INSPIRATION

The inspiration for this game came from many sources. These all have a common theme of magic existing as a subversive and powerful force for transformation, which is also a central theme of Mortal Coil.

Novels and Stories

- *The Anubis Gates*, *The Drawing of the Dark*, and *Last Call* by Tim Powers
- *Coraline*, *Stardust*, *Neverwhere*, *American Gods*, and the *Sandman* series of graphic novels by Neil Gaiman
- The *Hellblazer* graphic novels by Jamie Delano and Garth Ennis
- *His Dark Materials* trilogy by Philip Pullman
- *The Last Unicorn* by Peter S. Beagle
- *The Odyssey* by Homer
- *The Metamorphoses* by Ovid
- *Monkey* by Cheng-En Wu
- *Fairy Tales* by the Brothers Grimm
- *Fairy Tales and Stories* by Hans Christian Anderson
- *1001 Nights*

Plays

- *Dream on Monkey Mountain* by Derek Walcott
- *The Tempest* and *A Midsummer Night's Dream* by William Shakespeare

Movies

- *The Company of Wolves*
- *Prospero's Books*
- *Jacob's Ladder*
- *Spirited Away*, *The Cat Returns*, and *Princess Mononoke*
- *Big Trouble in Little China*
- *Jumanji* and *Zathura*
- *Unbreakable*
- *Sleepy Hollow*

Mortal Coil is a role-playing game of magic and passion. The goal of Mortal Coil is the creation of a shared world of the supernatural, and a strong style of narrative, novel-like play.

A role-playing game is one in which you create a story together with your friends, and the rules of Mortal Coil are designed to help you do this. Mortal Coil is similar to many other role-playing games: while playing, most of the people will take the role of one character, while one of the players, the Game Moderator or GM, presents challenges to these characters and portrays the supporting cast in the story. The larger group of players will represent the protagonists of your story, and will work with the GM to create the conflict and action that makes up your story.

THE GM'S ROLE

The Game Moderator has several responsibilities. The GM will bring the supporting characters to life in your story, as well as help the players set the scene, present challenges to the players, and help them bring the passions and issues of their characters into play in order to drive the human elements of the story forward. This is a big responsibility, but the GM is not responsible for doing all of this alone. The other players should help the GM by making suggestions, initiating scenes and conflicts, and making sure that the issues they want to address are brought to the attention of the other players.

As GM, you truly are a moderator. You have the power to organize what could be a very chaotic situation by announcing which scenes and characters are the current focuses of play, especially if it seems as if the group is getting off track. To do this, you must listen to your players. The most important things to your players are their character's passions, which are prominently listed right on the character sheets. The passions (page 28) indicate where a player is interested in taking his character. Only rarely should you try to introduce or push anything that doesn't directly relate to at least one of the player character's passions.

The theme document (page 20) is also a very useful tool for you as the GM. This document is created by both you and your players, and essentially defines your game world. Players can introduce new facts into the theme document, as described later; when they do so, they are also communicating what they want out of the game. If a player creates a fact about sorcerers, that's generally a pretty good indication that the player wants to have sorcerers become part of the game world and have some impact on the story that is being told. As a GM, you can note what facts are added to the theme and see to it that these facts show up in the game—in most cases, the sooner the better.

THE THRESHOLD OF CREDIBILITY

A game of Mortal Coil is a group effort requiring a high level of collective agreement among the players. No one player has the authority to make a sweeping decision about any character or the game world at large without the input of the other players.

When someone is introducing a new fact into the theme, or adding a new aptitude to a character, attempting to use an aptitude in a conflict, or even changing a character's passions, group consensus is required. The change is announced to the group as a whole, and any other player can bring up an objection. Mortal Coil is not a competitive game, it is meant to be a collaborative one. When an objection is raised, discuss it among the players and come to some sort of agreed solution. You will gradually come to understand what your group is willing to accept and establish a threshold of credibility for new information to be added to your story.

As a rule of thumb, the threshold of credibility for the group should match that of the player with the most demanding or rigorous standards.

SCENE FRAMING

Setting a scene and knowing when to end a scene are perhaps the most important skills you can learn in Mortal Coil. Starting scenes and ending scenes strongly influences the pace of play, and helps

focus the players on the important things in the game. The GM is mostly responsible for keeping an eye on this process, but all of the players also need to take an active role in this.

All scenes have one of two purposes. A scene can bring out one or more conflicts, or a scene can show some key information that is relevant to the characters and the overall story. Sometimes, it can do both. Set up the scenes to move action forward, and push your story. Don't focus too much on the little details—get right to the juicy bits. If the scene starts to drag, either move to resolution or conflict, or else end the scene and move on to the next one.

Players, make sure you speak up if there is something you want to resolve in a scene before it is closed. Remember, you are responsible for moving the action forward as well.

Example

The scene is a bar, and Russell's character, the Roman god Pluto, has just gotten the better of his rival Jupiter in a tense conflict. Pluto and his friend have managed to get Jupiter so drunk he passes out at the back of the bar. Conflict over, the players congratulate each other. Michelle, the GM, now immediately sets a new scene to move the action along: "OK. The next day, Pluto is in his office, and the door slams open. Stepping inside is none other than Jupiter, and he looks angry."

Keeping Things Exciting

How do you keep a scene focused and interesting? Make sure the scene sets up a situation the characters in it cannot ignore. The situation should demand to be resolved, one way or another. How the players choose to resolve the situation is entirely up to them; as a GM, don't have one specific resolution in mind. Let the players make their own decisions, but don't let them weasel out of the tough choices. Escalate scenes to the breaking point.

The players already provide you with what you need to know about what is important in your story. Passions (page 28) are the

key to interesting sessions. The passion of at least one character should be intimately involved in every scene in some way. Scenes get really interesting if more than one character's passions come up. Situations where a single character's passions pull him two different directions also create rich play, and scenes where the passions of more than one character pull in different directions create great drama. Try to get the players to choose between passions—which one is the most important to them?

Tokens

All action in the Mortal Coil system involves tokens that are used in play. Tokens can be poker chips, go pieces, beads, cardboard chits, or any other type of easily visible object that can be moved around on the table during play. Four distinct colors should be used, and it is usually convenient for all of the players to use the same type and color of token so the GM can clearly see what is going on with each character.

There are four types of tokens; these are detailed below.

- **Action Tokens**: Each character has a pool of action tokens usable for taking actions in the game. Each time you wish your character to perform any task, you must commit an action token to do so.

- **Passion Tokens**: Each character has powerful passions that drive his actions, and these tokens represent his ability to call on these passions to lend additional strength to his actions.

- **Power Tokens**: Players have another flexible pool of tokens, power tokens. These tokens are awarded in play, and you can sacrifice them to aid your character's actions, buy more influence over the theme and scene, or enhance your character's abilities for the long-term.

- **Magic Tokens**: Each player has a pool of magic tokens. You can hold and use these as a player, rather than having the

tokens serve as a resource associated with a character. Magic tokens must be spent to activate all magical *effects* in the game, or sacrificed to create new magical facts about the game world.

Using Tokens

During the course of play, tokens will be used to allow a character to act. There are three different ways to use your character's tokens, each having a different outcome: **commitment**, **spending**, and **sacrifice**. These uses are defined below.
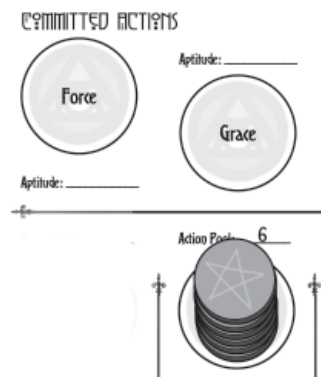
Committing Tokens

When you declare that your character is performing an action and move an action token forward to do so, this is called **committing the token**. Any physical or mental effort by your character requires the commitment of an action token.
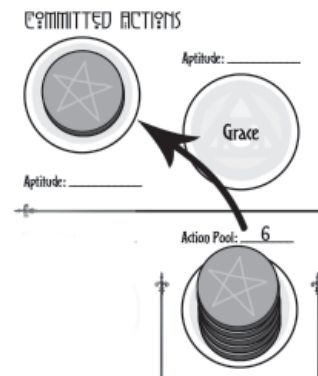
Once a token or tokens are committed, they cannot be reused until the conflict to which they were committed is complete or aborted.
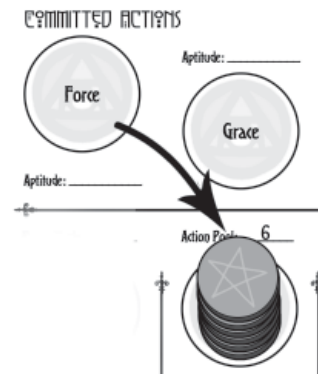
Example

Jason's character has a pool of six action tokens:

Jason decides his character is going to try to force open a locked door. He commits an action token:

Jason's character forces the door open and goes inside. Jason no longer needs to have the action token committed, so he moves it back into his pool:

Only action tokens are committed. Passion, magic, and power tokens are not committed—they may only be spent or sacrificed.

Spending Tokens

Tokens are **spent** if they are temporarily taken from play. Spent tokens can be regained, although the method and specific requirements for regaining spent tokens varies with the type of token (as detailed later).

Example

Krista has a pool of seven magic tokens:

Magic Pool: 7

Spent Magic Tokens

Krista decides to activate one of her character's magical aptitudes. She spends a magic token:

Magic Pool: 7

Spent Magic Tokens

Later, Krista decides to introduce a magical event into the game, the opening of a magical portal (the existence of the portal had already been established earlier). She spends another magic token:

Magic Pool: 7

Spent Magic Tokens

At the start of the next session, Krista will recover her spent tokens:

Magic Pool: 7

Spent Magic Tokens

Power tokens are not spent, but must always be sacrificed.

Sacrificing Tokens

A token can be **sacrificed**, in which case the token is permanently removed from the pool. Power tokens are always sacrificed; they are ephemeral by nature. Magic token may also be sacrificed when you wish to create some new magical fact within the game world. Very rarely will an action token be sacrificed: if one is, it usually indicates that your character has performed some action that permanently injured her body or mind.

Example

Keith's character has three power tokens:

Power Pool: 3

Keith decides to sacrifice a power token to get the edge in a conflict. He now has two power tokens:

Power Pool: 2

This token will never return to Keith's pool of power tokens. It is gone for good.

Passion tokens are never sacrificed.

SUMMARY

The GM's Duties
- Bring supporting characters to life.
- Help players set the scene.
- Present challenges to the players.
- Help players bring the passions and issues of their characters into play.

The Threshold of Credibility
- Equal to that of the player with the most demanding or rigorous standards.

Setting Scenes
- Each scene should bring out one or more conflicts.
- A scene can also show key information relevent to the characters or story.
- Scenes should set up situations the characters cannot ignore.

Tokens
- Four types: action, passion, power, and magic.
- Three uses for tokens:
  - *Commitment*: used to declare actions (only action tokens are committed).
  - *Spending*: temporarily remove tokens from play (action, passion, and magic tokens may be spent).
  - *Sacrifice*: permanently remove tokens from play (power, magic, and occasionally action tokens may be sacrificed).