find their characters confronting dangers that push them to their limits. Confronting a lethal confluence of injury and Conditions. Whatever it is, the brink has not only been pushed to, it's become something visible only in hindsight - and the present is collapsing around them in a horrifyingly real way.

## HEALTH

Every character's maximum Health is 50. Whenever characters are impacted in some manner which would obviously cause them harm, their Health is reduced. In the bulk of cases, the amount of Health taken due to an event is reflective of an Attribute's contribution to the roll which caused the harm in the first place.

If a character attacks another using a Skill, the base damage caused to the target's Health on a successful attack is equal to the attacking character's Attribute for that Skill. A physical attack that uses Athleticism, therefore, would cause damage equal to the character's current Athleticism; a spell using Token would cause damage equal to the character's current Will; etc.

When a Condition is applied, either via a Critical or because something in the Fiction makes that Condition an obvious part of the attack, the damage caused as a result of that Condition also defaults to the Attribute *at the time it was applied*. It is recommended to always write near the applied Condition what the Attribute's contribution to the roll was so this can be tracked more easily.

If a character's Health ever becomes 0, they are unconscious and cannot be awoken by any means.

## DYING THE OLD-FASHIONED WAY

When a character's Health goes below 0, a Condition is applied to the character called 'Dying'. As with all Conditions, this is hard to remove. Further, as the character is unconscious, they are not able to strain to support their roll against it. However, after each roll against 'Dying', the character's Athleticism and Will both decrease by 1 as if they had been strained. Once both hit 0, the character dies.

If any roll succeeds, Athleticism and Will both decrease, but the character's Health resets to 0 and the 'Dying' Condition is removed.

## INSTANT DEATH

Due to the nature of certain spells or events within the Fiction, the outcome of an attack may be instant death regardless of the Health of the person at the time it occurred. Such things as teleporting into the center of a wall, a gunshot to the temple, etc. will almost always result in death. Plain and simple.

This represents an underlying theme: *Don't turn mechanical something sensible*. This not only cements the tangibility of the Fiction, it adds weight to casting spells, shooting guns. Everything.

It reminds all participants of the game that Witch Doctors, though talented, are still ultimately human beings.

Tough but fragile.  
Capable but flawed.

Straining an Attribute does, in fact, increase the damage dealt in an attack - as well as the damage dealt by any Condition caused as a result of the attack.

Weapons often possess a *Damage* statistic that features a '+' with a number directly after it. In such cases, a successful attack with that weapon would add that number to the Athleticism that applied to the roll.

Any successful medical or magick activities, such as correctly using a defibrillator or casting a spell to shock or otherwise support the patient will offset the normal disadvantage on rolls to remove Conditions; i.e. the Player of the dying character will use the middle die rather than the low.

## RECOVERING FROM INJURY

Since there are no explicit healing powers, no regeneration or 'cure' spells that somehow automatically reset injuries as if they never happened, most acts of magick or medicine in an effort to heal someone are performed to remove Conditions that would otherwise complicate or lessen the patient's ability to recover naturally.

So long as no Conditions exist to keep someone from healing, characters recover Health equal to their Resolve Save at the end of each day; i.e. when going to sleep.

If a character has an Athleticism of 3 and a Will of 2, they will recover 5 Health at the start of the following day. If they have strained these Attributes down to a lower acting score, that lower score is used instead for that day.

Generally speaking, an average Witch Doctor will need 10 days to fully recover from a near-death experience (in which they hit 0). Obviously, those with a higher Resolve will mend more quickly, while those with a lower one will take longer.

Saving against Conditions is done independently of one another. If a character is both Poisoned and Dying, the Player would roll against each one. Only Dying requires that Athleticism and Will decrease after each fail, however, so it's best to attempt a Save versus the others first.

### Magick versus Medicine

Though magick is undoubtedly powerful, it is not perfectly applicable in all cases. You might be able to summon fireballs, set a timed lightning strike, or control the emotions of a dangerous crowd, but your tokens may not lend themselves to a broad range of medical situations.

This is where a knowledge of Medicine – even a low level of expertise – is valuable. Where one Condition may be up a token's alley, another may be entirely out of its reach. Medicine suffers from this issue far less and can likely be applied towards Conditions that would stymie a vast number of spells.

# TOKEN

Magick in the world of WITCH DOCTORS has gone through dozens, perhaps hundreds, of interpretations over the many millennia in which humans have been aware of its influence. Many schools of thought have come and gone; their interpretations of the grimoire fallen to the wayside in the face of more stable, productive methods.

## WHAT IS TOKEN?

Token is a formal training regimen and method that empowers magicians to cast spells with a great degree of success and fidelity. It is not required for casting spells but doing so without it is prone to error and often requires groups of participants. Elements of Token have existed in one form or another since the Renaissance, however it took till the 19<sup>th</sup> century for all of those elements to be synthesized into a single volume. Until that time, magick was largely an experiential practice, as likely to produce the desired effect as it was its polar opposite.

According to early Tokenists, this frailty of spellcasting was due to many spells being cast incomplete, missing key Articles. Without these, they argued, it was like writing a sentence without using all of the requisite nouns or verbs to be understood. What nouns and verbs were implied were somewhat left to chance, often missing the intended mark by a wide margin.

Some earlier schools of magick practice, such as Panentheism and Mesmerism, argued against Token's use for decades until the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – at which point the Geist's influence grew and Token became a virtual necessity.

It has enjoyed widespread dominance as a magical practice since.

## TOKEN'S ROLE IN THE GAME

Most Mysteries Players confront will be driven by a spell or errant magical effect that causes physical or psychological harm to innocent people who have no idea what's happening to them. Whether a Player's character is a mage or not, they should be knowledgeable of Token's interpretation of the grimoire and how to think about overcoming the challenges spells present.

The reason is simple: Players are expected to solve the Mysteries. Yes, their characters will provide an avatar within the world, as well as a wide range of Skills alongside considerable natural gifts, but Players have to use what they gather through the character and solve things for themselves.

Where the Grimoire provides structure to a sentence, tokens are the words that fit within its components.

For each Form of each Article in the pages that follow, a unique token must be controlled by the Player character and uniquely named. The name cannot sound like any word that the character knows. It must stand apart.

For each named token, the Player should generate a mnemonic device that calls upon it. It could be a movement of the hand, a particular sound, a spin of their garment, etc. It can literally be anything, so long as it speaks to the caster and allows them to trigger each of their tokens without revealing its name.

The name of a token is what allows others to dispel it, so they are ordinarily protected by casters to add strength and fidelity to their spellcasting.

# THE GRIMOIRE

Token interprets the grimoire of magick as composed of Articles – grammatical structures – that mirror concepts we all learn as children. This helps considerably with magick instruction. The information is laid out in the following structure:

## ARTICLE

*Short Description*

1st Form (Default) | 2nd Form | 3rd Form

'Locus' represents the location or individual the spell's effect(s) originates from. Where 'Source' is used, the 'Source' and 'Locus' are one and the same. The 'Source' is always the original caster of the spell. When a spell 'moves up' an Article, it means to cross one or more of the pipes {} between its list of Forms. Each pipe {} crossed adds to the complexity of the spell being cast. If a spell is cast without identifying a Form from an Article, the grimoire assumes the 1<sup>st</sup> Form.

## WHO

*Who can invoke the spell's effect(s)?*

Source | Locus | Loci

## WHAT

*What type of effect does the spell have?*

Subliminal | Material

## WHEN

*When does the effect occur?*

Now | Then | Trigger

## WHERE

*Where does the effect occur relative to the spell's point of origin?*

Here | Near | There

## WHY

*Speaks to motive. Intent. The Target. Who or what is the target of the spell?*

Source | Locus | Loci

Source | You (S) | You (P)

Source | That | Those

## HOW

*How does the spell affect its target?*

Desired Effect

In the following pages, we will dive into the use of each Article and Form in spellcasting.

**WHERE** is strongly dependent on **WHEN**. As a spell moves up **WHERE**, it must also move up **WHEN** in a 1:1 fashion. **WHEN** does not suffer from the same restriction or requirement.

**HOW** does not add complexity. Rather, it informs the key effect of the spell. It is the source of Fire in a Fireball or for devotion in a Charm. Whatever the caster wants to induce Subliminally or manifest Materially is informed most particularly by **HOW**.

# WHO

## Source | Locus | Loci

*Who can invoke the spell's effect(s)?*

If the mage activates the spell themselves, it activates from the 1<sup>st</sup> Form: Source. This allows the caster to have full control of the timing and targeting of the spell in question. It is the most common Form used, both because it is the default but also due to the clarity one has on the outcome. If the mage wishes the spell to be activated by someone other than themselves, they can select a single person (Locus) or pretty much anyone and everyone (Loci). The latter is most commonly used for trap spells, allowing the caster to be miles away without the effect(s) of the spell being neutered in any way.

To 'invoke' a spell means to activate its effect(s). This activation can happen when it is cast or later, the spell sitting dormant until it is activated via some condition or other.

Within the game, it will be common to cast spells without altering **WHO** in the slightest. Casting and invoking are one and the same in such a scenario.

If you wanted to shoot a Fireball at someone, you would not need to adjust **WHO**: The default would result in the Fireball being cast and immediately activating materially in the world, either at the caster's position or somewhere else. Detonation spells – in which the spell can be triggered at the Source's behest regardless of where they are – is another example where there is no need to modify **WHO**. You set the spell and invoke it whenever you like.

If, however, you wanted to set something up that a specific person could invoke, you would use the 2<sup>nd</sup> Form: Locus. You might want to provide someone access to a spell's effects to keep them safe, allowing them to invoke it when they become alarmed. Or, on the other side of the coin, you might want to cause harm to a specific person and allow them to invoke the spell based on their proximity to where you put it or some other condition.

The 3<sup>rd</sup> Form, Loci, would work similarly – except it is more open. Basically anyone can invoke the spell given its requisite conditions are met. Whatever they are. This is the “Don't care, cause as much assorted chaos as possible” option. Most students of Token are taught to avoid this Form, but it exists so... might as well let people know about it and hope they behave responsibly.

# WHAT

## Subliminal | Material

*What effect does the spell have?*

This outlines the nature of the spell's effect(s). As has been discussed elsewhere, Subliminal is the WITCH DOCTORS term for anything that may impact someone's beliefs or perception of reality but does not literally change the physical world in any way. Selecting Material means that your spell will warp reality or alter natural laws in some fashion, either by transforming something that already exists into a different state or conjuring an object or tangible form out of thin air.

Spells that are Subliminal possess the characteristic of permanency, which means that they do not have a built-in shelf life. They go until they are overcome by the person / people they are acting upon, are dispelled by their original caster, or are disrupted by someone who can identify one of their key tokens (usually **HOW** or **WHY**). The reason Subliminal spells are permanent in a fashion is that they do not come under the Geist's scrutiny directly.

This is remarkably different from Material spells, which are always ephemeral in nature as a result of the Geist's hegemonic control over the laws of reality. Material spells occur for a given period, serve their designed purpose, and then disappear - leaving behind whatever destruction or chaos was caused by their effect(s).

A Fireball spell, for example, would be Material, whereas a Charm would not be. The Fireball - if cast properly - will have a duration dependent upon what, whom, or where it is intended to go. It will go there and burn things... and then simply dissipate into nothing.

The Charm, on the other hand, will fix itself into the target's mind indefinitely. To overcome it, the target would need to succeed on a Defiance Save; at which point, the spell would cease to exist. Otherwise, the spell would need to be dispelled by its creator or someone armed with one or more of its foundational tokens.

Subliminal spells are the most common, not only because they act from the default Form but also because they can simulate physical damage or injuries within the mind that can psychosomatically induce physical harm on their target(s). Such 'injuries', however, immediately cease affecting the target(s) upon succeeding on a Defiance Save and recognizing that the cause was illusory.

Material spells are not so easy to walk away from. What harm they cause is quite real and can lead to life-threatening and permanent injuries depending upon what occurs as a result of their activation.

### **PERMANENCY**

The resolution system of WITCH DOCTORS allows for strongly-applied conditions to be potentially permanent.

This isn't merely a statement, but rather a key part of the design philosophy for the game as a whole.

### **Fighting mages is scary as hell.**

They are capable of changing a character in a single confrontation, from shattering their sense of reality and self-control, to severing body parts, inducing paralysis, or outright removing organs.

**Recognizing that a fight is coming should be horrifying.**

# WHEN

## Now | Then | Trigger

*When does the effect occur?*

**WHEN**, not surprisingly, is all about timing and is quite possibly the most adaptable Article other than **HOW**. That flexibility comes predominantly out of its 3<sup>rd</sup> Form (Trigger), but we will spend some time going through the other two first.

The default Form, Now, means that there is no delay between casting the spell and invoking it. This is the most intuitive Form, as it provides an immediate outcome and transparency around the spell's activation. The majority of spells cast during one's early education into Token will operate out of this Form.

The 2<sup>nd</sup> Form, Then, operates on a timer but how the timer works varies depending on what the caster wants to happen. There are two primary things that force one to invoke a spell with Then:

- Your spell requires you use Near, the 2<sup>nd</sup> Form of the Article **WHERE**. [Which is featured next.] If a spell's effect(s) have to travel from where they were cast to a different spot within the sensory perception of the character, it has to be supported by the time needed to travel to that point.
- Your spell needs to be invoked at a specific time or number of seconds, minutes, or hours from the time the spell is cast. In this regard, it acts as a timer or an alarm clock.

Operating from **WHEN**'s 3<sup>rd</sup> Form, Trigger, changes things dramatically. Time is essentially thrown out the window in favor of a logical statement of Cause and Effect, with the Cause being virtually anything. Trigger translates to "Invoke when X happens".

Whether it's a Subliminal event, occurring only in the realm of perception or thought, or a Material event in which someone is tapped on the shoulder or an airplane touches the ground, it can represent anything the caster feels is pertinent and only activate given the chosen condition or conditions occur first.

Its most common use-case is invoking trap spells. "When someone opens this door, invoke"; "when the Locus sees the color pink, invoke"; etc.. Even if the intent is not to harm someone, these are still trap spells as they lie dormant until X occurs.

The discovery of Trigger also brought about the development of Nested Spells, multiple spells that trigger off one another to cause a huge number of interrelated effects and allow more powerful spells to piggy-back on less powerful ones. Orchestrated properly, these can form complex hallucinogenic experiences that appear very real to the person experiencing it, as well as enable the casting of more powerful spells.

You needn't guess the time; it's implied by the spell's parameters and translated accurately by magick.

The distinction between Then and Trigger is that Then is purely time-based, whereas Trigger is event-based.

### **NESTED SPELLS**

Nested Spells are a series of spells designed to operate in a line of succession. When one spell feeds into another, successfully casting the prior spell increases the *Optimal* range by 1 step.

# WHERE

## Here | Near | There

*Where does the effect occur relative to the spell's point of origin?*

**WHERE** is often characterized as **WHEN**'s little brother due to its one-sided interdependence with the other Article, but it is nonetheless an important Article in its own right. Beyond that, it bears similarity with **WHEN** in that its first two Forms are quite simple to understand while its third opens things up spectacularly.

The default Form, Here, is exactly as it sounds: The spell invokes at the location it was cast. One tricky bit to this is that the caster may select to have the Here be the Source (themselves) or the precise geographical spot upon which it was cast.

**WHERE** recognizes either as Here, so that's something a caster needs to bear in mind.

Its 2<sup>nd</sup> Form, Near, means that the spell will take effect at a location within the sensory perception of its Source when it was cast. Sensory perception is exactly like it sounds: Any sense can be used to utilize Near. If the caster cannot see someone but can hear them, they can use Near to target the origin of the sound; if they suspect the flavor in the stew they just tasted is poison, they can target the source of the flavor.

As such, Near is sometimes referred to as 'the scalpel', as it allows one to be very particular about where an effect takes place and forces the spell to act within that confined location. Inversely, it can also be called 'the wave', as spells can be broadened to encompass areas where a target's precise location is suspected but not known.

There, its 3<sup>rd</sup> Form, indicates that the caster does not know where the spell will be invoked. Similar to Trigger in **WHEN**, There prepares the spell to be invoked from literally any location and shifts all its ties to the Locus or Loci invoking it.

This, also, feeds into its most frequent use-case of trap spells, often ones in which the precise target is not really important. What matters is that the spell invokes, not where it does.

**WHERE** is distinct to other Articles in that it wants to naturally refer back to its point of origin. Its 3<sup>rd</sup> Form, There, exists to divorce the caster from its natural inclination to 'phone home', so to speak. This odd behavior is something that Tokenists have debated for over a century with no final conclusion in sight. Some theorize that **WHERE**'s behavior is psychologically motivated, a reflection of the caster's ego; where others suggest that magick has no perception of geography and operates off landmarks identified within the spell's language only.

If the Here being referred to is not explicitly identified when casting the spell, Here translates to the Source, for good or for bad.

### WHERE & WHEN

When moving up **WHERE**'s Forms, spells must move up **WHEN**'s as well. Near cannot be paired with Now; There cannot be paired with Now or Then.

**WHEN** can freely move without impacting **WHERE**, however.

# WHY

## Source | Locus | Loci

## Source | You (S) | You (P)

## Source | That | Those

Speaks to motive. Intent. The Target. Who or what is the target of the spell?

**WHY** is about intent and translating that unspoken, implied intent into identifying the target of the spell's effect(s). In a sense, all of the rows above are similar, but let's move through each one to make sure how they work is clear.

### Source | Locus | Loci

This row defines the target as the original caster or the person or people responsible for invoking the spell. It is possible to have someone else invoke a spell that targets the Source. Casters often do this to receive buffs or boons based on others' activities, thus freeing themselves to focus on other spells.

### Source | You (S) | You (P)

This row defines the target as the original caster or a single individual (not the Locus) or a group of people (not the Loci). Each selection relates to those who do not invoke the spell but *are* the target or targets of it. In addition, this denotes the spell's ability to target living creatures only.

### Source | That | Those

This row defines the target as the original caster or a single object or group of objects. These are intended as non-living things. This distinction – between living and non-living – is an important one, as the intention of the spell may be to remove a gun from someone's hand without harming the person holding it.

In truth, these rows exist to be thorough but are not truly important in practice. Fundamentally, the default of the Article is always the Source; the next step, an individual person or object; and the 3<sup>rd</sup> Form is always plural.

The distinctions that matter are:

- Is the target living or non-living? *For what it's worth, a dead body is non-living.*
- Is the target able to invoke the spell?

Once these are defined, **WHY** becomes very straight-forward and obvious in its application.

# HOW

## Desired Effect

*How does the spell affect its target?*

The Desired Effect is what the spell actually does to its target. This is the fire in Fireball; the sense of devotion in Charm; the water in Rainfall. This can be anything from a change in perception or belief, to a transmutation of matter or disruption of natural law itself.

*This is the reason you cast a spell in the first place, the source of its identity.*

Contrary to the others preceding it, this overview will focus more on what can and cannot be done, as **HOW** does not alter the complexity or challenge of a spell.

- In order to create an effect, there must be a token that can be used to logically generate it. This requires some flexibility on the part of Players and the Guide, as it's possible for the same token to be used in a Subliminal and Material way.
- There is no token in existence that is able to heal an injury. Never has been, never will be. This is not an arbitrary limit but rather a natural consequence of how tokens are made in the first place.
- The more complex a spell, the more likely you are to cause a misfire. Depending on how badly you botched it, the Guide is instructed to change one or more Forms of the spell. This means your Desired Effect may very well come back at you, so be cautious about going full-bore.
- When attempting to dispel an active spell or one in the process of being cast, **HOW** is the preferred target for disrupting it, as doing so completely nullifies its effect(s). Disrupting other Articles resets them to their default Forms.

## CREATING TOKENS

Tokens are a caster's way of drowning out the noise of the Geist and all else. Drowning out all frames of reference, all doubt; and willing – demanding – belief in the unbelievable. They're about who your character is, what they've been through, what it means to them – and allowing that meaning to suffuse and supplant all other thoughts.

Which is to say: They are powerful as hell and emotionally intense to create. Each is a relay of life lived, pain felt, or joy held onto.

### NOT ALL CREATED EQUAL

Though characters will use tokens for every Form of every Article, most obey certain universal concepts. They may be uniquely named, but they represent something far from unique. This is true for the Forms within **WHO**, **WHAT**, **WHEN**, **WHERE**, and **WHY**.

These don't fly in the face of the Geist. They flow with the current. In and of themselves harmless. Directional and descriptive; not transformational. Named uniquely to protect the spells they are part of.

The delivery service for a package that may never come.

**HOW** is the package. **HOW** is where change happens. Where something veers away from normalcy. To use **HOW** is to recode the tide of humanity's collective belief and replace it – if temporarily – with something else.

To do that, it has to hurt. Even joy has to hurt.  
Something bittersweet and fractured.  
A trigger-happy nerve of memory.

### CREATING THE FIRE IN FIREBALL

Start with what you want the token to do. *The 'fire' in Fireball; the 'devotion' in Charm.* Write it down.

Now, you have to earn it.

What or whom does the token pivot around? It could be a person, a place, or an event. It's fine if it's a simple answer like, "My character's father." "The Vietnam War." Whatever.

This is the token's Core. Write it down.

Then, write down the answers to the following questions:

- ★ *What is it about (the Core) that matters so much?*
- ★ *When you think of (the Core), what do you picture?*
- ★ *What makes this mental picture – even if positive on its face – poison to you?*
- ★ *When you think of this poison, what do you picture?*
- ★ *What scars, if any, do you carry with you that are directly related to it?*
- ★ *How does (the Core) reflect in your actions even today?*

Creating Tokens requires a deep dive into a character's history. One not all Players will be willing to take. For a one-shot, that may be fine. For something intended as more, it would not be. As human beings attempting to overwhelm the force of all the collective thoughts screaming in their ears, tokens represent moments and sensations that the caster is either desperate to hold onto or wishes would go away.

Calling upon a token instantly sends the character back to a time of great misery or joy, to the exact instants that spike their belief in a way nothing else will.

These aren't casual moments. These moments fundamentally shaped who the character is.

Characters can have a number of **HOW** tokens equal to the lower number between their base Will Attribute Score and their Token Skill Level, with a minimum of 1. This means that all characters have a **HOW** token even if they don't know it exists or how to use it.

As their Will and Token Skill improve over time, they are able to add more.

This represents a growing ability to plumb the depths of their own psyche and invoke memories and emotions as needed.

When complete, share what you've written up to this point with your fellow Players and Guide. Tell them what the mnemonic device is for the token. As stated before, this can be anything. A sound or movement. A texture; the strum of a guitar.

Once you've shared, write down the token's name. Keep it to yourself. Even the Guide shouldn't know it. *Unless forced, you must never say it aloud.*

Refer to it by what it can do: *The 'fire' in Fireball.*

As characters go through experiences within the game, it's possible that they will be able to create tokens based on those experiences – even simulating spells they've been the victim of. This marks not only the evolution of their powers over time, but the evolution of the character's personality and beliefs as well.

## SIGILS

Though Token was a key source of structure and reason for casters, its structure also brought to light the frailty and limitation of human beings. Each has at most a handful of themes by which to inspire change. Further, it showed how little we understood magick in the first place. Early Tokenists enjoyed pointing out the latter – 'look how foolish you've all been' – but reviled the former. The number of **HOW** tokens was a source of unending frustration.

### THE OLD-FASHIONED WAY

Often in the shape of sheets of paper with symbols scrawled onto them, sigils had been around for centuries prior to Token. This was perhaps the reason why early Tokenists had rejected them. After all, Token was new and innovative. What could it learn from the dusty, superstitious times of people carrying leaflets in their pockets and writing letters that didn't mean anything?

Over time, this lack of maturity faded and its practitioners – seeking any and all reprieve from the innate limits magick's grimoire placed upon them – ultimately did look to the past for inspiration. Sigils, then, saw a resurgence – and it became common for Tokenists to carry around sheets (and other materials) of their own.

### WHAT SIGILS DO

Sigils are, quite simply, tokens or entire spells embedded into a material form. Though this is often parchment or paper of some kind, it can be any physical material. Glasses, dresses, musical instruments, rabbit's feet. The more elaborate, however, the more skill is required to create it.

Sigils offer several benefits:

- 1] **Sigils make casting easier.** When using a sigil of their own token or spell to cast, the caster's *Passable* threshold becomes an extension of their *Optimal* threshold. If it botches, however, not only does the spell backfire on the caster, but the sigil dies – losing all access to the power once embedded in it.
- 2] **Sigils allow a caster access to tokens they don't have.** By using a sigil, a caster is able to supplement their casting by having the token embedded in the sigil take the place of their own **HOW** token. This opens up spells that they normally would be unable to cast.

In fact, one of the salvos aimed against Token's adoption was the limit of **HOW** tokens it allowed for per person. After all, magick practitioners had never known such limits: They cast whatever they wanted, how and when they wanted.

Of course, most of what they cast failed on account of this detail. Token hadn't set the limit; it just identified what the limit was and how to understand it.

When you cast spells, you always use your Token Skill. The Sigil Skill is used to embed a token or spell into a material object called a sigil that offers the benefits to the left and no others.

- 3| **Sigils can become a source of income.** Using someone else's sigil to access a token does not reveal the original token's name, thus protecting its creator's property. As a result, there is a vast black market for sigils containing either tokens with rare or unusual effects or entire spells. Sigilists can restrict their sigils to working only a certain number of times or permanently until botched, further controlling the stock and trade of their valuable creations.

## CREATING A SIGIL

When creating a sigil, the form in which it will be housed must first be created. Though this form can be any kind of material or shape, it must be well-crafted or imperfections in the material may lead to irregularities in the token or spell embedded after the fact. Further, the material must be made by the sigilist personally.

When creating the material form for a sigil, the character performs the craft necessary to make it. Usually a Skill corresponding to a field of art, design, or engineering, with the components necessary to do so. This process has the following outcomes:

- ✦ On a *Critical*, the later roll to embed the token or spell will operate on the high die rather than the standard.
- ✦ On an *Optimal*, the later roll to embed the token or spell will operate as normal, using the standard middle die.
- ✦ On a *Passable* result, the later roll to embed the token or spell will operate on the low die rather than the standard.
- ✦ On a *Botched* roll, the material is so poorly fashioned that embedding a token or spell into it would result in a backfire of some kind upon its use. The Guide determines how that backfire occurs when/if it does.

Once the material is made, the character must trigger the mnemonic devices they would undergo if they were using the token or casting the spell - only this time, it operates off their Sigils Skill. This process has the following outcomes:

- ✦ On a *Critical*, any spell using the sigil will operate off the high die roll.
- ✦ On an *Optimal*, any spell using the sigil will operate off the standard die roll.
- ✦ On a *Passable* result, any spell using the sigil will operate off the low die roll.
- ✦ On a *Botched* roll, the spell backfires (as directed by the Guide) and the material is destroyed in a spectacularly ornate fashion, such as unthreading itself. Whatever the means of destruction, the material is unusable.

Sigils can be worth thousands, even tens of thousands, of dollars based on the rarity and value of the tokens or spells embedded into them.

That said, an average Sigilist would have an annual income of roughly \$50,000 and peddle wares that may be useful but are not unique outside their local market.

# EXAMPLE SPELLS

To illustrate the flexibility of Token and provide a foundation for thinking through its interpretation of the Grimoire, the following are spells that work within the game. Some are staples of the Fantasy genre, while others are more distinct to WITCH DOCTORS.

For each example, we will provide the information below in this format:

## Spell Name

**ARTICLE:** Form

**ARTICLE 2:** Form

...etc.

Read as a Sentence

Notes

Let's begin with an old favorite...

## Fireball

**WHAT:** Material

**WHEN:** Then

**WHY:** You (S)

**HOW:** 'the fire in Fireball'

Read as a Sentence: The Source conjures fire near themselves and it travels towards a specific living person.

*The reason we don't use **WHERE** despite the Fireball traveling to the target is that it doesn't appear Near (at the Target)- it appears Here (at the Source). Given **WHY** targets You (S) and **WHEN** allows the spell to exist for the time needed to reach You (S), the effect travels to that point, causes material damage, and then is overwritten by the Geist. If we had wanted the spell to set the target on fire without it visibly traveling towards them, using **WHERE** would have made that possible. This is just the least costly option.*

## Group Charm

**WHY:** You (P)

**HOW:** 'the affection in Charm'

Read as a Sentence: The Source causes a sense of adoration in a group of targets, You (P), towards the Source.

*Notice how structurally simple this is. In this case, **WHERE**'s habit of going back to the Source is useful: We are implying Here, which translates to the focus of adoration being the Source.*

## Self-Triggered Fear Effect

**WHO:** Locus

**WHEN:** Trigger

**WHERE:** There

**WHY:** Locus

**HOW:** ‘the existential fear in Hallucination’

Read as a Sentence: The Source sets a spell on the Locus that the Locus invokes via a Trigger, resulting in the Locus experiencing a frightening hallucination.

*In the above, the Source defines a Trigger {what is it?} that will cause the Locus to invoke a hallucination on themselves. It’s important to note that the Locus has no idea why this is happening or that they are making it happen. If desired, the Source could have left **WHO** off, allowing themselves to trigger the hallucination whenever they wanted.*

And, now, for something ridiculous...

### Mass Spontaneous Detonation

**WHO:** Loci

**WHAT:** Material

**WHEN:** Trigger

**WHERE:** There

**WHY:** Loci

**HOW:** ‘the explosion in Detonation’

Read as a Sentence: The Source sets a spell that anyone, anywhere, can invoke that results in those people exploding when triggered.

## THE SPELLCASTING WORKSHEET

On the next page is a tool called the Spellcasting Worksheet. It is intended to make the process of creating spells more straightforward by recasting the Articles of Token in a different order. It is not intended as a replacement for the information up to this point, but rather as an instructional aid.

Once you have defined a **HOW** token, write its descriptor into the box for **HOW**. Similar to the examples provided, it’s best to set it in context of a spell you have in mind already: ‘the fire in Fireball’, ‘the affection in Charm’, etc. With a pencil, select the options for the other Articles as needed to create the spell you envision.

Now, let’s play around a bit by changing one of the other Articles. Erase one of your selections and select instead the Form to its left or right. For **WHY**, you might move from You/That to You/Those; for **WHEN**, from Then to Trigger.

By doing this, you’ve created a new spell. Give it a name and write it down on a piece of paper, including the difficulty (the number of pipes you crossed). Not all of them will be useful. Some might even be dangerous to you.

Perform this exercise a number of times to build up your character’s go-to spells. You can always create more, but it makes it easier for you to reference them in the course of playing the game.

As a character’s expertise in Token grows, they can intuit new spells more easily. Mechanically, this means they can cast more spells without using the low die.

Using Token allows a character to create literally hundreds of spells for each token of **HOW** they possess. You don’t have to write them all down in order to use them – it’s just to speed the process and help you practice using the grimoire to achieve different effects.

In time, you’ll do it enough that creating a new spell on the fly won’t be as daunting a task.

# WITCH DOCTORS

## SPELLCASTING WORKSHEET

Compare your Skill Level to the number of |'s you crossed.  
If your Skill Level is greater than or equal to that number,  
roll normally. Else, use the low die.

**HOW** What effect do you want to create?  
*The fire in Fireball; the affection in Charm...*

**WHAT** What is the nature of the effect?  
*Subliminal hits the mind; Material hits physical.*

**Subliminal**

**Material**

**WHY** Who / what will be impacted by it?  
*Speaks to motive. Intent. The Target.*

**Source**  
*aka Me*

**You / That**  
*1 Person or Object*

**You / Those**  
*Many People or Objects*

**WHO** Who can trigger the spell's effect?  
*If a spell, it must match the other spell's **WHO**.*

**Source**  
*aka Me*

**Locus**  
*A specific someone*

**Loci**  
*Anyone*

**WHEN** When does its effect happen?  
*Then is about time; Trigger is about an event.*

**Now**

**Then**  
*At a certain point in time*

**Trigger**  
*When something else happens*

**WHERE** Where does the effect take place?  
*'Near' means within the range of one's senses.  
If you cross |'s, you must cross the same amount  
in **WHEN** at minimum.*

**Here**  
*Me or where I cast it*

**Near**  
*Near me or where I cast it*

**There**  
*Wherever*

# THE GUIDEBOOK

## PHILOSOPHIES & GUIDANCE

If you've been running tabletop roleplaying games for a long time, what follows may prove to be a nice refresher or an utter waste of your time. Peruse at your leisure, see if anything strikes a chord. Else, move to the next section and spend extra time on *Building a Mystery* and *Guiding the Game*.

It can't hurt.

For those who are new to this sort of thing, welcome. This is principally for you. While not being an exhaustive tome, this section is devoted to helping you understand some of the concepts and themes at the heart of WITCH DOCTORS and ensure that you're able to evoke them in a meaningful way.

Ultimately, these are guidelines. Do what works for you and your group. But these are some things to try out in the absence of alternative ideas.

- ★ **As Guide, your primary job is to ensure the safety and well-being of your Players.** WITCH DOCTORS can get brutal. It should, it must. To be true to what it is, a more realistic depiction of magick in a world very similar to our own, its antithesis is to pull punches. You have to land them. Hard. Where it hurts, in a part of the body that squirts life-giving juice.

But with that comes the risk of touching a nerve, of triggering a reaction that you might never have intended in a Player – or even in you. If you're unsure how far you should go, even after talking Consent in Gaming, let the Player know: "Look, this is going to be brutal. Like, really bad. What do you think might happen to your character in this situation?"

Use one of the options they bring to light. Even if it pulls the punch an inch more than you might have otherwise, do it. Their willingness to ideate, to provide an outcome, illustrates a foundation for accepting that the game might go there.

Just check in with them after. Listen to learn, not to speak.

- ★ **Running the game is not about rolling dice.** Yes, you have to. It's core to the mechanics; it allows for crazy shit to happen as crazy shit inevitably does. But don't feel like you have to trigger a roll every time they try to do something: Even a lack of Skill Level doesn't mean the character is an idiot. 'Untrained' is the average human being driving a car or using a computer; it's the average person being brilliant beyond our cousins in the animal kingdom.

When you call for a roll, it should be a sign to everyone at the table that shit just got real. To put down the phone, sit up, and pay attention. Something bad might happen. A screw might turn.

- ★ **Spend most of your prep time for a game thinking about Agendas and representatives of them.** What do they want? Remember: A Mystery is only mysterious when you're on the outside looking in. To the people you're creating, the Mystery is straight-forward. They needed X to happen

A PDF about Safety & Consent in Gaming is available at <https://www.montecookgames.com/consent-in-gaming>. Please at least read through and discuss prior to starting your 1<sup>st</sup> session.

so Y could. They had or have a goal in mind, and the Inciting Event of the Mystery was only part of it.

Don't try to layer mysterious element on mysterious element, especially early on. Keep it simple. As you grow your instincts for what matters and what doesn't, what compels and drives engagement from your Players, the more you'll start building things that are more complex and deeper. Don't try to do it. It will happen on its own.

The *Building a Mystery* section outlines some methods for doing this well, but from the beginning, lean on simplicity over trying to be clever.

- ✦ **Let the Players help you.** Few games mechanically provide Players the ability to snatch away authorial control from the Guide more than WITCH DOCTORS. But it requires the Player to reveal or come to terms with an aspect of their character that even the Guide may not have been privy to in advance.

With Resources Tests, Players are able to tell you something worth exploring about the character, even when what was revealed was done so impulsively. They defined the person or item – not you – and their willingness to interject that and have it connected to their character's life is meaningful and a source of evolution for who their character is.

- ✦ **If you are really good with something like Roll20 or Fantasy Grounds, by all means use it; else, streamline your approach.** Often the best way to guide WITCH DOCTORS is to allow yourself and the Players lots of flexibility. There are things like Travel Distance in the game, for those who like that tactical edge, but in some cases it's easier to run theater of the mind rather than having a battle map for every situation. If you know that battle maps are your group's thing, avoid having more than one to contend with in a session.

- ✦ **Keep a narrative Turn Order written down based on the characters' Reflex scores.** It's very easy for the most opinionated and extroverted members to take center stage at a higher rate than those who aren't those things. Having a Turn Order gives you a standard process for checking in with each Player, even if it's just to ask, "Hey, what are you thinking about (or doing), Em?" with Em being the character's name rather than the Player's.

- ✦ **Remind the Players to describe what their characters are actually doing in the scene, rather than letting them say, "I'm going to use my Token Skill."** Remind them why, referring back to the advice and guidance offered in *Playing the Game* earlier. Rolls are not to their benefit, so they should avoid prompting them.

# BUILDING A MYSTERY

Your primary prep for WITCH DOCTORS is building Mysteries, designing Agendas, and populating them with interesting, believable characters. Your job is not to be mysterious. *Again: Mysteries are only mysterious from the outside looking in.* Start from a logical series of steps that lead to a desirable outcome. Let the Players take it from there.

## GOALS

People do things for reasons. Some reasons are conscious, almost fanatically held to, while others may be inadvertent. Driven by desires even the character doesn't fully understand.

Start with the Goal. What does the owner of the Agenda (that we'll build soon) want? Is it revenge? Money? Influence? To satiate some kind of need or hunger? Each of these is a compulsion. Not something to be ignored. It may come from desperation, a place of vulnerability or pain. Not everything bad that happens is caused by someone intending to do bad or twirling a moustache at their own wickedness.

To buy into the world of WITCH DOCTORS is to buy into the inherent frailty of human beings. Even those with power suffer from weakness. Everyone who has things wants something else.

Start there. With a Goal that is driven by human frailty and hunger. What, in the end, does this person or group of people want?

If it helps, begin with a general and common need for many people. This can be things like:

- ✦ *They want money*
- ✦ *They want to be admired*
- ✦ *They want power*
- ✦ *They want to be desirable*

But don't stop there. People are particular about what they want. They need something *tangible*, something they can picture. Let's add a clarifying question.

- ✦ *They want money... for what?*
- ✦ *They want to be admired... by whom?*
- ✦ *They want power... over what?*
- ✦ *They want to be desirable... to whom?*

This doesn't change the need being broader in scope at its root, but it helps center the need around a specific benchmark. A starting point. Evidence that they're on the right track. Something to begin filling the emptiness that they feel, be it pure hunger, pain, or an unyielding sense of vulnerability. Even if ultimately it won't be enough and further steps will be needed.

This is what leads you to building an Agenda.

## AGENDAS

First, grab a sheet of typical paper and lay it horizontally in front of you. Draw a dotted line across the center, separating it into a top and bottom half. For now, we are going to exclusively operate in the top half.

On the far right, write down the Goal you've landed upon. This will be the more general need. *They want money. They want power.* Don't write it large. Leave yourself plenty of room. But definitely underline it to represent that this is what they want and what they desperately do not want to lose. Now, draw a line from what you wrote to the leftmost edge of the top half of your sheet. This is one timeline of the Agenda you're building:

**We're going to call this the 'Agenda', in fact.** *This is what happens if the Players' characters are not involved.*

Now, starting at the left end of that line, write the first step they took on their journey towards their Goal above the line. This will likely be small. A baby step. Sticking their toe in; seeing what they can get away with. If a spell was involved, it was something simple but had an outcome. Write what they got from the step below the line. It won't get them to the finish line, but it's a start.

Further steps along the journey will be written to the right of that one in a similar way, with each escalating from the one before it. Bigger. From a toe in the water to diving deep. In addition, the interval between steps will shrink as they grow in confidence.

Now, draw a new timeline in the bottom half of the page. From each step outlined in the timeline above, draw a dotted line straight down that touches against the timeline in the bottom half.

**We're going to call this the "Liabilities".** For each intersection where a dotted line from the Agenda impacts it, something was left in its owner's wake. A piece of evidence, a sign. It could be a victim or an accomplice; a sigil scrawled on a wall like graffiti or someone from the neighborhood who came into money suddenly and attracted the local gossip's attention. Not conclusive with a name handily attached or a perfect eye-witness, but definitely something that – upon reflection – could expose the owner of the Agenda in some way. Above the Liabilities timeline, write the liability – a clue. Below, write the place and the name of a person.

Each time the owner of the Agenda pokes their head out, they risk exposure. Steps leave marks: Sometimes on people, sometimes on places.

If the mark is on a place, the person's name is someone who can lead the Witch Doctors to that location; if the mark is on a person, the place is either where that person was impacted or where you can find them.

To this point, let's address the elephant in the room. **You, the Guide, do not hide clues from the Players.** The people with Agendas and Goals do. As a Guide, you enjoy nigh ultimate power to control what the Players can find or learn. The ones responsible do not. They will fumble; and, frankly, the more they do, the more you'll find the story expand and become interesting.

Once you have these two timelines built out, most of the work is done. You are a couple of decisions away from being able to run a session or two.

If you're designing a Mystery for a one-shot or single session, include three to four steps at most.

A Mystery can even be about the aftermath of a prior Agenda, in which the owner attempts to clean up after themselves by figuratively or literally burning shit down.

## THE INCITING EVENT

The Inciting Event is what caught the Witch Doctors' attention in the first place. It's a scene that may not even involve the Players' characters, but nonetheless is going to compel them into the Mystery. It's about setting the Mystery's tone and establishing some of the characters the Players will either interact with in scenes to come or attempt to help or avenge.

Something to keep in mind, though, is that the Inciting Event can happen at any time during an Agenda. Odds are it's one of the steps, or a consequence from actions taken in one, but it needn't be at the start of the Agenda. In fact, it's often more interesting when it isn't.

The Inciting Event is simply the event that ultimately got the Players on the train, not where the train started its journey or ended it. This leads us to the two types of Agendas:

- ✦ Closed Agenda
- ✦ Open Agenda

A **Closed Agenda** is one that has already been finished. The Goal was reached, whatever the aftermath. From the owner's perspective, they got what they wanted; now's the time to savor the spoils or, maybe, to close gaps. Remove Liabilities.

*Owners of Closed Agendas tend towards more passive measures against exposure: Bribes, mild threats, etc. They got what they wanted. No sense blowing shit up if they don't have to. Only where that fails do they escalate to more aggressive actions.*

An **Open Agenda** is one that's underway. The steps you listed haven't been taken. They're in process or yet to come. That hunger in the owner's belly, unsatiated, beckons them onward and forces them to escalate.

*Owners of Open Agendas tend to be more aggressive as a result. If the Inciting Event is early on, they may start with more passive measures but won't screw around with those for too long. If they're deeply entrenched in the process, nearing their Goal, escalation ramps up quickly to active measures: People get hurt, killed. Buildings are burned down. They pull strings or cast spells that can ruin lives.*

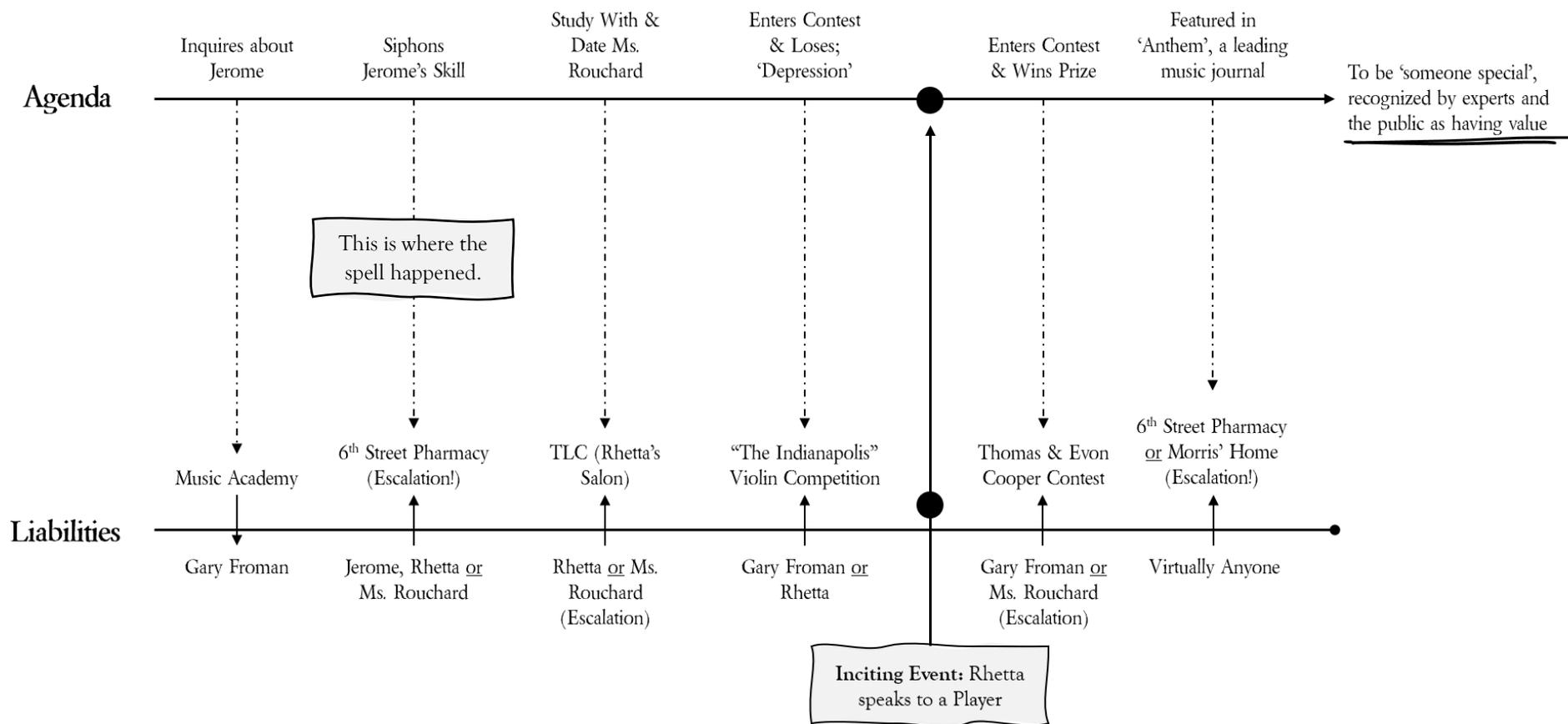
This is a key part of your job as Guide: Oscillating between passive and active measures. This is how you build engagement: When you make clear that the world engages back. The world isn't frozen, unsympathetic to the Players' actions. It responds. Evolves. Agendas may shift entirely based on their intrusion, pivoting to fuck them over before continuing on.

Building a Mystery isn't about making it confusing as hell, nor is it to pad it. If your Players figure it out quickly, that's fine. Start from a point of simplicity and escalate in later Mysteries if you're guiding for a bunch of Sherlocks. Just make sure there are stakes. That active measures are taken. That things go wrong, in the beginning, in the middle, and/or at the end. Figuring out the Mystery isn't the end; it just points the Players towards a way of resolving things.

Solving a Mystery and resolving a Mystery are two vastly different things.

# AN EXAMPLE AGENDA FOR A MYSTERY

## The Agenda of Morris Haller



## GUIDING THE GAME

One responsibility of the Guide is providing the Players a framework for how the game is played, how different situations are managed, and how to move through a Mystery (and the Scenes which comprise it) with a sense of purpose.

A key inspiration for WITCH DOCTORS is the television series *House M.D.* about a brilliant but physically and mentally tortured doctor and his team beset upon by complex medical mysteries, personal challenges and distractions, and the very moralities and ethics of the actions they take trying to save their patients' lives. It is, in principle, yet another procedural show – in which the characters move from one step to another in a semi-logical order – but it sets itself apart from many other procedurals by giving the characters motivations and obstacles beyond the mystery alone.

Where *Building a Mystery* provides you, the Guide, a map for what's out there waiting to be discovered, laying out clues, and creating believable antagonists to the Players' characters, this section is devoted to pacing and adding scaffolding to what the Players actually can and should do and how their characters evolve on account of it.

Similar to how *Playing the Game* began with a treatise on the Guide, *Guiding the Game* is going to start out by talking about the Players. Odd. Again. I know.

## THE PLAYERS

Players are the main protagonists of the game. They are expected to create characters that are interesting to them. Characters with jobs. Sometimes with family. Characters with goals and ambitions, drives and wants, that can send them afield from the strict progress of finding clues and solving Mysteries.

*This is intentional.* A traditional adage of roleplaying games is not to 'split the party' – that is, to separate the group of Player characters from one another. It increases the likelihood of characters dying, of the win state for the game fading further out of reach.

Turning bold adventurers into victims.  
With little reward to take the risk.

Which is why WITCH DOCTORS uses the desire to progress their characters, not only the Mystery, as a basis for simultaneously evolving characters and putting them at risk. Forcing them out of the safe harbor of their fellow Player characters and into something that sets their character up for success or growth to come.

This occurs through the application of Goals.

## PRIVATE GOALS

When characters are created, the Guide must tell the Players to turn their Character Sheet over and write something in the bottom-right corner of the page.

*What is your character's Private Goal? What do they want to accomplish or do, more than anything? And why don't they reveal this to the other Player characters?*

Once they've done this, inform them that satisfying that Private Goal is worth 3 Experience Points. That these points can be used to grow their characters. To make them stronger or more diverse. More interesting. Then, inform them that solving the Mystery is worth 3 Experience Points. Identify it as a Shared Goal: One that they each benefit from.

Similar to the Goal that drives a Mystery's Agenda, a Private Goal is something that permeates what characters do. Who they are. It is a compulsion. An emptiness inside. A cancer and its cure all at once.

Fodder, for you, to leverage at inopportune times. To drive a wedge between the characters; to force them apart and create obstacles, even chaos.

## MANAGING GOALS

For each Mystery, designate one Player character as a focus. This should be cycled, Mystery after Mystery, from one Player to the next. You needn't be as rigid as always keeping the order the same, but each must get their opportunity.

For that character, the promise of satisfying their Private Goal comes full force. Breadcrumbs give way to breadsticks. Depending upon what their Private Goal is, you integrate elements to draw them out without explicitly saying what it is to the other Players. They'll be able to guess, just as their characters may become more and more suspicious why their friend and associate disappears cryptically from time to time.

This serves multiple functions:

- ✦ **It splits the party.** Unless they're married, the Witch Doctors have lives apart from one another. Yes, they work together and rely on one another when the wicked this way comes, but they aren't tied at the hip.
- ✦ **It allows a deeper dive into one another's characters.** What drives people is a principal component of what forces them to evolve. Or to not evolve. Either is interesting because each brings intrapersonal conflict and helps define obstacles to their participation in the Mystery underway.
- ✦ **It provides opportunities for targeted escalation.** It puts Player characters at risk. Diving into a Mystery may lead to the Agenda owner taking note of who's screwing with their operations. If one of them keeps splitting from the others, going odd places, having private conversations and encounters, it opens up the potential for you to trigger an event that kicks the Mystery in the ass.

## EVOLUTION OF CHARACTERS

To mechanically evolve a character involves spending Experience Points that they accumulate to improve their Attributes, Skills, or Resources.

To improve an Attribute Score by 1, the Player must spend Experience Points equal to the sum of all their Attribute Scores *plus 1*. If a character has 12 points allocated across their Attributes, it will take 13 Experience Points to raise one.

To improve a Skill Level, the Player must spend Experience Points equal to the Skill's new Level. To go from 1 to 2 would cost 2 points; from 3 to 4, 4 points; etc.

If you like, you can even build a simple Agenda for the Player's character listing out things you will reveal and have happen to entice them to act on their Private Goal.

Attribute Scores and Skill Levels both top out at 6. This represents the zenith of human potential across their natural abilities, as well as their expertise in any one topic or field of study.

No Level may be skipped: To go from 1 to 3 would necessitate paying the cost for 2 before paying for 3. In such a case, it would cost 5 Experience Points to go from 1 to 3.

To improve Resources works the same as Skills: The character's current base Resources from their Profession *plus 1*. In essence, they are investing further into their Profession. This may take the form of a promotion, being published, etc. It's up to the Player how this manifests. If the character's base Resources value is 5, then 6 points would be needed to raise it to 6.

## EVOLVING A PRIVATE GOAL

The thing about a Private Goal is that it's almost impossible to complete fully. Even when it's technically achieved, it doesn't fully go away. There's an underlying hunger that compels characters to act. To yearn for more.

To take another dive into the depths within them.

Once something is achieved or explored about the Private Goal, what's left is... the Private Goal. You just tack something else onto it.

Let's say a character's Private Goal is: *To find peace with her father over what happened to her mom.* There are bits to it that matter more than others. Compulsions and themes that characters hang onto. Once completed, the Player should recraft the Private Goal borrowing the language (if needed) to center the character.

*To learn more about her father's time after he left her mom.*  
*To find peace with the loss of her mother by exploring her past.*  
*To learn more about what truly happened to her mom.*  
*To find peace with... something or someone else.*

It's a pivot. A shift that carries the character forward and deeper. What is the compulsion at the heart of this person? 'To find peace'? To explore connections to one or both of her parents? To explain things where there are gaps?

It needn't forever keep to the same language, but there should be certain themes that emerge about who the character is and what matters to them. Where the Mystery is about setting the world right (or at least more right), a Private Goal is about doing the same for the character.

Characters grow and evolve as people in the pursuit of both.

Unlike Attributes and Skills, there is no hard cap on Resources - though increasing income, again and again, may lead to a logical shift in Profession.

Private Goals must always be written down and shared with the Guide. One of the Guide's tasks is to ensure they understand what it is about the Private Goal that the Player wants to explore and frame things towards that.

## SCENES

Now that we understand what drives characters to do the things they do, it's important to describe the mechanical means of getting them from one point to another. This is done via Scenes.

If you've watched a film or TV show, you are familiar with the concept of a Scene.

Wikipedia defines it in the following way:

In filmmaking and video production, a scene is generally thought of as the action in a single location and continuous time.

Though we would recommend you avoid drawing explicit attention to the act of creating a new Scene in the course of a game session, it's easy to think of a new Scene beginning where there is a cut from one location to another, from one time to another, or a combination of the two. The concept of Scenes is not new to roleplaying games; in fact, many operate on the concept of truncating logical, in-fiction time to those moments of greatest interest to fit as much engaging material into a game session as possible.

What is rarely done, and something that WITCH DOCTORS expects to be done at least once in a Mystery (with the Inciting Event), is to show Scenes in which none of the Player characters even appear – or are not the primary focal point. Film and television share the same preference, after all: Show what is most interesting at that time. What creates momentum, heightens contrast, or builds dread.

*While the Player characters are searching for someone they suspect to be the cause of a horrible Spell victimizing dozens of innocent people, the Guide may intercut a tiny Scene to reveal that the suspect is visiting one of their homes, even though their characters could not possibly know this. In such an instance, what they know and what they can act upon within the game are two different things. Similar to when films use this technique, the intent is to build tension and generate concern for what happens next.*

Scenes act as the framework by which to build the story, and though most of the time this is driven by Player interaction, it can also be as a side effect of it. The above Scene might occur because of a failed roll in an earlier one. Something was revealed that shouldn't have been. Someone recognized the character in the midst of another person's interrogation. Many degrees of Kevin Bacon could have gotten the suspect to the character's front door.

Beyond that, you'll find Scenes just naturally weave in and out of one another on account of 'checking in' with each Player's character using the narrative Turn Order recommended in *Philosophies & Guidance*.

When the characters are separated from one another, asking, "What's Em doing?" or "What's Travis doing?" invites the Players of those characters to set a new Scene that the Guide then helps bring to life. Let them help build the story and the Scenes which comprise it.

In this instance, the Guide isn't Establishing Fiction about the Players' characters, but parts of the world in which they inhabit. Which is fair game, so long as it is explainable how it came to be.

When in doubt, consult the Turn Order and trust your instincts. You know how stories are told, how Scenes work. The mechanics are there to enable Fiction to be Established by the Players, not to turn the process into a slog or make you question how a story operates.

## GUIDING A CAMPAIGN

The serial nature of WITCH DOCTORS – with Mysteries as core to the fabric of play – makes it adept for one-shots. Which, in turn, makes it great for groups, as it allows a Player to miss a game and not miss out on anything massive in a vast plotline that has stretched over years. This also makes it easy to integrate new Players in, as a guest or otherwise.

But what about running a campaign with the same Players' characters week after week? There are a number of ways to approach this, but here are the easiest:

**At least one of the Players' characters is in a position that would warrant routine involvement in situations.** Yes, this might mean someone being a detective, but it needn't be so clear-cut. Paramedics, judges, guidance counselors, teachers, doctors, nurses, etc. are all people who have a lot of exposure to others' lives. Given that magick is most commonly used in a Subliminal fashion, psychologists are also a sound option. People translating magical effects for madness.

- and/or -

**There is a vast Agenda seeking to overturn elements of the sociopolitical order within their area.** Things are changing and there are a large number of interested parties and owners, with each potentially having a separate Agenda that rolls up to the larger one. Not every session would be about it, anymore than every Sherlock Holmes story is about Moriarty, but there is an undercurrent of steps being taken, Agendas being fulfilled or challenged or shifted, that the Players run up against from time to time.

In such a situation, it's unlikely that active measures will be used early on against the Players' characters. They may notice they're being watched. Someone at their work may retire early and have their position filled by an inquisitive, friendly person who takes a shine to a Player's character. Their spouse may complain of calls from surveys, their email being hacked, etc.

When you get to something big, exposure is something the Agenda's owners are good at managing. There may be cogs in the machine who aren't, but those can be dealt with – and, besides, they don't know enough to break the whole thing down. Further, not everyone involved is a Witch Doctor or has the ability to use magick.

In fact, the overwhelming majority will be mundane with minimal knowledge of magick's influence over the larger operation.

# APPENDIX

## WEAPONS

# WEAPONS

As with most things that require the character to step beyond their routine means, Weapons operate off Skills. To keep from bogging things down too severely, the Skills that operate them are meant to be somewhat generalized: Handguns, Shotguns, Rifles, Knives, Swords, etc. If Players want to gear up their characters with more specific types of pistols, they are welcome to – but it would still operate off the more general Skill of Handguns.

**Mechanically, Weapons add to or multiply the Damage generated by an attack, which defaults to the Athleticism added to the Skill roll. Obviously when straining Athleticism to support an attack, the character will hit harder.**

Before we dive into the Weapons and their stats, let's discuss some basic concepts so that they are understood:

★ **DUAL-WIELDING.** The majority of people have a main hand and an off-hand. That is, they are generally left- or right-handed. Characters are free to use a weapon in each hand, but there are some rules around this as trying to do both splits the character's focus.

- *The Weapon in the off-hand always operates off the low die roll.*
- *The Weapon in the main hand can only use the middle die roll, even if circumstances would have normally allowed it to use the high one.*
- *If circumstances are notably disadvantageous for the character, then the Passable threshold falls off and only the Optimal will result in a successful attack for either.*
- *If the Weapons require reloading, a Reload of Move Activity will become a Move and a Reload of a Move will become two Moves.*

★ **REACH.** Melee-based Weapons have a Reach stat that generalizes to Short, Medium, Long, and Far. If the Player character's Weapon is at its preferred Range and their opponent's Weapon is not, they use the high die roll rather than the middle; if the reverse is true, they use the low.

★ **PROPERTIES.** Weapons generally feature Properties, appearing as italicized text directly below their names. These represent how they are most commonly used. Some specific makes of that Weapon may not feature all of them. [A rapier, while a one-handed sword, is not known for *Slashing*.]

- When a Weapon is used in alignment with its Properties, it acts normally. When it is not, it should be seen as having the same effect as crossing three pipes { | | | }, or thresholds of difficulty, in order to be used in that manner.

We recognize that there are both nuanced and vast differences across the realm of Weapons. That a rapier and scimitar – while both being 1-handed Swords, reflect very different means of fighting. The same is true of any category of Weapon listed in the pages to follow.

Where the generalized stats do not match your personal knowledge of the Weapon in question, feel free to modify their Properties to suit.

But avoid trying to create the perfect Weapon. The reason such nuance exists across them is that there is no Weapon that is perfect for any and all occasions.

Players may choose to attack with only their main hand Weapon to get access to the high die roll.

This is easier to manage when a map is involved but can be used theater of the mind so long as the Guide is clear on the discrepancy in distance. Players should not be surprised.

## MELEE WEAPONS

Weapons that operate off a Melee Skill are kept within the character's hands across the bulk of an attack; they almost never leave the character's hands. Such Weapons feature a Reach stat.

### AXE

*Bludgeoning, Slashing.*  
Damage: +6  
Reach: Medium (5 ft.)

### AXE (2-Handed)

*Bludgeoning, Slashing.*  
Damage: +9  
Reach: Long (10 ft.)  
Requirement: Athleticism 2

### CLUB / BAT

*Bludgeoning.*  
Damage: +3  
Reach: Medium (5 ft.)

### HAND / FOOT

*Bludgeoning, Flurry, Grappling.*  
Damage: +0  
Reach: Short (5 ft.)  
Flurry: On an *Optimal*, a Hand / Foot gets one extra attack.

### KNIFE

*Flurry, Piercing, Slashing, Thrown.*  
Damage: +3  
Reach: Short (5 ft.)  
Range (Thrown): 10 | 20 | 30 | 40  
Flurry: On an *Optimal*, a Knife gets one extra attack *except* when Thrown

### POLEARM

*Bludgeoning, Slashing.*  
Damage: +5  
Reach: Medium (5 ft.)

### POLEARM (2-Handed)

*Bludgeoning, Slashing.*  
Damage: +8  
Reach: Long (10 ft.)  
Requirement: Athleticism 2

Melee Weapons feature fewer pipes {} than Ranged Weapons generally because they are less Skill intensive to use at their effective range. With Ranged Weapons, the character is not only competing against their opponent – but with a multitude of other factors exerting force against them successfully hitting their target.

A *Requirement* is used to note the minimal amount of an Attribute, or some other characteristic, that must be present to use a Weapon or Item normally. Characters who do not meet this Requirement when using the Weapon or Item will default to the lowest die roll for its use.

When using a Weapon that features *Grappling*, a character can choose to cause Damage or apply a Condition called *Grappled*. So long as *Grappled* is maintained, either Damage or another Condition can be applied in following Turns.

**If Short and Medium are both a 5-foot Reach, what is the difference?**

Medium has Reach advantage over Short unless the character using the Weapon with Short Reach attacks the other by surprise.

When Dual-Wielding, the Weapon in the main-hand dictates the Reach advantage for the roll.

## **SPEAR**

*Piercing, Thrown.*

Damage: +4

Reach: Long (10 ft.)

Range (Thrown): 20 | 30 | 40 | 50 | 60

## **SPEAR (Large)**

*Piercing.*

Damage: +6

Reach: Far (15 ft.)

Requirement: Athleticism 3

## **SWORD**

*Piercing, Slashing.*

Damage: +5

Reach: Medium (5 ft.)

## **SWORD (2-Handed)**

*Piercing, Slashing.*

Damage: +7 ||| +3 for 2 targets

Reach: Long (10 ft.)

Requirement: Athleticism 2

## **WHIP**

*Bludgeoning, Grappling, Slashing.*

Damage: +2

Reach: Far (15 ft.)

## RANGED WEAPONS

Weapons that operate off a Ranged Skill perform attacks most often against opponents from outside of arm's reach. That said, a pistol against a person's head does the job fine, so there are some situational aspects to be considered.

If used as Melee Weapons, Ranged Weapons act as Clubs and would operate off that Skill with a revised Damage of +1.

### BOW

*Ranged. Uses Arrows. A quiver holds 24 arrows.*

Damage: +2  
Range: 100 | 200 | 300  
Reload: 1 Activity  
Requirement: Athleticism 1

### BOW (Long)

*Ranged. Uses Arrows. A quiver holds 24 arrows.*

Damage: +4  
Range: 100 | 200 | 300 | 400 | 500 | 600  
Reload: 1 Activity  
Requirement: Athleticism 2

### CROSSBOW

*Ranged. Uses Bolts. A quiver holds 6 bolts.*

Damage: +2  
Range: 100 | 200 | 300  
Reload: 1 Move

### CROSSBOW (Heavy)

*Ranged. A windlass is used to reload. Uses Bolts. A quiver holds 6 bolts.*

Damage: +4  
Range: 200 | 300 | 400 | 500 | 600 | 700  
Reload: 1 Turn  
Requirement: Athleticism 2

### HANDGUN

*Ranged. Uses Bullets, holds 18.*

Damage: +4  
Range: 50 | 100 | 150 | 200 | 250 | 300  
Reload: 1 Activity

### SUBMACHINE GUN

*Ranged. Uses Bullets; empties after 4 attacks.*

Damage: +5 for 1 target ||| +1 for up to 3 targets  
Range: 100 | 200 | 300 | 400 || 500 | 600  
Reload: 1 Move

### RIFLE

*Ranged. Uses Bullets, holds 10.*

Damage: +8  
Range: 100 | 200 | 300 | 400 | 500 | 600  
Reload: 1 Move

## SHOTGUN

*Ranged. Propulsive. Uses Shells, holds 5.*

Damage: +10 for 1 target ||| +4 for 2 targets

Range: 50 | 100 | 150 | 200

Reload: 2 Turns

Requirement: Athleticism 1

# WITCH DOCTORS



## 1 NAME

Write the full name of your character.

## 2 CONCEPT, ETC.

Write a high-level concept of the character. Think of this as what you would say to introduce them to someone.

## 3 PROFESSION

What does your character do for money? Who pays them to do that job?

## 4 RESOURCES

How much income do they have? Google the Profession, find the amount, and round it up to the nearest \$10,000. Then, divide by 10,000 and write the number in the white box.

## 5 HEALTH

The character's Health is 50. Write it in the white box.

## 6 SKILLS

Based on the Concept and Profession, select Skills and write them on the long lines below the Attributes that support them.

Write only Skills that truly matter to the capabilities of the character you envision.

Distribute 20 Levels between them, up to 6 maximum in each. Write the Level in the white icon with 'LVL' above it.

Then, subtract your Level for each one from 20 and write the result under the 'OPT' column. Subtract 7 from the 'OPT' and write that number in the 'PASS' column. These are your revised Success thresholds anytime you roll these Skills.

NAME 1

PROFESSION 3

ASSETS 9

CONCEPT, ETC. & SO ON 2

4 RESOURCES

HEALTH 5

ATTRIBUTES & SKILLS

Example: Acrobatics LVL 0 PASS 13 OPT 20 As Skill Level Increases Acrobatics LVL 3 PASS 10 OPT 17

Attribute	LVL	PASS	OPT
ATHLETICISM	6		
EMPATHY	6		
WILL	6		
INTELLECT	6		

SAVES 8

- Reflex -  
Athleticism + Empathy  
Physical

- Resolve -  
Athleticism + Will  
Internal

- Intuition -  
Empathy + Intellect  
Sensory

- Defiance -  
Intellect + Will  
Emotional

## 7 ATTRIBUTES

Once you know where your Skills are, you know what to support with Attributes. Distribute 10 points across them: Athleticism, Empathy, Will, and Intellect. Each must have a minimum of 1, a maximum of 6. Write their scores in the large white circle near each one.

## 8 SAVES

With the allocation of your Attributes, you have also created the baseline amount for each of your Saves. When the Attribute change, so too do the Saves.

Each Save covers a different category of potential harm.

## 9 ASSETS

Your house, your method of transport. If you live in a modest home or apartment, reduce 1 or 2 from your Resources value and put the revised number in the gray box next to it. Scale up as necessary based on how well-off your residence is.

For every \$20,000 spent on the character's vehicle or mode of transport, subtract another 1 from the number in Resources. Modify the number in the gray box until it accounts for these expenditures.

You are done.



# WITCH DOCTORS

Coming Soon to Kickstarter