

Zero Signal — Core Rules

Game philosophy

- Fortune in the middle
- Fail forward
- Let it ride

Game cycle

- Set the scene → Introduce conflict → Resolve conflict → Downtime (optional) → New scene.
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Core resolution

Ability tests

- Roll a number of **d6** equal to the relevant **Ability**. Each **4+ = 1 success (Degree of Success, DoS)**.
- Compare successes to a Target Number (TN) or to an opponent's DoS in a contest:
 - **DoS > TN** → success
 - **DoS = TN** → success **at a cost**
 - **DoS < TN** → failure
- Contests: higher DoS wins; margin (0–1 = success at cost; 2–3 = clean; 4+ = exceptional).

Difficulty & Target Numbers

Tasks are assigned a **Target Number (TN)** expressed as required successes (Degree of Success, DoS). The GM sets TN based on task complexity. Suggested TNs (successes required):

Difficulty	Target Number (successes)
Easy	0 (no roll needed)
Simple	1
Moderate	2
Difficult	3
Very Difficult	4
Formidable	5
Nearly Impossible	6
Heroic	7

Notes - TN = number of successes required. Roll the relevant Ability's d6 pool; each 4+ = 1 success. Compare successes to TN. - **DoS > TN** → clear success. **DoS = TN** → success *at a cost*. **DoS < TN** → failure. - For **Opposed Tests**, each side rolls; higher DoS wins. Use margin of victory (difference in DoS) to scale results. - Use **Edge**, Pool spending, and Secrets to add dice before rolling. Declare these before rolling. - For extremely situational or narrative tasks, the GM may adjust TNs, allow partial successes, or create custom consequences for failure.

Edge & Modifiers

- **Edge** represents situational advantages, such as gear, allies, or environmental factors. Each source provides +1 die, with a maximum of +3 dice from Edge. Opponents can cancel Edge by applying their own Edge or through other narrative means

Pools (spending dice)

- Three default Pools: **Vigor, Instinct, Reason**.

- Spend 1 pool point → +1 die on a roll or to activate specific Secrets. Each Secret that requires a Pool point will specify which Pool is used. Spent points are recovered during Downtime.”

Harm & Consequences (severity scale)

When a character fails a roll there is a chance there might be **consequences**. Consequences impose narrative or mechanical weight until recovered. Remember to agree on what might happen before rolling. Set the stage and roll to find out.

Suggested scale:

Severity	Example impact	Recovery
Minor	-1 die on one Ability, bruised, rattled	This consequence persists until the end of the current scene or session, whichever comes first
Moderate	-1 die ongoing, bleeding, shaken, debt owed	Requires 1 Downtime action
Serious	-2 dice ongoing, broken arm, severe shame, dangerous enemy	Multiple Downtime actions or extended care
Lasting	Permanent penalty, scar, maimed, ruined reputation	Only healed through major effort, quests, or buying off with fiction
Fatal	Death or irrevocable end state	Only avoided via Secrets, Karma, or prior stakes

Notes - Minor = short-lived inconvenience.

- Moderate = persists until actively addressed in Downtime.
- Serious = requires extended recovery or multiple Downtime actions.
- Lasting = permanent unless extraordinary effort.
- Fatal = character removal unless extraordinary intervention.

Contests (Opposed Tests)

- Both sides roll their relevant Ability dice (plus Edge and any spent Pool dice).
- Higher DoS wins.
- Margin of Victory per contest:
 - 0 DoS → success at a cost
 - 1–3 DoS → clean success
 - 4+ DoS → exceptional success (extra benefit)

Draw the Line (Extended Contest)

- **Trigger:** After a Contest, either party (typically the loser) may call **Draw the Line** to escalate the conflict if they are unsatisfied with the result.
- **Declare stakes:** Before any further rolls, declare the stakes and the concrete consequences for losing the extended contest (e.g., grievous wound requiring Downtime, capture, loss of equipment, permanent loss, forced buyoff of a Key if no Karma, etc.). GM and players agree the stakes.
- **Procedure:**
 1. The Draw the Line sequence is **best two-out-of-three** Contests: the initial Contest and two subsequent Contests if necessary. Each Contest is crucial to determine the outcome.
 2. Before each additional Contest, parties may spend Pool points, activate Secrets, and apply Edge as normal. Any situational changes must be declared prior to rolling.
 3. Resolve each Contest using normal contest rules and record the DoS for that round.
 4. The first side to win two Contests wins the Draw the Line.
- **Margins & scaling:** Each Contest’s margin applies normally and affects that round’s result. The GM may scale the final outcome using the margins across the won Contests (e.g., larger combined margins → more complete victory / larger benefit).

- **Severe loss:** If a party that already lost the initial Contest then loses the Draw the Line overall, the previously-declared severe consequences apply (examples: grievous injury requiring medical/Downtime recovery, capture, death, major permanent loss, or forced Key buyoff if no Karma). The GM adjudicates specific mechanical penalties.
- **Win More:** After winning a Draw the Line, the victor may spend **1 point from the relevant Pool** to **Win More** — add one extra narrated/mechanical benefit beyond the normal win (extra loot, an additional resource, a small mechanical bonus, narrative leverage, etc.).
- **Recovery:** Consequences from Draw the Line (especially severe ones) require Downtime, medical/technical attention, or specific recovery tests as determined by the GM.

Character Creation

Purpose: This procedure defines your starting Abilities, Pools, Focuses, Keys, Secrets, Wealth, and Circles.

1. Choose number of Lifepaths (1–5)

- The number of Lifepaths determines your starting package of stats and resources.
- Fewer Lifepaths = more Karma and more Focuses to customize; more Lifepaths = broader base skills and resources.

Lifepaths	Keys	Secrets	Focuses	Abilities	Pool Points	Karma
1	2	1	5	4	6	3
2	2	1	4	4	6	2
3	2	2	3	4	6	1
4	1	2	2	4	7	1
5	1	3	2	4	8	0

2. Assign Abilities

- Open any number of Abilities you want and add a number of points equal to the amount granted by your chosen Lifepaths (usually 4).
- Opening means setting an Ability's starting rating at 1 or higher.

3. Assign Focuses

- Choose the number of **Focuses** listed for your Lifepaths. You don't have to spend all your choices immediately.
- Each Focus designates an Ability for future advancement and interaction with Karma.
- Opening a Focus during character creation is free; opening new Focuses during play costs 1 Karma, unless you decide to leave the decision for later.

4. Distribute Pool points

- Assign your Pool points (Vigor, Instinct, Reason) as granted by your Lifepaths (typically 6–8 total).
- Pools start at 0 and can be allocated freely.

5. Choose Keys

- Select the number of **Keys** listed in your Lifepath table.
- Keys define your character's drives and grant Karma when tested.

6. Choose Secrets

- Choose the number of **Secrets** granted by your Lifepaths.
- Secrets may require spending Pool points to activate during play.

7. Set Wealth and Circles

- Start with the **Wealth** and **Circles** ratings granted by your Lifepaths (see table above).
- Both are treated as Abilities.

8. Gain starting Karma

- Gain the amount of **Karma** shown in your Lifepath row.
- Karma is used to open Focuses, buy Secrets, and fuel rerolls or similar meta actions.

9. Record anything notable

- Optionally note one unique item, trait, or contact from your character's background (purely descriptive, no mechanics unless tied to a Secret or Circle).
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Abilities & advancement

Opening new Abilities

- **Ability range:** 0 (untrained) to 10 (world-class).
- You may **add (open) a new Ability** to your character sheet at any time. Opening it on the sheet does not automatically raise it — it simply declares that the Ability exists for play and advancement.
- **Raising from 0 → 1 (special case):** If an Ability is at **0 or 1**, you must **record at least one success and one failure** using that Ability before you can raise it.
- **Alternative routes:** The GM may allow Downtime training or in-fiction study to substitute for on-screen successes/failures in special cases; this still needs a plausible in-world justification.

Tracking advancement

- **General rule:** To raise an Ability rated **N → N+1**, you must accumulate **N total advancement marks** (successes + failures); **at least half** of those marks must be **failures** (round up).
 - Example: raising 5→6 requires **5 marks**: at least **3 failures** and up to 2 successes.
- **Special-case for N = 0 or 1:** you need a recorded **success and a failure** to raise the skill level from those values.
- **Reset:** When you spend those marks to raise the Ability, they are **consumed** — they do **not carry over** to the next level. You start fresh collecting marks toward the next increase.
- **Karma & substitution:** You may **spend Karma to substitute for missing marks**, but you must fully complete the requirement before increasing the rating.

Focuses

- **What a Focus is:** A Focus flags an Ability for prioritized advancement and is the primary target for Karma-driven options and Downtime training.
 - **How to get Focuses:** Choose Focuses at character creation (free, limited by Lifepaths) or **spend 1 Karma** to open a new Focus during play.
 - **Mechanically:** Focusing does not change dice pools directly; it designates which Abilities you're actively investing in for advancement and Karma interactions.
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Circles (social network)

- Circles is a special Ability used to **find, call, or influence contacts**. Roll Circles (4+ = success). Suggested TNs depend on rarity/power of contact.
 - **Downtime use:** invest downtime to **grow Circles** (mark an advance to Circles by forging relationships, doing favors, building reputation).
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Wealth

- **Wealth** is an Ability (0–10). Roll Wealth like any Ability to scrape together funds; success = you can afford it; failure → Debt or narrative consequences.
- **Permanent Wealth advancement:** Wealth (like Circles) requires **advancement marks = (current Wealth level) + 1** to raise permanently. Marks are gained through in-fiction gains and Downtime investments.
- **If you lack Wealth for a big purchase:** make a Wealth roll (temporary); success = scrape it together; failure = take Debt or make enemies.

Circles & Wealth — outcomes

Both Circles and Wealth are treated as Abilities (roll d6 pool, 4+ = successes). TN depends on scope:

Circles TN guidelines

Contact rarity/power	TN
Familiar peer	1
Skilled professional	2
Influential figure	3
Powerful elite	4–5

Wealth TN guidelines

Purchase size	TN
Everyday item	1
Expensive gear	2
Major property/asset	3–4
Exceptional/luxury item	5+

Failure outcomes - Circles: contact unavailable, reluctant, or demands a favor (introduces obligation or risk).
- Wealth: you go into **Debt** — borrow, steal, or owe someone. Debt functions as a **Moderate or Serious consequence** until repaid.

Karma, Keys, Secrets

Karma

- **Karma** is the meta-currency for rerolls, buying Secrets/Keys, opening Focuses, and subsidizing advancement.
- **Common uses:**
 - Reroll a check — 1 Karma
 - Buy a new Secret — 2 Karma
 - Buy a new Key — 1 Karma
 - Open a new Ability Focus during play — 1 Karma
 - Substitute for a missing success/failure toward advancement — 1 Karma each

Keys

- **Number at creation:** The number of Keys a character starts with is determined by the chosen Lifepaths (see the Lifepaths table in Character Creation). Choose the number shown for your Lifepath selection.
- **What Keys are:** Player-chosen beliefs/drives that earn Karma when tested or when they cause meaningful conflict.
- **Buyoffs:** Keys have **buyoffs** — when the character abandons or satisfies the Key's buyoff condition, the Key is removed and grants a Karma burst. Players are encouraged to push Keys into play to earn Karma.

Example Keys **Key of the Relentless**

- **Trigger:** You pursue your goal despite obstacles or personal cost.
- **Reward:** Gain 1 Karma when you take meaningful risks or sacrifice resources to stay on course.
- **Buyoff:** Abandon your goal completely or admit defeat.

Key of Compassion

- **Trigger:** You protect or aid someone vulnerable or disadvantaged.
- **Reward:** Gain 1 Karma when doing so creates risk or inconvenience for you.
- **Buyoff:** Let someone suffer when you could have helped them.

Secrets

- **Secrets** are purchasable special moves, techniques, or abilities bought with Karma.
- Many Secrets require spending Pool points to activate and have limited uses or costs attached.
- New Secrets are typically bought for **2 Karma** and require an in-fiction justification (teacher, study, discovery, downtime).

Example Secrets **Secret of Expertise**

- **Cost:** 2 Karma to learn.
- **Effect:** Choose one Focused Ability. When you roll it, you may spend 1 Pool from the related Pool to gain +2 dice instead of the usual +1.
- **Description:** This makes you exceptionally good at your chosen specialty.

Secret of Resilience

- **Cost:** 2 Karma to learn.
 - **Effect:** When you suffer a consequence, you may spend 1 Vigor to downgrade it (serious → minor, or minor → negated entirely).
 - **Description:** This lets you shrug off injuries or setbacks that would stop others.
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Downtime

What Downtime is for: recovery, resource refresh, training, investments, and other mechanical maintenance between scenes or sessions.

Pool recovery

- **Vigor** — refresh by doing physical exertion or high-stakes activity.
- **Instinct** — refresh by engaging social, emotional, or adrenaline-driven activity.
- **Reason** — refresh by intellectual, focused, or creative work.

Raising Pools (increase maximum)

- To raise a Pool from **N** → **N+1**, you must record **N marks**.
- **How to earn a mark:** Each time you completely **empty that Pool** (reduce it to 0) during play, record 1 mark.

- Once you have the required number of marks, you may raise that Pool by +1 during Downtime.
- Example: Vigor 3 → you must empty your Vigor Pool 3 times to raise it to 4.
- You may raise only one Pool per Downtime unless the GM rules otherwise.
- Temporary pool boosts from Secrets or items do not change permanent maxima unless explicitly stated.
- Special or new Pools follow their own rules as noted at creation.

Recovering From Consequences

- Use Downtime to remove or reduce lingering consequences. Minor consequences may expire automatically at scene/session end; more serious consequences need explicit Downtime actions or medical/technical attention.

Training & Learning New Things

- **Train a Skill / Open a Focus:** spend Downtime to open a new Focus or justify advancement; this can substitute for on-screen success/failure in special cases with GM approval.
- **Learn a Secret:** acquire a Secret via study, finding a teacher, or other in-fiction actions during Downtime; Secrets still cost Karma to buy.

Wealth & Investments

- **Invest in businesses:** spend Wealth during Downtime to attempt to make more Wealth; successful investments **mark an advance to Wealth** (i.e., add an advancement mark toward Wealth increase).

Grow reputation / Circles

- Spend Downtime forging relationships, doing favors, attending events, or otherwise increasing presence; successful downtime actions **mark advances to Circles**.

Quick reference

- Roll d6s = Ability rating; each **4+ = 1 success**.
- **Spend 1 Pool → +1 die** for that roll (or to fuel a Secret).
- **Edge** = +1 die per source (max +3).
- **Advancement:** log successes & failures OR use Downtime training; Wealth/Circles require marks = current level + 1.