

Start time - 4.42, 12th of August

ARBITRARY

"I bring my guns up, both of them, pull myself off the ground and start to fire wildly, not even aiming, holding down the triggers and spraying wildly into the recesses of the bar. I scream a warcry, loud and wordless and bestial and stand there, fists spraying death, until I run dry with a klik and roll into cover, reload and search for a new place to hide. I consider my exits briefly; a fruitless task, cause there aren't any in sight. A desk blocks the door at the top of the stairs leading out of the basement, ruining my chances of making a clean break back to the surface.

I stand up, spray again, see a few guys buckle and fall as my bullets connect. Rounds ping off the bar behind my head, shattering glass and mirrors. I duck. Shit. Run screaming out of cover, firing blindly at the dark shapes in the corners of the room, and jam a hi-ex grenade under the door before throwing myself flat behind the shot-up bar. One. Two. Three. Four. Fi-

There is an explosion - loud, world-filling, deafening - and the desk careens out of the stairway, crashing into the depths of the room. Papers spill and fill the air like oversized snowflakes. A fire breaks out from the blast and I run through it in slow motion, not bothering to fire because I'm almost out of ammo and the bad guys have got that flying desk to contend with, now, anyway. I duck as a few stray rounds ping against the nearby walls and stumble blindly up the stairs, kicking my way through the remains of the door.

Alarms are ringing out - red, pulsing light fills the corridor and in the distance I see employees running out of the building. A black-visored guard recognises me, shoulders his rifle, and I reach cover before he can fire; rounds smack into the thin metal of the storage lockers and the sound echoes in the hall. For good measure, I lob another grenade into the room I just shot my out of to make sure no-one follows me for a while. And I run."

Roleplay games about politics, masquerade balls and highly informative discussions on butterflies are all very well and good. They just don't do it for me. While I'm a complicated enough guy and I enjoy a good book as much the next man (in fact, probably a lot *more* than the next man) I also love action films. All my friends love action films. As such, in the 24-hour RPG contest, I thought I'd keep with the tradition of ages and write an Action RPG. The premise is simple;

- It's "rules-light"
- It's fast
- It has interesting little gimmicks to keep the game fresh.

Oh, and one other thing - I'm not going to call the GM anything other than the GM. It really irritates me when people insist on calling him the "Storyteller" or "Bartender" or "Conductor" (although I must admit I do like *Stuperheroes'* "Big Mac Daddy") - we all know what GM means. Stick with it.

The Setting

The setting in *Arbitrary* is modern; pretty much everyday stuff. There's no vampires, werewolves, magic, time-travellers or laspistols. There might be psychics, but only on the end of phone lines and in laboratories in Russia. Crime is a part of society, much as it is in real life - there are certain areas you don't go after dark (or even during the day). The police will beat the crap out of you if you get on their wrong side, or at least treat you in a rather unpleasant manner. In short, there's absolutely nothing special to it - it's typical action-movie fodder, as seen in *Die Hard* or *Lock, Stock and Two Smoking Barrels*.

Of course, GMs should feel free to write a different setting for it or steal one from a film or book; I have a few ideas up my sleeve, but not enough time to develop them past a few sentences. If this goes well, there may be an supplement with a setting or two, but don't get your hopes up. The different settings could be -

Old Wild West - Gunslingers and whores aplenty in the dusty USA; stories can be easily thought up by inserting some villains and getting the players to clear them out of town. Inspiration can be found in any Old West film you care to mention. Shootouts at high noon, trenchcoats packed with silver six-shooters, mysterious interlopers, gunfights with pesky injuns and overturned card tables are the order of the day.

Cyberpunk - My favourite setting; a dystopian future riddled with guns, crime, violence, and lots of body implants. Movies for inspiration are *Batman Begins*, *Blade Runner* and (I liked it) *Johnny Mnemonic*. Books are similar (although *Blade Runner* is called "*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*" in book form, rather oddly) and William Gibson is a great author to start with. There's also been one or two RPGs written on the subject - a great (and free) one is *Zaibatsu*, located online, somewhere. Search for it. It's great.

Space Opera - Mankind has conquered the stars. The empire stretches over much of the known galaxy. Space pirates raid orbital stations and aliens mix with humans in bars. Ride the rings of saturn on interplanetary surfboards and deal death with massive plasma pistols. It'd recommend things like *Babylon 5* and *Star Wars*, but I don't like them, so I won't.

Zombies! - Zombies are here! Agh! Why are they here? Who - or *what* - made them? How can they be defeated? Can we stem the source of the zombie tide, or are there more pressing details to keep in mind (for instance, rescue your girlfriend, kill your stepfather, rescue your mum, trek to the pub and wait until it all blows over)?

The important thing to consider, whatever the setting, is that both the GM and players must agree on it before the game so that they can all participate in the Card-making section of the prelude.

Character Creation

This is all fairly standard stuff - anyone who's read or played an RPG before will be able to follow along. I'm not going to try and slap new names on old abilities, so don't expect any surprises here.

The abilities of everyone in the *Arbitrary* universe can be summed up in six stats and a few words for skills; as I said, this is simple stuff. Players should feel free (and be encouraged) to write up a background for their character, but it's not necessary. The preliminary aim of the game is for players to enjoy themselves, and if this means playing 2-dimensional characters, so be it (there are ideas for character expansion listed at the bottom of this section).

The skills are as follows, and are rated 1 to 5 (1 being absolutely useless, 3 being average, and 5 being extremely good) -

Skill - Dextrous, Nifty, Good with your hands. Used for any and all hand-related tasks; driving, shooting, masturbation, tying shoelaces, poking people in the eye, banjo-playing and so forth.

Strength - Tough, Hard, Powerful, Built like a brick shithouse. Used for damage ratings in combat, stamina tests, breaking down doors, holding up heavy items, etc. Is also used to calculate the staying power of the character in terms of damage points.

Speed - Fast, Jumpy, Aware. Speed is used to dodge, jump, climb, bend and outrun - a measure of physical flexibility and speed. It is also used to measure awareness and perception; if a character is trying to stop an ambush, roll against their Speed.

Smart - The necessary intelligence stat. Used to remember your path out of a building during a gunfight, build complex machinery, research an enemy, plan an attack and so forth.

Social - Pleasant, Well-dressed, Good-Looking. The Social stat is a measure of how generally likeable the character is or how skilled they are at persuading people to do things for them. It is used extensively in bullshitting, seduction, and charm.

Spawn - Luck, Karma, Chance. Spawn is used to effect the game world as a player, and not a character. Much like mundane "luck" (I used "spawn" because, well, begins with "s"), a player can use luck to momentarily take over from the GM as controller of events. This is discussed in more detail later on in the document.

Health points -

The characters' Health Points (or HP) are worked out by adding their Strength, Speed and Spawn statistics together; big guys can take more damage, fast guys can dodge out of the way more often than not and lucky guys can usually count on being out of the line of fire when the shit hits the fan. This is the only passive use of Spawn, and - rather neatly, I think - it incorporates a Dodge rating into the HP system, so it doesn't have to be rolled against.

Stat calculation

These stats are calculated in one of two ways, and players are free to choose between them as they wish *but they must stick to the method that they have chosen once character creation has begun.*

Option One - Points

The usual fare - players have 20 points to divide between their stats. While this gives the players more freedom it does result in some pretty boring (and predictable) characters. GMs looking to set the campaign in a higher- or lower- powered setting can increase/reduce the points given; for a gritty setting give the characters 15 points, for a fantasy game give them 25. Or thereabouts. You're a GM. You know what you're doing.

Option Two - Fate

My personal favourite - the player rolls a dice (often referred to as "D6," 'cause I play warhammer a lot) for each of their stats, counting any sixes that come up as threes. They may then choose to reroll up to two dice as long as *the majority of their rolls are below 2*. If not, they're stuck with what they've got. I find this option to be more interesting than the first as it encourages creativity from the players to justify the numbers on the page with a creation rather than giving their character a 5 in Skill, a 1 in Social and saying "He's another unfriendly, jaded gunslinger." Players with high stats are welcome to mock the "point" system players who missed out; those with low stats are open to punishment from point players, and rightly deserve it.

Skills (and Anti-Skills)

Everyone's good at something in particular - I, for example, have the ability to convince people that I am very smart despite knowing very little. I can also charm women that are of 40 years or more without trying (or, really, wanting to). Despite my myriad talents, I have weaknesses too - I haven't run for more than thirty seconds in over two years, and as such I am terribly unfit. (But not fat, ladies.) As such, if I were an *Arbitrary* character my skill list would look like -

Skills -

Making himself appear clever
Charming middle-aged women

Anti-Skills -

Anything that involves running

Of course, in an action game you probably won't want these dubious "skills" and can come up with your own. Characters are free to take one skill at no penalty, but for every skill after that they must bring in a weakness, or Anti-Skill, to counter it. Skills are freeform, but examples are - *Shooting, Athletics, Climbling, Bullshitting, Research, Attractive, Monkey-tamer, Grievous Bodily Harm, Computing, Stunt Driving, Pilot*. Anti-Skills should involve difficulties that can be easily broken down into mechanics, rather than unwanted personality traits which should be roleplayed. Of course, this is all subjective. Examples of good Anti-Skills are *Unfit, Mute, Deaf, Unattractive, and Perfectionist*. Anti-Skills should not be *Lazy, Easily Bored* or *Lusts after every women he sees* - these are not, really, dice-related ("I need a motivation test to turn off the TV, Gareth!").

Gear

Arbitrary is a very rules-light system (as you have seen). As such, there is not a lot of room for mechanics to deal with the effects of "stuff" - so, niftily, we'll just say that characters can have whatever they want, within reason. They can have whatever a character in their position *would* have - a gunfighter would have a couple of pistols, a computer nerd would have a PC/laptop and a load of hardware, a driver would have a nice car, so on and so forth. Details of weapons (though sketchy) are dealt with later - for now, it's safe to say that most weapons do pretty much the same thing - cause harm - and players can kit themselves out with a decent amount of gear. Encourage players to be specific about their gun makes, etc - it has no effect on game play, but "twin silver-plated colt 45.'s" sounds a lot better than "two pistols."

The Fluff - why it's called "Character Creation" and not "an exercise in dice-rolling"

Of course, this is a Roleplaying Game, and the players should be prepared to play a role. We're not asking for major dramatics here - simply a change from their usual behaviour would be nice. Players are encouraged to write a background for their character, and it need only be a few lines of text (this is all shown in the example below). Players should stick to this at all times. Players who write nice little interesting hooks into their background should be given special treatment, and possibly beer, by the GM. To make the whole process easier, I have written a few questions to ask yourself "in character," as it were. There is also your character's **Theme Tune** to consider, but that comes in a bit. Skip down to it, if you want. I don't mind.

QUESTIONS -

What's your name? Any nicknames?

Where are you from? Do you still have the accent, or a different one?

What're you like as a person?

What are you wearing now? What other interesting stuff do you wear?

Do you have any nervous tics or habits that mark you out?

How tall are you? Hair colour?

Do you drink? If you do, what would you order if given the choice?

Favourite food? Why do you like it so much?

What do you like to do on the weekends?

Come to think of it, what do you do during the week? Are you happy at work, or are you just waiting until something better comes up?

Do you break the law?

What advantages do you have over everyone else? Any allies?

Do you have a girlfriend/boyfriend? What do they think of your lifestyle? How long have you been together? What's their name? Do you love them?

How did you get your stats/skills? Are they due to your hobbies, your lifestyle, your job, or are they innate?

Are you good-looking? Is it due to the way you dress, the way you look, or something else?

Do you have any signature weapons or a particular vehicle that you like? What's the story behind them?

Signature Tune

We're nearly finished with character creation - now comes an (almost) unique feature for this game, a character's theme tune. You should pick a tune that embodies your character's attitude, combat style, and general outlook on life; you can use this for inspiration for your character, if you'd like (which is a nice way of coming up with raw material) but it's main, in-game effect is as thus -

Invoke signature tune - Once per game, a player can put his/her signature tune on the CD player. While it is playing, they gain a one dice bonus on all rolls - it is the time when the "spotlight" is on them, if you like. If there is no way of playing the signature tune, then no bonuses can be gained by anyone. Not even if they hum it. If a character manages to make a reference to the song itself (either in title or lyrics) in their actions, then give them *two* bonus dice. This may only be done once.

Good choices for tunes depend on your character type - mad psycho blasters packing a couple of sawn-off shotguns may be more in the Rob Zombie category (I must confess a liking for *Scum of the Earth*) and gunfighters may appreciate techno or dance music for the fast, full-auto sound. Swordfighters might like Rob Dougan (*Clubbed to Death* being an excellent example, here) for his sweeping, fluid grooves, whereas moody characters might be more in the mood for Massive Attack (*Angel is fried gold*, in my opinion).

EXAMPLE OF CHARACTER CREATION

'Cause I love you all so much, I'm going to walk you step by step through the character creation process.

Stats - Rolled up, I got -

Skill - 4
Strength - 2
Speed - 3
Smart - 2
Social - 3
Spawn - 5

Seeing as most of my dice came up above 2, I'm not eligible for any rerolls (not that I really need them). We can see that our character is good with his hands, and very lucky. He's not terribly bright or strong, but he's a nice enough guy and not slow of body by any means.

Let's see. Seeing as our setting is the present day, and I want an original character but retain some combat ability ('cause there *will* be fighting) I'll go for a military mechanic - he used to be a full-blown soldier but, now, he tends to tanks and other vehicles. While he isn't as good at combat as he used to be (he's out of practice) he could probably handle himself in a fight.

Skills -

Well, the obvious choice for our hero is *Mechanic* - it's what he does. I'll give him *Shooting* as he retains some of his military skill and *Dirty Fighting* from stuff that he picked up in barfights throughout his life. Seeing as I used three skills, I need two Anti-Skills - the first is *Out of Shape* on account of him being cooped up in the workshop and the second will be *Badly-Presented* - always being covered in oil and keeping a generally unshaven appearance means that you won't be able to fit into a swanky party as easily as that well-kempt assassin you're working with.

Gear -

Our mechanic - let's call him Mackensie - has acquired a load of stuff over his life and keeps it hoarded in his garage at home. If something's broken, chances are he's got the right part to fix it. He carries a toolkit

around in the back of his truck, and keeps a sawn-off shotgun under the front seat. He's got a few spanners (or, for American audiences, *wrenches*) which could be used as clubs in the right situation.

Fluff -

I know - I don't really want to do this, either. But we'll try, eh, children? It might even be fun. bear in mind you don;t have to answer all these questions - just pick a few to get a general idea of your character.

What's your name? Any nicknames? How old are you?

Douglas Mackensie. Everyone calls me "Mackensie." I'm 35 years old.

Where are you from? Do you still have the accent, or a different one?

Aberdeen, originally. And yes, I kept the accent.

What're you like as a person?

I'm a decent enough bloke, but I have a fuse. I don't like being fucked around and I'm not afraid to do something about it.

What are you wearing now? What other interesting stuff do you wear?

My overalls. Not a lot; maybe a nice hat.

Do you have any nervous tics or habits that mark you out?

I swear a lot. I also keep things behind my ears.

How tall are you? Hair colour?

I'm 5' 10", and I have dark brown hair.

Do you drink? If you do, what would you order if given the choice?

I drink beer, but if you're offering I'll take a dose of single malt.

Favourite food? Why do you like it so much?

Mince and tatties, cause ma used to make it.

What do you like to do on the weekends?

Fix things in my garage, make repairs on the truck, ride my bike, go out for a drink with my pals.

Come to think of it, what do you do during the week? Are you happy at work, or are you just waiting until something better comes up?

I'm very happy - I love working with cars.

Do you have a girlfriend/boyfriend? What do they think of your lifestyle? How long have you been together? What's their name? Do you love them?

I'm currently unattached.

Do you break the law?

Not often. I don't particularly care about it, though.

What advantages do you have over everyone else? Any allies?

I'm not big on allies, but I have my garage full of stuff which comes in handy every now and again.

How did you get your stats/skills? Are they due to your hobbies, your lifestyle, your job, or are they innate?

I've been a mechanic all my life, and the shooting comes from my stint in the armed forces. I picked up a few tricks in bars in my youth, though, and as a result I know how to hit people where it hurts. Where it really hurts.

Are you good-looking? Is it due to the way you dress, the way you look, or something else?

I'm not especially good-looking; mostly it comes from the way that I'm usually covered in oil, grease or dirt and I'm wearing my overalls. I guess if you smartened me up I'd look okay, but I'm not bothered.

Do you have any signature weapons or a particular vehicle that you like? What's the story behind them?

I have my truck - a real beauty - and it goes like shit, too. I have my sawn-off shotgun under the seat in case I get into trouble, but I've never had to use it.

Theme tune -

Seeing as I've picked a character who is, essentially, a mild-mannered non-combatant, it's hard to pick a kickass action tune for him to roll into battle on. Seeing, though, as he possesses an angry streak and if he does any fighting it'll probably be old-school brawling, we need something with a proper guitary smash to it. Also, it can't sound too modern as Mackenzie doesn't sound like a dance music sort of guy. Some Rage

Against the Machine, perhaps - we can say that he snaps at some point in the game, goes crazy, and brings out his fight song. *Guerilla Radio* has the right blend of guitar and speed to qualify for it.

One final note on character creation

If you're at a total loss for character ideas, one thing remains - play yourselves. Write up stats for yourselves and play in the action-movie esque world. Instead of the usual bunch of hardasses that your players use to represent themselves in the game world, it might be good fun to see how you - the players - would fare in a bank robbery, heist, or rooftop shootout. It also ensures fairly low-powered characters (unless you play with a bunch of body-building military types) which can make an interesting experience.

RULES SYSTEM

Much like the Character creation method, the rules in Arbitrary are pretty simple too. They are as follows -

DOING STUFF

While sitting around talking is all well and good, there's a chance that a character will want to do something at some point within the game world. Tsk. "Stuff" is described as Actions and players may take as many actions as they have Speed per turn - for example, a character with Speed 3 could take aim, shoot a round from their rifle, and duck into cover in a single turn. There are three different kinds of Action that can be taken -

Automatic Actions -

Simple things like "driving to the shops" and "finding a spoon in the cutlery draw" do not need any dice rolls to work out - we can just assume that the characters pull them off without problems. However, "drive to the shops in heavy traffic quick enough to meet someone you're already late to meet" would require a Skill roll (or, if you really know the city, a Smart roll). "Finding a spoon in the mall, at night, after you've broken in" would require a Speed roll if security is active and you're just running around the place or a Smart roll if you know your way around. Roll if failing will make game the game more interesting; don't bother if it would just slow things down.

Tested Actions -

Lobbing the grenade through the window, sprinting down the corridor away from the gang of security guards, kicking the door down and trying to find your way out of the building with an out of date map are all examples of Tested Actions. If a character wants to do something and the outcome is in question, roll a dice. If the dice roll is equal to or under their Statistic that is being used to make the test, then they have passed. If not, they have failed.

Opposed actions -

Opposed actions occur when two parties are trying to do the same thing - win in court, defeat their opponents in a tug-o-war, duel banjos, outrun each other, whatever. When this occurs, simply have both players/NPCs roll off as normal until one fails and the other succeeds in the same go. If they both succeed, keep rolling; if they both fail, end the contest (if applicable) or carry on. If a task has a set time/distance limit - for example, the two players are running across the room to reach the parachute before the bomb explodes, and only one can use it - then define a set number of turns in which the contest has to be resolved. If this is exceeded, the action is drawn and the players must roleplay it out from there on it (probably a fight over the parachute).

Bonuses/Penalties to Rolls -

Characters can get bonuses or penalties to their rolls through four main things - **Skill, Environment, Equipment, and Description.**

Skill - If characters have the Skill necessary to do a task, give them a bonus dice - i.e. they roll *two* dice and if either comes under their stat number, they have succeeded. If characters suffer from the Anti-Skill for their chosen task, the reverse applies - they must roll two dice and *both* must come under their stat number, or they have failed.

Environment - The same applies when the situation is beneficial or detrimental to the character's attempts - for example, shooting someone who is completely unaware of your presence and facing the other way is a *good* thing (one bonus dice in hand) but shooting a fully aware opponent through a rainstorm is a *bad* thing (one penalty dice in hand).

Equipment - The equipment that the characters start off with is assumed to be average. Any upgrades on said equipment or equipment of a higher quality that is found and used are represented by Bonus Dice. If a character is without their equipment or it is damaged, then they may suffer Penalty dice.

Description - Much like Dan Bayn's *Wushu*, players can gain bonus dice by giving actions a particularly evocative description. We're not looking for poetry, here, but something above "Okay, yeah, so I shoot the guy" would be nice - "I grab the MP5 off the floor, shoulder it, and blaze away down the corridor smashing windows and sending guards flying, the muzzle flash giving the walls a staccato illumination." Or something like that; probably not so cheesy, but you get the idea.

N.B. - Penalty dice and Bonus dice are like negative and positive numbers - they cancel each other out. For example, if you find an absolutely kickass sniper rifle on the corpse of a soldier you just took out and decide to use it to eliminate your target in the next building, you would get a bonus dice (because it's a kickass rifle). However, your target is at a difficult angle to get a good shot at him, so you suffer a penalty dice. These cancel each other out, so you'll be rolling on your basic Stat alone.

"Creaming it" and "Fucking it"

Known in other systems as critical hits and critical failures, a character who "creams" an action can be said to have done it particularly well and unexpected bonuses have become open to him. A character who "fucks" an action can be said to have done it spectacularly badly and things have gone from bad to worse as he not only fails, but added complications make further actions difficult.

To "cream" or "fuck" a roll, all of the dice rolled must come up the same number. If they all come up the same number and it is equal to or below the target stat the result is "creamed;" similarly, should they all fail on the same number then the result is "fucked." The more dice that are rolled, the higher the quality of the cream/fuck - creaming on a double is not as effective as creaming on a triple, and so forth.

The results of a cream/fuck are determined by the GM. You may notice that there is no chance of an ordinary character doing an ordinary task creaming or fucking a roll - this is perfectly fine. If, however, you want the option of creaming a roll doing such a one-dice task (for instance, you have to shoot the wheels out of the car before it hits you and you're right out of Spawn points), then take a penalty dice (probably due to your character crossing his/her fingers) and hope to hell they both succeed on the same number.

Generally, a creamed roll in combat doubles (triples, quadruples) the damage of a subsequent strike.

Example - Two characters are trying to break into different buildings without being heard; one a museum, one a car showroom. They both have the same level of security (average) and both characters have the skill of Breaking and Entering - as such, they both roll two dice on a target number to equal their Skill of 4.

Johnny - who is trying to get into the showroom- rolls a double one and "creams" the roll. The GM states that the nearest guard is, in fact, asleep and does not have to be dealt with in the same way as an alert guard. Frankie, on the other hand, is trying to gain access to the museum. He rolls a double six on his dice - a definite "fucked" action. Not only does he fall through the window, making a hell of a lot of noise, but he knocks over a massive antique vase that the curator had paid great sums of money to acquire.

Using Spawn

Spawn is a measure of luck - how much the player, rather than the character, can turn events in-game to suit his character. It is used like a normal stat in that it is rolled against on a D6 - unlike normal stats, however, it decreases by one each time it is successfully used (as the phrase goes, "you can only push your luck so far"). The effects of Spawn are determined by the player and GM - Spawn won't cause the roof to fall in on your opponent's heads, thus allowing you an escape route, but it will allow a block of stone to fall on the head of a guard if he's standing in an already dangerous building. It is usual practice to describe uses of Spawn by stating what happened, starting with the word "lucky." Spawn can be used at any time, even after a normal roll has failed. You can only use Spawn once per turn.

Example uses of Spawn -

"Luckily, my shot didn't miss - it came back off the stone wall and hit him in the chest."

"Luckily, I found a spare parachute."

"Luckily, I managed to reach the door before the bomb exploded."

"Luckily, the shot just grazed me."

Regaining Spawn

Luck is measure of how much the Gods like you. In the game world, the GM is God. Therefore, if you please the GM - by acting in character, saying/doing something particularly cool, or bringing him/her beer - then you may gain a Spawn point. GMs should be wary - only three or four points should be given out a session in this manner.

CARD CREATION

Heads up, people - gather round. This is the part where it gets interesting and I introduce a unique gimmick. Recently, I discovered the game *1000 Blank White Cards* - I've yet to fathom it out, really, but it involves drawing a set of pictures and results on blank cards and playing with them much like a CCG. The cards don't have to have any meaning; there are no winners, and no losers. One card (my favourite) shown on one of the few fan websites had a picture of a chirpy Jesus, and the text "JESUS SEZ - "Man, I wish I could have gone to Woodstock, but my ride crapped out. That must'a been a STONE GROOVE."

I like things like that - it was all rather Exquisite Corpse. I thought - I need something to separate my game from others of the same type (aside from the partly stolen "Theme Tune" idea - credits may or may not be given out at the end, depending on time constraints) and this is something I could work in - note, *not* "steal and jam in" - my game system. So here it is.

Before the game, give each player four blank cards (if you only have two players, you might want to make this six blank cards) and take the same number yourself. Upon them, write down an event, a piece of scenery, an enemy, a piece of equipment, and so on and so forth. Write down two positive, one negative, and one neutral event. Draw little pictures if you want. Examples are given below. Shuffle the cards and deal them out to the players and yourself. This is their "stock" of cards and they are recommended not to reveal them to other players (it might spoil the surprise).

Cards can be played at any time and interpreted in whatever way the user desires (within reason; as ever, this is sanctioned by the GM). Positive cards are generally played on the user's character (or a fellow PC) - they result in beneficial events, such as finding things or actions going particularly well. Negative cards are played on your enemies, which cause them difficulties/harm. Neutral cards are not played *on* anyone - they represent actions and features that, while they may act as beneficial to one side or the other, are not directly active in this respect. The GM can use his/her cards in the same way.

By the way, Positive cards such as *"You kill everyone without trying"* and negative cards such as *"You die, suddenly"* should not be allowed.

You should feel free to write/draw more cards than this; though they won't all be dealt out, they form a stock of cards that the GM can use in repeat games (should you play this more than once). Every game, repeat this, and eventually you will build up a stock of personalised action cards.

Examples -

Positive -

"You find a submachinegun laying at your feet."

"You find a first-aid kit on the wall."

"You kill the guard in utter silence - no-one hears a sound."

"You find a wallet containing two hundred pounds."

Negative -

"The grenade goes off in your hand - you escape death, but your hand is fucked."

"You run out of ammunition."

"A truck pulls out in front of you."

"In your path, you spot two guys carrying a massive pane of glass."

Neutral -

"There is a balcony nearby."

"A car is parked outside."

"A fully-loaded truck crashes through the wall."

"All the windows in here are broken."

"A train pulls up at the station."

"The roof starts to fall in."

COMBAT

Hopefully, at some point, the shit will hit the fan and you'll have to start throwing punches and pulling triggers to escape in one piece. This, my friends, is combat.

Combat is fought in *rounds* - everyone gets to make their actions, both PC and NPC, and a new round is started. The order of action is taken in order of Speed -characters with a rating of 5 go first, then 4, then 3, and so on. Actions themselves are carried out in *Bands* - Band 5, Band 4, Band 3, and so on. Band 5 is the first and anyone with Speed 5 can act once within (if two characters have the same rating, roll off to see who wins and goes first). After all actions in Band 5 are resolved, move to Band 4 - similarly, anyone with a rating of four or more can act once here. Characters with a Speed of 5 will act before those with a Speed of 4. Continue on in the same manner until you reach Band 1, where yokels and lardbuckets reside (assuming they haven't been killed by faster characters). The round then ends and a new round is begun.

If the theme tune of a particular character is currently playing, they automatically go first in Band 5. They may only make as many actions as they have speed, though, so will probably be unable to act in later rounds.

All of this, while sounding quite complex, is in fact done to keep the action moving - everyone gets to make their actions at the same time, but faster characters get to go first and have "extra" actions, as it were. Once the players get into the flow of it everything should be fine.

Fighting

While a lot of combat - the running, jumping, shooting part - is pretty much self-explanatory, you may need some assistance with hand-to-hand fighting. Treat the contest as an Opposed Action in which combatants roll to strike each other every Band while their opponent is doing their best to avoid/parry the strikes.

Players with a higher Speed may strike first - in fact, if a character attempts to strike an opponent in a speed Band which they are not eligible to use (hitting a Speed 3 character in Band 5) then their opponent may only

defend while they gather their wits - any successes they make are counted as draws. The winner of the opposed roll inflicts damage on their opponent appropriate to the weapon (detailed below).

Weapons

This system, I'll admit, is not a complex one. Accommodating weapons statistics such as "rate of fire" and "armour penetration" is too difficult to pull off - henceforth, weapons only have one rating. **Damage.** Admit it - it's the most important one, anyway. note that damage can be spread amongst potential targets, representing a spread of shot or a particularly dangerous follow-through.

Pepper spray and electric prods do no *actual* damage, but on a successful hit the target must make a Strength test with an additional penalty dice or be incapacitated for the remainder of the combat round.

Punches and kicks only inflict damage if the character passes a Strength Test, and at that only 1 point.

Pistols, clubs and knives are the most basic tools a character will use to hurt someone, and as such do 1 point of damage per hit. While they don't do a whole load of damage, they're a lot easier to conceal than the other types of weapon.

Submachine guns, automatic pistols, long-range shotguns and nasty, fuck-off swords are the next step up. A "hit" from one of these (depending on the type of weapon you may have taken more than one actual hit) does two damage.

Grenades, sledgehammers, close-range shotguns and assault rifles fill in level three, and do - noticing a distinct pattern here - 3 points of damage. Falling masonry also comes into this category.

Heavy machine guns, demo charges, fully automatic shotguns at close range form the highest and most dangerous damage 4 category.

Okay, okay - the system is far from perfect. *Very* far from perfect, actually, but let's keep in mind that these are roleplay characters and not actual, physical objects here. I'm aware that a demo charge is going to cause a hell of a lot more damage if thrown into a basement than a pistol fired four times down the stairs. The thing is,

players can take a lot of near-misses and flesh wounds until their luck runs out and they catch a bullet somewhere serious, and the system should represent that. The ratings are more "danger values" that show the relative chance of death if you stand in front of a man with a pistol or a man with a heavy machine gun.

Ammo

There is no system of tracking ammunition - it's assumed our heroes carry enough ammo to get the job done and reload as and when they see fit. Characters will only run dry on a "fucked" roll or if a negative card says they did; at this point, they must acquire some more ammo or a new gun.

Armour

Armour either stops a bullet or it doesn't - it's rarely destroyed before it's owner has been shot in enough other places that it's use has become somewhat irrelevant. Therefore, a character in armour gets a save - much like Warhammer - to represent the chance of a shot getting lodged in their armour. Quality and Covering give the character their save - a character in a run-of-the-mill bullet-proof vest gets a 6+ save (every time they are hit, roll a dice - if it comes up 6, no damage is suffered). A character in a suit of the same material gets a 5+ save. A character with said suit, a helmet, and a riot shield gets a 4+ save. Likewise, a character in a new-fangled ultra-protective bullet-proof vest might get a 5+ save.

Armour is only effective against weapons of the same "level" or lower - level one (6+) is only effective against knives, clubs and pistols, level 2 (5+) against Submachine guns, automatic pistols, long-range shotguns and nasty, fuck-off swords as well as knives, clubs and pistols, and so on.

Health

Get hit enough times in combat and you're going to start feeling the effects sooner or later. Once a character loses half of their hit points they take an extra penalty dice in addition to any other modifiers. Once they run out of Hit Points, they're dead. Hit Points can be regained by using a first aid kit, getting treatment in a hospital or simply having a rest against a wall for a little while. Once a player's HP is brought back above half they lose the penalty dice.

CREATING NPCS

Creating enemies and allies for the characters in-game is easy enough. Your average security guard will have a 3 in all stats and no skills. Cops are the same but are trained in hand-to-hand and shooting. Mysterious, black-suited security guards are the same but are better equipped and often come with stats ranked at 4. End-of-level bosses may have more skills, and the occasional 5 stat. Big head honcho baddies should, ideally, be more dangerous than the characters.

NPCS and health points

Most NPCs should be easily killed by the players; they're an obstruction, rather than a real danger. Therefore all "Mooks" - characters that are placed within the game solely to die and slow down the players - should have normal stats but an HP rating of one. Other bad guys can have increased or normal hit points - it's up to you.

VEHICLES

Arbitrary, as I have mentioned many times, is far from complex. Henceforth cars, buses and trucks only have two ratings to define their abilities - **Performance** and **HP**.

Performance - How fast a vehicle can go, and how well it handles. There are three ratings of this type; *Slow* - Vehicles such as trucks, tanks and construction machinery - although it's faster than walking, it's only just.

Normal - An average car or bike.

Fast - Sports cars, performance bikes, hot rods, etc.

While the actual distance covered in a turn is not calculated - that's up to the GM - a car that is in a race/chase/destruction derby "death bowl" type affair with a car that has a *lower* Performance rating gains a bonus dice to reflect their higher quality of car. Likewise, a car in a contest against an enemy with a higher Performance rating gets a penalty dice.

HP - Vehicles are given Health Points, much like humans, within the game. These are, again, divided up into bands -

Small - Bikes, Smart Cars, and so on are given 4 HP.

Medium - Average cars get 6 HP.

Large - Trucks, construction vehicles, and the like are rated at 8HP.

N.B. If a vehicle is armoured, give it two extra hit points.

A Sample Adventure - Requisition

Seeing as I've pretty much finished the game and I'm about halfway in, I figured I should write a sample adventure for any budding GMs to pick up and play. So here it is. It's not much to look at; I'm tired. Please excuse any obvious plot twists or crap direction. I also apologise for any inaccuracies in depicting the historic city of Edinburgh - I thought it would be more interesting than London, as all my other games have been set there.

In this adventure, the characters are the kind of people who get into fights often, sometimes of their own accord. They may be personable but they will be expected to get into a lot of trouble due to either their personality or the company they keep. Chances are they will be hired muscle of some sort or specialists with few scruples as to who they are hired by and what they do. Please bear in mind that these are not the only characters suitable for this game, and a perfectly valid solution is the *Die Hard* "wrong place at the wrong time" underdog hero concept. This time, however, the characters are up for a fight. The mood is one of action - the players must complete their mission before time runs out - violence, and general camaraderie as the group gets to know each other's characters.

Setting - Edinburgh, December. Snow and slush and rain. Search for pictures online to establish the mood - especially for the cathedral, as it's rather spectacular. It's Sunday at 10am.

Scene One - The Meeting

The characters are, in typical style, hired to undertake a job. They may be part of the same group, they may have never met each other - it's unimportant. They are all told to come to a cathedral on Sunday Morning mass and sit in the back pew. Their contact will appear once they are all there. The cathedral is huge above their heads - it stretches out above them, the ceiling decorated with frescoes and stained-glass windows stretching from the roof to the floor, casting multi-coloured light over the congregation. It is a large T-shape, with the altar at the central point. Pews line the longer part of the T; at the sides, there are a few smaller seating positions and raised platforms for the choir to sit on. The priests will be preaching from the altar in Latin, swinging their incense burners back and forth as they chant.

Their contact will appear. She is a good-looking woman with ginger hair tied back under her hat. She wears sunglasses and a long, black coat, and walks slowly, unsteadily. She will pass the players and slip them a piece of paper with the details of their mission (shown below) before sitting down with the rest of the crowd in the pews. If they look, the players will not be able to find her again.

The paper reads -

"We require a man. His name is Peter Campbell and he resides, currently, in hospital. We need you to go to the hospital and remove him before bringing him, alive, to us. He is protected by two guards at all times - they may, or may not, be armed. If he dies the deal is forfeit - he is of no interest to us if he isn't breathing. Bring him to us at 14 Gregory Lane by Monday at 9am. Your fee will be 10,000 pounds."

Underneath the text is the name of the hospital, the location, and the room number in which Peter is staying - Room number 345 on the fifth floor.

As the characters get up to leave, a man will sit down next to them - well-dressed, bushy moustache, round glasses, scarf. he speaks in a pronounced Scottish accent.

"Don't do it."

"What?"

"Don't do it. Come with me, you'll get off with a small sentence as long as you give us the information we need. We can help each other out. I don't want to have to take you by force."

He motions outside with his hand.

"We've got the place surrounded. You don't have a hope of getting out of here. Just come quietly with me and you'll get off with one or two years maximum."

Should the characters decide - quite rightly - that no policeman is going to tell them what to do, then fight number one will break out. Should go with him then move to the police convoy sideline below.

Fight number one - Church Battle

The characters have no weapons other than what they brought with them, yet that have to take on a supposed force of policemen before they can hope of escaping. Tricky business. Also, they must consider the implications of leaving the small man in glasses at large; he knows all of their faces. Should they kill or capture him? If they kill him in cold blood, the police will get even angrier than usual.

Enemy forces -

The small man in glasses (unarmed)

6 Police Armed Response Unit members covering the exits (H and K MP5 submachinegun, Beretta 9mm pistol, baton, armour 5+)

Already this is quite a fight. However, they also have a Sunday morning mass congregation at their hands. Should they be quick enough, they can use it as cover, for hostages, or attempt to blend in with it as they escape the church.

The church contains a lot of natural cover itself - the pews, the columns, the altar itself. There are plenty of stained glass windows to break and quite a few prayer books to destroy and send pages flying into the air. Crosses on the walls can be used as clubs and the censer that the priests used to spread incense over the church can act as a mace. There is a back door through the rooms behind the altar (though the police have this covered too) and the windows can probably be climbed through, though it's dangerous.

Should the players start to have problems (i.e. a full-scale gunfight breaks out; they're outnumbered *and* outgunned) then introduce a mysterious sniper. Set up in an adjacent building, the sniper offers covering fire and will blow the head off a guard or two should the players start losing too badly.

Should the players make it out of the church, they will have to make their getaway somehow. They can try to sneak away, but the guards are watching the exits pretty closely so chances are they'll be spotted. They can try to get out in the crowd of people as the congregation flees from the gunshots - they might be checked over by the police, though. They could take a few hostages and walk outside, hoping that no-one brought a rifle. Finally, with a combination of luck, speed and unholy amounts of firepower, they might be able to shoot their way right out of the church and make it to a nearby car, at which point the Car Chase ensues.

The Car Chase -

Nothing out of the ordinary - the traffic is relatively light, seeing as it's Sunday morning. To succeed in a chase the players must make 3 successful rolls out of every 5 that they make, representing each "exchange" of the chase; if they pass, they manage to outrun one car or shove it off the road. If they fail, the police car pulls up alongside them and attempts to ram them off into the pavement. There are a total of three police cars to evade - they are rated at Normal Performance and Medium in HP.

Should the players get stuck in a tight corner, they can elect to try and pull off a stunt, thus giving them bonus rolls. Stunts to consider are jumps, 180 degree handbrake turns, driving through pedestrian shopping malls and driving dangerously fast down the narrowest alleys they can find in an attempt to shake off their pursuers. Note that Edinburgh, unlike American cities, is not full of wide, open streets to drive through; it is a maze of side streets and main roads, open busy with traffic, that must be outwitted.

Assuming the players escape, they will probably lie low for a while and tend to their wounds. After this, they should move to the hospital and attempt to find Campbell. The only problem is that, following the church battle, security has been stepped up...

Alternative - Police Convoy

Should the players go with the police forces, they will be taken down to the station in two police cars with two additional cars in front and behind them, as well as the armed response unit truck bringing up the rear. As they are driving along the road, a truck will suddenly pull out in front of them and send the first police car flying into the buildings at the side of the road. Another will pull out and try to disable their following car. A couple of men in balaclavas will jump out of the vehicles and drag the police officers out of the cars

before releasing one of the players from their handcuffs and giving them the key before leaving the scene of the crime. The players, now, will have undo their handcuffs and deal with the unarmed police in their cars as well as the armed response unit that will, soon, make it's way round the wreckage and start to open fire. Oh, and all of them, bar one, are wearing handcuffs.

Assuming the players escape, they will probably lie low for a while and tend to their wounds. After this, they should move to the hospital and attempt to find Campbell. The only problem is that, following the events of the convoy, security has been stepped up...

Scene Two - The Hospital

The characters arrive at the hospital as and when they see fit; they don't have much time, though. Whenever they decide to go along (although they're probably best to leave it for a couple of hours) they will see that security is a lot tighter than they had expected - there are metal detectors on the main doors, two police officers on the front door, and three guarding Campbell's corridor at all times. Officers may be guarding the back door. In addition, should a fight break out, an armed response unit is waiting nearby in a helicopter to land on the roof of the hospital and deal with any disturbances.

There are a load of ways the characters could gain access; they could go in wearing disguises, but it is unlikely that they will work all that well if the Small Man with Glasses from scene one is still alive (he remembered their faces, and gave information to the policemen/women on the doors) and if they do this they will have to go without their guns, although they can acquire some from the guards inside - easier said than done. They can attempt to break in a side window, but the whole place is under a lot of police supervision so it is likely that, even if there is no actual police presence at the back of the building, they are watching the players through security cameras and will dispatch officers to deal with the problem. The players *could* dress up as Doctors/Nurses and try to blag their way in - this requires some acting on the part of the characters as well as some way of requisitioning the relevant costumes (assaulting a Doctor who leaves for a smoke is possible, but dangerous - you'd really have to lead them away from the hospital to avoid detection). They could always shoot their way in, but it's a long walk up to the fifth floor when the police have shut off the lifts, locked down the doors and have a group of eight men with submachine guns on the roof. Dressing up as police officers would, much like the doctor disguises, require a lot of acting on the players' part to sound convincing enough - bullshitting rolls would also help, here. They could, somehow, start a fire and dress up as firemen in an attempt to gain entry (possibly sending in someone they know with some petrol and a fuse) which would mean they could bring all their equipment past the metal detectors without a fuss. It may be tricky, however, to acquire four firemen suits and suitable equipment. They also have to deal with the building being on fire as they attempt to break in/get out. They could try and pose as journalists reporting on a big story. they could send a character into a nearby building to act as a sniper to give them fire support. It's up to them.

However they choose to do it, the lift is just down the hall on the left, and he's on floor five, room 345 - walk down the corridor for a minute then take the first left at the intensive care department. A map of the hospital will be on the wall next to the entrance doorway and on all floors - characters can check it whenever they want and should they get lost a Smart roll is required to remember the right route to take. Should they need equipment they can try and steal it from rooms - scalpels are useful in combat and electrical wire is useful as a garotte, and gas canisters can be used as massive clubs if the need arise.

The guard station is located on the first floor behind several "Staff Only" doors; inside here is the commanding police officer (the small man with glasses), a couple of guards, and two hospital security staff watching the cameras. It would be hard to take without raising the alarm, due to the masses of communication equipment in there, but the characters are free to try if they like (they'll need a suitable excuse to warrant asking the position of the security room, though). They could also attempt to cut the power somehow, rendering the police blind by removing their cameras.

Campbell's room -

Campbell has been seriously injured by someone or other; in fact, the guy's in traction, tied to his bed. His head is out of plaster but not a lot else is - two of his legs and his arm appear to have been broken, and his back is in some sort of supportive apparatus. It'll be hard to move this guy without taking the whole bed along with him.

He's flanked by two guards - they look official, but not so official as they can't carry guns. They both carry 9mm pistols which they keep holstered. They have above average stats.

Outside the door are three unarmed policemen/women who have been assigned to screen anyone who wants access to the room. They have not let anyone in today, so force looks to be the only means of entry unless the players can *really* charm their way in. They carry batons, tazers and pepper spray; not nice when used on the players, but useful when taking on the personal guards inside.

Once the players break their way in and deal with the guards, they will have to get Campbell out of the room. He cannot be carried - aside from it being awkward, it would kill him. Should any players try this, they should be aware of the sign at the bottom of his bed next to his chart that reads "DO NOT MOVE - PATIENT IS IN A CRITICAL CONDITION." He was asleep when the characters came in, but if they made enough noise dealing with security he will be awake and screaming for help. Eagle-eyed players will notice the image of a helicopter in the sky out of the large window behind Campbell's head or hear the distinctive noise of the rotary blades - they have, roughly, two minutes to get out of there before the armed response team arrive on their floor.

As they move Campbell, he will scream for help unless silenced. He is rather irritating. He will do everything he can to hinder the characters unless his life is threatened, at which point he'll shut up and play nice.

They will be faced with many problems. Primarily, they have to extract Campbell without killing him - probably leaving him on his bed and wheeling him around. They will also have to contend with the eight armed men running towards their position. Should they reach the ground floor, they will be hindered by most of Edinburgh's police force crowding around their position. If they started a fire, it will begin to spread through the building and block off escape routes as the elevators are locked down - make sure you put in cool sprinkler effects, here.

There are two ways out of the hospital - down and up. Down involves a lot of shooting, a lot of Campbell-dragging and a lot of casualties should they reach the floor as they carve their way through Edinburgh's finest. There will be another car chase, much like the last scene, except that they will have to shake off five cars and (somehow) a police helicopter. They will also have to find a vehicle big enough to take Campbell in his immobile state.

Up, on the other hand, involves wiping out enough of the armed response team (using those two pistols you found - yeah, all two of them) to make your way to the roof and hoping that someone has flying experience or can threaten the existing pilot of the helicopter that is sitting on the roof. If they kill the pilot and no-one can fly, then it is essentially a useless lump of metal other than the fact that it contains a few spare submachine guns and a pump-action shotgun. If they manage to get into the air it is a simple matter of evading the police helicopter (which isn't as fast as the one they're using) and getting out of sight long enough to take Campbell to the agreed location come Monday, 9am.

Epilogue

Assuming the characters make it to the location on time, they get their 10,000 pounds (and probably work out why they got so much for doing it) in return for dropping off Campbell. Later on in the news they will see that *"an armed kidnapping took place at the city hospital - a group of men abducted Peter Campbell, the defence's critical witness in the ongoing O'Reagan murder trial. Without Campbell - and with the information he possesses in the wrong hands - it is unclear whether the trial will be able to continue."*

Appendices -

Voodoo and Psychics

While in my normal game I don't leave a lot of room for this stuff, you might want to include it in your scenarios, and hats off to you. There are two ways of dealing with such things as magic, psionics, and funky powers (either vampiric or cybernetic) -

Stat - Give the character a new stat based on their power - for example "Pyrokinesis 4" or "Earth Magic 3." Roll when you want to do something with the power. This is useful for wizard-esque magic and general, broad-brush abilities.

Ability - Give each power it's own strictly defined ability, for example "Grow claws out of my hands" or "See in the dark." These can be used without penalty at any time, but often require some sort of "fuel" in blood or spirit-love to function. Determine this with your GM. This is also useful for cybernetics.

A very quick Q and A session

Why's it called "Arbitrary?"

I sat down at my PC and didn't want to spend too much time thinking about the name. I figured that an RPG is an arbitrary means of defining events within the player's minds. I thought it sounded snappy.

Why aren't there rules for (insert subject I have not covered here)?

'Cause I didn't have time, or I don't care. Make them up - it's all pretty much there.

Where's the credits?

Again, I don't have time. I'd like to thank the creators of the fantastic 24-hour RPG *Waxing Lyrical* (Plot Device Games) for inspiration on the theme tune idea, my dad for taking me out to dinner halfway through this project, my girlfriend for living in a timezone with a 6 hour difference so I'm forced to stay up until 3am, writing, so I can call her and any and all action film directors and producers for the fine hours of entertainment they've given me (apart from Jerry Bruckheimer - he's shite).

Music listened to whilst writing this RPG

A mix disc I burnt especially - a lot of Unkle, Rob Zombie, Massive Attack and techno beats (including a great tune called *Axion* - dunno who wrote it, though).

FINISH TIME - 12.55. August 13th.