

CRIMINAL ELEMENT

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A GAME OF DESPERATE DEEDS

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24HourRPG 

the forge 

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Created as part of the 24 Hour RPG challenge

Created between 12.30 am 8 April 2003 and 12.30 am 9 April 2003.

Eastman Variation Version 0.5

THE BEGINNING

Criminal Element was originally created as a 24HourRPG, meaning that the game was supposed to be created, from original concept straight on through to layout and posting online, within 24 hours of beginning the process. The idea for the 24HourRPG was inspired by comic book creator and historian Scott McCloud, who once challenged a friend to create a 24 page comic within 24 hours. Both failed to make 24 pages within that allotted time period but both also discovered a great new creative tool to stretch themselves with.

For more information on 24HourRPGs go to the following link:

<http://www.indie-rpgs.com/viewtopic.php?t=5951>

And for more information on independent role-playing game creation simply go to:

<http://www.indie-rpgs.com>

THANK YOU'S

Thanks first off goes to Phil Reed for suggesting the idea of the 24-hour rpg in the first place. Thanks also to Ron Edwards and the rest of the guys and girls at the Forge for hosting such a great website and a wonderful forum for creators. Fred Hicks also gets a big thank you for setting up a home for the games made by 24HourRPG.

I also want to thank my mother and father for supporting me creatively over the years. Even though I still haven't gotten that job as a comic book artist, when I do, I know it will be because of them.

I also want to thank my brother, Daniel, for being such a great little brother to me for these past 23 and so years. Have fun in Hawaii, Danny!

My gaming group also gets a mention for their support of my various gaming creations. Craig, Matt and Corey in Philadelphia and Julio, Scott, Erik, Reppy, Mike, Laurel, TJ, Bob, Troy, Camden and everyone else back in Jersey.

And finally, thank you, the reader, the player of games. It is because of you that those who create have a reason to exist. It is you who inspire us, not the other way around.

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I. WELCOME TO THE WRONG SIDE OF THE TRACKS...



Criminal Element is a role-playing game set in that dark and seedy underbelly populated by gangsters, thugs and hoodlums, a genre that can be seen in popular films and novels as well as other pop entertainments. Here we explore what happens in the dark recesses and hidden places within our societies. Players portray characters that fully believe that “who dares wins” and are willing to put everything on the line to prove it.

THE WORLD

THE UNDERWORLD

YOUR GEAR

What you need to play

All that you will need to play Criminal Element is some paper and pencils, a standard deck of playing cards without jokers, a set of poker chips to represent Drama Points in play and an active and devious imagination.

WHO THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU ARE?!

The Roles of players in a game of Criminal Element

There are two kinds of players in Criminal Element: Protagonists and Directors. In short, Protagonists portray the main characters and help envision a story that is in part controlled by the Director. Each group of players will have one Director, the other players

being Protagonists.

The Director

Criminal Element is a game for telling stories. As such, one player is selected to be the lead storyteller of the game. Other games use various different names for their lead story maker. Some call him the Referee, others the Game Master. Some even call him the Storyteller. Criminal Element refers to this player as the Director

The main purpose of the Director is to weave together different plot elements to create a functioning storyline for the Protagonists to play in. The Director also acts as the rules arbiter, being the final word on the outcome of conflicts.

Directors also control the remaining cast of characters that the Protagonists don't control; the Antagonists, the Supporting Cast and Lames. Antagonists are characters that both directly oppose the Protagonists and are also of some importance to the story. Supporting Cast Members, or SCMs, are characters that are important to the game but don't necessarily oppose the Protagonists. Lames are characters that are not of any great importance to the game but instead populate the background, making things seem full and real. The Director is also responsible for describing the action of the game, making things quick-paced and entertaining.

The Protagonist

Protagonists are the lead characters of the story as well as the characters portrayed by the players. The Protagonists are the characters that the storyline of the game centers on and the action revolves around. Being a Protagonist does not imply that the character is a kind hearted or good-natured person, the term simply states that the story being told is one that is lead by this character.

Game Terms

Antagonist: a character that is in direct opposition to the goals of the Protagonists.

Protagonist: the main characters of a game of Criminal Element. The characters portrayed by the Players.

Director: The player that guides the plot of a game of Criminal Element and controls all of the characters that are not played by the other players.

Draw: to take a card from a deck and place it into your hand.

Hand: the total cards that a player has drawn in the resolution of a conflict.

Difficulty: the rating of an action that shows how hard or easy it is to accomplish.

Trait: a quality of a character that they have at least moderate capability in or power over.

Knack: what a Protagonist or Antagonist defines themselves as.

Vice: a personality flaw that acts as a hindrance to a Protagonist or Antagonist.

Conflict: a point at which a character's actions are not guaranteed to succeed, whether because the attempted action has opposition from another character or there is some innate difficulty.

Margin of Success: a measure showing how well a character succeeded in an action.

Margin of Failure: a measure showing how poorly a character did in an action.

Drama Point: a measure by which a Player can control the narration of a game or to improve his character.

Dramatic Shift: an alteration in the narration of a game made by the expenditure of Drama Points.

Health Level: a rank of damage that a character has received.

Hit: a point of damage.

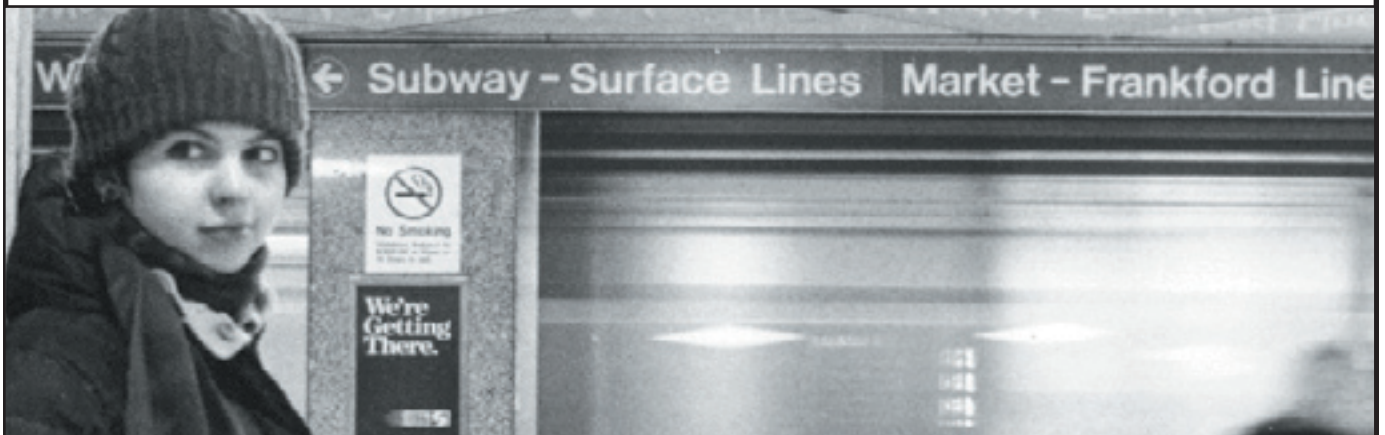
Collapse: the succumbing of a character to their Vice.

Initiative: how quickly a character can react in combat.

Supporting Cast Member

Lame

Static Conflict



2. PLAYING THE SYSTEM

THE BASICS OF PLAYING CRIMINAL ELEMENT

As with most other Role-playing games, Criminal Element uses a system to arbitrate most conflicts and questions that may arise during gameplay, as well as add an element of suspense and randomness. Below the system is laid out in detail.

BLACKJACK

Most conflict resolution systems used by role-playing games employ a random element in their play such as dice and this game is no different. Players use a variation on the playing card game Blackjack to arbitrate all conflicts in the game.

The basic rules behind Blackjack are quite simple. First, all players involved in a hand of Blackjack receive two cards from a standard deck of playing cards, jokers removed. One of these cards is played face up so that all of the other players may see the card, the other card is played face down. Only the owner of the face down card is allowed to look at it.

Play begins from the left of the dealer. Each player decides whether they want to receive another card, to “hit”, or whether they will stay with what they have, or to “stand”. Players in a gambling game of Blackjack may also decide to fold if they do not like the cards that they have received.

The value of numbered cards to a hand are equal to the number on the card. Face cards are always rated as 10, though in the case of a tie, the higher the rank of the face card, the better. Finally, aces can be read as either 1 or 11 points. The player doesn't have to decide if the ace is read as either until his hand is revealed.

Once all players have had the opportunity to gather together the best hand possible, all players reveal all of their cards. To win a hand of Blackjack a player must have as high a total possible without going over 21. This is the reason why the game is often referred to as “21”. If at any time a player has drawn over 21, he is “busted”. A player who has gone bust should immediately turn all of his cards face down and discard them, making his fellow players aware that he has gone “bust”. The best possible hand a player can draw is “Blackjack”. “Blackjack” is when a player draws for their first two cards both an ace and a face card of any suit.

In the case of a tied total the player with the highest single card in their draw wins the hand. In this instance any aces drawn count as the value that they were played at in their hand.

VARIATIONS ON PLAY

The way a player draws their cards and receives extra cards in Criminal Element is different from the basic play version of Blackjack and is outlined below.

If a player ever goes “bust” in Criminal Element, you do not fold your cards as above. The “busted” player fails in their attempted action but should reveal their cards so that a player can compare totals in order to calculate their Margin of Success.

Novice to Expert and into Master. A Novice-ranked Trait shows a certain basic understanding of the ability. A Trait ranked at Expert shows a deeper understanding of things involving the Trait. A Master-ranked Trait displays the deepest and most impressive understanding of the trait. Having a rank in a Trait will help a character succeed on actions that involve that Trait.

Trait Rating and Extra Cards Draw

| Trait Rating | Cards Drawn |
|------------------|---------------|
| No Related Trait | 0 extra cards |
| Novice | 1 extra card |
| Expert | 2 extra cards |
| Master | 3 extra cards |

Knacks are not only something that a character is good at but is something that they define themselves by. Some people call their Knack their calling, their bag or perhaps their talent. A Knack is the core of a protagonist or antagonist; it is what they do best and is what they're known for. In short, a character's Knack describes that character in one broad stroke. If a character were a listing in a dictionary, their Knack would be their definition. All Protagonists and Antagonists have one Knack, which is not ranked. Common Knacks are "Hitman", "Driver" or "Leader of the Pack".

Vices are certain things that a Protagonist or Antagonist has a soft spot for, something that is a hang-up that they can just never get over and will always knock them down. Some characters have a weakness for fine spirits, others will always need to be in control of a situation, no matter what. Protagonists and Antagonists always start a game with one Vice. Vices make it harder to succeed at actions that involve them. Examples of Vices include "Boozehound", "Never allow a woman to be hurt" or "Adrenaline Junky".

CONFLICT RESOLUTION

When a conflict is first declared each player draws two cards from their deck. In most situations the first card drawn is set down face up so the other players can see the value of the card, the other face down. If a character has a Knack that is related to the task at hand all cards played are kept face down. If a character has a Vice that is somehow related to the conflict all cards are kept face up. If a character has both a Knack and Vice that relate to the conflict, ignore both and act as if the character had neither.

Example of Play

Using the previous example, Scott is getting ready to start a brawl in the Two Nails, his favorite pub. He takes a look at his character sheet and sees that Eightball's Knack is "Big Bruiser". He tells the Director his Knack and Norman agrees that it applies to the action at hand. Scott draws his opening hand of two cards and places both face down on the table in front of him.

Next, each player should look over their character's Traits. Try and find one that is closely tied to the conflict. A player may draw as many extra cards, either face up or face down, as he has in the highest ranked trait that is related to the conflict at hand. These extra cards can only be used if the Trait that the

DEFINING CONFLICT

Whenever a character encounters a task that he wishes to accomplish but there is some doubt as to whether or not he will be capable of succeeding he is in Conflict. Conflict Resolution is something that helps the player figure out whether he is capable of succeeding in said action or if he fails miserably in the attempt.

Criminal Element uses a conflict resolution mechanic that plays much like standard Blackjack, outlined above. Every conflict boils down to a series of card draws between the characters involved.

The Director is always the person to decide whether a character is in Conflict and is the final word on the matter.

Example of Play

Scott is playing Eightball, a big boulder type character, and has just been angered by a rather obnoxious character in his favorite bar. Scott decides that he wants Eightball to punch this guy in the face. Norman, the Director, decides that there is a conflict since the guy could possibly get out of the way.

TRAITS, KNACKS AND VICES

Characters in Criminal Element are defined by three basic game concepts: Traits, Knacks and Vices. While all characters will have Traits, only Protagonists and Antagonists will have Knacks and Vices.

Traits are simply qualities that a character has that may be of note. Traits can run the gamut can define a number of things such as in-born qualities such as strength or leadership qualities, to learned skills like firing a weapon or knowing the ins and outs of the law. Some traits can even define a character's social standing, declaring them as rich or well connected.

Traits can be described in any way that a player wishes. While basic one-word descriptors such as "Strong" or "Quick" can be Traits, others named with a bit more flair also be used, such as "Gift of Gab" or "Cool as a Motherfucker".

Traits are ranked on a three-tier scale, ranging from

player wants to use can be reasonably seen as helpful in the conflict. Only one Trait may be used by a character in any given draw. A player does not have to draw these cards if he doesn't want to and can draw less than their Trait rating if they chose to do so. All cards drawn cannot be looked at before deciding if they will be drawn face up or face down. A player should declare how he wants his cards faced before drawing them.

It is likely that a character will not have a Trait related to the Conflict. If this is the case, the draw is calculated from the two original cards drawn.

Example of Play

Scott takes a look at Eightball's Traits and notices a couple that might help him out. One in particular stands out from the rest though. Scott declares that he will be using his "Skullcrusher" Trait, which is ranked at two, and draws an extra two cards, one face up and the other face down.

Finally, each character should put together their best hand possible, attempting to get as high a total as possible without going over 21. All face up cards must be used to create this total but any face down cards that the player doesn't want can be discarded. The highest draw between the two conflicted characters or character and static opposition (see Static vs. Opposed below) succeeds in their action and gets to describe the outcome based upon their Margin of Success.

After the end of each conflict, shuffle all cards back into the deck.

Example of Play

Scott gets a quick look at his cards. Face down he has a Jack, a ten and a four. His one face up card is a five. Scott knows that he has to use that five, so he decides to take that and the Jack and four, giving him a total of 19, just two shy of 21.

STATIC CONFLICTS

Sometimes a player will find himself involved in a conflict that doesn't have any direct opposition from another character. Perhaps he is trying to break open a vault door or hot-wire a car. Instances such as these are called Static Conflicts.

Characters involved in static conflicts draw their hand in an attempt to succeed as normal but, rather than comparing the total that you get from this draw to that of an opposing character's, you will instead compare the total to a draw made by the Director. This draw is based upon how difficult the attempted action is. The easier an attempted action is, the less cards the Director will draw in opposition to you, the more tenuous the chances are that you will succeed, the more cards will be drawn against you.

Static Conflict Difficulty Chart

| <i>Difficulty</i> | <i>Draw</i> |
|-------------------|--------------|
| Simple | 1 up, 1 down |
| Average | 1 up, 2 down |
| Difficult | 1 up, 3 down |
| Arduous | 1 up, 4 down |
| Intimidating | 1 up, 5 down |

MARGIN OF SUCCESS/ FAILURE

Sometimes it becomes necessary to know not only if a character has succeeded or failed in their action, but how well or poorly they did. In order to figure this out, simply compare the draws of the two characters involved, or the character and difficulty draw in the case of a Static Challenge. The difference between the two draws is the Margin of Success, as applied to the person succeeding in the challenge, or the Margin of Failure for the character that failed the check.

A Margin of Success of one or two points shows a minor victory, just overcoming a conflict. A Margin of Success of three or four shows a true success, but nothing fancy. A margin of success of five or six represents an action that is spectacularly successful. Any Margins of Success over six show a truly fantastic level of accomplishment.

Margin of Success Effects

| <i>M.O.S.</i> | <i>Effect</i> |
|---------------|---------------------|
| 0 | Tenuous Success |
| 1-2 | Normal Success |
| 3-4 | Exceptional Success |
| 5-6 | Astounding Success |
| 7 or higher | Legendary Success |

A Margin of failure may have somewhat adverse effects on what you are attempting to do. A Margin of Failure of only one or two points shows a minor loss. A three or four point Margin of Failure represents a complete failure in an action. A Margin of Failure of five or six points displays a dismal failure, one that will definitely be a major setback for a character. Any Margins of Failure of seven points or greater are Disasterous failures, the kind that can have serious dramatic repercussions.

Margin of Failure Effects

| <i>M.O.F.</i> | <i>Effect</i> |
|---------------|---------------------|
| 0 | Tenuous Failure |
| 1-2 | Trivial Failure |
| 3-4 | Complete Failure |
| 5-6 | Dismal Failure |
| 7 or higher | Disasterous Failure |

Example of Play

After comparing Eightball's draw of 19 to the annoying guy's draw of 15, Scott sees that his action was successful. He subtracts 15 from 19 and finds that his "Skullcrushing" punch has a MoS of 4, a rather decent success.

TIED DRAWS

The winner of a tied draw is the one with the single highest card in their draw. Any Aces within a draw count as the value that they were used for in the hand.

If there is still a draw, compare the suits of the highest ranked card. Spades are the highest ranked suit, followed by Diamonds, then Hearts, leaving Clubs as the lowest of the suits.

DRAMA POINTS AND DRAMATIC SHIFTS

Protagonists also have one more thing that put them ahead of the pack: Drama Points. Drama Points, or DPs, can be used in a number of ways. Most frequently a player will use their DPs to advance their character, spending the DPs to buy new ranks in Traits or to purchase brand new Traits.

Drama Points can also be used to modify the direction of the game, allowing players to have a certain amount of narrative impact over it. These uses of DPs are called Dramatic Shifts. The effect that the player is attempting to achieve will impact the number of DPs spent to create the outcome. DPs can be used to insert a back-up pistol for your character into the game, create a contact in the police force or to even save you from a rather unpleasant demise.

In order to activate a Dramatic Shift in game play a character must reserve a Collapse. A Collapse is when a character succumbs to his or her Vice and tumbles headlong into it. Players should keep track of the kinds of Drama Shifts that they have created in game as these correlate to the severity of the Collapse that the character will suffer from later.

Players may elect to undergo a Collapse that they have reserved at any time they wish in order to eat up some of their accrued Collapses. Directors may also force a Protagonist into one of their reserved Collapses at any time. Collapses forced by the Director cannot be delayed through the use of Drama Points. Players cannot go through a Collapse to negate a future one.

Drama Shifts

| <i>Game Effect</i> | <i>DP Cost</i> |
|---|----------------|
| Minor (creating a minor item) | 5 DP |
| Serious (creating an important contact) | 10 DP |
| Major (uncovering a major secret) | 20 DP |

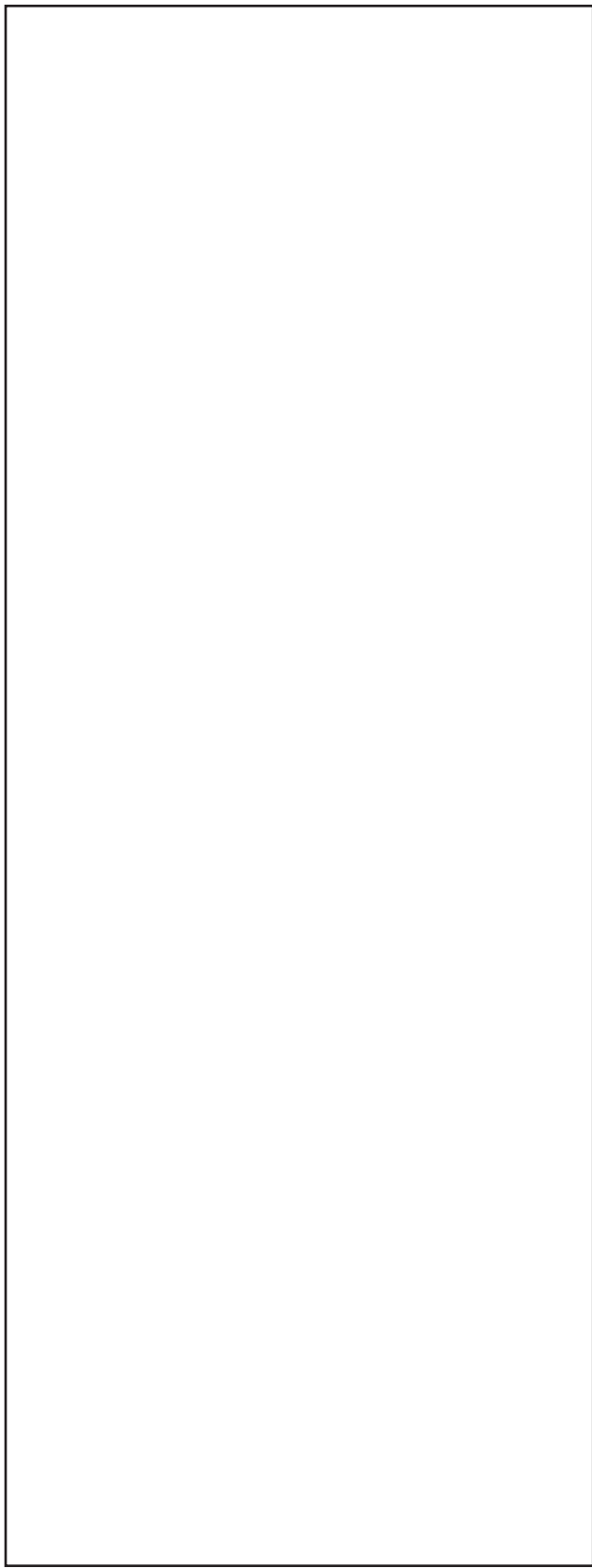
GAINING DRAMA POINTS

Drama points are accrued by a player in two ways. Firstly, a player can earn drama points by simply role-playing their character well and making the game interesting for the other players involved. The director awards these drama points at the end of every session.

The other way to earn drama points is by betting them on the outcome of a Conflict that you are involved in. A player may bet as many drama points as he has face up cards in their hand. If the action is successful, you gain back as many drama points as you bet plus an additional half over. If the player bets Drama Points on an action while suffering a Collapse the player earns back double their investment. If a character fails at an action that they have bet drama points on then those points are lost.

3. GET A LOAD OF THIS CHARACTER!

CREATING CHARACTERS FOR CRIMINAL ELEMENT



This chapter outlines the process of creating a character for play in Criminal Element. It is encouraged that all players make their characters as a group to insure that every character has a place on the team and to keep characters from being repetitive.

CONCEPT

The first step in creating a character for Criminal Element is to come up with a basic concept for you to work from. What kind of character do you want to portray? Do you like playing brainy guys? Maybe you enjoy the thought of playing a character that hits people with a rather well worn baseball bat instead. Perhaps you would like to play a young kid, new to the scene, or maybe an old guy, a natural player who isn't letting the years pull him down.

Think of a couple of defining ideas for your character and talk these ideas through with the rest of the players in your group. Refine them a little and take note of them on a piece of paper.

Example of Play

Brian is getting ready to play his first session of Criminal Element and, as such, needs to create a character. He sits down for a moment and talks to the other players and Norman, their Director, about what kind of game they want to play. After running through a couple of ideas they all decide that they want to play small time hoods and thieves trying to find that one big Score. Immediately, some of the players have ideas for their characters and start firing them off at Norman and everyone else to see how well they'll stick. Within a couple of minutes the group has a wheelman and a contract killer in their ranks.

Brian considers his options for a minute before listing an idea for his character. Brian knows he always likes playing smart guys, thinkers rather than smashers. He also sees that the group is kind of lacking in the idea man department. He decides he's going to play a con man, a manipulator. Smooth and smart and with all of the ideas. He talks to the other players and they all sound agreeable to the beginnings of this new character.

MOTIVATION

Everyone running a job has a reason to do it. Some people have mouths to feed, or, for that matter, a habit. Some think that this is the only thing that your feels he can do well, or perhaps it's the only thing that he feels good doing. Some people do it for the money while others do it for the ladies.

Motivations are role-playing tools, as well as hooks for the Director to use to get your character involved in a story. Design a Motivation for your character, thinking of the loose background and personality that you have some up with for him. Talk with the other players and Director about

your character's Motivation and how it impacts your character. Once you have finalized the ideas behind your Motivation you can write it down.

Example of Play

Brian thinks for a moment; why would this guy be running a con anyway? He sounds like a smart guy. Perhaps that's why he does do it, Brian decides. He tells the playing group that his character runs cons to prove how smart he is, not just to others but to himself. Norman likes where Brian is going with this and tells him to write it down on his character sheet.

KNACK

There is something that separates you from the rest of the lames that try and work the grift and your Knack is that one thing. Some people think of them as a natural talent, almost like a reflex, others see them as something that they have aspired their entire lives to become. Some characters are incredible Bare-Knuckle Boxers while others are Ruthless Mafioso's.

Discuss with the other players the possible Knacks for your character. Decide upon your favorite one, trying to steer clear of Knacks that other players have decided on for their characters, and write it down.

Example of Play

Brian already has a little bit of a head start on this. He knows that his character is a con man and knows that that would probably be his Knack. He asks his Director and they both agree. Brian writes "Con Man" in the space for his Knack on his character sheet.

VICE

Just as there is one thing that your character is good at, there is also one thing that he is horrible at and that is fighting his Vice. Vices are personality flaws that can be almost crippling in the worst of situations and are the mark of those who have turned to a life in the dark recesses of the criminal world. Some characters are horrible womanizers; others have anger that can't be kept in check.

Define a Vice for your character. Make it one that both matches your character's personality and the background you have started to imagine for him as well as one that will be interesting to play out in the game.

Example of Play

This is where Brian gets stuck for a minute. What could this guy's Vice be? Brian wants it to be kind of original so gambling and drugs go right out the window. Brian takes another look at his character's Motivation and starts to roll an idea over in his head. He asks his Director if it's okay to have his character's Vice be that he must always prove himself to be the smartest. Norman considers it for a minute and likes it. Brian writes "Must prove that he is the smartest/best" in the space for Vice on his character sheet.

TRAITS

Now that a basic framework has emerged from the jumbled bits of notes that you started your character with we can now further define what he is capable of with Traits.

Traits are used to further define a character by showing what fields they are gifted in. This could include such tangible things as a strong or handsome person to characters that are good brawlers to those who are just really convincing speakers.

While traits can be simple, one-word descriptors, the way a trait is phrased can also help give a character a bit more personality. Perhaps a player envisions their character as a strong person. He could simply use the Trait "Strong", or he could get into more detail and say that his character has "Massive Muscles" or is "Fuck-Off Huge". All three create the same outcome but the latter two have more character to them.

Traits are ranked in a scale from one through three, the higher the rank, the better the character is with that Trait. A Trait ranked at one shows a character that is a novice in the Trait; while you may have more experience than the average Joe, there are those that are better than you. Traits ranked at two show a person who is experienced, a character who has been doing this kind of thing for a while and knows a thing or two about it. A character with a Trait ranked at three is a master of it; you're the beat in the game and everyone knows it.

Beginning characters start play with six traits, three ranked at Novice, two ranked at Expert and one ranked at Master.

Think for a moment about what your character is good at, what his past would have gotten him some experience in. Jot down six things that your character can be described as being good at and rank them.

Example of Play

Brian jots down a couple of notes, things that his character might be good at. He goes through these notes and pulls out his six favorites: "Cool as Ice", "Charismatic", "Sharp as a knife", "Gunplay", "Fighting", "Making the Masterplan". Brian decides that his Master Trait will be "Sharp as a Knife". Brian is then stuck. He knows he wants his character to have a "Cool as Ice" of two, but he can't decide which is more important to him, "Charismatic" or "Making the Masterplan". He decides that while he knows that he's a likable guy, he's knows the character tries to prove himself through the cons he pulls. Brian decides to put his Experts ranks on "Making the Masterplan" and "Cool as Ice", leaving Novices for the remaining three Traits.

HEALTH AND WOUNDS

It is inevitable that, in the cutthroat world of Criminal Element a character will run into a couple of scrapes. There are three kinds of wounds that a character can receive: Light, Serious and Mortal. These three ranks are called Health Levels.

All characters start play with three hits per Health Level. This means that a starting character can receive

three Light, three Serious and three Mortal wounds before succumbing to the total damages and dying. A character gains a number of extra hits for each Trait that they have that relates to durability, endurance and pain tolerance. These extra hits are distributed evenly through the Health Levels, going up the scale from Light to Mortal. Thus, a character with two Traits that can help him from being wounded in combat would receive an extra Light and extra Serious wound.

Example of Play

Brian has no Traits that would help him out with Health Levels and so marks of three hits for each level.

INITIATIVE

Initiative is a rating that shows how quickly a character can react when the shit has hit the fan. All characters have a base Initiative rating of two. For each Trait a character has that is related to speed or remaining cool and calm under fire, that character gains an additional point of Initiative.

Example of Play

Brian knows his character, like every other, starts of with an Initiative of two, but he thinks he might have a Trait that might bring that up. Brian asks his Director if “Cool as Ice” will have an affect on his Protagonist’s initiative. Norman says that it definitely would and Brian writes a Three down on his character sheet where it says Initiative Draw.

TYING UP THE LOOSE ENDS

After going through the process of designing a character’s Concept, Knack, Vice and Traits, you can start to fill in some of the blanks about the character himself. Start thinking about their past, where they may have come from. Perhaps you can figure out where your character got his training from, where he got started, what he’s been up to recently. If there are any important people in your character’s life such as a wife or child you should define them now.

All characters begin play with five Drama Points. You should also ask the Director for any equipment you may see your character having at the beginning of the game and write down what he gives you.

Example of Play

The first thing that Brian wants to come up with is a name. Most of Brian’s characters always have kind of generic names so he decides to spice this one up a little. Looking at the deck of cards in front of him, Brian decides to name his character Tommy Two-Jacks, a name that makes him think of gangster movies. Brian decides that Tommy has a tattoo of two Jacks from a deck of playing cards on his right shoulder, the Jacks of Spades and Hearts. He also decides that Tommy got the tattoo in when he went to jail, the one and only time that Tommy wasn’t able to think his way out of a bad situation. The experience bruised Tommy’s ego a

Example of Play (cont.)

little and, now that he’s out, he’s looking to prove himself all over again.

Next, Brian writes down a small list of items that he could see Tommy having; a car, some nice clothes, a cell-phone and a small pistol. Norman can easily see Tommy having these things and agrees on every count.

Finally, Brian jots down his five Drama Points and grabs five white poker chips to represent them in play and gets ready to tell a story.

TELLING YOUR STORY

The final step in creating a character for Criminal Element is to tell a quick story to the other players involving your character. This story should be told in character, using the personality traits that you have developed through character creation. This is a great opportunity to “try on” your character and experiment, seeing if you like what you have created.

It shouldn’t take more than a couple of minutes to tell it and can involve any point in the character’s life. Perhaps you want to talk about the dime that he pulled in Folsom for the Manslaughter charge. Maybe you want to talk about the best friend that what shot back in your youth. You could even talk about why you got into this thing you do in the first place.

Tommy Two-Jacks’ Story

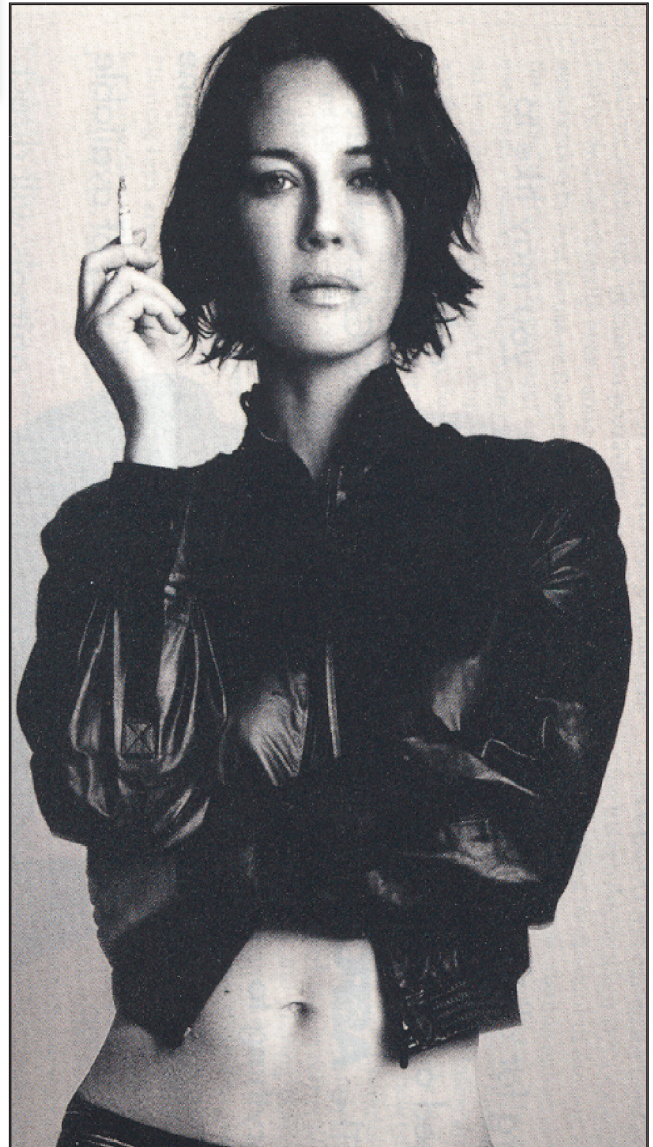
Yeah, so I once did three years up in the state pen for a job I did, no big deal, right? Well, anyway, everyone in there was always looking for something to do, lots of downtime and all, lots of cats were playing some card games. Y’know: Spades, Texas Hold ‘Em, stuff like that. So everybody always had a deck of cards on ‘em to pass the time.

One afternoon i’m playing some Hold ‘Em with these three or four other guys, one of them so fat with cigarettes and such that he had everyone else sweating. Not me though. I cleaned him out that afternoon, just cleaned him the fuck out. I left him with a pack of cigarettes so that he could get into a pick up game the next day.

Now, this guy just wasn’t happy with the outcome of said game. As a matter of fact, he was downright vitriolic. The next day i see this dude in the cafeteria, just sitting around, talking with some skinhead guy. I don’t think anything of it so i head up to get my Chicken Cordon Bleu. All of a sudden this white guy with these stupid fucking dreadlocks just hops out of nowhere and grabs my arms. Some other dude starts throwing ood and suddenly there’s a riot. In the middle of all this this cat, the one that i cleaned out the day before, he runs up and drives a shiv right into my chest. The air goes out of me and I just collapse on the floor, thinking that i’m dead for sure.

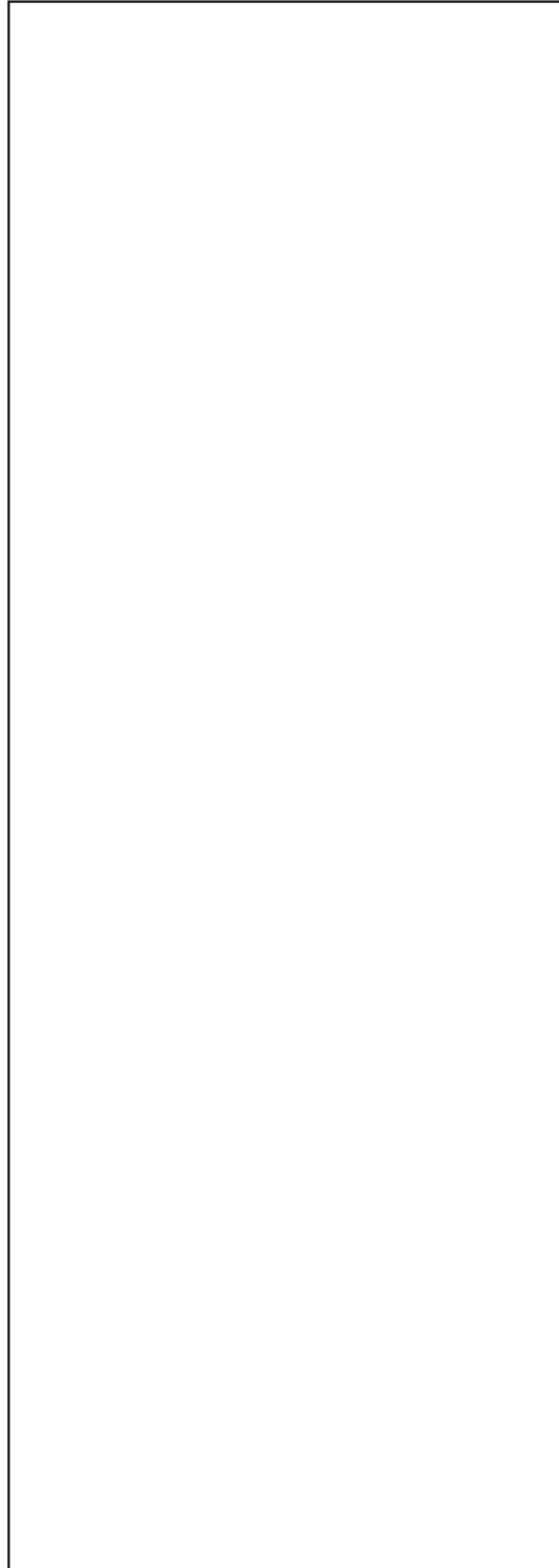
A couple of minutes later the guards have the riot

settled and I look down at my chest. I see the shiv sticking out of my chest, a sharpened toothbrush, but i don't see any blood. I notice that the shiv was stuck into the pack of cards i kept in my shirt. I opened the pack up and the shiv went through every card but the last two, two Jacks. So I got them tattooed on me to help me out, y'know? Not that i'm superstitious or nothing.



4. FIGHTING, OF THE DIRTY VARIETY

COMBAT IN CRIMINAL ELEMENT



There is a certain brutal beauty to combat. Fighting is savage and kinetic and can almost become entrancing. That is, of course, until you get knocked out or killed. Then it just sucks. The following chapter outlines the rules for all things combat related.

It can be easy to become bogged down in combat, getting stuck in the rut of just simply punching and getting punched back and sapping the life out of a scene. Fighting should be both fast-paced and entertaining. Players shouldn't worry themselves over trivial matters such as whether your gun has laser-assisted targeting scopes or whatever, simply move forward and have fun playing.

TELLING TIME

Combat situations can sometimes become confusing. In order to help players understand things a little better when a fight has broken out combat is always broken down into rounds. Rounds have a fluctuating length according to the requirements of the story, though the average combat round is approximately ten seconds long. Every character involved in the combat gets the chance to act once per round.

INITIATIVE

Getting into a fight is a dangerous thing and a split second can be the difference between walking home and never walking again. To determine the speed that a character reacts at during combat you have to determine Initiative.

At the beginning of a combat all characters make a draw tied to a Trait involving speed or remaining calm under pressure. All of these cards are played face up.

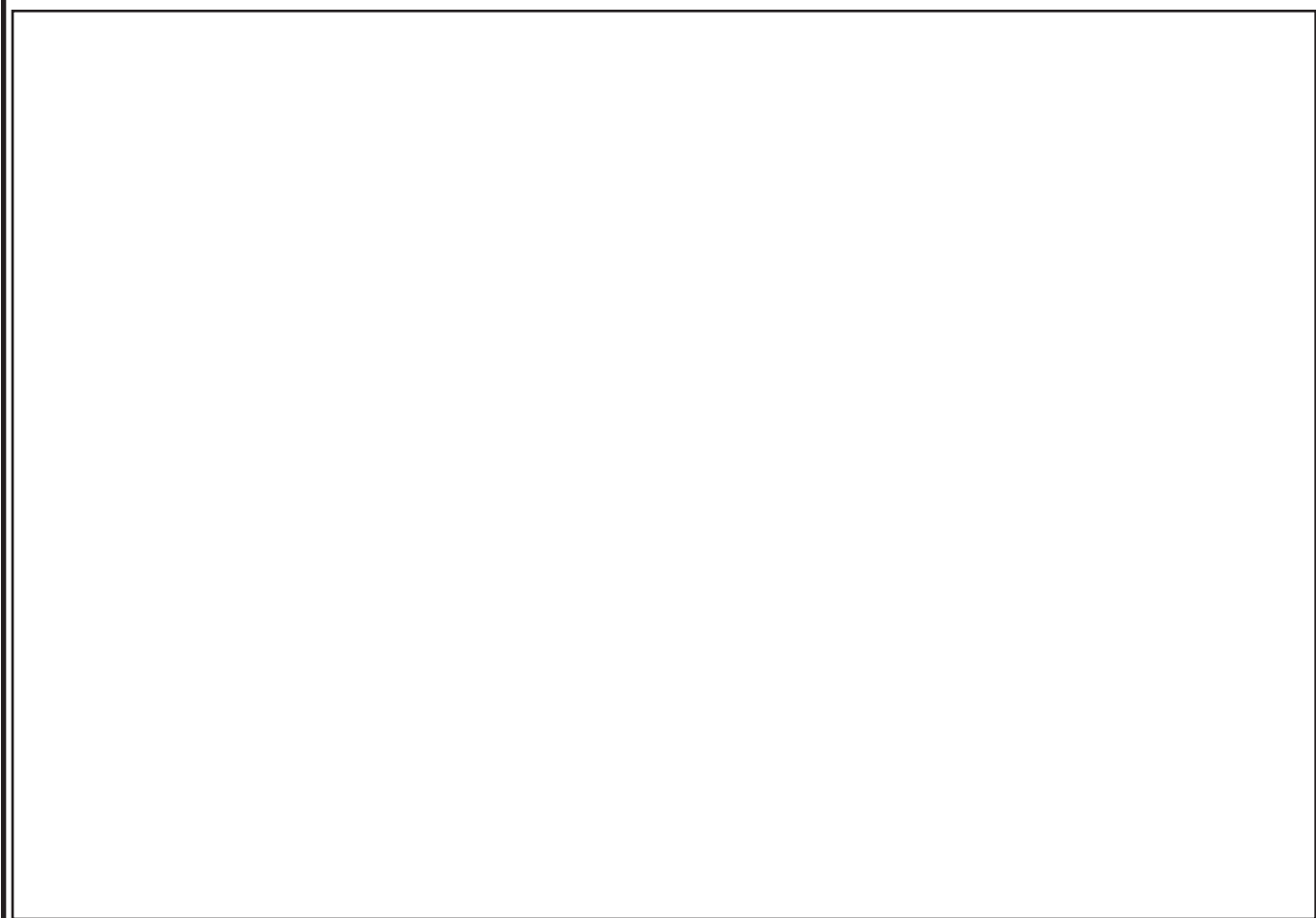
At the beginning of every round the Director will start counting down from the top ranking card in a standard deck of playing cards, from King down through Ace, ignoring suits. Every card called for is referred to as a segment and represents a point in time during the round when a character can act. Every character gets the chance to act once per round, acting on any segment that matches a card from his initiative pool.

When a character elects to act, he declares his intent and, at the end of the action, discards the card for that segment from his initiative draw back into his deck and draws a new card to replace it. All unused cards are kept in your initiative pool until used or the end of the combat.

ATTACKING AND DEFENDING

Attempting to hit someone is a rather simply resolved Conflict. All attacks are Opposed Conflicts, the attacker using a draw based upon any Traits that relate to the type of attack that he plans on using.

In opposition to this draw, defenders use a draw based upon a Trait that could be used in a way to defend the character. The person who succeeds in the conflict determines the outcome, whether it be the damaging of the opponent or the



appropriate defense for an attack.

DEAZING DAMAGE

Whenever a character successfully attacks another character he causes damage. Damage is calculated based upon the way in which you attack. To figure out how much damage has been done to a character the attacker draws a number of cards from their deck equal to the damage rating of their attack plus the Margin of Success from their attack draw. For every card drawn that has a red suit, (either Diamonds or Hearts) one hit of damage is suffered to a characters Health Levels by the character being attacked. This draw is normally referred to as “Drawing Blood”.

If a character has taken all of his hits in damage, the character has died, caught the late train to the big adios, is pushing up heaven, saying hi to Christopher, is getting measured for a long box or any other colorful euphamism you can come up with for death.

| <i>Attack or Weapon</i> | <i>Damage</i> |
|-------------------------|---------------|
| Punch/ Kick | 1 |
| Knife | 2 |
| Sword | 3 |
| Pistol | 4 |
| Shotgun | 6 |

5. RUNNING THE CON

DIRECTING CRIMINAL ELEMENT

Criminal Element is a game that seeks to emulate crime fiction of any medium, ranging from the bloody and stylized vision of Reservoir Dogs to the hard and unforgiving writing of James Ellroy.

As the Director, it is not only your job to settle disputes but to create an entire world, a world that the Protagonists interact with. Criminal Element employs a system that allows for a lot of leeway for all players, Protagonists and Directors both, to insure that a great story will not be hindered by a system that simply gets in the way.

ANTAGONISTS

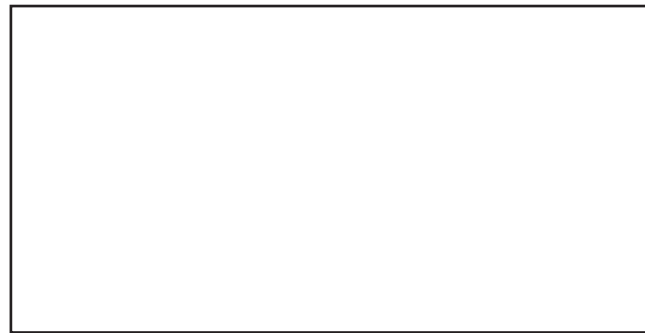
Antagonists are the characters that directly oppose the Protagonists in a game of Criminal Element. For lack of a better term, the Antagonists can be considered “Bad Guys”, though in a game like Criminal Element, good and bad are both relative terms.

Antagonists are created using the same rules as Protagonists. It is not necessary to tell the Protagonists a story involving the Antagonist, though it could be fun to tell one in the form of a rumor circulating about the Antagonist.



THE SUPPORTING CAST

Supporting Cast Members are normally the average people that the Protagonists will interact with. The bartender at the local pub, the girlfriend and the little brother are all examples of Supporting Cast Members.



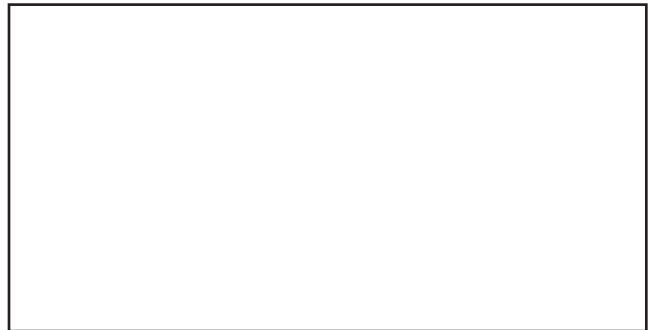
It's a good idea to normally have SCMs be of lesser capability than the Protagonists. Most SCMs will have two Rank One Traits and one Rank Two, though certain characters

concepts may call for more. SCMs never have Knacks or Flaws.

LAMES

Lames are the dupes on the job, the basic background person that can screw a protagonist's line of sight when they're in a firefight or accidentally walk in on them breaking into a bank. Lames are often security guards and inept police officers.

Most Lames will have one or two rank one Traits and never have Knacks or Vices. Most Lames can be easily discerned from other characters by their lack of name. Once a Lame is named, they normally become SCMs.



AWARDING AND USING DRAMA POINTS

As characters grow and learn from their experiences, so their Traits should change to reflect such growth. At the end of a given session of Criminal Element a Director should reward his Protagonists with Drama Points, which can be used to increase a character's Traits or saved up for use in game play.

Rewarding DPs

| <i>Action deserving reward</i> | <i>DP Gain</i> |
|--|----------------|
| Playing in the game | 1 DP |
| Making the experience fun for everyone | 1 DP |
| Coming up with a brilliant idea | 1 DP |
| Playing your character well | 1 DP |

Spending DPs

| <i>New Rank of Trait</i> | <i>DP Cost</i> |
|--------------------------|----------------|
| Rank One | 10 DP |
| Rank Two | 30 DP |
| Rank Three | 50 DP |

DRAMA POINTS AND THE DIRECTOR

You may be asking yourself right now: why doesn't the Director get any Drama Points of his own to spend? Well, to borrow a gambling euphemism, the Director is the House. The Director doesn't need any Drama Points to effect change in his game. It is the job of the Director to create opposition for the Protagonists for without opposition the Protagonists would have nothing by which to define them. Players want a challenge for their characters. If every session they sat down to play Criminal Element and easily defeated every bad guy that came down the pike then the game would be no fun at all. If the Director wants an Antagonist to carry a back up weapon with him, then he simply does.

Yet, you shouldn't beat up and ruin every character that the players make simply because you have no need for DPs. Every player is there to enjoy the game, and as the Director it is your job to ensure that this happens. Honestly, it is hard to play a game without any players.

6. THE LAST WORD

FINAL THOUGHTS ON IT ALL

INSPIRATO!

The following are all books, movies, games and what have you that inspired me to make this game. Take from them what you will and enjoy.

Watch these movies!

- Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels
- Snatch
- Killing Zoe
- Reservoir Dogs
- Pulp Fiction
- Sexy Beast
- Way of the Gun
- The Usual Suspects
- Heist
- The Spanish Prisoner
- L.A. Confidential
- The Killer
- Hard Boiled

Steal these books!

- *L.A. Confidential* by James Ellroy
- *Get Shorty* by Elmore Leonard
- *Blossom* by Andrew Vacchs
- *100 Bullets* by Brian Azzarello and Eduardo Riso

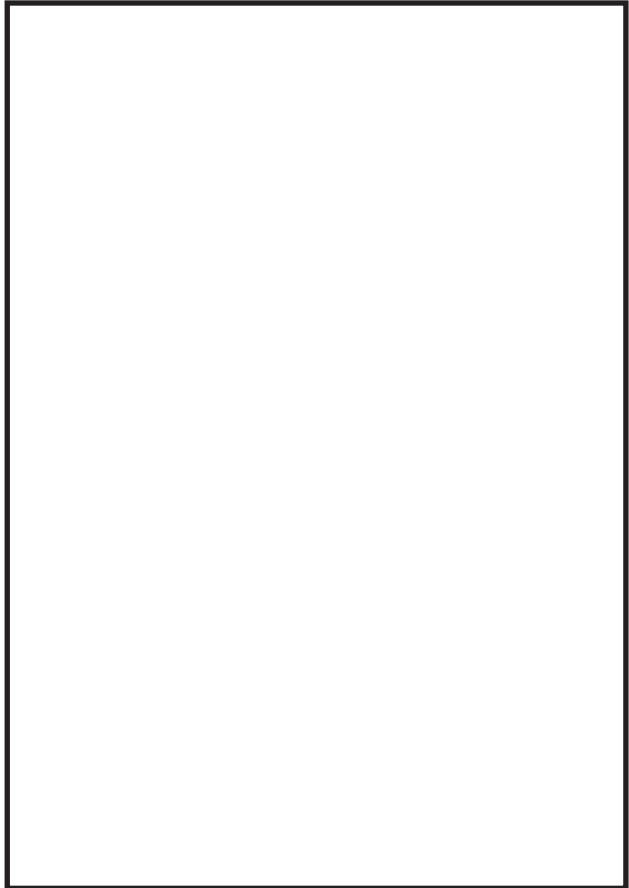
Play these games!

- *Nobilis* by R. Sean Borgstrom
- *Torchbearer* by Shreyas Sampat
- *Unknown Armies* by John Tynes and Greg Stafford

Now hear this!

- Portishead, *Dummy*
- *anything* by Billie Holiday
- Afghan Whigs, *Gentleman* and *Black Love*

It's been said that the sign of a good criminal is whether or not they have ever been caught.



Michael P. O'Sullivan has never been caught.

