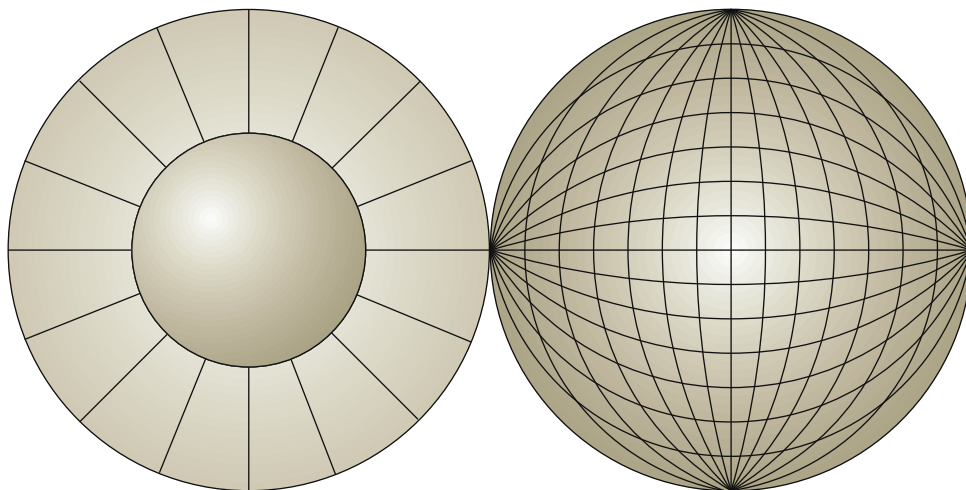


EPITOME

Continuous Role Playing System

Version 0.2.2



©1992,1998 by Pitt Murmann

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Contents

The Aim	4
Political Correctness	4
Flattened	4
Audience	4
The Rules	4
The Character	5
The Character Sheet	5
Self	5
Composition	6
Coherence	7
Persona	7
Advantages and Disadvantages	8
Special Abilities	8
Memory	8
Creating a Character	8
Inside-Out	9
To The Core	9
Comprehensive Examples	9
Cpt. Jessica Hathaway	9
Halfdan Ingvarsson	11
Rhæthondryl	11
The Game	12
Correlating Characters	12
Background	12
Potential	13
Comparing Different Levels of Power	13
Resolution Based on Circumstances	14
Playing the Game	15
Progress and Development	15
Conclusion	16

The Aim

When you lose control of the situation, just keep lashing out until you feel important again.

Unknown source

EPITOME claims to be a role playing system, or, at least, may be regarded as a fundament for generic role playing games. Rather than providing a self-contained system including rules, a plot and a setting (that is, a background), EPITOME just tackles the rules fragment. By doing so and by trying to be as versatile as possible, EPITOME can be combined with a variety of imaginable settings, be it fantasy-, science-fiction or what-so-ever-related.

Political Correctness

To avoid unnecessary animosities (being the result of incorrect use of pronomina), genera have been mixed throughout the text as often as possible.

Flattened

Unlike many other role playing rules sets, EPITOME does not claim, at no point, to be exhaustive, comprehensive or complete, but instead follows the opposite approach: flattening rules and obligations as much as possible and handing responsibilities for running the game back to living creatures, that being players and game masters alike.

One outcome of this policy results in the rules being quite simple, if noticeable at all. Another is that the few guidelines, rather than rules, are not at all ultimate and definite, but just offer suggestions and hints on how to structure your game.

The reason for having to rely on rules naturally derives from the fact that different types of people have to be dealt with, their preferences covered and their expectations met. Rules in games are supposed to create a common standard to which every participant is ought to stick. They also help to wipe out personal discussions and interpretations, cutting off any kind of such uproar by sentences like “rule x applies here, stating that...”

EPITOME does not like the approach of predefined universes that pretend to cover any situation with an appropriate rule. In fact, this is what it is trying to avoid at any cost, encourages players to step forward to point out what they believe is right and applicable. Using a basic set of rules just places a certain amount of candy pool at the disposal from which players may, or may not, choose the most appetizing splinters. However, the alternative, that is, not relying on

rules at all, thus following an even more spontaneous approach, is not that far-off beyond the horizon.

All things considered, the booklet, whose pages you are invited to go through during the next half an hour, is not so much a set of rules, but a collection of generic suggestions of how to play a role playing game. It basically assumes that you have played such a game before and that you have made your own experiences with whatever system and rules you used. It does not try to persuade you to move and stay away from a system you like to stick to an other instead. It just wants to offer you the opportunity to have look at a (most likely) different approach to run your game.

Audience

EPITOME addresses compromising players. Whether this requires the players to be experienced or just persons who do not stick to rigid rules solely depends on the nature of the players involved. You should make sure not to take on the burden to study these pages if the only way you prefer to play is to cling to the state of affairs described in rules. As laid out above, the game’s approach is to involve players, not to restrict their creativity and shut them out by rules. That’s why you will most probably not find what you are looking for.

EPITOME may be used with or without a game master (GM). This, too, solely depends on the preferred style of playing. Some players prefer to leave out GMs altogether, while others consider GMs necessary to maintain the balance of the game. Since EPITOME provides no GM-specific sections, both fractions should be served equally well. For the sake of simplicity the term “GM” is used throughout the text to refer to an umpiring entity, regardless, whether this is administered by a particular player or all players in unison.

The Rules

Bend me, suspend me, grind me down.

— The Golden Rule

The most important rule in EPITOME, and most likely applicable to role playing games in general, is that there are no axiomatic rules at all or, at least, no rules players can not set aside.

Although this statement may sound ridiculous in respect of traditional board games it makes sense in regard of role playing games. Role playing games are played by actually *playing* a character, by evaluating

her or his strengths and weaknesses and by making decisions based on analyzing fictitious situations, which, in turn, are the result of previous decisions and actions of the involved characters.

Any situation has virtually an endless number of possibilities of how to continue the game, even if players sometimes seem to have difficulties in proving the latter's validity. Role playing games differ profoundly from games like Chess and Go, which, too, often offer a large number of possibilities and moves of how to continue. However, these games' player's variety of choices are finite and, most importantly, discrete, that is, you may choose either to move A or move B, but nothing "in between". Role playing games, on the other hand, do not have these kinds of restrictions. The players themselves represent the ultimate jury. They, and only they, decide what is appropriate, valid and possible and what is not. Sometimes this task is up to only one person – the game master, but eventually it is a living person who has the final say.

Because of this, EPITOME's prime directive is to withdraw as many rules, restriction and obligation as possible, thus keeping formal complexity away from the players. It just offers hints on how to run the game. Its framework is not considered to represent a complete drawing, but rather a sketch or outline. If you have a look at the EPITOME character sheet you'll notice no nooks, but only circles, spheres and lines. Nooks represent interrupts in continuities, abrupt alterations of directions, while circles and lines represent infinity and enable the artist to think of a continuous spectrum rather than a discrete one. This represents a very important aspect of EPITOME. A character's attributes and abilities, if any, need not only be restricted to a certain number of items, but, to close the ellipse, anything "in between".

The Character

Behold! This is the very fabric I am made of.

— Anonymous golem

No rule or obligation matches the importance of characters, them being the most important aspect of role playing games. This applies to both, player characters as well as non-player characters, yet, above all, concerns the former, since player characters are original, unique and inimitable in the sum of their diversity.

The Character Sheet

Strictly speaking, EPITOME deals with portraying a character on a sheet of paper. You won't find tables

on how to strike foes down in a specifically applicable situation or how many yards your characters can cover within a given period of time. The rules won't tell you how much damage your character is able to endure before he is knocked out or how much capacity he may carry before his attempts to climb a steep wall are considered impossible to succeed. What you will find instead is how to use crayons to color your sheet.

The best way to represent EPITOME's character sheet would have been to use a clean sheet of paper with no writing or drawing on it, for this would constitute the purest form of continuity. However, relying on a small number of guides turned out to be quite helpful for most people, guiding their imagination to take shape more quickly. Most aspects of the game to which characters are connected are epitomized by circles and lines. These geometrical objects are just that – abstract containers for the players' imagination. Whether players choose to express their thoughts by writing words, use colors to emphasize the meanings or rely on drawings to symbolize their characters is completely up to them. Yet, it is suggested that players should be able to reinterpret their meaning at a later date.

Self

This large, central circle consists of three concentric zones. The outermost section provides space for describing the character's appearance, that is, her immediate presence and outwardly noticeable form that is shown to her environment. This may include her personal style, clothes being worn, appearance and so on. It should comprehend anything a player considers important regarding the external and obvious traits of a character, that is, things that can be seen, heard, smelled, etc.

The middle layer provides space for the character's demeanor. It may take an other person quite some time to discover a character's demeanor. A character would have to be watched, followed and, most importantly, talked to to reveal his attitudes, tastes and personal preferences. Unlike the outwardly expressed appearance, a trait that can hardly be hidden from his environment, it is completely up to a character which details of his demeanor to pass on to the world around him.

The innermost circle provides space for the character's innermost desires and fears, maybe her aim in life, her soul name or her arch enemy who's presence causes abysmal terror to run down her spine. It depicts her soul, that is, her real feelings and desires. Contrary to one's demeanor, which represents a character's behaviour or what she pretends to be, her soul

stands for her real sentiments and values. This circle is meant exclusively as a note for the respective character's player and the game master and should be concealed from the other players. If the party of players do not want to conceal and screen their character sheets from each other, but prefer to place them in front of them openly, they should at least refrain from disclosing their souls aloud.

EPITOME neither poses restrictions, nor offers suggestions on how to describe your character properly. Players may use any means to express their thoughts on their characters' appearance, demeanor and soul. In many cases, color is a nice way to distinctively express matters, while drawings often represent fine ways to embody a player's mood (or vice versa). In fact, many persons seem to rely on drawings to express their subconscious, be it during a telephone call or a role playing session. Other players, who lack the artistical skill to express themselves via visual depiction, may refrain from drawings altogether and rely on words instead.

Composition

Matter-of-factly, the middle left circle is not as continuous as the other circles, but subdivided into sectors by several lines. However, these lines are supposed to represent guides only that may be ignored completely, if so desired.

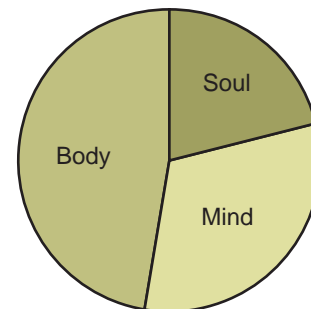
The Composition represents the character as a whole, that is, all his potential, abilities and skills, his body, mind and soul. When creating a character, players choose their strengths and weaknesses in terms of the background setting. They distribute the character's applicable aspects to mold the character as such. The process of specifying these aspects can be illustrated by subdividing the circle area, the character's total potential, into several smaller pieces, the latter of which represent the stance of the respective attribute in regard of the other attributes that compose the character. Allocating a certain amount of space for any aspect leaves the rest of the yet unallocated area for the remaining aspects. The number and type of aspects solely depend on the players' choice.

The central circle inside the Composition circle can be used to hold a brief description about the character's most remarkable and outstanding ability – either in the form of a personal sign or a couple of words.

Example 1: *The party's scenario takes place in a modern world and the players decide that their characters are mostly determined by the latter's physical, intellectual (that is, mental), spiritual and social (that is, interactive) potentials. They allocate each of the 16*

Composition sectors by respectively shading the area, thus dividing up their characters' potential according to each player's preferences. If each of the shaded areas covered four sectors, the character would be perfectly balanced and equally potent in each of the four fields (four times four sectors covers the whole circle made up of 16 sectors). Yet, some characters could turn out more interesting with strengths in certain fields at the expense of the rest of their abilities. For instance, an athlete could be assigned more physical prowess adjusted by somewhat decreased intellectual capabilities.

Example 2: *The character is supposed to be a humanoid living being. The player decides that, for molding this particular character, the basic components are Body, Mind and Soul. Thus, he uses pens of three different colors to mark three sectors of the circle, now looking like a pie chart.*



Example 3: *The character is supposed to be an earth elemental, a magical being primarily consisting of energy related to the element of Earth. Thence, the player chooses most of the circle's area to be covered by the Earth-sector, which she assigns a greenish-brown color. The Fire- (red) and Water-sectors (blue), are less significant for an earth elemental, but are still existent. The Air-sector (white), on the other hand, represents the opposite characteristic to Earth and therefore covers just a tiny remnant of the circle area.*

Example/Suggestion 4: *Many players choose to use the inner circle of the the Composition circle to hold and depict their characters' most outstanding attribute by writing down a short expression describing it more clearly. Examples might be "Tough Warrior", "Quick Thinker", "Keen Perception", "Cool Performer", etc.*

The Composition circle not so much represents a character's absolute potential, but the way her traits and abilities are distributed. Thus, the Composition does not describe a character's total potential in comparison with an other character, like Joe Average compared to a super hero (whose potential is certainly

much bigger than an ordinary cosmopolitan's), but comprehends this particular character's composition. However, there are also means to compare the potential of characters with different levels of power. This sort of information is dealt with in the section of how to resolve situations, called *Correlating Characters*.

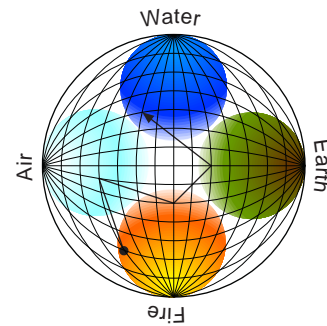
Coherence

The Coherence may be used to record a character's coherence, interrelations and contiguity, that is, it describes continuously shifting properties like affinities, belief/faith, alignment or other characteristics that are likely to change during the character's existence. are expressed by visual means rather than numbers and digits. EPITOME tries to deploy visual means instead of numerics to express these values.

The Coherence circle has been designed to provide guides to record two dimensional correlations, but, by making use of some imagination, could also be used to record any other kind of singular personal state. There are several possibilities of how to keep track of these values. The circle's lines could, for instance, be regarded as a planar coordinate system, the grid of which comes into shape when the surface of a sphere is projected onto a plane. Thence, two dependent or independent characteristics could be dealt with in regard of each other, their values being measured by the distance from the origin of the coordinate axis. With lots of imagination even more complex constellation and the mutual relationship of aspects could be visualized using the Coherence sphere.

Example 1: *The Coherence circle is used to record the character's alignment that combines two different aspects on a continuous scale: the Good-vs.-Evil-factor and the Law-vs.-Chaos-factor. In this case, the origin of the coordinate axis would represent the point of absolute neutrality, while points furthest from the origin would stand for the greatest possible eccentricity. The more the character's alignment shifts towards good (evil) behaviour, the more the alignment moves to the top (bottom) of the circle. The more the character's alignment shifts towards lawful (chaotic) behaviour, the more the alignment moves to the right (left) of the circle.*

Example 2: *The character tries to reach four distinctive goals in her life. These goals are represented by the four uppermost, lowermost, leftmost and rightmost points of the sphere, respectively. Approaching one of them implies neglecting the others, like compassion interferes with self-realization.*



Example 3: *To tackle the formerly employed example of elementalism once more, the four elements are used to represent certain psychic patterns of a character's behaviour. When her behaviour changes, the position on the Coherence map changes, too, leaving behind some sort of temporal path or trace of how the character felt along the way.*

Persona

The five smaller circles surrounding the upper central circle may be used to further outline the character, providing space for the latter's name, profile, place of birth, family status, relatives, relationships, supernatural or special abilities (if any), primary attributes, professions, occupations, ranks and titles, interests, etc.

Notes about one's occupation or profession might help to create and mold an image about what a character is into. It also gives you hints about her adopted skills and abilities.

Taking down some notes about the character's skills is important for later reference when a situation depends on her actual abilities. A character's abilities may include several skills in certain fields of knowledge, skills in craftsmanship, physical skills like acrobatics, climbing and running, weapon skills like guns, pistols and plasma cannons, languages, wilderness lore, etc. While playing, it turned out to be quite useful to have a character's repertoire prepared for later reference. The skill circle just offers enough space to hold to the most extraordinary skills – maybe the type of skills that make this character stand out.

Relations, taken down in the homonymous circle, comprehend individuals and groups a character is befriended with and has contact or conflict with. The list of personal relations is highly dynamical and likely to grow rapidly during the game.

The circle of Experience is mostly used to take notes about events and experiences respectively gathered while a character thrives in his life. In a world

almost immune (or even hostile) to supernatural belief, you might find it remarkable that your character was once abducted by aliens.

Advantages and Disadvantages

Sometimes, player characters are special – either above average or particularly gifted. Some characters have special or even supernatural abilities, feats and traits that grant them a certain power ordinary people do not possess. On the other hand, certain players want their characters to be ordinary persons like you and me, embedded into their respective environment. They are not what is usually expected to be a hero or heroine, but seem to be just like most people are. Players usually accept both variants, eventually choosing the kind of play they consider most appropriate for their character.

However, the most interesting characters not only have powers and special abilities, but also disadvantages, drawbacks and handicaps. Superman is, without doubt, an impressive, powerful superhero, but even he is vulnerable. Not only does cryptonite affect him badly; he is also susceptible to human feelings and values – a fact, rogues tend to use against him regularly when they are unable to beat him openly. His other self, Clark Kent, is even more vulnerable because of his conservative and retentive behaviour. Love, mercy and commendation do not leave him untouched and sometimes he seems to be even more vulnerable than mere mortals.

Characters who not only have advantages, but also disadvantages are usually more interesting to play on the long run. Although you might ask why your character should be short sighted, spluttering or dumb at the first place, such drawbacks could provide depth and variety for the game.

Special Abilities

The great advantage of rules sets like EPITOME is that everything that does fit anywhere, may still be included somewhere.

Since the players are not limited in the choice of abilities, feats and goodies, the only power of decision of whether a property may be chosen or not, are the players themselves and, most preferably, the GM. Apart from that, there are no restrictions of how many abilities may be selected.

Abilities that do not fit anywhere else on the character sheet may just be written down as part of the character's background. Very powerful abilities that take up large portions of the character's personality, should also be included into the Composition Sphere

of the character. By doing so, the player illustrates that the specific aspect is so important that it takes up a considerable part of her potential. Magical and psionic powers would be candidates for such powerful abilities. Again, the proportion of the ability would indicate its significance in comparison to the other aspects of the character's self.

Memory

The large lower circle is intended to serve as a general-purpose mnemonic device. Players can use it to keep track of their characters' equipment, secondary skills, names of persons and species they have met, dearest friends, monthly income, experiences, number of foes killed, number of times being killed themselves, etc.

Creating a Character

During the creation process of a character, a player character (PC) as well as a non-player character (NPC), usually gets initiated by a spark of imagination. Players have certain visions lurking in the depth of their minds, waiting to emerge and be brought to the surface. After these patterns have formed and the player has outlined at least a rough concept of the character the character sheet can be used to take down some notes about it. The players can either agree to a common style of how to record their respective concepts or go ahead independently.

The former method has the advantage that all characters can be easily compared to one another by referring to the same attributes of the same circle, being painted in the same color and representing the same characteristics. Thus, all characters possess the same basic framework, but the players still have the possibility to allocate, draw and paint their characters according to their own ideas and preferences.

Designing their characters independently provides the greatest flexibility in regard of how to mold their imaginations, since the players do not have to stick to specifications or defaults. The natural result are characters who express the players' ideas best. The drawback, however, is that characters created this way tend to have difficulties to match each other. If, for instance, one player prefers to play a standard human character, while another one chose to develop a powerful supernatural creature, the disparity of their ability to affect and manipulate things in the game world is quite steep. Although it could be interesting to work out a playground for such a diversity of characters, scenarios of this kind usually turn out to be less preferable on the long term, because the characters either outwit or are inferior to each other.

The medium course of both approaches would be to first settle the scenario and basic conditions and subsequently leave it up to the players to work out their characters the way they want.

If the game is guided or lead by a GM, things are less troublesome. A player trying to develop a character simply has to come to terms with the GM. The GM, in turn, can arrange with all players independently without cutting down their creativity too much.

At any rate, all players should be satisfied with their respective characters when starting the game. One of the most disillusioning threats to a game session are unbalanced characters, who, as the case arises, even cause groups to shatter sooner or later.

The mere moments of the character creation may turn out to be one of the most exciting moments in the life of a character – or at least, one of the most far-reaching. While it is still possible to change the character later on during the game, these moments, minutes or days provide the basis, the very fabric, for the character’s career.

Inside-Out

Usually, a player starts with taking down some notes about her new character. She could, for instance, start with the innermost part of the Self circle to work her way out the peripheral sections of the sheet – the inside-out-method.

The Soul represents the very self of your character, her innermost core or whatever seems appropriate. It is referred to to record her true nature: What touches her? What does she like? What is she really up to? It comprises all things that are not obvious to her environment, but are only known to her player and the game master.

The next step would be to define the character’s demeanor, the way she appears to her surroundings: How does she treat her confidants? How does she react to strangers? How does she (outwardly) cope with unexpected situations?

Thereafter, she has to allocate her potential – the primal elements the character is composed of. The Composition circle, representing her potential needs to be allocated or sliced up to depict the respective components of her self. Whether these are certain statistics, attributes, abilities or other integral parts is completely up to the player or GM.

Next comes her Coherence, the scales of her persona. Like the Composition circle, Coherence measures certain aspects of the characters personality. Unlike the Composition, Coherence usually refers to interdependent characteristics: If there are conceivable extremities, where would she locate herself within a fi-

nite range? Is she close to the norm or rather eccentric in certain respects?

Afterwards, the upper peripheral should be filled with some useful hints about the character’s persona. For instance, it would be appropriate to give her a name, even if she was unable to speak or communicate at all. Simply by being able to call her by her name raises the character from its impersonal state of being a subject. Furthermore, details about her race and genesis should be added: it is always useful to know from which part of the universe a character arrives and from which species she descends. Similarly, notes about the character’s primary abilities help to check out her possibilities in certain upcoming circumstances.

Finally, the lower circle may be filled by annotations about her experiences, further skills, feats and other details that help to decorate the character’s profile.

To The Core

Rather than starting with the Self and emerging to the surface going inside-out, players could also pursue the opposite approach, that is, beginning with observable formalities digging down to the core of a character. This approach is particularly interesting for NPCs, since the first thing a GM usually has in mind is the function or purpose of this kind of character. After that, the character’s appearance and behaviour is assigned, eventually concluded by his emotions, feelings and preferences. This, too, represents the way characters interact with each other: First, he is just a person embedded in his respective environment. Later, while talking, working and adventuring with others, more of his true soul is revealed peel by peel.

Which approach happens to be the more appropriate is completely up to the player. Most probably, introducing just two character generation methods might be too coarse a granulation. On the other hand, a comprehensive description of the theoretical aspects of character creation would fill piles of tomes of it own.

Comprehensive Examples

This section is concluded by several examples on how characters could be developed and how their abilities and personalities might be expressed in terms of play.

Cpt. Jessica Hathaway

Jessica always wanted to become a captain onboard of one of the Imperial starships. The desire to command

a crew through the infinity of space was never second to any other vision she fostered throughout her life. It was only this unmatched desire that made her come to terms with the high standards demanded at the starfleet academy and which, after many years of hard work, made her eventually reaching her goal. What followed were years of happiness – the sort of happiness that occurs when you have reached what you ever wanted to reach, when you are respected, being looked up at and admired by those people who share your dreams, but who haven't made it yet to the position you hold. These years could or should have lasted for ever, yet things of such quality are not supposed to last for eternity and that's why all she ever fought for came to a stillstand all of a sudden. And her dreams were shattered.

Captain Hathaway was in command of a ship and crew being sent to the outer asteroid belt of the Kearney IV system. Her mission was to track down and arrest a loose bunch of pirates the leaders of which were thought to cooperate with an organization of terrorists who caused damage worth billions of credits to several major affiliated groups being known to work close with Imperial governments. After several months, the crew eventually succeeded in subduing one of the enemy ships and even one of their leaders. While interrogating the other captain, a person called Darius Blount being infamous for his charismatic and subtle ways to interact with his counterparts, something that Jessica would never have expected happened: she started to abandon the world picture she had clung to hitherto.

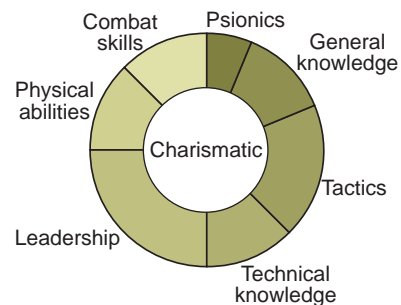
Being fully aware of Darius' reputation as well as his charismatic and manipulative skills she built up her defenses soon and high. Yet, most of the things Darius stated were mostly based on clinical facts that were accompanied by personal points of view only from time to time. The pirate stated readily to be part of the so-called terroristic organization that tried to cause as much trouble to certain wings of the government as possible. The reason for their doing was the corruption of these groups and the things certain powers and executives had done. Although Jessica denied the news at first, mostly because she refused to believe them due to their competing point of view, she could not deny the facts Darius presented her piece by piece. Independent of each other they were just plain facts, but when combined and applied to the conditions she knew to be true about the government, they made sense in the end. The fact that all means she applied to detect whether Darius told the truth approved his allegation was even more disturbing – yet not as perturbing as Darius' sincerity and candor, both of which started to impress her more and more. After several days of interrogating the pirate, having his statements verified

by either her own knowledge or the Imperial database and having to admit her opponent's charming ways without feeling targeted by any manipulative powers, her ice broke. Finally, she couldn't deny her conscience any longer, even if this meant to throw overboard anything she had believed in so far. After her officers had left her alone with her prisoner in the evening of the eighth day of interrogation she arranged his and his crew's escape to their ship. Still, the most disturbing fact for all participants was that Jessica found herself at the pirate's side when the ship set off for one of its hideouts in the asteroid belt. Interestingly enough, Jessica did not look back to the world she left behind.

Terms of play: Jessica's strength is her social ability to lead and motivate people who serve under her command. She is intelligent, charismatic and deals justly. Her leadership is supported by several fields of knowledge, most of which she acquired at the starfleet academy. She also possesses a minor, latent psionic talent. Although this supernatural ability is not highly developed, it sometimes comes in handily when sensing the true motives of people who try to fool her around.

Jessica's player assigned her Composition as follows (the numbers represent the number of circle sectors being covered by the respective ability):

- Psionics: poor [1]
- General knowledge: fair [2]
- Tactical knowledge: good [3]
- Technical knowledge: fair [2]
- Leadership: excellent [4]
- Physical abilities: fair [2]
- Combat skills: fair [2]



Her most outstanding ability is to *Lead and command a crew*, a fact that her player takes down notes about in the central Composition area.

Her Composition scales the following aspect: loyalty versus (personal and ultimate) freedom. Within eight days, Jessica's Coherence takes a quantum leap on the respective axis, but her sense for justice, if denoted on the other axis, is left almost untouched.

Jessica's personal Soul motive is *Harmony*.

Her Demeanor comprehends *Justice, Respect, Personal progress*.

Her Appearance is *Good-looking, self-assured, demanding and somewhat grim*.

Her abilities are mostly derived of her potential, which, in turn, is made up of her Composition. There is no need to split up the categories any further or go into details about specific skills as long as the player has an idea about the character's Composition.

Halfdan Ingvarsson

Halfdan, firstborn son of Ingvar, chieftain of the north western territories along the frayed coast, eagerly tries to follow suit his father's deeds and values. But to his and his father's distress times have changed. No longer is the north man's tribe capable of playing games with the enemy, a "civilized" empire invading their land from the south. No longer do their longships sail the coasts to drive the warriors' battle axes into the skulls of their victims. No longer do their ferocious battle cries clash against the forts erected at the southern borderline. Times have changed and it seems that the young chieftain's prime directive will be to save his people's culture instead of invading or conquering the enemy's land, to uphold the status quo instead of leading assaults to breach their walls. The north men's glory lasted for generations, but now it is most likely to fade, maybe for ever. Too long have the tribes fought among themselves, trying to settle petty disputes. Too long have they tried to achieve their own advantages only, gaining nothing in the end. Now each of them is isolated, their people either scattered in the wilderness or hidden in their own forts. It is only a question of time when their enemy will push north its armies, rolling over their fathers' land and annexing the unorganized tribes one after the other.

Halfdan, a proud young man, healthy and skilled in both, warfare and wilderness lore, is confronted with quite hard an heritage. Being aware of the fact that the glorious days of his people might fade in a couple of years, the warrior's conflicts mostly do not take place on the battle field, but in his father's hall and inside his mind where arguments about how to protect the tribe best rise and fall in conjunction with low and high tide. Whether to confront the enemy or to hide from him to keep the own losses low. As it seems, the only remaining chance for the country as such to survive is to set aside pride and meet with the other tribes, an effort that is not to be taken lightly. Still, uniting the tribes, them being built up in unison, strength and hope might pose the only weapon that proves strong enough to block the invader's advance.

Feats and traits:

- Tough and strong [advantage]
- Seasoned warrior [advantage]
- Keen senses and wits [advantage]
- Handsome (kind of) [advantage]
- Blessed by the gods [advantage]
- Arrogant and proud [disadvantage]
- Short tempered [disadvantage]
- Relentless [disadvantage]

Rhæthondryl

Rhæthondryl's life span measures in millennia and aeons rather than seasons or decades. She is an ancient, huge, horned dragon who spends most of the time in deep slumber. From time to time her sleep is being interrupted by a certain uneasiness the source of which is either profane appetite or caused by a careless bunch of adventurers trying to steal precious pieces of treasure from her lair. In the majority of cases, the latter leads to satisfying the former quite perfectly, Rhæthondryl having found out that human flesh seems to fit into her annual diet extraordinary well. In cases of a surprisingly low adventurer population, she has to heave her huge mass out of the comfortable, subterranean corridors of the mountain range and feed on the nearby farmers' cattle – hopefully including the keepers as well, whose taste top that of the four-legged creatures by far.

The dragon rarely bothers conversing with mortals, but sometimes falls victims to some adventurers' offers to exchange some news about events having taken place within the last decade or a tale or two to stimulate her idling intellect. Even more rarely, the information exchanged satisfies her so thoroughly that she forgets about dealing with her other needs, food, which means that tale tellers generally do not leave the conferences alive. History can tell only of a handful of cases where Rhæthondryl intentionally (or accidentally) refrained from swallowing a guest or messenger. Most of those who survived a meeting were bards or poets who somehow managed to feed her enormous pride and personage with enough adulation to leave the cave while the recipient was entranced in the false flattery.

For generations Rhæthondryl has been a thorn in the nearby kingdom's king's side and enormous hassle has been dealt with to meet this problem. Yet, until today, neither great men, nor "volunteers" were able to survive an argument with the flying serpent. Rhæthondryl, on the other hand, seems to consider

this to be a more or less challenging game whose winner was the same for more than four centuries now.

The ancient dragon's abilities can hardly be compared to the ones possessed by mortals and are therefore depicted using the scheme described below as *Comparing Different Levels of Power*.

The Game

No one succeeds without a little bit of good fortune, and the luckier you are, the smarter your stupid plans look.

— James M. Ward & David Wise

“The show must go on”. This is probably one of the most important of all rules in a game – apart from the one to leave out rules altogether, if need be.

Without this basic aspect of the game taken to heart, the story and the characters will be kept from developing and the players will be bored. To prevent this from happening, EPITOME provides a basic fundament of suggestions on how to run game sessions and how to apply a small number of rules or solutions on certain circumstances. However, these suggestions just comprise hints about how interaction of characters might take place in a very generic way.

Correlating Characters

Certain circumstances require characters to be compared to one another, for instance, to determine which one of two fighters is the better or whether one character is able to sneak past an other character who is guarding the spot. In both cases one characters' abilities have to be compared and correlated to one another.

This type of comparison also takes place if a player or the GM needs to determine whether a character is capable of doing something she intends to do. When doing so, the respective character's ability is not compared to an other character's potential, but is correlated to the difficulty of the intended action. A large number of situations do not have to be dealt with in such complex ways – breathing, walking and cooking stew comes naturally to most humans and does not require any further consideration, of course. Yet, sometimes things are more critical and the outcome of a situation depends on how capable a character is of doing something.

Background

The first suggestion to apply here is common sense. For instance, is the untrained squire really skilled

enough to seriously harm the seasoned knight in a duell? Has the gardener, who spent his life cultivating flowerbeds, got the knowledge to hack into the remote computer network and defeat the vicious A. I.? Is the solitary clerk and lone wolf able to impress an expectant crowd with an instrument she had never laid her hands on before? Or is it more likely that tasks of this severity can be handled by true experts only?

While some characters may appear relatively balanced when being compared to each other, others simply do not fit into an appropriate comparison slot, most probably because they lack the respective ability to handle a situation successfully. Thus, characters trying to achieve incredible difficult tasks will most likely fail unless the circumstances are particularly exceptional. A tiny chance, be it infinitesimal still, should always grant the player an option to cope with even extremely hard situations. If continuously being blocked from all opportunities and limited to passive participation, players will soon lose their interest of the game. Additionally, the special taste of role playing rules sets like EPITOME, which does not follow a strict approach of simulating the reality as we know it, lies in the infinite spectrum of opportunities it grants to imaginative players. Yet, chances differ for various types of characters, even in role playing games. Characters who are particularly skilled in the field required to deal with a task are, of course, more likely to succeed than less skilled or untrained characters.

To determine whether a character is proficient in what she is doing, her knowledge and background should be referred to. When the character is created she is not only assigned a personality, but also some general abilities and skills. The latter may be specified manually to point out and emphasize that the character is particularly proficient with this type of action or is able to use this specific ability.

Alternatively, the character's background itself may spawn certain proficiencies because the character either uses the associated skills daily or has used them in her past. Usually, skills that derive from the character's background, that is, her profession, her hobbies, her environment or past, and thus being not as exquisitely developed as specifically noted skills, tend to be less distinctive than the latter. The more strictly the respective term is specified, the higher it is valued and expresses some of this character's abilities. For instance, while *combat skills* may indicate that the character has smelled gun powder once or twice before, *9 mm S&W* is obviously more specific and indicates that the character has a certain knack with this particular weapon. Still, both ways to describe a background are perfectly acceptable as long as the players and GM

are satisfied. Players usually employ both methods, describing their characters' profiles roughly by selecting certain groups of skills, such as occupations and professions, eventually spicing them with some particularly qualifying feats.

Example 1: *David taught history in two classes at the local university in the last quarter of the twentieth century. When he is sucked into a time tunnel and whirled back to 1820, he is quite disorientated at first. However, because of his occupation and knowledge in the field of history he is more likely to understand the strange things going on around him than a character without his knowledge would. He could try to use his knowledge of the past, his present now, to be at the right place at the right time – whatever this means for forging his personal destiny.*

Example 2: *Nancy worked as an electrician before she was offered joining a professional ghostbuster team. When one of her simpler devices drops to the floor and breaks she picks it up and examines it. If she takes her time, she should have a fair chance to reassemble it, maybe after replacing some of the broken interior gadgets.*

A craftsman will have no or few problems accomplishing his daily work. This is what he has is trained in and what he has done for several years. Most of the time he considers his daily work as a routine job. If, on the other hand, he is supposed to finish a job under pressure of time or has only wrong or low quality tools at his disposal, even this task may pose quite a challenge to him. However, he still knows how to do the job and if he is lucky he could get around it by using some alternative means. This sort of scenario will apply totally different to somebody who has no or few information in the necessary field of knowledge or working process. All he can put forward is the small piece of luck he has got left. Sometimes, if the stars are right, this will be enough to accomplish the task miraculously.

Potential

Apart from the general proficiency of a character, which is expressed by her background and virtues, her effective potential in a certain field may also be determined by her Composition. As described in the previous chapter, this sphere is commonly used to represent how the character's holistic potential is distributed among several statistics or attributes, such as physical, mental or spiritual abilities. If two or more characters are to be correlated to each other, their respective attributes, if available, may be referred to. This type of comparison is much more accurate and grants more

detailed conclusions on how characters correlate to one another, but works only properly if both guys possess the same set of applicable abilities.

Let us examine two characters with similar backgrounds (say, both of them are clerks who spend day and night in well conditioned cubicles) who all of a sudden find themselves in an unfamiliar, hostile environment, the wilderness. Since neither of them has ever been confronted with wilderness survival before, the GM might rule that the chance of passing out due to exhaustion for each of them depends on their physical capabilities, respectively. In this very case, the chance of success for survival depends on the character's Stamina, Physique or otherwise assigned and applicable aspect of Composition. It is higher, the larger the area that represents the respective ability. Two characters with the same amount of potential are equally potent in succeeding in their tasks. It might make sense (and add to the infinity of solutions of how to cope with all kinds of situations) to include considerations about a candidate's theoretical knowledge about wilderness survival, even if this turned out to be second hand information gathered while reading adventure novels in his early days.

Characters benefit most from precisely and well-defined capabilities, while general purpose abilities add less benefit to more specific tasks. Consequently, allocating one's Composition is always a compromise and trade-off between a deep and a wide spectrum of abilities. *Combat Skill* comprehends a wide spectrum of sub-abilities that are applicable to a large number of circumstances. *9 mm S&W*, on the other hand and to revisit the example used above, describes a much more specific feat and may only be applied if this particular pistol or comparable gun is used, but provides much higher potential to succeed once it is applicable. The only rule on how to compare abilities of different precision is to use common sense to value the precision of the respective ability against each other.

Comparing Different Levels of Power

The Composition just describes how this particular character distributed his personal potential. It does not, by any means, express how this potential correlates to beings or species of a completely different kind. For example, it takes a lot of imagination to correlate a dwarf wrestling a giant even if both creatures possessed the same fine wrestling qualities. This sections tries to find a solution for dis dilemma by reinterpreting the content of the Composition sphere.

A possible approach to uniformly measure and compare capabilities in certain fields is to not only assign to one's Composition with proportional values

in regard of one's own potential, but also in regard of absolute levels of power. If creatures of the same level are compared, their respective potentials are referred to on a one to one basis. If, on the other hand, creatures of different levels have to be correlated, the difference of levels has also to be taken into account.

The easiest way to represent different levels of power would be to deploy numerical or mathematical means, like factors or non-linear functions. As far as numerics is concerned, EPITOME tries to refrain from using it simply because it contradicts the game's continuous and visual demands. Consequently, it is suggested to rather use verbal terms like "better than", "much better than", "by far better than" and so on. An other way to nicely incorporate levels to a character's Composition is to use different shades of colors to paint the circle area with.

The term "level" itself may adopt any meaning depending on the particular context. Regarding physical interaction, level may stand for size or strength as the wrestling scenario imposes. Yet, mental abilities, too, might be conceivable. Imagine a human creature playing chess with an extraterrestrial life form whose intelligence surpasses anything a limited human's mind could think of. Its level of Mental Ability will most likely be much higher than the human's.

Example 1: *The black knight was well-known within and outside the borders of the kingdom for his skill with both the lance and the battle axe. Still, the opponent he faced the last day of his existence proved to be superior: the dragon, considered only a weakling among its own kind, blasted searing flames against his opponent and roasted the knight and his mount inside their metal shells. After that, it could be considered almost unnecessary to crush the remainders with a stroke of one of its mighty talons.*

Example 2: *The tiny bullets fired by the numerous rifles of the frantical rebels caused only annoying scratches to the assault walker's exo-armor. After it had taken about two dozens of the mosquito bites, it turned one of its cannons and disintegrated major parts of the building where the snipers hid with a single plasma blast.*

To cut a long story short, it may be considered quite difficult to consistently correlate creatures of different levels of power. This applies, above all, to conflict simulation. While it is perfectly handable to play out a conversation between an humanoid mortal and a great old wyrm, a dragon, it proves difficult to send both of them into battle with the human eventually getting the upper hand. Yet, this issue not only concerns physical disputes, but all kinds of contests

and skirmishes where one of the participant's abilities are far beyond his counterpart's. This does not mean, though, that EPITOME cannot be used for playing superhuman beings or take part in superheroic encounters. The accompanying circumstances just have to be dealt with on an abstract level instead of quantifying each other's raw muscle or superhuman power. If you are looking for a means to *simulate* such kind of quarrel on a consistent basis, EPITOME won't do you much good. Instead, you might discover an appropriate solution somewhere else.

Resolution Based on Circumstances

Whether or not a character's action succeeds primarily depends on the following factors:

- the player's description of the character's performed action
- the situation the character finds herself in
- the character's experience and applicable abilities that could help her to perform the task successfully

The first applicable criterion to decide whether a character's action is possible should always be the statement of her player, describing and portraying how her character performs the action. Even excellent characters will fail in their task, if their players do not back them. As a general rule of thumb, a character's action is more likely to fail, the less detailed it is described by her player. If the player just states that her character is going to disable the encountered alarm mechanism, this is not considered quite detailed a process, not to mention the lack of atmosphere such a statement might add to the game. If, on the other hand, she states that her technician takes her time to step back, consider the gadgetry as a whole, then unpacks her electronic sets and carefully starts to unscrew the cover plate of the switching box, studies all wires as well as the cables and where they disappear into the wall, figure out the integrated circuit units' types being used, then takes out her astatic voltmeter trying to measure which part of the circuit she has to care about, and so on, the character's chances to achieve what she is heading for are pretty good. Of course, it is completely up to the players how to play their characters and lead them through the scenario. Some players may even prefer a more direct, pragmatic style of play. Yet, a player prospering in details clearly states her interest in the game as well as the development and progression of the plot.

The second criterion for successful actions is being provided by the situation itself. For instance, the

success of an outcome of an action may depend on whether there is enough time to perform the respective task and to consider all necessary details extensively. Is the character's party under heavy gunfire and without cover so that they constantly have to jump back and forth to dodge the bullets? Is the character, trying to perform a difficult action, assisted by a qualified handyman? Is a character blinded by back light? Do the weird sounds of a haunted building give him the creeps?

The list of the things to be considered here may go infinitely. However, this is where the strengths of a continuous RPG play out quite obviously: while discrete RPGs tend to rely numerous tables on how to apply bonuses and penalties for each and every situation, EPITOME refuses to accept such reckless assumptions. The premises to these suppositions are often even more fictitious than the game itself and rarely cover more than a few singular conditions.

Last but not least, a character may have certain innate or trained abilities that help him accomplishing his task. He may also have encountered a similar situation before and learned how to cope with it successfully. The more the respective feat or experience is related to the current situation, the more likely it will be of use for him. The aspect of how to apply knowledge and skill has been dealt with in the previous chapter about correlating abilities. It is repeated here to emphasize its use along with and in the context of the other two aspects of resolving situations.

Playing the Game

Participating in a pen and paper role playing game usually means to express one's thoughts about a given situation verbally. A good role player would be capable of imagining the situation, adopt it to his character's perception, conceiveability and personal values and explain the way his character reacts. The groundwork for a perfect game would comprehend players who are able to explain their characters' actions equally well in regard of comprehension of the circumstances, level of detail of explanation and the choice of their words. Unfortunately, quite often neither the players, nor the GM is capable of meeting all these ideals for several hours of continuous, entertaining play, in particular, when it comes to situations the outcome of which has a lasting effect on the forthcoming plot. However, since things being said at the table may have far-reaching effect on the scenario, all decisions should be made wisely, not only for one's own, but the entire party's sake.

Making decisions is not always easy. If the players

prefer a style of play without a GM, it may turn out that it is even harder for them to meet the prerequisite of equality in regard of their narration style, because of the lack of an almighty equalizing and balancing entity. This is not necessarily a disadvantage, but requires the players to accept and tolerate each others style of play. They should be constantly open to adopt to the situation to keep the process of play running as fluently as possible. This usually also requires them to instinctively make compromises: certain turns of the plot, which do not fit into one's own concept, should be considered as necessary trade-offs to keep the game as such running, maybe momentarily not for the own, but for the common good.

If, on the other hand, a GM is leading the game, the responsibility of making the final decision in cases of vagueness rests solely with the GM. The prime prerequisite for this style of play is to select a person for leading the game in whom the rest of the players trust. It is needless to say that a person, who contradicts himself regularly will be mistrusted by his players soon. Once the GM is agreed upon, the rest of the players should bear the consequences of their choice (unless the GM proves them wrong), that is, keep themselves in check of arguing with the GM every now and then and learn to accept his decision without grumbling. Discussions with GMs about the correctness of decisions almost always prevents the game from running fluently. If the choice of the GM turns out to be wrong, because of his being untrustworthy, capricious or acting arbitrarily, it may be time for a change.

Progress and Development

It's not whether you win or loose that counts, but how much pain you inflict along the way.

Unknown source

In a RPG that disposes almost no rules at all it is difficult to formally improve a character's statistics or abilities. In fact, EPITOME knows no experience points or experience levels like the ones that are used in certain other rules systems to reflect a character's experience, knowledge and power. In EPITOME, everything continues and grows uniformly and steadily instead of increasing by leaps and bounds. Characters certainly do gather experience, but the process is usually reflected by learning details about the world and one's environment rather than accumulating points and traits, abstract values that lack any connection with the journeys, travels, voyages and personal experiences they made beforehand. Players are encouraged

to take down some notes about the persons their characters met and the monsters they have fought, but it is not necessary to keep tallies of how many of them they have killed with whatever weapon.

Of course, characters may improve their skills and even learn new abilities from other characters and it may be a good idea to take down even further notes about these facts. Yet, this process is not accomplished by spending development points, but by sweat, tears and time – either “in time” by simply playing the character’s role or by keeping a character for herself for a while to extensively train old or new abilities.

The most interesting part of being good at something is the reflection a player’s style of play. Novice characters are just different from experienced veterans and a good role player would be able to express this fact by his own means. While the novice might be shy and unsure in the application of his abilities, the veteran would bristle with self-confidence, easily handling the most difficult situations. Still, there is word about novices trying to conceal their uncertainty by pretending to be tough and experienced, although they have never been far from their mother’s apron.

Conclusion

All things considered, it’s just a game.

— The author

EPITOME is quite virtual a game and concept. Most of the important things take place in the players’ minds or are talked about verbally. Only few things need to be written on character sheets once that character has been created, and even then, the sheet is more likely to serve as a scribbling paper rather than a means of keeping track of values. Maybe, some things are not written down at all, but are “just there” because of pure implication. For instance, medieval hunters possess bows as much as modern cyber junkies possess network plugs. EPITOME is not about tracking equipment and inventory, but about role playing.

EPITOME claims to be a continuous RPG, that is, it does not rely on discrete values and scores. As a

side effect, everything is possible by default. Black and white are obvious, but there is a lot of shades of gray in between, most of which is even more interesting to be depicted than the obvious, opposed superlatives. Discover the infinity of manifolds rather than sticking to discrete numerics. That is what EPITOME encourages you to consider. Sometimes, numbers are interesting to do nice things with, but not in the field of role playing games where a profane “My score is 11” tends to ruin the game’s atmosphere more than it contributes to its progression.

Besides being continues, EPITOME is a RPG that places most of the responsibilities in the players’ hands. The players, in cooperation with the GM, decide whether or not they have certain abilities, feats and items. There are no rules about how many abilities a character may have when being created or how much he may carry along with him. The player decides, and if nobody objects to the decision, it is considered a fact.

This aspects of freedom tends to surprise and even frighten certain players and, above all, game masters mostly because they are stripped from their discrete sets of rules or options to apply to a situation. The consequent lack of random elements, usually created by the use of dice in other rules sets, virtually *demands* decisions from players instead of leaving the outcome of a situation to the random factor. Especially GMs are sometimes unable to cope with circumstances where they personally have to make a final decision without relying on dice to determine the immediate progress of the plot. On the other hand, certain players seem to enjoy the freedom of focusing on the display of their characters instead of diving headlong into rules and tables. If this is the case for you, EPITOME might be a candidate to play for you. In fact, it is dedicated to all free-form role players in general.

EPITOME, the role playing game, is just that – a role playing game. It is about having a good time while playing characters who actually do not exist, doing things that are hardly conceivable, taking place in your imagination only. Ω