

RUBY

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Setting and situation

It's the far future. Humanity has settled in a solar system far away, with binary stars called Red and Golden, orbited by the planets called the Red Worlds. They ("we") live on Ruby, an unspoiled paradise, rich in natural beauty, cradling modest communities which resemble nothing we know. There is no crime, no population growth, no war, no emotional discord, no unhappiness, no one-on-one mating, no death except for occasional accidents, which is why the people are called NuManity. Policies are implemented by the Consensus, a psychological summation of what everyone wants – the ultimate in automated democracy. The Consensus is assessed and implemented by the computer system called Unity.

NuMan society is stabilized by Casting, meaning the projection of dreamers' minds to the other Red Worlds. They inhabit Shells, which are either organic beings (in which case this is something like possession) or programmed robot bodies. They do not remember their experiences. They awaken refreshed, emotionally purged, rational, and undemanding of others – happy.

- Crimson and Carmine are the Fervor Worlds, where violence and sensuality are respectively given their full expression for cathartic purposes. The former is a jungle world, in which the native many-armed apes constantly battle with automated melee weapons (chainsaw swords, et cetera). The latter is a series of subterranean Graittech habitats which respond wholly to the individual Dreamers' fantasies, usually producing extravagant fairy-tale or pulp-action scenarios, with a dose of porn.
- The Gem Moons of Cerise – Sapphire, Diamond, Opal, Emerald – present different economic and ethnic societies, in which political striving, economic advancement, law-breaking, and risky betting (on the televised battles of Crimson, as it turns out) are given their full expression for cathartic purposes.
- Scarlet and Cerise are industrial planets in which Casters labor in robot shells to provide Ruby with resources.
- Vermilion is not itself a resource except for gravity-well aid to transporting materials to and from Cerise, but its Splinter Moons house the small remaining unreconstructed Human population, who raid Ruby's shipping.

Interestingly, NuManity has ethnicities, which are not in evidence in waking life, but only determine into what kinds of bodies dreamers go when they Cast into the Gem Moons: a kind of chimp, a beautiful android, a utility-type robot, or a squid-type deal, all of whom are present on all the Moons, and whose ethnic conflicts exacerbate the various financial and criminal conflicts in those societies.

Some NuMans are Lucids; they remember their dreams and cannot psychologically benefit from Casting. Only the drug Blacknight can give them restful sleep. Unity enlists them to Cast throughout the Red Worlds to deal with problems, effectively paying with Blacknight and hence sanity. As psychological aberrants, Lucids are excluded from the Consensus.

What we do

Player-characters are Lucids, and all play is carried out on missions. Therefore you don't play a character in his or her waking mind in his or her actual body, but rather their experiences and decisions they (or a rather vulnerable psyche within their identity) have in Shells, out among the Red Worlds.

- On the Fervor Worlds, Crimson and Carmine, Dreamers sometimes get psychologically stuck in their fantasies of carnage or sex, and the Lucids act as shock therapists by disrupting the fantasies and waking the dreaming minds.
- On the Gem Moons, similarly, Dreamers sometimes become criminal, political, and/or economic bosses and refuse to wake up, and again, the Lucids break the psychological lock by invalidating their gains, more-or-less as detectives, reformers, or perhaps rivals.
- On Scarlet and Cerise, Lucids seek and stop Outsiders (rogue Lucids) from sabotaging the industrial work that sustains Ruby.
- On the Splinter Moons of Vermilion, Lucids battle and seek to annihilate the last surviving “old” humans, who loot the supply ships coming back from Cerise. These people are an acknowledged problem among NuManity, and the Consensus at this time urges their destruction.

From there it’s really wide open; setting and system present multiple possible developments, but there is no metaplot, no named characters, or any details whatsoever of “what’s going on” in the setting aside from basic descriptions. Any and all fictional events are completely left up to play itself. Things will happen and characters will change, but based only on whatever scenarios have been developed and played by the group, not the game book. This is good design given the intense Creative Agenda focus and the degree of Premise inherent in the starting material.

NuMans, including Lucids, don’t have much perspective on the technology of the setting, but for our visual purposes, here’s a quick breakdown.

- Salvage tech: mainly found among the humans of the Splinter Moons, basic life support, short-term space travel, and agrionics, possibly some computing, all jury-rigged from more advanced but non-nanite systems and integrated with simple tech such as fire and electricity.
- Ultratech: cybernetics, robotics, genetic engineering, terraforming in the broadest sense, and Casting. Employed relatively crudely on Crimson for combat enhancements and weaponry, much more nuanced on the Gem Moons, and effectively accomplished on Ruby to establish its paradisaical qualities.
- Graintech: nanites, effectively making anything that can do practically anything out of molecular ‘grains’ – employed as services on Ruby and at its most extreme, the wholly constructed fantasy realms of Carmine.

Bleeding hot Narrativism

From the text: *... without character death, just what dynamic is it that drives Players and their characters in Ruby? The answer is morality, a difficult subject that can strongly influence the activities of Players. Morality provides one of the most powerful themes of Ruby and is worth exploring in detail.*

... [Memory of their dreams] is the horror that Lucids suffer, the reason they are so different from the rest of Numanity. They know what the rest of Numanity does not, the true uncaring barbarity of the Red System. ... Is it right to act for Unity? Is it right to genetically alter and modify the natural forms of creatures native to the Red Worlds, and then to destroy them for nothing more than emotional release? And the working worlds raise further questions. Is it right to rape and exhaust Scarlet for the sake of a comfortable life on Ruby? These are questions which ... all Lucids must face every time they Cast.

... Are NuMen real people? Without emotion, incapable of natural reproduction, cold and aloof, are these beings really the rightful heirs of the human race? Lucids who encounter humanity will be forced to confront this question. ... Could it not be said that despite their flaws and the devastation of Ancient Earth, that humans remain far more alive than NuMen could ever be?

One of the strongest features of the game text is that absolutely nothing is specified to “occur next” in play. There’s no ongoing timeline to follow, nothing at all but the inherent tensions and deliberately-built instabilities of the setting and system which cannot help but raise the questions he lists. What happens and where it goes from here are entirely up to the play-experience itself.

Make your Lucid character

The beginning character is very stripped-down, as we're more interested in the raw psyche of the Casting Lucid than in the person who walks around Ruby in waking life. Appropriately, characters' scores are solely psychological (Ego, Volition, Reason) and their physical capabilities (Body, Grace, Vitality) are determined by the Shell they currently Cast to.

- Divide 7 points among Ego, Volition, and Reason
- Assign 5 points to specify your Lucid's Aptitudes, using the Trunk-Branch-Leaf diagram
- Name 3 Drives, corresponding to Love, Hate, and Fear

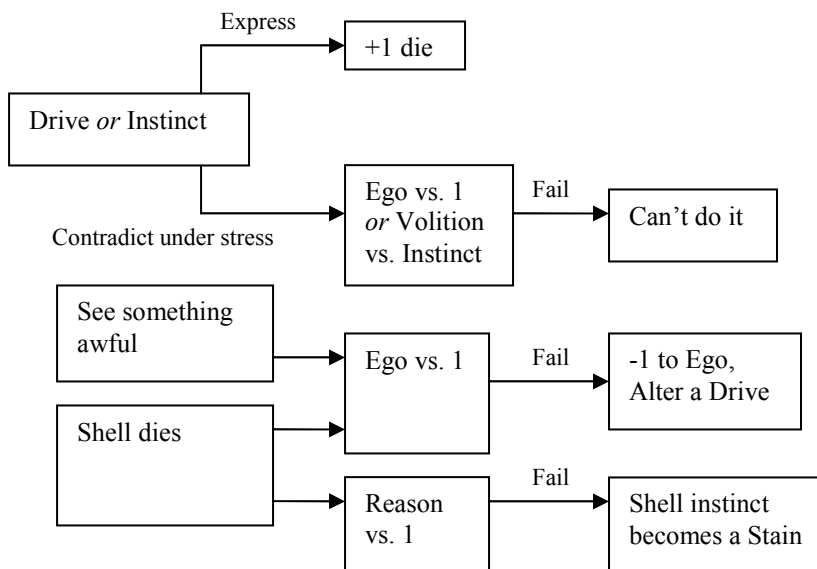
A key point, probably a little hard to internalize, is that your character's most practical skills will be provided by the Shells he or she inhabits during missions. So arriving at some kind of technical niche for the character is counter-productive; you can't be good enough to matter. Instead, consider the skill trees associated with your mental attributes to round out the character psychologically and emotionally.

And related to that, your Drives are a big deal. It seems reasonable to me that if possible, Unity would match the Shell's skill and identity to the Lucid most psychologically primed to embrace them. So Drives that would be considered asocial indeed by Consensus standards are quite appropriate; remember, Lucids do not get emotionally tamed throughout life the way all other NuMans do, and also, we are talking about the raw and exposed Drives of a dreaming mind, not what the person openly expresses during waking life.

System components

Each score indicates a number of d6. For resolution, roll the d6 pool based on your score value, then count all 4-5-6 as successes, and every 1 as a minus, for a total value to be compared to a target or to a foe's total. If your score is less than the target value in the first place, then roll additional dice to make up the difference, but those "inverted" dice' ratings are reversed (1-2-3 are minuses, 6 is success). Aptitudes are tapped as re-rolls for failed dice, with the skill's rating being the number of times you can re-roll for a given attempt.

The mental aspects of the character interact all the time, especially in terms of dealing with the Shell one's dreaming mind is hosted within.



Certain clarifications illustrate how fragile characters' sanity and even personalities may be.

- Ego is only restored through the Blacknight drug, i.e., out of play.
- If Ego goes to 0, the character falls under the Guide's control.
- Drives belong to the Lucid mind, but may become altered through stressful events; Instincts come from both the Lucid and Shell, but Shell death can transfer a Shell Instinct to the Lucid mind as a Stain.
- It's possible for a given action to express a Drive while contradicting an Instinct, or vice versa.
- One cannot control a Shell unless one's Volition exceeds its Instinct.

The mental scores and Aptitudes do improve through use, slowly, but that's not too important. The mechanics of real interest are Drive/Stain, and keeping one's mental scores from dropping to nothing from stress, and those are integrated into what's happened during missions, and ultimately what you decide to do about it.

Fighting looks a little clunky to me. A fixed order character actions is determined for all rounds through a Grace check, then you expend Opportunity Points on actions and reactions. Effects seem minimal, as opposed attacks can be blunted significantly. Also, implied damage is reduced significantly because on a successful hit, the attack must still get through a second roll.

I may be mistaken though, because speed and resourcefulness are what matters, in terms of who can finally get the drop on whom, as well as weapon type. Perhaps fighting will only be really effective for characters optimized toward that end, and such optimization will be a matter of Shells rather than the Lucids themselves – so that might actually be interesting in itself.