

The **RISUS** *Companion*

By S. John Ross

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Additional Art by Dan Smith

Playtest, commentary, inspiration and valued input from the Cumberland Fire-Eaters and local **Risus** players, including Glen Barnett, Mike & Melanie Costello, Reese Harrell, Guy Hoyle, Tim Huntley, Dave Insel, Michael Kurko, Paul Reed, Cody Reichenau, Marcia Schoonover, Dan Smith, Owen Syler, and Robert Wehnke

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Dedicated to Nick Atlas, Lee Garvin, and Robin Jenkins... for making Risus necessary all those years ago – and for memories that still educate, entertain, and inspire. “Two copies!” for each of you

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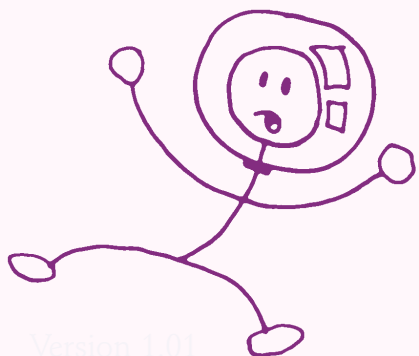
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INTRODUCTION

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

You give him credit for too much cleverness. My impression was that he's just another blundering American.

– Major Strasser



S. John Ross has been a Game Master since 1984 and game writer since 1990. His works include the **Points in Space** series, **Risus: The Anything RPG**, the **Pokéthulhu Adventure Game**, **GURPS Russia**, **GURPS Warehouse 23**, **Weirder Tales: A Space Opera**, **Feast of Blades (the In Nomine GM's Kit)**, **Among the Clans: The Andorians**, **Uresia: Grave of Heaven**, the **Star Trek RPG Narrator's Toolkit**, and the creation of **Sparks** paper miniatures. As a contributor, his work has appeared in other supplements for the lines mentioned above, as well as the Flying Buffalo's **CityBook** series, White Wolf's **Mage: The Ascension** line, and numerous periodicals, including *Dragon*, *White Wolf*, *Star Wars Gamer*, *Autoduel Quarterly*, and *Pyramid* (where he served a brief stint as Editor). His homepage, The Blue Room, includes the **Big List of RPG Plots**, one of the most linked-to gaming tools on the World Wide Web. Outside of gaming, he's a literacy volunteer, cook, and loving husband to his wife, Sandra.

When a thing is funny, search it carefully for a hidden truth.

– George Bernard Shaw

Your English teacher – bless her heart – warned you against using clichés. She meant well, but I'm here to preach the gospel of cliché and everything that goes with it, in what amounts to a 64-page user's manual for a six-page roleplaying game.

Here, you'll find strategies for character creation, techniques of adventure design, and tips for things like more effective GMing, getting the most from the game, and for celebrating the offbeat and farcical. In these pages, we'll explore genres, clichés, and game mechanics; along with big wobbly doses of the game's own philosophies. To dissect **Risus** is, in a sense, to dissect adventure gaming in distilled form, so this thing may even be *handy* on some level. On the other hand, I may be kidding. I make no promises.

As you read, keep a song in your heart and this sacred mantra in your thoughts: Everything is easy, everything is covered, and there's *no wrong way to play*.

This is a very different **Risus Companion** than I would have written four or five years ago, and I mean that in the best possible way. Thanks to the regulars on the **Risus** Mailing List, the **Companion** reflects a broader approach to the game. Thanks to the gamers who've played **Risus** with me, the **Companion** reflects more styles and richer personal experiences. And thanks to the prodding of **Risus** fans across the globe, I finally got the darned thing written. Thanks, indeed – and lots of it.

Austin, Texas
December 2003

CHARACTER CREATION

I am not an adventurer by choice but by fate.

– Vincent van Gogh

Risus character creation is simple, but it can intimidate just like any other. I've seen players stare at the blank paper horrified by the prospect of just *naming* their character, much less selecting the perfect balance of clichés. This chapter explores the ins and outs.

10 DICE TO SPEND

You say to me you want to go shopping; you want to buy clothes, but you don't know what kind.

You leave that hanging in the air, like I'm going to fill in the blank. That, to me, is like asking me who you are, and I don't know who you are. I don't want to know. It's taken me my whole life to find out who I am, and I am tired now.

– Marshall

There are two recommendations I make to newbies baffled by the process of spending the standard 10-die spread for character creation. The first: have at least *one* cliché rated at (3) or better. The second: choose either *three* or *four* clichés, total.

The first one is an easy sell; everybody likes to be good at something, and three dice is good.

The second one can take a moment of explanation, because some gamers – used to the skills and perks and traits and advantages and powers of more traditional games – think I'm trying to snow them into limiting (even crippling) their charac-

ter's versatility. Who wants a character that can only do *four things*, right?

It can take a moment of adjustment to realize that a single cliché is a *big wallop* sack of character, and that someone with four of them can be extraordinarily, even ridiculously, well rounded. With five clichés, a character begins to look schizoid; with six; he's just plain sloppy.

Risus reminds the reader that the character classes of ye olden dayes were clichés, but the reverse is equally true. A cliché is a character class, nothing more or less. The only functional differences

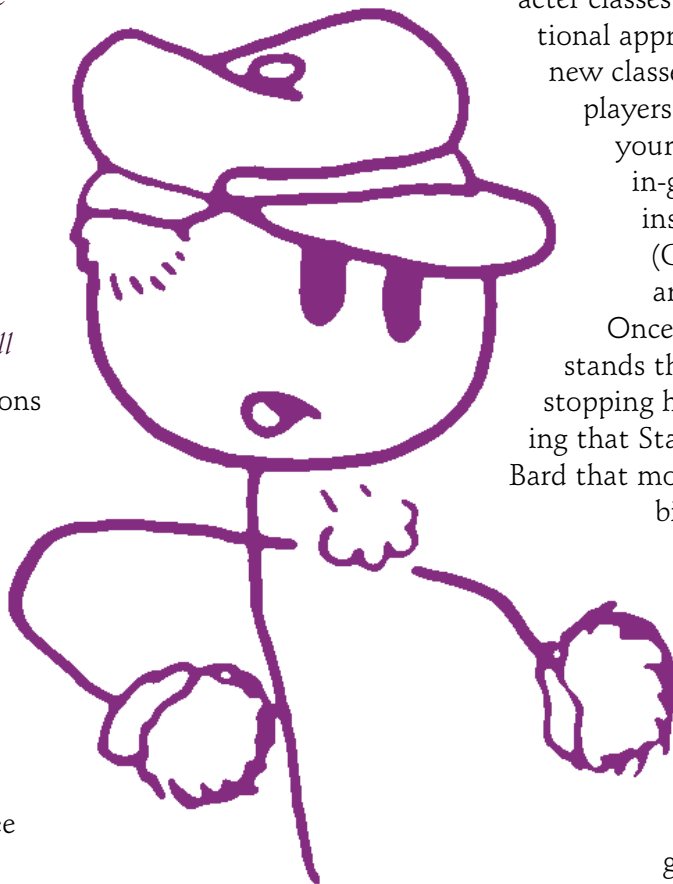
between the **Risus** approach to character classes and the more traditional approach are (A) creating new classes is so fast that most players choose to do so; (B) your "level" provides your in-game numbers directly instead of indirectly and (C) skilled hairdressers are deadly in combat.

Once a new player understands that there's nothing stopping him from finally playing that Starpilot/Druid/Samurai/Bard that more sensible games forbid, it will click that four clichés is *plenty*.

For my own characters, I usually prefer what I call the classic countdown – four clichés rated at 4 dice, 3 dice, 2 dice and 1 die each. That

gives me something I'm

excellent at, something I'm *good* at, something I *don't suck* at and something I *do suck* at, for later improvement and those times when failing is cooler or funnier. Grolfnar Vainsson (**Risus**, page 1) is a "classic countdown" character.



THE DOZEN ENDEAVORS

My father was a quitter; my grandfather was a quitter; I was raised to give up. It's one of the few things I do well.

– George Costanza

There are, when it comes down to it, a dozen areas of endeavor in any **Risus** adventure:

- Athletics (running, jumping, climbing, swimming, shoving, lifting)
- Persuading (lying, seducing, inspiring, enthralling, calming, leading)
- Communication & Protocol (languages, jargon, courtly manners, cultural quirks)
- Detection (noticing, recognizing, and understanding clues)
- Driving, Riding & Piloting (chasing, eluding, handling tricky conditions)
- Gadgeteering (repairing, improving, disabling, and otherwise exploiting technology)
- The Medical Arts (healing, when the cans of whoop-ass run dry)
- Wilderness Mastery (survival, tracking, using plants and taming beasts)
- Scholarship (knowing things, following tricky conversations)
- Intrusion (spying, stealing, hacking, hiding, slipping by unnoticed)
- Combat (beating the crap out of people, blowing stuff up)
- Magic (wielding supernatural powers for fun and profit)

Most clichés are really just shorthand for “I can, with a particular style, handle *this* endeavor well and *that* endeavor after a fashion.” The dozen endeavors are a character creation checklist ... If there’s something you want your character to be capable of, write the necessary implications into your clichés.

You absolutely *can* do it all, if you feel like it. Multifaceted heroes are common stock figures. A cliché like Swashbuckler, for example, includes nearly half the list: a proper swashbuckler is actively athletic, devilishly charismatic, knows his courtly manners, fences and brawls well, and can probably manage some decent horsemanship and a little sneaking, too. He’ll face stiffer-than-ideal Target Numbers in *some* of those areas (he won’t be as good at sneaking as a Burglar, Ninja or Peeping Tom with the same number of dice), but he’ll handle himself impressively in the face of many dangers. His “roguish romantic hero” counterparts in others genres are similarly broad.

FROM QUALITY TO CLICHÉ

At sixteen I was stupid, confused, insecure and indecisive. At twenty-five I was wise, self-confident, prepossessing and assertive. At forty-five I am stupid, confused, insecure and indecisive.

– Jules Feiffer

Sometimes, the inspiration for a character arrives in fragments. You know you want to play someone *wealthy*, for example, or someone physically *strong*, or someone *witty* ... but you’re not sure how to best express it in your clichés. “Wealthy” and “strong” and “witty” are too one-dimensional to be clichés on their own; they’re just ordinary adjectives, isolated qualities.

If you see the quality as a secondary feature, just let it ride the coattail of a more important cliché. If you already know you’re playing an Undertaker (4), making him a Wisecracking Undertaker (4) is a snap. See the *Anatomy of a Cliché* section (page 8) for more fun along *those* lines. But if you’re plagued with an uncrystallized image of a *central characteristic*, you need to give it a cliché all its own. The solution rests on the mighty shoulders of a single question: *Who*, in the game’s setting, possesses – or better still, embodies – this quality?

There are clichés about moneyed people that span the ages: Millionaire Playboy, Spoiled Debutante, Eccentric Patron of the Arts, Power-Mad Rail Baron, Gruff Oilman, Upper-Class Twit, Jaded Heiress, Emperor of the Known Galaxy, Fat

Merchant, Ruthless Loan-Shark, and Beverly Hillbilly, to rattle off just a few. Want to be strong? You can be a Sweaty Barbarian Warrior, a Farm Boy Who Ate His Oatmeal Every Day, a Vain Bodybuilder, a Circus Strongman, a Grinning Lumberjack, a Bighearted Palooka, or a Beetle-Browed Dockworker. Witty clichés include such gems as Confidence Trickster, Latin Lover, Neurotic Writer-Comedian, Superspy, Jongleur, Court Jester, and Wiseass Cab Driver. Want to be witty *and* rich? Try “Sparkling Socialite” on for size. Want to be wealthy *and* fit to brawl? Play a War-Mongering Duke.

Along the way, enhance the root question with some worthy branches:

- Where does the quality (the money, the strength, the wit) come from?
- What does your character most enjoy *doing* with it?
- How does he feel about the quality?
- How does he feel about those who lack it?
- What would he *trade* it for, if he could?

You can imply any of these things in a good cliché, and just the process of thinking about it can give you an iron grip on your character’s persona.

NAUGHTY TRICKS

The disclaimers make me want to do it more.

– Milhouse

So if anyone can do it *all* with three or four clichés, and any cliché can imply tons of cool things about any sort of characteristic, quality, skill or talent ... what does that leave the number crunchers to do? Real munchkinism in **Risus** requires familiarity with the tricks of combat:

- In combat, you can swap out an injured cliché for a healthy one. That is, if you’re playing a Mercenary (4) who’s also a Barbarian (3), you can wade in as a Mercenary, do some carnage that way, and then – just when your battered opponents think they have you on the ropes, you can go all Barbarian on their asses and

teach them to respect your sandaled tread. This means you can create a character designed for *combat endurance* by taking multiple clichés appropriate (or equally inappropriate) for a given style of combat. Most munchkins prefer to focus on the *physical* of course, god bless their literal little hearts. But if your GM is truly riding the Zen of **Risus**, you can get just as much mileage by playing someone who’s both a Cunning Defense Attorney (4) and a Passionate Rabble-Rouser (3) ... or someone who’s both a Martha Stewart (4) and a Spawn of Satan (3), etc.

- Inappropriate clichés provide the second kind of deliberate rules “abuse” I enjoy. **Risus** combat – traditional or otherwise – encourages unusual tactics from people who have no business in the battle. Bringing a knife to a gunfight may be classic stupidity, but bringing a bottle of tequila, a blender and an ice chest can be tactics on a level only Alexander himself might truly appreciate. It’s fundamental to **Risus** that every cliché is beautiful (in its own way) and that provides an unusual degree of freedom: If you want to play a character who’s witty and wise-cracking and sexy and that’s *all* – you aren’t penalized in the action scenes. Furthermore, you have an *advantage*, thanks to the Inappropriate Cliché rules. Taking this to the logical extreme, the most “combat effective” character in **Risus** might be one with a strong cliché that’s *never* appropriate.



Combine these two approaches for a real combat powerhouse: a character with most of his dice in *multiple, consistently inappropriate clichés*, ready to dish out “triple damage” to anyone who dares cross him. If that means “abusing” the rules and making a character who’s all entertainment and no practicality, then whip, beat and *tickle* those rules. They love it.

THAT LAST #@!% CLICHÉ TABLE (1D100)

| | | |
|--|------------------------------|------------------------------|
| 01 - Alchemist | 32 - Escaped Gladiator Slave | 67 - Porn Star |
| 02 - Armchair General | 33 - Ex-Con | 68 - Priest |
| 03 - Bartender | 34 - Executioner | 69 - Prophet |
| 04 - Basketball Star | 35 - Ex-Mercenary | 70 - Prowler |
| 05 - Battle-Scarred Veteran | 36 - Exotic Dancer | 71 - Psychic |
| 06 - Berserker | 37 - Explorer | 72 - Psychoanalyst |
| 07 - Black Market Contraband Broker | 38 - Fortean Investigator | 73 - Ranch Hand |
| 08 - Blacksmith | 39 - Frat Boy/Sorority Chick | 74 - Rebel |
| 09 - Brain Surgeon | 40 - Friend to the Animals | 75 - Sadistic Megalomaniac |
| 10 - Butcher | 41 - Gadgeteer | 76 - Sailor |
| 11 - Cat Burglar | 42 - Gambler | 77 - Saint |
| 12 - Chef | 43 - Gigolo/Call Girl | 78 - Salesman |
| 13 - Chosen One of the Ancient Prophecy | 44 - Groupie | 79 - Scholar |
| 14 - Circus Acrobat | 45 - Hayseed | 80 - Science-Fiction Fan |
| 15 - Civil Engineer | 46 - Hedonist | 81 - Sensitive Artist |
| 16 - Comedian/Jester | 47 - Helpless Victim | 82 - Serial Killer |
| 17 - Computer Wiz | 48 - Hit Man | 83 - Slob |
| 18 - Con Artist | 49 - Hobo | 84 - Smartass |
| 19 - Concerned Parent | 50 - Homemaker | 85 - Spare-Time Detective |
| 20 - Contortionist | 51 - Inveterate Coward | 86 - Spoiled Dilettante |
| 21 - Couch Potato | 52 - Ladies' Man | 87 - Stage Magician |
| 22 - Counterculture Icon | 53 - Law School Dropout | 88 - Storyteller |
| 23 - Cowboy | 54 - Looter | 89 - Stunt Double |
| 24 - Criminal Informant Building a New Life | 55 - Mad Scientist | 90 - Swashbuckler |
| 25 - Cub Reporter | 56 - Miser | 91 - Swinger |
| 26 - Cyborg Killing Machine | 57 - Misunderstood Monster | 92 - Trivia Master |
| 27 - Dabbler in the Dark Arts | 58 - Musician | 93 - Undercover Agent |
| 28 - Dancer | 59 - Neat Freak | 94 - Unemployed Actor |
| 29 - Deposed Dictator | 60 - Novelist | 95 - Vampire |
| 30 - Disc Jockey | 61 - Outdoorsman | 96 - Veterinarian |
| 31 - Drug Dealer | 62 - Peeping Tom | 97 - Visitor From the Future |
| | 63 - Philosopher | 98 - Volunteer Social Worker |
| | 64 - Pilot | 99 - Weekend Warrior |
| | 65 - Poet | 00 - Werewolf |
| | 66 - Political Activist | |

THAT LAST #@!% CLICHÉ

By the time we finish with him, he won't know whether he's Number Six or the cube root of infinity.

– Number Two

You've absorbed that a cliché is a big deal and that three or four of them is plenty. You've absorbed it *so well* that you've got two clichés that say *everything* about your character, and you've got dice left over. You need at least one more #@!% cliché to round your creation out a bit – to give him an unexpected little twist.

I heartily recommend the *That Last #@!% Cliché* table (above). Drop some percentile dice, take whatever the fates demand, and tweak as necessary. I've selected these clichés, in particular, because they're all especially fun to have just one or two dice in – they're all ideal "other" clichés. Many will need to be rewritten to suit the exact genre of your campaign, but I've carefully selected them for universal appeal ... If your campaign is a romantic comedy, for example, or a western, and you roll "Cyborg Killing Machine," just adapt it to its natural genre equivalent.*

**If your campaign is anime-style, no genre conversions are ever necessary.*

CORE CLICHÉS

A nation that draws too broad a difference between its scholars and its warriors will have its thinking done by cowards, and its fighting done by fools.

– Thucydides

Let's return to those dozen endeavors I tossed off so casually a minute ago. They're just an arbitrary chunking of skills, sure, but they're a little trickier than that, too ... They correspond to the molds from which many adventure heroes are cast, because such characters – deliberately or just because it works out that way – are written, and played, to exemplify one of that magic dozen.

Actually using a core cliché as a cliché is pretty dull; they're just keys, not characters. But in a game as loose as **Risus**, where that Starpilot/Druid/Samurai/Bard really is a likely PC, it can be helpful to decide which flag you really fly above all the others. Recognizing your core cliché is like finding your seat in the orchestra, and it can help provide a solid anchor for whatever wild creation you may have spawned.

It's useful, too, to recognize which core cliché you *usually* play, because if you've been itching to be somebody radically different, **Risus** is the game to do it in. **Risus** provides a very forgiving foundation for "departure" characters, since every cliché is equally useful, except the oddball ones which are equally more useful. Use what you learn to turn tradition on its ear. It is generally true that, in fantasy, a Bard can belt out a tune and enthrall an angry crowd, but who's to say that a very charismatic Standup Comic couldn't be given the same kind of romantic powers to woo the masses? There aren't any examples I can think of in novels or films, but RPGs are, when you get down to it, *much, much more powerful and versatile than static fiction*. Seize that power, and take the story where the story wouldn't go without a warped mind like yours to guide the way. With all that in mind, we'll drop in on the core clichés throughout the book.

ANATOMY OF A CLICHÉ

Anatomy is destiny.

– Sigmund Freud

A Surly Northern Barbarian Woman Eager to Taste the Blood of the Coastlanders (3) isn't any more or less "powerful" than a Barbarian (3), but we get a clearer picture of what she's capable of, and what she's like. We know she's probably better at being intimidating than ingratiating, that her survival skills are oriented to cooler climates, and that she's probably not comfortable with a crabbing net or a conch shell. Her explicit hostility to the Coastlanders implies that she's firmly rooted in her home culture, and unlikely to change her ways. The whole package is evocative and informative. She's distinct from her partner, the Cheerful Alcoholic Northern Barbarian Eager to Better Himself in the Broader World (3). He's a Barbarian (3), too, but a very different one. A rundown of the many things a cliché might include:

Profession: This is the core of most ordinary clichés; a job, like Private Eye or Fighter Pilot. Of

course, some characters don't really *have* jobs. For those, skip this kind of cliché entirely, or insert the nearest equivalent: what they do to pass the day, put food in their tummies, that kind of thing. Frequently, a Vampire (3) is just a Vampire (3) – that's what he *does*. He goes around ... vampiring. Sometimes, though, he's a Vampire Wal-Mart Greeter (3) or a Vampire Attorney (3).

Race or Species: An Astronaut (4) is one thing; a Minotaur Astronaut (4) is a whole 'nother ball of twine. He'll need a bigger bubble-helmet, for one thing. Character race (or *species*, if your GM celebrated the new millennium a year later than normal people) makes an excellent modifier to color a humdrum cliché, or to add the *snap* and *pop* to one that already crackles. It's best to tag this onto your *primary* cliché – the one that most defines the core of your character or (barring that) the one with the most dice. If a character is a Dwarvish Dervish (3), we'll be able to guess that he's "Dwarvish" in all his other clichés, too (unless he's a both a Dwarvish Dervish and an Elven Archer, in which case most of his Phat Dungeon Loot will soon belong to his therapist).

Cultural Background: In some game worlds, there's no such thing. Barbarians (4) are from "wherever it is Barbarians (4) come from."* But in more interesting game worlds, culture won't just affect your roleplaying, but the specifics of your abilities, too. Everyone knows that a Glorbedrian Crayfish Sorcerer (2) learns entirely different techniques of the Deadly Claw Dance than a Jaclomadrian Crayfish Sorcerer (2), and that's the kind of detail that can bring a whole campaign to life. What if your Minotaur Astronaut (4) is from the Land of Purple Lightning? What if he's from Cape Town?

Personal History: Normally, a cliché is a very present-tense concept, but some excellent clichés imply what a character *used to be*, and perhaps can be again, if the occasion demands it.



Just throwing in the word like "former" can change the character of a cliché considerably, and allow clichés that would otherwise contradict. There's lots of precedence for heroic good-guy types being a Former Criminal (3) for instance – giving them a convenient mix of redemption-driven motives, unusual social contacts, and handy breaking-and-entering skills. Comparably a Cynical Self-Interested Nightclub Owner (2) might be a Former Heroic Mercenary Known for Defending the Underdog (4), and just needs a good woman (and a dashing Frenchman) to bring him back into fighting the good fight. Or an Artist (1) might be an Artist Formerly Known as Prince (1).

Degree of Dedication: Sometimes, the present is as tenuous as the past. You can imply a more distant connection in a present-tense cliché by being a Weekend Warrior (2), a Dabbler in the Dark Arts (1), or an Amateur Brain Surgeon (3). Conversely, you know a cliché is near and dear to a character's heart with clichés like Devoted Priest of the Hairy God (3), Overzealous Combat Medic Forever Running Out of Gauze (2), or Barry Manilow's Absolute Biggest Fan (6).

*A Mommy and Daddy Barbarian, who Love Each Other Very Much (4).

Religion or Philosophical Bent: An Irish Minotaur Astronaut (4) is groovy, but an Irish Shinto Minotaur Astronaut (4) is *really* cooking with gas. Always keep in mind, when designing your character, that combat in *Risus* is a many-splendored thing, and if somebody attacks you with a stream of rhetoric, it's just plain *classy* to be able to fight back without resorting to Inappropriate Clichés.

Social Class and Financial Means: For many clichés, this detail is hardwired to profession: if a character is a Gumshoe (4), we know he's a working-class Joe with a battered fedora, without asking. On the other hand, if it's the Depression (and it often is, with those gumshoes) maybe he's a Gumshoe On the Skids (4) – he's lost his office and he's living in the shantytowns, protecting the dispossessed ('cause the cops sure won't). For other kinds of clichés, it can just be a fun gloss to point out if they're rich or poor, working hard or hardly working. Since, in many settings, wealth is closely tied to which social circles a character moves in, it can be a crucial detail in an adventure.

Gender: Some – even many – character clichés imply the character's sex. Say words like "inventor" or "cop" or "astronaut" or "mercenary" and the default image is a dude. By contrast, clichés like "prostitute" or "nurse" or "witch" conjure images of women in most minds. This says a lot of things about both adventure fiction and our culture – *things too deep and important to be hinted at in a Risus book*. It can be helpful, though, to indicate gender in your primary cliché, especially if your cliché includes some concepts traditionally associated – fairly or not – with a *different* sex. Of course, your character's *name* can provide a clear enough indicator, too, but I never pass up another way to pad my clichés out to ridiculous lengths, nor should you.

Group Affiliation: In many settings, there are powerful groups that act as global puppeteers, commanding entire nations from the shadows, ancient conspiracies that permeate every level of society. They know who you are. They know what you're doing *right this instant*. Everything is under their control. This is the kind of thing an

Irish Shinto Minotaur Astronaut Freemason (4) would know all about. On the other hand, it might just be fun to know that your Grim Vigilante (5) is a Grim Vigilante Scout Troop Leader (5), or a member in good standing with the Columbia Record Club.

Demeanor: Cheerful, surly, defeatist, haughty, starry-eyed and innocent, weather-beaten and cynical ... A little personality goes a long way to sprucing up a cliché and making it different from the cliché next door. If given the choice between being murdered by a Jolly Grandfatherly Hit Man (4) and a Cold-Hearted Twitchy Hit Man (4), which would you prefer? I'll take my chances with the one played by Wilford Brimley.

Appearance: Handsome, muscular, wiry, pale ... Looks aren't everything, but they can be a lot. Some points of appearance are keys to clichéd personalities, too. Everyone knows that a Beady-Eyed Little Sneak (4) is even *less* trustworthy than an ordinary Sneak (4), and that a Square-Jawed Football Hero (3) is even *more* heroic than one with a curvier countenance.

Ham-Handed References: You can't have too much ham, not in *Risus*. You can build some excellent clichés by making direct (or sly) references to actors, actresses, fictional characters, or genre conventions. Simply calling a character a Woody Allen (3), Jackie Chan (5) or Margaret Dumont (4) can speak volumes in the right context, no less than being a Sherlock (2), Shylock (3), Romeo (4) or Redshirt (1).

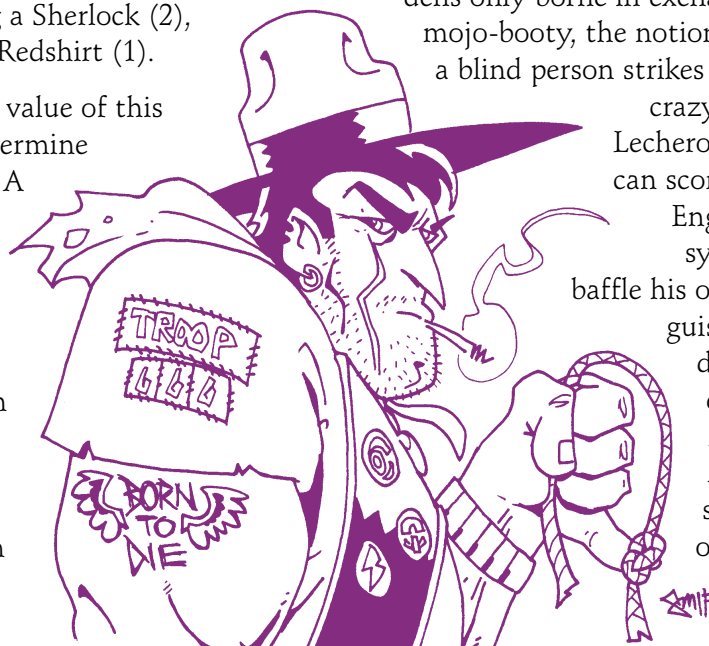
Goals: Never overlook the value of this one; a character's goals determine how he develops his skills. A Genetic Engineer Determined To Cure Cancer (4) probably doesn't share office space with a Genetic Engineer Bent on World Domination (4), even though they may have roomed together in college (the Reed Richards/Victor Von Doom effect).

Self-Image: Frustrated, self-righteous, humble, self-loathing ... This is a useful cousin to a character's goals; sometimes a cliché can tell us what a character *is* and what he *thinks* he is, all at once. Decide if your character over- or underestimates himself, to transform a Swordfighter (2) into a Swordfighting Legend in His Own Mind (2) ... or to flesh out a Gentle Giant (3) to a Gentle Giant Convinced He's a Monster Unfit to Live (3). It only takes a little dressing to make a snack a meal, when you're dining on cliché.

Subplots and Relationships: No cliché is an island, and clichés can include *other people* in them. They're that cool, clichés are. For example, a Fighter Pilot The Other Guys Seek Out For Romance Advice (3) is bound to have some cool roleplaying moments between (or even during) dogfights. Similarly, a Globe-Hopping Archaeologist Secretly In Love with the Hot Redhead Who Keeps Stealing His Finds (4) is just asking for a rollicking new dimension to the same old ruin-delving story. That kind of asking is good stuff.

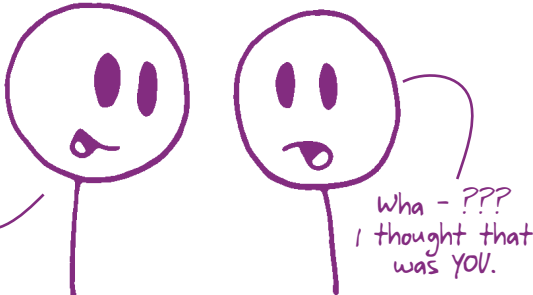
Problems: For years, fans have asked, "Why would anyone want a negative cliché?" They don't mean a Fighter (-2), they're usually responding to a character I've made, something along the lines of a Lecherous Blind Swashbuckler (3) or a Dirt Poor Necromancer With An Unmentionable Problem in the Bedroom (4). Accustomed to the notion that "flaws" and "disadvantages" are burdens only borne in exchange for character-mojo-booty, the notion of *spending* dice to be a blind person strikes some as odd. Am I

crazy? Like a fox. A Lecherous Blind Swashbuckler can score plenty of Haughty English Lass (3) with a sympathy routine, and baffle his opponents by extinguishing the candles and defeating them in the dark. Sure, his Target Number to read the Necronomicon in a single night will be outrageous, but that just means he wakes



up in the morning *still sane* and cuddled up with chicks while Professor Bespectacled is staring into other dimensions and drooling on his cardigan. And besides: troubled, challenged, and imperfect characters are just more fun to believe in. In a comedy game, they're funnier. In a dramatic game, they're more dramatic. It's a win-win.

Very cool costume for the Vigilante Scout Leader, man!



A CORE CLICHÉ: THE CHARISMATIC

All charming people have something to conceal, usually their total dependence on the appreciation of others.

– Cyril Connolly

The Charismatic is the romantic seducer, the wily haggler, the wisecracking confidence trickster, the soul-stirring minstrel. He's all about *convincing and inspiring* people, and Player Characters often have a lot of need to be convincing. Sometimes a crowd needs rousing (or an angry mob needs quieting), sometimes a stubborn NPC needs a little grease or sugar to get that vital clue, and it's just plain safer to be *invited* into the Dark Lord's compound as honored guests than it is to hack through all those guards. You'll be hacking through them on the way out, anyway.

In modern and futuristic games, just about any Charismatic is either a suave-and-sexy type, a naturally magnetic leader, or a shifty con artist. Just watch some old *A-Team* episodes to catch Dirk Benedict burning that candle from both ends and round the middle. With fantasy the cliché broadens a little, thanks to a tradition of *artistic* characters: jesters and minstrels and tale-tellers that can enthrall, anger, or soothe with clever patter and a plucked string or two. Of course, we've also got science fiction where teenage pop stars can save us from alien invaders, so there's hope for the "game-effective artiste" concept to spread its wings a little.

ABSENCE SPEAKS LOUDER THAN WORDS

Absence diminishes little passions and increases great ones, as wind extinguishes candles and fans a fire.

– Francois de la Rochefoucauld

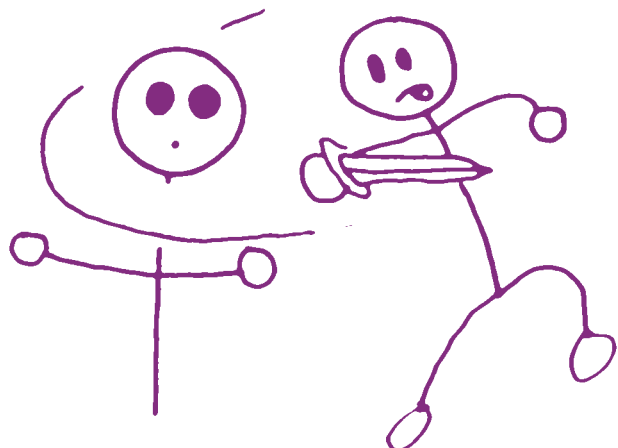
The most basic cliché is a simple term describing a profession or life-defining role ... But the truth is, it's almost never *necessary* to include a character's defining role as a cliché. And sometimes, leaving a shapely silence in the cliché list can communicate something very potent and useful. For example; here's a stereotypical Master Sleuth:

MRS. BUTTERBREAD

Description: A strange, pear-shaped little woman, elderly and cheery. Her white hair is tinged metallic blue, and she commands a small army of miniature dogs (mostly toy poodles and Lhasa apsos). To keep herself occupied, she stalks along foggy hedgerows and across quiet courtyards, solving the murders that stump Scotland Yard.

Clichés: Kindly Grandmother-to-Everyone (4), Bothersome Fussbudget (3), Small-Breed Dog Enthusiast (3)

This character is one to be reckoned with, armed with the full might of *Risus*. She's a detective... that's what her adventures about and, to a great extent, that's what her life is about (and has been, ever since her dear husband Jerrold died in the war ... don't ask *which* war). Despite her focus, though, her clichés never wander *near* words like



“detective” or “sleuth.” There isn’t a single cliché there that implies an ability to dust for fingerprints, rattle off statutes, or handle a revolver. Mrs. Butterbread doesn’t do *any* of those things, of course. If those techniques had been working, Scotland Yard would have cracked the case and a Master Sleuth wouldn’t be necessary to save the day. Her weapons are backyard gossip, an intimate knowledge of doily patterns, and a great faith in the empathic instincts of tiny, deeply inbred, yappy dogs. Does Inspector Wallace of the Yard notice the difference between a *currant* jam and a *blackberry* jam? No, but that stain solves the murder, and Mrs. Butterbread is there to know how.

This technique returns us to one of the pillars of the **Risus** game engine and, by extension, of the **Risus** philosophy: *every cliché is beautiful* ... the notion of the “inappropriate cliché.” It’s not just for making hairdressers fearsome in combat, and it’s not just a vehicle for farce. One kind of heroic character is, of course, someone who’s just *extremely good* at what he does. But the other is the kind of character who brings a *new approach* to the case, to the battle, to the quest ... Someone who isn’t a superhero or a warrior or a cop, but rather,

one who can see what such characters overlook, and who will try things that such characters wouldn’t consider.

Of course, Mrs. Butterbread is well armed for another of the pillars, as well: *to the victor go the spoils*. When she lays down the gentle-but-deadly guilt-trip smackdown as only a “kindly grandmother” can, you’ll feel the pain wherever she *wants* you to feel it. No Master Sleuth needs a revolver when she’s armed with a soft admonishment and a pained look of disappointment.



A CORE CLICHÉ: THE ATHLETE

Nobody in the game of football should be called a genius. A genius is somebody like Norman Einstein.

– Joe Theismann

The Athlete is strong, fast, and limber. His forte is raw human prowess. A well-rounded band of heroes often has one: he’s the one they ask to kick a door in, chase down the hooligan, or swing that vine across a deadly pit of lava. He’s got a cliché like Hometown Football Hero (4), or she’s got one like Perky Gymnast (5). There’s another choice here, too: are you about *power and raw strength*? Or are you *agile and quick*? Of course, some athletes are just well rounded, healthy people at the peak of human condition and performance. Lets take a moment to resent them.

Nearly any kind of combat cliché implies a degree of athletic prowess ... Certainly, a Swashbuckler (4) can swing from chandeliers and a Medieval Warrior (4) can haul up a portcullis. And what kind of Martial Artist (3) isn’t also an acrobat? All true, but the Athlete is something beyond a fighter’s respectable health.

In science fiction, for example, there’s a fun tradition of real sports playing a part in a character’s background. You can be an Athlete to show off the nifty low-gravity arena games of the future (and score alien cheerleaders with exotic bedroom talents) ... Or you can focus on athletics just to show that you’re *good and trustworthy*. Despite SF’s general pro-brains, anti-brute-force vibe, we can still tell our hero is a stand-up guy if we know he ran track or quarterbacked his high school football team. Fantasy invites athletes to shine, too, as the forte of Asian-style monks who practice incredible physical feats by sitting still and humming, or elves who can run through the forests for days at a time to deliver a vital message, Olympic-torch style, to a king that needs to be warned of the coming army.

THE MEGAVERSAL OMNIGROOVY BACKGROUND MACHINE

*It is only in adventure that some people succeed
in knowing themselves – in finding themselves.*

– Andre Gide

Hurry, hurry, hurry! Step right up and *witness* this phantasmagorical feat of fabulous fantasy! This marvelous device is just a single table, just *one small table* that will restore hair to balding characters, inspire vigor in the bedroom, and ease the suffering of campaign logic by putting it (the logic, not the campaign) out of its misery.

This is the Megaversal Omnigroovy Background Machine, a streamlined device that will replace several bulkier items currently on your kitchen counter. Pull the lever a few times (if you can't find the lever, rolling some percentile dice will do), and you will learn the *reasons why*. Why your character *is* what he is! Why he believes what he believes! Why he's *striving* toward whatever it is he's striving toward!

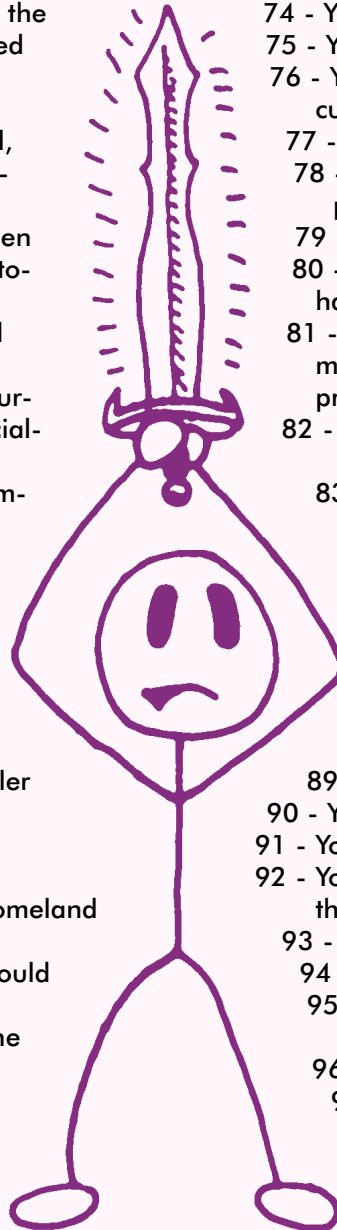
The M.O.B. Machine doesn't create your character for you; you've already done that. Instead, it provides a steaming plate of half-baked rationale and serves it up with mustard sauce. You can bake it the rest of the way, or *eat it raw*, as your predilections demand. Without further *adieu*:

THE MEGAVERSAL, OMNIGROOVY BACKGROUND MACHINE (1D100)

- | | |
|---|---|
| 01 - You achieved some fame | 24 - You forgave someone for a long-standing wrong |
| 02 - You accidentally killed your pet | 25 - You finally had to give up your wooby |
| 03 - You accepted something that shouldn't have been yours | 26 - You fell very ill |
| 04 - There was a terrible accident | 27 - You failed to achieve something you wanted very much |
| 05 - The GM pressured you into it | 28 - You failed as an artist |
| 06 - Someone tricked you | 29 - You committed a crime with friends but you were the only one to get away |
| 07 - Someone powerful or wealthy took an interest in you | 30 - You committed a crime with friends but you were the only one caught |
| 08 - Someone gave you a hickey | 31 - You gave shelter to an unusual traveler |
| 09 - Someone gave you a cryptic warning | 32 - You got in a fight |
| 10 - Someone depended on you | 33 - You had a career that you thought would last your whole life, but it didn't work out |
| 11 - Somebody was honest enough to tell you that your poetry or artwork is awful | 34 - You had a lot of siblings |
| 12 - Nobody understood you | 35 - You had a transformingly good romance |
| 13 - It seemed like a good idea at the time | 36 - You had some incredibly good sex |
| 14 - Good fortune brought you unexpected money | 37 - You had some unusual dreams |
| 15 - Bullies picked on you | 38 - You have no idea. You certainly don't want to be what you are; it just keeps working out that way. |
| 16 - A plate of spicy food affected you | 39 - You saw an inspiring movie |
| 17 - A new religion or philosophy caught your interest | 40 - You saw a hygiene play |
| 18 - A group you disliked or didn't trust did you a good turn, and changed your feelings about them | 41 - You sacrificed something you enjoyed for the good of another |
| 19 - A group you admired ridiculed, ignored, or excluded you | 42 - You reconciled with a parent or friend you had separated from |
| 20 - You are doing this to spite a relative's wishes | 43 - You realized that you're different from the others |
| 21 - You are following in a relative's footsteps | 44 - You read a really good book |
| 22 - You aren't of this Earth (or of this whatever-planet-this-is) | |
| 23 - You can wiggle your eyebrows independently | |

THE MEGAVERSAL, OMNIGROOVY BACKGROUND MACHINE (1D100)

- 45 - You never had a dog
- 46 - You needed to prove something as a point of pride
- 47 - You met the love of your life, but she stood you up and you never learned why
- 48 - You met someone who does the same thing, hated them, and it still bugs you that you ended up similar to them
- 49 - You met someone who does the same thing, did them a good turn, and in exchange they taught you something
- 50 - You met someone who does the same thing, and he impressed you/aided you/etc.
- 51 - You met someone who did something entirely unrelated, but it gave you the idea anyway
- 52 - You met a lifelong friend when strange events brought you together
- 53 - You made a moral or ethical choice that you still regret
- 54 - You made a discovery that surprised a lot of people, especially you
- 55 - You indulged in a lot of chemical entertainment
- 56 - You single-handedly solved a case involving stolen cheese
- 57 - You solved a mystery
- 58 - You spent time as a soldier, or among them
- 59 - You suffer from a disease
- 60 - You thought it would be cooler than it is
- 61 - You took a wrong turn
- 62 - You took some lessons
- 63 - You traveled beyond your homeland for the first time
- 64 - You turned left when you should have turned right
- 65 - You were admitted for routine gall bladder surgery but something went wrong
- 66 - You were arrested for a crime
- 67 - You were arrested for a crime you didn't commit



- 68 - You were befriended by someone old and wise
- 69 - You were bitten by a radioactive animal of some kind
- 70 - You were bored
- 71 - You were entrusted with a special object
- 72 - You were forced, repeatedly, to eat a vegetable you didn't like
- 73 - You were frustrated by how badly others were doing it, so you decided to take up the cause and do it right
- 74 - You were given a cool science toy
- 75 - You were just filling in for somebody else
- 76 - Your parents were a member of an ethnic, cultural, or religious minority
- 77 - Your parents split up
- 78 - Your parents saved all of your naked baby pictures to embarrass you with later in life
- 79 - Your parents are unknown to you
- 80 - You're just doing it because it comes in handy in a fight
- 81 - You're in it for some secondary benefit, like money, fame, groupies, or discount skin care products.
- 82 - You witnessed a lot of suffering that you hadn't been aware of
- 83 - You witnessed a hilarious animal act that you hadn't been aware of
- 84 - You were visited by a supernatural entity (or believe you were)
- 85 - Your wicked Uncle Ernie was your babysitter
- 86 - Your parents were noticeably rich
- 87 - Your parents were noticeably poor
- 88 - Your parents were killed
- 89 - Your parents were infamous and despised
- 90 - Your parents were famous and admired
- 91 - You were too trusting
- 92 - You were threatened by shadows at night, then exposed to the light
- 93 - You were the savior of your people
- 94 - You were seriously wounded
- 95 - You were secretly attracted to someone you shouldn't desire
- 96 - You were kind of a jerk
- 97 - You were mistaken for somebody else
- 98 - You were raised in the traditions of a religion that emphasizes guilt
- 99 - You were raised on a farm by foster parents of some kind
- 00 - You were savaged by a turbot

The Machine in Action

To provide an example of the M.O.B. Machine's wonders, we'll begin with a straightforward fantasy character – a spiritual, woodsy sort of rogue named Sheeth Jonas. When he's not adventuring with his companions, he's trekking deep into the Chaos Woods to the Temple of Zor to continue his studies of ice magic.

SHEETH JONAS

Description: A man with wisdom beyond his years and sideburns beyond his collar, Sheeth is equally comfortable in the steamy brothels of Nai-Noda and the frozen forests of the trackless north.

Clichés: Kindhearted Northern Ranger (4), Acolyte of the Ice Wizards of Zor (3), Spare-Time Scholar (2), Gambler (1)

But ... How did he come to be this way? How did a young man choose this path, and to what extent was it chosen for him? We yank the lever three times and learn the truth:

- You fell very ill
- You accidentally killed your pet
- A group you disliked or didn't trust did you a good turn, and changed your feelings about them

Now, it falls on the player to weave these three crucial events into Sheeth's past, arranging them into a quick biographical sketch.

- The first one seems simple enough ... while not a scholarly lad by nature, young Sheeth was always curious about books and scrolls, and learned to read even though he didn't have much practical use for it. One bitter winter, in

THE RISUS ROSETTA STONE?

If you want a fun way to while away a rainy afternoon, print out the sample cliché list from **Risus**, next to the same list from the many foreign-language **Risus** translations. It's difficult to summarize just how amusing the comparisons can be – and it's a great way to work on becoming a polyglot.

THE TENETS OF RISUS, DISTILLED

There's no wrong way to play.

I'm not the last word on **Risus** rules. I'm just a consistent *first* word.

The GM is not God. God is one of his little NPCs.

Risus is a comedy RPG. It's good for serious games only if you *insist* it is.

Risus has rules for anything, not for everything.

Every cliché is beautiful (and game-useful), in its own way.

Any **Risus** mechanic can resolve any diceworthy challenge.

The character's abilities, not his props, determine his success.

the Year of the Split Shadows, Sheeth spent a month at death's door due to a rare disease or curse, and he was nursed back to health at the local temple. This provided the genesis of the scholarship he still pursues when time permits.

- Of the three, the middle one looks the most traumatic, so we attach that to *two* things: We decide that, when Sheeth was a young boy, he was a bit of a hellion with little respect for life and property. While horsing around in a barn owned by his uncle, he caused a fire that trapped his pet badgerine, Patches, in the rafters. Little Patches* never made it out alive. This softened him forevermore, accounting for his kindheartedness and (though he'd never admit it) his outrageous sideburns, which look a lot like Patches from the proper angle.
- We can't go through this without giving a moment to the Ice Wizards of Zor, obviously. So while the "group" in the third revelation could just as easily be the Order of Rangers or the Exquisite Companions of Nai-Noda (Local 282), we lay it on the Ice Wizards ... the enigmatic keepers of the Chaos Woods, witnessed by few living men and trusted by fewer. A few years ago, we decide, a quest led Sheeth into those woods tracking down some villains, and

* "Little" Patches, a fully-grown badgerine, weighed 1,200 pounds

they got the drop on him, carving him up a treat. The whole time, Sheeth assumed they were the pawns of the mysterious Ice Wizards, but it was the Ice Wizards who saved his life and – for the second time in his life – Sheeth found himself being nursed back to health among books and scrolls ... This time, they contained powerful magics. The Ice Wizards, impressed by his literacy and his enormous facial hair, took him as a pupil, and as their liaison with the outside world.

Now, despite a very casual attitude toward the character and an open willingness to be silly about his sideburns, we've transformed a good character into an *Omnigroovy* one. Taken to extremes, the Machine can explain *every* facet of a character, with a combination of past events and present-tense conditions ... another yank of the lever would reveal the origins of Sheeth's interest in the Nai-Noda brothels (as if we couldn't guess), exact-

ly why he's a ranger, and just why he's a gambler (or why he isn't a very *good* one). This is the magic of the Machine! Just a dab will do you, generally; too much background creates an anchor of expectations, while just a little creates wings of promise. Or something. Either way, it's monster mojo. Use it wisely.

FINISHING TOUCHES

Risus character creation is very fast, so there's no need at all to skip any steps. In particular, make sure everyone – especially the GM, but everyone – understands what *you* mean by your cliché descriptions. Also, if you're not entirely clear on what your Tools of the Trade entail, ask the GM to give you a run-down so you can jot down the important stuff. Does a Burly Dwarvish Warrior (2) have an axe? Almost certainly, but does he have a touchstone or some kind of enchanted helmet-lamp? Maybe so, maybe no. Ask now.

THE LCBS

The **Risus** stick figures are called the LCBS – *Little Cartoon Bastards*. They first appeared in my fanzines for an APA called *All of the Above*, but quickly became something I'd doodle into nearly anything given the chance. They became permanently associated with **Risus** in June of 2001, with the release of **Risus** version 1.5 – and they so perfectly express the feel and philosophy of **Risus** that I'm at a loss to imagine **Risus** ever existing without them.

There are really only two LCBS, the One on the Left and the One on the Right – so called because they've often appeared as a pair exchanging dialogue. They have no other given names, though they've taken on character names in some instances (in the Cumberland Games ad appearing in the Dork Storm edition of **Pokéthulhu**, for example, they're Sparky and Renfield, the heroes of Stickman City). When more than two LCBS appear at one time, it's really just the same two guys, multiplied using advanced digital trickery, animatronics and other special effects. The LCBS have also appeared in many non-**Risus** capacities on the Blue Room website, and once decorated an article logo for *Pyramid* magazine.

Some of the earliest drawings of the LCBS appear here for the first time since their fanzine publication.



MASTERING THE GAME RULES

Half this game is 90% mental.

– Danny Ozark

R*isus* isn't complicated, but as one regular on the **Risus** Mailing List once said, it can be *subtle*. A crackerjack **Risus** GM is an odd duck, really, possessing all of these qualities:

- A sincere affection for comedy
- A sincere affection for adventure fiction
- A sincere affection for his gaming group
- No need to rationalize or “repair” the sillier traditions of what he’s affectionate towards
- In fact, a hankering to celebrate them
- Freedom from the literal and the linear

The following sections wander through the **Risus** engine. The wanderings lack apparent direction on occasion, but never lack for purpose. They frequently lack seriousness. Also, except in one notable instance, they lack references to “blowpod squeezings.” We’ll return, now and again, to those qualities of a crackerjack **Risus** GM. Sometimes it may even be *apparent*.



OBJECTS ARE LESS POSSIBLE THAN THEY APPEAR

When an Elder Boogeyman turns your brain to oatmeal by flashing you with his improbable geometry, that’s an attack, as surely as whacking you with a baseball bat (and no more pleasant). In one sense, **Call of Cthulhu’s** “Sanity” mechanic – where a monster’s weirdness does damage to the hit points in your mind – is an important precursor to the “anything can be a fracas” **Risus** combat philosophy.

THE UNHOLY TRINITY

Baldrick, the ape creatures of the Indus have mastered this. Now try again.

– Edmund Blackadder

If there is a single *key* to getting the most from the rules, it’s a thorough understanding of what I sometimes call the unholy trinity – the three conflict mechanics that form the game’s engine. Absolutely *any* conflict can be categorized as:

- **A Single-Action Contest:** Two or more characters roll dice for opposing clichés. Winner take all; no second chances. For rapid, decisive conflict between two actively opposed characters.
- **A Combat:** Two or more characters face off in a *series* of contested rolls, wearing down one another’s resolve, bodies, or other resources to represent an extended conflict of some kind.
- **A Target Number Roll:** A single character faces some kind of challenge, but nobody’s opposing him directly. The GM assigns a Target Number (TN) based on the applied cliché. The player rolls to beat the Target Number. Covers any situation the two methods above don’t.

That’s the most basic way to look at the unholy trinity; each represents a particular type of challenge. Two cowboys facing each other at high noon will draw their guns and fire; the fastest man will win. There is no jockeying for position, no

wearing the foe down ... so that's a single-action contest. If they dive for cover and engage in a full-blown gunfight, instead, that calls for combat. If a lone cowboy is shooting at bottles on a fence, each shot is a test against a Target Number. Simple.

Unless it isn't. Once you've mastered the trinity in basic, literal terms, look at them again ... peeling away what they represent and seeing instead what they mean in terms of *pacing* and *gameplay*:

- A Single-Action Contest: A conflict that's over quickly. The characters involved each get one chance to affect the outcome, then the game moves on.
- A Combat: A conflict to be savored. The characters involved can swap clichés to try different tactics, use teamwork, and enjoy the ebb and flow of potential victory. A conflict that can dominate a scene.
- A Target Number Roll: Only one character has any chance to affect the outcome, and the resolution is instantaneous. The rules peek in, make the call, then duck out of sight.

The truth is laid bare. Not only does any conflict fit in one of those three bottles; any conflict fits in *any* of them, as the flow of the scene suggests. Let's revisit those cowboys at high noon: The slow walk to the middle of the street (*chink ... chink ...*); the cold stares squinting in the hot sun, the tentative flex of fingers, hovering near the handles of each revolver ... Those details are *usually* left to good roleplaying. Truly masterful **Risus** gamers might even throw in a pantomime of spitting out a distracting cheroot, just before the **BANG** of the dice in contest. But if it would serve the scene better to assume that each of those things is really a vital part of the conflict – the “psyching out” stage of the battle – then it's perfectly reasonable to run a high-noon showdown as a combat, where only the *final die rolls* actually represent the firing of guns.

At the other end of the scale, where it's a case of a skilled Player Character facing down a pathetic local poser, the GM can express the lopsided nature of the battle by simply declaring a Target Number. That says: “this schmuck

A CORE CLICHÉ: THE COMMUNICATOR

Drawing on my fine command of the English language, I said nothing.

– Robert Benchley

The Communicator can navigate the maze of interlocking communities, barely-friendly nations, and complex societies. He *fits in*. He reads and speaks in several languages, and he knows the tune as well as the lyrics: the quaint native folkways of Distant Nowhereland, the one-mistake-costs-your-head court rituals of the Really Grouchy Shogun. He remembers to bring a gift when he's invited over.

Some campaigns gloss right past languages with a Universal Translator or a Common Tongue that even the mountain goblins can manage (with an accent). *Customs*, though, remain a constant concern.

Should you kneel on your right or left knee when addressing his August Magnificence? Is it an insult or an honorable salute to punch his mistress in the face as a greeting? Only the Communicator knows. In fantasy, this kind of knowledge is often the purview of the very scholarly and arcane, because wizards are presumed to be more well-read and well-traveled than basic village folk. In nearly every genre from low medieval to high space opera, wily merchants and one-step-ahead-of-the-law rogues can be counted on for a bit of this, and in space fantasy, it's traditional to have a robot in the party to handle “etiquette and protocol” and small-talk with binary loadlifters.

isn't worth rolling for.” Beat the Target Number and he goes down clean and easy. Fail to beat the Target Number and he goes down screaming and messy. Either way, he goes down. He's not really a *challenge*.

Or assume our hero is a space ranger, stopping at a beverage dispenser on his way to his docking bay. He registers his credits, makes his selection – “Diet Blowpod Squeezings, please” – and then ... nothing. No drink. The space ranger's player says, “I thump the machine.”

The ball is now in your court, as the Game Master *and drink machine*. Are you merely a malfunctioning device, or are you a *malevolently* malfunctioning device: a twisted, dastardly drink machine bent on wearing down the space ranger's patience and composure? "I thump the machine" can lead to a Target Number roll, a single-action contest, *or a combat*, a titanic showdown between man and his reluctant refrigerating servant. Is that sound a grinding in the coolant compressor? No ... that sound is an evil chuckle from deep in the guts of that wicked machine, and that's when **Risus** combat gets good.

If he wins, he'll get his Blowpod Squeezings, *oh yes*, he will. And victory will be sweet and victory will be pleasantly, refreshingly carbonated.

- **A Target Number Roll:** Annoying beverage bot.
- **A Single-Action Contest:** Evil beverage bot.
- **A Combat Scene:** *Starkly sinister beverage bot from the Fetid Pits of Vormox.*

If this example strikes you as too odd, you haven't *really* relaxed into **Risus** yet. Have some squeezings. See also the handy flowchart (below) providing a graphic demonstration of your choices. Other excellent scenes to enjoy as a **Risus** combat include getting ketchup from a narrow-necked glass bottle and dealing with a small child shouting "Mine! Mine!" and grabbing at the PC's equipment.

And If That Doesn't Work ...

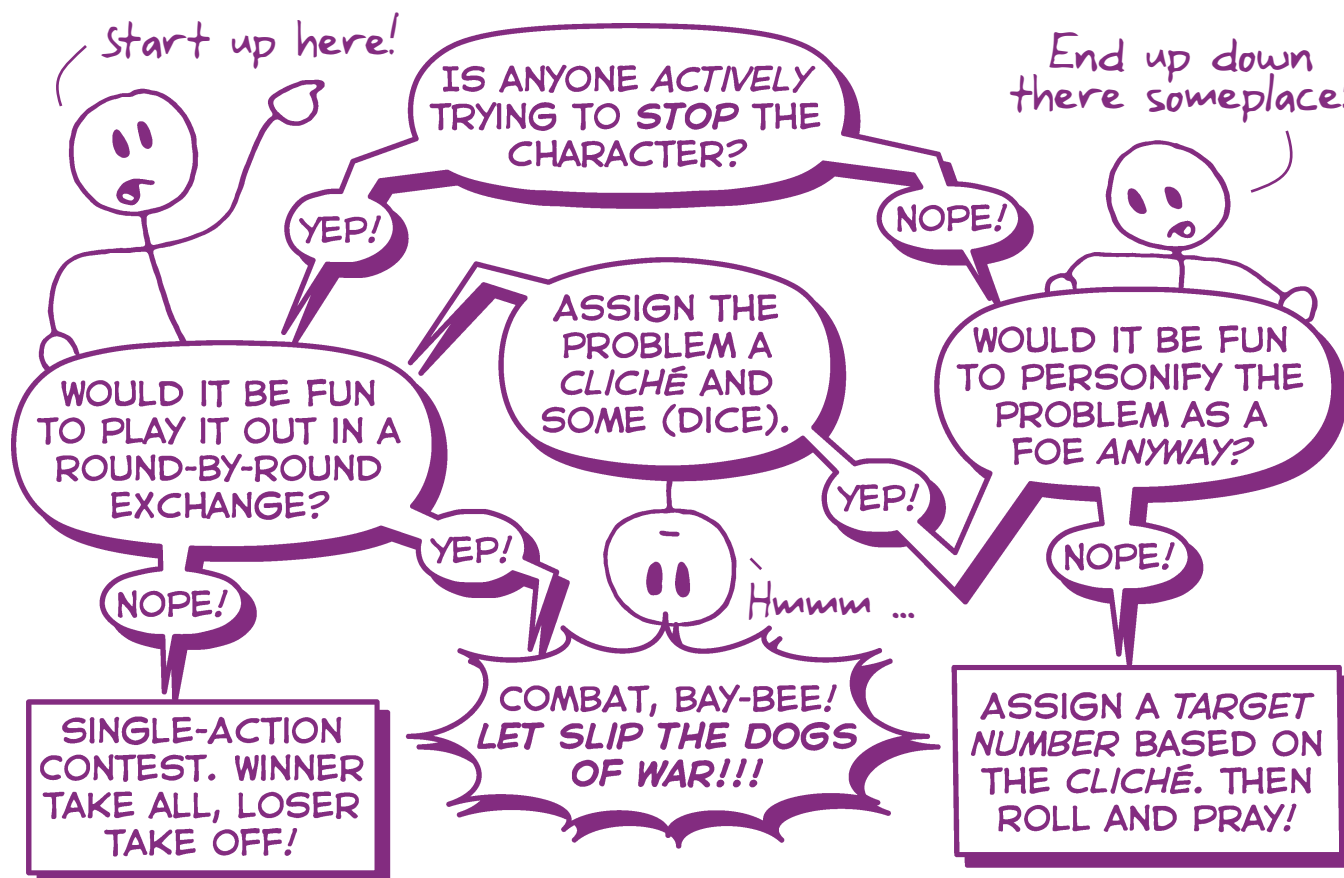
You must unlearn what you have learned.

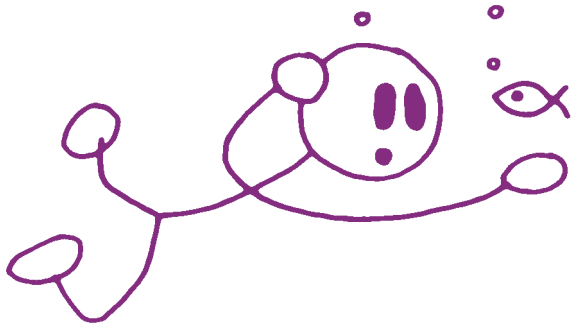
– Yoda

So ... thumping a drink machine might be combat. Shooting someone in the chest might *not* be. Huh.

If the "fun-based" approach isn't clicking, and you still feel lost, the trick – if we can even call it that – is having a *clear question* and an equally clear understanding of which characters are responsible

THE "WHAT THE HECK KIND OF CONFLICT IS THIS?" FLOWCHART





for the answer. Boil any situation down to that, and the path will be clear. With only a little practice, it becomes second nature.

To use a common example, consider a long-range ambush by a sniper. Because a sniper is a guy with a rifle and a rifle is a weapon, we're trained as gamers to think of it as a "combat" issue. It *can* be, but it isn't usually, in **Risus**. The combat mechanics are for situations where foes *jockey for position and wear each other down*. Snipers aren't much into that. A sniper doesn't want to *fight* you; he just wants to disrupt the integrity of your skull from a safe vantage point. That means it's more likely to be a single-roll contest (his cliché that implies sniping, versus your cliché that implies being able to notice the distant glare of a rifle scope in time to duck) ... or just a Target Number roll (made by whichever character is the PC).

Anyone Can Try Anything

All I could think about was if this wimp ever saw a monster he'd probably throw a shoe at it and run like a weasel. Turns out the shoe part was giving him too much credit.

– Cordelia Chase

Since each cliché is an abstraction of a huge list of complex qualities, *anyone* can at least *attempt* anything, drawing on some applicable experience. What this means, in practice, is that Difficulties are never fixed. Even when the rules, or a **Risus** adventure, provides a definite Target Number, that's just a *benchmark*. Not only can a Target Number change from character to character, it can change from cliché to cliché as the same character tries a different approach.

This is why the When Somebody Can't Participate rule (page 4 of **Risus**) applies only in opposed conflicts, and never rolls based on Target Numbers – and it's why **Risus** has an example about a guy in a wheelchair swinging, Tarzan-like, across a chasm.

Ring of Thieves, the free **Risus** solitaire adventure, demonstrates this early on. In paragraph 1, both your Ladies' Man and Fun-Loving Mercenary

A CORE CLICHÉ: THE DETECTIVE

When you're slapped, you'll take it and like it.

– Sam Spade

The Detective hears what others don't catch, sees what others overlook, finds what others have concealed, and *understands* how these details play connect-the-dots with the questions facing the party. In a sense, choosing to play the Detective of the party is like volunteering to be the player-side mouthpiece for the Game Master. Clues are, after all, the traffic signals of a game's pace and flow. What the Detective "unearths" often amounts to encoded instructions from the GM. "This way, you dorks." The fun of playing the Detective isn't so much in the detecting as it is in the power of knowledge ... When you're the smartass that knows the tangled social landscape better than the bad guys do, you can lord that over them, crack wise, and generally feel all big in the pants.

The Detective of a high-tech world is different, though, from a Detective in the Dark Ancient Renaissance Medieval Age. In modern games, detective work is tied to *acumen* – intellect and perception. Detectives are trained investigators, canny professors, nosy busybodies with minds like a steel trap, and so on. In games where the hocus pocus is real, it's usually tied instead to spiritual and natural attunement – to developed *intuition*. Detectives are those close to the spirits, close to nature, close to the mysteries of the fairy otherworld. In games that combine these elements, we get the mystery cliché of the Psychic Detective, neatly fusing the notions into one.

A CORE CLICHÉ: THE DRIVER

It's got a cop motor, a 440 cubic inch plant; it's got cop tires, cop suspensions, cop shocks. It's a model made before catalytic converters so it'll run good on regular gas. What do you say, is it the new Bluesmobile or what?

– Elwood Blues

The Driver doesn't just get you from point A to point B, he does it at high speed, with hairpin turns and tricky maneuvering. He does it better than any chasing him, or better than any he's decided to chase. He's the hotshot dogfighter, the stunt-riding cowboy, the hooting hayseed in the General Lee.

In most game worlds, it's a given that any character can drive/ride/et cetera in a basic sort of way. So, this cliché is about driving in that *special* way that makes the physicists scream and holler and throw a little physicist tantrum. Players who plunk dice into a driving or piloting cliché can generally expect to be remarkable drivers and pilots, not merely "good" ones.

The Driver has a place of honor in every adventure genre. When the best car is still a horse, equestrian skill can save a kingdom, prevent a war, or terrorize the footsoldiers just for the style of it. In fantasy worlds where knights mount dragons and gryphons and other odd beasts, these clichés can allow a ride on creatures others dare not approach. In a caper crime story, the driver is a vital member of any crooked gang, and in a modern or futuristic military piece, the master of the dogfight is often the star of the climactic battle scene. And in any genre where people can chase or race each other, the driver – from Ben Hur to Ben Throttle – is a special kind of hero.

clichés are equally useful for fighting off the effects of an alchemical "hangover" (because both clichés imply a little *partying* in your past). In paragraph 2, though, the Fun-Loving Mercenary and Halfling Burglar clichés are *not* equally adept at grabbing for a ledge. Both clichés imply the necessary athletic ability, but a Burglar – even one who's a little undertall – has more experience with prowling around on ledges. Which cliché is the "better" one to use depends on how you allocated your dice (the adventure allows for "customized" versions of the character).

The truth is, Lucas could grab for a ledge using his Outrageous Story-Teller cliché, too ... but the Difficulty would probably be 20 or more, so I didn't clutter up the adventure text with it. In a game with a living, breathing GM, though, everything is possible, and absolutely any cliché can attempt absolutely any effect.

Of course, if you're a Fire Wizard (1) and you want to burn the imperial city to a cinder with a flick of your bushy red eyebrows, you might find the Target Number a *little out of your reach* ... but it'll be there, waiting for you, if you ever improve that cliché. A lot.

Target Numbers and the Professional Hero

Difficulties are meant to rouse, not discourage.

– William Ellery Channing

The baseline **Risus** potency is *professional*, or Cliché (3). An excellent technique for mastering the difficulty scale is to mentally *discard* the other power levels. A roll of three dice provides the foundation the others to compare to. Re-examining the Target Numbers with that in mind, we can describe the most useful range entirely from the professional perspective:

3-5: Child's play. Don't waste my time with this stuff.

6-8: A little tricky. But if I mess up, test me for poison darts or zombie bites.

9-11: Challenging. A real test of what I can do.

12-14: Difficult. *I think* I have a shot, but don't lay any bets.

15+ Totally out of my league. I might succeed by blind luck.

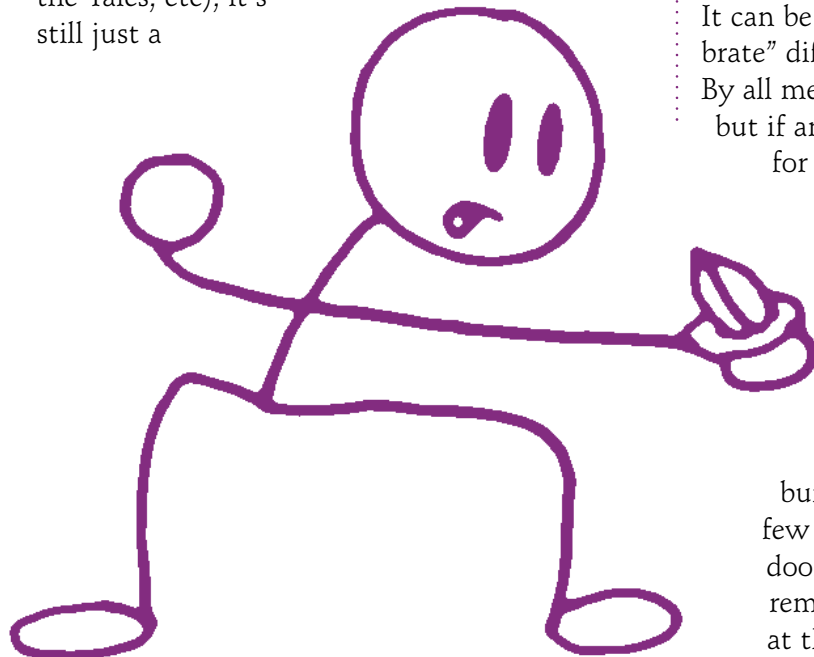
Barring the madness of Funky Dice, most of your Target Numbers for things the PCs *should* achieve

will fall in this range, when they're using clichés appropriate to the challenges. Characters with Cliché (4) will breeze past most of the trickier stuff; those with Cliché (5) or (6) will laugh in the face of chaos and death ... and that's as it should be.

When they're using clichés that *don't* quite fit the challenge, feel free to play ruthless with the difficulty scale. I use a pretty basic rule of thumb for mismatched clichés and Target Numbers: bump them up by 5 for a cliché that implies a secondary or tangential ability to handle the task, by 10 for a cliché that implies a very *distant* possibility of handling it, and by 20 for a cliché that really has no business even considering it.

The wheelchair example on page 1 of *Risus* demonstrates this, but here's another, as long as we're chewing over the idea: a hotel door lock. Player Characters love to pick locks; invading the privacy of others is one of the Dirty Little Thrills.

- A Burglar (2) or Locksmith (3) or Ninja (5) shouldn't have much trouble with a crummy hotel lock ... Hotel locks are mainly for show, and while the show has gotten flashier over the years (double-cylinder Yale locks replacing old-time keyholes, electronic card-keys replacing the Yales, etc), it's still just a



song and dance. So a perfectly matched cliché would face something like a Difficulty 7, assuming he's trying to work quickly.

- A lot of clichés imply lockpicking as a secondary (but always beloved) pursuit. In particular, any cliché that deals with crime or espionage will include a tangential dose of breaking & entering ... Any Private Eye (3) or Snooping Crime Reporter (4) should have a shot at opening that lock, with a Difficulty 12 or so.
- The “distant possibility” category is vast; it'd include anyone comfortable with mechanical things, tools, or just the nimble use of their fingers. So, a Handyman (3) or a Brain Surgeon (4) could pick a hotel lock with a Difficulty 17.
- Some people just aren't here to pick locks. There's nothing wrong with *trying* (well, okay; it's a felony) but if you're playing a Soulful Blues Guitarist (3) or a Magical Unicorn From Beyond the Gumdrop Rainbow Land of Fluffy Things That Smell Like Gingerbread (4), you'll be facing a Difficulty 27. Plus, it can scrape the glitter off of your pretty unicorn horn ... but when Lou the Cynical Burglar (3) tries to perform the Sugarplum Frolic of the Enchanted Glade to impress the Doe-Eyed Princess, it's payback time.

It can be tempting (or even reflexive) to “recalibrate” difficulties to match the power of the PCs. By all means, recalibrate the *challenges* they face, but if an ordinary hotel door lock is Difficulty 7 for the party Burglar (2) in the first game session, an ordinary hotel lock should stay Difficulty 7 when he advances to Burglar (3) and Burglar (4) and Burglar (5) and Burglar (6). The joy of becoming a more powerful character is *feeling* more powerful. Place bigger, more dangerous things *behind* the hotel doors – or invite the burglar to rob some art museums or crack a few bank vaults. Always toss a few hotel doors in for old time's sake, though – to remind them how excellent they've become at things that didn't *used* to be so certain.

Target Numbers and the Single Showoff

I'm only really at home in the spotlight.

– Judy Garland

Sometimes, it's better to discard literal thinking entirely when establishing difficulty, and focus, instead, on the *dramatic impact* of what the PC is attempting. This approach is especially useful when judging very subjective tasks that have few useful anchors in real-world activity, like using superpowers, magic spells, psionics, or the unpredictable resources of the crackpot gadgeteer or mad alchemist. Consider how generous, or how selfish, the proposed outcome will be:

5: A generous effect that contributes to the party cause, and actually provides some extra fun or opportunities for the other characters in the group.

10: The character would be contributing his fair share of impact on the scene; pulling his weight as part of the team.

15: A mildly selfish effect that steals the thunder of others in the group.

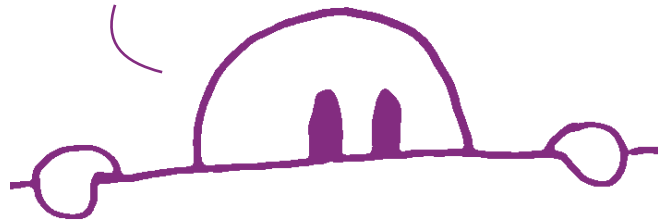
20: This would entirely upstage the other players, turning the other characters into bystanders for the rest of the scene.

25: This would upstage (or at least instantly rewrite) the whole scenario.

30: This not only hogs the spotlight, it shoplifts it and runs off with it tucked down the front of its pants.

This method is inherently inconsistent in literal terms, but can be ironclad in dramatic and comedic ones. It works equally well in any genre, but not in any *moment*: it's best for when hand-waving, technobabble, *arcanobabble*, mumbo-jumbo and half-baked rationale is welcomer than logic (which, in *Risus*, can apply to nearly anything). Teleporting through a brick wall was easy yesterday when it was just a way to look cool ... It's harder, now that it's a way to instantly slaughter the Demon of the Nine Dimensions. Why? His occult nature warps the local mana field, and permeates the living rock with resistant thaumite radiation. It's also blocking the transporter beam; we'll need to send the red-shirts

Some of us couldn't show off if our lives depended on it!



down in the shuttle. Plus, that sausage pizza you had this morning is really doing a number on you.

The chart makes the simplifying assumption that the spotlight on the *player* and the spotlight on the *character* equate. Keep an eye peeled for the moments when this isn't true. Accomplished role-players can have their character "steal the scene" in a way that's *very* generous, by using colorful descriptions others can build on, by raising the stakes and making the scene more exciting, by handing out straight lines and sucker targets, and (best of all) by *daring the others to steal the scene back*. An effect is only selfish if it leaves everyone else twiddling their thumbs, or ends the scene so quickly no one even gets to twiddle.

Be more concerned with the spotlight on the PCs, though, than the spotlight on you, the Game Master. Your position in the game guarantees you the spotlight *whenever* you feel the need for it, so it's *déclassé* to bother yourself about it as long as the players are having a blast. Again, we return to putting something bigger "behind the hotel door," or in this case behind the wall of thaumite-soaked living rock. Whenever the PCs attempt something that *seems* like a way to short-circuit a beloved challenge, remember that it's *really* just a desperate cry for an *even more entertaining* challenge that they'll want to savor. That's what's waiting on the other side of that wall; don't make them wait.

YOU'LL GO BLIND DOING THAT

Q: What happens if you pump yourself right out of commission?

A: You're right out of commission. Save that tactic for last-ditch emergencies or going-out-in-a-blaze-of-glory.

Haggling

Jeannie: *How should I punish him? Should I give him the Death of a Thousand Itches?*

Major Healey: *How about scratches?*

Jeannie: *Itches are much worse.*

– I Dream of Jeannie

Another facet of fluid Target Numbers is that a roll's Difficulty can be a *haggling* exercise, especially when the PCs have a little time to consider different approaches and effects. I use this approach extensively for the use of supernatural powers, in particular, since the effects are so variable. Here's a bogus sample dialogue between myself (Game Master) and a player (playing Zorbok the Necromancer):

Zorbok: How many guards are there?

GM: Four at the gate, and two in each of the three towers. The guys in the towers have big crossbow thingies.

Zorbok: I'll cast a spell to make them all spontaneously explode. Into little piles of ... diamonds!

Other Player: Good call, dude. Ooh! And make one of them explode into ham sandwiches. My guy is hungry.

Other Other Player: He'd still be a guy ... I mean, you'd be eating ham sandwiches that were a person, man.

Other Player: So?

GM: Difficulty 30 for the diamonds. 32 if you add the ham sandwiches.

Zorbok: Holy ... 30, huh? Okay, skip that. How about if I just turn them all into newts?

GM: Difficulty 25. There are ten whole guards, and they don't look like schmucks.

Other Player: Are newts edible?

Other Other Player: Dude. Stop it.

Zorbok: How about if I put them to sleep?

GM: Difficulty 15, for all of them at once.

Zorbok: Hrm. I can pump and get that easily enough, but I'll need you guys to clean up if anyone comes running to attack us afterward.

Other Player: Go for it. I'll ready my dachshund.

You can also haggle with *resources*. "Sure, you can turn them all to little piles of gems, but that spell will require 40 minutes of dancing and screaming. You'll also need five pounds of Forest Pixie drumsticks, none of which get *snacked on* during the ritual." The GM glares at Other Player with that last line.

Degrees of Success and Secret TNs

Hey, look who's here! The big Broadway success! I don't write hits. My plays are art.

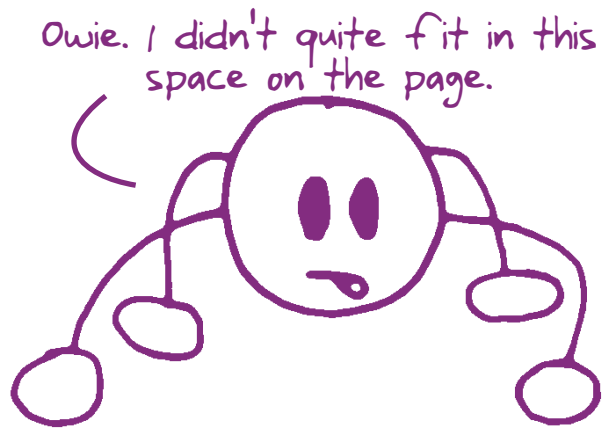
They're written specifically to go unproduced.

– Sheldon Flender

Rolling the Target Number scores a *bulls-eye*, a satisfactory achievement in line with what the character intended. But characters who don't *quite* make the Target Number can still hit somewhere in the stripes *near* the bulls-eye. In the magic example above, a roll of 10 would probably put *some* of the guards to sleep, but alert the others. When picking a lock, missing the TN by a point or two might still get the lock open ... but it'll take ten times as long and visibly damage the lock.

You can also establish multiple difficulties for combined effects. Back to the Wheelchair-Bound Eccentric in the chasm-swinging example (*Risus*





page 1), the rules propose a Difficulty 15 roll for clearing the chasm, but a Difficulty 30 for clearing the chasm *and* keeping the wheelchair. That's just another example of including degrees of success ... A 15 succeeds, but without that 30, success will have a cost.

If you're feeling naughty, applying degrees of success combines well with *secret* Target Numbers, even when haggling. "Okay ... you want all ten guards to explode into instant treasure, huh? Subtle. Classy. I've determined the Target Number. Feeling lucky tonight?"

The haggling process stays the same, but you speak in riddles and suggestive tones of voice, instead of hard numbers. When the dice bounce, judge the effects relative to the Target Number in your head, assuming the Target Number, as always, represents the bulls-eye. If Zorbok the Necromancer goes ahead with his "ten guards explode into diamonds" spell, and actually *rolls a 30*, then it goes through just fine. If he rolls less than a 30 (very likely) he'll get something less glamorous. Maybe a guard or two *will* explode. Maybe into cheaper gems. Maybe into ham sandwiches. Maybe into coal. Maybe they'll all just get new jewelry and a sudden awareness of an over-reaching wizard's presence. Use the "showoff scale" as a guide to what the roll achieves, relative to the party's potential efforts ... Since Zorbok is one member of a party of four (Other Other *Other* Player doesn't speak up much), a roll of 10 would contribute about one-fourth of the solution to the problem, for instance – Zorbok would "pull his weight" and the other 75% of the group could handle the other 75% of the obstacle.

MORE REASONS TO ROLL DICE

The generation of random numbers is too important to be left to chance.

– Robert R. Coveyou

I advocate the constant clatter of dice. Make *excuses* for it. Here's a couple I've made for you.

Success ... Or **SUCCESS?**

A no-win situation is a possibility every commander may face. Has that never occurred to you?

– James T. Kirk

Duke Steele, Action Hero, is 20 stories above the ground in the burning wreckage of a skyscraper he's been action-heroing in. Just seven inches away, an *entire ton of C4*, planted there by the Frothing Terrorist Madman Villain, explodes, engulfing Duke Steele in a massive fireball.

Dramatic convention is very clear on what happens to Duke Steele, Action Hero. He survives the blast. There's no question. People called "Duke Steele, Action Hero" just *do* that kind of thing.

So, it would be disingenuous to ask for a roll to "see if you survive." You're not fooling anyone with that.

But *never* pass up a chance to hear the pitter-patter of little d-sixes. Demand a die roll in a firm tone; put a glint in your eye. "Difficulty 15 against your Action Hero cliché, Duke. Let's see what you've *got*."

If Duke makes the roll, he sails on the explosive shockwave, neatly clipping a series of awnings on his way into the deep end of a crystal-blue swimming pool. He emerges, tearing his wet, burned shirt free from his gleaming pecs, as dozens of fascinated girls in white bikinis look up from their sun tanning. "Hi, ladies." Making the roll gets Duke a *sexy* bomb survival.

If Duke flubs the roll, he sails on the explosive shockwave, crudely clipping several smelly laun-

THE FUNKY AXIS

When using Funky Dice, the number of dice *still* indicates expertise, on exactly the same scale as normal **Risus**. So, a Soldier (3) is just as skilled as a Super-Soldier (3d20). The funkiness of the dice represents raw power, magical energy, super-speed, poetic insight, or other unusual might.

dry lines and some randomly-placed pigeons on his way to a garbage scow in the nearby river. He rides back to town at a snail's pace, smelling like yesterday's tin of Alpo. At least his dog (also named Duke) will be glad to see him ...

Because while convention tells us that a terrorist bomb won't *kill* Duke, it's unclear on whether he'll land in water or garbage. And on that point of uncertainty hangs a die-rolling opportunity. These are everywhere; don't miss 'em.

I've Got Dice that Jingle Jangle Jingle

I'm vilifying you, for God's sake – pay attention!

– King Henry II

A brisk pace makes for excellent **Risus**, and dice can be like spurs into the haunches of the session. Don't wait 'til things get *actually slow*. Things should never get actually slow. Rather, pounce on your players the instant there's more than, say, three seconds of silence at the table. Immediately demand a die roll; you don't even *need* an explanation just yet. You can make one up while the dice bounce and the PCs chatter.

GM: ... And down he goes, unconscious.

Zorbok: And bleeding.

GM: And bleeding, sure.

Zorbok: [3.2 seconds of silence]

Other Player: [3.0 seconds of silence]

Other Other Player: [4.7 seconds of silence]

GM: Zorbok, give me a roll against "Master of the Elder Arts." Target 12.

Zorbok: Whoa! What's happening now? Is he not unconscious?

GM: He's down and out. Just roll the dice; we'll see what happens ...

Zorbok: [Nervously rolls the dice] ... A 14. Made it. Thank god.

Other Player: I have my weapon out. I mentioned that earlier. I called it. It's out.

Other Other Player: Mine too. I also have that protection amulet ready just in case. I said so while you were in the bathroom, but the others are witnesses. And I sleep in my armor.

Everyone Else but the GM: Yeah.

GM: You made it; good. [Steeple his fingers, flashes an evil grin] You ... *sense* something. A magic aura clings to this guard. He's been ensorcelled recently, or charmed. You only made it by 2 so you don't get much of a *detailed* sense of it, but the aura is there, you catch it out of the corner of your third eye, so to speak. You are filled with a sense of foreboding, a sudden gloom. You suspect something is *happening* somewhere, and that this magic is connected to it.

Everyone Else but the GM: [Babble of theories and concern]

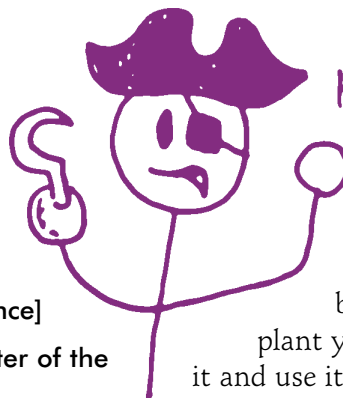
GM: [Takes notes, picking the best theories to be true, mentally pats self on back for a tantalizing line of total and utter rubbish]

Calling for a dice-roll *calls attention* to the activity. You can use this to mess with the players' heads, as above, but you can also use it to *highlight* something important, or to provide a nudge or clue. It's a curious truth, but suddenly dragging the game mechanics into a scene can be a very evocative method of *implied* description that snaps player attention into a special place that only game-rules can. When a character moves to open a

door, you *could* just describe it as stuck, or you could – without warning – ask for a roll against a modest Target Number. For a moment, nobody knows what the Target Number represents, and that adds an edge to the moment.

You can let it melt away, a pleasant but meaningless morsel ... Or you can

plant your mighty GMing meat hooks into it and use it for something. The only limits are your own capacity for evil.



STATS FOR STUFF

In Sicily, women are more dangerous than shotguns.

– Fabrizio

Monsters, tools and magic items, crowds of adoring groupies ... If you love stats for stuff, you've come to the wrong book, but you've come to the *right* chapter. Weird.

A Risus Bestiary?

Rodents Of Unusual Size? I don't think they exist.

– Westley/The Dread Pirate Roberts

Monsters are people, too. Usually, they're very *simple* people, represented by a single cliché (often just "Monster") or as a Grunt-Squad (often "Bunch of Monsters").

Some monsters are more complex, with one cliché that implies force, another that implies intimidation. Some can also use psionics or sorcery or flatware. For instance, a Goblin warrior might look like this:

Goblin Warrior (2), Particle Physicist [4]

A war party of goblins might include a Goblin Shaman (4), a few Goblin Scouts (3), and perhaps a Big Mutant Goblin The Other Goblins Lead Around on a Chain (5) ... or the entire party might just be a Goblin War-Party (7) and that would be that. Very important or complex creatures are full-blown **Risus** characters:



DOLPHIN

Description: A loveable cetacean occasionally prone to humping humans until they drown.

Clichés: Bigass Aquatic Mammal (3), New-Age Symbol of Everything New-Agers Enjoy Seeing Symbolized (2), Crowd-Pleasing Charmer (3), Well-Intentioned Rapist (2)

Tools of the Trade

Ooh – Synchronizers!

– Kaylee

In **Risus**, "Tools of the Trade" is a catchall term meaning anything *external* to the character that naturally accompanies his cliché. Mrs. Butterbread, on page 11, is a dog-loving old fuss-budget, so that means she's got dogs. Lots of dogs. Little yappy dogs, with tiny tiny brains and disproportionately loud barking.

She's also got a house of some kind – probably a cozy cottage with a garden out back. When she's there, she can bring the full might of her grandmotherly skills to bear, because that's where her *oven* is, where her baking supplies are, where her shelves full of preserves are stored. Tools of the trade fall into these broad categories:

- **Portable Items:** The obvious stuff. Clothing, armor, hand-weapons, a wristwatch, a magic wand, a motorcycle, some ninja gadgets, this morning's newspaper, a toothbrush, etc.
- **Non-Portable Items:** House and home, fortress and headquarters. Also, most characters have replacements for their portable items stashed somewhere, and larger, more impressive versions of them that don't travel well. A wizard usually carries a potion or two, for example, but he can achieve even bigger tricks with access to his occult library and braziers and alembics and things. Some characters don't own anything they can't carry, though – and in many adventures, access to non-portable gear is very limited.
- **Yes-Men:** As cynical as it may seem, living things are Tools of the Trade, too. Mrs. Butterbread's dogs are "equipment" to her, and

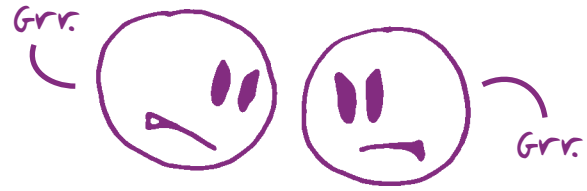
if you play the Captain of the King's Army, your *troops* are "equipment." When people (or notable animals) are a natural part of a cliché, I find it handy to refer to them globally as "yes-men."

In the "Proper Tools" section on page 2 of *Risus*, we learn just how important the Tools of the Trade are. Without them, a character's clichés can be crippled, or even rendered useless. As Game Master, it's important to enforce the half-dice rule (and its more extreme cousin) with a mixture of tempered fairness and wanton, childish cruelty –

MRS. BUTTERBREAD'S BANANA PUMPKIN LOAVES

- 2-½ cup all-purpose flour
- ½ tsp salt
- 3 tsp baking powder
- 1-½ sticks butter, slightly softened
- 1 cup cane sugar
- ½ cup brown sugar
- Dash of ground clove
- Dash of nutmeg
- 1 tsp ground ginger
- 1 tsp ground cinnamon
- ½ tsp pure vanilla extract
- 1 large ripe banana, mashed
- ½ lb fresh pumpkin flesh
- 3 eggs, beaten unto death
- 2 dashes fresh lemon juice
- ½ cup chopped walnuts
- ½ cup chopped pecans

Instructions: Grease two loaf pans and preheat the oven to exactly 340°. Sift together the flour, salt and baking powder; set this mixture aside. In a second (larger) mixing bowl, cream the sugar and butter, and to this add the spices, vanilla, banana, pumpkin, eggs, lemon and nuts. Fold the flour mixture in so that all ingredients are combined into a batter. Pour equal portions of the batter into each loaf pan, and bake for about an hour, until a tester comes out clean. Cool the loaves on a rack, then chill overnight in the refrigerator. Serve cold, or toasted with cream cheese.



in whatever proportion most entertains your players. The rule can be relaxed as appropriate, since most tools aren't *globally* necessary. A Barbarian (5) fighting without a sword is "halved" to a Barbarian (3), but a Barbarian (5) gorging himself in a mutton-and-ale-consuming-contest doesn't really need his sword. He can use his fingers, and take no penalty.

This goes double for non-portable gear, since many characters don't have it and just as many characters have it but go adventuring nowhere *near* it. Obviously, Mrs. Butterbread remains a Kindly Grandmother-to-Everyone even when she isn't at home. If she wants to lay a guilt trip on someone and her player has a good enough description of the attack, there's no need to penalize her die-rolls ... But if she wants to get some *baking* done, she'll need a kitchen, and what's more she'll need *her* kitchen. She could bake in a stranger's kitchen at half-dice, but if she's trapped on a raft in the English Channel with nothing at hand but a trembling little terrier ... Well, terriers don't have much meat on them, anyway. And they're hardly a substitute for her fresh banana-pumpkin bread (see sidebar).

Note that yes-men are frequently "non-portable" in practical terms. Any Corporate Bigwig (5) will have a secretary and a horde of generic "suits," for example, but they're features of the character's home territory. It's not part of their job descriptions to tag along on magical quests into the secret realm beyond the sparkly gateway.

Non-portable tools and yes-men are handy plot-yanking devices. If you, as the Evil GM, need to nudge Mrs. Butterbread back to her cottage so you can introduce a new NPC at her doorstep, it's a simple matter of inspiring a desperate need for her vacuum cleaner. If the party sorcerer wants to cast a spell with great repercussions, you don't need to say *no* ... You can say "yes, but ..." and indicate that, for *that* kind of magic, he'll need to refer to

the Grimoire of Xord, a 730-pound monstrosity he keeps chained up in his basement (it bites). Similarly, if you're playing the Captain of the King's Army, you can fight just fine without your archers and cavalry and foot-soldiers nearby, but you can't *wage war* if you misplace them. Remember to write your name on each one, preferably somewhere inconspicuous.

Special Equipment

Jack Burton: *What's in the flask, Egg?*

Magic potion?

Egg Shen: *Yeah.*

Jack Burton: *Thought so, good. What do we do, drink it?*

Egg Shen: *Yeah!*

Jack Burton: *Good, thought so.*

– *Big Trouble in Little China*

The standard **Risus** method for representing a “magic item” or similarly notable Tool of the Trade is to grant it the status of “bonus-dice gear.” These are good old-fashioned *treasure*. These are tools to nudge the balance of power, and to provide the PCs a cheap little thrill of satisfaction. Cheap thrills are a big part of what makes **Risus** fun ... and while no cliché goes higher than Cliché (6), special equipment can provide bonuses that bust that boundary down.

It's pretty rare for any special item to provide a *universal* bonus to a specific cliché. That is, if you're a Wiseass Mercenary (4) you're not necessarily going to find an *Amulet of Being a More Effective Wiseass Mercenary* lying around on a treasure heap. Maybe you'll find an “Amulet of Biting Wit” that helps you be a more effective wiseass, though ... or a Charmed Brooch of The Wily Merchant that'll allow you to haggle for better contracts when taking on a new mission.

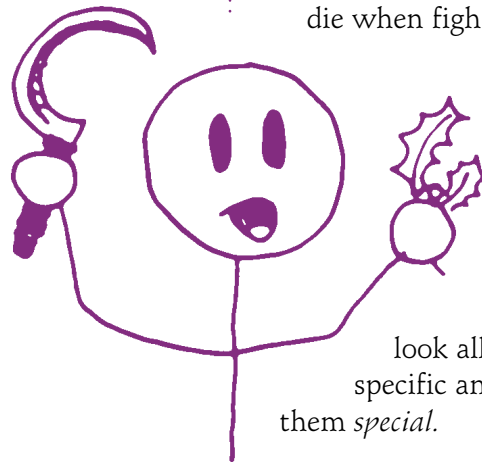
Similarly, a good many special items can help nearly *any* cliché in the right circumstances. The old standby, the Generic Magic Sword, will help any kind of violence-oriented cliché wreak havoc, but it can also help to gain the respect of someone

impressed by shiny magic things, or when beating a Target Number to cut some ropes. A *less* generic magic sword will have colorful properties and conditions – a Sword of Mercy might grant an extra die when fighting people but forbid you from

killing anyone, for example. A Sword of Badgerine Slaying will grant a bonus when fighting badgerines, but perhaps not otherwise. A Sword of Majesty might apply *only* when showing off or trying to impress people – it makes you look all kingly. Keeping special items specific and conditional also helps keep them *special*.

Technology and superior craftsmanship can produce special gear, too – and in many game worlds, the line between these things is blurred beyond recognition, anyway. In a world where a given art or technology is *constantly advancing*, having a “cutting edge” item can provide a bonus that won't last forever ... Your X24 Secret Army Proton Ray will be a bonus-die raygun for a few months, until the X24 knockoffs start flooding the market.

If you're *really* fond of special items, you may enjoy experimenting with variations on the game mechanics beyond the basic bonus-die method. Perhaps a *moderately* special item grants a bonus die on just one roll per scene, or even one roll per game session – it provides just enough of an edge to exploit an occasional weakness, but it doesn't carve through any challenge that comes along. Or, a *defensive* item might allow the owner to declare one contest or combat roll a *tie* when it was really his loss. Mix, match, and pervert to your heart's content, and keep in mind that much of the *really* interesting special gear doesn't need a mechanical effect at all. If the PCs find a psychic fortune-telling deck, that's a device to amuse them with, and a way to feed them clues. If the PCs acquire an alien Stuff Replicator, they'll have a blast creating useful and unexpected things, and won't need any kind of “bonus” to make the item feel impressive. Ditto for magic carpets, etc.



Building & Fixing Their Own

Ow! That's not it; bring me the Hydrospanner!

– Han Solo

Sometimes, tools get lost or damaged, and sometimes players will want to *create* special tools. This is almost always a standard unopposed challenge – a cliché roll against a Target Number. Take special care to haggle, though (page 24) especially with required resources. A Sinister Archmage (5) shouldn't have much trouble constructing an *Amulet of Bending to My Will and Becoming My Helpless Slave, Foolish Mortal Ha Ha!*, but just because he's got the skills doesn't mean he has the time or materials to whip it together in the middle of a fight scene. Some characters (mad scientists, necromancers, that kind of thing) can even construct their own yes-men, yes-golems and yes-robots, or summon up yes-corpses and yes-spirits.

The Tao of the Grunt-Squad

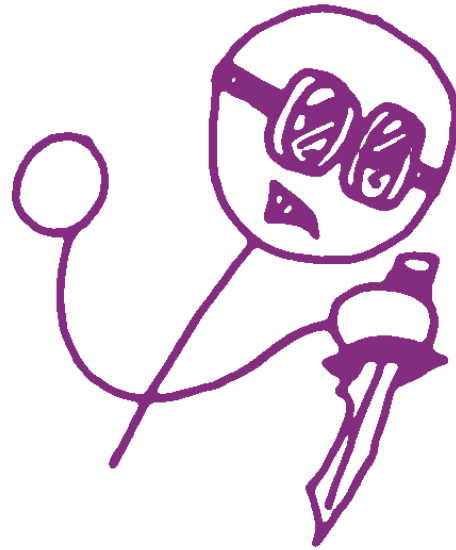
"You are the brute squad."

– Miracle Max

A Grunt-Squad is a much broader catchall than it may appear at first glance. In formal **Risus** terms (and where would **Risus** be without its vaunted formality?) any kind of *collective entity* is a Grunt-Squad, from a horde of shuffling undead that must be laid to permanent rest to an unruly pack of four-year olds that must be babysat.

Really, *anything* can be given a cliché or two and become an "entity" in the game. Some **Risus** fans have expanded the concept to include entire *cities* ... Very handy when using the combat rules to represent (for example) trying to beat rush-hour traffic to stop the villain from bombing the community center.

There is no formula for "converting" single entities to collective ones. The *usual* idea, though, is to assume diminishing returns: 501 angry villagers are more dangerous than 500 angry villagers, but even though each might be an Angry Villager (2) on his own, that mob – when acting as a group –



is just a Mob of Angry Villagers (5) whether it's a mob of a hundred or a thousand.

Sometimes the returns don't diminish. Sometimes they multiply! A pack of three Morons (2) might band together to form an Eerily Coordinated Trio of Morons (10), because while they're individually weak they happen onto a kind of synergy as a team.

Or returns can "diminish" so intensely that banding together becomes a liability. A trio of Morons (2) might just become a Really Embarrassingly Stupid Pack of Morons Tripping Over One Another (1).

It's all a question of how the GM sees the effectiveness of the *combined* foe. And that's the thing to remember. A Grunt-Squad is a *single* foe, dramatically speaking, and the only question to *really* ask is "how hard should this foe be to beat?" It's not reducible to formula beyond a comparison to the PCs own abilities and the GM's expectations of PC success.

Sometimes, a crowd is just a crowd, and there's no need to give it any dice unless it intends to *do* something. Sometimes, too, a crowd can *become* a Grunt-Squad spontaneously ... when the PCs do something brilliant, or something stupid, or a scheming NPC does it for them. See *Uzis, Bombs, and Public Speaking*, on page 37, for one example that might come up in play ... and apply it broadly.

ONCE MORE INTO THE BREACH

*For God's sake, Mrs. Robinson. Here we are.
You got me into your house. You give me a drink.
You put on music. Now you start opening up
your personal life to me and tell me your hus-
band won't be home for hours.*

– Ben Braddock

I designed **Risus** combat for speed. Not because I like to get combat out of the way, but because I like to get combat out of the way *to make room for yet more combat*. With all that fighting going on, combat provides a lot of things to think about. The following articles explore the joy of carnage in **Risus**. To arms!

Victory and Injury

"To the victor belong the spoils of the enemy."

– Senator William Learned Marcy

The victor chooses the manner of his victory in **Risus**, unless the GM feels that the victor is being too greedy or not silly enough or not serious enough or too vague or too slow or not generous enough with the bag of Fritos. If the GM *does* feel that any of the above is true, it triggers another kind of haggling process:

GM: That's it; he's out of dice. You've won. What happens to Veculos the Truculent?

Zorbok: Hrm. With that last maneuver, I'll cause his head to fall off.

Other Player: It's lunchtime in hungry-for-brainsville!

Other Other Player: Oh, man, just give that up.

GM: Zorbok and Veculos were just playing chess. Ordinary chess. Not even magical chess.

Zorbok: Well ... yeah ... just his eyeballs explode, then?

GM: Hmmmmmm ...

Zorbok: And he begs me to take him as my slave.

A CORE CLICHÉ: THE MECHANIC

I came into this game for the action, the excitement. Go anywhere, travel light, get in, get out, wherever there's trouble, a man alone.

– Harry Tuttle, Heating Engineer

The Mechanic knows the machinery of the world, and he knows it well enough to fix it when it's broken, push it to achieve more when it's not, and invent more of it in his spare time. Despite being a celebration of applied knowledge, the Mechanic gets more powerful as realism slips to the side. In a purely grounded game, he might still make the ship go a little faster ... But in a more fanciful one, he can turn the tractor beam into a matter purifier or whip up a makeshift nuclear weapon from a dozen glow-in-the-dark watch hands and a microwave oven.

The Mechanic is a reflection of the Wizard. They're two sides of a coin that spins so rapidly in some genres it becomes a single sphere. Both represent a rare breed privy to something that surrounds us without explaining itself. They apply arcane knowledge to make their will manifest. The difference is often just aesthetic, or a matter of handwaving: a Wizard achieves what he desires without implied "causation" in the traditional sense, while the Mechanic achieves his magic more "honestly" with applied physics and engineering. In the realms of science fantasy (or good old fashioned pulp adventure, or one of those "steampunk" fantasies where the mecha are made of wood) the distinction just means different breeds of gobbledygook.

It's fun to keep the distinction, though, because when one approach fails, the other can kick in. It's never a bad thing to give the GM more clay to slap onto his wheel.

GM: Okay, that sounds about right. [With emphasis]: You weren't going to eat that last slice of pizza ... right?

Of course, a treacherous, blind Veculos the Truculent is a dangerous slave to keep near a sleeping party, but that's a problem for another scene. Hell hath no fury like someone checkmated when he still had a queen and two rooks on the board.

Choosing the manner of victory isn't just fun, it *vastly* broadens the possibilities for character action, because combat isn't necessarily violent, violent combat isn't necessarily dangerous, dangerous combat isn't necessarily deadly, and even *deadly* combat can end in a flourish of gentlemanly sportsmanship, as the winner spares his wretched foe, leaving him to cower in humiliation and perhaps join some kind of self-help cult. In **Risus**, a group of PCs can cut a bloody swath of violence across a continent and – when the smoke clears – everyone can go home to lick their wounds, or whatever it is they like to lick.

The loss of cliché dice represents the loss of “ground” in a battle – the loss of edge, the loss of will, the loss of fervor, appetite, stamina, pep, courage, restraint, weaponry, ammunition, snappy comebacks, escape routes, conviction, lunch, fortitude, sense of purpose, magical energy of some kind, virginity, honor, clever tricks, nameless hordes of allies, moral support, voter support, back support, faith, hope, interest ... It just means loss. Sometimes it means the loss of blood and physical well-being. But only sometimes. Making someone else lose dice means you're *winning*. What “winning” means depends on the context of the scene, the tone of the game and (ultimately) the choice of the winner.

Fully embracing this aspect of **Risus** combat is *essential* to squeezing the most juice from the game. It's one of the pillars of the game's design, and the source of a lot of fun – and a lot of freedom. The Game Master can lay endless smack-down on the PCs when it might amuse them to be smacked down ... without worrying that he'll *accidentally* smear them across the pavement by putting them up against a foe that's too beefy.

The players benefit even more. Not only can they win the right of a thoroughly *satisfying* method of trouncing enemies, but they can also – with absolute confidence – play characters who “win” by being honorable, or witty, or by having faith, or by being in love, or by being sly and quick. The combination of this and the *inappropriate clichés/when someone can't participate* rules provide a platform for a broad palette of moral and stylistic choices.

It also allows for buttloads of combat. Once players get the hang of it, they'll jump into a lot more combat scenes on purpose. By eroding some players' natural timidity when faced with a tricky adventure, it ends up creating – as a happy side effect – a greater sense of energy, of action.

If you're GMing for a group of **Risus** newcomers (or if you're new to **Risus**, yourself) take special care to ease them in to the **Risus** mindset for combat; it's likely to be different from what they're accustomed to, and it's another one of those things that requires some unlearning.

A CORE CLICHÉ: THE NATURE BOY

Live each season as it passes; breathe the air, drink the drink, taste the fruit, and resign yourself to the influences of each.

– Henry David Thoreau

The Nature Boy knows which insects taste good, which roots cure poison, which mushrooms are poison, and where the little muddy footprints lead. He can track a falcon on a cloudy day; he'll find you. Then he'll suck the venom from your wound, build a lean-to, lead you back to civilization, and regard you with sadness because you prefer to live there. He gives a hoot. He does not pollute. He looks spiffy in earth tones.

The Nature Boy is very versatile when he's in his element. Nature can (even in fairly sober and realistic world) serve up nearly anything: clues, an edge in combat, sudden danger, and equally sudden remedy.

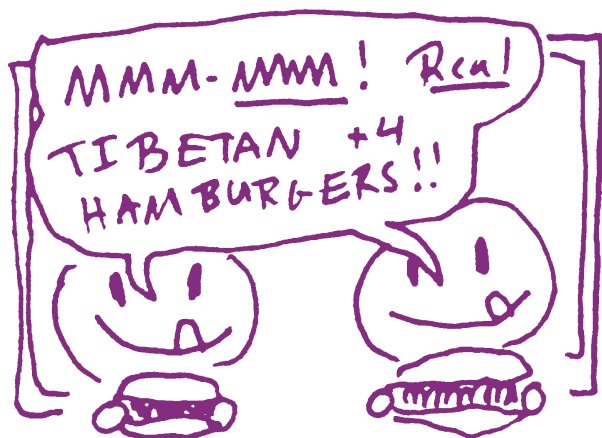
This core cliché is timeless; it doesn't change much as the genres move from the ancient world to distant galaxies. A far-future Nature Boy might be able to pick up the spoor and trail of a Deadly Vacuum Worm the size of a star cruiser, but it's the same shtick as his more primitive counterpart tracking a deer or finding the dragon's lair by observing which way the Dragon Mushrooms are pointing at sundown.

Like the Detective, he's often a handy dispenser of the Game Master's secret roadmap. Like the Mechanic and the Wizard, he's privy to unusual and versatile knowledge. Like the Scholar, he can drone on about it. For extra-credit fun, he gets to play Fish Out of Water when he's away from the wild too long.

The best way to ease them in is to let them win a few easy fights, a few warm-up bouts. They'll soon come to expect that magical question: "You win – what happens to your enemy?" It won't take them long to feel the power crackling in their hands like some kind of destructive black magic.

Then, after a time, it will dawn on them that the door swings both ways, and that if they *lose*, they're at the mercy of their conqueror. There is a tiny moment when this idea sinks in to each new **Risus** gamer, and the expression on their face is often priceless. Bring a camera.

Winning and losing are each fairly common for PCs, in most **Risus** games. The curve between different clichés is very steep, to take advantage of the nature of "victory" – when a Noble Knight (3) faces down an Abominable Snowman (5), the Knight will *desperately* need some friends, some special rules-fiddly-bits, or a strong streak of luck. Two dice is a *ruinous* difference in combat power. But that's because combat is common and losing is seldom fatal and is usually *exciting* or *funny*. Sometimes the Abominable Snowman (5) just wants to hug you and squeeze you and call you George (3) ... Sometimes he wants to freeze your feet in ice and hang you upside down in his cave. Sometimes he wants to sell you Avon products, in which case many strong men will simply beg for death. But the GM, evil and cruel, will never let it be so easy. Not with this lovely line of face creams fortified with *aloe* are available ...



Another *very* early LCB image from the vault.

Order Out of Chaos

Gentlemen, you can't fight in here; this is the War Room!

– President Merkin Muffley

Risus combat conspicuously lacks any kind of initiative system; there's no rule for who attacks first, who attacks second, and so forth. With **Risus** combat, one of two things (or both) is almost inevitably true:

- It's very obvious, in context, which combatant has aggressively *taken* the initiative.
- It really doesn't matter.

In any combat between two opponents, the second one is *always* true, because in every combat exchange, both sides roll dice ... if you're attacking Fred, you roll, and Fred rolls. If Fred's attacking you, you roll, and Fred rolls. Same-same. There's no game-mechanics advantage to going first in most cases; it's just an ego boost to be the first one to describe your attack. Since there's nothing to prevent you from describing your *defense* in offensive terms (and I don't *just* mean using naughty language, though that's a plus) it's all the same deal in the end.

There is, however, one kind of situation where going first matters. In a large, chaotic battle where everyone has several targets of opportunity, the choice of *who* to attack can be a kind of blood-in-the-water affair, where it makes sense (or just feels safer) to pick on someone who's already been badly injured. On those rare occasions when the order of action matters in **Risus** combat, *and* there's no clear chain of aggression based on who initiated the fight, you can, if you like, use any of these handy methods:

- **Player Contests:** Arm-wrestling, celebrity impersonation, and snack-food consuming races are all excellent methods for determining initiative. If using the latter, make sure someone knows the Heimlich maneuver, just in case.
- **Round Robin:** Go around the table in seating order, beginning with the player who (pick one: is the most likely to kick your ass if you don't

let him go first, has the most stick figures doodled so far this session, is wearing the most interesting underwear).

- **Just Roll Some Dice:** You can even look at them, if you really want.

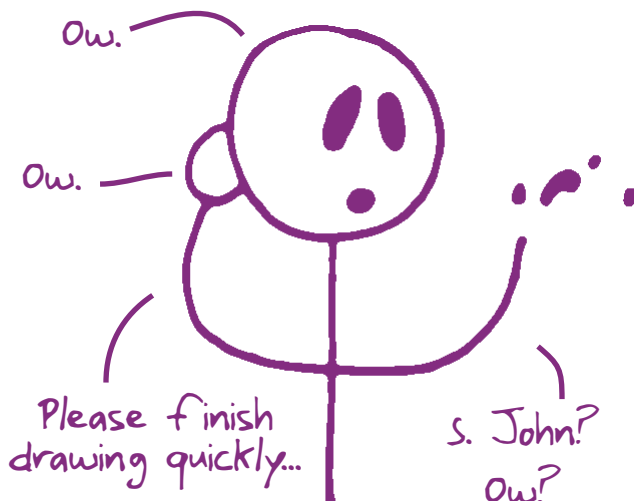
Healing

Nobody ever died of laughter.

– Max Beerbohm

The rate at which a cliché “wounded” in combat recovers – the healing rate – is a powerful tool in the hands of a savvy Game Master. With it, you can temper or accelerate the pace, ramp up or soften the tension, and nudge the characters toward characters they’ll enjoy meeting or places they’ll enjoy exploring. There are three principal factors in healing:

- **The Nature of Battle:** If a beating is physical, healing from a knockout punch is a lot easier than healing from a face-to-face encounter with a flamethrower. But beatings can be emotional, magical, or even stains on a reputation. Some things can heal *instantly* because sometimes “losing a combat” doesn’t imply lasting effects of any kind.
- **The Intentions of the Victor:** This is a big one. If you’ve got a machine gun, you’re not necessarily *shooting* your foe ... You could be hedging him into a position where another can grab him in and pin him down, or just using it



to “button him down” and demoralize him. To the victor go the spoils, as always, and a crucial “spoil” is the intensity of that closing attack.

- **The Tone of the Campaign:** The sillier the game, the faster *anything* heals ... unless it would be amusing to have the PCs hopping around in full body casts for a while.

The GM sets not only the healing rate, but (as he pleases) any *conditions* on the healing rate ... Perhaps a Grim Vigilante (5), beaten near to death by a criminal mutant, won’t heal at all without hospital care. And it could be so that Hammersack the Dwarf Warrior (4), after battling the deadly acid slugs of Myrm, can’t heal until he gets a swig of the Blessed Waters of Korian. A Frat Boy (2), emotionally scarred from a brutal hazing, will heal quickly, but only if he can re-bolster his self-image a little ... He’ll need the company of his girlfriend for that, and if he hasn’t got one, maybe a long weekend convalescing at home in his old bedroom.

Conditions are a fun toy for the GM to play with, especially where wounds of ego are concerned. Sometimes, a wounded character can’t heal (or can’t heal all the way) until he’s had *revenge* on the one that wounded him – or until he finishes a task the battle prevented him from completing.

Also, there’s never much need to *declare* the healing rate. Rather, you feed the dice back to the PCs over time, on whatever schedule suits fun and fairness. Answer any questions in general terms. “You’ll get a die back in the morning. After that, the rest could take a few days. It’s hard to tell right now; your ego is still deeply bruised.”

Healer Characters

A wound, a disease, a broken self-image, a trauma-induced phobia, a curse ... To most characters, these are burdens to be borne, the scars of battle. To *some* characters, they’re challenges to be overcome, rivals to be vanquished, and foes to be destroyed. For every kind of injury there is a healer. A robot character, laserblasted to chunks, will need a skilled mechanic and electronics wizard. A character with accursed magical wounds might need the aid of a wizard or holy man. A slighted lover might need years of Freudian analysis.

Healer clichés can take many forms; see the Medic entry in the Core Clichés sidebars (right).

In game terms, healing the wounded is all about *accelerating* the restoration of dice. Since most wounds don't *actively* resist being healed, it's usually a single roll against a Target Number. Hagglng (see page 24) will often play a part, regardless of the nature of the wounds:

Zorbok: I still have those herbs we found in the witches' hovel. I'll smear those on in the form of a balm.

GM: Okay. He's still decapitated, but now he smells soapier.

Zorbok: Still? These herbs suck. I'll try a glue spell.

As with any conflict, though, it can sometimes be fun to *personify* the problem, giving it a few dice and letting the characters battle it out. It can happen, then, that a healer *takes combat damage* from somebody else's *wounds*. In most cases, this just represents that he's exhausted all of the possibilities he can think of and isn't making any headway. That sort of damage tends to heal instantly, but it may be some time before the GM permits him to try again. With a magical or venomous wound, though (or a contagious disease) it really *could* mean literal injury.

Characters can attempt to accelerate their *own* healing, too. Many clichés imply extraordinary, stubborn willpower or personal *grit* ...so even without "healing" arts at their command, sometimes characters can simply battle for the right to heal by biting down on something and grunting.

Non-Combat Injury

The only monster here is the gambling monster that has enslaved your mother! I call him Gambler, and it's time to snatch your mother from his neon claws!

– Homer Simpson

In **Risus**, "injury" usually refers to the loss of dice in combat, but **Risus** characters can suffer accidents, too, or become wounded – physically or otherwise – by their environments. See the Random Bad Thing That Just Happened To My

A CORE CLICHÉ: THE MEDIC

Haven't you ever heard of the healing power of laughter?

– The Joker

When the party has the crap beat out of them, the Medic kisses it and makes it better (mixed metaphors can be very unpleasant). The Medic is rarely a glamorous cliché, but most groups of heroes would rather *not* sally forth without at least one healer in the party. Because healing is usually something that happens *after* rather than *during* the action, a lot of genres tuck the medical arts into the sphere of the party Wizard, or provide healing from the gods, or in the form of miracle quick-cure pills and other super-science gizmos. When the medicine becomes part of the story, though, healers and doctors and their kin can take the limelight as a legitimate, even crucial, breed of hero.

In one sense, **Risus** undermines the healer character by design. Since physical healing is left as a dramatic tool without objective mechanics tied to it, nobody *needs* to be a healer if the GM is going to be generous with post-carnage recovery. What this means is just this: in **Risus**, you play a doctor because you *like playing doctor* (who doesn't?), not because it's compulsory. You play the healer because you've enjoyed too much *Doctor Quinn*, *Medicine Woman*, or you like bandying insults with the green-blooded Science Officer. Healers are often the firmest voice of morality in an otherwise bloodthirsty party, and that can be a refreshing note of variety.

In another sense, **Risus** opens up the healer character to a broader, more metaphorical canvas. Since **Risus** combat never has to be *physical*, and the losses from combat likewise, a "healer" can usefully be a counselor, a teacher, an inspiring general, a supportive friend, an excellent lover – anyone who can pick up an abused cliché, dust it off, and stand it on its feet again.

Character table (overleaf) for useful scene-generating ideas. This *can* be represented by the loss of cliché dice in some cases, but it doesn't *have* to be. More often, it's better just to treat it as a comedic and dramatic tool, to nudge Target Numbers this way and that, or to inspire interesting challenges. A Balding Security Guard (3) can break his ankle

and *still* be a Balding Security Guard (3) if he's got a little moxie ... But the GM will penalize him if he has to chase anybody, or carry something heavy, or win a Charleston competition. Healers (see above) can always try to help out. When the GM knows he'd like to inflict a non-combat injury on someone but isn't sure exactly what kind would be the most fun, just roll:

Doubly Inappropriate?

It's just, like, the more I know, the more confused I get.

– Buffy Summers

Since characters can swap clichés freely in combat, the nature of the fight can *shift* on occasion. What happens when two characters, using inappropriate clichés in the same fight, attack *each other*? Do inappropriate clichés “cancel each other out?” Do they explode at the speed of light on contact? Something in-between? Here's a run-down of responses to try on:

- You declare that, since the combatants have both strayed from the initial nature of the combat, the combat has simply been redefined, in which case neither cliché is inappropriate. For example, in a fight that starts as a swordfight, one guy gets desperate and shifts into Mime. His opponent, not to be undone, counters with his own Corner Saxophone Player cliché. Since both opponents are now fighting the same kind of fight (Dueling Street Theater), the “inappropriate” rules simply don't apply.
- You declare that both clichés are divergent enough that the combat has turned truly ugly (as if Dueling Street Theater wasn't ugly). In this case, whoever loses will take the full three-die loss, since both sides are being *dangerously* bizarre. This would work in cases where both opponents diverge from the nature of the fight, as above, but they do so in ways that don't follow any kind of recognizable theme. A fight that starts as an argument about game rules, for example, but elevates to one side attacking with a bazooka and the other calling in high-end

THE RANDOM BAD THING THAT JUST HAPPENED TO MY CHARACTER TABLE (1D100)

"I was/am/is/have/have been ..."

| | |
|--------------------------------|----------------------|
| 01-02 - Abandoned | 49-50 - Interrupted |
| 03-04 - Abused | 51-52 - Irradiated |
| 05-06 - Annoyed | 53-54 - Lied To |
| 07-08 - Burned | 55-56 - Manipulated |
| 09-10 - Chafed | 57-58 - Mislaid |
| 11-12 - Cheated | 59-60 - Misquoted |
| 13-14 - Cloned | 61-62 - Mutated |
| 15-16 - Corrupted | 63-64 - Nagged |
| 17-18 - Crashed/ Wrecked | 65-66 - Offended |
| 19-20 - Cursed | 67-68 - Outdone |
| 21-22 - Diseased | 69-70 - Overindulged |
| 23-24 - Driven In- sane | 71-72 - Overslept |
| 25-26 - Drowned | 73-74 - Parodied |
| 27-28 - Electrocuted | 75-76 - Persecuted |
| 29-30 - Embarrassed | 77-78 - Poisoned |
| 31-32 - Exhausted | 79-80 - Possessed |
| 33-34 - Exploited | 81-82 - Pranked |
| 35-36 - Fallen | 83-84 - Riled |
| 37-38 - Fired | 85-86 - Robbed |
| 39-40 - Frozen/ Frostbitten | 87-88 - Slandered |
| 41-42 - Heckled | 89-90 - Stalked |
| 43-44 - Imitated | 91-92 - Starved |
| 45-46 - Imprisoned | 93-94 - Subpoenaed |
| 47-48 - Infested | 95-96 - Suffocated |
| | 97-98 - Teased |
| | 99-00 - Threatened |

political connections for blackmail. I'm sure we've all been there.

- You declare that both clichés are so silly the fight has ended with both sides either giggling and slapping each other on the shoulders in new comradeship, or (perhaps) slinking off to neutral corners in shame. In any event, any remaining combatants in a multiplayer fight will remain under the *original* conditions of the fight unless they, too, wander off in freakishly divergent pairs.

Or you could just make an excuse, run to the bathroom, and come back pretending that the fight was already over and the PCs won. This works.

Uzis, Bombs, and Public Speaking

It is not enough that I succeed, but everyone else must fail.

– Attila

What happens when someone attacks a whole group of people at once? How do you represent a submachine gun in *Risus*, anyway? How about a rousing political speech? A hand grenade?

Any weapon – any weapon at all – remains a Tool of the Trade. A Space Marine (4) with a run-of-the-mill caseless autocannon or minigun strapped to his hip with an articulated combat harness would roll 4 dice in combat, just like any other Space Marine (4), and be on perfectly equal footing with a Novelist (4) armed with a half a slug of rye and a surly disposition. This can be borne out in any of a dozen of the classic novelist-versus-space-marine films, from *Bestsellers Of Orion* (Paramount, 1984) to modern pastiches like *Dawn of the Binding Glue: A Postnuclear Odyssey* (Miramax, 2000).

So, a machine gun doesn't affect the dice *directly*. And normally, the distinction between attacking a single foe and several is moot, since both sides roll in every attacker/defender pair in combat. If Joe attacks Fred, both Joe and Fred roll. If Fred then



A CORE CLICHÉ: THE SCHOLAR

Back off man. I'm a scientist.

– Dr. Peter Venkman



The Scholar's forte is lore and trivia. He *knows* stuff. In pure form, a scholarly character can't do a darned thing (those who can't do, teach), but he can explain things at length. In theory, this character is another form of voluntary GM mouthpiece, but in *practice* the Scholar usually becomes a world-building collaborator. A *Risus* Game Master at the top of his game will let the Scholar run rampant inventing amusing details, provided they don't go undermining anything important in the campaign. And then, that same canny Game Master will construct a petard from those details, on which the party might hoist themselves. Feel the love. Traditionally, the scholar is like the Medic ... usually an accent to other roles instead of a central character concept. This flags it as a particularly excellent core cliché for *Risus* campaigning.

Gamers often enjoy genres where knowledge is respected, even revered, so the Scholar is always welcome. In the far future, Scholars are often aged scientists, mad theorists, child prodigies, and artificial beings like robots (with encyclopedic stuff brimming out of their brains like so many came-boxed-with-the-operating-system extras). The archetypes erode slightly as the genres drift toward fantasy, and eventually only sages and wizards and others fond of dusty old scrolls and tablets carry the load – but that's sensible enough in a world without Google. In a world where folks believe in magic but it doesn't actually work, any "wizard" becomes a scholar, alpha to omega.

attacks Ginger, both Fred and Ginger roll. If Wayne then *also* attacks Fred, both Fred and Wayne roll, and so on. If Fred has and Uzi, then everyone – by attacking him instead of taking cover – is inviting him to spray them with 9mm rounds, a bit of spittle, and crass invective, as he chooses ... Fred doesn't need an Uzi to attack three people; he can just do it anyway, as part of the natural flow of **Risus** battle.

The Uzi makes it nice and noisy, though, and Fred really appreciates the lack of ammunition rules.

Sometimes, though – especially when large groups of unsuspecting or nameless NPCs are involved – players still want to affect large groups as a unit. Attacking a group *defines* the group as an enemy. So, it forces the creation of a Grunt-Squad, of whatever potency you declare appropriate. It's a useful attack against milling random throngs.

For example, let's assume that Harid the Nimble, a classy Burglar (5) of the ancient world, is making haste from the scene of a fun crime with a horde of angry guards (a six-die Grunt-Squad) just a few blocks behind. He's weaving through the city and he comes into an open square. He decides that it's time to fight fire with fire and Grunt-Squads with Grunt-Squads, so he *attacks the population of the marketplace* by standing on a sack of dried dates and shouting at the top of his lungs for attention. He wants to rouse them to his cause, so he uses his Kind of Guy Your Mother Warned You About (4) cliché against their Unruly Mob of Disinterested Slobs (3) group-identity. After a few rounds of rousing speeches about the oppression of the masses, the rising taxes, the snooty demeanor of the average palace guard, and the sale on smocks at Heribab's across town, Harid the

Nimble *defeats* the crowd with his wit. As the victor, he's free to choose the nature of his victory ... Since his attack was a rousing speech, his spoils of war are a temporary ally: the crowd becomes a

Mob of Confused Slobs Eager to Beat Up Palace Guards While

Stampeding Toward a Smock

Sale (3), and buys him enough time to make good his escape into the spice-scented smoke of the city's rooftops.

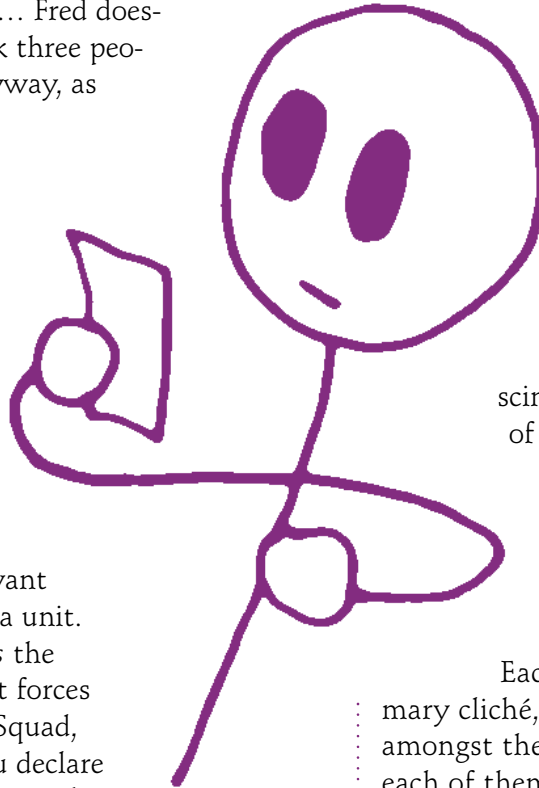
He could have used a submachine gun, if he had one, but it wouldn't have been nearly as good for the smock industry. Of course, he could also have used his scimitar, or a water pistol, or a small tin of cocktail shrimp.

In another caper, Harid comes up against three of his old foes in uneasy alliance ... Dania the Grudgeholder, Urma the Flatulent, and Philip the Vaguely Disconcerting.

Each of them has Old Foe (3) as a primary cliché, and they attack Harid while arguing amongst themselves. If Harid is smart, he'll face each of them round-by-round in a proper **Risus** combat. But if he gets dumb and whips out an Uzi to spray the entire group with 9mm slugs (he had one all along, it seems) he may – at the GM's whim – force three individual egotists to defend themselves in concert. That will transform them, perhaps, from individual Old Foes (3) to a single Band of Suddenly Cooperative Madmen (6). Woopsie.

If the GM is feeling more absolute and less whimsical, he could add a Target Number roll in there somewhere, and make it plain what might happen: "If you really want to force these guys to fuse into a Grunt-Squad, beat a 15 on your Uzi-Packing Prince (4) cliché." As with any other conflict, any mechanic can represent any trouble, if the GM has a clever way in mind to make it entertaining.

NPCs can't force PCs to do anything without defeating them, first.



ADVENTURE DESIGN

All I need to make a comedy is a park, a policeman and a pretty girl.

– Charlie Chaplin

Some handy and inspirational methods and tools for that most terrifying bugbear of the campaign GM: fresh adventure design. Gird thy loins, mighty warrior, and sally forth. And sally with a funny sort of walk, because your loins are all girded.



ROCKY ROADS

*A wicked overlord plans to digitally-enhance all of the old movies and **must be slain!***

*The PCs need to deliver a pizza in thirty minutes – **or it's free!***

*Sell 6,000 copies of Grist magazine and earn **Big Prizes and Cash!***

Adventure design haunts many a Risus GM. A talent for improv, an ear for dialect, and a willingness to ignore even the brain-dead rules of **Risus** in the name of a good time can carry you far, but there's no substitute for *actually* having something in mind for the players to do when they show up with bags of chips, bags of dice, and expectant grins.

Most of us can say that the best games we've ever experienced were done entirely on the fly. Most of us can say the same thing about the dozen or so *worst* ones. An adventure is a control rod on the nuclear chaos of gaming.

Traditionally, smart, professional RPGs offer a brief chapter of theory about the basics of plot and conflict and rising action and so on. These chapters aren't very helpful, but they can be comforting.

Risus isn't terribly smart and is professional only by a technicality, so I'm off the hook, and feel at liberty to brush past theory into technique. Before we begin, though, a few ground rules:

- Don't wait 'til the last minute. Panic is bad, and you have a duty, as a **Risus** GM, to uphold the game's sterling reputation for having only *cool, suave, wicked-sexy Game Masters*. If you've been too busy with Life Stuff, or just shamefully lazy, admit it to your players. They'll understand. Pull out a good board game and promise you'll do better next week. Next week, keep the promise.
- Don't feel constrained by logic or good taste.
- Run games very late at night. Gamers in need of sleep will laugh at anything.

The Routine

The "interrupted routine" technique is an old favorite that works well in over-the-top, high-adventure games, but even *better* in over-the-top, high-adventure games *no one is taking seriously*. That makes it perfect for **Risus**.

The method is simple and (usually) quick: select a premise (a one-line description of Something to Do that suggests either consequences or rewards or both, like the three blurbs we started with) and then explore that premise as a *routine* – a series of simple steps. Then, complicate every step along the way.

Don't fuss too long over the premise; brainstorm a small handful and just *pick* one. Don't second-guess your choice. As long as it sounds kind of stupid and potentially dangerous, it's probably just fine.

Looking over my little trio above, I decide I like the middle one best. Pizza is nice and universal; gamers understand it. If, by chance, my players don't design pizza deliverymen, that's no problem – everyone knows that pizza parlors often hire mercenaries and space marines and sorcerers

A CORE CLICHÉ: THE SNEAK

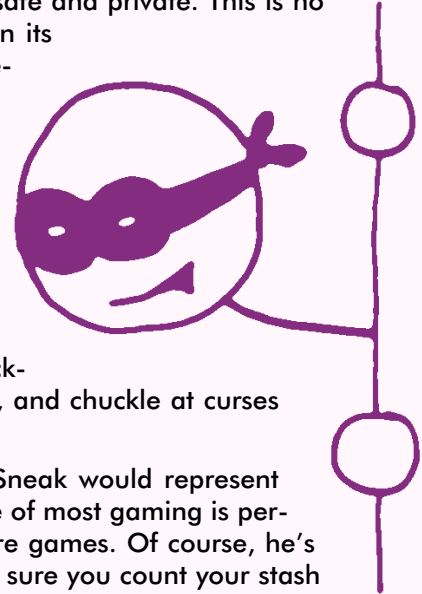
A-ha. The old rubber ducky with invisibility-spray trick. Check.

– Kermit the Frog

The Sneak can make himself unseen and unheard, and slip into places where he's not welcome. He can steal away with what others own, and spy where others feel safe and private. This is no role to bury in a bundle; it can helm a whole cliché – or two – all on its own. Ironical, really, that a core cliché that's all about subtlety and secrecy is so often a flamboyant, likeably cocky show-off.

Spies, assassins and thieves are as timeless as Nature Boys. Once technology arrives, they gain a lot of specialized categories, including many that seem (on the outside) like respectable engineers and academics: safecrackers, electronics security experts, computer wizards that can hack deep into the Imperial Banking Network and give fat bonuses to every garbage collector with a birthday in June. In fantasy, some greybearded mystics are privy to the rituals and symbols that unlock wards and avoid scrying, and they amount to the "hackers" of their genre ... They can crack past runes older than the rocks, and chuckle at curses that would burn a lesser man's soul to cinders.

If the core clichés were some kind of divinatory playing cards, the Sneak would represent things like a playful disregard for authority ... and the anarchic nature of most gaming is perhaps the greatest source of his enduring and central role in adventure games. Of course, he's also the guy most likely to be slipping little notes to the GM, so make sure you count your stash of gems every few hours, when he's around ...



when things get difficult. Plus, I can plug a pizza delivery business into pretty much any genre or time period.

If anything in the paragraph above made you drop your jaw in protest, you haven't relaxed enough yet. *Let it go.*

The premise has a fairly obvious reward: the players will get to keep their snazzy Pizza Shack visors and stylish Pizza Shack bowling shirts. Maybe they'll even get a nice tip. The penalty for failure is explicit and horrible: Pizza Shack will have to shell out a *free pizza*, and the blame will lie squarely on the shoulders of our heroes. That's the stuff of nail-biting adventure right there. Let's outline the routine:

I. THE ORDER

- A. Answer the phone
- B. Write down order
- C. Give order to cook
- D. Wait for Pizza

II. THE TRIP

- A. Get into vehicle
- B. Turn vehicle on
- C. Drive/Fly/Teleport/Sail to address

III. THE DELIVERY

- A. Get out of vehicle
- B. Go to Door
- C. Ring Doorbell
- D. Wait
- E. Hand pizza over to deliverer
- F. Collect money/Give Change/Take Tip

IV. GO BACK TO WORK

Note that even very mundane steps have been included. Skip nothing. Then, complicate it. This simple outline, sufficiently juiced up, could make an entertaining three-hour game – or a two-year campaign.

Complications

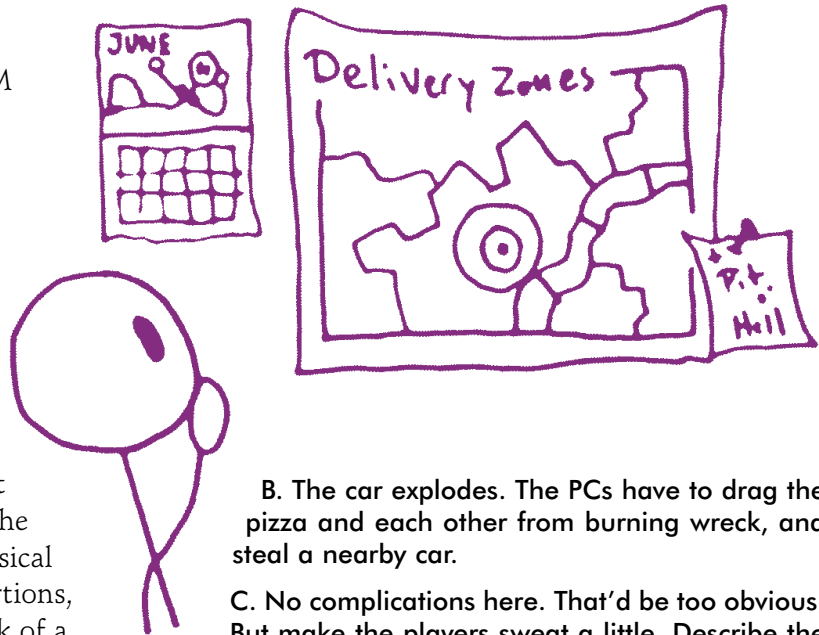
In a very simple or serious game, the GM might mess with one or two steps, tops, but a well-rounded comedy adventure spreads trouble over the entire routine. *Slather conflicts everywhere*. These can be simplistic and violent (a wandering Glutinous Cube decides that the phone is its friend and the PCs are its enemy) or more complicated (the pizza cook accidentally swallows the phone; the PCs have to get it out and answer it without killing him, or at least without making too much of a mess). The best adventures have a mix of both. Physical combat can be funny in the right proportions, but NPCs and weird dilemmas are a heck of a lot funnier, and your adventure should exploit the broad nature of the **Risus** combat rules, providing situations where unlikely clichés can grab the spotlight, traditional clichés are challenged in unexpected ways, and (most important) where “combat” can be a battle of ego, skill, wit, stubbornness, dress sense or Humphrey Bogart impressions. Limiting **Risus** combat to the physical would be like spending a weekend at the Playboy mansion alone in your room, watching game shows. Here’s a quick sample of what you might do if you’re feeling very silly indeed.

I. THE ORDER

- A. The cook swallows the phone, convulses with electric shock. The PCs must fish it out.
- B. The customer is Beelzebub; it turns out the pit of hell is technically part of the delivery area.
- C. Woopsie. No cook.
- D. The PCs must cook the pizza themselves, dealing with dangerous oven equipment and odd ingredients.

II. THE TRIP

- A. The car is being stolen as the PCs arrive. They must stop the theft and deal with the thieves.



- B. The car explodes. The PCs have to drag the pizza and each other from burning wreck, and steal a nearby car.
- C. No complications here. That’d be too obvious. But make the players sweat a little. Describe the suspiciously light traffic, the ease with which they find Exit 666 on the interstate, the fact that hell has a Stuckey’s every three miles.

III. THE DELIVERY

- A. The door has been fused shut from incidental licks of hellish flame.
- B. Fences, guard animals (if you think all dogs go to heaven, make them penguins and kiwis – most PCs are terrified of flightless birds), rivers of fire, tempting illusions, images of childhood fear, brush salesmen.
- C. A placard reads: *The house of evil has no door save unrepentant sin*. The players each need to commit some. When they do, it turns out Beelzebub has a musical doorbell (“Do You Know the Way to San José?”).
- D. Nobody comes to the now-revealed doorway. The PCs must venture in and explore.
- E. Beelzebub is angry that they’ve broken in, and complains that the pizza is burned, cold, and has anchovies on it instead of Canadian bacon.
- F. He doesn’t have any change smaller than a human soul. If the PCs are willing to haggle and jump through a few surreal hoops to make him happy, he’ll find a way to pay them and give them a handsome tip in the form of an extra mortal life apiece. If the PCs don’t make him happy, they’ll enrage him and have no choice but to utterly destroy the Source of All Evil before they can collect on his bill.

IV. GO BACK TO WORK

The car has once again been stolen, and the PCs are stuck hitchhiking in hell. The end.

The above outline would entertain the heck out of some groups, and frustrate others. It is your sacred duty to mold the scenes to fit *them*. Some parties like getting shot at, and some parties just like to shoot. Both are fine; neither is sane.

Season, Bake, and Serve

To finish your adventure, toss in any campaign running gags (recurring NPCs and/or scenes and/or subplots), and make any game-crunchy notes you feel are necessary (many GMs are happy just to run from the outline). In this particular example, you might want to jot down some notes on how much *time* each stage might take since, as you recall, the entire adventure through Stage III represents only 30 minutes of fictional time, and should feel like it in play (even if play is more likely to take a couple of hours). The image of a ticking clock should be a constant specter.

If you're feeling extra-sadistic (or just want an extra-long session) you can complicate the complications, too. Just layer in additional problems, or treat the existing problems as mundane steps to be perverted. Maybe the "odd ingredients" are too odd to be found (or dangerous)! Maybe the ghost of the cook torments them while they make the pizza (having a ghost in the scenario is also handy if they need an "ace in the hole" to help them in the climax).

The interrupted-routine technique is useful because, like *Risus* character-creation, it can be lightning-fast. It produces an adventure outline that reads linear but plays loose, and it gets you there without mucking around with dramatic structures, realistic NPC motivations, or the other baggage of saner forms of gaming. Combine it with *Risus*' sister document, *The Big List of RPG Plots*, and you should be able to keep the oddball adventures rolling along for as long as your players can tolerate your insane grin. Comedy gaming terrifies some GMs, but it can really be easier than other forms once you learn the basics. You'll also

find that players loosen up and let themselves really *do* stuff in *Risus* that they'd never do in other games, since they no longer fear losing precious spells or gold pieces or blaster shots. The system magnifies the "liberty of fun" attitude with its only-lethal-when-you-say-so combat rules. In *Risus*, dying is *not* easy, and comedy is not especially hard.

The only "trick" to sharp GMing with this style of adventure is to pay very, very close attention to your players. Having lots prepared is good. Knowing when to ignore it is even better, and your group will let you know, in subtle ways, when the "fun" is getting frustrating. Then, they'll let you know in ways that aren't so subtle. Catch it before it goes sour, and don't get so wrapped up in your own amusement that you forget that the joy of the game is amusing *them*, and (best of all) giving them opportunities to amuse each other. If a scene drags, *cut it short*. If the players get a little frazzled, *ignore the next few complications*, and give them different kinds of scenes – let them help a little old lady across the street, or the genre equivalent (blowing up a building is a common substitute). Give them a few unqualified victories to pump them up, then you'll be free to whack them back down again, and they'll love you for it. It's a balance, but it's not *really* a tricky one – watch them, listen to them, and they'll tell you all you need to know.

In a strictly historical game (munch, chew) – the Lord of All Evil would never order Canadian Bacon, of course.



THE ADVENTURE MATRIX (1D6 AT NEED)

| VILLAINOUS GOAL | | HEROIC GOAL | | ORDINARY GOAL | |
|-----------------|---------------------------|-------------------------|--|------------------------------|---|
| 1 | Appease the Evil Master | Achieve Justice | | Acquire Something | 1 |
| 2 | Conquer and Subjugate | Aid or Rescue Victim(s) | | Build or Create Something | 2 |
| 3 | Prove Something | Avert a Disaster | | Learn Something | 3 |
| 4 | Sow Chaos and Destruction | Defend Honor | | Survive | 4 |
| 5 | Steal | Thwart a Villain | | Travel Somewhere | 5 |
| 6 | Impress the Girl | Impress the Girl | | Impress the Girl | 6 |
| VICTIMS | | VALUABLE THINGS | | DISASTROUS OUTCOME | |
| 1 | Abstract Ideals | Friends & Family | | Disease or Death | 1 |
| 2 | Doe-Eyed Children | Inventions & Ideas | | Embarrassment or Humiliation | 2 |
| 3 | Helpless Townsfolk | Life | | Loneliness or Isolation | 3 |
| 4 | Puppies | Riches & Resources | | Poverty | 4 |
| 5 | Someone Famous | Widgets & Tools | | War | 5 |
| 6 | The Girl | The Girl | | The Girl Likes Someone Else | 6 |

RANDOM ADVENTURE GENERATORS

In preparing for battle I have always found that plans are useless, but planning is indispensable.

– Dwight D. Eisenhower

The Adventure Matrix is a tiny little powerhouse. You can use it as the basis for old-fashioned “mad libs” adventure rolling ala *Toon* and others (“You must stop the villain from causing [Disastrous Outcome] to [Victim], and if you do you’ll be granted [Valuable Things]”), or you can (and this works even better) just approach it more randomly, picking two or three tables, rolling some results, and then assembling them in the order they *demand* to be assembled in. Concepts are like that, when you allow them to assemble ... they gain force. Just open yourself to broad metaphor and it’s an extremely potent icepick for chipping creative blocks into disposable chunks. Some of the uses for each of the tables:

- **Villainous Goal:** This can be the goal of a villain or villainous organization, obviously, but try it out for some grittier *heroic* goals, too. It’s a very fine line, sometimes.

- **Heroic Goal:** Most villains *see themselves* as heroes, or at least just champions of some cause or another. This table can provide the *villain’s eye-view* of a Villainous Goal or Disastrous Outcome.

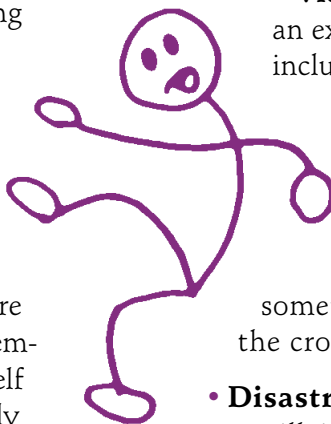
- **Ordinary Goal:** These become “heroic” or “villainous” at the proper scale. Also handy for more mercenary plots, or for determining what the victims are up to.

- **Victims:** Keep in mind that “puppies” is an extremely broad metaphor that can also include full-grown dogs, if they’re cute and small enough.

- **Valuable Things:** Everyone likes valuable stuff. This can be the reward for an adventure well done, the true goal of the villain, or just something that must be protected from the crossfire.

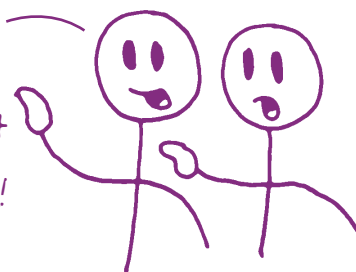
- **Disastrous Outcome:** Provides another look at villainous activity, but also makes a handy “something has gone wrong” guide in general, for accidents of science, spells gone awry, and so on.

If the Adventure Matrix isn’t quite clicking for you, I’ve also included a handy percentile index to the **Big List of RPG Plots** (on page 45).



Like the Adventure Matrix, the *Fantasy Locale Generator* is pretty much “random access.” You can roll the three columns in order to create places like the Tower of Hairy Pleasures or the Lake of Icy Witches, or go for Column B to A for simpler terms like The Wandering Kingdom or the Seven Rivers ... then add a nonsense word, if you like (the Wandering Kingdom of Lugarth; the Seven Rivers of Woompah). You can double up on columns, too ... doing an A-B-A will produce such wonders as the Kingdom of Terrible Kings, or the Land of Great Ridges. Swap from plural to singu-

Behold! 'tis the
Road of Haunted
Mystery; it doth
lead to the distant
Temple of
Squandered Spirits!
Yea, Verily!



lar forms as necessary to make more or less sense of things, as you prefer. To use this table for serious hard-science fiction, simply replace all of column A with the term “asteroid.”

FANTASY LOCALES TABLE (TENS/ONES D6)

| | PLACE | DESCRIPTION | STUFF | |
|----|-----------|----------------------|------------|----|
| 11 | Abode | [A Number from 2-10] | Beasts | 11 |
| 12 | Butte | [A Season] | Chaos | 12 |
| 13 | Castle | Accursed | Children | 13 |
| 14 | Caves | Ancient | Demons | 14 |
| 15 | City | Barren | Dragons | 15 |
| 16 | Cliff | Blessed | Dreams | 16 |
| 21 | Cove | Broken | Ghosts | 21 |
| 22 | Dale | Damned | Gods | 22 |
| 23 | Desert | Dark | Heroes | 23 |
| 24 | Dunes | Dead | Jewels | 24 |
| 25 | Dungeons | Doomed | Kings | 25 |
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RANDOM RISUS TRIVIA

Despite being a hardcore fan of West End Games' **Ghostbusters** RPG (the game that "fathered" **Risus** in many respects) since it first appeared, I never got to be a *player* in a game of **Ghostbusters** until May of 2002, when Dave Insel – who I met because he was a Cumberland Games customer and member of the **Risus** Mailing List – ran a game I could play in. Up until that point, I had only been a Ghost Master (for seventeen years)!

DIRTY LITTLE THRILLS

It's hard to be funny when you have to be clean.

– Mae West

The joy of gaming is the joy of fantasy, made *social*. We enjoy little bits of fantasy by ourselves all the time ... getting sucked into a trashy murder novel, daydreaming about screaming in the boss's annoying face, watching someone cute walk by, or having that recurring dream where you're declared God-King of the Beach People. But when we game, we do something fairly unusual by fantasizing together. Of course, our fantasies get a *little* tamer as a result. You and I know very well that the God-King of the Beach People needs no clothing save the Royal Utility Belt, but it's best (for game purposes) to describe a more modest uniform.



A kickass **Risus** GM knows that the "starter set" of socially acceptable fantasies (beating up goons, collecting the loot) are only part of the equation. Games thrive on *dirty little thrills* – and on *clean* little thrills sometimes overlooked. An adventure that provides more opportunities for these is more satisfying, and *that* provides a much-needed complement to a game's challenges and frustrations. Obstacles build tension, satisfaction releases it. Ahhh.

As with any other delight, variety is the spice. Don't spend *too* much time plumbing the depths of human fantasy (not without a bottle of Lysol, anyway) but *do* keep a list handy to freshen your memory on the many choices available. Inject them as sudden spikes of pleasure, or draw the buildup over time. Use them as adventure-fortifiers or as character motives. This is the *Big List of Dirty Little Thrills*, a sampling of sybaritic delights that give a scene (or an entire adventure) a sense of *payoff*, a visceral rush of satisfaction. Like my

Big List of RPG Plots, it belabors the obvious, but it belabors rather a lot of it in a short space ... a compact blade to cut the cobwebs of old habits. How many sessions has it been since your PCs have enjoyed the thrill of spying and voyeurism? How long since they've been praised and thanked? How long since they caught a villain in a lie? Get your Lysol ready ...

Eyes on the Prize

The simplest of gaming satisfactions: raw, shiny treasure. Players love to loot the bodies, crack the strongbox, and finally see the magic sword gleaming in a shaft of sunlight, waiting. Bait the hook by bundling the treasure with fresh challenges (magic and supertech are cooler when they're more than what they seem), and the satisfaction provides the next wave of challenge, too ... But for now, let them dive into the coins like Olympic swimmers.

Bludgeons & Bloodlust

Beating the heck out of someone is, in some ways, the signature Dirty Little Thrill. There's *nothing* quite like opening a fresh can of pasteurized, non-dairy whoopass. **Risus** doesn't reject our wargaming roots; **Risus** just feeds them mutant plant-food.

Worthy Foes, Worthy Friends

It's gives the players a satisfied glow when they can make peace, turning a hostile foe into a new chum. You can set this one up any number of ways, but the two most common are clues in prior scenes – "Oxnar respects anyone who prefers fists to blades" – and the sudden introduction of a mutual threat (a common enemy, for example, or a danger from the environment).

Foxes and Hounds

The thrill of the chase can be very dirty indeed, since – like combat – pursuit can be physical, social, intellectual or something else entirely. Whether the PCs are chasing a fleeing crook across city rooftops, a coy maiden at a society ball, or an obscure fact in an old newspaper archive, the rush

DIRTY LITTLE GAME MASTER

Of course, the GM can enjoy most of these thrills, too, and more besides. During one of the games I ran while finishing this book, I used an old favorite ... presenting the PCs with a restaurant in one scene ("Mmm. Yummy ribs!") and then revealing that the restaurant is a haven of cannibals in the next ("... Um.

Cannibals?") Like most forms of classic humor, the consumption of human flesh never fails to earn an appreciative titter of amusement.

When using this trick yourself, remember that it's best to toss the cannibal detail off-handedly into the middle of a bit of NPC exposition, inspiring the players to interrupt you to make sure they heard you right.



comes from unexpected twists, sudden bumps in the road, and that golden moment when the quarry has nowhere left to run.

Crackling Energy, Humming Machinery

Simply *wielding* an earth-rattling power or technology can be a Dirty Little Thrill. Players will provide this one for themselves much of the time, taking clichés that give them big guns or magical lightning ... But you can also inject it as a special treat with temporary enhancements to their prowess in the form of unusual superhuman might or nifty magic or supertech ("the gem glows, and suddenly you feel like you could *tear the planet in half* if you wanted to").

I'd Like to Buy a Vowel

Given an unusual shop or access to a unique craftsman willing to make a custom widget, a band of tough-guy heroes can come to resemble a pack of crazed housewives at a clearance sale. Many players get a feral gleam in their eye when they can jot on their character sheet that they've got a new gewgaw tricked out with unusual features and engraved with a dragon.

Charming Their Socks Off

Exercising some sex appeal, telling a perfect lie, delivering a speech that makes the crowd roar ... The power of natural human influence is a drug that, even if you know its pleasures in real life, you never get tired about fantasizing more of it. It's exciting to be charming, satisfying to be convincing. This Dirty Little Thrill doesn't have to be *nice*, either. Some characters really get off on being scary and intimidating, cowering others into running or crying uncle. And sometimes it's just a hoot to play the infuriating bastard who's holding all the cards and there's nothing anyone can do about it.

Violations of Privacy

This *very* dirty thrill is the most fun a Player Character can have while sitting still and being quiet. It's great fun to live out the fantasy of being a "fly on the wall" – eavesdropping on the plots of conspirators, the speeches of villains, the throaty moans of adulterers, the quiet mutterings of a madman communing with demons. On a quieter note, just rifling through someone's private belongings for clues can be an example of this thrill – especially if the clues are nice and damning.

Don't Make Me Repeat Myself

Distinct from being charming is being *in authority*. The effect – being able to tell people what to do – is functionally the same, but the pleasure of indulgence differs when they jump because it's *you* who wears the uniform, it's *you* who wears the badge, it's *you* who bears the banner of His Majesty (or for that matter, it's *you* who sits on His Majesty's throne on account of His Majesty is you). Like "crackling energy," you can provide this as a brevet-rank treat or even a case of mistaken identity ("It ... it is she! The goddess of the prophecy! Tell us your bidding, oh munificent one!")

Damn, I'm Good

The best games include lots of little moments where the PCs can purr in self-satisfaction,

pleased with the unquestionable *competence* of their characters. The cyberpunk hacker feels this when the big megacorp's much-vaunted computer security crumbles before his bag of tricks; the acrobat feels it when he can enter the room with a complex tumble and casually land in a chair.

I Told You So

This one's so dirty it's grimy ... Victory can be fun, but *really rubbing it in* with a bit of self-indulgent gloating can be a nice little gratuity. It's not just for villains, either ... Commander Bellicose of the United Squad of Superheroes just wouldn't be his Ovaltine-swigging self if not for his signature speech when he's grinding his boot into the back of a defeated enemy of peace and justice. That's what you get for being evil, chum.

Sparkling Repartee

The joy of witty banter is one of the more delicious indulgences, cutting right to the heart of the place where RPGs can bring us "in person" while more static forms of fiction can only *show* us. A good crackling dialogue can be friendly, flirty, confrontational or just devil's advocacy. It can be played for the benefit of onlookers, or just a personal game of wit and wordplay. It takes (at least) two to dance this tango, but as GM, you can put out your dance card and hope for the best.

Wonders and Discoveries

Gaming can offer the thrill of the explorer and traveler – the sensation of standing on an icy mountaintop, the wind tunneling down into snowy darkness beyond (insert your own York Peppermint Patty joke here) ... The wonder at witnessing the famed (but seldom seen) Glowing Waters of the Secret Ravine of Starlight ... The knowledge that you're setting foot on an alien world no human has witnessed, or cracking open an ancient vault and breathing air that's been smelling that rank since the Bronze Age.

Crossing the Knowledge Line

It's basic gaming courtesy to leave player knowledge separate from character knowledge. It's a

Dirty Little Thrill to cross that boundary and get away with it. You can provide the opportunity by setting up challenges where what the player knows will naturally overlap with the character's own expertise ... Or just by throwing in scenes very obviously meant to provide a treat tied to a player's special area of interest. This is especially fun in historical settings ("Ah, of course! The Albert Memorial Chapel ... or rather, *not*, since Queen Victoria isn't even alive yet! Come this way; I know something secret about this place ...") or in settings where unusual (but real) technology plays a part.

Plane Fall Down Go Boom

The pure, hedonistic luxury of collateral carnage has few equals. This isn't about *combat* – this is about dropping the plunger on the detonator and watching something big, heavy, stable and strong billow, crack, explode and collapse into rubble. This pleasure can be a moment all to itself, or a happy background side effect of having a fight with really *big* forces involved.

Horror & Revulsion

It's fun to be a little creeped out, concerned, scared or threatened. Sometimes, just the nature of a situation can inspire a tasty sense of dread, and sometimes it's more about the telling details – the mass of maggots squirming in the wet areas where the corpse was pressed against the ground, the lunatic smile of the killer, his lips shining with fresh blood, the distant scream of a child – followed by sudden, heavy silence.

Nailing 'Em

There is a very momentary but *intense* thrill in the half-second where it dawns on you that the untouchable criminal has just tripped over his

own story and said something you *know* is a lie. That same spike of pleasure comes when you lead a foe to hoist himself on his own petard in a more physical way – he pauses from his gloating speech just long enough to realize that the "control device" he just ripped out of your hand was actually a grenade, and that you're smiling and holding the pin as you duck behind some cover.

That Sinking Feeling

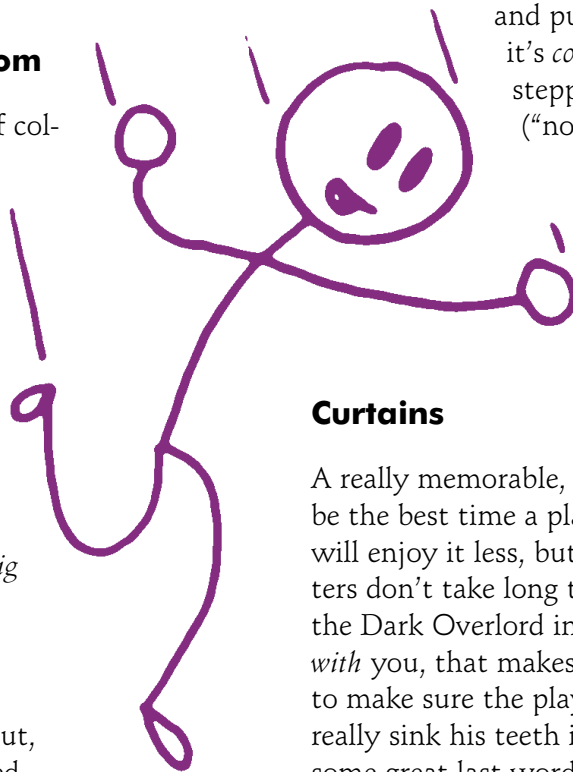
Nailing is fun, but when the nail twists, that's a thrill, too. Danger wakes players up and puts them happily on edge, and it's *cool* when you realize you've stepped on a pressure plate ("nobody move!") or when your trusted guide sticks a gun in your back, or when it dawns on you that you're shooting the bad guy, but the bad guy doesn't seem to notice. Time for Plan B.

Curtains

A really memorable, meaningful death scene can be the best time a player can have. The *character* will enjoy it less, but that's okay ... new characters don't take long to make, and when you drag the Dark Overlord into the eternal pit of doom *with* you, that makes it all worthwhile. The key is to make sure the player has the opportunity to really sink his teeth into the scene, getting off some great last words or one last vital attack, before the curtains go down.

I Knitted This For You

When players *make* (or unmake, or alter or repair) something, it provides a nice glow of satisfaction. This can be an individual project (Krisix the Fire Mage finally completes his Staff of Instant Bread Baking) or a group one (a group of fantasy PCs helping a village raise a barn). It can be a matter of momentary pleasure (Rudolph the Ninja, whipping up a gumbo) or something long term (a complex achievement requiring dozens of little side-trips over the course of a campaign).



Bragging Rights

Most campaign worlds have “name” bad guys and “name” good guys – paragons of villainy and virtue, gods among men. *It’s fun to kick their asses.* Then, the PCs earn the special right to say “Oh, the Trickster God and his horde of clanking robot minions? Did him, yeah. Kind of a *wuss*, really.” If you’re a real bastard (and you should be) it becomes a running gag that no one believes they did it. Then later, if you’re basically a softy at heart (and you should be) they can do it again, with the whole world watching.

Strokes of Fortune

Don’t reserve strokes of good luck as “damage control” for an adventure that’s gone awry; it’s cool to engage in random acts of kindness as the GM, now and then. With good timing, a really *useful* lucky stroke can be downright thrilling, as the possible implications sink in. Suddenly finding the villain’s Achilles’ heel outlined in an old tourist pamphlet doesn’t end the adventure – it just suddenly and unexpectedly kicks the pacing into high gear.

Throwing Caution to the Wind

Now and then, include some important choices where *logic* doesn’t apply. The space station is breaking apart. There’s a switch labeled “In the Event of Dire Emergency.” It has a skull and crossbones painted on it. Would throwing the switch be good ... or bad? Another popular equivalent is the old magic potion with no label that the wizard doesn’t recognize. It smells funny. It has lumps floating in it. There’s a nine-hundred-foot demon attacking. What the hell.

For the Homeworld

Most players enjoy it a lot when their characters get to represent something larger than themselves. It’s a thrill (sometimes Dirty, seldom Little) to exemplify an ideal, to make history, to deliver a blow on an ancient enemy of the people, or to

win the Intergalactic Quilting Bee and showing *the whole darned Galaxy* that *nobody* makes a quilt like an *Earthman*.

Revenge

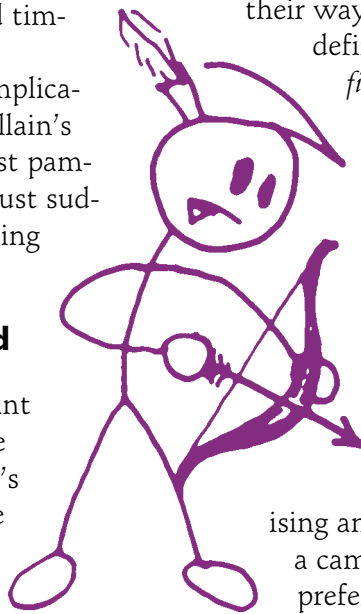
There will always be moments of defeat, but those can plant the seed for a dish best served cold. When the PCs are beaten by someone really weasely, really oily, really contemptuous or really smug, the players will delight in hacking through whatever needs hacked in order stomp that smug grin into the dirt and ride away laughing. Ooooh, yeah.

All’s Well that Ends

One of the things many gamers find more satisfying than *anything* (in a game, anyway) is clawing their way to the end, reaching the adventure’s definite conclusion, knowing that they’ve *finished* and that the quest or story or slice-of-life or moment in the sun is (for now, at least) done. This basic idea scales upward and downward, pretty much to infinity. Playing any game – RPG or not – boils down to making choices that matter, and seeing the results of those choices. On the campaign level, this means (as many of can attest) that there’s nothing more frustrating than a campaign that starts out very promising and then fizzles with no closure ... Even a campaign that ends in defeat and failure is preferable to one that just *stops*. At the smaller level of individual scenes, it means the most important element any scene can include is the opportunity to do something – *anything* – that answers a question, closes a door, ends a threat, makes an impact. Your players are splashing around in your pool; let them make waves, and see what their actions create in the end.

Adulation & Gratitude

And as long as we’re ending things, it feels *great* to get a warm hug of thanks, the key to the city, and a ticker-tape parade. Groupies are fun, too.



MORE ADVANCED OPTIONS

From the moment I picked up your book until I laid it down, I was convulsed with laughter. Some day I intend reading it.

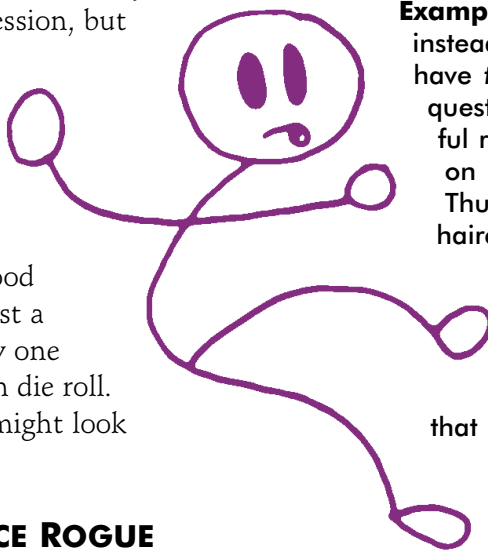
– Groucho Marx

As if *Risus* wasn't complicated enough! Here are a few more Advanced Options to play around with, or to inspire you to author options of your own.

LUCKY SHOTS & QUESTING DICE

With this option in play, players can spend their starting dice on something other than clichés. A single cliché die can, instead, buy three *lucky shots* or five *questing dice*.

Using a lucky shot boosts one of your clichés by one die for just a moment – long enough to make *one* important roll of the dice. Lucky shots “recharge” every game session, but can't be hoarded between them. So, if you spend two of your starting dice on lucky shots, you can make up to six of your die rolls “lucky” per game. Lucky shots can represent random good luck, the favor of a deity, or just a streak of resourcefulness. Only one lucky shot can affect any given die roll. A character with lucky shots might look like this:



CUNO SALK, SPACE ROGUE

Description: The devil-may-care captain of the *Headlong Sun*, Cuno spends half his life battling slimy bug-eyed monsters on distant jungle planets, and the other half out-sliming them in seedy spaceport singles bars.

Clichés: Cynical Space Captain (3), God's Balding Gift to Women (3), Petty Criminal (2)

Lucky Shots: [] [] [] [] [] []

Questing dice are lucky shots with a *focus*. They're less flexible, though, because questing dice are tied to a character's personal *quest*, a mission that consumes his life, a love that defines him, a hatred that consumes him. Characters who aren't on some kind of clearly-definable crusade shouldn't be allowed to buy questing dice; they're not for something broad like “succeeding in the adventure;” they're for something *personal* like slaughtering the six-toed sloth that murdered your father, re-uniting with your one true love, saving the orphanage you grew up in, or proving, once and for all, that a Halfling can succeed in the NBA. This kind of personal quest is seldom the thrust of the evening's adventure; it's a personal subplot that may only occasionally dominate the storyline. Questing dice may be used to boost any die-roll to overcome any obstacles standing directly between the character and the character's “quest.” They can't be applied to unrelated rolls.

Example: Cuno Salk's player decides that, instead of six generic lucky shots, he'd rather have *ten* questing dice. He defines Cuno's quest as “the sweaty affections of a beautiful redhead,” and immediately puts Cuno on the trail. When brawling with a surly Thundark for the affections of a fire-haired beauty, Cuno can apply his questing dice to any of his combat rolls ... but when brawling with a nine-meter Brain Worm in the steamy pits of Pretax VII, the questing dice don't apply. It's true that Cuno's chances with cute redheads would be threatened by having his brain fluids sucked out, but unless the Brain Worms have such a red-head captive, they aren't directly in the path of his quest.

If a questing character completes his quest, he may choose to take up another one (re-defining the purpose of his questing dice) or he can lay questing aside and relax, exchanging his questing dice for an equivalent (smaller) number of lucky shots, or for a single die in a *new* cliché associated with his post-quest lifestyle.

SIDEKICKS AND SHIELD-MATES

Characters already have whatever NPC “support staff” their clichés imply (if any). Normally, they’re just Tools of the Trade, a background detail (see pages 27-30).

This Advanced Option allows characters to pluck a friendly NPC out of the background and into the fore, to have a potent, loyal (even subservient) follower, ally, bodyguard or boon companion that travels along on adventures, risking life or limb to help him stay healthy and look good doing it.

Create a sidekick by peeling dice away during character creation, as for lucky shots. Each die spent on a sidekick creates a three-dice NPC ... So, a 10-dice hero could, instead, be an 8-dice hero with a 6-dice ally. It’s usually inappropriate for a sidekick to have any clichés *higher* than the Player Character’s best cliché. A few quick examples of what you can get for a single die:

- An Intelligent Robot Merchant Ship (3) as the property of a space merchant.
- A Ferocious Jungle Cat (3) as a companion to a jungle lord.
- A Sassy Girl Friday Secretary (1) who’s also a Shameless Flirt (2), for a private eye.
- A Band of Merry Shield-Brethren (3) fighting alongside a barbarian warrior.

A sidekick doesn’t need to be a human being (any more than a PC does) and it doesn’t even need to be a single entity. The last example above is an allied *Grunt-Squad*, a noisy group of nameless guys with beards and braids and a lusty hankering for quaffing things and splitting things asunder. The GM (and other players) might choose to name them on a whim, but some can be killed, and others might be recruited, as the game goes on. In game terms, they maintain a static group identity.

Sidekicks are loyal to the end, and obedient provided they’re not betrayed. Beyond that, they’re NPCs to be used and abused by the GM as frequently as by the player who paid for them. Sidekicks don’t usually improve their clichés or gain new ones.

A CORE CLICHÉ: THE WARRIOR

I am the Prince of Chichester!

– Groo the Wanderer

This cliché needs no introduction; he’s the star slugger of nearly any heroic team. And we do mean slugger, from knuckles to baseball bats to depleted uranium rounds. The Warrior applies force to things that require breaking, bruising, burning, bleeding, and blowing to Kingdom Come.

Really, the only difference from genre to genre is effective range. The Warrior’s reach extends to millions of miles in a science fiction setting, but in every age, a real Warrior prefers to face his opponent, man to man. The Warrior is, in most genres, presumed to be honest and forthright ... force is simple, direct, and sincere. Technology and magic is trickery, inherently untrustworthy.

That said, in games where magic is commonplace, quite a few “wizards” will really be warriors, in terms of character appeal and campaign role. The fun of playing the warrior is the fun of knowing that your place is where the action is – on the front lines, protecting those who need protecting and thumping those who need a good thump. As long as you stand your ground and face your quarry eye-to-eye, everything else is just light-shows and Foley art.

STRIP RISUS

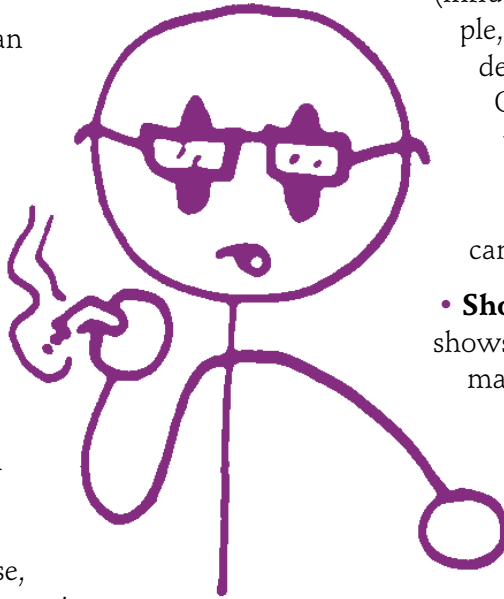
With this option in play, players may choose to discard an article of clothing instead of losing a die in combat. Players losing a round to an Inappropriate Cliché must lose *all* of three dice or three articles of clothing; they can’t divide the losses between the two.

When using the “most interesting underwear” initiative method (pages 33-34), visibly wearing *no* underwear is *automatically* most interesting. Thus, a player being roundly beaten in combat can gain a slight edge by discarding his underwear as damage. If two or more players are visibly wearing no underwear, it’s time to either put the clothes back on or put the **Risus** away, depending on how attractive everyone is. This one’s especially appropriate for **Risus** convention tournaments and public demo games.

EYE OF THE TIGER

With this option in play, characters with Lucky Shots or Questing Dice have the *power to summon a montage sequence*. This scene-between-scenes is usually set to music (everyone should participate, providing vocals, vocal imitations of musical instruments, air-guitar, beat-boxing and so on as talent and shame permits), and shows the Player Characters working together to achieve something in the wake of a setback. The montage must be roleplayed. It achieves one of the following game effects:

- **Healing:** A healing montage can *completely* heal a wounded, embarrassed, discouraged, or otherwise weakened character, by showing every stage of healing from dragging one's self across the floor by one's arms, to performing complicated acrobatic maneuvers on the uneven bars.
- **Repairs:** A repair montage can entirely repair/refurbish something that isn't a character, by turning an old-fixer-upper house, boat, starship, weapon system, etc. into a shiny specimen in perfect working order. If the characters would have no idea how to achieve this, the montage will show them recruiting friends, reading how-to manuals, and managing to succeed. The montage will include at least one brief shot of the PCs using paint rollers, even if there's no sensible reason for it.
- **Training/Preparing:** The training montage is a cardio-pumping sequence of punching bags, shouting, push-ups, chin-ups, jogging, combat drills, the PCs carrying stern gurus on their shoulders, and so forth. Every few shots will demonstrate escalating success – failing at something first, then coming close, then succeeding in triumph. This montage grants the *entire* group a one-die bonus on *every* roll they make in a scene of their choice – usually the Big



Fight or Big Race or Big Spelling Bee.

Alternately, it grants a *single* character a two-die bonus for the scene, if the group agrees to put all their eggs into that particular basket (useful if one character will be engaged in a gladiatorial bout, for example).

- **Recruiting/Campaigning:** The campaigning montage shows the PCs hitting the streets with handbills, giving speeches, and explaining things to fascinated but puzzled cab drivers they've never met before. This can either sway mass opinion in favor of the party's cause (influencing a city election, for example, or convincing an army not to despair), *or* recruit a Generic Grunt-Squad (5) that will come to their aid. The Generic Grunt-Squad will disperse after they've been used in a significant scene.
- **Shopping:** The shopping montage shows the characters hitting the malls and poring over catalogues, testing new equipment in the showroom, test-driving spiffy new vehicles, trying on wedding gowns, and engaging in animated haggling. When the dust clears, they are *fully equipped* for an important endeavor they hadn't been prepared for previously.

In every case, time is effectively frozen around the montage. Even if it would reasonably take months to achieve what the montage suggests, the characters lose no time in game terms. Either the entire montage really *does* take place in a 40-second series of heartwarming moments, or the rest of the game world is too busy with other affairs to advance much in the background.

Only *one* montage may be triggered per session. The price is *two* lucky shots or (if the GM agrees it fits the character's "quest") two questing dice. A montage must also be a response to a defeat or setback of some kind – characters montage to *rally* and prepare to face the challenges anew.

RESCALED RISUS

This provides a simpler alternative to Funky Dice. It's great for games where *all* of the Player Characters have powers (or at least prowess) far beyond those of mortal men. Instead of monkey-ing with the funky-ing, use all standard **Risus** rules, but *rescale* the engine by a fixed number the GM assigns.

Any challenges in the game become smaller, *divided* by the scaling number. For example, if you'd like a balls-to-the-wall, titans-among-men superhero game, you might select a scaling number of 5. In such a game, a Grunt-Squad along the lines of Unruly Mob with Pitchforks (5) becomes an Unruly Mob with Pitchforks (1), and Target Numbers would be adjusted, like so:

TARGET NUMBERS FOLLOW THIS SCALE, INSTEAD:

- 1:** A cinch. A snap. A challenge for a Schmuck. Routine for a pro.
- 2:** A challenge for a Professional.
- 3:** An Heroic challenge. For really inventive or tricky stunts.
- 4:** A challenge for a Master. Nearly superhuman difficulty.
- 5:** You've GOT to be kidding. Actual superhuman difficulty.
- 6:** Throwing a motorcycle.
- 10:** Throwing a tank.
- 14:** Throwing a loaded train.
- 17:** Throwing a pile of 15,000 loaded trains . . .
- 20:** Kicking the Earth five feet out of orbit.
- 25:** Kicking the Earth into the Sun
- 30:** Kicking the Sun into the Earth
- 35:** Watching an entire episode of *Star Trek: Voyager*

A scale this extreme picks up where normal **Risus** leaves off . . . In normal **Risus**, nobody begins with anything higher than Cliché (4), but in *this* kind of **Risus**, a single die is the equivalent of Cliché (5), and two or more dice are absolutely superhuman (or at least outrageously cinematic).



An excellent scaling number for a more moderate super-game is 3. This gives you two ranges for normal humans: one die for professional competence, two dice for badass mastery. Six dice would be necessary for any kind of consistent tank tossing, like so:

NO, TARGET NUMBERS FOLLOW THIS SCALE:

- 2:** A cinch. A snap. A challenge for a Schmuck. Routine for a pro.
- 3:** A challenge for a Professional.
- 5:** An Heroic challenge. For really inventive or tricky stunts.
- 7:** A challenge for a Master. Nearly superhuman difficulty.
- 8:** You've GOT to be kidding. Actual superhuman difficulty.
- 10:** Throwing a motorcycle.
- 17:** Throwing a tank.
- 23:** Throwing a loaded train.
- 28:** Throwing a pile of 15,000 loaded trains . . .
- 33:** Kicking the Earth five feet out of orbit.

By ratcheting the entire scale of the game, everything still works exactly as before, and you don't need to worry that somebody's going to bring a d30 to the table. You can also work it the *other* way, scaling the entire game to Player Character insects, forest pixies, or dust motes. Special thanks to Steffan O'Sullivan for inspiring this approach with his work on **GURPS Bunnies & Burrows** (and later, **Fudge**). Now we're square for Hedge Magic.

BOXCARS & BREAKTHROUGHS

With this option in play, any roll where *all the dice come up sixes* is a “breakthrough roll,” a moment of peak performance and special insight. Keep the total, and roll the dice *again*, adding the second roll to the first one. If the second roll also “breaks through,” add a third roll, and so on.

Example: Grolfnar Vainsson the Viking is angling for a night of sweaty affection with Urda, the Saucy Barmaid (3) at the local mead hall. She’s out of his league – his Womanizer (2) cliché is a little under the curve – but nothing ventured, nothing gained. In the opening round of combat, Urda rolls a 14, but Grolfnar rolls a 12, a pair of sixes. Since that’s a breakthrough, he rolls again ... and gets another pair of boxcars. His total is up to 24, and he rolls again, scoring a fairly humble 5. But humble on top of magnificent is plenty; his total of 29 wins the round. Urda loses a die from her Saucy Barmaid cliché, impressed by Grolfnar’s charm ... or at least, by his charm relative to the three dozen other screaming Vikings in the smoky hall. The battle for her affection continues ...

Example II: Barry Parker, in his heroic guise as Burning Rubber, has carelessly set yet another building on fire, and he’s trying to rescue those leaping from it using his Stretching Guy (4d10) cliché. The GM says he can save all of them if he can beat a Target Number of 40. The dice drop, and three come up six. The fourth one comes up 10. A total of 28 – not nearly good enough. The GM isn’t watching carefully, though, so Barry’s player cheats and nudges that last die so it, too, shows a six (total 24) – a breakthrough! Barry rolls the dice again, and the new roll totals 20 (grand total 44). Thanks to Burning Rubber’s heroic determination and quick thinking (and the GM’s distracting infatuation with a pop singer dancing half-dressed on TV in the next room) Burning Rubber rescues everyone except his publicist. Oops! Butterfingers.

Breakthrough rolls don’t guarantee success or victory, but they can help tend the way. In practical terms, adding this Advanced Option makes Cliché (1) characters 20% more powerful overall, and makes Cliché (2) characters 3% more powerful. It rarely benefits those with professional competence (3 or more dice); they’ve already mastered the techniques that come to lesser characters in “eureka” flashes.

DEADLY COMBAT

Risus assumes that combat isn’t automatically – or even *ordinarily* – deadly. A lot of *Risus* combats don’t even involve physical forces; they’re psychological, social, abstract, even artistic. But the same assumption carries over to *physical* fight scenes: If two men duel with swords, the winner can “win” by disarming his opponent and dropping his trousers to embarrass him. In a gunfight, the defeated party may be out of ammo and caught reloading, with a pistol barrel shoved against his temple. In a dogfight between World War I flying aces, the Red Baron can line Snoopy up for the kill but then – sportingly – spare his life because this is the *Christmas* version of the song. Use this

A CORE CLICHÉ: THE WIZARD

I was thrown out of N.Y.U. my freshman year for cheating on my metaphysics final, you know. I looked within the soul of the boy sitting next to me.

– Alvy Singer

The Wizard is two things at once: he’s a jack-of-all trades, able to stand in for any of the other core clichés at some kind of cost (a handful of newt eyes, the soul of his pet goldfish, his eyesight and hair color), and he’s a *willful plot device*, able to achieve the impossible simply by wanting and needing it to happen. If the group is without a helicopter, the Wizard can fly them. If they’re without allies, the Wizard can summon magical brutes. If a beloved party member has died, the wizard may be able to cheat the hand of death.

Of course, “wizard” is a broad metaphor for any kind of hocus-pocus wielder, whether the hocus-pocus is black magic, white magic, mental powers, or cosmic duct tape. That said, he’s most comfortable in unabashed fantasy, where he can stride around being cryptic, muttering in dead languages, and delivering dire warnings in a booming baritone. When he makes the jump to science fiction, he must run to ground a bit, disguising his powers behind a more specific rationale. In many forms of space adventure fiction, he simply merges with the Mechanic as Clarke’s famous axiom takes over, and every god is a god from the machine.

option for campaigns where none of the above is really true, for games where the **Risus** approach to combat is presented in a more traditional mode, and where a fight is – more often than not – settled by serious or even deadly wounds. With the Deadly Combat option in play, the following rules changes apply:

- **Best of Set:** Determine the winner of a combat round by comparing the *single highest die* rolled instead of the total. If Gladiator Rex rolls 4 dice for a 2, 1, 3, and 6, he'll win the round against Gladiator Joe who rolled a 3, a 4, and a pair of 5's. Joe rolled the higher total, but Rex had the single highest die.
- **The Goliath Rule:** If the combatants each score the same high die, the combatant who rolled the *fewest dice* is the winner. Only if they rolled the *same* number of dice is a tie really a tie. This depends on the actual number of dice rolled – not the size of each foe's cliché when perfectly healthy.
- **Smells Like Team Spirit:** When PCs attack as a team, everybody's dice count for determining the single highest die (not just sixes) – but *only* the leader's dice are counted for the Goliath Rule.

There are no alterations beyond the three listed (the winner still determines the fate of the loser, for example, so combat isn't *required* to be deadly). When combining this option with Boxcars & Breakthroughs, breakthrough rolls don't apply to combat.

Be warned that this rule *dramatically* softens the difference between cliché levels, so far as combat is concerned, diluting some of the “may the best man win” nature usually central to the game. Without it, a Grim

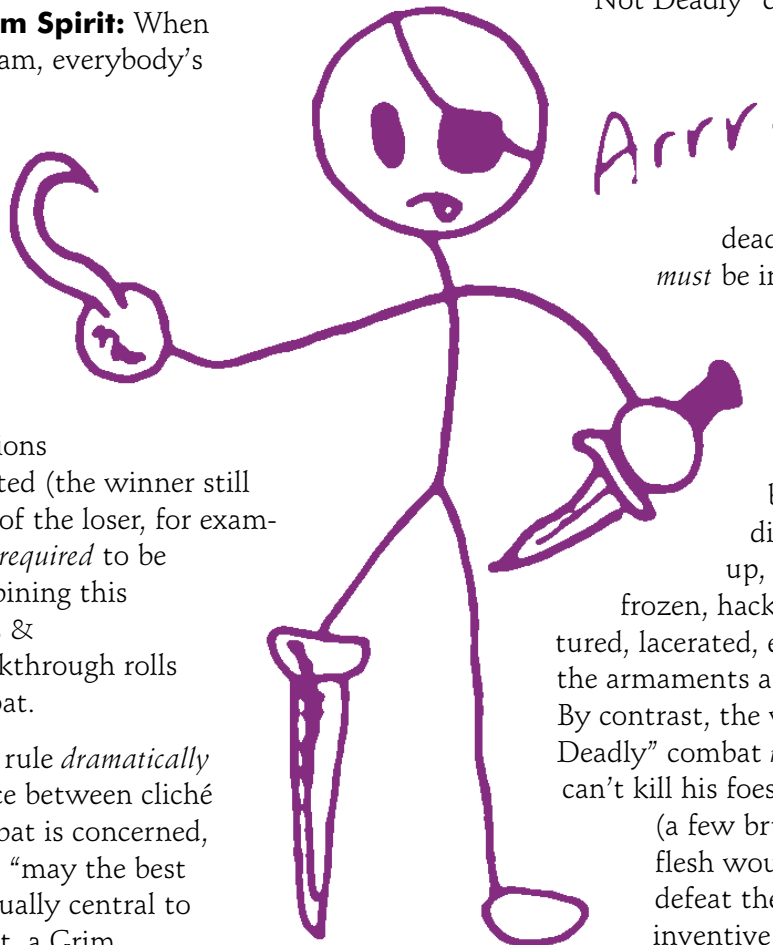
Vigilante (5) is basically certain of defeating any foe with a single cliché rated at (3) or lower – and seldom breaks a sweat beating down one rated at (4). With this option in play, he still has an edge, but he has to really fight to win. This option isn't necessary for comedic **Risus** games (where losing is just as fun as winning, and where death is rare or desirably funny) but it works fine for them, too. It's ideal for those “serious adventure **Risus**” moods that strike now and then without warning, creating a more sporting playing field when the loser is more likely to be killed than left counting stars and tweety-birds.

SWING COMBAT

This is a good way to handle “swashbuckling” cinematic play. Every combat is either Deadly or Not Deadly, from the beginning. The aggressor normally determines which. When in doubt, the Game Master decides. “Deadly” combats use the rules for the Deadly Combat option.

“Not Deadly” combats use the regular **Risus** rules.

Once committed to battle, the winner is more limited in his “choice of spoils.” In a deadly combat, the losers *must* be injured to a degree appropriate to the weapons involved – not necessarily *killed*, but definitely shot, stabbed, beaten, burned, lased, phased, disrupted, spaced, blown up, broken, run over, frozen, hacked, julienned, punctured, lacerated, etc. as appropriate for the armaments applied to their person. By contrast, the winner of a “Not Deadly” combat *must* be sporting. He can't kill his foes or seriously hurt them (a few bruises or inconsequential flesh wounds are fine), but must defeat them in some other, more inventive and amusing, fashion.



LAST MAN STANDING

It's easy and fun to concoct alternate ways for the dice to bash on each other; here's one I've used occasionally. With this option in play, **Risus** gains a *fourth* conflict mechanic: the cascade.

Like Target Number rolls, single-action conflicts, and regular combats, a cascade can represent pretty much anything, but it works especially well as an alternate combat mechanic, representing any large, extended conflict with multiple characters on multiple "sides" – whatever that means at the time. It's also ideal for extended battles where only *one* victor can win the day (a beauty pageant, for example, or a cross-country road race).

Cascades work on very different assumptions than normal **Risus** combat, so introduce them with care.

Everyone involved picks a cliché (any they'd like to use; none are "inappropriate" in a cascade) and rolls the dice, leaving them on the table for all to see. The flow of action is irregular – some characters may get several turns in a row, and some characters may get skipped a lot, as the cruel fates demand. The rules are:

- **Whose turn is it?** The character with the highest total. If, when he's done, he's still got the highest total, it's his turn again. If there's a tie, *everyone* re-rolls their *lowest* die, and compares again.
- **Attacking:** To attack, discard one of your dice. Then, force any other participant to discard a die of equal or lower value (you choose the foe *and* the die). Describe what this represents, and make it good. If it isn't good, the other players are entitled to throw snack food at you. Attacking concludes your turn. Discarded dice are gone for the remainder of the scene.
- **Coming to Another's Aid:** To aid someone, *give him one of your dice*. He must immediately *re-roll* it and add it to his own. Describe what this represents, as above. Aiding *doesn't* conclude your turn. You can aid again, or attack. Once you attack (or run out of dice) your turn ends.
- **Changing Your Cliché:** As in combat, you can alter your approach by swapping out your current cliché for another one. It doesn't have to be your turn; it can be any *Player Character's* turn (NPCs can swap on any NPC's turn). Discard your current dice (including any other PCs have given you as aid) and roll fresh dice for the new cliché. You may never *return* to a cliché you've used and "discarded" in the same cascade.

Anyone who loses all his dice is defeated. The cascade battle ends when there's just one character left with dice, when there's *no one* left at all, or when there's just one *side* left. If a group of three Player Characters is whacking on a single villain and the villain goes down, there's no need to continue the cascade unless the PCs want to decide who whooped the villain the *most*. The victor typically determines the fates of all the losers, as in a combat. Losing characters heal lost dice at GM-determined rates, as in combat.

Some notes for combining this with other Advanced Options:

- **Pumps:** Characters may not pump cascade rolls.
- **Boxcars & Breakthroughs:** The boxcars stay on the table. The same number of fresh dice *joins* them.
- **Lucky Shots/Questing Dice:** These may be applied normally, even to re-rolls made to break ties or aid (whether the character is the one doing the aiding *or* the one being aided). This means a character could spend a Lucky Shot plus one of their dice to give another character *two* dice. It also means a character *being* aided could spend a Lucky Shot to get two dice from it instead of one.
- **Strip Risus:** Articles of clothing may be substituted both for dice lost to attacks *and* dice spent to aid others.

Cascade battles are more complex than any other **Risus** mechanic, but only by a little. There's an excellent payoff in terms of the potential for *teamwork*, in particular, as PCs pass their bad dice back and forth to "refresh them" with re-rolls, do tricky cliché-swapping tricks, and more.

HOW TO DRAW STICK FIGURES THE RISUS WAY

*That which is static and repetitive is boring.
That which is dynamic and random is confusing.
In between lies art.*

— John A. Locke

Gaming matters aside, the best part of **Risus** is (many insist) its stunning illustrations. While I can't hope to impart the magic of real artistic talent with a simple tutorial article, I can at least describe the *craft* of creating the **Risus** stick figures, leaving the soul of inspiration – the *art* of it – in your hands.

Correct Paper



LESSON ONE: TOOLS

Begin by acquiring the necessary art supplies. For paper, I use cheap spiral notebooks and/or graph paper. Light blue lines are preferable; they vanish when scanning or photocopying the artwork. You may find it more comforting to use something like kid-finish Bristol paper or some other kind of “art” paper, but to create genuine **Risus** stick figures you'll eventually need to upgrade to cheap spiral notebooks and graph paper.

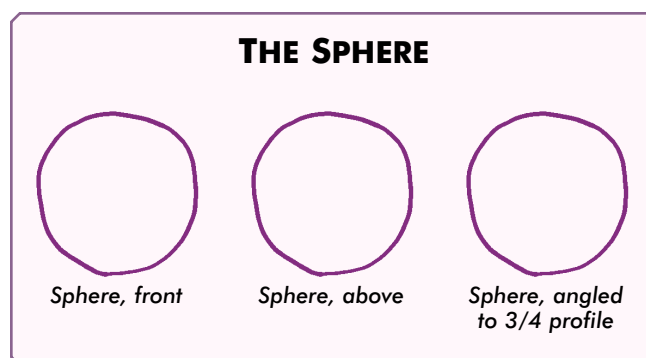
The pen is even more important. I've created every **Risus** stick figure using the same kind of pen: the **Flair** felt-tip, manufactured by Paper-Mate (now a division of the Sanford corporation

of Bellwood, Illinois). You can visit the Paper-Mate website at 'www.paper-mate.com and see these beautiful pens for yourself. Note that they're available in black, red, green and purple – a purple Flair would be a very classy and very “**Risus**” thing to own. A Flair runs around a buck-fifty, so you must be prepared to invest yourself financially as well as spiritually.

For oversized stick figures (like those I sometimes create for commissioned art clients) I sometimes use an oversized pen, the **Sharpie**, also manufactured by Sanford. I don't recommend attempting large-scale stick figures until you've mastered the basics. Sharpie ink is permanent on clothing; don't use one without parental guidance.

LESSON TWO: REALISTIC FORM

The fundamental component of the stickman is the *sphere* ... not the circle. It's important to always remember that the heads and hands of a stickman are usually spherical, represented simply, and that a mastery of the sphere is essential to **Risus** stick figure drawing. Practice from the following diagrams:



The feet of a stick figure are like spheres, too, only squished a bit 'cause the stickman spends so much time standing on them.



LESSON THREE: FACE AND HEAD

A stickman's face is capable of almost infinitely subtle modes of expression. In most illustrations, the face has two kinds of feature: the eyes, and the mouth.

When a stickman is healthy and happy, his eyes are tall, black ovals. When he's frightened, surprised, excited or miserable (for example) the eyes change to reflect this ... becoming more circular, flatter, taller, larger, smaller, or even sketchier. Extreme effects like total shock and death can alter their appearance more dramatically.

SAMPLE EYES



Note the soulful, tortured depths

The mouth of a stickman indicates whether he's talking (or singing or screaming), and how loudly ... The more his mouth is open, the more noise he's probably making. Open or closed, a stickman's mouth can smile or frown to reflect his mood. Shape is, again highly mutable to indicate special moods, situations, or feelings.

SAMPLE MOUTHS

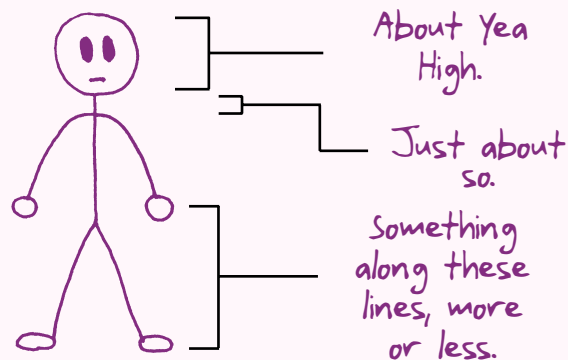


Note assorted pretzel crumbs

LESSON FOUR: THE FIGURE

See the diagram above right for a detailed look at stick figure anatomy and proportions. Note the whipcord musculature, the lean, supple torso, the strength and flexibility that make these stickmen such excellent heroic figures. The arms are usually a continuous curve; the legs vary more in that regard. The neck is normally $1/4^{\text{th}}$ the height of

CORRECT PROPORTIONS



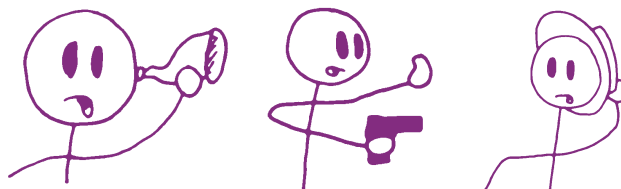
Use a protractor, ruler, or electron microscope

the head; the hands are typically $1/3^{\text{rd}}$ the head's size. These proportions are the correct ones, but you can violate them to:

- Emphasize the surreality of intense drama
- Suggest extreme action
- Demonstrate that you're a game writer, not an illustrator

LESSON FIVE: COSTUMES & GEAR

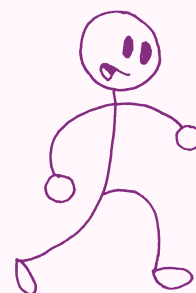
Maintain strict discipline, here. It's easy to overdo the props. As in *Risus* itself, it's the stickman, not his gun, who wins the fight. Some examples to work from:



LESSON SIX: PUTTING IT ALL TOGETHER

This diagram shows the main steps in creating a complete *Risus* illustration. Study and practice it until it becomes second nature to you.

THE PROCESS



Step One (of One)

SOCIAL STUDIES

*We have to shoot and kill and destroy.
We represent everything that's wholesome and
good in the world.*

– Maxwell Smart

This final section is a rambling collection of thoughts on **Risus** as a social thing, as a game that, despite all common sense, has appeal enough to have formed a huggy global following. This is the sort of stuff that runs around naked in my head flashing me when I make the mistake of pondering the game beyond the more practical “how many dice should the horde of goblins have?” level.

THERE'S NO WRONG WAY TO PLAY

Fact of the matter is, there is no hip world; there is no straight world. There's a world, you see, which has people in it who believe in a variety of different things. Everybody believes in something and everybody, by virtue of the fact that they believe in something, use that something to support their own existence.

– Frank Zappa

For years, my mantra on the **Risus** Mailing List was “There’s no wrong way to play **Risus**.” It became my stock closing line whenever a **Risus** fan would ask a rules question or something like one. I’d respond with how I do things at my gaming table, but I’d do my best to remind anyone reading that how I do it just provides a consistent baseline, a “foundation recipe” for the way **Risus** works. Once **Risus** passes into *your* hands, it becomes something it can never be when I run it, or when Joe over there runs it, or when Liz up there runs it, or when Stinky Frank Who Dresses Like a Klingon runs it. So, there’s no wrong way to play **Risus**.

I’ve since retired that mantra, or rather, I’ve begun shortening it to what I now consider the summa-

WHEN IN DOUBT, LIMIT THE LATINATES

For a long time, I assumed that the **Risus Companion** would have a Latin title, just like **Risus**. I abandoned the idea to keep the title simple and the book’s purpose plain. Rejected titles include *Non Compos Mentis* (mindless), *Cum Grano Salis* (with a grain of salt) and *Ex Post Facto* (after the fact).

tion of the **Risus** “social philosophy.” There’s no wrong way to play.

Which means, right and wrong are great concepts on which to base law and ethics, and on which to base procedures at work, and for solving an engineering problem or whatnot. But **Risus** is meant for playtime. In playtime, friends gather in mutual affection and for mutual entertainment ... So there’s no need for all those weighty matters, because – to me anyway – the word *play*, in that context, implies something so friendly and safe and even *loving* that the law and ethics may as well take their socks off, too. Nobody’s here to hurt anyone, after all. Well, unless you’re an orc. I dropped “**Risus**” from the end of the phrase because I consider it a universal axiom – and a useful one to take to heart.

There’s no wrong way to play.

*But if you play
underwater, you
might need
special dice ...*



CHARTER OF THE INTERNATIONAL ORDER OF *RISUS*

Access to the *Risus Companion* is a privilege exclusive to the International Order of *Risus*, but it's not the only one. This section provides the definitive text of the Order's sacred Charter.

Article I – Our Purpose & Motto: The purpose of the Order is to promote, encourage and celebrate *Risus*, those who enjoy *Risus*, those who contribute to the *Risus* community, and the philosophy inherent to its design. Our motto is *Imprimatur Domi* – “Let it be printed at home.”

Article II – Membership

Standards: Membership in the Order is exclusive. However, the Order does not exclude members on the basis of sex, age, skin color, ethnicity, sexual orientation, wealth, politics, weight, height, eye color, toenail color, mode of dress, species, quirkiness of speech, religion, specific preference between Kei and Yuri and between the Thin Movie Reviewer and the Fat Movie Reviewer, preference for other game systems, or the lack of any of the preceding. In fact, the weirder you are, the better it is for the Order and the more interesting your personal Clichés will be.

Article III – The Membership Card: Members of the Order each bear a physical membership document. Each is unique: signed, numbered, and illustrated with an official Little Cartoon Bastard (stick figure) by *Risus* author and Order founder S. John Ross. This card identifies Order members to one another. The membership card may be used, for example, to provide access to “all-*Risus* orgies” hosted at science fiction conventions (should anyone ever choose to host such a thing). Membership numbers unadorned with alphabet codes indicate paid-in-full supporters of *Risus*. Membership codes prefixed by the letter “C” represent complimentary memberships such as those granted to contributing playtesters, co-conspirators, colleagues, and other things beginning with

“C.” Membership codes prefixed by the letter “X” represent special memberships, which the bearer must explain if asked by a fellow member. Membership codes prefixed by the letter “F” are forgeries.

Article IV – Preservation, Transferability & Edibility of Card:

Members must carry their membership card whenever practicable, and keep it relatively dry. Membership cards are non-transferable and probably aren't edible, though the latter is more a matter of theory than policy.

Article V – Use of Motto and Coat of

Arms: Members of the Order are exclusively entitled to emblazon their *Risus* documents, public and private, with the official Coat of Arms, with the Order's motto, and with any related, cheesy web-graphics provided by the Order for such purposes.

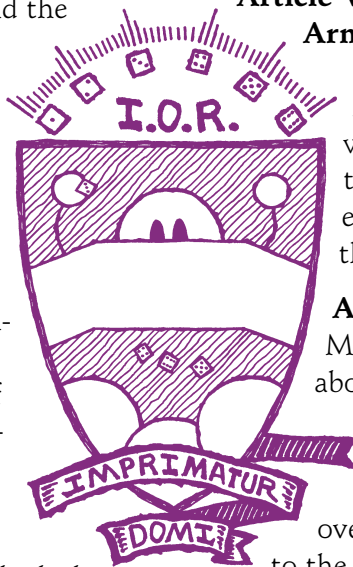
Article VI – Psychic Bedrock:

Members must think happy thoughts about *Risus* at least once per month, in order to provide the psychic bedrock of affection and goodwill on which the game stands, towering over the horizon and broadcasting love to the universe.

Article VII – Casual Relationship with

Designer: Any member of the Order is presumed to be a “pal” of S. John Ross, and upon meeting him in person, may – without embarrassment, specific rationale or fear of reproach – ask him to remove his pants. Members of the Order recognize that S. John Ross may choose not to comply with this request, but you never know. Members of the Order may remove their own pants as encouragement.

Article VIII – World Domination: Should any member of the Order, by chance or design, become ruler of the world, he will grant all members of the Order favored positions in his regime (including, but not limited to, well-paid but otherwise meaningless positions in his bureaucracy). Should he fail to do so, and also fail to dissolve the Order by whimsical decree, he shall relinquish his membership in the Order. Members of the



Order recognize that domination of a larger area or dimensional multiplicity that *includes* the whole of the planet Earth is, for the purposes of Order policy, equivalent to world domination for this purpose.

Article IX – The Companion: Members of the Order have exclusive and perpetual access to *The Risus Companion*, but may extend access in the form of hardcopy printouts provided without charge to *Risus* gamers at their gaming table. Members recognize that floors, decks, beds, swimming pools and trampolines are the equivalent of tables for the purposes of this policy. The *Risus Companion* also serves – through specific references – as the Order’s secret codebook for unlocking members-only archive files, providing passwords for secret gatherings, et cetera.

Article X – Community & Mutual Affection: Members of the Order will maintain a sense of community by gathering at conventions, game retailers and game clubs whenever possible, and by hugging. Individual gatherings may exclude some members of the Order on the basis of age, depending on applicable statute and how much rampant sex and alcohol is meant to be present, or on the basis of the possible successful invocation of Article VII.

Article XI – Maintenance of Mystique: When discussing the Order with outsiders, Members are free and encouraged to invent secret handshakes, code-phrases, and imply connections to the occult in order to maintain the Order’s mystique. All such references should be vaguely (or overtly) titillating when practicable.

Article XII – Gentle Conquest: No member of the Order shall create any publicly presented *Risus* document (supplement, campaign, et al) that implies that the *Companion* is necessary to enjoy *Risus*. Furthermore, no member of the Order will ever suggest that any *Risus* game, played or described by any *Risus* gamer (member of the Order or not) is being played incorrectly. It is the solemn belief of the Order that we are capable of much subtler, more creative and friendlier ways of imposing our iron will upon an unsuspecting universe.

PREACHING THE *RISUS* GOSPEL

“There are some folks that, if they don’t know, you can’t tell ‘em.”

– Louis Armstrong

Risus is the *Anything RPG*. No doubts, there. Some gamers enjoy it so much they assume it must be an *Anyone RPG* as well. No game is, and that goes double (or more than double) for *Risus*. So, one key to preaching the gospel of *Risus* is a sensitive understanding of why some converts resist.

It’s Tiny and Simple

Simple games don’t satisfy everyone. Gamers have appetites for game systems, and *Risus* is a snack. It’s not even a very *meaty* snack. It’s a little bag of chips. Of course, once you register and get the *Companion*, it’s one of those *monstrous* bags of chips like they have at the warehouse supermarkets and price clubs. But it’s still just chips. It’s for people who like to pack their own lunch.



It has a Latin Name

I'm so pretentious and scholarly. Worship me.

It's Goofy and Irreverent

Risus takes nothing seriously except the quality of its stick figures. The presence of those *very same, world-class, ultra-cool stick figures* can turn people off. And then ... a few will feel queasy about the stick figures, but they've heard good things so they'll press on and read the text. And the text is downright goofy. It's got *Cajun ninja* in it. It mocks William Shatner (lovingly, I insist). There are hairdressers in the combat examples. *This thing is freakin' stupid. At least now those dumb stick figures make sense!* Comedy gaming *definitely* isn't for everyone (and humor is subjective, anyway).

It's Kind of Old-School

In terms of design goals and philosophy, *Risus* is very "eighties style." The GM controls all the game-world juju, players play a single character "from the inside" and combat is meant to be fun, attractive, and as part of *as many scenes as you can cram it into*. That's a little too retro for some.

It's Free

Some people feel that free games can't be taken seriously. That *Risus* isn't *meant* to be taken seriously doesn't seem to exempt it from condemnation on those grounds.

It's Weird

Risus is heterodox and syncretistic. Those are fifty-cent words for "a mish-mash contrary to tradition." That makes it almost *Gnostic*, which is a fifty-cent word for "arcane rubbish sometimes mistaken for wisdom." The Gnostics believed that matter is evil. *Risus* feels the same way about hit points. I've asked it.

But none of us would be here (and I mean a very specific here) without matter and hit points. Matter is an essential component of most gamers [according to a 1983 Gen Con poll conducted by

TSR], and RPGs wouldn't exist if not for a Certain Game featuring hit points [according to the same poll].

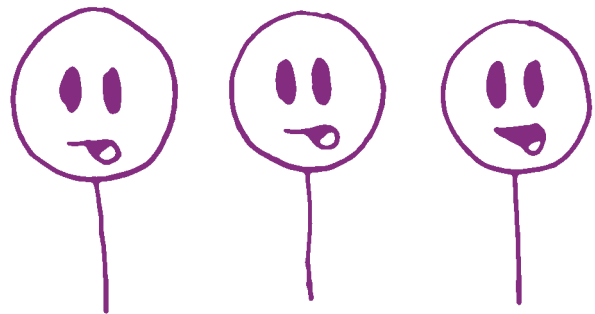
It's important to respect that. *Risus* is weird. And for the same reason *some* people are willing to taste a ham sandwich that's been food-colored bright blue, and *most* people aren't, some people will – if asked to play something like *Risus* – look at you as if you've grown an opera house on your neck.

Put another way, adventure gamers aren't necessarily *adventurous*. Many prefer to leave that to their characters. Given what can *happen* to those characters, it's an understandable attitude.

But ... But ... But ...

"...but those are all the things I *love* about it!" you may shout. Yeah. Funny how that works.

No, I mean it's *really* funny. People are so cool.



Take Up the Gauntlet!!!

With all these things in mind and heart, go forth and preach the gospel of *Risus* ... There are a lot of gamers who'd *love* *Risus*, and without access to Cerebro I'll never find all those mutants on my own. They're out there and they are *starving* for a simple little bag of free, Latin Gnostic chips left over from the 80s.

All you need to preach the gospel of *Risus* is a sincere affection for it, a sharp eye for our fellow weirdos, and a good sense of when to stop. If you've got eager gamers who are eager for anything *but* *Risus*, give them what they want. If they're playing a game they enjoy, you'll be having fun, too.

HALFWAY TO PERFECT

Friends applaud, the comedy is over.

– *The final words of Ludwig von Beethoven*

There's an occasional motif in the work of Douglas Adams that's interesting to me: a kind of optimism where – if you give people one tiny piece of a puzzle, and they *like the piece*, they'll assume the rest of the puzzle is beautiful.

It crops up in the *Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* in the form of the well-known joke about a hitchhiker's towel. If you haven't read it, it boils down to "carry a towel and you'll be okay," because people will assume that if you've got a towel, you're an intrepid and well-stocked adventurer who also owns a host of other useful things. They will, furthermore, be happy to loan you any of these items you might have misplaced. Odd, sure, but when Adams does it it's funny. Read Adams.

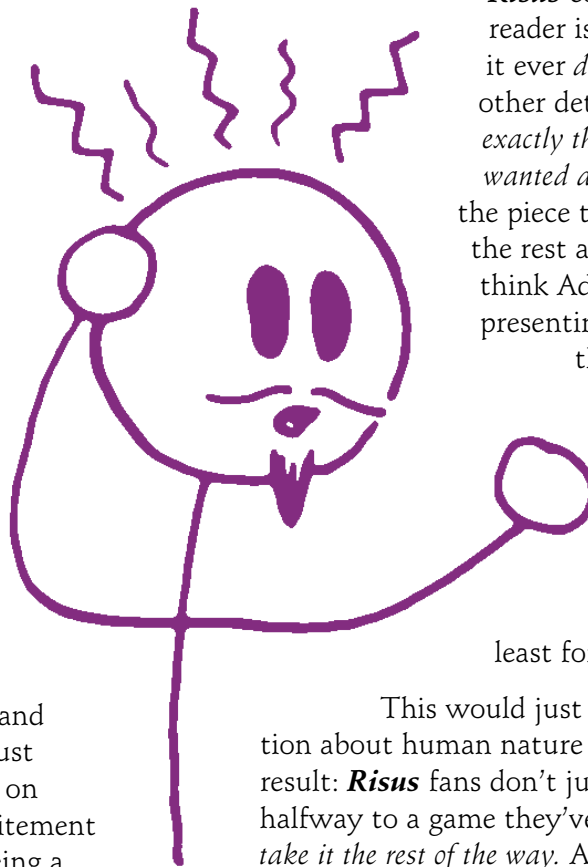
It crops up again later in the series when describing Brockian Ultra-Cricket, an alien sport that the audience isn't actually allowed to *watch*. They sit on one side of a big wall and don't see the game, but they get just enough of a sense of what's going on that – in the spirit of sporting excitement – they *assume* they just missed seeing a great event in sporting history.

Or, put another way: if you give people a glimpse of a horse's ass, they'll sometimes believe they've seen a unicorn.

This explains a substantial portion of **Risus** fandom, I believe. To me, **Risus** is a complete (if brain-dead) system for very farcical comedy gaming. Just enough to get the job done without fuss. But to many gamers, **Risus** looks like an unfinished masterpiece *halfway* to being the RPG

THE COLOR PURPLE

On the World Wide Web, "**Risus** Purple" is `` when coding HTML, or RGB 255/143/255 when fiddling around with web graphics. The purple used in **Risus** itself (and in the **Risus Companion**) is called – for reasons too silly to worry about – "Risus Green." It's Hue 302.997 degrees, Saturation 100%, Brightness 44.7% (or, if you prefer CMYK, it's C 55.7% M 99.6% Y 13.7% K 1.2%)



they've always wanted. Since **Risus** commits to so little, the reader is free to assume that, if it ever *did* commit to a bunch of other details, it would do so in *exactly the way they've always wanted a game to do*. They like the piece they see, so they envision the rest as beautiful. Frankly, I think Adams was (once again) presenting a universal truth. I think the world is *full* of renowned "great stuff" that's "great" for exactly that reason. Something to be said for elegant understatement, I guess. Or at least for brevity.

This would just be an aimless observation about human nature if not for the curious result: **Risus** fans don't just *assume* that **Risus** is halfway to a game they've always wanted. They *take it the rest of the way*. As the "**Risus** guy," it's my pleasure and privilege to stock my **Risus** web page with links to *dozens* of individual expressions of what **Risus** *can* be. It's a herd of unicorns, many of them lovelier than anything I'd have come up with on my own.

Here's hoping the **Risus Companion** inspires more gamers to glue a sparkly horn ... and a head ... and a neck and a body and some legs and a tail ... onto that humble horse's ass. And here's a really big thank-you to those who've already done so. We are family.

A RISUS LEXICON

Beat – To equal or exceed the **Target Number** is to “beat” it; it’s how characters succeed at an unopposed cliché roll.

Bonus-Dice Gear – Any Tool of the Trade exceptional enough to provide some kind of bonus in game terms.

Classic Countdown – The practice of assigning a character Cliché (4), Cliché (3), Cliché (2) and Cliché (1) as a sure-fire mix of useful (and entertainingly less-useful) power levels ...

Cliché – A character class. *But so much cooler.*

Combat – Any contest in which opponents jockey for position, utilize attacks, bring defenses to bear, and try to wear down their foes to achieve victory. Either literally or metaphorically.

Difficulty – The Target Number for an unopposed cliché roll. (q.v.)

Double Whammy – One of many terms for a character design strategy focused on combat. By taking two clichés that are clearly appropriate for the same kind of combat, the character has a “fallback” cliché that will ensure greater endurance, but not necessarily greater success.

Ford Prefect Strategy – A number crunching “trick” in character design. A character built with the Ford Prefect Strategy has at least one cliché of reasonable potency that will never be appropriate in the game, insuring that he can deal out “triple damage” in any combat. Named for Douglas Adams’ hitchhiking journalist character, who carried an American Express Card with him because it was useful to have a form of payment nobody would ever be willing to accept.

Funky – Any polyhedral die that isn’t a cube with faces numbered and/or piped 1 through 6 is “funky.” Specifically, though, **Risus** applies the term to dice with more than six sides, since the d4 doesn’t exist in the Risusiverse and the d2 is just a coin, people. And pro wrestling is fake and there is no Santa Claus. Don’t read a glossary if you can’t handle the truth, man.

Grunt-Squad – Any collective NPC entity assigned a Cliché and some dice. Grunt-Squads may have any number of dice.

International Order of Risus (IOR) – The worldwide **Risus** fan club. Members of the Order receive a signed, numbered, stick-figured membership card and a copy of the **Risus Companion**. But you knew that.

LCB – A Little Cartoon Bastard, a **Risus** stick figure.

Little Cartoon Bastards – The official name of the **Risus** stick-figure mascots. Usually shortened to “LCB.”

Order, The – The International Order of **Risus** (q.v.) is often referred to as the Order.

Potency – The number of dice invested in a cliché. So, a Mighty Sailing Man (3) has a potency of three dice; a Skipper Brave and Sure (5) has a potency of five.

Primary – Your “primary” is your primary cliché; it’s usually the first one listed on your character sheet, indicating your character’s central role (and race, if he’s not human, etc). The rule “when in doubt, roll against your primary” is so simple and fundamental to how I GM **Risus** that I’ve never written it down. Oh. Bugger.

Risus – A Latin term for laughter and smiles, with connotations of foolishness or silliness. The proper pronunciation of the Latin term seems to be something like *RREE-soos*, with a bit of a roll on that R. The official pronunciation of the game’s title is *REE-suss*, with the vowel in the second syllable voiced as briefly as possible – just enough to keep the consonants from rubbing against one another and catching fire.

Risusiverse – The world of **Risus**, including (but not limited to) the game, the International Order, the mailing list, and the bizarre headspace they all share. Pronounced *Ree-SUSS-ih-vers*.

Single-Action Conflict – Any conflict represented by all the parties involved rolling the dice just once. The GM compares the results to determine the outcome.

Target Number – The difficulty of an unopposed cliché roll. The player must equal or exceed the Target Number to “beat” it and achieve what he wants.

TN – Difficulty. Short for “Target Number.”

Tools of the Trade – A character’s equipment. This includes any portable item strongly implied by his clichés (a revolver, fedora and trenchcoat for a private eye, for example), but also – in some campaigns – larger, non-portable property and yes-men (q.v.).

Yes-Men – Any Tools of the Trade that can move around with a semblance of free will. It’s only a semblance, though. Tools are tools. Yes-Men can also be Yes-Robots, Yes-Spirits, Yes-Golems, Yes-A.I.s, Yes-Zombies, Yes-Pets, and (most importantly) Yes-Red-headed-Triplets-In-Catholic-Schoolgirl-Outfits.