

WuXalted

Exalted using Wushu rules

Wushu Rules System

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The Golden Rules:

1. Principle of Narrative Truth

"Everything the players describe happens exactly as they describe it, when they describe it."

The most important thing about Wuxalted is the way it doles out narrative and authorial power to the players. They don't ask the GM if a course of action is alright, then roll to see how successful they were. Instead, they say what happens *before* they roll any dice. The roll doesn't tell you how well you did, it says how effective your chosen course of action was in bringing the scene towards resolution. Because that is the key to Wuxalted - it doesn't do task resolution, only the broader resolution of a scene.

Task resolution is left up to the players by way of the Principle of Narrative Truth. Namely that everything happens exactly as the players describe it, when they describe it. It bears repeating, so I'll say it again: Everything happens exactly as the players describe it, when they describe it.

It is left to the players' discretion whether they describe success or failure; it's all the same as far as Wuxalted goes. What might seem like a character struggling to get their point across could be turned around at the last minute with the one piece of evidence they've

been saving until the last moment. It's an action movie staple for some protagonists to get beat on by the goons until they switch things up a gear and lay the smack down.

The player is within rights to describe never "failing," or to never describe "succeeding," but regardless their character can still advance a scene towards its end. If this sounds too much like make-believe to you, there's more to it, including elements of risk. More on that later.

The exceptions to the Principle of Narrative Truth

It doesn't quite go all the players' way though. The problem with an unfettered Principle of Narrative Truth is that it requires everyone to be (mostly) on the same page about what is and is not appropriate for the game you're playing. Wuxalted is great at emulating the mythic fantasy of Creation, provided that everyone gets what the conventions of that genre are (and which are applicable to that particular game). However, it doesn't provide any mechanical means by which to enforce those conventions... except the Veto.

Veto

"If a description doesn't feel right, anyone can Veto it."

Everyone around the table, *not just the GM*, wields the right to Veto anyone else's description at any time. You could look at this as completely invalidating the freedom of the Principle of Narrative Truth, and turning every game into a legislative session of trying to pass your descriptions through the House of your group, but that's not how it happens in practice. This is why it's so

important that everyone is on the same page.

Rather, the Veto should serve as a flag that people aren't on the same page, and is an opportunity for everyone to get it straight. It's a chance to say "hang on a minute," and check that you're all still playing the same game. 'Cos shy of telepathy, we're only ever working on shared approximations of what everyone else is thinking.

The Veto doesn't have to be a negative thing. Sometimes you might have an idea on how to jazz someone else's narrative up. In that case, a Veto might be a subtle "Hey, might it be cooler if..."

When a Veto is used, the person Vetoed should describe again, amending their original narrative to fit the new consensus.

Coup de Grace rule

"You can't narrate complete victory without first resolving a scene's mechanical component."

There is one other limit to the Principle of Narrative Truth, one that's softer than the Veto. The Coup de Grace rule says you can't describe blowing away the entire challenge of a scene in your first description. More than that, you can't describe ending it until the mechanical representation of that challenge has been resolved.

In a contest to forge the sharpest Daiklave, you can't narrate swinging the sword around and boasting an edge that can cut moonlight in your opening narrative if the contest is all about creating the weapon. Instead you must first deal with the mechanical representation of the scene's challenge

and, should you win, you get to describe your victory as a parting shot.

A Coup de Grace is a bonus narrative that the victor of a scene gets, after the roll, to describe how the thing is resolved. This is the only time a narrative comes after rolling, rather than before. It is most often used to end Exalted battles, though it may be appropriate in any situation where the players' descriptions have left loose ends. When it is not clear who struck the final blow, the Coup de Grace may be awarded to whoever has the best idea or handled by the GM.

2. Everything is a Detail...

"Any and every course of action you can describe contains Details."

The second Golden Rule goes to the driving force of Wuxalted, the narrative. Wuxalted rewards expressiveness in describing what you do; each discrete element within the narrative is a Detail which earns a die. Wuxalted's engine works on a dice pool system, where the size of the pool depends on the elaborateness of your narrative. More on mechanics later.

In one respect, it doesn't actually matter what you describe, as long as you describe your character doing *something*. Everything is a Detail: dialogue is a Detail, an action is a Detail, the environment and changes in it are Details, your character's wardrobe is a Detail, flashbacks and inner monologue are Details, descriptions of camera angles and shots are Details, and so on - I think you get the idea.

This can seem daunting, to be creative for the entire game all by yourself. Thing is you don't have to be on fire the entire time, because you're not alone.

There's nothing to stop you from building on the ideas of other players, weaving your narratives together in a step-by-step building of one idea on top of another. Setting up part of a narrative, then handing it over to another player for embellishment, before they give it back to you to continue is called a "Pass" in Wuxalted. Provided everyone's happy with sharing some degree authorial control over their characters, this is actively encouraged. It's not only less tiring than coming up with all of your own stuff, it incentivises teamwork and tends to produce much cooler, more entertaining descriptions than any one person could conjure up alone.

...but choose the right Details for the game.

"Everyone has to be on the same page about what kinds of Details are appropriate."

There isn't complete freedom to narrate anything you like; the more outlandish or inappropriate descriptions may trigger a Veto from someone. This is where questions of genre and appropriateness come to the fore. There are no mechanics in Wuxalted to tell a group what is and isn't allowed as a Detail. That's up to the players and GM to work out amongst themselves, because the internally consistent "reality" of the game only exists so far as there is consensus on what the genre of the game is, and what conventions of that genre apply.

Aside from narrating descriptions appropriate for the power level of the characters (so, Heroic Mortals should be a lot less flashy and casually hyper-competent than Solar Exalted), there can be subtle distinctions in the genre of the game.

For example, consider two games with Abyssal Exalted rebelling against their Deathlord masters and killing some of their fellow Abyssals.

"Blood of Heaven's Last Jewel turns to his former friends and unleashes his glittering soulsteel daiklave, 'Here is your oblivion!' he howls, and uses Soul Sailing Leap to gracefully ascend to the ceiling and collapse the temple on top of them. While he is jumping between falling chunks of rubble a Day caste assassin appears behind him, but is cruelly impaled and diced by Keening Blade Attack, with each cut making the daiklave thirsty for another".

This is great for a high-octane action game. Emphasis is on describing named techniques and feats of ability with lots of sensory detail.

"Blood of Heaven's Last Jewel turns to his former friends and draws the cursed daiklave Heaven's End. Clouded by his rage, a Day Caste assassin is able to sneak behind him, but is swiftly overcome by his righteous fury. He swings the gore-spattered blade, howling 'Here is your oblivion!' and his foe's faith was broken. Thus the once-great temple to the Void cracks asunder and the shards of obsidian fall like the cold, hard tears he would shed to its memory."

This seems more tailored to a dramatic angst game. Emphasis is on describing the emotions and motivations of the characters, and the action is given symbolic significance.

Either is fine (or anything in between, or perhaps a different focus entirely), as long as the players agree what is wanted.

Core Mechanics

Now to the meat of how this all works. The mechanics of Wuxalted are all about regulating conflict. As before, it doesn't actually matter what the nature of the conflict is, whether combat, physical, social, mental, or any other kind. All that matters is that the outcome of something is important enough for us to focus on.

Wuxalted breaks conflicts up into a number of rounds, which could represent any length of time in the game reality, depending on the nature of the conflict. A round in a swordfight may be a few seconds. A round in an political revolution may comprise months of canvassing, rallying support and making speeches. A round in an investigation might be weeks of research and info-gathering interspersed with hours of cross-examination and study. There's no hard and fast rule on this, indeed each round may not necessarily be the same length as the one before or the one after.

Each round is broken up into two phases which are completed by everyone at the same time. First, the group Describes the scene; this is the important part because their narration determines what actually happens in the game world. Then, they Resolve their dice rolls to see how this round progressed the scene towards an end.

Description

As hinted at in the section "Everything is a Detail," Wuxalted works with a dice pool mechanic (using ordinary six-sided dice) based on the nuances of your narrative. As long as you do something, you earn a die. For each additional Detail you layer on top of this, you earn an additional die. Whether your

narrative is one long unbroken string of actions or built up action-by-action with input coming from everyone is entirely up to the group.

Here are a few examples of different types of narrative in different genres of game:

Social description: *The character looks around the great-hall (1), and spotting several obvious mercenaries, heads towards them with a firm step (2) and the confident, level gaze of one who has likewise seen action (3). He smiles in a friendly fashion (4), and finding a point in the bragging session to jump in, starts palling around with his own war stories (5), gently trying to tease information out of the other guards about recent events (6). (Using the Trait: "Leader of Men.")*

Physical description: *The character traces her fingertips over the hilt of her ancestral daiklave, (1) before she grasps the handle firmly with ease born of decades of use (2). With a eerie metallic whine she draws the blade, (3) the bright sun appearing to be cut by its perfect edge (4). A faint smile creeps over the character's face as a drop of sweat rolls down the pompous Dragon-blooded's brow, and he swallows nervously (5). "You seem hesitant. Should I come back some other day? Perhaps when you've learned by which end to hold your blade?" (6) (Using the Trait "Blade of Sun's End")*

Mental description: *The character takes the old parchment gingerly in his hands,(1) and carefully sprinkles a mixture of glowing dust across the surface to bring out any concealed marks and hidden writing (2). His eyes widen as he sees the faint traceries appear and dance across the page (3). Carefully he notes down the mystical symbols (4), and then he nods to himself. "Yes, of course! I*

should have seen it before!"(5) (Using Trait "Forgotten Secrets of Creation")

Mystical description: *The character holds out an ancient stone (1), and draws a pattern in the air in front of the victim (2). "Look deeply into the stone. Deeper, deeper," she croons in a soft lullaby monotone (3). The victim's eyes glaze over (4), and he murmurs quietly, "What is thy bidding, mistress?" (5) (Using the Trait "Glamour of Transcendent Dominion")*

If, at any stage, someone doesn't like a particular Detail, they can Veto it, and it has to be reworked.

Pool Limits / Die Caps

To control the pacing and tone of a scene, GMs can put a pool limit or die cap on the number of dice any player can roll at once. This is normally set up at the very beginning of a conflict. Three or four dice per round tends to result in shorter, tighter-framed descriptions, suitable for less important or warmup scenes. When things get more dramatic, such as the climax of a session, ratcheting the scene cap up to six or eight dice is appropriate.

One way to encourage a frenetic back-and-forth between players is to have a high cap on a scene, but only let players narrate a Detail or two before moving on to the next player.

You don't have to describe up to the scene cap in each and every round; sometimes tacking on a few extra Details can become exhausting. Nor do you have to stop your narrative just because you're not earning any more dice. This is a filibuster, where you go way over the cap simply because you're

enjoying yourself narrating. Some groups like it, others put limits on it.

Held Dice

Originally published in Dan Bayn's *Wire Fu* found at <http://www.bayn.org/wushu/wire-fu.html>. Normally, you have to roll the dice you earn during a conflict right away. However, you can also earn dice which are held over - Held Dice - to be used for a specific task later on. It is in this way that Wuxalted can reward preparation. Each Detail describing a preparation activity adds to either an individual or communal pool of Held Dice to be used later on. A scene with a round of planning or foreshadowing or a flashback or montage sequence are just a few means of earning Held Dice.

Resolution

Having Described what happens, the second phase of a round tells you how effective your action was in bringing the scene that bit closer to resolution. Remember, as per the Principle of Narrative Truth you've already described whether or not your action succeeded, this frames it in the context of the wider scene.

Typically, all players roll their dice at the same time. This helps keep gameplay fast and fluid. When the action is more segmented, often because players are dealing with different threats or in different locations, GMs may want to have each player roll right after completing their Description. However, since Wuxalted makes it easy to run intercut scenes, simultaneous Resolution should work fine more often than not.

The Description phase will have told you how many dice you have in your pool. When acting against opposition,

you have to split them into Yin and Yang dice before you roll.

Yin and Yang

Now to the complication in the mechanics, the splitting of your dice pool. Characters are simultaneously doing two things - exerting themselves to bring the scene to a resolution, but also protecting their narrative power to stay in the scene. It's here that the risk management element comes into Wuxalted.

The more you expose your narrative power, the faster you'll finish the scene and thus remove the risk, but the greater danger you are in of being removed from the scene before it's done. Keep your narrative power protected and you run the risk of doing nothing to bring the scene towards resolution, and prolong the exposure of your narrative power to gradual attrition.

Yang dice are your "offensive" dice, used to deal with the nature of the scene's challenge. Yin dice are your "defensive" dice, used to protect your narrative power from whatever threats there are in the scene. It might help to use two different coloured dice to distinguish them. In essence, every successful Yin die cancels out someone else's successful Yang die.

Successes

Wuxalted characters are defined by their Traits (more in a bit), which are rated from 1-5. When it's time to roll them bones, pick the Trait that's most relevant to the actions you described (if you don't have a relevant Trait, the default rating is 2). Every die that rolls above that Trait's rating is a failure; those that come up equal to or less are

successes. If there are any Yang successes directed at you that are left un-cancelled by your Yin successes, your plot immunity takes a hit.

Essence

Script immunity in Wuxalted is called Essence. Essence can represent health and breath, creative power, faith, resolve - it's not fixed and can mean different things to different characters in different conflicts. It is the source of your narrative power as a player. As long as a character has Essence, the player has the ability to affect the scene. Run out of Essence and your script immunity is all gone, and someone else delivers a Coupe de Grace on you to determine your fate.

Solar Exalted start with 6 points of Essence, and a point is cashed in to remove a Yang success after the dice are rolled. When you're at 0 Essence, you're teetering on the brink of losing narrative power once you go negative, you're out. That doesn't mean your character is dead, just that you the player can no longer contribute directly to the scene, perhaps because you are injured or the Great Curse has overcome you. As long as you still have Essence, you can choose to withdraw from a conflict rather than narrate a description.

It's purely optional whether or not you describe losses of Essence. It can often be a rich source of Detail-fodder to work some kind of complication into the narrative following a round where you lose Essence. In an ironic way, the misstep of losing Essence helps you to do better next time.

GMs decide when characters refresh their Essence, usually between scenes. For more lethal or gritty games, or those

where you want to put the players on the defensive, Essence may refresh slower than this.

Setbacks

If you want conflicts to last a little longer, but with the feeling of a vicious spiral to them, you can allow players to describe Setbacks rather than going into negative Essence. Instead of losing a point of Essence, they take a Setback. A Setback is some kind of hindrance affecting the characters' ability to perform in that particular scene. When talking to a fair maiden, a Setback might be breaking out in uncontrollable sweats.

The mechanical effect of a Setback is this: it reduces your personal dice cap for the scene. While everyone else may be able to narrate 4 Details, if you've taken 1 Setback, your cap is now 3. And so it continues with each loss of Essence becoming another Setback and another reduction of your cap. If your cap hits 0, you're out. This does extend the duration of conflicts, because Exalted get to use Setbacks just the same as players, but may be more appropriate to particular genres.

Setbacks can be recovered from in two ways. You can wait for the normal refresh of Essence, which will reset your dice cap, or you can use rolled successes to raise your dice cap on a one for one basis back to the scene's maximum. If you choose to take a recovery from a setback using this method, however, you will need to decide before you roll how many dice from your pool you will allocate to the recovery.

Types of Conflict

There are two types of conflict in Wuxialt – Extras and Nemesis.

In a conflict, players will likely be describing multiple actions and potentially use several of their Traits. Not a problem - just pick the Trait that is most relevant to the narrative. That becomes the target number for your Yin and Yang rolls.

Extra conflicts

Ambient threats in a scene, which are there to showcase the players looking good, are called Extras. They don't have Traits, they don't have Essence, and they never roll any dice. They're just an abstraction.

In a combat scene, Extras would be the faceless, nameless goons who are no match for the players. Players are free to describe dealing with as many of them as they like, in any manner they choose, within genre. In a research scene, a Extra might be a snippet of information that just takes time and effort to track down, not any sophisticated search techniques. Extras don't have to be people, just relatively straightforward challenges.

An Extra conflict has a Threat Rating (TR) as the mechanical representation of its challenge. The exact value depends on how many players you have, your dice pool limit, and how long you want the scene to last. Figure out how many Yang successes your players are likely to generate per round (roughly the dice cap minus 2) and multiply by the number of rounds you want to see.

Each Yang success the players generate reduces the TR of a Extra conflict by 1. When it reaches zero, the player who

knocks it out gets to describe a Coup de Grace to resolve the nature of the threat.

Since Extra conflicts are an ambient threat and don't roll any dice, they won't be throwing Yang dice at the players. To represent the totality of their threat, every player engaging them must get at least 1 Yin success every round or cash in a point of Essence. More dangerous Extra conflicts might require 2 or even 3 Yin successes a round. When framing an Extra conflict, remember to factor the number of Yin successes required into the calculation of Threat Rating.

A GM doesn't have to narrate in an Extra conflict, since they don't roll any dice (or earn them in the first place). Depending on taste, they can sit back and let the players handle the whole scene, recap and redirect at the end of each round, or actively narrate back and forth with the players.

Nemesis conflicts

The most important scenes are handled more actively, and are called Nemesis conflicts. Nemesis have Traits and Essence (usually from 1-5) of their own, just like the player characters, though they may not necessarily be people at all.

As befits such pivotal conflicts, Nemesis must be dealt with one-on-one. If two or more players absolutely need to gang up on an Nemesis, they'll have to do one of the following: First, they can take turns dealing with the Nemesis, completing both their Description and Resolution phases before letting their allies have a go in the next round. If you've set a dice pool limit, the second option is to have the

players split the max dice between them. If the Nemesis gets to roll 6 dice, two players would get 3 dice each, or three players would get 2 dice each. The Nemesis would then split their Yang successes between their opponents. The same is true if more than one Nemesis engages a single player.

What really sets Nemesis conflicts apart from Extras is that Nemesis have narrative power just like the players. This is where you can get an interactive back and forth between player and GM in the Description (similar to players teaming up with a Pass), before you finally go to the dice to Resolve.

Remember that the Coup de Grace still applies as always, only the victor describes the end result of the scene. If player and Nemesis go negative in the same round, the one with the least-negative Essence wins. If player and Nemesis are equal, ties go to the player.

Mixing them up

While there are two kinds of conflict, you can mix the two into one scene. If there is only one Nemesis conflict in a scene, and more than one player, you need something to keep everyone else occupied. This gives them something to do while they wait their turn to have a go at the Nemesis.

The classic combat example is that not only do you have to defeat a BigBad (who is a Nemesis of some description), but he's also accompanied by the Badguys (his henchmen, who are Extras). So while one character duking it up with BigBad, the others hold off his goons. In a social situation, while one character apprehends the celestial minister (Nemesis) to find out what she knows, the others could be running

interference charms to make sure no one else barges in.

Secondary Goals

Even a combined Extra and Nemesis conflict may not have enough in it to keep all the players engaged. Particularly if the nature of the threats are better suited to some players choice of Traits than others.

Secondary Goals are adjuncts to the main scene challenges which you add to make things interesting. They generally work just like Extra conflicts, though they don't necessarily require Yin successes of their own to stay safe. Being exposed to the main Extra threat, you may still have to get Yin successes to prevent Essence loss from that. It's the GM's call as to exactly how they function.

Secondary Goals are useful for framing a scene to contain conflicts of interest to each and every character. When the main scene is about investigation and stitching together the clues, you might include a social Secondary Goal for the talkative character to interview a particular witness.

Secondary Goals can also be used to spur players to make a choice between two conflicting courses of action. Yang dice thrown at a Secondary goal instead of the main Extra or Exalted, or at one Secondary Goal over another, necessitate player choice. They must sacrifice pursuit of one goal in favour of another.

A classic Secondary Goal in a physical situation is a fire. As long as it's burning it raises the number of required Yin successes by one, in addition to any others they require. It can even be tied

to a timed condition - if it's left burning for more than 2 rounds, it then becomes a 2-Yin threat. And so on.

Time Limits

A potential problem with Wuxalted is the lack of urgency in the standard setup - as long as a player keeps rolling lots of Yin successes, they don't lose the ability to narrate. Because the dice bear no relation to what is actually be described, they are doing just as much cool stuff as everyone else, but having little impact on actually resolving the scene.

A method of forcing players to "get on with it" is having time limits on Secondary Goals, or indeed any other element of the scene conflict. You state up front that if a Secondary Goal, or the scene, isn't resolved in X number of rounds, then Y happens. Effectively, the GM gets to describe a Coup de Grace on the players.

Let's say your character is trying to pump a diplomat's aide for information, but cannot be overheard by the diplomat. You come upon the aide at one end of a corridor while the diplomat is on the phone at the other, walking towards his aide. The GM rules that you've got 3 rounds in which to get whatever information you can before the diplomat is in earshot and the opportunity is lost.

Alternatively, you can simply say that, for every round after the first, players automatically lose a point of Essence. That will also give them an incentive to resolve the scene quickly rather than playing it safe.

Character Creation

Character creation in Wuxalted is simple; all you do come up with a collection of distinguishing features about the character. Distil your character concept into a small number of Traits.

Traits

Each Trait starts at a default rating of 2; but usually each character will have one Trait at 5, one at 4 and one at 3.

It's important to arrive at a common standard in the group on the level of focus of Traits. Otherwise, those with more specialised Traits may find themselves using the default 2 more than others.

Trait Categories

Completely freeform Traits can be a recipe for both player paralysis and a wide disparity in the focus of Traits in a group. One way to avoid this is to categorise the Traits, so that each one covers a distinct and separate kind of conflict.

Characters usually have three Traits, and the most appropriate spread is to have a Combat, Social and Caste Trait.

Combat Traits tend to cover both violent and physical conflicts. Examples of appropriate Combat Traits: Golden Essence Arrow Technique, Unstoppable Juggernaut, Sometimes Horses Fly Approach, Lightning Speed Strike, Seven Shadow Evasion Assassin, Veteran of the Legions, Alchemical Terror.

Social Traits tend to cover interpersonal and social conflicts. Examples of appropriate Social Traits: Just a Quiet Word, Silver-Tongued Rogue, Bureau Rectifying Method, Seducer, Brazen

Righteousness, Connections in Low Places, Intimidating Presence, Rabble Rouser, Skilled Orator.

Caste Traits tend to cover mental conflicts in the area of expertise that comes with the Exalted's Caste, including all associated specialist skills and abilities. Examples of appropriate Caste Traits: Warrior-Sorcerer of Dawn, Waning Moon Trickster, Scholar of the Furnace Transcendent, Water Monk of Iselsi, Twilight Sage of Infinite Arcane Mastery.

Schtick

Players love toys, and giving them a special something helps with that. The Schtick is a bonus die added into the players roll when they narrate an action in which it comes into play. It might be an ideal or concept like for a Sidereal it might be "Destiny of the Realm". It could easily be a thing, like "My Warstrider" or "Wavecleaver Daiklave". Whatever it is, when they manage to put a character trait to use, narrating an action scene which uses that "Schtick", they gain a bonus of one to the Trait in question. So a Trait of 3 becomes a 4, and if a Trait is already 5, they gain an automatic success.

Flaw

Finally, to balance out the average hyper-competent Wuxalted character, they need a Flaw. Flaws are Traits with a rating of 1. This is some kind of tragic flaw that surfaces at unhelpful moments, usually a manifestation of the Exalted's Great Curse. Any time your character goes against the conditions set by their Flaw only dice that roll a 1 are successes. For example: Always love children, Always disagree with Bronze Faction Sidereals, Never show compassion, Always Proud.

Caste

The majority of the characters in Wuxalted have a Caste which goes a long way to summing up their general abilities, and this can be indicated by drawing the appropriate symbol or simply writing what it is.

Essence

Essence might vary by the type of Exalted the character is, but otherwise it should probably be set at 4-6 by the GM.

Background and Appearance

A short amount of background information can help flesh out the character. Vagueness can be filled in later as play 'reveals' details about the character.

In addition, drawing a picture of the character and their stuff is a good inspiration for Details as well as simply being cool.

Skills, etc

A list of precise abilities may not matter from the rules point of view, but having a reference for the main charms, spells, martial arts, etc that the character uses is good Detail fodder.

Advancement

In standard Wuxalted, characters start out competent and stay that way. They don't improve mechanically, nor do they accumulate experience with which they can raise their Traits.

What they can do, if change is desired, is evolve. Between sessions, player are free to shuffle points around between their Traits, and to redefine and refocus their Traits. Freshly Exalted Kara might start out with Mercenary 5, Skilled Rider 4,

Carefree 3 and Flaw: Greedy 1. But by the end, Kara, Forsaken Blade of the East, is a long way from that happy-go-lucky sellsword. She buys down her Mercenary Trait and increases her Riding Trait, which is also redefined, while her Carefree nature is transformed into something harder. Her new Traits are Mercenary 4, Forsaken Blade of the Dawn 5, Fearless 3 and Flaw: Lust for Power.