

RISUS

THE ANYTHING RPG

By S. John Ross

Welcome to *Risus: The Anything RPG*, a complete pen-and-paper roleplaying game! For some, *Risus* is a handy “emergency” RPG for spur-of-the-moment one-shots and rapid character creation. For others, it’s a reliable campaign system supporting years of play. For others still, it’s a strange little pamphlet with stick figures. For me, it’s *all three*, and with this edition, *Risus* celebrates not only two decades of existence, but two decades of *life*, bolstered by an enthusiastic global community devoted to expanding it, celebrating it, sharing it, and gaming with it.

Character Creation

The character *Cliché* is the heart of *Risus*. Clichés are shorthand for a kind of person, implying their skills, background, social role and more. The “character classes” of the oldest RPGs are enduring Clichés: Wizard, Detective, Starpilot, Superspy. You can choose Clichés like those for your character, or devise something more outré, like Ghostly Pirate Cook, Fairy Godmother, Bruce Lee (for a character who does Bruce Lee *stuff*) or Giant Monster Who Just Wants To Be Loved For His Macrame – anything you can talk your GM into. With a *very* permissive GM, you could be *all these at once*. Each Cliché has a rating in *dice* (the ordinary six-sided kind). When your character’s prowess as a Wizard, Starpilot or Bruce Lee is *challenged*, roll dice equal to the rating. Three dice is “professional.” One die is a putz. Six dice is ultimate mastery. A complete *Risus* character looks like this:

Grolfnar Vainsson the Viking

Description: Tall, blond, and grinning. Likes to drink and fight and drink and chase Viking women and fight and sail the high seas and raid. Wants to write great sagas about himself.

Clichés: Viking (4), Gambler (3), Womanizer (2), Poet (1)

To create Grolfnar, all we had to do was name him, describe him, and assign his Clichés. You get 10 dice to spend on Clichés, distributed however you like, on as many or few Clichés as you decide (but more than 10 would be odd, considering). The first Cliché listed for your character (“Viking,” in Grolfnar’s case) is his *Primary Cliché* – the Cliché that most clearly expresses how your character *sees himself*. In general, new characters may not have Clichés rated higher than 4 dice, so Grolfnar’s “Viking” is maxed out for a beginning PC. Your GM might choose to expand, relax, or otherwise transmogrify such parameters for his game (ask if you’re not sure).

Powers, Tools, and Power Tools

Each Cliché implies a lot about a character, most crucially including his likely *abilities* and *equipment*. If you’re playing a Hirsute Barbarian (3), we can assume your character is comfortable with blades and battle. He’s probably a climber, a runner, and all-night reveler. He probably owns at least one sturdy hand-weapon and (hopefully, mercifully) a complete loincloth. If you’re playing a Psychic Schoolgirl (3), you probably have the power to sense (and be freaked-out by) the psychometric residue lingering at a murder scene, and might own a cute plushy backpack filled with school supplies. If you’re playing a Roguish Space Pirate (3), you can do all kinds of piratey roguey space-things, and you probably own a raygun, and maybe a secondhand star freighter. When there’s any doubt about your character’s abilities or “Tools of the Trade,” discuss it with your GM.

Tools of the Trade come “free” as part of each Cliché, but they’re vulnerable to loss or damage, which can (sometimes) cripple or limit the power of the Cliché. A Roguish Space Pirate, stripped of his star freighter, loses *all* ability to haul booty to distant suns ... while a Psychic Schoolgirl loses *none* of her ability to be freaked out by murder scenes if her plushy backpack is stolen. A Hirsute Barbarian (3), forced into a pit-fight without his trusty blade, can still rely on his bare hands, but he’ll operate at *half-dice* – a mere Hirsute Barbarian (2) – until he’s once again properly armed. The backpack-deprived Schoolgirl might face similar penalties when it’s time to do her homework.

In the course of adventuring life, lucky explorers may discover enchanted and/or cutting-edge and/or otherwise *special* equipment. The most basic sort is called *Bonus-Dice Gear* (such items let you roll an extra die, or more, when using them) but there are other kinds of “special” to be found, in the form of alternate game mechanics (“With this experimental piloting software, you can reroll any 1s”), in-world powers (“Only a Stradivarius can be used to seduce a Vampire Prince”) or even mixed benefits and restrictions (“While wielding the Sword of Mercy, you always roll dice *at least equal* to your foe, but you *must* spare his life if you win.”)

The Game System

Whenever anybody wants to do anything, *and* nobody’s actively opposing it, *and* the GM doesn’t think success would be automatic, the player rolls dice. If the total rolled beats (equals or exceeds) the Target Number set by the GM, success! If not, failure! Target numbers follow this scale:

- 5:** A cinch. A challenge for a schmuck. Routine for a pro.
- 10:** A challenge for a professional.
- 15:** An Heroic challenge. For really inventive or tricky stunts.
- 20:** A challenge for a Master. Nearly superhuman difficulty.
- 30:** You’ve GOT to be kidding. Actual superhuman difficulty.

The Target Number depends on the Cliché, and anyone can *try* anything. Crossing a chasm by swinging on a rope or vine would be child’s play (automatic success!) for a Swashbuckler or a Lord of the Jungle, easy (Target 5) for a Pulp Archaeologist, and challenging but definitely doable (Target 10) for a Gymnast, Barbarian, or Cat-Burglar. Even a Wheelchair-Bound Eccentric Occultist could try it (Difficulty 15, but the wheelchair is lost unless the roll beats a 30)!

The Combat System

In *Risus*, “combat” is any contest in which opponents jockey for position, make attacks, bring defenses to bear, and wear down their opponent to achieve victory. *Literally or metaphorically*. Examples of “combat” include:

- Arguments:** Combatants wielding logic, stubbornness and cheap rhetorical tricks to make their point.
- Horse-Racing:** People on horses running around a dirty track, trying to get nowhere first.
- Dogfights:** Pilots in airplanes or spaceships trying to blow each other out of the sky.
- Astral/Psychic Duels:** Mystics/psionics looking bored or sleepy, but trying to rip each other’s ego apart in the Otherworld.
- Wizard’s Duels:** Sorcerers using strange magics, trying to outdo one another.

Dueling Banjos: Banjo players using strange melodies, trying to outdo one another.

Seduction: One (or more) characters trying to score with one (or more) other character(s) who is(are) trying to resist.

Courtroom Antics: Prosecution vs. Defense. The goal is victory. Justice is incidental.

Actual Regular Combat: People trying to injure or kill each other.

The GM decides when a combat has begun. At that point, go around the table in rounds, and let each combatant make an attack in turn. What constitutes an “attack” depends on the nature of the fight, but it should always be roleplayed (if dialogue is involved) or described in entertaining detail (if it’s physical and/or dangerous and/or does/should involve contraceptives). The GM will determine what *type* of Cliché is appropriate for the fight. In a straightforward physical brawl, Clichés like Viking, Soldier, Swashbuckler, and Ernest Hemingway are equally appropriate, while Clichés like Hairdresser and Latin Lover are not.

Attacks must be directed at an opponent. Both parties in the attack (attacker and defender) roll against their chosen Cliché. *Low roll loses*. Specifically, the low roller loses *one of his Cliché dice* for the remainder of the fight – he’s been weakened, worn down, demoralized or otherwise pushed one step towards defeat.

Eventually, one side will be left standing, and another will be left without dice. At this point, *the winners decide the fate of the losers*. In a physical fight or magical duel, the losers might be killed (or mercifully spared). In Courtroom Antics, the loser is sentenced by the judge, or fails to prosecute. In a Seduction, the loser gets either a cold shower or a warm evening, depending. While the GM will reject combat outcomes that make no sense in context (if you beat someone at tennis, you aren’t *normally* allowed to decapitate them and drag their corpse through the city square), the spoils of victory are otherwise down to the choice of the victor.

You needn’t use the same Cliché every round. If a Viking/Swashbuckler wants to lop heads one round, and switch to swinging on chandeliers the next, that’s groovy, too. However, anytime a character has a Cliché worn down to zero dice in combat, he’s been *defeated*, even if he has other Clichés left to play with.

Dice lost in combat are regained when the combat ends, at a healing rate determined by the GM (based on the nature of the attacks involved). If the combat was in vehicles (space fighters, mecha, wooden sailing ships) then the vehicles themselves are likely damaged, too, and must be repaired. Sometimes, healing takes not only time, but *conditions* specified by the GM (“now that you’ve been soundly defeated, you can’t even *look* at your banjo until your girlfriend assuages your ego”).

There’s no standard time or distance scale in *Risus*; everything depends on context. In a physical brawl, each round might represent just a few seconds ... while in a long-term fight between a married couple, each round might represent an entire day (Day One: Husband “accidentally” burns Wife’s favorite dress in the oven, Wife “accidentally” feeds Drano to Husband’s prize goldfish, and so on).

Inappropriate Clichés

As stated above, the GM determines what sort of Clichés are appropriate for the fight. Any Clichés left over are *inappropriate*. In a physical fight, Hairdresser is inappropriate. In a magical duel, Barbarian is inappropriate.

Inappropriate Clichés aren’t *forbidden* from the fight. They can still be used to make attacks, *provided the player roleplays or describes it in a really, really, really entertaining manner*. Furthermore, the attack must be *plausible* within the context of the combat, and the genre and tone that the GM has set for the game (making this kind of attack more often useful in very pulpy/swashbuckly games, or very silly ones).

All combat rules apply normally, with one exception: if an *inappropriate* Cliché wins a combat round versus an *appropriate* one, the losing player loses *three* dice, rather than one, from his Cliché! The “inappropriate” player takes no such risk, and loses only one die if he loses the round. Thus, a creative hairdresser is dangerous when cornered and attacked unfairly. Beware.

When in doubt, assume the aggressor determines the type of combat. If a wizard attacks a barbarian with magic, then it’s a magical duel! If the barbarian attacks the mage with his sword, then it’s physical combat! If the defender can come up with an entertaining use of his skills, he’ll have the edge. It pays in many genres to be the defender! But ... if the wizard and barbarian *both obviously want to fight*, then *both* are aggressors, and it’s “fantasy combat,” where both swords and sorcery have *equal* footing.

Teaming Up

Two or more characters may form a *team* in combat. For the duration of the team (usually the entire fight), they battle as a single unit, and may only be attacked as a single foe. There are two kinds of team: full-on *Character Teams* (for PCs, and sufficiently interesting NPCs) and *Grunt-Squads* (for nameless NPC hordes).

Grunt-Squads: This is just special effects. When a horde of 700 rat-skeletons attacks the PCs within the lair of the Wicked Necromancer (5), the GM probably won’t feel like keeping track of 700 tiny skeletal sets of dice. Instead, he can declare them a Grunt Squad, fighting as a *single foe*: a Skeletal Rat-Horde (7). Mechanically, the Rat-Horde is the same as any single foe – except it sometimes has more dice (as many as the GM cares to assign it). Grunt-Squads stick together as a team until they’re defeated, at which point some survivors may scatter (though at least one will always remain to suffer whatever fate the victor decides). Taken to logical (or whimsical) extremes, an entire ship’s crew, or even whole forests, dungeons, cities or nations might be represented by a single Cliché.

Character Teams: When PCs (and/or NPCs worth the attention) form a team, the Team Leader is the character with the highest-ranking applicable Cliché (if there’s a tie, the team must *designate* a Team Leader). Everybody rolls dice, but only the Team Leader’s dice completely count. Other team-members contribute only their *sixes*, when they roll any.

Clichés joined in a team need not be identical, and (provided the GM can be convinced) they can even be a mix of “appropriate” and “inappropriate” for the fight (a group of warriors might be aided by their able minstrel, for example). However, they don’t triple enemy dice-loss unless the *entire team* is equally inappropriate (which means the players get to explain to the GM exactly how a Hairdresser, a Parakeet Trainer, and a Life Coach are coordinating their talents to take Darth Viraxis to the mat!)

Whenever a team loses a round of combat, a *single* team-member’s Cliché is reduced. Any team-member (Team Leader included) may “step forward” and voluntarily suffer this loss. If so, the noble volunteer is reduced by *twice* the normal amount (either two dice or six, depending), but the Team Leader gets to roll *twice as many dice on his next attack*, a temporary boost as the team avenges their heroic comrade. If no volunteer steps forward, the Team Leader must assign the (undoubled) hit to a team-member, and there is no “vengeance” bonus.

Victory & Defeat: With teams as with individuals, the victor determines the fate of the loser ... but when the loser is part of a team, his fate is generally reserved until the *end* of the team’s existence (even if he’s defeated while the fight rages on). So, if his team *wins*, his team – not their opponent – gets to decide. There are some fights where this won’t be so, where the PCs are under such precarious circumstance that their fates must be resolved immediately. But, in most cases, being part of a team – especially a *winning* team – is excellent insurance.

Disbanding: A team may voluntarily disband at any time between die-rolls. When disbanding, each team-member instantly loses a single die from the Cliché they’d been contributing to the team (equal to “damage” suffered in the fight itself). Disbanded team-members may freely form new teams, provided the die-loss from disbanding doesn’t defeat them. Individuals may also *drop out* of a team, but this reduces them to zero dice immediately as they scamper for the rear. Their fates rest on the mercy of whoever wins the fight!

Lost Leader: If the Team Leader ever leaves the team for any reason (either by dropping out or having his own Cliché dropped to zero), the team *must* disband immediately, with consequences as above. They may immediately opt to reform as a new team (with a new leader) however, and if the old leader was removed by having volunteered for personal damage, the new Team Leader gets the double-roll vengeance bonus to avenge his predecessor!

Single-Action Conflicts

“Combat” depends on multi-round jockeying and wearing each other down ... but many conflicts are too *sudden* to be played that way (two characters grabbing for the same gun, for example). Such “Single-Action Conflicts” (SACs) are settled with a single roll against appropriate Clichés (or inappropriate Clichés, with good roleplaying). High roll wins. Note that, in nearly *any* case, the Game Master may jump between the three resolution methods (Target Number, Combat, Single-Action Conflict) to suit the pacing and mood. Sometimes, an arm-wrestling match works best as a combat ... sometimes it works best as a Single-Action Conflict, and sometimes (preferably if it’s against some kind of coin-operated arm-wrestling machine) even as a simple Target Number.

When Somebody Can’t Participate

Sometimes, characters find themselves facing a Combat or Single-Action Conflict where they simply have no applicable Cliché, even by stretching the imagination. Perhaps one character in the party enters a pie-eating contest with his Disgusting Glutton (2) Cliché, but the rest of the characters are astronauts or accountants, neither of whom traditionally gorge themselves on pie. In situations like this, the GM might grant *everybody* two free “brevet dice” to play with for the duration of the conflict. This means the Disgusting Glutton (2) would become, temporarily, a Disgusting Glutton (4), while everyone else would get a Regular Person Talked Into a Pie-Eating Contest (2) Cliché “on loan” until the last crumb burps forth. The Glutton, naturally, retains his winning edge, but everyone else can still bury their noses in pie. This rule applies only to Combats and SACs, never to rolls against Target Numbers (since, with Target Numbers, the TN itself simply moves wherever it needs to, for *any* Cliché attempting *any* action).

Advanced Option: Lucky Shots

This option allows players to spend some of their 10 starting dice on something *other* than Clichés. A single Cliché-die can, instead, buy three *Lucky Shots* (spend two dice for six Lucky Shots, and so on). Using a Lucky Shot boosts any Cliché roll by a *single* die, for a *single* die-roll. Lucky Shots “reset” between game-sessions. Lucky Shots can represent random good luck, the favor of a deity, a streak of resourcefulness, etc.

Advanced Option: Hooks & Tales

With this Advanced Option, players can bargain for extra character-creation dice by giving their character a Hook and/or a Tale. A *Hook* is some significant character flaw – a curse, an obsession, a weakness, a sworn vow, a permanently crippling injury – that the GM agrees is *so juicy* that he can use it to make the character’s life more interesting (which usually means less pleasant). A character with a Hook gets an extra die to play with.

A *Tale* is a written “biography” of the character describing his life before the events of the game. The Tale needn’t be long (a page or two is *plenty*); it just needs to tell the reader where the character is coming from, what he likes and dislikes, how he became who he is, what his motives are. Some Tales are best written from the player’s omniscient perspective; others are more fun if written as excerpts from the character’s own diary. A character with a Tale provided before gameplay begins gets an extra die to play with.

Advanced Option: Pumps

Characters may *pump* their Clichés, expending extra effort at the cost of certain injury (loss of dice). A pumped Cliché receives a dice-boost lasting a single round of combat (or single significant roll, otherwise). After that round or roll is resolved, the Cliché returns to normal, then suffers immediate dice-loss *equal* to the boost. Such loss is comparable to combat losses, and must heal.

Example: Rudolph the Ninja (3) is attacked by a Monster (6)! Rudy doesn’t have much of a chance against such a powerful foe, so he opts for a tricky tactic: since the Monster is attacking physically, Rudolph decides his first-round response will use his skills as a Cajun Chef (3) – a decidedly *Inappropriate* choice! He also opts to *pump it by two dice* to Cajun Chef (5), putting his all into his cooking!

On round one, the Monster rolls six dice, and Rudy (quickly whipping up a tempting Gumbo spiked with Ninja sleeping drug and offering it to the Monster) rolls five. If the Ninja loses, he’s instantly defeated: his Cajun Chef Cliché would drop to Cajun Chef (1) for the pump, then to Cajun Chef (zero) for losing the round. The Monster would eat Rudolph instead of the Gumbo. If the Ninja *wins*, however, the Monster (6) drops to Monster (3), and Rudy’s Cajun Chef (3) drops to Cajun Chef (1). In round two, Rudolph can switch back to Ninja (3), where he’ll be on equal footing with the groggy, well-fed Monster.

Pumps are legal for any kind of Cliché roll, provided the GM agrees that “pushing it” fits the action involved.

Double-Pump Clichés: If permitting pumps, the GM might also allow *double-pump Clichés*, which take only “half damage” from pumping. Thus, a Sorcerer [5] could roll eleven dice for a single combat round (six extra dice!) but take only *three* dice of loss from the extra effort. Double-pump Clichés cost twice as many dice to buy during character creation, and are especially appropriate for Clichés representing supernatural abilities (in fact, some Game Masters may *require* that supernatural Clichés be purchased this way). The use of [square brackets] instead of (parentheses) indicates a double-pump Cliché.

Advanced Option: Character Advancement

At the end of each adventure, each player rolls against each Cliché *challenged* during the course of play (ignore lingering “injuries” for this purpose; roll as if the Cliché were *whole*). If the dice land showing *only even numbers*, the Cliché advances by a single die (increasing it permanently). No Cliché advances past Cliché (6).

Midgame Leaps: Anytime you do something *really, really, really spectacularly entertaining that wows the whole table*, the GM may allow you to roll instantly (in the middle of the game) for possible advancement, in addition to the roll(s) at the end of the adventure.

Adding New Clichés: There may come a time when a character has grown and matured enough to justify adding an entirely *new* Cliché to his character sheet. If the player and GM *agree* this is the case, *and* agree on what the new Cliché is, the player rolls for advancement as usual, but new dice earned for that adventure may be put toward the new Cliché instead of the ones that earned them. This can also be applied to “in-game” improvements, if the situation warrants it!

Long-Haul Variant: Instead of rolling against *every* challenged Cliché, roll against a *single* Cliché of your choice.