

PACE



A Fast Game of Diceless Action by Fred Hicks

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1: Introduction

Pace is a 24 Hour Game, which means it was started with the intention of writing a 24 page RPG inside of 24 contiguous hours. In this, it has a strong relationship to the National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo), in that the intention is to crank out a work without looking back at any point, without pausing and wondering if you're doing it right. The point is to get the ideas out of your head and onto the page. This game will doubtless reflect the warts of such an approach; one hopes it also has a shot at reflecting the beauty.

If you're interested in learning more about the 24 Hour Game concept, it was kicked off in this thread on the Forge:

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

This is a revised version of what was originally produced in that 24-hour experiment.

What I Have In Mind

Pace will be a diceless game of resource allocation, where the choices a player or GM makes to resolve a situation involve spending "pips" to get a result rather than rolling dice.

It will also focus on very, very lightweight character sheets. I've named the game *Pace* because I'm particularly concerned with the game running quickly when played, despite there being a touch of bookkeeping to it in the form of the pips. The complexity of spending the pips, too, should be kept as basic as possible.

Ultimately, this means I intend *Pace* to be a game that gets out of the way of the story. This places some burden back on the players and the GM, though, to cooperate, to trust one another, and to exercise a certain amount of *get-on-with-it* impatience in a context of keeping things fun. If a detail in the system is a hang-up for you, ignore it. If an action's cost doesn't look right or isn't, dare I say the dread word, "balanced", change it.

At any rate, this is probably the last time I'll say such things, so there they are, take 'em or leave 'em.

On with the show.

Influences

Always worth mentioning. They are:

- Risus
- Over the Edge
- Amber Diceless
- Fudge
- What little I know about Nobilis, the new Marvel Supers game, Theatrix, and a bunch of others.

The degree to which these fellows show up in the text is entirely by chance, however. They just happen to be the game systems I most fancy today.

Thanks

Much thanks for this goes to my usual partner in crime, Rob Donoghue, who helped to plant the vestiges of the seed that grew into this game.

Additional thanks doubtless go to the indie-rpgs.com community, without whom I would probably still be procrastinating on getting this puppy done.

2: Creating Characters

Choosing Descriptors

Characters are built simply, using a pair of descriptors. One of them should be a noun, but the other can be whatever seems to pair up well. Sometimes a single descriptor may be made of multiple words, but this should be avoided if possible. If it does happen, though, hyphenate the descriptor to make it clear. Alliteration can be fun, but is not required.

Example: Descriptor Pairs

- *Dashing Duellist*
- *Swashbuckling Pirate*
- *Dwarven Drummer*
- *Wisecracking Space-Pilot*
- *Warrior Poet*
- *Butterfingers Robot*
- *Zen Bounty-Hunter*

Negative descriptors (such as “butterfingers”) may be allowed or disallowed as suits the sensibilities of the game. Their use is covered specifically in chapter 4.

Descriptors are then rated with numbers. The GM should determine what the character’s total “level” should be in this regard (picking an odd number is best). Truly, it can be anything, but seven is a nice, solid number, and it’s what we’ll be using here.

The higher a descriptor is rated, the more potent it is. No descriptor may be rated at zero. For example, our Dashing Duellist could be Dashing[1] Duellist[6], all the way through Dashing[6] Duellist[1]. The former is only a little dashing but is hell on toast with a sword. The latter knows how to use a sword, but really shines when it comes to turning on the charm and looking heroic.

GMs may wish to offer a “broadly talented” character option where someone gets to use three

descriptors instead of two (“Cowboy Ninja Diplomat”). Also, under such an option, the same number of points will be available for distribution among the descriptors, so these “broad” characters will also tend to have lower ratings in each individual descriptor:

Cowboy[2] Ninja[3] Diplomat[2]



Rounding It Out

The usual character gimmicks of equipment, wealth, contacts, and so on are really relegated to color or otherwise subsumed by the chosen descriptors for the character. If it makes sense for a Dashing Duellist to have a sword, he has a sword. When these sorts of judgement calls are made during game time, you may wish to write them down so the decision remains consistent as things progress.

Looking At What You've Got

Ultimately, the ratings in the descriptors are the tools with which the character assails the game world. The specific mechanics will be covered more in later chapters. However, it is useful to keep, at the least, the following in mind:

1. You'll probably get more mileage out of a more "balanced" pair (3 and 4) than a "spiked" pair (1 and 6). This is to some extent common

sense, as it's a form of the "all eggs, one basket" principle. All the same, the potency gained by having a 2-and-5 character can really pay off when the chips are down.

2. You'll probably want to define your descriptors broadly enough that you'll be able to cover a number of actions with them, but narrowly enough that you don't end up stepping on the toes of other players' schticks. Regardless, enough focus should be there that the term chosen has some amount of evocativeness to it and easily implies its scope of action.

3. If you're called upon to do something that is not clearly covered by one of your descriptors, you'll end up limited by whatever your lowest rating is. See what I meant about eggs and baskets?



3: Characters in Action

You're Good At What You Do

It's an important thing to remember. Your character is good at what he does. What he does is indicated by his descriptors. So it would follow that, all things being equal, if your character is doing something covered by a descriptor, he should succeed, right?

In *Pace*, he does.

Here's how it works. Your character is called upon to do something, or you say you want to try something and the GM gives you the go-ahead. You pick a descriptor, and explain how it applies. If that makes sense to the folks involved (usually you and the GM), then it's what we call the "active descriptor" for the moment.

And then, you succeed using your active descriptor. It's a pretty basic success, and is basically a "1" in terms of giving it a number ("one success"). You can increase that number, and thus the degree to which you succeed, by up to the rating of your descriptor (if you have a 3 rating, you can increase your success by 3 to a total of 4). This costs you one "pip" per point (we'll talk more about pips later on).

Example: Basic Success Mechanics

Roderigo, our Dashing[3] Duellist[4], is on a balcony and fighting for his life. He's outnumbered, and decides it is time to make an escape. He says he wants to leap over the balcony and land on the awning of a shop below, and that this is the sort of thing a Dashing fellow like himself would do. The GM agrees.

Roderigo wants his landing to go as smoothly as possible, so he decides to spend some pips on his success. He's already got a basic success of 1, since his descriptor of Dashing applies. He can spend up to three pips to take that up to a 4, which is his limit since that's his Dashing rating. He spends the two, and ex-

ecutes the maneuver with a Dashing display of dynamic derring-do.

If no descriptor applies, then the character fails (a zero). This can still be bought up to a success, however, but it cannot be bought up any higher than the lowest rated descriptor your character has.

Example: No Descriptor Applies

Roderigo's companion, Emile, has sprained her ankle during an ill-advised attempt to duplicate Roderigo's awning acrobatics. Roderigo wants to set Emile's ankle so she doesn't make it worse, and so they can keep on the move. He tries to make the case that as a Duellist he knows some first aid, but the GM isn't buying it.

No descriptor applies, so at the get-go, Roderigo fails. He still has a few pips he can spend, however, but can only spare one for this task. He buys his zero up to a one for a basic success, and binds Emile's ankle enough for her to stand, but not enough for her to walk all that quickly.

What a Success Means

Degrees of success should be handled fluidly and quickly. As such, I am not providing a "table" that tells you what each level of success translates to.

Suffice it to say, a single success (a "1") is just a basic, no-frills success. Each step beyond that adds a bit more flair. Around 2 or 3 you're looking at someone who's expert. Beyond that, you're getting into the realm of heroic action.

Example: Awning Acrobatics

Let's go back to the moment of Roderigo's leap for his life.

If Roderigo had left things at a 1, he'd have leapt and landed on the awning, but without much grace, and he'd have to spend some time recovering and getting down off of the awning, and so on.



Taking it up to a 3, he's more liable to land after a perfect somersault, and be able to dismount without much difficulty thereafter.

Since he's gone that extra distance, to a 4, or if he'd been able to take his successes even higher, he can land as described, then bounce off the awning and down onto his feet on the ground without so much as a mussed hair on his well-coiffed head.

Character Against Character

Inevitably, you will have two characters competing directly against one another — maybe they're fencing, or in a race, or trying to track the same quarry. This is referred to as a "contest", and both sides are able to spend pips on their actions.

In a contest, it is good and proper to compare the success each character has bought, and declare the one who has a greater success to be the winner.

Naturally, if neither character has spent any pips, it's going to be a tie, so deadlocks and draws will happen. Then again, if neither is spending pips, neither character is really trying to beat the other guy, at least not yet.

Generally, it is up to the person with the higher rating to declare how many pips they're investing first. But, if people can do it quickly and without

slowing down the pace of the game, a back-and-forth expenditure of one or more pips at a time (up to each character's maximum total) can heighten the sense of tension about a contest. In such a case, the current loser can always call the contest on his turn, after spending pips (but he must still be the loser to do so).

Example: Roderigo vs. Draco

Roderigo is facing Draco in a duel. Roderigo's using his Duellist[4] descriptor, and Draco's playing it Vicious[3]. Roderigo starts out by testing his opponent, declaring he will invest three pips, giving him a total success of 4.

This is Draco's maximum, and he knows it. He could take it to 4 as well, and force Roderigo to spend a final one, or he could save himself (and, unfortunately, Roderigo) a couple pips and spend 2 and then call the contest at 4 vs 3.

Still, it's possible Roderigo won't want to spend that final pip. A draw would certainly be favorable to a loss, even a minor one, so Draco decides to gamble with it, and spends three pips to take his success up to its maximum of 4 (1 + Vicious [3]).

Roderigo really wants to teach Draco a lesson here, though, so he responds by spending a final pip, getting a 5 vs Draco's 4. Both contestants are at their maximum, so the contest is called and resolved on this result.

Contests should not be taken lightly. Each “test” among characters should be regarded as a significant moment in the playing of the story. Contests that represent combat should not break down into blow-by-blow action; they may, at the most, occupy three or four contests, and then be done.

Much the same is true of things outside of combat as well, but in such cases, this mode of play is more “normal”, *vis á vis* how it is handled in other RPGs. So mainly what I’m saying here is that combat isn’t any different, in *Pace*, than things which are *not* combat.

Combining Efforts

Sometimes PCs or NPCs will want to combine their efforts in order to overcome an obstacle. There are several options for how to do this.

The first method is going by simple numbers (“out-numbering” or “mobbing” the opponent). Each character, if acting in the scope of a descriptor, may contribute the single automatic success to a common result pool, but may not spend pips. In effect, you count the number of people involved, and that’s how many successes are gained. This is a popular minion tactic — throw four guardsmen at the hero, and they’re combining for four successes.

The other tactic involves watching each other’s backs and compensating for weaknesses while accenting the greatest strength (using “teamwork”). One character is selected as the “lead” and chooses the descriptor that applies. The rest are acting in a “support” role. If you are in a support role and may do any of the following, providing you can describe the actions and events that are taking place to make it possible:

- Spend pips to remove blots (see the next chapter), one pip per blot, on any character involved in the teamwork effort, other than yourself.
- Spend pips to remove failure cards (see the next chapter), paying a number of pips equal to the number on the card, on any character

involved in the teamwork effort, other than yourself.

- Spend a pip to give the lead access to one of your descriptors.

Support characters cannot spend pips to buy successes for the lead, however. That’s the lead’s job.

All this said, there is a downside — everyone’s blots and failure cards may apply to the lead’s efforts.

The “mutual buy-offs” aspect of a teamwork tactic is there to counter that. Thus, when characters come together as a team, it has a tendency to wipe the slate clean — at a cost. Such moments are the only way that players can effectively “share” their pips.

Margins of Success

When doing a contest that doesn’t end in a tie, you’ll be able to gauge how much the winner won by. This is a margin of success, and can easily be converted into a narrative result by viewing the margin as a success-result of its own.

That is to say, if you beat someone else by one, then the margin is “basic”, and the consequence inflicted upon the loser is minor but palpable. A margin of two or three indicates something major is afoot, and beyond that the loser’s predicament is dire indeed.

Again, no hard and fast guidelines are going to be provided here, because how this plays out is very much something which should be done to the taste of your play-group. If you’re playing a game of armed conflict where life is cheap, then people probably start dying around a margin of three. If you’re a bunch of martial arts action heroes out of an anime epic, ultimate defeat may come at a much higher margin, or may require multiple “losses”.

Such notions should be spelled out as clearly as possible near to the start of a game.

Losing

If a character loses, it is incumbent upon the character's player (or the GM in the case of an NPC) to describe the loss in keeping with the margin by which he was beaten, and to the satisfaction of the winning party. A third party should be brought in if the winning party is implacable, but really, nobody likes a sore winner, so victors are encouraged to play along in the spirit of the game.

Example: Draco's Wound

Roderigo has beaten Draco by a margin of one, which, luckily for Draco, indicates only a minor consequence. Since this is not a duel to the death, Draco declares that Roderigo scores a "first blood" hit to his shoulder.

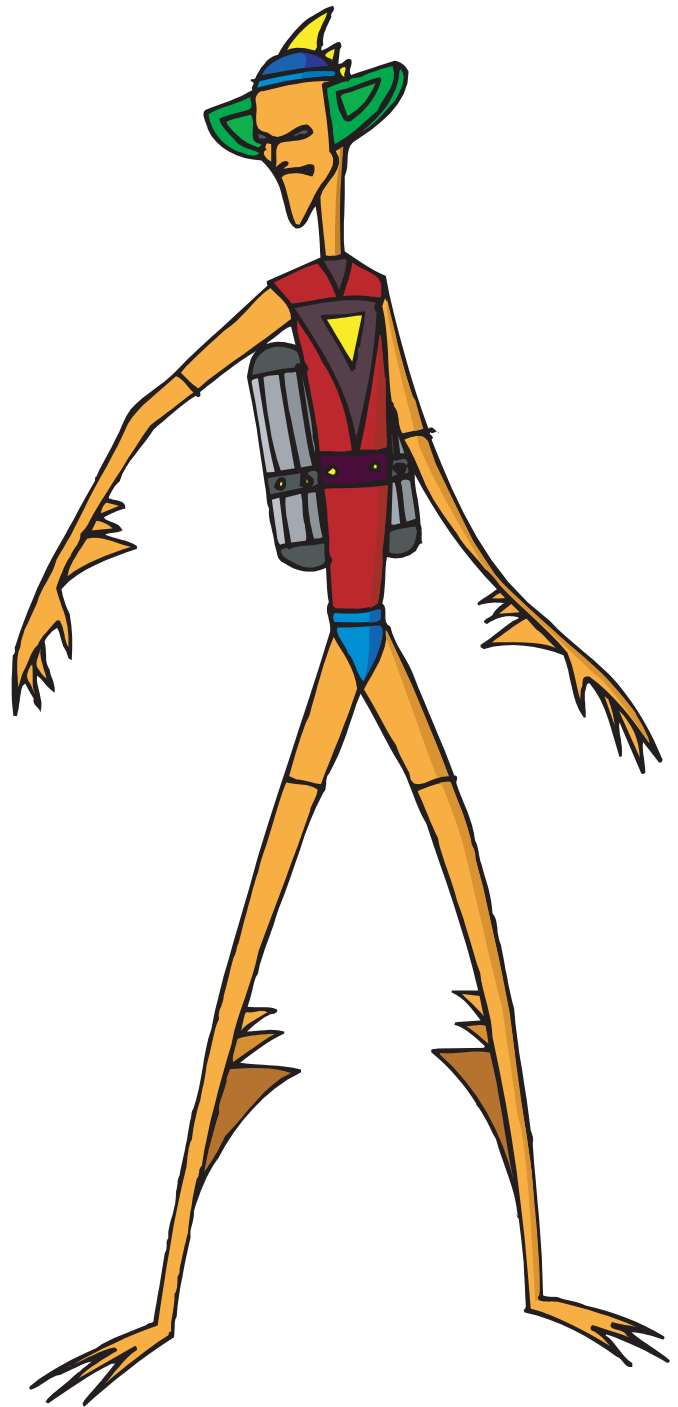
Roderigo counters that he was trying to teach Draco a lesson, and wanted to give him a scar on his cheek for his trouble.

Draco protests that Roderigo's success was only a "basic" one, and that something like a scar would be a more drastic consequence, as reputation and appearance play important roles in the story.

Roderigo considers and ultimately agrees, accepting Draco's shoulder wound as a fair result.

The effects of a loss are not represented mechanically (unless player-elected and severe — see the next chapter), but if it suits the tastes of the play-group involved, some house rules may be introduced to track "wounds" or whatever suits you.

When cooking up such house rules, be careful about applying too much in the form of "penalties". Pips should not be stripped from a player as a consequence of loss, either — if they lost because they elected not to spend pips and save them instead, those savings shouldn't be challenged. You may wish to instead consider reducing the rating of a descriptor by one when a wound is inflicted, or potentially more potently, reduce the "zero cost" success level for a character by one for each major wound received (where



one wound would lead to starting at -1 for a no-descriptor situation, and 0 for descriptors).

Remember, though, that these are options, not core rules. If you'd rather handle your consequences in a purely narrative fashion, you should! It's the default.

Players may choose to lose and, in fact, may choose to lose more drastically than usual, in exchange for pips. But that's covered in the next chapter.

4: Pips

Physical Representation

Every player and the GM has their own pool of pips (which may be empty at the start, or not, depending on how things are set up). This pool should be reasonably visible to the other players and to the GM, so a physical representation of the pools is in order.

Assuming you're gaming around a table, there should be a bowl on the table that unallocated pips go into. Players should be seated in such a way that their pool is clearly visible in front of them.

What you choose to represent a pip is really up to you, past that point. Glass beads are certainly facile, and since they're difficult to stack it's a little easier to tell at a glance how many there are. If the stacking thing doesn't bother you, coins are a good option — something to do with all those pennies you have lying around. Or you could use poker chips. Foodstuffs such as candies are really not recommended, since some players will tend to eat their pips rather than spend them on the game. You could also use dice, if you wanted, since you won't be using them otherwise in this game.

Spending Pips

This has already been covered to a great extent in the prior chapter.

In summary, pips are spent to increase the level of success from its starting point. If an action is covered by a descriptor, it starts at 1, and if not, it starts at zero. 1 and above are considered successful.

Some GMs may wish to allow the expenditure of pips for non-descriptor-focused effects, like arranging for minor coincidences to occur in the storyline, or to invent new facts ("Yeah, I know a guy in that part of town, let me see if I can track him down and ask him about the headless ghost we've

been hearing about.") so long as the facts don't step on toes or run afoul of something already in motion.

Further, if your game has characters with special powers, you may want to assess a starting pip cost to use the more potent abilities of those powers. A Pyromancer might be able to light campfires just fine, but to throw a fireball it will probably cost a pip just to get started.

Using the physical set-up we talked about above, spent pips go into the bowl in the middle of the table.

Getting Pips

Players can acquire pips in a few ways.

The primary means is by choosing to fail — that is to say, by selling off their successes. You can sell your level of success down as far as -3, gaining one pip for every level you drop. Negative-result failures carry consequences with them, though, in the form of failure cards (see below).

This operates more or less like successes in reverse. Things start with zero as a "basic" failure, and progress naturally towards -3 as a "catastrophic" failure. -3 is the practical limit, granting 4 pips where a descriptor applies, and 3 where no descriptor applies.

Example: Roderigo's Embarrassment

Roderigo is Dashing[3], and is trying to impress a lady he's been following around town. He decides he could use some pips, as his supply is running low, so he goes for a backfire, deciding that his usual success of 1 should instead be a significant failure — a -1. He and the GM work out the details, and Roderigo walks away with 2 pips and a handprint reddening the side of his face.

This should not be allowed to be done haphazardly. It has to be proper for a determination to

be made; if the GM wouldn't be calling on you to pick a descriptor to resolve an action in the circumstance, you are not allowed to simply decide it's time to get your pips all the same. That said, this is usually not a problem in playgroups where rules are not targeted for abuse.

Similarly, the player is not allowed to create an "internal conflict" where two or more of his descriptors are driving him in different directions, and are thus in contest against one another, allowing one of the descriptors to be sold down to fail against the other. That's an abuse.

Another means of acquiring pips is as simple reward from the GM — either to represent good play, an award for achieving a particular goal, or just for making folks laugh.

As a rule, players cannot give pips to one another and, furthermore, "lame" player-to-player conflict for the simple purpose of driving up their mutual pip pools is frowned upon. Good player-to-player conflict may be valid, however, so long as it's given the same kind of attention and tension as any conflict with an NPC.

Failure Cards

Selling your successes down to a negative number always has some lingering consequences, manifesting as "failure cards". Whenever a player takes a negative-number failure, he writes the number on an index card and hands it to the GM. The GM, in turn, writes a description (descriptor-like, it should be a single word or hyphenated

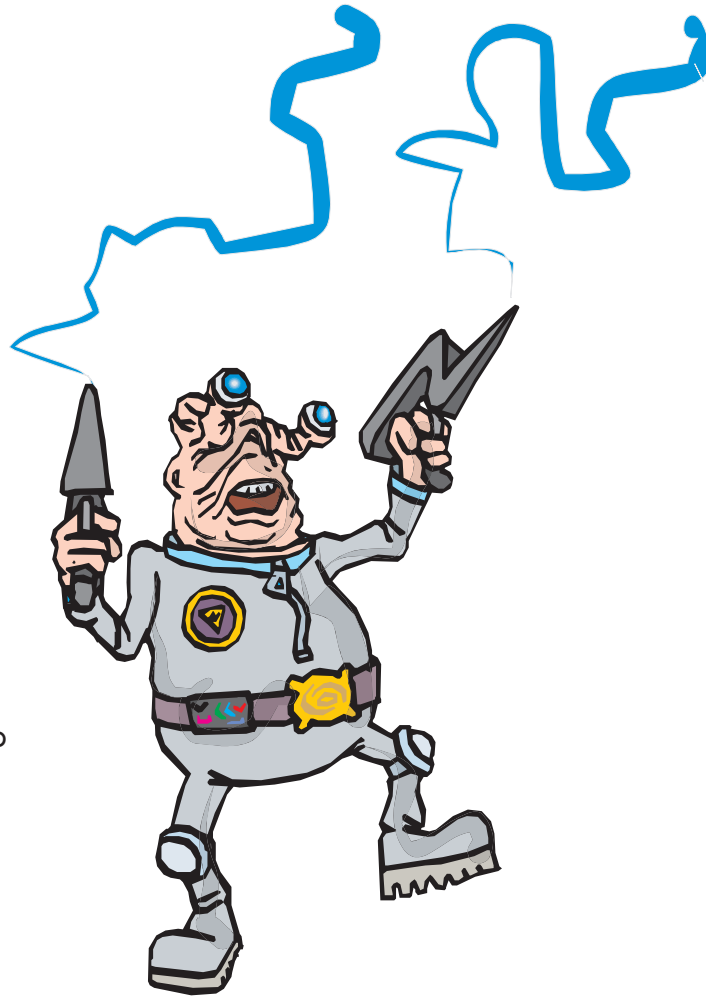
phrase) and hands it back to the player, who must display the card prominently in front of him.

As the game progresses, the failure card's number reduces the number of successes produced whenever it seems appropriate for it to apply.

If the GM and player agree the consequence represented by the card has played itself out, the card may be removed. Other possibilities include deciding that failure cards only remain in play for a given number of scenes or "invocations", and some GMs may allow players to buy a failure card off by spending a number of pips equal to the failure number later on.

Example: Roderigo's Embarrassment (Continued)

In the previous example, Roderigo took a significant failure of -1. His player hands the GM a card with a -1 on it. The GM writes "Bad-Reputation" on it and hands it back. For the rest of the day, the lady's friends see to it that Roderigo's efforts to be Dashing[3] with the ladies are reduced by one success.



Using Negative

Descriptors

In some cases, a character may have a negative descriptor attached to them (not the same as a failure card!). This is the case with our Butterfingers Robot from the second chapter. Such descriptors can be looked at as pip generators, if the GM allows them in her game.

Negative descriptors default to producing a simple failure, a zero result. If the descriptor is chosen as the active descriptor, then, it automatically grants a number of pips equal to its rating, and can be sold down from there.

Example: BTR-FNGRZ-3

Our Butterfingers[3] Robot[4] is running from a troop of imperial marines. He has managed to pick up a gun but is more than a little scared of using it. But he's been pinned down, and it's time to try.

His player doesn't see him getting a successful shot off, and decides that for humor value, things should go really spectacularly badly. He sells down to a -3 result, and gets a total of 6 pips for his trouble. In the narration that follows, our poor robot manages to shoot his own leg off (justifying a Failure Card that reads "One-Legged: -3").

"Oh heavens!" he exclaims, "We're doomed!"

On rare occasions, a negative descriptor may be used for the expenditure of pips if the ultimate effect is a positive one. In the case of our Butterfingers fella, he might bumble in such a way that knocks a set of controls that drops a crate on the bad guy. This is entirely appropriate, but the successes will have to be bought starting from zero, not one.

Deficit Spending

Both the players and the GM may go into deficit spending when using pips. That's right — you aren't limited by the number of pips you have in your pool.

As a player, if you have no pips left and you need to spend a few more, you can put a pip from the bowl into the GM's pool for each pip you need.

Example: Roderigo's Predicament

Roderigo is outnumbered and low on pips. The Count's men are advancing, and Roderigo needs to draw on all of his knowledge as a Duellist[4] to face them down. He has one pip,

and he spends it to bring himself to a success of 2. Each of the three men will be getting one success apiece and will probably be working together in a simple "outnumbering" move, for a total of three, so he knows it won't be enough. He needs at least another two!

Wincing at what's in store for the future, Roderigo puts two pips from the bowl into the GM's pool. That adds another two spent pips to his result, for a total success of four.

It's enough for him to beat the Count's men back — for now.

Similarly, if the GM is out of pips, he can put pips into the players' pools. Usually which player the pips should go to is obvious — it's the one who is directly involved in the circumstance where the pips are being spent. If there's more than one player involved, though, then in general, the pips should go to the one with the lowest total. If tied, the pips should be split as evenly as possible.

In player against player contests, the pips go to the other player, rather than to the GM. This should not be done in an abusive fashion, where the players get into contests against one another solely to generate pips for later use against the GM.

If this is occurring, the GM is free to rule that the pips gained in such a fashion may only be spent in player against player conflict!

Blots

Every time (per contest or other exchange) you deficit spend — regardless of how many pips you acquire — you also acquire a blot.

Blots should be represented by something obvious and different from the pip counters — finger puppet monsters, for example.

When you take on a blot, you put it on the table in front of you, next to your pool of pips. You may have more than one blot at a time.

Whenever you get into a contest and you have blots on your character, the opposition may opt to remove blots from you, forcing you to fail (*without compensation in pips*). Each blot removed makes your failure worse by one (the first one gives you a -1 failure). Since the maximum failure is -3, only three blots may be removed at a time.

Example: Roderigo's Consequences

Roderigo has had one incident of deficit spending so far, and as such has acquired one blot. Ahead, the Count's men are barring a door.

Roderigo declares he's racing for the door to stop them. The GM looks at the blot sitting in

front of Roderigo and shakes her head. "You're just too winded from taking on those four men." She removes the blot from in front of Roderigo. "You get a -1 failure," she concludes, and gives him a failure card that reads "Winded: -1".

Roderigo has paid a palpable price for his earlier actions — but on the other hand, he's still on his feet, and those four men aren't.

Timing and Contests

Spending pips in a contest isn't too much of a problem when both participants have available pips and aren't going into deficit spending to cover the circumstances.

But what happens when, for example, a player's PC and a GM's NPC go head-to-head, and some deficit spending occurs? Isn't one person funding the other's opposition of him?

This is a very real concern. The solution is to put the pips generated by the deficit spending in escrow until the contest is resolved (or until the scene is resolved, if multiple contests are in store and that suits all involved). By this, I mean that the pips that are to be owed to the players or the GM are set aside into a fund which is then passed on to the appropriate party once the contest has been resolved.

Example: Roderigo & the Count's Men, Take 2

Roderigo is facing the Count's men, as before, and has gone 2 into deficit spending in order to cover his success of 4. The GM does not have any pips left either, but doesn't wish to buy up the Count's lackeys successes anyway.

Roderigo holds the two pips for the GM in escrow until the contest is resolved, which comes down to his success of 4 vs theirs of 3, and beats them enough to make his retreat.

He then passes the 2 pips for the GM into the GM's pool. Roderigo still has no pips, and the GM now has 2.



The Ebb and Flow of Pips

Deficit spending introduces an interesting sort of tidal force to the flow of pips over the course of a game.

If both players and GM start out with few or no pips, then one or both are liable to take actions early on that end up in failure, in order to boost those pips for themselves, or will come out strong with a lot of deficit spending, only to find that the “opposition” has gotten piled deep in pips and is now turning the tables.

This is entirely intentional, and when it’s working right, it should echo some of the familiar plotlines of popular fiction.

Example: Now You’ve Made Me Mad

Roderigo starts an adventure without any pips. Early on, he runs afoul of the Count and his men, and allows for a number of failures in order to build up his supply of pips.

The Count and his men continue to hound Roderigo through several scenes, and Roderigo conserves the pips he gains where he can.

Finally, Roderigo reaches his breaking point and expresses his displeasure with the Count’s men at the tip of his sword, spending the pips he has accumulated over the course of the adventure. He’s gunning for his nemesis hard, and goes into deficit spending to drive towards his goal.

Ultimately, however, the deficit spending puts a few pips into the GM’s coffers, who uses them to give the Count a successful getaway in the 11th hour.

Roderigo has defeated his enemy, and is “spent” in several senses of the word. His enemy, his resources depleted, has vanished to return another day.



5: Concerns for the GM

Players and Their Pips

Pips are a pretty powerful resource, and the players usually have the means to provide themselves with them as needed.

Encourage deficit spending; sure, any healthily paranoid player will look at you with suspicion, but they should also know that you'll make a good story for them with those pips in your hands.

Don't be afraid to do deficit spending yourself. The mechanic is there so your villains can succeed where they need to, even if it ends up leaving the heroes in a stronger position. Do be afraid to overdo it, though; if you deficit spend often enough to consistently undercut the players' expenditures of "real" pips, you'll probably end up generating some resentment.

If you're giving players pips outside of a deficit scenario, be sure you know exactly why — maybe you're planning on this adventure being tougher than usual (some guidelines on that below), or maybe they overcame a challenge particularly handily and should be getting rewarded for that. My main point being, don't do it willy-nilly. Pips are story power, and are best — and most valued — when earned.

Notions of Advancement

Admittedly, *Pace* is not a game rife with possibilities of advancement. The system is simple, thin, and has certain issues of granularity that could make for problems when trying to give out "experience".

Characters should gain potency in their descriptors only very slowly. If you're the kind of GM that divides her adventures up into "story arcs" spanning multiple sessions, then it's at the conclusion of those arcs that PCs should have the possibility of gaining a single point of potency.

In the meantime, if you're looking for something to reward your players with from session to session, pips are your answer. Keep the awards small all the same; a few extra pips in the hand can make a big psychological difference in terms of whether a player decides to spend or conserve.

Non-Player Characters

There are three fuzzy categories of NPCs out there, mainly in terms relative to the PCs.

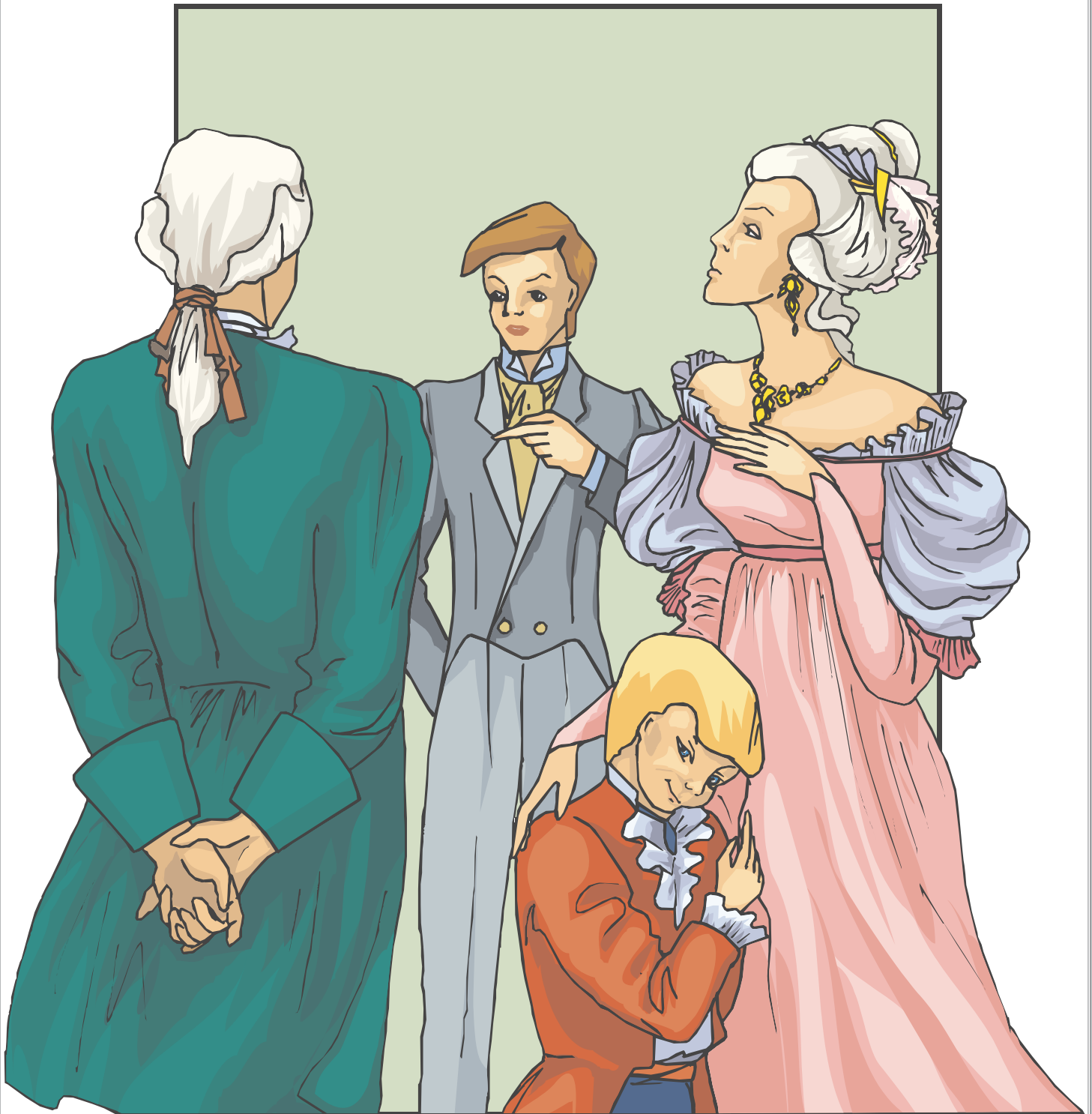
Lackeys and mooks will tend to have descriptor ratings that are at least one or two shy of the best of the PCs'. At the least, this guarantees that the PCs can fairly easily outclass them with minor expenditures of pips. These NPCs may also often be thinly characterized, with only a single descriptor to their name (City-Guard[2]).

Generally they will come into a scene for a specific purpose, and if they are called on to do something outside of that purpose, they'll likely fail at it, since it's unlikely their descriptor will cover it, and spending pips on them is a dubious investment at best.

The next category is made of those who are "PC competitive", often referred to as "named characters". Their total descriptor potency is about on par with the PCs.

To ensure that some differences of potential are possible when these NPCs come into contests with your PCs, you may wish to deliberately seek out a different distribution of potency in their descriptors.

If you have a lot of "spiked" PCs (6 and 1, 5 and 2), going for a "balanced" NPC (3 and 4) could be a good idea. The opposite is true as well. If your PCs are a mix, that's fine — think about which PCs your NPC is liable to come into strongest conflict with, and make his descriptors a "response" to the PC's.



Then the final category are those who are “PC superior”. These are the Big Bads of the adventure, the Boss Monsters at the end of the level. They’ll cost a lot of pips for the GM to fuel into those truly titanic terrors, but they’ll also take a lot of pips out of the PCs in their efforts to take ‘em on.

They’re liable to get ganged up on fast so the PCs can combine their successes, so when you’re giving them descriptors (feel free to go for three), make sure they’re competitive with the combined potency of any two or three of your PCs (depending on the size of the group).

For more on how to size your NPCs, read the “Sizing Your Adventure” section in this chapter.

To Fiat or Not To Fiat

One of the essential dilemmas for a diceless GM (or a rules-light GM) is balancing the player-held sense of fair play and decisionmaking against the need or desire to declare (or mandate) a story event or circumstance.

This is another place where the pip mechanic can be your friend. Combine it with the overall concept of the degree of success, and you've got a pretty good sense of how much it should "cost" you as a GM to declare "so mote it be". And if you're going into a deficit to do it, all the better — your players then get to walk away getting paid for the trouble you're causing them.

As a rule, in the interests of fairness, it's entirely appropriate to decide that the GM should always pay pips in order to make anything of significance happen. Or more simply: *When in doubt, buy it.*

Minor stuff is much like a basic success, costing one or perhaps two pips. Major circumstances should hover around four. "Global" ones start at six.

Example: The Cliffhanger

The group is about approaching their time limit on gaming for the evening, and the GM still has a pile of ten pips on the table in front of him due to a round of runaway deficit spending in the eleventh hour. He decides to spend them in order to set up the circumstances for the next session.

"You are summoned before the king," he says, and drops two pips into the bowl to allow for this particular fiat. "He demands an explanation for why you attacked the Count."

The players make their explanations, but the GM responds with, "The King is having none of it," and drops another two pips into the bowl, to cover his determination of the King's reaction.

"He declares you criminals and has you stripped of your weapons. The curtain closes with you all being led off to the dungeon in chains pending trial." This last bit is huge, and

changes a lot about the story that's to be told. It affects everyone fairly completely — it's a "global" circumstance in that regard, and thus the final six pips — the ones the players gave him over the course of the big fight against the count — go into the bowl.

Sizing Your Adventure

Constructing an adventure peopled with appropriately sized threats and challenges should be a fairly easy exercise in *Pace*, since you can probably fit everyone's character sheets on a single index card (a practice I would recommend for general GMing convenience).

You should start out by doing some simple math. What's the total potency of the party? What's the average potency of their descriptors? What's each character's highest-rated descriptor?

The numbers that come out of this can be used as guidelines for creating your NPCs (above). Further, the thinking that is described in "To Fiat or Not To Fiat" translates pretty well into a rubric for constructing an adventure.

As a general rule, an adventure built out of as many pips as the players have potency will be pretty competitive. Consider each "mook" to be a minor circumstance (costing 1 or 2), each "named" character to be a major circumstance (costing 4), and the big bad to represent a good 6 to 10 of the pips by himself.

If there are some non-NPC obstacles in the way, those should be rated as well. If the PCs have to stage an assault on a protected mountain fortress, that's a pretty major circumstance, and should cost you four.

If you find you haven't spent all your pips to construct the adventure, fine; that's your starting pool as a GM. Similarly, if you've overspent, you've done some deficit spending that should go into the pools of the players — they'll need it.

You may also wish to defer some of your deficit spending until certain elements come into play.

PACE

Say you've set up a final showdown at the end of the adventure. At that point, some additional mooks come into play (4 for 4), as well as a named sniper that's going to be hidden in the balcony (4 for 1 named character), all bought on deficit as the rest of the adventure used up the usual allocation of pips. When that scene starts, you would hand out the 8 pips in deficit to the players, to bring your mooks and sniper into play.

You can even take this a step further and simply rate your scenes individually, rather than on a whole-adventure scale, and simply pay out of your pool (or go into deficit) whenever a particular scene gets "activated".

Example: Setting Up the Count

The Count is a villain set up to oppose a party of three brothers-in-arms, Roderigo, Halifax, and Ulysses. They each have a potency of 7, for a total of 21, so the GM takes those 21 to do her design.

He decides to take the Count right off the top, detailing him as a Well-Connected[5] Devious[6] Brute[4], a potency of 15 and well-equipped to take on any two of the three brothers in a number of realms. The GM charges herself 8 pips for the Count due to his wide-spread capacity for mayhem. This leaves 13 pips left to spend.

She creates two named henchmen, Rogo and Togo, who are each about on par with one of the PCs.

These cost her four apiece, taking her down to 5 remaining pips.

3 of those pips go into adding a few lackeys to the mix to send out with Rogo and/or Togo when they go harrasing the brothers, and the remaining 2 are invested in representing the notion that the Count has a clever plan in the works that has already gotten past the first few stages, putting our heroes on the clock.

Looking at this, the GM decides to reserve spending into deficit just yet, with the idea that if it looks like more firepower's going to be needed for the Count, she can cook up a few more mooks on the spot as play progresses.



Appendix: *Pace* and Other Systems

Some of the concepts in *Pace* can be adapted pretty easily to other game systems, bringing dicelessness where there's dicefulness. Here, I'm going to talk about types most of the time, rather than specific systems. I figure you're talented enough to walk the rest of the distance.

Dice Pools

In essence, this is what *Pace* really is, in disguise. If folks were rolling dice equal to the potency of each descriptor and counting up the "successes" found, you'd get something pretty close to how things can function dicelessly (though with a somewhat smaller assurance of getting single success results).

As such, it'd be pretty easy to adopt the pips notion to another system that uses dice pools, simply using the pips to buy successes.

One issue you may encounter mechanically is that in *Pace*, your successes don't taper off in frequency towards the top — if someone's willing to spend the pips to go there, they go there. If you're doing a die pool, however, the chances of many multiple successes on the same roll diminish as the probabilities aggregate.

If you're going for a pips style dicelessness, then, you may want to either charge more for each successive success bought, or blunt the effectiveness of higher margins of success relative to how the adapted system currently works.

Fudge

Fudge is an interesting beast in the light of *Pace*, if only because it's already dirt-simple to run it dicelessly — you just don't roll the dice, and you've got everything already operating at its center-weighted point.

Here, you turn pips into Fudge Points (or vice-versa, depending on your perspective), and what you are buying is not something based on the

trait, but based on how the dice usually function. That is to say, for spending no pips, you "rolled" a zero. On a single given "roll", you can buy a die result right up to +4, or gain pips by selling it down.

This means highly skilled people will be able to gain pips while still succeeding by consistently lowballing their results, but that's not as much of a problem as it might sound to be.

Additive Systems

These are pretty popular these days, thanks to a certain feat of licensing and marketing. And they're very easy to adapt, especially using our Fudge-based guideline from above.

Pick a midpoint on the die roll. Say, a 10 on a d20. That's what you get for no pips. From there, you can buy results in steps of 2 (in a d20 based system, bonuses tend to operate in increments of 2 best — other die types will have other, hopefully obvious, breakpoints). You are limited to only being able to buy or sell your result to what could show on the die.

It does mean in some cases you'll be spending far more pips than you would in the baseline *Pace* system, but once the ratio there becomes apparent, it should be pretty easy to adapt the concepts.

Roll Under Systems

Very similar to additive systems, roll under systems involve your zero-cost being the midpoint of the dice (say, 11 on 3d6), and you buying your roll down from that point (again, increments of 2 may work well here).

This means some skills are at the "automatic success" point (those rated 11+), and others will require an expenditure to succeed at. This "syncs" with the idea of some of them being "descriptor" tied skills and some of them not, just on a level of greater detail.