THE
LADDER

- A Simple Roleplaying Game -
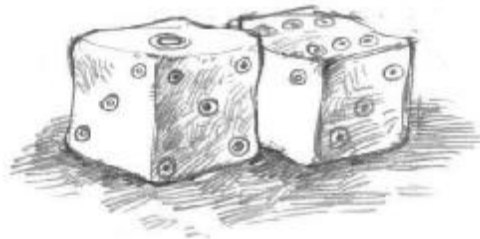
ZOZER

ZOZER Games Design
Written by Paul Elliott © 2003

Introduction

The Ladder is a rules-lite roleplaying game, perfectly suitable for use with new players, and especially with younger players. This lack of complexity has also seen The Ladder used successfully to run internet roleplaying games. Tasks are resolved with a single roll of a standard six-sided die. There's no addition, subtraction or multiplication required, and there are no numbers used to describe how good characters are at things. But I hope it isn't too simple! Have a look and see …

Why is it called The Ladder? Good question. The entire task resolution system is designed on a 5-step ladder each rung denoting a level of expertise required to achieve a certain effect. If you are 'good' at driving, then we assume you achieve a task result of 'good' most of the time. Occasionally you will be forced to Step Down your success level (to Poor or Fail) or Step Up (to Expert). All will be explained later.

If you're an experienced roleplayer, then skip straight down to Character Creation. However, if this is your first experience of a roleplaying game, keep reading to find out what Roleplaying Is …

Roleplaying Is ...

Roleplaying is just like story-telling. Well, *almost* like story-telling. In roleplaying each player narrates the part of **one** character in the story and one character only. She can say what that character does and says. One of the players is also in charge. This person needs to read and understand all of The Ladder rules and be able to think up good stories and ideas on the spot - and *that* can be quite difficult! This person is the Gamesmaster (GM) and he will think up a story (in secret) and plan out how it begins, what the characters will have to meet or overcome and generally make the story exciting. The GM is not always right, but he does have the final say on what the players want their characters to do. His job is to be fair, keep the story going and make sure all the players are having a go and having fun. Arguments should always be avoided; this *is* a game after all. The players must understand, though, that the GM is in charge and when he has made a decision that is it. On with the game.

In a roleplaying game like The Ladder the players narrate the actions of their own characters. Usually the GM will give each player an idea for a type of character that will fit in with his story idea. For example, if his game is going to be about a bunch of pirates stranded on a deserted island, then all the characters must be pirates. Makes sense? If they are going to be children daring each other to stay overnight inside a real haunted house, then all the characters need to be children. The characters in the story need to be suited to the type of game being played.

The person running the game (the Games Master) must first decide what the game is about. After this he must think about the setting (and maybe prepare a map) and think up suitable characters for the story. It's a bit like writing a story plan, but no-one knows how it will end until the game is played.

A few ideas:

- Cowboys looking for treasure
- Pirates looking for treasure
- Survivors from a crashed spaceship, well, surviving!
- Rabbits trying to find another warren to live in
- Knights trying to kill a dangerous dragon
- Young wizards at school trying to stop an evil magician
- Children on holiday investigating a smuggling ring
- Children living on an island where magical things happen
- Going back in time to another age
- etc, etc. I borrow lots of ideas from TV and films - you should too!

The GM's plan should include an introductory statement to be read out to the players "you are all pirates stranded on an island ...", as well as a secret list of events or obstacles they will face during the story. Often these obstacles or events might be marked on a map (of the island, for example). Often, also, there will be people in the game 'world' and the GM narrates all of *their* actions to the players. Some of these non-player characters will be friendly, some will be enemies, others just neutral – it all depends on what the story is about. In the pirate game there

might be a marooned sailor on the island who can help the pirates (if they promise to get him off the island when they leave). There might also be a rival pirate gang or cannibal natives who will not want to talk, they will want to do the characters harm!

To start a game, the GM reads out his prepared introduction and ends it with "what do you all do now?". He can then narrate events as the players tell him what their characters want to do. He might have to drop hints or even secretly change parts of his story if the players don't go where they should or talk to the right people. But because its secret, no-one will know he's changed any of the details. Keep the story going, keep it fun.

I - Character Creation

Character Concept
Firstly talk with your GM and find out a bit about the setting of the game. The GM is advised to prepare a list of useful character types the players can take inspiration from. A 1930s murder mystery game might include a Retired Colonel, a Crime Writer, a Detective, a Rich Playboy, a Professor, a Flying Ace and many more. Think up (or steal from books and films) a suitable character concept. Is your character like Indiana Jones? Like Boromir? Like Buffy? If it helps, select one of the keywords just listed, and build up a concept around it. Most helpful of all is a brief written description of the character - what he does, how he does it, his personality and any other quirks that you might discover during a movie or the reading of a novel. These keywords just give the imagination a 'kick'.

Assets
Secondly, select six Assets. An Asset is a 'good thing' possessed by the character. It could be sharp eyesight, high military rank, leadership, good at driving, good at fighting, damn fine shot, willpower, funny, rich, strong and so on. Relate them back to the character concept. Select two Assets and mark these as Expert. The other four are now designated Good. If you attempt any other task not covered by one of your Assets then the character will be rated as Poor in that area. So, the three ratings are:

- **Poor** - You've not had any training or experience in this subject at all
- **Good** - You've been trained or had some experience, or are naturally gifted in this subject
- **Expert** - You are a master, a veteran, a true expert in this subject

Example: Tai Givar is a time travelling secret agent who is sent back into the past to try and stop the most famous assassinations in history.

Tai's player (Sara) decides on the following six Assets for her character: Guns, Driving, Stamina, Disguise Himself, Great Eyesight and Running.

She then decides to be an Expert with Guns and have Expert Eyesight, which means she is 'Good' at Driving, at Disguising Herself and at Running. At any other task not listed as an Asset(such as giving first aid or finding information on a computer) Tai is rated as 'Poor'.

Flaws

Thirdly, the player should select three Flaws for his character. A Flaw is a 'bad thing' possessed by a character, typically a mental quirk (such as afraid of heights), a social peculiarity (hates all Chinese) or a physical problem (blind in one eye). Don't overdo the Flaws, they are there to give your character flavour and dimension, not to unnecessarily cripple him. Look again to books and movies for inspiration, what Flaws do the great heroes have? Curiosity, Obsession, Stubbornness, Drunkenness, Jealousy, Enemies, Fear of Snakes, etc.

Identifying Features

Fourthly, select three Identifying Features. Your character is about to make their appearance in the game - if this were a movie what would be the character's identifying features? Think of three. There's no need to go over the top here either, nor to limit yourself to an aspect of appearance.

Can you identify these 1930s heroes by their Identifying Features:

- Detective - Very short, well-trimmed thin moustache, corrects people's bad French.
- Academic - Battered leather jacket, dusty fedora hat, ironic sense of humour.
- Masked Vigilante - Long dark trenchcoat, wide-brimmed black fedora hat, mocking laugh.

The answers (of course) are Hercule Poirot, Indiana Jones and The Shadow. Use only Identifying Features that can be seen or heard on film. Indiana Jones' fear of snakes or hatred of Nazis are not Identifying Features but Flaws. One of the features should really try to illustrate the character's personality. How do we 'know' a movie hero is arrogant or shy or a stickler for pronunciation or high-living? Here are just a few Identifying Features - but your character can be made totally individual by creating more:

Sneers
Friendly Smile
Piercing Gaze
Long Dark Hair
Scar on face
Wears white suits
Limps
Pats people on the back
Shakes hands with both hands
Clears throat when nervous
Always orders Martini "shaken not stirred"
Never uses his (unknown?) first name
Smokes huge cigars
Says very little
Unshaven

Allies

Many player-characters will have friends, acquaintances, social contacts and allies. Often they will help during an adventure, and rarely get involved directly, more-often-than-not providing information, a safe haven, money or equipment.

The player is free to think of up to three Allies for his character (he may opt not to bother in which case he cannot receive free Allies at a later date). Each Ally must have a name, a concept and a short account of how they met up with the character. Of course Allies may later die or disappear, or turn into enemies, and the player is always encouraged to develop new Allies during his adventures if possible.

Example: Tai Givar creates one Ally called Orb, a computer generated person sent back in time to aid Tai in which-ever time period she finds himself. Orb always appears as a quirky white haired old man, always turning up in suitable period costume. He can give advice on customs of the era as well as historical information.

Location

Sometimes a character created by a player might be associated with a certain location, providing useful connections for adventures later on, or simply providing some atmosphere. Players may want to give their character a Location, or they may not. In fact the GM may not want to tie the character's down geographically. The Location may be a dwelling, but can just as easily be a place of work or a place the character 'hangs out' between adventures. Think gentleman's club, bar, police precinct, peculiarly decorated apartment, historic house or what-ever. The GM could ask the question 'where would I most likely find your character between adventures and what is that place like …?' Think logically, a boxing champ might be found at a local gym, a cop behind his desk at Scotland Yard, a novelist in her gothically-styled town house. Locations are a part of character creation, and an extension or illustration of the character's personality. Have fun with them.

Equipment & Resources

Your character is almost complete. Many games (especially those set in the real world or in an historical era) give a character an amount of money to spend on weapons and equipment. But The Ladder is a little more free-form and there are more exciting things to ponder than the difference in price between one gun and another. Likewise we don't bother with ammunition expenditure. A Terrible! result probably denotes a gun jam or the unfortunate situation of running out of ammo.

Because of this attitude, money is irrelevant to the game. If you want your character to be especially rich or poor - then give him a suitable Asset or Flaw. Characters have access to a standard of living, resources, cash and credit commensurate with their concept. Basically, don't sweat it!

Put down on your character sheet some things you think your character will find hard to be without. Don't list everything he owns - just those things that are likely to crop up in adventures. The GM will review this list and may amend it. Further purchases conducted during the game should be checked by the GM first who may veto them (such as a struggling artist buying a mansion). Common sense will prevail!

II - Using the Ladder

Assets & The Ladder
The heart of The Ladder system is a five-step ladder that corresponds to the skill levels of a character's Assets. If a character has the Asset 'can fly a plane' (Expert) then when he tries to perform a piloting-related action he will normally be able to do so at an Expert level. If the character attempts an action with a difficulty set by the GM as either Terrible!, Poor, Good or Expert, then the character should be able to succeed (see The Ladder below to review this simple 5-point hierarchy).

The Ladder

Superb!	Fantastic, a permanent outstanding success beyond expectations
Expert	Above average, outstanding result
Good	Adequate result, usually enough to succeed
Poor/Fail	Partial success, a bad result, a failure or unresolved action
Terrible!	Catastrophic failure. Fumble. Disaster

Of course nothing in life (fictional or otherwise) goes that smoothly all of the time! So we roll a single six-sided die (a 'd6' - which is the type of die found in games of Yahtzee, Monopoly and just about every other boardgame invented). This adds a measure of randomness to the process. On a '1' the expected result (equal to the character's relevant Asset) is moved one Step Down The Ladder. On a '6' the expected result (equal to the character's relevant Asset) is moved one Step Up The Ladder. Sixes are good, Ones are bad. Usually any number between 2 and 5 is ignored - the character performs at exactly his normal Asset level. `

Rolling The Die
It is the GM's responsibility to set the difficulty of the task being attempted. He simply picks one of the rungs off of The Ladder. Some tasks don't need a roll at all. For example, even a poor pilot can land a plane. If the character needs to crash-land into the sea safely, the GM might rate this task as Good (only a good pilot can do this). Perhaps the pilot of an airliner tries to out-manoeuvre a heat-seeking missile! Ouch! The GM sets this task at Expert. The die is rolled and the final result checked on The Ladder. To succeed the rolled result must equal or exceed the difficulty of the task as set by the GM. As a further example, a GM might say 'it would take an expert shot to hit the fuel tank of that car, but you're a good shot - give it a go …'

Example: Tai Givar, as we have seen, has Expert Eyesight. The Gamesmaster tells the player that Tai sees a car swerve off the road to try and run her over. As she gets up and dusts herself off she tries to read the number plate. With all the dust around, and the speed of the fleeing car, the GM decides that this task requires Good Eyesight. Tai has Expert Eyesight, and should be OK. Her player rolls the die and gets a 5. That's fine - for this task his Asset stays at Expert, and she reads the licence plate easily enough.

Totally Unforeseen Results

Sometimes even experts can screw things up big time, and on occasion even an unskilled guy can outshine the best. It happens - but rarely. To simulate this, we use a simple mechanic. When a character rolls a '6' and Steps Up, the die is quickly re-rolled to see if he goes up another step as well. If that is the case and another '6' is rolled, roll again etc. When re-rolling ignore any results of 1 to 5, only the '6' counts. Conversely, when a character rolls a '1' and Steps Down, the die is rolled again, but this time the Step Down may be repeated by re-rolling another '1' and another … In this way a Poor Asset may produce an Expert, and sometimes even a Superb!, result.

Example: Tai Givar has crashed her car in the desert while fleeing from a helicopter. Now she must hide from the chopper as it circles around looking for her. Tai has no Asset called 'Hide' or 'Camouflage' or anything similar, so she is rated at Poor in hiding. Unfortunately, the GM rules that hiding in a barren desert in broad daylight will require an Expert in hiding. Oh dear… Tai's player rolls the d6 as normal and gets a '6'. Great! A Step Up to Good. Because she Stepped-Up she also gets to roll again. Another '6'. Wow! That's another Step-Up to Expert! For this action (and this action only), Tai hides like an Expert, and the chopper eventually leaves the area because it's getting low on fuel.

Wonky Dice

Sometimes the character will have a major advantage he can bring to a task or an action that means success is more likely. To simulate this (and other effects), we use a 'Wonky Ladder'. A Wonky Ladder leans in one direction, so that a Good Wonky Ladder allows a Step-Up on a 5 or 6, while a Bad Wonky Ladder allows a Step-Down on a 1 or a 2. The Gamesmaster should declare a Wonky Ladder before the die is rolled. Here are a few examples of Wonky Ladder events:

- Using a magic sword that is especially effective against a certain type of opponent.

- Acting under the protection of some divine being for a short period, or in some restricted way (for example; Neptune, god of the sea is your patron, and always gives you a Good Wonky Ladder when on a boat or ship).

- A broken or malfunctioning piece of equipment might provide a Bad Wonky Ladder.

- A curse or some magical effect, or the wrath of a divine being could give the character a Bad Wonky Ladder for certain tasks.

- An emotional Asset might be perfectly apt for a certain task and enable a Good Wonky Ladder. For example, a character has Honourable (Good) and Persuasion (Good). He attempts to convince the Duke of Alsace to lend him a troop of cavalry (requires Expert level Asset) and the GM rules that the Duke may be swayed by the character's honorable reputation. There's no point in letting our hero roll his Honorable Asset (it's the same as his Persuasion!) so he awards the player a Good Wonky Ladder. Now the Duke will lend our hero his cavalry on a 5 or a 6.

- Alternatively an emotional Flaw might come into play to affect the outcome of a task, calling for a Bad Wonky Ladder. For example, the character has a Flaw called 'Hates all Chinese', yet the player wants his character to ask a Chinese gangster for help. The GM rules that any attempt to persuade the gangster will use a Bad Wonky Ladder.

The source of a Wonky Ladder is nothing inherent in the character (that's covered by Assets), nor is it inherent in the setting (this is covered by the difficulty level chosen by the GM). Instead Wonky Ladders are awarded when an interfering power comes into play. It might be magical, emotional, divine or mechanical.

III - The Conflict System

Most situations can be resolved by checking the character's ability, rolling one die and looking at The Ladder (in fact it is child's play to memorise the 5-rung Ladder ...). But when it comes to resolving conflicts, where a character goes up against another character, things get a little more complicated. Fights are a common conflict and involve characters' lives, and so we include a brief section on combat - few players want to see those lives destroyed on a roll. There are two basic categories of conflict in The Ladder, Instant and Extended.

1- Instant Conflicts

An Instant Conflict is one that is resolved immediately in the game world. Two characters both reach for the same gun, two characters see who can jump the highest, etc. Both characters require a roll on the relevant Asset, and the character with the highest result wins. If it looks like a tie, the player-character who rolled the highest number on the die roll wins.

2 - Extended Conflicts

An Extended Conflict is one that may include some room for manoeuvre, and an element of tactical choice. A sword fight, a running race, a game of chess, an argument or attempt at seducation are all Extended Conflicts. In such a conflict, both participants roll a relevant Asset, the highest scores a number of Advantage points against his rival. How many depends on the amount the success was made by: equal success (same result rung) 1 AP, exceeded by one rung 2 AP, exceeded by two rungs 3 AP. When a character scores 6 or more Advantage points against an opponent, he has out-manoeuvred them (physically, verbally or otherwise) and essentially, has achieved victory over his opponent. Advantage points can be erased with a new scene or a new combat (the GM should adjudicate this).

Outnumbered: Most roleplaying is done in small groups - it is, after all, a social activity. Because of this, a good many Extended Conflicts will be 'lop-sided'. The PCs may outnumber the antagonists (or sometimes vice versa). Not much changes in the way the rules work, however. The participating 'sides' or 'teams' try to reach 6 AP as a group. Each participant in the conflict rolls against the relevant Asset and his team uses the highest result rolled to gain Advantage points for the team. Once 6 APs are collected a team can 'neutralise' one of the opposing team-members. Everyone loses any AP's they have gained so far, and the coflict then continues.

The Race: One other variation of the Extended Conflict is the Race. Three or more characters are in competition (chariot race, poker game etc.) and there can be only one winner. In such a situation the GM sets an appropriate difficulty rung for the contest. Each participant tries to equal of exceed this rung and gain AP. The winner is the first one to gain a number of APs equal to # contestants +3 (so if there were 5 poker players the target to win would be 8 Advantage points).

3 - Conflict and Advantage

In any of these types of conflicts one side or another may start the struggle with an advantage in hand. It might be the moral high ground (in an argument), it might be armour or a long spear (if a fight), or it could be ownership of the faster car (in a chase). In such circumstances don't add or subtract anything from the die roll,

simply add a point or two onto that character's Advantage score. He begins with some Advantage points , making victory more likely - but not certain.

4 - Murder & Mayhem

Combat often features in roleplaying games, and because the rules regarding combat may result in death, I've included a little more clarification here for Ladder players and GMs. Behind these clarifications is the philosophy of integrating all the stages of complicated fights into a single die roll. I'm a great fan of this idea, and also of the concept that character strengths determine damage inflicted - not the characteristics of the weapon. This is a concept based more on fiction than on real life, but it works for my genre.

Combat is organised like this: simultaneous hand-to-hand combat is followed by simultaneous gunfire. If someone defended themselves or was attacked in hand-to-hand combat, then they cannot fire a gun in that round. Combat rounds last anywhere between 10-30 seconds.

Hand-to-hand Combat: Hand-to-hand fights using swords, axes, fists or anything else are resolved as Extended Conflicts. Once the character has scored 6 Advantage points against his enemy, his next successful strike will inflict a Wound (see below).

Gunfire: Gunfire is resolved much as any other standard action would be; the GM gives the player a desired target result and the character must achieve it to score a hit. Although firing a gun is combat orientated action, it isn't a conflict, either Instant or Extended - the gunman isn't competing with an opponent (unless maybe he is in a shooting competition!). If the Asset roll is equal to the rung required, the target is Wounded - Still In The Fight. If the roll exceeds the rung required, the target is Incapacitated - Out of the Fight.

IV - The Injury System

Injuries can be sustained from physical objects (fast cars, falling trees, a 3m deep pit, etc.), or from the attacks of other characters. Arbitrary damage requires adjudication from the GM. He selects the most appropriate damage ('the falling tree is probably going to Wound you') and the player character must then roll one die, hoping for a '1' to Step Down the damage, and not a '6' that will Step Up the damage to a Wound or possibly an Incapacitate. A grenade might be rated as Incapacitating damage, but on a Step-Down will Wound, and on a Step-Up will Kill.

Damage Levels
Subdued
Wounded
Incapacitated
Killed

Some characters might have Assets that mean they are tougher than normal, if such an Asset seems appropriate for shrugging off physical injury, then allow a Bad Wonky Ladder (which should serve to work in the character's favour, Stepping-Down damage on a 1 or a 2).

Subdued - Subdual Damage is inflicted by a combatant using fists, feet, head-butts or other natural weapons. After he has outmanoeuvred his enemy with Advantage Points, the next successful strike will produce whatever effect the character wants (such as trip, knock-out, holdfast, knock-back etc). Subdual damage may also be inflicted by inanimate objects causing shock or knock-out. The GM may or may not want the attacker to also roll a die to check to see if the damage is stepped up to a Wound.

Wounded - The character is still alive and still conscious, but is injured with an impaired body location (Either the GM chooses based on situation, or use the initial combat die roll: 6 = head, 5 = body, 4,3 = an arm, 2,1 = a leg). If arm is impaired, drop any held items and struggle to use it again. If leg is impaired then move at half speed. If head is impaired then the victim is knocked out for 3 combat rounds. If body is impaired then no actions can be attempted requiring strength (climbing, pushing, running etc). The character loses their next attack. A third Wound is an Incapacitate.

Incapacitated - The character falls over unconscious for 2d minutes. When they have come around a body location is hurt as above. The character moves at half speed due to pain and shock. If no medical attention is available within the hour then roll an appropriate Asset for a Good result or lapse into unconsciousness and begin to die (exactly when is determined by the GM, but any extra time after the hour is a bonus!). A Wound or Incapacitate inflicted on an already Incapacitated character results in almost instant death.

Recovering From Injuries
Subdual damage can be recovered from in-game. Wounds can probably be recovered from in a week or so, while an Incapacitated character will be up and around a week after receiving treatment, and fully recovered after a month. But in game terms, just assume that if medical help is forthcoming characters are fully recovered by the start of the next game.

V - Plot Points

Gaining Plot Points

During character creation, the GM can award players 1 Plot Point for each 'episode' in a character's life up to that moment. An episode is an important event in the character's life that must be written down on the character sheet. He can receive a maximum of 3 Plot Points in this way. After each adventure survived the character gains an additional Plot Point, and an additional 'episode' to add to his character's growing narrative. Plot Points can also be given out for in-character roleplaying, for great investigative work or clever thinking, for making everyone laugh at the gaming table, or for being brave or ingenious enough to overcome a really tough individual challenge.

What are Plot Points used for?

Plot Points are a resource to be carefully used by the player. There are four ways that Plot Points can be utilised:

1 - If the player has already rolled the dice for an action and is unhappy with the result then he may spend a single Plot Point to push the result up by one Step.

2 - If the character is Good or Expert in the task at hand, then the player can spend a Plot Point before rolling the dice to automatically get a Superb result with no need to roll! If the character is Poor or Terrible at the task in hand, then the player can spend one Plot Point to get an Expert result, or two Plot Points to get a Superb result. If the character is a superhero at a Superb! or Unprecedented! level he can boost his Asset to Improbable! with a single Plot Point.

3 - If a character receives an Incapacitating injury, the player can spend a Plot Point to Step Down to a Wound instead. Note that three Wounds still make an Incapacitate - and unfortunately this cannot be Stepped Down.

4 - Create a minor 'prop' in the game. GM's may also want to allow players to spend Plot Points in other, more unusual ways. Perhaps the character is trapped in a dark cave. 'Did I bring a torch?' The GM rules that you didn't specify so, therefore you have no light. In this situation the GM might let the player spend a Plot Point to have 'remembered' to bring along a torch. These tiny plot 'tweaks' should be perfectly acceptable, and not include any major plot twists or NPC actions. They should really be restricted to the immediate world of the player character.

Character Development

Plot Points can also be used for character development. Most players like to see their characters grow and develop, and Plot Points allow a mechanism for this. When a character secures another 'good thing' from the events of a scenario, the player can turn this into an Asset by spending 2 Plot Points. The player character must have worked to achieve this 'good thing' and not have it handed to him by another player character or an NPC. It is now a 'Good' Asset. For example, the character may have plundered an ancient tomb and recovered lots of gold. The player spends 2 Plot Points to make the character wealthy.

To make an already Good Asset into an Expert Asset, the player must spend an additional 4 Plot Points.

Likewise, a Flaw can be turned into an Asset through the use of a good piece of roleplaying (in effect telling the tale of how you were a Coward but are now Brave,

how your Enemy is now an Employer). It costs just 1 Plot Point to reverse a Flaw and turn it into an Asset (providing the event was roleplayed well).

As a rule, characters cannot be Experts at everything and the Good Assets should always outnumber the Expert ones. In addition, don't let the character learn too much; doubling the original number of Assets should be pretty much the maximum. Also don't allow the characters to lose all of their flaws, this will take away some of their personality (and of course the GM is urged to find and award new Flaws during the game!). New distinguishing features or a whole new concept could develop, but keep them snappy! Create no more than a sentence for concept or five distinguishing features.

It is the GM's responsibility to award the character new Flaws, and to take away Assets that have not been used or referred to within the game for a long time (a long time meaning five or six sessions). All of this must be done within the context of the game, however.

VI - Ladder Magic

by Ian Young © 2001

What follows is a set of simple magic rules for use with The Ladder, a "rules-light" roleplaying game written by Paul Elliott. While the magic rules may be my own, the actual game and it's associated mechanics must be credited to him.

Magical Assets
The ability to perform magic, like any other ability in The Ladder, may be taken among a character's Assets, provided the GM is allowing real, supernatural magic in his scenario. The specific Assets necessary will depend upon the school of magic represented and the dictates of the GM. An example system of magic will follow as a model for choosing and utilising magical Assets.

Casting Spells
All spells are improvised by the player, and begin with the player describing the intended effect of the spell and the intended magical Assets to be applied. Any magical Assets may be combined, though combinations of some Assets may be more or less fortuitous than others.

Once the spell has been described, the GM considers the intended effect of the spell, determines whether or not the chosen magical Assets are appropriate to the task, and declares an appropriate success rung.

Bear in mind that all magic is inherently difficult, and the lowest possible rung for succeeding at even the simplest of magics is Good, and only a skilled magician may attempt any magic – no characters without a magical Asset attempting to cast a spell. As magic often attempts to affect the flatly impossible, the required success rung may be declared to lie beyond the normally-ultimate Superb! rung. To reflect this, the GM may indicate higher rungs such as Unprecedented! (one rung higher than Superb!) and Improbable! (one rung higher still).

Improbable!	Flatly impossible without magic
Unprecedented!	Never before seen. Both illogical and amazing
Superb!	Fantastic, a permanent outstanding success beyond expectations
Expert	Above average, outstanding result
Good	Adequate result, usually enough to succeed
Poor/Fail	Partial success, a bad result, a failure or unresolved action
Terrible!	Catastrophic failure. Fumble. Disaster

The need for these higher rungs, of course, will depend upon the audacity of the player's intended magic and the needs of the story. If the desired magical effect is particularly trivial, the GM may, at his discretion, choose to lower the required success rung below Good, though the character still requires a magical Asset to attempt the spell. Again, the needs of the story should dictate.

While all magic in The Ladder is improvised in play, once a character has successfully cast a spell to a particular effect, the player may write down all of the conditions as a precedent, or rote, for future casting. The GM always maintains final say on the spell's applicability.

Dueling Magics

Inevitably, two or more magicians will want to pit their magical Assets against one another. In such head-to-head contests of magic, spells are treated as if they occur simultaneously. The player with the highest magical Asset declares the intended nature of his spell and the relevant magical Assets to be used, after which his opponent follows in like kind. The GM determines a single appropriate success rung for both magicians to succeed in casting.

Both magicians roll their magical Assets, and the resulting rungs indicate a number of Advantage Points (AP) scored against the opponent. The number of APs scored depends upon the difference in rungs rolled, assuming both magicians cast successfully: equal success (same rung), both magicians receive 1 AP; exceeded by one rung, the higher roll receives 2 APs; exeeded by two rungs, 3 APs; and so on.

When a magician scores 6 APs against an opponent, his spell successfully bypasses his opponent's magical defenses and takes effect. In the event that one magician fails his roll to cast a spell while his opponent succeeds, his opponent's AP total is automatically raised to 6 and the opponent's spell takes effect unhindered.

Each round, the magician with the highest AP total declares what magical Assets he intends to bring to bear and what effect they will take. In response, the magician with the lower AP total declares the nature of his response. Again, the GM determines the necessary success rung, and the two opponents roll the dice again, pitting one magical effect against the other.

Players are encouraged to describe their magical give-and-take in the most colorful and evocative manner possible, giving vivid life to the magical forces being unleashed.

If a magician accumulates 6 APs, and his opponent remains locked in the duel (i.e. he was not incapacitated by the spell and has chosen to not disengage), the magician erases his previous APs and attempts to accumulate another 6 APs to land another spell.

Advantage Points may be erased after a spell overcomes opposition, with a new scene, or with a new magical duel, at the GM's discretion. Note, however, that magical duels need not be face-to-face combats that occur to blinding effect in a matter of minutes. Magical duels may take place over great distances, utilising extremely subtle "coincidental" effects that may take days, months, or even years to resolve, as long as the spells are maintained.

Color Magic

The following system of magic is provided as a ready-to-play example of how any magic system may be designed and implemented for The Ladder. While this system focusses on color to represent the schools of thought and spheres of influence associated with practicing magic, one could easily use this as a model for the wu-hsing, thaumaturgy, goetic theurgy, Aristotlean elemental magic, or whatever school of thought appeals to your personal tastes. Simply substitute the appropriate elements, astrological houses, circles of rulership, or whatever, for the various colors listed. Bear in mind that, in The Ladder, ease of play and verisimilitude are prized over slavish adherence to detail. In short, keep your magic systems simple and intuitive, and have fun.

In this system, magic is inherently tied to color, each color possessing its own sphere of influence. To perform magic, the magician must commit his or her Assets to one or more of the schools of color magic. The magical effects that can be attempted are proscribed by the domains associated with each color. Colors may be combined to produce more elaborate or detailed effects, but the roll for such a combination would be against the lower of the combined Assets.

The most commonly associated magical domains and effects are as follows:

Red Magic – Blood, flesh, life, strength, violence, instigation
Orange Magic – Fire, heat, self-confidence, pride, smithcraft, mechanical construction
Yellow Magic – Thought, reason, scholarship, communication, sun and air, illumination
Green Magic – Growth, abundance, fertility, fortitude, steadfastness, prosperity, creativity
Blue Magic – Empathy, water, illusion, sleep, dreams, inspiration
Indigo Magic – Weather, night sky, lightning and storms, movement, travel and transportation
Purple Magic – Power, passion, politics, persuasion
Brown Magic – Earth, materiality, physicality, baseness, foundation
Black Magic – Darkness, silence, stillness, absorption, decay
White Magic – Protection, reflection, cold, spirit, purification

Hedge Magic

These rules are essentially an interpretation of the hedge magic rules written by S. John Ross for the GURPS rule system. They port to The Ladder very well, but try to not be disappointed by the fact that they are summed up in the single following paragraph.

Hedge magic allows the magician the subtle ability to work magic within the context of Assets he already possesses. If the magician wishes to produce an effect that should be possible by means of a given Asset, but that lacks a logical and rational explanation given the circumstances of time, place, or resources, he may opt to roll on his Hedge Magic Asset instead.

Hedge magic is an Asset usually taken to the exclusion of other magical Assets. It is not flashy, nor is it particularly powerful. It is intended as a useful tool for the magically resourceful individual, not as a means to remake reality.

VII - The Superhero

The Ladder rules can be used to create classic super-hero characters and run them in full-on four-colour superhero action.

Creating the Hero

Perhaps the main difference between a standard game of The Ladder and a superheroic game of The Ladder is the fact that the players and GM understand and accept that it is OK to give the characters impossible, bizarre and improbable Assets. 'Force blast', 'Fly', 'X-Ray Vision', 'Intangible' and so on.

Assets - The hero is designed with seven Assets, not six, with the understanding the a special phenomenon, a super-power lies behind one or more of the Assets - this is the hero's concept. The Assets are essentially effects or techniques that come as a result of that concept. Try to rationalize the actual commonality of seemingly diverse metapowers. If one's character flies, is super-strong, invulnerable, and projects an optical heat beam, these apparently unrelated abilities could be considered as merely aspects of the principal concept: Telekinetic.

Two Assets will be Superb!, two will be Expert and the remaining three Assets will be Good.

Example: Black Widow is our spider hero, with Superb! Web-shooting, Superb! Wall climbing, Expert Spider Sense, Expert Toughness and Good Acrobatics, Good Fighting, and Good Sneak.

Flaws - The hero has four Flaws, one of which is described as the Super-hero's 'Vulnerability.' The Vulnerability can *never* be converted into an Asset. This Vulnerability will ALWAYS function under a Bad Wonky Ladder. This represents the Super's debilitating weakness…

Examples would include: Kryptonite, a weak heart, the fact that your character's secret identity is known to his or her nemesis, a dependent, your character is feared and even hated by non-mutants, or their powered-armor is prone to malfunctioning, etc., etc. If it is first justified by good role-playing, a character's Vulnerability can be bought-off by sacrificing 2 Plot Points.

Identifying Features - The superheroic identity of a character is additionally assigned his or her own quota of three Identifying Features. One of these Features must be dedicated to the description of the character's costume.

Plot Points - The super-hero genre practically cries out for the use of Plot Points. To encourage players to freely spend Plot Points, award the starting hero three PP and referesh them at the end of each session. Now any Plot Points earned after a

game has finished can be allocated either to enhance this Plot Point Pool, or to a Background Pool.

Points in the Background Pool are being invested for use in advancing the character's Assets later on. Meanwhile the Plot Point Pool is used in-game to carry out audacious heroics and survive successfully time and time again. Without Plot Points it's going to be hard to carry out Unprecedented or Improbable feats, such as dodge bullets from point blank range (Unprecedented) or stop them by holding up your hand (Improbable). At session end, if the Plot Point Pool is below three, return it to three.

Super Rules in Action
As with Ladder Magic, extend the Ladder upwards to include the Unprecedented and Improbable rungs.

Combat in General - All damage between supers is treated as subdual, as in four-color comics of the Gold and Silver Age losing a fight was by no means fatal. The player is merely rendered unconscious. Death violates The Comic Book Code and should be avoided at all costs. Heroes and heroines should settle for a knockout of the supervillian. If there is a more serious result, then they have (intentionally or not) broken THE CODE…and there will be consequences that the GM is just waiting for you to role-play.

All fights between superpowered individuals are Extended Conflicts, and each participant, after a given round of dice-rolling, might even be required to orate a brief rant, witty riposte, or anomalous profundity.

Combat Against Henchmen - The superpowered should just plough-through masses of opposing thugs, minions, or agents. Hey, your character has superpowers, remember!? Although it is still possible for the mastermind's flunkies to prevail, it just shouldn't happen very often. Fights that involve the arch-enemy's many henchmen are resolved in a similar fashion to battling multiple opponents. However, once the Super reaches 6 AP he rolls one die and removes that many henchmen from the fight. These is no Stepping-Up or -Down on this roll! If the Super rolls above the number of henchmen involved in the action (DO NOT COUNT OPPOSING SUPERS!) the remaining values are lost.

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