TRUTH & JUSTICE

BY CHAD UNDERKOFFLER

Playtesters & Peer Reviewers

PDF Preview

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INTRODUCTION

Welcome to *Truth & Justice*.

I've always loved superhero comics, cartoons, movies and gaming. To me, they celebrate valor and "mad, beautiful ideas" in adventurous, stylish, and *fun* ways. What's not to love?

However, I think that the story-based aspects of the genre are often overlooked when translating amazing superhero action to gaming; the wargame-based inheritance of RPGs sometimes interferes with the vital characteristics of superhero stories. These characteristics include: the ability of dedicated, highly-trained but unpowered heroes to work successfully alongside or against individuals with superpowers; the heroism in transcending limitations and overcoming obstacles; the importance of a hero's motivations, personal ties, and behavior alongside their more-than-human talents; and the sense of freewheeling imagination and improvisation that suffuses the source material. *Truth & Justice* (*T&J*) is my stab at encouraging gaming that supports and enhances those qualities.

I hope you enjoy reading and playing *T&J* as much as I enjoyed writing it.

ABOUT THE PDQ SYSTEM

The rules in this book build upon the ***Prose Descriptive Qualities (PDQ) System***, suitably modified for superheroic play. ***PDQ Core*** is available as a free download from the following URLs:

> http://www.atomicsockmonkey.com/freebies/di/pdq-core.pdf
> http://www.rpgnow.com/product_info.php?products_id=4175&
> http://e23.sjgames.com/item.html?id=ASM-000

PDQ has been designed for evocative simplicity, speed, and flexibility in play. It currently serves as the core game mechanics for ***Dead Inside: the Roleplaying Game of Loss & Redemption*** (***DI***); ***Monkey, Ninja, Pirate, Robot: the Roleplaying Game*** (***MNPR:RPG***); and ***Truth & Justice*** (***T&J***).

ABOUT ATOMIC SOCK MONKEY PRESS

http://www.atomicsockmonkey.com/

Atomic Sock Monkey Press is dedicated to high-quality, off-kilter, imaginative fun. Currently, that means tabletop games of both the "beer & pretzels" and roleplaying game (RPG) varieties. In the future, we may expand into other areas; but for now, Atomic Sock Monkey Press is concentrating on games.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Chad Underkoffler is an editor for a telecommunications standards body by day and a freelance game writer by night. He's been gaming since 1981, to the confusion of his family. His column "Campaign in a Box" appears in Pyramid Online at http://www.sjgames.com/pyramid (*Chapter 7*, *Second-String Supers*, first appeared as a CiaB column); he has written material for *Gamma World* (Sword & Sorcery), *GURPS* (Steve Jackson Games), and *Unknown Armies* (Atlas Games); and he is the author and publisher of *Dead Inside: the Roleplaying Game of Loss & Redemption* and *Monkey, Ninja, Pirate, Robot: the RPG*. Chad currently lives in Alexandria, VA, with his wife Beth and their two black cats.

CHAPTER 2: *T&J* RULES OVERVIEW

This chapter gives the basics of the *T&J* rules, so that players have a general understanding of how the system works before creating characters. Further details and refinements will be offered in later chapters.

The core design concept of *PDQ*-based games is of prose, descriptive, do-it-yourself, wide-ranging *abilities* that summarize a range of attributes, advantages, merits, flaws, skills, relationships, or incapabilities. Abilities are a measure of story-effectiveness rather than reality simulation, and are intended to be ranked and compared against one another.

The *PDQ Master Chart* (see below) is the foundation of this scheme. When attempting a task, players roll 2d6, plus the Modifier – or MOD – from the Rank of the ability they are using to determine whether or not they succeed.

PDQ Master Chart

Level	As Quality Rank	Modifier to 2D6 roll	As Difficulty Rank	Target Number
Poor	Notably Inept.	-2	A trivial task.	5
Average	Typical human capability.	0	Straightforward task.	7
Good	Better than usual; most professionals or talented newcomers.	+2	Complex task, requiring attention to detail.	9
Expert	Noted/famed professional; talent with skill to back it up.	+4	Intricate task, difficult and requiring sharp concentration, hard for a typical untrained person (Average).	11
Master	Acclaimed genius: talent with substantial skill behind it.	+6	Extremely difficult task, hard for most professionals in the field (Good).	13

NOTE - An expanded table – the *T&J Intensity Chart* – appears on p. 34, which discusses the Intensity and scope of superpowers. Both charts are available as a handout found at the end of this book and at the Atomic Sock Monkey Press website.

QUALITIES

Qualities describe a character's noteworthy talents, skills, relationships, resources, and flaws. The player selects a word or phrase to sum up what they want the character to be able to do, and the GM will then agree to or veto the Quality. A Quality represents a broad skill, field of knowledge, unique perspective, personality trait, or social connection: if a particular Quality is relevant *at all* to an action or topic, the character may apply it when attempting that action or understanding that topic. This is called the *penumbra* (or "shadow") of the Quality. Therefore, a player shouldn't pick Qualities that are too narrow or

its penumbra will be too narrow; too broad, and identifying the sorts of things that should fall under the penumbra becomes pointless. Proper word choice is key. The parameters for what's "too broad" or "too narrow" are up to the individual GM.

Consider a character who has the Quality of "Teacher." For some *T&J* games, that will be perfectly fine; for others, too broad. The GM might ask the player to refine the Quality, to give a better idea of the sorts of things that will fall under its penumbra. So: "Teacher" could become "College History Prof," "High School Chemistry Teacher," or "Grade School Teacher." While all would cover the basic concept of education, each individual choice

brings different skills under the penumbra – not just the specific field of interest, but also knowledge related to it. For example, the College History Prof would have more experience with (academic) politics, the High School Chemistry Teacher would know more about adolescent fads, and the Grade School Teacher would be better at dealing with kids on a sugar high.

Take another example: "Gunplay." This Quality would be useful not just in shooting at things, but also in cleaning and repairing all sorts of guns, discovering the location of nearby gun dealers and shooting ranges, knowing the history of firearms, and so forth. If the player had instead selected a Quality of ".44 Magnum," the Quality would only be useful in shooting or knowing about that individual model of gun, and (maybe) other pistols.

Qualities are often drawn from six general areas:

- ♦ **Personality.** Over-arcing traits; answers the questions of "what is this character *like*?" and "how does the character think about or approach things?" Personality Qualities also remind the player of how he or she plans to play the character.

- ♦ **Physical.** Having to do with the body, athleticism, or natural talents.

- ♦ **Mental.** Areas of study, intellectual acuity, education.

- ♦ **Social.** Groups the character is a member of or associates with, skills in dealing with people.

- ♦ **Professional.** Knowledge and skills picked up on the job.

- ♦ **Resources.** While a character is assumed to have access to most normal-scale (see *Chapter 1*, *Scale*, p. 4), mundane gear related to their other Qualities, certain rare types of specialized equipment known as *Gadgets* (see p. 41) or *Vehicles* (see p 53) – can be considered a separate Quality. In some *T&J* settings, devices like utility belts, high-performance vehicles, swing-line devices, jetpacks, etc., will be considered normal-scale Gadgets; in others, they will not.

IMPORTANT NOTE – If a PC wants to be particularly better at some Quality that might normally fall under the penumbra of another Quality (for example, taking "Cop" and "Pistol" separately), it's perfectly okay to do so, provided that the player realizes that in exchange for the benefit of being able to use both Qualities at the same time when they shoot a handgun, this character generation choice *limits* the breadth of what the character can do.

QUALITY RANKS

Qualities have Ranks that indicate increasing levels of proficiency (see also the *PDQ Master Chart*). From lowest to highest, the Ranks are:

♦ **Poor [-2]**;
♦ **Average [0]**;
♦ **Good [+2]**;
♦ **Expert [+4]**; and
♦ **Master [+6]**.

The numbers in square brackets following the Rank of the Quality show the Rank's *Modifier* (or MOD) – how much is added to or subtracted from a 2d6 dice roll for resolving a task (see below).

Characters have some things going for them (*Strengths*), which have positive Modifiers, and at least one thing working against them (*Weakness*), which has a negative Modifier.

IMPORTANT NOTE – At everything else, characters are neither noteworthy nor inept – that is, they're Average [0]. They can attempt a roll for any task, knowledge, or skill that is not specifically secret, abstruse, technical, or esoteric with a 2d6 roll. That is, while any character can attempt to land a jumbo jet if the pilots are sick, it's doubtful they'll be able to successfully shut down a nuclear reactor.

A *Strength* is an inherent positive aspect (benefit, skill, talent, attribute, relationship) of a character. Come up with a word or a pithy phrase to sum up the Strength. Examples include Handsome Man, Kung-Fu Fighting, Observant, Credit Rating, Race-car Driver, Find Bargains, a Friend in the Precinct, True Love, and Run Away! Strengths can be any Rank greater than Average [0].

A *Weakness* is an inherent negative aspect of the character, stemming from ignorance, flawed understanding, physical or mental incapability, a recurring duty, or some other vulnerability. A word of advice: pick something that will be fun or entertaining (for you the player, not necessarily you the character) to flub at! Come up with a word or a pithy phrase to sum up the Weakness. Examples here include Glass Jaw, Bad Credit Rating, Slow As Molasses, Bed-ridden Grandmother, Unlucky in Love, and Wallflower. Weaknesses are always Poor [-2] Rank.

Depending how the Quality is considered when creating the character, any Quality could be either a Strength or a Weakness. For example, suppose a character has "Spoiled Brat" as a Quality. If it's ranked Average or above, it's a Strength: the character always gets his own way, can wield undue influence by threatening to sic their Mommy or Daddy on others, might possess lots of cash or equipment, and people may fawn over them, making life easy. But if the character has "Spoiled Brat (Poor)," this is a Weakness: the character has led a pampered and sheltered life, rubs people the wrong way, and expects everyone to bend over backward to fulfill his most minor needs. Or ponder "True Love for Pat": if the character's pure devotion to their lover Pat helps them succeed in dire situations, it's a Strength; if the character's obsession with Pat interferes regularly with daily life or adventuring, it's a Weakness.

An important note relevant to superhero gaming: as a player, you should only take a Weakness for your character that you will enjoy playing, and that you want to come up in play. For example, taking a Quality like "Secret Identity" (or "Vigilante") as a Weakness indicates to the GM that the player *wishes* to have situations come up in which people try to figure out the hero's real name (or question the hero's motives, methods, or the lawfulness of his actions).

> NOTE - Some players may wish to consider taking "Secret Identity" as a type of Vulnerability rather than a Weakness (see *Chapter 4*, p. 37).

During character generation, players have several packages to choose from, each with a different number of Qualities and Ranks. They may choose between having more Qualities at a lower level of competency, or having fewer Qualities at a higher level of competency.

> <u>Examples</u>: Here are two simple characters and their Qualities:
>
> **Joe Thug.** Good [+2] Brawler, Good [+2] Criminal, Poor [-2] Ugly.
>
> **Mike the Cop.** Good [+2] Policeman, Good [+2] Outdoorsman, Poor [-2] Singer.

Never fear: if after play begins, a particular Quality sees no use and doesn't really add to the characterization of a PC, the player and the GM can work together change it to something that fits better.

DIFFICULTY RANKS

Difficulty Ranks are like Quality Ranks for things, tasks, and situations, and show how challenging a thing, task, or situation is. A wall that needs to be climbed, a lock that must be picked, a swaying rope bridge that must be crossed, a trap which must be disarmed, and so forth. The GM looks at the *Master Chart* (see above), and determines the Difficulty Rank of the task. Some Difficulty Ranks will be figured out in advance, but the simplicity of the *PDQ Master Chart* helps make it easy to determine complexity on the fly.

Difficulty Ranks show increasing levels of intricacy (see also the *PDQ Master Chart*). From lowest to highest, the Ranks are:

- **Poor [5]**;
- **Average [7]**;
- **Good [9]**;
- **Expert [11]**; and
- **Master [13]**.

The numbers in square brackets following the Difficulty Rank show its *Target Number* (or TN) – the number a character must roll on 2d6 (plus any Modifiers) to succeed or conquer the task.

> NOTE - Some GMs may wish to include Difficulty Ranks of Improbable [19] and Impossible [25+] for *really* challenging tasks that only the "best of the best" (under optimum conditions) and the super-gifted have a chance of succeeding at. However, this is purely optional.

BASIC TIME, RANGE, AND MOVEMENT

For most things on the normal-scale (see *Chapter 1, Scale*, p. 4), the following information is adequate when running a *T&J* game. When talking about Powers and other things on the super-scale, please refer to the *T&J Intensity Chart* on p. 34.

BASIC TIME

For most purposes, time measurements are as normal: seconds, minutes, hours, days, weeks, etc. However, the terms used in *T&J* for identifying the passage of "game time" are: Scenes, Turns, actions, and reactions.

Scenes are however long it takes for a distinct action or set of actions (combat, library research, defusing a bomb, a business meeting, traveling across town, etc.)

to happen. Scenes can be long or short, and can collapse or extend time as necessary.

A *Turn* means "the set of all characters' next actions and reactions." Each character takes an individual *action*: that's when they make their move, say their piece, throw a punch, etc. Other characters *react* during a character's action – saying something back or performing a defense, usually – but reactions can only be *in response to* the actions of the character whose turn it currently is. They cannot initiate moves of their own until their action. The Turn is over when each character's action and any resulting reactions have been resolved.

How the Scenes and Turns of game time relate to the seconds, minutes, hours, etc. of real time is variable.

BASIC RANGE

For most purposes, GMs can be really flexible with distance in a *T&J* game. Ranges are either *Near* (can punch it), *Middling* (can run up and punch it), *Far* (can throw or shoot at it), or *Too Far* (out of range). If one really wants to connect numbers to this, Near would be any distance up to a yard, Middling would be between 1 and 3 yards, Far would be between 3 and 60 yards, and Too Far is anything over 60 yards. If one wants to connect Difficulty Ranks to these Ranges, Near is equivalent to Average [7], Middling is equivalent to Good [9], and so forth.

BASIC MOVEMENT

While *T&J* tends to leave normal-scale movement rates for characters abstract and up to the discretion of the GM (like by requiring a character to make a roll using a speed or movement Quality vs. a reasonable Difficulty Rank), some folks like having a concrete movement rate. So here it is: characters have a movement rate equal to 4 yards plus the sum of all involved Quality Modifiers per Turn. Half of this (i.e., the sum of their Qualities being used) is taken on their action, and the other half is taken during their reactions.

> Example: This means that a Good [+2] Jogger would have a movement rate of 6 yards per Turn – base 4, plus 2; they can move up to 3 yards on their action and 3 yards on their reactions.
>
> A skier with Good [+2] Fast! and Expert [+4] Skiing on a downhill run would have a movement rate of 10 yards per Turn – base 4, plus (2+4); they

can move up to 5 yards on their action and 5 yards on their reactions.

POWERS

Powers are the superhuman abilities that a character possesses. A character may use them as often as they wish. Like with Qualities, whatever a player can think up and that the GM agrees to can be a Power. Powers are Ranked similarly to Qualities, have penumbras (a character with Fire Blast can easily light his cigarette), and their Modifiers add to a 2d6 roll when the character attempts to use the Power to do something (blast an enemy, lift a tank, outrun an explosion, etc.). Unlike Qualities (see above), characters *must* have a Power listed on their character sheet to attempt to use it. The scope of a Power's effect – duration, range, speed, etc. – is known as its *Intensity* and is shown on the *T&J Intensity Chart* on p. 34.

> Example: Optikon has an Expert [+4] Laser Eyes Power. To blast one of Dr. Vrobotnik's evil vrobots, he rolls 2d6+4.

QUALITIES, POWERS, AND SCALES

A simple rule of thumb is that Qualities are normal-scale and Powers are super-scale.

STUNTS

The dynamic and imaginative use of characters' abilities permits them to achieve useful effects called *Stunts*. Only Powers (any Rank) and Master [+6] Qualities can serve as the *base ability* for a Stunt. Stunts either lie outside of an ability's normal penumbra, but can be justified to the GM by the player within the context of the character's abilities (*Spin-off Stunts*), or express a specific focus or "special move" (*Signature Stunts*). So long as the GM agrees that a Stunt fits within or logically extends the idiom of a Power, it is possible. Spin-off Stunts can be attempted at any time during play, though it is suggested that any that a character uses regularly should be noted on their character sheet. Signature Stunts require the agreement of the GM ahead of time, and should be written down on the character sheet.

The effective Rank of a Stunt is figured from its base ability; and some Stunts may require the expenditure of *Hero Points* (see below) to perform, given their complexity or the Intensity desired for the Stunt. *Chapter 4*, *Superhuman Stunts* (p. 53) goes into detail on how to figure out effective Stunt Ranks and Hero Point costs, but the simple rule of thumb is that most Stunts have an effective Rank two steps below that of their base ability with no Hero Point cost (e.g., an Expert [+4] Power means that a character can do Average [0] Rank Stunts). To achieve higher Stunt Ranks, and thus Intensities, Hero Points must be spent.

When using a Spin-off Stunt, the character rolls 2d6, plus the Stunt's effective Modifier only; a Signature Stunt uses 2d6, plus the Stunt's effective Modifier *and* the Modifier of the base ability. A Spin-off Stunt can be turned into a Signature Stunt through spending a point of *MAX* (see below).

> Examples: Optikon wishes to use his Expert [+4] Laser Eyes to eavesdrop on a conversation in a hotel room by bouncing a beam off the room's window; there are covert listening devices that work this way in the real world. The GM agrees that this is a viable Spin-off Stunt, and tells Optikon he can roll with an effective Rank of Average [0] – that is, 2d6 – to listen in. If Optikon wants to improve his effective Rank, he can spend Hero Points to do so.
>
> Crouching Dragon (Master [+6] Kung Fu) is fighting a tough alien warrior. He wants to hit it *hard*, and figures that his Signature Stunt called "Burning Talon Rake" – already written down on his character sheet – is the way to do it. Since the GM has already signed off on this Signature Stunt, the hero declares that he's using his special move and rolls 2d6, plus 6 (for Kung Fu), plus 2 (for Burning Talon Rake) – or 2d6+8 – to punch the alien. If Crouching Tiger wants to boost his punch even further, he can spend Hero Points to do so.

HERO POINTS

Hero Points are a quantification of the heroic energy, fortune, indomitable will, and plucky attitude that makes a character larger-than-life. Most normal people rarely access these hidden, potent reserves within themselves to exceed their normal boundaries; heroes do so regularly. By spending Hero Points,

characters can shift the odds in their favor, get up when a normal person would be down for the count, temporarily surpass their limitations, and persevere through adversity.

Simply, the more heroic a character *acts*, the more Hero Points accrued. PCs also gain Hero Points for following their *Motivations* (see *Chapter 3*, *Motivation*, p. 26), agreeing to let the GM hose them with a *Revoltin' Development* (see *Chapter 3*, *All About Hero Points*, p. 30), or being affected by a *Vulnerability* (see *Chapter 4*, p. 37) they possess. Hero Points can be used to increase the Intensity of Stunts, recover from combat injuries, alter the odds in the hero's favor, and so forth.

The more *often* a character acts heroically, the larger the maximum amount of Hero Points he can hold at one time – called *MAX* – becomes. MAX is also used to help characters get better with their Qualities and Powers (see *Chapter 3*, *Improvement*, p. 33), and to turn (or "cement") Spin-off Stunts into Signature Stunts.

TASK RESOLUTION

When a character tries to do something, the GM will determine if the task is a *simple situation*, a *complicated situation*, or a *conflict situation*. Let's take each in turn.

SIMPLE SITUATIONS

In *simple situations*, the task is clear-cut, there are no outstanding issues interfering with the attempted action, there is plenty of time to attempt the task, or randomness would bog down the game. In a simple situation, the GM looks at the *PDQ Master Chart* (see above, p. 15), and determines the Difficulty Rank of the task. Then, the GM compares that Difficulty Rank to the character's most appropriate ability (Quality or Power) Rank. If the character's ability is higher than the Difficulty Rank, the character succeeds. Otherwise, the task becomes a *complicated situation* (see below).

Examples: While investigating a report of strange noises at an abandoned house, Mike the Cop (see above, p. 17) needs to climb a tree to look into a window. He convinces the GM that he should be able to use his Good [+2] Outdoorsman Quality. Mike automatically succeeds in scaling Poor [5] and Average [7] Difficulty trees; for him, these are simple situations. If a tree is Good [9] Difficulty, it becomes a complicated situation.

If Joe Thug wanted to climb a tree, he has no applicable Quality, and so would have to use his "default" Quality Rank of Average [0]. This means he can only automatically succeed in climbing Poor [5] Difficulty trees – all others are complicated situations for him.

COMPLICATED SITUATIONS

Dice rolls are made in *complicated situations*: where comparisons of Rank are inconclusive, or when randomness is desired. Complicated situations are when Quality and Difficulty Ranks are tied, or when ability Rank is lower than Difficulty Rank. To attempt a complicated situation, the PC rolls two regular six-sided dice (2d6), and adds the Modifier for their ability Rank. To succeed, the PC must match or beat the Target Number of the task's Difficulty Rank. If the PC fails, they may or may not get hurt or discouraged in the attempt (see below, *Basic Damage*, p. 22, and also *Chapter 5*, *Environmental Damage*, p. 61), and may or may not be able to try the task again, as the GM dictates.

Examples: The tree that Mike needs to climb is, unfortunately, Good [9] Difficulty. Comparing this to Mike's Good [+2] Outdoorsman Quality makes this a complicated situation. Mike rolls 2d6+2 and must match or beat the tree's Target Number of 9. He rolls a 3 and a 5, plus 2, for a total of 10. Mike climbs the tree successfully.

Somewhere else, Joe is trying to climb a Good [9] Difficulty tree himself. Since he doesn't have any applicable Quality, this is definitely a complicated situation for him. Joe rolls 2d6 and must match or beat the tree's Target Number of 9. He rolls a 3 and a 5, for a total of 8. Joe fails to climb the tree, but the GM decides he didn't fall far enough to get hurt.

When a character's Qualities are set against the Qualities of other characters, this isn't just complicated, it's a *conflict situation* (see below).

CONFLICT SITUATIONS

> NOTE - This is just a basic overview of conflict situations. There are several details of conflict that require closer attention; these fine points are addressed in *Chapter 5*.

Conflict situations involve active resistance to a character's attempts to perform a task: trying to punch a guy in the face, out-thinking a chess player, seducing a hottie, running a race, or convincing a cop that you weren't really speeding. Conflict situations in *T&J* include more than just the immediate success or failure of an attempted action; here, conflict includes the back and forth of an active contest, out-maneuvering the competition, and wearing down an opponent's resistance. Examples of conflict situations include combat, seduction, haggling, debating, and so forth. (Note that some gaming groups won't necessarily want to use the conflict situation mechanics to resolve social interactions, and may want to rely on pure roleplaying or a combination of roleplaying and rules instead; but the methodology exists if a group wishes to use it.)

In conflict situations, the characters involved compare the results of 2d6 plus Modifier rolls; the highest successful result wins. The loser of the conflict takes temporary Ranks of damage (see

below, *Basic Damage*, p. 22), which may be physical injury or mental confusion, equal to the difference between the higher roll and the lower roll. If the rolls are tied, each participant takes some damage. Repeat as many times as necessary to determine overall victory.

> Example 1: Joe and Mike (off-duty, in civvies) are both in a bar, and get into a fight. Here are their Qualities again:
>
> *Joe Thug.* Good [+2] Brawler, Good [+2] Criminal, Poor [-2] Ugly.
>
> *Mike the Cop.* Good [+2] Policeman, Good [+2] Outdoorsman, Poor [-2] Singer.
>
> Joe takes a poke at Mike. He rolls 2d6, plus the Modifier for Brawler, for his attack action. Mike reacts defensively, rolling 2d6, plus the Modifier for Policeman.
>
> Joe rolls a 4 and a 5, plus 2, for a total of 11. Mike rolls two 3s, plus 2, for a total of 8. Mike would take 11 - 8, or 3, Damage Ranks.
>
> Example 2: Joe and Mike are playing chess; neither has any Quality that could contribute to playing the game. Joe rolls 2d6, while Mike rolls 2d6. Joe gets a total of 4 while Mike gets a total of 6. Joe takes 2 Failure Ranks, and Mike is closer to winning the match.

UPSHIFTS & DOWNSHIFTS

UPSHIFTS (AKA BEING BADASS)

This is how PCs get more bang for their buck through good, entertaining roleplaying. If the player describes his character's attempt to perform an action in a graphic, flavorful, and amusing way, the GM can give them an *Upshift*. An Upshift means that for that particular action, the PC rolls as if their Quality or Power were one level higher (essentially giving an additional +2 to their roll). So, rather than "I hit the sailor" (or "I haggle"), the player says something like "I grab the sailor's shirt with one hand and pull him closer to punch him in the face with my other fist!" (or says, in character, "May the fleas from a thousand camels infest the beds of your children if you try to rob me in this way!"). If the PC had a Good [+2] Brawling (or Bargaining) Quality, this would change his roll in attempting to hit the sailor (or haggle with the merchant) from 2d6+2 to 2d6+4, as if he were Expert [+4] Rank.

NOTE - Each Upshift above Master Rank adds *an extra die* to the character's roll (i.e., instead of rolling 2d6+6+2, the character rolls *3d6+6* for 1 Upshift, *4d6+6* for 2 Upshifts, and so forth).

DOWNSHIFTS

While *functionally* the same thing as a temporary Weakness (a -2 to a 2d6 plus Modifiers roll), the reasons behind having a Weakness or incurring Downshifts are different.

For example, Joe has a *Weakness* of Poor [-2] Ugly. If he tries to charm the woman sitting on the barstool next to his, he'll roll 2d6-2. That's just par for the course, his Weakness affecting in that particular situation.

A *Downshift* means that for the action in question, the PC rolls as if his ability were one Rank lower (essentially giving him a -2 to his roll). Downshifts can come from a number of sources determined by the GM.

While judicious use of Downshifts to reflect a sudden or unexpected change in the complexity of a situation can work very well, GMs should resist the temptation to *overuse* Downshifts as situational modifiers. *T&J* games tend to run more smoothly if the GM simply sets the Difficulty Rank (and thus, Target Number) of a task appropriately. For example, if the PCs are attempting to climb an Average [7] Difficulty wall and it begins to rain, a Downshift to relevant abilities makes sense. However, if it's already raining when they begin their attempt, simply make the wall Good [9] difficulty from the get-go.

NOTE - Abilities Downshifted below Poor Rank mean automatic failure in the use of that ability.

SHIFT ACCUMULATION

In *T&J*, all Upshifts, Downshifts, and bonus dice are cumulative. That means that if a character in a fight is Being Badass and using Hero Points simultaneously, he might have 2 Upshifts (or a Modifier of +4) on the attack and damage. This means if the starting Quality was of Average [0] Rank (2d6), it would temporarily become Expert Rank (2d6+4); if the Quality was Good [+2], the roll would be 2d6+6, and if the Quality was Expert [+4], the roll would be 3d6+6, because one of the Upshifts would move the Rank above Master and translate into an extra die to roll.

Alternatively, consider a character who is climbing a wall while Being Badass, but it starts to rain. The Upshift of Being Badass is countered by the Downshift for the sudden storm. He will roll at his "unshifted" ability level to scale the wall.

BEING LAMEASS

Being Lameass is – in some ways – the opposite of Being Badass. After all, the point of roleplaying is to have a good time, and contrary, uncharacteristic, or disruptive roleplaying can ruin everybody else's fun. If a player is reading, refusing to pay attention, watching TV, pedantically rules-lawyering, utterly ignoring the characterization of their PC, being pointlessly abusive or distracting to other players, or – saints preserve us! – *sleeping* at the gaming table, they are working against the overall good time. In these cases, the GM *could* give the offending PC a Downshift based on the *player's* behavior. . . but what's the point? If the player's not interested enough in the game to even pay attention, penalizing his character will probably have little effect on his behavior around the gaming table.

Try to discover the cause of the player's Being Lameass. Maybe it's something about the focus or subject matter of the campaign, a difference of roleplaying style, or even an unrelated personal issue that's bugging the player. The answer to Being Lameass is to discuss the situation outside of the game – either by taking a break or talking between sessions – and try to work through it like grown-ups. A little bit of open communication can do wonders for these sorts of issues.

BASIC DAMAGE

Damage (be it physical, mental, emotional, or social) is the loss of capability. As a character takes damage, he is less likely to be able to perform at peak efficiency. This is shown by a temporary Downshift applied to the character's listed abilities called either a *Failure Rank* or a *Damage Rank*, depending upon the nature of the conflict. The player selects which of his Qualities or Powers takes the damage/Downshift(s), and can spread out the damage across several abilities at once. Whichever ability of the character that the player decides takes the first hit of damage in a conflict generates a Story Hook (see below).

In mental, social, and some physical conflicts, this loss of capability is usually temporary, and is represented by Failure Ranks. Examples include a chess match, witty repartee, or running a race. Failure Ranks are almost always completely recovered at the end of a Scene.

In many physical conflicts, loss of capability is more enduring, and is represented by Damage Ranks. Examples here include not just combat, by *environmental damage* taken by running through fire, falling off a roof, or beginning to drown . Some or all Damage Ranks are recovered at the end of a Scene.

> Example: Joe hit Mike for 3 Damage Ranks above. Mike takes one of the Ranks on his Outdoorsman Quality, temporarily dropping it from Good [+2] to Average [0]. This generates a Story Hook for the GM (see below).
>
> There are still 2 Damage Ranks to account for. Mike drops his Policeman from Good [+2] to Average [0].
>
> One Rank of damage to go, and Mike's in a situation. He cannot drop his Poor [-2] Singing a Rank because this would mean he "zeroed out" (see below) and lost the overall conflict. He must drop either Policeman or Outdoorsman from Average [0] to Poor [-2]; he chooses Outdoorsman.
>
> Joe got Mike pretty good with that right to the jaw!

SUPER-SCALE DAMAGE

Against living targets, most Qualities and Powers do normal-scale damage, but some do *super-scale damage*. Super-scale damage indicates that on a successful hit, a number of *extra Ranks of damage* equal to the Target Number of the Power used is added to the normal-scale damage. Nearly all Powers can do super-scale damage to non-character normal-scale targets like mailboxes, trucks, trees, buildings, etc. So, while Laser Woman cannot instantly fry Frogboy in one shot, she can blow up police cars all the livelong day. (The major exception to this rule is the *Super-Strength* Power; see p. 51.)

> Example: To show the difference between normal-scale damage and super-scale damage, let's use the exact same situation as above, only this time, let's pretend that Joe has Average [0] Super-Strength. Joe hit Mike successfully for 3 Damage Ranks, so to this 3 is added the TN of Average [0] Super-Strength, or 7 additional Damage Ranks, for a total of 10 Damage Ranks to Mike! This will zero our policeman friend out in a single blow, but Mike still needs to select which Quality takes the first hit for Story Hook purposes.

Basically, in any *T&J* conflict situation, some of a character's Qualities and Powers can be thought of as useful for either "attack," "defense," or "absorption." The player has to make choices about what to sacrifice for their character's well-being and effectiveness. It's resource management at a basic level. The player must make a decision on which abilities will be most useful for the remainder of the conflict scene.

As an example, say a character has Good [+2] Rank in *Kung Fu*, *Debating*, and *Accountant* Qualities, and a Good [+2] Rank in the *Laser Vision* Power.

In combat (a physical conflict), the character will probably opt to keep Kung Fu and Laser Vision at Good [+2] as long as possible, and apply Damage Ranks to Debating and Accountant. In an argument (a social conflict), the character will want to keep Debating high for as long as possible, and take Failure Ranks on Kung Fu and Laser Vision first. If being audited by the IRS (could be a mental, a social, or even a professional conflict, depending on how the GM spins the situation), the character would protect Accountant, try to keep Debating at Good [+2] as long as he could, and sacrifice Kung Fu and Laser Vision.

Additionally (and importantly!), a player's selection of which Qualities or Powers takes the *first hit* of in conflict gives the GM a powerful tool for generating *Story Hooks* (see p. 24) for future Scenes and sessions.

The abstraction of how Failure or Damage Ranks are applied isn't meant to be a one-to-one relation ("Hey, why does getting punched in the face lower Accountant?"), but amusing justifications can be made up anyway ("Well, your black eye makes it hard to see your spreadsheets..."), which could become fully-fledged Story Hooks. Though the player decides upon which ability the damage affects, either the player or the GM can come up with a rationale.

ZEROING OUT

Superhuman conflicts take a lot of time, since superhumans have both Qualities and Powers to absorb Damage Ranks, as well as Hero Points to burn to obviate or reduce the effects of being hurt. Still, characters eventually hit bottom in one of their Qualities or Powers and "zero out." This means they lose the conflict they're in, or are at least uninvolved with the rest of the Scene.

In *T&J* games, just because a character zeroes out doesn't mean they die (see *Chapter 5*, *Out for Blood?*, p. 62). An Opponent has to specifically choose to kill a fallen foe. In a *T&J* game, zeroing out is often just

the prelude to a character being shoved into a villain's deathtrap!

> Examples: Let's say that Joe hits Mike again for 2 more Damage Ranks. Mike takes one of the Ranks on his Policeman Quality, temporarily dropping it from Average [0] to Poor [-2]. All of his Qualities are now at Poor [-2], and he still has to take another Rank of Damage somewhere. He takes it on Policeman, which generates another Story Hook for the GM (see below).

RECOVERING FROM DAMAGE

This is explained in detail in *Chapter 5* on p. 62, but – in general – Ranks temporarily Downshifted by damage are recovered in the time between the Scenes of the game.

STORY HOOKS

Several elements of *T&J* help the players and GM come up with *Story Hooks*: exciting or interesting subplots, complications, and events for their characters.

In conflict situations, whichever ability the player selects to take the first hit of damage (and the ability they choose when they need to zero out), generates a Story Hook. Some GMs may also wish to use the ability that the PC chooses when *zeroing out* of a conflict (that is, when any one of the character's Qualities or Powers drops below Poor [-2] Rank) as a source of these sorts of Story Hooks, too.

When the ability is announced, the GM should make a note of what it is, and come up with something interesting about that trait – this "something interesting" can be good, bad, or indifferent, but it should add a little texture to the PC's day. The GM can simply make quiet notes, or say something like "Meanwhile, across town, one of Professor F8's henchmen is talking to your receptionist about setting up a Roth IRA. . ."

> OPTIONAL RULE - If there are only one or two players when a Story Hook pops up, the group can *Scheherazade* the situation. To Scheherazade, the Story Hook is roleplayed out immediately as a flashback, flash-forward, or "cut-scene" with the GM and players temporarily taking over any involved NPCs. These characters interact until they hit a point of crisis, then the action returns to the original conflict.

Imagine that, under the *T&J* rules, the reason Arachnid-Girl always has a crappy home life is that she consistently uses her "secret identity" Qualities (True Love for Gary Shane; Supported by Uncle Ray; and Photojournalist) to absorb the first hit when she's taking on the Ochre Orc or Nurse Squid.

Additionally, a character's Weakness (see above, p. 17) or his Background, Origin, and Motivation (see *Chapter 3*) or Limitations or Vulnerabilities (see *Chapter 4*) can spark Story Hooks.

SUPER-CONFLICT EXAMPLE

Here's an extensive example of super-conflict, involving *Joe Thug*, *Bob Brick*, and *Snow Owl*. The relevant portions of each character's write-up appear below. (Reprinted from pages 63 to 66 of **Truth & Justice**.)

NOTE - A version of this super-conflict example appeared in the Spring 2005 issue of *Daedalus* at:

The version below is significantly different than that earlier one, since the issue appeared during the *T&J* playtest, and elements of the system changed. Also please note that the GM is explaining the rules in *extreme* detail, because Snow Owl's player is new to the game.

SNOW OWL

Qualities: Expert [+4] Businessman, Good [+2] Conversationalist, Good [+2] Outdoorsman, Good [+2] Sidekick: Kid Sister Katie, and Poor [-2] Impulsive.

Powers: Good [+2] Freeze Beam, Average [0] Flight, Average [0] Memories of Previous Incarnations, Average [0] Super-Senses: Darkvision, and Average [0] Super-Stealth.

Stunts: *Frost Manacles* (Freeze Beam Spin-off; Good [+2]; 2 HP; beat a TN of 9 to break free); *Icy Fist* (Freeze Beam Shifty Business; 1 HP; Average [0] to hit and Expert [+4] damage).

Hero Point Pool: 5/10

JOE THUG

Qualities: Good [+2] Brawler, Good [+2] Criminal, Poor [-2] Ugly.

BOB BRICK

Qualities: Good [+2] Athletics, Average [0] Criminal.

Powers: Good [+2] Stoneskin (Super-Armor), Average [0] Super-Strength.

GAMEMASTER (GM): While flying your nightly patrol, you see (courtesy of your Darkvision) two people on the roof of the Museum of Expensive Antiquities, apparently trying to open a door.

SNOW OWL (SO): What do they look like?

GM: The smaller one is dressed all in black, with a ski-mask on. The larger one seems just to be wearing black pants – and from his shirtless condition and stony, red skin, you recognize him as Bob Brick, a minor supervillain.

SO: They must be trying to break in – I'll stop them!

GM: How?

SO: Well, I'll swoop down silently and start busting heads before they know what hit them.

GM: Which one first?

SO: Brick.

GM: Okay, you've got your Super-Stealth going for you, but they're criminals performing an illegal act, so I'm sure they're probably keeping a lookout for any interference. If neither of them manages to beat the Target Number of your Super-Stealth, I'll give you surprise. If one of them twigs, you'll have initiative for the Scene, but you don't get a free Turn to wail on them like you would if you had surprise, okay?

SO: Sure, sounds fair.

GM: The TN of Average Super-Stealth is 7. The little guy gets a (rolls) 6, and Brick gets a (rolls) – damn – 10. Brick sees you hurtling down on them at the last minute and yells "Look out!" to his partner. Now what?

SO: I'll fly down and punch him.

GM: Are you going to land and then punch him, or punch him on the fly?

SO: I'll do the second one. I increase my flight speed, my cape sweeps out like a owl's wings on the hunt. I grit my teeth and wind up for a hard right to his jaw!

GM: Very cool. Take an Upshift on your attack for that great description! Brick will try to jump out of your way as his defensive reaction. Roll!

SO: (rolls) A 4 and a 6 plus 2 for the Upshift gets me a 12.

GM: Pretty good! (rolls) A 2 and a 3 plus 2 for Athletics and 2 for Stoneskin gets Brick a 9 – 12 minus 9 would be 3 Damage Ranks, normally. However, Brick's Stoneskin is a form of Super-Armor. It totally blocks normal-scale Damage Ranks lower than its current TN – that'd be 9. So nothing gets through.

SO: Crap! What if I Freeze Beamed him? Don't I get to add my TN to damage?

GM: Only to non-living targets.

SO: I see. Damn, that was a good roll, too! (grumbles under breath for a second) Hey! Since I used my Flight Power as part of the attack, does that count as a super-scale attack?

GM: (thinks) Hmm. Interesting. I could go either way on that. (thinks a bit more) Listen, let's not bog down the session in debate. I'll just say "no" for now, but we should talk about it after the session, okay?

SO: All right. (hmpf)

GM: You swoop in and sock the criminal with a hard right across the jaw, but it barely seems to faze him. "That tickled!" he quips. Your hand stings a little.

SO: "Caught you red-handed, Brick!" I say.

GM: (laughs) That's mighty funny. Give yourself a Hero Point for that. (GM makes a tick mark against Snow Owl's MAX; when enough are collected, the size of his MAX will increase.)

SO: Awesome. (scribbles on sheet; his 5 HP become 6 HP) I think I'm gonna need it.

GM: Now it's his little buddy's action. Joe Thug tries to punch you right in the breadbasket. What do you do?

SO: Can I use Flight to dodge backwards?

GM: Sure. It's only Average Rank, so you're not getting any big benefit from it.

SO: It'd look cool.

GM: True! Roll. (rolls) 2 and 2 plus 2 for Brawling is 6 for Joe's attack.

SO: (rolls) 4 and 3 is 7.

GM: You zip back far enough that Joe's punch never connects. Now it's Brick's action. He's gonna swing at your face, to return your little face slap. What's your reaction?

SO: Fly away again.

GM: Let's roll. (rolls) 3 and 4 plus 2 for Super-Strength is a 9.

SO: (rolls) Two 3's, plus 2 is an 8. He gets me.

GM: You take 1 Damage Rank for the roll, plus 7 Ranks from his Super-Strength, for a total of 8.

SO: Damn! (studying his sheet) I'll drop Businessman from Expert to Good to Average to Poor, that's 3. Conversationalist from Good to Average to Poor, that's 2. Outdoorsman from Good to Average to Poor, 2

more. And Sidekick from Good to Average for the last one. Geez.

GM: Brick's Super-Strength punch slams into your face. You reap the benefit of being superhuman; that hit probably would have knocked Joe there into next week. You see stars and dollar signs.

Okay, that's the first hit in combat, which will give a Story Hook for later. Let's see: Businessman, Businessman – Got it! "Meanwhile, across town, at City Mall, the lights in the store next to yours flick on." (GM scribbles notes about one of Snow Owl's neighbor retailers burning the midnight oil for mysterious purposes; if the GM had gotten stuck for an idea, he could have just made a note saying "Snow Owl's Story Book = Businessman" to think about later.)

Okay, new Turn; you go first.

SO: I'm going to hit Brick with Frozen Manacles and slow him up, so I don't have to deal with two opponents at once. I thought taking on the tougher guy was smarter, but I can't concentrate on him with Joe whittling away at me at the same time.

GM: You sure? He does have Super-Strength, and he'll probably be able to break the Manacles just by stretching his arms.

SO: Good point. I'll freeze Joe's wrists to the access door, so I can work on Brick.

GM: Okay, you're spending 2 Hero Points and rolling Frozen Manacles.

SO: I'm planning to use this often.

GM: Do it a couple times over the next couple sessions and spend a MAX point, and you can justify taking it as a Signature Stunt. That way it'll be more effective than a regular Spin-off Stunt.

SO: Okay, sounds good. (rolls) 3 and 5 plus 2 is 10. (drops his 6 HP to 4 HP)

GM: (rolls) Joe gets a 2 and a 4, and I'll let him use his Brawling here to twist out of the way. . .

SO: Can he do that? I mean, my Frozen Manacles is a sort of jet of ice, ranged attack thing that solidifies on contact.

GM: I figure a dodge is kosher; people throw stuff at each other during a brawl. Bottles, paving stones, trash cans.

SO: Well, alright.

GM: So, 2 and 4 and a 2 is 8, and he's frozen to the door. Brick's action. He rips an HVAC unit from the roof and wings it at you.

SO: I'll do the flying dodge thing.

GM: Roll for defense. (rolls) 2 and 4 plus 2 for Brick's Athletics and 2 for his Super-Strength is 10.

SO: (rolls) 6 and 4 is 10. It's a tie!

GM: That means you both take a Damage Rank. Uh. . . The HVAC unit slams into the wall behind you and just explodes, sending a shower of sharp metal pieces everywhere, at high velocity. A bunch of screws graze your hip, and one big piece spangs hard off of Brick's chest. What are you taking the damage to?

SO: I'll drop my Memories of Past Incarnations from Average to Poor. I don't think I'll have time to commune with the Ice Owl Spirit in the middle of *this* fight.

GM: Brick utterly ignores the 1 Damage Rank. Next Turn.

SO: He's really tough. I'd use Icy Fist with some extra HP behind it, but that has to hit first, and I'm not sure how that'll work through his Stoneskin. He's too tough.

GM: Well, physically, at least. Instead of going for physical Damage Ranks, you should try to give Brick some mental or social Failure Ranks. Think of Spidey fighting the Rhino.

SO: (looks at sheet) I shouldn't have dropped Conversationalist. I could have taunted him with that. Hey, if I put an ice-slick down so he loses his footing, would that be Failure Ranks?

GM: Sure! That'd be a new Spin-off Stunt. With your Freeze Beam of Good, you can do a Poor slippery slick (TN of 5) for free, an Average one (TN of 7) for 1 Hero Point, a Good one (TN of 9) for 2 Hero Points, and so on.

SO: I'll do it at Good.

GM: Spend 2 HP and roll at Good.

SO: (drops his 4 HP to 2 HP) A 5 and a 6 plus 2 is 13!

GM: Brick tries to jump out of the way; he rolls a 2 and a 4 and a 2 for Athletics –I won't give him the MOD for Stoneskin because you're not aiming directly at him – for a total of 8. That's 5 Failure Ranks, and Super-Armor does not protect. (looks at Brick's sheet) He'll drop Good Athlete to Poor, that's 2. Average Criminal to Poor for 1. Average Super-Strength to Poor for another 1. And he'll drop Good Stoneskin to Average for the last. He's slipping and sliding all over the roof! (Brick is two Ranks away from losing the conflict.)

SO: Awesome!

GM: Smart thinking. Joe attempts to break free from the Frozen Manacles. 2d6 vs. the Manacles' TN of 9. (rolls) 3 and 4 is 7; Joe's still stuck.

For his part, Brick will try to get off of the slick area. It's a TN of 9, he's rolling 2d6, minus 2 because of his Downshifted Athletics. A 5 and a 6 less 2 is 9, and he manages to get off of the icy spot.

SO: Darn it!

GM: New Turn, your action.

SO: Well, if I'm understanding the combat system here, that softened him up, right?

GM: More or less. He still has Average Stoneskin.

SO: I'm going to try Icy Fist this guy right in the face, since it does more damage if I hit. (spends 1 HP, dropping from 2 to 1, then rolls) A 6 and a 2 gives me 8.

GM: Brick's gonna stand there and take it, if he tried to dodge, the minus from his Athletics would hurt him. He rolls a 1 and a 3, for 4. That's 4 damage, which is below the TN of his currently Average Stoneskin of 7. No effect.

SO: Wait a second – I take no bonus on the chance to hit with Icy Fist in return for more damage if I do!

GM: Oh, yeah, you're right. I forgot. What was that, again?

SO: (looks at his character sheet) On a successful hit, I do Expert damage.

GM: So let's add 4 to that damage, it becomes 8. Okay, that beats his Stoneskin's TN, which means he'd take all 8 Ranks. Cold, bluish energy crackles around your fist as you deal Bob Brick a mighty uppercut!

SO: Yeah!

GM: Not so fast, bucko! Since his Stoneskin is still at Average, he can voluntarily Downshift it to Poor to ignore all damage. So that's what he's gonna do.

SO: (curses under his breath)

GM: Hey, the bright side is that he can't do that again. Also, he's swaying on his feet pretty badly. (All of Brick's abilities are at Poor Rank.)

Joe's still trying to get unstuck from the door you froze him to. (rolls) 1 and 3 is 4; still stuck.

Brick's gonna take another poke at you. He rolls two 4s, minus 2 for Poor Super-Strength, for 6.

SO: Shouldn't he have another minus 2 for Poor Athletics?

GM: I just used that when was dodging or throwing stuff at you. I'm not counting hand-to-hand fighting as part of Athletics.

SO: Okay. (rolls) A 2 and a 3, for 5. Crap.

GM: That's 1 Damage Rank, plus 5 for Brick's current Super-Strength of Poor, or 6 Damage Ranks.

SO: I'll drop Average Sidekick to Poor, that's 1. Average Darkvision to Poor, that's 1. Average Super-Stealth to Poor, that's 1. Average Flight to Poor, that's 1. And Good Freeze Beam to Average to Poor, that's 2. I take one more hit, and I'm out.

GM: New Turn, your action. Now what? You're both nearly dead on your feet.

SO: I should do the ice slick again.

GM: With your Freeze Beam at Poor, that's gonna take 2 Hero Points to do at all.

SO: I only have the 1 HP left. Can I Freeze Beam him to knock him back onto the existing ice slick? Not to do any damage, just to push him onto it so he can get himself another Failure Rank?

GM: Sounds like a decent idea. Brick's just gonna stand there and hope you miss, because if he does anything – try to resist it with Stoneskin or dodge it with Athletics, he's worse off. Go ahead and roll.

SO: 3 and 6 minus 2 is 7.

GM: 3 and 3 is 6. You hit for one Failure Rank, which is enough knock him back. What happens?

SO: Huh?

GM: You knocked him onto the ice slick. What happens then? Tell me.

SO: Uh, well, Brick slips and slides all over the melting ice slick. He waves his big, stony arms around trying to catch his balance. Then he trips and falls down again.

GM: Excellent. In fact, he knocks himself silly. He's unconscious.

SO: Yeah! Damn, that was close. Is the other guy still there?

GM: (rolls 5 and 6 for 11) Nope. Looks like Joe got away.

SO: Only for now. And I got the big one. I call Owlette and tell her to contact the cops while I catch my breath.

GM: That'll end this Scene. Give yourself 2 Hero Points for capturing a dangerous super-criminal.

SO: Thanks.

GM: If you're done patrolling for the night, you get all of your lost Damage Ranks back. If you want to chase after Joe, roll 1d6 for lost Ranks and we'll take it from there. . .
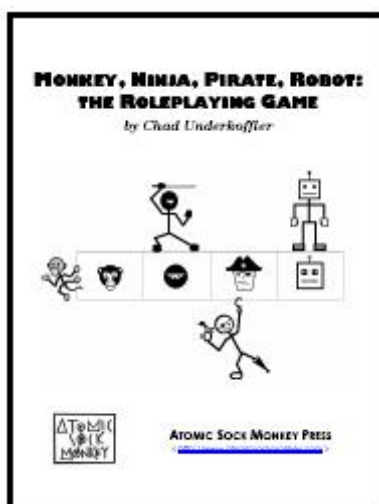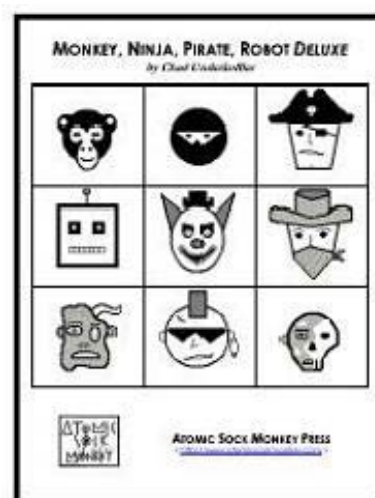
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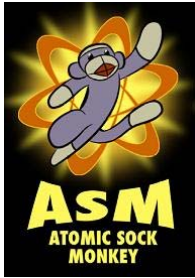
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